

Buck Walker was a good man. He had a big hat and an even bigger smile. He wandered into the saloon every evening for a drink after his shift ended over at the sheriff's station. His wife, Caroline, was the talk of the town; delicate features, dark hair piled on top of her head, clothes fashioned with intricate embroidery and the kind of fabric only former cityfolk could afford. Everyone was shocked when she got him to settle down, but he did — talk of children and everything. But there was no questioning why she loved him — he was a funny, charming, chivalrous fellow. He put away bandits and outlaws and made cheerful small talk with the townsmen and their wives whenever he'd see them on the street. He'd treat horses kindly and let trouble-making kids off with a warning. He was a good man. Everyone loved him.

Which was why finding his killer was bound to be a challenge.

Devil's Ridge never lived up to its name. It was a quiet town full of quiet people. The only deaths in these parts were from natural causes. But on that dry summer morning, as the townspeople gathered in worry at the edge of Copper Canyon and the new sheriff ushered us back, they brought up Buck Walker's body, draped in white cloth.

Caroline was inconsolable. She stood near the sheriff with Abigail Parker, the barmaid. Abigail knew the Walkers personally — they'd struck up a friendship years ago, when Buck first started his nightly tradition of dropping by the saloon after work. She and Caroline clung to each other now, devastated with grief.

I made my way through the crowd towards them to give my condolences, but I was blocked by the new sheriff, who seemed to appear out of nowhere.

“Sorry, ma’am. I’d give them space, if I were you. I don’t think they were so happy with my line of questioning.”

She was a taller woman, with red lips, eyes the colour of the desert sky, and black hair curling out from under the wide brim of her hat. Instead of a dress, she wore white boots and black chaps like a man would, a faded bandana tied loosely around her throat. I’d seen her around before, always at Buck’s side. I had heard from Abigail that the two were childhood buddies. She was sheriff over in Silverwood until her brother took over.

I held out a hand to shake hers. “Winona Winchester. I don’t think I caught your name, Sheriff.”

“Cassidy Hudson. Lovely to meet you, partner.”

“And you, ma’am. As I understand it, you and Mr. Walker were close. My condolences.”

“Thank you, Miss Winchester,” she said, her gaze darkening. “And as I understand it, you were the last person to see him alive.”

I started, eyes widening. “I was?”

She nodded. “Miss Parker told me you were with him at the saloon last night. She said by the time she returned from the back room, he’d gone. And this morning, Jessie Wyatt found the body. Between dusk last night and dawn today, Buck was unaccounted for.”

I knew Jessie, though not very well. He was a quiet gentleman who spent most of his time at the stables. But he always tipped his hat at me when I passed.

“If you don’t mind me asking, Sheriff — you mentioned Caroline and Abigail weren’t pleased with you. Why?”

Cassidy ducked her head. “Well, ma’am. It’s never pleasant being accused of murder.”

My hand went to my chest in surprise, an instinct. “Oh, no, Sheriff. They couldn’t, either of them. All due respect, but I know this town better than you do.”

“Perhaps you’d better come back to the station with me, then,” she said, glancing towards Abigail and Caroline. “Bring them, too.”

She disappeared into the crowd before I could blink, leaving me to collect Buck’s friend and his widow.

The three of us sat in a row in front of Cassidy’s desk. I stared at the single jail cell bitterly, hoping to soon see Buck’s killer behind the bars. Cassidy entered solemnly. She removed her hat and set it down carefully on her desk, before taking a seat and folding her hands in front of her.

“Good morning, ladies. I won’t take up too much of your time.”

None of us spoke.

“Mrs. Walker. Once again, you have my sympathies.”

Caroline glared back at her, eyes still puffy and rimmed with red.

“I didn’t mean to offend. You understand I need to rule out all the possibilities if I’m to bring Buck’s killer to justice.”

“Ask me anything,” Caroline spat. “But you come into *my* town and accuse me of *murdering my husband* — don’t expect cordiality.”

"I wouldn't dream of it, ma'am," Cassidy said gently. She glanced between us. "Now. Is there anything at all you can tell me about last night?"

"I dropped by the saloon around sunset for a nightcap and a chat with Abigail," I said. "Buck was there at the bar for his whiskey, just like every day. He left around dusk."

