

SIX GUN DEVIL



DR. PAUL CRAWFORD

Six Gun Devil —

Part I: The Man with the Guns

1. **The Stranger Rides In** – A lone rider enters a dust-choked frontier town, his reputation whispered on the wind. They call him the “Six Gun Devil,” a gunslinger who never misses and never forgives.
2. **A Town on the Edge** – The town of Redemption lives in fear of outlaws, and rumors spread that the Devil himself has come to stake a claim.
3. **Whispers of the Outlaw** – Townsfolk share hushed stories of the stranger’s bloody past, mixing truth with legend until even children fear his shadow.
4. **Shadows in the Saloon** – The Devil sits quietly in the saloon, his cold stare silencing gamblers and gunmen alike.
5. **Duel at Dawn** – A cocky young outlaw challenges him, only to meet the lightning draw of Six Gun’s revolvers. The legend deepens.
6. **Blood in the Dust** – The town sheriff buries another dead man, muttering that judgment comes for every soul, even the fastest gun.
7. **A Preacher’s Warning** – A weary preacher confronts the Devil, warning him of hellfire and the wages of sin.
8. **The Devil’s Mark** – Strange signs follow Six Gun’s trail—crows gathering, shadows lingering—as if something unearthly clings to him.
9. **Ghosts of the Past** – In dreams, he relives the faces of those he’s killed, their eyes haunting his restless nights.
10. **A Price on His Head** – Wanted posters declare him an outlaw worth a fortune. Bounty hunters circle like wolves.

Part II: The Devil’s Trail

11. **Wanted Dead or Alive** – The first hunters ride in, but none live to tell the tale.
12. **The Crossroads Gamble** – Six Gun wagers everything at a card table and senses the Devil himself watching.
13. **The Devil in Disguise** – A mysterious drifter, charming yet sinister, speaks words that cut to the gunslinger’s soul.
14. **A Bible in the Saddlebag** – A child slips him a weathered Bible, whispering that it belonged to her slain father.
15. **The Man They Called Six Gun** – His reputation spreads across territories, his name both cursed and revered.

16. **Night Riders** – Masked riders terrorize the countryside, and Six Gun's own shadow seems among them.
17. **The Burning Church** – Bandits torch a church. Inside, a Bible survives the flames untouched.
18. **Ashes and Prayer** – The preacher kneels in the smoldering ruin, praying over the outlaw who watched without stopping it.
19. **The Widow's Plea** – A grieving widow begs Six Gun to leave the town before more blood is spilled.
20. **A Sheriff's Burden** – Torn between law and mercy, the sheriff wonders if Six Gun's soul can still be saved.

Part III: Redemption or Ruin

21. **The River Baptism** – The outlaw watches a baptism at the river, water reflecting his own scarred face.
22. **Dreams of Hellfire** – He dreams of demons dragging him to a pit of fire, hearing his own gunshots echo in eternity.
23. **When Demons Ride** – A gang of outlaws bear the mark of evil, almost supernatural in their cruelty.
24. **The Psalm in the Desert** – The preacher recites Psalm 23 as they bury innocents slain in the raid.
25. **The Lone Cross on the Hill** – Six Gun stares at a wooden cross planted above a grave, strangely unsettled.
26. **The Gun That Wouldn't Fire** – In a duel, his revolver jams for the first time. He wonders if it's a sign.
27. **Blood Money** – He collects payment for another job but feels a sickening emptiness.
28. **A Child's Faith** – A child prays for his soul, insisting God can forgive even the Devil.
29. **Campfire Confession** – He begins to confess his sins to himself under starlight, though no one listens but God.
30. **The Devil's Bounty** – A new bounty is placed on him—not by men, but by the Devil himself.

Part IV: The War for His Soul

31. **A Bargain in Blood** – A dark figure offers him power and protection in exchange for his soul.
32. **Tempted in the Wilderness** – Wandering the desert, he recalls Christ's temptation and realizes his own test has come.
33. **Gospel Under Gunfire** – The preacher dares to read Scripture in the saloon, bullets flying around him.

- 34.**The Prayer of a Dying Man** – Six Gun hears a dying man whisper the Lord’s Prayer with his final breath.
- 35.**The Road to Jericho** – He aids a wounded traveler, recalling the parable of the Good Samaritan.
- 36.**Wolves in Sheep’s Clothing** – A posse of bounty hunters pretends to serve justice but worship darker masters.
- 37.**The Judge’s Gavel** – The sheriff prepares to hang him, saying only God can judge rightly.
- 38.**Shackled in Darkness** – He spends the night in jail, tormented by nightmares of eternal chains.
- 39.**A Midnight Hymn** – From the church across the street, hymns rise through the night, stirring his heart.
- 40.**Chains Broken** – An outlaw gang breaks him free—but he wonders if God is calling him instead.

Part V: The Ride of Faith

- 41.**The Desert Prophet** – In the wastelands, Six Gun meets an old hermit who speaks Scripture with piercing clarity, calling him to repent.
- 42.**The Book of Romans in Dust and Blood** – The hermit quotes Romans: “All have sinned...” Six Gun realizes the verses describe him perfectly.
- 43.**Baptized in Bullets** – An ambush forces him to defend innocents; though blood spills, something changes in his heart.
- 44.**A Widow’s Psalm** – The widow he once wronged sings Psalm 91, reminding him of God’s protection over the righteous.
- 45.**The Wages of Sin** – Romans 6:23 rings in his mind: the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life.
- 46.**A Hymn over Graves** – The preacher leads a hymn at another burial, the outlaw watching with tears he hides.
- 47.**The Demon’s Ride** – A notorious gang, calling themselves “the Devil’s Horsemen,” rides in, mocking faith and spilling blood.
- 48.**The Angel’s Whisper** – In a near-death moment, he hears a voice telling him to choose life, not death.
- 49.**Crossfire Redemption** – In a shootout, he spares an enemy, shocking both himself and the watching townsfolk.
- 50.**The Last Supper at Sundown** – He shares a meal with the preacher, who compares it to the Lord’s Supper, urging him to accept Christ.
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Part VI: Blood and the Word

- 51.**Fire in the Canyon** – The Devil’s Horsemen set a canyon ablaze; Six Gun saves a family by risking his life.
- 52.**A Gunman’s Gospel** – He begins to quote verses mid-gunfight, unnerving his enemies and stunning allies.
- 53.**The Devil’s Posse** – A rival gunslinger claims to be Six Gun’s mirror—soulless, ruthless, and damned.
- 54.**The Widow’s Revenge** – The widow nearly kills the gang leader, but Six Gun talks her down, pointing to forgiveness.
- 55.**A Song of Mercy** – Children sing a hymn in the ruined town, their innocence piercing through despair.
- 56.**The Colt and the Cross** – He nails one of his old revolvers to a cross, symbolizing his inner war.
- 57.**Broken and Remade** – He collapses in prayer, admitting he cannot save himself.
- 58.**Sermon by Lamplight** – The preacher reads John 3:16 to him under flickering lamplight; the outlaw listens intently.
- 59.**The Book of Job in the Badlands** – In suffering and doubt, he sees himself in Job’s story of pain, endurance, and eventual redemption.
- 60.**The Psalms of the Outlaw** – Alone in the desert, he begins praying Psalms in his own words, crying out for mercy.
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Part VII: Heaven or Hell

- 61.**The Temptress’ Snare** – A woman offers him love without repentance, trying to pull him back into sin.
- 62.**A Child Shall Lead Them** – A little boy boldly tells him Jesus can save even the worst man alive.
- 63.**The Gallows at Noon** – The sheriff arrests him again, and the gallows wait, but townsfolk argue he deserves a second chance.
- 64.**The Devil Laughs** – Strange visions plague him; he hears laughter that chills him to the bone.
- 65.**The Silent Prayer** – Shackled, he whispers a prayer not even he thinks God hears—but heaven does.
- 66.**Showdown in the Sanctuary** – Outlaws storm the church; Six Gun defends it, standing side by side with the preacher.

- 67.**The Book of Revelation Opens** – The preacher reads of seals, trumpets, and judgment, shaking Six Gun to his core.
- 68.**A Pale Horse Rides** – A rider in pale clothing challenges him, reciting Revelation 6. The duel feels apocalyptic.
- 69.**The Trumpet Sounds** – Thunder echoes like trumpets as lightning splits the sky during the standoff.
- 70.**Angels on the Wind** – Survivors claim angels shielded the church as bullets missed their mark.
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Part VIII: Showdown at the End of the World

- 71.**The Devil's Last Bargain** – Once more, the dark figure tempts him with wealth and power. He refuses.
- 72.**Valley of Decision** – In Joel's imagery, he sees himself standing in the valley where souls are judged.
- 73.**Blood on the Bible** – A bullet pierces his Bible but spares his heart, convincing him God is at work.
- 74.**The Sword of the Spirit** – He wields Scripture as fiercely as his guns, quoting verses during battle.
- 75.**The Final Ride** – He prepares for one last confrontation, saddling up with a Bible in his holster.
- 76.**Smoke and Thunder** – The final showdown with the Devil's Horsemen rages across the valley.
- 77.**The Devil's Chains** – He faces the drifter who was the Devil in disguise, binding him through prayer and Scripture.
- 78.**The River of Fire** – A wildfire rages; the Devil's men perish, but Six Gun survives through divine providence.
- 79.**The Cry of the Saints** – The townsfolk lift hymns of thanksgiving, declaring God victorious.
- 80.**The Devil Defeated** – The drifter vanishes, his power broken. Six Gun kneels in surrender to Christ.
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Part IX: A New Man

- 81.**The Dawn of Mercy** – The sun rises, and for the first time, peace fills the outlaw's heart.
- 82.**The Town Reborn** – With the gang defeated, life begins anew in Redemption.
- 83.**A Gun Laid Down** – He buries his last revolver, symbolizing his death to sin.
- 84.**The Bride's Song** – The widow sings a hymn of joy, representing the Church awaiting her Bridegroom.

