

GOODNIGHT, MONTANA

04.11.2025

I

Montana Territory, January 1882

THE MORNING was cold and pale and the snow lay high and glistening where it had fallen. It had been snowing for over two weeks; a blanket of five feet suffocated the ground just as it suffocated the pines that stood atop the hills.

A young man crossed the drifts with a rifle in his hands and steam rising from the barrel. Ahead of him a jackrabbit lay turned on its side, the white of its belly fouled with blood where it had run out. Its eyes were half-shut. Its legs lay wrong upon the ground.

He stood looking at it awhile. The wind moved thinly through the woods and the light came slantwise over the hills. The man knelt. Snow soaked through his pants and burned his knees. He took from his breast a small pencil worn to a nub and a leather book creased and dark with use. On the inside cover a name was written faintly: *Rawhide*. Not the name he'd been given at birth and not one he thought on much now.

He bent over the rabbit and studied it. The set of the ears. The long arc of the back. The small curl of the paws as if the thing had drawn itself inward at the last. His pencil moved across the page. He pressed harder, but the paper puckered beneath his hand. He cursed under his breath and rubbed his eyes with the heel of his palm. The page would not lie flat and at last he let it be.

His joints ached but he did not rise. He leaned again to mark the way the snow gathered in the fur and the thin shadow the body cast across the ice. His rifle rested forgotten at his side. A gust came down the trees and dusted the rabbit over, softening it, as if already the world were taking it back.

He shivered. His fingers were red and numb and his knuckles had blistered open for he had not been wearing gloves. When he was done he took the rabbit by the hind legs and pulled it free. It was heavy with meltwater. He swung it over his shoulder and started uphill as the snow shifted underfoot and for a moment he only breathed, looking out across the gray fog on the horizon.

Over yonder the pines had already begun to shed the winter. Men huffed and lifted boards and stacked goods. A woman bent over fondling open her shirt and nursing a child. A young man swept the church steps disinterested while being told a story. He listened then; far off a crow called. Somewhere a fire cracked.

The rabbit knocked softly against Rawhide's back with each step. His thoughts drifted as they often did when he walked alone, toward places he no longer went and voices he no longer heard. He wondered, not for the first time, if the hills were done with him at last.

II

BY NOON the road into town had gone to mud. The thaw had opened it into ruts and pools and wooden boards had been laid across the streets.

Rawhide rode through with his coat unbuttoned, sweat darkening the collar despite the cold. The horse picked its way carefully as its hooves sucked loose with each step. The town announced itself by noise before it came into view. Hammer on nail. Men shouting from rooftops. The chop of an axe biting green pine. Smoke hung low and the air carried the smell of pitch and tanned hide and something sour beneath it all. When he reached the street he dismounted and led the horse.

There were several long runs of buildings, clapboard pressed tight together as if for warmth. A grocer stacked sacks of flour and barrels outside his door. A tailor hammered at his sewing machine while bolts of cloth fluttered in the breeze. Two saloons still stood quiet in the early hour, while two stables smelled of hay and manure and sweat. Houses lined the roads, curtains bleached thin by sun and time, children darted between them with bare feet kicking up mud. New buildings and stores appeared around every corner, the wooden frames still smelling of sawdust, their signs freshly painted and swinging in the wind. The railroad climbed toward the mountains, drawing in men and families and strangers. Wagons and carts and the sound of hammers on timber. The quiet of the village was coming to an end.

He tied off at the butcher's post and stepped inside. Warmth struck his face. The butcher looked up with a smile and wiped his hands on his apron.

“Better be clean.”

“Fur's off. Good as you'll get.”

Rawhide laid the rabbit out. The man turned it once, grunted, and reached for the box. Coins clinked. Rawhide took them and put them away. He stood a moment longer than he needed to, letting the heat work into his fingers, then went back out into the street.

Two young women passed him, one glancing quick and then away. People stepped around him. He was known but not counted among them. A shape more than a man.

He wondered whether he should go home. But he walked on. Something restless moved in him, as if there was something left unfinished that he had forgotten and was desperate to recall.

