

## *Tex*

The temperature always drops, just before the sun rises.

They could feel it, the sudden coolness creeping its way across their skin. Their mother had always said it was the earth's way of welcoming the sun. Welcoming her warmth and making room for the rich rays to sink into the earth, helping the prairie to come to life each day.

The older they got, the more they just thought of the pain the cold can bring. The way it creeps slowly into the joints, locking knuckles and stiffening shoulders. The center of their left knee gave a jolt of pain as they rose, a reminder of the time they tied the calf string just a bit too loose and were dragged from the seat of the saddle by a four-month-old longhorn.

They stood for a moment, untangling the mass of knotted muscles and creaking vertebrae they'd become. A result of years spent sleeping on the hard, flat floors of canyons and creek beds. They wiped away the red soil that clung to their eyelashes and surveyed the current camp's conditions. The empty pot still swung slowly above the pile of ashes. Their hat lay at the head of their makeshift bed. Bill lay snoring to their right, and Wyatt across the campfire and to the left. All five horses stood off in the far-right corner, foraging for some of the sparse, coarse prairie grass in hobbles.

They made their way over to the small herd and slowly removed the saddle bag hanging off the side of the grey colt. After ensuring they had what they needed, and rewarding the colt with an affectionate scratch, they slipped away, soundlessly, into the early morning air.

Behind the camp was a dip in the valley, a hollowed-out curve of packed earth just far enough to be out of sight from the others. After a thorough inspection, guaranteeing the alcove was indeed rattlesnake-free, they lowered themselves gently to the ground, and lay the saddle bag beside them.

They tucked their unruly, dark shoulder-length curls behind their ears, and began to coax their shirt up and over their head. The stiff fabric scratched along their skin like dull claws, a reminder of the week's buildup of sweat and grime that had now absorbed into the cotton. They made a mental note to boil the shirt next time they were in town.

They draped the shirt across their knee, and reached forward, nudging the lid of the saddle bag aside. From within the pack, they removed a large, wrapped bandage, and a single safety pin. They opened the pin, placed it carefully on top of the leather flap, and unrolled the bandage.

The sun had begun to peek its way back into the horizon by then, starting as a small corner of red in the right side of the skyline. It was through the faint, pink glow of the morning sun that they began to work, first straightening the spine, and then bringing the flesh of their breast to lay flat against their ribs. They then began to wrap the bandage around their chest once, twice, thrice, and so on, until it was tight enough to flatten the broad planes of their chest.

They took an experimental breath in, testing to see how far their lungs could inflate until it became unbearable. The worn gauze moved easily with the pattern of their breathing and, feeling satisfied, they reached for the safety pin.

Finding the tail end of the gauze, they pulled lightly at the wrappings, and quickly slipped the pin through each of the layers. They swore when the cold, pointed tip pierced the delicate flesh, quickly shifting it, and forcing it back out through the gauze to lock it in place. They craned their neck to examine if any bleeding had occurred, but the bandage remained the same, dingy color throughout.

They stood, dusting the fine powder of dirt from their breeches, and once again tugging the starched shirt back over their head. But it was as they were collecting their belongings that they heard it.

The soft *coo* of a prairie chicken. Followed soon by another.

Then, it was the gentle *chirps* of a prairie dog, calling to its mate.

Next the gentle bellows of a cow, calling for her calf.

And soon the horses, greeting one another with whinnies.

One by one, the creatures of the prairie began to stir, and all the while the sun climbed higher and higher into the sky. The once drab dirt surrounding them seemed to glow as each ray struck it, and life returned to vast, open country. They thought of their mother, and how her story of the sun and the plains would always end.

*Once the sun has kissed all corners of the earth, she would smile, a new life has begun.*

*A new life?* They would ask.

She would nod. *A new life, and a new start, for all that survived the darkness of night.*

“TEX?!” Bill’s gruff voice carried across the valley. “TEX! Mountin’ up in five!”

They lifted a hand to cup around their mouth. “I’M COMIN!”

“Well, get yer ass up here!”

They broke out into a grin and reached down to pluck their hat from the earth.

“A new start.” They mumbled.

Tex began to walk east.