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THE  
SERPENT'S STAR

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MURIAL ROBERTSON 1

By Sarah Ickes

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A Historical Mystery Series

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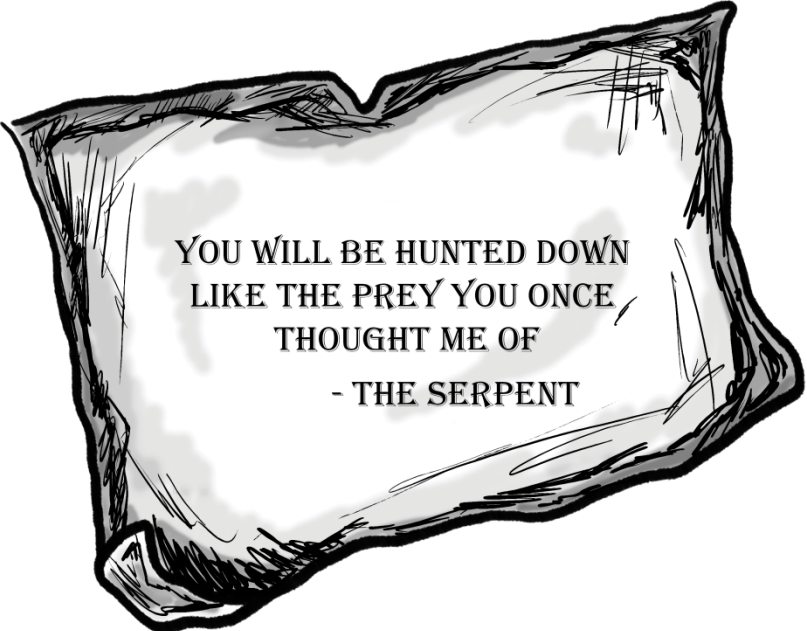
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The characters in this historical mystery novel are fictional and any resemblance to real people is coincidental.

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Definitions for some of the historical words and/or phrases used in this novella can be found on my website.

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YOU WILL BE HUNTED DOWN  
LIKE THE PREY YOU ONCE  
THOUGHT ME OF  
- THE SERPENT

# JULY 1886

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Murial Robertson.....	main character, works for her father on his security team
Jack Fulton.....	sheriff of Conestone
Curt Ruger.....	chief deputy sheriff of Conestone
Walter Crancin.....	bank manager, Murial's cousin
Senator Gerald Robertson.....	senator campaigning for Arizona to be a state, Murial's father
Clive Johnson.....	senator's campaign manager
Brewer.....	man with a well-groomed mustache

and....

You will have to read on to learn about the others!



The sun glinted off of the tin metal star she held in her hand as it soaked up the overwhelming heat. She longed for the cooler environment she had grown up with on the east coast, but acknowledged that the dry heat, distinguishing this part of the country as a place all its own, was far better than the saturating humidity of her home. Studying her new surroundings, the five foot six inches tall woman watched the people milling about the activity-filled streets. Dust clouds swarmed around their feet and danced into the air before vanishing without a trace. Her eyes were alert and sharp, being the exact reason for her father's trust in her, to scout out the road ahead of him while campaigning along the trails.

Being an artist gave her an edge in paying attention to the minute details that saved her father's life on more than one occasion. It wasn't heard of to have a female scout on a Senator's security detail, and the very notion challenged the social structure of the times. Her job, however, was not a blessing, but rather a curse in disguise.

This town seemed like all the rest at first appearance - stocked with saloons, gambling houses, and few reputable

shops for the people of Conestone in the territory of Arizona. Drunken cowboys sleeping it off in the alleys, or puking up the previous night's festivities in a disgusting sobering process, dotted the side streets.

As her fingers toyed with the metal star in her hand, she rubbed it mindlessly with her full attention focused on where her father should make his speeches. Her sturdy figure was hidden by her big belled dress and its dark blue drapery with ruffles. A baby blue parasol hung off her left arm and she neatly opened the laced fabric before leaning the rod against her left shoulder. Producing a smile on her wrinkle-free face, she daintily dipped her head to the stunned cowboys that parted the seas for her to walk down the sidewalk unimpeded.