Across the street a short young man moved through the crowd with quick feet and quicker hands. He slipped between bodies, never stopping, never drawing more than a curse or a shout. They called him “Le Lapin”. The Rabbit. He lived by it. Took little. Took often.

When he saw Rawhide he slowed. The man stood much taller than most. Broad-backed, his dark braid tied with leather hanging down his spine. His coat was frayed and stained. A knife rode his belt. A rifle strap crossed his shoulder. And across his forehead tore a scar so deep and purple that one might wonder whether his head had been ripped in half. But

right below, sunken eyes sat. Dark and barren, as if endlessly grieving. A man who looked like he carried nothing and yet might have just been paid. Le Lapin fell in behind him.

He waited. The press near the saloon. The turn of Rawhide's head toward a passing wagon. The bump was slight. An apology muttered. Then he was gone.

Rawhide took two more steps before the quiet fell out of the world. His hand went to his pocket and stopped. He looked down. Then up.

Across the street Le Lapin slipped through bodies with his head low and his stride too quick. Rawhide turned and went after him. He did not run. Not yet. He walked steady, the crowd parting around him as if it knew better than to interject.

He cut between wagons and barrels and leapt puddles clean. When Rawhide reached the far side of the street the young man was already down the alley, glancing back once with panic bright on his face and almost something like delight.

“Hey!” Rawhide yelled. Heads turned, but no one stepped in. Le Lapin ran.

Boards thundered under Rawhide's boots. He heard laughter up ahead as he ran.

“Gonna need longer legs, my friend!”

Rawhide did not bother replying.

Behind the stables where the mud lay wet and deep Le Lapin ducked a rail and slipped, cursed, and regained himself as Rawhide closed the space between them. For a moment they faced one another. The grin faded. Short and thin as a

fencepost. Two large ears poked out at the sides and his freckled face revealed a crooked mouth with an overbite.

“I’d like my coins back.”

The young man backed away. “Then come take them.”

Rawhide reached the fence and stopped. He looked once at the horses. Le Lapin eyed a gray Appaloosa with a flicker of panic before he looked back and realized Rawhide was not headed for him.

Rawhide swung over the rail and took the horse in hand. The horse surged and then went. Le Lapin’s eyes went wide.

“That’s my horse, you—!”

Rawhide rode past him and out into the street as mud flew, the sound of hooves tearing loose from the earth. Laughter and shouts rose behind him but he did not look back.

“*Putain*— God damn savage!”

The horse was small and unsteady and he heard it huff as he leaned into it and the holler behind him dulled. He did not slow until he turned and looked at the blurred line of buildings. He could picture him still there, red-faced and shaking, hat crooked, fury and awe mixed together.

He turned toward the open plain and rode on. He laughed timidly, almost as if pained, unsure of what or why he had done what he had done and knowing it hardly mattered now. Maybe it wasn’t about the money at all.

III

BY THE TIME he returned for his own horse the sun had dropped low and red and the day had begun to fold in on itself. His shire stood where he'd left her, reins looped neat around the post. She watched him come with a dull patience, one hoof cocked and her breath ghosting in the cooling air.

"Easy now," he said, softer than he meant to.

He slid down from the borrowed horse, clumsy with it, and felt a twinge of guilt at the weight he'd set on the young animal's back. A freckled stallion. High-strung. Not meant for long work. He took a moment to smooth its neck before turning to his own. She snorted when his hand found her muzzle but didn't shy. He rested his hand against her for a second longer than needed, then gathered both sets of reins and started down the street, the horses walking side by side. Their hooves rang dully in the mud.

The town had thinned. Men drifted toward lamplight and drink. A woman locked the mercantile. Somewhere a drunk argued with the wind. Lamps went dark one by one until only the saloons burned bright, spilling laughter and shouts and warmth into the street.

A gentle rain began, tapping softly against his shoulders. He drew his coat tight and his breath came white. The little thief's face kept finding him unbidden. Sharp and wild. Too much hunger behind the eyes. He tried to shake it loose and failed.

He did not know why he passed the turn for home once again. The night was going to be merciless, he knew that. There was a stove waiting to be fed and a blanket to be shivering under. Thunder began to howl yonder.

