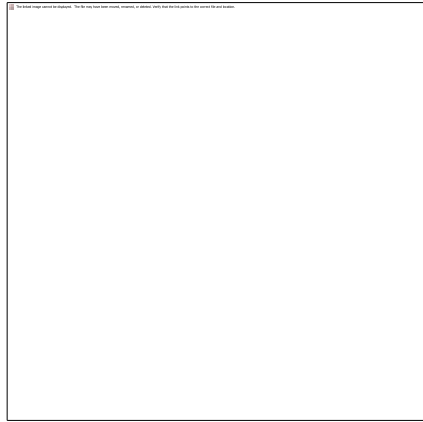


~ How To Rattle An Outlaw ~

by silverwriter01



3rd Place
The Athenaeum's 2009
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All characters are mine and mine alone. If they look like anybody you know or think you know, it's sheer coincidence. This story does contain violence.

Synopsis: A small town in the Old West is taken by surprise when outlaws come in and shake things up. However, nothing could prepare the town or the outlaws for what was heading towards them.

My thanks and dedication are to Rosa who has been waiting for this completed story since I mentioned I had an idea for a story.

She's also one incredible editor though circumstances didn't allow the last 1/4th of the story to be edited.

Questions? Comments? Rude remarks? silverwriter01@yahoo.com.

It was a hot summer's day when a large, pregnant, Mojave rattlesnake slithered down into an abandoned mine shaft to escape the heat. Long ago the miners had been searching for any type of valuable mineral, but all they found was useless rocks for the several months they dug. So the mine was abandoned, and the miners went to search for work elsewhere. Within a few years all the miners were dead from diseases that no doctor could cure. It wouldn't be for decades later that people found out those useless rocks were extremely radioactive.

The pregnant snake was curled around one of those rocks when she gave birth to seven live and hungry babies.

During the next three years farmers and ranchers who lived near the mine started noticing their livestock were disappearing. First it was small animals like chickens and pigs, then larger animals vanished, like goats and cattle.

Jim Thornton owned a small cattle ranch about ten miles from the abandoned mine and he was the first to notice his cattle were dwindling. Certain it was cattle rustlers, he and his brother, Todd, started camping out by the herd so they could catch the thieves.

Todd said after a week of camping, "I think those rustlers are long gone. Been a week and it's been no sign of 'em."

Jim took a sip of whiskey from his flask, "I guess you're right. Wish I knew what was making those tracks though."

Todd nodded. They had come across strange tracks the past few days. Like something large was being drug in a continuous curvy path. Todd said it looked like a giant snake track, but Jim had just laughed at him. There was no snake that big in the world, Jim had said, and Todd had to agree. He was still puzzled at what could have caused the two-foot-wide marks.

They banked their fire low and bedded down once the moon rose high. It was a warm spring night, so they didn't even sleep with a blanket over them. Both fell asleep looking forward to heading home the next day.

Todd awoke to the sound of cattle making weird sounds. He sat up with a frown. They sounded like they were upset, almost scared. He then heard the grass rustling as if someone was crawling towards them. There was a soft hiss and he grabbed his rifle beside him. He froze when he heard the sound of a rattle, and the cattle went wild with fear. He knew the sound of a snake rattle very well, but this rattle sounded louder than any he had ever heard. He reached over to wake his brother and he found himself staring into large, yellow, slit eyes.

Those eyes were the last thing he saw, and his screams were the last thing his brother heard before he died as well.

With the sun overhead, two riders rode through a twisted canyon by a slow running creek. They were headed north towards a small town a few miles away. Both horses were large, sure-footed. One was an Appaloosa stud and the other was a roan mare.

"What's the name of this town we're headed to?" the rider of the roan asked. He was a tall man who wore dark leather chaps over plain breeches and a dark leather vest over a tan, canvas shirt. His dark brown cowboy hat and gun belt were well-used, but of fine quality. The same could be said of his guns. He wasn't an extremely handsome man. His broken nose made sure of that, but women seemed to flock to him all the same. His companion thought it was his green eyes that attracted them.

"Rain something. I don't think they're expecting us, Reverend," the other rider answered with a smirk, "Should get there before nightfall."

Jake Dillon had been trained since birth to take his father's place as reverend of a church. Just before he was ordained into the church, he met a gang of riders. Long having known he wasn't meant for the church, he took the biggest risk of his life and joined the gang. The group had disbanded over two years before, but he had remained with his companion, Que Neb. They had ridden together for ten years, and he still didn't know what went on inside Que's head. Que could ride through a town without making trouble, or leave a trail of death behind.

"It will be fine, Reverend. I'll just make a little deal to get us some nice hospitality. The town-folk will treat us just right. Don't you fret."

Staring at the town in the distance Jake murmured, "Book of Judges, chapter six, verse five: And they entered into the land to destroy it."

Sinisterly, Que smiled, "Amen."

"Thomas Smith and John Harper, would you like to share with the rest of the class what you're talking about?"

The two boys instantly stopped whispering to each other and sat up straight in their desk. Margaret Johnson had been the schoolmarm of Rain's Creek for the past few years and knew how to get the children to behave.

"Well, we're all waiting," Margaret prompted, crossing her arms and tapping her foot.

Both boys were silent for a moment before John said, eyes fixed on his desk, "I was telling Thomas about the famous outlaw that's staying at my Pa's saloon."

Margaret frowned, "While I do enjoy a good imagination, John, I don't approve of lying. Especially the spreading of lies."

"It's not a lie," the boy cried, "Pa told me so!"

"Do you honestly think Sheriff Kingston would let a 'famous outlaw' stay at the saloon and not arrest him?"

"Pa says the sheriff is afraid to come arrest 'em. Pa says if we don't give 'em no trouble, they won't give us no trouble," John answered excitedly.

Margaret shook her head while making a tsk-tsk sound. Either John was making the whole thing up or his father was spinning his son a tall-tale. Either way she was going to get to the bottom of this after school.

"What's the outlaw's name?"

"Ellie Tanner," Margaret scolded.

The six-year-old hung her head, shame-faced. Risking his teacher's scorn, John answered, "Pa says it's Pretty-face Neb."

"John!" Margaret sharply snapped. "Now I've had enough of this. Class, back to our numbers."

After school Margaret walked a horrified John to his father's saloon, where his family slept behind the saloon and guests stayed above it. They first walked across the street to the church and then up the street. They passed the barber's shop and the trading post, which was on the corner of the two streets of Rain's Creek. The four main stores on the intersection of the street were the saloon, the bank, the jail and the trading post.

Margaret and John had barely stepped onto the large wooden sidewalk after crossing the street when John's father rushed out to meet them. Bob Harper looked like many bartenders, with a drover vest and sleeve garters. He was also plump, balding, with a thick mustache. Bob usually had a cheerful smile on his face, but he looked worried and fearful.

"Hello, Miss Johnson. Um, was there some problem at school?" Bob asked glaring down at his son.

"Well, John was telling the class an interesting tale that he said you told him."

Bob's eyes hardened onto his son, "Interesting tale?"

John gulped and ducked his head to stare at his boots. Margaret was unsure about how to continue. She didn't want John to get into too much trouble, but she didn't want to encourage such lying either.

Margaret gave the bartender a hard look, "He says there's an outlaw staying in your saloon. He says you told him so."

Nervously, Bob laughed, "Indeed I did, ma'am. Was just kidding him. Didn't know he would go talking about it in school. I'll straighten him out, ma'am."

Margaret smiled, pleased her assumptions had been correct. She leaned to look past Bob into the saloon and commented, "It would seem business is a little slow today, isn't it?"

Bob smiled tightly. He grabbed his son and started walking away, "Yes, ma'am. It is. Well, I guess I should get back to work and John should start on his homework. Talk to you later, Miss Johnson. Good..."

"Bob!"

Bob Harper flinched.

"Bob! I want 'nother drink! Where you at?"

Margaret watched, stunned, as Bob started trembling. He looked at her and pushed his son towards her. He whispered, "Get away from here."

Confused, Margaret stayed right where she was. She watched as the double doors to the saloon opened and someone stumbled out.

"There you are, Bob! I missed you. How about another drink?" The person called.

Margaret looked the loud drunk over. He wore cowboy boots, tan breeches and a strange vest. Margaret had to admit the man was very pretty with blue eyes and blonde hair that was almost long enough to cover his eyes, but it was swept to the right. His triangular jaw was clean-shaven.

The drunk stopped when he noticed Margaret and he started to stare. The longer he stared, the more uncomfortable she became. He then walked over to lean against Bob, who started trembling harder, and asked, "This a friend of yours, Bob? You should introduce us."

Bob said nothing for a moment, but when the man gave him a nudge, Bob reluctantly said, "This is Margaret Johnson. She's the teacher around here."

Margaret gave the drunk a look of distaste. She couldn't help but try to figure out the odd vest though. It looked like it had rods on it.

The man stepped forward, his hand outstretched, "Howdy Maggie. My name's Que Neb. Pronounced 'Q', like the letter. Some folks call me Pretty-face."

Margaret noticed two important things when Que stepped forward. One was that Que Neb was a woman. Her breasts were obvious when the vest slipped a little. The second was that the vest was covered in dynamite.

Que grinned and grabbed a hold of the vest as she spun on her heels, "Do you like it? Made it myself. You just don't know how hard it is to stitch dynamite onto cotton."

Margaret couldn't help herself. She fainted.

John, Bob and Que stared at the fallen schoolmarm in surprise before Que reached down to pick Margaret up.

Bob stammered, "Just...just want do you think you're... you're doing?"

"Taking her inside," Que said slowly, as if she was talking to an idiot. She adjusted the schoolteacher, who was thrown over Que's shoulders like a bag of potatoes, and said to John, "Go fetch the doctor. We'll make Maggie more comfortable inside."

John raced for the town doctor while Bob followed Que inside like a duckling following its mother.

"Clear off the bar," Que ordered, "It's the only place long enough to fit her."

Bob rushed to clear the empty shot glasses Que had been drinking from off the bar. Jake looked up from his solitaire game at the far end of the bar and the only way his surprise showed was in the momentary widening of his green eyes. "What have you got there, Que?"

"I saw her first, Reverend. Keep your grass eyes over there," Que replied, not really paying him any attention. She sat Margaret on the bar and cupped the back of her head as she lowered her flat. Que took the time to investigate her prize.

The schoolmarm was in her early twenties. Old enough to be married and have children, Que realized. Que picked up Margaret's left hand and examined it. There was no wedding band or any hints of one worn in the past. Que hummed happily and went back to looking over the unconscious woman. She liked the chestnut color of the teacher's hair, which was pulled back into a tight bun. Que had also liked the soft brown eyes she had seen before Margaret had passed out.

Que let her eyes wander from Margaret's beautiful face down her body. Though her body was hidden by a long-sleeved dress, Que could tell it was nicely figured. She even guessed the schoolmarm had to be at least 6 feet tall, which was a few inches taller than herself, a rare thing to find in woman.

Que found her eyes lingering on the row of buttons going from under the woman's chin to her stomach. She reached over to start undoing them.

"What are you doing?" Bob screeched, "Leave her alone!"

Que shot him a disappointed look, "I'm just making it easier for her to breathe, Bob. Jeez, you're such a prude."

Bob was still flushed as the old doctor came rushing in with John trailing behind him. Doc, as he had been called the past twenty years, checked Margaret's blush and her breathing. Jake left his cards to come over and look at the teacher better while the doctor finished examining her.

Jake was surprised by her looks, "Second book of Samuel, chapter fourteen, verse twenty-five: But in all Israel there was none to be so much praised as Absalom for his beauty: from the sole of his foot even to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him."

Que heartily agreed, "Amen."

Doc finally offered, eyeing Que's vest, "She's fine. She just fainted. Probably from too much...excitement. She just needs bed-rest."

Que grinned as she picked Margaret up in her arms. Doc was taken back, "What are you doing?"

"Taking her up to my bed," Que answered as if it was obvious, "You said she needs to rest. My bed's the closest."

"Actually mine's the closest," Jake broke in with a grin.

"You're a man of the cloth, Reverend. No sex for you."

"I'm not a man of the cloth," He shouted at her as she climbed the stairs.

Little did the people in Rain's Creek know that the creatures that had killed Jim and Todd Thornton were headed straight towards them, only a day away. Having eaten everything near their mine-shaft home, they traveled looking for a new food source. There was a huge cattle farm several miles south of Rain's Creek that the creatures had smelled, but the creatures had to go through Rain's Creek first.

Always hungry, they hoped to find food on the way. The two creatures who had eaten Jim and Todd thought humans were the tastiest things they had ever eaten and they hoped to find some more.

Margaret's eyes slowly fluttered open. She stared up at an unfamiliar ceiling trying to remember what had happened. The last thing she recalled was the drunk with the vest made of dynamite. Margaret scolded herself for thinking such silly things. No one would be crazy enough to wear a vest of dynamite.

"How are you feeling?"

Margaret jumped upright at the question and looked around wildly until she spotted Que sitting at the other end of the bed.

Que yawned as she sat up, "Took you long enough to wake up. The sun's almost set. Have you been getting enough sleep? Do you eat enough? Maybe that's why you fainted."

Margaret could only stare at the rambling outlaw. A pretty rambling outlaw if Margaret was being honest with herself. She didn't allow herself to dwell on such thoughts.

"Just who are you and what am I doing here?" She snapped. She looked around the room. She guessed she was in a room above the saloon, but she couldn't figure out with the window being boarded up from the inside. Margaret then happened to glance down and gasped as she saw she was wearing only her slip. She yanked the covers up to her chin, "Where are my clothes!"

"They're over there," Que said, "You shouldn't wear such tight clothes even though I don't protest too much. It might be why you fainted though."

"I don't care why I fainted, just give my clothes," Margaret ordered.

Que grinned as she stretched, "Get them yourself."

Brown eyes glared at careful blue ones.

"Fine," Margaret barked. She fisted the covers in her hand and yanked hard.

Que's arms pin-wheeled in the air as she tried to keep from falling off the bed as the covers were yanked out from underneath her, but she didn't succeed. She watched from the floor as Margaret wrapped the covers around herself and moved to get her dress.

"Where's your changing screen?"

Que tucked her hands behind her head, "What screen?"

Margaret growled as she pulled the dress under the covers and awkwardly tried to put it on without letting go of the covers.

"So, you're a schoolmarm? Do you like it? Do you like kids?" Que asked, trying to make conversation. Margaret ignored her. Que continued anyway, "I bet if you had been my schoolmarm, I would have learned a lot."

"What?" Margaret snapped.

Que mused, "Then again, maybe not. I would have been too busy staring at you to learn anything you taught."

Margaret's jaw dropped. She had heard similar things from men, most of whom were drunk, but never a woman.

"Don't look so surprised. You're a fine looking woman, Maggie. I bet we could teach each other a lot of things," Que leered.

