

MEN OF VIOLENCE

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
the University of North Carolina at Charlotte
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in
English

Charlotte

2021

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ABSTRACT

Cory Stephen Kessler. MEN OF VIOLENCE.

(Under the direction of DR. Aaron Gwyn)

The Cowboy Era in American history began following the end of the Civil War in the 1860s and lasted until the 1890s when much of the Western Frontier land was privatized and sectioned off by owners with the use of barbed wire. Despite the relatively short life of this era, it spawned myths for American culture well into the 20th century. Many of these lawmen shared characteristics with the outlaws—gambling, womanizing, gunplay—which created a mirror narrative that allowed those who heard and read the narratives to identify with both the lawman and the outlaw equally. *Men of Violence* challenges the mythology of this era by removing the stereotypical cowboy from his original context and placing him in the modernized world of 1927 in the waning years of the Prohibition Act. The story follows retired Marshal Josiah Cane as he is drawn into one last investigation and manhunt, and challenges the prevailing cultural story that violence can be honorable.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

The Cowboy Era in American history began following the end of the Civil War in the 1860s and lasted until the 1890s when much of the Western Frontier land was privatized and sectioned off by owners with the use of barbed wire (LOC). Despite the relative short life of this era, it spawned myths for American culture well into the 20th century. Historical figures from this period such as Jesse James and Billy the Kid gave birth to the legendary heroic outlaw—an American spin on the Robin Hood narrative in British Literature. On the other side of the law, figures such as Wild Bill Hickok and Wyatt Earp contributed to the growth of the heroic lawman whose exploits defending the law were as grandiose as their respective personalities. Many of these lawmen shared characteristics with the outlaws—gambling, womanizing, gunplay—which created a mirror narrative that allowed those who heard and read the narratives to identify with both the lawman and the outlaw equally.

The literary exploration of this era is expansive. Western novels have been published since the turn of the 20th century, and continue into the present. One author's work has particularly inspired this project: Cormac McCarthy. McCarthy's novels *All the Pretty Horses* and *Blood Meridian* are primary influences on the project, albeit for different reasons. The influence *Men of Violence* attempts to draw from *All the Pretty Horses* is the way McCarthy pulls the traditional Western narrative from its historical time period and imposes it on another. *All the Pretty Horses* is set in the late 1940s and John Grady is a teenager who belongs to the mythical wild west, perhaps even more so than the historical one. The novel highlights the conflicts this creates between John Grady and the modern society that surrounds him, which drives the boy to Mexico in search of the mythic frontier life.

Drawing on this, Josiah Cane, the protagonist of *Men of Violence*, is a man who belongs in the same era. However, *Men of Violence* diverges from *All the Pretty Horses* in that Josiah actually saw and experienced a taste of the true Cowboy era. Josiah's father fought in the Civil War and took part in the settling of the west. As a child, and growing into adulthood, Josiah envisioned himself as a peacekeeper on that frontier. However, by the 1920s, the historical setting of *Men of Violence*, Josiah finds himself in a tamer world that has already mythologized the era of his childhood. This creates one of the central conflicts of *Men of Violence* as Josiah's life has become mixed with the legends and he struggles to reconcile the myths with the reality he experienced and remembers.

From *Blood Meridian*, *Men of Violence* draws inspiration from the novel's antagonist, Judge Holden. The Judge is an imposing figure who is sinister, mysterious, and cold-blooded. His origins are unknown; he is ruthless, calculating, and McCarthy makes little effort to disguise the character's brutality. Judge Holden acts as a mirror for the protagonist of the novel, the kid, who joins a band of violent scalp hunters and participates in the brutality. The antagonist in *Men of Violence*, Mordecai Solomon, serves the same purpose. Solomon embodies Josiah Cane's internal struggle with the blurred line between legend and reality. The implications of the violence Josiah has committed in the name of law and order haunt him, even while other characters celebrate them. In *Blood Meridian*, Judge Holden can appear to be something other than human at times. However, this is where *Men of Violence* diverges from *Blood Meridian's* inspiration because Mordecai Solomon is definitively human. Solomon is a religious zealot whose narrative acts as an accusation against Josiah Cane for violating the social contract and refusing to participate in the "righteous violence" mythology that has historically been used to justify American Imperialism.

Another aspect of McCarthy's writing that has influenced *Men of Violence* is his dialogue. While McCarthy's dialogue is unique in that it never uses quotation marks (a trait that *Men of Violence* does not imitate), it is also unique because of its simplicity. McCarthy's use of simple syntax and declarative sentences create an honest and believable dialogue between characters. *Men of Violence* is a project that is driven by dialogue, and maintaining the honesty of that dialogue will allow the characters to be honest and believable which is necessary for *Men of Violence* to communicate its message properly.

Men of Violence began in a Historical Fiction workshop directly after reading *All the Pretty Horses*. The idea of pulling the mythic cowboy from his historical context and placing the character in a new environment was fascinating to me. McCarthy was able to create a unique narrative that I found easy to follow and identify with as a reader who grew up heavily influenced by the myths of the American West and the settlement of the frontier. *All the Pretty Horses* was my first experience with a narrative that forced me to think beyond the cowboy myths portrayed in John Wayne and Clint Eastwood films to the realistic implications of the lifestyle of the era—particularly the complex moral and legal boundaries that are blurred in remote areas where cattle thrive.

All the Pretty Horses introduced me to the idea of pulling the cowboy myth from its historical context, however, *Blood Meridian* pushed me further into an interest into the realism of the time period itself. It was after reading *Blood Meridian* that I decided a character who simply embodied the cowboy myth was not enough to tell the story that was developing on paper. I also needed the character to have experienced the real time period, a character whose memory conflicted with the developing mythology of the time period. In *Blood Meridian*, there is a scene where the scalp hunters finally come upon a group of Apache. However, these are not the

aggressive warrior savages portrayed in mythology, they are a group of the old and sick, the women and children. The scalp hunters slaughter them with relative ease. This scene forced me to consider the legitimacy of “righteous violence,” and whether violence committed to a “righteous” reason was truly heroic, or if such violence was always accompanied by embellishments and lies. At this point I knew I needed a character who was young enough to have lived through at least part of the real time period, but who was also old enough to see the real events fall into legend.

Having a very specific need made searching for a historical setting fairly simple. However, need was not the only reason I chose the Prohibition Era for the setting, there were two other factors to consider. First, I wanted to stay away from a modern setting given the current cultural moment which is challenging the moral right of law enforcement to commit violence. This cultural moment is obviously more complex, with far more nuanced analysis available, but I did not want my work to be seen as portraying law enforcement as the victim of culture’s violent mythology. The current cultural moment is not something I have a desire to shy away from necessarily, but defending law enforcement is not the focus of *Men of Violence*; therefore, I decided to keep the context in a time period that removes the possibility of that reading altogether. Second, the Prohibition Era was the prelude to a new version of the outlaw myth that first developed during the cowboy era. Moonshiners and bootleggers were criminals technically, but many stories have emerged of their heroic status within their communities, which, I would argue, directly led to the legendary status of depression era criminals like John Dillinger and Al Capone.

As the project progressed from development to drafting, I initially drew on the works of Elmore Leonard for a fast-paced crime narrative. Leonard is famous for his crime narratives, and

I paid particular interest to the short story “Fire in the Hole.” The main character of the short story is Deputy U.S. Marshal Raylan Givens, who is known for a quick draw and dead-eye marksmanship. Leonard loosely uses a cowboy myth to define Givens, but Givens is definitively modern. Givens was the initial model for Josiah Cane and that influence can still be seen in a similar temperament; however, as the writing process continued Josiah Cane’s character diverged significantly from that initial influence. The project itself has also moved away from crime being central to the plot. Instead, the story has morphed into a loose bildungsroman.

Men of Violence’s central conflict is not the crimes being investigated, it is Josiah Cane’s internal struggle to find absolution if not redemption for the violence he has committed which also haunts him. To accomplish this spiritual development, I have placed Josiah’s internal conflict in the context of a Christianized society. This choice was made for several reasons, not least of which was to stay true to the real American mythology that is intertwined with a version of Christian nationalism. However, on a more personal level I have both a traditional education journey through seminary, and a “coming of age” personal journey set in the same context. Much of what Josiah Cane questions about Christian theological claims as it relates to the possibility of redemption are things I have questioned as well, and continue to do so.

More subtly, Christian symbolism is embedded throughout the story, particularly in the choice of Josiah Cane’s name. Josiah is a Hebrew name that means “God has healed” and it comes from King Josiah, a character in Jewish and Christian Scriptures. As recorded in the Book of Chronicles, King Josiah’s life was characterized by the religious reforms he made on behalf of God that healed the Israelites’ religion from corruption. Specifically, King Josiah was responsible for restoring the Temple, and the discovery of a scroll containing the Hebrew scriptures. This discovery led to a revival of a pure form of Judaism that brought peace and

harmony to the nation. Conversely, Cane is an Anglicized version of Cain, the infamous character in the book of Genesis who committed the first murder and was given a mark by God so that no one would forget what he had done. Josiah Cane's name reflects a spiritual journey to heal what violence has broken. Josiah Cane is the only truly dynamic character in the narrative.

This spiritual journey Josiah Cane undertakes is inspired by that of my own late grandfather who is the primary influence for the character. My grandfather grew up in a harsh environment in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. He was a man who was self-taught in most things he knew. He had a natural skill with anything mechanical and could not imagine a world where a college degree prepared someone for work more than getting your hands dirty would. What little he did share about his personal spiritual journey—from growing up in a fundamentalist Baptist orphanage, to having a wife who was endlessly dedicated to her church, to his experience with grifting pastors—is written into Josiah Cane's journey. As to what he did not share, I have filled in the gaps with my own spiritual maturation making Josiah Cane's journey a combination of his and mine.

The other characters in the novel are all relatively static and are specifically designed to assist Josiah Cane in his spiritual journey. The antagonist, Mordecai Solomon, serves as a mirror that reflects Josiah Cane's worst fears and darkest secrets back to him. Mordecai Solomon's name is rooted in the same religious imagery as Josiah Cane, but has contrarian meaning. Mordecai is a character in the book of Esther who guided Esther as she ascended from concubine to queen of the Persian empire. He also convinced her to take vengeance on Israel's enemies through physical violence committed using the force of the Persian military. Solomon is another famous Biblical character whose reign over the nation of Israel was marked by excess and a loss

of true religion because of the wealth he acquired. Solomon is traditionally credited as the author of the Biblical book Ecclesiastes which declares that all material things are “vanity.”

George Stevens is a character who has bought into the mythology of righteous violence that Josiah Cane struggles against. Stevens is a surname that means “a crown,” and the crown Stevens bears is the innocence of the ignorant. Josiah Cane does not begrudge Stevens his ignorance, in fact he wishes he could maintain his innocence because his own internal spiritual world is far more difficult to navigate than the black and white world of innocence. As he accompanies Josiah Cane on the physical journey, Stevens also has a purity of belief in the morality of law which Josiah wishes he could have held onto. Josiah Cane is afraid that the death of Stevens’ innocence will prove that there is no purity of belief and thus no absolution he can obtain for his actions. Similarly, Corinne Cane is Josiah Cane’s late wife. Her character is introduced and developed through flashbacks and dreams. Josiah sees her as a saint, and in that role she serves as a foil for Josiah’s own spiritual journey because he believes a genuine faith like hers is unobtainable. However, the memories also reveal her deep love for Josiah because of his flaws, a line of thought the reader will have to pick up on because Josiah will not notice it.

The point of view of this project is third person limited, which I believe to be the best method to allow the reader to follow along with Josiah’s internal struggle while maintaining the ability to see the exterior conditions of his spiritual journey. The reader is given full access to Josiah’s thought processes and motivations, but the reader is limited to a narration of other characters through the lens of Josiah. The project is also dialogue driven. Almost all of the narration sections are a third person view of Josiah’s reflections. Little space of the narration sections are dedicated to descriptions of the physical world, which is an attempt to stay true to the central conflict of the novel being internal. Josiah Cane is a character who is very

contemplative and gets lost in his own thoughts frequently which does not always afford him the ability to notice his environment. Limiting the reader's access to the environment to that of Josiah's perspective is designed to keep the reader focused on the spiritual journey in the midst of the physical journey.

The current intention for this project is to continue into a full-length novel. I anticipate the space needed to accomplish the goals I aim to achieve with this story will take a minimum of 250 pages. In the five chapters I have provided for this thesis I have attempted to set up the inevitable conclusion: what sacrifices are required for absolution? The answer to this question is the ultimate end to all spiritual journeys. It is the question that runs through most religious texts and is answered in various ways. Because my story is laced with Biblical imagery, the theme of blood sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins seemed an appropriate answer to the question. However, the Biblical narrative is clear that the blood of the guilty cannot pardon itself. The blood of the innocent must be spilled to obtain mercy—in the Biblical case from God. The spotless lamb image runs from Genesis to Revelation, culminating in Jesus, the perfect man whose blood bought redemption for all people. In *Men of Violence*, it is my intention to keep the who or what Josiah Cane seeks redemption from an abstract concept. It can be inferred that he is seeking redemption from the Judeo-Christian God, and that will be strongly supported from the text, but my hope is that readers whose spiritual beliefs do not center on that same God can find common ground with the story and connect with Josiah's journey.

