

Belonging

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Belonging

by [peanut12](#)

Summary

Things are becoming increasingly more strained at camp, and everyone there is feeling it. There needs to be a change, in attitude this time as well as location. Charles and Arthur's search for a new campsite doesn't turn out as they had planned.

Spoilers from the end of Chapter 2 (A Strange Kindness Mission) on! I changed "A Strange Kindness" a bit, using it more as a guideline.

Chapter 1

“So we keep heading east, is that the plan?” Arthur could hear Hosea’s voice booming from the tent before he could see the man.

“For now,” he heard Dutch growl back.

“And when do we stop? When we reach Paris?”

Arthur couldn’t recall a time in recent memory when he heard Hosea this upset, and it had been even longer since he heard him this upset at Dutch in particular.

“Oh that would be nice, join the Commune,” Dutch continued. “We stop when we find someplace sensible, shake them that’s following us, and lie low.”

“This is lying low?” Hosea shot back. Arthur hung back for just a moment to listen without interrupting their conversation. “We’ve turned into a bunch of killers! I mean it! We ain’t even got the delusion of being anything other than killers!”

Arthur couldn’t agree more with Hosea’s sentiment. He had felt that something had been off with Dutch recently, but he couldn’t quite articulate what it was just yet. Arthur decided this was the time to step forward into the men’s line of sight, avoiding this conversation from getting any louder and alerting the rest of the camp.

“So, we moving?” he asked, his boots thudding as he stepped toward Dutch.

“Yeah,” Dutch said confidently. “This’ll end soon.”

“Damn right, it will,” Hosea shouted back. So much for Arthur sparing the camp the awkwardness of the disagreement.

“Constipated, as usual,” Dutch muttered as Hosea stormed off. “Micah told me of a place that we can lie low.”

Goddamn Micah. Arthur sure as hell didn’t trust him, but it was clear that Dutch did so he kept his mouth shut for the time being.

“Look here.” Dutch pointed to a map, showing Arthur where their new camp might be. “Dewberry Creek, he said. Maybe you could go and take a look, clear off anyone you find before the whole lot of us move in looking so conspicuous.”

“And how we gonna do that?” Arthur found himself snapping at Dutch, unable to hide his frustration.

“I don’t know, start dancing?” Dutch spit back.

“Looks like I’ve turned into the goddamn errand boy,” Arthur muttered as he stormed out of the tent and looked around the camp. If he was going to scout out an area suggested by

Micah, there was no way in hell he was going alone. Finally he spotted Charles, someone he could trust, a little ways away chopping wood for the camp.

“Charles,” Arthur called, “come with me. We’ve got work to do.”

Charles put down the work he was doing and followed Arthur. “Now where have I heard that before?” he asked, almost laughing wryly. The two men mounted their horses and headed down the trail out of camp, Arthur leading just slightly.

“So where are we going?” Charles called after several minutes of riding silently. Arthur only just then realized he had never told Charles what the work was they were doing.

“Find a new camp,” Arthur called back. “We’re packing up and moving on.”

“Again?” Charles asked. Arthur was somewhat surprised at the disgust he could hear in Charles’ voice as he said it. Charles was a confident but often stoic man, preferring to work quietly and show his steadfast loyalty to the gang through actions instead of words.

“We have to,” Arthur grunted back to him. “And fast. We’d already pushed our luck too far before that mess we just made in Valentine.”

“Ah. That didn’t sound good,” Charles mused. It wasn’t. Arthur grimaced as he thought about the number of people they had killed, mostly Cornwall’s men and lawmen.

As they rode, the men talked about the events of the last few days, and the damage control that would have to be done in the coming days. Neither could understand Dutch’s change of heart, moving the gang south instead of west as they had always moved, and his intentions to “lay low,” as he had always been the one to label it as hiding. Still, they rode on, their loyalty to the gang outweighing their more recent doubts of Dutch.

“Hang on a second,” Arthur called to Charles suddenly, slowing up his horse. “I think that must be it up ahead. The old dried up creek.”

“Seems very open,” Charles noted.

“Yeah, it does. Ain’t sure it’d be the best in the rain, neither.” Arthur sighed heavily. “Well, let’s take a look around.”

The men split up from one another, searching for more concrete reasons to bring back to Dutch that the place wasn’t suitable for the gang. Not a few minutes later, Charles called out to Arthur that he had found something. Arthur brought his horse over to Charles, both dismounting to investigate the dark heap Charles had found on the ground. A corpse, as it turned out to be.

“He’s been shot,” Arthur noted. “Looks like trouble got here before us.”

“There’s a camp just up ahead,” Charles pointed not far from them.

“Sure. Let’s get ready for business. Any issues, shoot first, debate second.”

“I’m not gonna shoot for the sake of it.”

Arthur nodded back at Charles, sympathizing with his discomfort of the amount of shooting that had been going on recently. “Let’s go take a look.”

The men slowly walked to the camp, hands never straying far from the weapons in their holsters. “Few tents, but the place looks empty,” Arthur pointed out.

“Let’s have a look around and make sure,” Charles suggested. Wordlessly, they continued their search. With fires still smoldering and supplies left all over the campsite, it was clear that whoever had occupied this area before had left quickly. Suddenly, Charles froze.

“Someone’s still here,” he muttered.

“There ain’t no one here now.”

“I ain’t so sure about that.”

It only took Arthur another moment to realize that Charles was right. The men’s eyes were drawn to slight movement from under a wagon at the very end of the camp, just a few paces away from them. They stepped forward and started to move the boxes and barrels that were blocking their view.

There, curled up under the wagon, was a woman, eyes wide open and covered in a mixture of mud, tears, and blood.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Almost instinctively, Charles and Arthur crouched down to the ground and hunched over, trying to make themselves seem smaller. It was clear with one glance at the woman's terrified eyes that she was no threat to them.

"It's okay," Charles reassured her as he slowly put his gun back in its holster. "You can come outta there." The woman made no attempt to move as more tears rolled silently down her cheeks. Charles reached a hand out to her. "You okay? We don't mean you no harm." The woman gingerly reached her hand out to meet Charles' and made her way out from under the wagon silently.

"Are you okay?" Arthur repeated Charles' words quietly, knowing that his voice could be unintentionally gruff. The woman flashed her eyes towards him and then back to Charles. "They killed him," she whispered, barely audible to either of the men. Arthur shuffled closer so he could hear her better.

"Killed who?" Arthur said quietly, trying to discern if the blood on the woman was her own or someone else's.

"My husband, two nights ago," the woman whispered, somehow even quieter than the first time. Charles and Arthur glanced at each other, knowing that the corpse they had found earlier must have been her husband.

"You're safe now," Charles reassured her. "We're going to take you back to our camp and get you cleaned up and rested." The woman nodded stiffly as Arthur took a few steps away to whistle for his horse. Somehow it felt disrespectful to make that much noise around someone who seemed so fragile.

"If you take her back to camp, I'll go and find somewhere else for us to lie low," Charles suggested to Arthur. It was clear that this spot wouldn't be suitable for a new camp. Arthur nodded and lifted himself onto his horse as Charles and the woman slowly moved forward. Charles took the woman by her waist and lifted her onto the horse just behind Arthur. He felt

her shaking hands reach forward around his torso to hold onto him unsteadily. Afraid she may still fall, he took his right hand that usually hung freely next to him as he rode and laid it on top of both of hers.

“Be careful,” Arthur nodded to Charles.

“You too,” Charles told him before whistling for his horse as well.

Arthur’s ride back to camp was slow and quiet to accommodate his still-fragile passenger. As he rode through the trees he heard the familiar “who’s there?” shout of the person on guard duty. “It’s me Lenny!” he called back, receiving a more friendly greeting in response.

“Miss Grimshaw!” Arthur called, sliding from his horse before reaching up to help the woman down. “Miss Grimshaw, a little help!” The stern woman came stalking from the other side of the camp, her eyes widening at the sight of the cargo Arthur had brought with him.

“Mr. Morgan, you’re quite a sight!” she fussed, her eyes fixed on the newcomer. “What in the world happened?”

“Not quite sure,” Arthur shrugged. “Found her hiding out, looks like damn Lemoyne Raiders got to her camp.” Arthur paused for a moment, scratching his bearded chin. “Help her get cleaned up, would you? Be gentle, she’s pretty shook up. Make sure she ain’t hurt.” Miss Grimshaw nodded at Arthur and took the young woman by the hand, leading her away with as much gentleness as he had ever seen from her. “Oh, and Miss Grimshaw, put her in my tent to rest when you’re done!” She nodded her head without her eyes ever leaving the girl.

Arthur went over to his tent to get it set up for a guest, drawing the canvases on each side to allow for some privacy for the girl. It wasn’t much, but it was the best he could do. He was just finishing up as Dutch came over and leaned against the wagon that made one of the walls of Arthur’s tent.

“Charles went to go find another place for us to lie low,” Arthur told him, keeping his eyes fixed on the ties on his tent. Dutch crossed his arms across his chest and nodded.

“And what about that damsel in distress you brought back with you?” Dutch raised his eyebrows.

“We couldn’t leave her to die, Dutch.”

The two men looked up as they heard hooves coming up the road to the camp. Charles appeared between the trees, clearly moving faster by himself than Arthur had with a passenger. He hitched his horse and came over to meet Dutch and Arthur.

“There’s a good spot to camp just past that dried up creek,” he said, looking at Dutch. “It’s in the trees back from the main roads, easier to defend.”

Dutch nodded and clapped a hand on Charles’ shoulder. “Excellent work, son,” he said, smiling. He walked off back to his own tent. Arthur couldn’t help but notice Dutch’s curt words with him, a departure from his usual verbosity.

Charles turned his eyes toward Arthur now. “How’s she doing?”

“Fine, I guess,” Arthur shrugged. “Miss Grimshaw’s helping her clean up and bringing her back here. Didn’t say much on the ride back, maybe she will after she rests.”

Charles nodded, his eyes scanning over the bustling camp. “She needed our help,” he noted.

“Maybe it’ll help make up for some of the death these last few days.” He and Arthur met eyes for only a moment before heading in different directions, Charles to finish chopping the wood he had left earlier when Arthur asked him to, and Arthur to get a bowl of Pearson’s stew.

Probably could have combined this chapter and the first one, but oh well! Here we are!

Chapter 3

As Charles walked back to his half-finished work of chopping wood, he glanced over to where Miss Grimshaw was bustling about getting things ready for the newcomer to camp. He still wasn't sure if the blood that was all over her was her own or someone else's. She hadn't mentioned at all that she was hurt, but then again Charles realized she hadn't mentioned much of anything at all. He didn't even know the girl's name. The only thing he knew was that the terror he saw in her wide blue eyes peeking out from under the wagon left him no choice but to help her, regardless of what Dutch was going to say about it.

He was working on the last piece of wood in the pile when he saw Miss Grimshaw with one hand on the girl's waist, guiding her toward Arthur's tent to get some rest. He swung the axe down one last time and wiped the sweat off his brow, realizing how hungry he was. He made his way over to the stew pot and filled himself a bowl, getting a second one when he noticed Miss Grimshaw heading to the same place.

"Thank you for getting her cleaned up," he said, handing to older woman the full bowl. She nodded in response and they carefully made their way towards the fire. "She say much of anything to you?"

"Not much," Miss Grimshaw admitted. "Told me that Raiders killed her husband, everyone else they were with took off and she hid."

"Did you get her name?"

"Anna Crawford, she told me."

"And what about the blood? Hers?"

Miss Grimshaw shook her head as she sat down at the fire next to Tilly. "Her husbands, I'd guess," she said a little sadly.

Charles nodded and lightly touched her shoulder in thanks as he went to find his own place to sit and eat. He planted himself next to Arthur, who was staring into the fire quietly, his hat pulled down low over his eyes and arms crossed over his chest. He looked exhausted.

"Take my cot tonight, I'll stay up with the girl," Charles told him. He was sure it would be a bit of a rough night for her.

Arthur scratched his chin. "You sure? I can-"

Charles cut him off. "You need sleep Arthur. I'll do it. Her name is Anna, by the way. And it wasn't her blood."

"Glad to hear it," Arthur said nodding and rising from his place by the fire. "Thanks for your help today." He clapped Charles on the shoulder as he shuffled past, evidently to Charles' cot to get the rest that he needed.