Margaret's mouth opened and closed like a fish out of the water. When she finally found her voice, she growled, "You are a disgusting pervert. I could never want an outlaw. And no one calls me Maggie!"

Margaret let go of the blankets around her and revealed herself to be dressed again. She stormed towards the door and yanked it open before rushing down the hallway.

Que jumped up and grabbed her dynamite vest as she ran after her. Sliding it on, she called out, "Maggie, wait up! Let's have dinner or something!"

"Get away from me, you pervert!"

Margaret was already out of the saloon as Que got to the first floor. Que stood by the bar, looking sad. She turned to Bob, whose eyes were wide in amazement, "Bob, pour me a tall one. My girl just left me."

Jake said solemnly, still at the far end of the bar, "Also from the second book of Samuel, chapter twenty, verse twenty-two: Then the woman went unto all the people in her wisdom. And they cut off the head of Sheba the son of Bichri, and cast it out to Joab."

Que asked, missing the Jake's message completely, "Are you saying I need a haircut?"

"Sheriff! There is an outlaw staying in the saloon! Go do something," Margaret shouted.

Sheriff Kingston looked at her wearily, "Just what would you have me do? Did you not notice the vest she was wearing?"

"Well, evacuate everyone out of the building and shoot her."

"Can't," The sheriff sighed, "She's got two of Bob's busboys locked down in the cellar. If we shoot her and hit the dynamite, she'll take them with her. She said her and her partner were just passing through and would leave soon. That they would not harm anyone or take anything when they leave if..."

"And you believe her? That pervert?" Margaret gasped, outraged, "Can't you shoot her in the head or something?"

"Who do you know in this town is capable of making that shot, Margaret?" The sheriff replied, "Now by all accounts, Pretty-face Neb is crazy as bat-shit...excuse my language, and has killed so many people they lost count. She also has a five thousand dollar reward on her head. I'd like to bring her to justice as much as any other sheriff, but I know it's not worth the risk. I hear she's capable of leaving a place without hurting anybody. So we'll just give them what they want, within reason of course, and let them leave."

Margaret turned, ready to storm out of the sheriff's office much like she had Que's room.

"Margaret?" The sheriff called, causing her to pause, "Don't tell anyone about this. You'll cause unnecessary panic."

Margaret merely shook her head as she left. Before she headed home she went to the schoolhouse to figure out the lesson for the next day. It took her longer than she thought it would since she found it hard to concentrate with a crazy outlaw staying a hundred feet away. Once she was done Margaret headed home. She hoped when she awoke in the morning she would find it had all been a dream.

Margaret lived with an old woman who had been widowed several years before. The widow's house was located on the second street of Rain's Creek. The main street was full of businesses every small town would need to survive while the second street was a residential street. The houses of greater economic value were on the east end of the road and the degree of value went down the further one traveled west.

The widow's house was a modest home on the east side of the street. The widow, Helen, had been married to a merchant who traveled from town to town selling whatever he pleased. He never made himself a hill of money, but he did better than most.

Margaret sighed in relief as she closed the front door behind her. She was home.

"Mrs. Ludlow?" she called out.

Margaret's eyes widened as she heard a loud giggle. She couldn't imagine Helen giggling.

"In the kitchen, dear," Helen called out.

As she headed to the back of the house, where the kitchen lay, her nose picked up the scent of food cooking. Margaret smiled as she thought Helen had cooked them both dinner.

"What's for dinner?" Margaret asked as she entered the kitchen, her smile still on her face. She found Helen sitting at the kitchen table while someone stood at the stove frying chicken. The moment she realized it was Que at the stove, Margaret's smile vanished in a heartbeat.

"What...what are you doing here?" Margaret stammered.

Helen smiled, "Your friend was just entertaining me, Margaret. She's so delightful. Odd, but delightful. And look! She can cook."

Margaret ignored the widow and glared at the smug looking Que. Margaret moved towards her and grabbed her arm in a tight grip. She repeated in a hiss, "What are you doing here?"

Que looked meaningfully down at the hand on her arm until Margaret let go. Que then shrugged, "Isn't it obvious? I'm cooking dinner. I just got to thinking about you turning down my offer for dinner, and I realized you must have had other responsibilities. So I asked Bill, and he said you cooked dinner for you and lovely Mrs. Helen here. I decided to help you out a bit. Mrs. Helen said you liked fried chicken, tomato stew, and cornbread."

Indeed that was Margaret's favorite meal, and from the smell of Que's cooking, Que definitely knew how to cook her favorite meal. Trying hard to ignore the mouth-watering chicken in the frying pan, Margaret gave Que a hard look, "I don't want you here."

"Margaret," Helen scolded, "Que has been nothing but a sweetheart. Now come and sit down while Que finishes dinner."

Margaret looked between her housemate and the crazed outlaw. Realizing she was outnumbered, Margaret went to take a seat. She stopped when she saw Que's dynamite vest hanging from the chair. Her mind raced with possibilities. If she could steal the vest, then the sheriff could arrest Que without anybody being hurt.

As if she read Margaret's mind, Que warned, "Be careful with my vest, Maggie. If you aren't used to handling such 'fabric', it could all blow to pieces on you."

Margaret glared at her before taking a seat in a different chair. She didn't want to risk blowing herself and Helen up, even though that's exactly what Que Neb was risking.

Que served them in twenty minutes after Margaret had gotten up to set the table. She made sure not to give Que a knife since she didn't think the crazy woman needed any more weapons.

Margaret hadn't intended to eat anything on her plate, but the look she got from Helen made her take a bite. Once she had one bite the schoolmarm couldn't stop. She cleaned her plate before she could realize what she had done. Que, with a smug smile, filled her plate up with seconds, "You need to eat more. Not eating might be the reason you fainted."

If looks could set things ablaze, Que would have been nothing more than a pile of ashes.

"You have such an interesting name, Que," Helen said, "Que Neb. You must tell us how you got it. Is it your real name?"

Margaret wanted to scream. She didn't want to know how Que got her name or even what her real name was. She wanted the crazy pervert out of her house and far away from her.

Que said, staring down at her plate while she pushed the crumbs of her cornbread with her fork, "I don't know my real name. I woke up in a hospital with a head injury not knowing where or who I was. The doctor guessed I was 'bout ten. No one ever came to claim me. That was fifteen years ago. They called me Jane, but I didn't feel like a Jane so I picked my own name. The nurses had all the patients' charts labeled in letters. Was easier than remembering names I guess. My chart had a big Q on it. As for Neb, well, I read somewhere...I was able to read though I don't know how...that if you were a son or daughter of Neb, you were a child of unmarried or unknown parents. Since my parents were unknown I thought it fit."

Margaret tried her hardest not to feel anything as Que told her story. She didn't want to believe it for two reasons. One, it was just too sad a story not to feel sympathy for Que and two, she didn't want to feel anything for Que other than anger.

Helen dabbed her teary eyes with a handkerchief, "That's just horrible, Que."

Que shrugged with a crooked smile, "It's okay. I like my name and my life. It suits me."

"Well, if you'll excuse us, Miss Neb, it's Wednesday evening and it's time for church," Margaret said abruptly.

Helen looked surprised, "You want to go to Wednesday service, Margaret? You never want to go to Wednesday service."

Que grinned sinisterly as Margaret's cheeks flushed, "Mind if I accompany you, ladies?"

Margaret was sure her jaw hit the floor, "You want to go to church?"

"Why not?" Que asked, "Reverend is always trying to get me to go. And who knows, maybe you'll get lucky, Maggie. Maybe God will strike me down with lightning when I try to enter His house."

"I'm not that lucky," Margaret grumbled, "and don't call me Maggie."

Que continued as if she hadn't heard her, "Though God didn't strike me down when I robbed that Catholic church. Those nuns were really fun though."

Helen giggled while Margaret sneered, "Pervert."

When Helen stood Que rose with her, "If you'll excuse me, Que, I must go get ready for church. You should too Margaret."

Margaret nodded and rose herself. She hated that she had backed herself into a corner. Casting Que one final glare, she headed towards her room, which was upstairs.

Halfway up the stairs she realized Que was following, much like a lost puppy.

"What are you doing?"

"I wanna see your room," Que casually replied, two steps behind her.

Margaret turned around, her hand gripping the rail so tightly her knuckles paled. She hissed, "When is it going to get through your thick skull that I don't like you?"

Que smirked, "You do like me. You hate that you do, but you do like me. You want me even."

Margaret's glare hardened, "Excuse me?"

Que climbed up a step so their bodies were dangerously close. She was now eye-level with Margaret's chest and her mouth could be on her breasts with a simple turn of her head.

"You want me," Que repeated in a low voice.

Margaret was certain she absolutely didn't want Que Neb. What she wanted was Que to move away because she wasn't used to being so close to someone. It was making her heart beat faster, and she felt very warm.

She jumped when she felt hands grasp her hips. She let go of the railing in her surprise and found her hands on Que's shoulders.

"Relax," Que said softly as if she was trying to calm a scared animal, "It's okay."

Margaret was sure her heart was about to bust out of her chest. She couldn't believe the audacity of the pretty outlaw.

Que turned her head to rub her cheek against Margaret's left breast and smirked when she felt a hard prominence.

"I knew you wanted me," Que smugly whispered, "I knew there was a harlot behind the schoolmarm mask."

At Que's words Margaret broke out of her daze. Margaret became utterly disgusted with herself for letting a strange outlaw put her hands all over her. She then felt a wave of fury wash over her towards Que for having her hands on her in the first place.

"You pervert!" Margaret screamed, "Get away from me!"

In her desire to get Que as far from her as possible, she shoved hard on Que's shoulders. Both the outlaw and the schoolmarm's eyes widened as Que fell backwards. Margaret tried to grab one of Que's arms, but missed. She could only watch in horror as the outlaw fell down the stairs.

When Que hit the hard wooden stairs with a loud thump, her body immediately erupted in pain. She wasn't sure what hurt worst: her butt, the two spots on her back, or her head.

Margaret couldn't believe what she had just done. She wasn't a violent person and she certainly didn't believe in violence. She thought for a breathless moment that she had killed the pretty outlaw and she let out a sigh of relief when Que started groaning.

She watched as Que rolled over and crawled, slowly, down the last few steps on her stomach. Que croaked weakly, "I'll just wait down here as you get ready for church."

Margaret watched until Que had crawled out of sight, and turned to rush up to her room. Once safely in her room she quickly locked the door just in case Que got any ideas. She couldn't believe her day. It had started out so normal.

She slipped out of her dress, flushing as she remembered it had already been taken off of her before. As she changed into a new slip, she caught a glance of herself in the mirror. Staring at herself, she couldn't figure out what Que would want with her. She knew she was beautiful, many people had told her so, but she also knew there were more beautiful women out there than her. Why did the outlaw seem to want her so bad?

Margaret's eyes widened in shock when she saw her panties were damp. She didn't recall wetting herself, and she knew she was much too old for that. She quickly untied the strings of her

underwear and found a fresh pair in her drawer. Before she tied the new pair on, she took a cloth from her wash basin and ran it between her legs. She involuntarily shivered. The cloth fell from her fingers when she realized what was happening to her.

She was aroused like the harlots she had heard and read about. Isn't that what Que had called her, a harlot?

Margaret knew she didn't have time for a scalding hot bath but she desperately wanted one. To become aroused like a harlot by an outlaw woman? She knew that went beyond sinful.

Margaret quickly finished changing for church. She knew she needed to pray for forgiveness. She muttered as she grabbed her bible, "I need prayer and an exorcism."

She walked downstairs to find Helen and Que waiting on her. Helen carried her bible and Que wore her vest. Helen looked at the clock on her mantelpiece, "We'd better hurry."

Que walked to the door and Margaret felt her cheeks flush with shame as she noticed her limping. The outlaw smiled as she opened the door, "After you, pretty ladies."

The creatures slithered slowly across stones warmed all day from the sun. The night was warm and they could see in the dark. They liked hunting at night the best. During the warmest parts of the day they found shady places to sleep and digest their food. Though the pack of creatures had found a herd of goats to eat just an hour before, they were getting hungry again. They were always hungry.

The creatures traveled until the sun was over the horizon and their instincts told them to sleep. Their noses told them food was only a few miles away and they looked forward to the feast they would have once afternoon came.

Jake couldn't help but gaze in wonder at his companion, "You went to church?"

"Yep," Que said with her mouth full as she ate the breakfast Bob had made for her. She had made the bartender eat some of it before she did, just in case he got any funny ideas of poisoning her.

"Last night? You went to church last night?"

"I said yeah, didn't I?"

Jake leaned back in his chair, still amazed, "Book of Deuteronomy, chapter six, verse twenty-two: And the LORD showed signs and wonders before our eyes...So, did you learn anything?"

Que gulped down some milk, "Sure I did, Reverend. Learned about Joseph, Mary, and baby Jethro."

"Baby Jesus," Jake corrected.

"Yeah, that's what I said."

"So where did you get that shiner?"

Que gave him a dopey smile as she gently touched her blackening eye, "Maggie gave it to me."

"Uh hmm," Jake mused, "So I take it your courtship isn't going well?"

Que thought about what had happened after church. She had walked Helen and Margaret back to their home, where Helen had excused herself to go to bed. The schoolmarm had found herself alone with the pretty outlaw.

"Well...I should be going to bed too," Margaret quickly said, "I'll let you out."

Que protested, "You don't want to go to bed. Stay up and talk with me some. If you don't want to talk, we can find other activities, I'm sure."

Margaret rolled her eyes as she opened the front door. Obviously her prayers to cure Que of her perverseness hadn't been answered. She didn't figure any of her prayers would be answered since Que was still walking and talking.

"Come on," Que begged, "you know you like my company. I saw you trying not to smile during service."

Margaret bit her lip to keep from smiling then. Que had raised her hand several times to ask the preacher questions. Like why had the Three Wise Men brought the young savior gold, incense and myrrh? Just what was myrrh? Why hadn't they brought him diapers, baby clothes and a real crib?

"See?" Que smiled, "You think I'm funny and you enjoy my company."

Margaret took a step back as Que stepped forward, "I found you slightly amusing, that's all."

Que continued to move forward until she had Margaret backed against the door, "No, that's not all. I make you feel things. Things you've probably never felt before. Like on the stairs."

The feelings Margaret had had on the stairs were returning. Her heart was beating faster and her knees felt weak due to the close proximity of the outlaw.

Margaret's mind raced for a way to get Que to leave. An idea finally came to her. Breathlessly, she said, "I really do need to sleep. I didn't get much sleep last night and that might be why I fainted."

Que's whole body language changed. She took a step back and said, now serious, "Well you need to rest then. I'll let you get some sleep."

Margaret smiled internally, very pleased with herself. She opened the door and said, "Good night, Miss Neb."

"Goodnight, Maggie," Que replied, and leaned over to kiss Margaret on the lips.