In my mind, the inevitable end of this story is a showdown between Josiah Cane and Mordecai Solomon wherein Josiah must make the choice to kill and add to his guilt, or allow the innocent to die (George Stevens) and buy absolution for himself. What decision he will make is unclear to me at this time in development, and the steps need to be taken to get the narrative to

that point are not yet complete. However, I cannot envision the story ending any other way than a physical representation of Josiah's inner journey wherein the choice is his own to make. After graduating from UNCC, I intend to continue working on this project until it is a publishable novel. I have found that I am connected to the subject matter more than the genre, so it is my intention to continue exploring spiritual journeys through different lenses and different settings in works to follow this one.

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I

October 1927

The wind whispered a lullaby known but long forgotten; words ever-present on the tip of his tongue but unreachable. A shutter slapped the wood paneling of a cabin perched on the side of a mountain. A primal rhythm. A heartbeat reaching beyond man's limits to continue as long as time stands. He dreamed. Wide-open spaces. A plain blanketed by wildflowers and knee-high grass as far as the eye could see. A piece of God's earth wherein harmony dwells, untouched by corrupt hands.

Deer were there grazing at their leisure, wandering to and fro without fear. Wolves as well. Unburdened and unhidden. They rolled through grass and flowers leaving imprints and howling with delight. The sun-kissed the land. A horse walked among them. Proud and elegant. Pure white besides socks that were red as freshly spilled blood. The wolves perked their ears and the deer froze to watch. Everything stopped, time suspended. He held his breath, the horse passed in front of him.

A whistle broke through the moment, shattering the tranquility. A plume of black smoke covered the sun with darkness. A locomotive plowed across the plains directly toward his bliss. He realized his feet were no longer on the soft earth. His worn leather boots were glued to their place on railroad tracks as an engine closed in, aiming directly for his heart. He knew he should move, he knew he should be afraid; yet he only felt curious.

—

Josiah woke with a start and reached for the gun he kept on his nightstand. He knocked over an empty bottle. The darkness around him was all-encompassing. His pulse quickened. He thought judgment had finally come, body left behind in a mountainside cabin, soul banished to

damnation. He inhaled. The air was clean and crisp. Not death then. The darkness began to give way and the outlines of a barely furnished room appeared.

Slowly—ever more slowly with the passing years—he sat up and let his feet rest on the floor. He moved to the edge of his bed and rubbed his stiff knee, the left one that had taken a beating almost a decade ago, and all of the other achy joints he could reach. His head throbbed. Maybe it was the liquor, or maybe his slow movements and stiff bones were the results of age, father time collecting his due.

He stood and made his way to a small sink to splash water on his face. He put on his hat after he finished combing his hair. Why his son had gifted him a comb—and a nice one—knowing full well Josiah never went anywhere without his hat was beyond him. Yet he felt as if neglecting to use the gift would dishonor his son in some way. But he would still wear the hat.

This particular Stetson has been with him for thirty years now. He remembered Corinne's smile the first time he placed it on his head.

“It suits you,” she said as he walked to the mirror to have a look. He had never been a hat man, perhaps the only man from Texas to make such a claim, but he couldn't bear to break his young bride's heart. It was the day he was sworn in as a Marshal. He wore it out of his own sense of obligation and then it grew on him. After Corinne passed it was one of two tokens—along with his wedding ring—he kept to remember her.

Josiah pulled on his coat and checked his pocket watch. 6:30. The sun's first rays were beginning to crest the horizon, painting the sky a mix of dull pink and vibrant gold, the world creeping into his small room. He stopped for a moment in front of the lone window. Watching the sunrise always felt like a holy moment. His father used to say, “Any man with a lick of sense can look and see there's a God. But only a fool thinks he cares,” and he supposed that was true.

Given the things his father had done and seen—the things Josiah had done and seen. Though it was Sunday, he had no intention of going to church. His momma would roll over in her grave if she knew. Josiah removed his hat and fumbled his way through the Lord's Prayer and took in the sunrise for a few lingering moments. He hoped that was enough to get him into heaven if there was one. If men like him were allowed in anyhow.

Outside, a cold breeze blew softly. He made his way along the side of the cabin, following a well-worn path through the bramble to the main house. A valley lay below him. The morning fog hung like a haze over the hills. He entered the main house from the back porch, nodding his head and tipping his hat to the old man smoking a pipe in the rocker. The old man lifted his pipe in salute and returned to the morning paper.

Inside the house smelled like fresh-baked biscuits and bacon. He headed directly for the large table in the dining room where an old woman was busy arranging place settings. Miss Sue smiled when she saw Josiah and entered the kitchen. She emerged after a few moments with a cup of coffee and a plate full of breakfast. Josiah sat in his usual place.

"I served you extra, Marshal," Miss Sue said. "Since you ate no supper last night, but don't go gettin' comfortable with it. I'll not have folks thinkin' I enable sinners in my house."

"No ma'am I wouldn't have folks believing that either."

She nodded and he ate in silence. Miss Sue busied herself keeping his coffee warm and cleaning in the kitchen. The landlady was always working around the house, cleaning this or that room preparing for tenets. It was methodical, one room after another, and by the time she finished the whole house, it was time to start over again. The house was a good size, not traditionally a boarding house, but inherited by Miss Sue and her late husband in the 1860s. They converted it into a boarding house just after the war finished.

Miss Sue returned to the dining table with a second cup of coffee and sat down across from Josiah. She said not a word until he finished eating, which he appreciated.

“A young man stayed here last night,” she said. Josiah looked up when she didn’t continue. He pushed his plate forward slightly to clear space to lean his elbows on the table. A habit Corinne tried to break for years. Miss Sue sipped her coffee and watched Josiah over the brim of the cup.

“Miss Sue, this is still a boarding house, I believe...?” Josiah left the question hanging and smiled.

“Now Marshal, no need for sass. The young man was asking after you the moment he got out of his automobile.” Josiah leaned forward slightly.

“Well, he said he had official government business with you and couldn’t discuss it with anyone else. I told him that was just fine and he could wait until mornin’.”

Josiah rubbed his eyes. “Did he tell his name Miss Sue?”

“In fact he did, George Stevens. A nice lad, if not in a great hurry. Said he’s a lawman”

“What did you make of him?”

“Educated and well-spoken. Likely has money. I would’ve taken him for a banker if not for the firearm he carried. I never seen a lawman like him, pressed suit and combed hair.”

Josiah nodded. “If you have a plate for his breakfast, I would like to deliver it to his room.”

Miss Sue fixed a plate and another cup of coffee. She placed them on a serving tray and pointed Josiah to the proper room. He walked through the foyer and up the staircase. There were four rooms upstairs in the main house. Rarely were they unoccupied. He knocked on the second door and waited.

A young man opened the door and took the tray without raising his eyes. A mumbled thank you, and the door closed again. Josiah stood for a moment before knocking a second time. The man opened the door and was fumbling with his glasses. He was half-dressed, wearing slacks and an unbuttoned shirt.

“George Stevens?” Josiah said. The man put his glasses on and started.

“Mar-- Marshal Cane?”

Josiah pushed his way through the door and into the room.

The young man was startled and stammered a protest that died on his lips. The room was a fair enough size, decorated in Miss Sue’s antique style. Stevens had sprawled out his clothes on the bed. The only other furniture in the room was a dresser and a small armchair under a skylight in the ceiling. Josiah moved toward the armchair and sat down after sliding the bag which occupied the chair onto the ground.

Josiah held a finger to his lips and Stevens went mute. Josiah looked around for a moment. There were three pairs of shoes lined at the foot of the bed, all polished and barely worn. The closet door was open and revealed two jackets and three more shirts. Several ties hung on a tie hanger in various patterns and colors.

“Alright, son. What is it you want?”

Stevens swallowed and began to speak before pausing. He shook his head and started again.

“Marshal this is highly unusual...that is to say a man of your...well sir, I wasn’t expecting you to come barging in here is all.”

Josiah motioned at the unbuttoned shirt. “You can finish up getting ready and by the time you’re done I expect you’ll have told what you came to tell and we can both get on with our day.”

Stevens looked down and began buttoning his shirt. He misplaced a button and had to restart the process. Josiah sat in the armchair evaluating. His headache had subsided considerably, likely as much from the problem before him as from the coffee he drank. If he were honest, he missed the thrill. He was an addict to it. That’s why he could wake up at the crack of dawn and leave his wife and son for days at a time hunting a fugitive across state lines. The lack of adventure left a void.

“Well, manners aside, now that I have you here Marshal I suppose I ought to bring you up to speed.”

“Up to speed on what?”

“Right, well I presume you read the papers?”

Josiah raised an eyebrow. Stevens stammered an apology.

“What I mean is...no insult intended Marshal...actually, do you mind if I eat while we speak?”

Stevens moved to the dresser on top of which sat the tray Josiah had brought him. Underneath the tray lay an open folder which Stevens removed and handed to Josiah.

“That there is the case file for the murder of Arthur Little. The local boy whose body was found rather brutally treated last week.”

“I remember the story. What’s this got to do with you? You’re not local law enforcement.”

“Well, Arthur and his brothers were moonshiners. More specifically, Arthur’s brothers were moonshiners and Arthur was the bootlegger. He ran the contraband down the mountain into the South Carolina upstate and as far as Charlotte. We’ve been apprised of the situation for quite some time and in fact I—”

“Who’s we?”

“Right. I’m an agent with the Bureau of Prohibition in Washington D.C.”

“The Marshal service handles enforcement of the Prohibition Act,” Josiah cut in.

“Yessir that is true, but the Marshals have been handing off cases to the Bureau as we are taking over. Congress believes the Treasury department is better suited for—”

Josiah leaned forward in his chair and laughed. “Oh hell. You *are* a banker.”

Stevens scratched his head and took another bite of his biscuit. “Not quite sure what you mean by that, but I do have an education in finance.”

“You leading a murder investigation? That seems to be outside of the treasury's purview.”

“Right enough. I’m looking for the moonshine. Local law enforcement and the Marshals are looking for the killers. It’s a joint task force. Though I wouldn’t mind being in on the action if you follow me.”

Josiah put his face in his hands. Here sat a fool. A banker itching to be a cowboy. Josiah had seen plenty of men like him in his time with the Marshal’s service. Plenty of those men were buried in shallow graves all over Texas and Oklahoma. Fools looking for the adventure they read about in dime-store novels. Thinking anyone could wield a weapon and shoot a man, especially if they’re a criminal.

“Alright then,” Josiah sat after a moment’s pause. “What do you want with me?”

“The local Sheriff has requested you directly. Marshal Robert Douglass mentioned your name in correspondence and the Sheriff hasn’t stopped asking if I’ve brought you into the loop yet. It took a day or so to track you down, but here you are and there you have it.”

Josiah opened the case file Stevens had given him and looked through the papers. Arthur Little, 17, was found with thirty-one gunshot wounds. Twenty to the torso, the rest dispersed around his body. Josiah had seen similar tactics before. This was meant to be a message.

“What do you know about Arthur Little?”

“Not much more than is written in there,” Stevens said. “I’ve been trying to locate his next of kin but no luck so far. Only family is two older brothers. Sheriff thinks they may be hiding out in the hills.”

Josiah sifted through the photographs in the file. Crime scene. Body. One photograph of Arthur Little leaning against an automobile with crates tied to the back. He was holding a wrench and grease covered his clothes. Just a boy. Josiah thought of his own son, a boy when he left for France. Not a boy anymore. The human capacity for violence has a way of doing that. What his son saw in the trenches he would never ask. He already knew. The Cane family was cursed with that knowledge. An unholy inheritance passed to each generation. But Josiah knew they were no mere witnesses. They earned it with their own blood-soaked hands.

He hoped it would be different for Michael. Hope is a fickle thing, but what else is there? The last time they spoke, Michael told him he would not be coming back to the states. Shrapnel to the knee earned him a discharge and a wife whose father had a job for him immediately. “I love her,” Michael had said as they limped along together down the streets of London. “And she’s pregnant.”

He invited Josiah to stay, and some part of him wanted that too. His granddaughter was three years old now. Michael sent a photograph with his last letter. The girl looked nothing like the Cane family. A blessing. Maybe he thought staying away would protect her. He could think of no other excuse for having never set eyes on her. *She can't wait to meet you* was inscribed on the back of the photograph in Michael's bride's hand.

