



# Flesh and Bone

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**Category:** Horror

**Description:** One month ago, Everett did something unforgivable. Now, he and his partner Marshall are paying the price. As they drive their cattle west to a ranch in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, something stalks them under the light of the full moon.

Haunted by a lifetime of shame, Everett's guilt over what he did with Marshall is coming to eat him alive. Equally dangerous is the monster following him, which will sink its teeth into anything and anyone. After it gores Everett, he begins to feel that same awful hunger for himself. If Everett wants to survive the night, it's not only the monster he needs to fight. It's his own bloodthirsty urges that want to tear him apart. Worse, they'll tear Marshall apart just as easily.

Marshall would do anything for Everett: his best friend, and the man he has secretly loved for years. Now, he doesn't just have to save Everett from the creature hunting them. He has to save Everett from himself, and that might mean putting a bullet through Everett's skull before the man he loves becomes something unrecognizably monstrous.

Flesh and Bone is a short, standalone mm horror-romance novella of approximately 14,000 words, set in the Canadian Wild West of 1889.

**Total Pages (Source):** 11

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:19 pm*

“No way a coyote could take down a steer like this,”

Marshall finally said.

It was near midnight. Summer daylight kept long hours in the Prairies, but not long enough. Above, the stars burned cold and distant.

To the west, the Rocky Mountains took jagged bites out of the sky. And below—

Everett was trying not to look.

“There’d have been a commotion if a grizzly came up through the herd,”

Marshall said, frustrated. “We’d have heard it.”

“A cougar?”

Everett offered doubtfully, keeping his face tipped skyward.

The steer was the fifth animal they’d lost in a month. Moving two hundred head of cattle, they expected to lose a couple as they drove west from Saskatchewan into the Porcupine Hills — illness, lameness — but nothing so drastic.

Something was following them.

It didn’t sound like any coyote Everett had ever heard, and it didn’t eat as much as he figured a bigger predator would.

He didn't know what kind of animal that left.

Something rabid, maybe.

But something rabid wouldn't have survived so long.

Neither he nor Marshall had caught a good look at the thing, no matter how late they kept watch.

Everett had seen its eyes once, flat circles reflecting the campfire in the dark, but in the second it took him to haul his rifle up and aim, they blinked away.

He couldn't shake the feeling that they were still on him, even in the daytime.

A tiny itch in between his shoulder blades, digging at him like a thorn under the saddle blanket.

That had been a week ago.

The steer was a mess.

Even with its throat torn open and its guts pooling into the dust, it had been alive when they found it.

Eyes rolling in their sockets to show the whites, breath coming hard and fast in panicked wheezes.

Deep gouges marred its sides, and the lake of blood under it was black and sticky in the darkness.

Marshall had put a bullet through its skull to end its misery.

How long it had lain there, disembowelled and bleeding out, they couldn't tell.

A few minutes, or half an hour.

Longer.

The stars had seen what happened, but they weren't saying.

Marshall had been the one to look it over afterwards, trying to figure out what could be responsible.

Everett had turned away to be sick.

"Ain't a hungry animal doing this,"

Marshall said, full of conviction. "Show me any animal in its right mind that makes a kill and doesn't take more'n a bite or two.

The flies ate more of the poor bastard than whatever killed him."

"Whatever it is, it's been after us since the July moon."

Everett didn't look at Marshall to mark his reaction. "I'll take first watch."

He hadn't been sleeping lately anyhow, lying awake more hours than not.

Marshall didn't argue, just moved past him and headed back to where they'd pitched their camp, a little fire burning low between their bedrolls.

Time was, he'd have clapped Everett on the shoulder, and that change was Everett's fault, too.

“Two hours,” he said.

Everett used to dissect every touch, trying to read Marshall’s intentions in every jostled shoulder, every tap and nudge.

Every glance.

It hadn’t done either of them any good.

It was better, he told himself, that the contact was gone.

All that analyzing and second-guessing was a waste of energy.

But no matter how he tried, he found himself missing it at the strangest times.

They’d spent too many years roughhousing, then working together, sharing space and living in each other’s pockets, to give it up so abruptly.

Marshall was a physical man, more so than Everett.

That physicality was familiar enough, even if it didn’t come naturally to him, that its sudden absence left him off-balance now that it was gone.

It would be better, maybe, to straight-up ask what Marshall wanted, instead of pussyfooting around the matter, waiting to see what he’d do next.

Or not do.

The problem was, Everett couldn’t fit those worms back in the can once it was opened.

He'd already cracked the lid; he didn't need to go opening it any further.

They had stopped hobbling the horses after the first cow got killed, figuring to give them a fighting chance of escape, if it came to it.

Everett rode his raw-boned gelding in a wide circle around the herd, watching for movement in the dark.

His trusty Yellowboy lay against his thigh, ready to swing up at the first sign of anything that wasn't bovine.

Everett was a crack shot at a distance, even if he could never beat Marshall at hitting bottles off the fence with a handgun.

He glared into the night, tapping his fingers against the brass frame of his rifle that gave it its moniker.

They ought to have dogs for this, those big livestock guardian dogs that farmers used for sheep, the ones unafraid of squaring up against something wild.

Dogs could work in the dark a damn sight better than he could.

And they were loyal, too.

That unconditional loyalty Everett could do with studying.

His gelding tensed under him, ears pricked and head high, blowing hard through his nostrils.

Everett couldn't see Marshall's horse past the cattle, but he imagined the animals talking to each other, riding each other's nerves.

He dismounted to steady the gelding and the horse danced around, nervous as anything, before bolting.

The reins ripped out of Everett's hands and he cursed as both horses high-tailed it, their hoofbeats thundering away.

"What happened?"

Marshall called, his voice groggy like he'd managed to catch a few minutes of sleep.

"Horses ran off,"

Everett said tersely.

The prickle in between his shoulders dug deeper like claws hooked in his spine, the anxiety enough to make his bones rattle.

Hefting his rifle in both hands, uneasy sweat slicked his palms.

Nothing but wide-open space all around, and the light from the campfire didn't reach far.

The full moon's silver glow was muted as clouds rolled in.

"Shit."

With a groan, Marshall got up, rolling his shoulders and shaking off his slumber before reaching for his revolver.

The nights used to be peaceful.

Beautiful, the way the world looked beautiful in between the pages of Whitman's poetry.

Velvet dark like they didn't get in the city, the whole Milky Way sprawled overhead like jewels spilled from a bank robbery, the fire crackling and spitting out sparks.

Cool enough compared to the daytime that they could take the excuse to sit close, shoulders rubbing, thighs pressed together through their jeans.

Close enough to pass a can of beans back and forth while they waited for their supper to warm up over the flames.

Potatoes baking in the coals, grouse or rabbit turning on the spit.

They shouldn't have needed the excuse to get close, not in the middle of nowhere without a single witness for a hundred kilometres in any direction, no sounds but the distant yipping of coyotes in the foothills and the soft lowing of the cattle as they settled in for the night.

Marshall wouldn't have needed the excuse at all, but Everett was a coward.

Even after he decided he wanted something, he had dropped that wanting in Marshall's lap for him to take responsibility for it and decide what to do next.

Self-loathing twisted his guts at the memory.

His back to the fire, Everett flexed his fingers around his rifle, holding it at the ready.

Marshall had been hot and solid in his hand that night; Everett could still feel him every time he let his mind wander.



Something shifted in the dark.

Everett froze like a rabbit, heart hammering.

A footstep, and then a rush of movement towards the fire, something huge and ragged — a gust of humid breath washed his face, rancid like rotten meat—

He squeezed off a single shot, firing blind.

Hot, wet pain seared his right side.

He was distantly aware of Marshall shouting, shots fired, and the sense that the thing was retreating, but all he could hear was the pounding of his own blood in his ears.

His rifle fell from useless fingers as he dropped to his knees.

Time slipped; the stars wheeled drunkenly.

“Fuck, c’mon, get up,”

Marshall ordered, hauling Everett to his feet. “Can you walk? We gotta go.”

Everett staggered against him, dizzy and weak. Marshall slung Everett’s left arm around his shoulder and set off. Everett’s right arm swung loose by his side, dead weight, until Marshall clamped a hand over it.

“Did you see what got you?”

Marshall asked. “I saw it against the fire for a second, but I don’t know what I was looking at. Too big for a coyote, that’s for damn sure.”

Everett shook his head. “Don’t know.”

“How bad are you hurt?”

His arm felt wet. He couldn’t figure out more of a sensation than that. Every lurching step he took against Marshall’s side felt more unstable than the last.

“You know that cabin by the bend in the creek?”

Marshall asked, not slowing his pace.