- 85.**Children in the Streets Again** – Laughter returns to the once-haunted town.
- 86.**The Preacher’s Blessing** – The preacher anoints him with prayer, welcoming him as a brother in Christ.
- 87.**From Outlaw to Brother** – Former enemies now call him “brother,” stunned by his change.
- 88.**The Father’s Forgiveness** – He writes a letter to families of those he killed, begging forgiveness.
- 89.**A New Name** – No longer called Six Gun Devil, he takes a new name—one given in faith.
- 90.**The Gospel Rides On** – He leaves town, carrying the Good News across the frontier.
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Part X: The Eternal Horizon

- 91.**A Cross Carved in Stone** – He erects a stone cross at the site of his old hideout, a memorial of grace.
- 92.**No More Blood in the Streets** – He works to bring peace between rival towns, using Scripture instead of guns.
- 93.**The Psalms of Peace** – He writes down his prayers, echoing David’s psalms but in frontier language.
- 94.**The Old Gun Buried** – His revolver rusts beneath the earth, never to be drawn again.
- 95.**A Wedding Feast in the Desert** – He joins in a celebration that reminds him of the marriage supper of the Lamb.
- 96.**Tears Wiped Away** – He comforts a grieving family with the promise of Revelation 21:4.
- 97.**The New Jerusalem Rises** – He dreams of the Holy City, radiant and pure.
- 98.**Light Over the Badlands** – Sunrise paints the desert in gold, a symbol of heaven’s eternal dawn.
- 99.**The Rider in White** – In a vision, he sees Christ riding on a white horse, conquering forever.
- 100.**Amen** – The story closes with the outlaw redeemed, his soul secured in Christ, and the Word of God triumphant.

Introduction to *Six Gun Devil*

The desert wind carried more than dust. It carried whispers. Whispers of a man who rode with death at his side and judgment at his heels. They called him the *Six Gun Devil*—a name spoken with fear in saloons, muttered in dread by mothers to their children, and cursed by men who hoped never to see him draw.

He was faster than the rattlesnakes that slithered under the mesas, colder than the steel of his revolvers, and more ruthless than the desert sun. To many, he was nothing but an outlaw, a killer destined for the gallows or hell itself. To others, he was a dark legend, a man whose bullets carried the weight of final judgment.

But behind the shadow of the Devil's name was a man. A man haunted by blood on his hands, pursued not only by sheriffs and bounty hunters but by something deeper—his own soul's damnation. He had stared into the abyss of his own choices, and the abyss had stared back.

This is not just the tale of a gunslinger. It is the story of a war for one man's soul—the tug-of-war between heaven and hell played out in dusty streets, burning churches, and lonely deserts. It is the story of how even the hardest heart can hear the faint whisper of grace.

For out here, in the badlands where law and mercy collide, where men carry both a Bible and a six-shooter, the line between saint and sinner is drawn in blood and faith.

This is the story of the *Six Gun Devil*.

A story not of how a man died, but of how a man was reborn.

Author's Note

Stories have power. They can carry truth into places where sermons may never reach and speak to hearts that would never open a Bible on their own. *Six Gun Devil* is not just a tale of the Old West, but a mirror of the eternal struggle every soul faces—the battle between sin and salvation, darkness and light, death and life.

The gunslinger at the center of this story bears a name given by fear and violence, but his journey is one that belongs to all of us. He is a man haunted by his past, pursued by guilt, and tempted by the Devil himself. And yet, like every soul, he is also pursued by a greater power—by the relentless mercy of God.

The Bible tells us in Romans 5:20: “*Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.*” That is the heartbeat of this novel. No matter how dark a person's past, no matter how deep the stain of sin, the blood of Christ is greater still. The outlaw may be beyond the reach of man's law, but never beyond the reach of God's grace.

This book is written as both a Western adventure and a parable of redemption. It is for anyone who has ever wondered if they were too far gone, if they had crossed too many lines, or if God could possibly forgive them.

The truth woven into every chapter is simple:

The Devil may ride hard, but grace rides faster.

And in the end, there is no outlaw Jesus cannot save.

Dr. Paul Crawford

Prologue

The desert stretched wide and endless, a canvas of dust and silence broken only by the groan of the wind. Heat shimmered off the cracked earth, warping the horizon where mountains crouched like watchmen against the sky.

A lone rider crested the ridge. His horse was black as midnight, its flanks streaked with sweat and dust. The man in the saddle sat tall and still, as if carved from stone. A battered hat cast a shadow over his eyes, and the weight of two six-shooters hung heavy at his hips.

Whispers had gone ahead of him like storm clouds. By the time he reached the town below, shutters would close, saloons would fall silent, and mothers would drag their children inside. They called him the *Six Gun Devil*. No one knew his real name anymore—if he still had one.

As he rode into the valley, a hawk screamed overhead. The town lay sprawled in the dust, its streets empty but for a stray dog nosing through trash and a pair of boys daring each other to stay out in the open. One look at the rider sent them running.

The church bell rang once—low, uncertain. The preacher stood in the doorway of the chapel, his Bible in one hand, his face pale but resolute. He had prayed for this day, though he did not know if the prayers would end in salvation... or blood.

The horse's hooves clattered against the main street. Every creak of saddle leather seemed loud in the silence. The rider dismounted slowly, his spurs jingling with a sound that carried like a death knell.

He paused, scanning the street. Somewhere, behind shuttered windows, a child whispered: "*Mama, is it true? Is he really the Devil?*"

The gunslinger's eyes hardened. He had heard it all before. And maybe—just maybe—it was true.

But deep inside, beneath the dust, the blood, and the legend, a crack had begun to form. A crack through which something greater might break through.

For this was not just the day the Six Gun Devil came to town.
This was the day heaven and hell both laid claim to his soul.

Part I: The Man with the Guns

Chapter One – The Stranger Rides In

Dust hung thick in the air as the sun baked the land into a shimmering furnace. The sound of hooves echoed off the hardpan, slow and deliberate, each strike a drumbeat that sent shutters closing and voices falling silent.

A lone rider emerged through the heat waves, his silhouette sharp against the horizon. Black hat pulled low, a long coat trailing behind him, and two six-shooters glinting at his hips—one worn smooth from

years of drawing. His horse, lean and restless, carried him with the weight of a man who knew he was feared wherever he went.

They called him the *Six Gun Devil*.

The name was spoken in hushed tones, passed from saloons to campfires, always carrying the same warning: he never missed, and he never forgave. Men swore they'd seen him gun down three before a fourth could even touch leather. Others said he walked away from shootouts without a scratch, as if Death itself tipped its hat and let him pass.

Children peered from behind doorframes as he rode down the main street of Redemption—a town living on the edge of hope and ruin. Merchants froze where they stood, eyes darting to the revolvers at his side. A card game inside the saloon stopped cold, one gambler's hand hovering mid-air over his whiskey glass.

The horse came to a halt in front of the watering trough. The rider swung down, boots hitting the ground with a heavy thud. Spurs jingled, sharp and final, like the toll of a bell before a hanging.

A gust of wind kicked dust across the street, scraping against the church steeple's weathered boards. From the chapel steps, the town preacher watched him—Bible clutched tight, face stern but pale. He knew the stories. He knew the man. And he knew this wasn't just another outlaw passing through.

The gunslinger looked up, scanning the town with eyes as cold and flat as iron. His hand rested on the grip of his pistol, not in threat, but in habit. A man who lived with death close at hand never left it too far behind.

No one spoke. No one moved.

Somewhere, a voice whispered from behind a shutter:
“Lord have mercy... the Devil's come to Redemption.”

The rider's gaze flicked toward the sound. A hint of something—weariness, maybe sorrow—crossed his hardened face. Then it was gone, swallowed by the shadow of his hat brim.

The silence stretched, broken only by the restless stamp of his horse's hoof.

The Six Gun Devil had arrived.

Chapter Two – A Town on the Edge

The town of Redemption had seen its share of outlaws, but never one like him. The air itself seemed to tighten around his presence, as if the land knew it carried a curse.

Shutters stayed closed, doors bolted. Only the groan of a swinging sign and the squeal of a half-broke mule tied outside the general store dared break the silence.

Inside the saloon, men who'd been laughing minutes before now huddled close to their drinks. “Six Gun Devil,” one muttered under his breath, his voice trembling. “Ain't no man fast enough to live if he wants you dead.”

The barkeep scowled, drying a glass that no one was going to fill. “Keep your tongue still, Caleb. That man hears his name, you might as well dig your own grave.”

A heavy bootstep sounded outside, measured and steady. The saloon doors creaked as the outlaw pushed through. The room froze.

He didn’t look around much. His eyes passed over men like smoke passes over fire—just enough to choke but not enough to burn. He made his way to the bar, spurs clinking with each step, and set down a silver dollar that caught the lamplight.

“Whiskey,” he said, his voice low, gravelly, carrying the weight of a man who rarely wasted words.

The barkeep hesitated, then poured with shaky hands. The glass slid across the wood and stopped in front of him. The outlaw lifted it but didn’t drink right away. He studied the amber liquid as though it might reveal something he wasn’t ready to see.

A gambler at the corner table leaned close to his partner. “You see his eyes? Cold as iron.”

The partner swallowed hard. “That ain’t no man’s eyes. That’s a coffin’s stare.”

The outlaw set the glass down untouched. His gaze lifted toward the window, where across the street the church stood silent, its cross leaning a little from years of wind and weather.

For the first time, something flickered in his face. He stared long and hard, as if the sight of that crooked cross pressed against something deep inside him. A memory. A wound.

Then the saloon doors opened again.

It was the sheriff. Elias Grady, tall, worn, his badge dulled by dust but his eyes sharp with years of watching men like this one. His hand rested near his holster, but he didn’t draw. Not yet.

“Devil,” the sheriff said, his voice steady but strained, “this town don’t want trouble.”

