

CHAPTER ONE



MY BATTERED POCKET WATCH WAS AS DEAD AS THE BODY in the coffin, but that didn't stop me from keeping it in a white-knuckled grip. After all, it was the only thing I could hold on to. I couldn't hold on to Pops. All I could do was eye my grandfather's coffin and tell him how sorry I was about the wretched farce of a funeral we'd just left. Pops *hated* funerals.

But he loved a good wake.

Funerals were for wailing. Wakes were for celebrating and toasting a life where you'd savored every bite. My people loved a good wake. Pops said that the old gods, they were much more understanding about these sorts of things. New Retienne liked the new god, and the new god liked proper funerals.

I'd never set foot in New Retienne's graveyard until today. Pops and I only came into town every three weeks for supplies—four if we could stretch it. The ramshackle church behind us blocked the bite of the winter wind some, but not completely. Far as I could tell, that was all it was good for.

"You ready, young Kelly?" the preacher asked, not unkindly,

but also like maybe he wanted away from the cold and back to his warm fire.

No. I was not ready. “Yes, sir.”

He nodded, taking out his holy book. Pops didn’t belong to the Shining God, like this preacher did, but I reckoned Pops wouldn’t care, so I wasn’t going to fuss. I ignored the preacher’s warbly voice, my mind whited out with grief, as I stared over the rustling treetops.

Strange that I couldn’t feel the bitter wind at all myself. But then I had my own windbreak—Eustace Clarke, the honorable mayor of New Retienne; his second-in-command, a lawyer named Finchly; and the sheriff, John Bascom. They were fencing me in, and I quashed the urge to fidget.

The mayor was an interesting-looking fella. New Retienne might have been a small town, but it had a circulating library sandwiched between Ms. Lilibet’s brothel and the Crooked Donkey, our sorry excuse for a saloon. We likely wouldn’t have had a library at all if Ms. Lilibet herself hadn’t been fond of books. The circulating library had a natural history book on display, the illustrator indifferent at best. I’d never seen a walrus, only the fella depicted in that book, but if I’d added a waxed mustache and an overly embroidered waistcoat onto that creature, it would have been the spittin’ image of our Mr. Clarke.

The mayor rested a heavy hand on my shoulder, leaning in to whisper so as not to interrupt the preacher. “He’s in a better place.”

I disagreed but bit my tongue.

Finchly hummed an agreement. He was a handsome older man, I suppose, but he had big, blocky teeth I didn't like the look of. Sheriff Bascom shifted at my right, smelling of cologne with a hint of old bacon fat—not quite rancid but flirtin' with the idea. All three of them loomed like scarecrows around me.

A few other townsfolk stood at the graveside along with the preacher. I recognized each of them, except for a lady standing a ways back from the group, sniffing as she brought up a lacy handkerchief to dab at her eyes. She was dressed plainly, but that only seemed to frame her beauty more strongly. She kept sending me sympathetic smiles. I kept ignoring them.

The preacher smiled at Mr. Clarke, his glasses slipping down his nose. “The Shining God takes, but he also gives. Your loved one is gone—”

“But the community comes together to support you in your time of need,” Mr. Clarke said, stealing the words from the preacher's mouth.

I could almost hear Pops's snort. *Nobody can unload verbal pucky like a bureaucrat. They'll leave you knee-deep in it, Faolan, you mark my words. Best get your shovel ready.*

My grandfather had been a simple man. Didn't mean he was wrong.

And now he was dead.

They were all dead.

I didn't remember my parents much, and what I did remember, I didn't mourn. That might be on me. Some people had a knack for mourning, and despite all my practice, I

didn't appear to be one of them. I did miss my grandmother. She'd hummed while she baked and said a bushel of wildflowers on the table reminded her of warm summer days in tall grass. She beat everyone at dominoes, couldn't shoot a pistol for squat, but could nail a grouse forty yards away with her eyes shut using her crossbow.

Every word from the preacher made me feel like I was filling up with sand. I wanted to bolt from the graveside like a rabbit legging it to the safety of the underbrush.

But I couldn't.