Charles finished his stew quietly and got up to clean his bowl before heading towards Arthur's tent. He moved a flap aside as silently as he could, hoping that if Anna was asleep he wouldn't be the one to wake her up. He looked in to find her curled up in Arthur's cot, her blue eyes wide open and staring at him in almost the same way they did when they found her under the wagon.

He moved into the tent slowly, noticing that Miss Grimshaw had left a lantern turned down low for her so she wasn't completely in the dark. "Miss Crawford?" Charles whispered as the tent flap closed behind him. "Do you mind if I call you that?" She offered only one nod in response. "I'm Charles. I'm going to stay right here tonight in case you need anything." He sat himself down next to her cot, propped up against Arthur's trunk. Her eyes followed him the whole way.

Charles settled in, nestling himself against the trunk and bending one knee up so he could rest an arm on it. He knew what the nightmares could be like after something like this. Just about the whole camp knew, especially recently. He didn't want anyone, even this newcomer, to go through it alone. Judging by the way she blinked quickly and infrequently, Charles guessed that Miss Crawford already knew what closing her eyes might bring. He wished there was something more he could do to help her, but staying with her seemed like the only solution he could think of. He made himself as comfortable as he could, and prepared himself for what could be a long night.

He must have started nodding off, as his eyes flew open and he had to pick his chin off of his chest when he heard Anna whispering his name. He turned his dark eyes to her blue ones. "Charles, would you mind if I held your hand?" she whispered to him. He gave a sad, knowing smile and lifted his arm onto her cot. She took his hand in hers, fresh tears falling down her cheeks, as he tried to find a new way to get comfortable. He watched her face as she fought a losing battle to stay awake, her eyelids sliding closed slowly. He hoped that having her tiny hand in his much larger one would help ward off some of the nightmares, but didn't count on it.

Charles tipped his head back, leaning against the chest behind him, ready to get a few moments rest before Anna needed him again.

Anna woke with nightmares three times that night, collapsing in Charles' arms each time with heavy sobs. He did his best to console her and get her back to sleep. He had just watched her close her eyes again, her hand still in his, when he realized that the sun was starting to come up. Others would be awake and moving around the camp soon, and he wasn't sure how much rest she would be able to get then.

It wasn't long before Charles heard slow, firm footsteps outside of the tent. The flaps rustled for just a moment before Hosea's peeked through quietly. Hosea raised his eyebrows wordlessly and pointed to himself, asking Charles silently if he wanted Hosea to take over for him. Charles shook his head and pointed to Anna's hand clasped in his, indicating he didn't want to wake her if he left. Hosea nodded in agreement and left the tent as quietly as he came in. Charles glanced over at Anna, making sure that she was still asleep. Her eyelids were

closed, but fluttering as if she were dreaming. With any luck, he thought, it would be a good dream. Or at least that she wouldn't remember it when she woke up.

He sighed and tilted his head back once again. His arm had been falling asleep most of the night as he kept it in the same position on the cot, but there was no way he was going to move away from her.

Charles watches her face, her eyelids still fluttering, until all at once they fly open instead. She lets out a gasp as she wakes up, but does not scream or sob as she did when she woke up that night. Charles gives her a small smile. "You okay?" he asks.

"I think so," she nods and whispers back, but makes no effort to move her hand from his. "Thank you for..." Anna's voice trailed off and her eyes flitted around the tent, as if searching for the word she needed. "Thank you," she settled on.

"You hungry?" Charles asked her. He could smell Pearson's breakfast.

She nodded wordlessly.

"I'll go get you something to eat." He moved to get up from the floor, patting her hand almost as a small reminder to make sure she would let go. She slid her hand back towards herself, hugging her own torso. "I'll be right back," he promised, slipping through the opening in the tent quietly.

There weren't many people milling about the camp quite yet. Charles made his way over to Pearson's makeshift kitchen, finding that Arthur was already there.

"How's she doing?" Arthur asked, filling up a bowl.

"She's alright," Charles told him. "Woke up a few times last night. I'll probably get Hosea to sit with her for a while today."

Arthur nodded and moved out of the way so that Charles could get his own breakfast. "We're going to have to move here pretty soon," Arthur reminded him.

Charles grimaced as he filled up two bowls. "I'll make a plan. Thanks Arthur." The two men nodded at each other and Charles headed back to the tent, food in hand. He slips through the opening quietly, finding Anna sitting up, her arms still wrapped around herself. He set his bowl down on a small table and held onto hers before offering it to her.

"When did you last eat?" he questioned.

"Maybe three days ago," Anna guessed, shrugging her shoulders. Charles paused for a moment, thinking.

"Eat slowly," he finally decided, extending the bowl out to her. "Take small bites and don't finish the whole bowl. We've got more food we can give you later when you're ready." Anna took the bowl from him, giving him a grateful look, and did her best to follow his advice. Charles sat down on the ground again, taking his own bowl in his hands. He watched her, studying her, as he ate his own food in silence.

“Slower, Miss Crawford,” Charles warned as he watched her pace pick up a bit too much. She put the spoon back in the bowl, giving herself time to finish chewing what was already in her mouth.

“Anna,” she said, once she had swallowed her food. Charles gave her a questioning look. “Call me Anna, please.” She took another bite of food, Charles’ eyes on her, monitoring her pace.

“That’s probably enough food for now Miss...Anna,” Charles corrected himself, reaching out for her bowl. As hungry as she was, she gave the bowl back to him. He placed both of the bowls on the table, although his was only half empty as well.

Charles leaned forward, looking Anna in the eye. “I have to tell you, we’re moving camp today. You’re welcome to come with us, but you don’t have to. The new camp will be pretty close to where we found you.”

Anna felt tears welling up in her eyes again. “I have nowhere else to go,” she admitted. Charles sighed and reached a hand out to touch her knee gently. “Then come with us,” he suggested. “You’ll be safe.” Anna nodded, wiping at the tears falling down her cheeks. “I have to go help pack up the camp. I could come and get Hosea to sit with you instead if you’d like?”

“I’d like that,” Anna told him, catching the last of the tears running down her cheek. Charles smiled and nodded, taking the half full bowls as he stood up. “I’ll come and check on you again before we leave, get you somewhere in the wagon train where you’re comfortable,” he promised before disappearing past the tent flaps.

Anna sighed and dropped her head into her hands, willing the tears to go away again. She felt miserable enough that the goddamn Raiders took everything from her, now she felt she was taking advantage of the kindness of these people. She lifted her head up and looked around the tent she was staying in, finally feeling a little more ready to take in her surroundings. Her eyes were drawn to the photographs framed on the tables and hung to the wagon that made one of the tent’s walls. It was only then that she realized that someone usually sleeps here and she took their spot last night. She heaved a heavy sigh and pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes, once again willing away the tears that threatened to fall.

Anna only lifted her head when she heard two short knocks on the table. She raised her eyes to see an older man coming through the tent flaps. “Miss Crawford,” he greeted her quietly but cheerfully. “Our friend Charles told me that you may like some company.” He took a few steps forward and put a hand on her shoulder. “I’m Hosea Matthews. I’m sorry to have you come to us in this state, my dear.”

“Thank you,” she offered weakly, trying her best for a small smile.

“I hate to make you move, but they’ll need to take this tent down soon,” Hosea told her. “Care for a walk with me?” He offered her his arm, and she accepted, grateful for a change of scenery and fresh air.

Chapter 4

Anna hadn't felt much like talking the last few days. That is, until Hosea Matthews showed up in her tent. Anna was strolling around the camp, her arm tucked into Hosea's, talking about everything and nothing all at once. She appreciated that he kept the conversation light, not asking how she had ended up under that wagon where Charles and Arthur had found her in the first place. They walked and watched as people bustled around the camp, tearing it down to get ready for their move later that day. Hosea pointed out each person as they worked, telling Anna about their personalities and how they ended up here.

It was almost midday when the last few camp items were being loaded onto wagons and Charles came over to check on Anna. "Don't worry, Mr. Smith," Hosea reassured him, patting Anna's hand on his arm. "I've been taking good care of Miss Crawford here."

"Glad to hear it," Charles said, offering a small smile. He turned his eyes to Anna. "We're just about to move on," he told her. "Arthur's the one who rode you back here last night. He and I will be in a wagon with some others, you could ride with us. Or if you'd like to stay with Hosea he'll be up front with Dutch." The two men looked at Anna, waiting patiently for an answer.

"I think...I think I'd like to ride with you and Arthur," Anna decided. Riding up front with what she decided was probably the leader from Hosea's description didn't seem to be the best plan when she was afraid she'd burst into tears at any moment again.

Hosea patted her hand again. "Let's get you over there, then!" he smiled at her. "Mr. Morgan and Mr. Smith will take good care of you." Charles, Anna, and Hosea walked toward the last wagon in the train as the other that had been busy around the camp were loading up into the wagons or onto horses as well. Arthur was already sitting in the driver's seat of the wagon, and another woman that Anna had forgotten the name of was making herself comfortable in the back. Charles and Hosea offered their hands to help Anna up into the back. As she found a spot to sit, Hosea made his way up to the front of the wagon train and Charles found his spot riding shotgun next to Arthur.

"Y'all good back there ladies?" Arthur called, turning his head back to look.

"We're set!" the other woman called back.

"Thank you, Mr. Morgan," Anna added.

"Call me Arthur," he offered with a small, crooked smile.

"And I'm Abigail," the woman added, smiling large at Anna. "That there is my husband John and our son Jack." She gestured at one of the men on a horse, holding a small boy of maybe four or five on the horse with him. "We're glad to see you up and about, Miss Crawford."

"Call me Anna, please," she tried to smile back, unsure if she was successful or not.

The caravan started moving slowly, and the passengers fell quiet for a moment. Anna knew from last night that Charles and Arthur were both comfortable with silence, but wasn't sure if Abigail would be as well. It became clear after just a few moments.

"Miss Grimshaw told me that you lost your husband, Anna," Abigail said softly. Charles turned his head and gave her a look, warning her. "You don't have to talk about that," he assured Anna.

"No it's okay," Anna told Charles. "I think I owe all of you an explanation anyway. I just...I needed to rest first I think." Anna choked back a sob, letting a few tears overflow from her eyes quietly instead. "Lemoyne Raiders found our camp, took my husband to make an example out of him, I suppose. Everyone else we were with ran, and I hid in case I could have..." her voice trailed off. She took a deep breath, allowing more quiet tears to flow down her cheeks steadily.

Abigail reached out and put a hand on Anna's knee. "I'm real sorry to hear that," she said softly. "You'll be safe with us. If you want to stay, that is." Abigail didn't seem to plan on taking her hand off of Anna's knee, and Anna didn't mind the physical reassurance. The rest of the conversation was kept much more light, getting more details on everyone at the camp from Abigail with occasional additions from Arthur. Charles stayed mostly quiet, watching the woods as they passed, his hand never straying far from the gun on his hip.

The ride to the new camp somehow didn't seem to take as long to Anna as the ride with Arthur had the night before, despite the number of wagons in their train. Charles hopped down from his spot and offered his hand to Abigail and Anna to climb out of the back. Almost immediately, everyone in the camp set to work getting it set up once again. Anna stood in the middle of the organized chaos, unsure what to do or how to help. Hosea found her just a moment later, once again offering his arm for a walk.

"Actually, Hosea, I think I'd like a job to do," Anna offered. She didn't like being perched up by herself, walking leisurely, while everyone else worked hard. "We can certainly put you to work, my dear, as long as you're certain you're ready for that."

"I think I am," Anna nodded.

Hosea and Anna walked arm in arm to where Pearson's makeshift kitchen was being set up. "Pearson!" Hosea called. "This here is Anna Crawford, got any work she could do to help you get dinner ready?"

Pearson raised an arm to wipe his brow. "Can you chop vegetables?" he asked Anna. She nodded in response. "Then I've got work for you," he promised. Pearson got her set up with vegetables and a knife, and set her to work. Anna appreciated having something to do to take her mind off of the events of the last few days, and by the time she looked up, the camp was almost finished and Pearson had the stew close to ready.

As her work was finished, Anna scanned the camp looking for Arthur. Hosea had mentioned that the tent she had stayed in was in fact his, and she hadn't had a chance to thank him yet. She found him at his tent, newly set up, organizing the photographs and memorabilia he had

brought with him. Arthur looked up as he heard her footsteps approaching, and greeted her with a lopsided smile.

