

~ Aces and Eights (The Ballad of Little Jack) ~

by Cheyne

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Disclaimer: Little Jack is a character from the movie “Dean Teaster’s Ghost Town.” All characters belong Dean Teaster and DJ Perry (except for Dusty Rose (an UberX), Liberty, Beatrice & Merry who belongs to me) and to Kennedy/Teaster Pictures /A CDI and Perry/Hornus Production. No money is being made off this story and no infringement is intended. Illustrations by me; most illustrations taken from ‘DTGT’ movie stills, others are from various sources.

Rating: R

Violence & Other Warnings: ***YES, VIOLENCE***. It takes place in the Old West with gun, ***physical and sexual violence*** accordingly. Also, there is sex between men & women and women & women. If that ain’t yer cuppa tea, Starbucks is down the road.

Summary: The story of Little Jack as seen through the crystal blue eyes of Madame Birdie’s prettiest prostitute.

Spoiler or Other Information: This story includes the end of the movie. Read at your own risk if you haven’t seen Dean Teaster’s Ghost Town and want to.

As usual, thank you to Renae for what she does.

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Aces and Eights: Little Jack’s Story

“Hey, Little Jack, where ya off to?” Linn shouted from the second floor outdoor balcony of the Silver Dollar Saloon.

“Lookin’ for my Pa. You seen ‘im?” Little Jack looked up and shielded her eyes from the bright sunlight. She spotted me standin’ next to Linn an’ grinned.

“Yeah, he was with Esther a little bit ago,” Liberty, one of the other girls, said.

“Well, he ain’t with her now, ‘cause she’s back downstairs.” Little Jack didn’t take her eyes offa me.

“Maybe he headed back home,” Linn said.

She shook her head an’ extended an arm outward. “Naw. His horse is still tied up out here.”

I bent at the waist an’ leaned over the railin’, showin’ off my cleavage. “Try the General Store. You know how he fawns over Betsy Mae. ‘Specially when he’s had a few too many.”

“Which is every day,” Linn said in a voice not meant for Little Jack to hear.

Little Jack smiled up at me. “Yup. That’s prob’ly right where he is. Thanks, Rose.” She turned on her heel and headed across the street.

“*Thanks, Rose,*” Linn aped. “Lord, Rose, why do you tease that girl?”

“Oh, it’s harmless,” I said, an’ waved her off as we walked back inside.

“Harmless, my behind. Jackknife raised her like a boy an’ she’s got feelins’ like a boy. Ain’t natural an’ you ain’t helpin’ none.”

I rested my hands on my hips. “Natural? An’ what we do is?” I waited for her answer. None came. “We share our beds with more than a few men a night an’ then with each other when business hours are over. Why does that make us any different from Little Jack?”

“Because Little Jack don’t seem to have no desire towards men at all.” Linn said.

“If that’s true then she’s more honest than we are,” I said.

“D’you think Little Jack thinks about fornication?” Linn asked. “D’you think she’s even been kissed? By anyone?”

I give her a secret smile an’ sashayed back to my whorin’ room to get ready for my next customer.

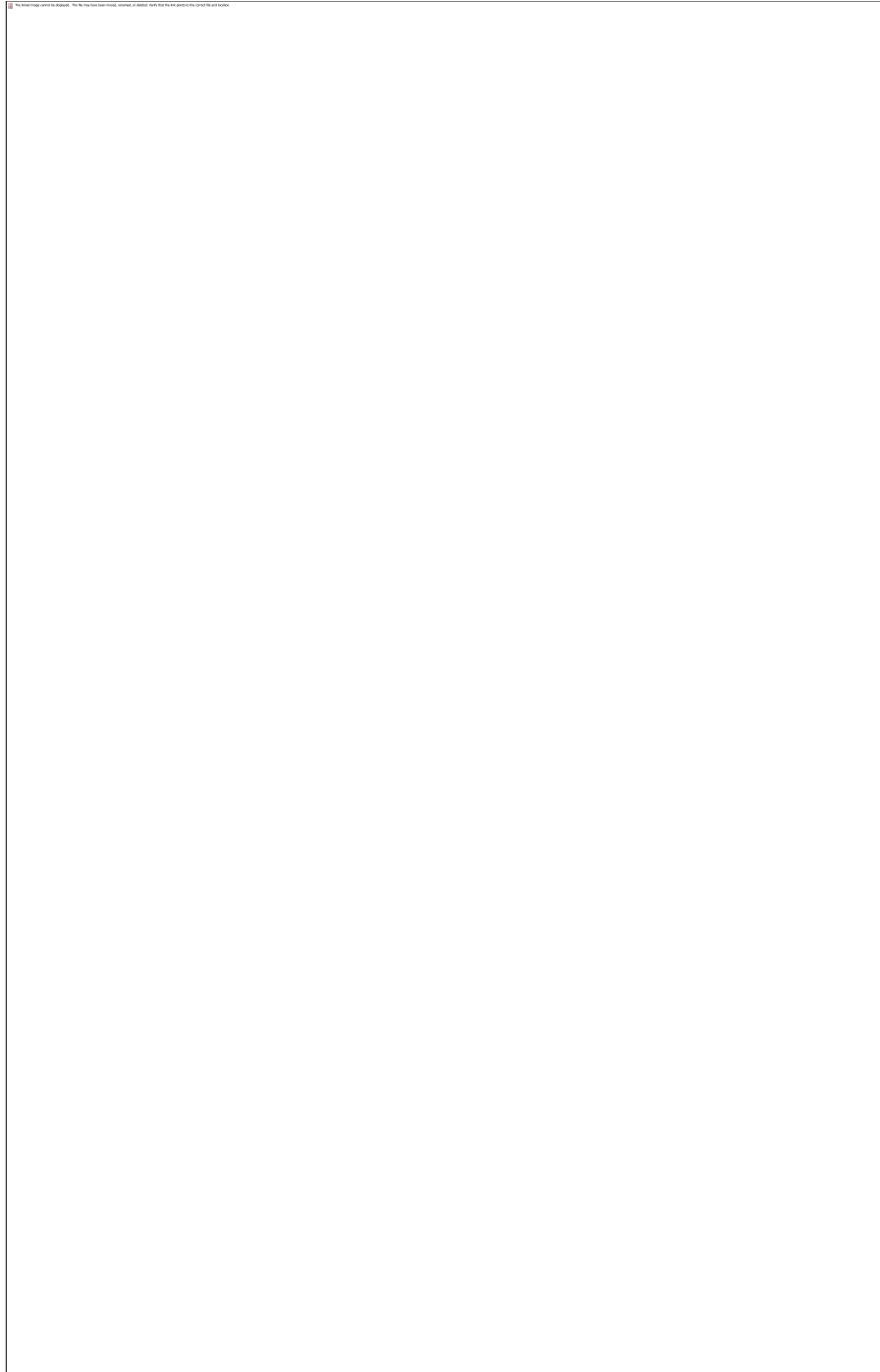
“Dusty Rose Potts, you know somethin’ we don’t! What is it?” Linn asked. She just couldn’t stand not bein’ right in the middle of all that was goin’ on.

“Never you mind,” I told her. “An’ for your information, Miss Linn, I know me lots of things you don’t.”

The frustratin’ look on Linn’s face made us both laugh. Wasn’t often we got one up on Victor Burnett’s favorite pleasure girl. Even if she could be right dense at times.

“Don’t listen to her, Linn, she gets the same pillow talk we do. She just gets hers from a old, worn out Yankee soldier what makes her think her sweet nothin’s are sweet somethin’s.” Liberty said an’ give me a knowin’ wink

The last thing I wanted was for her to be runnin’ off at the mouth about Little Jack n’ me.



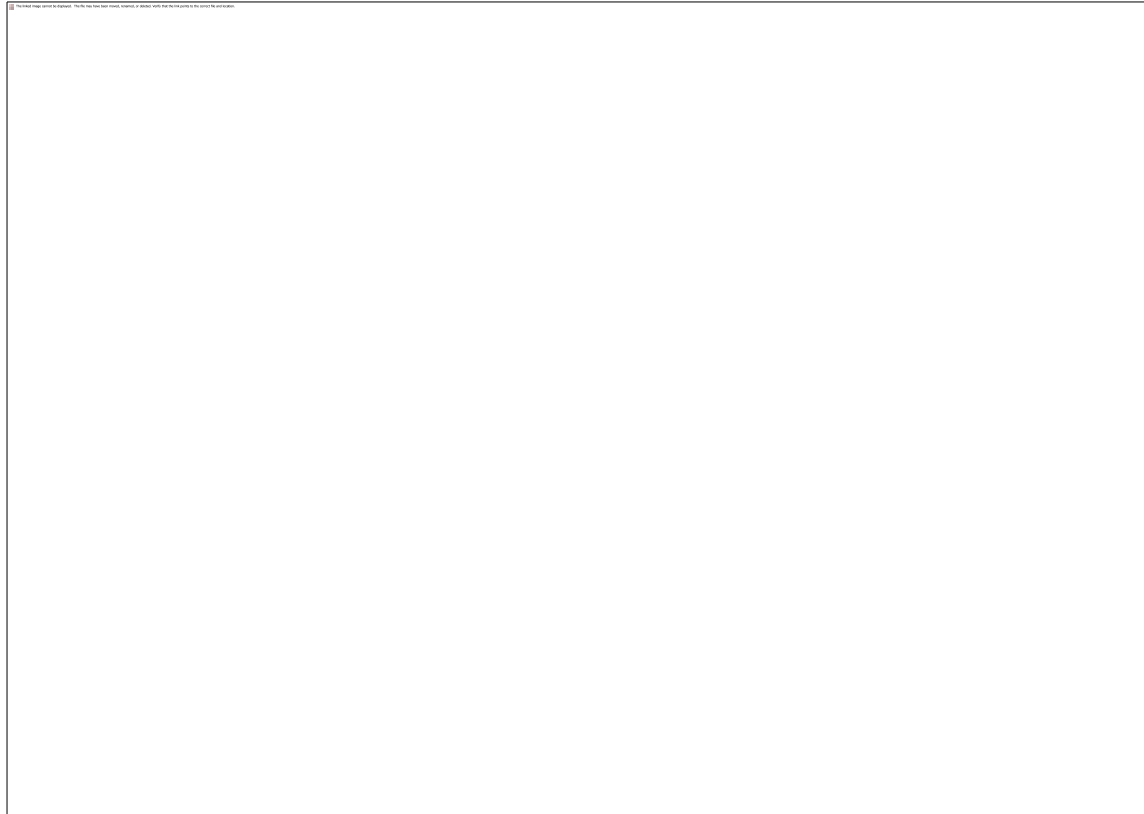
I recall the first time I saw Little Jack. Hell, she weren't no bigger than a shot glass full of rotgut, followin' her pa around everywhere he went. I don't think she'd been walkin' very long, not the way she teetered behind him, like a tiny rummy just left the Silver Dollar Saloon with a snootful. Tho she still had better balance than her pa after he spent the afternoon in there.

She was born Abigail Grace Fairchild. She was named for her ma who died in the throes of birthin' her an' she was called Abigail Grace until she was somewhere in her third year. That's when her grandma kicked the bucket from a sickness' ol' Doc Morrison called 'monia. An' that's when it all went to hell and she stopped bein' the cutest little yellow-haired baby girl south of the Mason-Dixon an' turned into a rough 'n tumble little wildcat.

Her pa, Jackknife Jack Fairchild, loved her to pieces but he didn't know how to care for a daughter. Since it was just him an' Abigail Grace out at their cabin, he raised her like a boy an' 'cause she was like his shadow, everyone started callin' her Little Jack. I'd be s'prised if anyone even remembered her real name anymore. Well, anyone but Jackknife Jack, me an' Madame Birdie, that is; Madame Birdie run the sportin' house over the Silver Dollar Saloon, where I work. She always had a soft spot for Little Jack, would keep a eye on her when Jackknife Jack was takin' pleasure with one of the girls or too sotted to be any good to her. Madame Birdie would make her run errands or teach her some new card game an' how to bet on it. Little Jack had her sassin' problems, no doubt about that, but she was always r'spectful to Madame Birdie.

I hear tell Jackknife Jack was once a good lookin' man 'fore his wife died. Abigail Fairchild was said to be a true faith Christian woman an' I'm sure if she was still around, Little Jack would've been reared a lot different. They say Jackknife Jack just fell apart after that and became a shell of a man. He took to the drink like stink to a cow pie an' grewed into a bitter, brawlin' man. He was always madder than a wet hen at somethin' an' poor Little Jack was always pullin' him outta fights, even when there was nothin' to her. Jackknife Jack had been a rough with Victor Burnett's pa when he was a young 'un, 'fore he met Abigail and she roped him in. After her passin', he took up with Victor an' life just went downhill for him an' Little Jack from there. Their lives was no longer their own an' Jackknife didn't seem to mind 'cause workin' for Victor Burnett got him free spirits at the saloon.

Everyone says if Abigail was still alive, Jackknife Jack would be a clean-livin' furniture maker an' Little Jack would be off to some Yankee boardin' school somewheres. Knowin' Little Jack like I do, I can't see it. People like to say what mighta been but too much has happened in this town for anyone to ever really be prosperous, 'cept for Victor Burnett an' Madame Birdie. Don't really know how one woman survivin' coulda changed this town all that much. Although one man did which is why they call it Ghost Town. But I'll get to that later. I don't recall much about Abigail Fairchild 'cause I got to Maggie Valley the summer just before her untimely passin' an' I was but a child, myself.

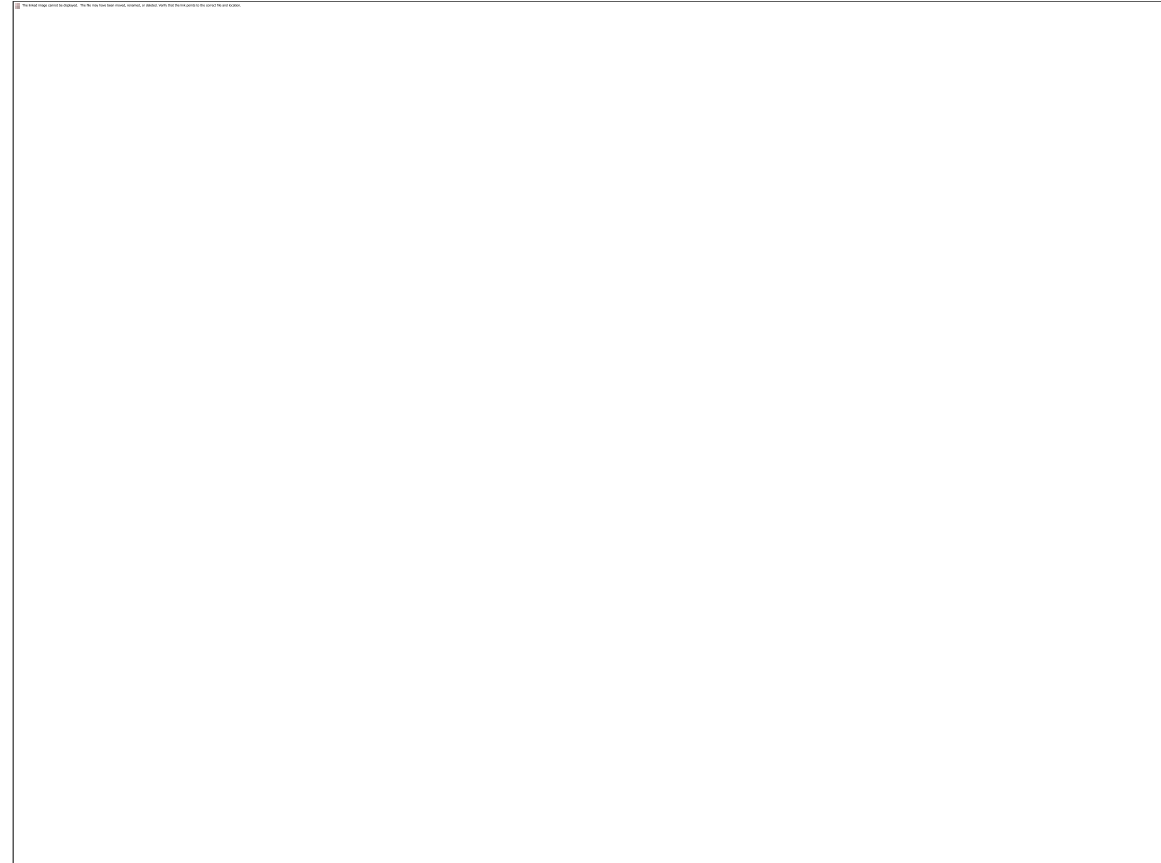


My name is Rose Potts. Dusty Rose to my customers. I work for Madame Birdie but I belong to Victor Burnett. Victor Burnett is a deranged, shady, immoral rich man who runs this town. Even the mayor an' the lawmen kowtow to him. He took me away from my folks when I was four years old 'cause they couldn't pay off a debt. Or so I was always told. Mr. Burnett isn't an' never was a nice man by any stretch of the imagination. He made me sleep in the hayloft of his barn. I'd start workin' from the minute the sun came up, 'til it set. I washed clothes, hobbled horses, milked cows, slopped hogs an' mucked out stables until I was ten. An' I got beat regularly 'cause nothin' never seemed done right.

Mr. Burnett's boy, Will, was a year younger'n me an' Will was nothin' like his pa. Still ain't. Will always had a decent streak in him a mile wide. He used to sneak me food an' give me clothes he outgrewed to wear. Sometimes the clothes I'd growed out of, I'd cut up an' sew into a skirt with fishing line or thread remnants that Will would pull out from his Aunt Mary's waste basket. When I was eleven, Will taught me to read an' write an' when I was twelve, Will taught me how to kiss. We practiced kissin' a lot 'til Mr. Burnett caught us. He beat me pretty bad an' sent me to town to live with Madame Birdie. He said if I was goin' to be a whore, I needed to live in the right place.

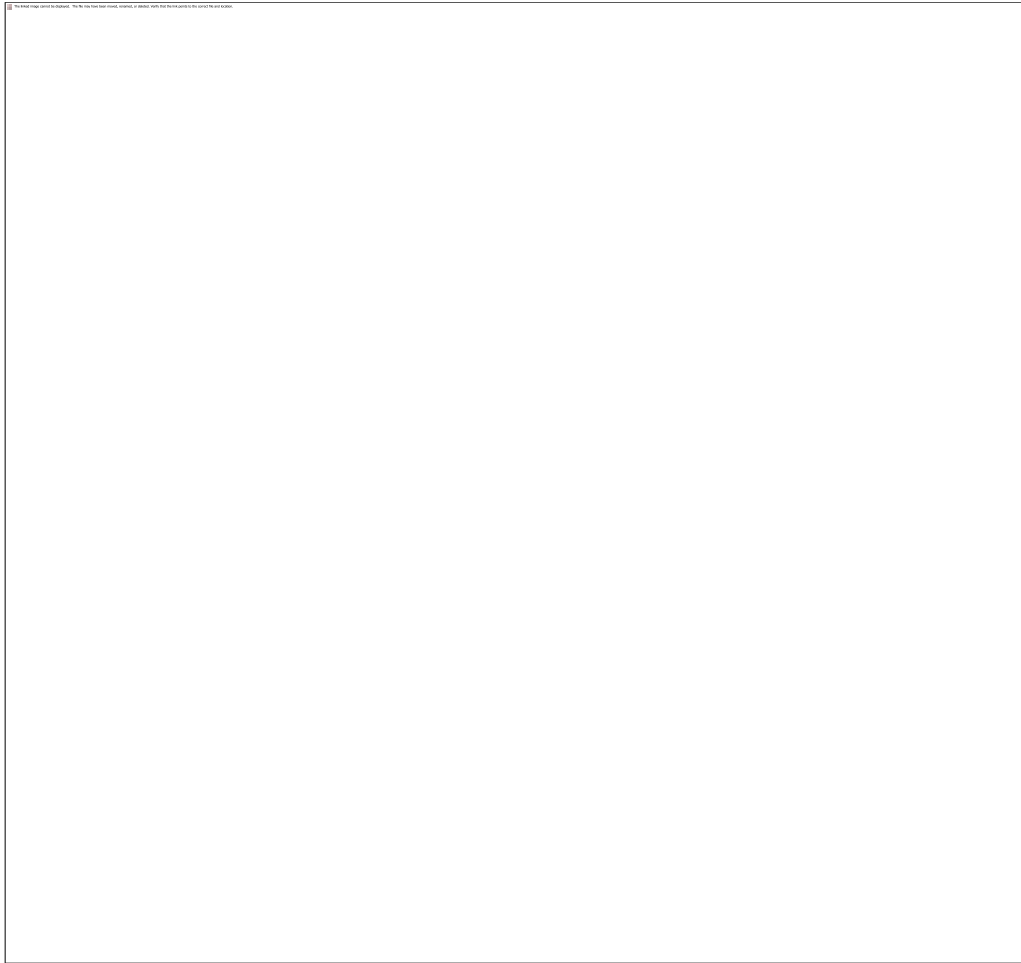
Madame Birdie didn't know quite what to do with me since I was all long limbs an' hadn't growed into my womanly form yet. So I earned my keep cleanin' her sportin' house. By the time I turned sixteen, I'd filled out my tall frame quite nice, if I say so

myself. I got myself quite the education at Madame Birdie's an' tho I hadn't known a man in the full biblical sense, I sure knew everything 'bout 'em. The pleasure girls made sure to that. An' I knew bein' a pleasure girl was my destiny. Mr. Burnett made sure of that. He told Madame Birdie that when I started, he wanted a cut of my earnin's 'cause, I was still his an' hadn't worked off my folks' debt yet.



To my delight, my very first customer was Will Burnett. I recall us both bein' pretty bashful an' nervous but I couldn't ask for more of a gentleman. He'd never knowed a woman's secret, innermost delights, so we had a good time figurin' it all out. He took comfort with me a few more times 'til he decided he didn't like takin' advantage of me, or the other girls, like that. That's kinda when he started partin' ways with his pa, too, rebellin' against everythin' Mr. Burnett was an' wanted Will to be. Still don't know where Will got his good character from. It sure wasn't the Burnett side of the family.

After my first time with Will, bein' a harlot wasn't so nice. My customers were smelly an' drunk an' mean, most of the time. I became a favorite of a old Union soldier, Captain Ketner. His bedroom appetite was definitely on the peculiar side of strange but he always paid extra for me, which Madame Birdie kept in a safe place. She would always say that I was too pretty to be layin' down for men the way I was. She told me as soon as Mr. Burnett released me from the debt, she was goin' to give me all that money to go away and make an honest life for myself. That's a nice dream an' all but I don't know anythin' other than whorin' an' I don't think Mr. Burnett will ever set me free of what he says my folks owe him.



First time I recall havin' a conversation with Little Jack was one day when her pa was sleepin' off a bender in Sheriff Tom Parker's jail. She got bored sittin' over at the jail an' wandered over to the saloon. Mr. Burnett an' his boys was celebratin' somethin' an' were gettin' wilder an' wilder so when Little Jack pushed through them doors, he told her to get lost right quick an' in his normal foul tone. She stuck her tongue out at him an' told him to piss up a rope. Everybody laughed an' he turned to swat her one when Madame Birdie grabbed her by the back of her overalls.

"Abigail Grace Fairchild, get in this kitchen with me this instant!" She yelled, draggin' a tornado of blonde hair an' blue denim with her. She sat her down in a kitchen chair opposite me, who just finished slicin' potatoes.

"Aw, Birdie! Let me play poker with 'em. I know how," Little Jack whined.

"No. Those men don't want no little kid in their poker game. An' I know you know how 'cause I'm the one who taught ya. It's getting' rough out there, Little Jack, an' I don't want you gettin' hurt. Now stay in here with Rose 'til your pa comes to get ya."

“C’mon, Birdie...”

“Little Jack! I ain’t gonna tell ya twice, ‘less you wanna feel the sting of my switch.” Her tone was warnin’ but I know she’d fall on fire ‘fore she’d raise a hand to that child. She just sent her only daughter, Ellie, off to a finishin’ school somewheres east an’ I think she was missin’ having a child about to fuss over.

Little Jack folded her arms ‘cross her chest an’ huffed. “Okay!” She sat, quiet, with her bottom lip pokin’ out.

“Yep. I get to miss all the fun, too,” I said to her, tryin’ to get her attention away from the other room. She didn’t answer me. “How old are you now, Little Jack? Six?”

That got her attention. “I’m eight fingers old!” She boldly held up six fingers.

I reached over an’ pushed two more up. “That’s eight fingers. You’re awful little to be eight.”

Her green eyes stared a hole into me. “And you’re awful big to be...to be...how old are you?”

“Almost thirteen.”

“Oh.” She looked dashed an’ returned her attention to the doorway that led to the saloon. “I bet I could beat ‘em all in poker.”

“I bet you could, too.” She was just so cute. It was hard not to grab her an’ squeeze her in bear hugs. I was sure that wouldn’ta been looked upon kindly an’ I dare say I would not have escaped that without deep wounds that would have resembled an attack by a Grizzly cub. “Wanna play poker with me?”

She turned an’ looked at me again. “Aw, you don’t know how to play.”

“Do too. Madame Birdie showed me, too.”

“Nuh uh. It’s not fun like that.”

“When’s the last time your hair was brushed, Little Jack?” I asked. The tangles were clear an’ many. “In fact, when’s the last time your hair was washed an’ you had you a bath an’ your clothes were cleaned?”

She looked at me, terrified. “Oh, no. You ain’t doin’ that to me!”

“Didn’t say I was. I was just askin’.”

“Oh.” She calmed a bit. “Can’t recall.”

“You like your hair long like that?”

“My pa does. Says it ‘minds him of my ma.”

“Tell ya what – you don’t get some of them tangles out, it’s gonna knot all up an’ have to be all cut off so it can grow again. You wouldn’t want that, would ya?”

She shook her head. “Pa wouldn’t like it much.”

“So...why don’t we surprise your pa an’ make it all pretty again?”

“Will it hurt?”

“It might pull a little. But I heard you’re real brave so that shouldn’t bother you.”

She sucked in a breath, sat up real tall an’ said, “I’m the bravest.”

“That’s what I heard.” I stood up an’ held out my hand. To my surprise she took it. We walked to my little room in the back to get my comb an’ brush an’ then went out the back door. I sat on the steps an’ she sat down ‘tween my knees with her back to me.

‘Fore I started, she turned to me an’ held up a tiny finger in warnin’. “It won’t hurt, right?”

“I’ll do my best,” I promised her. “If I can make your hair all pretty again without hurtin’ you, will you think about lettin’ me clean ya up a little?”

