

# Chapter 1

Dorothy was thirteen when she met the War-Witch and fourteen when she watched her die.

She'd been a foundling, like many others in the town of Knee Branch Creek. The place ate people, always had. Men and women died in mining accidents or in feuds. Some came then left, cursing the place. Abandoning half-constructed homes along with whatever family they'd dragged west.

Life there was harsh to everyone but harshest to children. Many ended up struck down by disease or crushed as they scampered underfoot. Others found work in the local mine and died down in the dark. Buried under rock or choking in the gas that bubbled there from time to time. Bad ends, to be sure, but at least these got the dignity of gravestones to mark each passing.

Others weren't so lucky. Those vanished, lost in the woods that encircled the town to the things that dwelt there. Leaving nothing more than a scream followed by cold silence.

Not that this bothered Dorothy much. She was a survivor.

Her parents had died so long ago that they'd faded to blurred images in her imagination. A man standing in a doorway surrounded by sunlight. A woman crying as snow fell. She didn't think about them too much. Too much thinking made her sad and took her attention away from getting by and making sure she made it to another day. Which, as all of the foundlings knew, was all that mattered.

Like many of them, she'd grown up on the streets near Mama Bell's brothel.

Many of the whores had children of their own or had lost one and still felt the ache. Those were kind to the town's strays. When they felt particularly generous, they'd give them a bit of food or liquor. The lucky ones, the prettiest of the orphans, got treats and ribbons. Almost all of these ended up working on their backs as adults. Pimped and prepared early on for lives as painted joy-toys. The ugly ones would shuffle off and try to find work as they got older. Becoming apprentices or working on the remaining farms. Working to eke out a living, and just.. get by.

Not Dorothy.

Mama Bell herself took an interest in the young girl. Mama was a ferocious woman, ancient at thirty-four. She told Dorothy that she'd got her

name from the songs she'd sung when she was young and an 'actress'. With a voice she swore had run across stages bright and clear as her namesake.

Before, as she put it, "Years drinking whiskey with bad men and smoking cheroots with worse women put an end to that."

She'd say that and roar with laughter each time she told the story. Dorothy would laugh back, which made Mama happy. And both would ignore the real reason. She was Bell, not for some long lost voice, but because of the great clapper she carried with her at all times, ringing it whenever a client's time was up.

Dorothy liked her though and Mama seemed to like her in turn. The older woman called her Dormouse or just 'Dor' for short and would often give her a bit of food or pay her coin for an errand. No more than that. When she'd first offered the girl a place for the night, Dorothy had scowled and backed away.

"I don't want to be a joy-girl."

Mama had rolled her eyes. "You've got to be charming to work as one. Your friends Jelly and Suzanna? They're charming. You..." She punctuated this by jabbing Dorothy in the ribs. "Are not charming. You're a damn loud-mouthed brat."

The girl gave her a suspicious look. "What, so why're you being so friendly? What do you want?"

“Maybe you remind old Mama of a child she once had.” She’d made a dramatic noise, holding one hand up to her forehead. “My poor little lamb. Dead these past few years. Ohhhh.”

She’d grinned. “But maybe not.” Spitting out a wad of phlegm, she fixed Dorothy with a discerning eye. “You’re a human, girl. Same as me. There aren’t many pureblood’s like us, especially in this shit-hole of a town.”

“And bein’ human’s a good thing?”

Mama shrugged. “Nothing special ‘bout it. But it does make me feel a bit of... kinship towards you, y’know? Like... there aren’t many of us left so we got to stick together.”

Her smile turned savage. “Besides. Little thing like you makes a great pet. Sort of like my personal lucky charm.” And she’d burst into laughter when Dorothy swore at her and cursed up a storm.

Mama Bell was right though. Pure humans were rare, especially out near the wastes. Most of the townsfolk had at least a touch of the beast in them.

In some it was minor. Silver eyes or scales brushing their face like freckles. Dorothy’s friend Jelly was one of those. Human enough until he laughed and showed incisors thick enough to do a hare proud.

In others, the animal dominated. Her other friend Suzanne sported a thin coat of fur, black except for a skunk stripe that ran down her back. Her

face was an odd blend of ugly and beautiful. Teeth mixed with sharp fangs that made her slur whenever she overcame her shyness and spoke.

Dorothy had been jealous of the other children when she was young. She'd stare at her unremarkable face with a frown, poking her dull looking nose and tweaking at her round, ordinary ears hoping they'd shift and change as she grew. Wishing there was something, anything, interesting about her. She'd asked Mama Bell about why the others tended to look so different and the older woman had given her chin a thoughtful scratch.