Standing graveside in a suit too big for my frame, I knew I was a pitiful representation of the Kellys. The suit itched something fierce, too, and I was sweating despite the cold. Still, I kept my chin high, wanting to do Pops proud. The mayor patted dry eyes at my side while Finchly and Bascom flanked us, stone-faced.

A tidy trap if ever I saw one.

The preacher seemed like a decent fella, but for how little he knew my Pops, he sure found a lot to say. Since I wasn't about to step foot in his church again, I had no issue with ignoring him. Pops thought life was complicated enough without adding churching on top of things, and I can't say I've strayed far from his thinking on the subject.

I could almost hear the deep singsong of his voice. *I miss the old gods, Faolan. They were distant, like mountains. Give them a bit of music and dance on feast days, and they left you well enough alone. They didn't need us nattering their ears off, and we didn't need them up in our daily business.*

Today there had been an abundance of nattering. When

the preacher hadn't been flapping his gums, there was music, and I use the word generously. The only good thing about it was the out-of-tune piano almost drowned out the singing. Almost.

I would have liked to play some fiddle for Pops. One of his favorite songs, like when we'd sit beside the fire in the cold months offering up a bit of song to the gods of the lands he was from. The gods that weren't welcome here. I wasn't sure they could hear a single note, but he'd loved to hear me play, and that was what mattered.

But I'd had to sell my fiddle to pay for the doctor.

Pops would have hated that most of all.

It had been a shock this morning, seeing his still frame in a wooden box. Death gave his face a softness it hadn't had in life. Made him look a stranger.

I gripped his battered pocket watch in my palm—now mine—the entire ceremony, just to remind myself of the truth.

He was gone, and I was alone.

I hadn't wanted my grandfather put to earth in the burial grounds of the new church. My grandmother had been buried on our land—I'd wanted the same for Pops, but no one had listened. I had no money, and until my grandfather's lands were settled on me, my words only had the force of my own breath. The mayor and his people spoke a different tongue, of power and wealth, and I wasn't fluent. I decided to choose my battles until I mastered their way of speaking. My grandfather wouldn't give two beans where we laid his carcass, anyhow.

"May he find solace in the arms of the Shining God," the

preacher intoned. There was a rustling as a few men came forward, the service finally done.

The ground was cold but no longer frozen, winter almost giving way to spring. I grabbed a shovel, tossing the upturned earth next to the grave onto the coffin. It thudded against the wood, and I said a silent goodbye to the best man I'd known.

I had assumed that I would do my fair share of the shoveling, but the mayor and his cronies were impatient, and before the coffin was fully covered, I was pressed into the mayor's buggy and shuffled into his stuffy parlor. Mr. Clarke and Finchly sat across from me while Bascom leaned against the wall, the air still except for the ticking of the grandfather clock in the hall.

Mrs. Clarke seemed to haunt her own home. She'd appeared in the parlor only to wordlessly place a hot mug of dandelion tea into my hand before disappearing back into her kitchen. I didn't care for the stuff, but I held on to the mug anyway. The room had a feminine touch to it, or at least the kind of feminine the mayor would accept—doilies on the small table to my left, stitched samplers on the wall—the furniture redolent with beeswax. The stiff settee I was perched on was covered in a print of large flowers.

I'd been raised better than to spit on someone's floor, but let me tell you, it was a close thing. This was a floor made to be spit on, if only because it was Mr. Clarke's.

I missed my threadbare hearth rug, the quilt my grandmother had made folded neatly in her old wooden rocking chair, the one that squeaked. I was suddenly desperate for it.

I set down my tea, harder than I meant, the noise startling in the room.

The mayor braided his fingers over his rounded belly. “Now, Mr. Kelly, we’re in a bit of a pickle.”

I turned my eyes on him, unblinking. He didn’t like it. Most didn’t. My eyes were a very pale gray, giving them a ghostly look. It bothered some folks. Don’t ask me why. They’re just eyes.

Mr. Clarke’s tongue flicked out, lizard-like against his lips, half hidden by his abundant mustache. “The thing is, you’ve got little in the way of kin, and you’re not of age yet yourself.”

“I have nothing in the way of kin,” I said, “and I’ll be eighteen in a few months.”

“Eight is hardly a few.” The mayor’s mustaches twitched as he talked. “And according to Ms. Regina, you’ve got an aunt. Madigan Kelly.”

