

# ~ The End of the Wild West Show ~

by K. Alexander

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DISCLAIMER (Skip if you're not going to sue me) Most of the characters belong to 20th Century Fox, as does the premise. No copyright infringement is intended, not for profit, and all that jazz.

WARNING (Please don't skip) This story is a continuation of the 1994 movie "Bad Girls". If you haven't watched it, I strongly suggest that you do (or at least read a synopsis) before you venture any further, because 1) you won't know what the heck I'm talking about, 2) I'm going to spoil the entire movie for you, and 3) it's four women with guns. C'mon.

COMMENTS (Your call) A while back, I caught a rerun of this movie totally by chance. Though it's certainly not the best movie ever made (although, four women with guns. C'mon!) it features Madeleine Stowe, and if you know Madeleine Stowe you'll understand. If you don't know Madeleine Stowe... well, I just don't know how you've survived this long. Now, I'm not the kind of person to spot subtext everywhere, but this time something caught my attention. There was an awful lot of intense... looking... between two of the leads. The interaction got me thinking, and ... well...

As a companion piece to this story I put together the following video:  
<http://www.youtube.com:80/watch?v=azFYdXOlnM>

FEEDBACK Go ahead. Make my day. Telegrams to [kalex@webmail.co.za](mailto:kalex@webmail.co.za)

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1892

"Miss Anita Crown."

I looked up from my stitch work to find Cody Zamora grinning at me from the bottom of the porch steps, her smile white and easy in a smudged dirty face. She had been chopping firewood, and the axe rested casually on her shoulders, her dusty wrists propped loosely over the ends of it. Honestly, it made me slightly nervous, the way in which she so heedlessly handled the sharp implement, but I did not let on for fear that she would tease me about it.

I hadn't heard her approach, and that said a lot - it had not yet been a year since the nasty Echo City and Kid Jarrett business, and we were all still a little on edge. I realised that I had come to know her long sturdy stride by ear, and the thought made me smile. With so much uncertainty behind us, the small discoveries of ordinary life and constancy still tasted new and sweet.

"Woman, are you even listenin' to me?" Cody's low voice was mocking, but there was an irreverent twinkle in her brown eyes.

As haughtily as possible I returned to mending the shirt resting on my lap. "No, but then I figure you're likely to be talking nonsense anyway."

"Is that so?" she countered, and I knew that if I looked up I would see her raising her eyebrows. Instead I kept my gaze down, though I was sure she could very clearly see the small smile that I was unable to keep off my face.

"That is so."

"Now listen here, Miss Crown, you stop wastin' my time right now." Her accent thickened like treacle when she was annoyed, even if she was only pretending. "How about a cup of coffee?"

I threaded the needle carefully into the cotton so as not to drop it, and then looked up with as innocent an expression as I could muster. "Why, that would be very nice, thank you."

Something wicked flashed behind her eyes and then she gave that small tight-lipped grin that meant someone was in trouble. "Anita Crown, if you do not make me a cup of coffee this instance, I... "

"You'll do what, Cody Zamora?" I challenged her, slowly pushing aside my work to be prepared should she rush at me in retribution.

She rolled her neck once, and then lifted the axe over her head and propped it on the ground, leaning on it casually. "Anita, if you do not make me a cup of coffee this instance, I will come up there and hug you."

I almost laughed before I took in just how filthy her clothes were, and how her skin shone with sweat. Noticing the direction of my gaze she cocked her head jauntily.

"Well?"

Letting the axe drop she stepped forward, and I stood and began to move backwards as quickly as possible, without falling and humiliating myself. "Now Cody, as much as I love your hugs, I'd prefer to just make that cup of coffee for you."

Her grin split back into that wide smile. "Oh, that's a pity, 'cause I was really lookin' forward to..." When she suddenly lunged forward I spun around and ran back into the house, shrieking as she laughed somewhere behind me from the very pit of her stomach.

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To say we had had a rough time was a bit of an understatement. Cody had come out of it the worst, I think - she had almost been hanged in Echo City after killing a client of mine for mauling me and then drawing his pistol on her; she'd been held up at the bank by the gang she used to run with whilst drawing her savings; the notorious Kid Jarrett had stolen all of her

money, raped her (as had his gang, most likely) and beaten her half to death when she'd gone to get it back from him. Then, he'd killed her friend Joshua McCabe in cold blood right in front of her. Shot him in the back.

No wonder then, I suppose, that I felt so fiercely protective of Cody - even though she probably needed the least protection of all of us, and would have scoffed at me had she known. She seemed to take it all in her stride, but I think that was exactly what made me want to keep her safe; I could not bear to see her so stoic, as if she thought that she deserved all the pain she'd suffered.

We had all suffered, of course, to lesser degrees: Eileen had been thrown in jail after the authorities thought we had something to do with the bank robbery, and Lilly had been raped by Kid Jarrett. I think for Lilly the part that was actually worse than the rape was when she had to say goodbye to Eileen at the Circle Bar T, when Eileen decided to stay behind with William Tucker.

Of the four of us they had been the closest. Lilly was still young and spirited, but Cody was too serious and determined to have much time for tomfoolery, and I often felt far older than my years since my husband had passed and I had to resort to working at the brothel to get by. Eileen, for the difference in years between her and Lilly, still had an air of light-heartedness about her that had created a spirit of solidarity between them.

Lilly did not speak much about what had happened with Kid Jarrett. Occasionally she denounced him cuttingly as a bastard and declared her satisfaction with the way he had met his end. She did, however, speak of Eileen often, and sometimes I would find her tearful in a quiet moment. For all of this she was still the young carefree girl we loved, and I did not think that she had regretted her decision to be a part of the dream that we had all created.

When we had left the Circle Bar T and Eileen we made our way up to Dawson City. Cody still had Joshua McCabe's deed in her pocket, but in the end it had turned out to mean nothing to us - unless one of us had been married to Joshua we could not claim the land. We could have done some criminal dealings with one of the many crooks in Dawson City to get the necessary documents, but this was to be our fresh start, and so Cody had opted for using some of her savings to buy a small plot of land next to the Yukon River. We'd camped there and, with the help of some of the men who were willing to do casual labour, had built a small cabin. When that had been done we had set up the sawmill and begun the task of building our reputation amongst the many people drifting into the area to seek their fortunes. It had been an expensive affair, and Cody had nearly depleted her savings in order to get the business up and running, but once we'd been settled a slow steady stream of work came in and kept us busy - and solvent.

Of course many people had been mistrustful of three women doing such strenuous work at first, but we had hired quite a few men from the area to help, and that had seemed to justify us in everyone's eyes. We were producing not only essential lumber for the rapidly developing area, but also providing jobs for the community.

Once the mill had been set up and production was going ahead full steam, Cody had sat me down and suggested that I should take control of the cabin and the daily tasks therein. At first I'd been offended, and demanded to be an equal part of the mill, but her considered argument had finally won me over. Someone had to take care of the housekeeping, but Lilly was too unruly and carefree to be of much use at housework, and besides which, her spirit would have faded had she had to spend most of her time indoors. Cody was the driving force of the business, and no-one (least of all me) would have dreamed of taking her away from the daily running thereof. No decision was made without Cody Zamora's express say-so, and even had I wanted to, I did not possess the determination to manage such an undertaking. Furthermore, of the three of us I was the weakest physically, and more adept at the daily tasks that a house involved. And so, once I had made the token protests and had had Cody assure me that it was not a case of my being weaker, but rather that I was more methodical than the both of them when it came to certain tasks, I settled into my role with quiet enjoyment. It pleased me to cook and clean, to make curtains and rugs, and to look on both women with exasperated pride as they came back in the late evenings covered in sawdust and sap to make appreciative noises over hot stew or roast.

We had also gradually built out the small cabin to suit all three of us, and now there was the sitting room with its cozy fireplace, the kitchen with its square table where I often sat peeling potatoes, the outhouse and three small bedrooms all nestled together to one side of the house. I think the favourite place for all three of us was the porch where we sat each evening, each on a rocking chair that one of the men had timbered together for us, watching the sun set over the Yukon River.

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"What smells so good?"

