



Bullet for the Devil

by Alessa

Chapter 1

In the heart of the rugged, sun-scorched borderlands, where the fierce sun baked the earth to a relentless hardness and the wind carried whispers of both desperation and opportunity, lay a forsaken outpost known as La Frontera. A town shrouded in a perpetual haze of dust and flies, it stood as a stark reminder of the forlorn dreams that had led wanderers astray. This was a place where hope seemed like a distant memory and grace had long been abandoned, a haven of finality for those unfortunate souls washed ashore by fate's cruel tides. The story that unfolded in this den of thieves and dust was set around the cusp of a new century, a time when the echoes of the grand tales of the West had faded into obscurity, leaving behind a bleak reality in their wake.

Gone were the days of rugged wanderers and daring exploits; in their stead arrived the shadows of border raiders, living half-lives mired in poverty and desperation. In this corner of hell, the reins of power were held by the Herreras, a savage dynasty of bandits who had ensnared the town in their iron grasp. Their influence extended over every facet of La Frontera's existence, from the crooked sheriff's office to the beleaguered bank and the silent telegraph wires. Even the lecherous priest was an appointment of theirs.

Amidst this desolation, there existed a solitary bastion with a superficial veneer of elegance, masking the grim reality that permeated every inch of La Frontera. The bar-cum-whorehouse—known as The Cheeky Château was a place where a peculiar union presided—a worn-out European aristocrat, feeble-minded and ravaged by the twin afflictions of alcoholism and consumption, bound to an unlikely companion in the form of the brothel's madame, known by all as Josephine—a rather raddled, unimaginative woman who possessed a straightforward demeanor. Yet her age-worn countenance belied a heart that still clung to affections, however tarnished by the world's hardships.

Intriguingly, Josephine shared kinship with Maria Herrera, the wife of the very bandit who cast his shadow over the town. This familial connection was the key that unlocked Josephine's passage into the world of her brothel enterprise. She and her ailing, despairing companion, the so-called Marquis, arrived on the scene unheralded, borne like an infectious disease on the desert wind that whispered their names to this desolate enclave of existence. They descended upon La Frontera with little more than tattered rags, penniless, and with a tale of woe that had compelled them to beg for passage in a humble farm cart.

"I've come home, Maria, after all this time... There's nowhere else to go," Josephine spoke with a mixture of resignation and longing. Having gleaned a lifetime of experiences in the trade, she, with a

reluctant nod from her brother-in-law and aided by his financial backing, established an enterprise that combined the allure of a bar with the secrecy of a whorehouse. A gathering of women, each bearing reasons to evade the prying eyes of the outside world, were assembled under her wing. They might not, perhaps, have been the best class of whore, but they suited the clientele within the walls of the establishment very well. Five souls they numbered, and their services were, in fact, tailored to fit the diverse desires of the patrons who darkened their doorstep.

Yet their role extended beyond mere companionship. They skillfully kept Herrera's rowdy band of desperadoes at bay, guiding their unrestrained violence towards less disruptive pursuits, while occasionally extending their unique talents to appease the whims of the bandit's visitors. And sometimes, like tumbleweeds drifting through the harsh landscape, came the unanticipated wanderer—a lost traveler, a peddler of wares, a solitary soul straying from sanity's path, or even a smuggler burdened with secrets. The brothel thrived as it offered refuge and release to these wayfarers, these desperate souls lost in a whirlwind of existence in this unforgiving abyss of lawlessness.

And the Marquis, with his crumpled, stained shirt and tattered suits of dandified black, cast an air of refinement upon the establishment. Such was the unfortunate turn his life had taken—he now served as little more than an adornment to his mistress's drinking establishment. An aura of embittered pride, a forlorn nobility, shaded the Marquis's countenance.

In this lowly, iniquitous haunt, the Marquis permitted patrons to purchase drinks on his behalf. He was a drunkard, a man ensnared by the clutches of alcohol, yet distinguished in his debauchery. He maintained a certain aloofness, a buffer of personal space around him. Even as his health waned, he clung to his dignity. Tales of his past were whispered amongst the whores. Martha, the brassy Yankee, claimed to have heard that he and Josephine once performed together in a traveling circus. The routine involved him shooting all the clothes off her until she was as naked as the day she was born.

"But didn't he end up killing Josephine's paramour?" Seraphina inquired, her curiosity piqued.

Martha's cataracted eyes rolled in disbelief at the improbable assumption. "No, not her lover, but some gambler she had been sold to. A sordid tale, that was..."

"Wasn't it amidst the clamor of San Francisco's waterfront?" Seraphina pressed further, her fascination driving her on.

"Ah, no, no, my dear. The drama unfolded in Austria, or perhaps it was Germany—the very lands he hailed from—long before he ever crossed paths with Josephine." Permelia, the seasoned whore, interjected with authority. She was well-acquainted with the chronicles of the Marquis's life. "Since he met Josephine, he's laid his hands on no firearm. He never shoots now, even though his old rifle, a relic of bear-hunting days with its elongated barrel, hangs there on the wall... See it, there! He was too fine a shot. They whispered that only the devil himself—"

It's wise not to pay attention to such stories, even though Permelia once earned her keep in a San Francisco brothel where Josephine herself had worked, and it was there she heard the whisperings. But

as the Marquis's silhouette cast its shadow upon the wall, silence enveloped the room, and Permelia even furtively crossed herself.

Within the realm of La Frontera, nobody asked any questions. Who amongst its inhabitants would have entertained the luxury of curiosity if they had the option to live anywhere else? Poor Faye Herrera, pretty as a picture yet only twelve, sullen, and simmering with discontent. Her sojourn in a convent, an attempt to bestow the gifts of literacy upon her, seemed frivolous. What use had she for reading and writing, shackled as she was to a life akin to swine? But was she not destined for matrimony? To a rich man, no less? Indeed, but he was a rich bandit!

As the sun dipped into afternoon lethargy, Josephine and her sister nestled in the dimness of the boudoir, their haven from the relentless heat. Swathed in the confines of cane rocking-chairs, the siblings shared the smoke of cigars while tipping tequila. Maria Herrera, her voice rough and unpolished, radiated the aura of a brash and primitive bandit. Booted and spurred outlaw herself—she was a savage force to be reckoned with. Illiteracy clung to her like a second skin, yet she was mother to just one daughter—the beautiful child Faye.

"We've finally hitched the deal, Josephine; it's signed, sealed, and almost ready for delivery..." She held out a small photograph, the edges worn from frequent handling. "Look here, the portrait of Faye's fiancé. Quite the handsome devil, isn't he? Hm? Hm?" Maria's gravelly voice boasted, pride and excitement resounding in her words.

Josephine took a contemplative drag from her cigar, its tendrils of smoke mirroring the twists and turns of her thoughts. She peered at the photograph that Maria had proudly displayed, studying the chiseled features and piercing eyes of the infamous bandit with a mixture of curiosity and skepticism in her gaze. Though outwardly composed, inwardly she recoiled. Another outlaw, this one more ruthless and bloodthirsty than even the notorious Herrera. At least with her own marriage, she mused, love had blossomed unexpectedly from the barren soil of chance. Luck or wisdom had secured her a partner gracious enough not to wear spurs to the matrimonial bed. Would such sentiment take root in Faye's partnership?

"He does cut a dashing figure, Maria; I'll give you that. But tell me, has Faye even set eyes on this man who's to be her husband? Are they really in love?" Josephine inquired, her voice tinged with doubt.

"Oh, heavens no!" Maria let out a hearty laugh, the sound rough and untamed in the small space, much like the landscape beyond their haven. "You always see things through the eyes of an operatic play, where love's a fancy ribbon tied in bows. Out here, love's like a wild stallion—it ain't tamed by sight, it's tamed by time."

Josephine's brow furrowed as she considered her sister's words. "But should love not be the foundation of a marriage, Maria? A flame that sparks from the first glance and burns bright through the years?"