The outlaw turned his head slow, his eyes settling on him. “Trouble don’t ask what a town wants.”

A murmur rippled through the room. Men shifted in their seats, hands inching toward weapons, nerves pulled tighter than a hangman’s rope.

From outside, the church bell rang once—faint, hesitant.

The sheriff’s jaw clenched. “I’ll say this once. You pass through, and you keep ridin’. You stay, and blood’ll spill. Maybe yours. Maybe theirs. Either way, this town’s had enough.”

The outlaw’s lips twitched—not quite a smile, not quite a sneer. “Blood’s always been enough for me.”

He lifted the glass, swallowed the whiskey in a single burn, and set it down with a final thud. Then he rose and walked toward the door, spurs echoing like judgment through the silent saloon.

As he stepped into the blinding light outside, the preacher’s voice carried from the chapel steps. “What does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose his soul?”

The outlaw paused. His shadow stretched long and dark across the street. He didn’t turn. He didn’t speak.

But his hand tightened on the grip of his revolver.

Chapter Three – Whispers of the Outlaw

Morning bled into the streets of Redemption with the color of old brass. Merchants lifted half-doors, chickens scuffled in alley dust, and a freight wagon creaked to a stop before the general store. Life tried to move like it always had—but the town moved quieter now, as if sound itself could draw a bullet.

It started like most things start in small places: with talk.

At McAllister's barber shop, the bell chimed and a ranch hand slid into the chair, his hat twisting in his hands. McAllister's scissors snipped, slow and careful, as two men hovered by the window pretending to read the tacked-up notices.

"I heard he took down three Comancheros by the rail spur in Abilene," one man murmured, low and thin as thread. "Forty paces. Didn't even bother to stand up."

McAllister snorted. "Forty paces? Son, at forty paces you're shootin' at a Sunday prayer."

"Wasn't no prayer," the other said. "Man said he shot through smoke like he could see in it. Said his bullets don't miss on account of they ain't his. Devil guides 'em."

The ranch hand swallowed. "They say his eyes shine at night."

"They say a lot of things," McAllister said, combing a part that didn't want to stay. "Men tell a story long enough and the story starts tellin' them."

Across the street, at Mrs. Pruitt's general store, the talk ran faster, tripping over flour sacks and bolt cloth.

"Celia, I heard he keeps a tally scratched inside his gun grips," Mrs. Pruitt told a customer, voice pitched for scandal and salvation both. "Marks for every soul sent to glory—or the other place."

Celia leaned in, eyes wide. "Oh, surely not."

"I had it on good authority from Mrs. Reilly, whose brother freighted through Yuma. Says the grips are cracked from the pressure of his hand. Says there's a groove where his thumb rests when he aims. A *groove*, Celia."

The door swung open and a boy darted in, breathless. "Ma! He's outside the livery! I seen him! He—" The boy's words stuttered to a stop as his mother clamped a hand on his shoulder and steered him behind a barrel of nails.

"Hush, Thomas," she whispered. "Don't you speak that name."

By the schoolhouse, recess rang thin as a tin bell. Children clustered in patches of sun, skipping rope, kicking a scuffed ball, playing marbles in the hardpan. But every game drifted toward the road, toward the sight of the horse tied at the livery post and the long coat hanging from the saddle horn. Even play, that holy business of forgetting fear, kept glancing over its shoulder.

A little girl with straw-colored braids—Hannah, the preacher’s—held a marble in her palm and whispered to a smaller boy beside her. “Pa says some men get names they don’t deserve.”

The boy frowned. “He’s the Devil.”

Hannah shook her head. “Pa says we wrestle not against flesh and blood.” She rolled the marble. It clicked against another and spun into the chalk ring. “Pa says you can’t scare a shadow away, but you can light a candle.”

“Candles don’t stop bullets,” the boy muttered. He looked at the street again, swallowed, and stepped out of the shadow of the schoolhouse. His own shadow stretched long and wobbly toward the livery, like it wanted to run ahead and hide.

On the steps of the chapel, the preacher watched the town the way a shepherd watches a night sky for wolves. He had a Bible open to a psalm and a prayer in his mouth, but his eyes kept sliding to the street. Rumor moved like brushfire—hungry, unpredictable, making its own wind.

Inside the saloon, where rumor was currency and whiskey greased its rails, a gambler in a frayed vest lifted his glass like a lectern.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “I once seen that man split a cartridge in the air and make it sing.”

The barkeep wiped the same spot on the counter he’d been wiping all morning. “You seen that in your dreams, Jessup. Or at the bottom of a bottle.”

“I ain’t sayin’ it was *this* man for certain,” the gambler allowed. “But the fella had eyes like an undertaker’s ledger. Never forgot a name owed him. Wore a scar shaped like a horseshoe nail.”

“Now it’s a scar,” the barkeep said. “An hour ago it was eyes that shine.”

Jessup shrugged. “Truth wears a few coats ‘fore it finds a fit.”

A man at the end of the bar—Ezra Coyle, who’d buried two sons from fever and one from gunplay—kept his head down. “Man like that don’t ride for free,” he said, voice barely above a gravel whisper. “World’s made of debts. The Devil keeps clean books.”

“Or maybe he’s just fast,” the barkeep said. But his eyes slid toward the street all the same.

In the jailhouse, Sheriff Elias Grady listened to fear the way a blacksmith listens to metal—judging its temperature by the color. His deputy, a boy with more freckles than whiskers, hovered by the window like it could tell his fortune.

“They say he shot a man’s shadow clean off his boots in Dodge,” the deputy blurted.

Elias pinched the bridge of his nose. “Shadows ain’t got soles, Tucker.”

“Still,” Tucker said. “Folks are wound tight. Mrs. Pruitt said she seen him smile at the church. Smilin’ at a church ain’t normal.”

“Smilin’ ain’t a crime.”

“Could be a sign,” Tucker insisted. “Of what, I don’t rightly know.”

Elias stood and settled his hat. The badge on his chest felt heavier than usual. “Listen hard to me, son. Fear’s a poor shot and a worse judge. You keep your head and your finger off that trigger unless you need the Lord’s forgiveness right quick.”

“Yes, sir,” Tucker said. He didn’t move from the window.

Word traveled to the edge of town where the cottonwoods stood and the little house with the split-rail fence sagged under years of wind. A woman in a black dress—Sarah, though her neighbors still called her *the widow*—stood at her doorway while two women pressed hands to her arm and poured their worries into her ears.

“You don’t need this on top of everything,” one said. “Man like that brings gun smoke wherever he goes.”

“Wolves don’t change their teeth,” Sarah said, eyes on the road. “Sometimes they just lick the blood cleaner.”

“Sarah...”

She lifted a hand, a soft sign to still their talk, but the hardness in her jaw didn’t soften. “He’ll ride on,” she said. “They always do. Just pray he rides on before the ground has to drink.”

Under the livery’s awning, the horse stamped and tossed its head, thirsty and impatient. The man who owned it leaned in the shade, one shoulder to the post, coat off, sleeves rolled. He’d taken a whetstone to a knife out of habit more than need, the scrape a quiet razor through the noise of the street. He looked like a man waiting on something he didn’t particularly want.

He could feel the town looking without ever lifting his eyes. A pressure at the edges, like a storm thinking about it. Words have weight when enough of them lean the same way. He could feel them stacking on his back: *Devil. Killer. Never misses. Never forgives.*

A boy from the schoolyard came too close—dared into it by boys who weren’t brave enough to come themselves. He stopped when the man’s shadow fell across his bare feet. The boy’s face went hot and pinched. For a heartbeat, he couldn’t seem to move.

The gunslinger glanced up. The boy flinched like a rabbit.

The man’s gaze flicked down to the shadow between them—his own stretched dark and long, swallowing the boy’s.

He shifted a step to the side, into the slant of sun. The shadow slid off the boy’s toes. “Water’s free,” he said, nodding at the trough.

The boy stared, mouth open. Then he bolted, legs kicking dust, friends scattering to make room for his panic.

Across the way, the preacher watched that small movement as keenly as if it were a sermon line. A man steps out of his own shade. He tucked the thought away like a verse.

The bell over the blacksmith’s door clanged as a wagon wheel hit the rut outside. Two teamsters leaned together over the buzzing heat.

"I heard he once fired on a man and the gun wouldn't," one said.

"The Devil's gun?" the other scoffed. "Ain't that the point—that it always does?"

"Maybe it was a sign," the first said, uneasy with his own words. "From God."

"Or maybe the hammer stuck," the other replied. But he didn't sound like he believed it.

By noon, tales had grown antlers. In one version, the outlaw had traded his shadow to shoot straighter. In another, he wore a saint's medal under his shirt that burned his skin but kept his heart beating. A peddler swore he'd seen the man at a river baptism years back, standing far off like a coyote watching sheep. A farmhand said he'd watched him lay a dying man's eyes closed before riding on without a word.

"Truth is a mule," McAllister said later, sweeping hair into a neat pile. "Stubborn, slow, and folks would rather ride a story."

The preacher closed his Bible and stood. He found a few townsfolk lingering in the chapel's shade, faces drawn taut with the question no one wanted to say out loud.

"Fear makes loud prophets," he told them, gentle but firm. "Remember what's written: 'The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?'" He let the verse settle in the dusty air. "If a man is beyond grace, it won't be because we refused to speak it."

A murmur of uneasy assent passed through the handful. Some nodded. One shook her head. The widow did neither; she only watched the street with eyes like flint.

Afternoon sagged into itself. Heat pressed low. The gunslinger put his coat back on and cinched the saddle, the leather protesting in small, honest squeaks. He lifted a canteen, drank, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. The town's weight hadn't receded; if anything, it had thickened, rumor making more of him than he was, and less.

He stood a long moment with his hand on the saddle horn, listening to the way a place sounds when it holds its breath.

