

CHAPTER THREE: WILLIE DERN

She was a high-stepper, this Symphony McKenzie-Whoever-the-Hell. She kicked along the road out of town like she marched in a parade on the Fourth of July. Hostetter followed, grumbling. He followed her past the last building, out of reach of the last oil lantern, and clean off the passable trail that connected Keystone and distant, dusty Hill City. Before long, the marshal stumbled along under the black canopies of Ponderosa pines and rustling oaks, tripping over roots and rocks. This was not the best of procedures. It was fool's errands like this that found a feller robbed, ridiculed, and wearing only his skivvies come the morning sun. Hostetter had been ambushed once already.

Not only that, but the woman he followed would have set any man off his ease, truth be told. Yes, she would have made a pleasant handful for them that cared about such things, and she wore far too few underthings beneath her dress. But the way she moved through the woods was nothing less than unnatural. Whenever she entered the shadow of a tree -- and those woods were hardly anything but shadows -- she seemed to disappear. She didn't vanish in the sense of the shadows blocking her out; she seemed instead to wink out of existence then reappear where the moonlight managed to cut through the leaves. The dark claimed her; the light gave her up, and on and on. She soldiered along among the close-set pillars of gargantuan trees, marching over rocks, mounded earth, and roots as if it were noon and she walked a marked path. So, she could see in the dark. This female was something other than the everyday illiterate, chicken-stealing Negro. She hadn't just learned to talk smart, she knew what she was saying.

Hostetter stopped in his tracks. He reached into his frayed vest pocket for a cigarette, then frowned when he remembered. The robbers had taken his *cigarettes*. They had taken his cigarettes when they took his horse, guns, bedroll, camp gear, and his two tins of chaw tobacco. Well, okay. But still Hostetter didn't move. He leaned on his stick and waited.

It took a minute for the darkie woman to notice.

She halted, probably noticing the absence of Hostetter's hitherto constant complaints. She glanced to where he should have been, looked startled, and scanned the surrounding woods more deeply.

"Come along," the woman called when she spied him.

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"Sorry, won't happen." Hostetter tilted his hat back.

The nigger backtracked. "Marshal, I told you. We're on a schedule."

"Yeah, well, I've been known to be ornery."

"We've no time for ornery. Level two event. You are required--"

"That ain't gonna work, Miss Sinf'nee. Now, maybe you're on the up and up, and maybe you ain't. Care to start talkin' so's I can figure out which?" He squinted into the woman's face. It was half shadowed, and so only half there. "Go on now. What's it to be? We get there soon, or later after we head back to town?"

"That's an idle threat."

"I'm in the wilderness at night, don't know where I am, with a nigger bitch who fades in and out of the light and talks like a goldarned gypsy, and I ain't got no weapons to speak of. Damned straight I'll go back to town. I'll go back holdin' you by your hair."

They stood there in the dark, the pines rustling about them.

"I can tell you," she said, "or show you, once we get to the house."

"The what? There's a house now?"

"There was always a house. I'm not trying to entrap you."

"Uh-uh."

"Huh?"

"Uh-uh. Don't you speak no good English? I reckon not. What's that name of your'n again?"

She threw him an exasperated sigh. "Sinfonee McKenzie-Rodriguez-Yun. What does it matter?"

"Well, it says you ain't no normal person, that's sure. That first name makes no sense. Who names their kid after a bunch o' fiddlers? Then that last name. What is it? You Irish, Mexican, or a Chinawoman? Don't matter, 'cause ain't a one of 'em reputable."

"I don't know what to tell you." The darkie stood there like a statue. The way she stood would have unnerved any man. It was as if she weren't really there, like she only needed her mouth just then, so that was all she connected to her brain.

"You could start with your real name. I think you just made that one up to make you sound more 'merican. You failed on that point, by the way."

"They said you'd be difficult. I should have grabbed you this afternoon. There's no time." Her eyes started working. She stared at him, at the woods, at him. "Come with me. We've only seventy-three minutes--" She snatched up her satchel and peered inside it, then dropped it back to her hip. "--and twenty-two point six seconds."

Hostetter grinned. "Till when? Till we meet your unsavory friends? Are they niggers, Mexicans, and Chinamen too, or do you just take up with white trash Irish?"

"No trap. This is important. If I lie to you, you can beat me."

BAD LANDS

"Now, that's a true statement. You make sure you know, girl, I will do just that if you leading me astray. I'll beat you down with this here stick, no mistake, y'hear?"

"I understand and submit."

Hostetter stood straighter, hefting his stick. He peered into the dark all around. "Okay now. How far to this house of your'n?"

