

A dramatic landscape featuring a lightning storm over a field. The sky is dark and filled with heavy, dark clouds. A bright, jagged lightning bolt strikes the ground in the center, with several smaller bolts branching out to the left and right. The ground is a flat, open field with some sparse vegetation. The overall mood is intense and powerful.

# Lightning Struck Twice

**D Ray Van**

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By D Ray Van

March 18, 2024

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*CHAPTER ONE: Hot-Blooded Murder*

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Friday, August 5, 1892

Prescott Woods, Wyandotte, Oklahoma Territory

The argument had spiraled out of control, and all sense of reason had high-tailed it out of town. In one swift and horrifying act, the woman's fingers gripped a nearby rock and struck the other woman from behind. The sound of stone against skull was a sickening thud, and the victim crumpled to the ground, dead.

The murderess stood for several moments, trembling. She was waist-deep in guilt and regret, awash with fear. The weight of her actions was painfully clear: the victim's lifeless body lay on the ground, and she held the bloody murder weapon in her hands. She looked at both in disbelief and shock.

*What have I done?* she thought. *My God! What have I done?*

The weapon slipped from her fingers, and she held her hands in front of her face, staring at them. A shudder gripped her from head to toe. Her heart pounded against her rib cage; she tried to catch her breath. She dropped to her knees beside the dead woman and attempted to arouse her.

"Wake up! Please. Oh, please wake up," she pleaded and shook the victim. "I didn't mean to—" But she soon realized the victim would not, could not wake up.

She wept bitterly. Tears ran down her cheeks and dripped off her chin.

###

The day had started peacefully enough on a summertime outing. The bright sun was high in the cloudless blue sky, but a light northwest breeze kept the temperatures quite pleasant. Two Japanese women were enjoying a leisurely buggy ride on the dusty trail south of Wyandotte, Oklahoma Territory, toward the Neosho River. They looked so much alike that they could have passed for sisters, even twins. Their near-matching calf-length skirts with delicate beads, white cotton blouses, and straw hats added to the allusion.

The women stopped for a picnic lunch under the shade of a scraggy oak on a bluff overlooking a bend in the river. They ate, drank, and laughed the afternoon away, swapping stories, future dreams, hopes, and desires.

They finished their meal and cleared away the remnants of their picnic. The conversation was jubilant when the women confided in each other that they were pregnant. They laughed and danced over their shared good news.

But words formerly shared in laughter eventually took on a sharper edge. Once filled with merriment, their voices now dripped with disdain and acrimony. With each passing minute, the tension grew taut like a tightly wound spring. The breeze, which had provided

comfort earlier, seemed to carry a deepening chill, mirroring the cooling atmosphere between the two companions.

The woman's eyes narrowed. Her voice was laced with hostility. She could not hide her growing rage any longer. A festering anger consumed her, fueled by memories of her mother's death and years of perceived slights and unfulfilled desires.

Words evolved into heated arguments, accusations flying like poisonous arrows. Their voices echoed in the otherwise peaceful surroundings, and when the other woman turned her back—the final insult—she could endure no more, and she stuck without any thought of consequences.

The victim lay dead.

The murderess got to her feet and stood frozen for several moments, uncertain what to do next. Beads of sweat trickled down her temples. Her brow was wet, her body drenched in sweat. The forest seemed to swirl around her; she staggered but regained her balance. She quickly looked to see if there were any witnesses. When she saw none and heard nothing out of the ordinary, she devised a plan: swap clothes and identities with the victim and then leave on the first train out of town.

She knelt and undressed the victim's lifeless body. She disrobed and slipped into its undergarments. She shook the leaves off the skirt and stepped into it. She cleaned as many smudges as she could from the blouse before putting it on.

When she started to dress the corpse, an unfamiliar noise startled her. The woman froze and looked to see what it was but saw nothing. Her heart beat so rapidly it felt like it would leap from her chest. She could not control her feelings of anxiety and guilt; they overwhelmed her like stormy waves crashing on the shore. Abandoning the first part of her plan, she hastily gathered her clothing and stashed them under the buggy's seat. She took one last look around for anything she had missed and spied the victim's straw hat. After retrieving it, she got on the buggy and slapped the horse's rump with the reins. It lunged forward, buggy in tow.

But what next?

Her mind raced, filled with unanswered questions: Who had seen the two of them leave town together? Who would notice that only one returned? Could she pass herself off as the victim? How much time did she have before she would be missed? How long before someone would find the naked body?

Her fear and desperation mounted with each passing mile. But she suppressed these feelings as best as she could by focusing on the last part of her plan: take the first train out of town.

On the ride back, she stopped at an abandoned barn. The woman looked for witnesses, and seeing none, she hid her clothes and the picnic basket under some loose straw. After hiding the items, she stood frozen with guilt and regret, looking at the pile of straw,

reliving the horror of what she had done, but she brushed aside those feelings with the overwhelming urge to get away as quickly as she could. She ran to the buggy, climbed aboard, and firmly slapped the horse's rump with reins.

It took off in a gallop, buggy in tow.

In ideal conditions, the northbound train's whistle could be heard when it blasted at Cattle Crossing, nearly five miles southwest of Wyandotte, but today, its first blast echoed through the valley at the four-mile curve. When she heard it, the woman urged the horse toward Miss Lilly's Boarding House with a flick of its reins, and it responded with a brisk canter. She stopped by Miss Lilly's long enough to pack two satchels and leave without being seen.

The woman purchased a one-way ticket on the northbound St. Louis Express and boarded the first passenger car with little time to spare. She had barely found her seat when the conductor yelled, "All aboard!"

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*CHAPTER TWO: TG Lambert's Urgent Telegram*

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TG Lambert was no ordinary cowboy. He was an eye-catching, light-skinned, pure-blood Navajo brave, forty years old but could pass for thirty or younger. He stood six feet tall, was broad-shouldered, and looked more like a white man than a Navajo but was shunned by both. Early on, he learned to fight everyone and draw against anybody who called him a half-breed or looked at him cross-eyed, thinking he might be one.

By his early twenties, Lambert had made a name for himself when, in the fall of '73, a gang robbed the Silver Rock City Bank, and Sheriff William Duggan asked him to help track them to their hideout. His sharp eyes quickly followed their trail and found their cabin.

While Duggan and two other deputies flanked the building, a ruckus broke out inside the cabin with riotous thumping, crashing, banging, and rowdy yelling, shouting, and cursing.

Then silence.

The door burst open so suddenly that the sheriff and deputies raised their rifles, ready to fire. To their surprise, four ruffled and bloodied bank robbers stumbled out the door with hands lifted high above their heads. Right behind them was the brave, brash young Navajo, grinning from ear to ear and waving his Colt .45 like a victory flag.

After that, Duggan called upon him from time to time to hunt fugitives and bring them to justice. Before long, Lambert discovered he had a knack for finding people, and he abandoned punching cows for a new full-time profession: bounty hunter. Anyone with a price on their head, dead or alive, did not matter one way or the other to Lambert as long as there was a bounty.

Over the years, Lambert and Duggan developed a close bond and friendship out of respect, so when Lambert received an "URGENT" telegram from Sheriff Duggan, he dropped everything and caught the first northbound train out of Fort Worth, Texas, to Vinita, Oklahoma Territory.

###

Monday, August 22, 1892

Vinita, Oklahoma Territory

The setting sun cast long shadows across the landscape, creating a warm golden glow in the western sky, but this idyllic scene was interrupted when passengers aboard the steam locomotive felt a jolt as the train slowed and abruptly stopped beside Vinita's depot.

The cars jostled and settled into place, and passengers braced themselves against the sudden stop, their bodies swaying back and forth before finding balance. Some held onto the seatbacks or the overhead luggage racks, while others reached out to steady

themselves on the sturdy brass handrails along the aisle. A few hats flew off and tumbled to the floor, adding to the commotion.

Outside, the locomotive released a final puff of steam, and its iron beast-like form gradually quieted down. The Vinita depot stood nearby, a charming wooden structure, weathered and now a fading shade of red.

The train's unusual arrival caused a stir among those waiting on the platform. They watched with raised brows and dropped jaws, concerned for friends and loved ones aboard the train.

"Vinita, Oklahoma, folks," the conductor said when he entered the passenger car. "Thirty-minute stop. Refreshments are available in the depot, and rest facilities are on its north side."

The commotion finally settled, and the passengers recovered from the unexpected stop. Conversations resumed, and people exchanged curious glances, wondering what had caused the abrupt halt. They began to gather their possessions, preparing to disembark.

Lambert glanced out the window, his tired eyes squinting against the setting sun. He preferred the feel of a leather saddle and a good horse under him, but he could not make the trip on horseback as quickly as by rail. When he first boarded and saw the size of the passenger seats, regret was his immediate reaction, yet he managed to wedge himself into the cramped accommodations. But after ten hours on the train, every joint in his body begged for mercy. He had not slept in more than a day and had eaten the last bite of beef jerky hours ago. The salt-laden meat had his throat as dry as the desert, and with only warm water to quench his thirst, he needed a real drink—the sudsier, the better.

While the passengers made their way to the exits, Lambert unwound himself from his confined seat and stretched his six-foot frame. He grabbed his satchel and saddlebag. When he set foot on the platform, the rich aroma of cows hung so heavy in the calm air that their taste lingered on his tongue. To the west and north of the depot, stockyards were overflowing with cattle awaiting transportation northward to the packinghouses in Kansas City. Their grunts, snorts, and bellows added to the din of cowboys, the locomotive, depot workers, and passengers.

Nearby, eager young men waited with buggies, hawking rides into town. Lambert approached three, none yet out of their teens. The lankiest one with unruly flaming red hair spoke up.

"At the livery, mister. We's got horses fer hire. Good stock and reasonable prices, too."

"Then you can ride me to the hotel, boy."

"Not fair," a pudgy, pimple-faced kid said, blocking Lambert's way. "I was here first."

"Me, too," the other one said.

"Maybe you were, but he's got the goods; you ain't," Lambert said. He stared at the two, square in their eyes. "So step aside, gents."

The two young men glanced at each other and then at Lambert's matching pearl-handled sidearms. Without hesitation, they twirled, and the lanky young man stepped between them.

"Ya Injun, mister? Ya kinda look like one," he said, cocking his head, "and then again, ya don't dress like any I've seen. Maybe, yer a half—"

"Full-blood Navajo," Lambert said sternly, cutting him off before the boy could call him a half-breed.

Lambert had lived with a foot in both worlds: the Navajo and the white man, accepted by neither because his features were more white man than Navajo. And the mention of half-breed was a guaranteed fistfight or gunfight.

"Uh... Lemme take yer bag, mister, whiles ya hop aboard."

Lambert handed him his satchel and followed him to the buggy.

"Which hotel, mister?" the young man asked, climbing to the buggy's seat.

"Didn't know there was more than one," Lambert said as he took the passenger seat. "What's the difference?"

The boy giggled.

"Well, ya see, mister. We's got us a regular one, the *Morganza Hotel*, with a dinin' hall and bar, and we's got us a *special* one where's the *painted ladies* are. Mostly trailhands go there and spend an hour or so, but ya don't strike me like the kind that'd—"

Lambert chuckled to himself as memories flooded his mind. For his twelfth birthday, the braves of his village thought it would be a rite of passage into manhood to visit a *special hotel*. While he relived that encounter, he smiled—it was not all that great, as he remembered. Then his thoughts returned to Dibe, a young woman from his tribe... For a few moments, his weariness faded as the fond recollections of her gushed from his subconscious.

"The regular one, boy."

"Yessiree, mister," the young man said. He slapped the horse's rump with the reins and yelled, "Giddy-up."

The ride to the hotel did not take more than ten minutes, but Lambert's driver gave him the lowdown on the town in that short time. Besides the hotels, Vinita had two saloons, a mercantile where townfolks could buy "just prit' near 'bout anythin' they's wanted," a newspaper office—*The Vinita Leader*—and a church. A feed and tack shop and a wheelwright were near the livery, the *Western Star* hardware store was next in line, then the telegraph office and jail. A few other storefronts that "didn't amount ta much." The lone barbershop was at the south end of Main Street, close to the largest stockyards,

where trailhands could get a haircut, a shave, and a bath for half a dollar, which was “highway robbery fer the times.” Most people lived in houses at the end of town, as far from the stockyards as possible, “‘cause folks doesn’t cotton ta the smell of cows inna they’s clothes, foods, or what’s they’s a-drinkin’.”

“Well...,” the young man said as he yanked on the reins, and the horse stopped at the steps to the hotel. “That’s ‘bout all thar is ta say ‘bout our town, mister.”

“And the Cattleman Bank?”

“Oh, yeah... Townsquare... ‘Bout a stone’s throw from here.”

“Much obliged, boy.” Lambert tossed him a coin, got down, and grabbed his bag.

“Two bits! Jeez, mister. The ride ‘tweren’t worth more than a dime.”

“Entertainment.”

“Don’t get yer drift, mister, but thanks, anyhow.” He slapped his horse’s rump with the reins, and it trotted off. “If ya ever need another ride, just stop by the...” The clip-clop of his horse’s hooves drowned out his voice.

Lambert climbed the steps to the hotel and hesitated before going in. When asking for a room, the hotel clerk’s reaction could go well but often went the other way. After countless hotels, butterflies still stirred in the pit of his stomach, but there was no way he was sleeping in the livery barn tonight.

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*CHAPTER THREE: No Rooms For Lambert*

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Lambert entered the *Morganza Hotel*, sauntered to the registration counter, and tapped the bell.

“Hold your horses; I’m coming,” the hotel clerk said from the backroom. He closed the door and stopped dead in his tracks when he saw Lambert. The clerk sized Lambert up from head to toe. He gulped and cleared his throat. “What you want, mister?”

“A room,” Lambert said.

“A—A room?” The desk clerk, a short, stout man with a puggy face, glanced around the lobby, his voice quivering. “You—You want a room?”

The muscles in Lambert’s neck tightened. “You hard of hearing or something, mister? I want a room for the night.”

The clerk’s eyes squinted.

“Uh... Sorry, mister,” the clerk said, forcing a nervous smile. “But we’re all full up.”

The clerk’s rotund frame quivered as he ran his fingers through the meager hair on his head. His temples and upper lip were wet with beads of perspiration.

Lambert sighed. He had hoped he would not have any trouble getting a room, but the clerk’s lie was all too familiar; he had experienced it many times. He glanced over the clerk’s shoulder, where several keys hung on the wall-mounted key holder. He locked eyes with the clerk.

“I’ll take one of those,” Lambert said, pointing at the keys.

The clerk teetered and grabbed the counter for support. The color drained from his cheeks. He licked his upper lip.

“They—They’re all spoken for, mister,” the clerk stuttered. “So—So, as you can see, we’re all full up.”

Lambert’s cheeks flushed as his temper grew. He grabbed the clerk’s lapels, yanking him against the counter.

“If you’re holding out on me, mister, it’d be your last,” Lambert said through clenched teeth.

The clerk’s eyes bugged out. He pulled at his shirt collar, trying to swallow.

“Hold—Holding out?” He gulped hard. “I—I don’t know what you mean, mister.”

By now, several onlookers were gawking at the commotion.

Lambert let loose of the clerk’s lapels and drew his weapon.

“Help,” shouted the clerk.

"What's the problem, Clifford?" a nearby man asked.

"Fetch the sheriff," Clifford shrieked. "And hurry!"

The man ran out of the hotel while others watched, waiting to see what would happen next.

Then Lambert promptly stuck the end of his gun's barrel under Clifford's nose.

"When the sheriff arrives," Lambert snarled, baring his teeth, "we'll see if you have any vacancies or not. Until then, stand on your toes."

"I can't, mister, Clifford said. "Got back pain... Hurts me somethin' fierce."

Lambert applied pressure to the clerk's nose with the gun's barrel. Clifford's face winced, but he raised himself on his toes just the same.

"Easy there, mister," another man said. "Don't ya hurt ole Clifford. He's got him a poor wife and kids."

Lambert relaxed the pressure on the clerk's nose, and Clifford eased himself back onto solid ground.

"Drop it, mister," the sheriff's booming voice said from behind. "I got ya covered."

Lambert holstered his gun and slowly pivoted to face the sheriff. His eyes were still black with anger. Clifford started to speak, but the sheriff lifted his hand, waving it at him to shut up. The clerk spun on his heels and scurried into the backroom.

"Who are ya anyhow, mister?" the sheriff asked.

"I go by Lambert. TG Lambert."

"Funny name fer an Injun."

"Ezra ain't the manliness name I've ever heard of either," Lambert said, pushing his hat high on his brow.

"How'd ya know my name?"

Lambert took a deep breath and pulled back his shoulders. "Maybe this will clear things up, Sheriff." He reached into his breast pocket, got a folded telegram, and handed it to the sheriff.

The sheriff holstered his gun, took the telegram, and read it.

*URGENT. Reginald Prescott needs your help in Vinita, Oklahoma. My regards to Sheriff Ezra Clark. Bill Duggan.*

A grin stretched across the sheriff's grizzly face, and his eyes lit up in remembrance of an old friend. "I'll be damned," Sheriff Clark said, returning the telegram. "How is ole Bill?"

"Still kicking." Lambert folded the telegram and put it in his pocket.

“Any friend of Bill’s is a friend of mine.” Sheriff Clark’s face was aglow as he extended his hand. Lambert shook his hand like meeting a long-lost friend again.

“Did he marry yet?” Sheriff Clark asked, chuckling.

“No... Still holding the women at bay.”

“Said he wouldn’t as long as he wore a badge. We’re cut from the same bolt of cloth, I reckon.” Sheriff Clark paused for a moment. Sadness swept over his face, but he shook it off. “What’s this here Prescott problem all about?”

“That telegram is all I know.”

“Lambert... Not yer typical Injun name; how’d ya pick that one?”

The memories came flooding back to the night the village braves had discovered him lying with Dibe, both nearly stripped skin bare under a blanket. The men were outraged. To them, *half-breeds* violating their maidens was forbidden and punishable to the brink of death.

Lambert smiled. *Too late... That horse had already jumped the corral!*

The recollections of what happened next were painful as he remembered the braves dragging him to a nearby canyon, beating him ferociously, dumping his body in a ravine, and leaving him for dead. But Brother Lambert from the Sacred Heart Abby found him all battered and bloodied. He bound his wounds, took him to the Abby, and nursed him back to health.

Lambert’s smile was gone, his jaw clenched. “The monk who befriended me when no one else did.”

“And what’s the TG stand fer?”

“It’s my Navajo name. Most can’t pronounce it right. Let’s say it stands for ‘two guns’ and leave it at that.”

“Oh...Two Guns, ya say,” Sheriff Clark said, glancing at Lambert’s sidearms. “So’s long as ya control ‘em, ya won’t push my beholdin’ to Bill too far.”

“Agreed,” Lambert said, nodding.

Sheriff Clark glanced around the lobby. “What’s all the ruckus about?”

“Seems they don’t have any rooms for the likes of me, Sheriff,” Lambert said, grinning and cocking his head toward the keys hanging on hooks behind the clerk’s desk.

Sheriff Clark glanced at them and yelled, “Clifford!”

Clifford poked his head out from the back room.

“You want me, Sheriff?” Clifford asked timidly.

The sheriff looked him over and grunted in response.

“Get yer... Goldarnit, Clifford! Ya try my patience sometimes.”

Without saying anything else, Clifford scampered and stood behind the counter.

The sheriff pointed at him with a smirk on his face. "All right, Clifford, what is this I hear about ya not havin' no rooms fer my friend here?"

"That's right, Sheriff," he said, nodding as fast as a woodpecker. "We don't... *For him*, anyways."

"What ya mean..." the sheriff asked, glancing at Lambert. "*For him?*"

"It's as plain as the nose on your face, Sheriff," Clifford said, pointing. "Him bein' a half-breed and all."

At the sound of half-breed, Lambert's anger flared again. He had lost count of the times prejudice had risen its ugly head, and he was tired of it. He put his hand on his sidearm and stepped toward Clifford, but Sheriff Clark blocked his way.

"Calm down, son. I'll handle this," Sheriff Clark said to Lambert, then directed to the clerk. "Ya blind or just plain stupid, Clifford? Men have gotten themselves killed fer less, especially if the man yer insultin' is packin'."

"Only following house rules, Sheriff." Clifford leaned close to the sheriff and whispered, "And... And I need this work, Ezra."

"Prescott'll make an exception this time."

"I don't know, Ezra..." Clifford said.

"Prescott's gonna be more put out if ya don't give him a room."

Clifford looked puzzled. He glanced at Lambert again, then leaned toward the sheriff. "How ya know he will?"

"Trust me, Clifford," the sheriff said, smiling. "He most certainly will."

"All right, Sheriff, if ya say so, but this is on you."

"For Heaven's sake, Clifford, where's yer backbone."

Clifford hung his head. "Ain't got one, Sheriff... Prescott took it when I mortgaged my farm to him."

Part of him felt sorry for Clifford, but Lambert was thankful that Sheriff Clark had settled the matter of a room before he had drawn blood—and he would have before taking much more from that toad of a clerk. Yet, what pushes a man to say, 'Prescott took my backbone?' What kind of a man was Reginal Prescott, and what kind of trouble was he in that ole Bill would even bother with him? These questions would have to wait for another day. For now, Lambert needed food, drink, and sleep.

"If'n ya have any more trouble, Lambert," the sheriff said, "just give a holler."

"Thank you, kindly, Sheriff," Lambert said, extending his hand.

They shook hands, and the sheriff left.

“My key if you please, Clifford,” Lambert said, smiling.

The clerk handed him the key to Room #5 without comment.

“Uh... Which way is the dining room?”

The clerk pointed, and Lambert tipped his hat.

“Watch my bag while I grab a bite to eat?” Lambert asked.

The clerk glanced at the satchel and nodded. Lambert handed it to him and started to leave.

“I know you’re about to heave my bag against the wall,” Lambert said, his back to the clerk. “Before you do, you should know there are fragile items in it, and if they get broken...”

The clerk looked at Lambert and down at the satchel in his hand. Then, he carefully lowered it to the floor. Lambert walked away, chuckling.

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*CHAPTER FOUR: Prescott Cattleman Bank*

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Tuesday, August 23

Two Prescott Cattleman Banks prominently occupied Vinita's heart at Main and First's cross streets. One was a typical bank where one could deposit or withdraw funds. The other was a complex where Mr. Prescott had his office, and customers could apply for loans and mortgages.

Lambert stood across the street from the bank complex. He had seen banks of all descriptions in his travels, but none quite like this. It was gaudy by any standard—a huge glass storefront with gilded scrollwork above and flanking the pillared sides. Its hunter-green trim and sage-green building did not have a mark or chip; it looked freshly painted. The calligraphy lettering on the windows was 24-caret gold, and a larger-than-life bronze relief sculpture was affixed above the doors—Prescott's, most likely. Shiny brass lanterns hung from matching holders, and centrally placed double doors with brass trim and kick plates opened into the main office. Workmen were busily polishing the metal surfaces to mirror perfection.

Lambert had dealt with men like Prescott before—hungry for power and wealth, willing to trample over anyone in their path, those men did not impress him. Sooner or later, they all came crawling, desperate for help when they were about to lose something valuable or wanted something they could not have. Now and then, they needed someone removed who stood in the way of their desires, but he was not a hired gun, never was, and was not about to start anytime soon. He could afford to pick and choose his work; now, Prescott sounded like a definite pass. However, he owed Sheriff Duggan a favor, and their old friendship compelled him to see this through until the end,

So, Lambert crossed the street and went inside.

The huge room was deeper than it was wide, and off to the left, a herd of clerks at tall desks, sitting on tall stools, pondered over ledgers. On the right side of the room, several half-wall stalls topped with wood-framed window glass had senior clerks meeting with customers. Farther back, a large reception area had a few chairs, a desk, and a secretary.

A nervous, lanky, wrinkled-faced clerk met Lambert at the door. His pin-striped gray coat and overly starched shirt hung loosely on his frame while his baggy pants floated freely on his waist, supported by suspenders. His shoes, nearly hidden by the scrunched end of his pantlegs, were dust-covered and scuffed.

"Ahem," the clerk said, retracting the corner of his mouth and sucking air through his teeth. "Welcome to the Prescott Cattleman Bank. May I help... Uh... You, sir?"

"Mr. Prescott," Lambert said, looking around and spying the reception area in the back of the room.

“Have an appointment, do ya?” the clerk asked, giving Lambert a quick glance from toe to head.

“I’ll work that out with his secretary,” Lambert said and started for the back.

The clerk blocked his way.

*I’ve got to admire his spunk, Lambert thought. Not many men ever challenged me... And lived.*

“But sir, I can’t let you—”

Lambert pulled his coat aside enough to reveal his sidearm. He was in no mood for anyone standing in his way.

“I guess you didn’t hear me, pardner. Mr. Prescott’s office—direct me there, or I find it myself.”

The man’s eyes flitted between the weapon and Lambert’s unflinching gaze. He gulped and stepped backward.

“No—No, sir. I—I mean, yes, sir,” the clerk stammered. “No need ta... Uh... Just—Just follow me this way.”

At a brisk shuffle, the clerk hustled toward the back area. He looked over his shoulder every few steps, intimidated by Lambert’s persistent presence.

Lambert trailed while the nervous clerk made a beeline for the reception area. A thigh-high railing corralled it off from the main room. He held the railing gate for Lambert, nodded when Lambert stepped through, and then hot-footed it to a nearby stall where he watched through its glass partition. His eyes widened cow-like, and his upper lip curled into a sneering grin as Lambert approached the desk and the woman sitting there.

The woman’s eyes fluttered as she slowly looked Lambert over. His seven-inch crown and flat-brimmed hat made his six-foot, muscular frame stand taller than he was. His shoulder-length hair was coal black, and his eyes were dark brown. His complexion was a lighter olive than most Navajo. He wore a thigh-length, black town coat, matching trousers, a white shirt, and a black string tie. Two pearl-handled Colt Peacemakers cradled in tooled holsters rested on his hips.

She sighed.

Her pursed lips, crinkled nose, and squinted hazel-colored eyes contrasted her otherwise schoolmarm appearance. She sat tall and was a shapely woman in her late thirties, with dark-brown curly hair rolled high on her head. Her long-sleeved, high-necked blue dress was modest yet elegant. She wore a touch of rouge on her high cheeks. Her eyelids had a hint of coloring, and her lips had a wisp of carmine. According to her shiny brass nameplate, she was Miss Elizabeth Whitaker.

Lambert removed his hat and put his plain card, the one without the crossed six-shooters in the center, on her desk and asked to see Mr. Prescott. Miss Whitaker picked

up his card, glanced at it, and then let it casually slip through her fingers and tumble to her desk.

“Mr. O’Bryan handles all our Indian affairs,” Miss Whitaker said. “Perhaps you’d care to see him.”

On the inside, Lambert sighed, but on the outside, he remained determined and calm. He felt but suppressed the urge to slap some sense into the woman sitting high and mighty behind her desk, thinking she could decide the fate of all who approached merely by their appearance.

Lambert casually glanced around the room.

Dark-stained oak wainscoting on the north and west walls matched the oak flooring. Above the oak, the ivory-white plastered wall extended upward to the pitched ceiling. Two large windows on the west wall bathed the room in natural lighting. Double-hung, raised-panel doors in the middle of the north wall led to Mr. Prescott’s office. To the right of the door was a large brass plaque engraved with *Mr. Reginald Prescott, President*, in fancy lettering.

His gaze settled on her.

“No, ma’am. I’m here to see Mr. Reginald Prescott... Personally.”

“Mr. Prescott doesn’t see anyone without an appointment,” she said with a furrowed brow. “Do you have one?”

“You should know,” Lambert said with a steely glare. “You’re his secretary, aren’t you?”

Miss Whitaker’s eyebrows raised but let that question pass.

“Mr. Prescott is a very busy man, and it is impossible to see him without an appointment.”

Lambert looked away and glanced at the big clock on the wall. *Ole Bill’s going to owe me when this is over*, he thought. Then, his gaze returned to Miss Whitaker.

“What do you want to see Mr. Prescott about, Mr...” Miss Whitaker picked up his card. “Uh... Mr. Lambert?”

“It’s a personal matter.” Lambert slid his hat around his hand a couple of turns.

“That so? Well... Uh... Does Mr. Prescott know you, Mr. Lambert?”

“Possibly.” Lambert laid his hat on her desk. “My name may have come up in discussions with a mutual friend, Sheriff William Duggan.”

Miss Whitaker glanced at his hat and frowned. She briskly tapped the edge of Lambert’s card on her desktop, stopped, and leaned back in her chair.

“And does Mr. Prescott know him?”

Lambert grinned at her.

"If he doesn't, I've wasted a trip. So how 'bout you waltz your pretty little... Little... Face right in there and ask him?"

Miss Whitaker sat straight in her chair and crossed her arms. "Well... I never," she said. Blood rushed to her face, turning her cheeks and forehead a rosy red.

"Never been told you're pretty or been told to waltz?" Lambert said, smiling.

"Mr. Lambert, you are by far the most impertinent person I've ever had the displeasure to meet."

"Just give Mr. Prescott my card, would you please, Miss Whitaker? I wouldn't wanna be the one who interfered with his personal business, would you?"

Lambert picked up his hat, chose a hard-backed chair near a window, and lit a cigarillo. He took a long drag and blew a cloud of gray-white smoke toward the ceiling while glancing at the portraits of Mr. Prescott that flanked the door to his office.

Waiting was nothing new to him; it was a regular part of his line of work. Contrary to the exaggerated tales about bounty hunters, the reality was that capturing fugitives often required hours of watching and waiting. And the locales were rarely as pleasant as this one.

Lambert smiled when he noticed Miss Whitaker's face had regained its natural color halfway through his cigarillo. She stood, smoothed the wrinkles of her dress, went to Mr. Prescott's door, and knocked.

Prescott's muffled voice asked, "Yes?"

Miss Whitaker stepped inside and closed the door behind her. After a couple of minutes, she emerged, went straight to her desk, and sat.

Lambert pitched his cigarillo in the spittoon and started toward Miss Whitaker's desk.

"Don't bother, Mr. Lambert," she said with a sneer. "Mr. Prescott says he never heard of you or your sheriff, so it'll be impossible for you to see him today or any other day."

Lambert slid his hat around his hand a couple of turns. He nodded, went back to the chair, and lit another cigarillo.

"Didn't you hear me, Mr. Lambert?"

Lambert blew a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling, waited a few moments, and said, "I heard you all right, miss, but I'll wait all the same."

"Suit yourself, Mr. Lambert." Miss Whitaker smiled, returned to the Caligraph on a nearby stand, and started typing a letter. The click-clack sound of the keys hitting the paper filled in the area.

Lambert took another drag and tapped the ash in a nearby spittoon.

An hour and three cigarillos later, the double doors of Mr. Prescott's office opened, and his six-foot-two-inch, paunchy body stood between the doorframes, looking at Lambert.

Not one hair of his slicked-down reddish locks was out of place. His steel-gray eyes were as sharp as his gray, pin-striped suit was tailored. An empty room would have felt his presence. He stepped into the reception area, hands on his hips, glaring at Lambert.

He could not help himself when he saw Mr. Prescott. *Just as I'd figured*, Lambert thought, chuckling to himself. *Would pick him out of a crowd without ever having met him before.*

"Miss Whitaker says you want to see me on a personal matter. That so?"

Lambert chucked his cigarillo and stood. "If you're Prescott, Mr. Reginald Prescott, I do," he said, letting Prescott know he was unimpressed.

"My name's on the door; who the hell else would I be?" Prescott said in a voice that boomed from one end of the office complex to the other.

Ledger clerks stopped working and looked toward Prescott's voice. Senior clerks' heads popped above their partitions at the commotion. Customers stared, awestruck, but Miss Whitaker was amused, and she just snickered.

Lambert picked up his hat from an adjacent chair and spun it once around his hand. "Have to be sure, mister. Caretakers do well for themselves these days."

Prescott curled his hands up into tight fists. "Well... Never have I—"

"Now you have, Mr. Prescott," Lambert said, locking eyes with him.

Prescott noticed that everyone was looking his way. "Nothing to see here," he said in a calmer voice, waving his hand and smiling. "Back to work, back to work, everyone." He forced a smile and continued. "Sorry for the interruption."

Prescott faced Lambert again after the clerks returned to their tasks and the customers settled down. His steely scowl—effective on most—made no impression on Lambert. With an unblinking stare, he simply smiled in return. That sent Prescott's fury through the roof: his face flushed, and the veins in his neck throbbed.

"Who's this Sheriff Duncan anyway? Never heard of him," he said through a clenched jaw.

"He's a mutual friend... And his name's not Duncan. It's Duggan, William Duggan."

"Oh... William Dugg—"

Prescott swallowed and cleared his throat.

"Bill Duggan, is it?"

He glanced at Miss Whitaker as the corner of his mouth curled into a sheepish grin. Then he fixed his gaze on Lambert as his steely scowl returned.

"All right, Mr. Lambert, I'll give you ten minutes." He looked at the wall clock. "Make that five, and make it quick."

Lambert looked at Miss Whitaker, grinned, and followed Prescott into his private office. As the doors closed, Miss Whitaker crumpled Lambert's card in her fist.

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*CHAPTER FIVE: Mrs. Prescott's Gone Missing*

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Mr. Prescott's private office personified the man. It was as wide as lengthy and could corral a sizeable herd of cows. The walls were paneled in stained oak to match the flooring. His massive desk was solid oak with hand-carved scrollwork. On the wall behind his plush leather chair, a larger-than-life portrait of himself hung, dressed in a military—neither Union nor Confederate—uniform, decked out with ribbons and metals, and atop a great white horse. The portrait had an Italian sterling silver repoussé frame, Rococo style, with swirling swags and leaves.

Lambert stopped for a moment when he saw the unmistakable Navajo-designed rugs that covered much of the dark-stained flooring. He smiled and continued into the room.

Prescott plopped in his high-back chair, tented his fingers, and looked at Lambert with a penetrating stare with his unyielding eyes.

"Well," he said with a tone that dripped with impatience. "I haven't got all day, Mr. Lambert, and the clock's ticking."

Lambert took a seat facing the desk and sat. Unlike Prescott's comfy chair, the ones facing the desk were hard and uncomfortable. When Lambert flipped his Stetson on the desk, Prescott's eyebrows raised two inches.

"So Duggan sent you. Got any proof?"