From a second-story window, a woman whispered to a child, "Don't look at him." From a stoop, an old man whispered to another, "Don't cross him." At the chapel door, a prayer slipped into the heat, soft and certain: "Lord, remember mercy."

The rider set his boot in the stirrup and paused. A hawk cried somewhere high and empty. He glanced to the chapel—the leaning cross, the preacher's black coat like a brushstroke against whitewashed boards, the little girl beside him with her hands folded so tight her knuckles blanched.

His face did not change. His eyes did, just a fraction—like a shutter lifted a half-inch to let in light.

He swung into the saddle.

The horse snorted, the bit rang, and the shadow that had frightened children stretched long behind him, thin and crooked on the dirt. The whispers followed as he moved—stitched into the clink of spurs, the jingle of tack, the small comforts a town tells itself when it doesn't know what else to do.

By sundown, the stories would be larger and meaner. By morning, they would wear new coats. But for now, the truth was simple enough to fit in a palm: a man had ridden into Redemption, and fear had ridden faster.

Even so, a candle had been lit. And though shadows are longer in the late day, every shadow ends where light begins.

Chapter Four – Shadows in the Saloon

The saloon was the heart of Redemption—though some would’ve said its lungs, since the air was never free of smoke, whiskey, or brag. Cards slapped against wood, dice rattled, and spittoons rang like low bells. But when the Six Gun Devil pushed through the batwing doors, the saloon forgot how to breathe.

He didn’t hurry. Men who lived fast didn’t waste motion. His spurs whispered against the floorboards, his long coat brushing the dust. Every eye trailed him, even those pretending not to. The piano player’s hands froze mid-tune, a chord hanging unresolved before dying into silence.

The gunslinger chose a table against the far wall, the one half-swallowed in shadow beneath the mounted longhorns. He sat with his back to the wall and a clear view of every soul inside. His hat brim angled low, the lamplight glinting off his eyes just enough to remind men that he *was* watching. Always.

A gambler at the nearest table cleared his throat. “Evenin’, stranger.”

The outlaw didn’t answer.

The gambler’s hand hovered above his chips. “What’s a man call you?”

The Devil’s stare slid to him, cold and flat. That stare cut deeper than any knife, and the gambler shrank like a boy caught in a lie. “Some call me Devil,” the gunslinger said finally, voice low as gravel dragged across stone. “And some don’t call me at all.”

The table chuckled nervously, but the sound cracked in the air like brittle wood.

The barkeep, a thickset man named Harland, poured a glass with hands that wanted to tremble but didn’t dare. He set it at the end of the bar. “First one’s on the house,” he said.

The Devil didn’t move to collect it. He let the glass sit there, whiskey glowing amber in the lamplight, as if he’d set a test before the whole room: who among them would dare touch it? No one did.

Two gunmen at a corner table tried to muster courage. One leaned forward. “Ain’t true what they say, is it?”

“What do they say?” the outlaw asked.

“That you... you ain’t missed a shot since—” The man faltered. “Since ever.”

The outlaw’s lips barely moved. “You want to find out?”

The man swallowed his words back down with his pride. His partner stared at the floor.

A shadow shifted near the far corner, where a pair of hired riders had been drinking all evening. They whispered, their words slick with whiskey and spite. “Man bleeds the same as anyone,” one said.

The outlaw heard it. His head turned slightly, eyes narrowing—not quick, not threatening, but enough that the two cowhands forgot how to swallow. One coughed into his hand and muttered an excuse about needing fresh air. They left their drinks behind.

Silence swelled again, thick and heavy. The outlaw’s hand rested on the table, long fingers brushing wood scarred by years of knife games and bullet gouges. The way he held still was worse than a man drawing—stillness that spoke of certainty.

From outside came the faint toll of the church bell. Once, twice. Not loud enough to interrupt, but enough to remind every man in the room there was another power in Redemption besides lead and fear.

The Devil’s gaze flicked toward the sound, then back to the gamblers. “Cards,” he said.

Relief spilled into the room like whiskey from a cracked cask. A deck appeared. The game began, but quieter than any game before. Hands shook, bets came small. The outlaw didn’t play for long—just enough to win half the table, just enough to remind them that even chance bent when he was near.

When he rose, the room froze again. He touched the brim of his hat once toward the barkeep, then toward the silent piano man. “Play,” he said.

The pianist fumbled at first, then struck up a shaky hymn disguised as a drinking tune. Men stared at him like he’d lost his mind, but he played on anyway.

The Devil walked back into the night. His shadow stretched across the floorboards and lingered even after he’d gone, darkening the room like smoke that never cleared.

And the men left behind sat with their cards and their fear, each one thinking the same thought but none daring to say it:

The Devil’s shadow had grown longer, and it had settled on Redemption.

Chapter Five – Duel at Dawn

The night before had carried whispers through every saloon corner, whispers that ran quick and loud enough to reach a young man too eager to prove himself. By the time the first light cracked the horizon, half the town already knew a duel was coming.

His name was Jeb Mallory. Nineteen, maybe twenty. A boy with more pride than bullets and more bullets than sense. He’d robbed a stage once, shot a man in the leg, and thought himself carved from outlaw cloth. But men like Jeb mistook fear for respect, and when he heard the Six Gun Devil was in town, he saw not danger but a chance to etch his name into the legends.

By dawn, he was waiting at the edge of the main street, boots planted, hand itching near the pistol at his side. The air was sharp and cool, but sweat lined his palms.

The street was quiet but not empty. Curtains shifted. Shutters cracked open. Townsfolk lined porches, their faces taut with something between curiosity and dread. Redemption had not seen a duel in years, but the Devil's name was a storm that drew watchers as surely as thunder draws ears.

Sheriff Elias stood on the boardwalk, arms crossed, jaw set hard. "Fool boy," he muttered. He wanted to stop it—but the law didn't stretch far enough to bind a man's pride.

From the chapel steps, the preacher watched with his Bible open. Beside him, Hannah gripped his sleeve, her face pale but eyes fixed on the street.

The sound of spurs came slow and steady.

The Six Gun Devil stepped into the open, his long coat whispering in the dawn breeze, his revolvers heavy at his sides. He stopped ten paces from the boy. His eyes narrowed, not with anger, but with the weary recognition of a story he'd lived too many times before.

"You wanted me," he said. His voice carried like gravel underfoot, low but sharp enough to cut through the silence.

Jeb spat in the dirt. "Folks say you're fast." He forced a grin. "Let's see how fast."

The Devil tilted his head, studying him. "You got someone waiting on you, boy? A mother? Sister? Girl who thinks you'll come home tonight?"

The words rattled Jeb. His jaw tightened. "Don't try your tricks. Draw."

The outlaw's eyes darkened. "I don't trick. I bury."

The sheriff's voice broke in. "Don't do this, Jeb!"

But the boy's pride burned hotter than his fear. He jerked for his pistol.

What followed happened faster than thought.

The Devil's hand blurred, iron flashing in the dawn. One shot split the air. Jeb's pistol never cleared the holster. He staggered, eyes wide, hand frozen around the grip. The bullet had torn clean through his gun belt buckle, sending the weapon clattering into the dust.

For a moment, time hung still. Jeb's breath came hard and fast, disbelief written across his face.

The Devil stepped closer, revolver steady, barrel aimed between the boy's eyes. Then, with a movement so slow it cut deeper than the shot, he lowered the gun and holstered it.

"Go home," he said. His voice was cold, but underneath it rode something else—an edge of mercy, jagged and raw. "Your grave ain't ready yet."

Jeb stumbled back, hands shaking. The boy's bravado cracked wide open, leaving only terror. He ran, boots pounding, the crowd parting to let him pass.

The town exhaled all at once.

From the chapel steps, the preacher's voice carried over the street: "*Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.*"

The Devil glanced at him once, eyes unreadable, then turned and walked away, spurs ringing against the boards like the toll of a funeral bell.

The legend had not only deepened that morning. It had taken root in the very dust of Redemption.

Chapter Six – Blood in the Dust

The morning sun climbed higher, burning the cool from the air. Redemption stirred again, but slower than usual, like a body waking with a bruise. The duel at dawn had left its mark, and though no blood had spilled from Six Gun's hand this time, there was still blood to reckon with.

It wasn't Jeb Mallory lying in the street—it was another man, older, who had tried his luck the night before when whiskey convinced him he was braver than he was. The Devil hadn't hesitated then. A single shot. Clean. Quick. The man's body had lain in the dust until the sheriff's men carried it away.

Now, Sheriff Elias Grady stood by the open grave on the edge of town, hat in hand, dust clinging to the lines in his face. A handful of townsfolk gathered, heads bowed, words caught in their throats. The preacher murmured a psalm over the coffin: *"The days of our years are threescore years and ten... it is soon cut off, and we fly away."*

The sheriff muttered under his breath, his voice rough with gravel and weariness. "Judgment comes for every soul. Even the fastest gun."

He let the words hang in the dry air. His deputy, Tucker, shuffled beside him, eyes darting toward the Devil's shadow in town.

"Sheriff," Tucker whispered, "you gonna let him keep walkin' free? He's death in a coat. Folks won't sleep easy."

Elias replaced his hat, pulling the brim low. "I ain't God, Tucker. Ain't my job to hand out judgment like bullets."

"Seems like he already took that job," the deputy said.

The sheriff's jaw tightened. "And maybe that's what'll hang him in the end."

The widow Sarah stood apart from the others, black dress clinging in the breeze, eyes hard as flint. She didn't cry for the dead man—she'd lost her own long ago. But she watched the outlaw from a distance, hatred and something else warring in her face.

Six Gun sat on the edge of the livery, sharpening his knife with slow, steady strokes. He didn't watch the burial, didn't bow his head, didn't pretend he cared. But his hand moved with a rhythm that matched the preacher's voice, steel whispering against stone like a second sermon—harsher, sharper.

The coffin lowered. Dust rose in a brown cloud as shovels bit the earth.