"Three point four kilometers. We have to hurry."

"Yeah, yeah, stop tryin' to be smart with them kilometers and them points. Get on, girl. I'm right behind you, and the stick is closer!"



They reached the house an hour later, with Symfunny setting a grueling pace overland. She crashed her way out of the treeline, angling onto a direct path to the windowless back of the rustic shelter. Hostetter dropped his stick, grabbed her collar, and hauled her whooping back into the trees.

The darkie glared at him. "What was that?"

"Use them unnatural peepers of your'n." The marshal stooped to pick up his stick, and did not rise. "Moon's lit the house, lit the clearing... You see them dead circles at the edge of the grass, right out there in the wheat?"

"Oh, no..."

"Look familiar, do they?"

"Yes. We're too late. What do we do?"

"Well, if it was daylight and I was armed and had a passel of deputies behind me, I'd ask how you know what the tarnation I was talkin' about, but that'll save for later. Right now, I think you better get behind me and stay close. We'll check this out real quiet-like."

"I can take care of myself."

"I don't give a goldarned shit about you, I just don't want you gettin' me killed." Hostetter straightened and tested the balance of the stick in his hand. He scanned carefully side-to-side, then quickly to his rear. No sound came from the house, no chirp of bugs, no song from birds, nothing from critters of any kind. The place smelled of sweet rot.

Well, that couldn't be good.

Hostetter stepped into the clearing that separated the woods from the house. One step. No rustle of startled badmen, though they might already have been roused by the darkie's tromping and squealing from earlier. Still, nobody shot at him. He took slow, careful strides toward the building. The marshal's boots crackled on dry grass and the woman's dress rustled behind him.

He reached the back wall of the house and leaned against it.

"Smell it?" SinPhoney asked, and Hostetter cringed at the loudness of her.

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"You keep your trap shut," he whispered. "The way you carryin' on, you might as well dance out there on a goat standin' on a cow, and singin' Dixie!"

"I don't think anyone's here. That's putrefaction. Animals dead for hours."

"We'll be dead for hours if you don't shut your hole!"

Hostetter took a few deep breaths, then edged toward the corner of the house. The girl stayed close to him.

"I really doubt anyone's here," the darkie whispered loud enough to scare horses.

Hostetter gave no reply. He peeked around the corner. There wasn't much to see, just the next long stretch of wall and a bunch of dark, hairy humps about thirty yards out at the edge of a field of green wheat. Those lumps were heaped at equal intervals in what looked like a broad half-circle, but it was hard to tell with the house blocking the view.

The marshal started around the corner, then paused.

Nobody shot him or sprang out to scalp him, so he continued along the second wall until he reached the front corner. There, he took another peek.

"What do you see?"

"Shut yo' mouth!"

The dead cows -- because the humps in the field were cows for sure -- definitely made a half-circle out front of the house. The farthest carcass lay maybe seventy yards off to the west, the closest thirty feet to the east.

"Don't see nobody," Hostetter whispered. "Them cattle been there a while, and the wheat field was scooped out right up to the carcasses. The whole thing forms a circle. Half of it's inside the house. I can see pretty good all the way back to them trees in the west--"

The damned nigger girl stepped right out around him and strode around the front of the house. Hostetter sputtered, then stalked out and grabbed her by the wrist.

"What in the wild, wild west is the matter with you?" he snapped. "Ain't you never been bushwhacked? I have, and I don't like it one bit!"

"You said there was no one around."

"I said I didn't *see* nobody. That ain't the same as nobody bein' about. Why, I got me a good mind to--"

"Oh!" The girl stood open-mouthed as she stared at the front of the house. Her big eyes glittered in the moonlight.

Much of the house was missing, vanished, as if the Almighty had slapped a biscuit cutter down onto Earth, taking away a portion of field lined with cows and the greater portion of the house with one mighty flick of His wrist. A perfect circle lifted from the farm, two-thirds of the house included. Not blown up, not torn down, but completely gone, even the roof. A cast iron stove inside the ruin had been half in, half out of the circle.

BAD LANDS

The half of the stove inside the arc was gone, sliced from the whole as if it had never been. The girl stared horrified, as if that sort of thing didn't happen every day.

"Well," Hostetter said, "looks like I got to telegraph the gov'ment."

"Me, too," the girl said.

"What? What you mean 'me, too'? Since when are you a marshal?"

There ain't no nigger marshals and there ain't no *woman* nigger marsh--
Come back here!"

