

*November 26, 1923*

## Chapter 1

*How many chances does a guy get before he goes to hell?* Tommy Dixon didn't think hell could be much worse than where he was now, sitting next to his lawyer in the stuffy Salt Lake County courtroom. The plain brown suit he wore felt stiff and pulled at his shoulders and thighs. He wasn't used to such restrictive clothing, or the hardness of the wooden ladder-backed chair in which he sat. He shifted, trying to relieve the numbness that was beginning to set into his left buttock. His left hip was always the part that bothered him, ever since that bronc in Pocatello.

"Sit still, Tommy!" the white-haired man next to him hissed in his ear.

*Sit still.* How was he supposed to do that? It was hot and smelled of stale ink and newspaper. The air was so still that even a large fly on the corner of the table couldn't be bothered to move. *When was the last time this room saw fresh air?* Tommy eyed the firmly shut windows. He would have gladly thrown them wide despite the November chill.

He wished he could have a cigarette. He wished he could see the sky. It had been almost three months since he'd been around the familiar scent of horses and cattle and dust. They were like home to him. The smell of real life. A smell you could grab onto. This place was sterile. Nothing lived here. Everything just died a slow death, in stuffy confinement. It was so slow that most of them didn't even realize they were dying. But Tommy knew he was. If he had to stay in jail, he would just die of suffocation.

Tommy looked across the dim courtroom to the door the jury would enter through, but it was still firmly closed. Under the pretense of a stretch, he glanced behind him at the big man in the front row. Max Johnson looked imposing in his dark blue suit, but he would have been

imposing no matter what he wore at six feet tall with his barrel chest. Hell, he was a commanding presence in any room. Tommy had never figured out how he did that. Was it the penetrating way he looked into you? Or just the confidence he exuded. Max Johnson: rodeo cowboy, stock contractor, and cattle rancher. There was nothing the man couldn't do.

Max might as well be Tommy's father. Tommy had lived at the Johnsons' ranch since he was thirteen. But he felt he was a constant disappointment to Max. He could never quite measure up. And now, well, now he didn't know how he would ever redeem himself. Max would never understand why he had done what he'd done.

Tommy shifted in his chair again, enduring another warning stare from the lawyer: Max's lawyer of course. Tommy was grateful for Max's help. He just wished Max really believed in him.

Tommy closed his eyes and tried to breathe calmly. And then he saw her. Floating inside his head. Eleanor. Bobbed brown hair framing that porcelain skin, those bottomless eyes, that beautiful big-toothed smile. He felt a pang deep in his chest. He'd killed his best friend for her. And may have lost her anyway.

The door to the judge's chamber clicked open, and Tommy opened his eyes. Eleanor's face dissolved as a short round man strode into the court room, wearing the traditional black judge's robe and very little hair on his perfectly round head.

"All rise for Judge Joseph M. Merriam," bellowed the bailiff. Tommy unfolded his lanky height from the hated chair, brushing back the lock of chocolate brown hair that habitually fell across his face and straightening his jacket. The judge reached his bench and sat, and then, as if on cue, the jury's door opened and the twelve now-familiar men filed

through and took their seats. To the one, they averted their eyes from Tommy. *Bad sign*, he thought.

“Has the jury reached its verdict?” said the judge, his face devoid of expression.

The jury spokesman rose from his seat. “We have, Your Honor.” He was a pasty-skinned man, his hair graying at the temples and his gray suit permanently wrinkled. He delivered a folded scrap of paper to the bailiff, who in turn carried it like an offering to the judge. Tommy watched the progression of the paper scrap like a starving man, following the judge’s fingers as he took the paper from the bailiff and opened it. With no change in expression, the judge simply folded the paper and reversed its journey back to the jury spokesman. Tommy’s eyes could have burned a hole in that paper. He half-expected it to catch fire as the spokesman opened it and cleared his throat.

The spokesman cast a glance toward Tommy before continuing. Sweat trickled down the back of Tommy’s neck. That this pale-faced pencil-pusher should have Tommy’s entire future in his hands- it was unfathomable. In a moment he would know whether he was going to breathe again or die of suffocation in a jail cell, convicted of first degree murder at the age of 22.

## Chapter 14

The spring of 1916 was blooming into summer by the time the divorce was final. The cattle were back out on the range, and Tommy's ribs were healed. The Johnsons had agreed to keep Tommy on, and they agreed to let him come along for the rodeo season again.

Max drove Tommy and his mother to the train station in Cheyenne the day after his 15<sup>th</sup> birthday. It was the first time he had been back since he left two years before. Seeing the rail yards again brought back sour memories of running with the boys and drinking and of Mr. Morton's death. Saying goodbye to his mother and watching her cry as she boarded the train cemented his dislike of the place. He couldn't leave for the ranch soon enough.

For Jake's part, he was surlier than ever, and never missed a chance to torment Tommy. Even Max, who seemed to have a blind spot where Jake was concerned, could see it, and let Tommy move into the bunkhouse with the other hands.

