



# JoyRide

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**Category:** Romance, Western

**Description:** A vicious gang of juvenile offenders rampages through Harrison County, terrorizing innocent citizens as they jack vehicles and steal wallets. But their crimes escalate to a horrifying new level when they start brutally attacking people and collecting weapons. As Sheriff Travis Frost and his Deputy are both temporarily disabled, it falls on newly sworn-in deputies, Harlan and Tammy to bear the heavy burden of bringing these teenage outlaws to justice before more lives are lost.

**Total Pages (Source):** 91

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

## Chapter One

Sunday, July 21st.

Harlan's Eighteenth Birthday.

Wild Stallion Ranch. Montana.

The past two years had to be the best years of my life. It was like I started my life over when I was almost sixteen and that's all I can remember—all I want to remember.

Everything that happened from birth to sixteen was ancient history—so ancient it felt like it happened to somebody else and not me.

In my first life there was nothing important. Shuffled from foster home to foster home, I never felt like any of those caregivers were my family. Some were nicer than others, but during that entire period of my life there was one thing that I couldn't forget. And that was my brother, Virgil. Virge was exactly two years younger than me. Weird, but we were born on the same day. The twenty-first of July.

When our parents died and we had no other kin, we were put into the system. Virge and I were placed in a couple of foster homes together and for a while and I can remember being with him. I was about six and he was four—something like that.

One day stands out from all the others. It might have been in the fall when the leaves were turning colors, but I can't say for sure.

I remember going to school on the bus and coming home and Virge was gone. My foster mom told me the case worker came and picked Virgil up and took him to live with his new family—a family who were adopting him.

Just him and not me.

They never let me see my brother again and when I was older I tried to find out what his last name would be if it wasn't Linley anymore, but that was a dead end. I was just a kid, and nobody was willing to help me find out what I wanted to know.

That was a long time ago.

I sat on the end of my bed with my head in my hands trying not to think about it no more. Today was my eighteenth birthday and Tammy was making me pancakes. I had to suck it up and get downstairs and hug my foster sister.

I was close with Tammy, but not as close as I was with Travis—my adopted dad—he was tough and hard as nails—an ex-biker, former Marine, and the best thing that ever happened to me.

Now that I was eighteen, I could leave him and our ranch and live some place on my own, but that wouldn't happen. This was my home. Travis made it my home—our home—and I'd never leave him.

I ran down the stairs from my room and the smell of coffee, pancakes and bacon coming from the kitchen was like the best birthday present I could ever have.

“Happy birthday, Harlan,” said Tammy. She ran towards me and gave me a present and kissed me on the cheek. She gave me her best kisses in the barn, and she'd get around to that later.

“Pancakes are ready. I hope you’re hungry. I made a big batch of batter.”

I sat down and smiled at my family. This was my real family—like my forever family. Not like the foster people who fed me because they were paid to.

“Happy birthday, Harlan,” said Billy and he handed me a carton of American Spirit.

“Thanks, Billy. I can use those.”

Billy lived with us. Ex-military, Billy was a sheriff too, but had a bad leg and couldn’t do as much as he used to. My dad’s best friend.

“Happy birthday, son,” said Travis. “I ain’t giving you your present until after breakfast because then you won’t eat nothing and the rest of us won’t get to eat either.” He chuckled. “And I happen to be hungry.”

I laughed. “Okay, then. Let’s have those pancakes, Tammy.”

Felt like one person was missing, but I was getting used to Savanna not being here with Travis no more. That hot little romance had lasted for about six months before she decided Travis and the life of a sheriff was too much for her and she went back to her own place in Coyote Creek. No hard feelings. Still friends. They had a pretty good run.

The first stack of Tammy’s pancakes went down easy soaked in butter and dripping with the Canadian Maple Syrup Travis liked to have on hand at all times.

“Delish, Tam. You are the fuckin Queen of Pancakes.”

She giggled. A few months older than me but not much. We were both eighteen now and eligible to be deputies in the Coyote Creek Sheriff’s Office. That’s what we’d

been training for and waiting for. Her and me. Bringing down the bad guys together. Travis would be the boss, but me and Tam would do a lot on our own.

After the pancakes were all cleared up and we drank coffee and talked a bit about the work week ahead of us at the station, Travis slid a set of keys across the table to me.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

“Happy birthday, son. Might keep you happy for a lot of years.”

I jumped to my feet and ran out the back door. Both dogs barking and running behind me—just because I was running—Max and Sarge wanted to run too.

Down the hall and out the back door. Through the woodshed and outside into the big parking space between the outbuildings and the barn.

Out of breath, I stopped next to it and couldn’t believe my eyes. Did I say I had the best fuckin dad in the entire universe?

I threw my leg over the seat and grabbed onto the bars. Just the Harley smell of it made me dizzy.

The screen door slammed on the woodshed, and I knew everybody had come outside to watch me. I started the engine and just sat there with my hands on the bars listening to the big engine rumble.

“Can I get on?” hollered Tammy.

“Sure. Toss your leg over and get on behind me. Hang on, girl.”

Tammy wrapped her arms around my waist and squealed as I gave the bike some gas and steered it down the laneway towards the road.

Travis and Billy leaned on the woodshed and watched the kids ride off. The rumble faded as they went farther down the highway.

“We got ourselves two good kids, Billy. We fuckin lucked out.”

Billy laughed. “Is two enough, Travis?”

“Yep. I’d say so. Two is just the right number to handle easily. Why? Were you thinking we should go for three?”

“Nope. Two is perfect.”

During the afternoon, we took the horses for a ride to the back of the ranch looking for the wild mustangs that liked to run through our property.

Travis rode Outlaw, a beautiful blue roan. Tammy rode her barrel-racing quarter horse, Bonnie Grace, and I rode Windrider. I loved that horse, and he loved me back.

We were about to turn around and head back to the house when three wild horses ran through our ranch from east to west. Close to the back fence, but not too close.

Their manes and tails blowing in the wind, symbols of their freedom, they were a beautiful sight to see. Every time we saw them on our ranch, Travis marked it on the calendar in the kitchen. Just something my dad did.

When we got back to the barn, Tammy and I cooled the horses out and put them into the corral. They needed a lot of water after a big ride. Horses got thirsty, just like people.

After the horses were set and munching on a slab of hay, Tammy and I sat on a bale of straw with the barn door open and just vegged.

“Good birthday, Harlan?” She slipped her arm around my waist and hugged me close to her. Kind of a sister hug, but she was fully capable of other moves from time to

time that I had to watch out for.

“Best birthday ever, Tam. Are you cooking me a birthday dinner tonight?”

“Nope. Somebody else is doing the cooking.”

“Who?”

She giggled. “Can’t say.”

I laughed at her. She wasn’t the best at keeping secrets. “You could say if you wanted to.”

“But I ain’t gonna say it. It’s a surprise.”

“I can wait for it. Nothing else I need after Travis getting me a goddamned big Harley. What could be better?”

“If you had one other birthday wish, what would it be?”

“Umm...guess it would have to be spending my birthday with my brother Virge. His birthday is today too, and I haven’t seen him since he was four years old. He’d be sixteen today.”



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

“Oh, my God, Harlan. That is the saddest thing I ever heard. You never mentioned your brother before. I didn’t know you had one.”

“Don’t feel like I do have one, Tam. He’s been gone so fuckin long.”

“We’re gonna be cops tomorrow. We’ll find him.”

“Are you serious?”

“I am.”

“Do you think it’s possible?”

“Yep. We’ll make it our mission.”

“Are we telling Travis and Billy?”

“Maybe later when we bring him home. They’ll have to know then, won’t they?”

I laughed. “Guess they will.”

Travis told us all to get cleaned up for dinner because we were going out. Not many places in Coyote Creek a person could go for their birthday dinner, so I had to guess we were going to the Coyote Creek Inn. Best place to eat in town.

Travis and Olivia, the owner of the Inn, were getting it on at one time, but he gave that up too. He needed somebody new in his life to spice it up a bit.

I liked Marilyn Pellegrino for him. Pretty woman with long black hair. Former barrel racing champion. Travis liked her, but maybe not enough to give it his best effort.

Billy and I missed Savanna. She was fun and she could cook. She owned the feed store in Coyote Creek, and we thought she was a good woman for Travis.

Tammy wasn't so sure Savanna was right for dad and I knew she was still hoping Annie—her step mama—and Travis would get back together. I wasn't betting on that happening. Travis might have done a little too much damage to his relationship with Annie to ever patch things up with her.

Coyote Creek Inn.

Olivia had a table reserved for us in her fancy dining room. We'd eaten there lots of times before on special occasions or just when Travis wanted a steak or a roast beef dinner. She had the best desserts in town and probably in the entire state. Tammy and I were trying them one by one.

Before Olivia sent our server over, she came by our table and wished me a happy birthday. "Doesn't seem like I've known you for two years, Harlan, but I guess it's true. You've grown into a handsome young man, and I imagine you'll be fighting the girls of Coyote Creek off soon..." she turned and smiled at Travis, "just like your father."

Tammy and I laughed but Travis just shook his head and looked away.

A girl came and stood next to Olivia, and she said, "Brooke will be your server tonight. This is her first week with us, so don't be too hard on her."

"Hi, Brooke," said Billy. "Nice to meet you."

I stared and couldn't help myself. All that blonde hair around a cute face, and a great body too. Trying to think of something to say to make her like me and I couldn't say a damned thing.

"What would you like to drink?" she looked down at the notepad in her hand and I noticed her hand was a bit shaky.

"I'll have a Miller," I said and glanced at Travis to see if he was having the same. He nodded and so did Billy.

"I'll have Coors," said Tammy. "Thank you, Brooke."

Brooke. That was her name and I already forgot it. How could you ask a person out if you couldn't even remember their name?

The food was fantastic like it always was and before we ordered dessert, Brooke and Olivia came and brought me a cake with eighteen blazing candles.

"Wow, that's some fire, Harlan," said Billy. "Call the fire department."

I laughed and blew out the candles. My best birthday yet. Be hard to top getting a Harley for my birthday on top of having the best family in the whole goddamned world.

After I blew out the candles, Tammy asked, "What did you wish for, Harlan?"

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

“I think you already know, Tam.”

She smiled and got teary-eyed again. “Yeah, I know.”

“Well, come on,” said Travis. “Billy and I don’t know. Are you gonna tell us?”

“Not yet,” said Tammy. “Me and Harlan have to do some preliminary work on it first. Then we might tell y’all.”

Tammy had picked up a bit of a Texas twang from living with her step-mama on her ranch.

“Preliminary work,” repeated Billy. “Huh. This is gonna take some figuring out.”

“Huh,” said Travis, and gave me a look.

Dry Run Roadhouse. Coyote Creek.

After that great dinner we drove on up to the roadhouse. We had to pass it anyway on the way home and Travis always liked to stop in for a beer or two.

We’d stopped going there a bit when Savanna was living with us because the guy who owned the roadhouse was Savanna’s ex-boyfriend, and he was plenty pissed at Travis for cutting his grass.

Now that Savanna moved back to town to her own place, we could drink at the roadhouse again. Just the way things worked out.

Small towns were like that. Everybody knew everybody else's business and you could piss somebody off without even knowing you were doing it.

Legally, me and Tammy weren't old enough to drink in any state and we were never allowed to go out drinking on our own. Travis would never condone deliberately breaking the law, but he figured if we were legally old enough to be deputy sheriffs in his county, then we deserved to drink a beer on our birthday.

Walking in the front door, I saw Savanna sitting at the bar talking to Jack, so I turned to the left and headed into the big dance hall to find a booth for the four of us.

Travis stared at Savanna for a minute, Jack looked up at him and glared and Travis moved on. I didn't think he had any intention of getting Savanna back, but Jack might not know that.

We settled into our booth and Tessa came running over to take our drink order. What can I get you, Sheriff?"

"I'll have a pitcher of Miller and a pitcher of Coors, Tessa. Four glasses."

"Coming right up, Sheriff."

"Not too busy in here tonight," said Billy. "Guess it never is unless the band is playing."

"If it ain't busy, then we don't have to worry about busting up any fights, do we?" asked Travis. "I wouldn't want Harlan messing up his pretty face before that Brooke girl gets to kissing on him."

"Yeah, I saw the way she was sizing him up," said Billy. "You couldn't miss that look she was giving him."

Tammy giggled.

I just shook my head and drank my beer.

## Chapter Two

Monday, July 22nd.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

Tammy and I rushed through our chores in the barn this morning. We had to feed the horses and move them into the corral, get breakfast over with and get ready for our first day as co-deputies at the Coyote Creek Sheriff's Office.

Travis had talked to people who counted in the county office and there was enough in the budget for the two of us—me and Tammy—to get paid a wage just above minimum for our services.

I worked the last two years for nothing—well, not for nothing—the county didn't pay me, but Travis did. He gave me money every week for helping him out and it was more than I needed.

Travis looked after me in all ways like I was his own son and now I am his own son. The papers have been filed for me and for Tammy by dad's lawyer in Great Falls. Travis legally adopted both of us and we belong to him officially.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

“What’s it like going to the office every day?” asked Tammy. “You already did it for two years while I was at Mama’s in Texas.”

“Mostly it’s fun. Sometimes it’s hard work helping people out of the messes they get themselves in. I like the murders the best, I guess. Figuring them out.”

Tammy made a face. “How many murders do you think there will be?”

I shrugged off her question. “Maybe none if people used their fucking heads.”

“Yeah, I hope they do. I can’t believe the county is paying us, Harlan.” Tammy tossed down a bale of hay from the loft, and jumped down the ladder after it.

I kind of caught her in my arms and hugged her. We wouldn’t be getting too close while we were working, and we’d already talked about it. She thought I should get a town girlfriend and she’d get by without a boyfriend for the time being.

I’d asked her a few times why she didn’t want a boyfriend and she was kind of vague and didn’t really give me a solid answer. Something to do with the guy who held her prisoner, I was guessing. What had that fucker done to her? Best if I didn’t know.

Pained me to think about him kidnapping her when she was ten years old. What kind of sick pervert was he? A dead sick pervert now. According to Tammy, Annie had killed the guy on her ranch when he came looking for Tammy in Texas.

“I’ll put the horses in the corral and check the water. You run in and help Travis with breakfast. We gotta speed up.”

“Copy that,” said Tammy, and then she laughed.

Breakfast was ready after I got washed up and made it to the kitchen with the dogs. They always waited in the barn for me while I did chores. Mostly because I gave them a treat for being so fuckin good.

I sat down at the table and Travis put eggs and sausages on a plate and set it in front of me. A plate sat in the middle of the table piled high with toast. I took a couple of pieces and slathered them with peach jam.

“You working today, Billy, or sitting on your ass porch-smoking?”

He reached over and smacked me in the arm so hard I had a hard time staying on my chair. Reminded me of us doing that in the dining hall in Juvie. We’d punch each other so fucking hard, we’d get a point when somebody fell off their fuckin chair and hit the floor.

“I’ll get you for that.”

“You’ll have to catch me first,” said Billy. Joking because since he buried the axe in his leg, Billy Johnson was crippled up a little. He could barely walk, let alone run. Didn’t bother his sense of humor, though.

“So, you didn’t answer my question. You working or staying home?”

“I’m working. Molly can use the help with reports and there are tons of cases that need follow up reports—reports that Travis never did and never will do if he lives to be a hundred-year-old-deputy-dawg.”

Travis gave Billy the finger and Tammy started clearing the table. “Save the dishes, Tam. We’ve gotta get going.”



“Copy that.”

“You practicing saying that?” Travis laughed at her.

“Yep. Just practicing for when you give me my first order.”

I grinned as I got to my feet and patted the Beretta in my waist holster. “It’s gonna be a great day.”

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

Molly brought a dozen donuts to the office to celebrate our first day as official deputies. She was our dispatcher and knew how to do everything that there was to do in a sheriff’s office. She could answer any question and was happy to help. Tammy and I had already learned a lot from Molly.

“No matter how much they beg and whine, don’t give the dogs any bites of your donuts,” hollered Travis. “I don’t like them having sugar. It’s not good for them.”

“Somebody is grumpy this morning,” said Ted. “Didn’t you get any on the weekend, super stud?”

“Shut up, Ted.” Travis gave him the finger.

Ted was the senior deputy. Town tow truck driver and if we got calls requiring the towing of a vehicle, Ted took care of it. He was a good guy and lots of fun.

I walked over and picked up a chocolate glazed donut and asked Molly, “Which desk do you want me to sit at, Molly?”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

“Doesn’t matter, dear. Just pick one and make it your own. Tammy too. I worked years here with a completely empty squad room. Only me here at the front desk and the other four desks empty. It’s exciting for me to actually have more company in here—besides Max and Sarge and recently... Ted.”

“Billy is going to take over my office,” said Travis. “He’s going to do all of my paperwork and hand it over to you, Molly, on time. If I’m lucky, I won’t need a desk.”

Tammy giggled. “I’ll take this desk next to Molly. I guess this is what it’s like to be at school. Can’t hardly remember. I only went until I was ten.”

I rolled my eyes at that one. Even though I ran away and missed a lot of school, I went longer than ten fuckin years old.

Travis was right there next to Tammy when she said the thing about school, and he started yakking to her about filling out reports to distract her.

Filling out reports was something he rarely did because he hated paperwork. I did it for him and now Billy was going to do it.

I caught the tail end of the conversation. “Get Harlan to show you how to fill out the reports and then Billy will look them over and sign them before he passes them to Molly.”

“Copy that, Sheriff,” said Tammy, and winked at me.

Yeah, this was going to be fun.

“Okay, it’s time,” said Travis. “Swearing in time. Everybody into the office for the swearing in of the new deputies. Big ceremony.”

We all crowded into the small private office that belonged to Travis, because he was the official county sheriff, but he was giving the office to Billy.

Billy would be more comfortable in the office sitting in the big swivel chair than sitting at a squad desk. Travis was like that.

He reached into the bottom drawer and pulled out an old bible. “Who’s going first?”

“Ladies first,” said Billy.

“Raise your right hand, Tammy,” said Travis. “Do you solemnly swear to support and defend the law as prescribed by the State of Montana... To perform your duty as assigned to you to the best of your ability..., so help you God?”

“I do.”

Travis pinned a star on Tammy’s uniform and didn’t hand her a gun because she already had her own—provided by her step-mama.

“Welcome to the staff of the Coyote Creek Sheriff’s office, Deputy Tamara Bristol.”

Tammy beamed a big smile. “Thank you, Sheriff.”

Then it was my turn, and I repeated the same basic stuff and Travis pinned a star on my shirt.

“Welcome to the staff of the Coyote Creek Sheriff’s Office, Deputy Harlan Bristol.”

He shook my hand and I said, “Thank you, Sherriff.”

Travis still went by Sheriff Frost, his fake name in Montana for reasons of his own, but me and Tammy just got adopted and Travis’s real surname was Bristol and he wanted us to use our real name.

Molly wiped tears from her eyes. “That was so touching, Travis. We haven’t had a swearing-in ceremony for so long, and we’ve never had a full staff here for as long as I’ve been here. Travis has been responsible for bringing a lot of change to Coyote Creek in general and to this office in particular. I’m honored to be part of the Coyote Creek Sheriff’s Office team.”

“Let’s have a coffee to celebrate,” said Billy, “and all of you can go sit in the break room and give me back my new office.”

Travis laughed. “You’d better get started on your paperwork, Undersheriff Johnson.”

Tammy and I took our coffee out to Molly’s desk so Tammy could talk to her about looking for my brother Virgil.

“Molly, we’re keeping this a secret for now, but Harlan wants to look for his brother, Virgil. He’s sixteen years old and Harlan ain’t seen him since a social worker took him away from the foster home they were living in twelve years ago.”

“Oh, my. I’m so sorry, Harlan. Does Travis know about this?”

“No. Me and Tammy are going to look for him first. We may not be able to find him, and I don’t want to upset Travis. He has enough to worry about.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

“Where was the foster home you were living in when your brother was removed?” asked Molly.

“I think we were with a family in Butte at the time,” said Harlan. “Hard to remember, me and Virge bounced around so much.”

“Gloria Grafton, over at the county office is in child services and she’s our best bet to help us with this,” said Molly. “Let me talk to her first and she may want you to come to her office and give her a lot more details. Do you have a picture of your brother, dear?”

“No.”

“Okay,” said Molly. “We’ll start with a phone call.”

“At least we’re started,” whispered Tammy. “Step one over with. We’ll talk to the county lady next and go from there.”

I nodded and I felt a tiny bit of hope stirring inside of me.

Molly’s phone rang and it was incoming for the sheriff’s office. Molly listened to the caller and made some notes, then she hollered for Travis.

“Lake Frances campground, Sheriff. They’ve got trouble.”

Travis hurried down the hall from the break room. “What kind of trouble, Molly?”

“The story is a little garbled, but from the person calling in, it seems a child wandered into a neighboring campsite and said his parents were dead.”

“Huh. Okay, we best get down there and see what the hell is going on.”

“The call came from the Lake of the Woods Campground.”

“Okay, thanks. I think I’ve passed the sign on patrol.” Travis whistled for the dogs, then hollered out orders. “Ted, you take Tammy. Harlan, drive my squad. We’ll take the dogs.”

“Copy, boss. Let’s go.”

Lake of the Woods Campground. Harrison County.

Took us half an hour to drive down to the lake southwest of town. There were camping and fishing places all around Lake Frances that were only open from May to September. Closed up for the winter and the owners went to Florida or Mexico.

Big painted sign at the end of the road leading into the Lake of the Woods camping area. Picture of a huge fish with a big grin on his face. Scary.

This time of year—mid July—every campsite would be filled with city folks on vacay.

“Did Molly say what campsite the caller was at?” asked Travis.

“Don’t think so, boss. Didn’t hear her tell us.”

“Okay, stop at the office and I’ll ask.”

I stopped next to the office and shoved the Bronco into park. Real log cabin with nice white chinking, and a no-vacancy sign in the window. The campground was full up. We hopped out and went inside.

Nobody at the front desk. Travis rang the bell.

A lady came running out of the office. “Oh, Sheriff, I’m so glad you’re here. We never have upsetting things like this happen at our campground.”

“Which campsite, ma’am?” Travis was in a hurry.

“Forty-three.”

“Got a map?”

She handed him a brochure and opened it to the colored map inside. “Thank you, ma’am. Might need to talk to you in a while.”

“I’ll be here, Sheriff.” She brushed a tear away and I figured it was bad—whatever it was.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

We ran back to the squad and kept going. Tammy and Ted were right behind us. Travis studied the map and the winding roads that snaked through the campsites.

“Left at the next corner, son. That should be a road with the forties on it.”

“Copy. Looking for forty-three.”

Travis pointed with his smoke. “There.”

“Yeah, I see the people.”

Campsite forty-three had drawn people from all the neighboring sites and all the campers—men, women and kids—were clustered around the picnic table where a little boy sat crying.

His face smudged with tears and dirt. He didn’t seem hurt, but I could only see the top half of him. He looked about six or seven. Brown shaggy hair and blue eyes. Dirty T-shirt. A few splatters of red that could be blood or...something else. Hope it was ketchup.

Next to him was a young woman in her thirties and she had her arm around the little boy trying to comfort him.

“Tammy, take the little boy to your squad and sit in the back seat with him. Give him water and wait until he’s able to talk to you.”

“Copy, Sheriff.”



“Ted and Harlan, use the campsite next door and get the names and addresses of all these folks. Take their statements one at a time.”

“Copy, boss.”

Travis said, “At this picnic table,” he pointed, “I want only the people who belong to this campsite. All the rest go with the deputies to the next campsite.”

“Yes, sir.”

When the crowd cleared, Travis was left with the blonde lady who had been cuddling the little boy, her husband, and their son, who was about ten.

Max and Sarge sat like statues next to Travis’s leg. “Your names?”

“Jan and Pat Farmer. This is our son, Jeff.”

“Hey, Jeff.” Travis turned on the recorder and set up the interview. “Just tell me what happened this morning. You were probably getting up or thinking about breakfast when the little boy showed up.”

“Yes,” said Pat. “I was making coffee on the Coleman stove and Jan was still in the tent with Jeff. The little guy just wandered along the road, saw me at the picnic table and walked over to me.”

“And he said?”

“My mom and dad are hurt.”

“Which direction did he come from?” asked Travis.

“He came from the east, but I don’t know which campsite. Or even if his parents were campers. Just don’t know.”

“Right, at this point we don’t know much.”

“I asked him if he was camped here,” said Pat, “and he said he didn’t know.”

“Okay.”

“Then Jan came out of the tent to see who I was talking to, and she asked him where his mommy and daddy were.”

“And what did he say?”

“He pointed and said, They’re back there, but I think they’re dead. And that was it. He never said another word after that. He just sat on the bench. I made breakfast and Jan called your office. He ate a bowl of cereal with Jeff. Never said anything else.”

“Never said his name?”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

“No.”

“I asked him his name,” said Jan, “but he didn’t tell me.”

“Hey, Jeff,” said Travis, “Did the little guy who came to eat cereal with you tell you his name?”

Jeff nodded and his parents both seemed surprised. “Dillon.”

“His name is Dillon. Thanks, Jeff. Nice job.”

“I didn’t hear him say that” said Jan. “Sorry, Sheriff, I didn’t know.”

“No problem. He probably told Tammy by now. She’s good with kids.”

“How are you going to find where he came from, Sheriff Frost?”

“The dogs will find his parents. The boy’s scent will be on the parents—at least it should be. I’ll try that first and see what we get.”

“Good luck.”

“Thanks. I’ll go see what Tammy found out.”

“She looks young to be a deputy.”

“Yep, she’s young, but she’s smart and she’s a dandy shooter.”

Travis went back to the squad, slid into the front seat, and twisted around to see Tammy and the boy. “Hey, guys. How’s it going here? How you doing, Dillon?”

“I’m good. Tammy gave me water and a bite of her chocolate bar.”

“She’s good at sharing. Are you?”

“Yep. Pretty good.”

“We’re going to play a game, Dillon.”

“What’s it called?”

“It’s called the shoe game.”

“I don’t know how to play it.”

“This is how we do it. You take off your shoes and give them to me and I borrow them for a couple of minutes. Then I bring them back and if you put them on the right feet, then you get a prize.”

“What do I win?”

“Can’t tell you yet. It’s a surprise. You playing or not?”

“Yeah, I’ll play.” He whipped his sneakers off and handed them over the console to Travis.

“Be right back.”

Travis ran back to the campsite where Ted and Harlan were working. “Ted, keep

going on the statements. Tammy is in the squad with the boy. Harlan, you, and me are on the dogs.” Travis held up the boy’s shoes.

Ted nodded.

Travis gave me one of the shoes and I gave it to Max to sniff and carry around for a couple of minutes. He did the same with Sarge. As soon as the dogs alerted we were off and running.

Travis tossed the shoes in the window of the squad at Tammy as we ran by.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

Travis had hold of Sarge's leash and I was trying my best to hang onto Max. Both dogs were so fuckin strong they could pull you right off your feet if they felt like it.

We ran past the last campsite in this park, climbed a fence, ran across a dirt road, over another fence and into the next park on the other side of the road.

Not the front of the park, but the side. No name or sign or anything. We didn't know where we were going, but the dogs did. They were going in a straight line following where the little boy had walked from when he left his dead parents.

Soon as we climbed the second fence we had to stop for a breath. Travis was winded and had to take a break. "Keep going with Max. I'll catch up."

"Okay." I sucked in a few gulps of oxygen and let the big Belgian Malinois pull me forward.

Wasn't long before I heard birds squawking.

Max kept running, and looking up I saw a lot more birds. Vultures perched up in the trees making a huge noise. Screeching and squawking and flapping their big wings.

The campsite was on the water. Had to be Lake Frances. Small rowboat tied to the dock. Pop-up camper trailer hitched to a blue Ford F-150 pickup. Two dead bodies on the grass near the dock with a couple of the birds on them.

Max sat down next to the bodies and held up his paw waiting for his reward. I gave him a biscuit and patted him on the head.

“Yep, good boy. You found them all right.”

Travis caught up and stood beside me looking down at the man and the woman. Young—they were young—twenty-seven or twenty-eight.

Travis stepped away and made a call. He was on the phone to Doctor Olsen in Cut Bank. He was our county coroner.

“Doc, I’m at a campground down on Lake Frances and we have two homicide victims. Male and female. Throats cut. Not a pretty sight. Waiting for you here.”

“What’s the name of the campground, Travis?”

“Not sure. We came in from the side—the road between this one and Lake of the Woods. Far east side of Lake of the Woods Campground. Sorry, the dogs ran straight through. I’ll send Harlan to find out where we are and call you back.”

“I’ll start driving down and you can give me better directions when you find out.”

“Yeah, I’ll work on it and call you as soon as I figure it out.”

While Travis talked to Doc Olsen, I took the man’s wallet out of his pocket to check his ID.

Johnathan Walker from Kellogg, Idaho. The woman didn’t have ID on her, so I checked inside the camper and found her purse.

Kathy Walker. Same address.

Travis finished his call. “Got IDs on them?”

“Johnathan and Kathy Walker from Idaho.”

“Huh. On vacation, I guess,” said Travis. “You see if you can find the office to this park and get the name of it. I’ll call Tammy and Ted and get them over here to the crime scene.”

“Do you want the little boy over here, boss?”

He glanced down at the bodies. “Umm...not particularly. Ted can drive Tammy and the boy to the station. You and I can manage here with Doc Olsen. We’ll talk to the park owners before we leave.”

“Copy that.”

Travis sat down at the picnic table to wait for Doc Olsen while I ran through the woods searching for a road that would take me to the park office.

Once I hit the narrow dirt road and followed the campsite numbers backwards to one, I came to the office.

Small building with rough cedar siding made to look like tree bark. Mostly it just looked like shit. I went inside and a bell jingled over the door.

“Yes, can I help you, Sheriff?”



## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

“Deputy Bristol, ma’am. You mind telling me the name of your campground?”

She smiled. “It was on the sign at the road when you came in.”

“Didn’t come that way, ma’am.”

“Pine Hollow is what we call it.”

“Okay, Pine Hollow.” I stopped for a minute and texted that to Travis. “Would you mind telling me when Johnathan and Kathy Walker checked in, ma’am? When did they arrive here and what number is their campsite?”

“Let me look that up for you, officer. Are the Walkers in trouble?”

“Not anymore ma’am. They’re dead.”

She smiled. “That can’t be true. They checked in yesterday and they had their son with them. First time campers—all three of them.”

“Uh huh. Anybody come into the office asking which campsite they were at, ma’am?”

“No. Nobody asked for them. Not while I was here, but I’ll check with Norm. He was on the front desk for a while yesterday afternoon.”

“What time does your park close, ma’am?”

“No check-ins after eleven, officer.”

“Thanks. The campsite number for the Walkers?”

“Oh, yes. They are at twenty-seven. Right on the shore of Lake Frances. They wanted to be on the water. The husband was keen to take the little boy fishing in a boat for the first time.”

“Thank you, ma’am. Sheriff Frost may be back in a while to ask you a few more questions.”

“I’ll be here. I’m on duty until four o’clock. Are the Walkers really dead, Officer? I’m not quiet believing that story.”

“They are dead, ma’am. Any help you can give the sheriff’s office would be appreciated.”

“Nobody ever died on our campground before, Officer. This is a terrible blow for Pine Hollow.”

“Big blow for the Walkers too, ma’am.”

I jogged back to campsite twenty-seven and Doctor Olsen and his assistant were rolling the bodies into body bags.

Travis was busy inside the tent-trailer going through what little the Walkers had in there. He came out shaking his head. “Nothing in there.”

“The woman’s purse might be the best bet,” I said.

“Yeah, we’ll take everything back to the shop.”

“Call Ted and tell him to come tow the pickup back to the office. I’ll get my squad and I’ll tow the camper.”

“Copy, boss. I’ll unhitch it from the truck and put the top down.”

Travis smiled. “Be right back as soon as I climb a couple of fences and run a fuckin mile.”

I started on the tent-trailer. Never put one of these rigs up or down before, but it couldn’t be too hard to figure it out.

Travis was back with the Bronco by the time I had the fuckin top down and locked in place. I unhitched the trailer from the pickup, turned it and Travis backed into place.

“Ted on his way?”

“Yeah, he’s coming and brining Tammy back. Molly is giving the boy lunch from the diner.”

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

“Next of kin in Idaho, boss?”