She was in the house, across the dead zone within the circle. Then she entered the house proper, drew up, and let loose a terrible squeal. She sounded so sore afraid that Hostetter froze on his way to snatch her back.

Whatever had cut loose two-thirds of the house had taken one corner of a wood-box bed. It had also taken a chunk of the woman lying there.

It had taken her clean, like a red-hot knife through beeswax. Everything was missing along a line from the right side of her neck to under her left arm. The wound was seared, heated so hot, and apparently so fast, that not a drop of blood had spattered the floor or the mattress.

But that wasn't the worst of it. The worst was that the body still smoked at the wound. It didn't smoke much, but it did.

"Come on back here," Hostetter said. "This place ain't safe."

"Dead!"

"I reckon so. Come on back here now."

She took one step backward, then froze.

"Whatchoo sniffin' about?" Hostetter complained. "She's dead. She can't harm you none."

"That wasn't me sniffing."

They stood there a good half a minute, then heard it again.

The girl and the marshal turned their heads toward the only corner of the house not molested by whatever had cut out the homestead. The girl took a few tentative steps into that corner.

"Back up there, missy," Hostetter ordered her. "I'll check it out." He hefted his stick. "That there's men's work."

She spared him an incredulous, broadly sneering glare, then stepped farther into the dark of the house, where she disappeared. "Oh, by the strings of all the worlds, are you all right?" Her voice chilled the bone, seeing as it came from nowhere.

She reappeared with a kid. She held him tightly by the shoulders and rubbed his arms and chest. Hostetter stared at them.

The boy had sodbuster written all over him. Those must have been milk cows out there in his field. He was so filthy he might have dirtied the ground if he sat down on it. He had blond hair where any of it showed through the crud, and wore threadbare coveralls but no shirt. The boy wasn't barefoot, but he might as well have been, his boots were so split, scuffed

and water-warped. He had the biggest eyes a kid ever had right to, either due to a gift from his parents or because he was scared beyond speaking.

"What's your name, boy?" Hostetter demanded when the girl deposited her find before him.

"W-W-Willie, sir."

Okay, so not scared beyond speaking.

"Ain't you got no given name?"

"Dern, sir. My pa, he's Cletus Dern. Was."

"When did this here thing happen?" Hostetter asked.

"Marshal. He's a boy, not a criminal to be interrogated." The darkie girl held the kid close and gave Hostetter the evil eye.

"He's a material witness. When I catch the bastards what done this, the circuit judge might care to hear his words."

"Is that so?" a new voice called, and Hostetter drew in a puff of breath. He said something to himself, something, by his expression, that wasn't proper. Then he turned toward the voice.

Two men strode lazily around from the west side of the house, one with his hand on his holstered pistol, the other with a rifle aimed at Hostetter's chest. There wasn't no wall there for them to hide behind, so they must have come up quiet-like from the woods. The leading man stopped when Hostetter showed his face. Then he laughed.

"Well, howdy, lawman!" the man bellowed. His accomplice stood to one side of him. He was a skinny feller looking too small for a horse, like maybe he'd be better on a pony. Or a dog.

"Howdy-do." Hostetter stepped next to the darkie girl, never taking his eyes from the men.

The taller man just laughed, a deep, confident sound. "Y'all made a ruckus sneaking on up here. We heard you from all the way yonder."

"And yonder would be?" the marshal asked.

The man turned toward the woods in the west and whistled. Almost before he'd ceased his screeching, a rider broke from the woods, he and his mount leading two horses.

"Sorry, Marshal," the darkie woman said.

The waylayers guffawed so hard at that they almost sounded to be choking.

"Mamma's biscuits!" Skinny Man slapped his knee. "I think I mighta pissed myself a bit!"

"Sorry doesn't seem at all adequate, little missy," the leader said between bouts of laughter. "You done killed the good lawman there with all your crashing about and yelping. I don't imagine that puts him in a forgiving mood."

"Don't know about that," Hostetter said. "I'm a pious Christian."

BAD LANDS

The third outlaw rode up to his friends, releasing the extra horses to each as they took the reins. This latest arrival was a big-bellied ogre with arms as thick as most men's thighs. He was probably the weak link, having been left back with the mounts.

The leader boosted onto the worn, black saddle of a chestnut stallion with a flash between its eyes.

"Fine horse you got there," Hostetter said to the leader. "Where'd you get it?"

The men laughed. Fat Boy turned to the leader and slapped his shoulder. "Y'all hear that, Mr. Southerman? He done asked where you got it. Har!"

"Nice rifle, too," Hostetter said.

The men laughed even harder.