Lambert took Sheriff Duggan's telegram from his coat pocket and tossed it across the desk. While Prescott unfolded and read it, Lambert lit a cigarillo and leaned back.

"All right, Mr. Lambert. If Bill sent you, I'd trust he knows his man." Prescott leaned forward, pointing his finger at Lambert. "But let's get one thing straight from the beginning: I don't fool around and don't have time for it."

"That's two things, Mr. Prescott," Lambert said, yawning.

"What you say?"

"You wanted me to get one thing straight, but you said two."

"Don't get flippant with me, young man," Prescott said, glaring at Lambert. "When I hire a man, he is my man. He does exactly what I tell him and keeps it under his hat. Do we understand each other?"

"Just so you understand me, Mr. Prescott, my birth name is Tyeë Gaagii. I'm a full-blood Navajo, but my features are more Bilagáana—white man to you—than Navajo, so I took the name TG Lambert as a young man. Growing up, I was shunned by both my people and yours. Everyone called me a half-breed."

"I don't know what that has to do with me."

"I learned to fight, handle a gun, and use my native abilities to track people. And when I find them, I bring them back, dead if they're already dead, dead if they resist, or riding if they come along peaceful—it doesn't matter to me one way or the other."

"Now wait one goldarn minute," Prescott said, sitting upright in his chair. "You bring 'em back, dead or dead! That ain't much of a choice, Mr. Lambert..."

"Their choice," Lambert said, staring Prescott eye to eye. "Not mine."

"There'll be no killing," Prescott said. "Nosiree. I just want to—"

"And one last thing, Mr. Prescott, so we understand each other, I'm no man's man. Tell me who you want me to find and what the bounty is, and if I decide to look for him, I'll find him. You can bank on that; otherwise, the next train to Fort Worth leaves at noon."

Lambert blew a cloud of gray smoke above the desk and waited. Prescott watched the last fingers of smoke waft into nothingness, and then he clasped his hands on the desk, staring at Lambert with a soulful and teary-eyed look.

"I—I—" Prescott coughed and swallowed. "I want you to find my wife."

Lambert sat straight in his chair and reached for his hat.

"Sorry, Mr. Prescott. I'm a bounty hunter by trade, and finding wayward wives is not my line—too messy."

"Please, Mr. Lambert. Hear me out."

Lambert rested against his chair, took a shallow drag on his cigarillo, and let the smoke trickle from his nose.

"All right, Mr. Prescott," Lambert said reluctantly. "The train doesn't leave for a couple of hours."

Prescott opened his desk drawer and took out a wrinkled, folded paper. He spread it on the desk and smoothed it the best he could.

"Two and a half weeks ago, I received this telegram," he said, handing it to Lambert.

Lambert opened and read:

*Need fresh air. Boarding the Mississippi Queen with David for New Orleans. Sayonara Mika.*

"Sayonara, Mika?"

"Yes. Mika, my wife, is Japanese."

"Reads like she ran off with someone named David. Like I said, Mr. Prescott—" Lambert said, getting to his feet.

"Wait," Prescott said, extending his hand. "Please sit, Mr. Lambert."

Lambert thought for a moment and then returned to his chair. Part of him wanted to walk away, but the other empathized with Prescott. He could not shake off the feeling he had not felt in a very long time... But why now? He leaned back in his chair and listened.

“Uh... David Thompson’s a gambler,” Prescott said, “and lady’s man from over Claremore way.”

“This just isn’t my line of work, Mr. Prescott.”

“What if I put a bounty of five thousand on her? Would you be interested then, Mr. Lambert?”

Lambert’s eyebrows raised, and he looked at Prescott. “What’s your story?” he said, grinning and leaning back in his chair.

“Mika is twenty years younger than I am, and she has insatiable appetites: clothes, jewelry, and... Well... Men. With my position in the bank, I kept her escapades as quiet as I could, but it all came to a head two and a half months ago, and I put my foot down. A week later, she up and left. Said she was going to our place over by Wyandotte to think things through. That was the last I heard from her until the telegram.”

“So what you want done, Mr. Prescott?”

“Find her, of course. What else would I want?”

Lambert stood, walked to the window, and stared at nothing, lost in thought. Then, he faced Prescott.

“I’ve seen all kinds, mister. Some wish them found and brought back—kicking and screaming if necessary; others just need to know they’re safe but never see them again; a few would rather see them dead for running off. So I’ll ask you again. What you want done once I find her?”

“I haven’t hired you yet, Mr. Lambert,” Prescott said, leaning back into the folds of his chair.

*My debt’s paid to ole Bill on this one, Lambert thought as he listened to Prescott. Maybe I can oblige next time he asks for a favor.*

He shrugged and started for the desk.

“I’ve got time for a drink before the train leaves,” Lambert said, grabbing his hat. “Good day, Mr. Prescott.”

Before Lambert could turn to leave, Prescott sprang to his feet, extended his hand, and pleaded.

“You go me all wrong, Mr. Lambert. Please. Sit. I need your help.” Prescott plopped in his chair and cradled his head in his hands. “I must find her. She can go if she wants to leave me, but I must know she’s all right. Safe. That’s all.”

Lambert sat and put his hat back on the desk. "Tracking a woman is difficult, nearly impossible. Nobody wants to help find her; they feel obliged to protect her, shield her, or even hide her. So it'll take time and money."

"What we talking?"

"Maybe a month or two. And I want a thousand dollars on account."

"On account," Prescott said, leaning back in his chair, eyebrows raised. "On account of what?"

"On account of we don't like each other," Lambert said, smiling. "Too much alike, I reckon. And four thousand when I find her."

"I like a man who lays his cards on the table. Given time, a wart grows on you and doesn't bother you unless you rub it the wrong way."

Lambert chuckled.

"Here's the twist. I occasioned the saloon last week, and there sat Thompson, pretty as you please, dealing cards. I confronted him, and he denied running off with Mika. Instead, he claimed he hadn't seen her in three months or more. A cold chill came over me, and I thought the worst: either he did her in, or she lied and was in trouble of some kind. Either way, I gotta know."

"Don't drive your herd into a box canyon just yet. Too many possibilities would explain this. For one, Thompson's lying, and they split up after a while; that's my bet. In that case, she's all right and enjoying herself in New Orleans."

"You do give a man a spark of hope, Mr. Lambert. Will you find her for me?"

"How far you want me to go? New Orleans or short of that?"

"If she safely boarded the *Mississippi Queen* like she said, I'd be satisfied with that."

"Did she have much money with her?" Lambert asked.

"A few hundred," Prescott said.

"Is Thompson still in town, or has he drifted on?"

"Day after our encounter, he packed up and left town to parts unknown."

"If all my leads are dead ends, I'll have to find Mr. Thompson and—" Lambert did not finish that train of thought; instead, he settled back in his chair and lit a cigarillo. After a few puffs, he said, "I imagine you must stash the good whiskey away to seal a deal."

"You get right to the heart of the matter, don't you, Mr. Lambert?"

"Saves time... About that whiskey."

Prescott went to his liquor cabinet.

"You puzzle me, Mr. Lambert."

“How’s that?”

“I’ve come across many Indians in my time, and not one of them could speak our language as well as you can.”

“Sacred Heart Abby, Pottawatomie Reserve.”

“I’ve heard of it. Taught by monks? But you’re a Navajo, not a Pottawatomie. Then, how is it that you were schooled there?”

“And a bottle for the road if you have extra,” Lambert said, ignoring his questions.

Prescott hesitated but got an unopened bottle and held it for Lambert to see.

“Well, Mr. Prescott,” Lambert said, nodding, “looks like we got us a deal.”

“I’ll write a letter of introduction for you, Mr. Lambert...” He put the whiskey bottle on the desk. “We do have us a deal.”

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*CHAPTER SIX: Wyandotte, Oklahoma*

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Wednesday, August 24

When the train stopped at the northernmost end of Wyandotte, Lambert was the only passenger to get off, and no one was waiting to get on. The sun was high in the cloudless sky, and the short walk into town added to his building thirst. He passed a feed and hardware store, wainwright, jail, Doctor Winston, and a few closed businesses: the *Wyandotte Sentinel* (newspaper), *Mary Lou's Dresses*, and *Sarah's Psychic Readings*. The buildings were rundown, suffering from neglect, and sorely needing a facelift.

The dusty street was deserted, except for a lone horse hitched in front of the *Wyandotte House*, a single-story, combination trading post, saloon, hotel, and eatery. He stepped inside and slowly scanned from left to right, ready for the worst.

The bar was at the back wall, with three round tables in the middle of the room. Above a counter on the right, a menu showed a short list of meal choices, and two men sat at one of two long family-style tables and chairs, eating. The trading post's goods took up more than half of the building on the left, where just about one of everything you would ever need was either hung on racks, folded on tables, or stacked on shelves.

The barkeep was wiping the bar clean of spilled beer. He looked up when the door opened.

"What'll ya have, stranger?"

"A cool beer and some information," Lambert said, approaching the bar.

"Beer's warm, mister, but good tastin'. It'll wash the dust off yer tongue, all the same."

"And information?" Lambert asked, leaning on the bar.

The barkeep picked up a mug and slowly wiped it with a towel. "Depends, mister."

"On what?"

"Folks 'round here don't cotton ta strangers askin' about their business," the barkeep said, drawing a tall—mostly head—warm beer and setting it on the bar.

"This town got a sheriff?" Lambert asked, watching the foam dissipate to liquid.

"Yer lookin' at 'im."

"Not what I expected," Lambert said, smiling.

The barkeep was a lanky, older, balding man with an oversized mustache. His long-sleeve, collarless, striped shirt—pulled tight at his wrists and buttoned to his chin—was a size too big for him.

"Looky here, son. We's gots us a quiet town. Not much call for the law 'round these parts and can't afford much law, neither, so I'm the sheriff, the mayor, and part owner of this

here establishment. And befer ya look down on us 'cross that half-breed nose of yers, drink up, and catch the two o'clock southbound."

Lambert stiffened when he heard "half-breed" but suppressed his anger after a few moments. He took a sip of the beer and wiped the foam off his upper lip.

"Warm but mighty good, like you said."

The sheriff cocked his head, squinted, and eyed Lambert. "Ya didn't come ta our fine community ta sample our beer, son, so spill it befer I get riled."

"Don't get a bee in your bonnet, Sheriff. I just want to know the whereabouts of the Prescott Farm."

The sheriff picked up a glass and wiped it clean with a towel. Then he gave Lambert a slow glance over again. He leaned on the bar and asked, "Who ya be, anyhow?"

"An agent for Mr. Reginald Prescott."

"So ya seys," the sheriff said, stepping back from the bar. "Gots any proof?"

Lambert handed Prescott's letter of introduction to the sheriff. He took it, read it word for word, and handed it back.

"Seys yer TG Lambert. Funny name fer a half—"

Once was forgivable, but twice was too much for him. Lambert pulled his Colt .45 at lightning speed, poked the sheriff's upper lip with the barrel's tip, and cocked the hammer back.

"I'm full-blood Navajo, and don't you forget it," Lambert said through clenched teeth.

The sheriff didn't flinch. Instead, he slowly pushed the barrel of Lambert's gun aside with his index finger and looked Lambert eye to eye.

"I won't ferget, son," the sheriff said, lifting a sawed-off shotgun off its under-the-bar cradle with his other hand and laying it on the bar. It pointed squarely at Lambert's belly; his finger wrapped around its trigger.

Lambert eased off the hammer and holstered his Colt. He stepped back and said, "I like a man who doesn't fold in death's face. So what do you hail by, Sheriff?"

"Amos Anderson," the sheriff said, edging his finger off the trigger. "My friends call me Andy—never cared much fer Amos—but call me Sheriff Anderson or just plain sheriff if ya please." He put the shotgun back in its cradle under the bar.

Lambert extended his hand. "Hope to earn the right to call you Andy someday, Sheriff."

They shook hands.

"So what's that there letter 'bout? I ain't seen Mr. Prescott 'round the parts near on—" The sheriff closed one eye and scratched his head. "Near as I can recollect, it'd hav'ta be three years or more. But Mrs. Prescott stops by quite often, though."

"When was the last time?"

"Oh," the sheriff said, rubbing his chin.

A customer stepped to the bar. "How's 'bout another beer, Andy."

Sheriff Anderson nodded and drew a mug full of mostly suds.

"Much obliged," the customer said, returning to his table.

"Now, where was I? Oh, yeah. Mrs. Prescott. Well... Must've been 'bout six weeks ago when she got off the train. Jeb done give her a ride to the farm."

"Jeb?"

"Jeb White, he's my livery handyman."

Lambert took a gulp of the warm beer. "Jeb, stay with her?" He wiped his upper lip.

"Hell no, mister," the sheriff said, wagging his head. "He took him a horse to ride home by."

"She stayed alone, then?"

"Mrs. Prescott? Not likely. That there China woman—"

"Japanese," Lambert said.

"Say, what?"

"Mrs. Prescott is Japanese. She's from Japan."

"Japanese, huh? They all look the same to me... Anyhows... Where was I?"

"Her staying alone," Lambert said.

"Right... She couldn't no more last the night without help than a newborn—can't do nuthin' by herself."

"Who helped her, then?"

"Henry Bronston and his wife, Mary, live there and keep it up. They take on extra hands at planting and harvest time; otherwise, it's just them two."

"Where can I find the Prescott Farm?"

"Ole Jeb'd be glad ta take ya out there fer two bits," the sheriff said, gesturing toward the door. "My livery's just across the street. Ya'll find him there—most likely sleepin'."

"Much obliged, Sheriff... Can I get a mount there?"

"Dollar a day, five-day minimum... In advance."

"If you throw in a saddle..."

The sheriff laughed and extended his hand. They shook, and Lambert paid the sheriff five dollars, finished his beer, and left.

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*CHAPTER SEVEN: To The Prescott Farm*

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The livery was quiet, no one in sight. The blacksmith's forge was cold, the stalls were empty, and a lone meowing cat met Lambert when he entered the building's wide-open doors. He walked to the back of the barn—the cat following closely at his heels—and found a lanky, bushy-haired young man, barely old enough to shave, sleeping in a stall on the hay.

Lambert cleared his throat, but the young man did not awaken; he just snorted and rolled over. Lambert grabbed a nearby muck rake and tapped the young man on his shoe. This time, he stirred and sat up, rubbing his eyes.

"Uh... What ya want, mister?" he asked, yawning.

"You Jeb?"

"That'd be me, mister. In the flesh."

"Sheriff Andy rented me a horse, but it doesn't look like you got any."

"Sure do, mister," Jeb said, staggering to his feet. "They's out back, exercisin'."

"And a saddle?"

"In the tack room," Jeb said, pointing to a side door. "Got a couple ta choose from." Jeb took off toward the door.

"And he said you were for hire..."

Jeb spun on his heels and faced Lambert. "What fer?"

"A guide... To the Prescott Farm."

"Sure, mister," Jeb said, rubbing his hands together. "Be glad ta."

"What's your fee?"

Jeb stared at him cow-eyed. "Huh?"

"What you charge?" Lambert asked, smiling.

"Uh... How's two-bits sound?"

"About right. Deal?"

"Yessiree, mister," Jeb said, smiling. "Deal."

"What you got for saddles?"

Jeb and Lambert stepped into the tack room, and Jeb started to point out the pros and cons of each of the three saddles.

"We got us here a short-necked, large-horned stock saddle with wide, double—"

"Show me the best one, Jeb."

"I reckon this here one is yer best bet. It be a slick-forked, high-beveled-cantle—"

"I'll take it; now, the riding stock."

Jeb led Lambert to the corral behind the barn, where four horses stood in the shade of a tree. They leaned on the railing, and the horses walked toward them. Jeb took carrot stubs from his pocket and offered them on his palm. Each horse—in turn by age, oldest to the youngest—took a stub and walked away.

"They always do that?"

"Do what?" Jeb asked with eyes narrowed, brow furrowed.

"Line up by pecking order?"

"Oh... That," Jeb said, chuckling. "Yeah, they do..." Jeb stood on the first rail of the fence and leaned farther into the corral, holding another carrot. Each horse looked but did not make a move. "As long as I's been workin' here, the old gray gets in line first, then they's line up all the ways ta the youngest. Elsewise, the old gray bites their ears ta show 'em who's boss." Then, the old gray trotted over and took the extra treat from Jeb's hand.

Jeb hopped down from the rail. "What kinda ridin' ya fixin' ta do, mister?"

"Long and hard."

Jeb pointed to each horse, one by one.

"That there gray swayback wouldn't last a day—ready for the Big Corral in the sky. That stallion's too ornery; he'd fight ya all the livelong day. That Mustang's a gelding, strong, even-tempered but a little long in the tooth—might not hold up. Yer best bet's that there quarter horse. She's only three and smart, too. She'll carry ya anywheres ya wanna go, mister. I'd pick her."

"You know your horses, Jeb... When can you take me to the Prescott Farm?"

"How's 'bout now?"

"Saddle her up," Lambert said, nodding.

###

Lambert and Jeb strolled out of the barn, leading their horses, and met two cowpokes, one standing alongside his mount, the other atop his.

"Shod my horse, boy," the standing cowpoke said.

"Gotta take this here, fella outta town, first," Jeb said.

"Ya hear'd that, Earle?" the cowpoke said, cocking at his head toward his mounted pardner. Then he said to Lambert and Jeb, "Ain't no half-breed more important than my horse." He slid his hand toward his gun.

In one swift action, Lambert drew his gun and whacked the cowpoke broadside his head, knocking him to the ground. Then Lambert took aim at Earle, the mounted cowpoke, as he reached for his weapon.

“Don’t do it, mister,” Lambert said through a clenched jaw. “Unless you want a piece of this!”

“Easy with that hog pistol, mister,” Earle said, extending his right hand and yielding to Lambert. “Jamie... He don’t mean no disrespect.”

“That’s not how I heard it,” Lambert said.

Jamie raised up on his hands and knees. “Ya dirty, thievin’ red-skin,” he shouted. “Why don’t ya go back ta the reservation where’s ya belong?”

“Shut up, ya fool,” Earle said. “Don’t ya know ya gots one foot in the grave and how close yer other foot is. Mount up, Jamie, so we’s can get the hell outta here.”

Jamie put his hat on and stood. He felt the sticky blood on his left temple and cheek. “Ya’ll pay fer this, mister.”

“Drop it, Jamie,” Earle said. “Let’s ride.”

Jamie mounted, and the two cowpokes rode out of town.

###

Lambert and Jeb were on the outskirts of town, following the trail south toward the Neosho River.

“Did you know either of those two cowpokes back there?” Lambert asked.

Jeb pulled on the reins and cocked his head. After he rubbed his chin a few times, he shook his head. “Nope... Never seen ‘em befer.” He nudged his horse onward. “Why ya askin’?”

“No particular reason... Don’t want anything to interfere with my—”

“Yer a Texas Ranger, ain’t ya?” Jeb blurted out. He became so excited at the prospect of guiding a Texas Ranger that he circled his horse around Lambert. “I’s knowed it the first minute I’s laid eyes on ya. Nobody’d take care of that cowpoke like ya done except a Ranger.”

Lambert busted out laughing. “Hold on, Jeb! When was the last time you ever heard of a full-blood Navajo Texas Ranger?”

Jeb stopped and came alongside Lambert. “So’s ya ain’t no Ranger?” he asked, hanging his head.

“No, I ‘ain’t no Ranger,’ Jeb,” Lambert said, still laughing.

“Then... What is ya? ‘Cause ya ain’t like nobody like I’s never seen befer.”

Lambert had pistol-whipped more men than he could remember for asking far fewer personal questions, but coming from Jeb, they had a childlike charm and curiosity, even admiration quality to them, and he did not feel threatened. Yet how much could he, should he reveal?

"I'm a... Uh... Bounty Hunter," Lambert said, laying his cards on the table.

"I's know'd it all along," Jeb said. "From the first minute I's seen ya take care of that there cowpoke, I's said ta myself, 'Jeb, ole boy, there goes a first-rate Bounty Hunter.'"

"How old are you, Jeb?"

"Don't rightly knowed fer sure. Ma and Pa died when I's were a youngin, and I's lived with this family and that one til I's were on my own. So's I's reckon 'bout sixteen, give or take."

Lambert and Jeb continued toward the Prescott Farm.

"What are your plans for the future, Jeb?"

"Ain't ever had any. Since Sheriff Andy offered me work at the livery a whiles back, I's never took time ta think much 'bout no future. He give me a place ta stay, meals, and all I's can drink... And some pocket silver. So's day by day 'tis future enough fer me."

The men rode and talked until about a mile from the Prescott Farm, near Prescott Woods. The wind shifted, and the odor of decaying flesh wafted in the air.

"What the hell..." Jeb said, holding his nose.

"Probably a kill of some kind left to the weather."

"It stinks sumthin' terrible."

"Usually does. Especially in this heat."

"Should we see what it is?" Jeb asked, turning his mount into the wind toward the smell.

"No time," Lambert said. "Mrs. Prescott's missing. That's our focus, Jeb."

"Ain't ya a might bit curious?"

"I've seen enough of death to last a lifetime. I can pass this one by."

Jeb frowned. But he turned his mount toward the farm again, and Lambert followed.

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When Lambert and Jeb rounded the bend in the road, and the farm was no more than a hundred yards ahead, Henry Bronston stepped from behind a massive oak and pointed his rifle at Lambert.

"Hold it right there, stranger," he said.

The two horsemen pulled up the reins, and their horses stopped dead.

Henry had a harsh face, deep-tanned, unshaven, and leathery. He was stalky, short, and walked with a slight limp. His beard was white, and his tattered hat sat atop a tangled mess of graying hair. He wore faded blue-denim-trouser overalls and a plaid shirt opened at the neck.

He spat a wad of tobacco-tinged saliva on the ground. His deep voice was slow but deliberate.

“Him, I know,” Henry said with a quick jerk of his head toward Jeb. “But you...” He eyed Lambert from hat to boot. “I don’t recollect ever seein’ ya befer, mister.”

Jeb leaned forward in his saddle. “He’s Mr. Pres—”

“No offense, Jeb, but let him tell it,” Henry said.

Lambert reached for the letter in his breast pocket.

“Easy there, mister,” Henry said, following Lambert’s movements with his rifle. “This gots a hair trigger.”

“Point that rifle somewhere else, Mr. Bronston,” Lambert said through a clenched jaw, “or you’ll not be alive to see the setting sun.”

“Tall talk fer someone starin’ down a loaded barrel,” Henry said, raising his rifle to a firing position.

Jeb yanked on the reins, and his horse jerked its head to the side.

“Don’t do it, Henry,” Jeb yelled. “He’s faster than grease lightnin’!”

Henry looked at Jeb, the edge Lambert was waiting for. Then, in one swift action, he dove off his saddle, rolled on the ground, and crouched, aiming his Colt square at Henry.

“Drop it, or I’ll drop you, Mr. Bronston.”

Henry spun around toward Lambert.

“Do like he says, Henry,” Jeb said. “He’s gots ya dead ta rights, and ya gots a snowball’s chance in hell against him.”

“Jeb’s talking sense, Mr. Bronston,” Lambert said, extending his hand, palm up. “Lower your rifle, and we’ll talk this through.”

Henry lowered his gun and let it hang over his arm, pointing at the ground.

“What ya want here, mister?” Henry asked. He took off his hat, wiped the sweat off his brow, and put it back on.

Lambert holstered his gun and handed Prescott’s letter to Henry. Henry put on his glasses and read it.

“So yer TG Lambert. Funny name for a—”

“Don’t say it, Henry,” Jeb said. “The last man who did ended up eatin’ dirt.”

Henry spat on the ground. "Prescott says we're ta extend all courtesies and answer all questions pertaining ta Mrs. Prescott," Henry said, handing the letter back. "That don't include a welcome wagon ta anyone sneakin' up 'n on us."

"We wasn't sneakin', Henry," Jeb said. "We was ridin' down the middle—"

"And you'll honor Prescott's requests, I expect," Lambert said.

"Well, it seems we started off on the wrong footin', Mr. Lambert. But so ya know wheres we stand, me and Mary have private lives, and we aims ta keep it thatta way. So ask yer questions 'bout Mrs. Prescott and leave us out."

"Fair enough, Mr. Bronston."

"Henry... Can we's get out of this heat?" Jeb said. "I's near butt-glued ta my saddle and could use some water."

Henry stood firm for a few moments, spat an over-chewed plug of tobacco on the ground, and headed toward the farm.

"I can find my way from here, Jeb," Lambert said.

"But Mr. Lambert, I's should—"

"Here's a dollar for your trouble," Lambert said, flipping a coin toward Jeb.

"Thank ya, kindly, Mr. Lambert," Jeb said, catching the shiny coin mid-air and turning his horse toward town.

"Thought ya was thirsty, Jeb," Henry said.

"Not no more, I's ain't," Jeb said, digging his heels in his horse's flanks. It took off in a gallop.

"Youngins," Henry said, shaking his head. "Come this way, Mr. Lambert."

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*CHAPTER EIGHT: The Prescott Farm*

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Henry moseyed down the road toward the farm, and Lambert followed close behind, leading his horse. The farm was small by Western standards: a single-story farmhouse, barn, corral, and ancillary buildings, weathered and long overdue for a fresh coat of paint. However, in a wooded plot next to the pond, a well-kept cabin stood in contrast to the other structures.

When they reached the barn, Lambert led his horse to a nearby water trough. He hitched the reins to a post and took the bottle of whiskey from his saddlebag. He held it up so Henry could see the amber liquid glisten in the sun. Henry's eyes popped wide when he saw the sparkling fluid.

"You a drinking man, Mr. Bronston?" Lambert asked with a sly grin.

Henry licked his lips and looked toward the farmhouse and back at the bottle. He leaned his rifle against the barn and wiped his hands on his overalls. He ran his tongue across his lips again and smiled from ear to ear.

"Do a bear do his business in the woods?" he said with a cackling chuckle.

"I reckon he does, Mr. Bronston," Lambert said, handing the bottle to him. "I reckon he does."

"Then we best get in the barn, if you know what I mean, and call me Henry, Mr. Lambert." He looked at the label and popped the cork. "Never heard of this kind."

"From Prescott's private stock."

"Prescott's private stock, ya say?" Henry took a long swig and sputtered. His face scrunched up, and his eyes teared. "Went down... Went down the wrong way..." He wiped his mouth and grinned. "But man... Oh, man, was that smooth or what?" He took another drink. "Smooth as a baby's hiney. Ain't never tasted nuthin' like— Ya want one?" Henry said, offering the bottle to Lambert.

Lambert took a sip and handed the bottle back. "Go ahead, Henry. Have another."

"Don't mind if I do," Henry said. "Mary don't like me to take a whiskey, even now and then. She says it's the devil's drink. Well... The devil be damned is what I always say. She might even change her mind if she took a taste of this."

"Then, drink up while you can, Henry."

Henry brought the bottle to his lips and hesitated. He glanced at a bale of hay next to a stall and shuffled toward it. He spun around and plopped down.

"Reckon, I'd better sit befer I fall down," Henry said with a chuckle.

Lambert sat on a nearby bale, recalling his conversation with Prescott about the lengths men would go to protect a woman from those searching for her. He wondered how Henry

would respond when he began to question him. A swig of whiskey for Henry and a cigarillo for himself might relax the mood and bring down the tension, but Lambert glanced around the barn and decided it was too much of a firetrap for a smoke. So he settled for letting the whiskey work its magic on Henry and lower his defenses.

“Now... About Mrs. Prescott.”

“Figured ya’d be getting around to that once ya got me primed with liquor. Don’t matter none. I’d told ya everything without the whiskey. Didn’t much like her.” Henry slowly swayed his head from side to side. “Nosiree, Bob. Not one bit. She treated us like servants—especially Mary; she treated Mary like dirt. ‘Twas all I could do ta restrain myself at times.”

Lambert failed to mention the other side of the flapjack to Prescott—the burnt side—where men would not hesitate to give up a despicable woman instead of protecting her. He did not feel it was appropriate to bring this up with a man who had just lost his wife, but from Henry’s account of Mrs. Prescott, she was far from angelic. In fact, he painted a bleak picture of her, and Lambert was sure Henry would not protect her under any circumstances.

Lambert’s mind was at ease, so he pressed him for a reaction.

“Maybe this time, she went too far, and you—”

“Stop right there, mister,” Henry said, putting out his hand in protest. “I felt the urge ta pick up a club and defend Mary when she mistreated her, but life’s precious ta the Almighty, so I didn’t touch so much a hair on her head. Lord knows I wanted ta often enough.”

Henry took another swig.

“Every man’s got his breaking point, Henry.”

“Not me,” Henry said, trying to stand but giving up. “Not like that, I don’t. Anyhows, ya got no call ta accusin’ me of sumthin’ I didn’t do.”

“Don’t get so riled up, Henry. I’m not laying any blame on you or on Mary; I’m just tryin’ to find out what happened, that’s all.”

Henry cocked his head and squinted his right eye. “God’s honest truth?”

“Yep. She was seen in town, so the two of you were low on the list of suspects in my book.”

“Thank ya, mister. Wanna slug?” Henry asked, holding the bottle toward Lambert.

“No, thanks... What about visitors?”

Henry leaned back and looked upward. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Visitors, ya say?”

"Yes, Henry. Did Mrs. Prescott receive any visitors while she was here? Gentlemen visitors, especially."

"Yeah," Henry said, nodding, "She entertained a couple of visitors... Only men, though. But..." He shook his head. "It'd be a stretch ta call any of them a gentleman."

"What you mean?"

"They's was younger, strapping, and... Well... Had all the qualities ya be lookin' fer inna stud horse. And... And the whole bunch together couldn't outsmart a rooster," Henry said, sweeping his free hand from one side to the other. "Stupidest herd I've ever laid eyes on. Couldn't find water if they's was standing in it, and no manners whatsoever. Never did thank Mary or me for what we had ta put up with, clean up after."

Henry took another sip. "And she thought too highly of herself."

"What you mean?" Lambert said.

"Help me up," Henry said, extending his hand to Lambert.

Lambert pulled Henry to his feet and steadied him as they walked to the back of the barn.

"See that pond over yonder?"

Lambert nodded.

"Well, she'd wash herself in it... In her altogether, no less, and... And she didn't have much," Henry said, cupping his hand in front of himself. "If yer a-knowin' what I mean. No shape at all, 'tweren't nuthin' but skin and bones. I like 'em with some meat and a womanly figure; sumthin' ya can cozy up ta on cold nights. She couldn't keep a bed warm in summer." He wagged his head. "Nosiree... But she was proud of what she had and didn't seem ta care who seen her or who were a-watchin' her." Then, Henry slowly nodded. "I do declare she could pass fer a young man with the right clothes and shorter hair. Though... This time, she'd done gone put some meat on her bones."

"What you mean, Henry?"

"You know... A little bigger up here," he said, cupping his hand again. "And a little tummy pouch. More womanly lookin', if'n ya get my drift."

"Who was her last visitor?"

"Don't know his full name. Heard her call him darlin' Dan... Or sumthin' like that... Maybe 'twas Dave... Yes, darlin' Dave or David."

"When he leave?"

"Lemme think," Henry said, rubbing his chin. "Musta been near onta a month ago... Could be longer."

"Maybe your wife could remember more."

Henry clutched the whiskey bottle to his chest and put his index finger to his lips. “Shhh... We don’t wanna do that. She’s... Uh... She’s a-sleepin’. That’s it; she’d be a-sleepin’ fer sure.”

“All right, Henry. I may be back, so save anything you remember till then.”

“And the bottle, Mr. Lambert?”

“Keep it, Henry. You earned it.”

“Yer a mighty fine gentleman. Yessiree. Mighty fine.”

Lambert mounted his horse.

“Oh, one last thing, Henry. When did Mrs. Prescott leave?”

“The day after, darling Dave.” Henry waddled to the side of the barn and pointed toward the master house. “She had me load all her belongings onto the buggy—nearly bowed the axle ta the ground. ‘Twas like she ‘tweren’t never comin’ back.”

Henry staggered in a circle, nearly losing his balance, but managed to wave his hand toward the road. “Then she rid off toward town without so much as a thankya or a goodbye.”

“You’ve been a great help, Henry. Enjoy the whiskey.” Lambert tipped his hat, yanked on the reins, and rode toward town.

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*CHAPTER NINE: Back to Wyandotte*

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On the trip back to Wyandotte, Lambert mulled over the information he had gotten so far from Henry and Prescott. He tried to piece together a timeline of events for Mrs. Prescott, but the jostling of the ride kept derailing his train of thought. He stopped at a nearby stream and dismounted. While his horse drank from the cool waters and nibbled on fresh grass, he sat in the shade of a tree and thought out loud.

“On or about June six, the Prescotts argued about Mika’s dalliances,” he said in a baritone voice. His horse looked up and turned toward the sound.

“She left for their Wyandotte farm a week later to sort things out. She packed all her things and moved them to town the day after she and David Thompson had a falling out on the twenty-sixth of July.” His horse shook its head and returned to the green grass.

“Prescott received a telegram from her on the eighth of August, saying she had enough of the smell of cows and was taking a paddleboat from St. Louis to New Orleans with David. Things to consider: What did she do between the twenty-sixth of July and the eighth of August? How did she spend her time, and with whom? When and how did she and David patch up their relationship enough to run off with him? Did she take all her belongings with her to St. Louis? If she did, who helped her load them on the train? If she didn’t take them, where are they?”

Lambert stood and looked westward, deep in thought, no closer to answers than before, but pieces of a timeline began to fall into place. He mounted his horse and patted her neck. “Time to go home, gal,” he said calmly. The horse seemed to understand, and she took off, trotting toward Wyandotte.

The sun was setting when Lambert rode into town. He went straight to the livery. Jeb saw him coming and met him in front of the barn.

“See ya found yer way back with no help,” Jeb said with a chuckle.

“Could’ve followed your trail, blindfolded, Jeb. It was as wide and straight as the railroad.”

The blood rushed to Jeb’s cheeks. “Uh... My horse was thirsty, and he always—”

“Not criticizing, just stating facts,” Lambert said while dismounting.

“I—I—”

“See that she gets plenty of feed and water, would you, Jeb?” Lambert said, handing the reins to Jeb. “I may need her tomorrow.”

Jeb took the reins. “Yes, sir,” he said, nodding. “Right away, Mr. Lambert.”

Lambert walked toward the *Wyandotte House* as Jeb led the horse into the livery barn. The sounds of laughter and piano music coming from the saloon were louder and more boisterous the closer he got to its open door. He climbed the steps to the boardwalk and

looked in. The usual assortment of characters—cowpokes, drifters, husbands, bachelors, businessmen, and a single saloon girl—milled around. Some stood at the bar; others sat at tables.