The road rose and at its crest stood the church, squat and weathered, the whitewash long gone. The cross leaned slightly as if tired of holding itself upright. Mud and snow slicked the steps. Warm light breathed faintly through warped glass.

He looked once at the sky where clouds churned low and heavy. The rain thickened as the tapping turned to thudding and his hair began to soak. To the left stood the stable where a mule brayed inside. He tied both horses and stood a moment with his hands on the rail before turning back. The door groaned when he pushed it open.

Inside it was damp. The smell of tallow and old wood hung in the air. Candles burned low and pews sat uneven, patched and scarred, some indented and split. The altar cloth was frayed but clean. Someone had tried.

He moved slowly down the aisle. His boots sounded loud despite trying to keep quiet. He rested a hand on a pew and traced the grain worn smooth by other hands. Other lives. His fingers were cracked and stiff and he flexed them, watching the color creep back.

The quiet here was not the quiet of the hills. It did not press. He sat.

His elbows rested on his knees. His breath fogged faintly in the candlelight. The sound of it filled the space and would not

leave. Outside the rain knocked steady at the windows like a pulse.

“Good evenin’.”

Rawhide’s hand went halfway to his rifle before he stopped it.

“Easy,” the voice said. “Didn’t mean to spook you.”

An older man stood near the pews, leaning on a cane. His coat was worn. His nose red with drink or weather. A white collar showed at his throat. And there, one eye caught the light wrong and did not move.

“Sorry. I didn’t see you.”

“You’re not alone in that,” the man said with a crooked grin. “Name’s Francis. Though most folks simply call me ‘Reverend Glasseye’.” He tapped the blind eye. “Guess you can figure why.”

Rawhide nodded once. The reverend shuffled closer. In the candlelight, he saw the man’s ruined side. Mottled red and pink, torn skin long healed reached from his brow down his cheek. And there, a cloudy glass eye sat a little crooked in a socket that looked as if badly reconstructed.

“You don’t strike me as the praying sort. What brings you in?”

Rawhide’s shoulders tightened. “Are Indians not allowed inside churches?”

“Well, that depends,” Glasseye said, his tone turning flat. “If you’re here to repent you’re welcome. If you’re here to rob the collection box, I will warn you, you’re too late.”

Rawhide’s mouth twitched despite himself.

The reverend smiled. "So, you huntin' or hidin'?"

"Hunting."

"Game or men?"

"Does it matter?"

"Not really," the reverend said before easing himself onto one of the front pews, resting his hands atop his cane.

"Though if it's men, I'd prefer the shooting stay outdoors."

Rawhide looked toward the door.

"You can sit, son. I won't strike you for restin'."

After a moment Rawhide lowered himself back onto the pew. His rifle rested against his knee.

"You're uh, Blackfoot?"

Rawhide shook his head.

"Not from 'round here then?"

"I was born near Wyoming."

"Lakota then?"

"I've shot Lakota."

The rain drummed hard against the roof. Rawhide murmured something under his breath.

"Crow."

"Ah," the reverend nodded. "You're north of where most men stop."

"I know the line."

"Good. Cross it and you'll find redcoats pretendin' they're better than the rest of us."

Rawhide shrugged. "Borders don't change much."

"No," the reverend agreed. "Just the accents." He settled back with a sigh.

“Still, I’d take them over them Frenchies. I’ve already been cursed with one, and the Lord tests me enough.”

Rawhide snorted softly, then rubbed at his mouth.

“You really just came in for warmth, didn’t you.” Glasseye smiled warmly. He looked toward the ceiling, listening to the storm. “And probably to get outta that rain.”

“I suppose.”

“No crime in that. A refuge’s a refuge.”

They sat awhile. Smoke curled from the candles and lost itself in the rafters. The reverend watched Rawhide the way a man watches weather rolling in.

“What’s your name, son?”

Rawhide did not answer. The reverend waited patiently, but Rawhide only faintly smiled before turning away.

“You play cards?”

“Cards?”

