

Traveler in Time - Prologue



Nick - 1887

It is no accident that his time control popped him out in 1887. Nick had chosen the time, then set the control for the test run himself, before inserting it into the pommel of his saddle so it wouldn't get lost. Without it, he wouldn't be able to return to his own time. He tucks the round metal case into the palm of his hand, placing it in the custom-made pommel pocket, the red digital readouts sparkling like rubies from the saddle horn. He touches the small buttons on either side to set the readout designation for his return trip to his own time, 2025, in case he needs to make a fast get away. In case of unforeseen events, all he needs to do is to push the red button above the readouts and he'll be whisked from this time before any ripples can be created by his actions.

The old west has fascinated Nick since he was a young man digging up historical facts for the sheer thrill of the discoveries of lives in simpler times. Not the typical pastime of a twenty-one-year-old male, but he never turned down an opportunity to research the American West. Since he was a boy, he'd wanted to live in the old west. He longed to experience it, if only for a short time. This was why he'd signed up to be a Time Regulator, for Time Travel, Inc. at the age of forty-two.

Traveling from time period to time period, his job is to ascertain the intended uses for time travel technology are legitimate, and that fool-hardy users create no ripples in the time/space continuum. One advantage of being a Regulator is that he is allowed to do the test

runs on new prototypes, and he is allowed to select his own time destination for that. For his first test run of this new device, he'd chosen 1887.

He's prepared for this period, dressing the part, complete with a straw cowboy hat and a holster with a .38 long colt on his hip. He'd stuffed three double eagles from his collection into his pocket. Twenty-first century money wouldn't get him very far here.

Now, sliding down out of the saddle, he wraps the reins over a hitching post. He ambles a little way up the boardwalk, then turns and heads back the way he came, liking the way his stiff leather chaps squeak with every step, and the 'ting' of his spurs announce his arrival as he crosses the wooden boardwalk.

"Hey, you there!" he says, motioning to a man preparing to enter the *Silver Leaf Saloon*, across the street. The tall, dark-haired young cowboy looks his way and changes course, heading over to him at a slow amble. Although his chambray shirt and denims are covered in dust, he wears a black felt hat upon his head. Nick knows felt hats are pricey in 1887, so he takes this as an indication that the man is no drifter.

"What's your name, son?" Nick asks as the man approaches. He walks back to stand by his horse, closing the distance between them.

"Name's LeRoy McAllister," the man replies, eyeing Nick as if sizing him up. "What is it that you want?"

"Nick Umbridge. I'm new in town," Nick says, giving the Appaloosa a pat on the neck. "Just looking for someone to tend to my horse while I step inside to slake my thirst. You interested? There's a double eagle in it for you."

LeRoy's eyes grow wide. A double eagle is a good amount for such a simple task, and he knows it. But his expression quickly turns skeptical. "What all I got to do?"

"Just fetch him some water and a handful of grain, and then stay right here with him until I return," Nick says. Seeing the puzzled expression on the man's face, he explains further. "See, this is a special saddle, and it wouldn't do for me to come out and find it gone."

LeRoy looks the saddle over, seeming unimpressed. "I don't see anything so special about it."

"All right, I'll show you," Nick says, reaching up for the pommel. "But you must promise not to tell anyone else about it."

LeRoy gives a nod of his head, and Nick continues. "You see, I can pull this pommel back to reveal this little metal device." He pulls the device out and holds it so that LeRoy can see the digital display. "This thing is what you need to protect, because that's my only way home."

"You been hitting the bottle, Mister?" LeRoy asks, taking a step back. "You ain't making a whole lot of sense."

"No, you don't understand." Nick weighs out in his mind carefully on how much of the truth to divulge. It really doesn't matter. It wasn't like this kid was heading into the future any time soon. And even if he was, he wouldn't understand. "I'm a scientist, and this device guides the horse where I tell it. See those numbers?" Still holding the time travel device so that LeRoy can see it, Nick points to the digital display. LeRoy gives a nod, but he still looks unsure. "I put in those numbers and then, when I've had too much to drink and can't find my way home, I just push this red button and they take my horse where he needs to go."

“Are you feeling all right, Mister?” LeRoy asks with a wrinkled brow. “Maybe you should see the doc.”

He turns and takes a step to leave, but Nick reaches out and grabs him by the sleeve of his chambray shirt. “Please. It may not make sense to you, but I’ve prepared all my life to visit this... place. I should have thought this through better,” Nick says, having second thoughts about showing LeRoy the device. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out one of the gold coins which he had brought with him. “I’ll tell you what. Here’s that double eagle I promised you. You just tend to the horse. I’ll take this little gadget with me, so you won’t even have to worry yourself about it.”

LeRoy takes the coin from him with hesitation. “I guess that’s all right,” he says. “I sure can use the money right about now.” He walks over to the watering trough and dips a bucket in. Nick tucks the time device into his inside vest pocket and heads across the street toward the *Silver Leaf Saloon*.

He pauses and looks back over his shoulder to see LeRoy placing the bucket down in front of the horse. A young saloon girl with curly red hair and freckles comes running out of the *Silver Leaf*. “LeRoy McAllister, what’s wrong with your head?” she says. “You’d better git outta town right now. Sheriff’s gettin’ up a posse.”

LeRoy glances up to see Nick watching. “Can’t Sissy,” he replies. “I just took a job tending this here horse. I’m not worried about no posse.”

“The whole town knows it was the Montoya gang that held up the stage and killed poor Sam Wheat,” the girl called Sissy says. “He drove that stage since the stage line started, and people in this town thought well of him....”

