

BANG!

“We’re moving off,” raucous Klaus Woodstock spilt through the sound of sparrows singing among the oak boughs overhead and the chattering of camp inhabitants. “Up and gone *now!*”

“What happened?” I questioned.

“The law’s following our trail,” Woodstock dismounted his mighty chestnut, Fender, and removed his black hat from his sweaty, grey scalp. “They know of the robbery in Sheoke. Posters are up in town and soon enough should the hunters find us.”

“Were we not masked up?” I gulped. “How’d they catch up so quickly?”

“I blame Billy’s new colt!” Chimed in little Alfred. “They know its shimmer!”

“Moonshine!” Retorted William Stane through gritted teeth. “You’re bitter that your nag’s hide don’t shine like Artemis!” Artemis was a satiny dappled palomino with a gleaming silver mane. William had spent nearly all of his savings on the colt.

“Over my dead body should you insult Goosey!” Alfred pulled back his sleeves, to defend his beloved Mustang, whom he’d raised from a gangly filly.

“Simmer down, kid,” I scolded him. “We haven’t time for a brawl.”

“Better lay off Goosey then,” he pouted, adjusting his tattered hat over his mop of cocoa curls.

“Goose’ll survive,” I told him. “Your hat, on the other hand, deserves retirement.”

“Bold you’d assume I can afford a new one,” Alfred rolled his eyes.

“Here,” I lifted my hat off my ginger hair and replaced the one on Alfred’s head. “Take my lucky hat and I’ll use your old thing for the time being. I’ll have myself a new one soon enough.”

“I’ll take good care of it, Zach,” Alfred beamed.

“C'mon, Zachary,” Woodstock interrupted us. “Let the girls know we’re leaving and I’ll tell Jack and Thom.

Woodstock spoke with Jackson and Thomas, meanwhile, I strode across the campground to inform the girls, who were sheltered from the Arizona heat beneath the shady sanctuary of a canvas wagon.

Winona was the first to glance up as I approached. Rays of sun brushed her olive skin and ebony hair as her head tilted upwards. Elizabeth looked next. Sunbeams danced across her unblemished porcelain complexion and played upon her toffee ringlets. When the light hit her sparkling eyes, they shone green and brown. *My Beth. My beautiful Beth.*

“Zachary!” Elizabeth lit up as our eyes met.

“Whaddaya want, Ginge?” Asked a less enthusiastic Winona.

“I’m not here to be a fool,” I assured Winona. “Woodstock wants us all out. Posters are up in Sheoke.”

“Tugging my leg, you are,” Winona folded her arms.

“Deathly serious,” I wiped the smirk from her face. “You two oughta pack up the wagon. Now.” I prepared to walk away, but not before adding: “And you’d better tame your boy, Winona.”

“My boy?” She raised an eyebrow.

“Alfie,” I told her. “Scrawny kid was about to give big Billy a hiding.”

“Idiot,” Winona groaned. “Bill could snap him like a twig.”

“Course he could,” I said. “But don’t fear now, Winona, I look out for your loverboy.”

“You’re one to discuss *loverboys*, aren’t you, Ginge?” Winona sneered.

I noticed Elizabeth's cheeks glow rosy at Winona's remark. I suppressed an enamoured grin and waved goodbye as I turned away.

For my pack-up, I tore down my tent, extracting the sweltering metal pegs from the soil one by one. I then rolled everything up and attached it behind the saddle of my stallion, Jagger, and stroked his glossy black neck.

"You've got me, don't you old boy?" I murmured.

Jagger turned his handsome head and scratched it against me, leaving dust and hair behind. "Thanks, Jag," I sighed, scratching his ears with my chipped nails.

"Zachary dear," said a gentle voice.

"Hello, Beth," I smiled when I turned to see my sweet Elizabeth. "Aren't you packing up?"

"Winona's doing the rest," she assured me. "I need a word with you."

"I'm listening," I said.

"I've had a lot of thoughts about us," her arms wrapped around my waist as she looked into my eyes.

"How so?" I rested my hands on her hips and played with the polka-dotted fabric of her skirt.

"What if we went our own way?" She whispered. "What if we married and bought a homestead? I'd become a seamstress, you know how I love to sew, and you'd tend to our ranch. We could move to Riannon, where you grew up. We'd be far from trouble."