Some of the gambling girls were whistling, jealous at her flauntingly wealthy attire, but she took the distasteful remarks in stride, and continued toward the center of town. She felt a sense of renewal after being able to freshen up at the hotel from a long and filthy journey by means of the stagecoach. While the scenery was quite beautiful between the variety of cacti and saguaro, the dusty winds and cramped quarters on the stagecoach was not her idea of a good time. The only pleasures she obtained from her trips was learning about the other travelers' experiences and from the artistic inspirations nature had to offer. Even as she was walking down the street, her mind could not stop studying the way the light and shadows were playing off one another. It was not long until her destination appeared on her right and she heard the creaking from the wood under her feet where she stopped.

The local bank was a single-story brick building with small glass pane windows and minimal decor inside the main lobby. She walked in through the front door to find the only teller helping an elderly gentleman make his deposit at



the wooden counter with metal bars separating them. Two minutes later, the brown door to her right opened and a rotund gentleman, dressed in a brown suit, eagerly motioned at her to join him. Obliging, the lady placed her parasol back onto her arm and walked through the threshold into a small office with one window that watched over the mountains in the distance. Several nearby farms dotted the landscape with moving shadows casting downward from the crawling clouds above. Sitting in the chair facing his pine wooden desk, she waited for the middle-aged man with glasses to take his seat. “You’re looking as good as ever, Murial. Have not seen you in a long time. I was surprised to find out that your father sent you ahead of him instead of one of his security men.” His tenor-like voice briefly added to the clock ticking endlessly away at the back of the room, hanging above cabinets over-stuffed with paperwork.

“It is so good to see you too, cousin.” Murial didn’t realize that her right hand was still playing with the Sheriff’s star until she stood up to give him a hug, pricking him in the process. Her cousin shifted his gaze to the pin and she quickly stashed it into a hip pocket within the fold of her dress, along with a quickly spoken apology. She awkwardly gulped down some saliva in her throat and patted the pocket with her hand while looking at the worn-out floorboards between her feet.

“You still have Uncle Seb’s star? He always did seem to favor you.” He was perplexed by the shame written on her face. “Did I say something wrong already?”

Murial appreciated his attempt to lighten her mood with some humor. “No, not at all. I just...it’s just that... well, I guess I should be over his passing by now.”

“Don’t be ashamed that you still miss him, Murial. If your father is the one feeding you that nonsense - why, he is the reason that you grew so close with Uncle Seb.” His

attention was redirected to the pencil in his hand, rubbing the smooth sides in rhythm, catching himself before he went too far in consoling her. Sweat ran down his slightly tanned, rounded face and he sighed awkwardly as he patted his forehead dry with a handkerchief that had been tucked away in his pants pocket. He leaned his body weight against the table. "So, how long have you been here?"

Murial's eyes shifted back onto the star's new location for a moment before replying. "What do you think? A waste of time or not?" Her style had always been more direct than what most of the women in her social status were expected to behave like, but that never stopped her. Ever since childhood, she had possessed a more factual demeanor and truth in her words as opposed to the idle gossip typically exchanged among the genteel. Always sneaking her way into her father's office to hear the political talks and war statistics landed her mind in a more knowledgeable place, however, it also placed her butt in more than a few spankings.

"To the point as always. Some things never change." Her cousin's mouth smiled from only one corner as he continued. "I think it is worth a shot, but I can't guarantee anything." Murial's eyes flashed hard as rocks toward her cousin and her voice spouted out daggers upon hearing his answer. Surprisingly, her cousin did not seem taken aback by her sudden turn of mood.

"Worth a shot?! Walter, my father is risking a lot for this campaign and we need to know if coming here would be worth it or not!" Murial shot up from the uncomfortable chair to pace around the room, anger fuming inside her. "He is putting pressure on me like you would not believe. Telling me to keep this tour moving steadily along so he is in a location no more than a week to eliminate any..." Her mouth clammed up tight when she realized what was about to slip

from her lips.

“Where is he now?”

“Hacksaw, two weeks away. I have been trying to keep ahead of schedule, but a tornado took out one of the towns and there is time for only one more location before heading onto California. It is either here in Conestone or over in Burkville.” Murial’s focus stopped on a landscape painting sitting beside the clock, counting away the seconds like grains of sand through a sieve.

“Burkville? They do not care about anything that isn’t related to farming and could care less about becoming a state. Why, half of their population is made up of bandits hiding from the law.”