Stevens's voice broke his thoughts. "Marshal? Did you hear me?"

"I heard."

"What is your assessment?"

"Agent Stevens, I—"

"George is fine, Marshal."

"Alright, George. Your instincts are good. Finding the Little brothers is your first step in this investigation."

"And you'll help me then?" George said.

"I'm sorry?"

"Marshal, as you've noted I'm not a traditional lawman. I've received brief training, but I don't have any acquired skills tracking fugitives. On the other hand, you are one of the best. We find the Little brothers, we find the still, and we can shut this whole mess down."

Josiah leaned back in the armchair and crossed one leg over the other. He tapped the arm of the chair with his fingers in a rhythmic pattern. The doctor told him keeping his fingers moving like this may ward off any problems with his grip. He'd been doing it so long it now became a habit. Stevens was throwing him a lifeline. He craved the chase. He craved the feeling of unknown danger, like leaning over the edge of a precipice. It gnawed at his bones. He wondered if his body would even hold up under the same conditions he used to subject himself

to. Yet still, this case seemed fairly straightforward. Like as not there was no sinister plot, just an outlier or a blood feud that led to tragedy.

“I’ll tell you what George. I’ve got some idea where you ought to start. And I’ll come along with you.” Stevens’s countenance changed to one of excitement, but Josiah held up a finger.

“What training do you have for this job?”

Stevens looked down. “To tell you the truth, Marshal, not much. I read the manual but—”

“The manual?”

“Yessir, they gave me a manual. *Best Investigative Practices*. Gave me this gun, an automobile.. This is the first case I’ve had to myself.”

Josiah pondered the fate of law enforcement in the hands of men like George Stevens. Soft men. He sighed. “Alright George, your manual has led you to the conclusion that you need to find the Little brothers. What did it teach you about doing so?”

Stevens studied his hand for a moment. “Marshal, that’s one of the reasons I volunteered to find you at the Sheriff’s request. He figured you might be keen to assist in this case. I figured I might pick up a few things from you that no manual can teach.”

Josiah thought maybe Stevens was not a complete fool, yet still. A retired Marshal and a man whose only training came from a book would not make the most intimidating duo.

“Well alright then. First things first, we need to speak with the Sheriff. We’ll make a stop for lunch on the way. There is a diner not far from Asheville.”

Stevens grabbed a pair of shiny black dress shoes to complete his suit. Josiah stood from the armchair and walked across the room. His boots caused the floorboards to creak under his

weight. They were quite the pair. Stevens in a pressed suit, combed hair, and shiny black shoes. Josiah in a worn-out work coat and boots.

“I suspect, then, that locals will be at this diner,” Stevens said. They walked out of the room and down the stairs. “And those locals may know the whereabouts of the Little brothers?”

Josiah called to Miss Sue and told her he would be stepping out with Mr. Stevens. From the kitchen, she waved her assent and they walked out the front door. The sun was high overhead and the leaves gleamed as the last morning dew melted away. His breath, a vapor, disappeared as it grew beyond its own ability. He heard a preacher compare men to a vapor once. The preacher’s tent was set up in a small, remote town somewhere between Mexico and Texas. No one truly knew. A town with no name. The gaunt faces of dwellers listening intently.

Josiah sat at the back of the tent watching. Hat in his hands. The preacher gesticulated wildly, painting a vivid scene of eternal fire and damnation. Mexican, White, Black, Apache, Catholic; all facing the same judgment. A few women wept at his words. Norman Peterman sat on the front row and when the preacher called for baptisms he was first in the stream. Josiah arrested him damn near the moment he came back to shore. Norman murdered two Mexican workers on a farm outside of Dallas before making a run for Mexico.

The preacher attempted to intercede for the man, a good Christian now, saved by the grace of God. Norman attempted to smash Josiah’s head with a stone on the third night of their return to Dallas. Josiah dropped his body off at the courthouse two days later. It was beginning to smell.

Josiah closed the passenger door of the automobile and Stevens drove toward Asheville. Josiah never enjoyed automobiles. He felt much more at home on a good horse with loose dirt

under its hooves. The way God intended. But the world was moving a different direction he supposed, paying no heed to his preferences or God's intentions.

II

Josiah and Stevens entered the diner. A bell attached to the door announced their arrival. The low drum of conversation and the clink of silverware on dishes, a symphony of the living. Josiah had come to this particular establishment on multiple occasions and sat at the bar alone. He'd spoken to Margaret, the waitress, and Joe the cook infrequently. He caught Margaret's attention and pointed to a booth next to the window and she waved the towel in her hand. Stevens sat across from Josiah and looked uneasy.

"Is there a problem, George?"

"Hmm? Oh no sir, Marshal, it's just...well, I just assumed you had a contact here we would be meeting." Margaret approached the table and placed a hand on the booth behind George's shoulders.

"Afternoon Marshal."

"Margaret."

"Coffee, black with one sugar for the Marshal coming up. Marshal's friend?"

"I'll have the same."

Margaret nodded and returned several minutes later with two coffees. They ordered burgers to eat and she took it to the kitchen. The crowd began to disperse as the lunch hour drew to a close. They spoke of simpler things as they ate. Stevens's wife and six-month-old child back in Washington, D.C. His hope of becoming a proper lawman. He asked Josiah pointed questions about his time as a Marshal which Josiah tried to answer as best he could. Truth be told Josiah felt most of his success was owed to his upbringing and a whole heap of luck.

Josiah was one of nine—seven brothers and two sisters. He was the only one left that he knew of. Two brothers had disappeared when they were old enough to leave the house and his

sisters got married and he never heard from either again. The four that stayed died untimely deaths. Which is partly why Josiah became a Marshal in the first place. Of course, he told Stevens none of this. His father was a Texas Ranger before the Civil War. When he got back the Rangers were disbanded until 1873. He was an older man by then and given the post of training the new recruits. He hated every second of it. But by 1873, his body was already beginning to fail.

Joe came out of the kitchen to speak with them for a time. Stevens introduced himself and the two shared common knowledge of the fishing industry. They swapped tales and Stevens surprised Josiah because he seemed comfortable talking to this stranger. Perhaps he was confident in his knowledge. Josiah made a mental note of that. Stevens would need to be comfortable talking to strangers if he wanted to make a career out of law enforcement. He needed the confidence too.

After a time Joe returned to the kitchen and Josiah motioned Margaret over as she cleaned another table. Only Josiah and Stevens and one other occupied table remained.

“Need anything else Marshal?”

Josiah produced a photograph from his pocket. “Do you know this young man?”

He passed the photograph to Margaret. She held it close to her face, inspecting it before giving it back.

“I assume you mean other than from the papers?”

Josiah nodded.

“Well Marshal, I knew Martha Little—Arty’s momma—since I was a little girl. She grew up not a half-mile away from my daddy’s house. I say knew because she up and disappeared when those three boys were still knee-high. Most folks figure, myself included, that

she runoff. Her daddy tried to search for her and convince the police there was foul play, but nothing ever came of it. She never was a woman who loved children, mind. She tried don't misunderstand me, but she had a history and it got the best of her if you're askin' my opinion."

"What about their father?"

"Sam wasn't a local. He was a salesman from Charlotte. Even after they got married he spent less time here with the boys than he did on the road. Last I heard he headed out to California and never come back."

Josiah nodded gravely. He watched Stevens who had pulled out a notepad and a pencil to jot down everything Margaret said. "What can you tell us about the boys?"

"Sam Jr. and Eric—those are the two older boys—been inseparable all their lives. Most folks mistake them for twins but Sam Jr. is a year older. Eric has the brains though. They been schemers their whole lives. Mostly typical boy stuff when they were younger; stealin' candy from the store and sellin' it to other children at school. That is, when they went.

"Around here we don't take kindly to sendin' our own off to be raised somewhere else, so many of us looked after 'em. Them boys been on their own for quite a while. Joe and I would feed 'em anytime they come around, trying to do our part."

Josiah sipped his coffee.

"Arty was different from his brothers. A sweet boy. Not a schemin' bone in his body. He wasn't much younger than the other two, but he was a might smaller. He always tagged along and the older two would convince him to do this or that so he could take the blame. Truth be told I think that was a scheme as much as anything because everybody loved Arty.

"Now, listen Marshal, Arty Little shoulda never been close to somethin' that got him killed. And he never would've been if not for his brothers."

“Margaret, do you know where we can find Sam Jr. and Eric?”

Margaret produced a cigarette and offered one to Josiah. He took it. Stevens refused and kept sipping his coffee. Josiah pulled out a matchbook and lit both. Margaret paused for a moment and pulled a chair from a table next to theirs. The silence stretched. The other table called for Margaret and she went to give the occupants a refill of their coffee. She came back.

“Now Marshal, I thought you were retired.”

Josiah smiled. “I am. I’m just consulting on this case. Mr. Stevens here has come all the way from Washington D.C.”

Margaret reevaluated Stevens. “The moonshine?”

Stevens nodded. “Yes ma’am, I’m an agent representing the Bureau of Prohibition—”

Margaret turned to Josiah. “Marshal you ought to know I won’t be helpin’ you bring these boys to charges for makin’ shine. Especially not while all these rich D.C. types enjoy their liquor with no repercussions.” Her tone dripped with loathing. A sentiment Josiah had come to recognize in various places throughout the country. He recognized it and understood. When the Marshals were charged with enforcing the Prohibition Act, Josiah knew his days with the agency were numbered.

“Miss Margaret,” Josiah said, “I have no interest in getting these boys into trouble and neither does Mr. Stevens here.” He held up a hand to stop Stevens before he put his foot in his mouth. “What we aim to do is help local law enforcement find Arthur Little’s murderer and bring them to justice. Now, Mr. Stevens has a job to do, and the boys need to surrender their still. If they do that you have my word that will be the end of it as far as that goes.”

Margaret tapped her cigarette on the ashtray at the edge of the table then crossed her arms. "Alright, I'll take your word for it," She pointed at him with her cigarette, "but if you break it you ain't welcome here."

Josiah nodded and tapped his cigarette on the same ashtray and waited.

Joe called to Margaret from the kitchen and she excused herself. Stevens protested Josiah's pledge, but Josiah waved him off. He was in the middle of explaining the compromises a lawman has to make—the ones that allowed him to do his job—when Margaret returned.

"Alright Marshal, I'll help you. I don't know where the boys are and that's God's honest truth. But one thing you ought to know about the Little boys is as they grew their mischief got more serious. They had more than a few scrapes with the law. Sheriff Blythe himself took a likin' to them. He and his wife felt a Christian responsibility to see the boys on the straight and narrow. You want to find Sam Jr. and Eric? He'll be the man to know."

Josiah thanked her and paid their bill. The bell rang again as they left the diner.

Before they got into the automobile Stevens said, "Marshal, I've had correspondence with the Sheriff and he said nothing about having a personal connection to the Little brothers."

"What do you make of that, George?"

"Maybe he has the same attitude as Miss Margaret regarding Prohibition and he wants to keep the boys out of trouble?"

"Could be."

"Or maybe he's involved somehow with their illicit activities?"

"Possible."

"How do we find out?"

"Well, George, we ask him."

Josiah's hands rested on an old wood railing. The weathered texture, split in various places, met his calloused palms in a fraternal embrace. He'd been to the Texas hill country many times tracking fugitives. He'd even chased a couple of rogue ranch hands far enough into Colorado to see the Rockies in the distance, but this was something altogether different. The Blue Ridge mountains were just that—a blue hue shone around the peaks in the morning light. The amber and yellow and red colors of the leaves grew more vibrant the longer he stared. If ever there was a holy moment, he supposed this was one.

He wondered what Corinne would have said if she ever saw such a sight as this. She always had the perfect words for the moment. Josiah had a reputation for being a man of few words, but truth be told, up until Corinne's death ten years past, he never needed to say much for her to know his mind. It was her gift to know his thoughts better than he did, and he loved her for it. She never complained about the life he never gave her, and that made him feel all the more ashamed. *If the Almighty is like they claim*, his father used to say, *he's got no place for men like us*. But Corinne? She met a warm embrace, he felt sure.

They stood on a wooden deck attached to a house that seemed to grow out of the hillside. The house belonged to the Sheriff of Buncombe County, Clearance Blythe, whose family had been one of the first to settle the area. After they left the diner the day before, they went to the Sheriff's office where a deputy informed them that Sheriff Blythe was taking a leave. He had business in Rutherford County and wouldn't be back until the following day. They called on his house first thing in the morning.

The Sheriff was fond of hearing his own voice, and he spoke to them of many things, including his family. The first Blythe, a Baptist preacher, brought a group of congregants to these

mountains and never left. “The Good Lord gave this promised land into their hand,” the Sheriff said, “not a one of them ever fired a musket or brandished a weapon against Indians to conquer it.” Josiah found that hard to picture as he had known folks personally whose fathers or mothers or brothers or sisters had been lost to Indian raids. Most folks where Josiah was from itched for any reason to brandish their weapons. Granted all that was from his childhood, and his father always said the Indians back East were no Comanches. Sheriff Blythe was hospitable and since their arrival a half hour before, he had been a gracious host, if not forthcoming.