“I know all that,” LeRoy says, breaking in and cutting off her words. “Sam was a friend of mine. I didn’t have anything to do with him getting killed. I only rode in with them on one job to keep the bank from foreclosing on my Pa, you know that...”

The rest of the conversation is none of his affair. Satisfied that LeRoy would honor their agreement, Nick turned back to get that drink.

He steps through the bat-wing doors of the saloon, and amazement overwhelms him. He is really here, in 1887. Sawdust stirs beneath his feet as he heads for the bar, which runs nearly the length of the back wall, with a spittoon at each end. Many of the men at the tables look up at him briefly before returning their concentration to their hands, but a few gazes linger as he crosses the floor and steps up to the bar.

On the left, bored looking women in fancy undergarments sit on the risers of the staircase leading to the second floor, gazing out over the saloon in the afternoon heat. One girl’s eyes settle on him, and she pokes the girl sitting next to her with her elbow. When the second girl catches sight of him, she gives a little giggle, drawing the attention of the rest.

It is just as he has always pictured it, except none of the wranglers and cowhands look anything like he does. None of the men in the saloon donned chaps or spurs. They all wear work clothes that look as if they’d put in a hard day; most are dirty, as LeRoy had been, making Nick stick out like a sore thumb in his brand new, twenty-first century store bought western attire.

Two men, their clothes gray from dirt and trail dust, sit at the far end of the bar, sipping beers. The one on the end meets his gaze and nods. He gives the other a nudge with his elbow, causing him to glance in Nick’s direction. His gaze fixes on Nick, staring at him in his fancy

duds. Ignoring them, he walks up to the bar; the bartender approaching from the other side.

“Whiskey.” Nick says, slapping his hand down on the bar hard enough to sting his open palm.

The bartender slides a shot glass over to him and produces a bottle from behind the bar, filling it with a smoothness that said bartending was a career for him. Nick slams the shot back the way he does with Parker Goose, back in his own time. But this is not Parker Goose, which is a smooth, cooling liquor. This is rot-gut whiskey, the likes of which, Nick has never tasted, and it burns all the way down, bringing tears to his eyes. He coughs and sputters, trying to maintain his composure.

“Have another,” says a voice from behind him, and a very large hand pounds him on the back. “On me. The second goes down smoother.” Nick turns to see a big, burly man, wearing a genuine foxtail hat, step up to the bar next to him, as the bartender fills Nick’s glass once more. The man looks as if he could use a shave and a haircut, his hair sprouting out every which way to match the ruffled appearance of his fur vest and foxtail hat. His vest looks to be badger fur, and the foxtail is so bristly you could clean a stove pipe with it. He’s big enough to wrestle a bear, and Nick thinks he may have done so a time or two, but his grin is wide and his smile inviting beneath his burly beard, and Nick can’t help but take a liking to him.

“Pour one for me, too,” the man says to the barkeep. He turns back to Nick, extending his hand. “Chance Webber is the name.”

Nick shakes his hand, as the bartender fills a second shot glass for his new friend. “Nick Umbridge.”

“Where you from, and what brings you here, Nick?” Webber asks, looking him over.

“Just passing through,” Nick replies, picking up his own drink. Webber lifts his glass as well, touching his with Nick’s in a toast, although Nick isn’t sure what they are toasting. Maybe that he is just passing through, but this man appears to be too friendly for that. He didn’t buy his drink randomly. He wanted something.

Both men put their glasses to their lips and tip their heads back, letting the fiery liquid slide down their throats and into their gullets. Once the fire within has subsided and he finds his voice, Nick croaks out a thank you for the drink. Webber gazes over at Nick a long time without saying a word, a slight smile crossing over his face.

As Nick begins to feel self-conscious under Webber’s gaze, a tall, dark stranger wearing a Mexican poncho and sombrero saddles a barstool on the other side of Webber, providing a needed distraction.

The stranger raises a finger, and the bartender places a mug of beer down in front of him. He flips a gold piece through the air with a flick of his thumb, and the bartender grasps it from the air with practiced ease, squeezing it into his palm as he makes his way down to the other end of the bar. When the stranger flips the coin, he turns enough for Nick to catch a glimpse of the left side of his face, his shoulder length black hair revealing a handlebar mustache and goatee adorning a face bearing the long lashes and high cheekbones usually associated with women. Then, Mr. Webber was speaking once more, and the stranger is forgotten.

“I’m trying to figure you out,” Webber says at last, slamming his palm down on the bar and motioning to the barkeep to pour another round. “You come in here looking like you were just outfitted in some fancy foreign country and you ain’t put in a good day’s work in your life.”

“What makes you think that?” Nick asks, self-consciously. Webber is putting him on the spot, but he’s still grinning that big old, silly grin. There seems to be no threat from the man.

“Your hands are soft,” he says, grabbing Nick’s hand and holding it up in the air for all to see. He raises his own bear’s paw, three times the size of Nick’s, and holds it up next to his for comparison.

“You any good with that pistol?” Webber is referring to the Colt Peacemaker, which hangs in the holster on Nick’s hip.

“I do all right with target practice,” Nick says with a shrug of his shoulders, not wanting to brag. In truth, he is a crack shot. He’d started by practicing his fast draw, to see if he could learn to draw like the gunslingers in some of the old western movies. Movies which were considered classics in the 21st century. Hell, he was almost a classic himself, but he was as fit as he’d ever been. He chuckled to himself at the thought. As he’d gotten older, he’d advanced to actual target practice at the shooting range. He’d set up a private shooting range in his backyard and practiced the fast draw until his aim on the draw was dead on.

“How about when it counts?” Webber asks with a wink. “You shoot worth your salt when the chips are on the table?”