“I know, but my father’s campaign manager stupidly suggested it and has been persistent at making sure he gets there as his final stop. A little too persistent if you ask me. That is why I need evidence that coming here would be better than going to Burkville. I haven’t liked Clive from the start, but I have a feeling that there is something more behind his decision. However, when I bring it up with my stubborn father, he does not wish to hear a single bad word against his ‘friend’ and the conversation ends with him shouting for me to stop contradicting him.” Her eyes squinted, gazing at the painting and the strokes used to create the life-like imitation. It had been some time since her hand had created it. Even so, she remembered the strokes like it was yesterday.

Walter sensed a longing in her stare, despite only seeing the back of her head, and his face saddened with the possible reality she could have been living. If Murial wasn’t his cousin, he would have asked her to marry him when they were teenagers back East. Her passion for art and life was unmatched by any other woman he had ever met and he pitied her current situation. “How has your artwork been

going?”

Murial’s outstretched hand, toward her initials on the painting, halted abruptly and she snapped back to the task at present. Her watery eyes were steadfast; but, she did not turn around as she spoke. “Fine.”

Her lips tightened as she moved slowly through the small room and over to the only window displaying the true countryside. She fought back her long internal struggle, wanting desperately to confide in her cousin, but remaining as quiet as ever instead. Uncle Seb, Walter, and her grandmother were the only family she had felt a true kinship towards. Their uncle was another rebel of the family, and encouraged her to be herself in opposition to society’s imposed boundaries. Senator Robertson, her father, was not of his brother’s mindset. Rather he was of the status quo, and forced Murial into this position to silence her artistic desires. His claim was that he was already risking enough, politically, by having her in his security detail.

“He hasn’t accepted your art dream has he?”

Walter’s eyes grew compassionate toward his cousin, who possessed the talent and drive of a professional artist if her gender was that of a man. That was something he always admired about Murial; that despite society being ever so against her gender, she didn’t let it stand in her way. At least, that is how he had always known her to be. But the woman standing in front of him was not the same one he had left back home four years ago.

“He has me doing this job, and is paying me fair wages, so I am not to complain.” Murial recited her father’s words like a script in a play and wanted to change the topic all together. “So far, I have been in town for three hours and I believe that the two trees by the stream, at the edge of town, would be the safest location to house my father’s speeches.”

“By Old Man Boris’s land? What’s wrong with having it in town? Or the Dance Hall for that matter?”

Murial shook her head. “No good. Too many high vantage points from the multiple two-story buildings and the Dance Hall has too many possible exits to cover. Besides, I have seen all of the sealed mine shafts throughout the streets. The leftover tunnels from past mine explorations are too numerous to count. No, outside of town is best.” She kept staring out the window, watching the sunlight cast short shadows from its high noon position.

Walter didn’t give up trying. “What about the church? It is a short distance from the other buildings.”

Murial turned around and looked at her cousin in disbelief. “Do you honestly think that my father would do that?”

Walter chuckled. “You do know your stuff, I will say that. But what about one of the saloons? I just think that you would be better off with a location in town if you want a better turnout.” Her cousin was one of few people not scared off by Murial’s authoritative stature and personality.

“Then we can take the liquor to them by the stream, but it is my father’s life that is on the line here and I say it isn’t safe for him to be a standing target.” Her dress swished slightly as she stepped up to Walter, who took his turn at studying her for clues as to what was making her so testy. Reading people was not his strong suit, but he did have a suspicion that she was trying to hang on to what little she had left in terms of a life under constant scrutiny from her oppressive father.

“Whatever has your father spooked must be serious. I don’t know of too many people who scare him.” Walter grabbed both ends of his pencil and snapped it in half with ease. Everything always seemed to be about his Uncle the Senator when it came to family matters, like he was the only

son his grandfather ever had who amounted to anything; despite having two other sons and two daughters. His mother was the third born and the eldest daughter. So her family was not seen upon with much favor from their grandfather. His grandmother, on the other hand, adored them along with Murial and their kinship was closer than most.

“You have no idea.” Murial spoke with her eyes distantly in the past. Her gaze wandered back to her cousin as she bid him farewell. “I must go and speak with the sheriff across the street to hear his opinion before contacting my father. Shall we have dinner tonight at the hotel?”

Walter’s lips quivered and his forehead was perspiring again. “Well, yes, but um...”

“Say 6:30?” Murial was fiddling with her parasol and not paying attention to Walter’s nervous expressions.

“Yes, that will be fine. But Murial, there is something I need to tell you...”

