

The Rider of Los Muertos

by David M. Bachman, ...

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Chapter 1

It was shortly after sunset when the caravan was brought to a halt by the strangest sight that Clay had seen thus far in the desert. Standing directly in the middle of the road with her back to the approaching band of settlers was a woman in a dark and filthy dress. Her curly blonde hair looked frazzled and matted in places with what appeared to be dried mud. It looked as though a horse had thrown her and completely knocked the sense right out of her head.

“Whoa, there!” called out Ned, the man in the lead of their group and seated next to Clay on the lead wagon. Ned jabbed Clay with his elbow and gestured to the woman. In a hushed voice, he asked him, “What the hell do you make of that?”

“You got me,” Clay responded with a shrug. “Maybe the heat got to her. She looks lost.”

“What is it, Ned?” called out Billy from two wagons back. “Something in the road again?”

“Yeah, a woman!” Ned responded.

“A what?”

“A woman, I said!” he repeated impatiently.

The blonde barely even moved at all, at least not in response to their presence. Was she deaf? Crazy? Maybe one of those people just born a little soft in the head?

“Miss? 'Scuse me, miss?” Clay called out to the woman. She didn't reply, nor did she turn. She was swaying slightly, her arms hanging slack at her sides with her head cocked slightly to one side. To Ned, Clay said, “She might be cooked. You know, by the sun. Maybe she got herself jumped by Injuns and run herself dry...?”

“Maybe,” Ned agreed with a nod, handing the reins off to Clay before grabbing his canteen and getting up from the bench. “Suppose we might as well see to her.”

Ned climbed down from the wagon and awkwardly made his way over the rocky terrain towards the silent, swaying, and seemingly sun-baked female. They had been riding pretty easy for most of their trek from Prescott to Camp Verde, but once they'd started getting closer to these mountains on their way toward Goldfield, the terrain had become so rough and covered with loose rocks and boulders that going off the trail was nearly impossible without risking a broken wheel.

Theirs was an odd mix of travelers seeking a similar destination for very different reasons. Ned, along with his sons, Billy and Clyde, and his wife, Betsy, were looking to find a new home in Tucson and set up a general store there. Ned was fairly well-off due to some land investments he'd made and sold in Kansas. That was where he'd met Clay and hired him to ride shotgun in the odd chance they encountered any rough natives or bandits along the way. Chet and Frank were looking to do some prospecting around Goldfield which was, as the town's name implied, a land supposedly thick with veins of gold. John and his wife, Clara, were a religious pair of Bible-thumpers, supposedly on a mission to bring

the light of the Lord to what they heard was a godless pit of sins and carnal indulgences known as the city of Tombstone.

And as far as Clay, well... he was going wherever life took him, just so long as it was far away from Kansas. He wasn't inclined to explain to the others why he was with them. He was sure that Ned knew, but apparently the man was sympathetic to his situation because he'd never once brought it up or questioned him about it. Whenever any of the others had asked him, he'd simply replied that he had his reasons and that it was of no consequence to them. As of yet, nobody else seemed to have had a problem with that.

Out of habit, Clay picked up the double-barrel shotgun from where it lay at his feet, holding it skyward with its buttstock on his knee while his left hand held the reins and his eyes surveyed the surrounding area. While the blonde woman seemed to be no problem, Clay was aware that they were in Apache territory now. If this woman had been accosted by them and had escaped, it was entirely possible that they might be nearby and looking to finish what they had started. Just as well, there was also the odd chance that this was a setup for a robbery. Again, Ned was rather well-to-do and he, along with the others, had brought along their entire life's savings on this venture, making them a ripe target for bandits.

"Ma'am? I say, ma'am? Can you hear me?" Ned tried to greet the woman as he cautiously approached. The dimming light from the sun that had set on the other side of the mountain clearly was making it hard for Ned to observe the strange woman, just as it was making it hard for Clay to spot any incoming threats. Ned stopped a couple of yards behind the woman, apparently seeing something odd about her. Not that her behavior wasn't already odd enough, of course.

Ned turned to look back at Clay for a moment, visibly both confused and amused. "Looks like she fell in a pile of horse apples. I can smell her from here."

"Careful, Pa!" called out Billy. "She might be one of them crazy Mormons."

"Hush up now, Billy," his mother chided him as Ned stepped closer to the woman. "The Mormons are God-fearing folk just like the rest of us."

"Indeed, we are all children of the same Almighty!" chimed John, to which his wife enthusiastically added an "Amen!"

Clay rolled his eyes and went back to keeping watch for trouble. He wasn't some godless non-believer, but he didn't think that his purpose in life was to go around telling others how to live theirs and threatening them with eternal damnation if they didn't go to church every Sunday. He didn't get on well with that preacher and his homely wife, as he usually didn't with most religious folk. Again, it wasn't a matter of whether or not he believed, but more so an issue with others shoving their own views and opinions in his face at any and every given opportunity. John's tendency to stay drunk nearly all day, every day, also added to the level of annoyance Clay felt whenever someone started talking about...

"Jesus Christ!" Ned suddenly gasped, stepping back in horror as he stood before the woman. "Lady, are you all right?"

"Ned? What is it?" Betsy demanded worriedly.

"Get the medicine kit! This woman is seriously hurt!" he shouted back to her. To the strange woman, he said in a slightly softer tone, "Don't you worry there, ma'am. We're gonna help ya'."

“What's wrong with her, Pa?” asked one of the other sons – Clyde or Claude or whatever, Clay could never remember.

Ned looked so horrified that his feet seemed glued in place as he stared wide-eyed at the woman. “I think she may have had a run-in with a bear or a mountain lion or something. Her face is just ... it's so ... my God!”

Ahead of Clay, the horses began stirring anxiously. While it was possible that they were reacting to Ned's alarm at the sight of the injured woman, the attention of their ears seemed to be directed away from that. Instead, their heads were angled to their right, toward the upward incline of the hill which went up at a steep angle not far away on either side, making a small valley through which the road passed. Clay's pulse quickened as he heard the scuff of a foot upon rock and a few pebbles and small loose stones clattered down the hill.

Betsy came running past the lead wagon with a black leather bag in hand and her son, Billy, following closely behind. Ned had come by some of his money as a field medic in the Army. He was no surgeon, but he knew enough to get a wounded soldier or an injured ranch hand bandaged up well enough to stay alive until he could see a real doctor.

“Ned?” Clay called out. “Hey, Ned?”

“Not now, son! This woman needs help,” Ned insisted dismissively. To the woman, he said, “Everything will be all right, ma'am. I'll see to your wounds and we'll take you to a doctor in the next town so they can see you get stitched up, okay?”

It was only then, as Ned drew close enough to be nearly within arms' reach of her that the woman finally seemed to notice his presence. Clay saw her slowly turn her head towards him and pivot her upper body slightly, her hands coming up lazily from her sides to reach out for him. Betsy knelt down beside them and began opening the black bag while Ned reached to take the woman into his arms comfortingly. Clay looked away as the horses stirred again, one of them whinnying mildly as the sounds of movement again could be heard off to their right.

Clay finally saw movement, a dark form moving almost casually in the general direction of the halted caravan. He spotted a man in dark clothes with a beard stepping out from behind a line of brush. Instinctively, Clay let go of the reins and thumbed back both hammers of the shotgun before shouldering it and aiming in the general direction of the approaching man.

“Ned, we've got company!” Clay shouted. To the approaching man, he yelled, “You there! Stop where you are and get your hands up!”

Walking with an awkward but calm gait, the man continued toward them as if he, too, was deaf. There was something very bizarre going on here. Had both of these people gotten lost in the desert and been driven mad by heat and thirst? Were these just horribly dazed victims of an Apache ambush? Maybe survivors of some animal attack, as Ned had theorized? Had they eaten something poisonous that affected their minds?

“There! Over there!” one of the prospectors indicated loudly before drawing a revolver and aiming at something to their left. “We got two more coming!”

“It's a damned trap! They mean to rob us!” another yelled.

“Nonsense! These people are hurt!” Ned argued as he held the woman and attempted to look her over. The woman was clutching his shoulders and actually

seemed to be trying to hug him, perhaps even to... kiss him?" "Ma'am, just relax. I need you to... ma'am? Madam? Excuse me, you're..."

A moment later, the sound of Ned's voice tore Clay's attention away from the approaching man to their right, whom he had been very close to shooting. Ned cried out first in alarm, then terror, and then raw agony as the woman forcefully buried her face in the crook of his neck. Ned struggled to push away the woman, or at least pry her away, but to no avail as she apparently began to... to what? To bite him? Really? Why? For certain, the woman had gone completely insane, as it seemed she was trying to eat poor Ned's throat while he, his wife, and his son all screamed—he in pain, they in horror.

It was the prospectors that were the first to start shooting, the sound of their gunfire echoing off of the surrounding rocky terrain in strange ways. Assuming this was a coordinated attack by a band of crazy people, Clay let loose with the shotgun, giving the approaching man one barrel's worth of buckshot and then sending the other load at a second man that had staggered out from behind a large prickly pear cactus plant.

Neither man went down. Each staggered or jerked in reaction to Clay's blasts, confirming that he'd hit them, but both continued toward the caravan unabated. The women were screaming, the men were cursing and shouting, and the gunfire became steady for the next minute. When Clay had finished putting another two shells of buckshot into his two oncoming attackers, and both of the prospectors had each fired five rounds apiece from their revolvers, the gravity of the situation became clear.

"Son of a bitch! They ain't going down!" one prospector declared.

"That's because we ain't hitting 'em!" the other guessed. "Keep shootin'!"

The screams from ahead of the caravan had changed in that the young Billy now sounded to be in pain, and the wife was absolutely hysterical with terror. Clay glanced aside and saw Ned upon the ground, thrashing about and holding his neck while blood squirted out from between his fingers. Betsy knelt over him, her hands upon her cheeks as she wailed uselessly. And Billy was on his back with the filthy blonde on top of him, his right arm in both of her hands. Over and over, the blonde took one gory bite after another out of Billy's forearm, pulling away mouthful after mouthful of skin and muscle like she was devouring a roasted chicken leg.

"I'm-a take this mess myself!" Clay heard one of the prospectors declare. As Clay dug for more shotgun shells, and as the preacher and his wife prayed frantically, one of the gold-seekers hopped off their covered wagon with a pick-ax in his hands. "Ain't no crazy bunch of bastards going to stop me from gettin' rich before I even start diggin'!"

Clay plucked the emptied and smoking shells from his double-barrel, tossing them over his shoulder before dropping a fresh pair into the tubes. He was running out of shells already. No one man could stand up to a single load of twelve-gauge buckshot to the chest, much less two, and it wasn't often that a group would need to defend themselves from much more than a couple of foes at a time. Sure, the Apaches were known to attack in big enough groups, but if killing a few didn't make them turn around and run, nothing short of an Army regiment would have enough guns to stop them.

What they were faced with here went beyond anything for which they could have ever planned. Not only were these people insane and numerous, but they were tougher than hell, too. Clay knew his blasts were connecting. He'd seen them stumble, seen the puffs of dirt kick up around them from the scattered lead pellets, and he could now see the spreading dark stains of blood and the exposed flesh where the buckshot had torn into them. And yet they were still standing and walking, still coming towards the short line of wagons.

The horses were kicking about and beginning to panic from the chaos. Clay had to stop in his reloading actions and grab the reins in an effort to keep the horses from hauling forward and running over Ned and his kin. Not that it would seem to matter, as that insane blonde woman was tearing them all to shreds. Being trampled by hooves or crushed by wagon wheels may have been a better way to leave this world.

Clay looked over just in time to see one of the prospectors—Chet, he thought it was, he wasn't sure—run up to a male in torn and filthy coveralls, draw back with a cry of rage, and bury one end of the pick-ax into the crazy fellow's torso. The tip entered between the man's shoulder and neck, burying itself all the way to the hilt.

Chet stood there for a moment, holding the embedded pick-ax in place, apparently waiting for the crazed man to fall. It never happened. The impaled man remained standing. Not only did he not fall, the man instead grabbed Chet, pulled him close, and apparently began to eat his face. The response from his partner, Frank, was to curse loudly, jump from the wagon, and run in the opposite direction... and right into the arms (and teeth) of three more shambling, crazy, face-eating people. Rather than grabbing a rifle from one of the wagons, John and Clara grabbed their Bibles, stood up, and clutched those sacred books to their chests. While they prayed at the top of their lungs, Ned's wife shrieked at the top of hers as the crazed blonde turned upon her.

Amid all of these horrific sounds, Clay heard the sound of a gunshot... followed by another, and then several more. He had thought the prospectors had already emptied their guns, but apparently one of them had managed to draw a spare. Clay had no time to even look, as the two men were now very near the wagon upon which he stood. In the last remaining glow before full dark, Clay was able to see now the faces of these men, the look upon their faces, and the vacant and faraway look in their eyes, which appeared to be glazed in a milky sort of film. There was no pain, no anger, nor the wild look of an insane person as Clay would have expected to see. There was only a total look of unblinking emptiness, an absolute lack of thought or emotion. The fact that these people could eat other people, and to do so without even showing the slightest bit of...

The hand that clamped down upon his ankle snapped his attention back to reality, the horror of the scene having momentarily dazed him. The insane cannibal was just barely tall enough to reach him, and his filthy fingers grabbed first at the cuff of his trousers and then locked around his ankle with alarming strength. The cannibal pulled hard with a yank, nearly pulling Clay off the wagon. He was already opening his jaws to take a bite. The stench of the man... no, the *monster* had been obvious at a distance, but the putrid breath rolling out of that nasty-looking mouth was instantly nauseating.

In a somewhat panicked move, he jabbed the twin muzzles of the coach gun at the creature and fired. He was damned lucky not to have taken off his own leg in the process. The blast seemed to demolish half of the thing's torso, entering right at the shoulder and blowing shreds of meat and clothing away from its arm, chest, and neck. If it screamed or yelled or made any other noise, Clay didn't hear it, but it did fall backward to the rocky ground below. And yet, even then, he still felt its grip as tight as ever upon his limb. A quick glance down told him why: he'd severed the arm completely from its owner, and the hand was left gripping his ankle while the body had fallen.

And yet that body continued to move. The cannibal seemed almost confused by the loss of its arm, flailing uselessly with its remaining appendage and legs as it tried to get up again. Clay aimed his shotgun at it and pulled the other trigger. Instead of a loud boom, he heard only a weak poof and saw a shower of sparks being spat forth. It was certainly a hell of a bad time to have a dud shell in his gun.

With utter disregard for its fellow monster, the other cannibal stepped right upon the buckshot-riddled chest of its partner and used it as a step stool to reach for Clay. Although it might have been wiser to draw his pistol, it wasn't his first thought. Instead, he gripped the shotgun by its stock and forearm like a spear, thrusting it at the monster's ugly, bloody, torn-up face.

The muzzles of the shotgun punched right into the cannibal's mouth, tearing through its lips and shattering its rotten teeth with a sickly satisfying *crunch*. Clay wasn't prepared for the cannibal to go back with the thrust so easily, and he found himself losing his balance as the wagon rocked from the shifting of his weight and the panicked movements of the horses. Rather than going overboard and right into the creature's arms, Clay let go of the shotgun and fell backward onto the bench seat. The cannibal grasped the shotgun and held it for a few moments, visibly working its jaws as it seemed to try to chew upon the barrels. Its broken teeth scraped upon the steel with hollow metallic sounds, and Clay could actually hear the hiss of its split lips being burned upon the hot metal.

The cannibal's momentary fascination with the empty, hot shotgun afforded Clay an opportunity to draw his revolver, cock it, and aim it at the thing's face. The cannibal dropped the shotgun and stared at him dumbly.

"See if this tastes better," he said before pulling the trigger.

The forty-four caliber bullet punched a neat, round hole into the cannibal's temple, blowing chunks of brain and bone out the back of its head. It finally slumped and slid off the side of the wagon lifelessly. Maybe it had finally given up the fight. Perhaps a bullet in the head was the only way to put these things down. Apparently, the only way to remove from their minds the idea of eating people was by blowing those sick thoughts right out of their heads with lead.

There were more gunshots coming from somewhere nearby. Clay sat up and began to look around the area for their source. He had just enough time to see that the area was being overrun by perhaps twenty of these flesh-hungry humanoid monsters, cannibals that looked like horribly disfigured corpses that refused to stay dead. Was this what had been described in the book of Revelations, all of that talk about the coming of the Antichrist? Was this a weird form of the Rapture where the dead arose from their graves and the evil were cleansed from

the world? Clay had committed more than a few sins in his years, so perhaps he was the evil one here? If that was the case, then there was no sense in trying to make amends now in hope salvation. If this was the End of Days and he was bound for hell, then these ugly things were going to have to drag him kicking and screaming the whole way... just like the preacher and his wife were doing as about four cannibals began climbing onto their wagon.

Clay's look-around was made brief as a bullet ricocheted off a metal hinge on the wagon, kicking up sparks and splinters. He ducked back down and knelt in the space between the bench and the footboard, steadying himself as the horses shrieked, kicked, and fought to break free. About five more cannibals had descended upon the mares with lazy but determined speed. Apparently, their appetite was not limited to human flesh.

An arm was flung over the side of the wagon, grabbing hold of the bench's leaf spring. Amazingly, the first cannibal—the one now missing an arm—had found its footing and was still hungry for Clay. It clumsily struggled to haul itself up there, and Clay began to take aim at its head. He was hesitant to shoot. His shotgun was somewhere on the ground, and he only had two shells left in his pocket. His revolver held six shots, but only a fool or a madman carried with all six loaded and a hammer resting on the primer. He'd fired one shot already, leaving him four, and already he saw there were far more of them to kill than that, even if his aim was perfect. The odds of him being able to dig his Winchester out of the wagon, load it, and bring it into action were slim to none. He might have been wisest to save the last bullet in his revolver for himself.

A flash of movement behind the flesh-eater caught his eye. Clay saw a rider streak past, mostly dressed in black like a shadow atop an even blacker horse. The rider halted behind the horses that the other monster-men were attacking, leveled a cavalryman's pistol at them, and began firing. One after the other, the creatures were felled by shots to their heads, only one shot missing. One creature required two bullets to down, as the first shot only blew away part of its face. One cannibal remained, and the rider's gun clicked upon an empty chamber. With well-rehearsed ease and swiftness, he holstered that revolver while drawing a fresh one, cocking it, and blasting off the top of the remaining cannibal's head.

The Rider apparently determined in an instant that both horses were too injured by the flesh-eaters to be spared. He summarily put them both down with two bullets each, also delivered to their brains. That pistol now empty, the Rider reholstered it as he whirled his mount around expertly in the other direction. There was a scraping sound of metal and a momentary flash of steel as the Rider drew a cavalry saber and held it aloft, displaying it briefly as either a threat or a gesture of triumph. Behind the Rider's wide-brimmed hat and the dark rag that masked much of his face, it was impossible for Clay to gauge his intent.

A tug at his right foot tore his attention away from the Rider and back to the thing that was trying to climb into the wagon with him. Clay drew back his leg, yanking it from the cannibal's grasp, and he thrust the heel of his boot into its nose. He felt the crunch, saw the roll of blood from the foul-smelling thing's nostrils, but somehow didn't succeed in knocking it out. He kicked again, then again, connecting squarely each time, but with no effect. On his fourth kick, the creature caught hold of his trouser leg, its fingers as tight as a bear trap on the

material as Clay tried to kick free of it. He saw the thing rear back slightly, bare its snaggle-toothed and gory grin, and prepare to chomp into his leg.

And then the cannibal's head just... vanished.

Well, to be more precise, the thing's head sort of rolled off as it was cleaved from its perch on its shoulders by the passing blade of a cavalry saber. The headless corpse immediately fell limp and blood that appeared black in the gloom rolled easily out from the stump of its neck, like an overturned keg of crude oil. If Clay had thought the creature's breath had smelled bad, it was positively rose-scented compared to the stench of the rotten fluids that drooled out of the headless torso. Clay tasted bile in the back of his mouth as he fought the urge to empty what little his stomach still held.

His ears still ringing slightly from all of the shooting, Clay was barely able to hear the sounds of hurried hoofbeats and a large steel blade in a continued battle behind the wagon. He was reluctant to lift his head again to look. Last time, it had nearly earned him a bullet in the head, nearly mistaken for one of those flesh-eating abominations. Still, being that the Rider had just saved him from becoming cannibal chow, he thought it was worth the risk to take a peek.

The preacher was still howling at the top of his lungs, holding a cannibal away by shoving his beloved Bible into its mouth. The cannibal and the preacher momentarily played Tug-O'-War with that sacred tome before the monster instead grabbed the holy man's wrists, spat out its bite of the Good Book, and then bit into the man's forearm. His screams somehow became even louder still. He'd been blessed with a speaker's voice, able to be clearly heard even by those in the back rows of his clergy, and with enough force to keep them awake. Now, he was hollering loud enough to wake the dead. His wife, however, had already fallen silent. Clay saw her upon the ground with two cannibals upon her, one which appeared to be feasting upon her stomach.

The Rider made swift work of the first few creatures, dropping them with a series of thrusts, hacks, and slashes from horseback. Some were beheaded, some had their skulls split, others simply had their brains skewered, but not a one of them got back up or even twitched once they fell. Clearly, this was all old hat to the Rider. Had Clay known better from the start how to stop these things, he could have better done his job of protecting the others in the caravan.

It was not yet too late to save John the Preacher. Clay still had a few shots left in his pistol, and the odds were now much more in his favor. He hopped up, jumped down from the wagon, and began running to the covered wagon where the Bible-thumper was screaming in a way that no grown man ever should.

While the Rider almost casually dismounted, his black cape momentarily billowed out to reveal a small arsenal of holstered guns and sheathed knives, in addition to the ornate gold-accented scabbard of the sword he still grasped. Clay disregarded this unusually heavy armament to focus on the imperiled holy man, running around the wailing and kicking horses that visibly had chunks of flesh bitten or torn from their hides.

The cannibal was ravaging John's arm like a mad dog, worrying its head back and forth as it tore a large mouthful of skin and muscle from the wailing preacher's arm. Clay was momentarily stunned by the sight, watching the blonde-haired, teenaged boy-like thing toss its head back and begin to chew and swallow

what it had pulled off with its teeth. It took one look at Clay, gulped down its mouthful with hurried greed, and then let go of John's arm. Before it could get up and come for Clay next, he put a bullet right into its face, slightly to the left of its halfway bitten-off nose.

Clay quickly surveyed his surroundings. It didn't take more than a seconds or two to see that he and John were apparently the only ones left alive from the caravan. The Rider wiped the blade of his sword clean upon a rag that he pulled from somewhere under his cloak, then sheathed his saber with a swift, clearly practiced movement. The Rider then pulled his rifle from a scabbard strapped to the saddle of his horse and began to reload it with cartridges from one of what looked to be three belts—one around his waist, and two crisscrossing his torso, with holsters under each arm and on both hips.

Clay hopped up into the covered wagon and began to see to the badly injured but still living Preacher John. He tore a strip of cloth from John's shirt and wound it around the man's profusely bleeding arm, cinching it down in a tight tourniquet. He was still whimpering with pain by the time Clay had finished tying the makeshift bandage, but he had calmed down quite a bit once he managed to latch onto a bottle of rye whiskey.

"Clara?" John finally asked. "Where's Clara? Where is my wife?"

Clay cast one brief glance over the side of the covered wagon to where the woman's remains lay. Even that one quick look was enough. He shook his head ruefully as the Rider calmly walked over to the body of Clara, cocking the Henry rifle he carried. Clay looked away as the Rider took aim at one of the two cannibals that were still eating her. He waited until after the two necessary shots were fired before replying to John.

"Afraid she's gone to see God, preacher," he told him.

John closed his eyes, winced, and nodded in surprisingly immediate acceptance. Keeping his eyes closed, he took another gulp from the bottle and sniffed back his tears.

"She was a whore, you know. Before I tried to make an honest woman of her, that is," he explained to Clay. "I had hoped to save her from the Devil by taking her away from all of that sin in the city where I found her. But it seems the Devil found us both... found us all... and he came to claim what he thought was his." He paused to drink. "The Devil took her body, but the Lord has her soul now. And he's seen fit to let me live on... to save others. Thanks to you, son."

"Well... not so much me, but..."

Clay's words were cut off by two more loud gunshots from the Rider's rifle as he put down both of the horses tied to the covered wagon. He looked over to the Rider with a bit of annoyance.

"Is that really necessary? If you go killing all our horses, how are we supposed to get out of here?" Clay demanded. "We've got injured folk here now that need a doctor, and those damned things killed our only medicine man."

"Ned? They got Ned?" John asked worriedly.

"Yeah, 'fraid so," he responded as the Rider approached.

The Rider suddenly pointed his rifle at Clay, aiming from the hip.

"The hell? Watch where you point that!" Clay snapped. The Rider cocked his Henry rifle, the empty brass clinking loudly off of a rock on the ground. Clay held

up his hands. "Okay. Easy, partner. I got no quarrel with you. I appreciate what you done here, friend, but I don't take well to looking down a barrel."

The Rider jerked the aim of his rifle aside twice, directing Clay to step down from the wagon. Reluctantly, Clay got up slowly and began to climb down, leaving the bandaged and bereaved preacher to his bottle. John sat up with some effort, and the Rider also silently directed him to get down, too.

The darkness was quickly swallowing up the fine details of the surrounding area, but both Clay and John could see well enough to take in the carnage of the battle's aftermath. Bodies were scattered all around the halted caravan. Only two of their six horses still stood alive, not counting the Rider's black stallion.

John quickly saw the remains of his wife and fell to his knees beside what was left of her. Clay couldn't look there again. He had glimpsed parts of her insides that were now on the outside, and he was sure it would give him nightmares for more than a couple of nights. Instead, he focused upon the Rider as he approached.

Standing on the same ground now, he could see that the Rider was surprisingly shorter than Clay, who wasn't a very tall man, himself. The Rider was also fairly slender, or at least appeared to be, from what little clay could see of his form in glimpses of his body under the black cloak. Under the riding cape, the Rider wore a white shirt, black pants, and black leather cavalry boots with matching gloves. Clay would have guessed the Rider to be some sort of military cavalryman, but nothing that he wore appeared to be anything that Clay recognized as U.S. Army issue, or at least it wasn't marked as such. The saber in particular looked to be Spanish in design. If the Rider was Mexican, then perhaps that explained his silence. He only hoped it wouldn't also become an explanation for their demise. Had they somehow ridden too far south, all the way across the border?

The Rider directed Clay some more with silent gestures, keeping the aim of his rifle trained upon his chest while pointing with his free left hand. He pointed to Clay's sidearm, then made a sweeping gesture to the side. Perhaps against his better judgment, Clay tossed aside his pistol. As suspicious as the Rider was acting, he wasn't exactly being hostile, and he had, after all just saved their lives. At any rate, Clay had no chance of beating the Rider to the draw when the Rider already had the business end of his rifle aimed at Clay's heart.

"You speak any English?" Clay asked.

The Rider responded by gesturing for him to be silent, then pointed for him to put up his hands and turn around. John was too busy praying over his dead wife, reading her Last Rites or whatever, to even notice that the Rider was now apparently taking them prisoner. The Rider patted his gloved hand up and down Clay's arms, legs, and torso, checking for something. Clay initially thought he was being searched for other weapons or valuables, but when the Rider ignored his knife and pocket watch, he soon figured it out. The Rider was checking him for wounds.

"Oh... oh, thank the Lord Almighty for sending you here, stranger!" John slurred, his speech affected by a mix of emotion, pain, and alcohol. Clay looked aside and saw John standing now, arms now also raised in surrender but looking in no way alarmed by the aim of the Rider's rifle. "Thank you for coming to us in our time of..."

The Rider shouldered his Henry and shot Preacher John right between the eyes.

Clay stood still for a moment in absolute shock before turning to face the Rider. He kept his hands up, but he suddenly felt that having this person's gun at his back was not comforting.

"What in the hell is wrong with you?" Clay shouted. "You just shot a damned preacher!"

The Rider answered that by chambering another round in the Henry. Clay began to slowly back away from the Rider as he simultaneously advanced, matching him step for step at the same pace.

"Look here now," Clay said carefully, "I don't know who you are or what you want, but there ain't no need for more killin'. I'm not one of those crazy people, okay? I ain't no cannibal. I'm just a guy that was riding with these folks, and all I was along to do was see 'em safe to where they was going."

Clay's words became faster and a bit more urgent as the Rider continued advancing, wisps of smoke rolling out of the big-bore rifle that was now aimed at his head.

"I was only riding shotgun in case we ran across any redskins or thieves," he explained. "Just didn't want to get robbed or killed. Well now, seeing as everyone else is dead, I guess I'm out of a job now because I got on one to protect. So, like I said, I got no quarrel with you, okay? You want what they had, then have at it. Ain't much of value, except for Ned's money. But you go on and take it all, okay? Just let me go on my way, and I'll hold nothing against you, seeing as you just saved my life. I don't know why you shot John but, hey, I'm in no position to make a stink of it, so..."

The Rider suddenly advanced one broad step and kicked Clay in the groin so hard that it nearly lifted him off his feet. He fell to his knees, clutching his bruised man parts, and the Henry rifle boomed overhead. Clay saw through his pained grimace that the Rider had shot at someone or something else behind him, which he then saw as being Chet, whose body fell in a heap right beside Clay. The top half of Chet's head had been blown open, but Clay could clearly see that those cannibals had chewed off his lips and nose, leaving him with a permanent, skeletal grin. How Chet had still been alive and able to walk over there was beyond belief, but it seemed the Rider was now set on leaving no survivors to tell of this insane battle.

Clay saw his dropped Remington 1858 nearby, easily within reach. He had one chance, one last chance to save himself, so he took it. Before the Rider could chamber one more cartridge, Clay rolled over, picked up the Remington, and thumbed back the hammer as he swung it around at the Rider. He was quick, but the Rider was quicker. The Rider's foot kicked the pistol out of Clay's hand, sending that shot safely aside. The last thing Clay saw before blackness and numbness claimed him was the brass buttplate of that Henry rifle coming at his face and slamming into his cheek.

Chapter 2

Clay awoke to the sounds and smells of fire. His panic was brief as he realized that he was neither in danger of burning alive, nor was he able to do anything about it even if he had been. His hands and feet were bound together with rope, and he had been deposited next to a well-made campfire, lying upon his side. A rolled-up duster had even been placed under his head.

He struggled at first with a wave of nausea, and then with the difficulty of trying to figure out where he was and how the hell he had gotten there. His cheek throbbed with the dull ache of where something had apparently struck him. Had one of the horses kicked him? Had he tripped and fallen? As his eyes began to adjust to the scene and his vision cleared up, he saw a familiar-looking Henry rifle propped up against one of Ned's trunks, its polished brass receiver gleaming brightly in the firelight. Oh yeah, that rifle: that explained the soreness.

He remembered the Rider, and all of the madness and violence that accompanied him, and Clay's worry soon returned. What did the Rider seek to gain by taking him as a prisoner? Did he have plans to use him as collateral or some sort of bargaining chip with someone else? No, of course not. Clay wasn't one of the Pinkertons, nor was he a lawman. Frankly, he was a nobody. No one would come looking for him. No one would pay to set him free. Unless...

"Damn it all," he grumbled. "Bounty hunters are the worst."

He surely had at least one warrant out there for his arrest. That had been a big part of the reason he had been a part of this caravan heading south to God-knew-where in this desert wasteland. Like the now departed Preacher John's ex-whore wife, Clay had sought to escape the sins of his past. Well, apparently the Devil had indeed caught up with all of them. Those flesh-eating people had only been his working demons. The real Devil wore cavalry boots and gloves, and he rode a horse as black as his rotten heart... and none of those things were visible at the moment.

Clay felt mostly okay, at least until he tried to sit upright. The nausea returned, and it was strong enough to make him turn and retch into the dirt nearby, though his stomach was so empty that it offered up very little. The sickness wasn't so much a consequence of his having been knocked out cold; rather, it was the unmistakable smells of death and burning flesh and hair, so strong that they were like a thick slime upon the back of his tongue.

For a moment, Clay had a crazy and sick fear that the Rider was, himself, some sort of cannibal and that the iron pot that had been propped up near the fire was filled with human entrails, eyeballs, and brains. The opened tin can of beans nearby told him otherwise. And then a further look-around spurred on by the sounds of movement told him where the Rider was and what they were doing.

The fire heating the pot of beans and his feet was not the only one burning, nor was it by any means the biggest. For whatever reasons, the Rider had set the wagons afire after robbing them of their valuables and anything useful, most of which had been piled up near the campfire. The Rider had spared the rear-most wagon and its horses, those belonging to the dead prospectors. After all, there was no other reasonable way for him to cart away all of this loot on just one horse, however fine a mount it may have been.

Clay watched at first with curiosity, then dismay as he saw the Rider dragging a body over toward a pile of other bodies that he had stacked. The Rider appeared to set the body upon something with deliberate care, arranging the body in a particular way, before drawing his saber and making a downward slash with it. The sound of the blade cleaving head from neck with a single clean stroke was quiet enough that Clay could not hear it over the roar and crackles of the fires. The Rider pitched the head into the raging fire of Preacher John's covered wagon, then dragged the rest of the corpse onto the top of the chest-high pile of the dead.

