



ONE GOOD
DEED

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Chapter 1

Business was booming at the Silver Spoke, and Shirley Coombs couldn't be happier. She used a wet rag to scrub the gleaming bar top and nodded to one of the newly hired waitresses who was loading a tray of drinks destined for her thirsty patrons.

The piano player was tapping out a lively tune while a couple of drunken cowpokes struggled to find the melody. They stood on each side of the piano and tried to get everyone who passed by to join them in song. So far, they had received no help from the buzzing crowd and the sounds they produced were enough to make someone hard of hearing cringe.

But Shirley smiled anyway because after sticking her neck out to purchase the Silver Spoke, mortgaging her family farm and everything else she owned, it looked as if the gamble had paid off.

Speaking of gambling, several poker games were going on including a couple of Friday night regulars. The main action, the one that always gathered the most spectators, had four players already seated. They were waiting for two more but had already begun drinking in earnest.

The games were mostly friendly but every once in a while things got out of hand, so Roscoe Barnes, the town marshal of Blandford, Kansas, and the only lawman within fifty miles made it a habit to stop in and keep an eye on everyone. And tonight was no different.

One of those people he kept an eye on was his fiancé, Shirley Coombs, and as he pushed his way through the batwing doors and entered the smoky saloon, he smiled broadly. He made his way through the crowded room and leaned against the bar until Shirley noticed him.

"Howdy, handsome," she said. "What'll it be?" She winked and slapped at him with a bar towel. He caught it and drew her closer to him, staring into her eyes.

"You know what it'll be, young lady," he said. "But until then, I'll take a bowl of chili and a quiet night. Can you arrange that?"

"Chili, yes, but it's too late for the quiet. Besides, noise means money to me, so watch your step, buster." She laughed and dug a bowl of chili out of a crock behind the bar and plopped it in front of Roscoe. He pulled it closer and tried a spoonful.

"Nice," he said. "A looker and a cooker. My favorite kind of gal." He laughed and spooned more chili.

Shirley disappeared into the crowd and Roscoe finished his meal, then glanced at the clock on the wall. At just after eight PM, he knew the patrons of the Silver Spoke would start to get

wound up soon. There were a few troublemakers that always seemed to be in the middle of things and Roscoe's presence wasn't enough to alter their behavior.

Blandford was, for the most part, a peaceful little town, but a few well-known locals loved to stir the pot. Add in a few drifters and a gang or two now and then and it was enough to keep Roscoe busy seven days a week. The town was growing, and so were its troubles.

Roscoe placed his back to the bar and watched as Coe Brissette pushed his way into the saloon. He stood half-a-head taller than any other person in the room, including Roscoe, and he was an imposing figure. Brissette owned the Bar T ranch on the outskirts of town and managed over five thousand head of cattle at any one time. He ran a tight operation, mainly through intimidation and outright threats, and rumor had it that several men who had crossed him were never heard from again.

Brissette's wife, Darlene, had accompanied him to town, probably to enjoy a nice dinner at the Blandford Jewel before Brissette sat down with the boys for his usual Saturday night card game. She walked meekly behind until he found her a seat at a table next to where his boys were waiting. He used one foot to hook the rail of the chair, then motioned for his wife to sit down. She flinched when he extended his hand, glancing around nervously.

Roscoe noticed what looked like a scrape or bruise on her cheek. Life on the frontier was pretty rough, and he didn't pay much attention to it. She kept her gaze directed at the floor and folded her hands in her lap.

Brissette made his way to the bar, shaking hands and patting the backs of several of his friends in the process and yelling at people across the room. *'If Blandford ever needed a mayor, he'd be a shoo-in,'* thought Roscoe. Finally, Brissette stood beside him at the bar and extended his hand.

"Good evening, marshal," he boomed. "How's the peacekeeping business?"

Roscoe shook hands and countered with, "Business is booming, Coe. How are you and the missus?"

"Couldn't be better, thank you. And I'm feeling lucky tonight, so I'm afraid these boys are gonna lose their shirts. Stick around now, will ya? I may need an armed guard on my way back home."

