

# Midnight Springs

A Monster Western

By

NICK SIPE

Copyright © 2023 Nick Sipe

All rights reserved.

ISBN:

## DEDICATION

To Brooke, who always believed in me. Even when I didn't.



## CONTENTS

	Foreword	i
Part 1	Jailbreak	5
Part 2	It's A Long Way to The Top	71
Part 3	Gone Shootin'	151
Part 4	TNT	245



## FOREWORD

Right about now, you're asking yourself the question everyone asks.

*Why does a book set in the Old West have sections named after AC/DC songs?*

The reason is quite simple. In my head, a soundtrack for this book formed before the sentences and paragraphs did. Some of the song lyrics were direct inspirations to the characters and action in the story. Like this one:

*Public enemy number one. Understand? So, lock up your daughters, lock up your wife. Lock up your backdoor, run for your life.*

Those specific lyrics gave birth to the witch from this story. I started listening to other AC/DC songs and picked up similar Western and macabre vibes. After creating a playlist of those songs, a novel started to take shape. Lyrics and song pacing lined up with the story in my head. The songs worked as a soundtrack for the novel, and now, after writing the novel, I can't imagine having one without the other.

Whether you're an AC/DC fan or not (you don't have to be to enjoy the novel), I hope you have half as much fun reading it as I had writing it.

-Nick Sipe 12/19/2022





Cripple Creek, Colorado  
April 25, 1896

# PART 1

## Jailbreak

*“Heartbeats they were racin’. Freedom, he was chasin’. Spotlights! Sirens! Rifles firing!  
But he made it out. With a bullet in his back.”*

“Jailbreak” Performed by AC/DC  
Written by Angus Young, Malcolm Young, Ronald Scott



## SHORTY

Before flames engulfed the town, sending five thousand people fleeing into the hills, there were two major eras in the town of Cripple Creek.

There was *Before*, meaning before the Gold Rush, when the town was a quiet Colorado mountain town, and there was *After*, when it became flush with cash and opportunistic out-of-towners. Practically overnight, the tiny, isolated town became home to the highest number of millionaires per capita in the United States. With them came a flood of unique characters seeking fortunes either in the mines or in the wallets of the newly wealthy.

Of all the towns in the American West, Cripple Creek's acceptance of strangers made it ideal for Shorty's *unique* ambitions. Everything was going according to plan, until Shorty was arrested and met the blood-soaked man with the distended belly the day Cripple Creek burned.

The Cripple Creek jail was a remnant from the time *Before*. Designed for only eight prisoners, it was far too small for a town that's population doubled from 5,000 to 10,000 in just over a year. There were over thirty casinos in town, and on most nights a drunken fistfight broke out over loaded dice, marked cards, or the fleeting affections of saloon girls. The jail was too small to hold all the town's criminal element, so the sheriff looked the other way for most crimes, choosing to only jail the most heinous of criminals.

This special honor, to be one of a select few arrested, and in fact the only prisoner currently in the jail, was lost on Shorty. Unbathed, disheveled, and wrapped in a dirty blanket for warmth, Shorty squinted through barred windows into the bright sunshine. The April day was bitterly cold, and the thin blanket offered little protection from the elements. Although spring had come over a month ago, snow still pooled in every darkened street corner, but as the day wore on, the tiny cell would boil with heat. America, it seemed to Shorty, was the land of contradictions. Hot and cold. Rich and poor. Beauty and brutality.

Another contradiction you could add to the list was wet and dusty. Despite a storm the previous night, a cloud of dust surged down Bennett Avenue towards the jailhouse. In his short time here, Shorty discovered dust was a constant of the American West. Even inside a saloon, if you didn't keep a hand over your drink, you might find a thin layer of sediment in your next sip. The previous night's storm hadn't managed to moisten the baked landscape at all, it only slowed the timetable for Shorty's eventual escape. If not for that accursed storm, he might have expected a jailbreak last night. His dimwitted partner feared storms, but he was near. Shorty could feel it.

Shorty only hoped the brute would wait until nightfall. The less people who saw him, the better. Once bullets started flying everywhere, it was more likely Shorty would get injured rather than his large companion. Still, time was running out. By his math, he could survive another one, or possibly two days without food or water.

Shorty had no imagination for lying, so after his arrest, when they had started questioning him, he simply refused to talk rather than make something up or incriminate himself. In turn, the sheriff refused him food or water, suggesting it would *loosen his tongue*. Medically, that was an impossibility, yet Shorty had rolled his tongue around experimentally a few times to detect possible looseness. He quickly concluded *loosen his tongue* was more useless American slang, rather than something to be taken literally.

Bottomless hunger and unslaked thirst presented no real problem for Shorty. Quite the opposite. Never one to miss a chance for study, Shorty viewed their pangs with detachment, curious to examine them. He'd never had a chance to study the effects of starvation on the human body, and he delighted at the unique opportunity. When his stomach groaned, he counted the duration and logged it in his mind for future analysis. When his dry lips split, parched from the elevation, Shorty mentally recorded how long it took them to scab over before splitting again. The real, proper torture was not having a pencil and ledger to record his observations.

He reassured himself that soon he would be free, and return to his work, although *where*, he had no idea. Cripple Creek would have been perfect, but there were other towns out West. Towns with cold winters and hard earth. Once rescued, he would simply start over. Setbacks were simply new puzzles to be solved. The sheriff had only denied him food and water. He hadn't beaten Shorty, and for that Shorty was grateful. Sheriff Dallas Fingers seemed to be on the level. The sheriff's brothers, Raleigh and Montgomery, the ones who *had* beaten and arrested Shorty, were a different story.

A boxy trailer pulled by two black horses materialized from the thick cloud of dust. The only people on the street were casino dealers reporting for work and they stopped in the street to gawk, taking off their hats and scratching their heads. Open on four sides, iron bars ran up and down the trailer's sides, making it look like a cage on wheels. Inside was a single man

## MIDNIGHT SPRINGS

in long underwear, covered in blood, his face buried in his hands, as if he were crying. Shorty thought the cage seemed overkill for just one man.

The wagon paused long enough to let the townsfolk get a good look, letting Sheriff Dallas Fingers prove he was earning his pay. The blood-drenched man lifted his head to stare at the black iron birdcage mounted to a pole in the center of town. Three fat crows fidgeted inside the cage, their intelligent button-eyes watching him hungrily, as if they might peck those delicious gore-soaked clothes right off his back. The man's mouth opened and closed wordlessly in horror as the wagon resumed its bumpy ride.

Shorty had yet to understand why those black cages frightened everyone so. He had spotted them in numerous towns spread across the American West, but when he had asked their purpose, no one would tell him. No one wanted to talk about them. They were too afraid.

The trailer bounced along Cripple Creek's uneven streets until it lurched to a stop in front of the jailhouse. For Shorty, this new arrival was a matter of curiosity, but nothing to fear. There were seven empty jail cells. Another prisoner in the mix wouldn't change his calculus for survival unless they placed him in Shorty's cell. That seemed a low probability.

Outside, Sheriff Dallas Fingers and a young helper jogged out to meet the trailer. The sheriff, tall and lanky, drew his pistol and pointed it at the blood-soaked man. His helper withdrew a large skeleton key from his vest pocket and unlocked an iron padlock. The sheriff ordered the new prisoner on his feet and out.

The man's belly was distended, stretching the blood-soaked clothes across a belly so swollen, he appeared pregnant. A heavy chain clinked between the man's hand and ankle irons as he hopped down from the trailer. He grinned over his shoulder at the sheriff, saying something Shorty couldn't hear that earned him a hard boot in the behind. Looking defeated, the new prisoner said nothing more, taking abbreviated steps towards the jailhouse. The sheriff's pistol remained pointed squarely at his back for every step.

Shorty was starting to have a bad feeling about this. Filled with sudden dread, he decided to review the facts. Stroking his ratty beard, he muttered to himself, "I've been here for eight days. It stormed two nights, preventing his travel. On foot he can travel approximately...twenty miles a day, that means he should be here to break me out by—"

Bat doors swung open, interrupting Shorty's estimates. The helper came in first with another set of keys. The helper, an unconfident kid named Horace, had snuck Shorty the occasional bowl of water when the sheriff wasn't looking. The boy was no more than twelve or thirteen, the iron keyring looking oversized in his small hands. Anytime the keys to his cell were out, Shorty paid keen attention to their movements so he could point them out to his partner when he arrived. Out in the street, Sheriff Dallas Fingers tapped his foot impatiently as he held the new prisoner at gunpoint in the blinding

morning sun.

“Don’t you move a muscle,” Horace said, trying to sound tough as he unlocked Shorty’s cell. “I got an eye on you. You try anything and Dallas will fill you full of holes.”

Sheriff Dallas Fingers came up with the nickname *Shorty* for two reasons. First, Shorty *was* diminutive in stature. He was unashamed of his 5-foot 4-inch frame, nearly a head shorter than Horace, who himself was a head shorter than the tall, lanky sheriff. Secondly, Shorty refused to give his real name, and the sheriff had needed to call him something, *anything*. Everyone in America it seemed had a nickname. As unoriginal as it was, until rescued and miles from this place, Shorty was the only name he planned to answer to.

“Stop jawing with Shorty, Horace!” the sheriff yelled. “I don’t pay you for conversation. Get that cell open so we can move in the new prisoner!”

The boy grumbled under his breath, “Don’t talk so much, Horace. Shoe my horse Horace, he likes to kick. Clean my gun Horace, the trigger is sticky.”

“Horace Chissum, get on with it, you ignoramus!” The sheriff pronounced it *ig-NO-ramus*, as if it were three words, stretching it out.

“Coming, sir!” Horace opened the cell and without another look at Shorty, scurried towards the open door. Horace flattened himself against the wall, giving the sheriff a wide berth. With dawning horror, Shorty realized the new inmate would not be held in any of the empty cells in the jailhouse but would instead share his cramped cell. It made no sense. Completely illogical! Shorty’s brain buzzed with this new data and began to recalculate his odds of survival.

The bloodied man held his hands up as he was marched in. He wore full-body long underwear, complete with a flap in the back designed for outhouses in cold weather. The fabric was shredded and soaked through, as if he’d not just spilled blood, but bathed in it. Examining the man for injuries, and seeing none, Shorty hypothesized the blood belonged to someone else. This new variable unbalanced the equation.

“Listen, sheriff, you got me all wrong here,” the new guy pleaded. “I don’t know what you *think* I’ve done, but I didn’t do it! I was an invited dinner guest at that ranch.”

Sheriff Dallas pointed at the man’s full round belly, “You definitely ate your fill, but I don’t think you were a guest. By the mess you left, it looked like you slaughtered a dozen animals. Goats, a few horses, a chicken, but mostly donkeys. And then you ate them. *Ram*. With your bare hands.”

“They slipped me something in the wine! Honest!” pleaded the new prisoner. “I’m as surprised as you. One minute, I’m drinking some fine wine, and next thing I know, I’m out in the field where you found me, covered in blood. Find the WWSF or the owner of the Busy Bee Ranch. They’re the true villains here. Arrest them!”

“Villains, eh?” asked the sheriff. “You think they butchered their own livestock to frame an innocent man? Do you know who owns the Busy Bee?”

The new prisoner shook his head.

“My brother owns the Busy Bee,” the sheriff snorted, letting it sink in. “Shortly after we found you, we found him passed out in a barn as if he’d been drugged. Probably by you. And he doesn’t have guests over. *Ever*. There is no *they*. He lives alone. Maybe you’ve heard of him. Name’s Norman Fingers.”

The bloodied man considered, and his expression dropped further, if that was possible. “Not, *Abnorman* Fingers? The one who says animals talk to him and—”

He never finished his sentence. The sheriff slugged him hard in the jaw, knocking him to the ground. “You don’t call him that. That’s not his name! He’s a good kid!” The sheriff breathed hard, his face flushed, eyes bulging, ready to deal another slug if the new prisoner said one more wrong thing. Shorty realized the sheriff wasn’t so different from his brothers, after all.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t mean it. It’s just that—”, the new prisoner looked for words that would keep his jaw intact. “I didn’t... I didn’t know... that the Fingers family lived in these parts. I thought you were all in Texas, that’s all. So, if he’s... Norman... that makes you...”