Ms. Regina was the local midwife. She kept track of such things. Still. “Mayor—”

“Please,” he said, flashing crooked teeth. “Call me Mr. Clarke.”

I could hardly see how that was any better, but I was smart enough to give him the concession. “Mr. Clarke, I don’t wish to argue with Ms. Regina, but if I have an aunt, that’s news to me.”

Finchly clucked in sympathy. Mr. Clarke’s brow knotted in concern, his mouth turning down, but I caught his eyes. They had the look of a hen sitting on her nest—roosting and pleased with herself. “Well, Mr. Kelly, then, like I said, we’ve

got ourselves a right pickle. Wouldn't be neighborly, leaving you alone on your grandfather's land, rest his soul." Finchly and Bascom made noises of affirmation. I had yet to hear them say anything with actual meaning.

I wished I'd kept the tea in my hands so I could slam the mug down again. "Speak plainly, sir, for I've no patience left in me."

His gaze narrowed. The hen was gone, replaced by the stoat, ready to filch the eggs from the nest. "A young man such as yourself can't be left with such overwhelming responsibilities. Why, it's not suitable." He placed a hand across his chest. "How would we sleep at night?"

Just fine, by my reckoning. And I could handle enough of my grandfather's choring to get by. I'd been doing my share of the work for years.

"Now, Madigan Kelly may be only a woman, but she's of age at least." The pale hands on his belly twitched. "I'm sure we can convince her to do what's right by New Retienne. By you." He tacked on the last bit, a clear afterthought. "We need time to find her, is all."

I didn't like where this line of discussion was headed one bit. "What does that mean, 'to do what's right'?"

"Well, that's New Retienne land—that's your land. It should have one of our people on it. I'm sure your aunt's husband would be keen on our ways. Who wouldn't want to settle down on such fine acreage?"

An image of Pops winking at me as he hid the deed to our land away surfaced in my brain. I had no doubt that if my

grandfather had left the deed with the bank, the mayor would have it in his sticky fingers already. Even now, Pops was looking out for me.

Mr. Clarke's expression became decidedly smug. "And if your aunt's not married or a widow, well, we have many fine, upstanding gentlemen around these parts." He shook his head, the smug expression shifting into one of almost comical sorrow. "I think we can all agree that it wouldn't be proper, leaving a young man of your tender years out on that homestead all on your own."

Ghostly fingers ran down my spine, chilling me. If the mayor dismissed my supposed aunt so easily, how would he feel about me if he knew the truth? How quickly would I be marched into the New Retienne church and down the aisle to hand all my worldly possessions over to a fine, upstanding gentleman of the mayor's choice?

I crossed my arms over my chest, grateful for my too-big suit. My voice came out soft as down feathers. "What would help you sleep at night, Mr. Clarke?"

"Normally, in a case like this," Mr. Clarke hedged, "we'd send you to a charitable neighbor."

Charity. Free labor, more like. I snorted before I could stop myself. I would spend the next eight months milking other people's goats and cows, cleaning chicken coops, digging privies, hauling wood, and doing any other unfavorable job. If I was lucky, I would get to sleep in a hayloft. To be honest, I would prefer that or sleeping under the stars, despite the chill temperatures. You sleep in someone else's house, you better trust

that person an awful lot. A house could be a trap just as easily as it could be a home.

I bit my tongue. Pops always said I had a smart mouth.

Sometimes I was even smart enough to keep it shut.

Mr. Clarke sighed. "In this case, no one had room."

Ah. Now I was catching on. People in these parts didn't like the look of the Kellys—it's the red hair, I reckon. Folks get superstitious about it, like we're changelings or the spit of evil spirits. You can try to tell them it's just hair, but they won't listen.

Stubborn as mules and half as useful, some people. That's what Pops used to say.

Though I'd left it off for the funeral, usually I wore a low-crowned hat with a wide, flat brim, as it covered my hair, which I kept short. Even better, the hat shaded my eyes. Red hair made most people frown. One look at my eyes and they ran their fingers over their heart, like tracing a rainbow. It was supposed to ward off evil. It did precious little to me except tell me we wouldn't be friends. It was a handy shortcut, to be honest, and a nice way to weed out the ignorant.