Brissette bought a drink for everyone at the bar and collected two bottles of whiskey for the table, then sat down with all his friends, his back to his wife. Someone produced a deck of cards and Brissette began shuffling, keeping one eye on the saloon doors.

After a few minutes, the sixth man of the Friday night poker group pushed his way into the smoky room. Carl Overton was a lanky farmer that looked as though a stiff wind would blow him into the next county. He was a meek man that liked his drink and mostly kept to himself.

He religiously attended the weekly game, as did most of the other men at the table, but Carl seemed to be drawn to gambling like a moth to a flame.

Roscoe didn't know him very well, but some men said Carl Overton would bet on bullfrog races or how many rainy days the town would have in May. To say he had a problem with gambling would be an understatement.

Overton took his place at the table and shook hands with all the men. Someone offered him a drink, which he declined, and the first hand was dealt. Roscoe watched as the men fingered their money piles and rolled cigarettes when their hands didn't pan out. A couple of rowdy cowpokes began arguing loudly and Roscoe had a word with them to make sure things didn't get out of hand.

The night wore on without incident and Roscoe got bored, but at the same time, he was glad his services weren't needed. At around ten o'clock he winked at Shirley and she met him outside. The full moon bathed the street in beautiful light and he held her arm and walked her away from the noisy saloon.

"Whaddya say you close up early, Shirl? Come on over to my place?"

"Sounds tempting, big fella, but I have a full house in there and they're in a drinking mood. Let's catch up tomorrow?"

Roscoe sighed and pulled Shirley close, then gave her a quick kiss and was off.

Chapter 2

Inside the saloon, things were heating up. There was only one poker game still in full swing, and the participants were serious about two things; their gambling and their drinking. The stakes were high and the whiskey was flowing freely. One of the men at the table had run out of money and was just watching, but the five players left were down to serious business.

Coe Brissette's wife, Darlene, had enough of the evening. She was bored and squirming in her chair. She leaned over to her husband and whispered in his ear, but he slapped her away with the back of his hand dismissively, connecting with her forehead. She made a face that everyone but her husband could see and the whole table erupted in laughter.

Coe dealt the next hand, oblivious to the fact that his wife had departed. He smiled and glanced around the table at his fellow card players.

"Okay, boys, sweeten the pot and make me happy," he said.

"You're already a little too happy, Coe," said Carl Overton. "I think my bad luck makes you smile."

"Come on, now, Carl. That's no way for neighbors to act. I open, and since it's after ten o'clock, let's up the stakes." Brissette threw a twenty-dollar-bill into the pile in the middle of the table.

"I'm curious," said another man, and called Brissette.

"Too rich for me," said the man to Carl Overton's left. "This isn't a hand, it's a foot." He laid his cards on the table and poured whiskey from a half-empty bottle.

Overton raised another twenty and another man folded, leaving just three players. Brissette dealt the number of cards each man requested and slowly peeked at his hand, his face expressionless. Finally, he cleared his throat.

"I'll raise," he said. He counted out five twenty-dollar-bills and dropped them on the pile, swelling the pot. He laid his hand on the table face-down and smiled at everyone.

"Damn," whispered Overton. He rubbed at his chin whiskers and then scratched at one ear, trying to make up his mind. Meanwhile, the third remaining player folded. Overton never said a word. He reached into his pocket and produced a wad of cash, then peeled off some bills and pushed them toward the pile.

“See you, and raise a hundred.” He never looked up from the tabletop.

One of the men that folded whistled and fanned himself with his hat. “Whooo, Carl, where does a farmer get all the money?”

“Never you mind,” said Carl. “That’s my business, ain’t it?” He threw back a shot of whiskey and swiped at his mouth with the back of one wrist, looking expectantly at Coe Brissette across the table.

Coe checked his hand once more, then counted out the money from his pile and called. He looked up and Carl and smiled.

“Whatcha holding, Carl?”

Carl turned his hand over and laid it on the table. “Two pair,” he said. “Aces over queens. Beat that, Coe.” He folded his arms and nodded his head.