Elias turned once more to the grave, his words meant for no one in particular. "Fastest hand in the West won't mean a thing when the Lord calls time."

The townsfolk shifted uneasily. A woman crossed herself. A boy clung to his mother's skirt.

From the chapel steps, the preacher spoke louder this time, so all could hear. “It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.” His gaze swept toward the outlaw. “No man outruns that.”

Six Gun lifted his eyes just enough to meet the preacher’s. The knife paused in his hand. For a heartbeat, silence fell heavy as stone. Then the outlaw sheathed the blade, stood, and walked back into town.

Behind him, the grave closed. The dust settled. Redemption breathed again—but every soul knew the earth would drink more blood before long.

Chapter Seven – A Preacher’s Warning

The evening light stretched long across Redemption, painting the buildings in copper and shadow. Smoke from cookfires drifted lazy on the breeze, and somewhere a fiddle played a tune that couldn’t quite shake its sorrow.

The preacher stood at the edge of the boardwalk, his black coat worn thin at the elbows, Bible tucked firm under his arm. His name was Reverend Josiah Markham, though most simply called him *Preacher*. Years of dust and grief had carved lines deep into his face, but his eyes still carried the steady fire of a man who believed what he read.

He had prayed half the afternoon about this moment. Now his boots thudded across the street toward the livery, where the outlaw sat on an upturned barrel, coat hanging loose, revolvers easy at his hips. The Devil’s shadow stretched long in the dirt, a dark finger pointing straight at the preacher’s feet.

“You’ve walked a long way under blood, stranger,” Josiah said, voice steady though his heart thundered. “And blood leaves a trail even faster than boots do.”

The outlaw lifted his gaze, cold and unreadable. “You another man wanting me gone?”

“I want you saved,” the preacher answered without pause.

The Devil gave a low, humorless chuckle. “Saved? You think a prayer can wash lead and blood off my hands?”

Josiah stepped closer, Bible raised like a lantern. “The wages of sin is death,” he said, his voice carrying down the street, “but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

The outlaw’s jaw tightened, a flicker of something—anger, maybe fear—passing in his eyes. “I’ve earned death a hundred times over, preacher. And I reckon the Devil’s got a claim on me already.”

Josiah shook his head, his tone cutting sharp as the Word itself. “The Devil makes claims he can’t keep. Hellfire’s real, son, but so is the blood of Christ. And it speaks louder than yours ever will.”

The outlaw stood now, tall, hand resting on the butt of his revolver—not threatening, just habit. His shadow swallowed the preacher’s boots, but Josiah didn’t flinch.

“You afraid of me?” the outlaw asked.

“I fear only the One who can cast both body and soul into hell,” the preacher said, firm as stone. “And I fear for you, Six Gun Devil, because every step you take without Christ is a step closer to the pit.”

Silence stretched. Even the wind seemed to hold its breath.

At last, the outlaw turned his face aside, eyes narrowing toward the setting sun. “Preacher, I’ve buried too many men to believe in your mercy. Whatever heaven you preach, it wasn’t built for me.”

Josiah laid a hand on the worn Bible. “Heaven wasn’t built for the righteous, son. It was built for sinners who turned.” His voice softened, almost a plea. “Even for devils who lay their guns down.”

The outlaw’s gaze cut back to him—sharp, searching—but he said nothing. With a motion as quick as it was final, he tugged his hat brim low and stepped away, boots grinding the dust.

The preacher watched him go, a whisper escaping his lips: “*Lord, don’t let him die before he kneels.*”

From a window nearby, the widow Sarah watched too, her eyes full of fire. “He won’t kneel,” she muttered. “Not until death breaks him.”

But the preacher kept praying, watching that long shadow fade into night.

Chapter Eight – The Devil’s Mark

Night came heavy over Redemption, pressing shadows long and thick across the ground. The lamps in the saloon glowed weak, sputtering against the dark, while the chapel candles burned steady and bright, their light stretching across the street like a warning.

Six Gun Devil rode out before dawn the next morning, hat pulled low, coat stirring in the wind. His horse’s hooves thudded against the earth, each strike dull and final. He hadn’t gone a mile before the signs began.

First came the crows.

They gathered on the fence posts and cottonwoods, black wings folding and unfolding, heads cocked toward him with unblinking eyes. Their caws rose in ragged chorus, a sound too sharp for morning. As he passed, they took to the air all at once, a storm of feathers wheeling above him before settling again farther down the trail, waiting.

He narrowed his eyes, spit into the dust, and rode on.

Then came the shadows.

At high noon, when the desert sun left nothing but clean edges, his shadow stretched too far—longer than a man’s shadow should stretch. It slid ahead of him like it wanted to show the way. Even when he turned his horse, the shadow turned last, reluctant, like it had a mind of its own.

He pulled the horse to a stop and sat still, jaw clenched, watching it. The beast shivered under him, ears pinned back, nostrils flaring at something it could smell but not see. The outlaw’s hand went to his revolver out of habit, though bullets couldn’t hit what clung to a man’s soul.

From behind him, a sound like wind stirred—though the air was still. He turned fast, scanning the mesquite and the barren rocks. Nothing moved but the heat. Nothing lived but the crows, circling high, black specks against the white sky.

“Devil’s mark,” a voice muttered.

The outlaw spun his head. A peddler’s wagon had creaked up the trail behind him, its driver an old man with one eye cloudy as milk. He pulled the reins, staring at Six Gun like he’d seen him in a nightmare.

“You wear it plain as day,” the old man said, his voice cracked and sure. “A mark no water can wash, no bullet can burn. You’re ridden, son. Ridden hard.”

Six Gun’s eyes narrowed. “Best keep your tongue, old man.”

The peddler’s hand shook as he crossed himself. “I seen it before. Men who don’t die when they ought, men who walk away when others bleed. Shadows cling to ‘em. Crows follow. And when the time comes, the ground itself won’t take their bones.”

The outlaw urged his horse forward, passing the wagon without another word. But the peddler’s last call followed him down the trail:

“Every mark’s got a price. And the One who made heaven and earth—He keeps books cleaner than the Devil ever will!”

The outlaw rode harder, as though he could outrun the words. But the crows wheeled above him still, and when the sun dropped low, his shadow grew darker and longer, swallowing the ground beneath his horse’s hooves.

Back in town, the preacher sat on the chapel steps, staring out at the horizon. He couldn’t see the crows or the length of that shadow, but he felt it. Felt the darkness pressing closer. He bowed his head and whispered, “Lord, don’t let the mark be the end of him. Let it be the start.”

But Sarah, the widow, stood by her fence watching that same horizon, her voice hard as iron. “That man carries hell in his pocket,” she muttered. “And one day, he’ll spill it all over us.”

The crows screamed in the distance, echoing her words.

Chapter Nine – Ghosts of the Past

The nights were the hardest. Not because of the cold or the coyotes crying on the ridges, but because sleep no longer came clean.

Six Gun Devil lay under the stars, his saddle for a pillow, fire burned low. His horse shifted restlessly, ears twitching as if it too felt what haunted the camp. The crows that had followed him earlier were gone, but their memory hung thick as smoke.

When his eyes finally closed, the dreams came.

Faces. Dozens of them. Men he'd shot in dusty streets, in saloons, in canyons where echoes carried death a mile. Their eyes stared, hollow and endless, and one by one they opened their mouths. No words came, only the sound of gunshots—sharp, cracking, endless.

He woke with his hand on his revolver, sweat slick on his brow, breath heavy. But the fire was burned down to embers, and only the empty desert looked back. Still, he swore he could hear the echoes fading, as if the ghosts hadn't left at all.

The next day, as he rode back into Redemption, he saw them again—not their faces, but their shadows. Men leaning against doorways, eyes hard with suspicion. Wives clutching their children tighter when he passed. The dead were buried, but their memory lived in every wary glance, every whisper.

Inside the saloon, a gambler crossed himself when Six Gun entered, muttering under his breath: "He carries his dead with him."

And maybe the man was right.

Chapter Ten – A Price on His Head

By mid-morning, new posters were nailed to posts at the edge of town.

WANTED. DEAD OR ALIVE. SIX GUN DEVIL. \$5,000.

The likeness was rough, but the name alone was enough. Drifters and bounty hunters would come sniffing like coyotes soon. The reward could buy land, cattle, even a railroad share.

Sheriff Elias tore one down and crushed it in his fist. "This town's got enough trouble without every hired gun from Abilene to Tucson ridin' in."

His deputy, Tucker, shifted nervously. "Five thousand dollars is a mighty strong call, Sheriff. You think he'll leave now?"

Elias shook his head. "Men like him don't run from death. They drag it along behind 'em."

The preacher, hearing the talk, stepped in. "Then we pray he meets mercy before he meets another gun."

But Sarah, the widow, was there too, her voice sharp as broken glass. "Mercy?" She snatched the poster from Elias' hand and held it up. "That man has stolen more sons than sickness. There's blood in his shadow. If death's riding for him, let it come quicker."

The preacher met her gaze, unflinching. "Be careful, Sarah. Hatred burns the hand that holds it."

Her eyes watered, but her jaw stayed hard. "Then let it burn. As long as it burns him first."

Word of the bounty spread before sundown. Men in the saloon boasted they could take him; others whispered they'd already seen riders on the trail. Six Gun himself stood at the bar, whiskey untouched, staring at the poster nailed near the door.

He read it once, twice, then walked out without a word. The door swung behind him, the poster trembling in its nails like it feared him too.

Part II: The Devil's Trail

Chapter Eleven – Wanted Dead or Alive

By the third day, they came.

The first pair of bounty hunters rode in lean and cocky, wearing dust and smirks. They asked too many questions in the saloon and left for the livery with their hands already near their guns.

They didn't come back.

By sundown, the sheriff found them lying in the arroyo half a mile outside town. One still had his pistol half-drawn, the other clutching the hole in his chest. Both dead before they hit the dirt.