He hesitated before entering. Lambert had experienced all kinds of reactions—some bad, most worse—so he never knew exactly what to expect, especially from a wild crowd. He took a deep breath and walked through the opening.

The music stopped, and a hush came over the room when he strode to the bar. Before Lambert could get the barkeep's attention, a trail bum yelled, "I don't much take ta drinkin' with yer kind."

"And what kind would that be?" Lambert asked, turning and facing the blurry-eyed, unshaven, stringy-haired cowpoke who could barely stand without support.

"Ha—Half-bree... Breeds," the cowpoke said, barely getting the words past his whiskey-numbed tongue and lips. "Th—That's what's kind." His eyes fluttered, and his knees buckled a bit, but he braced himself against the bar.

"I'm full-blood Navajo if it's any business of yours." Lambert felt for the cold bone-carved grip of the Colt under his right hand. If the trail bum pushed the issue, he was ready. "You got any objections to that, mister?"

The cowpoke's eyes fluttered again as if he was about to pass out. Then, at the last moment, he revived and stood erect. His hand moved toward his gun.

The muscles in Lambert's forearm tensed as he gripped and loosened his gun in its cradle.

The cowpoke's two sidekicks came forward.

Lambert stepped back and prepared for the worst. But they each extended an arm, catching the cowpoke before he crumpled to the floor. His body went limp, and he passed out cold.

"He don't mean nuthin'," the first friend said.

"'Tis just the whiskey talkin', mister. He's a gentle soul when he ain't all liquored up," the other friend said. "We'll take him and be on our way, if'n ya'd be so kind ta rest yer hand easy on that there shooter of yers."

"Don't be causin' no trouble, mister," a man at the bar said. "Sheriff Anderson will lock ya up fer sure, ya bein' an Injun and all... Won't matter none, who started it."

The barkeep moseyed over to Lambert. "No gun-fightin' tolerated in here, mister. Take it outside, or I'll take ya in."

"If I'm left alone, there'll be no trouble." Lambert glanced around the room. "Gimme a whiskey and a beer."

“That’s what I like ta hear, mister: no harm, no foul... Whiskey and beer comin’ right up.”

Lambert leaned against the bar and downed the whiskey in one gulp. While he sipped the warm beer chaser, he signaled for another shot.

Meanwhile, people started talking and laughing again, and an older man hammered out familiar tunes on an upright piano.

The barkeep nodded and refilled his glass.

Lambert downed the whiskey and signaled the barkeep again.

“Another, mister?”

“Not this time. I’m looking for Sheriff Anderson?”

“What ya want Andy fer?”

“None of your goldarned business,” Lambert said through clenched teeth. “Best you be telling me where to find him.”

The barkeep reached under the bar, uncradled the sawed-off, and laid it on top, pointing at Lambert.

“In case ya ain’t heard, I’m Deputy Sheriff Reuben Anderson, so I’m makin’ it my business.”

“Whoa there, deputy,” Lambert said, backing away from the bar and extending his hands in plain sight. “Andy and I are old friends.”

“Not likely, mister,” the deputy said, pointing the scattergun at Lambert. “Who are ya, and what ya want with Andy?”

“Could you ease your finger off the trigger—nice and easy like—and I’ll show you a letter of introduction from Mr. Prescott?”

“Would that be Reginald Prescott?”

“One in the same.”

The deputy spit on the floor. “Should’ve pulled the trigger straight up.”

Lambert stared at him, puzzled.

“Ain’t got no love fer Mr. Prescott or anythin’ Prescott... Including you, mister,” the deputy said, putting the shotgun back in its cradle. “He killed this town with his high and mighty ideas.”

The deputy picked up a glass and wiped it brutally with a towel—any more brutal, it would’ve broken in his hand.

“Bought up everythin’ he could, turned his back, and left it ta go ta hell inna handbasket three years ago.”

He waved his arm from one side of the saloon to the other.

"Everyone. Yeah, everyone but me and Amos sold out until this here *Wyandotte House* and the livery was the only thing Prescott don't own."

"Interesting history lesson, deputy, but I still need to see Sheriff Anderson. Where is he?"

"Yer a Prescott man, all right," the deputy said, nodding. "Should've pulled that trigger."

"You got me all wrong, deputy," Lambert said, returning to the bar. "I ain't got no dog in this fight, so it doesn't matter to me, one way or the other, who wins."

The deputy frowned, and his steely eyes fixed on Lambert.

"Mayor's office. Over the livery. Andy'll be there later this evening."

"Meanwhile... Where can I get a juicy steak?"

"How thick?" the deputy asked.

"An inch or so," Lambert said, holding up his thumb and forefinger in a C, tips about two inches apart.

"Baked beans and biscuits, too.?"

"Beggars can't be—"

"Don't say it, mister. If I got a penny every time... Oh, never ya mind. Go, find yerself a seat. Want another beer?"

Lambert nodded, and the deputy drew him a beer. He grabbed it and made a beeline for the last empty chair at the table. He sat, sipped his beer, and lit a cigarillo. As the smoke curled above his head, he thought again about his unanswered questions, but he was in a quandary about whom he should ask. The deputy interrupted his line of thought with a plate of hot food.

"Yer in luck! Hot biscuits, fresh from the oven. Butter? Jam?"

Lambert nodded. When the deputy left, Lambert was deep in thought again, but the aroma of food overpowered him, and he began to salivate. After a big chomp of a biscuit, the flavor hit his taste buds, and he forgot all about his questions.

He snatched the knife and fork and dug in.

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*CHAPTER TEN: Another Woman's Gone Missing*

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When Lambert left the saloon and headed across the street toward the livery, the sun had set, and the moon was a sunlit sliver visible low in the western sky. The town was quiet, and its streets were dark except for a light in a second-story window on the right side of the barn. He tried its doors, but they were closed tight. He went to the alley and found stairs leading to a landing on the top floor.

Each step creaked and moaned as Lambert climbed. He reached the landing and was about to knock, but a voice stopped him.

"Might as well come on in, mister," Sheriff Anderson said. "I hear'd ya a-comin' a mile off."

Lambert opened the door and stepped inside a room not much bigger than two horse stalls. Sheriff Anderson sat at a small desk covered with papers and a ledger. When he saw Lambert, he put his pen in the ink bottle and pushed it aside. He blotted the last entries and closed the log.

"Jeb said ya might find yer way back on yer own," the sheriff said with a chuckle and a shake of his head. "Had my doubts, though, but then again, that horse knows the way by herself—ya did choose the smart one. That, ya did."

Lambert took off his hat and wiped the sweatband while moving closer to the desk.

"You didn't tell me that Mrs. Prescott came to town a month ago, loaded down with all her personal effects."

"No, I didn't, but like I said, son. We don't cotton ta strangers askin'—"

"Don't bother saying it, Sheriff. Heard that one already, and it doesn't help me one bit."

"Looky here, son. I'm the law in what's left of this town, and knowin' Reuben, he filled ya in on the doins 'round here. So if I decide ta tell ya sumthin' or not ta tell ya sumthin', well, that's the way it is."

"Listen, Sheriff. Mrs. Prescott is missing, and I'm trying to follow her last trail. I'm gonna do that with or without your help."

"Missing, ya say?" the sheriff said, eyebrows raised.

"About a month."

"Jeez, Lambert," the sheriff said, sitting upright in his chair. "Why didn't ya say so?"

Lambert looked at the sheriff in disbelief but remembered his warning to Mr. Prescott and realized the sheriff was protecting *the missing woman*, hiding her from him. The threat of cold steel pointed between the eyes usually brought people around to Lambert's way, but this was the sheriff, who already proved he did not scare easily. He would have to wait and see how things developed.

“For one thing, it hasn’t been a month,” the sheriff said, “more like two weeks, give or take.”

“How’s that?”

“Have a seat, son,” the sheriff said, pointing to a chair.

Lambert put his hat on the desk, dragged a nearby chair closer, and sat.

*Maybe the sheriff’s going to cooperate after all,* he thought.

“Want a drink?” the sheriff asked.

Lambert nodded.

The sheriff took a bottle from the bottom desk drawer, poured two glasses worth, handed one to Lambert, and kept the other for himself. They toasted and sipped their whiskeys.

The sheriff leaned back in his chair.

“Well.. About a month ago, Mrs. Prescott come in ta town, her buggy loaded ta overflowin’, and rode straight over ta Miss Lilly’s Boardin’ House—like she always done when a-waitin’ fer the next southbound train.” The sheriff took another sip and continued. “The train come and went, but she never got on it, stayed in town. I thought that bein’ a bit unusual fer her, seein’ she don’t cotton much fer the townsfolks, and they don’t much cotton fer her, neither.”

“Any idea why?”

“Why she stayed, or why she and the townsfolk was never friendly?”

“Why she stayed this time?”

The sheriff took another sip of whiskey.

“A traveling medicine show had come and pitched their tent on a vacant lot southwest of town. A man, Doctor Suza, callin’ hisself a doctor of far east herbal medicines—more likely, a horse doctor—were sellin’ elixirs to cure just ‘bout everythin’ from toenail fungus to baldness. ‘Twas ‘bout ta run the bunch out of town, but Mrs. Prescott latched onta one of them show women—a China woman like herself.”

“Japanese,” Lambert said.

“Huh?”

“Mrs. Prescott is Japanese, not Chinese,” Lambert said. “She is from Japan, not China.”

“Can’t go by me,” the sheriff said. “They all look ‘bout the same.”

“Was the show woman Japanese, too?”

“Like I said, son. I can’t tell one from the other, but when them two got together, they’d gibber-jabber in that there foreign tongue of theirs. No one but them know’d what they was talkin’ about.”

"Then she was Japanese," Lambert said.

"If ya say so, son. Anyhow... A week later... First week of August, as near as I can remember, Mrs. Prescott caught the evening northbound train there was—'bout sunset it was—she never done that before, take a northbound train, that is. And that same day, the China woman from the medicine show turned up missing."

"Looks like lightning struck twice, Sheriff."

"Reckoned it did, son."

"Coincidence? Maybe, but I don't believe in them. Yet you must ask yourself how often two women, and two Japanese women at that, disappear on the same day."

"Nows ya mention it... It do sound unusual, almost impossible unless they's connected somehows. Ya figger they is?"

"Not enough information," Lambert said, "but it's been my experience that coincidences don't stack up any better than crooked logs in a wood pile."

"Ya gots that one right," the sheriff said, nodding. "Anyhows, we searched fer her fer two whole days. But by then, everyone stupid enough to believe the malarky that so-called doctor was a-peddlin' had bought two or more bottles of elixir, so they packed up and moved on when nobody was buyin' no more."

"Where were they heading?"

"Don't know," the sheriff said, shrugging his shoulders. "Southwest, I reckon. Leastways, that's the road they took."

"Much obliged, Sheriff. You've been a great help."

"Don't see how," the sheriff said, shrugging, "but yer welcome just the same."

Lambert started to stand but hesitated. He settled in his chair and held his glass for a refill. The sheriff poured two fingers for him and the same for himself.

"What's on yer mind, son?" the sheriff said, cocking his head and squinting one eye.

Lambert took the glass and held it to the lantern's light. He swirled the glass and watched how the whiskey responded in kind.

"Did you ever wonder, Sheriff... About all that goes on in the background to make what we see..." Lambert said, showing the glass to the sheriff. "Take whiskey, for example. This amber liquid results from countless steps in a process honed to perfection over the centuries... Did you know the first written record of distilling dates back to the second century in ancient Greece?"

"Don't get wheres yer a-headin', son."

"It's like what I see in this glass is whiskey, but I don't see how it was made. Then, take this town, you, your brother, and... Prescott. Your story, Sheriff. This town's story and how

Prescott figures in it. How did it become what I see when I look at a shell of a town called Wyandotte?”

Sheriff Anderson paused momentarily, picked up his glass, looked at the whiskey, and leaned back in his chair. He took a sip.

“‘Twas after the war... Me and Reuben pulled up stakes and headed west till we’s found this town—Prairie City, it were called in those days. ‘Twas little more than a handful of townfolks then, but when cattle drives outta Texas way stopped, the City grew. ‘Twasn’t long befer Reuben and me build this here livery and a saloon. Times was good. Town changed its name, the railroad were a-comin’, and money were ta be made fer the askin’. So we’s expanded the saloon...”

The sheriff took a gulp of whiskey.

“Soon as the railroad comed, the cattle herds dwindled, and those that comed, most quit stoppin’. They passed us by, the town suffered, businesses failed, and people moved on. Then Prescott showed up, buyin’ everythin’ fer sale. All but me and Reuben sold... And Miss Lilly.”

“Miss Lilly?”

“She owns the boardin’ house at the south end of town... Anyhows, comed ta find out, Prescott built the biggest cattle feedin’ pens ‘round these parts in Vinita and loads cattle on trains headin’ ta Kansas. He single-handed kilt this town, plain and simple, Mr. Lambert, and that be my and the town’s story, and I’s stickin’ by it.”

“Thanks, Sheriff. Helps me understand the man I’m working for.”

Lambert downed his whiskey, stood, shook hands with Sheriff Anderson, and returned to the saloon. Nobody paid any attention this time when he walked in and headed for the bar.

“Find Andy, all right, mister?” the deputy asked.

“Yep,” Lambert said with a quick nod.

“Uh... What’ll it be? Beer and whiskey, same as last time?”

“Nope, Lambert said, leaning on the bar. “Some information.”

“Information don’t pay the bills, mister.”

“A beer, then.”

The deputy drew a tall one—mostly head—and set it in front of Lambert. He paid and leaned back on the bar.

“About that information.”

“Sure, mister. Ask away. Won’t guarantee ya’ll get an answer, though. People ‘round these parts don’t—”

"I've heard about enough cotton to weave a dozen shirts, deputy. What I'd like is a straight answer to a straight question and save the dancin' for Saturday night."

"Don't get on yer high horse, mister. Just keepin' in mind the privacy of our good townfolk. That's all."

Lambert took a sip of the warm beer and wiped the foam off his upper lip. "Sheriff Andy said a woman from the medicine show turned up missing."

"Yep," the deputy said, nodding. "That'd be the truth."

"What particulars can you tell me about her disappearance?"

"Well..." The deputy thought for a moment and scratched his head. "Mrs. Prescott and that there medicine show a woman like herself struck up an acquaintance right off—two peas in a pod, they was. Sipped tea right over there on occasion," the deputy said, pointing to the table by the eatery.

"Another beer, Reuben," a man said, leaning on the bar.

The deputy drew a tall one and slid it to him. He grabbed it and walked away.

"Where was I?"

"Drinking tea over there, Lambert said, cocking his head toward the tables.

"Right... And I seen 'em walkin' the town, snoopin' inna a store window or two. We only gots two stores besides this here place, so 'tweren't much ta see, but they didn't seem ta mind, talkin' mostly."

"What about her disappearance?"

"I'm a-gettin' ta that part, mister, so hold yer horses. Anyhows... Where was I? Oh, yeah... 'Twas the day before... And Jeb got the buggy fer them ta go picknickin'. That evenin', Mrs. Prescott loaded up a couple of bags, rode ta the station, and took the late northbound. 'Twas 'bout noontime the followin' day, when the medicine-show doctor come'd in lookin' fer Andy sayin' his China woman were a-missin'."

"Anyone chase after Mrs. Prescott?"

"Why'd we do that?" the deputy asked, rolling his eyes.

"Maybe she could shed some light on the missing woman's whereabouts."

"She's a Prescott, mister," the deputy said, wagging his finger in Lambert's face. "And besides, 'round these parts, no one with any common sense would go chasin' after a China woman," he said, waging his head. "It'd make no difference if'n she left on her own accord or otherwise."

Lambert's brow creased while he listened, disbelieving yet believing—he had experienced prejudice often enough to recognize its ugliness. He did not bother to finish his beer; he had heard more than enough for one day. He tipped his hat, bid the deputy good evening, and went to his room for the night.



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*CHAPTER ELEVEN: Searching For The Medicine Show*

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Thursday, August 25

Lambert awakened early, ate a hearty breakfast, and stopped by the livery. He found Jeb mucking out the stalls.

“Howdy, Jeb. Got time for a few questions?”

“Sure, Mr. Lambert,” Jeb said, leaning against the muck rake. “Ask away.”

“The day before Mrs. Prescott left town, did she have you fetch her buggy?”

“Darn tootin’ she did.” Jeb waved his hand toward the barn door. “She sent Sammy with word that I’d better be damn quick ‘bout it, too—she ‘twas always demandin’.”

“What time was that?”

“Oh... Musta been ‘bout one or two,” Jeb said, scrunching the left side of his face and squinting while he thought. He looked straight at Lambert. “Nope... ‘Twas just after one, ‘cause Mr. Jenkins stopped by fer a one o’clock meetin’ with Sheriff Andy, uh... Mayor Andy, and he was runnin’ ten minutes late. So, it ‘twere nearer ta one than two.”

“Where was she going?”

“Sammy said I was ta hitch up the quarter horse,” Jeb said, pointing to the mare. “‘Cause she was takin’ a friend ta see her farm. So, I did what I were told and dropped the buggy by the boardin’ house at two or there ‘bouts.”

Lambert thought for a few moments. “When will she return?”

“Can’t rightly say fer sure,” Jeb said, shrugging. He cocked his thumb over his shoulder. “‘Twas workin’ on the corral’s fence till sundown. When I come out ta close up the livery, the mare were drinkin’ from the waterin’ trough, draggin’ its reins behind, and the buggy still hitched up. She never done that befer.”

“Mistreat her horse?”

“Naw,” Jeb said, shaking his head vigorously. “She done that all the time, but no matter what I was doin’, I had ta drop it and give her a ride ta the boardin’ house. I doubt she’d walk there unless someone put a gun ta ‘er head.”

“What was her temperament when you dropped off the buggy for the trip to the farm?”

Jeb’s face was blank, then he frowned and leaned the muck rake against the stall. “Gee, Mr. Lambert.” Jeb rubbed his chin. “I don’t rightly know what ya mean by that. I’m a-learnin’ ‘bout a horse’s temperament but didn’t know a woman had one, too.”

Lambert bit his tongue to keep from laughing. “Her mood then,” he said with a smile.

Jeb's cheeks were a bright red from blood rushing up his neck and filling them. He cleared his throat. "Uh... Well... I don't rightly know nuthin' 'bout a woman's moods, Mr. Lambert. Can't say I even know much 'bout my own."

"All right, Jeb. Let's try this: did she act out of the ordinary?"

"Nope," Jeb said. "Can't say she did. Always looked down on me, and 'twas no different that time."

Lambert thanked Jeb for the information and strolled by the corral to digest what he had heard. He lit a cigarillo and leaned on the fence while he smoked. A few things didn't add up.

A complicated portrait of Mrs. Prescott was painted by the people Lambert had met so far. Mr. Prescott's brush strokes showed an attractive, wanton, young wife with insatiable appetites. Jeb, Henry, and Sheriff Anderson's brush strokes showed a demanding, demeaning, and sometimes vile person. She chose to be helpless and wanted people to wait on her and jump at her beck and call. Lambert could not fathom whether it was cultural upbringing or that she was just plain despicable.

The swayback gray wandered over to him while he took a long drag on the cigarillo.

"Hey, big fella. Maybe you have some answers to questions bothering me."

The gray tossed its head up and down as if it understood. Lambert smiled and took another drag on the cigarillo. The gray whinnied and tossed its head again.

"Ya do?"

The gray shook its mane.

"All right then... Why did Mrs. Prescott walk to the boardinghouse this time? What ya think, big fella?" Lambert asked the animal, chuckling. "You got any ideas?"

The gray looked at him with its large brown eyes.

"No idea, eh? Answer this: if she loaded up all her things at the farm, why did she board the train with only two bags?"

The animal nudged Lambert's hand, expecting a carrot.

"Sorry, fella. Plumb out of carrots today."

When Lambert did not produce a carrot, the gray shook its mane and walked away. But Lambert leaned on the fence and kept talking to it. "Why did the woman from the medicine show go missing at the same time? She was Japanese, too. Coincidence? I don't believe in coincidences."

Lambert tossed the cigarillo butt on the ground and returned to the barn. Jeb was still mucking the stalls.

"Could you saddle up the quarter horse?"

"Sure thing, Mr. Lambert. Goin' anywheres special?"

"Fairland."

"Fairland? Ain't nuthin' worth seein' there, Mr. Lambert. Now, if ya'd ask me, I'd recommend—"

"While the sun's still up, Jeb," Lambert said, glancing up.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Lambert." Jeb dropped the muck rake and hot-footed it to the corral.

###

It was still early when Lambert rode into Fairland, a small town with a saloon, mercantile, livery, and sundry stores and buildings lining its mostly deserted main street. Like Wyandotte, its buildings needed some tender loving care and a fresh coat of paint.

Lambert stopped at the livery, and a boy ran out to meet him.

"Howdy, mister," he said. "What can I do ya fer?"

Lambert leaned on the saddle's horn and slid his hat back.

"Did a medicine show swing by in the last two or three weeks?"

"Sure did, mister. But it left town a week ago," the boy said, nodding. Then he laughed. "More like they was run out of town."

"Did a Japanese woman travel with them?"

"Japanese?" the boy said, shrugging. "Don't reckon I'd know what one'd look like, mister."

"Chinese, then?"

"Oh... Yessiree... I seen two of them."

"Any others with the show?"

"No, sir. Just them two and that doctor fella. That'd be all there was, and I slipped over and seen that there show every night."

"What direction they go?"

"Probably ta Afton," the boy said, pointing southwest. "Hour's ride. Maybe less. Just folla them rail tracks."

"Obliged," Lambert said, sitting straight in the saddle and adjusting his hat.

He dug his heels in his mount's flanks, and the horse took off in a gallop. And true to the boy's description, the trail followed alongside the railroad. The ride was easygoing over mostly flat terrain, and trees lined much of the way near a meandering stream. He stopped, dismounted, and let his horse drink.

Lambert spun around toward the sound of a rifle being cocked. He faced two cowpokes, one holding the gun, the other holding a bottle of whiskey. They both were weather-beaten, unshaven and wore dirty clothes. Neither was steady on his feet.

“Looky here, Earle,” Jamie said, wobbling closer to Lambert. “We’s got us a thieving redskin.”

“Ain’t he the same one at that there livery, Jamie?” Earle asked, leaning toward Lambert to the point of almost falling.

“Whatcha talkin’ ‘bout, Earle?” Jamie asked. “What livery? I’s don’t remember no livery.”

“He done pistol-whipped ya there, Jamie. Ya gotta remember that?”

“Oh, yeah... Now, I remember,” Jamie said, touching the side of his head. He cocked his head and eyed Lambert. “Yep... I reckon he’s the one, all right. Ain’t too many uppity Injuns ‘round these parts, so it’s gotta be him.”

“Where ya figger he stole that there horse from, Jamie?”

“Don’t matter, none,” Jamie said, jerking his head from side to side. “Twill be ours soon’s I kill ‘im.”

“Aim high, Jamie,” Earle said with a laugh. “I want’s that there coat he’s a-wearin’.”

Lambert remembered them from the livery in Wyandotte. He had gotten the best of them there, but now, they held an ace-high flush to his measly pair. So he eased his right hand close to his sidearm while distracting them.

“Take the horse if you want it,” Lambert said, waving his hand toward the animal. “I’ll steal another one.”

The men burst out laughing.

“See, I’s told ya, Earle,” Jamie said, looking at his companion and lowering his rifle. “He’s a thievin’ redskin.”

That was the edge Lambert needed. He reached for his gun, but Earle saw him make his move.

“Shoot ‘im, Jamie,” Earle shouted. “He’s goin’ fer ‘is gun.”

In one swift action, Jamie swung and clipped Lambert’s chin with the butt of his rifle, sending Lambert sprawling backward on the ground, knocked out cold.

When Lambert awakened, he was hog-tied to a tree, and Earle was rummaging through his saddlebags. Jamie sat near a campfire, twirling one of the Pearl-handled Colt .45 on his finger while chugging a bottle of whiskey until empty with his other hand.

“Whatcha find, Earle?” Jamie asked, pitching the empty bottle aside.

“Nuthin’ worth much.”

“We’s gots his horse and guns, and they’s be mighty fine guns at that,” Jamie said, holding them so Earle could see. “They’s gots ta be worth sumthin’.”

“Reckon so... But where’s ‘is money?” Earle asked, throwing the saddlebags aside. “Injun or no Injun, nobody dressed like that travels with no money. ‘Tweren’t in ‘is pockets, so ‘e’s got it hid on ‘im somewheres.”

Meanwhile, Lambert had slipped the hidden knife from a pouch inside his boot and cut himself loose. He did not make a move but acted as if he was still unconscious and waited for the right opportunity.

“Check his trousers,” Jamie said, getting up from the campfire. “I’ll get his boots.”

The men approached and bent over Lambert.

“Careful, Earle,” Jamie said, pulling on Lambert’s boot. “He might wake up any minute.”

“‘E’s still out co—”

Before Earle could finish, Lambert’s right fist caught him square on the jaw, sending him tumbling. In the same motion, the toe of Lambert’s boot jerked Jamie’s nose upward in a sickening crunch. The heel of his other boot crushed the bloody nose flat. Jamie reeled and yelled from the pain.

“Ya had no call ta do that, mister,” Earle said, rubbing his jaw. “No call at all.”

“Looky what ya done ta my nose, mister,” Jamie said. “‘Twon’t be good fer nuthin’.”

Lambert gathered his things, mounted, and glanced at the hapless pair sitting on the ground. “Take my advice, gentlemen: choose another line of work. You aren’t any good at trailway robbery.”

“But, mister, this be all we’s knows,” Earle said.

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*CHAPTER TWELVE: Doctor Suza's Magic Elixir: Snake Oil*

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It was late afternoon when Lambert rode into Afton and stopped at the livery. His horse reared its head and snorted from the clamor of the blacksmith's hammer, striking the hot metal and anvil.

"Easy, gal. Easy," Lambert said, patting the horse's neck.

The blacksmith, a sweaty, muscular, graying man in his early fifties, looked up. He eyed Lambert over a couple of times and then spat on the forge. A hiss of steam rose when the spittle landed on the hot coals.

"How do, mister," the blacksmith said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Uh... Can I help ya?"

"Feed and water for my horse," Lambert said while he dismounted.

The blacksmith sized up Lambert's horse. "Don't look so she'd eat much. Want her brushed?"

"No. Just feed and water."

The blacksmith reinserted the horseshoe deep inside the forge. It sent sparks and flames whirling above the hot coals.

"Fer how long?" he asked, cocking his head toward Lambert.

Lambert loosened the cinch and slid the saddle off.

"Don't know yet."

"Six-bits minimum fer the whole day and night." The blacksmith puckered and spat on the hotbed of coals again, raising a burst of steam. "Pay when ya ride out."

Lambert nodded.

"Town got a sheriff?"

"Not anymore," the blacksmith said, wagging his muscular head. He wiped the sweat off his brow with a filthy rag and stretched his back and shoulders.

"What you mean?"

Lambert slung the saddle over the side of a stall and faced him. The blacksmith repositioned the horseshoe in the hot coals, releasing more flames.

"Retired last year. Ain't found a new one yet..." The blacksmith gave Lambert the once-over again. "Ya wouldn't be interested, would ya, mister?"

"No, not my favorite pastime," Lambert said with a chuckle. "Just passing through looking for a traveling medicine show... Seen one of late?"

The blacksmith pulled the white-hot horseshoe out of the forge, positioned it on the anvil, and whacked it with the hammer. Lambert flinched.

“Yep, and they’s still here.”

“Where?” Lambert asked and then broadly smiled.

“Southwest edge of town,” The blacksmith said, pointing the hammer toward the southward road. “Almost see their tent from here.”

“Obliged.” Lambert tipped his hat and turned to walk away.

“Sure ya won’t reconsider that sheriff openin’? Most townsfolks won’t care much that yer a—”

“Let that thought perish before it tumbles off your lips,” Lambert said, pointing at the blacksmith with his left hand while his right eased toward his gun. His anger had flared again. His fingers wrapped around the grip of his weapon, ready to draw.

“Sorry, mister. I was just gonna say ‘gunslinger,’ that’s all,” the blacksmith said, stepping backward. “Hell... Our last sheriff was an Apache, so ya bein’ an Injun ‘twouldn’t make no difference ta us.”

Lambert relaxed and smiled. “Where can a man get a good meal in your town?”

The blacksmith chuckled nervously.

“Wouldn’t call anything they offer *good*, but it’ll fill ya up,” he said, cocking his head toward the saloon across the street. “But don’t order the beef; it’s been hangin’ too long in this heat. It’s buzzard bait by now.”

Lambert nodded and walked toward the saloon but stopped. “One more thing,” he said. “Does that medicine show doctor frequent the saloon?”

“Happen ta seen that there doctor fella go in not more than an hour ago. Ain’t come out that I seen.”

Lambert tipped his hat and crossed the street to the saloon.

###

Lambert entered the *Wilted Rose Saloon*, and his eyes swept the room. For a lazy afternoon, the saloon was nearly empty. Besides the barkeep, two men stood at the bar drinking, four more played cards at a table, and a fancy-dressed man sat alone at a corner table, playing solitaire and sipping whiskey.

“What’s your pleasure, mister?” the barkeep asked.

“Beer.” Lambert strolled to the bar.

“Ain’t the best, but it tastes better than the water ‘round these parts.”

Lambert paid, took a swig, and winced.

“How bad’s the water?”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn ya,” the barkeep chuckled.

Lambert leaned on the bar and cocked his head toward the fancy-dressed man.

“That the medicine show doctor?”

“Yep. Comes in nearly every day at this time. He orders a bottle and sits alone for a couple hours, playing cards and sipping. Been doing that ever since they come into town.”

Lambert picked up his beer and strolled over to the man’s table. The man had a deck of cards in his left hand. With his right, one by one, he flipped over a card from the Stock and played it on a Tableau or a Foundation or discarded it in the Talon.

“Care for some company, Doctor Suza?”

Suza looked up and sized Lambert from head to toe.

“Show starts at six, mister. Until then, I value my solitude.”

Lambert pushed his hat high on his head. “Didn’t trail you all the way from Wyandotte for a show.”

“Wyandotte?” Suza said, cocking his head. “Who are you, mister?”

“Name’s TG Lambert.”

“Odd name for an Apache.”

“Navajo.”

“What you want with me?”

“Understand a member of your troupe is missing.”

“What’s your game, Mr. Lambert?”

“No games, Doctor Suza. Your woman’s disappearance may have something to do with the disappearance of a woman I’m trying to find.”

“Whoa, there, Mr. Lambert. You left me standing in your dust.”

“I’m trying to determine the whereabouts of Mrs. Prescott. She turned up missing the same day your woman went missing.”

“I don’t see a connection.”

“Both women are Japanese. Aren’t that many of them around these parts, so doesn’t it strike you odd that they’d both disappear on the same day?”

“Another Japanese? Well, I’ll be...” Suza sat upright in his chair and laid the deck of cards on the table. “Take a load off your feet, Mr. Lambert.”

“Don’t mind if I do, Doctor.” Lambert laid his hat and beer mug on the table, pulled up a chair, and sat.

“Heard Sakura had befriended some local woman—”

“Sakura?” Lambert asked.

“Sakura Nakamori’s her name... I didn’t take notice or care about her friend, though. ‘Twas too busy making *snake oil* and selling it.”

“Snake oil? Didn’t expect that...”

Suza reached for the bottle and poured a shot of whiskey. He tipped the bottle toward Lambert. “Care for a nip?”

“Got what passes for beer, but thanks.”

Suza downed the whiskey in one gulp. “You don’t strike me as a man to trifle with, so I reckoned I’d lay my cards on the table—metaphorically speaking.”

“Let’s have the whole story, then, Doctor Suza.” Lambert took a cigarillo from his coat pocket and lit it. Suza poured another shot of whiskey and sipped it.

“For one thing, Suza is my stage name, not my God-given name. That would be Ernest von Stubenbaum. Yep. You heard me right... von Stubenbaum. A real tongue twister, so I changed it to sell my elixir.”

“Why you call it snake oil?” Lambert took a draft on the cigarillo and blew the smoke above the table.

Suza leaned forward on his elbow so only Lambert could hear him. “Because it doesn’t cure anything,” Suza said softly. “The alcohol makes you feel warm, but that’s about it.”

“Then why do you—”

“There’s precious little hope to be found in these dark and dangerous days,” Suza said, leaning back in his chair. “From our birth, we’re plagued with incurable diseases and infections. I’m fifty-two years old, mister, and gave up doctoring ten years ago when I realized the medical profession offered little beyond what the good Lord willed and what the sick or injured mustered from within. Despite all the doctoring, those with hope often survived, and those without usually didn’t. It was then I decided to offer a bottle of hope wherever I could.”

“But—”

“But, what, Mr. Lambert?” Suza said, leaning forward and sweeping his right hand toward the four men playing cards. “Most folks aren’t sick; they just think they are.”

Lambert took a gulp of beer as he listened in disbelief.

“And those who are truly sick, their local doctors can’t help but a few of them,” Suza continued, inclining his head and leaning back in his chair. “But with an ounce of hope, maybe... Just maybe, some will pull through, or at least go to their grave peaceably.”

“Are you too blinded to see what you’re doing is wrong, Doctor Suza?” Lambert said, pointing the cigarillo toward Suza. He felt his anger rising as he debated with the doctor.

“Not a topic I’m willing to argue, but that’s not why you sought me out, is it, Mr. Lambert?”

“You are right, sir,” Lambert said, deciding it would only sideline the hunt for Mrs. Prescott if he pressed this topic further, so he asked, “What happened the day Sakura went missing?”

“Sakura said she was going on a buggy ride—I assumed it was with her townsfolk friend—and she promised to return in time for the show, but she didn’t. So after the show, I went to find the sheriff, but his deputy said to come back in the morning. I did, and the sheriff organized search parties, but they found nothing and gave up after two days. We packed up and left town.”

“We?”

“Chyou and Daiyu. The Chinese twins.”

“Weren’t you curious about Sakura’s friend and her connection with Sakura’s last buggy ride?”

“Yes, but I couldn’t raise any concern with the sheriff or his deputy. They knew something but weren’t about to tell me what it was, or they just didn’t care since Sakura was nothing but a *China woman*, as they so richly put it. Besides, we’d reached the saturation point for the town, and that’s when we decided it was best to leave.”