“Dallas Fingers. *Sheriff* Dallas Fingers.”

“I meant no offense, Dallas... er... *Sheriff Fingers*, I mean.” The bloodied man took a deep breath and swallowed all the blood in his mouth rather than spit it on the floor. He pointed at the open cell door. “Is that my cell? I think I’d like to go in and rest a bit.” With that, he crawled into the cell on his hands and knees. For the first time, he noticed Shorty, looking both embarrassed and angry at someone witnessing such a humiliating exchange. Shorty side-stepped to the corner near the barred window, deciding that if he couldn’t give the man back his dignity, he could give him space.

Dallas Fingers motioned over his helper, Horace. Dallas raised an eyebrow, appraised the two men in the cell. He seemed to mull his options, and then he leaned down, whispering in Horace’s ear. The boy’s eyes widened. “I won’t get in trouble, will I?”

“Of course not, Horace,” he whispered through gritted teeth. “Who would you get in trouble *with*? I’m the sheriff! You do as I tell you. Now, get along.” And with that, Horace handed over his key ring and left.

The sheriff locked the cell and hung the big iron ring on a nail near his small wooden desk. Dallas removed his gun and holster, draping them across the desk. Next, off came his hat and he wiped his sweaty brow with a kerchief, ruffling a head of thin gold hair, almost the same shade as Horace’s. Without the hat, the sheriff was handsome in a boyish way. The sheriff had tidy, uniform features Shorty noticed. Symmetrical. Well-aligned.

The sheriff leaned back in his chair and put his boots on the desk to

address the bloodied man. “So, you’re telling me, my brother, Norman Fingers, had *you* over as his guest? That’s your story? It’s not too late to change it. You can come clean before the judge’s gavel falls on—”

Gunfire erupted in the street, interrupting the sheriff. Horses neighed and a woman screamed. The sheriff jumped up, grabbing his gun belt. “What now?” he growled and stormed out, the batwing doors swinging behind him.

Shorty hopped up to peer out the barred window, worried his liberator had come too soon, in broad daylight no less. He craned his neck but couldn’t see anything from this vantage. When he looked away from the window, the bloodied man had sidled up close enough that his warm breath tickled Shorty’s arm. For a long moment their eyes locked, and Shorty thought it highly probable he was about to be strangled with the chain running between the man’s hands and feet.

Instead, the man offered a disarming smile. “How do you do? The name’s Alfred Drum. A pleasure.” He offered a blood-stained hand, and even though there was clearly gore under the fingernails, Shorty shook it. “Everyone calls me Red.”

Shorty nodded, looked the man up and down, and asked “Red? Because of all the blood?”

“The blood? Oh, that! No, no, no. All *this*,” he motioned to his crimson-stained clothes, “Is just a misunderstanding. Red is short for Alfred, and because of the red hair.” Red raised his cuffed hands as high as he could to point at his thick red eyebrows, mutton-chop sideburns, and shoulder-length mop of ginger hair. Although caked with blood and bone fragments, Shorty found him quite striking. Shorty was no stranger to blood or bone fragments.

“That’s funny, though,” continued Red. “Great sense of humor you have there. I like you already.”

Shorty had not made a joke but forced a smile nonetheless to pretend that he had. Shorty was not a joking man, but he had an appreciation for interesting body parts and facial features. Hair color wasn’t Red’s only interesting feature, either. The man had large, expressive eyes, the pale green of milky emeralds.

“What’s a nice guy like you doing in a dump like this?” Red asked. “Wait, don’t tell me.”

Shorty was here because he hadn’t followed his own plan, but he wasn’t about to tell Red Drum that. The plan had been to travel to Colorado and set up residency until winter. After he’d become a regular, someone people knew and trusted, part of the landscape, he would have secured a night clerk job at a hotel. Once winter set in, they stopped burying the dead in Colorado. The ground was too cold, and they stacked bodies in unused hotel rooms like cordwood until the spring thaw. On long winter nights when the hotel wasn’t busy, Shorty could have snuck in and had his pick of the inventory. It was an inspired plan, but before he could enact it, he had grown impatient, as always,



## MIDNIGHT SPRINGS

and he'd gotten caught. He still couldn't figure out how the Fingers brothers, Raleigh and Montgomery, had found him like that in the middle of the night, *red-handed*, to borrow the American slang.

Alfred "Red" Drum rubbed his mutton chops while he mulled over a possible backstory for Shorty. "Hmmm. When you said, 'the blood', it came out *dee blood*. I have an ear for accents, and yours, although light, sounds European. It's not immediately distinguishable, so I'm guessing you know more than one language."

Shorty mentally cursed himself, but said nothing, remembering the plan to remain completely silent until his rescue. This man's ridiculous appearance had distracted him, made him let his guard down, and now he had revealed something he would have preferred to keep hidden.

Red continued, "A European accent draws a lot of attention in a small town like Cripple Creek. People probably thought you were a high roller, yeah? Saloon ladies and down-on-their-luck miners flock to the wealthy to buy them a drink." Red ventured, "Did you get in trouble buying a drink for someone's gal?"

Shorty said nothing, neither nodding nor shaking his head.

"I can see you are the quiet type. I respect that," said Red. "How about I make you a deal, eh? I'll tell you what happened to me out at the Busy Bee Ranch, and then you can tell me what happened to you. What do you say?"

Shorty had no interest in talking but learning Red's crime might firm up his calculations for survival. Besides, what could it hurt to listen? It might buy him some time.

As if reading his mind, Red asked, "What could it hurt to listen? You've got nothing but time. Besides, this cell won't hold me long. They never do."

Red began his story first by telling Shorty that he was an actor, maybe the best that ever lived, and then moved onto how he came to the Busy Bee. Both men became instantly engrossed in the telling, Red's animated way of speaking, pantomiming everything, pulled the reluctant Shorty in as well. The two men were so distracted by the story, they forgot all about the sheriff and the gunshots outside.

Creeping up to the jailhouse wall from the outside, Sheriff Dallas Fingers ducked his head below the barred window. He heard every word of Red's confession.

## RED

Earlier that morning, Alfred “Red” Drum held up a crumpled telegram to make sure the address printed there matched the wooden sign towering over him.

“The Busy Bee Ranch,” he announced. “This is the place.” The sign stretched between two telegraph poles straddling a gravel path that disappeared over a small hill. The words *The Busy Bee Ranch* were painted in jaunty gold lettering next to a matching cartoon honeycomb. Nailed to the poles were small golden bees, turned in all directions, ready to swarm anyone upsetting their work. “Odd place,” Red snorted.

A fat drop of his own sweat landed on the telegram, smearing the type, but he could still read it:

ELITCH THEATRE, DENVER, COLORADO  
ATTN: MR. ALFRED “RED” DRUM,  
OH MEN OF DARK AND DISMAL FATE. SAW YOU PERFORM THAT SONG ON STAGE  
AT ELITCH. MESMERIZING! THERE IS SOMETHING SPECIAL INSIDE YOU. I WANT  
TO BOOK YOU FOR A PRIVATE EVENT. ONE NIGHT ONLY. AUDIENCE OF ONE.  
HAVE WIRED A TRAIN TICKET AND ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS. PREPARED TO  
OFFER ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS MORE UPON COMPLETION.  
EVENT IS APRIL 25. THE BUSY BEE RANCH, CRIPPLE CREEK, COLORADO.  
ARRIVE BEFORE NOON OR THE DEAL IS OFF.  
YOUR BIGGEST FAN,  
THE WWSF

There was an unspoken assumption among rich theatergoers that actors like himself, for the right price, would dress up, say whatever you wanted, and *do* whatever you wanted. It was an insult to his artistic integrity. A slap in the face to the craft. But it was also a true assumption.

Only one thing about this whole endeavor rubbed Red the wrong way. It wasn't that they had known his nickname was Red. He was a famous actor,

## MIDNIGHT SPRINGS

and people everywhere knew his name, or so he liked to believe.

It wasn't the anonymous client. He was used to that. It wasn't unusual for someone to slip money to a stage manager and ask for his company after a show. It was usually harmless enough, an invitation to have a few drinks. Sometimes they wanted more than just drinks, but not usually.

Red wasn't bothered by way the telegram had ordered him around either. As an actor, strict adherence to directions mattered. If you missed your curtain call or stage directions, you missed your next meal. That was just show business. None of those were the problem, but there was something wrong here that he just couldn't put his finger on.

Also, that acronym had gotten under his skin.

He'd never heard of the *WWSF*, and he knew of every wine-sipping, cheese-eating, tuxedo-wearing, hoity-toity, arts council there was. Knowing your financial backers was also just part of the business. Yet, none of those snobby clubs had the initials *WWSF*. He could only guess what it might stand for, but hoped it was *Widow with Small Fortune*.

Another drop of sweat hit the telegram. The morning had been cold, so he'd worn long underwear beneath his clothing, but now, the sun was bright overhead, and he could feel sweat dripping into every crevice. If he sweated any more, he'd show up for the big event smelling like a wet dog. He had hoped to change clothes upon arriving, but now it was less than an hour until noon, and the telegram had been very clear what would happen if he were late.

There was just one more matter to attend to before he went in.

Red looked both ways to see if he was being watched, and when he was satisfied the coast was clear, he used his pocketknife to pry one of the golden bees off the pole. He side-chomped the bee, to see if it were real gold, but sadly, it was not. Painted iron. What a bunch of untrusting cheapskates.

Still, Red pocketed the iron bee anyway, and marched up the drive. After he crossed the small hill, he came to a modest clapboard farmhouse, also painted honeycomb yellow. On each side of the house's wide front porch were animal pens, positioned directly against the house. Dog pens were often built this way, next to the house for protection and so kids could play with the family pet. In this case, instead of a family dog, one pen was filled with goats and the other with donkeys. The goat enclosure was full of stacked hay bales and crudely built wooden tables set up as stairsteps. Someone had built a kind of goat playground and the goats were happily climbing all over it.

From where he stood, he could see yellow signs and more iron bees mounted along the railing of both the goat and donkey enclosures. Each enclosure had one large sign flanked by smaller signs, all of which were that same, nauseating honeycomb yellow. The larger sign at the goat enclosure read *Kid's Playground*. Red was more a city dweller but even he knew baby goats were called kids. A play on words. Funny.

The larger sign at the donkey enclosure read *Burro's Burrow*, and Red was amused by yet another play on words. It grew close to noon, but he had a few minutes to spare, so he strolled over to the donkey enclosure to read the smaller signs to see if they were equally clever. The signs read:

*Fun Fact: Donkeys are considered stronger and smarter than horses!*

*Fun Fact: Donkeys are naturally opposed to canids like dogs, foxes, and wolves!*

*Fun Fact: The strongest donkey will become the leader and defend the pack against predators!*

Red hadn't been paying attention to the movements of the donkeys as he read this last bit, otherwise he might have noticed most of them moving as a group to the back of the pen, while the largest one sidled close to him.

He spotted signs with the names of individual donkeys and began reading them aloud. "Pinkney. Favorite food: Apples. Likes a good scratch behind the ears."

*Don't we all?* thought Red.

"Nikkie. Favorite food: Barley Straw. Can be cranky in the mornings." He furrowed his brow at that before reading another sign. "Clarabelle. *Leader*. Favorite food: Sugar Beets. May bite when threatened but has a gentle heart."

Heavy, wet, breathing interrupted his reading, and he looked down to see a donkey's wet muzzle poking through an opening in the fenceposts. Absently, he reached down to pet it, saying, "Hey, girl. Which one are you?" Big yellow teeth shot out at his hand, and Red was barely able to pull back in time to avoid the creature biting down on his knuckles. Red's first instinct was to give the donkey a kick for trying to bite him, but he looked over his shoulder, afraid someone might be watching. If he wanted to make that other hundred dollars, he must be on his best behavior.

