

BAD LANDS

CHAPTER ONE: HOSTETTER

The stranger tromped through the double-swinging doors of the Keystone Saloon and Ice Cream Parlor, saddlebags over one shoulder and trailing a cloud of dust. He was a tall one, the stranger, who trod bow-legged and slouching over the floorboards, one dusty hand grasping a stick that cut a dirty trail behind him along the planks. The stick was long, about as long as the stranger. The stick was gnarled, a curl at its top. Otherwise, the stick was a stick. The spurs on the stranger's boots rang as he approached the bar. They and the stick drew the eyes of the half-drunk denizens in a way the stranger's grime had not. Nobody cared about dirt there. Hell, any who entered clean through those doors wasn't a man of honest work. But a man with a stick, now that was something.

Them who witnessed the stranger were few. Three grisly prospectors watched him from a round table a few feet off the entrance. They held beer mugs in dirt-chalked hands, suspending them inches from their red-burned faces. A clown sat far to one end of the bar, duded up in a black frock suit beneath whiteface with red greasepaint smeared about his mouth. He looked more feral than funny. The bartender watched the stranger with squinted eyes over a knobby nose and a handlebar mustache long in need of trimming. Beside him stood his only seemingly reputable patron, a bear of a man in a brown suit, high collar and tie, and a bowler hat perched back past his forehead. They all stared at the stranger because of his spurs, his stick, his unknown aspect, and the fact that no horse had drawn up to herald him.

The stranger stopped at the bar, looking at no one, greeting no one. He propped his stick against the tarnished rail and lowered his saddlebags to the worn counter. A half-circle of prairie dust settled atop the bar from his belongings.

"A drink," he said, his voice sounding of gravel deep in his throat.

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"And what would you prefer?" The bartender swiped at the arc of dust with a none-too-clean rag. "Perhaps you'd imbibe one of our classic microbrews, a Pissin' Bobcat fresh from Wall, or maybe our local specialty, a Strangled Sow? It's a fine red, so thick and lustrous you can just see particles of yeast floating beneath the cinnamon topping."

The stranger looked slowly up from his gnarled, gritty hands. His icy blue eyes focused on the bartender, and his thick mustache twitched. That face was long, chiseled from weather and suspicion. He raised one hand to tilt back his sweat-darkened Stetson. "What is this, a faggot bar? Whiskey. And one of them ice creams."

"Whiskey it is. Would that be Scotch, or a fine Kentucky Rye?"

The stranger looked at the bartender, his hands bunching into loose fists. "Rotgut."

"Yes, sir. Excellent choice. I stilled it back by the outhouse just yesterday." The bartender reached beneath the counter and brought up a brown, unlabeled, corked bottle and a shot glass. He slapped the glass before the stranger and twisted the cork from the bottle.

The big man in the brown suit straightened. He grasped the lapels of his jacket and faced the stranger. "Friend, you look like the waste spillway of this here town's gold mining enterprise. Where you from, if it ain't too immodest to ask?"

"Montana."

The bartender sloshed the shot glass full. He stood holding the neck of the bottle, ready to cock it forward again.

"Montana, eh?" The man in the brown suit grinned and looked pointedly at the saddlebags. "I got acquaintances in Helena. Rough country between Keystone and those parts. Walk all the way, did ya?"

The stranger lifted his glass between one thumb and middle finger. He held it a few inches from his mustache and licked his lips. "Ambushed. Bastards took my horse, my gear, my guns." He slapped back the whiskey, then lowered the glass gingerly to the bar. "More." He drew his duster back from his waist. The holster at his hip hung empty.

"Sorry to hear that." The man in the brown suit shook his head in a show of disapproval. "Nearby, was it? You should inform the law."

The stranger threw back another gulp of fire. "I am the law."

"Really. And I thought Sheriff Madson maintained that high position."

The grizzled onlookers sniggered at the brown suit's witticism.

"More," the stranger told the bartender, and stared at his empty glass. "I be Clayton Hostetter, U.S. Marshal. Sent here by President Theodore Roosevelt himself. To deal with range agitators. Fence cutters. Crop defilers. General uncivilized folk." He shoved the lapel of his coat aside to reveal a tarnished silver star.

Everyone in the bar drew up a little straighter.

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"Marshal, eh?" The man in the brown suit grinned. "I reckon you've found some of them 'uncivilized folk.'"