Lilly always announced her entrance in some way, and it pleased me to hear her light tones peeling through the house. When she came loping into the kitchen and threw her hat on the table I only had to give her one sidelong look before she picked it up with a muffled grumble and hung it on the wall hook that Cody had installed for that exact purpose. Dropping into a chair with a content groan she ran her hands through her pale hair, shaking a cloud of sawdust onto the floor without thinking.

"So where's Cody?"

I shrugged and turned around to stir the stew. "She was chopping wood the last time I saw her."

"Probably finishing up with the guys. Ouch." Pulling her hand from her head Lilly studied it closely, and then stuck her thumb into her mouth with a pout. "Thgotaspltergdamnt."

"Excuse me?" I put down the spoon I had been using and turned back to her. "I can't hear what you're saying if you have your finger in your mouth, Lilly."

Her lovely large green eyes narrowed at me over her hand before she pulled her thumb from her mouth with a popping sound. "I know that, ANIta. I said I have a splinter, goddamnit."

"Language," I berated her before getting the needle from its pouch and sitting down opposite her. "Give me your hand."

"No. You're just going to hurt me." She was about to stick her finger back in her mouth when I intercepted the motion and pulled her wrist towards me.

"How can you lug around lumber all day and still be such a sissy, Lilly Laronette?"

"Sissy?" She raised her eyebrows cockily at me and then hissed as I found the source of her discomfort and wiggled at the small splinter with my needle. "Damn it, Anita, careful with that thing!"

"Then sit still."

I was still bent over her hand when Cody came in and hung her hat on the hook. "Smells great. I could eat a whole cow tonight. What's this?"

"Got a splinter," Lilly informed her sulkily, "and Anita's going to amputate my finger."

"And Lilly's a sissy."

"Am not."

"Ladies," Cody interrupted our bickering, "I'm goin' to leave you to it, and give myself a quick wash before dinner. I'm filthy. That okay, Anita?"

I halted my gentle prodding of Lilly's thumb to take a quick look at the pot bubbling on the stove. "Sure, if you make it fast."

"Will do."

Another few pokes and I had the small instrument of torture out, and then it only took moments for Lilly to forget all about it and begin chattering about some poster one of the men had brought her from Dawson City.

"He's called the... um... I'd have to get the poster, but I think it's something catchy like 'The Wild West Show' or something. He rides, and shoots, and does all sorts of amazing rope tricks. And he's performing in Dawson City next week. I've got to see it, Anita, I really do - do you think we can go?"

"Well," I turned away, both to stir the stew and to hide my fond amused smile, "I'm sure we can. What does this boy look like?"

"He's not a boy, he's a man," she informed me condescendingly before pausing. In my mind's eye I could almost see her biting at the inside of her mouth as she did when she was thinking, before

she continued. "I don't know exactly what he looks like, Anita. The poster isn't that good. And why should it matter?"

"It doesn't, I suppose. I was just wondering. You can show me the poster after dinner, if you can wait that long."

"Hmph." She snorted derisively at my comment, and was quiet for another moment. "I'd sure love to go."

"Go where?" Cody came back in and sat down, rubbing at her hair with a linen towel. Excitedly Lilly repeated her story, and while Cody was listening attentively I stepped behind her and took the towel from her, drying her long hair carefully. I knew that her arms ached after such long days, and besides which, I loved the feeling of her soft black hair sliding through my hands. Smiling her thanks at me sideways Cody nodded at Lilly's enthusiastic demonstration of some or other rope trick.

"And you want to see this show, I take it?"

"More than anything else in the world. Can we? Please, Cody?"

"I don't see why not."

I winced at the resulting squeal, and almost knocked Cody's head into the table as Lilly jumped up and rushed over, throwing her arms around both of us elatedly. "Oh, I'm so excited! I just want this week to be done so we can go!"

"Whoa, Laronette, there's still heaps of work to be done." But Cody was smiling, and so was I.

Lilly beamed. "I'll do it all tomorrow. By myself if I have to. I'll split the goddamned logs with my teeth if I have to."

Cody burst into laughter as I berated the feisty young woman. "Language, Lilly! Sit down, I'm dishing up dinner."

Seemingly chastised, Lilly sank back into her seat and thanked me meekly as I placed the steaming bowl in front of her. She ate one spoonful with relish - she had a tin throat, we always joked, because she would toss the hottest food down her gullet without so much as a cough of discomfort - and then leaned closer to me. "Anita?"

"Yes, Lilly?"

"This is really very good. Thank you. And I'm telling you... with my goddamned teeth, if I have to!"

Cody choked on her stew, and I had to pat her on the back a little.

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Lilly had taken out the poster and unfolded it for our admiration, and as I'd thought the young man pictured on it was rather handsome, in a roguish way. He sat astride the back of a massive black horse, his back straight and his nose arrogant as he pointed his revolver at something in the distance.

Cody and I had both made the appropriate appreciative noises, and then, when Lilly had had her fill of mooning at the picture and had put it away, we went outside and watched as the moon rose over the Yukon.

It was an exceptionally radiant evening, as if to compete with Lilly Laronette's luminous mood, and whilst the other two women stared into the distance I leaned back a little and watched them in turns - my preferred pastime.

Lilly's little button-nose was turned up towards the full moon, but her eyes (normally green, but a shimmering silver in the moonlight) were fixed to something far in the distance; something I knew took the form of horses and shooting and riding. Her father had been a show rider and shooter (which had also brought him to his end), and I imagined that's what her very best dreams were about. Her curly pale hair, almost white in this light, was spread about her shoulders like the unravelled halo of an angel. She was a beautiful girl.

By contrast, Cody's hair and eyes were black on even the most moonlit nights. She sat low in her chair, her long legs stretched out before her, and there was something obstinate about the way she tilted her jaw up to the sky. Her profile was noble, and though she didn't have the sparkly brilliance of Lily Laronette, she was the kind of woman who drew admiring glances wherever she went. Sometimes I thought it was her bearing, more than anything else.

In comparison to them I frequently felt plain, I had to admit. Jim, my late husband, had regularly called me beautiful, as had many other men, but in the company of two such remarkably attractive women I knew that I paled in contrast.

Catching my gaze Cody turned her head towards me and smiled slightly. "What are you thinkin' about so deeply, Anita?"

How beautiful you are, I wanted to say, but the words would have embarrassed her, and me too. From the beginning of our friendship there had been a strange awareness to my association with Cody Zamora that I'd never been able to put into words. Lately those words had been making their way into my head unannounced, and I was not yet ready to face what they might mean.

"Just about this and that. The vegetable garden. The candles that need to be melted down."

"Now Anita, I know that you don't only think about housework," she teased me lightly. "Tell the truth."

Lilly turned her impish gaze on me too. "Yes, let us into that mysterious head of yours, Anita

Crown."

"Don't bully me." I glared at them both, and then shrugged. "I was just thinking about... how much I love it here."

"Me too." Lilly breathed in deeply. "I love it here."

Cody held my gaze for a moment before she nodded. "Yep."

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After Lilly had gone to her room to moon over her poster I made Cody sit at the table so that I could brush out her hair. She made the obligatory complaining noises about it, but I knew that it was all bluster.

"If I brush it now you won't struggle with tangles tomorrow morning, Cody. You know that."

She waved her hand dismissively, not even bothering with an answer.

"Besides which, you know you love it, really. Big ole Cody Zamora enjoys being pampered once in a while." I gasped with laughter at the resulting snort. "Don't worry. I won't tell on ya."

"Will you stop talking nonsense and just get done with it?"

I gave the shiny black hair a few more brush strokes and then smoothed it over with my hands. "There."

Tucking the front strands behind her ears offhandedly she turned and offered me a smile and a hug. "Thanks, Anita." Coming from someone like Cody who rarely offered elaborate language that was genuine, and it made me smile in turn.

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Maybe it was the poster that reminded Lilly of her father. Three nights later I woke up from a muffled cry; disorientated, I stumbled from bed, almost falling over my own feet tangled in the blanket.

Opening Lilly's door softly so as not to wake Cody (her room was on the other side of mine) I tiptoed in and almost stubbed my toe on the frame of Lilly's bed before perching on the side of it. Reaching out in the darkness I laid a hand softly on her creased forehead and stroked her hair back.

"Lilly, sweetheart, it's just a bad dream."

