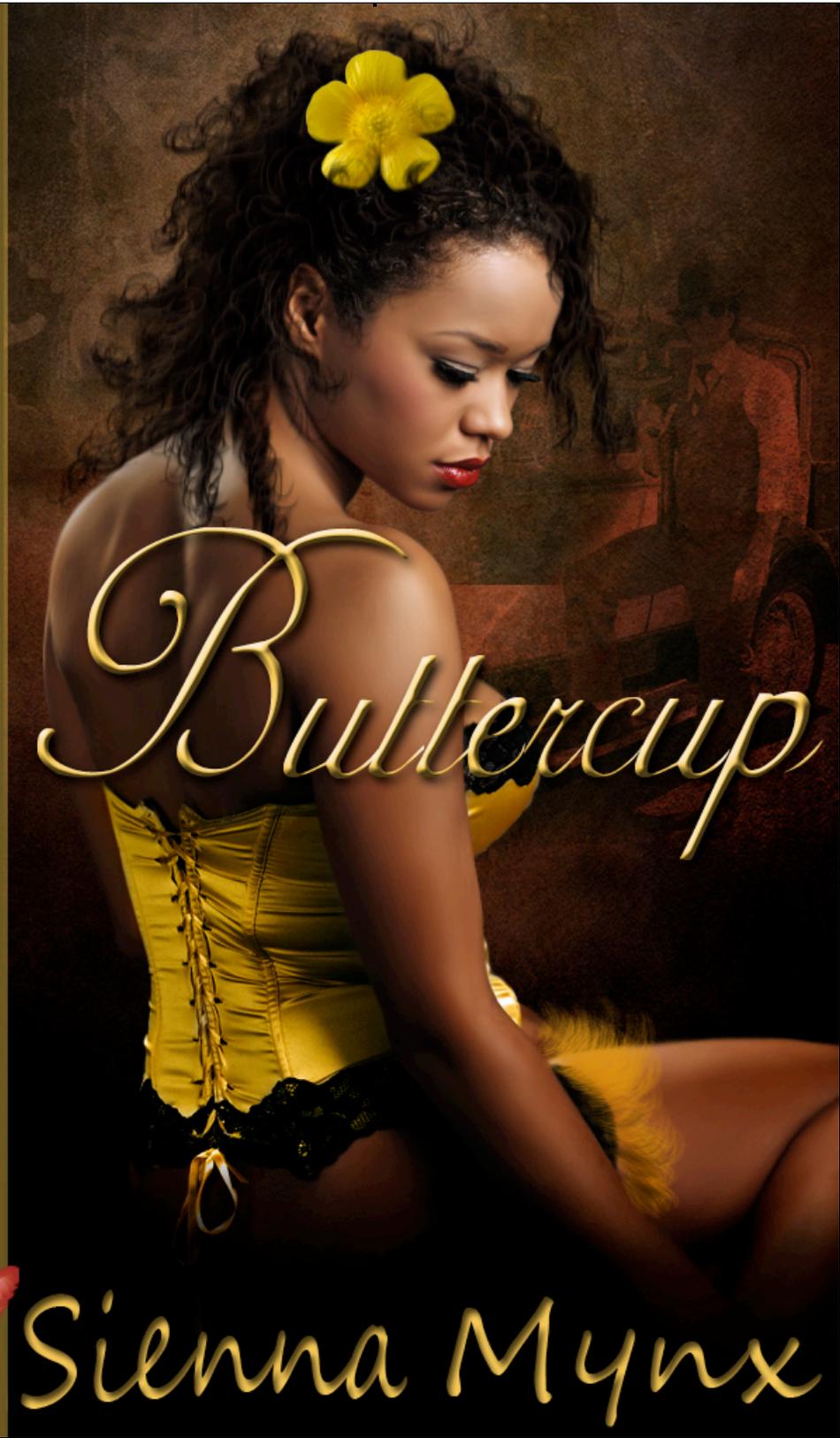


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Buttercup

Sienna Mynx



The Divas Pen LLC Publication



<http://thedivaspen.com>

Buttercup

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Carnie Brogue

Scratch – money

Rousty or Roustabouts – A temporary or full-time laborer who helps pitch concessions and assembles rides. In the 1930s, American roustabouts would work for a meal and perhaps a tent to share with other workers.

Money –

- *ace* (\$1)
- *deuce* (\$2)
- *fin* (\$5)
- *sawbuck/saw* (\$10)
- *double* (\$20)
- *half-yard* (\$50)
- *yard* or *c-note* (\$100)
- *rod* or *d-note* (\$500)
- *large* or *k-note* (\$1000)

Carny or Carnie – Carnival worker

Townie – General public

Bone yard – Place at which employees stay when not working.

Patch-money – Money used to induce police officers to turn a blind eye. Also known as *juice* or *ice*.

Lot Lizard – Describes a carnies (usually female) who has multiple sexual partners (also carnies) or one who tends to "sleep-around" or cheat with other carnies on the lot.

Mark – Townie marked for the con.

Nut – The sum total (in cash) of a performance, or group of performances. The nut (or kernel) is also sometimes used to refer to the basic operating expense of the joint (including the "patch"). To "make your nut" is to break even, anything beyond that is profit (or tip).

Greenies – Hired help

Donniker – Outhouse

Genny - (pronounced "jenny") - A huge generator that powers some or all of the midway

Prologue

"Miss me?"

Silvio sat up in his rickety tent chair. Her voice beckoned. Like the opening of a song, those two words, 'miss me', rose softly above the drumbeat of his pounding heart.

The warm fragrance of sweet kettle corn and roasted apples blew in from the midway through the loosened flap at the front of the tent. Carnies taunted townies to test their luck, get their fortunes read, or become one of the chosen few to bear witness to the never seen before oddities of man. However, here under the cover of a patchwork carnival tent, it was just Buttercup and him—alone. Silvio swallowed. His nerves, a ball of conflicting emotions, had lodged in his throat as he stared on, riveted. He had found her. Beyond a stage curtain made from tattered wash-worn sheets strung up by fishing wire, she called for him, seduced him, damned him.

Buttercup drew closer, her shapely hips swaying in a wondrous slow motion with each step. She worked the momentum, causing the adornments that circled her small waist in a low-slung belt, to sing with soft chimes. Silvio knew she wore nothing else beneath her garment. She never did.

She was as he remembered.

Buttercup possessed an untamed wildness to her beauty. The thin shroud of cover between them could do little to conceal it. She drew closer. With the lights of the carnival outside the tent as her backdrop, her dark silhouette approached with the grace of an African Goddess. He wiped his hand down his face. There was only so much he could withstand.

Silvio's arousal almost reached its peak when she began her tease. Her movements suggested the cupping of her breasts and the squeeze and pinch of oversized nipples he once remembered sucking to hard nubs. All the while, she allowed her hips to roll in sweet provocative circles. It was beginning. With a sharp intake of the sweltering air of the tent's confinement, Silvio narrowed his

focus on her shapely form and acknowledged the hard punch of lust to the center of his chest. She released one pert nipple to run her hand down her midriff and then lower. He was certain that she was now pleasuring herself.

As the urges he resisted churned in his gut, Buttercup began to dance. A gyration of hip thrusts that worked up a frenzied tribal shake. Her arms flew up with palms pressed together and raised above her head. The belt of bells and possible feathers rang a melody that went through him. Silvio yearned in his core to possess her and to rediscover all the pleasures he once felt with her. Tortured, quick, impatient gasps of deep breaths escaped him. He shifted in the chair, and it creaked on its weather worn legs. He laid a hand to his groin, applying pressure. Under the dark shadowed solitude amongst empty tent chairs, he rubbed out the swelling.

Damn the curtain. Damn them all for keeping her from me for so long, he thought. Six fucking years is far too long to be without her, and it's all this cursed carnival's fault.

"Miss me?" her beguiling whisper asked once more.

Silvio's throat torched from the inside. A heat wave of forbidden desire boiled the blood in his veins, and his passion for her bulked between his legs. He rasped out a barely audible reply. It came out in stuttered expletives. The touching of himself helped, but this deliverance was short lived. The ache moved through him, settling in his heart. Buttercup would show no mercy. Denying him the pleasure of the visual, she wound her heart shaped ass in another frenzied shake. This he could only perceive behind the cover of the rag-tag stage curtain. But perception was everything. Silvio shuddered. His lids fluttered and then closed. The friction of his britches brushing against his neglected cock sent another spasm of wanton lust through him. He relished his undoing as ribbons of pleasure, threaded with hot searing lust, pumped blood through his shaft. Buttercup proceeded with finesse and wicked skill to seduce him further through her dance. Silvio's chest seized with tightness. The wild beating felt as if his heart would punch a hole through his ribcage. He was cold and hot, all at the same time.

Buttercup spun in a half circle. Wringing her hips, she dropped and then came up with a fierce roll of her rump. Silvio licked his dry lips, which parted a fraction to allow in a much-needed breath. He miserably neared his end. Then Buttercup stopped.

Silvio exhaled, keeping his eyes shut. Sweat beads dotted his furrowed brow. And despite his efforts, a lonely suppressed tear escaped the inlet of his eye and trailed down the outer contour of his nose. He dropped his head back on the top rung of the chair, slumping further down. Yes, he suffered, and it was all because of her.

She waited.

He was grateful for the short reprieve. He willed himself to look upon her again. His pulse rate normalized and so did her dancing before it came to an end. No woman should be able to exude such control. Buttercup did. She posed behind the thin sheath with her back to him, arms crossed over her enticing chest. Her head gave a slow turn, and she peeked at him from over the curve of her left shoulder. The lift of her chin spoke to the awareness she foolishly thought remained concealed. He knew she was smart. Despite her color, and lot in life, she was damn smart. He'd be a fool to forget that fact.

"You've bewitched me," Silvio stammered, so enamored with her that he could barely speak.

"Show me. Be a bad boy for me, Silvio 'Blood-shot' Garelli, a bad, bad, boy."

Silvio eased down the tab to his zipper. He reached in and brought his coiled length out in his hand. Holding his shaft at the base, he tightened his grip and relieved the pressure of his curved erection. She was making him do it. Had to be. He was helpless under her command. To be hers again was his sole focus as he worked his hand up and down his length, slow and easy at first. Under the watchful eye of her shadow, nothing stirred. Even the sounds of the Carnies hurrying up and down the midway of the rag-tag carnival were muted. Silvio closed his eyes once more. He imagined her mouth descending with wet heat and her full lips grazing each inch as she swallowed him all the way to the back of her

throat, then deeper. He pumped his man meat, drowning in flashes of her riding him, his sweet beautiful Buttercup bouncing on his lap and clenching her silken vaginal walls with each descent. In his fantasy, she rode his cock until the reserved breath he held seeped from his lungs. No, he couldn't see her, but she was doing him all right. Her penetrating stare was giving off silent commands: if you want it then show me. Show me, show me...

The curtain separated them, but he knew his Buttercup. He had sampled her nectar; it had damned him for sure.

This he did for her and for him.

Jerking his dick in quick upward tugs, he relished the wicked downpour of sin pooling in his chest and cooling his feverish restraint for a release. And in his mind, there she remained. Firmly seated upon his lap with every inch of him inside of her, she opened for more. Long dark legs draped over his shoulder and the side of the tent chair as she whispered her desires to please him in his ear. Silvio inhaled a staggered breath. With clenched teeth, he squeezed hard on his dick, stalling his pleasure in search of the pinnacle release. He huffed through flared nostrils and wheezed out of quivering lips. It was nearly too late. Not yet, he told himself. Not yet! He had waited too long to lose control now. Silvio had plans. Plans that began with his body on hers, his cock tunneling deep between her butter soft dark thighs—while she begged for mercy. It was a plan that ended with Buttercup leaving this carnival with him, being his, no matter what the law said against their union.

With the same shaky hand, Silvio drew out a hanky from his pocket to clean himself. Then he readjusted his stiff unrepentant penis to the front of his trousers. Primal need pulsed through his groin and his balls ached with tension-clenching spasms that slammed through his gut. He endured. Buttercup had more in store for him than this tease. He would wait. It didn't matter how insufferable the wait would be.

"If in you do, miss me that is, you have to say it, Sil. Those is the rules between you and me. Those is my rules," said Buttercup.

“Stop your games, doll. You know I do. Why else would I return here after all this time?”

“Why indeed? Why you come here, Sil, to your own peril, is a mystery to me. Care to say the truth?”

“What do you know of truth?” Silvio snapped. “You condemned me when you chose a lie over the truth.”

“I condemned us both, don’t you’ know? I condemned us to your dreams, to these false moments where we is free. I’m sorry for that, sugah, but you and I don’t exist. You know that, don’t you?”

There was an explosion of drunken laughter behind him. His head turned, eyes seeking the unknown, fearing carnies with sticks and knives coming for him. Instead he saw two Joe’s walking just outside the opening of the tent. Silvio relaxed. It was to be expected that his private show could soon be raided. No red-blooded man should pass on Buttercup’s hoochie-coochie performance. Still they strolled on, unaware.

Buttercup chuckled.

His head snapped around. Was she reading his thoughts?

A delicate whimsical tune went through him. Buttercup hummed through a sweet melody. It was a sensual stroke to his bruised pride before she shook her feather-covered ass at him once more. She giggled again with girlish glee. She was in no hurry, but Silvio was. Time was short. The mean giant of an Indian they called Lone Wolf guarded her from the white boy townies thinking she owed them more for their money. He was nearby. If Silvio got caught, he’d lose his scalp and his hide. The carnies lived by their own rules, and the number one rule was no one touched Buttercup. He broke it once; tonight he’d break it again. So would Buttercup.

“Miss me?” she asked in a soft pained voice, as if his inability to respond was her torture. Try living in a jail cell for four solid years with lungs full of dirt and grime from busting rocks. Try wishing for a do-over, for a chance to save Jelly’s life, to claim her as his, and be his own man. She had no idea what torture

was or why that one night in her young arms so many years ago got him through it.

"Sil...I waitin' to hear you say it. Do you miss me?"

"I miss you," said Silvio.

"Aw, sugah, of course you do." Buttercup cooed.

Slender hands slipped through the part in the curtain drawing them open. Buttercup's emergence siphoned the air from the tented room. Seeing her again was a surge to his being, to his manhood. He swallowed the sweet air she brought. His eyes absorbed the simplest of detail. Her skin. He loved her skin. It was flawless, pecan brown brushed bronze under the dim lights. She glistened as if she bathed in the sun. Her face. How many nights had he seen that face in his dreams? Too many to count. A heart shaped face with large round brown eyes, high cheekbones and a delicate yet wide nose. Her face was framed by a wealth of dark unruly hair, bushy like a lion's mane. It sported a yellow flower, pinned one side up, with its stem tucked in the mass of curls. She smiled, and those full sensuous lips of hers spread to reveal even teeth. Most carnies were missing a few.

Buttercup crossed the short distance from the curtain to the edge of the stage on her toes. Amusement shone like dark diamonds in her eyes. When Silvio shifted forward in his seat, she winked and acknowledged the erection bulking between his legs. Silvio was right. She wore nothing except a belt of leather adorned with long black and white ostrich feathers cinched to her shapely hips. She shook those curves of hers and bells chimed. Music played with every step she made. Silvio's eyes lingered on her breasts. Being a mouthful, they were plump and medium in size. They bounced lightly when she moved, dark large areolas with hard nipples. Beauty like hers should never be covered. In fact, he was going to make it a rule once he stole her away from the carnival. No clothes. Ever.

Silvio rose. "Buttercup, Buttercup, Buttercup...doll. I should kill you for what-cha done to me." He stopped before her, his hard gaze unmoved by the defiant one he met.

"Will you?" she asked. A hint of mockery tainted her concern.

Silvio traced the tip of his index finger along the vein that ran from her big toe to the center bone in her foot, barely visible beneath her flawless skin. Her feet were small, delicate, and soft with perfect toes. Did she walk on clouds everyday? His touch was purposefully slow, like his roving gaze. It climbed her toned legs, stopping at the nest of dark curls covering her sex. Such a sweet jewel lay hidden between the folds. Nothing in life tasted or felt sweeter than Buttercup. He'd tried to replace her. He tried them all. He had bedded the whore, the virgin, the widow, all in vain. He could never convince his heart that the passion they once shared was just in his head.

"It's taken me a long time to find this carnival, to find you again. But like I told you," he said lifting his stare, "I would."

With unabashed curiosity, she blinked her thick lashes at him. The wide-eyed innocence shining through her soulful brown irises was nothing more than a smoke screen. The last time he'd been with her, it had nearly cost him his life. He was different now. It wouldn't go down how it had then.

"You don't fool me, Silvio. You came for me. You a crazy one to think ya' could." Buttercup lowered, right before him, balancing on her toes with knees bent. She put a hand to the scruff darkening his jaw. Silvio couldn't help but admire the sweet promise between her parted thighs, imagining the taste and feel of her moist fragrant essence, now up-close and on display. He had a helluva imagination, thanks to her. His hand rubbed up her ankle and continued. He caressed the back of her sculpted body to her soft thigh. He longed for her touch; he turned his face into her hand and pressed a kiss into her delicate palm.

"If Tiny find you, he'll pump you full of hot led," she warned. "Lone Wolf find you, he'll take your scalp while you still alive fer sure. If you still running, Silvio, why run here? They gon' kill you."

"Not if I get them all first."

"That's foolish talk. I ain't worth it. Doncha' hate me for what I done?"

Silvio's eyes lifted up to hers. All his life, he was told he wasn't worth a piss. This he could accept. But even he, a hooch runner turned outlaw, would confess that she was worth ten of him. He didn't say so. Couldn't find the words.

Somehow Buttercup knew, downplayed her value, and seduced unsuspecting men to do her bidding. He would need to be careful with sharing just how much love he had kept in the cold storage of his heart, next to his thirst for revenge.

Buttercup eased down on the stage, hands at her side. She crouched before him with her knees parted. Silvio moistened his lips. She sat. With a dancer's grace, she lifted one leg, dropping it to his left shoulder. Hooking it around his neck, she drew him forward. He didn't need the guide. Silvio knew what he wanted and where to find it. Buttercup sighed. She lowered to the dusty platform. Her lashes fluttered shut, and her nails clawed up sawdust over the wooden planks of the platform. She lay before him, exposed, ready, inviting. He could delay himself no longer. What should he taste first? The tip of his tongue eased from his parted lips for a sample. Her skin was warm, salty, and tangy with adrenaline spiked perspiration. Silvio ran a moist trail over the soft flesh between her inner thighs. Her feminine scent drew him by the nose, intoxicatingly rich and natural. He could bury his face in her sex for eternity.

Buttercup exhaled, lifting her hips to put the lips of her quim in his face—darker skin folded over a damp pink center. Silvio gripped the ring of her belt-skirt and dragged her down an inch or two lower. He pushed to the backs of her raised thighs, driving them as far back as it would go. The feathers that tickled his nose and cheeks were a meaningless distraction. Ooh how sinful she was! He craved more. He seized the moment to show her how much, parting the lips of her vagina with both fingers to run his flatten tongue from her hole to her clitoris with a single lick. The ripple of her reaction came with a sudden shudder of her clenching buttocks. He made wicked forays with his tongue.

"Aaah..." his sweet Buttercup exhaled.

Silvio inhaled her. Buttercup was as sweet as the flower she was named for and as addictive as he remembered. He was gone now. He deep kissed her below her pretty curly mound. He continued to lick and suck until she thrashed and whimpered. Her feminine wiles were like a jolt of electricity through him, driving him onward.

She was his. She gave herself up to the sizzling delights with the bucking of her hips. She was his. Silvio had to press his palm flat to her pelvis to keep her down. His lips and tongue drowned in her essence. Buttercup aided the best she could. She gripped the tops of her knees to keep her thighs parted.

“Ooh Siiiiiiiiiiii,” she choked out in a sob. He felt her convulse with tremors from another pending climax. He made love to her with his tongue and sucked her engorged bud, thrilling himself as well as her. The juicy morsel quivered and swelled in his mouth. She cried out through her release. An instant before his brain dissolved into mists of pure passion, a thought surfaced: what if they were caught? He was most vulnerable there. It was too risky. The Indian, the Carnie boys, the coppers chasing him, and his gang could run in at any moment. He licked her once more and dragged himself away, savoring the taste of her on his lips.

Buttercup’s bottom lip quivered like her core. She looked up at him through the shadow of her long lashes. “Whatcha go and stop for?” she weakly groaned. Her head lifted from the stage. Her breasts jiggled, covered in a slick sheen of sweat. Each perky mound glistened as if sprinkled with stardust. He touched his cock again in his pants, battling the urge to take her there on the spot. The prolonged pause lengthened between them. He tried hard to decide on what next. Her lithe lush body was still shuddering in the aftermath of her climax.

She waited, pleading with her eyes for more. Silvio broke. He swept her up into his arms. He climbed the short steps of the stage and went through the part in the curtain from whence she came. Buttercup nuzzled her face in the nook between his neck and shoulder. Behind the curtain to the back of the show tent was a small changing place. She moaned sweetly in his ear, holding on to him. He soon spotted it. A cot awaited the hooch dancers after their show. If he ever caught her pinned down on it with another man, giving up what was rightfully his, there’d be hell to pay. But what had she done in the six years he was gone? He forced the doubt of her faithfulness away. She was his. Only his.

Silvio repressed the knowledge of the changes his mind secretly catalogued. Buttercup was different than in the past, but she was a girl of barely seventeen and he was a kid himself. He paid it no mind. They both had changed. His mind was on

one thing. Reclaiming what was taken from him prematurely. Silvio gently placed her on top of the unsophisticatedly fashioned mattress. She stretched her arms above her head and shook her hips at him. The jingles and fluffing of the feathers were wildly stimulating. Silvio smiled. No words passed between them.

Silvio fingers nervously fidgeted with the ties to the belt of her exotic skirt. He tugged it from under her and then tossed it aside. She was nude, complacent, but her smoldering gaze wasn't. The first time he saw her she gave him that look. Like kerosene oil on a raging inferno, her beauty incinerated his sensibility. Not so tonight. Tonight he knew and would do everything as planned. Silvio yanked down his suspenders and undid the front of his pants to get on her quick. His hurried actions left her giggling, but when he rubbed his erection down in her delta, parted her legs, and shot his cock through her tight hole in a single thrust, her body shuddered in surprised delight.

It had been many years. She would remember him. She would remember everything just as he did on the dirty roach infested floor of his jail cell waiting for freedom to come. This freedom. The freedom that would finally break the stifling hold this torturous desire for Buttercup held him in once and for all.