“I guess so,” Nick replies, scratching his chin. “Never had occasion to test it.”

“Never had no...?” Webber says with a look of disbelief. “Boy, where you been living? In the stone age?”

“No, the twenty-first century,” Nick says, mumbling under his breath, and clearing his throat to cover.

Webber takes no notice and continues. "I'm looking to hire me a gun hand, is why I'm asking. Got to be good with the iron, though," he says. "I got me a good claim back up in the hills. I plan to work it until it's played out. The thing is, there are a lot of claim jumpers here about. A man has got to protect what's his."

"Wait. Are you offering me a job?" Nick asks.

"Well, I haven't seen you shoot yet, but I was thinking on it," Webber replies, sliding off the stool and heading for the back door. "Come on. Let's see how much damage you can do."

It is out of the question, Nick knows. Staying here for any amount of time would risk altering everything that followed in the future. Although Regulators are allowed to go to the time of their choosing on these test runs, they had to take caution not to do anything that would change the future or cause a paradox, or a time ripple. One ripple could set off a chain reaction, causing more and more ripples, possibly hundreds, maybe even thousands. Yet, the idea of showing his skill with a gun is intriguing none-the-less, so he slides down off his stool and follows.

Nick had donned the Peacemaker to dress the period and fit in. He hadn't considered that someone might intend him harm. He was pretty sure that shooting someone would be enough to cause a ripple.

"Aren't they all just out for a good time?" he says, feeling a little uncomfortable as they step out the back door into a fenced area where bottles have been set up on stumps along the back. "They're all just good old boys, aren't they?"

"Man... where the hell have you been?" Webber asks with disbelief. "Ain't you heard? The Montoya gang held up the stagecoach and killed the driver just last week. They could be

around here now. They're all local boys, 'cept for their leader, Juan Montoya. He's a mean ol' snake that slithered up here from Mexico. With them around, ain't nobody safe."

"No kidding?" Nick says. "I guess I'd better take more care."

"You're darn tootin'," says Webber with a nod of his head. "A man can't be too careful around these parts. Ain't no telling what a man will do for money. You can see why I need to hire someone to protect what my claim produces." He grabs hold of a string hanging around his neck and pulls a small pouch out of his shirt, handing it to Nick. "That's what I pulled out of her last week."

Nick takes the pouch and opens it, peering inside with one eye. He pours a good amount of gold dust into his palm to sparkle in the sunlight, along with a sizeable chunk of rock, presumably ore. He pours it all back and feels the weight of the pouch in his hand. The pouch is heavy enough, he has no doubt it is what Webber claims.

"Looks like you stumbled upon a mother lode," Nick says, handing the pouch back. The dark stranger in the sombrero steps out the back door. Nick recognizes the black hat. "But, as much as I appreciate the offer, I can't..."

"I ain't made no offer yet," says Webber, nodding toward the back fence. "Go on. Let's see you shoot."

This is what Nick has practiced a lifetime for. Before Webber has even finished his sentence, Nick draws and shoots six times, blasting six bottles in a huge spray of glass.

"Well, now," says Webber, clapping him on the back. "I guess you can shoot all right. Reload. Let's see if you can do her again."

“I’m afraid I can’t,” Nick says, patting his pockets. “I’m out of ammunition.”

Webber looks at him with a puzzled expression. “Now what kind of a fool doesn’t carry his reload?” he says. “I thought you were smarter than that.”

Nicked blushes. Embarrassed by his folly. Perhaps he doesn’t know as much about the west as he’d thought. A real cowboy always carried extra ammunition. Everything he’d done here today cried out amateur. Next time, he would have to be better prepared, thinking of all the possible contingencies. But then, if his bosses found out he was engaging like this, there might not be a next time.

Another shot rings out, and Webber slumps to the ground, dropping his pouch and spilling some contents out in the dirt. He stares up at the sky with eyes that will never see anything again, a bullet hole centered perfectly between them.

“What the...?” Nick says. The stranger in the sombrero snatches up the pouch as he runs by Webber’s prone body on his way out the back gate. “Hey! Come back here!” Nick yells, but the stranger just keeps on going. Nick kneels at Webber’s side, but there is nothing to be done for him now.

Folks start piling out the back door of the saloon to see what the commotion is about. “That thar’ fella shot Chance Webber!” a voice from the crowd yells.

Nick spins around to face them, wondering where they all have come from. There certainly hadn’t been so many patrons in the saloon. “What? No,” he says, holding his arms open to show he has nothing to hide. “I didn’t shoot him.”

“He’s still holding the gun,” someone else says. “That ought to prove he done it.”

“But... no! I didn’t shoot him, I tell you,” Nick cries in protest as the crowd moves forward. He sweeps his open arms out toward the crowd, letting the gun fall to the ground, backing away from the advancing mob.

A tall, skinny cowpoke snatches the gun from the ground, sniffing the barrel. “Fresh powder. This here gun was just fired.”

“Look! There’s gold dust on the ground near Webber’s hand,” another good citizen cries out.

“Yes, I fired it,” Nick says. “Look at the bottles. I was shooting at the bottles.”

“Probably robbed him!” Another cry arises from the mob.

“No!” exclaims Nick, but he’s not sure which accusation he is denying. None of them are true.

“Get him!” someone cries.

“Yeah, string him up!” someone else yells, as the crowd closes in on him.

“No! Wait,” he says, trying to think of what to say to defuse the situation. “The stranger from the saloon did it. He wore a poncho and sombrero. You all were inside. You must have seen him. The bartender seemed to know him. That’s who shot this man. I saw him run out the back gate.”

The cries of the mob grow louder. They don’t want to hear what Nick has to say. They are coming for him.