The other cowboys welcomed Tommy when he moved into the bunkhouse. He wasn't sure when it happened, but he had become one of them. When he thought about it, things might have changed after he cracked his ribs. A rite of passage. Anyway, it felt good to be accepted as one of the cowboys instead of tolerated as a child.

He spent every spare minute he could scrounge with Glenn, picking his brain, trying to learn everything he could. For his part, Glenn seemed to enjoy having a protégé, a kid brother. When people saw them together, they assumed the two were brothers, and Tommy liked how that felt.

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It was fall, and they had returned from the rodeo circuit when a letter came from Tommy's mother, and he realized he hadn't even missed her. Bernice brought the letter down from the house while he was putting his horse away for the evening.

"Thanks, Bernie," he said, tucking the letter into his hip pocket.

"Well, aren't you going to read it?"

"Sure. I'll read it later."

"Why not now?"

He looked at her. "What's your hurry?" He closed the stall and started for the door.

She followed him out of the barn. "I would think you would be anxious to hear how she's doing, that's all. You haven't heard a word since she left."

He closed the barn door behind her and then stopped a minute. "That's just it. She hasn't seen fit to write. Why should I be in a hurry to read it?"

"Oh, for Pete's sake. She's your mother! And she probably waited because she knew you were at the rodeos anyway." But then she looked closely at him. "Or have you still not forgiven her for leaving?"

He turned abruptly toward the corral and started walking. "Of course I've forgiven her. It was the best thing for her. She was miserable here. And frankly, it was the best thing for me, too."

"Then what's the problem?" she said, following him again.

"Look, Bernie. I'll read it when I'm ready. Just drop it, okay?"

“Okay,” she said, looking away.

He started for the bunkhouse. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yeah.”

When he looked back, she was already out of sight. He kicked a fist-sized rock with the toe of his boot. The day had been going so well until she brought him the letter. Why couldn’t Bernie understand that some things were better left in the past?

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Later in the bunkhouse after everyone else had gone to bed, he pulled a lantern close and opened the letter. His mother’s looping script struck him as foreign. He couldn’t remember ever getting a letter from her before.

*“Dear Tommy,*

*I’m sorry it has taken me so long to write, but I have been so busy.*

*I arrived in St. Louis without trouble and have been staying with my sister. I found a job at the county library. It is so good to be back in the city. I love the books and morning newspaper and all the hustle and bustle. There are so many automobiles now and everyone has electric lights in their houses. Imagine that.*

*I hope you are still enjoying ranch life. It is so good for me to be away from it. Give my best to Bonnie.*

*Love,*

*Your mother,*

*Sarah*

Tommy read the letter several times. He wasn't sure why. Maybe he hoped it would say something more, something he could relate to. How did he and his mother become so different? At least she was happier now. And he felt some satisfaction in that she hadn't written to or even asked about Jake. A snore from the nearest bunk made him look up into the dark outside his pool of lantern light. He shook his head. He didn't like the burning, tearing feeling in his gut, and thought it was probably just as well that she hadn't written more often.

He didn't write her back for a couple of weeks, and when he did his letter was just as brief and newsless as the one she had written. It wasn't on purpose; there just didn't seem to be anything to say that she would be interested in. Bonnie wrote a letter, too, and he was sure his mother would find that more worth reading anyway.

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Max rode along the south fence line, looking for breaks. The cattle had been grazing this area heavily because the grass was thicker here next to the wash. As he rode, he thought about Sarah and Jake's breakup and how Tommy had stayed on after Sarah left for Missouri.

Why did he bother trying to help young cowboys out? Jake, Tommy. Slim, who had joined up young and stayed for fifteen years. Why take on the aggravation? Best he could tell, it was just in his nature. The fact was that Max loved ranching and cattle and rodeo. Ever since he had run away from his father's dirt farm in Nebraska at the age of 16, he had wanted nothing else but to be a cowboy. It was because he loved it so much that he wanted to share it. To his way of thinking, being a cowboy was the best character-building experience there was.

It was the horses Max loved the most. A rodeo cowboy in his own right in his younger days, he had won many a steer roping title and ridden his share of bucking horses. That's how he knew what the rodeos wanted in their stock. He bought up horses at auction every spring, and he had a good eye for which ones would make good roping horses, and which ones were flashy and wild enough to be broncs.

Max had always been big, the leader by default. "Blessed with a deep voice and an imposing character," Bonnie's father used to say, although Max had always wondered if it was really much of a blessing. Seemed like it added up to extra work most of the time. Still, look at what he had accomplished. He'd picked this land up when the previous owner died, and the man's family had sold it to Max for a very good price because they liked him and Bonnie and wanted to see them make a go of it. Max had even expanded it by buying 100 acres from the county and 40 more from a neighboring ranch. And look at it now. The Bar J was something to be proud of. His cattle herd had swelled over the last twenty years, too, numbering over 1500 head now. And the regional rodeos counted on the Bar J stock. Max's steers were big and fast, and the broncs were wild and tough.

