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The next morning I washed in the bowl that stood for that very purpose, on a dresser with a pitcher of water beside it before making my way, with a throbbing head down to the restaurant for breakfast. Ruth and Maya were already seated at a table and were drinking coffee when I spied them. All my instincts told me to get the hell out of there, saddle up my horse and ride like the wind to get as far away as I possibly could from them, or at least from Ruth. It seemed to me that anybody who hung around with her was signing his or her death warrant and I suddenly feared for Maya remembering the way Ruth had simply abandoned her in a bar full of drunken, leering men with only me to look out for her. She either had confidence in my ability to look after the girl, which incidentally, I did not share. Or she knew for certain that she herself would be back to look after her within minutes, which as it happened, turned out to be true. A third option was, that she simply did not care what happened to either her or Maya.

Ruth had spotted me and was casually waving me over with a beautiful bright smile on her lovely face. My head told me to turn around and leave never to look back, but my legs had other ideas as they propelled me without any prior bidding from me towards the beautiful woman and what seemed to me to be inevitable doom. It was as though she had taken over my mind and try as I might, I simply could not walk away from her. I had heard of small mammals being hypnotised by snakes, charmed into immobility before the snake struck inflicting instant death on the poor creature. Well I felt just like that poor creature knowing that something bad would happen if I did not flee, but unable to get out from under the enchanting spell and despite all my instincts I simply placed myself in harm's way and walked, like a condemned man into her web totally bewitched.

My legs took me straight to their table despite my instincts trying to force them to stop, where Ruth smiled up into my face as I was once again struck by her incredible beauty.

'My goodness William,' she giggled. 'You look terrible, didn't you sleep very well?'

I pulled out a chair and sat before answering.

'I wish I could say the same about you,' I sighed. 'But I can't.'

'Oh my, was that some kind of back handed compliment William?'

‘I guess you could take it that way.’

‘Well in that case I will and thank you, I presume the same compliment applies to Maya?’

‘That goes without saying, she is as pretty as a picture as always.’

Maya giggled and regarded me fondly through her big brown eyes.

‘I want to thank you William for saving me from that ruffian last night, you were very brave,’ she whispered shyly.

I did not consider myself to be brave, I was looking out for myself as well as her and I could see no way out of the situation other than the course of action I took.

‘Well to my mind,’ I said pointedly. ‘You should never have been left in that situation in the first place.’

I waited tensely for the inevitable scathing remark from Ruth, but as was her way, she surprised me once again with something totally unexpected.

‘You are so right William,’ she said softly. ‘I should never have left her alone with all those drunken men and only you to take care of her. It was very selfish of me I know. But in my defence, I cannot bear those sort of men who think that it is their god given right to treat women like objects to use and cast aside when they have finished with them. I have come across many men like that in the past and they all deserved what they got.’

I didn’t doubt that she had met many such men, she was like a magnet, and she attracted men to her like bees to honey. But it was her remark about the men she had met who she said, “Deserved all they got,” that got me thinking and I wondered just how many men she had either maimed or killed during her travels simply because in her eyes, they were bad men.

For the most part, we ate in silence apart from the two girls who shared an occasional joke and finished up giggling happily as though nothing had happened the previous evening. For my part, I dwelt on Ruth’s revelation about men to whom she may or may not have caused severe damage or even death depending upon how seriously I was willing to take her and I considered

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only a fool would take what she had said lightly, especially after what she had so readily done to Eric’s eyes with no show of remorse and the more time I spent in her company, the more obvious it became that she was a very dangerous woman to be around and a serious risk to my health.

Over coffee Ruth turned to me and spoke with a certain amount of concern in her tone.

‘You’ve been very quiet William,’ she said softly. ‘Is there something that is troubling you?’

I kept my gaze averted as I replied knowing how easy it was to get lost in her eyes and find oneself unable to get across what they wanted to say.