She whimpered once - I think I heard her say "daddy" - and then quietened again, reaching up to grasp my hand with both of hers before pulling it to her chest and curling up on her side silently.



Lilly had had bad dreams ever since Kid Jarrett. Every once in a while she would wake me with her thrashing and whimpering, and then I would go to her and whisper calming things until she went back to sleep. She dreamed of Eileen sometimes. Hearing Lilly call her name made my heart clench.

I sat up with her until she was deep in sleep, peaceful by the sounds of her breathing, and then stood as softly as possible to drop a light kiss on her forehead and pull my hand from her grasp. The action made her murmur, but she did not wake up, and quietly I went back to my own room.

My eyes had adjusted to the darkness by now, and after a moment of deliberation I tiptoed to the door on the other side and cracked it open just enough so that I could look in on Cody. In contrast to Lilly's tightly curled - almost childish - sleeping position, Cody always lay half on her side, half on her stomach at the very edge of the bed, her right knee and arm drooping over the edge as if the smallest sound would have her rolling right over onto the floor and into action. Her .44 Smith & Wesson was not far from that right hand, I knew from experience - I'd once woken her from a deep disorientating sleep by accident, and had found myself staring down the barrel of her revolver. I hadn't enjoyed that, to say the least, so after that I took care not to trouble her when she was sleeping. She'd felt terrible about it. Her apologies had been followed by a few low-spirited days during which she said little, and then an almost fearful tight hug and a few remorseful words whispered in my ear.

If I stayed close to the door, I'd learnt, did not register as trouble in her mind. She had her rough nights too, and though I did not sit with her as I did Lilly, I would sometimes whisper her name, and just that would be enough to calm her agitation. It was not only the fact that I thought she might shoot me that kept me from going to her, but also the knowledge that she would not necessarily appreciate waking up in such a vulnerable state and have someone else around, even if that someone was me.

I remember Cody surrendering to me to be comforted only once. After Kid Jarrett had raped her and beaten her severely, then left her in the middle of nowhere unconscious, she'd been found by Joshua McCabe, who had taken her to a Chinese healer to treat her wounds. None of us had known where she was, and it was by pure luck that we'd spotted her horse outside the tent. I offered to take a closer look, and as Eileen and Lilly went on to the Circle Bar T I'd crept into the tent and found Cody there with McCabe. He'd seemed to be a harmless sort then, standing back to let me go to her and even leaving the tent to let us talk. I will never forget as long as I live the look in her eyes when she'd turned that dazed beaten gaze on me. I'd wanted to cry. Instead I'd sat down and put my arms around her carefully, mindful of her tattered back, and it had been almost more than I could bear when Cody Zamora had muttered "I didn't get our money" almost apologetically before she sank into my embrace with weak relief. That, more than the injuries which took weeks to heal properly, had told me how badly she'd been hurt.

Nevertheless she'd ridden out not a week later, back proud and stiff against the pain, to bargain with Kid Jarrett for Lilly's life. That was Cody for you.

Tonight she didn't need soothing. Though her hair covered most of her face I could see in the lines of her body that she was fully immersed in sleep, and I stayed only for a moment more to enjoy the sight of my friend, relaxed as she never was awake, before I went back to bed and tried to get a few more hours of rest myself.

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I was sweeping the porch mid-morning when Lilly and Cody marched by with a long piece of lumber propped on their shoulders. They were building a small roof all the way from the back door to the outhouse - the suggestion had come from Cody, but I suspected it was because every time it rained and Lilly got wet on her way to do her business, she was about as pleasant as a drenched cat.

Lilly beamed at me across the wood propped on her shoulder, her happy demeanour at odds with her dishevelled appearance and torn sleeve (which I would have to fix later, naturally).

"Hey Anita!"

"Hey Lilly, how's it going?"

"Lots to do, but we're getting there. Hey Anita?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm going to the Wild West Show!"

I had to laugh, more at the pained expression on Cody's face than anything else.

"Cody?"

Long-suffering brown eyes turned to me. "Yeah?"

"I bet you've been hearing about this all day long."

"Uh huh." Cody raised her eyebrows tiredly. "I've been thinkin' about takin' her up on that offer to split the logs with her teeth. Just so she'd have somethin' in her goddamned mouth."

Lilly beamed from behind her. "Cody?"

Cody couldn't turn around, so kept her gaze on me. "What, Lilly?"

"You love me."

Cody shook her head at me exasperatedly. "More's the pity for me. Now shut up and carry."

Washing her hands at the basin in the kitchen, Cody peered through the window that she'd broken out a few months back to give me a nice view of the land.

"That boy's here again."

I leaned closer and peered over her shoulder. He was indeed around again, laughing so widely at Lilly from the top of his large stallion that you could see his back teeth. She was demonstrating some riding trick or other, slipping in and out of her stirrups so easily that it seemed as if she were flat on the ground, and every time she laughed he leaned forward onto his pommel and joined in. His eyes never left her face.

"I knew the first time I saw that poster that we'd have trouble like this," Cody grumbled without malice as she dried her hands on the little towel.

"Is it really trouble if she's having a good time?" I countered, and leaned in surreptitiously to take in the earthy smell of her hair before I moved away and sat down to continue cleaning vegetables.

Turning around, Cody propped herself against the basin table and folded her arms with clear amusement. "Your heart is just too damned good, Anita."

"So is yours, Cody. Don't kid yourself."

She sniffed at me and then turned around again, jerking with shock as Lilly fell off her horse - and then jumped back onto it with obvious ease. "Damn that girl! I thought she'd ..."

"But she didn't. She's okay."

Cody sighed. "I don't know what I'd do if somethin' happened to her, Anita. Or to you."

"Nothing's gonna happen." Reaching out, I patted whatever was closest to me, which turned out to be her hip. "Calm down, Cody. She's just showing off for that boy."

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That boy, we called him, but his full name was Weston Young, and he was the Wild West Show. Swarthy, lean and handsome, he'd given married men pangs of anxiety from here down to the very Southern tip of the continent. His manner was assured, his walk a studied swagger, and his voice as pleasing as honey. He had been using all of these gifts very badly when his eyes fell on Lilly Laronette - and he promptly fell off his horse. It was the first time in three years, he had told us, that he had had an accident, and the other time the sun had come in at just the wrong angle and blinded him. From the expression on his face just before he had slipped and met the ground quite painfully, it hadn't been the sun this time.

Lilly had jumped over the railing, heedless of the murmurs and catcalls around her, and had

helped him up with such a beaming smile that the noise had instantly died. He could have said anything he liked, afterwards, about why he'd been distracted, but from the way those two were looking at each other the truth was clear.

His show had been here for a week, and in that time we saw him nearly every afternoon. He'd come in bashfully, hat in hand, and it had been almost funny to see Cody grill him about his relations as though she were Lilly's tetchy father. I'd taken mercy on him and sent the two of them out for a drink, and within a few minutes Lilly'd had him back on his horse, showing her everything he knew. They'd been inseparable for those few days, and when he'd had to leave she cried like her heart was fit to bust. We'd thought she'd never recover - and then he'd started sending the letters. We had never seen Lilly more radiant.

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Now West Young was back, and from the expression on Lilly's face it was none too soon. I could see her laughing heartily at something he said, her head thrown back and her pale hair cascading down her back, and the way his dark eyes were fixed on her made my heart ache. No-one had looked at me like that in a while.

Dropping the towel at the side of the basin Cody crossed her arms and watched them for a while. "He looks a little like Joshua McCabe," she commented offhandedly.

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Joshua McCabe. That name never failed to bring up conflicting emotions in me. He'd hung around, making us all nervous, before saving both Cody and Lilly's lives (and giving his own in the last instance). He and Cody had had some sort of bond between them - she never told us much, and the only times she spoke about him afterwards it was casual, like she was purposely saying his name to get rid of the pain. Their strange relationship hadn't been physical - Cody had been badly hurt when he'd brought her back to us, and by the time she'd healed properly he was already dead and buried at Jarrett's place - but they always seemed to be off to one side, even if we were all together. It seemed to me that Cody had been unfamiliar and slightly ill at ease with his tentative manner of courting. She had only ever known rough men, or the hypocritical whoring kind, and she probably hadn't had any idea what to do with McCabe. They'd been bound together by two things: pain, and the past. Not the way to start a life, I think.