Silvio bit into her bottom lip, which quickly became pliant. Where tight resistance greeted him, so did heat, a wet heat that eased his glide deeper through her channel. Buttercup gripped his arms, accommodating each inch of him, allowing him to plunge and go deeper. The expansions and contractions left them both gasping and grunting. Overcome with raw need, he broke.

Uncontrollably, he began pumping at her moist pussy, madly slipping in and out, power-drilling his urgency for her submission. Buttercup purred in response. Madness. She enticed his tongue into her mouth and squeezed both halves of his butt, throwing her hips up to receive him, strike after strike. Oh, he was going to fuck her good.

The humid cramped quarters, combined with the combustible heat from their joined writhing bodies, had the air in the tent sweltering. Silvio could not be stopped. He would not be stopped. He threw his head back, taking down a deep gulp of air, once his cock became sheathed in the most unbelievably delicious

warmth. He found her body taut, thrumming for more no matter the demands he put on her. Silvio slowed his eager pace to something they both could savor. But her body, moving beneath him so tender and soft, made it all for naught. Again, he ravaged her, pounding inch by inch into her tightness. The press of her nipples, as he pinned her beneath him, gave way to nice swirls against his sweaty chest. When the kiss broke, so did his will. She empowered him with her feeble struggles and made him mad with her light giggles against his mouth.

The physical completion of their joining rendered him mindless. His growls of pleasure rumbled deep in his chest. The passion was too extreme—nirvana. There would be none. He looked down on her, his hips now rotating and his dick tunneling deeper. He gazed upon her in disbelief. How is it that he, a man of such raw toughness, would desire such a forbidden flower? He tried to weather the brain fever when her bottom maneuvers reduced his thrusts to quick jerky pumps. He couldn't. His brain felt like it boiled in his skull. The air in his lungs became too thick to release. She was killing him with rapture—sheer passion beyond his understanding.

Killing him!

“Buttercup,” Silvio whispered. He forced his focus to return to her face. He thrilled over the gambit of emotions playing over her pretty features as he throttled her sex into submission. Her lashes drifted down to perfect arcs against her cheeks. Her nostrils flared, then relaxed from her sweet pants. It only encouraged him to pump harder and faster. He gave her cock bangs that had his balls slapping her lower half.

“Ugh!” he grunted, dropping on her but going the distance. He continued his hard and fast onslaught. His face, buried in her wild tresses, muffled his pants of pleasure. He came apart, going and going, faster and faster and faster. Chest to chest, he bore down on her. The tribal beat of her heart matched his own. He could feel the muscles in the back of her legs weaken. One, dropped over his shoulder in uncontrollable shakes. The other fell at an awkward angle as she neared her exhaustive end. Nothing this glorious should ever be denied him.

“Butttteeeerrrccuuup!” he wheezed. Moving in and out of her sweet, honeyed flesh, he abandoned his bitter self, his regretful self, his disbelieving self, and gave in...clenching every muscle in his ass and curling his toes. Silvio cried out during his release...

Chapter One

1938 Indiana (Present) –A Gangster’s Moll

Silvio jumped. The pistol dropped between his parted knees. The car jostled over a rocky patch of road then leveled off. He pushed up on the front of his fedora, knocking the felt brim higher on his brow. “Fuck... holy fuck!” he coughed. Eyes darting around, he sucked in three deep cool breaths. *He wasn’t breathing.* His mind was such a fog, and his lungs were so tight that he’d forgotten how.

“You okay, boss?” Manny asked, shooting rod straight in the driver’s seat with hands tight to the steering wheel. He usually drove slumped down behind the wheel. The young hoodlum’s face was flushed with alarm. Silvio didn’t speak. Not yet. His dick, stiff between his legs, spoke for him. *No, I’m not okay. After a dream like that, how could I be?* He winced, shifting, adjusting his sack. He was grateful the darkness of the country road concealed his actions. He reached for the floorboard and retrieved his gun. *I need to get it together. Don’t need the boy’s anxious. It was only a dream. A dream like all the others, ’cept this time I’ll have my reality.*

“Who’s Buttercup, boss?” Manny pressed.

“Drive.”

Manny silenced.

Silvio’s shoulders slumped. He eased back down in the seat. Road weary, the three men in his gang travelled in silence. This night was different. A shiver of anticipation gripped his gut and twisted it like a pretzel. Eventually, the burn for his Buttercup eased. It always did, eventually. But damn it, his dreams had never been that... real. She must be close.

“How goes it back there, Touchy?” Silvio mumbled, desperate for a distraction. A car chase would be nice right about now. He could go for blasting his frustration at those trigger-happy coppers that always wanted his freedom from state to state.

“Clear, boss,” Red answered for Touchy, his backseat companion.

Silvio’s gaze shifted to the rear mirror on the Packard. Touchy cast a steely look. Red had the annoying habit of speaking for everyone. Touchy didn’t take well to those liberties though. He found conspiracies in every unsolicited action, no matter the intent, when leveled his way. But thankfully, he wasn’t in one of his moods. Silvio had no patience for a backseat fistfight tonight.

He kept watching.

Touchy fingered the groove along the trigger of his shotgun. The grip rested between his legs, pressed hard into his crotch. Red shrugged off the glare. He put his hat over his face, dropped his head back and shifted down into the cool darkness of the backseat. “I say we make a stop at Moncrieff. Get off the road before sunrise. I need to take a piss,” said Touchy.

They would definitely make a stop, thought Silvio. But it wouldn’t be Moncrieff. Silvio smirked, his eyes trained on the dirt road. Bold bright light-beams cut down the darkness from out of the front pods of a silver-blue Packard with white wall tires and bullet holes peppered along the rear. It powered an eight cylinder V-12 engine near 80 mph down Route 36. The men were barely seen behind the opaque dust covered windows. The Packard was barely heard as it coasted through the countryside, and that was the point. In fact, the ride would have been uneventful if it weren’t for the locusts.

Swarms fluttered in and out of the cornfields on starless nights. Nasty critters on blind suicide runs. They torpedoed the windshield, leaving blots of yellow-greenish slime, legs, and antennae smeared across the pane. Manny hit the wipers, to no avail. They just kept coming. The bugs couldn’t necessarily be blamed. They were seduced out of the fields by the glare of lights from back road travelers: bootleggers, racketeers, bank robbers and gangsters. The quad at one time or another had been all of that and more.

Night travel was best for the business of Silvio 'Bloodshot' Garelli. The press bestowed the name 'Bloodshot' upon him after a bank robbery in Mason County. It started and ended with a spray of bullets over the heads of terrified customers. The press reported that he carved his name with bullet spray into the safe to blast it open. *Horseshit!* Not a single person took a hit in all the fun, and still they labeled him a killer because some bank manager up and died from a bad ticker when it was all done. Silvio had never killed a man that didn't have it coming. *This infamy I'm saddled with is all complete horseshit.* When asked of his outlaw fame from bank robbing by his crew or the men in their circles, Silvio made it pretty clear that no crime was committed. He needed money like the rest of the country during these bleak times. The banks claimed to be empty but they had plenty, and he wasn't too keen on asking for it.

He'd come up empty a few times. His men were losing faith. But the last ride had been it. He and his boys had hit the mother lode. The job was ace. His crew was with him all the way to Mexico. In the backseat was Red Lafferty, a lean second generation Irishman with hair so red it appeared orange in the sun. Red had a sleepy eye, was missing a front tooth, and spit when he talked. That wasn't all. Red was best known for an unnatural cruel streak when it came to the dames. Sure, they all had quick tempers and a history to justify it. But Red's brutality toward the birds, brave enough to spend a little time with him, gave even Silvio pause, especially when he was liquored. Silvio had heard tales of Red's mother being the cause. She was a prostitute who used to put her cigarettes out on Red's arms and then force him to watch her when she serviced her clients. The rumor in the can was that Red killed her. He had heard from an even more reliable source that Red had witnessed the murder of his mother. Whatever the story, it was Red's to tell. And in his gang, no one had to share a thing.

Next to Red running the gun, was Touchy—he earned his name in the can. A hard-boiled stick-up man who'd rather kill first and ask

questions later. Touchy was the reason two jobs got messy quick. When the vault turned up empty, a cash teller took it in the face and a customer in the gut for just giving questioning looks over Touchy's tantrum. Of course Silvio 'Bloodshot' Garelli got blamed for it. As a reward, they all had nooses fitted for their necks in over ten states.

At the wheel was always the same, Fat Jim's little brother, Manny. Fat Jim was the only casualty of the gang. Manny rolled with them ever since. The *Gimp* is what they called him. Having a clubfoot, Manny was prone to scratching whenever he got nervous. He was an alright kid though. Manny would empty his pockets for any pair of legs promising to split and give him a good time. But he was far too shy to make a real connection. He reminded Silvio of Jelly, but that was a long time past.

Manny wasn't useful for much except driving. He used to run firewater before the repeal of prohibition; something Silvio did in another lifetime as well. Racing cars was their blood until the hunt for money became its supplement. On a night like tonight, with coppers on their backs and the main roads blocked, there was only the bootlegger run to take them across the state lines.

"I said I need a piss!" Red grunted from under his hat.

"Keep a lid on it," Manny shot back. "We can't stop just yet. Right, boss?"

Silvio's eyes darted to the night, the silent black void beyond the tangled branches of the forest trees and beyond them the open plains of farmland. Normally, a straight run in the night and then a hiding place at sunrise was in order. Capture might be waiting after each bend of the road. Not tonight. Plans had changed just for her. In another life, she would be his *Moll*, but in this one she was just his ghost. She cursed him with night-sweats and dreams. It had been six years since he laid eyes on her. He reached inside his coat pocket and removed the worn brown paper flyer. In the dark of the car, he studied the writing. It was a hand drawn carnival advertisement that promised food, games, girls, and fun times.

Silvio didn't believe in fate. But even he had to marvel at the hand of destiny. After years of wondering and searching, a drifting wind blew his second chance under his boot heel just as he stepped in front of the Wells Fargo Bank's doors. Curious, he knelt to retrieve it from the sidewalk. The carnival boasted wonders never seen, such as the bearded lady, elephant boy, snake charmer, and twins with one body. A Ferris wheel and trapeze act were the main draw. But at the very top corner was a *featured* spot for a hooch dancer, Buttercup.

"Gimp, take Danberry lane. We're making a stop," Silvio said, crumpling the flyer in his gloved fist.

"Stop? Out here? Why, boss? You said—"

"Because I need to take a piss, kid. Do as he said," Red grumbled, stumping his foot in the backseat. Silvio didn't bother to answer. He found her. He thought about this moment constantly before he broke the chain gang. His search always turned up nothing. Hunting for a colored woman in a travelling carnival was harder than he could have foreseen. Each time he came close, the carnival moved on.

Not tonight.

Tonight, he'd find her and no matter what they thought, she was not going to leave his side.

The train car was hers. She'd decorated it as such. Her costumes were lined up on hooks from a thin macramé rope run across the front of the car. She'd sewn each and their sparkling adornments by hand. Posters from her favorite shows were tacked to the walls. Benny, the *strong man*, was also an artist. He made the best posters of her. Amidst Sylvester's things were gifts from men vying for her time. She loved the music boxes mostly. Some even gave hats or rhinestone necklaces. Nothing too extravagant for a carnival Negress, still they were hers and hers alone. Tiny allowed it. He thought it good for business to have regular customers. He would even grant a private show or two. But the rules were to never be

broken. Lone Wolf was on hand to make sure no one dared. The rule for all was 'look but do not touch.' Buttercup no longer knew the pleasures of a man. Not after Silvio Garelli.

Of all of the parts of the carnival, here in her train car with Sylvester is where she felt safe. No more forlorn nights on a cold cot in a ratty tent. She'd earned the right to her own.

Buttercup rose from her chair. She tightened the sash to her robe and picked up Sylvester's things. He slept in her bed. His light snore told of a day of frolicking and mischief. After dropping his britches and hand sewn shirts in a basket nearest the vanity, she fetched the paper that a townie had left behind.

Her time was short. She could already hear the grunts and shouts of the rousties who pitched the game tents. Soon they'd be calling for her. But she would make time for this. Buttercup turned up the flame on the kerosene lamp just a tad to make the lettering rise.

'BLOODSHOT AT IT AGAIN!' the headline read.

Buttercup dropped to her knees before her chest of secrets. Reading, she held to every word in print. The article proclaimed that Silvio had made away with an undisclosed bounty in a spray of bullets. It also asserted that his band of thieves were terrorizing good citizens while emptying the banks of their meager holdings. She turned the page. Her heart leapt to her throat when the only picture they had of him, a jail-shot, greeted her.

Silvio scowled at the photographer, his glare dark and menacing. But it mattered little. He was ever so handsome. Unruly waves of black hair, dark eyebrows brooding over the dreamiest pair of jeweled eyes set his face like that of a portrait. Buttercup traced her fingers over his image. The anger was there too. A hate filled glare at the photograph told of his bloodthirst for revenge. He was not the boy she knew. This man, this thief and killer was far from the man she wished he'd be, despite what became of him because of her. The date on the paper was yesterday. The city of

Jefferson was only sixty-five miles east. She pressed her lips together, secretly wondering. How close?

“Della! Tiny says an hour.” A hard bang on her train car door followed. Sylvester rolled on his side. Della expelled a deep sigh. She lifted the lid to her cedar chest; there she tucked the newspaper inside underneath the bible and a journal she kept as a girl. Silvio was not to be. She’d accepted that painful truth long ago. Della rose from her knees and joined Sylvester on her bed, made softer by pillows. Holding him before a show always made her suffering ease.

Chapter Two

Six Years Earlier

1932 Kentucky –A Dancer’s Dream and A Bootlegger’s Scheme

“Della!” Lady Joyce screeched. “Della!”

“Coming! I’s right here!” Della said, throwing open the train car door. Held tightly in her small hands was a large tin of tepid water. The flimsy door swung shut behind her with a smack. In the back, Lady Joyce moaned. The small, cramped, confined space was decked for a queen—a carnie queen.

Lady Joyce rested on a bed of shiny purple and gold pillows. Multi-colored beads, strung up like lines of jewels, were pinned over and tied back by a silk scarf to keep from concealing the back of the trailer. Della believed them to be magical stones when she was a girl. She even stole a few. Balancing the tin of water, she ambled her way toward the back. Lamps, two of them, were covered with sheer scarves. They cast the place in red lighting, which doubled the shadows. She stumped her toe in her hurry and sloshed the water back over the front of her dress. Della grunted. Her eyes sought a place to set it down. Lady Joyce was everywhere. Frames with her dancing smiling face during her Vaudeville days were tacked to the walls, and her costumes hung about. This train car and Tiny’s were the only two that were wired with electricity. Lady Joyce actually had a radio.

“You yelling so loud you scaring away the townies,” Della smirked. She swallowed her laugh. Lady Joyce lay in her shiny black and gold polyester robe with her ankle, the size of a grapefruit, peeking through the slight opening at the hem. Tiny attempted to prop it up. She was in a lot of pain. Her skin was pale and pasty, and her eyes were puffy from crying. She smoked from her long stem cigarette holder with a shaky hand.

"I'm telling you, Tiny!" she began. "Something should be done! I get bit, and I'm the only one suffering!" Lady Joyce groaned as another tear slipped down her rouged cheeks.

"There, there," Tiny said, stroking her hand.

Della cut them both a look and shook her head. They were the strangest non-couple she'd ever seen. And growing up in a carnival, she had seen her share of strange things. She set the tin on the dresser, water sloshing over the top. Joyce would blow a vein if she used one of her imported silks to tend to the pus oozing from her foot. So she reached down to the front of her tattered dress and ripped at the hem. She submerged it in the cool water and listened.

Madame Danielle Danique, a gypsy snake handler and professed hater of Lady Joyce, said she accidently let her rattler loose. The rattler had to slither from one side of the carnival to the other to slip up behind Lady Joyce and take a plug out of her ankle. If it weren't for Lone Wolf, that bite would have been the end of Joyce's dancing days for sure.

Della wrung the cloth until all the remaining water seeped through her fingers. Her ears perked, and she feigned disinterest.

"Danique knows what she done, Joyce. She sends her apologies," Tiny groaned.

"Apologies? Apologies! The cunt! I want carnie justice!"

"Now hold on there, Joyce."

"Look at my foot! Owe!" she shrieked, after a failed attempt to lift it.

"Steady yo'self," Tiny said stroking her thigh with his nubby fingers.

"How can I when po' Della got to go on without me? It's my show! I'm the one they pay to see from county to county! What them boy's gon' do with a colored gal waving her snatch in front of them? Huh? Ansa me that! We gots to cancel."

"I can do it," Della spoke up. "I did it in Henry County jus' fine."

Della crept over. She went to her knees. She applied the cool rag over the swelling. Tiny gave her a wink. He raised her with Lady Joyce since she could remember. The entire carnival did. Her mama ran off with a Creole magic man shortly after she was born. They were the only family she'd ever known. That's how they did their own. No matter the color of your skin or the freakish deformity you were cursed with or your outlaw status, once a carnie, you were always a carnie.

"Well I can. You two both know I'm better than Trix. Way better."

Tiny dropped back down on the footstool at the side of Lady Joyce's bed. He removed his tattered hat and ran his finger over the thin wisps of hair sparsely covering his oversized head. At barely three feet tall, with stubby little fingers and short arms, he proclaimed himself to be the smallest ringmaster in the world. On some days, he was management, then ringmaster, barker or a diplomat to offer patch-money to pay off the nasty sheriffs that wanted to shut down the hooch tents.

Tiny may have been small, but his control over the Carnies was long. He could be mean and violent if pushed. Lone Wolf was his fist and the other carnies his muscle. Della had seen that side of his anger once and it scared her to death.

"She'll be fine. If in it gets out of hand, we'll protect her. You know that."

Lady Joyce looked over at Della, her large brown eyes welling with tears. Joyce was quite a striking woman. Plump with big breasts and hips, her hair was always platinum white from the peroxide shampoos. Her skin was ghostly pale and her eyes blue as rainwater. When she was dolled up and on stage, men would pay sometimes more than a dollar to touch her. And when she took the customers into her train car, she could score as much as ten dollars from a dustbowl of a town like the one they were trapped in for the night.

She was Della's idol, mother, advisor, and on days she wasn't liquored on meanness, her friend.

“She aint ready,” Joyce said, her voice broken with emotion. “She shouldn’t.”

Della suspected that the problem was the crowd coming in for the night. Whites in the South were particularly nasty. Once a man waited behind Lady Joyce’s train car near Della’s tent after the show. He had hoped to barter some time alone with the hoochie-coochie starlet. He found Della instead, attacked her, and then tried to drag her off to the woods. Tiny and the other carnies got him good though. *Carnie justice*. Thanks to that mean bastard, the Carnival can’t ever travel to northern Mississippi again. And that’s when Tiny’s rule was made into law. No man, carnie or otherwise, was to ever touch Buttercup.

“It’s fine. I can do the show, and if they don’t like it then I don’t care.” Della stood up proudly. She was eighteen. Grown by all standards but still the baby of the group. She wasn’t a virgin either. She gave her cherry away to a townie when she was fifteen and did it once more for an ace behind Tiny and Lady Joyce’s back. She didn’t like doing what she called 'the pokie'. It felt like nothing between her legs. But she liked the attention. Problem remained that if Tiny or Joyce ever found out they’d skin her alive. Of that she had no doubt.

“Settle down, Buttercup. We all know what you can do.” Tiny waved her off. He patted Joyce’s thigh once more. “You rest. If you want to see to her, have Lone Wolf carry you in the tent. Otherwise, it’s Buttercup tonight.”

Joyce sighed. Tiny’s word was law. No one questioned it. Not even Joyce if the matter was decided. Tiny reached for his cane, a whittled walking stick made of old oak. Della grabbed it and handed it over. His dwarfed legs weren’t working for him as well as he’d like. He made his way to the train car door, stooped to pick up his hat, and sat it on his round head. He cast them one more parting glance. “You come on down in half an hour. Joyce, make sure she wears yellow. She’s our Buttercup after all.”

Della smiled. "Thanks, Tiny!"

She closed the door behind him. Before turning, she could feel Joyce's eyes on her. "What is it? What's so different from me performin' with ya, than without ya?"

Joyce scooted back into her pillows, several dropping to the floor. She grunted, putting down her cigarette for a fan. "The difference is that you gettin' to like it too much. I should've never let you on. You coulda' done the trapeze like Tiny wanted, or read them cards like Adeline. Hooch dancin' ain't just about rolling those brown hips of yours or turnin' a few in the back of a train car, which I better neva' catch you doin'!" She wagged the fan at Della, then popped it open to chase away the sweat beading over her brow.

Della's smile faded.

"Come here. All I want is to make sure you're safe."

Della moved closer. Lady Joyce patted the lumpy mattress on the bed for her to sit. She did. Her surrogate mother gave a sad sigh.

Della tried to comfort her. "I knows that. But I can help. Folk's ain't payin' and comin' like we need them to. We can't afford to not have a show," she sighed. "If you don't like it, then fine. Tell me what to do and what it's about other than what I do out there with you."

"It's about sellin' yo'self, Della, and not just the physical. Sellin' it all. They call it hooch dancin' because you got to get them boys all liquored up so they thinking a peek and sniff is better than bread and potatoes on their family tables. They dangerous, Della, and mean. You know how mean they can get. Get 'em all riled up and... you need me on that stage to handle them."

"I hears you. I won't do it. I trust you. Always have. We make the scratch how we can. I can play the shill and draw them marks over to Lone Wolf and Ed's tables or sumthin'."

"A colored gal in these times actin' as an *outside-man*. It'll clue in every one of them townies that you makin' a play for their pockets." Joyce

shook her head, sinking back into her pout. Della knew the truth. They were living in the days of the soup kitchens and bread lines. Sober, these townies were looking for a fortune, not trying to spend it. Drunk, they all stumble into a hooch tent. These shows were the Carnival's lifeblood. Regular cons were only turning over pennies.

"Be careful is all. Jus' be careful. Get Trixie up there tonight. Get a dress for you both."

Della squealed. Leaping to her feet, she threw her arms around Lady Joyce's neck. Her surrogate mother grimaced in a tight breath through her teeth. "Sorry!" Della laughed. "Okay then!" She turned to the stringed up line of costumes and snatched dresses before Joyce could speak. Then she ran for the door. Her tent was just beyond it. She couldn't wait to get dressed.

Silvio spun the wheel hard left, not bothering with the brake. If he'd hit the brake, they'd be seen for sure. Silent prayers tumbled off his lips. Speed was his guide. The 1932 Hudson took a nosedive into the ravine, slamming into a tree. His forehead smacked the steering wheel. Impact gave him a nosebleed.