“I don’t need to be clean,” she said, shaking her head in a ‘xaggerated manner. “Bein’ clean is for girls.”

“Little Jack, ‘til you grow one them faucets ‘tween your little legs, you’ll always be a girl.” I started brushin’ her hair as gentle as I could. “You smell like you rolled in somethin’ over at the livery. Wouldn’t you be happier with a more pleasant odor about you?”

She looked back at me with those big green eyes of hers an’ wrinkled her nose. “I guess so.” I couldn’t tell if I hurt her feelin’s or not an’ I didn’t want to do that.

“I’m stinkin’ a little, too. How ‘bout after I get done with your hair, I fill up that big ol’ washtub with hot water an’ bubbles an’ you and me will take a bath together.”

She looked at me doubtful-like then smirked. “Well...if you’re gonna go through it with me, I guess it won’t be so bad.”

“Little Jack, it ain’t torture.” I laughed.

“It ain’t fun.”

“Tell you what – you can wash me an’ soap my hair if you let me wash you.”

“I can?”

“Sure. Fair is fair, right?”

“Shake on it,” she said, serious as a gunshot wound. She held out her little hand an’ I took it mine an’ moved it up and down.

After I finished gettin’ all the knots out, I walked her back to the bathin’ room that Madame Birdie kept for herself. She let me use her tub when I needed to an’ I knew that if I was seein’ to Little Jack finally havin’ a bath, she wouldn’t mind us both usin’ it.

Little Jack was not modest at all. When the tub was filled with hot water an’ bubbles, her clothes were off an’ she climbed in faster than I could tell her to. “Come on, Rose. Your turn.”

“Hold your horses there, Little Jack. I got more to take off than you.” I stripped an’ slipped into the tub quick as I could. My body was changin’ an’ I didn’t want to be answerin’ no embarrassin’ questions.

“Me first!” Little Jack said an’ splashed me with a face full of water an’ foam.

“Little Jack, cut it out!” I wiped soap away from my eyes.

“I’m washin’ you,” she said an’ splashed me again.

“No you ain’t, you little turd, you’re splashin’ me.”

She giggled an’ splashed me again so I splashed her back an’ drenched her. She didn’t expect that an’ stopped dead, her eyes closed an’ mouth hangin’ open.

I took the wet washcloth, soaked it in the water an’ tossed it over her head, where it landed with a flop. From underneath the cloth I heard her giggle into a hearty laugh. “See? I told ya it wasn’t torture.”

She pulled the cloth off her head an’ stuck it in the water. It disappeared into the bubbles. She stood up.

“Be careful now, Little Jack, it can get mighty slippery.” I found the cloth. “C’mere an’ I’ll wash your face.”

She grabbed the cloth from me. “Me first.”

I let go a big, mock sigh. “All right.” I closed my eyes, not quite sure what to prepare for. It was but a moment an’ my head was soakin’ wet an’ she was gigglin’ again. “Little Jack, we’re wastin’ all this good, hot water. Let’s get this done ‘fore it feels like we’re in that chilly crick.”

“Aw, c’mon, Rose, I’m just havin’ fun.” She was poutin’.

“I know, but we’re getting’ more water on the floor than on ourselves an’ Madame Birdie’ll have my hide for that.” I wasn’t yellin’, I was just sayin’. I handed her the cloth. “Go ahead. Wash my face.”

She took it cloth an’ gently rubbed it all over my face. “How’s that?”

“Why that feels right clean, Little Jack! You done a good job.” I don’t think she really took any dirt off but her face lightin’ up told me it was the right thing to say.

“Now you wash my face.”

I took the cloth, dipped it the water an’ rubbed some soap on it. There was no way I could be as gentle with her little face. That grime looked worn in an’ the Good Lord only knew when she’d bathe again. “Close your eyes, ‘cause this’ll sting if it runs in ‘em.” She shut her eyes tight an’ then held her breath while I scrubbed her face clean. “Breathe or your gonna faint.” She let her breath out an’ opened her eyes. “Why, goodness, Little Jack, if there ain’t a little girl under all that dirt!” I touched the washcloth to the tip of her nose before I rinsed it in the water.

If she was gonna complain about how rough the washin’ had been, she changed her mind when she saw me smile.

“Now, turn around an’ let me get your shoulders an’ back.” She obeyed an’ I scoured her arms, neck, back an’ shoulders as thorough as I could without takin’ her skin clean off. I rinsed the cloth again, spun her around washed her chest an’ tummy. I dipped the cloth, wrung it out an’ handed it to her.

She looked at me, kinda at a loss an’ blinked a couple a times. “Ain’t you gonna wash pete?”

“Pete? Who’s pete?” I was thinkin’ maybe she had a ‘maginary friend no one knew of.

She pointed downwards. “You know...pete!”

“Pete...” I looked to where she was pointin’ an’ it dawned on me. “Oh! *Pete*. Sweetie, first of all, you don’t have a...a...pete. You have a vagina an’ –“

She looked horrified. “A what?”

I shoulda knowed she was too young to be learnin' all that yet, so I just rattled on like I hadn't heard her. "Second of all, you're old enough to be washin' yourself down there." An evil thought came into my head an' I didn't want to ask but I knew I had to. "Little Jack...your pa don't wash you down there, right?"

She shook her head. "Nuh uh. My pa ain't washed me anywhere for a long time now. He tells me to go to the crick and don't forget to wash pete."

I breathed me a sigh of relief. "Okay. Little Jack, I'm gonna tell you somethin' an' I want you to listen to me." My voice was stern.

"Did I do somethin' wrong, Rose?" Her eyes were wide.

"No, sweetie, I just want to make sure you're hearin' me, 's all."

"Kay. I'm listenin'."

"It ain't okay for nobody to be touchin' you down there. That's your private area. That's only for you. Understand?"

She shook her head. "Nuh uh."

"Anybody ever touch you there?"

"Just Madame Birdie last time I had a bath."

"But she just washed you, right?"

"Right. Was that bad?"

"No. But if anyone ever tries to touch you down there or do somethin' that don't make you feel right, you come and tell me, okay?"

She give me a hearty nod of her head. "Kay."

"Promise?"

She held out her pinky finger an' I circled it with my pinky an' we shook. Pinky promises was sacred. "Promise."

"Good. Now, wash your private area an' then I'll lather up your hair." When she finished, she handed the cloth back to me. I turned her back around. "Now sit an' let me do your hair."

She plopped down on her behind which caused water to splash back up in my face an' to slosh over the sides of the tub. "Little Jack! You're gonna get us in trouble, now quit!" I was careful not to yell.

Just then Madame Birdie opened the door. "What in the devil is goin' on in here?" I thought she'd hit roof seein' the floor so wet but she didn't even notice that. "Good Lord in Heaven, Rose, how did you ever get Abigail Grace in a washtub? She hogtied?"

"No, Ma'am, she got in all by herself."

"Last time I tried washin' her, it was like tryin' to wrestle with a rabid weasel!"

"We've had us a good time, ain't we, Little Jack?"

Her little blonde head bobbed up an' down vig'rous-like.

Madame Birdie shook her head, amazed. "Well, I guess I need to start believin' in miracles from here on."

"Madame Birdie, ya know what? I don't have a pete. I have a virginia!" Little Jack's voice couldn'ta been prouder.

"What?" She was clearly confused at what Little Jack was tryin' to tell her. Thankfully.

Before Little Jack could open her mouth again, I said, "I'm gonna wash her hair now 'fore the water gets too cold."

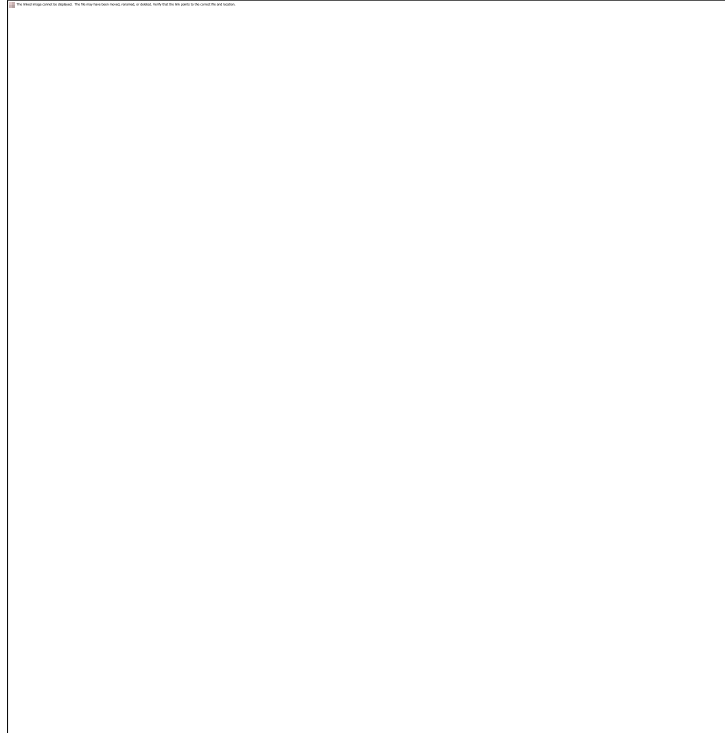
"Alright." She left the room and muttered, "I just can't believe you been washin' her all this time an' she ain't screamin' like somebody's bein' murdered in here." She closed the door.

"Little Jack, did you used to holler like that?"

"Yeah but not no more 'cause you make it fun, Rose."

I finished gettin' her clean, did a quick wash-up of myself an' got out of the tub. I wrapped a big linen around me an' then held out a towel for Little Jack. She climbed out of the tub an' I wiped her hair, dried her off, wrapped her up in the towel an' carried her to my room. I dressed her in one of my cleanin' jerseys 'til I could wash an' hang out her clothes. She was so adorable walkin' around in what looked like a long nightshirt on her. She followed me around the rest of the day, just apin' everythin' I did. She seemed downright sad when Jackknife Jack came to get her to take her home.

She became very special to me that day an' I dare say, I became the same to her.



Little Jack would come visit me whenever her pa would go upstairs with one of the girls or if he was passed out somewhere safe. The visits were often an' that was nice 'cause I truly enjoyed that feisty little girl's company. Then Jackknife Jack called on the pleasure girls less an' less so Little Jack's free time dwindled to an afternoon here an' there. It dropped down to once a month shortly after 'cause Madame Birdie insisted Little Jack get some schoolin'.

Didn't last long, tho. Little Jack didn't wear dresses like the other girls 'cause she didn't have none. I offered to sew her one an' she looked at me like I was a traitor. She didn't want to sit on the girls' side of the room, either, an' that caused a lot of bother with the schoolmarm.

They didn't understand, it didn't matter how pretty Little Jack was, she wasn't no frilly girl an' she wasn't never gonna be one. She stayed in school just long enough to learn to read an' write, which is all Madame Birdie asked of her. I'd try to get her to read stories with me when she'd stop by but she wanted to fish or hunt or do whatever the boys was doin'.

Then, when she did want to spend an afternoon just shootin' the breeze, I was too busy. I'd started workin' upstairs by then an' I couldn't take the time. One mornin', I saw her walkin' with her pa out of Pete an' Betsy Mae's store an' I called her over.

"Hey, Rose," she stood by the back steps with me.

"I'll be inside, Little Jack," Jackknife Jack said.

“Course ya will, Pa. I always know where to find ya.” She looked back at me an’ smiled.
“Gee, Rose, I ain’t seen you in forever.”

“Lord Almighty, Little Jack, when did you start growin’ up?” She looked different. Still pretty as a picture but...older.

“When you weren’t lookin’.” She shoved her hands between her belt an’ trousers.

“I guess. You know you’re gonna have to start bein’ careful around them boys you grew up with.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Cause soon you’re body’s gonna start changin’ an’ you’re gonna look less like your best friend, Jim Dandy, an’ more like Nell.” I used Nell, a big chested gal not much older than me as a ‘xample ‘cause Nell stepped out on the back porch to roll an’ smoke a cigarette. Little Jack’s eyes fastened on Nell’s ample bosom an’ Little Jack shook her head.

“I ain’t never gonna have those,” she told me.

“Well, maybe not that big, but sure as I’m standin’ here, Little Jack, you’re gonna have ‘em.”

“Nuh uh, Rose.”

Nell looked at us both. “I can’t believe you two are talkin’ ‘bout my tits while I’m standin’ right here.”

“We ain’t talkin’ ‘bout ‘em bad, Nell, I’m just tellin’ Little Jack here that someday she’s gonna have some. Maybe even like yours.”

“If you’re lucky,” Nell winked at her.

“No I ain’t.” Little Jack then ran her eyes over my bountiful cleavage. “You’re almost as big as Nell, Rose.”

“Why, thanks for noticin’, Little Jack.”

She pulled out the collar of her shirt and looked down at her own chest. “Lord, I hope He don’t smite me with those things. Looks like cow udders to me.” She looked at me an’ grinned which made me laugh.

Nell wasn’t so amused. “I’m goin’ back inside.” She turned an’ faced Little Jack.
“You’re growin’ up, little girl. You best face it sooner as later. Can’t stop nature.” We

both just looked at her an' she sighed an' walked back inside, mumblin', "Cow udders, my ass."

"How old are you now, Little Jack?"

"I'll be thirteen in two months."

"Thirteen! Goodness, where has the time gone?" Even tho she had got taller an' her face had changed a bit, she was still small. Maybe she always would be. Her pa ain't never been that big; he ain't as tall as me. "You started your monthly curse yet?"

She looked at me, all strange-like. "My what?"

"Nobody 'splained any of that stuff to you yet?"

"I don't know what you're talkin' 'bout, Rose. What curse? Is somebody gonna curse me?" She seemed real upset. I asked her to sit with me an' she did. I told her about what to 'spect from becomin' a woman.

"You sure that's gonna happen to me?" She looked doubtful-like.

"It happens to every woman, Little Jack. It's just a part a growin' up."

"Sounds like a dreadful part. I don't plan on havin' me no babies so why can't I just skip that curse thing?"

"Little Jack, you say that now, 'cause you ain't interested in boys that way. I'm pretty sure things'll change when you get older."

She smiled an' shook her head. "Naw, I don't reckon they will. I just ain't interested in any of that stuff, Rose."

"You're hair needs brushed. Don't go nowheres." I got up an' got the brush from my room. I serviced my customers upstairs in one of the empty bedrooms but I still slept in the same room I had since I came to live at Madame Birdie's. I sat back down on the steps. "Put your back to me." She obeyed an' I started brushin' her hair. It was messy but it was clean. "Little Jack, you're a right handsome young woman. I 'spect soon as you start gettin' a figure to you, you'll have boys sniffin' around you from everywhere."

"My pa'd kill any boy who –"

"Little Jack, ain't no boy gonna try nothin' with your pa around. Get that in that pretty little head of yours right quick. Problem is your pa don't keep no eye on you like you do him. Boys'll be all over you once your pa's passed out. So be 'spectin' it a lot."

"I don't want no boys pawin' me! What do I do, Rose?" She turned to look at me.

“I ain’t tellin’ you to scare you. I’m tellin’ you so’s you’ll know an’ you’ll be ready for it.”

“But I don’t want it.” She leaned back into me an’ I put a reassurin’ arm around her.

“Don’t get riled up now. Maybe you’ll think different when it start’s happenin’.”

“I don’t think so.” She folded her arms tight ‘cross her chest.

I finished brushin’ her hair. “Little Jack? You recall that talk we had a long time ago about your private area an’ how no one but you is supposed to touch you there ‘less you want ‘em to?”

“Yeah.”

“Just remind yourself of that little talk when boys want to start pawin’ at you.”

“Okay, Rose. I’ll try.”



Little Jack just kept getting' prettier an' prettier an' the thing was she just wasn't aware of it. 'Cause it just didn't matter to her. But the young men in town sure noticed, like Cole Sorrells, Henry Spitz, Smilin' Joe, Jim Dandy an' Whiskey Walters. 'Specially Jim Dandy an' Whiskey Walters.

Cole, Joe an' Henry acted like dogs pantin' after a bitch in heat. They was just boys bein' growin' boys. But they was all too scared she'd whup the tar outta 'em if they looked at her wrong. An' she prob'ly woulda. Jim Dandy didn't s'rprise me, he'd been sweet on her for years. 'Course she never saw it, 'cause it wasn't nothin' that appealed to her. She didn't think of or treat him any different 'cause it just never crossed her mind that anythin' 'tween 'em had changed. But Jim Dandy, well, he just got all goofy when he was anywheres near her, not that Jim Dandy wasn't half fool most the time, anyways. There was no doubt that boy was missin' a few pieces of brain matter. Mostly the pieces that called for scruples.

But Whiskey? The way he looked at Little Jack lately sent a shiver down my back, like a hungry wolf huntin' unsuspectin' prey. He was a little older than the other boys an' much younger than some of the original Burnett pack. Quite studly, accordin' to Merry an' unreason'bly brutish most of the time. Some others of Mr. Burnett's gang of roughs also leered at her in a pretty ungentlemanly manner but they looked that way at every gal. It's just that before Little Jack started fillin' out, they all treated her like a little brother. Now they was practically salivatin' at her like starvin' men at a feast. It made my flesh crawl.

Not that I could blame 'em, to a point. Little Jack was a fine lookin' young woman. I don't know who she took after, I would guess her ma. Jackknife's face was so weathered an' aged from drinkin' an' bitterness, it was hard to tell if Little Jack favored him or not. Truth be told, even I was lookin' at her different. Just seemed like one day she was still this kid an' the next day...well, she wasn't. One day, she's a flat-chested stick of a girl an' the next day, she's got a real nice womanly figure. 'Til she started coverin' it with layers of men's clothin'.

She seemed to be unmindful of this an' treated her body's changes as more of a bother than a blessin'. 'Cause to Little Jack, she was still the same rough 'n' tumble little tomboy she was when she was younger. She didn't understand the way men thought an' didn't understand why any of 'em would change their feelin's towards her, 'cause she didn't feel any different towards them. None of 'em ever treated her like a girl, includin' her pa, so the sudden clumsy attempts at courtin' just seemed silly to her. It was like they'd all just gone plumb crazy.

Seemed to me they'd been crazy all along.

Jim Dandy, he tried to kiss her a couple times an' the third time, she blacked both his eyes an' broke his nose. I was hopin' he'd get the message but I guess not. He probably thought she was just playin' hard to get.

Maybe he had more brain matter missin' than I thought.

It was her sixteenth birthday. Betsy Mae baked her a cake an' Madame Birdie was gonna throw her a party. Madame Birdie gathered her girls (all but Linn, who seemed to be the 'sclusive property of Mr. Burnett) an' told us that, as a present, if Little Jack decided she wanted to be with any one of us, then she could have her pick an' that would be Madame Birdie's gift to her. Everybody automatically turned to look at me.

"What are you all lookin' at me for?"

Liberty, a pretty girl with a sultry smile said, "Like she would pick anyone else."

"You don't know that." But deep down the thought of her pickin' anyone else, turned me green with jealousy. "I bet you she don't pick nobody. Little Jack don't think about that stuff yet."

"Anybody whose got the goods to make babies thinks about that stuff," Merry, a short blonde with ringlets, said.

"Now, I don't want nobody makin' a big deal outta this," Madame Birdie said. "Far as we know, Little Jack might already have herself a sweetheart in one of them boys out there. If she don't an' wants to take advantage of my present to her, then I don't want no whinin' from any of ya. I promise ya, takin' care of Little Jack's needs'll be a lot easier than some of the customers you get on a regular basis."

Beatrice, a rather rugged gal who looked as tho she mighta really cottoned to the idea of beddin' Little Jack, surprised us all. "Madame Birdie, I'm sorry but that's just somethin' I can't do. Bein' with another woman in that way. It's just agin' the laws of Jesus."

"Beatrice...you're a harlot!" Liberty reminded her.

"Well – harlots are in the bible, women who lay with other women ain't!" Beatrice said.

Madame Birdie looked at Beatrice, shocked. "You're familiar with the word of God?"

"Only when she says, 'oh, lord, I'm a comin'.'" We all busted up at Liberty's teasin'.

"Hold on a minute," I said. "You mean to tell me that you'll go behind closed doors with Digger, who makes you lay in a tub of ice cold water 'fore he takes you to bed, where you have to stay as still as a corpse before he'll do...whatever it is he does...to you but layin' with another woman is wrong?"

"That's right. Digger's still a man." She put her hands on her ample hips, indignant-like.

"Digger's a ghoul," Nell said an' shuddered.

“He pays extra,” Beatrice said, as if that made it all okay.

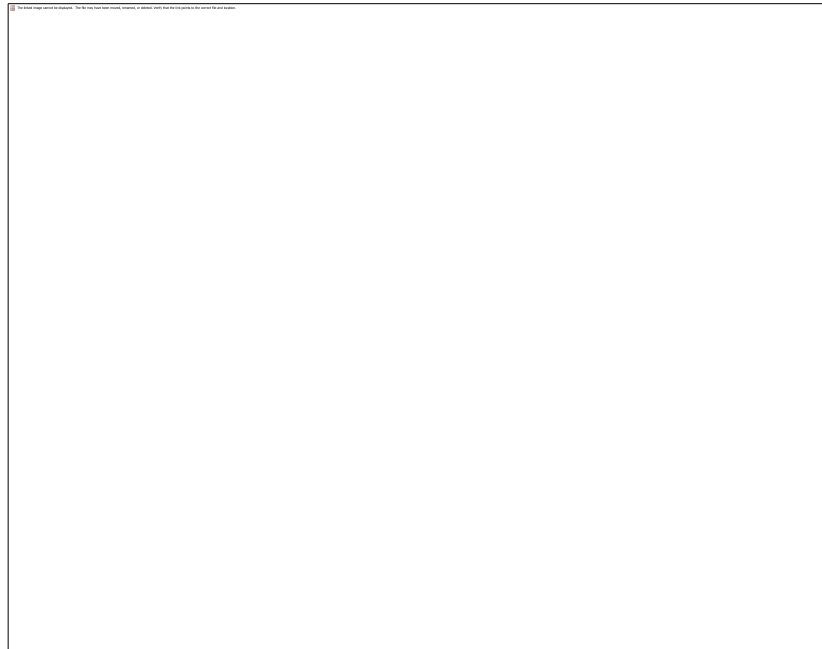
“He could never pay me enough,” Liberty said. “I really don’t think you gotta worry none, Bea. Little Jack’s only got eyes for one of us an’ it ain’t you.”

As we all left to mingle in the saloon, Beatrice suddenly looked insulted. “Why? What’s wrong with *me*?”

Digger was the town undertaker. His real name was Elmer Enlow but everybody knew him as Digger. Undertakin’ was a family business, handed down to him. I don’t think nobody willin’ly goes into the business of tendin’ to dead bodies but somehow I think Digger mighta volunteered for the job on his own. Don’t know if undertakin’ made him peculiar or if he was that way long before he took over the profession after his daddy passed on.

He was a tall drink of water, that Digger. An’ he almost always wore a stovepipe hat that made him seem even taller. It was rare to see him dressed in anythin’ other than his undertaker suit an’ Beatrice said that even when he was bein’ serviced – if that’s what you could call what she did for him – he always wore his longjohns. She said he’d just unbutton the crotch part, haul out what he called his ‘beard splitter’ an’ begin.

Digger would visit Beatrice about once a week an’ always before our official ‘business hours.’ He would slink in an’ slink out like he truly believed no one knew he was a regular customer. No one really cared one way or t’other.



Earlier, I overheard Mr. Burnett talkin' 'bout Little Jack's 'initiation'. He an' Captain Ketner was sitting at the bar before their nightly poker game. He said there were two things she was gonna have to do 'fore she could officially become a Burnett rough an' they were not to let Jackknife know 'bout the second one. I had a bad feelin' creepin' in. I had to go upstairs with a customer 'fore I could hear what they was plannin'. Hopefully, I could get the colonel to tell me 'fore anythin' happened but this wasn't one of the nights he came to see me. This was his poker night with Mr. Burnett an' by the end of it he'd be too drunk to make it upstairs.

"Little Jack!" I called her over.

She walked to me, grinnin' like a barn cat that just caught a mouse. She was feelin' no pain. "Hey, Rose."

"What kinda rotgut they been plyin' you with?"

"I don't know. Somethin' Judd had behind the bar. Drinks are all on Mr. Burnett."

"Walk with me a minute." I linked my arm with hers an' escorted her into the kitchen.

"Whatcha got in mind, Rose?" She arched her eyebrow an' I was a little surprised by her boldness.

"What did you want me to have in mind?" I rested a hand on my hip.

She shrugged. "I don't know...maybe a birthday kiss?"

My heart fluttered at the thought. "Is that what you want from me, Little Jack? A kiss?" I looked deeply into her eyes. I must've made her nervous 'cause she retreated real fast.

"Uh..."

I stepped closer to her, flirtin' deliberately. "You know, Madame Birdie said you could have your pick of any one of us tonight...to help you celebrate your birthday."

"I, uh, know. She told me earlier. Why do you think I'm drinkin' so much? I need to get up the grit."

"You don't want to lose your innocence with one of them boys you hang out with?"

She shyly looked down at her feet then pinned me with a look of lust that near made me lose my breath. “No,” she said, quietly. “I want to be with you.”

I shoulda been shocked, I guess. I mean, we’d knowed each other since she’d been so tiny but I was feelin’ the same about her. “You don’t need to be drunk to get with me, Little Jack.”

“You...you want to be with me, too?” The look of surprise an’ relief on her face was worth her weight in gold nuggets.

I nodded. “I was scared you’d pick someone else, that’s if you picked anyone at all.”

“Lord, Rose, why would I want anyone else? There ain’t no one else. Ain’t never been.” She shoved her hands in her waistband. “I just don’t want to be another customer to you, ’s all. I want to be special.”

I reached over an’ cupped her chin an’ tipped it up so’s that she would look at me. “You are special, Little Jack.”

“Rose, I swear, if you take me upstairs right now, I’m yours. Forever. I’ll never be with anyone else.”

“That’s a promise I wouldn’t ‘spect you to keep. I know I couldn’t keep it to you.”

“I know what you do. I know it’s ‘cause you have to, not ‘cause you want to. I know you can’t promise me your body ‘cause it ain’t yours to promise. But you ain’t give your heart to nobody yet, right?”

I pursed my lips. “Actually, Little Jack, I have.”

She looked so disappointed an’ sad. “Oh. Well, guess I shoulda knowed.”

I lifted her chin again an’ leaned in, surprisin’ her with a gentle kiss. “You’ve had my heart for years.” I was about to kiss her again, a real naughty kiss this time, when someone was callin’ her name from the saloon. I winked at her an’ moved back. “I’ll give you your birthday present later.”

Her face was flushed an’ her smile coulda outshined the sun itself.