“Saw you got yourself a job with Mr. Pearson over there!” he called out to her.

“I did, I’m glad that I could help.”

“Yeah, well, Pearson could use all the help he can get.”

Anna watched for a moment as he put a photograph of a young woman on it’s own table. “Mr. Morgan,” she started, quickly realizing her mistake. “Arthur, I meant to properly thank you, first for finding me under that wagon, and then for letting me stay in your tent last night.”

Arthur kept his hands busy around his space. “Don’t mention it. You’re welcome to stay here again tonight if you’d like.”

Anna shook her head. “Thank you, truly. But I think there’s a space for me now with some of the other girls.”

Arthur nodded his head. “If you need anything you know where to find me.”

“Stew’s ready!” they heard Pearson call. Anna smiled at Arthur who tipped his hat to her, and she made her way to the stew pot. Charles fell into step with her on the way. “Did you keep down breakfast alright this morning?” he asked her.

Anna nodded. “I’m just starving now.”

“Glad to hear you weren’t sick,” Charles smiled at her. “Do the same thing again now. We’ll get you starting to eat normally again tomorrow.” He reached over and filled a bowl for himself, and second one half filled that he handed to Anna. “Let’s go find a place to sit,” he suggested.

Anna followed Charles over to the fire where others from the camp were starting to gather as well. He sat down on a small bench, and gave a small smile as a silent invitation for Anna to sit with him. She sat down and picked up her spoon, trying to make a conscious effort to bring it to her lips slowly. She couldn’t help but notice Charles’ eyes on her, monitoring the pace of eating like he did this morning so she didn’t get sick.

“I’m sorry that Abigail was prying earlier,” Charles started.

“It’s really alright,” Anna assured him. “Y’all were kind enough to offer me hospitality, the least I could do is tell you what happened, why I’m here.”

“Just know that you don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

“Thank you, Charles. Truly. For everything over the last few days. Anna offered him a smile, the first one that she felt was real since she arrived at camp.

Anna continued to eat at her slow pace as she watched the spaces around the fire fill up with people. She saw Arthur talking and laughing with a younger boy she thought she remembered was named Lenny, and Abigail, John, and Jack sitting together as a family at one of the tables a little ways back. She turned as another woman sat down on the ground next to her, propping herself up on a crate. "Charles," the woman greeted him as she sat down.

"Sadie," he nodded back to her.

"And you must be Miss Anna Crawford," Sadie turned her eyes to her.

"That's me. Just Anna, please."

"Well Anna, I hear that we'll be sharing a tent."

"Is that so? I haven't figured that out for myself quite yet."

Sadie nodded, spooning food into her mouth hungrily. "Abigail and Charles asked me to keep an eye on you for a bit," she admitted. "They told me a bit about what...what happened to you. I fell in with this band of misfits here after something similar happened to me." Sadie kept her eyes down on her food even though her voice sounded confident.

"Thank you for being willing to help," Anna told her, reaching down to place a hand lightly on Sadie's shoulder. Sadie reached up and tapped Anna's hand instead of replying, as her mouth was full with the last of Pearson's stew. "Miss Tilly will be in there with us too," Sadie said as she swallowed her food. She pointed over to a few girls finishing their dinners. "The one in the pink dress."

Anna was glad that she wouldn't have to spend the night alone. She wasn't sure if she'd be comfortable with that any time soon, maybe ever again. From where she was now, she would be perfectly content if the last nights she spent by herself were those nights terrified under the wagon. Anna was just as happy that she had someone like Sadie there with her. In just the short conversation she had with Sadie and the little that Hosea and Abigail had told her, Sadie seemed like a force to be reckoned with. If her story was as similar to Anna's as she had implied, Anna truly didn't know how she had the kind of confidence that she displayed.

Anna stayed in her spot on the bench for the evening while others moved around her. Charles finished his food and went to go wash Anna and Sadie's bowls as well as his own. Jack had found a wooden toy horse and was racing it around the camp, Abigail watching with a smile. A poker game had started at one of the tables. A group of some of the girls gathered together, laughing and gossiping. Still others were chatting casually in smaller groups or nodding off in their seats as Anna soon found herself doing.

Not wanting to completely fall asleep, Anna stood up slowly and looked for someone who could help her find where she was supposed to sleep that night. Right on cue, Sadie popped up next to her. "Ready for bed, darlin'?" she asked.

"Yes, I'm exhausted."

“You and me both,” Sadie agreed. Anna followed her over to tent just big enough for the three bedrolls on the ground. Anna changed quickly into the nightgown that Miss Grimshaw had given her the night before and lied down on one of the bedrolls closest to the side of the tent. Sadie chose the one in the middle.

“Remember, I’m here if you need me,” Said told her, giving her hand a quick squeeze before rolling over and falling asleep.

Chapter 5

Anna woke up twice again that night with nightmares, Sadie there both times with a kind words and a comforting hand on her back. Sadie made it so that Anna wasn't quite as afraid to shut her eyes again after those dreams. Tilly woke up with the other two women both times as well, keeping a gentle hand on Anna's knee while she let Sadie do all the talking.

When Anna awoke to sun peeking through the slit in the tent, Sadie was already gone while Tilly was still fast asleep. Anna dressed in her blouse and skirt as quietly as possible so as not to wake Tilly before ducking through the slit in the tent and heading out to the camp. She just stood for a moment, enjoying the feeling of the sunshine on her face. These last few days had been the worst of her life. She had absolutely everything taken from her and was left with nowhere to turn. These people took her in without any question, making her feel as comfortable as she could in such a situation.

She wasn't kidding herself. No one had said it outright to her, but she knew this was a gang of outlaws. What other group moves around from place to place, living in tents, guns and other various weapons hanging off of their hips? But a kinder group of people she had never met in her life. It was in that moment, when she came to grips with how little she had left in the world, she decided that if they would have her she would like to stay.

Anna smiled to herself as she made her way over to Pearson's tent, ready to eat a full bowl of food today as Charles had promised her. She glanced around for only a moment before seeing Arthur sitting by himself. She took her bowl and went to join him.

"Morning," Arthur tipped his hat to her.

"Good morning, Arthur," she smiled at him. He gave her a slightly lopsided smile back.

"Good to see you've got a little smile back."

The two settled into a comfortable silence as they ate their food. Others started to rise and emerge from their tents, some seeming ready for the day while others appeared to already be missing their beds. It wasn't long before Charles settled himself in the empty spot at the table with Arthur and Anna. She thought she noticed the corners of his mouth turn up just slightly as he glanced down at her bowl, already empty. She pushed the bowl away from her, a little embarrassed that he noticed how quickly she had eaten the food, and then turned her eyes towards him. "I'd like a job or something to do around the camp today," she asserted. "Y'all saved me, the least I can do is pull my weight."

Charles' eyes met hers. "You don't owe us anything, Anna."

Anna rolled her bottom lip between her teeth. "I do, but that's not the point. I can't just sit here all day while everyone else does their share. Besides, it would be nice to have something to keep my mind off of..." her voice trailed off. She didn't need to finish her sentence for the two men with her to know what she meant.

“I’m sure Miss Grimshaw could put you to work if you think you’re ready,” Arthur assured her. Anna grimaced just slightly to herself. She had heard the way that others complained about Miss Grimshaw’s expectations of the girls in the gang, most notably from Abigail on the wagon ride into the new camp. But if she had decided she wanted to stay she better start giving them a reason to keep her around.

Arthur was right in assuming that Miss Grimshaw had a job for her to do. Before she knew it, Anna found herself scrubbing mud and blood stains out of the gangs’ clothes, Mary-Beth working next to her. Anna appreciated having a companion working with her, especially someone like Mary-Beth who loved to talk. Hosea had described Mary-Beth as a bookworm, but Anna decided by midday that was an understatement. She wasn’t sure if the brunette woman had talked about anything besides books yet that day. Not that it was a problem. Anna welcomed the distraction.

By the time all the washing was done, Anna found herself with a grumbling stomach and an armful of books that Mary-Beth had loaned her to read. She tucked the books into her shared tent quickly and made her way over to get a bowl of stew. As she got herself settled on a log near the fire, Sadie plopped herself down as well. “How was your day of washing?” she asked, flipping her braid over her back.

“I think Mary-Beth and I got it all done.” Anna frowned at her hands, noticing how red and raw they were. She had done plenty of washing before, but not quite this much at once. Or with this many blood stains.

Sadie noticed Anna’s unhappy gaze at her irritated hands and laughed a bit to herself. “You know, when I first got here they had me wearing a skirt and chopping vegetables with Pearson,” Sadie told her. Anna looked over the woman next to her, wearing men’s pants, a large hat, and a gun belt slung low across her hips. She acted like one of the boys, and it seemed the gang treated her like she was too. Anna tried to hide a smile at the thought of her doing typical women’s work with Pearson.

“You can laugh,” Sadie assured her, giggling herself. “They found me other work to do when I threatened to stab Pearson one too many times.” Anna let out a real laugh for the first time in a while, and she thought she saw Charles looking over at her turning up the corners of his mouth at the sound of her laugh. She pushed the thought out of her mind, knowing that she was probably just seeing things anyway. She instead turned her focus back to the blonde sitting next to her.

“So all’s I gotta do is threaten Grimshaw to get out of washing?” Anna held up her raw hands to show Sadie. “I always hated it, even when...” her voice cut short before she could get to her husband’s name.

Sadie placed a hand on Anna’s knee and jumped in, sensing that she wasn’t quite ready to go there yet. “You and me both, darling. I swear my Jake used to roll around in the goddamn mud before giving me his clothes to wash. Would much rather have been out hunting.” Sadie smiled at the memory, but Anna noticed just a hint of sadness behind it.

“What happened, if you don’t mind my asking?” Sadie had mentioned something similar had happened to her when Anna first got to camp, but she hadn’t mentioned anything after that.

Sadie patted Anna's knee where her hand still rested.

"My husband Jake and I, we were happy. Had a home around Colter, and a while back some O'Driscoll's broke in." Anna watched Sadie's face darken at the mention of the other gang. "They killed Jake and I went and hid. Didn't take too long 'til some of these boys came calling at the house, ended up in a shootout. Micah, he found me first, but...it was Dutch and Arthur that saved me. Took me back to where they were staying and I've been with 'em since. Suppose at first it was because I had nowhere else to go, but I don't think anything would feel this close to family anymore." Sadie stared into the fire quietly, and Anna hesitated for a moment before laying a hand on top of the other woman's.

"When does..." Anna started to whisper, but paused to swallow hard. "When does it stop hurting like this?"

Sadie looked back up at her with a sad smile on her face. "It doesn't stop hurting, the hurt just...changes."

Anna nodded, biting back tears that were pricking behind her eyes. Both the women fell silent, gazing into the fire as others started to gather as well. Sadie and Anna kept their hands together as Javier brought out his guitar and started plucking a soft melody on the strings. Anna appreciated having the silence between her and Sadie with the buzz of others chatting around them.

Anna felt Charles come up beside her before she heard him. She tore her eyes away from the fire to meet his as he sat himself next to the log she was sitting on.

"I see Miss Grimshaw had you doing the washing," Charles noted, nodding down towards her raw hands.

"Sadie taught me how to get out of it," she joked, winking at Sadie.

Charles chuckled, resting his hand on his bent knee. "Pearson asked to go hunt again tomorrow. You could join me if you want."

"I've never been a very good shot," Anna admitted, smiling apologetically at him.

"I'll show you." He offered a smile back at her. "If you want to, that is."

Anna nodded. "I suppose it couldn't hurt."

"We'll leave early," Charles suggested.

"And you can take my horse," Sadie added.

Anna squeezed the other woman's hand before standing. "Thank you both, so much. I better turn in for the night." Sadie's eyes turned back to the fire, while Charles' eyes met her own. "I'm glad to see you're happy," he said simply. All Anna could do was nod before heading to her shared tent and falling asleep.

Chapter 6

The sun was just starting to set as Charles and Anna were headed back to camp after their hunting trip, riding side by side on the trail. Anna had only been hunting a handful of times before, and even then her husband had done most of the work. This time, Charles showed her patiently how to track animals on her own, how to knock the arrow and draw the bow, and where to aim to get the cleanest kill. She still had some work to do, but the trip wasn't a complete failure as they were returning to camp with a deer on the back of each of their horses. She couldn't help but notice that each time Charles had brushed against her, it felt like a jolt of electricity on her skin. She tried to push the thought out of her mind. She just lost her husband, clearly she wasn't thinking straight.