He scans his surroundings like a trapped animal with nowhere to go. Then, his thoughts go back to the gate, and he does the only thing he can. He runs out the gate just the way the man who'd shot Webber had. Only Nick has the mob hot on his heels.

Nick runs around the building to the boardwalk and the hitching post, where LeRoy has perched, murmuring to the Appaloosa.

"Hey, I need my horse right now!" he says. LeRoy rises and holds out the reins, eyes wide. Nick grabs hold of the reins and pulls the time device from his vest pocket, fumbling it back into the pouch.

But the crowd is on him. Strong hands grip his biceps, pulling him back. "Shit! Take care of my horse," Nick says, dropping the reins as they pulled him back away from LeRoy and the Appaloosa horse.

He sees the saloon girl, Sissy, run out of the *Silver Leaf* from the corner of his eye as they drag him away.

"LeRoy, you've got to go now!" she says, yelling to be heard over the noise of the mob. "The sheriff is on his way with the posse!"

He sees LeRoy grab up the reins and mount the Appaloosa, as they drag Nick down the street. Another group of men on horseback round a corner with a man donning a Sheriff's in the lead, his silver star gleaming in the sun's light. Nick calls out to him in a last desperate attempt to right the events that he knows he has set into motion. "Sheriff! Sheriff! Please, I swear I'm innocent. Don't let them hang me!"

Pulling up on the reins, the Sheriff looks over in Nick's direction.

But then, someone from the Sheriff's crowd yelled, "Look there's McAllister!"

Looking up the street once more, his gaze falls on LeRoy and he snaps the reins and yells, "Get him, boys!" The Sheriff and the men with him gallop up the street, leaving Nick to the fate he's created.

Nick sees LeRoy look back before riding off on the Appaloosa at a fast pace. "Don't push that red button, Boy!" he cries as the mob carrying him down the dusty street stops in front of a large cottonwood tree at the end of a row of rickety shanties.

He tries once more to explain his situation, but no one is listening. "Hold on now. Wait. How many shots did you hear?" Nick shouts, desperate to make them hear him. "My gun is a six-shooter. The shot that killed Webber was number seven. Someone must have heard it. My gun was already empty." He twists and turns, trying to get away, but there are too many hands on him. He'll never be able to cut loose.

Someone tosses a noose over one of the large branches and pushes Nick forward to stand beneath it, while someone else slips the noose over his head. "Wait! I'm a traveler in time. I didn't kill anyone, I tell you. I've got to go back the same way I got here."

The noose tightens around his neck. He can protest no more. His hands go to his throat, trying to work his fingers under the rope, so he can get a breath. Someone yanks his arms behind his back and ties his wrists together. The noose tightens more as his feet leave the ground. He is lifted up, dangling from the branch, and his air is cut off.

He sees the cute little saloon girl, Sissy, trailing the crowd and tries to tell her to make sure LeRoy doesn't push that red button, but he can't make the words come out. His last thought

is that he's lost the time control and allowed the first ripple. Then, the folks standing below him grow fuzzy as he struggles to breathe, and that is all he will ever know.

Take Me Down



Amaryllis – 2025

Amaryllis pushed her way in through the apartment door, arms loaded, kicking the door shut behind her. “Lights on,” she said aloud, flooding the living and dining area in ambient light.

She made her way into the small kitchen, dropping the mail on the center pedestal table and muscling her groceries down on the marble counter.

After playing three full sets at the bar last night, and partying with the band until the wee hours of the morning, she’d picked up some things she needed at an all-night grocery. Now all she wanted was to soak in a hot tub and then crawl into her bed to sleep away the heat of the day.

She went about putting the items from the bags away until a noise caught her attention. She set the package of spaghetti on the table next to the mail and moved through the living area to find the origin of the noise. It seemed to be coming from her bedroom.

It sounded like a woman in the throes of ecstasy, which could only mean one thing. Claude had brought his extracurricular activities home. And that was a no-no in her book. Amaryllis could tolerate a lot. She put up with his other women. Neither of them were exclusive in the relationship, but you didn’t bring it home into her bed. For Christ’s sake, he’s got his own damned apartment. She felt her blood pressure rise just thinking about it, overriding the calm she’d been feeling from the lines she’d snorted before leaving the bar after her last set. She would not stand for this.

She walked to the bedroom door and gently turned the knob, pushing the door open slowly. Sure enough, there was a woman with long, blond hair bobbing up and down on top of Claude in the middle of her bed!

Amaryllis took two steps to cross the room and grab the bleach-blonde bimbo by the hair, pulling her off Claude.

The woman landed on her ass, spread eagle, between the foot of the bed and the dresser, giving out a surprised squeal. “Hey, what the hell?” she exclaimed.

“It’s time for you to leave, bitch,” Amaryllis said, snatching up a pile of clothes she didn’t recognize from the chair by the bed, and throwing them at her. “You can keep the asshole, but this room is taken. Get your shit and get out.”

“Amaryllis, what the fuck?” Claude’s voice came from behind her. “I was just getting ready to cum.”

She spun around to face him. “You’re breaking my heart,” she said, spitting her words at him. “You can go with her. I don’t give a shit. This happens to be my bedroom and I want her out. Now!”

The girl snatched up her clothing, shoving her legs into her shorts without bothering with her panties. She pulled a shirt over her head as she shuffled for the door.

“It may be your bedroom, but I pay the rent,” Claude said, rising to face her, exposed for her to gaze upon his naked form, his dark eyes blazing with anger. “What the hell is your problem?”