In a strangely formal and polite gesture, the Rider bowed his head and paused for a few moments, apparently praying, before crossing himself. The container of fluid that the Rider then picked up and began splashing upon the pile of bodies wasn't holy water. It was lamp oil, which the Rider then set ablaze with a piece of timber pulled from the edge of the crumbling fire of Ned's wagon. The Rider stood and watched the new fire for some time, apparently to be certain that the bodies caught flame adequately, before finally turning and calmly walking back toward the campfire. He was breathing quite heavily with exhaustion by the time he sat down across the fire from Clay, letting out a strangely light sigh as he sat. Slaughtering and roasting human beings was apparently tiresome work.

It was still very difficult to make out any particular features of the Rider. His wide, black hat and the dark blue cloth covering his face left only his eyes visible, and even that much was smeared and streaked with soot and sweat. The only thing Clay could discern was that the Rider had very dark eyes as black as his boots and horse. The rider again wiped his blade clean with a cloth before sheathing the saber and then tossing the cloth into the fire. The dark eyes, the sword, the Spanish stallion... probably Mexican. This was the Arizona Territory, after all, and there wasn't anything about the Rider that struck Clay as being Apache or Navajo. If he saw his way out of this alive, he would make it a point to learn some Spanish words.

"I don't suppose you understand English, do you," Clay said more than asked.

The Rider regarded him silently for a few moments, then nodded as he turned his attention toward the fire. Okay, so he understood Clay's words. That was a start, anyway. Even if the Rider couldn't speak a lick of English, at least Clay could hope to plead his case to the masked killer.

"None of those people were really my friends," he told the Rider. "Not close ones, anyhow. If you're thinking I'm sore about what you just done with 'em, I'm not. I saw you pray over 'em. I know there weren't no hard feelings there. Although I can't for the life of me figure why you shot the preacher man. Sure you probably had your reasons for that. Just like you probably got your reasons for keeping me alive and tied up. You know... as opposed to tossing me in the fire over there with the others like a log."

The Rider kept his black eyes upon Clay with cautious suspicion as he picked up the pot of beans and stirred it with a wooden spoon. Clay waited for the Rider to say something in reply. Of course, he got nothing but that cold stare.

Clay snorted. "Didn't figure you'd care to explain any of that. Doesn't matter, I guess." He hesitated. "You planning on killing me still?"

The Rider shook his head, pouring some of the beans into a tin cup.

"How about letting me go, then?"

Again, he shook his head in silent reply. The Rider got up and stepped around the fire to stand before Clay. He held out the cup of beans with his left hand; his right hand rested upon the butt of a holstered revolver, his thumb already upon the hammer.

“That for me?” Clay asked cautiously. “The grub, I mean. Not the lead.”

The Rider thrust the cup toward him insistently. Clay shrugged and accepted the cup of hot food with his bound-together hands, though the beans were too hot to sample just yet.

“Much obliged, stranger,” he said. “Name's Clay, by the way. What about you?”

They locked stares for several long moments. Even at that close range, the Rider's identity was as vague as ever. Just a somewhat short, slender, silent shadow with equal parts mercy and ruthlessness. The Rider backed away from Clay calmly, although he kept that hand upon his pistol and his body facing him directly until he was a safe enough distance away.

He chuckled to himself. “Too much to ask, right? All right, then. Stranger's your name. Or Rider. You know, on account of that cavalry getup you're wearing.”

The Rider shook his head again and picked up another tin cup before grabbing the pot again and pouring himself the rest of the beans.

“So, I'm guessing you're taking me in alive. Didn't know they had any wanted posters of me yet, especially out this far in the country. Ain't like I'm Billy the Kid or anything. I only done one crime worth getting me hung, and that was far enough back in Kansas that I don't think anyone this far south would care.” He thought for a moment, blowing upon his cup of beans to cool them. “Unless, of course, you followed me all the way down here from Dodge City? Don't know why you didn't try to take me in sooner. Now you've just gotta ride that much farther back. Unless the whole mess with the crazy people-eaters was just your way of letting someone else deal with the others so you could come in without anyone else shooting back? That, or you wanted to get me before they did, because the reward money's less if I'm dead. Say, what's the story with these crazy people-eaters, anyway? Damnedest thing I ever did see. Never even heard of such a thing before.”

The Rider slammed the empty pot down with a loud clank that made Clay jump slightly. He let out a heavy sigh of apparent weariness as he proceeded to take off his riding gloves and wash his hands briefly with a few splashes of water from a canteen. The Rider's hands were surprisingly small, quite different than they had appeared when gloved. They were lightly stained, but obviously not even slightly calloused. These were not the hands of a working man by any means. Even for a man that appeared to be so well-versed in horseback riding and fighting, they were amazingly fair. The hands of a nobleman, surely. A man made rich by the blood of wanted men, able to afford servants to do his dirty work for him.

Although, if that were the case, then what was he doing so far away from his estate? Why bother doing all of this on his own? Why sully those clean, unmarked, and unscarred hands with all of this hard labor? Killing mad men and drunken preachers, beheading them, dragging their bodies, setting them ablaze...

“This sort of thing doesn't suit you.” The Rider froze in his movements, meeting Clay's eyes squarely from across the fire. “Not that you don't know what you're doing. Clearly, you've got a knack for it. But this ain't your bread and butter. You

make your days doing something else, I reckon. So, why do all this yourself? You trying to prove something to someone? Maybe to yourself? Hell, maybe this is all some kinda... what? Some kind of game to you? Some kinda sport?" The Rider clenched his gloves tightly in one hand, glaring at him with obvious displeasure. "Maybe this is just something personal?"

The Rider stood up suddenly. He gripped the gloves in his right hand with enough force that they squeaked.

"I know you understand what I'm saying." Clay cocked his head slightly. "You don't talk much, though. You some kinda mute?"

"*Shut up!*" the Rider finally yelled, pitching the gloves at Clay's face. The gloves bounced softly off his cheek... the sore one, of course.

Clay grinned. "Well, now. Ain't that a surprise. I knew you were listening. Never figured you for a woman, though."

"Shut your stupid gringo mouth, *pendejo!*" the Rider shouted angrily, yanking down the cloth that covered most of her face.

"Trying to prove you're as tough as the boys in your family, is that it?" he prodded with a laugh. "Or did your daddy raise you like a boy 'cause he never wanted a girl?"

The Rider drew the revolver from her right hip and had it cocked and aimed at him faster than Clay could even blink. He held up his bound hands in surrender, still smiling.

"Okay, okay," he said, "that was out of line. I'm sorry. Just funnin'."

"Do you ever shut up?"

"Sometimes, yeah, when I'm alone," he answered. "Being tied up and having a gun pointed at me by a woman who just killed, cut up, and burned a couple dozen people makes me a might bit nervous, though. And I talk a lot when I'm nervous. And besides, it gets a little lonesome out here in the desert, and..."

The Rider fired a shot that struck the dirt next to his feet and went buzzing off somewhere into the night. Clay took the hint. He kept his head down and focused on cooling his cup of beans for a while as the Rider holstered her Colt Peacemaker and sat down. For a long while, they both ate in silence. Clay used the time to gather his thoughts and further study his apparent captor.

The Rider was no doubt Mexican, that much was certain. And judging by her clothes and clean hands, she was from some kind of wealth. Perhaps she was some kind of... what? What the hell could she be that would explain her appearance, and her seemingly opposite knowledge of fighting and riding and general skills of living on the trail? She couldn't have been some runaway bride of a rich land owner, or some spoiled-rotten wealthy man's daughter. Was she just a thief that also happened to be a skilled shooter and rider? That might explain how she got her clothes, but it didn't make sense that she had such fair hands. Anyone who lived outdoors enough had the same hands, male or female—calloused, cut, scarred, leathery, and stained from daily use.

He finally set down his emptied cup, still watching her. She kept her gaze lowered most of the time, studying the crackling fire as if its flames and embers were telling her all of the world's secrets. Lost in her own thoughts, no doubt... but what sort of thoughts went through the mind of a woman like the Rider? For all he knew, she might have been thinking of killing him anyway and adding him to the

fire, just for being an annoyance to her. Or maybe she was already thinking of ways to spend her reward money after hauling him back to Kansas.

Wiping his lips with the back of his tied hands, Clay said the only thing that seemed safe and proper at the time: "Thank you... ma'am... for the meal. And for saving my life."

She lifted her head just enough to peer at him from under the brim of her black felt hat. The Rider stared at him briefly, apparently decided his words were sincere enough, and then responded with a subtle nod.

"You don't talk much, do you?"

"You talk enough for both of us," she responded in a low voice.

He shrugged. "Just trying to make sense of all this. Obviously, you know all about whatever is going on here. I was just thinkin', since you apparently don't want me dead... maybe you might tell me what it is that you do plan on doing with me?"

She shrugged, still watching the fire. "I have not decided."

"You mean you don't know what you're planning to do with me?"

"What I mean is," she replied testily, "I have not decided if I should kill you."

"Oh." He smirked. "I don't suppose my yapping is helping with that decision, is it?"

"It is. The more you talk, the more I want to shoot you."

He stared at her for a few moments. "Was that a joke?"

"Talk more," she responded calmly. "You will see."

Clay laughed nervously. The Rider didn't even crack a smile. He still wasn't sure if she was pulling his leg. Given his situation, he figured it was worth the risk to push his luck. If she really had wanted him dead, she wouldn't have wasted a meal upon him. Not unless she had a mean streak a mile wide and just wanted to raise his hopes for nothing before killing him. He wished he could say that women didn't have that sort of capacity for cruelty, but after what Ellie had done to him back in Dodge City, he wasn't so sure.

"Pardon my saying so, miss," he began carefully, "but you sure do talk pretty well for a Mexican."

"That is because I am not Mexican," she countered, setting aside her cup. "And if I was, we would not be talking now."

"Oh? How you figure?"

"Because I would not have helped you. I would have let Los Muertos eat you," the Rider informed him flatly. The Spanish accent in her voice was obvious, but not in a way that made her difficult to understand. "You gringos are not the only ones to remember the Alamo."

He wanted to press more to understand her background, but the stench of burning flesh that nearly pulled the food up from his belly made him drop that. The bigger issue at hand seemed a better thing to pursue while she still felt talkative.

"Los... what did you call them?"

"Los Muertos," she answered, picking up a roll-up kit that had she had previously laid atop Ned's trunk. "The dead."

"Those were dead people?" he asked incredulously. "They sure did seem lively for a bunch of dead folk."

"Undead."

"Yeah, that's what I said. Dead folk."

"No, you stupid gringo! Undead!" she snapped, shaking her head. "The undead are people who have died and are alive again."

"But I thought you just said they were dead...?"

The Rider threw her hands up in the air briefly, letting out an exasperated sigh and muttering something bitter in Spanish. She took out a spiral brush and drew her revolver. Instead of shooting Clay, she expertly popped out the cartridges, removed the cylinder, and then began cleaning the revolver with the brush.

"So," Clay asked after a few moments, "these *Los Mortals* things..."

"Los Muertos! *Muertos!*" she insisted impatiently, again muttering angry Spanish. "How can you live in this desert and not speak Spanish?"

He shrugged. "Sorry. Nobody I knew where I grew up in Kansas was teaching it." She said nothing in response to that. "So these..."

"Los Muertos."

"...undead, I was going to say," he continued with a smirk. "What are they, and where are they from? And how do you know so much about them?"

She shrugged, jabbing the brush down the big bore of the Colt forty-five.

"I do not know where they are from," she admitted, "but I do know who took them here. And I do know what makes them. It is a sickness."

"What, like the pox?"

"No. It is like the rabies. Or the Bubonic Plague."

Clay snickered at that. "That's rich."

"What is funny about that?"

"You just made that up. The *Blue Bonnet Plague?*" he chuckled. "That's the goofiest damned sickness I ever heard of!"

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Why do I even try to tell you? You are too stupid a gringo to understand."

"Well, you could try talking with one of those people-eating *Los Moo-air-toes* things instead, if you see another one around," he quipped, mocking her pronunciation of the Spanish term, "but that would be a mighty one-sided conversation." He shrugged. "Anyway... so, these things are made by a plague of some kind, you say?"

"Si."

"Yeah, I see."

"Si means yes, gringo."

"Oh. How about that, you're teaching me Spanish. That's great!" he said with a smile. After a moment, he gave her a puzzled look. "Although it seems you really don't care much for white folk."

"I have no problem with the whites," she said, pausing to blow a puff of air down the barrel of her pistol. "I have a problem with *you*."

"My charming looks are irresistible, I know."

"Your big mouth never shuts up."

"It does when I'm kissing a pretty lady."

"Do not waste your time on stupid dreams," she said, shaking her head. "You will never be kissing me."

"I wasn't referring to you." He shrugged, running his fingers through his wavy brown hair. "Then again, I've never really had a clear enough look at you to rightly say you ain't pretty."

"And you will not."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"Because I am going to shoot you with this gun when I am done cleaning it," she said as she picked up the cylinder. "I think you should think of a very, very good reason I should let you live."

That gave Clay a bit of pause.

"What about... because I'm so damned handsome?"

The Rider ignored him, running the brush through each bore in the cylinder.

"Y'know, if you shoot me, you won't have anyone to talk to," he suggested. "Like I said, it can get mighty lonely out here."

He saw the Rider's gaze lift slightly, her eyes just barely visible again under the shade of her hat, as if she'd actually considered that thought. It only lasted for a moment. She went back to cleaning her gun.

"Okay then," he finally said, "what about the fact that you could probably use an extra pair of hands and another gun or two to help you deal with these... Muertos?"

"I do not need your help. I need more bullets and supplies," she replied flatly. "I have that from your wagons."

"Maybe. But obviously, you saved me for a reason."

She shrugged. "It seemed right at that time."

"But now you're going to shoot me anyway?" he asked. The Rider shrugged again. "Seems like kind of a waste. Does my wanted poster say they'll pay the same reward, whether I'm dead or alive?"

"I do not know," she responded, running an oiled patch through the bore of the revolver. "And I do not care."

"Then why not just let me go?"

"Because you might become one of them. I have to know you do not have the sickness that will make you Los Muertos." She ran another patch through the bore. "If I shoot you now, then I know you will not become Los Muertos."

A thought occurred to him. "That why you shot Preacher John? You thought he was one of those things?"

She nodded, tossing the dirty patch into the fire. "He had the bite. Los Muertos are made by the bite, like rabies."

"Well, I never got bit."

"Other things make Los Muertos, too."

"Like what?"

The Rider shook her head. "Other things. I am not sure. That is why I tie you up. If you become Los Muertos, then I cannot let you go. You will give the sickness to others. I am trying to stop that." She paused, her voice softening somewhat. "This is my thing to do."

She began to reassemble the revolver after putting away the small cleaning kit. Time was running short. He supposed that his life was on trial here, and this was the moment to make his final argument before she handed down her verdict... and carried out his sentence.

“Suppose I ride along with you just for a while? Help you out however I can, and help you kill a few more of those things if we run across any between here and Tombstone? Or at least Goldfield, maybe Tucson?” he suggested. “I’m not so bad with a gun myself, as you might have seen earlier.”

“I saw that,” she admitted with a subtle nod, poking the cylinder guide rod into place.

“And I know more than just how to shoot ‘em,” he added. “My dad was a gunsmith back in Kansas, taught me a thing or two about fixing guns. So, unless you plan on using that fancy sword of yours all the time, it might be a good idea to have me around so I can make sure they always go bang.”

The Rider considered that for a moment, rolling the cylinder of the revolver with her fingertips very slowly, the clicks of the Colt’s action ticking away like a very loud pocketwatch. Finally, she let out a heavy sigh, gave the cylinder a very quick spin, and then stood up. She let her left arm hang at her side while her right held the Peacemaker steady, leveling its aim at his nose.

“Do you have last words?” she asked calmly.

For a moment, he just stared at the gaping hole in the end of the gun. From that perspective, it looked like he was staring into the wrong end of a cannon. And then he smiled.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’ve got a feeling it’s going to be a real interesting experience, riding with you.”

The Rider cocked the revolver’s hammer with a slow tug of her thumb, and then tightened her grip upon it as she lined up the sights with his forehead. Clay chuckled.

“That bluff might work on someone else, but I ain’t that someone else...”

The gun clicked.

“...partner,” he finished with a triumphant grin. “Unless you’re planning to pistol-whip me to death, an empty gun ain’t much of a threat.”

The Rider stared at him for a moment before asking, “How did you know?”

“The way the gun looked when you pointed it at me. I could see that the cylinder bores were empty,” he explained. “You’re holding the bullets in your other hand. You never loaded them into the gun.”

She held up her left hand for him to see, uncurling the fingers of her fist. The palm of her hand was empty. Clay felt something inside of his chest do a flip-flop.

“You are very brave... or maybe very stupid. I *did* load this gun,” she said. She stepped around the fire, keeping her Colt aimed at him until it was nearly touching his forehead. “Can you see now?”

How could he not see? Indeed, from his perspective, it looked as though the gun might have been fully loaded, as he could see the flat gray noses of four bullets staring back at him from within the cylinder. He swallowed what felt like a lump of sand in his throat.

“Well... I’ll be damned,” he marveled softly. “Guess my eyes aren’t as good as I thought.”

“There were five bullets. I shot one. Now there are four,” she explained.

“But... I saw you take ‘em out and run a brush through...?”

“And I put the four bullets in again,” she confirmed with a nod, keeping the gun pointed at him. “I put in two, left one out, and put in two more.”

Now his palms were beginning to sweat, and his tongue was starting to stick inside his mouth. He had terribly misjudged not only her actions, but her capacity for violence and her mercy.

“And then you spun the cylinder.” He swallowed hard. “You really were going to kill me.”

“Stand up.” He hesitated. She cocked the gun. “Stand up!”

Reluctantly, he obeyed. The next time she pulled the trigger, he knew it would not simply go *click*. He only wondered if he would hear the gun go off, or if his death would be so sudden that he'd never hear anything but the singing of angels... assuming, of course, he didn't just go straight to hell, or if he even went anywhere at all when he died.

He stared long and hard at the Rider for as much time as he was given. Up close now, her face not hidden so much by her mask or hat, he could see that she wasn't the least bit ugly. In fact, from what he could tell, she might actually be pretty. Full lips, small nose, high cheekbones, smooth skin—although smeared with filth at the moment—and those eyes, those incredibly dark eyes of hers. The Rider's gaze was both beautiful and chilling at once. As a woman, her eyes were charming to behold, but there wasn't the slightest bit of compassion or mercy to be seen in them now.

“Well... I guess this is it,” he sighed. “At least I got a chance to look you right in the eye first. And you gave me a chance to say my piece... even if I did waste it like a fool.”

“Turn around.”

He offered one last feeble smile before showing her his back. “Death sure does have a pretty face.”

Clay felt the muzzle of the Colt touch the back of his neck, right at the base of his skull. The blued steel of the forty-five was warm against his skin.

“One last question?” he dared to ask.

The Rider let out a heavy sigh of frustration. “What?”

“Why only four bullets? Why not five or six?” Clay asked, feeling his pulse thudding in his throat. “You only had a four-in-six chance of shooting me.”

“Because,” she explained, moving abruptly behind him and throwing something onto the ground nearby, “I did not know if I could trust you. So, I decided to ask God. He wants you to live.” She pulled the gun away from his head, and he heard her de-cock the hammer. He glanced down with his eyes and saw that she had thrown a large knife into the ground to the left of his feet. “Use the knife to cut the rope. And stay on your side of the fire.”

“And then what?”

“And then you sleep,” she replied. “I will watch for Los Muertos until morning. Then you will help me move the wagon, and I will sleep while you take us to the next town.”

Clay turned around slowly to look at her. The Rider's gaze was still cautiously fixed upon him as she snapped shut the loading gate of the Colt Peacemaker, apparently having just added one or two more bullets to the cylinder. She worked the action quickly, lowering the hammer back down to a safe resting position, and then she thrust it into its leather home upon her hip.

“Do not give me a reason to go against God's will, gringo,” she warned him before picking up the Henry rifle and sitting down across the fire from him once more.

Chapter 3

Sleep did not find Clay easily. Being from Kansas, there were some sounds of wildlife in the desert night that were not familiar to him. The images of those grossly disfigured Los Muertos things, coming after him and brutally savaging his travel companions, kept lingering at the front of his mind every time he closed his eyes. The idea that a surprisingly skilled fighter like the Rider was keeping watch was comforting, although not very. He halfway expected her to shoot him in his sleep, perhaps for no other reason than because he might be snoring. He did manage to get some sleep in before the sun rose and became hot enough to wake him.

By the time he arose, terribly sore and still feeling like he could use a few more hours of rest, the Rider had packed up everything that she had deemed worth keeping in the prospectors' covered wagon. The two of them managed to maneuver the wagon around the smoking wreckage of the first two wagons and the stinking, smoldering remains of their former owners. The Rider's fine black stallion was tied to the wagon and allowed to trail behind while she found just enough space in the wagon to lay down and rest as Clay commanded the other pair of horses.

Clay was surprised that she trusted him enough to give him back his revolver and shotgun, with enough ammunition for both to hold off a small army... or another gang of Los Muertos. She was not trusting him enough to take off her own arsenal of weapons to sleep, as she laid down in full attire, using her rolled-up cloak as a blanket, and covering her face with her hat. He wasn't sure how she could sleep back there like that, hot as hell and bouncing around as they went along, but she actually did seem to find some rest that way. It was well into the afternoon before she emerged again.

When she awoke, commanding him in a weary voice to stop the wagon, she somehow looked even more tired than she had before. They had descended from the mountain upon which their paths had crossed, and they were perhaps a mile away from what looked like a potential stream or small river in a wide valley before yet another long mountain range. At least Clay hoped it would be a stream, rather than yet another dry wash. This hellish landscape seemed to have no end to the number of places that offered false promises of fresh water, only to mock him with large, dry cracks in the land. There may have been water there are one point in time, and with it many signs of life. But now all this land seemed to hold was dust, stone, thorny things, and much more certain promises of death in many ways.

The Rider squinted against the brightness of the midday sun, covering her head with that black hat. He'd glimpsed long, flowing hair so black that it was nearly blue as the light hit it. Before she hid herself under the black riding cloak, he saw that she was quite slender but shapely, with womanly hips that showed obviously

through the form-fitting line of her trousers, a tiny waist, and the swell of a generous bosom chastely hidden under a long-sleeved white shirt accented with ruffles and lace here and there.

"You've got a mighty poor choice of colors for most of your outfit, if you don't mind me saying," he told her as she got out of the wagon. "I hope for your sake you thought to take some of the dresses that Betsy and Clara had."

"Why do you care?" she asked. "These clothes are good. There is nothing wrong with them."

"Well, nothing except for the fact that they belong on a fella," he replied with a smirk. He tipped his own hat to her as she glared at him. "Again, no offense meant, ma'am."

"These are my clothes. They were made for me, and I am a woman," she informed him flatly. "What you are saying, gringo, makes no sense."

"You don't think that outfit is weird for a woman? Pants and a shirt?" Clay asked. He gestured loosely at her with the reins. "And why the cape? Are you cold or something?"

She frowned at him deeply. "This is what I wear so that I may ride and fight. I do not dress to please you, gringo. What I wear is not for you to worry."

"Well... why so much, though? And why black?" he persisted as she put her fists upon her broad hips. "I mean... ain't you kinda uncomfortable wearing that in this heat?"

"I am fine," she insisted stubbornly, "but again, that is not for you to worry."

"It is, if you go falling dead or sick from the sun."

"We are in the mountains!" the Rider exclaimed, throwing her arms apart widely to gesture to the surrounding landscape. "How can you say this is hot? When we go into the valley on the other side of those mountains, it will be much, much hotter than this."

Clay gawked at her. "Hotter than this?"

"*Si, gringo. Mucho más caliente.*"

"What?"

"Much hotter."

"Lord almighty," he breathed as she spun on a heel and began to march away. "Already feels as hot as the worst summer days I ever knew in Kansas."

"You are not in Kansas anymore," she responded without looking back at him. He was surprised that she could hear him that many paces away, especially since he'd only muttered that remark.

She began making her way west, away from the wagon and toward a line of brush. Raising his voice, he called out to her, "Where you going?"

"Somewhere I can be alone!" she yelled back. "And do not follow me! If I see you watching, I will shoot you in the eyes!"

Clay chuckled, mumbling, "If you heard nature calling, you could've just squatted behind the wagon. Betsy and Clara always did. No sense wandering way off the trail."

Amazingly, she turned around and shouted something rude at him in Spanish in reply to that before walking on. She had to be at least twenty yards away, maybe more. Damn, she had the ears of a wolf! The Rider finally disappeared behind the tall, thorny line of bushes to attend to her needs.

Clay took the opportunity to stand up, stretch, and climb down from the wagon. He went to the opposite side of the wagon, relieved himself, and refilled his nearly empty canteen from the keg inside the wagon. They were not yet out of water, but he was still hoping to find fresh water soon. Waiting until the water was gone before looking for more was a sure way to die of thirst in a hurry, even on the Kansas Plains. And if this wasn't even the hottest part of the Arizona Territory that they were in yet...

The sound of a gunshot startled Clay enough to nearly drop his canteen. By the time he had capped it and grabbed for his shotgun, three more shots had rung out from the west. Without hesitation, Clay sprinted toward the line of brush, his right hand ready to sweet back both hammers as he ran. As he drew near, he heard a completely inhuman sound, the high-pitched squeal of something that almost sound like ... like a pig? Really? Out here? In the desert? While he wasn't entirely sure of that, he was very certain about the other sound that preceded and followed yet another gunshot: a woman's brief scream, then the same woman breathlessly prattling away in Spanish.

When he dashed 'round the edge of the bushes, the first thing he saw was the Rider whirling around to face him, her hat gone and her long, blue-black hair billowing around her like a long veil. An instant later, he saw the pistol in her hand, although not before he heard the snap of her gun's hammer landing upon an empty chamber. She was laying upon the ground with her legs drawn up defensively, her riding cape and gun belt hanging from a tree branch a couple of yards away. Her trousers were down past her knees, though her long, un-tucked shirt kept her lower self discreetly covered.

Whatever the hell she had been shooting was now lying upon the ground by her feet in a dusty heap. It was fat, brown, covered in coarse hair, had yellow-white tusks, and smelled almost as bad as Los Muertos—almost, but not quite.

“What in God's name...?”

“Javelina,” the Rider said after a moment, finally relaxing somewhat.

“Looks like a wild boar to me.”

“Si. Javelina,” she repeated, still catching her breath. “I smelled it, but I was thinking it was the smell of Los Muertos on my clothes.” Snapping out of her breathless panic, she only then seemed to become aware of her exposure, scowling at Clay angrily. “I told you to stay at the wagon.”

“I heard shooting. Thought you needed some help.”

“I do not. I am fine.”

Clay watched as she shoved her emptied revolver into one of her shoulder holsters and began to hike her trousers back up. He glimpsed a smear of blood upon her leg, and a fresh wound above her knee.

“You okay? Looks like it cut you up a bit.”

“I am fine,” she insisted impatiently. “Now go.”

Clay hesitated. “That cut looks serious. It might get infected if...”

“I said go!” the Rider shouted, drawing her pistol from the other shoulder holster and pointing it at him. “*Desaparecer, pervertido!* Stop looking at me!”

“I wasn't...” he began to say. The Rider cocked the revolver, and Clay immediately turned away with his hands up in surrender. “All right, all right, I'm going! I'll be at the wagon.”

He made his way back to the wagon, closely examining the surrounding countryside with his eyes for any signs of humanity. If anyone else had heard those gunshots, they might come to investigate. He could not really imagine any scenario where that would be a good thing. If Apaches found them, they might attack. If a patrol of soldiers found them, they might identify Clay as a wanted man and take him prisoner. Even if ordinary folk came their way, he wasn't so sure that the trigger-happy and easily-angered Rider might not shoot them for little or no reason at all. And if there were more of those Los Muertos things around, and if they were drawn to the sounds of gunshots, then there would be enough shooting after that to get the attention of everyone and everything in the whole damned desert.

Clay tried to busy himself by tending to their horses as he waited for the Rider to return. His patience had nearly run out, and he had just been on the edge of risking one of her bullets to check on her when the Rider finally emerged from the brush. She had torn a sleeve from her shirt and tied it around the wound above her left knee as a bandage. She was limping only slightly as she walked calmly in his general direction, using her riding cape to brush the dust from her clothes before shaking it out and putting it on.

He fought the urge to say anything just yet, and she seemed to be deliberately avoiding direct eye contact as she walked around behind the wagon. From a pack tied to the saddle of her horse, she pulled a large bottle of liquor. She pulled the bandage slightly away from the wound, uncorked the bottle with her teeth, and bit down upon the cork as she poured a bit of tequila directly upon the bandage and wound. The Rider took a long drink from the bottle before jabbing the cork back in. Her gaze finally drifted in his direction.

For a few moments, they just stared at each other in silence while the bugs of the desert heat buzzed their loud and monotonous one-note song. The Rider tapped her palm upon the cork a couple of times, seating it a bit deeper in the neck of the bottle as she seemed to be thinking deeply about something. At last, she averted her eyes and turned away, putting the bottle back into place in the saddle pack.

"I wasn't trying to sneak a peek, I swear," Clay offered carefully. "I just heard shooting, so I came running. I thought it might be more of those Los Muertos things."

"I know," she said. The Rider opened her mouth to say something, then appeared to think otherwise as she shut it again. She glanced once more in his direction before looking at her hands to put on her gloves. "You did nothing wrong."

"Even though you damn near shot me?"

She let out a heavy sigh. "I was confused."

"Lucky for me, you lost count of your shots," Clay mused.

"*Si*. Lucky for you," she agreed, adding something to that in mumbled Spanish that he did not understand. The Rider approached him and then strode past, climbing up to the front of the wagon. "We must go. There will be rain here soon. We do not want to be in this place when it comes."

Clay looked up and around, utterly incredulous. "Rain? Here?"

"*Si*, rain. *Mucha agua*," she confirmed with a nod, settling onto the bench seat. "It will come before sunset."

He could only see a loose gathering of clouds in the southern sky. Clay knew the weather in Kansas, and he knew rain when he saw it. What he saw in the sky past the range of mountains looked nothing like it.

"How can you be so sure?" he asked as he climbed onto the wagon and sat next to her. "Were you doing some kind of Mexican rain dance back there in the bushes?"

She gave him a sour look for just a moment, but surprisingly she did not insult him or threaten to shoot him. Clay hoped that it was a sign of progress between him. He couldn't spend this entire journey with someone that he feared would kill him at any given moment for random, trivial reasons.

"I can feel it in the air... smell it," she explained vaguely as Clay took the reins and urged the horses into motion. "It rains much here at this time of the year. You can feel the water in the air, how it makes the air feel heavy."

"Feels like any other summer day in Kansas to me," he said as the horses began to plod ahead, "except it's a hell of a lot hotter."

"This is not Kansas," she reminded him again.

He nodded. "You ain't kidding."

"No, I am not. What I say is true."

Clay gave her a confused look. "You don't have much of a sense of humor, do you?" When he saw the equally confused look upon her face, he elaborated. "You don't know how to laugh at anything in life, do you?"

The Rider cast her dark eyes at the trail ahead as she replied, "There is not much in life to make me laugh or smile. Nothing left to enjoy."

"You think so?"

"*Si*. I know this to be true." Her face seemed to darken as some thought crossed her mind. "Very, very true."

"Is that why you're so angry all the time? Why you're always threatening to shoot me, why you're always calling me a gringo?"

"No. I call you gringo because this is what you are."

"Then why does it always sound like an insult when you say it?"

The Rider glanced at him again, then looked down to the bandage around her leg. "I do not say it as an insult. It is just a word. It is who you are."

"Who I am?" Clay laughed. "Rider Girl, I'm not sure if you paid any mind when I told you before, but my name is Clay. That's who I am."

"Clay?"

"That's me."

She stared at him for a moment. "Your name is... dirt?"

He laughed long at that, slapping his knee. "See? I knew you had a sense of humor under that hat of yours."

"I did not say a joke. I was asking a serious question," she insisted innocently, not even cracking a smile. "Why is your name a word for dirt?"

He grinned at her and said, "Maybe it's because they knew I'd grow up to have a dirty mind?" Clearly, that also went right over her head. "I don't know. It's just a name my parents gave me, because my father had the same name."

"Oh. I understand now."

“How about you? You got a name?”

She hesitated. “I do.”

“Well... what is it?”

“My name is not important. Why do you need to know this?”

“Because you're always trying to kill me,” Clay said. “I'd at least like to know your name before you wind up putting a bullet between my ears at some point, just for looking at you the wrong way.”

She fiddled with the bandage for a few moments, then finally said, “If I promise to not kill you, then will you still need to know my name?”

“Well... I suppose that's okay,” he conceded. “I mean, it would be nice if I could call you something other than Stranger or Rider, especially if we're going to be on this trail together for a few days.” He paused, waiting for a response and receiving none. “But if you don't want to tell me, then that's fine. I suppose your promise is better than knowing your name. I don't figure a name is much good to me if I'm dead.”

They rode on in silence for almost a minute before either of them spoke again. When the Rider finally did utter something, Clay almost didn't hear it.

“Thank you.”

He turned to face her with a raised eyebrow, adjusting his hat for the sun's angle. “Come again?”

“Thank you... Clay,” she said with visible reluctance. Apparently, it must have hurt her pride something terrible to say those words.