"Thank you for taking me with you today," Anna broke their comfortable silence. "I hope I didn't make it too difficult."

"You're getting the hang of the bow quickly," Charles assured her. They rode a little farther before he spoke again. "Have you given much thought about if you're going to move on or stay with us?"

Anna dropped her eyes to the road beneath them, for some reason feeling embarrassed to admit that she had been thinking about her future now that her husband was gone. "I've thought about it," she started slowly. "And if y'all will have me, I think I'd like to stay." She glanced up again to see Charles looking right at her, a small smile turning up the corners of his lips.

"I'm happy to hear that."

"Who's there?" came a gruff call from between the trees.

"It's Charles and Anna," Charles called back. Arthur appeared before them, rifle in hand, and followed them up towards camp. They hitched the horses and Charles and Arthur swung the deer over their shoulders, headed towards Pearson's tent. Anna busied herself by taking the saddles off the horses and brushing them off.

She finished her work, wiping her hands on the pants she borrowed from Sadie as she headed further into camp. Anna nestled herself at a table near the fire, watching others move around the camp. Thinking of her husband still left a physical ache in her chest, and she suspected that wouldn't change anytime soon, if ever. Things were never going to be the same again. But if living with this gang, being *part* of the gang, was her new normal, she thought it was something she could come to appreciate in its' own right.

"Miss Crawford!" Anna was ripped from her thoughts by a booming voice calling her name. She looked up and saw Dutch approaching her, with Arthur and Charles just behind him. Dutch sat himself down at a table across from her. "It seems you and Mr. Smith had a successful hunting trip today."

Anna nodded. "Charles had already taught me so much about hunting." Out of the corner of her eye, Anna saw Charles drop his eyes to his boots, almost seeming bashful. She let her thoughts wander for just a moment, wondering what exactly he felt he should be embarrassed about.

"Mr. Morgan and Mr. Smith also told me that you were hoping to stay with us," Dutch continued. Anna's eyes widened as she looked between Arthur and Charles. Charles had only asked her a little while if she had thought about sticking around, she hadn't imagined that the topic of conversation would come up with Dutch any time soon. He and Arthur must have gone straight to Dutch's tent after giving Pearson the deer. She couldn't decide if she was mortified or excited. Maybe a little of both.

"I - yes, I've been thinking about it," Anna admitted, forcing her eyes back to meet Dutch's. He gave her a large smile.

"We've got a place for you here if you'd like it," Dutch offered, rising from the table again. He clapped a hand on Anna's shoulder and looked down at her. "Welcome to the family."

As several weeks passed, Anna found herself falling into her own routine with the gang - or family, as Dutch called it. The pain of losing her husband was still there, but had moved into the background in some ways. It always burned, but now was letting her function and fall into this new normal. Miss Grimshaw had decided that Anna had a knack for washing clothes, so she found herself scrubbing stains next to Mary-Beth most days. As she grew more accustomed to the volume of work, her hands ended each day less angry and red than they day before. She also enjoyed talking with Mary-Beth as they worked side by side, mostly discussing the books they had both read.

Anna's friendship with others around the camp continued to blossom as well. She and Sadie shared a unique connection through their unfortunate circumstances. Anna had hardly felt this close to another woman before, quickly considering Sadie her best friend. Arthur was often in and out of the camp, but when he was there he seemed to check on Anna, making sure she felt comfortable and safe. On the days that she was sick of doing the washing under Grimshaw's overly watchful eye, Charles would take her out hunting again. Her skills with the bow were coming along nicely, but she still usually relied on him to help track the animals. Sometimes as she was trying to track an animal on her own, she swore she could feel him staring at her. She didn't dare look to see, and instead tried to ignore the feeling.

One afternoon, Anna was sitting with Mary-Beth doing the washing once again, and giggling uncontrollably as they poked fun at one of the poorly-written books they had read together. Anna glanced up when she heard two sets of hooves coming up the way to the camp. She furrowed her brow in confusion but kept scrubbing when she saw Charles on Taima with another horse following along behind. She was just hanging up the last shirt when she heard slow, heavy steps behind her. She spun around and almost ran right into Charles, he was so

close. He grabbed her shoulders gently to help steady her, and she felt the same electric feeling through her skin that she had felt when he was showing her how to use the bow.

“Oh god I’m so sorry,” she squealed, giggling as she stepped back from his fingers.

He smiled down at her. “Come here, I’ve got something to show you.” He put a hand on her back and guided her toward where the horses were hitched. She took a few deep breaths, reminding herself to ignore the tingling feeling his hand caused as it rested on her back.

Charles walked them over to the horse hitched next to Taima and patted her side affectionately. “What do you think?” he asked Anna.

She knitted her eyebrows in confusion. “What’re you talking about?”

“She’s yours if you like her.”

Anna’s jaw dropped. “You - you got me a horse?”

“Yes.”

“You mean it’s mine?”

“Yes.”

“Forever?”

“Yes.” Charles couldn’t hide his smile at her repetitive questions.

“Charles, I don’t know what to say.” Impulsively, Anna stepped forward and gave him a hug. She felt his muscles tense under her at first, and relax as he hugged her back.

“If you’re going to be hunting with me, you can’t be borrowing Sadie’s horse all the time,” he explained.

“Thank you, Charles,” Anna said, finally letting go of him and moving her hands to the painted horse’s back.

“You’ll need a name for her.”

Anna thought for a moment as she stroked the horse’s snout. “What do you think about Stormy?” she asked Charles.

“I think it fits.” The smile still hadn’t left his face.

Charles stayed with Anna as she continued to fawn over Anna for a while, until they heard Pearson call for dinner. The two walked over together and found a spot at a table to eat their stew. “I was thinking of hunting again tomorrow,” Charles mentioned. “You and Stormy want to come with?” Anna couldn’t help but smile at the use of her horse’s name. “Let’s do it,” she decided.

When Anna made her way back to her tent that evening, Sadie was already there, propped up on her bedroll braiding her hair. "I see you won't need to be borrowing my horse anymore," Sadie mentioned with a mischievous grin.

"No, I suppose I won't," Anna agreed, ignoring the way that Sadie was looking at her.

"Pretty nice of Charles to get you your own horse," Sadie added, pushing the subject further.

"Yes, it was. Figured if I was going to keep hunting with him I would need one."

Sadie chuckled. "Pretty nice gift for just a hunting partner."

Anna shot her a look as she crawled under her blanket. "Good night, Sadie," she said, a smile playing on her lips but ending the conversation anyway. Whatever Sadie thought was going on between Charles and Anna, she was wrong. Whatever she thought she felt between them sometimes was just misreading the situation, she thought as her eyes slid closed and she fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter 7

Anna and Charles rode for almost half a day before stopping to track an animal. After such a long ride, Anna was grateful that it was only a short time before they found a small grouping of deer. Sadie had given Anna an old bow of hers, so she and Charles both had one now.

“You take the one on the left, I’ll get the one on the right,” he whispered in her ear, sending a chill down her spine. It was getting harder for her to ignore the reactions he caused, but she did her best. They both knocked their arrows and drew back their bows, releasing at almost the same moment. Two clean kills. Charles had taught her well.

The two stood up and started walking towards the deer, Charles just slightly ahead of Anna. “That was a good shot,” he commented, pushing through the brush as it got thicker. Anna did her best to keep up, but could only do so much with her shorter legs. Charles had almost reached the deer when he heard a sharp cry behind him. He spun around to see Anna had fallen down in the thick brush.

“Goddamn it!” she cried, propping herself up on her elbows. “My foot got caught in a rabbit hole and I twisted my ankle as I fell.” She unwedged her foot from the hole, wincing as she moved it, and Charles doubled back to crouch next to her.

“Let me help you up,” he offered both of his hands to hers to help pick her up out of the dirt. She rose slowly, keeping her foot off the ground. “Can you put any weight on it?” He kept his hands in hers for extra support as she took a hesitant step forward. She cried out again and collapsed towards Charles. He caught her easily and gently moved her back to sit down on the ground.

Carefully, he removed his hands from hers and moved them down towards her feet. He loosened up her boot as much as he could before sliding it off of her foot, Anna grimacing at the pain. He held her foot in his hand as he peered down to inspect the damage.

“Looks like a sprain,” he decided, looking back up at her. “You’re going to need to rest it for a while.”

Anna dropped her head back and groaned. “I’m sorry, Charles. I should have been more careful.”

Charles waved her off. “I should have slowed down for you. There’s nothing we can do about it now. But you won’t be able to ride like that, I’ll have you ride with me.” He stood up and whistled for the horses, loading both of the deer they had shot onto Stormy. Before Anna could say anything, he scooped her up from where she was sitting on the ground and placed her gently on Taima. Anna felt her heart pounding as his hands left her body so he could swing himself onto the saddle in front of her. She bit her lip and she reached her hands to his waist to steady herself for the ride they had ahead of them.

It was all she could do to remember how to breathe as they made the journey back to camp. She mentally kicked herself for reacting this way to Charles. He had been nothing but nice to

her since he and Arthur had found her under that wagon. He was a great hunting partner and that was the extent of their relationship, despite what Sadie had said before. If she kept this up every time he was anywhere near her, soon she wouldn't be able to function around him.

She continued mentally berating herself the entire way back to camp. The only thing that drew her out of her thoughts was the gruff "who goes there" from Bill as they made their way up the trail into camp. Charles hitched the horses quickly as Anna tried to slide herself from Taima's back as carefully as she could. She slid farther than she had hoped and was clenching her teeth for the inevitable impact of her injured foot on the ground, but it never came. She gave a small gasp as Charles grabbed her just in time to avoid the pain. He held her in his arms bridal style and started moving towards her tent. "You don't have to carry me," she whispered. She wasn't sure her voice would go any louder.

"You almost sprained your other ankle trying to get off the horse. A little help won't kill you."

Anna nodded and kept her eyes down the whole way through the camp, avoiding everyone else's gaze. She hoped they couldn't see how red her cheeks were. She couldn't be sure if the heat in her face was from the embarrassment of hurting herself or from the way that Charles held her made her heart flutter in her chest.

Anna felt like she could finally breathe again as Charles laid her down gently on her bedroll.

"The hell did you do, girl?" Sadie had followed into the tent just behind Charles to see what all the fuss was about.

"Twisted my ankle," Anna shrugged. "I'm sure I'll be fine in the morning."

Charles knelt down to examine her ankle again and shook his head. "Gonna need a little more time to rest than that," he advised.

"Maybe Grimshaw'll even let you skip washing for a day or two," Sadie threw in.

Charles stood up. "You need anything?" he asked Anna, one hand resting on his gun belt.

Anna shook her head. "I think I'm set for tonight. Thank you so much, Charles." She thought she saw the corners of his mouth turn up just slightly as he left the tent. As soon as he was out of sight, she let out a groan and flopped back onto her pillow, her hands covering her face.

"Long day?" Sadie smirked at her, removing her gun belt to get herself ready for bed. Anna moved her hands so she could look back at Sadie.

"Aside from almost breaking my goddamn ankle, it was great," Anna said, anger in her voice. Sadie had to bite her lip to stifle a giggle.

"So then what's the problem?"

"Every time Charles get anywhere close to me, it feels like there are birds flying around in my chest. The man has been nothing but nice to me, the last thing he needs is for a goddamn

fool like me to go run off and catch feelings.” Anna threw her blanket up over her face. “It’s not his fault that he’s got those big arms and that I misread signals,” she muttered.

Sadie choked on a laugh as she laid down on the bedroll next to Anna. “No, I suppose it’s not this fault,” Saide agreed, making herself comfortable. The two sat in silence for a few moments. “But for the record,” Sadie added, “I don’t think you’re misreading anything.”

Anna awoke the next morning still in pain. Charles was right when he had said she would need to rest her ankle for a few days. While most of the boys headed out of camp for odd jobs, Sadie helped get her set up at one of the tables in the camp, and she spent her day reading the books that Mary-Beth had loaned her and chatting with the girls as they took breaks from their chores. The latter had earned her more than one scolding from Grimshaw for being a distraction. When Pearson called for dinner, Sadie grabbed two bowls and brought them over to the table where Anna had been planted all day. Two two sat side by side quietly eating their stew, but Anna soon found herself poking at it more than eating.