Standing there with his junk hanging out was distracting enough that she almost missed the throbbing vein in his neck, which was a tell-tale sign that he was getting ready to blow a gasket. Perhaps she could have handled this situation better. She suddenly had the feeling that it was about to get out of hand. She didn't need to go rounds with Claude right now. What she needed was sleep.

"Look Claude," she said, running a hand through her hair. "You know I don't care if you screw them," she said in a calm voice that she hoped would be calming to him, as well. "I just don't want you bringing your whores to my bed. Is that too much to ask?"

He backhanded her across the face in reply, snapping her head back and ringing her ears.

"You think you're so high and mighty, just because you've got a voice," he said, lunging at her. He knocked her back against the dresser, slamming her head into the mirror, causing a spiderweb of cracks to appear across it. "You're no better than her. You're nothing but a cheap slut. I pay the rent. I manage your band. I provide all your drugs and your liquor. Without me, you're nothing. I can take you down."

"You're not man enough," she said, lashing out with her foot, her high heel connected with his thigh. *Too bad it couldn't have been just a little to the left.* "I'd make a deal with the devil himself before I'll be taken down by you!"

She tried kicking out again, but he took a step back and to the side and her foot found only air. His fist found its mark in her gut, pushing the air from her in a rush. She gasped, trying to regain her breath as she threw an arm across her abdomen, fearful of another blow.

Claude grabbed her arm and flung her over onto the bed. Amaryllis landed on her side, curling into the fetal position. She tucked her head next to her knees to protect as much of her

body as possible from the tirade she feared was coming. She especially tried to protect her stomach, as that was Claude's usual target of choice. The damage was seldom visible there, although after his last tirade, she'd had to eat bland foods for several days.

He pounded her with his fists, battering her arms and legs without mercy. She made herself as small as possible, but she couldn't hide everything. It seemed that he would never stop as the pummeling continued, one blow after another, to every part of her body that remained exposed.

Claude was wild with fury. He was usually careful not to leave marks where they would be visible on stage. The stomach was his usual target of choice, but her back and shoulders would be black and blue this time for sure. Probably her arms and legs, as well.

In the past, that had been her saving grace, because the outfits she wore on stage didn't cover much, so there weren't that many places it wouldn't show. But now, that didn't seem to matter as he hit her over and over in a relentless frenzy.

She cried out in pain as one of his blows connected with her foot so hard her shoe came off, flying up and smacking her in the head. "Stop, Claude. Stop!" she cried, throwing her hands up in surrender. "That's enough."

"You're right. It is," he said, grabbing her by the throat and rolling her onto her back, pinning her to the bed. Red faced and bulging eyes, he looked like a madman hulking over her, with his dark hair falling across his face in every direction. "I've wasted enough time with you, bitch. Time to end it."

She knew he was a bastard, but he'd never been this out of control before. You didn't get to be one of the biggest dealers in Vegas by being a nice guy. He cut off her airway, and the world around her became fuzzy. *The bastard is really trying to kill me.*

Her hand found the shoe that had cracked her in the head, and her fingers grasped it. She couldn't draw in any air. Her head was swimming, and she knew that consciousness was slipping away from her. In a desperate attempt to stop him, she flung her arm wildly at him, connecting with his head.

Claude's body lost its momentum, releasing pressure from her throat, and collapsed on top of her.

Amaryllis gasped, drawing in air in big gulps. She pushed against Claude. He rolled off of her and lay staring up at the ceiling with glazed eyes, her high heel embedded in his temple, and a trickle of blood running down his face from the wound. Another trickle ran from behind his eye. Now, life had been extinguished from those eyes in a single moment, and they both stared up at the ceiling, empty of all awareness.

"Holy shit!" she said, pushing herself away from him. She propelled herself off the bed and onto the floor, where she landed hard on her butt, causing her battered body to cry out in objection.

"Claude?" she said, in a voice so soft it was almost a whisper. *What have I done?*

All Witches Burn



Amaryllis

The rainbow colors of Monique's moo-moo blared in the sultry afternoon sunlight shining down from the skylights. Clinking bracelets, which covered her forearms, announced her arrival. She didn't wait for pleasantries. There was no need for an invitation. Monique was as permanent a fixture in this barn as Roger, the Raven she had taken in and nursed when he broke his wing. The Raven which was hanging upside-down from the rafter above the corner stall.

"So, what's up?" asked Monique as she entered the barn through the open double doors. "You make things seem so mysterious, calling me up out of the blue after not hearing from you all week, demanding I meet you here on the spur of the moment. This is something more than just needing to unwind, isn't it?"

"You're the psychic," Amaryllis said, keeping her face stoic so as not to reveal the tension she was under as she looked up from the rolling paper she was filling. Her nerves were shot. She was so jittery; she could barely keep her hands steady to keep from spilling its contents over the tabletop. "Did it take all of your hoodoo powers to come to that conclusion?"

She looked up to see the familiar wrinkled features of her oldest and dearest friend. The red of her hair seemed to crackle and sizzle as it was hit by the diffused sunlight streaming in through the slats in the barn walls as she moved, highlighted by the afternoon sun from the skylights above. Monique's flame red mane trailed out behind her, and dangling hoop earrings

bounced from her lobes with each hobbled step she took, a sharp contrast to the gnarled figure she presented. The effects of the Werner's syndrome made her childhood friend appear old enough to be her grandmother, but her youthful spirit was still apparent in her attire.

“You didn't give me a lot to go on,” Monique said, pulling a folding metal chair up and taking a seat across from her. She took care not to bump the rickety card table and spill the dish of herb, cleaned of seeds and stems, resting in front of Amaryllis as she took her seat. “But the bruise on your cheek tells me you've got big trouble. You need a reading, don't you?”