He dreamed of Glenn taking over one day and running the whole thing, once the boy gained enough experience in the rodeos and used up some of his youth. Glenn had a level head, and Max was pretty sure he was interested in being a rancher. Just thinking about Glenn taking over the Bar J someday made Max's chest swell. Glenn had talent and drive, and the patience and endurance necessary to make a fine rancher.

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Every so often, Max asked Glenn to take the car into Cheyenne to do the errands, and sometimes Tommy got to ride along. Today was one of those days. The morning cool was already giving way to the heat of a late September day. Jake thought Tommy was trying to get out of an honest day's work, which was partially true. It was a fun diversion.

Tommy liked the feel of the leather seats, and he particularly liked going fast. As Glenn pulled onto the main road, he opened his window to let in the breeze. The road was hard and dry, and the dust rolled in as they picked up speed.

"Close that thing before we suffocate," Glenn said, waving his hand to disperse the cloud.

Tommy shut the window. "We may die of heat with it up."

"I prefer heat to dust, thank you."

"Why don't you go a little faster? Then we can open the windows and solve both problems."

"Aren't you the smart aleck?" But he sped up, and when Tommy rolled the window down again a few minutes later, Glenn didn't say anything about it.

They made it to town in good time and the errands went smoothly. They had lunch at the café on Front Street, and by mid afternoon, the trunk was full of rolls of barbed wire and miscellaneous hardware and the back seat was packed with groceries.

As they drove out of town, Tommy said, "Can I drive?"

Glenn looked at him like he was daft. "Hell, no. You don't know how to drive."

"So teach me."

"Very funny."

"Come on. I didn't know how to ride a horse when you met me either, and you taught me that just fine."

“And you took off like a steer through a gate and nearly killed yourself, too.”

“I didn’t nearly kill myself. I didn’t even fall off. Besides, I can be careful.”

Glenn looked sideways at Tommy. “Like you were careful with that first bronc ride?”

“Yeah, well. That’s not the same thing. Besides, I didn’t mean to get bucked off that son of a...Ow!”

Glenn whacked him playfully in the chest. “Enough. I’m not going to let you drive Dad’s car.”

Tommy put on his best hurt expression. “Why ? Don’t you think I can do it? Is it that hard?”

“No, it’s not that hard. In fact it’s easier than riding a horse.”

“What do you have to do?”

“Well, there’s a gas pedal and a brake pedal and a clutch. See?” And Glenn showed him how it was done.

“Is that all? I can do that.”

“No, you can’t.”

“Why not? Just let me try for a minute. I promise I’ll go real slow.”

Glenn sighed. Tommy knew he would give in. He always did.

“All right. But just for a little ways.”

Glenn pulled the car over to the side of the road and the two switched places. Tommy concentrated on everything Glenn said, and after a few lurching false starts, he was driving the model T down the straight dirt road heading north.

“Look at me. I’m driving.”

“Yeah. Just take it easy, big shot.”

“Quit worrying, will you? I can do this.” Tommy looked across at Glenn and the car drifted toward the ditch.

“Watch where you’re going!”

Tommy swerved back to the left, fishtailing a little in the recovery. “Sorry.”

A few uneventful miles later, Tommy began getting bored and started experimenting with pushing down on the accelerator.

“Slow down.”

“It’s okay. I got it.” He sped the car up some more.

“That’s fast enough, Tommy.”

“You worry too much. Hey, this is fun.”

In spite of himself, Glenn started laughing. “I wish you could see the stupid grin on your face.” And then Tommy was laughing, too. They were making very good time until a hawk swooped across the road in front of them, going for a rabbit in the ditch.

“Whoa!” Tommy yelled and wrenched on the wheel. The car lurched across the road to the left. When he tried to compensate it began to lift off its right wheels.

“Hit the brakes!” Glenn shouted, and Tommy jammed them on. The airborne wheels hit the road with a *thunk* and the car began to fishtail. Tommy kept the brakes on as hard as he could and steered with the skid. A cloud of dust and gravel spewed out behind them. The car began to slow, but despite his efforts it slid toward the right shoulder, and lurched into the ditch with a thud that threw Tommy forward against the steering wheel. As the dust settled, Tommy saw that Glenn was bracing himself with his arms and feet, and looked unhurt, but he was panting like he had just run a foot race.

“Jesus Christ!” Glenn said.

“You all right?” Tommy asked.

“Yeah. You?”

“Yeah.”

“You hit your head,” Glenn said, and Tommy realized he was bleeding from a cut above his left eye.

“It’s no big deal,” he said, wiping the blood off with his fingers and then wiping the fingers on his pant leg.

The car was upright, although listing at an angle in the ditch. They both climbed out through the driver’s side door and walked around to look at the front of the car.

“It don’t look too bad,” Tommy said hopefully.

Glenn knelt down and looked under the front end at the axel, then at the right front wheel. “The axel looks okay. So does the wheel.” But the axel was resting on the dirt and the left front wheel wasn’t even touching the ground.

They looked at each other.

“Sorry,” Tommy said.

Glenn shrugged. “I let you drive. Come on. Let’s see what we can do to get this thing back on the road.”

Tommy felt terrible. He knew Glenn would be in big trouble with Max for letting him drive. “I’m really sorry.”