And there sure was a lot of ignorant going around.

With no family forthcoming, and my looks in mind, I was officially more trouble than I was worth. "Well, I'd hate to cause my neighbors any bother. What say we tell them we tried, and we all go about our business?"

Mr. Clarke was shaking his head, those clasped hands back on his belly. "Now, Mr. Faolan, that will not do." He smiled. I wiped my sweaty palms onto my suit trousers. I didn't like that smile. It widened, like he could smell my fear

and it made him happy. “As it happens, we’ve made other arrangements. Isn’t that right, Miss Honeywell?”

The stranger from the funeral breezed in then, her dress rustling softly as she moved. Everything about her was round and soft, pretty in a dewy sort of way. She had the biggest, bluest eyes I’d ever seen, which she kept wide before batting them at the mayor, making him flush from the neck up. She smiled demurely at him, her cheeks dimpling before she turned her gaze on me.

It has always been my thinking that while words and smiles lie easily, eyes do not. For all her sweet dimples and delicate features, those big blue eyes reminded me of frozen river water, straight out of the mountain. Still, when she sat beside me on the settee and started tutting over me like a motherly hen, I will admit I wallowed in her attention for a moment. It was a weakness I could not indulge overmuch, for I knew that not a single soul in this room had my best interests at heart.

“Why, it’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Kelly, despite the unfortunate circumstances. I’m Miss Nettie Honeywell, and I hope you don’t mind, but your esteemed Mr. Clarke has told me all about your situation.” Miss Honeywell placed one delicate hand over her bosom. “And my heart just went right on out to you, my lost little lamb.” Tears welled in her eyes, making them appear even larger. Both the mayor and his two cronies immediately produced hankies, jabbing them at her like the first one would get a prize.

“Why, thank you. How thoughtful.” She plucked Bascom’s hanky and dabbed her eyes. “As soon as your beloved grandfather passed from this mortal plane, these fine gentlemen

reached out and told me of your plight. I came as soon as I could.”

I picked up the mug again and sipped my tea, turning my ghost eyes on the pack of vultures masquerading as upstanding citizens. My Pops hadn’t been dead a week and I’d never laid eyes on Miss Honeywell before today, so she wasn’t local. They must have sent a fast rider to wherever she was the instant they heard the news. The question was, what did they want?

“How kind,” I murmured. See? I had manners. Rusty and ill-used, but I had them. “Did you have to travel far?”

She waved off my question. “What’s a little travel to help those in need?” She folded her hands in her lap. “And you are in need, my lost lamb. But on this day of sadness, there is a blessing.”

If there was a blessing, I was hard-pressed to see it.

“Miss Honeywell is from the Settlement,” Mr. Clarke said when it was clear I wasn’t responding anytime soon. “They’re in that fort west of here, about a day’s ride, up by the river. They have a place for you there.”

I frowned at the mayor, sure I hadn’t heard right. “I thought the fort was empty.” That fort had such rotten luck, Pops thought the land itself might be cursed. The group who built it died of a pox. The next group barely survived a cold winter season, and abandoned it. For the life of me, I couldn’t recollect what happened to any of the settlers after that. All this had occurred either before I was born or soon after.

Miss Honeywell smiled at me, an expression of rapture on her face. “Oh, I’ve heard the stories, but you’d never know it to look at the place now. Not since His Benevolence Gideon

Dillard took on the fort two years ago.” She leaned in, her voice soft and earnest, like she was telling me a secret. “HisBen Dillard saw the fort and just knew it was for us—that the Shining God would look down on us in favor, and He has.”

She took my rough hand in her soft one. “We’ve known nothing but abundance and good fortune in the Settlement, Mr. Kelly. All His Benevolence wants to do is share our good fortune with those in need, as the Shining God teaches.”

It was a honey wine kind of tale, too good to be true, and I wanted none of it. I wanted my hearth, my fire, my fiddle.

She squeezed my hand. “You’re found now, my little lamb.”

Mr. Clarke lifted his chin, his thumbs tucked under his arms like a mayoral chicken about to flap his wings and convince everyone he could fly. “The Settlement is a fine place, a *fine place*. They will aid you in your time of need.”

