

RATTLESNAKE: CHAPTER ONE



SNAKE BITE

A GOTHIC WESTERN

ABBY RAY

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A Gothic Western

By

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Chapter One

SNAKE BITE

The first thing I saw was blood in the moonlight. It looked like ink splattered across my hand as my eyelids slowly opened. I didn't know where I was, my name, nothing at all. It was like I'd been born again. Once I realized that my hand was bloody, I bolted upright, breathing heavily. Looking around, I could only see flashes of things. A road. I was on a road. A wagon tipped over along with a dead horse. A boy lying still several feet away from me. I nearly screamed at the sight of him and tried to get up, but my legs buckled under me. I crawled my way to him.

"He-hello?" I said, my voice was as dry as animal bones in a desert. "Can you hear me?" I shook the boy, praying to God that he was unconscious or asleep, anything but dead. I turned his head and, for a moment, I thought my prayers had been answered. He looked at me with wide green eyes, but he did not blink. His gaze looked up at the moon as if he was a porcelain doll. On his neck was caked flecks of blood around a small bite wound near his throat. Maybe some critter or snake got to him when I was asleep? Bullet holes dotted along his chest near his heart. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I stared at the corpse.

"*Help!* I screamed, "*Someone! Please!*" Only the wind answered. I felt like a child lost in the woods, cold and afraid of what was hiding in the dark. I glanced over to where I laid and gasped. On the other side of where I woke was a revolver and a knife, its metal blade glistened with black blood. I had woken up with hundreds of questions, but now they swirled around my head like a cyclone. *Did I do this? How could I have done this? Am I a killer?* I pulled my legs up under my chin and wept into them, alone, afraid, and full of guilt for what I might have done.

"Shhhh," I whispered to myself, rocking back and forth. "You're alive. You're all right because you're alive." I breathed. I tapped my shoulders and breathed in and out with the slow beat of a drum. I felt the dirt against my shoes, I felt the tips of fingers against my dress, I felt the wind blowing through my dark hair. I didn't know who I was or what I'd done, but what were the things that I *did* know?

I'm alive.

That was obvious.

I'm Hispanic.

Again, that was obvious from the color of my skin.

I'm in. . .

Where *was* I? The terrain around me was flat, but dotted with trees and grass. A word came into my mind: *Texas*. All right, then. That's a good a place to start as any.

I managed to get up slowly and dusted off my dress. I looked over at the wagon and noticed something sticking out of the tarp that covered its bed. I walked over, trying not to let my gaze meet the dead horse's eyes. I could hear flies buzzing around its nose and was struck by the smell of death. Not because it was rotten or bad, but because it was so sweet. It was like a strange bouquet of perfume that hit my nose so hard I almost staggered back onto the ground. I shook my head, ignoring it. If I was going to be distracted by everything that I thought was strange, then I wouldn't get anywhere.

I bent down and lifted up the tarp and saw a doll laying against the dirt. Its hair was made of twine and its button eyes stared back at me like lumps of coal. I looked at the corpse of the boy and thought about all the times he must have played with it. I wondered if that was the last thing that crossed his mind when he died. I untied the ropes that held the tarp to the wagon and pulled it all the way back. Inside was an assortment of goods, cookery, clothes, medicine, and other necessities. Whoever owned the wagon must have been moving their house along with it. I looked around as a thought occurred to me: *Where were the boy's parents?* As I scanned the fields around me, I saw no other bodies or any signs of people besides what was in front of me. Were they taken? Did they run off? Or did I. . .

I didn't even want to consider it. The thought that maybe *I* had something to do with this was enough to send me in a weeping fit all over again. A child *and* his parents? Jesus, what kind of monster am I? I quickly pushed it out of my head and began to inspect the wagon's contents. I placed a hand over my stomach as it growled like a mountain cat in heat. I saw some bread, bit into it, then spat it out after it felt like sand in my mouth. A slice of cheese, maybe? Made me gag. An apple? Like biting into a block of soap. Wasn't there *anything* that hadn't gone bad? Something twinkled in the moonlight and I saw off to the side of the wagon was a metal canteen. It must have been thrown off when the wagon fell. I ran to it and unscrewed the cap like a child opening a present. I poured the water down my mouth, it splashed all down my face and dress, and. . . Nothing.