Red stuck out his tongue at the animal, and it brayed loudly at him, "Eeeee-Awwwww! Eeeee! Eeee! Eeeeeee!"

"You must be Clarabelle," he said. "Well, you don't scare me." But she did scare him. Those teeth were huge, and her head was right at his waistline where large teeth should never go.

Stepping far enough away from the pen to ensure it didn't bite him in the rear end, Red turned to scan the property. He spied even more animal pens, containing horses, chickens, and pigs further away from the house. And just beyond those, the largest pen of all. Inside were even more donkeys. Hundreds maybe, milling about in small groups in the fields beyond the house.

What kind of place had he been invited to? Was this some sort of backwater petting zoo or children's menagerie? Why else would someone own so many donkeys? You couldn't eat them, and they were notoriously stubborn. Red had been hired to dress up in all manner of costumes to do all manner of debauchery for past clients, but he drew the line at one thing: children's birthday parties.

## MIDNIGHT SPRINGS

He wasn't about to dress up like a clown to entertain a bunch of snott-nosed brats who would pull his hair and kick his shins. But if it were a birthday party, where were the children? Where was anyone for that matter? The place seemed deserted.

"Hello? Anyone home?" Red called to the seemingly deserted ranch, although he doubted anyone would hear him over all the racket from Clarabelle, who was still braying at him. He decided to try his luck at the farmhouse. The WWSF hadn't told him where to go once he reached the Busy Bee. He stepped up on the porch and admired two sturdy rocking chairs, positioned to look out upon the grazing livestock. The homeowner was clearly an animal lover but didn't seem like the theater-going type.

Red rapped on the door once, and it eased open with an ominous *Creak!* He peeked in the crack with one bulging eye but couldn't see anything inside.

"I'm heeeere!" he called into the gap. "Alfred Drum, actor extraordinaire! At your service! I'm looking for the WWSF. They hired me, see?" He pushed open the door a little wider and peered inside. The room was dark, but his nostrils flared at an unknown scent wafting his way. Something had died in there. The smell was sour and sweet. Like rotten fruit.

Creeping inside, Red paused in an old-fashioned sitting room, the walls lined with framed black and white photographs of cats and dogs, sitting up regally as if they had posed for the pictures. Flickering orange light crept in from the next room, and Red's nose told him that was the same direction as the unusual smell. In the next room, stood a large dining table, set for a fancy dinner party. Place settings were neatly laid out, napkins meticulously rolled, candles were lit, and glasses of wine poured, but no one sat at the table. "Hello?" he tried again but heard or saw no one. The author of the smell became immediately evident. Pots and cast-iron pans full of food covered the table, yet none of it appeared eaten.

Upon closer inspection, none of it even appeared edible.

One pot held slimy, spoiled cabbage, while a nearby pan held some type of biscuits, so splotchy with mold they looked like blueberry muffins. "And this used to be beans, from the looks of it," he said to himself, disgusted. There was one full bowl of beans at the head of the table, but no sign of the person who had meant to eat them. Red scanned the rest of the spread. "These were baked apples." A fat nightcrawler wriggled among the cinnamon and sugar. On instinct, he put his hand above one of the pots.

It was still warm. That meant the food was freshly made rather than something that had sat out to spoil. But who would be crazy enough to prepare a feast of rancid food? And who would be crazy enough to sit down and eat it? Red circled to the head of the table, where there was a folded note waiting, which read:

*Kindly join us in the barn. We have been expecting you. The show is about to begin.*

Next to it, stood an unopened bottle of dark wine. Absentmindedly, Red

picked up the bottle and used his pocketknife to uncork it. He sniffed it to see if it was expired like the rest of the food. Luckily wine rarely went bad, usually getting better with age. Smelling nothing out of the ordinary, Red took a small exploratory swig. It was a little coppery perhaps, but not bad.

Red wondered what new mess he'd gotten himself into this time. Ever since that fiasco with the Mayor of Philadelphia, nothing about his life had been quite normal.

Whatever *this* was, the whole trip would be a waste if he didn't get his final payment. That was crucial, considering he'd already spent the first half of the money. Red had thought this mystery job cause for celebration, and he'd spent a wild night in Denver indulging in things he didn't really remember. Afterwards, he'd been grateful his host had supplied the train ticket. He was left with so little money that he'd been forced to walk several miles from the train station to the Busy Bee, rather than taking a coach, causing him to sweat profusely. When he asked for directions in town, he was answered with, "Why would you want to go out there? Nobody goes out there."

All the curtains were drawn in the house, making all the rooms dim, so Red gingerly retraced his steps towards the front door, sure that at any moment he would trip over the outstretched hand of his mystery host, lying on his back, dead and grinning from ear to ear. Nervously, he made his way back to the open front door without incident, swigging the wine straight from the bottle to calm his nerves. There was something odd about the wine. Was it blackberry? Muscadine? He couldn't tell.

Once outside, the sun climbed higher in the sky towards his noon deadline. Red was out of time. Scanning the property, he counted no less than six barns. Which one was he supposed to report to? He decided to start with the closest one and work his way through all of them if he had to. As he crossed the dooryard, he took a long swig, turning the bottle all the way up. When that large guzzle hit his stomach, it clenched violently, and the bottle slipped through his fingers to the ground, shattering. All too late, he realized what gave the wine its unique taste.

Blood. The wine has been spiked with it. The pain in his gut told him that somehow, he'd been poisoned.

The ranch seemed to shimmer and swim before him. His vision blurred, making it harder to get his bearings. The odd menagerie of animals swirled around him, their braying and bleating sounding like cruel schoolyard laughter in his ears. The animals' faces stretched into exaggerated, ghoulish grins. They surrounded him, their faces stretching and swirling, turning their crooked barnyard teeth into jagged yellow fangs from a nightmare. They seemed to creep closer, preparing to corner him. They were everywhere, no matter where he turned. There was no escape. They were laughing at him with those yellow teeth, egging him on somehow. This was all a joke at his expense. "Stop it!" he groaned. "JUST STOP IT!"

## MIDNIGHT SPRINGS

His heart pounding in his ears, Red stumbled over his own feet and fell to the ground near the donkey enclosure. The donkey from before, Clarabelle, was so close he could feel her rank breath on his face. Red desperately wanted to wipe that smug, crooked grin off her face, off all their faces. He wanted to make them pay for laughing at him. The rage inside him mixed with the blood-laced wine in some unexpected way and he could feel a physical change coming over him.

An ear-splitting howl broke Red's train of thought, and his entire body broke out in a cold, sickly sweat. Before he lost consciousness, he had time to realize a few things.

That howl. That awful, blood-thirsty howl. It was him. And it made no sense. Not because he had howled like a blood-thirsty animal on the hunt for fresh prey. Red had made that sound before. Lots of times since his run-in with the Mayor of Philadelphia. It made no sense because the sun was still up. There was no full moon in sight.

Before everything went dark, Red finally realized what had unnerved him from the very beginning about his invite to the Busy Bee Ranch.

There was no return train ticket. This was a one-way trip.

## DALLAS

When Dallas Fingers heard the gunshots from outside the jailhouse, he may have said, “What now?”, but he knew what was going down. Dallas made it his business to always know what was going down. He grabbed his hat and ran out the batwing doors, still fastening his holster around his waist, although he didn’t need to. It was all just for show. Part of the game.

Down the street, smack in the middle of town, as instructed, stood Horace Chissum, firing a pistol into the air. The pistol was Dallas’s own Colt Dragon, chosen because it would make the loudest noise; easily heard from the jailhouse. Although Horace stood where Dallas had told him to, he’d already fired five times, despite instructions to fire only twice.

Any other town, Horace would be dead. Shot by some wannabe hero stumbling out of the saloon, loaded on false courage. But this wasn’t another town. This was Cripple Creek. No hero was coming. For starters, Horace’s mother owned the very saloon he stood in front of, and she would not suffer some drunkard to shoot her only son. Dallas had never met a shrewder woman in his whole life than Lorena Chissum. She was pragmatic too, with an amazing dry sense of humor, an example of which being that she, a former saloon girl herself from Poverty Gulch, named her illegitimate son Horace.

Dallas had also never been so attracted to a woman with only one eye.

No one knew how she lost the eye, only that when she looked at you with her good eye, she bored deep into your soul, sizing you up. That hard stare created instant intimacy and either made you quake in your boots or instantly fall in love. Sixteen years ago, when he first arrived in Cripple Creek, Dallas Fingers acutely experienced both at once.

The other reason no one was going to shoot Horace was that Dallas ran heroic types out of town. Getting rid of wannabe heroes was part of his job description. When his father secured him the job as sheriff, he gave Dallas only two rules. His father growled, “Number one. You’re the boss. Never let



them forget it. Number two. Run out anyone who might want to be the boss. Best case scenario, they'll undermine you. Worst case, they're after your job. Your control of all situations must be absolute." That was the only training Dallas received, and it had served him well. Dallas's old man was a lot of things, especially if half the urban legends about him were true. But he was no fool.

Despite no previous experience, Dallas Fingers had taken to being sheriff the way some people sit down at a piano and instantly play by ear. Perhaps his greatest talent was designing ingenious techniques for getting the job done. Like denying a prisoner food or water, while having your assistant secretly bring them water to win their trust and get a confession. When that didn't work, he moved to one of his best tricks, Kill or Confess, which was underway at that very moment.

Dallas waved both hands to signal that Horace should stop shooting. No one would shoot the ignoramus, but he might spook a horse and get some fool kicked in the head, creating more work for Dallas.

The boy did not see him and emptied the chamber completely until the pistol clicked over and over as Dallas reached him. Horace looked pleased with himself until he saw the look on Dallas's face. Horace knew he had screwed up again.

"Horace Chissum, you ignoramus," whispered Dallas through gritted teeth. "Put the gun down. I told you *two* shots. Not six shots. Not ten shots. *Two* shots!" He grabbed the Dragon roughly, causing Horace to flinch away. Dallas holstered it and grabbed the boy by the scruff of his shirt. He dragged the boy back towards the jailhouse like a chastised puppy getting his nose rubbed in puddles left on the rug. Thirty feet from the jailhouse, Dallas stopped and placed his hands on the boy's shoulders, looking him square in the eye. "It's time for Kill or Confess. What's your job?"

"To stay completely quiet, sir," recited Horace.

"*Until?*"

"Until one prisoner kills the other or..." Horace stammered, forgetting his lines. "Or..."

"*Or*, until one of them confesses to a crime."

"Dallas, you really think one of those will happen?"

"Always does."

Kill or Confess was a reliable technique for greasing the wheels of the justice system. Either he got a confession out of one or both criminals, or one would prove he was a murderer by killing the other. At least one man would likely swing for what he'd done. Or was about to do. Either way, they were off the streets.

"But Dallas, what if one of them is innocent, and the other *is* a killer? Aren't we sending an innocent man to his death?"

"Horace Chissum, let me ask you a question. Do know Old Bill Hudson

down at Creek's End saloon?"

"Sure! Everyone knows Cookie. He makes the best biscuits. He—"

"Next time you see him, ask him something for me. Ask him if he can make an omelet without busting the eggs." With that, Dallas put one finger over his lips suggesting it was time for Horace to shut up. He motioned for Horace to follow, and they snuck around to the alley behind the jailhouse.

Two empty whiskey barrels stood in the alley, turned over for seating. One barrel sat under the jailhouse window, and the other across from it. Dallas mounted the barrel below the window like a horse, and Horace took the other one. Pulling rolling paper and a pouch of tobacco from his shirt pocket, Dallas rolled a cigarette while he listened in.

"Everyone calls me Red," drifted from the jailhouse window.

After a moment of eavesdropping, Dallas realized his prisoners weren't just degenerates, they were opposites. One wouldn't say a word, and the other didn't know when to shut up. Dallas hoped he could get lucky, and they'd kill each other. That would be a tidy resolution.