Coe Brissette shook his head and revealed his hand. “Triple deuces,” he said. “Read ‘em and weep, Carl.” Brissette reached out and hauled the pile toward him while Carl blinked in disbelief at seeing his hard-earned money being raked away from him.

“Dang it, he said. “Nobody is that lucky!” He slapped the table and the glasses jumped and teetered.

“Maybe it’s your bad luck,” said Coe. He stacked the money in a pile and passed the cards to the man on his left.

“I’m out,” said the man. He finished his drink and stood up. “Too rich for little old me.”

Three men were left at the table, and Carl Overton dealt the hand. Once again, Brissette raised recklessly, feeling confident while playing with someone else’s money. But Carl was just as reckless, and the more he drank, the bolder he became, believing that his luck would change at any moment.

Only it never happened. Carl reached into his pocket hand after hand, tossing handfuls of cash at the pile on the table until Coe Brissette practically begged him to stop. It was eleven-thirty and Shirley began sweeping the rest of the saloon, warning the boys that last call for drinks was upon them.

“Face it,” said Coe. “It ain’t your night, Carl. Why don’t we call it off? I’m sure your luck will change next week.”

“My luck’s gonna change right now. One more hand, double or nothin’.” Carl reached into his pocket and withdrew his now-diminished bankroll, shaking his head dolefully. By now there were only a dozen people left in the saloon, including the bartender and Shirley. They were all gathered around the table, watching Carl gamble his life savings away.

“Looks to me like you’re out of money, Carl. What else have you got that might be worth getting all your money back?”

“I’ll bet my farm,” said Carl. “Where’s a piece of paper, I’ll draw up an IOU right now.” Carl looked around the table at all the spectators, searching his pocket for a pencil. Finally, someone produced a ragged piece of paper for him to write on.

“You can’t be serious,” said Coe. “The way your luck’s been running, I’d think twice on that.”

“There’s no thinking involved,” said Carl. “I’ll bet you my farm against all the money you took in tonight, Coe. Put up or shut up.”

“Well, since you put it that way, I say let’s do it.” He grabbed the cards and began shuffling. “My deal, right?”

“Nothing doin’,” said Carl. “I think you’ve been dealing from the bottom of the deck all night. Nothing else could explain my run of bad luck. Let’s get a new dealer in here for this. Shirley!”

“Don’t drag me into this,” cried Shirley. “I don’t want the responsibility.”

“Come on,” said Carl. “One hand and no hard feelings either way.”

“Oh, alright. Give me those cards if it’ll get you boys outta here faster.” Shirley grabbed the desk and gave it a good shuffle, then dealt out the cards to the last two players.

Both men squinted as they examined their hands. There was no calling and raising as each man was all in, Coe with the cash and Carl with the deed to his farm. The tension in the air was thick enough to cut with a pick-ax.

Finally, Coe spoke. “I’ll take two,” he said. Shirley peeled two cards from the deck and slid them across the table. Coe gathered them but didn’t look, placing his original three faces down next to the other two.

“I’ll take one,” said Carl. The small crowd murmured and nodded. Carl plucked the card from the table and placed it in his hand, and a smile slowly spread across his face.

“Well, boys,” said Shirley. “Let’s see ‘em. It’s been a long night.”

Carl smiled and laid his hand face-up on the table. "Here she be, boys. Full house, queens, and sevens." Carl slapped his hands together and reached for the pot.

"Not so fast," said Coe Brissette. He hadn't even looked at his hand yet. He turned over his original three cards, revealing three eights. The crowd murmured and shook their heads while Coe reached for one of his draw cards. He flipped it and revealed an ace of diamonds.

"Go on," said Carl. "There's no way your luck can hold."

Coe reached for the last card and flipped it without looking, revealing a fourth eight, and the crowd erupted.

Carl sank into his chair and hid his face in his hands, trembling all over. Coe plucked his IOU from the pile and folded it neatly, tucking into his shirt pocket.

