

Vengeance In Bloom

By

Jamal W. Hankins

The small lantern on the night table barely lit the room, and Lily could see just enough to count the patches of chipped paint on the ceiling. She lied naked in bed, and whispered to herself while she counted. “Seven, eight, nine, ten.”

Nearly on top of her, a man snored into her right ear. One of his thick arms, slung across her breasts, pinned her down amongst the mangled sheets. The tequila on his hot breath was nauseating, and she turned her head as her stomach churned from the stench. The heat ruled the night, and she mopped a hand across her sweaty brow. Her skin was slick. She rubbed the grime between her fingertips.

He had been especially rough tonight. She did not know why, but he never really needed a reason. Her neck still hurt from his massive hands, and even now, the sting in her cheeks still tingled. He liked to slap his women. She was used to it though. She no longer woke up sore as she did when she was younger.

Moonlight bled inside the room from a window at the far wall and spilled out into a glowing puddle just short of the bedside. She reached out to it and played with her fingers in the light. The man stirred on top of her, and she froze not to disturb him. His eyes fluttered open for

a moment and he looked at her vacantly, then he buried his nose into the side of her neck and shifted his arm down to her waist. Locked in place, she looked at him from the corner of her eye. His body started to relax on top of hers, and moments later, he was limp with sleep.

She waited for him to settle, and not until he started to snore did she take a breath. The last thing she wanted to do was wake him, for while he slept, she had some sort of freedom. She looked back to her fingers, which she still held in the moonlight, and slowly balled them into a fist. She brought her fist to her face and opened it to stare into her empty palm. She knew that she could not hold on to the moonlight, but it would have been nice to steal a piece, even just for a little while.

Her gaze drifted from the pale skin of her palm down to the copper tone of her wrist, and she envisioned it slit open and bleeding out all over her arm. *If only*, She thought. If only she had enough courage to take Ortega's Bowie knife, and drag it across her wrists. If only she had enough courage to take that same knife, and plunge it deep into his back while he laid on top of her. If only she could find the strength within herself to kill the rest of them. She could slit their throats while they slept.

If only she could stop thinking about it.

Ortega stirred again, and this time, he pushed himself up off her. He yawned, stretched his muscles, and then turned over to lie on his side. Once he settled down, she dared a small sigh of relief and managed a slight stretch herself. It felt good to be rid of his weight. She could breathe easier, but her breasts were slick with his sweat. She pulled up one of the tangled bed sheets to wipe herself off, and gave him another look out the corner of her eye. She watched his muscled back shrink and expand as he snored, and then she looked over his shoulder at his Bowie knife on the night table. It was still in its sheath beside the lantern.

*If only*, She thought.

She turned over on her side and pulled the damp sheet over herself. She stared at the window where dingy curtains drooped lifelessly from bent rods and wished for a cool breeze. Even though the window gapped open, there was no airflow; it was stifling. She could not rest. Years under the gang's abuse made her a light sleeper. The smallest sounds disturbed her. She never knew when one of the others would come to take her next.

It was unusually quiet. The creaky floorboards had not moaned under the movement of the others for most of the night. Normally, at least one of them would be up, though too drunk to stand straight. Roth loved to get Carter riled up enough to fight, Payton would step in to teach them both a lesson, and Flanagan would sit back and enjoy the show.

She yawned and smoothed her raven hair back behind her ear. Her neck still hurt when she rubbed it. She could feel the exact spots where Ortega dug in his blunt fingertips.

She sighed. It was much too quiet— Glass shattered somewhere downstairs.

Someone was up after all. Which one was it? She hopped it was Carter. He was the only one she had not slept with, and he was younger than the rest of them, only a year or two older than her twenty-one years. He was new to the gang and he had not tried to have his way with her yet; and with Ortega lying in bed next to her, she doubted he would try.

There was another crash of shattered glass, a muffled voice, and then a gunshot. She popped up from the tattered sheets and leaned back against the headboard. She listened to the commotion. Another gunshot rang out and then another.

*Who was shooting? They drew guns on each other before but they never took a shot!*

Ortega stirred for a moment and then another gunshot woke him out of his sleep. He sat up and scanned the room. He turned to Lily and glared. “What was that?”

She flinched from his eyes. “Gunshots,” she whispered. “Downstairs!”

The commotion grew louder. Muffled voices barked loud and quick. It sounded like they were tearing the place apart. Gunfire erupted like fireworks, and a pulsing orange glow brought her eyes to the bottom of the bedroom door frame. She smelled smoke.