"Way I heard it, people weren't always like this. Everyone used to be like you and me. As you were whining about... Boring."

"Why's that? What changed?"

Mama'd pointed above them. Up towards the moon. It hung autumn low above the trees that evening, full, a black hole in the night sky. Visible only where its rim glimmered and ancient fires burnt red across its surface.

"Back in the old days, that thing used to be white." Dorothy had frowned at this, unconvinced. Mama laughed. "Fine, don't believe me. Hells, I don't really believe it either. But my nan swore it was true. That moon was once a pale ball, clean as a silver sun. So bright you could walk around some nights without needing a lantern. And people lived on its surface. Men and women tall and true; each with hearts that shone as bright as their home."

Dorothy frowned, trying to imagine it and failing. "Sounds like bunk t'me. Why ain't they still there, then?"

“Ah, now there’s a tale. Way my grandmother told it, something happened up there. Something awful that burnt it and turned it black then spat a great cloud down on the earth. Where that cloud fell, people changed. See, we each have a bit of the beast, in us.”

“You ’n me don’t!”

Mama took a swig from her flask, warming to the story. “Sure we do. Even those like us have it deep down. It’s just hiding. See, everyone’s got a... well a look to ‘em. You see a nervous couple in the street? Sheep. Miner comes in after a hard day’s shift and howls after one of the joy-toys? Hungry as a wolf. Old man Stevens up the road?”

Dorothy thought of the hunched be-speckled shopkeeper. “He’s definitely a turtle!” She giggled, imagining a large terrapin in an apron slowly shuffling around his shop.

"See? Each of us has an animal. It's hidden, but it's there."

Dorothy poked at her cheeks, excited at the thought. "Ohhh, oh, so what am I?"

Mama laughed. "You're an irritating flea." Ignoring the tongue, Dorothy stuck out, she added, "And I'm a mean old bat. So we're a fine pair!"

She drank from her hip flask. "Anyway, that's what I heard. Something happened up there, and the air changed. It tainted the earth and made a heap of us flesh and fang and fowl."

The old woman shrugged. “At least, that’s one idea. A professor I serviced swore it had nothing to do with the moon but was because of a disease. Some infection of the blood that changed us in our mothers’ bellies. Passed the nature of beasts right through the Cawl into some babies sleeping in the womb.”

“That seems dumb”

Mama grimaced. “There's worse ideas. A doctor came to town once. Posh as she was mean. Swore blind she’d figured out that the beast-kind were impure and was trying to rally what she called ‘the good folk’ to her side. She spent hours going from house to house, talking to any of the human’s she could find. Claimed we needed to sterilise our neighbours ‘just to be safe.’”

Dorothy had wrinkled her nose in disgust. “She sounds like a right fucker.”

Mama Bell didn't blink. “A right fucker indeed. Loud one too.”

“What happened to her?”

The old woman shrugged. “We hung her from the big tree in the centre of town. Don’t come to the Creek sprouting that sort of crap about our neighbours and expect not to get a smack in the mouth.” And Mama and Dorothy had laughed together at the thought.

There was laughter back then. And Dorothy figured that was enough.

Despite the poverty that hung over the town, she accepted the reality life had given her. Everyone was struggling to get by, so she never felt sorry for

herself. If she often slept in a barn or spent a day picking through trash so she could eat, well, so did dozens of others. If she was dirty and thin, so was everyone around her. And she was luckier than many she figured. Mama Bell looked out for her. She gave her work, letting Dorothy act as the whore house's runner and errand girl. A few of the joy-toys even whispered that Bell might one day take her on as an apprentice. That she was looking for an heir.

They were wrong, of course. Mama knew what Dorothy was, deep down. Even if she didn't say it. The girl was a feral cat, Too independent for a real home. Too used to hissing and spitting at those who got too close to ever want to curl up on a hearth no matter how much she'd stare longingly at the fire. Bell knew that one day those clever eyes would shut for good. That she'd be another corpse left on the street or dumped under a porch. And that made the Madam sad but she felt the inevitability to it.

The town ate people after all.

Then, In Dorothy's thirteenth year, a gang of men came to town and everything changed.

They arrived with the first autumnal rains and hunkered down. They called themselves '*The Bayou Boys*' as if it meant something and spread through the Creek like a plague. Most were beast-touched, all wolves and hounds which suited them. They were feral, killers each and every one, the kind of men who'd shoot someone and laugh as he bled out.