“Saturation? More likely, your customers discovered the elixir was nothing more than herb-infused liquor.” Lambert stood and grabbed his hat.

“Whatever... Staying for the show?”

“No, thanks. If I hustle, I can make Wyandotte by sundown.”

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*CHAPTER THIRTEEN: A Body's Been Found*

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The sun's last rays painted the horizon with hues of red and purple when Lambert rode into Wyandotte. He went directly to the livery, dismounted, and led his horse to a nearby watering trough. The day's ride had him in the saddle for too many hours, and his backside sorely needed a rest, but his legs felt good after a stretch, and he was finally standing on solid ground.

Lambert stepped through the wide-open doors of the livery and into the barn. The last of the day's light blended the outlines of stalls, beams, and hay. He found a lantern hanging on a post and lit it.

The barn cat approached Lambert and circled his feet, meowing. The gray swayback snorted and reared its head when he approached its stall. He scratched the animal's head.

"Where's Jeb, old fella?" Lambert asked, holding the lantern high. "Sleeping, I reckon, but where?"

A cough and gurgle gave away Jeb's location. Lambert found him curled on a bed of hay in the stall past the gray and Mustang. He tapped Jeb's shoe with the toe of his boot. Jeb retracted his leg and curled into a tighter ball.

"Jeb," Lambert yelled.

"Go away, mister," Jeb said, rolling over. "Can ya see I's busy?"

"Busy sawing logs," Lambert said with a chuckle.

Jeb opened an eye. "Who are ya, mister? I can't see nuthin' but that there bright lantern and shadows."

"Lambert."

"Jeez, Mr. Lambert, why didn't ya say so?" Jeb said, jumping to his feet. "What can I's do ya fer?"

"The mare needs fed, watered, and a rubdown."

"Likety-split," Jeb said, rushing past Lambert.

"What you say?"

Jeb stopped and spun toward Lambert. "Likety-split. Ya know, quick as I can... Get with the times, Mr. Lambert."

"Where'd you hear—"

"Well, ya see. There were this here girl at the train depot, and she—"

"Never mind, Jeb," Lambert said, jerking his head toward the saloon. "A beer is what I need right now."

"I suppose ya can get one, likety-split at the *Wyandotte*," Jeb said with a chuckle. "That were a good one? Huh, Mr. Lambert?"

"The mare, Jeb," Lambert said. "She'd appreciate dinner and a drink sooner rather than later if you please."

"Uh... Yessiree, Mr. Lambert."

Jeb hustled to care for the mare while Lambert hung the lantern on a hook and headed across the street.

###

"What'll ya have, mister?" the barkeep asked.

Lambert was bone-tired after his marathon trip and encounters with the *highwaymen* and the deranged Doctor Suza. He touched his jaw; it still hurt where the rifle butt had walloped him. His first thought was for some peace, quiet, and a soft bed, but his thirst took precedence.

"A tall one," he said. "The tallest you got."

Deputy Anderson looked up at the sound of Lambert's voice.

"I got this," the deputy said and started drawing a mug of beer. "Andy's been lookin' fer ya."

"What about?" Lambert pushed his hat back on his head.

"Probably 'bout that there woman's body 'twas found in the woods near the Prescott Farm," the deputy said, setting the mug on the bar.

"What woman?"

Lambert had few basic emotions left. Since his youth, he had learned to suppress fear and had found little in life to enjoy. Sadness toward any situation had been beaten out of him by twelve, and he had become indifferent; thus, little disgusted him anymore. The one emotion he had plenty of was anger. He was angry at everyone and everything, and he struggled to keep his anger under control. But when he heard the news of the woman's body in the woods, he knew the odor that he and Jeb had gotten a whiff of yesterday must have been that woman's decomposing body, and he was disgusted with himself, which fueled his pent-up anger even more.

"Don't know who or much else, but this mornin' Andy, Doc, and Zeeb went out ta the Prescott Farm... A dead body were found in the woods near the trail... And from what I hear'd, it were in mighty bad shape, too."

"What you mean?" Lambert asked sharply.

"Doc says it'd been there a long while. A week or two, maybe. So ya can guess what it—"

"Where's the sheriff now?" Lambert asked, cutting the deputy off.

"Most likely the mayor's office," the deputy said. "Ya knows where that is, do ya?"

"Been there, once."

"He'll wanna see ya right away, I reckon."

Lambert gulped the beer as quickly as he could and fished for a coin to pay.

"On the house."

"Obliged," Lambert said with a nod. His anger was waning as he wiped his upper lip and left.

###

Lambert hurried up the stairs to the mayor's office.

"Come on in," Sheriff Anderson said before Lambert knocked.

He opened the door. The sheriff sat at the desk, holding an ink pen in one hand and papers in the other.

"Sit a spell while's I put these away. Got sumthin' that might just pique yer curiosity."

Lambert pulled up a chair. Sheriff Anderson put the pen down and closed the papers in the ledger.

"Drink?"

"Just had a beer, but thank you all the same."

"Yer gonna need one after I tell ya what was found today."

"I heard about the woman."

"Reuben?"

"Yep."

"He don't know the half of it, son, so ya better take my offer. Ya'll need it when ya hear the whole story."

Lambert nodded. The sheriff was right; his curiosity was piqued, but he could not fathom what the sheriff was so fired up about. He remembered the smell on the trail to the Prescott Farm and imagined the body was in bad shape from the natural decaying process—he had seen that grim scene before, and probably the sheriff, too. But why was the sheriff so upset, so emotionally affected?

The sheriff got two glasses and poured three fingers' worth into each. He handed one to Lambert, took the other for himself, and knocked back a slug.

"I'm all ears, Sheriff," Lambert said, holding his glass without drinking.

"Moe Fletcher, a neighbor of the Prescott's, were squirrel huntin' this mornin'... And his dog started a-barkin' sumthin' fierce. So when Moe went ta see what his dog were so fired up about, he found a woman's body on the ridge overlookin' the river 'bout where their

properties adjoin... A mile from the Prescott Farm. The sight and smell were so terrible Moe said he nearly fainted dead away. After he regained his senses, he hightailed it to town, found me, and I got Doc Winston and Zeeb to follow him to the body.”

The sheriff gulped another whiskey.

“Ya could smell the stench of rotting flesh long befer ya were close enough ta see it. And... And it were the worst sight I ever did see. ‘Twas a putrid mass of maggots in a China woman’s naked body, that’s what it were. And add insult ta injury, wild animals had found and torn some of it apart. Bones, gnawed and stripped bare, were scattered about.”

Lambert took a gulp as well.

“That’s what Jeb and I got a whiff of on our way to the farm.”

“Didn’t ya stop ta see what were the cause?”

“Nope,” Lambert said. “Reckoned it was a kill some animal left for later. Besides, I was single-focused on finding Mrs. Prescott and didn’t want anything to sidetrack me.” He took a swig. “And uh...” Lambert cleared his throat. “Where were her clothes?”

“Thought it mighty odd, but her clothes was gone; she weren’t wearing nuthin’. Must’ve been as naked as a Jaybird when she died, or her killer took her clothes afterward. We searched... Didn’t find a stitch anywheres.”

“How you know it was a woman’s body, let alone the missing Japanese woman?”

“Doc said her pelvic bones were broad as a woman’s, and she had long black hair in a single braid like them China women wore theirs.”

“And Japanese?”

“We found three chopstick things like them China women wore still stuck in her hair.

“How’d she die?”

“Back of her skull, all caved in. Doc said that’s what killed her. Probably struck from behind with a rock or the like. She went quick—dead before her knees hit the ground.”

“So the body is a woman, likely Japanese, but whose body is still the question. And why was she naked?”

“She’s that missing woman from that medicine show, plain and simple. Clothes is an easy one: delaying us identifying her.”

“Got your herd all corralled, do you, Sheriff?”

“When the facts smack ya in the face, son... Ya find that show on yer travels?”

“Yep. Afton.”

“I’ll telegraph ‘em in the mornin’. Meanwhile, I’ll try ta ferget what I seen today.” Sheriff Anderson finished off his glass and refilled it to the brim. “Care ta join me?”

“Thank you, but no. I’ve got some serious thinking ahead of me and need a clear head.”

“Not me. Don’t want my head clear fer nuthin’. Maybe tamarra but not tonight.”

Lambert left the sheriff, guzzling his whiskey.

As he descended the stairs, Lambert tried to fit together the puzzle pieces he had so far. Two Japanese women had gone missing on the same day, and one had been found dead, murdered. Where was the other one? In St. Louis? Traveled on to New Orleans? Was she a murderess, or was someone else the murderer? What was the motive? Then the big question: who was murdered, and who boarded the train to St. Louis: Mika or Sakura? Lambert reached the street, stymied, stuck in a loop.

*Too many pieces, too late in the day, and too tired to think, he thought. Save it for tomorrow.*

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*CHAPTER FOURTEEN: Who Was The Woman?*

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Friday, August 26

Lambert arose early and, after breakfast, headed to see Doctor Winston, the town physician. Winston's combination office and residence was a two-story structure on the corner of Main and Second. It was a gray clapboard building with white-trimmed windows and doors, long overdue for repainting. A porch with weathered white balusters and chipped gray railings wrapped around the structure facing Main and partway around facing Second on the right. A seasoned white picket fence separated the small, neglected lawn from both streets.

When he knocked, Doctor Winston opened the door. The doctor was a white-haired, older man pushing seventy, paunch and shorter than average. The collar and sleeves of his white shirt were frayed, his dark coat and trousers were wrinkled, and his tie was poorly tied and crooked.

"Mr. Lambert, I presume."

Lambert removed his hat and nodded.

"Come in, my boy. Sheriff Andy said to be expecting you."

Lambert entered, and Winston led him to the parlor.

"Have a seat, son. Care for a coffee? It's freshly brewed."

The smell of coffee filled the air, and Lambert could not help but nod when he got a whiff of the tantalizing aroma. He licked his lips and smiled.

"If it'd be no trouble."

"Not at all, son," Winston said. "It'll be just a minute."

Lambert sat on the sofa and put his hat beside him. Winston shuffled out of the room.

"I don't get too many visitors to enjoy coffee with," he said from the kitchen. "They're usually injured or sick, and coffee's the furthest thing from their minds."

"Much obliged, Doctor," Lambert said, glancing around the room.

The room's furnishings and decorations showed a woman's touch: an ornate, floral-patterned, gold-gilded sofa and two matching chairs, papered walls, and delicate curtains, all having a feminine flair. Yet, the signs of neglect were everywhere: dust on surfaces, occasional debris on the floor, and curtains askew.

Daguerreotypes of a young man and woman on their wedding day, the same couple standing in front of this house, and individual portraits at various stages of growing older sat on a table, collecting dust.

Winston returned, carrying a tray with two mugs of coffee, a creamer, and sugar. He handed a mug to Lambert and took the other for himself.

“Milk? Sugar?”

“Just black,” Lambert said, taking the mug and sipping.

“Have the beans shipped in from New Orleans—special blend,” Winston said, sitting opposite Lambert. “But you didn’t stop by to discuss my coffee, did you, Mr. Lambert?”

“No, but...” He took another sip. “This is mighty fine coffee. Mighty fine at that.”

The doctor, unphased by Lambert’s complement, added half a teaspoon of sugar and a dribble of milk to his coffee. “You can come to the point anytime you’re ready, Mr. Lambert,” he said, stirring his coffee while waiting for an answer.

“Sheriff Anderson told me,” Lambert said, sliding to the sofa’s edge. “Uh... He said you found a woman’s body near the Prescott Farm.”

“Yes... Well...” Winston took a sip of coffee. “Truth be told, it was Moe Fletcher who found her, and then Andy, Zeeb, and I followed him to the corpse.”

Lambert took the last gulp of coffee and set his mug on the table. “Did you bring any of the remains back here for closer examination?”

“Some,” Winston said, nodding and glancing toward a side door.

“Some?” Lambert asked, brow raised.

“Yes...” Winston said, turning toward Lambert. “The long bones were flesh-bare, detached, and gnawed—an animal got after her arms and legs. Her head was hanging by a thread, so I also brought that. However, the torso and pelvic cavities were so maggot-infested I doused the body with lime. I’ll check back in a day or two.”

“Find anything that’d help identify her?” Lambert asked, repositioning himself on the sofa.

“Nothing except the left radius and ulna showed callus formations...”

Lambert’s face was blank.

“Uh... You might say it’s a healing suture,” Winston said. “Call it a bone scar if that helps.”

“Then you’re saying she broke her arm, Doctor,” Lambert said. “Was it recently?”

“Years ago, as a youngin,” Winston said, shaking his head. “And whoever set the bones misaligned them. So she had a mild deformity, not too noticeable unless you looked closely.”

“What killed her?”

“A fracture of her skull,” the doctor said, motioning with his hand.

“Skull fracture? Then, she was murdered.”

"Yep... Someone walloped her good from behind," Winston said, patting the back of his head, "most likely with a large pointed stone. Hit her right at the suture of the right and left parietals and the occipital bones. She was knocked out cold and was, in all practicality, dead before her knees hit the ground."

"Find the weapon?"

"Reckoned it was a stone... Too many lying around to be sure which one was the murder weapon," Winston said, sighing. "I gathered up a few candidates. But none exactly fit the fracture site... And I couldn't find blood on any of them."

"Any sign of defensive wounds?"

"What you mean, son?"

"If you saw an attacker coming, wouldn't you try to escape? Or, at least, defend yourself? And in the process, what are the chances other injuries might occur?"

"Superficial wounds wouldn't show, considering the body's condition."

"All right... I can buy that, but what's your best judgment: was she surprised by the attack, or was she executed?"

"I don't see a difference, Lambert. Dead's dead."

"Here's my problem. This whole mystery—the disappearance of two Japanese women on the same day from the same town—doesn't fit together as a puzzle should. One piece that doesn't: why was she naked?"

"Who told you that?" Winston asked, eyebrows raised.

"Sheriff Anderson."

"He wasn't to tell anyone."

"Why, Doctor? Seems to me it's a valuable piece of information."

"You know how people talk... And if the woman turns out to be Mrs. Prescott, well... You know how people talk."

"It'll be safe with me, Doctor. Now, back to my original question. Surprised or executed?"

"I still don't—"

"I'll draw you a picture, Doctor. As I see it, the clothes tell a tale. If the woman was surprised, most likely, her attacker approached from behind, struck her with a rock, and disrobed her after she died—only heaven knows why. On the other hand, if she was executed, the attacker had her remove her clothing first, did whatever he did to her, and killed her to cover up his deed. I've seen it too often to mention."

The doctor looked stunned. He took a gulp of his cold coffee and said, "To say one way or the other would be speculation on my part, son."

"Of course, there's the question of where she was killed."

"In Prescott Woods, of course," Winston said.

"That's where the body was found," Lambert said, standing. "If she was murdered elsewhere and transported there, that might explain her missing clothes: to confound her identity. On the heels of that line of thinking, when did she die? In other words, how long was the body in Prescott Woods before it was discovered? How and when was her body transported there if she was killed elsewhere? Did she know her attacker? And where are her clothes?"

"You have a lot of questions, but I can't answer any of them, son. Have any answers yet?"

"No, but I'm a trash-heap bulldog that *doesn't* give up bones easily."

"Sorry, I couldn't tell you more."

"Well... You've been a great help anyway, Doctor Winston," Lambert said, reaching for his hat.

"More coffee? Please stay a while and chew the fat."

"A refill would be great," Lambert said, sitting.

"Comin' right up."

"You married, Doctor?" Lambert asked, picking up the picture of a young man and woman on their wedding day.

"Was. Widower these past five years," Winston said from the kitchen.

"Sorry for your loss, Doctor." Lambert blew the dust off the frame and returned it to the table.

"Emily was a fine woman, and I miss her dearly," Winston said, returning with a coffee pot.

"Children?"

The doctor filled each mug and set the pot aside. He took his cup, walked to the window, and gazed into nothingness.

"Lord knows we tried, but we were never blessed that way; many other ways, though, but not with children. Yet, when I stop and think about my years here..." He glanced at Lambert and then out the window again. "Take those people..." He pointed to a man and a woman walking across the street. "And most of them around these parts..." He swept his hand broadly as he spoke. "Thirty or younger were delivered by me, so you might say the whole town were our children."

"Most people," Lambert said, nodding, "are never that fortunate or blessed, Doctor."

After coffee with Doctor Winston, Lambert stopped by the telegraph office and sent a message to Mr. Prescott asking for information about Mika's broken arm. Then he went to the saloon, looking for the sheriff. He found him sitting alone, head in his hands, elbows on the table. His face drooped, and his eyes were bloodshot and puffy.

"Howdy, Sheriff."

Sheriff Anderson winced. "Don't shout, son. Can't ya see I'm a-hurtin' sumthin' fierce?"

"Sorry. Just came from Doc Winston's."

Sheriff Anderson groaned.

"There might be a break in the—"

Sheriff Anderson waved Lambert off.

"Give me a *break*, son, till I—"

"Here's yer medicine, Andy," the barkeep said, handing him a concoction. "This should ease your hangover."

The sheriff grabbed the mug and guzzled every drop. He scrunched his face, and a shudder went from his head to his toes.

"Aargh! The cure's worse than the ailment," the sheriff said, slamming the mug on the table. He cocked his head toward Lambert. "What light's Doc Winston throwing on our mystery woman?"

"He showed me where the woman had a fractured arm years ago. If either Prescott or Suza knows anything about that, we'll know who the woman is."

"If'n ya say so, son," the sheriff said, rocking his head from side to side. "Miss Lilly knew Mrs. Prescott better than anyone. More likely, better than her husband."

"Where would I find her, Sheriff?"

"Go down Main till ya see a big yella house. That'd be Miss Lilly's... Now, will ya just let me die in peace, son? And when ya leave, walk away quietly... Please."

Lambert tipped his hat and walked away, chuckling—softly. With so many unanswered questions, knowing the victim's identity would go a long way toward unraveling the tangled web of loose ends. In a tight-knit town like Wyandotte, where everyone seemed to know everyone's business, indubitably someone saw or heard something, or were they all like Deputy Anderson, not giving a hoot if a person did not walk, talk, and look as he did. Lambert shook his head, hoping they were not.

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*CHAPTER FIFTEEN: Miss Lilly's Boardinghouse*

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Miss Lilly's boardinghouse was on the corner of Main and Creek at the southern edge of town. It was a spacious, two-story building with bright yellow clapboard siding, a black roof, white-trimmed windows, and white gingerbread-trimmed roofs. Its porch wrapped around its front and extended halfway along its right and left sides. A freshly painted, white picket fence enclosed the front lawn.

Lambert strolled up to the gate, but Miss Lilly flung open the screen door before he could step foot in her yard.

"Hold it right there, mister. No rooms for trail bums, cattle thieves, or half—"

"Don't finish that thought, ma'am, 'cause I'm none of them. But if you give me a minute of your time..."

"I don't have time for riff-raff the likes of you. And I'll put Sheriff Andy on you if you don't skedaddle this very minute."

"But Sheriff Anderson sent me."

"Likely story, mister," she said, backing into the house and closing the screen door.

"This will explain everything." Lambert unfolded and waved Prescott's letter at arm's length so Miss Lilly could see. "It's from Mr. Prescott."

"You work for Reginald Prescott?"

"Yes, ma'am," Lambert said with a nod.

"Another reason to keep you off my property."

"How's that?" Lambert asked, folding the letter and putting it back in his pocket.

"Got no love for him or anyone who works for him."

Lambert took off his hat and held it loosely. "Could I at least come closer?" he asked, slightly cocking his head and rotating his hat on his left fingers with his right hand. "So I can explain what I'm looking for."

"Right there is close enough, mister. Just state your business and leave."

"Mrs. Prescott... Mika has gone missing, and I'm trying to find her. Now, are you willing to help me locate her or not?"

"Mika's missing?" The screen door flew open, and Miss Lilly hurried to the edge of the porch. "How? She was just here a couple weeks ago."

"She never returned home. A telegram said she was going to New Orleans. Know anything about that?"

"Why would she be going there?"

“That’s what I’m trying to find out, Miss Lilly, so if you don’t mind—”

“Well, don’t stand there in front of God and everyone, mister... Uh, I didn’t catch your name.”

“TG Lambert, but just plain Lambert will do.”

“Come on in and sit a spell, Mr. Lambert,” Miss Lilly said, holding the screen door open.

When Lambert stepped inside Miss Lilly's boardinghouse, he was greeted by a spacious dining room on the left. The centerpiece was a large oak table with eight chairs around its rectangular shape. Straight ahead, a set of stairs led to the second floor, while the hallway branching off to the right led to the kitchen and other rooms. From that direction were the sounds of stirring, banging, clanking, and the muffled voices of the staff hard at work. The delicious scent of freshly baked bread and muffins filled the air.

To the right of the stairs was a cozy parlor with two sofas upholstered green-on-green stripes with delicate gilded edges. There were also four matching chairs strategically placed around tables. Bookcases and lamps were against recently painted beige walls. The dark-stained hardwood floors bore marks from countless boarders who had stayed here before, as did the well-loved furniture.

Lambert waited for Miss Lilly, and when she sat on the edge of one sofa, he sat on the other, facing her. He put his hat alongside him. She wiped her eyes with a fresh hanky.

“You’ll have to forgive my weeping eyes. Doc Winston says I’ve got an affliction of some kind. The salve he gave me isn’t working, and I can’t see too good. But enough of my troubles. Some refreshments, something to drink, Mr. Lambert?”

“No,” Lambert said, shaking his head, “but thank you kindly... Mika... Uh... Mrs. Prescott... Why did she stay so long this time? I’ve been told that was unusual.”

“Yessiree, it was,” she said, nodding. “Mika ordinarily stayed overnight to catch the southbound train to Vinita, but not this time. You see... A medicine show was in town, and one of the showwomen was from her homeland... Japan.”

Miss Lilly scooted deeper on the cushion and leaned against the sofa’s backrest. Her face lit up.

“She was Japanese, you know, and seeing someone like her... Well, they hit it right off and became fast friends; inseparable they were. And from a distance, you’d be hard-fixed to tell them apart,” Miss Lilly said, rolling her head from side to side. “I sometimes mixed them up, two peas in a pod for sure... And... And up close even, some couldn’t tell them apart; they could’ve passed for sisters... Maybe twins.”

“Others have mentioned how much alike they looked,” Lambert said, nodding.

“Yes, they sure did... You sure about some refreshment, Mr. Lambert?”

“No, thank you, Miss Lilly.”

Miss Lilly licked her dry lips and continued, "Well... When Mika returned from the picnic, she packed two satchels and took the late train without so much as a goodbye. I was visiting next door and didn't see her return or leave, and it's still hurtful she left without a word. Then, her boarding a train to St. Louis was a shocker."

"Why?"

"Reginald's twenty years older than Mika, and he treats her more as a father than a husband, except when he wants..." Miss Lilly squirmed in her seat and folded her hands on her lap. "Well... I don't have to spell it out... Do I, Mr. Lambert?"

Lambert said nothing.

"And... And she felt penned in, corralled, smothered by him," she said. "If the truth be told, he loved his Cattleman Bank more than anything, including Mika."

Miss Lilly became quite agitated and jabbed her finger directly in Lambert's face.

"Lord knows I'd never put up with that from no man!"

Miss Lilly calmed down and became melancholy. "But God bless her; Mika endured him, even loved him—I guess—and after being away from home and after the occasional *diversion*, she couldn't wait to get back to him."

"Hear tell, she stayed a week with you," Lambert said.

"Like I said... She usually stayed overnight—arriving or leaving—but she settled in for eight days as I remember, maybe it was nine, all told."

More of the pieces of the puzzled timeline were falling into place. Miss Lilly gave Lambert answers to two of his most pressing questions: why Mrs. Prescott remained in town instead of returning to Vinita, with whom she spent her last days before disappearing.

"How close were Mika and the showwoman?"

"Best way to describe them: two peas in a pod, joined at the stem," Miss Lilly said, crossing her fingers to illustrate her point. "Mika spied her the first night she was in town; after that, they took to one another, and you couldn't separate them with a whip if you tried. Spent hours together: in town, in her room, anywhere you looked, they were together."

"Understand she packed up and brought all her possessions from the farm."

"That she did, and they're still in her room and the room next to hers. I asked her why she'd moved out of the farm, figuring it might have been a falling out with Henry or Mary," Miss Lilly said, "but that wasn't the reason. Suppose you know about her gentlemen visitors at the farm."

"Henry was quite open about his disdain for them," Lambert said with a quick nod.

“The Bronstons didn’t care much for Mika, but they loved living on Prescott’s Farm, so they put up with Mika’s occasional visits... Anyway... David stopped by for a visit but didn’t stop by for *friendship*.”

“Thompson, the gambler.”

“And a no-gooder to boot... Anyhow, they had words that ended in a full-blown argument. Mika sent him packing. She told him not to see her anymore; they were through. She said she’d finally realized what a fool she’d been all these years and decided to return to Reginald and never leave him again.”

“Why the change of heart?”

“Don’t rightly know, and Mika never said, but I sensed something wasn’t the same. She seemed different in a way I couldn’t quite put my finger on. She often told me her most private thoughts, so I thought she’d tell me eventually, but she held back this time.”

“Then why’d she go north?”

“Mystifies me, Mr. Lambert. But if you knew Mika as long as I have, you’d expect her to do the unexpected.”

“Tell me about the last time you spoke to her.”

“You know about the buggy ride...” Miss Lilly said.

“When Mika took Sakura to see the Prescott Farm?”

“That’s right... Mika left in the afternoon—we said our goodbyes, and I wished her a fun time—and she returned before sundown, I reckon—don’t know for sure. Like I said, I was visitin’ with Martha next door. She must have gone straight to her room and packed in an awful hurry—her things were strewn all over her room. Then she left without so much as a goodbye; never left before without a hug and a goodbye. Never. ‘Twasn’t like her at all. And she left most of her belongings behind; only took two bags, near as I can figure.”

“Any idea why she left everything behind?”

“Beats me, Mr. Lambert. I still can’t understand why she’d go to the depot in the evening. Only train then is the northbound express to St. Louis.”

“Who helped her with her bags?”

“What you mean, Mr. Lambert?” Miss Lilly asked, somewhat puzzled.

“I’ve heard Mrs. Prescott never did anything for herself, so I was wondering... Who gave her a ride to the depot?”

“Until now, I never put much weight on that fact, but you’re right; Mika is a *pampered pup*. So, someone musta helped her... I can’t imagine Mika walking that far, much less carrying two bags or anything for that matter.”

Miss Lilly had answered more of Lambert’s central questions: where Mrs. Prescott’s possessions were, and she must have had help going to the depot. But the last answer led

to more questions: who helped her—prearranged or a helping hand from a passing townfolk?

Then Lambert read Mika's telegram to her.

"What's your opinion that Mika and David were taking a paddleboat from St. Louis to New Orleans together?"

"It has to be a fake, Mr. Lambert. Mika planned to go home to Reginald, not run off with that David character of all people. He'd be the last person she'd hightail it with, not after the row they had."

"I thank you kindly," Lambert said, reaching for his hat. "Oh... Just one more question, if you please."

Miss Lilly nodded. "Why, sure, Mr. Lambert. If I can help..."

"Did you notice if Mrs. Prescott had a broken arm?"

"Did he manhandle her?" Miss Lilly asked, sitting stiff-backed on the sofa.

"No, Miss Lilly, nothing like that. She broke it as a child, and her arm would have been slightly malformed. Did you ever notice anything different between her arms, near her wrists?"

"Sorry. No, I didn't."

"You've been a great help, Miss Lilly." Lambert started to stand.

"Sure, you wouldn't care for some refreshment, Mr. Lambert?"

"Since you twisted my arm..." Lambert relaxed on the sofa.

Miss Lilly got up and returned with a whiskey decanter and two glasses on a tray.

"Why, Miss Lilly, I'd never figure you for a whiskey drinker."

Miss Lilly smiled, poured, and handed Lambert a glass. She took the other and returned to the sofa.

"Would you answer another question?"

"Depends, Mr. Lambert," Miss Lilly said and sipped her whiskey.

"Why do you dislike Reginal Prescott the way you do? I sense a motherly love for Mika and understand your contempt for him because of how he treats her, but it goes beyond that, doesn't it?"

Miss Lilly took another sip of her whiskey and looked at the ceiling. Then she held the glass in her lap with both hands and glanced at Lambert.

"I don't know why I should tell you my story—I've never told it to a soul. But it's been tucked away inside of me all these years, wanting to come out, and I sense you're a good, honest, and understanding man who'll keep my confidence. Have I judged you accurately, Mr. Lambert?"

“You have, Miss Lilly.”

“Before Reginald made his banking fortune, he’d room here while the land was cleared for a house, barn, and corral for his new farm. My aunt Ruth owned and ran the boarding house then, and I stayed and worked, helping to run the place. She willed it to me on her passing... Anyhow... Reginald invited me to take a buggy ride and see the finished farm.”

She took another sip and continued.

“He showed me the barn, corral, and then the house. He was proud as punch of the farmhouse with the latest T Goshen stove and new table and chairs. And he got so excited telling me his future plans, building an empire around cattle and banking. I should’ve noticed the signs but didn’t, and when he showed me the bedroom, his excitement got the better of him... And he—”

“Didn’t you tell the sheriff?”

“The town was Prairie City back then, and we didn’t have a sheriff yet. Besides, who’d believe me or care? Times were pretty rough for women in those days, Mr. Lambert.”

“I’m sorry...”

“Don’t feel sorry for me. Direct your regrets to Mika.”

“What you mean?”

“Mika wanted children but couldn’t conceive. She always thought Reginald was why she couldn’t, but he wasn’t the reason.”

“How you know?”

“Never you mind, Mr. Lambert. I just know.”

Lambert glanced at the framed pictures of a young woman on the table behind Miss Lilly. “That’s a mighty fine-looking young woman,” he said, smiling.

Miss Lilly’s head jerked around toward the images. Then she slowly turned to face Lambert and nodded, her lips pursed. “My niece,” she said guardedly.

“She has her father’s chin and nose...”

Miss Lilly’s eyes widened.

“And her mother’s beautiful eyes and smile...”

Miss Lilly moistened her lips and shifted positions.

“And steel-gray colored eyes and red hair, I’d bet.”

Miss Lilly’s jaw dropped, and the blood drained from her face.

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*CHAPTER SIXTEEN: Examining The Woman's Remains*

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It was mid-afternoon when Doctor Suza's medicine-show bow-top wagon rolled into town, its bells clanging with each rocking motion. The wagon's calamity caught everyone's attention on the street, and they watched it pass. Suza yanked on the reins, and the horses halted at the livery. Lambert and Jeb had heard the commotion and came out to investigate.

"Lambert," Suza said, tipping his hat back on his head. "Expected you'd still be out looking for your lost woman."

"What brings you here?" Lambert asked, surprised to see the doctor.

"Got the sheriff's telegram about Sakura and had to come and see for myself."

Lambert glanced at Jeb and back at Suza. "Not a pretty sight."

"I could tell you about ugly, Mr. Lambert," Suza said, nodding. "I've seen it all, more than I ever care to see again."

"This you haven't," Lambert said. "I'd bet on that."

He told Jeb, "Better get Sheriff Anderson and meet us at Doc Winston's."

"And, sonny," Suza said to Jeb, "would you care for my team? Feed and water and a little shade will do."

"Yes, sir, Doctor Suza. Soon as I get back," Jeb said, turning to get the sheriff.

Suza got down from the wagon and went to its rear. He knocked on the door. Two young Chinese women stepped down when it opened, wearing plain-brown traditional clothing and sandals. Their hair was long, black, and braided. When they saw Lambert, they bowed.

"Howdy, miss," he said, greeting each woman with a smile and a tip of his hat.

"Lead the way, Lambert," Suza said.

"Not with them," Lambert said. "It'd take a strong man to see what we're about to see—not fit for a woman's delicate nature."

"They can wait outside in case we have any questions."

"All right," Lambert said after hesitating. "Have it your way, Doctor."

While they walked to Doctor Winston's home, Lambert didn't say much, and Suza walked alongside quietly. The woman trailed several steps behind the men, chattering between themselves in Chinese.

"Wait up," Sheriff Anderson yelled.

They turned to see the sheriff scurrying after them.

"Wait fer me," he said. "I might wanna ask ya'll a couple of questions."

They walked together after the sheriff caught up. As they approached the doctor's home, a team pulling an open flatbed wagon stopped behind the house next to the barn. Winston and a helper were on the seat, and a canvas-covered object lay in the back.

Winston saw them and waved. After giving his helper instructions, he climbed down and went through the house to meet them.

"Come in," Winston said, opening the front door. "Come in and have a seat."

Winston ushered them into the sitting room. The women sat together on a floral-print sofa. Suza sat in the matching chair while the sheriff and Lambert stood.

"Coffee? Tea, anyone?" Winston asked with an uneasy smile.

The men shook their heads, and the women sat stone-faced. Winston nodded once and nervously wrung his hands.

"Doc Winston," the sheriff said.

The doctor's whole body jerked toward the sheriff. "Yes..."

"This here's Doctor Suza, the medicine show doctor, who reported his China woman was missing."

Lambert refrained from correcting the sheriff about the woman's nationality. He had done it several times, but it never seemed to register. So he let it slide on by.

"Doctor Suza," Winston said, extending his hand. "Pleasure making your acquaintance. Sorry, it wasn't under better circumstances."

"I take no pleasure being here," Suza said, standing with a quick nod, "but thank you just the same, Doctor."

"Well, then," Winston said, retracting his hand. "I suppose you want to see the remains of your missing woman."

"That's why I came," Suza said, glancing at Lambert and the sheriff. "If you please, Doctor."

"Uh... Come this way, gentlemen," Winston said, bowing slightly and motioning toward the back room.

Suza started toward the doctor. Lambert and the sheriff waited for him to pass before following up. They entered the examination room and gathered around the long, narrow table centered in the room.

"Zeeb and I brought the rest of her remains just now," Winston said, "So you won't be able to see them just yet."

"Why not?" Suza asked.

"Well, sir... Uh... The state of decomposition is quite extensive, and the organs, what's left of them, are putrefied beyond belief."

"I am a physician, sir, and have experienced the horrors of the war. There's little I haven't seen."

"As you wish, Doctor."

