

MISERY
PLAZA

PROLOGUE

The Antiquarian pilot lurched forward in a violent, arcing spasm as the sharp object stabbed through its vulnerable chest. It had shed its protective gear prior to takeoff, and now, strapped under a shoulder harness, it found itself pinned to its seat. Its arms, fixed inside the cylindrical steering mechanism on either side of the helm, flexed and flared as it gaped down at the foreign weapon, then up at its surroundings.

Dark blood sprayed the control panel, leaving a streak across the crystalline navigation screen hanging from the ceiling of the cockpit. The spinning digits displayed beneath the splatter indicated that the craft had reached almost three hundred thousand feet. Close to departure. But the ship lurched forward, and the numbers on screen plummeted, the sheer thrust of the pilot's body sending the craft into a downward tailspin.

A creature encased in shiny silver material somersaulted over the helm with a sharp, clattering thud, rolling down the cockpit floor and sprawling across the wide, U-shaped windshield. The pilot blinked at its captive—the creature assumingly responsible for its assault. The WL-9768 native feebly struggled to his feet, gripping

the near vertical floor for support, but fell backward as the cockpit rocked back and forth. The ship trembled in a merciless pirouette over the cerulean void of WL-9768's terrestrial sphere, hitting every blustery bump of the rough night sky as they accelerated into a turbulent nosedive.

Warm blood oozed over a curved pincher on the left side of the pilot's quivering mandible. The savory taste of seeping discharge promised that the hapless end neared.

Mission: incomplete.

The pilot braced itself, chest burning with each jostling twist and turn. It needed to land the ship safely, or at least as safely as it could, given the circumstances. With heavy arms, it pulled up and back on the steering mechanism, trying to slow and even the craft. Agony. The glowing landmass behind the oozing splatter rapidly increased, soaring closer and closer at a rough angle. The planet's surface lay just past fifty thousand feet now, and a break on the map indicating a body of water loomed too close for comfort.

The captive, gaining partial footing, slowly crawled the steep incline toward the helm, shakily making his way toward his captor. The pilot pulled its attention from the map, watching the creature from behind its ocular guards. The captive's malevolent stare burned through the visor of his shiny, sinister helmet.

The pilot shuddered. Now at ten thousand feet, it needed to land and proceed with activating the distress signal located under the control panel. But darkness threatened to overtake it, the blood still oozing steadily from its fading form.

Arms tired.

Steering heavy.

The creeping captive neared, gripping the empty seat in front of the helm for balance. The pilot's eyes held his hidden gaze, all three of its stomachs churning. Unable to reduce enough speed to land safely and avoid further savagery to its ship, it reluctantly opted for the last option.

The craft plunged into the water, slamming nose first into the side of the soft terrain. The impact wrenched the sharp object into the Antiquarian's flesh with a vengeance so searing, its vision swam. Something shiny, its captive, thudded against the ceiling, then clattered back to the cockpit floor. He lay unresponsive, possibly dead. Even with armor, the human specimen remained weak to heavy blows.

The pilot drew in quick, hollow breaths, unable to see clearly, waiting for the pain to subside enough for it to begin its work once again. Through the windshield, the craft sunk under the blurry, dark current. Forcing its weak arms to slide from the mechanism and unstrap the harness, the pilot slowly leaned forward, inch by trembling inch, the weapon's edge tearing up its internal organs. Its grisly mandible opened to squeal, though no sound came out.

Consciousness dwindling, the Antiquarian reached for the panel.

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*M*y father was a good man. A decent man, despite what you may have heard about him through folklore or read about him in your history books. That's not to say he wasn't an inherently flawed individual, as many of us can be described. I mean heck—back in those days, who wasn't? I would defy you to prove me otherwise. Now, don't get me wrong, he was no Saint. Poles apart from one. I know this. A mere product of his egregious environment. And I'm certainly not going to stand here and begin to justify any of the things he did or those I happened to be privy to. Some of which stays with me to this very day. Things I couldn't explain at that time. Things beyond what you good folk would rightfully call rational comprehension. Now, I truly don't mean to harp on such things, but I would be completely remiss not to mention the impression he left on my brother and me. Especially me. There are some folks who can tell you their earliest memories at three, maybe four years old; even some as far back as a year—year and a half, if you can believe it. I am not one of those folks. Maybe it's something they refer to as repressed memory, but all I can tell you is that I don't remember much before I was nine years old. I can recall my mother's burial. I remember the Big Flood. I remember the first time I saw the

*broken soul that was Joseph Griffin, my father, cry. I will never forget
the second time.*

That's when we moved to Missouri Plaza...