A rumour went around town that said they were renegades. Mercenaries from a skirmish out East who'd been unable to find work once the fighting ended. Truth was, no one knew for sure. They just knew they were trouble.

All of them were vicious but their leader Theodore was the worst.

He was a stretched leather strap of a man, hard as a coffin nail. Fond of drink and hurting women when he was angry, which was all the time. He had rabid eyes and hands that twitched across the pearl handled guns strapped to his thighs. He liked those, yes he did. He'd draw them on any townsfolk who dared talk back to him. Grinning and almost begging them for a fight.

No one in the Creek did. They were all survivors in their own way and recognised a real threat when they saw one. Most begged his pardon and shuffled on their way. Dorothy understood this and didn't hold it against them. Life had taught her that the weak ducked when the strong swung. And for the next few months, she and the other children did a lot of ducking. Strays like Dorothy avoided the Bayou Boys whenever they could, crossing the road or ducking into an alleyway when one walked through town. Theodore though? They hid when he was about. Hiding under porches and whispering curses they'd learned at his back.

When he visited Bell's, Mama made sure Dorothy and the other children stayed away. He spent much of his time there, drinking. Laughing in a cruel way at whichever miserable whore he'd pulled onto his lap. The same ones who'd appear the next morning, face black with bruises. One

night they heard shouting from the tavern, followed by gunshots and screams.

Her friend Jelly joined them later, eye-whites huge against his dusky skin. He whispered Theodore had been meaner than normal. That he'd hurt one of the joy-boys and even slapped Mama when she rushed over. The bouncer Eli had finally worked up the courage to step in, ordering the gang out.

Jelly had shuddered in the telling. "They... they beat him. Beat him bad. Thrashed him until he stopped moving." He'd gulped. "Then Theodore... he called Eli a bug. Said he liked squashing bugs. And he stamped on his head again and again until he kinda... lay there."

That marked the end of Mama's patience.

Dorothy saw her the next day at the mail office, arguing with the clerk. When she stepped out, the girl had asked her what she was up to.

Mama had growled, face made worse by a purple bruise that was swelling across one cheek.

"Getting us a gun. A big one."

But winter had the Creek in its grip before that gun finally arrived. It was early in December and a blizzard had blown in during the morning, a heavy one that spat snow everywhere. Hours went by and the storm showed no signs of letting up. By the second bell, most townsfolk had left work and headed back home. The Bayou Boys camped out at Mama's, drinking and

whoring up a storm. Each of them getting more stir crazy and bored by the minute.

By night they were mean drunk, swilling back drinks then staggering out to piss or shoot their guns up into the thick sky. By midnight, even that had soured. Most of them lounged about. A few fought. Theodore sat alone by the fire. From time to time, he'd take out his gun and point it at one of the battered joy-toys. Smirking as they fled from the direction of the barrel.

Most of the strays had found places to await out the storm but Dorothy stayed huddled round a fire in one of the alleys, trying to stay warm and failing. So cold she felt winter clamp its teeth around her lungs and being to bite. She was awake when Mama came outside. When the madam beckoned, she stretched and staggered across the road, wading through snow deep as a pond.

"Need something, Mama?" From inside something crashed and a young woman wailed. Men laughed. Mama's flinched at the sound, her eyes frantic with rage and fear.

"You go tell Sheriff Potts he needs to come here, Dor. Now."

Dorothy hesitated. She knew the man and knew what a coward he was. "He won't come."

Mama had opened her mouth to say something when they heard the sound of horses. The street she'd crossed was empty and dark, buried thick beneath fresh flurries. Beyond the town slept or hid, every window dark. The only lights came from the bar and it took Dorothy a minute to make out two shapes riding towards them out.

Two men, she thought at first, the leader short, their companion tall and stocky. Dorothy blinked and realised the smaller of the two was a woman, ancient yet unbent. A scarf hid most of her face, but what Dorothy could see seemed as leathery and crumpled as last summer's apples. One eye was little more than a milky orb. The other blazed blue like a hawk's. Fierce and vicious.

Her companion huddled under a heavy coat. All she could make out of him was a bright nose and round glasses that blazed orange in the lamplight. His horse was heavy with bags, tenting and bundles that might have been books.

They stopped in front of Mama and Dorothy.

"You Bell?" The stranger's voice was a croak.

Mama hesitated, then gave a nod. "Who's asking?"