I'd never considered leaving. I'd barely known life without Woodstock, not since he adopted me as a runaway in Riannon. I was younger than Alfred back then.

"Oh," I said. "That's—"

“Klaus Woodstock,” a gravelly shout cracked the air like a stock whip. “You’re all to be behind bars soon like the animals you are!”

I turned around and recognised the rough, scarred face almost instantly. It was Clint Copperhead and his gunslinging posse. The Copperheads were the most renowned bounty hunters in the state, and now they were right upon our tails.

“Back off, Clint,” growled Woodstock. “Or I’ll fill you with lead.”

Clint scoffed. “I’d like to see you try!”

Swift like a fox, Woodstock aimed his pistol and shot towards Clint’s head...

BANG!

Clint’s gambler hat floated to the dusty ground and a scarlet stream trickled down his forehead, revealing where the bullet had grazed his hairline.

“You wanna play games, Klaus?!” Barked Clint. “We can play games!”

Clint unholstered his shining gun...

BANG!

...and shot Woodstock in the hand, disarming him.

“You dog!” Woodstock’s voice cracked mid-word.

I threateningly cocked my eagle-engraved revolver at Clint, who turned his head and raised his eyebrows.

“Shoot me, Fireboy,” he leered. “And we blow your brains out.”

I lowered my aim and fired between the hooves of Clint's steed. The spooked horse staggered backwards.

"Like mice, you lot are," chortled Clint as he settled his anxious horse. "Small and afraid. You wouldn't dare kill."

"I'm no mouse!"

BANG!

Without a moment to stop him, Alfred had blown a hole through the stomach of a Copperhead underling with his repeater, making him expel blood from his throat and keel over.

"Foolish boy," snarled Clint.

Alfred's visible determination was quick to become fear; realisation hit him like the bullet hit the Copperhead. Switching from 'fight' to 'flight', Alfred vaulted into Goose's saddle and prepared to flee the scene.

"Take them alive," Clint instructed his posse. "No lethal shots. Do what you must, *now!*"

I sprung aboard Jagger to take off and Alfred swerved towards Winona to hoist her behind his saddle. I looked in their direction and my eyes locked with Alfred's. He looked at me with his lips pressed together and his wet eyes glistening. One of the Copperheads aimed his gun at Alfred...

BANG!

...but I was quick to disarm him with a bullet to the shoulder. Little Alfred deserved a second chance.

I holstered my gun and moved my gaze to Elizabeth. Her idea of leaving suddenly didn't seem so daunting. "Beth!" I called for her attention through the chaos and she raised her arms for me.

I cantered Jagger towards her, hoofbeats thundering beneath me. I reached out...

BANG!

...but the bullet caught her first. A crater was punctured through her open chest, sending her to the floor. *So much for “no lethal shots.”*

“Beth!” I reached for my holster with no time for thought. There was only one hunter left in the area, Woodstock had fled and most of the Copperheads followed him.

“You sick-!”

BANG!

My sentence was cut by a sharp slice through my ribcage. I took my hand off the rein and clutched it to my wound.

I aimed my revolver, the eagle on the side glinting in the light and...

BANG!

...shot the assailant between his squinted eyes. I’d never been one to take lives, but the time left to avenge my Elizabeth was limited.

I collapsed as Jagger lurched at the gunshot, and landed in a crumpled heap. I scanned the region and saw my disappearing stallion, then Copperhead corpses, then Elizabeth. Digging my fingers into the ground, I pulled myself in the direction of my late lover, shovelling dirt under my nails as I did so. My body was weak and my veins were depleting, but I couldn’t leave without her.

I reached Elizabeth’s body with scraped knees and stinging eyes and buried my calloused fingers in her perfect curls. Her ivory blouse was tainted with deep cherry stains, but her face, though it had its glow had faded, was as beautiful as the day I met her. *How could she be lifeless, yet have such heavenly beauty?*

I slumped over my darling girl and closed her dull hazel eyes, then planted a gentle kiss on her pasty forehead.

“My Beth,” I whispered, clasping little Alfred’s scruffy hat to my chest. “My beautiful Beth.”

Emptiness engulfed my mind and my vision grew blurred, I didn’t have long left. My arms encircled her lifeless frame as a crimson pool tainted our garments and tears pricked my freckled cheeks one last time. “I love you.”