I looked about the room, at all the smiling faces, and could feel the trap springing shut. My stomach felt heavy with dread because I didn’t think there was a thing I could do about it. “What about Pops’s land? The animals?” There weren’t many left except my goat, Gertie, and a handful of chickens. I’d had to sell the rest.

“The animals will go to the Settlement,” Mr. Clarke said. “As for the land, we’ll hold it in trust until we sort out the question of your kin.” He licked his lips then, his eyes shiny. “Do you happen to know where your grandfather put the land deed, Mr. Kelly? Just in case, you understand.”

I knew exactly where it was. “No, sir. Have you checked the bank?” Pops didn’t care for banks. That would have been the last place he put it.

Mr. Clarke tried to hide his disappointment. “Ah, well. I’m sure it will turn up.”

I was positive it wouldn’t, but I smiled at him anyway.

Miss Honeywell took her leave after that—she would be going back to the Settlement today, whereas I had to tie up my affairs first. Mr. Clarke saw her to the door, leaving me in the care of his two silent cronies, Finchly and Bascom. Not wanting to sit there drinking unwanted tea, I excused myself to the privy. The mayor had an indoor one, and the hallway leading to it took me close to the front door. I snuck to the end of the hallway, stopping just short of the intersection.

Eavesdropping, I was once told by a cantankerous old biddy in town, was for naughty children who were in want of a good hiding. I’m of the mind that if you say a thing out loud, it’s not my fault if I overhear it. If a body wanted to keep something secret, they should work on their cunning. I mean, how else was I supposed to find anything out?

I heard the murmur of voices but couldn’t quite make out everything they were saying. Frustrated, I peeked around the corner. Mr. Clarke stood close to Miss Honeywell, his voice pitched so low I could only hear the tones. He drew two silvers out of his pocket, depositing the coins into Miss Honeywell’s delicate hands. She smiled, flashing him her dimples, before he bowed over the top of her hand in farewell.

I dipped back behind the corner before either of them looked my way. That was an awful lot of coin for Mr. Clarke to be handing out, and I had to wonder not only where the money was coming from, but what it was for. The exchange rattled me, leaving me as uneasy as a pullet in a snake pit.

I decided it didn't matter. Whatever anyone else's plans might be, to my mind, the Settlement was a temporary stop on the way back to my home. That's all there was to it.



After my trip to the privy, I was escorted to my grandfather's cabin to pack my things. It was difficult to be in the cabin without Pops there. The space was nothing as grand as the mayor's, but it was more than many had. The front door opened up into the parlor, which held a stone fireplace and two well-worn rocking chairs. A small table still held Pops's pipe and half-empty bag of tobacco, the sweet, earthy smell of the leaves making my throat tight. I could see the spot on the mantel where our clock had been, another sacrifice to Pops's doctor, leaving the oil lamp perched there looking mighty lonely.

From the parlor, there was a doorway leading into the kitchen and pantry space, as well as the small bedroom I'd lived in. Upstairs there were two bedrooms and another closet, which was where I needed to go, but I couldn't have the mayor dogging my heels the entire time.

Mr. Clarke was eyeing Pops's writing desk, no doubt wanting to get his itchy fingers on the land deed. Bascom and Finchly had stayed out on the front porch, so it was only me and Mr. Clarke in the cabin. I had the sense they were looking around, perhaps poking their heads into the barn to see what we had.

The way the mayor's hungry eyes were eating up the room, I knew leaving the land deed behind, even hidden as it was,

would be a mistake. I would have to take a chance, and I reckoned a few stolen moments alone with my grandfather's desk would tempt him sorely.

"I need to go get Pops's suitcase," I said, letting my eyes drift over to the desk, my expression troubled. I dropped my voice into a ragged tone. "I'd like a moment to say goodbye, you understand."

Mr. Clarke patted my shoulder awkwardly. "Of course, son." He dipped his hand into his pocket, bringing out a fine gold pocket watch. He made a production of checking it. "You go on ahead. We have a little time yet."

I forced out a "Thank you, sir" and kept my feet heavy as I went up the stairs. As soon as I was out of sight, I hustled along, fetching a worn leather suitcase out of the closet. I tiptoed into my grandfather's room, being careful to open and close the door quietly. The tobacco, leather, and soap smell of my grandfather was still strong, the scent causing a wave of grief to hit me so soundly all I could do was close my eyes and take it. I swallowed hard, scrubbing at my face with my jacket sleeve. No time for weeping, not now.