For the entire second the kiss lasted Margaret couldn't move. Once Que's lips were off hers, Margaret raised her hand and punched Que as hard as she could.

"You sick pervert! Get out of here!" Margaret hissed, "And don't call me Maggie!"

Que had walked away with her eye feeling tender and her lips still tingling.

It was obvious to Jake how love-struck Que was. He wasn't sure what to make of it. Que was never short on lady admirers wherever they went, but she never continued to harass someone after they expressed their disinterest. There was something about this town's schoolteacher that had gotten under Que's skin. He felt sorry for both Margaret and Que because he knew it probably wouldn't end well.

"Bob," Que called out, "What time does school end?"

The bartender was so startled he dropped the glass he had been cleaning. It shattered as it hit the floor.

Que looked down at the broken glass, "You mighty jumpy, Bob."

Nervously, he laughed, "Um, school gets out 'bout noon."

"Thanks, Bob. I think I'll pay Maggie a visit."

A few miles away the creatures were fast asleep under some trees. One stirred as he heard the sound of horses riding nearby. He hissed softly to wake a few of his companions and they waited. If the horses came close to where they were sleeping, it'd be worth going out into the sun for a little snack.

Hank Walker and his son, Junior, were riding towards Rain's Creek for supplies. Junior drove the family's two-mule wagon while Hank rode his horse.

As they passed a grove of trees Junior asked, "Pa, what's lying under those trees over there?"

Hank squinted his eyes, "Don't know. Big though. Guess they're someone's cattle. Laying under the trees for shade. Guess I better go see what brand they're wearing and mention it to the sheriff when we get to town."

Hank nudged his horse forward, but the horse protested. Hank growled, "Biscuit, what are you doing? Go!"

Hank dug his spurs in, and the horse reluctantly moved forward. Hank was beginning to think his horse was sick because Biscuit was trembling like a leaf. Hank and Biscuit heard the hiss at the same time. Biscuit whined in terror as he reared back into his hind-legs. Hank shouted as he was thrown off.

Junior watched as Biscuit turned to run off but something shot out from under the trees. The horse screamed as fangs sank into his flank and his legs collapsed underneath him.

Hank stood up and brushed himself off. He looked for his son and saw Junior was as pale as a ghost with his eyes bulging out of his head. Junior snapped out of his terror to scream, "Pa! Behind you!"

Hank Walker turned around to see a large pair of slit eyes staring at him before he was engulfed in a large mouth.

Junior screamed as his father was swallowed whole. The mules had decided they had seen enough and they took off running straight towards Rain's Creek, the direction they had been pointing.

The creatures didn't give chase. It was too hot for that. They'd start traveling again once evening came.

Margaret was glad for the peace and quiet of the schoolhouse now that the children were gone. She allowed herself to get lost in grading papers. She had actually kept herself busy all day because when she wasn't concentrating on something, she thought of Que Neb and the kiss they shared.

Margaret looked up at the sound of someone entering the schoolhouse. She internally groaned when she saw it was Que with a bruised eye wearing her dynamite vest and holding a bunch of yellow flowers.

"Afternoon, Maggie," Que greeted with a smile, "I brought you some flowers."

"Thank you but I must decline them," Margaret tersely replied.

A confused look crossed Que's face as she looked down at her flowers. She thought they were pretty. She gasped as it hit her, "Are you allergic? I didn't mean to...I'll get rid of them right away..."

Margaret growled, "I'm not allergic."

Que's blonde eyebrows came together in confusion, "So what's wrong with them?"

"There's nothing wrong with the flowers," the schoolmarm snapped, "It's you. You're here."

Que grinned, "But you like me."

Margaret started straightening papers on her desk, "I don't."

The pretty outlaw confidently walked closer, "Of course you do. I make you feel things."

"I won't deny you make me feel things," Margaret said coldly, "but afterwards all I feel is disgust. What we do repulses me when I think about it too long."

"Well you shouldn't think about it," Que protested, "Go with your heart. You know what we're doing isn't wrong."

Margaret stood abruptly from her desk startling the outlaw. Margaret walked purposely over to Que until she stood right in front of the outlaw. In a cool, collected voice she said, "What we do repulses me not because you are a woman, but because you are you. You're a criminal who's done things I wish I've never heard of. You take what isn't yours and you have blood on your hands. You sicken me, Que Neb. I could never have any type of relationship with you. So don't walk in here with flowers I know you stole from Mrs. Cross and think you can have your way with me."

The natural, cheerful aura around Que vanished, and a cold, solemn woman stood in her place. Curtly, she said, "Sorry, I won't bother you again."

Que spun around on her heels and walked out of the schoolhouse, dropping the flowers in a bin on her way out. Once inside the saloon down the street Que shouted, "Reverend, get your gear ready because we're leaving at first light in the morning! Bob! Tequila shots! Now!"

After the outlaw walked out, Margaret didn't move for several minutes. She had succeeded in her goal of having the outlaw leave her alone, but she didn't feel like rejoicing. She couldn't shake the feeling that what she had just done was worse than pushing Que down the stairs or hitting her.

She went to her desk to gather a few papers before leaving the schoolhouse. She locked the door behind her and made her way down the wooden sidewalk towards her house. As she passed Cross's General Store, she stopped at the sound of someone calling her name.

Mrs. Cross, a pleasant plump woman, came out of the store wearing a smile, "So did you like your flowers?"

"Excuse me?"

"Your flowers? That pretty, young gentleman came over and gave me a few dollars to get a few from my window boxes. I would have let him get some for free, he was so sweet," the woman said, gesturing to the yellow flowers planted along the store windows.

Margaret swallowed an unpleasant feeling, "You must excuse me, Mrs. Cross. I have to get home."

The schoolmarm started walking down the sidewalk faster. She just wanted to get home and pray all this would end quickly.

The sound of hoofs thundering down the road drew her attention. Margaret turned her head to see a wagon speeding down the road. As the wagon drew closer, Margaret could hear the driver's screams.

"Sheriff! Sheriff! Help! Help me! Sheriff!"

As the wagon flew past her towards the sheriff's office, Margaret recognized the driver. She had taught Junior Walker a few years ago before his father had decided Junior had had enough schooling. She turned and went to see what was wrong.

Junior had a crowd around him when he skidded to a stop in front of the sheriff's office. Sheriff Kingston grabbed the terrified teenager by his shoulders, "Junior, what is it? What's happened?"

"Snakes!" Junior screamed, scaring the crowd around him, "Snakes got Pa!"

"Calm down, Junior," Kingston ordered, "Someone go get Doc. Junior, are you saying your Pa was snakebit?"

"No! He was...he was swallowed whole!"

The town-folks around him started whispering to each other. The boy was clearly delirious. There was no way a snake could swallow a man.

"It's the truth!" Junior shouted, "I saw it. It ate him. There were a bunch of them! Huge snakes! Longer than the wagon and mules put together! And giant fangs! I'm serious! They got my Pa!"

The sheriff drew the overwhelmed teenager into his office away from everybody until Doc could come. Kingston gave him a shot of whiskey to calm him down. It worked a little. Junior no longer shouted, but muttered about snakes until the doctor came to put him to sleep with chloroform.

Kingston shook his head, "Junior's out of his mind. Giant snakes?"

Doc mused, "Perhaps his father was bitten by a snake and died. Grief would explain this."

"We'd best go fetch his body then."

"We'll wait until Junior wakes up so we can find his body easier," Doc recommended. Then came a knock at the door. Margaret entered without being bid.

"How is Junior?" She asked, worried.

"He's fine, Margaret. Just sleeping. Seems his father was snakebit and he's drowning in grief," the sheriff explained.

"Oh," Margaret softly said, "Poor Junior."

"Could you stay with him, Margaret? I'm sure Doc needs to get back to his office and I gotta round up some men to look for Hank's body," Kingston requested.

"Of course," Margaret agreed.

As the sun started setting, the creatures Junior Walker called 'giant snakes' were waking up. They slowly stirred and tasted the air around them. They started slithering fast and straight for Rain's Creek.

They slithered across the main road going into town and started following it naturally. They moved quickly, enjoying the feeling of the warmed stones around their bellows. The smell of prey was starting to thicken the air. They were a hundred yards from Rain's Creek when they were spotted.

"Snakes!"

Margaret jumped up from her chair at the scream. She thought she must have dozed off when she heard more screams.

"Run!" "Snakes!" "Giant snakes!" "Ahhhh!"

Margaret rushed to the window to see what was going on. People were running in every direction, obviously terrified of something. She moved to the door and opened it to get a better look. While her brain registered what her terrified eyes saw, she couldn't believe it.

Enormous snakes were slithering down the street, snapping, hissing and chasing after people trying to get away from them. Several men had their handguns out and were firing at the beasts, but it didn't seem to do any good. Margaret could only watch as she saw someone, she wasn't sure who, get swallowed whole.

Margaret screamed as something fell in front of her. She looked down to see it was an injured Sheriff Kingston. "Help..me...inside."

Margaret could see a puncture wound in his leg that was now swollen to the size of a large cannon. She grabbed his arms and grunted as she tried to pull him inside the jail. The schoolteacher wasn't able to pull him far. He was much larger than herself. She looked up to see where the snakes were and was terrified to see they were coming down the street. Most people had gotten indoors, and they were coming closer. She started pulling harder.

Suddenly two people were beside her and they helped her pull the sheriff inside. Once inside, one abandoned the sheriff to quickly lock the door and started barricading it.

Margaret glanced up as Que said, "Now, Maggie, that's what I call some damn big snakes."

Que had been on her eleventh or thirteenth shot (she had lost count) when the screaming started. Instantly sober, she, Jake and Bob ran out onto the wooden sidewalk to see what was wrong. If the screaming hadn't sobered her up, the sight before her would have then.

Large snakes were biting and snapping at people who were just trying to get away. Que watched as the woman she had bought flowers from early got swallowed whole.

She reached over to grab one of the guns in Jake's belt while he grabbed the other. They both started firing. She shouted, "Bob! Go get that shotgun from behind the bar!"

The bartender just remained frozen in his spot. Que quickly ran out of bullets. They just seemed to bounce off the scales. She turned and ran inside for the shotgun while Jake reloaded. He had just watched the sheriff get pierced in the leg by the fang of one of the beasts.

Que grabbed the gun and stuffed as many shells as she could into her pockets. Checking to make sure the gun was loaded, she rushed back outside. Jake shouted, "Aim for the eyes! Their scales are like bullet proof!"

Que raised the gun to her shoulder and she quickly tried to figure out which snake to shoot first. She focused on the one closest to her. Focusing on one of its large slit eyes, she fired. The shot slammed back hard into her shoulder. She watched as the snake flinched, but it hadn't hit him right in the eye. She swore as she pumped the rifle again and aimed once more.

The second time she fired, she succeeded. The snake screamed and curled up in a protective circle, its rattler shaking rapidly. This only seemed to make the other beasts wilder.

"Que," Jake shouted, pointing towards the jail. Que turned to see Margaret was standing outside, trying to drag someone inside. She could also see the snakes were headed down that way.

She took off without a second thought. Jake was fast on her heels. They reached Margaret and helped pull the body of the sheriff inside. As Jake looked over the sheriff's horrible wound, she started barricading the door with a few chairs and chests. She said as the schoolteacher's brown eyes looked up at her, "Now that's what I call some damn big snakes."

Jake couldn't believe what was happening to the sheriff's leg. It was swollen to three times its size, and it seemed to be decaying. He jumped as the sheriff grabbed his hand and he turned to meet the eyes of the dying man. His last words were, "Protect... 'em."

Kingston convulsed a few times as the venom quickly found its way to his heart. He soon stopped breathing. Jake gently closed the sheriff's eyes and whispered a soft prayer for his soul. Margaret couldn't believe what was happening. She sat on the floor, staring into space. Sheriff Kingston had always been kind to her and now he was dead, killed by the most unimaginable creature.

"I hate to break the moment of silence but what are those things?" Que demanded. She hated not being in control of a situation.

"Book of Numbers, chapter twenty-one, verse six: And the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel...died," Jake whispered, still horrified at what he had seen.

Que shot him a look before rolling her eyes, "Couldn't you have quoted something a little more cheerful, Reverend? Like the story of Sodom and Gomorrah?"

Margaret snapped out of her daze, "But didn't God help the children of Israel after that?" She recalled parts of the story from church. They repented and God helped them.

"Yeah," Jake confirmed, "He had Moses make a brass serpent and put it on a pole. When any person was snakebit, they looked on the staff and they lived."

"Fascinating. Do either of you happen to have a brass snake anywhere?" Que asked. When no one said anything, she said, "Then we'll have to find another way. I wonder if a tin snake would work. Still I don't know how to make a metal snake and for all we know the smith became dinner."

"How can you be facetious at a time like this?" Margaret shouted. She jumped to her feet and moved towards the pretty outlaw. She had every intent to hit Que, but found Jake in her path.

"She doesn't mean it. Que becomes completely tactless when she's scared, nervous or mad. It's her way of handling the stress."

"She's never said a tactful thing to me," Margaret grumbled.

"Well," Jake mused, "You either make her really nervous or really mad."

Que growled, "I hate to ruin yall's discussion, but in case yall have forgotten, there are giant snakes out there!"

"Snakes," Junior cried out, awaking from his sleep, "Snakes got Pa!"

"The snakes are here," Que muttered as she went to look out a window.

The creatures slithered along the street, stopping every now and then to inspect something. From what she could tell, the snakes were about twenty feet long and two feet across. She knew they could easily swallow a human because she had seen them do it. Glancing back at the dead sheriff, she concluded their venom was more than lethal. She had to think of a way to get Jake and herself out of the town safely.

Several long minutes passed as Que stared out the window. Margaret sat in a chair while Jake and Junior drug the sheriff into the back of the jail where he would be out of the way. Afterwards they started looking over the sheriff's rack of rifles.

"Half of these are just show pieces," Jake grumbled. He pulled out the ones that still looked usable and checked their chambers.

"There are enough bullets here that we can keep cover in here and fill them up with lead. We can shoot their eyes out and everything," Junior excitedly cried.

"I don't think it would do much good," Que solemnly said, shaking her head, "I once saw a hawk claw out the eyes of a rattlesnake. When the hawk came back for seconds, the snake got him. Snakes don't need their eyes to catch their pray."

Firmly, Jake said, "Well it can't hurt."

"If you start shooting at them, you'll just..."

Que's words were cut off as the sound of shots firing filled the air. Everyone rushed to a window to see what was going on.

Across the street and a few buildings down, people were firing their rifles at the snakes from the windows, obviously trying to kill them. Most of the bullets bounced harmlessly off the snakes' scales.

"They're shooting from the barber's shop," Margaret said.

"Well, they're about to get shaved by a snake's fang if they don't quit shooting. The shots aggravate and attract them. Pretty sure all loud noises would," Que stated.