"Fuck!" he grunted, slinking down in the seat. "Fuck!"

Sheriff Tuck and his boys raced down Dixie, sirens wailing, several hanging off the back of pickups with shotguns in hand and a rope for his or Jelly's neck. They hadn't seen him veer off. At least he didn't think they had. He slipped even lower. The steering column pressed into his chest. His knees were cramped up under the dash. He pulled down the front of his cap over his bruised forehead; his breathing came out in short quick pants.

"Did we make it?" Jelly asked in a loud whisper.

"Shut your trap, Jelly!" Silvio barked.

Together they waited.

They listened.

Nothing.

Silvio inched up. He squinted hard to see through the thicket out to the road. "I'll be damn. I think they're gone."

"Applesauce! They out there. Told you this was a deadman's run. We need to get the shine out of the trunk and buried before they double back."

"Yeah, yeah. I know. Give it a sec."

In truth, neither of them wanted to get out. Sheriff Tuck was no one to meddle with. And running shine through his county without the proper tariff guaranteed jail or worse. Problem with this rule was it didn't apply to the Sheriff's nephew. Silvio was tired of pennies on the jar. He was aiming for a bigger payday.

Silvio threw open his door. Jelly hissed a warning, but he went ahead and eased out from under the steering column. He landed knees first in the moist dirt and leaves. Half of him expected to look up and find the sheriff standing over him.

"Get out," he said, rising and slapping his cap against his thigh, dusting off dirt and twigs. "Out, Jelly. Now!"

The back door to the Hudson pushed open. Jelly poked his head out like a shut-in child. Silvio looked around. He heard the sounds of laughter, and music, dings and bells. Walking around the banged up Hudson, he knocked tree branches from his face. "Hey, you hear that?"

Jelly arrived at his side, breathing through his nose, his large belly deflating then inflating. As a kid, he survived on jelly sandwiches and even now preferred them over a steak. "Think it's a carnival. Heard one was near. Smell that? Roasted corn and apples." His mouth watered. "We should go on down," Silvio smirked.

"Huh? You bumped your head in there, Sil? We got to deal with the two crates of shine in the truck and the sheriff before the sun catch us."

“Can’t get on the road now. They’ll sweep back. We push the car down there.” He pointed to the deepest dive in the ravine. “Take the shine with us. Carnies can probably give us a lift out. Perfect cover.”

“Carnie folk don’t help or take to strangers. You know that. No way they smuggle us. And that’s my pa’s Hudson. He’ll tan my hide.”

“You twenty or twelve?” Silvio frowned. “Besides, it’s smashed. Engine’s busted. Look at it.”

They stared at the plumes of steam hissing from the front grill. The car was bent inward around a thick oak tree. “Jelly, we don’t know if we don’t try. You got a better idea?”

Jelly closed his eyes, his left cheek pulled inward as he sucked hard on the inside of his jaw. He was a preacher’s kid with the bad luck to be friends with Silvio. He was the only kid Silvio knew who had access to a car to run Dan Crichton’s hooch through this county. There was no turning back. Jelly shrugged his fat shoulders, and his belly flopped over his belt from under his shirt.

“Bad run is what it is. I told ya. I told ya.”

Silvio grinned. His blue eyes sparkled in the darkness. “Help me push the car out, and I promise to show you a good time.”

Chapter Three

1932 Kentucky – A Hooch Dancer Named Buttercup

“You done gone and did it. Aint ya?”

Buttercup ran the zipper up the side of the dress, then down—up then down again. She grinned at how easy it was. She’d slip it off to her one good pair of garter stockings with no panties, just as Lady Joyce would. She’d done this before. She’d seen Lady Joyce do it too many times to count. It was going to be as easy as you please.

“Ya hear me talkin’ to ya?”

She didn’t bother to look back. “What you want, Trix?”

“I want to know why it is that I’ve been performin’ before you were off your mammy’s tit, and I ain’t never had me own peepshow? Only chance I get is when someone run-off. That’s fine, but Lady Joyce down for the night, and Tiny picks you?”

Buttercup turned on her. There was a simple answer to Trixie’s question. They could get a pig to stand upright and do the jig before they could sell one seat to see Trixie down to her skivvies. If she was pretty before, it washed away with her youth. Her refusal to bathe regularly and love for the hooch left her skin looking aged and saggy. Her breast drooped. Her lumpy butt cheeks drooped. Even her mouth drooped at the corners of her thin lips. She could barely cover her flaccid features with rouge. The Daisy twins told her that Trixie was thirty-four. *That was ancient!!* Besides that, she looked more like one hundred and four with dirty feet and missing back teeth. The only reason Trixie was included was because Claudette run off and they needed a third girl. “Take it up with Tiny. I’m jus’ doin’ as I’m told.”

“Buttercup! You and Trix get out. Tiny calling,” Stan, the lot guy, yelled from outside the tent. Della swallowed her nervous tongue and quit with her taunts. It was show time.

“I say it’s a bad idea. That’s what I say,” Jelly went on. Silvio ignored him. He let his nose be the guide. Too many storm clouds had formed. He couldn’t see the moon. That was a good sign. A moon on a night like this would be a bad omen.

Silvio swatted and snapped branches out of his face before they cleared the forest. The lights of the Ferris wheel, sounds of laughter, and calls for townies to test their luck filled the air. That and the sweet smell of the open plain, mixed with the roasting treats, had the inner muscles lining his stomach twisting with pangs of hunger. He dropped his hands in the pockets of his knickers and walked the line with Jelly into the mix. Tents were up. Folks gathered. The crowd was mostly thin. That could be due to the late hour. Maybe it was because a storm was rolling in. Possibly the location hadn’t spread through the rest of the town. Those thoughts faded when he noticed the true reason why. The barker’s voice drew his attention first; the crowd of men circling made him stop in his tracks.

“You see that, Jelly?” he asked.

“Fortune? I can tell you boys need some.” A gypsy woman of ill repute stepped out of the shadowy opening of her tent. Jelly slowed to a stop, forcing Silvio to do so and look back.

“Jelly, let’s go.”

“Leave him with me. For a fifty-piece I’ll tell him everything he need,” she offered. Draped over her head was a dark blue and black scarf with a fringed edge that had tiny coins attached. Her raven dark hair matched the coal black eyes focused on them both. She tossed one end of the scarf over her shoulder, and gave them a secretive smile. The kind a cobra gives before he strikes.

Silvio had to shake the willies. Jelly could not. He stood there, transfixed and rooted to the spot. The gypsy stepped to a table outside of her tent and moved her hand over a stack of cards, fanning them out. Her black nails were long and pointed. She batted her lashes at Jelly. The top left corner of her mouth curled up with a tempting smirk.

"My Pa preached about these people. Sil, we... we should go from here," Jelly stammered. "We should go now."

"Sorry, toots. Take the con elsewhere. C'mon!" He snatched Jelly's collar and pulled him away from the witch. Several tents had card games or shuffling shells, the usual carnie tricks. Nothing compared to the barker's call.

"Step right up fella's. Hey you! That's right, I'm talking to you. This you want to hear! Not another show better than this one, boys. You know it's the trooth! Always the finest, the freshest pussy when Tiny's Carnival comes to town. Got a flower that's ripe for the picking tonight. One night showing only..."

Silvio pushed his way into the crowd to get closer, dragging Jelly by the back of the neck.

"They call her Buttercup, prettiest little flower you ever will see." The midget stumped his wooden cane on the podium. "Dare any of you to find a gal, colored or white, that gives you half as good! She'll make it dandy, boys. That's Tiny's promise!"

"We should go. What if someone finds the hooch we left," Jelly whispered. Silvio's eyes lifted to the flapping sign over the event tent. It whipped about by the stormy winds. He could smell rain and the bullshit the little man was selling. Still he was curious. Who was the gal they called Buttercup?

"Shut your trap, Jelly," Silvio hissed, not wanting to seem like a sap around the other men. No one noticed Jelly's whining. He fished in his pockets. He had ten dollars as a down payment on the run. Another twenty waited for him on delivery. He supposed he could spare a dollar for them to have a good time. "I think we going to see a show."

Jelly stepped back instead of forward. He shook his head; the fat meat along his jaws began to jiggle along with his double chin. "My Pa won't approve."

"Jelly, boy, you need to loosen up. Your Pa, Sheriff Tuck, hell all of Jefferson County can kiss our ass! We got money and now we gots means.

Now we get us some Buttercup. She might even let you sniff it!" he chuckled.

Jelly paled.

Silvio hooked his arm around Jelly's neck and yoked him forward, forcing him to walk at his side. They moved through the pinned back fold of the tent. The place was filled with others. Rickety foldout chairs offered a place to squat, but most men preferred to stand. If anything, they wanted to see who would replace Lady Joyce.

A tall Indian, with shoulders about a foot wide, collected coins in his hat. Silvio dropped in a folded bill. The Indian looked at it for a moment, and then his eyes flipped back up at him. Dark and mean, they narrowed on Silvio before he offered change. It wasn't a look that Silvio took kindly. He knew a shake down. If he and Jelly were pegged as marks they would have an even harder time trying to tag on with the carnies out of the county. He pushed Jelly to the front, keeping an eye on the Indian who just stared after them.

"We shouldn't," Jelly protested. He stumbled awkwardly over his feet. Silvio forced him down in a seat.

"Take a load off. Either way, it's coming out your half." Silvio slapped him on the back and plopped down in the empty chair to his right along the front row. He'd seen a couple of girlie papers but not a real live show. It would be a good way to pass the time until Tuck and his men called off the hunt. But even more interesting was the money they collected at the door. He wondered about what a night's take in a hoochie-coochie tent would bring. Just as quickly, he set aside the thought, though his pistol was down in his knickers pocket pressed into his thigh. Not even Jelly knew he carried it. He looked back for the Indian. There were two other men with him at the back of the tent, all staring. Things could get interesting.

The dwarf was lifted to the podium. He walked along with the aid of a gnarled wooden stick, eyeing the crowd.

“Where she at!” one fella yelled.

“Pussy better rain gumdrops for a damn quarter!” another threw out.

Silvio rocked back on the shaky legs of his chair. He chuckled. How special could some gal be in a dusty ole carnival like this, he wondered. The dwarf favored them with a toothless smile. “Not gumdrops, fellas. More like rose petals. The sweetest little flower you’ve ever seen. Not like the ones you got home waitin’ on ya, if’in you do.”

Tiny was his name. He gave a bow-legged waddle over to the phonograph player’s crank, winding it up. Out of the curtain came a scraggly looking woman. Some laughed. Others snickered. Silvio just frowned. The old hag in a dress, a size too big, danced the Charleston.

“Trixie, boys!” said the midget.

She was quite pathetic, panting, gyrating her hips at one man then the next. And when the clothes slipped off, Silvio wished he hadn’t chosen the front row. He noticed that Jelly kept his eyes down. He elbowed his friend in his fat belly. “Look at it. Hooch is right. Need an entire bottle to want some of that.”

Jelly shyly looked up. Trixie tried her best, coming out of her dress, her skin all wrinkly with moles. “Her teat’s look like Maxine’s...our cow,” Jelly said.

Silvio let go a laugh. He laughed so hard he nearly fell back in his chair. Shaking his head, he decided it was a quarter well spent. And most there felt the same, laughing and pushing at each other as the poor creature gave it her best. Then she went for the stealer. It started with knee knocking, and hands pressed under armpits while her arms flapped in a chicken-like dance.

“You like that, boys?” the barker yelled out.

“Hell no!” several yelled back.

“If I wanted to see a dead chicken, I’d stayed back on the farm!” one man snorted. The others roared. Jelly finally laughed too. Silvio was glad

to see him loosen up. The barker walked over to Trixie and gave her a pat on the backside to move it along. He waited for quiet. "Are you ready?"

"Where's Lady Joyce! That's what I wanna know," another man yelled his reply.

The barker put up his hand. "You seen that pussy. This here is your special treat for half the cost. Now how's that?"

"Awe, stop stalling, Tiny, and bring her out already!" another yelled back.

The others exchanged puzzled glances. Silvio sat upright in his chair, attention drawn to the shut curtain. Suddenly, he wanted to know more. The phonograph skipped, then blared a swing beat, a mix of trumpet and piano keys that anyone could dance to. And from nowhere, she appeared. Her arrival stunned them all into silence. None of them expected her to be colored. None of them expected her to be beautiful.

"Buttercup!" Tiny announced.

Buttercup strutted across the platform. She gave a girlish twirl, smiling sweetly. The hem to her yellow flapper dress swirled at her knees. The men in the tent fell silent. Either she didn't notice or didn't care. She rocked her hips back and forth smiling from ear to ear. The music played. The seductive rhythm slowly introduced her body to a controlled sway. Her hands were on her hips and she continued to work them in time with the music. As the melody rose in pitch and intensity, so did the tension amongst the men. Her bottom shakes, first shy and girlish, became purposeful, provocative.

No one spoke.

Buttercup bloomed before their eyes. She worked every inch of her lower half, stroking and touching herself through her dress. She put on moves Silvio would never want a beauty like her to do publicly.

The tempo changed, and so did Buttercup. A slow jazzy tune skipped on the record. She ran her hands down over breasts and stomach, torturously slow. Then she reached both hands behind her to ease down

the zipper. She turned as she did so but peeked innocently over her shoulder as the fabric began to peel away from her skin. The smooth brown flawless skin of her back was revealed. Her hair, a dark cloud of bushy curls, was pinned on one side by a large silk yellow flower. She batted long even lashes at them over large brown eyes as the fabric moved down her curves and fell in a puddle of material at her feet.

“Sil?”

“Shut up, Jelly,” Silvio murmured.

Buttercup, as they called her, had yet to reveal her treasures. Her arms crossed in front of her. She looked over her left shoulder and then her right while working her bare hips, save for the garter belt, stockings and heels. Silvio admired her back view, which was perfect symmetry. The air in his lungs grew solid. He struggled to breathe. Every man in the room felt it. A collective held breath waited for the true unveiling.

She looked away from her admirers but opened her arms and with a rounding whirl of her hips and gave a slow turn for all to be revealed. Silvio finally stood. Jelly blushed for what he considered wicked ways that Buttercup displayed. A harlot, a jezebel, he couldn't stand it. Silvio knew his thoughts and felt the exact opposite. She was a goddess.

Unabashedly seductive, Buttercup went down with hands to knees and opened her thighs for them. Soon, every man in the room knew why she was anointed with the name.

Then their eyes met. By chance? No, this moment, he was sure of, was supposed to happen. She focused on him. She danced for Silvio, rising, and winking. He couldn't stop grinning. From her pert breasts and dark nipples, to her flat tummy and the bush over her sex, she exuded the kind of appeal he never envisioned on gals like her. As if she knew what spell she cast, she rolled her hips directly at him, running her tongue over her full upper lip.

Silvio squeezed his cap in his hand. He hadn't realized he removed it. Biting down hard on his bottom lip, he felt tightness in his groin from

the promise of what was just beyond his reach. Buttercup worked it for him. There was no doubt in the naughty way she fondled the lips of her sex, parting as an open invitation. Silvio actually took a step toward the stage, but she danced away, gyrating for another. Bringing her performance to an end, she did a cartwheel and then split in a climatic conclusion.

The men went wild, rushing the stage. The Indian shoved them back along with other lot men that he had mixed in the crowd. The Carnies were taller and stronger, determined to turn back those that thought the colored girl was theirs for the taking. Buttercup beamed at the mob-like attention and hand whistles. She blew them kisses, grinning from ear to ear. Silvio whistled through his fingers and clapped just to get her to look his way again.

He slapped Jelly on the back of the neck and squeezed. "See, I told you the sweetest treat a quarter could buy."

Della couldn't stop laughing. Tiny was hissing through clenched teeth like a rattler for her to get off the stage. Sure men ogled her on the sidelines, but when Lady Joyce was on the stage it was Joyce's show alone. This night they were whistling for her, begging for more. *Offering to pay!*

Buttercup's eyes swept the pale faces. She blew another kiss to her adoring fans, waving at them all. It was then that she noticed him. He was one of many but the only one that made her blush, look away, and then back again. His dark hair was smoothed back from his face with the purest bluest eyes. Della blew him a special kiss, and he winked back. Stan lifted her and threw her over his shoulder, a direct order from Tiny. He carried her off stage. She waved at the dark haired fella with the eyes the color of blue-sky. He stood there with his hands in his pockets, watching her get carried away.

“Now stay put until Lone Wolf come for you both,” Stan grunted, pushing her to get dressed. He then went back to herding the men out of the tent.

She found Trixie pacing, her sunburned face twisted in rage.

“Tiny did that on purpose!” Trixie spat.

Della slipped on her yellow show dress. She had made the nut tonight though she’d have to share with Lady Joyce and Trix. Whatever was made over in tips was the split. Normally, she and Trix would only get about a deuce if Joyce starred and even less if more girls performed. Tonight would be more than that. She was sure. So to hell with Trixie and her pout. She couldn’t wait to find out from Tiny how much. Trixie cut her off when she tried to run out of the back of the tent.

“You think you special? Well you ain’t! Just some darkie with a young nigger snatch. They’d want me before they’d ever want you!” Trixie sneered.

Della laughed. “You wish, Trix. Problem is you forgot that this here is a Hooch Show, not a chicken coop. That bird dance you did had us all thinking you was gon’ lay an egg for sure.” She pushed past her, stuck out her tongue, and then ran out of the tent laughing. She laughed hard enough to cry. She was moving fast to get around being seen by Tiny’s men. It took him twenty minutes before he cleared the townies away.

Ducking between the back trucks, she beat a path for Lady Joyce’s train car when suddenly blue eyes jumped out in front of her.

“Hey there, pretty lady.”

“Lordie! You gave me a fright!” Della stumbled back. She regarded him with suspicion, which was quickly eclipsed by curiosity. *How’d he make it this far and not get stopped by one of the lot guys*, she wondered.

Silvio smirked. He offered her a gentleman’s bow. Della’s eyes darted around them. She and he were the only ones on the east side of the carnival.

“Forgive me. I just had to meet the star for myself. Name is Silvio, mam, but you can call me Sil.”

He was cute enough to be interesting.

“I’m Del-Buttercup,” she said with a smirk.

“Yes, you are the prettiest flower in Kentucky. That was quite a show, Miss Buttercup.”

She nodded, grinning for him and giving a polite courtesy. Then she crossed her arms and stared him down. “I’m done. Show over.”

“Right. I didn’t mean...”

“I know what you meant. What you want?” she huffed. He stood there staring for a few minutes, as if unsure of the question. Della smiled at the cute way his brows drew together and his nose pinched. “You hard of hearing?”

“No, well... I...”

Then came the rain. The clouds exploded. Della squealed. She shot like a bullet across the grass. She could’ve run for Lady Joyce’s train car but she rounded it, feet sloshing in the mud puddles. She rushed straight into her tent. When she turned around, she found cutie-pie had followed. “Tiny catch you in my tent, he’ll kill you’,” she warned, not bothering to demand he leave. He just stood there watching. She glanced back at him once more. “You gon’ watch me change? It’ll be a dollar.”

He reached in his pocket and threw five bills on her cot. Della stared at the money in disbelief. She looked to him and then the money.

“You’re the prettiest colored girl I’ve seen. You can have it. All of it.”

“If in I give you something more?” she asked, hands to her hips.

“Not if you don’t want to. I mean, I rather sit and just stare at you,” he smirked. Della laughed, knowing the score.

“Della!” Lone Wolf yelled outside of her tent. She grabbed his hand and pushed him to the far corner. Snatching up the loose bills, she tucked them inside the front of her dress. She stuck her head out of the fold of the

tent in the rain. She had to squint to see through the downpour that dripped into her eyes and nostrils.

“Yeah!”

“You know better.” Lone Wolf marched over angrily.

“I gettin’ dressed. Tell Tiny I’ll stay in my tent. I won’t come out. It’s rainin’. Nobody come fer me out here any ways!”

He stopped mid-step, the rain falling, his dark mane stuck to the sides of his head. He crossed his arms over his massive chest and looked up to the sky as if he just noticed the storm. He leveled his gaze on her once more.

“I’ll go see Lady Joyce when I done changin’. Just need to catch my breath is all.”

“Stay in this tent. I’m sendin’ one of the greenies to watch over here,” he grumbled before turning away and disappearing into the downpour.

Della slipped back in.

“Your Christian name is Della?” Silvio asked.

“My name is Buttercup to you.”

Her visitor walked around her tent. He looked at the meager possessions she owned, stopping to touch the music box.

“Don’t touch that!” she snapped, moving quickly toward him. She picked it up. “Belongs to my mammy.”

“Oh I...”

“A *fin* is a lotta’ money. You givin’ it to me? You sure? Cause if I scream they’ll...”

“Fin?” he frowned.

She pointed to the money. “Five dollars, a fin.”

“Oh,” he gave a one-shoulder shrug, “It’s yours. I got plenty. Got my own thing.”

“What *thing*?”

“Me and my boy. We run hooch through these hills.”

Della smirked. She set down the music box on the card table and shook her wet locks. "You ain't no runner. Too young. What is you? Seventeen, eighteen?"

"Twenty. Don't laugh at me, doll. I don't like to be laughed at," Silvio snapped.

Her smile faded. She stood there staring at him. "If you such a big shot hooch runner, why you want to give anything to a colored gal for her time?"

"Cause I want to buy something else with that money." Silvio stepped toward her. Della's eyes held his. He was tall and broad shouldered to be so young. When he stopped before her, he fingered the fringe along the sleeve of her yellow dress. "Sheriff is out for me. Gotta get out of this county. You can speak to the midget for me and my friend to hitch a ride out. The people I work for will pay him for his effort."

"Tiny don't cut no deals with townies."

"Which is why I'm not askin'. I want you to do it."

"What about me?" she asked, an evident pout in her voice.

Silvio frowned, not understanding.

"I thought you wanted to see me? I saw the way you was staring when I was on stage."

"I...well I..."

"That's my show you know. I pull them in from town to town," she bragged with an upward toss of her chin.

Silvio shook his head, confused. "You sure about that?"

Her eyes narrowed. "What's that mean?"

"It means you look like you'd be more than some hooch dancer," he said, smiling.

She stood there at first, not sure of his answer. She studied him for the trick; slowly she smiled, understanding the compliment. "I got other talents."

"I'm sure you do." He moved in close. His hand went to her exposed shoulder, then up the side of her neck. His touch was gentle, light. His face moved in closer. "So what say you, Buttercup... will you help us?"