“Yeah, Molly can contact the Kellogg Police Department and have them do it. We have to find the maniac who might still be here in the fuckin park.”

“Want me to do a sweep with the dogs?”

“Yeah, son. As soon as we get Ted squared away with the truck, we’ll start and work our way around with the dogs. We have to talk to all of the campers and that’s going to take a while.

### Chapter Three

Tuesday, July 23rd.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

“I feel bad for Dillon,” said Tammy. She placed a platter of fried eggs and ham in the center of the table. “That little guy doesn’t have a mommy or daddy no more.”

“But Molly said his mother’s sister was coming to get him last night,” said Billy. “He’s got family and he’s young. He’ll be okay.”

I shook my head. “Doubt it, Billy. He saw his parents lying on the grass with their throats cut and I doubt if that kid will ever be okay again.”

Tammy nodded. “Some things you never forget.”

I sucked in a breath wondering about the horrible stuff Tammy said she was going to unload on me one of these days. Not something I was looking forward to, but I guess she had to tell somebody, sometime about what that guy, Tibor, did to her.

“How are we gonna proceed on the case today?” Billy asked Travis.

“We talked to all the campers who had rented sites on the same road as the Walkers and none of them heard anything,” said Travis. “Makes me think the guy killed them in the middle of the night.”

“Just jerked them out of their camper?” I asked.

“Guess so,” said Travis. “How else would he do it?”

“Sounds weird to me.”

“Was it somebody who knew them?” asked Tammy. “Like they owed him money or something?”

“If it was a crazy,” I said, “it could have been totally random. The killer might not have known them at all.”

“We have to dig into their background,” said Travis. “That’s up to Billy. His job. When he comes up with people we should talk to, then I guess we take a little trip to Idaho.”

“I’ve never been to Idaho,” said Tammy. “I’m Canadian, like Mama. Never knew it. When my mother was done with me she dumped me on her neighbor on this side of the border. I thought I belonged here in Montana, but I didn’t. Just a visitor and I didn’t know no different.”

Travis nodded. “Yes, you are Canadian, same as your parents. Your daddy was a biker from Scarborough, a part of Toronto. Never met him, but from what I’ve heard about him from Annie, he was a good guy.”

Tammy smiled. “Still hope for me.”

Travis hugged her.

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

Molly had coffee ready when we got to the office and Ted was slumped at his desk staring at his cell phone.

“Molly, check with all the Montana prisons and get a list of their releases in the last week or two. See if they let out a totally rehabilitated serial killer.” A lot of sarcasm in Travis’s voice. From personal experience, he wasn’t a big believer in rehab programs.

“I’ll do that right now, Travis. Hope he doesn’t do more damage before we catch up with him.”

Travis wasn’t done with the orders, and he hollered at Billy next. “Check guys on parole in our neck of the woods—lean towards known users—one of them might’ve gone off his fuckin nut and tried out his new blade.”

“Yep. Doing it now, boss.”

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

“Harlan, you check psychiatric hospitals with criminal confinement and see who was recently released.”

“Yeah, boss.”

“What do you want me to do, boss?” asked Tammy.

Travis handed her a list. “You take our order on down to the feed store and have it delivered.”

Tammy giggled. “Can’t you let Savanna see you, boss? You could call it in and have it delivered to our ranch.”

“Yeah, I could, but I got a double reason for you to go in person, girl.”

“What am I looking for at the feed store?”

“Anybody who purchased a hunting knife with a serrated blade in the past three weeks. Get me a list of the names and addresses of the buyers.”

“Do you think it was that kind of a knife?” asked Tammy.

“Yeah, I do. When you get that done, you drag ass back here and phone all the gun shops and outfitters in the area and ask them about that type of knife and get names and addresses of recent buyers.”

“Yep. I’ll be right back.”

When Travis was finished, Ted was standing in front of him waiting for a direction. “Ted, print the truck and the camper and be thorough. Find out who the hell pulled the Walkers out of their fuckin beds and slit their throats.”

“Copy that, boss. Doing it now.”

Coyote Creek Needs and Feeds.

Tammy parked the squad car in front of the big feed store at the south end of town and ran inside with the ranch order in her hand.

She was third in line at the order desk, but when it was her turn all she had to do was hand over the list. Travis had everything they needed for the horses and for the dogs itemized. He ran an account at the store, so she didn’t have to pay for it either.

A cute guy she hadn’t seen before was manning the order desk. The nametag pinned to his maroon Needs and Feeds shirt said Kenny. He looked up, looked again, and then gave Tammy a big smile. “Hi, you need something, Miss...Officer?”

“Deputy. You can call me Tammy, Kenny. This is the order for our ranch. My dad’s ranch. He’s the sheriff.”

“Thanks, Tammy.” Kenny took the list and ran a finger down the items. “Yep, looks like we got everything in stock.”

“You can deliver it to our ranch when it’s ready,” said Tammy. “I have another question for you.”

“Sure. Go ahead.”

“You guys sell guns and knives, right?”



“You bet, Tammy. We have a large sporting goods section.” Kenny pointed a finger to the other side of the store.

“I need to know if you sold any knives with a serrated blade in the last couple of weeks. Can you help me with that?”

“Nope, but Bonnie can. She’s on cash and she can print out stuff like that for you, Deputy Tammy.”

“Thanks, Kenny. I’ll try Bonnie. Thanks for your help.”

He grinned. “No problem...Tammy.”

She made her way through the aisles, past the horse section to the cash at the back of the store. Bonnie was busy with a customer but when the rancher left, Tammy asked for what she needed.

“Travis needs that information for a case he’s working on?” asked Bonnie.

“Yes, ma’am. Be helpful if we could track any purchases like that from recently—couple weeks back.”

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

“Let me go get the inventory numbers from the knives we have in stock matching that description, then I can ask the computer to show me the ones we sold.”

“Sure,” said Tammy. “I can wait.”

Bonnie ran across the store to the glass showcase that held the knives and Tammy followed her. Bonnie unlocked the glass door at the back of the case and checked the numbers on the tags of three of the knives with serrated blades. All different models.

Tammy followed her back to the cash and waited while she punched the numbers into the computer then ran over to the printer to retrieve the results.

“Here we go, Tammy. We sold two of them since the end of June. July sales to Art Andrews and to Kyle Gregory. You can have the printout.”

“Thanks so much, Bonnie. That’s exactly what I need.”

“One of our knives used in a crime?” asked Bonnie. “You wouldn’t be asking me for that unless something bad happened.”

“Down at Lake Frances,” said Tammy. “Bad enough, Bonnie.”

“Aw, shit. Guess I’ll read about it in the paper.”

Tammy ran outside to the squad. She had to get back to the office and start calling all the sporting goods stores and outfitters in the area. That was gonna take her some time, but she was anxious to find the murder weapon.

Two punks were at the back of the squad. One was laughing while the other one sprayed black paint on the tag.

Tammy saw what they were doing and gave a shout out, “Hey, you fuckers get away from my truck.”

The laughing boy kept on laughing. “Yeah, or what? What are you gonna do about it, little girl with a star?”

Bang.

Tammy fired a shot at the paint can and it flew out the kid’s hand and exploded in midair. Black paint rained down on both the boys and made them holler.

“Face down on the ground. Hands on your heads, you dumb fucks, or I’ll put bullets in both your fucking legs.”

The boys flopped down on their bellies and didn’t move. Tammy cuffed them one at a time while she called them a few names under her breath.

The sound of gunfire drew a lot of people out of the store and Tammy had an audience as she shoved the boys into the back of the squad and slammed the door shut on them.

As she jumped into the driver’s seat she caught a glimpse of Kenny from the order desk smiling and waving at her.

She laughed and waved back at him.

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

Tammy parked close to the back entrance of the building, opened the door, and stuck her head in. She gave a shout out, “Harlan, give me a hand.”

Harlan came running from his desk in the squad room. “Whatcha got, Tam?”

“Come and see.” She giggled as she led the way to her squad. She opened the back door and hauled out the two punks splattered with black spray paint.

Harlan chuckled. “How’d they get painted up like that?”

Tammy patted her gun. “Shot the can out of his hand,” Tammy pointed. “That one. Check the back end of my squad.”

“Aw, shit.” Harlan ran around to take a look. “The tag is black and a lot of the paint ain’t just on the tag. It’s up the door of the hatch. The whole squad will have to be re-fuckin-painted.”

“Yeah, property damage and it ain’t gonna be ten cents. These guys or their parents will have to pay for it.”

“Let’s book these fuckers.” Harlan glared at the kids—maybe fourteen or fifteen. “Let’s go you wannabee graffiti painters. Bet your parents will be happy when they find out they have to pay for a new paint job on the squad.”

“You can’t tell our parents,” said the one.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

“Oh no?” asked Harlan. “Who else we gonna call? Paintbusters?”

Tammy giggled.

Travis loped down the hallway to see what the commotion was at the back door and took a look at the punk kids. “What did you guys do to piss Tammy off?”

“Take a look at the back of my squad, Sheriff. You’ll see why we’re booking them.”

“Malicious property damage,” said Harlan, “for starters.”

Travis tramped outside and came back a minute later and he was fuming. “Get their names and home phone numbers. Molly can call their parents and get them in here with their lawyer. Meantime, book them and lock them up.”

Travis turned to the two boys who were standing next to the booking station with their hands cuffed behind their backs. “You punks think about picking up a can of spray paint in Harrison County ever again, and I’ll bust your asses.”

“We won’t, Sheriff. Honest, we won’t.”

“Get at it, Harlan. Tammy, write down their names and numbers and give them to Molly. And take a couple of pictures of the squad for evidence.”

“Copy.” She handed Travis the printout of the knife buyers at the feed store.

“Art Andrews?” Travis frowned. “Don’t know the other guy, but I guess we’ll pay

him a visit and get to know him a bit better.”

Harlan helped Tammy through the booking process and then together they locked the punks up in the run to wait for their parents to show up.

“You boys enjoy it in here,” said Harlan. “Can’t wait to see the look on your parents’ faces when they see you sitting on your bunks in here.”

“We was only pranking on the girl sheriff just for fun, Deputy. Didn’t mean no harm.”

The other one said, “How were we supposed to know she was a wild west shooter n’ all?”

Harlan smiled. “You mess with the law in Coyote Creek, you got trouble, boys. Big fuckin trouble.”

Ted came in from the parking lot with the prints he’d lifted from the pickup truck and the camper, and he and Billy ran them through the system and made a list of possible suspects.

“Add this guy to the list,” Travis gave Billy the printout from the feed store. “He bought a knife in the last two weeks.”

“Yep, adding him to the interview list. What about Art Andrews? He’s a piece of work,” said Billy.

“Yeah, write him down. I’ll brace him, but I don’t picture him as a killer. Art is too fuckin stupid to kill anybody—like pre-meditated. He can’t think that far ahead. Just say’n.”

Ted nodded his head. “He’s into drugs heavy now, boss. Might be worse than he’s ever been.”

“Okay, we’ll give him a serious look, Ted. Just in case he went off his fuckin nut. Put him on the list.”

Travis’s cell rang and it was Wyatt Thompson calling from the Cut Bank paper. “Yeah, Wyatt. We got an investigation going on here at the office. Can’t give you much but meet us for lunch across the road at noon and I’ll tell you what I can.”

“Thanks, Travis. See you in a bit.”

Tammy was calling outfitters and asking about the knives, and I was sitting at my desk in the squad room getting caught up on my reports when the parents of the two punks came in the front door.

Each set of parents had a lawyer with them. The fathers looked pissed, and the mothers were red-eyed like they’d been crying.

They walked up to the front desk and told Molly who they were. “We’re Darryl Levine’s parents,” said the woman, “and these people are Todd Toohey’s parents.”

Travis heard them come in and strode down the hall into the squad room to meet them.

Mister Levine took a stance in front of Travis and that was definitely the wrong thing to do. I watched my dad shift gears and tried to hide my smile.

“Sheriff, why don’t you tell me what my boy did that was serious enough to call me away from work? I don’t have time for trivial matters in my life.”

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

“Sure. I’ll show you what he did. Malicious property damage and I figure it’s gonna run you and Todd’s parents in the range of about three to four thousand dollars.”

“I can’t believe that.”

“Harlan, show Mister Levine the squad.”

“Copy, Sheriff. Follow me, Mister Levine.”

“I might as well look at it too,” said Mister Toohey.

I took them out the back door and marched them around to the back of the squad and pointed at the black paint covering the tag, all around the tag on the hatch and sprayed upwards across the back window.

“Whole squad will have to be repainted, all the lettering and whatnot will have to be redone,” I said. “A costly paint job for the county.”

“And you can prove our boys did this damage?” asked Mister Toohey.

“They spray painted the squad right in front of Deputy Bristol. She caught them red-handed when she came out of the feed store, and both boys were laughing about it.”

“Any witnesses?” asked Levine.

“At least a dozen,” said Harlan. “Store emptied out to watch Tammy arrest the boys.”



Mister Toohey shook his head and sighed.

Back inside, the parents wanted the boys out of their cells, and Travis said no dice. “They’ll be arraigned tomorrow in juvie court and that’s when the judge will decide if they are eligible for bail.”

“I want to see my boy,” said Toohey.

Travis shook his head. “Nope. Only the lawyers will be admitted into the run.” Travis nodded at the legal beagles. “Y’all can speak to the boys for fifteen minutes and then they’ll spend the night here.”

“Come on, Sheriff,” said Mister Toohey. “They’re only kids pulling a prank.”

Travis pointed. “Have a seat on the bench by the door, sir. You can wait there for your attorney.”

“I’ve heard stories about you, Sheriff.”

“And? Your point, sir?”

“Never mind.”

Push my dad a little harder and you’ll find out all those stories are true.

Mainliner Diner. Coyote Creek.

Wyatt Thompson was waiting for us across the street at the diner. All the food for our prisoners came from the diner, and the office ran a tab that was picked up at the end of each month by Harrison County.

“Did you order?” Travis asked Wyatt.

“Nope, waiting for you and the kids.”

“Not kids anymore, Wyatt,” I said. “We’re sworn in now. Me and Tammy are full-fledged deputies working for the county.”

“Seems like you were kids just the other day.” He laughed. Wyatt was a good guy. About forty—around the same age as my dad. Short dark hair and dark-rimmed glasses. He looked like a teacher or one of those nerd guys, but he wasn’t like that.

Wyatt was a newspaper guy but not pushy like the city reporters. He wrote about our cases on his crime page and only printed what was true.

I knew the diner menu by heart we ate here so much, and I usually got a cheeseburger and fries. Tammy was trying to get Travis off fries and greasy stuff so he wouldn’t have no heart attacks. Neither one of us could afford to lose him. Getting ourselves a dad was the best thing that ever happened to either one of us.

“What can you tell me about the murders down at Lake Frances, Travis?” asked Wyatt. His notebook and a pen lay on the table in front of him. He ordered a turkey club sandwich and Tammy did too.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

“So far there’s nothing to tell you except who the victims were. Their families have been notified in Idaho and that’s about it. Johnathan and Kathy Walker from Kellogg, Idaho. They were on vacation camping at the Pine Hollow campground with their son. First time campers according to the woman who ran the park. The father intended to teach his son how to fish.”

“Huh,” said Wyatt. “Poor little boy. How old?”

“Six,” said Tammy. “Dillon Walker. His aunt came from Idaho and picked him up from Gloria Belmont at the county office.”

Wyatt looked at Travis over his glasses. “No leads so far?”

“You know I can’t tell you that, Wyatt. All I can say is we’re investigating every lead. And we are.”

Wyatt nodded. “These things take time if the killer was careful and left nothing behind. Honestly, I don’t know how you ever catch any of them.”

“I wonder that myself. About all I can tell you about the murders, but Tammy has a story for you from yesterday. She made her first arrest and no names on her case. The kids are juvies, and their names can’t be mentioned. Go, Tam. Tell Wyatt what happened at the feed store.”

Tammy laughed and started.

Wyatt listened with a smile on his face while Tammy told her story. “Two unnamed

juveniles...huh...that's a good one, Tammy. They in the jail now?"

"Yep, we gotta order food for them and take it back when we go," said Travis. "What do kids like best? Orange soda or root beer?"

"We'll take them root beer," I said.

"Interesting lunch, Travis," said Wyatt. Appreciate you sharing what you have. Hope you get more on the killer soon. Scary to think of him running around loose out there."

"Yep, that part ain't good," said Travis. "We don't even have a description so folks could be watching out for him."

Sheriff's Office. Coyote Creek.

First thing me and Tammy did was take the food containers into the run to feed the boys. "Lunch is here, boys," said Tammy. "We got y'all root beer to drink. If that ain't okay, I can change it out for a bottle of water."

"I like root beer," said Todd. "Good for me."

She handed the containers through the bars. "Enjoy your lunch."

"Thanks."

With the prisoners fed, we went to the meeting in Billy's office. He'd been working hard on the computer and running down our list of suspects.

"Who do we need to interview?" asked Travis.

“Harlan came up with one guy recently released from a mental facility in Great Falls,” said Billy. “He has to be near the top of the list. Clarke Edmundston. I’ve rated everybody in order of the threat they pose, but only my opinion. You can question them in any order you want.”

“Okay. Let’s split up and take the first four,” said Travis. “I’ll take the nutter in Great Falls on my own.” He pointed at Tammy, “You ask Kyle Gregory about the knife he bought at Needs and Feeds.”

“Copy. I have an address for him here in Coyote Creek.”

“Billy, I want you in the squad with Tammy—just in case. This is her first interview.”

Tammy made a face and Travis shook his head. “You heard me, girl.”

“Okay. Copy that, Sheriff.”

Billy nodded his head in agreement.

“Harlan, you pay a visit to Art Andrews up at Sunburst and see if he’s slinging. Check for the knife and bring him in if there’s drug or knife evidence.”

“Copy.

Travis turned to Ted. “You take the guy on parole that Billy came up with. He’s down in Valier living with his mother and he’s in her custody. Just verify him and get a feeling for him—I’m talking about stability.”

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

“Copy, boss,” said Ted.

“I’ll take my own truck,” said Travis. “Harlan, take the Sheriff’s squad, Billy will drive Tammy in his truck, and Ted can take the other squad. That will work just for today. Don’t see the county buying us more squads anytime soon, so we’ll have to manage and put in for mileage on our own vehicles. Keep track.”

“Copy, boss.”

Gregory Residence. Coyote Creek.

Kyle Gregory lived right in the town of Coyote Creek and his house was only five minutes from the sheriff’s office.

Billy parked in the driveway and turned off the engine. “Got your comm on?”

“Yep. I’ll holler if I need you.”

“Make sure you do,” said Billy. “Away you go, little girl.” Billy sat with the driver’s door open and lit up a smoke.

I knocked and a guy about thirty-five with bedhead opened the door and peered out at me.

“Deputy Bristol, sir. Are you Kyle Gregory?”

“Sure am. What does the sheriff’s office want with me? I ain’t done anything—that I

know of.” He grinned as he opened the door a little wider, and I stepped into the small front entrance.

“You bought a knife from Needs and Feeds recently?”

“Umm...yep. Sure did. Hunting knife. Ain’t a crime to own a knife.”

“No, sir. I wonder if you’d mind showing me that knife if you have it handy?”

“Sure. Wait right there and I’ll get it for you.”

Kyle came jogging back a little out of breath and showed me the knife still in the package. “Haven’t opened it yet. Saving it for hunting season in September. I won’t be using it until then.”

“Thanks so much, Kyle.” I smiled at him for being so nice. “We’re checking knives like that one county-wide. One was used in a recent crime.”

“Only recent crime I heard of was those campers down at Lake Frances. They got killed with a knife like this?”

I couldn’t confirm it, so I said, “We’re checking all the knives fitting the description that were bought recently. Thank you for your time, Kyle. Appreciate it.”

“No problem, Deputy. Happy to help the sheriff’s office anytime.”

I ran back to the truck and Billy butted out his smoke in the ashtray. “Anything?”

“He ain’t opened the package yet. Bought it for hunting in September.”

“Cross him off the list, Tam.”

“Nice guy. I liked him.”

Billy frowned.

Both he and Travis were a little over-protective of me at times—most of the time.

Sunburst Acres Trailer Park.

I parked the sheriff’s squad in front of Art Andrews’s scruffy single-wide. Me and Travis had been to this trailer often enough in the past. If we were ever short on arrests for the month, we could be sure of getting a couple here in this trailer.

Drug capital of Sunburst, small town twenty miles shy of the Canadian border.

I banged on the door and hollered, “Sheriff’s Office, Art. Open the door.”



## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

Art didn't show his face at the door, so I tried the handle and eased the door open. Gave him a shout out, "Hey, Art. Police coming in. Where you at?"

Heard a groan from one of the bedrooms and I tracked Art down. He was sprawled out on his bed drunk, or high or both—right out of his head. Not expecting company or dressed for it.

With him too far gone to know I was even there, I bagged up all the drugs on the kitchen table, in the cupboards and on Art's dresser. Checked a few of the drawers and figured I had most of his stash. If he had a bigger load between the walls, I didn't bother looking for it.

Next, I searched for the knife that matched our murder weapon and found it in his top dresser drawer. Looked like he had used it, but there was no blood on it. Nice and clean.

I bagged it for Travis and took the knife and all the drug evidence to the squad. Secured it all in the hatch and went back inside for Art.

Looking at him lying there on his bed, I figured him to be a prime candidate for rehab.

I hauled his ass off the bare mattress and walked him out to the squad. "Come on, Art. Get comfortable in the back seat. I'm taking you to jail for a nice long rest."

He flopped on the seat while I secured him and I was pretty sure he didn't have a clue what was happening.

Drapeau Residence. Valier

Ted knocked on the door of the little winterized cottage outside of Valier. Situated on a desolate piece of road, there wasn't much around but an open field to the east and thick bush to the west. How deep the property went, he couldn't tell from the road.

Dark and cloudy, it started to sprinkle rain as he waited for somebody to come to the door.

The door opened and Ted thought he might have seen Mrs. Drapeau in town. Maybe at the convenience store. Didn't know the boy they were looking for. "Carl home, ma'am?"

"No, Deputy, he ain't home now and he didn't come home last night neither. Can you look for him? I been thinking about calling the sheriff's office to help me find my boy."

"Yeah, we can help, ma'am. You saying your boy's gone missing?"

She nodded her head. Wasn't that old. Early forties and she'd been pretty once. Nice brown eyes. Ted was pushing thirty-five and hadn't found the right girl yet. He wasn't in a hurry.

"When was the last time you saw your boy, ma'am?"

"Saw Carl yesterday at breakfast, then he said he might go fishing and that was the last time I saw him. He went out the door and never came back. He didn't come home last night to sleep and now I'm worried."

"Gotta ask you this, ma'am." Ted had been working on his tact since he joined the sheriff's department and he had to stop and think about his words. "Carl stable? Like

he got his wits about him, ya think?”

Mrs. Drapeau wasn't offended by the question. “Sometimes he's better than others, Deputy...”

“Ted, ma'am. You can call me Ted.” She nodded and Ted kept on going. “How long has Carl been out of the hospital, ma'am?”

“Almost a week. He's a lot better. Pretty good, really. I think the doctors helped him a lot.”

“When Carl was sent to the hospital, ma'am, can you tell me the reason?”

“I don't like to talk about it, Deputy Ted. Not a good memory for me.”

“Wouldn't be, but it would be helpful if I knew.”

She let out a big sigh and told Ted the story. “Carl got down in the dumps pretty bad and wouldn't come out of his room. Stayed in there for days on end. I'd leave food outside his door and he ate it sometimes, but not always. Then he moved into the basement, and he wouldn't come up out of there neither. I had to leave food for him on the top step.”

“Uh huh. Things get better or worse after that?”

“Worse. Carl came upstairs during the night, this one night, and he tried to hurt himself in the kitchen.”

“Uh huh. Did he use one of the knives?”

“How did you know that?”

“Just a guess. He came out of the basement because he needed something, and I just guessed he was looking for a weapon.”

“You seem smart, Deputy Ted.”

“Thanks.” Ted smiled. “Did Carl hurt himself bad that time?”

“Not too bad.” Mrs. Drapeau made a face thinking about it. “He was just getting started hacking on his left arm when I heard him yelling and I came running down the hall. I tried to stop him and when I was taking the knife out of his hand—he didn’t mean to do it—I’m sure he didn’t mean it.” She swiped at a couple of tears.

“But you got hurt, ma’am?”

She rubbed her upper left arm and winced. “It’s all healed up now. That’s when they took Carl to the hospital and said he was a danger to himself and to others.”

“How long ago was that, ma’am?”

“It was a long time ago. I’d say five or six years.”

“And how old is Carl now?”

“Twenty-one.”

“I’ll go back to the office and see what the sheriff says about using the dogs, ma’am. We’ll probably drop back in the morning, and the sheriff’s dogs will search for Carl. In the meantime, you call the office if he shows up.”

“Okay. I’ll do that. Thank you, Deputy Ted.”

“No problem, ma’am. Don’t worry. We’ll find Carl for you.”

Edmundston Residence. Great Falls.

It took Travis over an hour to drive down to Great Falls to interrogate Clarke Edmundston. He called ahead and spoke to Clarke’s wife, and she agreed that two o’clock would be ideal to catch Clarke at home. His new job started at four o’clock and he’d be working afternoons as a janitor at Great Falls Hospital.

At the door, Travis introduced himself, showed Mrs. Edmundston his creds and she invited him into a sparsely furnished living room. Clarke was watching a game on a small flat screen and didn’t look up.

“Turn off the TV, Clarke. The Sheriff is here to talk to you.”

“It ain’t half time yet,” he mumbled. “I’ll turn it off then, Mandy.” Clarke shoved a big hand into a bag of Doritos.

Mandy snapped at him, “Turn it off now, Clarke. The sheriff doesn’t have all day to wait for halftime.”

Clarke turned and stuck his tongue out at his wife.

Yep. Not too stable.

“Does Clarke have a hunting knife, ma’am?” asked Travis.

“No. I don’t allow him to have any weapons in the house.”

“Could you tell me where Clarke was the night before last?”

“What time, Sheriff?”

“Let’s say between ten in the evening and dawn.”

“He was home in bed. I know that for sure, because he started his new job yesterday and he doesn’t get home and into bed until twelve thirty.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I’ll leave you one of my cards. You can call me anytime.”

“Thanks, Sheriff Frost.”

Travis jumped into his truck thinking he wasted a trip.

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

Tammy was already back at the office after her interview with Kyle Gregory, and she helped me get Art Andrews out of the squad and into a cell.

Once Art was secure, I gave the evidence bags to Molly and gave her a quick verbal report of the arrest up in Sunburst Acres.

While I made a fresh pot of coffee, Molly started cataloguing the drugs I'd brought in. Ted came into the office next after his trip down to Valier.

"Anything going on with that guy they released, Ted?" asked Billy.

"Yeah, for sure something is going on with him, Billy. He ain't been home long and his mama says Carl run off already and she wants us to find him for her. I told her we'd get at it in the morning—on account of Travis having the dogs with him—and we gotta wait for Max and Sarge."

I leaned on Billy's door to hear Ted's story. "True, Ted. Boss has the dogs. Does the lost guy sound like he might be our suspect?"

"Might be. Definitely a nut bar. Locked up for turning a knife on himself and accidently cutting up his mama when she tried to get the knife away from him."

"Aw, shit," said Billy. "We better find him tomorrow, then. Did Drapeau's prints show up anywhere in the truck or camper, Ted?"

"Nope. He'd be in the system—him doing time in the State looney bin—but he could've worn gloves."



“Yeah. Gloves,” said Billy.

It was almost quitting time and Tammy had gone across the road to the diner to get food for the three prisoners. That’s when Travis got back from Great Falls. “Any luck, boss?” asked Billy.

“Not a bit. I drove all that fuckin way to find out that Clarke Edmundston has an alibi for the night the Walkers were killed.”

“Solid?” Billy raised an eyebrow.

“His wife says he was in bed with her the entire night.”

Billy shook his head. “I don’t put too much stock in wives’ and mothers’ alibis. Just can’t convince me.”

“Okay, that’s a point to consider, but Clarke didn’t seem too bright. Nose in the TV and shoving Doritos into his face. Wouldn’t look me in the eye and wouldn’t talk to me directly. He’s not hitting on all four burners.”

“Sometimes, those guys will just flip out and kill somebody,” said Billy. No tellin.”

Tammy returned from the diner, and I gave her a hand to feed the prisoners. We wrapped up and Molly and Ted went home for the day.

Travis locked up and headed for the ranch. That was it for our first official day on the job. Pretty busy day for both of us.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

Travis and Billy sat on the porch when we got home to our ranch, the two of them

tossing back a few cold ones before dinner.

Tammy and I ran upstairs, changed out of our uniforms, and pulled on our barn jeans and T-shirts. As we ran to the barn to do our chores she asked, “First day good for you?”

“Yep. Pretty busy. Flew by fast.”

“Me too,” said Tammy. “You think we’re any closer to grabbing the killer?”

“Nope.” I opened the double doors and let Tammy go into the barn first. “You?”

“Nope.”

We mucked out the stalls first and got the bedding in before we got the horses from the corral and brought them in for the night. Weather-wise, the horses could stay out in July, but Travis didn’t trust the bears after they got Max that one time. He was being cautious because there were a lot of grizzlies in our area.

Travis loved his dogs. We all did.

## Chapter Four

Wednesday, July 24th.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

Tammy and me finished the morning chores and ran into the house for breakfast. Sitting at the end of the table, Travis wasn't wearing a happy face. He and Billy were arguing about something, and they stopped as soon as Tam and me came into the kitchen.

"What's wrong?" asked Tammy. She wasn't too good with a lot of tension circling around her. Fight or flight. Made her get ready to run. Seen it happen a hundred times.

"Nothing," snapped Travis. "Billy and me aren't seeing eye to eye on something. Nothing important." He jumped up to the stove, shoveled ham and eggs onto our plates and set them on the table in front of us.

It must be important if Travis is pissed at Billy. That never happens.

I glanced across the table at Billy, and he wasn't saying a damned thing. Best to let it lie.

Tammy was ready to jump and run just from the tension floating around in the room, but she held on and said, "I'll make more toast."

"Thanks, Tam. I can use more toast." She stood behind me stroking my hair while she waited on the toaster to pop, and I could feel how stressed she was.

Sheriff's Office. Coyote Creek.

Molly had given the juvies in the run their breakfast already, but the container meant for Art Andrews sat on the counter in the break room.

He was still sleeping off his big druggie binge. Made me wonder if Art had been close to an overdose when I brought him in. Might have saved his life unintentionally. Not much worth saving there. Course people always did big turnarounds—some people dug in and made their lives better. Others kept on going until they buried themselves in the white stuff.

Hard to tell which way it was gonna go.

Ted and I cuffed the two paint-spraying kids and took them out of their cells and put them in the back of Travis's squad. They had an early arraignment in juvie court.

"Don't worry, boys. Your parents and your lawyers are gonna meet you at the courthouse and chances are better than good that both of you will be released on bail into your parents' custody."

"Yeah, that's what we're scared of," said Todd. "Our parents are gonna fuckin kill us dead. I'd rather stay here."

"We'll be grounded until next year," said Darryl Levine. "At least I will be. Todd's parents are way nicer than mine."

"Probably none of your parents will be in a good mood today," I said. "Best to keep your mouths shut and your heads down. Don't look at anybody and say nothing unless the judge asks you a question."

Darryl sucked in a breath. "The judge gonna like...say stuff to us?"

"Uh huh. He might decide to give you a little advice about not showing up in his

court again—something like that. Judges are like that. They like to give you a warning. You show up in front of that same judge again and whammo.”

Todd jumped and I almost laughed out loud.

“Down will come that fuckin gavel and you’re off to Juvie detention in Great Falls. Enjoy your stay, boys. You might bethere for a couple of years—depends how grumpy the judge is on that particular day you show up.”

“Geeze,” said Todd. He looked over at Darryl. “We better not get caught ever again.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” said Darryl.

I closed the back door of the squad on them, and Travis slid behind the wheel.

Harrison County Court House. Coyote Creek.

When we got to the back door of the courthouse, Travis explained to the boys what was happening to them. “At the rear entrance, I’m gonna hand you boys off to the bailiff. He’ll take you downstairs to a holding cell. You wait there until it’s your turn to stand in front of the judge, and the bailiff will come get you and take you to the courtroom. Once you get there, he’ll hand you off to your lawyer. Simple. Nothing to worry about here.”

