

Goldwater

Everybody in Goldwater could tell you how it was: his cloak was dark grey, almost black from the rain. Talk hushed and heads turned when he blew in the doorway with the wind. He headed straight for a table in the corner without appearing to notice the stares.

It was almost the end of my shift. Tagger never liked for me to stay past ten; he knew Mama'd need help getting settled for the night. "There won't be nothin' come up that I can't handle," he'd say, though we both knew that the hard drinkers wouldn't be in for another hour. He'd have been better off hiring someone else, a big mean-looking guy—and I'd told him as much—but he always shook his head, wouldn't hear of it. "You're the best shot in town, if it comes to that."

I approached the stranger and offered him my last smile of the night. "Get you something?"

He didn't look up; only said, "Tap beer," in a serrated voice. He hadn't taken off his hat or his cloak. As if he might sweep back out at any moment.

"Sure thing." If he wasn't going to try and rope me into a conversation, raise his eyes to my breasts and no higher, that was fine with me.

He did look at me when I brought his beer, though. Nodded his appreciation. He had whiskey eyes—brown and liquid bright, catching the light—and wild, dark hair sneaking out from under his hat.

I've always been a sucker for silent types. "Where you from?" I asked.

"All over. Maybe here, now. We'll see."

"You looking to settle down somewhere?"

"You offering?" The ghost of a smile.

"Not a chance." I laughed, and some of those heads turned again. "I got enough folks to take care of at home already."

"Maybe I'll change your mind." He leaned back, sipped from his beer, and turned his attention away from me.

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The rain should've quit, but it never seemed to. It kept coming and coming, and the river got higher and higher. The sun was just a memory; it felt as if we'd always lived under slag heap skies. After a couple days, I was wading through puddles to get into Tagger's. Another day after that, people started to talk about evacuating. Some folks did. Most folks didn't. It's hard to move someone out of a place, when the dust has settled on them.

The stranger came every night, ordering tap beer and giving me glimpses of the deep pools of his eyes, rivaled now by the floods outside.

I started thinking about getting Mama out. Some days she was so weak that moving her seemed like it would do more harm than good, so I put off deciding.

The night he became a hero, I'd just given the stranger a fresh pint. His eyes followed me now. Not when I was looking; I couldn't see it, only feel it like a hearth at my back.

We heard a yell from outside, and then Levi Burdock's youngest boy launched himself through the door. His speed propelled him halfway across the room. "Jesse's in the river! Somebody help him!"

It was like he'd known, like he'd been waiting. He was on his feet before anyone else had turned; out the door before the boy collapsed at Tagger's feet.

Everybody in Goldwater could tell you how it was: mothers standing on the banks, clasping their own little ones close. Levi Burdock himself coughing up riverwater on the bank, half-drowned from going in. He'd got swept away, barely made it out alive, had had to leave his boy to the clutching wrath of the Chuckum River.

They'd all say how miraculous it was, how brave. How the stranger seemed to summon a rope from nowhere, tied himself to the bridgepost, waded in, caught the boy. Fought the current to drag him out. Bent over him, sharing his lungs and pressing his chest until Jesse spit up half the river.

You ask anybody in Goldwater, and they'll tell you that was the moment the sun came out—when the stranger dragged that boy back from the edge of death.

I'd have been a fool to say no. I was a fool for him already.

"On one condition," was my answer. "You have to tell me your name."

His name was Eli Carr.

There was no bridal tour, no train ride to the mountains or bungalow on the beach. We bought a bottle of peach wine and carried it up to the roof of Tagger's, sharing a bag of peanuts and making frantic love under the westering sun.

We named our boy Clay, after Eli's papa.

Mama loved Eli; he brought me flowers every day and asked her how she felt in the mornings. She felt better, for a while. Until she didn't, but I had him to lean on, then.

He was just a traveler who'd struck oil on his property and sold out, came our way, and found me. Just a traveler, but we bought the Kennick farm when they moved away, and Goldwater accepted him like he'd been born and raised there, like he'd inherited their devotion along with his dark liquor eyes.

He was always there when they needed him. When the wildfire ripped through Grady Carver's wheat crop and danced over to Main Street, he was there to lead the bucket brigade. When John Hollis's hound got rabies and the poor man couldn't bear to put it down, my Eli was there to look the wretched, foaming beast in the eyes and put a single, merciful bullet between them. He brought Clay along for that, saying it was never too early to teach him hard things.

And when the Mercer Gang came into town, robbed Third Financial and killed two people doing it, he was there to stand in their way. He didn't have any authority, not really; all he had was a shotgun, a straight back, and a sneer.

Everybody in Goldwater could tell you how it was: how the Mercer Gang rushed out, firing their pistols into the air. How Eli stood firmfooted in the street, dropping two of them and reloading before they finished squinting in the sunlight. How he'd have had them, if the sheriff hadn't showed up and pulled his attention away just as they raised their pistols.

The sheriff got shot that day, too. He made it. My Eli didn't. The Mercer brothers left him leaking red into the dry dust street.

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If I hadn't had Clay, I mightn't have made it. Some folks sink into the swamp of their grief, let their little ones figure it out while they mourn. I don't hold that against them. It's a hard thing, and there's no right way to do it.

But Eli had given me a gift, and all I could think to do was raise that gift to be the kind of man we could've been proud of together.

It wasn't always a sure thing. He was roguish and wild, dark-haired and dangerous, years before he should've been. As likely to steal a horse as he was to bring biscuits to the potluck. But he evened out—they way they all do, I guess.

When he married his sweet, pretty wife, she moved in at the farm. I wasn't my mother, rest her soul; they didn't have to care for me. I still did the milking, and went out in the fields with them when harvest time came. Come deer season, I brought out my rifle and took down my share of meat—always a clean kill, just behind the front shoulder. Even when Clay and his wife had babies, and I could've sat on the porch with them through long summer days, I pulled my weight.

I know Eli *would* have been proud. Our boy was a hard worker and a fine neighbor. He was good to people, just like his pa had been. Never wanted to hurt anybody.

Not until we heard that the Mercer Gang had killed a sheriff's deputy in the next county, and were headed through Goldwater on their way north.

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This kind of thing is supposed to happen at high noon, or in the middle of the night. But they came through when folks were getting food on the table, calling their kids in, kicking off their shoes.

My Clay was waiting for them, standing in the street like his pa. Hardstanced, hat pulled low, shotgun in his hands.

There was a storm of bulletfire, the scream of a horse, and a cloud of dust. When it was over, there was my boy still standing, and there were two dead men, watering the street with their blood.

Everybody could tell you how it was: my boy's shotgun still loaded as the men lay dying. The Mercer Gang brought down, not by shotgun pellets, but rifle rounds that came from the roof of Tagger's.

THE END