Dallas felt Horace studying him. The boy couldn't hear the conversation from where he sat across the alleyway. That was by design. One startled gasp from the boy might ruin the whole thing. Dallas held up his palm, *wait for my sign*.

Dallas would draw a finger across his throat: *Kill*. Or he would move his hand like a duck quacking: *Confess*. Horace bit his nails with anticipation as he waited for the verdict. At first, Dallas's body constricted like a cat ready to pounce, eager for action. But eventually he rolled his eyes and made the quacking gesture. The boy always bet on Kill. He was a good kid, but he had a lot to learn about human nature. Few people had the steel to kill a stranger on their first meeting.

Dallas listened longer than he cared to, the conversation outlasting his cigarette and his attention span. This cad Alfred Drum was not only the Busy Bee Butcher, a nickname Dallas devised to make this arrest legendary, but apparently, Red was also an actor. The man prattled on and on about the art of acting, and to hear him tell it, he was one of the finest actors living today. It was the most long-winded confession since that inebriated preacher last fall.

Boredom eventually overtook Dallas. Pressing his back against the building, he pulled his hat down over his eyes. The day grew hot, and between his boredom and the heat, Dallas dozed off.

Dallas heard that mothers could sleep soundly while one ear listened for their babies crying. He didn't know if that was true, but he knew that sheriffs had a similar skill. His body dozed, but his ear listened for anything of importance. When he heard useless words from Red Drum, like *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, or *Caesar*, which came up many times, his brain discarded them, allowing the rest of his body to continue napping. Words drifted in, and out

again like an ocean tide, until one word pierced his sleep like an icy knife in the back.

That solitary word forced his eyes open and his whole body jerked awake so violently his hat tumbled off his head. Hopping down from his barrel, Dallas grabbed Horace by the arm and without a word, dragged him out of the alley, towards the center of town.

Once out of earshot of the jailhouse, Horace asked, “What did he confess to? We already know he butchered all those animals at your brother’s ranch. Did he confess to more?”

“You could say that.” Dallas didn’t look at the boy, just tugged him along. “It’s something out of our league,” was all he said, but Dallas wore a look of determination that always meant trouble for someone. When Dallas came to a stop, they stood before a large, black iron birdcage hanging on a pole in the middle of town.

Horace gasped, “We’re calling the Man in Black?!?”

“Yep. Never thought I’d see this day,” admitted Dallas. Calling the Man in Black went against the old man’s rules. The Man in Black was the very definition of a heroic-type. But what else could he do?

“Have you ever called him before?” Horace tried and failed to hide a goofy grin.

“Nope,” said Dallas, and unable to help himself, he too broke into a grin. “I have to admit, I’ve always wanted to.”

Three large crows hopped around inside the cage, turning their heads, sizing up Dallas and Horace. The crows were bigger than Horace’s head, and the boy looked hesitant to get too close, even if it meant a chance to meet the Man in Black.

“You know what to do?” quizzed Dallas. “You know how to call him?”

“Of course!” blurted Horace. “Everyone West of the Mississippi knows how to call the Man in Black. You tie a note to one of the crow’s feet. You write the name of your town, the amount you’ll pay, and...” Horace paused, uncertain.

“—*And* the name of the monster you want to kill,” finished Dallas.

“But Dallas, we don’t have a monster in Cripple Creek! You know if you call the Man in Black and there’s no monster, he will—”

“Don’t you think I know what he’ll do if there’s no monster? Don’t worry,” said Dallas Fingers. “There’s a monster, alright.”

“What monster?”

“We caught ourselves a werewolf,” grinned Dallas.

With the Man in Black on his way, that left one loose end to tie up.

Red Drum, the *actor extraordinaire*, mentioned something called the WWSF, claiming they’d sent him a telegram. It was a crazy notion, but after the Man in Black left town, Dallas decided he would ride back out to the Busy Bee and see if there truly was someone else out there. After locking up

Red Drum and finding his brother asleep in a barn, Dallas had been so relieved at finding Norman unharmed, that he had ignored everything else. When he turned his mind back to the crime scene and picked through the details, one swam up from the darkness and he felt foolish for not noticing it before now.

Norman had been asleep in the barn while Red Drum had slaughtered his livestock, yet Dallas remembered an odd smell coming from Norman's house. It was the smell of a bread baking and cinnamon. If Norman was asleep in the barn, who was cooking the food?

It was crazy to think someone could be out there at the Busy Bee, alone with his brother, right under Dallas's nose. Crazy to think someone had cooked while Norman slept and Red...did what Red did. Beyond crazy, in fact. Wasn't it?

Before he could make another trip to the Busy Bee trip, the town had burned, and Dallas with it.

ABNORMAN

Norman Fingers wasn't a bad host. He just didn't know how to entertain humans. Donkeys made sense to him. And cats too.

Cats, he understood.

If he'd been a better host, he might have invited Dallas in to share the meal that had been lovingly prepared and laid upon the dining room table before their guest's arrival. He'd forgotten his manners. He'd forgotten everything after his brother Dallas had shaken him awake with straw in his hair and on his clothes, itching all over. Dallas must have thought him a lazy loafer, sleeping the afternoon away in the barn to avoid the day's chores. Norman might have defended himself, explaining he didn't even remember going to the barn, but he hadn't.

Upon waking, he had drifted dreamlike around the Busy Bee, sleepwalking from one horror show to the next. His brother Dallas kept one firm hand on his shoulder, talking softly to him, and steering him away from anything too gruesome. Norman looked at his brother dumbfounded, the words coming out of his mouth not registering. The only thing that registered was the blood. And the man covered in it.

More words came from Dallas, but they were distant, as if spoken across an open field at normal volume. The first words that seeped into Norman's brain were, "Why don't you go inside?" Dallas added, "I'll send over some folks to help you clean this up."

Norman nodded and made his way to the back porch, forgetting his manners, forgetting to invite his brother to the meal Nell had prepared. Before entering the clapboard house, Norman carefully removed his straw covered chaps on the slatted back porch. Always the back porch, never on the front porch. He knew how Nell felt about that. Taking care of all the animals at the Busy Bee Ranch, *his* ranch, was hard work, dirty work, and Nell's rule was that dirty things didn't belong anywhere you might entertain

company. The rule had made no sense to him, because until today, there had been no company to keep things clean for.

He walked in to find her straightening the silverware on the table, pawing at it, making sure the fork and spoon sat perfectly parallel to one another. “Can you finish setting the table, Norman dear?” Nell asked sweetly.

“Why?” asked Norman, staring off in a daze. “Who is there to eat the food? Our guest...he...ate already.”

“Norman, I’m so sorry about that. It’s been so long since we entertained. I...couldn’t have guessed it would go like that. I invited that awful man here, and...I’m sorry.”

Norman didn’t understand how she couldn’t have seen how things would turn out. Nell always knew how things would turn out.

“We can still eat, Norman,” said Nell. “We *should* still eat. I don’t want this food to go to waste. After all, I made all your favorites. You look peaked dear, is something wrong?”

There *was* something wrong with Norman Fingers, or, as they called him in town, *Abnorman*. “Nothing’s wrong,” Norman mumbled back, flashes of the Busy Bee Ranch before and after the blood-soaked man’s rampage tumbled through his head in quick succession. In one vision, he saw his goats, skipping around and nipping at each other. In the next, he saw their broken pens, full of broken animals. He pictured his neat little chicken coop, the hens roosted serenely inside, followed by the building looking like it had exploded from within, feathers scattered everywhere. His mind was caught in a loop, reliving everything, but his hands still seemed to work, and they joylessly placed bowls and plates on the table.

Even through his haze, the aroma of a lovely dinner drifted in, somehow penetrating the shield his mind tried to put up to block everything he’d just witnessed. Nell was right. It was his favorite meal; spicy beans with grilled onions, a pot of salty, stewed cabbage, fresh baked corn fritters dripping with butter, and for dessert, baked apples swimming in cinnamon and sugar. His stomach grumbled despite itself, urging him to take at least one bite.

“You don’t have to eat,” said Nell. “You’re in shock right now. None of this makes sense, but I promise, a few bites of this food, your *favorite* food, and you’ll start to feel more like yourself.”

Earlier in the afternoon, Nell had arrived at the house, in a whirlwind of words and actions, befuddling Norman as usual, who hadn’t known she was coming. He never knew when she would come or go, and that was some of her appeal. With no explanation, she started immediately preparing a meal big enough to feed ten people. When she pulled out her special candles and wine glasses, Norman mistakenly assumed they were having a romantic dinner. That was when Nell had mentioned they would have a guest.

“Our guest,” Norman had asked, “Is he from Cripple Creek? Will he call me... *Abnorman*?”

“No, he’s not from Cripple Creek,” she had said. “I found him living in Denver, not knowing who or what he was and wired him a train ticket. He will not call you that awful name. Before all is said and done, no one will be left to call you that ever again. I’ll see to that.”

Satisfied, Norman had left her to cook. He tried not to question her, but her behavior had been increasingly odd lately. Nell seemed distracted, as if her mind were elsewhere. If Norman didn’t know better, he would have suspected she was running around on him. Seeing someone else. But that was crazy.

Norman didn’t like that word, *crazy*. People threw that word around a lot, sometimes at him, usually without understanding the whole picture. He pushed the thought away. If Nell were splitting her time elsewhere, would she really have made him his favorite meal?

Long ago, Norman had given up trying to figure out why Nell did the things she did. She kept her own counsel and following along to discover what would happen next was Norman’s favorite part. Calm and unrushed, her quiet plans always seemed to work themselves out in time. Yet lately Nell seemed impatient, as if she were waiting on him for something. It couldn’t be that she wanted him to commit himself only to her. He had done that already, in every way he could think of, going so far as proposing marriage numerous times. Each time Nell politely refused, saying that she liked their relationship just the way it was, but that someday, when the time was right, he would come live with her.

“Try one of the corn fritters, Norman. They’re your favorite.”

He picked one up and took a tentative bite, chewing mechanically at first, and slowly he began to eat with more gusto, chewing faster. “Why did we even need a guest?” Norman asked, perking up. “I thought it was going to be just the two of us tonight. A nice night in.”

“I invited him *for* us, Norman,” she purred. “Try the stewed cabbage. A few more bites are all you need.” When he had, she continued, “We needed him.”

“What could a stranger possibly have done for us? Unless...” An idea occurred to Norman. “Was he a preacher? Could he have married us—”

“He’s not a preacher. Far from it,” she smirked. “He’s more like... a dark cloud rolling in.”

Norman scratched his chin. “Is this a riddle? *How is a man like a dark cloud?* You know I’m no good with riddles.”

“No, no, no,” she giggled, “Nothing like that. I’ll explain. Let’s say a ranch, like your Busy Bee Ranch, went through a drought. What would you do when you caught sight of a dark cloud?”

“Throw my hat in the air and cheer, I reckon.”

“Even though you couldn’t know if that dark cloud brought a summer shower, or a spring flood?” Norman bowed his head, thinking it over. She

waited for him to catch up. “Would you still cheer?”

“I reckon so,” admitted Norman.

“Do you know why?” she asked. Norman shook his head that he did not. “I’ll tell you why. Because you’d be so grateful to end the long drought, that you’d take a flood, or even a lightning strike, all so that your farm—”

“Or ranch,” Norman added helpfully, taking in a heaping spoonful of cabbage.

“*Or ranch,*” she corrected, “All so that your ranch could get what it so desperately needs.”

“So, our guest is a dark cloud,” announced Norman, proud that he had figured it out.

“Not quite. He’s merely the catalyst for the coming storm,” Nell said. “Do you know what that word means? *Catalyst?*”

Norman began picturing a directory, perhaps leather-bound, with addresses, for cats to find other cats, but didn’t say so. He didn’t want to appear ignorant in the ways of cats. Least of all in front of Nell.

“*Ingredients,*” supplied Nell helpfully. “Catalysts are like ingredients in a recipe. Or a potion. Do you know what ingredients are needed for a really powerful storm, my dear one?”