“Little Jack! Where’d ya get off to?” It was Jim Dandy. He pushed through the kitchen door. “There you are. C’mon, it’s time for your first initiation.”

I swallowed really hard. “Initiation?” I looked at Little Jack.

“Yeah,” Little Jack said. “I guess Mr. Burnett doesn’t think my growin’ up with the boys means anythin’ so he’s testin’ my loyalty.”

“An’ if she passes, she’ll be a rough, just like the rest of us,” Jim Dandy said with a gleam in his eye.

She swatted at him. “You just got initiated last month, it ain’t like you was born into it.”

I didn’t have to ask her why she felt the need to ‘officially’ join up with Mr. Burnett. It would make her look good in her pa’s eyes an’ it was all she knew. But I was worried ‘bout what the ol’ coot had in mind for her. He was not a nice man an’ more times than not, he thought with his crotch. “You be careful. An’ remember what I told you.”

She cocked her head. “Told me? ‘Bout what?”

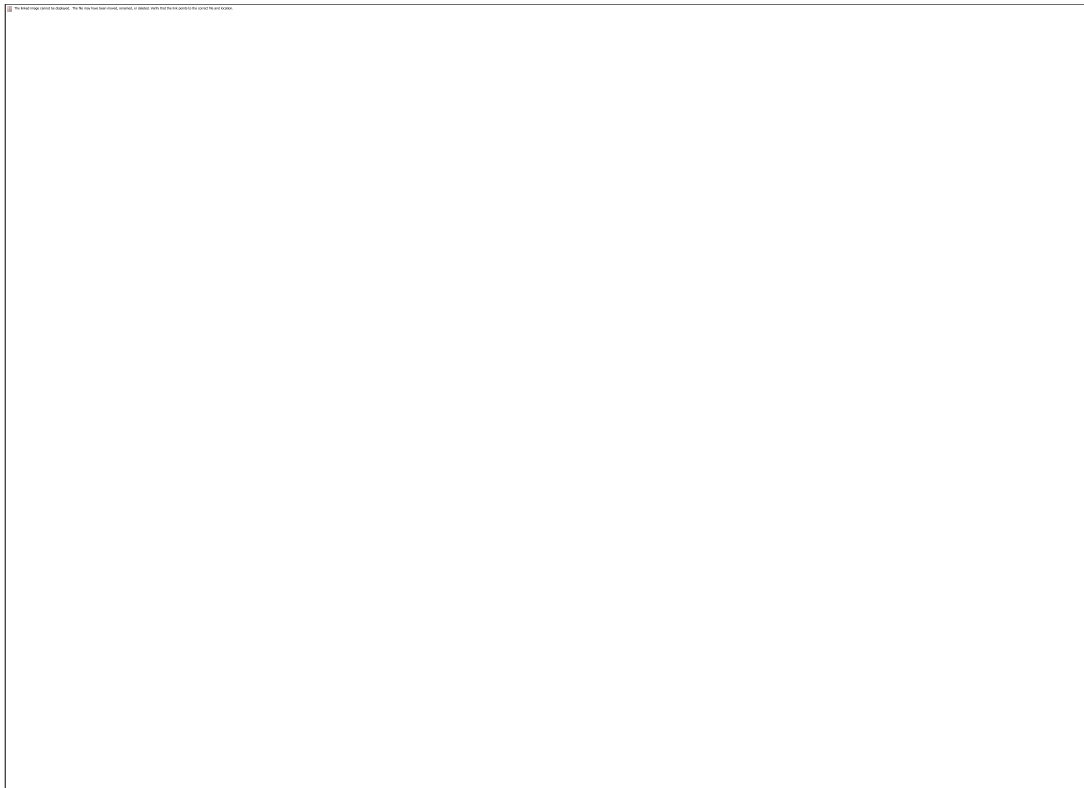
“Virginia an’ Pete.”

It took her a moment an’ then she busted out laughin’. She stepped forward an’ hugged me. “I’ll be back later.”

I squeezed her tight. “You’d better.”

Jim Dandy pulled her back through the door. “Don’t wait up for her.”

I walked out to the saloon an’ watched them leave, followed by a few other roughs an’ then Whiskey Walters. I got a sick feelin’ in the pit of my belly.



I tried not to get involved with any customers, waitin' for Little Jack to return. My heart pounded with anticipation of havin' her in my bed, 'specially knowin' she wanted to be there. I ended up losin' a whole night's business, waitin' on that girl. By the time Madame Birdie an' Judd closed up the saloon for the night, I was still sittin' at the bar.

"Rose, you might as well go to bed," Madame Birdie said. "If Little Jack is comin' back at all tonight, she'll know where to find you."

"It's not like her," I said. I was worried. What if somethin' happened to her?

As if Madame Birdie read my mind, she said, "Little Jack can take care of herself, Rose. Whatever's goin' on out there, well, she'll be back when it's done." Her look told me she was just as troubled as I was. She knew what those boys was capable of doin'.

"As much as they were drinking," Judd said, putting his hand on my shoulder, "she's probably passed out somewhere an' sleeping it off."

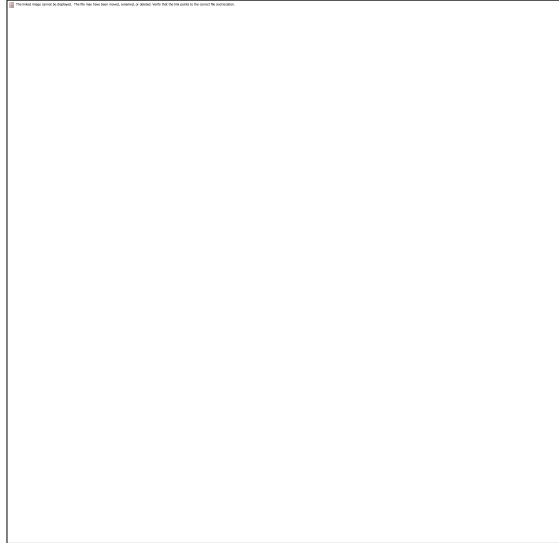
"Do you really think so, Judd?" I asked.

Before he could answer me, Madame Birdie said, "Rose, Little Jack can fight an' shoot just about better'n anybody in this town. An' even as surly as Mr. Burnett is 'bout a woman's place an' even tho Little Jack ain't never behaved like a girl, he'd never do that to Jackknife."

"Do what to Jackknife?" Somehow I knew we wasn't thinkin' the same things.

"Let Little Jack be killed, especially by his own men."

"There are some things worse than death," I said.



I woke up out of a fitful sleep, feelin' like I was bein' watched. It took me a moment for my eyes to get used to the dark an' when they did, I seen a shadow in the doorway. Before I could even rise up, the person spoke.

"It's me, Rose."

"Little Jack!" I flew outta bed. "Where in tarnation have you been? I been worried sick!" I was about to light the oil lamp.

"Don't." Her voice was soft. Strange.

"Little Jack, what happened tonight?"

"I don't wanna talk about it, Rose. Not...not right now. I just...Can you just...hold me while we sleep?"

I pulled her to me. Her clothes an' hair was damp. She stunk like stale liquor, vomit, blood an' semen. "No. No, Little Jack, what'd they do to you?" Tears stung my eyes an' fell no matter how I tried to hold 'em back.

"Not now, Rose," she said. Her tone was quiet-like.

"Take off those clothes an' put on one of my sleepshirts," I told her. I reached over and grabbed one outta my bureau.

She did what I asked. My eyes'd really got used to the dark an' I saw the bruises and cuts on her behind when she took her trousers off. She slid the shirt over her head an' turned around. I took her wrist an' led her to the bed. She laid down an' faced the wall an' I snuggled up behind her. She stiffened up.

“Relax, Little Jack. I know you gotta be hurtin’,” I whispered. “I’ll hold you real careful.”

She nodded. “That’s...thanks..just hold me, Rose.” She scooted back ‘til her skin was touchin’ mine. I put my arm around her waist. She was cold an’ shiverin’.

I kissed her shoulder. “You might need to see Doc Morrison ‘bout them cuts an’...other things.”

“I ain’t seein’ no Doc Morrison. I scrubbed myself in the crick for a long time, ‘fore I come here.”

“Please, Little Jack, tell me what happened?” She didn’t need to. My ‘magination told me enough.

“Go to sleep, Rose.”

Those was the last words we spoke ‘til late mornin’. It took a while ‘fore I could go back to sleep. I was so blasted furious, if I’d had any one of them boys in front of me, I woulda killed ‘em all with my bare hands. They had no right to do that to Little Jack! She was one of ‘em, she’d always been one of ‘em! It shouldn’ta mattered if she had a different body than they did, she was as much a boy in her head an’ in her pa’s head as any of ‘em. And to know that Victor Burnett had ordered it made me wanna kill him first.

If she hadn’t been drunk, maybe she coulda fought ‘em off. If I had taken her upstairs when she asked me to, she never woulda gone with ‘em. If, if if...

In the mid-mornin’ light, I inspected Little Jack closer, hopin’ I wouldn’t wake her. Her face, so beautiful in sleep, was blackened on her right cheek an’ jaw with purplish-blue marks. There were a few scrapes by her eye an’ forehead that were beginnin’ to scab over. I had already seen her arms, legs an’ backside. I couldn’t help but wonder what they’d done to her on the inside.

I slid out of bed quietly, put my robe on an’ went to the kitchen, shuttin’ my bedroom door behind me. There was coffee percolatin’ on the stove so I knew someone was up an’ about. I reached for a mug in the cupboard an’ heard the door that led to the saloon swing shut.

“She come back?” Madame Birdie asked.

I took a deep breath, not really sure how much I should say. “She’s in my room.” I turned around an’ looked at her. I guess I didn’t need to say much of nothin’ ‘cause everythin’ musta showed on my face.

“What’s wrong? What happened?” Madame Birdie walked toward my room.

“No. Please. Let her sleep.” I turned to pour my coffee.

“What happened to her, Rose?”

“I honestly don’t know. She didn’t wanna talk about it. But she was mighty beat up.”

Madame Birdie gasped. “They beat her up?”

“Worse, I reckon. If the smells stickin’ to her clothin’ was any hint.”

“Oh, no. No, no, no, not Little Jack! Mr. Burnett’ll kill those boys when he-“

“Mr. Burnett told them to do it!” I lowered my voice as not to wake Little Jack. “I heard him an’ the Captain talkin’ yesterday.”

Madame Birdie was clearly shocked. “Why that son-of-a-serpent! I hope Jackknife don’t find out.” We sat opposite each other at the table. “How is she?”

“I don’t know yet. She just wanted to go to sleep. We didn’t talk.” I wanted to cry all over again. Little Jack seemed so, I don’t know, broken.

“She needs to see Doc Morrison.”

“I said the same thing to her. She’s havin’ none of it. Maybe she thinks she’s provin’ her loyalty to Mr. Burnett by not sayin’ nothin’. Maybe she’ll listen to you. She’s always looked up to you.”

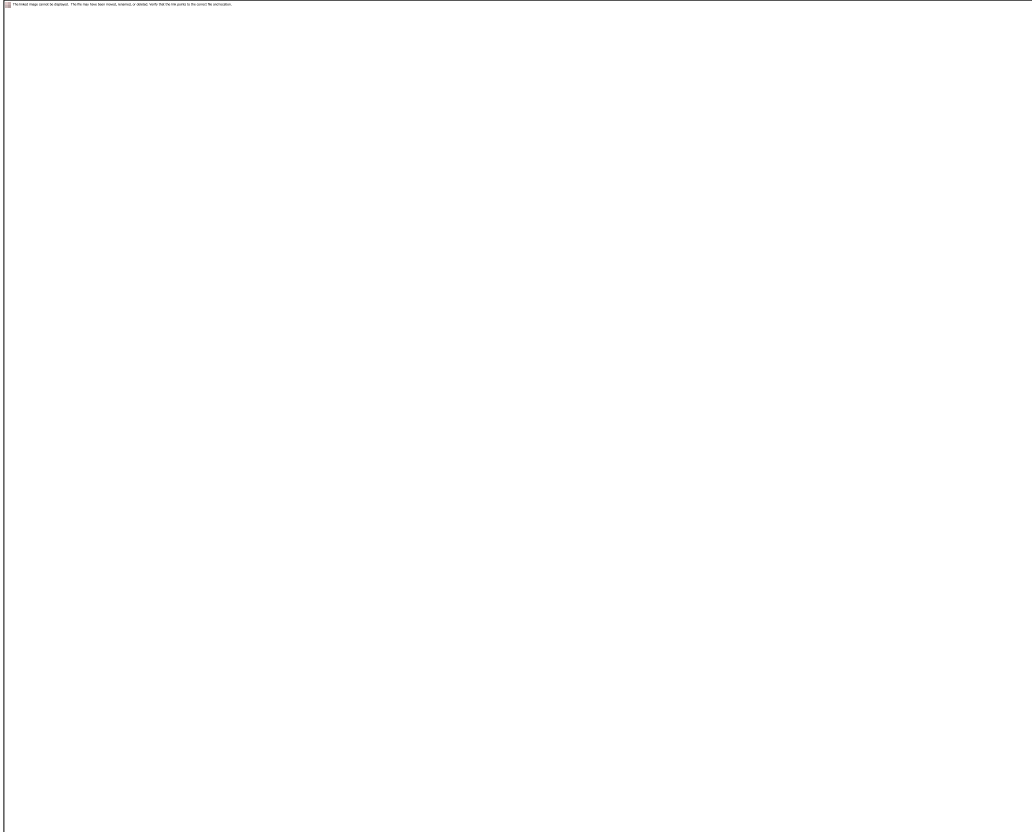
“Maybe. But she’d do anything for you, Rose. If you can’t get her to talk about it, I doubt anyone can.” She reached over an’ patted my hand.

“Then I dare say, ‘til she’s willin’ to talk, we’ll be guessin’. I just can’t believe they did that to her.”

“Of all people, Little Jack didn’t deserve it.”

“Nobody deserves it. Not even whores.”

Madame Birdie gave me a kind smile. “You’re right, Rose. Not even whores.”



I checked on Little Jack throughout the day an despite everythin' I assumed happened, she seemed to be sleepin' peaceful-like. I finally woke her up 'fore my evenin' was to begin. I sat on the bed, leaned over an' gave her a soft kiss on her bruised cheek. I rubbed her arm 'til she started to stir. Suddenly she jolted an' tried to sit up, lookin' around, wild-eyed. "Hey, hey – Little Jack, it's me."

She had a crazed look about her 'til she saw it was me an' she wasn't in any danger. "Rose."

"I have to go to work. I don't want to leave you but I lost a lotta business last night, waitin' on you, so I have to be out there tonight."

She tried to stretch but her wounds clearly called to mind her bein' sore an' what had got her that way. She got real quiet for a minute an' then she looked up at me, a little smile showin' on her face. "You waited on me all night?"

"Of course. We had a date, remember?" I asked, pushin' some unruly hair away from her face. Her right eye was nearly swollen shut now.

"Yeah. Sorry 'bout that, Rose. I was mighty drunk. I kinda passed out." She looked away from me. "I don't remember much after that." We both knew she was lyin'.

“It looks like you got stomped by a steer. Do you remember how that happened?”

“Nuh uh.” She was starin’ at the blanket coverin’ her.

“Sure you don’t wanna go see Doc Morrison?” I was tryin’ to be gentle with her.

“Don’t need to see him ‘bout nothin’. I been worse. I’ll be good as new in a day or two.”

“If you say so, Little Jack.” It was hard to keep the disappointment outta my tone. “Well, I went to see Doc today for you and –“

“Rose! What’d ya do that for?” She was real upset.

“I didn’t tell him it was about you so simmer down there, Little Jack. I’ve had to go to him before when me or the other girls got beat up.”

Her eyes got real squinty. “You been beat up?”

“Yes. Some of my customers get a little rough sometimes.” I pointed to the dresser. “There’s a heap of stuff there to fix yourself up. I’m sure you know what to do with it.”

“Someone’s hurt you? I’d killed ‘em if I’d knowed that.”

“Then you know how I feel right now.” She seemed almost s’prised as I was to see a tear fall down her face. “I gotta go. You can stay in here as long as you want. I mean that an’ I don’t care if it’s days.”

“Thanks, Rose, but my pa’s prob’ly lookin’ for me. Don’t need to make him any crazier then he already is.”

“I’ll let him know you’re okay. Why don’t you stay here another night or two an’ let them bruises calm down a bit. I washed your clothes an’ they’re almost dry. There’s a hearty pot of stew on the stove an’ you know how to heat the water for tea.”

“Thanks, Rose.”

I took her hand in mine an’ paused. “Uh...there’s a pill on the dresser I want you to take.”

“For my achin’?”

I shoulda lied to her. “No, Sweetie. It’s a pill Doc Morrison orders from a place overseas, ‘specially for all us girls here at the saloon. It’ll make ya pretty sick a coupla hours after you take it but it’ll work.”

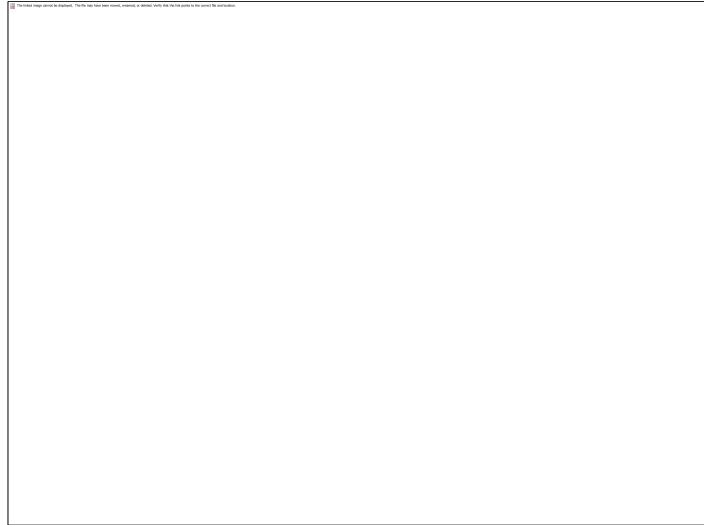
She looked at me, doubtful-like. “Work for what?”

“Not havin’ unwanted company in your belly.”

It took her a few seconds, then she yanked her hand away. “What’re you sayin’, Rose?”

“Let’s stop kiddin’ each other, Little Jack, you know what I’m sayin’.”

She shook her head an’ laid back down, turnin’ away from me. “Go to work, Rose.”



Distinctly missin’ from the rowdy regulars at the Silver Dollar when I got out there was Whiskey Walters, Jim Dandy an’ Henry Spitz. Either they was still sleepin’ off their drunk or they was too yellabellied to be around Jackknife, not knowin’ what he mighta heard. If I was them, I’d a been much more scared of what Little Jack might do, next time she saw ‘em.

I was truly surprised to see Cole Sorrells shuffle in. He looked around an’ seemed relieved when no one paid much attention to him. He needed to shave an’ he looked real drawn. His eyes darted around like he presumed to see the devil hisself after him. I watched him from the upstairs landin’ where I’d just left a room, entertainin’ a saddle bum ridin’ through town. Cole went to the bar an’ took a drink from Judd an’ threw it back like it was water, then drank another.

Cole kept stealin’ glances at Jackknife, like he was expectin’ an ambush. Lucky for Cole, Jackknife was three sheets to the wind. Earlier, when I told Jackknife that Little Jack was sleepin’ off her birthday overindulgence, he was already half in the bag. He just cackled an’ said, “Chip off the ol’ block, that boy!”

I felt like haulin' off an' slappin' him a good one but all that woulda done is give me a sore hand. I just wanted to scream at him, *If you hadn't raised her an' treated her like a damned boy, makin' her dress an' act like a boy so's you'd accept her, last night mighta not happened the way it did!* But I knowed Jackknife did the best he could an' considerin' how much I thought of his daughter, he hadn't done a horrible job, tho I think Little Jack did most of her own rearin'.

By the time I got to the bottom step, I was just in time to cut off Cole's beeline towards Jackknife. I linked my arm through Cole's an' spun him in the opposite direction. "What're you thinkin', Cole? Gonna confess your sins to Jackknife?"

He stopped dead an' stared at me, startled an' guilty. "Wh-? What are you talkin' about, Dusty Rose?"

I lowered my voice an' spoke in his ear, lettin' other's think I was makin' an indecent suggestion. "I'm talkin' 'bout Little Jack's initiation last night. If you don't wanna end up with a cross planted above your brow, you best stay away from Jackknife. Come upstairs an' confess your sins to me."

"Dusty Rose, I'd love to but I don't got the money to —"

I reached down an' grabbed me a handful of Cole's manhood an' squeezed. "I ain't askin' you up for a good time, Cole. Now, you come upstairs with me this instant or I'm gonna make sure there ain't never gonna be any little Cole Sorrells runnin' around."

"Ow. Damn, Dusty Rose..." He walked upstairs with me, real docile. I only let go of his family jewels when we got to the room I used for customers.

I shut the door an' leaned against it. Cole held onto his crotch an' moved away from me, real quick. "How much do you know?"

"I know me a whole lotta nothin'. 'Cept somethin' bad happened last night an' Little Jack ain't talkin'."

Cole looked relieved. "You seen her?"

"Yep, I seen her. She looks like hell." I folded my arms. My heart was poundin' in fury.

"Where is she, Dusty Rose? I gotta talk to her." His voice was pleadin'.

"You ain't getting' anywheres near her."

Then he did somethin' that shocked me. He fell to his knees an' started to cry. "I didn't know they was gonna do that, Dusty Rose, you gotta believe me."

"Who did what to who? What in holy hell happened last night?"

“I thought the initiation was to go after Obie Washburn for stealin’ that wagon of ‘shine that was supposed to go to the Silver Dollar. It was gonna be Little Jack’s job to kill him. If she did, she was in. That’s all I knew.”

Obie Washburn had been achin’ to get hisself killed for a while. He’d constantly do stuff just to see if he could get away with it. It begun with little stuff that nobody really noticed missin’ an’ he just got more darin’ from there. When he started stealin’ from Victor Burnett, he crossed a line of no return. It was only a matter of time before Obie met his maker at the hands of one of Burnett’s hired guns. It made me sad to think that Little Jack had to kill someone to be accepted as a rough but at least it would be someone no one would miss. “So did she kill him?”

“Yeah. She didn’t even blink. He started to draw an’ she cut him down quicker ‘n anybody I ever seen.”

“Then what happened?” I held my breath. Did I really wanna hear this?

“That’s when everythin’ started goin’ crazy. Henry had him a bottle he took from his pa. Some kind of bourbon. We all started drinkin’ again an’ I thought we was goin’ back to the Silver Dollar. Jim Dandy had him other ideas. Little Jack was pretty drunk by then. Henry kept givin’ her two shots to our one. One was ‘bout all I could handle ‘cause I started feelin’ pretty sick. I remember us all findin’ a spot over by Smokey Crick an’ Little Jack and I sat down. She asked if she was now one of Victor Burnett’s boys. Whiskey looked at her real funny an’ said, ‘Not yet.’ Henry an’ Whiskey jumped on her an’ tried to hold her down. She fought ‘em real hard but she was too drunk. She kept yellin’ for me to help her...an’ I couldn’t. I couldn’t even stand up.” He was sobbin’. I almost felt bad for him.

“What happened?” I could barely get the words out. I was ready to chew nails an’ spit rust.

“They turned her over on her belly an’ Jim Dandy got hisself, uh, *ready* while they was rippin’ her trousers off. He...he, uh, shot some of hisself on her bare backside. Then he got on top of her an’ told her this was how boys took it. She wanted to be a damned boy so bad, this is how they did it.” Cole looked away an’ wiped his eyes.

“Was it just Jim Dandy?” I wiped my eyes, too. It was too vile too think about, what they had done.

“Yeah. She’d fought ‘em so hard, no one had any might left in ‘em. Henry threw up on her an’ passed out. He an’ Whiskey never touched her. Not like that, you know, like Jim Dandy.”

“Whiskey never -?”

Cole shook his head. “Nope. Just held her down. When he was done, Jim Dandy told her she was now a Burnett boy. Then he blacked out. Whiskey, well he just watched, lit up a cigar an’ walked over to the crick an’ took a piss. I was sick an’ dizzy an’ ‘fore I blacked out, I saw Little Jack crawl out from under Jim Dandy, pull up her trousers an’ just wail on him. She messed up Henry pretty bad, too. I don’t think they’ll be entertainin’ any female comp’ny for a while.”

“And what about Whiskey?”

“He just left after he was done pissin’ in the crick. I don’t know if Little Jack caught up to him or not. I was out by then.”

“She didn’t try to hurt you?”

“No. She knew I woulda helped her if I could.”

“Then why do you feel so guilty?”

“Cause I shoulda knowed! I should knowed what they had in mind! I shoulda kept myself clearheaded. I couldn’t help her.” He pounded his fist on the bed. “I can’t be with Burnett. I just ain’t cut out for it. I just don’t have it in me to do that kinda stuff.”

“Then walk away, Cole.”

“He’ll kill me, Dusty Rose. Victor Burnett don’t let nobody walk away, you know that.”

“Go talk to Will. He’ll help you. He don’t see eye to eye with his Pa. He’ll help keep you outta Mr. Burnett’s way.”

“You think Will would really help me?” His eyes were all red an’ bloodshot.

“If you’re serious about changin’ your path, I know he will.”

“Do you think Little Jack would go to Will with me?” He stood up.

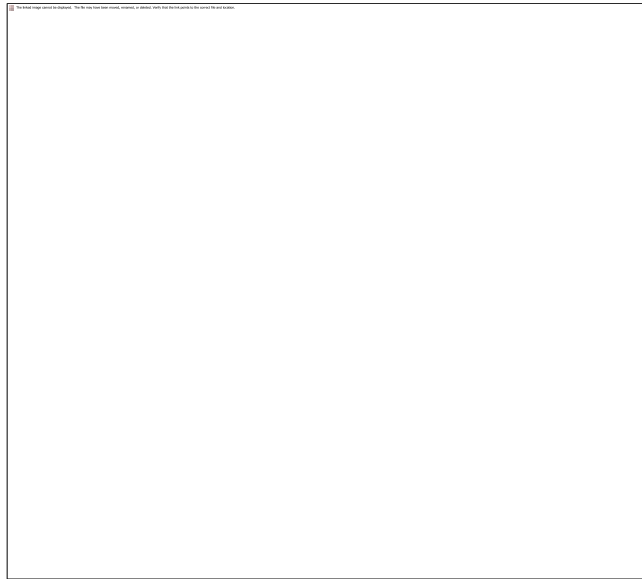
“Cole, what happened to Little Jack last night was dreadful. But she has no aim to do nothin’ else with her life. She grew up bein’ groomed to be a rough.” It was sad but true. I wished she’d change her mind, ‘specially after last night, but I know Little Jack would see that as her showin’ weakness.