“You can tell me at dinner, Walter.” Murial’s hand grabbed the doorknob to leave when Walter suddenly gripped onto her wrist in protest. Her eyes slowly moved from his hand and up towards his eyes. “Walter, you still have a hand because of who you are. But, if you do not remove it in the next ten seconds, it will not matter whether you are my cousin or not.”

“Fine, I am not going to tell you. But, hear me out. Do not overreact.”

“Why would I?” Murial’s face displayed her curiosity, but Walter just removed his hand calmly and graciously opened the door for her. She eyed him on her way out and dipped her head to the cowboy holding the front door open for her as she exited the bank. *I wonder what that was all about?*

The sun was unrelenting in its hold on the town and

Murial's body instantly began sweating from underneath all her clothing. Her corset felt just the tiniest bit tighter with each breath. She waited for a passing stagecoach before walking across the street and onto the sidewalk in front of the sheriff's office. Murial's attention was too preoccupied with brushing her dress off from the dusty street, to make a good first impression, that she failed to see the name painted on the sheriff's sign before walking through the front door.

A slender man dressed in a cowhide vest over his red shirt and tan pants stood in the middle of the room with paperwork in his hands. One look at Murial and he dipped his hat in greeting, fumbling with a nearby chair while still managing to awkwardly hold onto his papers.

"Ma'am. Won't you have a seat?"

She could tell that he was a southern man by his accent. "Are you the sheriff?"

"Why no, the sheriff is out catching a runaway prisoner, but he shouldn't be long."

"How do you know he will not be long?"

"Well, Scott has a bum leg and isn't sober yet. He gets drunk almost every weekend he is in town, and well, let's just say he ain't too bright."

Murial raised her eyebrows in understanding. "Oh, I see. And you are?"

"My name is Curt Ruger, Ma'am, and I am the Chief Deputy Sheriff. Pleased to meet you Miss..."

"Miss Robertson. Likewise Mr. Ruger. If it's alright with you, I think I will just wait for the sheriff here."

"Be my guest, Miss Robertson." He gestured toward the chair he just pulled out from in front of his desk on the right side of the room, and Murial took him up on his offer. She patted her parasol down on top of her lap and made some idle chit-chat with the Deputy Sheriff until a horse was heard from outside, about ten minutes later. Curt headed out

to greet the Sheriff and their prisoner, Scott, while Murial tucked in a stray strand of hair that had fallen in front of her eyes and patiently waited. Curt dragged Scott through the door and toward the back jail cells, giving him a half-hearted scolding for trying to escape.

She watched as the sheriff walked in from the dusty outside and removed his hat to beat his clothes clean from his dirt covered body. Murial's face widened in shock and disbelief as the dust settled and the man went over to the water pitcher located atop his desk, on the left side of the room. Her mouth hung open as she stood up from the chair the moment Curt finished locking Scott away. "By the way Jack, this lady would like to see you about something." His arm motioned in Murial's direction. The parasol slid from her grip and collided onto the ground with a small thud.

Jack turned around and his face told her that he recognized her. He walked excitedly over to her frozen body. "Murial Robertson! It is so good to see you!" He reached out to give her a friendly bear hug, as if they were old friends. Her mouth closed and her eyes were stern but she reciprocated his welcome with a handshake instead.

"Jack Fulton. Never thought I would ever see you again."

He looked into her dark brown eyes. "Same stern look you always had for me. Some things don't get better with age, huh?"

"Well, how did you think I would treat you after all the boot-licking you did to my father?"

"Nah, you are just jealous because you were the only girl on our street I didn't court at one time or another."

Jack's equally brown eyes lit up as he brushed his right hand through his dark hair, plastered with sweat and filth, over his sunbaked face.

"You always did think that everything was about



you.” Murial rolled her eyes and placed her hand on her hip. “Look, I am not here to reminisce. I am here for an important matter.”

“I had a feeling it was not because you missed me.” His smile was smirking and playful in its meaning.

“Oh, wind up, will you? I need to talk to you about my father possibly visiting Conestone in a fortnight as part of his campaigning for this territory to become a state.”

Murial reached down to grab her parasol that had fallen to the floor. Jack’s face grew a bit more serious.

“I was wondering why you were dressed up. Even back home you refused to be seen with a parasol. That is your disguise isn’t it?” Murial glanced down at the parasol in her hands and shamefully slipped it behind her back, dropping it onto the chair. Her face betrayed the answer. “So he sends you, the unexpected dainty daughter ahead, to scout things out so as to not arouse suspicion. Is that right?” Jack leaned back against his desk, studying her body language. “You do realize that you stick out worse than a pink flower in a green field around these parts?”