The old barn was a part of the family property she inherited when her parents died. She'd left the front stall on the far side as stable for Demon, the big, midnight black stallion, which she'd raised from a foal. But she'd taken out all the rest of the stalls, replacing them with a staging area at the back on that side, where the band practiced, and a recording studio opposite. She preferred the open space of the barn with its tack and saddle décor for hanging out. She'd brought in the old card table and folding chairs for she and her guests, plopping them down in the middle of the large open area that remained.

It was quite a contrast to the loud goth décor of her loft reprieve above, where she wrote all of her songs and housed all of her stage outfits and props. The smell of fresh hay made her feel down to earth and helped separate her thoughts from her work. Right now, she needed the calming effects of it to sooth her frayed nerves. She rolled the paper and its contents between thumb and forefinger with concentration.

“Roger! Roger!” the crackling voice of the Raven cried from the back of the barn, but Amaryllis paid him no mind, not even looking his way. She had more important things to think about right now than that silly bird.

“Shut up, Roger,” Amaryllis hollered back toward the horse pen, rising to her feet once more, then she turned back to Monique. “Yeah, I’ve got a problem,” she said, rubbing her injured cheek bone. “Claude was being a dick, as usual, and we got into another big fight last night. I came away with a few new bruises to cover up on stage.” That was only half of the story, but she wanted to weigh her friend’s reaction before telling her the rest.

There was rustling in the air as Roger came forward to sit on the rafter above them. “Shut up, Roger!” the bird mimicked. “Shut up, Roger!”

“Did you leave him this time?” Monique asked, raising an auburn brow, and ignoring the bird. Demon nickered from the front stall.

“Kind of,” she said with a scowl. She stuck out the tip of her tongue and ran it along the joint. “There’s only one way out when you’re dating the biggest drug dealer in Vegas, though. You know Claude. He’d have his goons after me in a heartbeat if he could. This way, it might take them a little longer to come looking. In the end, all witches burn, baby.”

“I know you’re kidding,” Monique said, turning up the corners of her mouth just slightly. “But you do tend to push the limits. I swear you are part Latin lover and part dominatrix, the way you use your feminine wiles.”

“My feminine wiles?” Amaryllis said with a raised brow and a soft chuff of breath. “Really?”

“Well... you’re headstrong,” Monique said with feigned hurt in her eyes. “You don’t like to be told what to do, or worse, what not to do.”

“I’d be insane to defy Claude,” she said, running a hand over her hair, knowing that was exactly what she had done, but still trying to deny it. “Claude is a powerful man. Grown men cower in his presence. You think I’m playing Claude for the thrill of it?”

Monique shook her head. “No, not purposely, but sometimes you push things too far for the thrills. Is there any way that you haven’t tempted death?”

“Isn’t that my choice?” she said, meeting her friend’s eyes as a flare of anger sparked inside her. It was a sore spot. If she chose to push the limits, that was her business, and Monique was her friend, not her mother. “I walk around like a fucking zombie for half my life. Going wherever someone else tells me, playing other people’s songs in dumps where the audience is so drunk or stoned, they don’t know where they are, let alone hear my music. Pushing the limits makes me feel alive. Driving fast, bungee jumping, rock climbing, even messing around with drugs—I have some degree of control. But messing with Claude LeCroix is pushing things out of my control. I know that.”

She stopped to catch her breath. She was talking as if the words couldn’t come out fast enough. The realization of the degree of risk she’d put herself in hit her for about the twentieth time since this morning. Each time she thought about it, it seemed even worse than it had before. She grabbed her head with both hands. “That’s not just taking a risk and grabbing a thrill, that’s fucking insane. I don’t know what the hell is happening to me.”

Monique gave her a knowing look. “Is there something we need to talk about? You got a dark cloud hanging over you.”

Amaryllis darted her eyes away, concentrating on the doobie drying in her hand, not wanting to meet her friend's gaze. It was eerie how accurate Monique's intuition, what she called her psychic vision, could be.

Monique motioned toward the joint. "Are you gonna light that, or sit around holding it all day?"

Amaryllis had never been comfortable with all this hocus pocus mumbo jumbo. Monique often shared what she saw in her visions, but Amaryllis had never asked for a reading before. Now she did.

"Are you going to look into your crystal ball and tell me what you see?" she asked, putting the joint to her lips. Trying to appear nonchalant, as if this was a request she made often, when in fact this was the first time that she had ever called upon her friend's abilities, she picked up a lighter off the table and produced a flame. She inhaled deeply as the fire touched the tip, then passed it to her friend.

"I don't need a crystal ball to tell me you've got darkness hanging over you," Monique said with raised brows, taking the joint from her. The sleeve of her brightly colored moo-moo slipping back to reveal the bony hand of an old woman. "You need to separate the seed from the chafe." She paused to take a hit off the joint as she reached into the pocket of her jeans and pulled out a leather pouch.

Amaryllis threw her head back and let her breath out in a big plume of smoke. "All witches burn, baby," she said. "Why the hell not?"

She looked up as she exhaled, shrouding the bird on the rafters above in smoke, obscuring him from vision. As she did, Roger flipped around on the rafter above them to dangle

upside down and turned his head to stare at them through one large obsidian orb. “Wanna get high?” he called. “Wanna get high?”

Smoke issued from Monique’s nostrils as she produced a handful of bones, resting on the hardened skin of her open palm, which she held out to Amaryllis. “You want to touch them?” she offered. “It will make for a clearer reading.” The barn filled with the pungent aroma of marijuana.

Amaryllis shook her head. “Just give me the joint.” The bones were creepy. Werner syndrome gave Monique the hands of a crone, adding to the overall eeriness of the gesture.