“Where we stayed a night last year? We’re gonna hole up there, get you fixed up, and then we’ll take care of whatever the hell this thing is come daybreak.

Okay? I’ll track the fucker to its den and put it down for good.

You just stay with me.”

“Sure thing,”

Everett mumbled.

The cabin was half a night away: a long trek with their horses run off, and Everett was losing blood by the pint.

“Too easy to pick us off like this,”

Everett slurred against Marshall’s shoulder. “Gotta keep your gun up...”

“I clipped it, whatever it was,”

Marshall said grimly. “It’s run off to lick its wounds. You shut up and let me worry about it.”

“That thing’s the devil. We got the devil after us.”

Marshall didn’t miss a step, but his grip tightened around Everett’s shoulder. “That’s the blood loss talking. Ain’t no devil here or anywhere else.”

When Everett stumbled one too many times, Marshall hefted him over one shoulder like a sack of flour and kept at it, his mouth set in a thin line.

The sudden movement made Everett’s stomach swoop as the last of the blood rushed away from his brain.

His body felt like it belonged to someone else, hollowed out and buzzing full of flies.

His thoughts were scattered over the range, driving down into the dust and the rocks.

He couldn’t do anything except hang limp over Marshall’s arm, clinging to consciousness by a thread.

The thought of slipping under terrified him.

If he passed out even for a second, Marshall would be setting down a corpse in that cabin.

A corpse with Everett trapped inside, unable to move, unable to so much as scream.

The horror was offset by guilty relief at the same thought. If he was dead, that was the end of it.

The cabin by Pekisko Creek wasn't more than four thin walls and a rickety roof against a backdrop of evergreens stabbing into the sky like knives, but Marshall carried him inside and shut the door behind them like he expected it to keep them safe.

Stripped of his duster, propped up on the narrow bed, Everett tipped his head back against the wall, staring blankly into the ceiling beams.

Black splotches swam around the edges of his vision like big ugly catfish, and he couldn't get his eyes to focus.

When Marshall tore away the sleeve of Everett's ruined shirt, Everett couldn't feel it. His arm was hot from the shoulder down, but touch and pressure didn't register.

"Let's see how bad it got you,"

Marshall muttered, more to himself than to Everett.

He had the oil lamp lit on the little dresser, enough to take the edge off the night, but barely good enough to see by.

Everett wasn't sure he wanted to see anyhow.

Marshall put a rumpled pillow in Everett's lap and moved Everett's bad arm to lay on top of it, peeling the tattered blood-soaked cloth away.

"Shit,"

he hissed.

Cold fear trickled down the back of Everett's neck. He tried to lift his head from the

wall.

“Don’t look,”

Marshall said quickly.

Everett’s stomach twisted. “That bad?”

“Nope,”

Marshall said after a split-second-too-long pause. “Just messy, and you’re a pussy about blood. Once I get this clean, you’ll heal up just fine.”

Marshall wasn’t a liar, but Everett didn’t believe a word out of his mouth.

“Here,”

Marshall said, tossing something over Everett’s arm. Everett forced his vision to cooperate and found Marshall’s coat covering him like a shroud. “Let’s get some booze in you. Take the edge off.”

He searched Everett’s duster for his flask, offering it to Everett’s good side.

“That bad,”

Everett repeated.

“Just don’t look,”

Marshall repeated in turn. “It looks worse than it is. It ain’t gonna kill you and you ain’t gonna lose the arm. Drink this, shut your eyes, and don’t worry about it.”

As Everett took his first drink, Marshall got a fire going in the tiny hearth and set a pot of water to boil over it, shredding strips from the bedsheets to sterilize for bandages.

Everett watched him, not totally present, like he'd watch the herd milling in a pen, following the movements without investment.

He couldn't move his fingers.

Couldn't sense anything but wet, blinding pain.

From the elbow down, his arm felt like something attached to him that wasn't his anymore.

He gulped down more of the booze, clumsy enough to spill it over his chin and down his front.

If he drank enough, it would numb the blind panic; that was more important than the pain.

His stomach twisted, half hunger, half nausea.

The booze would get him drunk quicker on an empty stomach.

The blood was so thick in the air he could taste it, but under that, he could smell Marshall's sweat, the scent as familiar to him as the cattle, or the smell of gunmetal, or fresh rain stirring the dust under the grass.

More familiar, maybe, with the way it was burned in his memory.

His stomach growled, though he doubted he could keep solid food down if he tried.

When the flask was empty, he let it drop to the bedsheets and Marshall wordlessly handed him his own to keep going.

“Should we talk about it?”

Everett asked eventually, once he was good and drunk.

Marshall was quiet for a minute, keeping his head down as he focussed on his ministrations. They both knew exactly what Everett meant. “Do we need to?”

“Don’t see a better time for it.”

Everett kept his eyes shut. Keeping them open was disorienting, what with those catfish, and he couldn’t raise the subject open-eyed anyhow.

“We ain’t talked about it these four weeks, and you want to unearth that shit now?”

“Drunk enough that I’ll barely remember, come morning. If I even make it through the night.”

Drunk enough that he wanted to talk about it. Drunk enough that his self-loathing over the whole thing wanted a voice, and he was far enough gone to think it was a good idea to give it one.

“You’ll make it through fine. I just don’t see what there is to talk about.”

“You don’t think having this thing on our tails changes anything?”

“You think we got the devil after us because of what we did?”

Marshall shook his head and kept cleaning the wound.

His hands were shaking; Everett could feel that much.

They hadn't been shaking when he'd been working them down the front of Everett's jeans.

"This thing's flesh and bone, same as any other animal. This one's just sick or something. It's got a fever in its blood hot enough to boil its brain and drive it crazy, that's all."

Everett swallowed.

It tasted grimy, like copper and iron.

He brought the flask to his mouth again, hoping to taste Marshall's lips on it.

He didn't.

"Whatever it's got, you think it's catching?"

"You're already crazy."

"Marshall."

"What do you want me to say?"

Marshall snapped, pausing his work to glare at him.

"I've been taking my cues from you ever since that night. When to get close to you, where to touch you, for how long. Where to bunk down, where to look. I didn't make the first move, so I ain't apologizing for shit. You said it wouldn't happen again and it hasn't, so what's there to talk about that we ain't already covered?"



“I just want to clear the air.”

“Air’s already clear,”

Marshall returned churlishly. “And quit acting like you’re on your goddamn deathbed. I ain’t a priest and I ain’t taking your last confession.”

He worked in silence for another minute, winding the bandages tight.

Everett watched the crown of his head, the bunch of his shoulders, the set of his jaw, to avoid looking at Marshall’s hands or the blood on them.

Looking was what had set them on this path in the first place, but the damage was already done.

Something hungry in Everett, unfamiliar in its recklessness, wanted to make it worse.

“I like it,”

Everett confessed around the mouth of Marshall’s flask. “The attention. Knowing you want me like that.”

Marshall’s breath gusted out, the rhythm of his hands stuttering. “Jesus Christ, Everett.”

Everett’s drunken tongue wouldn’t quiet. “Don’t know what that makes me. Selfish, I guess. I just want you to know that I always liked you looking. Wanting. All of it.”

“Looking and wanting ain’t doing.”

Everett knew that, but the drink blurred the lines between the three.

He looked, and he wanted, and he might have done again.

But his body was something else now, an empty, mangled thing that didn't listen to what he told it.

Then again, it had always been a traitor. Always wanting things it wasn't meant to have.

“Look,”

he managed, “I’m not proud of stringing you along like I did.”

“I know you’re not proud,”

Marshall retorted. “Fuck, you got enough shame in you it must feel like dragging around a dead horse.”

The drink urged Everett forward, begging him to reach out, touch, hold, his inhibition shaved down to shivering bare bones. The blood loss kept him seated. Guilt made him heavy.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:19 pm*

“Don’t say anything,”

Everett implored.

He couldn’t look Marshall in the eye.

He’d got the impression over the years that Marshall was bent that way, even though the man was careful.

He might hit Everett for asking, but Everett didn’t figure that was too likely, and even if he did, that would be the end of it.

They’d still be friends.

But more likely, Everett thought, Marshall would take him up on his offer.

Everett wanted so badly to know what it was like, not just with Marshall but with any man, and he was finally drunk enough and it was dark enough for him to admit it.

They had no light that night but the moon; even so, Everett waited until a cloud passed in front of it before making his move.

Unsteadily dropping to his knees in front of Marshall where he sat on his rock, one hand on Marshall’s thigh, as clear as anybody could get about his intention.

“Just say yes or no.”

“Yeah?”

Marshall said carefully. Hopefully.

But when Marshall reached for Everett’s face, one rough hand cupping his jaw to draw him up, Everett jerked back. Turned his head, resolute. Drunk heart hammering, on the verge of panic.