Stevens spoke with the Sheriff about life as a modern lawman, and the Sheriff nodded along indulgently. The Bureau of Prohibition recruited him in 1926, he was saying, because of his college education. A college education was preferable for lawmen these days. Josiah wondered what sort of college education would teach a man to track, or fight, or stand your ground when the law required it; or to look a man in the eye, see yourself reflected back, and kill him anyway, and most of all, he wondered if the college education would teach them when not to. He never considered himself a learned man, though he had finished six years of school before his father put him to work on the ranch.

“Let me ask you, Mr. Stevens—”

“George is fine, sir.”

“Right, you said that. George, do you reckon your college education prepared you for this line of work? What I mean is, I know some boys who came back from France and have made fine lawmen, but none of them wasted time in college.”

The Sheriff raised his eyebrows and paused. It wasn't a question as much as an accusation. Josiah glanced at Stevens and saw a shadow of rage pass over his face. In his experience, young men who stayed home from the war didn't particularly enjoy folks insinuating

they were cowards. He remembered two young men of his hometown who disappeared just before “the War for Southern Independence” as his father called it. They reappeared afterward and drew his father’s ire, along with most of the town. They were quick tempered, particularly when someone called them cowards, quick to draw knives. They were both gunned down several years later.

He imagined it was the same now. Boys fought and died on foreign soil for the sake of their fellow man, boys like Josiah’s son, while boys like George Stevens stayed home safe and sound enjoying the fruits of other men’s labor. But there was a note of shame in his voice as Stevens spoke of it, which is more than could be said about most of his contemporaries. Josiah supposed that was good enough. You can’t change the past, and the sooner Stevens learned that lesson the better off he would be.

Josiah put Stevens’ age at no more than thirty. From their conversations he originally guessed Stevens was born in a wealthy family, and now he pursued a path that was looked down upon in those circles. Over the course of his career, Josiah had been in close quarters enough to know it didn’t take long to get the measure of a man. Stevens was clean-cut and proper-mannered. While he had his quirks, Josiah couldn’t find a good enough reason to hate him, and he supposed that would do just fine.

The Sheriff on the other hand was as old as Josiah, maybe older. It was difficult to tell. While he didn’t exactly appear in good health—falling into coughing fits and struggling to rise from his seat—he was a barrel-chested man, as tall as he was wide with tree trunks for arms. He seemed built for his station, rougher than anyone around him to make sure they knew he was in charge. Sheriff Blythe eyed Josiah as Stevens rambled on—clearly more than the Sheriff was

expecting—about how he wished he could have been in France with “those brave men.” He was looking for some kinship in his plight.

“Mr. Stevens...” Sheriff Blythe cut in when Stevens paused to take a breath.

“George is just fine sir.”

“Right. George. Well, as I was saying, ‘It’s a beautiful mornin’, a bit too late for breakfast, as it were, but could I interest you gentlemen in some coffee?”

Stevens vigorously accepted, using ten words when no words would suffice. Josiah tipped his hat and they followed Sheriff Blythe through the door into his home. Josiah removed his hat as he crossed the threshold and knocked his boots on the doorpost to loose the dirt and dust. The Sheriff motioned to a sitting room on the left as he went to the kitchen.

Josiah sat down in a brown leather armchair and rested his hat on his knee. The room was decorated richly, in contrast to its simple exterior. All of the sitting furniture—which Josiah guessed could seat ten people comfortably—was made of the same deep brown leather. A wooden writing desk sat in one corner, and a cocktail table centered the room underneath a crystal chandelier.

Stevens sat directly to the left of Josiah, and the aged leather creaked as he leaned over and whispered, “What’s your measure of the man?”

Josiah didn’t answer.

“He’s a bit rough on the edge, but given all of this,” Stevens made a sweeping gesture to the richly decorated room and paused.

“Go on.”

“Well, it would appear the man is more refined than he puts off.”

Josiah nodded. “Why would he want us to think of him a certain way?”

“Could be that he wants us to underestimate him, or more likely that he wants everyone to underestimate him.”

Stevens seemed surprised at his own words and took a moment to think them over. Josiah smiled despite himself. Stevens may make a lawman yet. Into their silence, the Sheriff appeared carrying a tray with three mugs and a pot of coffee. The tray rattled as he set it on the cocktail table in the center of the room and poured three cups. He handed one to Stevens and one to Josiah and sat down in another chair directly across from them. The Sheriff reached for the small side table next to his chair and pulled open the drawer and retrieved a mason jar with moonshine clear as water.

Stevens, who had just taken a sip of his coffee, almost spit it on the floor. Josiah paused with the coffee mug halfway to his mouth and raised his eyebrows. The Sheriff, for his part, didn't seem to notice either reaction as he unscrewed the top from the jar and poured it into his coffee. Stevens looked incredulously at Josiah and opened his mouth as if to object.

“Oh, pardon my manners,” the Sheriff said when he noticed Stevens' expression. He offered the mason jar with one hand while he sipped on his coffee with the other. Stevens paled and set his mug down on the table between him and the Sheriff.

“Sheriff, uh, sir...that is contraband according to the United States government. You are a man of the law, sir, and this illegal activity is unbecoming of...”

The Sheriff's jaw dropped as silence filled the room. Josiah sipped at his coffee, both hands warming on the mug. That was one thing they never told you about getting old, the cold reaches down to your bones. He often wondered whether the creeping cold was what it felt like to die. It starts in the extremities and slowly works its way through the whole body. He shivered.

His eyes moved between Stevens and the Sheriff as they were locked in what appeared to be a standoff without the guns. Both men stared unblinking at each other—unmoving until the Sheriff cleared his throat and leaned back, setting the mason jar back on the side table next to his chair.

“I’ll be damned son, you’re serious,” the Sheriff looked at Josiah and pointed to Stevens, “he’s serious.”

Josiah nodded and sipped his coffee. “It would appear so.”

Sheriff Blythe rubbed his chin as he reappraised Stevens. Stevens fidgeted in his seat looking back and forth from Josiah to the Sheriff. The Sheriff continued to sip from his coffee mug, and Stevens finally broke the silence.

“Sheriff Blythe, you can’t...what I mean, sir is that the Prohibition Act prohibits...”

“Son, don’t feed me that horseshit. I ain’t a hog who will dance to a tune. Coolidge hisself keeps liquor stocked in the White House—don’t you read the papers?—and besides, I didn’t make this nor do I sell it.”

Stevens began to object, but the Sheriff ignored him and he turned to Josiah and said, “Marshal Cane, can I interest you in some of Appalachia’s finest?”

Josiah took another sip and set his coffee mug on the table between them. “Thank you, Sheriff, but it’s a little early for me.”

Sheriff Blythe looked disappointed, and for a moment apprehensive, but he masked both emotions quickly.

“Right. Business then. I suppose you’ve seen the case file, and I suppose you’re wonderin’ why we asked for your specific assistance in the matter.”

“I have and I am.”

The Sheriff leaned forward. “Crime is up across the country, Marshal. I know you know that, but it bears remindin’. Buncombe County has been mostly undisturbed by it all because, as it were, we’ve got some natural barriers.” He smiled.

Stevens spoke up, “Appalachia is notorious for the creation and distribution of moonshine, Sheriff, and that illicit activity is bound to draw...” Sheriff Blythe sat back, heavy in his chair, and rubbed his eyes. He and Stevens argued for several minutes about the merits of Prohibition, and what it meant to be a lawman who followed the law, and what sorts of laws were worth following. Josiah observed with mild amusement as at one point Sheriff Blythe stood out of his seat, turned as red in the face as any preacher worth his salt, and motioned with his hands wildly emphasizing every word he spoke. With that display, any Baptist ancestors would be proud.

“Marshal, if you would be so kind?” He motioned to Stevens.

“George,” Josiah said, “You said your piece.”

The Sheriff gave Stevens a hard look, daring him to interrupt again before continuing.

“It’s no secret ‘shine flows like water from these hills, true. But up until the last few weeks, we never had violence.”

Since Prohibition began, according to the Sheriff, there had been exactly zero murders in the North Carolina section of the Appalachians. There had been deaths, but those were mostly accidental since hiding a still in a hunting cabin or the dug-out basement of a house perched on the mountainside provided certain inherent risks. Josiah listened intently as the Sheriff discussed which families had rivalries predating any living member of said family, and which moonshiners might have cause to do violence to another—the Sheriff swore there were none of the latter and no shortage of the former.

“It’s a rich history we uphold here,” the Sheriff said. “Making our own liquor been a part of our community since before Prohibition, and it ain’t no criminal enterprise. We’ve never had to worry about murders or big city gangsters coming down here and disruptin’ the peace. You know the story of ole Amos Owens over on Cherry Mountain? He used to throw these parties, now Marshal I tell you...”

Josiah shook his head. “What changed?”

The Sheriff reached in his pocket and produced a letter. He handed it to Josiah who unfolded the letter which was, as it turned out, a list of names—who was operating stills and where those stills were hidden.

Josiah handed the letter to Stevens and looked up at the Sheriff. “What’s this?”

The Sheriff gave a shrug. “It’s a list. Truth be told I’ve known most names on that list and what they been up to for years.”

Josiah pulled at a loose thread on his coat. “Where did it come from?”

“Don’t know that either. My best guess is some out-of-towner lookin’ to stir up trouble. My cousin up in West Virginia came to visit last spring. He told me and some of the deputies that big-city gangsters bring their money into the hills and get local law enforcement to be their muscle. They want to control the flow, as it were. Could be something like that.”

In the early days of Prohibition, Josiah had heard of wealthy men descending on places like Buncombe County with money and muscle trying to control the flow of moonshine to the cities. What the Sheriff said was true. Where there was money to be made you could be sure the worst sorts of people would show up. “Were you supposed to answer this letter?”

“Not even a notion as to that, else I’d have my boys on the search. Some of the boys figured maybe it was a local do-gooder tryin’ to make a statement. But I didn’t think so,

‘specially after we found Arthur Little’s body.’ He pointed at the middle of the list where *Little brothers* was written next to directions. *Take county road 217 to its end. Right turn toward the ridge.* “That’s when I sent my wife to stay with our eldest over in Rutherford County, just returned this mornin’.”

“Now Marshal, Arty Little and his brothers have been in their fair share of scrapes with the law. But they’re good boys. Local boys. We know’d ‘em when they was young and their mama took off. Hell, my wife—saint that she is, God bless her—has had them boys over to this very house on a number of occasions. I’ll not try and hide the fact.”

Josiah picked up his hat and started picking at the lint on it, a habit he formed, he realized, when he attempted to solve a problem. The letter could be tied to a large outfit out of Chicago or New York—both cities produced growing criminal organizations that had shown up in West Virginia and Kentucky trying to muscle the local moonshine business. There were blood-soaked hollers all through those hills and Josiah hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

“What I’m tryin’ to say is I believe I might be in over my head here—hard as that is to admit to another man. I’ll put it to you plain. My deputies are good boys, but they are just boys.” Sheriff Blythe said. He reached for the mason jar and unscrewed the lid to take another sip. Halfway to his mouth he paused and shook his head.

“I’ve got no experience with this particular situation or what may be required to wrap the case up. Not to mention the Bureau went and sent me a choir boy,” He gestured to Stevens with the mason jar as if offering a toast and threw back a swig, “no offense intended there Georgie, and the Marshal service says they can’t spare any hands.”

Stevens flushed with anger but held his tongue. Josiah considered that, and he supposed it was true. His father used to complain about the “dandies” who thought they would move to west

Texas and tame the land only to find out they weren't as hard as they figured, or the land was harder, or maybe both. He wondered if Stevens would find the same to be true about being a lawman, and what would happen if it came down to a shootout. Most men like to think they'll react like heroes from the papers or dime-store novels without ever realizing those were always just stories.

Josiah thought about the week he spent outside of London with his son. His son, who shipped out to France as a wide-eyed boy, but somewhere along the way became a man, asked him to stay—he was retired now, he had no reason to go back. *We want you here pop*, he'd said. God's honest truth, he wanted to be there too. He didn't know how his son managed it, but Josiah was proud of the man he had become. Married to a lovely young woman, home by supper every day. *Twice the man I am*, he thought.

"You're a well-known man, Marshal, the type of man I need. A man of violence. With your reputation, you could clean this mess up, likely without any more blood. But if it comes to that, who better to have on hand than Josiah Cane?"