“I know. Now come on and help me.”

Glenn pulled a coil of rope they had bought in Cheyenne for Max out of the boot and they fastened it around the front axel. First they both tried pulling on it, then Glenn pulled while Tommy pushed at the back of the car. Neither strategy worked. The entire time not a single

vehicle passed by. Finally, when they stopped to wipe the sweat off their foreheads with their shirt sleeves, Tommy noticed a couple of riders approaching from across the prairie. He began waving his arms at them, and then Glenn joined him.

When the two gray and grizzled riders reached them, they looked down at the car with what Tommy took for amusement and a little disgust, and the heavysset one said to the other, "I told you these things wouldn't amount to nothin'."

Then the same man took a slow appraising look at Glenn and Tommy, who had sweat stains at their armpits, their new jeans covered with dust. "Looks to me like you boys should have ridden a' horseback."

Tommy felt himself flush and looked across at Glenn.

"Yes, sir," Glenn said. "I reckon you're right. The thing is, now that we're in this spot, we could use some help getting out of it."

The slimmer of the two horsemen, who hadn't said anything yet, looked at the car. He rode his horse around it from front to back and then to front again. Then he looked at Glenn. "How do you figure on getting it out of the ditch?"

"Well, we tried pulling it out with this rope, but we can't budge it by ourselves."

Tommy said, "Maybe one of you could tie the rope to your saddle while we push from the back." Both horsemen looked at him as if they just noticed his presence.

"You think so?" the heavysset one said.

"Might be worth a try," Glenn said.

"Might be, at that," the man said. The slimmer one looked thoughtful, but didn't speak. Glenn handed the rope up to the heavysset cowboy and he dallied it around his saddle horn. The other man was uncoiling his lariat.

“Why don’t you tie this rope around the axel, too,” he said to Tommy. “Then I can help pull.”

“Yes, sir,” Tommy said, and hurried to tie the rope. Then he moved to the back of the car, while Glenn went to the driver’s side.

When the stouter cowboy gave the signal, the two riders urged their horses forward and began to pull. Tommy pushed against the back of the car with all his strength and Glenn pushed against the door frame. At first nothing happened, but then the car began to move. Tommy pushed as hard as he could, his boots skidding in the gravel. He could just see Glenn through the car’s back window, steering the car with one hand on the steering wheel and pushing the frame with the other. The horses pulled gamely, and the tires began to bite into dirt. A few more minutes and the Model T was free.

Tommy untied the ropes from the axel and brushed the dirt from his hands.

“We’re mighty grateful,” Glenn said. “Can we give you anything for your trouble?”

The heavyset man shook his head.

The slimmer one coiled his rope, looking into the back seat of the vehicle. “What about a few of those groceries?” he said.

Tommy looked at Glenn. They would have to think of something to tell Bonnie.

“How about a couple of cans of beans?” Glenn volunteered.

The cowboys exchanged glances and nodded again. “That would be fine,” said the broader man.

So, beans delivered and stowed in the saddlebags, the cowboys rode off into the dry prairie grass. Tommy gave no argument when Glenn got behind the wheel. Neither said a word as they started down the road. The car seemed to be fine, except for a wobble in the right front

tire. As they drove along, they concocted a story to explain the missing beans and the sack of flour that had broken in the back seat, leaving a white coating of dust on the black leather. They settled on telling Bonnie that Glenn forgot to buy the beans and Tommy dropped the flour sack. They hoped Max wouldn't notice the wobble in the front wheel.

"I'll drive from now on," Glenn said.

"Good idea," Tommy agreed.

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They spent an hour cleaning up the car when they got home, and Max replaced the front right wheel a month later, thinking he must have hit a rock and bent it. Glenn and Tommy's secret bound them together even more closely.

Winter came on again, but Tommy didn't mind it so much. His schooling finished, he spent all his time with Glenn and the other hands. There was talk of the United States entering the European War. A couple of the younger hands, Floyd and Shorty, said they would join up if the country went to war, but to most of the hands, the war seemed like a very distant thing. Max complained regularly and loudly about Woodrow Wilson. Bernice said he was worried about what would happen to rodeo if the country got involved in the war.

When the news came in April of 1917 that the US had entered the war, Floyd and Shorty packed their bags and rode into Cheyenne to enlist. But Max held onto the rest of the hands, urging them to wait in the hope they wouldn't have to go. Tommy was too young to go anyway, but Glenn wasn't, and Tommy fervently hoped Glenn wouldn't decide to join up.

Since Max made his living contracting stock to the regional rodeos, Tommy and the other Bar J hands spent a lot of time driving cattle and horses during the summer. If the rodeos were close enough together and the terrain was suitable, they would drive the stock cross country from one rodeo to the next. But if the rodeos were particularly far apart or there wasn't much time between them, or there were too many fences in the way, Max would ship the stock by rail. Tommy dreaded driving the stock to the train station in Cheyenne in June of 1917, because the memories of Mr. Morton and whiskey and his mother leaving on the train bubbled up in a bilious soup. He stayed at the back of the herd with the stragglers and kept his head down until the last animal jumped aboard the freight car and the door slammed shut behind it. When the train pulled out with all hands on board, he didn't look out of the windows, but he felt the tension melt away with every passing mile. Once they left Cheyenne, the summer sprawled out ahead of him like paradise.