“Got something on your mind?” the other woman asked her. Anna forced a small smile.

“It’s nothing,” she promised.

Sadie raised her eyebrows at her. “Sure don’t look like nothing.

Anna sighed and put down her spoon. “It’s just that...today would have been my husband’s birthday.” She spit the words out quickly, wanting to get them all out of her mouth before the tears came. She was mostly successful, reaching up to quickly wipe away the one droplet that had escaped her eye.

“Oh, honey,” Sadie reached out a hand to hold Anna’s, pity in her voice. “I know what you need. Just wait here.” Sadie got up from the table and bustled over to their tent. Anna let her mind wander again, being drawn back to earth when Sadie slammed something down on the table. A full bottle of whiskey. “We’re gonna celebrate,” she announced. “Or drink to forget, whichever you prefer. But both involve drinking.” Anna giggled despite herself.

“Ooh, what we celebrating?” Tilly spotted the whiskey as she walked by.

“We’re just celebrating,” Sadie answered. Anna looked up at her appreciatively. It was one thing to talk to Sadie about losing her husband. Sadie had been through it too, she understood. It wasn’t the same with the others. Not for lack of trying on their part, it was just *different*. Anna reached forward for the bottle and took a long swig out of it. The whiskey burned as it slid down her throat, but Sadie was right. It’s what she needed for right now.

As the sun was setting and some of the boys started trickling back into camp, their celebration grew. Anna felt like every time she looked somewhere else, there were more

people than there were before with more bottles of liquor. Arthur came back and dug his own bottle out from somewhere in his tent. Dutch had turned up his gramophone and was dancing with Molly. Pearson had started talking about his time in the Navy to no one in particular. Everyone was enjoying themselves, but none quite as much as Sadie and Anna. The two stayed arm in arm almost the whole night and had kept a bottle to themselves the whole time. Anna wasn't quite sure where Sadie had gotten all the liquor from, but each time they finished off a bottle she had another one to replace it.

When Javier came back he got out his guitar and started strumming. People seemed to flock to the campfire where he was sitting at the sound of his music. Anna and Sadie sat next to him, Sadie singing loudly along with every song. Anna even started to catch on to some of the songs and sing along too. She was in the middle of singing the few words she knew to "One-Eyed Riley" when Charles joined the group at the campfire. "Charles!" she called. She tried to stand up to go to him but fell right back down again, although she wasn't sure if it was from the pain in her ankle she had forgotten about or from the alcohol. Sadie toppled over almost on top of her laughing. Anna tried one more time to stand up on her own and was about to fall back down once again before Charles caught her arms. Anna looked up at him, having to tilt her chin as he was so much taller than she.

"Where are you going?" he asked her, keeping a firm but gentle grip on her arms.

She had to think about her answer for a moment before she remembered. "I was coming to say hello to you!"

"You could have done that from where you were."

She scowled up at him. "But I've got other things to say too."

"What do you need to say?"

"Let's go...somewhere else." She couldn't name anywhere else, but tried hopping away on one foot. She only got one hop in before she started to wobble and Charles scooped her up and carried her away from the campfire. He carried her over to a log at the edge of the campsite and sat her down, nestling himself next to her.

"What did you want to say?" Anna stayed quiet for a moment as she got lost in his dark eyes staring directly into hers.

"Charles, I'm drunk," she finally said after a long pause. The corners of his lips turned up just a little.

"I know."

He had barely gotten the words out before Anna leaned forward and crashed her lips into his for a sloppy kiss. They stayed that way for a moment before Charles took her shoulders in her hands and separated them. He kept his hands on her shoulders and just looked at her for a moment, and unreadable expression on his face.

“I think we need to get you to bed.” Anna nodded and he slid his hands down her arms and took her hands to help her stand up. He scooped her up just as he had done the night before, but this time she rested her head against his chest. He walked her slowly to her tent and laid her in her bedroll, reaching to brush a strand of hair out of her face as he moved back. Sadie was already facedown on her bedroll next to Anna.

“We’ll talk again in the morning,” Charles promised as he left the girls’ tent.

As soon as the tent flap closed, Sadie flipped over to face Anna.

“I thought you were asleep,” Anna slurred, fighting her own drooping eyelids.

“Not yet.”

“I kissed Charles,” Anna whispered to her.

Sadie let out a girlish giggle. “You did what!?”

“I kissed Charles,” Anna told her again. Sadie had more questions, but Anna didn’t hear them as she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 8

“Shit, it’s so bright out,” Anna moaned through a pounding headache, flipping over to bury her face in her pillow.

“Keep your goddamn voice down,” Sadie shot back, pulling her own blanket over her head. It was clear that both women had over indulged the night before.

There was a rustling noise as their tent flap moved. Sadie threw her pillow at it, but Arthur caught it with ease as he slid into the tent. “That’s no way to greet someone who just convinced Grimshaw not to come and wake your lazy ass up,” he grinned as he tossed the pillow back towards Sadie.

“Sweet Jesus, I couldn’t take that woman’s screeching this morning,” Sadie agreed as she pulled herself up sit on her bedroll. Anna started to roll over, but froze as she began to remember the events of the night before.

She had kissed him. She had gotten drunk and kissed Charles.

“You alright there, Anna?” Arthur had noticed the change in emotions on her face.

“I’ve just got a pounding headache.” It wasn’t a complete lie, it really did feel like there was an ice pick stuck in her skull. She wasn’t sure that Arthur believed her, but he didn’t push the issue anymore.

“Good luck to you, ladies,” Arthur chuckled as he went to leave the tent. “Looks like y’all need it today.” The two women both rose and started getting themselves ready for the day as slowly as possible. Anna did her best to hop on one foot, her sprained ankle still protesting under her weight.

“Did anyone else get as sloppy as we did last night? Anna asked Sadie. She honestly didn’t remember what the others were like. Maybe she wouldn’t have to worry if Charles had been drinking too, but she had a feeling this wasn’t the case.

“Not quite like us,” Sadie chuckled. Anna bit her lip as it was confirmed that he was fully aware of everything that had happened. “What are you gonna say to Charles?”

“You remember it too?” Anna sighed. “I have no idea what to say.”

“You could always tell him you didn’t mean it.”

“I can’t lie to him,” Anna let the words slip out without fully realizing what she was saying. Did she mean it? Sadie let her hands rest at her gun belt and looked over at the other girl.

“You’re sweet on him, aren’t you?” Sadie asked, somewhere between teasing and interested.

Anna bit her lip hard, feeling tears pricking her eyes as they threatened to fall. “I don’t know, Sadie,” she whispered, avoiding eye contact. “I just lost Matthew, I’ve been hating myself for

feeling anything about Charles. It just don't seem right."

Sadie suddenly wrapped Anna into a hug. "Quit beating yourself up," she encouraged. "You can't control when these things happen. When people come into your life." Sadie pulled away so she could look Anna in the face. "He'd want you to be happy."

Anna nodded and wiped away a few stray tears. "Thank you, Sadie. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Probably wouldn't have a hangover now," Sadie laughed. She wrapped an arm around Anna's waist and helped her out of the tent to a table near the center of camp. Neither of them were all that interested in eating yet, so they were content to sit and watch the bustle around the camp, squinting their eyes as they tried to get used to the sunlight. Anna had a hand up over her eyes to try and shield some of the more direct light and didn't notice Charles heading her way. She gasped, startled, as he sat himself down right next to her.

"Jesus Christ, you scared me." She noticed a smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

"How are you two feeling this morning?"

"Just peachy, thanks for asking," Sadie shot back sarcastically. He couldn't hide his smile that time.

"Anna, take a ride with me?" Charles stood and offered a hand to help her up as well. She accepted his help with a smile, fighting the urge to glance back at Sadie. He helped her walk over to Stormy and lifted her onto the horse's back, his touch making her heart flutter. He mounted Taima and they trotted out of camp side by side, neither one saying a word. Anna chewed on the inside of her cheek, trying to find the right words to say. They stayed silent as Charles led them to spot on the shore of a lake. He dismounted and went right over to help Anna down as well, moving with her over to a log where they sat down together. The two looked out over the lake, both at a loss for words.

"Charles, I'm sorry," she broke the silence with the only thing she could think of.

He shook his head. "Anna, you don't...you've got...I'm the one who should be apologizing." Anna had never heard him at such a loss for words. He was usually so calm and put together, almost stoic.

"What on Earth would *you* need to apologize for?"

"I knew you were drunk, I shouldn't have let it happen. It's my fault that you regret it."

"No, Charles, it's not your fault, I'm the one who kissed you. And besides, I don't regret it." The words were out of her mouth before she realized what she was saying. His dark eyes stared right at her. She only looked for a moment before she felt heat burning in her cheeks and she turned away again.

"Anna," she loved the way her name sounded on his lips, and brought her eyes up again to look at him. She could only imagine what color her cheeks were at this point. "What exactly

are you telling me?”

“I’m telling you that I don’t regret kissing you last night. I do regret that I was drunk, I regret that I’m still so broken from losing what my life was before, I regret that I’ve been ignoring the way you make me feel for weeks now. Shit, there’s lots of things that I regret. Kissing you is not one of the those things. I guess I’m sweet on you, Charles.” His face brightened with a soft smile as her rambling had gone on, reaching down and grabbing her hand in his as she finished. He brought it to his lips, pressing them to her knuckles.

“Can I be honest with you?”

Anna let out a small laugh. “After everything I just told you, I sure as hell hope so.”

“I suppose you’re right. I’ve had eyes on you for weeks now. I didn’t want to overstep anything. I still don’t want to if you’re still healing.”

Anna opened and closed her mouth a few times, trying to find the right words to say. She couldn’t find them. Instead, she leaned forward and pressed her lips to his. She felt him tense for just a moment, surprised, but then relaxed next to her. He reached up and put a hand on her cheek, deepening the kiss. They stayed that way for several beautiful moments before he leaned back slightly, separating their lips. He ran his thumb over her cheek bone and smiled at her. She couldn’t help but smile back, a small giggle escaping as well. For having no plan at all for what to say to this man, things had turned out alright for her. The two sat hand in hand for a few more minutes, looking out over the lake.

“We should probably head back before they start to wonder where we are,” Charles suggested. Anna moved to stand up with him, but before she could he had scooped her up in his arms and moved to put her on her horse. Before he could move his hands away from her waist, she grabbed one and squeezed gently, smiling at him. He offered a warm smile back before she let him go so he could swing himself up on Taima. The two rode back to camp slowly, enjoying each other’s uninterrupted company for a short while until they were back at camp. There were several times on the ride that they would fall into a comfortable silence, but Anna never felt the need to fill it. Charles was quiet, only saying what he felt needed to be said, and she appreciated that about him. Their quiet was only interrupted by a gruff shout of “who’s there?” from John as they came into camp.

Soon enough, Anna found herself perched at the same table in the middle of camp that she had been at the night before, several of Mary-Beth’s books surrounding her. She lazily paged through one but found that she was having a harder time paying attention to the words on the page than she was yesterday. Her eyes kept being drawn to Charles’ large figure as he chopped firewood for the camp, his muscles rippling under his shirt with each swing of the axe. Miss Grimshaw had stopped by the table at one point, pointedly asking when Anna would be well enough to begin her chores again. After Anna promised she would get back to it tomorrow, she closed her book and rested her head on her hand, lazily watching Charles do his own work. She realized that she must have drifted off when she was startled by Sadie roughly dropping a bowl of stew in front of her and sitting down at the table with her own as well.

“So, how was today?” Sadie asked, a mischievous grin playing on her lips.

“You mean aside from the hangover?”

“Yes, aside from the hangover, you dumbass.”

“It was...amazing.” Anna stopped short as Lenny joined them at the table.

“What's so amazing then, Miss Crawford?”

“The fact that my headache has somehow gone away,” Anna joked. She wasn't quite sure what Charles was comfortable with the others around the camp knowing. And besides, she wasn't quite sure what to call the agreement they had come to.