“What for?”

The Rider jerked a thumb over her shoulder. “Back there... with the javelina.”

Clay shrugged. “I didn't do anything. Well... aside from almost getting shot.”

“You tried to help.” She nodded to him. “Thank you for that.”

He waited for more. She said nothing else, turning her eyes away to look off to the southeast and the swell of clouds peeking up from the other side of the mountain range. Clay chuckled.

“I guess that's the closest thing to an apology I can hope to get from you, huh?”

“Si, gringo.”

Chapter 4

The Rider's keen senses proved true once again. It soon became obvious that a storm would be upon them before nightfall, just as she had predicted. Passing through the least treacherous passes between the mountains, the storm clouds seemed to spring up from out of the mountains themselves. Lightning flashed with a frequency and intensity like nothing Clay had ever seen before. His initial fear was that they were about to be taken by a wicked storm that would birth a massive twister that would stretch down from the darkened skies and scoop them up like the hand of a wrathful God.

The Rider assured him that the wind would be of less a worry than the rains and the lightning. According to her, they wanted to be standing on neither the

lowest ground nor the highest when the storm hit. Waters could flood the low areas in a blink, and lightning always seemed to lust for the highest parts of any landscape. Clay offered no protest to her direction as she guided him off the trail toward more favorable ground.

It was as they were passing between two moderate inclines of the mountainous terrain that the Rider abruptly ordered Clay to stop the wagon. Her gaze panned left and right, slow and wide-eyed, as she actually began to sniff at the air.

"Yeah, I smell it now, too," Clay agreed. "No doubt about it, that storm is gonna..."

"*Silenico!*" she hissed, lowering her voice nearly to a whisper. "It is not the rain that I smell. It is smoke."

"Smoke?" Clay sniffed at the damp air, too. "Yeah, I kinda smell it. Maybe the lightning set fire to something ahead. I hope we're not riding into a wildfire." Something odd caught his nose just then. "That doesn't smell like wood burning."

"No. It is not only wood. There is something else." She stood up, her hands resting upon the pistols at her hips. "Burning skin... blood... Los Muertos. Death."

"Well, that ain't exactly comforting," he muttered as she disembarked from the wagon. "Where you going? Need to find another bush again?"

"Stay with the wagon and horses," she told him. "Make one of the horses ready to ride. If Los Muertos comes to you when I am gone, you cannot run away fast with the wagon."

The Rider quickly began to untie her stallion from the back of the wagon. She pulled her Henry rifle from its scabbard, made sure that it was fully loaded, and then slid it back into the sheath on the side of the saddle. From underneath the front collar of her shirt, she took out what appeared to be a crucifix, clutching it tightly in both of her gloved hands and touching it to her forehead. She closed her eyes, whispered a brief prayer in either Spanish or Latin, kissed the sacred item, and then tucked it back into her shirt.

"If I do not come back, then you will ride back to the trail and camp there until morning," she told him as she mounted the horse easily. "Ride the trail south through the mountains. Goldfield is not far from here. You will be safe."

"What if you find those Los Muertos things?"

"Then I will kill them."

"What if there's too many?"

"Then I will kill some and try to make the others follow me," she informed him confidently. "I will take them away from here so you can run away."

"What if they find me here first?"

"Shoot their heads. It is the only way to kill them," she said. "I will hear your shooting, and I will come to help."

"And what if I hear you shooting?"

"Then be ready to run away." The Rider pointed her finger at him sternly. "Do not come to help me. Wait here, even if there is shooting. You must trust me. *Entiendes?*"

"What?"

"Understand?"

"Oh. I guess so."

She pulled up the dark blue handkerchief she used to mask her face, and she gathered up the horse's reins firmly. Meeting his gaze squarely one last time, the Rider said, "*Vaya con Dios, gringo.*"

With that, she dug the heels of her riding boots into the stallion's sides and took off like a shot, zipping out of sight in just a few moments around a bend in the sloping landscape that was layered with scant trees and more thorny brush. She rode with such swiftness and surety that she seemed to know exactly where she was going. Having no idea whatsoever about her history or origins, it was entirely possible that these hills and mountains were what she called home. It might have better explained why she was familiar with the weather, and how she had run across Clay and the others in the caravan: she may have simply been defending her own land from Los Muertos.

The first real winds of the storm arrived a short time later, coming in great, powerful surges, like God Himself was blowing one mighty breath after another at the world. When the rain came, it was surreal in its delivery and frightening with its force. Clay could actually see the rain coming from almost a quarter of a mile away, a slowly waving but rapidly advancing veil of torrential downpour that came like an ocean wave. One minute, it was utterly dry and still between gusts of wind, then the first few fat drops began to fall, and then it was suddenly just there, all of it, all at once. Thinking of it as a heavy rain seemed literal, as it sounded and felt as though the heavens had become water and were crushing the earth as it all came down.

Clay had initially planned to just sit on the bench of the wagon and literally ride out the storm. That was until hailstones the size of grapes began to fall, at first only mixed in with the heavy rain but eventually coming down as nearly half of everything that fell from the swirling dark gray clouds overhead. He initially tried to seek refuge under the canopy of the wagon, but the force of the winds and the hard rain began to bend and finally break the hoops holding up the oiled canvas covering. He did his best to pull what remained of the cover over the wagon's contents to protect them, and then he ducked underneath the wagon for shelter, holding the canvas in place with a couple of ropes he tied to the wheels.

Under the wagon, he was safe from the hailstones, but not the dampness of the rain, as water was already running under the wagon in a series of little rivers. The horses, unfortunately, were at the mercy of the elements. They screamed and whinnied loudly as the hailstones pelted their hides. Hailstones of this size would not kill them, but Clay knew that they sure hurt like hell, as he had been struck by more than a few of them already. He just hoped that they would not break free from their rigging or pull the wagon over the thick rocks he had placed in front of and behind a couple of the wagon's wheels to keep it in place. Instead of being beaten to death by hailstones, he would instead be trampled or crushed by the horses or wagon.

The hail didn't last very long. However, what seemed to replace it and the gale-force winds and rain was not an improvement: lightning, far too close for comfort. Thunder had already been rumbling and booming for the past couple of hours, only vague but somewhat bright flashes of light amongst the clouds that seemed to hang almost low enough to touch. Now, as the rain seemed to let up halfway, the lightning had decided to take center stage in this furious display of nature's

force, appearing as blindingly bright, singular bolts of white light that shot down from above. The bolts were accompanied not by soft rumbles or low booms but instead by sharp cracks and bangs of thunder, like otherworldly cannon fire.

Clay wasn't an expert on the weather, but one thing he had learned from his years on the Kansas Plains was that the shorter the time was between a flash of lightning and the sound of thunder, the closer it was. At this point, it almost seemed to be right on top of him, taking little more than the moment of an eye-blink for the sound to reach him after each flash.

In the middle of all this chaos, as he hunkered down under the wagon in the mud and worsening streams of water, Clay's mind began to wander. Storms did not especially frighten him—not usually, at least, not like this one—but one storm in his childhood had left him with an important lesson he would never forget, as well as his first experience with death.

Clay had been a young boy at the time, he remembered. He and another boy had been playing in a creek near the family farm, catching frogs, playing with sticks, skipping rocks upon the water, and so on. The banks of the creek were steep and lined with just a few tall trees, mostly just weeds and bushes, and everything beyond on either side was nothing but grassy fields that had been fenced off with barbed wire for cattle grazing. A storm had begun to roll in, nothing quite as powerful as this desert-borne mountain fury, but full of lightning and dark clouds.

Clay's father had often told him to never be the tallest thing in a field when the lightning came. A rancher sitting on his horse only a mile or so away had been killed that way not long ago, he'd been told. So, afraid of running out in that open field to get home and thus making himself a target for God to strike down, Clay had insisted upon ducking under the concave bank of the creek. His friend, Tommy, instead thought it wiser to seek shelter under a big fat oak tree.

"The tree's bigger than me, so I'm fine!" Tommy had insisted, motioning anxiously for Clay to come stand beside him.

No sooner had Tommy made that claim than fate had proved him wrong. Clay had actually just begun to lean away from the creek bank to go stand with him when he felt the weirdest damned sensation ever. Even being wet from playing in the creek, Clay's hair all seemed to want to stand on end suddenly, like some ghostly force was pulling it up off his head. And then, just a moment or two later... *POW!* There was a blinding flash, an explosion louder than anything Clay had ever heard before or since, and a shower of sparks and embers from that big tree. Just like that—*POW!*—and Tommy was dead.

He remembered that burnt and blackened look poor Tommy had earned from his choice of shelter, how the lightning had not only carved a big fat limb right off the tree but also continued right on down through the top of his head, scorching that red hair right off, passing through his body, and then coming out of his left foot, which it had halfway blown apart. And, of course, the unmistakable stench of burnt hair and flesh... much like what the Rider had brought about last night, and what they had both smelled before the start of this storm.

All of this was bouncing around in Clay's head while the storm went on, as his thoughts always did during bad storms. What jerked his attention away from that bad childhood memory and back to his unpleasant adulthood was a very loud,

very bright, and very close clap of thunder. And with that, Clay took a moment to survey his surroundings yet again. And then he realized what an awful spot he was in, and what an inadequate shelter he had chosen.

Perhaps an eighth of a mile away, Clay saw a small tree in flames and a puff of smoke rising from it, freshly struck by lightning. The Rider had reminded him that they did not want to be on the higher parts of the mountain range when the storm hit. Well, he was sitting about two-thirds of the way down to the lowest part of this area. There were several mountain and hill peaks far higher up than where he was at. And there were numerous trees and a couple of tall cactus plants that were taller than the tree that now burned, yet the lightning had sought out that particular little tree anyhow. Apparently, the "lightning seeks the tallest thing" idea was more of an educated guess than a hard rule.

What was clear to him in that moment, though, was that the wagon was a poor choice of refuge. And the wagon and horses were at least as tall as the tree that had been struck. And, worst of all, a familiar and peculiar sensation was coming over him then as he pulled back the damp sleeve of his shirt.

"Oh, hell," Clay gasped, watching gooseflesh pop up on his forearm as a strange tingling sensation began to wash over him.

Clay scrambled out from under the wagon, dashing full-speed toward the only feature that looked like it might protect him: a shallow wash surrounded by large rocks, maybe twenty yards away. Clay had scarcely dove into it and turned to look back when a sharp and incredibly strong crack of thunder exploded behind him with a simultaneous flash of light that actually left him blind and blinking away a strange ghost-image of a big line of blue. His ears rang for a few seconds after the echo of the thunderclap reverberated through the mountains, as if he'd been sitting right next to the world's biggest cannon as it had been fired.

When Clay's vision finally cleared up enough for him to really begin to look around again, he looked back toward the wagon. The horses both lay still and in odd positions, every bit as dead as poor Tommy had been. The echo of that thunder seemed to bounce off of the surrounding landscape forever, coming back to him in shorter, more muted reports... almost like pops or minor bangs from afar. There was more lightning, more claps of thunder, but none so close as what had nearly cooked him. Clay doubted he would ever hear anything again so loud for the rest of his days. And he sure hoped not, for it would surely be the last thing he ever heard at all.

Clay waited for a couple of minutes. The intensity of the lightning and thunder was quickly diminishing, and the worst of the storm seemed to be moving on to other parts of this rocky wasteland. Only a steady pattering of rain continued, not even a third as strong as the initial downpour. The rain... and the echoes of thunder, bands that carried through the mountains and hills with a strange sense of timing and frequency. Eventually climbing out of his hiding place, Clay quickly realized that the sounds had nothing at all to do with lightning and thunder. Rather, they were the sounds of burning gunpowder and hot lead.

Chapter 5

Without a live horse, Clay had no option for retreat. The sounds of gunfire were surprisingly close, perhaps just around the bend of the hillside where the Rider had disappeared. Running away from those sounds of battle would have taken him in the same direction as where the storm seemed to have moved, and he'd already had his fill of that experience. Clay hurried over to what was left of the wagon, which was smoldering in a few places – it might still catch fire, but he could not wait around to see. He grabbed his lever-action Winchester rifle from the back and started heading on foot in the general direction of the shooting.

The way that the rough landscape caused sounds to echo in odd ways played tricks with Clay's ears. He'd started going around to the southwest side of the hill when he heard a shot that sounded like it was coming from the east, almost directly behind him. He had turned and started to trot along that way quickly, being mindful of the muddy and rocky ground that was tricky underfoot, when another shot sounded again from the southwest. It was only when a bullet struck the ground just a few yards beside him, buzzing upward, that he suddenly realized that the shots were coming from lower ground.

The site was so small and hidden amongst the landscape that it wasn't likely that he would have otherwise found it on his own, least of all before nightfall. Even in daylight, the cabin would have been a trick to see, given the way it was neatly tucked into the hillside. Only the thick, acrid smoke that arose from nearby the cabin gave away its placement, until Clay rounded one more angle in the landscape and happened upon it.

The cabin was actually somewhat huge, once Clay was in a position to observe it directly. Trails well-worn by hooves and wheels led to and from it, a worn lean-to shelter stood on one side, and what looked to have once been a stable was smoldering on the other side, its flames mostly but not entirely extinguished by the heavy rains. Even from afar, the smells of death were obvious, and they became downright overpowering as Clay cautiously approached the ravaged trading post.

The shooting had stopped a few minutes before Clay got close to the site. As far as he could tell, nothing alive was in sight, or at least not moving. There were several wagons, and more than a few dead horses in front of them or nearby. The Rider's black stallion was milling around on the loose in front of the cabin, audibly still huffing as it tried to catch its breath. It regarded Clay almost nervously as he approached, pinning its ears back and looking at him with wide eyes.

Bodies lay strewn about the area in shockingly high numbers and in various states of gory death. Most appeared to have been shot, and a few were either decapitated or missing portions of their heads. All but a few appeared to have suffered other strange wounds prior to being shot or cut down by the Rider, with parts of their clothing and the pale flesh underneath torn away by teeth or maybe claws... although Clay wasn't sure why the latter thought occurred to him.

There was a lot of shouting going on from within the cabin. Some of it sounded like outright panic, but part of it sounded like a mostly one-sided argument. He

recognized the Rider's voice quickly, but he didn't have a clue what anyone was saying, because everything was apparently being spoken in Spanish.

The front door of the cabin appeared to have been pulled almost completely off its hinges and cast aside. Three bodies—two male, one female—were scattered around it. Bullets had punched their way through the wooden planks of the wall on either side of the door, as if someone inside had been wildly shooting outward, and both of the windows had been caved in by some force. Another body lay hanging half in, half out of one window. Most of the dead appeared to be whites, a few were Indian, and a couple looked to possibly be Mexican, judging solely by their clothing. Their skin and features were all so generally obscured by violence and what Clay could only guess was disease that it wasn't easy to tell otherwise.

The trading post seemed to double as a residence, being that it had been built to have a second floor. From what Clay could see in the gloom of the day's dying bit of storm-shrouded sunlight, and in flashes of bluish light from faraway lightning, the first floor was mostly for the display of merchandise and a table with several chairs and a nearby kitchen. The upper half of the building was where the owner or owners presumably lived. Clay could see the bottom part of a stairway leading to the upper half, opposite from the main entry door. And it was from this stairwell that Clay saw a flash of sparks and a puff of smoke as a shot boomed out, taking chunks out of the front porch next to his feet.

“Jesus!” he cried, rolling aside on the porch and tripping over a corpse. Clay scooted away from it and put his back up to the wall, shouting, “Hey! Rider Girl! That you? It's me, Clay the Gringo!”

An angry male voice shouted something back to him in Spanish and then fired another shotgun blast, uselessly taking out a segment of the broken door frame. Clay heard a woman sobbing hysterically somewhere inside, and two men arguing in Spanish excitedly.

“Rider? Can you hear me in there?” Clay asked.

After a moment, he heard her always-angry voice shout back, “I told you to stay with the wagon, stupid gringo! Why did you come here?”

“Guess I got lonely without you around to insult me all of the time,” he responded. “What the hell's going on here? Do these Los Muertos things speak Spanish and shoot guns now?”

“Shut up and go away!” the Rider snapped. One of the men inside shouted something about Los Muertos, and the Rider started yelling back and forth with him over that.

A slow bit of movement to his right caught Clay's attention. Shambling away from the general direction of the smoking ruins of the stable, he saw a tall, thin man approaching. The man ... no, the thing was so badly burned that Clay could not even begin to guess its ethnicity. All of its hair had burned off, and most of its flesh and clothing was blackened by fire. Only the downpour of rain seemed to have spared it from being consumed. Smoke rolled thickly from what remained of its clothing and skin, the stench becoming all the more potent as it approached.

Clay chambered a round, shouldered his Winchester, and put a shot right into the bridge of its half-melted nose. The Los Muertos thing dropped back into the mud with a *splat* and moved no more.

“Look, I got nowhere else to go, okay? The storm killed the horses, so the wagon ain't going anywhere,” Clay yelled to the Rider. “I didn't feel like walking back to Kansas, and I sure as hell didn't feel like pulling that wagon myself. So, I came here where the fun is at.”

The Rider cursed something in her native tongue—at the men inside or at Clay, he wasn't sure—and then she yelled, “I need more bullets! Do you have more?”

Clay saw another of Los Muertos clumsily staggering into view, also smoking and halfway burnt to a crisp. He worked the lever of the rifle, aimed, and fired. The shot hit, but it was low and impacted from the side, taking off part of the creature's jaw. The impact made it stumble, and it only then seemed to even become aware that Clay was there. It took two more steps in his direction before he put it down with a more direct hit to its skull.

“Yeah, I got a few I can spare,” he answered, “but I don't know if you got the same caliber, and I don't know if the powder got wet.” Another shotgun blast came from the stairway, striking one of the corpses on the porch. “Not sure those fellas are just gonna let me just mosey on through the door, though.”

“Go in the window!”

Clay got up and stepped over to the nearest window, where the body was hanging out of the frame. Not wanting to have to climb over a cadaver, he planted the heel of his boot into the dead man's hip and kicked out a couple of times, dislodging him from the frame. As the body slid out of the way and onto the porch, another shotgun blast boomed, sending a spray of wooden splinters outward, just inches from his face. He crouched down and backed away immediately.

“Not that window, *estúpido!*” the Rider cried. “This window! Here!”

“Thanks for the warning,” he grumbled, making his way over to the doorway again.

Clay kept a watchful eye out for any more of Los Muertos as he planned his next move. Getting to the other window meant that he would have to pass right in front of the main doorway. For obvious reasons, it wasn't an act to be done casually. He steeled himself, crouched slightly, and then dove across the doorway. Though he landed upon his feet, he didn't quite manage to jump as far as he'd hoped. His right foot landed upon the ruined head of one corpse. He slipped on something—blood, brains, he didn't want to know—and that leg went out from under him, dropping him onto his side. A boom and another shower of wooden bits followed. He looked up and saw the ragged hole in the wall, right about where his head would have been if he hadn't fallen.

“Gringo?” the Rider called out from inside the structure after a moment. She sounded very close to his position. “Clay?”

“I'm alive. Just stepped in something,” he replied casually. “You okay?”

“Come in here! Now! *Rápidamente!*”

Remembering how he had almost lost his head when trying to enter the other window, Clay didn't feel it was wise to just step right on through the broken window without hesitation. He took off his rain-soaked hat, placed it on the end of his rifle, and then slowly raised it up in view of the window. If another volley of buckshot was coming, he preferred that it find his hat while it was on the end of his Winchester rather than when it was on his head. He waited. Nobody fired. Just

for good measure, Clay held the hat up much higher, bobbing it up and down and side to side while singing a line from "Camptown Races."

A dark, gloved hand shot out of the window, snatched the hat off the end of the rifle, and pulled it inside the trading post.

"Stop playing games! Come in here! Now!" the Rider hissed. One of the men inside shouted something at her, and she yelled something presumably vulgar in reply.

Clay dared to peek around the edge of the window to see who and what was inside. Most of the interior was obscured by a long set of shelves lined with various dry goods, as well as some pickled foods and salted meats. He saw some miscellaneous tack gear hanging on the far wall, and just the edge of the stairway off to the far right. A glance down showed the Rider peering up at him, barely anything more than a shadow with eyes with all that black clothing of hers. He supposed that was the whole point, though the outfit only seemed useful now at dusk and more of a burden during the day.

Clay stepped over the low frame, his boots crunching upon shattered glass and broken window frame parts on the dirt floor. The Rider seemed to be actually conversing somewhat with the males inside, although by the tone of their Spanish words, they weren't about to become friends anytime soon.

"Howdy, miss," Clay said as he crouched beside her. She handed his hat back to him and he plopped it back upon his head. "Are y'all still trading insults, or is this just how you always talk with each other?"

"These *pendejos* say that I am *bruja*... that I am a witch," she informed him calmly, her voice lightly muffled by her mask. "They say that I bring Los Muertos here to take their souls and make them my slaves."

"Are they the owners of this place?"

"No. They come from Mexico. A man, his brother, and family," she said. "This was a busy place. Many people stop here for food and supplies, and to hide from the rain. Los Muertos came and... now this." She grabbed for his rifle, but he held fast to it. "I need your gun."

"Hold on there a minute, Rider Girl," he said. "Why are these guys so mad at you and calling you a witch? Those fellers are Mexicans. Y'all should be shaking hands and drinking tequila together, not shooting at each other."

"I told you, I am not Mexican! Why do you think this?"

"Well, if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck..."

"I am not a duck, *idiota!*" she snapped. "Stop this stupid gringo talk and give me your gun!"

He held aside his rifle, out of her reach. "Nope. Not until I know what the hell is going on, and why you want to kill those people."

"We do not have time for this." The Rider drew a revolver from her shoulder holster with her left hand, transferred it to her right, and pointed it at him. "Give me your gun, gringo."

"Y'know, I'm getting real tired of looking down the wrong end of your guns, lady," Clay said with a frown. "I thought you promised not to kill me."

She cocked the gun. "I did promise."

And then she aimed high and fired over his head. Clay flinched and had just begun to rack the lever of his rifle when he heard and felt something fall onto the

floor behind him. He turned and saw yet another of Los Muertos in an awkward, crumpled heap with a big hole in its head, having fallen through the window. He'd never even heard its approach.

Before he could even react, he felt his rifle being yanked out of his grasp. The Rider jammed him hard in the chest with the butt of the Winchester as he reached for it, causing him to fall back upon his rear. He stared at her with a dumb, confused, open-mouthed look of shock for a moment. The Rider just glared right back at him as she re-holstered her pistol and finished chambering the next round in the Winchester.

"I thought you said you were out of ammo...?"

"That was my last bullet," she replied. "I was keeping it to shoot myself if I could not run away."

"But you used it to save me. Much obliged," he said with a tip of his hat. "And now that you have more bullets with my rifle, you're gonna use them to kill the only other people still alive around here. Is that it?"

"You do not understand. They are dead now."

One of the men yelled something, while the other appeared to be saying something to the sobbing woman upstairs. Clay shook his head and said, "They sound mighty alive to me."

"The wife has the bite. She will be Los Muertos," she explained impatiently, peeking around the corner of the shelves. "When I came and killed Los Muertos outside, they were fighting them. The wife got the bite. When I try to shoot the wife, they do not let me. They say I am a witch and try to shoot me."

"Imagine that. A man that actually doesn't want someone to shoot his wife." He thought for a moment. "Nobody else got bit, right?"

"I do not know. They will not tell me."

"Yeah, well, trading bullets with them probably doesn't make them want to share much, I reckon." He began to unbuckle his gun belt. "Maybe we just need to try something different here."

"What are you doing, gringo?" she demanded, and then she rattled off some Spanish phrase that sounded like, *You locomotive baster*.

Clay dropped his belt onto the dirt floor beside the Rider. "I don't know what you just said, but maybe you could teach me one thing right quick. What's the Spanish word for friend?"

She hesitated for a moment, then replied softly, "Amigo."

"Mushy-ass, grassy-ass, Rider."

"What?"

"That's *thank you* in Spanish, ain't it?"

"No."

"Guess you'll have to teach me that one later," he said, standing up with his empty hands raised. "Hey! Amigo! Hold your fire a minute, would you?"

The Mexican shouted something unpleasant at him in response.

"I just wanna talk, okay? See? No guns! No bang-bangs!" he declared, waving his hands. He could clearly see the twin barrels of a shotgun being aimed at him from around the corner of the top of the staircase. Two dead bodies lay upon the stairs, with dark splashes of blood painted upon the wooden planks of the wall nearby. "You speak any English, amigo?"

“*Que?*”

“English, *hijo de puta!* Do you speak it?” the Rider chimed in loudly.

Clay waved a hand at her. “That ain't helping.”

After a few moments, the Mexican finally replied, “*Si*. I speak some English.”

“Good! That's good,” he said. “Listen, *amigo*, I don't know everything that's going on here. But I do know these things outside, those things you folks call *Los Muertos*, are really bad news. They're people that turn into things that eat other people. And I know that if one of them bites you, that makes you become *Los Muertos*.”

There was a pause as one of the Mexican males could be heard discussing something with the other one upstairs, possibly translating Clay's statement for him, or at least what he understood of it.

Clay began to wonder if anything he'd said had made sense at all as he asked again, “Did you understand any of that, *amigo?*”

“No,” the Mexican finally replied. “Have the *Puta del Diablo* speak for you.”

“*Puta del Diablo*,” the Rider muttered sourly. “Whore of the Devil. That is what they call me. It is like... I call you Stupid Gringo. It is a name.”

“Well, that's definitely not a very nice name to give someone.”

“I will speak the Spanish for you,” she said, and then she loudly chattered away to the Mexicans in Spanish, apparently relaying his message. She finished her statement with, “*Entender?*”

“*Si, puta,*” the Mexican replied. “This man with you... who is he?”

“My name is Clay. I'm just a guy from Kansas passing through here on my way to... ah, Tombstone, I guess,” he offered. “I heard shooting down here, so I came running.”

The Rider translated his words into Spanish for the others. Once again, the men discussed things amongst themselves for a bit before saying anything in reply.

“How do you know the *Puta del Diablo*, gringo?”

“She saved me from a bunch of those *Los Muertos* things last night,” he said. “She only wants to help.”

The Rider relayed his words. The Mexican's reply was quicker this time, and much angrier.

“She want to kill my wife? Why?”

“She just wants to stop *Los Muertos*,” Clay insisted. “If any of you or your kin got bit, then I'm sorry, but it's too late to help them. That's how these *Los Muertos* things are made, it seems. It's like a disease or something. Once you get bit...”

The Rider silenced him by raising a gloved hand. There was a lot of animated Spanish talking going on upstairs now. The sobbing woman had fallen silent some time ago. One of the men began calling out to someone named Cecilia—presumably the wife—and his voice quickly fell into sounds of despair and mourning that needed no translation. The Rider shook her head sadly.

“We are too late,” she told Clay. “Be ready to shoot.”

As the sounds of sorrow upstairs soon began to take on an urgent and then a panicked sound, the Rider held up the gun belt with Clay's Remington in it. The twin barrels of the Mexican's shotgun had disappeared from view at the top of the stairs, and there was a lot of movement and now frantic Spanish coming from the second story. Clay accepted his gun belt and wrapped it around his waist.

“Well, hell,” he sighed, buckling the gun belt. “It was worth a try, anyway.”

“You should have let me kill them,” the Rider said. “Now there are more of Los Muertos to be killed. You could have never saved those people.”

“So, you're saying I was wrong for stopping you from killing some people instead of those Los Muertos monsters?” he asked, looking up to the floorboards overhead as one of the men began shouting and screaming.

“*Si, gringo,*” the Rider said with a nod. She turned, shouldered the Winchester rifle, and slowly stood up. “Killing people is easy. Killing Los Muertos is not so easy.”

Chapter 6

It seemed like a horrible thing to do, even cowardly, but Clay and the Rider waited downstairs until the sounds of chaos and struggle from upstairs had ended. The violent melee seemed to end abruptly with a single shotgun blast, followed by the sound of a body and some heavy object striking the floor, sending bits of dirty and dust down upon Clay and the Rider below. The Rider let out a heavy sigh and crossed herself, shaking her head at the outcome. Going upstairs to intervene would have meant either walking into a load of buckshot, or at least walking into a potential room full of Los Muertos. Neither possibility would have had a positive outcome.

Clay followed closely behind as the Rider proceeded cautiously toward the stairs before ascending them, keeping the rifle to her shoulder the whole time. Clay kept checking behind them, half expecting for another one of those skin-hungry monsters to spring out of the shadows. None could be seen inside the trading post, nor outside its windows. Either all of the others were dead or they had simply wandered off into the wilderness. Clay didn't figure them to be smart enough to deliberately retreat. If anything, the sounds of gunfire had only seemed to attract them, rather than scaring them off.

The stairs creaked loudly, and the hard soles of their boots were hardly silent upon the crude and worn wooden planks of the stairs. They weren't exactly trying to sneak up on whatever was upstairs. They just wanted to be ready for whatever might come running out at them in a hurry.

There wasn't much to the upper story. It was mainly just an elaborate loft, just a couple of beds, a standing closet, and a dresser with a cracked and tarnished mirror. At the top of the stairs, there were two opened boxes of shotgun shells, with a handful of them scattered across the floor. If things hadn't played out the way that they had, the Mexicans had been sitting upon enough ammo to have kept them at bay for quite some time.

One of those Mexicans—or at least what remained of him—was laying just a few feet away to the left of the stairs. At a glance, it was easy to see that he had elected to suck on the end of his shotgun and pull the trigger, rather than dealing with the horrors facing him. It wasn't that the man had been decapitated that made the scene so ghastly, but rather the fact that his head had basically ceased to exist.

Clay surmised that this was the one he had known only as “amigo.” Now, he was probably “Amigo Muerto,” the dead friend. A distant part of his mind rejoiced with the realization that he was apparently learning Spanish, albeit a crude form of it, and under the worst of circumstances.

From around the edge of the bed, he could see a pair of legs and booted feet sticking out with a woman straddling them. The woman was in a filthy dress that had been mostly white at one point in time, and one of her shoes was missing. She was breathing heavily and making grunting sounds of physical effort... and chewing... eating...

“Jesus Christ almighty,” Clay breathed in horror, gripping his pistol tightly as it sat in its holster.

Whether it was the religious aspect of his words that got the unholy thing's attention, or just the sound of his voice, he couldn't be sure. The thing, apparently once a middle-aged woman named Cecilia, raised its head to look over the top of the bed. Something bloody and fleshy was hanging out of its mouth like a torn-off piece of roasted chicken. The Rider muttered something in Spanish, shouldered the Winchester, and took aim.

The sound of the gunshot indoors was incredibly loud, something that Clay had never before experienced. The effect caught him a bit off-guard, actually disorienting him somewhat with the force of the blast in such a confined space. Smoke from that one shot mixed with the lingering evidence of Amigo's suicidal shotgun blast, making the room absolutely reek of sulfur, blood, and worse things. The thing formerly named Cecilia fell backward and slumped against a nearby wall, a splash of blood and brain matter painted upon the wooden planks. The Rider waited for a moment, worked the lever of the Winchester, and stepped ahead while the empty brass shell bounced and rolled across the dirty floor. She rounded the edge of the bed, aimed down upon what remained of Amigo's fallen companion as if to shoot, and then... did nothing.

Clay waited tensely, covering his ears with both hands this time. Seconds passed, maybe even a minute. The aim of the Rider fell lower and lower, as if the weight of the rifle was becoming too great for her to support any longer. It wasn't until she had completely lowered the rifle, just letting it hang in her hands at her waist while her shoulders slumped, that Clay was finally able to see what was wrong.

The Rider was absolutely terrified. Her big brown eyes were almost impossibly wide, clearly filled with fear at whatever she saw. Clay could not even begin to guess what it was that had her suddenly so frightened, not when she had just finished tearing through a mob of Los Muertos only minutes ago without the slightest bit of hesitation.

“What is it?” Clay finally asked. She said nothing, letting go of the rifle with one hand so that the muzzle touched the floor as her other hand still loosely held onto the grip. “Hey. Rider Girl. What are you seeing?”

She still said nothing. Clay began to draw close, his hand returning to the grip of his Remington 1858 revolver. Before he had even halfway crossed that small distance, something began to rise into view. Clay finally saw. And he understood. Well... somewhat. The horror and tragedy of it was obvious; the Rider's sudden fearful reaction to it, however, was still puzzling.

Rising to its feet, still clutching a piece of whatever it had torn off of its victim and chewing upon it hungrily, was what appeared to have once been a small Mexican boy, surely less than ten years of age. Like the now twice-dead Cecilia, he did not appear to be rotten or thoroughly chewed up like most of Los Muertos that Clay had seen thus far. The putrid smells of decay did not fill the room—*fresh* death and gunsmoke, yes, but not old death. Apparently, this was how Los Muertos looked when they first became dead... or undead... or whatever it was that they were when they became flesh-eating monsters.

The boy-thing took a step forward. The Rider took a step back.

“Sobrino,” the Rider murmured, barely audible over the ringing in Clay's ears. “No... no, Sobrino.”

The boy-thing continued to advance, that equally empty, slack, emotionless expression on its small and blood-smeared face like any other of Los Muertos. The Rider backed up until her elbow bumped against the wall behind her. The rifle fell from her grasp and clattered to the floor with a heavy *ka-thunk*. Clay responded by jerking his Remington out of its holster and loosely aiming with his thumb resting upon the hammer. The Rider wasn't shooting – should he? Surely, she had a logical reason for not shooting, for actually dropping her rifle, when confronted by this member of Los Muertos. Right? Maybe? No?