Winston led them to the back room and then to the prep area, where Zeeb was scrubbing the skeletal bones of the torso and pelvis. As soon as the sight and smell hit Sheriff Anderson, he gagged, went outside, and vomited alongside a tree. Lambert and Suza stood stoically, watching Zeeb work.

"How much longer, Zeeb," Winston asked.

"I reckon twenty or thirty minutes should do it," Zeeb said, flushing away loose flesh with a splash of water from a bucket.

"Meanwhile, gentlemen, we could examine the long bones and skull."

Winston led them to the examining room. While Suza and Lambert watched, he displayed the arm and leg bones in their natural alignment on the table and put the skull at the far end, lying on its left side. Some of the finger and toe bones were missing.

"What we have are the skeletal remains of a woman. I reckon some animal chewed a few fingers and toes and carried them off somewhere; otherwise, it's complete. You'll notice, Doctor Suza, that there are callus formations of the left ulna and radius, indicating a fracture several years ago—during her teens. The bones weren't aligned perfectly, so this woman would have had a mild deformity of her left arm just above her wrist. The long bones' gnaw marks indicate wild animals feasting on the corpse; however, I assume the creatures were a smaller variety since none were cracked open."

"How did she die?" Suza asked.

"I'm coming to that, Doctor..." Winston said, picking up the skull.

Sheriff Anderson entered the room, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Sorry, but I don't know what came over me back there."

"As I was saying... The cause of her death was a sharp blow to the back of her head, fracturing the suture of the right and left parietals and the occipital bones. Most likely from a pointed rock since the fracture is relatively small and localized. Her death occurred quickly, probably knocked cold with the blow, and she died before falling to the ground."

"How do you know these bones are of a woman?" Suza asked.

"When we examine the pelvis, you'll see its overall structure is thin, broad, and shallow, and the superior pelvic aperture is wide, oval, and rounded; clearly, a female's skeleton."

"And Japanese?"

Winston opened a drawer and laid the hair across the leg bones.

"You tell me, Doctor," Winston said.

Suza picked up the hair and examined it closely.

“And we found these chopsticks nearby.”

Winston laid three two-pronged brass hairpins about eight inches long on the table. Each had a one-inch round filigree-style carved design at one end.

“They’re kanzashi sticks,” Suza said. “They keep Japanese women’s hair in place.”

“Then ya recognize them,” the sheriff said.

“No...” Suza said, pondering. “Not exactly.”

“What’s that mean? Either ya do, or ya don’t.”

“Chyou, Daiyu, and Sakura had so many different ones, and they shared them. I never paid much attention... That’s what I’m saying. You should ask the twins; they should know.”

“I will, but fer now...” The sheriff hesitated, glancing at Lambert. “What ya know ‘bout this here broken left arm, Doctor Suza?”

“Nothing. I wasn’t aware one way or the other that Sakura had ever broken her arm.”

“Didn’t you notice any deformity?” Lambert asked.

“Can’t say that I did. She usually wore long-sleeved garments, even on the hottest days. Rarely saw her arm uncovered and didn’t pay much attention—”

“Ya don’t seem ta pay much attention ta anythin’, Doctor. Why’s that?” the sheriff asked.

“Don’t read more into what I’ve said than face value: these women help me sell my elixir, nothing more. I give them no more thought than a rancher gives his hired hands. I’ve never had any personal designs on any of them beyond our business arrangement. Then, you are correct, sir, if you call that not paying much attention.”

“Why don’t we ask the women?” Lambert said, picking up the hair sticks.

Winston led the way to the parlor. The twins smiled and nodded when the men entered.

“These men have some questions of you,” Suza said.

They looked at each other and shook their heads. Suza knelt and took their hands in his.

“You must answer them,” he said. “You’ll be all right. Understand?”

They nodded. Suza stood.

“You may ask your questions now.”

“Have you seen these before?” Lambert asked, handing the hair sticks to them.

They looked at the sticks but did not touch them. They said something to each other in Chinese.

“In English,” Suza said.

“Sakura had some like these,” Chyou said.

"Yes. I saw them," Daiyu said.

"Did she ever break her arm?" the sheriff asked.

They spoke to each other in Chinese, and then Chyou said, "Sakura never said, but she fell from a tree while in the orphanage with us."

"But she no break her arm," Daiyu said.

"Did she have all her teeth?" Winston asked. "Cavities? Gold fillings?"

"No... Same as she was born with," Suza said.

"Not likely," Winston said.

"You know what I mean, Doctor. She had excellent teeth."

"How tall was she?" Winston asked.

The twins and Suza shrugged.

"About their height," Suza said, referring to the twins. "Or close to it."

"And they are...?" Winston asked.

"About five-two or three, I suppose."

The twins glanced at each other, puzzled.

Please come with me, ladies, and I'll measure you."

The twins shook their heads.

"It's all right," Suza said. "The doctor needs to know."

They nodded and stood. But before Winston could take them to the patient examination room, Zeeb burst in.

"Doc! Ya won't believe what I just found!"

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*CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: Doctor Suza, Prime Suspect*

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Sheriff Anderson jumped to his feet when Zeeb returned to the parlor. The corner of Zeeb's mouth was curled up in a nervous grin, his brow was raised an inch or more, and his eyes were as wide as saucers. Lambert slowly stood.

"What's the mystery, Zeeb?" the sheriff asked.

"Can't say," he said, relaxing his facial muscles and glancing at the floor. "But Doc wants ta see ya both." Zeeb licked his dry lips and fixed his eyes on the sheriff. "He'll tell ya hisself, I reckon."

"Did he discover something significant?" Suza asked, sliding to the edge of his seat.

Zeeb was puzzled. "Don't know'd 'bout *see niffy can't*, but Doc's got sumthin' mighty important ta say just the same." Then, an impish grin formed on his lips. "So never ya mind, Doctor Suza. When the time's right, ya'll find out."

On hearing that, Suza hopped to his feet.

"What the hell do you mean by that, sir?" Suza asked. He took a step toward Zeeb, but Sheriff Anderson blocked his way.

"Sit down!" the sheriff said. "Until Doc tells us what he's found, remain calm... And don't leave..." The sheriff waved his hand at all of them. "None of ya. Stay put! Ya hear?"

Suza returned to his chair, and the twins nodded. Zeeb led the sheriff and Lambert to the examination room.

###

"Whatcha find, Doc?" the sheriff asked as soon as he stepped into the room.

"Actually, Zeeb found it... A fetus..."

"Fetus?" the sheriff asked. "What's a—"

"An unborn baby," Winston said.

"I'll be...", Lambert said. "The woman was pregnant."

The wheels in Lambert's mind were turning, and the puzzle pieces were falling into place. The deceased woman was young. Her long, midnight-black hair and kanzashi sticks suggested she was Japanese. Since the woman was pregnant, that ruled out Mika as the corpse's identity, at least according to Miss Lilly, so that pointed to Sakura, the only other Japanese woman in the picture. But as neatly as the puzzle was fitting together, Lambert had lingering doubts. Mika had the opportunity, but he could not fathom why she would murder Sakura.

Then, the sound of Doctor Winston's voice redirected Lambert's attention.

“...And as near as I can determine—her being a China woman and all—she was about five to six months along.”

“That throws a new light on the situation,” the sheriff said.

“How’s that?” Lambert asked.

“Motive. Now we gotta motive fer her murder.”

“Don’t drive your herd up a box canyon, Sheriff,” Lambert said.

“What ya mean?”

“Opportunity: when he do it?” Lambert asked.

Winston and Zeeb swapped glances.

“Miss Lilly and Jeb said Mika and Sakura were together on a buggy ride until about seven-thirty,” he continued. “If the medicine show started at six, and Suza was on stage, hawking his elixir, he couldn’t have done it.”

“That’s not how I sees it,” the sheriff said, sweeping his hand toward the door. “The prime suspect’s sittin’ right out in that there parlor, Lambert, plain and simple. He got angry ‘cause she missed the show, they fought, and he killed her—on purpose or by accident; it don’t matter a hill of beans, one way or the other. He’s guilty just the same.” The sheriff turned to leave. “And I’ll get ta the truth, with or without yer help.”

“Sheriff... Wait. Wouldn’t the twins know what—”

But Lambert’s plea fell on deaf ears. Sheriff Anderson was already through the door.

###

“Will you tell us what’s going on?” Suza said, getting to his feet when Sheriff Anderson entered the room. Lambert, Winston, and Zeeb followed close behind him.

“I’m arrestin’ ya fer the murder of yer China woman,” the sheriff said, leveling his weapon on Suza, “so hand over yer gun.”

“What?” Suza said, waving his hands. “I—I didn’t kill anyone.”

“I said ta hand over yer gun.”

“I don’t have one, Sheriff.”

“You’re making a big mistake, Sheriff,” Lambert said, stepping toward Suza.

“Stand aside, Lambert. I’ll handle this.”

“Before you do something you’ll regret, may I question Doctor Suza?”

“Don’t sees how it’ll hurt none. He ain’t a-goin’ nowheres.”

“Why don’t you and Doctor Suza have a seat.”

“Lambert...” the sheriff said.

“Humor me, Sheriff.”

Sheriff Anderson waved his gun toward the sofa, and Suza sat next to Chyou and Daiyu. Anderson holstered his weapon, found a chair, and sat. Winston and Zeeb backed against the wall.

Lambert moved a chair to face Suza and the twins and sat. He wrung his hands and glanced at Winston.

“Doc Winston discovered that the woman murdered in Prescott Woods was pregnant—possibly five or six months along. That right, Doc?”

“That’s right, son,” Winston said, nodding. “As near as I can figure.”

“Pregnant!” Suza said, jumping to his feet. “Sakura was pregnant?”

“You’ve got your herd in a stampede, Doctor,” Lambert said. “We don’t know for sure the identity of the woman.”

When Sheriff Anderson heard that, he started to stand, but Lambert motioned for him to remain sitting with a wave of his hand.

Suza ignored Lambert and asked the twins, “Did either of you know Sakura was going to have a baby?”

Chyou and Daiyu chatted with each other in Chinese.

“Chyou... Did you know?”

Chyou looked at the floor.

“Daiyu?”

Daiyu looked at the floor as well.

“Why didn’t you—she tell me?”

Neither woman answered.

“All right. All right, Suza,” the sheriff said, getting to his feet. “This family intrigue don’t change nuthin’. Yer still my—”

“Unsaddle your horse, Sheriff,” Lambert interrupted. “I’m not done yet.”

Sheriff Anderson returned to his chair and punched his hat, frustrated.

“There’s more going on than a rancher and hired-hand relationship, more than a business arrangement to sell elixir. Am I right, Doctor?”

Suza shifted positions in his seat and looked at the twins. He adjusted his tie and licked his lips.

“Is Sakura your wife?” Lambert asked.

Suza sat stone-faced.

"This ain't gettin' us nowheres, Lambert," the sheriff said, standing again. "I'm fer lockin' him up till we's can figger the truth of the matter."

"Sit down, Sheriff," Lambert said, "and let me finish... Please."

Sheriff Anderson plopped in his chair.

"Was Sakura Doctor Suza's wife?" Lambert asked the twins.

They chattered in Chinese and then nodded.

"I can only think of one reason for your silence, Doctor Suza. Chyou and Daiyu are your wives as well, aren't they?"

Suza looked at the floor.

"Might as lay your cards on the table, Doctor," Lambert said. "The truth's coming out with or without your help."

Suza squirmed in his seat and wiped his brow.

"You won't understand..."

"What's ta understand?" the sheriff shouted, jumping to his feet and unholstering his gun. "Ya got three wives and killed one of them 'cause she were carryin' yer baby."

"No... No... You got this all wrong, Sheriff. When I purchased them from the orphanage, I had no matrimonial intentions, just their freedom, and a business arrangement. But after a year or so, I developed strong feelings for them. When they reached marrying age, I asked them if they had feelings, too, and if they would consider... Having three wives was legal at the time, and I couldn't give any of them up when the law was passed."

"But that don't explain the baby," the sheriff said.

"I tried... We all tried... But I'd given up hope of fathering a child," Suza said with a tear in his eye. "So you see, Sheriff, we wanted a child more than anything, and I couldn't kill my wife because she was pregnant. On the contrary, I'd be the happiest man on Earth."

"Then the twins done it out of jealousy," the sheriff said, pointing his weapon at them.

"Sheriff..." Lambert said. "Your herd's stampeding in circles."

"Take no offense, Lambert, but ya Injuns talk in riddles," the sheriff said. "Spit it out, plain and simple like."

"For one thing, how'd they do it? When'd they do it? Sakura and Mrs. Prescott left on their buggy ride between two and three. Jeb said the buggy was returned at sundown or about seven-thirty. The medicine show started before then. So, the twins couldn't have killed Sakura. That leaves Mrs. Prescott..."

"Ole Reginald ain'ta gonna like yer insinuation, son," the sheriff said, wagging his head.

"Would explain her sudden departure on the northbound train, which, from all accounts, was unusual even for Mrs. Prescott's sometimes unpredictable behavior."

“Where ya get yer schoolin’, Lambert?” the sheriff asked. “Half the time, I don’t knows what yer sayin’.”

Lambert ignored him.

“What time does the train to St. Louis stop tomorrow?” Lambert asked.

“Don’t know fer sure... Just what ya up ta, Lambert?” the sheriff asked.

“Looking for answers. Meanwhile, I’d turn them loose but keep them in town until I return.”

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*CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: Muddied Waters*

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Lambert left Doctor Winston's house and headed to the depot to check the train schedule for St. Louis and buy a ticket. The depot was a one-story building with clapboard siding, cornice brackets painted yellowish-gold, window trim, door trim, and fascia painted dark brown, and a roof covered with black shingles. The main double-wide doors opened from the loading platform into the middle of the building.

The interior was three times as long as its width, and its walls were dark-stained, with vertical tongue and groove planking above light-stained wainscoting. A potbelly stove divided the waiting room on the left, with church-pew-like seating from an open area and ticket sales on the right side of the building. A framed, walk-up height, arched opening with ornate metal bars in the wall served as the ticket window. To its right was a chalkboard with train schedules, but it had not been updated in several days. To the left was a door to the ticket office.

The ticket agent was a young man barely out of his teens with curly brown hair, a narrow face, and a pointed jaw. He was sitting on a stool with an elbow on the counter and his hand cradling his head. He wielded a fly swatter in his other hand, whacking any unfortunate insect landing within arm's length.

"...Twelve," the agent said, whacking another fly. Soon, another landed nearby. "Thirteen... That beats my record, Joey."

"Yer plumb loco, Billy," Joey answered from the office behind the ticket counter.

Lambert approached the window. Billy raised his lazy eyelids but managed to swat another fly without missing a beat.

"Fourteen, Joey... What ya want, mister?"

Lambert suppressed the urge to rip the bar off the ticket window, drag the insolent youngster through the opening, and teach him a few manners. Instead, he took a deep breath and slowly let it out while counting to ten to himself.

"Didn't ya hear me, mister? I said—"

"I heard you the first time, sonny," Lambert said, glaring at him. "When's the next train to St. Louis?"

"Saturday," Billy said while swatting at another fly and missing. He threw the swatter on the floor. "See what ya done, mister?"

Lambert did not respond; he just glared at him.

"Made me miss that there fly. Now, I'm gonna havta start countin' all over again."

"What time does it leave? Lambert said through his clenched jaw.

“Oh, yeah... The train to St. Louie... The Saturday Limited... I reckon it arrives somewheres ‘round six and leaves ‘bout six-twenty in the morning. Wanna ticket?”

“Yes. And some information.”

Billy sat straight on the stool, leaned forward, and took a slow gander at Lambert from toe to head.

“Uh...” Billy sucked air through the corner of his mouth. “What kinda information, mister?” he asked, cocking his head backward and looking down his long nose at Lambert.

“Did you sell a ticket to a China woman about two weeks ago? She would’ve been going to St. Louis.”

“Who wants to know? We don’t up and revel them kinda particulars to every trail bum, waltzin’ in here, thinkin’ he’s somebody. Especially, ta no Injun Chief.”

“Billy,” Joey yelled. “That mouth of yers is gonna get ya inta trouble sumday.”

“Seys, you,” Billy said, turning his head toward Joey.

Lambert’s anger flared. He stepped backward and pushed his coat aside, revealing his sidearms.

“These want to know, sonny.”

Billy whipped his head around. He took one look at the Pearl-handled guns strapped to Lambert’s hips and dove under the counter.

“He’s gotta gun, Joey! Hide!”

“Yer gonna get us kilt, fer sure, ya idiot.”

Lambert tried opening the door to the ticket office, but it was locked. Undeterred, he kicked it in and found Billy cowering under the counter. Joey was nowhere to be seen.

“Don’t shoot, mister,” Billy whimpered, hunched over against the wall and shielding his head with his hands.

Lambert approached Billy and stopped, hands on his guns. He loomed tall over the trembling young man. Tears trickled down Billy’s cheeks, and his jaw and lips quivered.

“Ple—Please, mister. I didn’t mean nothin’,” Billy pleaded and stuck a finger in each ear. “Just don’t shoot me.”

“Lord knows I’d like to,” Lambert said, putting his hands on his hips, “but I’m not gonna waste good lead on the likes of you. Now stand up, you sorry dump of horse muck.”

“Yes, sir,” Billy said, hopping to his feet. Whatcha wanna know, mister? Anything. Just ask.”

Billy stood ridged, hands at his side. His brow was raised an inch or more, his eyes were as wide as saucers—focused on Lambert’s guns—his mouth was agape.

“Did a China woman purchase a ticket to St. Louis about two weeks ago?”

“Not that I can remember. Honest, mister,” Billy said, flicking his head without moving his body. He cocked his head toward Joey. “You remember a China woman, Joey?”

“Yeah,” he answered from under his desk. “She come ridin’ in her buggy, bought a ticket, and left on the northbound local at eight-thirty.”

“She came by buggy?”

“That’s what I said, mister. And floggin’ that poor beast sumthin’ fierce,” Joey said. “And damn near missed the train.”

“Is she the same China woman who always purchased a ticket to Vinita?”

“Don’t know... She always got tickets from Billy,” Joey said, getting to his feet. “Sorry, I can’t help ya, mister.”

“What happened to the horse and buggy?”

“That animal know’d its way home... So, after a whiles, it just wandered off... Back to Sheriff Andy’s Livery, I reckon,” Joey said.

“Obliques,” Lambert said, and to Billy, he asked, “Wasn’t that much easier?”

“Yea—Yeah, I guess so,” Billy stammered, and then he opened the counter’s drawer and offered Lambert a ticket. “Oneway or roundtrip, mister?”

###

After purchasing a roundtrip ticket, Lambert started for the saloon to get a bite and some suds to wet his whistle. Before he was halfway there, a horse-drawn coach rolled into town.

There was no mistaking who the coach belonged to. Only Reginald Prescott could be that audacious. It looked as outlandish as his bank, all painted sage green with hunter-green trim. Gilded scrollwork outlined the coach’s top, bottom, and side edges. Its wheels matched the color scheme all the way to the ground. The calligraphy letter *RP* on the coach’s door was 24-caret gold, and shiny brass edge protectors were freshly polished to mirror-like perfection.

The horses were a matched team of four of the finest stock Lambert had ever laid eyes on. They were hitched to the coach with harness leather that looked brand new and had never been used. A driver and “shotgun” wore matching uniforms akin to toy soldiers.

They stopped at the livery, and the “shotgun” hopped down to open the coach’s door for its only passenger. Prescott put his hand on the window frame, leaned forward, and surveyed the town. A few townsfolk looked toward the livery to see what the commotion was all about.

He climbed down and tipped his hat to the onlookers, but they ignored him and went about their business. When Prescott saw Lambert, he waved his hat above his head to get Lambert’s attention.

Lambert was not at all pleased to see Prescott. The mystery of two missing Japanese women had too many open-ended questions for anyone to step in and muddy the waters, and having Prescott in town would do just that. But Lambert cordially acknowledged him and walked toward the livery.

When he was in earshot, Lambert asked, "What brings you to Wyandotte, Mr. Prescott?"

"Well... Your telegram, for one thing, and my curiosity, for another. It's been years since my last visit to this fine metropolis, and I wanted to—"

"We both know bull when we see it, so let's not waste each other's time."

"All right, Lambert... I've had my eye on a plot of land for quite a spell, and I got wind it might be for sale, so I—"

"Then, you're not one bit concerned about the corpse Doc Winston has in his office and that it just might be your wife, Mika."

"Hell, no, Lambert. You read her telegram; besides, Mika never had a broken bone in her body."

"Perhaps after you met her," Lambert said, "but what about before? In her youth?"

Prescott leaned against the coach, his face drooped.

"Was her left arm deformed in any way?" Lambert asked. Near her wrist, maybe?"

Prescott wagged his head without speaking.

"Now, hold on to your hat, Mr. Prescott. Are you confident Mika was not pregnant?"

Prescott stood upright, feet firmly planted on the ground, face fiery red, and jaw tightly clenched. "How dare you, Lambert. You've no right to suggest—"

"Come down off your high horse, Mr. Prescott. For one thing, I'm not suggesting anything we both don't already know about your wife. For another, this isn't the place to discuss anything about her. Wouldn't you agree?"

Prescott nodded in agreement and said to Samuel, the "shotgun," "See to the horses, Samuel, while Mr. Lambert and I stop by the saloon. Afterward, you and Hank can get something to eat and drink."

"You stayin' in town for the night, Mr. Prescott?" Samuel asked.

"We'll be more welcomed on the farm," Prescott said.

Lambert's mouth curled up into a slight grin. He was not so sure Mary and Henry would be glad to see Prescott's entourage come a-rollin' down the road. He doubted Prescott would be as welcome as he thought.

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*CHAPTER NINETEEN: Old Enemies Meet Again*

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The *Wyandotte House* saloon was busier than usual. Besides the townsfolk, who were regular fixtures, a half dozen or more cowpokes on their way back to Texas from Kansas had stopped for food and drink. Deputy Anderson and the other barkeep were behind the bar, setting up drinks, drawing mugs of beer, and taking food orders. Laughter, loud talking, and off-key piano playing filled the room. And the odors were a curious amalgam of beer, whiskey, spicy food, and cowboys who had not bathed in who knew when.

When Lambert and Prescott entered the saloon, Deputy Anderson immediately noticed them. He slammed the whiskey bottle he was holding on the bar, pitched his apron, and hurried to meet them.

“Well... As I live and breathe... Reginald ‘Horse’s Butt’ Prescott.”

“Good to see you, too, Reuben. How’s Andy?”

“Like ya give a tinker’s dam ‘bout anythin’ other than yerself.”

“You got me all wrong, Reuben. Always have.”

“Rattle or no rattle, I know’d a snake when I’s seen one.”

Lambert put his hands on the men’s shoulders and tried guiding them to an empty table.

“As much as I’d like to hear you two reminisce about old times, there’s a larger issue at stake: identifying the woman found in the woods.”

The men stopped bickering, but Reuben declined to join Lambert and Prescott at the table.

“Too busy ta stop and chew the fat,” he said. “I’ll send Bert over ta take yer orders fer food and drinks—on the house... Andy should be here soon.”

Lambert nodded, but Prescott was already looking around the room. Reuben walked away, mumbling under his breath.

“I’ve heard Deputy Anderson’s version of the story. We’ve got time; I’d like to hear your version.”

“What story?” Prescott asked, turning to face Lambert.

“Why try, Mr. Prescott? Your games don’t work on me.”

Prescott rocked back in his chair and put his hat on the table. He glanced right then left and leaned forward, his elbows on the table. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“All right, Lambert,” he began. “Don’t know why I should, but I’ll lay my cards on the table.”

But before Prescott could start telling his story, Burt interrupted him.

“Reuben seys you gents are hungry and thirsty... But ain’t we all tonight. What’ll ya have?”

“Beer, steak, beans, and biscuits,” Lambert said without hesitation. “Beer first, if you please.”

“Steak cooked as usual?”

“Just so long it’s not bleeding to death on my plate,” Lambert said, chuckling.

“And you, Mr. Prescott?”

“The same, but make sure it’s dead before bringing it out.”

“Beer?”

“What’s the beer like, Lambert?” Prescott asked.

“Wet, warm, and plenty of suds.”

“Hasn’t changed a bit. Bring me a mug, too.”

“Beer’s comin’ right up, but the meals will take a while—fresh biscuits are in the oven.”

“We’re in no hurry, are we, Mr. Prescott?” Lambert said.

Prescott did not react.

Burt nodded, left, and returned with two mugs of beer dripping with froth.

Lambert picked up a mug and took a gulp.

“At least it’s wet.”

Prescott sipped his.

“Your story,” Lambert said. “Anytime you’re ready...”

Prescott checked again for anyone within earshot and hunched over the table. He took a long drink of beer and set the mug within reach.

“About twenty years ago, maybe more, maybe less, I was just getting started in banking and building my fortune. The war was thirty years behind us, and the country was expanding. For anyone bold enough, opportunities were limitless.”

Prescott took a gulp of beer and wiped the suds off his mouth.

“The country was hungry—hungry for beef. Texas had beef, Kansas had railroads east, and Oklahoma was between them. Cattle need food and water—we had plenty in Vinita and Wyandotte, natural stopovers. And it was a matter of time before the railways extended south.”

“As much as I’m enlightened by your history lesson,” Lambert said, “it’s not getting us any closer to why the town hates you so much.”

“I’m coming to that... I started buying land along the main cattle drive stopping points: Vinita and here. I acquired enough land in Vinita to create one of the territory’s largest

holding pens for cattle. And when the railroads were finally built, I was sitting on a gold mine. But I couldn't get the last tract of land I needed here—until now. The townsfolk think I've abandoned them, but they don't know that the businesses I purchased were failing. I kept them afloat by writing off their losses until I could turn Wyandotte into the next Vinita."

"Why didn't you say something?"

"That's another story I'd rather not tell, Lambert."

"I saw a couple of Daguerreotypes of a young woman in her late teens while visiting Miss Lilly the other day."

Prescott's eyes widened.

"Miss Lilly said the woman was her niece, but she had a striking resemblance to both of you."

Prescott slammed back in his chair.

"What you sayin', Lambert?"

"Miss Lilly told me what happened between you and her at your farm."

Prescott leaned forward.

"Then, you think that young woman might be... Lilly never said anything, never told... Anyone about anything."

"I wondered how she could manage such a big house in such a small town. You own the boardinghouse, don't you?"

Prescott grabbed the mug of beer and took a gulp.

"After her Aunt Ruth died and willed her the house and its big mortgage, I bought the mortgage when she went back east to care for a sick relative. At least, that was the story she told. Anyway, when she returned, I had the mortgage refinanced so she could afford to live there."

"Then, she doesn't know..."

"No, and I want to keep it that way."

Bert arrived carrying two plates of food.

"Who's got the blood-rare steak?"

"That'd be me," Lambert said.

Bert set the plates on the table and fished forks and knives out of his pocket.

"Refills on the beers, gents?"

Lambert handed his mug to Bert, but Prescott just shook his head and picked up his knife and fork. He had barely cut off a piece of meat when Sheriff Anderson walked into the room.

The sheriff stopped behind Lambert and glared at Prescott.

“How long’s it been, Reggie? Twenty years?”

“Good seeing you, too, Andy. How you been?”

“And that ain’t nearly long enough in my book.”

Lambert twisted in his chair. “Have a seat, Sheriff, and take a load off your feet.”

The sheriff hesitated, then slammed a chair back and plopped in it. “What brings ya ta town, Reggie? More land?” Sheriff Anderson asked with a snide smile.

“As a matter of fact...”

“Ain’t ya the least bit curious about the woman we found in the woods near yer farm?”

Prescott slanted his head and sat straight in his chair. “Should I be?”

“He ain’t convinced,” the sheriff said, cocking his thumb at Lambert, “but I’s pretty sure it’s the China woman from the medicine show...Uh... Sakura’s her name.”

“There you have it,” Prescott said. “Mika’s Japanese, not Chinese, so she can’t be that woman.”

“Chinese, Japanese. I can’t tell ‘em apart no how. All I know is two Asian women of the same age, build, and general description done gone missing on the same day. And that there body Doc Winston has in his office may or not be yer wife, Reggie—God forbid that it is—and we’s not rock-solid in agreement one way or the other who it is.”

The blood drained from Prescott’s face, and he was white as a sheet.

“Finish yer meals, and we’ll all go over ta Doc’s. He’ll wanna ask ya some questions ‘bout Mrs. Prescott, and ya can see the remains if’n ya have a hankerin’ ta do so.”

Prescott put his knife and fork in his food and shoved the plate toward the middle of the table. He grabbed the beer mug and chugged the last of the suds. He signaled the barkeep.

Bert hurried over.

“Yes, sir, Mr. Prescott.”

“Whiskey,” Prescott said.

“Comin’ right up,” Bert said, turning to leave.

“Bring a whole bottle,” Prescott called to him. “And a big glass.”

Bert nodded and hurried to the bar.

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*CHAPTER TWENTY: More Clues*

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Prescott was tipsy when Sheriff Anderson and Lambert took him to Doctor Winston's house. Lambert steadied him against a porch post while the sheriff knocked.

When Winston opened the door, he looked surprised.

"Hello, Andy," Winston said. "What can I—" He glanced over the sheriff's shoulder. "Uh... Is your friend ailing, Mr. Lambert?"

Sheriff Anderson laughed.

"No, Doc," Lambert said with a chuckle. "A cup of strong, hot coffee's what he needs right now."

"You're fortunate. I just brewed a fresh pot."

Winston held the door wide open and ushered the men into the parlor. Lambert guided Prescott to the sofa and sat next to him. The sheriff chose the chair alongside the sofa while Winston went to the kitchen for coffee.

"Anyone take milk and sugar?" he asked from the kitchen.

Lambert glanced at the sheriff, and he waved off. Prescott did not react.

"Black for us, Doc," Lambert said.

"Be ready in a minute."

A few minutes later, Winston returned carrying a tray with four mugs of coffee. He put the one with milk and sugar by his chair and offered one to each man. He sat and sipped his coffee while each man tasted theirs.

"Good-tasting brew, Doc," the sheriff said.

"This one's different than before," Lambert said.

"Yes. An evening blend I prefer after dinner. Like it?"

"Smooth as silk," Lambert said, nodding. "Quite good."

Prescott held his mug close to his lips and blew on the hot liquid. He slurped a taste and winced. "Hot but good," he said.

"I reckon you didn't stop by for a kaffeeklatsch, Andy," Winston said. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"You probably never met Mr. Reginal Prescott, or have you?" Sheriff Anderson asked.

"No, I haven't," Winston said, putting his mug down and standing. "But I've heard of him."

Sheriff Anderson and Lambert stood, but Prescott could not get to his feet. Lambert grabbed his arm, but Winston said not to bother getting him up.

"Such as he is at the moment, this here is Prescott," Sheriff Anderson said, extending his open hand. "And this here's Doc Winston, Reggie."

Prescott nodded.

Winston smiled, retook his seat, and leaned toward Prescott. "If you can, I'd like to ask a few questions about your wife, Mr. Prescott."

Prescott nodded and gulped the black coffee. Lambert and the sheriff sat again and faced him.

"What can you tell me about the fracture of your wife's left arm near her wrist?"

"Never knew she broke her arm," Prescott said. "Maybe before I met her, but she never mentioned it."

"Did you ever notice a mild deformity of the distal end of her forearm?"

"Distal?" Prescott asked, glancing at Lambert.

"Near her wrist," Lambert said.

Prescott flicked his head.

"Did she have any other fractures?" Winston asked.

"No... Not since I've known her." Prescott drank the last of his coffee.

Lambert grew impatient. These bushes had been picked clean, and he felt the questioning needed to move to a new row of ripe fruit. He did not have to wait long.

"Anything special about her teeth?"

Prescott glanced at the sheriff and Lambert; they shrugged. Then he looked puzzled at the doctor.

"What you mean?"

"Missing teeth? Cavities? Gold? Things like that."

"Oh... No," he said with a smile. "I wish my teeth were as perfect as Mika's."

"How tall was she?"

"Don't know... Never measured her, but she didn't quite come to my chin, so that'd make her about five-two or five-three."

"Anything else you can think of that would help identify her?"

"She had a small butterfly tattoo on the left side of her neck. Maybe a half-inch or so tall and wide. Just a black outline, no color."

"Thank you, Mr. Prescott. You've been most helpful."

Prescott slid to the edge of the sofa.

“Wait a minute, Doctor. Don’t leave me hanging in mid-air. Tell me plainly: is the woman you found my Mika or the medicine show woman?”

“It’s too early to tell for sure, Mr. Prescott.”

“And the baby? What about the baby? I heard the woman was with child. Is that so?”

“Yes. About six months along.”

Prescott slid back on the sofa. He gave the sheriff and Lambert a quick glance and smiled.

“Well, Doctor... That can’t be Mika, then. We’ve tried for years to conceive, but it never took, so it can’t be her. It just can’t be. Can it?”

Winston leaned back in his chair and tented his fingers.

“I would’ve had to agree with you, Mr. Prescott, until I met you.”

“What you mean?” Prescott asked, lurching forward.

“A fetus will start growing hair by the fourth month and gets its color by the sixth.”

“So?” Prescott said.

“The fetus we found had reddish-colored hair,” Winston said, folding his hands. “Like yours, Mr. Prescott.”

The color drained from Prescott’s face, and his eyes and mouth slowly opened wide. He sank into the sofa, and his coffee mug slipped from his hand, but Lambert grabbed it before it fell. He tried to speak but could not.

“No... No,” he uttered in a harsh whisper, wagging his head from side to side. When his voice returned, he said, “That woman can’t be Mika! I won’t accept your conclusions, Doctor.”

“But, Mr. Prescott...”

Prescott sprang to his feet and spun around to face Lambert. “I’m paying you a sizable sum to find my wife, Mr. Lambert! I suggest you get on with it and earn your keep!”

The others followed suit and stood. Prescott put his hat on and adjusted his coat and trousers.

“Meanwhile, I’ll be at my farm,” he said, tipping his hat. “Good day, gentlemen. I can find my own way out, thank you.”

He walked briskly to the door and left.

Lambert had arrived at Doc Winter’s, figuring he knew how all the puzzle pieces fit together. Mrs. Prescott was his prime suspect for the murder of the medicine show woman. She had the opportunity and was at the location within the timeframe. A motive was the last missing piece to the puzzle, but he was confident he would soon find it. At least, that is what he thought until Doctor Winston scrambled all the puzzle pieces with

the pronouncement of a redheaded baby. Now, he would have to start again and rethink everything from the beginning.