‘I’m still trying to get over how close you came to getting me killed and Maya,’ I hesitated for a moment as my eyes turned to the younger girl. ‘Well god knows what could have happened to her.’

‘Oh William,’ she laughed. ‘I told you I had absolute faith in your ability to take care of her. Anyway the worse that would have happened was you taking a beating and I would have rescued you before that man could inflict any mortal damage upon you.’

I could not believe what I was hearing, she spoke as though she was invincible and capable of taking on any man or men no matter how tough and I was lost for words incapable of commenting on what she had said. When I did eventually speak, it was to state my intentions.

‘I’m going to buy a saddle and rifle and some supplies,’ I declared. ‘Then I’m going to head out before any more trouble comes my way.’

‘Where are you heading?’ She asked brightly. ‘We might be going the same way.’

‘Lady,’ I growled with a little more venom than I had intended. ‘Whichever way you are going, I intend to go in the opposite direction, I want to put as much distance between us as is humanly possible.’

‘My goodness William,’ she pouted. ‘If I didn’t know better, I would think you were angry with me.’

‘Not angry,’ I said. ‘But from now on I am going to be very careful about the kind of company I keep.’

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‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘I’m sure you can work it out,’ I replied keeping my eyes averted from hers.

‘Why won’t you look at me?’ she asked huskily.

‘Because if I do...’ I let my words trail off. I didn’t want her to have the satisfaction of knowing that if I looked into her eyes, I would be lost and unable to walk away. For no matter how insane she was, she had the ability to draw me to her like a moth to a flame and I had no intention of getting myself burned to death.

After the bill had been paid, I made my way to the mercantile to buy a rifle and some cartridges while Ruth and Maya headed for the Mexican side of town to purchase what Ruth had described as riding clothes.

As I approached the store, I noticed the town Marshal talking to a man who was pointing my way causing me to feel very uncomfortable especially when the marshal called out and made his way towards me.

‘Howdy Marshal,’ I said innocently.

He was an elderly man and I figured he ought to be taking it easy at his age not trying to take on gunmen and desperadoes.

‘What can I do for you?’ I asked lightly.

He regarded me suspiciously before he answered.

‘I hear you were involved in a ruckus last night son,’ he said easily.

‘Oh, it was just something and nothing Marshal,’ I replied. ‘Nothing serious.’

‘Oh?’ He said with feigned surprise in his voice. ‘You don’t call one man blinded for life and another one losing the sight in one eye as well as a broken nose and deep gashes to face and head, serious? According to the doc Erik will be permanently blinded and his brother Jan, has possibly suffered brain damage.’

‘Oh, I’m really sorry to hear that Marshal,’ I said putting on my best trying to appear concerned, voice.

‘Well personally son,’ he replied. ‘I don’t give a damn about those boys or what happened to them. From what I can gather from the men I spoke to, you were only defending a lady’s honour. However, most of them are of the

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opinion that the other woman is some kind of devil after what she did to Eric before calmly walking away as though it was all in a day’s work.’

‘Well in her defence Marshal, he was forcing himself on her and the only reason she went with him was to take the tension out of the situation and spare her young friend from being harmed, she wasn’t to know his brother would try to do the same to Maya.’

‘I’m not concerned with the reasons son,’ he replied. ‘As far as I am concerned, those boys got what they deserved, they have been throwing their weight around in this town for long enough and it was inevitable that they would meet their match one day. What surprises me, is that it was a woman who did for Erik.’

‘Does that mean that you don’t intend to take it further Marshal?’

‘What it means son,’ he growled. ‘Is that your problem isn’t with me, it is with Erik’s family, if you think he and his brother were bad, you should see the rest of ‘em. Now I’m going to give you a bit of friendly advice.’

He studied me with his tired eyes before continuing and I figured at his age and with his years of experience, he could probably read what a man might be thinking with a certain amount of accuracy, so I put on my best poker face.