“Yep. Sounds simple,” said Todd. “I got it, Sheriff. Thanks for the stay in your nice jail. Tell Tammy I like her and me and Darryl are sorry about messing up her truck. Tell her the burgers and fries from the diner were extra good.”

“I’ll pass that along, boys. Good luck with the judge.”

“Thanks, Sheriff Frost.”

Travis and I walked around to the front of the building and inside we found out which courtroom was hearing juvenile cases.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

We grabbed seats about halfway back and we could see both sets of parents sitting near the front. No lawyers—the lawyers were in the ante-room waiting for the boys to be brought up from holding.

Wyatt came in just before the court was in session and sat down next to me. “You brought the spray painters for their arraignment?”

“Yep. They’re here and their parents are sitting up there closer to the rail.”

“Good,” said Wyatt. “I might get a comment from the parents.”

“Pretty hostile,” I said. “Extremely pissed at their kids at the moment. You’d better watch yourself.”

Several cases were called before Todd and Darryl. Travis listened and seemed interested in the charges against the other juvie boys. Whoever they were, they hadn’t gone through our office, but this might have been the only juvie session available, and they’d been sent over from a neighboring county.

“Wonder what those boys have been up to.” I said.

“Some of the charges sounded vague,” said Travis. “I might have Molly pull up their jackets when we get back to the office.”

After Todd and Darryl had their turn and were released on their own recognizance into their parents’ custody, we went back to the office.

When we got there, Molly told us that Ted and Tammy had taken Max and Sarge and gone to talk to Mrs. Drapeau. She had called asking if the dogs were coming to find her son.

“We’ll catch up,” said Travis. “Forward any calls,” he hollered to Billy.

“Copy that.” Still an edge to Billy’s voice.

What the fuck are they pissed about?

Drapeau Residence. Valier.

Tammy’s squad was parked in the driveway and she and Ted were inside with Mrs. Drapeau. I tapped on the door, and she came to let us in.

“Carl didn’t come home again last night,” said Mrs. Drapeau. “I hope no harm came to him.”

“Does he have a weapon with him, ma’am?” asked Travis. “Knife or gun?”

“I don’t think so, Sheriff.”

Tammy handed me items of clothing for Max and Sarge, and I let them sniff the T-shirts and carry them around for a few minutes.

“What if he’s not alive when you find him, Sheriff? Then what am I going to do with no Carl?”

“Let’s not think about that yet, ma’am. For now, we’ll just consider him lost until we prove otherwise. Okay?”



“Okay.” She wiped her eyes with a wad of tissues.

“You make yourself a cup of coffee and try to relax,” said Travis. “It might take several hours for the dogs to find Carl if he’s wandered a long way from home.”

“Okay, thanks, Sheriff. I’ll try not to be a crybaby.”

Travis smiled at her. “Attagirl.”

We left the house and the logical place to start was the hundreds of acres of bush next to the house. I held Sarge’s leash and Travis had hold of Max, and we set off in different directions.

Tammy ran alongside me, and Ted followed Travis. We’d been dodging branches and ducking through thick underbrush for over half an hour when Sarge suddenly changed direction and almost jerked me off my feet.

I turned so fast Tammy ran right into me and we both broke out laughing. “Sarge wants to go this way instead,” I hollered.

Following the new direction, Sarge picked up speed and I was about winded when he stopped dead and sat down at the bottom of a tree. Paw in the air waiting for his treat.

I reached into my pocket for a biscuit while I glanced around for any sign of Carl. Didn’t see him. No sign of anybody.

## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

Sarge said he was here in this spot, and the dogs were never wrong.

“Look up,” said Tammy.

“Aw shit. Looking up, I saw a dead body draped over a branch. Carl’s dead eyes were wide open and staring down at me. Gave me a shiver.

Easy to see Carl was clawed up real good by a bear. His left arm dangled over the branch, hanging on by what skin was left and a couple tendons. After the bear got him, Carl must have scrambled up the tree and bled to death.

Lucky the bear didn’t climb up after him. Didn’t matter in the end.

“Tam, call the boss and tell him we need Doctor Olsen.”

“Copy.”

I gave Sarge the biscuit in my hand and patted his head. “Good boy, Sarge. You found Carl.”

Tammy and I sat down on a log and had a smoke while we waited for Travis and the coroner.

Wasn’t long before Travis tramped through into the little clearing and glanced around for the body. I pointed up and Travis shook his head. “Aw shit, look at that fuckin mess. Let’s get him down. Doc can’t examine the body up there.”

“Ted waiting for the doc?” I asked.

“Yeah, Ted’s sitting at the road.”

“I’ll do it, boss.” I climbed up the birch tree and freed Carl from his death grip on the branch. He flopped to the ground with a thud, and we left him where he landed.

Soon after, Doc Olsen came along carrying his medical kit. Ted carried the body bag.

Shaking his head, Doctor Olsen did his examination and made a few notes. When he finished up, we spread the bag out and did our best to put what was left of Carl Drapeau inside.

“First bear fatality this year,” said the doctor, “and it’s already July. Not too bad.”

“How many last year, Doc?” asked Tammy.

“Five.”

“Huh.” Tammy made a face. “One is bad enough. We have to tell Carl’s mother.”

“Yeah, I’ll do it,” said Travis. “You and me, Tam.” Travis turned to me: “Harlan, you and Ted carry the body to Doc’s van and then take the dogs back to the shop and start on your reports for Molly.”

“Copy that, boss.”

Me and my dad tramped all the way back to Mrs. Drapeau’s house to tell her that Carl was dead. My first notification and I figured that’s why Travis wanted me to go with him. Harlan had done lots of notifications with Travis before I started working.

Travis knocked on the door and Mrs. Drapeau answered right away hoping we had good news about her son. “Did you find Carl?”

“Yes, ma’am. We did find him and I’m afraid it’s not good news.”

“Is Carl hurt, Sheriff?”

“Carl is deceased, ma’am. I believe he was killed by a bear. Possibly a grizzly.”

“Oh, no.” Mrs. Drapeau began sobbing.

I stepped into the house, took her arm, and steered her to a chair in the living room. I picked up a box of tissues sitting on a nearby table and handed the box to her.

She sat quietly for a few minutes crying to herself before she was able to listen to Travis telling her about the morgue in Cut Bank, Doctor Olsen, and the numbers on the cards for grief counselling and community outreach he was providing her with.

“Do you have anyone you can call to come and stay with you, ma’am? A friend or relative?”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

Mrs. Drapeau took a minute to dry her eyes before she answered. “Yes. I can call my sister in Cut Bank. She’ll drive down and stay with me. Thank you, Sheriff Frost.”

Travis pointed to the cards. “People who will help you through this, ma’am. Call the numbers.”

“I will. Thank you.”

We left Mrs. Drapeau waiting for her sister and as Travis and I drove back to the office, he said, “We don’t know if Carl was our killer or not and now we might never find out.”

“We will find out for sure if it wasn’t him,” I said.

“Yep, we will. Thanks for scaring the shit out of me, Tam.”

“Welcome.”

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

Back at the office we told Molly about Carl, and she was sad for Mrs. Drapeau. She knew her from church and from their quilting group.

“She finally got him back from the hospital,” said Molly, “and now he’s dead within a week. Such a tragedy for her.”

“Sure is,” I said, “Her sister is driving down to stay with her. You know her sister,

Molly?”

“No, I’m not sure I do, dear.”

“Sarge found him,” I said.

Molly smiled at the dogs sitting close to her desk. “Such good boys.”

Max and Sarge were looking a little chunky lately. Molly gave them way too many biscuits when Travis wasn’t looking.

Carl Drapeau was dead. Was he the one who killed the Walkers and left Dillon with no parents? He had no knife with him when we found him. Huh. If he was the killer, we’ll never solve that case.

Dry Run Roadhouse.

On the way home to the ranch, we stopped at the roadhouse for beer and the four of us sat on stools at the bar. Jack, the owner, was Billy’s cousin and he wanted to hear about the progress we’d made on the campground killings.

“Not a lick of progress so far, Jack,” said Travis. “Today we were busy looking for a missing boy. Guy in his twenties. Found him in the bush. Grizzly got him.”

“Who was it? Do I know him?”

“Carl Drapeau,” said Billy. “He’s been in the State Hospital for a few years. Just released.”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “Ya think they might have been a bit premature giving him his walking papers?”

“Definitely think so,” said Travis. “Carl wasn’t ready to face the real world. He ran off from his mother’s house and that was it.”

“Huh,” said Jack. “How many grizzly kills a year do we have?”

“Five last year,” said Tammy. “Doc Olsen keeps track. Only the one so far.”

“Huh,” said Jack. “Four more to go.”

“The bears ain’t counting,” I said. “They might go for a higher number.”

Tammy made a face. “After seeing what Carl looked like, I hope that ain’t true, Harlan.”

“Just say’n.”

Chapter Five

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

Thursday, July 25th.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

Me and Tammy had a big talk in the barn while we did morning chores and mucked out the stalls. Travis and Billy weren't talking to each other and that was like...so fuckin weird because they were best friends and lived together, and they always joked and laughed and kidded around.

"What do you think is going on?" Tammy asked me. "I can't figure it out."

I shrugged. "Don't know, Tam. About all I can do is come right out and ask Travis when I get a chance alone with him."

"Yeah, can you do that? Both of them seem so unhappy about whatever it is. Too much tension inside the house. I'd like it to be done with."

"Me too."

We put the horses in the corral for the day and then ran into the house to clean up and have breakfast. Billy wasn't in the kitchen when we got there.

"Where's Billy?" Tammy sat down at her place and drank some of her orange juice. Travis made us drink juice and eat vegetables every fuckin day.

"He's drinking coffee on the porch," said Travis.



“What’s going on with you guys?” I took my chances with pissing Travis off. “What are you arguing about with Billy?”

“Just a personal thing,” said Travis. “Nothing to worry about, kids.” He tried to smile but easy to see he was faking it.

“Y’all never fought before,” said Tammy. She was pushing it a little.

“Eat your breakfast, both of y’all. We’ve got work to do.”

“Billy coming to work today?” I asked.

“Nope. He’s taking a sick day. Says his leg is aching like a bitch.”

“Okay. We should be fine without him,” I said. “Not too much going on. Just a fuckin killer we can’t find.”

“Or it was Carl and we already found him,” said Tammy. “I’m voting for Carl.”

“Yeah, Carl is our best option,” said Travis. “He ticks all the boxes. Just gets released from the mental hospital, and bang...two dead bodies.”

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

“State-wide alert,” hollered Molly. “Two juveniles, one sixteen and one seventeen, escaped from Great Falls Detention Center.”

“Are they heading our way, Molly?” Travis hollered back to her from the office.

“No direction given, Sheriff. I guess we’ll watch out for them.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“What do they look like?” asked Tammy.

“Look like kids,” said Ted.

“Thanks, Ted,” said Tammy, making a face at him. “That helps a lot.”

Sitting at his squad desk, he shrugged. “You know what I mean. They probably look like regular kids. Jeans and a fuckin T-shirt. Every kid wears that.” He hooked a thumb at Tammy.

“They might be blond-headed or have red hair.”

“Okay. Hair color.” Ted hollered over to Molly. “Hair color, Molly?”

## Page 27

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

“Let me get the full printout and you can read the whole works, Ted.” Molly ripped the two pages out of the printer and walked them across the room to Ted’s desk.

“Thank you, ma’am. Let me see what these here punks look like.”

“Any weapons?” I asked Ted.

“Haven’t got to that part yet, Harlan. Let me see. Yep. Right down here. The little bastards have knives they took from the kitchen at the juvie center.”

“Jeeze, that’s good news, Ted.” Tammy made another face. “I’m not too fond of knives.”

I knew exactly why she didn’t like knives. The guy who kept Tammy prisoner for more than five years almost cut Travis’s arm in half the day he came to get Tammy from the Cut Bank Hospital. She didn’t tell me that—Travis did. Showed me the fuckin scar and the ink that got mangled on his arm.

“Can’t worry about that now, Tam. We have to get Art to the courthouse for his arraignment.”

“Get him ready, Harlan,” said Travis. “Doubt if he’s gonna make bail again. Too many times in front of the judge already for that loser. The gavel might be coming down hard this time.”

I walked into the office and grabbed the keys to the run from the rack on the wall. “I’ll get him right now.”

“Me and Ted will drive him over,” said Travis. “No use four of us going.”

Art Andrews had sobered up some since the day I brought him in, and I wondered about him going into withdrawal. He’d been pretty loaded a couple of days before. Now he seemed just stupid and groggy.

Maybe this was his new normal. Used to be a big boozier wandering around in an alcoholic haze, but now he was on the good stuff.

Harrison County Courthouse. Coyote Creek.

Travis and Ted sat inside thinking they’d be the ones getting Art back for the duration, but the judge surprised them and granted Art bail. Travis couldn’t see one reason why he would, but a lawyer showed up for Art out of the blue and argued his case.

Judge set bail and Art stomped out of the court with his lawyer.

“Huh,” said Ted. “What the fuck?”

“Guess we don’t have to wait for him,” said Travis.

Strolling to the squad in the parking lot, Ted, and Travis both saw a woman pull up alongside Art Andrews and his lawyer.

She climbed out of her Lexus, opened her purse, and gave the lawyer a check. Art climbed in the passenger seat of her car, and the woman took off.

Not a bad looking woman somewhere in her forties. Travis wasn’t looking, but if he was...

“What the fuck?” Ted shaded his eyes to follow the car down the road. “Since when did a piece of work like Art Andrews have women paying his bail and picking him up?”

“Like...never.” said Travis.

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

I was sitting in the break room drinking a coffee and staring at a text Brooke from Olivia’s Inn sent to me. I’d texted her once before asking if she wanted me to call her and she never answered me. I figured the answer was a hard no.

“I’m off on Saturday night. Want to do something?”

I stared for a minute wondering what I should say. Tammy came in to get a coffee and I showed her the text. We had no secrets.

“Say, sure, then make a plan.”

“Okay. Sounds sensible. I don’t want to sound fuckin stupid or something.”

Tammy giggled. “Grab a date while you can. You might like her.”

“Umm...I’m not sure.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

“That’s what dating is for—to find out if you’re sure or if it’s a hard no.”

I laughed. “Okay, I’m doing it.”

I typed in my answer and that’s all I had time for. Molly was hollering from the dispatch desk. Me and Tammy went running.

“Two teens just stole a car from the parking lot of the feed store. You better get over there. Travis and Ted aren’t back from the courthouse yet.”

“Yep. Me and Tammy will take it.”

Needs and Feeds. Coyote Creek.

Savanna was out front smoking and looking pretty pissed when me and Tammy got there. I jumped out of the squad and said, “Molly said two kids stole a car.”

“My car, Harlan. They stole my car, and it’s not just some cheap piece of shit.”

“No, ma’am. It ain’t. What did the kids look like?”

“Seventeen. Two tough looking kids.”

“Two missing from the Juvie Center in Great Falls today,” said Tammy. “We got the State-wide alert.”

“Could easily be them,” said Savanna. “Not local. Never seen them before.”

“Any witnesses?” I asked.

“Kenny saw them from the order desk,” said Savanna. “He can give a better description than I can.”

“I’ll go get his statement,” said Tammy.

Savanna smiled. “He’s hanging onto something, Tammy—from the spray painting incident. I think he likes you.”

“Doubt it. Not many guys like me.”

I shook my head at Tammy. Guys liked her all right—maybe a little too much, but she kept them at arm’s-length.

I stood at the order desk waiting for Kenny’s last customer to walk away before I talked to him. It was hard getting a word or a question in, because all the time he stood at the desk or sat on his stool, he answered his phone and took orders at the same time.

The mill and feed section of the store was way busier than the retail store inside.

I pulled out my notebook and set it on the counter ready to write as soon as he ended the last call. “Notice anything about the carjackers?”

“Umm...not too much. Just kids, but I can tell you what they’re wearing if that helps.”

“Sure. Description of their clothes will help a lot.”

“One kid had dark hair—almost black—and he had on torn jeans and a black T-shirt.

Concert shirt, maybe.”

“And the other one?”

“Blond or sandy hair. Blue shirt—short sleeves—and faded jeans. Both of them wore runners. White runners. Noticed the shoes when they were running around trying to get the boss’s car open.”

“You call Savanna?”

“Sure, but the kids were fast, and they were pretty cool at getting that car open and starting it. Like I mean fast, Sheriff Tammy.”

“Wow. Sounds like they grabbed a few vehicles before and got practiced up.”

Kenny grinned. “Yeah, don’t it?”



*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

I shoved my notebook into my pocket, thanked Kenny and went to find Harlan.

When we were done with the interviews—and nobody had seen much—me and Tammy sat in the squad at the front of the store wondering if anybody who wasn't in the store had seen which way the kids went with Savanna's car.

"The store is big with a lot of property around it for the trucks," said Tammy. "Way down here at the south end of town, it's not like any neighbors would have seen her car go by."

"Not until they cruised Main Street," I said.

"Then the people downtown wouldn't know it was stolen."

"Most of them wouldn't know it was Savanna's car," I said. "I'll put a BOLO out on it, and we'll go back to the office and fill out our reports for Molly."

"Not much we can do," said Tammy, "until somebody spots the car with the kids in it."

Wild Stallion Ranch.

Sitting on the porch with his leg propped up on the railing, Billy saw the car come down the laneway. He thought it looked like Savanna's car, but then figured it wouldn't be. If it was her car, there wouldn't be two kids in the front seat.

The car rounded the house and drove out back towards the garage.

Billy got up off his chair, limped through the house and exited through the woodshed at the back. The car was parked near the corral and the kids were nowhere in sight.

Thankful the punks weren't touching the horses, he let out a breath and listened to see if they were in the barn. Doors were closed and he didn't think they were in there. Out behind maybe, in the bunkhouse. That's what it sounded like.

Billy kept going in that direction and the kids' voices grew louder. They were inside the bunkhouse shouting and yelling at each other about something. Billy couldn't make it out.

"What the hell do they want with the bunkhouse, or with this ranch? What the fuck are they looking for?"

The dogs were with Travis and the kids, so Billy had nothing but his Sig. He stopped outside the bunkhouse door, stood there, and listened to the two kids hollering inside.

"Are they nuts? Maybe they're high and on some kind of trip."

Leading with his gun, Billy pushed the door open, stood in the opening and gave a shout out. "Hey, you kids. Get out of here. This is private property."

"Hey, Stu, we got company. Looks like an old cripple. Think we can take him?"

"Sure can, Dan." They both laughed like it was a big joke.

The black-haired one, Stuart, wielded a tire iron and the last thing Billy wanted to do was shoot kids. When Stu came at him, Billy took a dive to his right to get out of the way and didn't quite get clear. The iron hit him on the side of the head and knocked him to the floor.

“He’s down. Get his wallet.”

Billy heard nothing after that. He was out.

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

Travis and Ted returned from the arraignment at the courthouse and Tammy and Harlan weren’t there.

“Art Andrews made bail, Molly, and a lawyer and a woman showed up for him. This is her tag. Could you find out who this good friend of Art Andrews is? I’d like to know.”

“Sure, Travis. Something else happened while you and Ted were gone.”

“Like what, Molly?”

“A car was stolen from the feed store. Harlan and Tammy went on the call and I’m sure they’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Knowing Harlan and Tammy were trained to handle a call, he worried all the same about the kids and called Harlan’s cell. “You guys in control of your situation?”

“On our way back to the shop. Talk in a minute.”

“Copy, son.”

Me and Tammy came running in the back door of the station and through the sally port.

“Whose car got jacked?” hollered Ted.

“Savanna’s,” said Tammy. “She’s pissed about it too. Two kids and we figure they’re the ones from the escape in Great Falls.”

Travis nodded. “Could very well be, Tam. They might’ve caught a ride this far and they need wheels to get to the border.”

“Yeah, I was thinking Canadian border,” I said.

Tammy gave Molly the statements from Savanna and Kenny, the only witnesses. “Give you my report as soon as Travis is done with us, Molly.”

“Thanks, dear. I’ll enter these statements for now.”

“No sign of the kids or the car when y’all got there?” asked Travis.

“Nope. Goners. Kenny gave us descriptions of what the kids are wearing,” said Tammy. “We have that much.”

“BOLO on the vehicle, Harlan?” asked Travis.

“Yes, sir.”

“Good boy.”

The front door of the office opened, and Savanna hurried in from the street, one of her big feed trucks parked at the curb.

“What is being done to find my car, Travis?”

“Give us a minute, girl. From what I gather, it was only stolen twenty minutes ago, and we’ve got a BOLO out on it. No time has passed yet for us to hear anything back on it and get a location. Settle down.”

Savanna frowned. “Can I talk to you for a minute in private?”

“I guess. What about?”

Savanna corralled Travis into the run and closed the door behind them. Tammy pointed and we laughed. We had no idea what was going on in there.

“Weird, Tam. That is just weird.”

She giggled.

The two of us sat in the break room and watched the door to see if Travis and Savanna were mad or happy when they came out of the run.

Tammy leaned close and whispered to me, “Dad looks kind of neutral, but Savanna looks as mad as piss.”

“Yep. You called it. She is fuming.”

“Wish I knew what it’s about,” whispered Tammy. “Same as at home with Billy. What the hell is going on?”

Savanna left the building and Travis stomped into the break room and barked out orders to us. “Give Molly all the reports you owe her, and we’ll get out of here. Maybe go for a ride when we get home.”

“Copy that, Sheriff. Doing it now.”

Wild Stallion Ranch.

We brought both squads home from the office...just in case. I drove one and Travis drove the other. When we drove in the lane, I expected to see Billy on the porch with his leg up, but he wasn’t there.

“Billy ain’t in his spot,” said Tammy. “Wonder if the pain is real bad for him.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

“Hope not.”

“Let’s park and grab a beer before we saddle the horses.”

“I’m for that,” said Tammy.

I followed Tammy into the house, and she went straight for the fridge and grabbed three beers. Travis was hollering for Billy, and he wasn’t answering.

“He wouldn’t be upstairs,” said Travis. “Can’t do the stairs.”

“I’ll check the barn.” I set my beer on the kitchen table, ran through the house and out through the woodshed at the back. No sign of Billy.

The horses are in the corral.

I opened both barn doors and left them open. We had chores to do. Billy wasn’t in the barn. “Billy, where are you?” I hollered loud so he could hear me if he was outside.

Tammy came running out. “His truck is here. He can’t be too far.”

I came out of the garage. “Check the bunkhouse. That’s the only place I haven’t looked.”

Tammy ran ahead of me, and the door of the bunkhouse was open. Tammy screamed and I knew it was bad. She was no wussy.

I ran to the bunkhouse, and she was standing over Billy staring down at him and crying. He was sprawled on the floor all beat to hell and he looked pretty much dead.

I dropped down on one knee and felt his neck for a pulse and he was warm and breathing. “He ain’t dead, Tam. Run and tell Travis to back the truck up to the side of the barn. I’ll carry Billy.”

She took off like a shot and I had Billy over my shoulder walking past the winter wood pile when Travis backed across the compound.

He jumped out and opened the back door for me, and Tammy helped me get Billy inside and lying down on the back seat.

“I’ll sit in the back with him,” said Tammy. “He’s out cold. Not moving. There’s a lot of blood.”

“But he’s breathing?” asked Travis.

“He’s warm, Dad,” I said. “He ain’t cold or stiff.”

“Let’s go. We’d better step on it.”

Travis slid behind the wheel, rammed the truck into gear and we were out of there.

Cut Bank Hospital.

Ten minutes to get to Cut Bank Hospital with the siren screaming and the strobes flashing. Travis had his pickup outfitted with police equipment same as the squads. We always were needing an extra vehicle.

When we got there, Travis ran inside and got an orderly. The guy in blue scrubs lifted



Billy out of the truck and put him on a stretcher.

After Billy was wheeled inside and taken to an emergency room, we had nothing to do but drink coffee for an hour until a doctor came to talk to us.

By that time, Billy's parents had arrived from Shelby. Travis called them. He kind of eased into it so they wouldn't be too shaken up or upset. Billy's dad had a bad heart.

They asked too many questions, and we had no answers for them.. We had no fuckin clue what happened to Billy, but they kept on asking us anyway. Kind of like we knew, and we weren't telling them.

The doctor came to find us and gave us the low-down on Billy's condition. I tried to catch all of the medical stuff, but it was tough to understand.

"The preliminary examination has been completed along with a set of x-rays and bloodwork. Sheriff Johnson's damaged leg has been further injured and that's going to cause trouble for him, cuts and bruises will heal, but what I'm most concerned about is the head injury."

"He has a head injury?" His mother started to cry.

The doctor didn't try to comfort Mrs. Johnson, just kept going. "Sheriff Johnson was struck on the head with a heavy object, and I have no idea how long he was unconscious, andhis brain was deprived of oxygen. More tests will have to be run tomorrow."

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

“Is Billy awake?” asked Travis.

“He’s barely awake and I’m not allowing any visitors until tomorrow around noon, but he has something he needs to tell Sheriff Frost.” The doctor held up three fingers. “Three minutes, Sheriff.”

“Okay, I’ll be fast.”

Mrs. Johnson sobbed while Travis was in with Billy and it was kind of unfair that she couldn’t go in to see her boy, but it wasn’t our call.

Travis was quick and as soon as he came out of the ICU, we left for home.

Rolling home in the truck, Travis said, “It was kids in the bunkhouse, and they hit him with a tire iron.”

“The kids in Savanna’s car?” asked Tammy.

“Yep. He saw Savanna’s car and thought it couldn’t be hers. Now we want those little bastards for attempted murder of a police officer. This has gone from being a simple joyride to something that they’ll never shake off.”

“We need to find out what those two kids were locked up for,” said Tammy. “Those little bastards are violent.”

“Yep,” said Travis. “We’ll have Molly get copies of their files from juvenile detention. We need to know everything about them.”

Wild Stallion Ranch.

Dark when we got home, and the horses were still in the corral. Travis fried us up some potatoes and bacon and beans while Tammy and I did the barn chores and locked the horses up for the night.

Travis wouldn't leave them out because of the bears. Always a risk and one he wasn't taking with our beautiful horses.

"The bunkhouse is a crime scene," said Tammy between bites.

I nodded. My sister was right. Our bunkhouse was a fucking crime scene.

## Chapter Six

Friday, July 26th.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

At breakfast me and Tammy talked to Travis about treating the bunkhouse like a crime scene and getting a forensics unit in to run it.

"We know our county don't have the money for it," said Tammy, "but how much would it cost? We know the names of the two kids that escaped, and those punks are in the system if they came out of the juvie center. There will be prints in the bunkhouse and we can make a positive ID. They have to go to trial for what they did to Billy."

"Ted and I will do it this morning," said Travis. "I want to do it myself."

"Okay, good," said Tammy. "They committed a felony, and the next thing is getting

those fuckers tried as adults.”

Travis smiled and winked at me.

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

Molly was already at her desk when Tammy and me got to the shop. “Morning, everyone,” she called.

“Hey, Molly. Me and Tammy are on calls this morning.”

“What about me?” asked Ted. “Where’s the boss?”

“Travis is waiting at the ranch for you to bring the fingerprint kit and the evidence bags,” said Tammy.

“What happened at your ranch?” asked Molly. “Where’s Billy?”

“Hospital,” said Tammy. “Those boys who stole Savanna’s car—at least we think it was them—beat up Billy at our ranch and stole his wallet.”

## Page 33

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

“Oh, no.” Molly teared up. “How badly is Billy hurt?”

“The kids hit him with a tire iron,” I said. “He has a severe head injury, and the doc is running tests today.”

“His parents are at the hospital,” said Tammy.

“I’d better load up,” said Ted. “Matter which squad I take?”

“Nope,” I said. “Take the sheriff’s Bronco, then Travis will have it if you guys go to the lab.”

“Yeah, I’ll take the Bronco,” said Ted.

“Any sightings on the car?” I asked Molly.

“Nothing, Harlan. Does Jack know about Billy?”

“Not yet,” I said. “You could let him know and Savanna too. She lived with us for a long time and her and Billy are tight. She’s gonna freak sideways when she finds out—especially the part where they used her fuckin car.”

“I agree. She will be upset,” said Molly. “I’ll call Jack Johnson at home and then Savanna at the feed store.”

Molly began making the first call and had to stop for incoming. “Sheriff’s Office. How can I help you?”

I moved over closer to the dispatch desk and watched her writing stuff down on her yellow pad.

“Yes. I’ve got it. Sending a squad your way, sir. They’re on their way.”

“What is it?” asked Tammy.

“Gunfire in Sunburst Acres. Perhaps you should call Travis on your way there.”

“We will, Molly. Let’s go, Tam.”

We ran out the back of the building and jumped into our squad. I flipped on the lights and the siren and roared out of the parking lot onto Main Street.

I turned north and pounded the gas while Tammy tried to get ahold of Travis. “Yeah, Dad, we got a call. There’s gunfire in Sunburst Acres and we’re headed up there.”

“Is he coming?” I asked her.

Tammy finished her conversation. “He and Ted will meet us there. They’ll leave the prints for now and assist us.”

“Copy that, Tam. Did you remember to put your vest on this morning?”

“Yep. I don’t want to get shot in the boob.”

“I don’t want that to happen either.” She made me chuckle. “Travis would be super pissed if we got hurt and he found out we weren’t properly dressed for work.”

“Yeah, he’d kill us if we weren’t already dead.”

Sunburst Acres Trailer Park.

“Which trailer?” I asked Tammy. Then I saw guys running around outside. “Not Art’s. That’s not Andrew’s trailer.”

Tammy started screaming. “That’s my trailer. It’s supposed to be empty. I’m never going in that trailer. I can’t go in there.”

She was right. That was the trailer Travis had pointed out to me—the one Tammy had been living in with the guy who owned her.Owned? That was a dirty word.

I pulled into the driveway, jumped out and pulled the shotguns out of the gun safe in the hatch. I handed Tammy hers. “Stay back here using the squad for cover. Shoot any runners in the shins. Got it?”

“I know what to do, Harlan. I’m trained and I won’t let you down. I’ll give you backup. I don’t want you getting hurt.”

## Page 34

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

We stood there with our guns levelled at the door of the trailer until Travis and Ted got there. Travis would suspend us if there was gunfire and we went in without waiting for backup. We'd been warned.

Tammy turned her head when she heard the siren coming. "Here they come. I'm going around behind the trailer to cover the back door. The fuckers are gonna run. That's a for-sure."

"Be careful."

As soon as Travis and Ted bailed out of the Bronco and got their shotguns, we charged the trailer.

"Ted, cover Tammy at the back door," said Travis.

"Copy." He ran around the side of the trailer.

Max and Sarge ran behind me and Travis. They were anxious to see some action.

No knock.

Travis put his boot to the lock and the door flew off the hinges. "Sheriff coming in," he hollered. "Lay your weapons down. Do it now."

Bang. Bang.

Four guys inside the single-wide and one of them just shot my dad. I guess I went a



little nuts and started blasting double ought buckshot at them.

Upper body. Head.

When they heard the shotgun blasts, Ted and Tammy ran in from the back and helped me out. We soon had all four of them laid out dead as dirt on the filthy floor of the trailer.

With the threat gone, Tammy screamed and dropped down beside Travis. I was on the phone calling an ambulance and I didn't have a clue if there were more of the druggies running loose outside.

"Ted, check outside for runners and get the tags off all the pickups. Write them down."

"Copy. Doing that. Better call Doc Olsen."

"Yep. Doing that next."

Tammy's eyes were weird, and I knew what to look for. She was going into shock. I yelled at her to make her focus. "Tammy. Soak some cloths in hot water and clean Dad up for the ambulance guys. Hurry. Run to the bathroom."

She stared straight at me, and I wasn't sure she could hear me or process what I was saying. But then she snapped out of it and nodded. She jumped up and ran to get stuff to help Travis.

I checked him over and he was hit in the right side. His vest should be covering the area, but he might not have put it on if he figured he'd be in the bunkhouse all day collecting evidence and fingerprints.

With Travis down and Tammy half in shock, I tried to think of everything me and Ted had to do at the scene.

Ted came back inside. “Nobody else out there, kid.”

“Okay, good. Search for drugs and guns and bag everything you find. Mark the bags. I’ll pull the IDs from the bodies for the notifications.”

“Copy.”

Tammy sat on the floor beside Travis wiping the blood off him and trying to stop the bleeding in his side. Through her tears, she sobbed. “I can’t get this stopped, Harlan. Daddy’s gonna bleed to death.”