Maria leaned forward, the firelight dancing in her eyes. "That's quite unnecessary. Love's a luxury we can't always afford, sister. Out here on the border, survival's the name of the game. Love will sprout in due course, as soon as they're united in holy matrimony, once he's had his share of her... and then, the

babies—my Faye's progeny, my grandchildren—shall thrive within his enormous house, tended to by a posse of bowing and scraping servants."

Josephine sighed, her doubts and confidence wavering like the fragrant smoke. She shook her head, her uncertainty palpable. "But can't she have both, Maria? Love and a life that's not bound by bloodstained trails?"

Maria's laughter softened, a hint of melancholy in its timbre. "You've always been the dreamer, Josephine. But dreams don't put food on the table or guns in our hands. Faye's gonna be a bandit's wife. She'll find her own way to love in this life, just like we all do. In any case, there's nothing Faye can do about it," her mother asserted with unwavering resolve. "It's all been fixed up by Herrera himself; she'll be the outlaw queen of the entire border, reigning over banditry. That's far better than wallowing like a pig in this hole."

The sisters shared a moment of silence, the weight of their words settling like dust in the air. The Herrera family indeed lived like swines in squalor, secluded behind a makeshift stockade. A filthy encampment of adherents and hangers-on congregated around them, creating a dismality reminiscent of wandering gypsies. This settlement was established on the grounds of what had once been a resplendent Spanish colonial hacienda, now tarnished by the Herreras' dominion. Since that transformative juncture, the burly patriarch, Herrera, Faye's bristling brute of a father, galloped his horse down the corridors and shot his revolvers out the windowpanes in his drunkenness.

Josephine took another sip of tequila, feeling its warmth spread through her veins. "And what of her happiness, Maria? Does that count for naught?"

Maria's gaze turned distant for a heartbeat, as if she were seeing something beyond the room's walls—something vast and unfathomable. "Happiness, Josephine, it's a shifting target. What makes us happy today might be gone tomorrow. But what lasts, what endures, are the blood that binds us, the choices we make, and the life we carve out for ourselves from this dusty wasteland."

Maria's words echoed with iron resolve, leaving no room for doubt. Josephine lowered her eyes, grief and helplessness pooling in her heart. Her poor niece, sold like cattle to the highest bidder. But what could either of them do? When Herrera called, one obeyed.

In the midst of this household, Faye, the lonely single daughter, cradled a doll in her arms. During such moments, she would echo her mother's impassioned sentiments to her inanimate confidante, pouring forth her fury, "We live like pigs! Like pigs, I tell you!"

Chapter 2

Fridays invariably ushered in problems for the brothel, and that fateful Friday was no exception. A particular predicament had reared its head—the pianist had absconded with the fairest of all the whores. A southerly exodus was their course, bound for the inception of their own establishment. The reasoning

lay in the wife's calculation that her spouse's pursuit would wane before they reached the distant shores of Acapulco. They awaited the stagecoach to take them away, sitting on barrels in the general store, their bags piled around them. As the coach graced them with its arrival and a solitary passenger disembarked, the driver ventured off to tend to the horses.

"Any room here for a piano instructor?" The passenger queried, a tall, lanky girl, no more than twenty and a change.

"Why, what serendipity!" exclaimed the erstwhile harlot. "Pose the query indoors; they're on the hunt for a piano player."

A northerner and a foreigner in this dust-cloaked dominion of desperadoes, the passenger was a city girl—gringo in her nomenclature—swathed in the luxurious embrace of a black velvet coat. Long, alabaster fingers danced along her cuffs. But oddly enough, the thunder of gunshots—the cacophonous reverberations of a Herrera bandit engaged in target practice upon hapless chickens in the gutter—failed to elicit even a flinch from her. How pallid she appeared... a creature of striking beauty, her bearing replete with grace, her voice articulate, polished by education. Was there the faintest trace of an exotic accent?

Much like the Marquis himself, who emanated an air of sophistication that was starkly at odds with the untamed terrain of semi-arid bandit country, the arrival of Henriette seemed almost surreal. She stood as a beacon of culture amidst the rugged wildness, a delicate bloom among thorns.

Josephine's maternal instinct surged forth at the sight of her, a fusion of pride and nurturing warmth. She saw in Henriette a potential for elegance, a refinement that defied the harshness of their surroundings. A day elapsed before she settled into the confines of La Frontera's makeshift whorehouse. Acquaintances were made, the threshold of camaraderie crossed, and the baby grand piano was scrutinized for its music-making abilities.

While reluctantly acclimating to her role as a piano player rather than an instructor, she managed to astonish the Marquis by weaving strands of Brahms's melodies from the instrument's out-of-tune, honky-tonk keys. The Marquis, whose eyes were veiled by the mists of memory, could hardly contain his joy. "The Conservatoire in Vienna? Can it truly be? How extraordinary... so you were studying at the Conservatoire in Vienna?"

Josephine observed the Marquis's reaction with a mixture of amusement and curiosity, her lips curling slightly in a subtle expression of skepticism—an innate trait. But despite her doubts, she couldn't deny the girl's prodigious talent on the piano, for Henriette's skills were perhaps the finest she had ever witnessed.

Yet despite this enigma, Josephine never pursued further inquiries, lest Henriette took offense at her forthright manner. And in any case, questions weren't commonly posed within this township, nor were the resultant answers taken at face value. Henriette, this enigmatic newcomer, must have harbored reasons for seeking refuge within this godforsaken pocket of chaos.

"The position's yours, Henriette," Josephine declared in the warm embrace of the afternoon light. "Your lodgings will be the room above the porch to sleep in, with a lock on it to keep the girls out. Monotony often breeds mischief... don't let them bother you. They'll leave you undisturbed, unless you're tempted to join their ranks and earn a dollar more than the base pay."

Henriette didn't.

She exuded an aura of solemnity and dedication, an all-consuming fervor that gripped her soul. A grim and dedicated being, she ignored the girls completely and reserved even more indifference for the men who ventured through the whorehouse doors. In her modest bedroom, she graced the splintered pine vanity with faded photographs of a man and a woman—her parents—and then adorned the wall with a poster from the San Francisco Opera House, an announcement heralding the premiere of *Der Freischütz*.

Chapter 3

The rhythmic thud of hooves reverberated through the air, a percussion of anticipation along the dusty road. Maria Herrera was en route to her sister's abode, riding with the decorum befitting a lady, a role she had always aspired to embody but was never able to attain. Beside her rode her little daughter, straddling her horse with a boyish confidence while her hair, a messy, uncombed haystack, flew in the breeze behind her. She looked the wild bandit-child she was, though a shadow of sorrow and torment clouded her little face with an air of gravity. She was an engaged woman now. Her father forbade her to grace the brothel's entrance, even in the spirit of a formal visit to her affectionate aunt.

"Turn back, Faye!" His voice, a thunderclap of authority, pursued them as they retreated.

Sullen resentment simmered within her, etched upon her expression as she obediently wheeled her horse around. As her gaze lingered upon the brothel, her retreat marked by the steady rhythm of trotting hooves, she saw Henriette gazing at her from her bedroom window above the whorehouse porch. Their eyes met for a fleeting moment, and Henriette's briefly blinked in the blazing sun.

Faye was momentarily confused by the beautiful girl looking at her from the window; then she spurred her horse cruelly and galloped off like a wild thing.

During the darkest hours of the night, after the brothel had closed its curtains on the night's festivities and the last traces of revelry had faded, Henriette's delicate fingers found solace on the ivory keys of the grand piano. The room, once alive with laughter and desire, was now cloaked in a profound silence, broken only by the melancholic strains of Chopin's music. Each note she played wove a mélange of emotions, a symphony of sentiment that transcended time and memory, coaxing tears to flow unbidden down the Marquis's weathered cheeks.

Seated across the room, his presence illuminated by the soft glow of candlelight, the Marquis watched Henriette with a mixture of reverence and nostalgia. He cradled a crystal tumbler in his trembling hand,

its contents a rich amber liquid that offered a brief respite from the weight of remembrance that clung to him. The whiskey, like an old friend, provided momentary refuge from the turmoil of his thoughts.