"It'll have to wait until the tent shows close. Tiny won't see me until they done."

"How long?"

"Another few hours. Not long." She stepped around him, removed the five dollars from her dress and put the money under the lining of the music box. "You from 'round here?" she asked.

"Not far from here," he said.

"I from the carnival. Was born in the carnival and will die in the carnival. That makes me from everywhere."

Silvio watched as the zipper on her dress eased down. The soggy fabric dropped from her body in one discarded heap. She wore nothing but her stockings underneath. The kerosene lantern in the tent wasn't lit, but the outside carnival lights gave him some view of her, different than when she was on stage. There was a ripe innocence to her nudity. Something he'd never really seen in another girl. The humid air was cooler thanks to the rain. Her nipples puckered in response. Her breasts were perfect in symmetry and darkly coated, her nipples the darkest. He'd never been with a colored woman. He'd seen pretty ones before but never been with them. Seeing her now from the stage, he found the girl beneath and something he couldn't quite name stirred in him. Was she a whore? Her eyes said no. She was a hooch dancer and sometimes that was different—sometimes. He had worked it out the moment she blew him the kiss. This was a sure way to get his self and Jelly out of a pinch, so he told Jelly to hang back, give him time to work it through. He took the money Jelly had and planned to sweet talk her and get her to barter the deal.

Now?

“You know why I plan to stay a carnie?” she asked, and lifted her leg. Her foot rested on the only chair in the tent. Her thigh covered her pussy from his view. So instead, his eyes latched on to her fingers that worked down the top trim of her stocking.

“No, why?”

“Cause here we all free. Tiny is the boss, a respected man, even though he three feet tall. Janice has a boyfriend who doesn’t care about her beard. Madame Danique can play with her snakes, worship her snakes, and not get burned or hanged. Lady Joyce is a star again.” She looked over at him, rolling down the stocking, then switching to the other leg. “And a colored gal can get five dollars in a night for showing a little skin.”

“You’re quite something, Buttercup.”

“Am I?”

Silvio stopped directly in front of her. She turned to face him as if standing there nude meant nothing. It meant something all right. He was possessed with the urge to show her what. He reached out in the dark and traced his fingers from her eyebrow to her jaw.

“Yes.” His voice was as soothing and sensual as his touch.

A charge went through the pads of his finger from contact. It scorched a shivery yearning path that warmed her interior and his. He inclined his head and she didn’t even blink. Instead of capturing those full ruby red lips, he rubbed his cheek against hers.

“I did like the show,” he whispered in her ear. He took the time to inhale the floral natural scents that permeated off her skin. His face drew away slowly, but remaining close, their eyes locked. He’d had girls before in the back of trucks or out in cornfields. Not much to it. Somehow, she inspired him. So he kissed her, a pressing of their lips that suddenly released the last remnants of his inhibitions and hers. Then he drew away.

Though the available light was low, Della could see the flex of sinews in his strong neck and see his eyelids grow heavy with desire. In

the room's muted glow, the lines in his face were set in relief from cheek to jawbone. His hands freely roamed her body, both coming up to caress her breasts. This wasn't like the secret sex she had before. He touched her in ways she touched herself when alone. *And he was a tough guy.* She could tell. She liked it. She could feel the power radiating from him as it dragged at her breathing. Heat unfurled deep at her core and radiated through her pelvis to the bone.

"You like that?" he asked with a sly smile.

What had given her away? The ways she panted or the flutter of her lashes. She wasn't sure. Whatever it was ignited a fierce storm of sensations between her thighs. "Un huh..."

"You do. Don't you?"

He stroked her bottom, hips, and thighs. It was giving her fever.

"That kiss. I'm not sure it's the best we can do," he said.

Her eyes flipped opened. She looked at him, really looked at him. He was beautiful to be a man-boy. His brows weren't bushy like Tiny's, and his skin wasn't pale and pasty like most white boys she'd seen. It was golden smooth over a strong jaw. But there was a hint of rebel in his stance. He didn't walk the line like most townie white men she knew. The line of predictable meanness and crude superiority made her want to take them for every penny shoved down in their dirt filled pockets. He *chose* to be different. *But why?* What was his angle? She'd let him stick it in for the fun and be done. Except these touches, these kisses. Where did it all lead?

He slipped a hand under her wet tangles, cupping her nape. She contemplated his mouth. "I knew I could've done better," she breathed. "Who says I wanted too?"

"I say you do." He brought his lips down on hers. It was no tepid kiss. It was more like a searing demand, his lips confident and assured. Her heart surged at the lazy dance his tongue gave when it swept over hers. The forbidden act was the most deliciously sinful one she'd ever indulged in. Della never considered kissing a man, and none ever

considered kissing her. Her mouth thirsted for more. She opened her eyes to stare at him through the kiss, trying to understand his mastery. But the feeling of feminine submission that his tongue play drove through her body, weakened her muscles, clouded her thought, and whispered in her head to let go. So she did. Stepping toward him instead of back, she grew bold in her unexplained desires, allowing his darting tongue to love hers. Aroused, she gave herself up to its sizzling delights. Those delights threaded from her head to the bottom of her feet. She felt anew, and at her very center moisture gathered between her legs as her body temperature rose. His hands went firm to her waist. His fingers dug deep. He drew her to him.

Della's hands flew up to his shoulders and her mouth opened wider. Was he smiling as she visibly trembled? Yes, he was. He deepened the kiss, dissolving her objections. This she allowed. She liked kissing, especially like this. This kind of kiss was what she'd catch Tiny and Joyce doing when they thought she was asleep on Joyce's floor as a young'un. This was a love kiss, from a strange moonshine running man-boy. She wanted more. Her thoughts became a scrambled mess. *I want him to touch it. I hope he touches it. I need to feel his hands and tongue on it.* Her mind repeated the silent wish over and over. So she touched him instead. He didn't even flinch at her action. But her hand froze in surprise at his firm hardness. Intimidated, she dropped it away.

Silvio walked her back to the cot she always laid on alone. But he never broke the kiss. He furthered the seduction with his mouth, lips, tongue, and tiny bites too. Della gasped deep breaths in between. He forced her down and back, her knees bending as she complied. She looked up at him in the darkness, breathless. He said he was twenty or so, but she guessed him no more than 18 like her. His damp hair curled on his brow. His eyes, however, were different. The lustful luminous and desire had darkened the blues, making them akin to midnight.

Della shivered. She wasn't afraid, not really. She'd done it before, or thought she had. She let a townie boy stick it in because she was curious, bored, and possibly both. But that wasn't what she saw in his eyes. He wanted something from her that she wasn't exactly sure how to give. She wouldn't tell him though. She'd seen Lady Joyce with Townies and Tiny too, hearing her squeals and moans. She had seen her bounce her big ass on Tiny until he disappeared under her, save for his little feet. What more was there to it than that?

He shed his wet clothes, pulling down his suspenders, dropping his knickers, and undoing and casting aside his shirt. Parting her legs, she lay perfectly still and waited. He was on her in an instant. His mouth again found her neck. He rained hot needy kisses down her throat, nuzzling his nose into her neck. First kisses, then his tongue. He drew his tongue over her flesh and down to her breasts. Most of all, he seemed fascinated with her breasts. *Thank you, Lordie!*

Della moaned. Her head rolled back, and she relished the dangerously erotic flicking of his tongue. Painfully aroused, her nipples strained for attention and the comfort a good sucking would bring. He did, and she worked her burning desire up into his pelvis, knees dropping further apart. His flesh to her flesh with his mouth on her wasn't enough. She wanted more. She could feel the press of his cock. It so urgently pressed hard to the juncture between her thighs for entry, missing her wet opening in his haste. He grunted, locked his jaw, and put a hump in his back as he lifted off her to get the right angle for a strike. The invasion of his thick member caused her chest to heave. Della's eyes flew open. Had she not been with a boy before, would she be as shocked by the tight pressure? This was different. He was wider than he was long, and that warm thickness stretched her beyond her imaginings. He shot his pelvis forward, and she moaned but wound her hips in response. He sank in to the hilt. A shudder ripped through them both. Silvio grunted, his speech stunted, but his hot mumblings were felt against her neck.

“Are you a virgin?” he gasped.

Should she lie? The question tore at her more than it should. Because in that moment she felt as one. She understood why Joyce never let her be ‘one of the girls’ and hated the fact that she rebelled. Before she could speak, he settled on the answer for himself and kissed her ever so gently between her brows. “I’ll be gentle,” he said, moving slowly. She stretched from his entry and adjusted. The pain dissolved into warm tingles. Her toes curled. Passion crawled through her body before she could rejoin the mating dance.

“Do me,” Della said, growing impatient, moving beneath him. He was too tender and her body begged to be owned by him. There was more. She could tell, and she was desperate for it. She gyrated her hips and felt him sink warmly inside her, deeper than any cock had ever reached. Silvio looked down at her and something sparked between them, a new understanding. This was something that belonged to them, binding them. His thrusts became more demanding. He pumped his hips and went in and out with controlled energy. The more he gave the more she took. Tender cries escaped her throat. He dropped on her, holding to both edges of the cot, his cock now jerking violently for release. She hooked her legs around his waist and forced his strikes to go deeper.

“Fuck!” he grunted. He must have thought he’d bottomed out, but she took him all in.

“Ugh, yeah...yeah,” Silvio panted. He pumped hard and fast, violently, until the cot creaked and collapsed underneath them. Both of them gasped. His head shot up in concern, but Della giggled. She bucked her hips up at him for him to continue. He liked that. She could tell. He worked his clenched buttocks in a frenzied circular motion then returned to his pump action, which made him escape her hole with a wet plop. He smiled and she rolled him over, seizing the moment to get on top. It was instinctual.

He blinked up at her, shocked by her control. Should she tell him riding his cock would be her first? Did it matter to him that he know that all of it was truly her first? Even in the dark, she saw his heavy gaze going through her. There were no words. This was not to be explained. It just was. Della took his hands and put them to her breasts for him to continue to stroke and please her nipples. She eased down on him, taking inch by inch into her achy channel. Seated, she felt him warmly fill her inside. She bucked her hips front to back; the friction caused the convulsing of his penis, or so she thought. It moved so wondrously within her. Della pressed her hands to his chest, flat, then got to her feet but remained low to keep him inside. Now she could rise up and down on his still erect cock with ease. He groaned and thrashed to have her so open. She giggled. He released her breasts and grabbed the tops of her knees to control the rise and fall. But she had control. Then he pinched her turgid clitoris and she lost control. She fell over on him shaking all over. Her face pressed to his sweaty chest, her hips working back and forth.

“My beautiful Buttercup, aah...hell, doll. I think I’m in love.”

With one final mating thrust, he gripped her buttocks tight and pumped until his seed exploded within what should have been her forbidden paradise. The universe was a flare of white-hot flames and heat radiated from her skin. She squeezed her eyes tightly shut as he held her through her very first climax. The friction of his pubes on her clitoris sent shockwaves of pleasure that mixed with the currents of desire sweeping through her system. Della pressed her face to his chest to stifle her cries of pleasure. Then she shuddered through the last of the most intensely felt orgasm she’d ever known in her meager life.

There was silence except for their heavy breathing and the dings and calls of the carnival. Nothing stirred. A different kind of silence settled between them. What happened in the tent wasn’t something he had planned for. But that had always been his life. He never went the way of

others. Still she was a surprise. He could lay with her for an eternity. It felt so right. He'd never shared feelings, sex or otherwise, with anyone. And now this strange bird flew into his life. How was that possible? Della lifted, and he groaned over their sticky parting. But she dropped on his side, keeping the plush warmth of her body close. He made room to keep her near the cot and not on the moist earth, though she had spread out rugs and blankets to cover most of it so the tent felt truly contained.

"Sil, you a stick-up man too?"

Silvio frowned. "What?"

Della reached behind her and pulled out the gun. When he tossed his knickers, it fell out. She handed it to him. "I wouldn't let Tiny see it," she chuckled. Silvio nodded, securing it over his pants. He felt her eyes on him. When he looked back, he saw her staring down at him. Her wild hair had drawn up like a sponge. Still it was a dark cloud surrounding her face. She rested her chin in her palm. He was right about her beauty. It was through and through. Her soul possibly too.

"Where your people from?" she asked in that singsong voice of hers.

It was a strange question. He frowned not understanding at first. So he replied, "Kentucky."

She giggled, "No silly. That's where they at. Where you from? I think you're from Camelot."

"Camel who?" he gave a baffled blink.

"I read, you know. Tiny gets me all kinds of books. I read about King Arthur. He from Camelot. So is his knights. Kind-of think it's where the good white people come from. Your people are from there I'm willin' to wager. You probably don't even know it."

Silvio rubbed his brow at her logic. One minute she was wise and mysterious. The next she was like a child. She grinned. Her face loomed in close, her wide eyes blinking for a response. "No, doll, not from that place.

My Pa is a miner in Hollow Creek and Ma dead and buried after childbirth. I'm from two counties west of here. That's all."

"But we all from somewhere, Sil. Somewhere is the beginnin'. This here is just middle stuff?"

"Is that so? Then where you from?"

"Africa, silly! Lone Wolf said he knows my tribe. I might go back one day to see them too when I become rich or famous like Lady Joyce. My ma and her Magic Man are there too. I think."

"You're the strangest girl I've ever met."

"We should get dressed. There are times when they come in to check on me. You can't stay here. Gotta hide you."

Silvio rolled on top of her pushing her thighs apart with his, her sticky center rubbing his pelvis, his penis growing harder by the minute.

"You make it bad for me, doll. Its hard to want to leave."

"Me?"

"Any other girl in here?" he chuckled.

"You just sayin' that cause we done the pokie."

"I got news for you. I say what I mean. You different, see. And I like that. I'm different too."

"How you different?" Della frowned.

"I'ma be big one day. Real big. Got plans, see... and when I do, I'm coming for you. I figure I need a girl like you. Gonna take you with me."

Della laughed. She pushed at his shoulders and laughed. Silvio didn't welcome laughter. It stung. She was a colored girl in a carnival. Here he was making an offer after just meeting her, an offer that he ain't made to no woman. Then here goes this one having a laugh at it. "I mean it. See that five dollars I gave you. That's the beginning, doll. I told you before. Don't laugh at me. I don't like it!" he grabbed her throat. Not hard, but to emphasize his point. He was a man and not a boy. She should show him some respect.

“What you gon’ do with a colored?” she asked, not the least bothered by the way his fingers circled her neck. In fact, the light of fearlessness in her eyes unnerved him. She mocked him with her smirk. “What you think? I’ma go with you and your people gonna welcome me in? We gonna have a bunch of yella babies and...”

“When I become a legend, so will you.” He released her throat to stroke the side of her face for forgiveness. “What I do and where I go, it won’t matter. Never will.”

“But what them important people you work for think? A colored girl in tow? Think they respect you then?”

He hesitated. She had a point. Since when did he want any girl, especially one that would just bring him scorn? The truth was he didn’t know where the promises came from, certainly not his head. Then where? Della shrugged it off as if bored with the topic. But he could tell his silence hurt her feelings. Maybe part of her wanted to be convinced that this wasn’t just some roll he gave her for pay. “You different is all. I never met anyone like you,” he said.

“Get dressed we...” She tried to rise. Silvio pulled her back down. He was on her again. Her nervous laughter impinged his already foggy brain. He ignored it when she parted her thighs to receive him. He got in her smoothly this time, her body now accommodating. He preferred to continue the rest of the conversation inside her. He liked the way her eyes fluttered and how she bit down on her bottom lip when he thrust deep and withdrew slow. He gave her long strokes to prolong the pleasure, and his access to the ways she stimulated every fiber in him, groaning her name—her stage name, Buttercup.

With thirsty lips Silvio kissed away her objections. When they heard others outside of the tent he would not be denied. Especially if this was going to be the one and only time he had her. In her arms the world didn’t exist and race didn’t matter. It was just feeling. What you felt is all that mattered. He fucked her. She fucked him. The world careened on its axis.

He shot off a continual stream of raw pleasure before once more collapsing in a haze of delirium. It was bliss. Buttercup was right. After he hitched out of the country, they'd never meet again. But the night with her like this made him want to pretend.

"Get up," she whispered, alarm in her voice. "You have to get dressed. I'm tellin' you, you can't stay here. I'ma hide you, then talk to Tiny."

He grunted through his final release, then withdrew. Stunned again from what she awakened in him, he managed to rise on shaky legs. She was intoxicating and stronger than the case of hooch he covered with leaves and branches in the forest. His dress movements were slow and awkward. The muscles in his body strained to regain control. He looked up to see she had put on a tattered dress. Gone was the allure of her costume. She was simply a girl, young, confused, trying to survive in a motherless world like him. Was that it? Was it why he felt so connected to her from just minutes of knowing her? He watched her pick up the wet stage dress and stockings as if they were delicate items and fold them neatly. Her hair was now a matted bush of tangles, but still he wanted to sink his fingers into the coarse strands. He longed to run his lips over the exposed nape of her neck. He wanted to whisper that life was hard for them all, but she was destined for more. That he had a feeling about her. "I think we can hide you over by the donniker."

"The what?"

"Donniker," she said, looking over at him and smiling. "The honeypot? Doncha' know nuthin'?"

"You mean where you take a shit?" he frowned.

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, Stan's tent is there. He and Lone Wolf are the last to turn in after the carnival closes. And no one ever goes over by the donniker now. While you wait, I find Tiny and explain your needs."

"We got a problem, doll. Need to find my boy. Name is Jelly."

Her thin brows drew together. She dropped her hands to her sides and gave him a puzzled look. Then her eyes lit with renewed understanding. "The fat kid that was with you. Right?"

"Yes, he's waiting for me. Let me find him and..."

"No. If in you leave without me, you won't get back to me. The greenies are patrolling tonight. That mean sheriff Tuck always gives us problems at night. So everyone ready. Let me find your fat-boy friend. First, we hide you, then I find him. Okay?"

Silvio smiled. "You think Tiny will help us get past the sheriff?"

She walked over to him. Her hands clasped behind her back, she rocked on the balls of her bare feet. "Tiny hate that sheriff too. I'll explain it to him. You can trust me. He like my pa. He listens to me."

He slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her over to him. "Stick with me, babe. I promise to take you places." He winked. She hit his shoulder playfully. Running in circles, she found her shoes and dusted the bottoms of her feet before slipping them on. Blowing him several kisses, she darted out of the tent. Silvio dropped down on the broken cot. He shifted and removed his gun that was in his pocket. Checking for the bullets, he put it back in. Buttercup was definitely his kind of girl.

Chapter Four

1932 Kentucky - Tiny's Rules

Della was in luck. The carnival had drawn in most of the town. This meant patrols were heavy near the midway. It didn't take her long before she found her warden. Peanut leaned against the Daisy twin's train car, his hat pulled down low over his brow. He tossed a dime piece in the air. Peanut was one of the tallest and meanest roustys under Tiny's employ. Lone Wolf would often pick him to walk the bone yard at night. He wasn't attractive. His face was a horror story. A lumpy nose from his constant brawls and fistfights and a scar that ran from brow to his cheek over his left eye was what people had to look at. His cheekbones were high and sunken. He constantly licked chapped blistered lips. When Della approached, his head lifted. He gave her one of those looks. After a night with her new friend, she knew exactly what it meant. She smiled. "Hey there, Peanut. You watchin' the bone yard tonight?"

"What you doin' out there, Buttercup?"

"Goin' to the tents. I got to..."

"You know the rules!" Peanut said. He moistened his bottom lip and stepped before her. Her head went back to maintain his stare. He smelled of grease, the kind that oiled the gears of the rides. The coppery stench caused her nose to itch, but she batted her lashes at him.

"I do know them rules. Tiny rules this, and Tiny rules that," she said smiling. "He won't ever let me have a little fun. Tell you what though. If in you let me break Tiny's rules now, I might..." she dropped her eyes to her feet like she was shy and then peaked up at him. "I might let you break Tiny rules with me later."

Peanut moved in on her. He touched her cheek, ran his finger up under her chin, and tilted her head back. "Tiny won't let none of us have you. Why's that? What he savin' you for?"

"He my pa. What pa you know let any man have his girl."

“Pa my ass. Even if he had a cock, and I say he don’t, he couldn’t reach no pussy to put it in. I think if he can’t have you he don’t want none of us to. That’s what I think.” Peanut hawk-spit out a wad of phlegm to the right and then grinned at her. Della held her tongue and her nose. She had to bite down hard to keep from saying what she truly meant. Joyce told her once that Tiny had a thing for her ma, and when she up and left her behind it broke Tiny’s heart. Tiny always believed her as his and gave her the name Buttercup, even though the dark hue of her skin proved she wasn’t. Tiny was cruel to most, but he protected her. She never had to suffer his wrath. But she never defiantly disobeyed his rules like she was by letting an outsider hide amongst them.

“You gonna take a breeze or what?” Della smirked.

“Where you meet me later?” Peanut asked. He grabbed at her breast. She flinched. His touch was nothing like Silvio’s. He gave it a hard squeeze, pinching her nipple until she felt it bruise. Della managed to hold back her discomfort. That seemed to excite him. The nasty critter that he was. “I’ll meet you down by the genny after Lone Wolf shut it down,” she said.

Della waited for him to think it over. She endured his rough feels and pinches a little longer and rolled her eyes when he had the nerve to kiss her neck. He was so disgusting. Even his fingernails were ringed in black oily muck. The musk and funk that was him permeated from every cell in his skin. Finally, he nodded his agreement. “Sure, I need a breeze anyway. Nothing happening now. Where you heading?”

“My business,” Della said.

Peanut chuckled. “We gonna have a little fun t’night. Don’t make me come lookin’ for you.”

Della smirked and then stuck out her tongue behind his back once he turned and walked away. Sighing, she headed toward the midway, careful to not be seen. Della took to walking behind the tents, peeking out at the midway when opportunity presented itself for the fat-boy that

belonged to Silvio. Nearly twenty minutes had passed and she feared he'd taken to the woods, a place even she wasn't fool enough to venture into unattended. Set to give up, Della backtracked to the bone yard. The clouds covered the moon, which aided her with multiplying shadows. She wasn't afraid of the dark. What she was afraid of was Tiny. If he discovered her wandering, the punishment would be severe. So she was extra careful to listen and watch her surroundings.

Della's travels took her back through the girl's tents. Tiny had lost many. Girls come and go at a carnival. Sometimes he's only stuck with lot lizards, and they aren't enough to turn a profit in the tents. So she hurried her pace, expecting to find nothing but empty tents until the sounds from one gave her pause. Della strained to listen. Out came the hoarse grunts and mewls from a woman. She giggled, confused and intrigued. She pushed her ear to the tent. Inside the soft grunts continued.