‘I think you are a sensible man son and from what I hear, you were drawn into that fight reluctantly. So I am sure you will heed what I say when I tell you to hightail it out of town as soon as you can because one of old Jens Ahlstrom’s men left early this morning to let him know what happened to his boys and if I know the old man he will be seeking retribution for them, he has two other sons and a daughter whose husband is pure evil and handy with a gun. Old Jens will be coming in with his sons and some of his crew and he will want an eye for an eye and whatever else will satisfy his need for revenge, so the best thing you can do, is take them two women you came into town with and get as far away as possible in the short time you have left.’

‘Thanks for the concern Marshal, I was about to leave anyway, I just need to buy some supplies and a saddle and then I’m gone. But I cannot speak for the two ladies, Ruth is a law unto herself and it is not my place to tell her what to do. I will pass on your message though and hope that she heeds it.’

‘She had better,’ he growled. ‘The last thing I want is to have two women strung up in my town. The repercussions would be enormous and there would

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be outrage all over the west. But I would be powerless to stop Ahlstrom and his clan, I have just two deputies right now and neither of them would be willing to go up against them.’

‘I’ll try to persuade her to leave Marshal, but that’s all I can do.’

The Marshal turned to walk away before giving me a parting shot.

‘You had better do more than try son,’ he warned. ‘Because what Eric had planned to do to that woman was nothing compared to what the rest of them will do to her if they catch her.’

I watched him stride away towards the jail for a moment before I turned and climbed the steps to the store.

After I had purchased supplies which the store man had stuffed into two gunny sacks, I headed for the livery carrying them and a Winchester repeating rifle which I had also bought. The liveryman had two saddles for sale in the tack room, one was a nearly new roping saddle, while the other was an old and well-worn trail saddle, it was that one that I plumped for, partly because it was the cheaper of the two but mainly because it would be far more comfortable for riding over long distances which was what I planned to do. The liveryman agreed to saddle and bridle my horse and secure my supplies to him while I returned to the hotel for the rest of my belongings.

After shaving and generally tidying myself ready for my journey, I went down to the lobby to return the room key. I hoped to catch up with Ruth and Maya so that I could warn them about Erik Ahlstrom’s family and the likelihood that they would seek retribution for what had happened to the brothers.

While returning my key, I enquired of the desk clerk whether or not my companions had handed in their key yet and was a little disappointed to learn that they had not. I was hoping they had already left town and were safely on their way to putting some distance between them and the Ahlstrom family. For despite my attraction to Ruth, my overriding concern was for hers and Maya’s safety. Besides, I selfishly felt the urge to ensure my own safety by getting the hell out of town as soon as I could before I could also find myself in danger. I am not a coward but neither am I stupid enough to believe I would be able to face down that family and come away unscathed.

I hung about in the lobby for nearly an hour after going to their room and knocking on the door only to find that they weren’t there. The longer I waited

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the more agitated I became and I cursed Ruth under my breath for being so irresponsible as to put my life in danger with her casual approach to the perils of life. However, no matter how impatient I was to get away, I didn't intend to leave without warning her and giving her a chance to put some distance between her and the impending danger that she and Maya inevitably faced if they lingered in town. I had not asked the Marshal how far away the Ahlstrom spread was, it could be as near as five miles or as far away as twenty. I fervently hoped the latter, but felt it could be something in between which would give us a possible three to four hours from when Ahlstrom's man had left town and that had been over two hours previously.

Eventually, after nearly an hour Ruth and Maya entered the lobby carry clothing and weapons. I intercepted them and told them about the Marshal's warning urging the pair of them to leave town as soon as was humanly possible, but no matter how insistent and compelling my argument to Ruth that she should flee the town with all possible haste, she showed no sense of urgency and simply smiled at me before speaking.

'Alright and thank you William for warning us,' she said brightly. 'If you want to be on your way I won't hold you up for you seem to be eager to get away and I don't blame you if you are scared to face those men.'