“Y'all two ladies did have a bit of fun last night,” Lenny laughed, a smile brightening his face. Anna really liked Lenny. He was younger than many of the rest of them in the camp and seem to want to prove his abilities despite his age. He was always one of the first to volunteer for jobs when Dutch needed another man, and Anna knew from Charles and Arthur that he was one of the men they trusted to have along.

Lenny sat for a while and told the two ladies about when Arthur had taken him out to the saloon in Valentine. They had both drank too much, Arthur kept losing him in the bar, and Lenny ended up in jail for the night to sleep it off. The way Lenny told the story had Sadie and Anna practically falling out of their seats laughing. Arthur sat nearby, interjecting his own perspective to the story here and there. Anna couldn't stop smiling at the idea of him not only dancing, but getting others to dance with him as well.

As others were winding down for the evening as well, Sadie helped Anna over to the campfire where Javier was already strumming his guitar quietly. It wasn't long before Charles joined as well, sitting at Anna's other side. She found herself mesmerized watching Javier's fingers on the neck of the guitar. It seemed everyone was content to just listen to the music that night, and as he was singing “Angel de Amor,” Anna felt her hand being enveloped by Charles' much larger, calloused one. She looked up at him to see that his eyes were already on her. She smiled at him and he squeezed her hand gently in response.

Javier hadn't even finished the song when Anna found herself starting to nod off. As soon as Charles noticed he took her in his arms and started moving towards her tent, her head resting against his chest. She found herself wishing that the walk to her bedroll was just a little bit longer as he pushed the flap aside and laid her down gently. He kissed the top of her head before he left, whispering, “sleep well, my girl.”

Chapter 9

Anna was sitting at a table, sewing a button back on one of Charles's shirts as he looked on silently when Uncle's voice boomed across the camp. "Bill! Come on over here. Will you be my other fool? You too Charles!"

Charles rolled his eyes but stood as Uncle approached, Arthur not far behind.

"What are you talking about?" Bill snapped.

"Arthur's above a little stick up I heard about."

"No I'm not," Arthur corrected.

"Well, you just said-"

"Hey, I'll do it as long as you ride with us."

"I got a serious medical condition."

Anna bit her lip to keep from laughing, but Arthur let out a chuckle as he took a drag on his cigarette. "Yes, you are a compulsive liar."

"No need to be like that. Charles, have I ever lied to you?"

"I hardly know you," Charles finally responded now that Uncle had addressed him directly.

"Exactly!" Uncle exclaimed. "Now, you boys should do this. It's easy, and I'll only take a small commission for my information, but it's now or never."

"Then it's never," Arthur threw his cigarette butt to the ground.

"Oh, God help me," Uncle complained. "Fine, I'll do it."

"Well, what is it?" Arthur finally demanded. Clearly, Uncle hadn't explained the job to any of them.

"It's a supply wagon carrying payroll, but very briefly unguarded apparently as it passes through a crossroads near here where there's an old ruined church before it connects with the rest of the wagon train. Very easy pickings."

"As long as we get paid or you get shot I'm happy," Arthur decided. Bill, Arthur, and Uncle started toward the horses, Uncle continuing to complain as they went. Anna shook her head as she turned her attention back to the shirt in her lap, muttering about Uncle and his less-than-reliable information under her breath. Charles hung back, eyeing Anna to gauge her reaction to the job. She raised her eyebrows at him. "Well, ain't you going to go?"

"I don't have to, I'm sure they could manage."

“Go. Arthur’ll need you along to keep him sane.” She glanced over to see if anyone was watching before she leaned forward and kissed him. “Just come back safe.”

A smile tugged at Charles’ lips as he squeezed her hand gently. “I’ll be back later today.” She watched as he caught up with the other three men, mounting Taima and heading out. Anna tied off the thread she had been working with and carefully folded the shirt before picking up another out of the pile to mend.

“Looks like you’ve got a soft spot for the redskin,” a nasally voice came from behind her. She whipped around to see Micah leaning on the table, a predatory grin on his face. Anna really hadn’t interacted with him much since she had gotten to the camp, but Arthur had warned her she might want to stay away. As this was the first full sentence he had spoken to her, she could see Arthur’s warnings had merit. Her face must have twisted, showing her feelings, because he let out a laugh that made her skin crawl.

“Hi, Micah,” Anna did her best to hide her shaking voice.

“Ain’t no reason to be scared, sweetheart. Just thought I’d come and check on you, know what all you went through with your husband.”

“I’m doing just fine.” She kept her attention on the shirt she was mending instead of on his face.

“Well, you just let me know if you need anything. Anything at all.” Micah offered a sleazy wink and sauntered off to bother someone else in the camp. Anna let out a breath she hadn’t realized she had been holding. For such a short conversation, she felt incredible uncomfortable around the man. She tried to push him out of her mind and instead get back to the clothes Grimshaw had asked her to mend.

Anna was just folding another shirt she was finished with when Hosea came and sat himself down at the table with her.

“Miss Grimshaw’s got you busy, I see?”

Anna nodded and smiled. “I’m happy to help.”

“Well, my dear, I may have another task for you if you’re up for it.”

“What is it?” Anna was a bit excited that Hosea had come to find her. She had been watching the men coming and going from the camp, busy around Rhodes, and always returning with another story to tell and a promise of gold from some rich families when it was all through.

“Arthur has been playing messenger for a Gray boy and Braithwaite girl, but I think you’d be better suited to some of the work. Make friends with the girl, Penelope Braithwaite is her name. Get close, see what you can find. We’ve got a letter from the boy to bring her, she’s waiting in town.”

Anna was more than happy to put down her current work and climb up in a wagon with Hosea. He was going to pick up a few supplies from the general store while she chatted with

Penelope.

"It seems like you're fitting in quite well here, my dear," Hosea noted as they made their way into Rhodes.

"I quite like it," Anna admitted. "Although it's not exactly what I expected out of a gang of outlaws."

Hosea let out a small laugh. "And what exactly did you expect?"

"I'm not sure. I suppose I wasn't expecting the kindness that I've been shown. I truly don't think that another group of people has ever been this kind to me before."

"You were lucky that Charles and Arthur were the ones to find you. Arthur don't like to say as much, but he's a good man. Charles is too, but he's a bit more accepting of the fact. If I'm bein' honest, I don't think everyone in the camp would have extended the same kindness if they had been the ones to find you."

"Are you thinking about the same person that I am?"

"If you're thinking about Micah, then yes. No point in beating around the bush about it. I'm not sure exactly what Dutch sees in him, but he's here and it doesn't look like he's going anywhere any time soon. Why, has he said something to you, dear?"

Anna glanced down to her shoes. "No, nothing in particular," she lied.

"You sure? He makes it pretty clear how he feels about having some folk at camp, and Charles is on that list." Anna looked up to see a warm smile on his face and a knowing look in his eye. How had he known about her and Charles? She opened her mouth to say something, but couldn't quite figure out what to say. He laughed gently.

"No need to be embarrassed, dear. I see much more going on around camp than I think most people realize."

Anna realized they had already made it into Rhodes as Hosea pulled the wagon just off the main road and stopped the horses. He climbed down before reaching up to help Anna down as well, offering up his arm as they walked together into the town. He nodded down the road toward a young woman near the bank.

"I think that there is the girl you need," Hosea mentioned. He patted her hand affectionately as they parted ways, and Anna made her way towards the other girl.

"Miss Braithwaite?" Anna asked, hoping that her words sounded more confident than she felt. "I've got a letter for you. And a gift." She dug both items out of her bag and handed them to the other girl.

"A letter and a gift? Well, we don't even know each other."

"Well, it's not from me, it's from-"

“From Beau!” the other girl cut Anna off as she realized quickly what was going on. “Oh, he is so, well, a little strange. But also, so human. The rest of our families are stuck in the Dark Ages, or...well, I don’t know...cave people, perhaps. Beau’s different, but if they find out they’ll kill him and send me to live someplace awful like Ohio. You ever been to Ohio?”

“I can’t say that I have, miss.” Anna was shocked how easy it was to get this woman to talk to her.

“Well, neither have I, but my uncle has a factory there. He was sort of the black sheep, on account of having left, but now they tolerate him because he’s a vicious snob. Families are...are...they’re something else! Have you got a family?”

Anna balked for only a moment before deciding to slide in a little bit of truth. “Well, I did, miss. But not anymore.”

“Well, they tolerate him because of the money, but me with my ideas above my station, they can’t stand.”

“I think I know what you mean, miss,” Anna agreed as Penelope started scribbling hurriedly on the back of the paper.

“I like you,” she commented in between her writing. “What’s your name?”

“Anna Crawford.”

“Good to meet you, Anna.” Penelope finished her writing and folded the paper back up again. “Anyway, if you see Beau again, would you give this to him?” She held the paper back out to Anna, who put it back in her bag once again. She was just about to turn and walk away when Penelope called her again.

“Oh, and Anna! There’s a...there’s a march this week. For women’s suffrage. It would be wonderful if you would join us.”

Anna smiled and nodded. “I’ll be there,” she promised, before turning and heading back toward the wagon. She found Hosea already loading up the last of the goods from the general store. He brushed his hands off on his pants and offered a hand to her to get back up into the wagon.

They rode in silence for awhile until they were safely out of town to talk about Anna and Penelope’s conversation. She told him about everything she had learned, from the rich uncle in Ohio to the protest march she had been invited to and the letter she had to deliver back to Beau at Calliga Hall. When she finally stopped to take a breath, Hosea patted her knee, smile on his face. “You did good, real good.”

“I’m glad I can help.”

“You’re doing plenty of helping, my dear. It’s good to have you around camp.”

They heard John’s raspy voice calling out a warning as they drove through the trees, and Hosea called him off easily. Anna wandered around the camp to find the best shady tree she

could nestle herself under to read one of Mary-Beth's books.

The sun was already starting to set when Anna realized that Charles and the others that had gone out on Uncle's tip hadn't made it back yet. She closed the book and stood up, looking around the camp for Sadie and trying to ignore the worried feeling starting to settle in her stomach. Anna found Sadie sitting near the fire, cleaning her revolver. Anna sat herself down next to the blonde, chewing the inside of her cheek as she tried to come up with a way to ask about the boys without sounding overly worried.

Her face must have shown her emotions, just as it had earlier in the day with Micah. "What're you so worried for?" Sadie asked her almost right away.

"I'm still learning this whole outlaw thing," Anna admitted. "Charles had said they'd be back this afternoon from that job Uncle had found. Should I be worried they haven't shown back up yet?"

Sadie shrugged her shoulders. "Knowing Uncle, the tip wasn't as great as he was making it out to be. Probably just took them longer than they thought, I'm sure they'll make it back tonight still."

Anna nodded and fell silent, doing her best not to worry as Sadie had suggested, but finding it difficult. She spent the evening milling about the camp, unsure what exactly she should be doing with herself. It was relatively quiet around the camp that night, making it even more difficult for her to entertain herself. By the time she turned in for the night, the boys still hadn't returned.

Anna awoke the next morning to the sound of hooves approaching camp. It was still early and most of the camp was awoken to the same sounds. Anna poked her head out to find Uncle was the only one approaching, and the pit of worry that had been in her stomach since the night before grew even larger.

"What happened?" Dutch was the first to speak despite the number of people who had come out of their tents to investigate the noise. "You told us it was a simple job."

"It was supposed to be," Uncle muttered. The sound of another horse's hooves came towards the camp as Arthur appeared.

"You goddamn idiot!" he cried, hopping off his horse and stomping towards Uncle. "What in the hell possessed you to take us to rob a Cornwall wagon?"

Anna glanced over to see Dutch hang his head, eyes closed and the bridge of his nose pinched between his thumb and pointer finger. With the way Arthur had spit out the word "Cornwall" and the way Dutch was reacting, she could tell there was a history behind it she didn't know.

"And what about Bill and Charles?" Sadie piped up.

"We all had to split up, don't know where they went," Arthur explained. "Should be back soon enough." Dutch, Arthur, and Uncle walked back to Dutch's tent to give him the details

of the job gone wrong, and Anna trudged back to her tent to get dressed for the day. There was no way she was getting back to sleep now. Instead, she would have to struggle to find ways to entertain herself and forget her concern.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Heads up: there is a description of a panic attack in this chapter. I did my best to put into words what my panic attacks are like, not so sure I did it justice but it's whatever.

Almost summer break, I'll have more time to write soon! Thanks for sticking with me, lovelies.