No sooner had Que said the words than they became true. The snakes headed towards the barber shop. The number of shots increased.

"They'll be alright ,right?" Junior asked, "Snakes can't open doors, right?"

"No," Que answered, "but those are big snakes and if they wanted to, they could..."

One of the snakes butted its head against the door of the barber shop while others hissed at the windows. The men inside the barber shop were desperately reloading their guns with trembling hands. Fueled by the scent of fear the men were giving off, one snake surged towards one of the men it could see through the window. It broke through the glass easily and opened its mouth wide to start biting. Another snake soon followed him inside.

Que shook her head as she finished her sentence, "They could break inside."

"No one is safe," Margaret whispered, horrified.

Junior wailed, "We're all going to die."

The pretty outlaw firmly stated, "Speak for yourself. I'm not going to die here. Now, boy, come here."

Junior yipped as Que grabbed his ear and sat him down in a chair. She said, leaning over him, "Now I want you to tell me everything that happened this afternoon. Were the snakes on the move when you and your Pa ran into them?"

"No, they were sleeping under some trees."

Que asked him a few more questions and she was smiling when she was done. Jake asked, "What's going through your head, Que?"

"Snakes gotta sleep sometimes. Some snakes sleep during the night, others during the day. These snakes seem to sleep during the day. If we can make it through the night, we can leave during the day, Reverend. Get on our horses and..."

The sound of screaming filled the air, but this time the screams weren't human. Que's and Jake's eyes widened as they recognized the sounds of dying horses.

His voice full of sadness, Jake said, "You were saying."

Que started biting the inside of her lip, something she did to keep from losing her cool when she needed to stay calm. It didn't help. She had really liked the Appaloosa who she had called Spot. She walked over to a simple wooden chair in the corner of the room and picked it up, raising it high above her head with the intent to smash it into the ground. She found a strict-looking schoolmarm in front of her.

"You said yourself loud noises would attract them and that you don't want to die. So, Que Neb, you will calmly put that chair down. Then you will sit down in it and behave so we can all think," Margaret ordered.

Que stood there with the chair raised for some time. The corner of her lips finally twitched in a suppressed smile and she calmly put the chair down to sit in it. She then closed her eyes and rubbed her brow, trying to think of a way out of the snake-infested town.

"Reverend?"

"Yeah, Que?"

"Remember that town in Kansas?"

"You can't be serious?" Jake gasped.

Que grinned, "Took more than prayer to get us out of that situation, Reverend. It's the same here."

"It's not the same," Jake protested, "We were drunk for one. We also had more men. And a goat!"

Margaret and Junior looked back and forth between the two outlaws, and then at each other. They knew they were missing something.

"Well, I can't help the goat part," Que said, "But I can with the men."

Que stood up and walked over to Junior. She slugged him in the shoulder hard enough for him to cry out. She said, "Congratulations. You're now part of Pretty-face's gang. You ain't real pretty, but you'll do on such short notice."

Que turned to face Margaret, who merely gave her a look, "I'll rather be snake food."

"That can be arranged," Que grumbled. She then said, "Okay, here's the plan. Kill the snakes."

"That's your plan? Just kill the giant, bullet-proof snakes?" Junior gasped, outraged, "What was all that talk of Kansas?"

Jake said, "Our gang got cornered in a town once. We were surrounded in a saloon with a whole slew of men outside waiting to hang us. There was no way to escape so we did the only thing we could."

With a stunned and slightly horrified expression Junior asked, "You killed an entire town?"

"Just the people who were trying to kill us," Que replied nonchalantly. Jake winced as he saw how appalled Margaret looked. He knew Que was not helping her chances with the schoolmarm, and he really did believe she had some left. He silently chuckled at his hidden romantic self.

"First," Que said, taking charge, "We gotta figure out how to kill them. Their eyes are vulnerable and they sleep during the day. That's all we know. Once we figure out number one, we can go to number two which is..."

"Moving the citizens to safe ground," Margaret finished.

Que asked, bewildered, "Beg your pardon?"

"We have to save the people of this town."

"No, *we* don't," Que icily replied, "Cause there is no 'we'. I'm only doing this to save me and my gang. I don't care 'bout these people."

Jake expected the schoolmarm to explode in a fit of rage and tears, as did Que. They were both surprised when Margaret didn't reply at all. She merely turned around and walked to the pile of rifles Jake had taken down early. She picked up one and fumbled as she checked to see if it was loaded. For a moment everyone thought she was going to shoot the pretty outlaw.

Instead, Margaret snapped the rifle closed and walked into the back area of the jail. The other three followed her as she grabbed a key ring off the wall and started unlocking the back door of the jail.

"What are you doing?" Que asked, no longer able to hold her curiosity.

"Someone's gotta save these people. Since you won't, I will."

Que had to pick her jaw up off the floor. Jake asked, "How do you plan to do that? You do know you'll more than likely get killed?"

Margaret hesitated in unlocking the door. She finally said, "The chances of my survival are slim anyway. I'd rather die trying to help someone else than helping myself."

"You can't save no one dressed like that," Que protested. The outlaw realized she didn't want Margaret to go there. She only found herself surprised again as Margaret grabbed the knife from Jake's belt and started slicing at her dress. A few cuts later and Margaret's dress was cut right at her knees. She then cut off the long, restrictive sleeves of the dress.

Margaret looked herself over and gave a satisfied nod. She grabbed the rifle and carefully opened the door to look in the back alley. Seeing no snakes, she quickly stepped out and quietly closed the door. She then started climbing up a wooden ladder that had been placed right by the door. Margaret knew they had been fixing the roof of the jail the other day and that the ladder would still be there.

She huffed as she climbed the ladder with only one hand, holding onto her rifle with the other one. She didn't really have a plan, but figured on making one up on the roof, where she could see everything. The schoolteacher just hoped snakes couldn't climb walls.

Up on the roof she had a good view of the entire town. She tried to count all the snakes. There were at least four of them with their tails hanging out of the stable down the street. Two more roamed the streets.

Margaret noticed that all the buildings in the town were made of wood with the exception of the church. The church, which had just been rebuilt last year, was made out of large cut blocks which had been plastered over and whitewashed. She also noted the church had two heavy wooden doors which could easily be barricaded with some pews. The church was where people could be safe, she decided. That's where she would take the people.

"Do you really think your plan will work?"

Margaret jumped at Que's questions. She turned to see the outlaw finish climbing up the ladder. Margaret said nothing, turning her attention back to the town.

Accustomed to the silent treatment, Que moved to stand beside her, viewing the town, "It won't work. There's one of you and at least five of them. You'll die and then the people you're trying to save will die."

"If you helped us," Margaret said, turning towards her, "we'd give you anything you wanted. Help me get these people to the church. They'll be safe there. Afterwards we'll give you anything you want."

Que laughed, "I could take anything I wanted in this whole town."

Margaret's mind was spinning as fast as it could. She finally settled on a decision and took another step forward so that she was in the outlaw's personal space. Though confused by the action, Que didn't show it.

She put her hand over Que's heart and softly said, "If you helped us, I'll give you what you want."

Que fought against every reaction her body wanted to do. She didn't shiver or gasp. Her heart barely even sped up. Instead she tried to regain control of the situation. She took a step forward herself so that their bodies were pressed together. Sinisterly, she grinned, "Again, I could *take* anything I wanted."

Margaret refused to back down. She held Que's gaze without wavering, "Yes. You could take anything you wanted, but you and I both know it wouldn't be the same as if it was given to you. Help me save these people and I'll give you me."

Margaret backed up her offer by running her hand slowly down Que's chest, over one of her breasts. She tried to tell herself it was just to help everyone, but she knew it was a lie. She got a thrill out of touching Que.

Que couldn't help herself, she shivered as Margaret's hand ran down her. Her eyes closed, she whispered, "You said I disgust you."

Margaret paused, unsure about what to say. She knew she didn't want to say something like 'desperate times call for desperate measures' so she went with her heart.

Que's eyes flew open, completely startled, as soft lips pressed against hers. The kiss only lasted a moment, but that was just the first kiss.

The schoolmarm had only meant it as a kiss to seal the deal, but once she felt Que's lips on hers she couldn't stop herself from going back for a second one. She was pleased she did when the pretty outlaw returned her kiss with equal eagerness.

Neither were sure how long the kiss lasted, but they both knew exactly when it ended. It was Que who broke the kiss when a hand reached up to cup her breast. The move shocked her so much that she jumped, breaking the kiss and the moment.

Still stunned at what she had done with her hand but trying not to think about it, Margaret asked, out of breath, "So, do we have a deal?"

Que cleared her throat, "Let's save some town-folks."

"Dynamite," Que suddenly cried out, "We'll blow them up."

Jake looked up from the lantern he had been lighting. The sun had set some time ago, and darkness had fallen over the town. He repeated, "Blow them up?"

Que's face suddenly fell, "But we only have two sticks of dynamite left and they're over in the saloon. We need to get some more, but from where?"

Margaret rolled her eyes, "You're wearing it, Que Neb."

A look of confusion crossed Que's face and it cleared as she looked down, "Oh."

Que shrugged off her vest and put it down on the table. She mused, "Now how do we get the snakes together to blow them up?"

"We use bait," Junior offered. When everyone turned to look at him, he quickly shook his head, "Not me."

"Damn. Wish we had a goat," Que muttered, "Put the vest on the goat, light the fuse, and send the goat out."

"You aren't serious?" Margaret gasped.

"Would you rather wear it out there?" Que demanded.

Margaret shook her head, "No. Anyway we don't keep goats in this town and most of the animals were down at the stables."

"A dog would work. Does someone in town keep an indoor dog?"

Margaret snatched the vest away from the pretty outlaw, "You're not blowing up a dog."

Que nodded, "You're right. I'd need two dogs. Do yall have two dogs? Anyway, give me my vest."

Que grabbed one armhole of the vest and tugged. Margaret refused to let go, "You're not going to blow up a couple of dogs."

"Do you have a better idea?" Que asked.

"You can drop a net over one of them and have the vest hooked in it," Margaret retorted, pulling hard on the vest. Even though that was a good idea, Que wasn't going to admit it, "Give me my vest."

"No," Margaret huffed.

"Oh, for the love of God, give me that," Jake sighed, "First book of Kings, chapter three, verse twenty five: And the king said, Divide the living child in two, and give half to the one, and half to the other."

He easily took the vest from the two women and pulled out his knife. With one easy cut, he sliced it right down the middle. He handed a half to each woman and said, "Do with it what you will."

Margaret stared down at her half of the vest as she thought out her plan. She turned to Junior and said, "Let's sneak out down to the general store. It's not too far and the creatures might not even notice us."

"Yes ma'am," Junior muttered. They checked both the front and back entrances to see which was their best choice for getting two buildings down to the general store. As soon as they opened the back door, they heard a soft hiss and rattle. They quickly closed it.

"Wait," Que said, "I'll go with you. Maybe they'll have some dried meat that we can use instead of finding a dog."

Que would have sacrificed herself for the smile Margaret gave her. It was one of the most beautiful things she had ever seen.

They left Junior at the sheriff's office. He started trembling as they got ready to leave, so Jake volunteered to go. Motioning for Junior to dim the lanterns they had lit, Que opened the door as soon as the room was dark.

There was a half moon in the sky so they were able to see just a little as they stepped out onto the sidewalk. They crept as quickly as they could down the street, trying to make as less noise as possible while keeping close to the buildings. Que tried the door of the general store only to find it locked. Softly, she cursed, "Damn it. Locked."

She knew they needed to get inside, but hated the thought of breaking the glass because that might alert the snakes. She didn't see another way to do it. She was about to break the glass with one of guns she had bought when a hand covered hers. She turned to see Margaret shaking her head.

The schoolteacher silently moved to one of the flower beds on the other side of the door and started digging around in it. She had to feel around in the dirt for a few moments before she found what she was looking for. Margaret triumphantly held up a dirty and slightly rusted key.

Amused, Que smiled as Margaret quickly unlocked the door. Once the three were inside they let out a sigh of relief. "So, where's a light in this place?" Que asked.

Before Margaret could reply, something made a noise behind them. Within the next second, both outlaws had drawn and cocked their guns, pointing them at the place where the sound had come from.

"If you don't want to be pumped full of lead, you'll come out right now," Que growled.

A figure emerged from the shadows and whimpered. Margaret squinted to focus her eyes and gasped when she recognized who it was. She pushed the outlaw's guns down before rushing to wrap young Ellie Tanner in a hug. The girl was cold and trembling, and she started to quietly cry as Margaret held her.

Que and Jake quickly holstered their guns once they realized it was a child. As the schoolteacher tried to calm her down, they looked for a candle or lantern. Finding an oil lantern on a wall, Jake lit it with the matches he had brought along. The room was filled with a soft, warm glow.

Margaret pulled back and bent down to look the little girl in the face. She asked, "Ellie, how long have you been in here? Where are you parents?"

She watched as large tears filled her student's eyes and Ellie wailed, "Snakes! The snakes ate 'em!"

"Shh," Margaret whispered, pulling the girl tightly against her, "Shh. You must be quiet, Ellie. I'm sorry. So sorry."

Que and Jake made their way around the store gathering things they would need. They took all the rope and all the dried meat the store had. They also gathered food for themselves. Jake found a large blanket to wrap all their items in and they were ready to go.

Que touched Margaret's shoulder and gestured towards the door. The schoolteacher nodded and pulled back to talk to her student, "Ellie, we gotta go now."

"No," The girl cried, "Snakes."

"I know the snakes are out there but it's not safe in here. We'll go back to the sheriff's office, which is safer. Now you must be quiet. Don't say one word until we're at the jail. Do you understand?"

Ellie gulped, then nodded. Que chuckled, "Brave tyke."

After checking to see if it was clear, the four quickly made their way back down to the sheriff's office. Just as they were about to close the door behind them, they heard a loud crash. Then the screams and gunfire started.

"That's from the west end," Margaret whispered, horrified.

"Snakes sniffed them out. One level wooden houses don't stand a chance," Que muttered. Soon the gunfire stopped and so did the screams. Que had barely thought out her next move before she acted on it.

She quickly closed and bolted the door before she rushed to the back door. Peeking out, she found it was clear and closed the door behind her as she went out.

"What is she doing?" Margaret asked.

Jake shrugged. He never knew what was going through her mind. Everyone looked up as they heard footsteps on the roof, but soon they were gone. A few minutes later they heard a bellow coming from a few buildings down.

"People of Rain's Creek, listen good! Get to the highest floor you can and stay away from the windows! Keep quiet and don't use too much light! Don't attack the snakes unless they attack you! Now, the snakes sleep during the hottest part of the day! Tomorrow you can move to safer ground like the church!"

The message was repeated and then there was nothing. A few minutes later the footsteps were back on the roof and the back door opened not long after that. Que said, dusting her hands, "Well that's my good deed of the year."