“Rain? Wind?” asked Norman, scratching his head. How the sun, the wind and stars worked were a mystery to him.

“Hot and cold,” Nell purred. “You take hot pressure and cold pressure, and you slam them together. It can create high wind. Rain. Even lightning.”

“Was our guest hot pressure, or cold pressure?”

“Oh, he is cold,” she purred. “All the way to his core.”

“And who is the hot pressure? You?”

She chuckled and might have blushed if that were possible for her. “I’m flattered Norman, but no. The hot pressure is only a few miles from here. In the Cripple Creek jail, behind lock and key. The hot one has something I need. It wasn’t easy to find a man with his skills, and now I’ve got him just where I want him.”

“So...*hot,*” Norman raised a corn fritter in his left hand. “And cold,” he raised a corn fritter in the other and squashed them together, then took a bite out of each. Through a grin and a mouthful of food, he asked “How hot is he?”

“Hot as a lightning bolt.”

“I see.” Norman didn’t, but he felt calmer with each bite. Nell always knew just how to put things so that he understood, and her cooking always seemed to make him forget his cares.

Feeling foolish that he could ever think poorly of her, Norman teared up, choking on his words, “You’re too good to me. I don’t deserve it. This food. This guest. You always know just what I, what *we,* need.” He was on the verge of proposing marriage again when something troubling occurred to him.



## MIDNIGHT SPRINGS

“The hot and the cold...” began Norman. “You said they’re in the Cripple Creek jail? Together?”

“This very minute,” she smirked. “I made sure of it.”

“But Dallas is the sheriff. He runs the jail alongside Horace. Will he get hurt? Will he—”

“You’re thinking about *them* again, aren’t you? Your brothers?” She sauntered over and sat down across from him at the table.

“Yes,” he admitted. His brothers were on his mind a lot lately. Suddenly he wasn’t sure he could eat even one more bite. “Will Dallas be alright?”

“Norman, dear, I know you worry about them, but you have to be strong. And you are so very strong. It’s what drew me to you. But...” she paused, changing her tone. “You will be tested. You will need strength for what comes next.”

“Is something bad going to happen? Because I have this feeling, in my gut, that something awful is about to happen. Maybe to Dallas, or one of my other brothers.” Norman looked up from his now empty plate, but Nell would not meet his eyes. “Or even to you. I don’t think I could live with that.”

“Don’t be silly,” said the large black cat sitting in a high-backed wooden chair at the opposite end of the table. Nell was larger than a normal house cat. Little brown spots like sprinkles of cinnamon speckled her sleek black fur. She smiled at Norman in her special way, both reassuring and a little mischievous. He loved that secret smile. And she knew it.

“Nothing bad is going to happen to me. Not now. Not ever. I’ll always be here, Norman dear. Our futures are intertwined. I’ve told you that. We belong together. I can’t become the WWSF without you.” Nell absent-mindedly considered her paws and licked them clean, although Norman couldn’t see any dirt on them.

There were those letters again, *the WWSF*. She always cleaned her paws when she mentioned it, and when Norman asked what they stood for, she always changed the subject.

Nell purred, “As for your brothers, you can protect them from this world, but not from themselves. Each is a slave to their own vice. Lust. Pride. Envy. Gluttony. Greed. Wrath.” She eyed Norman for agreement, and he nodded vigorously on cue. “You’re not responsible for them. Their problems are of their own making. They bite off more than they can chew. Especially your brother Raleigh.”

“They say he’s the fastest gun in Colorado, maybe in all the West,” bragged Norman. Despite how Raleigh treated him, Norman was still proud of his famous brother, the gunfighter.

“The only thing faster than his hands is his mouth,” said the cat. “I have my suspicions he started everyone calling you *Abnorman* in the first place.” Norman flinched at her using his nickname. “Raleigh and the others will reap

what they sow in the end. We all do.” She smirked, her sharp little teeth visible and glistening white in the candlelight, but her sly smile disappeared when she saw the worry on Norman’s face. “You needn’t worry about them,” she reassured him. “Leave everything to me. In the meantime, maybe you should eat some of the beans...before they go cold.”

“I’m not sure I have room,” he said, patting his full belly.

“Eat!” she said. “I insist.”

“Maybe just one bowl,” Norman said as he slopped beans into his plate, and despite his earlier worries, he was able to eat. After a few hearty bites, Norman conceded, “You’re probably right.” After a few more bites, “Of course, you’re right.” He winked at her, and continued digging into his food, not noticing the beans spilling down his chin. Through a mouthful, he asked, “What did I do to deserve you?”

“You’re important to me. You take care of me, Norman,” purred the big black cat. “It’s why I only talk to you.” Norman knew what that was code for. She would pull a disappearing act soon. Nell was careful not to let others see her talking to Norman. He would be on his own again soon until the next time she appeared without warning. Norman tried not to let it bother him that their relationship always remained a secret. It was just her way, he assured himself. It had always been her way.

The cat continued, “Don’t worry, Norman. Everything will work out fine. I’ve taken care of everything you need because you always give me what I need. And tonight,” Nell batted long eyelashes at him. “I need it again, Norman my sweet.”

The big black cat hopped down from her chair and sauntered the length of the table, her long tail swishing from side to side. Stopping next to Norman’s seat, Nell looked up at him expectantly, her green eyes shining and bright.

Norman opened the palm of his hand, the one holding the spoon, and examined the scars there. Some were faint memories, while others were quite fresh, still pink, having barely healed. “Blood?” asked Norman, neither afraid nor concerned. “You need more?”

“Yes, Norman. Blood is powerful and it too can be a catalyst. We’ll call this the *Before* sample.”

“Before what?”

“Before the storm. It’s all coming together, Norman, and I’m ready to throw up my hat and cheer! Now, take the empty wine goblet and I’ll do the rest. I need a little now, and a little later. We’ll call that the *After* sample. Tomorrow night, maybe?”

Norman nodded, put down his spoon, and presented his palm with the wine goblet held underneath, ready to catch every drop.

The cat’s claws came out and went to work on Norman’s palm until the goblet was full.

## SHORTY

“What do you mean you were *howling*?” asked Shorty. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s a thing that happens,” explained Red with a shrug. “Once a month I...*change*.”

“What do you mean *change*? Change how? Into a grown man that communicates through animal noises?”

“No, I’m a werewolf,” Red said, a shy smile formed at the corner of his mouth, as if he were a little proud of the specialness of it all.

“A *werewolf*?!” gasped Shorty. Once again, his plan to say nothing, to share nothing, forgotten.

“Yes, a werewolf. Part-man. Part-wolf. Changes at the full moon.” Red punctuated it with a small wolf howl, “Arooooo! I. Am. A. Werewolf.” Red delivered each word with gusto, the way only a showboat actor can. “You see, a werewolf—”

Before he could perform a monologue on the rules of being a werewolf, his audience of one blurted, “Preposterous! What do you take me for? Some sort of charlatan? Such a creature goes against every law of natural philosophy! I can’t believe I listened to that entire, boring, long-winded story, only for it to end like this!”

“Boring? *Long-winded*?!” gasped Red.

Shorty snorted and stormed away to the other side of the cell, grumbling, “What a waste of time.”

“Wait a minute, pal. Maybe you don’t know what a werewolf is. Perhaps there is a language barrier. A werewolf is—”

“A hoax. A fake,” snapped Shorty. “It’s the kind of superstitious nonsense peasants use to keep their children in bed at night. The science of a part-man, part-wolf simply does not work at a molecular level. Man cannot shape-shift or metamorphose. If you expect me to believe you can—”

“I believe you, Red,” interjected a voice from the doorway.

Sheriff Dallas Fingers stood in the doorway, the sun at his back, darkening his face. He spread his legs in the stance of a gunfighter, and his thumb absentmindedly stroked the curved handle of his holstered pistol. “And I know someone else who will believe you too.”

In unison, Shorty and Red asked, “*Horace?*”

The sheriff choked a bit, his big moment ruined. “No, not *Horace!* The Man in Black. And he’ll be here before the next full moon to take you in, kill you or whatever he does with your kind. Maybe he’ll make you into a nice werewolf-skin rug.”

“But today’s April 25th. The full moon isn’t for two more days,” Red gasped.

“If you’re really a werewolf, why did you change this morning *before* the full moon?” asked Shorty. “And who is this *Man in Black?*”

Red ignored him, staring out the window towards sky. “There’s no way he can be here that fast!”

“We both know that he can.” Dallas grinned, but there was no humor in it.

“Oh, this is bad. This is so bad.” Red paced back and forth in the small cell. Red stopped in his tracks. “Wait, how much did you offer him for me? Whatever it is, I’ll double it. I’m a very famous actor. I have money.”

“Twenty-five dollars!” announced Horace from behind the sheriff.

“Horace Chissum, you ignoramus!” growled the sheriff. “I told you we were not going to tell him the amount.”

“Twenty-Five dollars?!? That’s all?” asked Red, outraged. “I’m worth at least fifty. In fact, I’ll pay you the fifty to take it back.”

“You know there’s no taking it back,” said the sheriff. “The crow is on its way to Midnight Springs right now.”

“When the sun is high, no need to be sly,” recited Horace carefully. “When skies turn black, best watch your back...”

“*Though daylight sings...Beware! Midnight Springs.*” Horace and Dallas finished together in unison.

“Ha!” guffawed Dallas, slapping his knee. “I forgot all about that old nursery rhyme! Every kid from here to St. Louis must know that one.” He turned his attention back to his prisoner. “Funny thing about Midnight Springs, home of the legendary Man in Black. Nobody knows where it is. No one knows how he gets to his bounties so fast. No one knows *who* he really is. I couldn’t take it back if I wanted to. And believe me,” grinned Dallas, “I don’t want to. I can’t wait to meet him.”

Dallas strolled to his desk, sat down, and propped his boots up luxuriously on the desk. “You know Horace,” bragged Dallas, “I saw the Man in Black once. In El Paso. A few years back.”

“You never told me that,” gasped a starstruck Horace. He pulled up a chair, and both men ignored the two prisoners.

## MIDNIGHT SPRINGS

“This was shortly after I became sheriff of Cripple Creek. My brother Raleigh and I rode down to El Paso to collect some ponies our brother Monty won in a card game. So, I step out of the stables for a smoke while they fed and scrubbed down the ponies for the trip home and there is this enormous crowd. People running towards the middle of town as if free money was being handed out. I stop a guy running by and ask him what’s all the ruckus about.”

“Haven’t you heard? The Man in Black has brought in Neptune Nelly and she’s about to swing for her crimes. Everyone in town is going to watch.”

“Who is Neptune Nelly?” asked Shorty, and all three of men turned, surprised to hear him speak.

The sheriff went back to his story, relaying it directly to Horace. A paper shotgun shell lay on his desk and as he talked, he spun it. “Neptune Nelly is a famous witch. They say she eats children, makes cows give sour milk, rides a broom. You know, standard witch stuff. I’d heard tales of that witch before, but I was more curious about the Man in Black. He’s a legend. They say there’s no monster he can’t trap or kill.”

“I heard once he killed a ghost, all wrapped in grave clothes and chains,” said Horace.

“Horace Chissum, you ignoramus, you can’t kill a ghost. They’re already dead.” Dallas added, “Although I heard the same thing. I also heard he once traveled to Charleston, South Carolina and killed a lizard-man there, even though it was out of his jurisdiction, so to speak.”

“He doesn’t go that far normally?” asked Horace.

“I think he sticks mostly to the West. Anyway, I was curious if I could meet him,” said Dallas. “So, I follow the crowd to the center of town, and immediately I knew it wasn’t happening. They erected gallows and you couldn’t get close for the crowd. I was way at the back, but I could see him. We all could. He stood straight as a nail, unafraid of anything. Neptune Nelly stood next to him on the gallows stage, her hands tied behind her back, wriggling like a snake.”

“What did the Man in Black look like?” asked Horace.

“You know what he looked like. Everyone knows,” said the sheriff. “He wore all black. His holsters, gloves, and even his spurs were black. And he wore a round black gambler’s hat.”