"Bastards."

"We been wondering when you might show up. Those fence cutters letting all the cattle run loose. And them that make the circles in the crops. Very odd." The brown suit stuck out his hand. "Dave Swanzey, prospector, explorer, businessman. This here is Mr. Johnson, the proprietor of this fine establishment." He indicated the bartender with a flourish. The bartender just stood there, holding the rotgut bottle. "We welcome you to Keystone, Marshal Hostetter."

The suddenly more respected stranger ignored the hand Swanzey offered him and downed his whiskey. He slapped down the glass.

"On the house," Mr. Johnson said, and poured another. "Just call me Howard."

The marshal turned toward the clown. "And what do I call that?"

"*He*," Swanzey emphasized, "would be called Clem on any other day. He's dressed up for the celebration."

"Celebration?"

Swanzey threw out his hands in grand fashion. "Yes, sir. Welcome, Marshal Hostetter, to the twentieth anniversary of our fine town's founding."

"So you hired a clown?"

"Clem's more of a volunteer."

Marshal Hostetter pointed his empty glass at Clem. "That there clown gonna scare shit out of the young'uns."

Swanzey offered the marshal a scolding schoolmarm look. "Sir, you are forgiven for not knowing the vim and vinegar of our local stock. But the children of Keystone are made of sterner stuff than you imply."

"You got you a ice cream parlor?"

"And saloon, sir, and saloon."

"Ever place I been to with a ice cream parlor been filled to the rafters with soft-handed pussies."

A chorus of grumbling sounded from around the saloon. Some of the hairy, taciturn spectators rested fingers on their holstered guns. Swanzey scanned the room with alert eyes before leaning close to the stranger.

"Marshal Hostetter, with respect to you and your high office. You go around mouthing insults like that, you will not endear yourself to the town."

Marshal Hostetter looked at Mr. Johnson. Maybe he wondered if the burly barman might smash that bottle over an offender's skull. Howard made no sign of his intention. "I meant no offense," the marshal said. "I ain't here to do no endearin', though. I'm here to kill outlaws."

"We generally go for capturing them first," Swanzey said. "And then a trial."

"Yeah. *Then* we kill 'em," Howard Johnson said.

"Right." Hostetter looked longingly at his empty glass, but too much liquor on a parched tongue brings about the devil's bullshit, as they say. He pushed the glass away. "Well, since I ain't got no outlaws in hand, I believe I might partake of some of that there ice cream, as I said. Seein' as it's there anyhow. Whatcha got?"

Howard put down the rotgut bottle. "We have both flavors, vanilla and vanilla bean."

Hostetter stared at Howard for a good couple of seconds. "So what in tarnation is the difference between vanilla and vanilla bean?"

Howard paused as he reached for a dirty glass and his dirty rag to polish it with. For a moment, he didn't seem all that clear on what the question meant. "Well, obviously, vanilla bean has beans in it."

"Beans."

"Absolutely. Like navy beans or sometimes pinto beans. Whatever beans we can get."

"And why would a fella want beans in his ice cream?"

"You don't *have* to have beans in your ice cream, but some customers prefer the extra flavor and texture. And it's a quick way to imbibe both your supper and your dessert in one bite."

"Honestly?"

"Honestly."

Hostetter grunted. "Well, maybe you ought to shove some biscuits in that there ice cream churn while you're at it, make the supper complete."

Howard, grinning, waved an index finger at the lawman. "No, no, no, Marshal. No churn here. We have the latest in ammonia-infused mechanical refrigeration here at the Keystone Saloon and Ice Cream Parlor. All our ice cream is imported. All the way from New York City!"

"New York City?"

"New York City!"

"Huh. Well, don't you know, Mr. Johnson, that New York City ain't but the biggest haven for pussies and faggots anywhere in these here United States and territories? Aww, what's it matter? I reckon a bunch of faggoty pussies probably make the best ice cream there is, the limp-wristed bastards."

Swanzy, who had kept his mouth shut a long time but had been staring at Hostetter with widening eyes and rising eyebrows, cleared his throat and latched once more onto the lapels of his coat. "I reckon, sir, that, though I personally share your views of the eastern climes, I would be remiss if I failed to point out that the words themselves are, shall we say, impolitic."