Adding insult to injury, Prescott's convicting words stung. Lambert did not like being dressed down, but this time, he deserved it and took it. He had solved the mystery before all the evidence was in—a raw recruit's error, and he knew better.

"Well, Doc," Sheriff Anderson said. "Ya could've knocked me over with a feather when ya said the baby had red hair just like ole Reggie. I couldn't believe my ears. Why didn't ya say sumthin' sooner?"

"The color wasn't clearly evident until we dried it a bit. It's not conclusive, however."

"What ya mean, Doc?"

"Don't know if you noticed that Doctor Suza fellow has reddish overtones to his hair color, too, but Mr. Prescott... Take one look, and there's no mistaking."

"So yer sayin' Mrs. Prescott were the one murdered?" the sheriff asked.

"The woman's teeth are intact, with no cavities or gold fillings, and I estimated her height to be about five-three, maybe five-two. All these match the medicine show woman's description and Mrs. Prescott's. Yes... It's possible, but I'm not ready to bet the farm on it."

"Whatzit gonna take, Doc?"

"If we knew which woman got on the train..." Winston said, trailing off.

"Ya been mighty quiet, standing over there, Lambert. What's yer take on this?" the sheriff asked.

"Already got a ticket to St. Louis."

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*CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: St. Louis Bound*

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Saturday, August 27

Lambert arrived in St. Louis late afternoon to hot and muggy weather, worse than he had encountered in a long time. He took a buggy cab to the waterfront. By the time he arrived, his shirt was sticking to his body from sweat, and his mood had gone sour.

Paddle-wheel steamboats were slant-moored to the docks, bows pointing landward with sterns jutting into the river like piglets to a sow's belly. Barrels, boxes, and bales lined the docks, and roustabouts scurried from dock to boat, carrying cargo onto and off vessels of all sizes. People of all descriptions and ages milled around, some embarking, some disembarking, and others just watching all the activity.

Lambert's cab stopped at the *Mississippi Queen's* ticket office. After he paid the driver, he entered the building and approached the ticket counter. No one was manning the counter, but a sign said to ring the bell for service.

After two taps on the bell, a clerk appeared at the window. His smile changed to a frown when he got a good look at Lambert.

"Ah... What can I do ya for, Chief?"

Lambert's sour mood curdled. The ten-hour train ride in cramped seats was bad enough. Now his belly growled, and his mouth was bone dry. He was *hangry* and on the edge; pushing him over would not take much.

When he did not answer quickly enough, the clerk leaned forward and raised his voice. "Hard of hearin', are ya, Chief?"

That was all Lambert could stand. He drew his weapon and stuck it between the bars. The end of the barrel pressed against the clerk's nose.

"My hearing is just fine, sonny, and I'm no chief."

The clerk gulped and raised his hands above his head.

Lambert's tense encounter with the clerk quickly drew the attention of others in the ticket office. Customers and employees looked, their gazes fixated on Lambert's gun. He tightened his grip on his weapon. Tension in the room was unmistakable.

The clerk stammered, "I-I'm sorry, mister. I meant ya no offense. Please, put yer gun down," the clerk pleaded. "I got a wife, and we got a little one, barely a year old."

Lambert glared at the clerk, his eyes narrowing. After a moment of silence, he slowly withdrew the weapon, keeping a watchful eye on the clerk. The bystanders breathed collectively.

Lowering his hands cautiously, the clerk tried to compose himself. "How can I help ya, mister?"

Lambert lowered his weapon, his expression softening slightly. "Information..."

"Whatever ya want, mister. Just ask."

"You keep records of ticket sales?" Lambert asked, holstering his gun.

"Every passenger is recorded," the clerk said, pointing to the log. "Well... That ain't quite the truth, mister. I only wrote down who bought the tickets and how many. I ask for the passengers' names, but the buyer don't always give 'em. Even then, I can't trust the names are real. I got more John Smiths than ya can shake a stick at, if'n ya understand what I'm a-sayin'."

"Identification not required then?"

"Hell, no, mister," the clerk said, rapidly shaking his head. "We wouldn't have any passengers if'n we asked fer positive identification."

"Do you remember an Asian woman purchasing a ticket to New Orleans about two weeks ago?"

"Chinese travel a lot on our steamboats, mister." The color drained from the clerk's face. "I—I don't know if'n I'd remember—"

"She would've been traveling alone," Lambert said, "well dressed, young, and comely."

"No one, mister," the clerk said, perking up. "And I'd remember someone like that... For sure."

Lambert nodded, acknowledging the clerk's response. Despite his earlier aggression, he recognized the fear in the man's voice and was confident the clerk had been truthful. Threatening him further would serve no useful purpose. He needed to stay focused and find another means of locating the Asian woman.

He turned to leave and was met by two police deputies.

"That's him, alright," the clerk yelled. "Ya can't do that in this town, Geronimo, and get away, Scott free."

"Come along peaceful, mister," the first deputy said, grabbing one of Lambert's guns.

"I don't want any trouble, deputies," Lambert said, raising his hands—chest-high—and smiling. "I'm here on business, law business."

"Seys, you," the second deputy said, grabbing the other gun.

"What kinda law business?" the first deputy asked.

"I'm a bounty hunter looking for a missing banker's wife," Lambert said, dropping his hands. "Maybe a murderess to boot."

The deputies glanced at each other.

"Bounty hunter, huh?" the first deputy said. "Seen all kinds, mister, and I ain't never seen a half-breed one befer."

Lambert's anger flared, but he suppressed the urge to plant a fistful of knuckles on the deputy's jaw. Instead, he curled his hands into tight fists alongside his body and counted softly to himself.

"Reckon Chief Hannigan'll wanna know 'bout you," the second deputy said. "And you can tell your story to him."

Lambert did not resist as he was ushered to the paddy wagon and locked inside. He leaned back against the hard wooden bench, his mind racing. The situation had taken an unexpected turn, and now he faced the all-familiar prejudices he had hoped to avoid. His years of experience as a bounty hunter had taught him to expect resistance and skepticism, but derogatory remarks about his heritage always struck a nerve, and he could not resist reacting.

While the paddy wagon rumbled through the streets of St. Louis, Lambert focused on maintaining his composure. He knew that another reckless outburst would only further complicate matters. Instead, he concentrated on formulating a plan to prove his intentions and secure his release.

Twenty minutes later, the wagon rumbled to a stop at St. Louis' main police station office. Lambert was escorted inside by the two deputies. The bustling atmosphere of the station greeted him as other lawmen and individuals glanced in his direction, their curiosity piqued. The deputies led Lambert to the third-floor office of Laurence Harrigan, Chief of the Department of Police.

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Lambert waited quietly in the reception area of the Chief's office with a deputy on each side while his secretary inserted documents in an open filing cabinet drawer. She was smartly dressed in a gray neck-high pleated cotton blouse with a white collar and black bow. Her off-white cotton skirt was full-lengthed with a wide black belt, cinched tight to accentuate her youthful figure, and her coordinated black shoes had small heels, adding to her five-foot-nine frame, sported buckles instead of laces.

The engraved brass plaque on the desk identified her as Miss Mabel Thorpe.

"What we got here, boys?" she asked, closing the filing cabinet.

"Some kinda Injun gunfighter that tried ta hold up the *Mississippi Queen's* ticket office," the first deputy said. "Calls hisself a bounty hunter. Ain't never seen one like 'im, so we thought Chief Harrigan might wanna talk ta 'im befer he goes into the hole."

"I doubt it; he's quite busy."

The second deputy stepped closer to the secretary.

"Pretty please, Mabel. Me and Coop need a break for Chief Harrigan's good graces, and this here's our ticket. So do this favor for me, and I'll—"

"And you'll take me to dinner and..." she said, smiling and batting her eyes.

"Sure, Mabel," he said, nodding. "Sure."

Miss Thorpe knocked and went in. Moments later, she held the door open.

"Bring him in, boys; Chief Harrigan will see you."

One deputy entered with Lambert behind, followed by the other deputy. The deputies stood on either side of Lambert, facing Chief Harrigan's desk.

"What we got here, Deputy Cooper?"

"We caught 'im tryin'," Cooper said, sweeping his hand toward Lambert, "ta rob the *Queen's* ticket office, Chief."

"Not many fancy-dressed Indians come our way," Harrigan said. He leaned to get a better look at Lambert. "Can't remember that last one, to tell the truth. What's your name, mister?"

Lambert glanced at the portrait of Harrigan in full military uniform hanging on the wall behind his desk with the crossed swords below it.

"It'll go a lot easier if you cooperate with us. You can start by telling me your name."

"Lambert."

"Just Lambert?" Harrigan asked, tilting his head.

"TG Lambert."

"What does the TG stand for, Mr. Lambert?"

Lambert took a deep breath and chose his words carefully.

"It's my Navajo name. You probably couldn't pronounce the amalgam of my native vowels and constants correctly anyway, so I go by TG; it's easier on my ears."

"You talk mighty fancy for an Indian, for most men I've encountered, for that matter. Where'd you learn—"

"The Sacred Heart Abby School," Lambert said, cutting Harrigan off. "Can we skip the routine questions and get to the part where you ask me why I'm in St. Louis? And what I was doing at the *Mississippi Queen's* ticket office."

"I wouldn't wanna play cards with you, Mr. Lambert, and expect to leave the game with the shirt still on my back," Harrigan said, chuckling. He motioned to Deputy Cooper. "Get him a chair. I reckon his story's gonna take a while."

Deputy Cooper frowned but pulled a chair in front of the chief's desk for Lambert. He sat and leaned back, relaxed. He reached into his coat and got a cigarillo.

"Mind if I smoke?"

"Go right ahead, Mr. Lambert," Harrigan said, nodding. "You can leave us, deputies."

"But Chief..." Deputy Cooper said, stepping forward.

"I'll be fine, deputy. Mr. Lambert's not going to cause us any trouble..." He looked Lambert square in the eyes. "Are you?"

"No trouble... I'll just enjoy my smoke and your hospitality, Chief Hannigan. I won't be any trouble at all."

Both deputies glanced at each other and shrugged.

"Oh... And leave his sidearms with Miss Thorpe on your way out."

"But, Chief—"

"Do as I say, deputy."

The deputies left and closed the door behind them.

"All right, Mr. Lambert..." Chief Hannigan leaned back in his chair and tented his fingers. "I've grown weary of the mundane, petty crimes that plague our fine city. It's been some time since I've sunk my teeth into a juicy case, and I've got a feeling your story may be rather interesting, so don't prove me wrong. Let's start with the following: who are you? Not your name, but who you really are."

Lambert did not know what to think of this aging ex-military officer, who obviously craved the excitement of battle but was faced with the placidity of civilian life. He sighed and began his story.

"By trade, I'm a bounty hunter, but when I received a telegram from Sheriff William Duggan—"

"Bill Duggan of Silver Rock City?"

"Yep... He's the one. I got his wire that a friend of his, Mr. Reginald Prescott of Vinita, Oklahoma—"

"Cattleman-Bank Prescott?"

"Yep. One and the same," Lambert said, nodding. "Bill's urgent message said Prescott needed my help. So, I caught the first train out of Fort Worth and arrived in Vinita on August 22. The following day, I discovered Mika, Prescott's wife, had traveled here on the fifth of the month and, since then, had been missing. As a rule, I don't look for wayward wives, but Prescott put a bounty on her. I couldn't pass up the challenge, let alone the money."

Lambert took a long drag on his cigarillo and let the smoke curl out his nostrils.

"Oddly, a woman from a traveling medicine show, Sakura, disappeared on the same day. They were both Japanese, about the same age and physique, and could have passed as sisters—twin sisters by some accounts. A couple days ago, a woman's decomposing body was found in a wooded area near the Prescott Farm. Nothing much was left of the body except her bones and her pelvic tissues, but her fractured skull indicated she was murdered."

"Murdered, you say?"

Lambert nodded, relieved that he had captured the chief's interest. He knew he had to act quickly to gather the necessary evidence to prove his case and gain Chief Hannigan's trust. It was a delicate balance, but if successful, it could bring him closer to uncovering the truth behind the missing banker's wife and the potential murderess.

"Yes... Doc Winston is a hundred percent sure of that fact, but the facts are confusing from there."

"How so?"

"The body was naked, and her clothes were nowhere to be found."

"Don't see that... Even in this city."

"Then there's the timing: Mika and Sakura went on an afternoon buggy ride, and someone returned the buggy by sundown and went to the boardinghouse where Mika stayed. The medicine show started at six without Sakura, and she's been missing since then."

"Seems simple enough to me, Lambert. Mika... Mrs. Prescott killed the medicine show woman and—"

"That exactly was my train of thought until Doc Winston discovered a six-month-old fetus in the woman's remains."

"I don't follow..."

"The baby had red hair, just like Prescott."

"So now your line of thinking has switched tracks," Harrigan said, sitting upright in his chair, "and Sakura's the possible murderess."

"Not so fast, kemosabe... The other wives of Doctor Suza—"

"Other wives?" Harrigan's mouth was agape, and his eyes were as big as saucers.

"That's a whole new story," Lambert said, waving his hand. "His wives claimed Sakura was pregnant and hadn't told Suza yet."

"But the hair color?" Harrigan was on the edge of his chair.

"If it wasn't complicated enough, Suza's hair has reddish overtones, and a close friend of Mika's claims she's barren—she'd tried to conceive but couldn't."

Harrigan grabbed a pen and paper and hurriedly scribbled a few notes. He looked up and asked, "Didn't anyone see who returned the buggy?"

"No... And that evening, the mystery woman purchased a ticket and caught the northbound train to St. Louis. I can only assume she stayed aboard until she arrived here because Prescott received a telegram from the woman, identifying herself as Mika and saying she was leaving for New Orleans on the *Mississippi Queen*."

"So, that's why you were at the ticket office... Discover anything?"

“No one fitting her description purchased a ticket for the *Queen* around that time.”

“Maybe I can help,” Harrigan said, rubbing his chin. He got up, went to the door, and called to his secretary, “Mabel! Bring me the file on that assault case three weeks ago where the woman nearly killed her assailant with her feet.”

“Right away, Chief.”

After a few moments, Mabel found the file and handed it to Harrigan. He took the file, returned to his desk, and flipped through the pages.

“Here’s what you may be looking for, Mr. Lambert. A tallish, slim-build woman... Attractive, as I recall... Well dressed... Wouldn’t have expected her feet to be as lethal as they nearly were.”

“What you mean?”

“Early the morning of Saturday, August six, a woman arrived by train and was drugged and robbed by the cab driver; he took everything: money, jewelry, and even her hat. Then, she was accosted by a man who tried to molest her. She managed to get free and broke his jaw with a kick to his face.”

“One kick?”

“Witnesses said she whirled around and caught him with the heel of her shoe while he was bent over protecting his privates. Apparently, she’d landed a solid blow to his crotch with the toe of her shoe and was in no shape to defend himself.”

“Ouch!” Lambert said, scrunching his face.

“And she wasn’t done with him yet. Before he hit the dirt, she’d twirled around and caught him square on his Adam’s apple, crushing his windpipe. He damn near suffocated. My deputies had to restrain her legs and hands to bring her in.”

“Then, you still have her?”

“No, we don’t,” Harrigan said. “No reason to keep her. According to witnesses, the woman acted in self-defense, and the molester got what was comin’ to him. He’s still sipping his meals and singing soprano if he’s able to sing at all.”

“You find out her name?”

“Inari Kumamoto; it was a fake name—Inari is the Japanese rice god, and Kumamoto is a Japanese city. But her story matched the witnesses, so we set her free.”

“Any idea where she is now?”

“No. But without money, most young women end up on Olive Street, especially if they’re attractive or exotic. The City Council tried to regulate the brothels, but they gave up.”

“How many are there?”

“Nobody knows for sure.”

"She's the key to solving my murder mystery."

"Then, I'd try Madam Lee's *House of Seven Pleasures*, but don't let the name fool you; she's no more Chinese than we are. Her actual name's Maribelle Lee, a freed Virginia slave who employs mostly Asian women to entertain her customers. And they are among the most powerful and influential."

"Why would the woman go there?"

"Word travels around this town faster than the telegraph," Chief Harrigan said with a chuckle. "If I know Maribelle, she had our mystery woman under her wing as soon as we released her."

"Oh... One last question. Did she have a butterfly tattoo on her neck?"

"Sorry," Harrigan said. "Her collar covered most of her neck, so I didn't notice. But speaking of tattoos, Maribelle insists all her girls get tattooed. It's a throwback to her slave days—she was tattooed like you'd brand cattle as proof of ownership."

"One sick woman..."

"Regardless, she insists, and the women comply without question."

"Where do I find the *House of Seven Pleasures*?"

Distant lightning flashed, followed by rumbling thunder.

"I'd wait till Monday. Madam Lee closes on Sundays, believe it or not. Besides, storms are heading our way, and we can get gully-washers. You have lodging?"

"Thanks, Chief," Lambert said, standing, "but I'll find something to my liking."

"Be careful, Lambert. This city can turn on you like a wild beast before you know what hit you."

"Much obliged," Lambert said, extending his hand.

Chief Harrigan extended his, and they shook. Lambert left, leaving the chief slowly shaking his head.

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*CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: House of Seven Pleasures*

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Monday, August 29, 1892

After a day and a half of thunderstorms, a northeasterly wind brought cooler temperatures and lower humidity, chasing the oppressive heat out of the city. The welcomed rainfall transformed the metropolis. It washed away accumulated dust and grime and cleansed its streets—at least, it tried to. The air was crisp but earthy, smelling of wet pavement and buildings. Thirsty trees, bushes, and lawns were revived. Their drooping leaves were already stiffer and noticeably greener, and flowers seemed more brightly colored.

The city's residents, thankful for cooler weather, took to the streets. Sidewalks were lively, with customers going from shop to shop and friends gathering to catch up and enjoy the pleasant weather. Cafés added outdoor seating when more people than usual appreciated the opportunity to eat outside and take advantage of the enjoyable temperatures.

When Lambert's taxi buggy approached the bustling intersection of Sixth Street and Poplar Avenue, he was fascinated by how the setting sun cast a dazzling splash of yellows, oranges, and reds, painting the drab buildings with an elegant radiance. His eyes darted here and there, unable to take it all in.

Street vendors lined the sidewalks, tempting passersby with the teasing aroma of freshly cooked food on sizzling grills. Musicians positioned along the street played for anyone stopping and listening, hoping to charm the onlookers and perhaps earn a few tips.

For Lambert, this lively scene was a stark contrast to a vivid memory, and he could not help but smile—the night was of his twelfth birthday that now felt like a distant reminiscence. That night, he had embarked on a rite-of-passage journey into manhood urged on by the older braves of his village, visiting the *special house* and the *woman*. But it was done in the shadows of the night, in the secret of darkness, not in the carnival-like feeling of energy and laughter of Sixth and Poplar.

When he approached the *House of Seven Pleasures*, Lambert was struck by the elegance and grandeur of the Second Empire-style building. Its pristine whitewashed brick exterior stood tall and imposing on the northwest corner, commanding the attention of all who passed by. He ascended the wide steps flanked by wrought iron railings, adding a touch of elegance. The front yard was meticulously maintained, with carefully arranged flowerbeds, neatly manicured grass, and trimmed bushes enhancing the building's overall appeal.

When Lambert reached the landing, a doorman opened the tall, dark-stained, nine-panel oak door to the *House*. He stepped into the anteroom and was ushered into the main greeting room. Its luxury and extravagance immediately struck him with awe and wonder.

His eyes popped as he marveled at the splendid furnishings. He had never seen anything like this before.

Persian rugs covered hardwood floors. Elaborate tapestries hung on the walls, showing scenes of merriment and folklore, their vibrant colors quickly capturing attention. Several gas-lit crystal chandeliers hung from the high ceiling; their flames cast a sparkling glow across the room. Their shimmering light fell upon European-style furniture, handcrafted and upholstered with colorful fabrics. Above the chatter of the patrons, the delicate tinkling of Italian-cut glassware filled the room, adding a touch of refinement to the setting.

In the far back of the room, an older woman of mixed-slave ancestry sat at an upright piano. Her fingers glided effortlessly across the keys, skillfully playing charming melodies. Lambert couldn't help but notice the lyrics she sang, although memorable, carried a vulgarity that seemed to amuse the patrons—both men and women—who gathered around.

The staircases flanking both sides of the room caught Lambert's attention. On the right side, the stairs ascended, where patrons were led to the upper floors, and on the left side, the staircase descended, where satisfied patrons rejoined the first-floor entertainment.

As he stood, taking in the room's opulence, Madam Lee, the proprietor, approached him with a warm and welcoming smile. Maribelle Lee, a freed slave of mixed heritage, commanded attention with her striking appearance and flamboyant attire. She was an imposing presence for a woman of four-foot-eleven. She carried her plump figure with unwavering confidence, gliding with the ease of an angel. The soft glow of the gas-lit chandeliers highlighted her bronze skin. The years had been kind to her, and now, in her mid-thirties, they added to her charm.

Maribelle accentuated her figure with a snug-fitting elegant gown of brightly colored silk fabric with raised patterns in gold and silver. Its low-cut neckline proudly displayed her ample bosom. Gaudy feathers adorned her ensemble, and her jewelry was just as showy but genuine. Her diamond earrings, necklaces, and bracelets sparkled and shimmered with her every movement.

She gracefully sashayed across the floor toward Lambert. Her voice dripped with Southern charm as she greeted him. "Oooo... My, oh, my... Where does y'all comes from, handsome?" Her words flowed with a musical quality.

Flustered yet captivated by Maribelle's magnetic presence, Lambert struggled to find his voice. He tipped his hat respectfully, his mouth as dry as the desert sand.

"Uh... Okla... Oklahoma, ma'am," he managed to stammer, his cheeks reddening.

Maribelle's playful nature surfaced as she circled behind Lambert, lightly swatting his rump with her open hand. "Mmm... Mighty fine hams!" she remarked, her tone laced with flirtatiousness.

Lambert felt his face growing hotter as blood rushed up his neck to his cheeks. He stood firm, hat in hand, feeling both exhilarated and overwhelmed by Maribelle's brazenness.

Sensing his discomfort, Maribelle circled back to face him, a mischievous grin spreading from ear to ear. She playfully squeezed his upper arm, her eyes roaming from his head to his crotch.

"Ooo... Strong like a bull," she remarked, her voice dripping with innuendo. "Y'all hung like one, too, I bet."

Blood rushed to Lambert's cheeks, and his face was beet red. It did not take long before he realized he was the center of several patrons' attention. Perspiration trickled down his temples while he stood there, momentarily frozen, like a fresh-cut tree stump.

Maribelle, undeterred by his reaction, continued to radiate confidence and boldness. She twirled around him, lightly bumping against his hips as she passed by. "How 'bout the two of us—on the house, of course—take a tumble. I've never done a turn with a half-breed, especially with such a fine specimen of a man," she suggested, playfully fanning herself with her open hand.

Lambert's initial embarrassment changed to anger as her words struck a nerve. "I'm a full-blood Navajo, not a half-breed like you octoroons!" he snapped, his words laced with frustration and regret as they tumbled off his tongue. He heard several people gasp.

Maribelle, seemingly unfazed by his outburst, maintained her composure. She regarded him with a calm yet knowing gaze, her voice conveying understanding. "Ooo... Touchy one, ain't ya, honey child?" she remarked, her tone tinged with wisdom born of experience. "One look at ya would tell a stray hound was a-sniffin' at yo family tree sometime in yo past... But it don't make no difference to me, handsome. So, my offer still stands... What ya say, cowboy?"

By now, the gathered crowd had lost interest in Lambert and Maribelle and had moved on to other, more exciting entertainment. But Lambert stood firm, the weight of her words settling heavily upon him. He realized he had let his anger get the best of him and regretted his hasty response. At that moment, Lambert understood that Maribelle saw beyond appearances, uninterested in societal labels or prejudices, and had uncovered a dark family secret that he had pistol-whipped countless men and killed too many unknowingly to keep hidden.

After taking a deep breath, Lambert regathered himself, his voice more composed this time. "I appreciate your offer, ma'am," he began, his tone sincere. "But I'm looking for a woman—"

Maribelle laughed. "Well, ya sure done comes to the right place, handsome. We got all kinds: white, black, brown, yellow, and all shades in between, but no reds. And if women ain't yo fancy—"

“No. I’m searching for a particular woman... Japanese... Arrived in St. Louis on Saturday, August six. Was arrested for nearly killing her attacker with her feet but released. Goes by Inari, Sakura, or maybe Mika.”

Maribelle’s expression softened, and she regarded Lambert with mixed curiosity and caution. “Well now, ain’t that somethin’?” she said, her Southern drawl nearly gone. “A man on a mission to find a special woman, and he comes here. I reckon we’re each on our own journey. Now, ya take care of yourself, handsome. And if ya ever find yourself needing a listening ear or a shoulder to cry on, ya know where to find me.”

Without fanfare, she turned and walked away to greet other patrons.

Lambert knew she was withholding information about the Asian woman, but he could do little about it. He could not imagine drawing his revolver would phase Maribelle one iota; besides, he would not survive ten seconds if he so much as put his hand on his gun. So he strolled to the door to leave.

He tried shaking off his frustration and helplessness but could not. Lambert knew there was more to the story, more to the Asian woman than Maribelle was revealing. It gnawed at him, but he realized that confronting Maribelle with aggression or force would only escalate the situation and potentially danger his and others’ lives. He took one last glance at her. She stood calmly, her eyes fixed on him, a faint smile playing on her lips. It was clear to Lambert that she was a woman of immense confidence and cunning. Whatever secrets she held, she was determined to keep them hidden.

Lambert worked inside and occasionally outside the law to gather information, primarily through patience, persuasion, and, when necessary, even at the end of a gun. So when he reached for the doorknob to leave, he paused, considering his options. Perhaps he could find another way to uncover the truth.

The butler, an older, white-haired man as black as coal, opened the door for Lambert, but in passing, he whispered, “Try’s da boardin’ house on Fourth and Chestnut. Ask’s fo Tamiko.”

Lambert’s ears perked up when he caught the butler’s words. The mention of a boarding house and of the name Tamiko intrigued him. Lowering his voice to match the butler’s tone, Lambert leaned closer and asked, “What’s the connection? Why should I look for Tamiko?”

The butler glanced around, ensuring no one was within earshot, before responding, “Tamiko... She know’d sumthin’ ‘bout the Asian woman ya lookin’ fo. She’s been wit her if ya catch my drift.”

Lambert nodded, appreciative of the information. He had an address and a potential link to the mysterious Asian woman. It was a promising lead, and he needed to act swiftly.

“Thank you,” Lambert whispered gratefully. “I owe you one.”

The butler gave a curt nod, acknowledging Lambert's gratitude, before stepping back inside and closing the door.

Lambert took a deep breath, feeling renewed urgency and purpose. Without wasting another moment, he descended the steps, hailed a passing buggy cab, and quickly relayed the address to the driver. As they sped toward Fourth and Chestnut, Lambert's mind raced with thoughts of Tamiko and what she might know about the Asian woman's whereabouts.

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*CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: Lee's Boarding House*

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The horse-drawn buggy cab rumbled along Sixth Street, crossing Myrtle, Elm, and Walnut Streets, and the building became shabbier and more rundown. "What a miserable place," the driver muttered when he directed the cab onto Chestnut Street and headed eastward toward the river and waterfront.

"Mississippi dock's up ahead," he said, continuing the journey through the changing neighborhood. "Look at this area," the driver said, shaking his head in disbelief. "Used to be a great place to live. Now looky at them ramshackle places."

Peeling paint, broken windows, and crumbling facades hinted at better days long gone. Poor to no building maintenance was widespread, giving the area a forlorn appearance.

The cab slowed its progress along Chestnut Avenue, crossing Fifth. The closely built, multi-family structures seemed to huddle together, and the occasional gas-lit lamppost cast long shadows on the street, making the driver anxious. "Only the bravest walk these streets after sundown," he said. "Or the foolish... Then only once." He chuckled nervously.

The rains had done little to wash away these signs of decay. The air was heavy with the pungent stench of rotting garbage and animal waste, lingering regardless of the wind's direction or intensity. As the cab continued, the surroundings served as a reminder of the stark disparity within the city. The carnival-like atmosphere of Sixth and Poplar versus the hopelessness-like cloud hanging over Fourth and Chestnut.

"If this is big-city living," Lambert muttered, "count me out."

The three-story, brown-brick building on the corner of Fourth and Chestnut had patches of crumbling mortar. Its small windows were weather-beaten and stripped of paint; many were broken or so grunge-covered that the view from the inside and out was obscured.

Above the entrance, a ramshackle sign read, "Lee's Boarding House."

The cab stopped. Lambert stepped down and told the driver to return in an hour. But the driver balked.

"Not me, mister," the driver said, balking. "An hour from now, 'twon't be safe for man or beast on these streets!"

"For twenty dollars?"

"For twenty dollars, mister, I'd ride through the gates of Hell." The driver rubbed his chin. "But how'd I know'd yer gonna pay up?"

Lambert took a twenty-dollar bill from his pocket, tore it in half, and gave one half to the driver. "You'll get the other half when you come back for me."

"All right, mister, but I'll tell ya straight. If yo ain't waitin' on them there steps when I come gallopin' by, I ain't stoppin'. Twenty dollars or not. We clear on that point?"

“Clear.” Lambert pocketed the other half of the bill and checked his pocket watch. “Ten-fifteen sharp. I’ll be here. If you aren’t, I’ll come looking for you, and believe me, you don’t want that nightmare.”

The driver gulped, nodded nervously, and rode away.

After giving the building a once-over, top to bottom, Lambert glanced up and down the nearly deserted streets. Two drunks stumbled and laughed midway down Chestnut toward Third, their raucous voices echoing in the night.

Farther down, an argument unfolded under the meager glow of a lamppost. A woman’s voice roared above her two companions. Her grotesque gestures expressed her frustration and anger with them. A crying baby, a screaming woman, a man’s angry hollering, and the nonstop barking of nearby dogs joined the neighborhood chorus.

Lambert stepped into the boarding house. The diffuse light from the single oil lamp cast long shadows across a sitting room just beyond the foyer. Its furniture was worn and stained, and its carpet was threadbare and dirty.

A strong, musty smell gripped his throat. Sections of faded wallpaper peeled from the plastered walls. The air was thick with dust, adding to the place’s general despair. To the side, a narrow hallway stretched toward the back of the boarding house, leading to more rooms. The flickering light from the oil lamp barely reached the first doors.

As Lambert’s gaze focused upward, he noticed the stairs ascending to the upper floors. The banister was dull and chipped. Years of grime hid its ornately carved newels and balusters.

The reception desk stood at the corner of the sitting room, covered in a thin layer of dust. It seemed abandoned, with no sign of anyone attending for quite a long while. A small, tarnished, barely recognizable bell sat beside a dog-eared ledger, suggesting a time when guests checked in and out regularly.

Lambert dinged the bell. When no one responded, he pounded it three more times.

A grumpy, grizzly voice answered. “Hit that bell again, and I’ll shove it where the sun don’t shine!”

The bad-tempered man bumped against the wall as he stumbled toward Lambert. The backroom door flew open and slammed against the wall. A frumpled giant of a man in sullied clothes filled the doorway.

“No vacancies,” he bellowed. “Go away!”

“Not looking for a room.”

The man giant rubbed his eyes and yawned. “No room? So whatcha ya want, mister? And it better be good fer waking me from my *beauty sleep*.” He slammed his palm with his fist. “Damn good.”

“A woman named Tamiko.”

The man giant hesitated and curled his lip. "Never heard of her. Now go away," he said, hesitated again, then started to leave.

Lambert unholstered and cocked his weapon. The man stopped dead when he heard the click of the Colt's hammer and slowly raised his hands.

"Don't got no money, mister."

"Tamiko... Room number?"

The man faced Lambert and asked, "Who are ya, anyhow?"

"Uh..." Lambert hesitated. "Marshal Bill Duggan."

"Don't see no badge, Marshal... Where's yer warrant?"

Lambert leveled his weapon at the man and held his coat back, revealing his other one.

"These are my warrant," Lambert said with a clenched jaw. "So what's it going to be, partner?"

"Easy, Marshal, easy," the man giant said, nodding like a woodpecker. "Put that hog pistol away, gentle-like."

Lambert holstered his gun, and the man sighed in relief. "Room number..."

"Twenty-eight... Second—"

"No need... I got it."

"Whatever ya say, mister," the man said, turning and disappearing into the back room.

Lambert slowly climbed the stairs to the second floor. The foot-worn wooden steps creaked beneath his weight as he ascended. The second-floor hallway was shadowy, with only reflected light from the first-floor oil lamp. The air was thick with the odors of mold, garbage, and human waste.

He felt his way along the corridor, passing several closed doors until he heard the creaking of a door opening behind him. Lambert spun around, but it was too late. He remembered the pain in the back of his head and neck and hitting the floor, but nothing after that.

When he came to, he was in a dingy, darkened room, hog-tied with his hands tightly bound behind his back. He tried to free himself, but the rope was too tight. Across the room from him sat a lanky woman with grimy hair and soiled hands, holding a club. Standing next to her was the frumpled man-giant of a night clerk. The back of his neck and head throbbed where the woman had clobbered him.

"Ya done good work, Amy," the man giant said. "Mama Lee's gonna be pleased."

"Who is he?" Amy asked, glancing at Lambert.

"Who cares... Mama sey'd ta watch fer anyone come'd lookin' fer Tamiko... And we's did..." The man giant chuckled. "Yes, we's did, all right."

"What she gonna pay me for him?"

"Nuthin'," the man giant said. "Yo's owe her!"

"He coulda killed me... And I get nuthin' for my troubles?" Amy shouted at the man giant and got to her feet. "Is that how it works?"

"Ya got that right, Amy," the man giant said, poking his finger in Amy's face. "Mama owns yer soul, mine, too. So, enjoy yer small piece of Hell on Earth while ya can." The man giant lumbered and towered over Lambert. "Lemme sees what kinda cash he's got." He knelt to check Lambert's pockets.

Amy raised her club as high as she could reach. The crunch of wood against the skull sent the man giant sprawling on the floor, out cold. She dropped the weapon and began gathering her meager belongings.

"Where you planning to go, Miss Amy?" Lambert asked in a calm, soothing tone.

"If it's any skin off yer nose... As far away—"

"You'll need money. Got any?"

"I'll manage," Amy said defiantly while gathering her things.