“His head, was it hairless and pale as they say?”

“Yep. His skin was so ghostly white it glowed like sunshine off fresh snow. Even from the back of the crowd, I could see there wasn’t a hair on his head. I don’t think he even had eyebrows. There’s something unsettling about a man with no eyebrows.”

“Was he the tallest, skinniest man you’ve ever seen?”

Shorty thought it sounded like they were describing the grim reaper.

“Yep. The man walked in long, smooth strides, almost like a stork. I bet

he was twice as tall as Shorty over there. But you want to know what impressed me the most?" asked Dallas.

"What?" all three men asked in unison.

"The man was fearless. Absolutely fearless! Even from where I stood, I could see the witch was the most crooked, ugly, old crone you've ever seen. She was a hundred years old if she was a day. Nothing but a bag of pointy bones going in all the wrong directions. I nearly threw up my breakfast just looking at her. A few of the women in the crowd fainted and children hid behind their parent's britches' legs. The Man in Black wasn't the least bit afraid to put that noose around her neck. He asked her if she had any last words."

"What did she say? What did she say?" asked Horace.

Dallas continued spinning the shotgun shell on his desk, as if it helped him focus on the story. "The old crone said the filthiest things I've ever heard a human say. Raleigh had joined me by then, and even he blushed. Raleigh used to work on a freighter boat in Wilmington and has heard every filthy thing imaginable. This beat them all. I won't repeat it, but afterwards, she cackled, high and sharp. The Man in Black paid no mind and put that noose around her neck even as she cackled. I was afraid she'd bite him with all those jagged, ruined teeth."

"He said, 'Neptune Nelly, for crimes against Nature and Man, too many to list here, I sentence you to Death. In the name of the great state of Texas and under the witness of God Almighty, may the Devil himself meet you at the gates of Hell.' And then he nodded at a man who was no doubt the Mayor of El Paso. The mayor pulled the lever, dropping the floor out from under Neptune Nelly."

Horace gasped, covering his mouth.

"I've been to hangings before, lots of them, even administered a few, but that was the worst. They always put a black bag over the guilty man's head. But not the Man in Black. When someone offered him a black bag for her head, he swatted it away." Dallas Fingers looked off in the distance. "I saw the life pass out of Neptune Nelly. The Man in Black wanted me and everyone else to see it. She kicked. She screamed. And she looked directly at us the whole time. Asking around afterwards, I heard the same thing from everyone there. They all agreed, 'She was looking straight at me when she died.'" Dallas took a deep breath, "How could that be? How could we all feel her eyes on us? How could we feel like she was looking straight at us when she died?"

"For a long time afterwards, I kept a bottle of whiskey next to my bed to help get me to sleep, because I'd close my eyes and I'd see her there. That face. That *amful* face. Laughing like it was all so funny. Like it was the best joke in the world."

This kept getting better. Shorty was locked in a cell with a werewolf. And

## MIDNIGHT SPRINGS

a monster hunter was on his way. With each passing moment, Shorty felt less confident he would be rescued.

## THE MAN IN BLACK

The Man in Black heard the crow approaching before he saw it. He had a sharp ear. By sound alone, he could gauge what manner of creature approached, from which direction and how fast. This particular skill came in handy in his line of work, allowing him to intercept nearly anything that walked, crawled, shuffled, or flew his way.

A crow's wings cutting through the air made a distinctive sound, one that most people ignored or couldn't hear at all. But not the Man in Black. Most people might notice a crow's sleek black coat, or its large, strong body, stockier, more muscular than most birds. To the Man in Black, he had long since learned to ignore all those things. To him, a crow was simply an alarm clock, telling him it was time to get to work. Another crow. Another job. Another monster. Thankfully, it was too soon to be another witch.

Recognizing the sound of his messenger crow approaching, he returned to his chore. He raised an axe, letting it rise and fall against a downed tree. The tree's trunk was three times as wide around as the Man in Black's own skinny waist, but with each rise and fall of the axe, deep cuts appeared in the wood. A few more cuts and it would be severed completely.

The Man in Black hoped the crow carried work that wouldn't force him to leave before the cutting was done. He had looked forward to this chore from the moment he left the cabin and discovered the fallen tree. Chopping up a downed tree grounded you. It felt *real* in his world of unreality. It also gave a man time to think. Time to sort things out. Granny was acting differently of late. Distant. Evasive. Not herself.

Behind him loomed Midnight Springs, fabled home of the Man in Black. Smoke poured out of its stone chimney in smooth regular puffs. He marveled at how whispers and wild stories had built up this place he called home. According to legend, like the Fountain of Youth, Midnight Springs was impossible to find. This was mostly true. Its rocky entrance was hard to reach,



## MIDNIGHT SPRINGS

and even if you discovered it, most visitors would die trying to get past Gilda and her followers. Nasty surprises awaited anyone foolish enough to come unprepared.

Some searched for Midnight Springs in the name of revenge, but most sought out its riches. The Man in Black was a well-known, well-paid commodity. People naturally assumed if they found his cabin, they would not only find money amassed from years of lucrative work, but they would also find priceless magical treasures. If rumors were to be believed, he was sitting on everything from the Book of the Dead to the sword Excalibur.

While he did possess forbidden books useful to his work and a magic sword or two, it wasn't the relics that made his home unique. The building itself was an architectural oddity. From the outside it appeared built in the style of a Mongolian yurt, round, with a domed roof. Instead of the yurt's animal skins, Midnight Springs was constructed with carefully laid limestone. Hand-carved runes and drawings crisscrossed each limestone brick. Like the Mongolian yurts, the structure could withstand gale-force winds coming off the mountain. Also, like its Mongolian counterparts, the cabin was of a modest size, but only on the outside. Inside, a spiral staircase cut deep into the mountain, traveling far below ground level. Once underground, tunnels snaked off in every direction, like the roots of a giant tree. The Man in Black imagined it like a giant clock tower, jutting into the earth, rather than into the sky, built upside down.

Granny claimed the cabin had once been an ancient wishing well, dug so deep that it led straight to Hell. She further claimed previous residents went to the bottom to commune with the dead or make human sacrifices. Amused, the Man in Black had pointed out that wishing wells and human sacrifices were very different.

"Sometimes, sacrifices and wishes both must be made if you wish to live through the night," she had replied matter-of-factly.

The Man in Black didn't believe the part about the underworld, but he'd never personally ventured to the bottom. He had tried it several times, but at a certain depth, no lantern or torch stayed lit. It was as if something kept blowing it out, intent on leaving you deep underground in abject darkness. Besides, the deeper you went, the colder it became. The air down there became hard to breathe, thick with cold; the moisture settling heavily into your lungs with each drawn breath. He remembered that suffocating cold all too well. He could feel it now. Even here in the sunshine, chopping wood.

The Man in Black's dark button-up shirt, with its rolled-up sleeves, exposed lean forearms rippled with wiry muscle. Pale scars crisscrossed his skin in a spiderweb of scar tissue. A few feet away, his wide-brimmed gambler's hat and matching black coat hung on the branch of a tree to keep them clear of flying wood chips. On the same branch, the crow landed and cawed at him for attention.

Ignoring the bird, the Man in Black continued swinging his axe. He had nearly cut the tree in half, and wasn't about to stop now, no matter what job the crow might have brought for him. The crow didn't appreciate being ignored and cawed at him, "WORK! Time to go to WORK!"

Granny oversaw the crows—

She oversaw everything and foresaw even more.

—and she found it amusing to teach the crows to say a few choice phrases. She well knew a crow squawking, "Time to go to work," would always get his attention. The crows had become so good at speaking that they often repeated words they heard before his customers sent them on their way. The Man in Black gave his axe one last, powerful swing, splitting the fallen tree completely in half. Both pieces fell away neatly. "What's the job?" he grunted, tossing the axe aside.

"Werewolf! Werewolf!" screeched the crow.

The Man in Black rolled one finger, beckoning the bird to come closer. Silently, it glided from the branch to his bare forearm. The crow balanced on one foot so the Man in Black might easily untie the note from its leg. Its other clawed foot wrapped tightly around the Man in Black's forearm, the talons digging in. He barely noticed, reading the note aloud:

Teller County Jailhouse  
Cripple Creek, Colorado  
Werewolf  
\$25

The Man in Black snorted at the note. Twenty-five dollars to kill a werewolf? It was a low-ball offer if he had ever heard one.

The Union Pacific Railroad had once paid him three \$20 gold pieces *per* werewolf after they attacked train cars outside Nebraska. On that occasion, he rode atop the train as it passed through Deuel County at night, with the Union Pacific detective by his side. The Man in Black carried only his repeater rifle and one hundred rounds of silver bullets. He stalked from car to car, leaping across the gaps in between, picking them off one by one as they ran alongside the train, howling.

It would have been easy money, except the detective refused to pay afterwards, claiming there was no proof those weren't anything but regular wolves, and that any decent marksman could shoot those from the window of a moving train. At the next stop, the Man in Black and the detective rode on horseback to the scene to find no dead werewolves. Instead, they found a dozen naked men and women lying dead in the grass next to the train tracks. In the end, Union Pacific paid up for the werewolves, and extra to cover the expense of the silver bullets. They also agreed to fire the detective under one condition: that the Man in Black never speak of his work with the Union

Pacific Railroad.

The Man in Black surmised from the note that they may have already locked up the werewolf in the jailhouse. If so, it could be easy money. If he were to wait a day or two, he might receive another crow letting him know the bid increased, possibly as high as \$50, however he'd be tangling with a werewolf during a full moon. If he left for Cripple Creek now, it would almost certainly be dark when he arrived, but there'd be no full moon to contend with. As a rule, he tried not to take on werewolves at night during a full moon. They could be...unpredictable.

He patted the crow on the head and produced a piece of corn from his shirt pocket. The crow gobbled it down greedily and flew off, presumably back towards Cripple Creek. Should he go tonight or wait?

The Man in Black couldn't decide, and whenever that happened, there was only one thing for it. He would ask Granny for advice. Unfortunately, he entered the cabin only to find it empty. A lukewarm bowl of beans and a plate of bacon awaited him. He found a handwritten note that read, "Eat up. You'll need your strength. Also, you might need these." Next to the note, lay a small vial of wolfsbane and a box of silver bullets. She always knew before he did. Even before the crow had arrived.

The Man in Black had his answer. It was time to suit up.

He descended the spiral staircase to the floor below the kitchen and main living space. The Man in Black kept an armory on that level, as well as the fold-up cot he slept in each night. Guests would have found that odd, sleeping in an armory, but it was simply a matter of pragmatism. He didn't feel safe sleeping upstairs near the windows. Any further down would be like sleeping in a coffin. Sleeping in the armory, a place he spent most of his time anyway, just made sense.

As he equipped himself, he counted off the items on his mental checklist.

Two silver-bladed Bowie knives: Check.

Two black cross-body bandoleers, loaded with Granny's silver bullets: Check.

Two silver-handled Colt pistols: Check.

The Man in Black never left home without his signature Colt pistols, the ones with the silver grips. They were enchanted to never miss their intended targets, which sounded more impressive and useful than it was. He gathered a few items more for the insides of his long black coat and ate the beans and bacon as suggested by Granny's note. The Man in Black ate slowly, on the off-chance Granny might show up. He hoped to discuss the werewolf bounty with her, but she never appeared. She was usually there to see him off and he wondered where she could be.

When the Man in Black emerged from the cabin, he was armed to the teeth. The sun had dipped behind the tree line, and he could already feel the chill of nighttime in the air. It was nearly dark. Even without a full moon, he

regretted not getting an earlier start. You could see everything better in the daylight.

The Man in Black returned to the tree holding his gambler's hat and long black coat. He loaded the inside pockets of the coat, slid neatly into it, and placed the hat on his pale, hairless head.

Ten yards from the south side of the cabin stood two small wooden buildings, identical in almost every way. The only difference being the carving on the doors. One had a star and crescent moon carved into its door, while the other had a bird in flight carved into its door.