After a while, as the final notes of Chopin's composition hung in the air, the Marquis broke the silence. "Does Vienna still bear the reflection of days gone by?" His voice carried a tinge of yearning, a hint of sorrow echoed in his words. The question lingered like a delicate veil, concealing the memories he both cherished and struggled to confront.

Henriette turned her gaze toward him. With a voice conjuring remembrance, she interjected, "Is it true what I've heard... stories circulating in the distant Austro-Hungarian Empire?"

The Marquis stirred in his seat, his attention fully captured. He leaned slightly forward, as if drawn by an invisible thread woven from their conversation.

"The age-old legend," she continued, her words a delicate dance between curiosity and caution, "of the outlaw who sold his soul to the devil in exchange for evasion of justice, as long as he drew his breath..."

The Marquis sighed, a rueful smile playing at the corners of his lips. "Such tales have endured through the years. In the superstitious villages, they believe such things still, even in the face of the changing world."

As if summoned by their words, all kinds of shadows danced and flickered through the slightly ajar window, each possessing a story of its own, an intricate narrative spun from the threads of their thoughts and musings.

The old legend, now resurrected by the enigmatic circumstances surrounding an aristocrat's sudden disappearance—an abrupt vanishing that left behind an echoing void—troubled Henriette's mind. She contemplated the Herreras, the notorious bandits entrenched in the heart of La Frontera. Those marauding outlaws, condemned by society, embodied wickedness and brutality, qualities synonymous with the damned. Could it be, she wondered, that a man who has sold his soul to the devil feels safest among the damned? Among the company of whores and murderers?

The Marquis, his frail form marked by the passage of time, sought solace in the bottom of his glass, his fingers trembling ever so slightly.

"Did those whispers hold a grain of truth?" Henriette's voice was a gentle breeze—a deadly snare of curiosity and probing. "The fervent rumors that once painted you as a marksman of extraordinary prowess, a figure so skilled that common folk attributed supernatural origins to your talent?"

Collecting himself, the Marquis met her gaze with a mixture of ruefulness and nostalgia. "Similar murmurs followed Paganini, tales of the devil imparting mastery of the violin to him. Such exquisite melodies, they claimed, could only be the work of an otherworldly hand."

"And perhaps he did," mused Henriette.

"Your artistry resides in music, not murder, Henriette." The old man brushed aside the idea with a motion of his wrinkled hand.

"Stranglers and pianists alike favor nimble fingers. Nonetheless, a bullet extends a merciful end," suggested Henriette obliquely. "In his avarice, the Devil extends his service to anyone who asks. Outlaws are not his only clientele. But, pray tell, if the Devil gambles against himself, who wins in the end? "

Out of some kind of dream into which he abruptly sank, the Marquis divulged, "Should two adversaries make a pact with the Devil against each other, the fiend shall honor the righteous one."

That night, he refused to divulge more, his voice muffled by an enigmatic silence. He lumbered toward his chamber, to Josephine, who awaited for him, as she always did.

Yet the question persisted—why did the old man weep? The whiskey turned him into a baby... yet Josephine tended to him, as she always had, from the very moment she found him.

Chapter 4

Henriette, the fresh addition to the fold, received Josephine's maternal care, yet in the depths of her gaze, Josephine detected the flicker of uncertainty. Henriette immersed herself in the cadence of the piano, yet her thoughts seemed perpetually occupied by the presence of Herrera's gunmen, sporting and frolicking within the confines of the tavern. At intervals, she would turn her attentions to the Marquis's ancient rifle, displayed as a relic upon the wall. Her hand would stroke the barrel, caress the stock as if she knew everything about the arts of death. That was unhealthy and suspicious of vengefulness. Surely, she knew nothing about the craft of slaying. Intrigue shrouded her intentions.

Josephine discerned a kinship between her weathered gentleman and the fledgling Henriette. Their shared eccentricity, that mad splendor draped in black-clad dignity. They conversed frequently, and on occasions, their dialogue shifted into the lilt of German. The language grated upon Josephine, eliciting sensations of exclusion, of a barricade raised against her.

Could Henriette, the young maiden, potentially be the Marquis's progeny, sired and forsaken—a daughter unknown, journeying across continents to reunite with the man who had shaped her? Was it conceivable?

Old man and youthful girl, united by the symmetry of their gaze, the congruence of their hands... Could it be?

If indeed it was the truth, then why withhold the revelation from her?

Concealment rendered Josephine an outsider, her sentiments cocooned in a shroud of isolation. Within her bedroom, as dusk permeated the air, she rocked upon her rocking-chair, the rhythm echoing in the sips of tequila.

Voices sounded below in German, reaching her through the window. She went to her window, her eyes finding the Marquis and the piano-player, ambling together towards the muddied pond nestled in the brothel's dusty courtyard, recessed from the main thoroughfare.

She hastily crossed herself and then continued with the rhythm of rocking and sipping tequila, a silent communion with the spirits.

"Speak English; we must leave the Old World and its mysteries behind us," the Marquis declared, his tone suffused with irony. "The old, weary, exhausted world. Leave it behind! This is a new country, full of hope, brimming with promise..."

His words were laden with heavy sarcasm. The desert's ancestral stones loomed large against the backdrop of the setting sun.

"Perhaps you are right, however, the vastness of this land existed long before us, and mysterious forces oversee it. I won't find any friends here, I'm sure of that." In the encroaching darkness, Henriette's thoughts continued to unravel.

Amidst this desolate terrain, both outsiders and foreigners, the Marquis and Henriette, observed a spectacle unfold before them as the Herreras, a band of outsiders in their own right, rode out in a frenzied sortie. Led by the Herrera patriarch, the battle-hardened band of ruffians fired their weapons wildly into the darkening sky, their raucous shouts forming a chaotic symphony in the descending dusk.

Henriette, poised in her bearing and thoughtful in her demeanor, began to unburden herself of a closely guarded secret. She unveiled a tale of sorrow and retribution, a narrative that had remained hidden within her. With a certain vulnerability, she shared with the Marquis the heart-wrenching account of the Herreras' merciless rampage. It was a harrowing scene—their assault on a train brimming with the gold it carried, their brutality exacted without mercy. Her parents, accomplished opera performers, were passengers on that ill-fated journey back from a San Francisco performance. On that fateful day, they became victims of the bandits' unrelenting violence. Yet, as fate would have it, Henriette found herself continents away, nestled within the embrace of Europe, as the tragedy unfolded.

In a calm recounting, Henriette revealed the grim details of Herrera's actions. He had taken her mother's earrings and proceeded to rape her. The sound of gunshots echoed through the air, killing her father as he tried to protect his wife. And then they shot her mother because she was screaming so loudly. With a semblance of tranquility, Henriette concluded her tale.

"We all bear our burdens of tragedy," the Marquis murmured, his voice a reflection of the grief he held within.

"Some tragedies demand retribution," Henriette responded, her tone carrying an eerie calmness, as if the very essence of vengeance coursed through her veins. "I've planned my revenge. A vengeance befitting of an opera. The bandits shall find their demise—die to the last one. Except for the child. She shall be mine."

Serene, resolute, and with a cold determination that coursed through her veins, Henriette had honed her proficiency in the lethal dance of gunfighting since the day her parents were torn from her. She knew a gun like a bandit knows his tequila—a familiar companion, yet a hand that had never been raised in wrath. She'd been brooding on this revenge since the ink of that black-edged letter had etched her fate in Vienna, where she heard of Herrera's pact with the Devil—a covenant ensuring that justice would never reach his hideout...

"If you've planned it all so well, if you're dedicated to your vengeance..."

Henriette nodded. Quiet, assured, deadly.

"If your conviction remains unshaken, then... you already belong to the Devil. And a well-aimed bullet is indeed more merciful than the relentless blaze of anger." The Marquis had always hated Herrera's contempt for himself and Josephine, who lived on Herrera's charity.

But Henriette had never been more sure of herself and her gun. "Old man, what does it matter to you? Your stakes are but shadows; you've come to a dead end, kept by a whore in a flyblown town at the end of all the roads you ever took... My vengeance shall be your salvation."