She turned towards Ortega and they locked eyes.

He sprung from the bed cursing, “What are those idiots doin’?” He pulled on his pants, snatched his Bowie knife off the table, and bolted for the door. After he opened it, he jumped back from the blazing fire that raged in the hallway.

The room was flooded with the orange glow and Lily could feel the heat all the way from the bed.

Ortega gathered himself, then dashed out into the hallway and slammed the door behind him.

*What the hell was goin' on?* Lily stared. Smoke seeped under the doorframe. Gunfire raged downstairs. Smoke stung her eyes and she choked on the cloud that filled the room. She jumped out of the bed, snatched her pants and shirt off the floor, and pulled them on.

Something smashed through window behind her and erupted into shards of fire when it hit the floor. She hopped back and beat at the flames that caught the bottom of her pants. Before she knew it, the bed was a blazing inferno with tongues of fire that licked the ceiling. A boiling cloud of black and orange grew above her.

Instinctively, she ran for the door and grabbed the knob— Searing pain bit into the palm of her right hand and she recoiled with it clutched to her breast. The smoke was blinding. Her nose and throat burned. She could not breathe. Flames roared in her ears and the heat was like the hand of death slowly closing around her. She ran towards the window, where she thought it should be, shielded her head with her arms, and jumped.

Wood and glass shattered around her as she crashed through the window frame. Landing on the short slanted roof just below, she tried grabbing hold of something, a shingle, anything to stop from falling. Her momentum was too great. She tumbled down the slope of the roof. Before she even realized that she fell off the edge, she slammed to the ground in a breathless heap on her back.

The pounding in her head dulled all other sounds. Her vision was blurred and she gasped for air. Her throat and nose still burned from the smoke, but after her fourth agonizing try, air flowed into her lungs. She coughed, shook her head, and blinked until her vision cleared. The stars in the night sky twinkled down at her in silence.

The world rushed back and engulfed her.

Gunfire exploded around her. Horses neighed high-pitched and excited. The raging fire roared and the heat was suffocating. She turned over on her stomach and grunted at the pain in her spine. While she pushed herself up on her hands and knees, the burning house began to collapse before her. Wooden support beams moaned under the rolling flames. The inferno lit the sky.

She heard voices of men, angry and yelling, calling to each other to come this way and look that way. The ground vibrated beneath her and she could feel the rumble of horse hooves in

palms of her hands through the dirt. She stumbled to her feet and ran into the surrounding trees as fast as her bare feet could take her. She ducked, dodged, and swatted at the tree branches and thorny bushes that tugged at her clothes and scratched bleeding welts into her skin.

Those men had to be from the nearby town. She just knew it. Hiding in that abandoned house was a bad idea and she knew it was; but Payton did not care. Payton feared no one and did whatever he wanted. Nobody corrected him, especially not her, unless she wanted to nurse another broken arm.

As she fought her way through the woods, a thought nearly stopped her in her tracks, but she refused to stop. *What happened to the others? Did they all make it out the house? Did they burn in the fire, or did the townsmen get them outside?* She prayed for either to be true, if not both. She was scared to indulge the idea of being free of them. It was yet another prayer that God failed to answer. She realized that this was the farthest she had ever been from any one of them in a long time, too long.

Soon, the woods gave way to an open field of grass occupied by a single dark structure. She stumbled to a halt and panted. It loomed over her in the moonlight and its shadow stretched out to bathe her in darkness. It looked like a barn. She ran to it and pulled on the large doors, but thick rusted chains barred her entry. She clawed her way between the heavy doors and rattled the rusted chains that held them closed. With gritted teeth, she squeezed most of her body through but the doors slammed on her right ankle. She collapsed to the dirt floor and bit her bottom lip to muffle her screams. She laid there on her stomach, balled her fists, and took in the pain.

Moments later, the pain seemed to melt away and her ankle grew numb. She pushed herself up on her elbows and took a deep breath. Her heart pounded and her lungs burned, but she dared not stop. She turned over on her back and nudged the doors apart with her free leg just wide enough to yank her ankle loose. She touched it and could feel that it had begun to swell.

A faint rumble rose up in the night, and she scrambled to her feet. A bolt of pain shot up her right leg and she stumbled forward. Before she dropped, she caught herself on the barn doors in a clatter of wood and chains. "Shit!" she hissed, and her ankle throbbed hot and angry.