"The outhouse and the Abouthouse," he said aloud as he checked his weapons one last time to make sure they were in order. He opened the door adorned with the bird carving and stepped inside. "Time to go to work," he said, and disappeared in a poof of orange smoke.

## HORACE

The prisoner known only as Shorty clapped slowly in mock applause. The sound was loud in the stark silence following the sheriff's Man in Black story, and it startled everyone, especially Horace. Shorty gave him the creeps.

"*Cavemen*. That is what you are. Cavemen sitting around a fire telling scary stories of things that go bump in the night." With each word, he became bolder, his volume and tone of a professor in a lecture hall. "There is no such thing as werewolves, witches, ghosts, or sea monsters," said Shorty. "Man believes these things exist, and *every* time, science disproves them. In China, unearthed skulls of giant lizards were taken as proof of the existence of dragons. We now know they belonged to the extinct creatures, *dimosaurs*. In ancient Greece, they discovered the skulls of the woolly mammoth, and because of its fused eye cavity, mistook it for the skull of the Cyclops. Two hundred years ago the Salem Witch Trials only proved that paranoid men in power will do anything to stay in power. There is nothing that Man can imagine that science cannot explain."

Horace didn't know what a woolly mammoth was, but if it had just one eye, like his Mama, he felt like he might like a woolly mammoth. He couldn't recall having ever met one. That was the kind of thing you'd remember.

"Well, well, well," taunted the sheriff. "He *can* speak. We just needed to find a topic worthy of the professor here."

"I'm not a professor. I'm a doctor and a scientist," announced Shorty.

"Well *doctor*, I propose an experiment," said Dallas. "You men of science love that kind of thing, right? I've called the Man in Black, and he travels abnormally fast. Faster than any horse or any train. I suspect he'll be here around sundown. When he arrives, I'll let you test your science against the thing in the cell with you." Dallas motioned at Red. "You've been locked up Shorty, so you haven't seen what your friend did to all those poor animals at my brother's ranch. You may not think he's a werewolf, but I can vouch for

the fact that he's a wild animal. A killer."

Horace's heart went out to those poor animals. So many dead. It was the stuff of nightmares. And to make matters worse, most had all only been partially eaten. Shredded and ravaged, most of the meat would go to waste.

"When the Man in Black arrives," Dallas continued, "We'll leave you two together in this cell. We'll see if werewolves are real, or if your science is stronger than his monster."

Horace didn't like Dallas goading these two. It gave him a dark feeling in his stomach. It was a bad idea, but Horace wasn't going to correct Dallas in front of the prisoners.

Shorty and Red shared a nervous glance.

The sheriff laughed loudly. "One of you," said Dallas, "Or both of you, are going to die tonight when the Man in Black arrives. The real shame is that he's barely going to earn his money killing a werewolf that's already locked up. But, just to show you I'm not made of stone, I'm going to treat you both to one last meal before you leave the great state of Colorado. Horace, come here. Go down to the saloon and tell them I want two of their best biscuit and gravy plates for two prisoners having their last meal. They won't charge you. Feeding the condemned is a kindness they offer. Now, get along." With that, Horace ran out the door and up the street.

When Horace walked back, one plate in each hand, the sun had nearly set, and the daylight was almost gone. He walked faster, thinking about Dallas's story of the witch, Neptune Nelly. With darkness approaching, he didn't want to be out on the street alone. Every shadow seemed to move out of the corner of his eye, but he when he whirled to look, nothing was there.

When Horace entered the jailhouse, Red and Shorty held their noses high, sniffing the biscuits and gravy. Cookie had heaped the plates high with steaming food. The gravy was thick, peppery, and full of sausage. Underneath, there were no less than four biscuits on each plate. Both prisoners groaned with hunger when they saw the food.

The sheriff pocketed the shotgun shell he'd been spinning and taking the plates from Horace, placed them on his desk. He bent his head over them, drinking in the smell of the steaming hot plates. Still bent over, Dallas locked eyes with Red and Shorty, sat down and began shoveling the food in his mouth.

"Noooo!" moaned both prisoners in unison.

After wolfing it down solidly for a few minutes, the sheriff slowed to a leisurely grazing pace. He ate from one plate, then the other, then back again. Horace realized he meant to eat both plates and torture them with it. Seemed a little cruel, even for Dallas.

The prisoners watched every bite go down, unable to turn away, as if by watching they might get some vicarious enjoyment of the meal. Horace also watched, glaring, feeling embarrassed and tricked, knowing that Dallas didn't

pay Creek's End, his mother's saloon, for the meal. He trusted Dallas, who usually had a plan in mind. Even if they didn't always make immediate sense to Horace, they always seemed to work out in the end. Watching Dallas eat this meal, which he didn't pay for, and which rightfully belonged to two dead men, Horace decided maybe the sheriff didn't always have a plan. Sometimes, like a cat, Dallas just liked to toy with his prey before he gobbled it up.

Shorty, normally withdrawn and quiet, had spent the last few days starving in favor of silence. Now Horace saw a change in the man. The small, bearded man focused with razor-sharp attention on a white glob of sausage gravy on the sheriff's chin. Impossibly suspended there, the fat glob should have fallen off Dallas's face or been wiped away. Instead, Shorty seemed transfixed by it, and Horace sensed something large was building inside the small man.

The sun finished setting in the West, and darkness crept into the Cripple Creek jailhouse. Shorty asked, "So sheriff, you like scary stories? Stories about werewolves, witches, and things that go bump in the night?"

"Sure." The sheriff leaned down and licked one plate clean. His eyes never left Shorty.

"I'm not a gifted storyteller like you two, so I will be brief. In my village, back home, there is a local legend. There was once a brilliant young Doctor of Chemistry who lost his mother to scarlet fever. He refused to accept her death, so he could not grieve for her. He couldn't face the pain of burying her, so he buried *himself* in his work. The young doctor believed he could bring her back if only he could find the right mixture of chemicals, and the right power source to energize her lifeless flesh back to life. Before attempting this on the body of his beloved mother, he decided to first try it on a test subject."

Sitting in the corner, Horace squirmed in his chair like a kid that's suddenly realized how badly he needs to pee. Horace felt exposed, vulnerable somehow and had a sudden urge to run home before it got any darker outside. He didn't like this story. Not one bit. This was different than tales of Neptune Nelly. This seemed real. *Close*. Close enough to bite him.

"The doctor went to the morgue and found a cadaver suitable for his experiment, the unclaimed body of a thief. An unusually big man, he stood about eight-foot-tall, killed by the constable and his men while fleeing his crime. He had a ruined face, as he'd taken a musket to the eye, and another had taken off his ear. While at the morgue, the doctor found a replacement eye from one body, and an ear from another. He replaced any other damaged or missing parts as necessary." Shorty paused, smiling to himself. "Although the doctor's focus was chemistry, he proved himself adept at picking missing parts and even better at sewing the parts back on. The stitching was so delicate and finely done that you could not see the seams."

Red slowly backed away from his cellmate. "Hey buddy," Red asked shakily, "What did you say you were locked up for?"

“I didn’t,” said Shorty.

Red retreated further until his back bumped against the bars, with nowhere to run. The sheriff said nothing. In the darkened room, his eyes seemed to be the only source of light; they shined, and they never left Shorty’s, not even to blink. Horace had seen that look before. Dallas was being challenged, and Dallas didn’t like being challenged.

Once again Horace thought of a cat, and how they looked just before they pounced on an unsuspecting bird. But this was no unsuspecting bird. Horace knew why they had locked up Shorty, even if Red did not. The man was sick. Twisted. Almost as bad as the Busy Bee Butcher.

“I won’t bore you with the specific chemicals injected into the test subjects’ muscles, veins and even into his brain,” said Shorty. “Once complete, the missing piece was the power source, and the young chemist knew just what to use. To create life, he needed a power source as strong as life itself. He built a giant copper lightning rod out of the top of his watchtower lab and connected it to his subject. He waited a few days before the perfect storm came. Lightning struck the rod, and his experiment was a success.” Shorty’s eyes gleamed with greedy light.

Dallas used his finger to wipe up the extra gravy out of the rim of the plates and licked his fingers clean. Unimpressed, Dallas said, “I thought this was supposed to be scary.”

“The experiment was a success,” continued Shorty, “But at a terrible cost. The lightning may have given life, but it burned every stitch and scar black, and turned the big man’s skin the thick yellow color of sun-bleached leather. His new eye and new ear drooped, as did all the replacement parts. He became hideous, even to his Creator, his skin a spider’s web of blackened stitches and dark incision lines. No one could bear to look at his face for even a moment. You had to turn away, lest you go mad. The people in my village called him the Patchwork Man.”

“The villagers say the Patchwork Man stalks from house to house at night looking for fresh parts to replace the drooping or crooked ones. Locals say you’re only safe from him if there is stormy weather. The one thing the Patchwork Man fears is the lightning. It gave him life, and he fears what might happen if it struck again.”

Complete darkness swallowed the room while the small, hairy prisoner told his tale. Dallas was the first to notice. The sheriff pulled a match from his desk drawer and grabbed his lantern. “And what became of the brilliant young doctor?” Dallas struck the match against the edge of the desk, trying to get it to light. “Did the monster kill him?”

“No, something much worse,” said Shorty. “The Patchwork Man follows him. Everywhere he goes. To the Patchwork Man, the doctor is his Creator. His Maker and Master. We are all drawn to our Creator for answers and help when things make no sense to us. The young doctor will never be free,



## MIDNIGHT SPRINGS

enslaved by his Creation. The Patchwork Man *always* follows the young doctor wherever he goes. The Patchwork Man feels no pain, and he does not rest, save for waiting out a storm here and there. When the doctor runs away, the Patchwork Man always finds him. If he runs across Europe. If he runs to America. Even if he runs all the way to *the great state of Colorado*, as you put it.”

“That’s the most ridiculous story I’ve ever heard,” snorted the sheriff. “Completely unbelievable.” His match finally made a flame, and he plunged the match into his lantern, illuminating the room.

Horace gasped as the lantern illuminated a giant figure standing stone silent in the room behind the sheriff. No one had heard or saw him enter. Horace gasped.

It was him! The Patchwork Man! And he was here. Right here in Cripple Creek!

The sheriff seemed to read the look of horror on Horace’s face, but before he could turn around to see what spooked his ignoramus partner, a hand the size of a bear’s paw landed heavy on the top of his head. The force made his teeth rattle together. The hand squeezed. Horace heard a cracking sound and realized it was Dallas’s skull.

Horace bolted through the batwing doors and down the street without looking back.

## DALLAS

When sheriff Dallas Fingers felt the vise-like grip tighten on his skull, one hand went to his scalp to pry it off, while the other went for his pistol. When he touched the giant hand, he knew one thing for certain. The thing gripping his skull was not alive. That was a dead-man's hand.

As his other hand raised his pistol, another colossal hand grabbed his hand and mashed his fingers into the iron trigger guard. The gun went off as the bones in his fingers snapped like kindling. Dallas screamed out in pain, not sure which pain he was screaming from, his skull or his mangled hand. Everything hurt.

"Stop!" yelled Shorty. Instantly, the grip on the sheriff's head and hand first loosened, then released completely. Dallas fell to the floor, writhing in pain and swearing. "Come get me out of this cell, you fool! You can deal with the sheriff when I'm safe from this man." Shorty pointed his thumb at Red. "He purports to be a monster."

"I'm the monster? Really?" asked Red, offended. "*You're* the monster!"

The Patchwork Man finally noticed the bloodied man locked inside with his Master and approached the cell. Red scooted away from the cell door until his back was against the opposite wall. He fruitlessly scrambled for a place to hide, but there was none. The Patchwork Man gripped both hands on the bars of the cell door and pulled. There was a squeal of metal bending as the door bent and folded under his strength. The squeal of metal, awakened Dallas from his stupor of pain.