“Keep pressure on the wound. Press hard.”

A couple of minutes later, the paramedics came running in and rolled Travis onto a stretcher. I said, “Tam, go with Dad in the ambulance.”

“Copy. You coming later?”

“Soon as I’m done here, I’ll come to the hospital.”

“Okay.” She hugged me and sobbed tears onto my shirt, then she ran out the door behind the ambulance guys.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

Doctor Olsen was ten minutes behind the ambulance, and I stayed with him while he worked through the guys I'd shot. Ted had written down their IDs and taken down the addresses of each one for the notifications. Surprisingly, none of them lived in Sunburst Acres.

A couple of the dead guys were from Canada. Not too far away—twenty miles to the border. Maybe this trailer was the spot they squatted in to sell their goods on this side of the line.

“Finding any goods, Ted?” I gave him a shout out.

“Bagging them. Lots of guns to mark. I might need more bags, Harlan. That's what I'm thinking.”

“More bags in the back of the squad. Doctor Olsen is going to need a hand to load these guys into the back of the van, when you get a minute.”

“Copy. I'll be done with the evidence in a few.”

As soon as the doctor finished up, Ted and I carried the body bags to the van one by one and loaded them in. Doctor Olsen was in his fifties, and he couldn't lift an occupied body bag by himself.

“You got help at the morgue to get these guys inside, Doc?” asked Ted.

“Yes. I have help at the clinic. Thanks, Ted.”

The doc left and Ted and I finished up inside the trailer. I locked the front and back doors and sealed them with yellow tape.

“Think we remembered everything, Ted?”

“Yep, I do. Don’t want the boss to be pissed at us when he wakes up.”

“Both of them in the hospital now, Ted. We’re kind of on our own.”

“No shit.”

Cut Bank Hospital.

I rode in the back of the ambulance with Travis and held his hand. He opened his eyes and looked at me a couple of times, but his eyes were weird and not focused. I didn’t think he knew what was going on.

When we got to the hospital, the ambulance drove right into the garage. The doors opened at the back and the driver and the guy in the back with me took the stretcher out, and they wheeled Travis down the hall to the operating room on the same level.

I couldn’t go in with Travis, but across the hall there was a waiting area. I grabbed a chair and called Molly.

“Tammy, is that you, dear?”

I choked back my tears and tried to tell her what happened. “Travis got shot at the trailer park, Molly. He’s in surgery. I’m at the hospital by myself. Harlan and Ted are still at the scene.”

“Oh, no. Not Travis.” Molly started to cry. She sniffled a couple of times and then

said, “See if Savanna is there with Billy, dear. If she’s at the hospital, she’ll sit with you until the surgery is over.”

“Okay. I’ll go to Billy’s room and see if she’s there. Thanks, Molly.”

“Is Harlan coming to the hospital when he’s done at the scene?”

“Yes.”

“Good. He’ll be there with you. Let me know when you talk to the doctor. I’d like to know Travis’s condition. I’m so sorry this happened, honey. I’m sure he’ll be okay. He’s very strong.”

The operation to get the bullet out would take a couple of hours at least, so I went upstairs to Billy’s room to see if Savanna was sitting with him.

Billy flashed me a smile when I walked in the door of his room. “Tammy, I didn’t expect to see you in the middle of the day. Come and give me a hug.”

I hugged Billy and felt so bad he was beat to shit. All black and blue and his damaged leg was way worse because of those rogue punk juvies.

“Don’t cry, girl. I’ll be okay.”

“Those boys were so mean to you, Billy.” I didn’t mean to, but I started to sob on his shirt. “We were on a call up at the Acres and Travis got fuckin shot.”

## Page 36

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

Savanna hopped out of her chair. “Where is he? Where is Travis?”

“He’s in the operating room. I came up to see if you were here with Billy.”

“Where’s Harlan?” asked Billy.

“At the scene with Ted. He’ll come after the bodies are cleaned up. Doctor Olsen is there.”

“Bodies?” Billy raised an eyebrow. “How many bodies are we talking about, Tam?”

“Four. Harlan got pissed and kind of lost it when one of the assholes shot Dad.”

Billy nodded. “Uh huh. I can see how that worked.”

“You poor thing.” Savanna hugged me. “Let’s go down to the cafeteria and get coffee. We’ll get one for Billy too.”

“I’m going for more tests in a couple of minutes,” said Billy, “so you girls take your time.”

On the bottom level of the hospital, me and Savanna drank coffee for an hour, then we went back to the waiting area and Travis still wasn’t out of surgery.

Savanna took coffee upstairs to Billy while I waited for Harlan to come and find me. I didn’t want him to look all over the hospital and get upset like he could do.

He came rushing in and I hadn't noticed it before, but his uniform was covered in splatters of blood. Big gobs of it in some places. It was drying up now and turning to dark stains that I'd never get out in the wash. His pants were toast, but I might be able to save his shirt.

I drove like a maniac with the strobes and siren on from the trailer park all the way to the hospital in Cut Bank and it turned out I didn't have to hurry.

I asked a couple of places, found out where Travis was and found Tammy in the waiting area for the operating rooms.

"He done yet?"

"Nope. Savanna is upstairs with Billy. She'll be back to sit with us."

"How long has it been, Tam?"

"Long."

I sat in the chair next to her and pulled her close to me. "Anybody say anything yet?"

"Nope. What if he's dead in there, Harlan? Then what are we gonna do?"

"He's not dead, Tammy. If he was dead, they'd come running right out and tell you to your face."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. They'd have no reason to stay in there, would they?"

"Guess not. You're so fuckin smart."

“Yeah, right.”

Savanna came back to the waiting area, and she'd only been back about ten minutes when the doctor came out and said Travis was being moved to the ICU and we could see him in twenty minutes.

“If you want to move to the ICU waiting area on the fourth floor, you can see Sheriff Frost very soon, but only for five minutes.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” said Savanna.

“Come on, Tammy,” I said. “We'll get a coffee, go up to the fourth floor and then it will be time to see him.”

She nodded and took my hand.



## Page 37

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

Tammy and I were first to see Travis in the unit, but he wasn't awake. Hooked up to a bunch of machines. Lying still. Pale shade of white and sleeping. Couldn't hear him breathing and I listened close.

"He'll continue sleeping until tomorrow afternoon, at least," said the nurse. "You come back after lunch tomorrow and he may be awake enough to talk to you."

"Okay, thanks," I said. "Let's go home, Tam. We've got chores to do."

"Right. We have to go home."

My sister was still pretty shaky, but she held on.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

We were both so fuckin tired, it was tough getting through the chores at the barn. We got the horses squared away and locked them in for the night.

We drank a beer while Tammy made us soup and grilled cheese sandwiches. She wasn't too hungry.

"I don't like it here without Travis and Billy," she said. "It's way too quiet."

"The dogs are whining," I said. "They know Travis isn't here."

"Let's feed them and go to bed," said Tammy. "I am so goddamned tired, Harlan. It's like I never slept for a week."

“Yeah, I’m beat too, and I can smell the blood on me. I’ll grab a quick shower, so I don’t get any on my sheets.”

“Can I sleep with you, Harlan? I can’t sleep alone in my own bed.”

“You think that’s a good idea, Tam?”

“Yeah, best idea I’ve got for tonight.”

“Okay. I don’t have a better one.”

## Chapter Seven

Saturday, July 27th.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

I woke up drenched in sweat with Tammy hanging onto me like she was going to fall off the fuckin bed. It was a bad idea for us to sleep together and I figured I’d feel funny about it for the rest of my fuckin life.

When Travis came home from the hospital, would he be able to tell by looking at the two of us? For sure, he would. That was the part I was already dreading.

Tammy opened her eyes and teared up right away. “What if Travis died during the night?”

“He didn’t. The hospital would’ve called my cell.”

“Did you check for messages?”

“Just opened my eyes.”

She cuddled closer to me and kissed me.

“Shouldn’t be doing that, Tam. Not when I’m naked and under the same quilts as you. I’m getting up. We never should’ve slept together. We gotta shake this off.”

“Okay. I’ll pretend it didn’t happen and I take the blame. I made you do it because I was a cry baby and a wussy.”

“You didn’t make me have sex with you, Tam. I managed that part all on my own. Remember that?”

She smiled. “Yeah, I do. I’ll take half the blame.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

“Okay, take half. We’ve got tons of work to do. Let’s get back on track. Get the chores done. Get to the office and then after lunch, we can go see Travis and he should be awake.”

“Yep. I’m up. Tonight, I’ll sleep in my own bed. I promise.”

“I’m not saying I didn’t like you sleeping with me,” I said. “Nothing like that. We just wouldn’t have a big case of the guilts if we’d never done it.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m sorry.”

“No, I don’t want you to be sorry, and I’m not sorry. Better for living with Dad if it didn’t happen—that’s all I’m say’n.”

“Yeah, I hope I don’t freak out and tell him,” said Tammy.

“That is what you’re not going to do, Tam. By the time we get him home from the hospital, it will be in the past and not so fresh in our minds. We’ll be able to live with it better.”

“Yeah. You’re the smart one, Harlan. After Tibor and all that stuff, I figured I’d never have sex with anybody ever. Kind of surprised me when I wanted to have sex with you...like real bad...and it was so fuckin easy.”

I put my hands over my ears so I couldn’t hear Tammy talking about us having sex. Bad idea.

When I came out of the shower, I could hear her downstairs in the kitchen. Probably making coffee. We had a heavy day ahead of us.

We worked through the chores at the barn without any touching and that was best for me. The horses were fed and cleaned out and in the corral when we ran inside for a fast breakfast.

Tammy made fried egg sandwiches and we ate them in the squad on the way to Coyote Creek.

“Our statements about the shootings at the trailer are going to be long,” she said. “Yours and Ted’s will be even longer than mine. Much drugs there?”

“Yeah, Ted bagged all of it and we brought all of the guns in too. Lots of evidence for Molly.”

“But the drug guys are dead. Who can we charge?”

“Their boss, if we knew who the hell that was.”

“They might all have been calling the same number and that’s the boss,” said Tammy. “Molly could compare the phone calls on the four cells and come up with a number.”

“Good plan, Tam. That’s a great idea. We have all of the phones. I took them off the bodies when I grabbed their wallets for ID.”

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

“Morning, Molly,” I hollered from the back door when Tammy and I came in with the dogs. They’d been whiny overnight, and they searched the house for Travis this

morning. Max and Sarge ran into the squad room to Molly, and she hugged them.

“They been crying, Molly,” said Tammy. “They looked all through the house this morning, upstairs and down, trying to find Travis.”

“Oh, no. That’s a heartbreaking story.” She leaned down and hugged both of them.

I plopped the evidence bag holding the cell phones on the counter in front of Molly.

“Tell her your idea about the phone numbers, Tam.”

Tammy explained what she hoped was true and Molly said she would look for a match.

We gave her our statements of what went down at Sunburst Acres, and she got all of it typed into the computer. She barely had time to finish that up when a call came in on the landline.

“Sheriff’s office. How can I help you?”

I stood there watching as she grabbed her pen and started writing down the details. Didn’t take long and the call was over.

“Kids came to Shelby lumber, and they had a gun. One of the men working in the yard is hurt. The kids stole a different vehicle and they’re gone.”

“Those are the same kids who hurt Billy,” said Tammy. “Come on, Ted. We all have to go after them.”

“Bring both squads,” I said to Ted. “Never know if we’re going to need both.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

“Copy. I’m ready to go.”

“Do all of you have your vests on?” asked Molly. “We can’t afford anyone else getting hurt.”

“Yes. We’re vested up, Molly.” I whistled for the dogs, and we ran for the parking lot.

Shelby Lumber.

I pulled into the spacious lumberyard parking lot with the siren screaming, rammed the Bronco into park and hopped out. Me and Tammy ran into the store at the front of the big building to find out who made the call.

“I’m acting Sheriff Bristol, ma’am. Who can tell us about the trouble you had here?”

“You should talk to Mark out in the yard, Sheriff. He was there when the kids came and shot Clay.”

The lady at the checkout counter pointed to a door at the rear of the store and Tammy and I ran out the back way to find Mark.

A group of guys wearing Shelby Lumber shirts and caps were standing in a tight group talking about what had gone down and I interrupted them. “I’m looking for Mark who saw the shooting happen.”

“I’m Mark McAllister and I was out back when it happened, Sheriff.” He grinned.

“You look kind of young to be a sheriff, kid.”

“Deputy Wallace is here. He old enough for you?”

“Yes, sir.”

Mark was a big guy with a beer belly and a bushy beard. He looked about thirty-five, his ball cap pulled low over brown eyes.

“The man who was injured,” said Tammy. “Where is he now?”

“At the Medical Center,” said Mark.

“Okay, good. We’ll speak to him a little later. Go ahead and tell us what happened.” I turned on the tape recorder and pointed at Savanna’s car. “You saw the kids pull in driving that car over there—a stolen vehicle—belongs to a lady in Coyote Creek.”

“Yeah, the kids jumped out of that car—two kids in their teens. One had a gun, and the other punk was swinging a tire iron.”

“Okay. What did they want?”

“The one with the gun pointed it at Clay and wanted his wallet.”

“Okay. A robbery,” I said.

“Clay told them to go to hell and the kid shot him in the leg. Just like that. Bang. Didn’t even hesitate or stop to think about it. Just pulled the fuckin trigger.”

“Uh huh. Which kid did the shooting? Could you tell if he was the older or the younger of the two?”



“Younger one, I’d guess.”

“Okay, thanks. Go ahead, Mark.”

“Clay fell in the dirt and the other kid charged over and cracked him on the head with the tire iron. Laughing his head off, the guy with the gun took Clay’s wallet and lifted his truck keys at the same time.”

“Wallet and truck keys. Go ahead.”

“Then I heard one of them say something like, ‘Hurry up. We gotta meet Linley in an hour.’”

“Linley? Are you sure that was the name?”

“Yeah, pretty sure.”

I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand up when I heard that name. “They happen to mention where they planned to meet this Linley guy?”

## Page 40

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

“Nope. They ran for the parking lot pressing Clay’s key fob. His truck beeped and they jumped in the pickup and burned out of here.”

“They only took the one wallet and changed vehicles and left?”

“Yes, sir. Gone. That’s when I called you.”

“Okay, thanks. What kind of pickup did Clay drive?”

“Red Chevy Silverado, about two years old. Nice truck and Clay kept it spotless.”

“Thanks. I’ll look up the tag and get a BOLO out on it. We’ll talk to Clay in a couple of minutes. Which way is the Medical Center?”

Mark waved his arm towards the west. “About a block behind Main Street on Pine Avenue. You can’t miss it. Open twenty-four seven.”

I turned to Ted. “Go back to the station and get your tow truck. Come hook up Savanna’s car and tow it back to the shop. When you get there, have Molly call Savanna, and tell her we got the car.”

“Copy that. Going for the truck.”

Tammy gave Mark one of our cards and we ran for the squad.

I figured I’d hyperventilate behind the wheel. “You hear that, Tam? Mark said my name—Linley. Those juvie kids were going to meet a kid named Linley.”

“I heard it, and it didn’t blow by me, Harlan. I recognized your old name. Might not be your brother at all. Lots of people have the same name.”

“Linley isn’t too common a name,” I said. “What if it’s my brother and he’s turned out bad—like real bad?”

“No. He couldn’t.” Tammy started to cry. “No. Virgil will be a nice kid. Just like you.”

“I haven’t seen him since he was four years old,” I said. “He’s sixteen and could be anything by now. Could be a fuckin killer.”

“You’re a cop, Harlan,” said Tammy. “We can find out if he was ever arrested or if he spent time in detention. Call Molly.”

“No. I’m not calling her now. We still have work to do, and it will freak me out. I’ll talk to her when we get back from the shop.”

Tammy reached over and patted my leg. “Don’t think the worst. It will work out.”

“Like your life worked out for you?”

“Yours will be better. I promise.”

“I hope that’s a promise you can keep, Tam.”

Shelby Medical Center.

We rushed into the waiting area at the clinic and found out from the nurse at the front desk that Clay Little was in exam room three. The nurse wouldn’t let us in to talk to him until the doctor finished treating his wounded leg.

When we were allowed in, Clay seemed to be in a lot of pain. His pants were cut off at the knee and below the cut-off he had a fresh snow-white bandage. In his right hand, he held a written prescription.

“We’ll give you a ride home, Mister Little,” said Tammy, “and on the way, you can tell us your version of what happened at the lumberyard.”

He nodded, a lot of pain in his eyes.

The nurse came in with a pair of crutches and Clay had a time getting sorted to walk down the hallway on them.

I helped him into the front seat of the squad and Tammy rode in the back. “We talked to Mark at the lumberyard and got his statement,” I said. “We’d like to hear your story, just to compare.”

“Two kids with a lot of attitude,” said Clay.

He rubbed the side of his head and closed his eyes for a minute before he continued talking. “Smart ass punks with weapons. A dangerous combination.”

“For sure.”

“The one kid shot me when I said I wasn’t giving up my wallet and as soon as I fell to the ground, the other one clocked me with a tire iron. I can’t tell you much more than that. The ambulance came and took me away.”

“None of the lumberyard guys tried to take them down?” asked Tammy.

“The kids had a fuckin gun,” said Clay. “After they shot me without thinking twice about it, the other guys weren’t keen to get shot. Can’t blame them.”

“No, you can’t,” said Tammy. “What street do you live on, Clay?”

“Two-twelve Maple. It’s not far. I’ll have one of the guys bring my truck home from the yard after work.”

“The punks stole your truck,” I said. “We have a BOLO out on your Silverado, sir.”

“They took my truck after they shot me?”

“Yes, sir. They did. We’ll get it back for you.”

“That truck is in perfect condition. If they put a scratch on it, I’m gonna sue somebody’s ass off.”

“Don’t blame you, Clay. You’ve had a real fucker of a day.” I pulled into his driveway, and Tammy and I helped him into his house.

“You want me to call somebody for you, Clay?” asked Tammy. “I don’t mind.”

“No. I think I’ll take the pain meds and sleep. That’s what I feel like doing.”

“Sure, that’s probably best.”

“Thanks for the ride. Appreciate it.”

Cut Bank Hospital.

We finished up in Shelby and Tammy wanted to go to the hospital to see if Travis was awake. I wanted to do that too—almost as much as I wanted to find my brother and see if he was mixed up with a gang of juvie carjacking robbers.

The nurse let us go into the ICU together and Travis had his eyes open. He didn’t look right at me but stared into space kind of funny.

Tammy leaned down and hugged him. “You just waking up, Daddy?”

“Still tired. You get those guys at the trailer?”

“Yeah. We got them.”

“Y’all didn’t get hurt, did y’all?”

“No. Me and Tammy didn’t get hurt, Dad. We’re fine.”

“Good. Do the chores and feed the dogs...and check on Billy.”

“Yep.”

“I have to sleep now.”

Tammy gave him another hug and we went upstairs to see Billy. “Travis is full of drugs, and he can’t keep awake. We need Billy to come home, Harlan. Should we tell him those kids have his gun?”

“Don’t know if that’s a good idea. Might make him crazy if he can’t get out of the hospital to go after their dumb asses.”

Billy grinned when we walked into his room. “Hey, my deputies are here. What’s up today?”

Tammy hugged Billy and we sat down and told him about the lumberyard robbery, and we didn’t tell him about the gun right away, but later I told him.

## Page 42

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

“The kids used the tire iron on Clay’s head,” said Tammy. “He’s got a lump just like you.”

“I’ve got to get out of here. Did the doctor tell you how long Travis would be in?”

“Nope. He’s just barely awake and wanted to go back to sleep. Won’t be out for days yet.”

“My parents will be in later and if I can sign myself out of here, I’ll get them to drop me off at the ranch.”

“Good,” I said. “I hope to hell you can get released, Billy. We’ve got some shit going on, and we could use some help.”

“I’m not staying in here. I’m banged up, but I can manage on my own.”

“We need you home, Billy,” said Tammy.

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

Tammy and I got back to the office after the hospital visit and Molly had come up with a phone number the four dead drug slingers had been calling a lot. They’d all made a lot of calls to a number belonging to a Barb Hamilton.

“Wow, that’s great work, Molly. Now we have a name for the drug boss.”

Molly chuckled. “That’s not the best part.”



“What else did you find?” I asked.

“Barb Hamilton matches the registration of the woman’s car who picked Art Andrews up from the courthouse.”

“Holy shit,” I said. “That’s fantastic. Do we have an address for her?”

“According to her DL, she lives in Sweetgrass.”

“Huh. Close to Sunburst Acres and only a stone’s throw away from the border crossing.”

“We’ll check her out tomorrow,” said Tammy.

“Amazing work, Molly. Now I need you to look into something else for me,” I said.

“I will, as soon as you tell me how Travis was.”

“Awake, and talking,” said Tammy, “but he wanted to sleep so we let him do that.”

“We need him to recover quickly,” said Molly. “Sleeping is the best way to heal.”

“Billy is hoping to break out today or tomorrow,” I said. “He’s doing a bit of a freak out.”

“I can imagine.” Molly shook her head. “What’s the second thing you want me to do, dear?”

“Can you search and see if Virgil Linley has ever been in detention anywhere in Montana?”

“Yes, I can. You’re inquiring about your brother, Harlan?”

“Uh huh. I need to know that. It’s important.”

“Of course, it is. I’ll work on it right away.”

While Molly did that, I went into the break room and poured myself a coffee. “Do you think she’ll find him, Tam?”

Tammy sat down with a can of Coke in her hand. “Molly is good on the computer. She’ll find Virgil. What we really need, Harlan, is for Billy to come home and help us out in the office.”

“Yeah, we need that to happen for sure. I hope he talks the doc into letting him out.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:50 pm*

Molly hollered from the squad room, and I left my coffee and ran to see what she had found out. “Your brother was in detention in Butte, but he was released when his time had been served.”

“When did they let him out, Molly? Was it recently?”

“Just after his sixteenth birthday,” she said.

“That was the same day as mine,” I said.

Molly smiled. “You share the same birthday. That’s sweet, Harlan.” She handed me a yellow Post-it note with an address on it. “Your brother’s address of record is in Conrad East.”

“Okay. Not too far away and doesn’t mean he’s still there. I’ll go down there tomorrow and see if I can find him. Thanks, Molly.”

She brushed a tear away. “I truly hope you have a happy reunion with your brother, dear. You’ve grown up away from each other and it will take time to get to know Virgil again.”

“Don’t know if he’ll even recognize me after all this time, Molly. I’ll be a stranger to him. He probably forgot he even had a brother.”

“You didn’t forget, Harlan.”

Wild Stallion Ranch.

Tammy and I were beat into the ground when we got home from the station. We took a break on the porch for one beer before we went to the barn and started the chores.

Passing by the bunkhouse, I remembered that Ted and Travis hadn't finished with the fingerprints. They had left that job and rushed to the trailer park and Travis had been shot.

"I'll put Ted back on that job in the morning. We have to get the positive ID on those kids linking them to our crime scene. No witnesses but Billy."

"Yeah," said Tam. "I forgot that wasn't finished, Harlan. Ted should finish it up tomorrow and Molly can enter the prints into evidence."

We took our frustrations out on the stalls in the barn and had them cleaned up and fresh straw laid in pretty quick.

"I'll go start supper for us while you put the horses in for the night, Harlan."

"Yeah, won't take me long. We might need groceries, Tam. Think about a list for tomorrow."

She sighed and nodded her head.

## Chapter Eight

Sunday, July 28th.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

"If they let Billy out of the hospital today, he can help us figure shit out," I said to Tammy while she fried up bacon and eggs for us. "It seems so quiet and weird in the

house without Travis here.”

“We should ask the doctor today, how long he’ll be in there,” said Tammy.

“We’ll find out for sure. If we could get him home, you could take a couple days off and stay with him. Me and Ted can manage if Billy is back in the office.”

“I could do that,” said Tammy. “We can’t leave Dad home alone if he can’t get around on his own.”

She put our breakfast on plates, and we ate while we planned the day ahead. “I’ll check the pantry and the fridge and make a big grocery list. We can shop today before we come home.”

“I’ll make a work list of all the shit we have to do. I feel like there is so much we need to do we’re forgetting half of it.”

“Molly probably knows what hasn’t been completed,” said Tammy. “She keeps track of everything needed to close a case.”

“Yeah, she does. I’ll ask her for a copy of her list, and I won’t have to count on mine having everything on it.”

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

We got to the office and parked out back. Tammy and I were getting out of the squad at the same time Savanna got a ride over from the store with one of her drivers. She hopped out of the feed truck, ran over to the back fence, and took a look inside her car.

Hands on her hips, she was fuming mad and let go a long string of curses. “Where are my keys? The inside of my car looks like the city dump.”

“The keys are in the office, Savanna,” said Tammy. “I’ll get them for you.”

“I’m not mad at you guys,” she said. “Just mad my car got stolen and messed up and Billy got beaten up for no reason. This car was in perfect condition.”

“When we catch the kids and they go to trial,” I said, “they may have to make restitution for damages they did.”

“Hope the judge sees it that way, Harlan. I’d hate for them to get away with the stuff they’ve done. They hurt Billy really badly.”

“They did more damage since then,” I said. “Shot a guy over at Shelby Lumber. Hit him over the head with that same tire iron they clobbered Billy with, robbed the lumberyard guy and stole his pickup.”

“Oh, no,” said Savanna. “You’ve got to catch them. I realize how hard that is with Travis and Billy both in the hospital. You guys and Ted have to do your best to track them down.”

“We will,” said Tammy. “We’re following a new lead today. I think we’re closer to them.”

“You kids shouldn’t even be working today. It’s Sunday.”

“We’ve got a lot of shit to do, Savanna,” I said.

“I’m sure you and Tammy are doing all the work you can. I wish I knew how to help you.”

I didn’t mention my brother to Savanna. She knew about him, but I’d wait and see how that played out first.

“I’m going to the hospital to see Travis later, but I’m going to the car wash first. Thanks for getting my car back, guys. Appreciate it.”

“Ted towed it back from Shelby Lumber for you, Savanna. He printed it and it’s good to go. You might want to thank him too.”

“I definitely will.”

She drove off and I let out a breath. “I didn’t tell her there was a tow bill on the desk in there from Ted’s Towing. Save that for another time.”

Cut Bank Hospital.

Sunday morning turned out to be a good time to visit in the ICU. Tammy and I didn’t have to wait so long to see Travis. The nurse was in a good mood, and she let both of us go in at once to see our dad.

“Hey, Dad. How long are you planning on dogging it in here?” I asked.

He tried to smile. "I'll be out of here a lot sooner than they think. How are the two of y'all managing?"

"We're doing okay. Lots of work but we can handle it. Billy's coming home today or tomorrow."

"Billy came to visit me, and he told me he was breaking out today. Y'all go see if he needs a ride to the ranch."

"Good news," said Tammy. "We'll go see him next and take him home."

"I don't like y'all at the ranch alone. There are too many bears, and those maniac kids are still on the loose. Y'all be extra careful and sleep with your guns handy."

"We will," said Tammy, "and we have Max and Sarge watching over us. We're okay. Try not to worry, Daddy." She leaned down and hugged him.

"After what happened to Billy on our own property, I have to worry," mumbled Travis. Easy to see he was getting upset.

One of the machines started beeping. A nurse ran in and shoed us out of the unit. She had more drugs for Travis, and he'd sleep for another four hours.

"He's not ready to come home," I said. "Gonna be a while yet."

"I saw his side," said Tammy, and she started to tear up. Must've been a mess.



## Page 45

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

We got to Billy's room just as his doctor finished up with him and he was wearing a big smile. "I can go, kids."

"Great. We'll take you home."

Billy was dressed and sitting in a wheelchair, and he seemed pretty cheerful. "I went down to see Travis and he talked a little bit, but he had to stop and start. He's in a lot of pain. It will be days before they let him out—maybe a couple of weeks."

Tammy groaned when she heard that.

Travis wasn't the only one who would take a long time to heal. Those kids had pushed Billy back weeks on the healing and rehab of his damaged leg. He needed to catch them and toss them in jail for that abuse alone.

On the way to the ranch, I told Billy the whole story about the lumberyard and the mention of my brother's name in passing and he was interested in following through on it. Then I told him Molly had come up with an address for Virgil in Conrad East.

"I'm going with you to find your brother, Harlan. Don't bother stopping at the ranch because I don't want to go straight home."

"Sure. You can come, Billy. I have no idea what I'm gonna find."

"Whatever it is, Harlan. I want to be there for you. Travis wouldn't let you go into a situation like that alone and neither will I."

“I’m kinda prepared for Virge not to be there. The address could be old.”

Tammy reached over and patted my arm. I noticed she didn’t pat my leg like she usually did. Not when Billy was in the back seat.

Conrad East.

The GPS took us to the address Molly had for Virgil Linley—my last name before it was legally changed to Bristol. The old house was on the wrong side of the tracks in Conrad East. Not a big town, but the eastern end of town on the far side of the railway line was old and a lot of the houses had been torn down to make room for an industrial development.

We parked in front of a crack house with the doors and windows missing. I got a sick feeling in the pit of my gut just looking at the place from the outside.

“Tammy, stay here. You can’t go in there.”

“You might need me for back up, Harlan. Druggies have knives and guns.”

“Give me your gun, Tammy,” said Billy.

“You can’t walk, Billy,” said Tammy.

“I can walk on crutches, and I can shoot through the fuckin eye of a needle if I have to.”

Tammy unsnapped her holster, took the gun out and handed it Billy.

I got out of the squad and waited for Billy to get mobile on the crutches. When he was ready, we walked across what had once been the front lawn of the house but was

now hard-packed dirt littered with cans, garbage, needles, and broken glass.

Billy stood in the doorway leaning on his crutches giving me backup as I walked through the opening into the dimly lit drug pit.

When the homeless kids and the druggies saw my uniform, they hollered, jumped to their feet, and ran. Scattering in all directions like rats on the Titanic.

Using my Maglite, I worked my way slowly around the big, gutted building. My Harley boots crunched on needles and trash as my eyes searched through the faces of the tenants.

Some of the tenants lay on the filthy floor wrapped in ragged blankets, and others leaned against the crumbling bricks, smoking, or sleeping, or shooting up. A lot of them were so far gone, they didn't care if cops were in their house or not.

My light focused on one face, and I didn't have to look any further. Staring at my brother's face was like looking in the mirror.

Drooping eyes, Virge could barely keep awake. He wasn't running from the cops because he couldn't even get up.

Adrenaline shot through my veins when I was sure I'd found my brother. I grabbed his arm and gave him a shake. "Virgil, wake up. It's me, Harlan."

"Go away. I don't know any Harlan."

"I'm going to get you up, Virge. I want you to come with me."

## Page 46

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

“Not going with you. Not going anywhere. Fuck off and leave me alone.”

“Come on.” I reached my hand down to him and he swatted me away.

“Fuck off. Don’t touch me.”

Virgil made a feeble motion towards the knife in his boot, but he was moving in slow motion. Lots of time for me to grab it out of his hand.

I shoved the knife into my gear belt then tried for my brother again. “Come on. You’re getting up, bro.”

Virgil kicked at me and hollered to get me away from him, but he was as limp as a dirty rag and couldn’t stop me.

I pulled him to his feet and wasn’t ready for his dead weight. He flopped right back down into the debris that littered the floor of the gutted building.

“Here we go. Second try. You’re getting out of here, Virge. I’m not leaving without you, so you can forget that.”

“Ain’t going. Piss off.” He swung at me and tried again to kick me in the nuts. A weak effort that went nowhere.

I picked my brother up and figured he weighed less than me. Maybe a hundred and fifty pounds. Tossed him over my shoulder and started for the door.

“Put him down,” hollered one of the kids. “Get your filthy hands off Virge or I’ll cut you, pig.”

“Shut up,” I hollered back at him. “This is my brother and he’s leaving your little pigsty and he ain’t coming back here.”

The kid came running at me and there wasn’t much I could do to fend him off with my brother on my shoulder.

Bang.

Billy fired a shot over the kid’s head to warn him off and that backed him up a bit. “You get back there, punk, or you’ll be doing time in our lockup,” Billy hollered at him.

“Take more than a cripple like you to take me in, fucker.”

Virgil struggled against me, but he didn’t know what he was doing. High, drunk, and uncoordinated, he was a goddamned mess.