“I know that. If anyone asks, I am on my way to California to meet up with some relatives that have gone on ahead of me.”

“Is even part of that true?” Jack raised an eyebrow. Murial took a step closer to him.

“Isn't truth the best lie?”

She hadn’t aged much since the last day he had seen her, three years, five months, and twenty days ago. He had memorized her sweet face with light pink lips and her unruly hair she loved to let run wild. The story in her eyes gave away the lapse of time, hardened but not stone, and her stare was strong but gentle.

“I am here to get your opinion first before reporting back to him. He is two weeks away and I have to send him a

telegram tonight before his mind is made up by Clive.” Murial was restraining her pride in having to stoop to ask for Jack’s help.

“Your father is still with that weasel as his campaign manager?” Jack shook his head. “Well, I guess that means that good ole Clive wants your father to go somewhere else to do his campaigning and you are trying to persuade him otherwise.” Murial nodded her head in agreement and Jack continued. “I’m not sure that many people in this town would care much about this area becoming a state, but you have a right to try. Why ask me? Does he not have his own bodyguards?”

“He does, but we make it a policy to let the law know ahead of time before coming into town so we can cooperate together.” Murial stated flatly. Jack was not convinced.

“I know you Murial, and that was not you talking. Your father has you trained well to spit out his lies.”

Murial’s blood was hot and pumping loud as her hands turned into fists. “See here you pompous Lunk-head! My father sent me here to scout out the town upon my request because Clive wants to head to Burkville. I didn’t know you were the Sheriff here, but if my father’s life was not on the line, I would be out this door in an instant. Now, are you going to help me or not?”

Jack’s head cocked to one side. “Your father that fearful for his life? It must be serious if he is that scared. Then why doesn’t he just turn around and go home?”

Murial was becoming extremely impatient. “You really think my father would do that?!” She turned her back to him and fetched her parasol before heading toward the door. Jack reached out and grabbed her arm.

“Where are you going?”

Murial glared back at him. “To the hotel, if you

do not mind. Or are you going to arrest me for something?”

He backed away from her and softened his approach. “That is fine with me. I was just asking.” Rubbing his fingers down the side of his hat, Jack was trying to decide if he should ask her a particular question. “Hey, do you want to have dinner tonight? It’s on me.”

“No thank you. I already have plans for dinner.” Murial turned and stormed out of the office and into the dusty Monday afternoon.



Walter was happy to be able to talk to Murial while eating dinner in her hotel room. “This is quite nice and more peaceful than being at Molly’s with everyone chatting up a storm.”

“I am sorry, Walter. It’s just that I have become so used to eating in my room due to my father’s position, that I find it hard to go back to eating in public.” Murial’s gaze fell to her food as her fork picked at the chicken on her plate.

“No, it was a compliment, really. I find this a nice change. How did your meeting with Jack go?” Walter was unsure on whether he should have asked after seeing Murial beginning to fume once more.

“It was definitely a surprise, I can tell you that. And it did not go all that well.”

“He really isn’t that bad once you get to know him Murial.”

“Are you still defending him? Walter, he is a Boot-Lick. Always agreeing with my father, like a lap dog would, and helping him with his work and...” Murial shook the rest of the statement away from her mind. “I am not going to talk

about it.” Walter decided to change the subject and asked her if she had reported back to her father as of yet. “No, I have not. Because, I am not sure what I am going to do. Even Jack says that the effort might not lead anywhere. I just do not know Walter. I was hoping to find something here that would force my father to change his mind about Burkville. I have had my reservations about Clive before, but something is not adding up this time. I was just at Burkville yesterday and it is about the same as here.”

“You were in Burkville by yourself?! Murial, I am surprised that you were not kidnapped, or worse.” Walter’s voice lowered as if someone might be listening in on their conversation.

“I was not alone. There were some very nice people on the stage and I ended up befriending an older Colonel on his way to California. He escorted me around the town for a couple of days and I thanked him by paying his ticket to San Francisco.” Murial shoved some chicken and potatoes into her mouth. “And I will have to tell you, Walter, for all the frightful stories that are spread about that town, I almost think it is better there than it is here.” Her face smiled when the comment riled her cousin up, just as she expected it would.