There were several times that summer when they drove the stock across the prairie to the next rodeo. Driving the stock cross country was almost as much fun for Tommy as the rodeos themselves. He spent most of his time at the back of the herd in the dust, but that was fine. He enjoyed the routine of riding all day and camping at night.

He spent any spare time he had with Glenn. Tommy watched Glenn compete, and Glenn was always there to see Tommy ride and rope. Then in the middle of the summer of 1917, Glenn met a girl named Jeanne and began spending a lot of time with her in between events. Although Tommy liked Jeanne, he wasn't going to hang around when she and Glenn were together. He didn't like being the odd man out. He could take a hint. Besides, it was embarrassing when he found them kissing.

Bernice and Tommy still teased each other regularly, and more times than not they ended up together during that summer and the next. But as they got older, and Bernice grew prettier, Tommy found that sometimes he couldn't help thinking of her as a girl instead of a buddy.

Like now, sitting beside her on the corral fence waiting for Glenn to rope a steer in practice for tomorrow's rodeo in Cheyenne. It was a clear, warm July evening in 1918, and Bernice, now 16 to his 17 years old, had cleaned up and washed her hair. Her fresh smell distracted him, and it was all he could do not to reach out and touch her. How she managed to keep so clean during rodeo season was a mystery to him. Right now he smelled like sweat and horses and cow manure, which was pretty much his normal state. During the day, Bernice practiced her trick riding, raced horses and roped and herded stock with the rest of them, and yet here she was, all shiny and scrubbed. He wondered why she bothered when she would just get dirty again tomorrow.

Being back in Cheyenne didn't bother Tommy. He was glad the rodeo grounds were a long way from the rail yards. It was kind of nice to be so close to home midsummer. Bonnie and Suzanne had even taken the opportunity to go back to the ranch for a few days.

"I think Glenn is going to pop the question to Jeanne soon," Bernice said, as they watched Glenn ride into the arena, across the fence from a corral full of milling steers. Two other cowboys rode into the crowd of cattle and began to separate a steer from the herd and move it toward the gate.

"What question?" Tommy said, watching Glenn back his horse up next to the corral and then ready his rope. The cowboys took turns cutting out steers for each other to rope, and the two who moved Glenn's toward the corral gate threw playful jibes at each other and at Glenn that

Tommy couldn't quite hear. One of them would haze the steer, keeping it running in a straight line for Glenn to rope it, and then Glenn would do the same for one of them on the next one.

"The marriage question, you dope."

"How do you know that?"

"Jeanne told me."

"How would she know if he hasn't asked her yet?" He shook his head. "You girls spend too much time gossiping. You can't even tell truth from stories anymore."

Bernice sniffed. "Oh, what do you know? You boys would miss your own funeral if it was up to you."

"If she's so sure he wants to marry her, why doesn't she talk to *him* about it?"

"Because! It's the boy's job to ask. For Pete's sake, Tommy, don't you know *anything*?"

Tommy laughed, and was about to launch a retort when the gate opened and the steer shot out into the arena. Glenn let it run the required forty feet ahead before he spurred his horse after it. Tommy loved to watch Glenn work. He and the horse moved like one being, and the horse knew exactly what to do. The hazer lit out after the steer, keeping it going in a straight line until Glenn could throw his loop. Tommy watched Glenn's every move, memorizing the details to use with his own mount. Glenn's throw was smooth, the rope an extension of his arm, and it dropped neatly over the steer's horns. The steer felt the rope and slowed abruptly, and Glenn pulled the reins back. The horse responded immediately, tucking its back legs under to prepare for the jerk when the steer hit the end of the rope. But the rope's slack had caught behind its right front leg. When the rope went taut, the horse's leg shot out from under it, knocking it off balance. The horse threw its head up in panic just as Glenn was starting to dismount, causing

Glenn to lose his balance. With his left foot still in the stirrup, he pulled the horse over on top of him.

Bernice screamed.

Tommy leapt from the fence and sprinted toward Glenn. The horse was struggling to right itself, still panicked by the rope pulling its front leg up. The hazer drew his knife and cut the rope to free the horse and Tommy ran to the horse's head and pulled the animal up and away. But Glenn didn't move. The horse was unhurt, so Tommy let it go. Glenn's body lay at an odd angle, and his head was turned too far over his shoulder.

The hazer yelled for someone to get a doctor. Tommy heard someone ride off at a gallop. Bernice ran up and threw herself over Glenn's body. But Tommy just stood there, staring. The sounds around him seemed far away. His ears buzzed, and it was as if he was watching what was happening from some other place.

A buckskin-clad Indian ran up and knelt beside Glenn, and Tommy recognized Leon Red Deer, an Arapaho they roped with sometimes. As the hazer pulled Bernice away, screaming and crying, Leon's eyes met Tommy's and confirmed what Tommy already knew. Glenn was dead, his neck broken.