In that moment, Josiah realized Sheriff Blythe was a fool. Not malicious, but a God's-honest fool. He wanted the Josiah Cane from the stories. The Josiah Cane who could put a bullet between a man's eyes before he was able to clear the holster—a lie. The Josiah Cane who gunned down seven bandits that were stupid enough to draw down on him—also a lie. He wanted the man who put down criminals for breathing wrong—another lie. Maybe his whole life had been a lie. Corinne had tried to get him to see what was and what wasn't. These cowboy folktales didn't exist, and the Sheriff was a fool for believing the stories—Josiah felt like a damn fool himself.

Josiah studied his hands. His long, slender fingers had grown gaunt. His knuckles were like the knots on a dried-up hickory stick. He wondered if the stiffness would fade as the weather

got warmer, or if it were here to stay this time. He remembered when his father lost his grip. It was a slow fade until it wasn't. He went from being unable to hold a gun steady to unable to use a knife to cut his own tomatoes in a span of six months. *Is there anything worse for men like us?*

Stevens cleared his throat and Josiah's attention returned to the room where both the Sheriff and Stevens were looking intently in his direction. Josiah sighed. "Alright Sheriff."

Sheriff Blythe slapped his knee. "Now I already spoke to Marshal Douglass about deputizing you for legal purposes. He sent me this." The Sheriff produced a Marshal's badge and reached across the table to give it to Josiah. He also produced a standard-issue revolver in a chest holster. "I hereby deputize you to carry out the law in the name of Buncombe County as you see fit," he said.

Josiah held the badge in his hand and stared. It had been three years since he wore this badge. The weight of responsibility felt heavier than he remembered. He wondered if he could still do what was required to serve the law. He wondered if he had the desire to do so. He removed the pistol from the holster and aimed it at the floor to check the sights. It was plain but it would shoot straight. He replaced the weapon.

"Now Sheriff. Where can we find Sam Jr. and Eric Little?"

Sheriff Blythe leaned back in his chair and narrowed his eyes. "Now why would you suppose I would have that information?"

"Well sir," Stevens cut in, "by your own admission you are close with the Little brothers and have always looked after them. Finding Arthur Little's brothers is imperative to our investigation."

"And if I can tell you for certain they don't know anything of value?"

Stevens cast a sideways glance at Josiah. “Well, I would say we are still hoping to do our due diligence.”

Sheriff Blythe was silent for a long moment. He looked deep into his mason jar of moonshine. He took two more sips and looked up. “Now Marshal I expect you to understand. I’ve been protectin’ those boys for half of their life. When I saw Arthur Little’s body brutalized that way I felt like a failure of a man. I swore nothin’ would happen to Junior and Eric.”

Josiah nodded his head. “I wouldn’t ask you to betray them, Sheriff, but if they got nothing for us then we got nothing to go on.”

Sheriff Blythe drained the rest of the moonshine and set the jar down on the table between himself and Josiah. He stood up and paced back and forth, mumbling to himself, inaudible to Josiah and Stevens. Finally he turned back to the pair and said, “I can tell you where they’re holed up. But mark my words you won’t receive a warm welcome. I’d come with you but I’m due in court in an hour. Be on your guard and announce yourselves. They’re scared but they don’t aim to hurt nobody.”

III

“I think...this is it?” Stevens put the car in park. The dirt road—which was a generous description of the barely visible path—ended in what appeared to Josiah to be an uninhabited plot of land. Josiah removed the pistol the Sheriff had given him from its holster and gave it a once over. He hadn’t worn a gun in two years. He replaced the gun and put on his jacket after stepping from the automobile. Stevens walked around the front and leaned against the wheel well.

“What are we looking for, Marshal?” Josiah saw Stevens scanning the trees. The car was parked on a steady incline which continued into the woods for a time before gradually becoming steeper. A quarter-mile in a straight line, or so they guessed, would take them to what looked like the base of a crag.

“We’re looking for the Little brothers’s hideout, George.” Stevens gave Josiah a sideways look.

“Stupid questions will win you stupid answers. Especially when your job is to ask the right questions.” Stevens hung his head. Josiah’s expression softened. “So what is the right question, George?”

Stevens placed his hands in his pockets. “We already know the Little brothers are here, somewhere. The question is where. There are several miles of open ground here, much of it inaccessible. We could wander for hours and never find anything.”

Josiah began buttoning his coat against the chill. He found the process slower with each new winter. He fumbled with the first button for a few moments and looked down to concentrate. When he looked up he noticed Stevens watching him with pity.

“You’re wasting time looking my way and you still ain’t figured a damn thing.”

Stevens cleared his throat and looked back toward the trees. “Right, sorry Marshal. Yes, well, I suppose we ought to look for...signs?”

“Is that a question?”

“Signs. We ought to look for signs or a trail of some sort leading through the brush.”

Josiah sighed. One of Stevens’s most regrettable qualities was his lack of confidence. It wasn’t that he was wrong, it’s that he never knew he was right. “A trailhead would be a good start. Sheriff said this is the only road to get up here by automobile and he dropped the brothers off himself. Like as not we’ll have to wander a ways into the woods to find it, so we might as well get started. The sun sets early in these hills.”

They walked into the woods and slowly made their way toward the crag. Josiah marked trees with chalk the Sheriff had given them so they didn’t get turned around in the woods. The land graded steadily upward and before long both men were winded and the cool breeze was a welcome respite. As they walked, Stevens probed Josiah with questions about law and about himself. Josiah answered all of the former and none of the latter. Stevens was not deterred.

An hour passed, and still they had not reached the crag. The hills had a way of masking distance with beauty. They walked in silence that second hour. The sound of their footsteps and breathing mixing with the chorus of bird songs and squirrels scurrying across the fallen leaves on the ground. At the beginning of the third hour they crossed a trail. It led down the hill in one direction and further up the hill in another. Josiah could tell through the trees that the crag still lay directly in front of them, so they decided to take the path that led uphill.

In the third hour they reached an outlook. The view took Josiah’s breath for a moment. Land untouched by man as far as the eye could see. The hills rose and created valleys in plenty. Shades of green still clung to the last vestige of summer amid oceans of red, amber, and yellow.

The blue hue still hugged the peaks, earning the range its namesake. Josiah sat down on a rock and removed his hat. He wiped the sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his coat. Stevens broke the silence first.

“Marshal, I think I see something.” He pointed to the south, from which way they had ascended. Josiah looked but saw nothing.

“What do you see?”

“See where those two peaks meet off in the distance?” Stevens pointed. “Follow the line down into the gap and make a straight line toward the base of this overlook. Right in the middle of that line. It looks like smoke rising from those trees.”

Josiah followed the line and sure enough he saw it. A thin wisp of smoke that could barely be seen before it dissipated into the air. “That’s a sharp eye George. Looks to me roundabout where we took the path. If we go the opposite way we ought to run right into whatever it is making that smoke.”

Stevens smiled. As they descended along the path his pace increased. Josiah walked several steps behind. He began to feel the thrill of the chase. His pulse quickened and his fatigue faded. The ache of his joints relegated to a dull sensation. Their descent took almost half the time, and by mid-afternoon they were hidden behind several large rocks within a stone's throw but slightly uphill from a small cabin where smoke was rising from a stone chimney.

“Marshal, I think we should announce ourselves,” Stevens said. “These boys know they’re in trouble which means they’re likely armed. If we startle them they could react.”

Josiah agreed. “You keep your head down back here. I’ll move up to that tree directly in front of the door. Keep your eyes on the backside of the cabin in case they get spooked.” He moved quietly, and slowly. A decade before he would have had no trouble with this sort of work.

As it was, it felt like an eternity before he was safely behind the wide trunk of a pine tree that stretched at least one hundred feet in the air.

“Eric Little! Sam Jr.! This is Deputy U.S. Marshal Josiah Cane. I know you’re in there. I just want to talk.” Josiah waited and watched the door for several minutes. Nothing moved. He made a sign to George who nodded his head and began moving to the backside of the cabin. Josiah leaned against the trunk of the tree and breathed deeply. His heart raced. At this stage the line between fear and excitement blurred. He called again.

“Boys, come on out now! Sheriff Blythe sent us to help you out.” Several more seconds with no movement. Josiah wondered if the brothers were truly in the cabin. He moved from behind the trunk and began walking toward the door not fifty feet away. At the halfway point he stopped and unholstered his weapon. He moved to the closest tree he could find. The birds had stopped their song and he heard no motion among the branches and leaves on the ground. He waited.

A gunshot rang out from the backside of the house and then another, followed by three rapid rounds from a different weapon. Josiah ran the rest of the way to the house and put his back against the wall next to the door. There was one window on this side of the cabin. It was on the other side of the door opposite himself. He watched as the window slowly opened and a rifle barrel appeared and disappeared. The window remained open and he heard whispered voices inside.

Stevens’s pistol sang an answer to two more shots from the house and Josiah heard heavy footsteps approaching the door.

“Eric, open the damn door and run. The hell you waitin’ on?”

“Junior, I tell ye there’s ‘nother man out here somewheres.”

“‘An’ I tell you, it don’t matter. This one back here scared and firin’ blind. ‘Probly gone an’ pissed hisself. We hit the woods and we’ll be gone.”

Josiah heard the door latch come undone and it slowly creaked open. He heard two more shots from inside the house and the sound of running boots as Stevens returned fire again. A man stepped out the door with his rifle raised, aiming straight. Josiah leveled his pistol against the man’s head and cocked the hammer.

“Alright now, don’t go doing anything you’ll regret. Go on ahead and put that rifle down—Ah!—Nice and slow.” The man put his right hand up in the air and slowly leaned the rifle against the door frame. The man turned toward Josiah and spat. Before him stood one of the biggest men Josiah had ever seen. He was a head taller than Josiah with a full beard, dirty face, and unkept red hair. The man glanced over his shoulder.

“Why don’t you tell your brother to put that other rifle down inside and come out with both hands where I can see ‘em.”

“Why don’t you go to he—”

Josiah moved the barrel of his pistol to the man’s forehead and held a finger to his lips. The man’s eyes widened and Josiah could see fire in them. “I asked you politely. But I won’t ask again.”

The man glanced over his shoulder again. “You heard ‘im Junior. Put that shit down and get out here ‘fore he blows my head off! He’s crazy as a rabid dog, I can see it in ‘is eyes.”

Another man appeared, almost as tall as the first. The same unkept red hair but with a beard that grew in patches. Josiah motioned for both men to step down the one step from the porch to the ground which they did.

“George! Come out front.” Josiah waited several seconds with his pistol level at the two men until Stevens came running around the corner of the house in a rage. He was already speaking before he appeared.

“One of these sons of bitches is going to hear it. Firing on a man of the law. I have half a mind to—” He stopped and raised his gun. “Which one was it then?”

Josiah motioned for Stevens to lower his gun and several tense heartbeats passed. Stevens blinked as if returning to himself and lowered the weapon. Josiah pointed at his holster. Stevens methodically put the weapon away and produced a pair of cuffs which he placed on one of the men and Josiah tossed him a second pair which Stevens placed on the other. Stevens sat both men on the stairs leading to the porch. That settled, Josiah holstered his weapon and took a deep breath.

“Now then, let’s sort this out.” He pointed to the big man with the full beard. “Eric?” The bearded man spat again.

“Never heard of no Eric.”

“That’s right,” the other one said, “never heard of no Eric or no Sam Jr. neither.” He laughed, revealing several missing teeth. The big man sighed and looked down. Josiah looked at Stevens who shrugged.

“Look here son,” Josiah squatted down in front of the smaller of the two. “The time for being an idiot has passed. It already got your brother killed. Best thing for it is for you to quit wasting my time so I can be on my way.” He looked up through the trees. Dusk was already approaching as the sun set behind a peak. Josiah looked back at the smaller man, then looked at the larger man. “I suppose you’re the brains of this operation so I’ll talk to you.”

He helped the man up and moved him toward the door. “George,” Josiah called over his shoulder, “see if you can get anything useful out of that one.” He nodded his head at the smaller man still sitting down.

Inside of the cabin was one room barely furnished. Two cots on either side. A fireplace on one wall and a table on the other. Josiah led the man to the table and both sat down. A small fire had been reduced to embers in the fireplace. The warmth was sapped from the room. The last rays of light filtered through a small window next to the table. A dozen mason jars with clear liquid sat between them. Josiah pointed at one. “May I?”

The man nodded, and Josiah drank. “It’s been near three days since I’ve had a sip. Used to be heavy on the whiskey—man needs something to numb the senses in my line of work. Gave it up for a while after I retired, but then the memories came.

“Now, listen, I know you’re Eric Little. I know your brother was killed and that’s why you’re holed up out here. I know you make moonshine but of the three that’s the least of my concern.” He took another sip. “And I also know this is fine craftsmanship.”

“Best ‘shine in three counties,” Eric said.

Josiah didn’t disagree. “My name is Josiah Cane. You don’t know me but the Sheriff asked for me personally to find out who is responsible for your brother’s killing. I’m the best there is. That ain’t bragging that’s the plain truth. You can help me or you can hinder me.”