"Spit on that," Hostetter growled. "I been ambushed, robbed, and horse-stole. I need some ice cream!"

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"Are you hungry for a full meal?" Howard asked with an ingratiating smile.

"Not as I can say. Had me some salt rabbit in my boot to tide me over."

"Then, sir, we'll skip the beans."

Hostetter wolfed down his ice cream and asked for another bowl. But when he went for his purse to pay the barman, his fingers hesitated at the vest pocket beneath his badge. "Hmmm," he grumbled.

"Hmmm?" Mr. Johnson asked, raising a concerned eyebrow. It didn't take a gilded paper from Harvard to know what either "Hmmm" was about.

"I ain't got no coin," Hostetter said.

Mr. Johnson made a deflating sound that wiggled the hairs of his mustache.

"Them varmints what waylaid me, they took my purse."

Mr. Johnson turned his eyes meaningfully on the empty bowl. That ice cream didn't come cheap. It was all the way from New York City, after all. The rotgut he wasn't looking to give a hoot about.

Swanzey laughed deep like a bear and slapped the bar with one big palm. "That's so the way of things, isn't it, boys? Misfortune rarely takes one pass. Don't worry about the bill, Marshal. We know you're good for it. Right, Howard?"

"Well ... okay." But Mr. Johnson still stared with longing at the bowl.

"Why don't you get the marshal that other bowl of ice cream?" Swanzey suggested. "Let's show how Keystone supports its lawmen, eh?"

Johnson looked horrified, but Hostetter saved him from that attempted extortion.

"No, thankee," he said, but he licked his lips while he looked at the bowl. "I don't cotton to charity." He placed both palms on the bar and pushed away. "Still, I would be beholden, Mr. Johnson, if you would take my chit on the matter of the ice cream until such time I'm forwarded some pay."

"Sure, Marshal," Johnson said, choking a little on the words. "I trust you to make good."

"I thank you again. You're a Christian soul, no mistake. Now, I should see to the matter of that pay, and to the outlaws what make it necessary." He took his saddlebags in one hand and the stick in the other. "Could either of you gents direct me to the sheriff?"

"Cross the street, five doors down on your right," Johnson said.

"Many thanks." Hostetter tapped the brim of his Stetson and turned to tromp out the way he had come. Every eye followed him except those of one prospector, who directed his attention instead to his neighbor's cards.

Out on the boardwalk, Hostetter squinted up and down the wide, dusty street. Keystone wasn't much, the truth be told, maybe fifteen, twenty buildings of sun-bleached wood, the tallest the whorehouse across from the sa-

loon. A few men lounged in rocking chairs out front of the barber's two doors down and again in front of the feed store a few buildings down from the whorehouse. For a town all set for a birthday celebration, the place looked awfully hound dog sleepy. A casual observer wouldn't have recognized the whorehouse except for the red bit of cloth streaming from one of its porch posts. Gray dust, the creaking doldrums, and the razor cliffs of the Black Hills leaning in from the east. There were a hundred towns just like it up and down the trail, none of them worth a mouthful of spit.

Hostetter hefted his saddlebags onto one shoulder and gripped the stick at its middle, then stepped off the boards and back into the dust. He clearly didn't need the stick for walking. His stride was strong now that he had some whiskey in him. He marched between the horses tied at the saloon hitching posts, angled around the buckboard parked askew alongside the horses, and headed straight for where the sheriff might be though he couldn't see no shingle that was obvious. The tired but habitual wind clattered grains of sand off his duster and fluttered the brim of his hat.

"Marshal? Marshal!"

Hostetter stopped in the middle of the street. It wasn't like a wagon threatened to run him down.

Swanzy cantered up to him, then the two continued onward.

"I found myself thinking," the man in the brown suit said. "If you're expecting to go after outlaws, you need provisions. A horse. A gun. Such things as that."

"That would be so."

"So, I was wondering, with your recent misfortunes and all, how do you plan to pay for said provisions?"

"I been sent by President Theodore Roosevelt himself. I don't expect no trouble wiring for expenses."

"Ah, yes, deep pockets, Washington. I suppose there'd be no difficulty. And with the sheriff's backing, you could arrange all your other requirements on good credit, I'm sure."

"I'm sure."

"Dry goods, camp kit, a little shine to keep you warm at night."

"I reckon so."

"A guide."