"You know these people?" The girl protectively embraced the boy.

"I reckon we've met. But I surely recognize my mount and kit."

"I reckon you do," Southerman called. "I also reckon you ain't too smart."

"Oh? How you figure?"

"Well, first time we met, we caught you nappin'. Second time we catch you an' your gang here makin' a ruckus."

"They ain't my gang, and they made the ruckus."

"Well now." The man leaned on his saddle horn. "That's what we call one of them Samantha technicalities."

"That's semantic, you mo-ron. Miss Whoever-you-are, stay behind me, and both y'all hold on to me, no matter what."

"Why?" the girl asked.

"Cause I'm just about to shoot him down," Southerman explained, "an' he's wantin' somebody for his carcass to fall on."

"So's it won't git bruised," Skinny Man elaborated, and guffawed.

"He don't want to crack his blowed out haid on no rock," Fat Boy added, and joined in his partner's merriment.

Southerman shook his head, cradling it in one hand. He clearly harbored only limited appreciation of the humors of his gang.

"You boys listen up," the marshal said. "You are ordered to stand down and submit to arrest in the name of the United States gov'ment."

The men alongside Southerman paused in their braying display of humor, stared, then exploded into renewed peals of hilarity.

"Shut your holes!" Southerman pointed to a spot in front of the house, a few feet from Hostetter's gaggle.

"Aww, boss, we want to help kill the lawman..." Fat Boy complained.

"I'll kill the lawman, you aim the lightnin' post. Now git."

"Aww, boss..."

Southerman waggled the rifle at Fat Boy. "You want to tell *him* you shirked your job, or do I shoot you right now, as a mercy?"

"Aww, ain't no need to git all like that," Skinny Man whined. "We goin', we goin'..."

Hostetter watched the two underlings as they ambled their horses toward the spot Southerman indicated.

"See, lawman." Southerman slid the rifle into its sheath near the saddle horn. "You done interrupted a delicate operation."

"Also an illegal one," Hostetter said.

Southerman drew a pistol from his gunbelt. "Legalities don't concern me. Accuracy does. It ain't no easy matter aiming one of them lightnin' posts. You don't do it right, you don't know *what* might happen. Oh, wait a minute. You likely don't know what a lightnin' post is, do you, lawman?"

Skinny Man and Fat Boy took rocks from burlap bags hanging from their saddles and plopped them onto the ground almost at Hostetter's feet. The rocks were black and reflected in the moonlight. "No," the marshal said, "don't know what you talkin' about."

"It's hard work, lawman. Like, we had to kill all them cows, and drag 'em around to just the right spots to map out the blast, and even then the first strike was off by almost two mile..."

Hostetter spared a lazy look over to the house. "You count different from me."

"Oh. That there's the second strike. We're getting close. The iron, it don't work as precisely as I might like, but, well..."

"Shoulda used silver."

"Really. I thought you said you didn't know about no lightnin' posts. Well, don't matter none. We ain't got bags and bags of silver. The iron, it's just laying around on the ground in these parts. Kinda prissy, though. You have to adjust and adjust. It's gone nigh on twenty-four hours-- But I'm borin' you, ain't I? Where's my manners?"

Southerman sat up straight in his saddle and cocked his pistol.

"Porthos, snake!" Hostetter yelled to Southerman's mount.

Southerman yelped as the horse reared under him. He flew from the saddle despite his desperate grab for the reins. His pistol pinwheeled into the dark.

Hostetter faced the other two outlaws. He crouched and pointed the top of his stick at Skinny Man. He steadied the stick, leaned back, and slammed the butt end into the dirt.

A blast erupted from the top of the stick. It twisted about itself, liquidly, like a tornado of luminescence, leaping into the direction of aim. It slammed into Skinny Man, ejecting him from his horse. The man hurtled, arms flapping, until he plummeted to the ground forty feet away at the edge of the crop circle arcing across the farm.

BAD LANDS

As his boss fell to the ground, desperately trying to avoid the horse's hooves, Fat Boy snatched out his pistol and sent two shots in Hostetter's direction. Dirt jumped at the marshal's feet and splinters flew from the body of the stick, but he brought the staff to bear on Fat Boy and blasted him from his mount.

"By all that's treasured!" the girl exclaimed.

"Holy shit!" the boy added.

"Porthos!" the marshal called, and sent a shrill whistle between his teeth.

The horse whinnied, left off terrorizing its erstwhile rider, and drew alongside.

Hostetter threw himself into the saddle. "Come on, get up!" he ordered the girl and the kid, and tried to keep the horse still. He thrust the stick into its specially designed sheath, right next to the rifle.