Marshall never tried to kiss him a second time. Just breathed out a quiet, “Okay,”

and kept things below the belt.

Everett had done it once before, years earlier, with a boy working alongside him on Marshall’s daddy’s ranch.

They’d both been running hot on hormones, more sex in their blood than brain in their skulls.

They did it fast and clumsy one summer eve, started and finished so quickly that Everett barely knew what he was doing, and hardly remembered it afterwards.

It didn’t really count, not at that age, not when Everett had finished in his pants before the other boy had even got a hand on him.

They didn’t talk about it, after; the other boy mostly spoke French, and they only had a few shared phrases between them.

It was better that way.

After the season ended, the other boy had moved on.

Back home or further west, Everett didn't know.

Everett couldn't remember his name — he made sure he forgot it in the years following like he tried to forget the rest of it, the wanting and the shame that came with it — but he remembered the boy's face.

Fair and freckled with a gap in his front teeth that he could spit tobacco through like a bullet.

Then Everett had seen a man shot dead that fall.

Rumours had coated the poor wretch beforehand like tar, only to fall quiet as the grave after the funeral.

His widow never said a word about the matter and neither did anyone else.

They didn't need to.

Everett had already heard every whisper, and they had squirmed into his brain and into his heart; thorny, paranoid things that pointed out every similarity between him and the corpse, urging him to keep his mouth shut and his hands to himself, his desires neutered.

So, Everett had folded up his memory of that reckless, immature encounter like a secret letter, writing over the words with sonnets and poetry that made love sound like something chaste and noble and bigger than anything he could ever grasp, with the calluses on his hands and dirt on his boots.

Love was for dreamers and poets.

Cowboys had lust, and Everett's lust was liable to get his teeth kicked in or his brain

shot out if he presented it to the wrong man.

There was a reason the poets didn't speak its name.

For years, he did his best to black it out, that illegible scrawl against his heart.

But ink had a way of fading with time, and Marshall casually worked his way through every defence Everett built, seemingly without noticing the effect he had.

There were days, weeks, months at a time out on the range with Marshall when Everett felt like a stray dog, so desperate for a tender touch that he wondered if it might be worth whatever beatings followed.

The thoughts that had followed him his whole adult life grew teeth and claws.

That night with Marshall under the cloaked moon, Everett finished hot and sticky.

He barely had time for pleasure before regret crashed over him like a summer storm.

His shirt clung to his back.

He cleaned up with his kerchief before tucking himself away and fastening his jeans again, eyes averted.

When the moon came out, its light brought the devil with it.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:19 pm*

Something crawled up the back of Everett's skull from between his shoulders and he froze, listening intently through the cabin's wood panels into the dark.

"It's back."

Marshall didn't hesitate, crossing the room in three strides to grab his shotgun from where he'd propped it. He checked out the window, like he could see anything in the night, with the lamp burning inside. "Hold tight,"

he said shortly, and before Everett could react, he was out the door.

Everett fisted his good hand in the sheets, fingers tingling and thick-feeling, teeth grinding as his breath came faster than that dying steer's.

Sitting up straight, he strained to hear what was happening, struggling to get his legs over the edge of the bed.

Every movement took monumental effort, his head swimming from drink and blood loss, half-blind and off-balance.

When his feet were planted on the floor he staggered sideways, crashing his bad arm into the wall.

He blacked out from the pain, but didn't stop trying to follow Marshall outside.

A crack rang out and Everett stumbled, his heart missing a beat before coming back triple-time.

A second shot from the second barrel — the first for a ranged attack, the next for defense in close quarters.

Everett fought his way to the door, his dread a solid mass dragging him down.

For a horrible second, he didn't know which outcome was worse: that Marshall was dead, or that he'd killed the creature.

No.

That thought couldn't be his.

Fumbling the door open, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dark, Everett couldn't breathe.

Something was wrong in his brain.

His thoughts weren't coming right.

He needed Marshall to be alive, to have killed whatever that thing was, but every time he blinked, he saw Marshall lying bloody in the dirt, ripped open like a butchered bull.

As awful as that image was, printed in red against the backs of his eyelids, a sick part of him wanted it.

There was a gnawing hunger in his belly growing by the minute, a deep ache like he wanted to sink his teeth into a raw steak, like he wanted to fuck something hard and rough until it went limp under him.

Fucked up, violent thoughts that weren't his, in the middle of the night with his arm



all bloodied and his friend facing down the devil in the dark.

“Marshall?”

The name came out mangled.

“I got it,”

Marshall said.

His silhouette materialized from out of the night and Everett’s knees went weak with relief or horror.

“Bring me that lamp, I want to see that it’s dead.”

“You got it?”

“Hit it dead on. It dropped like a rock, but I don’t want it crawling off to bleed out in some hole before I see what it is.”

“No,”

Everett said numbly, “no, it’s dead. I can feel it. It’s all in me, now.”

And then he dropped sure as that creature had, out cold before he hit the ground.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:19 pm*

“Shit.”

Slinging his shotgun onto his back, Marshall ran for Everett.

The bandage around his arm was already soaked through, dark and dripping.

But he was still breathing, his pulse rapid and thready but there, so Marshall left the creature where it had fallen and dragged Everett inside.

His skin was clammy by the time Marshall deposited him back in bed.

Marshall had expected the fever, but he'd hoped it wouldn't hit until the next day.

He'd lied about the injury.

Even if Everett survived infection, there was no saving that hand.

Marshall was no surgeon.

Best he could do was clean it out and wrap it up, and hope and pray that if he kept the bandage tight enough, the skin might knit itself together.

He'd tried to put the torn flesh and muscle back in place but it was like pushing river clay around with his fingers.

It hadn't looked like an arm at all, flayed open and hanging in tatters like something rejected from a butcher's shop.

A goddamn mess.

But he couldn't say that to Everett.

Couldn't tell the man the thing had good as killed him.

He didn't have the words for it.

Didn't want to believe it himself.

"It's dead,"

Everett moaned through gritted teeth as Marshall pulled the rough wool blankets over his legs.

"Yeah, it's dead,"

Marshall promised, hoping it was true.

"But it's still here. Got its teeth in me. Feels like a hole inside, like that thing was living in behind my ribs ever since—"

Everett swallowed. It sounded painful. "You killed it and pulled it out but now there's nothing left 'cept this hunger. Am I dead?"

He was raving. When Marshall put one hand to his forehead to push him down against the pillow, Everett turned into the touch, open mouth panting against Marshall's wrist.

Marshall flinched back. "You're running a fever, that's all. Sleep it off and I'll take care of you."

“I’m starving, Marshall. This awful hunger—”

“Water’s the best thing for you, now. Especially after all that drink.”

“I need meat. Something fresh, something raw. Please...”

If he had it, Marshall would give it to him. Who the hell was he to deny a dying man his last meal? Hell, if they’d stayed out on the range, he’d have carved a steak from that steer and put the poor fucker’s death to use.

But Everett had eaten supper the same time Marshall had. Maybe it was the blood loss making him so hungry, his body trying to repair itself with red meat, but something about it unsettled Marshall.

Finally, Everett fell back, his eyes drifting restlessly behind half-closed lids, jaw working as the fingers of his good hand clenched spasmodically in the sheets.

He drank the water Marshall offered but couldn’t relax, shaking and shivering as the sweat got heavier, running in rivers down his face.

Marshall couldn’t watch.

“Rest up,”

he said, patting Everett’s knee through the blankets. “I’ll be back in just a minute, okay?”

Everett managed a short nod, not opening his eyes.

Reloading his shotgun and his revolver, Marshall confirmed that he had his knife on him, then took up the lamp and left to find where he’d shot the creature.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:19 pm*

Everett's skin itched.

It was the itch of an ingrown hair, something burrowed under the surface that needed a layer scratched off to let it out.

Like something stuck between his molars.

The itch got stronger until he could feel it in the pit of his stomach, the urge to scratch like a craving, a hunger.

Like the mindless, half-asleep need to get off while still wrapped in some sticky dream.

Under the bandage, he could scratch all the way down to the bone.

It would feel good.

Satisfying.

Slowly, Everett sat up and peeled back the sodden cloth.

He didn't want to look, but he had to know.

He had to see for himself his chance of recovery, whether he'd ever be able to use his hand again or move his fingers.

The last layer fell limp across his lap.

He stared.

That wasn't his arm.

That wasn't anything belonging to a living body.

Flesh and bone.

He'd unwrapped the bandages and they'd unwrapped his arm with them, meat coming away in slabs, shining with blood, exposed tendons, ribbons of raw nerves.