Dallas pleaded with himself, *Wake up!* If he didn't do something, and soon, he'd die while these two argued over which one was the monster. He pulled himself onto his knees, and using his uninjured hand, drew his other revolver. Dallas put three bullets in the Patchwork Man's large, impossibly wide back. In the small room, the gun's report was deafening. At this short range, Dallas couldn't have missed, but the Patchwork Man didn't seem to

notice he'd been shot. The monster never lost his singular focus on pulling off the iron cell door.

The door groaned until the two hinges snapped. Without looking back, the Patchwork Man tossed the mangled door over his shoulder, where it crashed into Dallas and his lantern. Bowled over, Dallas's gun went off again, this time into the floorboards. The lantern fell behind his desk, its globe shattering. Lamp oil splattered across the floor and immediately burst into flames. The flames licked the oil trail, and soon covered half the jailhouse floor. Dallas froze, not sure what to do next, not sure which was the least dangerous: the fire, Red, or the Patchwork Man.

The Patchwork Man bent and squeezed his considerable bulk inside the cell, which was difficult since his shoulders were wider than the cell doorway. He grabbed Red by the biceps ready to tear him apart. Before he could harm Red, Shorty warned, "Don't hurt this one. I just need him out of this cell. He's a friend... I think."

The Patchwork Man nodded, lifting Red to move him, but he stopped short. Red's arms grew bigger in his grip, the veins bulging, and the muscles inflating like a balloon. The Patchwork Man turned his head, confused. Red's eyes burned yellow, the eyes of an animal. Hair sprouted on Red's cheeks, and his teeth lengthened, growing long and sharp.

"I hate this part," groaned Red. "I'm sorry if I hurt you. It's nothing personal!"

"I thought you were a werewolf!" growled Shorty. "The full moon isn't for two more days! Why are you changing now?"

"I don't know," whined Red. "Something at the Busy Bee changed me. Broke the cycle, maybe."

The Patchwork Man looked revolted by Red's grotesque transformation, and instinctively threw Red's body out the cell door, where it crashed into Dallas. The force of the impact carried both men into the other side of the room, where flames now licked the walls. The Patchwork Man put himself between Shorty and the cell door, shielding him from harm.

Dallas and Red rolled around on the floor, wrestling each other, as Dallas tried to put Red between him and flames. Dallas's clothes smoked and charred, hot against his skin. The room filled with smoke, making it hard to see what was happening, but Dallas knew. He didn't want to admit it, but he knew. Red was changing into a werewolf. It was a fact that Dallas hadn't truly believed until this moment.

With each passing moment, Dallas no longer wrestled a blood-soaked criminal. Now he wrestled a snarling, wild animal, its body a whirl of hair, snapping teeth, and claws. It was all Dallas could do to keep it from tearing out his throat. His only advantage was that the creature still wore chains between his hands and feet, limiting its range of movement. As the two rolled around, Dallas spotted his pistol a few feet away. He couldn't dislodge

himself from the werewolf's grip, so he barrel-rolled them both over to the gun and grabbed it. Raising the muzzle to its face, the werewolf instinctively raked its claws across his hand. Dallas cried out in pain, but managed to get off a shot, the flash of the gun going off into the sea of red fur. The monster released Dallas and he crawled towards the door. Only a few more feet and he could slip out into the night, maybe find a place to lay low.

"You've got to get me out of here," shouted Shorty to the Patchwork Man over the roar of the flames. "We'll asphyxiate from the smoke if we stay in this cell."

Shorty had the right idea. If Dallas stayed here any longer, he'd be dead. Werewolf or no werewolf.

The creature that was once Red Drum stood to its full height, nearly eight foot tall, and roared like a lion. Flexing its hairy arms, it snapped the chains linking its hands and feet. It leapt onto Dallas's back, forcing his face hard into the floorboards. The creature slashed until Dallas's shirt soaked through with blood. He was cut up real bad, he knew that, even though the claws somehow hadn't hurt going in. All he'd been able to feel was the hot gush of his own blood and nothing more. He couldn't feel his feet. He couldn't feel his legs. And just when he needed them the most, so close to making it to the door.

Dallas worked through his options. The flames had followed them across the room, catching on Red's shredded clothing. There was some chance the gamblers down at Creek's End saloon would smell smoke and pull together the town's volunteer fire fighters. As sheriff, he knew most of them. They were a worthless lot, each of them either too old, too fat, or too lazy to care. Not a hero among them. And who did he have to blame for that? He ran all the good ones out of town.

Dallas was on his own.

Maybe he was going about this all wrong. He'd been treating this werewolf like a man, thinking he could overpower it or outfight it. This thing was an animal, a big-time predator. It wanted to hunt not fight. If it found wounded prey, it would swoop in close to finish it off. He needed a weapon and he would need to outsmart it.

He didn't know where his gun was now. It had become lost in their tussle. Dallas considered trying to reach the lantern and smashing what was left of it upon the werewolf's head, but it was already too deep in the flames. That left only one option, the paper shotgun shell in his pocket. With the wolf's clothes burning, it gave Dallas an idea. The black powder in shotgun shells burned hot and fast. To make his plan work, he'd need to use Red Drum's own craft, acting, against him.

"My stomach," moaned Dallas. "You've cut me open! I'm dying!" As death scenes went, it wasn't the most believable, but Dallas hoped it would be enough to do the trick.

The beast seemed to understand the sheriff was finished and flipped him over to feed on the soft, torn flesh of his belly, but when he flipped him over, Dallas grinned through blood-stained teeth.

“Made you look!” Dallas took the paper shotgun shell and tore it apart towards the werewolf. The black powder showered a cloud of grainy dust across the werewolf’s red fur. When the black powder hit the burning clothing, Red Drum became a fireball, momentarily engulfing the werewolf. The creature released Dallas and made a blind charge towards the door, smashing through the frame and batwing doors into the cool Colorado night.

The frame of the door, now burning, collapsed, blocking the exit. A concerned Patchwork Man pointed towards the shattered front door, now engulfed in flames, and shook his head no.

“I know! I know,” said Shorty. “We can’t go that way. We’ll have to find another way out.”

With a sinking feeling in his gut, Dallas realized he wasn’t getting out of the Cripple Creek jail. Kill or Confess had backfired. Red had confessed, and now Dallas would be killed. It was funny, and Dallas laughed despite himself.

You had to laugh at something that ridiculous.

Horace, the boy who he had called ignoramus more times than he could count, had been at least smart enough to know when to run. Dallas hoped the boy was safe, wherever he was. Dallas had put off telling Horace who his father was. Had put it off, waiting for the right moment. Now, that moment would never come, and Dallas realized *he* was the ignoramus.

Dallas had faced bandits, swindlers, bouncers, thieves, and every manner of scoundrel Cripple Creek could muster, and somehow, he’d been too cowardly to tell the boy the truth. Horace was the most cowardly kid he’d ever met, and Dallas supposed that made him an awfully lot like his father. Soon, Horace would meet the bravest man Dallas had ever seen, the Man in Black. Flames reached his boots and crawled up his legs. Luckily, Dallas couldn’t feel a thing. This too seemed funny, and he couldn’t stop laughing.

The Patchwork Man looked towards the window of the cell, pushed Shorty roughly aside, and tore the bars from the window. Shorty protested, “No, no, no, not yet. Wait, we could—” But before he could finish, the Patchwork Man grabbed Shorty, and threw him out the open window. Shorty landed hard in the back alley, knocking over the barrels Dallas sat on only a few hours ago.

Dallas laughed harder, amused by Shorty’s clumsy escape.

The Patchwork Man tried to follow, but he could not fit through the narrow opening. He grunted with displeasure and stomped his foot angrily. The big man gave the wall an angry look and then punched the brick wall with all his frustrated fury. Bricks exploded outward, and one hit Shorty squarely in the head, knocking him over. The Patchwork Man jumped through the opening and scooped up the small man, now moaning in pain,

with blood trickling down his forehead. The Patchwork Man moaned in response, like a dog howling when it hears nearby dogs howling at the moon.

It was all too funny. Dallas was going out laughing. Just like that witch. That was the funniest thing of all. The best joke of them all.

## THE MAN IN BLACK

The darkened Cripple Creek train station closed for the evening shortly after the last train departed for Denver at 6:15. The first floor was used mostly for luggage and equipment, and off to one side stood a door marked *Maintenance: Employees Only*. Inside were disorganized shelves full of hammers, railroad spikes, and wrenches, smelling sharply of machine oil. As the sun crept behind the nearby mountains, orange light glowed around the doorframe of the maintenance closet. The shape of a bird etched itself into the center of the door. Burning its way through, the door gave birth to a perfectly cut, bird-shaped woodblock that fell to the floor outside.

The Man in Black opened the door from the inside, and stepped out, careful to step over the still smoldering woodblock with his tall black boots. Walking through the darkened station, he stepped around stacks of luggage until he reached the front door, facing Bennet Avenue. The door was locked, so he kicked it open, letting in the cool Colorado night air. The Man in Black took a moment to look, listen, and smell his unfamiliar surroundings.

The town was anything but quiet. Casinos lined both sides of the street, and from the sounds of things, business was good. But there was smoke in the air. His gut told him he should follow the scent.

The Man in Black often dropped into unknown towns, forced to find his way aided only by his senses and intuition. As such, he had learned to follow his gut. Following the smoke, he walked up the rolling hill of Bennett Avenue. As he did, people loitering outside the casinos began to recognize him. Some gasped, one skinny fellow in a giant cowboy hat dropped his drink, and others pretended not to notice, nonchalantly ducking back into the casino they'd just stepped out of.

Shortly after one such customer ducked into Bronco Billy's Casino, a big man, seemingly the casino owner, closed the doors and pushed a teenage boy out into the street. The Man in Black watched as the teenage boy ran from

casino to casino, giving the other owners the news of his arrival. The other owners followed suit, ushering patrons back in and barring their doors, leading guests to the protection and comfort of the blackjack tables.

The casino rats were a clever, tight bunch. They watched out for one another. And for ways to make an easy buck. They were wise to the fact that scared customers had loose wallets.

Soon, what had been a bustling, wild night of gambling in Cripple Creek turned as quiet as a Sunday morning church service because of the Man in Black's arrival. Untroubled by this, he continued to follow his nose towards the smoke.

Footfalls approached, running towards him through the quiet night. Bennet Avenue was lit with torches, but beyond them uphill was nothing but darkness. He gripped his revolvers, ready for trouble. The footsteps came closer, sloppy and erratic, but light. It sounded like a child or a young woman. Panicking, overcome with fear.

The Man in Black relaxed. Out of the darkness barreled a boy of maybe fourteen, babbling something incoherent over and over. "Patch... Work... Man... Patch... Work... Man," he gasped. The two might have collided if not for the Man in Black's quick reflexes. He grabbed the boy by the shoulders. "Patch... Work... Man... Patch... Work... Man," the boy sputtered.

"Calm down, boy. Take a breath. I'm looking for the Teller County Jailhouse. You know where I can find it?"

The boy nodded but kept chanting, "Patch... Work... Man... Patch... Work... Man."

The Man in Black gave the boy a shake. "What's your name, boy?"

"Hor-hor-hor-Horace. My name is Horace." The kid's eyes were large and wild, and one sniff told the Man in Black something scared the kid enough to make him lose control of his bladder.

"That's a good boy now, Horace. Point me towards the jail." The boy pointed a shaking hand up the street, towards a jailhouse lit up in the distance. Bulky shadows moved behind the windows, and he heard shots fired. "You did well to come get me, Horace. Now I want you to go inside the train station and hide." The boy looked confused, as if he knew the station would be locked at this time of day. The Man in Black added, "I left the door unlocked for you."

He had kicked open the door and broken the lock, but there was no reason to point that out to a hysterical child. The Man in Black continued, "Hide until I come back and tell you it's safe to come out. Can you do that?"

Horace couldn't take his eyes off the jailhouse, so the Man in Black put his scarred hand under Horace's chin and turned the boy's head to face him. Horace gasped at the long white face looking down on him.

The Man in Black's skin was bone white. Sharp, pointed features and a