“What's going on? Snap out of it, Rider!” Clay cried. He cocked the revolver, but kept his thumb upon the hammer, still unsure what to do. Only the Rider's hesitated was giving him pause. “What the hell are you doing? Can't you see he's one of them?”

“Sobrino... no, Sobrino, no,” she was saying softly as the boy-thing closed in almost casually. She was shaking her head, slowly at first, and then with more vigor as he neared. “No... no! *No!*”

Clay aimed, but hesitated to pull the trigger. That hesitation would prove costly. Abruptly, the boy-thing that the Rider was calling Sobrino dropped whatever it had been snacking upon, and it suddenly lunged for the Rider. The Rider put up her left arm defensively. Sobrino latched onto it with both of his hands, immediately peeling back his lips to bare his teeth before chomping down upon her forearm. The Rider shrieked with pain.

Clay could wait no more. In fact, he knew that he was already too late. He could not get a clear shot at a distance, not without risking his bullet finding its way into the Rider. She was doomed, but even so, it wasn't in his nature to willfully shoot a woman in peril. He took two broad steps forward, jabbed the muzzle of his revolver against the small thing's temple, and fired. Sobrino fell aside and down like a puppet whose strings had suddenly been cut, only a fog of smoke and a spray of gore upon the wall left in his wake.

The Rider slid down the wall and dropped to her knees upon the floor abruptly. She sat still for a few moments, head bowed as she clutched her bitten arm. Clay stood over her for a few moments, unsure of what to do while he waited for the smoke to clear and his ears to stop ringing. The Rider reached up to her face, pulled down her mask, and then covered her eyes with her hand. Her shoulders lurched with a few random spasms. As Clay's hearing finally began to return, he finally realized that she was sobbing.

Whatever iron will the Rider had possessed up until then had somehow broken or melted at the sight of the boy-thing. Maybe it had finally proven to be just one horror too many. Perhaps the strain of it all had finally become more than her mind or her heart could bear. There was no shame in it. Woman or not, she had seen and done things that no one, not even a soldier in a war, should ever have to experience. It was nothing short of amazing that she had done this well and for so long already without having broken down sooner.

And now... the Rider's journey, her quest to destroy Los Muertos, had apparently reached its premature and tragic end. As the Rider quickly managed to stifle her sobs, sniffle away her tears, and somewhat dry her eyes, Clay began to aim his Remington at her head.

"I'm real sorry about this, Rider Girl," he sighed at last. He cocked the hammer, and the sound made her lift her gaze to meet his eyes. "I never even got to know your real name."

"Angelita," she replied softly.

And with that, Clay pulled the trigger.

Chapter 7

What surprised Clay the most was not the serene manner in which the Rider, Angelita, faced her death so easily. Rather, it was the fact that her death never came at all, because the bullet never left the barrel of Clay's gun.

There was a *bang* as the hammer fell and ignited the primer cap of his old revolver, but no recoil, and certainly not the *boom*, the flash of sparks, or the belch of smoke that should have come with it. Lacking the sealed parts of a gun that used metallic cartridges, such as his Winchester rifle, his old cap-and-ball Remington 1858 had fallen victim to the elements. The soaking rain had found its way into the powder of at least one chamber in his pistol's cylinder. The primer could still pop, but the powder was too wet to ignite and push the bullet down the barrel, out of the gun, and into its target. He should have considered himself lucky that the gun had even fired the one time that it had, when he'd shot down the boy-thing called Sobrino.

Angelita stared up at him blankly as he kept the gun trained upon her. Perhaps it was a slow burn, a delayed ignition? He'd experienced that a few times over the years. The primer would fire, but the gun wouldn't go off until a few seconds later when the live ember of fire inside the chamber finally chewed its way through whatever slow-burning bit of junk had gotten inside there. He waited. And waited. And waited. This was no slow burn. This was...

"God's will," Angelita said softly. "I am blessed, you see. Blessed and cursed. That is why I cannot die."

Clay kept the gun pointed at her. "You got bit. You know what that means. I'm sorry, but that ain't a blessing. That's just a death sentence."

"Your gun did not shoot."

"Yeah, but only because the powder's wet," he said, turning the Remington aside to point at the cylinder with the finger of his other hand. "See, if this was like one of them fancy new Colt guns like you got..."

The *boom* and recoil of the gun's discharge caught Clay so much by surprise that it actually jumped right out of his hand and clattered to the floor off to his right. Instead of putting a hole through Angelita's head as it would have when he'd still been aiming it at her, the bullet punched its way through the same wall against which she rested, flying off harmlessly into the night. Clay stepped away from her with his hands up, feeling as though his eyes might pop right out of his head from his expression of shock. It took him a few seconds and several unsuccessful tries to relearn how to speak again, and not just from the loudness of the gunshot.

"You... you knew that was going to happen, didn't you," he said more than asked. "You knew that it was going to go off."

She shook her head ever so slightly, her expression still blank. "No. I did not. But I knew that you would not kill me."

"You mean... you made that happen?" he asked incredulously. "Is that why they called you a witch? Was that some kind of witchcraft you just did to make my gun not go off until just then?"

"No. It was not me," she insisted calmly. While she should have probably been grinning at him triumphantly, even mockingly, Angelita only appeared to be saddened. Again, she said, "It is God's will. I cannot die. That is why your gun did not shoot. That is why the bite will not kill me. I am blessed, and I am cursed."

Clay continued to back away from her until he had reached his dropped pistol. He knelt by the gun and wrapped his fingers around the hardwood stocks of the grip.

"So, if I pick this up and try to shoot you again," he proposed cautiously, "then what's going to happen? The same thing?"

She shrugged lightly, touching her bitten arm gently. "I do not know what your gun will do. I only know that I will not die."

"Even if it goes off? Even if a bullet hits you?" Clay asked. "What, will the bullet just bounce off of you?"

"No," she said, reaching down to the makeshift bandage around her injured leg, "but I will heal."

Clay watched by the flickering light of the oil lamp upon the dresser as Angelita untied the bandage. She dug her fingers into the hole in the leg of her trousers that the javelina had made, and she ripped it open wider with a jerk of tearing fabric. She held the material apart so that he could see. Clay hesitantly got up and drew closer to see, still clutching the potentially useless revolver.

He'd gotten at least a halfway decent glimpse of the gash in Angelita's leg that the wild boar's tusk had made. It hadn't been a gushing, life-threatening wound, but it had definitely been more than just a little scratch. Angelita hadn't seemed the least bit worried about it at the time she'd been hurt, content to just pour a little tequila over it and wrap it with a bandage.

Now, Clay could see why. Aside from a bit of dried, crusty blood around the area of the wound, the only evidence left that the javelina had even touched her was a

minor, oddly-shaped mark that was of a slightly different shade than the rest of her light brown skin.

Clay stared for a few moments in stunned silence. Then, shaking his head, he holstered his pistol, stepped back, and held up his hands in surrender.

“Okay! All right! You win!” he declared. Clay looked up at the ceiling, as if to address God. “Sorry! I'm sorry, okay? My mistake. I didn't know, all right? No harm, no foul, right?”

“Who are you talking to?”

He pointed up at the ceiling. “The man upstairs. I'm just hoping he doesn't strike me dead with a bolt of lightning for trying to shoot you. I mean, you know... going against God's will or... or whatever...?”

Angelita let out a sigh, shook her head, and wiped away another tear from her cheek with a snuffle. “Stupid gringo.”

The next few minutes were spent in silence. Clay picked up his dropped Winchester rifle, lowered the cocked hammer, and headed downstairs while Angelita wrapped the new wound to her forearm with the old bandage. He had perhaps a hundred questions that he wanted... no, he *needed* her to answer. But, for the time being, there was neither time nor opportunity. Clay spent a few minutes creeping around the downstairs and the area surrounding the trading post, searching for any more of Los Muertos. If any remained, they had apparently walked off into the wilderness already.

Angelita's stallion had found a dropped bag of oats and had been helping itself to a well-earned meal, only regarding Clay's presence with a disinterested glance. At the front of Clay's mind was the question of Angelita's story. Again, how did she know so much about riding and fighting, and why did she have such a personal interest in using those skills to chase down all of these Los Muertos things and destroy them? And how in God's name—literally—had she acquired this supposed blessing/curse that enabled her to heal wounds with ease and somehow cause Clay's gun to misfire so conveniently? Was it some kind of divine spell that granted her all of these abilities? Was she a witch, as the Mexicans had claimed? Or was she just ridiculously lucky? And if she was supposedly under heavenly protection, why had the boy-thing been able to bite her? Sure, she could heal the wound, but why allow her to be bitten in the first place? Had it been God's will for her to be bitten and to feel such pain? And who was this Sobrino kid to her, someone that had made her become so terrified and helpless all of a sudden?

As Clay stood outside, his mind reeling with all of those questions and more, his gaze sweeping the area warily, he saw Angelita step out of the ruined doorway. She had pulled her mask back up into position to cover most of her face, and she was poking fresh cartridges into one of her Colt Peacemakers from a handful of ammunition she apparently had found. She glanced at him only briefly, much like her horse, before surveying the area with a wary look. She holstered the reloaded Colt and began inserting the rest of the metallic cartridges into the empty loops of her gun belts, taking out more from a pocket.

Clay stepped over a couple of corpses, watching them closely as he finally asked her, “You maybe wanna tell me what in the hell I just saw and heard up in there?”

“No.”

He had pretty much expected that response.

“Look, I just shot a kid in the head,” he stated flatly as he stood before her. “He was making a meal out of your arm.”

“He was Los Muertos. You did nothing wrong.”

“I’m not talking about what I did,” he said, “but more about what you *didn't* do. What the hell was that all about? One minute, you’re like the Grim Reaper with a gun. Then you run across a boy that’s become one of those Los Muertos things, and suddenly you’re in crying and letting him eat you.”

She avoided making eye contact with him as she continued inserting ammunition into her belts. It wasn’t until he had positioned himself right in front of her, close enough that she had no other choice but to see him, that she finally lifted her eyes to meet his. The tears were gone. It was very dark outside now, with just a few distant flashes of lightning from the far north side of the mountains, but he could see the hard resolve in her expression. If anything, she looked a little bit angry now. Apparently, she found anger to be a more comfortable emotion than sadness.

Still holding her gaze, he said, “No more secrets. If we’re going to be riding together, then I need to know exactly what’s going on, I need to know who you are, I need to know *what* you are, and I need to know what this is all about.”

“You do not *need* to know anything, and I do not need your help,” she insisted flatly. “Take the things you need from this place and leave. Go east to Payson. Forget about these things you see. Live your life. This thing is for me to do. This problem is for me, not you.”

“Not my problem? How the hell you figure?” he demanded, his voice becoming angrier. “Last I remember, everyone I was riding with down here got chewed up by Los Muertos. And in case you didn’t hear me before, that wagon over the hill ain’t going anywhere with two dead horses in front of it.”

She blinked at him. “Dead horses? Los Muertos?”

“No, they didn’t get eaten. They got hit by lightning. Damn near got hit, myself,” he explained. He felt a bitter smirk tug at the corner of his mouth. “You know... *God's will* and all that.”

She considered that for a moment. “He did not want you to leave. He made you come here.”

“The sound of gunfire and the fact that I was on foot made me come here,” he countered dryly. “I wasn’t about to try walking through all these desert mountains on my own. And anyway, I figured you could use an extra gun.”

“I do not need...”

“Yeah, yeah, I heard that already,” he interrupted with a dismissive wave of his hand. “You didn’t need to borrow my rifle. You didn’t need me to shoot that kid that started gnawing on you while you were turning white as a ghost. No, ma’am, you were doing just fine without me being around to hold you down. And the next time one of those things decides to start chomping on you, or you’ve got more of them around you than you have bullets, why, I guess I’d better just step aside and let that all happen. You know, because it’s *God's will* or something.”

She stared at him for a few moments. When she spoke, her voice was much softer and more subdued in tone and volume. Her facade of arrogance and invincibility seemed to have slipped down a bit in the face of Clay’s words.

"You see that I heal," she told him. "You see that I am not Los Muertos, even when I have the bite. And your gun did not shoot... like my gun did not shoot you last night. Do you not see that this is... what is the word?"

"God's will?"

"No, it is another word."

"Divine intervention?"

"Si, that word," she confirmed with a quick nod. "Do you not agree?"

Clay shrugged. "Honestly, I don't know well enough to rightly say for sure. Most of it is just awfully damned convenient. Aside from the fact that you apparently heal up really well, I don't see any of that as being a clear sign that God had a hand in any of it."

"Do you not believe in God?"

Now it was Clay's turn to dodge a question. It wasn't that he was too proud to admit something or too secretive to divulge any details about himself, as Angelita was so apt to be. Rather, he just didn't have anything in the way of a simple yes or no answer to give in response. It was a question he had been asking himself ever since he'd been a kid. He was no closer to reaching a solid answer now as a grown man.

Relaxing slightly from his anger, he sighed, "Let's just say that I was raised on the Bible to believe, but I've seen enough in my time to make me have some serious doubts. If God does exist, and if I do ever get to meet Him someday, I've got some mighty strong questions for that big feller, that's for damned sure." He paused. "Kinda like how I still have a lot of questions for you."

Angelita looked away, folding her arms. "I am not good with talking about me."

"Yeah, I kinda noticed." He nudged her with the butt of his rifle. "Would it help if I pointed a gun at you again?"

Her eyes tightened slightly. With the mask covering the rest of her face, he couldn't tell if she was sneering at him or not. It seemed unlikely, but it might have been possible that she had actually smiled.

"My horse needs to rest, and we need to get supplies," she told him. "Other people will come here tomorrow. We must leave before that. If you will help me with supplies and destroying Los Muertos, I will answer your questions, gringo."

"Destroying them?"

"Si. We must burn what we can. The fire destroys the sickness."

"I thought shooting them in the head took care of that...?"

She shook her head as she moved past him to bend down, grabbing the nearest corpse and beginning to drag it off the porch and in through the front doorway. With a bit of physical straining evident in her voice, she said, "You must shoot the head or cut it off to kill Los Muertos. But the body still has the sickness. I cannot leave the sickness here. Someone will find it and get the sickness, and then there will be more of Los Muertos."

"Oh." He watched her drag the cadaver inside for a few feet before she let it rest and came back for another. "So, why do you cut off their heads?"

"I want to know they are very dead," she answered, grabbing another dead body by its wrists and pulling it along. "Sometimes they look dead, but they are not." She pointed at the still smoldering remains of the thing that she had shot through the window earlier. "You said you would help. Take that one."

Clay propped his rifle up against the wall and walked over to the wretched thing. He stopped over, tried to grab its wrists as she had done, and he began to pull. The blackened flesh was so crispy and thin that it tore and slid right off of the muscle and bones underneath. Clay staggered back a step and found himself holding two loose handfuls of charred and bloody tissue that suddenly smelled twice as bad as it had before. He threw the stuff aside with a disgusted sound.

“Christ, the stink!” he cried, trying to wipe his hands off upon whatever was nearby. “How can you stand the smell?”

“I wear this,” she told him, gesturing to the cloth covering the lower half of her face. “It makes the smell not so bad. It is better if you put something on it. I use tequila or lilac water.”

Clay shook his head. “Well, that answers one of my questions already.”

Dragging bodies inside the trading post was the most exhausting part. Even with both of them working together, the process was still time-consuming and difficult. After the bodies had been brought inside, Clay suggested that they stop and eat something while they caught their breath. Angelita refused. If the next step made him sick, she informed him, it would be better for him to vomit with an empty stomach rather than wasting what he had eaten.

They lined the bodies up in such a way that the next step of decapitating them was almost easy. With the bodies lying shoulder to shoulder, Angelita needed only to slide a thick log of firewood under their necks and then slice off the head with a single stroke of her sword. They quickly worked out a routine where Clay would position the corpse and the log, Angelita would make her cut, and then she would toss the head over to the far corner of the room while Clay prepared the next body. They were grimly efficient with the task. There were almost twenty-four bodies in total, not counting the Mexicans upstairs. By the time they were nearly done, the floor was absolutely awash with blood, the air gaggingly thick with its smell, and the entire main area of the trading post was covered with carnage.

Clay had insisted that they leave the kitchen area clear of the bodies. They were able to use some water and soap to cleanse their hands and faces of the filth that had nearly covered them. Clay took one look at himself by the light of the oil lamp they had brought downstairs and was immediately appalled.

“I look like I've been rolling around on the floor of a slaughterhouse,” he said, tugging down the mask of whiskey-soaked cloth that he had tied around his face.

“That is why I wear black clothes,” she informed him almost breathlessly, also pulling down her mask. The cloth made the stench more bearable, but it also made it more difficult to breathe. “It is easy to see the blood on white clothes.”

“Well, your shirt's white. What about that?” he asked, gesturing toward her.

She shrugged. “My other clothes were destroyed. This was my last shirt.” It seemed that she only then had remembered her bare left arm, around which she had tied the bandage. “I will need new clothes.”

“Yeah, me too,” he agreed. Clay had a thought. As he began to head for the stairs, he said, “Maybe they've got something for us to wear upstairs? I know I could sure stand to get out of these filthy, wet rags. I don't want to smell like Los Muertos all day. And you probably don't want to ride into town looking like you do. You'll raise too many eyebrows, and the sheriff will probably arrest you on sight for suspicion of murder.”

She remained standing in place, her eyes a bit wider now. "I will stay here."

"Why? It's no worse up there than it is down here," he said. And then it finally dawned upon him. "Oh. I see. The kid's still up there."

Angelita nodded, bowing her head slightly, as if she was ashamed of herself. She wiped the blade of her cavalry saber off with the towel they had used to dry their hands.

"Look, it's safe up there now," Clay offered gently. "Everyone up there already got some lead through their noggin, so nobody's gonna try to eat you... least of all that Sobrino kid."

"No," she insisted softly, "I will stay here. I do not want to see him again."

"Yeah, but... how will I know what kinda clothes you need?"

She looked aside. "I only need a shirt."

"Don't we need to... you know... take the heads off those bodies up there, too?" he asked. "Probably would've been smart to do that before we washed our hands."

Angelita was still refusing to look at him. He could clearly see the sadness upon her face. Something about the Sobrino boy had truly rattled her. Had it simply been his youth, the tragedy of his short life ending as he became a person-munching thing of Los Muertos? Or was it, like so many other things, just another detail from her background that she wasn't willing to share with Clay because she felt it was none of his concern?

Knowing that it was pointless to press the issue, Clay sighed, "All right. I guess I'll take care of it myself."

He turned and began to make his way towards the stairs when her softened voice halted him: "Clay?"

He looked back at her over his shoulder as she approached. Holding it up by its blade near the hilt, Angelita held her saber out to him, handle-first.

"Could you...?" she asked, gesturing towards the upstairs with just her eyes.

Reluctantly, he accepted the sword. It felt nimble and surprisingly light in his hand. He had never really handled a sword before, not a real one, so he hadn't really known what to expect. Now, he was being asked to use one to hack up some dead bodies. It wasn't just the grossness of the task but the actual how-to of it that gave him pause. He gave it a couple of quick swings to test the feel of it.

"So, uhh... just give 'em a good whack on the neck?" he asked. "Do I need to do it really hard? Or does the blade just do most of the work?"

"Use it like a big knife," she said, making a saw-like gesture with her hands. "The blade is very sharp. Do not let the blade cut you. It has the sickness on it. If you are cut by it, you will be Los Muertos."

He blinked at her. "I thought getting bit was what caused it?"

"That is one way, si, but there are other ways," she said. "This is why I burn Los Muertos when I can. The fire makes the things clean."

"How do you know all of this stuff?"

She shrugged. "I learn most by fighting them."

"So, I take it you've been doing this for quite a while?"

"Si, for many days and nights."

"Months? Years?"

"No," she said, "but for some weeks."

“Fast learner,” he mused with a smirk. “I would've guessed you'd been doing this for years.”

“No. I could not fight them so long. I would be crazy,” she said as she looked away. There was a pause. “I think I am crazy some now. I have seen so many bad things. And I have done many, many evil things.” She pulled out her crucifix and fiddled with it thoughtfully as she stared at the row of headless bodies they had laid out. “These men... they are right. I think I must be *Puta del Diablo*. I do not want to be this, but... these things I must do, they are evil. I do not understand why God wants this. That is why I say I am blessed and cursed. I am blessed to live, to heal, but I am cursed to see and do many evil things. I pray that what I do is right, that I am doing these things for God and not the Devil. If I am right, then God will forgive me. If I am wrong... then I am *Puta del Diablo*.”

Clay watched her for a few moments, seeing and hearing how genuinely concerned this woman was for her very soul. It wasn't just the time and experiences they had shared thus far that was changing how he saw Angelita. It was because of these glimpses he was briefly offered to see just who she really was that made Clay see her less as a heartless creature of mayhem, and more as a brave and skilled but emotionally conflicted woman. In seeing her this way, he was able to feel something close to kinship with her, or at least he could sympathize with her plight. He, too, had done a few things that might be seen as evil deeds – okay, more than a few things—yet they had seemed justifiable at the time, often even in hind sight.

Now that they were essentially in the same boat now, killing Los Muertos and then chopping up and burning their remains, Clay guessed that theirs was a shared destination. Wherever this river took them, be it heaven or hell, Clay was pretty much along for the full ride. He just hoped that boat didn't sink or tip over before they got there.

Chapter 8

Shooting Los Muertos and helping Angelita position their remains was one thing; actually being the one with the sword, doing the decapitations himself was another matter entirely. Making things worse was that Clay couldn't simply lop those heads off with a neat, single cut as Angelita had. He had to actually saw them off, like he was carving up a Thanksgiving Day dinner.

Obviously, he didn't need to bother with Amigo's remains. There was almost nothing of a head left to be removed. The former Cecilia was a bit stomach-wrenching, not just because it was a female that he was cutting up, but also because it was his first time doing the cutting. It went more easily than he expected. As she had assured him, the blade was indeed sharp and glided through the flesh almost effortlessly, only becoming an issue when he had to cut between the bones of the neck. He tossed the head aside, supposing the idea was to put some distance between head and body, as if Los Muertos could maybe pick up their head and just put it back on if it was left within their reach.

What remained of the boy-thing was physically easier, but emotionally more difficult. Clay had to remind himself countless times that this had no longer been a human boy, but instead a flesh-eating monster of Los Muertos that only resembled the boy it once had been before. The boy was dead and gone. He would feel nothing. And his soul or spirit or whatever, if any such thing even existed, would not or at least *should not* have cared what happened to the body that remained behind. With that, Clay removed the head and tossed it aside. It rolled near Amigo's body, looking absurdly small and out of proportion. He finally turned his attention to the last body.

Clay neither knew this Mexican's name, nor did he have a nickname in mind for him just yet. He supposed it didn't matter. Sad as it was, there would be no tombstone or cross for any of these people, so names were irrelevant. Still, it seemed wrong for someone to die like this and for no one to know who they had been or what had become of them. Unless someone still lived that remembered these people, then it would be almost as if they had never existed at all, having all but entirely been erased from history. Was that the sort of fate that awaited Clay? Or Angelita? Or both of them?

Clay was so preoccupied with these thoughts that he almost didn't notice the last body's movement as he dragged it away from the bed in preparation of his final deed. He had just begun to reach for the supposedly dead body's head when he saw a pair of hands reaching out for his own. Clay reflexively drew away his left hand and punched out with his right, in which he'd been holding the sword. The blade pierced the creature's chest just to the left of where its neck and collarbone met, and he felt the blade scraping against bone as it lodged into place. The thing didn't grunt or cry out at all. It just kept reaching for him, actually pushing the sword deeper into its body as it sat up, fully impaling itself.

"Oh, great!" Clay complained as he unsuccessfully tried to yank the blade free. Doing this only brought the thing closer to him. "This ain't how this is supposed to work."

He didn't know how this thing had still been alive or why it had waited until that given moment to suddenly stir into action. He did not realize—too late again—that this was the one person/thing left in the room that had not been shot in the head. Both he and Angelita had been so distracted over the issue of the boy-thing and her reaction to it that neither of them had thought to put a shot into the chewed-up Mexican behind the bed. It was a mistake that had been easy enough to make, but there were some dire consequences.

Holding off the thing by keeping it at bay with the saber stuck in its chest, Clay's right hand was occupied and unable to draw his pistol. Awkwardly, he reached around to his right hip with his left hand and barely managed to draw the revolver without dropping it. He fumbled a bit, got it turned around in his left hand so that he could operate it, and he pointed it at the torn-up face of Los Muertos. Without hesitation, he cocked the hammer, tightened up his grip, and yanked the trigger.

Once again, there was a *pop* but no *boom*—another chamber full of wet powder. Another misfire. What, were these Los Muertos things under the same weird divine protection as Clay and Angelita? Clay did the first thing that immediately came to mind as he began to panic: he cocked the gun again and pulled the trigger once

more. As fate would have it, this was possibly the worst thing he could have done at that time.

Instead of the *tick-boom* of a good primer and dry powder, there was a strange *tick-ba-BOOM* as loud as a shotgun blast. This was accompanied by a sharp sensation that felt like someone had smacked his hand with the hard swing of a big stick. The flash and smoke of the blast temporarily blinded him, the sound left his ears ringing and his head fuzzy, and his left hand was numb with a weird buzzing sort of pain. He let go of the sword in his right hand and staggered backward a couple of steps until he slammed up against the wall with a bone-jarring impact.

Clay scrambled away from the spot like he'd just thrown a rock at a hornet's nest, and then he stopped to turn and look back when he reached the stairs. Through the fog of smoke left by all that gunpowder, he could at least see that the momentarily active Los Muertos was lying still upon the floor again, now with that cavalry sword sticking up out of its chest.

He looked down at his left hand and stared. It took him a few moments to try to make sense of it, but it came to him soon enough. He found himself holding half of his Remington 1858 revolver, the barrel and most of the cylinder having blown entirely off the gun. His mistake had been in trying to fire again so quickly when the first shot had misfired. The second shot had gone off normally, but it had apparently set off the prior chamber's still smoldering powder. The first chamber's powder charge had gone off but the bullet had nowhere to go, since that chamber was no longer lined up with the barrel. The effect, called a chain-fire—one chamber setting off one or more others in the same cylinder—had turned the gun into a small bomb, causing the old revolver to blow itself apart.

Clay's fingers didn't seem to want to work right as he shook the remains of the gun out of his hand. He was relieved to find that all five of his fingers were still attached, but his hand was scorched black from the small blast and a small but deep cut across his knuckles was oozing blood mildly. The numb, buzzing, tingling sensation in his hand was quickly fading away, replaced by a dull, throbbing ache. As unlucky as the small explosion had been, he was glad not to have been as unlucky as others he had heard about. He had met more than one guy that had lost fingers or even a whole hand to such things.

For a moment, Clay thought that his heart was hammering so frantically in his chest that he could feel it in his feet. It wasn't until he felt a hand upon his shoulder and he turned, wide-eyed and letting out a short yell of alarm, that he realized that it had been Angelita dashing up the stairs in her riding boots. His ears were still ringing so badly that her words were terribly muffled. This, combined with her accent, made it almost impossible to understand her, although he managed somehow.

"What did you do?" she demanded, her Colt drawn and aimed into the room.

"Damned gun blew up on me!" he answered with a yell. "Thing over there tried to eat me, and the sword got stuck in it! Tried to shoot, and... *boom!*"

She surveyed the room with her eyes, saw no threat, and then her gaze drifted down to the boy-thing's severed head upon the floor nearby. The sight made her flinch away abruptly, a pained look upon her face. She shook her head, either in disgust or dismay, and then stepped past Clay into the room. She kept her gun

drawn until she was sure that the thing that had tried to bite Clay was truly dead. Angelita shoved the Colt back into its holster, planted a foot upon the chest of Los Muertos, and jerked the blade free with a strong yank. She knelt down, quickly sliced off its head, and tossed it just a few feet away before standing again. She wiped the blade of the saber upon the sheet of the nearby bed, and then slipped it back into its sheath upon her hip.

In a curiously respectful gesture, Angelita pulled that same sheet from the bed, shook it open wide, and then draped it over the remains of the headless bodies of Cecilia and the boy-thing. She stood there for a moment, head bowed and possibly praying, before she crossed herself and turned to walk back to the stairs where Clay remained standing. There was a hard, almost angry look upon her face as she passed him. She said something, but Clay still couldn't hear well enough to catch it, though he imagined it was something along the lines of "stupid gringo."

Clay followed her downstairs, feeling somewhat dazed still by what had happened in the bedroom. Angelita had already started a fire in the heating stove, which she poked at only briefly before abruptly going about the store area of the first floor in search of things. She directed Clay to sit at the table, and he did so, still trying to coax his fingers into moving at will again. He could make a fist now, but only just barely, and it hurt like hell to try. He hoped that he hadn't broken his hand, but if he had, at least it had been his left instead of his right.

Angelita returned with a few items that she plunked down upon the table before pulling out a chair and sitting next to him. Rather roughly, she grabbed his left wrist and pulled it closer to herself, angling it slightly back and forth to examine his hand by the light of the oil lamp. His ears were still ringing slightly and they hurt a bit, but he could hear well enough now to converse normally without feeling the need to shout.

"Nothing serious, I don't think," he assured her. "Hurts and might swell up some, but I'll be fine."

She wiggled out the cork of a whiskey bottle and set it aside before picking up a roll of bandaging. She tore off a section, folded it neatly, and then picked up the bottle of whiskey, dousing the material with booze. Without much warning, she grabbed his wrist again, held it firmly, and dumped some of the liquor directly upon the minor wound. It burned enough to make him flinch, but her firm grasp kept him from pulling too far away.

"Stop moving. Be a man," she admonished him.

"I am a man," he said through clenched teeth, "but that ain't water you're pouring there."

"This will make it clean." Her eyes met his directly. "This was from your gun?"

"Yeah. Like I said, it blew up on me. Damned chain-fire."

"This was not a bite?"

"No. That thing tried, but it didn't bite me."

"And this is not from the sword?"

"No. I told you, my gun blew up." He watched her as she began to use the dampened bandage to cleanse away the blood and soot from his hand. "Why? Are you just looking for an excuse to shoot me?"

She met his gaze briefly before looking back to his hand. "I am only asking to be sure."

"I got no reason to lie to you. If I got bit, then I'd rather you shoot me than let me turn into one of those things."

"I know." She wiped around the wound and continued to examine it closely. "I did not know a gun could do this."

"It happens sometimes if you're not careful. I panicked," he admitted, and then briefly explained his pistol's catastrophic malfunction. "Been carrying that gun for years. I never once had a problem with it 'till now. But then again, I ain't never needed to shoot it much until all this Los Muertos stuff came along. Well ... that, and one other time."

"What other time?" she asked idly, still examining his hand as if she still didn't quite believe him.

"The time I had to kill a man," he replied after a moment of hesitation. "One that wasn't dead already, I mean."

She scrubbed at the filth on his hand a bit more as she asked, "Why did you shoot the man?"

Clay couldn't help but to smile a bit. "Nope."

"What?"

"Nope," he said again, "I ain't sharing my story until you give me yours first. That was the deal, remember? I helped you with the bodies, so now you answer my questions."

She let go of his wrist abruptly. "You did not do your thing. I had to cut off the last head for you."

"Only on account of my gun blowing up on me! I could've finished it myself, but you went and did it for me before I could." He shook head and waved it off. "To hell with it. Forget I even asked. If that's how you are, then maybe I don't wanna know any more about you. Seems I already know what kinda woman you are: one who don't keep her damn word when she gives it."

Clay began to reach for the roll of bandage, intending to finish the task of tending to his wounded hand on his own. It wasn't a serious injury anyway, least of all one to warrant putting up with this strange woman's secretive attitude. She moved quicker than he could blink. In a blur of movement, she swiped the bandage roll away and held it far out of his reach. Clay scowled at her.

"What? You gonna make me beg now?"

She shook her head. "Let me do this."

"I can manage on my own."

"I will help your hand if you tell me your story."

"No, thanks. I'm done making deals with you." He snapped the fingers of his right hand and gestured towards the roll, demanding it. "No more games."

She met his eyes squarely for several long, tense seconds. The loud pop of a damp log in the fire made them both jump slightly. Frustrated and feeling the blood beginning to ooze down the palm of his left hand again, Clay let out a huff and moved to stand up. Again moving more quickly than him, she stood up and shoved him firmly back down into his chair.

"Look, I've had just about enough of..."

"Angelita Maria Sandoval," she said quickly. "I am the daughter of Ricardo Juan Sandoval. I was born in the land that your people now call Texas. My family is from Spain, not Mexico. And my father and brothers show me how to ride and how

to fight.” Clay's surprise kept him sitting in place. “Does this answer your questions, gringo?”

He sat there for a moment in stunned silence as she loomed over him, keeping her hands upon his shoulders and staring directly into his eyes. Her gaze was fiercely intense. He couldn't entirely tell whether she looked angry, scared, both, or something else altogether, but it was nevertheless an intimidating look upon the strange woman's face. It seemed to really bother her to have surrendered that much information.

“It's a start, I guess,” he finally said to her. “But that ain't everything I've been asking.”