He tried to move his fingers and something in the meat twitched weakly, some muscle that wasn't connected to anything anymore, still trying to follow orders.

From in between the strings of muscle, a coarse black hair sprang out.

He stared at it, repulsed, before catching it between his thumb and forefinger.

It was thick and wiry, and it didn't lift away when he pulled.

Instead, it stretched taut like a guitar string, and something tugged from deep inside.

He felt the tension in his guts, but like a compulsion, he pulled harder.

It came away by the root.

He held it up to the firelight.

An oily glob of fat, waxy and thick, clung to the follicle.

Disgusted, he flicked the hair onto the floor, but he couldn't ignore it.

There must be more of them.

Those hairs were probably causing the itching.

Hesitantly at first, he pushed his fingertips into the open wound that ran from his elbow to the heel of his hand.

His forearm was flayed open, the thumb hanging off at a wrong angle, the pink gleam of bone exposed.

The firelight turned the room ghastly and unreal, flickering in time with the scattered, uneven pulse of his fever.

Trapped in a nightmare, hellfire licked at him from a few short feet away.

Moonlight poured in through the window, but instead of offering soothing relief, it only made the lighting weirder, silver-blue clashing with orange-red until Everett didn't know which shadows were real and which were conjured.

His body was unrecognizable to him.

He pushed his fingers in until he touched the bones, sliding in between them like he was trying to push the meat out from a chicken wing, hands shiny with grease and gristle as he ate.

It wasn't the same thing.

But he was so hungry.

There was something chewing at him from the inside, trying to get out.

His head wasn't right.

But he was so hungry—

He craved red meat.

He wanted to know what Marshall tasted like.

They were twin urges, confusingly conjoined.

He had touched Marshall that night, but never put his mouth on him.

Marshall had spilled thick and hot into Everett's palm and over his knuckles, his heartbeat thrumming against Everett's fingers.

Everett hadn't tasted him then, not even to put his lips to his own skin in the aftermath.

He might have, if he had known how his curiosity would warp and keen later.

Lifting his mangled arm with his left hand, he put his nose to the slab that had been sliced away to hang loose, and breathed in.

Nothing of Marshall's scent lingered in the blood or meat.

He whimpered, hurting and scared of himself, scared of dying, but something turned it into a guttural growl.

Opening his mouth, he tasted flesh.

Salt and iron.



As he tore a chunk away and swallowed, his eyes rolled back in awful pleasure, and the guilt and the horror were pushed back under his wave of hunger.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:19 pm*

Marshall circled the corpse, his hackles up until he was sure it was dead. Planting the lamp on a patch of bare ground, he paced for a minute, restless until he found the nerve to dig his shotgun barrel into the thing's ribs and shove it onto its side.

“What the fuck is that,”

he breathed, crouching to take a better look.

If he'd got a good look at it in the distance, he would have guessed it was some badly-bred dog with mange, but that didn't hold water so close-up.

It was near the size of a heifer, with dark, coarse hair down its back, thinning on its sides and over its flanks to leave its underbelly and lower limbs bare.

That was one thing; some disease or hereditary defect could explain that away.

Its face, though — Marshall had never seen an animal with a face like that, and he never wanted to again.

The snout was blunt like it had been bashed in, with too many teeth sticking out of its maw.

They bristled at odd angles, incisors and bonecrushers all mixed up together like they'd been in such a hurry to erupt from the gums that they hadn't paid any attention to the natural order of things.

Cracked black lips like cured leather wrapped around them, locked in a permanent

snarl before giving way to pallid flesh going blue in death.

There was something wrong with it that went beyond physical deformity.

That kind of bloodlust wasn't natural to any animal.

Marshall took a steadying breath before kneeling in the dry yellow grass, grey in the dark, and peeling back the lid of the thing's left eye.

Cursing, he immediately let go and scuffled back, but the eye stayed open, staring at him.

The iris was pale, and the way it swam in the white was all human.

Bloodshot and accusatory, it seemed to look straight at Marshall through the gauzy film of death coating it.

"Fuck me,"

Marshall muttered.

He wanted to bury the thing and never see it again, but stronger than the revulsion was the need to understand what he was looking at.

He slit the thing's belly open lengthways with his knife before gritting his teeth and digging into the wound.

It was messier than butchering a cow but not so different from helping birth a calf.

The organs were slick, still warm as he cracked open the creature's ribs to open up the abdominal cavity.

The guts slopped into the dirt, shining purple and pink.

Grimacing, Marshall scooped the rest of them out and threw them aside, digging deeper until he hit something cool and firm.

Not bone, but a body.

Marshall paused.

Whatever was in there, he didn't want to see it.

This creature was unnatural, through and through, and if he kept digging, there'd be no turning back from that.

He'd have to reconcile whatever he saw with his understanding of the world, and he might not come back from that.

But it had gone after his friend.

If Everett was right and it really had been stalking them for weeks, Marshall wanted to know what it was.

With both hands, he pulled the body into the light.

Like being birthed from some demonic mother, the naked, slimy body of a man emerged.

Whether he had died before or after he shot the creature, Marshall didn't know.

The body lay wormlike against his knees, pale skin scraped away in sheets, the lips chewed off to bare a pained, gap-toothed grimace, eyes clenched shut and fingers and

toes curled in rictus claws.

Freckles stood out stark against bloodless flesh.

Marshall didn't recognize the man, and he knew most of the ranch hands and cowboys west of the Big Muddy.

Vague familiarity niggled at him, like he might have met the man years ago.

But that couldn't be right, not with the man looking to be so young.

Barely out of his teens.

With a shaky hand, he lifted one of the corpse's eyelids.

There was nothing underneath, just an empty socket bruised purple and trails of stringy nerves dragging out of it, like they'd been connected to something that had ripped away.

The creature's pale eye stared up at Marshall.

Marshall stood, stepping away from the thing as his stomach tied itself in knots.

The urge was strong to put a bullet point-blank through both heads to be sure there was no chance either one could ever get up again.

He had one hand on his revolver when something crashed inside the cabin and he jumped, on edge like a stray cat.

He was a goddamn coward, not staying by Everett's side.

He should've stayed; fuck that thing dead in the dust, fuck the cattle they were meant to be driving to Bar U Ranch, and to hell with their runaway horses, too.

He'd find them come morning.

Everett was the one who needed him most.

Everett was gnawing his own arm down to the bone.

Marshall's heart plunged to meet his rising gorge.

"Everett, what the fuck! What are you doing? Hey—"

Everett didn't stop when Marshall barged inside, just doubled down, fiercely desperate, like he hated what he was doing but couldn't stop himself.

Slamming the lamp back in place on the dresser, Marshall grabbed Everett's good hand before forcing his ruined arm away from his mouth.

Everett tried to follow, teeth snapping on empty air, his eyes wild and bright with fever.

Marshall tasted bile.

"The fuck do you think you're doing?"

he repeated, giving Everett's shoulder a shake, furious and helpless. "Jesus, Ev, what have you done to yourself?"

"Help me,"

Everett choked, viscera stuck between his teeth.

He'd chewed his arm to the core, teeth leaving white scrape-marks against pink bones, the flesh jagged and pulpy. Enough had been chewed off — eaten, Marshall realized with a fresh lurch of nausea —

so that even if Marshall tried to fit it back together like he'd done before, there was too much missing, and all that raw wound would stay open to the air. Not a hope in hell of fending off infection like that.

Marshall roughly swallowed back his own sick as he wrapped what was left of Everett's arm tight against his chest to pin it in place.

Everett's good arm, Marshall tied behind his back, roping a harness over his shoulders and around his chest.

Swaddled tight, Everett barely had the mobility to get to his feet, and he couldn't reach any of the ropes or bandages with his teeth to chew through.

Marshall was tempted to hogtie him, but that would likely do more harm than good.

By the time he was done, Everett had settled somewhat, his chin against his chest, hair in his face.

A string of red drool hung from his mouth.

Marshall dropped to the edge of the bed beside him, where they sat in silence.

“What was it?”

Everett asked listlessly.

Hell if Marshall knew. Everett wasn't far off after all when he called it the devil. "Just a sick dog. Big, ugly brute, must've gone rabid and escaped somebody's ranch, going 'round raising hell. We'll head out come morning; Bar U ain't far now. Maybe we'll get lucky, come across some cowboys who can give us a ride, get us there faster. Get you looked at by a real doctor."

Never mind that they were more likely to run into outlaws than honest men in these parts. Marshall would try his luck with the meanest horse thieves in the badlands if it meant saving Everett's life. "I've seen men get gored worse than this. You're gonna be okay."

"Not sure I'm going to make it to morning,"

Everett admitted, and Marshall's heart sank impossibly deeper. "There's this awful gnawing in my belly. Like it's full of rats. I don't want to hurt myself — I don't want to hurt anybody — but there's something else in my head making me do things. Feel things. Don't know how to make it stop."