Della knew that noise anywhere. "Trixie?"

Quiet and careful she crept around to the opening. Her fingers gathered up the edge of the fold enough to gently draw it back an inch. Della peered inside. It was Trixie. She was naked. It was the only beginning of the horror. To Della's shock and disgust, she discovered Trixie on top of some townie, riding his cock backwards. Trixie's long scraggly blonde hair covered her face. But that didn't spare her captive from the worse of it. Trixie's wrinkled ass, dotted with moles, bounced up and down like some rabid jackrabbit. And the poor townie or rousty—Della couldn't quite discern—grunted for mercy. Straining against the darkness covering the scene, Della leaned in further. The young man's face dropped over to the side. It was Silvio's fat-boy friend, Jelly. He was either in the throes of passion or holding back his puke. His face was pinched into a grimace—the deepest shade of pink.

Della fell back from the tent. She rolled away in the grass. Her cheeks puffed. Her lips pressed so tight they went purple, and her eyes bulged. She neared an explosive bout of laughter. She stopped, holding her

stomach. She felt the hot tingly feeling in her clit that preceded a piss and struggled to suppress the urge while forcing down the bubble of laughter lodged in her throat. It was torture. Scrambling to her feet, she shot out and away from the tent, laughing loudly. She ran like the wind. Her belly ached as she breathed in gusts of night air, but she kept running. Her eyes burned from all she had seen and she kept laughing. By the time she crashed inside of her own tent, she was a blubbering mess of tears. Silvio stood over her, alarmed. Della couldn't speak. She could barely breathe. She put up a hand for him to wait. But Silvio grabbed her by both arms and brought her to her feet. "What happened? Talk to me girl. What happened?"

"He, Trix and he, together, they, eeeewww..." she panted. "Pooookkkkiiiiiiii, doin the pokie!!!" she laughed.

"Pokie? What the hell does Pokie mean? Talk to me!"

Della grinned. She shook her head of bushy locks at the alarm in his eyes. "He's fine. I swear it to you. He's fine. Trixie showin' him a *gooooooooood* time."

Silvio doubled back. "Trixie? You mean that bird flapping on the stage with you?" Della nodded through a cheeky grin. Silvio slowly smiled. "Well I'll be damned. Jelly's getting pussy? That pussy?"

"Like I say, she showin' him a good time."

Silvio turned away, hands to head. "Okay. Well, I guess we wait. Right?"

"I told you it'll take another hour, maybe two before I can see Tiny. I sent Peanut away. We can stay here. No need to run just yet." She dropped down on her blanket, folded her legs under her. The cot was busted. She'd have to sleep on the floor until she could commission another. Silvio dropped beside her and suddenly all thoughts of her sleeping predicament wiped away. And when he touched her exposed thigh, she felt her cheeks warm. Her heart slammed in her chest. The air in her lungs solidified. She ached between her legs from their tryst; still a touch had her craving him

once more. His eyes lifted, latching to hers. She looked down into their blue depths. The answer was yes. She'd want to lie in his arms again with him on top of her for as many hours as they pleased.

"Come here," he said, easing her down. The backs of his fingers grazed her cheek lovingly. "Tell me about the carnival. What's it like?"

Della frowned up at him. "What's what like?"

Silvio's head lowered. His lips were a breath away from the exposed curve of her neck. A brief shiver rippled through her. Then came his kiss ever so gently. *Oh the fever!* Like a Mississippi heat wave, it burned so hot it layered over her skin, scorching her soul. Della's heartbeat rushed to the spot he kissed, and she heaved an affronted sigh. "It's a good place. Strange place...and um, a safe place. That's what the Carnival is."

"Mmmm...and what else," he whispered against her ear, as his fingers gathered the fabric to the front of her skirt. She hadn't put on britches in her hurry. So the cooling air of the night breezed over her damp thighs. A knot formed in her chest, then lodged in her throat. Two of his fingers stroked her slit. The calming finger play had her winding her bottom in the rhythmic sync. He flicked his tongue at her inner ear.

"We had a kangaroo once, but it died," she stammered, her brain scrambling for something interesting just as his finger took the plunge. Her pelvis lifted from the ground and her body responded to the welcomed invasion. Silvio's head slowly rose. Della felt his eyes on her as he fingered her deeply. Opening them once more, they locked with his as their breathing came and went in unison. Though he was the one pleasing her, she could tell he liked it by the way he moistened his lips. No man, carnie or townie, had magic hands like him—she was sure. Silvio's thumb pressed against her clit sending a current of rapture through her core. He then rubbed it in circular motions. He gave her two fingers, purposefully stretching her for his pending entry. Della tried to deny the darker side of lust as her mind filled with images of her on all fours taking it from the back, hole to hole. She tried to ignore the wicked desires that made her

want to slip her mouth around his cock and suck deeply until it rested in the back of her throat. She burned through her soul as she neared an unexpected climax. But Silvio would have none of that. He watched. A passionate fluttering rose from the pits of her stomach. A cooling spread through the clenching muscles of her sex and a hot ache incinerated her throat. Just as she was ready to scream he was on her thrusting his dick into her. Della gripped his arms and moved beneath him. His broad shoulders were heaving, and sweaty. Her hands slipped twice until she dug in her nails to hold on. Silvio covered her completely, rising and falling out of her with hip pumps that set her teeth on edge. Della closed her eyes and went freely with it. The closeness that came with his lovemaking was so male, so bracing. She was floating on waves of euphoria.

He spoke into her ear as he throttled her sex repeatedly, panting how beautiful she was, how good she felt and how he 'd never had anyone like her. She felt *desired* and *wanted* and all those things he spoke of. She gasped, grunted, and wept silently. Her thighs quivered. Her body thrashed as she exploded with such a blinding intensity that it rendered her mute.

He flipped her. Della's head and back dipped as he thrust in and out of her from the back. In the rapturous throes of her climax she could do nothing but pant and endure. He rolled his dick into her with the swirl of his hips and made it so ever-lovin-good she prayed he stayed deep for ever. But forever never lasted long enough. His will broke. Together they went down. Her stomach clenched as she weathered the weight of him. His hard thighs, now on either side of her own, forced hers shut as he pumped her beaten sex until his seed shot through her. She felt him warmly coating her; she relished how his cock jerked out the last throes of pleasure while buried deep. Then he groaned over their separation. He fell over on his side. They were still clothed. She with her skirt pushed up to her hips, and he with his britches rolled down to his knees. His breath was

warm and moist against her cheek when he turned and kissed her there. Silvio tried to speak but failed. He pressed another kiss, this time to her inner ear, before she lifted her head and he reclaimed her lips. It was a slow drugging kiss that branded her his for eternity. Slowly lifting his mouth from hers, he gazed down at her in wonder. "That was tops, doll. Two times over."

Della pushed at his shoulders. She feared he'd go for three. "We should stop. We need to listen for Lone Wolf or the others. You neva' know."

"You're special. You know that? No matter what, you're the real deal."

Della blushed. "I knows it. Now get off," she said, pushing at him.

Silvio withdrew and dropped over on his back. He lifted his arms and put them behind his head, his dick, wet and limp, hanging to the side. They stared up at the top of the tent in silence. Neither of them spoke. Eventually there was movement. One of his arms lowered, and his hand sought hers. Della smiled. She let him hold it. And soon, without a word, she turned to him and drifted to sleep.

"Buttercup, hey, wake up," he whispered.

Della groaned. Her arm was around his bare chest and her sex pressed into his thigh. She snuggled under his armpit for comfort.

"Buttercup?"

Her eyes opened and then her lids slipped down over her eyes again. "Huh?"

"It's been almost an hour. Jelly should be done with your friend. I think we should..."

"Oh, yeah. I s'pose." Della stretched and yawned. Forcefully shaking off the fog of sleep, she blinked several times, allowing her eyes to adjust to the darkness. It was late. She'd fallen asleep. When she looked over at him, he was smiling up at her. She'd never fallen asleep with a boy or man before. Della pushed her skirt down and fixed the front of her

dress, suddenly aware of how far beyond Tiny's rules she had gone. She could still feel the evidence of their playtime leaking from her sticky center. She desperately wanted to bathe. "I didn't mean to drift like that."

Silvio rose. He offered a hand and helped her to her feet. Quickly, they groomed themselves, adjusting their clothes in silence. "I'll go and find Tiny and..." she turned but stopped. Before she could utter another word the little man himself walked in. Della stepped back in stunned silence. Lone Wolf appeared next. He had a bat in his hands. The glare the Indian gave her and Silvio chilled her.

"I can explain... I swears it. We ain't did nuthin'..." she stuttered, but her voice faded into silence when that mean ole sheriff none of them trusted emerged. Silvio's friend Jelly was forced in by two of the Sherrif's deputies. The young man's face was covered in blood from an undeserved beating. He heaved and sobbed noisily. It was the only noise in the tent, and it scared the hell out of Della.

"Let him go!" Silvio shouted. Della turned to warn him against it, but he shoved her aside and went for his gun. Lone Wolf must have circled; he was silent and deadly like that. Before it was expected, he delivered a powerful hit with his bat to Silvio's arm. The gun fell and Silvio dropped to his knees.

"No! Don't hurt him!" she said trying to reach him. Lone Wolf had her next. She could do nothing but look down at Silvio helplessly. The sheriff, a short sweaty man with meaty jaws and multiple chins, stepped over to Silvio. Della noticed how Silvio held his arm but didn't weep or moan. He just glared at them all. "Well, well. What do we have here?"

"There he is, Sheriff! He attacked my gal," Tiny snorted, spit, and glared.

"That's not true, Tiny! He ain't done nuthin' wrong. He lost his way, and I was gonna show him where to go," Della said snatching free from Lone Wolf. She rushed Tiny. "I can explain it. I swears it."

"Della, stay out of it," Silvio wheezed, barely able to speak.

“No, he wasn’t doin’ nuthin’ wrong. I bought him in here,” she confessed. Tiny’s kind eyes hardened to black stones. Before Della could foresee his rage, she experienced it. Tiny swung his cane, delivering a gut-crushing blow with the blunt end to her stomach. She doubled over in pain. Silvio, though wounded, lunged for Tiny. He was quick, but the men were quicker. He was kicked in his stomach by the sheriff for his foolish efforts. Through tears in his eyes, he bore witness to the midget’s cruelty. They all did. Tiny grabbed a fistful of Della’s hair and yank her up to his level. He spoke in her face, spraying it with angry spittle between his missing teeth. “Now tell the Sherriff the troof! That boy done come in here and attack you! Didn’t he! Forced himself on you!”

“Let her go, you freak!” Silvio grunted.

Della sobbed. She’d never been struck by Tiny in her life. She’d seen him do it to others, but he never touched her. Never. She didn’t know how to process the pain and humiliation the attack brought.

“Say it!” Tiny snapped.

“Yes,” she wept. “He force me.”

“Della! No!” Silvio yelled at her. “You bastard. You know I didn’t! You let her go!”

“Get her out of here!” Tiny shoved her to the floor. Della was swept from her hands and knees by Lone Wolf and lifted into his massive arms. Her stomach pained her terribly, but watching the sheriff give the okay to have Silvio beaten with his friend was too much to bear. So she closed her eyes and pretended. She wished it all away. Problem was the screams from the one called Jelly. That she could never wish away. Looking back once more, she saw Tiny approach Silvio on his cane. “You think you can come in here and fuck with me, boy?”

Silvio spat on him.

Tiny wiped at the spittle with his nubby fingers. He swung his cane like a bat, hitting Silvio on the side of the head. Then the others started kicking him. It was all she saw before Lone Wolf carried her away.

Chapter Five

1938 Present

Little Surprises

"It's a carnival," Manny said. "Well I'll be damn... it's a fucking carnival out in the middle of nowhere." Manny leaned forward on the steering wheel. His neck stretched, and his mouth gaped. Manny's eyes lifted beyond the parked cars. The approaching lights of the Ferris wheel sent a cascade of color over his face. Silvio could hear the mix of laughter with the screams of ringing bells and blaring horns as many walked through the tall grass to the carnival tents. These days carnivals were few and scattered. Still Manny gawked like a three year-old.

"Park over there, under the cover of those trees," Silvio ordered. Manny did as he was told. The getaway car light pods blinked off. The four men coasted in the car over to a shaded stop between a farmer's truck loaded with watermelons and a large oak tree with low hung branches. Touchy sat up, grabbing the back of Silvio's seat. He leaned forward.

Red had passed out somewhere on the turn off. "What's this about, Sil?" Touchy asked. His breath wafting over the seat was a pungent mixture of onion and whiskey.

"Need to make a stop," Silvio grunted. "You boys hang back. There's something I come for."

Before either man could press for an answer on the 'what' could summon him on a ride like this, Silvio threw open the door. That night, that one bliss filled night, was all that got him through the next four years in prison busting rocks. When he broke out, he hit the ground running. He'd been running ever since. But never once had he forgotten. Tonight, he was determined to find out if she did the same.

Silvio stalked through the crowded midway. His eyes were barely seen under the downward slant of his fedora. To his left were lighted booths where carnies called to townies to test their luck on games of

chance for penny prizes and day old stale treats. A nearly six-foot tall Asian, covered in tattoos, juggled flaming sticks for a small crowd while another man who looked like his twin prepared to walk over a bed of nails. Grown men in tattered clothes, mended with bright patchwork, wore painted white faces with ghastly drawn red lips and darkly drawn triangular brows. The clown impersonators passed off balloons to the young people, seducing their parents to empty their coin purses. Silvio felt all of their stares: watchful, curious, unwelcoming glares. To his right were tents offering just a little more to adults behind the cover of the curtain. From freak shows to peep shows, you could take your pick. He kept going. With the night cloudless and the moon full, he felt her. She was near.

Silvio reached the end of the midway. He glanced up at the painted sign. It wasn't Lady Joyce headlining. The barker called a new name. Her name. Others hurried briskly, several side-stepping him. Each man was drawn by the loudmouth midget's call. Buttercup's infamy was evident in the townsmen's eagerness to empty their pockets into the hats of the lot men who blocked the entrance. Silvio pulled on the front of his fedora, tipping his hat further down his face when the Indian passed him. He'd wait out the crowd and find another way to slip inside.

"You lookin' for her, ain't-ya?" a soft voice spoke.

Silvio's gaze turned to the tents. A woman appeared through the dark folds of one. An aging gypsy woman, vaguely familiar, her eyes black as a cobra's, fixed on him. It was the witch from before. She was the one who taunted his gullible friend and the one that sold them out the first time they arrived those years ago.

"I know you." She pointed a gnarled finger at him. Her shawl dropped from her grey streaked hair to rest around her shoulders. Her sun-aged face was covered in so many wrinkles he could see nothing of the woman she once was. Silvio was compelled to hold her stare, and her face split into a toothless smile. "Buttercup! You come for her. You come for our Buttercup? Haven't you?"

“Where’s her tent?”

“Tent?” the witch cackled. She covered her head once more with her shawl. It spared him the haunting cruelty of her features. But his trigger finger itched to draw on her just the same. Silvio parted the fold of his coat with his hand and let it slip back to where he tucked his pistol. “Buttercup don’t have no tent. She got her own boxcar. Aint you see the sign? She’s carnie royalty now.”

Silvio looked back to the line of men entering the tents. The shows were starting. Where there once was only one, he saw at least three. The need to escape the strange woman overcame him. He started away, but the gypsy spoke again. “The cards told me you’d come,” the old woman rasped. “I tell Buttercup the day draws near. She betta’ be ready. I say, *he* will come to take what is *his*; this time Tiny and Lone Wolf can’t make it different. This time he who rides by the gun will have his revenge. And for some coin, I will tell you what she had to say of your return. Help you find your way.” The woman’s cruel gaze went east. Silvio’s head turned slowly. His eyes followed. There were several boxcars lined up away from the carnival. It was what Buttercup once referred to as the *bone yard*. The witch laughed again. It was a nasty, phlegm filled laugh that went through him like the cool autumn wind and rattled a nasty cough in her chest like crumbling paper. Then she rasped, “You thinkin’ that Buttercup belon’ to you...the truth is, you belon’ to her.” Another cold wave of bitter laughter escaped the gypsy woman’s pale, dry lips. “You been dreamin’, boy?”

Silvio tensed. He hated those that laughed at him and mocked him without cause. The mention of dreams made him waver, for just a moment. Then he clenched his fist realizing he could snap her neck if he wanted. He leveled his eyes on the woman and took a step toward her. A step from Silvio Garelli usually was all that was needed. But the gypsy didn’t move. She sneered like some venomous snake, waiting for the perfect moment to strike, feeding off his uncertainty. Feeding off his rage.

"Believe me now. Believe me later. She won't leave this carnival with you... and when you knows the truth, you'll grow to hate her."

"Boss?"

Silvio turned, reaching for his gun.

Dragging his bum leg and holding his hat down on the top of his head against the increasing force of the night wind, was Manny. Trailing close behind came Red and Touchy. Silvio glared at his men, watching their approach. His hand relaxed on his piece. The gypsy witch slunk back into the shadows. When he recalled her again, he looked back to find her gone.

"Boss, sorry, boss. We, um, they, um, we really need to get back on the road before daylight come." Manny removed his hat and scratched at his head. He cast his eyes to the others and then to Silvio. "I told them to wait on you, but they...well it's getting late and... they..."

"What the fuck is this? A fucking carnival?" Touchy asked, scowling at the townspeople running or walking in clusters to the latest trick tent or carnie rides. Red popped his collar on his coat and glared directly at Silvio. "We thinking of doing some business here, boss?"

"Like I said, this is my business, personal business."

All of them froze at the word, personal. They knew so little of each other. But they knew one thing. None of them had personal business since they broke out of the clink and started hitting banks that weren't dried up from the Depression. It was simple. They moved as one until the last job. Then they'd depart. That was the deal, and *this* was the last run. So why stop for 'personal' business now? Silvio read their thoughts. He clenched one hand tightly into a fist. He wouldn't explain any of it further than that.

A voice snapped over his thoughts like a lion tamer's whip. *"Tonight's your night!!"* The midget tapped his cane on the platform. *"We got some naughty for you boys. She's here, back for one last show if you payin'*

right..." Tiny pointed his cane to the opening in the tent. The hooch show's music nearly drowned out the midget's high-pitched voice.

Silvio's men all looked in the direction of the voice. The midget waddled gap legged back and forth. The rambunctious crowd inside could be heard in loud waves of catcalls and hand whistles. Silvio checked again for the witch. She was gone. It didn't matter. Before the bitch could finger him, his business at the Carnival would be done. The show would soon start. Buttercup was within his reach.

"Boss, it's a bit risky tonight. We got to get a move on," Manny said. All questioning eyes returned to him.

Silvio clenched his jaw and weighed his options. "We part ways here then," he announced.

"What?" Touchy shouted.

"Boss? What you mean? What that mean we part here? That's not. That's not how it goes. Right, boss? We go to Mexico. Together. That's the plan. The four of us together."

"Like I said, it's personal. So if any of you got that itch, I suggest you scratch it now. Make a decision, boys. I've made mine."

The three men exchanged looks. The wind whipped at the tails of their coats. Its low howl mixed in with the surrounding fanfare, but the three stood silent. Red scratched his jaw. "Nah, we stick together. You got business then you got business. I need a break. Fuck, we all do. A few hours won't make a difference."

"But—" Manny started. He received a silencing smack to the back of his head from Touchy. Manny's hat was nearly knocked from his head. He stepped back, scowling but said nothing.

"Fuck, kid. Let it go. Boss needs to make a stop, and then we stop. Nobody breaks up the gang in this pisshole." Touchy nodded respectfully to Silvio. "We'll lay low; we're here if you need us." He then turned and walked off. Red tipped his hat at Silvio and soon followed. Manny was the last standing before him. He dropped his hands in his pockets and looked

back at the boys, unsure. His clubfoot slowed him as he approached. "If you tell me what we here for, I can help, boss. You need anything?"

"Keep the boys out of the hooch tent. That's what I need for now. Tell Red I expect trouble, so be ready. Until I say better, make sure Touchy keep's a cool head. I'll find you when I need you."

Manny frowned. It was brief. He gave an obedient nod before turning and limping away. Silvio's eyes returned to Madame Danique's tent. She wasn't there. But she knew where his Buttercup would be after the show. That information he couldn't pass on. He entered her tent to find it darker than the night outside of its folds. But even in the dark cramped quarters, he confirmed she wasn't there. How did she get past them all?

"Fuck this!" Silvio stormed out. He'd find Della's train car on his own.

"Hey, mister."

Silvio nearly knocked the young lad down. His eyes dropped to the little brown boy. The child wore clothes a size too big. A confederate soldier jacket nearly swallowed him. His britches were tied around his waist by a braided rope. Even in the grass Silvio could tell he wore no shoes, and it was fucking freezing out. *Where did the kid come from?*

The boy smirked up at him, as if he, too, had heard his thoughts. What was he five, six? Silvio narrowed his eyes on the little ankle-biter. Was the kid from the carnival or from the piss-poor town? He didn't really give a fuck. The kid was in the way.

"Wanna see a trick?" The boy put his hands out and flipped them front to back. He gave a broad cheeky grin. "Huh? Do ya? Do ya?" His curly bushy hair was twice the size of his small head. The mass blew back in the wind. Silvio also noticed his cheeks were peppered in tiny freckles, just like the kind he had when he was young. Strange that this kid had freckles. It was obvious he was a colored boy, despite his fair skin.

"Not now kid. Scram."

“Wanna see a trick?” the boy repeated, this time more firmly. Silvio almost laughed at the bass in the child’s voice. Then came the last call for the hooch show. Silvio headed for the tent. The little one kept up with him. He bounced and skipped along like a jumping jellybean. Wasn’t the kid cold? Where the fuck were his shoes?

Silvio frowned. No matter how fast he walked, he couldn’t shake the kid. Then the child jumped in front of him again as if springs were attached to the bottoms of his bare feet. “I’m a magic man, mister... wanna see a trick!”

“Beat it, kid!”

In a flash the kid pushed at Silvio’s legs as hard as his little hands could muster. Silvio reached for the child’s shoulder to move him aside—a mistake. The little boy darted inside the open fold of his coat, giggling. Suddenly the long tails of Silvio’s wool trench covered the kid, running around and through his legs. He reminded Silvio of a slippery and quick jackrabbit he chased one spring for supper as a child. He could never quite get a hold of it. The boy was quick. Silvio turned in a 180-degree circle trying to reach inside then behind him to free the tyke. Like a bullet, the kid shot free of his legs and ran for the tents. He was gone. Problem solved. Well not quite. A quick pat down revealed Silvio’s pockets were a little light.