Angelita rolled her eyes with a sigh, pushed herself away from him, and walked over to a shelf nearby. She eyed the bottles upon it briefly, grabbed one, and began uncorking it as she quickly returned to sit by him again. She took a long, full drink from the bottle of tequila and then slammed it down upon the table loudly. She touched the back of her hand to her lips and closed her eyes as she appeared to choke down a mouthful of liquor, finding it either more potent or less flavorful than she had expected.

Stripping off her gloves again, she said, “Ask me more questions. Ask me anything.”

He eyed her suspiciously. “What, *now* you're suddenly comfortable with talking about yourself?”

“No. I am not comfortable with this,” she admitted, “but you are right. I said I would tell you more if you helped me. You did that, so... I will do this.” She paused to take another gulp of tequila. “And this will make me not care.”

Chapter 9

Her story was relatively short and required very little prodding from Clay to get her to go into detail. Angelita was, as Clay had figured, born into a wealthy family and raised with three brothers by a father that had been some kind of Spanish military man of importance that Clay did not quite understand—a general, or something like that. Her siblings had been given advanced training in horseback riding, fencing, shooting, and survival in the wilderness, as it was expected that they would follow in their father's footsteps to become great soldiers someday. At first, her father refused to allow Angelita to be given the same training because it was considered un-womanly. But when her unusual healing ability became obvious after she was seriously hurt in a very bad fall down a rock cliff, her father realized that she was special and had the potential to do great things. She proved to be as skilled as her brothers, perhaps even more so, and she was as quick to learn these things as she had been in her academic education, which seemed to explain her fluency in English.

Her vendetta against Los Muertos began when a large mob of them were, as she claimed, deliberately unleashed upon her family's large ranch compound. Los Muertos quickly overwhelmed them, coming in the night when most of the family

had been asleep. Her entire family and their friends and servants had been killed and/or turned into Los Muertos—everyone she knew, young and old. She had tried to save her nephew by hiding in a kitchen with him, but he had been bitten on the arm. When he became Los Muertos, he bit her, and she was forced to drive a knife into him. This was her first terrible lesson in killing the things, as well as her realization that she was apparently immune to the disease that created Los Muertos.

Since then, she had devoted herself to tracking down Los Muertos, destroying them at every opportunity, and hoping to catch up to its source. That source was a man by the name of Colonel Walker of the United States Army, and he was on the move through the Southwest, leaving a path of devastation, death, and wandering undead creatures in his wake. His goal was supposedly to cleanse the western half of the country of “undesirables”—that is, Indians, Mexicans, and anyone else that happened to get in his way—and Los Muertos was his means of conquest. He kept a number of these horrible things with him as he and his troops marched along, and they would dump them in the middle of whatever town or village that they wanted to “cleanse.” Los Muertos would quickly decimate the population in the immediate area, and then they would gradually die off from starvation or from the plague itself, which limited its ability to spread very far in the land. The sickness did not appear to turn animals into Los Muertos when they were bitten, but it did cause them to die a swift and apparently very painful death, as if the disease acted upon them like a poison.

Angelita had been following Colonel Walker's trail for weeks now, mostly only finding corpses at first, and then finding more and more of Los Muertos wandering around as she came closer to his present location. She had initially thought that he had been heading west to California, but recently had found that he had turned south already, possibly intending to cross into Mexico with his shambling, flesh-eating weapons.

She admitted that much of the information she had learned about Los Muertos and Colonel Walker had been by way of capturing one of his scouts. Although she did not say as much, and he did not ask, he imagined that her conversation with that scout had not been even remotely as civilized as the one she was presently having with Clay. A fair amount of unfriendly persuasion had likely been used, and considering how passionate Angelita was about finding and destroying Los Muertos and stopping Colonel Walker, it wasn't likely that she had elected to set the scout free after questioning him.

By the time she had finished telling Clay all of this, Angelita's words had become slurred and frequently intertwined with words of Spanish that she did not always translate for him. Clay had helped himself to a bit of the bottle of whiskey, but only enough to help him feel a bit relaxed and to dull the pain in his left hand. Angelita had finished cleaning and bandaging Clay's hand early on, and she had instead been medicating herself with tequila to numb her own pains—those of her soul, caused by the loss of her family.

“So, about the boy upstairs,” Clay asked carefully during a lull in the conversation, watching her stand uneasily by the fire of the opened wood stove's door. “Was that one of your relatives? Or maybe someone you knew?”

She jabbed the fire poker clumsily at the remains of what burned inside before grabbing another log and tossing it inside as she spoke.

"No. I did not know those people. They were Mexican," she said blandly. She suddenly straightened up, slapping a palm against her chest proudly. "I am *Americano!*"

"If you say so," Clay mumbled with a shrug. "So, how did you know the kid's name?"

She appeared baffled by the question. "I did not know his name."

"Well, didn't you call him something? Sombrero? Burrito? Something like that?"

"Sobrito," she replied humorlessly. "I called him *sobrito*."

"Yeah, that. Wasn't that his name?"

"No." She paused to tip back her bottle of tequila again, almost staggering now as she made her way over to him. "It is what we call the son of a sister or brother."

"Oh, you mean a nephew?"

"Nephew, *sobrito*, *si, si*," she slurred, standing over him where he sat upon the floor, leaning back against a fat log that had been carved up and mounted with legs to form a long bench for sitting.

"So, I take it the kid just looked a lot like your nephew then, huh?" Clay guessed.

Angelita nodded slowly, hugging the tequila bottle to her bosom and tucking her chin down to rest upon its top. She rocked herself slowly from side to side as she stood there, probably not even aware that she was doing so. It looked like something a nervous or scared little girl might do while clutching a favorite doll. Clay realized it was the first distinctively feminine thing he had seen her do thus far. Her facade of toughness had slipped yet another peg lower still. Either she was becoming more comfortable around him, more trusting, or perhaps she was really getting drunker than she had intended.

"You probably better sit down before you fall down," he suggested with a smile.

She remained standing and rocking, looking down at him with a blank expression for a few moments. "Mi sobrito was the first that I have killed."

"The first of Los Muertos?"

"The first... anything," she said. "I did not ever kill before. No person, no animal, nothing. Francisco, his wife was sick and died some years before, and I help care for *mi sobrito*. I treat him like he is my son. I love him so much. And then Los Muertos bites him, and then he bites me. And then I do it so fast. I take the knife and I just do this." She pantomimed a vicious downward stabbing motion in the air with one hand, and then tapped a finger against her temple. "I put the knife in here... in his head. And then he falls down." Angelita paused, reflecting upon that memory briefly before taking another sip of tequila. "I never kill before. And the first one I kill is *mi sobrito... un niño pequeño*."

Clay looked up at her, meeting those very dark brown eyes of hers and seeing them glisten wetly in the light of the nearby fire. Instead of fearing her, for once he actually pitied her... and admired her even more so. Not only was she amazingly adept at fighting Los Muertos and gifted with supernatural healing, but she also had an iron will. Clay could not imagine how difficult it must have been to go through what she had and not only survive but also charge head-on at danger, even pursuing it. And she never had given in to the need to stop, to slow down, or

just plain give up. Compared to her, Clay was nothing but a coward, someone who would sooner run away from such things rather than confront and conquer them.

He held a hand up to her. "Come here. Have a seat. You look plain whooped."

"Whooped?" she echoed. "What is that?"

"Tuckered out."

"*Que?*"

"Schnoekered. Three sheets to the wind. Sauced up. Shitfaced."

She took half a step back and scowled at him. "My face is not shit!"

"No, no, no!" he laughed, holding up both hands. "That's not what I said. Sorry, it's just another way of saying you're drunk."

"Oh." She stumbled, just barely managing not to fall over. "I think that you are right."

"C'mon, have a sit-down. Here, I'll even clean a spot off for ya'," he said, making a show of pretending to dust a space off beside himself upon the dirt floor.

Angelita hesitated. "Will you tell me your story now?"

"Sure, if you really wanna hear it," he said, "although I doubt you'll remember it in the morning if you keep drinking."

"I will remember if it is a good story," she told him confidently as she took his hand, very lady-like now, and allowed him to help steady her as she half-knelt and half-fell onto the floor.

"Afraid it ain't much of a story to tell. Certainly not a long one, and nowhere near as interesting as yours."

She settled herself up against the log bench with her shoulders against its side, slouching lazily as she brought the bottle to her lips once more. She clumsily spilled some down her chin and she failed to catch it with her hand.

"You'd better give me that before you make yourself sick," he said, reaching for her bottle. She immediately slapped his hand away. "Hey, now!"

"You have your drink! I will have mine," she scolded him, wagging a finger in his face. "I will stop when I want, gringo. This is mine. I have worked for this. Now, tell me your story."

"Well, all right then," he relented. "Once upon a time, I was born and raised in Kansas near Dodge City. I worked farms and cattle, and my dad taught me some gunsmithing. Awhile back, I met a girl named Ellie and fell in love with her. She was with some other fella named Ike that used to treat her bad. She took a liking to me because I treated her like a lady, 'cause that's how I was raised. One day, Ike found out about her and I, and when I came to see her, I saw him beating on her. We had some words, he went for his gun, and I went for mine. He shot and missed. I shot, and he fell dead. Ellie plum lost her sense then, called me a murderer, said her daddy would have me strung up from a rope as soon as she told him. So... I got the hell out of Dodge, started heading south, and then I met you. The end."

For a few moments, Angelita just stared at him and blinked slowly, as if she was still trying to digest what he'd said. Then she narrowed her eyes a bit, shook her head, and looked away with a disgusted sound.

"That is a stupid, stupid thing," she said quite sourly.

"I told you it wasn't a very good story," he said, taking a slug of whiskey.

“No, gringo! The woman! *Muy estúpido!*” Angelita insisted, nudging him with her bottle. “She is stupid to be angry at you. You try to help her. It is crazy for her to be angry at you!”

He shrugged. “Yeah, well... no offense, but women ain't always the most sensible creatures. Had I known she was gonna turn on me like she did, I probably would have just let Ika take another shot and kill me instead.”

“No. No, gringo, that is more stupid,” she said, again hitting his shoulder with her bottle and now leaning closer to him. “You are a good man that does good things. You try to help women. This other man... Ike? Ike is a bad man. It is good that you killed him. He should be dead.” She shrugged. “I would have killed him.”

Clay held his bottle up to the firelight, looking at its amber contents as he swirled it around a bit. “I was raised to believe it ain't anyone's place to decide whether someone deserves to die, except a judge or God. I didn't kill Ike because I thought he needed killing. I just did it because I wasn't ready to die that day, and because I was better with a gun than him.” He pointed toward the upper floor with his bottle. “Did it with that same gun that blew up on me. Guess the damned thing was cursed or something. Or maybe it ain't the gun but me that's cursed.”

“You are not cursed. You are blessed. We are both blessed.”

“Not like you, I ain't,” he chuckled. “I bleed like any other man. I got scars to prove it.”

“But you are blessed to be here now. You are alive. You have come very far and done many hard things to be here.”

“Blessed to be running from the law for killin' a man while trying to protect a woman that didn't need protectin'?” he countered. “And now I'm shooting and cutting up dead people to keep them from eating other people. If this is what you call being blessed, then I'd hate to see what you call being cursed.”

Angelita sighed and bowed her head, reaching up to take off her hat and lay it upon the floor. She ran her fingers through her hair, which lay thick and wet with the earlier rain and with sweat. A few strands stuck to her temple and forehead from the sheen of perspiration that dotted her brow. She looked utterly exhausted.

“Y'know, maybe you better get some rest,” he suggested. “It won't be light anytime soon, so you could probably get in a pretty good sleep if you let yourself.”

She didn't look at him. She just nodded her head, drew in a deep breath, and then let out a long, heavy sigh as she leaned over fully, resting her head awkwardly upon his shoulder. Without really thinking much of it, he scooted himself over closer to her and put an arm around her comfortingly. Angelita seemed to stiffen her body for a moment in reaction to this.

“What are you doing?” she asked almost suspiciously.

“Oh.” He began to take his arm away, preparing to move away again. “Sorry.”

She caught his hand and wrapped his arm around her shoulders again. “No. No, this is okay. I need this.” She snuffled herself into him a bit more as she settled into a more comfortable position. “You are a good man, Clay.”

“I am?” he chuckled softly. “And here all this time, I thought you hated me.”

“No. I do not hate you. I respect you. You are a good man for trying to help me.”

“Oh.” He paused for a moment. “Does that mean we're friends now? Or amigos? Whatever?”

She shrugged. “Si. I think so.”

“Then does this mean you're going to stop calling me a stupid gringo?”

“No,” she replied immediately. And then he heard a soft, sweet sound he never would have imagined she could make. She giggled. And then, after perhaps a minute of shared silence, he felt her turn soft against him and begin to snooze softly, fast asleep with his chest as her pillow. It wasn't the sort of ending to the evening that he might have expected, but it was hardly the worst that he could have imagined.

Chapter 10

When Clay awoke, it was still dark outside, but the glow of the approaching dawn was already obvious. The fire in the stove had been kept alive somehow, and he could see another fresh log had been tossed inside. Angelita was no longer resting against his side, and just a brief look around the area showed him that she was already up and active again somehow. If she was hung over at all from her tequila binge, she was hiding it remarkably well. She moved about the place with a sense of urgency, as if the approach of sunrise was signaling some impending doom.

He got up, went outside briefly to visit the outhouse, and then took to assisting her with the task of essentially robbing the dead. They gathered everything of value that they could: ammunition, a new Colt Peacemaker for Clay, food, water, fresh shirts for both of them, and cash, of course. With only one horse between them, they would only be able to travel so far, so fast, and only with so much. There was nothing of importance to Clay in the wagon they had left in the hills, so it was decided that what they could carry on their persons and sling over the horse would be enough until they reached the next town. It seemed almost criminal to relegate Angelita's fine horse to doing a mule's work, but the wagons left by the dead trading post patrons—those that hadn't burned up in the barn fire—were unsuitable for their needs, and her horse was not trained to lead a wagon, anyhow.

As Clay had come to expect of her by then, Angelita said a prayer quietly after completely saturating the corpses in the trading post with every flammable liquid they could find. Clay was given the honor of tossing the burning oil lamp, throwing it in through the front door. The fire erupted with such suddenness and ferocity that it was nearly an explosion. The deep and heavy *woof* sound quickly was followed by the crackles, pops, and sizzles of burning things. Clay tried not to think of how much of that was the sound of burning flesh and hair as they turned and walked away, leading the loaded-up stallion along behind them.

Clay was surprised how well the mountains and hills concealed the source of the smoke from the fire. The building had been fully engulfed in flames by the time it had disappeared from their direct view around the next large hill. By the time the sun had fully risen, Clay could scarcely even see a hint of smoke, which was almost impossible to make out against the cloudy backdrop of the sky that looked as if the previous night's storm might turn around and come back.

The walk was long and unpleasant, but the cloudy skies helped to keep the temperature mercifully lower. The steam-like dampness in the air from the prior rains made up the difference, and both Clay and Angelita were almost completely exhausted by high noon. They found an adequate shade tree, tied off the horse, and rested for a couple of hours. Angelita slept a bit, but Clay remained awake, partly to watch for trouble and partly because his rambling mind would not allow him to doze at all.

For one thing, Clay couldn't stop thinking about his strange companion. They had barely spoken at all during their walk, but their conversation the night before had put Angelita in an entirely different light. For one, he now saw her as Angelita, a young woman that was admirably brave, determined, and apparently gifted with divine powers or protection to some extent. The person he knew now starkly contrasted against the one he had first known only as The Rider, who had seemed utterly ruthless and interested only in killing and destroying. Though it was more likely that he was simply getting to know who she truly was, that his initial impressions had been skewed, it seemed possible that Angelita may have actually been changing a bit as they spent more time together. However unlikely, it was still possible that she was becoming a bit softer, a bit less cold-hearted... a bit more human.

Stranger still was the fact that Clay was actually able to admit to himself that Angelita was attractive. He'd barely seen much of her at all, usually just her face, and even that was usually under less than ideal circumstances due to poor light and/or the hat and mask she so often wore. But he had seen plenty of her eyes, those big and incredibly dark eyes of hers, so full of potent emotions. He had never really seen much of the rest of her, at least not really enough to have anything more than a vague guess as to what kind of a build she had, but as of yet, she was anything but objectionable. She was clearly fit, strong, agile, and... well, he had been given a brief glance at those legs of hers. There had been no mistaking their appealingly strong, firm, shapely form.

What drew him the most, however, had nothing to do with her physical being and everything to do with her personality. Angelita was a survivor, through and through. She was one of those rare souls, especially among women, who had the willpower and the stomach to do anything and everything necessary to survive, no matter how vile, violent, or possibly evil it may have seemed. And, more than that, she was beyond committed to doing what she felt was right, whether it be a matter of justice or decency or, as she put it, carrying out God's will.

Clay knew that it couldn't all be chalked up to her religious convictions. In his experience, people more often than not used religion either as a justification for wicked deeds or as an escape from feeling guilty. Angelita only seemed to use religion as a means for explaining that which she did not understand, but what she nevertheless felt was true. For all Clay knew, maybe she truly was on a mission from God to stop Colonel Walker and Los Muertos, and maybe he'd been chosen as her mismatched sidekick.

Clay watched her as she took her extended nap, something she called a *siesta*. She did not appear to rest well. As exhausted as she was, she should have been snoring away soundly to sleep off the lingering effects of the tequila and the fatigue of so much fighting. Instead, she tossed and turned fitfully, murmuring

unintelligible things of Spanish as she dreamed of God-knew-what. Angelita awoke with a gasp, sitting bolt-upright and swatting her hands at the air to fend off some invisible foe(s). He sat in patient silence as he watched her regain her bearings and return to her senses. She blinked wearily at Clay for a few moments, looking as though she was trying to decide if he was really there or if she was still dreaming. She finally turned away, rubbing her face and her eyes.

“Did I sleep much?” she asked groggily.

“Not too long. Maybe an hour or so,” he replied with a shrug.

She looked at him again, now seeming puzzled. “Did you sleep?”

“Nah. Didn't need to. Sun's still up, anyway.”

She ran her fingers through her ink-black hair, moving it back over her ears. “You were watching me sleep.”

“Me? Nah. I was just... watching out for snakes.” He could see from the way she narrowed her eyes at him that she wasn't buying that lie. Not fully admitting the truth, he shrugged and said, “You were rolling around and making a lot of noise. Looked like you were having one hell of a nightmare.”

“What is that?”

“A bad dream,” he replied. Hesitantly, Clay asked, “Do you have a lot of those?”

She nodded, picking up her hat from the ground nearby and dusting it off. Her confirmation of this didn't surprise him. Dealing with Los Muertos and seeing one's whole family die would give anyone nightmares. Clay was having a trick of a time trying not to think about his own such experiences when he was awake.

“You were saying a bunch of Spanish stuff, and you looked like you were fighting something just before you woke up,” he said. “Los Muertos?”

“No,” she said softly as she put on her hat. She met his eyes directly. “You.”

“What? Me?” he chuckled. “Look, I know I ain't the best looking guy around, but I never thought I was so ugly that I gave women nightmares.”

As usual, the humor missed Angelita entirely. She looked away as she brushed a few bits of earth and dried leaves out of her hair with a somber expression upon her tired but pretty face.

“Los Muertos bites you,” she said flatly. “You come to bite me, and... I cannot shoot.”

Again, Clay could not help but to chuckle a bit—nervously, perhaps. “What, you mean you've taken a liking to me, so you couldn't bear to put me down?”

For a beat, she just met his eyes, showing very little more than perhaps the slightest bit of alarm in her eyes. Then that look changed to one of scowling disapproval. She began to get up from the ground, picking up her rolled-up cloak and shaking out the dust.

“My guns would not shoot. I had no problem with shooting you, if my guns were not bad,” she explained, whipping the cloak out a couple of times. She gave the cloak a practiced sort of twirl as she thrust her arms through its openings. “I saw you die. I was okay to shoot you. But my guns would not shoot.”

“Well, that's sure a big relief. Here I was, worried you might have gotten kind of attached to me or something, and you'd sooner let me chew on you rather than shooting me,” he scoffed. Clay had meant for it to be a joke of sorts, but somehow it came out sounding too serious and bitter. What the hell was wrong with him? The heat? Lack of sleep? Dehydration?

Clay opted to pick up his flask of water and take a drink, in the off chance he was getting silly in the head from drying out. Angelita stood over him with her hands upon her shapely hips, which he could see more clearly now in the mid-day's light. The dark blue shirt that she now wore was either too small or cut wrong for her shape, as it clung to her body in ways that made it very obvious to Clay that she had a slender waist and an ample but not large bust. In spite of the hat, the cavalryman's pants and boots, and the riding cloak, there was no mistaking her for anything but a woman.

"Do not think that I will not kill you because of what we did last night," she warned him. "If Los Muertos bites you, then you are dead, and I will shoot you and cut off your head."

Clay stared at her for a moment. "Because of last night? What we did? Funny, I don't remember us doing anything last night except cutting the heads off a lot of dead people."

She hesitated, seeming almost confused. "No. There was ... there was more." Angelita blinked, shook her head abruptly, and declared, "What we did was wrong. I should not have done that with you."

"What, the head-chopping? Hey, that was your idea. You said if we didn't, then Los Muertos..."

"*Chinga los muertos, estúpido!*" she cried angrily, stamping her foot. "I am saying what we did was wrong! What we did after the drinking."

Clay shook head and shrugged his shoulders. "Honestly, lady, I ain't got the foggiest idea what you're going on about. After all the head-chopping work, the only thing that happened was you grabbed a bottle of that Mexican rot-gut you call tequila, we traded stories, and then you fell asleep." He held up his left hand. "Oh, and you fixed this up for me. Thanks again for that."

The uncertainty was plain upon her face, as much as she tried to mask it with aggression. "But... there was more! I know this! How can you say we did nothing? Why do you lie?"

"Lady, I don't..." he began, and then it hit him. "Wait. What, now?"

"The things you said! And... the things you did," Angelita fired back, her anger faltering as she clearly began to doubt her own accusations.

"The things I did? The only thing I did was put an arm around you! And you even said you were okay with that. With God as my witness, I swear that was all I did," he insisted. Clay shook his head with an amused smirk. "Christ almighty, woman! You make it sound like we fornicated or something."

The anger was gone now as she protested, "But there was kissing."

"Not with me, there wasn't. Maybe you got up and did something with the horse after I fell asleep, but I never saw it," he said. "I mean, you did put down a lot of tequila last night, so..."

Angelita turned away from him with a sigh. He couldn't tell whether she was more embarrassed, annoyed, confused, or... or what? Disappointed? That last possibility seemed as unlikely as pigs learning how to fly.

"I was wrong to tell you my story. It was a stupid thing to do," she said. Clay wasn't sure whether she had directed that statement at him or herself. "I am sure that we kissed. I remember it. And you told me things."

“The only thing I told you was how I wound up on that trail the night I met you. I swear, that's all I said,” he assured her. “And I hope you don't mind me saying so, but I damn sure would have remembered kissing your pretty face. I know you'd sooner shoot me or run me through with that sword than you ever would put those lips of yours anywhere near my ugly mug, though. And I ain't too eager to die, so I would never risk trying.”

She turned slightly to look back at him. “Did you say... I am pretty?”

Hesitantly, he confessed, “Well, yeah, I suppose I did. I mean, far as I can tell, what with all them guy clothes you wear. Not that it matters much what this stupid gringo thinks of you, anyway.”

There was a pause as Clay got up, dusted himself off, and grabbed his gun belt from the nearby tree branch where he had hung it. After putting it on, he grabbed the other loaded gun rigs and brought them over to Angelita.

“Here,” he said, holding the belts out to her, “you might want to put these back on. You know, in case you get the urge again to shoot me. Anyway, we got a lot of walking to do before it gets late.”

She accepted the gun rigs, but reached out with her free hand to catch his shoulder as he began to turn away. “Clay, wait.”

He turned halfway around toward her, for some reason expecting to be punched or slapped. She did neither. Angelita's gorgeous dark brown eyes seemed to peek into his very soul as they stood there for a moment, apparently trying to read one another's thoughts. She left her hand upon his shoulder as she gave him a subtle nod.

“I remember,” she said softly. “I remember your story. I know that I told you my story. But I had too much tequila. I was confused. I am not sure what we did. I think I remember. But if you say we did not... do anything... then I will believe you.”

Holding her gaze, he asked, “Are you saying you trust me?”

She closed her eyes and turned away. “I was very, very sure it happened.”

“Must have just been another nightmare,” Clay responded, walking away from her and adjusting his hat as he stepped out from under the shade of the tree.

Chapter 11

The next town proved to be much closer than they had anticipated. The mining town of Goldfield was relatively large, at least for a town on the western frontier. Even near sunset, the whole area was alive with activity as the miners were apparently ending their workday and spending every hard-earned penny of the wages they'd just earned. As such boom towns went, the businesses of Goldfield catered to the interests of its primary source of income, the gold and copper miners. There were multiple choices when it came to satisfying the various “pleasures of the flesh,” as Preacher John might have called them: gambling, drinking, whoring, and even an opium tent run by the Chinese.

The sorts of pleasures that Clay specifically sought were far more practical and basic. The thought of getting his boots off his blistered feet, soaking in a hot, soapy bath, having a fine steak, and then sleeping in an actual bed sounded like the best things in life a man could have this side of heaven. Thought they had not spoken much during their trek since their earlier conversation, Clay estimated by sight alone that Angelita was equally anticipating the chance to indulge in a few comforts of civilization.

Clay was still a bit nervous about being identified as a wanted man by anyone in town, so he elected to skip on his initial impulse to seek out a barber, hoping the short beard growth would help mask his appearance. He concocted a thin story to explain his presence and to deflect any curiosity away from himself or Angelita, and he made sure that she was on the same page. If anyone asked, Angelita was his common-law wife from Mexico, and they were heading to Tombstone to start up a gun store together.

After boarding Angelita's stallion at the corral, they checked into a local inn that was not too high-profile but still had the amenities that they both sought. Feeling a stronger craving for steak than for soap, Clay was content to take a quick scrub and throw on the semi-clean set of clothes he had brought along. Angelita suggested that she would be taking her time with her bath, urging Clay to go on without her. Clay decided to make use of some of the money they had come by from the dead, finding a store that was still open and outfitting himself in a set of working man's clothes. With his boots and hat, he looked like a confused mix between a ranch hand and a miner when he left the store, but at least the clothes were clean and new, and they were not tainted with the stains or scents of Los Muertos.

By the time Clay finally made his way into a nearby saloon, one that did not appear too rowdy, he felt absolutely famished. His diet of beans, beef jerky, and desert-hot water had been taking its toll upon his insides, feeling as though he hadn't eaten a proper meal in ages. He sat alone at a table in a quiet corner, ordered a full dinner, and he practically stuffed himself sick with the beef, potatoes, and corn that he was served. It was nothing like the home-cooked meals he had been raised upon in Kansas, but compared to what he had been eating lately, and how little he'd had, it seemed like one of the best feasts he'd ever had in his entire life.

Even as sore as his feet were, they felt a great deal better in the proper-sized boots he'd bought, and the refreshing feel of clean skin under clean clothes with a full belly had put him in a fine mood. It felt good to be around people again—live ones, not the undead, flesh-eating kind—and even the company of strangers seemed preferable to being solely with a woman who always seemed to be looking for an excuse to murder him. More certain of his anonymity in his new appearance, Clay dared to belly up to the bar of a neighboring saloon that was bustling with activity.

The life of a miner was hard, filthy, thick with danger, and apparently short-lived, judging from the patrons that filled the noisy, tobacco smoke-filled saloon. Many had visible injuries of varying types and degrees of severity, ranging from fresh bandages and wounds to old scars and missing things. None of the miners were old, nor was a single one of them even remotely clean, save for two of them

that had apparently just rinsed off before trudging in with wet hair to seek their liquid rewards for a long day's work.

In fact, even being the modest age that he was at the time, he seemed like an old man compared to many of the young bucks here. Mining was hard work that required strong backs and youthful vigor, and so many of these fellows were just under Clay's age at the most, but largely just past their teenaged years. Along with such youth came the rowdiness and tail-chasing urges that fed the local businesses so well. Clay would need to be wary of avoiding an unprovoked fight here, but he would not let it stop him from enjoying a good drink or two.

He got more than a few curious looks and no shortage of nosy questions, particularly because of his relatively clean appearance, his age, and his unfamiliar face. Most only inquired in passing with no serious interest. Only the bartender seemed genuinely interested in Clay. He was a somewhat short, older Mexican who spoke English almost as well as Clay, with gray-streaked hair, a heavily pock-marked face, very serious eyes, and a somewhat gravelly, raspy voice.

The bartender asked the usual things—who Clay was, where he was from, and where he was going—and Clay easily fed him the half-true details of his made-up history. Clay's only worry was the collection of wanted posters that the bartender had tacked up on the wall behind the bar, and the old gun belt and revolver that he'd hung up from a hook near the bar.

"A gunsmith, you say?" the bartender asked. "I know a few things about guns. I used to be a pistolero, myself. A lawman, actually. I kept peace in my town for fifteen years. Never killed a man, but I drew my gun many times and fired a few warning shots." He grinned, his teeth heavily stained and worn. "I spent more time shooting cans and bottles than shooting at bad men."

"No shame in that at all," Clay said as a raucous group of miners near the door began hooting and whistling. Every time an even somewhat attractive woman would enter the place, they practically announced her presence with their cat calls. Clay had turned to look the first few times, but he had already begun to ignore it now.

"Killing a man is very serious business, *señor*, even for a man of the law," the bartender explained. "After you kill a man, it is not the judge that you have to fear, or even God in heaven." He tapped a finger to his own temple. "It is all in here, my friend. The guilt, the doubt, the regret. It will make you *loco en la cabeza*. I have known many men who have killed. Some in war, some in the streets. Even if you live, when you pull the trigger, you are not just killing the other man. You are killing yourself a little bit, too. Some of those men I have known, when they have killed too many, they are dead inside." The bartender nodded. "Very serious business, my friend."

"Not that I disagree at all with what you're saying," Clay said as he eyed his diminishing mug of beer, "but why are you telling me this?"

"Because you are a gunsmith," the old man replied. "You make the things that do the killing. You should know that what you do is serious business, too. Do you not see yourself as a maker of things that kill?"

Clay shook his head. "Not really. See, my dad taught me that a gun is just a tool, just like an ax or a shovel. You can use it for good or for bad. The gun, itself, isn't what decides that. It's the person behind the trigger."

“But what good can a gun do if it only is for killing?” the bartender asked. “This is why you see my gun up there on the wall and not on my hip. I have no more interest in killing. I have seen what it does to the man that lives.”

Clay shrugged. “I guess it depends on how you look at it. I don't carry a gun because I'm interested in killing. I carry a gun because I'm interested in staying alive. And I've been saved by a gun more times than I can count.”

The bartender placed his hands upon the bar, leaned over it towards Clay, and lowered his voice as he narrowed his eyes. “Have you ever killed a man, *señor?*”

“Nope,” Clay said without a moment's hesitation as he picked up his mug for another gulp. “Just a lot of wild animals.”

The bartender stared at him for a few long, tense moments. For a moment, Clay worried that he had said or done something to give himself away. Then, at last, the bartender grinned broadly and laughed as he leaned back, wagging his finger at Clay.

“I think I like you, gringo,” he said. “You are different.”

Clay focused his attention upon his nearly empty glass as the bartender hurriedly put away the tumbler he'd been polishing with a towel. He only glanced aside for an instant as he noticed someone taking a seat next to him on his right. Out of the corner of his vision, he had glimpsed that it was a woman in a blue dress. He responded by turning himself slightly away. There was no shortage of prostitutes finding their way into this place in search of lonely men who had full pockets and empty lives, willing to give them a few minutes or hours of company for a few dollars at a time.

Clay wanted no part of that. It wasn't that he resented such women. He knew that they were only doing what they could to make a living in a way that wasn't the easiest or most respected of trades. Quite honestly, he'd been with a few in Dodge City in the past, before he'd met Ellie. He just didn't want such involvement at that time. He had too much on his mind to even think of seeking carnal knowledge of a woman in a town through which he was only passing. Doing so would only have left him longing for more, wishing that he could be with a woman for a lifetime instead of a night at a time. Until he found himself in a place of normalcy in life again—if that ever happened at all—then he would have no opportunity to find someone with whom to settle down. Thus, it would do him no good to distract himself needlessly by thinking of such things now.

“*Buenas noches, señora!*” the bartender greeting the woman next to Clay. “What would you like?”

“*Dos cervezas, por favor,*” she responded dryly.

“Two beers?” the bartender chuckled. “You must be very thirsty.”

Clay felt a warm, soft hand being laid upon his wrist. “One is for my husband.”

He turned to look at the woman and nearly jumped right off his bar stool in surprise when he found himself looking at Angelita, seeing her as he had never imagined she could have looked. The blue dress she wore was form-fitting in a few select places and had black ruffles around the shoulders, hemline, and waist. The neckline scooped dangerously low and the top bunched her breasts together to form some impressively deep cleavage. Her hair had been cleaned and brushed out smooth, tied back into a long, tight, braided tail that went halfway down her back. Her lips looked a bit more red, her cheeks slightly rosy, her eyes somehow even

looked darker than before, and she smelled sweetly of some girly soft of powder. In short, her beauty was absolutely jaw-dropping.