“Yes. There’s a clever boy here who boards in the stables. Thinks he’s God’s gift to the deck. Beats me twice a week and gloats about it the other five days. I’m plannin’ my revenge.”

“Cheats?”

“Like the devil himself. I let him. Builds character.”

“Is that what you call it?”

“That’s what I tell myself.”

Rawhide’s shoulders loosened a little. The church was larger inside than it had any right to be, the ceiling lifting away into dim rafters darkened by smoke. The walls ran back farther than the eye first caught, opening into side rooms and narrow

passages, the kind built for storage, for cots, for men who stayed longer than they planned. It felt familiar in a way he could not name.

“Not much of a talker.”

Rawhide smiled. “Never saw the use.”

“Aye, fair enough.”

Rawhide looked at him then. The reverend leaned forward, drawing out a flask and tipping it back. The smell of whiskey slipped into the air. Rawhide’s brow twitched.

“What? You think the Lord minds?”

Rawhide did not respond.

“Son, if the Lord keeps score, he lost count since Appomattox.”

A pause hung between them.

“Union,” Glasseye added with a crooked smile before another swig. “Before you ask.”

Rawhide’s eyes narrowed a touch. Glasseye caught the look and snorted.

“Don’t give me that face. Still got one eye left, no? World didn’t finish the job on either of us, looks like.”

Rawhide’s gaze flicked up.

“Are you always this blunt with strangers?”

“Only the ones who can take it.”

“That right?”

Glasseye gestured lazily with his cane. “The scar says so.”

“What scar?”

The reverend traced a line from his temple down across his

brow. “That one. Looks like someone tried to open you up to see what’s inside.”

Rawhide’s hand twitched toward his forehead.

“World chews slow,” Glasseye went on. “Likes to see if you’ll quit first. Adds character, though. Half my congregation would pay good money for a mark that made them look that interesting.”

Rawhide laughed. “You talk too much.”

“Probably. But it beats the alternative.”

“Does it?”

For a long moment both said nothing. The sound of the relentless storm filled the space between them. The wind moaned through the cracks in the boards, and a beam of lamplight flickered across the reverend’s ruined face.

Then, quieter, as if to himself, Rawhide murmured, “You think the world asks too much of some folks?”

The reverend did not answer right away. He studied Rawhide’s face, the way the man sat like he expected the floor to give.

“You askin’ for yourself?”

Rawhide looked at him, but did not answer. The reverend leaned back.

“I used to think that. Then I figured the world don’t care much about who’s expected to do what. It just keeps turnin’, and if you’re lucky, you turn with it.”

“That supposed to help?”

“No. It’s just truth.”

Rawhide nodded once. Something eased in his chest, as if

laid to rest. He leaned back a little with his eyes on the rain streaking down the windows.

“You don’t sound like most preachers.”

“Well, you don’t listen like most men.”

They laughed then, together.

Suddenly, hurried footsteps thundered from the back hall.

Glasseye quickly took another swig and rubbed his temple.

“Lord save me,” he said. “That’ll be the boy.”

IV

THE SIDE DOOR banged open. Le Lapin stumbled in soaked to the bone, his boots slick with mud, breath tearing in and out of him. His brown hair clung to his cheek.

“Reverend! *Nom de Dieu*, you won’t believe what—” His eyes found Rawhide across the dim church and the color ran out of his face. Rawhide’s eyes went wide. For a moment, no one moved.

“You two acquainted?” Glasseye asked.

Silence.

The young man found his voice again and it came sharp and shaking. “You... You...”

Rawhide rose slow. His rifle stayed where it leaned.

“You stole my goddamn horse!”

“You stole my pay.”

“That’s different!” Le Lapin’s hands shook. “You left me in the cold like a dog! I could’ve frozen to death!”

“You were breathing fine when I rode off.”

“*Breathing*.” He laughed. “You call that mercy?”

“At least I left you your boots.”

Le Lapin’s face twisted. The young man stepped closer with his fists clenched, fear riding hard behind the anger.

“Jean-Marie,” Glasseye barked. “Enough.”

He spat. It landed on Rawhide’s boots. He stood still. For a moment, it looked like he might turn away.