"Can I help?"

Marshall asked, knowing he couldn't. Not in any way that would make a difference.

"You remember that calf we lost last spring? You stayed up with her all night, holding her till she died in your arms."

"You want that?"

Marshall asked quietly.

Everett shifted back against the wall, his chest open.



An invitation.

The kind Marshall used to yearn for.

Marshall sat on the edge of the bed, hesitating a moment before swinging his legs up, heels digging into the bedcovers, his back up against the headboard.

Marshall gathered Everett against him, his chin hooked over Everett's shoulder to hold him tight, the way he hadn't been allowed, before.

Everett was burning up, his skin on fire as he sweated buckets, hair limp and plastered to his scalp.

It smelled rank but Marshall buried his nose in it, unwilling to let him go.

He didn't know how long they had.

If Everett lived to see the dawn break, that would be a miracle.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:19 pm*

“You remember Sam Kelly?”

Everett asked out of the blue.

Sam Kelly had worked at Marshall’s daddy’s ranch alongside the two of them the previous year.

That was a man disinclined to make an honest living if Marshall had ever met one, but they got along well enough, connecting over their mutual love for guns and horses.

Kelly had even taken a shine to him, though that wasn’t enough to convince Marshall to leave with him when he moved on to whatever bigger and brighter things awaited a man like that.

The sorts of things that ended with a shootout and a posse of the sheriff’s men, Marshall expected.

“Sure I do.

What about him?”

The moon was full overhead, its silver glow muted behind a bank of clouds that weren’t quite heavy enough to threaten rain.

They lounged around their campfire, seated on a couple of good-sized rocks as their horses lazily flicked flies behind them.

Marshall stretched, enjoying the summer, enjoying his drink.

The combination of fire, moonlight, and a little alcohol buzz made Everett look especially pretty.

It was the kind of casual observation Marshall hardly noticed anymore, a quiet, constant background hum of attraction that he didn't need to act on, nor say out loud.

He was comfortable with it.

Everett wouldn't be.

The campfire burnished the brown tan of Everett's skin to copper.

The shade spoke to some mixed blood in his recent ancestry, the same blood that made his hair and eyes so dark.

Blackfoot, Marshall figured, though Everett always adamantly denied any such thing, like denying it could make it wholly untrue.

Marshall never pushed.

A man was entitled to his privacy, and Everett was one of the most private people Marshall knew, keeping his whole life close to his chest like he wanted to go unnoticed altogether, convincing everyone around him that he was unremarkable in every way.

It didn't work on Marshall, but he pretended.

After all, he had his own secrets, and he'd never much liked the taste of hypocrisy.

“You ever think about what it might have been like if you’d taken Kelly up on his offer?”

Everett asked.

Marshall laughed, as much entertained by the question as he was bemused by it. “I don’t regret turning him down, if that’s what you mean. I ain’t so dissatisfied with my life that I feel the need to drop everything and go off stealing horses and robbing trains.”

“I don’t know,”

Everett said, staring off somewhere past the fire. “I think I get the appeal.”

“Sure,”

Marshall agreed slowly. “Hell, we’d probably even be pretty good at it. I like horses better than cattle, anyhow. And it’d be an exciting life, for sure. But I’m not fixing to die at thirty.”

“Sam Kelly isn’t dead yet, is he?”

Marshall snorted and took another swig of his drink. “Give him a few more years. Why’re you asking, anyway? You thinking about ditching the ranch and trying the outlaw life on for size?”

He couldn’t see it.

Everett was soft-spoken, reserved.

He read poetry and memorized Shakespeare, preferring a quiet sunset to getting

roaring drunk with the boys.

Not that romantics couldn't turn outlaw, Marshall supposed, but Everett wasn't a burning-passion kind of romantic.

He was the sensitive, scholarly type.

He could've been a schoolteacher or a pastor, somebody who dedicated himself to a life of learning, if Marshall's daddy hadn't offered him a job first.

And Everett had never been fool enough to turn down reliable work, not at any age.

"We'll be coming up on those outlaw caves again soon enough,"

Marshall offered. Saskatchewan was full of big old caves claimed by dangerous men hiding out from the law, men Marshall had no intention of crossing. He could only imagine Everett wanted less to do with them than he did. "Want to poke your head in there as we pass, see if anyone's interested in taking you on?"

They'd left Saskatchewan in the spring, heading east to a smaller ranch in Ontario before trading in for fresh horses and turning around to go all the way west again, across the Prairies to Alberta.

It was a long trek, and now, in July, they were right in the midst of it.

The journey might have been lonesome if Marshall had been partnered with anyone else, but he'd never met anyone who kept him better company than Everett.

"No, thanks,"

Everett said, his smile self-deprecating. "We should probably give those caves a wide

berth. I don't think I have the fortitude to go messing around in outlaw territory."

"Well, good. Because if you wanted to, I'd have to follow you, you know? We've been living on top of each other since we were kids. Seems a waste to throw aside all those years of partnership. If you ran off to join some outlaw gang, I'd have to go with you."

"I'm not interested in joining anybody else's gang,"

Everett said. "I was just thinking about how men like that, they don't seem afraid of anything. And you're good at that. Not being afraid. I always thought you'd fit in with them."

"I'm flattered,"

Marshall drawled. "I ever get bored of cattle ranching, I'll be sure to look Kelly up and see if he'll take me after all, since you're recommending me so highly. I bet he'll have made a real name for himself, by then."

He stretched out long, kicking a stick of wood with the pointed toe of his boot to flip it into the fire. "What would you do, if you weren't scared of anything? Since you've clearly been thinking about it, and all."

Everett was quiet for a long minute.

Contemplative, like he was giving Marshall's question more thought than it deserved.

Overhead, the clouds rolled over the moon, and the night darkened.

Slowly, Everett got to his feet, setting his flask aside to weave around the fire, coming to stand in front of Marshall.

Marshall's heart kicked up, anticipating something he didn't dare voice.

Hardly even dared believe it, not till Everett sank to his knees in the sparse grass.

Eyes downcast, voice low, low enough to shake off the trappings that this might be a booze-soaked joke.

He put his hand on Marshall's knee, the touch unassuming at first, like a dog politely begging for its master's attention.

But when he moved it higher, there was no misinterpreting his intent.

"Just say yes?"

Marshall shouldn't, not when Everett couldn't look him in the eye.

But he wanted, and he'd been wanting, and he was man enough to admit that he'd imagined a scene almost exactly like this more than once before.

There were a dozen good reasons to turn Everett down the way Marshall had practice turning down men who made advances he didn't want for whatever reason, the kind of rejection that made it easy for everyone involved to deny that there'd ever been an advance made in the first place.

But every one of those reasons dried up like dust when Marshall held them against Everett's big dark eyes, the way he smiled out of the corner of his mouth when he was pretending Marshall wasn't funny, the way his hands moved knotting ropes, the shape of him in blue jeans and leather, his skin in the moonlight.

He'd been watching Everett for so long, memorizing every detail and mannerism without ever supposing that Everett might be looking at him the same way.

If Marshall were a smarter man, more cautious, he would've questioned it.

Would've refused until Everett could at least look at him and tell him what he wanted.

But he was an animal of easy urges he'd never seen reason to deny, not when what he wanted was offering to crawl right into his lap.

He reached for Everett, meaning to draw him up, wanting to kiss him the way he wanted to kiss any man he tangled with, warm and wet and easy.

Everett jerked back like Marshall had put the muzzle of his Colt Paterson revolver to Everett's temple instead of cupping his face in one hand.

"Not like that,"

Everett said, gone still as stone.

Despite the way his heart contracted at the denial, Marshall went along with it.

If Everett was the one setting the pace, that couldn't leave the man any room for regret.

Shame didn't come naturally to Marshall, so he underestimated just how deep it ran in his friend.

All the way down to the bones, and then some.



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:19 pm*

“Sorry I couldn’t love you the way you wanted,”

Everett mumbled.

“Nothing to be sorry for,”

Marshall lied. “We did okay.”

“No, we could’ve done better. I could’ve given you what you wanted if I tried harder.”

“Don’t work that way.”

Everett shifted against Marshall’s chest, restless and uncomfortable, the fever making him jittery and the chills making his jaw clench and his hand tremble.

He tried to push back against Marshall’s groin.

Pulling in a ragged breath, Marshall pressed a kiss to Everett’s temple, over his hair.

He stank like alcohol, like an open wound gone off, and Marshall wanted to cry.

Everett twisted to face him, pressing closer, gripping him hard with his knees, their belt buckles catching.