'I'm not scared,' I blustered. 'I'm just showing some sense which is what you should do. I doubt if Ahlstrom will take into account that you are a woman after what you did to his son, he'll treat you like any other desperado who harmed his family members.'

'Ok,' she answered brightly. 'Then if you are not scared you won't mind waiting for us while we get changed, it would be nice if you accompanied us on the trail for a while and we will feel much safer with you around.'

I was desperate to get away for there was no telling how far or near Ahlstrom and his boys were and I cursed myself for a fool for not asking the Marshal how far they would have to travel to get here then at least I would have an idea of how much time we had left. However, despite my fear that we could be in serious danger by lingering, I was more concerned that she would look on me with disdain if I left without them and I would sooner risk my life than invite her contempt.

'Ok,' I said urgently. 'But please hurry, those boys could be real close now and if we aint gone by the time they get here, we will be in it up to our necks.'

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'Oh you are such a worrier William,' she smiled as she ushered Maya towards the stairs. 'Just try and relax we won't be long.'

I could not fathom the icy calm of the girl, she either had no fear at all or she was stupid. Or, which was even more likely and which I had already concluded earlier, she was totally insane.

I paced the lobby, becoming more and more nervous and agitated as the time ticked away until, after around twenty minutes but what seemed more like an hour, they appeared at the top of the stairs and I involuntarily gasped in awe at the sight that I beheld.

They were both dressed in Mexican style male clothing and I was astonished to see exactly how long Ruth's incredible legs really were, for the flared pants she wore were clinging to her thighs and buttocks like an old and very intimate friend leaving little to the imagination, but she looked stunningly impressive and incredibly beautiful wearing a white shirt tucked into the pants and a short ornate jacket over that while on her feet instead of boots, she wore moccasins. Maya was dressed similarly and was almost equally as impressive as her older friend but where Maya had the look of an angel, Ruth was more like a goddess. They both wore six guns on their hips and had saddle bags slung over their shoulders. I could see that Ruth's wicked knife was attached to the ornate belt that kept her pants up, while in her hand hanging by her thigh, was a Winchester rifle similar to the one I had bought earlier, but whereas hers was the newer eighty two model carbine using thirty two twenty cartridges, mine was the more popular and reliable seventy three model with cartridge size forty four forty. I briefly wondered if she was capable of using it with any degree of skill and accuracy.

They reached the bottom of the stairs and came towards me.

'Close your mouth William,' snapped Ruth. 'You resemble a halfwit for heaven's sake.'

Maya giggled and once again, I marvelled at their complete aloofness of the seriousness of the situation. However I wasn't the only one who had become awestruck by her. The desk clerk was standing statue like with his mouth gaping open as his eyes took in the incredible sight of Ruth slinking across the lobby like a stalking cougar.

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'Come along then William.' She said as she headed for the door. 'We have already bought supplies and a pack mule and a horse for me, they are waiting at the livery with yours so we are all set to head out.'

I followed behind her and Maya feeling like a child and trying very hard to tear my eyes away from her buttocks and hips but with no success as they swayed seductively with each elegant step she took.

We reached the livery incident free where the animals were waiting fully tacked up and the pack mule fully laden all ready to go, all that was left was for us to pay the liveryman and mount up ready to get the hell out of there and put some distance between us and the Ahlstrom family.

I led my horse from the barn and into the sunlight with Ruth following and Maya leading her big mule as well as the pack mule, bringing up the rear. However, as was to be expected and to my utter dismay, fate took a hand and circumstances took a turn for the worse, because as I came out into the sunlight, my ears picked up a far off noise and something at the far end of the long street caused me to raise my eyes and squint into the bright sunlight. I saw the dust rising far away and before long there came the sound of galloping hoofs and my heart sank when I observed, quite away back along the wide dusty street, a bunch of mounted men galloping towards us. There was no doubt who these men were and even though they were still a fair distance away, I could see they were all heavily armed and coming on fast, there would be no time to mount up and flee. All that was left for me to do was to stand and confront them in the hope that I could talk them out of any violence towards us, but I didn't hold out much hope on that score. The odds were that I would have to shoot it out and though I considered myself to be pretty good with a gun, I would be no match for six heavily armed men. However, I was

sure I would be able to take out a couple of them and delay the others long enough for Ruth and Maya to ride away and put some distance between them.