“I’ve seen men like you before. All size, no sense. Go on. I

know damn well you're just another half-mad savage with a gun."

Rawhide crossed the space in one stride and tried to catch the boy by the front of his coat. The boy ducked sideways, Rawhide's fingers tearing cloth instead of flesh. Le Lapin stumbled back as his boots slipped on the damp boards. Rawhide turned and reached again. The boy darted in close, like something feral cornered in a barn. Rawhide drove him back hard. The pew cracked against the wall and candles guttered. Le Lapin tried to swing but Rawhide hooked a knee into his gut and folded him. The air left him in a wet sound and he clawed at Rawhide's sleeves, boots skidding uselessly on the boards.

"Enough, both of you!"

Neither heard.

Le Lapin drove his shoulder hard into Rawhide's ribs, knocking the breath out of him. Rawhide shoved him down and followed, his weight coming down full. Rawhide took it without flinching and slammed his head once against the floor. Blood came fast and bright out of his nostrils and down his chin. The young man made a thin sound. His hands fumbled.

"Why'd you do it?" Rawhide said, his voice hoarse. "Why this." He struck his face once. Twice. Then again. His knuckles tore open as blood spat on his face.

The boy shook his head with glassy eyes, his breath coming in broken pulls. Rawhide's forearm pressed into his chest and the boy's ribs creaked under it. Rawhide's eyes were wide.

"You didn't even need the damn money."

The boy tried to laugh and failed. His mouth opened and nothing came out. He swallowed hard.

“Because—” His voice broke. He sucked in air and coughed. “Because I’m hungry.” The words broke apart. He thrashed beneath him, boots scraping against the floor. “Hungry,” he said again, quieter now, ashamed. “I ain’t eaten right in three days. Please— please—”

For a heartbeat, he saw something in his face. Terror. The kind he recognized. He could’ve been lying for all he knew. But his grip loosened a fraction. Then the young man’s hand slid to his boot.

Steel flashed. Small. Shaking. A folding knife. Rawhide stepped closer instead of back. His eyes were soft, almost sad.

The knife swung.

It caught Rawhide across his lips. Blood welled and spilled down his chin. He reeled back with a hand to his face.

Then—

A gunshot split the church open. The sound rolled through like thunder. Plaster sifted down. Smoke curled. Both men froze.

The reverend stood by the altar with a pistol raised skyward. Smoke curled lazily from the barrel. His good eye burned.

“You done?” he yelled.

Rain hammered the roof.

“I don’t care who wronged who. This is a church, not a saloon!” He took a limping step forward, jabbing the cane toward them. “You want to act like animals, take it outside.”

Rawhide let go. The boy collapsed, clutching his jaw, blood streaking the floorboards. Glasseye lowered the gun.

“You,” He pointed the gun at Rawhide. “got no right to raise a hand in here.” Then he turned the gun toward Le Lapin. “And you, quit runnin’ your goddamn mouth before it gets you killed.” The reverend sighed.

“For God’s sake. Two half-grown men playing wolves.” He rubbed his eyes, stepping aside. He gestured to the door with the barrel. “*Out.*”

Neither argued. Rawhide grabbed his rifle and went. Le Lapin stumbled after him.

Outside the rain swallowed them whole. Cold sheets of it beating down hard enough to sting. The church glowed behind them as light trembled through the downpour.

Le Lapin wiped blood from his face and breathed ragged. Rawhide stood under the overhang with his fingers pressed to his split lip.

Thunder rolled across the plains. From inside came Glasseye’s voice, muffled by the door.

“If you come back in, do it as men.” The door slammed shut.

V

THE RAIN CAME down without order or mercy. Just noise. Heavy, senseless noise. It beat the roof and the earth alike and ran red in the grooves of the steps before carrying the blood away. The endlessly black world narrowed to sound and cold and breath.

They stood beneath the church overhang a long while. Then Rawhide lowered himself onto the steps. Water soaked his boots. Le Lapin hesitated as his eyes darted between him and the door. But when no one called him back inside he sat, two steps lower, far enough that their shoulders would not touch.

Rawhide could hear Le Lapin's breathing. Uneven and wet. He could smell the iron in the air, blood mingling with rainwater.