"What is wrong?" she asked, as if she was completely unaware of how stunningly gorgeous she looked.

It took Clay a moment to find his voice again. "I almost didn't recognize you."

"You do not know your wife?" she countered without even a hint of a smirk. Angelita picked up the mug of what little beer remained, examining it closely. To the bartender, she said, "I think you have put something in his drink to make him forget."

The bartender chuckled, presenting two fresh mugs full of beer. "Only alcohol, *señora*."

"Then I will also have some," she said, picking up the mug and meeting Clay's wide eyes. "I also would like to forget some things."

Noting Clay's lingering surprise, the bartender asked her, "Why does he look that way? Have you not seen each other for some time?"

"Well, I... I'm just not used to seeing her dressed up so nice," Clay said for her. At least it wasn't a lie. "I didn't think you even owned anything like that."

"Of course! I am a woman. I like to dress like one when I can," she replied as she watched Clay finish his first beer. "I cannot wear nice things when I am riding in the desert."

"Is that your dress? Or is it one that you... ah, picked up along the way here?" he asked, suspecting it may have been one she'd found in Ned's wagon before she'd torched it. "It looks a little too small for you."

"This is my dress. It was made for me." She looked down at herself for a moment, now appearing genuinely concerned. "You do not like it?"

"Oh I definitely like it. It's very... eye-catching." He paused, forcing himself not to stare at her cleavage and instead looking at the rest of the saloon's patrons. "And I think everyone else in here likes it, too. Maybe a little too much." He noted the abundant number of lusty stares that the other men in the place were casting in Angelita's direction. "Aren't you a little worried about attracting too much attention?"

She shrugged. "Why? Do you worry that another man will take me away?" She took a hearty slug from her beer and wiped her lips delicately. "I can protect myself. I do not worry. I think it is you that should worry."

"Me? Worry? What for?" Clay asked.

As if on cue, he felt a heavy hand clapping down upon his shoulder just then.

"That is why," he heard Angelita say as Clay turned around.

He found himself facing a giant of a man, one that was still covered in dirt and other filth from his day of work in one of the mines. He had a tangled, curly, dust-filled mop of dark hair, a bushy mustache, and an ugly, ragged, oddly-shaped scar running down from his forehead and across his left cheek. When he grinned, his teeth were blackened, not complete, and in total disarray. When he spoke, his breath reeked of foulness and decay... not unlike Los Muertos.

"You must be new," he said to Clay. "Ain't seen your face around here before. What area you workin' in, boy?"

Clay fought the urge not to laugh at being called a boy. He hadn't been called that in years, and he was sure that he was older than this overgrown two-legged

ox. And anyway, the stink of his breath robbed him of any humor, potent enough to knock a buzzard off a manure pile.

“Oh, I'm not working in the mines,” he said casually, “I'm just passing through town, that's all.”

“Just passing through, huh?” The big ugly beast loomed over Clay menacingly. “Well, this place is for miners, and you ain't one of us. So, you'd best get on back to passing through.”

This was exactly the sort of thing Clay had hoped to avoid. He had been a fool to enter this saloon. Well, on second thought, had he still been here by himself, this terrible giant likely would have never given him a second look. However, with Angelita here now, dressed as she was, the huge ape of a man had suddenly noticed Clay, seeing him as an obstacle to be passed, overcome, or just crushed on his way to get to her. Clay didn't see himself as competition for Angelita, because as far as she was probably concerned, he was nothing more to her than a partner in crime that she had reluctantly tolerated for this long. Of course, the towering troll didn't know this. He was only aware that Clay had been talking to her and that he needed to be removed from the situation so that he could be free to force himself upon the woman without interruption.

“No problem. We'll just finish our drinks and we'll be on our way out in a few minutes,” Clay told him with a forced smile of politeness.

“Like hell, a few minutes,” the mountain of a man growled. “You're leaving now.”

Clay shrugged, tossing some money upon the bar to cover the tab. “Okay, then. You have yourself a fine evening, mister.”

Clay tipped his hat to the mining monster, climbed off his bar stool, took Angelita by the hand to politely help her stand, and he began to move past the gargantuan wall of dirty flesh. The giant lashed out with one big, meaty, grimy hand and clamped it around Angelita's wrist, wrenching it upward with enough force to yank her hand out of Clay's grasp and make her cry out with pain. As Clay spun to face him, the beast took a heavy-footed step forward, placing himself between Clay and his make-believe wife.

“You go,” he said. “She stays.”

“She's not a miner,” Clay said. “According to you, she's not welcome here either.”

“Ladies are always welcome here,” the mammoth said with a hideous grin. “Yella'-bellied drifters pretending to be miners ain't. Now go on, little guy, before I break you like a dirt clod.”

Clay couldn't even see Angelita at all with that wall of big, dumb muscle blocking his view. People around them had quickly taken notice of the confrontation, and everyone nearby had begun to move away to give them space in case they came to blows. Clay noted the movement of the caveman's arm behind him as Angelita apparently struggled to free herself from his grasp, but the behemoth hardly seemed to exert any effort in maintaining his hold upon her wrist.

Clay sighed disappointedly and squared off with the big guy, the fingers of his right hand dancing upon the butt of his Colt in warning.

“C'mon, now,” he said, “there ain't no need for this to get ugly.” He blinked up at the creature. “Well... no uglier than it already is.”

"You think I care about that thing?" the giant demanded with a nod toward Clay's hip. "You ain't nothing without that piece of iron."

"God made men, but Sam Colt made men equal," Clay responded with a smirk. "Anyway, that's my wife you're manhandling there."

"So what? You think I'm trying to steal her away? I'll give her back when I'm good and ready to," he snarled, his thick, chapped lips curling into an ugly smile. "We're just gonna talk for a spell. Maybe go for a long walk together under the stars. Then you two can be on your way out of town. Unless she decides to stay..."

There was a bit of hurried movement off to either side of Clay as people seemed eager to get out of the way of more than just some potential flying fists. Many footsteps sounded upon the wood floor as people began to exit the saloon, or at least to get a better view of the face-off.

"Okay, *cabrón*. I think it is time for you to leave," Clay heard the bartender say.

"Mind your own business, you old bean-fartin' fool."

The unmistakable series of four rapid clicks to Clay's left force him to look in the bartender's direction. The gun that had been in the belt holster hanging on the wall was no longer there. It was now in the bartender's hand, its hammer was cocked, and its muzzle was trained steadily upon the huge target that stood between Clay and Angelita.

"This place is my business, *cabrón*, and you are a problem for my customers," the bartender said. "Now it is time for you to leave."

The huge thug let out an amused snort. "You ain't never shot a man before, Pablo, and you sure as hell ain't gonna shoot one tonight. Not with that thing, you ain't. Everyone knows that ain't loaded. You just keep it over the bar for show."

Suddenly, the big lug grunted, arched his back, and dropped to his knees with a floor-shaking *thud*. It was only then that Clay could see Angelita again. She had somehow cranked the giant's arm around behind his back and kicked his knees out from under him. A long, slim-bladed knife was in her free hand, and she held it to his throat.

"This is not for show," she told the suddenly frightened big guy, "and it is very, very sharp. Can you feel it?"

To accentuate her point, she drew it across his cheek very quickly before laying it against his thick neck again. Blood drooled easily from the cut she had made. The ugly giant would have one more scar to add to his collection... if he survived this night.

"Yeah," the brute replied after a bit of hesitation. "Yeah, I can feel it."

"Do you know how long it is for a man to die when his neck is cut?" she asked him.

"Uh... no, ma'am," he responded with sudden politeness.

"Not long," she answered, "but it is long enough to see all of your blood come out. Long enough to know that you will die. And when you are cut, you cannot stop it. You cannot talk or cry or say that you are sorry. You cannot do anything. You can only see your death coming as you make this sound." She leaned in close to his ear and made a disturbingly graphic hissing, gurgling sound. The giant was so clearly horrified that he visibly shuddered. "Do you want to die this way?"

"N-n-no, ma'am!" he stuttered through trembling lips.

"Will you leave this place now?"

"Y-y-yes! Yes, ma'am!"

"Will I ever see you again?"

"No, ma'am! N-never again! I swear!" he promised all too eagerly.

"Good," she said. "Now, say that you are sorry."

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!"

"Not to me." Angelita's eyes drifted in Clay's direction, looking cold and indifferent. It was the same look he'd seen in those eyes before she had shot Preacher John in the face. "Say it to my husband."

"I'm sorry, mister! I'm sorry as hell I ever laid a hand on your woman! I'll never do it again, I swear!" he cried. Amazingly, he actually looked and sounded like he was about to start weeping.

Clay didn't know what else to do but nod at him and reply, "I'm sure you won't."

Angelita released the big animal's arm, patted him on the head, and said, "Good boy. Now, go home on your hands and knees." She planted a foot in his back, kicking him forward. "Go!"

"Yes, ma'am!" he said, and he hurriedly began to crawl across the floor as the other patrons of the saloon began to laugh uproariously.

Once the humiliated bully had made his way out the front door, getting kicked in the behind by several of his peers along the way, Clay turned to look at Angelita again with wide eyes. She hiked up her dress again to stick the knife back into its sheath in her boot, and then she smoothed the dress out again very femininely. She didn't look proud or boastful or even slightly satisfied as she stared back at him. If anything, she looked almost bored, perhaps just slightly annoyed.

Clay stepped up to her and they both retook their seats at the bar. "Where did you learn how to do that? I mean, that trick with turning his arm around...?"

"I told you, gringo, I had three brothers," she informed him quite casually. "They did not play nice with me."

As the mood of the saloon quickly relaxed and the piano player started in with a new song, Pablo the bartender came to them with a bottle in his hands. He set it upon the bar between them and slid it toward them in offering before also presenting them with a pair of clean tumblers.

"For your trouble, my friends," he said humbly, "my best whiskey."

Clay accepted the bottle with a surprised smile. "Much obliged, amigo."

"I am sorry I could not help."

"It's okay. My, ah... wife here is pretty good at taking care of herself," he said, giving her a smile as he watched her take another long drink from her beer. "You might want to consider hiring someone to keep these boys in line, though. Someone's bound to call your bluff again, and that unloaded gun ain't gonna be much more useful to you than a rock."

Pablo grinned. "Maybe I could hire your wife?"

Clay poured a double-shot into each of the glasses, sliding one over closer to Angelita. "I'm afraid we won't be in town for very long. We've got business waiting for us on down the trail a ways. Sort of a limited opportunity. Can't wait around long."

"I see." Pablo watched quietly as Clay raised his glass to Angelita in a silent toast. She returned the gesture and downed her drink in a swift, effortless gulp. "May I ask you, *señor*... if you do not mind... how did you meet this woman?"

Clay shrugged. "Random chance, I guess." He winked at the enchanting, dangerous beauty at his side. "Call it God's will or something."

Angelita smiled.

Chapter 12

In trying to stay with their claim to be a married couple, they had only paid for one room for the night at the inn. However, they had paid extra for the best suite in the house, which had a bedroom and a separate parlor with couches for socializing. It was onto one of these couches that Clay dumped himself wearily. He would have preferred an actual bed, of course. But even a couch indoors was still worlds better than rocky, sandy dirt for a bed. At least here, he would not have to worry (as much) about snakes or scorpions finding their way up his trouser legs as he slept.

As before, Clay had drunk until he had felt relaxed, but not so much that he was at risk of dealing with some unpleasant after-effects in the morning. Angelita had been more conservative with her drinking this time, although it seemed she had consumed enough to have managed to unwind a bit, herself. In fact, on more than one occasion that night, he had even seen her smile again ... broadly, openly, and genuinely. That smile of hers was radiantly beautiful. He wished that he could see it more often. Likewise, her laughter was like music to him, soft and reserved but heartfelt.

Clay kicked off his boots with a groan of tremendous relief. They were the right size, and they were made well, but they were new and it would take some time to break them in. He lay there with the fancy pillow under his head, staring at the swirling designs of the wallpaper upon the ceiling as he reflected upon their conversation earlier in the saloon. That conversation was the reason he was laying in this room alone now.

Like always when it came to him and women, Clay had done something stupid. He had once again let his heart overrun his brain, and he had gone with what had felt right at the time, rather than what his common sense had told him. Clay had taken a serious liking to Angelita, one like he'd never felt for a woman before, not even with Ellie. She was beautiful, strong, brave, highly educated, very perceptive, and dangerous enough to be scary ... although he wasn't entirely sure why that last detail appealed so strongly to him in the way that it did.

Like and idiot, he had gone ahead and admitted all of that to her at one point. The crowd of the saloon had begun to clear out, their words had become more soft-spoken and private, and the whiskey had loosened up Clay's mouth perhaps a bit too much. He hadn't declared an undying love to her, nor had he suggested that they elope and make their marriage a real thing instead of a disguise. But he had suggested that maybe it was best that they let go of this Los Muertos hunt, that it was likely too big a thing for just the two of them to defeat, and that it was something they should instead leave up to someone else.

That was when Angelita's good mood had clearly gone cold. Like someone blowing out the flame of a candle, the glow of her smile had vanished and it had never returned. Realizing how cowardly his idea had sounded, Clay had backpedaled and instead offered that they try to gather a few allies, a posse of sorts, to help them on this quest. Instead of making things better, that had only seemed to make her even more displeased with him. Just like that, she went from being delightfully warm, open, and perhaps even lighthearted, back to being cold, detached, and seemingly annoyed with his very presence.

She hadn't just jumped up, slapped him, and left. It might have been better if she had, in hindsight. Instead, she had told him something that had put the final nail in the coffin for the jovial mood they'd shared for a while that night. Angelita was a married woman.

Well, at least she had been, up until her husband had been killed by Los Muertos on that horrible night. Her nephew had been the first one that she had ever killed, but he had not been the only one. She had found her husband, or at least the thing that had replaced him, wandering around just outside of the barricaded door of the kitchen where he had instructed them to wait. He had been overwhelmed while trying to hold back Los Muertos, dying as he tried to protect his wife and her nephew, and he had become one of those things. Angelita had taken his sword from his hip, hacking apart the other two things in the room. And then she had thrust that same saber through the eye of her former husband.

Angelita told Clay all of this in a hushed but dry, emotionless tone at a quiet table in a far corner of the saloon. She didn't even bat an eyelash as she told Clay that she had even tried to commit suicide after that, using her dead husband's pistol. Of course, it had failed to fire. Odds were that her husband had emptied it while trying to fight off Los Muertos, but Angelita insisted it was the first of many signs that she was meant to live, that hers was a divine cause, a mission from God to defeat Los Muertos and bring Colonel Walker to justice.

"I cannot stop. I cannot run away," she had told Clay. "This is why I am here. This is why I live. This is the only thing I have now. If I do not do this, then I have nothing. I will be nothing."

"Well... what happens when it's over?" Clay had asked. "Suppose you do get this Colonel Walker, and you get rid of every last one of Los Muertos. What then? What will you do?"

That had given her some pause. It seemed that she hadn't ever stopped to consider the possibility that she might ever complete her mission. At that point, finally showing a hint of emotion—fear, of all things—she had arisen from her chair and began to step away from the table.

"Then I will go where God wants me to go. I do not know where, and I do not care. I only know that I must do this thing first," she had said. As Clay had arisen, reaching out to grab her arm gently to prevent her departure, she had swatted it away. "I need to be alone now. I need to think... and to pray."

"Should I wait for you back at the room?" Clay had asked, feeling desperate and dumb at once.

She had nodded, backing away from him and departing with a curious sense of urgency. Ever since then, Clay had been worrying himself almost sick over the situation. What if he'd truly upset her? Was she done with him then? As he

recalled, she had never really committed or otherwise agreed to officially claiming him as a partner on this bloody quest of hers. It was something that had only been implied, at best, or perhaps just assumed by a very hopeful Clay. Maybe she had decided that he was not worth bringing along because he was not worthy, because he didn't fully have his heart invested in the cause as she did. It seemed silly that she might decide to cut ties with him now, considering all they had been through together already. But maybe that had not been for either of them to decide? If this whole "God's will" thing really was behind it all, then maybe Clay's role in things had only been to help her get to this point.

Wouldn't that have been a kicker? What if she just rode out of town that same night, leaving him there and never looking back? What if his whole life had led up to this point, that his only purpose for being had been to lend her a hand in a couple of minor occasions along the way? And now that his duties were fulfilled, he was supposed to just live out the rest of his days like anyone else while she went on without him? At that point, all he could do was sit and think back to those memories of the brief time in his life when he'd done something that mattered, something good and righteous, and that would be all that he'd have to sustain him until the end of his years.

Clay began to dwell upon these thoughts for what seemed like forever. At one point, he began to accept the possibility that maybe she had actually left. Sure, their weapons and such were there in the room with Clay, but she had been carrying a lot of money. She could always have bought more. If she had gone down to the corrals, retrieved her horse, and then...

A knock at the door brought Clay up and standing on his feet in a hurry, so sudden that he stumbled and nearly fell. He hesitated. Who would be knocking on their door at that time of night? Sure, it was likely Angelita, returning as she'd said she would, but... well, what if it wasn't? Of course, it would not be Los Muertos. They didn't knock upon doors politely, or at least they did not seem to be capable of that. But what if they did? Or what if it was just that big miner again, looking to settle the score after licking his wounds and regaining his courage with a few more drinks? What if he had recruited a few of his friends to come along and exact some revenge? What if they were armed? What if they had gotten their hands upon Angelita when she had been out there alone? What if...

The knock at the door came again, only slightly more insistent. Clay grabbed his gun belt off of the floor where he had dropped it next to the couch, and he drew the Colt Peacemaker that he had inherited from a dead stranger. Holding the gun at his side, he crept across the fairly dark parlor to the entry door and began to reach for the door lock.

"It is me," he heard Angelita tell him softly through the door. "Please open the door."

It was Angelita. Of course it was! Besides making him prone to speaking without forethought, apparently another side-effect of whiskey was that it made him slightly paranoid. Or perhaps a bit jumpy. Or maybe it made him think too much, and all of those whiskey-soaked thoughts were pointless and ran in circles? Or...

"Clay, please."

Oh, right! The door. Clay opened it and stood aside. Almost reluctantly, Angelita stepped inside, walking slowly past Clay with her head bowed slightly. He closed

the door gently, re-engaged the lock, and watched her as she seemed to wander in a dream-like state toward the bedroom door without saying anything. She stopped there, standing in the doorway with her back to him for several long, quiet moments of awkward silence. Of course, Clay was the first one to speak.

“Listen, ah... Angelita, I'm sorry,” he began. “I'm sorry for what I said, if it upset you. That wasn't my intention. I was talking foolishness. Too much whiskey, I guess. I never should have even suggested what I did because, well, let's be straight here. That sort of thing could never work between us. I mean, you're this beautiful... and I do mean drop-dead gorgeous woman. And you're on a mission from God above. And me... why, hell, what am I? Ain't sure if I'm anything much to look at, and I damn sure don't have any special powers or nothing like you got. I'm just a nobody on the run, just a dimwit who makes stupid decisions and says dumb things when he's around pretty women like yourself. I ain't got much for someone like you to want. So, I'm sorry if I offended you by suggesting you put aside what's important to you for the sake of... well, whatever the hell you could do with a fella like me.”

During this monologue, Angelita had reached back and untied her hair, calmly undoing the braid that had kept her hair so neatly in place. She drew her fingers through it a few times, fluffing her shiny black hair out over her shoulders, and then turned around to face him. She still said nothing. He could see her face clearly by the light of the moon that shone through the parlor windows. As before in the saloon, when she had been explaining the death of her late husband, her expression was utterly blank. He couldn't even begin to guess what she was thinking at that point. He only hoped that she wasn't still upset with him.

“I can't blame it all on the whiskey, of course,” he rambled on anxiously. “I got what my dad used to call diarrhea of the mouth, you see. Can't stop all the crap that just wants to keep coming out, no matter how stupid it sounds sometimes. I can't help it, but at least I say what I mean, and I mean what I say. And I really did mean it when I said you're an amazing woman. Maybe a little scary sometimes, the way you do things, but even that part I kinda like about you because you're so different and... and... hell, I just plain like you.”

All the while that Clay had been talking, Angelita had begun to fiddle with something behind her back, perhaps still fussing with her hair, or maybe adjusting her dress, or even just scratching a hard-to-reach itch. And like never before, Clay kept on yammering away, feeling his pulse race.

“I guess maybe that's why I'm so wound up tight right now,” he explained, “because I'm mighty worried about how you took all of that balderdash I was spouting earlier. Like I said, I like you. A lot, actually. I mean, more than a lot, but... anyway, that's why I'm so jittery right now, I think. I mean, no kidding, I am actually more tense right now than I was the first time I run across Los Muertos, if you can believe that. And that's because, well, I'm scared. Not scared of dying or that kind of scared, mind you, but I'm terrified. Honest-to-God terrified that I done upset you enough to want to be rid of me. I know how dumb that probably sounds, maybe even crazy, but I think somewhere along the line I got so interested in you that I got mighty attached. And the thought of you just taking off now and me never seeing you again, why, that just... just... what are you doing?”

Clay's almost frantic speech had clumsily ground to a halt as Angelita had slowly begun to walk towards him, closing the distance until she was standing almost nose-to-nose with him. Well, nose-to-chin, anyway, because she was a bit shorter than Clay. Instead of reaching up to wrap her hands around his neck and throttle the life out of him until he stopped talking—even Clay wished that he would just shut up—she laid her slender hands upon his shoulders and stared deeply into his eyes. That gaze of hers was so entrancing, so dark and beautiful, that Clay wondered if he might somehow be pulled right into the abyss of the blackness in her eyes, falling forever into a comfortable oblivion.

She gave a shrug of her slim shoulders, and the top of her dress began to fall loose. This told Clay what she had been doing with her hands behind her back a few moments before. It also told him quite clearly what she had in mind.

"I... I-I'm sorry, Angelita," he nervously told her in a hushed voice. "I'm terrible at this sort of thing. I'm better with a gun than I am with words. I just like you, and I don't want to run you off, plain and simple. And..."

"*Silencio*," she whispered as she pulled him closer, shut her eyes, and pressed her lips against his. And just like that, Clay had nothing more to say.

Chapter 13

Clay awoke to find himself alone and naked in the bed. He had slept so soundly that he had not only failed to notice when she had slipped out of bed, but he had slept in so late that it appeared to be approaching noon outside. Sure that she had only gone out to seek breakfast and perhaps purchase some needed things for their continued travels, Clay took his time with cleaning himself up a bit and getting dressed.

His night with Angelita seemed too fantastic to believe that it had been real. He didn't actually believe that it had been a dream, of course. He knew full well and good that he hadn't just imagined all of that, not like Angelita had done when she had gotten so drunk on tequila that she had confused reality with dreaming. No, there was enough proof here and there to know that the passionate lovemaking they had shared had not simply been a vivid fantasy. The only part that was missing at that point was Angelita, herself.

He wasn't inclined to panic over it, though. Smiling as he ran his fingers of the red marks she had left upon his forearms and back, he could think only of the bliss he felt in knowing that all of that passion had been mutual. Was it normal for a woman to almost draw blood with her fingernails like that? He didn't know. He didn't care. All of it had felt right to him. In fact, just about everything seemed right in his world now.

That was, of course, until he stepped foot in the parlor again. Right away, he noted the careful way that things had been moved and arranged. His boots had been set upright, his clothes neatly folded into a stack beside them upon the floor. Next to those were his rifle, his gun belt, and the knapsack of miscellaneous items he'd hauled from the trading post. Also folded nicely in half was a fair amount of

money, resting on top of his clothes. It was more money than he had been carrying before. In fact, it was probably more money than he had held in his entire life. But one detail, one part of his life that was of more value to him than any of those things, was still missing.

Angelita, and everything she had been carrying, was gone. He knew it right away, felt it like a sick twist in his gut, that she had left him after all. She had granted him one night of glory, one brief chance to experience the closest thing to heaven on earth that he could imagine, and then she had fled.

Clay threw on his boots and gun belt, grabbed his rifle and bag, shoved the stack of dollars into a pocket, and dashed out the door. He flew down the stairs in such a hurry that he stumbled and nearly rolled the whole way down. He knew that it was stupid to hurry. He knew there was no point in rushing to look for her. He had been out for so many hours, so drugged into a death-like sleep by whiskey, sex, and outright exhaustion that she had taken her leave of him with ease. She likely had quite a head start, and he had no idea where she had gone. Sure, first to the corral to get her horse, but after that, he had no clue at all. And that had been exactly her plan, for it seemed she did not want him to follow.

The clerk at the front desk was of very little help at all. He confirmed that he had seen a woman in an unusual outfit leaving the inn, just after daybreak. Aside from asking the clerk for a piece of paper, she had said nothing, and the clerk had paid no attention to what direction she had gone. Clay thanked him and hurried off.

The main street of Goldfield was alive with business, although no miners were in sight at that time because they were all underground, working the start of their shifts. He peeked in briefly at a number of businesses, hoping that by chance she might still be in town and purchasing essentials before heading out. He had no such luck, of course. She clearly was long gone.

Feeling helpless and lost, Clay trudged into the saloon from the night before, took a seat at the bar, and took off his hat to lay his head in his hands. Pablo was there, of course, drying off a plate with a towel as he walked over to Clay.

"Sorry, amigo," he said to Clay, "we stopped serving breakfast an hour ago. We won't have dinner until later tonight."

"Food ain't what I'm looking for right now," Clay sighed miserably.

"She knew you would come here," Pablo said understandingly as he approached. "She left here very early, after the miners had been here for breakfast. She did not say much. She came in, sat at a table to write something, and then she gave this to me to give to you. She told me not to read it."

Pablo reached inside his vest and took out a folded page that he handed to Clay, who eagerly unfolded it. He was not as highly educated as Angelita, he was sure, but he definitely knew how to read. His parents had made sure of that, so that he could read the Bible passages that the preacher gave sermons about in church. He wondered how or if she had known this about him, but only thought of that for an instant as his eyes took in the feminine pencil strokes of her excellent penmanship:

Clay,

I am sorry to leave you without saying goodbye. I know you understand why I leave, where I go, and what I must do. This is for me to do. Only me. Please do not follow. Wait for me here. If I do good, I will come back for you. If I do not come back, then do not look for me. Do not worry, and do not be angry. I do this because you are a good man with a good heart. I want you to live many years. If I come back or not, know that you are the only one to make me smile and feel joy when everything is so bad and painful. You are a stupid gringo, Clay, but you will always be my stupid gringo.

*Vaya con Dios, mi amore,
Angelita*

Clay sat and stared at the note for several long, silent minutes. He read it again, and again, and again. It wasn't that he could not make sense of the letter. He understood it perfectly, aside from the line above her signature. He simply couldn't convince himself that what he was reading had been her words, that she had meant what she had written. He just could not accept the simple fact that she was gone.

Why now? Why abandon him at that point? According to her letter, she had gone away on her own because she wanted him to live on. Did that mean she didn't think he was capable of surviving the battles ahead, even with her by his side? Was her opinion of his abilities so low that she thought he would be more of a burden than a help? Or was she so certain that the road ahead was so bleak, her odds of survival so small, that she was essentially on a suicidal path? Was she so convinced that her failure and death were inevitable that she simply didn't see a point in having him along, just to die with her?

Well, of course that had to be it. It was exactly what Clay had been trying to tell her the night before. She was trying to win an impossible fight, waging a war against Los Muertos and Colonel Walker entirely on her own. She knew how hopeless it was, just as Clay knew. Clay wasn't eager to throw away his life. Angelita did not want him to die, either. She wanted him to stay in Goldfield, to settle down, and to live a long life. That had also been Clay's idea ... but only if it also included her. With her gone, he was no better off than he had been before, just a fugitive on the run, with nowhere to call home and no one to care if he fell dead tomorrow.

"You look very sad, *señor*," Pablo said. "She looked very sad, too. Did your wife leave you?"

Clay nodded. "Yeah, it looks that way."

"Did you have a fight?"

"No," he said. "Quite the opposite, actually. Last night was... amazing. We were like rabbits in season. But when I woke up, she was gone."

"Did she leave you for another man? Maybe the big miner?"

"Worse," he replied, "she left me to go try to save the world."

Pablo gave Clay a curious look before turning to put away the plate. He threw the towel over his shoulder and folded his arms as he leaned back against the counter behind the bar.

"She was not your wife. I am sure of this now."

Clay shrugged. "Not really, no. Just wishful thinking, maybe."

"I knew it. I never thought it was true," he said, pointing a finger at him. "Nobody else thought you were married. It looked very strange. You did not look like a couple. Friends, I think, maybe a little more, but not a couple."

"Really? Why not?"

"You are a gringo, and you are very... what is the word?"

"Handsome? Charming? Witty?"

"Normal, I think," Pablo said. "You are like so many other men. Do not think this is an insult. I do not mean this in a bad way. What I say is, you are very normal, very safe. You are a good person, I think. You do the right things. I saw this when the big miner try to fight you. Some men would just shoot him. Other men would let him take your woman. You try to stop him, but you do not kill him to do it."

"I didn't need to do anything at all, as it turned out."

Pablo wagged his finger and nodded. "That is why you are different. Your woman, she is not bad. She does not have an evil heart. But she is mean, like no man I have seen. She is afraid of nothing. She is not afraid to fight. And she can kill without thinking. Remember what I say, that killing is serious business? And killing can make you dead inside? Your woman... it is easy for her to kill because it is nothing to her. She does not die inside, thinking about how bad it is to kill a man, because she does not know it is bad. She thinks that it is right. She thinks she is... I do not know how to say."

"In God's good graces?" Clay guessed.

Pablo clapped his hands. "*Si!* That is what I say! She is not afraid to kill, not afraid to make a man bleed. I think even she is not afraid to die. She thinks that what she does is okay with God."

"That she's doing God's will?"

"*Exactamente!*" Pablo clapped again. "This is why she is mean. She is scary! She makes me afraid, even if she is very, very pretty. I do not know how you are not afraid of her, *señor.*"

He shrugged. "She's not so scary once you get to know her."

"Well, this is why you are lucky. I told you, you are different. I think she knows this, too," he said with a nod. "A woman like that needs a man like you."

"Why? I thought you said I was just normal?"

"A dangerous man and a dangerous woman can make only evil. A dangerous man needs a good woman, and a dangerous woman needs a good man," he replied. "Together, it makes... what is this?"

Seeing Pablo make a seesaw gesture, Clay suggested, "Balance?"

"*Si*, balance! With balance, many good things can be done. She needs a good man like you to be sure that she does good things, and to help her do God's will, as you say," he explained.

"Why shouldn't it just be a good man needing a good woman?"

"Bah! That is no fun," Pablo scoffed, waving it off. "You need a little danger, I think. Fun is what makes life good. This is why you must go get her."

Clay looked up from the note. "Come again?"

"Go get her!" he cried, gesturing toward the front door. "Why are you still here now?"

“Well... because she said in this note here that she wanted me to stay,” he replied sheepishly.

“What? Why?”

“Because she's gone off to do something damned foolish, something she thinks is God's will,” Clay said, “and it's probably going to get her killed.”

“That is the danger! *Ay caramba*, gringo! Do you not see? This is why she left this for you!” Pablo declared, pointing to the note. “She wants you to come, but she is too proud to say that she cannot do this without you. If she did not want you to know this, then she would not have left this.”

Clay was still having a hard time seeing this point as clearly as Pablo seemed to. But in a bizarre way, it did seem to make some sense. Indeed, if Angelita would not have wanted him to know where she had gone or why, or particularly how she felt about him, she would have simply vanished without a trace. As vague as her letter was in some ways, it seemed very clear that she still wished to be with him in the future. That, alone, seemed like reason enough to follow Pablo's advice.

“Well then, I guess I should see myself on the way to chasing her down,” Clay said as he began to get up from the barstool.

“*Excelente!*” Pablo said with a smile. “*Vaya con Dios*, gringo.”

Clay halted, blinking at him. “What does that mean, anyway?”

“Go with God.”

He had a thought, and he unfolded the letter as he slid it across the bar for Pablo to see. Pointing to the last lines of the note, he asked, “Can you tell me what this means?”

Pablo leaned forward, eyes the woman's pretty handwriting for a moment, and then leaned back with an even bigger grin.

“Go with God, my love,” he told Clay. “And then she calls herself *little angel*.”

Clay blinked at him dumbly again. “No shit?”

“No shit,” Pablo confirmed with a satisfied nod.

He dug out several dollars and slid them across the bar to Pablo with a smile and a nod of his own. “Best damned bartender I ever did meet.”

“*Muchas gracias, señor*,” he said with a nod before gesturing to the door again. “Now go find her before she is gone forever. And come back with her when you do. I want to hear stories of the trouble you find together.”

“Knowing her,” he said with a smirk, “there won't be any shortage of that.”

Chapter 14

Not knowing if his search for Angelita would only take a few hours or if it might be a few days, maybe longer, Clay erred on the side of caution and acquired enough necessities to last him almost a week. It would slow him down, but he was not in need of agility because he was seeking Angelita, not Los Muertos.

Just the same, knowing he would very possibly find the latter before the former, he also made sure that he would be adequately armed. Already having his Winchester Repeating Rifle and Colt Peacemaker, with enough ammunition for

both to carry on a small war, Clay additionally purchased a second Colt in the same forty-five caliber, and a new cross-draw holster for his gun belt. It was far quicker to draw another gun than it was to reload the first one, even with those fancy new metallic cartridges.

