

HOMECOMING

A GUNSMOKE NOVEL

BY DAVID BLIXT

Based on characters created by Norman Macdonnell,
Adapted from scripts written by
Norman Macdonnell and John Meston

This novel is based on episodes of the popular Gunsmoke radio series. This was written for fun, for my father, and for my own enjoyment. I do not hold the rights to this story nor these characters. Therefore this remains a work of love, and not for sale.

- DB

Around Dodge City and in the territory on west, there's just one way to handle the killers and the spoilers, and that's with a U.S. Marshal and the smell of... Gunsmoke.

Gunsmoke – the story of the violence that went west with young America, and the story of a man that moved with it.

I'm that man – Matt Dillon, United States Marshall. The first man they look for and the last they want to meet. It's a chancy job, and it makes a man watchful.

And a little lonely...

CHAPTER ONE

“Wanted for murder...”

“Wanted for murder.”

“Clay Richards...”

“Clay Richards.”

“Aged thirty-one...”

“Mmmm.”

“Height, six feet...”

“Six feet...”

“Eyes Brown, hair red.”

“Brown, Red...” Hightower looked up from his pencil. “Hey, how’d you like me to print his picture on these notices! I got a woodcut – let me show you. Ernie!”

From the back of the shop Ernie poked his head out. “Yep?”

“Fetch the Marshal a copy of that front page.” Hightower twisted his fancy swivel chair back to face me. “Interviewin’ Clay’s wife yesterday, I noticed a tin-type settin’ up on the mantle – their wedding photograph. So, first thing you know, I snipped it.”

“Very thoughtful,” I said.

“Yeah,” agreed Hightower with a bald grin. “Oh, I’ll take that, Ern. And then I propped it up in front of me and carved up this woodcut. Ain’t she prime? Ain’t she just elegant?”

“Real elegant,” I said.

“Good likeness, don’t you think? Of course, he was seven or eight years younger then. Had his hair cut shorter...”

The short newspaperman prattled on as I studied the photograph. Yeah, it was a good likeness. It didn't show what makes a law-abiding man suddenly rob a bank. And he didn't look like a man who killed an old cashier and a Chinese cook who just happened to be there. But it was a good likeness.

Hightower lifted his latest edition. "A picture like this sure dresses up the front page, don't you think?"

"Yeah," I said. "It's a little masterpiece, Mr. Hightower. A notable contribution to the culture of our city."

"Well, thank you, Marshal. Does fetch the eye, don't it? I'm printing an extra five hundred copies of the weekly, and I bet I'll sell 'em all. Too bad the cashier's shot went wide. If he'd managed to kill Clay, or even wing him, why I bet I could sell a thousand extra copies!"

"We must be thankful for the blessings we do receive, Mr. Hightower," I said.

"Oh, I am, Marshal, I am! Why, just before it happened yesterday afternoon, I didn't know what I was going to fill my columns with, and then, like manna from heaven, two murders and a bank-robbery."

"Attempted bank-robbery, Mr. Hightower," I said, correcting him. "He turned and ran before he got his hands on so much as a dollar. Still, as you say, like manna."

My new deputy walked in then. Short and lean, you could almost look the Texan over without seeing a thing. He wore his fine black hair long - though not in any kind of fashionable way, just to keep the sun off his neck - and his eyes were always half-lidded, unless he was squinting at you. No, Chester Proudfoot wasn't much to look at. But I liked the way he walked. And I'd seen him shoot.

"Mr. Dillon, I—"

“I’m talking business,” I said, with a little snap to it. I hadn’t meant to, but ten minutes with Hightower in a good mood will do that. A little softer, I said, “What is it, Chester?”

Chester looked put out. “It can wait, I guess, Mr. Dillon.”

Deciding Chester would be all right for the moment, I turned back to the town’s publisher. “Yeah, print Clay’s picture on those notices, Mr. Hightower. Where was I?”

“Eyes brown, hair red,” said Hightower helpfully.

“Oh yeah. Also known as Red, Brick-Top, and Sorrel. He didn’t answer to any other nick-names, did he?”

“No,” said Hightower, “that’s what they called him.”

“All right, then in big letters, four hundred dollars reward – dead or alive. And at the bottom, apply Matt Dillon, Marshal, Dodge City. Print, ah – two hundred copies. How soon can I send Chester over for them?”

“This afternoon,” said Hightower, touching the nub of his pencil to his tongue.

I tugged the brim of my hat down, said, “Good morning, Mr. Hightower. Chester,” and my deputy and I left the news-office.

Outside the heat was coming up off the street, making waves over the wooden sidewalks. The water troughs looked like they were boiling. The county was suffering the worst drought anybody could remember. Under my vest my shirt was soaked with sweat. It’s not a bad feeling, and if you’re on horseback it even feels pretty good. But walking down a dusty street with a few hours to go before the first beer, it felt pretty lousy. I was wearing my dark vest and a dark shirt – the better for the night’s ride. I don’t often wear a coat, although Doc thought it was pretty funny when he gave me one just like his at Christmas. Long and black, it came down to my knees. I’d just killed my first man since taking up my office in Dodge. I guess Doc thought it was a good joke.

I walked slowly towards my office, looking up and down the street. People were looking at me, wondering what I was going to do about Clay. It was kind of a test. And any day now the cowboys would be coming in to Dodge. My first round-up, and they'd be watching me to see how I handled things. That's the thing about a badge – there's always another test.

Chester was ranged alongside me with a couple feet between us. He said, "Think those posters'll do any good? Richards is probably over the line to Oklahoma or Colorado by now. That strawberry roan of his is the fastest in the county."

"He's got no money," I said. "He panicked and ran out of the bank before he got a penny. I think he'll try to get help from his wife or brother or some friend the first chance he has, maybe tonight. I say he's around here somewhere."

It was bothering me, why Clay had turned thief and murderer. But I couldn't do anything about that at the moment. It would have to wait until I caught up to him.

Something else bothered me more. "I, ah – I'm sorry I turned on you like that, Chester," I said.

Chester ducked his head, shrugged. "Why, that's all right, Mr. Dillon. Out all night with a posse, no sleep, a man's bound to get touchy."

"No, it's not that. It's the way – it's the way men use a thing like this. The men out riding last night enjoyed it, as if they were hunting fox or possum. Hightower back there, he acts like it's a birthday treat specially gotten up for him. Everybody finds a way to use it." I shook my head, blinked away the sweat gathering on my eyebrows. "What was it you wanted to tell me?"

“Hm? Oh! I got a kid, a little boy, locked up in a cell. Looks like he run away from home. Ed Slade turned him over to me when he come through on the stagecoach just now. Kid about twelve years old.”

“Whose is he?”

“Ed doesn’t know. Not from around here. He flagged Ed down for a ride on the road halfway between there and here. Soon as Ed seen him standing there with a bundle on his shoulder he knew what he was up to, so he told the kid he’d help him, and then turned him over to us when he got here.”

We reached my office, a little two-room affair bought with government money. The door wasn’t locked, though the gun-cabinet behind the desk was. That was a lesson a fellow I knew had learned the hard way. “All right,” I said, “we’ll start sending out telegrams to see if anyone around here is claiming him. Well, come on in, Chester, and shut the door.”

Chester had stopped by in the doorway and was looking up the street, back the way we had come. “Mr. Dillon?”

I stepped over to a trunk and pulled out a clean shirt. A white shirt. “You’re letting in every horsefly in Kansas,” I said.

“Mr. Dillon?” said Chester again. “I think you better cancel the order for them notices.”

“What?” I just had my old shirt off and as I buttoned up the new one I walked to the door. Chester made way, and I saw Pete Ziegler, known around town as the Dutchman, coming up the street on his sad little mare. He was fair and tall, but not imposing in any way, with his slack shoulders and awkward, shambling walk. Pretty harmless to look at.

Tied to his saddle-horn was the lead for the horse that trailed along behind him. A strawberry roan. There was a body draped across the roan’s back. I could tell from where I stood it was Clay Richards. Like a sack of wheat across his saddle. Last time I saw him, two days ago, he was

standing at the bar in the Texas Trail, laughing his head off. And now he was a sack of wheat across his saddle.

The Dutchman kept right on towards us, keeping a painfully slow pace. His poor old horse was feeling the heat and was too tired to even swat the flies at her hindquarters. They were followed by half the saloon-bums and loafers in town.

“All right, Chester,” I said, “make ‘em keep back.”

Chester walked forward with that light step I’d hired him for. “All right now, you fellers, stand back now! Stand back!” His hand was nowhere near his gun.

“Ziegler!” I called when the Dutchman was close enough. “How’d it happen, Ziegler?”

Ziegler dismounted and took off his hat – a ten-gallon looks silly on most men, and he was no exception. He pulled out an old handkerchief and mopped his face from brow to chin. “My goat, my old billy-goat, he pushes open the pens last night and runs away.”

“Forget your goat, now,” I said. I was still feeling a little mulish. And I hated those bums watching. “What about Clay?”

“I – I tell you,” said Ziegler, a little less certain now. “This morning I go look for the goat. I walk here, and there. Near the river I see Clay. He sits there. I say, Hello Clay, vie geits?”

From out of the crowd someone shouted, “You dirty dutchman! You no good dog!”

Then someone else was picking up the mood. “Clay was your best friend! He helped you buy your farm, so you kill him for it!” The crowd was growing, and they were all shouting. Chester was looking at me.

“All right,” I said, “all of you, keep back, everybody.”

The Dutchman was looking out at the crowd in confusion. “Clay? No no. My brother he was like!” There were some derisive sounds from the bums. “We was in the war together. Listen...”

He didn’t know it, but he was making things worse. “You killed him for the reward!”

“Not so!” shouted Ziegler, mopping his face. “I kill nobody – not since Gettysburg. Clay is dead when I find him.” He turned to me. “I don’t even own a pistol.”

The crowd was getting bigger, louder, and uglier. “Ziegler – get inside, quick,” I said, stepping out of the doorway and into the street.

“Ja.” The Dutchman ducked inside quickly.

I must’ve looked a poor peace officer, no coat, no vest, and my shirt-tails hanging out. The crowd wasn’t just bums and drifters anymore. Real citizens were coming to see what was up. And what I was going to do about it. “Chester, give me a hand with Clay.” I walked around the strawberry roan and didn’t look at Clay’s face – there’d be time enough for that inside. But before I got a handle on him I decided to do something about the crowd.

“All right, all of you. Listen.” They didn’t. “Shut up!” Like a fool, I let my hand drift to my gun. They shut up, but I knew I’d lost a little authority. I shouldn’t have had to resort to the threat.

“I will not tolerate a disturbance,” I told them. “You know me.”

No, they didn’t. Eight months, and easy ones at that. They didn’t know me from Adam. And they trusted me even less.

“All right, Chester, take his legs.”

We carried the body inside.

CHAPTER TWO

“Chester, kick the door shut,” I said. Chester did, and the crowd got noisier on the other side. I knew it wasn’t the end of things.

Ziegler was standing in the middle of the room, his chins working up and down as he said, “Marshal, I don’t kill Clay.”

I ignored him. “On this table, Chester.” We laid him down gently. He’d killed two men, but he’d also bought me more than one drink. I turned to Ziegler. “What’d you do with Clay’s gun? His holster’s empty.”

“Gun?” asked Ziegler. “Clay’s? I ain’t got it. I don’t even own one...”

“Chester, see if it slipped out when we were -”

Chester was already shaking his head. “His holster was empty coming up the street. First thing I noticed,” he added, then glanced at me to see if I’d be angry. I wasn’t – at least, I wasn’t at him. But my face might not have looked it, because he was in a rush to say, “Maybe it’s over on the...”

Chester was interrupted by the arrival of Doc Adams, who came in through the back door. He didn’t seem to mind the heat at all, in his long black coat and floppy tie. His white and brown mustache positively bristled with excitement. “Another customer! Three in less than a day! Oh, bountiful harvest! My fees this month will keep me in luxury! In luxury!”

“Doc,” I said, “I want to have an inquest as soon as possible.”

Doc Adams slapped his hands together and rubbed them. “As soon as I finish the autopsy.” He had a funny way of saying that last word – or perhaps it was because he was licking his lips. “Shouldn’t take long with the practice I’ve had this week, eh? No! Heh. But first I’ve got to finish up on the Chinaman before he starts to go bad. Late afternoon tomorrow all right with you? I’ll take him up to my office right now. No, thank you, Chester, I can carry him all by myself here. You just open the door there

like a good fellow. Marshal, tell the city fathers I'd like to make a deal, when the corpses are as famous as this one. Heh. Back in '53, in San Francisco, fella I knew earned a fortune, exhibiting the head of Joaquin Marietta! Tell them if they let me keep the remains, I'll do the autopsies for nothin'!"

"Shut the door, Chester," I said. My deputy obeyed and Doc was cut off mid-sentence. "Ziegler," I said, "where is it you met Clay on the river?"

"By the ford," said Ziegler. "This side, by the ford."

"Ride out there, Chester, see if you can find Clay's gun. Maybe he dropped it when he was shot."

"I did not shoot him," said Ziegler.

"Sure," I said.

"I did not," insisted Ziegler. "I had no reason to. I did not! I did not!"

Maybe it'd been looking at Clay lying there on my desk, maybe it was the still heat, or maybe it was standing there with my shirt-flaps covering my holster, but I could feel my temper fraying. "You listen to me! Maybe you think Dodge's got so big since I've been gone that I don't know about everything that goes on here. Well, if you do you're wrong! If you think I don't know about the bank having an overdue mortgage on your farm, you're wrong! Four hundred dollars is reason enough to a struggling sod-buster like you."

Ziegler recoiled like I'd struck him. His back was against the far wall. "No! Who could do such a thing? I am a human being!"

"To a peace officer, Ziegler, that's enough grounds for suspicion." Chester was still in the room, looking at me. I acted like I didn't notice, but I did lower my voice. "Now whether you did it or not'll be decided at your trial. In the meantime, you just stop yammering about it."

"Trial? Me?"

“Even when I shoot somebody I have to stand trial. If they find that it’s justifiable homicide – and they probably will, Clay being a wanted man – then they’ll let you off. If not...” I let my voice trail off.

Ziegler was looking a little crazed. “Please, I am permitted to go now?”

That forced a laugh out of me – my first of the day. “Go? Are you crazy?”

“My farm, the stock, I must look after it –“

I walked over to him, put a hand on his shoulder, and steered him to a chair. “You sit right down. Do you want to be lynched? Are you trying to get yourself murdered? Have you forgotten about Adam?” The dead man’s brother, he’d come to Dodge about the same time as Clay.

The Dutchman shook his head again. “He will not believe I shot –“

“What difference does it make if he believes or not? His brother’s been killed! Everybody’s looking to him to do something about it and he knows it. Right this minute he’s in one of those saloons, lapping up courage to come in here and ask me to give you to him for a present. You want to know who’s with him? Every loafer, every bum, every slob in town, slapping him on the back and telling him what a shame it is. Egging him on to kill you so they can have some excitement and some fun. Maybe you deserve killing, but it’s my job to uphold the law, and I’m not letting you out of here.”

“But, I – I—”

I walked over to my desk, tucking my loose shirt into my belt. “You might spend your time thinking up a better story. That is, if you intend to stay in this town.” I dragged a chair around and sat. Leaning towards the Dutchman, I said, “All right, now think back. Didn’t Clay go for his gun before you shot him?”

Ziegler just kept shaking his head. “I tell you I didn’t—” He stood. “If I’m not under arrest, you have no right to keep me here. I have to look after my farm. I go.”

I stared at him for a moment, then said, “All right. Chester, lock him up.”

“Yessir, Mr. Dillon.” Chester walked forward with his light-footed glide and took the Dutchman by the arm. “C’mon now, Ziegler.” He led the way to the back room where the cell was and I heard the keys come out as he opened the door. It was funny – we usually kept it unlocked. Then I heard him say, “Step out, sonny. This cage is bespoke.”

“Who’s in there, Chester?” I called.

“That li’l ol’ runaway,” said Chester.

“Oh,” I said, getting my first real chuckle in about a day. I liked kids in general, and after chasing after a murderer all night this was a welcome diversion. “Come over here, son.”

The kid was thin but tall for his age, almost five feet. He had fair hair and blue eyes so bright that they looked like cornflowers. He almost ran into the room, but about halfway to the door he stopped and began walking in a pretty good imitation of Chester. He reached where I was sitting, and with me hunched over in my seat we were about eye to eye.

“I don’t suppose you want to tell me your name,” I said.

“No. But I know who you are,” he said.

“You do, do you?”

“You bet,” he said. “You’re Matt Dillon.”

I nodded. “Guilty.”

The kid nodded as if I hadn’t spoken. “I know’s ya right off. You was pointed out to me one day back home. Feller says you was the fastest gun-thrower in Kansas.”

“Wyatt Earp wouldn’t be awful interested to hear that, I’m afraid.” Earp was in Ellsworth at the time, and had made something of a name for himself by buffaloing Ben Thompson. I’d run into him over there, chasing down some rustlers – but that was before I’d come to Dodge.

“Feller says you were faster than ol’ Earp. Faster than Wild Bill Hickok in Hayes City, or Bat Masterson, or any of ‘em. How many fellers’ve you killed?”

That wiped the smile right off my face. “You don’t keep score, son. It’s something you try to forget.”

“Not me,” he said, standing tall. “Someday I’ll be famous like you, an’ for every feller I kill, I’ll – I’ll put a notch on my gun.” The kid’s eyes glazed over, as if he was already seeing the notches. “People’ll see those notches and know they better not try anything –“

“Why’d you run away from home, bub?” I asked. “Don’t you know your mother’s likely to worry about you?”

“Aw, she won’t worry, she’s too busy workin’.” His eyes got real narrow. “Y’ain’t gonna make me go back, are ya? Ya wouldn’t do that that, wouldya?”

“Well...”

“‘Cause it wouldn’t stop me for long, I’d only run away again!”

“Where’re you off to in such a sweat?”

“Texas, California, Mexico. A fella can do things there – not like where I’m from. If you let me go, someday when I’m famous you can tell people you helped get me started.”

“Well, ah, that’s a pretty strong inducement. I’ll have to think about it for awhile. Now, while I’m making up my mind, I want you to give me your word – the word of a man who’ll be famous someday – you won’t try to run away from me. Otherwise I’ll have to have Chester lock you up again.”

The kid held out his hand. "I'll shake on that."

We shook hands. "Good, good. Chester," I said, a little louder. "I want you to go look for Clay's gun."

Chester came back into the room. "Yessir, Mr. Dillon."

"And on the way, stop off and send those telegrams."

Chester gave me a blank look.

"Y'know?" I said with emphasis.

"Oh! Those telegrams. Yessir, Mr. Dillon."

CHAPTER THREE

I had the kid pretty well settled in on the couch of the office. Chester had locked his little bundle of belongings in my desk drawer, but the kid didn't seem in a real hurry to get anyplace. He sat watching me as I went through the circulars and did the paperwork three killings brought in.

It was almost noon and we were making conversation about the kid's favorite subject – guns - when Adam Richards burst in. I wondered what had taken him so long. Probably the saloons had opened late on account of the heat.

“Where's Ziegler?” he demanded.

I looked over at the kid, who was startled but excited. “It's all right, bub,” I told him.

“Where's that murderin' dog?” asked Adam, moving towards the back room. He spotted the caged Dutchman through the open door. “Oh, there you are, you –“

Adam was surprised to find me in his way. “Not a single step further, Adam,” I said.

Adam Richards looked me up and down. I was bigger, though not by more than a few inches, but I was wider than him, too. He couldn't see around me, so he looked me in the eye with a half-drunk dead-eye stare. “I want him, Dillon. He murdered Clay, shot him down without givin' him a chance.”

“How do you know?”

“‘Cause Clay wouldn't let anyone catch him off-guard unless it was a friend. A friend!” Adam spat then looked at me. I could smell the liquor in him. “Now, Dillon, give me that Dutchman.”

“Try to take him.” There was a good yard between us. It was enough. He gave me the stink eye. “It's like that?”

“It’s like that,” I said.

“Then it’s true what the fellas say! You made a deal with the Dutchman to give him the reward and to protect him if he killed Clay for ya!”

I made sure not to look surprised. But then I don’t suppose I was.
“That was the deal, was it?”

“Yeah!”

I nodded. “The fellas say why I’d make such a deal?”

“Dillon, it ain’t no longer a secret around town that you and Francie want each other. But Clay was in the way! You had him killed so you could get his wife. Do you deny it?!”

Maybe it had been a mistake to come back to Dodge. Maybe there was too much history here – too much for a man to start over again. Especially a man with a badge.

“No, no,” I said. “It’ll serve as well as any other crazy story to work you up.”

“We all know about that run-in you had with Clay.”

“He was hitting his wife.”

“That’s a man’s own business, Marshal,” said Adam.

“Not in Dodge,” I said. “Not anymore.”

Adam had that sneering look drunks get when they’re needling you.
“You think you’re safe behind that star, dontcha? Well, Clay had friends – lots of ‘em! I’m comin’ back with them friends and we’ll get the Dutchman and you and anyone else who tries to stop us!”

“All right, Adam. I’ll be waiting.”

“Yeah, you wait!” He stomped out of my office and slammed the door. I was grateful. I didn’t feel like closing it myself. It was too hot. I sat back down behind my desk.

The kid whistled. "I almost seen somethin' pretty there, didn't I, Mr. Dillon?"

"Yeah, almost," I said. "One more pint of whiskey oughta do it."

CHAPTER FOUR

I had a problem. I had to do some investigating. Figuring why the Dutchman had shot Clay wasn't that hard – the reward – but figuring why Clay had tried to rob the bank in the first place was eating at my innards. With Clay dead, most would say that ended things. But there were two other men lying over at Doc's place, and I wanted to know why.

But I was tied to my office, at least until Chester got back. Not only was I responsible for the kid, I also had to make sure that I was present when Adam Richards came back and to lynch Ziegler.

“Son?” I said.

He was sitting next to me, watching me reloading my pistol. His head snapped up. “You say somethin', Mr. Dillon?”

“Yeah, open that drawer in front of you there. You'll find a small bottle of oil in there – no, no, the one to the right. Yeah, that's right. Now, bring the little brush too.”

He handed them over. “Here ya go.”

“Thanks, bub.”

He only had eyes for the gun. “It's a right nice gun you got there,” he said.

“Yeah,” I chuckled, “it's not bad. But it's a little stiff, just a little stiff.”

“Don't it have a trigger? I never seen a gun without a trigger.”

“You remove the trigger, or tie it back against the guard, and all you have to do is thumb the hammer.” I dropped out the cartridges and showed him. “There, like that. It's faster.” I ran the oiled brush up the barrel and through each of the chambers, then reloaded. There's a good ritual to reloading a gun. Someone once told me never to check a gun once

you've loaded it. If you loaded it once, it stays loaded, he said. But I like to see them there, all in that small circle. "Yeah, that's better now."

"Remove the trigger," murmured the kid. "I'll remember that."

"What in the world for?" I asked.

"I remember everything you told me – 'bout the Texas holster and the spring holster and the double-roll and filin' off the sight—"

He was cut off by the door opening. I stood up and put myself between the boy and the door.

Chester came in. "It's just me, Mr. Dillon."

I sat back down. "Close that door behind you, Chester. Any luck?"

Chester already had the door shut, and he crossed to the window beside it. "No, sir, not any. I went to the store first and asked Mr. Denton what kind of ammunition Mr. Richards used to buy, and he told me Clay had a double-action 44. I scoured the riverbank a half-mile each way from the ford and not a sign of it."

I nodded. I'd half-hoped it would turn up with three shots fired – two for the dead men and one aimed at Ziegler. But wishes aren't horses.

"I got those telegrams off," Chester said.

"Good," I said.

We sat there, me at my desk, Chester by the window, the boy sitting close to me, and Ziegler sulking in the cell. I was wondering if I could leave Ziegler and the boy with Chester while I went out and asked a few questions. I suppose I could've taken the boy with me – there was something about him that I liked. There are a lot of folks who think kids ought to be seen and not heard. I like kids who ask questions. Not that I always have the answers.

So I could take the kid with me and go off hunting. But I got to wondering if, when Adam came at the jail, could Chester hold the place all by himself? Would he? He didn't seem like the type to run. But there

was something about him. It wasn't steel. It was fluid, like water. Chester was an unknown quality. He could shoot, but shooting a tin can off a fence doesn't mean he had the – whatever it was, to kill a man. No. I'd have to wait. Wait and see.

After awhile I heard a bell ringing. "Is there a fire in town?" I asked.

Chester peered out the window at an angle. "Funeral services for Mr. Grinnell."

The dead cashier. "So soon?"

Chester shrugged. "It's awful hot weather." He went back to looking down the street towards the saloons.

"Yeah," I said. "Any of your guns need oiling, Chester?"

"I don't think so."

"You sure? Adam Richards said he'd be coming back – with some friends."

"Yeah, I know," said Chester. "I stopped at the Alafreganza just now to – uh, rinse out m'mouth. Adam was there, talkin' mighty ugly and mighty big. He's got a sizable followin'."

"Mm. When do you think?"

"Any minute now, Mr. Dillon. Do you want me to take the boy outta here. To one of the hotels, maybe?"

"I wanna see it!" the kid protested.

"No," I said. "I think he'll be safer here, behind stone walls, than ducking about the streets rubber-necking."

Chester nodded. "You keep your head down now, sonny, y'hear?"

"Yessir, Mr. Proudfoot."

CHAPTER FIVE

The door opened and Chester and I both stood up fast. A woman came through the door. Francie – Clay’s widow. “Matt! Matt, I’ve got to talk to you!”

I gave Chester a look. He shrugged. It was almost an apology. Then he went back to looking out the window towards the saloons. When the girl was past him he nudged the door shut with his toe.

Francie came towards me. She should have been in mourning. If she cared for Clay at all anymore, she should have been in black.

“Matt!”

I first saw Francie twenty years ago, when we were both younger than the kid here. She’s only gotten more beautiful in the time between.

“Matt, I was just at Fred’s funeral –“

“Fred?” I said. “You went to Fred Grinnell’s funeral?”

“Yes! And the people there were all talking about me!”

“Well, Francie – your husband did gun him down.” She’d gone to the funeral. Women are funny sometimes.

“Have you heard what they’re saying?” she asked me.

“What are they saying, Francie?”

“That you and me, that you made Pete Ziegler kill Clay because—” Her voice trailed off.

I nodded. “I’m sorry that got back to you.”

“It’s all over Dodge!” She waved a hand towards the door. “I left before the service was over and went back home, and Adam stopped me on the way. He almost stoned me before they dragged him off.”

From the back room, Ziegler called out, “Francie, I didn’t shoot Clay! Francie, I beg you, believe me!”

“Shut up, Ziegler,” I said.

Ziegler didn't listen. “Francie—”

I turned my head as my temper snapped. “Shut up or I'll club you to death!” I stared at the Dutchman and he quailed, but it wasn't him I was seeing. I was remembering the last time I lost my temper. Back in Texas. Reel it in, I told myself. Uncock that gun.

Another voice in my head, the dangerous one, asked, What good is an uncocked gun?

With something like a normal tone I turned back to Francie. “It's just one of those crazy stories. They needed one and they made one up.”

“But, Matt, everyone believes it! On my way down here, people were pointing, whispering. Old women, clucking their tongues at me. They believed it!”