"Where were you three last night?" Cassidy asked.

"I stayed at the saloon with Abigail until she closed up shop.. We walked home together."

"I live with my sister and her kids. It's a small place. They'd know if I'd left," Abigail added. "And Winona, she lives above her shop. If the bell on the door rang, during the night, the whole town would have heard."

Cassidy turned her attention back to Caroline. "What about you, Mrs. Walker? You didn't find it suspicious when Buck never came home?"

She bristled. "I retired early. My leg was killing me from a fall off a horse the other day. I was at home all night, could barely walk."

"Is there any chance it was an accident?" Cassidy speculated. "He had too much to drink, wandered too close to the canyon, and fell?"

Abigail shook her head. "He only had one glass of whiskey. Just like always."

A brisk knock on the door cut her off. A man I didn't recognize entered. "Sheriff Hudson. Just came from the coroners. Buck Walker was stabbed. This was definitely a murder."

"That answers that question," Cassidy muttered. "What else can you tell me, Jack?"

“Three stab wounds to the stomach, but it was the fall that killed him — cracked his skull on the rocks. His toes were broken, too, but that was perimortem. He probably tried to kick his attacker away,” Jack explained. “Murder weapon was a hunting knife, serrated at the base.”

“I’d better have a look for myself,” Cassidy thought aloud, picking up her hat and pushing back her chair.

“Am I still needed here, Sheriff Hudson?” Caroline snapped. “Or may I go plan my husband’s funeral?”

“Of course, Mrs. Walker. Thank you for your time.” Cassidy nodded towards us as she stood to follow the man to examine Buck’s fatal wounds. “Miss Parker. Miss Winchester.” Her eyes lingered on me, and we exchanged a glance as she left.

Abigail squeezed Caroline’s shoulder as she bid us farewell. I watched her go, shaking my head with sorrow. She was far too young to be a widow. Abigail took my arm, returning me to the present.

“I’ll walk you back to your shop,” she offered.

“Actually,” I said, “I’d like to swing by the stables first.”

Jessie Wyatt wore his hat pulled low over his eyes, and his boots were scuffed and muddy. His blond hair fell to his shoulders, tied half-up, and he barely spared us a

glance as we entered. He stood with a chestnut-brown mare, running a brush carefully along her side – she belonged to Sheriff Walker, I thought. Or, well, she used to.

“Good morning, Mr. Wyatt,” Abigail said kindly.

He quirked a half smile in response, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Morning, ladies. Sorry for the mess.” He gestured around at the tools scattered on the benches and tables, the hay dusting the floors.

“Oh, please. You’re the groomer, Jessie. Not your fault the stable boy doesn’t do his job.” I kept my tone lighthearted and my smile warm as I detached from Abigail and began to wander.

“How are y’all holding up? I know you and Buck were friends.”

Abigail and I exchanged a look. “Caroline is worse off than us,” she said finally. “All we can do is stick around for her.”

“What happened this morning, sir?” I asked casually. “At the canyon?”

Jessie sighed. “I really don’t know. I was just out for an early ride. I was over on the opposite side of the canyon when I saw the body. I rushed back, checked over the side to be sure, and went to see Sheriff Hudson first thing.”

I froze. My eye caught on something glinting on a workstation at the back of the stable. I walked slowly between the stalls towards it.

“What’d he look like?” Abigail asked behind me with morbid curiosity.

He sighed again. “It was bad, Miss Parker. You ever seen a body?”

“No.”

“I’d keep it that way.”

I pushed a small, empty satchel out of the way to uncover the gleaming object that had my attention and held it up towards the light to examine it. It was a hunting knife, the handle made from polished dark cherry wood. It was beautiful, and good quality – must have been expensive. But the part that mattered was the blade: smooth and sharp, with serrated edges at the base.

I caught Abigail’s eye over the stalls and tilted the knife into her line of sight. Her eyes widened and she opened her mouth to speak, but I quickly shook my head.

“Go on early rides often?” I asked the groomer.

“Every day. Helps me clear my mind.”

“Where’d you get this knife, Jessie?”

He looked up, peering over at it. “Oh. That’s Buck’s. Has a couple just like it – got ‘em in a set as, a gift from Sheriff Hudson when she first came around. He lent it to me. Mind bringing that back to Caroline, if you see her before I do?”