"I have naught left to gamble," the Marquis responded inscrutably. "Except for my sins, Henriette. Except for my sins."

Chapter 5

Faye, a twelve-year-old girl with a blend of sullen and dissatisfied appearance on her beautiful face, retreated into the depths of her bedroom—a jackdaw's nest filled with tawdry, looted riches. She had a grand four-poster bed, snatched from a train, displaying ornate gilded designs to match her fancy. In the midst of a jumble of trinkets, broken dolls scattered around, and clothes strewn all over, she settled herself. Clutched in her arms was a frail kitten, her sole companion in this sordid squalor. Overhead, chickens had settled onto the bed's canopy, while an audacious goat poked its head through the open window. Annoyed, she frowned at these intruders, showing her irritation. She missed her days of innocence in the convent, where she could learn to read and play with friends to her heart's content.

A sudden intrusion disrupted her solitude. An excited dog surged through the ajar door, its tail of excitement trailing a cacophony of squawking chickens. Chaos erupted as the chickens roosting on the bed mounted their insurrection, heralding their displeasure with vociferous cries. The dog, unfazed, leapt onto the bed and began to gnaw at the pillows. The kitten, in defiance, rose on its hind legs to swat at the canine adversary. Faye's realm turned into a battleground! She retorted by hurling dolls, books at the animals, screaming her head off, then storming out of the room.

In the courtyard, a scene of grim vitality unfolded as Faye's mother presided over the slaughter of a protesting pig. That's the sort of thing the Herrera womenfolk enjoyed! Ugh. Such were the customs they found solace in—habits that held no allure for Faye. She was made for better things, she knew it.

She embarked on a disconsolate wander out into the dusty street. Empty, like her life—a thoroughfare echoing the hollowness of her existence. Beside the murky pond that graced the space before Josephine's brothel, willows lent their grace, bending tenderly as if in sympathy and giving it a secluded air.

Faye loitered by the pond's edge, sullenly hurling stones at her own reflection—an act of rebellion, a silent defiance against a life that felt as desolate as the landscape surrounding her. Morning light adorned her, a disheveled vision in her convent attire and tousled blonde hair, while a symphony of *déshabillé* adorned the brothel's veranda, the whores giggling and observing her in her youthful innocence.

"Little Faye! Little Faye! Come hither, dear! Come in and see your auntie!" Their laughter trailed behind the epithets hurled her way—caricatures of endearment that tugged at her heartstrings. In her black stockings, her convent-girl's dress, her rumpled blonde hair, she stood. Beautiful. Innocent. Sad.

Amidst the chatter of bookkeeping, Josephine leaned over the bar, wire-rimmed glasses perched on her nose—a combination of stern authority and practicality. Nearby, the Marquis enjoyed his drink, her impulse to scold him stifled by a second thought that made her focus return to her ledger.

In the background, Henriette's fingers wandered across the piano keys, playing a Strauss waltz—a melody that was both familiar and captivating. Josephine, the respected figure in charge of the establishment, couldn't help but tap her foot to the rhythm. The Marquis, relinquishing his glass of whiskey, stood with a benevolent smile. His actions held a gentlemanly charm as he walked towards Josephine, extending his arm—a gesture that carried the nuances of a bygone era. Her response was a mix of surprise and pleasure, a blush rising on her cheeks that made her look youthful. With quick motions, glasses were cleared away, hair was tidied, and a stolen glance in the mirror behind the bar accentuated her charming fluster. The Marquis's effort to bring a smile to her face added to the atmosphere of chivalry. Time hadn't dimmed his inherent charisma, just as Josephine's radiant smile reminded everyone of her youthful beauty—an aura that resonated with those fortunate enough to witness it.

A sweep of Henriette's hands over the keys signaled a building crescendo—a shift from calm to passionate performance. The strains of the Strauss waltz filled the room.

Caught in the music's embrace, Josephine relented and accepted the Marquis's outstretched arm—two souls compelled to dance by the charm of the symphony. "Look! Look! Josephine's dancing!" Laughter echoed as the brothel's inhabitants gathered inside, the whores gliding in to admire, giggle, and find solace in their own dance with one another. They were clad in spoiled *négligées*, unlaced corsets, petticoats, and tattered stockings.

Yet Adelpha remained without partner, ensconced upon the verandah, her playful taunts directed at little Faye. The melodic strains spilled beyond the confines of the brothel like a beckoning invitation.

"Faye! Come hither, Faye, and dance with me!" Adelpha's call carried in the breeze.

Gradually, Faye made her way to the edge of the verandah, ascended the steps, and found herself gazing through a window. On the other side of the glass, she saw the aftermath of a dance, marked by joyful laughter and figures sprawled about.

Henriette and Faye exchanged a secret, flashing glance—a shared connection encased within that fleeting gaze. But her aunt caught sight of their communion and abruptly interrupted the secret smiles on their faces.

"Faye, Faye! Away with you, child! This is no place for a little girl!"

Later that evening, the Herrera family dinner presented a scene of rough comfort, her father casually using a knife to pick his teeth. Faye approached him slowly with a deliberate demeanor, her presence carrying an almost tangible plea as she leaned on the table.

"Papa, I want to learn to play the piano," she begged her father.

Without pause, he continued picking his teeth with the knife. "You showed no interest in the piano back at the damn convent. Why do you want to learn it now?"

"To become a lady, Papa. Ain't I going to have a grand wedding and marry a fine man? Papa, I wish to learn the piano."

Little Faye was spoiled and a creature of indulgence, her whims granted without hesitation. Yet her father took pleasure in prolonging her entreaties, stretching out her pleadings as if they were a prized morsel to be savored. Seldom did he encounter his daughter in the act of beseeching him. He carved another piece of meat and chewed thoughtfully.

"And who, pray tell, shall undertake the task of piano instruction within this forsaken rathole?"

"Henriette! Henriette from Aunt Josephine's."

A sudden surge of anger seized him—an emotional tempest that cast a shadow over Faye's heart. His outburst, like an untamed primal force, held an animal rage that struck fear into her.

"What? My own flesh and blood to be tutored in a brothel's halls? Under the watchful eye of that fat whore, Josephine?"

Maria, fierce and unyielding, hurled herself into the fray, gripping a carving knife with determination. "You won't insult my sister!"

Herrera's reflexes surged to life; he twisted her wrist, and the knife dropped from her grip. "I won't have my daughter mingling with harlots!"

"I wish to learn the piano," the young girl's voice rang out.

"You won't set foot in Josephine's place to learn piano as long as I'm alive. And certainly not now that you're engaged to be married."

"Then, Papa, buy me a piano and bring Henriette here, so she can teach me."

A mere week hence, a weathered wagon rumbled into the yard, its timeworn joints groaning in harmony with grunting pigs. There, amidst the ramshackle remnants of what was once a proud hacienda, now overrun by the frenzied fluttering of barnyard chickens, alighted a magnificent sight—a gleaming baby grand piano. Its polished surfaces glinted like the desert sun on a still pond, casting a surreal disparity against the rustic backdrop of decay and neglect.

The piano found its place within the confines of Faye's bedroom, a symbol of fresh possibilities. Drawn to it by its glamour, her fingertips hesitated, aching to uncover the secrets hidden beneath those polished keys. With artless dexterity, she tentatively prodded the keys downward, eliciting a clumsy cacophony of sound that filled the air with graceless notes. Nearby, her kitten sauntered serenely across the smooth ivory keys of the grand instrument, adding its own contribution to the infernal noise.

But suddenly Faye's focus shifted as she spotted Henriette approaching—a figure dressed in darkness that exuded an air of mystery against the bright desert landscape. Holding her cat, Faye pressed her round cheek against the window pane and murmured, "Look, Kitty, here comes the girl in black. She's the one who will teach me piano. Isn't she pretty?"

Faye's mother, an observer with a taste for indulgence, reclined languidly on the porch in her rocking-chair, the rhythmic creak accompanying the leisurely sips of tequila that seemed to suspend time itself. She barely noticed Henriette, a vision of refined elegance and tidiness, who had arrived as a stranger with an air of mystery clinging to her like the fine layer of dust that settled on everything in that outlaw dugout. She carried with her a collection of meticulously preserved music sheets. For now, that was all she needed to get closer to the Herreras.