I wanted to pat her shoulder. Chester was still looking out at the street, but I knew he was paying attention. I kept my hands by my side. “They'll forget it as soon as this is over,” I said. “They'll remember that, even if we once did go with each other, it was finished and done with even before the war ended – before you even met Clay.”

Francie shook her head, her blonde curls flopping around like a moppet's. “No, they won't forget it! For the rest of my life, as long as I stay here—”

“Look, Francie – go home and give matters a chance to simmer down.”

That was when she settled down and looked me in the eye. “Matt... I'm going to ask you something.”

“Yeah.”

“Turn Pete Ziegler out,” she said. “Into the street.”

“What?” I must've looked as dumbfounded as I sounded. That wasn't at all what I'd expected. “Francie, they're itching to get their hands on him.”

“Let them have him,” she said. “It’ll prove that story’s a lie, that you didn’t make a deal with him. Please, Matt! I have to live here! I have to live here! Matt? Matt? Don’t look at me like that.”

I walked past her and looked at the peeling paint on the doorframe instead. “Go home, Francie.”

“Matt...” She touched my arm with her little fingers.

“Go home, or leave town, or hang yourself, or anything you like. Just go away.”

“But Matt...”

I looked her in the eye. “Right now.”

The hand went away. She backed up like she’d never seen me before, like I’d never held that hand under a cottonwood tree up by the Arkansas. She left with that look still on her face.

Coming back to Dodge was working out swell.

Chester blinked a few times, cleared his throat, then said, “I bought me a bottle at the Alafranza, Mr. Dillon. Would you care for a drink?”

“No.”

And we sat listening to the funeral bell ring.

CHAPTER SIX

It was about an hour later, and cooling off just a little. There was a breeze. Dust motes floated in the air.

“Guess the funeral’s over,” said Chester.

“There’ll be others,” I said.

“Funny, though,” said Chester. “Now I miss that bell. Awful quiet, ain’t it? It’s about—”

Chester stopped talking when he heard them. A mob was coming down the street.

“Just about on schedule,” I said. “You ready, Chester?”

“Yessir, Mr. Dillon.”

I stood up and put on the coat Doc had given me at Christmas. It was too hot for it, but I put it on anyway and made sure to pin my star over the breast pocket.

“I’d use the shotgun if I were you, Chester,” I said. “It’s more effective when there’s a mob to be dealt with.”

“Oh yessir, I aim to.”

I turned towards the back room. “Ziegler! And you too, son. If trouble starts, lie down flat on the floor and keep your head down all the time. Don’t gawk to see what’s happening. Understand me?”

The Dutchman just nodded. The kid said, “Yessir, Mr. Dillon,” in a good parroting of Chester. It made me want to smile.

“All right,” I said.

Outside I heard Adam Richard’s voice. “Dillon! Dillon! Come on out here, Dillon!”

“Chester,” I said, “I want you to stand here in the doorway after I go out where you can cover the backdoor and me at the same time.”

“Yessir, Mr. Dillon.” He had the shotgun out of the locker and resting against his shoulder.

“All right, Chester,” I said. “Open the door.”

I walked out to jeering and shouting. I couldn’t understand too much of what was being said, but I didn’t have to. Adam was in the front of the crowd, the only one not yelling. He looked sober, and he was heeled. I kept my eyes on him as I said, “It’s my duty to warn all of you that you’re in the breach of the peace. I’ve sworn to uphold the law. I’ve killed in order to do it, and I’m prepared to do so again.”

Someone in the back called out, “Give us the Dutchmen, Dillon!”

I took a risk and took my eyes off Adam and dead-eyed the crowd. They were looking back and forth between me and Chester’s shotgun. “Men! Men! I ask you to be sensible and to leave quietly! But if you refuse to listen to reason, if you insist on being fools and’ve already decided to act like wolves instead of humans, then there’s nothing I can say to make you change your minds.”

They were too far gone. This time when the bum shouted, “The Dutchman!” more voices joined in. “The Dutchman! Give us the Dutchman!”

They didn’t know me. Not anymore. And not as a lawman. I felt that fire rising in my belly – the fire that had gotten me into so much trouble when I was younger, the fire I thought I had left behind in Arizona and Texas and Mexico. But it was a fire that had kept me alive.

“All right!” I said. “You want Peter Ziegler? Well, he’s not more’n twenty feet behind me, so come on and get him, any of you! One at a time or all at once! Come on! Which one of you wants to die first? You? You?” They started backing up – probably because I was walking out towards them. “You, Adam?” I asked. Richards took only one step back before steeling himself. “Well, what do you say, Adam? You led ‘em here! Don’t

let this star on my coat stop you! C'mon!" With my left hand I plucked off the star and tossed it into the dirt. "There, I'm not wearing it now. Well, c'mon, draw, Adam, draw!"

He drew. My hand dropped to my hip and I yanked my gun. My left hand was already hovering over the hammer and I hit it back once. There were three shots between us. A window shattered behind me. The smoke hung in the air. The crowd had cleared to either side of us, and they were silent now.

I heard Chester's voice. "You all right, Mr. Dillon?"

"Yeah," I said, not turning. I was eyeing the crowd. "Get his gun."

Chester hadn't budged from the doorway, but now he stepped into the street and pocketed Adam's gun. "Man alive, I couldn't even see your hand move."

Doc Adams came running up the street. "Marshal! Oh, don't tell me! Don't tell me!" He sounded positively jubilant.

I holstered my gun and rounded on him. "Doc, you make one single funny remark and I'll knock you down! You just take him to your office and get to work."

Doc was flustered. "Well, I – I never do mean to offend, Marshal. In my line of work, well, bodies, they're just so much lumber."

I reached down and picked up my star from the dirt. "Make all the jokes about him you please, but not to me and not in my hearing. In my line of work, there's nothing humorous about death." I pinned my star back in place and turned to go back into the office. "Give him a hand, Chester," I said.

"No, no," said Doc quickly. "I can handle him Marshal, thank you just the same."

"Fine," I said. "C'mon, Chester."

Turning back towards the jail I saw a fair head duck back behind the window. One of the panes of glass was broken.

Back in my office, the kid was practically bouncing out of his skin. “That was something! You sure out-skinned ‘im, Mr. Dillon. He barely cleared leather.”

“Not now, son,” I said. He watched as I opened the chamber of my pistol and replaced the single spent cartridge.

“Bullet went about an inch past my face – I could feel the air as it went by!”

“You should’ve kept your head down,” said Chester. “You almost got yourself killed.”

“Not me!” said the boy. “I ain’t gonna die unless it’s in a real gunfight. Then I can’t die, ‘cause I’ll be faster’n anybody. Faster’n Mr. Dillon, even!” He made to draw an imaginary gun. “Pow!”

“Chester,” I said, “I’m going over to the Texas Trail for supper. Think you can keep our young friend here company?”

“Why, sure, Mr. Dillon.”

“I wanna go with you,” said the kid.

“Saloon’s no place for a youngster,” said Chester.

I took off the coat. It made me look like an undertaker. I didn’t want people to see that I was heeled, but I also wanted them to think of me as a lawman, not a gunslinger. Fella I know used to wear a coat like that. A dentist turned gambler and gunslinger. I didn’t want to be like him.

“In about an hour, you can cut Ziegler loose,” I told Chester. “There won’t be any more trouble until the trial.”

“Yessir, Mr. Dillon.”

I nodded towards the kid. “Don’t let him shoot off your guns or anything.”

“No, sir,” said Chester.

“And Chester?”

“Yessir?”

“I’ll send over a couple of steaks and some beer.”

Chester smiled. “Thank you, Mr. Dillon.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Texas Trail was along Front Street, down by the Longhorn and the Oasis, kitty-corner to the Alafraganza. I've always liked saloons. There's something very comfortable there. You always know what you're going to get there - booze, cards, and girls. I suppose as a peace officer I should have liked them less. All three led to the same thing. Trouble. But I wasn't always a marshal. And my idea of fun is the same as any man's. So I went to the saloons and watched and enjoyed the atmosphere. I drank sometimes, and every once in awhile I played a hand of cards in a friendly game, but that was as far as it went.

In the few months since I'd come back to Dodge I'd made it my habit to eat with Big Kate, the Texas Trail's owner, once every couple of weeks. It's nice to have feminine company, and Kate was enough older than me that there wasn't much for folks to speculate about. Other nights, though, I sat in the bar and watched the tables and listened to the sounds and tried not to stare at the girl Kitty, who worked downstairs. She was a fine-looking girl, with dark-red hair and a sassy smile. She must've been a couple years younger than me, though not more than a couple, but there was a look in her eye that told me she'd seen more of life than I had.

Sam Noonan was at the bar when I came in. "Evenin', Marshal," he said. "Heard you had you some trouble."

"Yeah, Sam," I said. "I did." He didn't ask anything more and I was grateful. Noonan was a good bartender - just the right amount of gab. I ordered my food and asked for something to be run over to Chester. Sam poured me a beer and I took it to a corner table.

Things were just getting lively, though they quieted down some when I came in. There were even a few cowboys at the bar, looking around like they planned to rob the place. Maybe they did, until they saw me. It was

the time of year that troubles a lawman most – the cattle were starting to come in from Texas and New Mexico. That meant cowboys, and drinking, and fights, and killings. Rustling, too, probably. Sipping my beer, I thought about the town. They'd be watching to see how I handled things. The six months or so here had been a good sojourn, and now I had to make good. I worked for the government, there was no chance of me losing my job. But if I wanted to be accepted here, I had to handle the next few weeks just right. If I could just keep my temper.

“You look like you just lost your dog, Marshal.”

I looked up. Kitty was standing over me, with a steak on a plate. She half-smiled down at me.

“My dog, Miss Kitty?”

“A man looks sadder over losing his dog, I've noticed, than over his wife.”

I laughed and stood. “I suppose he does at that.”

She set the plate down in front of me. “You're not married, right?”

“No, Miss Kitty.” She knew I wasn't.

“So I figure it has to be your dog. Or maybe you lost a bet.”

My smile went away slowly. “I had to shoot a man.”

Her smile went away, too. “I know, Marshal.”

We stood there for a moment, looking at each other. There was just something about the girl – though we hadn't passed more than a dozen words in a row since I'd come to Dodge, I felt like she – she understood me. Or understood something. There was a connection, that's all I knew.

I gestured to an empty seat across from me. “Would you care to sit, Miss Kitty?”

Her smile came back. “Don't mind if I do, Marshal.”

“Call me Matt.”

“Only if you drop this Miss Kitty stuff. Plain Kitty does well enough between friends.”

I laughed. “It’s a deal, Kitty.” I held out her chair for her and she sat. I went back to my seat and started in on my steak.

“This is real good,” I said, just to be saying something.

“Made it myself,” said Kitty.

“I didn’t know you cooked, Kitty,” I said.

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me, Matt,” said Kitty.

“That’s the truth,” I said.

“I heard you got a kid over at the jail,” she said.

“Runaway,” I said.

“Any idea where he came from?”

Around a mouthful of steak I said, “Chester sent out some telegrams. No word yet. I’m hoping to hear something before the week’s out. I’d hate to send him to one of those foundling homes.”

“How old is he, Matt?”

“Eleven or twelve. Hard to say for sure, but he acts like a real kid.”

“You like kids, Matt?” asked Kitty.

I put down my fork and wiped my lips. “Yeah. Yeah, I do.”

She nodded and smiled. It wasn’t the smile one of the bar-girls gives a mark. It was real, and it was for me. At least, I liked to think it was. The connection between us was strong, but comfortable. Not a lot had to be said about it, but we were both working at it anyway.

“Would you like another beer, Matt?” she asked.

“Sure, Kitty.”

She got up and ducked behind the bar and pulled the beer herself. She brought it back and sat down again opposite me. “Big Kate likes you,” she said. “Your beer is free.”

“But not the whiskey,” I said.

“No,” said Kitty with a smile. “Not unless she’s drinkin’ it with you.”
“Her whiskey’s better’n what they serve down here, anyway,” I said.
“That’s true.”

Across the room a couple of cowboys started getting a little rowdy. I could tell they had money burning a hole in their pockets. I’d have to find someone to look after the kid tonight – maybe Shiloh over at the Dodge House would take him. In another few hours I was gonna need Chester. Come midnight these cowboys’d be looking to tear the town apart.

But I didn’t want to be looking at cowboys. As I sipped my beer I turned back to Kitty.

“Cowboys are in town,” I said.

“From the Drag-R herd, they said,” Kitty told me.

I nodded. I was staring, but she didn’t seem to mind. And I wasn’t feeling embarrassed about it for some reason. She wasn’t as pretty as, say, Francie, but there was more life in her than in a hundred town ladies.

Thinking of Francie, I said, “Say, Kitty. Couple days back, Clay Richards was in here, having a drink. Did you talk to him any?”

“Some,” said Kitty. “Seemed like he was celebrating somethin’.”

“Did he say what?”

“No, not that I recall. Why?”

“I’m trying to figure why he robbed that bank – or tried to, anyway. Was he having money-trouble?”

“His tab was paid up here, far as I know,” said Kitty. “Why’n’t you ask his wife?”

“Francie’s a little out of sorts right now. She needs some time to cool down.”

“Sure,” said Kitty. “But I know what you mean. Clay was happy as a lark the other night. The next day he goes and shoots two people. It don’t figure.”

“No,” I said, “it don’t figure.”

I sat there thinking about Clay, and the cashier, and the Chinaman. And that got me to thinking about Ziegler and Adam. Four hundred dollars. A missing gun. Nothing fit. None of it.

“Wow,” said Kitty.

I blinked at her. “What?”

“I’m glad I didn’t break any law,” she said.

I smiled at her. “What do you mean?”

“I just saw you at work, and it’s not something I’d want to be on the other end of. You’d be a bad man to be up against – so to speak.”

I flushed. “I’m sorry, Miss Kitty...”

“Matt,” she said, laying a hand on mine. “It’s Kitty.”

It was like being in a lightning storm, having her touch my hand. All my senses were alert and my heart beat faster.

“Sorry, Kitty.”

“No worries, Matt.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

I finished my steak and Kitty brought me another beer and we talked about all kinds of things – the weather, the town, a new horse I was thinking of buying. We'd been talking awhile when one of the two cowboys came over and asked Kitty for a dance.

"She's busy," I said.

"But she ain't doin' nothing but gabbin' wit'you," the cowboy protested. He was in his middle thirties and smelled of the saddle, whiskey, and manure.

"That's so," I said.

"Matt," said Kitty.

"She's a dancing girl, ain't she?" said the cowboy. "Oughtn't she t'dance, then?"

"She's busy," I said again.

"Look, mister," said Kitty, standing and smiling at him. "There're plenty of girls around tonight. And I promise to save a dance for you a little later, when I'm done talking with my friend, the Marshal." I don't know how she did it, but just standing up there seemed to be a vague sensuality, an undefined sense of what she'd move like if she weren't hampered by all those clothes. It was something I liked.

The cowboy liked it too. He glanced over at me. "Marshal, eh?"

"Yep," I said. I liked how she'd managed to let that piece of information drop so casual-like.

"Never met me a Marshal before."

"But I've met plenty of cowboys," I said. "They're all the same."

"Is that so?" he said, rocking on his heels.

“Yeah. That’s so.” I stayed sitting, but I picked up my beer with my left hand.

Kitty moved between us. “Look, mister, why don’t you go over to the bar and tell Sam that your next round’s on me.”

The cowboy used the flat of his left hand to move Kitty aside. “And what are all cowboys like, Marshal?”

Kitty shot me a pleading look. I’d already shot one man today. I decided to back off.

“They’re all looking for something,” I said, “and when they’ve got it, they want to get rid of it as fast as they can. Otherwise they’re not cowboys anymore.”

That puzzled the drunk, but it didn’t sound like an insult. “Well, I know what I’m lookin’ fer, mister Marshal. And that’s a dance.”

“I already promised you that dance,” said Kitty. “Now why don’t you get back to your friend. Look, Sam’s bringing out another couple of beers for you.”

The cowboy turned as saw two beers heading for his lone friend. He was clearly worried that he wouldn’t get his share, but he didn’t want it to look like he was backing down. He looked at Kitty. “I’ll remember ‘bout that dance. Don’t think I won’t.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” said Kitty with a big smile that showed all her teeth. They were good looking teeth.

The cowboy looked at me. “I’ll remember about you, too.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve forgotten you already.” I took another sip of beer. He lurched away from our table and back to his friend, who had a hand on both glasses of beer.

Kitty waved at Sam, who nodded back to us as he cleaned a dirty glass on his apron. Kitty sat down again.

“What am I going to do with you?” she asked.

I shrugged.

“Were you trying to get into a fight with him?”

“No,” I said. “But I wasn’t avoiding one, either.”

“Is it the Marshal’s job to pick fights?”

“No,” I said.

“Then why were you egging him?”

I shrugged. I felt like Chester. “I didn’t like the cut of his coat, is all.”

Kitty smiled. “He wasn’t wearing one.”

I shrugged. “That must be it.”

“So you’re a man who likes trouble.”

I didn’t like the sound of that – not coming from Kitty. “No,” I said.

“But I’m good at certain things. I figure I can either make money by following the law, or by breaking it. I’ve made my choice. If that means trouble comes my way, I’m not going to dodge it.”

Kitty nodded, then added in a wry voice, “Besides, what would the people think?”

I set my beer down. “Kitty, if I wanted a safe life I’d go buy a plot of land and raise some hogs or corn or something.”

“But you’ve killed men. Not just today, but before.”

“Yeah. Some. But I’ll tell you this, Kitty – I never killed a man who wasn’t out to kill me or someone else. Even before I took up this badge.”

“So, tell me, Matt – what were you like before you became so holy?”

She was laughing, and I wanted to laugh with her.

“Just a cowboy. A drifter, sometimes.”

“I bet you were a real wild one.”

“I guess maybe I was.”

“Ever get on the wrong side of the law?”

“Not in any serious way,” I said. “At least, nobody’s after me.”

“That’s a pretty answer. Where did you do all of this nothing, Matt? In Kansas?”

“No. Texas, for awhile, then Arizona. I went down to Mexico a couple of times.”

“Did you ever make it as far as San Francisco?”

“No.”

“Were you born out there?”

“No. Funny enough, I was born right here – well, about thirty miles from here, but close enough.”

“So the prodigal son returns.”

I nodded and took a sip of my beer. “I guess so.”

“Did you ever have a woman?”

I nodded. “Sure, sure. Almost got married a couple of times.”

“What happened?”

“It’s hard to tell. Say, Kitty, what’s with all these questions?”

Kitty’s eyes glittered in the darkening room. “It’s all a plot, Marshal. You see, now I know everything about you.”

“Well,” I said, leaning forward, “what about you, Kitty?”

“What about me?”

“I mean, what’s your story?”

Kitty fanned her face and laughed. It was a good laugh, full of fun and teasing and life. “You’ll just have to keep wondering, I guess.”

The cowboy who’d bothered Kitty was at the bar again. His friend had gone outside to relieve himself and make way for more alcohol. The rangy youth was giving Sam Noonan some lip. I let my gaze drift off of Kitty and focused on listening for a minute.

“I said whiskey!” the cowboy said real loud.

“And whiskey is what I gave ya,” said Sam in his best calm.

“I don’t mean a shot! I wan’ a whole bottle!”

“You didn’t say that,” said Sam.

“Well, y’shoulda known! Whaddya think I am, a dude? Can’t handle my whiskey? Izzat it?”

“No, mister,” said Sam, still calm. I saw his hand drop behind the bar, though, to the place where he kept his shotgun. I’d seen him use it often enough, though he’d never had to fire it. The sight of that thing in pointing across the bar tends to calm things down in a hurry. And it made a pretty fair club, too.

The cowboy must’ve seen Sam’s hand drop, though, and he wasn’t so drunk that he couldn’t figure out that it wasn’t a bottle of whiskey Sam was reaching for. He grabbed Sam’s searching arm from behind the bar, yanked it towards him, and slammed it down on the mahogany counter. There was a sharp crack and Sam yelped.

I was already moving as Sam reared back, and before he and the cowboy could really come to blows I had my gun out and I slammed the butt of it into the back of the cowboy’s head. He crumpled like a blown buffalo and looked about as useless.

“How’s the arm, Sam?”

“How the hell do you think it is, Marshal?” said Sam loudly, cradling it.

“Broken.”

“Damn right!”

“Get over to Doc’s. I’ll tell Big Kate, and Kitty can watch the bar for you.”

Sam shook his head. “I’ll tell Kate. You go find this fella’s friend. He’ll be gunning for one or both of us if he hears, an’ I ain’t in no shape to draw.” He tried to take off his apron, and winced as he shifted his broken arm.

“Sounded like a clean break,” I said.

“Silver linings don’t mean there ain’t clouds, Marshal.”

“True enough.”

Kitty was by my side. “Say, Kitty,” I said. “Could you find someone to run over to the jail and have Chester come and haul this sorry poke back to the lock up? I’ve got some more business, I expect.”

“Sure, Matt,” said Kitty. “Did you have to hit him so hard?”

“Not much point to hitting him if he doesn’t fall down.”

“I suppose not.”

“And now you don’t have to dance with him.”

Kitty smiled at me. “My hero.”

CHAPTER NINE

I came into the office a little late the next morning. It had been a long night. There had been four more encounters like my one at the Texas Trail, and all of them had ended the same way. If this kept up I'd have to check the butt of my six-gun for dents.

Chester was in the office already. He was wearing a new shirt. In the short time I'd known him, I'd discovered him to have a little of the dandy in him. He liked buying new shirts. Whenever he won money playing cards – which wasn't all that often – he went out and spent the better part of a morning picking out a new shirt. It was strange, because in the time I'd known him I'd never seen him wear anything but the same striped pants. Or maybe he had lots of pairs of the same pants. But he was real neat about them. And they never drew your eyes away from his nice crisp new shirts.

“I turned ‘em all loose this morning, Mr. Dillon,” said Chester, “like you said.” The keys to the jail were on my desk.

“Good, Chester. Thanks.”

“It's a good thing you had me let Ziegler go. Otherwise we'd've been hard pressed for accommodations. They was the sorriest lookin' cowboys I ever did see.”

I chuckled. “Well, I guess I didn't really hurt any of ‘em, Chester.”

“Yeah, but bein' banged on the head with a six-gun ain't the gentlest way to end an evenin's pleasure. Still, they'll live,” he added.

“Well, they started taking their pleasure too seriously.”

“Yessir, well, things quieted down a little after you locked them up. There might've been real trouble otherwise.”

“Well, it isn't over yet,” I said. I was looking out the open window.

“What?” asked Chester from where he lay on the couch.

The front door opened and a thick man with skin dyed by the sun walked in. “You Marshal Dillon?” he said.

“Yeah,” I said, leaning on the edge of my desk. “Yeah, I am.”

“M’name’s Rance,” he said. His voice was deep and gruff. I knew voices like that, voices that had shouted a lot over dry prairies.

“Glad to know you, Rance,” I said.

“I bossed the Drag-R herd up here from outta Matagorda,” said Rance. “That’s in Texas, Marshal,” he added.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ve been there.”

“You have?” He sounded surprised. “Well, you better not go back.”

I had a sense of where this was going. “Oh?”

Rance nodded. “We might give you the kinda welcome you’re givin’ us.”

Chester had stood up and was now leaning against the far wall. His holster was clear. I walked around my desk as sat in my chair. “What’s your complaint, Rance?”

“Buffaloin’ my men,” he said. “Five of ‘em come into camp this mornin’ with blood in their hair. They said you done it.”

“Yeah, yeah, I did. If I hadn’t they mighta been shot. Or shot somebody else.”

“Good thing for you you took ‘em on one at a time.”

“I’d have taken them anyway,” I said. “Look, Rance, this town was on the edge of a riot last night. I stopped it, and I stopped it without any killin’.”

“Man’s own business if he wants to pull out his gun,” said Rance.

“Not around here, it isn’t,” I said.

“Marshal, I can’t ask men to come up here the way they do and stick to drinkin’ soda water and talkin’ in whispers.” He looked really perplexed. “What kind of a town is this, anyway?”

“It’s a good town, Rance,” I said. “Now, you and your men can drink and gamble all they want. But they can’t shoot the mirror off the wall at the Alafraganza, and they can’t grab townswomen on the street, and they can’t break the bartender’s arm in the Texas Trail, and they can’t offer to shoot anyone that tries to stop ‘em. It isn’t that kind of a town.”

“Well, sure,” said Rance, “they get a little frisky, but there’s no harm in it I can see.”

“Sooner or later it’d lead to killing,” I said. “I’ve got to draw the line somewhere.”

“So do I, Marshal,” he said.

“Oh? What does that mean?”

Rance looked grim. “I mean I won’t drive cattle to Dodge no more. I’ll spread the word it’s a no-good town, and you people can live offa sod-busters and buffalo hunters. This place’ll starve to death.”

I stared at him. “I’m hired to keep the peace, Rance. Any way I can.”

“Keep it, then. We won’t bother Dodge no more. Good-bye, Marshal.”

He turned and left, leaving the door open behind him so the flies came in. Already the day was turning into another scorcher.

“I guess it’s like you said,” observed Chester.

“How’s that, Chester?”

“It ain’t over yet.”

“No,” I said. “I guess it’s not.”

CHAPTER TEN

The day was another scorcher. The drought out in the prairie was the worst I'd ever seen. Everybody in Dodge was a little edgy about a prairie fire, and I couldn't blame them. All it would take was one fool with a cigar and the whole of Dodge could burn to the ground. But that wasn't the kind of thing a Marshal can do something about. The law only reaches so far.

The kid was with Shiloh for the day – I'd convinced the ex-cowboy to take the boy out hunting, with instructions to keep to traps and away from guns. If he was determined to keep running, catching some game would be a useful lesson. There was still no sign of anyone looking for him.

I sent Chester over to Clay Richard's place to ask Francie to come see me when she was feeling up to it. I knew if I went over to her place the day after her husband had been shot I'd only make things worse for her in town, and I probably wouldn't get anything useful out of her.

While Chester was out I went through the answers to my telegrams about the kid. There were a few runaways folks were looking for, but none that matched mine. I wondered if I should even be bothering. Another couple of years and he'd be off west without a care anyway. But I'd hate to have his ma worrying about him.

Chester came in. "She'll be here in a minute, Mr. Dillon. She said she wasn't feelin' too well, and for me to go ahead."

"I suppose that's understandable," I said. "After all that happened yesterday. Francie's always had a delicate constitution."

Chester nodded and said, "And I ran into Mr. Green from over at the Alafraganza. He asked if you could come over to the town hall 'bout one, Mr. Dillon."

"Did he say what for?"

"He said they was havin' a businessman's meetin', and they'd appreciate it if you'd drop by."

"I'm sure they would."

Chester nodded and glanced out the door behind him. "Here comes Mrs. Richards," he said. "Do you want me to leave, Mr. Dillon?"

I stared at him. "You stay right where you are, Chester."

"Yessir." It was almost sheepish.

Francie had finally put on mourning clothes, though perhaps there was a little too much ankle to her dress. She looked like she'd dressed up for a play where she was acting the widow.

"Hello, Matt," she said.

"Hello, Francie. Come in, come in."

"I shouldn't be here, Matt," she told me. "You shouldn't've asked me here."

"Couldn't be helped, Francie," I said, holding out a chair for her.

She sat down and glanced at Chester, who was busy brushing his hat. "Matt – I hear you shot Adam."