ONE

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Sullivan walked behind Eugene McCormac, about three feet back, pointing the filed down barrel of a sawed-off scattergun, waist height, at his lower back. Every few minutes he'd slow his pace a bit, enough to allow some slack between himself and his captive. Just in case McCormac decided to make a daring dash as they entered the heavily wooded area. Firing such a gun at close range meant spending the rest of the day picking Lord-knew-what from your clothing, all kinds of awful, and Sullivan knew better than most that a good clean change didn't come easy. And blood? Those pearly whites—one of only two pairs he owned—well, they'd be as good as horse shit.

Through the slits of tall, narrow trees, Sullivan caught a glimpse of the sun sinking down behind the silhouetted Pikes Peak range. Rays of golden light exploded from behind the jagged mountains, a partially hidden projection illuminating the distant northwest skyline, before the fresh spring growth completely obstructed his view.

They had walked quite a distance through the tranquil grove in silence, save for the irritating clink of McCormac's crooked boot spurs with every bowlegged step. Shrill calls from birds of prey

circling high above the treetops punctuated the quiet, along with small woodland creatures rustling through the brush as they passed. Katydid, just beginning their evening song, resonated through the shaded proliferation. Their trilling slowly grew, encompassing the pair the further they walked into the timberland.

McCormac's fingers—which had been behind his head, interlaced—separated, and his hands began to lower.

"Keep em up," Sullivan ordered, his voice rolling out low, deep, and slightly broken. He hadn't spoken since riding up on McCormac an hour earlier.

McCormac stopped. "I gotta itch."

The mosquitos, which trickled out only moments before, now flew out of the woodwork in droves. McCormac waved a hand around his head, paused, then began to turn around.

"Epp... eyes forward," Sullivan commanded with a slow wave of the gun. "Keep moving."

"What you planning on doing with me once we get to where we goin'?" McCormac's hands rested at shoulder level, head tilted just enough for Sullivan to see the white of his right eye below the frayed brim of a black Stetson.

Sullivan had no idea. Well, some idea. He knew exactly what he wanted to do, what he should do. Whether that was going to happen, he just had to wait and see. He didn't like the situation this *chance encounter* with an old acquaintance now put him in.

He shook his head. *Everything is fine*. Fine as he supposed things could go, considering the circumstances.

The men trudged on. By this time, the sun had completely vanished behind the Front Range as the navy skies of civil twilight bled down from the upper atmosphere, nonchalantly blotting out the remains of the day. Sullivan hadn't brought a lantern, and if he progressed further, making his return could prove difficult. He was armed—heavily armed at that—but just the same, nobody wanted to stumble upon the business end of a grizzly bear in the dark.

“Stop,” Sullivan uttered, following a moment later with “turn around.”

Shrouded by the grove... it was as good of a place as any.

“When did you know?” McCormac said.

“Does it matter?”

“Just surprised is all. Been here a few weeks now. Neither one of us looking like the men we once was.”

“How did you find me?”

“I-I didn't. Just dumb luck, I s'pose. It's a big country. We was bound to cross paths again at some point or another.”

“Apparently not that big. I guess we were *destined* to do this dance, is what you're sayin'?”

“Huh?”

“I'm supposed to believe it was coincidence you stumbled upon Bennett's Mine?” Sullivan, gun in hand, slowly backed McCormac against a tree.

The other man held his arms out, hands crossed, as if to keep Sullivan at a distance.

Sullivan peeled back both hammers of the sawed-off.

2

“I-I swear I was just passin through,” McCormac pleaded. “That’s all! I-I-I was never gonna say nothin to nobody. Honest! I was plannin on leaving in a day or two, anyway, you-you know? I did what I came to do—now off to the next town, same-ol,’ same-ol,’ know what I mean?”