Rawhide pressed his fingers to his mouth. When he drew them back they were dark with blood. His lip throbbed. Le Lapin's face was swelling fast, one eye already closing. Blood matted his hair and streaked his chin. Without the fire in him he looked young. Too young.

He could not stand this kind of quiet. The kind that pressed down until you could hear your own heartbeat. He tried not to think. Tried not to see the look in his eyes when he'd pinned him down. But the memory wouldn't quit.

Then, a sound.

Le Lapin laughed, a short rough wince that broke apart halfway through. "Hell," he said. "You hit like a train."

He wiped his nose on his sleeve and smeared more blood across his face. “We’re a pair, huh.”

Rawhide gazed out at the fog that hung low over the trees.

“All that trouble. For nothing.”

Rawhide turned the rifle in his lap, watching water bead along the barrel. “Ain’t uncommon.”

The young man gave a crooked grin. The silence returned, but it was different. Less sharp.

“You didn’t have to pull that knife.”

“I know.” Le Lapin stared at his hands. “Didn’t think. I just—” He looked away. “Get backed far enough, you start swinging at anything.”

“That’s how animals do it.”

He snorted. “You sound like him.”

“Who?”

“The reverend. Always talks like he’s got answers. I hate it.”

Rawhide almost smiled. “He seems all right.”

“He is,” Le Lapin said after a moment. “Talks too much.

Drinks too much. Says the Lord keeps him company but I think it’s just the whiskey.” He huffed. “Got more sense drunk than most sober.”

Rawhide nodded. The little thief spoke with a thick accent.

“Found me half-frozen outside town couple winters ago.

Didn’t ask what I’d done. Just patched me up and cursed the whole time.

“Called you clever.”

“Called me a bastard,” Le Lapin said. “Same thing to him.”

“Sounds like a hard man to argue with.”

“You got no idea.” He smiled faintly, then winced at ache in his bruised nose. “He’s all I got.”

“You’re lucky.”

The rain softened to a drizzle. They sat there. The night opened around them, the moon revealed itself bright as the storm gently rolled away into the hills. The young man kept his eyes down, scuffing at the muddy step with the toe of his boot. Rawhide watched the stars, as if he could see something moving beyond the darkness.

“He’s gonna make me scrub that blood up, you know.”

Rawhide gave a small chuckle.

Le Lapin grinned. After a while he reached into his coat and fumbled his fingers before pulling out a crumpled cigarette pack and then stuck his hand back into the pocket. He paused.

He drew out the small coin bag and pressed it tight a moment before tossing it up the steps. Rawhide blinked, briefly opening his mouth as if to say something. He caught it and put it away.

The boy struck a match. It guttered, then caught. Smoke rose thin and gray between them. For a while, the only sound was the rain’s soft patter and the faint crackle of burning paper.

He glanced sideways, studying Rawhide’s bleeding face. Rawhide reached out his fingers towards him. A humoring scoff escaped Le Lapin before handing him the rest of the cigarette. Rawhide took it and drew on it once.

“You live here?”

“No.” Rawhide drew at the cigarette again before handing it back to Le Lapin and then taking it back. “I live further north. About nine miles yonder.”

Le Lapin considered that.

“Are... you coming back? To town, I mean.”

“Maybe.”

“If you do, try not to punch me next time.”

“Don’t give me reason to.”

The boy smiled despite himself. “No promises.”

The rain began to subside. A gust of cold wind bit into his skin. Le Lapin shivered. Rawhide pressed the cigarette stub against the sole of his boot before he rose. He settled the rifle at his shoulder and looked down at Le Lapin. He did not meet his eyes, but he gave a short nod.

“Bonne nuit.”

“Sorry?”

“*Goodnight*, I said.” Le Lapin grinned wide.

“Right, yes. *Goodnight*.”

He watched Rawhide mount his horse and ride off until he disappeared past the pines. Le Lapin sat there a while longer with a hand over his swollen nose. He bit down on his lip, as though he was trying to hold something in.

Behind him, the church bell rang with a single, heavy toll.
Just one.