"He didn't give me a choice, Francie," I said. It wasn't quite true. I'd pushed him, just like those bums had. I'd lost my temper. I'd stopped the mob from rushing the jail. That was something. But it didn't stop me from feeling raw about it.

"I know," she said, though she didn't. "Matt – I'm sorry."

"What for?"

"For asking you to –"

“Throw Ziegler to the mob?” I said. “That’s alright, Francie. You weren’t thinking clear. But now I’ve got to ask you a few questions. About Clay.”

“You already asked me, the day he –“

“I asked you where he might go,” I said. “There wasn’t time for anything more. But now that it doesn’t matter, I’ve got a few more things I’d like to know. Like this – why did he try and rob that bank?”

Francie shook her head. “How would I know?”

“You’re his wife, Francie. Wives know their men. Even if they aren’t friendly,” I added.

“He wasn’t a bad man,” said Francie. “But he had his moods.”

“Most men do.”

“He beat me.”

“I know,” I said.

“I should’ve come to you, but –“

“I know. He was your husband.”

“Yes.”

She’d done well, not crying. But the tears were there behind her eyes. I was sitting on the edge of my desk and she fell against me. Her breath was coming in sobs and her shoulders shook. I held her and tried not to smell her hair. It was the smell of my youth. Chester was focused on some invisible spot on his hat.

“You had a fight with him, over me,” she said.

“I told him not to hit you,” I said. “That’s all. There wasn’t any fight.”

“How did you know?”

“Francie,” I said, “everybody knew.”

She looked down at her hands. “And if I’d come to you?”

“I’d have put him in jail.”

She looked into my eyes. “Just that?”

“I might have hit him once or twice. But no more than that.”

“Matt!” Doc came bursting through the door. “Matt! I – oh.”

I didn’t recall ever telling him to call me Matt. “Yeah, Doc, what is it?”

Doc face broke into a broad grin. “Am I interrupting?”

“What is it, Doc?” I said again.

“Heh. Autopsy’s finished. I examined his liver and lights as –“

“This is Mrs. Richards, Doc,” I said.

Doc’s hat popped off his head like I’d shot it. “Oh!” he said. “I beg your pardon ma’am. You know I meant no disrespect for the departed.”

Francie sniffled and I said, “Can you come back in a few minutes, Doc?”

“Sure, sure.” Again with the grin.

“Thanks, Doc.”

On his way out, the Doc bowed to Francie. “Please accept my condolences, Mrs. Richards.”

“Chester,” I said, “close the door. Now, Francie, I’ve still got to ask you – do you know why he tried to rob that bank?”

She wiped her eyes with her handkerchief and said she didn’t.

“He was out the other night,” I said, “and he was celebrating something. Do you have any idea what that was?”

“Celebrating?” she asked. “No. No, I’ve no idea.”

It’s always hard to tell with women, but I thought she was lying. I’ve been lied to a lot. You get to know the feeling.

I tried for another few minutes, but there was nothing else to get out of Francie – at least, nothing I wanted that she would tell me. She had lots to say about Clay, but none of it helped me. I let her cry her fill, then sent her home with Chester while I sat back and thought about what a man could celebrate that his wife wouldn’t know about.

Or that his wife would lie about.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Well, Clay was shot, all right,” said Doc, “but from the meat of the wound and the quagginess of the blood, I’d say it happened sometime the day before yesterday – the day of the robbery. I’d say the cashier’s bullet didn’t go wild after all.”

That didn’t make any sense. “Doc, how could a dead man gallop away?” I asked.

Doc held up a hand. “But the wound wasn’t what killed Clay. The ball hit the ribcase and bounced off. Twenty-two caliber, it was. What did kill him was the stab in the back, right through the spine, inflicted sometime early the next morning. Now, near as I can tell, by a small blade – oh, two, three inches long. It could have been a Barlow knife.”

“A knife.” I stood up from my desk and started to pace. I remembered the Dutchman saying he didn’t even own a gun. I suppose he could’ve knifed Clay – but Pete Ziegler didn’t seem the sort to stab a man in the back, no matter how desperate he was for the reward. A shooting, maybe. But a knife? A knife takes work, a knife takes will. No, the more I thought about Clay, the less I liked Pete for the killing.

There was also Francie and the lie. Clay had been celebrating something two days before he’d shot two men while trying to steal a hefty chunk of cash. Then he’d been stabbed in the back. It all added up to something I didn’t like.

The Doc watched me as I paced the room. “You call the inquest any time you’re ready, Marshal,” he said.

“Yeah, Doc,” I said absently. “Thanks.”

“Marshal, you’re giving yourself a case of nerves. Prob’ly been shot at too many times.”

I stopped and smiled. “You think so?”

“Oh, yeah,” said Doc. “You’re getting’ to act like a spooky old horse that’s jumpy ‘n gun-shy. Now you take me. I don’t rant and rave against Fate. I just sit back and take what comes.”

“Yeah, sure Doc. Sure you do.”

“I do! If I get a patient I steal ‘im blind, and if I don’t, well, I keep my hand in, settin’ a broken leg on a dog or a broken arm on a bartender or something.”

“How is Sam?” I asked.

“He’s fine, Marshal. Clean break. He can still pour from a bottle.”

I nodded. “Well, as you’ve already pointed out, Doc, you aren’t doing so poorly this week.”

“Oh, I can use another fee or two – I owe some money over at the Oasis. Not plannin’ to shoot anybody else, are you, Marshal?”

From another man – Mr. Hightower, for instance – I’d’ve knocked him down. But Doc just sat there grinning at me. I grinned back and tugged at the collar of my shirt. “If this drought doesn’t break, I’m in the mood to shoot myself.”

Doc nodded. “It’s a bad one, all right. I don’t think I’ve ever seen the prairie as dry as it is this year.”

Chester came running into the room. “We got trouble, Mr. Dillon.”

“Rance or Ziegler?”

“Neither, Mr. Dillon. Ol’ man Howard just sent a rider in. Another trail drive’s pulled in from around the Big Bend. They’re threatenin’ to cut his fences so they can water the cattle at Cottonwood pond.”

“Well, there’s a fine blow up,” said Doc, “a real head-on smash. A thirsty herd against that skinflint Howard.”

“That’s all I need,” I said, “more trouble with cowboys.”

Doc rubbed his hands together. “Ah, maybe I can get myself a few more fees out of this before it’s over.”

Chester looked at me. “Good ol’ Doc,” I told him, “always hoping for the best. Come on, Chester, let’s ride out to Cottonwood.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Ike Howard had no call to fence that pond there, Mr. Dillon. There’s enough water there for all the trail herds in the next ten years.”

“It’s on his ranch, Chester,” I said. “He’s got a right to fence in his own range.”

“A right, maybe,” said Chester, “but no decent rancher would take advantage of it. And he’s the one who set fire to those poor sod-busters’ homes last month, just so’s he could buy up their land.”

“We couldn’t prove that, Chester.”

“I know, Mr. Dillon, but Howard’s mean. Just down-right mean.”

I shook my head. “I think it’s more than that, Chester. It’s the old business of making two dollars grow where one dollar grew before. I think Howard figured on something like this when he strung that fence last month. The trouble is—”

Chester was squinting against the sun at the trail ahead. He pointed. “Look! Look yonder, Mr. Dillon!”

I looked to where he pointed. There must have been fifty or sixty riders facing each other across Howard’s barb-wire fence.

“Looks like a couple of armies,” said Chester.

“Well,” I said, “it wouldn’t be the first range war that started over water rights.” I spurred my horse. “Come on, boy.”

It looked like we’d arrived just in time. The shouting and name-calling was getting pretty nasty, and under it all was the sound of some pretty miserable steers begging for a drop of water. They tried to eat the grass around them, but it was much too dry and only made them thirstier.

Howard, the farm owner, was a slender man with a pinched face and a big round buckle on his belt. There was a pistol stuck in the belt, the way

I never wear a gun, and in his hands he held a Sharps rifle. He sat at the back of his men, with them protecting him in case shooting started.

Over the fence from Howard's men, atop a strong but tired-looking horse, was a man just as lean as Howard, but far more active looking. His skin was pretty brown and he had the look of a decent cowpoke. He kept his hands free as he shouted at Howard. "The river's dry as a bone! Cottonwood pond's our last hope for water for the herd."

"T'ain't my problem!"

The cowpoke shook his fist. "I been bringin' cattle up here to Dodge city for 12 years. Drought or no drought, the pond's always had water – water we need!"

"Again I say, ain't my problem!" shouted Howard. "I made you an offer...!"

"You're tryin' t' steal my cattle, get 'em for nothin'!" The cowboy looked glanced around at his herd, and his men bristled with guns. Across the fence, Howard's men were holding their rifles a little too ready. "If you don't let us through – !"

"Alright boys!" I said, riding right up to the fence. "Hold it! Hold it, I said! Now put away the guns! Party's over!"

The cowboy squinted at me. "Who says so, mister?"

"I do," I said.

Chester rode his horse to another point on the fence, where he had a clear angle on both leaders. I didn't take my eyes off the lead cowboy.

The cowboy looked at me. "Who're you?"

"Dillon, U.S. Marshal out of Dodge."

From my other side, at the back of his gang around the fence, Howard spoke in that thin tone of his. "Marshal, that man and his gang are threatenin' to break through my fences and trespass on my property. I demand the protection o' the law!"

“You’ll get it, Howard,” I said sourly. “You the owner of this herd?”

The man nodded. “That’s right, Marshal. Jack Jackson from the Circle C spread down in the Big Bend. Maybe you can make this fella see reason. I got a herda’ cattle here that’s dyin’ like flies for lacka’ water. Over there a hundred yards is plenty a’ water. Only the sneakin’ crook has fenced it in. How about it, Marshal?”

“It’s his land, Jackson,” I said. “The law gives him the right to fence it.”

Jackson stared at me. “Law? Right? Everythin’ I’ve got in the world’s tied up in the herd. There’s twenty-five riders there in the saddle I can’t even pay wages to if I lose these cattle. Does the law uphold pushin’ a man against the wall an’ wipin’ him out?”

I shook my head. “It wasn’t intended to. Howard! Whyn’t you ride up here to the fence and talk, eh?”

Howard rode through his men with a nasty smile. “Why, sure, Marshal! No objections at all. My fence, ain’t it?”

“Nobody’s doubting it,” I said. “Now, look, is there any reason you can’t get together with this man and let him take that herd in and water it?”

“I made him an offer,” said Howard. “He turned it down.”

Jackson spat. “An offer! A dollar a head a day for water or buy the herd himself for three dollars a head!”

That was when I knew I was right about Howard. “Those’re pretty stiff terms,” I said.

Howard stared at me like a dead fish does. “Better’n losin’ everything, like he’s gonna do,” he said.

Jackson stood up in his stirrups. “Why you dirty, low-down—” Both men started to move towards their guns.

“Hold it! Both of you!” I shouted. “Now, look, if there’s any gun-slissing starts, I’m going to be in on it too, you understand?” They backed down, but only Howard looked disappointed. “Howard, I just don’t understand you,” I said. “Most people out here stick together when trouble starts. They don’t kick a man when he’s down. And they don’t look on a drought or a blizzard as a chance to make a personal cleaning!”

“Just a minute, Dillon,” said Howard. “You call yourself the law in Dodge. Alright, does the law say I can fence in my own land?”

I held his gaze for a long minute.

“Well, does it?”

“It does.”

“Then nevermind your opinions, Marshal,” said Howard. “All I want outta you is enforcement of the law.”

The heat and my temper. But I’d shot a man yesterday. That has a sobering effect. “Alright, Howard, you’ll get it. And that’s all you’ll get. Jackson, you better have your boys start the herd circling.”

Jackson studied me. “This mean you’re backin’ him up, Marshal?”

There was a bad taste in my mouth. “I’m backing up the law, that’s all, Jackson.”

“Then I don’t think much of your laws up here,” he said.

“I only enforce ‘em, I don’t make ‘em.”

“Y’know,” said Jackson, “there’s a fella named Rance...”

“I’ve met him,” I said.

Jackson was still studying me. “He says Dodge’s become a no good town. He said it was the fault of the new Marshal there.”

“I know what he says, Jackson. Now you better circle that herd.”

On the other side of the fence, Howard said, “I’ll say you better! I’m orderin’ my men to shoot the first man or steer that comes through that fence!”

That did it. "Chester, you cover Howard."

"Yessir, Mr. Dillon." Somehow he made the draw look lazy, but his gun appeared in his hand like it'd been there all along.

"And if he orders any of his men to fire a shot – kill him."

Chester nodded, his face blank. "Be a pleasure, Mr. Dillon."

Howard stared at me with wide eyes. "What's the idea, Marshal?"

"You wanted the law enforced? Alright, you're getting it! But I'm gonna do the enforcing, Howard, not you. So if you're smart you won't give any orders about shooting."

Jackson pursed his lips, then he nodded slowly. "Alright, Dillon. You got a tough job. I guess you're tryin' to do it fair and square."

It was the kindest thing anyone'd said to me since I'd moved back to Dodge. "Man does what he has to do, Jackson."

Jackson nodded. "I know. Like with me. That herd o' mine beds down without water, most of 'em won't get off the ground in the mornin'. So, law or no law, we're goin' through that fence."

"I'll have to stop you," I said.

"I know you have to try," he said.

"Jackson," I said. "Give me some time."

"We ain't got a lot of time, Marshal. We're losin' fifteen head an hour, now."

"Just give me some time, Jackson, to try to figure out something."

Jackson blinked a couple times. "Tell you what, Marshal. I'll give you 'til nine o'clock. But then we're rushin' that fence."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

We were back in Dodge. It was almost one o'clock. I had eight hours to figure out a solution to Jackson and Howard's spat, or else a range war would break out, with all the cowboys on one side and all the ranchers on the other. I'd been a part of a few and they were always bloody and useless. The fretting made me forget Clay Richards and Rance and the rest. But when we'd rode back in, Shiloh had spotted me and reminded me that his boss, Mr. Green, was waiting for me over at the town hall. I felt like cursing, but he had the little runaway with him so I thanked him instead. Chester and I dismounted and hitched our horses in front of the jail then walked over towards the town hall.

"You sure you want to go in there, Mr. Dillon?" asked Chester.
"Oughtn't we be tryin' to figure out –"

"I expect it won't take long, Chester. Besides, we need to talk to Pepper, and he'll be in there with the rest of them."

"You want me to go in with you, Mr. Dillon?"

"Ah, no," I said. "No, Chester, you better wait outside."

"Okay, sir," said Chester. "What d'ya think they're up to, anyway?"

"Well, Green told you it was a businessman's meeting, didn't he?"

"Yessir."

"Then I expect they're worried about business." We reached the town hall door. "Here we are. I'll, ah, I'll be out shortly."

"Yessir." Chester took up a place leaning against the wall. He took out a wad of slippery elm from his shirt pocket and fitted it neatly inside his lower lip. He started chewing. I went inside.

Inside were several of Dodge's leading businessmen – Green, Howe, Hightower, Gremmick, Pepper, Witherspoon, Torpe, Summers, Denton,

and the rest of them. They were all working themselves up, muttering and grumbling and nodding at each other. I walked in wearing my undertaker's coat. Warm as it was, it had the pleasing effect of shutting them up.

Mr. Green came forward a little hesitantly. He managed the Dodge House, the city's main hotel and restaurant. It was the only place folks from out east felt comfortable in Dodge City, because Green was from Boston and ran the place just like they did back home. I'd never been to Boston. I wondered if everyone there was like Green – nice suits and real friendly, but not too much spine. He was a man famous for not wanting trouble. As the one who had invited me, he obviously felt he had to take the lead.

“Hello, Marshal,” he said.

“Mr. Green,” I said, touching the brim of my hat. “Gentlemen.”

They muttered their hellos but kept their eyes on the wall, or on the floor, or on my badge. This wasn't looking too good for me.

“Well, Mr. Green?” I said. “I don't have a lot of time. You asked me to come here.”

Green coughed and said, “Well, ah, yes. We all did, Marshal. Mr. Pepper, 'n Mr. Howe, and, well, all of us. Practically every man who does business in Dodge is here.”

“Uh-huh,” I said. “Not Howard, but he's a little busy. And I don't see Rance. He says he does business here.”

Howe stepped up then, much more confidently than Green. He was a Kansan. “He sure does! That's what we want to talk about.”

“Well,” I said. “Go ahead.”

Green coughed again. “Well, ah, we – we've had a meeting, Marshal, and, ah, we've decided you've gotta go easier on these cowboys when they're in Dodge.” He seemed relieved to have gotten it out.

“Oh,” I said. I waited a moment, then said, “Why, gentlemen?”

Green looked around. It was Howe who answered. "We can't afford to lose all that business. That's why."

The other men muttered their agreement, but this time they summoned up the nerve to look at me as they did.

"There's always some trouble the first day or so when a herd reaches a city," I said. "All I have to do is buffalo a few of the wildest and gradually the rest of the cowboys calm down a little bit."

Green said, "But they won't stand for your sluggin' men and throwin' them in jail."

More mutters of agreement. It wasn't so much that they were looking at me now, as looking through me. All the way to the bank.

"Nobody got killed last night, did they?"

Green shook his head. "Well, that's not the point."

"According to the law," I said, "it's a pretty good point, Mr. Green."

Howe chimed in. "The law's a fine thing, Marshal. But we're also interested in business." The mutters again.

I bit back my first answer to that. "You're scared because one hard-headed trail-boss has threatened you, Howe. They're not all like Rance, you know."

"There – there's no use arguin', Marshal," said Green, spurring himself on by balling up his fists and letting them go again and again. "We got our minds made up. You're just too rough with those men."

"Uh-huh," I said. "Tell me something, Mr. Green. Would you like to run this town?"

Green blanched as his courage disappeared. "Why, why, why, no – 'course not. No, not me. But, well, we thought maybe if you kinda – leave Dodge alone 'n do your work in the country – like this thing with Mr. Howard. That's what we need you for. You deal with them cowboys out

there. Then, for town, we'll hire somebody the cowboys'll – take to a little better. Ah, you know what I mean.”

I nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, I do. Good thing for me I'm employed by the government, isn't it?”

“Oh, now, Marshal,” said Green. “We're just makin' a suggestion, sorta...”

“Oh yeah, sure, sure.” I looked around at all of them, and this time none of them met my eye. I turned back to Green. “You know what, Mr. Green? You're all actin' like fools.” They didn't like that. At least, from what I got from the mutters, they didn't sound like they agreed with me. “Yeah, yeah, it's true. And there's only one way you're gonna learn. Well, gentlemen, I won't make anymore arrests in Dodge City until you ask me to. It's your town and you can blow it right off the map if you want to. Good day.”

I turned and walked out and left the door of the town hall open to let in the flies. That showed them.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I cornered Mr. Pepper when he came out of the town hall and sent him off with Chester. Then I stopped by the Dodge House where Shiloh was staying and saw the hare that he and the kid had caught and skinned. I asked Shiloh if the kid could stay at the hotel for the night, things being what they were. Shiloh said sure, but when I asked him if he'd be interested in becoming a temporary deputy, he shook his head. I couldn't blame him. I didn't feel much like carrying a badge right now, myself.

I went over to the Texas Trail. I try not to eat in the same place two nights in a row – don't want to give the townspeople the impression I was soft on any one place. But I wasn't really interested in what the townspeople thought of me at the moment. And the Texas Trail was where I wanted to be. I ordered a beer and leaned up against the bar, staring out the open doorway at the bright, piercing sunlight.

“Matt.”

“Eh? Oh, hello Kitty.”

She was wearing a yellow dress. It fit rather tight in some places, and it suited her fine. “What's the matter?” she asked. “Bad liquor or a busted stake?”

“Oh, neither, neither,” I said. “How are you?”

“Eager,” she said. “But you probably noticed that before.” She laughed, giving me my first smile of the day. “Seriously, though, what's wrong?”

“Plenty,” I said. “The townsmen have all gotten it in their heads that I'm too rough with the cowboys. They want me to back off enforcing the law here in town.”

“Well, Matt, I don’t know you that well, but that sounds like something you’ll have a hard time doing.”

“You know me better than you think. And on top of things, one of the bloodiest little range wars you ever saw is about to break.”

“Out at Cottonwood pond,” she said. “I heard about it.”

“Did you hear, too, that I’m backing the wrong side?”

Kitty put a hand on my shoulder. “Here, pull a stool up to the bar. Sam, a drink for Mr. Dillon.”

Sam, his arm in a plaster cast and a sling, started to pour me a whiskey. I waved him off.

“No, Sam,” I said. “Thanks anyway.”

Sam shrugged as if it made no difference to him, but left the whiskey on the bar next to me.

“I can’t stay, Kitty,” I said. “I’ve got to try and round up some deputies. And try is about as far as I’m gonna get. Whole town’ll be siding with the Texas cowboys against Howard. And against me,” I added. This was shaping up to be a real lousy week.

Kitty took the stool she’d dragged over for me and sat on it herself. She looked at me, and again I felt that connection. “Maybe you oughta switch sides, Matt.”

I leaned back against the bar, facing the door. “Oh, sure, sure, I know I ought to,” I said. “But I can’t. If I started making my own rules it’d be the end of law and order in Dodge. I just can’t do it, Kitty. Much as I’d like to.”

Kitty’s forehead creased for a moment, and the skin around her eyes crinkled. Then she shrugged. “Well – not for me to say. You’re the one who has to decide...”

Chester came in through the door. “Mr. Dillon?”

“Yeah, Chester? What’d you find out?”

I already knew by the sag of his shoulders. “Mr. Pepper down at the railroad depot checked clear through to Topeka. They can’t get enough cattle-cars to load that herd outta here ‘til the day after tomorrow,” he said.

I turned and downed the whiskey Sam had left for me. “Well, that’s that,” I said. “It was an outside chance, anyway. I thought we might load ‘em up fast, Kitty, and run ‘em up to Walnut Creek. It’s still got a little water in it.”

Chester bellied up to the bar and Sam poured him a beer.

“Matt,” said Kitty, “there’s something wrong with a law that upholds a lowdown scheme like this.”

“What Howard’s doing is legal,” I said. “I gotta find a legal way to stop him.”

Kitty laughed. “I bet a lawyer could find a way of some kind. Too bad this town doesn’t have one.”

I snorted. “Heaven forbid.”

The door opened and a burly man with an ill-kept beard came through it. He had eyes that looked too small, too recessed in his pudgy face, to actually see anything. He had the look of a brute who liked doing brute work. Seeing me, he came over and loomed over Kitty and Chester, facing me.

“Marshal Dillon?” he said.

“Yeah, what is it?”

“My name’s Fenton. I’m range boss fer -”

“Yeah,” I said, “I know. You work for Ike Howard. I saw you out there today.” I wanted to add something, but it didn’t suit a peace officer.

“Well, what’s on your mind, Fenton?”

“Well – Mr. Howard figures you oughta be arrangin’ to protect his property.”

“Tell Howard I’ll be there in plenty of time. Jackson gave me his word he’d lay off until nine tonight,” I said.

Fenton made an ugly face. It might have been a smile. “His word? Sure. But Mr. Howard figures it’d be a good idea for you to deputize his riders –“

“Fenton,” I said, “get out.”

Fenton took a step back. “Now wait a second, Marshal –“

I came up off the bar and walked at him. “Go on, get out! When I want Howard’s advice, I’ll ask for it. Now go tell him that.”

“Well, yeah, but...”

“Go on! Get out. Move!” I watched him leave, and then listened to the sounds of conversation start up again softly around me. “Deputize his riders,” I muttered as I went back to the bar. “Sure, he’d like that.”

“Well, it just may come to that, Mr. Dillon,” said Chester. “I couldn’t get anybody else.”

I felt my jaw clenching. “You know, I ought to just throw this badge away, for all the good it does me. Green and Howe would be happy enough, and I’d could go out there and help Jackson cut that fence!”

Kitty laid a hand on my arm. “Matt, I still think what you oughta do–”

“I know, I know, I oughta get a lawyer. Well, Kitty, the only lawyer Dodge City ever saw was that young fella from Boston who died here last month on his way to–”

Kitty looked at me, sitting there with my mouth hanging open. “What is it, Matt?”

“Chester,” I said, “what happened to those books of his?”

“That lawyer fella’s?” he asked. “Well, nobody ever claimed ‘em. There’re still in the back of the jail there, somewhere.”

“It’s a long shot, but–” I snapped my finger and laughed. “Kitty, you’re wonderful.” I reached out, took hold of her shoulders, and kissed her once on the cheek.

She put her hand up and touched her cheek with a vaguely shocked smile. “Matt!” she said.

But I was already headed for the door. “Come on, Chester,” I said. “Let’s find those books.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It was getting late. The summer sun was sinking, and we weren't any closer to finding an answer.

"I don't know, Chester," I said, flipping another page. "It'd take a man a year just to learn what these words mean."

Chester was frowning as he leaned over one of the law books. "Well, I sure can't help you, Mr. Dillon," he said. "Lookee there – 'tort'. 'Re-plev-in.' 'Stat-u-tory mal-feas-ance.' Why don't they write the laws out in English?"

"Be no work for lawyers, then," I said. I lifted a book and opened to a page I'd marked about an hour before. "The only thing that might do it is this one – and I'm not too sure of what it means."

That was when Doc arrived. I'd sent for him. "Evenin', Matt!"

"Doc!" I said without standing from my desk. I waved him over. "Come on in here, willya?"

He chuckled and opened the screen door and came in. He lifted a bottle from the inside of his coat. "Heh. I figured I'd bring you a little courage for the battle. There might be snakes out at Cottonwood pond."

I had to laugh. "That's very thoughtful of you."

"Yessir," said Doc. "Caramel and Irish Whiskey. No doctor west of the Mississippi oughta be without 'em. The caramel is for the woman, you understand."

"Yeah, Doc," I said. "Sure."

Doc found a couple of tin cups on the shelf over the couch and poured out two fingers of whiskey into each. "Of course a bottle of Jameson might not cure a patient, but it sure makes him enjoy his illness." He

handed one cup to me and the other to Chester. Then he sat down, bottle in hand.

“Thank you kindly, Doc,” said Chester.

I set the cup aside. “Look, Doc – you’ve been to school,” I grinned. “At least, I guess you have.”

“Oh, well,” said Doc, “I guess I browsed through a couple of ‘em.”

I leaned forward with the book in my hand. “Well, listen to this, now, and tell me what you think of this paragraph right here.”

Doc read the name off the cover. “Let’s see – ‘Schedule territorial ordinances of judicial precedents. Handbook for local law administrators.’ Well, Matt,” he said sourly, “I didn’t go to *law* school.”

“No, no,” I said, “but you’ve read books and you know big words. Now, listen to this – ‘The local administrator or other duly constituted authority in a territorial division is hereby empowered to declare a state of acute emergency in case of riot, rebellion, or any natural catastrophe which threatens the general welfare.’ Now, Doc, would you say that I’m a duly constituted authority?”

Doc clucked his tongue a few times. “Well, ah, in Dodge City, I guess you’re about the only authority.”

“Until Mr. Green and the rest appoint a sheriff, anyway,” said Chester.

“Not now, Chester.” I didn’t want to get side-tracked. “Now, Doc, would you say that this drought we’re having is a – a ‘threat to the general welfare’?”

Doc nodded vigorously. “I’ve never seen a worse’n. But–”

“Alright, now listen to this. ‘During a period of such emergency, the officer in charge is allowed to seize, confiscate, allocate or otherwise administer critical materials and facilities in accordance with the common need and his own discretion.’”