I remember when I saw him in that tent, so close to Cody with her exposed tattered back, and I just wanted him to back off. I'd wondered then if he'd had anything to do with the whole nasty business, and for a while after I hadn't trusted him, even if his story had checked out. He was both my good news and my bad, which was sort of ironic. He'd watched over us, and kept my friends safe, and had made Cody smile, and for that I'd been glad. But every moment McCabe had been in that room taking care of her and I hadn't, it had worried me sick. I'd wondered if he'd be gentle enough, and if he'd keep her comfortable, and that had gotten under my skin after a while. I'd wanted things back to the way they were.

I just about got that after he died. Cody was real quiet for a time, and then life just went on. I'd

wanted that, but not in that way. Leastways I don't think so.

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That night Lilly didn't have dinner with us. West had a show to do and she was at the ringside every time he hit the arena. He had invited us, just to keep on our good sides, but even though we'd really enjoyed the show last time round we decided to leave them to it - they never knew anyone else was around when they were together anyway.

It was quiet around the table at dinnertime, and I had the sudden realisation that this was how it was gonna be when Lilly was gone. Cody must have had the same thought, because she paused with her spoon halfway to her mouth and sighed.

"That boy's goin' to take her away from us."

"That he is." I bit the inside of my lip. "Though I suspect it's more a case of her taking than him."

"Mm. He doesn't know what he's lettin' himself in for."

"Poor lucky bastard."

"Anita! Language!" Cody mimicked me, and I stuck out my tongue at her.

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Two nights later, what we'd been anticipating finally happened.

"I wanted to talk to the two of you." From her perching spot on the bottom step of the porch Lilly twirled a sprig of grass between her teeth, something she only did when her mind was going a thousand miles a minute. "About some things."

"Okay." Cody's voice sounded nonchalant, and when she exchanged a glance with me over Lilly's head there was a small smile curling around her mouth. "What's up?"

"Well..." Lilly's head drooped as she tried to think things through... and then it just all came out in an excited rush as we knew it would. "You know how I've been seeing West when he's around? And how I really really like him?" Her voice dropped on the second really, something so inherently Lilly that it made me smile. "And how he's travelling through the country all the time, and never stops too long in one place at a time?"

"Uh huh," Cody responded in that low voice, and that was so inherently her that I just suddenly felt my heart squeezed with love for these two.

"Well, he'll be going again soon - and I really want to go with him." Looking at both of us earnestly she rushed on quickly. "He said I could be a part of the act, and he really wants me there, and I can't go without seeing him that long again, I just can't. I like him - no, I love him,

and this is what I've got to do, and I hope you understand, I really do..."

"Lilly, honey;" I interrupted her, "breathe!"

Mouth still open, she stopped and did as I asked, and then giggled before becoming serious again. "So do I have your blessing?" Her eyes were earnest as she gazed beseeching at each of us. "I need it, you know."

"Well," I looked down at Lilly fondly, "you know we're gonna miss you, right? It's gonna be quiet and miserable without you here. Just us boring old biddies..."

"Hey!" There was an indignant tone to Cody's voice. "Speak for yourself!"

I shot her a look to silence her, and then continued pitilessly. "Just us boring old biddies twiddling our thumbs and staring at each other all night. No fun will be had whatsoever. But he does love you - that is about as clear as the nose on my face..." I couldn't help but grin at the dreamy-eyed look Lilly suddenly got, "and if you want this, then it's exactly what I'd want for you too. I think Eileen would be so happy for you, Lilly."

"Oh Anita, thank you!" Springing up from the stairs she hurled herself into my arms for a tight hug, kissing my cheek sweetly. "Thank you!"

The silence from Cody was overwhelming. Pulling out of my arms Lilly kept a hold of my one hand with both of hers, her green eyes fixed on Cody unsurely.

"Cody?"

I was trying to gauge her reaction, but her dark eyes were shuttered as she gazed at Lilly. Surreptitiously I shook my head at her, though she didn't seem to notice me. Letting go of me Lilly rushed forward and sank to her knees at Cody's feet, grasping the other woman's hands tightly in both of hers.

"I know I'm leaving you with the work, Cody, but you can get someone easy, and it'll go well, and Anita will help you, and..."

Cody leaned forward, and that was all it took to silence Lilly. Taking a breath, Cody exhaled heavily before she spoke. "Lilly, I know that you feel strongly about this boy, and I can see you really want to do this, but the only way I'm goin' to allow this is if..." she paused, "he marries you."

There was a moment of stunned silence before Lilly began to laugh - then I joined in out of sheer relief.

"If he marries me? That's all?"

Cody nodded seriously. "That's it. I won't have you ridin' all over this godforsaken land after a

boy who doesn't put a ring on that finger, you hear me?"

Lilly giggled and scrunched up her face. "He hasn't even asked me yet!"

Shaking my head I grinned. "Now since when would some little thing like that stop Lilly Laronette?"

"Oh no, Anita." Her pout was a mixture of mischief and joy. "Did I say it was going to stop me?"

---

Of course it didn't. Very few things could stop Lilly Laronette once she had her mind set on something, and so, we had a wedding at the mill.

It was nothing fancy - Lilly looked beautiful in a pretty white dress that we'd insisted on picking out with her, and West looked as handsome as could be in his suit and tie. It was only us, and a few of the men from the mill that Lilly liked, and West's cousin Jeremiah who travelled everywhere with him. The preacher's service was short and sweet (though I suspected that this had something to do with the talking to that Cody had given him beforehand) and afterwards we roasted a sheep and danced a little. Jeremiah played the violin, Homer played the banjo, and Mack played the harmonica, so they made up an impromptu band and kept us tapping our feet 'til the early morning.

Lily stayed with us that night and West went back to the hotel, on account of the fact that she'd be leaving us in two days. We encouraged her to go, asking what kind of honeymoon she was giving her husband, but she obstinately refused.

"I'll be out of here soon enough, and then I'll see plenty of West. Right now I'm going to stay here with you, whether you like it or not."

We liked it, of course.

---

The next night I woke up from faint sounds next door and struggled out of my bed, not even giving pause to the thought that West might've paid his wife a midnight visit. Luckily that wasn't it - Lily was dreaming. When I sat down at the edge of her bed, however, I realised that for once she didn't need comfort. She was smiling, and from the sweet murmuring sounds she was making, the dream was finally a good one.

When I left her room I was woefully awake. Taking care not to step on the loose plank right in front of my door I tiptoed through the sitting room and out onto the porch. I was carefully closing the front door behind me when a shifting dark shape to my right had me juddering with shock.

"What...?"

"It's just me." Cody's head tilted in the darkness. "Can't sleep?"

"Lilly was having a dream." Shaking off the last of the chills I moved over to sit in my chair.

"Bad one? I didn't hear her."

"No - turned out to be a good one."

"It's about time." She sounded as if she were smiling. "Anita, it's kind of funny that of the three of us you're the only one without nightmares - and you're the only one who very rarely gets to sleep through the night."

It caught me by surprise. I didn't realise that she'd noticed. "Um... I've gotten used to it." Then, since she'd opened the door by choice, I plunged through it bravely. "What do you dream about, Cody?"

That low laugh I was so fond of hearing bubbled up softly. "The good ones or the bad ones, Anita?"

"Either. No - Both." Hell, I was already in with both feet.

"No half measures with Anita Crown." She chuckled again and then was quiet. I was just getting worried that I'd scared her off when she began to speak. "There's lots of stuff. That's the benefit of havin' had such a wild life. With the bad ones, sometimes I'm back with Kid at the hideout. Or I'm tryin' to save Joshua McCabe. Mostly, though, I dream about bad things happenin' to one of you." Cody scoffed at herself with a quick sharp exhalation. "Not Eileen, though. I never worry about her. Trouble slides off that woman like she's a greased turkey."

I almost choked, laughing so hard that tears came to my eyes, trying all the time to muffle the sound against my arm so I wouldn't bother Lilly. From the other side of the porch I could hear Cody chuckling softly, though I think it was at me rather than her own wisecrack. Finally, when I had my giggles under control, I could speak again.