“Even after what they done to her?”

“Yes. That’ll make her more intent on stayin’. She’s gonna show ‘em they ain’t gonna break her. The way she took care of Jim Dandy an’ Henry afterwards showed that. She ain’t gonna run away ‘cause she wants this. You don’t. This is all she knows. You ain’t

always lived in this town an' you got places to go if you choose to leave. Little Jack? She don't have no choices. None that she recognizes as such anyway."

Cole slipped out through the upstairs back door. He didn't want to be caught in the saloon, in case Whiskey Walters was there now. He thanked me with a hug an' went off to find Will. I hope I didn't have more faith in Will Burnett than was really there.



The rest of the evenin' went downhill from there. It started when I 'accidentally' spilled a cup of steamin' hot water onto Whiskey Walters, who was at the bar when I came downstairs from my fourth customer after Cole left. I saw him there, grinnin' an' chucklin' with Smilin' Joe an' Bobcat Roberts, a crusty, one-time trapper, who always dressed in animal pelts. Bobcat was also one of Mr. Burnett's roughs. On the other side of Whiskey was Jackknife who was pattin' Whiskey on the back, laughin' with him. If Jackknife Jack knew what Whiskey had done the night before, he'da been slappin' him on the back with a hatchet, I bet.

I inched my way to the bar between Bobcat an' Whiskey an' asked Judd if he'd find me a teabag for one of my customers while I went to the kitchen to heat some water. Bobcat pinched my behind, then swatted me in the same area an' I made a point of gigglin' coy-like to make him think I liked it an' then I walked to the kitchen.

"You come on back, Dusty Rose," Whiskey called out after me. "I'll show you a real good time tonight."

Not tonight you won't.

While I waited for the water to heat, I checked on Little Jack. She was sound asleep an' I was happy to see that. It was clear she had used some of the salves but that pill was still where I left it. Knowin' what I knowed now, if Cole was tellin' me the truth, she wasn't gonna need it. There was a half-empty bowl of stew on the nightstand, along with a mostly drunk cup of tea. I watched her for a few minutes, wishin' I could crawl in right beside her, then I smiled 'cause I knew that later, I could.

Back in the kitchen, I filled a mug with boiled water an' brought it back to the bar, takin' my place between Bobcat an' Whiskey. After Judd handed me the teabag, I plunked it into the mug an' turned around real fast in Whiskey's direction. That made me stop 'fore I ended up fallin' on him an' that caused the hot water to spill out of the mug all over his lap.

Oopsy.

I gushed serious apologies but I'm not sure anyone heard me over Whiskey's screams of pain. When I was able to get away from the ruckus, I noticed Madame Birdie was standin' next to me. We watched as a bunch of men helped Whiskey out the door.

"Never knowed you to be clumsy," Madame Birdie said to me, in a tone that let me know she was aware of 'xactly what I done.

Suddenly Victor Burnett was standin' in front of us. "Birdie, this one," he nodded my way, "is trouble. Always has been."

"Mr. Burnett, it was an accident," Madame Birdie told him.

"Is that so? Then why ain't she rushin' back to the kitchen to make another cup of tea for her customer?"

Damn it! He was too wily for his own good. Clearly for my own good, too. "Mr. Burnett, I told Mr. Walters I was sorry..."

The slap came outta nowheres an' it stung like a swarm of hornets. "You're gonna be sorry. Bobcat told me that you didn't take any customers yesterday. Why not?"

I was holdin' my hand over the place he just hit. "I...uh..." I couldn't tell him I was waitin' for Little Jack. That wouldn't sit well for me or Little Jack. "I was waitin' for Captain Ketner."

"Liar!" He hit me again, slammin' my hand deep into my face, nearly knockin' me into Madame Birdie.

"Mr. Burnett, that's enough!" Madame Birdie told him.

“You don’t tell me what’s enough, Birdie! I tell you!” He looked over his shoulder.
“Moose! Take Dusty Rose, here, upstairs an’ give her what she needs. She’s done for the night with anyone else.”

My eyes musta got as wide as pie tins ‘cause Mr. Burnett just started laughin’ that evil laugh of his. Moose picked me up, slung me over his shoulder an’ took me upstairs, where he threw me on the bed an’ kicked the door shut.

Moose was a big colored man, the size of a Grizzly Bear, standin’ on its hind legs. He was Victor Burnett’s muscle. No man or woman enjoyed bein’ in the company of Moose when Moose was your punishment. Moose was a huge man –down there - with an untold amount of stayin’ power. Servicin’ him was never pleasant an’ when he was riled up, like right now, he had a way of makin’ you feel like you was bein’ split in two. I grit my teeth an’ took it because I didn’t have a choice an’, in a way, I brung it on myself. But it was worth every agonizin’ thrust, knowin’ I’d finished the job for Little Jack.

Three hours later, I was able to get up outta that bed. Moose’d left maybe a half-hour earlier. It hurt to move, it hurt to walk an’ I knew it was gonna be torture to pee for the next couple days. I took the sheets off the bed an’ brought ‘em downstairs with me. I’d wash ‘em when I got up.

The saloon was closed an’ everyone but Judd an’ Madame Birdie was gone. Judd was cleanin’ up the bar an’ Madame Birdie was waitin’ for me. She watched me walk down the stairs very slowly.

“Oh, Lord, Rose.” She ran to me an’ hugged me, all careful-like.

“It’s okay. I won’t break.” I was entirely too brave as I wasn’t sure if that was true or not.

“I never thought he’d set Moose on you. Are you okay?”

I smiled. It was weak but it was there. “I will be.”

“How bad did he hurt you?” Judd asked. He came out from behind the bar.

“Ain’t nothin’ he ain’t done before. Least I was ready for it this time.” I said.

“That damned Moose.” Judd shook his head. “He knows he terrifies an’ hurts the girls.”

“That’s why Mr. Burnett uses him. I actually feel sorry for Moose.” They both looked at me like I lost my mind. “Moose has gone from bein’ a slave to bein’ a paid hand for Mr. Burnett. He’s a free man now but he ain’t. No one’s free who works for Mr. Burnett. I sit an’ talked to Moose an’ he ain’t a bad man. He knows Mr. Burnett’s the only one who’ll work him like he works the others an’ not treat him like a freed slave. So he does everythin’ Mr. Burnett tells him to do whether he wants to or not.”

“You got a lot more mercy in you than I do,” Madame Birdie said. “Last time Merry got on Mr. Burnett’s bad side an’ he punished her with Moose, Doc Morrison had to sew her up down there.” She looked at me, hard. “Do I need to send you to the doc?”

I shook my head. “Naw, I hurt an’ it’s sore down there an’ there was a little blood but I don’t feel tore up. I think I’ll be okay. I’ll let you know tomorrow.”

“You better.” Madame Birdie said. “Get yourself cleaned up an’ go to bed.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” I gave her a little, half-assed salute an’ Judd smiled.

“You still got that visitor in your room?” Madame Birdie asked me after Judd went to the back.

“Far as I know she’s still there. I found out what went on from Cole Sorrells.”

“Bad?”

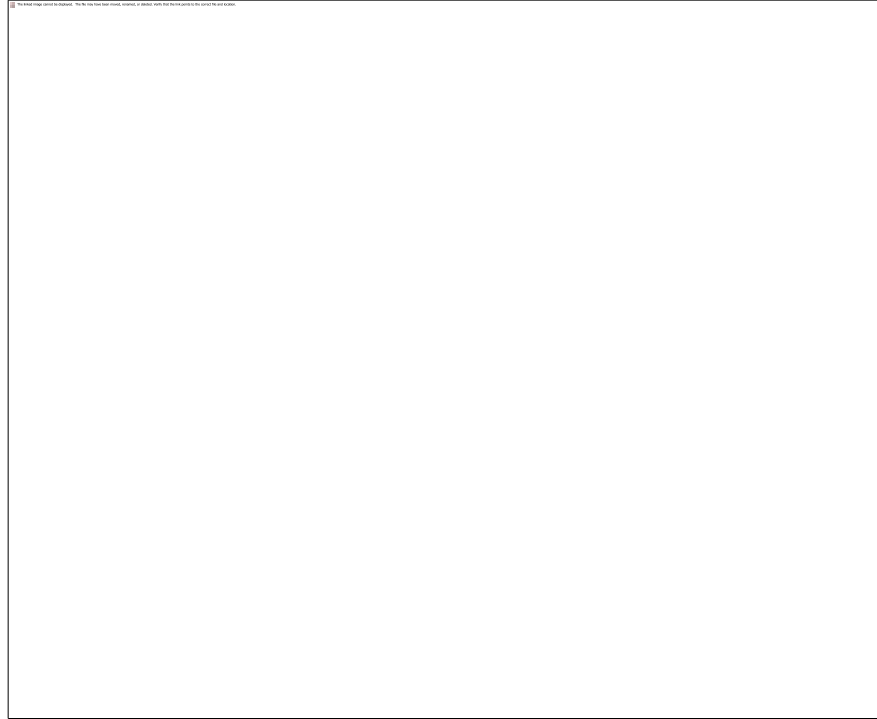
“Yeah.”

“Want to talk about it?”

“No. I just want to go to bed, hold Little Jack an’ make it all go away. For both of us.”

Madame Birdie nodded. “The only way that’ll happen is if you both move away from here. An’ I know Little Jack would never leave her pa.”

“I know that, too. Little Jack was born here an’, sadly, she’s gonna die here.”



After I cleaned myself up, I went back to my room, got undressed an' slipped in next to Little Jack. I had to push Little Jack over to the other side 'cause she was hoggin' the whole bed. When she tried to roll back over, she flopped most of her body over me. That made her stir.

"Hey, Rose." Her voice sounded rough an' sleepy.

"Hey, Little Jack. How are you feelin'?"

"I'm okay. How was your evenin'?"

"Same as always," I lied. I started to rub her back. "Does this hurt?"

"Nuh uh. Feels nice." She suddenly stiffened up. "Rose...you ain't got no clothes on."

"It's too warm, Little Jack. If that bothers you, I can –"

"No. No, it just s'prised me, 's all. I thought maybe you was 'xpectin' us to, well, you know..."

"Even if you was ready for that, Little Jack, tonight wouldn't be a good night for me."

She let out a relieved breath. “I am lookin’ onwards to doin’ that, Rose, I really am but...”

“You don’t need to explain nothin’ to me, Little Jack. I seen how banged up you was. I don’t wanna hurt you anymore than you already are.”

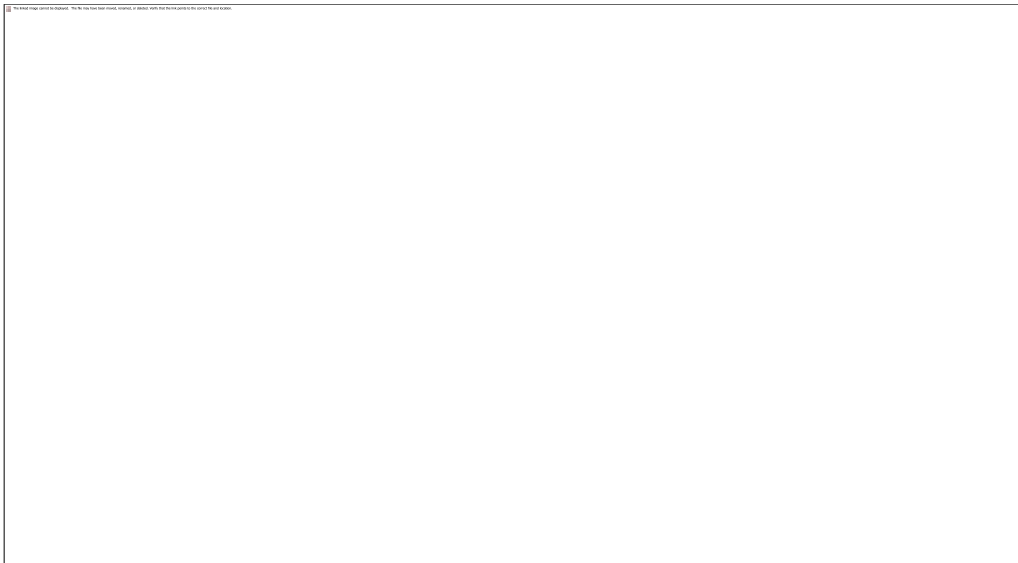
“Honest, I’ll be fine in a few days.” She moved her position a little an’ nuzzled her head into my neck. “This feels really nice, Rose. Maybe I should take off my clothes, too.”

“That might not be a good idea...” Even tho I was mighty sore an’ achin’, the notion of Little Jack’s warm skin against my own was still too invitin’.

“You still want me, doncha Rose?”

“More than you know, Little Jack.” I felt her body unknot, like she just started meltin’ into me. She shyly put her hand on my breast an’, almost at once, fell back to sleep.

This felt more right than just about anythin’ I’d ever knowed.



When I woke up the next mornin’, Little Jack wasn’t there. My nightshirt was layin’ across the bottom of my bed an’ her clothes was also missin’. I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes an’ was curious about where Little Jack might have got off to. My guess was she went home to check on her Pa an’ to maybe try to get her life back to how it was. I think she figured the sooner everythin’ got back to her usual routine, the sooner she’d forget.

After a bit, she might forgive what they did but I knew she’d never forget.

As I 'spected, it hurt to move but I made myself get up, anyways. The smell of fresh coffee found its way to my nose an' woke me up more. I put on a robe an' stepped out into the kitchen, hopin' I'd be alone. I just wanted me a hot cup of coffee an' some time to myself just to mull over everythin' that happened in the last two days.

The kitchen was empty. I poured myself some coffee an' then let it sit while I used the toilet room. I was no longer bleedin' an' I was glad for that but it still burned like fire when I peed. Looked like I was gonna be makin' another trip to Doc Morrison, for myself this time.

When I got back to the kitchen, Liberty was there. She poured herself a cup of coffee an' sat at the table. I took my cup an' joined her. "I saw Little Jack sneak out of your room this mornin'. Two days, huh? She musta enjoyed it." Liberty's smirk was downright bawdy.

I just smiled into my cup as I took a sip. I didn't know what to say. I knew Liberty was probably the one who gossiped the least of all Madame Birdie's girls but would tellin' her anythin' betray Little Jack?

"So... 'fess up, Rose, how was it?"

I set my cup down an' grinned at her. "What happens behind closed doors with Little Jack an' me is gonna stay private."

"Come on, now, Rose, that just ain't fair! We all had a bet that Little Jack is as much a wildcat in bed as she is otherwise."

"Who's 'we all'?"

"Now, who do you think?"

It tickled me that they all wondered what beddin' Little Jack was like. It tickled me more that they would never know. At least not from my lips. "I care for Little Jack, Liberty, an' I ain't gonna talk about her like a customer. What we have is, well, special."

Liberty stopped smirkin' an' stared at me, all serious-like. "Damn, Rose...you ain't in love with Little Jack, are you?"

"I ain't puttin' a name on it, Liberty. My feelin's for Little Jack, they're personal."

"Personal. Uh huh. So I ain't getting' no details outta you?"

"Nope."

She finished her coffee. "Honestly, I don't know how you coulda done much of nothin' after you got done by Moose."

“Oh, you heard ‘bout that?”

“Beatrice was on the floor when Burnett told Moose to take you upstairs. That damned Beatrice is the only one who don’t mind the size of Moose’s pecker an’ can’t understand what all the fuss is about. I’m surprised there ain’t a thunderin’ echo when she has her legs in the air.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at that. “Liberty, I do declare, the things you say.”

“Well, it’s true, ain’t it? She should hook herself up with a bank robber. I know the perfect place they could hide them bags of loot. Pretty sure the law would never look there.” She reached over an’ patted the back of my hand. “You bleedin’ much?”

“I was but it stopped.”

“You tell Little Jack what Moose done?”

“No. No need. It’ll just rile her up an’ it ain’t like she can do anythin’ to him. He’d kill her in a fight an’ if she shot him, Mr. Burnett’d kill her.”

“Didn’t think of that.” Liberty finished her coffee an’ rinsed the empty cup out. “You gonna go see the doc?”

“Yep. I don’t wanna but I don’t dare to miss any business tonight. Mr. Burnett’s watchin’ me like a hawk.”

“That old buzzard’s always watchin’ you like a hawk. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say he wanted you hisself.”

“The idea of that makes me ill. An’ even if it didn’t, Linn would kill us both.” We knew the only thing Linn saw in the old coot was money but she sure acted like she loved him. “You know an’ I know if Mr. Burnett really wanted me, he’d take me. He ain’t done it yet, so...”

“He prob’ly can’t get it up no more. He’s prob’ly soft as marshmallow sap.”

“Linn must be doin’ somethin’ to keep him happy.” We looked at each other, knowin’ what that meant. I made a face. “Lordy, I hate doin’ that.”

“I don’t mind it, ‘specially when I got the curse. I’d hate havin’ to do that with him, though. Can you imagine the lockjaw Linn must get ‘til he gets done?” Liberty got up an’ poured herself another cup of coffee an’ leaned against the kitchen counter.

“Disgustin’.” I got up an’ washed my empty cup in the sink.

“Funny, you find that disgustin’ but not puttin’ your mouth on a woman down there?”
The voice came from Beatrice at the doorway.

“How long you been standin’ there?” Liberty asked.

“Long enough to hear you talk about Linn an’ Mr. Burnett.” She sounded downright nettled.

“Ain’t nothin’ we ain’t said before so don’t go gettin’ on your high horse,” Liberty said. Her tone was warnin’. Beatrice could be a real pot stirrer without tryin’ an’ she seemed to be happiest when she was instigatin’ somethin’.

“You take Little Jack to bed, Rose?” Beatrice asked me, turnin’ a deaf ear to Liberty.

Before I could say anythin’, Liberty said, “Ain’t none of your damn business, Bea.”

“Now, I wasn’t talkin’ to you, Liberty! Why don’t *you* mind *your* own business?”
Beatrice raised her voice an’ I knew that would bring Madame Birdie into the kitchen.

“Liberty’s right, Bea. Ain’t no reason for you to know one way or t’other. I know it ain’t somethin’ you take kindly to so there ain’t no need for you to know.” I started walkin’ to my room.

“If Mr. Burnett knew what somma you girls do when Judd closes them doors, he’d have y’all shot.” Beatrice said, blockin’ my way.

“Oh, horsefeathers, Bea! He’d prob’ly wanna watch.” I was surprised I’d said that without even thinkin’.

“Dusty Rose Potts, you have a very sick mind!” Beatrice shook her head at me, sad-like.

“He wouldn’t shoot nobody,” Madame Birdie said, shuttin’ the kitchen door. “He’d lose too much money. Now y’all quiet down. Mr. Burnett spent the night upstairs with Linn in his bedroom off the office. If you wake him ‘fore he’s ready, there’ll be hell to pay.”

Liberty, Beatrice an’ I looked at one another, shocked. What was we thinkin’, talkin’ about him when he was sleepin’ right above us? Then I had to wonder...

“I saw him leave last night. He was gone when —“

“He came back,” Madame Birdie cut in. “I went up to the office to look at the ledger just now an’ he was there, wrapped up in Linn, snorin’ up a storm.

Both Liberty an’ I sighed, relieved. The last thing that man needed to overhear was our earlier conversation of his non-workin’ parts. A good beatin’ an’ another round with Moose would surely follow.

I went out to the back porch with Liberty so's she could take her sheets down from the line. I mainly wanted to get away from Beatrice an' her disapprovin' ways. "Why d'you think Beatrice is so interested in what I do with Little Jack?"

"She ain't. C'mon, Rose, she's a harlot, just like the rest of us. She ain't got nothin' to be high an' mighty about. So she clings to that damn bible 'cos she knows the rest of us don't. She thinks that makes her better'n us." Liberty folded the sheets over her arm. "You can't let her get to you."

"Oh, hell, she ain't gettin' to me. I just don't want her causin' no trouble for Little Jack."

Liberty smirked. "Yeah, 'cause she can get in enough trouble all by her little lonesome." Liberty looked me. "And so can you, without even tryin'. I hope that don't end up in an untimely endin' for either one of you."



Little Jack didn't come around for quite a while. I seen her on the street but she stayed away from the saloon an' from me. I was really startin' to get upset 'til she showed up at my door one night after all the customers was gone. I was getting' myself ready for bed when I saw her standin' at my doorway.

"Hey, Rose."

"Hey, Little Jack. What brings you here so late?" I tried to sound like I didn't care but my tone gave me away.

"You okay? You sound funny." She looked at me, troubled.

"I feel like you been avoidin' me an', well, that hurt my feelin's."

“I’m sorry, Rose. It’s just I ain’t been able to get here to see you ‘cause Mr. Burnett’s been watchin’ me an’ he’s still mad as a hornet at you. I heard what you did to Whiskey an’ I ‘preciate it an’ all but I can take care of myself. You don’t need to be doin’ no more to get on Mr. Burnett’s bad side.” She bowed her head. “This was the first night he ain’t had me doin’ something for him or been watchin’ my pa’s to see if I went back there at night.”

“So you’re tellin’ me that ol’ vulture knows ‘bout us?”

Little Jack shrugged. “Can’t say for sure but I guess he fancies we got us somethin’ goin’.”

I felt good an’ bad. Good that Little Jack was tryin’ to protect me as much as I was her an’ that her feelin’s for me hadn’t changed but bad ‘cause she had to go through that awful initiation an’ Mr. Burnett still wasn’t trustin’ her. “What’ll make him quit?”

“My stayin’ away from you, I reckon.”

“Ain’t nothin’ happened between us, though,” I said, sadly.

“Well...not yet...” She looked at me with nervous hope.

I broke into a relieved smile. “So you’re gonna defy Mr. Burnett?”

She stepped closer to me. “I have to, Rose. I want you so bad, I can’t stay away from you. You make me wanna get up in the mornin’ an’ go to sleep at night so’s I can dream of you. I gotta have you, Rose...an’...I’m...um, you know...ready...” Her last words were spoken very soft an’ shy-like.

“You want to spend the rest of the night with me?”

“More’n anythin’.” She looked up at me with such desire, it nearly made my knees go weak. “I even went down to the crick an’ washed up ‘fore I come.”

“Shut the door,” I told her. When she did, I stepped closer to her an’ took her hand. We was both tremblin’. I looked down at her an’ pulled her to me. “I’m gonna make love to you, Little Jack,” I said in my most sexy voice.

She stared into my eyes for a very long time, swallowed hard an’ then said, “I know.”

I started unbuttonin’ her shirt as I kissed her face an’ neck, tender-like. She let her head roll back an’ made a soft moanin’ sound which really stirred my blood. I took her shirt off an’ dropped it on the floor, s’prised to feel that she was naked underneath. Little Jack usually wrapped herself up to look more like a boy but not tonight. I hugged her close, feelin’ her breasts under my own an’ I brought her face back to mine. I began kissin’

those eager lips of hers, a kiss that just stoked the fire in my loins to a high flame. Little Jack may've been new at all this but she sure knew how to kiss. I broke the kiss an' went to step back but Little Jack stopped me.

"Can we douse that light?"

"No. I wanna see you," I told her.

"But..."

"You was a lot less shy when you was eight fingers old," I kidded her.

"Well, yeah. I didn't have nothin' to look at then." She was smilin'.

I took a step backward an' admired her breasts which was just 'bout as perfect as I ever seen. "You sure can't say that no more." They was round an' firm an' just right for her size. "You should be right prouda whatcha got there, Little Jack."

Little Jack turned bright red. "You're embarrassin' me, Rose." Her tone told me she loved every minute of it.

"Get used to it. I'm gonna spoil you rotten in this here room." I kissed her again an' led her to the bed. "Let's get them trousers offa you." She started to unbutton them an' I stopped her hand. "No. That's my job." She fixed her eyes on me, as I removed her pants. She wasn't wearin' nothin' underneath. I was on my knees, starin' at the wiry, yellow, patch of hair that covered the famed Pete and Virginia. "You was pretty sure you was gonna get laid tonight, wasn't ya, Little Jack?"

"I was hopin'." She gasped when I nuzzled her. "What're ya doin', Rose?"

"Somethin' I know you're gonna like." I put my hands on the back of her thighs an' pushed my face into her. I licked her a coupla times, gettin' myself a taste. She was salty sweet an' my tongue took in plenty of all the thick, musky nectar that flowed from her. It was suddenly like mother's milk an' I couldn't get enough of it. Little Jack nearly passed out on me as I moved my tongue in an' around her, collecting her essence an' suckling her where it mattered the most.

"I...I...good Lord in heaven, Rose, I gotta sit down or I'm gonna faint." Little Jack was pantin'. She had a hard time gettin' the words out.

I let her go an' nudged her backwards. "Sit." She did as she was told, waitin' on me to make the next move. I just smiled at her 'fore I put her legs over my shoulders an' got back to what I'd been doin'. It didn't take long 'fore Little Jack was grabbin' handfuls of sheet an' gaspin' for breath. She was tryin' her best to stay in one place but she couldn't help but buck. Her moanin' got louder 'til she grabbed my pillow an' put it over her face. The sound of her climaxin' was muffled by a linen full of goosefeathers.

I watched her belly rise an' fall. "You all right, Little Jack?"

She took the pillow offa her face an' starin' up at the ceiling. "Sweet Jesus, Rose...I ain't never felt nothin' like that before." She propped herself up on her elbows an' looked down at me. "Thought I was gonna die of pleasure. I never woulda thought of puttin' my mouth there. I had no idea how pleasin' that would be. How'd you know how to do that?"

"I know lots of things that'll please you." We just looked at each other. I didn't need to remind her what I did at night an' I didn't want her to know that Liberty had taught me about what to do in bed with a woman. Liberty an' I hadn't got together that often an' there wasn't any real feelin's 'tween us so I didn't think Little Jack woulda benefited from knowin'. I stood up, wipin' my chin on my arm an' began to take off my clothes. Now Little Jack was grateful I left the light on.

When I stood before her, bare as the day I was born, she just stared up an' down my body, open-mouthed. "Damn...you're...you're beautiful. Your prettier than any of them picture postcards Whiskey has from that France place."

I laughed. "Those are some naughty pictures, Little Jack."

"You seen Whiskey's pictures?" Her eyes were wide with s'prise.

"No, I have not seen Whiskey's collection but I seen me a lot of French postcards." I snuffed out the lamp an' crawled on top of Little Jack who spread herself out underneath me on the bed. I loved the feel of my naked body on top of hers. I reached down an' started to lightly rub 'tween her legs. She automatically wrapped a leg around my backside.

"Now what're you doin'?" She already started breathin' heavy.