“You oughtta rest,”

Marshall said reluctantly, holding him at bay.

“I know I’m not thinking right. Mind’s running in circles and they keep getting smaller and smaller, honing in on this one fixation where I just want—”

Everett broke off to swallow. Marshall watched his throat move, heard it click.

“I want such awful things,”

Everett admitted wretchedly. “Worse than before.”

Worse things than he used to want, or the same things wanted more badly, Marshall wasn’t clear.

Wasn’t convinced Everett would be able to articulate it in this state, anyhow.

Exhausted and heartsick, Marshall tried to catch Everett’s face between his hands.

Just like before, Everett jerked back, this time with his teeth bared like a cornered dog, the whites of his eyes shining.

“Don’t you kiss me like some faggot,”

Everett warned, and then Marshall was the one jerking back like he’d been hit. “You want to fuck me, fucking do it. But don’t — You can’t just—”

“That’s the fever talking,”

Marshall said firmly, disentangling from him.

Marshall wasn’t naïve, and he wasn’t sheltered.

He knew how men talked, what they thought.

If Everett had been in his right mind, Marshall would've knocked every pansy-assed insult from his mouth like loose teeth.

But Everett had never talked to him like that in his right mind, not even drunk, not even after that night under the moon.

Marshall wrapped his fist in the sweat-damp bedsheets instead of driving it into Everett's blood-stained mouth.

"Lay back and quit making things worse,"

he ordered. "Let me take care of you and you'll be all right."

Everett shook his head furiously and tried to crawl forward, dragging himself over the bedcovers as Marshall retreated.

"Isn't this what you wanted? You wanted me to want you back.

So, finish what I started that night.

Can't get worse than this, can we?"

When he advanced again, Marshall caught him by the shoulder to hold him off.

Everett's expression turned cold and calculating like Marshall had never seen.

Like Everett had been carved away and underneath was nothing but mean hunger.

It unsettled every one of Marshall's natural instincts, as unnerving as a dousing of ice

water.

Clarity cut through him like a bullet.

Whatever was sitting there facing him on that bed wasn't his friend anymore.

They both sat unmoving for a second, waiting to see what the other would do.

Marshall's revolver was on the dresser beside the lamp.

He didn't take his eyes off Everett's face, but he knew exactly how far he had to reach to grab it.

Everett growled, a deep animal rumbling from out of his chest.

His lips curled, flashing inflamed gums, new teeth pressing out like an infected boil trying to burst.

When Marshall recoiled, Everett lunged.

Marshall dragged Everett's back against his chest again, wrapping one arm over Everett's collarbones to keep him pinned.

Everett thrashed and snarled, trying to smash the back of his skull into Marshall's face, to sink his teeth into Marshall's forearm.

He was a rabid dog, stinking with fever and fighting with more strength than he should have left.

He wasn't fighting to escape but to deal as much damage as he could, snapping his teeth like he wanted to rip out Marshall's throat.

Marshall was at a disadvantage, trying not to hurt him in return.

Marshall hoped Everett would exhaust himself or pass out from blood loss before Marshall got tired.

If he didn't — if his brain was boiling too hot for his body to recognize its own limits — that didn't leave Marshall too many options.

If he was a sick dog, a lame horse, that poor disembowelled steer, Marshall would've done him a kindness and put him down.

But Everett was the boy he'd grown up alongside, the man he'd spent more hours of his life with than anyone else in the world.

The only one he'd loved in years, long before that fat July moon when Everett had come onto him, red-faced even in the dark, and Marshall had been too pathetically hopeful, his brain too full of longing and bullshit poetry, the same bullshit poetry he'd stolen glances of from Everett's weather-beaten chapbooks over the years, to turn him down like he should have.

The minute Everett hadn't let Marshall kiss him was when he should've called it off, pretended stumbling drunkenness, pretended he couldn't remember anything the next day.

Marshall had an obligation to put him down before things got worse.

Because it wasn't just a matter of watching Everett suffer through a bad fever, or trying to find him a doctor before gangrene took hold.

Marshall had seen that monster outside.

He knew what fate had in store for the man, even if Everett didn't.

Everett writhed in his grasp, his eyes rolling back as he moaned and shuddered like his body wasn't his own.

"Hurts,"

he panted. "Hurts, god, Marshall, let me—"

He bucked, teeth snapping an inch from Marshall's throat with a rough, barking growl.

"Don't you fucking bite me,"

Marshall growled back, shoving Everett off him, too rough for the man's injury. Everett fell off the edge of the bed to the floor, landing on one hip, his arms still twisted up out of the way with Marshall's knots.

"Let me,"

Everett begged, his voice a rough and ragged thing.

He hardly sounded like himself.

Marshall didn't know what exactly what he was begging for anymore, a touch or a fuck or a bite out of Marshall's throat.

He doubted Everett knew for sure himself.

Everett twisted onto his knees, hunched forward for balance.

Tears tracked salty trails through the blood and dirt on his face; Marshall couldn't recall ever seeing him cry before.

The tears were bad enough, but his eyes — his eyes were looking strange in the lamplight.

When he turned so the light hit them at just the right angle, they looked flatly reflective, like a wild animal's in the dark.

Marshall had to shoot him.

No way around it.

And he had to do it now, before Everett's body twisted itself into that monstrous inhuman thing Marshall had killed outside.

He pulled in a shaky breath, flexing his hand before pressing it flat against his thigh to steady it.

He swung both legs over the edge of the bed, boots planted flat on the floor.

Everett keened, swaying, eyes shut under his sweaty hair, face turned to Marshall's knees with his bloody teeth bared, nose wrinkled like a predator's snarl.

In his mind, Marshall held onto the image of Everett as he'd been the day before: still whole, still human, with his soft brown eyes and an easy smile.

Everett's sweat had turned from the sickly scent of terror to wild animal musk, pungent and ripe.

He'd been on his knees under that full moon, too.

Maybe Everett was right, and that night had set some kind of devil on them.

Not in retaliation for the act itself — Marshall had fucked around with his share of men, and nothing and nobody had ever struck him down for it — but in punishment for being careless with his best friend.

For taking him up on his offer even though Everett couldn't meet his eyes or articulate what it was he was asking for.

Marshall knew better than to get involved with a man like that, but he'd gone and done it anyway, and now Everett was the one getting ripped apart for it.

Maybe that fever was spreading.

Those weren't any kind of rational thoughts.

Then again, that beast lying dead outside with a man in its belly wasn't rational, either.

Marshall reached for his revolver on the dresser. "I'm sorry,"

he whispered. His voice cracked.

Everett's eyes snapped open, meeting his, and for an instant, he was himself again. Scared and bleeding out, hurt bad enough to die from it, kneeling bound on the floor at Marshall's feet.

"You're all right,"

Marshall said hoarsely.



He tested his grip on the Colt, the familiar weight of it uncomfortable now, enamel grip worn smooth, silver barrel licked red by the firelight.

The 140 Colt Paterson was Marshall's prized possession, passed down to him from his daddy.

Not as powerful as his double-barrel shotgun, but that thing would take Everett's head clean off.

The revolver would kill him just as dead, but he'd still have a face when it was done.

Marshall hesitated.

He wasn't sure which option was worse.

To have his friend looking up at him from the corpse, or to obliterate him so totally, he could pretend it wasn't Everett he'd killed at all.

He'd never killed anyone before and never imagined he might.

"I didn't want to hurt you,"

Everett said helplessly. The lamplight glowed against his brown eyes.

"It's okay,"

Marshall lied. More honestly, "It's not your fault."

Everett managed some semblance of a smile that hurt to see.

Then, he screamed.

His back bowed forward until his forehead hit the floor hard enough to rattle his skull.

Marshall scrambled back onto the bed, pressing himself against the far wall, body reacting in an instinctive panic before his brain caught on.

The Colt was clumsy in his hand; he couldn't aim it at Everett the way he needed to.

On the floor, Everett reached for him, his arms still bound tight to his body, leaving him struggling to push himself towards the bed on his knees and chest, twisting from one shoulder to the other, craning his neck trying to catch Marshall in his sights.

His body broke, wrenching itself apart.

Marshall could hear the crack of bones and crunch of vertebrae under the scream that ripped from Everett's throat like a howl.

His blood-soaked shirt tore at the seams as the devil in Everett's body fought its way out.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:19 pm*

Blinding agony.

There was hardly an atom of Everett's body still in his control.

One arm useless, both of them tied, and his legs too weak to stand on.

Belly starving for awful things and an infected brain spinning his thoughts in feverish circles, fixating on everything he shouldn't want.

The only thing he could do was scream.