"No way," said Carl. "There's no way anybody could be that lucky. I don't know how you did it, Brissette, but I know you cheated. You ruined my life and mark my words, I'm gonna ruin yours."

"Don't go gettin' all crazy on me, Carl. Everything was on the up and up." Coe stood and began tucking money into his pockets. When he was done, he left a huge tip for Shirley and the bartender while Carl weaved his way toward the door.

"Mark my words, Brissette, he said. "You mark 'em" He made his way out into the moonlit street and disappeared.

Chapter 3

Coe Brissette was riding a wave of spectacular luck. He left the Silver Spoke singing and laughing even though Carl Overton was crying and moaning. He had nothing against Carl, and in the past had even offered to buy his little farm from him a couple of times, but business was business.

Now, it looked like he wouldn't have to.

Coe tried to climb into the saddle in front of the saloon and failed on the first attempt. The amount of whiskey he'd had to drink might have something to do with it. His head was buzzing and the world was slowly revolving, but on his second attempt, he managed to find the stirrup and heave himself up. Once he got aboard, his head seemed to clear a bit and he pointed his faithful horse in the direction of his ranch, which was only a ten-minute ride outside of town.

A full moon lit his way and the trail was even and easy for his horse to navigate, so he let it pick its own pace and turned his face up into the slight breeze, thinking how lucky he was these days.

Little did he know his luck was about to run out.

Coe was about halfway home and still feeling pretty good about the whole evening. He hummed a tune and swayed in the saddle, oblivious to his surroundings. He never heard the person on the trail behind him and was surprised when a gunshot pierced the night air.

He was even more surprised by the burning pain in the middle of his back, and his inability to take a deep breath. Coe tried to stay in the saddle but it was a losing battle and he hit the ground with a thud. He moaned for a moment and tried to get to his knees while his horse whinnied and pranced around nervously.

Finally, Coe collapsed in the dirt and lay still. His horse stood by him for a few minutes and then wandered off towards his ranch.

Overhead, the moon shone brilliantly, lighting the trail and sparkling atop a gurgling stream that meandered nearby.

“What do you mean, he’s dead?” asked Roscoe Barnes. He was on his second cup of coffee in the marshal’s office, his feet propped up on his desk. He stared at Orrin Pitts in disbelief, shaking his head back and forth.

“I mean dead, Marshal Barnes. Like, not among the living anymore.” Orrin removed his hat and swiped at his forehead with the back of one skinny wrist, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down.

“I know what dead means, Orrin. I guess what I’m trying to say is how in the heck could this happen?”

“Well,” said Orrin, “I figure that’s where you’ll come in. I’m just reporting what I heard.”

“Okay, okay,” said Roscoe. “Are you sure it’s Coe? He dragged his feet off the desk and reached for his hat. “Is Doc Fallow in town?”

“That’s what they told me. Doc’s here. He was seein’ to someone else when they dragged Coe Brissette’s carcass back.”

“Alright, Orrin, thanks for the info. I’ll go see the Doc.” Roscoe automatically felt for his sixgun and adjusted it for an easy draw.

Old habits were hard to kill.

“What do you make of it, Doc?”

Doc Fallow was washing his hands in a basin and had his back to Roscoe. He grabbed a towel from a shelf and turned to face the marshal.

“Big bump on the side of his head, but that’s not what killed him.”

“What was it, then?”

“Definitely the bullet in the back. One shot, looks like it nicked his heart and he bled to death pretty quickly.” Doc hung up the towel to dry and sat behind his desk, reaching for his glasses.

“Last I saw of him,” said Roscoe, “he was at the Silver Spoke in a pretty heated card game. I guess I’ll take a walk over there and see what I can find out.”

“Shooting a man in the back, that’s pretty cold-blooded, Roscoe. Whoever shot him really wanted him dead, I reckon.”

“Can you do me a favor, Doc? Would you dig that slug out of Coe? It could be important.”

“I’ll do that. It’s not hard to find. Almost passed through him.”

“Thanks,” said Roscoe. He got to his feet and left the Doc’s office, heading for the Silver spoke with thoughts swirling in his head like drunken bees.