I turned to Ruth who was standing with her hand on her hip and her other hand dangling by her side holding the Winchester. She was looking at me quizzically with a slight smile playing across her full lips as though she were actually amused at my predicament and I wondered yet again how she was unable to understand the seriousness of the situation in which we had found ourselves. However, there was no time to dwell on her indifference.

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‘Mount up the pair of you,’ I cried urgently. ‘I’ll try and hold them up while you both get away.’

‘Oh you are brave William,’ she said gaily. ‘Such a gentleman to look after the welfare of two weak and tender young ladies.’

She made no move to mount her horse, instead she told Maya to take the animals and move them back into the shelter of the huge barn.

‘What are you doing?’ I yelled. ‘I told you to get the hell out of here.’

‘No chance of that,’ she replied lightly. ‘I wouldn’t miss this for the world. I can’t wait to see how you go about saving us from those ruffians.’

At that she giggled happily which only added fuel to my anger and further ascertained me of her insanity. By then it was too late anyway for six horsemen came to a skidding halt in front of me and quickly dismounted as I saw from the corner of my eye, Ruth sidle over to the door frame and casually lean on it.

I quickly scanned the six men as they fanned out to form a semi-circle before me instantly recognizing that one of them was Jan Ahlstrom and I noticed his face was heavily bandaged with a large pad covering his damaged eye. He stood next to an even bigger man than he was and who was obviously, his father even though most of his features were covered by a bushy grey beard and moustache. He carried a lot of bulk which along with his glaring eyes and the two pistols he carried in shoulder holsters, made for a fearsome sight. However, it wasn’t the old man nor his three sons and the hard looking hand who had held Maya while I confronted Jan in the saloon that concerned me the most. There was a sixth man who I figured to be far more dangerous than the other five put together. He was tall and slim and carried a single pistol slung low on his thigh and the holster was tied down with a rawhide thong. I figured that he would be around my age and any man who carried a gun in that manner, had to be good if he could manage to live to thirty something without being killed in a gunfight. I quickly took in the fact that he was studying me and weighing me up as I was him, as he stood easily to one side of the rest showing a distinct lack of interest in the proceedings. But he didn’t fool me, I knew he was alert and ready for anything. This had to be the man who the Marshal had told me about, Ahlstrom’s son in law, the one he said was pure evil. I decided that when the action began, he would be the first I would try to take out.

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The old man began to speak and I sensed by the authority in his voice that he was a man who was used to being obeyed.

‘Is that the whore who did for Erik’s eyes? He growled as he nodded towards where I considered Ruth to be standing.

Before anyone could answer, Ruth spoke up and I groaned inwardly at her recklessness.

‘Who you calling a whore you fat old bastard?’ she yelled. Then, as if it were me who had the upper hand and wasn’t outnumbered six to one and just when I couldn’t believe she could make things any worse, she continued with the most outrageous utterance yet.

‘Fill him full of holes William,’ she cried. ‘Shoot him down like the fat pig he is, how dare he insult me, I am a lady.’

The old man had clearly been taken by surprise by her outburst because he fell silent for a moment and I figured he was used to people cowering in terror and wilting under his fierce glare fearful of what might happen to them so he was visibly shocked that Ruth had not shown the same fear that he was so obviously used to seeing in folks who fell foul of his ire. However, he quickly regained his composure and turned to me, though I still watched his son in law figuring that was where the most danger would come from.

‘I hope you aint as crazy as that damned bitch mister,’ he growled. ‘I’m giving you a chance to save your life. All you gotta do is surrender to us and take a beating including losing an eye same as my son and I will let you live, you will be badly crippled, but at least you will be alive, just.’