Under his shirt, around his spine, the wicked hungry thing that had got its teeth in him to devour him from the inside out cracked apart the two flanks of his back ribs to arch out from its cage of flesh and bone, a gristly, blood-matted thing.

Throat shredded, vocal cords torn, Everett's screams turned wet and hoarse.

Through the throbbing red of his vision, he saw Marshall, crouching frozen by the headboard, his expression a mask of perfect horror that made Everett's stomach flip in one last push of panic.

The devil in him clawed its way out, pulling free its ugly, toothy snout, then its legs, two at a time.

Its breath was damp and rancid against the back of his neck as it hunched over him like a shell.

It was bigger than he was, a heavy weight pressing him down.

He stared up at Marshall from between its forelegs as it shook its head, its ruff falling into place as the fur settled.

Blood sprayed the floor and flecked the bedcovers.

He knelt as the beast surrounded him like a pelt, its ribs enclosing him in a dread embrace, drawing him up into its belly, towards its spine.

His shirt hung in tatters off his shoulders, his good arm free, the harness pulled apart.

He reached desperately for Marshall, like the man could take his hand and pull him out of the creature that had claimed him.

“Help me,”

he croaked, straining forward.

With the beast torn out of him, it was like it had taken with it every awful thought and violent urge.

He felt empty, like a sawdust doll: no blood, no bones, no hope, just thin skin in the rough shape of a person.

He couldn't blame Marshall for not taking his hand.

Everything Everett had said and done, everything he hadn't said and failed to do, every avoided word and glance and touch; in Marshall's place, he might not have wanted to save himself, either.

He wasn't even sure there was enough of him left to be worth saving.

But the animal instinct for life, that bone-deep terror of dying, and dying messy at the teeth of a predator, kept driving him forward.

It wouldn't let him give up.

Even though the easiest thing for him and Marshall both would be for him to go quiet and limp and let the beast finish him off without any more fight.

But he clawed against the floor, digging broken fingernails into the seams between the boards, trying to keep himself from being consumed completely.

Marshall grasped his hand and the touch shocked a current through Everett. His palm was slick with sweat, Everett's sticky with blood, but his grip was like a vice.

It wasn't enough to drag him out. The beast's grip on Everett was stronger. Through the beast's filthy fur, Marshall's gaze met Everett's, terrified but determined. They both understood that Everett wasn't going anywhere.

"Finish it,"

Everett begged.

The beast's ribs encircled him, holding him tight as the thing's meat and muscle knit itself around him like he was an exposed bone that needed to be brought back inside.

Marshall's revolver was in the hand that wasn't holding onto Everett.

The gun was raised, safety cocked, but Marshall didn't pull the trigger.

His hand shook, the revolver's nose wavering between the beast's snarling head and Everett's face.

He couldn't do it, Everett realized, any more than Everett could have shot him in the same position.

Everett let go of his hand to fumble blindly for the gun. "Give it to me. You don't have to do it, I won't make you, it's okay, I'll do it myself—"

"Shut up,"

Marshall retorted.

Everett fell back, hurt and confused.

"Shut up, I've got you. I owe you. Listen,"

Marshall said frantically, dashing aside his tears. "Trust me. Close your eyes. Okay? Shut them. I got you."

The beast on top of him snarled and gnashed its teeth, gusting hot, rotten breath in Marshall's face.

For a split second, Everett could see out of the beast's eyes instead of his own.

The room was red, hazy at the edges like it was full of smoke, and Marshall was a pulsing shape made of tender meat and bones to gnaw.

Everett flinched.

The beast's body closed around him, smothering him in matted, manky fur, choking

him against the slide of wet muscle.

Tendons wrapped him into the beast's flesh like a spider wrapping its victim-fly in silk.

They tied him to the beast's bones where nerve paths zipped over him, overwriting his own body's.

His hand was the last to go, fingers stretching towards his friend, towards the gun, before they too were swallowed in a tangle of dense fur.

"Close your eyes,"

he heard again, and he scrunched them shut tight, refusing to look out with the beast's hungry red vision to see his friend as something to be mauled and devoured.

The revolver cracked.

Then there was nothing.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:19 pm*

Marshall stared at the monster slumped on the cabin floor.

The bullet had torn straight through its skull, a neat entry wound between its eyes and a gaping hole at the back of its head, spattering fur and bits of bone and brain out behind it.

The bullet had shattered one of the window panes in its wake, disappearing into the night, leaving a monstrous corpse behind without the thing that killed it.

Weak-kneed and wobbly as a newborn calf, Marshall took a step towards the thing.

It didn't move.

Not a twitch, not a breath.

It was as lifeless as the one he'd killed outside earlier that night.

Carefully, Marshall raised one foot to dig the toe of his boot into the thing's ribs.

It shifted under the pressure, but didn't move on its own.

Marshall's fear was rapidly retreating to make room for the gaping hollow of loss.

Hooking his boot under the monster, he turned it onto its side.

There was nothing underneath, no second body.



Just a pool of sticky dark blood, thick with the pulp of flesh and viscera, slowly soaking into the wood.

Everett had been fully subsumed by the beast before Marshall shot it.

He hooked a lasso around its neck and dragged it into the open air so the stench could dissipate.

By lamplight, he sliced the thing open from sternum to groin, praying he wasn't too late.

Hope felt foreign and very far away.

The carcass stank like rot and offal, but instead of intestines spooling into the dirt, a bare arm fell out from between the ribs to land palm-up against the ground.

Marshall rocked back onto his heels, staring at it.

Afraid to see the rest.

The fingers twitched.

Cursing, Marshall hurried to toss aside his knife and grasp Everett's arm above the wrist, shoving at the heavy ribs to lift that hunk of meat and bone out of the way.

He pulled Everett out like a caesarean section, first with resistance, then all at once.

Everett slipped from the monster's innards into the mud, where he lay like a maggot hatched inside a carcass that had never seen the light of day.

He trembled and twitched like a dog in a dream.

Marshall watched and waited, clinging tight to Everett's hand, committing his friend's face to memory in case whatever woke was something monstrous.

With his other hand, he drew his Colt and held it ready.

If his first shot hadn't done what was needed, he couldn't hesitate a second time.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:19 pm*

Everett stirred, the effort disproportionate to the resulting movement, like struggling to wake from sleep paralysis.

Some horrible nightmare had him in its grasp, trying to eat him alive.

But now, the waking world was in reach again.

Cool metal touched his forehead, the kiss of a gun, gently drawing across his skin to move his filthy strings of hair from out of his eyes.

When he shifted, the touch abruptly withdrew.

He tried to speak, but he couldn't unclench his teeth.

His voice came out a weak, strangled groan from between tight jaws.

His name, in Marshall's voice.

He clung to the sound like the end of a rope, using it to drag himself back to the surface like a rescue from a tar pit.

When Everett managed to open his eyes, his vision was glassy and disoriented.

He looked around blindly, his pupils big and round, unreactive, left hand groping over the ground to orient himself.

His right arm was gone below the elbow, the torn flesh and chewed-up bones left

behind somewhere in the monster.

Clumsily, he pushed himself to his knees.

A hand caught his, warm sweat meeting sticky viscera again, and he sharpened, looking around until he could find Marshall's shape in the smog smothering his sight.

There he was, broad shoulders curled forward as he knelt in the dirt, still holding his revolver in his other hand, the barrel ready to put itself to Everett's temple at the slightest direction from its master.

Everett stared at him, willing his image to clear, willing the cabin behind him to solidify into something real.

His heart kicked, his breath hitched as his body tried to recalibrate after having been ripped apart and born again.

He had been something else for a while, like there had been some parasite inside him that had sunk roots into his nervous system, into his very thoughts, insidious and all-consuming.

He had been nurturing it for a long time, feeding it morsels of guilt and shame and self-loathing until there was nothing left of him, his whole body turned to rotten fertilizer in the hungry mouth of that monstrous thing.

He had assumed it would only eat him.

His vision cleared — not entirely, just enough to shove those blotchy catfish back to the peripheries — and Marshall solidified from an outline into a living, breathing man.

Even if he looked wrecked, he was alive and whole, more so than Everett.

With a croak of Marshall's name, Everett crawled into his lap, curling his half-arm around Marshall's shoulders to bury his face in the man's chest, breathing him in.

Everett was warm, but not hot, the fever abated, the blood loss slowed.

Marshall went still, Everett's teeth too close to his throat for trust or comfort.

But Everett didn't bite. That urge had been exorcised along with the fever. Like Marshall had shot its brain out.

"Don't let me go,"

Everett said over Marshall's heart.

Carefully, Marshall raised his other hand to Everett's back, mindful of his finger on the trigger. Everett shuddered against him, raising his face to meet Marshall's searching gaze.