A couple of hours after Arthur and Uncle returned from the botched wagon robbery, Bill came trotting into camp as well. All that was left was Charles. Anna tried to busy herself with washing and mending clothes to better appease Miss Grimshaw, but her attention was torn to the entrance of the camp each time she thought she heard the sound of a horse approaching, although more times than not there wasn't a noise at all.

It was past noon by the time Charles came back to the camp as well. She noticed he had a deer on the back of Taima, and realized he must have used his time split up from the others hunting on his own, delaying his return to the camp. She knew it was irrational, but couldn't help feeling a bit hurt that he didn't come back to camp as quickly as he could so she would know he was safe. She wanted to run up and kiss him, but that small, hurt part of her won out. She turned her attention to the washing she still had in front of her and watched out of the corner of her eye as he dismounted and slung the deer over his shoulder, bringing it over to Pearson's tent. Finally, he made his way over to Anna, sitting down next to her at the table where she was working. He watched her washing, silently.

"Hi, Anna," he finally broke the silence with the first thing he could think of.

"Welcome back, Charles." Anna stood with the last of the clothes she had just washed and went to put them out to dry on the outskirts of the camp. Unsure what else to do, Charles followed along just behind her. He stood back and watched as she finished her chores.

"Anna, did I upset you?"

"No, I just...I was just worried." She felt the prick of tears behind her eyes and tried to blink them back. She couldn't understand why she was upset. He did what he had to do for the job, and just used his time wisely by hunting. The gang had to eat. She felt more embarrassed as tears threatened to fall.

"I shouldn't have promised I'd be back that day, especially if Uncle is the one with the tip. Things can always go wrong."

Anna bit her lip. She wasn't sure if his comment about things going wrong had hurt or helped more. "So...so what did exactly happen?"

“The wagon we were robbing was a Cornwall wagon. Leviticus Cornwall is some business man that Dutch has robbed from a few too many times, and has far more guards on his wagons that Uncle had told us. We had to go hide out in a barn for the night, but then the property owners found us. There was a bit of a shootout, the barn burned down around us. When we finally got out of there we thought it would be best to split up and lie low for the night until we could make it back here separately.”

Anna couldn't help but notice the nonchalant way that he told the story, despite the fact he or any of the other boys could easily have been killed. All of a sudden, she felt her chest tightening around her. The tears that she had been fighting back spilled over, one after the other, leaving steady streams down her cheeks. She gasped to catch her breath, but it felt like her heart and lungs were going to explode inside her. She sat down with her back against a tree, holding her head in her hands. She vaguely realized that Charles had knelt down next to her, placing a hand on her shoulder and asking if she was alright, but he seemed like he was miles away.

Anna squeezed her eyes shut as tight as she could and focused on her breathing. It seemed like every inhale burned her lungs and that the air kept getting caught in her throat. She felt like everything was collapsing around her, crushing her. “I'm gonna...I'm gonna die,” she gasped out between sobs. She honestly believed that this would be the end for her, propped up here against the tree.

Just as Anna thought she was about to pass out from the lack of air entering her lungs, she felt her heart rate starting to slow again, the pain in her ribs from it's pounding subsiding. She felt like she could start controlling her own limbs again. Her breathing rate slowed and she lifted her head, starting to feel like she was making her way back to normal, although there were still tears running down her cheeks.

A gentle squeeze on her shoulder drew Anna's attention to Charles, still kneeling on the ground next to her. She glanced up to see the worried expression on his face and immediately dropped her gaze back down, feeling embarrassed.

“Are you okay? Do you need me to go get Swanson?”

Anna shook her head. “No, no, I'm not sick or anything.”

“If you're not sick then what just happened?”

“Sometimes it just...happens. If I get too worried about something.” Anna bit her lip, trying unsuccessfully to stop the stream of silent tears that were still rolling down her cheeks.

“What can I do?”

Anna shook her head. “Just...talk to me about anything besides what just happened.”

“Did you see what Jack was doing yesterday?” Charles expertly changed the subject and Anna shook her head, finally making eye contact with him. “He was trying to act just like John. He was following Marston around, walking just like him, trying to get his voice to sound just like his. Even John had fun watching him, at least until Jack went and called

Arthur a dumbass. Then everyone else laughed while Marston grumbled that he doesn't curse at Arthur that often.”

Anna couldn't help but grin despite herself, even finding a small chuckle at the mental image of the small boy trying to act like his father. She wiped at her cheeks with the back of her hand, the tears finally slowing down. She glanced over at Charles and noticed the small smile on his face as well as he watched her closely. Although she was starting to feel more like herself, she knew that her face was likely flushed and her eyes puffy from crying. If she went back towards the camp, she knew others would be asking her what was wrong - a question she couldn't quite answer for herself.

“Will you walk with me for a while?” she finally asked Charles. He rose and offered a hand down to her to help her up as well. He kept her smaller hand clasped in his as they walked along the shore near the camp.

“So what did you get up to while I was out?” Charles asked, doing his best to keep the conversation as light as he could.

“Actually, Hosea found me and asked for my help with a job.” Anna felt Charles' hand stiffen just slightly in hers.

“What kind of job?”

“With the Grays and Braithwaites. There's a Gray boy and Braithwaite girl that are playing Romeo and Juliet. Arthur got a letter to deliver to the girl, Penelope, but I took it to her instead. Hosea wants me to try and get close to her.”

“Hmm.” Charles fell silent, his eyes gliding out over the lake beside them.

“She asked me to be in a march for women's suffrage with her tomorrow.”

“A protest march? In Rhodes?”

Anna nodded, chewing her lip. It did sound a bit crazy now that Charles had said it like that. But Hosea hadn't seemed worried about it and so she hadn't worried either.

“I'll go with you,” Charles decided.

“I'm not so sure that a women's suffrage protest march in Rhodes would be made much safer with a half black, half native man there.”

Charles heaved out a sigh, realizing she was probably right. “What about Arthur?”

“I can handle myself, Charles.”

“It's not you I don't trust. It's everyone else.” He pulled her into a hug and kissed the top of her head. They stayed that way for a few moments before she leaned back to look at him again.

“Let's go find Arthur, see if he'll come with.”

The two walked hand in hand back towards the camp. As they approached the tents, Anna started to pull her hand away from Charles', thinking he wouldn't want the others to see. He held fast, not letting her take her hand back. She raised her eyebrows at him, but he just smiled back and continued walking.

They found Arthur propped up against the wagon that made the back wall of his tent, writing and drawing in his journal. He shut it as he heard them approaching.

"Arthur," Charles greeted him. Arthur's eyes flicked down only momentarily to their hands. A small smirk graced his lips, but he didn't acknowledge it otherwise.

"Need something?"

"Actually, yes," Charles replied. "Hosea has Anna getting close with Penelope Braithwaite, and wants her to go to a protest march tomorrow with the girl. I won't be much help there but you might be."

Arthur nodded. "I'll go with, then."

"Thank you, Arthur," Anna smiled at him.

He tipped his hat in response and went back to working in his journal as Anna and Charles left him to it.

The next morning, it seemed that Charles was almost hovering around Anna as she got herself ready for the protest. He sat close to her while she ate breakfast and got Stormy ready for the trip before she even had the chance to do it herself. When it was time for her and Arthur to leave, Charles walked over to the horses with them. He planted a kiss on Anna's lips before looking down at her with his intense gaze. "Be safe."

"I will."

He gave her one last kiss before helping to lift her into the saddle, then hung back and watched as she and Arthur left the camp quietly.

They were well away from the camp by the time Arthur broke the silence. "So, uh, you and Charles...?" He waved his hand in the air a bit instead of finishing his thought. Anna felt her cheeks starting to redden. She just nodded in response, unable to find her voice.

"That's....that's good." Arthur readjusted his hat so it covered his eyes a bit more.

"Charles...well, he deserves to be happy. You do too."

"Thank you, Arthur." Anna could still feel the burning in her face, but managed to smile at Arthur anyway.

They came up over a small hill and saw a gathering of women, some with signs, trying to get organized around a wagon just on the outskirts of the town. Arthur and Anna hitched their horses and made their way over to the group, Anna looking for Penelope as they approached.

An older woman began addressing the group, and Anna found Penelope off to the side, talking intensely with a boy she assumed was Beau.

"I cannot let you go thought with this," they heard Beau telling her as they approached. "You'll be killed."

"I'm prepared to die for the cause, Beau. You know that."

They both turned their heads as Arthur and Anna came up next to them. There was a flash of recognition on Beau's face when he saw Arthur, and Penelope came over to stand alongside Anna.

"Do something, please!" Beau begged Arthur.

"Do what? Fight this mob? They'll eat me alive." Anna had to swallow a laugh at Arthur's words.

"This is no laughing matter, sir," Beau shot back. He gestured over to Anna and Penelope, standing arm and arm as if they had been friends for ages. "They need protecting from certain elements. Mostly my family."

"I'll tell you what," Penelope finally broke into the conversation. "Anna's friend here can drive the wagon for us. It'll allow us to shout all the louder." She practically dragged Anna over to where the older woman had just finished speaking. "Ms. Calhoon!" she called. "Ms. Calhoon, my friend here says he can drive the wagon."

"Olive Calhoon," she offered a hand out to Arthur to shake. "Normally, I like to drive myself, but today, I feel like a man joining us sends the right message."

"Well, I ain't never been in a protest march before, madam," Anna could hear Arthur telling her. But Ms. Calhoon was already leading him to the front of the wagon while Penelope led Anna to the back. The two women took their seats among the others as Beau looked on, worried. It was only a moment before Ms. Calhoon turned to address the women one last time.

"Alright, ladies," she called, "We know our song is a good one, and we know our cause is a pure one. Let liberty reign!" There was a loud cheer as Arthur urged the horses forward towards the town, and the group began singing. Anna did her best to learn the words and sing along as they made their way down the main street toward the bank.

Beau trailed behind the women as they went, trying unsuccessfully to look like he wasn't doing exactly that. The farther the wagon went, the more attention the group got, with people across the town coming out to hurl insults at the group. If Anna was being honest, she was glad that Charles had asked Arthur to come along rather than going on her own.

Arthur pulled the horses to a stop in front of the steps of the bank, and Ms. Calhoon instructed all the women to climb down. Arthur left his seat as well, gravitating towards Anna as a large, angry crowd formed opposite the protestors.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is a great day for all of us,” Ms. Calhoon began. “For today is the day we begin to live as equals. Fair, equal, and free, just as the Founding Fathers intended.”

“What the hell you doing here, boy?” Anna’s attention was drawn away from Ms. Calhoon at a gruff voice not far from them. She hadn’t noticed when Beau had joined Arthur, but now there were several others there who looked none too pleased.

“Hello there, darling cousin,” Beau greeted him dryly.

“Don’t you ever speak to me like that! What are you doing here?”

“Listening, I suppose.”

Anna caught Arthur’s eye and nodded over to where Beau was in the middle of the confrontation, hoping he’d get the signal to go and help the boy.

“Beau!” Arthur called, making his way over. “Weren’t we just leaving?”

“Who the hell is this?” his cousin demanded. Both Arthur and Beau ignored him.

“Follow me around here,” Arthur pointed over to an alley near the bank.

Beau did as he was told, leaving his cousin gaping. “Come this way,” Anna whispered in Penelope’s ear. She led the other woman around the opposite side of the bank, back toward where her and Arthur’s horses were hitched.

The two other men were just swinging into their saddles as Penelope and Anna joined them. Arthur nodded to Anna. It seemed he had been watching to make sure they made it around the bank safely as well.

“Beau, you get goin’ before that moron cousin of yours changes his mind ‘bout lettin’ you go,” Arthur instructed. Beau nodded, sparing one last longing glance at Penelope before spurring his horse down the road.

“Miss Braithwaite,” Arthur turned his attention back to the women, “let’s get you on back home.” He offered a hand down to Penelope and helped her on the back of his horse and Anna mounted Stormy. They set off at a bit of a faster pace than when they made their way into town.

Penelope directed Arthur the back way into the Braithwaite Manor, where she knew the guards were a bit more agreeable and wouldn’t give him as much trouble. They made their way to a beautiful gazebo and Arthur helped Penelope down from the horse.