“Sure thing,” I called back, sliding the knife into the small sheath that lay beside it.

“We’d better go, Winona.” Abigail shot me a pointed look and I nodded.

“Yes. Good to see you, Jessie.”

“You too, ma’am. Always a pleasure.”

*A pleasure indeed*, I thought, mind whirling like a dust storm in the flats.

The gallows in our town weren't used often. We didn't get a lot of outlaws around these parts, none that warranted a hanging. Until the murder of Sheriff Walker.

I stood beside Cassidy as Jack repaired the rotten wood of the platform for the execution later today.

"How'd he plead?" I asked without turning towards her.

"Not guilty. But he had the murder weapon and no alibi, and he was the one to find the body. As for motive... maybe he wanted Caroline."

Apprehension pooled in my stomach. We had the evidence, but a part of me worried. Jessie didn't seem like the type to kill for the heart of a woman. He didn't seem like the type to kill at all.

"If you'll excuse me," I mumbled. "I think I'll grab a drink."

Cassidy touched my shoulder. "You alright?"

"Fine."

"Hey. You helped catch a killer," she said, offering a small smile of reassurance. "Buck's killer. This whole town owes you for that. *I* owe you."

"Thank you, Sheriff," I said half-heartedly. "I'll be at the saloon."

She nodded and let me go.

I stopped on the porch of the saloon. The lights were off, but Abigail wasn't at the town square, so I knew she'd be there. I reached for the doors, but stopped short at the voices that reached me from inside.



“You’re *insane*.”

That was Abigail. She sounded... scared.

“Don’t lose it on me now,” a second voice hissed. “With Buck, I got lucky. But I want Hudson dead, too, and she’s far too clever.”

“*Why?*” Abigail asked in despair. “Why’d you kill Buck?”

“He was spending far too much time with his new *partner*.” She spat out the word like it tasted foul.

“Oh, yes,” Abigail snapped. “Because God forbid a man and a woman be friends, without having an affair.”

“So you’re not with me?”

“No. *No*. Of course not!”

“So be it.”

A rustling noise followed, which I realized too late was the drawing of a gun. I burst through the doors, but I wasn’t fast enough. The shot fired through Abigail’s heart, and Caroline Walker turned towards me, the smoking revolver in her hand and a snarl twisted across her delicate features.

“What are you *doing?*”

“Just cleaning up my mess,” she said coldly. She took a step in my direction, and her stride faltered. Of course – I should have known. Her leg wasn’t injured in a riding accident. Buck had kicked his killer away as they’d stabbed him with his own hunting knife – a knife Caroline had easy access to. I raised my hands in surrender.

“Caroline. We can talk about this.”

She shook her head. “Nothing to talk about, Miss Winchester. But I *am* sorry about this.”

She raised the gun, pointing it towards me, and I closed my eyes. But the shot never came.

“Caroline Walker,” Cassidy said in a low voice from behind the murderer, her own revolver pointed at Caroline’s head. She must have slipped in from the back room. Caroline slowly lowered her gun. “You are under arrest for the murders of Abigail Parker and Buck Walker.”

Caroline was hung the next morning, and she, Buck, and Abigail were buried later that afternoon. I squeezed my eyes shut, fighting off tears, as they lowered Abigail into her grave. She hadn’t deserved this. And Caroline, the woman we both had considered our friend...

I caught up to Jessie after the bodies were in the ground to apologize for getting him into this mess. He understood where my suspicions had come from, and shook my hand, giving his condolences for my losses and wishing me well. As the sun sank lower into the horizon, I made my way back to the saloon, now run by Abigail’s sister — I never did get that drink earlier.

Cassidy caught up to me on the walk there. “Y’know, ma’am, it’s getting dark. Not safe to be wandering around after dark anymore, what with all the killers on the loose.”

“Seems to me you’re not all that great at your job,” I shot back teasingly, grateful for the reprieve in my time of mourning. It would take this town a good while to recover. A part of me felt like I never would. But life goes on.

“May I buy you a drink, Miss Winchester?” Cassidy offered, shooting me a crooked grin.

I pretended to think for a moment, and then took her arm. “Please, Sheriff. Call me Winona. And yes. You may.”