She hopped on her good leg and turned around to lean back against the door. Her raven hair clung to her sweaty face and she wiped it out of her eyes. Moonlight shone through partially

boarded up windows and hinted at the empty stalls of splintered wood that lined both walls of the barn. A patchy blanket of musty hay covered the dirt floor, and she caught the silhouette of a ladder, which she could use to hide in the hayloft if she moved fast enough.

The rumble grew louder and vibrated through the ground under her feet, and then it abruptly stopped just outside the barn. Horses neighed and snorted in a commotion just beyond the doors. In an explosion, a hole ripped through the door beside her head. She fell to the side into a mound of hay, and a cold tingling sensation rippled through her body. She shivered. A high-pitched ringing filled her head. Her left ear burned. It stung when she touched it. There was a deep gouge in the curve of her ear and her fingers were slick with blood. Her jaw dropped. If it had been only an inch more to the right, she would have been dead.

“Come on out, girl!” a man yelled outside the door.

She pushed herself up to her feet and hobbled over the ladder half-buried in hay. She grabbed the rungs and heaved with all her might. It scrapped across the ground a half inch if it even moved at all; it might as well have been rooted to the ground.

“Don’t make us chase you no further, hear?” A second voice called. The barn doors shook violently. “We know y’er in there!”

Lily hopped down the line of dilapidated stables, and the pain in her ankle knifed its way up to her knee, then to her upper thigh. Finally, she collapsed into a stable on her right where piles of hay took up its left and right corners.

There was a thunderous boom of a shotgun blast, and the chains on the barn doors rattled. She clawed her way over to the pile of hay to the left and burrowed into it head first. She dug her way to the corner of the stable and covered herself completely in hay. She left a little hole just big enough to see through, and took a deep breath.

She heard the barn doors slowly creak open, and pale moonlight bled inside the stables. Concealed by the hay, she curled into a tight ball, and waited in silence. Footsteps stalked through the barn and two men came to stand in front of her stall. She could not see their faces, but the one on the left carried a rifle and the other gripped a shotgun.

“How ya know she’s in here?” one of them said.

“B’cause I know.” The other replied. “Go check down there. See if there’s another way

outta here.”

The one on the right walked off as told and the other, with the rifle, stayed in front of her stall. His feet shifted slightly then he took a step inside.

“Ain’t nothin’ back here, Will!” the other man hollered from the rear of the barn.

“Yeah, well, I know she’s in here somewhere.” He yelled back. He took two more steps inside the stall.

The other man walked into the stall and stood beside Will. “Why you standin’ in here?”

“Look here, Cody, we got two piles of hay. Which one do you think she’s in?”

Lily’s heart sank. She held her breath and prayed for the men to leave. She prayed for something to happen, anything to happen to draw their attention away.

“Oh, I see. How ‘bout the one on the right?” Cody answered. Amusement laced his voice.

“Let’s take a look-see.” Will agreed.

Lily could see him raise the barrel of his rifle and fire. She summoned everything inside of herself not to jump.

“Don’t look like she’s in there, huh?” Will said. “Guess she’s in the other one.” He cocked his rifle.

Lily sprang up from the pile of hay with her hands raised. “Okay, okay, please, don’t shoot!” she pleaded. Her ankle throbbed as she limped towards them.

Will stared with his rifled aimed at her from the hip and Cody grabbed her by the shirt collar. “Get over here!” he yanked her towards him. She almost fell into his chest, but he held her up by her shirt. “Look at me!” he snapped. She winced at the pain in her ankle and looked up at him. He stared into her eyes for a second then glanced back at Will. “You ever seen a redskin with eyes like these?”

The color of her eyes was the only way in which she resembled her mother, and it was the one feature, despite the foreign nature of all her others, that her mother grew to despise most.

When Will approached, she turned away, but he grabbed her by the chin, yanked her head up towards him, and peered down into her eyes. He held her gaze for a moment and his grip was like a vice. She thought he would crush her jaw before he was through.

As she got older, the men who frequented her mother’s bed began to pay more and more

attention to her strange little Indian daughter with light eyes. They called her words like *exotic*, and she became an enticing morsel for their secret appetites. Even though her mother got paid, regardless of which one of them the men took to bed, Lily was punished for her “attention mongering” everyday; But not in ways that would show on her flesh, her mother was very clever, and she had a mean streak in her that Lily figured could rival the devil himself.