“Now, that isn’t true. We have some good folks here from back East that do care and are willing to listen. I trust your judgment, Murial, and so does your father. Send him a telegram in the morning explaining as such and make him listen.” Walter shoved more mashed potatoes into his mouth as three knocks came from the door. Murial rose from the wooden chair and walked past the bed and nightstand to open the door with two gunshot holes by the knob. Her eyes rolled once again when she saw Jack standing there, cleaned up from the afternoon’s pursuit and grinning from ear to ear.

“May I come in?”

“Sure thing Jack. There is plenty of food.” Walter did not give Murial a chance to refuse him entry and Jack slipped in past her.

“Boy, that food smells good. Is it from Molly’s?”

The two men laughed and talked like Murial wasn’t even there and she slipped back into her seat, silent and unamused. It was not until Jack had his plate filled with Molly’s food that he spoke in Murial’s direction. “You can’t allow your father to go to Burkville.” He stuffed his mouth and watched Murial’s interest grow from his peripheral vision. “I contacted the sheriff there by telegram and he informed me that there have been some strangers slowly coming into town over the past week.”

“That does not mean anything.” Murial returned to her dinner.

“No, but they are being very secretive and one of them happens to be a known gunfighter. His wanted poster is hanging in my office.”

“Why does the sheriff not arrest him?” Walter inquired.

“Because he has a feeling that something bigger is brewing. So he has asked for some United States Deputies to come in.” Jack eyed the satisfied look on Murial’s face. Once she spotted him watching her, her face hardened again.

“Well, that is great news, huh Murial?” Walter pointed his fork at her. “That gives you something to use in persuading your father.” Murial’s face slightly softened.

“Yes, it does. I cannot believe I’m saying this, but thank you Jack.”

“You are quite welcome, Miss Robertson.”

Walter checked the time by his pocket watch and dabbed his mouth with his napkin. “Well, I hate to end such

a lovely evening, but I must be going. I have work in the morning.” Murial’s eyes lit up.

“You still have the pocket watch I gave you for Christmas?”

“Why, of course. It did come from my favorite cousin.” Walter winked at Murial and bid them farewell as he headed out the door. Silence fell after the door shut with only the sound of Jack’s eating audible and Murial’s hand rubbing over her Uncle’s star under the table. The metal had somewhat cooled from the day’s heat, smooth and calming with each stroke of her thumb.

Jack looked over at her to find Murial staring at a distant place and time. “I am really sorry about what happened to your uncle.”

“You were there for the funeral and had spoken your condolences then. Anyway, it was over three years ago.” Her hand stopped in mid-stroke.

“I realize that. But I also know how much he meant to you. Despite the fact that time has since moved on, the pain does not.”

“What would you know about it?” Murial challenged him with her glare and threw her uncle’s star onto the table. “You are a man living in a man’s world with everything at your disposal. My Uncle Seb was one of the few that believed in me and challenged me to strive for better. He supported me going after my dream of being an artist and selling my artwork instead of becoming a housewife, knowing that that kind of life would hollow me from the inside out.” She stood abruptly from the table and moved away from her chair. Jack rested his fork down upon his folded napkin.

“I may not know what it is like for you, but I do know about pain and rejection.” Jack removed himself from the table. “Thank you for the dinner.” Without another

word, he walked over to the door and let himself out. Murial was confused by his statement and sat on the end of the bed in thought for a time. The next thing she knew, her eyes were closed and she was back home on the worst day of her life.

*It was New Year's Eve, three years ago, and Jack was downstairs with her father as usual. Murial was sitting on the balcony outside her bedroom and was painting with the paints and brushes her uncle had given to her for Christmas. Shannon, her sister, had helped her stretch a roll of canvas over a frame she constructed under her grandmother's guidance and was happily filling it with vibrant colors. Upon hearing her name being bellowed from her father, she reluctantly headed down the hall and staircase.*

*"I have heard from your mother that you have decided not to go to the Henrys' tonight for the ball?!" Senator Robertson shouted at her.*

*Murial was defiant and rigid. "Yes, that would be correct, Father."*

*"That is unacceptable. You have twenty minutes to get ready. Shannon, go help your sister!" Shannon hesitated as she looked between the two, not wanting to be caught in the middle of their argument.*

*"That will not be necessary Shannon, because I am not going." Murial turned and headed back up the stairs toward her bedroom with her father raging behind her.*