"You just relax and let me take care of you." She was soaked and ready for me. We started to rock together an' then I moved against her, strokin' to build up the pressure I knew was risin' in her. I watched her eyes watch mine. She was just so trustin' of me that my heart melted. The things I was doin' to her felt almost as good as if she was doin' 'em right back. "Lord, Little Jack, you're so wet."

"What? Is that bad?" She was instantly upset.

"Shhhhhh, shhhhhh, it's fine. You're supposed to be that way. It's you're body tellin' me you want this."

"But I already told you —"

I quieted her with a lustful kiss that lasted until she was ready to spill over again.

“Mmcan’t breathe,” she gasped an’ pulled her lips from mine.

I held her an’ watched her when she came. I didn’t think I’d ever seen anythin’ so glorious. She finally started breathin’ regular. I couldn’t take my eyes off her. “I love you, Little Jack.”

She looked startled, then she smiled really warm. “I love you, too, Rose. You know that. I think I love you more after tonight.”

I hugged her for all I was worth an’ sat up, pullin’ her with me, forcin’ her to straddle me to keep her balance. I reached down an’ moved my finger around her openin’, gatherin’ what was just inside. I brought my finger up to my mouth an’ sucked all the liquid off.

Little Jack just gaped at me. “Oh...my...”

I took her face in my hands an’ kissed her, makin’ sure our tongues touched an’ played. I broke the kiss an’ licked her upper lip. “That’s what you taste like, Little Jack.”

She nodded, smilin’. “What do you taste like? When can I find out?”

“Soon.” I pulled her tight to me, reached down an’ again ran my finger in circles around her openin’. “I’m gonna go inside you. I’ll be real gentle. Are you ready for that?”

She rested her forehead against my chin. I knew she had to be thinkin’ about what Jim Dandy had done to her. I pressed my lips to her hair. “You won’t hurt me, Rose, I know you won’t.” She talked soft-like, soundin’ like a little girl tryin’ to be brave.

“I’d never knowin’ly hurt you...but...I’m gonna take your virginity an’ sometimes that can be rather unpleasant. But only for a moment. Then I promise you, Little Jack, I will make you feel better ‘n I made you feel so far.”

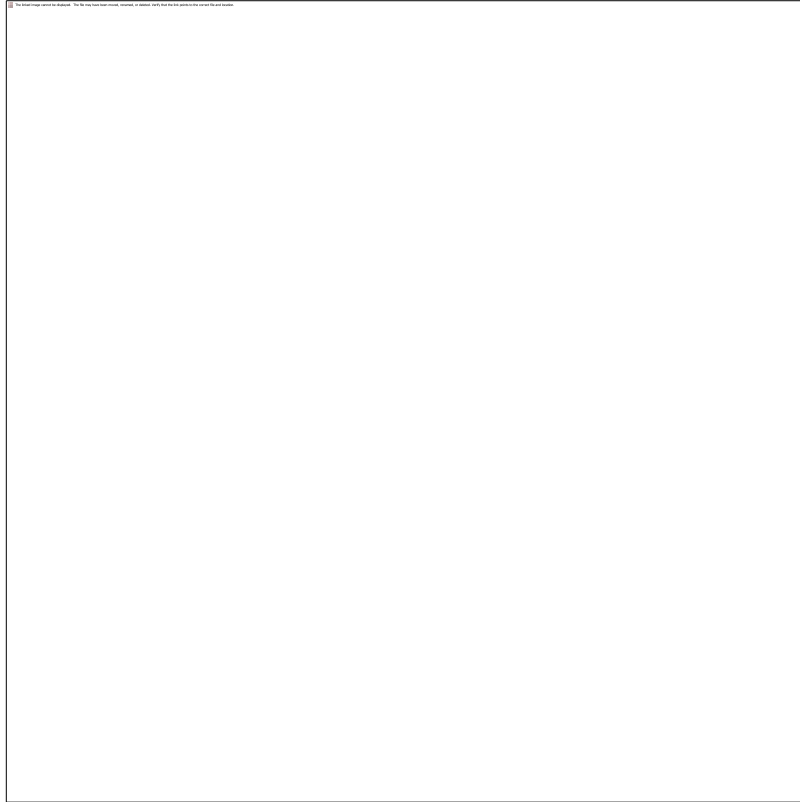
“That can’t be likely.” She raised her head an’ looked in my eyes. “Can it? You can do that?”

I nodded at her. “Just you wait,” I whispered in her ear. I kissed her neck an’ moved my lips back up to her mouth. I kept kissing her while I moved my finger inside her a little more with every push. I felt her maidenhead an’ with one thrust, broke through. Little Jack jumped an’ made a noise into my mouth that told me she clearly felt it. I just kissed her harder an’ touched her center in spots I knew would make her react.

She stopped kissin’ me to bury her head in the crook of my neck, breathin’ harder than I’d ever heard her. I slid another finger in an’ worked my magic. She began to move up an’ down on my hand. I could feel her body stiffen an’ then she held her breath for what seemed like forever. Then it happened. She musta climaxed for a whole minute or more ‘fore she collapsed against me. I laid us both back down.

“When you get your wits back about ya, I ‘spect to be pleased. I think you got a pretty good idea ‘bout what I want.”

“Then get yourself ready, Dusty Rose Potts,” she said as she rolled over on top of me. “We ain’t gonna get us no sleep tonight.”



Little Jack picked up the art of lovemakin’ right quick. I didn’t have to teach her much at all an’ she took right to what she needed to do to taste me. That clearly became her favorite an’ I dare say, with what she could do with that tongue, it promptly became mine, too.

She was a little disturbed when she saw the blood on my hand an’ on the sheets from losin’ her virginity but it wasn’t that much an’ I told her it was natural. Soon it was forgotten an’ we was goin’ at it again. I can’t recall the last time I felt such a longin’ for someone to touch me like Little Jack did, to thrill me an’ fill me with such desire. She made me feel like a lover, like someone worthy of another’s passion an’ devotion, not like the whore that I was. She downright broke my heart at how she felt about me an’ the hope in her eyes that we could be somethin’ more.

When Madame Birdie woke me up, Little Jack was gone. I looked around for her but the only evidence of her bein' there was the dried blood, which I covered.

"Rose, are you ailin'?" Madame Birdie sounded worried.

"No, I'm...I...just slept longer 'n usual." I tried to blink the slumber away an' get my head clear. "How late is it?"

"Why, it's half-past noon. You got sheets to do an' need to get ready for upstairs. You never sleep this late." She stopped an' sniffed the air. "This room reeks of sex." She looked at me. "Rose? Who you had in here?"

"I, uh, I can't say."

She glared at me, then closed the door, lowerin' her voice. "Rose, I love you like you was my own daughter so I'm tellin' you, you gotta be careful. You can't be bringin' customers into your private room. If Mr. Burnett finds out, he'll beat you within a incha your life *and* the customer that you clearly ain't chargin'!"

"She ain't a customer," I said 'fore I thought.

Madame Birdie folded her arms. "She? Was it Little Jack?"

"Yes. I entertained Little Jack all night."

"Belated birthday present?"

"No. It's more 'n that." I looked up at her. She wasn't surprised.

"I figgered as much. I seen it in the way you two've gawked at each other since Little Jack growed up. It don't bother me none 'cause I feel it's hard enough to find someone special on any account but when you work in our profession, it's darned near impossible. You an' Little Jack take what you can get while you can get it. Just don't let Mr. Burnett catch you. He don't understand love, 'specially not one like you two got."

"He don't want me to be happy, Madame Birdie. I don't know why. That man has always hated me."

"He don't like any woman unless they're warmin' his bed. Linn's 'bout the only exception." Madame Birdie took another whiff. "You two musta near burned up them linens. I'm surprised Little Jack had the energy to walk outta here."

I smiled at her. "Me, too."

Madame Birdie patted my shoulder an' left. I stood up, donned my robe an' went to the kitchen. The coffee pot already had the guts rinsed out an' everythin' was dryin' upside

down in the sink. No matter, I'd go over to Betsy Mae's after my bath an' before havin' to go upstairs; she always had a pot of coffee percolatin'.

I woulda thought, with all the nightly exercise I get, that I would be used to the muscle strains caused by sex but Little Jack must've found a few new places, 'cause my lower legs was crampin'. Prob'ly from curlin' my toes so much. A hot bath helped, long as I remembered to keep movin' around n' not stay slothful before I had to go to work.

Betsy Mae was her usual sunny self when I walked in. She an' Pete was always nice to me an' the other Silver Dollar girls. She said our money was just as good as anybody else's, that it spent the same way. Sometimes Pete had a tendency to gawk a little too much at Nell an' who could blame him (other than Besty Mae), she was a cute, busty little thing, but they always treated us like kin when we came in.

"Hey, Dusty Rose!" Betsy Mae's smile was wide an' welcomin'. "What brings you in so late in the afternoon?"

"I didn't get me no coffee this morning. I was wonderin' if you had some on the stove?"

"You bet. I always have coffee." She held up one finger. "Pete? Bring out a cup of coffee for Dusty Rose." She rounded the counter. "We got some brand new milled soaps in. Would you like to see 'em?"

"Sure. Thanks." I followed her to a shelf against the wall, where she showed me her display of French soap. I picked one up that smelled of oatmeal an' lavender. "Mmm, Betsy Mae, this is nice. How much?"

"Fifty cents for ten cakes."

"Fifty cents? Well, how much for just one?" Fifty cents was half of what I made for one customer.

"Can't sell 'em one at a time, Dusty Rose." Betsy Mae seemed as dismayed as I was.

"I'll talk to the other girls an' see if they might wanna chip in 'n then we can share the soap."

Betsy Mae agreed that was a good idea as Pete brought me out my coffee. As I started to sip, I heard Pete sigh in disgust.

"It's those Burnett roughs! I hope they don't come in here. They never pay for nothing," he said an' shook his head.

I walked over to the window an' looked out. There was Little Jack an' the rest, congregatin' by the saloon. I couldn't help but smile when I saw her an' my insides

trembled a little. She seemed to be standin' a little taller, a little prouder, than I'd ever seen her.

Betsy stood next to me an' folded her arms. She tsked. "I swear, if Abigail Fairchild was still alive, Jack an' Abigail Grace would most certainly not be allowed anywhere near that gang."

I hadn't heard Little Jack called Abigail Grace in years. "You think she woulda had more hold over them than Victor Burnett?"

"Jackknife would've been a business man an' that beautiful daughter of theirs would've been off to finishin' school an' married with babies by now." Besty Mae sighed. "He's a lost cause an' there ain't much hope for her now. If she marries anybody, it'll be one them other roughs. That's if she don't meet the Good Lord first, doin' Victor Burnett's biddin'."

The thought made me shiver. It seemed to be the general opinion of Madame Birdie, Liberty an' now Betsy Mae. "I don't think she'll be doin' much of nothin' 'til her pa passes on. It's a lotta work just keepin' an eye on him," I said, not taking my eyes offa her. Her long yellow hair was shinin' in the sun an', in my eyes, she seemed to be glowin'. I took some large swallows of coffee an' handed the cup back to Betsy Mae. "I should get goin' 'fore Madame Birdie has a fit. Thanks for the coffee," I called over my shoulder.

"Anytime! You ask them girls about that soap," she said.

I shut the door behind me an' started walkin' across the street towards the saloon. I heard a loud wolf-whistle.

"Well, lookie what we got here, if it ain't Dusty Rose." I recognized the teasin' voice of Henry Spits.

The whole crowd of 'em turned to look at me, includin' Little Jack. I thought her smile was gonna split her face when our eyes met. I had to look away so no one would suspect nothin'. The recollection of last night flooded my thoughts an' I know I musta been blushin' bad.

"Ooh, whatcha thinkin' about there, Dusty Rose? Your face is as red as a spanked baby's butt," Jim Dandy cackled.

Just the sound of his voice made me ill. It took everythin' I had not to walk up an' slap him in the face.

"I know what she's thinkin'," Bobcat Roberts said. "She's thinkin' about bein' between them sheets with me. That'd make any woman blush."

“Only ‘cause you ain’t got nothin’ to please her with,” Little Jack said to him.

“Look who’s yappin’?” Bobcat said back.

“You’d be surprised what I got,” Little Jack said, boldly.

Whiskey Walters just stood back an’ chewed on the end of his cigar. He didn’t say anythin’ but he didn’t have to. The cruel look in his beady eyes was enough. His eyes shifted from Little Jack, to me an’ back to Little Jack again.

“If you got somethin’ that give a woman what she needs, then, yeah, I would be surprised,” Jim Dandy said to her.

Little Jack stared him square in the face. “You ain’t one to talk about pleasin’ nobody, not with that little crabapple-headed worm you got.”

“I ain’t never got no complaints!” He had a wild-eyed look, like he was ready to fight.

Little Jack was as calm as could be. “That’s ‘cause livestock can’t talk.”

Even Whiskey Walters laughed at that but I saw, as I was about to walk through the saloon doors, that he stopped smilin’ an’ the way he was watchin’ me was unsettlin’, to say the least. He had somethin’ up his sleeve an’ I knew I’d be findin’ out what it was before I really wanted to.



Little Jack visited me every night after our first time. That lasted ‘til she got her curse an’ then we just laid in bed, kissin’ an’ cuddlin’. I finally got her to wake me up before she

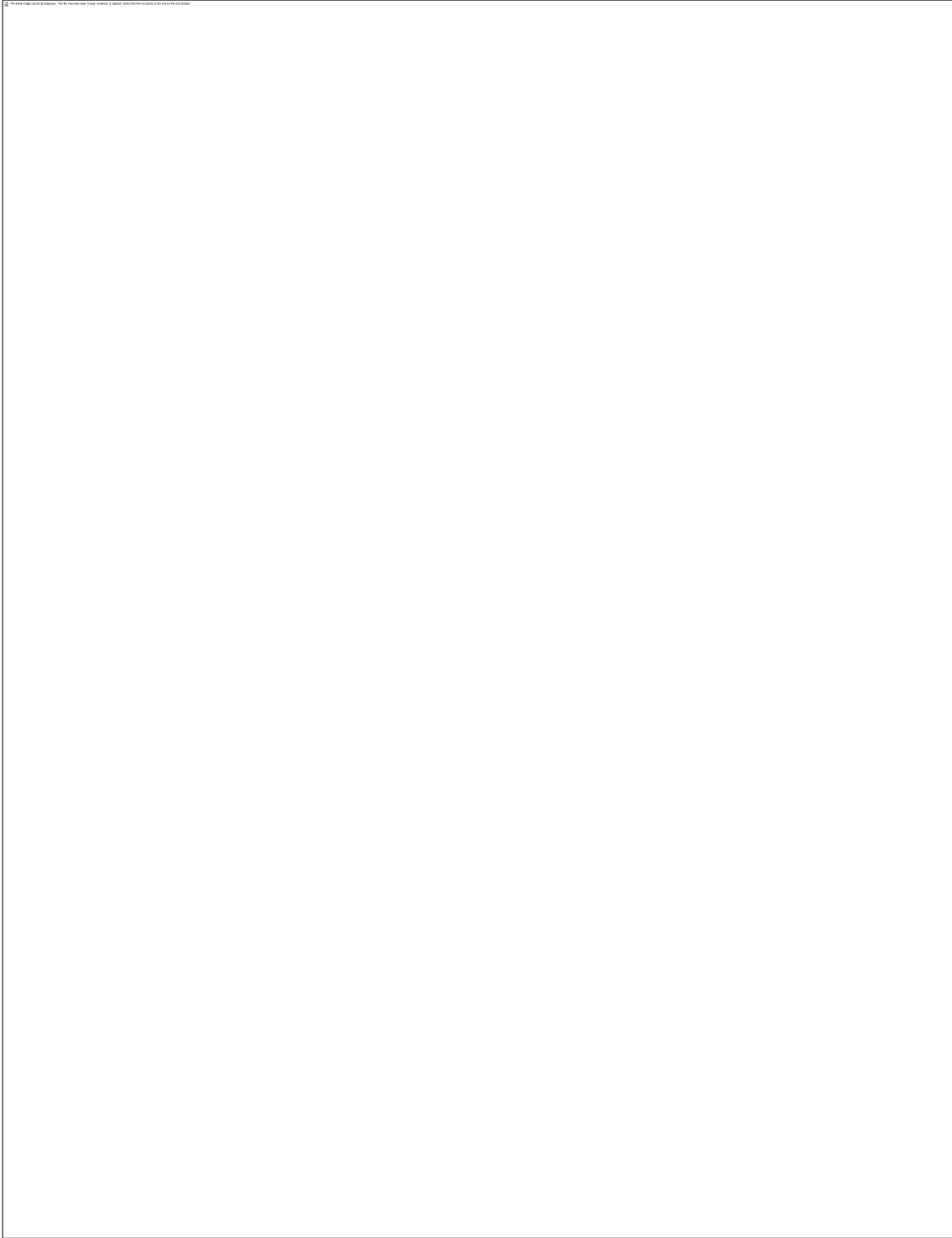
snuck out at first light. I liked wakin' up with Little Jack in my bed an' sometimes our kissin' goodbye led to more. That girl was wearin' me out but I loved every minute of it.

After a while, the newness wore off an' she cut her visits down to a couple nights a week. Little Jack was becomin' more involved with doin' jobs for Mr. Burnett, which kept her away some nights until very early mornin'. Sometimes, on those nights, she would not wake me an' just crawl in bed beside me an' go to sleep.

I wasn't sure if the others noticed or not but Little Jack was really growin' up. I think her becomin' assured in our lovemakin' helped to make her surefooted in other areas. I told her that no man ever made me feel the way that she did an' no man ever made me want to please him the way she did. I think what she took away from that was that she was better than any man an' that made her head swell in a good way. She was still respectful of Mr. Burnett but she gave back as good as she got from the other roughs. She was the best shot out of all of 'em an' they all knew it. In no time, they started treatin' Little Jack like she was one of 'em an' not just a tagalong tomboy girl who pretended to be a rough.

The matter of Little Jack's initiation soon seemed all but forgiven 'cause she, Henry, Jim Dandy an' Whiskey palled around like they was as close as they used to be when they was young 'uns. She was smart enough to know holdin' a grudge an' gettin' even with them boys wasn't gonna do nothin' for her bid to be a equal.

Little Jack an' I never spoke of the initiation but she knew I knew 'bout it. She wasn't sure just how much I knew 'til she run into Cole Sorrells one day not too long after an' he owned up to her that he told me everythin'. Durin' their conversation, she looked over an' saw me watchin' them. It was by accident that I picked that time to hang my laundry over the back line. When our eyes met, she looked ashamed an' then stared down at the ground. I waited for her to bring it up later but she never did, so I didn't, neither.



It'd been six months since Little Jack an' I become lovers. We'd gotten into a nice habit of dodgin' Mr. Burnett, his roughs an' Linn, an' of understandin' each other's needs an'

of quietly knowin' we was fallin' in love more each day. Liberty an' Madame Birdie knew but they kept it 'tween us. Beatrice thought she knew but could never catch Little Jack comin' or goin'. I was pretty sure Whiskey knew somethin' was goin' on but so far, he hadn't made no trouble for us.

I knew it was only a matter of time.

Little Jack just got better 'n better in bed an' got real good at romance, too. For my birthday that year, Madame Birdie gave me the day off. Little Jack got Liberty to borrow Madame Birdie's wagon an' had Liberty tell me we was gonna go berry pickin'. When we got to the woods where the berries was, Little Jack was waitin' for me with a big gingham tablecloth spread on the ground an' a picnic basket full of food an' drink. Liberty left us alone an' went back to town.

"Surprise," Little Jack said, grinnin' an' blushin' at the same time. She walked up to me an' took both my hands in hers. "Happy Birthday, Rose." She leaned forward an' kissed me with such tenderness, it almost made me cry. She led me back to the tablecloth an' we sat.

"Oh, sweetheart." I put my hand over my mouth.

"Lord, Rose, I love when you call me that." She took a bottle out of the picnic basket an' held it out to me. I guessed she wanted my approval.

"What is it? Shine?"

"Nuh uh. It's dandelion wine. I made it myself." She pulled the stopper out an' was 'bout to take a swig when she stopped an' apparently recalled her manners. She reached in the basket an' pulled out two old porcelain teacups. She poured the wine in those.

"Where'd you get china?"

She handed me my drink. "They was my ma's. Pa'd kill me if he knew I took 'em but it meant a lot to me to have 'em today. Ma had a whole set an' they was s'pose to be mine when I got myself hitched." She stared into my eyes. "I guess this is prob'ly the nearest I'll ever get." She carefully clinked her cup against mine. "To us. Mister an' missus Little Jack Fairchild."

"You definitely ain't no mister, Little Jack, I know that for sure," I said an' took a sip of wine. It was not as bad as I thought it was gonna be. I took another sip.

"Sure would be a lot easier if I was." She drank all the wine in her cup.

"Only for the sake of gettin' wed. I'm glad you're all woman," I told her.

"You are? Really?" She was surprised.

“No man’s ever treated me good, ‘cept Will Burnett. Ain’t no one with a two-barrel pistol ‘tween their legs ever done nothin’ for me ‘cept earned me a livin’. What they got is just decoration. I don’t want no babies so I don’t need it. What I do need, Little Jack, is someone who loves me an’ wants me for me, who knows my flesh like she knows her own, who don’t treat me like a harlot. You don’t. An’ you can do and feel so many more things than any man I ever met. If you was a man, you’d be just like the rest. So I love you just like you are.”

“Gosh, Rose, that’s ‘bout the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me.” She poured herself more wine.

I pointed to the picnic basket. “An’ this is most definitely the nicest thing anyone ever done for me.”

“Madame Birdie gave you a party before...right?”

“Never. She used to bake a cake...I love Madame Birdie, you know that but she can’t cook an’ she sure as hell can’t bake. Even Bobcat’s coonhounds wouldn’t eat it, it was that bad.”

“Good Lord, they’ll eat anythin’ that don’t eat them first.”

“Yup. ‘xactly my point.” I took another sip of wine. “So this is my first birthday celebration. An’ it means the world to me, Little Jack, you got no idea.” I couldn’t help the tears that spilled down my cheeks.

Little Jack scooted closer an’ pulled me into a hug. She wiped my tears away with her thumb. “I love you so much. I’d do anythin’ for you, Rose.” She kissed my cheek.

Anythin’ but quit Victor Burnett. I knew better than to even bring it up. “I know, baby, I know. I love you an’ I’d do anythin’ for you, too.”

She placed a gentle kiss on my lips. “You’re mine, Rose.” She moved her lips down my jaw line.

“Little Jack, you best quit that or we ain’t never gonna get to the food you brought.”

She smiled as bright as I ever seen. “Guess I know what’s for dessert.” She reached in the basket an’ took out some lukewarm fried chicken.

“Don’t tell me you made that, too.”

“Oh, hell, no. Besty Mae’s the only one in this town knows how to put a good scald on fried chicken. I killed one of her hens an’ she cleaned it an’ cooked it. I told her I was goin’ huntin’ with Pa an’ we needed it for a meal, in case we didn’t bag nothin’.” She

read my mind. “Don’t worry, he won’t show up at the store or in town. Pa’s passed out at home. Too much samplin’ of dandelion wine.”

I took a bite of a wing. As usual, it was delicious. “Don’t that scare you? How much your Pa drinks?”

Little Jack shrugged. “I wouldn’t know him any other way. Fact is, I don’t think I ever seen him not drunk. I wouldn’t know who he was if he was ever sober.” She finished eatin’ her wing an’ wiped her mouth on her sleeve. “I hear tell the only time he stopped drinkin’ was when he met an’ married my ma.” She reached for another piece of chicken.

“What started him drinkin’ so much? Was it your ma dyin’?” I picked a homemade biscuit out of the basket an’ took a big bite.

“The way he tells it, he used to work for Victor’s daddy. Pa was a hard drinkin’ rough but he never got drunk an’ did whatever was asked of him. Then he met my ma an’ tried to court her but she wouldn’t have nothin’ to do with him ‘cause of what he did an’ who he worked for. He loved her so much, he cleaned hisself up an’ quit John Burnett to be with ma.”

“I didn’t think it was possible to quit. I thought once you was in, you was in.”

“Well, Pa started buildin’ furniture an’ old man Burnett told Pa if he made him a fancy dinin’ room table an’ gave him a cut of his profit, he’d let him leave. So he did. I don’t think he ever told my ma he was payin’ off John Burnett.”

“Don’t sound like she woulda put up with that.”

“Nope an’ that woulda got ‘em both killed.” Little Jack sipped at her wine. “He an’ ma hadn’t been married that long when the devil came to Ghost Town. Man named Harmon Teaster, whose daddy was killed by John Burnett, came back to get revenge.”

“I heard about that. He killed all the Burnetts, ‘cept Victor.”

“Yep an’ most of the roughs, too. Had my pa not got out ‘cause of my ma, he woulda been one of ‘em.”

“Why’d John Burnett kill this Teaster fella’s daddy?”

“Teaster’s pa was the sheriff at the time an’ he’d arrested Victor an’ had him locked up for killin’ a redskin boy. Old man Burnett an’ his roughs came to town, shot Teaster an’ put his pa in one of Digger’s coffins, shot it up an’ then burned it, ‘case the bullets didn’t kill him. Pa said Teaster saw it all then disappeared. When he healed, he came back an’ murdered the whole lot of ‘em. Pa was then extra thankful for my ma. He an’ Ma tried to start them a family for over ten years an’ nothin’ happened ‘til I came along. Then my ma

died birthin' me an' he just ain't been the same since. Took to drinkin' an' ain't never stopped."

"How'd he get back in with Mr. Burnett?"

"Mr. Burnett was the only one who'd have him. Felt sorry for my pa, I think. Since he wasn't makin' furniture no more, Pa had to do somethin' to feed us."

I didn't have to ask her no more 'cause I knew the rest of her past. It was 'round that time, I first came to town. I don't know why we never talked about this before. I hated what she was doin'. I wanted to tell her that Madame Birdie was savin' some of my earnin's for me, that as soon as there was enough, I could leave Maggie Valley an' not look back. I wanted to ask her to come with me but I knew she'd never leave her Pa. I decided it was best I stay quiet. The less she knowed about my savin's, the less could be tortured outta her. I would bring it up when the time was right.

"Rose? You all right?"

I snapped outta my daydreamin' an' looked into her young but knowin' green eyes. "I'm just fine, Little Jack. I was just thinkin' again how sweet you was to do this."

Little Jack beamed. She stood up an' held out her hand. "There's more. I got you a present. You wanna go for a walk?"

I took her hand an' stood up, not lettin' go. "You got me a birthday gift?"

"Yup. I'll show it to you when we get to the crick."