“What color are they, gray?” Cody asked.

Will broke his gaze with her and nodded. “Yeah, somethin’ like that. Can’t tell too much in this light. It don’t matter much no way, her eyes’ll be closed when she’s hangin.” He finally released her with a shove, and she would have fallen back if Cody did not have such a tight grip on her shirt. “Let’s take her back to town.” Will turned and headed out of the stall.

“Hangin’?” Lily shook her head. “But...but I didn’t do anythin’” she pleaded. “It wasn’t me; it was them, the others!”

“That don’t matter now!” Cody yanked on her shirt again. “Should’a watched who you rode with.”

“Besides,” Will stopped just outside the stall. “I don’t think we need much any reason to hang a redskin.” He smirked back at her, then walked off.

“Come on, now, get a move on!” Cody pushed her forward. A streak of pain shot from her ankle up to her kneecap and she crumbled to the dirt floor on her hands and knees. “Come on, come on, get up!” he pulled up on the back of her shirt. Once she was on her feet, he shoved her again and pushed her out of the stable.

She steadied herself before she fell this time and limped toward the entrance of the barn where Will waited by the horses. She had to get away, but she could not run on her ankle.

“Should we go meet up with the others?” Cody followed close behind her.

“Nah, they can handle the rest.” Will shook his head. “We’ll take her straight back to town.”

When Lily stepped out of the barn, she could still see the smoke and fire from the burning house. The orange blaze radiated against the black of night, and gunfire raged in the distance. Some of the others were still alive. She stood next to Will and watched him strap his rifle to his saddle. She had to take one of their horses. It was her only chance.

Cody grabbed a fist full of her shirt collar. “She goin’ on mine or yours?”

Her eyes darted to the open grass fields.

Will shrugged, “Don’t make no difference to me—“

Lily lashed out and rammed her left elbow up into Cody’s jaw with all her might. He stumbled back and fell with a grunt. The horses stirred. Will turned towards her— She kicked him in the groin, and he dropped to his knees. She climbed his horse and “Yahh!” kicked her heels into the horse’s sides.

It took off at a full gallop through the field of grass. She leaned forward, and her raven hair was like a black streak as it whipped in the wind behind her. Only the horse’s thunderous gallop rivaled her pounding heart.

A shot rang out and she jerked as it whizzed passed her head. She leaned in low beside the horse’s neck. She could not see where she was going, but it did not matter.

Another shot chased her down and bit into her left shoulder. The force of it knocked her out of the saddle and she crashed to the ground. Her head thudded to the dirt and she laid there breathless for a moment. The horse thundered away into the night and left her to fend for herself.

She sat up in the dirt and rubbed the back of her throbbing skull. The way things were going, she would be surprised if she made it through the night. A rumble of boot steps sped towards her. She looked up. Will and Cody barreled down on her with fire in their eyes. She curled into a ball and let their kicks and stomps rain down on her arms and legs. Their blows were like hammers to her body. She tried to get to her feet and run, but one of them grabbed her by the hair, wrenched her head back from her shielding arms, and punched her in the face. There was a flash of white light and she hit the dirt again.

She flailed in the muddy waters of unconsciousness and fought hard to stay afloat. Something welled up inside her, dark and angry. She felt it before, as child, and it frightened her. It hated everything. It hated everyone. It wanted to be free, but she was afraid to let it go. She was afraid of what it would make her do.

She swam back to consciousness, back to the world, back to the beating Will and Cody rained on her. With every strike of their fists, the darkness within her wanted out. It surged up from her gut. A ball of raw emotion welled up in her throat and almost choked her. She had to

release it; she had to let it out.

She became a torrent of fury and lashed out blindly with a wail of madness. She kicked, punched, clawed, and bit her attackers. She cursed them as her fists and feet pounded into their bodies. She bit down on someone's hand. She tried to bite out a chunk and could taste blood in her mouth. Her victim hollered and snatched their hand free of her teeth. They forced her down on her back, straddled her, and held her arms down. All the screaming, hitting, and grabbing reminded her of the first time her mother let one of those men rape her while she sat and watched.

Lily opened her eyes and Will was on top of her with clenched teeth. He struggled to hold her arms down as she fought against him, then Cody's boot smashed into her face. In a flash of light, her vision blurred. The cursing and yelling faded to silence and everything went black.

The muddy waters of unconsciousness consumed her.