*"THIS IS ALL MY BROTHER'S DOING! TURNING YOU AGAINST ME!" He stormed after her and pushed Murial out of the way once they reached her bedroom. She screamed while her horrified eyes watched her father draw a knife from his pocket and slashed through her painting.*

*Tears streamed down her face as all the anger inside*



*propelled her forward and she attacked him like a wild man. The Senator simply shoved her aside and she landed on her bed, crying. "If you will not go to the ball tonight, then you shall not paint either. Why can you not be more like your sister or Jack? The sooner you learn that I am running this show, the better it will be for you."*

*Murial shriveled on her bed as sorrow filled her heart. The Senator thrust his knife back into his pocket and strutted down the stairs. Her grief consumed her so much so that she failed to hear the sound of footsteps approaching her room. Only when Jack had reached her bedside did she feel his presence and turned around, trying to blink away the tears in order to see the person standing there.*

*His hand was outstretched while holding a single lilac, her favorite flower, with a compassionate smile. Her hand flew at the flower and struck it on the ground. "I will never be like you!" Murial stated and turned her back to him.*

The light streamed upon her face and woke her from her sleep. Her eyes flashed open at the same instant gunshots rang out from the street below and the glass in her hotel room window shattered. She rolled onto the floor and held her head down while listening to the feet of chaos running up and down the hallway. Shouting and more shots were filling the morning air and she remained hunkered down for the next five minutes. Murial raised her head when the noise dissipated but she changed her mind again when there was a knock on her door.

"Miss Robertson, it's Chief Deputy Ruger. Are you alright?" Curt spoke through the locked door. Murial picked herself up and dusted off her dress, appalled that she had fallen asleep in her day outfit. She opened the door and let Curt inside.

“Yes, I am alright. However, I can’t say the same for my window.” Murial pointed toward the broken glass fragments lying on the floor.

“Oh, I’ll have Bert come around to patch it up for you Ma’am. But I am sure glad that you’re alright.” Curt dipped his hat to Murial and she nodded in return.

“Why thank you Curt. That was very nice of you to check up on me.”

Curt gave her a sideways glance while he kicked some of the glass into a pile with his boots. “It wasn’t me Ma’am. It was Jack that sent me over to check on you.” Murial’s face widened with surprise.

“What was all the noise about anyways?”

“Just a few cowhands wanting to stir up some trouble. It’s like a land war out here. But Jack got them under control and Deputy Harrison is taking them back to jail while Jack gets looked at by the Doc.”

Murial’s attention was grabbed immediately. “Is he okay?”

“Right as rain. Just hit him in the arm and luckily not his gun arm.” Curt eyed her with a sly smile and Murial retracted her interest.

“My uncle was a sheriff and passed away when someone shot him in the chest. I am just glad that Sheriff Fulton will be alright.” Murial thanked Curt again and ushered him out of her room. She rapidly gathered herself together and headed down to the telegraph office hidden inside the stagecoach depot.

“Excuse me, I would like to send a telegram, please.” Murial greeted the elderly clerk, who obliged and she paid him after sending her father her report. She asked him directions to the doctor’s office and hastily made her way down the street and to the left of the tree by the stables

where Walter was already waiting outside the doctor's door.

“Good Morning, Murial. Curt told me that a couple of the shots were fired into your room from this morning's events. Are you okay?”

“Yes, I'm fine. Curt informed me that Jack received a bullet in the arm. I just came from the telegraph office to see how he was doing.”

“Better than the other fellas.” Jack opened the door with his left arm in a sling. “If I would have known it would have taken getting shot to have you come and see me, I would have gotten shot sooner.” Walter chuckled and gave him a pat on his good arm.

“Glad to see your sense of humor is still intact.”

Murial resisted the urge to give him her normally steely glare. “It was very nice of you to send Curt over to check in on me. You did not have to do that.”

“Nonsense. Walter's my friend and he would kill me if anything was to happen to you.” Jack's look was sincere and Murial allowed a small smile to form on her lips.

Walter's gaze shifted back and forth between them for a moment before excusing himself back to the bank. “I'm glad to hear that you are alright buddy and I am sure that Murial has a few things she will need to discuss with you after her father decides to visit.”

“You sent him the telegram?”

“I did. I just hope that he agrees with my decision. No telling what that slimy Clive has put into his mind.” Jack and Murial walked beside one another back toward the hotel. “You don't have to walk me back to my hotel room, Jack.”