“So you say it was a pretty late night?” asked Roscoe. His sweetheart, Shirley, was stacking polished glasses behind the bar. The saloon was open and a few customers sat sullenly at tables here and there, talking and laughing in small groups.

“Midnight, or a little after,” she said. She fanned her face with her hands and blew a strand of hair out of her eyes. “I never saw the likes of it. High stakes, even for the Silver Spoke.” She carried a tray of dirty bowls and coffee cups back to the kitchen area and Roscoe followed her.

“Slow down for a minute, will ya, honey? I have to tell you something before it gets all over town.”

“Okay, Roscoe. In here.” She led him into a small closet and closed the door behind them.

“What is it, big boy?” She drew close to him and put her arms around his waist.

“Coe Brissette is dead, Shirley. And since you’re one of the last people to see him alive, I need to ask a few questions.”

“Dead? What on earth?” She looked up into Roscoe’s eyes.

“I don’t know. That’s what we need to find out because he was shot in the back.”

“Oh my,” said Shirley. “Who in the world would do such a thing?”

“Well, he was a tough man and ran a large operation. As far as I can tell he was a pretty ruthless businessman. There could be any number of people that might want to settle a score.”

"I guess so," she said. "But it's just awful."

"I agree. So tell me what went on after I left."

"One by one the players dropped out of the main poker game that Coe was in. By the end of the night, it was just Coe and Carl Overton left, and they were drinking and betting pretty heavily."

"Hmmm," said Roscoe. "Any big winners? Or losers?"

"Brissette won it all. Carl Overton lost it all. And I mean all. Carl lost the farm on the last hand."

"The farm?"

"Yes, he bet his farm on the last hand. Even wrote it out on a piece of paper for everyone to witness. And then he lost the hand."

"Holy cow. I knew he had a thing for gambling, but I didn't know it was that bad."

"Me either," said Shirley. "I feel horrible, especially since I was dealing."

"You? How did you get involved?"

"I just wanted the night to be over with." She sighed and they broke apart.

"Okay honey, thanks for the info. I guess we got at least one person with a strong motive."

"That isn't all, Roscoe. Carl threatened to ruin Brissette's life before he left the saloon."

"Woah. And everyone heard him?"

"Oh yeah," she said.

Roscoe rode out to the Overton farm to have a chat with Carl under an afternoon sky that was as blue as a robin's egg and dotted with fluffy white clouds. A faint breeze swung the branches of the trees in Carl's front yard as Roscoe dismounted.

Carl was sitting in a chair on the front porch, his hat over his face, fast asleep. Roscoe could hear him snoring lightly as he climbed the steps. He tapped Carl on the knee to wake him.

“What, what?” said Carl. He removed his hat and rubbed the sleep from his eyes, then blinked a couple of times as he tried to focus. When he saw Roscoe his eyes grew wide and he tried to get up.

“No,” he said. “No, no.”

“No, what, Carl? I just came to ask you a few questions, is all.”

“I guess I was havin’ a dream, Marshal. What brings you out here. Don’t tell me it’s Coe Brissette.”

“It is. I heard you got into it pretty good last night over at the Silver Spoke.”

“Yeah, I guess I did. In a little over my head. Everything’s still a little fuzzy today. I ain’t never been that sick over a night of drinking.”

“Do you remember the whole evening, Carl?”

“Yes sir, I do. Right up until I left the saloon. Then it kinda goes blank.”

“So you recall betting your farm and losing it to Coe Brissette last night?”

“Unfortunately, I do,” said Carl. “I thought that’s what you were here about. Come to kick me off my land. I woulda thought Coe would give me a little time to tie up some loose ends.”

“No, nothing like that. Are you telling me you don’t know? Coe Brissette is dead.”

“Dead? What in blazes happened to him?”

“Murdered, Carl. Shot in the back on his way home last night.”

“The hell you say! I can’t believe it.”

“I wouldn’t either unless I saw it myself. So what I’m hearing is that you have no recollection of any events after you left the saloon last night, is that correct?”