"You're right, you know. Just one bat of those eyelashes and a quick helpless simper, and she's clear. Sometimes it sure helps to be beautiful."

"You're beautiful too, Anita. It's just that nobody would ever mistake you for bein' helpless, that's all."

I could feel my face glowing, and I sat in the dark basking in the unexpected compliment, not really knowing what to say. That was the benefit with Cody - she didn't need the silence to be filled.

We watched the stars for a while, and then my thoughts drifted back to Lilly. "She looked real pretty today. I wish Eileen could have been here."



"Yeah." Cody sighed. "Our little girl is all grown up, mama."

That made me laugh again.

Cody's chair creaked as she suddenly stood up. "Yup, pretty soon it'll just be you and me."

With her low quiet voice I couldn't tell if the idea pleased her, and I didn't know why it should have pleased me so much. When she passed me she patted my shoulder softly, just once, before she went back inside and left me alone with thoughts I was sure it was too late in the night to unravel.

---

Cody insisted on giving Lilly a chunk of the mill profits as a wedding gift. A third of it belonged to her, after all. Lilly put up quite a struggle before taking the money - her mind was already all about the Wild West Show, and all thoughts of sensibleness had fled her head. Finally she accepted, which was when I think West shot up a tiny prayer of thanks to the heavens, and then it was time to say goodbye.

It was worse than with Eileen - I'd sat around a table with Lily for years, had heard her call out a greeting every time she came into the house, sat with her night after night to chase away the dreams...

"It's never gonna be the same again, sweetheart." I hugged her for a long time, and then pressed a kiss to her cheek, biting back the tears. Though why I'm not sure, because she was sobbing like a child. "I love you, Lilly. Take care, you hear? And when you go past the Circle Bar T you tell Eileen we said hey and you give her a big hug from us. Okay?"

"Okay. I love you, Anita." Lilly sniffled and then giggled, kissing my cheek twice before letting me go and turning to Cody, who simply opened her arms.

"C'mere sweetheart," she said, her voice low - I could hear her trying to bite back the tears - and Lilly stepped into her embrace, sobbing as she pressed her face into Cody's shoulder. "Hey, we'll see you again, right?"

"Right." Lilly's voice was muffled.

Leaning back, Cody wiped hair away from Lilly's face and cupped her jaw. "You're goin' to have such a good time. I'm jealous." Then she cocked her head to one side and peered at West, standing off to the back waiting. "And you look after her, you hear me?"

"Yes'm." West nodded politely.

Lilly laughed in between her tears. "Now Cody Zamora, don't you scare my husband before we've even left!"

"If he picked Lilly Laronette then he doesn't scare easy." Kissing Lilly's cheek one last time, Cody stepped back and put her hands in her pockets. "Well, go on, or you're never getting' out of here."

There was still some crying, and some hugging, and then they were riding off on the horizon: a horse-and-gun crazy girl, crazy about a horse-and-gun crazy boy, who was crazy about her.

We watched them go, and at some stage Cody sighed and put her arm around my shoulders, squeezing me gently. "Well, Anita, that's that." I couldn't help but sob a little, and she rubbed my back soothingly. "It won't be so bad, just the two of us... what did you call us? Old biddies?"

"Yeah."

She cast one last look at the horizon and then turned me towards the house. "C'mon in and let me make you a cup of coffee."

---

The house was quiet without Lilly. Cody was silent - she had her moments, but what went through her head I was never quite sure. I had not seen much of Lilly throughout the day, so I mostly missed her in the evenings. Sometimes I even wished that Cody would throw her hat on the table instead of hanging it up neatly every time.

She took it worse. She had spent every day working alongside Lilly, getting into fierce arguments with her (because they were both so damned hard-headed) and keeping watch over her, in the way that she did with all of us, and she must have felt the loneliness deeply every moment of the day.

---

Cody had a lover.

His name was Seth Harper, and he was the man that she'd hired to replace Lilly. He was big (both tall and burly) with a square lantern jaw, short red hair and a pair of unnerving ice blue eyes. As for what kind of a man he was, I couldn't tell you. He said very little, and what I saw of him wasn't that much, either. He was in the kitchen once, when I came back from weeding the vegetable garden, drinking a cup of coffee and just staring at Cody with those cool eyes. She hadn't even been looking at him, had been staring out the window at something outside, and when I came in she ushered him out almost uncomfortably.

Sometimes he'd come over after dinner and greet me with a nod of his head, and then she would lead him to her room. She never touched him in front of me, never took his hand or kissed him, and he always looked almost bewildered around her. I once saw her through the window as she strode up to him next to the mill - she'd pulled his head down for a hard kiss, so hard that they'd looked as if they were wrestling for territory, and then she'd pulled away just as suddenly and

stared at him for a while. He'd followed her when she'd left, an arms' length away but unable to say no.

When they were in the house I would sit on the porch, or take a walk. I told myself that it was to give them privacy, but by this time I understood more than I liked.

I was sweet on Cody Zamora.

I'd started out thinking that I had some case of hero worship going on. After all, of all the people a woman could admire, Cody wasn't a bad choice. Sure, she'd done some bad things, and she had a past, but who didn't? She was strong, she was beautiful, and she'd gotten where she was with pure doggedness and hard work. And she was a darned good friend to boot. So what if my heart nearly broke when I saw her hurt? That was what happened with friends, right? Besides which, she was a woman, who'd loved a few men in her life. I'd been married. Those were the facts.

I have my daydreaming side, but mostly I'm straightforward, and I'm no liar. Not to anyone, but mostly not to myself. For a while I could do that - fool myself, I mean - but hell, I knew that nobody else watched a friend sleep just to see how beautiful her mouth was when it wasn't tight with tiredness. Nobody else would brush a friend's hair just to have that scent on her hands for a few hours. I wished so many splinters on poor Cody, just so I could take her hand and hold it for a little while with reason.

We'd been together through some trying times, and we'd spent a lot of time together. Maybe we were just so used to each other, or maybe I was just getting real lonely and reaching out for the closest, most familiar person.

Even if it was one of those things, in the end it didn't matter. Cody made me feel safe and valued and loved, and there was not a thing I could do about the other things she made me feel.

---

I'd resolved to ride it out, just let things be and enjoy being close to her the only way I could, but the trouble came with Seth Harper. I'm enough of a woman to admit that the jealousy ate me up inside. I couldn't sleep at night, wondering if he was with her; I couldn't tear myself away from the window during the day, watching and waiting for a glimpse of her - without him; I couldn't look at her for fear that she would see the hurt in my eyes and know it for what it was, and I couldn't not look at her, couldn't bear not to.

I was on edge, had been that way for more than a year, and I think my agitation made Cody jumpy. I suppose she could have been feeling the same way, thinking that her jumpiness was making me agitated. Wouldn't that have been funny? In any case, she knew I disapproved of Harper, but she seemed to think it was just because I was a bit of a prude.

Things came to a head when, one afternoon, I went out to pick potatoes but forgot my basket and had to go back. I found her ... on top of him, on a kitchen chair. They were still dressed, mostly, and when I walked in she was clutching clumps of his red hair between her fingers, her

expression somewhere between concentration and misery. He was as quiet as could be, his big hands wrapped around her thighs, and it was more than I could bear. The little spade I was carrying dropped from my boneless fingers, crashing onto the floor, and her eyes shot open wide and met mine immediately.

"Anita..."

She was out of breath. Shaking my head I turned my back on her and went outside. I was walking away, down the porch steps, and she was running after me, buttoning up her pants, her feet bare.

"Anita? Anita!"

I walked as fast as I could, and then ran, but she was faster. Her hand wrapped around my arm and she spun me around, but when I faced her she didn't know what to say. Letting go of me she shook her head helplessly. "Anita..."

I had no idea what to say either. Anything out of my mouth would give me away. Instead I settled for folding my arms and staring her down.

Uncomfortably she shifted on her feet. "Anita. I'm sorry. I thought you were goin' to be gone for a while. I'm sorry."

My mouth trembled. I could feel it. "That's the last thing I want to walk in on in my own house, Cody. The last thing."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"I..." The sight of her red-kissed lips was driving me out of my mind. "I can't take this. When I see you you're barely here, and then he's around... I'm lonely too, Cody, but I don't go around screwing the workers."