"Name's Appalachia. You sent for me some months back."

Dorothy expected the Madam to reply with her usual sass. Call the woman late as she chewed her ear off. Instead she turned pale, her face trapped somewhere between relief and terror. "Yes... ah... yes. I did."

"Got the cash for it? Don't be wasting my time if not." There was a threat to that, subtle but real.

Mama nodded. "Two thousand dollars. As asked." Dorothy gaped. She knew enough to know about Bell's to know that was a year's worth of profit. Maybe more.

The woman looked at her for a moment, then nodded. "Fair enough." She gave Dorothy a curious glance. "This your daughter?"

Despite her nerves, Dorothy shook her head. "Ain't no one's daughter."

To her surprise, the woman eyed her up and down for a moment with an odd little frown. "Huh. Well, alright then." She might have said more, but another crash followed by a gunshot echoed out from the tavern. Someone inside gave a little shriek of pain, and more laughter tumbled through the door.

"That them?" Without waiting for an answer, the newcomer strode into the tavern.

"This is a private par..." Whatever bit of bravado one of the gang was going to say withered before that look.

"Fuck off." The woman's voice slapped at him, and he stumbled backwards as she walked past the entrance towards the bar.

She ignored the gang and turned to Mama. "Give me something to drink. Something strong. I don't work when my tits feel like they're about to freeze off."

Dorothy had never seen Mama like this before. Theodore scared Mama, but he also enraged her. When she stared at him, there was hate in her face. This stranger, though? She was something else. Mama had always seemed strong and proud but she scurried after the old woman, head down. The madam's hands shook as she poured, spilling drink around the glass. If it bothered the newcomer, she didn't show it. She drained it in a gulp.

“Another.” She drank and sighed. “Ahhh... Burns a treat.”

Dorothy watched this from the door, nervous as a cat. Too excited to flee but too cautious to risk stepping into the tavern. Next to her, the other traveller stopped and put down his bag with a thump. He removed his hat, revealing a round, black face crowned with wiry hair slicked down tight to his scalp. He wore a suit and waistcoat, threadbare but finer than any Dorothy had ever seen. His voice, when he spoke, was educated and soft.

“You’ll want to leave now, young Miss.”

She bristled. “Ain’t ‘fraid.”

“You should be.” He didn’t look down at her as he spoke, just kept his eyes fixed on his companion. “There’ll be killing soon. Lots of it.”

He was right. There was murder in the air now, thick as the pressure before a storm. Around the room, the gang was standing, faces flushed, red with alcohol and bravado. Only Theodore still sat, a smirk on his face. His gun drawn but resting on his lap. Not pointing at the old woman. Not yet.

*He knows something awful is going to happen. Dorothy thought. And it excites him. He’s hungry for it.*

Theodore opened his mouth, but before he could joke or taunt, one of his men hissed.

“Look at her fucking hands, Theo!”

The hand in question crawled with tattoos. Black bands looped around each finger, and others swirled up her wrists. Tattoos, but they shimmered

when light hit them. Bright as gold. And seemed to shift occasionally; lethargic snakes shifting in the sun.

The stranger turned and lent back against the bar, letting her coat fall open. Her frayed clothing gleamed in the light from metal threads sewn into it. Elsewhere, dozens of talismans and charms hung from holsters. And there were guns as well, ancient ones. Each barrel blackened, and the grips scorched so badly they looked lightning struck.

“It’s a war-witch!”

If the bar was quiet before, it was grave-silent now. Everyone knew what a war-witch was.

Dorothy had never seen one, only heard whispers and tall tales from the older children. Most of the stories were the same. War-Witches (Warlocks if a man) were gunslingers. But they were more than that. The stories varied with the teller, but all said they were magic or at least had magic in them . Some ancient spirit that had hunkered down in their guts and sat there grinning, allowing them to do... things. Things like silencing their footsteps when they walked. Things like snatching bullets right out of the air. Or even shrugging off the worst of wounds like they were nothing more than rainwater. Folks said a Witch was equal to a whole troop of men, one a hundred strong. That they were death incarnate, all blood and flame and fear.

Theodore must have heard the stories because he stopped moving, face uncertain. *Like a dog who thought it was chasing a stray cat but found itself chewing on a lion's tail.*

“Thought your kind only existed in stories.”

Her reply was flat. “I’m real.” He started to reply, but she fixed him with her remaining eye. “You seem to be the leader of these sorry fucks, so I’ll speak to you. Polite, like. Because I’ve ridden all day and I’m cold and hungry. And I’d rather drink and eat than deal with you. ‘Kay?’”