Clay was so loaded down with guns and gear that he felt like he was barely able to walk. He got a lot of curious looks as he headed for the corrals to see about buying a horse. Fortunately, no one stopped him to ask questions. The horse he got was rather old and seemed hardly up to the job, but it was what he could afford and the selection was limited. The stable hand was the only one to inquire about his seemingly excessive armament.

"You expecting to run into a lot of Apaches out there?" the cigar-chomping, bearded man asked him.

Securing his Winchester in a saddle scabbard, Clay said, "Not really. But I do expect a fair amount of danger otherwise. The person I'm looking for seems to draw trouble like flies to buttermilk."

"Oh," the man chuckled, "you must be after that pretty Spanish gal you rode in here with yesterday."

"That would be her," he agreed with a nod.

"Women are always cause for trouble. Especially the pretty ones. And even more so with them brown-skinned ones," the man said, feeding a handful of oats to Clay's horse. "Beautiful little things, really passionate in the sack. But hoo-doggie! Don't ever get on their bad side! I heard about what your gal did to Big Curly last night at Pablo's. Didn't believe it until I saw him with my own eyes when he walked by this morning. 'Bout damned time someone put that big dope in his place. Now that he's the joke of the town, maybe he'll finally go somewhere else so we can be rid of him."

Sensing the man's tangent could go on for a while, Clay gently interrupted to ask, "Say, she didn't happen to mention to you where she was headed, did she?"

"Not in so many words, no," he said, wetly gnawing upon his unlit cigar. "But she did ask a lot about the Army for some reason. Where they was going, what they was doing, how many there were... really strange questions, coming from a little lady like her. 'Course, she was loaded for bear, same as you, looking like she aimed to take on the Army all by her little self. But, shoot, that ain't likely at all. One little gal with a few guns against a bunch of Union troops? No, sir, that would just be plain suicide, no matter how good she might be with a gun." The man considered that for a moment. "Unless maybe that's her goal, anyway. She seemed real keen on the guy I saw in command of that bunch. Colonel something. Colonel Wanker?"

"You mean Walker?"

"There you go! Walker!" the guy confirmed. "Seemed kind of a young feller for being that high a rank. Seemed real smart, too. Real well-spoken, talked like one of them rich, smart kids from way up north that went to one of them big, fancy Yankee schools. You can tell at a glance he's an ambitious one, probably on track to be a big-time general or some such thing. He sure talked big while he was here. I heard him bragging about some super weapon he'd run across, how he had this big strategy to use it to make the West safe for all us white folk, and how Mexico was going to be the next territory of the United States. 'Course, I don't see how

that'll ever happen, long as all them Mexicans down there have a say in it. Unless of course, they just all up and surrendered or something..."

Clay gaped at him for a moment, then tried to cover for it by faking a sneeze when the man noticed. Before the man could ask, Clay said, "Hay fever."

The man stepped back and covered his mouth. "Oh, hell! That ain't contagious, is it?"

"Not that I know of. I've had it all my life," he said quickly. "How long ago were those troops here?"

"Not long at all. They marched outta here the morning of the same day you and your lady-friend came into town," he replied. "Just missed 'em by maybe half a day."

"Were there many of them?"

"Oh, maybe twenty, I reckon. Maybe not even that. Kind of a small group, really. And they didn't seem too official, neither. Weren't flying no flag or wearing normal uniforms like I usually see, and half of 'em didn't look like they cared to shave." The man dug out another cigar, tossed aside what was left of his first, and poked the fresh one into his mouth. "You could tell they was Army, of course. All that equipment they had and how organized they was. But they seemed real off the mark somehow. Didn't socialize with the locals at all, except to recruit a few outta-work boys from the mine to do something for 'em. They seemed more interested in keepin' really close watch on them box wagons they had. Wouldn't let me or no one else anywhere near 'em, not even to tend to their horses."

"Did you see what was inside any of the wagons?" Clay asked as he double-checked the saddle and its attachments.

"No, but supposedly they was what was holding that fancy new weapon the Colonel was so proud of. Weren't no special new guns or nothing like that, though, I can tell you that much." The man stepped closer and his voice became hushed, as if he was worried about being overheard. "Unless they came up with some weird new kind of grease that stinks, or they're using manure for ammunition, there ain't no guns that smell like dead animals. And guns don't eat meat, neither."

"Meat?"

"Yeah, meat. Raw beef and chickens," he said with a nod. "Those box wagons is open on top with locked doors on the sides. Those troops bought about three cattle's worth of beef and a few chickens, and they was tossing live chickens and big slabs of meat over the top into those wagons. Way I figure, those wagons is just animal cages on wheels." The man grinned, revealing bits of tobacco stuck in the few teeth he still had left. "Wanna know what I think is in them cages?"

Clay already knew, but the man was bound to tell him anyway. He shrugged and answered, "No idea at all."

"Bears," the man said confidently. "Special trained grizzly bears, to be exact. I mean, what else? Couldn't have been mountain lions, because I didn't hear nothing but grunting sounds from them wagons. No big cat noises or wolf sounds or anything else. And as big as them wagons was, couldn't have been more than one or two in each. They had a whole row of them wagons, ten in all, one or two troops each up front."

"Bears," Clay chuckled, shaking his head. He knew the truth, but he didn't see any point in sharing it with the man.

"I know, it sounds plum crazy," the man admitted, holding up his hands. "But that's my best guess. Grizzly bears trained to kill on command. You ever seen a grizzly? God-awful scary monsters, them things. Claws that'll gut you in one swipe, a mouth full of teeth big enough to bite your head right off. And tougher than hell, too. I heard of men putting six shots of forty-four into one, and all it did was piss it off." The man laughed. "I guess that's why you two got so many guns, huh? You're goin' bear hunting. Bet you thought I was kidding when I said your lady looked like she was loaded for bear. Don't think those troops will just let you shoot their special bears, of course..."

Clay found out what direction they had gone (south), that Angelita had gone the same way, and she had left at a full gallop three or four hours ago on her fine-looking black stallion that the man had greatly admired. He thanked the man genuinely for the information, gave him a few extra dollars for his time, and finally headed out of town at a quick but sustainable pace.

Off in the distance to the east, another big storm appeared to be brewing, but it managed never to go in Clay's direction as he rode southward on a well-worn trail towards Tucson. He could not know exactly what path that Angelita had taken, but at least he had a good idea as to what general direction she was going. Wherever Colonel Walker was going, so was she.

Gone now were the mountains and rough, rocky hills. These were the plains of the Sonoran Desert, where the only features to be seen were minor hills, thorny brush, and all sorts of bizarre-looking plants called cactus. Angelita had educated him on a few of these things during their walk into Goldfield the previous day. The big, tall, cylindrical things were saguaro cactus, which either looked like big poles or giant pitchforks aimed skyward to skewer falling angels. Then there were lots of prickly pear cactus plants, which had outgrowths of fat, ear-like things upon which flowers sometimes bloomed. The nastiest things were the wickedly thorny bush things called jumping choya. Clay did his best to avoid these things entirely, based solely upon their menacing appearance and strange name. If one of these plants actually got up and started jumping toward him, he was going to shoot the hell out of it.

Everything in this land appeared to have been made solely for the purposes of maiming, poisoning, or killing people. There was no shortage of diamondback rattlesnakes, huge spiders and other bugs, giant turkey buzzards, coyotes, lizards, and God knew what else. If it didn't sting, bite, or eat flesh, it had thorns or was worthless to eat or use for much of anything. Beyond that, there was only dirt and small rocks as far as the eye could see. If not for the precious metals that could be found in some places, Clay was certain that this land had never been meant to be traveled or inhabited by mankind at all. Such a hot, dry, inhospitable wasteland seemed as close to hell on earth as he figured was possible... although he wondered if the devil would have preferred the somewhat colorful brown and green landscape against the bright blue sky, which was actually beautiful if one looked beyond its deadliness.

It was towards evening, perhaps an hour's time before sunset, when Clay saw something well off the main trail to the west that made him worry. A large gathering of buzzards was circling over something out towards a line of brush and scrub trees near a dry creek bed. Quickening his pace, he urged the horse into a

gallop toward the buzzards' grim feasting site. Along the way, Clay noted a series of many hoofprints in the soil that was still somewhat damp in places from the seasonal rains. Worse still, as he drew closer, he saw the glint of empty brass shell casings here and there along the way. The direction of the horses' tracks led straight to the line of the brush. At one point, the ground was littered with more empty brass shells than Clay could count, as if they had stopped to just take a lot of shots at someone or something. There had been a hell of a shootout here, and clearly, someone had lost.

Panic surged through Clay as he followed the trail of hoofprints around the brush to the other side. He stopped his horse so abruptly that it whinnied and bucked a bit in protest. Clay stared wide-eyed in horrified disbelief as he saw a thick puddle of blood in one place, another a few yards away from that, a dead soldier, then another, and a dead horse. Beyond all that, so dark that Clay almost completely missed the sight of it as it lay upon its side in the shade, he saw Angelita's black stallion, riddled with bullet holes.

Clay dismounted and pulled his Winchester from its scabbard, his heart thudding within his chest. He prayed, he actually prayed to God under his breath that he would not find what he was sure that he would. Obviously, Angelita had found Colonel Walker's men here, or perhaps they had found her first, and she had done her best to shoot it out with them. She had been a skilled rider, from what he had seen, and plenty good with her guns. But no horse could outrun or outmaneuver a bullet. As such, it appeared that she had used her fallen stallion as a berm to hide from incoming gunfire as she had made her last stand.

Clay was no tracker by trade, but it was quite obvious from the physical evidence left behind how the fight had played out. Hiding behind her dead horse, she had used her Henry rifle to try to engage them at a distance. The gathered pile of empty casings next to the dead stallion made this part clear. And the pools of blood, the bodies, and the other dead horse told him that she had succeeded in taking down at least a couple of them successfully. But the hoofprints of horses from multiple directions also said that they had outflanked her and overrun her position. The pool of blood near the horse told a heartbroken Clay that the outcome of the battle had been terrible. But without her body anywhere in sight, he could not be certain exactly if she had died or survived.

For the most part, the horse had been stripped of the gear and weapons that it had been carrying, save for its saddle, which was shot full of holes. No guns had been left upon the ground anywhere, and the other dead horse had been stripped of its tack and equipment, too. The worrisomely large spill of blood next to the horse had a strange set of tracks leading away from it, along with more signs of blood. It looked like Angelita had tried to crawl away after being seriously wounded. A smaller but still significant spot of bloodied soil showed that she hadn't made it very far. There were a lot of hoofprints around this spot, as well as many prints left by men's boots, and then nothing but hoofprints leading out and away from the brush and dry creek area. All of this... and Angelita's wide-brimmed black hat, left upon the ground where it had been trampled by men's feet and the hooves of horses.

If Angelita was still alive, they had taken her prisoner. If she was dead, then they had collected her body for some reason while leaving their own dead behind.

Whether or not she was dead or alive, Clay was now committed to finding Colonel Walker's troops. What they had been doing was terrible enough, but Clay now had a personal interest in seeing to the defeat of this evil military man and his cohorts. He only hoped that his would be a mission to rescue Angelita, rather than a quest simply to avenge her death.

Clay had been considering the fact that his odds were a little better than Angelita's had been, since they now were likely down at least a couple of men and one horse, when something caught his ear. Off in the distance, actually not all that far, Clay distinctly heard a man screaming, either in pain or horror or both. Though it had been hidden from his line of sight before, now that Clay was on the other side of the brush, he could clearly see one of the wheeled cages, or "box wagons," that the man at the corral had described. Less than a quarter of a mile away, they were far enough off that they could not have heard Clay riding up to the scene of the shootout, but they were close enough that he could hear a man wailing away for all his worth.

Crouching down and gripping his rifle tightly after cocking it, he closed the distance cautiously and quietly in a hunched-over sort of walk, hoping to stay out of sight. There were three horses, one of which was leading the box wagon, and at least three men. One of them was laying upon the ground while another knelt beside him, and a third was watching them as he stood with a rifle cradled in his arms. Clay's boots were surprisingly quiet upon the soft, sandy dirt as he approached stealthily, able to get around to the far side of the wagon and less than fifty yards away when he stopped to observe them.

From what he could tell of the conversation that he could overhear, they were attempting to remove a bullet from one of the soldiers that had been shot by Angelita. There would be a period of calm and quiet, and then the man would start yelling, cursing, and screaming in agony as they resumed digging for lead. It was during these moments of wailing that Clay stalked closer and closer, using the noise to mask any of his sounds of movement.

"Damn you, Billy, quit yer squirmin' and yellin'!" one of the men shouted from their position on the other side of the wagon. "Doc can't get that damned thing out if you don't hold still, and you yellin' in his ear ain't making it any easier!"

"To hell with you! You ain't the one that been shot!"

"Quit whining, you big damned baby, it ain't that bad," another said. "You'll live and heal up just fine if you get that thing out. But if you keep the doc from gettin' it out, then we may as well chuck you in there with the Biter and be done with ya!"

"No! NO!" Billy wailed. "Don't! Not that! If you gotta, then shoot me, but don't make me one a them!"

"Then hold still, you damned pansy!" cried another, presumably Doc.

Clay was now close enough on the opposite side of the wagon that he could throw a rock and hit one of the troops in the head, if he was foolish enough enough to try. He could see now that there were four of them, not three. One was Doc, trying to remove the bullet from Billy, another was holding Billy down, and the fourth was standing with the rifle. Clay was able to clearly see the young wounded soldier propped up against the wheel of the wagon while the apparent field surgeon tried to work on him. If either Doc or the soldier holding Billy down

simply turned their head aside and looked, they probably could have stared directly at Clay and spotted him. Fortunately, he was approaching them from the northwest instead of straight west, so he was not silhouetted by the setting sun and thus made a less obvious target. Just as well, Doc and the other were too engrossed in the task of trying to dig the bullet out of Billy's lower body. Doc probed around, moving his elbows, and Billy shrieked again, bucking against the hands of the other soldier that tried to hold him in place.

At last, Doc took away his hands with a frustrated sound and began wiping them off upon a rag, shaking his head. He rocked back onto his feet and stood up, and the other soldier did the same. This gave Clay an opportunity to move again without risking detection, now that he was out of their line of sight.

"I can't get it out. There's no way. Bullet's lodged right in his pelvis, and it looks like it shattered the bone," Doc explained with a sigh. "Even if I could, he wouldn't be able to ride a horse for weeks ... or maybe never again at all. And that's assuming he doesn't die from blood loss or infection first."

One of the men stepped closer and jerked the lever action of his rifle forcefully. "Sorry, Billy. Colonel's orders. Doc, you and him help get Billy in the wagon."

"No! No, please! Please, don't!" Billy yelled. "Doc, please! Don't let 'em! Just keep trying! I swear, I'll stop yellin' and movin'! Please!"

"I'm sorry, son, but I just don't have the tools I need to help you," Doc replied rather coldly. "Even if I did, you'd take too long to heal, and the Colonel isn't going to sit and wait for that. Maybe if you healed like that girl, you could. But you aren't her, so..."

"Last words, Billy. Make 'em quick."

"No! God, please! Sweet Jesus, have mercy!" Billy shrieked with a sob. "Please, don't make me one of them things! Anything but that!"

"Don't worry," one of them said, "we won't."

Out in the wide-open, flat desert, the sound of that rifle shot wasn't quite as loud at all, and its echo was minimal and brief. Clay saw Billy's body slump over to one side as a brief but thick gush of blood drooled out from the side of his head. He winced at the sight, somehow feeling sorry for the young soldier. Even though Billy had been an active and willing participant in Colonel Walker's scheme, and even though he had traded lead with Angelita, he had still been a human being. Criminal or not, it didn't seem right for Billy to meet his end that way, shot in the head while begging for mercy. These weren't just renegade soldiers that Clay was facing. These so-called men were just wild animals.

Clay was close enough now that the stench of Los Muertos was just as strong as the smell of burnt gunpowder. Having made the decision to act, he moved around toward the front of the wagon between its horse and the others that stood ahead of it.

"Well, that sure made things a lot quieter," one of the soldiers said. "I didn't think he'd ever shut up."

"You didn't give him much time to pray or anything," another said.

The first one snorted. "What, you wanted to stand out here all night and listen to him whine until he bled out? We're already way behind the others."

"Yeah, but still..."

There was a sudden hush and stillness, and Clay froze in place, still out of view behind the big brown horse that eyed him curiously.

“You hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“A horse.”

“Yeah, we got three right here.”

“No, stupid! It sounded like...”

“Back there! Where we just was!” one of the men declared. Clay could see their legs, and he saw their boots turning in the direction of the dry creek. In the distance, his stupid horse was trotting around and looking for water or things to eat.

“Is that Jack's?”

“Can't be,” Doc said. “That thing was dead as could be when we left. I put a bullet in its head, myself.”

There was a brief pause as they listened and looked. The rifleman chambered another round and said, “We ain't alone out here, boys.”

Putting the Winchester to his shoulder and sidestepping out from behind the concealment of the horses, Clay found the three soldiers standing with their backs to him. He drew a bead on the torso of the one holding a smoking rifle.

“No,” Clay said, “you ain't.”

Chapter 15

Clay fired before any of them had even fully turned his way. The first shot struck the rifleman dead-center in the back, dropping him face-first into the dirt. He racked the lever quickly, keeping the rifle shouldered as he pivoted, and he shot the wide-eyed blonde soldier next to the rifleman before his pistol could even clear its holster. With machine-like exactness, Clay cycled the lever of his rifle again, turned toward Doc, and lined the front sight up with his chest.

Doc froze in mid-motion and stopped fumbling with the flap of his sidearm's holster. As a member of the Army, he was expected to have at least some fighting ability, but as a field surgeon, or whatever sort of medical specialist he was, he likely had never once drawn his gun. Clay saw movement to his right, noted that the second soldier he'd shot was still trying to get his pistol out, and he turned to put another bullet into him. The soldier had enough time to cock his long-barreled revolver, but not enough to fully aim it before Clay put a shot through his heart. The soldier's own bullet whizzed over Clay's head by several feet, and the blonde soldier flopped limply to the ground.

As Clay again turned toward Doc, he saw that the man had not moved, other than to hold his hands up in surrender. He slowly turned and aimed at Doc again, the sole remaining potential threat.

“All right,” Doc said. “You got the jump on us. You win ... whoever the hell you are.” The handlebar-mustachioed man narrowed his blue eyes at him. “What do you want?”

"A damned good explanation, for starters," Clay replied. "Where's Angelita?"

"Who?"

"The woman that gave your troops a hell of a fight over yonder," he said, gesturing with the smoking muzzle of his rifle toward the dry creek. "Is she dead or alive?"

Hesitantly, Doc said, "She's alive... although I can't for the life of me see how. She was shot no less than five times that I could see, and she lost a terrible amount of blood. But she was still alive and conscious when I saw her last." He was clearly amazed as he added, "The bleeding had already stopped within minutes. I've never seen anything like it before."

"Where did they take her?"

Doc pointed over Clay's right shoulder. "Due south. They intended to set up camp just outside Tucson, but obviously we ran into trouble along the way. I imagine they're no more than a couple of miles from here... probably close enough to hear you shooting."

"Maybe." Clay nodded toward the wagon. "That what I think it is in there?"

Doc frowned. "I'm sure you have no idea at all what is in there. And it's best if you never look to find out."

"Let me guess. It looks like a person, but it's probably half chewed-up with bite wounds, stinks to high heaven, and walks around like it ain't got a lick of sense about anything except eating people." Clay smirked grimly. "Am I close?"

Doc nodded as he said, "So, you do know. I assume the Devil's Whore has told you all about us."

"Now, that ain't a very nice thing to call a lady."

"If you know her at all, then you know how well the name suits her."

Clay let that go for now. "I only know as much about that thing in the wagon as she knew from what she's been able to figure out on her own. Still a lot of things we don't know for sure." He relaxed the aim of his rifle somewhat, as the weight of it began to become tiresome. "Suppose you tell me the whole story. Might give me a reason to let you live."

"Suppose I tell you nothing at all," Doc countered. "Suppose I just tell you to go to hell."

Clay racked the lever of his rifle, kicking out the empty shell. "Suppose I shoot you in the gut and leave you here to die... after opening that wagon and letting that thing in there come out to chew on you a while."

Doc's arrogance evaporated as he paled. "You wouldn't dare."

"Well," he said as he leveled the rifle at him again and aimed low, "you're a sick son of a bitch and you're not very cooperative. If you won't talk, then I got no use for you." There was a pause as he waited for a response, getting none. Clay shrugged. "All right then, if that's how you want to be..."

"All right, all right!" Doc cried, waving his hands. "I'll answer your questions. What do you want to know?"

"What are they, where are they from, and where are you going with them?"

The dark-haired Doc drew in a deep breath and let out a heavy sigh of resignation. "They're people. Human beings like you and me. Except they've been infected with a pathogen that invades the circulatory system with amazing speed and..."

"English, Doc! Plain words," Clay said. "Pretend I'm just a stupid farm boy from Kansas. Spell it out for me slow and simple."

"It's a sickness that is spread through blood or saliva ... or spit, as you would call it," Doc explained tersely. "If you are bitten, or if the blood or spit of an infected person enters your bloodstream... getting blood in a cut, for example... then within a few minutes, the infection takes over your brain functions and you become one of the infected. One of the Eaters, or Biters, as the others have been calling them."

"Los Muertos?"

Doc stared at him. "The dead?"

"Angelita's word for 'em, not mine. I'm not real good with Spanish."

"It would seem that you're not very good with English, either."

Clay waited a moment. "Go on, smart fella. Tell me the rest."

"The disease attacks the brain," Doc said. "It destroys the finer parts of the brain that control your ability to reason, your sense of morality, speech, memory, fine motor skills..."

"Plain words, please."

"It makes you a damned idiot, okay? Even more than the kind you are already!" he snapped. "It takes over your mind, and the only thing you can think of doing is eating anything that moves. After a day or so, depending upon how severely damaged the host of the disease is, it destroys the rest of the brain and the host dies. Basically, the disease rots your brain and you drop dead, although for all intents and purposes, you're a dead man the moment that the disease takes over your mind."

"So, these things aren't really, like, demons from hell or anything like that, right?"

"I am a man of science, sir. I don't believe in such sorcery as that," Doc declared defiantly. He hesitated. "Although, if I were religiously inclined, I might believe the others are right to say that woman truly is the Devil's Whore. Her strength, her speed, her agility, her sharp senses, and her ability to heal major wounds are things that cannot be explained by modern medical science."

"Funny, she thinks she's on a mission from God, not the devil."

"I've seen the things that she is capable of doing," Doc said with a dark look. "She has been hounding us for weeks, killing our men one or two at a time, sometimes leaving their bodies for us to find. The men she has killed, sometimes their bodies exhibit evidence of torture... mutilation... body parts cut off. She is bloodthirsty and ruthless." Doc shook his head. "No, there is nothing holy or righteous at all about what she does."

"Well, if that ain't the pot calling the kettle black!" Clay chuckled. "I seriously doubt the things you and your men have been doing would qualify you as saints."

"The men are just following orders, mostly. Colonel Walker is the idealist," he responded. "He has a vision for this country. He wants to see the United States expand to include all of North America. And he is working to purge the lands of undesirables, and of all those who would stand in the way of seeing that vision become a reality."

"Gee, you really sound like you believe in this lunatic."

"I share his vision!" Doc announced proudly. "I know that this nation of ours is the greatest in the world, and I, too, wish to see it grow and prosper. Eventually, this whole planet we call Earth will be but one country, not a divided collection of little countries that are constantly at war. This shall all become one great nation of peace. One nation, under God, indivisible..."

"I thought you said you didn't believe in God...?"

Doc shrugged. "Semantics. You understand what I am saying."

"I understand you're a crazy son of a bitch, just like Colonel Walker," Clay said. "You seriously think the way to make this a peaceful world is to go around, turning these Los Muertos things loose on everyone you don't like, infecting them with some brain-rotting disease that makes them eat other people?"

Doc shrugged again, lowering his hands slowly as he relaxed. "The disease can only spread so far because of how quickly it kills its host. Once infected, a person can only walk so far before the disease destroys their brain entirely and they die. And usually, the infected never walk very far because they are too stupid to do much more than pace around in a small area."

"Yeah, I've seen that," Clay acknowledged.

Doc smiled, saying, "It makes for a brilliant weapon in this way. We turn a few loose, and the disease does all of the fighting for us. After a couple of days, our troops march in to clean up what little resistance is left. No Union soldiers have to die to win a war, so that is why we are able to travel with such a small number of men. We can cover a lot more ground than a large force by being so small and traveling light. By the end of this month, we will be staged near the southern border in the city of Tombstone. When Colonel Walker is approved to receive reinforcements, we will march through Mexico and soon claim its lands for the United States."

He shook his head with disbelief at the sick-minded field surgeon. "You really don't see a problem with any of this? Turning these things loose on men, women, and children?"

"Only the undesirables," Doc replied. "That is why we spared Goldfield, and also why we will avoid Tucson. Tombstone, however, may be another problem. Colonel Walker intends to turn it into a fort, but obviously we will need to remove the current population to make that possible. That will be the first large-scale test of the weapon. That town is full of nothing but degenerate gamblers, murderers, drunks, and whores, anyway."

"Lots of white folk in that town, though," Clay reminded him. "I thought you only wanted to get rid of all the non-whites?"

Doc once again gave that indifferent shrug. "The end justifies the means. If a few must die for the good of the many, then so be it."

Clay stared at him quietly for a moment before saying, "Wow. Just... wow."

There was a long, awkward silence between them as Clay recovered from the horror of the man's arrogant, elitist, warped sense of morality. Doc, in turn, waited for Clay to say or do something further. After a few moments, Doc held apart his arms.

"Well then," he began, "have I answered all of your questions?"

Clay thought for a moment, then shook his head. "Not all of them, no. But you've already told me a lot more than I wanted to hear."

"I see. Then does that mean I am free to go now?"

"Not yet. I got one last question for ya', Doc."

The man clasped his hands behind his back with a smug, self-important look upon his face. He truly did enjoy hearing himself talk, and he apparently loved to have an audience, even if it was only one man holding a gun.

"Well, by all means, ask away."

Clay brought the Winchester up to his shoulder and aimed for Doc's head. "Got any last words?"

For an instant, Doc looked surprised. And then, a beat later, he seemed to accept the inevitability of his demise. It wasn't that he had finally seen the evil of his ways, and he was accepting this as the payment due for his sins. Rather, he was just a vain, egotistical, criminally insane bastard. He turned to face Clay directly with his hands behind his back still and his spine straightened, as if tied to an imaginary post to face a firing squad.

"I regret that I have but one life to give for my country," Doc said proudly, sticking out his chin.

Clay sneered at his self-righteous use of that old quote. "Funny. I regret that I can only do this to you once."

And with that, he put a bullet right through the bridge of Doc's nose and out the back of his head.

Chapter 16

Rather than take a chance that someone else might stumble upon the terrible cargo within the wagon, Clay climbed up onto the riding bench, aimed down into the open top of the large box covered with a grid of thin iron bars, and shot Los Muertos in the head. He noticed that the smell of the thing, while stinking just the same, was not as intense with this particular one as it had been with the others. After opening the side door of the wagon, being careful in case another of Los Muertos was inside, he saw why. The thing he had just shot was dressed in miner's clothes, and it did not appear to be chewed up like the other examples of Los Muertos, but it was certainly one of them.

Working quickly to make use of the fading light while he still had it before full dark, Clay searched the wagon and Doc's bag of field surgery items. He found a leather-bound book that a quick look revealed was Doc's journal detailing his observations of Los Muertos, which he called "the infected," and how they would inject contaminated blood into hired or kidnapped people. The blood would make them Los Muertos, and then they would be carted around in these wagons as ready-to-use undead weapons.

One last thing Clay read before it became too dark to read: the brain was not only what the disease destroyed, but it was also the only thing that kept them going. Cutting off the head or destroying the brain was the only sure way to stop them, short of simply waiting for them to die. Fire was an effective means of cleansing metals and other things that came into contact with the blood of Los

Muertos, but it generally would not kill the actual monsters, themselves. Of course, this was not exactly new to Clay, but it did at least confirm what Angelita had already figured out somehow on her own.

“Angelita,” Clay whispered to himself, shutting the book and running off with it back toward the dry creek where his horse was milling around. He had spent far too long dealing with the soldiers and interrogating Doc. Now it would be that much more difficult to track the group of rogue soldiers. Within minutes, it was too dark to see the trail of wagon tracks and hoofprints at all, and the clouds of the coming storm were soon going to block out the light of the nearly full moon. At that point, travel would be impossible. Worse yet, he would be stuck out in the open on a very flat terrain, and the flashes of lightning he saw in the coming storm were not just going from cloud-to-cloud but also cloud-to-ground. He was not eager to have yet another literally hair-raising experience with that part of nature's fury.

Yet again almost frantic with desperation, Clay urged his horse ahead with reckless abandon now. If it found a hole or a gulley with its hoof in the dark and broke its leg, Clay would almost certainly be a dead man. Either the violent fall itself would kill him, or being stranded on foot in this hellish landscape would be his undoing. Still, he dug his heels in and charged onward almost blindly. For now, the moonlight was still just bright enough, and so he intended to keep riding until it simply was no longer possible, or until...

Topping a slight hill in the otherwise flat landscape, Clay suddenly saw a flickering light ahead, the glow of a distant campfire. His horse was already so worn that it was wheezing, yet it still obeyed his insistent urgings to keep going – it was a dumb animal, but strong and cooperative. Clay dared to hope, dared to anticipate what might yet come. As he raced ahead, he tried to comfort himself with the thought that Doc had assured him that Angelita was alive and, if that was true, then all was not yet lost. He had killed three of Colonel Walker's men, and Angelita had also killed another three during her own shootout. Down a half dozen soldiers, the odds were improving. He just had to go a little more, just had to do a bit more, and then it would all be through. It would finally all be worthwhile.

The wagons were lined up in a row, side by side. Behind each of them, a small troop tent had either already been pitched or was in the process of being hurriedly set up. He could soon see the cause for their rush, though it was unlike anything he had ever seen before. Only in his worst nightmares could he have dreamed up the image that he beheld, a sight that was somehow strangely beautiful with its awesomeness and a little terrifying for what it represented.

Looking like the onset of a Biblical end-of-days event, Clay saw the immense wall of churning dust approaching from the south, stretching from one end of the horizon to the other. Its features were ominously lit by the light of the moon that was already being smothered and the frequent flashes of lightning from the storm that it preceded.

As frightening as the coming dust looked, Clay instead saw this as a golden opportunity. Again roughly a quarter of a mile from his enemies, he slowed the horse's advance at last, and the animal gratefully came to a halt. Being focused upon bracing themselves for the approaching storm, they would be less likely to

notice his approach. He could close the distance easily on foot, and then he could... well... then he could do what?

Charge in with guns blazing? Try to pick them off from a distance with his rifle? Or just walk right in there, say hello, and politely ask them to set Angelita free? His first idea seemed every bit as absurd as the last. Angelita had apparently tried to fight them at a distance. Obviously, that tactic hadn't worked out well for her. She was a great deal better at shooting accurately under stress than Clay, at least from what he had seen. He didn't expect to fare any better.

Even though Clay had the element of surprise on his side again, this was far different than his sneak attack upon Doc and the other soldiers. For one thing, there were far more of them to deal with here, easily three times more. Secondly, he could not evade them on foot, nor hope to out-shoot them from a fixed position. He could not expect to ride in and shoot up the camp, nor engage them at a distance from horseback, for he had no experience at all with trying to simultaneously operate a firearm while controlling a horse—again, a fighting skill that Angelita had that he did not. And lastly, once the shooting started, he had no idea what they might do with Angelita. Would they try to use her as a human shield or a hostage? Or would they just shoot her in the head and be done with her? After all, there had to be a limit to how many or what kinds of injuries she could survive and heal.

And this all, again, was under the assumption that she hadn't already died from her wounds, or that they hadn't already killed her at that point. She had killed some of Colonel Walker's men and been tracking them for some time now, having learned the secrets of their evil motivations. That sort of thing did not seem like something that the Colonel would stand to tolerate without some kind of punitive response, nor was it the sort of knowledge that he likely wanted to have on the loose in society.

After finding a suitable tree that he was sure would keep his horse out of sight, less likely to wander off and attract attention like it had done before, Clay very carefully began his approach. Though the vegetation out here in the desert was sparse, short, and of course very full of thorns, its patchy clumps of growth made it fairly easy once again for Clay to gradually make his way toward the soldiers' encampment. The bushes and shrubs were just barely thick and tall enough to allow him to squat down behind one, then another, and another, only briefly exposed as he passed from one spot to the next.

As before, he paused along the way to observe them and rethink his approach. He still hadn't entirely decided how he should go about this, and his pulse thudding in his chest was becoming a bit of a distraction. As he closed in to within fifty yards of the northern side of the camp, at a slight angle that mostly faced the side of the line of box wagons, he tried to look for any signs of either of his goals: Angelita and/or Colonel Walker. Surely, if he found one, the other would be immediately nearby... again, assuming that she was still alive.