The boy scrambled up the horse like a monkey but the girl was a comedy of ineptitude. "What in hell--?" Hostetter complained. "Ain't you never got on a horse?"

"Help me! It's too big!"

A rumble groaned to life in the earth, a deep vibration that made the iron rocks dance against the dirt. Porthos fidgeted, tossing his head. The horse neighed and stamped.

Hostetter grabbed the girl's arm, tugged, then reached as fast as he could with one hand to grasp a handful of dress and heave her higher.

"Lawman!" Southerman called. He scrambled to his knees, fumbling about for his pistol. He fell onto his face once, shaken by the unsteady earth.

The girl squealed as she clung to the flank of the anxious horse. The boy groped for her. Hostetter glanced around for signs, for some indication of the source of the trembling earth. He couldn't run with that woman hanging there like a sack of potatoes, and he couldn't stay.

"Damn and hellfire!" he bellowed. He stepped his horse in among the dancing iron rocks. He grabbed his marshal's badge from the lapel of his vest and held it up to the sky. A vibration hummed through his body. The horse's mane stood on end. "Hold on!" he yelled over his shoulder. "Hold on, for the love o' God!"

An orange star winked in the night sky, then hammered its light onto them.



Heat, cold, weightlessness. Hostetter dug his boots into the ribcage of his horse, else they might have drifted apart. White light engulfed him, a blaze so intense it burned the eyes even through tight-shut lids. Just before the whiteness washed everything away, a rider passed. As marshal, horse,

and hangers-on entered the light, the rider left it. He was a figure as black as death with something smaller, more terrible, leading him. Then came a cascade of images, things, people tumbling through blinding fog: men on violent, loud contraptions, bicycles, kind of, imbued with kaleidoscopic lightning. The light hurled them after the dark man. Then there was nothing but the agonizing brightness.

The colored woman screamed. The boy let loose a continuous, warbling "Whoa-o-oh!" The world roared like a giant twister eating a town.

Then, blinking and gasping, they stood in green grass in broad daylight, surrounded by a ring of tall, rectangular stones.

Another burst of light, a distinct sense of rising and of liquored-up dreams.

The stink of jungle jumped at them. Stair steps appeared beneath the horse, no, not stairs, but the stair-stepped side of a building. An almost naked brown man stared at them, his eyes wide. He held a bloody knife. He held something else bloody in his other hand. The horse, without footing, fell over onto its side, screaming.

Light. A stretching, a pulling apart of their bodies, like they were made of warm taffy. Bone, muscle, and screams drew out through tunneled space.

Red desert, a razor-like mountain behind them.

Light. A momentary, eternal assurance of peace. Warmth in the vibrating chaos of their sweating bodies. Weightless again.

A stone, skeletal church, the ceiling as tall as Heaven itself. They landed in the aisle atop the panicked horse, red and blue streams of sunlight through the windows. A thousand, maybe two thousand people gasped, leaned away, or scurried from the horse's hooves.

Light. Weight. Falling, falling. This was going to hurt.

Rock, weeds. Porthos, done with it, shrugged them all from his back. He careened about, bucking, his eyes wild.

Hostetter sat up. He looked to his badge, then grunted and flicked it away. The silver emblem rattled on rock, almost dropping into a crevice. It glowed white hot. Hostetter's fingers burned.

"What in Sam Hill--!" the boy exclaimed.

Hostetter and the girl climbed unsteadily to their feet. They patted themselves down and dusted themselves off. All about them spread uneven rock, sprigs of weeds, and a black sky punched by a full moon.

"What happened?" the girl asked. She went to the thunderstruck boy and started patting him down, as well.

"I imagine you know," Hostetter answered.

"A better question: where are we?"

They staggered outward from where they had landed, avoiding the bucking, stamping horse. They reached a precipice, heavily crevassed.

BAD LANDS

Hostetter looked left and right along the drop-off. The edge of rock marked a long, ragged curve.

"I tried to control it," Hostetter said, "get us away from that maniac, but not too far, maybe to the mountain."

"*This* is a mountain," the girl said.

"Yeah, I reckon, but the wrong one."

Below, far below, the land rolled out in lines of pine and a grass carpet blue in the moonlight. A silvery river wound through grass and red rock outcroppings. Hostetter edged to the drop-off and peered down into a rock-fall rimming a face that looked clawed by a giant bear.

"Where are we?" the girl asked again.

"Devil's Tower," Hostetter answered. "In Wyoming."

"Hell's bells!" cried the kid.