Doc sat up straighter in his chair and set the bottle of whiskey aside.
“Oh! Right, Matt! Water is a material!”

“Yeah,” I said.

“And as far as keeping cattle alive are concerned,” he said,
“Cottonwood pond is a facility.”

I closed the book. “That’s all I wanted to know.”

Doc’s eyes were far away, considering. “I don’t see how it’ll help you,
though, Matt. Howard’ll never stand for it. You’re still gonna have a
pitched battle on your hands.”

“Maybe so, Doc, maybe so,” I said. “But at least I’ll be fighting the
way I want to fight. Well, come on, Chester, let’s go. It’s eight o’clock
already.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It was pretty dark before we got close to Howard's land. "It must be close to nine," I said. "Hope they don't jump the gun on us, Chester."

Chester thought about it for a second. "I figure that Jackson'll stick by his word, Mr. Dillon."

"If Howard lets him," I said.

There was a crack of lightning, followed by a roll of thunder. It was the fourth in about ten minutes.

"You know," said Chester, "we may get a break from this heat if that storm comes this way."

I wanted to agree with him, but had to shake my head. "No, I'd say it's only heat lightning. All thunder and no rain."

Chester sighed. "Well, if this goes on a few more weeks, this prairie'll be dried right down to the nub."

The sun had vanished entirely now, and the lingering blue air was turning purple, and about to change to black. There was no moon, tonight, of course. That would've been too much luck. The only light we had was from the lightning, a few miles off.

We were close to Howard's fence when we heard a voice call through the darkness. "Alright! Hold it! Pull up them horses!" It was Fenton.

There was another flash of lightning, and Chester whispered to me, "He's right there by the fence, Mr. Dillon."

"Yeah, I saw him."

"Who's there?" shouted Fenton. "Well, speak up!"

I raised my voice and said, "I usually answer bushwhackers with a six-gun. This is your lucky night, Fenton."

Fenton even sounded apologetic. "Oh, Marshal! I – I didn't know..."

"Where's your boss?" I called.

“I’m right here, Dillon!” Howard came riding up to the edge of the fence. “‘Bout time you got here. That mob may try to rush the fence any minute now.”

Jackson wasn’t so far away he couldn’t hear us. “Not yet, Howard,” he said. “I told the Marshal nine o’clock! You got five minutes yet.”

“Come on over here, Jackson!” I shouted, riding my horse close to the fence. “I want you to hear this too!”

Jackson rode over slowly and looked me over. “I kinda wish you’d stayed outta this, Marshal. Rather not’ve fought against ya.”

“Nevermind,” I said. “Mr. Howard – by the authority vested in me as a U.S. Marshal, and under the territorial laws and ordinances of the United States, I’m hereby declaring a state of acute emergency, due to the drought.”

Howard squinted at me. “What’re you talking about, Dillon?”

“I’m invoking the US Territorial Ordinance Schedule of 1858, Section 7-21-C,” I said. I had the book in my hand, but didn’t have to reference the number. I’d memorized it on the ride out.

Howard looked suspicious – as well he might. “What’re you tryin’ to say?”

“Just this,” I told him. “For the duration of the emergency, I’m taking charge of Cottonwood pond in the name of the United States Government. And I’m allocating use of it to Mr. Jackson here, to water his herd. Now, if you want to try to make a deal with him, you’ve got five minutes before I cut the wire and open the fence.”

Jackson didn’t crack a smile, though he was sitting a little taller in the saddle. He looked at Howard. “I’ve never bought water before – but I’ll give you ten cents a head, Howard. How ‘bout it?”

Howard looked back and forth between Jackson and me, then spat. “I’ll see ya dead first. And I’ll be struck dead myself before I see one head of

your stock onta my property! Dillon, I don't know what's behind this move. Maybe you sold out, made a deal o'yer own..."

"Easy, Howard," I said.

"If not, then you've lost your mind!"

"Your five minutes are running out," I said. "Now what are you going to do?"

"Fight!" shouted Howard. "What'dya think I'm gonna do?"

"Gonna resist the law?"

Howard shook his fist angrily. "You call it the law, I don't! Dillon, I'm givin' my boys orders to shoot any man who lays a hand on this fence! And that goes for you, too!"

"Listen to me, Howard," I said, leaning forward in my saddle. "You've got a chance to do something that costs you nothing and means life or death to somebody else, and you're refusing to do it. Now, I'm sorry you see it that way. But in any case, this herd gets water."

Howard gave me his best dead eye. "Maybe they will." He turned his horse around and call out loudly to his men. "Alright, boys, you heard it! Keep that fence covered!" They cheered him. He'd already gotten them pretty riled up – probably promised them a part of the herd once Jackson and his men were dead. "If they want a fight," cried Howard, "they'll get one!"

I turned to Jackson and sighed. "I guess I'm gonna need some deputies."

Jackson smiled, though his eyes didn't soften any. "Well, I got twenty-five men here, Marshal. They're yours if you want 'em." As we rode towards the men they cheered us, Jackson and Chester and me. I guess both sides were pretty riled up. And I was going to be the match to this fuse. But at least I was fighting on the right side.

“Alright, boys,” I said to the cowboys. “Will you all raise your right hands.” They did. “Do you swear to uphold the Constitution, ordinances, and bylaws of the United States to the best of your abilities, so help you God?”

Jackson led them in saying, “I do.”

“Alright, now,” I called. “You’re all temporary deputy Marshals, acting under my orders. Now bunch the cattle this way and start ‘em through the fence as soon as I open the wire.”

“They won’t need much startin’, Marshal,” said Jackson’s wrangler – I’d heard Jackson call him Pecos. No wondering where he was from. He was a big man, and looked like he could wrestle any of his steers to the ground. “They’ve been smelling that water for hours,” he said.

I dismounted. So did a few of the men. Most would have to keep their horses to guide the steers through the hole I was going to cut in the fence. Chester and I hobbled our horses on a sad-looking little tree about thirty yards from the fence. I had a second pistol in my saddle-bag and I dropped it in the pocket of my coat. I checked the load in the one at my hip. “Now, men, don’t shoot unless you’re fired on. If you are, then protect yourselves and your herd.” I looked around at them. They were about as ready as could be. “Alright, let’s go!”

There was no way to disguise the fact that a hundred or so steers were getting ready to rush the fence. I only hoped Howard’s men wouldn’t know exactly where to shoot until we were through. The darkness was helping us – for the moment. Still, the men were free to make as much noise as they wanted. I heard Jackson call out to Pecos. “Keep those flankers close and the men toward the openin’ here. If’n they crowd on that fence, they’ll cut themselves to ribbons!”

“Right, boss!” I heard Pecos call. “C’mon over this way!” he called – either to the cowboys or the cattle, I couldn’t tell.

“Chester,” I said. “C’mere a minute.”

Chester came ambling up with that lazy walk of his. Nothing seemed to hurry him. “Yessir.”

“You got the wire-cutters?” I asked.

“Yessir,” he said. “Here y’are, Mr. Dillon.” Holding out my hand I could barely see the outline of the wire-cutters as he passed them over. They were cool in my sweaty palm. “You know,” said Chester, “I think we got a fight on our hands.”

“Yeah, I guess,” I said. “Alright. Keep me covered.”

“Yessir, Mr. Dillon.” He lifted the gun out of the rifle boot by his saddle.

Jackson had dismounted, and he came up to us. He’d heard me give Chester his orders. “Chester, was it?” he said. “I’ll watch the left over here.”

“Alright, Mr. Jackson.”

I crept up to the fence, keeping low, to a place right in line with the pond. It was where they’d suspect I’d make the cut, but I wanted to create a straight line between the steers and the water. The last few feet I snaked along on my belly, my gun at my hip, the wire-cutters low by my side, under my coat. It was a good thing, too. One of those flashes of heat-lightning ripped the sky open behind me, but there was nothing for Howard’s men to see except a large lump on the ground – no man walking forward, no reflections off a gun-barrel or wire-cutters. I waited for my eyesight to adjust back to the darkness, then I crouched as low as I could and cut the bottom piece of barbed-wire. It made a sound like a guitar-string when it snaps, but over the noise of the cattle, I was pretty sure Howard’s men couldn’t’ve heard it. Well, there was one strand gone. I raised myself up just a little bit and opened the jaws of the wire-cutter for

the second strand. That was when the lightning revealed me to the thirty or so guns on the other side.

I heard Fenton shout, "They're cuttin' the fence, Mr. Howard!"

Howard's response was immediate. "Let 'em have it, boys!"

The shooting started. The air around me was alive with little lead flies darting past me, humming through the air or pelting the earth. So far, none of them hit me, though one smacked into the fence-post beside me.

As I cut the second strand, I remember thinking, Alright, Chester, fire at the flash, and I imagined I could hear him murmur, Yessir. Then Chester and Jackson and a few of Jackson's men opened fire, and I could hear at least one scream from the other side of the fence. I cut the third strand.

Chester rolled up closer to me and snapped off another shot. "Oh my gracious," he said. "I wish there was a moon."

"One more strand," I told him. He shot and rolled away as a hail of bullets came his way, drawing the fire away from me.

"Where's Howard?" asked Chester, a little louder. He was answered by a shot.

I heard Jackson shout from somewhere on my other side, "I spotted 'im." His words were followed by a shot of his own and another shout. It didn't sound like Howard, but you never know what'll happen to a man's voice when he's been shot.

I clipped the last wire. Then, gathering the four barbed-wire strands in my handkerchief, I dashed off to the other fence-post, opening up a wide gap. "Now!" I called out loud.

Jackson stood and shouted, "Alright, boys! The fence is open! Bring 'em through!"

I ran through the gap I'd made, Chester following close behind me. "Come on through, boys!" I called.

The cattle didn't need much prompting. At the first shouts they started pushing and bumping each other through the open fence. Some of Jackson's men took up positions in lines on either side of the fence, funneling the steers through the gap. The cowboys hollered and whooped it up as their herd raced past them towards the water.

I was listening for shouts from the other side. What surprised me was the fact that Howard's men weren't shooting anymore.

"Heads up, Chester," I said, drawing my gun for the first time. "They won't give in this easy."

"You can hear 'em out there," said Chester, "but you can't see 'em through the dust." The cattle were kicking up quite a cloud, and a wind was blowing the dust in, towards Howard's men, covering them even in the flashes of lightning that were coming more and more often now.

"Well, come on," I said. "Let's try to find Howard. I'm gonna take him in for attempted murder."

We ran along the inside of the fence, then turned inward, putting ourselves between Howard's barn and the pond.

"Last time I heard 'im," said Chester, "he was down along the fence here, somewheres."

That was when I saw the bobs of light coming towards us. It wasn't lightning. It was a torch, coming from around behind the barn. The first torch was followed by another, and another.

"Alright, boys!" came Howard's voice through the dust. "Fire the grass!"

Beside me, Chester said, "Lookit them torches, Mr. Dillon!" Both Chester and I fired into the dust, aiming at different torches. When the first two torches fell, I thought we'd hit them. But then all the torches went down, and the fire rose up.

"They're setting fire to the grass!" said Chester, disbelieving.

“Yeah,” I said. “As dry as it is, they’ll set the whole prairie blazing.”

The shots were coming again. Now that they’d dropped their torches, they had lifted up their rifles and continued to shoot at us.

“Come on, Chester!” I turned and ran back to the fence. “Jackson!” I called. “Get your herd through the fence! They’re trying to stampede them!”

Jackson looked at me in the dim light from the growing fire. “It’ll take more’n fire to turn those cattle away from water.”

I looked at the herd, and nodded. “I guess you’re right. But that fire is real trouble. Look, send as many of your boys as you can to help me. We gotta get that fire stopped and fast.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Getting a fire started on dry grass isn't all that hard, but it would have been easier if I'd had one of my father's old flintlock muskets – we could have gotten a spark off of that, the way they did in the old days. But since there was already a fire blazing, I sent Chester and some of Jackson's men up with branches and they brought them back burning. Using those flames, I had the men make a backfire, a fire along the inner edge of a blaze that consumes any fuel and change its direction. I'd seen backfires used once or twice to stop prairie fires. I just hoped I'd gotten it right. We set fires in patches, then beat them out quickly, leaving a dead zone that Howard's blaze couldn't cross, for lack of anything else to burn. What we ended up with wasn't a proper backfire. It was more of a scratch line. I just hoped it held. But the wind had me doubting.

I ran along the backfire, keeping an eye on the flames and watching as the wind made Howard's blaze dance as it came for us. The occasional shot still winged past our heads, and we fired back through the flames at the men on the other side, but it was impossible to tell where the shots were coming from. Lucky for us, that was true for Howard's men, too. But after awhile, as we lit fires then stamped them out, the shots stopped completely. Howard's men had vanished.

"I dunno, Mr. Dillon," said Chester, reloading his rifle. "I dunno if we're winnin' or losin'."

"Well, if that backfire holds, then we're winning," I said. "Otherwise..." I let my voice trail off. I had my coat in my hands, the one Doc had given me. It was scorched and covered in ashes, but it'd protected my hands.

“Couldn’ta been a worse time,” said Chester. “The prairie’s dry as gunpowder.”

“Well, at least that herd’s safe,” I said. “They wouldn’t leave that pond if the whole world caught fire.”

Pecos came running up. “Any orders for the boys, Mr. Dillon?”

“Yeah, just have ‘em keep working along the edge of the backfire there, Pecos. Beat out any sparks that get across.”

Pecos saluted. I wondered what army he’d served in. “Right, Marshal. I gotcha.”

Before he left, I grabbed his arm. “Have you seen anything of the Howard gang?”

Pecos shook his head in the flickering light of the fire. “Not a sign. I guess they figured they done all they could.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Chester looked up at the sky. “Mr. Dillon, I could swear a storm’s about to break. I can halfway smell the rain.”

I looked up, and the sky was bright from the flames, but I didn’t see anything that looked like rainclouds. “I don’t know about that, Chester.” I looked down again at the fire Howard had set. “But it’s doing one thing that won’t help us.”

Chester glanced at me. “Whaddya mean?”

I pointed. “Look. The wind’s shifting, it’s starting to drive those flames across the backfire.”

It was true. Sparks were floating through the air, carried by the wind, to the other side of our scratch line. Pecos’ men were trying to deal with it, and for the moment they had things under control. But if that wind kept up...

Chester was thinking the same thing. “Well, if it catches there again, it’ll get clear away from us.”

“It sure will,” I said. “Come on, let’s grab some more of Jackson’s boys and start working behind them.”

We turned to head back to the pond, then stopped, staring into the barrel of a gun. Fenton stood there, his pistol in his hand. He had a couple more of Howard’s boys with him.

“Don’t move, Dillon!” he shouted.

“Well, Fenton,” I said. “I figured you’d be halfway to the Mexican border by now.”

“You figured wrong,” snarled Fenton. “You keep your hands still, both a’ya! One move and it’s your last move!”

I had my coat balled up in my left hand. There was a pistol in the pocket. If I could use it. “That’s about the way you planned anyway, isn’t it? I figured you for a backshooting bushwhacker.”

“Drop your gun-belts, both a’ya.”

“No,” I said. Chester stood a few feet away from me. He didn’t drop his gun.

“Hold still, then,” said Fenton. “Rice, go fetch their guns.”

“Rice, if you try it, you’ll die first,” I told him.

Fenton shook his head like a bull does when something’s in its eyes. “You wiped us out, Dillon!” he shouted. “That backfire a’yours took the ranch house and the barns. There’s nothin’ fer us to do now but drift! Only first I’m gonna kill you—”

Lightning struck a mile or so away, and the roll of thunder that followed it was loud. Fenton’s eyes flickered, thinking it was a gunshot behind him. I shoved Chester with my left hand while I darted right. “Hit the dirt, Chester!” I fired the gun in the coat with my left hand. Rice dropped to the ground. At the same time Chester rolled and came up with the rifle at his shoulder. He fired once, then dropped the rifle and rolled

again, drawing his pistol. Fenton's other man screamed as his face exploded. "Damn," I heard Chester mutter.

"Hold it, Chester!" I threw the coat aside and let my hand hover over my holster. "Fenton! Drop the gun, you're under arrest!"

Fenton's gun was low by his side, aimed at the dirt. His face was red with rage. "I'm droppin' you first!"

He started to lift the gun and I jerked. My left hand went to the hammer and I fanned it twice. Fenton bucked like a wild steer, then fell to his knees.

"Dillon, I –"

He fell on his back, still trying to lift his gun. Then he let it go and lay there, limp.

Chester brushed himself off and retrieved his rifle. "Well, you warned 'im, Mr. Dillon."

I turned around. "It doesn't matter much now. Look, Chester."

The wind had taken the sparks of Howard's fire and blown it over our little patch of dead earth. "Yessir!" cried Chester. "It's jumped the backfire! With that wind drivin' it, it'll burn the whole prairie from here clear to the river!"

"And Dodge City along with it," I said. My voice was choked, but not from the smoke. "Not a way in the world of stopping it, either."

Jackson came running up. "I heard the shots, Dillon! Are you alright?"

I stared at the fire. "I'm sick at my stomach, that's all. Dodge City's gonna burn, Jackson, and there's nothing we can do about it."

Jackson stopped in his tracks and watched the blaze grow. "I sure didn't figure on this," he said. "I'd let him have the herd, gladly!"

"No," I said. "It's my fault. I should've jumped him first."

"A man does what he has to, Marshal," said Jackson. "I don't think that's your way."

“Maybe my way’s the wrong way,” I said sourly. My face felt hot and wet at the same time. “The burning ten of thousand acres of prairie and a whole town, there must be something wrong –“ I turned away, feeling sick. Then I stopped thinking of the city, and began to think of the people. One person in particular. “Where are the horses? Maybe I can beat it back –“

Chester grabbed my sleeve, holding me back. “Wait, Mr. Dillon!”

“Let me go, Chester!”

“I told you!” he shouted. He sounded perversely happy. “I told you! I could smell it!”

“Smell what? What the devil’re you—?”

Then I felt it. There was a slight pattering against the top of my hat, and the wind brought a few drops under the brim. They landed on my face, and in my open mouth. “Rain!” I shouted.

“Yessir!” said Chester in delight.

I looked up at the sky, but it was hidden by the smoke. I turned to Chester and Jackson. “By Heaven,” I said, “it’s starting to rain!”

Jackson grinned and took off his hat. “By Heaven might be the right expression!”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. The laughter just welled up inside me and came burbling out like water from a spring. “Well, I don’t know about that, but I do know that it’s about the only thing that can save Dodge!” I took off my hat, too, and lifted my face to the water that was coming faster and faster. I shouted with all the voice I had. “Well come on, rain! Faster! Let loose and rain, willya!”

I was answered by a low, long rumble of thunder.

Chester had his hat off, too, and he was skipping around with a huge grin on his face. “It’s doin’ it, Mr. Dillon, look at it! Beatin’ down on that fire!”

“Rain!” We were all laughing now. The rain gave me another reason to be grateful, now, as I was crying like a lost little boy. But they were tears of wonder, not fear. I took in a long breath. “You know, Chester – out here, at times like this, it makes you wonder if, maybe –“ Chester and Jackson were both looking at me, grinning. “Well, I don’t know,” I said. “Come on, Chester. Let’s find our horses.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

We rode back to Dodge through the downpour. I had my hat pulled low and my shoulders hunched. I was wearing my coat again, the one that now had a hole in the left pocket the size of a finger.

“It’s sure not lettin’ up, Mr. Dillon,” said Chester.

“No.” It was like the skies had stored up all the water we had been waiting for all summer and was now dumping it down on us. Jackson was worried about some of his herd getting stuck in the mud and drowning. We’d left him and his boys circling them up on the burnt ground that was all the remained from Howard’s land. Jackson’s men had cheered when we rode by, and whether it was for us or the rain, I couldn’t tell. But there was one group of cowboys who were going to have a lot of leeway in Dodge. I didn’t care if it was fair – they’d earned it.

Then I remembered I wasn’t in charge of the law in Dodge anymore. But even that couldn’t sour my belly tonight.

We were still quite a ways from Dodge, Chester and me, and we could barely see the trail. “Ah, let’s swing over by the bluff, Chester, and find a place to wait it out for awhile, huh?”

Chester smiled. “That’s what I was hopin’ you’d say.” He hadn’t brought a coat and his shirt was soaked through.

I clicked my tongue so my horse would know I was talking to him and said, “C’mon, boy.”

We found a place in the lee of the wind, and we sat on our horses, looking out into the darkness at the rain and the swinging branches. We listened to the storm as it raged over and around us.

“Well,” said Chester, “it took a long time to break loose, but it’s sure makin’ up for lost – wow. I never saw lightnin’ this big before.”

“It usually let’s up once the rain starts. I guess it’s just a freak storm anyway...”

For a split second I thought the sound was thunder. But the sound of a bullet ricocheting off a rock is pretty unique.

“Off your horse, Chester! Flat on the ground!”

He was already moving, and we dropped to the earth and lay there, almost under our horses, and stared out at the darkness.

“I saw the flash, Mr. Dillon,” whispered Chester. “It come from that lone cottonwood tree.”

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s a bad spot. He’s got cover and we haven’t. Well, I guess we found out what happened to Mr. Howard.” I raised my voice. “Alright, Howard! Come out with your hands up! You’re under arrest!”

“Why dontcha come and git me, Dillon!” It was Howard, all right. He was just waiting for another lightning strike to show where we were to loose off another round.

I took a chance and stood, and I pulled by rifle out of the boot on the saddle of my horse. Kneeling down again, I leaned in close to Chester and whispered. “I’m gonna flip a shot at the tree, Chester. Roll away as soon as I fire.” I’d kept one eye closed, just in case lightning flashed again and ruined my night-vision. Now I opened it and aimed at where I thought the tree was. “Alright, now,” I said, and fired off one shot before moving right.

There was a dull thwack as my bullet hit the tree. Howard fired back immediately, aiming for where he’d seen my flash. I fired again from my new position, but I’d barely gotten it off when a second shot came out of nowhere and clipped my left shoulder. I sagged back and rolled again, back to where I’d fired first.

“Smart, Dillon!” shouted Howard. “But not smart enough!”

He'd anticipated my ploy and hadn't even bothered aiming his first shot. He'd fired wild, then rolled around to the other side of the tree and tried to take me out when I fired again, knowing I'd be slower to move. He'd almost got me.

"That was close," said Chester. "Why, Mr. Dillon, you're bleeding."

"It's a scratch," I said. "But Howard's another matter. He's got all the odds. He keeps it up, he'll get us sure."

"Maybe we might as well rush 'im, Mr. Dillon," suggested Chester. "We haven't got much to lose."

I was thinking the same thing. "It's an outside chance, Chester," I said. "He's bound to get one of us."

Beside me I could feel Chester's shrug. "Yeah, but this way it's both."

"Yeah," I said. "Alright. We'll go in on the count of three. Stand up, move fast. And, ah – good luck, Chester."

"Yessir. Same to you, Mr. Dillon."

We stood. I slipped my rifle back into the boot and unholstered my pistol. "Alright," I said softly. "One. Two. Th-

Lightning flashed, so bright that I was almost blinded. It was like it was right next to me. All I could think about was being caught out in the open, standing like a buffalo waiting to be shot. I dove for the ground, and Chester did the same, as our bodies shook with the thunder that was so much a part of the light it seemed to rip open the air around us. Our horses reared and bolted away. We would have a devil of a time finding them again in this.

At the same time I heard Howard scream.

We lay there in the mud, Chester and I, waiting. It was a long second or two before Chester said, "Mr. Dillon! What happened?"

Slowly I stood. The cottonwood tree was on fire. I walked over a few steps until I was sure of what I saw. "It was lightning!" I called out to

him. “Struck the tree! I think Howard’s lying over there on the ground. Come on.” Chester was up and following me with that lazy walk of his. We both reached the tree and knelt down beside the charred remains of Ike Howard. “Yeah. He’s down, all right,” I said.

Chester had a handkerchief out and was holding it over his nose. “He said he’d be struck dead before he ever gave in,” he said. “Well, he was.”

“By Heaven, I think he was,” I said. Then I remembered using that expression earlier. “Second time tonight.” I sat quiet for a minute, looking at the sky and feeling the rain that still pelted us. Then I shook my head.

“You know, Chester – I think I’m gonna change my ways.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Fortunately for Dodge, the rain had not only doused the prairie fire, it'd also kept the Drag-R cowboys out of trouble. They'd kept to their cards and their beer and stayed out of the rain like sane men. But with the skies clearing and the day heating up again, and money in their pockets, the reprieve was going to be a short one.

I went by the Dodge House the next morning. Mr. Green avoided my eye when I came in, then thought better of it and came over. "Good morning, Marshal."

"Mr. Green."

"I heard about last night's excitement. Are you alright?"

"I'm fine." It was lucky, Howard's bullet had barely nicked me. But still I was wearing a sling. Doc had said I'd be more hurt if he'd thrown the bullet at me – though that didn't stop him from talking up the dangers of infection and the need for re-bandaging. I didn't mind – the United States government paid Doc's fees, not me.

"Still, it seems there's plenty around to keep you busy," Green observed.

"Sure," I said. "Is Shiloh around?"

Green nodded quickly. "He's out back with that little runaway. They're talking about going out hunting again." Green was clearly glad I hadn't stopped by to see him. Maybe he thought I'd come to strong-arm him. But I had told them – there was only one way for them to learn, and that was to get what they wanted. Be careful what you wish for – who'd said that?

"Has the kid been any trouble?" I asked.

"No, Marshal," said Green, "not a bit. He's always askin' 'bout you, though. I think there's a touch of admiration there."

I nodded. "It'd be real flattering," I said, "if he didn't feel the same way about anyone quick with a gun."

I didn't feel like talking with Green for too long. I was still sore about things. But I was feeling pretty good about life in general as I walked out back. The Dodge House sits right beside Moss Gremmick's stables, and sure enough, Shiloh and the kid were saddling up a pair of Moss' horses.

I'd met Shiloh a couple of times out on the prairie before I'd come back to Dodge, and had rode herd with him once from Amarillo up as far as Wichita. He was a good man, with at least twenty years on me. He'd stopped riding about a year ago, and had taken a job at the Dodge House last winter to pay for his grub and give him a bed until he figured out what he was going to do next. He'd worked hard for Green, so I figured it wasn't too hard for him to take a couple days off – as long as he was back in town when the round-up started in a couple of weeks.

"'Lo, Marshal," said Shiloh. He had a slow way of talking, as if he wasn't in a real hurry to say anything.

"Mornin', Shiloh," I said. "Hello, bub."

"Hey, Mr. Dillon!" The kid saw me and came running over, leaving the saddle dangling unstrapped on the horse's back. Shiloh moved over and finished getting the horse ready.

"Are you hurt, Marshal?" asked the kid, seeing my arm in the sling.

"It's nothing," I said. To prove it I took my arm out and wiggled my fingers. "Doc insisted on the sling, but I'm gonna take it off this afternoon."

"Good thing it's not your gun-hand," said the kid.

"Yeah," I said. "I guess it is."

"People are saying you blew Howard up!"

"Nope," I said. "It was just one of those things."

"You didn't dynamite him? The body was real burned."

“Now, bub, where would I get dynamite to blow someone up with? That’s a pretty fool idea.”

“I bet you could do it, though,” he said. “And with all the action here in Dodge, I bet it could help.”

“It would sure break up a crowd,” murmured Shiloh.