Margaret had a crazy urge to kiss the pretty outlaw as hard and as long as she could. She cleared her throat instead, "I suppose we should start making the nets."

"Never made a net before," Jake said, "But as it says in the book of Ezekiel, chapter twelve, verse thirteen: My net also will I spread upon him, and he shall be taken in my snare: and I will bring him to Babylon to the land of the Chaldeans; yet shall he not see it, though he shall die there."

"Amen, Reverend. Amen."

They worked into the night, tying ropes together into two makeshift nets. They made a grid pattern on the floor and tied the pieces of rope together at the intersections. The nets wouldn't last long, but they only needed them to last as long as the fuse did. Que handled the dynamite, running the fuses together. Jake, Margaret and Junior cut and tied the ropes together. Ellie helped a little, handing someone a knife when they needed it, but mostly she sat quietly in a chair. This worried Margaret. Ellie had been one of the most talkative children in her class.

As another hour passed, she noticed Ellie was nodding off. Margaret led her into one of the cells so the girl could sleep on one of the cots. She laid Ellie down and tucked her in. As she turned to go, Ellie grabbed her hand. She whimpered, "Snakes."

Margaret soothed her, "No. Snakes can't get in here. This is the jail. It's made to keep criminals from escaping so it's more than adequate to keep snakes out. It's okay. Close your eyes, Ellie."

Margaret stayed with the girl as she closed her eyes and soon fell asleep from sheer exhaustion. Margaret felt like joining her but knew they needed to finish the nets. A few hours later she glanced at the clock that Kingston kept on his desk. It was three in the morning and the nets were nearly complete. The schoolteacher went back to square lashing, as Jake called it.

Que stood and stretched after she finished tying one half of the vest into the middle of one of the nets. She felt satisfying pops in several of her joints. She then strolled around the jail to stretch her legs. As she passed the cells, Que curiously peered in on the sleeping child through the bars. The child was sleeping hard, subconsciously sucking her thumb.

Que moved inside the cell to get a better look at her. Ellie had blonde hair like herself, and Que had to admit the kid was cute. As Que wondered if she had been a cute kid, the girl suddenly sat up so fast that she startled the outlaw. Ellie looked around wildly before settling her scared green eyes on Que. She whispered, "Snakes. Snakes were...They got Mama...and Pa..."

Tears started rolling down the child's cheeks, and Que suddenly wished she was outside facing the snakes. She wasn't good with tears or kids.

"Umm," Que hedged, "No snakes here. Why don't you lie back down? Get some shuteye and grow healthy bones or something like that."

"Snakes," the girl repeated.

"Well, those damn snakes can't get in here, I promise you that. I'm going to blow them sky-high and wear their skin as boots."

"You will?" Ellie said, awed.

Que confirmed, "Yep. And we'll see about making you a pair too. Do you want a pair of snakeskin boots?"

The girl shyly shook her head, "No, thank you. But you can make yourself two pairs of boots."

Que thought about that. "Well, those things are big enough I could make a snakeskin vest. Would I look good in a snakeskin vest?" She asked. Ellie nodded, "They could call you Snakeskin Neb."

Que made a face, "No. Can't have that. They'll think I'll look like a snake or something. How about Pretty-face snake-killing Neb?"

Ellie eagerly agreed, "Yeah. Fastest draw in the West."

Que laughed and motioned for the girl to lie down. After Ellie complied Que tucked the blankets around her, "I can't claim I'm the fastest in the West, but I hold my own."

"It ain't just how fast you are with this," Que said, making a gun with her fingers. She used her other hand to tap her head, "It's how fast you are with this. Now close them baby green eyes and dream of robbing banks."

"Robbing banks," Ellie repeated sleepily, "I like that."

Que backed out of the cell trying not to wake the child. She was so busy concentrating on not waking Ellie that she almost jumped out of her skin when she backed into someone.

"Isn't she a little young to be recruited? You should be ashamed," Margaret whispered. Que spun around, but the angry retort on her lips died when she saw Margaret was smiling. She chuckled, "Well you gotta get them young so you can brainwash them to always obey you. It's easier to train a pup than a grown dog, you know."

Margaret merely shook her head.

"Nets are done," Junior said, "What do we do now?"

Que sinisterly grinned, "Now we kill some snakes."

"What in the hell are they doing?" Pete Madison asked. He was one of five people taking refuge in the bank. As soon as he said something the other four people in the bank rushed to the window to see what was happening.

Dawn was slowly approaching and everything was taking on a gray haze. The bank refugees watched as someone walked out of the jail holding a large bundle and started spreading it out on the ground.

Robert Anderson, the owner of the bank, growled, "They're trying to get killed and they're going to take us with them, the stupid idiots. I say we shoot them before they attract the snakes and get us all killed."

Pete, who was a wandering ranch hand with more sense than Robert Anderson would ever have, retorted, "And if we shoot them, we'll attract the snakes anyway. Besides, whatever they're planning might work."

His traveling companion, Dale Holt, nodded in agreement. Robert's wife and his bank teller said nothing. Everyone went back to staring out the windows.

"Ready?" Jake asked.

Que nodded once and watched as Jake went out the back. She waited until she heard his footsteps on the roof before moving towards the front door. Peering outside, she could see where she had laid out of the nets. They covered at least eight feet of the dirt street and she hoped it would do the trick.

"It's time," she said to Margaret and Junior, "Do you two remember what to do?"

Margaret and Junior nodded, each holding onto a rope that led outside the door. The pretty outlaw could tell they were both nervous.

Que leaned down to pick up the sack of dried meat they had taken from the store. She smirked, "I'll be back with a pair of snake skin boots. And, Maggie, I'm going to make you a pair of garters out of it."

Margaret rolled her eyes and pushed the outlaw towards the door. She allowed her hands to linger on the outlaw for a moment, something Que noticed. Que gave her a confident smile and fully opened the front door.

She followed the two ropes that led towards the net in the middle of the street. She held the sack of meat tightly in her hand. Que had to admit that she was worried. Since it was her plan, she knew all the things that could go wrong with it. She just hoped everything would go correctly.

She glanced up to the top of the sheriff's office and saw Jake signal he was ready. She opened her mouth and started shouting.

"Here, snakie, snakie. Come here! Fresh Pretty-face Neb for breakfast. Come and get it!"

She kept shouting until she could see a snake slithering out from beside the stables and down the street towards her. Que gritted her teeth, "Come on, you son of a bitch."

The snake finally caught sight of its prey and started slithering faster. It was closing in on Que, only 30 yards away. It started shaking its rattle in pleasure, knowing it was about to eat before the sun came up. Que met its predator gaze with one of her own. She was confident her face would be the last thing it saw.

When the snake was 20 yards away, a shot rang through the air. Within the next second there was another. The world seemed to pause a minute and then the air was filled with the snake's cries of agony. It started withering around as its eyelids opened and closed rapidly over bleeding sockets.

Que was so busy concentrating on the one snake she didn't notice the one coming up behind her at all. Luckily for her, Margaret had.

"Behind you, Que!" The schoolteacher shouted, "Jake, behind her!"

Que whirled around to see a snake rapidly closing in on her. She hadn't brought a gun and she knew she didn't have time to jump out of the way. Que was lucky again that the Lord was looking out for her. Well, lucky that Jake was looking out for her anyway.

Two more shots fired in rapid succession and the second snake started howling in pain as its eyes were shot out.

Suddenly remembering the plan, Que quickly emptied the sack of meat onto the net and ran towards the jail. She grabbed a hold of the rope Margaret was holding and shakily said, "Wait for it."

"How do you know they'll go for it?" Junior protested.

Que said nothing. She was still shaken up from almost being snake food. She might talk big but Que wasn't ready to die just yet. Margaret answered for the outlaw, "Because no one can resist the smell of dried, cured ham."

The schoolteacher was right. After a minute of withering, crying, and rattling their tails, the two snakes started to sniff out an incredible smell. They started slithering towards the smell, flickering out their tongues to get a better taste. They reached the dried meat at the same time.

"Now!" Que shouted.

Everything happened quickly after that. Margaret, Junior and Que pulled hard on their ropes. The ropes, which were tied off to two wooden posts on the other side of the town and were woven through two ends of the net, lifted the net up into the air about three feet. This lifted the meat inside the net with it. As the snakes opened their mouths to swallow the meat, something landed

inside the net. From above, Jake had thrown a lit oil lantern into the net. As soon as it landed right on top of the dynamite, he shot it with his Peacemaker and then the world exploded.

The force of the explosion knocked Margaret, Junior and Que off their feet. They fell into a pile as debris was thrown in all directions. The street and jail were filled with black smoke and dust.

Que struggled to her feet to survey what had happened as she furiously rubbed her ears to stop the ringing. Outside the jail the dust was still settling so she turned to check on the others. Junior was brushing pieces of snake and rope off of him while Margaret was coughing from all the smoke and dust. Ellie was staring wide-eyed from the cell door.

A triumphant shout had Que spinning around, "We did it! We did it!"

Outside lay the bodies of two snakes, but their heads were missing. A large smile crossed Que's face and she repeated Jake's shout, "We did it!"

Margaret stood to survey the site for herself. While she didn't enjoy blood and gore, she couldn't help but feel pleasure rise up at the sight of the headless, bleeding snakes. The schoolteacher yelped in surprise as arms wrapped around her and spun her around.

"We did it, Maggie. We killed two of those sonsabitches," Que beamed. Margaret wanted to correct Que's language, but found herself distracted by Que's smile. She then got distracted from Que's smile by the outlaw's lips and how much she wanted to kiss those lips. Before she got the chance, Que was gone. She looked around and found Que rushing towards Jake, who had entered through the back door.

Que jumped up and wrapped her legs around his middle. Jake, who was used to Que's maneuver, didn't even wobble under the added weight.

"You did it, Reverend!" Que shouted, noisily kissing the side of his cheek, "You did it, you lucky bastard!"

Jake laughed, "Language, Que. Besides, we still have more to kill."

Que planted one last kiss on his cheek before dropping off of him, "You're right. No time to get cocky. We'd better close the door before the other snakes come to see what's happened."

No sooner had they closed the doors than other snakes did come to see what had happened. Well away from the windows, they watched as the giant snakes circled their blown-up companions, hissing and shaking their rattlers.

Margaret expected the snakes to be thrown into a vengeful rage at the sight of their dead companions, and was surprised when they didn't.

"What are they doing?" she softly asked Que.

"Probably wondering if they could eat them," the outlaw replied, "I don't think they can swallow 'em."

Que was right. The couple of snakes that showed up to investigate tried opening their jaws around the bodies of the dead ones. After a few failed attempts the snakes slithered off to find shade. The sun was creeping over the horizon and they were mostly full. Now they just wanted to sleep.

Once the snakes were out of sight, the companions in the jail let out a sigh of relief. Que said, "In a few hours, once the sun is good in the sky, we'll get the people to the church."

With the sun high in the sky and the temperature rising enough to make them sweat, the jail's refugees moved out onto the street where the carcasses were starting to attract lots of flies.

Que said, "Reverend and I should go make sure the way to the church is safe. But first, I'm feeling right naked without my guns so a trip to the saloon first. Also we need to get those two remaining sticks of dynamite. Margaret, Junior, and the ankle-bitter can wait there."

The group moved quickly across the street towards the saloon. Margaret was surprised to find the saloon like it was the day before. She was certain a snake would have slithered through the double doors to at least look around.

"I could use a little drink," Que said, licking her lips. She walked behind the bar and grabbed a bottle of whiskey off the shelf. Just as she was about to pour, a scared but firm voice said, "Stop."

Que arched an eyebrow as she turned her head to look at Bob, who was standing in a door that led to the back of the saloon. He was holding two six-shooters at her, "I want you two outlaws out of my saloon before I count to ten or I'll blast both of your heads off."

Que raised the other brow in mild surprise at Bob's courage, "Did you hear that Reverend? He wants us out on the count of ten."

"Bob, put those guns down," Margaret sharply stated, "Ms. Neb and Mr. Dillon are helping us get everyone to safety and get rid of all the snakes."

"Stay out of this Margaret. This ain't no business of a schoolmarm," Bob ordered, his hands trembling.

Que narrowed her eyes at his hands, and she was no longer amused. She snapped, "Are those my guns? Those are my guns! Reverend, he has my guns!"

"Oh Lord," Jake muttered.

"What?" Margaret asked, "What's wrong?"

"Last person who took her guns...well...its not a pretty tale to repeat," Jake said.

Margaret turned to look at Que who seemed ready to explode. Bob looked more scared than ever. She knew if she didn't do something, someone was going to get hurt.

"Bob," Margaret softly said, "Why don't you give Que back her guns? You only took them to protect your family from the snakes right? No harm meant."

The scared bartender refused to lower Que's guns. Margaret watched as the pretty outlaw's fingers started wiggling, as if she was getting ready to do something. Desperate to make sure no one got hurt, the schoolteacher lost her etiquette, "Damn it, Bob! Drop those goddamn guns right now!"

The sound of two guns hitting the floor was followed by a long, stunned silence. Everyone stared at Margaret who instantly blushed. She cleared her throat, "Que get your guns. Now if everyone has had their fill of ogling me, we can start concentrating on saving the town."

Que went and picked her guns off the floor with an amused smile on her face. She did flash Bob a cold glare when she asked where her belt was. Learning it was still upstairs in her room, she went to retrieve it. She also retrieved the two sticks of dynamite and tucked them inside her shirt.

"Need to get me a new vest," she said to herself before heading downstairs. She found there were more people in the saloon then when she had gone upstairs.

"We having a party?" she asked, adjusting her belt as she came down the stairs. She noticed all the newcomers had guns with the exception of one worried looking wife.

"Que these are the people who were in the bank," Margaret introduced, "This is Robert Anderson, the owner of the bank and this..."

"I know what you're planning," Robert broke in, glaring at Que and Jake, "You want everyone to go to the church so you can go rob the bank and loot houses. You're nothing but a pair of filthy outlaws who want to leave us penniless. No one messes with my money."

Robert lifted his gun to point it straight at Que. Que sighed, heavily. She was beginning to become aggravated with everyone pointing a gun at her. She was starting to wish she had left everyone to be eaten.

"Gentlemen, escort these two vermin out of town," Robert smugly told his companions.

Pete shook his head, "You're an idiot. Wanna drink, Dale?"

"Am rather thirsty," his companion replied.

"Anybody else want a drink?" Pete asked, moving towards the bar, "You want one Pretty-face?"

Que grinned, "I'd love one."

Pete chuckled, "I'll make it a double. For each of those beasts you blew to kingdom come."

"I'll take the drink, but I can't take the credit," Que said. She waved at Jake, "Reverend over there blew them up. One of the keenest eyes in the West."

Pete looked Jake over and nodded, "Well good job, Reverend. You wanna drink?"

Jake smiled, "Thanks but no thanks. Que, best have your drink and come on. We got to check out the church."