Her mouth set into a straight line. "That's not fair, Anita."

"Fuck fair, Cody!" I was tired, and I was beyond reason, and I was slowly falling over that edge I'd been standing on for so long. "If I miss Lilly that's commonsense, 'cause she's gone - but I miss you - and you're supposed to be right here!"

"I am right here!" she snapped back.

"Barely! What the hell are you doing with him?"

Her eyes were dark. "Why is it such a problem for you where I find my comfort?"

"Is that what he gives you? Comfort? 'Cause from where I was standing it looked like plain old fucking."

Cody's eyes flashed, and then, suddenly, the fight went out of her. Her shoulders slumped. "What the hell else is there, Anita?"

I was miserable close to her, and I was miserable away from her. What was left? Stepping closer I slid my hand around her neck, into her hair, and pulled her tightly into me. She was stunned - when I kissed her, her mouth was still under mine. I put my heart into that kiss, poured everything I'd felt from the moment I'd seen her sitting in that healer's tent, and I didn't know what good it was gonna do, but I was beyond caring. I'd lost so much in my life already that I was tired of being scared.

Somewhere in the middle of it, her hand slipped up to cup my shoulder. She wasn't holding me, but neither was I being pushed away. She was yielding to me. Knowing that it would probably be the last time I ran trembling fingers over her cheek, traced her eyebrow with my thumb, and then began to cry. With a last gentle kiss I rested my forehead against hers for a moment, my eyes closed, and then stepped regretfully out of her hold.

She let me go, watching me quietly with sad eyes.

"That's what there is, Cody. Love."

Her tongue slipped out to taste me on her lips. "But that's different, Anita, it's not..." She wavered halfway, seeing something in my eyes that she clearly hadn't before. "Oh." We stood there staring at each other; me with tear tracks down my face, her with her pants half buttoned and her hands clenching at her sides.

"Anita, I can't give you what you want."

I could have sworn that my heart exploded like dynamite. Bits and pieces everywhere. I'd lit the fuse myself, though. "I shouldn't have kissed you. I'm sorry." Shaking my head I chortled bitterly. "No, I'm not. I've wanted to do that for a real long time. But I'm sorry you don't feel like that about me."

Cody surprised me with a short sharp laugh. "Feel like what, Anita? Love? You're talkin' to Cody Zamora. What the hell do I know about love?" She bit her lip and dropped her head. "I get screwed. Sometimes they pay, and sometimes I pay. Now that's where I'm the expert. That's what anyone'll tell you."

"Anyone who doesn't know you, maybe!" I wanted to curl up and cry, and I wanted to push her, to shake her and wake her up, and I was so goddamned worn out from fighting for things I couldn't have. "But you ask Lilly, and you ask Eileen, and you ask me - we know you, Cody Zamora. We know what's inside you."

Standing there with her shoulders drooping and her head down Cody looked beaten. "I am how I know to be. I'm sorry I can't be what you want. I'm sorry."

"Okay." It was sinking in for me that I'd messed this up, and I was starting to feel sick to my stomach. "I'll move into town or something. Find a bedsit..."

She looked up, and the expression on her face was the one I remembered from when McCabe had died. Her eyes were swimming in tears. "Anita. Please. I beg you. Harper's out. Today. Now. Just don't leave."

"How do we go on?"

"We just do." She reached out to me and then pulled her hand back at the last second. "If it's between you and him, you're always goin' to win."

It means nothing. It means you're a good friend, and you make the best coffee, and you're handy with a broom. It's not good enough. But I wasn't kidding anyone. It would do. Going forward one painful stopgap at a time was movement too.

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Cody's hat hit the table, and I was so surprised that it took me a moment to react.

"Hook, if you please."

She picked it up and did as I asked, but her eyes were a million miles away.

"Cody?"

"I saw a man in town." She sank down into the chair and stared at the scratched surface of the tabletop blankly. "I'm sure he's one of those Pinkertons that were after us."

Putting down the paring knife and the apple I gawked at her. "Here? But can he...?"

"I don't think so." She looked up at me and frowned. "Not while we're in Canada. But if Colonel Clayborne's widow kept a price on my head all this time, he might decide to do a little bounty huntin' on the side."

"What're the chances of that? The bounty still standing, I mean?"

"I don't know. Mrs Clayborne is a tough old cow, though. I wouldn't discount it totally."

"Did he see you? Did he recognize you?"

"I don't know." Cody suddenly realized that she was scaring me, and proffered a small smile. "Don't worry, Anita. It was a long time ago. We'll be fine. I'll go back to town tomorrow. Ask

some questions."

"Okay." I still wasn't at ease, but there was nothing more we could do. Picking up the knife I finished peeling the apple, and then offered her a neat wedge. She took it and bit into it, her gaze distant. "Cody?" Those beautiful brown eyes fixed on me, and like always the sight of them made my heart ache. "We'll be fine. We will."

"Sure we will." But her gaze kept slipping away.

---

That night Cody had her first nightmare in months. The Pinkerton had brought up memories neither of us liked too much. I myself was trapped in a mildly unpleasant dream about the shootout at Jarrett's place when a noise disturbed me. A little disoriented, I struggled upright and kicked against the linen pooling around my feet before actually waking up properly.

There weren't any words, like the way Lilly usually spoke in her sleep - just a low protest, almost a moan. Approaching the door quietly I pushed it open and peered inside, making sure that I wasn't disturbing anything I shouldn't have. Ever since Harper had left she hadn't had anyone, as far as I knew, but I wasn't gonna assume.

Her curtains were open. In the moonlight I could see her lying curled up, her back towards me. Her shoulders were jerking in rhythm with the hitch of her breathing, and the undershirt she slept in was riding up the narrow of her back with the movement.

"Cody?"

I spoke very softly - I wanted to settle her, not wake her - but she didn't respond. Taking a deep settling breath against the unease in my belly I pressed the door further open and slipped in, keeping a careful eye on her as I moved. The last thing I wanted was another gun pulled on me. She must have been deep in that dream, because I got right to her side and she was still out. Kneeling down, I put my hand on her shoulder and jarred her gently.

"Cody?"

She moaned and then inhaled with a hiss, so suddenly and loudly that I jerked my hand away before I could stop myself. I waited for a beat, and she was silent again, but her arms and the muscles in her back were still twitching. On her lower back, where her skin showed, I saw the silvery reflection of scars every time she shuddered. Wanting to pull the undershirt down over them out of respect, I resisted and instead touched her hair as softly as I could.

"Cody. Wake up."

"No! Don't touch me!" The exclamation startled me, and I retreated backwards and fell right off the bed, as she shot into an upright position, wide-eyed. "I..." Looking around she spotted me on the floor. "Anita." Her shoulders shook with how hard her chest was heaving.

Slowly I got to my knees, and then onto my haunches, showing my open hands to her as I moved. Like you did with a scared animal. I knew Cody wouldn't hurt me if she was awake, but it was the in-between parts that I wasn't so sure about.

"You were having a bad dream."

She pulled her knees into her body and locked her arms around them defensively. Her back was still shuddering a little.

"Yeah." Slowly she turned her head and looked at me, taking in my position. "Did I scare you? I'm sorry." She wiped one hand over her face, but in spite of the casualness of it I could still see the tears pooled in her eyes, and her voice was thick.

"That's okay." Now that I knew she was awake I got up and just stood there, unsure of what to do. Usually I'd have gone and sat on the side of the bed, but ever since Harper and the kiss things had been slightly off beam.

Cody gave a wry little smile. "Sure wish I could stop havin' these."

"Me too."

She nodded slowly. "Yeah. Sorry. Bet you could do without the commotion."

"Oh." I realised she'd misunderstood and shook my head quickly. "No. That's not what I meant. I don't like to see you upset like this."

There was the flash of a small smile and then she looked away, quickly wiping her eyes again before slowly uncurling her body and lying down.

That was probably my cue to leave. "Okay, I'm gonna go. You okay?"

She nodded in the near darkness, and then realised I might not be able to see her. "Yeah."

When I turned around the floorboards creaked under my feet.

"Anita?"