“Look, bub,” I said, shooting Shiloh a dark look, “the past couple of days have been a little more – active, than usual. It isn’t regular.”

“By God, I wish I was there with you last night,” said the kid, his eyes bright with the thought of it. “You coulda made me a deputy, too, and then I coulda shot all the men I wanted to.”

I looked over at Shiloh, who shrugged at me. “Heading out for another hunting expedition?” I asked him.

“Yep,” said Shiloh, swinging up into the saddle. “I’m gonna teach him how to shoot buffalo. If’n we find any,” he added.

I tipped back my hat. “It’s a long way to the nearest buffalo trail.”

“Maybe we’ll get lucky,” said Shiloh with a wink, “and we’ll run across some strays. Or, if’n we don’t, maybe I’ll teach him to rope a steer.”

I nodded. The kid’s obsession with guns was bothering Shiloh too. If he could teach the kid to do something with his hands, something useful, maybe we could angle him away from a life as a gunfighter.

“That’s a good idea,” I said. “Maybe I’ll come out and join you.”

“Really?” asked the kid.

“Sure,” I said. “There’s nothing for me to do in town, anyway. Which way are you riding?”

“I was thinking of heading over towards the river,” said Shiloh.

“There’re bound to be some cowboys moving across, and maybe they’ll let us help in exchange for some grub.”

“Be careful,” I said. “They may think you’re a pair of chicken-hawkers.”

Shiloh nodded. “We’ll be careful.”

“But we’re not gonna hook up with any cowboys,” said the kid. “Not if’n we see any buffalo.”

I knew that the nearest buffalo trail was almost a day’s ride away. Shiloh knew it, too. But we let the kid think he was in charge of the plan.

“Look,” I said, “I’ve got some paperwork back at the office. When I get that done, I’ll come out after you.”

“Sounds fine, Marshal,” said Shiloh. “Say, kid – why’n’t you run inside and grab us a hunk of cheese. I’ll be here waitin’.”

“Sure,” said the kid, who dashed inside.

“How’s he doing?” I asked.

“Kid’s a sponge,” said Shiloh. “Soaks up ever’thing an’ then some. But this thinkin’ ‘bout guns and shootin’ all the time – it ain’t healthy. I known some fellas like that, Marshal. They was dead before they grew their first beard.”

“Or else they were hanged.”

“Yeah,” said Shiloh. “Or else they was hanged.”

“Yeah,” I said. “This is a good thing you’re doin’, Shiloh. I appreciate it.”

“Yeah,” said Shiloh. “I figure I owe you somethin’ for not comin’ with you and Chester last night.”

“No,” I said, “you don’t owe me anything.”

“I shoulda known you’d pick the right side.”

I shook my head. This was the response I’d gotten from everybody in town. “It’s not a matter of picking the right side, Shiloh,” I told him.

“It’s a matter of following the law.”

Shiloh looked at me for awhile, then he shook his head. “Law’s not all it’s cracked up to be, Marshal. We got along fine without it where I come from.”

“Law’s the only thing that keeps us from being animals, Shiloh.”

“We are animals, Marshal,” he said. “Look at that kid. All he’s interested in is killin’.”

“We’re gonna try and break him of that,” I reminded him.

“Yeah,” he said. “Don’t know how much luck we’ll have, but we can try.”

“And that,” I said, “is what makes us better than animals. They don’t even know to try.”

Shiloh shrugged. “Or else’n it makes us worse,” he said. “Since all of us know, but most of us don’t try anyway.”

I had no answer for that.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Chester dropped a small pile of circulars and telegrams on my desk. “I got the mail, Mr. Dillon – what there was.”

I was finishing my report on the events at Howard’s ranch. “I’ll look at it later, Chester,” I said. “I have a lot of time.”

“Yessir,” said Chester. He sat down on the couch and stretched his legs out in front of him. “You think Mr. Green an’ them know what’s comin’?”

“Probably not,” I said.

“Well, you just wait’ll word gets out that Dodge is wide open,” said Chester. “There’s gonna be nothin’ but trouble.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But this is the only way I can handle it. They won’t listen to me otherwise.”

“But, after all that happened last night, don’t you think all the cowboys’ll see you – y’know, differently? More friendly-like?”

“If anything, Chester, they’ll think I’m weak. To them it looks like I switched sides because either I was scared or I took a bribe.”

“But Mr. Jackson knows that ain’t so!”

“Doesn’t matter, Chester. Last night we did the right thing. Never expect credit for that. No, the town council is going to have to learn things the hard way.”

At that moment a fat man I’d never seen before poked his head into my office door. He was tanned, but soft, like a saddle that had melted in the sun instead of hardened. His belly was pushing at his shirt and looked like it was trying to spill over his belt all the way around. “Excuse me, Marshal,” he said.

“What for?” I said.

“Well,” said the stranger, “I don’t wanna bother you none, but I thought I’d better come and see ya.”

“You’re not bothering me,” I said.

“I sure hope not,” he replied. He was having trouble getting through the door, and had to squeeze sideways inside.

I leaned back and put my feet up on the edge of my desk. “Well, what can I do for you?”

“Well, Marshal, you don’t know me, but I’ve heard about you.”

I looked over at Chester. “Seems like a lot of people have, lately.”

“I – I know,” said the fat man. “Marshal, I –“

“Well, go ahead, mister,” I said. “There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“Uh – I’m the new constable.”

“What?” I said, taking my feet back off the desk.

“The new constable,” he said, miserably. “They picked me, Marshal. I had to take it, sure, I’m so broke ‘n all.”

“You sound like you’re apologizing.”

“Well, I guess I am,” he said. “I didn’t want you to be mad at me. I needed the money, and that’s why I’m doin’ it.”

“It’s alright, somebody had to take the job,” I said.

“You sounded angry,” he said.

“No,” I said. “Surprised, mostly. Just didn’t know they were going to call it ‘constable.’”

“Well, they want it to sound as peaceful as possible, I guess.”

“Yeah, sure. What’s your name, mister?”

“Willard.”

“Willard?”

“Yessir,” he said. “Willard Bann.”

I stood to shake his hand. He cowered at first, like he was afraid of me, but when I put out my hand and it didn't bite him, he took it with a little more conviction.

I leaned back against the edge of my desk. "Where're you from, Willard?"

"Well, sir," he said, "I used to be a cowboy, but then I got so fat 'n all, I just sorta work around wherever I can. I been awful broke—"

"Yeah, you mentioned that."

He ducked his head. "Yessir."

"How come you're not wearing a gun?" I asked.

"Oh, shucks, Marshal, I don't ever wear no gun. I don't even know how to use one very good."

"Then you're a whole lot better off without one," I said.

"I don't aim to get in any fights, Marshal," said Willard. "If there's any trouble maybe I can just sorta, ah, talk 'em out of it."

From the couch, Chester looked over at me. I cleared my throat and said, "Yeah. Yeah, maybe. Well, Willard – I wish you a lot of luck." We shook hands again.

Willard brightened up quite a bit when he realized I wasn't going to shoot him. "Well, thanks," he said. "I gotta get goin', Marshal, I'm on pay already."

"So long," I said.

"So long, Marshal," said Willard, heading for the door. "So long, mister!"

"So long," waved Chester. The door opened and Willard edged through it, then closed it behind him. Chester looked at me with a sad smile. "Oh my goodness, Mister Dillon."

"Yeah," I said. "I agree, Chester."

"They will ruin that poor feller if he tries to stop 'em."

I shook my head. “No,” I said. “He won’t even raise his voice against them. But they sure might ruin Dodge.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The government paid for my office and the jail behind it, so I stayed there. I was sure that Constable Willard Bann, fat, broke, and humble, wasn't going to manhandle any randy Texas cowboys and throw them behind bars. And the first twenty-four hours passed peacefully enough. Rance and his Drag-R outfit were busy moving their herd across the Arkansas and didn't get into town. Chester and I spent the afternoon with Shiloh and the kid, out by Jackson's herd, teaching the boy how to throw a rope. Jackson told us that a third herd was coming to Dodge – the Crowtrack bunch. But it wasn't too large a herd, and Jackson told us it wasn't going to hurt his prices any.

The next day the Drag-R herd was safely grazing and ready for sale. Jackson had sold his first and so had gotten the best price, but Rance didn't do so poorly. There would be herds coming to Dodge for the next month or so.

Rance's boys were paid out, and that night it seemed like all of Texas had come to Dodge. By midnight no man should have been on the street unless he was armed and ready to fight.

Shiloh had dropped off the runaway with us, figuring there'd be less shooting at the Marshal's office than around the Dodge House, if things got bad. I told him I hoped he was wrong, for his own sake, and told him to look after himself.

"Sure, Marshal," said Shiloh, and he ruffled the kid's hair. The kid ducked and pulled out a comb. He liked his hair neat, it seemed.

After Shiloh left, Chester and I sat in the office playing a little two-handed twenty-one, with the kid watching us. Every now and then I let him play my hand. He learned quickly and clearly liked cards, but he

wasn't very good at being patient, or at knowing when not to press his luck. Eager. But then, what kid isn't?

The kid lost a hand and I took the next one, letting him watch my play. Chester dealt.

"How long d'you think, Mr. Dillon?" he asked.

"Not long, Chester," I said. "A few hours, maybe."

We finished that hand quietly, then it was my turn to deal.

"There's somethin' else botherin' you, ain't there, Mr. Dillon?"

"Oh, I don't know," I said. "It's this Clay Richards business. Still doesn't sit right with me."

The kid looked at me. "You know that Ziegler fella kilt'im," he said. "He said he didn't even have a gun."

"Yeah, I guess. Still, doesn't seem like something Pete could do," I said. "But that's not what's eating me. It's Clay and the bank. He wasn't a thief – hell, I think he had about as much money as any man in Dodge. He wasn't rich, but he was doing alright."

"Oh," said the kid. He seemed easier in his mind than I was at the thought. But then, he hadn't known Clay.

"I guess that's true," said Chester.

"I just can't figure on why he did it."

"It sure is a shame, though, Mr. Dillon. Fred Grinnell and that Chinaman both, for no reason."

"Yeah," I said. "It's funny, Grinnell was at the Texas Trail the same night as Clay, when Clay was celebrating –"

I stopped talking. Thinking back, I remembered Grinnell watching Richards.

"What is it, Mr. Dillon?" asked the kid and Chester at the same time. It was pretty funny, but I was too busy remembering Grinnell's behavior that night.

“He was sitting in a corner,” I said, “sipping beer and watching Richards, real dead like.”

“Do you think he knew something, Mr. Dillon?”

“I don’t know how he could have, Chester.”

“And even if he did, why didn’t he come to you? If he knew something was coming, why did he let himself get killed?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Why?”

“Why does it matter?” asked the kid. “If he was dumb enough t’get shot, he deserved what was coming to him.”

I looked at the kid. “I hope you never have to find out the hard way, bub,” I said.

The door to the office opened and Doc came through, closing it behind him. He looked flushed and angry. “Oh, it’s a fine thing when the U.S. Marshal holes up in his office when men are gettin’ shot up and knived all over town.”

The kid stood up, eagerly. I looked over at Doc. “I hope that’s not true, Doc.”

“It is true!” insisted Doc. “I just come back from tryin’ to save the second victim. The first one’s already dead.”

“Someone got shot?” asked the kid.

“Cowboys, or citizens?” I said.

“Cowboys,” said Doc. “If they’d’ve been citizens I suppose those dunderheads would’ve been in here on their knees, beggin’ you for help.” What I’d said to the city council was pretty much common knowledge in town.

“I don’t want them on their knees, Doc,” I said.

Doc shook his head. “I know, Matt, but it’s gettin’ worse! Why, that last fella, they wouldn’t even let me bring him back to my office. They said he might as well die, right there on the floor of the Texas Trail.”

“They did?”

Doc slammed his hand against the wall. For all his jokes about fees, I knew there was nothing he hated more than losing a patient. “They sure did. And they ran me right out of there.”

I bolted up out of my chair. “They what?”

“They took me by the arms and they half-dragged me as far as the door. Obviously, I called ‘em everything I could think of while they were doin’ it.”

I walked over and grabbed my coat. I didn’t even bother pinning the badge to the front. “You think that man’s dead yet, Doc?”

“He will be soon, if I don’t get him to where I can work on him.”

“Alright,” I said, “we’re going over there and get him. Bub, you’re staying here.”

“But Mr. Dillon...” the kid began.

I shut him down fast. “You can promise to sit here for ten minutes until we come back, or I can lock you up. I don’t have time to argue.” The kid’s shoulders slumped, but he sat back on the couch and nodded.

“Come on, Chester,” I said.

Chester was already up and moving for the door. “Yessir.” He held the door for Doc and me.

“I told them I won’t make any arrests and I won’t,” I said, walking out into the street, “but nobody’s going to stand between Doc and a wounded man.”

There were shouts coming from all over Front Street, and a block or so over I could hear the occasional gunshot as the cowboys let fly at the moon or at streetlamps. The streets were crowded with men and a few women. I didn’t recognize more than a few faces. Every man had a gun.

“You get in the middle, Doc,” I said. “Walk between me and Chester.”

Doc did as I told him, and we began elbowing and shoving our way down the street. "I wish there was a tunnel under the street," said Doc.

"I don't see Willard anywhere," observed Chester. "He oughta be out here talkin' his head off, if'n that's his plan."

Doc snorted. "He's lucky if he doesn't get hung tonight."

I was eyeing the street with a dead face. I wasn't seeing individual people, I was watching the mob. And it felt like they could sense me coming. Even the ones who didn't see me moved out of our way. It was like they could feel my anger.

Someone brushed up against me hard, and I elbowed them away, keeping my hand over my holster. "Watch your gun, Chester," I said. "Don't let anybody grab it."

"No, sir," said Chester. "I'm carryin' my hand on it, Mr. Dillon."

We pushed our way through the open doors of the Texas Trail. I needed to watch the crowd, but I couldn't help looking for Kitty first. She was over on the side of the saloon, sitting with some regulars. That meant she was pretty safe.

Doc started pushing his way through the crowd. "He's right over there, Matt. Lyin' in front of the bar."

"Alright," I said loudly. "Alright, get out of the way." I started clearing a path for Doc. "Come on, make room here. Move." I shoved the last of the drinkers out of the way. There was a man, lying right there in front of the bar. One of the Drag-R men had practically been standing on top of him. "Alright, go ahead, Doc, see if he's still alive."

Doc knelt while Chester and I stared outward at the sullen and angry glances from the drunk Texans. "Alright," said Doc. "Let me look at him here. Oh, he doesn't look very good." Doc set to checking the man's vitals and putting a stop to his bleeding.

From somewhere in the back of the crowd I heard a voice say, “I thought you’d quit, Marshal.”

“I haven’t quit, Rance.”

He came pushing up through his men. “What’re you doin’ here, then?”

“A man’s dyin’,” I said.

“It was a fair fight,” said Rance, coming to a stop just far enough away from me. He’d been drinking, but he wasn’t drunk yet. He didn’t weave. He was sober enough. “We believe in dyin’ where we fall, Marshal. We don’t need no help.”

“Was he one of yours, Rance?”

“Naw,” said Rance. “He come up with that fool Crowtrack outfit.”

I nodded. The rest of the Texas Trail had gotten real still. I could feel Kitty’s eyes on me but I didn’t look over. I knew Chester’s hand was free, and behind the bar Sam surely had his shotgun ready at hand – though how well he’d fire it with a broken arm I wasn’t too keen to find out. And if I started shooting, it would ruin my little object lesson to the town.

But you can’t go into trouble thinking you’re not going to shoot. Everyone’s got to believe you’re ready and willing to pull that trigger. Everybody, including you.

“You leave ‘im be, Marshal,” said Rance with some force.

“I won’t even argue with you, Rance,” I said, raising my voice a little, “but the first man that interferes with Doc’s gonna die on his feet, and if you can’t understand it any other way, just put it that Doc’s a friend of mine. Is that clear enough for you?”

Rance was giving me the dead man’s stare and he half-figured to go for it. But that was the half that’d been drinking. The sober part of his mind told him that he’d die before he cleared leather. And though one of his men would probably shoot me in return, Rance wasn’t the kind of man who’d be comforted by that thought.

He was just trying to figure out how to back off without losing face when Constable Willard Bann came through the open doors. “Now, now, men,” he said, trying to sound confident, but there was a fearful warble in his throat. He was aware of it, and ashamed of it, but to his credit it didn’t stop him. “Let’s not have no trouble in here. Let’s talk it over and settle this thing peacefully.” He pushed through the crowd, smiling and patting men on the arm. Then he saw me. “Oh. It’s you, huh, Marshal?”

“Hello, Willard,” I said.

“Howdy,” said Chester.

Willard’s smile vanished and he looked at me miserably. “Oh, I’m havin’ a terrible time, Marshal.”

“Yeah,” I said, “I can see that.”

At my back I heard Doc say, “Matt.”

“How is he, Doc?” I asked over my shoulder.

“He’s bad,” said Doc. “But I just might save him.”

“Okay, Doc,” I said, then eyed the Constable. “Willard?”

“Yes, Marshal?”

“Help Chester carry this man over to Doc’s office, will you?”

Willard nodded eagerly. “Sure, Marshal, sure.”

Rance reached out a hand and grasped Willard’s arm. “Leave ‘im be, Constable,” said Rance.

“That’s enough, Rance,” I said.

Rance looked at me again. “Let ‘im die in peace, is what I say.”

“Rance,” I said, walking slowly up to him, “I’d throw you in jail but I said I wouldn’t make any arrests.”

“Then why don’t you get outta here,” said Rance. “While you still can.”

I nodded. “I’ll get out.” I stepped to his side and he made way for me. I jerked my gun out of my holster and clubbed Rance hard on the side of

the head. Then I spun the gun around in my hand so it was pointing out at Rance's men. Chester's was out as well, covering my back.

"Alright!" I shouted. "Now I'll shoot the first man that touches a gun!" I eyed them all, but no one was looking for a fight against both of us, with our guns already drawn. "Alright, Chester, Willard," I said, "get moving. You lead the way, Doc."

Chester holstered his gun and together he and Willard lifted the bleeding man and headed for the door. Doc trailed behind them. "Let's hurry," said Doc. "That man won't live long if we don't."

I went out behind them, walking backwards with my gun at hip level. I made sure not to look at Kitty as we left. It would be trouble she didn't need if I singled her out in any way. Then I was out of the door and through it I saw Rance's men rush to his side. They'd prop him up and pour whiskey down his throat and in another hour he'd probably come looking for me – unless he was the kind of man who'd lay in wait and shoot a man in the back. I'd just have to wait and see.

I turned around once I was outside, and up the street I saw the kid slip back into my office. He'd been watching from outside the saloon window, like I'd known he would. I was glad I hadn't had to shoot anyone.

But the night was still young.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

It was after two o'clock in the morning. Doc had finished his surgery about an hour before, after working like the devil to save the cowboy's life. Chester and I had come back down to the jail so that when the trouble really started people'd know where to find us. I'd told the kid to go to sleep, and he was laying on a blanket on the floor of the back room, though if he was asleep or not I couldn't tell. I was pacing a rut in the wooden boards of the floor in the front office, waiting.

Chester was standing by the window of the jail, looking out into the street. "The crowd's thicker'n ever, Mr. Dillon. Come over here and take a look."

I stopped my pacing and walked over to stand beside him. Together we watched the chaos in the streets. "Yeah," I said. "Another hour and they'll really be outta hand."

"Yeah," said Chester. "Hey, look yonder there, Mr. Dillon." He pointed. "There's Miss Kitty coming across the street."

"What?" I said.

Sure enough, there she was, coming our way. There were no other women in the streets now, and her being there was like putting a raw steak in front of a starving dog. "Wait here, Chester," I said, opening the door and stepping quickly into the street.

From somewhere to my right I heard a man shout, "Hiya, Kitty! What's new?!"

"Meow!" shouted another drunk.

Kitty's eyes were fixed on me. She might as well haven't heard them at all. "Matt," she said.

I took her arm and eased myself up along side her, blocking her from the view of most of the men. "What're you doing out here, Kitty?"

“I was tryin’ to find you,” she said.

I led her towards the jail. “Come on, let’s get out of the street.” Kitty and I went inside and Chester closed the door behind us.

“Phew,” said Kitty. “It’s getting’ worse. Hello Chester.”

“Hello, Miss Kitty,” said Chester.

I looked her up and down. She looked all right. I mean, she looked a lot more than all right, but she looked unhurt. “You shouldn’t’ve gone out in the street, Kitty,” I said.

Kitty laughed. “It’s no worse than the Texas Trail.”

“Then you oughta go home,” I said.

“I am,” she said. “I’m all through ‘til somebody puts a lid on this town. That Rance is over there right now, getting’ drunk and callin’ for blood.”

“Mine, I’m sure.”

“Yeah.”

“There’s been enough blood around here already.”

“How is he?” she asked. “The one you got outta there?”

“Well, Doc was down a while ago,” I told her. “Said he got the bullet out and thinks he has a chance.”

“Oh, good.” She said it with real relief. She was a hard woman – I guess she had to be – but she still cared what happened to people, even strangers. It made me like her even more. It was a strange feeling. With all the chaos out there in the street, I was standing there in my office feeling mighty warm. Maybe it was just a warm night.

“You say Rance is working up trouble?” I asked.

“He’s tryin’,” said Kitty. “Guess he didn’t take to your bashing him on the head.”

“Well, it quietened things down for a little while, anyway.”

Kitty shook her head sadly. "They sure got that poor constable treed. Willard What's-His-Name."

"Bann," said Chester. "He's a nice fella. I hope they don't hurt him none."

"When I left they had him dancin' on the bar," said Kitty. "He looked about to cry."

Chester smiled a little. "Well, that's harder on the bar than 'tis on Willard," he said. "He's about the fattest peace officer I ever did see."

Kitty's voice was wry. "He's gonna be fatter'n ever after tonight. Everytime he opens his mouth to talk, somebody pours a glass of beer down him." She looked at me. "It's sorta pitiful, Matt."

"Yeah," I said. "It's worse than that, Kitty."

She nodded. "I know. That's why I got outta there. You can kinda feel when a crowd like that gets real mean."

Her words were punctuated by gunshots from somewhere down Front Street.

Chester whistled. "Just listen to them out there."

Kitty raised her shoulders and made up her mind. "I'm not even stayin' in town tonight," she said. "I'm goin' up to Ma Schnieder's." Ma Schnieder was a little old woman who lived just outside of Dodge on a ranch that used to be owned by her husband. He left her enough money when he died to hire a few hands, and her son ran the place, but there was no doubting who owned it. If you wanted to debate it with her you'd find yourself staring into the barrel of a shotgun. She had a habit of taking in stray or beaten women. It struck me that Francie had been there a couple times in the past few months.

"That's a good idea, Kitty," I said. "Chester, you go along with her."

"Alright, sir." Chester started for the door, but glancing out the window he looked back at me. "I better stick around," he said.

The front door opened. I wasn't worried. Chester's voice had told me who it was likely to be. Hightower and Pepper came in, followed by Green and Howe. The first two were carrying the huge form of Willard Bann between them, his feet barely on the ground. His face was a mess of bruises and cuts. The second pair were carrying a man clear off the ground. He was bleeding, too, but from somewhere around his middle. There was no life in him.

"Who is this?" I asked.

Howe looked at me, anguish in his eyes. "My brother, Marshal," he said. "My kid brother."

Howe's brother was about thirty-five, but I guess in some families the nick-names stick. And it was sure that Howe's kid brother wasn't going to do any more growing. "He dead?" I asked.

"Yeah, Marshal," said Green, when Howe couldn't. "He caught a stray bullet out back o' the Longhorn. It's too late for Doc to do anything."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Alright," I said. "Lay him on the couch."

"Look at Willard," said Chester, drawing out each sound with a soft kind of sorrow in them. He pulled out a chair for the poor fat Constable.

"Rance beaten me up," mumbled Willard through a broken face, falling into the chair. It creaked under him, and for a second I thought it might break. "Beaten me up bad."

"He certainly did," said Green. "We found him lying in the street with them taking potshots at him, seeing who could shoot the closest without hitting him."

"Uh-huh," I said. There wasn't much else for me to say. This was their deal. I was waiting for their call.

Green knew it and looked me right in the eye. "And, Marshal, we come here to ask ya—"

“Wait a minute, Mr. Green,” I said. “Chester, take Willard up to Doc’s.”

“Yessir, I sure will,” said Chester. I could tell from his voice that he felt really sorry for the humiliated ex-cowboy. “Come on, Willard.” He helped Constable Bann to his feet. Willard managed something that sounded like, “Thank you,” then allowed Chester to lead him towards the back door.

“Then come back here for Kitty,” I called after him. I heard his light, “Yessir,” and then the door shut after him.

I turned back to my visitors. “Alright, Mr. Green,” I said. “You wanted to ask me something.”

The kid poked his head in. I guess he had been sleeping, even through the gunfire, but Chester must have woken him up. “What’s goin’ on, Mr. – is that man shot?” he asked, excitedly.

I looked at Kitty. “Kitty, would you mind...?”

She gave me a sour look, and I guessed that she didn’t much care for children. But still she shoed him into the back room, followed him, and then closed the door.

Green looked at me. “You gotta stop ‘em, Mr. Dillon.”

“Yeah?”

Green kept staring at me – I guess he was trying to convey his misery. Hightower and Pepper stood looking uncomfortable. Howe was sitting on the edge of the couch, looking down on his dead brother. It was Howe who spoke. “We shouldn’ta interfered Marshal. We’ll trust your judgement from now on.”

“Yeah,” said Green, “we’re all behind ya now, ain’t we, gentlemen?”

Hightower and Pepper nodded and muttered a couple of yesses.

Green just kept staring at me, his desperation getting more blatant. “You’ll do somethin’, won’tcha, Marshal?” he asked.

I thought about it for a minute. I wasn't trying to make it worse for them. I was just trying to think if there was anything I could do at this point. Things were pretty close to the point of no return, if they hadn't passed it already. But it was my job.

"Alright," I said. "It's pretty late, but I'll try."

The three businessmen standing all sighed with relief. Howe didn't even seem to hear me.

"And I'll start with Rance," I said. "He's the worst of the lot. I'll go get him and put him in jail. But before I go I want every saloon-keeper in Dodge to put out his lights and close up. Now you gentlemen will have to pass the word for that one. I don't want to be seen until I go for Rance."

Green nodded vigorously. "Oh, we'll do it, Marshal," he said quickly. "We'll do it right now."

"Alright," I said to them, "then get going before it's too late." I walked up to Howe. "Mr. Howe? Let's get him over to Doc's."

Howe nodded absently. He and I lifted his brother's body and carried it out the back way. The kid followed us, asking questions, though Kitty did her best to quiet him. Once we had the body laid out in Doc's front office, I left Howe there, and sent Chester and the kid to take Kitty out to Ma Schnieder's. None of them knew I was heading out to look for Rance, and I kept it that way.

Always something to prove.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I waited for half an hour while Green and the others spread the word to close up the saloons. The lights gradually went out up and down the street, and I left the office. Alone.

I found Rance in front of the Texas Trail, and I was able to reach him before I was recognized. I stood ten feet away, half-shadowed, while Rance and his boys stood in the glow of a streetlight.

“Rance,” I said.

Rance gave a sort of drunken grunt of laughter, though he wasn't at all amused. “Marshal's back,” he said slowly, working to get the words out. “Let's shoot him, men.”