“I guess so,” said Carl, “Wait a minute, marshal. Are you accusing me of something here?”

“Were you wearing a gun last night, Carl? I can’t recall.”

“I had one on, yeah.”

“Don’t go leavin’ the area on me, okay partner? I’d hate to have to chase you down, but I will.”

“Now you see here, Marshal. I didn’t kill anyone. I’m not capable of it.”

“Maybe not, Carl. But twenty-four hours ago, who would’ve thought you were capable of gambling away your farm?”

Roscoe stood and descended the steps, then mounted his horse and tipped his hat at Carl Overton.

Chapter 4

Back in town, Roscoe went to his office and made a pot of coffee, then sat down to think about what might've happened after the poker game last night.

Certainly, no one had a more compelling motive than Carl Overton. Losing something in an instant that you've worked so hard to build up was a traumatic event, and who knows how one would react, especially with a headful of whisky?

Roscoe didn't think Carl Overton was capable of murdering anyone under normal circumstances, but these conditions were far from normal.

Still, it didn't matter what Roscoe Barnes or anyone else thought. The law operated on hard evidence, not theory or conjecture, and it was up to Roscoe to piece together the events of late last night as best he could.

He finished his coffee and locked up his office, heading once again for Doc Fallow's.

"Sorry to be a pain in your hind end, Doc. I know how busy you are, but I need to ask you a few questions."

"No problem, Roscoe. What's on your mind?" The Doc was fiddling with instruments that looked more designed for torture than healing. Roscoe swallowed hard and shook his head.

"Well, there was a big poker game last night over at the Spoke, and Coe was right in the middle of it. He was the big winner, and it makes sense that he would've had a lot of that money on him when he left town last night. I'm just wondering if any of that is still with him."

"Hmmm," said the Doc. "I didn't check any of his clothes, but we can do that now. Follow me."

Roscoe followed Dr. Fallow into his examination room, where Coe Brissette was lying on a table, naked and covered with a clean sheet. His clothes were in a heap on the floor atop his well-worn cowboy boots.

Roscoe picked up Coe's pants and began fishing through the pockets, and soon he struck gold. He pulled out wad after wad of crinkled money, laying it carefully on a chair next to Coe's body. When he thought he had it all, he began counting.

"Woah." He whistled and shook his head. "Over three-thousand dollars, and I ain't counted it all yet. There's a bit more in his shirt here." Roscoe extracted a few more bills and a wrinkled piece of paper, squinting to read the jagged writing.

"Yup, here's the IOU. Good Lord, what a crazy night. I never have seen the like of it."

"It sure does seem far-fetched," said the Doc. "What do you reckon?"

"Well," said Roscoe, "whoever got Coe Brissette didn't know how much money he was carrying, or surely they would've got that too, right?"

"It seems that way. So I guess robbery wasn't the motive."

"It doesn't seem that way, Doc. Thanks for indulging me while I'll try to piece this together."

Roscoe took the money and the IOU and went back to his office to lock things in the safe. His next stop was the Silver Spoke and another chat with Betty. Of all the people who might know some of the gossip that circulated the little town of Blandford, she would be at the top of the heap.

A good saloonkeeper would never blabber behind anyone's back or use private information in a way that was hurtful to someone, but Roscoe figured since he was investigating what looked like a murder, he'd cover all the bases.

The Saturday afternoon crowd was pretty thin in the Spoke, but those that were in attendance seemed to have heard the news. The room became quiet as Roscoe weaved his way through the tables and leaned against the bar. All eyes were on him as he scanned the room, looking for Betty. Finally, she emerged from the kitchen, carrying a crock of her famous chili. The patrons were already lining up for it and she dished it out as they laid their money on the bar and scurried back to their tables as if they were carrying treasure.

When Shirley had a free moment, Roscoe nodded and she joined him at the end of the bar. She wiped her hands on her apron and gave a little smile.

"Don't tell me," she said. "More questions?"

"You bet, honey. I'm trying to make sense of things. Something just isn't sitting right with me."