Tommy fought the nausea that rose up in his throat. He stared at Glenn, unable to move. As the doctor arrived with Max right behind him, Leon took Tommy by the shoulders and turned him away, walking with him toward the fence. Max's grief-stricken roar echoed toward the darkening sky, and Tommy's legs buckled. He would have fallen if Leon hadn't caught his arm. Clamping his hands over his ears, he bent over and vomited into the dirt.

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*Why couldn't it have been Jake instead of Glenn, Tommy thought. Or me?*

Even weeks later it still seemed impossible to Tommy that Glenn could be gone. He felt like he had lost his right arm, like he was alone in an endless moonless night. He had lost his sense of direction, his frame of reference.

The Johnson family mourned. Bonnie didn't come out in public, and Suzanne and Bernice moped around snapping at everyone. Max was unapproachable. He buried himself in the work of the rodeos, continuing to drive the stock and the hands from one town to another, devoid of outward emotion. At first Tommy thought Max was trying to deny it happened at all, and it made him angry. But one evening in Idaho Falls, he wandered into the horse barn after everyone had left, and saw Max there in the corner, crumpled to his knees. His body shook, and Tommy could hear his sobs from clear across the stable. Tommy stood afraid to move lest Max would know he was there. As he watched the man's grief pour out, he finally understood how much Glenn's death had cost Max. He had lost his only son. And Tommy felt an empty pain open up inside himself like a black chasm, so wrenching that he almost cried out. He wished that he could somehow bring Glenn back, could somehow ease his own and Max's torment. He would do almost anything to roll back time.

But then in the middle of that swimming hopelessness, another feeling tore through his gut, shocking him with its strength. Envy. He envied Glenn that he had a father who loved him so much, when he, Tommy, had never had one, and he wished he could take Glenn's place, dead or alive, on the receiving end of that love.

Bitting his lip until he tasted warm blood, he turned and ran into the night.

## Chapter 19

Tommy pushed his horse into a canter. The grass was still wet with dew as he rode through it, and the sun glittered off the moisture like diamonds. A young kid brought Eleanor's note to Tommy at camp first thing this morning. Her normally elegant handwriting, now hurried and messy, asked him to meet her down by the river right away. Its abruptness made him want to hurry.

As he rode, he thought about his time with Ray the night before.

Last night at the tavern in Pueblo was the first time Tommy had seen Ray since La Junta three weeks ago. Ray was already corked by the time Tommy got there. He clapped Tommy on the back and poured him a whiskey, and the bragging and jabbing began about the upcoming events.

"Drink up, Tommy. This is your last night before I wipe the floor with you again."

Tommy left the whiskey sit as always. But he leaned across the table towards Ray and smiled. "You haven't got a prayer, rich boy."

"You don't know from nothin'," Ray said. He spread his arms wide, appealing to the rest of the boys around the table. "A man that can't even stomach whiskey is telling me *I* haven't got a prayer?" He took his own shot glass and threw back its whiskey in one gulp. Slamming it down on the table, he leaned toward Tommy and said, "I look forward to wiping that cocky smile off your face."

Tommy sat back and lit a cigarette. Frank McGee and Pete Barnes stood behind Ray, and were starting an argument about which bucking horse was the worst they ever rode.

“It was Satan’s Uncle,” Pete said. “He nearly beat me to death. Then after ten full minutes of bucking he threw me over his head like he’d been playin’ with me the whole time. Then he stomped on my arm and broke it in three places!”

“That just shows what a lousy bronc rider you are,” Frank said. “I’ve stayed on him clear to a standstill.”

“Well, bully for you!” Pete fired back. “I noticed you had some trouble sittin’ Cobra.”

“That’s because he’s the worst bucking horse in the country.” Frank said, his voice rising.

Ray looked over his shoulder at the two of them and then grinned across the table.

Tommy met his eyes but stayed quiet. Cobra belonged to the Johnsons. He was Max’s pride and joy, and Tommy was the only one that had stayed on him so far this year.

Ray fingered his drink. “What do you think, Tommy? Is Cobra as tough as they say?”

“He’s almost as tough as me.”

Ray roared with laughter and slapped the table and the group erupted into noise. He raised his whiskey. “Attaboy,” he said and threw it back. He slammed his glass on the table again and refilled it along with the others around it. Tommy’s glass still sat untouched on the table.

Tommy watched Ray’s eyes scan the room, coming to rest on a woman with jet black hair who was standing at the bar. Her hair hung straight and gleaming to the middle of her back. Her dark face was round and beautiful and obviously Indian. The fringes of her western skirt accented the curve of her hips.

“Where is Eleanor tonight?” Tommy asked, knowing what was on Ray’s mind as he looked at the woman. He watched the other man’s face sour slightly.

“She stayed at the boarding house. Didn’t have much of an appetite for drinking tonight.”

“She doesn’t drink much at the best of times,” Tommy said, watching Ray. “Something up with you two?”