One of Rance's men took a step forward. “You better get outta here, Marshal,” he told me. “We ain't in no mood to fool.”

“Neither am I,” I said. “The street's closed, Rance. Now go on back to your camp.”

Rance peered at me through the half-light of the lantern and tried to see just one of me. “We ain't goin' nowhere.”

“It'll open up again tomorrow night,” I told them. “You're welcome to come back then.”

Rance shook his head like a mule. “There won't be no town by tomorrow,” he said. He turned his head to his boys. “Let's set it afire, men.”

“Rance,” I said. “Shut up.”

He looked at me kind of stupidly. “I won't shut up,” he said.

“Then you're going to jail,” I told him.

“I'm – what?”

Rance's man said, “Leave 'im be, Marshal.”

I stepped into the light. They could all see that I was armed, but that my gun was in the holster. "You want to fight, mister?" I said. "Rance here's too drunk, he wouldn't have a chance, but you might."

Rance thought for a minute, then nodded. "He's right, Pete," he said, looking at the man who'd spoken to me. "I'd never make it. You draw on 'im."

There was a tense moment while all of Rance's boys looked nervously at the man called Pete. Rance's voice swelled with anger. "Go on, shoot 'im!"

"Well?" I said. "I'm waiting, cowboy."

Pete shook his head. "I ain't no gunfighter."

Rance shoved him in the small of the back, prodding Pete towards me. "Go on, ya coward!"

Pete eyed me once more, then turned his back on me to face his boss. "No," he said. "Why should I die? T'ain't my business, anyway." And he walked to the side of the street and waited.

Rance glared at Pete, and I thought for a second he was going to draw and gun down his own man. In which case I would have dropped him, drunk or no. But he regained a little control and looked around at the rest of his boys. "Somebody do it, then!"

I took another step forward, my hand easy by my side. "I'll fight any man here," I said. "And I'll fight him fair."

There was a chorus of "not me"s and "no"s.

Rance staggered towards me. "Then I'll have to try it myself."

Pete took a step back towards his boss. "Don't do it, Rance! He'll kill ya."

"Get outta here, ya coward!"

Pete and two other men closed in on Rance, and stood in front of him.

“Get outta my way,” growled Rance. I thought I heard him reach for his gun.

“No you don’t!” shouted Pete, and suddenly the four men were struggling. I took a half-step to the side and angled my body to make a small target. Fair is fair, but a drunk with his gun out already was a stupid way to die.

Rance was slugging his men and shouting. “Gimme that gun, Pete!”

I saw Pete step back and stick something in his belt. “I’ll keep your gun,” he said.

Rance lunged at him. “Gimme it!”

“Cut it out, Rance,” said Pete, his voice pleading, “or I’ll slug ya!”

Rance swung at him, and Pete side-stepped and walloped Rance behind the ear with his fist. Rance fell to the ground like a dead ox.

“That was smart of you, mister,” I said. “But he’s still going to jail.”

Pete looked at me. “You’ve got a lotta nerve, Marshal,” he said, “buckin’ a crowd like this.”

“I’m not bucking a crowd,” I told him. “I’m one man, against any other one man here. You cowboys aren’t built that way. I’ve been in Texas too, mister.”

Pete thought about that for a minute, then shrugged. “Guess you win, Marshal.”

“Yeah,” I said, “it looks that way. Do you want to take Rance to jail, or do you want me to do it?”

Pete looked around at his friends. “Well, his head might be less lumpy tomorrow if we do it, Marshal.” He and a couple of other cowboys dragged Rance up to his feet. The trail boss was hardly conscious, and Pete had to help him get his legs moving. “Start walking, Rance,” he said.

I watched the other cowboys spread out and find their horses. I waited there in the street, watching them go, but I stayed in the half-light. Once

they were out of Dodge I walked over to the jail and put Rance in a cell. Pete and his friends left without a word, and I watched them ride out of town.

That was when I opened my bottom desk drawer, pulled out a bottle and a glass, and had a shot of whiskey. In fact, I had more than one. After the third, I lifted my glass and looked around my office.

“Here’s to Dodge,” I said, then I corrected myself. “Here’s to law in Dodge.”

From the back room Rance snored loudly.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Early the next morning I rode out to Ma Schnieder's place. I left Chester in the office, with instructions to cut Rance loose when he woke up. I was pretty sure there'd be no more trouble from the Drag-R herd. At least not this year. And maybe word would get out that Dodge wasn't a lawless town. Maybe the other herd-drivers would hear and stick to cards and booze and girls. Maybe there wouldn't be any more shooting. I was sick of it. I knew the town only thought of me as a gunman with a chip on his shoulder. Well, maybe they were right. But maybe that wasn't all there was to me. In fact, that's why I was riding out to Ma Schnieder's place. I had a few questions to ask her.

And it was an excuse to see Kitty, away from the town.

It bothered me a little that I thought I needed an excuse to see her. It bothered me a lot that I worried what the townsfolk would say - those chatty little birdlike women and their stuffy balding husbands. It bothered me even more that I wanted them to think well of me as a person, as well as a lawman. I knew it was wrong. I knew there that nothing good came of wanting to be liked. So I decided then and there to ride back into Dodge with Kitty beside me, and take her out to breakfast at the Dodge House. That'd show them.

Of course, then I got to thinking that if I was doing it to show them, it was still wrong. I just couldn't win an argument with someone as stubborn as myself.

As I rode I shrugged my left shoulder around a few times. It was still sore, and the bandage I'd put on this morning was a little tight. But I'd taken Doc seriously about infection - in the army I'd seen men lose limbs

from wounds less serious than the graze from Howard's bullet. It wasn't hurting much, just ached some. Still, I wasn't taking any chances.

I came up to Ma Schnieder's place just as the sun was clearing the horizon. Already the hands were out, hard at work. One of them spotted me and yelled to the others. Their heads turned, and I waved once. One of them recognized me, and they all started to converge on the house, just in case there was trouble.

Ma Schnieder must've heard the yell, or else she'd seen me coming, because she was standing on her front porch when I got there. Her granddaughter was there with her, and so was Kitty. I noticed that Mrs. Schnieder wasn't holding her shotgun, but it was within reach. A cautious woman, Ma Schnieder.

"Mornin', Marshal," she said, wiping her hands on her apron.

"Morning, ma'am," I said, nodding to her, then to Kitty and the granddaughter. "Ladies."

"Ladies?" asked Kitty. The grand-daughter giggled.

Ma Schnieder half-turned her head. "An' why not, ladies? What, ain'cha lady-like? What, do you carry a six-gun and get drunk and fight like ever' fool man in this world?"

Kitty smiled, but the grand-daughter looked down at the ground and said, "No, ma'am."

"That's right," said Ma Schnieder. "What're you here for, Marshal? Is there trouble?"

"No, Mrs. Schnieder," I said. "No trouble. Just wanted to check in on you and your guest."

Mrs. Schnieder looked at her son and the hired hands. "Well, you heard the man. There's no trouble, so git back t'work, you lazy fools, a'fore I find whichever one a'ya hid my whip!"

The men scattered, some of them smiling, some of them terrified. Her son was one of the latter.

“Well, come in, Marshal,” said Ma Schnieder. “There’s coffee on the stove, and I expect I c’n find some eggs from somewhere.”

I dismounted and hobbled my horse on the front rail of the porch. Kitty just stood there grinning at me, and I was smiling, too. The granddaughter looked back and forth between us, and her own smile grew from looking at ours.

“How’s the town, Matt?”

“It’s fine, Kitty.”

“You go after Rance?”

“Yeah.”

“And you’re not hurt?”

“Nobody got hurt, much,” I told her. “Rance’ll be free later today.”

“Is that safe?”

“Should be. Even if he wants to make trouble, his boys won’t let him.”

From inside Ma Schnieder shouted, “Are you comin’ in, Marshal? Or should I jus’ put’cher food in the pig trough!”

“We’d better go in,” said Kitty, laughing.

“Yeah,” I said. “We’d better.”

Inside it smelled like woodsmoke and bacon and coffee. It was a collection of smells that made a man feel at home wherever he was. I took off my hat and sat down to breakfast with the three women. They asked me more about the trouble last night, and the business out at Howard’s ranch. I gave them decent-sized answers, knowing how hungry ranchers always are for news. I knew they’d eventually get around to the subject I’d come for.

It was Mrs. Schnieder herself who brought it up. “And that poor Francie. Is it true that the Dutchman killed her husband?”

“It looks that way,” I said.

“Will he hang?” asked the grand-daughter.

I sipped some coffee. “I doubt it.”

“Should be given a medal,” said the old lady sourly.

“Oh?” I said.

“Now, Marshal,” said Ma Schnieder, putting her hands on her hips.

“Don’t sit there eatin’ my food and drinkin’ my coffee and tell me you didn’t know what was goin’ on in that house!”

“I knew,” I said. “I even had a talk with Clay about it. But unless she wanted to press charges, there was nothing else I could do.”

Ma Schnieder shook her head. “An’ that’s the problem wit’the law.” She said the last word with scorn.

“Law’s a good thing, Ma,” said Kitty.

“Now, don’t you go defendin’ ‘im, Kitty,” said Schnieder, shaking a spoon at Kitty.

“I’m not,” she said. “I’m defending the law. I don’t think the Marshal needs defending from anything except more of this coffee.”

I cringed for a moment before I heard the old woman’s cackle and realized she was laughing. She patted Kitty on the shoulder and went back to her stove.

“Say, Mrs. Schnieder,” I began.

“Call me Ma, Marshal,” she said. “Ever’body else does.”

“Okay, Ma,” I said, feeling uncomfortable. “Did Francie ever come out this way?”

“Sure,” said Mrs. Schnieder, “whenever he got to beatin’ her too hard. She was here last week, as a matter a’fact. Just before he tried to rob that bank.”

I looked up. “He hit her last week?” I asked. “When?”

“Oh, the night before the stick-up, I guess. She spent the night here, then went back to Dodge to find the whole city lookin’ for her husband.”

I remembered Francie saying something about not knowing where her husband had been the night before the robbery, but I’d thought at the time that she’d been home, and he’d been out. “I saw her,” I said. “She didn’t look beat up.”

Ma Schnieder looked at me. “You think a black eye is the only way a man has of beatin’ on his wife, Marshal?” she asked me darkly.

“No,” I said. “I guess not.”

“No,” she said, agreeing. She brought over some more bacon and laid it on my plate. Neither Kitty nor Schnieder’s grand-daughter were eating. They were just watching and listening, the girl fascinated, Kitty with a keen look in her eye.

“How’d he hit her, then?” I asked.

“He didn’t hit her, Marshal,” said Schnieder.

“What then?”

“He kicked her. Kicked her in the belly.”

I felt sick. “Why on earth would he do a thing like that?”

Ma Schnieder turned away from her eggs to look me in the eye. “To kill her baby, Marshal.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

After I finished having breakfast heaped on me, I said thank you to Ma Schnieder and her grand-daughter and rode back to Dodge with Kitty.

“You old liar,” said Kitty as soon as we were away from the house. She was smiling at me out of the corner of her eye.

“What does that mean?”

“You didn’t ride all the way out here to check on me,” she said. “You wanted to pick at Ma, see if she knew anything about the Richards.”

“Well, I did learn something I didn’t know before,” I said.

“Yeah,” said Kitty. “I hadn’t heard that either. Until last night.”

“Last night?” I said.

“Yeah,” said Kitty. “After I got to Ma’s place, we settled in to talking and I asked her about your friend Francie. She told me about the pregnancy. I figured that’s what Clay was celebrating at the Texas Trail the night you saw him.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“But it doesn’t make sense, does it?” said Kitty.

“No,” I said. “No, it doesn’t.”

“I mean, why would he be so happy about it, then try to make her lose it?”

“And don’t forget, the next day he tried to rob the bank.”

“Well,” said Kitty after a moment, “that makes more sense than the middle bit. If he was worried about money and the baby, he might rob the bank.”

“He wasn’t doing so poorly,” I said. “Besides, why rob the bank in broad daylight, with a dozen witnesses outside?”

“Yeah, I suppose that’s pretty queer too,” said Kitty. “It’s too bad about Francie, though. I mean, her losing her husband and her baby like that.”

I looked at her. “Tell me,” I said. “Why were you asking Ma Schnieder about Francie?”

“You asked me about it the other night, at the Texas Trail. I thought I could help.”

“I appreciate it,” I said.

“Yeah, well, you spoiled things by coming out here this morning,” she said. “I was looking forward to walking into your office and laying the whole story out on you.”

“Sorry,” I said.

“You should be,” said Kitty.

We rode along for awhile, looking at the morning. The heat was getting bad again, but I didn’t think about taking off my coat. I’d sewn up the bullet hole in the pocket, though not very well, and I’d brushed it until it was pretty decent looking. I realized that, more than what the townspeople thought of me, it matter what Kitty thought of me. And somehow that didn’t bother me at all.

“Kitty,” I said.

“Yeah, Matt?”

“I’m not a liar.”

She gave me a confused, searching look. “What does that mean?”

“It means that, even if I wanted to ask Ma Schnieder some questions... I mean, well... I could’ve sent Chester, couldn’t I?”

The skin around her eyes crinkled as she smiled. She started nodding. “Yeah,” she said. “I guess you could’ve at that.”

We rode along for another mile or so in silence.

“I was going to ask you to breakfast,” I said.

“But that was before Ma Schnieder started stuffing you with a whole suckling pig.”

“Yeah,” I said.

She thought for a minute. “How about tomorrow?”

“I’d like that, Kitty,” I said.

She frowned, and I saw that, unlike a lot of her expressions, this one wasn’t playful.

“What about the regular folks?” she asked. “I mean, you just got them on your side, Matt. Do you really think it’s a good idea – I mean, don’t you think it’ll look bad for you to be seen outside the saloon, with a—”

I cut her off. “People’ll just have to get used to it. I do things my own way.” I waited a moment before adding, “And my way includes being friends with you, Miss Kitty.”

She blinked a couple of times. If she wasn’t as tough a woman as I’d ever met, I could have sworn those were tears in her eye.

“It’d be my pleasure, Marshal Dillon.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

By mid-afternoon I was back sitting in my office. The heat was back and almost unbearable. The kid was off with Shiloh again, though they'd be back any minute. They were just rubbing down Clay Richard's strawberry roan, which the kid had taken quite a shine to. The kid hadn't stopped talking all night about my little run-in with Rance. He wasn't able to understand my not shooting it out with him. I tried to explain, but it fell on deaf ears. I was worried about that kid.

Chester was sitting on the long couch in the office, across from my desk, where I sat with my feet up. We were both staring out of the closed screen door.

"Sure is hot today, Mr. Dillon."

"Yeah," I said.

"Rain sure didn't cool it off for long," said Chester.

"Nope."

"Used to get hotter in Sweetwater, though."

"Texas?"

"Yessir," he said. "But I wasn't there very long."

"What'd you do there, Chester?"

"Oh, I was a salesman, Mr. Dillon."

"Salesman? Well, what'd you sell?"

"Lightnin' rods."

"Lightning—? Oh..." I started to laugh.

"Well, now, they're good things to have, Mr. Dillon. Why, I had a line of lightnin' rods..."

"Don't explain it to me, Chester. It's too hot."

"Maybe if'n Howard'd had a lightnin' rod out away from 'im, he wouldn'ta died the way he did."

“Yeah,” I said. “But then where would you and I be, Chester?”

Chester thought about that for a minute or so. “That’s a fair point, Mr. Dillon. A fair point indeed.”

“Chester,” I said. “It’s too hot to talk.”

Chester nodded. “Well, I’ll go get us some beer, maybe that’ll help.”

“I don’t think I want any beer, Chester.”

“Well then, why don’t you go take a siesta, Mr. Dillon? I’ll stay here in the office.”

I chuckled. “Why don’t you just leave me alone?”

Chester shrugged. “Alright, Mr. Dillon.”

We sat. After awhile Chester whistled a little tune. I recognized it, but couldn’t place it until he started it up again. It was the same tune he’d been humming while Howard’s men had been shooting at us.

“What’s so funny, Mr. Dillon?” he asked.

“Nothing, Chester,” I said. “You just go right on whistling.”

Chester looked at me dubiously. “No, sir,” he said. “Reckon I’m finished.”

Doc came in the screen door and closed it behind him quickly to keep the flies out. “Marshal...” he said anxiously, but with a gleam of wickedness in his eye.

“Yeah, what do you want, Doc?”

“Couple of cowboys are feelin’ their liquor, over at the Texas Trail,” he told me.

I shrugged and fanned myself with an unopened letter. It was from the government, so it couldn’t have been all that urgent. “That’s what saloons are for, isn’t it?” I said.

“They’ve been givin’ Kitty a bad time,” said Doc.

I stopped fanning myself and placed my feet on the floor. “Oh?”

“She got rid of them, though,” Doc added. “But they’re down at the end of Front Street now, makin’ remarks and pesterin’ the town ladies. It just might lead to trouble.”

I put my feet back up on the desk. “Well, I’m not gonna walk down there in this heat to lecture a couple of hard-nosed cowboys.” I figured after last night – hell, the past couple days – I’d proved myself enough.

Chester was still laying on the couch. He looked at me. “I’ll go, Mr. Dillon,” he said.

“Oh, good, Chester,” I said, closing my eyes. “You go, huh? Just tell them to take it easy and leave the ladies alone.”

I heard the couch springs creak as Chester stood up. “Yes, sir, I will, Mr. Dillon.”

“Stick around, Doc,” I said. “It’s too hot to be doing anything much but sitting around.”

“True enough, Matt. As long as you’re not giving me any more patients to doctor, I might as well pull up a chair.”

The cards lay out where Chester and I had left them the night before. I heard Doc start to shuffle them. “Ah – want to play a hand or two?”

I opened my eyes. “Why not?”

A few minutes later I heard a ruckus outside as a couple of horses raced past the window, but I didn’t see anything more than a couple of cowboys. They shouted and looked like they were racing. At least they were leaving Dodge.

“Chester must have gotten rid of them,” said Doc.

“Yeah,” I said. “Call.”

We laid down our hands, and I saw Doc holding three kings. “I swear, Doc,” I said, “I’m gonna start insisting that we play in shirtsleeves. That way I’ll know you’re not slipping cards in on me.”

“It’s your deck,” he said, sliding his cards over to me with one hand as he snatched up my two bits with the other. “And your deal.”

The kid came running into the office through the front door. “They got Chester, Marshal!”

I looked at him blankly for a second. “Wha—? Who got Chester?”

Shiloh came in behind the breathless kid and said, “Couple of cowboys, they roped him an’ dragged him outta town!”

I jumped out of my chair and grabbed my gun-belt off the wall. “Which way?”

Shiloh pointed. “West!”

Doc was already out the back door. I followed him, and both Shiloh and the kid raced along at my heels.

I started pulling at my horse’s bridle and freed the reins. “Stay here!” I shouted at the kid.

He shook his head, a huge smile on his face. “I’m goin’ with you! I can catch ‘em faster! Gimme a gun!”

“No,” I said, climbing into my saddle. The boy and Shiloh were both running for Moss Gremmick’s stables to grab a pair of horses.

“Hurry!” cried Doc, clambering up onto the back of Chester’s horse. “Draggin’ll kill a man!”

I kicked hard. There wasn’t time to argue with the kid. I angled my horse out of town and tried to see the tracks of the horses that’d pulled Chester along behind them. “C’mon, boy!” I shouted, and kicked again.

The trail wasn’t hard to follow. There were the tracks of two horses, and behind one of them were the marks of a body being dragged. It was hard to think of that being done to Chester. I’d seen the results of dragging. I’d even seen the body of a man who’d been drawn and quartered. I tried not to think of it. All I was focused on was catching up to the cowboys. And finding Chester.

Shiloh and the kid caught up to Doc and me pretty quick. Shiloh had a good grip on the lead to Clay Richard's strawberry roan, so the kid couldn't race out ahead of us. I don't know how Doc managed to keep up – the pace was brutal, and it couldn't have been doing his old bones any good. But, as I'd said the night before, nothing gets between Doc and a patient. Especially if that patient is a friend.

I was looking at the tracks, glancing up every few seconds to check the landscape ahead. One of those glances up showed me two figures. I blinked, and they were still there.

"There they are!" I shouted.

Shiloh's eyes must have been better than mine, because he said, "But they're not draggin' anything!"

He was right. They were riding right out, with nothing holding them back. "They must've cut him loose. Slow down!" I called, waving a hand.

We scanned the trail ahead, and I saw him. "Yeah, there he is, by that sagebrush there!"

I reached him first, almost jumping off my horse to reach his side. I rolled him over and saw what they'd done to him. They'd lassoed his feet, so for the whole last three miles he'd been dragged on his back and shoulders and chest and head. It showed.

"Chester! Chester?"

He didn't answer. I couldn't tell if he was even alive.

Shiloh knelt down next to me. "How bad is it?"

"Get that rope off his feet," I said. "Chester?"

Chester's mouth opened a crack and his eyelids fluttered – though it was hard to tell through all the blood.

"He's alive!" I shouted. "Doc, get over here!"

"Ah..." said Chester. I couldn't tell if he was trying to talk. I think he was too far gone to put words together.

Doc came running up. "Let me see him," he said. I was amazed at how calm he sounded.

I took a step back and watched as Doc examined Chester. "Look at him," I said, my voice choked. "He's bleedin' all over. They cut him to ribbons."

Shiloh looked at me. "I'll stay with 'im and Doc, Marshal, if you'd like to..."

I knew what he was going to say. "No, Shiloh," I said. "You and the kid go get our horses. We'll gotta get him back to Dodge right away."

Shiloh watched me for a second, then said, "Alright, Marshal."

"Matt!" called Doc.

"How is he, Doc?"

"We've got to get him back to my office."

I reached down and lifted Chester up in my arms. "But how is he?"

Doc shook his head. "We've got to get him back," was all he'd say.

Chester groaned again. I hoped that was a good sign. "It's over now, Chester," I said. "I got you now. We'll be at Doc's real soon."

He didn't do much more than groan in Shiloh's arms as I mounted. The kid wiped his face with a water and a handkerchief. When I was in my saddle Shiloh handed Chester up to me. There was a twinge from my wounded shoulder. I ignored it.

"Easy, Chester," I said. "Easy, fella. Easy, now." There was an evil rasp to his breathing that scared me more than all the blood.

The others mounted and we started off at a slow pace back to Dodge.

As we rode, Shiloh pulled his horse up next to mine. "I'll, ah, carry him when you get tired, Marshal," he said.

"I won't get tired, Shiloh," I said. "Not for a long time."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

I stopped pacing when Doc came out of his back room. “How is he?”

Doc sighed. Somehow it was worse than a head-shake. “He’s in bad shape, Marshal,” he said.

He wasn’t calling me Matt. That was an even worse sign.

“The worst is,” he said, “something’s botherin’ his breathing. I don’t know what it is. We’ll just have to wait and see if it goes away. If he lives the next few days, he’ll pull through.”

I felt my throat close. “Aw, Doc...” I croaked.

Doc opened his hands in a gesture of helplessness. “I know, I know.” He patted my arm. “I’ll stay right here with him.”

I balled up my hands into fists and turned to the window. “Why did I have to send him? Why didn’t I go?”

Doc laid a hand on my shoulder. “Now, don’t blame yourself, Marshal...”

“I told him to go, didn’t I?”

“Well, yes, but—”

I turned back around. “Can I talk to him?”

Doc shook his head firmly. “No,” he said. “No, Marshal, no. Not today.”

I nodded, my jaw clamped shut. I bit my lower lip for a second, then said, “Alright, then, will you tell him this for me? I’m going after those men, and I’m gonna bring ‘em back. Alive.” I squinted, and I couldn’t see anything but those two men dragging Chester behind them. They were outlined in a red haze. “Or at least half-alive.”

I left Doc’s and went into the street. Outside waves of heat moved back and forth, making things seem unreal. Like Chester lying up there at

Doc's. That seemed unreal somehow. I walked down to the jail and I went inside and I sat there for awhile. Then all at once I got up and unbuckled my guns and I hung them on a peg behind the desk. And I went over to the Texas Trail.

Kitty waved the moment I came in. "I'm over here, Matt." I crossed to her. "Sit down," she said.

I did.

"Matt, I heard about Chester. How is he?"

"Doc doesn't know for sure."

My voice must have told her more than my words. "Oh."

"They were in here bothering you. Who were they, Kitty?"

"I never saw 'em before. One was a kinda weasel-faced man named Trevitt."

Trevitt. "And the other?"

"Big man. Real brute. Named Stobo, I think."

Stobo. Trevitt and Stobo. "I see. What outfit? They say?"

Kitty looked down at the table, thinking, then back up at me. "Would it be the Crowtrack?"

"Yeah. The Crowtrack's holding a herd up the river." My chair scraped as I stood up.

Kitty stood up too. "Matt - they said that one of their men had been gunned down here the other night and that you hadn't done anything about it."

"Yeah," I said. "In a fight with one of Rance's men. He's the one that Doc patched up. I guess, since Rance's boys moved out, they decided to take things out on the first lawman they saw." My eyes regained their focus, and I looked at her. "Thank you, Kitty."

She grabbed my arm. "Wait a minute, Matt."

"Yeah?"

She let go of me and cocked her head. “No business of mine to ask, but – where’re your guns?”

I looked her in the eye. “It’ve been easier for Chester if they’d’ve shot him.”

Kitty stared at me like I’d just come down from the moon. “But I don’t see—”

“So I’m not gonna shoot them. If Chester dies, I’ll see them hanged. Otherwise...”

“Otherwise what, Matt?”

“I don’t know. But I’m gonna bring them back. Then we’ll wait and see.”

“You’re taking an awful chance.”

“Maybe.”

“Oh, Matt,” she said. “Please be careful.”

“Sure,” I said. “Ah, Kitty – look in on Chester once in awhile, will you?”

“Of course I will. Don’t worry about it.”

“Thank you, Kitty.”

“But don’t forget, Matt, you owe me breakfast. If you don’t come back, I’ll never forgive you.” She gave me a weak smile.

I nodded, but I didn’t feel like smiling. “I’ll do my best,” I said. “So long.”

I left the Texas Trail and walked back to the jail. My horse was still saddled and ready to go. I walked inside and grabbed a bag of water and tossed it into my saddlebag.

Just as I was mounting, Shiloh walked up, the kid right behind him. “Ah, Marshal?”

“What is it, Shiloh?”

“Marshal, I want to ride out after them cowboys with you.”

“I want to go, too,” said the kid.

“No,” I told them. “I’m going alone. But I could use you both here, at the jail.”

“Here?” asked Shiloh.

“I’m gonna take two prisoners,” I said. “I don’t know when or how, but they’ll need a jailer when they come in.”

Shiloh said, “So I’ll bring ‘em in with ya, then I’ll...”

“No. That’s something I have to do alone.”

“Marshal, you’re a stubborn man.”

“I also need you to look after the kid.”

“I don’t need lookin’ after,” said the kid.

“Doc can do that,” said Shiloh.

“Doc has enough to do,” I said.

Shiloh thought about it, then said, “Okay, I’ll do it.”

“Keys are in my desk. I’m going now. Kid, you look after the jail. I’m leaving it up to you and Shiloh here.”

“Yessir, Mr. Dillon,” said the kid. It gave me a real pang of guilt and pain to hear Chester imitated so perfectly.