“Okay, what can I help you with?”

“I can’t get into details, but the main suspect doesn’t pan out for me. Unless he was out of his mind drunk, I don’t see it happening.”

“Well, he pretty much was. Who in their right mind would bet like that anyway?”

“I know it looks bad, but it don’t wash. I’m looking for other angles. Can you think of anything else about Coe Brissette that I’m missing? I mean, I know he was a tough businessman, but his line of work demands that. I guess I’m asking if you’ve heard anything at all that might be useful as I investigate. I owe it to everyone to be thorough here.”

“Hmmm,” said Shirley. “You may or may not know, but Coe was a real ladies man. He had a well-deserved reputation as a womanizer. Some of the girls that work at Ruby’s have told me that he could be demanding and a little rough at times, especially with whiskey in him.”

“Are you saying that he would cheat on his wife?”

“I believe that’s what you call it. It makes me uncomfortable to talk about it, but that’s the way it is.” Shirley clasped her hands and shook her head back and forth. “What’s next?” she asked.

“I gotta get out to the scene of the crime. If there’s any evidence out there I don’t want it to wash away if some rain moves in. I appreciate the information, honey. I don’t want to drag you into this.”

“It’s okay, I’ll help if I can. Be careful, will you please?” She pecked him on the cheek and disappeared into the kitchen.

Roscoe rode out of town, taking the trail to Coe Brissette’s ranch as it meandered north of town. It was late in the afternoon and storm clouds were banked in the West, promising a good soaking once they reached Blandford. Roscoe figured he had another hour or so until he’d need his rain slicker.

After about five minutes of easy riding, he noticed a dark spot in the earth where he thought the life of Brissette might’ve ended. He dismounted well away from the area and tied his horse to a sapling to avoid contaminating the area.

He moved carefully, trying not to disturb the earth. There were wagon tracks that looked fresh, possibly from this morning, and belonging to the two people that had made the discovery and brought Coe’s body back to town.

There was a set of tracks that probably belonged to Coe's horse. Roscoe could tell the animal was confused and possibly frightened by the way the tracks were all in one spot and went in a small circle. He followed them down the trail and could tell they headed back to Coe's ranch.

He stood back from the scene and tried to imagine the things in his mind, and where someone might have hidden, waiting for Coe to come riding along. Whoever it was, it seemed to Roscoe that they knew Coe and his habits pretty well.

Finally, Roscoe spotted a clump of trees near the side of the trail and thought it might make the perfect place for an ambush position. He'd ridden by this spot hundreds of times but had never looked at with the thought of crime in mind.

He crouched down near the side of the trail and examined the earth. He could see distinct hoof prints in the soft ground and found a spot where he thought a horse might have been tied. The grass was eaten down to a nub and the tracks were everywhere. The horse was tied on a short lead and had nowhere to roam, but there were plenty of tracks to examine.

Roscoe followed the tracks as they led to where he thought Coe had fallen. Sure enough, it looked like the rider had stopped near the blood-stained patch, but never dismounted as far as Roscoe could tell.

One thing was for sure. The horse that was tied near the what Roscoe thought was the ambush point made unique marks in the ground.

The animal appeared to be missing one shoe!

He retrieved his horse and mounted up, following the tracks that led away from the scene and toward Coe Brissette's ranch. At one point he lost the tracks in a patch of rocky ground and had to dismount to pick them up again.

The Brissette ranch was just over the next rise and the tracks were leading right toward it. Roscoe shook his head and continued, following them to Brissette's front yard.

Chapter 5

Roscoe dismounted and tied his horse to a railing out front, then climbed the steps to the porch and knocked on the door. After a few moments, Darlene Brissette came and opened it. She appeared to be crying; her eyes were swollen and threaded with jagged red lines. There was a faded bruise above her right eye that Roscoe couldn't help noticing.

She straightened her apron and tried a weak smile.

"May I come in, Darlene?" asked Roscoe.

"Of course, marshal, please do. Can I get you anything?"

"Don't go to any trouble on my account. I'm awful sorry for your loss, ma'am."