"Mama Lee will find you," Lambert said, "unless you can leave the city. Can you do that without help, without money?"

Amy grabbed her bundle and scurried to the door. She opened it and stepped into the hallway.

"You won't get far before one of Mama Lee's henchmen finds you, not without help," Lambert said. "I can help you."

Amy stopped and spun around. "Help me? I 'twas the one that walloped ya, but good, so why'd ya be helpin' me?"

"I'm looking for a woman... Goes by Inari, Mika, or Sakura, and another woman called Tamiko in Room Twenty-Eight will help find her. If you help me, I'll help you—a simple business deal."

Amy hesitated, then returned to the room and dropped her bundle. She knelt beside Lambert and untied him.

"Much obliged, Miss Amy," Lambert said, getting to his feet and handing her a twenty-dollar bill. "This will help on your travels."

"But... I knocked ya out cold, mister. I don't understand why—"

"A deal's a deal. Now hurry," he said. "Times a-wastin'... Go!"

Amy grabbed her bundle and left. Lambert continued down the hallway until he reached Room Twenty-Eight. The door stood slightly ajar. He gently pushed it open and

stepped into a small room. An oil lamp's wick burned brightly on a nearby table but was adjusted too high, sending a column of sooty smoke toward the ceiling.

Lambert recognized the ammonia-like odor of opium. The young woman slumped beside a sagging sofa, her head hanging and her long, dark hair obscuring her face, confirming his initial suspicions.

The woman looked up when Lambert entered, her glazed-over eyes filled with fear.

"Tamiko?" Lambert asked softly, attempting to convey reassurance.

The woman nodded, her voice barely above a whisper. "Who are you?"

Lambert approached her slowly, making sure not to startle her further. "TG Lambert. I'm looking for the other woman."

Tamiko's eyes widened. "Other...? Woman...? Inari...?"

Lambert hesitated for a moment. "Yes, Inari. Where is she?"

"Who... Who are you?" Tamiko asked.

Before Lambert could answer, a woman coughed in the adjoining room. He left Tamiko and found Inari in a stupor, sprawled on a bed, wearing scruffy, soiled clothes and reeking of filthiness. He gathered her in his arms and retraced his steps down the staircase and out of the building.

Lambert waited with Inari supported at his side. He glanced up and down the street—clear. The distant clapping sound of a trotting horse came closer by the second as it approached them on Chestnut. He checked his pocket watch: five minutes past ten o'clock.

"The bastard's early!" he said, "At least he came back for us."

Inari did not respond. Her head flopped to one side, eyes staring at nothing.

As the cab slowed, Lambert grinned. He was satisfied with a good day's work: he found Inari, and Amy escaped Mama Lee's clutches, and no one died.

*A good day, in any way you add it up, he thought.*

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*CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: Butterfly Tattoo*

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"You're early," Lambert said, helping Inari into the horse-drawn buggy cab.

"Didn't reckon ya'd be there at all, so what'd five, ten minutes make one way or the other?" the driver said.

"Need a place where she can get cleaned up."

"No respectable hotel'd take her as bad as she looks... And smells, but I know'd just da place... Quiet... Clean... Well, almost clean, anyhows... And no questions asked fer the right price."

"Food, too?"

"Fillin' and plenty of it."

Lambert nodded appreciatively at the driver's offer. "Lead the way, but take it easy."

The driver flicked the reins, and the cab began its slow journey through the city streets. The rhythmic clip-clop of the horse's hooves echoed in the evening while Lambert and Inari settled into the backseat.

Inari's face was expressionless and pale. Her eyes were sunken and distant. Each time the cab hit a rut and bounced, she moaned. Before he realized it, Lambert had his arm around the woman, drawing her close and trying to comfort her.

"Don't ya worry, miss," the driver said, glancing back at them. "We'll have ya like a new person inna jiff."

After a short ride, the cab pulled up in front of a small, unassuming building tucked away in a quiet alley. The weathered sign above the door simply read, "Inn." The driver led the way inside. Lambert followed, half-carrying Inari.

The inn's interior was modest but tidy. To the left was a dining area with two round and two long tables and chairs, all showing years of use and abuse but clean. A large stone fireplace took up the right side, but its hearth was cold—too warm for a fire. Straight ahead was the front desk, where a full-bodied, middle-aged woman sat. She looked up when the door opened, and her tired eyes enlivened at the sight of the driver.

"This here woman's needin' a room and a good scrubbin', Sadie," the driver said, thumbing over his shoulder.

Sadie's gaze shifted to Inari's disheveled appearance, and she nodded. "Don't ya worry, miss. Gots plenty of hot water ready all the time."

Inari's face remained blank, eyes staring into emptiness. Lambert held her tightly around her waist.

"That be one room... Or... Two?"

"Two," Lambert said without hesitation. "You have anyone that could help her?"

"Sure do, mister, but it'll cost extra."

Lambert nodded, and Sadie took Inari by the hand, but when Lambert loosened his grip on her, Inari's knees buckled.

"I gots her," Sadie said, taking hold of Inari. "Mary'll help wash her and gets her somethin' clean to wear... Lord knows she needs a good scrubbin' and sumthin' new to wear. She'll look all proper inna jiff and smell better, too." She led her to the bath at the back of the inn.

Lambert pulled the other half of the twenty-dollar bill from his pocket and gave it to the driver. "As agreed?"

"Agreed... And much obliged, mister," the driver said, tipping his hat. "Hope yer lady friend feels better."

Lambert nodded and watched the driver exit. He got a chair from a nearby table, sat, and lit a cigarillo. He tried to fit all his puzzling pieces together, but at times, they were as elusive as the smoke rings he blew toward the ceiling.

He was sure of specific facts: An Asian woman purchased a ticket and boarded the northbound train at Wyandotte, Oklahoma, in the same timeframe as the reported disappearances of Mika Prescott and Sakura Suza. An Asian woman arrived in St. Louis on the morning of August six. Later, she was robbed, assaulted, and arrested for nearly killing her assailant. She identified herself as Inari Kumamoto and was released when witnesses confirmed her claim of self-defense. Her trail led to the *House of Seven Pleasures, Lee's Boarding House*, and here.

He blew another smoke ring toward the ceiling.

*Inari Kumamoto. Who was she?* Lambert thought. *Was she Mika Prescott, Sakura Suza, or someone else?*

Her facial features were Asian, probably Japanese, but like most, Lambert struggled to differentiate people from Far East Cultures. He discarded the idea of taking her to see Chief Harrigan since Harrigan could only provide the woman's name and a description from the arrest report and point him on her trail. He doubted the chief would be of any additional help.

But Lambert still had many unanswered questions gnawing at him. What was Inari doing in that rathole? She was probably drugged, certainly malnourished, and definitely living in squalor. And who was Tamiko? What connection did Madam Lee have to the *Lee Boarding House*? It was pretty evident Madam Lee knew Inari, but what was the link? Thoughts flitted through his mind, here for a fleeting moment, dissipating and gone like the smoke rings he blew.

Lambert was tired and hungry, but most of all, he needed a stiff drink.

Sadie returned, her face flustered and reddened.

"How could ya do that to a woman in her condition," she snarled.

"I didn't do... What condition you talking about?"

"A baby, mister. She hid it under that frumpled dress she were a-wearin', but when naked, 'twas no mistakin'. She's six or more months along."

"You certain?" he asked, his voice tinged with surprise and concern.

"I've seen enough pregnancies in my time, mister," Sadie said, nodding firmly. "That woman's definitely expecting."

Lambert's eyes widened as he processed the woman's words. A baby? This revelation deepened the mystery surrounding Inari. He had been confident but wrong when mentally identifying the deceased woman in Prescott Woods as Mika Prescott and the woman on the run as Sakura from Doctor Suza's traveling medicine show. Then he had been just as sure when Sakura, Doctor Suza's missing wife, and the deceased woman were one and the same, pregnant and Japanese, and that Mika Prescott had fled to St. Louis after murdering Sakura. Now, he was not certain of anything anymore. Could Mika and Sakura both have been about six months pregnant? If so, he was back to square one. Then who the heck was Inari?

"Do you have anything to drink?" Lambert asked. "Stronger, the better."

"Don't knows if I cater to the likes of you, mister."

"Listen," Lambert said. "You've got this all wrong, ma'am. I've been searching for the missing wife of a banker down Oklahoma way. I tracked her to that stinking, rundown boarding house, rescued her from the drugs and filth she was living in, and brought her here for a bath, food, and rest. I intend to return her to Oklahoma as soon as she can travel... Now, about that whiskey."

Sadie eyed Lambert suspiciously, her arms crossed over her chest, considering his words. She seemed to be weighing the sincerity in his voice against her initial impression of him. After a moment, she sighed and reached under the counter.

"Suppose I can spare a drink for a man claimin' good intentions," she conceded, retrieving a bottle of whiskey and two glasses. She poured a generous amount of the amber liquid into each glass and slid one toward Lambert. "But mark my words, mister," Sadie warned, her tone firm. "If I thought fer one moment..." Her voice trailed off, and she took a swig of whiskey.

Lambert nodded appreciatively and took a sip of whiskey, relishing its warmth in his throat. He leaned back, collecting his thoughts before speaking again.

"I assure you, ma'am, my intentions are genuine. This woman identified herself to the police as Inari Kumamoto, but it's a fake name. She's either of two missing women: Mika Prescott or Sakura Suza. One's dead, and the other's a murderess. The only way to

straighten this out is to escort her back to Oklahoma, where several witnesses are ready to determine her true identity," he said.

Sadie regarded Lambert for a moment longer. Her searching eyes surveyed his face for any sign of deception. After a while, she seemed to calm down a bit. The tenseness in her face relaxed, the skepticism in her voice gave way to the softness of sympathy, and she smiled.

"Well, I reckon ya gots yer hands full without me jumpin' on ya with both feet," Sadie said, sighing. "But don't ya start thinkin' for a second that I won't be keepin' a close eye on things."

She winked.

Lambert nodded gratefully and smiled.

Sadie nodded in response and took a sip of her own whiskey. Lambert felt a glimmer of relief, knowing that he had secured at least temporary assistance. However, the mystery surrounding Inari and her true identity still loomed large in his mind.

"Oh, by the way... Does Inari have any tattoos?" Lambert asked.

"Sure does. Charming little butterfly on her neck. Colorful, too."

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*CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: Wyandotte, Oklahoma Bound*

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Wednesday, August 31, 1892

Lambert was enjoying breakfast and coffee when Sadie arrived, beaming and grinning from ear to ear.

“Yer woman’s up and about this mornin’. It’s been two whole days since ya bringed her here, sleepin’ most of it.”

“I couldn’t hold my water for two days,” Lambert said. “How’d she—”

“Ya don’t knows nuthin’ ‘bout nuthin’ when it comes to women,” Sadie snapped. “Mary helped her up when she needed reliev’in’, and Mary fed her and made sure she had plenty to drink, too. We look after our own, I’ll have ya knows.”

“Unruffled your feathers, Sadie. Just making conversation.”

“Well... Anyhows thought ya’d like to knows, yer woman will be ready fer travelin’ today. Mary’s helpin’ her get a refreshin’ bath. Like I always seys, hot water and a good sudsin’ and scrubbin’ will wash yer troubles right down the drain.” Sadie chuckled. “And believe you me, Mary’ll go over every inch of her, too, making sure she’s thoroughly cleaned.”

“Wonderful,” Lambert said. It was the first time he felt like smiling from joy in several days. “Several in Wyandotte are anxious for our return.”

“Mary found clothes for her and helped her dress,” Sadie said. “And I ain’t never seen such beautiful, long, coal-black hair. Mary’s goin’ to help braid it once it’s dry.”

“Money is a small token of my appreciation for your help, Sadie.”

“Ah... Go on, now. Yer gonna make me blush,” Sadie said as blood rushed to her cheeks.

Lambert smiled warmly at Sadie’s response. “Well, you deserve every penny. Don’t know what I’d done without you and Mary.”

Sadie waved off Lambert’s gratitude.

“When can I see her?” he asked.

“Mary’ll bring her down for breakfast after she’s all gussied up,” Sadie said. She started to leave but stopped. “If ya ever cross paths with who done this to her, Mr. Lambert—” She did not finish; instead, she briskly left the room.

Lambert pondered Sadie’s request and the likelihood their path would cross his. He thought about what they deserved for what they did to Inari, but he brushed aside those thoughts for the immediate issue: what to say when he saw Inari and what questions to ask.

His mind ran through ideas faster than a stampeding herd but settled on nothing specific. He drank the remaining coffee and lit a cigarillo. He took a deep drag, savoring its bitter taste and the brief distraction it offered from his scattered thoughts.

He leaned back in his chair, its timeworn frame creaking under his weight, and stared at the smoke rings dissipating in the air. Their gentle swirls seemed to mirror the jumble of his mind, and he realized he needed to regain his focus before seeing Inari. Soon, the air in the room was filled with layers of haze, like the layered fogginess of his mind.

Sighing, he stubbed out the cigarillo.

Lambert could not let his thoughts aimlessly wander. When he saw Inari again, he needed a clear head. He glanced around the room and noticed a portrait of a cowboy riding a horse in the desert. It had a familiarity that helped him focus. He stood and paced the room, thinking and occasionally glimpsing at the scene in the painting, wishing he was that cowboy, but he shook off that thought and refocused.

He was positive on four facts: firstly, two Japanese women of similar age and physical description disappeared within twenty-four hours of each other. Secondly, on the day of their disappearance, they were seen together leaving town on a buggy ride for a picnic, but no one saw who returned the horse and buggy. Thirdly, one of the two women boarded a train to St. Louis that same evening. Fourthly, three weeks later, a badly decomposed body of a Japanese woman was found in the woods near Prescott Farm.

Coincidentally, Inari was arrested for nearly killing the man who tried to assault her after she had been robbed and her luggage stolen. She claimed she arrived by train on the morning of August six. The only train arriving then was northbound from Wyandotte. Later, she was released when witnesses confirmed she acted in self-defense, and the police had no other reason to hold her.

Lambert never put much stock in coincidences. So, he reckoned Inari was either Mika Prescott or Sakura Suza, the murderess.

Finally, his thoughts congealed, and Lambert was ready to meet and question the woman who claimed to be Inari Kumamoto. He did not have to wait long. Mary entered, and Inari followed close behind.

He greeted them politely and gestured for them to take a seat.

“Thank ya, kindly, but I’ve work to do,” Mary said, helping Inari into a chair. “Tea and biscuit, missy?”

Inari nodded and looked around the room, avoiding Lambert’s direct gaze.

Lambert took a moment to study Inari's facial expression and body language. Her chin was jutted, her eyes were bright, sharp, yet defiant and observant as she assessed her surroundings, and a smile dangled from the corner of her lips. She tossed her head, the braid came undone, and her long, flowing hair cascaded across her shoulder and face.

Unphased, Inari cradled a lock of hair with her thumb and pushed it behind her ear. She exuded confidence and caution.

Lambert was impressed by the calm demeanor of the woman sitting across from him. Few men had that resolve; he would not mistakenly underrate her.

"So you're Inari Kumamoto?" he began, studying her reaction closely. "I understand you were the victim of a robbery on the morning of August six and an attempted assault. Tell me about that."

Inari looked at Lambert but did not answer.

"Chief Harrigan told me you arrived on the train from Wyandotte, Oklahoma, that evening. Is that true, ma'am?"

Still no response from Inari.

Before Lambert could question her further, Mary arrived, carrying a tray with a teapot, coffeepot, biscuits, cream, and sugar.

"Breakfast's ready, missy," Mary said, eyeing Lambert as she put the tray on the table. "Bung ya fresh coffee, Mr. Lambert, and another biscuit if yer still hungry."

While Mary poured Inari's tea, they exchanged smiles. Inari cocked her head, her face softened, and her eyelids slowly fluttered. Mary's unspoken response was loud and clear but as unintelligible to Lambert as Navajo smoke signals were to the early pioneers.

"Just coffee," Lambert said, breaking into their communication. "Much obliged, Mary."

Mary shot him a quick look, forehead puckered, but she nodded a polite thank you and took his breakfast plates with her as she left.

Inari gripped her cup of tea while Lambert poured a mug of coffee. Both ignored the cream and sugar. While waiting for their beverages to cool, they stared at each other, locked in a battle of wills.

Inari was the first to yield and taste her warm tea, but Lambert kept his steel-eyed gaze locked on her while his coffee cooled. When she had finished her tea and reached for a biscuit, the opening he had waited for to resume his questions presented itself.

Lambert began by addressing Inari directly. "Miss Kumamoto, I must admit, when Chief Harrigan told me about your fighting skills and fancy footwork, my ears perked up. In my youth, I was trained in ancient Navajo hand-to-hand fighting, but I was never taught to use my feet as a weapon as skillfully as you use them."

He paused for a sip of coffee.

"But some morning details are concerning; they don't add up." He paused again, sipping more coffee and letting his words sink in.

Inari did not seem phased. Her expression remained unchanged while she sipped her tea.

Lambert continued, his voice steady and authoritative, repeating the questions. "You claim to have arrived on the northbound train from Wyandotte on August six, the morning you were robbed. Is that the truth, ma'am?"

Inari sipped more tea.

"The same one that carried a murderess from Wyandotte to St. Louis. A Japanese woman like yourself, ma'am. In my book, that makes you Mika Prescott or Sakura Suza. Both went missing on the fifth, and all the evidence points to one murdering the other and then fleeing to St. Louis by train."

Lambert paused, allowing his words to find footing in Inari's mind.

"The same train you arrived on," he continued. "And later, that woman sent a telegram from the depot to Reginald Prescott, care of Vinita, Oklahoma, claiming to be his wife."

He waited for any signs of Inari reacting to his questioning.

"And then... You appeared... Arrived out of nowhere," Lambert continued. "You were robbed... Assaulted... The same morning... A coincidence?"

Lambert drank the last of his coffee. Inari remained calm, aloof, and reserved.

"I've trailed all kinds—men, women, and a couple of kids once—and there's one thing I've learned: don't trust coincidences. They're so rare; most times, they can be discounted."

Inari casually set her teacup on the table and stared at Lambert, eye to eye.

"I would commend you on your logic, Mr. Lambert, if it weren't so flawed. Did anyone confirm I was the only Japanese woman aboard that train? Has anyone searched for the woman who sent the telegram? I think not." Inari picked up the teapot and put it back on the table. "Pity... It's as empty as your reasoning, Mr. Lambert."

He was stunned. Lambert had never met a woman as clever, educated, polished, confident, and, he had to admit, correct as she.

*What a woman!* he thought. *If only...*

Lambert's thoughts trailed off, captivated by Inari, but he soon regained his senses and focused on the task at hand.

"Uh," he said, clearing his throat and his thoughts. "Let's settle this, one way or the other. Accompany me to Wyandotte. No less than five witnesses can identify you as either Mika Prescott or Sakura Suza."

"And..." Inari said, cocking her head and smiling. "What do I receive for my efforts?"

Lambert leaned back in his chair and searched his coat packet for a cigarillo. "Mind if I smoke, ma'am?"

"Suit yourself."

He bit off its tip, lit the other, and took a deep drag. Lambert slowly let the smoke escape his nostrils while thoughts raced from one part of his mind to another. He leaned forward, the cigarillo hanging from the corner of his mouth.

“All right, ma’am. I’ll guarantee all expenses to and from Wyandotte, plus twenty dollars for your trouble.”

“Fifty, now, and another fifty when we arrive in Wyandotte.”

“Twenty and twenty,” Lambert countered.

“Twenty, fifty,” Inari said, arms across her chest.

“Deal,” Lambert said, sensing the bargaining was over.

“Deal,” Inari said, holding her hand for a shake.

They shook.

“Southbound leaves in the morning,” Lambert said.

“Yes,” Inari said. “Mary told me.”

He handed her a twenty-dollar bill. Inari took it, stood, and left.

Lambert poured another mug, thinking he may have gotten the short end of the deal. The coffee was cold, but he drank it anyway.

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*CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: Where Are The Witnesses?*

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Thursday, September 1, 1892

It was late afternoon when the train rumbled to a stop at the Wyandotte, Oklahoma, depot. Sheriff Anderson and Jeb were there to greet Lambert and Inari when they stepped out of the passenger car. As soon as Jeb saw her, he rushed to help Inari with her satchel.

"Welcome back," the sheriff said, shaking Lambert's hand. "Reckon this here's yer lady friend."

"Inari, meet Sheriff Anderson; Sheriff, this is Inari Kumamoto."

"Glad ta meet ya, ma'am," the sheriff said, tipping his hat and smiling broadly.

Lambert glanced around, puzzled. "I expected to see Prescott with you and halfway expected Miss Lilly, too."

"When I got yer telly, I know'd ya'd be disappointed they 'twasn't here, but things done gone south since ya left." Sheriff Anderson took off his hat and rubbed his forehead. "Prescott got to his farm, and 'twasn't two hours later when Henry comes rip-roarin' inta town with ole Reggie sprawled in the back of his wagon. He took him right over ta Doc. Well... Doc said it was apoplexy... And he needed rest and some lookin' after."

Lambert's face furrowed with concern as he listened to Sheriff Anderson's story. He glanced over at Jeb and Inari, standing nearby, listening. Inari's face showed no emotion or reaction to the sheriff's tragic news.

"Miss Lilly put him up?"

"Nope. Miss Lilly's was the best place fer him, but her eye infection got so bad Doc sent her ta doctors he know'd in Chicago. She left the day after ya did."

"Where is he?"

"I got him a-restin' at the *Wyandotte*. Doc checks on him every day."

Lambert put his hands on his hips. "Don't that beat all," he said. "Miss Lilly's gonna be all right, isn't she?"

"Don't ya worry none, my boy," the sheriff said, putting his hand on Lambert's shoulder. "Doc seys she's in the best hands in the country." The sheriff tried to convey confidence, but his voice was quivering on every word.

"And Suza? The twins?" Lambert asked, glancing at Inari again.

While she looked around, Inari's face showed wonderment, as if everything was all new to her, like she had never seen it before.

"They's camped outside of town," the sheriff said.

"Why they do that?" Irritation was etched on Lambert's face. "Did you show them my telegram?"

"Soon as I showed him it, Suza packed up and made camp with his wives just northeast of town alongside Bull Creek."

"What the...?" Lambert started to question Doctor Suza's hasty departure but dropped that thought. "Got any room at the *Wyandotte* for two weary travelers?"

"Always find a room fer ya, but fer the lady there... Ya might hav'ta double up," the sheriff said, followed by a belly laugh.

Inari's head jerked around so fast toward the sheriff her hat nearly spun off. Her eyes were as big as saucers, and her jaw dropped a full inch or more. Her shock at the sheriff's remark was evident, but she quickly regained her composure and shot Lambert a questioning look, unsure how to respond.

On the other hand, Lambert was delighted to see Inari's mask come off, and a grin stretched across his face, ear to ear. He suspected Inari was hiding something beneath her composed demeanor, and now it seemed her true self had surfaced, albeit for a moment.

Lambert refocused and, turning to Sheriff Anderson, asked, "Sheriff, do you know why Suza left town?"

Sheriff Anderson's expression became serious. "Don't rightly know, but he seemed mighty riled up after readin' yer telly. He didn't say much, though."

With a nod, Lambert's attention returned to Inari, but she had already put her deadpan mask back on.

Lambert's frustration mounted: two primary witnesses who could have identified Mika were unavailable—Miss Lilly was in Chicago, and Prescott was laid up, recovering from a stroke. Three other witnesses who could have identified Sakura left but were still close by—Doctor Suza and his two wives were camped just northeast of town. But Lambert did not trust Suza. His callous attitude toward the pain and suffering of others and his questionable philosophies on life had raised red flags in his mind. Lambert had encountered others like Suza before, and experience had taught him to tread cautiously.

"We'll figure this out," Lambert said, squinting at the sun. "Plenty of daylight left. After settling in at the *Wyandotte House*—two rooms, Sheriff, if you please—we can plan our next move."

The sheriff broke out in laughter again. Jeb grabbed Lambert and Inari's bag and gestured toward the buggy.

"Care ta ride, ma'am?" Jeb asked, tipping his hat.

Without a word or acknowledgment, Inari got into the buggy. Jeb climbed into the driver's seat.

"Anybody ridin' with us?" he asked.

Lambert and the sheriff waved him on, Jeb slapped the reins, and the horse took off, trotting down the road into town.

“So, you didn’t recognize her?” Lambert asked the sheriff. “Never saw her before?”

“A wee bit... Maybe... Trouble is, Lambert. They’s all look the same ta me. She could be the medicine-show woman or someone else altogether. I’s pretty sure she ain’t Mrs. Prescott, but ya couldn’t prove it by me, one way or another.”

“Is Prescott in any shape to—”

“Doc would know, Lambert,” the sheriff said. “Only Doc would know.”

As Lambert and the sheriff approached the *Wyandotte House*, Lambert's mind was consumed with a sense of defeat and unease. Unlike other bounties, this one proved to be exceptionally draining. Usually, he would track down a known guilty individual with a bounty on their head, but this time was different. The person he was after had not yet been identified, and Lambert's confidence in his pursuit was starting to waver.

He could not help but question himself. Had he been tracking the right person? Doubts began to creep in, but he forcefully pushed them aside. Doubt was not a luxury he could afford in his line of work. Lambert knew he had to stay focused and determined. Unfortunately, the prime witnesses were ill, and the secondary witnesses were untrustworthy.

The longer he walked, the more his shoulders slumped and his head drooped. Lambert kicked a stone that had the misfortune of being in his path and sent it flying.

“What’s the matter, my friend?” Sheriff Anderson asked. “Not yer usual self. What’s eatin’ at ya?”

Lambert stopped.

It was the first time the grizzly ole sheriff had called him a friend. For a fleeting moment, he felt good, and the corner of his mouth curled up in a smile, but it was short-lived.

“I’m getting too old for this, Sheriff,” Lambert said, stretching his arms and back.

The sheriff was astonished; his jaw dropped.

“Ya can’t be serious, son,” the sheriff said, rubbing his stubbled chin. “Yer still a youngster from where’s I’s a-standin’.”

“Yep. I am,” Lambert said, nodding. “But this’ll be my last bounty.”

“Why the change of heart, son?”

Lambert started walking again, and the sheriff followed.

“I never doubted myself before, but...” Lambert stopped and, gesturing with his hands, continued, “But this time, I’ve made several hasty and costly mistakes in judgment. I was certain Mika murdered Sakura, and then I was just as certain Sakura murdered Mika and

fled to St. Louis. And that led me to Inari, who I was sure was either Mika or Sakura, but now I'm doubting myself."

"Ya make things so complicated, Lambert."

Lambert started walking again. The sheriff walked in step by his side.

"I'm forty-one, got few friends, no place to call my own," Lambert lamented, head hanging low. "And... And when I die, no one will carry on my name. That's precious little to show after four decades of walking this earth... Precious little..."

"What ya need is a stiff drink," the sheriff said, "and things will look better. Besides, Doc should be checking on Reggie 'bout now, and ya can get an idea how he's a-doin'."

The men walked silently until they reached the steps to the *Wyandotte House*. Lambert stopped and looked at the sign above the entrance for a few moments.

"Dangit. We're taking Inari straight to Suza right now," Lambert said, turning toward the livery. "I have to know if she's Sakura or not!"

Sheriff Anderson grabbed Lambert's arm. "Go inside and 'round up the woman. I'll tell Jeb to get the buggy ready and saddle two horses."

Lambert thought for a moment and hurried inside.

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*CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN: Lambert Confronts Suza*

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“Howdy, Lambert,” Deputy Anderson said, standing behind the bar, drawing a mug of beer for a customer. “What’s yer pleasure?”

What room is the woman in?”

“Woman? Which woman?”

“The one that just arrived by train.”

“Oh... She’s in room five... At the end of—”

Before the deputy finished, Lambert hustled to room five and knocked.

“Who is it?” Inari asked.

“Lambert... Get dressed. We’re going to Doctor Suza’s camp while there’s still light.”

“But—”

“Come peaceful, or I’ll come in and get—”

“No need. I’m coming. Just give me a minute.”

Five minutes later, the door opened, and Inari stepped into the hallway.

“Lead the way, Mr. Lambert,” she said, smirking.

At times, Lambert felt sorry for Inari; at other times, like now, he felt anger and disdain. Something was wrong with this scene, but he could not put his finger on it. He directed her down the hall to the main room. Once there, they met Sheriff Anderson.

“Jeb’ll have the buggy and horses ready soon. Anyone besides me want a beer?”

Lambert shook his head. Inari ignored the question and stared outside.

“Ya ain’t no fun, ya know’d that?” the sheriff said, licking his dry lips.

Jeb stepped inside. “Ready ta ride?”

###

The sun was two hands high on the horizon, brightly shining in a cloudless sky when Lambert, the sheriff, Inari, and Jeb rode into Doctor Suza’s camp. Suza and his two Chinese wives, Chyou and Daiyu, stood when they heard the horses approach.

Lambert dismounted and met Suza with a handshake near the campfire. Suza glanced at the sheriff, Jeb, and Inari. The twins were chattering back and forth in Chinese.

“What do we owe this pleasure, Mr. Lambert?” Suza asked.

“Thought it strange you didn’t want to meet the train arriving with the woman who murdered your wife.”

"The twins couldn't... You know, face Sakura's killer," Suza said. "So we left town and camped here."

Lambert motioned to Inari. Jeb helped her get down from the buggy, and she joined them.

"Do you recognize this woman?" Lambert asked.

"Never laid eyes on her before," Suza said with hesitation.

"What about your wives?" Lambert asked, turning to Chyou and Daiyu.

"Have either of you ever seen this woman?" Suza asked them.

Chyou and Daiyu chattered Chinese between themselves and then shook their heads.

"They don't recognize her either, Mr. Lambert."

"Ya positive?" the sheriff asked, leaning forward in the saddle and pushing his hat back on his head. "We can put this off till morning when the light's better."

"Won't make any difference, Sheriff," Suza said, squinting at the sun still over a hand-high on the horizon. "She's not Sakura, and the twins say she's not Mika Prescott. All the light in the world isn't changing the fact that we have no idea who this woman is. So if it's all right with you, Sheriff, we'll break camp, head northeast, stop at Racine, Missouri, and go west."

"Kinda late in the day, ain't it?"

"No, Sheriff... Wanna put some miles between us and the horrific memories around here."

"Then, I's no reason ta keep ya," the sheriff said.

Suza barked instructions in Chinese, and the twins began gathering the camping gear and putting it in the wagon. Inari's facial expression had not changed during the entire conversation with Doctor Suza, but Lambert noticed the corner of her mouth turn up when the twins broke camp. Her face went deadpan again as Jeb helped her into the buggy.

"Hope you find Sakura's murderer, Lambert," Suza said, "but I've got these two to look after. Life moves on. You understand, don't you?"

Suza hitched the horses to the wagon.

Lambert walked back to his horse and mounted. He did not understand! The man's wife was murdered, and he acted indifferent about it. What kind of man does that? His scorn for Suza grew by the minute.

He took one long, last look at Suza and the twins, pulled on the reins, and the group started for town as the sun slowly kissed the horizon. Lambert was spent. He was tired from a long train ride, hungry, thirsty, and... Frustrated.

He was no closer to knowing who Inari was, but it was becoming abundantly clear she was neither Mika nor Sakura. But who was she? And if she had nothing to do with the murder and disappearance of Mika and Sakura, why should he care? But Lambert's gut kept gnawing at him—something was not right; he could sense it, yet it remained just out of his reach.

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*CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT: Something Doesn't Add Up*

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Friday, September 2, 1892

Lambert sat slumped in his chair, an empty coffee mug cradled in his hands. He glanced up briefly when Sheriff Anderson pulled out a chair and sat across from him. He put his Stetson on the table next to Lambert's.

The barkeep yelled from behind the bar, "Coffee, Andy?" The sheriff waved and nodded. "Change yer mind, son?" he asked Lambert.

Lambert shook his drooped head and mumbled, "Nope. I'm done with bounty hunting. This one did me in, Sheriff."

The barkeep brought over a pot of steaming hot coffee, poured a mug for the sheriff, and topped off Lambert's. Lambert took a sip and then put it back on the table, a sour expression on his face.

"Breakfast, anyone?" the barkeep asked, but neither man responded.

In the distance, its whistle blowing, the northbound train to St. Louis chugged out of the station. Lambert slammed his fist on the table and swore under his breath.

The sheriff leaned forward in his chair, eyes filled with understanding; "Don't take it so personal, son," he said. "Ya can't win 'em all."

"I've always known there'd come a day when I'd face someone faster on the draw than I am. When that day comes, I'll decide whether to hang up my guns or risk getting shot or possibly killed."

Lambert straightened himself in his seat and looked into the sheriff's eyes.

"But when your mind goes, when you're outfoxed at every turn... It's not the way I want it to end... Not for me, anyway. I'd rather you'd put one right between my eyes."

"Listen, son. We's all gotta face the passage of time, but it ain't no reason ta crawl inna gopher hole, cover yerself over, and give up. Yer still a young man. And an upstandin' one, at that."

Frown lines etched deeper by the sheriff's words of encouragement ran across Lambert's long face like dry riverbeds through a desert plain. His dejected state of mind had already found a gopher hole, and he had mentally retreated deep into it.

"Ya gents want anything fer breakfast or not?" the barkeep asked again irritably. "Biscuits hot and fresh from the oven..."

Lambert did not bother to look up from the table but stared sullenly at nothing in particular.

"Mouth's a-waterin' already, Slim," the sheriff said. "I'll have three eggs, bacon, and, of course, hot biscuits."

"How many?"

"Keep 'em comin' till I's burst," the sheriff said, laughing. "The same fer Lambert."

"Not hungry," Lambert mumbled.

"Is he eatin' or ain't he?" the barkeep asked grumpily.

The sheriff tried to think of another tactic as the barkeep looked on with growing impatience.

"Come on, son, ya gotta eat, else...," the sheriff said.

Seeing Lambert was not listening, he knew it would take drastic action to get through to him. "Just bring him what I's havin'. He can't go around like this... Eatin' less 'n a jackrabbit... Can't even think straight without food."

The barkeep nodded and left.

Lambert leaned back in his chair and lit a cigarillo. A cloud of smoke drifted up, melding with the shadows created by the rising sun, and continued to dangle there like a dark halo above his head when he blew out a trail of bluish smoke rings toward the ceiling. The scent of tobacco and a rush of nicotine bit deeply into his brain, but instead of usually putting things into proper order—as he had hoped—the tobacco made Lambert feel worse than before.