Elias stared at their bodies, his hat pulled low. "He'll bleed this whole territory dry before it's over."

Back in town, the whispers grew louder. Mothers pulled children off the street, gamblers left games unfinished, even the piano man let his instrument fall quiet. Fear had moved in permanent, like a guest no one could send away.

Six Gun walked through it all without a word, boots heavy, eyes colder than ever. If the bounty weighed on him, he didn't show it. But when he passed the chapel, he slowed. The preacher was outside, sweeping dust from the steps, humming a hymn.

The outlaw stopped long enough to say, "You think your God forgives men like me?"

Josiah leaned on his broom, eyes meeting his. "I think my God died for men like you."

For the first time in days, Six Gun looked away first. He tugged his hat lower, muttered something no one heard, and walked on.

From the chapel steps, Hannah whispered to her father, "Pa, I think he wants to believe."

Josiah set a hand on her shoulder, his eyes following the outlaw's retreating figure. "Then we keep praying he does before more blood stains the dust."

Above, a crow circled once and cried, as if to remind them that shadows still followed.

Chapter Twelve – The Crossroads Gamble

The lamps in the Redemption Saloon glowed like tired eyes, dim and yellow, halos of smoke curling in the stale air. A piano hammered out a half-hearted tune in the corner, its keys chipped and sour, the sound struggling to cut through the haze of whiskey breath and muttered curses.

Six Gun Devil sat alone at a table in the back, his chair tipped slightly against the wall, brim of his hat shadowing his eyes. His revolvers rested at his hips, silent as tombstones, but every man in the room felt their weight. Nobody sat too close. Nobody wanted to.

Cards slapped on wood. Coins clinked. Men laughed nervously, the kind of laughter that doesn't reach the eyes. And every so often, when the outlaw shifted, silence rippled through the tables like wind through grass. His presence changed the room; even luck itself seemed to lean his way.

The night wore on. Whiskey loosened tongues, and the pot at the main table swelled high. Silver coins stacked like towers, gold pieces gleamed, even a watch or two glinted under the lamplight. It was enough to feed a family for a year, or buy a man a quick death trying to win it.

That's when he came in.

The gambler.

He didn't look like the usual kind—no dust on his boots, no fray at his cuffs. His velvet vest shone even in the dim light, and his mustache was curled sharp, waxed to points like twin daggers. He carried himself as if the saloon belonged to him, moving between tables with a smile that was too wide, too certain.

"Room for one more?" he asked, sliding into the seat opposite Six Gun without waiting for an answer. His voice was smooth as oil, and it clung to the air the way smoke clings to wood.

The outlaw's eyes lifted, cold and flat. He said nothing.

The gambler produced a deck of cards from inside his vest, the motion too fluid, too practiced. The cards whispered against one another as he shuffled, his fingers moving with a grace that seemed... unnatural.

"Luck's been good to you tonight," the gambler said, his grin gleaming. "But luck's just another word for favor. Ever wonder whose favor you're riding under?"

The outlaw's hand twitched near the glass in front of him, though he hadn't touched it all night. "Cards fall where they fall."

The gambler chuckled, shaking his head. "Cards don't fall. They're placed. Same as bullets. Same as men." His eyes narrowed, and for a moment the lamplight didn't catch them right—they seemed too dark, too deep, like wells with no bottom.

The piano faltered. Conversations thinned. Men leaned closer without meaning to, sensing something unnatural but unable to look away.

The gambler dealt. "Tell me, Devil. Do you really think you've walked this far by your own hand? That death steps aside because of your draw alone? No... there's been a hand guiding yours. And I think you know whose."

The outlaw's jaw clenched. His fingers curled against the wood. "Talk plain."

"I am plain," the gambler said, smiling wider. "You've been favored. Bullets miss. Cards turn. Men fall before you. You're not feared because you're fast—you're feared because you're chosen. And I'm here to offer you the pot. All of it. The world at your feet."

The outlaw leaned forward, eyes narrowing to slits. "And what's the buy-in?"

The gambler's grin sharpened. "Just your soul."

The words dropped heavy into the room, and for a heartbeat, the saloon forgot how to breathe.

The outlaw's hand brushed the butt of his revolver. He didn't draw—he didn't need to. The weight of the gesture was enough. "Best watch your words, friend."

The gambler leaned back, still smiling, unbothered. "Oh, I will. But you'll remember them, Devil. Because sooner or later, every man comes to the crossroads. And when you do, I'll be waiting."

He gathered the cards, rose from the table, and left as smoothly as he came.

No one followed.

The outlaw sat still, the whiskey untouched, his jaw tight. He'd heard temptations before—gold, women, the promise of safety in a world that offered none. But this was different. This was darker.

And for the first time in years, he felt the chill of something deeper than fear crawl up his spine.

The gambler waited at the crossroads the next night. The moon hung low and pale, clouds smudging its light. The wagon ruts cut deep into the hardpan, the road signs pointing toward towns that had long since died. It was a place made for choices, and for endings.

Six Gun Devil rode in slow, his horse uneasy, ears pinned back. The man was there—same velvet vest, same dagger smile. Only now his eyes burned darker, black as coals under ash.

"Took you long enough," the gambler said, flicking the cards through his hands. "Thought maybe the preacher got to you."

The outlaw dismounted, boots hitting the dirt. His voice was low, even. "You talk like you know me."

"I do know you," the gambler said, laying a card face up in the dust. The Ace of Spades. "You're death, and you ride with me whether you admit it or not."

The outlaw's jaw tightened. "I ride for no one."

The gambler's grin widened, sharp as broken glass. "Not yet. But you will. Every road ends here. Every man chooses who he belongs to. The only question is whether you'll sign your name in blood—or keep pretending you're free."

The outlaw stared at him, cold as steel. Then he swung back into the saddle. "I'll keep pretending."

He turned his horse, riding back toward the faint lights of Redemption. The gambler's laughter followed him, echoing low and smooth across the empty desert.

And for the first time in years, Six Gun Devil wondered if the name the world gave him was more than just a name.

Chapter Thirteen – The Devil in Disguise

The desert stretched wide under a bruised sky, streaked with purples and grays that promised no rain, only wind. The land felt empty, but emptiness out here never meant safe. Coyotes yipped on the ridges, and the crows—those black watchers—circled high like vultures waiting for what hadn't died yet.

Six Gun Devil rode slow, his horse restless beneath him. The meeting at the crossroads the night before sat in his gut like iron. Men lied easy. The Devil lied easier. But the stranger in velvet hadn't felt like a man at all.

He knew too much. Spoke too sure. Looked too deep.

By the time Six Gun reached the edge of Redemption, the lamps in the saloon flickered awake. He dismounted, boots grinding the dust, eyes fixed on the batwing doors. He didn't like questions hanging over him, and this gambler had left more than questions—he'd left a shadow.

Inside, the saloon was buzzing again, though the laughter was brittle. The piano man hammered out a hymn-turned-dance tune, the kind that tried to bury reverence under liquor. Gamblers hunched over cards, mugs of whiskey sloshing, but talk stilled when Six Gun stepped through.

He didn't look at them. He scanned the room until his eyes landed on him.

The gambler. Same sharp mustache, same velvet vest, same smile that cut too thin. He sat at the far table, cards flicking through his fingers like they weighed nothing. His eyes found the outlaw's, and his grin widened as though he'd been waiting all along.

"Back for another hand?" he called, voice smooth enough to coat steel.

The outlaw walked through the silence, boots echoing, each step deliberate. He stopped at the gambler's table, leaned one hand against it, and stared down. "What are you?"

The gambler chuckled, laid the deck aside. "Just a man who knows the odds."

The outlaw's gaze didn't waver. "Men don't know odds like you do. Men don't talk like you do. And men don't follow shadows like crows on a carcass."

The gambler's eyes glinted. "Maybe I'm more than a man. Maybe I'm what you've been riding with all along."

The piano stumbled into silence. The saloon leaned closer, though no one dared move.

The outlaw's hand hovered near his revolver, steady as stone. "You talk like the Devil."

The gambler's smile widened. "Maybe I am."

The room went colder. The lamps flickered. For a heartbeat, his eyes shifted—black, bottomless, no light within. Then it was gone, replaced by the same dark gleam as before.

The outlaw drew his revolver so fast the room gasped. He pressed the barrel to the gambler's forehead. But the gambler didn't flinch. He only leaned into the steel, grin still sharp. "Go on. Pull the trigger. You'll find out bullets don't bite me."

The outlaw's jaw worked, his finger hovering on the trigger. He'd shot more men than he could count. But this one—this one was different. The room held its breath.

At last, the outlaw pulled back, holstering the gun with a snap. His voice was cold, final. "I don't ride for anyone. Not you. Not him. Not nobody."

The gambler laughed, low and smooth, the sound curling like smoke into every corner. "That's what they all say, Devil. But the truth is, every man rides for someone. And when the time comes, you'll find the trail you're on don't lead to freedom—it leads to me."

He gathered his cards, rose, and walked out. The door swung wide, then stilled.

The saloon exhaled.

The outlaw stood in the silence, eyes fixed on the door long after it closed. He didn't like questions, but now he carried more than questions. He carried a certainty he couldn't name: that man wasn't a man at all.

Later that night, the preacher found him.

Six Gun was at the livery, saddling his horse, the oil lamp throwing long shadows. Josiah Markham stepped close, Bible in hand, his face lined with worry.

"You met him, didn't you?" the preacher asked softly.

The outlaw's hand paused on the saddle strap. "Met who?"

"The one who whispers sweet lies," Josiah said, voice heavy. "The tempter. The serpent. He's been after your soul since the first time you drew in anger."

The outlaw turned, eyes hard. "And what's your God gonna do about it? I've killed enough men to fill this town ten times over. You think a prayer will wash that off?"

Josiah met his stare, unflinching. "The Devil makes men believe their sins are heavier than the cross. But he's a liar. Always has been. Always will be."