"You're just full of surprises today." I couldn't hide the thrill from my tone. We walked, hand-in-hand, through a wooded path. We both said nothin' an' just enjoyed the moment 'til we reached the water.

Little Jack let go of my hand an' turned to me. She stood on her tiptoes and kissed my lips. I felt her push somethin' in my hand. "I hope you like it."

I looked in my hand to see a cake of that lovely soap Betsy Mae wanted me to buy. "Oh, Little Jack – how did you know?"

"Liberty said you'd spoke of it so Birdie an' the girls chipped in to get the ten cakes. This one's yours. I chipped in your share."

I grabbed her an' kissed her soundly. "Let's go swimmin' an' use it," I said, excited.

Little Jack just smiled an' started undressin' me.



When we was done bathin' each other, I put the soap with our clothes an' jumped back in. We began makin' love in the water. It was somethin' new for both of us an' it brought fresh stirrin's in me. It was amazin' to me that we could do what we did, nearly lose consciousness from the pleasure an' still stay afloat. We finally had to move to a shallow part of the crick or, for sure, we'd both drown.

We just couldn't seem to get enough of each other an' each time felt better than the last. I was thankin' the good Lord above that we was way off the beaten path, in a spot Little Jack picked out 'specially 'cause no one ever went there when I heard a familiar an' unwelcome voice.

“Well. Ain't this a sight?”

We both stopped what we was doin' an' looked up at Whiskey Walters.

"How long you been there?" Little Jack snarled at him.

"Long enough." His manhood was strainin' to bust through his trousers. The sight made me ill 'cause I could guess what was on his mind.

Little Jack tried to move us to the middle of the crick but Whiskey drew his six-shooter an' fired. He missed us both. Little Jack pushed me toward a deeper section of water then dived under as Whiskey shot again. He was clearly aimin' for Little Jack an' when she didn't come back to the surface, I was terrified that he'd shot her.

"C'mon, Little Jack, where'd ya go? Come on out of the water! I wanna get another look at that womanly body you always hide before I kill ya. You got you some right nice curves on ya! Little Jack?" There was no answer so he turned an' aimed his gun at me. "You best come back, Little Jack, or I get me your girl." He looked at my nakedness through the water. "Looks like I'm gonna get ya anyway. Get out of the water, Dusty Rose."

"No! You ain't comin' near me!" I looked around for rocks to throw at him.

He pulled back the hammer on his six-gun. "You get out of that water now or I will come in an' get you an' drag you back to town buck nekkid an' personally hand you to Mr. Burnett."

"How do I know you won't do that anyhow?" I didn't know where my voice was comin' from. All I could think of was that he'd killed Little Jack. My heart was in my throat.

"Get out of that water now an' it'll be our little secret." The look in his eyes was frightenin'.

"What about Little Jack?"

"That'll be our little secret, too."

I was about to try an' dive backward, away from him but two quick steps in the water an' he had me by my hair, pullin' me to him.

"You owe me, Dusty Rose."

I spit in his face an' struggled to get away but he was just too strong an' too mad. He slapped me hard an' pushed me against a tree. He held me there with one hand while he took his jacket an' trousers off. He slammed his body against mine an' tried to guide what he called his 'whore hammer' inside me. The more I fought him, the more rough he became. He'd almost had me when we both heard the sound of a pistol bein' cocked. We both stopped dead.

“Let her go or I’ll splatter what brains you ain’t got all over this tree,” Little Jack told him, calm-like. I ain’t never heard that tone to her voice before. Guess Whiskey hadn’t neither.

“C’mon, Little Jack...I was just havin’ me some fun...” Whiskey laughed nervously.

“Rose ain’t havin’ no fun an’ she’s the only one I care about. Now let her go. I won’t tell you again.”

Whiskey took a step back an’ let me go. I immediately ran behind Little Jack who was wearing Whiskey’s jacket to cover herself an’ holdin’ his own gun on him.

Whiskey put up his hands. “Now, Little Jack. You can’t kill me. What would you tell Mr. Burnett?”

“Nothin’. It’ll be our little secret, Rose an’ mine’s.”

“What do you want?” he asked.

“I want you to never bother Rose again. Ever. I want you to not say nothin’ to Mr. Burnett ‘bout us. You ever do either of those things? I’ll kill you in your sleep.”

“But, Little Jack, she burned me, I had to get even.”

“She burned you ‘cause of what you did to me.”

“Hey – I didn’t do nothin’! I never touched you,” he yelled.

“That’s right, Whiskey. You didn’t do nothin’. You watched an’ didn’t do nothin’ ‘cept made sure it got done. That was just as bad.” Little Jack fixed her aim on him again. “I ain’t foolin’, Whiskey. Get your clothes an’ get out of here an’ we’ll forget any of this happened.”

Whiskey nodded an’ bent to pick up his pants. He put them back on. “You know what you two’s doin’ ain’t right.”

“You didn’t seem to mind watchin’ us,” I said. “Awful pious of you to condemn us while you enjoy lookin’.”

He bowed his head an’ didn’t answer me. He looked at Little Jack. “Can I have my jacket?”

“Nope. I ain’t givin’ you another free look. You’ll get it back when I’m done with it. Your gun, too.”

He sighed, picked up his hat an' walked away from us.

"I mean it, Whiskey," she called after him. "One word to anybody an' you're dead." Little Jack didn't turn to me until Whiskey was way out of her sight. "You okay?"

"Yeah, thanks to you." I hugged her. "I thought he'd killed you."

"He almost did. He has a hankerin' to always shoot off to the right for some reason, so I went left. I'm lucky I know these boys' habits so well." She took my hand an' we crossed a knee-deep part of the crick, got dressed an' left.

We rode back to town on Little Jack's horse. I sat behind her, holdin' tight to her waist until we reached the edge of town. I slid off the buckskin an' stared up at Little Jack. "Thank you. I kinda wish the day could go on forever."

"Me, too. I just might shoot Whiskey for ruinin' it." She pushed her damp hair out of her face.

"Goin' to check on you're pa now?"

"No. I'm gonna find Whiskey an' keep an eye on him. Don't trust him far as I can throw him." She bent down an' I stood tall an' we kissed goodbye. Even if anyone could see us, our action was hidden by her horse. "I want you to put a lock on your door, Rose. I don't want any surprises when we're in there together an' I 'specially don't want no surprises when you're in there alone."

"But any one of them boys could shoot or kick through a lock..."

"Not without bringin' the whole damned whorehouse down on him. And Mr. Burnett's been stayin' there a lot. He wouldn't take to kindly to any of his rough's killin' one of his best girls."

"No he'd rather do that hisself."

"He'd only kill you if you betrayed him or tried to leave him. He don't want no one to kill you or any of the other girls on their own."

"Well, that's reassurin'." I said an' rolled and my eyes.

"I don't think I should come around tonight. Maybe not for a while. I'm gonna make sure Whiskey an' me are seein' eye to eye 'fore I risk you gettin' hurt again."

"I understand. I don't like it but I understand."

Little Jack heeled her horse to a trot. In the distance I could see her dismount an' carry the picnic basket into Betsy Mae an' Pete's store. Then she came back outside an' walked

her buckskin across the street 'n tie him up in front of the Silver Dollar. I got back to Madame Birdie's 'bout ten minutes after Little Jack. I went through the back an' into the kitchen.

"What're you doin' back here?" Madame Birdie asked. "I figured you two'd be out all night."

"I'm sure we woulda if we hadn't been interrupted." I smelled somethin' good cookin' an' went over to the stove, liftin' the lid on the pot. "Judd made his stew?"

"Yep. This is the fourth pot of it."

"It's everybody's favorite. Can I have some?"

"Of course." She reached in the cupboard an' handed me a bowl and utensils. I ladled a big spoonful out an' sat down at the table. "Who spoiled your birthday?"

"Ain't sayin'. Don't wanna keep secrets from you but I'll feel safer if I keep it 'tween the three of us."

"One of the roughs?"

I nodded as I dipped a biscuit into the gravy of the stew.

"Think he'll say anythin' to Mr. Burnett?"

"Only if he's got a cravin' to die. Little Jack threatened him within a inch of his life."

Madame Birdie rested her hand over her mouth, then said, "I'm afraid for you, Rose. If this gets out, Mr. Burnett will kill you both." She leaned against the counter. "Maybe you an' Little Jack should stop seein' each other."

"I don't think I can. I love her."

"I know that, honey, but it just ain't safe."

I stopped eatin' my stew an' looked up at her. "Is lovin' someone ever safe?"

"I guess not. Not when you're one of us."

"Don't worry, Madame Birdie. Little Jack an' I decided on stayin' away from each other for a while. Least 'til she sees that our peepin' tom stays serious about keepin' his mouth shut. She also wants me to get a lock for my door."

"That ain't a bad idea. I'll get Judd to do it tomorrow. I'll see if Liberty can stay with you tonight."

“No. I don’t wanna drag Liberty into this if I can help it. It’ll be fine tonight. Even if she ain’t right here, I don’t think Little Jack will be too far away.”

“You want to come out to the saloon an’ have a birthday drink? I’ll buy you one an’ I know Captain Ketner will want to buy you one. After all, it is his usual night with you.”

I thought about it as I finished my stew. “Sure. A drink or two might be nice.”

And it was. Madame Birdie bought me my first an’ then, just as she said he would, Captain Ketner bought me another. Little Jack an’ Jackknife sent me over a drink an’ so did Mr. Burnett when he came in a little while later.

Then Mr. Burnett ordered me to carry out my obligation to Captain Ketner. Madame Birdie told him she’d give me the night off but he got mad an’ said I worked for him not her. He told her I was lucky he didn’t make me go change into my whorin’ clothes an’ finish the night out with customers. So I went upstairs with the captain an’ he surprised me by sayin’ he wouldn’t make me do anythin’ an’ that he’d give me a dollar to watch him do hisself an’ Mr. Burnett would be none the wiser.

When we went back downstairs, Little Jack, Jackknife, Whiskey an’ a few others was playing poker. Whiskey looked up at me when I passed but he just as quickly looked right back down at his cards.

I said goodnight to everyone and went to my room. From that day on, I never had a lick of trouble from Whiskey Walters.

It was months before Little Jack an' I got some time alone. I'd begun to think we was never gonna be in each other's arms again. Even though she spent a lot of time at the Silver Dollar, she kept herself clear of my room an' then Mr. Burnett sent her, Whiskey an' three others on a run to get back horses that was rustled off Burnett land. That seemed to take forever.

When she an' the boys rode back into town, filthy an' smellin' pretty ripe, I was never so happy to see anyone in my life. Liberty had to hold me back from runnin' an' jumpin' in her arms. The lot of 'em dismounted in front of the saloon an' tied their horses the hitchin' post. They was about to go in but Mr. Burnett came outside instead.

"Ain't you a sorry lookin' bunch," Mr. Burnett said. Bobcat an' Captain Ketner stood beside him. "Well?"

"Job's done, Mr. Burnett," Whiskey told him. "Horses are all back on your land an' I don't think you'll be havin' trouble with that gang no more."

"You take care of 'em?" Mr. Burnett asked.

"At first, it didn't seem like it was gonna be necessary but then they ambushed our campfire the first night on our way back. If it wasn't for Little Jack, we might not've come back."

Anyone within hearin' range turned to look at Little Jack. "Is that so?" Mr. Burnett sounded surprised. "Just what did you do to make these boys be braggin' on you?"

Before she could open her mouth, Whiskey put his arm around her an' said, "She did your name right proud, Mr. Burnett. They took our guns, tied us all up, said they was gonna string us all up in the mornin'. Little Jack flirted a little with the leader and he untied her, set on havin' hisself a good time. She pulled that Derringer out of her boot, stuck that gun in his gut an' made the stupid sumbitch tell his boys to put their guns down an' untie us or she told him she'd kill 'im. When he told her no, she put one in his leg, said the next one would go in his head. His boys untied us an', well, the rest is the rest."

"Did you kill 'em?" Bobcat asked.

"Yep. Little Jack got the leader an' we shot the rest."

"Well, good job, Little Jack. Guess I'll need to be doin' somethin' special for you to show my appreciation," Mr. Burnett said.

“I don’t need nothin’ special, Mr. Burnett. I just want you to treat me like the others. If I fail you, that’s one thing but if I keep doin’ as good as all the other roughs – better in some cases – then I want you to trust me, that’s all.”

He stuffed his hands in his waistband. “No, Little Jack, your pa will tell you, I don’t trust nobody. That’s why I’ve lived as long as I have. But...if that’s all you want as a reward for savin’ the others then I think that’s fair.”

“Thank you, Mr. Burnett.”

I wanted to tell her to watch her back because Victor Burnett didn’t know what the word ‘fair’ meant. The grin that split her face was enough to make me forget my bad thoughts. Far as I knew, this was the second time Little Jack had killed someone an’ it didn’t seem to bother her. I guess that was the way to be if she was gonna live that life but it was kinda disturbin’.

“Now y’all need to find someplace to wash all that stink off. Come on back here when you get done, drinks’ll be on me.”

There was a round of ‘thank yous’ to Mr. Burnett. He, the captain an’ Bobcat went back inside an’ the group of roughs started movin’ in different directions. Little Jack looked over at me an’ Liberty.

“Oh, my, Rose,” Liberty mumbled to me, “she looks hungry, if you know what I mean.”

“She ain’t the only one,” I said.

“Little Jack,” Madame Birdie called to her. “Why don’t you come in an’ use my tub to bathe all that prairie an’ what-not offa you. I’m sure one of the girls wouldn’t mind givin’ you a hand.” She winked at her, then at me.

“Uh, sure. That sounds right nice, thank you.”

Liberty couldn’t break the stare between Little Jack an’ me. “Oh, Lord. She’s all yours, Rose,” she said an’ laughed.

Little Jack walked to me an’ my heart started poundin’ somethin’ fierce. When she got ‘bout two steps from me, tho, I had to hold my nose. “Oh, Little Jack. How could you all stand each other? Weren’t there nowheres to bathe the whole time you was gone?”

“Well, nice to see you, too, Rose.” She stopped an’ stood with her hands on her hips.

“I’m sorry. I have missed you so much. Really I have, an’ I will show you just how much after your bath.”

I wanted to burn her clothes after she took 'em off. I carried them out to the back porch an' plunged them in the laundry bucket to soak. I threw in a handful of borax an' brought the box back inside with me in case I needed to use it on Little Jack. I was looking forward to washin' Little Jack with my milled soap but least not 'til she scrubbed herself with lye. When I got back, she was in the tub an' already the water was turnin' brown. I held a scrub brush to her.

"What's that for?"

"It's for you to get a couple layers of that grit off. After that, I might think about washin' you."

She glared at the brush. "That'll take off a couple layers of skin, Rose!"

I lowered my voice. "If you wanna end up in my bed tonight, you'll be doin' like I ask. You do want to end up in my bed, don't you?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Course I do."

"Then scrub. I ain't sleepin' with no one smells like they rolled in dead skunk."

She grabbed the brush from me an' begun to scour herself. The water turned black an' I drained the tub an' filled it back up twice before she was clean enough for me to take a soft cloth an' give her a nice, relaxed bath. After a fresh tub of hot water, I moved a chair in front of the door so we wouldn't be barged in on an' I stripped an' joined her. She closed her legs around me an' I pulled her on my lap.

We knew we had to be quiet, even though we were in Madame Birdie's bathroom, which was the furthest room away from the saloon. I figgered we'd get pretty rambunctious an' loud since we ain't seen each other in so long so I kept havin' to remind her to shush. It felt so good to hold her, to kiss her, to feel her against me, I knew all she's have to do is touch me an' I'd spill over with desire.

I bent to kiss an' suckle her breasts. When I was done I moved my lips back up her chest to her exposed neck. Her head fell back an' I wanted to mark her in a place where everybody would see but I knew that would raise way too many questions. I kissed her as passionately as I ever have before an' our feelin's musta got the better of us cause we began to make love like newlyweds on a honeymoon. I had to bury my face in her flesh somewheres to stifle my screams of pleasure. When we was done, what water was still in the tub an' not on the floor was cold.

We just looked at each other for the longest time, catchin' our breath. "Good Lord Almighty, Little Jack, what you do to me," I panted.

"Same here, Rose. I ain't never gonna get enough of you."



Little Jack dressed in duds Madame Birdie had scared up for her since all the clothes she had with her was dirty. She went out to the saloon to drink n' share a meal Mr. Burnett had brung over from the hotel kitchen. I went back to my room to change for the evenin' an' when I got out to the bar, Little Jack an' the boys was playin' poker. Jackknife Jack was there, boastin' about what his kid had done. Finally, even Little Jack got fed up with him an' told him to hush up or go home. He hushed up, drunk more an' passed out in the corner.

My evenin' was slow an' that suited me just fine. I wasn't much in the mood to be entertainin' anyone but Little Jack. She held her own in poker an' by the time the saloon closed, she'd broke even. She was also drunk as a pisspot. Good thing we made love earlier, 'cause she passed out on my bed soon as she hit the pillow. I took her boots off an' as many clothes as I could with her bein' a dead weight. I gave up, stripped an'

crawled into bed beside her. She rolled over an' flopped her arm over me. Soon as I was fixin' to fall asleep, Little Jack started snorin' like a hibernatin' bear. Musta been the drinkin' 'cause she never snored. Least not when she was with me. I poked her in the ribcage which made her snort in the middle of a snore.

"Little Jack!" I said in as loud a whisper as I dared, "you gotta be quiet, you'll have the whole house down here!"

She smacked her lips together, prob'ly feelin' cotton mouth, turned over on her back an' never woke up. I was 'bout ready to close my eyes when she started snorin' louder than ever.

"Good Lord!" I put my pillow over her face an' let it sit there. It did smother the loudness but I was afraid it'd smother her breathin', too. I took the pillow back an' put it over my own ears, hopin' that maybe I'd get some sleep an' she wouldn't wake the dearly departed.



Two months went by an' Little Jack n' me was still goin' strong. We tried to keep our romance quiet as we could an' away from Mr. Burnett knowin' but on her seventeenth birthday, Little Jack told Mr. Burnett that she was gonna buy me for the whole evenin'.

We was in the saloon celebratin' Little Jack's birthday 'fore the late afternoon work hours started an' Little Jack stunned everyone into silence, includin' me.

"What are you sayin', Little Jack?" Mr. Burnett's eyes got all squinty an' his tone became unpleasant. Well...more unpleasant than usual.

"I'm sayin' it's my birthday an' I wanna give myself a present." Her voice was steady an' strong. I was thinkin' it musta been crazy liquid courage. "I wanna spend the night with Dusty Rose an' I wanna pay for it so's you don't lose no money on the deal."

"Now, Little Jack, you know I don't cotton to that kinda thing. An' even if I did, I don't think you got that kinda money. If you do, then I'm payin' you way too much."

That got a laugh outta the boys. I wasn't laughin'. I knew she was takin' a big chance an' we was both prob'ly gonna pay the consequences of that chance.

"Mr. Burnett, I don't mean no disrespect. I knowed you all my life an' I always been one of the boys. I ain't never acted like no girl, I ain't never had no feelin's like no girl an' I ain't never gonna act or feel like no damned girl. It don't make no sense that I'd share my bed with any of these boys an' it ain't right that I have to turn down the comp'ny of a beautiful woman just 'cause it don't feel right in your gut. I'm bein' honest as I can with ya, Mr. Burnett. I want me a pleasure gal for my birthday an' I want it to be Dusty Rose."

"Why her? She's trouble, Little Jack. An' she's got too many regular callers that'll lose me money if she ain't available for a night."

"I told you, I been savin' up. I'll give you twenty dollars." Little Jack pulled the bills outta her vest pocket as a gasp went up around the room. The biggest gasp came from me. Twenty dollars was twice what I made a night.

"So you want to waste your hard earned money on a filthy whore most the men in town an' a whole lot of strangers had them a piece of?" He had a cruel smile on his face.

I could tell what he said bothered Little Jack but she took a real deep breath, looked long an' hard over at Linn then back at Mr. Burnett an' said, "Maybe you can tell me how best to reckon that feelin'."

Now I knew we was dead. Nobody talked to Mr. Burnett like that an' Linn seemed very insulted. I wanted to remind her that she'd been whorin' a lot longer than me. She might mostly service Mr. Burnett now but 'fore he took a shine to her, she was the Silver Dollar Special.

Jackknife Jack spoke up. "I'll drink to that." He raised his shot glass.

Victor Burnett swatted the glass outta Jackknife's hand an' it crashed against the wall. "You'll drink to anything, you old sot," he snarled. He turned to Little Jack n' shook his finger at her. "Now you listen to me, you ungrateful little -"

"Victor." Captain Ketner laid his hand on Mr. Burnett's shoulder. His manner an' tone were calm-like. "What do you care who Dusty Rose has beddin' her as long as they pay for it. Twenty dollars is more than you'd make off her in one night. An' it is Little Jack's birthday."

Mr. Burnett glared at Colonel Ketner. "You don't mind that another gal takes your whore to bed?"

"Well, she ain't really mine, now is she? An' Little Jack ain't never been 'another gal,' 'least not in my book. You ain't losin' nothin' on the deal, Victor."

Mr. Burnett rested his fists on his hips an' pressed his lips together real tight. He looked at Little Jack. "Maybe I'll make you take her right here on this here poker table in front of everybody." All the men in the room hooted n' hollered their appreciation of that little idea. "Yeah, maybe we'd all like to share your birthday present with you."

Liberty an' I immediately turned an' shot Beatrice a 'I told you so' look.

"I wanna see how Little Jack thinks she can please a woman better than a man can," Jim Dandy shouted above the noise.

Mr. Burnett put his hand up to quiet the crowd. "What do you say to that, Little Jack?"

"I'd say to Jim Dandy that I ain't payin' to please her, I'm payin' to be pleased." Little Jack smiled when her friends laughed an' patted her on the back. "An', Mr. Burnett, in your 'pinion, everybody all ready knows what Dusty Rose is like so they don't need to be seein' it. I want to know for myself. Behind closed doors. If you insist in front of everybody's the only way I can have her then I guess I'll pass."

"Then I guess you don't get her," Mr. Burnett told her. He turned to me. "You instigated this somehow. You could get her killed by pushin' her to defy me like that!"

"No, Mr. Burnett, I swear, I—" He grabbed my arm an' yanked me to him.

"Little Jack's young and's still learnin' but you, you know better!" He let go an' slapped me.

"Mr. Burnett!" I heard Little Jack cry out. "It wasn't her idea. She didn't know nothin' about it!"

"Moose! Take Dusty Rose upstairs an' teach her a lesson!"

As Moose broke through the crowd an' took 'hold of me, I was stunned how somethin' could turn bad so damned fast. He flung me over his shoulder an' carried me upstairs to my whorin' room. I could hear Little Jack yellin' an' then her cries was muffled. I begun to get real alarmed. Moose was about to tear me up inside n' Lord only knew what was happenin' to Little Jack downstairs.

Moose kicked the door shut an' threw me down on the bed. He loomed over me.

"Moose, please don't..." I begged.

He put his finger to his lips, showin' me I should hush an' then he smiled like I ain't never seen him smile in my life. I looked at him like he lost his mind. "Pretend like I'm really hurtin' ya," he whispered to me.

"What?" I was baffled. What on earth was he doin'?

"Do it."

"Please, Moose!" I yelled, knowin' it could be heard downstairs. "Don't! No, no, not that!" Then I tried to squeeze out a agonizin' scream. He grinned an' nodded an' I looked at him like he'd gone plumb loco.

He slapped one hand against the other. "Shut up, whore! You'll never defy Mr. Burnett again!" He then begun pushin' the bed against the wall, makin' it sound like he was nailin' me with all he had in him.

"Moose? What in the world -?" I whispered to him.

"Go downstairs to your room, Dusty Rose. Just be real quiet. Whiskey's makin' sure no one goes in the kitchen 'til you get in your room," he whispered back.

I tiptoed to the door, opened it an' made sure the hallway was empty. I looked back at Moose who was still pushin' the bed frame against the wall in a fevered rhythm. He winked at me. "Tell Little Jack happy birthday."

Then I got it. I couldn't believe they was defyin' Mr. Burnett like that. I tiptoed back over an' gave Moose a kiss on the cheek 'fore I left.

Closin' the door, I heard him say, "Lay still, woman!" an' then the bed started bangin' faster against the wall.

When I got to the bottom of the back stairs, Whiskey Walters ushered me to my room, shut the door behind me an' I heard him run out the back. I turned to see Little Jack, waitin' for me in my bed, naked.

“Have you gone mad?” I whispered to her, lockin’ the door an’ takin’ off my clothes.
“Mr. Burnett will kill you if he finds out!”

She pulled me into bed an’ on top of her. “Then I guess we just gotta make sure he don’t never find out.” She kissed me in a way that near made me forget my name.

“Little Jack...what’s gotten into you?” I breathed.

“You have.” She ran her calloused fingers up an’ down my back. “See, I knew he’d deny me but I couldn’t stand the thoughts of you with anyone else tonight. So I told Moose an’ Whiskey I’d give ‘em ten dollars apiece if they’d help me out.”

“You took such a chance.” I snuggled my face into her neck.

“It was worth it. Right now he thinks Moose is breakin’ you in two upstairs an’ Whiskey is givin’ it to me in your room. He knows when Moose gets done, you won’t be good for nobody else for the rest of the night. Moose will go back downstairs an’ Whiskey’ll come back after a bit, brag about takin’ me an’ warnin’ me to stay away from you. Mr. Burnett will be happier than a pig in shit.”

“But...why did you draw suspicion over us? Now we’ll have to be even more careful.”

“He was figgerin’ it out hisself. I hear him talkin’ to Linn the other day when he didn’t know I was ‘round the corner. Wanted to know if she ever saw us together in *that* way or if she ever heard any of the girls say anythin’ ‘bout you an’ me. She told him she ain’t never seen or heard nothin’ herself but Beatrice thought we was doin’ it. Then she told him Beatrice wasn’t exactly right in the head, after all, she seems to like pleasin’ Digger. They both started laughin’ at that but I knew he wasn’t about to let it go. So’s I thought I’d call his bluff. Think it worked, too.”

“Let’s hope so.” I looked into the prettiest green eyes I ever knowed.

Her smiled was so wide an’ allurin’. “Let’s not talk about Victor Burnett or Linn or any of the rest of ‘em. I’m sufferin’ ‘cause I want you so bad. Make love to me, Rose.”

So I did. ‘Til we fell asleep from exhaustion with Little Jack’s fingers still inside me.