“Motherfucker!” The kid was a pickpocket. Just that quick he had cleaned him out. Silvio chased after him, running between the tents to the other side. The kid had lifted \$200 from him. He couldn’t let that slide. He looked left, then right. The child was barely seen running through the tall grass for the train cars.

Silvio didn’t need this. Damn it to hell. Why should he even bother? The more he gave chase, the angrier he became. Almost two hundred bones lifted from him by a six year old.

Silvio stopped. He again looked left, then to his right. He moved through the shadows, careful to not be seen as he silently crept from around empty tents and trailers. He lost the kid to the darkness.

“Son-of-a-bitch!” Silvio grimaced.

He had to think on it again. Was it a kid? Was it a midget hustling him? It had happened so damn fast. No, it was definitely a kid. It was pointless to waste another minute on the search. Stalking off, his ear caught a hint of laughter followed by child-like giggles. It was almost faint enough to be the wind. Silvio’s head turned. The feeling of being watched made the hairs on the back of his arm stand on end. The clouds moved over the moon, and the absence of light was complete. His eyes sought out the figure in the shadows. Back tracking, he was careful not to make a sound. Then a child’s giggles grew distinct. Swiftly, he dipped around the side of the train car and caught the kid. He grabbed a fistful of the front of the child’s shirt and lifted him, kicking and screaming, from the ground. It was definitely a kid who was too young for the game he was running. The boy kicked his dirty feet, hitting at him with his tiny fist. “You don’t lift from me kid. You hear me?”

The boy showed no fear. Eyes were hazel with flecks of amber, a pair of eyes that were surprisingly familiar. Before he could connect with the familiarity, the child kicked him square in the nuts. Silvio howled, dropping the boy. He wheezed, stepping back and grabbing his groin. The child rolled under the train car, away from his reach. “You little fucker!” he grunted, almost going to his knees. He looked up to see the boy in the wind, running for all it was worth.

“You shouldn’t be in here, Joyce. You need your rest if you workin’ the girl’s tents after the show.” Della fixed the flower in her hair. Her eyes lifted to the cloudy mirror. They met with her surrogate mother’s. Joyce fanned away-imagined heat. It was nearly fifty degrees outside, but Joyce could always be found somewhere sweating in a slip

and robe. She watched Della, silent as always, balancing with another hand on her cane.

Lady Joyce never recovered from that snakebite six years ago. Madame Danique had to give up all her snakes and just read her cards because of it. Still, it wasn't justice for Lady Joyce. Being a carnie star was all she wanted. Accepting retirement made her bitter and addicted to the hooch. Della gave her a small smile. The end of Joyce's career dancing the hooch was the beginning of Della's. Crippled by life and circumstance, Joyce walked with a cane now. She barely escaped an amputation of her foot. She was management for the girl's tents and the director of Della's hooch shows. Though she never complained, it hurt Della to see her so abandoned to her fate, especially on her featured nights. Guilt sat in her gut like one of Benny the Strong Man's weights over many things since that fateful night.

"I was telling Tiny," Joyce began, "we got enough going with the girls now. You don't have to dance the hooch forever. It was never meant to be forever."

Della nodded. Joyce's concern was genuine. But they both knew the truth. Buttercup was bigger than any of them, and Tiny lined his pockets from town to town, mostly off of her act. He'd just as soon see them both dead before he'd part with money. Besides, Della had grown used to it. The only rules Tiny agreed to when it came to her life as Buttercup was that she was never to turn tricks for townies. After what happened with Silvio, the entire carnival made the rule law. She was just as much a prisoner to the hooch dancing as Joyce was to her cane. In that way, their misery was the same.

"I gots Sylvester to think of. He already out there pickin' up bad habits from Peanut and the men. I want him to go to a colored college and be something more than a carnie."

"We take care of our own. You talking crazy—going to college," Joyce scoffed.

Della shrugged. "It's his mother. I'm talking like a mother. You seen the boy lately? He ain't a baby no mo', Joyce. He growin' like a weed, and smart, so smart. I found his little jar of money. I think he stealin' again, and Tiny will skin him if he is. I can't keep up with him here. He needs to know there's more than this."

"He a carnie," Joyce snapped. "Colored boy got more chance here in the carnival than he does in that shitty world. You of all people should know that."

"He more than that, much more than that. And for the record, I ain't done nothing to shame him into thinking' he ain't and to make him think he less than a boy like all them other boys he see in and out of these towns." She mumbled the rest under her breath. Turning away from Joyce's scrutiny, she fixed the yellow-feathered garter around her thigh.

"You lie to him," Joyce said. "You tell him that his daddy is some magic man that run off. That's your story, gal. Not his."

Della sighed. She understood Joyce's attachment to her child. She knew Joyce loved him too. But sadly, she knew that the chains of the carnival weren't put on her neck by just Tiny. Joyce had been secretly unforgiving when they discovered she was pregnant from Silvio. Joyce even made mention more than once of her own barren womb.

Then there was the hooch dancing. Della started dancing after Sylvester was born as Tiny insisted. It had gotten the carnival enough money to hire more girls. Tiny told her she could then quit and raise her fatherless child at the carnival in peace. Tiny kept announcing to the townies that it would be her last show. But the money kept coming, and so she danced for her son and for herself. She didn't know much else she could do. She was so famous now—as famous as a colored hooch dancer in a carnival could be. In fact, she was so famous she'd even been invited to a Texas Rodeo. Della was now living her mentor's dream. She looked back at Joyce.

"Say what's troublin' you, Joyce. The real story."

"I want more for you. Always have. Look at you. Broke my heart when you got saddled with a kid but then to have you dancin' for these fools. It ain't your life."

"What you s'pose I do? Settle down? With who? This is who we is, Joyce. It's who I is. And that's fine with me," she lied.

"And your outlaw. What about him? You seen them papers. He's a bank robber now, a killer too. You been collecting his wanted posters."

"You goin' through my things again?" Della snapped.

"I was seeing to Sylvester when I found those papers. All these years, you still thinking on him? After what he done?"

"He did nothin'. You and I both know it. Tiny... it don't matter. He ain't comin' here. Tiny made sure of that. He don't know about Sylvester and if'in he did, it make no difference," she said bitterly. "That was a long time ago. It's done."

"Time don't matter when you still wantin' him. Get him out of your head. You right. He don't want you or that boy. We your family."

Oh how the truth burned. Della closed her eyes, refusing to show scant emotion to Joyce. But it burned through her. Yes, she collected his wanted posters and listened for gossip. He went to prison because of her. Not the rape. No, the law wouldn't throw a white man in jail just for that. And there was no rape. But Tiny was able to claim he stole from him as if she was a prize mule he broke in too early. It was then she realized the true nature of the man she considered a father. It was then she accepted that Silvio would hate her forever. "You right. Silvio 'Bloodshot' Garelli got bigger plans than me." She sniffed back the moisture in her nose and eyes. "Now, they playin' my song," Della said, with an acceptance of her fate.

Tonight she'd chosen a red and gold Kimono they bought from a Chinaman when they passed through Virginia. It was made of satin. She was told by the rousties that she looked like royalty when wearing it—a true carnival queen. A few have propositioned her more than once,

especially nasty, grimy Peanut. Behind Tiny's back, he persisted. When Della spurned him at every turn, he took to her Sylvester, using him to get closer to her and teaching him things she didn't like. She'd have to deal with Peanut, one way or another. As for their offers for a good time, she obeyed Tiny's rule and passed. Her appetite for sex ended when she walked off the stage. Tiny's wish that she never be touched as her punishment held true.

Joyce shifted in her cane from one hand to the other, her face pinched in disgust. She nodded that Della looked fine. Della winked and went to the curtain. "Find Sylvester, will you? I don't want him runnin' wild with no shoes on. He'll catch the death."

"Della?"

Della stopped. She looked back at Joyce who managed a weak smile. "I worry 'cause I love you. I love you and Sylvester."

"I love ya too, ma." Della winked.

Chapter Six

Lies, Secrets, and Hooch

Silvio dusted his hat off on the side of his leg. He'd wasted time on the kid and lost his way. Situating his hat back on his head, he walked straight for the hooch tent. For her. The Indian barely looked up until he pushed some bills on him. Before he could offer change, Silvio went inside. The men were whooping it up. Four white girls in nothing but their garters danced, arms locked with each other. They kicked their legs left then right, flashing pussy and shaking tits. Silvio frowned. *Had he missed her?*

Silvio scanned the crowd. Tiny was off to the left, next to the phonograph player. The curtain was drawn. Carnie men were walking around collecting money in their hats. The longer you stayed, the more you paid. This show wasn't even close to the one he'd been looking for. He needed the treacherous beauty who visited him in his dreams.

Silvio stalked around the gathered crowd, keeping to the shadows. He eyed the entrance as he went. The Indian didn't follow. The other men posted were carnies, body shoving townies for crowd control. Tiny was possibly the only man who would finger him on sight. That wasn't likely to happen. The midget remained focused on orchestrating the show. The dancing troupe broke out with the ladies giving the boys their money worth, letting them feel, sniff, even lick. His mind flitted back to the time he and Jelly had sat on the front row, vying for the same. His teeth clenched under the tension gathered in his jaw. Silvio watched the back curtain, anger rising, his nostrils flared. Had he made the wrong choice by coming here? Risking his gang, his freedom, for her? Was she nothing more than one of these whores and not worth the trouble? He stepped back, feeling like a fool.

"Give 'em a round of applause, boys!"

The others did, clapping and whistling. The midget walked slowly across the stage with the aid of his cane. He had aged a tad, but he was the same cruel bastard that watched and laughed as he and Jelly were beaten and then carted off. Maybe he should kill him first.

“That there is the finest pussy north of Dixie!”

One man howled. Tiny smiled, nodding his oversized head. “But that ain’t all. Is it boys? That ain’t the pussy you come for...”

“No, sir. It ain’t! Bring out Buttercup!” another shouted.

“I’m in the mood for some chocolate pussy!” another yelled, getting slapped on his back by several others.

Silvio’s hands bunched into fists. If he were close enough, he’d snap the bastard’s neck for disrespecting him. He kept his cool. He had to be sure. Was she still his Buttercup? His eyes remained trained on the curtain. From his vantage point, he could see nothing, not even a shadow. But he felt her. Tense, alert, and anxious, he stepped back from the men to the furthest end of the tent. Tiny waved his cane at those gathered.

“Exotic, beautiful, home grown here in the Carnival. She’s ripe and unlike any Negress you’ve ever beheld. Now you know the rules, boys. This pussy you look at, but don’t touch. My men will see to it.” The midget tapped the point of his cane three times on the stage. “I give you Buttercup.” Tiny’s last words silenced the crowd. He waddled back over to the phonograph and dropped the needle on the record. The jazzy flirty tune that played previously was replaced by a low drumming melody followed by the sexy whine of a sax. *Race music*, possibly. With his hands in his pockets, parting his heavy coat, Silvio waited. *The rules were look and don’t touch?* He was a man that lived outside of the rules.

Della smiled at the working girls. One by one they filed out. Most of them were her age with one a bit younger. The rest of the night these girls would spend in the tents on their backs. “Mules, that what we all are,” she sighed.

Trixie walked in. She wore a sack of a dress and again no shoes. Della didn't understand the carnies and her son, for that matter, that insisted on no shoes. She once did the same, when she was one of them. Their eyes met. Trixie rolled hers and walked out. She was now Joyce's guard dog to see to the girls. Trixie hadn't seen a stage since Buttercup's big solo debut, thankfully. She was nothing more than the lot lizard. She always was.

It definitely was not Della's fault. Tiny's rules governed all their lives. Joyce told her that men in several counties offered a pretty bounty for a chance to fuck her. Why Tiny never accepted was a mystery to most of the carnies. It wasn't as if he was above it. Hell, Joyce was his lady and he'd let anyone fuck her in her day if they were paying right. Maybe it was guilt over Sylvester's pa? Maybe he did see her as a daughter? Maybe he feared those white boys would only use the opportunity to be exceptionally mean to her, meaner than he had been when he stopped speaking to her for the first year of Sylvester's birth. Whatever the reason, she was grateful. She only had room in her heart for one boy now. Her Sylvester. She never wanted her son to grow up and think his mother was a whore. Hooch was a sin but not the greatest in the eyes of a son for his mother.

I give you Buttercup....

It was her music. Della closed her eyes and went to a place she often visited when she performed. She walked through the curtain. Always the townies, liquored or not, paused at her arrival. Some glared, resentful of her beauty, a colored that stirred their desires. Others watched with unbridled lust while others in mild curiosity. Still they all paid. She rolled her head, loosening the tensions in the tendons along her neck. Her arms slowly rose at her sides. Two of her girls arrived. They were naked except for a skirt of coins. They wore exotic painted masks over their faces. Each girl rubbed their hands along her back until either stood at her side. They reached to the front of her robe and together peeled it away

from her body. Della's skirt of feathers and bells swayed as did her hips. She moved in slow syncopated swirls as she eventually peered at her audience through her long lashes. She rolled her hips, letting the music take hold of her. Dancing was like that. She and music had their own understanding. With her body oiled, her hair picked out with wild flair and a yellow flower in her ear, she knew she was quite striking.

Della worked the momentum of her hip dance, and a collective sigh escaped the men. These men boys would deny it later, but all were captivated.

Running her hands over her bare breasts and down her tummy, she warmed all over. Then she let go. The flowing skirt of feathers barely covered her snatch with the frenzied shake of her hips. Her dance increased in its pace. Her breasts bounced and her feet drummed the beat into the floor. She dropped, spread her knees, and worked the crowd into a sex-induced craze. Soon the townies, seduced from their reservations, began to chant her name. Della whirled to one end of the stage. She shook her romp all the way down and worked it back up. Rolling her hips, she molested her sex, fondled her nipples, and ran her tongue over her pouty lips. With her mind clear of anything, she got down low with her hands to her knees, thrusting her pelvis at the men and then again upright to her feet. She danced the hooch like no other woman could. The crowd of men went wild. Della managed a smile. Gyrating through her dance around stage, she was free as any hooch dancer could ever be. Her eyes swept many faces as the tempo of the music commanded her groove. There, at the back of the tent, one lingered.

Silvio watched her intensely, his stare barely seen under the brim of his hat. He wore a long wool coat that was more expensive than the dusty jackets of the miners. This man stood absolutely still. Della lost her step. She quickly recovered, working the men on the other side of the stage. Her attention was called away by some drunk begging for a sniff.

But the chill remained in her bones. She looked back once more and the stranger was gone.

"Give it up boys, if you want more Buttercup!"

Silvio slipped out of the tent. He rubbed his gloved hand down his jaw with the other in a white-knuckle fist. It was either stay and rush the stage or leave before he killed someone. He chose a third option. A man like him with nothing to lose would. Buttercup's show would eventually end. He knew the score. This reunion would need to go down like any other thing in his life. The hard way. Slowly, a plan formed. Silvio cracked his knuckles and went in search of his men.

The townies went wild. Della bowed, covered by her robe. Her heart raced and her breath stunted. She blinked her long lashes in feminine modesty to the praise, taking the time to once again locate the stranger who had sent her mind reeling earlier. She heard Tiny calling her name. He pointed for her to make an exit. This was her second dance. She had three more shows to go. But if Tiny said move, she didn't question. She did as she was told. Della walked off to a chorus of boo's. Tiny grabbed her hand just beyond the curtain. "Lone Wolf, he say Danique's spotted your gangster."

"Silvio? It couldn't be."

"Others, too. Think two of his crew were in the gambling tents. Look like the ones on the wanted posters. I want you to go. Do as I say, now."

"Tiny, we don't have to. If he came here, it ain't for me. He don't know the truth of Sylvester."

"Shut your mouth!" Tiny hissed. "Of course he isn't here for you or Sylvester. He wants revenge. Are you that fucking dense that you don't know the difference?"

Della visibly winced. Her battered heart shriveled up just a bit more. "You right. Of course you is," she said bitterly.

"I got them looking for Sylvester. He been put in Joyce's train car waiting for you. Now go!" Tiny ordered.

She nodded. Out of the back of the tent she hurried out into the night. The first thing she saw was the moon. Could it be Silvio after all this time? He would certainly want revenge for what happened to him and his friend. Still her heart fluttered that it might be more. Maybe, just maybe he didn't blame her or her carnie family. Maybe he'd return just for her. She pushed aside that wishful thought. She was there. Like the others, she did nothing when that mean sheriff dragged him away after Tiny and Lone Wolf beat him. Through the darkness, she followed Peanut. He kept casting her looks over his shoulder. They were looks that made her tighten the front of her robe. The wind whipped through the bone yard, pushing her along. Della kept looking back. Looking for Silvio.

"Wait! Peanut, wait."

"C'mon, Della. Now."

"Sylvester's with Joyce," she said, turning and running for Joyce's train car. Peanut caught her in a few steps. He grabbed her by the waist and lifted her from her feet. She was pushed up against the nearest boxcar. Her legs were forced apart by her struggle and constant kicking. Peanut held her by the shoulders grinding in between her legs. "Mmm...Buttercup. He keep you all to yourself. You knows I want you."

"Let me go!" she screamed, clawing at his face until he did. Peanut stepped back, holding his cheek with a very deep scratch. He glared at her. She glared back. "You lay another hand on me and draw back a nub!"

"Whore!"

"I tell Tiny you broke his rule at a time like this, when we got an outsider in our yard. He kill you!" she shouted over the wind.

Peanut's mean glare wavered. He looked back at the midway. Della smelled his stench on her and gagged. She held down her disgust and her

fear. She stepped to him. "Now, we goes and get my boy, and you stay back. I don't want you around Sylvester no mo' either. You hear me!"

"Get 'er done already!" Peanut grimaced.

Della bolted for Joyce's. She yanked the door open and hurried inside. The panic and sorrow building in her chest eased when she found her baby boy sleeping in Joyce's arms.

"Tiny, shut down the girl's tents. You know your gangster is here?"

"He come for revenge. Yes, I know."

"Go on now. I'll keep him until it's over. Then have him bought to you."

Della hesitated. "Maybe I can take him with me?"

"I have him," Joyce snapped. She held Della's child to her bosom. A pang of motherly need went through Della that she repressed. "If that gangster come after you and Tiny, what he gon' do if he find he got a half-breed boy too? Ya think of that?"

She hadn't. Della could only imagine the rage of a man caged for wrong doing he wasn't guilty of. She could only imagine the amount of resentment and anger Silvio felt for the carnies. Seeing a child that the world said shouldn't exist may only make it worse. Silvio had no war with Joyce. Sylvester was best with her.

"You got a point," she said sadly.

"Now go. Stay put until Tiny say. You hear?"

"I hear." Della walked over to where her son lay sleeping in Joyce's arms, unaware of the danger outside of the train car. She ran her hand back through his wild locks, similar to her own. She leaned in and pressed a motherly kiss to Sylvester's cheek. "Have Stan or Lone Wolf bring him to me as soon as it ova'", Della pleaded. "I want him with me as soon as possible."

Joyce looked at the boy who carried mixed blood. She kissed the child's forehead. "You know he'd never want this child. Don't you?"

Della didn't know who Silvio was six years later. She didn't know him six years before. But she felt the beat of his heart once. A man that could give that passionately couldn't hurt his own son, no matter the conception. "No. I don't. But I won't risk Sylvester's life on the foolishness of what I think could happen. He safest with you," she relented.

Joyce nodded.

Della left, reluctantly. Peanut scowled at her. He grabbed her by the arm, marching her toward her train car with his shotgun pointed south but his eyes watchful. Obediently, she let him lead her inside.

"You stay put. I'm keepin' an eye out for your fella. Got a bullet with his name on it." Peanut gave a lopsided grin. When Della didn't react with anger nor fear, he removed a pistol from the back loop of his pants. He placed it in her hand. "If he get passed me, you fire it, and the boys come runnin'."

The weapon felt like a brick in her hand. But she was a good shot. Lone Wolf had taught her how to use it and the bow and arrow. "Bring me my boy when it's ova'. I want him with me. Don't forget, okay?"

Peanut sneered, then left. Della set the pistol down on her small dresser. She picked up some tossed aside toys and then dropped them in a chair. She put a hand over her eyes and another to her tummy. The churn and summersaults rolling through her stomach had her feeling nauseous with worry. *He had returned.* Deep down inside she feared and prayed he would. Now that he had, what was she to do? Arm her self? Plead her case? Fight for understanding, maybe forgiveness? Introduce him to a son that grows more crafty and intelligent by the day? Lowering her hand, she held it out before her face and found it was actually racked with tremors. Della almost laughed out loud. *Silvio had returned.* Good for him. If he burned the place down it would serve Tiny right for what he done. She went to the closed cedar chest near the bed she and Sylvester shared since he was an infant. She carefully lifted the hutch. Covered on top were pictures, many. Al worked the photo booth. He loved taking pictures of

Sylvester. Della smiled at his fat round face. He was such a beautiful child. She picked each photo up one by one and proceeded to stack them like tarot cards. Underneath it all, she uncovered her mother's music box. Gingerly, she brought it out of the chest with both hands. Underneath the inlay was the five bills, tucked where she had put them the night they created their son. Della smiled. She had never parted with them. To do so would taint and sully their union, the conception of her son. But there was no denying their night was not supposed to be. Sylvester was not to be. Keeping the money and inventing a fantasy version of that night in her head, had left her weak. She'd been weak enough to suffer in silence under Tiny's tyranny. She had no choice but to allow Joyce to be a mother to her child in moments when he needed her to be. And now, her weakness had her hiding from the truth, from the past.

Della closed her eyes as one lonely tear dropped down her cheek. Every painful memory returned with bitter sharpness. She could still hear Silvio's pleas for her to tell the truth, to help him. Then came his silent acceptance that she wouldn't as they beat him. She hated how her fear of Tiny made her dumb, deaf and mute. The sounds of them cursing her lover and laughing as they ground him into nothing pummeled her heart. Slowly she rose, expelling a mournful sigh.

The train car door opened.

Her back was turned.

Della wiped at her eyes, placing the music box back on the bed. "Peanut, get out. I'm in no mood..."

Della turned to the answering silence.

She stopped.

A man had stepped inside. It wasn't Peanut. It wasn't any of the men she knew from the carnival. *It was him.* Della dropped the photos in her other hand. They floated to the floor, most of them uncovered. She bolted for her pistol, grabbed it in an instant, and aimed it in the next. She

held the grip with both hands, her finger shakily on the trigger. "Whatchu doin' here?" she stammered.