The lessons commenced in earnest, marked by the simplicity of scales that danced from Henriette's deft fingers to Faye's eager ones.

"Listen closely and match each note," Henriette gently instructed. "Let the melody flow smoothly from one key to the next."

Faye nodded, her brow furrowed in concentration as she focused on replicating the confusing succession of notes. Each one resonated within the walls of the room, as if weaving a musical tapestry that painted the familiar picture of a little girl learning her first piano scale.

With the patience of a saint and the watchfulness of a hawk, Henriette guided Faye through the labyrinth of black and white keys, unraveling the mysteries of music one composition at a time.

"Steady now; don't rush," she reminded as Faye stumbled momentarily. "Take it slowly and practice each note as you go along."

As the dusty sun dipped below the horizon, bathing the room in a warm, amber glow, the lessons continued with Czerny exercises unfurling before Faye like a series of challenges waiting to be conquered. Fingers danced, stumbled, and danced again, each stumble a testament to perseverance.

"Beautiful!" Henriette exclaimed as Faye completed a difficult passage. "You're making excellent progress." Her praise filled Faye with pride and confidence.

Beneath the veil of musical tutelage, a subtle undercurrent of emotion began to flow, but Henriette's guidance remained steadfast, her gaze unwavering as she delicately balanced between mentorship and affection. Her eyes held a certain tenderness when they met Faye's, a vulnerability that hinted at a troubled past she had left behind. And Faye, in her innocence, felt drawn to this enigmatic girl who had brought not only the gift of music but also a sense of companionship that her heart had longed for since she left the convent.

The derelict bandit hacienda seemed to transform under the influence of the music that emerged from beneath Faye's fingertips. It was as though the melodies had the power to paint vibrant landscapes amidst the muted tones of the frontier. Each crescendo carried the promise of adventure, each diminuendo whispered secrets of the heart.

Yet Henriette's true intentions remained as concealed as the music nestled within the intricate notes. Her role as an instructor provided the perfect cover for the emotions that swirled within her. The unspoken undertones between them added a layer of complexity to their dynamic, a harmony that was as fragile as a note hanging in the air.

As the lessons progressed over the following days, a bond stronger than the strings of a grand piano began to take shape. Henriette had unwittingly become not just a teacher but a confidante, and Faye found herself sharing dreams and aspirations that she had scarcely admitted to herself.

"I want to play at a concert hall one day," Faye confessed shyly during a lesson break.

Henriette smiled at the little girl. "I know you can do it. If you keep up with your practice, people will come to watch you play in a grand concert hall. But it takes time to become a great pianist."

In those stolen moments, their fingers brushed against the keys and each other, and their gazes lingered a little longer than was warranted. Faye glanced at Henriette, a faint blush tinging her cheeks.

"Thank you for coming to teach me. I'm so happy when we're together like this," she murmured, but it was the unspoken words between them that resonated louder than any melody.

Henriette's presence near her made Faye flutter like a little butterfly. The little girl possessed an enigmatic charm, an indefinable allure that tugged against Henriette's senses.

"Let me guide you," Henriette said softly, positioning herself with quiet elegance behind Faye, her experienced hands becoming a gentle guide for the girl's tentative ones. Her long, white hands covered Faye's little, pink ones with bitten fingernails. Faye leaned back ever so slightly against Henriette. A contented sigh escaped her lips.

Faye turned towards Henriette. Her eyes caught her teacher gazing at her with silent fascination. In that charged moment, unspoken desires seemed to hang in the air. Their lips met in a kiss that was chaste yet brimming with the weight of unexplored passions. Faye's parted lips pressed against Henriette's in a soft, lingering touch, a mere whisper of what her heart truly desired.

In that instant, Henriette's guarded exterior cracked, revealing a frailty she had carefully hidden away. The fervor in Faye's actions caught her by surprise; her own emotions a hostile land that lay beneath

her composed veneer. She felt the warmth of Faye's breath upon her lips, a sensation that sent shivers down her spine and awakened long-forgotten desires within her.

Henriette's mind raced, thoughts swirling like leaves caught in a gust of wind. This was not by mistake. She considered the implications of Faye's eagerness and the knowledge that the child had experienced such encounters before. Perhaps in the convent. Was it with a nun or a forbidden passion shared in secret corners, behind veiled curtains, with one of her little classmates, Henriette wondered.

But where was the seduction to be completed? The constraints of their surroundings loomed over them like silent spectators, denying their love the freedom it deserved. Not in Faye's bedroom, with her mother dozing in the rocking-chair outside on the porch, the ever-vigilant guarding against such intimacies. Not in Henriette's room at the brothel, either, under aunt Josephine's watchful eye. And then, as if guided by a divine hand, Henriette's thoughts found a solution. Within the hallowed walls of the church.

The church, a place of worship and sanctuary, stood as an unexpected stage for their clandestine desires. Henriette's mind raced, crafting a daring plan. The pews would bear witness to their love, the stained-glass windows casting dazzling shadows on their secret kisses. Nobody would expect to find lovers within those sacred walls.

With a newfound determination, Henriette's heart swelled as she looked at Faye. The little girl's innocence and eagerness reflected in her eyes, igniting a fire that had smoldered within for far too long.

Chapter 6

The grand edifice, a colossal church that seemed to aspire to cathedral-like magnificence, had been erected in expectation of mass conversions among the Indians—an aspiration that now lay in ruins. Perched upon a bluff, it cast a brooding presence over the village's decaying remnants. Vacant and devoid of congregation, the church harbored an emptiness akin to the souls it once sought to enlighten.

As the church's heavy wooden doors closed behind them, sealing them in a world of reverent silence, Henriette and Faye embarked on a path of uncharted love, their hearts and hands intertwined amidst the hallowed walls. The piano teacher and her student, united by forbidden passion, dared to script their own future against the backdrop of a bandit country that held secrets as profound as their own.

Within this pious space, Henriette and Faye found refuge. Behind the sanctuary of an altar, the bandit-child entwined with the vengeance-seeker, their desires merging in passion like desert shadows. Afterwards, triumphant, Faye nestled her cheek into Henriette's bosom, a radiant smile lighting her little face as she shrieked for glee with newfound joy for the first time in her life.

Henriette, too, felt her heart stir with unfamiliar emotions—a surge of tenderness and compassion for this doomed little girl who now lay in her arms, breathing deeply with devotion.

Naked down to her waist, Faye ambled along the aisle of the church, her gaze drifting towards the window that offered a view of the dusty road winding its way towards the town. She spoke in a fragile, mournful whisper, tinged with heartbreak.

"I'll be here again soon. I'm going to be married."

"Married?" Henriette asked with disbelief, a discordant note in the otherwise tranquil setting.

"To a bandit gentleman," Faye explained, her delicate features twisted in a disgusted expression. "Because I have no brothers, I am the heiress. My son will inherit everything, but first, I must be married."

"No," said Henriette, with fiery hate burning in her eyes that veiled the tenderness of her love beneath the guise of vengeance. "You won't be married. I won't allow that to happen."

Initially skeptical, Faye asked, "Do you love me?"

Henriette's heart beat with newfound desire, her mind a whirlwind of conflicting emotions. But at that moment, she had only one thing in her sights. "I'll protect you, Faye," she declared with unwavering determination. "Nothing will happen to you."

"So you love me! You must love me! You'll take me away! Won't you?" Her excited shout cut through the air, beseeching her with a plea. She threw her little arms around Henriette's neck.

Henriette's arms found their way around Faye, drawing the little girl close as if to shield her from the world outside. In their embrace, the truth, veiled for so long, revealed itself with a quiet intensity, like a star breaking through the night's clouds.

"Yes," she admitted finally, her voice a blend of confession and devotion. "I love you, Faye."