Sullivan stared down at him from under a weathered brown hat, motionless, eyes barely visible. Vacuous. The man’s empty gaze bore into McCormac, and his heart stuttered. He’d never forgotten that look, despite the twenty years that passed since he’d last seen it.

“Besides, what would I stand to gain by sayin somethin? Ruh-ruh-right?” McCormac stammered, his filthy hands—still held out—beginning to quiver before his eyes. Whether his trembling stemmed from the chill in May evening air, or just fear poisoning his bloodstream, he couldn’t say.

“You stand to gain everything,” Sullivan said, sliding a leather sack down from the heavily worn shoulder of his long brown overcoat.

The bag hit the ground with such force, McCormac wondered—mostly feared—what it held.

Without another word, Sullivan pushed his coat aside, sliding his sawed-off into a handmade leather thigh sheath. A waist pistol sat holstered just above it. McCormac recognized its checkered walnut grip; its twin doubtless rested on Sullivan’s opposite hip. His own Colt protruded from behind the buckle of Sullivan’s gun belt, tucked away to the side of his groin.

Sullivan squatted and reached into the satchel, pulling out a length of twine. “Arms behind the tree.”

The katydids' music, pervading the woodlands, amplified. McCormac's heart hammered against his sternum while Sullivan disappeared behind the old Cottonwood, binding his wrists to the trunk. The rigid bark and taut rope dug into his skin, and something warm hit his thigh and dripped down his quivering shins. He'd pissed himself.

The stench of ammonia filled the air as Sullivan reappeared from behind the tree. A short smirk brushed his bushy, silver cheek. He'd smelled McCormac's fear, too. But any trace of a smile vanished as he reached for his ragged black gun belt, hung low on his narrow hips. Pulling McCormac's own silver Colt from behind the holster, he raised it a foot from the man's face, aiming for his forehead.

"Christ Almighty," McCormac squeaked out. His chest heaved with labored breath, the warm fog of his gasps visible before him in the chilly air.

"I used to think there were only two men in this world, Mac—or whatever it is you call yourself these days," Sullivan said. "The hard truth of it all is there's only one. I'm convinced of that now. I truly am." Sullivan sucked in a breath and exhaled deeply, shaking his head. "It's plain as the Denver day is long. And at the end of it, we're all just chasing the same thing, whether we care to realize that. Or not."

"Tuh-tuh-two-two men?"

"One that walks away. And one that doesn't."

Sullivan took a step back, twigs snapping under the Cuban heel of his black Wellingtons. "Now, who else you tell? You be straight with me; I'll make this nice and quick."

McCormac didn't need to consider his alternative: left here, defenseless, tied to tree in the Colorado woods at night. A fate worse than death. The elements, even in May, would kill him—and that was assuming whatever *thing* lurking in the dark didn't find him first. Tales of men vanishing without a trace in the woods may have been something of campfire lore, but now, facing his current predicament, the thought unsettled him deeply.

He shuddered. “Oh-oh-okay, okay, okay... I-I sent cuh-correspondence buh-back home. Tha's it! Said I-I thought I might a seen't ya, but wasn't sure, ya-ya see.”

3

Sullivan's heart sank in his chest. He'd figured McCormac would lie through gapped teeth, and he'd spend the night smacking him around to free himself of doubt—and even then, he didn't believe this fool would really have the audacity to cross him. Not so quickly, anyway.

To whom didn't make much difference. Sullivan knew the game, having heard more than enough tales around campfires. A thief or otherwise unsavory character would locate the whereabouts of an accomplice—usually the outcast of an old gang, long removed—and reach out to a friend or extended family member. The contact would tip off the local marshal, then cash in on the reward money and split the proceeds with the snitch. *Not a bad hustle.*

He sighed, wondering how much time he had left.

The occurrence of this ever-fleeting unit—the measure of a man's existence—had always seemed to elude Sullivan. To be honest, the

man had never paid time's passage any mind. Not until Bessie. He was no stranger to death; he'd seen many lives taken. Taken many a life himself. But when his wife met her untimely demise two years earlier, he felt it. The Clock. Somehow his hourglass had turned, beginning his true countdown.