Que nodded and gulped down the shot Pete poured for her. With it still burning her throat, she headed towards the door, "Be right back Maggie."

"Don't call me Maggie," the schoolteacher replied automatically.

Que found her path blocked by the angry banker who still had his gun pointed at her. His face red from being called an idiot, Que thought he resembled an angry tomato. He barked, jabbing his gun at her stomach, "You take one step and I'll pump you full of lead. I know you two have been eyeing my bank and I'm telling you now, you're not going to steal from me. So you leave now, or you'll wish those snakes had eaten you."

Que pursed her lips. She had decided she had enough of people pointing guns at her today. She was all set to kill the man in front of her when she felt a tug on her pants' leg. Both the outlaw and the banker looked down at Ellie.

"Please," Ellie said, "you said the church would be safe. Can we go to the church now?"

A battle waged inside the pretty outlaw. On one side was the voice that usually won every argument and it was telling her to shoot the annoying piss-ant pointing a gun at her. On the other side was the part of her that cooed at kittens and puppies, and it was the same side of her that thought Ellie was a really cute kid.

The scales were tipped dramatically when Margaret slowly approached to pull Ellie back away from the gun. The schoolteacher looked straight into Que's eyes, as she tucked the child behind her, and merely said, "Please."

Que heavily sighed as her kill-first-think-later voice was stamped down. She turned her attention back to Robert who had never taken his beady eyes off of her.

"You're lucky you're ugly," she said, "This might be an improvement."

Robert's eyebrows came together in anger and confusion. Before he had time to ask what she meant, a fist was flying into his face. A crunching sound was followed by a loud thump as the banker fell back onto the ground, his nose twisted and bleeding.

"Best roll him over so he doesn't choke on his own blood," Que stated, "Let's go Reverend."

Que and Jake quietly crossed the dusty street past the blacksmith's and walked further down the street. They kept to the street instead of using the sidewalk. They didn't know where the snakes had made their bed, and they didn't want to find out the hard way.

Halfway to the church, Jake placed his hand on Que's arm to stop her. She looked back at him to see him gesturing at the barbershop. She squinted her eyes to see better and she nodded curtly when she saw what was inside. One of the snakes had curled up in the barbershop for protection against the sun. Que motioned for them to keep moving.

The rest of the way to the church was snake-free. Que gestured for Jake to open the church doors since he was less likely to get struck down by God. Once Jake had the doors open, he peered inside. After signaling it was clear, the outlaws checked around the building to see if the perimeter was also snake-free. Satisfied it was, they made their way back to the saloon.

Que and Jake walked into the saloon to find there were more people there than when they had started. Que was mentally counting heads when one pretty chestnut-haired head made her lose count and when the schoolteacher flashed her a tiny smile, it was enough to stop her brain completely.

"First book of Corinthians, chapter thirteen, verse thirteen: And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love," Jake said in her ear.

Que whipped around to glare at him. She furiously whispered, "I am NOT in love."

Jake merely smiled knowingly at her.

Before Que could protest further, the banker shouted, "There they are! Get 'em!"

Que's and Jake's guns were out of their holsters before anyone could blink. Robert, who was now awake holding a bloodied handkerchief to his nose, shouted, "What are you waiting for? Get 'em! They'll rob us blind if we let 'em."

Que pointed her gun directly at Robert, "My finger is mighty itchy to pull this trigger, sir."

"Hey!" Pete's voice boomed through the saloon. Once he had everyone's attention, he said, "Let's not forget why we're all here. We're trying not to get eaten alive like those other poor saps. Now do you think those scaly bastards out there care who you are? They'll sink their fangs into a banker just as quick as an outlaw. These two folks just killed two of those things. I say we listen to 'em."

Someone added, "They are outlaws. They know how to handle dangerous situations."

A mumble of agreement filtered through the air and the tension in the room slightly eased. Jake holstered his guns while Que lowered hers.

"How does the church look?" Margaret asked.

Before Que could make an inane comment, Jake answered, "It looks safe. There's a snake sleeping in the remains of the barbershop so when we move down that way, we have to keep very quiet. I suggest we head down in small groups so as not to draw attention."

"When can we start moving people?"

"Now's as good a time as any," Jake said, "Women and children first."

Margaret helped Jake separate people into groups. There were fifteen people in the saloon altogether. Que led Margaret, Ellie, and a mother with her child to the church first. They walked slowly down the street with Margaret and the mother shielding the children's eyes from seeing the snake. A few minutes later, Jake came with Junior and Bill's family. Pete and Dale brought the rest of the men.

Once everyone was inside, the large wooden doors were shut. Jake said, looking around, "We should go check for survivors and bring them here. I mean if they have a cellar they can barricade themselves in, that's the best place for them, but how many houses around here have cellars?"

"Not many," Bob answered.

"I'm not letting those two thieves walk into each of our homes while pretending to look for survivors," Robert cried.

The bank owner was ignored and they broke up into groups to cover the residential street of Rain's Creek. Margaret led Que and Jake to the homes on the west side of the street. Que had tried to convince Margaret to stay in the church, but she failed.

They sent every person they found to the church. They were almost to the end of their half of the street when they heard shouting and gunfire.

"Dale! Dale! Let me go you bastards! I'm going to kill that fucking beast!"

"Back to the church," Que ordered.

Margaret protested, "But we have to help them."

"We can't help them now," Que replied. Que and Jake each grabbed one of the schoolteacher's arms and started rushing back to the church.

They made it back to the church, making sure not to disturb the snake in the barbershop. A few minutes later, Bob and another man came inside dragging a thrashing Pete.

"Let me go! Let me go! I can't leave him!"

"Here, let me help him," Doc said. Having survived the first attack, he had come over from his office with a large bag of medical supplies. He pulled out some chloroform to sedate the ranch-hand, "He's in shock. What happened?"

Once the ranch-hand was out, they laid him out on the floor, "We went into Mrs. Ludlow's and Margaret's place," Bob said, glancing at Margaret, "I'm sorry. A snake was inside and there was blood on the floor..."

"No," Margaret weakly protested, "It couldn't have been her. Did you check upstairs? It wasn't her. It wasn't her!"

Que came over and put her hand on Margaret's shoulder. Margaret whirled around and shouted, "Don't touch me, you pervert! It wasn't her! She got away! It wasn't her!"

"I'm sorry," Que whispered as she wrapped her arms around the schoolteacher, "I'm sorry Maggie. I liked her too."

Margaret struggled against the outlaw's embrace, but soon collapsed against her. Tears ran down her face, "It wasn't her."

Que rubbed her back as Margaret cried against her shoulder. Ellie came over to wrap her arms around Margaret's legs and leaned against her side. "I'm sorry too, Ms. Johnson."

Bob continued his story, "We didn't know the snake was still there till the last minute. It was sleeping in the kitchen. It shot out and bit Dale before anyone knew what happened. Pete, here, went crazy. We had to drag him away while the snake started eating...well...you know."

"It was God's will," a man said nearby. Que had never seen him before but assumed he had come in for shelter.

"Excuse me?" Que asked.

"Was God's will," the man repeated, "Everyone knows that Pete and Dale...well...they were unnatural...together."

"Excuse me," Que repeated with a growl.

The man sneered down at the sleeping Pete, "They laid with each other like man should only do with women. The snakes did God's will."

Everyone took a step away from the outspoken man. Margaret even stopped crying to glare at him. Everyone expected Que to draw her gun at him, but someone beat her to it.

Jake had his gun cocked and under the man's chin in a heartbeat. He growled, "I hate when people do or say horrible things in the name of our Lord. Our God is a loving and caring God who would never send serpents down to destroy us. A lot of other people have died today. What

did they do to deserve God's punishment? Dale died because a snake killed him, not because God dislikes who his companion was. Now if I hear you utter one other word I'm going to blow the top of your head off and feed you to the snakes outside."

The man turned pale in fear as Jake holstered his gun and walked to the altar at the front of the church. Que whispered into Margaret's ear, "Talking about the Lord like that makes Reverend very angry, and he's a scary man when he's angry."

The schoolteacher couldn't help but agree. Margaret reluctantly drew away from Que's embrace. It had felt very right, to be in the outlaw's arms. Que reached out to brush an errant tear away, and Margaret found herself wishing she could kiss her right then and there.

Instead she gave the outlaw a thankful smile and turned her attention to Ellie. She stroked the child's hair, "Thank you for the hug."

"I don't like it when you're sad," the girl said. Que silently agreed. The schoolteacher said, "I think we're allowed to be sad right now, but one day we'll be happy again."

Ellie asked, "What will you do now that Mrs. Ludlow's gone?"

Margaret frowned, "I'd really rather not think about it, Ellie."

"But you're all alone now," Ellie persisted, "You don't have anyone else or anywhere else to go right?"

Margaret felt like the child's words were slashing into her. She didn't have anyone or anywhere to go. The pain was overwhelming and she knew she couldn't bear to hear anymore. Harshly, she snapped, "Be quiet, Ellie!"

Tears filled the girl's eyes and spilled over. She whispered, staring at the ground, "I don't have anyone either. I just wanted to know what you would do so I could know what to do too."

Margaret felt her anger vanish in an instant and shame filled its place. How could she have forgotten Ellie had lost both her parents, the only people she had in the world?

Que felt her heart break at the sight of both of them in pain, but she didn't know what to do. The outlaw did know she didn't like the crowd that was watching them. Que growled, "Don't you people have something else you could be doing?"

Everyone quickly moved away, leaving the student and the teacher standing alone. Que sat down in a pew near them, pretending to clean her guns but was actually eavesdropping.

Filled with remorse, Margaret said, "I'm so sorry, Ellie. I didn't mean to snap at you."

"It's okay," the girl muttered to her shoes.

"No it's not," the schoolteacher replied, "I don't know what I'm going to do, Ellie. It will take some time for me to figure it out."

"Okay."

Margaret stared at the young girl for a moment. When Ellie shyly glanced up at her, Margaret knew what she was going to do. She said, "I don't know what I'm going to do but would you like to stay with me anyway?"

Ellie's head shot up and Que's head spun around to look at them. She hadn't seen that coming.

"Are you serious?" Ellie asked, afraid to hope, "You'd let me stay with you?"

Margaret nodded with a tiny smile, "If you don't mind."

Margaret was almost knocked to the ground by the force of Ellie's hug. Her tiny smile turned into a large one.

"I don't mind," the child cried happily, "I'll stay with you forever."

Que found her heart was swelling with happiness just by looking at them. Still she was confused. Margaret could now be considered a mother and Que had never wanted to be a mom before. The child aspect was always a turnoff for her, but Que found she still wanted Margaret just as much, if not more, than the day before.

"What is happening to me?" Que asked herself. Jake's words about love flashed in her head and she shook them away. She was not in love.

An hour later, after she had tucked Ellie down for a nap, Margaret went around talking to the others in the church. Mainly she tried to offer words of comfort though there was little to say. She nodded to Doc who was changing someone's bandage and looked at Pete, who was still sleeping. She hadn't known Dale had been his lover. That would make them like Que, whom she called a pervert. She couldn't help but think of Jake's words and wonder if they were really perverts.

Margaret started looking for her own pervert and found Que on the other side of the church. She saw Que pull two sticks of dynamite out of her shirt and lay them on a windowsill.

Margaret rushed across the room. She accused, "Did you have those in your shirt the entire time?"

Que nodded. The schoolteacher gasped, "Don't you care that it could have blown us all up?"

Que merely gave her a look that said the schoolteacher should know better. Margaret rolled her eyes as she shook her head, "Forgot who I was talking to. You who think a vest of dynamite is fashionable."

"You know you liked the vest Maggie," Que smirked.

"Don't call me Maggie," Margaret reprimanded as she moved away from the outlaw. She saw Jake was still at the front of the church, dusting and straightening the large altar. She went to stand by him, watching him work. After a moment, she asked, "So you believe in God?"

"Of course," Jake replied.

"Then why do you...why are you.."

"An outlaw?" Jake asked. Margaret nodded.

"Because I want to be. All my life I was trained to take my father's place as the head of our church. Que comes along and shows me another way. I still believe in God. I might even believe in Him more after with all the years I've ridden with Que. So I pray, help people when I can, and ask the Lord every night to forgive me my sins. And Que's," he added with a grin, "The Lord loves us all equally. We're his creations."

Margaret laughed, humorlessly, "Those snakes are His creations too."

"We're both cursed creations with an enmity to each other" Jake added, "but God predicted we would crush the snake's head."

"But doesn't it also say that the snake will strike back?"

"God said the serpent shall strike our heels," Jake confirmed.

Margaret frowned, "That does not sound promising."

Que, who found she had missed Margaret's company the moment she walked away, joined them. She said, "You forget God favors us. He gave us cowboy boots. Any snake that bites my heel is going to taste my spur."

Margaret fought against laughing which resulted in something that sounded like a strange cough. Que flashed her a knowing smirk, "Don't worry, Maggie. Those snakes are going to a good head-bashing."

"Don't call me Maggie," Margaret reprimanded once more.

Que merely smiled and moved away again. Jake watched the schoolteacher as he finished straightening the altar. The look he saw in her eyes matched the one in Que's. There was something real between them. Getting them to accept it was another matter entirely.

Casually he said, wiping his hands on his breeches, "I know every line in bible, ma'am. Every one. I know it says people are abominations if they do certain things like Que, Pete, and Dale. However, I don't think they're abominations. If the Lord didn't want people to love their own gender, he wouldn't have made them that way in the first place."

Margaret asked even though she was aware of what he was getting at, "What are you saying?"

Jake seriously thought about his next words because he knew they would make an important impact. He finally settled on what he had told Que, "First book of Corinthians, chapter thirteen, verse thirteen: And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

He left Margaret with her own thoughts.

An hour later, everyone was still being very quiet. Most were trying to think of a way to get out of Rain's Creek alive. Suddenly Bob called out, "Pete! Stop! Don't go out there!"

Margaret looked up to see Pete running out the doors and Que following him. Que shouted, "He took my dynamite!"

"Que!" Margaret called out, but it was too late. Margaret wanted to chase after her but knew it was too late to catch her. She could only wait to see what would happen.

The next few minutes nerve-racking. Margaret found herself wishing and praying that Que would just hurry back to the church.

The loud explosion caused everyone to rush to the door. They could see a faint smoke coming from the second street. Margaret started praying harder.

Her prayers were answered a minute later when she saw Que start coming down the main street. Margaret never knew she could feel so relieved and happy to see someone.

Que was bombarded with questions as she entered the church. With a harsh glare and deep growl, people quickly left her alone with Margaret and Jake. Margaret allowed herself to touch Que's arm, "What happened?"

"I caught up with him. He begged me to let him do it. So I wired the sticks together and gave him a match. He walked in there and a minute later, pieces of snake came flying out."

"He killed himself?" Margaret gasped.