Tammy hopped out of the squad, opened the back door, and helped me get Virgil cuffed and hooked up to the D-ring.

Once my brother was secure and couldn’t move much, Billy jumped into the back beside him, and I closed the back door.

I slid behind the wheel and let out a breath while Tammy jumped into the shotgun seat.

“Okay. We’ve got this. Let’s get Virgil home.”

Tammy smiled. “Under all that dirt, he looks a lot like you, Harlan.”

“Yeah. When I shone the light in his face, I knew it was him. No question.”

“That’s a helluva hole he’s been living in,” said Billy. “You might have to leave him in the shower...overnight.” He chuckled.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

By the time I drove north all the way from Conrad East to our ranch five miles past Coyote Creek, Virgil was slumped over in a pile in the back seat sound asleep.

I parked close to the back door of the ranch house and carried him in that way, so I didn’t have to lug him up the porch steps.

Tammy held the door open for me and helped me straighten him up when I flopped him down on the sofa in the living room.

“Fasten the chain on his wrist to the ring in the stone on the hearth,” said Billy. “That will hold him.”

It was July and the stove wasn’t on. Good suggestion.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

Virgil was down for the count and in a deep sleep. He slept through chores, straight through dinner and he kept on sleeping.

“I’ll crash on the other sofa and be handy for when he wakes up,” I said. “I’ll keep Max and Sarge down here with me.”

“Okay,” said Tammy. “He stinks, but we’ll clean him up in the morning. You okay, Billy? You need help with anything, or can you get to bed on your own?”

“Yep. I’m glad to be home sleeping in my own bed. Too long in the hospital with all those nurses fussing over me twenty-four seven.”

“You saying you didn’t like all the attention those pretty nurses gave you?” asked Tammy.

“It wasn’t bad when I was so beat up I couldn’t move, but after that I just wanted out of there.”

“Get any phone numbers?” I asked. “I saw a couple of cute ones on your floor.”

“Okay, I got two numbers,” said Billy. “Probably won’t use them.”

“You should,” said Tammy. “They can meet you at the Dry Run and buy you a pitcher. That would be fun.”

Billy laughed. “I’m going to bed.”

## Chapter Nine

Monday, July 29th.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

I woke up when my brother started shouting and yanking on the chain that attached him to the fireplace hearth.

“Get this goddamned chain off me and let me loose. I’m not your fucking prisoner.”

I rolled off the other sofa, crossed the room and knelt down to take the cuff off his wrist. As soon as it released, he ran for it.

Out the front door and down the steps and good timing by mama bear sent him right back into the house as I was coming out.

“Fucking bear right there at the bottom of the steps.”

“She likes to come on the porch and toss the chairs around.”

“Jesus. You shouldn’t live out here.”

“This is the best place to live on the fuckin planet,” I said. “Get in here, Virge. You probably need the bathroom and Tammy’s making coffee. Just sit down and talk to me for an hour. You don’t have to stay here if you don’t want to, but I’m your brother and I’ve been looking for you.”

He stepped into the house, and I closed the door.

“Where’s the bathroom?”



“End of the hall on the left,” I said.

When he came back from the bathroom, he flopped down on one of the kitchen chairs and Tammy put a mug of black coffee in front of him.

He stared across the table at me with cloudy eyes. “Never knew I had a brother. Always been on my own.”

“Same as me when they took you away from me. I was six and you were four when they split us up. You got adopted and I didn’t.”

“Don’t think I got adopted. Just went from one foster home to the next one.”

Tammy started a pan of bacon and Virge turned his head to watch her. He was probably starved.

“How do you like your eggs?” she asked him.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

He shrugged. "Dunno. Cooked, I guess." He glanced at me. "What's her name?"

"Tammy." I pointed at Billy coming down the hall on his crutches. "That's Billy. Our Dad is Travis, but he's in the hospital."

"I can't stay here," said Virge. "I've got shit to do."

"Like what?" I asked. "Sit around in a crack house and drink and do drugs?"

Virgil shrugged.

"I want you to try living here with me for a couple of weeks. If it don't work out, you can leave if you want. I won't make you stay here."

Tammy put a plate of food in front of each of us, then sat down to eat. "Monday morning," she said. "We have jobs."

"Yeah, you two are cops," said Virgil. "Don't take an idiot to figure that out."

"Deputies working out of the sheriff's office," I said. "Not a bad job once you get used to it."

"I hate cops," said Virge. "Always on your ass."

Billy nodded as he spread jam on his toast. "Yep. That's one way to look at it."

"I'll give you some clean clothes and you can ride with me today. Tammy can partner

with Ted. You don't have to do anything. Just ride around and get your head together."

"Sounds like the last fuckin thing I'd want to do." Virgil sneered. "Ride around in a fuckin cop car. Might as well slit my own fuckin throat."

I laughed. "Yeah, I bet it does feel weird. Same way I felt when Billy and Travis came and picked me up at the detention center."

"You in detention too?"

"Sure. Two years I was in that fuckin hell-hole in Grand Falls."

"I was in a different one down in Butte, but probably the same."

"Most of them are the same," said Billy.

Sheriff's Office. Coyote Creek.

Virgil stared out the window and rode silent to the station in town. He had argued hard against going with me, but if I left him at the ranch he'd be gone for sure when we came home. I couldn't risk that happening—wouldn't risk it. Not after all this time without him.

Billy would stay at home for a couple more days, but I couldn't leave my brother with Billy watching him. If Virge decided to run off, there wasn't much Billy could do to stop him. Other than shoot him in the leg.

On the drive, Tammy talked a little to Virgil, but he wasn't answering any of her questions. I gave her the stink-eye to make her stop quizzing him about his past and how he earned enough money to feed himself. Interesting to know, but for now we

should ease up on him.

Leaving him alone for a few days was the better way to go. Let him get to know us and settle down a bit. He had to learn to trust me all over again.

His health was another issue. I had no idea of the quantity of opiates Virge had in his body. Might take days to get the drugs out of his system. Was he an addict? Did he need to go to rehab to clean himself up?

No way he was going to tell me.

I parked the squad in my spot at the back of the station and we piled out. Virgil glanced around and followed me and Tammy and the dogs inside.

I showed him around the station, took him into the break room and poured him a mug of coffee. Already made—thanks to Molly.

“What the hell am I supposed to do around here all fuckin’ day? Sure as hell don’t want my friends to see me in here.”

“I doubt if your friends will see you here, Virge. You’re miles from your crack house way down in Conrad East.”

“I’ll stay in here and drink coffee. I don’t want you parading me around like your long-lost fuckin’ brother.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

“You are my long-lost brother, Virge, and I can’t help being happy that I found you. Even if you are a mess—I’m happy you ain’t fuckin dead.”

“I can take care of myself. Don’t need no cop brother looking out for me.”

“Yeah, I saw how that was going yesterday.”

“Fuck off, Harlan. Leave me alone.”

I strode out to the squad room and told Molly we found Virgil at the address she gave me. “He’s in the break room but he’s not talking to anybody yet.”

“That will take time, dear. Did he remember you?”

“Says he doesn’t know me, and he never had a brother.”

“He was a small child the last time he saw you, Harlan,” said Molly. “You have to get to know each other all over again. That won’t happen overnight, dear. Try to be patient with your brother.”

I nodded thinking Molly was right. I needed to be patient and give Virgil a chance to get used to me.

“You ready to get going?” asked Tammy. “We’ve got work to do.”

“Yeah, I’m ready. We’re going up to Sweetwater to pay a call on Barb Hamilton, Molly.” I hollered across the squad room to Ted, “Come on, Ted. You partner with

Tammy, and I'll take Virgil and the dogs. Let's go bust some heads."

Ted grinned. "I'm up for it. Love doing that first thing in the morning. Gets my blood going."

Hamilton Residence. Sweetwater.

The address we had for Barbara Hamilton turned out to be a small white frame bungalow with a detached garage at the back of the property. Peeling paint around the windows and doors and landscaped with waist-high weeds gone brittle and brown.

Barb's car was parked in the driveway along with a pickup, and two Harleys with decent paint jobs. Drug money put to good use.

Full house, judging by the driveway. Sellers or buyers? Maybe some of each. I guess we'd soon find out.

I pounded on the door with Virge standing beside me. Tammy and Ted had gone around the house to the back door, and they'd come in that way.

"Sheriff's office, Miss Hamilton. Need to talk to you. Open the door."

Virge grinned. "She won't open the fuckin door if she's got a goddamned brain, Harlan. You might as well save your breath."

The door opened a crack, and it wasn't Barb Hamilton, but one of her boys. "Barb's busy and she don't want to talk to the cops right now, so why don't you fuck off?"

I shoved the ganger out of the way and barged into the front hall. Virge came in behind me with the dogs running full speed ahead of him.

The dogs ran into the living room and Barb hollered at them. “Get those dogs out of my house or I’ll shoot them.”

The back door crashed open, and Ted and Tammy were in.

“Cuff them all,” I shouted. “Tammy, bag everything you can find. Ted start taking them to the squads one at a time.”

“Copy, boss.”

Virgil wandered into the kitchen where Tammy was shoving opiates and baggies into evidence bags, and I saw him shove a couple of bags of meth into his jeans.

“Put it in the evidence bag, Virge. You ain’t getting that stuff from me.”

He screwed up his face in anger. “I ever tell you what a shit brother you were?”

I laughed. “Nope. You ain’t known me long enough to tell me that yet.”

Two of the guys made a break for it and I gave Max and Sarge a hand signal and sent them after the druggies. The dogs took their guys down and held them in place with their jaws on their throats.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

“Cuff them, Virgil.” I held my gun on them while he rolled them over and fastened the cuffs I handed to him.

Ted came in from the squad and cuffed Barb Hamilton. He made another trip outside and secured her in the back of the Bronco.

When everybody was loaded, I left Ted and Tammy on prisoner watch and went back into the house alone for a search to be sure we hadn’t missed anything.

Tammy had checked the bedrooms and every inch of the house and done a thorough job. I headed out to the garage to see if they had a secondary storage area out there and found a big metal lockbox.

A pair of bolt cutters lying on the workbench cut the padlock off pretty quick. I opened the lid, peeked inside and there were six bricks of heroin still wrapped. I carried the box to the squad and shoved it into the hatch.

“We’re all set, Virge. Let’s go back to the shop.”

“What’s in the lockbox?” he whispered to me.

“H. Six bricks.”

“Holy shit. You hit the jackpot.”

“What are you on, Virge?”



“Ain’t on nothing regular. You asking if I’m an addict? Well, I ain’t. Casual user. Just a party guy. Know what I mean?”

“Just wondering if you needed a couple weeks in rehab.”

“That what you were wondering, my long-lost brother? Don’t you wonder about that no longer because I won’t be here for two fuckin weeks.”

“Okay. Don’t freak out. It was just a thought.”

Virgil turned and snarked at me, “Don’t be having no more of those fuckin rehab thoughts. You’re wasting your brain power on that kind of thinking.”

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

Ted, and I booked the prisoners and locked them in the run while Tammy and Molly went over the evidence Tammy had brought in from Barb Hamilton’s house.

Virge seemed to be fascinated by the quantity of drugs and he leaned on the counter in front of Molly’s desk watching her catalogue the drugs into evidence.

He paid special attention when Tammy locked the evidence bags up in the closet that we used for our evidence locker.

She put the padlock on and clicked it into place and hung the key on the rack in the office. Virge watched her do it, then went to the squad room to pet the dogs. He seemed to like Max and Sarge better than me.

I walked down the hall to the office and put the padlock key in my pocket.

By the time we finished up with the prisoners, it was lunch time and we had to supply

our guests with food and drinks.

“Going across the road for lunch, Molly. I’ll bring back food for the prisoners.”

“Thanks, dear. I’ll head home for lunch. See you in an hour.”

Mainliner Diner.

Across the road, the three of us settled in for lunch. Ted lived a couple of blocks from the station, and he usually went home and ate the lunch his father made for him. Made his dad happy and Ted didn’t have to bother about lunch.

Maryanne came over to our table with her order pad and her pen. She stood at the end of the table waiting and I said, “Five lunches to go, Maryanne. Busy morning.”

Her face lit up. “Wow, zero to five in sixty seconds, Harlan. I’ll get the cook on that for you, boss.”

Virge studied the menu and I let him look until he decided. I knew what I wanted. “I’ll have the chicken burger and fries.”

“Turkey club with fries for me,” said Tammy.

## Page 51

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

I glanced at Virge, and he wasn't saying anything. "What do you want, Virge?"

"Umm...you paying?"

"Sure."

"I'll have a double cheeseburger, fries and a Coke."

Maryanne took our orders to the kitchen and came back with our drinks.

"You eat here every day?" asked Virge.

I shrugged. "Depends where we are. We're not always in Coyote Creek. Harrison County is huge, and we cover all of it."

The food came and my brother ate like he'd been starved for a week. Tammy watched him eat but didn't say anything.

I didn't want her making him feel bad about anything. That wouldn't do any good or help me gain his trust. I ate my burger and said nothing to Virgil.

When we were finished, I paid the check with my credit card Travis had given me and I saw Virgil watching me.

The way he was acting—so skittish and twitchy—I was waiting for him to grab my wallet and take off looking for a fix.

Tammy took the bag of containers from Maryanne, and we crossed the road to feed the prisoners.

Cut Bank Hospital.

On the way into the hospital, I explained to my brother who Travis was. “He’s the guy who took me out of juvie. I was released into his custody, and he gave me a home and then adopted me when he adopted Tammy. “Me and Tammy both changed our names to Bristol, because that’s Travis’s real name.”

“What does that mean? He got a fake name too?”

“Yeah. He’s got a past with some bikers and it’s best if they don’t know where he is.”

“What’s the name the bikers are looking for?”

“You won’t know it. Why would you want to know?”

Virgil shrugged. “You and Tammy got yourselves a daddy. Sweet, but I don’t need one and I sure as hell don’t want one.”

“I’ll just tell him who you are, and you can sit in the waiting room until I’m done talking to him. You don’t have to make nice or anything.”

“I’m just about done hanging out with you, Harlan. Got to be on my way. I’ve got people to see and shit to do.”

“Sure. You can go.” I steered Virge into Travis’s room and left him standing at the end of the bed. Travis was propped up little in his bed, but he was pale as a snow cone. Long blond hair hanging down.

Tammy ran ahead and hugged Travis. “You look better today, Daddy.”

“Long as I don’t move or take a deep breath, I’m solid gold, Tam.” Travis looked up and saw Virgil staring at him. “Hey, Virge. Harlan finally tracked you down?”

Virgil’s eyes were on Travis. The long blonde hair, the sleeve tats, the muscle—the whole package. “I know who you are.”

Travis nodded. “I know who I am too, Virgil. Let’s play that on the downlow.”

“Yeah sure. Harlan found me. Don’t know how long I’m staying with him.”

“We got room for you, Virgil. Stay as long as you like.”

“I like your dogs, Dale. Never thought I’d get to meet you in person. You’re like a legend or some fuckin thing.”

Travis shrugged it off. “Yeah, I like my dogs too. Had them for a long time. Part of the family.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

“Did the doctor say when you can come home?” asked Tammy.

“Not yet. Still some bleeding. Few more days and I’ll be healed.”

“Harlan told me you got shot,” said Virgil.

“Druggies up near the Canadian border. They didn’t like me none.” Travis laughed.

“All dead now. My kids put them out of their misery.”

Virgil raised a dark eyebrow.

A call came in on the sheriff’s phone while we were talking to Travis, and I listened to it. We had to leave in a hurry. “Gunfire at the market in Ethridge.”

“Be careful, y’all. We’re short-handed and can’t afford anybody else being shot or beat up and off work.”

“We’ll be careful,” I said.

SaveWay Market. Ethridge.

Sirens screaming, I pulled into the parking lot of the market and could see at a glance that the owner of the store had the kids boxed up behind a couple of parked vehicles. We’d shopped in the Ethridge market a couple of times, but I couldn’t remember the owner’s name.

All the customers had been cleared out of the lot and the owner—crouched down

behind the cart corral—was doing his best to hold the kids at bay until we got there. Luckily, this market was only about ten minutes from the Cut Bank Hospital, and we'd wasted no time getting here.

I jumped out of the squad and circled around to come at the kids from a better angle. The punks fired a shot at me and missed. If they hit any of us it would be by sheer fuckin accident. Hard as hell to hit anybody in a gunfight with a pistol.

I ducked down and told Virge to stay in the squad.

Ted pulled in behind me and parked. Tammy hopped out and squatted down next to the Bronco to take cover.

Not good at following orders, Virge hopped out of the squad and as soon as the kids saw him, they fired a couple of shots at him. A miracle shot hit him in the leg and knocked him to the pavement.

I charged out of my spot to get a clear look at them, fired twice, and they cranked off about three shots each. I took a round in my shoulder and hollered when I went down.

Tammy screamed like a banshee when she saw me fall. She ran at them and opened fire.

She dropped two of them—dead as dirt.

From where I lay on the pavement, I couldn't see the other two, but I could hear them yelling and running away from the store.

"I'll get them." Ted hopped into the squad and went after the two runners while Tammy ran over and dropped down next to me.

She held me in her arms, sobbing, “Don’t die, Harlan. Don’t die.”

“Not planning on it, Tam. Call an ambulance. Virge is hit in the leg. I saw him fall. See if you can help him.”

She fumbled around with her phone and put the call in. Kind of in a daze, and I didn’t want her to go into shock. I needed her to get us out of this mess.

“Go over to Virge and put pressure on his leg, Tammy. Can you do that for me?”

“Yeah. I’ll do it. I nearly freaked for a minute, but I’m okay now.”

Ted roared back into the parking lot and jumped out of the second squad to help Tammy. “Can’t see them. They’re running through the bush on foot. Need the dogs.”

The ambulance pulled in right behind Ted and the paramedics got to work on me and on Virgil. Getting us on stretchers and shoving us into the ambulance.

“Ted,” I hollered before they slammed the doors on me, “Get the witness statements and help Doctor Olsen when he comes.”

“Copy.”

“Shit. I don’t want to leave Tammy on her own with Ted. She’s kind of upset after killing those two kids.”



*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

“I might have recognized one of them,” mumbled Virgil.

“They recognized you, bro. Soon as they saw you with me, they started firing at you. You can tell me what that was all about.”

“Don’t know.”

“Bullshit.” The pain in my shoulder was ready to kill me but I wouldn’t let Virgil see that. I turned my head and stared at the side wall of the ambulance.

After the ambulances pulled out, I said to Ted, “Two got away on me. They were running through the lot next door before I could shoot their asses.”

“You didn’t notice it, but I went after them and lost them in the trees. We’ll get them with the dogs, Tammy, but we have to finish up the scene first. If you want to go to the hospital, I’ll help Doctor Olsen with the bodies.”

“Thanks, Ted. I’ll go, but I’ll help you first. Did you get the statement from the store owner?”

“Yeah, I got it. Mister Kettle said the kids just drove in and started yelling and hollering and waving their guns around. Nobody else saw much. The customers either stayed in the store or beat it out of the parking lot.”

Cut Bank Hospital.

I parked at the front entrance of the hospital and left the strobes running. Searching

though the recently brought in patients, I found Harlan first and he was being wheeled down a long hallway heading for surgery. They had to get the bullet out of his shoulder, and it was going to hurt a lot.

I leaned down to hug him and the orderly had to put the brakes on for a minute. “I love you,” I whispered to him so nobody could hear me.

“Same.”

The orderly started rolling again and Harlan hollered to me, “Stay with Virgil and if he can go home from here, keep an eye on him.”

“I will.”

Harlan’s stretcher disappeared through a set of double doors, and I started to cry. Brushing the tears away, I went into treatment room six to stay with Virgil.

I didn’t realize I was covered in blood until a nurse handed me a towel to clean myself up.

“Were there fatalities at the shooting?” asked the doctor who was injecting freezing into Virgil’s leg.

“Yes. I shot two of the shooters and killed them fuckin dead. Two more got away from me. I’ll go after them tomorrow with the dogs and hunt them down.”

The doctor gave me a stare, but I didn’t know why. I was only answering his question.

“Will Virgil have to stay overnight?”

“No. I’ll fix the young man up with a crutch and he can go home. He’ll be ready in about an hour, Deputy...”

“Bristol,” I said. “Tammy Bristol. I’m going upstairs to see my father and then I’ll be back for Virgil.”

Virgil stared at me and never said a word while I was in the treatment room. After I made sure he was going to be okay, I ran upstairs to check in with Travis. I sat down next to the bed and cried. Couldn’t talk for a few until I got it together.

Travis reached for my hand and pulled me closer to his bed. “It is Harlan, Tammy? Tell me what happened.”

I patted my shoulder to show him, and Travis nodded. “Shoulder wound. Where is he now?”

“Surgery. Virgil was hit in the leg, and I have to go back down to Emerge and get him. He doesn’t have to stay overnight.”

“Is Ted at the scene?”

“Yes. He’s with Doc Olsen.”

“Doctor Olsen,” said Travis. “There were bodies at the market, Tammy?”

I held up two fingers. “I shot two out of four, Daddy. Two ran and I couldn’t get them.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

“You will, Tam. Y’all will find the other two. It’s more important for you to be here for your brother. Billy will help y’all tomorrow. Take some deep breaths, girl.”

“I’ll be okay, Daddy. I have to take Virgil to the ranch, then I’ll come back tonight to sit with Harlan when he gets out of surgery.”

“No. You stay at the ranch and take care of Virgil and Billy and do the chores. Don’t forget to feed the dogs. I’ll get a nurse to put me in a wheelchair and I’ll sit with Harlan while he’s waking up.”

“Can you get out of bed?”

“I’m going to.”

I hugged Travis and went downstairs to get Virgil. I only had to wait for a few minutes, and he was ready to roll. Crutches and a prescription for the pain.

He was a virgin on the crutches, and trying to walk on them made him mad as a hop. He cursed non-stop and it took a while to get him through the lobby, down the steps and into the squad.

I opened the door and he flopped into the passenger seat and closed his eyes. “If my brother hadn’t made me go with him, I never would’ve gotten shot. This is all his fault.”

“No. It’s the fault of your shitty friends, Virgil. Those assholes knew you and that’s why they shot at you. Ever think of that?”

No answer from Virge on that one.

“You part of that dirty little gang of robbers?”

“Don’t know them.”

“Liar. We’ll have a couple of beers when we get home, and you can tell me the whole fucked-up story. My brother got shot today and there is no way in hell I’m letting a lying punk like you hold out on me.”

“I could use a beer.”

“Yeah, and I could use six. If you’re thinking of me as a girl who can’t hurt you, Virgil Linley, you’d better think again. I could beat your ass into the dirt with one hand tied behind my back.”

Virgil laughed. “I’d like to see that happen.”

“Soon as we get home, I’m gonna show you.”

Cut Bank Hospital.

I opened my eyes a couple of times, and they didn’t want to stay open for long. The third time I tried to wake up, I saw Travis sitting in a wheelchair beside my bed.

“You shouldn’t be here, Dad.” My tongue felt fat, and I couldn’t tell if I was slurring my words like an old drunk at the Dry Run.

“I am here, son. I’m okay and I want to make sure you’re okay too. Tammy told me what happened at the market.”

“Yeah, two of those fuckers are still on the loose.”

“Tammy and Ted are taking the dogs out tomorrow. Max and Sarge will pick up a trail.”

“How long will I have to stay here?”

“Shoulder wound? Few days. Don’t rush it. Your whole body needs time to heal and recover from the trauma of getting shot and from the blood loss. Not just your shoulder.”

“Feels like unfinished business out there and because of me, Virge got shot.”

“He’s okay. Tammy took him home and I’m sure she probably fed him and Billy dinner. He’ll be fine.”

“I think he’ll run off first chance he gets. He don’t like me much. Pissed I took him out of the crack house he was living in.”

Travis shook his head. “Sounds shitty.”

“Yeah, it was. Needles crunching under my boots. Gross place to hang out.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

“No good for him there. He’s only sixteen for chrissakes. So much could go wrong.”

“Yeah. Better to have him pissed at me, I guess.”

“He’ll come around in time. You sleep now. You’ll be getting more visitors tomorrow.”

### Chapter Ten

Tuesday, July 30th.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

There was only Billy and me for breakfast and while we ate, I filled him in on the market shooting from the day before. Virgil was asleep on the sofa in the living room, and he hadn’t moved.

I figured he’d try to run off during the night, but he was still there where I left him, cuddled up in a plaid blanket. He looked a lot like Harlan but a younger version and not so much muscle.

“Was it the same kids who beat me up?” Billy held his empty cup up and wanted more coffee. He still had a bitch of a time getting around.

“There were only two kids when they came here,” I said, “and they were the two from the detention center in Great Falls. Yesterday, there were four of them. Twice as many and now they have guns.”

“They’ve accelerated,” said Billy. We can expect bigger things from them in the near future.”

“What do you think they might try next?”

“Maybe a convenience store or a package store. Possibly a gas station—one open twenty-four seven.”

“Do you think there are only the four or those four at the market are part of a larger gang?”

“Might fluctuate,” said Billy. “Whoever is around at the time joins in for the joyride—steal a new vehicle and go rob somebody.”

“If they’re part of a bigger gang, they must have a homebase. If the first two broke out of Great Falls Detention Center, wheredid they come from before that? I mean where did they commit the crimes that got them juvie time?”

“Good question, Tammy. We need to look up addresses for them before they went to detention. Be a damned good place to start looking for the rest of the gang.”

I was clearing the table when Virgil woke up and a loud moan came from the living room. “Is it time for your meds? Your leg hurting?”

“Get away from me, girl.” He waved his arm at me. “I can take care of myself.”

“Go for it, you little prick. You’re not half the person your brother is.”

“Ease up, Tammy,” said Billy. “Hand him his crutches so he can get to the bathroom.”



“Fuck you, Billy. I ain’t handing him nothing. I’m going to work.”

Billy laughed. “Guess you’re on your own, Virgil. You pissed Tammy off and you’d better watch yourself from here on.”

“She don’t scare me none.”

Billy laughed again. “This should be good.”

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

When I got to the station I was still pissed off at Virgil. He needed a good kick in the nuts with a steel-toed boot to tune up his attitude and I couldn’t wait to give him one.

I went into the break room, poured myself a coffee, then leaned on Molly’s desk in the squad room and gave her my take on what had happened at the market.

“That’s quite a story, Tammy. Two got away?” she asked.

“Yep. Ted and I will go back with the dogs today and try to pick up a trail.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

“Arraignments this morning for the big gang in the run,” said Molly.

“Have they eaten breakfast?” I asked.

“Uh huh. All done.”

“Ted and I will haul their druggie asses over to the courthouse. They’ll all make bail and get right back to their drug business. Don’t see how our effort is paying off none.”

“I can see how upset you are about Harlan, Tammy. Try not to worry so much. He’s in good hands in the hospital.”

“He won’t want to stay there, Molly. It will remind him of the detention center.”

“Yes. I can see that happening. You can go visit him later and he might know when he’s being released.”

“If he had a release date, he’d be cheered up.”

“How are you and Virgil getting along?”

“Not.” I made a face thinking about the little fart.

“Oh, I see.” Molly smiled.

“Let’s load up the prisoners, Ted,” I hollered. “Get this shit show over with. We got

shooters to track down.”

“Copy that.”

“Billy and I will catch up all the paperwork while you’re gone, Tammy,” said Molly.  
“Today will be a better day.”

“Couldn’t get any worse.”

Harrison County Courthouse.

Ted and I each hauled a squad-load of prisoners over to the courthouse. We turned them over to the bailiff at the back door and went inside to find seats.

“I hope we don’t get none of them back,” said Ted.

“Less work for us at the jail, Ted, but what good is it doing? They’ll go right back to selling drugs. Hardly miss a fucking beat.”

“Yeah, I see your point, Tammy. We end up having to go arrest their asses all over again.”

Barb Hamilton was the first case called and she made bail. No problem and she had the money to pay.

Then the rest of them were called in order. Two of them had outstanding warrants and we got them back. We’d be feeding them until their trial dates came up.

“Jeeze, that pisses me off,” said Ted.

“That’s the way the law works, Ted. We follow all the rules, and the judge grants the

scumbags bail, and it's one big piss-off for law enforcement."

"Let's get our two asswipes and get out of here."

Sheriff's Office. Coyote Creek.

"Ted's locking up the two bikers, Molly. They had outstanding warrants and we're stuck with them until their trials."

"Okay, let me see which two they were, and I'll see how long we're going to be feeding them."

"Ted and I are going to take the dogs back to Ethridge and see if we can pick up a trail," I told Molly and Billy heard me from his office.

He gave a shout out, "The kids will be long gone, Tammy. You and Ted are probably wasting your time."

## Page 57

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

“Probably, but if we don’t get anything, at least we tried. From the hospital, it’s not far to the market. We’ll go see Travis and Harlan first.”

Cut Bank Hospital.

Ted left the strobes turning when he parked at the hospital entrance, and we ran inside to visit Harlan and then Travis.

I ran up to the ICU first and Harlan was awake. His breakfast tray was empty on the rolling table, so I figured he was feeling well enough to eat.

“Hey, Tammy. You get the other two guys?”

“Taking the dogs to the store next.”

“They’ll be gone, but the dogs will show you where they went. Maybe they stole another pickup. Wouldn’t be surprised.”

“Never got a call for another stolen. Molly would’ve told me.”

“Virgil okay?”

“Mean as piss when I left the house this morning.”

Harlan smiled. “I might have to show him a few of the house rules before Travis gets home. Might not work out well for him if he pisses Dad off.”

“Sure won’t. Doctor say when you can go?”

“Tomorrow, but no work until next week.”

“That’s okay. You can stay at the ranch with Virge until Monday. It’ll work out.”

“What about the arraignments? You and Ted take the prisoners?”

“Yep. All made bail but the two bikers. They had outstanding warrants and we got them back.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah, shit.” I laughed. “Ted was pissed too.” I leaned down and hugged Harlan and kissed him when nobody was looking.

“Got to run up and see Dad and then take the dogs to the market.”

“Hope you have luck finding a trail.”

“Yeah, me too. Billy’s not hopeful.”

Travis was out of bed when I got to his room. “I’m coming home, Tammy. There is too goddamned much going on for you to handle.”

“Did the doctor say you could go?”

“No. Isaid I could go, and I informed the nurses I was signing myself out. Not much they can do about it.”

“You coming now with me and Ted?”

“That’s the general idea, girl. I can’t stay here another fuckin minute. Harlan will be out tomorrow and at least we’ll have everybody at home. That will be step one towards getting back to normal.”

“Okay, if you’re sure. Let’s roll.”

Travis grinned. “Roll me out of here, girl.”

We left the hospital with Travis riding in the back of the squad with the dogs. Kind of unexpected, but I was happy about it all the same. I wanted him home from the hospital. That was for sure. And Max and Sarge were crazed to see him. They were licking him all over his face.

“Want us to take you home before we start at the market?” I asked him.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

“Nope. We have to pass right by the turn for Ethridge. You might as well see what you turn up. I’ll wait in the squad.”

“Okeydokey.”

SaveWay Market. Ethridge.

Ted parked in the back corner of the market parking lot, and I let the dogs out to sniff around the area where the kids had been hunkered down behind the truck they had stolen.

Ted had come back yesterday and towed the stolen pickup to the station. Molly was finding out who it belonged to and where it had been jacked. It wasn’t the Chevy Silverado taken from Shelby Lumber.

I held onto Max’s leash and Ted held Sarge as the two dogs sniffed the pavement where the four boys had been when the shooting went down.

As soon as Max alerted and started to run, Sarge followed, and it was hard for me and Ted to keep up. The dogs were lightning fast on four legs, and we only had two.

Max’s nose was to the ground as we ran through town, past houses, and stores, then out the other side of the village and across a field of tall corn to an abandoned barn.

Big barn behind a house that had burned down. All that was left of the house was the foundation grown up and tangled with weeds and vines and a few wild saplings.



A few boards were missing from the weathered barn, but the blackened doors were intact and working. Ted and I went inside and looked around and it was easy to see where the kids had been hiding out.

Straw bales were gathered together in a square and the area was littered with food wrappers, soda cans, and empty cigarette packs.

“They were here,” said Ted. “Goners now.”

I wonder if they called their buddies and more of the kids came and picked them up.”

“Yeah,” said Ted. “They could’ve waited here for a ride. They couldn’t risk coming back to the store to get their stolen pickup.”