For a moment, the outlaw's eyes flickered—not soft, but unsettled. He turned away, pulling the saddle tight.

"Keep your prayers, preacher," he muttered. "I don't ride with angels."

He swung into the saddle and rode out into the night.

But the preacher watched him go, whispering to the empty dark, "*Not yet, maybe. But you will.*"

And somewhere beyond the horizon, laughter rolled low on the wind.

Chapter Fourteen – A Bible in the Saddlebag

Scene One – The Gift

The morning broke harsh and brilliant, the desert sun climbing fast, its fire already pressing against the shoulders of Redemption. Dust rolled off the hardpan in lazy sheets, lifted by the faintest breeze. The town moved slow, its people stirring like ants under a watchful sky.

The outlaw rode in from the east, his horse lathered and restless, snorting at shadows that weren't there. He pulled to a stop near the trough outside the livery, swung down stiff from the saddle, and let the reins fall loose. His hand brushed the butt of his revolver out of habit more than threat, but the sight of that hand alone was enough to keep the street still.

Eyes followed him. Mothers hushed their children and pulled them back into doorways. Merchants froze mid-gesture, a sack of flour hanging half-lifted, a tin of coffee set down too hard. A pair of drifters on the boardwalk muttered behind their hands.

“Devil rides early today.”

“Storm's comin', sure as sunrise.”

The outlaw ignored them. He crouched by the trough, letting his horse drink, the creak of wood and slosh of water louder than the whispers.

Then a voice broke through, clear and small, like a bell ringing in the wrong place.

“Sir?”

The outlaw's head lifted.

There she was. A girl no older than nine, standing near the chapel steps. Her hair was woven into two braids, tied with faded blue ribbon. Her dress was patched at the hem, her shoes scuffed. But she stood straight, clutching something to her chest like treasure.

He frowned. “What do you want, child?”

The girl's chin trembled, but her eyes didn't flinch. She stepped forward, lifting what she held. A book, its cover cracked and faded, leather worn thin. A Bible.

“This was my papa's,” she said, voice steady even as her hands shook. “He says you need it more than we do.”

The street hushed. Every ear bent toward the words.

The outlaw's eyes flickered to the preacher—her father—standing at the top of the chapel steps. Reverend Josiah Markham's black coat stirred in the wind, his weathered face solemn, lined from years of both prayer and battle with men's hearts. His eyes never left the gunslinger's.

The outlaw looked back at the child. “I don't need a book.”

Hannah swallowed hard. Then she lifted her voice, reciting words she had memorized. “*Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path*” (Psalm 119:105).

The words cut the air like a blade. They hung there, heavy, too heavy for a child to carry alone.

The outlaw's jaw tightened. "Faith won't stop a bullet."

The preacher stepped down, his boots thudding the boards. His voice carried strong, though not loud. "*Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God*" (Romans 10:17).

The outlaw spat into the dust. "I've heard plenty of words, preacher. They don't change nothin'."

Josiah stopped a few paces away, eyes hard as steel yet burning with something deeper. "*The word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword... piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit*" (Hebrews 4:12).

The outlaw met his gaze, unblinking. For a long moment the street held its breath.

Then he stepped forward and snatched the Bible from the girl's hands. He shoved it hard into his saddlebag without looking at it. "Satisfied?"

Hannah's eyes glistened, but her voice was sure. "Papa says no man's too far for Jesus."

The outlaw swung into the saddle, tugging his hat low. "Your papa don't know me."

He spurred the horse forward. Hooves struck the dust, carrying him away. The Bible shifted in the saddlebag, heavy, heavier than iron.

He rode out past the last buildings, past the cottonwoods swaying slow in the dry wind. The desert opened wide, silent but for the hoofbeats.

And in the quiet, the words he had tried to shake off came back, whispering unbidden through his mind:

"*Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*" (Matthew 11:28)

The outlaw cursed under his breath and kicked the horse harder. But the words clung, following him like the crows circling overhead.

Scene Two – The Weight of the Word

The desert stretched wide and empty by afternoon, the heat pressing like a hand against the back of his neck. Six Gun Devil rode hard, but the dust seemed to cling thicker today, the sun hotter, the land meaner.

He'd carried gold, bullets, even bodies across this wilderness. But he'd never carried something that felt as heavy as the small book in his saddlebag. The Bible didn't weigh more than a pound or two, yet it pulled on him like an anchor.

Every time his horse shifted, he heard it slide against the leather. A soft thump. A reminder.

By sundown, he stopped in a shallow canyon, where a thin stream cut through the dust and mesquite. He unsaddled the horse, let it drink, and built a small fire with dry brush. Sparks leapt skyward, fighting the encroaching dark. Coyotes called somewhere far off, lonely and sharp.

He sat with his back to a rock, revolver at his side, knife glinting as he cut strips of jerky. The saddlebag lay near, the flap open just enough for the leather cover to show.

The outlaw scowled at it. He reached over, grabbed the bag, and yanked the book free. Its cover was cracked, edges frayed, pages yellowed. He turned it over in his hands like a weapon he didn't know how to use.

"What good are you?" he muttered. "A book don't stop lead."

He tossed it onto the ground. It landed with a dull thud, pages fluttering open in the breeze. He looked away, chewed his jerky, stared into the fire.

But the words on the page caught the flames' light, and his eyes were drawn back.

It had fallen open to the Book of Isaiah. He squinted, lips moving as he read under his breath.

"Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." (Isaiah 1:18)

The outlaw froze.

His chest tightened, as if the verse had been written for him alone. Scarlet. Crimson. Blood. He had painted the desert with it. And here this book had the gall to say it could all be washed clean?

He shut the Bible with a snap, jaw clenched. He shoved it back into the saddlebag, hard, as if burying it deep enough would silence it.

But silence didn't come.

Instead came the memories. Faces. Eyes. The ones who hadn't been quick enough, the ones who'd begged, the ones who hadn't seen him coming. Their blood was still on his hands, even if the desert had swallowed their bodies.

He poured himself a drink from his canteen, the water metallic on his tongue, but it couldn't wash away the verse. He heard it again and again, echoing like a ghost in the firelight:

"Though your sins be as scarlet..."

The coyote's cry rose again, closer this time. The horse stamped nervously, ears pinned back.

The outlaw drew his revolver, spinning the cylinder with a click, just to feel the weight. But when he looked at his hand, he saw blood. Not real, but in his mind's eye—every shot, every man down. Scarlet. Crimson.

He gritted his teeth, shoved the gun back in its holster, and lay down against the rock. The fire crackled low. He pulled his hat over his eyes, trying to block out the stars.

But even as sleep crept close, the words wouldn't leave him.

"Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow..."

For the first time in years, the outlaw felt something worse than fear. He felt hope. And it terrified him.

Scene Three – The Stranger’s Warning

By mid-morning the next day, the outlaw rode the canyon trail, the sun white and merciless overhead. His horse’s hooves struck the earth with the rhythm of a war drum. The Bible thudded against the saddlebag with each step, a dull reminder that gnawed like a burr buried deep in wool.

He had half a mind to toss it into the dust, let the wind and coyotes have it. But every time he reached for the bag, Hannah’s voice came back to him: “*Papa says no man’s too far for Jesus.*” The words clung worse than any bounty poster.

Around noon he spotted another rider up ahead. A man leaned against a wagon pulled off the trail, shade thin beneath a mesquite. The horse tethered to it was swaybacked and tired, ribs showing. The man himself was little better—skin leathery from sun, beard gray and wild, an old coat hanging off his frame like a scarecrow’s.

The outlaw slowed his horse, eyes narrowing. Strangers in the desert rarely meant anything good.

The man raised a hand, palm open, no threat in it. “Water for trade,” he called. His voice was cracked, but it carried.

Six Gun studied him, then nudged his horse forward. He stopped a few feet away, dust swirling between them. “What do you want for it?”

The old man’s gaze flicked to the saddlebag where the Bible stuck half out. His cloudy eyes sharpened, almost startled. “You carryin’ the Book?”

The outlaw scowled. “Not by choice.”

The man’s lips pressed thin. He pushed himself off the wagon, staggering closer, his shadow stretching across the ground like a crooked spear. “Then hear me, son. A man don’t carry that Book without makin’ enemies. Both kinds.”

The outlaw’s hand shifted to his revolver. “What do you mean?”

The old man’s voice dropped low, words rolling like prophecy. “That Word cuts. Cuts clean through bone, through heart. It draws men to heaven—or it draws devils out of hell to stop it. You mark me: that saddlebag’s heavier than you think.”

The outlaw spat into the dust. “I didn’t ask for it.”

The old man’s eyes burned sudden fierce. “Neither did Jonah, but the Lord chased him down anyway.” His finger jabbed toward the saddlebag. “That Book’s a net. You’re tangled in it now. You can fight, but you won’t win. Not against the Word of the Almighty.”

The outlaw growled. “I’ve won every fight I ever drew.”

The man stepped closer, eyes wild, voice rising. “*‘For the word of God is quick, and powerful, sharper than any twoedged sword... and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.’*” (Hebrews 4:12) He jabbed a finger against his own chest. “Cuts me. Cuts you. Cuts every man who runs from Him.”

The outlaw's jaw clenched. His revolver hand twitched but didn't draw.

The old man leaned in close, his breath sour, his voice trembling but certain. "Don't you see, Devil? You've carried death your whole life, but now you're carryin' life—and life draws fire. The Enemy don't like losin' what he thinks he owns."

For a moment, the desert was silent but for the creak of the wagon wheel in the wind.

Then the outlaw shoved the reins hard, his horse sidestepping. "Keep your riddles, old man."

But the drifter's final words followed him like a curse. "You can outrun men, boy. But you can't outrun the Word. It'll follow you into your grave."

The outlaw rode hard to shake the sound, but the words clung.

That night, by the fire, he pulled the Bible free again, cursing himself even as he opened it. His eyes fell at random.