Chapter 7

In a chamber suffused with an air of quiet isolation, the Marquis found himself in solitude. He settled into the contours of a well-worn chair, a tumbler of whiskey held casually in his hand, its amber contents glinting in the soft light. The pages of an open book lay before him, a portal into realms distant from reality's grasp. Shadows, deep and full of mystery, danced upon the walls, remnants of times long past, lending an almost spectral quality to the room. Beyond the window, the night held court, an enigmatic spectacle, with the moon casting an ethereal glow that draped the land in a ghostly twilight.

In the midst of this stillness, a sudden rattle at the locked door announced Josephine's presence. Anxious and determined, she sought entrance into the inner sanctum, her voice slicing through the silence with a barrage of questions.

"What are you up to? What secrets do you hide from me? Is it the old secret? Is it—"

Once he let her in, she was drawn into his embrace, finding solace in his encircling arms. His eyes searched her face as if convincing himself that he could trust her, and then he said, "It is she who shall bear the burden in my stead, Josephine. She wants to, she's willing, she knows..."

Understanding slowly dawned upon Josephine. "Your... daughter has come to set you free?"

"Not my daughter, Josephine," he sighed, his gaze clouded with torment.

Josephine was so relieved that she almost forgot the dark revelation of what he was saying. Yet she had to ask him, "And what is the price to be paid?"

The Marquis gazed at her intently. "It is steep, Josephine. Do you love your poor old man? Do you love him more than you love your own kin?"

Her eyes grew wide with a mix of astonishment and comprehension. They had been companions for so long, through so many years...

"Yes, old man, I believe I do."

"Our bond has endured, hasn't it?" he said. "But Herrera's judgment looms."

She hesitated, then spoke earnestly. "The little Faye, nothing must happen to her..."

"No. Not Faye. What harm had she ever done to anyone? Not Faye."

Outside, the moon emerged to cast its soft glow across the dark landscape. Josephine pictured her little niece sleeping peacefully, unaware of the gathering storm. She hoped beyond hope that she would make it through the coming tempest unscathed.

Chapter 8

"Where is the gun?" the Marquis inquired with an intrigued tone, his eyes fixed on Henriette's movements. He observed intently as Henriette deftly unlatched a concealed leather pouch nestled within her well-traveled case, revealing a gleaming Smith & Wesson Model 3.

The Marquis accepted the weapon, cradling it in his weathered hands with a mix of curiosity and admiration. His fingers traced the lines of the cold barrel and the drum, noting the marks of use that told tales of battles fought and challenges overcome. He handled it somewhat awkwardly, his lack of familiarity evident after so much time had passed. A tinge of disappointment flitted across his features, though he tried to mask it behind a veil of feigned indifference.

"What's so remarkable about this piece, then? How is a lone firearm to stand against that nest of vipers?" He inquired, his voice a curious murmur in the air.

Henriette's expression remained composed as she met the Marquis's gaze squarely. She didn't falter under his scrutiny; instead, she radiated a quiet confidence that belied her youth. "It's not the gun," she

replied in her measured manner, her words chosen carefully like bullets loaded into a chamber. "It's the hand that wields it, the heart that drives it."

The Marquis arched a silver eyebrow, an intrigued spark lighting his eyes. "So you mean to tell me that this is more than just a tool, a mere instrument of destruction?"

Henriette's lips curled into a wry smirk, her gaze never leaving the gun as she spoke, "Precisely. This here is an extension of who I am, a dance between my skills and the challenges I've faced. It's just another musical instrument in my hands."

He studied her in silence, the weight of his years seemingly mingling with the intensity of her words. "And have you employed this gun before?" he probed still further, his voice an echo of experience.

Her response came without hesitation, her tone steady and unwavering. "More times than I can recall. Enough to know its heft, its rhythm, its heartbeat. Enough to feel the weight of its potential."

A glimmer of something akin to respect flickered within the Marquis's eyes. He returned the firearm to Henriette's outstretched hand, relinquishing his hold on it. "Confidence," he mused, his voice carrying a trace of admiration. "Confidence is a weapon as formidable as any steel."

Henriette's smirk deepened as she securely accepted the gun, her fingers curling around it with familiarity. "Indeed. And with the Herreras, confidence might be the edge that tips the scales in my favor."

The old man's lips twitched in a wry smile, and he inclined his head in a subtle nod. "May your confidence be your steadfast companion then, because there will be no return from hell if the Herreras prevail."

"Thank you, Marquis," Henriette responded, her voice carrying a hint of gratitude. With a final glance at her trusted firearm, she holstered it, ready to face the challenge that awaited her.

The Marquis watched her with a mix of curiosity and anticipation, a silent observer of a tale yet to be written.

Chapter 9

Faye fidgeted as her mother cinched the corset of the store-bought wedding dress, the lace and silk feeling foreign against her skin.

"Hold still, Faye," Maria chided, threading a needle to take in the waist. "How will I fit your wedding dress if you keep squirming like a slippery fish?"

Faye eyed her reflection sullenly in the clouded mirror. The dress had arrived just yesterday by coach all the way from Mexico City, pure white lace with pearl buttons trailing down the back. Maria popped an airy veil atop her head and beamed at the picture.

"Look at my beautiful angel, ready to be a bride!"

But Faye did not share her enthusiasm. "I don't want to get married, Mama," she protested. "I'm only twelve!"

Maria's stern tone left no room for negotiation, dismissing her concerns with a wave of her hand. "Too bad, Faye! Tomorrow you must and will get married."

"I won't! I won't!" She stood abruptly, stamped her little foot, and discarded the veil. "I won't do it! You can't make me!"

Faye felt a surge of desperation. She had pleaded and bargained with her father for weeks, but his mind was set; he would not be moved. Stomping to the piano in her bedroom, she half-heartedly picked out a few notes of Schumann's *Happy Farmer* before slamming the lid shut and pouted.

Meanwhile, across town in the whorehouse, the raucous laughter and idle chatter of wedding guests filled the smoky room where Henriette's fingers graced the piano keys, playing a few bars of the *Wedding March*.

Amidst the celebration, a drunken wedding guest flung his glass, shattering a mirror behind the bar. Murmurs of superstition rippled through the whores at this ill omen, their huddled figures exuding unease while fingers traced crosses over their heaving bosoms.

The place was packed out with wedding guests, all notable villains. But there was too much tension for there to be any joyful celebration. Josephine, her smile absent, tallied the cost of the broken mirror on her cash register while surveying the scene impassively.

At the bar sat the Marquis, once a personage of repute and respect, now disgraced and destitute, his disposition grim. He leaned over the bar and stared gloomily into his drink, a figure of dejected detachment midst the wedding guests who treated him with genial contempt.

Chapter 10

Faye, a silhouette in the moonlit night, slipped out through her bedroom window, the night enfolding her like a shroud. She moved with stealth along the street, blending into the shadows, much like an Apache on horseback passing down the road. With practiced ease, she concealed herself within the comforting embrace of darkness, her heart racing within her chest.

Her secret lover already awaited her by the murky pond, its desolate waters mirroring their forbidden love. No sooner had Faye found refuge in Henriette's arms than her voice quivered with urgency, "Please, take me away from here. Save me!"

Henriette held her close, her fingers gently brushing through Faye's disheveled blond hair—a rare tenderness that contradicted her usual cold and guarded demeanor. In this moment, perhaps she would

take the bandit-child away with her if she came out alive after the impending holocaust... The thought of having her little companion by her side would be nice, so nice. It brought a warmth to her heart, a yearning for intimacy—someone to cuddle with... someone to kiss in the night beneath the moon's silvery embrace. And who better than pretty little Faye?

In the midst of the night's eerie quiet, only the Marquis remained awake. He observed a wedding guest sprawled asleep on the floor, an unwitting casualty of the evening's revelry. The whores had adorned him with a feathered hat, stripped his trousers, and applied rouge to his face, transforming him into a comical spectacle.

When Henriette entered the room again, the Marquis silently poured her a drink. He looked at the girl with a mixture of paternal love and sagely understanding—a proud father looking at his daughter. A silent communion passed between them, and he could tell she'd been kissing little Faye just a minute ago under the dark sky.

"I hope you know what you're doing..." His words carried an undertone of caution as he spoke, heavy as if having a premonition.