‘Shoot the bastard William,’ repeated Ruth.

‘Shut up you fucking whore,’ shouted the old man, clearly perturbed that his fearful looks and show of strength hadn’t instilled fear in her.

‘I’ll shut the bitch’s stupid mouth pa,’ growled Jan.

He made a move to where Ruth stood which was a big mistake unfortunately for him, for in that moment all hell broke loose as a shot came from her direction and Jan fell back with a bullet in his temple which exited at the back of his head and blew it apart. At the same time, I drew my gun just as the son in law whose name I never knew, drew his weapon. I could hear more gunfire but it sounded far away as the adrenaline and concentration honed my senses

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and I concentrated on taking out who I considered to be the greatest danger before I could turn my attention to the other men in the group. I dived to my left figuring that he would do the same and aimed at the spot to where I expected he would have moved. My bullet took him high on his chest. His draw had been as fast as mine but he had aimed at where I had been standing maybe not anticipating my dive as I had anticipated his, so his bullet missed me by an inch as it whistled harmlessly into the space I had vacated. The action had taken but a few seconds as I rolled on the ground and rose to my feet in a

crouch ready to gun down as many of the others as I could before their superior numbers overpowered me.

However, I was both surprised and shocked when I saw five bodies strewn around and gun smoke clouding the air. I turned my head and looked across at Ruth. She stood easily, hip shod with the Winchester hanging loosely in her hand by her side. She was smiling at me as she regarded me with an amused look in eyes. To one side of her stood Maya with a smoking pistol in her hand but unlike Ruth, she looked as though she were about to throw up and there were tears in her eyes. Ruth moved to the girl's side and draped an arm around her shoulders before gently, easing Maya's head onto her bosom and whispering, what I assumed to be, soothing words into her ear.

It took me a while to take in what had happened as I stared at initially, the bodies on the ground and then at Ruth who regarded me questioningly as though waiting for me to enquire how, in the few seconds it had taken me to kill one man, she had downed the other four besides Jan who she had killed first. It was difficult for me to comprehend how a girl with a rifle had been quick enough to lever shells into the breech each time she fired the gun and line it up so that she could aim it and still kill four men before they even had a chance to fire their own weapons, she would have to fire from the hip and to shoot four men from that position in such double quick time took more skill than any man I had ever known to possess, let alone a woman.

'Did you...? I gasped unable to finish the question.

'Maya killed one of them,' she answered softly. 'But the poor child is in shock, she has never killed anything bigger than a rabbit before.'

She hugged the sobbing girl closer to her before continuing.

'You had the hardest part, she said. 'That man you killed was obviously the most dangerous of the bunch, none of the others were gunfighters, I think they

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were more used to beating men half to death with their fists rather than using guns, so it was easy for me to outshoot them.'

I still found it hard to believe what she had done as I looked around for any approaching lawmen realising we could be arrested for what had happened, though I doubt a jury would find us guilty of murder, not when they saw it was two young women and one man against six violent ruffians. I believed also, that the town Marshal would stay away for a while, he seemed to be a man who preferred the quiet life and would give trouble a wide berth. So I wasn't too surprised to see just a handful of curious folk edging along the street to see what all the ruckus had been about. However, if nothing else, I was a careful man and would never take chances if there was an alternative.

'We had better get out of here,' I growled. 'We don't know how folk around here are going to take what happened and I don't want to get thrown in jail.'

Ruth took Mya's face between the palms of her hands and looked down into her sweet, tear streaked face.

‘Are you up to riding honey?’ she whispered.

Maya nodded briefly before wiping her eyes and nose on her sleeve and mounting her mule which despite the gunfire, had wandered from the rear of the barn to be close to the girl.

Ruth leapt astride her horse and I mounted mine and took hold of the lead rope to the pack mule, then we walked our mounts to the outskirts of town before we turned and headed west.