None of the gang moved. Most glanced back at Theodore, desperate for some idea of what to do.

“The Madam behind me has hired me to deal with you lot. Said in her note she’s tired of your bullshit. She wants you gone.”

“You bitch! I’ll ki...” One of the Boys started shouting at Mama, only to freeze as the Witch looked across at him and held up a warning finger.

“As I said, she wants you gone. So now, one of two things can happen. You can either get, right now, right this very instant. You can pack up your guns and your noise and your mangy horses and fuck off into the night. And if you’re smart, you’ll never, ever, come back.”

Theodore’s face was pale, but he sneered, bringing the gun barrel up to his head. He tapped it against his cheek. “And let me guess. If we don’t, you’re going to kill all thirteen of us? Make a big old baker’s dozen of a trophy out of our scalps?”

“Something like that.” Her face was fearful in its asymmetry.



“But before you decide what to do next, I need you to hear me. Really hear me.”

Her voice had dropped, colder than the snow outside, and every syllable snapped as she spoke. “I’m worse than every story or myth you’ve ever heard about my kind. If you draw down on me? I will murder you. Murder you all right here, right now. Your lives will end in this shitty little saloon...”

Here she glanced around, fixing each one of the Boys in turn but ignoring the whores cowering on the balconies and alcoves. “...And no one will care. Not me, not the joy-toys here, not even the mothers who spawned you from their pox-riddled crotches. Your bodies will be flung out into the forest, and what’s out there will chew you down to bones and shit out the remains. That’ll be your end.”

Every word was the click of hammer on firing pin. “Now. Fuck. Off.”

One of the older Boys, an ugly man with hound dog eyes, held up his hands. “Good enough for me.” He turned to the door but stopped at Theodore’s roar.

“You stay. Everybody stays!”

The bandit gave his leader a desperate look but retreated. Theodore’s eyes snapped back to the Witch, and he snarled. “You come in here? You act all tough? You...”

Those were the last words he ever spoke.

Her guns were up, so fast they blurred. Dorothy saw light flicker down her fingers and along the worn metal, then heard a... shriek. Hollow and

raw, as if the scream came from underwater but really seemed to come from the Witch herself. The lamps around the bar blazed in time with the noise, then dimmed just as fast. Across the room, Theodore jerked back, and a red flower blossomed on his chest. A moment later and his jaw came apart, caving inwards like a month-old pumpkin. She fired for a third time and what remained of his head turned red and wet.

Upstairs, one of the joy-toys began to scream, and the sound turned into a chorus. The gang scattered across the room, and the Witch stalked after them. Most fled, running for the back room or up the stairs. Those died, each shot in the neck. A few of the braver ones tried to fight. They died as fast, each shot twice, first in the heart, then another to their head. A few of the braver ones got off shots, but each went wild, tearing into floorboard or wall. The Witch ignored those, drawing a bead and firing again and again. And each time she pulled the trigger, what looked like flame uncoiled down her arms, forcing its way down the barrel and out into the desperate men. The gun glowed, as bright as metal in a forge. Smoke rose up from the barrel and her skin; poured out like vapour from her mouth.

As the old woman unleashed on the Boys, something in Dorothy's head laughed. Clicked and snapped each time the guns roared. Something feverish and metallic and very far away. She tasted blood in her mouth, and the room swam. Through the spinning, she saw the Witch look away from the men she was killing. Just for a moment. Stared straight up and her with the same puzzled glance she'd had when they met. Followed by what might have passed for a grin before returning to the killing.

Only one of the gang, a man perched upstairs had time to aim. Dorothy saw him, and tried to shout out a warning to the old woman but was too late. He fired but instead of a spray of blood, something near the witch's head flared and swirled in the shape of a shield, bright as stardust. The old woman glanced up in irritation and shot back, hitting the sniper deep in his crotch. He fell, his cry high and brittle. He might have carried on screaming if she hadn't waded through the debris and finished him with a bullet to the face.

She spat. "Fucker." Then turned to the last survivor, the hound-eyed man who'd tried to leave.

He whimpered, holding up his hands. "I tried to surrender! I just wanted to leave!"

The witch sneered. "Should have tried harder." Then shot him dead.

Dorothy stared along with everyone else. Heard the thump through her boots as the body hit the floor. Felt light headed and feverish with excitement. She turned to the witch's companion but before she could speak saw him staring down at her.