The smoke above them cleared to reveal Roger swinging upside down from the rafter above. “Wanna get high?” he cried. “Wanna get high?”

“Shut up, Roger!” she said, scowling. On edge anyway, the bird was grating on her nerves. “I’m sorry I taught him to talk. Damn bird. Now I can’t shut him up.”

“Roger! Shut up, Roger!”

“Come on, it will help,” Monique urged, moving her gnarled hand toward her. “Ignore the dumb bird.”

“Where did you get those?” Amaryllis asked with a scowl.

“They’re possum bones,” Monique replied. “Specially prepared by my grandmother, who taught me to read them. She was a Blackfoot healer until she married my Irish grandfather and came out west.”

Amaryllis wrinkled her nose, but reached out her hand reluctantly, brushing the bones in her friend’s palm with the tips of her fingers. She wasn’t sure what she had been expecting,

perhaps a jolt of electricity to fly out of the bones and surge through her fingers. Although she felt nothing, she winced when she touched them.

“Roger! Roger!” the bird cried again.

Monique closed her hand around the bones within. Moving her hand across the surface of the table, she released them to spread over the faded tabletop. She produced a piece of flint from the pouch, chipped into the shape of a stone scraper. Making a few swift movements, she pushed the bones around the table with the flint. She stared into the bones, studying them, wrinkling her brow.

“What?” Amaryllis asked. “What do you see?”

“I see fear in you,” Monique said. “I see it, but I don’t believe it. Amaryllis Maria Sanchez, you’re scared of something.”

Amaryllis sat up straighter in her chair and looked Monique in the eye, placing both hands on the table. “I fear nothing. I thrive on danger,” she said, swallowing a lump in her throat. This was why she didn’t mess with this spiritual shit. Monique was picking up on her anxiety about Claude. His goons were a force worth fearing, and the cops would be looking for her, too, since she left him in her apartment. “Even when Claude was pounding on me, I felt anger, not fear. You know me better than that.”

“I do. But I still see fear,” Monique said, giving her a look that said she didn’t like what she saw. “The bones don’t lie. What are you afraid of?” She held out the joint, almost burned down now, for Amaryllis to take.

Amaryllis brought her hand up to meet Monique's, but she was unable to take the herb from her. The jitters overtook her, and she found her hands shaking too badly to grasp the small roach. She sank back down onto the folding chair in front of her. "Oh hell, I'm screwed."

Monique looked at her, questioning with her hazel eyes. "What happened last night? Are you afraid of Claude?"

"Not anymore," Amaryllis said, shaking her head, the tears flowing down her face. "I caught the cheating bastard with another woman in my bed. In my bed!"

"So, what's the problem?" Monique asked, wrinkling her already wrinkled brow in puzzlement. "You guys have an open relationship, don't you? You certainly aren't exclusive."

"I don't bring them home, damn it," Amaryllis said. "I've never flaunted it in front of Claude. The bitch was in my bed!"

"Okay. So, what did you do?" Monique reached out, placing gnarled fingers gently over Amaryllis' hand without breaking eye contact.

"I threw the bitch out. That's what I did," Amaryllis said, jerking her hand away to slam her fist down on the table, as she flew up from her chair, sending it crashing to the ground.

"Grabbed her by her bleached blonde hair, yanked her right out of the bed and shoved her ass out the door, Juan naked. What else could I do?" Pacing the dirt floor of the barn, she let the story spill from her lips. Once she had begun, she was driven to let it all out and get it over with.

"Then, Claude started yelling and doing his usual number on me. My torso looks like I fell on a paint pallet of reds and blues all swirled together. He usually doesn't hit me in the face.

He knows not to mark the moneymaker.” She circled her face with a forefinger, indicating her bruised and battered cheek. “He knows what sells albums and brings in the crowds.”

“Oh, Sweetie... I’m so sorry,” Monique straightened up as much as her twisted frame would allow. Reaching out, her gnarled fingers brushed Amaryllis’ shoulder as she passed by in this round of her pacing, but she was left grasping at air. “You may act like a devil, but you sing like an angel. That’s what people pay for.” A look of concern crossed over Monique’s wrinkled face. “Did you see a doctor? Is anything broken? What happened then?”

“Well, I had to defend myself,” she said, working her lower lip with her upper teeth. She set her chair upright and slumped back into it with resignation as the burst of stressed powered energy ran its course. “I hit him with my stiletto heel, but it was only because I couldn’t breathe. I planted that sucker right in the soft spot in his temple and ran like the devil was on my ass.” She plucked the roach from the ashtray and put it to her lips, but it was out. She let out a little laugh. “Hell, maybe he is. Didn’t I say all witches burn?”

Amaryllis reached for the lighter. The light in the barn dimmed as clouds crossed the path of the sunlight coming through the skylights. Monique looked down at the bones once more. “I see more,” she said, scowling. “There’s chaos coming, but I can’t see where it’s coming from. It’s like it has already happened.”

Amaryllis stared at her friend in puzzlement. “What the hell is that supposed to mean? My life is chaos. It’s already here.”

“There’s a male figure... he’s like a shadow form, there but not there,” Monique said, pointing to an odd-looking bone, darker than the others. “There is something very different about this bone.” She leaned over the table, staring into the bones, the stern look of consternation

adding even more lines to her wrinkled features. “I’ve never seen them laid out in this manner. It’s like your future is in the past.”

“Beware! Beware!” cried the Raven, swooping down from the rafter above to snatch up a bone from the table. Before the women could react, he disappeared into the shadows of the horse’s stall.