They stepped up onto the boards across from the saloon. Hostetter halted and turned square on the big man. "I imagine you got a recommendation in that last department."

"I believe the folks around here would swear that there's no better for-ester, no better rock climber, and no better man with knowledge of the land than David Swanzy."

"And that be you."

"As advertised."

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"Why am I not surprised? Well. Tell you what, David Swanzey. How about you demonstrate these keen forestry and trackin' skills by sniffin' out the sheriff's office."

Swanzey grinned like an iron miner in the sun. "That would be right this way."

The sheriff's office stood so near, an octogenarian could have kicked a cow pie to its threshold. And there really wasn't no shingle hanging near. Swanzey pushed open the door and held it for Hostetter, grinning. Hostetter gave him a look that spoke of suspicion and a mild itch of ire, then tromped through into the office.

Nothing special presented itself within, just the usual Spartan wood plank surroundings plus a wood stove holding up a tin coffee pot, two ancient, but also cheap desks, and a wall papered with wanted posters. Behind one of the desks and in front of the single and empty holding cell sat a gnarled old man with a mustache so overgrown he appeared to have no mouth. Gray hair streamed just as wildly onto his neck and over his ears, but the top of his skull was as bald as a stone, and shiny. He held the barrel assembly of an M1899 Springfield carbine in one knotty hand, an oily cloth in the other. One booted foot was propped on the desk, not far from the rest of the rifle parts. He gave his visitors a disinterested glance, then went back to rubbing down the length of the barrel.

"Afternoon, Sheriff." Swanzey took off his hat and stood a step behind Hostetter.

"Mr. Swanzey," the sheriff said, but he didn't look up from his work.

"Brought you a visitor, Sheriff, a man of high caliber and repute. Sheriff Tolan Madson, meet Marshal Clayton Hostetter, new of these parts and gainfully employed."

Hostetter tapped the tip of his stick to the brim of his hat.

The sheriff stared at him, then tilted his head and spat a black gob of chew toward the spittoon next to his desk. He missed by at least a foot. By the looks of his floor, he missed a lot. "Hostetter, eh? You the feller I got the wire about? The specialist from Washington, eh?"

Hostetter clumped over to the wall of wanted posters and seemed to peruse the updates. "Can't say as I've been in Washington in years, but they the ones sent me."

"On the order of President Theodore Roosevelt himself," Swanzey clarified.

Sheriff Madson chewed some more and wiped down the black steel guts of his rifle. "Interestin'. So's you know President Roosevelt, eh?"

"I been in his shadow once or twice. Kettle Hill, for one."

Nobody spoke. Swanzey went lantern-eyed, like somebody had stuck him with a saber.

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Sheriff Madson laid the rifle barrel on his desk and straightened to fuss with the smaller components. He raised the bolt assembly into the insufficient light from the tiny window by the door, then rubbed at it with the rag.

"You was at Kettle Hill?" he finally said. "Poor, luckless bastard, you is."

"Yeah, reckon so." Hostetter stared at one of the posters. "Truth of it is, I didn't need to be there. See, Roosevelt knew me from earlier, asked me to join his regiment, them Rough Riders. I'd been doing some sheriffin' three or so year before, up in North Dakota. I helped him with a thievin' problem he had."

"What? Horses? Cattle?"

"A boat. Anyways, he remembered, and looked me up when he mobilized for the war. I couldn't turn him down. Had to fight, see, for the security of these here United States and cock and bull like that."

"I hear Mr. Roosevelt got a medal for that," Swanzy said. "What did you get, Marshal?"

"A slug in the leg." Hostetter lifted one of the posters from the wall and held it out to Madson. The yellowing paper showed a clean-shaven, boyish face with large eyes. "Tell me about this one."

Madson had started reassembling his rifle. "That one there's a wily work, eh? Alfred Southerman. Him and his gang been all over these hills, mainly stealing cattle, the occasional armed dispute. Been huntin' them boys for months, eh, but they just run off into the mountains and disappear every time. I figure they ride with somebody bigger. They don't seem smart enough to avoid my jail so long on their own. Why you interested in them? I thought you had bigger problems to deal with."

Hostetter nodded, but stared hard at the poster. "I do," he said, "but this here man, he stole my property." He folded the poster and stuffed it in the watch pocket of his dusty vest. "I mean to find him, and get my property back."