Silvio made sure the door was securely shut. He dropped down the little latch, locking her in with him. When his eyes stared at her, another cold wave of fear cut through her body. His handsome face was clear thanks to the lantern light near him. But he was different. A man. Shoulders were broad. He was tall, expensively dressed and composed. "If'in you don't go, I'll shoot. They'll come. So. So. So just go. Ain't nuthin' here for you."

"You sure about that, doll?" he said, his lips barely moving. He removed his gloves, his fedora. His dark locks were pressed to his head, but his thick dark brows over the bluest of eyes made the boy he once was, emerge again. He tossed his things to a chair she'd left her son's toys on. Della winced. She stepped forward, covering a photo of Sylvester with her bare feet. She wondered if he'd notice. He didn't. His attention was solely focused on her. And now she could see his face clearly. The mustache was new. His chin and jaw were more profound. There was hardness to the blue in his eyes, life hardness she could relate to. God help her. She saw her son in his face. It was Silvio. They'd only had one night, but she'd know him anywhere. "Why you come here?" she asked weakly.

He didn't speak. Della held tight to the pistol. She thought of Peanut. How could Silvio just walk inside? She didn't hear a gunshot. "Where's Peanut? Did you hurt him?"

"What is he to you?" Silvio approached.

"Don't," Della said, backing away. "Stop, don't come close. I'll...."

Silvio snatched the gun free from her hands, tossing it aside. Della blinked at how weakly she handed it over. But her shock was momentary. She turned to escape him, finding herself trapped. He was on her in a flash. His arm closed around her waist. She was lifted back against his chest, off her feet. She didn't scream. She forgot it was an option. Instead

she struggled, twisting in his hold. He whirled her around and grabbed her by the top collar of her robe.

Della's heart pounded. She looked into his eyes, pleading. She should have fired. Do it, if not for herself, for her son. Her finger was just that close to the trigger. But she didn't. "I'm sorry for what they done. I... was a girl. What could I do?"

Silvio's hold lessened. Della knocked his hands free. She stepped back. Her actions drew his brows together in suspicion. "I wish it were different, but it wasn't."

He made a move toward her. Della pressed her hand to his chest and stopped him. He looked down at her touch and then back up to her eyes. Together they stood there for several breaths. She could feel his heart beating into her palm. It wasn't as calm and controlled as his piercing stare. In fact, it galloped like a stampede. She ran her hand over his chest. The fine threads of his shirt were felt over the hard edges. Della reached up and touched the side of his face. She was surprised to see his eyes softened upon contact. "You believe me, Sil?" She closed the distance between them, hopeful. "I thought of you so often. Did...did you think of me?"

Silvio's gaze remained guarded, hooded, and unreadable. "You did think of me, didn't you sugah?" she said, embolden by the flaring of his nostrils but the softening of his stare. Desire crept in over the coldness. It sparked and then blazed as her touch went down his chest. She didn't fear him, not when he looked at her with such soul-wrenching longing. A conflict she understood. She remembered it to be one she could soothe, and maybe in doing so he could soothe her wounds. To her delight, Silvio's lips fell upon hers. Della hadn't been kissed, touched or held by a man since his embrace. Oh how she missed this. Contact sent an electric current that threaded through her veins, shocking her to her core. Immediately, she grabbed the back of his head to feed the kiss. Her fingers gripped the soft hairs at his nape. She wrapped her arms around his neck,

holding on tight. His hands travelled along her sides, then splayed to caress her rump before squeezing both halves of her cheeks and lifting her body up against him. *Mercy, his touch was just as she remembered.* Her hands to his face, she panted, smiled, grinned at his urgency to keep her mouth pressed to his. She playfully let her tongue dart in and out of his mouth just as he once taught her. Silvio grabbed her wrist and forced her back. The anger flashed in his eyes. "For years I've thought about nothing, no one, but you. Years!" he seethed, giving her a shake. "You and this fucking carnival! You!"

"Sil..."

"Quiet!" he shouted in her face. "Did you think to ever tell them the truth while I rotted in that jail? When Sheriff Tuck shot and killed Jelly? When they tried me for my best friend's murder, condemning me to busting rocks for the rest of my fucking life instead of the hang man's noose!"

Della blinked, shocked. "Killed?"

"You knew what they did and you said nothing!"

"I...don't know what you're talking about; I thought you was in the clink for robbin' the carnival, not murder..."

"Lies!" he released her. Silvio turned from her in a fit of anger, possibly to keep from touching her again. Della rubbed the sting of her wrist. She looked to the gun he had tossed away. She could reach it. Still, she made no move for it. When she glanced up, he stood there staring at her. "You dancing like a whore. Is that what you are now? Or is that what you always were? It was a trap. Wasn't it? From the very start, they seen us coming, and you helped."

Della clenched her teeth. The hurt of his accusation clawed its way acidly up her throat, incinerating her vocal cords and rendering her speechless. Pride welled in her chest and the corners of her eyes filled with tears. The words formed again, but when she opened her mouth to speak, they lodged in her throat, a mixture of sadness and regret. She

never betrayed him in such a horrid way. But she was a hooch dancer, a colored one at that. There was nothing special about her. Yes, she was a far cry from gentility whether her legs parted for townies or not.

He sneered at her as if he strengthened from her pain and as if her silence was an admission. That too hurt. But her pride couldn't let her see the hurt boy baiting her; she only saw the emptiness of the man. A mean-tempered man had returned. Madame Danique said he would. She said he'd have his revenge.

"What I am..." her voice broke, "... what I am is what I always was, and it ain't never been any man's whore, not even yours." Della sucked down a hard breath to steady her voice. "I tell you what else. What I is, is miles away from a thief—a gun-toting thieving killer. And that's all you are," she shot back.

Silvio's eyes narrowed to blue slits. Della crossed her arms in defiance. "Is that why you come here? To finish me off for what you've become? Well? Is it!" His silence was enough. She boldly stepped to him. Her lips curled up in self-righteous anger. "Then do it. I was wrong to think you were ever anythin' more than a bitter vengeful buzzard anyway!"

He grabbed at her arm, but this time he got an open palm slap from her right hand. Kicking like a wild cat, she shoved and slapped him about his face and chest. She was fueled by fear of what he'd do to her, heartbroken that he would even think her capable of such a betrayal. Oh she mourned for her foolish heart as she clawed at him, refusing to be his victim or anyone's victim any more. She fought to push him to the door and hopefully out of it. But Silvio was even more determined. He drove her down and back on her bed, pinning her arms above her head. Della jerked and bucked beneath him. "Quiet!" he yelled.

Della opened her eyes. An angrily guarded veil of tears clouded her vision. She blinked them away, causing several to slip from the corners. Silvio brought his face only centimeters from hers. His rich scent unfurled

her nostrils. His warm breath escaped him as he breathed out resistance. "I didn't come to kill you. As if—as if I could. I want to be free of you, damn it!"

Della stopped her resistance. Staring up at him, she let his words take root. He didn't release her. In fact, he was pressed between her thighs. She shifted despite his weight and granted him the permission. His eyes slowly lowered from her face. The front of her robe was parted down the center, her breasts were revealed. She waited as his stare lingered there and took note of the bulking of his cock pressing against the zipper of his pants. "Who is he?"

"He?" she panted.

"Peanut? Who is he to you?"

"I..."

He looked up at her. "Are there others?" he asked. Della tried to process what "others". Why had he asked about Peanut? But in her eyes, she saw he knew little of her, of what waited for him. "Answer me." He shook her and thus the bed. Several pillows fell off to the floor. On the floor lay the pictures of the only one in her heart.

"There are no others," she said gently. "You will never believe me, but it's the truth. No man has touched me since... never."

"Why?" he asked studying her face, wanting to believe.

"Tiny wouldn't allow it. I wouldn't allow it. I couldn't," she swallowed, trying to catch her breath. From the way he stared into her eyes, she found it hard to breathe. She felt faint from the rush of awareness his body's closeness brought. Solid, imposing, he radiated heat like a furnace. "I fell in love with you long after you left," she said, her confession shocking her. The day Joyce put her baby boy in her arms, sticky and gooey, screaming in her face, she wept. *She was his*. When her boy took his first step and beamed up at her, she felt it. *She was his*. What was his excuse? Why did he care for a girl that the world said didn't matter? *If he did at all*.

“What good is it of me thinkin’ of you, when you evidently hate me?”

Silvio pinned her arms above her head. “That’s just it, doll. I never could.” He lowered his face to her chest. His cheek pressed to her breast. Della closed her eyes, opening and closing her hands. Her wrist, in his grip, had her pinned beneath him. She lay there for him, perfectly still, as he decided on her truth. She prayed that he’d open up his heart enough so she could share more. Then he stirred. His face, lips, nose, brushed the valley between her breasts. Damp moist heat met with her already feverish skin, and she moaned deep down in her throat. He flatted his tongue against her skin and gave a slow lick. She shivered with delight. Then his face eased in the opening of her robe as he enticed her nipple into his mouth. “Sil, there’s more, somethin’ you should know,” she sighed.

Silvio’s hold on her wrist softened. His hands released to glide up and rub his damp palm over her open palm. Their fingers entwined as he suckled her breasts. Della’s back bowed up from the mattress beneath him. She rubbed her need against the hardness of his chest while he crept down, his lips and tongue over her neck, collarbone, going lower. He wore his coat. He remained fully dressed, and still she felt him. The feel of him was the best. No more phantom dreams. He was the real thing. She loved the feel of him. Della relished his tongue. The way it moved in continuous swirls over her achy nipple left her dizzy. She let her fingers intertwine with his and held on.

Then Silvio broke from her nipple. Rising back on his hunches, he shed his coat, tossing it aside. Della watched with mounting desire as he lowered his suspenders and removed his shirt to reveal another, which he pulled over his head and cast away. There was a scar over his left breast that marred the perfection. She ached in her heart for him and the cause. He undid the button to his trousers. The sash to her robe kept the Kimono together at her waist, but the fabric was pushed open and her nipples glistened from where he moistened them. Beneath, the robe parted to

showcase the dark curls of pubes that covered her sex. Her thighs were forced apart, because he was positioned between them. He reached and undid the tie. The robe eased opened.

"I'm sorry, Della." Silvio cleared his throat. He palmed her cunt, his middle finger rubbing the wetness between her silky folds. He wouldn't stop with his touches. It was as if he had to touch every inch of her, continuous, sensual, massaging caresses that brought a quiver to her bottom lip. "I come for you and only you," he said in a voice edged with desperation.

Della's eyes stretched in wonder. Silvio lowered to her and she expelled the deepest sigh of relief to have him in her arms once more. "I've desired you always." His lips moved whisper-soft over her lips before he offered a possessing kiss. She didn't question the sincerity. Six long years and his return renewed her faith in emotions she kept under lock and key. His hand reached between them while his other braced against the wall of the train car above her head. She bent her knees and then held her breath for him to take her. Her mouth watered. Her body temperature rose, and her pussy spasmed, achingly empty...desperately in need of him. The headiest rush of desire swept through her. Silvio traced the head of his dick along the skin of her inner thigh. He hesitated and then wiped the bulbous tip down her slit. Della hissed in air. When the blunt head of his cock pressed in on her for entry, she groaned deeply when he pushed in an inch and then withdrew. She took in a trembling breath and resisted the urge to beg.

A wave of tenderness suddenly suffused Della when he planted a gentle kiss to the tip of her nose. "You're mine, only mine," Silvio said in a rough demanding tone, his face hovering. "My sweet, sweet, Buttercup." Then came an unexpected thrust. His hand reached underneath to grip her butt painfully tight. He maintained his balance with his other and clenched his teeth when he sank in deeper. Della dug her nails into his skin, moving with, then giving upward pumps causing him to go deeper

and deeper. He pushed inside her with a slow easy slide, her vagina stretching sweetly, giving her the final inch. Della's mouth fell open in a silent, obedient sigh.

Silvio came unhinged. For a brief moment, he felt his bones loosen from his joints to be held in such tight warmth. The clenching walls of her clamping down on his cock milked him of all doubt. He'd know if this pussy had been claimed, if any man had dared to touch her. She was the same as always, succulent, beautiful, unspoiled, his. He shuddered when she moved and realized he hadn't moved at all. Slow easy strokes were his beginning. He wanted to familiarize himself with every bit of her. Lowering to her, he dropped his face against her neck, grabbing both halves of her ass and parting the cheeks so he could pump in and out in long strokes. Her knees were parted, but the heels of her feet rested on his lower back as he drilled his desires deep into her. He bit her flexed collarbone and rolled his hips to get at the core of her desire. That soft wet heat commanded it so. He went in deeper and then pulled out to the tip before plunging in once more. Pleasure gutted through him with knife-like precision. Zips of ecstasy threaded through his nerve highways, intensifying the euphoria. He would live and die in this moment if it was to be. It was her again, his Buttercup. She was his.

Buttercup squirmed beneath him, and he tightened his grip on her butt. His chest heaved to the punishing pace of his hips that continued to bang against her as his cock throttled her tamed vagina. Both of them panted loudly with her clawing at his back for mercy. He hit it from every angle possible with her beneath him. He withdrew, flipped her to her stomach and got in from the back to a resounding whimper. He growled against her shoulder, pumping away at her and deciding on her dark hole next. But he'd been out of practice. Out of practice of making love. His heart and his dick somehow became one, and the pleasing of her was all he could endure. Silvio dropped his forehead to hers, panting with her.

He squeezed his eyes tight as her ass quivered in his hands and her vaginal contractions gripped him relentlessly. Unable to survive another moment, he exploded deep within, coating her with his seed.

He collapsed in an exhaustive heap on her. "I love you," he said.

He heard her mumble the same, before he closed his eyes.

Chapter Seven

The Fight For Love

Time hadn't moved all that fast. Even though for Della it felt like an eternity in his arms. She lay next to him with her fingers intertwined in his, her head resting on his chest. She counted the rhythmic beats of his heart, putting them to memory. "Sil?"

"Mmm..." he said.

"Did you really come for me?" Della lifted her head and looked at him to see the answer as well as hear it. Silvio kept his eyes closed. His breathing was easy and his face relaxed. But her chest burned for the answer. She pressed her lips together to keep from answering for him and waited.

"Yes," he finally said.

"But why? We knew each other once, and your friend dead 'cause of it..."

"It wasn't your fault. None of it." His eyes opened. "I only said those things to you, because I wanted to hurt you."

"I understand. Still. I have to know. Why would you look for me?"

Silvio put an arm behind his head. She rolled over on top of him, getting between his legs. Her face rested on her hands that pressed flat to his chest. With his free hand, he touched her face. "Because you got me through."

Della didn't understand. She frowned at him, and he smiled. "In the can, men had ways of surviving. You were mine. You and your hooch dance."

"You saw me?"

"You danced for me every night," he smirked.

Della grinned. She believed him. She had her dreams too. They were her escape "Sometimes the fantasy is better. Isn't it, Sil?"

"Not always. This here is real. And it's best."

“There’s something I have to tell you.”

Gunfire exploded. Men yelled, and someone, male, screamed. Like a cannon blast, it blew their serenity apart. Della jumped, startled. Silvio rolled her to her back and got up in a flash. “Get dressed. Pack light. It’s time.”

“No. Wait.”

“Get dressed, Della. You comin’ with me. The boys...” Silvio paused at the photos sticking to his feet. Della sat up in bed, holding the sheet to her. She watched as he scanned the images of her holding a baby. He settled on a more recent one and turned the picture toward her. “Who is this kid!”

“Silvio, please wait.”

“This kid! Who is he?”

“He my son,” she said softly.

He froze. The gunshots blasted once more. Men were screaming and yelling. But he stood there in disbelief. “Then you were lying. You never cared. Never was mine.”

“I’m yours,” she said, tears slipping from the corners of her eyes. “Always will be.”

“Then what the fuck is it? You a prisoner here in this carnival. That freak treats you like a slave. Now this! You lied to me. You like being his bitch in heat on that stage and a whore for every dollar that comes by!”

Della dropped her eyes. “No, I don’t like it. I’m a slave, Sil. I’m a mother, too.” She looked up at him. “I had a boy. When you left, you left a part of you. I never lied. I never told the truth. Sylvester is yours.”

Della watched the blood siphon from his face. Gathering her sheet, oblivious to the war raging out the doors, it was just them, and the truth. At last she could say it to his face and see what kind of man he really was. Della got to her knees and collected the pictures. Rising, she presented them to him. Silvio didn’t accept them at first. He stared down at the

offering as if it weren't his to accept. "His name is Sylvester. I named him for you. They couldn't stop me."

Silvio took the pictures. He went through them one by one. Slowly, she watched the color return to his cheeks. But his eyes glistened when he landed on the final picture. "The pick-pocket kid is mine?" he mumbled, his eyes stretching, watering, a slow smile forming on his lips.

"Pick-pocket?"

"Boss!" came a pound to the door and then more gunshots. The window to the left of the train car exploded in glass shards. Silvio knocked her back to the bed. He forced the photos on her. "Stay low, but get dressed. Do it now."

"What about..."

"Now!"

"Boss!"

Silvio put on his clothes the best he could, then released the latch to the door, throwing it open with his gun ready. Della pulled down her dress just as a young man stumbled in, bleeding. "Red is dead. Touchy is holding them back. They ambushed us. There's a mob of them, boss. They came from everywhere. I did as you said, but they had an ambush back at the ride. We did what...what you said."

"Dead?" Della repeated. Her eyes stared at the train car door. The young man spit up blood, but he looked at her with mixed shock and relief. He nodded. "Excuse the intrusion, mam."

"Bloodshot!" An angry shout called from outside. "It's over! Ya hear! Come out!"

"That's Tiny," Della warned, putting on her shoes.

Silvio tended to his friend. Della watched the blood pool beneath him. He was a goner. She was certain of it. And now Tiny had his guns

"It's okay, kid. You gon' make it."

Della hurried over to apply pressure. "It's pretty bad, boss. I'm sorry. We done what we could."

“Buttercup! You okay in there?” Tiny shouted. “Let her go or your man out here dies!” the midget boss ordered. Silvio’s jaw locked in defiance at them. She had to help. Della tried to ease the bleeding man’s suffering, but there was so much blood. She didn’t have to say it. One look into his eyes and it was clear that the kid wouldn’t make it. Still she did what she could. Silvio rose with his gun in his bloody hand. Della’s eyes stretched. “What are you doing?” she shouted in a loud whisper. “You can’t go out there. They’ll kill you!” she warned.

“Not if I get that fucker first,” he said, checking the chamber for enough bullets.

Della got to her feet, grabbing at his arm. “No, please...”

“Stay inside. It’s me they want. And I want him.” Silvio’s eyes glistened with a horrifying purpose.

“Didn’t you hear me? You have a son! You have us both! You gon’ go out there and get yourself shot afta everythin’ we feel. What about us?”

He wavered. She knew Tiny would fill him full of bullet holes before he stepped foot out of the train car. This time she wouldn’t let it happen. She shoved Silvio and bolted for the door. Nothing could stop her. As soon as she entered the night, she froze. Her heart stopped at the sight of him. A dead man lay not far from the train car. His throat cut and his scalp gone. She stumbled back in horror. Tiny had lied. She was right. It was an ambush. She looked up and saw her people. Guns. Lots of guns were pointed, not at her, but at Silvio who came out after her.

“Buttercup, out the way!” Tiny ordered.

She backed up against Silvio. Throwing her arms back around him, she kept hold of him. “No! I won’t let you hurt him, Tiny. Not this time. I won’t!”

Several of the carnies that knew her since she was a baby witnessed the blasphemy and wavered. Some guns were lowered. But Tiny, the man she saw as her father, didn’t. He stepped forward on his cane.

"Let me deal with him. You have to be safe for our boy," Silvio whispered in her ear, then tried to move her. Della squeezed her eyes shut and held to him with all her might.

"Noooo...not this time," she begged.

Tiny stopped.

"I say move, gal," Tiny ordered.

"Let's you and I deal man to man," Silvio said, again trying to move Della.

"NO!" she shouted at them both. She looked at Tiny with pleading eyes. "Please, Tiny, no more violence. No more of this. It has to end."

"You don't speak to me about the end." He pointed his cane at her. "There's only one end for you both if you don't obey me now!"

Della sucked down a deep breath. Her arms, pried from her lover, were pinned at her side. She stared Tiny in the eye and shook her head no. "I see myself dead first," she said, and an audible gasp escaped the crowd.

Tiny smirked, "That so?" He looked back. "Joyce."

To her horror, Joyce appeared, pulling her son in tow. Tiny grabbed her child's hand and snatched him to his side.

"Sylvester!!" Della shouted. She almost ran for him when Silvio's hand went around her and kept her back. Della screamed in agony that Tiny would go this far. To bring her son in the middle of a gunfight was a frightening new low. "Joyce, please. Get him! Take him back. Please!"

Joyce didn't move. She stood to the other side of Tiny with her cane. Della closed her eyes as tears leaked from the corners. "How could you let him do this? Why are you doing this!"

"We family, Buttercup. I gave you that name when you were born. I raised you," Tiny snapped. "I protected you against them townies that wanted to harm you. Twice you spit in my face. Twice you disobey me and spit on our family! Afta' all I done to make you a star."

"Let him go," she pleaded.

"You heard her!" Silvio snapped. He forced her aside. "Let the boy go. This is between you and me."

Tiny's brow winged up. He addressed Della. "All this time, I kept you safe, and you let him in here. You know the law. You made a choice."

"Let him go," she shouted through her tears.

"Go inside," Silvio said to her, through his teeth. His gun in his hand tightened on the grip. "I'll handle it."

"No!" she moaned. She couldn't risk it. Not this choice, her child or her man. Why would the man she considered a father force her to? "Please, Tiny, let him go. Please, Joyce, please... help me." She dropped to her knees, now at Tiny's and Sylvester's level. "I beg of you. I'm beggin'."

"Ma!" Sylvester said, trying to run to her. But Tiny yoked him back. The child began to cry. "Ma!" he said reaching for her.

Joyce dropped her head in shame. Tiny grinned wickedly at her. "Here's the deal, *Bloodshot Garelli*." He looked up at Silvio this time when he spoke. "I hear you got some loot stashed away. Plenty. How much her life worth or his?" Tiny shook the child. Della winced. All guns rose again and aimed at them both. She looked at the carnies in sadness. They would defend Tiny to the bitter end. All of them would. It was hopeless. "I can tell you now. Killin' your men was pretty easy. You ain't so tough," Tiny chuckled. "You want out? You give me that bounty that made you so famous and I'll consider it."