He looked hesitant, cautious, still holding that gun without squeezing the trigger. He looked like he had that night when Everett had offered him half of what he wanted but kept the rest in reserve. Part hopeful, part resigned.

As slowly as Marshall had done, Everett put his hand to Marshall's face, cupping one cheek.

His vision still wasn't quite right, like the monster had been in the process of taking his eyes for its own.

Maybe his sight would come back as the rest of his body mended; maybe it was permanently damaged alongside his arm.

His gaze held unsteadily on Marshall as Everett shifted closer, carefully leaning in

until he could press their lips together, Marshall's chapped and Everett's bloody.

Everett's heart kicked as hard as a mule, as scared of a chaste kiss as he had been when that thing was killing him — more scared, because he knew he was going to survive this and keep going afterwards.

Everett tasted like rust and iron and he smelled like a slaughterhouse, but Marshall held still against him, no withdrawal, no rejection.

When Everett pulled back, what little blood was left in his body burned in his face.

Marshall stared at him a moment, lips parted, words caught in his chest.

"I'm sorry,"

Everett said in a cracked voice.

He was still holding Marshall's face, palm pressed flat to his cheek, thumb brushing his cheekbone, fingers curled behind his ear.

Marshall was perfectly still under the touch, still as a spooked horse, but his eyes weren't afraid anymore.

They were round and wondrous, the same grey-blue as the pre-dawn, sparkling with stars.

With that monster ripped out of him, it was easy now for Everett to realize everything in Marshall he had been missing.

"I should have done that from day one,"

he admitted.

Dropping his revolver, Marshall wrapped Everett tight in both arms, hauling him as close as he could get.

For once, Everett went willingly, fully sitting in Marshall's lap, chest to chest, his knees around Marshall's waist.

They sat together like that as the sun climbed over the broad, flat plains to the east, turning the tall points of the spruce and pines throughout the western foothills from black to green and painting the sky and the mountains.

Everett pressed his face to Marshall's throat, where he could feel his pulse thudding strong and steady like he'd once felt it in other places that somehow didn't feel as intimate as this.

Marshall held him tight like he could put Everett back together, but Everett didn't want to be the man he used to be.

That man was dead, and for the better.

Dawn washed the sky pink like blood diluted in a basin, and as the night retreated, Everett's head cleared.

The catfish diminished to fingerlings; he expected them to linger, swimming around the edges of his eyes, until he gave his body permission to start the long recovery from everything he had put it through.

Over Marshall's shoulder, the cabin lightened, and, though Everett never wanted to see it again, it was still a better sight than the corpses disembowelled by the door.

Two hulking beasts with blood-matted fur, and one man, emaciated to the point of skeletonization.

Everett got to his feet, clutching Marshall's shoulder for support, and staggered closer for a better look.

Whoever the man had been — and Everett had an awful suspicion that he knew — he was unrecognizable now, features sloughing off the bone to pool into the mud like he'd been dead for months or years already, and the inscrutable process of decay was only now trying to catch up.

Everett crossed his good arm over his chest, holding onto his opposite shoulder like he could keep the remains of his body in one piece.

He couldn't know whether it was really that Québécois boy.

He hoped his suspicion was just another one of the devil's tricks.

But he couldn't know.

From behind, Marshall approached to steady him.

"We'll burn the bodies,"

Marshall said in a low voice. "All of them. No need to risk anyone coming across this mess in a grave, no matter how deep."

Wordlessly, Everett nodded his assent.

Marshall tied off the remains of Everett's arm above the elbow before they did anything else.

It was gone at the joint, the bleeding stopped and the wound sluggishly beginning to scab over, like he had left the infection behind along with the rest.



His back was stiff, the skin knotted and ropy where the beast had broken through; it would heal into layers of scar tissue like he'd been whipped, but it would keep itself in one piece.

As the pain settled into a dull, dreamlike throb, strangely detached from the rest of his body like his ordeal inside the monster was a solid line drawn in between the trauma of the attack and his current body, Everett's gaze fell on Marshall's shotgun by the cabin door.

"My Yellowboy?"

he asked hoarsely.

"I left it where you dropped it,"

Marshall said, dragging the corpses into a heap some distance from the cabin. Their blood had killed the grass under them where they had lain. "We'll go back for it."

"I won't be able to shoot it,"

Everett realized.

His rifle was his pride and joy, carried with him from the first time he had left home to make his own way in the world, even if that had only been as far as Marshall's daddy's ranch.

It had accompanied him on every cattle drive, every trek he and Marshall made across the plains from the Big Muddy to the Rocky Mountains and back again.

Marshall's revolver had been passed down to him from his daddy; Everett's Winchester Yellowboy didn't have the family history, and it didn't pack as strong a punch as Marshall's double-barrel shotgun.

He wasn't as quick a shot as Marshall, either.

But he was good at a distance; he had the kind of patience and stillness to pick off a target the size of an apple from over a hundred metres.

He hadn't been fast enough to shoot that beast dead before it was on him, but that wasn't his rifle's fault.

He loved that gun, and he knew it like the back of his own hand.

It wasn't the pain or his newly off-balance body that drove home the fact that he'd lost his arm.

It was the realization that he was now one hand short of being able to wield the rifle he'd learned to shoot with.

It felt like losing a friend.

He had already almost lost Marshall last night; he wasn't going to let another one go.

Marshall dropped the last corpse in the pile to be cremated, letting go of the lasso he used to pull them into place before fetching the lamp.

He stood over the corpses for a moment before swinging the lamp down to smash over the rigid shoulders of the topmost beast.

Once the fur was good and drenched with oil, he flicked his lighter, then stood back to watch it burn.

The stench of burning hair and something worse filled Everett's nostrils, but he forced himself not to turn away.

He kept his gaze fixed on the human body as the flames took it.

He hoped, if it really was that Québécois boy, that he hadn't been responsible for his death.

He hoped, if it had to be him, that he had died of natural causes and the beast had only stolen his body to haunt Everett.

Above all, he hoped he was still alive and well, and this was only a nightmare likeness designed to torment him.

Without being able to remember his name, Everett could never know.

He mouthed a prayer to commend the body's soul to rest in heaven and watched them all, whatever they were, burn.

He kept praying until the smoke curled thick enough to finally obscure the makeshift crematorium. It felt like being loosened from the grip of a strangling fist. The night was over; they were dead, and he wasn't.

"Hey,"

Everett said. His voice was rough, throat still raw from screaming, but Marshall looked over immediately like he'd spoken clear as a bell. "Do you think sometime later on, once I'm healed up, you could teach me some left-handed trick shooting?"

Marshall broke into a smile, as much relieved by the fact that Everett was planning for the future as he was to be asked, Everett suspected.

"Sure, of course."

It would be easy to give up, Everett conceded.

He'd seen other men throw out what was left of their lives after an injury like that.

But he had seen just as many others figure out their new bodies, let wounds heal to scabs, then scar over, and keep going.

He had survived, even when he had been sure of death, even when he had been more than ready for it.

He had survived the whole past month, even when the shame of what he'd done seemed determined to drag him into an early grave and eat him alive like maggots festering in an open wound.

He had left that shame behind in the smothering body of the beast along with his arm.

Under the exhaustion, under the trauma and the blood loss, he felt lighter than he had in years, like he had shed something more substantial than flesh and bone.

He hadn't died then, so he wasn't willing to die now.

Not before he had the chance to see what life might be like without his own self-loathing consuming him.

Limping forward, still clutching his opposite shoulder, Everett joined Marshall in front of the grisly cremation.

They stood side by side, watching the flames eat into the pile of corpses, fat crackling, liquid spitting, noxious black smoke curling up before dissipating among the dawn clouds.

They would stand there, shoulder to shoulder, until the whole miserable pile had crumbled to ash.

Marshall would kick through it, scattering the cremains to the breeze until every speck was strewn across the Prairies with no hope of ever reuniting.

Everett watched it like it was his own funeral rites, the man he used to be reduced to char, every fear and guilt ripped out of him and set aflame.

By dusk, he would have his beloved Yellowboy back in his hand.

The next day, they would recover their horses, grazing alongside the herd, which had been unbothered since that calamitous night.

By week's end, they would reach Bar U Ranch in the Porcupine Hills under guard of the Rocky Mountains, and Everett would see a doctor there to clean up his arm and his back, and ply him with enough laudanum to take the edge off the pain, which by then would have settled into a gut-deep ache that was somehow preferable to the nervous gnawing dread he'd lived with for so long beforehand.

And someday after that, when he and Marshall were riding east again, just the two of them and their horses and their guns heading home to Saskatchewan, Everett would kiss Marshall, as unafraid as any hard-blooded outlaw, in broad daylight under the wide-open skies of the badlands.

The End