"Thank you, marshal. I appreciate that. Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you. I have a couple of questions if you're up to it. If not, I'd surely understand."

"No, that's fine. Go ahead, marshal. Would you like some coffee? I could make tea." Darlene wrung her hands and glanced around the room, then stood up. She poured a cup of coffee for herself but her hands were shaking so badly as she made her way back to the chair that she dropped it from the saucer and it shattered at her feet, splashing coffee everywhere.

"Let me help you with that," said Roscoe. "I understand this is a difficult time." He got up to grab a broom from the corner and sweep the shards of china into a pile while Darlene leaned against the table, barely able to stand upright.

"Look," said Roscoe, "this is not the right time. I have just one question at this point, Darlene. Can I take a look in your barn?"

"The barn?" she asked. "The barn." She nodded her head and sat back down in the chair, shaking like a leaf in the wind.

"You can wait here or come with me, but I need to take a look in there." Roscoe left her sitting on the chair and climbed down the porch steps. He crossed the front yard and swung open the doors to the massive structure.

The place was musty and he could smell horse manure and hay. A horse whinnied when he entered, and he noticed Coe's stallion in one of the stalls. The horse was smart enough to make it back to the ranch even without the guidance of his rider. Roscoe patted his neck and whispered to calm him down.

In the next stall was a small mare eating some freshly forked hay. Roscoe whistled softly and the mare's ears pricked up. She came over and nuzzled Roscoe's chest and he let her get to know him a little before he entered the stall.

When they both felt comfortable he swung open the gate and patted her neck again. She whinnied and nudged him and Roscoe laughed.

He felt along her rear haunch, making her feel at ease, then reached down and lifted her left leg and examined the hoof.

No shoe, just like he expected. He lowered the foot gently to the ground and left the stall. The mare whinnied as he left the barn.

It was true that Darlene had probably ridden the mare to town last night, and that might explain some of the tracks on the trail, but the part that stuck out to Roscoe was all the tracks near what he thought would be a good ambush point.

It just didn't make sense, so on a hunch, he went back into the house. Darlene was right where he'd left her, fresh tears running down her cheeks.

"Did you find what you were looking for, marshal?" she asked.

"I did," said Roscoe.

"And now what?"

"You're not a killer, Darlene."

"No," she whispered. "I'm not."

"So, why did you do it?"

Darlene recoiled as if she'd been slapped. She stared at Roscoe and then put her face in her hands.

"I couldn't take it anymore," she said. "He cheated on me. With anyone. Everyone."

"It's terrible," said Roscoe. "But that's not the worst of it, is it?"

“No,” she said, barely audible. “The fear. He was abusive. It was a constant thing. And now it’s over. No more waiting to see if he came home in a good mood or bad mood, or hiding from him until he finally found me.”

“I’m so sorry, Darlene.”

“I just couldn’t live like that.” She sobbed into her hands and Roscoe stood and hugged her until she was calm again.

“I suppose I have to come into town now?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am. Would you like to ride your horse? She needs a shoe, and we could drop her off at the livery.”

Darlene nodded and Roscoe helped her lock things up, then they mounted up and rode for Blandford.

Epilogue

Coe Brissette was buried two days later, under a blue Kansas sky that seemed to go on forever. The preacher from town said a few words, and there were many in attendance. The day was sad in many ways.

Darlene Brissette was transferred to the county seat, where she stood trial for the murder of her husband. Testimony was given on a variety of subjects and things got emotional in the courtroom on more than one occasion, but in the end the jury couldn't bring themselves to convict her of the crime.

Darlene went back to the ranch, but having no way to run the operation, she soon sold it to some out-of-town investor with the means to make a go of it.

Darlene packed her bags and left Blandford in the middle of the night, searching for a new start somewhere and looking to leave her past behind.

The town of Blandford, rocked by the killing and subsequent events, eventually got back to normal, although from that point forward there were strict limits placed on the table stakes at the Silver Spoke.

The IOU that Carl Overton had written out had mysteriously disappeared in the process.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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