We jogged back through town to the market where Travis waited for us in the Bronco. We’d been gone so long; he was asleep in the back seat and jumped when I opened the door.

“Hey, y’all are back. Any luck?”

“We found the barn where the kids hid out. Might have called for a ride from there. Long gone now.”

“Y’all will get them, Tammy. Don’t worry on it no more. It will happen.”

“We’d better get you home to the ranch,” I said. “You’re looking pretty pale. Snowball has more color than you do.”

That made Ted laugh as he started the engine.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

I parked close to the front porch steps to make it easier for Travis to get into the house, but it was slow going. His side hurt so much with every step he took; I hated seeing so much pain on his face.

Once he was inside, he was happy to sit on the sofa in the living room. I tucked a blanket in around him and at the same time noticed that Virgil wasn't lying on the other sofa over by the woodstove.

Travis could see the kitchen from where he sat and could hear me and Billy talking.

My first worry was Vigil. "Where are you, Virge?"

I ran through the house, went upstairs, and he wasn't in the house. Gone.

Billy went into the living room to talk to Travis, and he was saying, "Glad you're home, buddy," when I came running back from my search.

"Where's Virgil?"

"Don't know. I'll look in the barn, although I don't know why he'd be outside. He can only walk on crutches and he sucks at it."

I ran out the back door and through the woodshed with the dogs. We checked everywhere there was to check, hollering out Virgil's name as we went.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

“Virgil, if this is a game, stop it. Tell me where you are.”

I looked in the garage last and Harlan’s bike was there but Travis’s Harley with the super cool paint job was gone.

“Oh, no.” I ran into the barn and flopped down on a bale of straw and tried not to cry. As soon as I could breathe, I texted Harlan.

“Just got home. Virgil is gone and so is Travis’ bike.”

“No. Don’t tell me that. I have to get out of here and help you find my brother.”

“You’ll be out tomorrow morning and we’ll find him together.”

“Does Travis know?”

“Not yet.”

“Can you keep it from him long enough to give me a chance to get his bike back?”

“I’ll talk to Billy when I go in the house and ask him what to do.”

“Text me later. I hate lying here. I miss you so much.”

“Same.”

Chapter Eleven

Wednesday, July 31st.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

I set my alarm to get me up extra early. I had to do the barn chores myself, then help Travis get up and get settled before I went to work, then make breakfast for all of us. I might be late for work by a little.

As soon as I came in from the barn, I washed my hands, whispered to Billy about the bike, then sucked in some oxygen and went into Travis' room to see if he was awake. I figured he would be, he was always up before me on a regular day.

"I can't get up, Tam. Can you drag my ass across the hall to the bathroom?"

"Sure can." I pushed the quilts back and saw that Travis had slept in the clothes he'd worn home from the hospital. He probably couldn't get them off on his own and wouldn't ask me. Saved getting dressed in the morning.

"How do you want me to pull you up, Dad? I'm afraid no matter which way I do it, I'm gonna hurt you something awful."

"You might inflict some pain, Tammy, but I have to get up, girl. Can't lie here a minute longer."

"Okay. Let's do it."

I inhaled a big breath knowing for sure I was gonna hurt my dad a lot. I took his hand and pulled Travis up halfway and he gave a loud holler as he moved from lying down to sitting up.

He sat on the side of the bed breathing hard through the pain for a couple of minutes.

Then he looked up at me.

“Take your time before you move again.”

He waited until he was breathing kind of normal and then held out his hand when he was ready to get to his feet. “On three, Tam.”

“Yep.”

On the count of three, I pulled him to his feet and Travis let out a god-awful holler, so loud it scared me. I put my arm around him, and real slow he shuffled across the hall to the bathroom.

While he was in there, I ran to the kitchen and made coffee and pulled everything out of the fridge for breakfast.

“I have a BOLO out on the bike,” Billy whispered.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

“Great. I hope we hear something and get it back before Travis finds out it’s gone. I can’t see leaving him home alone today, Billy. He can’t even get to the bathroom.”

“As soon as you pick Harlan up, he can stay here and watch over Travis. At least Harlan can walk around and get coffee or a sandwich for both of them.”

“Yeah, that’s true. We’ll leave Harlan here and Travis will only be alone for a couple of hours this morning.”

“Leave the dogs here today,” said Billy.

“Yeah. Good idea. Max and Sarge can watch over both of them.”

When Travis was finished in the bathroom, I helped him down the hall to the kitchen and he tried to sit on a hard kitchen chair and couldn’t do it.

I moved him to the sofa, cooked breakfast and took his plate into him. He ate in the front room kind of propped up with cushions.

“You’ll be alone with the dogs until I bring Harlan home from the hospital, Dad. It’s gonna be two or three hours after Billy and I leave. Think you can manage?”

“Sure, I’ll have another coffee and sleep until Harlan gets here. Then we’ll be good on our own. He has to take it easy, but he can walk around if he needs to get us anything.”

“Yep, Harlan will be on half-power for today.”

Sheriff's Office. Coyote Creek.

By the time Billy and I got to the station, Molly had given the two biker druggies their breakfast and she'd made two pots of coffee.

I leaned on her desk near the front of the squad room and told her about Virgil stealing Travis's Harley and taking off to parts unknown.

Never meant to cry, but I felt so bad for Travis. He was hurt so fuckin bad, and he loved that bike so fuckin much. It broke my heart that Virge would do something so mean to a guy who was trying to help him.

"I'll keep checking on the BOLO," said Molly. "How's Travis doing at home?"

"Not worth a fried turd, Molly. He left the hospital too soon because he was all worked up about me and Harlan. You know how he gets. All tough on the outside."

"I know." Molly brushed a tear away. "I know him pretty well and he tries to hide what a good person he is."

"We're lucky to have Billy back. He and Ted can catch up the paperwork while I go get Harlan."

"I'll get them going on it," said Molly.

"I had an idea, Molly."

"Tell me, dear."

"If you could find out where those first two kids lived—not when they got arrested in foster homes—but where they came from originally."

“The ones who escaped from Great Falls Detention?”

“Yes. If you can find out where they grew up, I could go to that town and track down their friends.”

“Going back farther to their roots,” said Molly. “I can see where that would be important, Tammy. I’ll work on that while you’re gone.”

“Thanks. Wherever they came from—like grew up—might help find them and the kids they’re running with now.”

“You might be right about that.”

Cut Bank Hospital.

I parked out front in the pick-up loop and left the strobes spinning to hold my spot while I ran up to Harlan’s room to get him.

Hoping he’d already been released by his doctor; I was happy to see him all dressed and ready to go. He was putting up an argument about getting into the wheelchair for his trip downstairs to the lobby.



## Page 61

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

I pointed to the chair. “Let’s go. I have to get you home to watch Travis. I don’t trust him at home by himself. He couldn’t get out of bed this morning.”

Harlan nodded and sat in the chair without more arguing. “Let’s go.”

While the nurse pushed Harlan to the elevator and continued on to the front exit, he didn’t say a word.

Once I got him out of the chair and into the truck, I waved goodbye to the nurse and ran around to the driver’s side of the Bronco.

I put the truck in gear and Harlan freaked out. “How in hell are we gonna find Virgil, Tammy? He took Dad’s bike and we both know how much Travis loves that Harley.”

“Molly is working on something for me. Remember we talked about where the first two kids came from before they went to detention?”

“No.”

“Okay. I’m thinking where those first two lived—like where they grew up—might be the place where the gang is coming from. It’s only a guess, but when Molly gets me the name of a town, that’s where I’m going with Ted.”

“I want to go too.”

“Today you have to stay with Travis. He needs help. Tomorrow we’ll see how he is and if he can be left alone.”

“I don’t see how I can sit around watching Dad while my shit brother is out there joyriding on the Harley with my dogs painted on it. Travis loves that bike more than fuckin life. This is my fault for bringing Virgil into our house.”

“You were only trying to help your brother, and this is how the little shit thanked you.”

“Tell me about it.” Harlan winced and clutched at his arm in the sling.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

Tammy dropped me off at the ranch and the first thing I did was get coffee for Travis. I made him a sandwich and then set up my laptop on the kitchen table where I could see him, and he could talk to me.

I started in on Tammy’s idea about looking up where the gangers were from before they went to Juvie in Great Falls. They might come from the same town as the two dead guys Tam shot at the market and then we’d have a connection.

With my arm in a sling, I had to type with one finger, but I read through all the reports and police records again and came up with a place called Glenroy.

Never heard of it, but on the Google map I put on the screen, it looked like it was west of Great Falls. A few miles. Not too far.

If that was hometown to the bunch of punks stealing cars and trucks and ripping off wallets, then that’s where we had to go and snoop around.

I called Tammy and told her the name of the place.

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

I went back to work and before I had time to ask Molly if she'd found out anything about the kids, Harlan called with the name of a place he'd searched out.

"I found a place to start looking for the punks, Tam. It's called Glenroy and it's west of Great Falls, but not too far from the city. What did Molly find?"

"Haven't had time to ask her yet."

"Don't go until tomorrow, so I can go with you."

"We don't know that you'll be able to leave Travis tomorrow. I'm going to do some recon today. If you're clear tomorrow, you can come with me when we take them down."

"Copy."

I ran into the squad room and Molly had names and addresses written down and they were in the same place Harlan found. Glenroy, down near Great Falls. That's where some of the kids had come from but it didn't mean they were still there.

"Fantastic, Molly. Ted and I will take a run down there and look around. Those kids have hurt Billy, Harlan, and Virgil. We have to grab them and get them off the street."

"I agree," said Molly, "but be careful, Tammy. They have guns now that they stole from somewhere and you've seen how dangerous they can be."

## Page 62

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

“I’ll be careful. I’m super pissed at them now, and if I find out that Virgil went right back to them or back to his crack house in Conrad East, I’m going to be more than super pissed.”

Ted grinned as he waited with the keys to the squad in his hand.

Glenroy. Montana.

Ted drove to the last addresses we had for two of the boys who had been identified so far. They both came from the small town of Glenroy.

Knocking on the doors of the old addresses we had, the people living in those houses didn’t know who we were talking about. The boys may have lived there a few years ago, but their families didn’t live on that street anymore.

“If they got into trouble here when they were younger,” said Ted, “the sheriff’s office might know who we’re talking about.”

“Let’s try that.” I pointed at the post office. “I’ll run in and ask where the sheriff’s office is, and it will save looking for it.”

Ted parked out front and I ran in and asked the man behind the counter. “Do you have a sheriff’s office in Glenroy?”

“No, we don’t, Deputy. The office for the county is over in Chapman. It’s about seven miles from here.”

“Thank you, sir.”

I ran back and told Ted. “The office is in Chapman. Seven miles away.”

“Put it in the GPS, and we’ll head over there.”

Sheriff’s Office. Chapman.

Ted and I went into the sheriff’s office for Fairfield County. It was on the main street in Chapman down at the end near the library and the post office. A little cluster of government buildings.

We stopped at the front desk, and I asked if we could talk to the sheriff. “We’re from the Harrison County office in Coyote Creek, and I’d like to speak to your sheriff.”

“Sheriff Grant is kind of busy and I’m not sure he’s got time to talk to you today,” said the lady at the front desk. She seemed kind of grumpy, or maybe she figured I was too young to be a deputy. Whatever.

“Could you ask him, please? This is about a case we’re working on.”

“And you came down here in person?”

“Yes, ma’am. We drove right down here in person, me and Deputy Wallace, to talk to Sheriff Grant this morning.”

The woman got up off her generous butt and trudged down the hall to see if the sheriff could spare us a minute.

We waited and it didn’t take long before the sheriff followed the grumpy dispatcher out to the front desk to see what we wanted.

He wasn't particularly friendly. Gray hair and a big belly hanging over his silver buckle. "Help you deputies with something?"

"We're looking for a gang of kids who have been stealing cars and pickups and robbing people up our way. They have guns now and they shot one of our deputies. Have you had any stolen vehicles in your county lately, sir?"

"Let's talk in my office, young lady. You don't look old enough to be a deputy sheriff, but I guess you must be."

"My father is Sheriff Frost in Harrison County, and he was shot by a gang of druggies. He'll be back on the job in a week or so. He'd be here himself if he could be."

"I heard about that shooting up near the Canadian border, but I've never met Sheriff Frost. He took over from Sheriff Monroe, didn't he?"

"I think so."

The sheriff sat down behind his desk and pointed to the other two chairs. Me and Ted sat down.

"We have had a couple of stolen vehicles in the past month and one of them involved a robbery of the owner."

"Was the vehicle owner hurt?" I asked.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

“He was beaten up. Yes. Badly beaten for just grabbing his wallet. Seemed a bit much for a mugging.”

“Could we have a copy of that report, sir?” I asked. “We’re trying to find a trail for these kids. They’ve done a lot of damage in our county.”

“There was one other stolen car before that one, and I can dig that report up for you too, if you want it.”

“Thank you. That would be helpful.”

“The kids you’re looking for have names?” asked the sheriff.

“The first two who broke out of detention in Great Falls were Danny Burrridge and Stuart Dickinson. Those two beat up our undersheriff and put him in the hospital. He just got back to work this week.”

The sheriff shook his head. “Bad seeds. I don’t recognize their names. Sorry. But I’ll keep an eye out and if anything related happens, I’ll give your office a call.”

I gave him one of our cards. “Thanks for your help, Sheriff. We appreciate it.”

“I’ll have Doris send those reports to your office too as soon as she gets around to it.”

“Thanks.”

We went back to the squad and headed north to Coyote Creek. “What did you think

of that sheriff, Tammy?”

“That old guy wasn’t too ambitious. But he’ll help us if he can or said he would.”

“I wouldn’t count on it.” Ted was a bit of a pessimist.

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

Ted and I got back to our own office and shared what we had found out with Billy and Molly. “Sheriff Grant, down there in Fairfield County will be sending you reports of their stolen vehicles, Molly. One of them included a robbery like ours and the victim was beat up really bad. Had to go to the hospital for a few days.”

“So those kids aren’t exclusive to our county,” said Molly. “I’ll watch for the emails and send a thank you note back to Sheriff Grant.”

“That would be nice, Molly. At first, he didn’t want to help us too badly. Ted said he seemed lazy and liked to sit on his butt in his office.”

“Kind of like Billy,” hollered Ted. That made Billy holler and made me and Molly laugh.

“Tomorrow when Harlan comes back to work, we’re going back down to Glenroy to knock on doors until we find somebody who lived there when these kids lived in that town.”

“Might be a lot of door-knocking,” said Molly. “I don’t think I’ve ever been there. How big is the town?”

“Small. Smaller than Coyote Creek.”



Wild Stallion Ranch.

I picked up chicken and side dishes on the way home and took dinner with me. There was no time to cook anything for Travis, Harlan, and Billy. I had to do the chores and feed the dogs right after we ate.

I ran into the kitchen and plunked the bags from Delia's Deli on the table. "Chicken, potato salad and coleslaw. Best I could do in a hurry. Are you guys starving?"

"Sit down and have a beer, Tammy," said Travis. "You're doing everything yourself and it's too fuckin much. Before we eat, we'll have a beer with you and you can unwind a little, girl."

"I'll be going with you tomorrow, Tam," said Harlan. "I want to go to Glenroy and knock on doors until my knuckles fuckin bleed. We have to get a lead."

"Yep. That's what Ted and I want to do too. We went to the old addresses today and the kids and parents had moved away. New people didn't know where they went."

"Check the local real estate office," said Billy. "You might find a forwarding address from them or from the county registry office. The sale would be registered when the property changed hands, and you can get info from that. It's free and the clerks there will help you find what you need."

"That's a good idea," said Harlan. "We'll try that. We have to find those bastards. My worst feeling tells me that Virgil knows the kids in the gang, or even worse, he might be with them."

"On the way through Conrad East tomorrow, we'll look in that crack house again," I said. "Don't know why he'd be stupid enough to go back there, but he might."

## Page 64

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

“Yeah, for sure we’ll cruise by there,” said Harlan. “I’d like to think he’d stay away from that life, but I don’t know my brother too well. Found out he’s a user and a thief. I’d hate to think he’s worse than that, but I guess we’ll find out.”

“Not your fault how he turned out,” said Travis. “He was separated from you by the system.”

“Yeah, the fucking system,” said Harlan. “Sometimes they make things worse instead of better.”

“I guess it’s the system were stuck with,” said Billy, “until they come up with something better.”

I felt better after I had a beer with my family. I spread out the food from the deli and we ate together and all of us relaxed a little.

When we finished, Billy cleaned up the kitchen while Harlan and I went to the barn.

### Chapter Twelve

Thursday, August 1st.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

Harlan was up early and came to the barn with me to do what he could to help me one-handed. He managed to feed the oats and do some of the easier jobs while I mucked out the stalls and climbed up the ladder to the loft and threw hay and straw

down.

“How upset was Travis when you told him about the bike?”

Harlan leaned on Windrider’s empty stall and lit up a smoke. “He took it a lot better than I thought he would, Tam. He just sat quiet and thought about it for a couple of minutes. Then he said, “We’ll get the bike back and I’ll show Virgil he ain’t as tough as he thinks he is.”

“Wow.” Was he talking in that flat, calm voice? You know—the scary one.”

“Yeah,” said Harlan, “and that shook me up a bit. But Virge needs discipline in a bad way, Tam. Can’t deny that.”

“Sure does. Ain’t gonna be a picnic when Dad shows him the goods.”

“Fuck,” said Harlan. “I wouldn’t want him showing me the goods either.”

When we went back into the house, Travis was sitting on the side of his bed. Definitely an improvement over the day before.

“I’ll help you to the bathroom, Dad,” said Harlan. “Tammy can start breakfast.”

“How are the horses, son? I haven’t seen Outlaw in days.”

“He’s fine. You can take a stroll out there tomorrow and lean on the corral fence and smoke. Be something for you to do while you’re healing your side.”

“Yeah, I guess. I gotta get over this and get back to work. You kids got too fuckin much to do.”

“We’re okay, honest,” said Harlan.

“I’m not convinced of that, son. Not convinced.”

Tammy made pancakes for breakfast, and we were all hungry as bears. Looking at her over by the stove, I could tell she’d lost weight in the last few days and Travis picked up on it.

“You’re working too hard, Tammy,” he said. “Shift into a lower gear, girl. You’ll get the same amount of work done.”

She turned and smiled at Travis. “I’m good, Daddy. Lots of work keeps me out of trouble.”

Travis pulled her over and hugged her close to his chair. “You never were any trouble, was she Billy?”

Billy laughed. “Well, there was that one time...”

“What time are you talking about?” hollered Tammy.

That made Travis laugh, and he had to hang onto his sore side.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

Sheriff's Office. Coyote Creek.

Molly had good news for us when we got to the station. The reports from Sheriff Grant had come in from Fairfield County. She let Harlan read them and then he showed them to Billy in his office.

"Two vehicles were stolen, and the drivers were robbed by kids. Sometimes two kids. Three another time. It's got to be the same gang."

"That sheriff didn't catch any of them?" asked Billy.

"Doesn't say there were any arrests in the reports," said Harlan.

"We're going back to Glenroy today," I said. "We'll do a lot of door knocking starting on the street where the kids originally lived. Somebody must remember those families."

"Is Travis well enough to be left alone?" asked Molly.

"Says he is, Molly," I said. "But he'd probably say the same thing even if he had two busted legs and his throat was cut."

"Tammy, don't say that even in fun." Molly put her hands over her ears.

Glenroy. Montana.

We drove down to Glenroy for the second day in a row. This time Harlan was with

me, and he was determined to find somebody who knew the kids who were causing all the trouble in our county.

We started door knocking again on the street where the kids had lived years before. “That’s one of the addresses.” I pointed to the house. “New people live there now, and the new owner never heard the names I gave her.”

“Cross that one off,” said Ted, “and also that red brick bungalow down that end of the street. I talked to the woman there and she didn’t know either one of the names.”

“Two houses been checked,” I said. “We’ll talk to every one of the other residents. I’ll take that end of the street up to the checked house. Tammy, you take that end. Ted work that side of the street and when I finish my half on this side, I’ll cross over and start at the far end and work back to you.”

“Copy,” said Ted. “Tell me the names again.”

“Burridge and Dickinson,” Tammy said. “Stuart Dickinson and Danny Burridge.”

“Okay, I’ve got it.” Ted crossed the street with his notebook in his hand. I went one way and Tammy went the other.

Starting with the corner house, I knocked, and an older lady answered the door. She looked to me like she’d lived there forever, and I had high hopes for her remembering one of the kids.

“Deputy Harlan Bristol with the Harrison County Sheriff’s Department, ma’am. Can I ask you something? Won’t take long.”

“Of course, dear. What do you want to know?”

“I wondered if you could remember when the Burridges or the Dickinsons lived on this street. Both families had boys who would be sixteen or seventeen about now, and we’re looking for them.”

She pointed up the street. “The Burridges lived up the street for a while, but it was a long time ago. They had a girl and a boy, but I can’t remember the names of the kids.”

“Do you have any idea where they might have moved to, ma’am?”

“Umm...maybe.” She took her glasses off and cleaned the lenses with the tail end of her flowered apron. “I think I may have heard something about them not too long ago from Mrs. Strachan. She lives across the street and likes to know everybody’s business.”

“It’s important if you can remember what she told you, ma’am.”

“Something about them moving to Dutton and living near somebody she knew. It would be better if you asked her, dear. She just lives over there in that white house with the red shutters.” She made a face. “An ugly color for shutters and I told her more than once, she should get old Jason Crowe to paint them blue. It would raise the value of her house if the shutters were blue. Everybody knows that.”

I nodded. “Thank you, ma’am. If you think of anything else, my office number is on the card.”

She smiled. “Nice talking to you, Deputy Bristol. You seem like a fine young police officer.”

“Hope so, ma’am.” She made me smile.

A bit of progress there, I waved up the street to Tammy and pointed to the house I was going to across the street on Ted's side.



*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

Tammy came running down the street to join me. “Did you find out something?”

“Yeah. This lady might know more.” I rang the bell and Mrs. Strachan opened the door. She was about a hundred years old and hunched over. The white apron she was wearing almost touched the floor.

“Mrs. Strachan?”

“Who wants to know?” she snapped, and I almost laughed. Tammy put her hand over her mouth.

“Deputy Bristol, ma’am. The lady on the other side of the street said you were telling her news about the Burrige family. Could you tell me too? I’m looking for their son.”

Mrs. Strachan screwed up her face and all of her wrinkles made her face look like an albino prune. “You’re looking for that brat, Danny Burrige?”

“Yes, ma’am. We are.”

“He used to kick his football into my flowerbeds, and I’d like to kick his ass if I could get aholt of him.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Tammy. “We’d like to do that too. You know where that brat Danny is now?”

“Sure do. My friend Delphina lives up in Dutton and she told me on the phone that

new people moved in next door to her. She said their name was Burrige and I told her they used to live on my street down here in Glenroy.”

“Amazing coincidence,” I said. “You think it’s the same family?”

“Don’t you?”

“Not sure, but I’m going to check it out today and I’ll let you know. Do you have a street address for your friend, Delphina?”

“Of course I do, young man. What do you think address books are for?”

“Not sure ma’am. I never had me one of those.”

“Organize your life, young sheriff. It will hold you in good stead in the long run.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll get right on that.”

She went inside and was back a few minutes later with an address written on a floral note. “Don’t forget to say hello to Delphina and tell her I sent you.”

“I’ll tell her, ma’am. Been nice talking to you. Thank you for the help. We appreciate it.”

She started to close the door then suddenly noticed Tammy who’d been standing beside me the entire time. “That your sister?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Thought so. You look alike.”

Tammy giggled. “She was funny.”

“Yeah, she was. Get the Bronco and we’ll pick Ted up and cruise up to Dutton to talk to the Burridges.”

“You don’t want to finish the street?”

“We’ll come back if our lead doesn’t pan out, but if we can find Danny Burridge, he might lead us to everybody else we’re looking for.”

“Hope he does. I’ll go get the truck.”

Dutton. Montana.

Following the address in the GPS, Tammy drove up I-15 to Dutton. It was on our way home, and we’d driven through the town on our way to Glenroy.

Tammy parked in front of a two-story brick house on an old street. “This is where Delphina lives, so the Burridges either live there or there.” She pointed to similar brick houses on each side.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

“Let’s ask Delphina which house,” I said. “I promised to sayhito her from Mrs. Strachan anyway.”

We chatted to Delphina—another lady in her nineties—at her door for a few minutes and gave her greetings from her friend in Glenroy. She confirmed that the Burridges had moved into the house north of her and added Mister Burridge was at work and Mrs. Burridge hadn’t found a job yet.

“Did you happen to notice their son Danny going in or out?” I asked.

“Nope. Never seen any kids.”

“Thanks, Delphina. You’ve been a great help.”

“I used to be on neighborhood watch,” she said, “but then they picked somebody younger to take over for me. Did they think I wouldn’t notice somebody creeping around on our street?”

“I don’t know, ma’am,” said Harlan.

“Just because I turned ninety, I didn’t lose all my senses.”

“No, ma’am, you sure didn’t.”

Burridge Residence. Dutton.

Mrs. Burridge answered our knock, and she was a pleasant lady in her late forties.

Brown hair and glasses. Judging by Danny's juvie mug shot, his hair was blonder, but he looked a lot like his mother.

"Mrs. Burrige, we're from the Harrison County Sheriff's office up in Coyote Creek and we're looking for your son, Danny. Have you seen him lately?"

"I'm sorry, Sheriff. I can't tell you where Danny is now. He doesn't live at home anymore. After he was sent to Juvenile Detention down there in Great Falls, Arthur threw him out of the house. I visited Danny a few times while he was in that place, but Arthur wouldn't go. It's been hard on our family."

Tammy nodded her head. "It would be, ma'am. So sorry."

"Do you know any of his friends?" I asked. "Does Danny still hang around with Stuart Dickinson?"

"The last time Danny dropped by—he comes to see me when his father isn't here—Stuart wasn't with him, but a couple of other boys were."

"Did they happen to say where they were living or where they were going, ma'am?"

"No. Danny didn't say anything like that, but I think one of the other boys mentioned they were going up to Shelby to look for work at the carnival that was setting up soon."

"That's great information, Mrs. Burrige. Thank you so much."

"I don't know why you'd be looking for Danny. He hasn't done anything wrong since he got out of detention. He learned his lesson. My son is a good boy."

"We need to ask him a couple of questions, ma'am," said Tammy. "That's all it is."

I gave Mrs. Burridge my card. “Please call me if you see Danny or if you think of anything else.”

“I will.”

As we ran back to the squad where Ted was smoking, I said, “We got another good lead, Tammy. We might round up a bunch of those punks at the carnival. Never knew it was coming to Shelby. When I ran with a bad crowd—before I got my ass sent to detention—the carnival was one of our fav places for stirring up shit and getting into trouble.”

“I better keep my eye on you when we check it out,” said Tammy. “I’ll keep my brother on a short leash.”

That made me laugh.

Conrad East. Montana.

Tammy had to drive because of my shoulder, and heading northbound on the interstate we came to the ramp for ConradEast. She made the turn so we could check the crack house and make sure Virge hadn’t gone back there. My worst fear was having my little brother hooked on drugs.

Tammy parked at the curb and the place looked exactly the same. It hadn’t changed at all in a week. Still ready to be torn down and replaced by another strip mall full of empty stores.

We all hopped out and Ted waved his arm in a circular motion, signaling that he was going round the back.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

Tammy and I walked through the front opening—missing a door—and inside talking to the drunk and high residents were a couple of dealers. They were only interested in the kids or homeless people who had money to buy their drugs.

When they peered through the dim light and saw our uniforms, they booked it and sprinted for the back door.

Leaning against the back wall, Ted was in position waiting for them to run. We followed from the inside and had them sandwiched between us.

Ted pulled his gun and held the slingers on their knees in front of him while we cuffed them from behind.

Tammy patted them down and took the goods they had for sale along with their weapons. Each of them had a gun and a knife. She bagged everything and marked it while Ted and I secured them in the back of the squad.

I wasn't much help with the arrest, but I asked the slingers if they'd seen Virgil Linley.

“Who? Don't know who that is.”

I had no way of knowing if they were lying or not.

Tammy took the wheel, and we continued north on the interstate to Route Two and turned east to Shelby.

“Where do they set up the carnival, Ted?” asked Tammy.

“Fairgrounds. On the north edge of town. You turn on one of the side streets and it takes you right to the gate. Can’t remember the name of the street.”

“The GPS will find it.” I punched in Shelby Fairgrounds, and it only took a couple of seconds to pop up on the screen. “Turn on Elm Street, Tam.”

“Elm. Got it.” When we came to Elm Street, she made the turn and drove for a few blocks, and we were there—looking right at the gate.

Leaving the squad at the gate, we walked in, and it was easy to see where all the action was. The carnival wasn’t all set up, but the laborers were unloading the trucks and putting the pieces in place.

Tammy stayed with the squad while me and Ted searched through the big crew of workers looking for Danny Burrige, Stuart Dickinson and any other kids in that age group that might be part of the gang.

“See them?” Tammy asked when we returned to the gate.

I shook my head. “Not here yet. We’ll come back tomorrow and check out everybody who’s been hired on for the weekend. We’re going to find them this time.”

“Yeah,” said Ted. “Carnival is a good place for them to work. Lots of people to rob on the side. Big parking area full of vehicles to steal. This will be a fuckin gold mine for them.”

“I think so too,” I said. “Hard for them to pass up a golden opportunity like the carnival. We’ll put in time on surveillance.” I laughed thinking about it. “I’ll take Tammy on the Ferris wheel.”



And kiss her at the top.

“Be a first for me. Never been to the carnival.”

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

Ted and I brought the prisoners in the back door, and he locked one of them in the run while I booked the other.

Billy came out of his office to hear what was going on and see what we were doing. We were his responsibility with Travis not at the station.

“We picked up a couple of drug slingers, Billy,” I said.

“Where’d you find them, Tammy?”

“Checked the crack house in Conrad East again. Had to pass near there.”

“Making sure Virge wasn’t there?” he raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah, doing that,” said Tammy.

“I wanted to be sure,” I said to Billy.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

“Course you did, son. Good call. I’m kind of glad he didn’t go back there.”

“Yeah, me too. I’ll take this evidence to Molly.

I stood at Molly’s desk in the squad room and gave her the evidence we’d collected from the drug dealers we brought in.

She smiled. “Our evidence locker is getting full, Harlan. Any luck with the canvassing in Glenroy, dear?”

“Yep, real good luck, Molly. We found out that the boys in the gang are thinking of grabbing jobs with the carnival that’s setting up in Shelby. We cruised by there and we’re going back tomorrow to put in some surveillance hours. We’ll get them.”

“That’s a good lead,” said Molly.

“Damned good lead,” said Billy, as he walked into the squad room. “I might do some surveillance myself. I’m good at sitting on my fat ass watching people go by. I love those burgers with fried onions they sell from the food trucks.”

Tammy ran into the squad room with more information for Molly. “The two drug dealers we picked up are Simon Platte and Jeffrey Ecclestone. Both of them in their twenties and both in the system.” She put their wallets on the desk. “You can make a bag for their personal stuff, Molly.”

“I will, dear.” Molly jotted down the details. “I guess we’ll have two more guests for dinner.”

“I can go get the meals before we leave,” I said. “I can carry a bag with one hand.”

“The guys you brought in know Virgil?” asked Billy.

“Said they never heard of him.”

“That’s what they all say. We’ll ask them again.” He winked at me.

I walked across the street to get the food from the diner for the prisoners so Molly wouldn’t have to do it. We finished a few more things and left for the day.

Tammy was worried about leaving Travis alone for so long and she wanted to get home to the ranch.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

We drove in the lane and saw there was nothing much to worry about. Travis was sitting on the porch drinking beer with his feet propped up on the railing.

He held up a Miller can in a salute, a big grin on his face.

“I think Daddy is okay,” said Tammy.

I laughed. “Looks better than okay to me.”

“We should join him for a beer before we start the chores,” said Tammy. “I’m hot and thirsty.”

“I’m voting for that idea, Tam. So fuckin hot today in this uniform, I’m starting to stink.”

She winked at me. “You always smell good to me, Harlan.”

“Don’t say stuff like that, Tammy. You know where that leads.”

She giggled.