I turned my horse about and got ready to kick my spurs. The kid came running up to the side of my horse. “Wait a minute, Marshal – you’re not even armed.”

“I know it, bub.”

“But – how’re you gonna take ‘em without shootin’ ‘em?”

“When I’m through with them, they’re going to wish I’d brought a gun.” I kicked my spurs. “G’bye.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Riding gives a man lots of time to think. Some men fill up that time with whistling or humming or low singing. Some men talk to themselves, or their horses. I knew a man once who'd recited verses of poetry he'd memorized – Shakespeare and Virgil. But I like it quiet, mostly. It's never a bad thing to be alone with your thoughts. I've always suspected the men who are noisy in the saddle are the men who don't like what's rattling around in their heads.

But imagination can be a terrible thing sometimes. Even though I was looking at the Kansas prairie, all my eyes could see was Chester, walking up to two cowboys over on Front Street. I couldn't get the scene out of my head. I could even hear the conversation.

The big one – Stobo, Kitty had said – calling out, “Hey lady – you ever been to Texas? Real men down there. Not like these short dressed Kansans.” Then he'd laugh, and his friend would laugh. Trevitt. Stobo and Trevitt.

I could almost hear Chester's slow, lazy cadence. “Alright, boys. Now, that's enough.”

“Who's this?” Stobo would ask.

“Preacher, maybe,” Trevitt would answer.

Then Chester would say, “Boys, Marshal Dillon sent me down here.”

“And we're gonna send you right back to the Marshal,” Stobo would answer, his piggish eyes gleaming. “With a message.”

But Chester would just plow on. “Mr. Dillon said you can have all the fun you like, but leave the ladies alone.”

Trevitt would look at his friend and say, “That's the whole trouble with these Dodgelings – they've been left alone too long.”

Stobo would laugh and say, “Yeah! What they need is a couple of big-handed Texas men.”

Chester would know I didn’t want any shooting, so he’d try to calm things down. “Look, why don’t you go over there to the Alafraganza. I’ll buy you both a beer.”

Stobo would like that offer. He’d think it was weak. “You will, huh? Well, that’s mighty thoughty of you, mister.”

“We just don’t want any trouble, that’s all,” Chester would say. And Stobo would nod and smile real big and say, “Sure we don’t. And I’ve got an idea how we won’t have any. Wait’ll I get on my horse here. Stay with our friend a minute, Trevitt—”

Or maybe it was Trevitt who went to get the horse and Stobo who stayed behind to distract Chester. It didn’t matter to me. They were both going to pay. One of them had roped him, and yanked him off his feet, making his gun spill out of his holster. And then they’d dragged him, dragged him right past my office, while I was sitting in there playing cards with Doc and letting Chester do my job.

I kept seeing the same scene again and again, with small changes each time. Every time it was worse.

That’s why I started talking out loud. It wasn’t anything important, just talking about the scenery, and women I’d known, and guns I’d owned. If the kid had been with me, he’d have gotten me to name all the men I’d killed. But he wasn’t, and so I thought instead about the places I’d seen – Amarillo, San Antonio, Laredo. I talked about anything that would keep my mind off of the image of Chester lying there in the scrub, facedown, with a rope around his ankles. I talked and I talked, and sometimes what I said even made sense.

“Funny how everything feeds into something else,” I said at one point. “Streams feed rivers. Kindling feeds a fire. And violence and shooting

feeds into more violence and shooting. I try to do something right in town, I teach the city a lesson about the importance of law, and because of what happened while I was teaching that lesson, a couple of Texas cowboys drag Chester three miles from the back of their horses.”

My horse didn't say anything.

“Funny. Yeah, funny. Funny how I don't feel like laughing.”

I got back to talking about places, but I ran out of places I'd been, so I started listing places I'd heard about – far off places like Paris, and Egypt, and China. Then I thought about the Chinese cook who'd been killed by Clay Richards in the bank, while he was trading shots with the clerk. I wondered how a man could travel so far, just to be killed in a chance fight by a stray bullet. I wondered about his family, and about his plans, and what kind of a future he'd wanted.

That got me back to thinking about the clerk, Fred Grinnell.

“He wasn't a big man,” I said. “Not brave, really. Fred never even wore a gun. Matter of fact, I'm surprised he put up a fight at the bank. I'd've thought he would just have handed over the money without a fuss, and be happy to escape with his life. But maybe he just didn't like Clay. Maybe it made him mad that it was Clay robbing him. I mean, the night when Clay'd been celebrating, Fred was looking murder at him...”

It was then that all the pieces clicked together. It's like a train that's stopped, and all the parts look solid and separate. Then the next minute the train starts moving, and everything runs smoothly, gliding along over the rails, and everything fits. Everything about Clay fit now. I suddenly felt really bad about that poor Chinaman. We already knew he'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time, but now I knew he never stood a chance. The flying lead was preordained, by both Clay and Fred.

Of course, there was nothing much I could do about it. I'd talk to Francie when I got back to town, but I was pretty sure there was no one

left alive to arrest. And the warm feeling solving that puzzle gave me didn't last long. All I had to do was think of Chester lying up at Doc's place, with that horrible wheezing breath, and I was back to the dull anger I'd started with. I stopped talking to my horse, since it wasn't helping. The horse didn't seem to mind.

By nightfall I'd reached the camp of the Crowtrack herd. I rode in slow, looking around, but I knew even if I saw Trevitt and Stobo I probably wouldn't recognize them. One with a weasel-face, one big. That's all I had.

A couple of cowboys saw that I was a stranger and guns appeared.

"Who are ya, mister?" shouted one of them. "Stop there!"

I stopped my horse and dismounted. "Who's the trail boss here?" I asked. "Where is he?"

One of the cowboys stepped forward. He was older than most of the riders, as trail bosses tend to be, and he wore a scruffy beard. Unusual for a Texan. "Here I am," he said. "You might as well turn around, stranger. I don't need any riders."

"Maybe not," I said, "but you got two riders I need."

"How's that?" The bearded trail boss looked confused. "Just what do you want, mister?"

"This is the Crowtrack outfit, isn't it?"

"That's right."

"I'm looking for a couple of your men. Called Stobo and Trevitt."

The beard bristled a little as he looked me up and down. "They ain't here, mister."

"Then where are they?"

The trail boss thought again, then made up his mind. "They come back this afternoon, picked up their gear and left. Didn't even wait to get paid

off. I'm tellin' you this just 'cause they're no good and I'm glad they're gone."

"Which way'd they go?"

He spat on the ground to show me how much I mattered to him. "I wouldn't tell you if I knew, mister."

"I didn't think you would. Even though I saved one of your men from bleeding to death last night, I didn't come out here expecting any favors."

"Who are you, anyway?"

"I'm a U.S. Marshal out of Dodge."

The man blinked, then looked at my belt. That made him smile. "That so? Well, I don't know what you want them for and I don't care, but how're you gonna take them, Marshal? Put salt on their tails?" Behind him his men laughed. "You ought to at least take a club if you're goin' after that Stobo. He's mean 'n he's big – besides bein' a Texan!"

There were laughs and scoffs and cat-calls from the cowboys. I just stood there, looking at them. I thought I was being pretty Indian-like, standing, waiting, without expression. But there must have been something in my face to let them know what was inside me, because the laughter slowly died away.

"We've hung Texans up here before, mister," I said, then turned my back and remounted my horse. I walked it away from them slowly. I heard the usual whispers behind me, but I was busy wondering which way I should go to follow my quarry. There was still almost no moon, and it was too dark to try and find their tracks in all this mess. I'd probably have to make a camp and wait for morning.

I was pretty well away from the Crowtrack camp when I heard a voice whisper to me. "Marshal?"

I turned in the saddle, and I saw a young man, no more than seventeen. He was thin and reedy and looked like a stiff breeze could knock him over.

“Yeah,” I said.

The young cowboy took off his hat and whispered, “I heard Stobo and Trevitt say they were headed west, followin’ the Arkansas.”

I studied him hard. “Where you from, son?”

He looked down at the ground. “Texas, near Waco.”

“What’re you sniveling around, informing on these men for?”

The teenager raised his head in anger, then saw my face and ducked it down again. “That Stobo kicked me. Knocked me down and kicked me.”

Like I said, I’ve been lied to before. I get lied to a lot. I’m pretty good at telling when I’m being lied to. I don’t always know what the lie means, like with Francie. I just know it’s a lie. And this scared, willowy teen wasn’t lying. Stobo had kicked him, alright. Probably one of a hundred indignities heaped on him since he left Waco. Hell, the way I was feeling, I wanted to kick him, too.

“Alright, son,” I said. “I’ll ride along the Arkansas. But you go back to Texas and learn how to fight your own battles.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

I cut straight down to the Arkansas and followed it west. I rode close to the water where I could use the sound of it for my cover. It wasn't much of a flow here, but there's something comforting to the sound of running water. Too bad I was in no fit state to be comforted. There were night birds and other animals around, and they were probably friendly to listen to. But all my energy went to slowly stalking along the Arkansas River, looking for two men and their horses. Stobo and Trevitt.

From what people were saying, it didn't sound like I'd have much trouble with Trevitt. It was Stobo who I was going to have to look out for. In my imagination now it was Stobo who threw the rope around Chester's ankles. Big, they said of Stobo. Big and mean.

Good. I didn't want this to be easy. If it was too easy, I'd have to find someone else to break. I hoped Stobo put up a real good fight.

After an hour or two of following the river, I spotted a hobbled horse, alone. It had to be one of them. Stobo and Trevitt must have separated. If they intended to travel together, there was no point in camping away from each other that I could see. Unless it was to trap whoever was chasing them. Because they had to know I'd trace them. Even if Chester never mentioned me, they knew there was a Marshal in Dodge. They'd gone back to camp, gathered their gear, and run for the hills. They had to know I was coming. Maybe this was a trap for me. Maybe I was supposed to think they'd separated, while one lay in wait further back in the trees with a rifle.

Part of me wanted to walk right up to whoever it was and start kicking him until he couldn't walk. But if I got shot that would mean that they would get away scot free. That was something I couldn't abide thinking of. So I dismounted and back-tracked the trail of the hobbled horse until I

saw where the two horses split up. It was hard work and it hurt my eyes, but I finally found the spot – it was a good ways away from the river, and the second horse had made a sharp turn. It wasn't a trap. They had split. I hoped that didn't make it too easy.

I already knew where one of them was, so I decided to retrace my steps and take him first. Whichever one he was, Stobo or Trevitt.

When I got close to the hobbled horse again, I got down off of my horse and followed a man's tracks as best I could until I caught the dying coals of a campfire on the bank ahead. On this side I could make out the huddled figure of a man asleep in his blanket.

I felt the old wildness again. I'd thought that taking a badge would wash it out of me. Guess I was wrong.

It took a long time to crawl to his head. From just four feet away I saw the weasel-face of the man, Trevitt. His gun-belt lay on his saddle-blanket, in easy reach. I stood up and heaved it out into the river. Trevitt heard the sound and his eyes opened. As he sat up with a snap I kicked him back down.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" he cried, gasping and blinking at the darkness. All he saw was me looming over him.

"You sit up again and I'll smash your skull, Trevitt!"

"Don't kill me, don't kill me."

"Shut up! Now, where's your rope?" Trevitt started to sit up again and I kicked him in the throat. "I told you to lie down! Now where's your rope?"

Trevitt lay gasping for a minute or so before he could answer. "Under my saddle there," he pointed, this time making sure to stay on the ground. "You gonna lynch me?"

I walked to where his saddle was sitting, a few feet on his other side. Sure enough, there was the rope. I lifted it and walked back towards him.

“No,” I said. “I’m not gonna lynch you. But you may hang legally if you live that long. Now keep your arms in that blanket and lie still while I get you roped up here.”

He did as I told him, but that didn’t stop him from talking. “Who – who are you mister?”

“Let’s just say I’m a good friend of that man you dragged outta Dodge this morning.” I finished binding his arms to his sides, then started on his legs. “There, that’ll do it.”

“Stobo was in on that too,” said Trevitt, real fear in his voice. “It was his idea, he did it.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll find Stobo.” I stood and walked away.

“Y’ain’t – gonna leave me like this?” Trevitt called after me.

“I’ll be back,” I said.

I walked as far as my horse and Trevitt’s, and led them both back to where the little weasel was lying, hog-tied and ready for a little justice.

As I stepped back into the glow of the burning embers he noticed for the first time that I wasn’t armed. “You – ain’t even carryin’ a gun.”

“Too bad for you I’m not,” I said. I dragged him up to his feet. “Now, Trevitt, I’m gonna throw you across my horse and tie you on. He’ll take you into Dodge, right up to the jail. When you get there, tell Shiloh who you are, if you can still talk, and he’ll give you a nice, clean cell.”

“You’re the Marshal,” said Trevitt. He was a bright one.

I lifted him up and threw him over my saddle. “I’ll be back when I find Stobo,” I said.

As I began lashing Trevitt to my horse he kept whining. “You can’t do it, Marshal. I’ll die in that sun. Ride like that, across a horse? No, no, now listen – Stobo’s ‘bout a mile upriver. We had a row and I left him. See? I told ya, Marshal. Let me go now?”

I took my own rope from off my saddle and walked around to look Trevitt in the eye. “Trevitt, how’d you like to go back to Dodge behind my horse with a rope around your heels?”

Trevitt began shaking. “No no no, no no! Don’t, Marshal, don’t kill me!” Any minute now he was going to disgrace himself across my horse.

“Save your water,” I said. “You’re gonna need it.”

I slapped my horse’s rump and started him off in the direction of Dodge. Then forgot about Trevitt.

Stobo was next.

CHAPTER THIRTY

I rode west on Trevitt's horse, with my own rope hung over his saddlehorn. I was probably going to need it for Stobo, if he was as big as they said. As I rode, I kept fussing with the rope, and before I knew what I'd done, I'd made a noose. It scared me a little. There's nothing I hate more than a lynching, but my hands seemed to have done my thinking for me.

Dawn was just breaking when I saw Stobo, crouched behind a campfire, cooking breakfast. He was big alright, bigger than I'd even hoped. He had meaty paws and a beefy face and shoulders like an ox. He was a good three or four inches taller than me. His nose had been broken, and his face was scarred and veiny.

Yeah. Stobo would do just fine.

His horse was saddled and stood nearby. He must have planned to ride right after breakfast. Too bad for him he'd waited to eat. He might have lasted another day, with me trailing him. But now he was going back to Dodge. Alive. Hurt, but alive. I'd promised.

I rode straight up, got down, and walked over.

Stobo looked at me warily, and kept his gun hand free. "You lost, stranger?"

"No," I said, stopping just across the fire from him. "I'm not lost – Stobo."

Hearing his name he drew his gun and pointed it at my belly. "No tricks, mister," he said. "I don't see a gun, but no tricks."

"Relax, Stobo," I said. Repeating his name was important, like I had to keep reminding myself of who he was. "I'm unarmed."

Stobo wasn't afraid of me, armed or not. But he did like having the advantage. Scornfully he asked, "Who are you?"

"Matt Dillon," I told him. "I'm a U.S. Marshal out of Dodge."

“You’re a long way from Dodge, Marshal.”

“Stobo, you and your pal had some fun with a friend of mine yesterday. You hurt him bad. Maybe you killed him.”

Stobo’s laugh was ugly. It came in short little fits, then built into something real nasty. “You rode out here without a gun to tell me that? You’re the craziest Marshal I ever saw.” He laughed in another short triple burst. “I’m gonna shoot you, Marshal, and bury you in the river. What do you think o’ that?”

“I expected you would.”

That confused him. He was big and he was mean and he had an animal’s sense of self-preservation. But he wasn’t smart. “Eh?”

“Yeah,” I said. “But unless you want it on your conscience you refused to feed a man on the trail, you better give me a piece of that pork first.” I nodded to his breakfast.

Stobo smiled like a man who appreciates a good joke. “You’re about the coolest man I ever saw, Marshal.”

“Do I eat?”

Again with the short little guffaws before he answered. “Sure you do. Sure. You just stand right there across the fire and don’t move or I’ll have to shoot you before you been fed.”

“I know.”

He kept his gun out as he moved toward the fire. “It’s too bad I only got one dish for your last meal, Marshal.”

“A man can keep sassy on meat alone, Stobo.”

Again the guffaws. “Yeah, yeah, he sure can.” He bent forward and used his left hand to poke at the meat with a stick. “Well, looks about done – at least this here piece is. You can’t—”

I kicked the fire, hard. Coals went flying up and struck Stobo in the face and on the arm. As he reeled back screaming I came at him with both

fists and hit him four times in the belly. He tried to bring his gun hand around and I slapped it away. His gun fell and I kicked him in the knee. He collapsed to the ground. I picked up his gun and pointed it at him. He couldn't see me because he was still clutching his face.

"Alright, I got your gun, Stobo," I told him, "so don't try anything!"

"You burned me, you burned me, you burned me! You sonofa—"

"It's just a few coals," I said. "It won't hurt you. Now shut up and get on your horse!"

Stobo opened his eyes, then, and there was no laughter now, but a pure animal rage. "I'll kill you for this. Marshal! You can't hurt me like that—"

"On your horse!" I shouted. He wasn't afraid of me, but he was afraid of the gun. I waved it at him again. "Go on, now! Get up there!" He did. "Now you just sit there, Stobo."

I remounted and took my rope from the saddle-horn of Trevitt's horse. Now I knew why I'd made the noose. "I'm gonna throw this noose around your neck, so keep your hands down!" One throw and it was on him. "There now. You ride towards Dodge. You do anything I don't like and I'll jerk you off your horse and drag you the rest of the way. Now ride."

We rode that way for the whole morning, Stobo just ahead of me, a noose around his neck, and his gun pointing at his back. It was hot and tiring work, but that was alright. I had plenty of water. For some reason, Stobo didn't ask for any. Maybe he wasn't thirsty. Or maybe he wanted to prove how tough he was. Or maybe he knew that I wouldn't have given him any, even if he begged.

We didn't say a word until we reached Dodge.

"Jail's on the left," I said. "See it?"

Stobo nodded and said in a croaked voice, "I see it."

I tugged on the noose. "Alright, pull up." Stobo stopped his horse, and I stopped Trevitt's. "Shiloh?" I called. "Bub! Shiloh!"

The kid came tearing out of the jail, with Shiloh trailing along behind him. "Mr. Dillon!" cried the kid.

"Well, hello, Marshal," said Shiloh. "This the other one?"

"Yeah," I said. "Trevitt get here?"

"He sure did!" the kid told me.

Shiloh nodded. "More dead 'n alive, but he's here." Shiloh eyed me in a way he never had before. "It was rough, Marshal. Real rough."

"Yeah," I said. "Shiloh – how 'bout Chester? Tell me."

Shiloh just shook his head. "Doc ain't sure yet, but he's alive."

I nodded. "Lock Stobo up. I'm going over to Doc's."

Shiloh reached down and pulled out his pistol. Stobo was too much of a brute for any sane man to take chances with. "Alright, you, get down! Walk straight or I'll shoot you through both knees."

Chester was asleep, but the Doc let me take a look at him. Seemed to me he had more trouble breathing than before. But Doc said another day might see him out of it. There was nothing I could do, so I went up for a steak at the Texas Trail, where I told Kitty and the kid what I'd done. The kid was real excited, but Kitty just looked at me with a strange look that I didn't really like, so I finished my food and took the kid back to Shiloh. Then I went to bed.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The next morning I woke at dawn and got dressed. I picked out a shirt that Chester had given me the last time he'd gone shopping. He'd ordered one of his fancy shirts, but when it'd come it'd been too big for him, so he'd given it to me. It was brown, and had some fancy stitching over the pockets. I felt a little silly, but Chester had given it to me, so I put it on and skipped breakfast and went straight to the jail. Shiloh was there, waiting for me.

"Mornin', Marshal," he said.

"Everything alright, Shiloh?"

Shiloh shrugged. "Doc looked over your prisoners. Trevitt's pretty sick, but Stobo's alright. He's got a few burns, is all. Nothin' could hurt that moose."

"A hanging might," I said.

"Sure," said Shiloh. "But what if Chester pulls through?"

From the back room, on the cot in the cell, Trevitt had been listening. He called out, "You can't hold us then, Marshal. There's no law that says —"

I turned my head. "I don't like the sound of your voice, Trevitt."

"But you can't hold us—"

"Be quiet," I told him. And he was.

But Stobo wasn't. "Don't worry, Trevitt. There's nothin' he can—"

"You, too, Stobo!"

"Aw, now, Marshal," laughed Stobo. "Don' be that way!"

"Shut the door, Shiloh," I said. "I don't want to look at 'em."

Shiloh did, then looked at me. "That Stobo's a mean one. But I feel kinda sorry for Trevitt."

I sat down behind my desk. “Then go cry about it someplace else. I don’t feel sorry.”

Shiloh walked up to my desk and stood opposite me. “Don’t you take it out on me, Marshal,” he said. “I didn’t send Chester off to do my job.”

I bit back my first answer. But he wasn’t out of line. I was just feeling pretty raw. “I – Yeah. Yeah, you’re right, I’m sorry. You’ve been a big help to me this week. Where’s the kid?”

“Sleepin’,” said Shiloh. “He likes to sleep late, now that he’s got a bed to sleep in. I figured I’d roust ‘im about noon.”

“That sounds fine, Shiloh. Thanks. Go get some breakfast, eh? I’ll, ah, I’ll wait here now.”

Shiloh nodded. “I’ll be back later.”

I watched him leave, then sat behind my desk feeling about as low as I ever had. I sat there hating my badge, hating Dodge, hating Shiloh for being right about what was eating me. And I guess I was hating myself most of all. But there was nothing I could do about it until Chester either improved, or... Well, there wasn’t anything else I could do about Chester. But I could still follow up on Clay Richards.

I leaned out my office door and got a stablehand from Moss Gremmick’s place to run over to Richard’s house and tell Francie I wanted to see her. While I waited I spent the time trying to find some balance. I couldn’t go around tearing the heads off everyone I saw. As much as I felt like it.

Francie came in, and now, I saw, she was wearing black. She was in mourning. But I was the only person in Dodge who knew what she was really mourning. Or whom.

“Morning, Francie,” I said, pulling out a chair. “Have a seat.”

“Morning, Marshal,” she said, very formal-like. I was glad. I didn’t want her to call me Matt. Not today.

“How’s Chester?” she asked.

“Doc says he might know later today,” I told her.

“I hope he’s all right,” she said.

“Me too, Francie. Thanks.” There was no easy way to start, so I just spurred ahead. “Francie, Ma Schnieder tells me that you’re pregnant.”

Francie went pale, and for a moment her white face was a perfect contrast to the black dress. Then she flushed and looked at her hands. “I was,” she said.

“And Clay knew. That’s what he was out celebrating, that night.”

“Yes.”

“But then he kicked you, tried to make you lose the baby,” I said.

“Why would he do that?”

“I don’t know, Marshal.” She was still looking at her hands.

There was no other way but to ask. “It’s because he found out it wasn’t his. Isn’t it?”

Francie seemed to shrink in on herself.

“That’s it, isn’t it, Francie?”

From out of a huddled lady I heard the voice of a frightened little girl.

“Yes.”

She’d never sounded that way back when we used to go together. She’d been bright and vibrant and full of confidence. It’s amazing what just a few years with a man like Clay could do to a woman’s spirit.

“It was Fred Grinnell’s baby.”

That was when she looked up.

“It was, wasn’t it?”

“How – how did you—? Matt, how did you know about Fred?”

“I guessed it. Clay didn’t go in there to rob the bank, did he?”

Francie shook her head.

“My guess is that somehow after that night at the Texas Trail he figured out that Fred Grinnell was the baby’s father, and he tried to get Fred to draw. But Fred never wore a gun – except when he was working at the bank. That’s right, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Francie in a dull voice.

“So the only way for Clay to have a fair fight with Fred was to draw on him in the bank. He went in there early, when no one else was supposed to be there—”

Francie went back to looking at her hands.

“And he challenged Fred to draw. But he couldn’t’ve known that some poor Chinese cook would come walking in and think it was a robbery. He probably tried to draw on Clay, and Clay had to kill him. Fred shot once, hitting Clay in the arm, and Clay shot Fred dead.”

She was crying now, blubbering little hitch breaths.

“Clay knew that he might’ve had a case for self-defense against Fred, but by killing the cook, he must’ve figured that no one would believe he wasn’t trying to rob the bank. So he ran. And was killed that night by the Dutchman’s knife.”

Francie wept outright into her hands.

“Three men dead,” I said. “All over you.”

She just sat there, weeping and shaking, her body wracked with sobs. Slowly I reached out and lifted her up and held her, letting her cry on me. We stood that way for a long time, her thinking about the men she’d loved, me thinking about the last time I’d held her this way. Back then, I’d thought the world could end, as long as she was in my arms. Now she was just someone I used to know, who’d seen some trouble. No, I stood there, with her clutching me, and there was only one woman I was thinking of. She had red hair and a spirit that just wouldn’t quit. And the

way I felt when she looked at me could power a hundred steam engines. It was like the kick of a mule.

But I was the Marshal. There were things I couldn't do.

Francie shifted against me, and brought my thoughts back to her. I sure didn't blame her for seeing Fred Grinnell, who'd been a pretty good man. I hoped he'd been the one to tell Clay whose baby Francie was carrying. I hoped he'd at least tried to step up and take care of things. But I figured it was probably Francie who told her husband. He'd been hurting her for so long, and she finally had a way to hurt him back. She hadn't broken any law – or at least, none that I was going to enforce. She'd paid enough. Her husband, her lover, and her baby, all gone in a week.

I wondered if I should have leaned on Clay a little more. No, probably not. It would just have made him hit her more, which would have sent her running to Grinnell. No, this was one of those times that the law was pretty much a show-horse. All leg, no step.

After awhile Francie's crying slowed, and she stepped back. "You ain't gonna tell anyone, are you, Matt?"

"No, Francie," I said. "Don't see much point. But maybe you want to sell your house and leave Dodge. Start over somewhere else. There's too much history here."

"What about you, Matt?" she asked. "What about your history? Our history?"

This time I knew what she was asking. "I'm here to stay, Francie," I said. "I've got nowhere else to go. Besides," I added, "it's my job."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

After lunch Shiloh and the kid came back to the jail and cut me loose from watching Stobo and Trevitt. I went straight up to Doc's.

"Hello, Marshal," said Doc as I came in. He looked tired, but his eyes were bright. I couldn't tell what that meant.

"Doc," I said in greeting. I took off my hat. "Well, what is it? Tell me."

Doc scratched his chin. "Chester," he said. Then he chuckled. "Heh. He's gonna be alright."

It was like I hadn't been breathing for twenty-four hours, and now I had air again. "You sure?"

Doc grinned wide. "Why, o' course, Marshal! His breathing suddenly changed – the pressure's off somewheres. Aw, he's gonna be fine."

I couldn't help but laugh. "That's good, that's good."

Doc shushed me. "Of course, he'll be in some pain for awhile yet, but..."

"Yeah, yeah," I said, grinning.

"And there's something else, Matt," said Doc, his pleasure lessening some. "I was too worried about his breathin' to mention it before – cart before the horse, and all that."

I sobered up. "What is it, Doc?"

"Well, his knee is in pretty rough shape – he'll walk with a limp for awhile yet. But the real problem..."

"Yeah, Doc?"

"It's his hand, Matt," said Doc. "His gun hand. He must've tried to cover up his face with his hands."

I blinked. "Is he going to lose it?"