Josiah took another sip and replaced the lid on the mason jar. Eric studied him. “You the old Marshal been stayin’ up at the O’Leary place?”

Josiah nodded. “Old is one way to put it.”

“I heard o’ you. Reckon you could’a put me down back ‘er pretty easy.”

Josiah rested his right hand on the table without responding.

Eric swallowed hard. “I ‘spose that means what you say might be true. You ain’t after us and all. Yet here I sit cuffed up like a fugitive.”

Josiah stood up and undid Eric’s handcuffs. Eric rubbed his wrists. Josiah sat back down. Eric motioned to the door. “And ole tenderfoot out there? He the best too?”

Josiah laughed. “George? Hell no. But he ain’t the worst by a fair stretch.”

Eric leaned back in his chair and took hold of a mason jar. He finished a full jar in two swigs. “A’ight then, what’d ye want to know Marshal?”

“I want to know the story. The real story. As much as you can give me.”

“I’ll tell ye, but ain’t gon’ be no disparagin’ my brother. Arty got hisself killed, but he’s still my brother. Couple weeks back Arty met a girl—Arty had a way with the girls, mind. She was a looker too. Petite, dark hair, red lips. Never did hear her name. Anyhow, Arty brung her up to the still. He took a likin’ to showin’ off. Fancied hisself some outlaw. Well soon as I seen her I knowed she was trouble. Out-of-town girls dressed fancy never brought a man good luck. She hung on Arty’s arm like he was some big city boy.

“Couple weeks go by ‘til one day Arty was actin’ funny, kickin’ dirt like he got somethin’ to say. So I told ‘im come out with it ‘fore it eats your bones. He says this girl introduced him to a man lookin’ for partners. Says he got a network for distribution from Virginia to New York. Now, Marshal we ain’t no gangsters we give most of this stuff away. So I told Arty go on and tell ‘is woman we ain’t interested.

“Now, we built a crow’s nest near the still to keep a lookout soon as we started. Well I was sittin’ up ‘ere a few days later—six days ago now—‘n I see an automobile comin’ to a stop at the road. The still ain’t as remote as this spot, why would it be? We never had no problems before, ‘sides we need access to load up the automobile. I made the signal down to Arty and

began my climb down. ‘Bout the time I was halfway I heard gunshots, so I started runnin’. Time I get down there Artys layin’ in a pool o’ his own blood. Sheriff Blythe had this huntin’ cabin and told us to lay low. But soon I get a chance, I’ll gut the bastards what did it.”

“What sort of automobile did you see?” Josiah said. “Describe it.”

“I ain’t see it but from far away. It was fancy though. Black. Shined in the sunlight.”

“And you never heard Arty mention names? Of the woman or the partner?”

Eric shook his head. “Like I said afore. Arty brung girls around more often than not. He met ‘em anyplace he went. ‘Prolly picked this’n up comin’ out a store in Asheville.”

Stevens opened the door and led Sam Jr. in, hands still behind his back. “Tell the Marshal what you told me,” Stevens said.

Sam Jr. gave Stevens an earful when Stevens pushed him forward. He was hesitant to speak. “Now Eric don’ go gettin’ riled on me. My memory ain’t what it should be n’ I got a lot on my mind as it is.” Sam Jr. looked at the floor. Josiah looked at Eric.

“Junior, the hell you on about?” Eric said.

“Well I was listenin’ to your talkin’ through the door and somethin’ weren’t settin’ right with me. You know how I get. I thought back and ‘membered somethin’ Arty said about that girl he brought out to the still.”

“Go on,” Josiah said.

“It was like this. Arty said she weren’t like other gals. She come up to him as he drove through town. They get to talkin’ and she invites him to church.”

Eric laughed. “Imagine that, would ye. One of the Littles in church. Ole miss Suzanne’s been prayin’ for that miracle since we was boys.”

Junior smiled too. “Ain’t that the truth. Say, ‘member that time we chased that dog through—”

Stevens cleared his throat and gave Sam Jr. a slight shove. “Before you get sidetracked again finish what you have to say.”

Junior glared. “Get a handle on your partner there fella ‘fore he does somethin’ he gon’ regret.”

Eric stood from his seat. “You’ll not put a hand on my brother again.”

Stevens opened his mouth. Josiah drew his pistol and set the butt on the table. The room fell silent. He motioned with the barrel toward the empty chair and Eric sat back down. Sam Jr. swallowed hard and Stevens blinked in surprise. Josiah pulled a rolled cigarette from his coat pocket and lit it. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Several moments passed in glorious silence.

“Finish your story,” Josiah motioned to Sam Jr. and put away his pistol. “You were saying Arty met this girl and she took him to church.”

Sam Jr. looked at Eric who nodded. “He did and she did. I seen him the next day and he’s talkin’ Jesus this and salvation that. Sounded crazy to me. And then he’s all excited ‘bout this business proposition he wants to tell me ‘n Eric that could make us rich and save our souls. Says this woman has friends what want to meet us. I told ‘im got to talk to Eric. Two days later they gunned ‘im down.”

“I suppose you don’t got a name for us either,” Josiah said. Sam Jr. shook his head. Josiah looked out the window and dusk had fully fallen over the woods. He saw a squirrel scurrying down the trunk of a small pine to dig around in the soft earth; a small hole here and moving on to the next. It stood on two legs and cocked its head to the side then scurried back up

the tree. Josiah rose from the chair and uncuffed Sam Jr. He motioned for George to follow and he headed out the door.

“Wait a minute Marshal,” Eric said. “That’s it? You jus’ gon’ leave?”

“You got anything else to tell me?” Josiah said.

Eric blinked and shook his head. “Nothin’ ‘cept if’n you find the bastard, don’t let ole tenderfoot over there take ‘im to no jail. You put ‘im down if you get the chance or you let the Sheriff know ‘n Junior and I’ll take care of the rest.”

Josiah crossed the threshold into the fading light. He did not stop. He did not speak. He followed the path and his chalk markers back to the automobile which they found just after the light failed. Stevens drove them back to Miss Sue’s boarding house where Josiah returned to his cabin immediately. He slept little and thought much. The Little brothers offered scarce information. Maybe they were holding out and he should have pushed them harder. Maybe they didn’t know anything more. He couldn’t shake the feeling that something sinister awaited him hidden in the shadows that haunted him.

He was glad his son put an ocean between them. He’d hoped this curse would go to his grave, then the war stole his son’s innocence. He had seen it in his eyes when he visited. A man who knew. *There’s only two types of men in this world, his father used to say, those who know and those who don’t. Hell ain’t somewhere you go after you die, Josiah, it’s what you see when you gaze upon death. It is our inheritance, and it’ll follow us wherever we go.*

Eventually he could fight no more and his eyes surrendered to the darkness. He dreamed again of the horse, and he dreamed of his son and of his granddaughter he had yet to meet. Dreams of the worst kind that he chose not to remember when he woke.

IV

Josiah and Stevens waited near the entrance to the Grove Park Inn. The five-story stone building stood ominously over them. Josiah was not afraid, but he had a feeling since leaving the Sheriff's home. He reached inside his coat and produced a tobacco tin and cigarette paper and began rolling a cigarette.

"Why are we here Marshal?" Stevens said.

"This is the only place folks from out of town with money stay, George. If our theory is correct, this is where our man'll be."

Stevens rifled through his pockets and produced a handkerchief that he used to wipe off his glasses. Candles lit windows here and there but otherwise the Grove Park Inn had fallen into shadow as the sun set behind a mountain peak. It wasn't until breakfast that morning that Josiah had spoken with Stevens. They still had nothing to go on, but both agreed that if they could find wealthy out-of-towners, they would likely find another piece to the puzzle.

Josiah finished rolling the cigarette and lit the end. He felt a nervous energy. Marshal Josiah Cane was famous, or infamous depending. He never failed to get his man and he had seen his fair share of gunplay over the course. Yet it had been three years since he retired. Three years of letting his senses dull and three years of age added on. His pulse began to race and he took a long pull from the cigarette, letting the smoke take the edge off.

Stevens replaced his glasses and checked and rechecked his side-arm. He felt the energy too. Neither one of them knew what to expect, albeit for different reasons. They stood. Josiah leaned back against the automobile and propped one boot on the tire. He took another pull from the cigarette and closed his eyes, and he listened to the voices drifting from inside. None of them were raised over another, but together they blended to make a chorus that carried. Soft music

played. Stevens grew visibly antsy, dancing from one foot to another. Josiah offered him a cigarette which he refused. *An innocent man needs no vices*, Josiah's father used to say.

Josiah blew out one last cloud of smoke and dropped the rest of the cigarette on the ground. He ground out the ember with his boot.

“Shall we?”

Stevens followed him to the door. They had made a plan before coming to the Grove Park Inn. Stevens would speak with the staff—the porters, the desk clerk, and the maids if he was able. He would ask them about the guests and if they witnessed anything suspicious or out of the ordinary. By the book. Josiah felt this would be a fruitless endeavor, but Stevens would not be swayed. Josiah never received formalized training the same way Stevens had and he supposed it was better to have something to fall back on than nothing.

Josiah would mingle among the guests, striking up conversation where he could, but mostly observing. He didn't know what to expect but decades of experience in the Marshal's service did something to a man's instincts. He trusted those instincts to guide him. He hoped those instincts would still kick in, if not slower than they used to be. A bellhop opened the door before them and smiled. Josiah nodded and tipped his hat.

“Welcome to the Grove Park Inn,” he said, “do the gentlemen need any assistance with their baggage?”

Josiah told them that they had no bags, and they would not be staying and the man was polite and told them where to find refreshments and told them where to find the concierge's desk if they needed any information. They thanked him and stepped inside into an expansive open room with tall ceilings and a fire blazing in the fireplace. The room was a buzz of activity.

Gentlemen in suits sitting together smoking cigars. Ladies in fancy coats hanging on their arms. Waitresses moving in and out of the tables and lounge chairs with trays of empty plates and full.

“Can I take your hat and coat, sir?”

Josiah turned to see another bellhop. He shook his head but Stevens handed over his coat. The pressed suit fit in well and Stevens’s pistol was still concealed. Josiah nodded to Stevens and they split up. The room was well-lit and warm and the lighting had a calming effect. No one spoke above a normal tone and near the fireplace a man was removing a violin from its case. Josiah circled the room letting his eyes and ears wander and get attuned to the crowd.

“...nice place to get away. Mrs. Jones hasn’t been to Europe since before the war but this...”

“...and they’ll wind up losing the whole business before the year is out, you mark it...”

A woman in a purple dress walked down the stairs into the midst of the throng and many conversations stopped. Her hair was dark and her lips were red and her legs were long and she was beautiful. Josiah caught himself tuning out the conversations around him for at least a moment as she glided to a chair beside a well-dressed middle-aged man talking to his fellows. She sat on the arm of his chair and he held her hand in his, continuing the conversation without interruption. The man he was talking to was thrown off though and perhaps that was the true intention of such an entrance.

Her eyes took in the room and settled on Josiah. He tipped his hat and she smiled. Josiah leaned against a stone pillar near the edge of the room and a violinist began to play a sad song. Much of the room fell into a short silence before the whispered hum of conversation picked back up, lower in volume now than before. Josiah saw Stevens across the room speaking with a waitress who looked exasperated by his questions. A man walked over to Stevens and the

waitress took her opportunity to move away. The man gave Stevens a card which Stevens read and began to protest with animated vigor.

“As I live and breathe, you look like Josiah Cane.”

Josiah turned. A short, thin man at least fifteen years his junior stood before him with his hand outstretched.

“It is truly an honor if I may say so.”

Josiah shook his hand. The man squeezed and held for a moment longer than was usual.

“I would be honored if you were to share my table, though, I’m afraid as fine an establishment as the Grove Park Inn may be, it does not offer much in the way of refreshments.”

The man smiled and Josiah noticed a gold-capped tooth. The man’s eyes were light and sharp. He wore a finely made suit and his shoes shone in the firelight. Josiah accepted and sat down with the man and two others.

“Gentlemen, may I introduce to you Marshal Josiah Cane; one and the same who you may recall was the hero of the Black Mesa shootout some years back. What was it, Marshal? Ten years past?”

Josiah nodded. “Roundabout.”

The man was still smiling and motioned to the other sitting to Josiah’s right. “This is Martin Rollins from Chicago. Marty is the owner of one of Chicago’s finest export companies.

“This schlub to your left is Clarence Owens, U.S. Army retired.”

Josiah shook hands with each man in turn.

“And my name is Frank. Frank Lynch, a pleasure sir.”

Josiah tipped his hat and leaned back in the lounge chair. Martin Rollins was leaning forward over a table with cards sprawled out, twirling a toothpick between his teeth.

“Do you play cards, Marshal?” Frank asked.