I flung the suitcase up onto the bed and hurried over to Pops's chest of drawers. Being careful to stay quiet, I eased the top one out, sliding my hand back into the space behind the drawer, feeling for the small piece of paper I knew was back there. For a few gut-clenching moments, my fingers met only wood. And then I found it, relief washing through me.

The land deed didn't look like much, only a hair bigger than my handspan if I set my fingers wide. Small, unassuming, yet a mighty powerful scrap of paper.

If you looked at a map around New Retienne, it looked like a patchwork quilt sewed by someone who couldn't cut a straight line. New Retienne and a few smaller holdings were sprinkled in among the very few pieces of land people had managed to purchase. Mostly, folks had to lease their lands from the various tribes, depending on where the land fell. Pops told me that a few early settlers had tried to take land by force. It went poorly, and folk had learned to deal square or take themselves to other pastures. This land and its people didn't take kindly to those who didn't treat it fairly. I respected that.

My grandfather had been a stranger here when he came over by boat, my father a babe in arms, and managed a third route—he married a young widow with her own small parcel of acreage and made a go of it.

The deed in my hand was near priceless. What *wouldn't* Mr. Clarke do to get his greasy fingers on it? I undid the buckles on the leather suitcase, popping it open, then thought better of it. Suitcases were easily searched or taken. I needed to be able to keep the precious deed on my person. Pops had been a canny fella and slow to trust. There was nothing he loved more than a good hiding spot. Which was why Pops's watch had a secret compartment.

I smoothed one finger gently along the edge of the back of the silver watch, feeling for the catch. When I found it, the back lid popped open, revealing a snug carry space. I tucked the folded-up deed into it and popped it closed before stashing it away in the inside pocket of my suit jacket.

I made sure I made a racket when I came down the stairs.

Mr. Clarke was as far as could be from the desk when I reached the bottom. I nodded at him before lugging my suitcase back to my room. Since I wasn't sure when I was returning, I packed several changes of clothing, my comb, tooth powder, and a small mirror. I had my grandfather's old deerskin bullet bag, which I used to carry my hunting knife, my few spare coins, and the other kinds of odds and ends one liked to carry about their person.

I stripped out of my suit to put on clothing more suitable for daily wear—trousers, linen shirt, suspenders. I was grateful that I didn't have to wear what other young women my age had to wear in New Retienne, which seemed cumbersome to me. Keeping an ear tuned for anyone approaching, I wrapped up my grandfather's watch and wedged it into the toe of my boot, grateful for once that they were a sight too large for my feet.

When I was all packed, I was herded unceremoniously into the back of a donkey cart alongside a wicker basket carrying the three egg-laying hens we had left and my brown-haired goat, Gertie. Gertie was unsure about the endeavor as a whole, bleating at me uncertainly as she was tied to the back of the cart, and I had never felt such a kinship with a goat until that moment.

Mr. Clarke, however, appeared right pleased with the development. "Mr. Cartwright here will get you where you need going." His eyes twinkled. "You're lucky—we managed to rustle up a gunslinger for your travels." He waved a hand like a proud papa at the man sitting next to the driver. "Bandits, you know."

Bandits. Right. A keeper, more like.

The driver, Mr. Cartwright, was skinny, all rawhide and bones, with suntanned skin and fat black muttonchops on his cheeks. Broken veins traced his nose and cheeks like a map of wandering creeks. “You sit in the back. Be careful of my cargo. You damage anything, you’re paying for it.” He didn’t look away from his donkeys as he said this.

The gunslinger was taller by inches, wider by several more, but leanly muscled. His skin was a deep brown with an undertone of bronze, the hair in his beard just starting to go a little gray, though he didn’t look much over thirty. He was dressed finer than Cartwright but not fussy like Mr. Clarke. Brown trousers, sturdy leather boots, and a good black jacket that were simple, but well made and well maintained. He wore a hat like mine—wide-brimmed but in a newer style, with a higher crown. I thought it mighty fine myself and more dashing than the bowler hat on Cartwright. He ambled over to me, and his coat flared, revealing a pistol on each hip, resting in a worn leather holster.