“No no, no,” Doc said quickly. “But it’s been damaged some. Hard to tell how bad, but he can barely move it. Matt – he won’t carry a gun no more. I don’t know if he’ll ever be able to draw one again.”

I nodded, and that sick feeling came back. My fault. Chester’s hand. My fault.

“Alright, Doc,” I said. “I’ll come see him in a little while.”

“I’ll tell him for you, Marshal,” said Doc. “Before you go, though, let me take a look at that shoulder.”

I took off my shirt and Doc peeled the bandage away. I hadn’t changed it since before heading out to look for Stobo and Trevitt, and he clucked his tongue and changed the dressing. When he was done, I put my shirt back on and tucked the tails into my trousers. “Thanks, Doc,” I said.

“Just try not to get too banged up for the next couple of days, Matt,” he said. “I was thinking about going on a vacation, once Chester’s on his feet again.”

“Where would you go, Doc?” I asked.

“I was thinkin’ of goin’ fishing, Marshal,” he said.

“Doc,” I said, “when Chester’s back on his feet, I think we’ll both join you. You know how he loves his catfish stew.”

Doc chuckled, and for a moment it felt like everything was back to normal. Then I remembered about Chester, and my smile slowed faded. “Tell Chester I’ll be back soon,” I said. Doc nodded and headed for his back room.

I couldn’t talk to him yet. It’d been my laziness that had got him hurt. I couldn’t talk to him until I’d made things right. Or at least, as right as I could.

I put my hat on and went downstairs and out into the street. Then I walked around to the front door of the jail and went inside. I looked at the kid. “Bub,” I said. “Get me the keys to that cell.”

The kid walked to the peg they were hanging from and brought them to me without a word. His eyes were wide.

“What’s up, Marshal?” asked Shiloh. I didn’t answer him as I walked into the back room and unlocked the door to the cell. I pulled out my gun and swung the door wide open.

“Alright,” I said, leaving the barrel of the gun floating somewhere between the two of them. “C’mon, Trevitt.”

Trevitt stood but didn’t move towards me. “Where to?”

“Come on, I said.”

Stobo looked at me and said, “What’s up, Marshal?”

“I’ll be back for you, Stobo. Come on, Trevitt.” I jerked my gun and he came out of the cell. I locked it behind him and pointed towards the back door. “Now get going. Go on!” I shoved him a little and he walked to the door and opened it. Once we were outside I closed the door behind me and holstered my gun. Trevitt tried to look at me over his shoulder. He thought I was going to shoot him in the back.

“It was Stobo did it, not me,” said Trevitt. “You can’t do anything to me—”

“Shut up,” I said. I grabbed him and turned him around to face me. “Trevitt, your horse is down at the National stables. Go and get on it.”

Trevitt blinked, disbelieving. “You — you’re turning me loose?”

“Get on your horse and ride. Don’t ever come back to Dodge, not while I’m alive. Now go on before I change my mind.”

Trevitt started nodding and running at the same time. “Yeah, yeah, sure. Sure. I’ll go!” He was around the corner of the jail and out of sight before I reached the door. One thing about Trevitt – he could run.

I walked back inside and unlocked the cell door again. This time I swung it wide and left it open. We weren’t going to need it anymore.

“You’re next, Stobo.” I had my gun out again.

Stobo stood, his arms folded. "What'd you do to Trevitt?" he asked.
"Put a knife in him? I didn't hear no shot."

"I turned him loose," I said. "Now come on, get out of that cell."

"Am I free, too?"

"You will be," I said. "In a little while."

We walked through the front office and Shiloh said, "Where's Trevitt?"

"Turned him loose," I said.

The kid saw the gun and said excitedly, "What're you gonna do with Stobo?"

Stobo grunted. "Gonna shoot me in the back, probably. That right, Marshal?"

"I'm gonna do what I should've done three days ago when I sent Chester after you." I holstered my gun and nodded to Shiloh. "Bring him outside."

Shiloh drew his pistol and prodded Stobo. "Let's go, Stobo. Slow and easy."

"What're you gonna do, Marshal?" asked the kid.

"Bub," I said, "for the week you've been here, you've been gun crazy. I'm gonna show you something that might put an end to that."

By the time I got outside a crowd had already started gathering.

"Bring him over here, Shiloh," I said.

Stobo looked around. Someone was leading a horse and he said, "You're gonna drag me, is that it? You try that and I'll—"

I cut him off. "That's what you'd do, isn't it, Stobo?"

"Don't try it!" he said.

"Nevermind!" I unbuckled my gun-belt. "Here, Shiloh, hold my guns."

Shiloh stared at them and said, "What?"

The kid grabbed my arm. "What're you doin', Mr. Dillon?"

Stobo started laughing that sick, rat-tat-tat laugh of his, like a repeating rifle. “Oh-ho-ho! I get it! You’re gonna fight me! Marshal, you’re crazier than I thought!” He flexed those huge muscles of his. “Why, I’ll tear your throat out!”

“If he wins,” I said, “let him go, Shiloh.”

Shiloh eyed Stobo. “Maybe I will...”

“I said you’ll let him go.”

Shiloh shrugged. “Alright, Marshal, alright. I guess maybe you are crazy, but this is your party.”

The crowd had made a ring for us – a wide ring, considering Stobo’s size. Stobo was grinning as he pulled off his shirt and threw it into the dirt. “Come on, Marshal! I’ll make it short for you! Real short!” He swung his arms around a couple of times to warm them up.

I took off my hat. And my vest. And my badge. I unbuttoned my collar another button. That was about as much as I was prepared to give.

“Make ‘em keep back, Shiloh,” I said. The kid had run off, which surprised me. I’d have thought, with his longing to see a fight, he’d have stuck around.

Shiloh walked the perimeter of the crowd, shooing them back like cattle. “You heard the Marshal! Stand back, everybody! Get back, d’ya hear?”

I walked into the center of the street, with the ring of people around me, all watching the show. Well, this time I wanted to give them one.

Stobo was watching me with a huge grin on his face. I decided that was what I’d start with. I’d stop him from grinning.

“You’re big, Stobo,” I said. “But you’re stupid. You’re ugly stupid.”

Stobo’s grin vanished as his lips turned down into an ugly sneer. “Why you...!” And he swung. It was a huge roundhouse, and I’d expected it, but

Stobo was faster than I'd expected and as I stepped back his knuckles grazed my chin. It turned my head, but my left arm was already moving.

Most men hit with their fists, which is about as dumb as kicking a man if you're not wearing boots. There're too many bones in the hand to break – I know, I'd learned the hard way when I was about fifteen. Sat all summer with a plaster cast on, and I never wanted to do that again.

No, the fist is only if you have to reach out. Instead, I stepped into Stobo and brought my left elbow up into his ear. It's a hit that could knock a normal man off his feet, or at least down to one knee. But Stobo wasn't a normal man. He staggered maybe two steps, then lashed out with the back of his right fist. It was what I'd wanted him to do, and I ducked and gave him two short jabs in the gut. There are no bones in the stomach – nothing to break your hand on. Then I backed away fast as he brought his left hand down to club me. He missed, and I stepped around, circling him. He followed me with his eyes, and he cuffed sweat from his forehead, to keep it from blocking his vision. I felt my own sweat spreading through my shirt already. I was beginning to loosen up. Under the hot Kansas sun, my mouth was still wet. I wasn't parched yet, which is always a good sign. Time was on my side. Stobo was big and quick, but he wasn't too smart. And he was already smacking his lips. He hadn't had enough water – probably refused to drink what Shiloh brought to him. Ornerly, that's what Stobo was. Well, I'd have to beat that out of him.

I was busy feeling smart when Stobo lunged, and though I dodged to my right I didn't get away fast enough. Stobo got ahold of my shirt and spun me around. With that meaty paw of his he clubbed my face, first the right side, then the left. I threw up my arms to block him, trying to angle them so his fist would bounce off without breaking my forearms. He still had hold of me with his right hand. I ducked down, but he hauled me back up. Again with the clubbing, right, then left. My lip split open, and I

knew my eyes were going to puff shut in a minute. The crowd was cheering, but if they were cheering him or me I couldn't tell. Again with the club. Another minute and I was going down. I pushed backwards, trying to get out of reach, while my left arm tried to break the grip he had on my shirt. If I didn't buy such good shirts it would've ripped by now, and I'd've been free. Then I remembered, it'd been Chester who'd bought this shirt. Chester and his new shirts.

Stobo was pulling me towards him, and he was laughing that evil, sick twitter of his. He pulled back his arm to club me again, and I lunged forward and pushed up off my feet. I drove my forehead up into his nose. He howled and reeled back. I stumbled off to the side, my vision blurred with dancing lights. Head-butting a man is never without those stars, and I hate doing it. But I was back in the fight before Stobo was. He was holding his head, or maybe just his nose, and there was his belly, wide open. I didn't feel like getting in close again, so I put the heel of my boot into Stobo's soft middle. His air rushed out of him with hardly any voice to it, just the wind from a bellows, and he went down, landing on his backside. The crowd gasped.

I staggered. For some reason I had trouble getting that leg back under me. But I managed to straighten myself. I spat some blood out of my mouth, tasting that strange copper flavor blood has. It hit the dirt and made a little sound. It was hotter now and I imagined that the sound was my blood boiling right there on Front Street.

"Come on, Stobo," I said. My words weren't slurred, but that's because I was working hard at it. "Get up." My eyes were both puffing up, and it was getting harder to keep them both open. But the right one was worse than the left, so I focused on keeping the left one wide.

Stobo clambered off his tail and stood holding his gut, shaking his head clear. I'd rung his bells pretty hard, but he wasn't a man who'd stay

down long. He wasn't even bleeding yet, except from his nose. I'd probably broken it. But noses bleed a lot, and when he cuffed his face he saw the blood and stared at me and growled. "I'll. Kill. You!"

This time I didn't have to say anything to egg him on. He came at me like a locomotive, his huge arms open so he could grab me and squeeze me to death. I fainted to the right. He fell for it, and I slipped around his other side and punched him in the kidneys with everything I had behind it. He arched his back and grunted, and the big arms came backhanding at my head again. I caught it against my right elbow and my whole arm shuddered and my hand went numb. I brought my knee up into his belly, and as he doubled over I brought my left elbow down where his shoulder met his neck. He folded, but he folded over me, his arms around my waist. With the cry of an angry buffalo he surged forward, carrying me off my feet and flat on my back. I tried to roll away, but he held me down with one hand and his other fist went back. My only luck was that he was a brute scrapper. He only thought about big swinging punches. If he'd taken the straight shot at me from his shoulder I'd've been done. But he brought that beefy paw around at my head. I hunched up and took the blow on my left shoulder. I couldn't help yelling when he hit the wound made my Howard's bullet the other night, but I was already reaching for his eyes. My arms weren't as big as his, but they were just as long. I jabbed at his face with my fingers, and between gouging at his eyes and twisting his broken nose, his grip on my shirt loosened. I felt it and threw my weight against that arm. He was using it for balance, so he fell and I rolled over him and back to my feet.

"Kick 'im!" shouted someone in the crowd. "Kick 'im, Marshal!" It soon became a chant. "Kick him! Kick him!"

I stood back to let him find his feet. I don't care what a man's done. I won't kick him while he's down. Even though Stobo deserved it. It wasn't

a matter of who he was, or what he'd done. It mattered who I was, and what I was willing to do.

Stobo didn't get up, though. He lay there on the ground, his hands out in front of him grasping the dirt, like I'd hurt him bad.

"Are we done, Stobo?" I asked. He said something, but it was muffled, and I took a step closer to hear him. When he saw my shadow near him he spun and threw the dirt in his hands into my face. My right eye was still shut, but the dirt got into my good left eye. I pulled back, and knowing what was coming, I dropped to my knees and rolled. He must have surged right past me, because I breathed in a cloud of his dust as I heard his scream of anger. I cuffed at my left eye and pried my right eye open. Stobo had turned and was about to come at me again. I stood up and ran forward and put a shot into his broken nose. It surprised him, me coming at him. I hit him again, right in the face, trying to puff up his eyes the same way he'd closed mine. I wasn't worried about breaking my hand anymore. I wasn't worried about much of anything. My blood was pumping and my face felt like a raw steak but my arms and legs were loose and my breathing was coming easy. Stobo was panting. I figured that any fight he'd ever been in had ended after the first couple punches. If I could last longer than him, I would win.

But that wouldn't be much of a victory. It was the kind of win that a man like Stobo would scorn. And I wanted him to know he'd been beat.

He tried to bring his arm around to grab me but I slapped it away and in the same move elbowed him in the jaw. He turned, and I hit him with my fist in the side of his huge neck. His hands came up, but to hit me or stop me I couldn't tell. I hit him again, a backhand to the face, then three good punches to his stomach. He folded and went down to his knees.

"Stay down, Stobo," I said. My words sounded strange in my ears, and I realized that they didn't sound much like words at all.

Stobo must've understood, though, because he shook his head and struggled up to his feet again. I let him come for me, though now it was his turn to have trouble seeing and he tried to find me more by feel than by sight. I ducked under his arms and put two good punches into his ribs, a right then a left. He staggered, and his huge arms came around limply, like he wanted to swing at me but just couldn't muster the energy. I stepped back out of his reach, then walked right up to him and gave him a solid straight arm punch to the jaw. I was lucky I didn't break every bone in my hand. But it worked. He stumbled back a few paces then fell on his back, barely breathing, his eyes closed.

I could hardly stand, and my feet were weaving under me. My nose was broken, and probably a couple of ribs. The sweat stung my swollen eyes and the tips of my hair hung down and half-blocked my sight. But I was still standing. Stobo wasn't.

"Gimme my guns, Shiloh," I said through my broken lip.

Shiloh handed them to me. "Here," he said. He looked down at Stobo. "He don't look too good, Marshal. I better get the Doc—"

"He's hurt but he isn't dead," I said, buckling my guns back on. "If he can't ride, throw him on a stage, but get him outta here. If I see him again, I'll shoot him."

The crowd made way for me as I walked back into my office. Even the kid didn't come with me.

Always something to prove.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Kitty came into my office a few minutes later, after the crowd had gone.

“Matt?” she said.

“Yeah, Kitty.” I had a bottle open, and I was gingerly sipping at my glass. The whiskey wasn’t doing my lip any good, but it warmed my middle. There are worse trade-offs in life.

“You oughta have the Doc take a look at you,” she said.

“In a few minutes,” I said. “I’ll go up and talk to him in a few minutes.”

“And see Chester,” she said.

“Yeah. And see Chester.”

“You two’ll make quite a pair. A matched set.”

I squinted up at her. “That bad?”

“Well,” she shrugged, “I wasn’t drawn to you for your looks anyway.”

I laughed. It hurt, so I stopped pretty quickly. Even smiling was painful, but around Kitty I had trouble not smiling.

She pulled a chair towards my desk. “Are you all right?”

“Sure,” I said. “The face always hurts, but it’s not anything that won’t heal. Stobo will be in pain a lot longer than I am.”

Kitty took in a breath. “That was pretty incredible.”

“You didn’t think I could take him?”

“No,” she said. “I was pretty sure you could. But I think the townsfolk were pretty impressed.”

“Yeah,” I said. “They thought that Washington had sent them just a shooter.”

“Now they know you’re something more,” said Kitty.

“Yeah,” I said sourly. “Now they know I’m a bigger brute than Stobo.”

Kitty leaned forward and took my bruised hand. “No,” she said. “Matt, you know what they’re saying? They talking about how lucky they are. They didn’t know before, but they do now. You taking the side of the cowboys the other night with Howard, you letting the town council have their way even when you knew they were being fools, you taking on Stobo without a gun, because of the way he’d taken Chester – they’re proud of you, Matt. They’re proud to have you.”

I looked at Kitty out of my one open eye. “Yeah?”

She nodded, then that wicked smile came out and she laughed. “Of course, you better lay low until your face heals up. They may be proud of you, but they won’t want to be seen with you until you look a little more human!”

I laughed again, careful not to take my hand out from under hers. I placed my other hand on top of her hand, and grinned at her. “I suppose that’s true,” I said.

She patted my hand, then stood. “You go see Chester, then come by the Texas Trail. I’m sure Sam and Big Kate’ll want to buy you a few drinks.”

I stood and looked into her bright green eyes. “I’ll be by,” I said.

“Good,” she said. Then, with a smile and a swing to her hips, she left.

Watching her go, I felt warm inside. It wasn’t the whiskey, which I locked up in my desk. As I stowed it away, I saw the bundle that little runaway had had when Chester’d brought him in. I wondered if I should give it back to him. It’d been almost a week, and there was no sign of anyone looking for a runaway. There had been no answers to the telegrams Chester had sent out. And the kid seemed to be settling in all right, hanging around with Shiloh and Chester and me. It might be nice to have a kid around town. Maybe we could get him a job at one of the stables. He’d certainly taken to Clay Richard’s strawberry roan – though that was hardly a surprise. It was one of the fastest horses I’d ever seen.

Yeah, I thought as I left the jail and walked up the stairs to Doc's, if we can get him thinking about horses and not guns, maybe the kid'll settle down and like it here.

Doc wasn't in when I got to his office, so I walked up to the door of the back room and knocked. "Chester? Can I come in?"

"Yessir, Mr. Dillon." I came over and sat by the side of Doc's sickbed. Chester's face was a mass of cuts and yellow and purple bruises, but his eyes were clear. He saw my face, which must've looked a little like a mirror to his own just then. If anything, mine was probably worse.

"My," he said. "What happened to you?"

"I, ah – I been lecturing a couple of hard-nosed cowboys," I said. "One in particular."

"Oh," said Chester. "I see. Well, I'm sorry, Mr. Dillon. Those two sure got the drop on me."

"Yeah, they sure did."

"Mr. Dillon?"

"Yeah?"

"I been – thinkin'. And – and I—"

"What is it, Chester?"

"Well, Mr. Dillon — I — I'm not much help to you here. An' with my hands all a mess, and my knee – Doc says maybe I won't ever draw the way I used to. I wasn't no help before, and now...maybe I better just..."

"That's enough, Chester," I said.

"Well, but I been thinkin'—" he said.

"Well, just stop thinking."

"Yessir, Mr. Dillon."

"Now, look, Chester," I said, "I'm gonna tell you something. I, ah – I need you, here. You see — you're the only man in Dodge I can really trust. The only one."

It was true. There was Doc and there was Shiloh and a half-dozen other decent men, men I'd have a drink with, or play a game of cards with, or maybe go to if there were some easy trouble. But if for anything real – anything I didn't think I could handle alone – well, there was only one man I wanted at my back.

Chester's voice was quiet at first. "Yessir. Well, you — you can trust me, Mr. Dillon."

"Yeah, I know I can. I'm – thanking you, Chester." I slapped my hand on my knee. "But, listen, you're sure no help to me lying there, y'know! No help at all!"

"Well, I don't aim to stay here long. The Doc says I'll be up and around again in—"

"Look, Chester," I said, "I'll tell you what. I'll go get patched up, then we'll get Kitty to come over and fix us some steaks, and we'll have us some beer too, eh? What do you say?"

"My, that'd be fine, Mr. Dillon," he said. "My, I'd sure like that." He studied me for a moment. "Say – isn't that the shirt I gave you?"

"Yes, Chester. Yes, it is."

"That was a new shirt, straight from Boston," he told me.

"Well," I said, "it still is."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

A half hour later I was walking back to my rooms to change clothes before heading to the Texas Trail when Doc saw me and cornered me. “You going to let me take a look at you?” he asked. “Or do you want to go on bleeding?”

“Doc, I’d rather bleed to death, if I didn’t know you’d get a fee for my body.”

He laughed. “Come along, then, Matt. I’ll sew you up. Who knows, with a new shirt and the miracle of my medicine, you might even look human again.” His wicked old eyes gleamed at me. “Or maybe you were hoping Kitty could doctor you.”

I sighed. “Lead the way, you old buzzard.”

A buggy came riding down Front street. Perched on the seat was a pretty homely looking woman in her working clothes. She wore a decent bonnet, but she had an apron over her dress and looked like she’d just come from a barn. She stopped the buggy and looked down at Doc. “Can you direct me to the Marshal’s office?” She pretty well ignored me.

Doc smiled at her and pointed. “Yes, ma’am, right there, on the corner.”

I shot Doc a dark look. “Can I help you, ma’am?” I said. “I’m Marshal Dillon.”

She looked me up and down like I’d made a mess in her kitchen. I suppose I wasn’t much to look at just then. She said, “I left home as soon as I got your telegram. Where’s my boy?”

“Oh!” I said, smiling. “We have him, ma’am, safe and sound. Here, let me help you down.” I reached up a hand. She looked at it dubiously, then thanked me and stepped down. I hitched the horse to a rail, buggy and all, and led her towards the jail. It was the last place I’d seen him, and I

figured he'd be waiting there to tell me again how I should have just shot Stobo and had done with it.

"Right this way, ma'am," I said, opening the door to the office. She followed me in, with Doc trailing behind.

The kid's mother seemed to thaw a little to me when she saw that I really was who I said I was. "I'm sorry he put you to all that trouble, Marshal," she said. "Truth of the matter is, he's a wild one, and no mistake. Takes after his father, one scrape after another."

"He was no trouble at all," I said. "I like children fine – like to have 'em around. And he was fine – not a mite of trouble. Isn't that right, Doc."

Doc smiled at her, his best undertaker's grin. "Oh, yes, a real angel, that's your boy."

"Bub?" I called. "Bub, your ma's here. Son?"

Just then Shiloh came walking in to the office. "You lookin' for the kid, Marshal?"

"Yeah, Shiloh. This is his mother, come to take him back. Ma'am, this is Shiloh – he's been looking after your boy the past couple days."

The woman nodded. "Thank you, mister."

"Shiloh," I said, "is the kid over at the Dodge House?"

"That's what I wanted to ask you, Marshal. Have you seen him?"

"No – I thought he'd either be here, or with you."

"Well, I left him here after that ruckus earlier – I figured he'd rather be with you for the day."

"Yeah," I said, walking into the back room, past the cells. The back door was open.

"He gone, Marshal?" asked Shiloh.

"Looks that way," I said.

The woman said, "He seen me and he high-tailed it, the devil."

I chuckled. "We'll round him up for you, ma'am, don't worry." I pulled out a chair for her, and she sat down heavily.

"Oh, I don't know why I bother hauling him back," she said. "If he's run away once he's run away a thousand times. This time he ran 'cause I wouldn't buy him a gun. He wanted a real one. That boy's just gun crazy, I swear. I got him a nice Bowie knife instead."

Doc looked over at me, his eyes wide. They weren't full of laughter anymore.

"Bowie knife?" I said, my stomach sinking.

The woman nodded. "I reckon it wouldn't signify, and off he run."

"Bowie knife?" asked Shiloh. Between Doc's expression and my voice, we'd tipped him off that something was wrong.

"Shiloh," I said grimly, "find that kid."

The mother looked up at me, her face real worried. "Marshal? Has he done somethin' bad with it? I told him to use it careful. He promised to use it careful!"

That was when we heard the hoofbeats outside. They weren't the slow pace of a casual rider. It was someone getting out of Dodge as fast as a horse could carry him.

Shiloh was over at the door and he saw the rider. I saw him too, from the window. It was the kid.

Shiloh bolted through the door, then looked back at me. "Marshal!"

"Nevermind, Shiloh," I said. "He's got Clay Richard's strawberry roan. He's a lot lighter than we are. Even if I was in any shape to chase him, we'd never catch up. He's gone."

The mother was still talking, more to herself than to us. "I try to bring him up right, I tell him to be good, but he don't listen! He just don't listen!"

“Now calm yourself, ma’am,” I said, “just calm yourself. Doc,” I said, tossing him my keys. “Open my desk drawer and look inside, will you? Chester locked the kid’s little bundle in there. I want to have a look at it.”

Doc unlocked the drawer and pulled out a little bundle, roughly tied with twine. “Here it is,” he said, handing it over.

It was pretty heavy. I felt sick. “Here,” I said, passing it back to him. “You’re better at knots than I am. Open it, will you?”

The woman just kept on talking. “Since the moment he was born he’s been nothing but tribulation to me.”

“Now, please, ma’am,” I said, patting her arm. “What’s he got in there, Doc?”

“Shirt, stockings, piece o’ sausage. An’ this.” Doc pulled out a pistol. “44 double-action,” I said.

“Why, so it is. Does that mean something, Matt?”

“Yeah, Doc,” I said. “I guess Ziegler was telling the truth from the start. It’s Clay Richard’s gun.”

Shiloh looked at it, and his face showed what I felt. “Sonny didn’t manage to keep it long, did he?”

“No,” I said. “Well, if he wants a gun that bad he’s bound to get hold of another one somewhere, somehow. Shiloh, will you call Mr. Hightower over.”

Shiloh nodded and stepped outside into the hot sun. He was gone less than a minute, and during that time Doc and I were quiet. The kid’s mother kept mumbling to herself, but I didn’t want to hear what she had to say.

Hightower, all five foot four of him, came into my office, with Shiloh trailing behind. “Yes, Marshal?”

“Mr. Hightower, it appears that I have business for you after all. Get some paper and a pencil. I want some notices printed.”

“Right away,” said Hightower with that mercenary gleam in his eye. Last week it had made me angry. Now I just felt old. Old and tired.

Hightower sat on the edge of my desk, licked his pencil, and said, “Go ahead, Marshal.”

“Wanted for murder—”

“Wanted for murder...”

I turned to the boy’s mother. “What’s the boy’s name?”

She sniffled and looked at me. “Same as mine. Bonnie. William Bonnie.”

“William Bonnie.”

“William Bonnie...”

“Age twelve, height, about five feet. Hair light. Eyes blue.” I looked at Mrs. Bonnie. “I don’t suppose he’s known by any other name?”

Bonnie shook her head. “No. Everyone just called him Billy. Or the kid.”

“Also known as Billy, the Kid.”

About David Blixt

David Blixt is an acclaimed author and actor living in Chicago. An Artistic Associate of the Michigan Shakespeare Festival, where he serves as the resident Fight Director, he is also co-founder of A Crew Of Patches Theatre Company, a Shakespearean repertory based in Chicago. He has acted and done fight work for the Goodman Theatre, Chicago Shakespeare Theatre, Steppenwolf, the Shakespeare Theatre of Washington DC, First Folio Shakespeare, and the Performance Network, among many others.

As a writer, his Star-Cross'd series of novels place the characters of Shakespeare's Italian plays in their historical setting, drawing in figures such as Dante, Giotto, and Petrarch to create an epic of warfare, intrigue, and romance. In *Her Majesty's Will*, Shakespeare himself becomes a character as Blixt explores Shakespeare's "Lost Years," teaming the young Will with the dark and devious Kit Marlowe to hilarious effect. In the Colossus series, Blixt brings first century Rome and Judea to life as he relates the fall of Jerusalem, the building of the Colosseum, and the coming of Christianity to Rome.

David continues to write, act, and travel. He has ridden camels around the pyramids at Giza, been thrown out of the Vatican Museum and been blessed by John-Paul II, scaled the Roman ramp at Masada, crashed a hot-air balloon, leapt from cliffs on small Greek islands, dined with Counts and criminals, climbed to the top of Mount Sinai, and sat in the Prince's chair in Verona's palace. But David is happiest at his desk, weaving tales of brilliant people in dire and dramatic straits. Living with his wife and two children, David describes himself as "actor, author, father, husband - in reverse order."

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