It tasted wet, that was for sure, but it didn't quench my thirst. I rubbed my throat as it remained dry, it almost hurt to drink from the thing. "*Shit!*" I cried and threw it at the wagon in a fury. It knocked over some of the contents, all that sweet water that could have been used for someone who actually needed it, trickled down into the dirt. I noticed the head of a shovel peeking out of the wreck and looked at the boy's body. I knew what I had to do.

It didn't take long to dig the grave. I chose a spot in the fields several yards away from the disaster that I woke up in. At first I thought it was because the boy might have liked the outdoors, I pictured him running through grass and climbing trees in the bright summer sun. But then I realized that it was more for my sake than his. That dead horse and that wagon felt like a haunted place. Like something from Revelations, an omen of something bad. I was surprised by how light the shovel was as I dug through the dirt. Didn't even break a sweat. Must've been loose soil. I wrapped the boy in the tarp, thinking that it would be good enough for a coffin. To tell the truth, I didn't want to see his face. I thought it would make it better if I didn't have to

look at those beautiful green eyes, pleading with me, asking why this happened to him, but it didn't. All it did was make me feel even worse as I laid him to rest. I made sure to put the doll in his hand, though.

After I filled the grave back up, I made a cross with the shovel, a switch, and some rope from the wagon. The switch was crooked in the knot, so it made it look like something silly more than something holy, but it would have to do. I stood in front of the grave for a time, trying to think of something to say. If I had been to any funerals, I couldn't remember, so I didn't have the best idea of what someone says at those type of things. I looked up at the night sky, the stars looked like diamonds against the black and the moon hung above as if they were waiting for me to say something. Couldn't even remember scripture or hymns, so I just said, "He was a good boy," and left it at that. I wiped a tear from my eye, hoping that I had done his short life justice.

A pain shot through my head and I went down on my knees in the dark grass. The pain was like a railroad spike hammering into my skull. My vision was blurred for a moment and I saw a shadowy figure standing over me. It was like having a nightmare while I was awake. The shadow stood over me and I heard a muffled sound like a laugh. It was high-pitched and rolling like a coyote howl. I wailed against the pain as the laughing grew louder and louder.

Then it stopped.

I looked around, dots of light floated in front of me like fireflies. It was quiet except for the wind. I breathed in, tired of all these questions and all this death that I found myself in. I knew that the shadow had something to do with what happened. Sooner or later I would remember who I was and who *he* was. If I really did kill that boy or not. Seemed like memories would come to me like a photograph slowly comes into view after being taken. My job so far was to find out what the hell was going on.

You might think I was a fool for not taking the gun and knife with me. Well, I may be a fool, but I wasn't a killing fool. I was sure that whoever I was before I woke up was not the real me and that this gave me an opportunity for a fresh start. Besides, as far as I was concerned, I'd never even held a damn gun, much less use one before. Think I'd be a straight shooter if I can't even remember my own name? Didn't even want to try it. So, I picked up my feet and started walking, hoping to find someone to help me out. Especially if that someone had something to drink that would wet my whistle better than water could.

It was about an hour or so when I saw the small town in the distance. Lights glowed from street lamps and inside buildings, making it look so warm and cozy. I walked faster. The town itself was small, but pretty fancy as far I could tell. A chapel was placed at the end of the main street flanked by billiard halls, barber shops, drug stores. Maybe everything that I needed in that little wagon on the road was right here.

The townsfolk themselves weren't too kind, though. I approached a gentleman who looked fine enough and began to ask him where I could find a place to shack up for the night, but he just

scowled at me and rode off. In fact, everyone that I saw in that sleepy little town did nothing but frown in my face. Some mothers grabbed their children and took them inside, others shuttered their windows after spotting me. The blacksmith even snuffed out his light and rolled the curtain down on his shop. I couldn't quite tell if they were just anxious around strangers in those parts or if it was something else. Did they not like Mexicans? Did they see the spots of blood on my hands and thought I was some kind of crazy woman wandering the countryside? It was all very curious.