"I want the boy and Della. They come with me," Silvio said.

"They carnies. They stay here. You give it to me or we take it. Your choice. Your only choice."

Della knew that Tiny would kill him either way. There was no choice. Silvio looked her over. "I'll die for you, but you promise me that you'll take my son and be free," he said.

"No, don't."

Silvio tossed the gun.

“No!” she yelled, fearing the spray of bullets that was going to tear him from her heart. But in a flash Tiny was face flat on the earth. A stunned silence followed. Della blinked through her tears to make sense of it. She looked up to see Joyce standing over him with her cane raised. She’d hit him to the back of his head and cracked his skull for her efforts. Not even Lone Wolf made a move against the unexpected violence. Tiny was their God. Barely three feet tall, he towered over them all in life. No one ever moved against him. No one ever even considered they could. Now, one of their own had. Her son, freed, ran right into her arms. She held his small body to her as he shook through his sobs. Joyce’s voice rose above all.

“It’s done. You hear me. All of you! We don’t live as family to be prisoners to each other. Tiny was wrong. That’s not the carnie way!” Joyce faced the few that kept their guns raised. She spoke directly to the lot. “If we can’t be free with each other, then what are we?” She took a step toward them, and guns slowly lowered. “Della deserves her chance. Tiny or none of you will take it from her.”

Silvio lowered to Della’s side. She felt his presence. She opened her eyes and locked hers with his over their child’s shoulders. She pried his little arms from her neck and turned him. Silvio took him into his arms. Sylvester cried but allowed the stranger to hold him. He rose, holding him. Della got to her feet. She wiped at her boy’s wet cheeks. His eyes opened and he looked up at his father. Della sniffed back her tears of relief. “Sylvester, this here is...”

“We met,” Silvio informed her.

“I’m sorry I took from you,” Sylvester said softly. Della looked between them both and suddenly the comment ‘pickpocket’ made sense. She shook her head at her son.

“It’s cold, Della, and,” Silvio said, watching closely the others that still glared his way, “we need to go. No buts about it woman. You and the boy are coming with me.” Joyce and Lone Wolf approached. Silvio set

Sylvester on his feet. The boy went to his mother immediately, hugging her hips. Della stroked the top of his bushy locks. The others carried a bleeding Tiny away. He looked hurt, really bad. Despite it all, she prayed he wasn't. He was one of their own; he'd forgotten that for greed.

"Is he going to be okay?" Della asked.

Joyce leaned on her cane. "Don't you worry about Tiny. We'll see to him. But you two needs to go. Pack your things and leave now. You got another six hours of the moon," Joyce said, looking up to the sky.

"My men?" Silvio asked.

"They all dead," Lone Wolf answered.

Joyce put a hand to the Indian's chest. She gave Silvio a warning look. "I'm sorry about your men. We'll take care of their burial. Now I bought you some time, but...you ain't wanted here. Take my girl and go, while the going still good."

Della hugged Joyce around the neck. She squeezed her neck and inhaled her scent of cloves and jasmine. "Thank you, mama," she said softly in her ear. Joyce patted her back. "Go...be happy. Okay."

Della nodded. She stepped back and extended her hand to her son, but Sylvester walked over to Silvio. He reached up to offer his hand. Della and Joyce watched as Silvio reached and picked him up. Joyce stepped over to them both. "You know, it's illegal for you to be with him, and I'm not talking about him being an outlaw. Go south... far south. Beyond the reach of the law. Go to..."

"Mexico," Silvio said. "We'll be okay. I'll protect them."

Joyce nodded. "Of course you will. Travel at night, always. Stick to the carnie roads. Della can show you some places to pitch tent to keep from being seen." She gave Sylvester one last parting look of love, then turned away, pushing for Lone Wolf to do the same.

"We don't have much," Della said.

"Bring what you want. Leave what you don't. We have each other," Silvio winked. Taking the other hand of her son, they walked back to the

train car where a dead man waited along with the few meager belongings they had there. She was free. It was a feeling she'd have to work at getting used to.

Chapter Seven

Father and Son

"Ma! Ma! Wake up. Hurry!"

Silvio was the first to open his eyes. It was dark. He took a moment to focus. The distress in his son's voice helped. Sylvester's small hands shook Della. Silvio instinctively closed his eyes for more sleep.

"Ma, ya hear me? Wake up. Hurry!"

"Wh-what is it baby?"

"We gotta run, now. I got the keys. Come on, Ma, get up."

"Sylvester, what is you talkin about?"

"He sleep. I seen him drinkin' so he liquored and sleep. We can go now. I took his keys."

"Sylvester, stop. Just stop. What has gotten into you? Come with me!"

There was movement, a separation of warmth and what had been the comfort of her body. She left the tent with her son in tow. When they were gone, Silvio rose on his elbows. They'd only been on the road for a day. He found a safe enough spot to pitch a tent. He drank because he worried. Right then and there he vowed to not to do so in front of the kid. Hearing Della's voice raise, he leaned over and looked out of the tent.

She paced. His son stood before her with his head down and hands clasped before him. His bushy locks were ruffled in the wind.

"Now tell me what this is about?"

"He ain't my Pa," the boy sniffed. "My Pa is a magic man in Africa. Like in the books you showed me. He ain't my Pa."

"Sweetheart." Della dropped to her knees. She cupped Sylvester's small face in her hands. "You listen heah. Your Pa isn't a magic man. He ain't in Africa taming no lions. Those is stories. Just stories. Your Pa is that man in there. And I'm so sorry for lying to you."

"Why you leave the carnival? Take us from Auntie Joyce? Why you lie to me, mama!"

"I wanted you to have more than the carnival. Sylvester, mama lied because she wanted you to have something to believe in, something special. I wanted you to know how special you is. And I didn't lie all the way. Your Pa did do a miracle. He come back for us. Afta all this time he come for us because he love us. And I can tell you, baby, that love is magic?"

"He don't like me."

"Oh I think he does," she smiled. "You got his freckles. And his temper."

"He hate me. I took his money."

Della laughed. "Your Pa has a thing about taking money that don't belong to you. He sorta understand why you did it. Trust me."

Silvio smiled. He watched them embrace. Della kissed his boy's face clear of tears. She was so beautiful under the moon and stars. He was so lucky to have them both.

"He don't talk to me," Sylvester said in a small voice.

"Do you talk to him?"

"No mam."

"Wanna know what I think?"

Sylvester shyly lifted his eyes.

"I think you don't know how. And guess what? I think he don't know how either. I think you both the same that way. But he will talk to you. I promise you that, because you a part of him. Just as you a part of me. We family and we gon' always be family."

Sylvester nodded. "You think he like to fish?"

"I bet you can show him a thing or two about fishin', cain't cha?"

Sylvester nodded.

Silvio eased back into the blanket. He closed his eyes when they returned. Della lay next to him. She turned on her side and cradled their

son to her, holding him to her breast so he could find a peaceful sleep. Silvio moved closer, burying his face in her hair. She was right. They were family. He would fight the world to make sure they remained one.

Together, she and Silvio lounged under the low branches and leafy shade of an old sycamore. Della smiled. The sparkling ripples of the lake in the distance beyond the tall grass and the swaying wild flowers were caught in the afternoon breeze. Bellies full of bologna sandwiches, she held to her guy, listening to his digestion. He never took his eyes off his son. He'd bought him clothes. Sylvester stood at the foot of the hill in his knickers, suspenders and cap. Della's heart swelled to see him looking like a normal boy, doing normal things, like skipping rocks and fishing. She thought to tell Silvio about Sylvester's fears, but she held back. She decided to let father and son find their way naturally.

Silvio pitched a tent off a site that Della guided him to in Douglasville, Texas. The open prairie was miles away from any farmhouses. They were safe. They'd managed to escape the law by sticking to their rules. While Sylvester slept, she rode in the back of the car with a shotgun between her legs, eyes wide and alert, Silvio at the wheel. Stopping for gas breaks and so forth, she kept hidden when he dealt with townies. Then they'd set up camp near sunrise. Two days later they were in Texas. Soon they'd be in Mexico. Soon the running would stop and they'd be a family.

His fingers gently caressed her chin. Her head was tilted back so she could gaze up into his eyes. It amazed her even now that all of it was real. "You look beautiful today here in the sun," Silvio said, giving her an open mouth kiss. Della pulled him down on her. She loved the feel of his weight. Loving him was an adventure with the ever-curious Sylvester appearing at the wrong times. His kiss soothed her, but she desired more when their lips parted. "So beautiful," he said.

Della smiled. Silvio liked the ensuing silent moments like this. With her and his boy always close, it gave him time to think, to plan. She had a way of understanding his needs and of filling that empty space in him. There was no pressure for him to explain his choices and where they were going. She had faith in him, despite all she risked by running with an outlaw. And he knew she risked plenty.

“When will we reach Mexico?” she asked.

“Soon.”

“A day?”

“A day,” he said. She seemed satisfied with that answer. Silvio lifted from her and sat up. He watched as Sylvester shed his clothes down to his britches and then dove into the lake. The little boy was fearless. Just yesterday, he showed him how to handle a weapon. He’d be damned but the kid was as good a shot as him if the weight of the gun didn’t overpower him. He never wanted children. Never knew any. But his son was his rib. He couldn’t imagine a day going forward that he wasn’t with them, Sylvester or his Buttercup. She sat up beside him. He drew her under his arm. “Everything copasetic, doll. We can raise our boy together in Mexico. Make our own way. We got plenty money. You believe me, right?”

She nodded. “I’m sorry about your men. We haven’t talked about them. What happened... to them that night. Joyce kept her word though. She buried them. I’m sure.”

“We don’t have to talk about them or the carnival. Those people are gone. It’s just me, you, and Sylvester now.”

She smiled. “Sylvester, he hasn’t said much. You think he okay?”

“Let me talk to him, man to man.”

“We haven’t been together in a few nights. Maybe we will get to Mexico sooner than a day. Then you and I can be together.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Water cool?”

The boy looked up. He shook his bushy locks and smiled as the water sloshed from his spongy mass of hair. “Yes sir.”

Silvio stared at the lake. “Plenty of fish. We can get some for your mama to cook. Maybe some catfish too.” Silvio walked down to where the embankment began. He picked up a rock and skipped it across the water. “I got some bait back in the trunk. Can show you how to fix up that pole to catch one.”

Sylvester shrugged. Silvio ran his hand back over his head. He glanced back. Della nodded at him. She made a gesture with her hand for him to go on, to keep trying. His son dropped on the grass and pulled at a few blades to relieve the awkwardness between them. Silvio looked down at the boy. The awkwardness wasn’t exactly his fault. “Got a question for me?”

The boy glanced up. He squinted as if the sun burned his eyes. “It true? You my pa?”

“I am.”

“Where you been?”

Silvio sat next to him on the grassy earth. He let his legs go out before him, crossing his feet at the ankles. “Prison.”

“For?”

“For many things. None of which I done.” He looked over to his son. To be six, he was wiser than his years. He wondered what a fatherless boy thought of a father that was different than him.

“You love my ma?”

“I love you both.”

“Then I’m glad you come. She used to be sad.” Sylvester looked back at his mother who blew kisses at him. “She ain’t no mo’. She smile a lot too.”

Silvio looked back at Della. There was nothing more beautiful to him than her smile. Sylvester rose and dusted his bun. "Can we fish now?"

"I think we can manage it."

Sylvester grinned. He turned and ran toward his mother, yelling that he was going to fish. It was the first he heard the boy speak with excitement. Silvio rose with a new understanding. The wealth of a man wasn't to be found behind the iron doors of a bank vault. No, those treasures existed in his family.

Epilogue

2 years later

Three days of blistering heat would bring the storms. Silvio rustled up the horses the evening before and saw the proof. A wave of dark grey storm clouds moved into the valley over the small town of El Teina. It was the rain he heard first. Thundering pellets smacked the roof shingles and windowpanes angrily. A soft rumble of thunder echoed in the distance. Living in the oven that was his Mexican town, rains were a welcomed event. They were soothing, pleasing, cooling, just like the touch of his wife. Soft, gentle fingers spread over his chest. Silvio's eyes slowly parted as the sheets moved, and her warm supple body grazed over his. He felt her going lower beneath the sheets just as the heavens split and lightning flashed through the windows. Her lips parted, and her mouth received him—moist warmth slid over him with ease. Her mouth on his shaft was steady and skilled. The bobbing of her head up and down sent waves of heat rippling through his pelvis. It spider webbed through his chest. Silvio groaned his approval as she sped up the pace, giving a fierce suction to his cock that left his legs shaking.

"Della," he wheezed, clawing at the bed sheets. Silvio's hips lifted upward in consonant rhythm. She sucked him off hard, rolled her tongue around his rod, and swallowed his cock. Soon he was fucking her mouth, hitting the back of her throat. Silvio grunted, racked with pleasure and tight pain from restraint. Then, like only his woman would, she lifted and quickly got on his lap. She eased down on his dick, pumping her hips to and fro, bouncing, riding him. Silvio's eyes rolled up in his head as he gasped out deep breaths for mercy, several of them back to back. She fell forward on him, kissing him deeply as her round soft ass bounced on his balls, and her wet pussy covered him. Morning had come, and so did he blissfully.

Spent, Della lay on him, breathing shallowly. "Morning," Silvio smiled.

Their daughter cried out. Della lifted her head in reaction to the call of her youngest. He groaned. His fears were soon realized once she shifted and rose. Silvio shivered through the mournful withdrawals over the separation. "Don't go."

"I have to. It's the storm. I'll be back," she said putting on her chemise, then her robe. Silvio groaned.

"Fine, I'll go find Hector and the boy. The saloon should open soon."

Della stopped at the door. Still panting from the quickie she gave him, he looked at her. She was beautiful. Her hair longer, she now wore it with a center part and two long braids. She blew him a kiss. "Then I will see you again at lunch." With that said, she was gone. Silvio grunted but rose. He could smell her on him like warm honey mixed with the feminine scent of her skin and hair. He'd have her on him all day. Walking over to the washbowl she left in the room, he splashed water on his face. His head lifted to the cloudy mirror and his eyes locked on his reflection. His beard had grown along his jaw nicely, but he hated it. Della didn't. She kept it trimmed. She said she liked the feel of his whiskers over her skin. But he knew different. She wanted him unseen from those that might uncover his identity. They had two run-ins since they escaped that bloody night. Silvio doubted it would be the last. He stroked the beard, looking at the man he'd become for her, for their children, and for a life they could have on their terms. If this was heaven, then he'd gotten there early.

They had a home now. A business. He was different. He took Sylvester's name, leaving his gangster fame and dreams at the border. He was a man, worthy of all the love and happiness having his Della could bring.

Silvio dried his face and hands. Somewhere down the hall his baby girl screamed. She was two, with lungs on her like her ma. After taking

her first step, she danced through her next three. She'd been dancing to his harmonica ever since. He chuckled to himself. He slipped on his shirt and pulled up his pants, forcing his legs to move. The day would begin like any other, and he had things to tend to.

Silvio's home was above his saloon. It made things easier. Two years and he was still very careful of his happiness. The idea of Della and the kids out of his reach constantly gave him anxiety. He kept the family close. He kept his gun even closer.

Silvio descended the stairs in a hurry. He nearly toppled over Consuelo, a short stout woman with hair as dark as raven's feathers and eyes too. She blinked up at him in surprise. Consuelo was his barkeeps wife. She, too, lived in the saloon. She saw to the boy's schooling and Della's too.

Consuelo stepped back with her hand to her chest. "*Perdone me signor,*" she gushed. "Where you hurry?"

"No time!" Silvio winked, and kept going. Consuelo shook her head and continued up, possibly seeking his wife. Hector was behind the bar. The storm had only blown in a few hombres. Maria, in the kitchen, would serve up the stragglers morning grub. But on a stormy morning, he doubted there'd be much more than the small crowd. Most would have already taken cover.

"*Buenos,*" Hector said.

"Not much of a crowd this morning?"

Hector shrugged, pouring a golden shot of tequila. It was better than the coffee that Della would insist Silvio drink. He knocked it back and shook off the fog in his head. The burn of his throat and drying of his tongue woke him for the day. "Where's Sylvester?" he asked, setting the whiskey glass back down on the bar.

"Seen him earlier. Think he's in the kitchen with Maria."

Silvio looked down the bar. One man sat there with his hat pulled down low on his head. He nursed a glass of whiskey. Hector came over as

if reading his mind. "Said he was waiting for you. Been here for an hour. Hasn't said much else."

"I'll take care of the bar. You see to the horses. The storm is sure to piss them off."

"Si', boss," Hector said. He handed off a dingy towel, then took leave. Silvio continued the wipe down. He watched Hector. His trusted friend stopped at the door, and he gave him the single nod. Hector nodded back and pushed out into the storm. Silvio turned to the bar. He chose a bottle of whiskey, then walked down to the stranger. "Care for another, friend?"

The stranger's head slowly rose. His dark eyes were no more than shadows under the brim of his hat. But they locked with Silvio's. The stranger smirked, then nodded his appreciation. Silvio poured the whiskey. He set the bottle next to the glass, then pushed it in front of the man. "I hear you looking for me?"

The stranger tossed down the offering and sucked the bitterness from his tongue before speaking. "I think you can help me find someone," the stranger rasped.

"I can try. El Tenia's not big enough to get lost."

The stranger peeked up at him. "You sure about that?"

Silvio stared him in the eye. The man reached inside his jacket and removed a folded piece of paper. His actions purposely slow but deliberate. The yellow aged document was flattened on the surface of the bar for Silvio to see. He hadn't seen a poster of that likeness in two years. "Looking for Silvio Garelli. You know him?" the stranger asked.

Silvio smiled. "What are you, a ranger? Bounty hunter?"

The man drew a gun before Silvio could lift the one beneath the bar. He pointed it within an inch of Silvio's face. "Don't try it or I'll..."

"You'll what?" came a calm voice behind the stranger. Silvio's eyes lifted to Della's. His wife pushed the barrel of a shotgun to the back of the

stranger's head. The few that were in the bar tossed back their drinks, collected their hats, then left.

When Della had entered the bar, he didn't know. But he figured she would. The stranger slowly lowered his gun, putting both his hands up.

"So it's true? You did take up with a Negress. Word is you two were dead. I didn't believe it."

"You should have. It would have saved your life," Della said. "Cause far as I'm concerned, all you gots in your future now is ghosts."

"Let him go, baby," Silvio said.

Della looked at her husband, alarmed. His daughter giggled somewhere at her feet. His son was over to the left also holding a shotgun. Silvio leaned in on the bar. He picked up the whiskey glass and tossed back the offering. The man sat before him, eyes wide, expectant. Silvio poured another glass. "I suggest you drink this one. The wife there has an itch you don't want her to scratch."

The stranger picked up the glass of whiskey and drank it down. Silvio noticed the slight tremors in the man's hand. This wasn't any Ranger out of Texas, or bounty man from Illinois. This here before him was some dumb fool who stumbled on an old story and thought he'd make a name for himself. That's all Silvio needed. "What they offering these days for Silvio Garelli?"

"I...um, I..."

"Take your time. We friends here. Della, lower the gun, baby."

"Not a chance in hell," Della said. She released the safety with a soft click.

The man paled.

"Women! This one here won't be told what to do. I suggest you get to talking," Silvio chuckled.

"A thousand," the man said.

Silvio drew back. "Hear that, baby. They offering a k-note for your man."

“He ain’t getting it,” Della said, shoving the gun again to the back of the stranger’s head.

“Now hold on, baby.” Silvio’s hands went up. His daughter waddled away from her mama, evidently bored. Silvio gave his son a nod. Sylvester was now eight and tall as a jack weed. He lowered the gun obediently. Silvio leaned in on the bar once more. The stranger was sweating profusely. “A thousand you say? I’m going to give you that thousand friend. And then you gonna take it and be on your way. Consider your job done.”

The man looked at him, confused.

“He buying something for his money!” Della hissed, knocking the stranger in the back of the head with the nuzzle of the gun for hesitating.

“That’s right, baby. I am. I think it’s enough to buy your memory. See here, friend. You forget about El Teina and all about Silvio Garelli. That man you huntin died in a gunfight at a carnival two years ago. You understand me?”

The man nodded.

Silvio reached deep in his pockets and peeled off the money. He put it on the flyer and folded the money within. He handed it over. “A little rain won’t hurt you now, will it?”

Della stepped back. The stranger nodded. He took the money. “You won’t see me again,” he stammered and headed for the door before any other decision could be made against it. Della stepped to the bar. She put the gun down on its surface. “Do you think he’ll be back?”

Silvio shrugged. “Possibly.”

Della turned, looking for little Delilah. She was under a table playing with her toes. “Come to mama.” His baby girl waddled over. Della picked up her daughter and set her on the bar next to the rifle. “Then you needs to make sure he don’t.”

Delilah reached her chubby arms for her father. He picked her up and kissed her. She was more hair than anything. Della usually kept it in braids. Today, he couldn't find his little girl's face under the cloud of hair.

"I'll handle it," he said, tickling Delilah's side. The child threw her head back and let go a sweet peal of laughter.

Della put her hands on her hips and glared at the front of the saloon. "Well, if'in you don't, I will."

Silvio chuckled. "Hear that, baby girl. Mama gonna handle it if'in pa don't. What you think of that?" His daughter dropped her head on his shoulder. She stuck two fingers into her mouth and sucked. "We'll be fine. Mama worries too much."

Della rolled her eyes, crossing her arms in a pout. "I worry cause you mine and no matter where we go, the world wants to change that."

"Nothing or no one can change that, woman. Don't you know this by now?"

"Pa! He done rode off!" Sylvester said.

"Go find Consuelo and see to your studies. Leave that rifle behind."

"Yes sir." Sylvester headed out. Silvio's eyes met with Hector who had returned. He gave a nod to the six foot tall Mexican. Hector nodded back. He turned and went out the swinging doors into the rain. Silvio expected his money back in the register before nightfall. But he didn't tell Della that. He hugged his little girl and kissed her cheek. He had no fear of tomorrow. Paradise was today, and no man could walk in and take that away.

The End

About the Author

Sienna Mynx is your naughty writer of Paranormal, Contemporary, and Historical Interracial Romance for readers that love the bad boy's but desire to be the women that tame them. A current resident of Georgia, Sienna Mynx has just emerged into the e-publishing arena. Her novellas reflect her thirst for romance told from a man's perspective with the diversity she craves in erotic romance. Look for more to come. Visit Sienna Mynx at <http://siennamynx.com>