## Chapter Thirteen

Friday, August 2nd.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

At breakfast we talked about the fantastic carnival lead we got from Mrs. Burrige and as soon as Travis heard it, he was keen to help with the surveillance. Not that we didn’t need him. We were short bodies to pull off a comprehensive surveillance of an area consisting of several acres of people. Acres of fairgrounds plus the huge parking area. Yep, we’d be spread thin.

Tammy cooked breakfast and while we ate together, I saw us as a tight family. That’s what I wanted for my brother after I experienced it, but Virgil didn’t see it my way. Not yet.

## Page 70

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

Travis set his coffee mug down and said, “I think I’ll go to the station today and see if I can sit in my swivel chair for a while. That will free y’all up to cover the fairgrounds. We have to catch those murdering little pricks.”

“I’m not sure that’s a great idea, Dad. You’re not ready to go back to work yet. Next Monday will be soon enough to try half a day.”

“Let me try that half day today, son. All I have to do is sign a few reports and be there for Molly. I can drink coffee and play poker on my phone and pretend I’m working.” He chuckled.

I shook my head. “Not liking it, Dad. Too soon. What do you think, Billy?”

Billy frowned and sided with me and Tammy. “You can barely walk, Travis. Best to give it until Monday.”

“By Monday the carnival will be packing up,” said Travis. “This weekend will be huge for Shelby and the carney will draw people from miles around. If those kids have any brains left at all, they’ll show up to take advantage of the crowd. The parking lot will be a big draw for them. All those cars and trucks sitting there with nobody watching them.”

“Yeah, I get that. This is a great chance for us to grab the little bastards, but we can manage it without you filling in for Billy.”

Travis shook his head. He wasn’t buying any of it. “Nope. I’m going to the station. I want Billy to go with Ted and the four of y’all will have a decent shot at grabbing the

kids.”

“What if you can’t sit any longer and you have to come home from the station and lie down?” asked Tammy. “Then what? You can’t drive.”

“Then I’ll call you to come and take me home.”

“Promise me you’ll do that?”

“I promise.”

Tammy gave him one of her I-don’t-believe-you looks.

“Okay, I swear I will, Tam.”

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

Thinking it was a terrible idea for Travis to be back at work, I helped him into his office and eased him down into his swivel chair. The one he claimed he didn’t need anymore and handed off to Billy—along with the rest of his office.

“I’ll get you a coffee.”

Travis glanced around the office and grinned. “Wasn’t sure I’d ever see this shitty office again.”

I laughed. “Sit tight, Dad. I’ll get you a mug of caffeine and tell Molly you’re here.”

“Jeeze, she won’t be wearing a happy face when she sees me.”

Ted checked on the prisoners in the run and Molly had already fed them and given

them coffee. Neither one of them would be arraigned until Monday morning. The other two mutts in there were permanent residents until their trials came up.

While Ted was in there, I walked into the run and asked the drug slingers one more time if they knew my brother. “Either one of you know Virgil Linley?”

“Never heard of him,” said Simon Platte.

“What about you, Jeff?”

“Nope. Don’t know him. Not sure I’d tell you even if I did.”

“That’s what I figured.” I sighed. No help from them. I had to find Virgil on my own. I couldn’t rest until I got Travis’s Harley back for him.

After everyone left for Shelby, Molly strolled down the hall to the office and looked in on Travis.

“Hey, Molly.”

“Can I get you another coffee, boss? You shouldn’t be here, but I’m sure you know that.”

“Yeah, I know it, Molly. But it beats lying on the sofa at home. I’m about done with that.”

## Page 71

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

“I’ll get you more coffee and I’ll get you lunch at the diner when I go over to get food for the prisoners.”

“Thanks, Molly. Tell the kids I did great, okay?”

She laughed. “Are you doing great, Travis?”

“Almost. I’m nudging greatness.”

Shelby Fairgrounds.

We found parking spots side by side in the designated area and split up from there. Billy took the food trucks so he could sit at one of the picnic tables, drink a Coke and smoke without anybody noticing him.

Ted took the section where the laborers were running the rides. Ticket takers, helpers getting people on and off, the guys controlling the length of the rides.

The fairgrounds was crawling with carney workers and day laborers. Men and younger boys milling around all over the place. A few girls in the ticket booths, and a few older guys supervising, but mostly guys in their late teens, early twenties.

Harlan strolled the midway watching the guys running the games and at the same time, keeping an eye on the crowds of people who might be attracting pickpockets. The wallet grabbers were slick and professional, and you could barely see them make their move.



I watched long tables of vendors who were following the carnival selling guns and knives and related hunting gear.

Those booths were manned by older guys who needed a closer look, but at the moment they didn't have any young kids working for them. Not yet anyway.

When Billy passed by them he wondered if they were selling stolen weapons. Over the course of the weekend, he intended to find out a few more details about those guys and where all their shiny merchandise came from.

Sheriff's Office. Coyote Creek.

Mid-afternoon, Molly tip-toed down the hall to check on Travis and he was slumped down in his chair sound asleep. She wanted to take him home to his ranch but couldn't leave the office or the phones unattended.

Taking a chance that Savanna still liked Travis enough to do him this favor, Molly called her at the store and explained what she needed.

Travis opened his eyes, and he was looking up at Savanna's beautiful face. A bit disoriented, he said, "Hey, girl."

"Hey, yourself. Come on, Travis. I'm going to take you home."

"No. I can call Tammy."

"Molly said Tammy is in Shelby working. I'll take you home. Let me help you up, and don't give me a lot of your macho bullshit. Don't be a butt."

"Aw, Savanna, I ain't worth helping up and you know it."

“Up.” She pulled him gently out of the chair and wrapped an arm around him for support. She helped him down the hall and out the front door of the station to her car parked at the curb.

Travis groaned as he eased into the passenger seat. “I’m a goddamned mess, girl.”

Wild Stallion Ranch.

On the drive to the ranch, Savanna apologized for not coming to see him at the hospital when he was shot. “I didn’t come to see you on purpose, Travis. If I’d come to the hospital and seen you like you are now, I’d have come back to you in a second. I guess I was trying to avoid that, but still I felt mean.”

“You gonna change your mind any time soon?”

“You want me to?”

“Course I do. Kids miss you every fuckin day. They’re always ragging on about you moving out and they blame me.”

“I miss them too. I’m attached to those kids after living with you as long as I did. I miss Billy too. You guys were the closest thing to family I ever had.”

“I was never clear on why you left me,” said Travis.

Savanna sighed. “I guess I thought I’d get hurt if I got in too deep. You’ve left a trail of broken hearts in your wake, and I figured I’d be next on the list.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

“So... you took an early out? You made sure you got out before it happened?”

“Something like that. But when I left it was already too late. I cried for days afterwards anyway and I was sorry I left. I missed you and the kids so much. I saved myself the heartbreak of us breaking up, but not the pain of us being apart. In the end, there wasn't much point to it.”

“Huh, I can never figure out what women are thinking. Probably never will.”

Savanna drove in the lane, circled the house and parked close to the back door. She helped Travis out of her car and in the back door, straight into his bedroom.

“Lie down and let me see the damage.”

“Nah. It's not nice to look at.”

Savanna helped him lie down on the bed and she sat down next to him and pulled up his shirt. She eased the stained bandage off of the wound and then screwed up her face. “Ooh, that's nasty. This bandage is about done too. You need a new dressing. Do you have antiseptic cream to put on that mess?”

“Yeah. It's on the counter in the bathroom. All the gauze and tape is there too. You don't have to do it. I can do it myself.”

“The bullet hole is in an awkward place for you to see what you're doing, Travis. I'll do it.”

After cleaning the damaged area in his side and fixing up the bullet wound, Savanna laid down on the bed next to Travis and pulled the quilt up over both of them. “Time for our nap.”

“I’m ready.” Travis was out like a light.

Shelby Fairgrounds.

Me and Tammy took a break from constantly watching the crowd and ate burgers from the food trucks down at the end of the midway. We sat at the picnic tables watching people go by and decided to stay longer hoping the kids would show up.

It was quitting time and Ted bought burgers and fries to take home to his father before he left. He gave us a wave. “See you guys tomorrow.”

Billy left shortly after Ted, and we told him we’d stay for another couple of hours. We hung around waiting for it to get dark.

“There’ll be a whole different crowd at night,” I told Tammy. “The kids might think they have a better shot of making a score after dark. We can go home whenever you get tired.”

“I’m okay, Harlan. I like it here at the carnival. It’s fun seeing all the happy people and it’s kind of like...not working.”

Tammy made me laugh. She was such a sweet and simple person. I loved her like a sister, and a little more than sister love too.

She wanted me to get myself a girlfriend and I’d gone on a couple of dates. Nothing stuck. Compared to Tammy, the girls seemed so...I don’t know. Silly?

After we ate, we strolled down the midway looking for kids who were sixteen, seventeen, hanging around in groups or in twos or threes.

I'd already decided the next time we came here on a stakeout we wouldn't wear our uniforms. We stuck out like cops and that was a point against us right from the get-go.

Farther down the midway where the crowd was thicker, I grabbed Tammy's arm and whispered to her, "Over there by the shooting gallery, I saw a kid filch a wallet. I'm gonna grab him."

"Show me which one."

"Red T-shirt and torn jeans. Blond hair."

"I see him."

We zoned in on the red shirt, and while we were about to grab him, I saw another kid grab a wallet out of a guy's back pocket. So slick, the guy didn't even notice.

Tammy and I grabbed both of them and they hollered and squirmed around like the thieving brats they were. "You guys shut up and suck it up. You're a couple of thieves and you got your asses caught. Both of you belong in jail."

"We ain't done nothing. You can't prove it, cop."

We hauled their teen asses to the squad which was parked way out in the middle of the parking field.

No way these kids were the ones we were after. These punks were only fourteen or fifteen at the most. Too young, but there was a chance they might know the other kids

or know where the bigger gang hung out.

## Page 73

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

If we got anything at all from them that led us to the others, it would be worth bringing them in.

Sheriff's Office. Coyote Creek.

Because we had taken prisoners, we had to stop in Coyote Creek at the station to lock them up. Tammy was tired and we still had the barn chores to do when we got back to the ranch.

We brought the kids in, and they swore at us a lot and called us kid curse names. "Your parents better not hear you talking like that," said Tammy. "Y'all are gonna get your asses tanned."

They laughed at Tammy, but they wouldn't be laughing when their parents showed up. I took their wallets and got their names. Kyle Smollett and Greg Gillespie.

As soon as we locked the two up in separate cells, we were full up. Six cells in our run and every one of them occupied. No more room at the inn.

"See everybody in the morning. Sleep tight."

They yelled and hollered as I slammed the door of the run and it automatically locked.

Tammy checked the lock at the front of the building, and we locked up the back on our way out.

“Let’s go home, Harlan. I’m dead beat.”

“Same.”

Wild Stallion Ranch.

Big surprise when we got home. Savanna was there playing cards with Billy and Travis, and she saved dinner for us.

Me and Tammy did late chores and put the horses in for the night. Then we ran into the house, sat down at the table, and ate plates of spaghetti that Savanna had made just for me. She knew how much I loved her spaghetti.

I was so happy to see her, and I hoped her and Travis were getting back together. They weren’t saying much but seeing her here at our ranch cooking us dinner was a damned good sign that she was thinking about coming back to us.

Chapter Fourteen

Saturday, August 3rd.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

“Not a workday, kids.” Travis seemed a bit better this morning as we sat at the breakfast table. “Y’all don’t have to spend the entire day at the carnival on surveillance. Y’all haven’t see any of the punks working there, so maybe they didn’t get hired like they thought they would.”

“Even if they didn’t get hired, Daddy,” said Tammy, as she cracked a dozen eggs into a bowl, “I think they’ll still come to check out the parking area. So many cars and trucks in one spot, how can they not?”



“I agree. Too big a temptation not to try for a couple of vehicles. I think they’ll come.”

“Yep,” said Billy. “I’m going again to sit at the picnic tables. I didn’t mind doing it yesterday and smelling all that junk food around me was like being in heaven. Smelling those candy apples and cotton candy, definitely worth it.”

“Yeah,” said Travis, “I think heaven might smell like fried onions.” He laughed. “Maybe I’ll go for a couple of hours and sit with Billy at a picnic table. I love those burgers with the fried onions. Nothing better.”

“What if you get tired like yesterday, Travis?” asked Savanna. “I have to work at the store and can’t come to get you. Saturday is my busiest day of the week.”

“Jeeze,” said Travis. “I don’t want to sit at home all day while my entire family is working surveillance at the carney.”

“One of us has to feed the prisoners,” said Tammy. “Ted is off, so Harlan can go ahead and get the prisoners’ breakfast over with on his way to Shelby. I’ll wait and clean up here until it’s time to get the fuckers their lunch, then I’ll do that, and I’ll bring Dad with me to the fairgrounds.”

“Good plan,” I said. “Travis will only be at the fair for the afternoon. It’ll work. I’ll get down to the station, make a couple pots of coffee, run over to the diner, and get the breakfast containers, hand them out and then go to Shelby.”

“No uniforms today,” said Tammy. “We want to blend in better than we did yesterday.”

“We still got us two punk pickpockets wearing our uniforms,” I said. “Filled the run right up.”

“Their parents been called?” asked Travis.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

“Will be when I get to the shop,” said Tammy.

“Tammy, you take the dogs with you. I don’t want you alone in the run feeding the prisoners. Make sure you take Max and Sarge in there with you when you hand out the food containers.”

“Sure. I can do that.”

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

Travis sat in the break room while I booked the two teen pick pockets, then I put them back into their cells and called their parents. Max and Sarge stayed with me the entire time like Daddy wanted them to.

Both phone calls I made resulted in parents screaming at me and they wanted to come running over to the office to get their little darlings out of jail.

“Your son will be arraigned on Monday morning, sir. If you want to bring a lawyer with you to the courthouse, that is your right. If the lawyer needs to speak to your boy before his court appearance, you can visit the office after eight on Monday morning.”

“I want to see my son now.”

“Sorry, sir. The office is closed on the weekend. Staff only will attend to the prisoners. You’re welcome to come on Monday morning, like I said.”

“I’m calling the mayor, young lady, and you’ll find out you can’t talk to me like

this.”

“Go ahead, sir. We don’t have a mayor in Harrison County. Only a county council. Call the County Supervisor if you wish to complain about the rules that he made, sir.”

I hung up and went to get Travis from the break room. “The parents are pissed and acting mean.”

“Too bad,” said Travis. “If they were better parents, their kids wouldn’t be in the can. What address did those kids have?”

“Both from Brownwood. A little past Shelby.”

“Where’s the county line to the east, Tam?”

“Let me look at the map in your office.” I ran and checked the big map on the wall in Daddy’s office and Brownwood was close to our eastern border.

I ran back to the break room. “Right at the east side near the line.”

“Huh. Don’t know if I’ve ever been over as far as the line.”

I locked up and helped Travis to the Bronco.

Shelby Fairgrounds.

Travis was slow getting to the picnic tables near the food trucks so he could sit with Billy. It was a long walk from the parking area and too far for a person in his condition.

“Anything happening?” I asked and Billy shook his head.

“Nothing yet. Crowd is getting bigger and bigger. Might be a productive afternoon.”

“Where’s Harlan?”

“He’s all over,” said Billy. “Last time he was back here for a Coke, he was watching the knife and gun vendors.”

“Okay. I’ll go look for him over there.” I ran through the midway and got to the section where the vendors had their tables set up. Down at the end I saw a couple of teens looking pretty closely at the guns.

They were talking to the seller and handling the guns. The guy was trying to make a sale and not caring that the kids were underage with no permit. All he cared about was the cash.

One of the boys looked kind of familiar to me, like I might have seen him once before. I walked around looking for Harlan and finally found him watching the midway games again—where we grabbed the pickpockets.

“There was a kid looking at the guns and he looked familiar to me.”

“Yeah? Can you think of where you might have seen him, Tam? Was it at the market? He could’ve been one of the punks who ran when you shot the other two.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

“Yeah, maybe. I only got one quick look at the two runners that day at the market and I’m not sure.”

“I saw a few boys about the right age and followed them, but they bought tickets and went on rides. Didn’t have any luck there.”

“We’ll get lucky today. I can feel it.”

Harlan gave me a grin. “Hope so. You’re my good luck charm, Tammy. You bring Dad?”

“I set him down with Billy at one of the picnic tables near the food trucks.”

“Good. The dogs with them?”

“Yep. But they’re here if we need them.”

“We might have to run back and grab them if we have to chase any of the little bastards down.”

“We won’t have to chase them, if they don’t show up.”

We passed a security guard in a blue uniform, and Harlan said to me, “Hang on a minute, Tammy.”

“What is it?”

“That guard is talking about a truck being stolen from the parking area. I’m going to talk to him. Come on.”

The guard was off to the side of the midway talking on his radio when Harlan showed him his badge. “We’re doing some coverage today for y’all here at the fairgrounds, and I heard you say something about a stolen vehicle?”

“Yeah. Nobody saw it happen, but the owner says his pickup is gone.”

Harlan pulled out his phone. “Make and model? I’ll put a BOLO out on it before they get too far. Anybody see who took it?”

“Nope. Just gone when the owner came to get it to go home. That’s all I know, Deputy.”

“Thanks.” Harlan turned to me. “Let’s go check out the parking area, Tam. There might be more than one of the little thieves creeping around.”

“That’s possible.”

We ran to the parking lot and thoroughly searched through the rows of parked vehicles and didn’t come up with another carjacking kid.

“We’ll have to wait until we hear back from the BOLO,” said Harlan. “Shit. I thought there would be more of them trying for another score.”

“Yeah, me too. I thought they worked in bunches and we’d have a real shot at them here at the carney.”

Almost time to give up and go home. Billy had already taken Travis back to the ranch a couple of hours earlier. Me and Tammy were sitting at one of the picnic tables

eating burgers and onion rings when she turned her head, caught a glimpse of somebody and flew into action mode. She jumped up and took off across the field chasing after a kid.

Surprised the hell out of me but thinking she had recognized one of the kids in the gang, I hopped up, ran like hell, and tried to catch up to her.

We were halfway across the field behind the fairgrounds property when the kid stopped dead, spun around, and fired a shot at her.

Tammy fired back and I saw the kid fall way up ahead of us. So fuckin good with her gun.

“We got him, Tam.” I panted out of breath, picked up speed and ran to where the kid had crashed and done a face plant in the weeds.

Danny Burridge lay on his side in the long grass turned August brown, a shiny gun in his hand—probably stolen.

I pointed my gun at his head. “Drop the gun, Danny.”

Tammy caught up and recognized the deadlock—two guys ready to kill each other—and without hesitating for a second, she fired a shot at the gun in Danny’s hand.

The bullet from her Smittie hit him in the arm and the gun flew into the air.



*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

Danny bled like a stuck pig and hollered at the top of his lungs. I rolled him over onto his belly and shoved my knee into his back with all the force I could muster. Cuffed him not too gently and shoved his thieving face into the dirt for good measure.

“You shot at my sister, you fucking son of a bitch. You’ll pay for that.”

I jerked him up out of the weeds and tossed him over my shoulder. He wailed from the pain of his two fresh bullet wounds, and I didn’t feel a bit sorry for him. Heading for the parking area, I found out it was a helluva long way to get to the Bronco.

“I’ll run ahead and get the squad,” said Tammy. She could see I was getting tired. The kid wasn’t a heavy-weight, but probably went about one-fifty. My bad shoulder hurt like a mother.

“Yeah, thanks.”

I kept going but I was a bit out of breath and ready to throw Burrige to the ground when Tammy bounced the squad across the field to meet me.

She stopped and opened the back door, and I tossed Burrige into the back seat. She locked him in while I leaned up against the Bronco to catch my breath.

My shot arm ached like hell on wheels from using it too much. I slumped into the passenger seat and smoked my way through the fucking pain while Tammy drove us to the hospital.

“You used your arm too much hauling that piece of scum,” said Tammy. “Where’s

your meds?”

“Home on my dresser.”

“Fuck. There’s Advil in my backpack. Take a couple, right now.”

“Thanks.”

A few miles out of Shelby, I felt better and was able to call Billy and tell him me and Tammy had Danny Burrige and we had to take him to the hospital. We wouldn’t be back for a couple more hours.

“Hospital? That mean you had to shoot him?”

“Tammy did. He was firing at her, Billy.”

“Copy that. Nice work.”

Cut Bank Hospital.

A nurse at the Emergency door took one look at the blood all over Danny Burrige and she rounded up an orderly and a gurney and took him from us right away.

Blood oozed out of the back of his right leg just above the knee and his right arm halfway between the wrist and elbow.

We sat in the closest waiting area until the doctor on duty in Emergency came to find us. “I’m Doctor Keene. Are you the people who brought the boy in with two bullet wounds?”

I held up my badge and Tammy did the same. “Harrison County Sheriff’s

Department, Doctor,” I said. “Danny Burrridge is a wanted fugitive.”

“Even so, he’s a minor. I need a signature on a consent form to take the bullet out of his leg. Does the boy have parents here in the hospital?”

“No, we haven’t called them yet,” said Tammy.

“The patient is a juvenile and I can’t operate on him without a signature.”

“I’ll call his mother,” said Tammy. “Could she give you the okay on the phone if she was on her way here to sign in person?”

The doctor nodded. “Yes. I’d like to get started as soon as possible. The boy is losing a lot of blood. We’re trying to stop up the bleeding, but we can’t wait too long.”

Tammy called the number she had for Sheila Burrridge and broke the news to her.

“Mrs. Burrridge, this is Deputy Tammy Bristol. I came to your house a couple of days ago about Danny. Do you remember?”

“Yes. I remember. I haven’t seen Danny or any of his friends.”

“We found Danny, ma’am. I have him here with me and we’re at the Cut Bank Hospital.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

“Is Danny hurt?”

“Yes, he is, ma’am. I need you to speak to Doctor Keene and he’ll explain what he needs from you. Here he is.” Tammy handed her phone to the doctor, and he took over the conversation.

“Mrs. Burrridge, your son is suffering from two bullet wounds, and I need your permission to remove the bullet from Danny’s leg. It’s imperative that I begin immediately before he loses any more blood. Do you understand?”

The doctor got what he needed and handed the phone back to Tammy. “The patient won’t be awake until sometime tomorrow.”

We left when Danny was taken into the operating room with the understanding that the kid was under arrest and had to be chained to his bedrail when he came out of surgery and was transferred to intensive care.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

On the drive home to the ranch, I told Tammy we were making progress. “The surveillance at the fairgrounds paid off. We caught Danny Burrridge, and he might lead us to the rest of the gang.”

“Do you think he’ll deal?”

“Yeah, I do. He’s a punk kid and he’s been shooting at cops and got himself shot in return. He’s in way over his head.”

“Maybe he doesn’t think he’s so tough now.”

“He has to be scared and in a lot of pain. He might even wish he was home with his mommy.”

“His daddy tossed him out of the house. That’s one parent that won’t be happy his son is in this mess.”

“Right. This might fall all on his mother, and that’s hardly fair either.”

We grabbed a beer when we got to the house, sat down at the kitchen table, and told Travis and Billy about catching Danny Burrige.

“Nice work, kids,” said Travis. “Y’all don’t need the old man helping y’all.”

“As soon as Burrige can leave the hospital,” said Billy, “we’ll take him to the station, book him and lock him up.”

“We’re hoping he’ll be scared enough to give up the others in the gang,” said Tammy.

Billy shrugged. “Might happen, Tam. Hope it does. Be a gift for us if it worked out that way.”

We still had chores to do, and I wasn’t much help to Tammy, and she was so fuckin tired, I could see it in her eyes.

She reached for a shovel, and I pulled her close to me with my one good arm and kissed her. “I’ll do all the chores for a week as soon as my arm is healed. I owe you, Tam.”

“I’m okay. We’re just doing our jobs. It’ll work out when Travis is okay again.”

I kissed her again and pulled away from her. “I’d better do something useful. I like kissing you way too much.”

She giggled. “Yeah, me too.”

## Chapter Fifteen

Sunday, August 4th.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

Tammy always made pancakes on Sunday. My favorite day for breakfast and today was extra special because Savanna slept over with Dad and she was there with us. Our family seemed complete—except for Virgil—and I had no clue where that little fucker had got to with Travis’s bike.

“I’d love to take Windrider out for an hour this morning,” I said, “before it gets too hot. Think we have time for a ride before we go to Shelby?”

“I’ll go down and feed the prisoners,” said Billy. “One less thing for y’all to do.”

“We have to go to the hospital today too,” said Tammy. “Danny Burridge will be waking up and I want to be sure he’s chained to his bed. The minute that little fart opens his baby-blues, I’m gonna be all over him about the other kids. I’ll thump it out of him if I have to.”

## Page 78

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

Travis grinned. “Attagirl. I’ll go with you and show him my tough face. That might help.”

Tammy laughed. “That will help tons, Daddy. You could scare the spots off an Appaloosa.”

Savanna said, “That’s no lie. I get shaky when he gives me the biker face.”

After breakfast, Tammy and I hit the barn and saddled our horses. My ride, Windrider was a gorgeous Appaloosa from Coulter-Ross Stables and Bonnie Grace came from there too. The blue roan mare that Tammy rode for barrel racing.

Because of my arm, I couldn’t lift my saddle and Tammy helped me get it into place so I could finish the job. Even the straps were a pain in the ass, but I managed.

When we were ready, we took off at a gallop from behind the windbreak of evergreens that sheltered the house and barn from the rages of frequent winter storms common to northern Montana.

Across the back of our huge acreage was a path the wild mustangs used to run from ranch to ranch and back again to their own protected preserve to the west of us.

Where there were no fences to stop them, the wild horses ran free and wild and were heart-stopping to see in motion.

I was disappointed we didn’t see any on our ride today, but every time I rode to the back of the ranch, I hoped to see them.

Back at the barn, we cooled the horses out and made sure they had lots of water after all that galloping. Horses drank a lot of water. Electrolytes were good for them too. Helped restore their energy. Tammy taught me that. She knew a lot about horses from living with her step-mama on the horse ranch in Texas.

Sheriff's Office. Coyote Creek.

Billy finished breakfast and drove down to the station to feed the prisoners so the kids could go for a ride. Tammy and Harlan had been working too hard since he and Travis had been injured. They both agreed on that.

First thing he did was make two pots of coffee before walking across the street to the diner to get the breakfast containers for the prisoners.

The kids had been working overtime and the run was filled to busting with criminals waiting for trials and arraignments.

On his return, Billy walked around to the back of the building to come in that way. He set the bags down and unlocked the door.

A car drove into the parking lot, stopped next to his truck and a man hopped out, hollering at him. "Hey, you. I want in there to see my son."

"We don't have facilities for visitors, sir. You'll have to wait until your son is taken to court. You can see him then."

"I ain't waiting until he goes to court. Get it? I want to see Kyle now. You hear me? Now."

Kyle Smollett's father.



Smollett pushed Billy out of the way and barged into the building ahead of him.

“I’m asking you to leave, sir. You can’t see your son until tomorrow when he’s taken to court for his arraignment. Your attorney can see him tomorrow morning at eight o’clock when the office opens.”

“You don’t get it, do you?” Smollett pulled out a Glock and pointed it at Billy. “I’m going to see Kyle now. You get the keys or whatever you need and get my boy out here so I can see him.”

“No. I’m not doing that.”

“No?” Smollett laughed and cracked Billy across the side of the head with the butt of the Glock.

Billy staggered backwards and hit the wall, blood trickling down from the gash on his temple.

Waving the gun in Billy’s face, Smollett said, “Get the keys or I’m going to kill you and get the keys myself. Do you understand?”

“I do,” Billy whispered.

With his hand on his head, Billy stumbled to the office and took the keys to the run from the rack. While he walked back down the hall at gunpoint, he made a quick plan and hoped to hell it was going to work.

Billy unlocked the run and let Smollett charge in ahead of him, then let the door click shut behind them. It automatically locked.

“Dad, what are you doing here?” shouted Kyle Smollett. He ran from his bunk and

grabbed the bars of this cell. “Dad, are you getting me out of here?”

## Page 79

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

Smollett's lip curled in a snarl as he hissed at his son, "Didn't I tell you not to get caught?"

Smollett is part of the pickpocket ring.

"Couldn't help it, Dad. Never saw the cops. They weren't wearing uniforms. Not my fault."

The kid is lying to his father.

While the father focused on his kid, Billy pulled the taser out of his pocket he'd grabbed in the office and jolted Smollett in the side of his neck.

Smollett hit the deck and while he was out, Billy did some quick cell shifting. He doubled up the drug pushers and rolled Kyle's father into the empty cell.

Billy let out a breath when the cell door slammed shut and the lock clicked. He leaned on the wall and called Harlan.

"What's up, Billy?"

"Trouble at the station, son. Need you right away."

"Coming now."

I took Billy's call and rounded up Tammy real quick. When Travis heard Billy had a problem, he insisted on coming with us.

With the siren screaming, we got to the station inside of nine minutes. A new record. I ran in ahead while Tammy helped Travis out of the squad.

Billy was slumped down in his office chair bleeding from under his mop of dark hair. Blood had run down the side of his face and his neck and made a mess of him.

“Okay, Billy. Let’s get you to the hospital. Did you fall? What happened?”

“Guy in the run came to break out his kid.”

“No fuckin way,” said Travis.

One look at Billy and Tammy couldn’t hold back the tears.

I said, “Take Billy to the hospital, Tammy. I’ll deal with whoever Billy locked up in the run and catch up with you and Dad.”

“Okay,” said Tammy. “Help me get Billy to the squad.”

We got Billy outside and he flopped down in the back seat of the Bronco. Travis got into the passenger seat and Tammy took the wheel and headed for the hospital in Cut Bank.

Billy’s truck was parked outside the door. I could drive it to the hospital after I checked out the guy Billy locked up.

I went back inside and unlocked the run to see the surprise guest. There he was in the cell at the end. A bald-headed dude who had hold of the bars and was shouting and cursing at me.

I needed his ID to start the booking process. Figured I’d start with attempted murder

of a police officer and work my way down from that. Planning a jail break was one of the charges I'd have to look up. Only Billy knew the rest of the shit this mutt had done.

In a swift move I pulled the taser off my belt and jolted the asshole through the bars. When he dropped to the concrete, I unlocked the cell, checked his pockets, and pulled his wallet and his car keys.

Billy had already relieved him of his gun. I saw the Glock sitting on Billy's desk in the office.

"There you go, Mister. You'll be awake in time for lunch."

"What did you do to my dad, pig?" hollered one of the pickpockets.

"Same thing I'm gonna do to you, you thieving little fucker. So shut up or I'll taser you right between your beady little eyes and make you squirm on the floor like your daddy did."

No way I could take Smollett out of his cell to print him until I had help. I'd do it tomorrow when Ted was there to give me a hand.

Cut Bank Hospital.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

I drove Billy to the hospital while Harlan took care of the trouble Billy had at the station. I sat Billy in the waiting area outside Emergency and walked up to the nurses' station to get him moved to the top of the list. His head was bleeding and didn't want to stop.

"Can I help you?" The triage nurse smiled at me.

"I have an injured sheriff sitting right over there. A head injury. He's bleeding bad, and I need a doctor to look at him right away."

"Take the sheriff to treatment room four down the corridor and I'll send a nurse." She handed me a clipboard with a form to fill out and I gave her the Harrison County Medical card.

"Thank you."

I went back, got Billy, and walked him down the hall to room four. I could tell by the way he was walking that he was dizzy on his feet.

He stopped for a minute and leaned on the wall. "Hold up a second, Tammy. I might puke."

"Let's get you into room four and you can puke in there. Travis puked when he had a concussion."

"You think I've got one?" Billy glanced up at me and his eyes looked weird. Concussion for sure.

“That guy hit you with the butt of his gun. You might need an x-ray to see the damage to your head.”

“I don’t want an x-ray.”

“Don’t be stubborn, Billy. Won’t hurt and only takes a minute.”

A nurse came in, cleaned all the blood off Billy’s head and neck, but it was still in his hair and would stay there until he got home and had a shower.

An orderly came in next with a wheelchair and whipped him off to the x-ray department.

While Billy was in x-ray, I found out where Danny Burrige was and took the elevator up to the ICU floor.

Lying in his bed, Danny was half asleep, with his left wrist chained to his bedrail. That was the most important thing to me. He had been hard to catch, and I didn’t want him running away on us again.

His mother sat in the chair next to his bed with a wad of tissues in her hand. Crying over Danny and I felt sorry for her having to deal all by herself with the trouble her son was in. Mister Burrige had run off and he wouldn’t be there to support either one of them.