I squinted at him. “Am I just supposed to call you Gunslinger, then?”

“Either that or Mr. Speed.” He held out a hand, sizing me up.

I shook it, sizing him up as well.

He sighed, his brow furrowing. “You going to give me any trouble?”

“No, sir,” I said, releasing his hand and putting mine over my heart. “You won’t hear a peep out of me.”

He snorted. “That’s what I thought.”

Mr. Clarke puffed out his chest. “Be assured, Mr. Kelly, us here in New Retienne won’t rest until we find your next of kin. In the meantime, you’ll be taken care of.”

“I’m sure I will,” I said, baring my teeth. He could call it a smile if he wanted.

And with that dubious goodbye, the cart lurched forward. The mayor and his cronies shuffled into their buggy, but I paid them no mind. My eyes were on my grandfather’s cabin, the only home I’d known, as it faded into the distance.

I hadn’t spent much time in New Retienne, the closest town to my grandfather’s meager lands at five miles distant, and when we did, we weren’t so high in the instep that we rubbed elbows with folks like the mayor. But I knew, sure as spring brings new lambs, that they’d only do as little looking as they could so as not to draw suspicion. Madigan Kelly, if she existed, would not be found.

They’d look for the land deed, but nothing else. Try as I might, I couldn’t see anyone in the town sticking their scrawny necks out for me. I didn’t blame the town for that choice, nor did I lose any respect for them. You have to have respect before you can lose it, and the people of New Retienne had none of mine.

I reckoned I couldn’t assign much blame. It had been a long, hard winter and no one wanted an extra mouth to feed, especially not mine. Well, I didn’t want them either, though no one had asked.

I shifted in the donkey cart and wished a plague upon the whole town. The cart was full of bags of potatoes or turnips.

Even if I'd wanted to sit on them, which I didn't, Cartwright would have pitched a fit. I perched on my suitcase instead, listening to the cluck of the chickens and watching Gertie trailing behind us to make sure she wasn't chewing on her lead rope.

Mr. Cartwright had an intricately carved pipe clamped in his teeth, grumbling around it at the donkeys. The only poetry about this man was that dratted pipe.

About the Settlement, I knew precious little—I'd never gone past New Retienne before. So I was keeping my eye on landmarks and marking the time by wagon. Miss Honeywell had said it was a day's ride, but a donkey cart was a lot slower than a horse and rider.

Mr. Cartwright stopped jawin' at his donkeys, and I took an opportunity to question the gunslinger. "You ever been to the Settlement?"

He grunted, "No."

He thought one-word answers were going to deter me. Pops must be cackling in his grave. I was a dog with a bone when I wanted something. "You must know something." When in doubt, flatter a little. "Surely a man such as yourself wouldn't go into a situation not knowing *something*."

He grunted again, but this one sounded amused. "I've heard a thing or two."

I waited. Nothing. "And?"

He glanced back at me. "Hearing isn't knowing."

I wasn't learning anything, but I had pried more words out of him. "It can't be a hospitable place," I ventured.

“Good enough for the likes of you,” Cartwright said.

“All I’m saying is that everything else there has failed.” And it sounded *charitable*, which, when used by a man such as Mr. Clarke, meant giving a pittance to make yourself feel better. I imagined rough blankets, dirt floors, watery gruel once a day.

The gunslinger grunted again, somehow making it sound dismissive. I’d never known a fella who could express so much with so little.

“They probably have rats,” I said, “and beds full of fleas.” No response. “Ticks the size of houses.”

“You ever shut your yappin’?” Cartwright asked, his words garbled around the pipe tight in his teeth.

“Not when I got something to say,” I shot back. Cartwright would be no help, I knew that, but the gunslinger knew something, I could tell. If my mental map was accurate, Settlement land was in Rover territory. I quite liked the Rovers. They had a bendy way of thinking that I appreciated, and they took care of their kin. A Rover kid never went hungry, even if their close kin were gone.

Not a single one of my neighbors in New Retienne had checked on me but the mayor, and look where that had landed me.

“Do folk at the Settlement deal with the Rovers much?” I asked in an offhand manner.