Que nodded, "Took the snake that killed Dale and Helen with him. He said he couldn't live without Dale. I wasn't my place to stop him."

Jake reached over to pat Que's shoulder and walked away. Margaret found herself staring at the outlaw. She didn't like the look on Que's face. There was no twinkle of mischief in Que's eyes or the hint of a sinister grin about to appear. Que didn't look sad or upset, but she didn't look herself.

"You must be tired," Margaret finally said, "Come sit down."

Que protested, "I don't want..."

"You're going to sit down and rest," the schoolteacher said in a firm, strict voice she reserved for her troublemakers.

Que was so stunned that she allowed Margaret to lead her over to the pew where Ellie slept and obediently sat down. The wooden bench was hard and uncomfortable, but Que had to admit it felt good to get off her feet. Que glanced down at the child sleeping beside her, curled up under a blanket Margaret had borrowed from someone. She was once again awed at how cute the little girl was and knew Ellie would grow up to be a looker. As she thought about how people took advantage of pretty women, the outlaw suddenly felt fiercely protective of the child. She didn't want anyone to come around and use Ellie for her looks. The outlaw felt she should protest some more, "I can't rest here."

"Just pretend we're at Sunday service and the preacher is into his second hour of sermon preaching," Margaret suggested.

Que struggled not to yawn as she did as she was told. A few sleepy blinks later, she nodded off. Margaret didn't even try to hide her smile of satisfaction. Soon the schoolteacher also nodded off for a nap.

A few hours later, Que awoke to find herself sleeping between two of the most beautiful things on the planet. The outlaw found that she didn't want to leave from her spot. She suddenly realized she wanted to be there, that she wanted to be a family with Margaret and Ellie. If Margaret was the mother and Ellie the child, Que wanted to be the father of the relationship. This revelation made Que happy and terrified at the same time.

Margaret woke up to find Que and Ellie gone from beside her. She spotted Ellie having a makeshift dinner with another family and Que standing in corner of the church. Margaret tilted her head in confusion as she stared at Que, and then rubbed the sleep out of her eyes to make sure she was seeing correctly.

Que appeared to be furiously checking her pockets. Margaret stood and moved towards the pretty outlaw, "What's wrong?"

"I thought I grabbed it. I was sure it was here," Que muttered, patting herself down. It looked like the outlaw was having a spasm.

Margaret put her hand on Que's arm and the outlaw met her eyes. Que confessed, "My necklace. It was my locket on it. If it's now here, then it's still in my saddle bags back at the saloon. I have to get it."

"Can't it wait until tomorrow?" Margaret asked, "sundown is only a few hours away. The snakes could wake any moment now."

Que firmly shook her head, "I have to have it. It might disappear if I don't get it now. It's the only thing I have left from before..."

Margaret looked closely at the outlaw. Que was on the edge of panic. She rubbed Que's arm, "Okay. It's okay. We'll go get it."

"No," Que said, her head suddenly clear, "I'll go. It won't take me long."

"I'm not letting you go alone," The schoolteacher firmly said.

After arguing a few minutes, Margaret snapped, "We could have been to the saloon and back by now. So quit arguing and let's go."

Que couldn't argue with her so she stopped arguing. Margaret left Ellie in the care of another woman, promising the child she would return soon, and stood with Que as they opened the large church door. Once outside the church, Margaret was washed over with a wave of fear. The final three snakes could be anywhere.

As if sensing her fear, Que reached out and took Margaret's hand. The pretty outlaw half expected Margaret to hank her hand away, and was surprised when she didn't. Que gave the schoolteacher a smile before starting them down the street.

Wanting to be as far away from the snake in the barbershop as possible, Que led them up onto the sidewalk. She held on tightly to Margaret's hand as they walked slowly. The temperature seemed to drop as sun sank lower into the west and they knew the snake could wake up at any moment. They tried to make as little noise as possible.

Margaret concentrated so hard on being quiet that she didn't watch where she was walking. Her foot caught on a large knothole that she hadn't tripped on since her first few weeks in Rain's Creek. She stumbled forward causing Que to come down with her in a hard fall.

They landed with a loud thud and made the wooden boards creak. Que quickly looked at the snake, hoping it was still asleep, but she found a pair of large, yellow eyes staring at her. The snake hissed loudly as its rattle started to shake. Que gulped, "Now would be a good time to run."

Both women struggled onto their feet and took off at a dead run, still holding hands. The snake shot forward after them. Normally the snake would continue sleeping in the shade but since the prey was so close, the snake decided it would make an exception this one time.

Their foots made loud sounds as they ran and glancing over her shoulder, Margaret knew they wouldn't make it to the saloon. "In here," she called as she made a sharp turn, pulling Que along with her.

"The blacksmith's?" Que said in disbelief, "Did you not notice the front is wide open? The snake can easily get in here."

Margaret ignored her as she pulled Que towards the back of the shop. She shouted, "Over here!"

Margaret was halfway up a ladder before Que knew what she was doing. Glancing up she saw the ladder lead to a loft above the smithy. She then wasted no time in climbing up as fast as she could.

The moment the pretty outlaw had both her feet on the loft floor, Margaret shoved something in her hand. Que nearly dropped the object, it was so heavy.

"What the hell is this?"

"It's a sword," Margaret replied, drawing another sword for herself off the wall. Que gave the loft a quick glance to see it was obviously where the smith slept and that he loved making the long metal blades. They lined all the walls.

Que stared down at the sword in her hand like it was the strangest thing on the planet. "What the hell is this?" She repeated.

The snake choose that moment to stick its head into the smithy. It started hissing and moving its head around, to see where its prey went. Margaret whispered, holding her own sword high, "Just think of it as a big knife. The pointy end goes into the snake."

That was something Que could understand. She lifted the sword with both hands and looked down at the snake. The snake slithered around in the shop, making its way around anvils and tables. It flicked its tongue out to taste the air, and it knew its prey was close by.

Que was surprised to see the snake only had one eye. She realized it had to be the first snake she shot the day before.

The outlaw stared down at sword and then the snake. An idea came to her, but she knew it probably wouldn't work and she would probably die in the process. However no other ideas came to her so she went with it.

Pointing the sword at her feet while holding it tight in both hands, Que stepped to the edge of the loft. She waited until the snake's head was right below her before she acted.

Margaret, having no inkling of Que's idea, could only watch in horror as Que jumped off the edge of the loft. The snake screamed as Que let out a long groan, both in pain. The schoolteacher looked down to see the snake pinned to the dirt floor of the smithy by a sword in its neck. Que

had rolled away from the snake and was now laying flat on her back, groaning. Her jump had caused the sword to penetrate through the hard scales of the snake, through its body, and into the floor, but it has also sent waves of pain through her legs. She wasn't sure if she had broken one or both of her legs.

The only thought going through the schoolteacher's mind was that she had to save Que. Not as brave, or as crazy, as the outlaw to jump off a loft with a sword, Margaret rushed down with the ladder with hers.

She approached the withering snake from its blind side. It was always free from Que's sword, having hanged so hard that it had almost cut itself free. Que stopped groaning when she noticed Margaret only two feet from the snake. She was about to shout for the schoolteacher to run and save herself when Margaret pulled back her arms and lunged forward with the sword. The sword, aimed at the empty eye socket, hit its mark.

The snake instantly stopped moving as the sword slide past the eye socket and into the brain. It was a lucky thrust, but the snake was dead all the same.

Margaret wasn't sure who was more surprised, herself or Que. They said nothing for a few minutes, just taking the situation. Que finally said, "No one is every going to believe this story when I tell it. Now, Maggie, if you help me up, we can go over to the saloon before the sun gets too low. I don't think my legs are broken, but they hurt like Hell."

"Don't call me Maggie," Margaret replied, but went to help Que up. They made it into the saloon before the sun had fully set. They were shocked to find Ellie and Jake waiting inside for them.

"She ran over looking for you two and I ran after her. We didn't know what had happened to you," Jake stated before either women could say anything.

Que said, bending down to rub her sore legs, "I guess we'll stay here for the night since it would probably be too dangerous to go back to the church. Let's sleep on the second floor. The snakes will have one hell of a time finding us up there. Reverend get a bottle of alcohol and spray it on the steps. That should mask the scent that we're up here."

Jake helped Que up the stairs and to her room before going back to cover their scent with alcohol. He also pushed a dresser out of one of the rooms and over the stairwell entrance to buy them some time if a snake did decide to come upstairs. He then went to his room to try and get some sleep.

Once alone in her room, Que quickly hopped over to her saddle bags and searched through them. She sighed in relief as she found it at the bottle of the bag.

Margaret place Ellie in the room across from Que's. Naturally exhausted from all the adrenaline rushing through her little body, Ellie fell asleep not long after Margaret placed her in bed. The schoolteacher couldn't believe that just a few hours ago she had agreed to raise Ellie, thus making this little girl her child.

Margaret brushed Ellie's blonde hair away from her face. She amused herself with the fact that Ellie could be Que's and Jake's child with her blonde hair and green eyes. She knew Que would balk at such an idea.

Thinking of the outlaw made the schoolteacher miss her even though she was just across the hall. Satisfied Ellie was out for the night, Margaret stepped out into the hall. She softly knocked on Que's door, wanting to go inside but afraid to at the same time.

"Come in Maggie," Que called.

"How did you know it was me?" Margaret asked as she entered, "And don't call me Maggie."

"Neither Reverend or the snakes would have knocked," Que replied.

"Did you find your locket?"

Que held up the piece of jewelry as an answer. Margaret walked over and took the necklace from her. The necklace itself was a black leather cord while the locket appeared to be made out of gold. It was shaped like a heart and while dented and scratched, it was still very beautiful.

"May I open it?"

Que nodded her permission. Margaret opened the locket to find a tiny picture on each side. On the left side was a picture of a man and woman and on the right was a picture of young girl.

"Is this you and your parents?"

Que shrugged, "I don't know. It's always been with me though."

Margaret closed the locket and handed it back to Que. Que slipped it over her head and tucked it inside her shirt. An awkward silence fell over them.

"You want to lay down?" Que suddenly asked. Seeing Margaret's shocked look, she quickly added, "To sleep. Its been a long day and sleep is good. I mean you could go lay down with the little one but why wake her up?"

Que felt like smacking herself. She couldn't believe she just rambled like a nervous schoolgirl.

Margaret fought with herself. She wanted nothing more than to lay down next to Que, but a part of her was saying that Que Neb was still a pervert who wanted her body.

The schoolmarm found herself laying down beside Que even though her mind protested it. She rationalized if Que wanted to take advantage of her then she would allow it and consider her end of their bargain completed.

However once Margaret was settled in the bed, under the covers, Que rolled onto her side away from the schoolteacher. Margaret found this very unsettling so she rolled on her side away from Que. The next few minutes were filled with awkward tension. Each knew the other was still awake, but neither knew what to say or do.

"Que?" Margaret finally asked.

"Hmm?"

"Do you really not remember anything before you were ten? Not even those people in the locket?"

"Not a thing," Que replied. Margaret turned over and Que followed her so that they facing each other. Unable to stop herself, she reached over to brush the blonde hair away from Que's eyes, "I'm sorry."

Que shrugged, "It's probably not worth remembering. I made a new life."

"Tell me about it."

"About what?" Que asked, "My life?"

Margaret nodded with a small smile. Que couldn't resist Margaret's smile so she started talking.

"After a week or two in the hospital, I ran away. People kept trying to steal my locket or do stuff with me that I didn't want to do. And they were talking about sending me to an orphanage. I couldn't go to an orphanage. I had heard rumors about that place. So once away from the hospital, I cut my hair short and dressed in some boy's clothes I found. I worked little jobs and stole a lot just to survive. That's how I met my best friend, Wesley. She was another girl dressing up like a boy to get by. She had run away from home after getting tired of her Pa hitting her. We just meet and clicked. Wesley had the idea of starting an outlaw gang and things went from there.

"A year after riding together, we found Jake. The three of us traveled around as the Pretty-face gang. We're all quite good-looking, that's how we got our name. Oh we practiced before we tried to do any big crime. Practiced shooting and making plans. Jake's the best shot in the whole West, but he doesn't like to brag. We all had a natural talent waiting to come out really."

"The gang kinda disbanded about two years ago. We were hiding out with some of the Crow. They really liked me and Wesley cause we were like men, but women. Anyway, Wesley fell in love with one of their women and they were mated. Was a very nice ceremony actually. Almost made me want to get mated," Que said with a grin, "Almost anyway."

"So Jake and I went on our way without Wesley. Stealing and killing just wasn't the same without her. A few months ago, a messenger tracked me down. He had a letter for me from Wesley. The tribe had been getting heavily attacked from other tribes so she, her mate, and some

of the others traveled north to Montana. Wesley posed as a man and bought a huge piece of land with some of her share of the cash we've stolen over the years. They've made a nice ranch, she says, and people don't bother them. They all work and live good. She wants me and Jake to come up there and live with them."

"So," Margaret said, "that's where you and Jake are headed then?"

"Yep," Que smiled, "I thought I'd try a hand at being a rancher or farmer."

"What about you?" Que then asked, "What about your life?"

Margaret said, "Well, my story isn't anything like yours I'm afraid. I'm the daughter of a general store owner. My mother wanted me to get an education and my father wanted me to marry a man to take over his business. They compromised and allowed me to get a college degree and then marry. However, I didn't want to marry. As soon as I had my diploma in hand and money saved, I took off on a stage coach out West. It brought me here and luck would have it Rain's Creek needed a schoolteacher. Helen was nice enough to offer me a place to stay..."

Margaret trailed off as she remembered her friend was now dead. Que reached to take a hold of one of the schoolteacher's hands and gave it a squeeze. Margaret gave her a grateful smile.

"And your family didn't come after you?" Que asked after a moment of silence.

Margaret shook her head, "I have a younger sister. I assume they put their expectations for me onto her."

"Well they're just idiots," Que replied, "I'd have gone after you. You're the kind of woman that shouldn't ever be let go."

The words had slipped out of Que's mouth before she could stop them. Once she realized what she had said, the outlaw fought not to blush. The incredulous look Margaret was given her did not help either.

Margaret realized she couldn't stop lying to herself anymore. Que had been right a few days when she said Margaret wanted her, and she had been wrong when she said she would never want any type of relationship with Que. She wanted Que, and even more than that, she wanted to try a relationship with the outlaw.

"Que?"

"Yeah?" Que replied, unable to look Margaret in the eye after her comment.

"May we kiss?"

Blue eyes quickly meet brown ones. Que asked, suddenly out of breath, "Are you sure you want to kiss with a pervert?"

Taken her fear in hand, Margaret moved closer. She chose the simplest of answers, "Yes."

Que felt like she should protest, but Margaret moved in to kiss her. Que thought that it was strange how Margaret was the one who seem to start all their kisses the past few times. However the thought was fleeting and she concentrated on kissing the incredibly beautiful woman beside her.