Sullivan had no illusion he wasn't a mortal man—and oh, he knew he'd crossed paths with the man in the black, tattered cloak. Brushed shoulders, even. He liked to think the pale rider trotted past in fear, its hooded head turning to glance back each time he passed by—but by now, he'd eluded death so many times, he had to wonder *when* karma would finally make his acquaintance.

“I—I'm ready,” McCormac said.

And Sullivan could tell that he was. McCormac squeezed his eyes shut, bracing as if for a strike of the hand. His upper lip curled, revealing a sliver of checkered teeth—what remained intact, stained brown. With the creeping night unfolding around him in its ritual consummation, he waited in silence, ready to pay for his sins in eternity once he got to where they both knew he was heading.

Sullivan, struggling to see the barrel's end through the darkness, took an additional step back for safe measure. Pulling the hammer, he took aim best he could. His index finger grazed the polished steel trigger, feeling for the perfect position to pull, but eventually found himself, instead, slowly caressing it.

The enchanting tune of the katydids waned, fading into the melodic whirr of a chill breeze shifting down between the trees. Through the surrounding brush, the Cottonwood's fledgling leaves rustled. The woodlands spoke. And with the mellifluous sounds

came intermittent, tiny flashes of amber light, which seemed to delicately drift about, encompassing the men. Just a handful at first, but as Sullivan glanced around, myriad flashes trailed curiously, a cluster sparkling as far as his aging eyes could see. The stellar forest erupted with light, the wind gently dispersing its itinerate constellation.

An odd, twinkling glow from inside the gun's barrel caught Sullivan's eye. He pulled the gun backward, turning it upon himself, and waited for the flash. The luminous filament of a tiny firefly flickered as it crept out of the tip, hovering in front of his face for a moment before extinguishing its curious light.

The deliberation ended.

Sullivan gently placed the hammer down. He emptied the six-cylinder chamber onto the cold earth and, by the barrel, tossed the pistol into the wooded void.

4

McCormac opened his eyes. Sullivan was gone.

"He-hey, where'd you go!?! Duh-don't you leave me out here you sum'bitch! You leave me out here, I'm a good as dead!" McCormac instinctually pulled away from the tree, the twine tearing into his wrists and drawing blood. "You get back here and finish the job, you no good yella coward! The whirlwind is comin for ya—just you wait... I swear to Christ, if I—"

Shrill howling in the distance shut him right up. A signaling of one coyote to another, the response to spotting a potential food source. He wasn't terribly concerned with coyotes, but what would follow—bear, cat—passing in the night...

Blood ran down his fingers.

5

In the distance, Sullivan heard a name being screamed. One he didn't immediately recognize, but one he once knew, decades ago, to be his. With the fireflies dissipating, he reached the edge of the woods, tied McCormac's horse to his own, and rode toward home.

The pale-yellow, nearly full moon still made its ascent, illuminating his pathway—the only source of light for miles through the woods and prairie. Not that he minded. Had he come across some stranger in passing, someone asking for directions, food, or water, he'd have to explain why he rode in the dark with an extra horse tied to his saddle. He could stumble into someone looking to rob him and steal his horses, or *worse yet*—and this made Sullivan's blood-pressure spike—someone hoping to recognize him. Of course, as Sullivan knew from his recent outing, there were far worse things to be caught doing in the middle of the night.

Fortunately, he had planned for such contingencies well in advance, and he knew exactly where he was. Bennett's Silver Mine lay up ahead about a mile or so. His job there—as a manager, mind you—obliged him to transport work horses that needed to be put down, about one or two every six months. He usually took them from the massive stable flanking the mine, not from dangerous criminals, but still, McCormac's nag certainly looked the part.

Sullivan gave the mare another appraising glance. *This girl is as tired as an old Bughouse whore. Shiiit. Probably stolen, too.*

Yet another thing for him to worry about. He shook his head and gave his horse a gentle nudge. Provided he remained on his own trail and stayed on the fringes of town, he would be fine.

Everything is fine.