With their tents now set up and tied down securely, most of the men had retreated inside with lit oil lamps that cast enlarged shadow images of them upon the canvas walls. The wind had already begun to pick up slightly in advance of the coming wall of dust, a monster that was a prelude in itself to the approaching storm behind it to the south. Being downwind from them, Clay was more easily

able to overhear their words as the wind seemed to carry the sounds right to him. Just as well, it also made it that much more difficult for them to possibly hear him coming... not that he was making a lot of noise in the first place.

“Get that campfire out, Johnson!” he heard a man bark quite clearly. “The last thing we need right now is for this storm to blow those embers around and start a wildfire.”

“Yes, sir!” one of the men answered as Clay peeked around the side of a bush.

It was immediately obvious to him that he was looking at Colonel Walker himself, standing tall near the campfire and issuing orders loudly to his men with gestures of his gloved hands and nods of the wide-brimmed hat atop his head. He was in full uniform, complete with a saber sheathed upon his left hip while a long-barreled revolver hung from his right in a flap holster. He had a full but well-groomed beard of dark hair, with thick eyebrows over deep-set eyes. His posture, voice, and uniform exuded authority, but Clay felt that he better represented much darker and sinister things.

Kneeling beside where he stood was Angelita. Her head was bowed and her shoulders were slumped. For a moment, it was not clear that she was even conscious. Again wearing a white, long-sleeved shirt over black riding trousers, it was clear at a glance how grievous her wounds had been, for there was almost more red than white to her shirt from the blood that had saturated it. Her hair whipped about loosely in the breeze, going across her face and mostly hiding it from view, and it looked tangled and dusty. Her black pants were mostly covered in dust, and overall she looked as though they had simply dragged her behind a wagon the whole way there.

Colonel Walker turned slightly, crouched to pick up a rope, and then yanked upon it as he began to pace away, half-leading and half-dragging a very weary, wounded, and utterly defeated Angelita. Pulled along by the rope that also bound her wrists together, she barely managed to get her feet underneath herself and limp along as the well-dressed but ill-tempered Colonel cruelly pulled her along. One of the soldiers doused the campfire by throwing a bucket full of loose dirt and sand upon it. He then kicked more dirt over it and stomped upon the coals to finish it off while Colonel Walker impatiently led Angelita toward the largest one of the tents, which was located on the opposite side of the camp from the row of wagons.

“And make sure those wagons are secured, Johnson!” Colonel Walker yelled as he reached his tent. “You have first watch tonight. Let me know as soon as Doc and the others have returned.”

“Yes, sir!”

Clay watched as the soldier named Johnson finished putting out the campfire before taking out a single large key on a ring and walking toward the line of wagons. All of the others had taken refuge inside of their tents, conversing noisily amongst themselves while the storm drew ever closer, looming high overhead like an immense, roiling, brown wall of doom. He saw the Colonel drag a weakly resisting Angelita into the tent. After he presumably tied her rope to something inside to keep her in place, he returned to the tent's entrance to pull its flaps shut and tie them into place to prevent the wind from pulling the tent apart.

Watching as Johnson, the last soldier out and about, hurried from one wagon to the next, checking the locks upon the sides of the wagons, Clay finally realized what he needed to do. By his count, there were eight wagons for Los Muertos, with one tent to each and what looked to be two soldiers per tent, plus a covered wagon for Colonel Walker, his tent, and whatever else they had brought along for supplies on their evil mission. That meant a total of at least seventeen men that needed killing. Clay's 1886 Winchester rifle held eight rounds, and he had an additional total of twelve shots of forty-five divided between his two Colts. Unless his aim was perfect and he only needed one bullet to put down each soldier, or if he somehow found the time and opportunity to reload from the loose cartridges he'd previously dumped into a pocket, he knew that he was under-gunned for the fight ahead. However, if he somehow managed to pull this off the way that he intended, he might not even need to fire a single shot.

Johnson had started checking the wagons to the far south, working his way up the line. Clay approached from the opposite end, posting himself next to the wheel of the last wagon in the row. He heard Johnson's key jingling and clacking as he scurried from wagon to wagon, checking the locks that held the bolt lock of the door to each wagon and, thus, making sure that the horrors inside could not find their way out during the storm. If just one of them managed to get loose while the soldiers were in their tents, especially if they were asleep...

Thunder boomed low and heavy with a sound that Clay could feel in the ground underfoot and in his chest. The scene became terrible dark as the clouds above devoured the moon entirely. By the light of the flashes of lightning and the ambient glow of the soldiers' lamps in their tents, and by the sound of his footsteps and actions, Clay was able to tell how close Johnson was to his position. Clay carefully lowered the hammer upon his rifle, switched it around in his grasp, and instead held it by its barrel, high and ready. His pulse thudded in his throat as he heard and saw Johnson's feet drawing near, coming around the backside of the last wagon.

Swinging the rifle like a fancy club made of steel, brass, and wood, Clay smashed the buttstock of the firearm into Johnson's face with such force that it made a fairly loud crack. The blow took him right off his feet, throwing him flat upon his back. Johnson had been given so little time to react that he hadn't even grunted. Seeing him still move a bit, Clay immediately dropped to a knee beside him, using that downward momentum to slam the butt of his rifle into Johnson's already bloodied face with a vicious impact. The soldier's body jerked and then became still.

Clay didn't know if he had killed Johnson or simply knocked him out. For now, it didn't matter. The fellow was no longer a problem, and Clay now had the key to the locks of the box wagons. If the guy was lucky, he'd just wake up later with a sore and busted-up face, having slept through everything else that was about to happen. But if he wasn't lucky, he'd sleep right through something truly terrible, unable to wake up and flee or defend himself from it. Clay didn't much care either way. As far as he was concerned, they all had earned everything that they had coming to them.

Clay grabbed the key on the iron ring that Johnson had dropped, and he switched the rifle around in his grasp as he prepared to move along. As he gripped

the rifle, he noticed that there was now a terribly loose, clunky feel to the gun. With just a bit of wiggling as he tested it, Clay was disappointed to find that he had completely broken the wooden stock of the Winchester. Apparently, he had been so excited and had swung so hard that the strain had been more than the stock could bear. The metal parts were probably still good, and it wouldn't have been much of a task to replace what he had broken, but obviously there was not time for that. Clay laid the now useless rifle upon the ground, opened the flap of Johnson's holster, and helped himself to the long-barrled Remington revolver inside. It was an 1858 model like Clay had once had, but it had been converted to use metallic cartridges rather than the old original cap-and-ball setup.

To free up his hands, Clay shoved the pistol inside the front of his belt as he stood up and took hold of the lock on the side of the wagon. Working as quietly but also as quickly as possible, he opened the lock and dropped it to the ground. Very hesitantly, taking the Remington out again, Clay slid the bolt lock of the door up and then very slowly and quietly over. He halfway expected that Los Muertos would come bursting out and be right on top of him the very instant that the door was unlocked. He stepped away from the unsecured door, his gun up and ready. The door stayed closed. Nothing came out. At least not yet, it didn't. So far, so good.

Clay hurried to the other wagons and did the same with the other seven, removing the locks and opening the bolts of the doors, but leaving the actual doors shut. As he unlocked the last wagon, he could hear the oncoming swell of wind during the brief but eerily silent lull. He looked around the corner of the wagon and, looking almost straight up, he could see in the blue flashes of lightning that the wall of dust was now upon them. Clay held the Remington in his right hand, undid the bolt latch of the last wagon with his bandaged left, and then backed away, moving toward the center of the camp as the storm enveloped the area in a choking brown fog of fine dust.

He saw the door of the last wagon being pulled open by the fierce gust of wind, and he heard the creaking hinges and the wooden *thunk* sounds of the other wagon doors doing the same. Nothing immediately came out, of course. Los Muertos were stupid things. It might take them a bit of time to realize that they had been freed. Clay hoped to be done with what he had left to do before then. He wanted to be nowhere near this place once they started roaming around. All hell was about to break loose, and Clay had been the one to unleash it.

He hurried over to the Colonels' tent, squinting and blinking tightly as the dust tried to blind him. His hat flew off and danced away into the howling darkness of the stormy night. Oh well, if he lived through the night, perhaps he would have an opportunity to take the time to look for it the next morning. A tattered old hat was hardly the highest item on his list of concerns right now.

He knelt just outside the entry flaps of the Colonel's tent, which were tied shut by two small, thin bits of rope that were looped through a couple of brass rings set into the canvas. From inside, even over the noise of the wind and the worsening thunder, he heard the Colonel's deep, angry voice.

"So, you see," he went on, "that is why I set them loose upon your family's little village. It was nothing personal to me. It was simply a matter of principle. This country and its lands belong to my people, not yours. I could not stand to let some

bunch of brown-skinned people, such as yourself, live such a splendid and wealthy life on our land at our expense, occupying that which does not belong to you. This land, this country... this *world* is the white man's by right, and I intend to make sure that unworthy creatures such as you do not stand in the way of that."

Clay had quietly undone both ties holding the tent flaps and, until then, had been holding the flaps shut with one hand while gripping the Remington tightly in his right. He laid his thumb over the hammer of the gun, preparing to cock it. A huge tumbleweed rolled toward him and bounced roughly off his back, its thorny branches briefly scratching and clawing his shoulder and side through the material of his shirt. Was that some sort of divinely-cause way of God saying, *Go on, son, get on with it?* Or was it His way of telling him to hold off and wait just a moment longer? Or was it neither of those things, but rather just a meaningless consequence of the raging dust storm that was whipping the canvas of the Colonel's tent around in his grasp?

"Doc could not think of a scientific reason to explain your ability to heal," Colonel Walker went on. "I have heard that you think this is because you consider yourself to be under God's protection. I assure you, this is very far from the truth. In reality, it is I whom am blessed. God has granted me the gifts of opportunity, leadership, and a weapon of war unlike an the world has ever seen. I believe you are only here as an agent of Satan. You are only able to heal as you do, and you only have the skills that you do, because you have been sent to me as a test of my will and my own abilities, a challenge sent for me to overcome. If you, the Devil's Whore, can be made to bleed, then I am sure you can also be made to die." Clay heard the sound of a sword clearing its sheath. "If you are anything like the Eaters, then I think the best way to end you will be to take your head." Clay heard the Colonel's boots begin to clunk across the wooden planks that formed the elevated floor of the tent. "Go ahead and scream if you must. I will do my best to make this quick."

Clay was through with debating with himself over the wisdom of when and whether or not he should act. Clearly, it was time. He let go of the canvas flaps, cocked the hammer of the Remington, and stepped into the tent as the wind flung the flaps open widely.

Colonel Walker spun around to face Clay, grasping his drawn saber in his right hand. He had taken off his hat and outer jacket, still wearing a black vest over his clean white shirt. He stared at Clay with wide eyes and his mouth agape in shock. Clay could not help but to smile a bit as he pointed the revolver at the evil man's chest.

"Evening, Colonel," he greeted him with a nod. And then, feeling his smile broaden into a grin, as he was so glad to see her still alive, he nodded to the bound woman that blinked up at him from where she knelt upon the floor. "Hello again, Little Angel."

Chapter 17

“Who the hell are you?” Colonel Walker demanded.

“Just a stupid gringo,” Clay replied calmly. He gestured slightly with a wave of his gun's muzzle. “Better put that away before you hurt someone.”

“And why should I? What will you do? Shoot me?” the Colonel asked defiantly. “My men will be upon you in seconds when they hear the shot. In fact, all I need to do is yell.”

“And all I need to do is squeeze this trigger. Your men might get us after the fact, or maybe they won't. But either way, you'll still be dead,” Clay responded. He shrugged. “It'd be a shame if your big fancy plans of taking over the world ended right here just because you wouldn't put down that big oversized knife, now, wouldn't it?”

The Colonel scowled at him for a moment, then turned the sword around and stabbed it downward into the wood plank floor, where it remained standing vertically. “You are a fool, if you came here alone. There is no way you will come out of this alive. This is suicide.”

“Who says I'm alone? I got eight others helping me.”

“You lie.”

“Nope. Ain't never been much good at lying,” he replied, again gesturing with the gun. “Lose the sidearm, too. Belt and all.”

Clearly hating this, but nevertheless complying, Colonel Walker began to unbuckle his outer belt as he asked, “Where are the others, if you are not alone?”

Making use of the sword stuck in the floor, Angelita scooted forward and laid the rope binding her wrists against its edge. She weakly began to work her hands up and down, sawing apart the hemp threads.

“They're a little slow,” Clay answered as the Colonel dropped his belt of gear to the floor with a clunk. “You'll know soon enough where they are once the gun starts. Have a seat on your cot, if you don't mind. No sense standing around with your hands up.”

Angelita's beautiful dark brown eyes went wider at this, and she began to shake her head quickly at Clay, but she could say nothing because her usual cloth mask had been tied around her head as a gag. The Colonel slowly and calmly walked over to the cot that had already been set up neatly to Clay's right, complete with a big, fluffy-looking pillow full of down feathers, and a clean wool blanket. For a soldier, it was a pretty luxurious place to sleep.

Thunder boomed nearer now, and the winds shaking the tent's canvas began to subside slightly as it was exchanged for the pattering sounds of thick raindrops that began to pelt the area. Angelita was reaching back, trying to undo the knot that tied the gag and kept her wordless. Alas, it had been fitted so tightly and the rope around her wrists made it so awkward that Clay could see she would not be able to do this on her own.

“Let me give you a hand with that,” he said to Angelita, moving over to her after the Colonel had sat down upon the cot on the opposite side of the tent.

Clay halted in his movement as he heard the first sounds of trouble outside the tent, which seemed to rise in intensity and worsen in their horrific nature at the same rate as the rain that began to pour down from the dark and dusty heavens. At first, it was just one man's shout of alarm, which soon became a sound of

panic, and then a scream of terrible agony. This was quickly followed by the inquisitive and then the soon panicked sounds of the other soldiers.

"They're loose!" a man yelled. "The Biters is loose! They're all out!"

Clay looked over to the Colonel and was actually amused by the wide-eyed and open-mouthed look that he gave for the second time that night.

"My God," Colonel Walker gasped. "What have you done?"

He gave the once-arrogant military man a bitter smirk as he knelt down near Angelita. "I knew I couldn't take on the Army all by myself, so I decided to let Los Muertos do the fighting for me. Got the idea from your good buddy, Doc. He told me all about your sick plans before I put one between his eyes."

"You... you're a monster!"

"And you're a damned hypocrite, just like he was," Clay said as he shifted the gun to his left hand so he could help undo the gag from Angelita. She was almost frantically trying to cut the rope from her wrists now. "Hold still, now, and I can get that for you."

He had just begun to work loose the knot of the gag when the first gunshots began to sound outside as the soldiers screamed, yelled, and tried in vain to rally together against Los Muertos as the things roamed and ate freely. Angelita was in a full panic now, moving quickly in spite of the bloody wounds to her right shoulder, left arm, left side, right thigh, and a graze across her right cheek. Instead of trying to cut the ropes upon the not-quite-sharp saber, she was now jabbing a finger in the direction of the tent's entrance.

Clay turned his head to look, and he immediately saw what Colonel Walker had also just then noticed, cursing under his breath. One of Los Muertos, apparently a former miner, was staggering up to the tent with its arms outstretched. As it began to reach into the tent, Clay shifted the revolver back to his right hand, aimed quickly, and blew the top-left part of its head off, sending it falling backward out of the tent.

Out of the corner of his vision, Clay saw the Colonel making a sudden movement. By the time he heard the *click*, recognized it for what it was, and began to swing the aim of that big handgun his way, it was already too late. The sound of the tiny little derringer that Colonel Walker had pulled from God-knew-where was not even half as loud as Clay's Remington. Just the same, the medium-caliber bullet that punched into his right shoulder hurt every bit as much as he figured any bigger one might have felt.

Clay's shoulder was instantly white-hot with pain, but the rest of his arm simultaneously went numb. He heard the Remington revolver *clunk* onto the floor as it fell out of his grasp. Gritting his teeth as he tried to work through the pain, he bent over and scrambled to pick up the dropped revolver. Just as he began to lift it, before he could even thumb back the hammer, Colonel Walker gave Clay the load from the second one of the derringer's two barrels.

The pain of the first bullet was nothing by comparison. Clay cried out as he doubled over in agony from the shot that tore into him, collapsing to the floor entirely. The Colonel got up, stepped over to Clay as he lay upon his side, and he bent down and yanked the Army-issued pistol out of his left hand.

“You damned fools have ruined everything! Everything! You've doomed us all with your stupidity!” he bellowed, stomping upon Clay's side with his boot. Clay heard something crunch inside of himself.

Through eyes narrowed to slits by pain, Clay saw the Colonel hurriedly dig his personal sidearm out of its holster that he'd dropped to the floor. He cocked both pistols, stood tall, and marched angrily out into the rain that was being whipped into a mist by the roaring winds, apparently more concerned with stopping the roaming Los Muertos than with finishing off Clay and Angelita. Over the sounds of chaos outside—screams of men, gunshots, wind, rain, and thunder—in addition to his own groaning, he heard Angelita trying to talk through her gag as she quickly resumed cutting the rope with the sword. It did not take her more than a few seconds to finish the task, and she untangled her wrists from the remains of the rope before finally removing her gag.

“Clay!” she cried in a voice thick with emotion. “Oh, Clay! You stupid, stupid gringo! Why? Why did you come for me? I told you not to come for me!”

“Blame Pablo,” Clay replied through clenched teeth. “Damned bartender was mighty persuasive.”

“You should not have come. This was for me to do,” she insisted, pulling his head up onto her thigh—the one that didn't have a miraculously-healing bullet wound in it. Tears trailed from her eyes.

Clay did not know what else to say except, “Yeah, well ... you're welcome.”

Gunshot after gunshot sounded outside. It sounded like a full-scale war out there, the booms of thunder from overhead like cannon blasts from heaven. Clay managed to roll onto his back, and then pointed as best he could to the holstered Colts he still had.

“Take my guns,” he told her.

“Why?” she asked almost helplessly. “What can I do?”

“Go get that son of a bitch. Finish this thing,” he told her. “That's why you're here, ain't it?”

She met his eyes for a moment, nibbling upon her lower lip to keep it from quivering as she made her decision. At last, she nodded, bent over, and kissed him tenderly upon the lips.

“*Mi amore*,” she murmured, touching his face gently. “I will come back for you.”

“You'd better,” he said with a feeble smirk. “Don't make me... come looking for you again.”

She gave him a quick nod, sniffled, and took his Colt Peacemakers out of their holsters before getting up. She tucked the one in her right hand inside the waistband of her trousers, retrieved her Spanish-styled saber from where the Colonel had stashed it under the cot—her holsters were there, but appeared to be empty—and then drew the gleaming saber from its sheath with a swift yank. With an obvious limp and visible discomfort from her still-healing wounds, she stepped out of the tent and into the raging storm of rain, wind, thunder, and violence.

With considerable effort, Clay turned onto his left side and painfully dragged himself across the wooden plank floor. He stopped near the entrance of the tent, where he was able to see the battle play out from a relatively safe vantage point.

At least one of the tents was ablaze with fire, probably from an oil lamp knocked over during the surprise visit from Los Muertos. The fire burned brightly in spite of

the raging winds and torrential rains, back-lighting the scene clearly in addition to the many frequent flashes and flickers of lightning overhead. Some men were running around aimlessly in a panic, pursued by Los Muertos that moved rather quickly, perhaps because they were so recently turned. A couple of them still tried to fight back, although without success. One in particular managed to shove away one of Los Muertos—one that wore a ripped Union blue uniform and looked like Johnson—and he shot it in the head. The soldier took a quick look at the bite wound to his arm, let out a cry of dismay and horror, immediately put the pistol under his own chin, and fired.

Clay could not fathom how she found the strength or how she ignored the pain of her wounds as she did, but he watched in awe at the terrible but somehow beautiful spectacle that was Angelita in all-out combat. By and large, she dispatched Los Muertos almost exclusively with her borrowed saber, hacking and slashing and thrusting with expert precision and amazing force. It was like a bloody ballet of sorts, a dance of death as she severed limbs and cut off or impaled the heads of Los Muertos. The few soldiers she found alive, she dispatched with lead rather than sharpened steel. Amid the gale-force winds and the drenching rains, Angelita was a storm withing a storm, a petite tornado of violence.

On the opposite end of his field of view, he saw Colonel Walker. Still holding a gun in each hand, his hat somehow still atop his head in spite of the winds, he seemed completely bewildered and lost. He held the guns up and looked around the area as he staggered toward the center of the encampment, mouth open wide and eyes bugging out. At first, it looked as though he was simply overcome with shock at seeing his troops all being slaughtered, his plans and ambitions laid to waste so suddenly and completely. Then, as he turned toward Angelita and began walking toward her with a strange, stiff-legged gait, keeping the pistols aimed upward, Clay knew why. Colonel Walker had been bitten by Los Muertos, and the disease that now coursed through the blood in his veins had taken over his brain quite rapidly. He still breathed and walked, but Colonel Walker was essentially already dead, killed by the very things he had sought to use to conquer others. Whether it was some part of his brain that was still left to recognized Angelita that motivated him, or perhaps it was just because she was one of the few left standing at that point, Clay wasn't sure. But the undead Colonel stumbled along toward her, guns still held high and useless. She was not aware of his approach from behind.

“Behind you,” Clay croaked. He struggled against the cramping, agonizing pain in his body and drew as full a breath as he could to shout, “*Behind you!*”

Somehow, through the winds and rain and rolling thunder, Clay's voice found its way to Angelita's keen ears. She spun about, her left hand coming up instantly with that Colt in it, and she fired. Or at least she meant to, through the emptied gun only clicked. She dropped it into the mud, drew the other Peacemaker, cocked it, and fired a shot into Colonel Walker's chest. His torso jerked slightly aside, but he kept coming. She cocked and fired again, surely hitting him dead-center in the heart. He reacted even less to this, his goofy-looking stride barely even disturbed. The fact that he was still holding up those guns, which was apparently the last thing he'd been doing before the disease took over, was misleading Angelita into thinking he was still alive, or at least still human.

Whether she finally realized he was Los Muertos, or she just didn't have time to cock and fire a third time, he didn't know. Instead, Angelita drew back her right arm as Colonel Walker came within grabbing distance. She spun and let out a fierce cry of rage as she swung that saber one last time. In a single cut, the blade passed right through flesh and bone like butter. His head and both hands, still holding those Army-issued revolvers, dropped forward and off to his left side while the rest of his body toppled over backward like a felled tree.

Angelita stood there for a few moments, her rain-soaked hair whipping around behind her as she faced the wind, blinking down at the scattered remains of Colonel Walker. She didn't do any sort of a victory dance, didn't make any kind of triumphant gesture, nor did she collapse to the ground in absolute relief—none of the things Clay surely would have done, had he been in her boots. She just stood there and stared for a long while. Finally, she turned to look back over her shoulder, and then around to the surrounding area. If anything, her success had been so sudden and unexpected that it had left her bewildered, even unbelieving of what had transpired. Though he was sure that she said nothing at all, he was sure what was going through her mind then was something along the lines of, *Really? That was it? Did that really just happen?* Of course, those thoughts would likely have been in Spanish.

It was as she gradually seemed to come back to her senses, seeing more of Los Muertos wandering around on the other side of the wagons, that Clay felt his head beginning to loll downward on its own. The pain of his wounds had not lessened at all, but seeing Angelita fulfill her destiny had at least been enough to distract him from it. As he saw her walk out of sight, now with a barely noticeable limp, Clay allowed himself to roll over onto his back again, groaning as he felt broken ribs grating together in that movement. Laying like this helped a bit, but he was still filled with agony, nevertheless.

Clay's right arm was completely worthless and numb. He wondered if he might permanently lose the use of that limb, or if it might even need to be amputated. It was amazing to think the Colonel's little tiny derringer, with those little bullets, had done this to him. Sometimes, the size of the bullet was irrelevant. Whether it was a twenty-two or a forty-four, it didn't make much difference if that bullet was put in just the right place.

Just the same, the more painful and more serious of the two wounds, the one to his stomach, was just as bad from the little gun as it might have been from a big one. Bloody holes in a person's body were always bad news, even more so when those holes went through organs. He wasn't in a city, or even a small town, where a doctor might be handy. He was out here in the middle of nowhere, smack dab in the center of this God-forsaken desert wasteland in the middle of a storm almost as intense as the insane tempest he'd experienced in the mountains, at that. And the only person with any sort of medical know-how out in these parts was laying face-down on the desert floor with a big hole through his head that Clay had created. This wasn't just serious. Clay knew exactly what this meant for him. Just like what Angelita had told Big Curly back in Goldfield about having one's throat slit, Clay couldn't stop this. All he could do was watch himself bleed, wait, and contemplate the inevitable.

He tried to sit up, tried to at least get an elbow under himself. He caught a glimpse of the little bullet hole in his belly – actually, it was a few inches higher than his navel and off to the right – and then his elbow slipped out from under him. The amount of blood he was losing from just that little hole, in addition to the one in his right shoulder, was pretty alarming. Clay tried not to let it worry him. There was nothing he could really do about it now, anyway.

The worst had passed. Perhaps not so much for Clay, who was still miserably in pain, but at least for Angelita. She had done what she had set out to do. Vengeance was hers, justice had been served, and disaster had been averted. Assuming that this was all that there was of Los Muertos, that Angelita would clean up the rest of this unholy mess when she was done, burning everything clean, then perhaps she truly had saved the world... at least from this one thing. Sure, mankind would eventually come up with other ways to destroy itself with selfish and short-sighted ideas in mind—Clay knew people well enough to be sure of this—but at least this one would not be among those possibilities. Human life on the North American continent had been given a stay of execution, however brief it might turn out to be.

Clay let out a heavy sigh and actually felt himself smiling a little bit. In spite of all his doubts and mistakes, he felt like he had finally done something right, something really good, and it had been for the sake of someone besides himself. He had long worried that he'd never amount to anything, that he would never be a part of something bigger than himself. And after killing Ike and seeing how Ellie had turned upon him, he had thought of himself as being unworthy of any such success, genuinely believing that he was just a bad guy, just a failure at life in general. Now, he thought differently. He *knew* differently. He had seen how important this had been to Angelita, how vital it had been for the benefit of so many others that she succeed in her mission. Now, her quest was drawing to a close, as was Clay's usefulness to her and this world.

When he felt his head being lifted and a certain fluffy down-filled pillow being slid under it, he realized that Angelita had returned. He must have passed out for a bit, maybe from the pain, because he'd somehow not been aware of her presence at all until then. Her hair hung down in thick, dripping, wet strands of blackness that were as dark as her eyes. The rain had rinsed away the blood upon her face, and there was a thick pink line of raw skin now across her right cheek where a bullet had grazed her during her earlier shootout. He wondered if it would leave a scar. Probably not. Even if it did, she would be no less beautiful at all to him.

“My Little Angel,” he said to her with a smile, his voice coming out as a raspy croak. “Did you get it all done?”

“Si. It is done. There are no more of Los Muertos,” she informed him softly, affectionately brushing a few strands of hair upon his forehead with her fingertips. “You helped me. I could not have done this without you. I am sorry that I left without you. But I am glad that you came for me.”

“Yeah, well... that was just me being a hard-headed, stupid gringo,” he replied with a feeble smile.

“You are not a stupid gringo, Clay. You are a good man. You have always been a good man to me.” She bent down and kissed him briefly but tenderly upon the lips. “Thank you.”

He chuckled lightly, though it hurt him to do so. He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them to meet her gaze again. "Wish I could be around to hear you say it more. You know as well as me... I ain't riding on with you anymore."

She shook her head. "No, Clay. We will be together now. We will go to Tombstone together. We will do many things together."

"Afraid not," he said. "Gut shots never go well. Ain't never seen a man live through one, even with a doctor's help. And I don't have no special healing like you got." He let out another sigh. "You best be on your way, Rider Girl."

Angelita blinked at him. "I do not understand."

"Go on. Take off. Finish doing what you gotta do here, and then ride on," he said. "Ain't no sense in you staying here just to watch me bleed out. You don't need to see that."

"But... I need you," she protested softly, tears welling up in her beautiful eyes. "I want to be here with you. I do not know where to go. I have no one else."

"Then ride on and meet someone," he told her. "Make new friends, find another man, start a new family. Just don't go pointing a gun at them all the time. Most men don't take too kindly to that."

She bit her lower lips for a moment, shaking her head. "I do not want to be without you."

"Sorry. Not my decision or yours. That whole... *God's will* thing again," he told her with a smirk. "I'm just glad I got to help you. Glad I got to spend time with you like I did."

Angelita laid a hand gently upon his chest, right over his heart. "I love you."

Clay closed his eyes and smiled as he sighed, "Never thought I'd ever hear that." With a great deal of effort, finding his left arm impossibly heavy and tired, he managed to reach up with his left hand to intertwine his fingers with hers. Barely murmuring now, he said, "I ain't very religious, but... that thing you do, you know, with the cross and praying and all? Could you maybe... do that for me...?"

She hesitated for a few moments. Clay could not even open his eyes now, but he heard her softly reply, "Si."

"Much obliged... ma'am," he relied in a whisper.

And so, still feeling her hand in his, he heard her begin to pray in Spanish, or perhaps it was Latin, or perhaps something else. It might have been the power of prayer, or it might have simply been massive blood loss. Either way, the pain soon began to fade away. The feel of her hand in his began to diminish. The sounds of the ongoing storm outside became quieter and more distant. And soon, the soft-spoken words of his Little Angel were all that he had left, the soothing, comforting sound of her voice cradling him and lowering him ever so gently into a silent, dark, blissfully comfortable oblivion.

Chapter 18

The only thing that Angelita found to be a bigger challenge in her life than destroying Los Muertos was in trying to adjust to a new life in their absence. Her whole life, it had seemed, had been planned in such a way that her very point in being in this world had been to fight and destroy them. Now that they were gone, she had to find a new purpose in life, a new reason for being. That reason came less than a year later in the tiny, wrinkled, adorable form of a baby boy. Somehow, she had known all along that she had been with child, she had known all those months that it was a boy, and she had known right away what his name would be: Clay, the name of the boy's father.

In the years before his death, Angelita's husband had tried in vain to become a father, but without success; Clay's father, however, had needed only to be with her one fateful night to bless her with what she had thought she might never have. And though little Clay's father was long gone, without even a grave site to visit—she had reluctantly cremated his remains with the others—Angelita was delighted to know that a part of him would always be with her.

Her son was born in Tombstone, where Angelita had tried to make ends meet however she could, mainly by working with horses to train them and their owners in advanced riding techniques. Ultimately, though, the boom town of Tombstone began to fall apart as the mines closed up. So, too, did the town of Goldfield, for the same reason. Tired of the endless curious questions of others, and worried about the rumor she had heard that the United States Army was still investigating the disappearance of one of its colonels and his men, Angelita eventually rode south with her very young son into Mexico.

Of course, people there still asked questions, but no one seemed overly concerned with her history there. Mostly, they were just curious about the father of her fair-skinned boy and how they had met. She never lied, but she also never went into detail. She told them only that their love had been brief, that he had been killed while saving her life, and that she did not want to discuss it further because it saddened her so deeply to remember—again, all truths.

She had mourned him for quite some time, not simply for the brief time they'd shared that she missed, but mostly for the countless times that she wished he could have been with her to share in so many experiences: his son's first words and first steps, the way he looked and acted like him in so many subtle ways, the home that she found near the Pacific coastline, where she found work by teaching English and horseback riding. She missed him, but she did not give up on living her life. Indeed, she had done exactly as he'd asked. She had ridden on. She had made new friends. She had found a new home. And eventually, she found love again, courted by and eventually married to a shy but strong and good-hearted younger man from California.

She never found a need to kill again. Multiple times in her years since the end of Los Muertos, she was required to draw a gun upon predatory men and animals, but never again was she forced to take another life. Though she was happy and certain that her violent days were behind her, she always kept a gun close by for the rest of her years—the same one that Clay had bought in Goldfield before riding out to find her, and the same gun with which she had shot Colonel Walker before cutting him down. Angelita insisted upon always having that gun within her immediate reach at all times, not simply for its sentimental value, but also

because she had sworn to protect at all costs those whom she loved. And if Los Muertos ever did somehow return—which they never did, to her knowledge—she was more than willing to ride out, hunt them down, and destroy them once more.

Her ability to heal did not change, and she never once fell ill. But as the years passed, she did grow old, and at a significantly faster rate than was the norm. She lived to see her son grow into a young man, tall and handsome and strong but good-natured and kind. She saw him wed a beautiful girl, and she saw the birth of several grandchildren. None of her descendants inherited her healing abilities, but they were at least gifted with her sharp intellect, keen senses, and physical agility. Smart, strong, quick, and perceptive, they all went on to do great things with their lives.

By the time she was forty-five, Angelita had aged to a point where she was too weak to do many things on her own. And by the time she turned fifty, she was too frail to leave her home at all. She did not complain, and she did not feel cheated out of anything in life. As she lay in bed those last few days, her son, friends, and extended family always nearby, she assured them all that this was exactly as it should be, that she was absolutely at peace with all that she had been blessed with in her life. While some may have fretted over the prematurity of her coming end, she promised them that the quality of their life was far more important than the nature or timing of their death.

“After all,” she told them not long before drawing her final breath, “everyone dies someday. But God did not put us here just to die. We are here to live, to do and experience all that we can in this life we are given. It is not about years or money or titles. It is about love. It is about loving and being loved.” She nodded as she closed her eyes and smiled. “Love is something that Los Muertos could not take away from me.”

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