Josiah shook his head. “No sir. I’ve never played.”

Frank pursed his lips as he scanned the playing table then evaluated what he was holding in his hand. They were in the middle of a game.

“This is not a game like other games, Marshal. This is a holy game, one that follows the principles of the good book. ‘To whomever has, more will be given.’ It is all about how you play your first hand and the ripple effect you cause that cascades for the rest of the game. Play that first hand correctly and everything else falls into place.”

Josiah watched as Frank played a card. “What the other plays have in their hands is irrelevant, and it is also irrelevant if they know what I have in mine. The only way to win this game is to have and to use.” The men went around and each played another card. Frank continued. “These men will play the game, but they know that the outcome is inevitable.”

Rollins laughed and shook his head. Clarence was concentrated on his own hand, though he seemed to have more cards than the other players in his hand. Frank played an ace against another one and pointed. “See that, Marshal? Snake eyes. And now it begins.”

Clarence threw his hands up and leaned back in his lounge chair. Rollins pulled the toothpick from his mouth and broke it. Josiah watched.

Rollins sighed. “Frank, the bullshit flows out of you easier than anyone I’ve ever met. I tip my hat to it, but I’m right tired of losing to you at games you clearly don’t even know how to play.”

All four men fell silent and turned their attention to the violinist playing near the fireplace. At length, Frank spoke again. “Now, the true question of the night. What brings Marshal Josiah Cane to the Appalachians?”

“I live here, as it happens.”

“Is that so?”

“It is.”

“That is quite the development. A lucky one for myself I might add.”

“Your accent isn’t local.”

“Not local. A keen ear. I’m from Minnesota originally. Been living here and there ever since.”

“Watch yourself Marshal,” Rollins said, “can’t trust this one as far as you can throw him.” He motioned to Frank.

Frank feigned shock. “Marty Rollins, you disparage our friendship.”

“Frank, I met you two days ago playing cards. You took my money and you’ve been following me around ever since. Not exactly a friendship.”

“And you Mr. Owens, do you share the sentiment?”

“Frank,” Clarence said, “I never met a more entertaining lying sack of shit in my life. And I been in the trenches with men from all over.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Take it how you like it.”

Frank turned to Josiah. He motioned at the two men. “Marshal, I apologize for my friends and their lack of manners. In fact, I should apologize for my own. I haven’t even offered you a game. Shall we play again gentlemen?”

Both men shook their heads. Clarence turned to Josiah. “Black Mesa. Back in ‘16? I believe I remember that story. Lone Marshal drew down on seven bandits. Killed all seven before they had a chance to pull their pistols. That right?”

“That’s how they wrote it,” Josiah said.

Clarence took a pull from his cigar and blew it out through his nose. “That how it went?”

Frank cut in. “Of course that’s how it went. Marshal Josiah Cane, the fastest gun in the West!” He made an exaggerated motion as if pulling a pistol from a belt and pointed his finger guns at Josiah.

“I’d love to hear that story from the source, Marshal,” Rollins said. “That is if you’re willing.”

Josiah studied his hands. The other three men watched. The violin played. Clarence leaned toward Josiah offering a cigar. He took it and lit it. He took a long draw and leaned back, remembering. At length, he spoke.

“It was four, not seven. The papers said it was three Mexicans, two blacks escaped from a prison farm, and two white experienced cattle rustlers, but all four of them were white. They were just boys, not one older than fifteen. Cattle thieves. First time stealing. I’m not sure what drove them to it. Best guess is they were seeking a thrill since they only stole four head.” He took another drag from the cigar.

“I set out with two local deputies. We knew they were just boys so we figured bringing the cattle back would be the toughest part. The owner had some relationship with the judge and was pushing for retribution. ‘The principle of the thing,’ he kept saying. We rode up on their camp mid-afternoon the third day. They already stopped and started a fire. They were easy to find, making no effort to cover their tracks.

“When we called out to them they were startled. Two relieving themselves, one was poking at the fire with a stick, and the fourth was trying unsuccessfully to unsaddle his horse. We brought all four together and set them down on a large stone. We didn’t cuff them because not

one of them looked threatening. Scared, maybe. There were two bottles of whiskey, mostly empty.

“We reckoned we’d camp there for the night and head back in the morning. As soon as the sun went down one of the boys pulled a knife from his boot and lunged at one of the deputies. The blade caught the deputy in the neck. Everything happened fast after that. The second deputy pulled his pistol and dropped it as another of the boys came at him with a rock. I pulled and leveled my pistol at the last two boys. One had his hand on the neck of the whiskey bottle, the other already had the deputy’s gun. ‘We ain’t goin’ back,” the one with the gun said.

“He reminded me of my own son. I was slow. I begged him to drop it. He began to raise it so I fired. The shot echoed across the emptiness. I fired again. He fell. The other boy made a motion and I fired three more shots. The second deputy got control of his situation and picked up his pistol. Before I could stop him he put several rounds into the boy with the rock.

“The first deputy was bleeding from the neck but found the strength to wrestle the knife from his attacker. That boy was layin’ in a pool of his own blood. All four dead. The deputy with the knife wound lived for almost a full day before he fell asleep and didn’t wake up. The other deputy and myself suffered superficial wounds and brought all of the bodies to the courthouse. I never set foot in that town again.”

Rollins stared at Josiah, silent and unmoving. Clarence Owens puffed his cigar and nodded. Frank was nodding his head vigorously. “Yes,” Frank said. “Now that is a story. Ugly, painful, violent. Beautiful.” He pulled a notepad and a pencil from his pocket and began writing.

“Marshal, I have a proposal for you,” Frank said as he wrote. “I want to tell your story, the real story. I’m a journalist you see, but I’ve been searching for a story to use to transition to novel writing. Like Hemingway, or Fitzgerald. Your story needs to be told.”

Josiah rose from his chair. “Gentlemen, I appreciate the company.” He tipped his hat and walked away. Frank followed.

“Now Marshal, hear me out. My proposal is something I’m sure both of us would—”

Josiah didn’t turn. “Not interested.”

“I understand that, but if I may speak as we walk since it appears we are headed in the same direction. I can commit three things to you, Marshal. First, I will tell the truth. Unless I miss my guess, you’ve got a weight on your shoulders; a burden that needs to be lifted...”

Josiah scanned the room for Stevens. He saw the woman in the purple dress and caught her eye. He blushed slightly. She smiled.

“...it’s as the good book says, ‘the truth will set you free.’ Now if you let me I’d offer you a chance to tell your side in your own words, with some professional rephrasing of course.”

Josiah headed for the door.

“And Marshal let me just say the second thing I can promise. If you’re worried about profits I will commit to a fifty-fifty split right here and now. A gentlemen’s agreement on my honor.” Frank moved in front of Josiah and stuck out his hand. Josiah stopped.

“I don’t aim to sell my stories. Plus I got a job to do and you’re currently in the way.”

“I understand that but you haven’t let me finish my proposal.”

Josiah rubbed his forehead. He lamented his lost paradise of solitude. He was just getting used to Stevens’s incessant questions about being a man of law and here was some new wrinkle in his life he didn’t ask for. He motioned for the reporter to speak.

“Immortality,” Frank said.

Josiah narrowed his eyes. Another fool. “The hell does that mean?”

“The written word is like magic, Marshal. It communicates across place and time. A little boy fifty years from now, reading *The Adventures of Josiah Cane* before bed where he’ll dream of being a cowboy lawman in a time the world has otherwise forgotten. A young man on his way to war, attempting to summon the courage to fight the good fight knows what it will take because he saw it in the actions of U.S. Marshal Josiah Cane. That’s my third promise. Immortality.”

Josiah closed his eyes. Not a fool, a madman. “Mr. Lynch, of all the idiotic things I’ve heard in my time—and believe you me the folks I’ve had dealings with are the bottom of the barrel in that regard—your proposal sits atop the list.”

Frank smiled. “Just think on it before you say—”

“No.”

“Marshal might I say that you are everything I thought you might be if I ever had the fortune of meeting you. I believe I can trust a man of your intellect to not throw away an opportunity to leave his mark. And with that I’ll bid you goodnight. We will discuss this further I’m sure. Fate has crossed our paths.” Frank moved and Josiah started forward. The bellhop held open the door with a smile.

“Luck crossed our paths, Mr. Lynch, or misfortune depending.”

“All one and the same in the good Lord’s providence.”

Josiah grunted and passed through the door. Stevens was waiting in the automobile. He wore a look of consternation. Josiah climbed into the passenger seat.

“Any luck?”

Josiah shook his head. “You?”

Stevens said, “The waitress I spoke with told me I have a demon.”

Josiah eyed Stevens. “I beg your pardon?”

Stevens nodded. “Yessir. I said, ‘ma’am, can I ask you some questions.’ Soon as I asked about moonshine she hissed and told me the devil is a lie. ‘Go down to the tent and get delivered,’ she said, “the devil’s poison has a latch on your soul.’ I tried to tell her I was an agent of the Bureau but she got louder. A gentleman came and gave me this card.”

He held out the card and Josiah took it. It was blank other than the statement *Please lower your volume*. Josiah smiled and handed the card back to Stevens.

“So you left after one strikeout?”

“Hardly!” Stevens said. “As a matter of fact I began asking around about this ‘tent.’ It stuck out to me, I’m not sure why. Well, the bellhop who took my coat had heard a thing or two about it. He said there was some traveling preacher who popped up a revival tent not far outside of town. He’s been holding services every Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday night for the last several weeks.

“Apparently this preacher calls on his listeners to be delivered of their addictions and vices. Harps on and on about the dangers of alcohol specifically. The bellhop said he's never been to a service himself but,” Stevens pulled out a small sheet of paper, “he did know the way,”

Josiah took the paper and reevaluated George Stevens. One thing he knew from his time with the Marshals is there’s no replacement for good instincts. Sheriff Blythe didn’t mention a traveling preacher in their conversation. But surely he knew the man was in town and murder committed just a few weeks after the arrival of an outsider is one hell of a coincidence.

“Alright, George. Let's go to church.”

V

The church was a large white tent set up on the flat ground next to a river. Josiah and Stevens arrived while the congregation was singing a song and stomping their feet in rhythm with a woman standing on a small stage at the front of the tent with a tambourine in her hand. Josiah removed his hat and sat in a chair at the back of the meeting. He immediately recognized the woman from the hotel two days prior. Dark hair, red lipstick. He thought she smiled when their eyes met, but wondered if it was her charm playing tricks on his mind.

The congregation was a small gathering of fifteen people, mostly middle-aged men in worn-out work clothes. The exception was a man sitting in the front row. He was immaculately dressed, tapping his foot along with the congregation. Josiah leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. He was certain this man was the one he had seen with the woman at the Grove Park Inn. He felt the nervous energy begin to build again. Josiah believed in coincidence, but only as it related to God's supposed intervention in this cursed world. As a lawman coincidence represented patterns of behavior that happened when men made mistakes.

The singing carried on for another half hour. Josiah knew the words to more than half the songs but could not bring himself to sing along. He remembered sitting in a pew with Corinne just before she became sick; an evening he would never forget. The fading sunlight filtered through the stained-glass window above the altar and cast a golden glow around Corinne's face. He had finally decided to retire and live out their days in the blue hills of Appalachia like he always promised her they would. Historically, he found one excuse or another to stay with the Marshal service in Texas. But this time he was ready to make good on his promises.

She was surprised when he announced he was coming to church with her. There was a traveling preacher in town and this was the fourth night of revival. Corinne never missed a

chance to gather with her church. Whether it was a Sunday morning or a Thursday evening, if the church was open Corinne would be there in her pew on the third row. At the beginning he struggled with her commitment. It took time, but he realized his hypocrisy. The meaning she found in the church was the same he found in the Marshal service. He couldn't fault her for that, and so he tried; but he was never one to sit still for too long. One of his many regrets.

After that service they made their way home at a slower pace. The moon shone and the sky was clear. The summer heat was dulled by the absence of the sun, but it was still warm. The cicadas' rhythmic pattern filled the void of the would-be silence. They spoke of their son who had just shipped to France. They were both worried, albeit for different reasons. Corinne believed that when you shed blood on behalf of truth and justice the Good Lord would not hold it against you. Josiah was of a different mind. The blood he shed stained his hands and his heart, despite shedding it in the name of the law, or because of it. He would never tell Corinne that truth. And he hoped she was right, for his son's sake.

The walk that night was the last he was able to enjoy. She fell ill the next week while he was away tracking a pair of bank robbers attempting to cross to Mexico. Two weeks after that she was gone. He didn't cry when they laid her to rest, nor was he angry. He was resigned to his fate, just like his father. *Death follows us boy, but you keep on runnin' and don't let it catch you.* His father prepared him for loss as far back as he could remember. And yet, he still felt the sting of losing Corinne all these years later.