Victor Burnett never bothered us again. When we was anywheres near him, we stayed far away from each other as possible an' if we had to cross each other's paths, we was polite but that's all. Madame Birdie an' Liberty knew different but they was more than trustworthy. Mr. Burnett seemed happy 'cause he believed he'd cured us of our 'unnatural' cravin's. If he only knew how much passion that give rise to when Little Jack crawled in my bed each night after bringin' her pa home.

The goin's on in Ghost Town begun gettin' more interestin' all 'round. Our do-nothin' Mayor Rogers' wife finally left him after years of his bein' run by Mr. Burnett. The mayor started spendin' many hours at the saloon agreein' on some crooked railroad deal with Mr. Burnett an' with the girls. Liberty become one of his favorites but that didn't mean I escaped havin' a roll with him. It wasn't that he was bad or nothin', he was just too impressed on his own, uh, *talents* when performin' an' always wanted it on the house. If he an' Mr. Burnett argued 'bout anythin', it was that.

One time with him was actually kinda fun. He paid for both Liberty an' I – Liberty for him an' me for his bodyguard, a Cherokee man everybody called Copperhead. Copperhead had no hair on him (anywheres) an' he never talked. Even durin' fornicatin'. Mayor Rogers insisted we do it in the same room at the same time so while Copperhead done me with his eyes closed an' the mayor done Liberty, us two whores made faces at each other, rolled our eyes an' pretended to be excited by moanin' an' cryin' out at what seemed like the most appropriate times. Liberty an' I couldn't stop laughin' when it was over an' the mayor was so proud he give us such a good time. He had no idea.

The next night the mayor came back an' bought us both again for a hour. This time, Copperhead wasn't with him. He wanted us both to pleasure him. We did an' it was over fast. Since he still had another three-quarters of a hour left, he told us he wanted to watch Liberty an' me do things to each other. I told him Mr. Burnett didn't want us doin' that an' he said he was the one payin', we'd do what he wanted us to.

Liberty knew that 'fore Little Jack, I didn't mind bein' intimate with her at the customer's askin'. I didn't give a hang about what Mr. Burnett liked or didn't like; the customer was payin' an' it was the only time I got pleasure from pleasin'. But this was the first time since Little Jack an' I been together that I been asked to please another woman. I kept tellin' myself it was for work, it didn't mean nothin' but when Liberty an' I started kissin', I couldn't do it. I felt like I was bein' unfaithful. I put my hand on Liberty's shoulder an' gently pushed away from her. I looked down at her with pleadin' eyes and she nodded.

"What's the matter? Why'd you stop?" His hand had been just about to slide inside his open lonjohn bottoms.

"Seriously, Mr. Mayor," Liberty said, "we can't do this. Mr. Burnett would punish us bad if he found out."

"He ain't gonna find out. Now, get back to it an' give me something more than kissing."

"Sorry. Can't. We're more afraid of Mr. Burnett getting' mad than you getting' mad," Liberty told him.

He stared at us, unsure. "Come on, you're joshin' me, right? Seriously? You ain't gonna go at it for me?"

"No, Sir," we both said.

"Aw, hell. Then...aw, hell! Come back an' get me goin' again, then. I should complain to Victor that I didn't get my money's worth."

"Then we'd have to tell him what you asked for an' I don't think he'd be too pleased with you, Mayor."

Mayor Rogers may've thought he was somethin' special but when it came to Victor Burnett, he was just as lily-livered as the rest of us to cross him. We serviced him one more time 'fore he got dressed an' left. He may've been disappointed that he didn't get to watch Liberty an' me have sex but he certainly didn't leave the room unhappy.

Liberty looked at me after the mayor had gone. "You sure got it bad for Little Jack, don't ya?"

"I do. I can't help it. I just love that little gal. Thanks, Liberty, for takin' my side."

She grinned. "I almost didn't. You know how much I like kissin' an' playin' with you, Rose. I was lookin' forward to it." Her eyes near sparkled. "I ain't never gonna be the one to stand in the way of true love. Guess if the mayor brings it up again, I'll suggest Nell. She's fun but she ain't as good at it as you are."

"That's 'cause Nell don't feel it like we do. To her, it's a job n' she'll do anythin' for money. For you an' me? It means somethin'." I watched her take in my words.

"You know, Rose, there's a part of me that's right jealous of you an' Little Jack." She reached over an' cupped my face with both hands. "She got what I always wanted. You."

I think my heart stopped about then. "What? What're you sayin', Liberty?"

"I always loved you, Dusty Rose Potts. I always wished I'd had you for myself." She pulled me close, kissed my forehead an' let me go.

"Liberty Jane Mason! Why didn't you never say nothin' to me?"

"'Cause I knowed the moment I see them magnif'cent baby blues of yours set eyes on a near growed up Little Jack Fairchild, I didn't stand a chance. I love you, Rose, an' sometimes lovin' someone means lettin' 'em go."

"Liberty..."

"No, it's okay. I'm happy for you an' Little Jack. I mean it." She sounded like she believed what she was sayin'. I was stunned. Liberty hid her feelin's really well. "I'll find me somebody. Someday."

"Not in this town, you won't."

"Ya never know. You did." She raised a eyebrow then winked at me. "C'mon, let's go downstairs an' see who might be next."

I wouldn't give up Little Jack for nothin'. She had my heart n' my soul an' everythin' in b'tween. But Liberty was a right han'some woman an' if Little Jack hadn't caught my

fancy, well, things might be a might diff'rent for Liberty an' me. That thought made me daydream a bit 'til a saddlebum driftin' through town paid Madame Birdie, grabbed my hand an' took me upstairs.

When I come back down, Little Jack was playin' poker with Jim Dandy, Smilin' Joe an' two men I ain't never seen before. I went to the bar an' Judd poured me a shot of bourbon bought for me by my last customer. When I finished that, I wandered over to the poker table an' stood behind Smilin' Joe who sat across from Little Jack. She looked up at me with such love in her eyes, it stole my breath.

"Okay, everybody show 'em," Jim Dandy said. Little Jack an' the rest laid out their hands. Jim Dandy looked at the one stranger who didn't. "C'mon, Billy boy, let's see what you got."

"You first." The young man he called Billy said.

Jim Dandy loved a challenge 'cause it gave him a excuse to get more hot headed. "Same time, then, you snake!" They both throwed down their cards. Jim Dandy had three kings an' two tens. Billy laughed an' pointed to his cards. Four aces an' a deuce, which was wild so it made it five aces. Billy went to grab the pot of coins on the table an' Jim Dandy quickly drewed his Colt .45, puttin' it right to Billy's forehead.

"Now, wait a minute..." Billy said an' put his hands up.

"You wanna tell me how you just drewed four aces outta a deck that gave you three last time an' two the time before that?"

"I...I...just got lucky, I guess..." Billy was scared an' stammerin'.

Jim Dandy pulled the trigger an' a bullet 'sploded outta the barrel, makin' everybody jump. What was left of Billy's head snapped back an' he crumpled to the floor like a dropped sack of spuds. "Your luck just ran out," Jim Dandy said, then laughed.

Judd came out from behind the bar an' ran to Billy. "What's wrong with you, boy?"

He holstered his Colt. "You gotta problem with me, Judd?" Jim Dandy's tone was darin'.

Judd looked disgusted. "You ain't the one's gotta clean up this mess!" Judd was used to the roughs shootin' cheaters, his shock over it desertin' him years ago. "Damn it all to hell, we don't even know who this boy is."

"That ain't my problem," Jim Dandy said an' split the pot between hisself, Little Jack an' Smilin' Joe. The other player just sat there in a wet chair, lookin' like he just seen a ghost. There was specks of Billy's blood on his face n'shirt.

The batwing doors of the saloon flew inward an' Deputies Wilson an' Tuck ran in, sidearms drawn. They stopped dead in their tracks when they heard the sound of metal bein' yanked outta leather an' hammers bein' cocked back. Suddenly they was lookin' at the barrels of at least thirty guns pointed at 'em.

Sheriff Tom Parker walked in an' shook his head. "Everybody put their guns away," he said, calm-like.

"There was shootin' in here, Sheriff," Tuck said to him.

"And if I ain't mistakin', there's a dead body over by Judd." Wilson pointed.

"What in the hell is goin' on down there?" Mr. Burnett asked from the railin' of the second floor landin'.

"That's what we're tryin' to find out," Tuck yelled up to him.

"I ain't talkin' to you, you little pissant." He looked at Smilin' Joe. "What happened?"

"Boy was cheatin' at cards," was all Smilin' Joe said.

Mr. Burnett cocked his head. "Reckon he won't do that again. Everybody settle down an', Henry, go get Digger to get this trash outta my saloon."

"Yessir, Mr. Burnett," Henry Spits said an' left the saloon.

Everyone holstered their guns an' Sheriff Parker gave a sign for his deputies to do the same. Mr. Burnett started to walk back to his office. "Wait a second, Victor. Cheatin' at cards ain't lawful cause to be killin' no one. I need to take in whoever shot this boy until we can straighten out what happened."

Jim Dandy stepped up to the sheriff. "That'd be me, Sheriff. I done the shootin'."

"No big surprise there. Jim Dandy, I'd appreciate it if you'd accompany my boys over to my office."

"An' I'd 'preciate it if your old, raggedy puss was six feet under 'cause then you'd stop botherin' me."

"Hey, boy! You show some respect!" Tuck yelled at him.

"Ain't no reason to start now," Little Jack piped up. "He ain't never done nothin' to earn nobody's respect." It was true. Sheriff Parker was a nice, ol' man but he was terrified of Victor Burnett. He an' his deputies give a wide berth to Mr. Burnett an' the roughs, which is why we never saw 'em much. Every now an' then, they'd show up at the saloon, when there was trouble, like today. But not much ever came of it.

“Jim Dandy ain’t goin’ nowhere with you, Sheriff,” Mr. Burnett told him. “He misspoke.” He looked in our direction. “Ain’t that right, Jim Dandy? Boy pulled his gun on ya an’ it was self-defense, wasn’t it?”

“That’s right, Mr. Burnett.” Jim Dandy nodded up to him. Then he stared at Sheriff Parker. “Self-defense, that’s what it was.” Mr. Burnett grinned evil-like an’ went back to his office.

“Betcha we don’t find no gun on or near the body,” Wilson said to Tuck.

Digger an’ Henry Spits walked in behind them. Digger went right to the body an’ pulled out his listenin’ tool. He put one end against the boy’s chest an’ the other end at his ear. “Yep. He’s dead, all right.”

The Sheriff looked frustrated. “No matter. Come on, boys. Let’s let Digger do his job and see if we can find out who he is.”

Judd looked at the terrified man still in his chair. “You know him?”

“Y-yeah. He...he...said he rode to town with his sister an’ new brother-in-law. He was stayin’ a few more days an’ then headin’ back to Savannah.”

“I think you just killed Cole Sorrell’s wife’s brother,” Madame Birdie said.

Sheriff Parker walked toward the door followed by his deputies. “That’s a good a place to start as any.”

When they left, Smilin’ Joe asked, “That sorry piece of pig shit got hisself hitched?”

“Well, whattaya know!” Jim Dandy smiled. “The coward come back to town. What say we pay ol’ Cole a visit?”

“No!” Little Jack was standin’ next to Jim Dandy. “We leave him alone.” Her tone was serious.

“He left us,” Jim Dandy’s voice sounded vengeful.

Little Jack grabbed his arm. “Yes an’ you know why.” They stared at each other for a long time an’ neither looked very happy with the other.

“Little Jack’s right. Leave ‘im alone.” Whiskey Walters stood on the other side of Jim Dandy. “He ain’t worth it.”

It took a few moments but finally Jim Dandy bowed his head an’ shrugged. “Don’t like it but I reckon I can find someone else to take my frustrations out on.” He then looked at

me an' smiled. "Wanna go upstairs with me, Dusty Rose?" He pulled a handful of coins outta his pocket. "I can pay for extras this time."

I saw the look on Little Jack's face. It was one thing that I sold my body every night. She didn't like it but she could look passed it. It was quite another if I pleased any of her friends, something I ain't done since she an' I started sleepin' together. "Not if you don't mind my monthly curse," I whispered in his ear, knowin' full well he did mind.

He jumped away from me like he been stung by a bee an' put his hands up in front of hisself. "No thanks. I don't want me no part of that." He looked around the room an' his eyes settled on Merry an' he made a beeline towards her. He showed her his handful of coins, paid Madame Birdie an' he an' Merry scooted upstairs, not to be seen for the rest of the night.

Digger an' Henry carried Billy outta the saloon an' everythin' started goin' back to normal. Little Jack touched my arm when we passed each other an' she mouthed the words 'Thank you.' I smiled at her an' she went back to the bar. My heart pounded, recallin' the way she looked at me when she'd been playin' cards. If someone can devour you with their eyes, Little Jack did it.

The days just got crazier an' crazier. I coulda blamed it on a full moon but I just knowed it wasn't that. Everybody seemed restless, includin' me. The little hairs on the back of my neck would stand up for no reason an' give me shivers. I had a feelin' of dread an' I didn't like it, not one bit. I hear tell when your back hairs rise for no clear reason, it's the good Lord sendin' you a warnin'. I just had to figger out a warnin' 'bout what.

Cole Sorrells' wife raised a big ol' fuss over the killin' of her brother, Billy. 'Course nothin' came of it 'cause it was a Burnett rough that done it. As much as Cole tried to tell her to forget it, his snooty bride, who spent mosta her time lookin' down her nose at everyone ('specially us girls at the Silver Dollar), kept runnin' to Sheriff Parker demandin' that he do somethin'. I think by the end of the week, the sheriff and his deputies wanted to shoot her.

Not that I don't feel bad that she lost her brother but she tried to make him sound like Saint Peter hisself. I don't agree with Jim Dandy killin' him for cheatin' but he was not honest at the poker table. When Digger was went through Billy's clothes lookin' for valuables to keep, like he did with all the bodies he picked up, he found more aces hid in secret pockets than Billy had fingers n' toes.

I did feel sorry for Cole, tho, 'cause every time I saw him on the street with his missus, she was bawlin' him out, screamin' at him like a fishwife. I think he thought marryin' him a out-a-town gal would help him from feelin' the need to associate with his old friends. I don't know why he came back to Ghost Town in the first place but I do know Mrs. Cole Sorrells wanted to leave as soon as Cole could buy a decent carriage.

The other big doin's was Mr. Burnett an' Madame Birdie talked about havin' a birthday party for Will. The only reason I could think of was that the ol' coot had somethin' up his sleeve for his only survivin' son. I wondered what Little Jack mighta heard.

"Don't you find that, well, just a tad odd?" I asked. Little Jack an' I was in bed an' her head was restin' on my shoulder. She was just startin' her monthly an' her lower parts was crampin' her somethin' awful.

"Why? Will is his son."

"Yeah, but... Will hates him."

She took in a long breath an' then rocked against me. "Damn, Rose, when's that medicine gonna start workin'?"

"Soon, sweetheart." I rubbed her belly, slow-like.

"That feels nice."

I kissed the top of her head. "When's the party s'pose to be?"

“Will’s birthday is in two days. Mr. Burnett got him that bell for the church he’s been wantin’.” Little Jack raised up an’ shook her finger at me. “Now, don’t you go tellin’ him that. That’s a surprise.”

I grabbed that finger an’ kissed it, then held it against my heart. Little Jack settled back down. “You know I won’t say nothin’. I don’t never see Will anymore. Not really. I don’t go near that church an’ he don’t come near here.” Will wasn’t the minister, he just kinda kept an eye on the place since the preacher took off a coupla years before. Reverend Booker lost many more flock than he turned into believers an’ goin’ up against Victor Burnett just wasn’t healthy. One day the reverend was here an’ the next day him an’ his family was gone. So Will kinda took over as caretaker an’ every once in a while, he would read pieces from the Good Book to whoever showed up at church. The one thing he wanted real bad but didn’t have the money for was a church bell. I couldn’t believe Mr. Burnett had got him one.

“He better be here in two nights. Mr. Burnett will be real mad if he don’t an’ you know what happens when Mr. Burnett gets mad.”

“Don’t add up,” I said. “Mr. Burnett thinks Will is a disgrace to his name. Captain Ketner calls Will ‘soft’ right to Mr. Burnett’s face an’ the cantankerous ol’ turd agrees with him. The two of ‘em barely spoken for years, why would he suddenly wanna throw Will a party?”

Little Jack shrugged. “Don’t know. Maybe he wants to try to mend ways. After all, Will’s gonna be twenny years old an’ Mr. Burnett sure ain’t getting’ any younger.”

“Oh my Lord, that’s right. That means I’m gonna be twenny-one. Talk ‘bout not getting’ any younger...”

Little Jack raised up again an’ looked in my eyes. “Rose, you’re the most beautiful thing I ever laid eyes on an’ you just get more beautiful every day. I don’t care how old you get, I’ll never get tired of bein’ with you. I love you so much, Dusty Rose Potts an’ I wanna spend the rest of my life with you.”

I teared up an’ pulled her close to me. “I want that, too.”

“I wish you could quit, Rose. I wish you could quit an’ we could get wed. I could take care of you. You could live with me an’ Pa.”

“Little Jack –“

“No, now I know that don’t sound appealin’, livin’ with Pa an’ all but maybe we could build us a house next door. We could have us a nice garden an’ some dogs an’ a coupla kids an’ –“

I pulled her on top of me. "Even if Mr. Burnett did let me go, which is never gonna happen, do you think, for one blasted second, that he'd let me be with you? Little Jack, we can't be wed, it ain't allowed an' how you gonna give me kids? I'd love it if you could but you just ain't got the goods inside you make babies with me." She looked hurt. "Oh, sweetheart, if I could, I'd bear your children, I'd marry you, I'd make it all okay. But I can't." I took me a deep breath. "An' honestly, unless you got away from Victor Burnett, we wouldn't have no life. I couldn't be the wife waitin' at home for you, Little Jack, 'cause I'd never know from one day to the next if you was comin' home."

"But I don't know nothin' else."

"Maybe your Pa could teach you 'bout furniture makin'."

"Don't think my Pa's got it in him anymore an' anyways, you're right. Mr. Burnett will never let either of us go." She was quiet for a real long time an' I stroked her hair.

"How're them cramps?"

"Better. An' I'm getting' sleepy." I knew the medicine had to start workin' soon an' I could hear in her voice that she was fadin' with the night. "You know, Rose," she said in a near mumble as sleep took her, "I could always kill him."

As thrillin' an' as terrifyin' as her words was, they was lost when I give in to sleep myself not too long after.

Little Jack didn't bring up killin' Mr. Burnett again an' neither did I. I don't think she recalled sayin' it or if she did, she chewed over it as a moment of madness an' forgot it. I was torn 'tween likin' the notion an' knowin' if it backfired, we was both dead. I wished there was another way, a way maybe someone else could get rid of Victor Burnett without us bein' a part of it.

Madame Birdie always told me be careful what you wish for.



The day of Will Burnett's birthday, started like any other day. Little Jack snuck out 'fore the sun come up, coffee got brewed an' we made sure our laundry was washed an' hung out to dry. Judd come in 'bout noon an' set up the bar an' Madame Birdie had us clean up the saloon to make it right pretty for Will. I was still thinkin' he wasn't gonna show his face anywheres near the Silver Dollar but Bobcat Roberts said he would. He an' Jim Dandy said they run into him earlier tryin' to fix a wheel hub for Cole Sorrells an' his wife so's they could get outta town. Bobcat said Will told them he would be here for his party but Jim Dandy told Judd that Will didn't want nothin' to do with it.

"Then this whore road into town," Bobcat said. "Gonna be givin' you gals a run for your money. Nice Injun gal an' I want me the first piece of her 'fore anyone else gets him a poke."

"Just keep dreamin'," Jim Dandy told him.

“Yeah, jush keep dreamin’,” Jackknife said an’ downed another shot. It was barely past two in the afternoon an’ Jackknife was already pickled. Little Jack told me that her pa got the hell beat outta him last evenin’ by Mrs. Sorrells an’ her umbrella ‘cause he said some stupid thing about her brother not knowin’ she was right behind him. Little Jack said he wouldn’t tell nobody what happened ‘cause he was ashamed he got bested by a prissy woman so’s I think he got started early on the imbibin’ to ease his pride.

I was over in the corner, outta the way, patchin’ up some tablecloths for Madame Birdie. Digger pushed through the doors an’ ran up to Madame Birdie an’ Judd, talkin’ real low. Judd gave him a shot of somethin’, he tossed it back right quick.

Jackknife begun tauntin’ Digger ‘bout Digger never gonna be puttin’ him in no box but Digger didn’t pay him no mind. Digger still spoke in hushed tones to Madame Birdie an’ Judd. Then Jackknife drewed his gun an’ started wavin’ it around, tellin’ Digger he wanted to see him dance. Then he fired off a shot that just missed Judd an’ broke a few glasses at the back bar.

Little Jack an’ Whiskey Walters come burstin’ through the swingin’ batwing doors to see why there was shootin’. She looked over at me an’ I shrugged my shoulders. She lowered her shotgun an’ went to Jackknife. She took him by the arm but he shook her off, arguin’. Just then Mr. Burnett, the mayor an’ Copperhead walked out to the landin’ an’ down the stairs. He wanted to know what was goin’ on an’ Little Jack apologized for her Pa disturbin’ him. Jackknife begun mouthin’ off to Mr. Burnett ‘til Mr. Burnett knocked Jackknife out with the butt of his pistol.

“Take him home and let him sleep it off,” Mr. Burnett told Little Jack. She drug her Pa out the door. That’s the last I saw of her ‘til later.

Mr. Burnett then said goodbye to Rogers an’ Copperhead an’ was ‘bout to go back upstairs when Digger stopped him. He tried to brush Digger off but then I heard Digger say, “It has to do with your pa’s murder!”

The look on Victor Burnett’s face was one I ain’t never seen before an’ hoped I’d never see again.

I went out to the kitchen to see if Madame Birdie needed any more help with anythin’ but she said she had everythin’ under control. “What’s Digger doin’ in here so early when he clearly ain’t lookin’ for Beatrice’s services?” I asked.

“Don’t know yet. But it can’t be good.”

Liberty pushed the door open in the kitchen. “Your Yankee boyfriend just beat the ever-lovin’ piss outta Pete Louder over at the store.”

“What for?” Was everybody goin’ crazy? Captain Ketner had a bad temper but it really took a lot to bring it out. For him to beat up anybody, ‘specially someone as mild mannered as Pete was plain peculiar.

“I reckon Pete asked him to pay for somethin’.” Liberty said.

“Pete shoulda knowed better than that,” Madame Birdie said.

“Still...” I looked at her.

“The sheriff just stood there,” Liberty said.

“Tom Parker’s just decoration, y’all should’ve learnt that by now,” Madame Birdie said.

Nell poked her head in the kitchen. “Better come out here, somethin’s goin’ on.”

“What is it?” Madame Birdie asked.

“Dunno. Mr. Burnett’s callin’ for a meetin’.

I don’t think we was s’posed to be included in the meetin’ but we all gathered there anyways. We wasn’t asked to leave so’s I reckon it was okay. When all the roughs was there, Mr. Burnett silenced everyone an’ spoke of his folks bein’ murdered so many years ago an’ the killer, Harmon Teaster, ain’t never been caught an’ punished. Then he said that he just found out that not only was the murderer was still alive but Harmon Teaster’s daughter was walkin’ the streets of Ghost Town that very moment. He then said he wanted the girl brought to him – unharmed for now – an’ there’d be a hundred dollar reward to whoever brung her to him first.

“Bet that’s the Injun gal we saw,” Bobcat said to Jim Dandy.

“I saw her headin’ to Doc Morrison’s,” Moose told them, and with that, the whole lot of ‘em rushed out the door.

“What’re you gonna do with that girl, Victor?” Madame Birdie asked. She seemed alarmed. Didn’t blame her.

“Now, don’t you worry, Birdie. I’m just gonna talk to her an’ try to find out where her daddy’s hidin’.” Mr. Burnett lit one of his special cigars.

“An’ you think she’s just gonna tell you where to find him?”

“I’m sure she’ll need a little convincin’.” He smiled that evil smile of his an’ said “I’m goin’ to find Will. If anyone asks or they bring that girl here, tell them I’ll be right back.”

“Harmon Teaster’s daughter? She’ll need a lot of convincin’,” Judd said, after Mr. Burnett left the saloon.

“This ain’t gonna be pretty, Judd,” Madame Birdie said.

“No, it ain’t, Birdie. Ain’t gonna be pretty at all.”

I was lookin’ out the saloon window a little while later when I saw Moose an’ Whiskey carry a girl outta Pete an’ Betsy’s store, with the roughs followin’ behind. She was strugglin’ somethin’ fierce. Moose had his hand over her mouth so’s she couldn’t scream.

The group ran right smack dab into Mr. Burnett who musta been comin’s back from meetin’ with Will. He said somethin’ to his roughs an’ they busted through the saloon doors an’ carried the girl upstairs. She looked to be at least half-Cherokee an’ maybe in her late teen years. She was a pretty girl. I doubted she would be once they was done with her. The thought made me sick in my belly. What made me sicker was that Little Jack was goin’ along with it.

I looked back out the window an’ I saw the mayor pointin’ towards the saloon doors an’ sayin’ somethin’ to Mr. Burnett. The tone seemed rather unpleasant. Captain Ketner came up an’ stood beside Mr. Burnett an’ said somethin’ to the mayor that caused Copperhead to take a step forward. Suddenly Jim Dandy an’ the deputies was there, squarin’ off an’ guns was drawn. Then I saw Mr. Burnett punch Deputy Tuck in the gut an’ when Tuck hit the ground, Mr. Burnett kicked him a few times in the ribs. My hand went to my mouth in worry. When the captain an’ Mr. Burnett walked into the saloon, I stood real quiet, hopin’ they didn’t see me. In the mood Mr. Burnett was clearly in, Lord only knew what I’d get punished for.

What in the name of all that was holy was goin’ on?

The evenin’ was approachin’ fast. Will’s birthday party was goin’ strong even tho the guest of honor hadn’t got there yet an’ I still wondered if he ever would. Until I saw Mr. Burnett slip a small bottle of dark liquid to Judd an’ I heard him order Judd to put some in whatever Will was drinkin’. Judd didn’t wanna do it but Mr. Burnett threatened him. I reckon that meant Will was comin’. I thought the liquid looked like the opium I seen Doc Morrison use on his gunshot patients before takin’ the bullet out an’ sewin’ ‘em back up. What was Mr. Burnett up to that he’d wanna drug his own son?

I looked around to find Little Jack but she was keeping a eye on her pa who she brung back for the party. Mr. Burnett was too close to her so’s I knew askin’ her what was goin’ on wasn’t gonna be happenin’. Then I thought if everybody was down here enjoyin’ the

party, who was upstairs with the Teaster gal? So I asked Smilin' Joe who was standin' next to me, tryin' to feel me up every chance he got.