“Don’t know,” the gunslinger said, not in a way that ended the conversation, such as it was, but in a way that said, *Wouldn’t that be interesting?*

“What about—”

Cartwright cut me off with an irritated growl. “Bite your tongue, or I’ll gag you with one of my socks.” He would do it, too. I could hear it in his tone. “You’ll have plenty of time to find out about the Settlement when you get there, now won’t you?” he said nastily, chortling around his pipe.

Eight months was a perishingly long time, and for a second, I broke out into a sweat. I took a shaky breath, calming myself. I’d get out if I needed to. I would find a way.

But I’d keep my mouth shut for the time being. The cart was slow, but Cartwright could always make me walk.

Cartwright tugged up on the reins, pulling the donkeys to a halt. “If you need a piss, now’s the time.”

The gunslinger kept a sharp eye on me as I climbed out of the wagon, mind working frantically. I couldn’t exactly take out my piece and make water next to him and Cartwright. Couldn’t hold it, either. I paused to scratch Gertie’s chin as I thought.

The gunslinger put his hands on his hips. “You going to go, or you going to scratch that goat?”

“Surely both.” I grimaced, holding my gut. “That dandelion tea. Runs right through a fella.”

The gunslinger ran a hand over his face before looking around us. He pointed at a clump of bushes. “Go on, then. And, Faolan?”

“Yessir?”

“Don’t make me shoot you this early in the trip.”

I pinched the edge of my hat, giving it a little tug down, before rushing to the bushes.



We were starting to lose light and looking for a good place to stop and bed down. That's when we saw the wagon. Or what was left of it.

From where I was perched on my suitcase, I could see a small, pale hand stuck out of the back, some of the fingers nothing but bones. Acid burned the back of my throat and I swallowed hard.

The wagon had been stripped, anything useful taken. With the bodies there, it was not far from grave robbing in my mind, but again, it had been a hard winter.

The gunslinger hopped off his seat at the front to go check it out, and I followed. No matter what was in that wagon, it would be better for me to see it and know than not see it and imagine. My mind could spin horrors with little provocation.

Cartwright stayed on the cart, a shotgun in his hands. "It's not a plague, is it?" He craned his neck, straining to see. "A pox?" Sweat beaded on his forehead, and his voice squeaked. "A bear or a mountain lion?"

Mr. Speed and I ignored Cartwright as we peered into the wagon. Inside the worn canvas, bundled into blankets, were the remains of a family—a woman, a young boy, a little girl. It was the mother's hand I'd seen. The gunslinger frowned, dipping around the side and dropping down on his haunches in the long grass.

I mimicked him so I could get a good look at the last body. A man, probably the father, his flannel shirt torn at the belly, his eyes gone. A wave of sadness crashed through me, filled

with echoes of my own grief. I let it flow away, back out into the world. I wouldn't cry on the roadside in front of the likes of Cartwright.

I nodded at the man. "Mountain lion?"

The gunslinger scowled down at the body before he shook his head. "Something got at him, probably drug him from the wagon, but it was after he was dead, I think. An opportunistic feeding, not a killing."

"How can you tell?"

"Very little blood around the wound. We stop bleeding after we die." He said the words absently, his mind elsewhere. He motioned to the man's face. "See the purple tint to his skin?"

I nodded.

"I think they froze to death. Happens sometimes. Folks think winter's gone, get desperate, and head out, only to get caught in a temperature drop."

Behind us, Cartwright made an impatient noise.

"We going to bury them?" I asked. Didn't seem right, leaving them as they were.

"No shovels," the gunslinger said. "But I reckon that canvas will burn just fine. Come on."

He stood up, and I helped him put the man back with his family. Cartwright fussed, but the gunslinger hushed him with a look as we dealt with the bodies. Before too long, we were on our way again. I watched the wagon burn as we clip-clopped down the road.

We should have been building camp, but none of us wanted to stay near the funeral pyre, so we kept on for a while yet.

I'd been considering sneaking away when we made camp

and heading for home on my own two feet. I put that thought aside for now. I could see, too easy, how it might be me someone found on the roadside, mouth open, eyes gone, screaming my way to the quiet fields and into the arms of whatever god would take me.