“It is the polite thing to do. Besides, it isn't often that I get to walk with the most beautiful woman in town.” Jack noticed the smile on Murial's face. “That makes two smiles

I have gotten out of you today. That is a record for me, considering that you have never smiled at me before.”

“You have not gotten shot before. At least that I know of, so there are some exceptions.”

Jack’s expression turned more serious in nature. “I never told you this, but your uncle was the one who inspired me to become a Sheriff.”

Murial stopped dead in her tracks and looked at Jack with bewilderment. “But you were always so enamored with my father and the politics of Washington.” She watched him study the dirt as he was about to say something when Curt approached them.

“Sorry to interrupt Jack, but you are needed out at Rendson’s farm. Karen is in your office. Looks like this bunch was a distraction for us while the others are surrounding Paul’s house.” Jack excused himself and Murial was left in suspense of what he was on the verge of saying. She watched the two men walk down the street, discussing what the situation was according to Karen’s account.

As Murial made her way back to the hotel, she caught a glimpse of a man lurking in the shadows of the alleyway. Her attentive stare caused the man to flee and Murial thought better of chasing after him. Shaking off a feeling of curiosity, she reached the door of the hotel to find the lobby half-filled with stranded travelers. The clerk at the counter was trying to handle the grumblings from the dissatisfied customers. Even though his voice was barely holding any authoritative presence, the clerk did his best.

“Now, ladies and gentlemen, I know that this is not what you had planned, but the company is paying for your hotel room while they fix the stage.”

While navigating her way through the crowd, Murial overheard two older women gabbing about an engagement announcement they would be attending in California. The

one lady still had some black hair mixed in with her upcoming gray and lowered her voice to a whisper. “Wait, what do you mean he has not asked her yet?”

“I mean just that - he has not asked her yet. I do not know why my boy has sent for us, I just do not know. Apparently he says that the deal is done.” The other lady had a completely white head of hair and wore fashion more suitable for one of the cities back East. Murial tried to get a good look at the women without causing a stir, but she was ultimately swept up in the directional flow of the group wandering toward the stairs. She was happy to have some personal space once again after shutting the door to her room behind her. *That must be what a cow feels like in a corral*, Murial thought to herself.

The air was warming up outside so she retrieved some sketching materials from her trunk to make good use of the beautiful day. With the pencil resting familiarly in her hand, she sat by the window to draw inspiration from the landscape before her. Two pages of sketches and ideas were filled by the time a knock was heard from the door. Walter walked in, upon her admittance, and his eyes lit up when he saw what she had been up too. “Your drawings are always so well done.”

Murial’s cheeks blushed slightly at his praise. “Thank you.”

His eyes were attempting to search her face for an answer to his question before saying it aloud. “Did he tell you?”

“Tell me what?” Murial was perplexed as to what her cousin was referring to.

Walter suddenly became embarrassed and hastily shoved the subject under the rug. “Sorry, I thought he told you. The way you two were actually getting along today... by the way, where is Jack?” She informed him of what she

knew about the situation out at Rendson's farm. Walter shook his head, "There is so much war and dispute over land out here. When are people going to learn that there is enough to go around? Why do some men have to be so greedy?"

"I don't know, Walter. Now, what has Jack not told me?" Murial tried, and failed, to get her cousin to spill the beans. Walter left the room with his hat in his hands, speed-walking down the hall before she could think about chasing after him.

Murial ate alone that evening, listening to the woman, in the next room, sing a song about the South. Her voice was soothing in a sad but pleasing manner, and she listened to it while reading over her father's response to her telegram. The hotel clerk had delivered it with her food and even though her father's response was in her favor, she was not as thrilled by her victory as she had expected to be. Traveling was the one aspect of her job she enjoyed, and discovering new experiences without being under the control of her hot-tempered father. Whenever he came, her life would have to be put on hold to suit his purposes once again and as time ticked on, Murial found it increasingly harder to keep up the fake pretenses that Clive choreographed for them.

Lying on the bed, she felt consumed by the memories she had of her father condemning her, shouting at her, guiltling her for being who she was inside. Darkness was closing in and she desperately wanted to curl up tighter than a ball, crying herself to sleep. Her rounded cheeks were stained with tears and she placed the paper on the nightstand through blurry eyes.

The nightgown she unearthed from her clothes, swayed around her body while she slowly strolled across the room and to the still broken window. Murial looked up to

see the moon as a thin crescent in the sky, mirroring itself  
within her eyes watered by sorrow.