Henriette's smile radiated, her spirit still glowing and giddy from the stolen kisses with Faye. She shook her head, a few notes from Chopin's *Funeral March* echoed beneath her fingertips. "If I don't make it... be good to little Faye for me."

The Marquis nodded solemnly, his own glass finding its way to his lips, the fiery liquid a balm for his thoughts. "You'll be alright. The prince of darkness is a gentleman..."

Chapter 11

Faye winced as the comb caught in another tangle of her unruly curls, entwining itself like ivy on an ancient stone wall. "Must we go through with this farce?" she implored her mother, blinking back tears. It's not fair! None of this is fair, she screamed silently, helplessly to her reflection, her thoughts echoing within her like the distant tolling of a bell. None of it was as she had dreamed about in the convent. She felt as though the very stars above conspired against her.

This was no celebration, only a transaction. Like cattle, she was being handed off from one owner to the next. Faye longed to scream out her frustrations, but she dared not raise her voice. Like a rabbit caught in a snare, she could only struggle in vain against her bonds before the inevitable end. She wasn't even allowed to take her doll with her to church.

Outside the Herrera encampment, great commotion buzzed with activity, like a beehive on a summer's day, as the bandit clan prepared for the festivities. Though Faye would have preferred a discreet ceremony, they had procured a carriage adorned with flamboyant paper roses that seemed to mock her inner turmoil. Nothing but the finest embellishments would satisfy their pride on the occasion of their

daughter's marriage. The contrast between the exuberance of the decorations against the cage of anxiety tightening around her was stark and humiliating.

Faye stood motionless as the women fluttered around her. Servants adjusted her dress and fussed over each detail, but she felt no joy, only mounting dread that left her cheeks pale and her hands trembling. Anxiety gnawed at her like a desert coyote as she chewed at her underlip. She was no bride, only a decorative doll in their elaborately orchestrated transaction.

Her mother, uncharacteristically somber in a black dress, dabbed at the tears spilling down her rough face. "My dear child," she lamented theatrically, "if only I could spare you this fate."

With a rush of emotion, Faye turned and threw her arms around her mother's shoulders, holding fast as if she could somehow stop this day from unfolding. "Mama!" she pleaded into her mother's chest.

"Hush now, be brave," her mother urged, extricating herself from Faye's grasp and cradling her daughter's stricken face in her hands. She offered a stern smile. "No more tears. You must go through with this."

Faye wanted to protest, but she swallowed the lump in her throat and nodded dutifully. She had no choice but to play her part.

Chapter 12

Kissing the faded photographs of her father and mother, Henriette felt a bittersweet rush of memories flooding over her. It was time. Dexterously, she strapped on the gun belt. The touch of the cold metal against her skin was a stark reminder of the fleeting time she had in this world. In her black, dusty velvet jacket, elegant, deadly, driven by madness and love, she went towards the church.

The hill on which the church stood loomed before her like a distant tomb, its imposing structure a mute observer of the brewing storm within her heart. Each step she took echoed the resounding decision she had made, the path she had chosen. It was a journey of revenge, a journey of redemption, and a journey of unexpected love.

Meanwhile, the Marquis lay in his room, his body ailing. The bedroom curtains remained drawn, though muted sunlight fought to pierce through. He had no intention of gracing the wedding with his presence. The thought was a bitter pill to swallow, a reminder of his own mortality. The idea of attending the inevitable bloodbath when his soul was at the end of its journey, heavy with secrets and regrets, was simply unbearable.

"I refuse to attend this farcical wedding," he declared to his mistress Josephine, who stood at the foot of the bed, hands on her hips.

"Don't be absurd," Josephine scolded with a dismissive wave of her hand. "Not see my little niece get married? And you should come, too, you irreligious old goat. Aren't you fond of Faye?"

The Marquis scrunched his face in distaste. "What do I care for the robbers or their oafish groom? Let them make their vows without me."

"Faye is your niece, and she loves you dearly," Josephine pressed.

But the Marquis was sick that morning, his throat raw from coughing and his frailty on full display. He couldn't crawl out of bed. He wheezed and stared at the ominous bloodstains on his handkerchief. When at last the spasms subsided, he gazed up at Josephine with watery eyes.

"Can't you see I'm dying?" he implored. "I haven't the strength to rise, let alone sit through a tedious ceremony." He grasped Josephine's hand with surprising urgency. "Stay with me," he rasped. "Don't leave me to die alone."

Josephine smiled sadly and extricated her hand from his weakening grip. "You always were one for theatrics. I shall return presently, once I've seen our dear girl safely wed."

Ignoring the Marquis's anguished protests, Josephine left the room to ready herself for the wedding. Her heart was heavy, but she would remain strong for Faye's sake on this most important of days.

Chapter 13

The gilded, suffering Christ stared down with woeful eyes upon the feral gathering from his pinnacle above the church altar. The morning sun streamed through the stained-glass windows, casting rainbow-hued light across the worn wooden pews and onto the dusty floorboards, unaware of the impending doom.

Focused and calm, Henriette crouched, pressed against the cool stone wall while concealed beneath the voluminous folds of the altar cloth. Her heart remained measured; the gun clasped tightly in her grip.

The doors swung open, and the unshaven, hulking brute of a groom lumbered down the aisle, as bear-like and imposing as Faye's father. He took his place before the altar, the floorboards creaking under his weight. The congregation rustled and whispered as the organ's dreaded wedding march filled the sacred space.

Amidst the whispers and shifting of the crowd, Josephine made her entrance, her presence a mixture of tardiness and unease. Her attire was haphazard, a reflection of her inner turmoil. As she slipped into the church, her eyes held a worried glint.

Finally, Faye emerged from the flower-decorated carriage in front of the church. All heads turned towards her when she stepped into the doorway, resplendent in white lace yet her face anxious. She walked calmly beside her father, but her eyes darted frantically as she searched for any sign of Henriette. She scanned the pews, her eyes tearing up, wondering where she could be and how she might save her. The thoughts of her rescuer gone missing this close to her ultimate entrapment made her heart ache.

As she walked down the aisle, whispers of admiration followed her—the congregation marveled at her unsettling youth and her childish beauty. Herrera, too, had dressed up for the occasion of his daughter's wedding—his boots were polished, and he donned his finest jacket for the occasion. Even his manners were a touch more dignified.

Amidst the hushed atmosphere, the organ's music soared, signaling the beginning of the solemn ceremony. Faye stood beside her loathsome groom. From beneath her veil, she gave him a swift glance of furious dislike just as the priest's pious words resonated within the sacred walls, as if setting the stage for what was to come.

In an explosion of movement, Henriette threw back the altar cloth and leapt onto the altar itself, her eyes ablaze with determination. The gun drawn in her right hand gleamed with vengeance as she took aim at the stunned and wide-eyed groom, firing a single, point-blank shot through the chest.

Screams erupted as the bandit-groom tumbled backwards, falling lifelessly down the steps. The effects of low-velocity slug fired at close range from the weapon of heavy caliber were massive. Henriette had sent a bullet through the man's rib cage from the right side at a distance of eight feet. After encountering bone and entering the chest cavity, the slug tumbled through the lower lobe of the bandit's left lung before exiting through the rib cage on the left side, tearing an exit wound the size of a fist.

With such force was the round driven into and through the body that bits and pieces of bone and shirt splattered across the church nave and wooden pews, together with gobbets of lung tissue, pink and gray in color.

Chaos erupted. Screams pierced the air as men shouted and women screamed while everyone frantically tried to take cover or flee the sanctuary. Herrera's men drew their pistols, but Henriette was too quick, moving sideways and dropping two of them in rapid succession before they could take aim at her.

The church was acoustically unsuited to gunfire. Not only were the explosions magnified, they were prolonged. They crashed back and forth between the walls; they boomed from the tile floor to the high ceiling and downward again. They reverberated and echoed and re-echoed within the chamber of the nave, deafening everyone unfortunate enough to find themselves in this sickening bloodbath.