Or everything *had* been fine until McCormac showed up in Bennett's Silver Mine not three weeks ago. At first, Sullivan thought him another drifter passing through, looking to make a quick buck. Such men comprised the primary challenge in the mining industry, particularly in Denver. Labor couldn't come cheaper. It also couldn't come more unreliable. Drifters tore through Bennett's like the cyclonic storm that buried Denver in snow about four weeks ago: materializing out of nowhere and capable of causing indiscriminate, cataclysmic destruction. They'd show up ragged, emaciated, and spitting a fake name, usually one Sullivan had heard so many times that he smelled their horseshit immediately.

He pulled a quirley cigarette from his inside pocket—one of his *special* recipes—and lit it with a thumbnail-struck match. *Something to help settle the nerves.* His gaze shifted towards the amber haze of gas-powered streetlamps, their faint flickering creating an ethereal ambiance over the town as he rolled past. The sounds of melodic tunes and laughter echoed through the air, emanating from a bustling saloon nearby where patrons were beginning their evening revelries. He couldn't shake the nagging thought that there might be an accomplice of McCormac's lurking in the shadows.

Not *all* drifters were a cause for worry, however. Many of these men kept their brows low, worked five to ten days, made some quick green, and went on their way. A few were even incredible finds—the

kind that almost made him want to offer a higher wage, just to keep them on-hand. Like Freddie Montgomery. A man so good and honest, he even used his real name. Lasted about a month before an Arizona marshal showed up to drag him back to Yuma, where, according to rumor, he had had escaped the “inescapable” new Territorial Prison. But for the short time Sullivan had him, Freddie proved a real workhorse. A *Sun Dog*, as people called them—a bright spot, like the brilliant halo surrounding the sun on a gorgeous blue-bird day, high above a glistening blanket of unmarred snow. The kind of view you might be fortunate to catch if you rode over yonder through the Rocky’s on a crisp February afternoon. Incredibly unique. Radiant. Few and far between.

McCormac, though, was neither cyclone nor Sun Dog. The man kept his head down, and the challenge of discerning “who’s who” in a company of over thirty men—mostly drifters—left Sullivan focused on the more apparent troublemakers. But the day before last, on the transport wagon back to town from the secluded caverns where they worked, he had noticed McCormac in his peripherals, sitting across and four men down. Staring at him.

Sullivan knew that look *all* too well. Quiet. Vigilant. Disconcerting. The sly fox—a predator in the night, stalking the shadows, its eye on the henhouse. Awaiting its opportunity. Sullivan could smell his own, and usually, his keen eye spotted such a man a hundred yards out. The fact he’d missed McCormac for so long disquieted him. Perhaps he was just getting old.

Home neared, signaled by the soothing trickle of Cherry Creek just beyond the outskirts of town, as the low-hanging moon bathed

its undulating surface in a shimmering saffron glow. His gaze lingered, captivated by the paradoxical nature of something both breathtaking and deadly.

Feeling the full euphoric effect of the quirley, lost in thought, he estimated he had four, maybe five days at the most to *make the decision*. The seasoned math told him the letter needed at least two days to reach Wichita, its most likely destination. After that, the marshal could either send a telegraph straight to Denver, alerting the authorities, or send his own squad, requiring another two to three days. Sullivan figured the latter more likely; different territories didn't much like the ubiquitous politics and the greasing of hands involved in using local authorities. *Everyone's got their dirty hand out*. Most marshals preferred to do things quietly. Covertly. Sullivan could only imagine the price on his head.

The whirlwind is coming...

His spontaneous decision to leave McCormac tied to a tree, without a bullet in his forehead, also worried him. Was he getting lazy, or just sloppy? He suspected neither. But he didn't have to pull the trigger to seal McCormac's fate. More than a decade had passed since he'd taken a life, long before the arrival of his firstborn—hell, even before he got hitched. At least since his last visit to the infamous Bughouse. His eyes narrowed, lost in thought as he tightened his red paisley hanky to his throat and popped the worn coat collar. Fifteen years. He wondered if Madam Kitty still ran things there.

Christ. Where does the time go?

Sure, he'd flashed the blue steel many a time, mostly in an intimidation capacity... but since Bessie first entered his life, he had never been *this* close to pulling the trigger.

Still, he remained the fastest motherfucker on the draw. If nothing else, this he knew for a certainty.

He smirked. *Ain't no flies on me.*