She didn’t notice me in the unit and didn’t need to. I saw what I needed to see, turned around and left. I took the elevator back to the main floor and went back to see if Billy was fixed up.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

Billy had a mild concussion. The doctor gave him pills for the headache that was coming and might last for several days. The gash on Billy's head didn't need stitches. Just antiseptic cream and a bandage. He was happy about that.

Savanna was at the ranch when I drove Billy home, and she could watch over Travis and Billy both.

"I'm waiting for Harlan to finish up at the shop and drive Billy's truck home to the ranch."

"So sorry you got hurt, Billy," said Savanna. "Lie down on the sofa and take it easy."

"I'll sit in there too," said Travis. "Will you make fresh coffee, babe?"

Savanna smiled. "I'm all over that, boss."

When Harlan got back to the ranch, He told us about Mister Smollett and asked Billy about the charges we needed to lay on the guy.

"I'll write the list down for you, son," said Billy. "You can book him in the morning."

"Yeah, I'll need Ted to help me control him. The guy is a fuckin nutter."

"Wish I could tune him up," said Travis, and Billy laughed.

Harlan and I ate sandwiches, drank coffee, then headed to the fairgrounds in Shelby with Max and Sarge.



*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

Shelby Fairgrounds.

I parked the squad and me and Tammy took the dogs back to the spot where Danny Burridge went to ground when Tammy shot him.

Our aim was to find out where Burridge was running to. The dogs picked up his scent without any trouble and ran for a ways. When we reached the county road that passed by the fairgrounds, the dogs stopped and sat down.

“He got out of a vehicle here,” I said. “One of his buddies dumped him off. This is a dead end.”

“We need to find the somebody who dropped him off,” said Tammy. “Why would Danny be alone at the carney? What was he trying to do?”

Harlan shrugged. “Don’t know why he was there unless he was meeting other kids in the gang. They could have been planning something until you spotted Burridge and made him run.”

“Yeah, maybe. I want to check out Brownwood and see what that’s all about.”

“For sure we can do that, Tam. Home of the pickpockets. Maybe it’s home to more lawbreakers. Let’s go see what we can turn up.”

“Brownwood is a lead we need to follow up on.”

Brownwood. Montana.

Brownwood was a tiny town on our side of the county line. Highway Two cut through the center of town and formed Main Street on its way by. Three or four stores on each side of the highway and a gas station a little farther along.

Branching off Main Street were about six side streets lined with houses. Tammy cruised slowly along each one of the streets and we both watched for anything familiar. Didn't pick up on anything. Quiet streets with nothing going on.

We turned the last corner heading back to the highway when I saw the sign for Brownwood Mobile Home Park. I pointed and Tammy said, "I see it. Let's check out the trailers while we're here."

About a quarter mile out of Brownwood going north, we came to the park property. Tam drove through the gate into the park and I realized right away that more people lived in this trailer park than in the entire town. There were dozens of trailers. Row after row close together. Only a few feet between them.

A couple of vehicles parked at each trailer, dogs running around barking, kids playing in the streets. A community all on its own.

Driving slowly through the narrow dirt roads, Tammy scanned each trailer on her side of the squad, while I did the same on my side.

"Virgil," I hollered and made Tammy jump.

"Where? Did you see him? Where is he?"

"Don't know but I see Dad's Harley."

Tammy turned her head and looked across the console so she could see past me. "I see the bike. You're right, Harlan. Virge must be in that trailer. Let's go get him."

Tammy parked in front of the trailer and we both hopped out. “Front or back?”

“Let me take the front,” said Tammy. “If anybody but Virgil comes to the door, they won’t know me. You come in from the back and we’ll lock all of them down. We’ll scoop the drugs and take them all to the lockup. They won’t have a clue we only want Virgil.”

“Okay. Like a sweep. Got it.”

Tammy headed for the front door of the single-wide and I ran around to the back and waited. I couldn’t hear what Tammy was doing or saying at the front door, but I figured she would give me a signal.

I knocked on the front door of the trailer and at first nobody answered. Then a guy I’d never seen before opened the door and stared at me.

I gave him a big smile, tossed my hair, and said, “Hey, I heard you guys were having a party. Can I come in?” Me and Harlan weren’t wearing our uniforms today, so that was lucky.

The guy blocking the door looked about the same age as me and Harlan. Eighteen, nineteen. He smiled and said, “Sure, babe. Come in and party with us.”

I followed him into the trailer and slammed the door hard behind me—loud enough for Harlan to hear it at the back.

There were a couple of ratty sofas in the main room and a table in the middle cluttered with pizza boxes, beer cans and drugs. Baggies, pill bottles and more.

Dirty floors and the air was polluted with weed and the smell of garbage and man-sweat.

## Page 82

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

On the far side of the room, Virgil was asleep on one of the sofas. Probably drunk. He didn't wake up when I came in.

I heard the back door open, and Harlan pounded down the hallway past the bedrooms. I pulled my gun and got ready to get the party started.

“Down on your knees. Hands on your head,” hollered Harlan.

The guy who let me in looked a little surprised, but he assumed the position and let Harlan cuff him. Maybe he'd had practice. Looked like it.

Harlan found one other guy sleeping in a bedroom. He roused him and shoved him into the living room. The kid stared at us through glassy eyes but was so high he didn't realize what was going on.

We secured the first two in the squad, then did a search and seizure inside the trailer. A lot of drugs when we checked the bedrooms—drawers and closet shelves. More in the kitchen cupboards.

I checked under the kitchen sink and behind the toilet tank. Favorite spots. We bagged all of the drugs and a couple of knives. No guns on these guys.

When all that was done, marked for evidence, and stashed in the hatch of the squad, it was time to get Virgil.

Harlan had a hard time waking his brother up. He pulled him up and made him stand on his one good leg while he cuffed Virgil's hands behind his back.

Virgil moaned and flopped back on the sofa, and he wouldn't get up again. "Go away, Harlan. Piss off and leave me the fuck alone."

Harlan grabbed Virgil's arm and dragged him across the dirty floor of the trailer, out the door and he never slowed down at the wooden steps. Bounced Virgil down those steps letting his head hit a couple on the way down.

I locked the trailer door and sealed it with yellow tape, then slid behind the wheel of the squad.

Harlan rolled Travis's bike out from under the sagging carport and straddled it when he got to the road. He hollered to me before he started the engine. "I'll meet you at the station. We'll have to move people, Tam."

"Yep. We can do that."

"I need gas. Have to stop."

I worried about him riding with only one good arm, but I gave him thumbs up and got going myself. Max and Sarge were yipping in the hatch and complaining about riding back there.

They knew Virgil was family and they wanted to be closer to him. The dogs weren't always the best judges of character.

Lucky for me, Virgil was too drunk to talk and say mean stuff to me. He slept all the way back to Coyote Creek.

Sheriff's Office. Coyote Creek.

I got to the office first and didn't try to get any of the prisoners out of the squad by

myself. Max and Sarge would've helped me, but it was better to wait for Harlan.

I lit up a smoke and gave it to Virgil and then lit another one for myself. We sat in the squad waiting for the Harley rumble to catch up with us.

Virge and I were smoking our second cigarette when Harlan rolled in and parked Travis's bike next to the squad. He set the stand, hopped off and opened my door. "You getting out?"

"Better to wait for you. You go do the shuffle, then we'll bring these guys in. When that's done I'll go get them some food before we go home."

"Copy that."

Harlan unlocked the back door of the station and propped it open. We'd be making several trips in and out.

Tammy was right not to go into the run by herself and open up any of the cells with this many prisoners on hand. She could've gotten herself into some serious trouble. The last thing I wanted was for my sister to get hurt. Too many people in my family on the DL already.

Two more druggies coming in and they could share a cell, but I'd have to find them an empty one first. Easiest way to do that was to move Kyle's father in with him and his buddy, but I had no intention of making things easy for Mister Smollett. He was a supreme prick and a would-be cop killer.

Instead, I locked him up with the drug slingers from Conrad East—Simon and Jeff. They might enjoy Mister Smollett's company—or not.

I hope they beat the piss out of him.

With the taser in my hand, I motioned for Smollett to go into the slingers' cell and slammed the door. He was hesitant at first but eyed the taser and moved to the other cell without incident.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

“Filling up. More room tomorrow when a bunch of you asswipes get arraigned.”

Once Smollett was out of my reach, he hollered out curses at me. I ignored him and headed to the back door.

Tammy and I brought in Virgil’s two buddies from the Brownwood trailer park. The older of the two was Ken Burt. The other one, Al Gooding.

We’d get all the booking done on Monday morning and give Molly enough reports to keep her busy until Friday at quitting time.

“Moving done, Tammy.”

“I’ll run across and get the food. Be right back.”

Best idea yet. We’d feed the prisoners while we were here so we wouldn’t have to come back again today.

Ten minutes later she was back with three bags of containers, and I helped her dole the food out along with Cokes from our machine. And we were done.

Locked up the run and locked the front and back doors and that was it.

Tammy drove Virgil home in the squad, and I rode the bike. Couldn’t wait to see Travis’s face when he saw his bike coming home to him.

Wild Stallion Ranch.



Travis didn't disappoint me. He was really surprised to see me come riding in the laneway on his Harley. Him and Billy were sitting on the front porch tossing a few back.

Travis got to his feet wearing a big smile. "Hey, son, you got my baby back."

I set the stand and Travis limped down the porch steps to have a closer look. He rubbed his hand over the airbrushed pictures of Max and Sarge and grinned. "Glad to have her back, boy. You find Virgil?"

"Tammy's got him in the squad. He's drunk but he's all yours. He stole from you, so you do what you want with him."

"Yeah, I might have to talk to him alone in the garage for a few minutes."

"I'm gonna get a beer. The jail is so fuckin full, they'll be using each other for mattresses."

"Can't wait to see it," said Travis. "I should be good to work for a few hours tomorrow."

"No need to rush, Dad. I have high hopes of Danny Burrige rolling as soon as he gets his senses back."

"Yeah, I hope he gives up the whole gang," said Travis, "but you shouldn't base your police work on hope."

"No? What should I base it on?"

"Yourself. You make it happen, son. That always worked for me."

Tammy pulled in and I walked over to the squad and Jerked my brother out of the passenger seat. His leg wasn't healed, and he wasn't walking worth a shit.

I got him into the house and Travis followed us and Billy was right behind Travis. Nobody wanted to miss what was coming next.

“Virgil, I'll speak to you in the garage.”

Virgil nodded.

## Chapter Sixteen

Monday, August 5th.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

I woke up at the first hint of dawn and my brother wasn't in the bed on the other side of my room. “Aw, Jeeze, you better not be gone again, bro.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

I pulled on my torn jeans and yesterday's shirt and headed downstairs to see where the hell Virgil was. He put me on my last nerve.

There was nobody else up and Virge wasn't in the house. I headed for the barn to start the chores and do what I could before Tammy got up. She'd been carrying the whole fuckin load since I'd been shot, and she was getting worn down. She never complained but I saw it in her eyes.

The double doors to the barn were standing open and the three horses were running around in the corral, feisty and full of energy, like they always did when they first got out of the barn.

I hadn't heard Tammy get up and I figured she was still sleeping. That's where I wanted her to be—in bed getting some rest.

When I walked in, it wasn't Tammy in the barn at all, but Virgil mucking out the stalls and loading the wheelbarrow. "Hey, bro. I thought you'd run off again to hang with your friends."

"Nope. I'll be here from now on."

That surprised me. "You and Travis have a little talk?"

"Something like that."

I pitched in and did what I could one-handed to help my brother. Measured out the oats and toted a couple of slabs of hayout to the corral and put them in the manger.

Filled the water trough with the hose.

When I'd done about all I could do, I lit up a smoke and waited for Virge to finish. I had no idea what was going on with Virgil and Travis, but it was something heavy. Yep. Heavy duty.

At breakfast Virgil was quiet. Sat at the table and drank coffee and made no move to run. Not antsy to get going like he'd been before. He was staying put—no question about that.

Huh.

Tammy came rushing into the kitchen with her hair damp and said, "I can't believe I slept through chores. Never done that before."

"You're exhausted, girl," said Travis. "Time for somebody else to take a turn."

While we ate, Tammy glanced at Virgil more than once and I was sure she wondered what Travis had said to him. With Virge being so closed off like he was, we might never find out.

Savanna began clearing the table. "Sorry I can't help with the dishes. I've got to get to the store and open up."

"I'll take care of the cleanup," said Travis. "Me and Virge will be here all day. The kids and Billy have enough work at the station. They've got an overcrowding situation." Travis laughed.

"Yeah, we do temporarily, but we might get more room when we shuffle some of the mutts to the courthouse. Hope we don't get all of them back."

“I hope that’s the way it works out,” said Tammy. “But when it comes to Mister Smollett, I hope his bail is set so fucking high he can’t raise the ten percent he needs. That maniac shouldn’t be wandering around loose.”

“Smollett is a prick,” mumbled Billy. He winced and rubbed the side of his head.

“Sure must be,” said Travis. “Harlan told me you heard Smollett say to his son that he told him not to get caught at the carnival.”

“Yeah,” said Billy. “A weird thing for him to say unless he’s running the pickpocket gang, then it makes perfect sense.”

“Yeah, it does,” said Travis.

“Smollett needs to be braced hard,” said Billy.

“His arraignment won’t show up on the docket for a couple of days,” said Travis. “I’ll take care of Smollett myself.”

Virgil raised his eyes from his coffee mug, and I saw it then. My brother wouldn’t be causing Travis or our family anymore trouble. He was like a prospect who had joined a bike gang. From now on, Virgil would be following the rules.

Billy nodded his head at Travis’s suggestion. Travis would be much more intimidating than Billy could ever be.

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

“The busiest Monday morning we’ve ever had,” I said to Tammy. “I have to ask Molly who we need to transport first to the courthouse.”

“Earlier this morning,” said Tammy, “Molly had to make two trips to the diner for the breakfast containers because she didn’t know about the new prisoners we’d brought in on the weekend.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

I laughed. “That would’ve been a shocker for her. First thing we’ll do is get everybody to the courthouse who has an arraignment today, then we’ll come back and book all the new people who haven’t been charged.”

Tammy laughed. “After all that, we’ll give Molly the reports from over the weekend, and all of that evidence we have to enter.”

“Should be time for lunch by then, and we can run over and eat at the diner.”

“I’m for that. I’m looking forward to lunch already and it’s not even nine o’clock.”

I walked into the squad room and stood at Molly’s desk while she read me the names of the prisoners who had arraignments and the times they needed to show their faces in front of the judge.

I got the keys to the run and got my ass in gear.

Harrison County Courthouse. Coyote Creek.

I helped Tammy get the pickpockets into the back of her squad and she took them over to the courthouse. Ted helped me get Simon Platte and Jeff Ecclestone, the drug slingers, into the Bronco and we followed Tammy across town.

Inside the courtroom, Mrs. Smollett was present for her son Kyle, along with both parents for Greg Gillespie. The juveniles were in a different courtroom than the one our drug dealers were in.

The parents of the pickpockets seemed to be in shock over the trouble their kids were in, and it made me wonder if Mrs. Smollett was in the dark too, or if she knew what her husband was up to. If she knew, she could be charged as an accessory.

I talked to Tammy about it, and she said she'd wait in the juvie courtroom and talk to Mrs. Smollett while Ted and I went to see if our drug pushers made bail.

Sheriff's Office.

With Ted there to help me get Smollett out of his cell and into the booking area, I printed him, took a mug shot and charged him with everything on the slip of paper Billy had written out for me.

Billy had a concussion and was missing more work because of Smollett, the prick, and I wasn't feeling friendly towards him.

Attempted murder of a police officer. Felony assault. Attempting to remove a prisoner from custody. Billy's list was long and detailed. He wasn't fond of Smollett either.

"I want my phone call," Smollett snarled.

"You can have your call now that you're booked," said Ted. "You can use the one in the squad room. I'll show you."

Smollett nodded and Ted led him down the hall.

"You can sit there and use that phone." Ted pointed.

I followed along and gave a hand signal to Max and Sarge to watch Smollett and not let him move from the desk where he sat.



The dogs positioned themselves and focused on Smollett with low growls coming from their throats.

“Get those fuckin dogs away from me.” Smollett swung the receiver at Max, and Max reacted like he was trained to do. He jumped up and grabbed Smollett’s arm, took him down to the floor, and stood with his jaws clamped around Smollett’s throat.

I ran into the squad room with my gun drawn and gave Max a signal to release Smollett. I pointed at the empty desk as Smollett scrambled to his feet.

“Sit down there and make your call. You antagonize the dogs, they react. They’re doing their jobs.”

Smollett rubbed his wrist. “I’ll sue the whole lot of you fake cops.”

“Before you do that I’ll introduce you to a real cop. He’s coming to talk to you later.”

Smollett laughed. “You can’t threaten me.”

“I don’t have to. Make the call.”

Mainliner Diner.

The diner across the road from the station was a favorite place for me and Harlan. We always did good thinking about our cases there and had great talks. The food was good too and the service was fast. Maryanne, the only waitress, was always friendly.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

We ordered our usual lunch, and I leaned in closer to Harlan. “I talked to Mrs. Smollett at the courthouse. Kind of interviewed her real friendly-like about the pickpocket gang.”

“Yeah?” Harlan’s big brown eyes lit up in anticipation of what I was going to tell him.

“I asked her if she knew her husband was running a gang of pickpockets.”

“And?”

“She swore she had no idea, but I had the feeling she was ready for my question. She was lying, Harlan. Easy to spot domestic abuse in her little world—she’s the poster girl—terrified of her husband. She won’t say anything against him until he’s locked up and can’t hurt her—that’s the way I see it.”

“What should we do?”

Maryanne brought our drinks, and I sipped my Coke until she went to the next table.

“Best if we let Dad handle Smollett and see where that takes us.”

Harlan grinned at the thought of Travis and Smollett having a little talk. “Can’t wait for the results of that meeting.”

“Me neither. That prick Smollett has no clue.”

When Maryanne brought our lunch, I ordered the food packages we needed for the prisoners we still had staying with us at the Jailhouse Inn.

“You kids trying to break Travis’s record for the most prisoners locked up at once?”

Harlan chuckled. “Yeah, something like that.”

“How’s the sheriff doing?” she asked. “He going to be back on the job soon?”

“He’s up and around now,” said Harlan. “Won’t be long. He can’t sit on his ass too long.”

Cut Bank Hospital.

Our next stop was the hospital to see if Danny Burrige would help us round up the rest of the car thief gang. We took the elevator to the ICU floor and waited at the nurses’ station until Danny’s doctor came to talk to us.

“Doctor Keene, we only need a few minutes to talk to Danny, then we’ll let him rest.”

“Ten minutes maximum, Deputies, then I’ll have the head nurse toss you out.” He smiled at us.

“Thanks.”

Tammy sat in the chair next to Danny’s bed and I stood beside her and recorded the interview. I hoped he’d give us something—anything we could use to find his thieving buddies—who now had guns.

Danny was awake but a little groggy from the drugs keeping his pain to a minimum.

Tammy started. “Danny, we’d like you to tell us where Stuart Dickinson and the rest of your gang is. There’s been enough violence and it has to stop.”

“Don’t know where Stu is,” he mumbled. “Stuie ran off with a girl.”

“Do you know her name?”

“Susie...something.”

I was happy he was talking to Tammy, but she figured it was all lies and called him on it.

“No more lies, Danny. You’re going away for a long time and the only way you’re going to get a lighter sentence is to help us bring in the rest of your gang.”

He groaned and turned his head.

I jumped in and said, “You’re going down for life for trying to kill a cop. You’d better do what’s best for Danny Burridge and give up the punks you’re running with.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

He cranked his head around and snapped at me. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” He held up his hand and gave Tammy and me his middle finger. “I ain’t no snitch, so forget it.”

Tammy got to her feet and smiled down at Danny. “Montana State Prison ain’t a baby nursery like Juvie, Danny. You think hard on that. Day you get there a big ole biker is gonna give it to you up the army hole and make you his bitch. Hope you enjoy your new girlfriend.”

We left the ICU and I had to smile at my sister. She definitely gave Danny Burrridge something to think about.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

On the drive home to the ranch Tammy asked me, “Do you think Travis could get it out of Virgil – where the gang is? If he helped round up the gang, Travis might go easier on him.”

“Don’t know, Tam. There’s something going on there. After they had their talk in the garage, Virge hasn’t said a fuckin word about it.”

“Maybe you could ease him into it,” said Tammy. “Like...point out that Travis would be happy if he helped us out.”

“Think that would work?”

Tammy shrugged. “I don’t know what will work, but Danny Burrridge didn’t help us

like I thought he might.”

“When we do chores and we’re alone in the barn, I’ll talk to Virgil.”

“Try that.” Tammy reached over and held my hand. We were trying not to touch each other too much.

When we got home to the ranch, Tammy started dinner and I looked around for Virgil and he wasn’t in the house. Maybe he’d taken to living in the barn after his talk to Travis.

I ran out the back door and headed for the barn. Doors were propped open. “Hey, you started chores without me.”

“Might as well get ‘er done,” mumbled Virge.

“What did Travis say to you in the garage, bro?”

“None of your fuckin business.”

“You want to keep it private, I’m okay with that. I respect your privacy.”

“Huh.” Virgil gave me a look I couldn’t read.

“Tammy and I talked to Burrige at the hospital today and he won’t give up the gang. I guess you wouldn’t want to help me with that.”

Virgil grabbed hold of a pitchfork and viciously stabbed the tines into a bale of straw. “Last I heard, they were holed up in Kelvin. That’s all I know.”

“Okay, that’s something. Appreciate it.” I held my fist out to give my brother a fist

bump and he shook his head.

Nope. We weren't on those terms yet, so I started measuring the oats. "One other thing, Virge. I want you to know I'm happy you're back home. I want you with me... like for good. You're my brother."

Virgil took a forkful of straw and spread it around in Outlaw's stall and wouldn't look at me.

After dinner Travis went into his room and put his jacket on, then he motioned to Virgil and the two of them went out the front door.

"Where are they going?" I asked Billy.

"Travis is going to talk to Smollett. Virgil is driving him."

"I could drive him, Billy. Virgil has an unhealed leg, for chrissakes."

"Don't interfere, Harlan. Travis is handling Virgil. There's already an improvement."

"You mean like he's doing chores because he's scared shitless not to?" I didn't mean to sound angry at Travis, but I might have...a bit. Travis was right and my brother was wrong. Why was I siding with my brother?

Blood is always thicker.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

Sheriff's Office. Coyote Creek.

"Park anywhere, Virge. This won't take long."

"Should I come in with you?"

"Sure. We'll find out about the pickpockets for the kids, and then go get a beer. I haven't been to the roadhouse for too fuckin long. I was never cut out to be a sheriff. You know that, right?"

"You've got a rep, Dale. Ain't nothing to do with the law. Kind of the opposite."

"Yeah, you're right about that, Virge. A rep I'll probably never shake."

Travis was walking better, but every step he took he felt the pull of the half-healed stitches in his side. He unlocked the back door, got the keys to the run from the office and went into the sally port without turning on the overhead lights.

He went to Smollett's cell, unlocked it, and jerked Smollett off the bunk and onto the concrete floor. "Watch the door, Virge."

"I've got it."

"Get off me," hollered Smollett. "You can't touch me. I've got rights. What the hell do you want?"

"I want you to write out a confession tomorrow and sign it, telling all the details



about the pickpocket ring you're running. Names and addresses of all the kids."

"No way in hell I'm doing that." Smollett spit at Travis and that was a mistake.

Travis took hold of Smollett's head—one hand on each ear—and bashed it three times into the concrete. "Think it over, asshole."

Smollett moaned and Travis left him lying in the cell. "You don't get 'er done tomorrow, I'll be back tomorrow night."

Virgil slammed the cell shut and listened for the click of the lock.

"Let's go drink a pitcher, Virge."

Virgil grinned. "Copy that, boss."

## Chapter Seventeen

Tuesday, August 6th.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

I was first up, pulled on clothes and headed for the barn. Virge was already there working his ass off. After his talk to Travis, he was a different kid, and me and Harlan were wondering what Daddy said to him. But if Virge didn't feel like telling us, we'd never find out.

"You've got a good handle on the barn chores, Virge."

"Ain't much to it, is there? Any asshole could do it."

That's all he said to me during the time we spent together. We went into the house, cleaned up for breakfast and when we sat down to eat, Virge ate a ton of food.

Travis said, "I'm going to the courthouse for Smollett's arraignment this morning."

"We can cover that, Dad," said Harlan.

"No. I want to be there. Virge can drive me."

Harlan glanced over at me, and I shrugged. I had no clue what was going on with Travis and Virgil, but it was something. No doubt about it.

Sheriff's Office. Coyote Creek.

I unlocked the back door of the station to let me and Tammy in. Ted was already in the squad room talking to Molly, and the prisoners were finished breakfast.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:51 pm*

“Morning, Molly. Is Smollett the only one going to court this morning?”

She smiled. “He’s the only one today, Harlan.”

“I’ll get him into the squad.”

“He wasn’t saying much when I distributed the breakfast containers,” said Molly. “I wondered if he wasn’t well.”

“I’ll check on him.” I got the keys for the run from the rack in the office and when I was unlocking the door to the run, Travis came in from the back with my brother.

“You getting Smollett ready for court, son?”

“Yep. I’m getting him now.”

“Go ahead. I’m here if you happen to need me.” Travis stood just inside the door with Virgil next to him. I had no idea what was going on, but I was pretty sure I didn’t like my little brother standing so close to my dad.

I unlocked Smollett’s cell and said, “Time for court.”

Smollett glanced up and saw Travis leaning on the wall at the end of the run and nodded his head. “Yeah, I’m ready. Let’s get going. I’ll be glad to get the hell out of this place.”

I cuffed Smollett’s hands behind his back with no trouble and walked him out the

back door.

He climbed into the back seat of the Bronco without saying a word. Whatever had gone on in his little meeting with Travis the night before was working like a charm.

Harrison County Courthouse.

Totally silent on the trip to the courthouse, I stopped at the back of the building and handed him off to the bailiff.

Smollett's case was the third one called and Mrs. Smollett tensed up when she heard her husband's name.

The lawyer Smollett hired stood beside him in front of the judge while the clerk read the charges.

"Do you understand the charges against you, Mister Smollett?" asked the judge.

"Yes, sir. I do."

"How do you wish to plead to the charges against you, sir?"

"I plead guilty, your honor. I'm guilty of all of it."

Sitting next to Virgil, Travis smiled. "Look at that, Virgil. Smollett is pleading guilty."

"Yep. He sure is."

Mrs. Smollett burst out crying across the aisle from us and Tammy scooted over to her. We could hear the conversation.

“Are you all right, ma’am?”

“I’m shocked my husband pled guilty. I never pictured him doing something like that.”

The judge said, “Your plea has been entered, Mister Smollett. You are remanded into custody until your sentencing hearing.” The gavel came down and the next case was called.

Tammy took the opportunity to question Mrs. Smollett a little more. “You knew what your husband was doing with all the young boys, didn’t you?”

“I did, but I couldn’t say anything because Kevin would kill me if I breathed a word of it.”

“Where do the boys in the gang live?”

“They all live in Brownwood,” she said. “I have a list of their names at home. We don’t live far from any of them.”

“A list would be helpful. Thanks.”

I didn’t know whether to arrest Mrs. Smollett or not. It was a tight situation. One that Travis could make the call on.

In their abusive marriage, Mrs. Smollett had most likely been threatened by her husband—possibly death threats—and she was more afraid of her husband than she was of going to jail.

We were lucky she was handing the other members of the pickpocket gang over to us.

Kelvin. Montana.

Tammy took Smollett back to the station, locked him up and told Billy about the confession. From there we headed north up the interstate to Kelvin to look for the rest of the car thieves.

We had no street address for them, but Kelvin was a small town with only a general store, a gas station and a few houses. I pulled into the station intending to ask the owner about a gang of kids and Tammy pointed.

“That’s one of them at the pumps. I’m sure of it.”

“Okay. I’ll park in front of the store and wait until he leaves, then we’ll follow him.”

The kid ran into the store and paid for his gas. When he came out and hopped into the red pickup, I followed behind and kept my distance.

He led us to an abandoned farmhouse outside of town and from the road we could see at least six pickups parked in a row at the side of the house.

“Call Ted to give us some backup,” said Tammy, “and tell him to bring the tow truck.”

“Good idea. He’s going to make quite a few trips back to the station.”

Tammy and me sat on the side of the county road and had a couple of smokes while we waited for Ted to drive up from Coyote Creek. When he got to us, he had Billy with him, along with Travis and Virgil driving the other squad.

Travis gave us the nod and we all drove in together.

Stuart Dickinson, his girlfriend and three other punks were smoking weed in the empty farmhouse, and they tried to run when we barged in with weapons drawn.

“All of you flat on the floor with your hands behind your heads,” hollered Travis. “Do it now.”

The tone of Dad’s voice was more than convincing—downright threatening—and the teen gang of thieves did what they were told. There were five of them and five of us and they were outmatched in muscle and fire power.

“Bag all the guns and drugs and mark them,” said Billy to Tammy. “Ted and Harlan, secure the prisoners in the two squads.”

“Copy that.”

When the kids were loaded into the squads, I drove the sheriff’s Bronco and Tammy drove the other squad. Billy rode with Tammy.

Travis stayed with Ted and assigned Virgil to help Ted hook up the vehicles they were towing.

Sheriff's Office. Coyote Creek.

We locked all the kids up when we got back to the station and started booking them one by one. Stuart Dickinson had escaped from the detention center in Great Falls and Molly notified them that we had their boy. They'd already been advised that Danny Burrige was in the hospital in Cut Bank.

We broke for lunch, and Tammy and I went over to the diner and got burgers and fries for the prisoners and for all of us.

When we returned, Tammy and I booked the rest of the gang members.

Virgil was especially pissed at the kid who had shot him in the leg. He didn't know his name, but that didn't matter. Virge gave him a good calling down anyway.

Giving Molly our statements to wrap up the case took the rest of the afternoon. By the time we were finished with all of it, it was time to go home.

As I was locking up, Travis said, "We'll stop at the roadhouse for ribs and a couple of pitchers. A little celebration for all of us."

"I'm for that," said Tammy. "I could use a beer after all that talking I did in my reports."



Dry Run Roadhouse.

It was early when we got to the Dry Run north of town and none of the night crowd was there yet. Travis kept Virge in the back of the booth because he was underage and shouldn't be drinking in a public place.

We all did it, but me and Tammy were older now and could pass for twenty-one. Coyote Creek was an out-of-the-way place where all of the rules weren't too strictly enforced.

Travis ordered the big rib platters for all of us, and we were having ourselves a time when Olivia Best showed up needing to talk to Travis about something important.

"Sit down and eat with us, Olivia. We can talk after dinner."

She smiled and Travis ordered her a drink.

We finished dinner and were all in a party mood. No live band during the week, but country music blasted out of the speakers all the same. A lot of couples were dancing.

Even Virgil seemed to be having a good time after a couple of glasses of beer.

Travis and Olivia moved to an empty table to discuss whatever was worrying Olivia. They were two booths away from where we were sitting, talking about financial stuff when Savanna came to join us after work.

She stopped at our table and smiled at us. "Congratulations on wrapping up the case,

guys.”

“Thanks.”

“Where’s Travis?”

I hooked a thumb over my shoulder. “Olivia had to discuss something with him. An emergency.”

Savanna’s eyes sparked. “Emergency?”

Moving with the speed of light, she covered the distance between the booths and smashed Travis in the face. “You fucker. I knew you’d do this.”

Savanna ran out the front door and Travis was right behind her, running in spite of the pain he was in.

“Come on, Savanna. It’s not what you think. I own the fucking Inn and Olivia needs an advance to keep her going. Come on. Aw, Jesus.”

He stomped back to the booth Olivia was sitting in and they continued their talk.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

When we got home, Travis got a bottle of Jose Cuervo out of the cupboard and set it on the table.

“You shouldn’t drink the hard stuff while you’re still on meds,” said Tammy. “Just say’n.”

“Yeah, I know, baby girl. Nothing ever turns out right. Not ever.”

I sat down at the table before I went to the barn to do the chores. “Your whole family is here, Dad. Savanna will realize she made a mistake and come back.”

“Yeah, you’re right, son. Put the tequila away and save it for another day. I’ll have a beer.”

“Attaboy.”