Henriette's progress was swift among Herrera's gang returning fire. The fourth bullet was aimed at Faye's father, crashing his skull open, while dilettante rounds flew past her to find their target in the body of the crucified Christ hanging behind her.

Herrera's wound was mortal. He died instantly, sprawled at the base of the altar steps, a growing circle of crimson pooling beneath his head. The bullet penetrated his temporal bone above the ear, passed through the brain, carrying with it segments of the skull, and exited through the right side of his head. On the church tile floor, under what remained of Herrera's face, lay the brain matter that used to hold the accumulated knowledge of the bandit's pitiful life.

Poor little Faye stood paralyzed, her white gown and veil now blood-spattered, making her stand out amongst the chaotic scene. Her mind struggled to process the deadly scene unfolding before her, yet

her mother had no time for her only daughter. With anguished wails, she rushed to her fallen husband's lifeless body. But it was too late. Henriette fired a single, ruthless shot, and the fifth bullet silenced her cries.

The thunder of gunshots filled the church, acrid smoke stinging Henriette's eyes. She snatched the bandit's fallen pistol and continued her onslaught, each shot finding its mark in one of Herrera's despicable thugs. The survivors fled for cover, but her righteous fury could not be escaped. Their last blood spilled onto the floorboards as she stalked from the church, death in her eyes for any who remained.

Finally, Faye's senses snapped back into focus. Adrenaline surged through her, and she pushed her way through the mayhem that had consumed the church. The world around her had become a realm of chaos and madness—a sight she could hardly comprehend.

Amidst the tumult, Josephine fought her way through the crowd and emerged beside Faye. She seized the little girl's hand, her grip firm and unwavering. "Come, we must hurry!" she urged the child.

Together, they fled the massacre, running through the windswept dust, and made their way down the path that led to the whorehouse. The white lace of Faye's dress dragged in the dirt. Like the symbol of her innocence, it now trailed behind her, tarnished by the bloody frenzy of bullets fired in the name of vengeance and her own liberty. The sound of shouts and gunfire still split the air behind them.

Back within the church, Henriette burst forth like a force of nature, the gun reloaded. The Smith & Wesson in her hand was her weapon, and she wielded it with relentless fury. Each shot found its mark, striking Herrera's accomplices one after another, sending their bodies falling down in the dust. The remnants of Herrera's gang rushed forward, firing reflexively, an act of muscle spasm rather than a conceived assault, but Henriette's resolve burned even hotter than before. The town's undertaker will have a busy day.

As the bullets ran out, Henriette stood with rage in her eyes amidst the debris and dead bodies, panting but victorious. She saw a young man lying near her, face down in the slime of his own brains, and a Mexican bandit next to him with a gaping hole in his skull, and a third man seated on the floor against the wall wearing a white silk shirt soaked with blood, and a fourth man, alive but gasping for breath and bloodied, cowering under a pew.

The church, once a place of reverence, was now a scene of death. So many rounds had been fired, so much black powder burned that the nave was surcharged with smoke. It did not hang inert. The open doors made it into veils and wreaths which turned and twisted and lifted and dropped as the air revolved. In the midst of death, the black smoke was alive.

Outside the church, she continued the onslaught once again, blowing away the last remnants of Herrera's men who dared cross her path until her gun clicked empty once again.

Josephine had nearly reached the brothel when Faye stopped and turned back. "Henriette!" she cried out in anguish. The Marquis's mistress tried to hold her, but Faye did not want to flee—her heart longed to stay with Henriette, to run away with her and never look back. She pulled away from Josephine,

stumbling, and then sprinted across the courtyard and down the dusty path, where Henriette was coming like an avenging angel, gun smoking.

With the urgency of a baby gazelle, Faye's heart raced with the triumphant conflation of fear and devotion as she flung herself into the waiting arms of her lover.

Inside the whorehouse, the Marquis grimly surveyed the scene through the window. A heavy sigh escaped his lips. With deliberate steps, he approached the entrance and retrieved a rifle that hung upon the bar wall. Hands shaking, he slowly stepped outside and raised the gun. Taking aim at Henriette, his finger tightened on the trigger.

In the distance, Faye caught sight of the Marquis's movement. With a surge of determination, she clung to Henriette, trying to shield her from whatever threat the old man posed.

Out of bullets and startled by the turn of events, Henriette halted in her tracks. Her heart raced as she tried to make sense of the Marquis's actions.

Then, in an unexpected twist, the rifle in the Marquis's hand discharged. Josephine gasped in horror as the bullet whizzed past Henriette and struck down the last of Herrera's bandits as he emerged from the shadows behind her.

The round was expertly placed. It entered the outlaw's torso in the space between the ribs, missing the spine but mangling the muscles, and exited by breaking out wide swatches of lungs and breastbone. The bandit dropped dead and bloodied, tumbling to the ground mere feet away from Henriette.

The shock of the bullet flying past her left Henriette momentarily speechless, her mind struggling to catch up with the rapid sequence of events. Clutching Faye protectively in one arm, she held the empty gun with the other, as if ready to defend them both should any more threats emerge.

The chaos had subsided. The smoke cleared on a ghost town street littered with the corpses of Herrera's men, now subdued by the rain of bullets.

The Marquis collapsed in exhaustion. Josephine rushed to his side, cradling his head. The town's people emerged from the church, their faces a ghastly union of astonishment and relief. At long last, the shadow of Herrera's tyranny had been lifted, and the town could begin to heal.

As the crowd spilled out onto the streets, Henriette holstered her gun and hugged the little girl in her arms. Faye kissed her lips passionately as if her life depended on it, their hair blown wild by the desert wind.

In that moment, all the chaos, turmoil, and danger seemed to fade away like the gunsmoke dispersing into the desert sky.

Only the love forged between them remained.

Coda

Henriette stood just outside the dusty porch of the brothel, her and Faye's horses saddled and packed with the essentials for their departure. The air held a tension that seemed to echo the recent massacre, a reminder of the gunsmoke that had mingled with the dry desert breeze. Her fingers absently traced the polished wood of her gun, still remembering the violence she had wielded against the Herreras. And with little Faye inseparable by her side, the vengeance never felt this good.

From the shadows emerged the Marquis, his steps slow and tired as he approached Henriette. His eyes held a depth of respect and something akin to paternal concern. "A hard day's work, Miss Henriette," he said, his voice a gravelly murmur.

Henriette turned to face him, a solemn expression upon her face. "Indeed, Marquis. A debt repaid in lead."

The old man's lips twitched into a faint smile. "Aye, and a debt repaid well, it seems." His gaze shifted towards the horizon, where the sun dipped towards the edge of the world, casting long shadows across the desert landscape.

"Thank you for standing with me," Henriette said, her voice carrying a sincerity that needed no embellishment. "Your shot saved my life."

The Marquis's eyes twinkled with a mix of amusement and wisdom. "Life, my dear, is a precarious thing, swinging on the edge of a trigger pull. But let's not dwell on the what-ifs. You stood your ground with a courage that echoes the legends of old."

Henriette's lips curved into a faint smile, her gaze meeting the Marquis's with a nod of gratitude. "Legends, you say? Perhaps one day they'll speak of the girl-gunslinger and the Marquis who helped her in her hour of need."

The Marquis chuckled softly, the sound rich and resonant. "Legends are born from the whispers of truth and the passage of time. But for now, let the dust of today settle and the echoes of your deeds find their place."

A moment of silence stretched between them, hanging in the air. Then, with a kiss on the child's lips, Henriette helped Faye climb into her saddle, and with graceful ease, she then swung herself onto her own horse.

"Safe travels, Miss Henriette," the Marquis offered, a touch of solemnity in his farewell. Josephine called out to Faye and waved, her eyes tearful.

Henriette tipped her hat in acknowledgment, her eyes meeting theirs with a mixture of determination and farewell. "Until our paths cross again, Marquis."

With a nudge of her heels against her horse's sides, she urged the animal into motion, the rhythmic sound of hooves against earth gradually fading as they rode into the distance, two lone silhouettes against the fading light of the day.

The Marquis and Josephine watched them go, silent sentinels witnessing the journey of love continuing into the unknown, empty space.

The End