The woman finished the last refrain of Amazing Grace and sat down. Thunder rumbled in the distance to fill the silence. The crowd had grown to close to thirty people since Josiah and Stevens sat down; most of the newcomers visibly wet from a fresh rain. The man on the front

row stood and walked to the small stage. He carried an old, ragged Bible and placed it on the podium.

He looked up at the crowd for the first time and raised his hands. “Brethren, welcome to the house of the Lord.”

The crowd responded and the man smiled. As he spoke, Josiah watched. The man’s eyes were sharp and every now and again they would rest on a single parishioner who would vigorously nod their head in agreement until he released his gaze. He began to pace up and down the aisle shouting and making animated motions with his hands. The parishioners responded with “amens” and sporadic applause.

“Brothers, I’m just a lowly preacher. A simple man, called by our lord and savior Jesus Christ, to bring good news to you. It is a year of Jubilee!”

A man next to Stevens stood up and lifted his hands and began mumbling something unintelligible.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.”

Several more of the parishioners stood up and began waving their hands and pacing up and down the aisles. A woman two rows in front of Josiah was weeping openly.

“And what is this prison, these shackles weighing down your very soul, keeping you enslaved to sin and death?”

The crying woman lifted her voice and shouted, “Drinkin’, pastor!”

The man walked over to her and lifted her chin. With his free hand he wiped the tears from her cheeks.

“Sister, only our Lord could show you this truth,” he said. He turned back to the crowd.

“Brothers, purge yourselves from the works of the devil. When the Israelites were consorting with witchcraft, the Lord commanded the faithful to purge the land in blood and fire, else all be damned.”

Josiah leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. The service carried on in the same manner for half an hour more at which point the pastor charged the congregation to go forth into the world and be watchful of evil. As they left the dark haired woman stood at the back of the aisle holding an offering basket. Each member dutifully placed their money, some more, others less. The pastor made his way to where Josiah and Stevens remained seated and greeted them.

“Gentlemen, I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure of seeing your faces at our humble revival.” He gestured to the tent and smiled. “However, all are welcome in the house of the Lord. My name is Mordecai Solomon.”

He reached out his hand which Josiah shook. Solomon offered a hand to Stevens but kept his eyes locked on Josiah.

He gestured to the dark haired woman holding the offering basket as she approached. “And this is Edith.”

Josiah nodded his head. “Pleasure.”

“And might I have the pleasure of your names?”

Josiah placed his hat back on his head, took his tobacco tin from his coat pocket, and began rolling a cigarette. Solomon watched him, but said nothing. As Josiah lit the cigarette Solomon’s eyes blazed, but he only smiled.

Stevens cleared his throat. “My name is George Stevens, special agent with the Bureau of Prohibition, and this is Deputy U.S. Marshal Josiah Cane—”

“Retired,” Josiah interrupted.

“Retired, Deputy U.S. Marshal Josiah Cane. We were hoping we could ask you a few questions regarding a member of your congregation.”

Solomon ignored Stevens. “Josiah Cane...” He walked back down the aisle to the pulpit. Josiah rose and followed. “I do believe I’ve heard that name before, but I can’t quite place it.” He took a bag from behind the pulpit and dumped the money from Edith’s offering basket in. He closed his Bible and placed it in the bag as well. He looked up as if remembering something.

“You baptized, Marshal?”

Josiah stood. “I suppose so, when I was just a boy.” He took a last pull from the cigarette, dropped it on the bare earth floor, and smothered it with his boot.

Solomon shook his head. “No marshal. That’s not what I mean.”

He handed the bag to Edith who disappeared through a side exit of the tent. “‘I baptize with water, but one comes after me who will baptize you with holy spirit and fire.’ Have you ever been baptized in spirit and fire?”

Josiah shook his head.

“When the holy fire comes on you it consumes you. It burns away all sin and vice; fills you with righteous indignation at the state of things in this world. The scales fall away from your eyes and you see, for the first time, how the wolf sneaks in with the sheep and devours them.

“I remember reading a story some years back in the papers. If I recall it correctly, a Deputy U.S. Marshal Josiah Cane had gotten into a shootout with some members of the Ku Klux Klan in Missouri. Avenging some colored boy that died in a house fire?”

Josiah didn’t respond.

“Oh, it caused quite the stir in South Carolina as you might imagine. A white man betraying his own kind in such a way. They didn’t exactly paint you in a flattering light.”

Solomon moved the podium from the center of the platform to the back corner. He walked back to the front and held Josiah’s gaze. “Now don’t misunderstand me. I’ve seen the light. ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, nor slave nor free’ as the book says. The Lord has declared all men equal, and I don’t discriminate against those who would willingly come to him.

“But my guess is a righteous fire drove you to that shootout, and that same fire guided your hand in the deed. Did you feel it in your belly Marshal? The knowledge that you were more than justified, you were *right* to do what you did after they brutalized that boy? That’s the fire I’m talking about.”

Josiah motioned in the direction Edith had taken the bag of money. “Does it cost money to keep the fire stoked?”

Solomon laughed. “Now marshal, I’m but a humble messenger. Every dime offered to the Lord will be counted righteous to the giver if it be used for God’s work.”

Josiah propped one foot on the small platform, looking up into Solomon’s eyes. “And what work is that, exactly?”

“Spreading the word of salvation in hopes that all who hear will avoid the wrath coming upon the world.” He turned his attention to Stevens.

“What about you, son? You belong to the Lord?”

Stevens cleared his throat. “I grew up Methodist—”

Solomon waved him off. “Methodists are as heathen as God’s own enemies. Repent son and believe the true gospel.”

Solomon hopped down from the stage and motioned for Josiah to sit. “Now that I’ve offered you the message it is yours to take or to leave, but my conscience is clear. You said you had questions.” Stevens joined them on the front row.

“Yessir,” Stevens said. “I suppose you have heard of the recent killing of Arthur Little.”

Solomon nodded. “Arty was a good boy. Saved in this very church, baptized in that very river with my own hands. Shame what happened, but he is in paradise now.”

Stevens blinked. “Is there anything you can tell us about the days leading up to his death?”

Solomon leaned an elbow on the back of his chair. “Edith met Arty in town and brought him here. The sermon that day cut to his core. With teary eyes he confessed all of his illicit activities—of which I am sure you are aware. Feared the Lord would judge him for opening innocent folks up to the schemes of the devil.

“He asked me what the Lord would have him do. I told him he could be washed white as snow if he repented. But repentance requires action. Some form of restitution to set things right. We never got to discuss what that restitution would be before his past sins were laid upon his own head.”

Solomon sighed. “‘The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away.’ Arty paid the price, but the Good Lord saw fit to bring him into the fold before the disaster. He is merciful indeed.”

Josiah noticed a soft rain beating on the tent; the hum and rhythm distracting him from the nagging feeling in his gut. He felt an intuition about Mordecai Solomon and yet could not verbalize it, nor distinguish it from his general disgust for men like him. Men who use religion to take from those who have not. Stevens continued asking questions about Arty Little and

Solomon continued to answer him politely. Edith reappeared through the tent flap and began gathering elements from the service—the small tablecloth, the chalice of wine, the plate of bread.

Josiah turned to Solomon and cut off whatever question Stevens was attempting to ask.

“Mr. Solomon, may I ask you something? A theological question.”

Solomon raised an eyebrow.

“The story of Judas always nagged at my mind. If Christ knew he was a traitor, why did he let him into the fold?”

“To fulfill prophecy Marshal. Without the actions of Judas, salvation would not have come to pass,” Solomon said.

Josiah nodded. “That’s what they say. So I suppose he was a scapegoat. No choice in the matter, really. What did he gain from the betrayal?”

Solomon scratched his chin. “Judas Iscariot was paid thirty pieces of silver, a hefty sum in his day.”

“Do you suppose he had a choice in the matter, that he was lured away by the silver, or was it his destiny?”

“The Lord’s plan of salvation had to come to pass, and without the actions of Judas our Lord would have never been delivered up to his crucifixion. So I suppose he was destined. But that doesn’t make him any less responsible for his actions.”

“How did his story end again?” Josiah said.

“He hanged himself,” Stevens said. “Couldn’t bear the weight of his betrayal.”

“He hanged himself,” Josiah mused. “I suppose that’s the way of it, isn’t it? Greed and treachery ending in blood shed, that of the innocent and the guilty.”

Solomon shifted slightly in his seat and sighed. “Out with it, Marshal. What would you really like to say?”

“Let’s get to it then,” Josiah said. “I don’t like you Mr. Solomon, but it’s not just you, it’s your kind. Men through whom the bullshit flows like a river over parched ground.” Stevens tried to cut in but Josiah silenced him with a look before he plowed ahead.

“You set up your tent, you use your flowery speech, and poor, hopeless fools give you what little they do have in hopes God will at least soften the blow in the afterlife; particularly since this life is already hell enough. So, not only do I think you’re full of shit, I don’t think you even believe half the nonsense that you say.”

Solomon’s face was unreadable.

“In addition, I think you know something about Arty Little’s death. Maybe you didn’t carry out the deed with your own hands, but you know who did and you know why. You can tell me now or I’ll find out later, but either way I will find out.”

“Marshal, you’re out of line,” Edith said. All three heads snapped to her. “You’ve got no cause to speak to Mordecai that way.” She stared into Josiah’s eyes and held his gaze for a long moment. “Mordecai is passionate, but he’s not a killer, nor would he consult with one. There’s nothing sinister here.”

The silence stretched. Solomon studied Josiah and Josiah studied him, neither man willing to blink.

“One last question, Mr. Solomon,” Stevens said. Breaking the tension. “Can you account for your whereabouts seven days ago?”

Solomon smiled. "Seven days ago I was with two associates at the Grove Park Inn discussing their donations to the ministry. We met at lunch time and the meeting lasted until the mid-afternoon when Edith and I went for a walk before sitting down to dinner."

"We're going to need the names of those associates," Stevens said.

"Am I under investigation Mr. Stevens?"

"Not quite yet."

Solomon motioned to the back of the tent where the flaps were flung wide and tied back. An automobile came to a stop beside Stevens's own and two men stepped out. "No need for names, Mr. Stevens. These are my associates."

Clearance Owens and Martin Rollins exited the automobile and jogged through the rain under the tent. Owens nodded his head to Josiah when he saw him. Rollins looked back and forth between Josiah and Solomon.

"Marshal, it's good to see you again. However, I must say I am surprised to see you here of all places," Rollins said.

"I go wherever a case takes me," Josiah said.

"And which case is that?" Owens asked.

"The marshal is looking into the murder of Arhtur Little," Edith said.

"You don't say," Rollins said and he looked at Solomon. "Sad story. I didn't know the young man, but I saw a true salvation that day."

Owens nodded his agreement and said, "You got any suspects, Marshal?"

"Just one," Josiah said. He turned toward Edith and tipped his hat. "Ma'am."

"Hold on there Marshal," Solomon said. "Don't you want to ask?"

"Ask what?"

“How these gentlemen are involved in the ministry. I can tell you if you like. Or you can ask them to confirm my whereabouts? I’m sure that mind of yours has a dozen questions.”

“No.”

“No?”

“I reckon I got a handle on all that.”

“Have you?”

“I have.”

“Alright then.”

He turned and walked toward the entrance to the tent. Stevens fell in step behind him. They said nothing until they were in the automobile on the road back to Miss Sue’s boarding house. Stevens broke the silence first.

“Did you notice what those two gentlemen were driving?”

Josiah nodded.

“Do you reckon it's a coincidence?”

“Lawmen don’t believe in coincidences, George. Can’t afford to.”

Stevens was silent for several minutes. Josiah watched the landscape as they ascended and descended, following the winding road. He felt the pieces of this particular puzzle finally falling into place. It was clear to him who and what, and his brain was toying around with the why.

“It appears, if we assume truth in the Little brothers’s tale, that we have found our suspects, but I don’t understand their motivations. By all accounts Arthur Little seemed to be a committed, albeit new, member of the community.” Stevens paused and Josiah did not fill the

silence. He was having the same trouble, and sometimes it is better for a man to work a problem through before speaking out loud.

“I think there are two options here. First, the two gentlemen—Mr. Owens and Mr. Rollins—are criminals who happened across Arthur Little and the church at the same time.”

Josiah nodded. “And their motivation is?”

“Criminal enterprise. They overheard Arthur Little’s confession and saw an opportunity to get into the moonshine business.”

“Then why kill him?” Josiah said.

“Because his brothers refused. They made an example out of Arthur...”

“Doesn’t sound good for business.”

“True,” Stevens said. “The other two brothers are much less likely to enter business with men who killed their brother.”

“What are your other theories?” Josiah said.

“That’s all I got so far.”

The rest of the drive was spent in concentrated effort to unravel the mystery. They had made clear connections yet could not see how the pieces fit together. They arrived at the boarding house just after dark, and parted ways to sleep.