"Gods' girl. What's wrong with you?"

Dorothy frowned. Her face felt wet and feverish. Touching it turned her fingers red. The whispers that had echoed through her head during the fight gave a final chuckle, then withdrew.

She wondered if a bullet had struck her, then licked blood off her upper lip. *Huh. A nosebleed. That's odd.*

Everything went dark.

She drifted, bobbing in and out of consciousness. There were shouts... then darkness. Warmth of a bed drenched in perfume and faces clustered over her. Then darkness once again. Once there were voices. Mama's pleading with someone. A voice harsh as rusted knives on rock firing back. Footsteps retreating and a door closing shut. Then the shadow of a figure above her pressing something ice cold into her hands that grew warm as she held it.

The harsh voice grunted with satisfaction. "...ee? I knew it! The relic lit up soon as we arrived. I could almost smell it on her. Girl's pure. After all this time. She might be like me. She could hold 'em. Can't believe we got this lucky in a shit-hole like this!" And the ancient voice laughed, harsh as iron scraping across a pan.

And another, a man's voice, responded. "Aye." A rough hand stroked her face. "Poor thing. You poor, poor thing." Then she fell back into the black and slept.

When she woke, it was morning or it might have been. She was in one of the joy-toys work rooms, a small one. Big enough for a bed and not much else. Under the blanket, her body was warm, but above it, her hands and face felt stiff from the cold. Snow was still falling and gathered thick on the filthy window. What light came through it turned the room an odd, pale silver full of deep shadows. One that made Dorothy feel like she was floating under a frozen lake.

It took a moment before she realised she wasn't alone. Sitting on the edge of the bed was the other stranger from before. The man. He was reading, glasses pushed back high onto his head.

“Who’re you?”

He turned and blinked, then smiled at her. “We weren’t introduced. I’m Nathaniel Abernathy, at your service, little Miss.” Seeing her blank face, he added “A friend of the war-witch your Mama Bell hired.”

Dorothy stayed still. “She get ‘em all?”

“She did. Two nights ago.”

The girl thought of the men and Eli’s body lying on the table as the whores wept. “Good. They needed killing.”

The man gave her a pained look. “I suppose some men do. Appalachia would agree with you, at the very least.” He sighed. “Still, enough about them. How are you feeling? You collapsed during the fight. Bleeding from your nose and eyes. It gave everyone a terrific fright.”

She yawned. “Fine. Still kinda sleepy.” She remembered the taste of iron in her mouth. Dorothy reached up but stopped when she realised she was still holding something.

Clutched in her hand was a trinket.

It was metal, a cross between a medal and an old pocket watch. It might have been beautiful once, but there was an ugliness to it now. It had engravings on the front, all swirls and hints of what might have been waves

or flowers. The back, though? That was a ruin. It lay pitted and worn, scorched as if flung into a kiln. Even in the chill, it felt cold and heavy in her hand.

Looking at it made her nape bristle. The alley-cat sense that had kept her alive for over a decade whispered. *This isn't a good thing. Get rid of it. You get rid of it RIGHT NOW.*

Dorothy would have listened if tiny lights hadn't begun to drift across the surface. Each a brilliant blue, and as small as dandelion seeds. The safe voice in her head faded, replaced by that whisper she'd heard during the fight. Tiny and precise, the voice of a clock chanting its way down to... something.

She gasped and dropped the trinket. Whatever she'd seen vanished, and it lay there, dull and ordinary, on the blanket. When she looked at the man in wonder, his face was sad.

"You saw them, then? The lights?"

Dorothy nodded. "What.... What was that?"

He sighed. "Things for witches, I suppose. If you're like me? You just see a lump of metal. If you're like Appalachia? You see something else. You too, I suppose." He stood. "I'd best go tell her. She's been searching for someone like you for years."

The girl thought of the fight. Of the old woman's guns blazing and the steel in her good eye. Of the raw power that seemed to burn off her till the

air hissed. Of the way no man or woman in the place dared cross her. “I could be like her?”

Nathaniel stopped at the door, face in shadow. He kept his back to her as he answered. “Maybe. I’m not sure you’d want to be but... maybe.”

Then he was gone. Left behind, Dorothy sank back into the pillows. Despite her exhaustion, a grin crept across her small face. *Things were going to change.* As his footsteps receded, she picked up the trinket again, turning it over and over in her hands.

And deep inside, entirely forgotten, the little warning voice that had kept her alive for so long moaned with fear.