Ray sighed and looked at Tommy. The din went on around them. “Naw. But,” he leaned forward and lowered his voice more. “To tell you the truth, being married is boring as hell.”

“I don’t know how you can say that, when you are married to such a terrific girl.”

“Yeah, well. Let’s just say it looks better than it is.” Ray sat back and eyed Tommy. “You wouldn’t be stuck on my wife now, would you?”

Tommy sat up. “Don’t be stupid. I just don’t see why you can’t appreciate what you’ve got, that’s all.”

“What I’ve got is a ball and chain around my ankle,” he said, turning to look at the Indian girl again. “Sometimes she drives me nuts.” He looked back at Tommy. “I’m not like you. I’m not a one dame man.”

“What do you mean, ‘not like me’? I don’t have a girl at all.”

Ray smiled slyly and glanced toward the bar. “Would you like me to introduce you?”

###

Tommy shook his head as he rode along through the still cold morning air, remembering how Ray had dragged him over to the girl on the pretext of introducing him and then proceeded to seduce her himself. It wasn’t right. He was a married man. But Tommy felt powerless to stop him. He felt sorry for Eleanor. She wasn’t stupid. Surely she knew what he was doing. He urged his horse on.

When he reached the grove of trees at the turn of the river, where she said she would be, he slowed his horse to a walk and looked around. A thin gray mist was rising off the water, dissipating in the sun. He stopped and dismounted about fifteen feet from the river, where the sand turned to cobbles, and tied Comanche to the nearest cottonwood.

“Eleanor?” he called hoarsely. “Are you here?”

She appeared from behind a willow break about 40 feet away, her hair falling across her face. He tried not to stare at the way her dress clung to her legs and hips in the early damp. His throat felt dry. How could anyone cheat on her, he asked himself?

“Thanks for coming,” she said, her voice trembling.

He moved toward her. “Are you all right?”

She ducked her head as he approached, and he had to bend his neck to try to catch her eyes. “Eleanor, what is it?”

When she looked at him, all he could do was stare. Both her eyes were blackened and there were bruises on her neck.

“What the hell happened?”

She cringed, and he lowered his voice. “Who did this to you?” Raising her chin in his hand, he saw the shame and fear in her eyes.

“As if you didn’t know,” she said, suddenly defiant.

“Ray?” he asked, not wanting to believe it.

“Who else?” She turned away. “He came home stupid drunk and stinking of some other woman. And when I turned him away, he beat me and... forced me.” Her voice broke at the end.

He stared at her helplessly. Seeing her beautiful face beaten black and blue made him sick to his stomach. He knew he would see her bruised features every time he looked at Ray from now on. He wished he didn't know.

She whirled back toward him, her battered face accusing. "You were there last night. I know you were. Why didn't you stop him? Why didn't you do something?"

The force of her sudden anger drove him back a step. How did this become his fault? "I can't control him!"

She glared at him for a moment, but then her anger evaporated as abruptly as it had flared. "I know," she said. "I'm sorry. I'm just all balled up inside and mad and...and..." Before he knew how she got there she was in his arms, her tears soaking his shirt. He knew he shouldn't be here, alone with her, comforting her. His friend's wife. But she felt so soft and warm and yielding.

He stroked her hair and let her cry. And as he held her, anger began to grow inside him. How could Ray hit a woman? Any woman. But especially Eleanor.

He didn't know how long they stood like that, her face buried in his chest, but finally she quieted and peered up at him. "Thanks for coming, Tommy. I needed to talk to someone, and I knew you would understand. You are so kind to me. Such a good friend."

But Tommy didn't feel like a good friend. She was right. He watched Ray get drunker and drunker last night. He knew Ray was going to seduce that woman and hadn't done anything to stop him. He had betrayed her friendship as surely as if he had hit her himself. And now, his shame was compounded by an intense longing to kiss away her pain. What kind of a friend was he? Whose friend?

"What am I going to do?" she said.

He pulled away gently, afraid to touch her anymore. "I'll talk to Ray," he heard himself say. "I'm sorry, Eleanor. He shouldn't treat you this way."

She smiled through her wet, bruised face. "Thank you," she whispered. She reached up and kissed him lightly on the cheek. His skin burned where her lips had touched. "Thank you," she said again.

Then she turned back toward the willows. "I should go before he wonders where I am."

"Will you be all right?"

She looked at him and smiled through her bruises. "Yes," she said. "I'll be all right now."

He watched her disappear into the willows and heard her horse's hooves recede before he went to untie Comanche and mount up. He felt dizzy from a wash of conflicting emotions and he didn't know which one to concentrate on. In the end, he focused on the place where she had kissed him, and his skin continued to tingle there for a long time.

###

Panic nagged at the back of Tommy's mind. How could he talk to Ray about hitting Eleanor without admitting he had met her by the river? But he promised Eleanor he would talk to Ray. Why hadn't he stopped Ray from seducing that woman last night? Made him go home before it had all started? Tommy was so distracted that his saddle bronc bucked him off in less than a minute. He placed dead last.

"Is something bothering you?" Max asked. "That was the worst ride I've seen out of you since you broke your ribs when you were a kid."