I stopped and turned back. Something was wrong; I could hear it. "Yeah, Cody?"

"Could you... um...could you stay for a little bit?"

Her question stunned me, but I tried not to let on. I knew Cody - if she felt pitied she'd back off in a second. "Sure, sweetheart." Pulling closer the chair in the corner I sat down and reached out, taking her hand from where it rested on her stomach. I could feel the muscles tighten under my grip, and then she relaxed and sighed.



"Thanks, Anita."

"It's okay, Cody. Go back to sleep."

---

We didn't talk about that the next day. She finished her breakfast and rode back into town, and only came back late that afternoon with news.

"He's gone, I think."

I put down the dress I was sewing and frowned. "Are you sure?"

"Michaels at the General Store said he came in last night, bought some provisions. Said he was headin' down to White Horse, had a claim round there." She took off her hat and dusted it on her leg without thinking. "Could be a story, but there's no way to be sure."

"We'll just have to be careful then, I suppose."

"Yeah." Hanging the hat on its hook Cody sat down and rubbed at the back of her neck.

"Tomorrow I'll tell the guys to keep an eye out for him."

---

"Anita."

I had no idea where I was or what was happening. There was a hand across my mouth, and I struggled up, grabbing at it as I tried to fight my attacker off.

"Anita. Shhh."

Cody. I felt as if I was gonna stop breathing. She was close to me, almost on top of me. There was just enough light for me to see her eyes.

"Shh. You need to be quiet."

I nodded to let her know that I understood, and she took her hand away. She leaned in close, and her voice was a whisper.

"Someone's here."

I looked around, still a little dazed, and she cocked her head.

"Outside. Near the outhouse. I'm hearin' things."

My breath got stuck in my throat. "Him?"

A small answering nod. "Maybe. I think so. I need you to take the shotgun and go out front. I'm goin' to sneak out the side and try to pin him down. I'll draw fire, then you know where he is. Okay?"

"Okay." I waited for her to move back and disappear through the door, and then slipped out of bed, cursing my nightdress. Ever since there had been trouble at the mill Cody had slept in a pair of old breeches and an undershirt, and now all she'd had to do was pull on her boots. Grabbing a pair of breeches I slipped them on and then tucked my nightshirt into the waistband hastily. As I was wrapping my bootlaces around my ankles Cody came back with my shotgun and the belt that held the extra shells.

"Here."

She reached her arms around me and then buckled the belt quickly. Her hands were shaking a little. "That tight enough?"

"Yeah." Without thinking I pulled her closer and pressed my forehead against hers. "Cody, please be careful."

"You too, Anita." Her eyes were dark and troubled when she leaned in and kissed my cheek before stepping out of my arms. "Go. Careful."

Anyone else might have had trouble getting out of that house quietly - there were so many floorboards that creaked. Luckily for me I'd been up nights in that house for as long as I'd been there. I peeked through the front window for a minute or so, but nothing was moving. There were no trees between us and the river now - what had been there before had been taken for the mill - but at the back there were plenty of hiding spaces. I was about to crack the front door open when something creaked softly at the back.

"Cody?"

I was barely hissing her name, but she heard me.

"Yeah?"

She was over by the kitchen window.

Something was bothering me, but I couldn't figure it out. "Nothing."

---

Holding my breath I cracked the door open and stepped away, but there was no reply from outside. I was just about to go onto the front porch when it hit me.

That sound hadn't come from the floor.

I knew the night sounds of that house by heart. How many evenings had I sat there, quiet as you please not to wake up one of the women who had woken me, listening to the settling of the wood? I knew what I'd heard, and I was sure of it now. There was someone on the little roof leading to the outhouse.

Closing the front door I quickly moved back to the kitchen, but Cody was already gone. If she stepped outside, thinking he was near the outhouse, she'd move through the bushes to the right side - and if he was on the roof, he'd be waiting to gun her down easily.

Panic rising in me I peered out the side window where she'd left, but I couldn't see a thing. If I called her and she answered he'd know where she was. I couldn't risk him having a clear shot. Rushing back through the front door I slipped off the porch and headed around the house to the left.

When Cody and Lilly had built that damned roof they'd put together a few rough footholds on the wall near my window, so that Lilly could climb up to secure the beams, and they'd never bothered to take it down. Cody always said that she was gonna fix the roof a little better some time, so why bother?

Carefully sliding the shotgun into my belt - last thing I wanted right now was to shoot myself in the foot - I tested the lowest holds and began to pull myself up as quietly as possible. Some of them had gotten pretty wobbly with time, but I reached the top of the house's roof without incident. The moon wasn't full, but there was enough light for it to be dangerous, so I just popped my head up high enough to see the top of the little roof. Sure enough, there he was, close enough that I could hit him with a stone, lying in wait with his guns out.

Taking a deep breath I estimated my options quickly. I couldn't shoot from where I was - the shotgun took two hands and I was hanging off the wall like a bat. It would probably be best to draw his attention so that Cody could see him - but as I was thinking about how to do that without putting either of us in danger, his manner changed.

I knew that Cody was somewhere close. Too close.

He shifted forward on his stomach ever so quietly and leaned down his head, aiming along the barrel. Screw estimating the options - I only had one left. Scaling the last two holds I jumped onto the roof and pulled out my shotgun in one clean motion, aiming as I ran.

"Cody!"

He'd heard me moving and had been unsure, for just a second, as to whether he should shoot Cody or take a look at where I was and hence give away his hiding place. That second had cost him dearly, because by the time he rolled around and lifted his revolver I was already on the edge of the house's roof and pulling the trigger. As he screeched and flipped over I felt a thump to my left arm and then the force of it pushed me off the side of the roof.

The bastard had hit me. I twisted in the air, trying to get my feet in under me - it wasn't that high and I could probably roll with it - but there just wasn't enough time. I hit the ground with my hurt arm first and the pain was so bad that I started screaming before I could stop myself. Somewhere in the haze of things I could hear another shot, and then Cody's voice - Anita? Anita? Sweetheart, stop moving - before there were hands on me, and I wasn't sure if it was the Colonel or the dead Pinkerton or Cody, and I rolled over, away, trying to protect my arm, but somewhere in the middle it became too much and I blacked out.

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"Anita?"

I hurt. That was the first thing I knew. The second was that Cody was fine, because she was saying my name.

"Anita? You awake?"

It took forever to open my eyes, but it was worth it to see those brown eyes staring down at me. Leaning closer she pressed a kiss to my forehead, then another.

"Thank God. Thank God."

I was in bed, and my arm was swaddled up in something and smarting like a sonofabitch.

"What..." My mouth was too dry to speak, so it came out nothing more than a moan.

"Shhhh." Sliding her hand under my head she tilted it up carefully and then pressed a glass of water to my mouth. "Here. Drink a little."

It was a bit of a struggle, with some of it leaking and running down my neck, but it tasted so good. Finally she took the glass away and put it down, then picked up a towel and wiped my mouth, chin and neck.

"Not too much yet, Anita. Hold on a bit."

It was light outside. Clearing my throat I tried again. "What happened?"

Her eyes were swollen, as if she'd cried a lot. Putting down the towel she took my right hand between both of hers. "You got the bastard. There was another one, too - that's why I heard something at the outhouse. They were tryin' to lure me into the open, and they would have, if you hadn't gotten him. When you started screamin' the other one figured they got me and came stormin' out. I got him. We tossed them both in the river - no papers or anythin', so nobody's goin' to know. 'Cept the guy who helped toss them in."

I stared up at her. "Harper?"

"Yeah. He was at the mill, and he's real strong, and I know he'll keep my secret..."

Stopping her frantic explanation with a press of my hand I tried to smile. "It's okay, Cody. I understand."

She looked at me like she was trying to see the truth, and then squeezed my hand back. "I was so scared." Suddenly her eyes were full of tears again. "I thought it was real bad when I heard you screamin' like that, Anita. I've never heard you like that."

"It hurt so much. Still does." I peered down and saw only bandages. "What's the damage?"

From the way her gaze slipped down I knew it bad news. "The bastard hit you in the arm, and then you broke it in two places when you fell. It's not a good break, Anita - you snapped your elbow. Doc Brady came in and set it this morning, but he said we'll have to see what happens."