"Did ya let your prisoner go or is she still upstairs?"

"She's upstairs. Colonel Ketner's watchin' her."

"So y'all get her to talk?"

"We ain't been up with her yet. After we brung her up an' tied her to the chair, Mr. Burnett made us all leave 'cept the captain an' Linn. But I heard he ain't been able to get nothin' outta her, 'cept her name: Violet Teaster. We're all hopin' he'll give us a shot at her...if ya know what I mean." Smilin' Joe pinched my behind when he said that. I took a step away from him.

"Yep. I know what you mean." I got that nauseated feelin' again.

A loud slap sounded right close to us an' we all looked to where it come from. Linn was lookin' mighty peeved at some stranger who was rubbin' his face. Mr. Burnett pulled Linn to him an' Moose an' Smilin' Joe helped the stranger to the saloon doors. They give him a good swift kick in the pants an' as he left, Will walked in.

Will looked right han'some. He was neat an' clean shaved an' was all dressed up. He smiled at everybody an' walked around the room, shakin' hands. When he got to me, I give him a big hug.

"Happy Birthday, Will."

"Thank you, Rose. Can you believe I'm twenty?"

"Nope." I shook my head. "I don't wanna keep you over here talkin' an' make your pa mad."

Will nodded. "That's true. He never did need much of a reason to get mad at you, did he?"

"No, sir, an' he still don't. You look good, Will. You doin' all right?"

"Yes, I believe I am. I met someone today and I know it sounds crazy but I think I fell in love with her the minute I saw her."

"Will, that's great! Who is she?" I was tryin' to think of who lived on the outside of town, who mighta growed up since the last time Will saw her. Or maybe it was some gal just moved to Ghost Town with her family. If that was it, I surely hoped Will got to her before his pa did.

“Her name is Violet and she’s –“

“Violet?” I musta turned the color of alabaster.

He clearly noticed my ghastly shade. “Rose? What -?”

“She’s up-“ He was pulled away from me by Bobcat an’ Whiskey.

“Get over here, boy!” Mr. Burnett shouted at Will. “Time for a drink an’ your birthday toast!”

“Will,” I wanted to warn him ‘fore he took a drink of anythin’, “Your pa, he –“

He shook his head, indicatin’ he couldn’t hear me no more. “Let’s talk later,” Will shouted back.

There would be no later. I suddenly needed to run out back to throw up. After heavin’ forceful-like at least three times, my head started to pound. I went back inside an’ told Madame Birdie I did not feel at all well an’ that I been retchin’. She felt my forehead.

“Why, Rose, you’re burnin’ up. Call it a night. Go lay down.”

“But –“

“Now, I’ll deal with Mr. Burnett if it comes to that.” She looked over at Mr. Burnett celebratin’ with his son. “I don’t think it’ll come to that. Go get in bed, Rose. Take a spoonful of that tincture I got over the sink in my bathroom. It’ll calm your belly. I’ll come check on you later.” She winked at me. “If Little Jack don’t beat me to it.”

I threw up one more time ‘fore I took the medicine Madame Birdie wanted me to. I went to sleep soon as I covered myself up. Not even the gunshots later woke me up.

I felt Little Jack climb into bed with me. I was kinda awake but I was feelin’ fuzzy. She was drunk an’ lustful. “Want you, Rose.” She was slurrin’ her words an’ tryin to figger out how to get my nightgown offa me.

“No, Little Jack. I’m not feelin’ good.” I tried to push myself out from underneath her.

“C’mon, Rose, I just wanna little...”

“No, I don’t –“

“Just a quick –“

We started wrasslin' an' not in a good way. I finally mustered up my strength an' trapped her beneath me. "No! I said no, Little Jack! Don't you never become as bad as them boys you're around all the time!" I was mad.

"Jesus, Rose, what's the problem? Why're you denyin' me? You don't never deny no one else."

I knew it was the liquor talkin' but I couldn't help it, I slapped her anyways. She was stunned an' her hand went to where her face was stingin'. "Don't you never, Little Jack! Don't you never talk to me or treat me like I'm your whore!" My voice broke when I said it. I sat up in bed an' put my legs on the floor. I broke down n' started to cry.

Little Jack sat up with me an' put her hand on my back. "Rose, I'm...I'm so sorry, I..." She leaned her head on my shoulder. "I don't know what come over me. I ain't never thought of you as anyone's whore, 'specially not my own. Please, please forgive me. I love you so much, Rose, I didn't mean to hurt your feelin's. Please, Rose, don't cry." She sounded like she was ready to bust into tears herself.

I wiped my eyes an' looked at her. "What is goin' on 'round here, Little Jack? It's like everyone's gone plumb crazy."

She coaxed me back down with her an' we laid in each other's arms. "I watched 'em tonight. Watched em' one after the other took that Teaster gal like they was wild animals. It was horrible, Rose. I wanted to leave but Mr. Burnett wouldn't let me. An' I ain't gonna lie to you, I was mean, too, in the beginnin'. I hit her a few times. But after they all, you know, had their way with her an' I saw what it done to her, I just couldn't take it. I went back downstairs an' just started drinkin'."

"So why'd you come in here thinkin' you could do the same thing to me?"

"It wouldn'ta been the same thing!" Then she thought about it. "Oh, Lord, Rose, I'm so sorry." She hugged me tighter. "I guess I didn't think of it like that. I was soused an' horny. I thought you'd want me 'cause, you know, you always do."

"I was sick tonight. I left just as Mr. Burnett was sayin' a toast to Will."

"Then you don't know?"

"Know what?"

"Will. He shot Wilson an' Tom Parker. Wilson's dead an' it don't look so good for Sheriff Parker."

"Will? Will wouldn't hurt a fly. Are you sure? *Will* killed a deputy an' maybe the sheriff?"

He was actin' kinda outta his head before he did it, tho. I think he knew the Teaster gal, too, 'cause he begun actin' real nutty after he recognized her."

"His pa drugged him, that's why he behaved the way he did." I told her about the opium Mr. Burnett made Judd put in Will's drinks. "Where's Will now?"

"Not sure. Jim Dandy said he thought they put him in with Nell to, you know, take care of him."

"And is Violet still in Mr. Burnett's office?"

"No, they took her somewheres else. I don't know where. All I know is Moose is guardin' her."

"Oh, no. Moose. Did he take a turn with her?" The notion horrified me. I mean, Moose surely couldn't help bein' big as he was but it was bad enough for those of us used to gettin' it from him. I couldn't imagine a virgin takin' it from him.

Little Jack thought about it. "You know what? I don't think he did. I think Moose was downstairs with Will when all the shootin' started."

"Lord, Little Jack, I don't think Mr. Burnett's got any idea of nest of hornets he's stirred up. This Teaster gal's pa is gonna come lookin' for her an' he ain't gonna like what he finds."

"That's what Mr. Burnett wants. He wants Harmon Teaster to come outta hidin' so's he can get justice for his folk's killin'."

I let out a big, long sigh. "I got me a real bad feelin' about this, Little Jack. Real bad."

"Don't worry, Rose. It'll all be fine. Like Mr. Burnett said, Harmon Teaster's only one man. There's a lot of us."

Somehow that didn't put my mind at rest.

When I woke up, Little Jack was still there, snuggled right tight to me. It felt nice but I was s'prised that she hadn't left 'fore first light, like she always did. I could smell the fresh coffee an' that meant everyone else was up an' about, includin' Beatrice. I shook Little Jack an' she groaned. "G'way."

"Come on, baby, you gotta wake up. It's really late."

"Don't care," she mumbled, half her face buried in the pillow.

“Little Jack, I ain’t kiddin’.”

“My head hurts.”

“I’m not s’prised.” I put my cheek on her forehead. “Must be a hangover, ‘cause it don’t feel like no fever.”

“Can’t I just stay here a little while longer, Rose?” She had yet to open her eyes.

“That’s up to you, sweetheart, but if it gets back to Mr. Burnett you was in here, we’re both gonna suffer.”

“I’ll make sure I get out without no one seein’ me, I promise.”

I kissed her an’ got outta bed. I slipped on my robe an’ went to the kitchen to get some coffee.

“You’re missin’ all the excitement,” Liberty said, handin’ me a cup. “How you feelin’? Madame Birdie said you was pretty sick last night.”

“I’m much better, thanks.” I poured the coffee. “What excitement? If it’s about Will shootin’ Wilson an’ Parker, I already know.”

“Old news, Rose. Will found out they was keepin’ that half-breed they brought in last night at the stables. He knocked Moose out an’ set her free.”

“Good for Will.”

“Not good for Will. His pa found out an’ he’s on his way to the church right now. By the way, you seen Little Jack? Mr. Burnett’s lookin’ for her.” She had a knowin’ grin on her face.

Before I could say anythin’, Little Jack came outta my bedroom, buttonin’ her vest an’ holdin’ her shotgun. “I heard. I’m on my way. Hey, Liberty.”

“Hey, Little Jack.”

Little Jack stepped over to me an’ kissed me real quick. “I’ll see you later.” She then left through the back door.

“Is she getting’ bolder?”

“Naw, it’s just she knows you won’t tell.”

An hour later, I was bathed an’ dressed for the evenin’ activities. I was helpin’ Judd set up the back of the bar when Madame Birdie came in with some groceries. She asked how I was, then asked me to help her put them away, so I followed her into the kitchen.

She told me that the roughs beat Will to a bloody pulp an' then dropped him off at Doc Morrison's. I shook my head. "The people in this town have gone as mad as a March hare, Madame Birdie."

"It's about to get worse, my dear Rose," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean Harmon Teaster *will* come to town, lookin' for them that wronged his daughter. He will kill them, I have no doubt of that."

"All of 'em? Little Jack, too?" My heart was in my throat.

"Rose... Little Jack was a part of it. If you don't want her meetin' her maker at the hands of Harmon Teaster, you best talk her into leavin' town an' I mean today."

"Madame Birdie, she'll never leave her pa." I was suddenly at my wit's end. "What do I do?"

"See if there's any way you can maybe get her to keep herself an' her pa home for the next couple of days. 'Til the dust settles. Maybe you should stay out there at their cabin with 'em, if she agrees."

"Mr. Burnett will find us an' kill us!"

"You ain't gonna have to be worryin' 'bout Victor Burnett too much longer, Rose. Teaster missed him last time 'cause Victor was outta town. Victor ain't so lucky this time. Victor Burnett is a walkin' dead man."

"You're scarin' me. Ain't you scared?"

Madame stared into my eyes. "Nope. Ain't done nothin' wrong. Now, go find Little Jack an' try to talk some sense into her."

She didn't have to tell me a second time.

I was just missin' Little Jack in every place I looked for her. I finally caught up with her at the saddlery where she was lookin' over halters an' reins. She was s'prised an' confused to see me. "What're you doin' here, Rose? Shouldn't you be at the saloon?"

I pulled her to the back where nobody could hear us. "Listen to me, Little Jack, please. I'll do anything you want, you want me to go live with you an' your pa? I'll do it, but --"

“You will? Lord, Rose, that’s great news! But what about Mr. Burnett?”

“Accordin’ to Madame Birdie, Mr. Burnett ain’t gonna live long enough to see it. That’s what I’m scared of for you...that Harmon Teaster’s gonna kill you, too, Little Jack, ‘cause you’re a Burnett rough. So let’s get your pa an’ get outta town for the next coupla days, just the three of us. Once it’s over, we can start a life where we can have each other an’ no one will bother us. We can have the garden an’ the dogs an’ I’ll even see what I can do ‘bout us havin’ kids. Please, Little Jack, we have to go now before the real trouble starts.”

She stared back at me with such love shinin’ in her eyes. “I want that so much, Rose, you know I do. If you’re willin’ to defy Mr. Burnett, then I am, too. But we gotta wait until this business with Harmon Teaster is behind us. Now, I told you last night, he’s just one man –“

I lost my temper. “One man who slaughtered near an entire town thirty years ago! Madame Birdie remembers it well. It ain’t a myth. Please, Little Jack, I’m beggin’ you. Let’s clear out ‘fore the bloodshed starts.”

“I want to, Rose, I really do but I can’t look like a coward to the other boys. Now, you know I’m the best shot of all of ‘em. Maybe you’re frettin’ over nothin’. Maybe he’s just comin’ for Victor Burnett. But I can’t desert an’ quit the roughs now. I mean, how would it look if my pa an’ I did that?”

“It would look like you an’ your pa was alive!”

“It’s gonna be fine, Rose. I’m tellin’ you, there’s too many of us. He took the town by s’prise last time. This time we know he’s comin’ an’ we’ll be ready for him.”

I was torn ‘tween Little Jack’s reasoning an’ Madame Birdie’s harsh point of fact. Which ever was true, I knew I wasn’t gonna get Little Jack to leave. Not only did she do everythin’ else like a boy, she had stubborn pride like a boy, too.

I suddenly felt very empty and lost. Little Jack saw my manner an’ touched my arm. “What is it, Rose?”

Sev’ral moments went by ‘fore I could speak. Finally I said. “Come back to the room with me. I need you. I need you right now, Little Jack. If we hurry, we can lock ourselves in before the evenin’s activities really start.”

Little Jack looked startled. “Rose, I ain’t been gone from there but two hours.”

“Yes but we didn’t make love last night an’ I need to be with you, Little Jack. I promise you lovin’ like you ain’t never had it before.”

I reckon the vision of what I was sayin' was doin' the convincin' for me. She swallowed real hard. "Get goin' an' I'll meet you back there."

We made the sweetest love I'd ever known that afternoon. It was urgent, satisfyin' an' pleasin' to both of us. We took each other over the edge many times, 'til we didn't have nothing' left in us.

"Why, Rose? Why in the afternoon? We could get caught so easy." Little Jack said, as she was dressin'.

"'Cause I'm leavin', Little Jack."

She sat back down on the bed. "Leavin'? What do you mean?"

"I can't stay here an' watch you die." I choked up at the idea of it.

She pulled me in her arms. "I ain't gonna die, baby. I mean, we don't even know if that ol' mountain man's still alive."

"Everyone seems to think he is. If he was dead, his daughter woulda said he was."

She let me go an' stood up. "I gotta go. They're prob'ly wonderin' where I been." She looked down at me. "Don't leave, Rose. Besides, you ain't got nowheres else to go."

"Madame Birdie'd make sure I got money to get me some place else."

"If you don't want to stay here, then why don't you go to me an' my pa's place an' wait for me there." She stood up an' buckled her holster belt, lookin' every inch the gunfighter she was.

"What if you don't come back?"

"Rose, stop!" She took my hand in hers, brung it to her lips an' kissed it. "Please, stop. How 'bout you get yourself dressed an' come out on the floor an' stay by me tonight. Unless some fightin' breaks out, then I don't want you to get hurt."

"That would be openly defyin' Mr. Burnett right in front of him."

Little Jack shrugged. "I think Mr. Burnett's got more to worry about then you an' me." She leaned down n' kissed me, tender-like an' left.

It felt so final.

I'd gotten dressed an' went out on the floor. When it came right down to it, I couldn't leave. I had to believe in Little Jack, had to believe that she would be all right. She was my life an' I couldn't turn my back on her.

She saw me come out from the back an' the look of relief on her was clear. She turned away from me to try an' hide her smile. She was standin' next to Moose who had a bloody rag tied around his head. She held a empty shotglass in her hand an' returned it to Judd at the bar. I was leanin' against the staircase railin' when Smilin' Joe walked in an' he wasn't smilin'.

He nervously moved to the bar an' asked Judd for a shot an' then another. I heard Little Jack why he was so jumpy an' he said he was thinkin' of headin' west.

Mr. Burnett appeared at the top of the stairs. He'd heard what Smilin' Joe said an' started to ask him questions. When he got to the bottom of the steps, Madame Birdie grabbed my arm an' pulled me with her closer to the kitchen door.

'Fore I knew it Mr. Burnett had his gun out, there were shots an' Smilin' Joe was on the floor with three holes in his chest. Any of the roughs who had not been in the saloon already, ran inside or downstairs to see what the shootin' was about.

Since Mr. Burnett had everyone gathered, he made a speech about knowin' Harmon Teaster was gonna come to town for him. He said that last time the coward came durin' the night an' killed everyone while they slept so this time they'd be ready for him. He finished with tellin' them that Harmon Teaster was just one man an' would die just like any other man, takin' his legend with him. That seemed to soothe Little Jack's fears an' she gave me a "I told you so" look. This was the only time in my life I wanted Mr. Burnett to be right.

One of the roughs fetched Digger who came in an' took away Smilin' Joe. Judd seemed upset 'cause he's just got the blood outta the floor from the other killin'.

The roughs stayed close to the saloon. The mayor an' Copperhead came in, argued with Mr. Burnett 'bout somethin' an' left. Then he an' the captain got heated 'bout somethin' an' the captain moved on. Mr. Burnett was now in the foulest mood I'd ever seen.

I looked over at Little Jack, who'd settled in to play poker. I guess now wasn't the time to be defiant.

Moose stood up. "Damn Doc ain't showed up yet an' I need my head sewed up. Guess I gotta go to him." Moose finished his drink an' left. That was the last time any of us ever saw Moose again.

The saloon was deathly quiet that afternoon. I strolled around the card table, lookin' at everyone's hand. I turned sheet white when I saw what Little Jack was holdin'. Aces n' eights. The dead man's hand. She heard my gasp an' threw her cards on the table.

"C'mon, Bobcat, let's go see how the doc's doin' on Moose's noggin." She wouldn't look at me when she left, rifle in hand.

'Bout a half-hour later, she came back in, all outta breath. "I found Moose! I don't think he ever made it to the doc's!"

As everybody charged out the door, she paused an' her eyes caught mine. There was dread in 'em. I didn't have to ask, I knew Moose was dead.

When Mr. Burnett an' the roughs got back to the saloon, they was all together. None of 'em, includin' Little Jack was as cocky as they been earlier. As day turned to night, they all drank many shots of whiskey an' milled around like the walkin' dead. Little Jack stayed watchful at the door, rifle in hand. While she kept a eye on the streets, I kept a eye on her.

Jackknife started croonin' some song 'bout death 'til Little Jack yelled at him to quit. It was clear she was irritable an' fraught. She would look over at me when she thought I didn't see her an' look back outside if I looked up at her.

"Spits ain't back yet," she said, breakin' the silence.

Jackknife said that maybe he'd met the same fate as Moose. None of 'em wanted to think 'bout that. But one by one, they all started to disappear only to be found later, dead. Mr. Burnett was losin' his gang of roughs one at a time. When Jim Dandy finally had enough, he ran outta the saloon into the street yellin' for Harmon Teaster to come get him, that he wasn't afraid of him. One shotgun blast later, Jim Dandy laid dead in the street.

"I can't do this, Little Jack," I said to her, finally. "I can't wait this out with you. Please, let's go to your cabin."

She was shakin' her head 'no' 'fore I even finished. "We can't now, Rose. He's out there. It's too dangerous. The only ones left is me, Pa, Whiskey, Bobcat, the captain an' Mr. Burnett. Spits, too, if he's still out there but I don't think he is."

While Mr. Burnett was up in his office with Linn, I grabbed Little Jack an' kissed her soundly in front of everybody. Nobody said a word. "I love you, Little Jack. But I can't stay. Madame Birdie, Liberty, Merry an' I are gonna go over to Pete n' Betsy Mae's."

She nodded, knowin' it was best. "Okay, Rose. You all go out the front door an' I'll watch to make sure you get across the way all right."

I went to the kitchen to get the others. Nell an' Beatrice had already fled to somewheres. When we walked back through the saloon, Mr. Burnett an' Linn were walkin' downstairs.

"Now where do you think you're all goin'?"

"I'm getting' my girls out of the line of fire, Victor," Madame Birdie told him. "They ain't a part of this an' I'm gettin' them out of harm's way."

For a moment he looked like he was gonna go on a rant but then he pushed Linn towards us. "Go with them," he told her. "Birdie is right. You don't need to be here. Go."

She hesitated but refused to join us. As Mr. Burnett told Judd to walk us over to the store to keep us safe, I said to Little Jack, "Remember this afternoon." She nodded an' smiled.

We ain't been settled at Besty Mae's that long when a loud noise, like a 'splosion rattled the windows of the store. We all went to look outside an' there was a lot of smoke comin' out of the saloon. I ran outside to the porch, holdin' my breath, 'til I heard Little Jack's mournful wail, "Nooooo, Pa! Pa!!!"

I wanted to go to her but Pete an' Liberty held me back. Pete said he'd go find out what happened. When he came back, Linn was with him. She was filthy from the dirt an' dust that the 'splosion caused.

"Jackknife, Whiskey an' Henry Spits are dead," Pete said.

"Henry?" Madame Birdie asked.

"He came back after you left. It took him an' Digger a long time to get Moose's big body back to Digger's an' then get him in a coffin."

"And Little Jack?" I asked.

"Alive. For now. But very, very angry," Pete said.

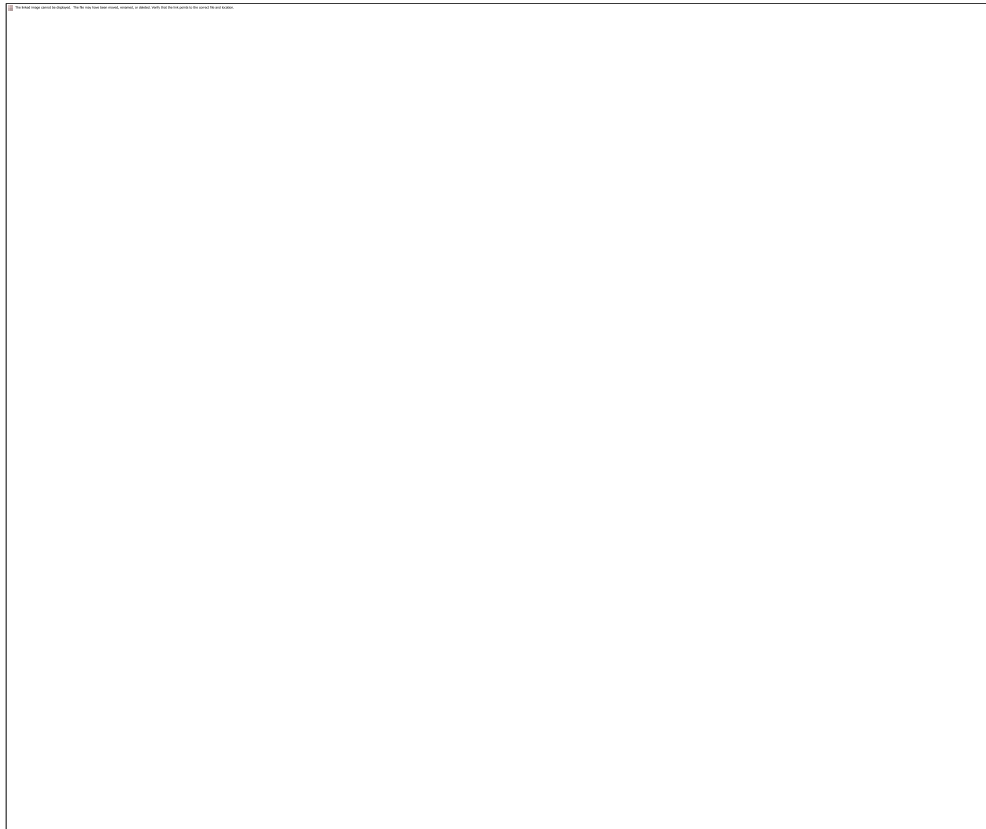
We had all dozed off at one time or 'nother but when we heard a gruff voice call out, "Victor! Victor Burnett! You're time has come," we all knew this was it. Now would be the tellin'.

When we all gathered by the window, we saw Victor come outta the saloon, followed by Captain Ketner, Bobcat an' Little Jack. Her face was tear-stained but mad as I ever seen her. They faced down one man, a grizzled, wild-lookin' mountain man. Then, suddenly, men from town started showin up behind him. There was Sheriff Parker with his arm in a

sling. Beside him was Deputy Tuck. The blacksmith an' his two sons walked up behind them . Then Pete grabbed his rifle an' ran outside, joinin' Copperhead an' Cole Sorrells, armed to the teeth with guns. They all stood with the man called Harmon Teaster. On one of the buildin's across the street was a Cherokee with a rifle.

I couldn't speak, I couldn't think, I couldn't breathe. 'Fore I knew it, everybody was shootin' at each other. I watched in horror as the gunfighters flinched an' bucked as bullets hit them. The gunfire kept flyin' an' the only two standin' on Mr. Burnett's side was him an' Little Jack. Then it happened an' it all seemed like it was happenin' slow-like, like it wasn't real. A bullet hit Little Jack an' she staggered back but she didn't fall. She started to raise her rifle an' she got struck again. If she would just fall, maybe they'd think she was dead an' they'd stop shootin' her.

She seemed to start droppin' when Mr. Burnett grabbed her an' held her in front of him, usin' her as a shield. So many bullets slammed into her that I knew there was no way she could be alive. When she finally dropped to the ground, it took only seconds for Victor Burnett to join her. When the shootin' had stopped, the store street was quiet, 'cept for a spine-tinglin', blood-curdlin' scream. It was a minute 'fore I realized that scream was comin' from me.



Epilogue

A year later, Ghost Town had gone back to bein' Maggie Valley again. The saloon an' brothel closed, the town was cleaned up, families started movin' back an' the town was boomin'.

The Burnett legacy was gone an' unfortunately, that included Will who was shot accidentally by Harmon Teaster when he ran out to the street durin' the gunfight to save Violet. Violet had come back to town to talk her pa outta killin' everybody.

Violet an' Doc Morrison fell in love an' got married. They're expectin' their first baby come Fall. Birdie, who ain't no longer a madame now helps Judd, who become a preacher, run the church. Deputy Tuck is now Sheriff Tuck an' he's runnin' the town like it should be run. Pete an' Betsy Mae still run the store but it's bigger now an' they do a great business.

Most of the Silver Dollar gals moved on to other places. Me? I stayed on in Maggie Valley. Liberty n' I live together in the Fairchild cabin on the outside of town. Right now, we're just two gals sharin' a cabin an' a past. We sleep together an' I love her but I ain't in love with her. Don't know what it'll become in the future.

Little Jack an' Jackknife is buried out back. I keep the gravesite free of weeds an' varmints an' around it, I've planted a little flower garden.

We got us a dog last week. He's feisty an' small. We named him Little Jack. I really think her spirit is inside him.

We ain't talked about getting' us no kids yet but who knows?

It's a better life without Victor Burnett in it but not with Little Jack gone. They say things work out for the best but I don't know. Liberty may have my love now but Little Jack will always have my heart.

The End

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