Then I heard the most welcoming sound that I had heard since I woke up. It was the faint tinkling from a piano. I followed it, recognizing the tune from somewhere. It grew louder as I walked closer to the saloon. As I opened the squeaky winged doors, I saw that the place wasn't crowded at all. Only a few patrons sat around playing cards or looking at their glasses of whiskey, eyes brimmed with tears and longing for better days. The song continued and the title hit me like a bolt from the blue.

"*Hey Jude!*" I shouted in excitement. It came flying out of my mouth faster than I could catch it. The piano stopped and the player turned to me, his eyes widened as he looked me up and down. All that was left of the saloon's occupants stared at me with either fear or disgust. A drunk ran out the back with the speed of an alley cat.

"We're closed," the bartender in the corner said, quickly putting the glass that he was cleaning with an old rag away.

"I'm-I'm so sorry for my intrusion," I said, not understanding why these people were just so damned scared of me. "I just came from an accident up the road and I was just wondering if y'all had a place where I could stay?" I ran up to the bar, hoping the man would at the very least take pity on me.

The bartender backed away and pulled out a double-barrel shotgun from underneath the bar. "I said we're *closed*," he pointed it directly at my chest.

I gasped, putting my hands up. Not even that revolver and that knife could have saved me even if I brought them. "Please, mister," I choked, "I don't want any trouble. I just want-." I froze. I looked over the man's shoulder into the dusty mirror that lined the bar. I saw no reflection besides his. It looked like he was pointing the gun at thin air.

The bartender pulled the trigger. Thunder roared and the blast hit me in the chest like a kick from a horse. I flew back and landed on the poker table, breaking it. My chest burned and it felt like a hundred knives were sticking out of me. I placed my hands over my chest and drew back red. I knew whose blood it was this time. My vision went blurry for a moment. I could faintly hear the other patrons shouting.

"God damn it, Wilbur!" One of the card players yelled at the bartender. "You know that won't smoke 'em! Ya gotta cut their head off!" The man leaned over and pulled out his bowie knife. It glowed with red fire in the light and I saw the vision of the shadow-man mirror over his figure.

A fury took over me and I hissed. My vision snapped back into focus. I grabbed the man's arm and twisted it. Bones cracked. White splinters shot through his skin and he screamed, dropping the knife. I stood up and with one arm, threw him over the bar, knocking the man with the shotgun down to the floor. I spun around, sensing someone behind me. The other card player with a bottle. I took the bottle from his hand and smashed it against his face. His jaw broke and bits of glass sheared into his flesh. Next was the piano player. He drew his gun and fired. I bent my head, dodging it. He fired again. I dodged it again. He fired it again. I caught it with my teeth. He fired once more and hit me in the shoulder. By this time I was nearly nose to nose with him.

"Try again, partner?" I asked, watching sweat pour down his brow. He pulled the trigger and it clicked. "Better luck next time," I grabbed his head and dug my fangs into his scalp. He screamed as blood gushed into my mouth like warm honey. He stopped screaming and I let him fall to the floor.

I jumped over the bar. I looked down and saw the bartender sobbing underneath the limp poker player. I picked the body up like it was a pillow and threw it over the side.

"I'm sorry-I'm sorry-I'm sorry-I'm-" he kept saying over and over again, his lips quivering.

"Mind if I have a drink, Wilbur?" I grinned and bit into his throat. His blood filled me up and his heart beat as fast as a stampede. The beat grew slower and slower as I drained him dry. I dropped him, his eyes rolled over white.

The fury inside me calmed. The lights that blazed like a campfire died and the thick smell of blood, sweat, and booze went down to a simmer. It all faded away like a passing rainstorm. I fell to the ground and blackness took over my vision.

After that, my throat wasn't so dry anymore.

TO BE CONTINUED. . .

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Abby(They/Them) is a writer living in central Texas. They are gender fluid and have a form of cerebral palsy.