“Hey!” yelled Monique, making a grab for the bird. Her arm hit the table, spilling the dish of weed across the tabletop, sending the lighter to the floor, and shifting the placement of the remaining bones. “Come back here!”

“Damn it!” cried Amaryllis, grabbing the dish and scooping the pot from the table over the edge into it. “Crazy bird.”

“That was weird. What got into him?” Monique asked, gathering the scattered bones. “When did you train him to call out that warning?”

“I didn’t,” said Amaryllis, turning to stare at her friend. “What did he take?”

“That odd piece of bone that I was examining,” said Monique, stooping to pick up the bone pieces from the dirt floor. “It wasn’t one of mine. I couldn’t get a better look at it. I don’t know where it came from, or what it means.”

“Wanna get high? Wanna get high?” came a cry from the horse stall.

The crash of thunder sounded in the distance and the light in the barn grew dim as clouds blocked the sun’s rays from hitting the skylights, making the air chill. Demon whinnied and huffed nervously in his stall. A chill ran through Amaryllis as Monique turned her head to look at her. The two women stared at each other in silence.

The clouds passed, and the sun illuminated the barn again, burning away the ominous feeling with its warmth.

“Wow, that was weird,” Amaryllis said. “When did you add all the special effects to your bag of tricks? Pretty convincing.”

“No, girlfriend,” Monique said, shaking her head. “That wasn’t anything I did. That made my skin crawl.”

“What does that mean, anyway?” she asked. “My future is in the past...? So, what? It’s already happened?”

“Wanna get high? Wanna get high?” Roger’s voice echoed through the barn with a hollow quality. “Shut up, Roger! Danger! Hit the road! Hit the road!”

Monique forced a smile to appear on her wrinkled face, letting out a nervous twitter of a laugh. “Maybe we should listen to the bird. That was enough to scare me straight.”

Amaryllis shook her head, placing the dish with the weed on the shelf behind her. “Sorry. Can’t,” she said. “I got a gig tonight. Gotta get ready.”

“Do you really think that’s wise, given the latest developments in the Claude situation?” Monique asked. “The police are going to want to talk to you.”

“Well, I don’t want to talk to them,” she said. “I don’t plan to live out my life in a jail cell, waiting for Claude’s goons to exact revenge. With his connections, his reach is a long one. Down I go.”

“You can probably get off with a plea of self-defense,” Monique said. “Do you think they won’t come pull you off the stage? You should turn yourself in.”

“Again, you know me. I live for rock n’ roll. My music is all I’ve got.” Her eyes pleaded with her friend for understanding. As worried as she was about what would happen now that she had killed Claude, she had to keep playing. Her music was the only thing that kept her sane. Hopefully, she could figure out her next move in the meantime. “I’ve got to play this gig tonight. I don’t know what might happen after. Maybe nothing for a while. Depends on when the goon brigade gets smart enough to break down the door. I locked everything up tight. Looks like the crime of passion that it was.”

“Roger! Roger!” the bird cried, landing on the rafter directly above them. Neither woman turned her head, intent on the conversation and the pieces of the puzzle being revealed by Amaryllis.

“What about the girl he was with? The one you threw out,” Monique said. “She knows you were there. It won’t take them long to put it together. You should turn yourself in before she points a finger at you.”

“They’ll put it together, anyway. He died in my apartment. It isn’t the cops I’m worried about,” Amaryllis said. “That’s nothing compared to what might happen if Claude’s goons get a hold of me. Hell, I’m already dead, unless I can figure a way out of this. There’s got to be somewhere I can go incognito until this all blows over.”

“Wait,” Monique said, reaching out to take a hold of her arm. “You think Claude’s death is just going to blow over? Are you crazy? No wonder you’re afraid. You should be. What are you going to do?” Monique asked.

“I don’t know,” she replied, heading for the ladder leading to the loft at the front of the barn. She felt her world falling apart around her, but she didn’t want to drag Monique into all this

mess. She already regretted telling her. Claude and his boys were dangerous. Amaryllis hoped she hadn't placed her friend in danger's path by confiding in her. "Right now, I've got a show to get ready for. After that, I'll figure it out. If my future has already happened, I guess it may not matter what I do."

"Amaryllis, wait," Monique said, stopping her in her tracks.

She turned to face her friend.

"I don't know what those crazy bones meant," the crone-like woman said. "Honestly. I've never seen a reading like yours. I don't know where that odd bone came from, and now that damn bird took off with it, so I probably never will." She pointed at the bird perched above her. "What I do know is, it scared the hell out of me. Whatever it means, it's not good."

"With my life, nothing ever is," Amaryllis said, meeting Monique's gaze. "Look, my friend, I know you're concerned. And I thank you for that. But you can't get involved in this. It's my mess. I shouldn't have even told you."

"Wanna get high? Wanna get high?"

"Well, do you care if I hang around a while and look for that bone?" Monique said, looking up at the bird now. He turned an obsidian eye toward her as he swung upside-down from the rafter. "If I find it, maybe I can figure out something that will help me understand that reading."

"No, of course not," she said, coming back to wrap her arms around her friend's shoulders in a hug. "You know you are always welcome here. And thank you for caring. It's nice to know somebody gives a shit. But don't worry. I got into this. I'll find a way out."

“Okay, but Amaryllis,” she said, pushing her back to arm’s length and looking her directly in the eyes. “Be careful.”

“Get him stoned and then ask him,” she said, grabbing ahold of the ladder. She needed to make her exit before her friend could pick up on the anxiety building inside her. “Maybe he’ll show you where he put it.” She winced at the pain in her abdomen as she ascended the ladder. She looked back over her shoulder on the step just below the one that would place the floor of the loft between them, cutting off visual. “Happy hunting, my friends.”