Fifteen minutes later, the barkeep arrived with two plates, heaping of food.

"Nice and hot! Butter? Jam, anyone?" he asked, setting the plates on the table.

"Bring it on," the sheriff said. "Gots any honey?"

"I'll bring it, too, if'n we's do." The barkeep left toward the kitchen.

The sheriff took a bite of a hot biscuit.

"Man, these are good... Even plain," the sheriff said, holding a half-eaten biscuit toward Lambert. "Ya otta try one while they's hot, son."

Lambert ignored him, still wallowing in self-pity.

"Suit yerself. I ain't gonna let not good food go ta waste. Nosiree bob!"

Jeb walked in and joined the men at the table.

"Whatcha doin'?" Jeb asked, pushing his hat back on his head.

"What's it look like?" the sheriff said. "Eatin' breakfast, that's what! Sometimes, Jeb, I wonder how yer head's put together."

"Ain't no call fer... Hey, ain't Mr. Lambert eatin' his?" Jeb asked. "'Twill get cold if'n he ain't."

"Help yourself, Jeb," Lambert said without looking toward him.

"Where ya been, anyhow?" the sheriff asked. "Ya was ta muck out the stalls, and ya smell too good, so I reckon ya didn't do it yet."

The barkeep returned with a bowl of butter, a jar of jam, and a jar of honey.

"Much obliged," the sheriff said, reaching for another biscuit and his knife.

"Was helpin' that there China woman catch the St. Louis train. Gave her a buggy ride to the depot," Jeb said, grabbing a biscuit, taking a bite, chewing, and swallowing. "Holy smokes, they's good! Anyhows, I carried her bag and waited while's she bought a ticket to Racine... Pass the jam, Sheriff, if'n ya please." qq

Sheriff Anderson handed the jam jar to Jeb. While Jeb scooped a glob of jam on his knife, he continued, "Then helped her get aboard the train, and... And I's came here."

"Ya've been a busy bee this morning," the sheriff said, dunking a biscuit in an egg yolk.

A split second later, Lambert spun around in his chair.

"What did you say, Jeb?"

"Uh... The biscuits was—"

"To hell with the biscuits!" Lambert shouted, leaning toward Jeb. "What about the train ticket? Inari bought a train ticket... A ticket to where?"

"Don't what all the fuss 'tis 'bout, Mr. Lambert. Racine's just up the tracks a piece, second stop after Wyandotte."

Lambert jumped up, bent over, and kissed Jeb's head. Then he broke into a Navajo victory dance.

Jeb leaned back and rubbed his head. "Hope nobody seen ya do that, Mr. Lambert. We's don't cotton ta that 'round these parts."

"Hush up, Jeb!" the sheriff said, watching Lambert's dancing. "I's ain't seen nobody this animated since Reuben squatted ta do his business onna hornets' nest."

"I'm not over the hill yet, Sheriff," Lambert said. "All the puzzle pieces just fell into place!"

"Don't keep me in the dark, son."

"No time. Mount up, Sheriff, and let's ride like the wind if we're going to arrest them," Lambert said, grabbing his hat and spinning toward the door.

Sheriff Anderson grabbed a last bite of food and his hat, following Lambert outside.

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*CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE: Where's The Woman*

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Lambert's body tensed with anticipation as he and Sheriff Anderson followed the tracks northward. When they pulled up to the Racine, Missouri, train depot, Lambert leaped off his horse and ran inside. His heart was racing, and the sheriff tried to catch up.

"Hold on, son! Lemme handle this," the sheriff said. "If'n ya get too rowed up, who know'd what'll happen."

Lambert gritted his teeth, slowed his pace, and the sheriff took the lead.

The sheriff stepped up to the ticket window and banged his fist on the counter. A few seconds later, a greasy-haired young man stood at the opening, looking bored and indifferent.

"What ya'll want?" he asked, barely lifting his head to look at them.

"Did the St. Louie bound train stop here this morning?" the sheriff demanded.

"Yeah... Always do, mister. Why?"

"Anyone, in particular, get off? Maybe an Asian woman?"

The young man hesitated briefly before responding dismissively. "Now, mister, ya can't expect me ta remember every passenger comin' and goin' on all the trains stoppin' here, do ya?"

Lambert was becoming increasingly agitated, pacing back and forth behind the sheriff aggressively as he tried to contain his impatience.

"Looky here, sonny," rumbled the sheriff. "This here's lawman's business, and I'm Sheriff Anderson—"

The young man cut him off sourly. "Ya don't look like no sheriff ta me, mister," sneering at Sheriff Anderson's disheveled clothes with undisguised disdain. "Sheriff Tilman's our sheriff—a smart dresser he is too—so if'n ya wanna know'd sumthin' 'bout private railroad business, you take it up with—"

But before he could finish his sentence, the sheriff produced his weathered star with a flourish of defiance. "Don't this badge mean nuthin' ta ya, sonny?" he growled menacingly.

Lambert's nostrils flared as he pushed the sheriff aside. His face contorted with rage, his eyes seething with anger, his jaw clenched so tight it could have been carved from stone. He aimed his gun directly at the young man's face, between his lips and nose, and snarled.

"If you want to see the sunset today, answer quickly and politely. Understood?"

The young man was visibly shaken, his eyes bulging and mouth agape. The crotch of his trousers was soaked with urine.

Lambert maintained his icy stare, waiting for an answer. Time seemed frozen in place as the seconds dragged on.

The young man blinked twice in quick succession.

"I'll take that as a yes," Lambert said before lowering his gun. "That's better... Did a Chinese woman get off the St Louis-bound train?"

The young man blinked again.

"Did anyone meet her?" he asked.

"A—A man and two women in a wagon," the young man stammered. "About two hours ago... Near as I can recall."

Lambert trained the gun on him as he asked one last question. "Which way did they go?"

The young man pointed southwards and said there was only a trading post at Jacob Hart's crossroads where the road split, one leg leading north and the other heading south to Oklahoma. "Only a couple three hours by wagon from here... I reckon," he added hastily.

"Now, wasn't that easy?" Lambert said, holstering his gun.

The young man nodded feverously. When Lambert and the sheriff made their move to leave, the young man dashed out the back door and ran toward town.

###

The men raced down the road toward Hart Trading Post, chasing after Suza's wagon. Its wheels left clear impressions on the road and were easily followed. They stopped to give their horses a much-needed drink when they reached Lost Creek, south of Racine.

"All right, son," Sheriff Anderson said, watching his horse siphon water. "What made ya so fired up this morning? 'Twas it sumthin' Jeb said?"

"He mentioned Inari bought a ticket to Racine... Not St. Louis."

"I's heard that, too, but not—"

"Don't you see?" Lambert said, face all fired up. "Inari has to be Sakura!" Lambert waved his arm excitedly. "And Suza lied when he denied knowing her; his wives lied to back his play." He nodded. "I watched their faces closely for any flicker of recognition or surprise and saw none. I have to hand it to them; they're the best troupe of actors I've ever crossed paths with—had me completely fooled."

"I's don't see—"

"Suza said their plan was to break camp, travel north to Racine, spend the night, and head west. He was telling Inari the plan to meet, and I missed it. It passed me by without so much as a howdy-do."

"I'm with ya so far, Lambert," said the sheriff. "But how we's gonna prove it in court?"

Lambert did not answer. He was uncertain of that yet, but first, he had to catch them before he worried about proof.

The men stood silently while their horses drank. They quickly mounted once the horses had drunk their fill. Lambert dug his heels into his horse's sides, urging it into a wild sprint away from Lost Creek. The sheriff followed close behind.

After another mile, a man riding a horse-drawn wagon of fresh-hewn lumber was coming toward them. When they met, Lambert asked, "Did you pass a bow-top, medicine-show wagon heading south?"

"When?" the driver asked.

"Within the last hour or so," the sheriff said.

The driver scratched his stubbled chin. "Naw... Ain't seen nobody since leavin' the mill."

"Been on this here main road all the time, have ya?"

"Yep. Since Hart's Tradin' Post."

"This road branch off anywhere?" Lambert asked.

"Nope. Straight into Hart's. Except for trails and roads into farms and such."

"That don't make no sense, mister," the sheriff said. "A wagon can't up and vanish like that!"

"Don't hav'ta... Yer vanishin' wagon most likely's stopped at Hart Springs—'bout a mile from here. Folks stop by there all the time. Freshwater spring, campground alongside Buffalo Creek, grass for the horses, and some apple trees loaded down with ripe fruit. Yep... They's most likely there."

"Much obliged," Lambert said.

"Follow the weathered sign... It ain't but a hundred yards off this here road."

The sheriff tipped his hat and took off after Lambert, who was already several links ahead.

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*CHAPTER THIRTY: Lambert Gets His Bounty*

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True to the driver's word, in about a mile, a weatherworn sign nailed to a gnarled oak pointed the way toward Hart Springs. Suza's wagon-wheel tracks veered onto the trail leading to the spring. Lambert and the sheriff slowed, dismounted, and gingerly made their way to the campground. As they rounded the bend, the wagon came into view with its horses grazing on the banks of Buffalo Creek.

Suza and Inari sat close together on a log in front of a blazing fire. His arm was around her shoulders, his lips softly pressing against her forehead as she gently rested her head against his chest. She tilted her head back, and he captured her mouth, kissing her deeply while the twins busied themselves, making tea and picking apples from the nearby trees.

"Tea's ready," Chyou yelled to Daiyu.

Daiyu picked another apple and started for the campsite. Chyou had gotten four tea cups and a tray and was pouring hot tea when Lambert stepped into the clearing.

"Got enough for two more weary travelers?" Lambert said, standing tall, hands on his hips.

Sheriff Anderson stood beside him, face shadowed by his hat.

Chyou screamed and dropped the tea kettle, tipping over the tray and scattering teacups on the ground. Daiyu dropped her apples as she ran to help Chyou gather the mess of teacups in the dirt.

"What the hell?" Suza yelled, jumping to his feet and sending Inari sprawling on the ground. The blood drained from his face at the sight of Lambert and the sheriff as they sauntered closer.

"I'll take that as a no," Lambert said, removing his hat and bowing to the woman sprawled on the ground. "Mrs. Sakura Suza, I presume." His tone was softer. He asked Suza, "Aren't you going to help your wife off the ground like a good husband should, Doctor Suza?"

Suza advanced slowly and extended his hand to the woman. She took it reluctantly and got to her feet.

"She's... She's not Sakura!" Suza said defiantly.

The woman stood, shaking her head while clutching Suza's arm.

Lambert regarded Suza skeptically. "You do know her, though... Don't you, Doctor Suza?" he said, moving closer until he stood almost before him.

Suza opened his mouth, then shut it after stammering incoherently, "Uh... Uh..."

The sheriff's eyes narrowed as he scrutinized the threesome. He took a step toward Suza, pointing an accusatory finger at him. "From what's I seen, ya was bein' mighty cozy

with a woman ya don't know," he said, squinting his eye and scratching his salt and pepper stubbled chin. "And in front of yer other wives, no less. Ya does take the cake, Doctor Suza... And the whole cake at that."

Lambert closed the gap between them, never taking his eyes off Suza or the woman. "Claimed you never saw her before, but I'm having doubts regarding your veracity, sir."

"What's this here, *ver rat city*, ya talkin' 'bout, Lambert?"

"Later, Sheriff. Later."

Suza pushed the woman aside and faced Lambert.

"You calling me a liar, mister?"

"He's callin' ya out, Lambert, and he ain't even packin'," the sheriff said with a chuckle. "Damnest thin' I's ever seen."

Before anyone could react, the woman spun on her heel and lashed out with her foot, aimed at Lambert's head. But Lambert had anticipated her move; he ducked and drew his gun from its holster. He fired just as she lost her balance and swirled wildly—weeks of malnutrition and the growing fetus had taken their toll.

Suza tried to catch Sakura before she hit the ground. "Sakura! Our baby!" he yelled, cradling her in his arms. "Are you all right?" He pivoted to Lambert with rage in his eyes. "Bastard! You tried to shoot her!"

"Idiot!" Sakura yelled, standing and dusting off her dress. "You played right into his hands!"

"What you mean?" Suza said, dumbfounded.

"Couldn't you see he fired and missed me on purpose just to get a reaction from you," Sakura said accusingly, "and you obliged him in Spades!"

Lambert had to admit that he admired the woman regardless of her crime. She was intelligent, strong-willed, and well-educated, and she was in charge of this troupe of actors despite all appearances.

"She tellin' the truth?" the sheriff asked, looking at Lambert.

Lambert nodded and holstered his weapon. "I missed on purpose even though her feet are as deadly as any weapon. I've killed men in similar circumstances, but in her case, I chose mercy. Besides, I knew Doctor Suza's genuine joy at the prospects of Sakura's pregnancy would unmask their charade if he thought she and the baby were in danger. But if I accidentally wounded her, she would've healed, so she can hang for the hot-blooded murder of Mika Prescott."

"Ain't sure they's hangin' women yet, Lambert, especially if she's with child," the sheriff said, holding the twins at gunpoint. "But she should be the first after she done give birth."

"Then, the whole bunch can enjoy the *comforts* of prison together."

"Comforts? Ya ain't never seen... Oh, I gets it, Lambert," the sheriff said with a laugh. "That be a good one."

"We're in Missouri!" Suza said, straightening his shoulders. His voice was laced with outrage. "You got no authority to arrest us here, Sheriff!"

"He's right, Sheriff," Lambert said, smiling. "But I'm a bounty hunter, and I'm taking you all back to Oklahoma so I can collect."

"There's no bounty on us!" Suza said.

Lambert's smile widened as he reached into his pocket and retrieved a crumpled paper. He unfolded it slowly and waved it in front of Suza.

"Prescott put a bounty on his wife's head. Since you deny knowing this woman, I must assume she's Mika Prescott... So, we'll all take a trip back to Wyandotte—in case you might have forgotten, it's in Oklahoma—to unweave the true identity of this woman."

"She's Sakura, my wife," Suza protested, and the women nodded in agreement.

The sheriff breathed heavily and glanced at Lambert, nodding.

"Sorry, folks, but a court of law's gonna hav'ta figger this one out..." He waved his gun toward Suza and then pointed toward the wagon. "So pack up yer belongings and yer wives and get in the wagon—we can make Wyandotte while the sun's still shinnin'."

While Suza and the twins broke camp, Sakura watched but did not help. After a while, she approached Lambert.

"I never thanked you for rescuing me from Madam Lee," she said.

Lambert nodded curtly.

"I'd most likely be dead now if you hadn't come by when you did."

"Why'd you kill Mika?" Lambert blurted.

Sakura recoiled and looked away, unwilling to face him.

"Then, we have nothing to say to each other, Mrs. Suza," Lambert said. "Go help your family pack up."

"Family?" Sakura said. She hesitated and then laughed. "Family, you say... You don't know the half of it, Mr. Lambert."

"I'm listening, but don't expect anything you say will change my mind."

"I was born in Japan and raised and educated in San Francisco. My family had a very high status in the political system—feudalism, you called it. My mother died when I was quite young, and so did my mother's slave—Chyou and Daiyu's mother. Since they were my age, they were given to me as playmates. When feudalism was abolished, my father lost his status and much of his wealth. This led to his early death. The twins and I decided to remain here, and we crossed paths with Doctor Suza and his Magic Elixir. We joined

forces, and our heritage added to the attraction of his product; sales bloomed. Against my better judgment, I fell in love with him, and so did the twins. When he suggested marriage, I concocted the orphanage story.”

“Was the snake-oil story yours as well?” Lambert asked.

“No,” Sakura said. “Haven’t heard that one, so it must be his.”

“Haven’t told me why you killed Mika yet.”

“We were enjoying our picnic and the joyful news that we were both going to have a baby... When Mika suggested I come to live with her and care for our children, I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. She wanted to enslave me like my family did to the twins’ mother. We exchanged words. I was enraged, incensed at the suggestion. She turned her back on me... No one ever dared turn their back on me when my father was alive... The next thing I remember, I was standing over her body, holding a rock.”

*Is this another of Sakura’s masterfully crafted stories?* Lambert wondered.

He was thankful he would not have to sit on the jury deciding Sakura’s fate. Saying she was a skillful storyteller was an understatement.

###

Lambert and the sheriff followed Suza’s wagon on the road to Wyandotte, back into Oklahoma Territory.

“Well, son. So’s yer back in the saddle again?” the sheriff asked, a hint of admiration in his voice. “Never thought ya’d hang up yer six guns over the likes of them.”

“Who? Me? Retiring?” Lambert said, shaking his head. “Whatever gave you such a crazy idea?”

The sheriff blinked and opened his mouth to say something but did not. Then he yelled, “Pick up the pace, Doctor Suza. Wanna get ta town befer I’s die of old age!”

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*CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE: Catching Up With Old Friends*

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Tuesday, November 15, 1892

Six weeks later.

Lambert had been in the saddle for eight straight days and was bone weary, saddle sore, and reweighing the merits of train travel.

*I'm getting too old for this*, he thought.

Then, his thoughts wandered to the tranquility of Wyandotte, Oklahoma, old friends, good food, and warm but tasty beer. He rode up to the crest overlooking Elm Creek, two miles northwest of town, and was captivated by the activity he could make out at this distance. When he last was there, it was a dying, neglected town with no future. Prescott had purchased every business that would sell, leaving them slowly dying on the vine, but now, with the sky crystal clear and blue as a newborn's eyes, Lambert could see the hustle and bustle of activity. He dug his heels in his mount's flanks, and it took off in a gallop.

Lambert stopped at the town's edge and saw that a new, energetic city was taking shape. The sound of hammers and saws filled the air, accompanied by the scent of fresh paint as workmen were busy repairing buildings. At a furious pace, workers were constructing cattle pens, feeding stations, and loading ramps on either side of the railroad south of town. Several new buildings were under construction in the town's vacant lots.

People of all descriptions crowded the busy streets. There were townsfolk stopping to shop or visit with neighbors, construction workers, cowboys, and the usual drifters. Wagons clogged the roads. Some were waiting at the train depot to be loaded, others to be unloaded in town or at the construction sites, piled high with building supplies or store goods. Lambert could sense Wyandotte had been reborn, a renaissance of sorts.

He stopped at the livery. It was humming with activity. A new blacksmith was shodding a horse while a boy held its reins. Workers delivered hay and grain while others fed and watered horses or mucked their stalls.

Lambert asked the boy holding the horse's reins, "Is Jeb around?"

"Jeb?" the boy asked, cocking his head.

"Yes, Jeb... He used to work here."

"Oh... Ya must mean Mr. Jebediah White. He's the bossman."

Lambert held back a chuckle at the word "bossman."

"Yes... Where can I find... Uh... Mr. White?"

"Why, he's over there," the boy said, pointing, "directin' the delivery of feed."

Lambert tipped his hat and walked over to the man with his back to him, barking orders to the delivery men.

"Mr. White..." Lambert said.

"Just a minute," Jeb said. "Kinda busy at the moment."

"Too busy for an old friend, Jeb?"

Jeb stopped and spun around.

Lambert hardly recognized him. He sported checkered trousers and a matching vest, combed hair topped with a straw hat, unlike the shabby clothes he had always worn. His crisp white shirt was open at the collar and rolled up to his elbows. His shoes were new and polished. His hair was trimmed above his ears, and his mustache was still an uneven growth above his upper lip, but he was trying.

Jeb's whole face smiled when he saw Lambert.

"Mr. Lambert... Glad to see ya," he said, extending his hand to shake Lambert's.

"Glad to see you, too, Jeb," Lambert said, shaking Jeb's hand. "Sheriff Anderson around?"

"Gone over ta the holdin' pens. Couple workers got inna fight over sumthin', but he'll be back anytime now."

"When you see him, I'll be having lunch and a beer... Join us if you're not too busy, Mr. White."

Blood rushed to Jeb's face, and his cheeks were beet red.

"Sorry, but I can't, Mr. Lambert. Gotta meet a farmer 'bout some feed," Jeb said. "But thanks fer the offer... Uh... Water and feed yer horse?"

"Obliged. Rubdown, too, if you can find someone to do it."

"I'll take care of her like she were my own," Jeb said, taking the reins from Lambert.

Lambert nodded and started across the street for the *Wyandotte House*, dodging wagons, horseback riders, and pedestrians. The first time he saw Wyandotte, a cannon shot down Main Street would have gone clear through town without hitting anyone or anything. Now, Main was so congested crossing it was as hazardous as traversing a raging river.

He entered the *Wyandotte* and was amazed at the activity. The bar was packed with workmen and cowboys; their conversation and laughter were so loud one could not think. Adding to the din, a little man plunked away at an upright piano in the corner while waiters hustled food and drink to seated customers. The air smelled of tobacco smoke, spicy food, and beer, with body odors thrown in depending on where one stood.

Deputy Anderson spied Lambert as soon as he stepped through the door.

"Well, as I live and breathe... Welcome ta our little piece of paradise, Mr. Lambert," the deputy said, smiling. "What brings ya ta our neck of the woods?"

Lambert approached the crowded bar.

"Move over, gents," the deputy said. "Make way fer my friend here."

A cowpoke cocked his head toward Lambert and was about to protest, but the deputy cut him off.

"Swallow that thought with a gulp of beer, mister, or it may be the last gulp of beer ya ever get."

The cowpoke jerked his head around and was face to face with a sawed-off shotgun, the deputy's finger of the trigger.

"Take a swallow of beer and ease yerself ta a table."

The cowpoke picked up his mug of beer and headed to an empty seat at the closest table. His two friends followed.

"Beer?" the deputy asked Lambert.

Lambert pushed his hat high on his forehead. "Don't mind if I do."

"So, I'll ask ya again," the deputy said, drawing a mug of beer. "What brings ya ta our neck of the woods?"

"Passing through on my way home from catching a bounty up Kansas way, I stopped by to say hello and get caught up on the latest goings on. From what I've seen, this isn't the same Wyandotte I remembered from six weeks ago."

"No... It sure ain't," the deputy said, setting the mug on the bar. "I don't knows the particulars—Andy does—but shortly after y'all left fer the trial of the killer woman, her husband, and her... I don't exactly knows what they was... Anywhows, shortly after, a herd of workmen and supplies arrived, and ya can see what they's did in just a month."

"Is that you, Lambert?" Sheriff Anderson yelled from the doorway. "Yer a sight for sore eyes."

He faced the sheriff, smiling ear to ear and extending both arms for a bear hug. Lambert was pinned against the bar and did not embrace the idea of being manhandled by another man, so he grabbed the sheriff's hand and shook it.

"Things couldn't be better, Sheriff. Things couldn't be better."

"Call me Andy, my friend."

Those words broke through Lambert's stoic façade, and he hugged the sheriff and thanked him for the honor bestowed on him.

"Befer we's get all teary-eyed or sumthin', the deputy said, "let's find us a table."

The deputy cleared the table at the back of the room, and the sheriff, Lambert, and the deputy sat. A waiter came over.

"Food? Drink?"

"A round of beer and the house special, Slim," the deputy said.

"Comin' right up, boss," the waiter said.

"What's happened around here, Andy?" Lambert asked, tossing his hat on the table.

The sheriff leaned back in his chair and rubbed his chin.

"Damnedest thing. A couple of days after we left fer the trial, ole man Prescott comed out of his apple plexy and ordered all the repairs and building ta commence at once."

"Yeah... Like I said, workers were on us like bees on honey in no time flat," the deputy added.

"You ask him about it?"

"Yep... Seems he had a turn of heart when he found out Mika was dead, and she had been carrying his child."

"How'd the trial turn out?" Lambert asked. "I left Vinita right after my testimony and never did hear."

"Didn't take the jury long," the sheriff said. "Sakura got thirty years... Suza and his other wives got five years apiece."

"What about Sakura's baby?"

"Didn't sway the judge one bit," the sheriff said. "He gives her thirty years just the same, and when she gives birth... Well, that bridge'd havta be crossed then. In the meantime, off ta prison, she were sent."

"How is Miss Lilly? And her eye ailment?"

"On the mend," the sheriff said. "She got back from Chicago near on ta three weeks ago, maybe more, and her daughter come ta stay with her."

"Her daughter? I didn't know—"

"Neither did anyone else. Always were her niece, never her daughter, but low and behold, she announced her daughter were a-comin' from back east ta stay with her. Ya could've knocked me over with a feather."

"And she's quite the looker, too," the deputy said. "Has a remarkable resemblance ta—"

"Hush up, Reuben," the sheriff said. "We's ain't gonna be spreadin' gossip."

"I's just sayin',"

"Keep it ta yerself."

"Is Prescott still in town?" asked Lambert.

The sheriff nodded and took a sip from his mug. "Ya betcha. He wouldn't miss this fer nothin'," he said, chuckling. "Wanted ta change the town's ta Mikaville, but I talked him out of it." The sheriff became more somber. "Wanted the town ta be memorial ta his wife.

I's understood wheres he's a-comin' from, but 'tis named afta the Wyandotte Nation and changin' it woulda caused such a ruckus... Anyhows, he backed down."

Slim arrived, carrying three mugs brimming with beer.

"Enjoy," he said. "Food's on its way."

The men nodded and grabbed their beer.

"And just yesterday," the sheriff continued, "I seen Prescott walking, arm in arm, with Miss Lilly and her daughter on Main Street, pretty as ya please."

"Prescott and Miss Lilly?" Lambert asked. "Never thought I'd see the day."

"Me neither, but the Lord do move in mysterious ways," the sheriff said. "Soon as Miss Lilly heard 'bout Prescott, she hot-footed it right over ta the farm and... Well... Nobody know'd what words were said between 'em, but see 'em all together... I reckon they's buried the hatchet."

"Since we're speculating, you reckon Miss Lilly's daughter is Prescott's daughter as well? Lambert asked.

The sheriff's eyebrows shot up an inch or more. The deputy punched the sheriff's shoulder.

"I's tolds ya, Andy," the deputy said. "It be as plain as the nose on yer face. Miss Izzy's the spitin' image of them both."

"Miss Izzy?" Lambert asked.

"Isabelle, but she goes by Izzy," the sheriff said.

"I'll have to meet her when I stop by Miss Lilly's."

"Most likely ta find Prescott there when ya do."

Slim arrived, guggling three plates of food.

"Eat up, gents, while it's hot," he said, plopping the plates on the table. "Anythin' else?"

"This'll do yer now, Slim," the sheriff said.

"Just holler if'n ya do, boss," he said, nodding and turning to leave.

"Smells mighty good," the deputy said.

"After a week on the trail, any *home cooking* tastes good to me," Lambert said, smiling.

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*CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO: Does All End Well?*

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On his way out of town, Lambert stopped by Miss Lilly's Boarding House. Before he could dismount, a robust voice from the front porch yelled, "Lambert! Is that you!"

Prescott shuffled down the front porch stairs and hobbled toward Lambert. His face was aglow, and he was grinning from ear to ear. He dragged his left foot slightly but, with the help of a cane, moved remarkably well for a man recovering from a stroke.

Prescott stopped halfway to the gate and waited for Lambert. When the men met, they shook hands like long-lost friends meeting for the first time in years.

"Come, my boy, I've so much to tell you," Prescott said, putting his hand on Lambert's shoulder and guiding him to the porch.

"You and Miss Lilly? Never thought I'd ever see the day," Lambert said, helping Prescott up the stairs.

"She told you the whole story, then?"

Lambert nodded and eased Prescott into a chair. He took one for himself.

"Saying I didn't know about her... Our child would be a lie. I was a coward, plain and simple, and I wanted a financial empire more than anything. What a fool I was... I am. Mika's death and my apoplexy have gotten my attention, Lambert. What's this all been for? Solomon had it right: pure vanity and worthless in light of eternity."

Lambert nodded. "So..."

"So, the first thing I'm going to do is rebuild Wyandotte and give back what I've taken ten times... No, twenty times over. When I'm through, it'll be as prosperous as Vinita... No, more prosperous! Then, I'm going to publically admit that Isabelle is my... Our daughter, and after a respectable period of mourning, Lilly and I will wed."

"I don't know what to say, Mr. Prescott."

"And I owe it all to you. Not many would've pursued this mystery to its bitter end," Prescott said.

"You give me too much credit, Mr.—"

"You're selling yourself short, Mr. Lambert. And to show my appreciation, my bank in Vinita will have a sizable bonus waiting for you. I didn't expect to see you here otherwise I—"

Lambert blushed, feeling surprise and gratitude. He had never expected such generosity from Mr. Prescott. Stammering slightly, he replied, "Mr. Prescott, I... I'm truly humbled..."

He paused for a moment, collecting his thoughts. "Rebuilding Wyandotte and making amends is decent of you."

Lambert looked at Mr. Prescott solemnly.

"But as for myself... I appreciate your thoughtfulness, but I didn't intend to profit beyond the bounty we agreed."

You're a good man, Lambert," Prescott said, his eyes softening. "Stop by the Vinita Bank as a last favor to me."

"All right, Mr. Prescott. I'll swing by on my way south next week or so. Got a bounty in—"

"You work too hard, Lambert."

"It's what I am; it's what I do, Mr. Prescott."

Prescott laughed.

"Sorry, you missed the womenfolk. They're at the farm. I did want you to meet Isabelle—a fine young woman, she is. And Lilly will be sad she wasn't here to say hi and express her thanks as well."

Lambert stood, and Prescott started to rise.

"Stay put, Mr. Prescott. I'll find my way out."

Prescott relaxed in his chair. "You take care, Mr. Lambert."

"Plan to," Lambert said, nodding. "Give my regards to Miss Lilly and Isabelle."

Lambert strolled to this horse, mounted, and waved goodbye one last time. He dug his heels into the horse's flanks, and it responded, galloping out of town.

###

November 22, 1892

A Week Later.

Lambert rode into Vinita, Oklahoma, and found the townsfolk in an uproar. A crowd numbering nearly a hundred gathered at the Prescott Cattleman Bank. They blocked the intersection of Main and First. Sheriff Ezra Clark and his deputies stood between them and the bank, but the mob pressed closer to the doors.

"We want our money!" the crowd chanted. "Give us our money!"

"You'll get your money," a bank official shouted above the noise, trying to calm the crowd. "You'll get every last penny."

"When?" someone yelled.

"As soon as we complete—" Someone pelted him with a rotted tomato before he could finish, and he ducked inside.

Lambert rode slowly through the gathering and stopped at the livery.

"Can I help ya, mister?" a young lad asked.

"Feed and water," Lambert said, dismounting.

"Six bits."

"She won't be bedding overnight."

"Still, six bits, mister."

Lambert handed the lad the reins.

"Cash," the lad said, extending his hand.

"You drive a hard bargain for such a youngster."

"Haven't ya heard, mister?"

"Heard what? Just rode in," Lambert said. He glanced toward the bank. "Got anything to do with that crowd at the bank?"

"And how! I heard the bank's closin', and all them folks gonna lose every nickel they's got."

"Where'd you hear that?" Lambert asked, glancing toward the bank. He fished coins out of his pocket and paid.

"Thank ya kindly, mister," the lad said, quickly shoving them into his pocket. He nodded and continued, "Yesseree... Everybody's been sayin' it, seein' that ole man Prescott's dead."

"What?" Lambert jerked his head toward the lad.

"Yeah. I hear'd folks a-sayin' ole man Prescott up and died near on ta a week ago."

"How?" Lambert was in a state of near shock and disbelief.

"Don't know fer sure," the lad said, cocking his head and scrunching his brow. "I think 'twas sumthin' 'bout his apples—"

"Apoplexy?"

"That's it... He died of that. Didn't think apples could kill a man—"

"When?"

"Like I said, mister... 'Twere a week ago. Story is he were found sittin' inna chair onna boardinghouse porch... He were already dead when they comed on him; deader than a doornail, they seys."

"After I have a beer, I'll be hitting the trail," Lambert said, "so make sure she's watered and fed, likety-split."

"Say what, mister?"

"Likety-split... You know, as soon as—"

The lad's face was blank.

"Oh, never mind... Just have her ready when I return."

"Yessiree, mister," the lad said, nodding.

Lambert crossed the street to the *Morganza Hotel's* saloon. He had trouble accepting what the lad had told him. He could not believe Prescott was dead.

*I may have been the last one to see him alive*, he thought.

He shuffled across the dusty street, shaking his head in disbelief and not looking where he was going. Before Lambert was aware, he had walked between two men crouched, ready to draw and settle the score. The men cursed him for disrupting and resumed as soon as he continued. Lambert ignored the gunfire behind him, climbed the steps to the hotel, and entered the saloon.

"What'll ya have, mister?" the barkeep asked.

Lambert glanced around the nearly empty saloon. "Beer." He slid his hat to the back of his head.

"One tall beer comin' right up," the barkeep said, drawing mostly foam. He scooped the subs off and topped off the mug.

"Warm but tasty," he said, sliding the mug to Lambert.

Lambert took a gulp. "Yep. It's tasty, all right." He looked out the windows. "What's the story at the bank?"

"Ain't ya heard, mister? Mr. Prescott's—"

"He's dead," Lambert said, nodding. "Yeah... I know that, but that doesn't explain the crowd at the bank."

"Well... Soon as word got here about his demise, the bank officers closed its doors... Pendin' an audit, they seys... And settlin' his estate, they seys."

"That's unusual."

"Smells ta high Heaven, if ya ask me, but a week ago, they up and closed the bank without so much as a howdy-do, and nobody knows when or if it'll open again."

"What about Wyandotte?"

"What ya mean, mister?"

"Prescott was rebuilding the town."

"Reckon all work's stopped there too since ain't nobody's gettin' paid fer nuthin' from the bunch over at the bank."

Lambert finished his beer and returned to the livery. The lad saw him approaching and fetched his horse.

"She's all fed and watered, mister. Just like ya wanted."

"Obliged," Lambert said, tipping his hat.

He mounted and slowly rode by the bank and the crowd to the edge of town, where the road forked north and south. Lambert took one last look at Vinita, the Prescott Cattleman Bank, and the angry townsfolk. He wondered what bonus Mr. Prescott had left for him. He reckoned it could be a month of Sundays before he would see what it was—if ever.

During a moment of indecision, he looked at the road north to Wyandotte and then at the road south to Texas. Friends and chaos awaited northbound, but a sense of normality awaited southbound.

Decision made, Lambert yanked left on the reins, and his horse responded, trotting southbound to Texas. Maybe he would get to Wyandotte again someday, but for now, he made a mental note to himself: in addition to divorce, never take a bounty on a wayward wife.

###

The End