I swallowed against my nerves and the tide of pain under the surface. "Okay. We'll have to see."

"Yeah." She stroked a cool hand over my forehead like she was brushing away my hair, and then shifted from the chair to the side of the bed. "It'll be fine. I'll look after you, you know that."

"I know." Her hand was stroking my forehead again and I wanted to stay awake forever just to feel that, but I was too tired and I hurt too much. It was enough to know that she was there when I fell asleep.

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It wasn't easy, that was for sure. My left arm was useless to me. Any effort to shift even my shoulder led to uncontrollable pain, and I had to keep it in a sling all of the time. For a while it hurt to move any way I tried. Cody gave up going to the mill during the day to look after me. I told her I'd be fine, but it was such an obvious lie that I couldn't even believe it.

I couldn't do a thing for myself. Cody cooked, she cleaned, she washed my hair (and sometimes me, though that's where I drew the line. Or tried to, in any case) and helped me dress in the mornings.

The wound itself was an ugly thing. The bastard had hit me in the upper arm and taken out a chunk of flesh. It healed without too many complications, though, but it left an unsightly scar that I didn't like to look at.

Two months in the doc came to check on me, and took off the splint. I hurt without it, but he said that if I didn't start using it soon, little by little, I was gonna have big trouble later on. Cody set out to do this the way she did everything - like it was her sole aim in life. I suppose it was, at that time. Every morning she'd make me breakfast, and then make me do some stretching and small exercises. It only took me two sessions to start swearing - the pain was constant, and she made it worse - but she laughed it off.

"Language, Anita," she'd scold me, and that would make me even madder.

Things began to get better, but about five months in I knew my arm was never gonna be the same. I could use it, sure, but I couldn't pick up anything heavier than the empty water jug, and I didn't have enough strength in my hand for a lot of things. Cody refused to be downbeat.

"Well, lucky you're right-handed then, Anita;" she'd say as she stood behind me, brushing my hair while I sulked like a child, "besides, it'll get better."

She was changing; little things that I don't think she even realised. She'd sit closer to me at the table, or stand nearly against me as we looked out the window, or touch my shoulder in passing. I knew it was probably because almost losing me had scared her, and because it would have been hard to care for me as she did without touching me, so in a way it was a double-edged sword. I liked the attention - I would have been a fool not to - but I wondered when I wouldn't need it anymore and she would stop.

When all that was left of the break was a constant stiffness and a dull ache in the bone, she took to rubbing liniment into my arm every night. She'd sit there, patient and quiet, her fingers working over my skin and into my muscles, and I'd watch her dark hair falling about her face. Thinking: This isn't gonna last, so I'm gonna drink in every sight I can. I wanted to be ready for anything - I didn't want to be surprised when she decided I was doing well enough so that she could go back to the mill, or that everything could go back to the way it used to be.

But then I did get surprised, and it wasn't any of the things I'd been waiting for.

"Damn it, Cody, I've had enough!"

"No, you have not. You're goin' to do more lifts with that arm and you're goin' to like it."

"Am not, goddamnit!"

She grinned at me and lifted her eyebrows. "Language, Miss Crown. Will you just shut up and do what I tell you to?"

"No." Folding my arms I shook my head crossly. "And you can't make me."

There was a gleam in Cody Zamora's eyes that had me inching backwards cautiously. "I can't make you do the exercises, Anita Crown," she shifted forward, "but I can sure as hell shut you up."

And then she kissed me.

Maybe she wanted it to be a friend-like kiss, but halfway in it turned into something I certainly

had never shared with Lilly or Eileen. It was like the kiss I'd given her, but packed into a shorter time. And this time her lips were moving. It took my breath away. It was my very first kiss since Jim had died, and it had been worth the wait.

Even if she'd been a bad kisser (which she definitely wasn't) I wouldn't have known what to say afterwards, so I sat there staring at her dumbly like some overgrown kid. Sitting back on her haunches she grinned at me.

"See?"

"Uh..." I couldn't stop staring. "Cody... I don't ... you said..."

Her grin wavered. "I know what I said," she interrupted me, "and I don't want to talk about it, Anita. I was wrong. That's it."

"But..." I was waiting to be struck down by lightning. It would have been a good time to go. "Cody, I don't want you to do this just because you don't want me to leave and you don't have anyone better."

"Anita." The way she said my name still gave me goose bumps. "There'll never be anyone better than you. I've always known that about you - I just never knew what I had to give. But bein' here, with you... You're it, for me." Her gaze dropped. "Unless you've changed your mind. I'll understand if you have. It hasn't been easy with me, I know..."

It was my turn to interrupt. "Cody, shut up."

When she looked up her eyes were so sweet that I could have cried. "Are you goin' to make me?"

So I did.

And then, a few nights later, after she'd rubbed my arm down, she turned to go and I asked her to stay. My nerves were shot, but she was smiling so hard that I thought she'd break her jaw or something.

She came into my bed, and at first it was kind of strange. Two professionals not knowing what to do with love in-between. But then she whispered in my ear, tender words I couldn't share with anyone, and we just fit together like it was meant to be. She didn't leave my bed that night, or the next, or the one after that.

And Cody Zamora was smiling again.

"I still can't believe you're here!"

Lilly beamed up at me from the top porch step where she was sitting, watching the sun go down. "Me neither. It's so good to see you, Anita."

After many long years the Wild West Show was back in town, and we got to see not only Lilly and West, but also West Junior, who had just turned five. He had the dark thick hair of his father, and the rascally green eyes of his mother, and he already loved guns and horses. West doted on his son, and Lilly watched them both with softness in her eyes that had never been there before.

"So the mill's going well, Cody?"

From her chair Cody nodded and grinned. "Yeah, we're doin' great. Doesn't hurt that the towns around here are still growin' like weeds. I'm not goin' in most days anymore, though - too old and grouchy now."

"Well, the old bit I can't believe - you look great;" Lilly winked at me, "but the grouchy part... well, I hate to break it you, Cody Zamora, but you've been that way forever."

"Why you!" Cody grumbled good-naturedly. "See what happens if I let you out of my sight? You get cheeky - or worse than usual, to be more precise. Obviously West is spoilin' you too much."

There was a sparkle in Lilly's eyes. "Well, I'm not going to argue about that."

With a laugh Cody got up. "I'm goin' to make the coffee. Be back soon."

Lilly watched fondly until Cody had gone in, and then turned back to me. "How's the arm, Anita? Cody says you're doing well."

"Yeah." I shrugged. "It's as good as it's going to get, I think. You know how Cody is - she thinks she can make things better with the force of her will."

Giggling, she nodded. "That's Cody for you."

In truth it hadn't gotten much better, but it also hadn't gotten worse. Nights like these, when it was slightly cold, it got into my bones and hurt quite a bit. I shifted a little and resettled my arm to make it more comfortable, and then sighed at the beauty of the sun setting over the water.

Catching the sigh Lilly looked me over. "You seem real happy, Anita. Happier than I saw you in a while."

"I am. I'm doing good."

Cody and I had decided against telling anyone - even Lilly - about us. We thought she'd understand, knew she likely would, but it was something that we wanted to be just ours. Mine and hers. We spent so much together, just the two of us, that our love was hopelessly dear to us.

The floor near the front door creaked and Cody came out with two cups of coffee. Passing one



over to Lilly she put mine on the floor next to my chair and then shook out the blanket that she had pinched under her arm. Tucking it in around me she took special care to fold it up around my left arm so that it wouldn't be cold, and then picked up my cup and put it in my right hand. Her smile was sweet.

"Got to keep it covered, or it'll hurt tomorrow. You know that."

She went back inside to get her cup and I noticed Lilly looking at me long and hard, a little smile curling around her mouth.

"What?"

"That's exactly what I'm asking myself, Anita Crown."

Though I shook my head at her and clucked I knew I was smiling too. Cody came out and sank into her chair, missing the quick look that Lilly shot her way. Taking a sip of her coffee, she sighed with contentment and cocked her head towards the last of the sunset.

"Beautiful."

Turning her head, Lilly took it in and sighed as well. "I've forgotten how much I love it here."

I smiled. "Me too."

Cody held my gaze for just a moment before she nodded. "Yep."

THE END

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