“Thank you for your help today, Mr. Morgan,” she said. “I don’t think Beau would have made it out of there unscathed without you.” She turned her attention over to Anna, wrapping her in a friendly hug. “Please, come and call on me here. I look forward to seeing you again!”

Arthur and Anna made their way out of the manor, avoiding the guards before hitting the trail towards camp again.

“You did good today, Anna,” Arthur offered her a small smile.

“Thank you for being there.”

Charles was waiting for them when they got back into camp. He came over and helped Anna down off of Stormy, hitching the horse for her.

“How was it?” Charles asked them, lazily draping an arm across Anna’s shoulders as they all made their way farther into the camp.

“Not bad. I’m glad Arthur came with, though.”

Charles smiled down at her and placed a kiss on her cheek. “I’m glad you’re safe.”

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Wow. It's been a HOT minute. With everything going on in the world right now and the extra time that I've found myself with I figured why not try to pick this back up a little?

Some smut in this chapter. Don't think it's great, but maybe passable? I'm down for some feedback if you've got it!

Anna realized after the protest march how truly worried about her Charles had been. Just a few days before, Charles had been looking around to make sure no one was watching before giving her a kiss goodbye. But as soon as she had returned from Rhodes with Arthur, Charles rested his arm across her shoulders as they made their way through camp. He kissed her cheek near the campfire and sat as close as he could while they ate dinner. That evening as the gang relaxed around the campfire, he even reached up and pulled her down to sit in his lap.

“Would you like to go hunting with me again tomorrow?” he asked her.

“I’d love to. It’s been a while.”

“I’d like to go a little farther towards New Hanover. We could make it a couple day trip.”

“Sounds wonderful to me.”

“We’ll get an early start in the morning then. Might want to get some sleep.”

Anna nodded in agreement, letting out a sigh before standing to head to her tent. She bade him goodnight before starting to leave, but he caught her before she could get far. He pulled her back down towards him and pressed his lips to hers. She heard a few “aww”s and whoops and whistles from the gang around them and smiled into the kiss before pulling away just slightly.

“Good night,” he smiled at her, giving her one more quick peck before letting her go.

Anna tucked herself into her bedroll with a smile on her face. She found herself wishing she could snuggle up with Charles to fall asleep, but she was willing to settle for getting to spend some time with him over the next few days.

Anna thought she woke up early the next morning, but when she came out of her tent she saw that Charles was already almost finished packing up both Taima and Stormy with the things

they would need for the trip.

He smiled when he saw her and finished tying up what he was packing on the horses. "Morning, sunshine," he greeted her, reaching down to get a cup of coffee he had set on the ground and offering it to her. She accepted it gratefully. He continued packing up the last of the items he had set aside for the trip as she watched. Anna couldn't help but watch the muscles of his arms shift and move under the shirt he was wearing. She bit her lip, knowing that she shouldn't be staring at him the way she was, but she couldn't help herself. Charles turned unexpectedly to grab something he needed, and Anna tried to avert her eyes and cover her cheeks turning red by taking another sip out of the coffee cup. Based on the smirk and small chuckle Charles sent her way, she figured she wasn't all that successful.

Anna and Charles spent more than half of the day traveling. Anna constantly found her eyes drifting over to Charles as they rode. She tried to bring them back to the road in front of her as quickly as she could, but there was more than one occasion that Charles caught her looking. He was kind enough to try to pretend that he didn't notice each time, but she noticed him fighting against the corners of his mouth turning up into a smile as his attention focused back on the trail.

Around midday they found a spot that Charles decided would be suitable for them to hunt. As they were taking what they needed from the backs of the horses, Charles stopped for a moment, putting a hand on Anna's shoulder and pointing out in the distance. "See the bison over there?"

Anna could just make out the outlines of several of the large, hairy animals standing at the top of a hill. She was shocked that he could pick them out that easily when they were still so far away. She knew if he hadn't pointed them out, she wouldn't have seen them herself. "Is that what we're hunting?" she asked quietly. She wasn't quite confident that her hunting skills would be much help with bison yet.

Charles smiled gently and shook his head. "Not this time," he assured her. "We'll stick with deer for now. But aren't the bison just beautiful?"

Anna watched his face as he kept his eyes on the small herd. Although the corners of his mouth had turned up into a small smile, there was something else she couldn't read behind his expression. "They are beautiful," she agreed.

"My mother's tribe survived off bison, used every part of the animal, only hunting what they needed." He fell quiet again, his eyes still trained on the animals as they turned and started disappearing over the hill.

"You've never really told me about your family," Anna noted quietly as his attention started to turn back to her. "Did you grow up with your mother's tribe?"

"In a way, I guess I did," he shrugged as he found the last of what he needed in his saddlebags. "I was still a kid when the army came and drove the tribe away from where we were living. They took my mother not too much later and we never saw her again. My father wasn't the same after that. Picked up a bottle and never put it back down. I left when I was thirteen or so and I've been more or less on my own ever since."

Anna was struck by the matter-of-fact way he recounted his childhood. She felt frozen for a moment, trying to decide how to respond to everything he had just shared with her. Finally, Charles lifted his eyes to hers with a small but genuine smile. "That - that sounds tough," Anna finally decided to say. She cringed internally at her choice of words, but realized there was nothing she could do now to take them back.

Charles kept the smile on his face as he came around Taima to stand with Anna. "At the time, maybe," he agreed. "But all those things led me to where I am now. I can't be upset about that." He reached over to squeeze her hand briefly and she let out a small sigh of relief.

The pair spent the rest of the day hunting, ending up with plenty of meat to take back to the camp with them. As the sun started setting, Anna began cooking some of their venison over the fire as Charles began getting a tent set up. She watched (again) as he quickly and expertly pitched his tent he had packed on Taima and started moving back towards the horses again to get another.

"Charles," she called over to him. "Why don't you come and eat first while it's still warm." She was lucky that he set that tent up as quickly as he did, or she would have burnt their dinner for staring at him. She passed him his dinner as he nestled himself next to her comfortably, his knees and shoulders touching hers. She grinned as they both dug into their food.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders but wasn't able to find an answer right away. "Nothing really funny," she admitted, but he still sat quietly next to her as if waiting for the rest of the answer. "Just makes me happy, being with you. Last few days, they've been...really nice. The way that you haven't been afraid of being around me in camp or anything like that. I don't know. Just happy, I guess."

Charles set his plate down and reached an arm around her waist, pulling her close. "I didn't mean to make you think I didn't want to be affectionate before that. I'm sorry if I did." He paused then, looking down at Anna like there was still something he was trying to find the words to tell her. "I love you, Anna."

Her face broke into a wide smile that she felt would never leave. "I love you, too." Charles let out a breath and gently squeezed her side where his hand had been resting. They stayed that way quietly for a few moments, each of them looking into fire and happy just to be together. After a while, though, Charles heaved a sigh and started moving to get up. "Better go set up the other tent before we fall asleep here," he explained.

Anna grabbed his hand to stop him before he could get too far. "You don't have to do that," she murmured. "I mean-" her eyes darted away from his as he looked at her, suddenly feeling embarrassed, "I mean, I can do it." Her voice came out as barely a whisper as she stood up and started turning towards the horses where the other tent was. He held fast to her hand, though, and stepped forward to place his other hand on her cheek.

"Anna," he said with a small smile on his lips, "I'd love that."

She pressed her forehead to his chest and breathed out a small laugh. "Sorry," she muttered, still giggling at herself.

At that moment, Anna felt a large raindrop land directly on her head. She looked up just in time to see another one dribble its way down Charles' face as well.

"I guess that means it's time," he said. He took a few steps over to the tent and held the flap open for her to enter first, following behind her quickly to sit cross legged on the floor. Anna leaned over, resting her head on Charles' shoulder and watching as the raindrops started to hammer harder and more frequently on the tent above them.

"Getting tired?" he mumbled, twisting a piece of her hair between his fingers.

"Not particularly," she admitted. "More like feeling content. And happy."

Charles wrapped his arms around her shoulders and pulled her into him. "Me too," he murmured into her hair, kissing the top of her head. Anna turned her face towards his before he could move too far away from her again, pressing a kiss to his lips instead.

Charles slid his hand from her shoulder to the back of her neck, deepening the kiss. Anna felt like she was melting into him, her hands running up and down his arms slowly so that she could feel the muscles hidden underneath his shirt. As she started sliding her hands towards the buttons on his shirt he took her hands gently in his and tilted his face down to break their kiss. Anna could tell he was trying to keep his breathing slow and steady, but he brought his eyes back up to meet hers.

"I'm sorry," he whispered as he squeezed her hands in his gently. Anna couldn't help but furrow her brows.

"Sorry? For what?"

She felt rather than heard him sigh next to her. "For...I just...I'm sorry for...for pushing you."

Smiling, she gently took one of her hands back from Charles and placed it on his cheek.

"Charles, you're not pushing me into anything," she promised him. "I want this. I swear to you, I want this. I trust you. I love you."

"I love you, too," he leaned down and kissed her again. This time, as her hands started working on the buttons on his shirt he didn't stop her. She pushed the shirt off his shoulders and leaned back, taking him in, running her hands up and down his abs, his chest, his

shoulders. He was beautiful. Suddenly, Charles' fingers were under her chin, lifting her eyes to meet his again.

"You okay?" he asked her.

"More than okay. I just...I can't get enough of you. I know you caught me looking at you today. A whole bunch of times."

"Maybe just once or twice," he grinned.

Shaking her head, he gently pushed on his shoulders to get him to lay back and then joined him, snuggled up to his side. He leaned down to press his lips to hers again as his own fingers started working on her buttons. Her breath hitched as she felt the warmth of his hands brush against her as he worked.

Anna sat up just enough to slide her shirt down her arms before leaning over him to kiss him again. She felt like she couldn't get enough of him. Their lips hardly parted as they helped each other shed their clothes.

Anna felt Charles' weight shift as he gently rolled her onto her back and hovered over her, supporting his weight on his elbow. His other hand drifted down her stomach slowly. "Are you sure you want this?" he whispered. "You can tell me to stop." She nodded her head, not trusting her voice at that moment, and squeezed his arm in reassurance.

His fingers continued trailing down her body until they slipped down to her folds. She couldn't help but gasp and grab onto his shoulders above her. He started moving his thumb in slow, steady circles that she swear made her see stars. She bit her lower lip, trying to quiet some of her moans as he pressed a finger into her, never stopping the circle his thumb was making. His other hand reached up to her breast, rubbing his thumb over her nipple and making her gasp.

She looked up and caught his eye as she reached down to take his length in her hand. She smiled at the sounds he made as she slowly started to move her hand back and forth, hoping she could make him feel half as good as she felt in that moment.

Charles pushed a second finger inside her and she couldn't hold her moan back. "God, Charles," he breathed. His hand froze.

"Did I hurt you?"

"No, please, don't stop! Feels so good."

His fingers picked up exactly where they had left off as he leaned down to trail kisses along her jaw.

"You're so beautiful, Anna," he whispered in her ear. She arched her back up to press as much of her body to his as she could.

"Please, Charles," she moaned, "Please, I want you."

He kissed her, deeply, once again as he moved his body over hers and pressed himself inside of her, making her gasp.

“You alright?”

She could tell that he was holding himself back to check on her. She nodded frantically, moving her legs around his waist and bucking her hips up to meet his. She couldn’t help herself. He got the hint and started moving as well.

His head fell to her shoulder, moaning against her skin. She kissed him anywhere she could reach him and dragged her nails lightly down his back. Their pace became quicker as they got lost in each other. Anna threw her head back as Charles found the perfect angle.

“Oh God, Charles, I’m gonna-”

“Together,” he murmured. His last few thrusts brought her over the edge just before he spilled himself on the ground. He collapsed next to her and she curled up into him, both breathing heavily.

Charles pressed a kiss to the top of Anna’s head with a contented sigh. They laid in silence listening to the rain patter on the tent, and it wasn’t long before they were both asleep tangled in each other’s arms.

Anna awoke the next morning tucked under a blanket with Charles behind her. She rolled over, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes, and found Charles already wide awake and looking at her. “Morning sunshine,” he smiled down at her and greeted her with a kiss.

“I want to wake up like this every morning,” she hummed.

The two got up and got themselves dressed, cleaning up their camp from that night and packing up the horses once again. They made their way back to camp as slowly as they could, content to just enjoy each other's company.

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