Tommy tensed. He was in no mood for Max's criticism. "I just had a bad day, that's all."

Max eyed him. "You sure that's all?"

Tommy looked up at the note of genuine concern in Max's voice. "Yeah, that's all," he said, thinking there was no way in hell that he could explain this to Max. "I'm just tired."

"Well, you're done now until Rawlins. Just take it easy and rest up."

"Yeah, I'll do that."

Max squeezed Tommy's shoulder and he responded with a weak smile. Once Max had gone, he walked around the grounds for awhile, trying to work out what to do. Nighttime found him at the local speakeasy, watching Ray party on as if nothing had happened. The very idea that he could laugh and flirt after beating up his wife churned in Tommy's gut. *I've got to talk to him now, before he gets too ossified to listen, or I get too mad to keep from punching him myself.*

He pulled Ray away from the laughing group. "I need to talk to you alone."

Ray regarded him for a minute. "Sure, buddy." Then to the others, "Carry on, boys." The cowboys around the table raised their glasses and Frank launched into a raunchy story that drew the attention of the rest, while Ray and Tommy went to an empty table in the corner. On the way Ray picked up another bottle and two glasses from the bar.

"You're not yourself tonight, Tommy. What's eating you?" Ray said, after pouring them each a shot.

For a moment Tommy just looked at Ray and his stomach hurt the way it did when he was about to ride a bronc.

"Come on, man. Whatever it is, it can't be that bad. Let's have it."

"I saw Eleanor today," Tommy blurted.

Ray looked confused. "And?--"

"Her face was covered with bruises," Tommy said, glaring at Ray.

Ray held his gaze for a moment before his eyes slid to the table. “Oh.”

“Oh? That’s it? *Oh?*” Tommy’s voice began to shake. “You beat up your wife, Ray. Is that really all you have to say?”

For a moment Ray looked completely lost. He sighed loudly, and the effect was that his entire body deflated. When he looked at Tommy again, his eyes were pleading. “I didn’t mean to, Tommy. It was an accident---”

“An accident?” Tommy could barely hold his voice down. “How stupid do you think I am? Nobody does something like that by accident!”

“No. I mean...” Ray cast his gaze around as though looking for inspiration from the dirty walls. Then he leaned toward Tommy, his elbows on the table. “Look, I got a little out of control. I didn’t even realize it until this morning---”

“A little out of control. For God’s sake, Ray.”

“All right, all right,” he said, throwing up his arms. “I blew it. Is that what you want to hear? I screwed up royal.” He leaned across the table again. “But it won’t happen again, Tommy. I swear, it won’t.”

It was Tommy’s turn to look away. He wanted to believe Ray more than anything. He wanted the whole thing to go away.

“You gotta believe me,” Ray said. “I love Eleanor. I never meant to hurt her.”

“Then why did you?”

Ray gazed at the table for a moment, gathering his words. When he looked up at Tommy, his face was sincere. “She was nagging me, the way she does. Complaining about everything; the time I spend with my friends, the drinking, the way I dress, the amount of money I spend, you name it. She wouldn’t stop. It drove me over the edge.”

“I can imagine it gets hard to listen to her criticize you,” Tommy started, “But that’s no excuse to hit a woman, Ray.”

“You’re right,” he said, sitting back. “I screwed up. I admit it.” His eyes met Tommy’s again. “I don’t know what gets into me.”

Tommy pointed to the bottle on the table. “That’s what gets into you. You let that stuff run your life.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Is it the dreams again? Do they have anything to do with it?”

Ray’s gaze slipped to the side and his eyes clouded as if someone had pulled a window shade. His hand reached for the whiskey bottle and pulled it into his lap. It seemed to Tommy like Ray had just left the room for somewhere very far away. “The dreams are always there.”

“Look, I’m sorry for what you went through over there. But, Ray, there has to be another way to deal with it besides hitting Eleanor.”

“I know. You gotta believe me when I say I’m sorry and it won’t happen again.” Ray was pleading now. “I need you to believe me, Tommy. Please.”

“You need Eleanor to believe you.”

“She does. I already apologized to her. I told her I’d make it up to her.”

“Then why are you here instead of with her now?”

“She didn’t want to come out in public like that. I’m taking her out in a couple days, when she feels better. She forgives me, Tommy,” he said.

Tommy shook his head, stared at his full whiskey glass on the table. He wanted to believe it had just been a one time thing. “Yeah, all right. But you gotta make sure there isn’t a next time, Ray.”

Ray looked so relieved it was almost comical. “You’re right. You’re absolutely right. There won’t be.” He held out his hand and Tommy took it. As they headed back over to the group a few minutes later, Tommy felt like a lot better; like he had made a difference.

“Say,” Ray said, stopping just before they reached the group. “When did you see Eleanor anyway?”

Tommy’s gut clenched. “This morning,” he said, trying to sound nonchalant. “I went into town on some errands for Max and passed the boarding house, so I stopped in. You had already left.”

“Huh,” Ray said. Then he clapped Tommy on the back. “Sorry I missed you.”

“Yeah, me too.”