Margaret let out a pleased moan as Que rolled on top of her. The sound made Que clench her thighs together. Margaret allowed her hands to stroke down Que's sides as their breasts and hips rolled together.

Still keeping her lips locked with Margaret's, Que sat up on her knees so she could start unbutton Margaret's dress. She released one button when she felt the schoolteacher freeze. The outlaw sat up, "We don't have to..."

Que was interrupted as Margaret reached up and pulled the outlaw back down for another kiss.

Margaret froze when Que undid one of her buttons because she realized they were going to have sex. All kinds of uncertainties raced through her mind but as Que sat up, Margaret realized none of them mattered. She wanted Que Neb, the perverted outlaw that was worming her way into her heart. She pulled Que back down to continue.

Que almost lost herself in the kiss, but realized she couldn't allow herself to do so. She sat up again, "No."

"No?" Margaret repeated, confused.

"No," Que affirmed.

Margaret couldn't believe Que had stopped. With Que no longer wanting to participate, she felt embarrassed by her actions. Her wantonness made her feel like a harlot.

Que could almost read the thoughts that were going through the schoolteacher's mind. Que leaned down to give her a quick kiss, "It's not you. You're incredibly beautiful and make me want you like I've never wanted anybody."

"Then why did you stop?"

"Because you make me want you like I've never wanted anybody," Que replied, "I know you're special and I want to wait."

Though Que may not have realized the meaning behind her words, Margaret understood them just fine. Que wanted to be with her and not just for sex.

Margaret pulled Que down for a hug. She whispered into her ear, "Thank you."

While her vulva was screaming for attention, it was easy to ignore with the sense of happiness that overcame her as Margaret snuggled against her. Que was sure sex with Margaret would be incredible, but being able to wrap her arms around the schoolteacher felt even more incredible. After one lingering kiss, the pair fell asleep from pure exhaustion over the past day's events.

Que woke in the morning as the sun's lights peered through the boards she had nailed up across the window a few days ago. Que was tempted to go back to sleep since Margaret was warm and wrapped in her arms. However she knew that she should get Margaret and Ellie back to the church and figure out how to kill the last two snakes.

Que woke Margaret with a series of soft kisses that led them to stay in bed a little while longer, just enjoying each other. They both knew their deaths could be close by so they took pleasure in their little morning.

Margaret woke Ellie, who seemed to look better after a long night's sleep. "When can we leave this place?" Ellie asked.

"As soon as the snakes are gone," Margaret replied.

"When will that be?"

"Pretty soon," Que answered from out in the hallway, "Jake and I are going to figure out a way to kill 'em. Don't you worry, little one."

Ellie beamed at the outlaw, and Que felt a warm feeling wash over her.

Jake said as he and Que pushed the dresser away from the stairway, "You look good, Que. Better than I've seen you in a long time, and I'm not just talking about your black eye finally going away."

Que had completely forgot that Margaret had punched her just a few days ago. It seemed like a different lifetime.

Que merely grinned at his comment, but Jake knew his friend was in love. From her amount of happiness, her love was returned and that made Jake very happy.

They all walked downstairs and stood among the chairs and tables.

Margaret asked, "Do you think its hot enough to walk back to the church?"

Que was about to reply when a wave of fear washed over her as she heard the sound of a soft hissing from behind her. She could only look at Margaret and Ellie and mouthed, "Run."

While Margaret didn't understand what Que had said, she did understand the look in her eyes. She took Ellie by the hand and started running for the saloon doors as a snake slithered out from the back of the saloon.

Ellie screamed at the sight of the snake, getting its attention. It started charging for the child and Margaret, sensing they were the easiest prey.

"Over here!" Jake shouted, throwing a chair at the large snake. Though the chair bounced harmlessly off the snake, the act drew its attention. The snake quickly changed directions and headed for Jake.

Jake tried to back away but tripped over in the process. He could only watch in horror as the snake closed in on him, its mouth open to sink its fangs into him.

"No!" Margaret screamed. The snake was lowering its fangs with something jumped on its back.

Que started slamming her fists into the snake's back. Her actions started it so much that it left Jake alone long enough for Jake to get up. Once Jake was on its feet, Que hopped off the snake's back just as it turned its head around to glare at her. Que and Jake ran towards the bar and jumped over it to take cover behind it. Margaret quickly drug Ellie out of the saloon and into the hot sunlight.

Que said, out of breath, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Jake lied, making sure to keep his wound out of Que's sight.

"We had to kill that thing before it goes outside and attacks Margaret and Ellie," Que stated.

Looking at the bottles around them, Jake said "I have an idea."

"No Reverend," Que protested, looking horrified, "Please tell me you're not thinking what you're thinking."

"There's no other way out Que," Jake said, trying to hide the pain he was in, "We gotta do something."

Que looked at the bottles of alcohol around them with sad eyes, "Some of these bottles are over five years old."

Jake hid a wince as his side seemed to be on fire, "Que, we're running out of time."

"Okay, okay," Que said, grabbing a bottle, "I just do this under protest."

Que stood up and through the bottle hard against the snake. It broke, spilling the alcohol onto it. Que kept throwing bottles while Jake crept around to the other side of the bar. Just as the snake was about to attack Que, Jake started shooting at it. Between the bottles and Jake's shooting, the snake didn't know which human to attack first.

Once Que had spilled enough alcohol to keep the entire town drunk for a year, Jake increased his gunfire. This caused the snake to focus on him, allowing Que the time to escape from behind the bar after grabbing a pair of matches.

Que stood by the saloon's double doors and lit a match. Just as the snake was about to attack Jake again, she tossed the match on it. The snake and the floor around it were engulfed in flames.

Jake took a step back from the sudden intense heat. Shield his face from the fire, he stumbled towards exit. At the door, he turned back to look at the snake. It was hissing in pain, withering around trying to extinguish itself. The walls of the saloon quickly caught fire, surrounding the snake. It would die of smoke inhalation before the fire would kill it.

Jake weakly turned around to look for Que. He found her checking on Margaret and Ellie, making sure they had no injuries. He saw a look pass from Margaret and Que, and Jake suddenly knew everything was going to alright. There was now someone else to look after Que. "Que?" he called.

It was the tone of his voice that had Que whirling around to see him holding onto his side. She would never quiet remember what made her realize Jake was going to die. It was either the expression on his face, or the bloody fluid that leaked between his fingers.

"No," Que whispered in dismay. She rushed to him as he started to fall. She barely caught him. Lowering him gently to the ground, Que snapped, "You said you were okay."

"I lied," He said with a sad smile. Que moved his hand to see a hole the size of a bullet in his side. The snake had just gotten the tip of its fang into him, but it was enough to inject venom into the outlaw. The hole was inflamed and leaking out pus.

Jake held out his other hand and Que grabbed it. Que said, tears in her eyes, "It's just a little bite. You'll make it."

"I don't think so, Que. I feel it going through my body. Book of Psalm, chapter twenty three, verse four," Jake weakly said, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

His green eyes meet Que's blue ones, "For thou...for thou art with me."

"You can't leave me, Jake," Que cried, squeezing his hand tighter, "I'll never find my way to Montana without you."

"Sure you will. Head north to the mountains. Book of Genesis, chapter nineteen, seventeen: Escape for your life...do not look behind you nor stay anywhere in the plain. Escape to the mountains, lest you be destroyed," Jake whispered as the venom entered his heart, "Psalm, twenty-three, six: ...and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

Tears ran down Que's face as she held her friend in her arms, rocking gently. He was dead.

Margaret wanted to break down crying as well, but knew she had to hold it together. The fire was growing and would destroy the whole saloon soon. She had to get Que and Ellie away from it.

She walked over to where Que sat, holding Jake's body tightly. She gently placed her hand on Que's shoulder, "We need to move, Que. We should go back to the church."

"I hate God," Que growled as more tears rolled down her cheeks.

"That's fine but think of what Jake would have wanted," Margaret said, "Wouldn't he have liked a nice burial by a church?"

Que was silent for a minute. The pretty outlaw then nodded. She said, looking down at Jake's body, "I can't carry him by myself."

Margaret squeezed her shoulder, "I'll go get some help."

A few hours later, Que stood beside a freshly covered grave. It was close to the church and Que had taken one of the stone crucifixes from inside and planted it at the head of the grave. Que stared down at the grave and then up at the sun, watching as it turned the sky various shades of warm colors.

Margaret had left Que alone to say her goodbyes to Jake, but as the sun sank lower, she was really wanted Que inside the safety of the church. She walked up behind Que and quietly said, "You need to come inside now."

Que turned around and stared at the schoolteacher for a long moment. She then shook her head, "I'm not going inside."

"What?"

"I have to kill the last snake."

"How?" Margaret asked, "Tell us and we'll help."

Que shook her head again, "There's nothing you can do. I'm going to lure it into the sheriff's office where I'll shoot so many bullets into its eyes and mouth that it will gladly choose death over staying alive."

Margaret gasped, "You're just going to stand in the middle of the jail and shot it?"

"Of course not. I'll stand in one of the cells and shoot it."

"No," Margaret protested, "you can't. You'll die. I refuse to let you do this. There's another way. We'll find another way to kill that snake."

"There might be another way, but this is the only way for me. I want you to stay in the church, Maggie, and take care of the little one. I'll kill the snake and come back for you. You still owe me a reward for saving all these people," Que said with a grin.

Margaret shook her head, half amused and half terrified.

Que was about to leave when an idea hit her. She reached under her shirt and pulled her locket out. Taken it off her neck, she placed it into one of Margaret's hands. She said, "You hold onto this for me. I'm going to come back and get it."

Margaret was struck speechless. Unable to resist herself any longer, the schoolteacher reached out and grabbed Que by her shirt collar. She pulled the surprised outlaw close and fiercely kissed her, no longer caring about the people watching them. Breaking off the hard kiss, she said, "Come back alive, Que Neb, and don't call me Maggie."

With a large smile on her face, the outlaw headed over to the sheriff's office. Once there, she took every gun and box of ammunition she could find and put them into one of the jail cells. Que made a quick trip down to the general store to take all their boxes of ammunition as well.

When night quickly fell, Que lit all the lanterns she could find until the whole place was bright as day. Satisfied with her work, she went to the door and opened it. As she stepped out onto the sidewalk, the light from the jail cutting into the night. She pulled out her gun and pointed it into the sky. She fired once and shouted, knowing the snake would be attracted by all the noise, "Come here you bastard! Fresh meat right here!"

She fired the rest of the bullets in her gun, all the while shouting for the snake to come and get her. Between the moonlight and light from the jail, she was able to spot its eyes a hundred yards away. The snake was moving fast towards her.

Que merely turned away and walked casually towards the cell where she stored all the guns. She closed the cell door and locked it, tossing the key on the bed beside the boxes of bullets. She had just picked up a shotgun when the snake slithered into the doorway. Que pumped the gun as the snake spotted her. It charged towards the cell, only to bounce off the bars. The snake hissed violently and tried to attack her again. The bars bent a fraction of an inch this time.

With a sinister smile, Que pointed the gun at one of the snake's eyes, "How many bullets does it take to kill a giant snake?"

She fired and watched as the snake's eye exploded. The snake screamed in pain as it recoiled. Que pumped the gun again, waiting for the snake to attack again, "I don't know how many, but lets keep count shall we? Ready for number two?"

The people in the church didn't know how long the gunfire lasted. It seemed like hours. Margaret didn't care about how long it lasted, just that it continued. As long as there was gunfire, she knew Que was still alive.

Margaret felt her heart stop as the shoots seized. She prayed for them to start up again while people around her murmured about whether Que was alive or dead. Her heart almost jumped out of her chest when at the loud pounding on the church door. It opened to reveal a tired, but otherwise unharmed Que.

"472," Que said with a sinister grin, "That's how many bullets it takes."

In the two weeks to come, the survivors of Rain's Creek were busy repairing their homes or packing to leave. It had taken a few days before help arrived, but soon the town was flooded with new people who came to see the snake carcasses. Most of the survivors decided to leave the small town for good and in the years to come, it would be just another ghost town from the old West.

Que checked the bags on her new horse whom she had named Charity. After sitting down to have a long, one-sided talk with Robert, the bank of Rain's Creek used all its money helping the survivors get whatever they needed for a restart. She had gotten a new horse while Margaret had gotten a wagon with two mules. Junior had gotten a new horse and headed back for his family's ranch where his mother and little brother were waiting on him.

Que doubled checked her bags while watching Margaret out of the corner of her eye. The schoolteacher was loading boxes into the wagon while Ellie petted one of the mules. The outlaw wanted to know what the schoolteacher planned on doing, but found herself afraid to ask.

Finally, after mustering all her courage, Que wandered over to Margaret's wagon. However at last minute, her courage failed and she turned to talk to Ellie instead.

"This is a good mule," Que said, patting the mule's head. Ellie smiled, "His name is Fluffy and the other one is Spot."

"The finest two names I've every heard," Que replied, feigning seriousness.

Margaret found it adorable that Que was afraid to talk to her. She knew she would have to take the lead. "Que," she called, "Could you help me lift this box?"

Happy to have a task to do, Que did as she was told. Que found the box wasn't particularly heavy, and was sure she had seen Margaret lift heavier ones. However when Margaret leaned over to kiss her check in thanks, Que lost her train of thought.

"Uh," the outlaw fumbled, "there you go."

"Thank you, Que," Margaret smiled.

"So what are you doing to do now that this whole snake business is over?" Que asked, staring down at her feet, scuffing the ground with her boots.

Margaret found the act adorable, "Ellie and I are heading north. Perhaps to the Montana Territory. I'm sure they need teachers, and it shouldn't be too hard to find a place to stay."

Margaret would never forget the expression on Que's face. It went from surprise, to wonder, to pure happiness.

The schoolteacher yelped as Que wrapped her arms around her and spun her in a circle. Her feet had barely touched the ground when Que kissed her. The dizzy sensation increased for both of them when Margaret wrapped her arms around the outlaw's neck and pulled her even closer.

Several moments passed before they broke away for air. Que asked, still looking like all her dreams had come true, "Does this mean you love me?"

"No," Margaret seriously replied.

Que felt like someone had stuck a needle in her and all the wonderful things she had been feeling were leaking out.

Margaret, as if knowing what was going on inside Que's head, gave the outlaw a little shake, "Hey. Don't look that way. We've only known each other a few days, Que Neb. I don't love you now but ask me again in a few months. I'm sure you'll get a different answer. For now, I really like you."

Que's face brightened immediately, "I really like you too, Maggie. I'll work hard to make you fall in love with me, I promise."

Margaret leaned in to nip Que's lower lip. She gently scolded, before kissing Que again, "Don't call me Maggie."

Several miles away, the seventh snake that no one in Rain's Creek knew about, was slithering back to the mine where she was born. She was starving, but her hunger would have to wait. First she had to give birth to the young snakes withering around inside her.

The End

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