"For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."
(Romans 6:23)

His hand trembled. He shut the Book, shoved it aside.

But he couldn't shove away the truth: death had been his wages all his life. And maybe—just maybe—there was something else waiting.

He lay back against the hard earth, revolver on his chest, Bible at his side. Sleep came slow, but when it did, it brought dreams not of blood—but of light.

Scene Four – The Widow's Fury

By the time Six Gun Devil rode back into Redemption two days later, the town was buzzing. Whispers trailed him down the boardwalks, curling in through open windows, rustling in alleyways. It wasn't about the duel, or the bounty posters, or even the bodies piling up in the desert.

It was about the Bible.

The word had spread fast: the preacher's little girl had given the outlaw her father's Book, and he'd taken it.

Some said he'd done it in mockery, that he'd spit on it as soon as he left town.

Others swore they'd seen him carrying it openly, reading aloud with a voice like thunder.

Still others whispered darker things—that the Devil himself had been caught by holy words, like a wolf snared in a shepherd's trap.

By evening, the widow Sarah Schaefer stood in the street, waiting. Her black dress whipped in the dry wind, her face pale but burning with anger. When the outlaw rode in, she stepped straight into his path, hand lifted like a wall.

He reined the horse sharp, dust curling around her. His eyes narrowed. "What do you want, woman?"

She pointed at the saddlebag. “You carryin’ it?”

His hand dropped to the leather flap. He didn’t answer.

Her voice rose, trembling but fierce. “How dare you! You? A butcher? A grave-maker? Carrying the Word of God while my husband lies cold in the dirt? While my children cry themselves to sleep ‘cause a man with hands like yours took their father?”

The street froze. Townsfolk gathered, eyes wide. The preacher himself stepped from the chapel, but he held back, knowing this storm had to break.

The outlaw’s jaw clenched. “I didn’t kill your husband.”

“You didn’t have to,” Sarah spat. “Men like you breed death wherever you ride. It follows you like a storm cloud. And now you think carryin’ a Bible makes you clean? That it washes the red from your hands?”

Her voice broke. Tears streaked her cheeks, but her words cut sharper than steel. “You mock God every step you take with that Book in your bag. *The name of the Lord is holy!* You ain’t fit to even touch it.”

The outlaw sat rigid in the saddle. His face was stone, but his hand trembled faintly on the reins. For a long moment he said nothing. Then he pulled the Bible from the saddlebag and held it up for all to see.

The crowd gasped.

The preacher stepped forward, his voice low but steady. “*The word of God shall not return void, but it shall accomplish that which He pleases, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto He sent it.*” (Isaiah 55:11)

Sarah turned on him, fire in her eyes. “Don’t you see? He carries it like a trophy! Like the Devil himself waving heaven’s banner.”

Josiah’s gaze didn’t waver. “Or maybe he carries it because God put it in his path.”

The outlaw stared at the Book in his hand. The leather was cracked, the pages worn. A child’s fingers had held it. A preacher’s eyes had wept over it. A widow’s fury now scorched it.

He swung his gaze back to Sarah. His voice was rough, like gravel ground under boot. “I didn’t ask for it. Didn’t want it. But it’s mine now. And I reckon if your God’s as big as you say, He’ll deal with me Himself.”

He shoved the Bible back into the saddlebag, spurred his horse, and rode on.

Behind him, Sarah sank to her knees in the dust, sobbing, fists clenched. “Lord, why him? Why give Your Word to a man who lives by the gun?”

The preacher knelt beside her, hand on her shoulder, his own eyes wet. “Because, Sarah,” he whispered, “sometimes the Lord puts His Word in the unlikeliest hands—just to prove no hand is too far gone.”

The crowd murmured, torn between fear and awe. The outlaw disappeared down the street, the echo of hooves fading into twilight.

But the whispers grew again, stronger than before:

The Devil rode with a Bible.

And no one knew what it meant—judgment, or redemption.

Chapter Fifteen – The Man They Called Six Gun

Scene One – The Legend Spreads

Legends in the West didn't need newspapers. They traveled on boots and whiskey breath, whispered in saloons, traded around campfires, muttered in jail cells. By the time a man rode fifty miles, his name was already a ghost ahead of him, walking through doors he hadn't reached yet.

And so it was with the Six Gun Devil.

By midweek, Redemption's streets buzzed with stories. None matched, yet all agreed on one thing: he was more shadow than man.

At McAllister's barber shop, a ranch hand sat for a trim, the shears clicking. "I heard he once shot a rattler clean through the eyes at thirty paces. Never even aimed proper."

McAllister snorted. "Boy, you've been out in the sun too long."

But another man leaned against the wall, arms crossed, eyes narrow. "I heard he killed two men at the same time—one with each hand. Said their guns never even cleared leather before they hit the ground."

The ranch hand shivered. "Reckon that's why they call him Devil."

Across the street at Mrs. Pruitt's store, gossip swirled over sacks of flour and barrels of nails. "My cousin swore he saw the Devil walk through gunfire in Yuma," Mrs. Pruitt said, stacking tins on a shelf. "Bullets hittin' the walls all around him, but not a scratch. Like Death itself stepped aside."

Celia from the boarding house shook her head. "You all talk like he's a ghost. He bleeds same as any man."

But her voice wavered.

At the saloon, the stories grew darker with every drink. "He carries the names of the dead in his guns," a gambler whispered. "Scratched inside the grips, one for each soul."

Another leaned close, voice trembling. "I heard he's sold his soul already. That gambler in the velvet vest? They say that wasn't no man at all, but the Devil himself, signin' the deal."

The piano man stopped mid-note, shaking his head. "Best not speak of such things."

But the whispers ran on, like water through dry sand—always finding a way.

Even the children carried it. At the schoolyard, a boy swung his marble bag and said, “My pa says he’s faster than Wild Bill Hickok. Says he could draw on ten men and walk away laughin’.”

Another boy whispered back, “My ma says if you see his eyes at night, they shine red like coals.”

Hannah, the preacher’s daughter, stood with braids swaying, her marble clutched in her fist. “Papa says names don’t matter. Devil or not, Jesus can still save him.”

The boys laughed. “Save the Devil?”

But Hannah’s eyes stayed steady. “Papa says ‘*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.*’” (1 Timothy 1:15)

The laughter faded, uneasy.

Legends were strong in Redemption. But Scripture was stronger still—though not all hearts wanted to hear it.

Scene Two – The Sheriff’s Burden

Sheriff Elias Grady sat behind his desk, hat tilted back, the lamplight throwing long shadows across the jailhouse walls. The tin star on his chest felt heavier than iron, though it was nothing more than polished metal pinned to his vest.

His deputy, young Tucker, stood by the window, chewing the edge of a pencil like it might give him courage. His freckles stood out in the lamplight, his eyes darting toward the saloon across the street.

“He’s in there again,” Tucker said. “Cards on the table, folks talkin’ like he’s a ghost more than a man.”

Elias sighed. His hands were thick, scarred, the hands of a man who’d hammered fence posts and broken horses before he ever wore a badge. He rubbed them over his face now, weariness clinging. “I know where he is. Seems the whole town does.”

Tucker shifted. “We oughta do somethin’. Put him out. Or lock him in.”

Elias’s eyes lifted, sharp as a hawk’s. “Lock him in? You think a pair of iron bars will hold a man like that? You think I’d sleep better hearin’ the Devil breathin’ three cells away?”

The deputy swallowed, shoulders sagging. “No, sir.”

Silence stretched. The clock ticked, loud in the stillness.

Elias leaned forward, elbows on the desk. His voice dropped low, heavy with thought. “Law’s a tricky thing, Tucker. You wear this star long enough, you learn it don’t weigh the same on every man. Some folks see it as a shield. Some see it as a target.”

He looked out the window, eyes narrowing at the glow of the saloon lamps. “But a man like him? The law don’t fit him neat. He’s too big for the bars. Too quick for the noose. He’s ridin’ in a place between law and judgment.”

Tucker frowned. “So what do we do?”

Elias rubbed his jaw. “We wait. Judgment always comes. Might come from a bullet, might come from the Almighty. But it’ll come.”

At that moment, the door creaked open. Reverend Josiah Markham stepped in, hat in hand, Bible under his arm. His eyes were tired, but the fire hadn’t gone out of them.

“Evenin’, Sheriff.”

“Reverend.” Elias leaned back in his chair, studying him. “Come to tell me to pray for him again?”

Josiah’s mouth twitched, half a smile. “Always. But tonight I came to remind you that justice and mercy walk together.”

Elias snorted. “Tell that to the widow. She’d like me to string him up by dawn.”

The preacher’s gaze softened. “Grief speaks louder than reason. Sarah’s wound is fresh. But her anger don’t speak for God.”

The sheriff’s eyes hardened. “Maybe not. But I swore to keep this town safe. And I can’t do that with the Devil sittin’ in our saloon every night, dealin’ cards and dealin’ death.”

Josiah stepped closer, setting the Bible on the desk, its leather cracked and worn. He opened it, his finger finding a verse as if he knew exactly where to land. His voice was steady, carrying weight:

“The Lord is slow to anger, and great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked.” (Nahum 1:3)

He looked Elias in the eye. “God’s patience ain’t weakness. And His judgment don’t miss.”

Elias exhaled through his nose, long and heavy. “You think He’s patient with a man like that?”

Josiah nodded. “I know He is. Because He’s been patient with me. With you. With every sinner who ever drew breath.”

Tucker shifted uneasily. “Reverend, with respect, I seen the way folks talk about him. They call him cursed. They say shadows follow him. If that ain’t the mark of the Devil, what is?”

Josiah closed the Bible gently. “It’s the mark of a man still breathin’. And as long as breath’s in him, the Lord can turn him.”

The sheriff leaned back, staring at the ceiling. His voice was low, almost to himself. “And if he won’t turn?”

Josiah’s gaze grew solemn. “Then judgment will meet him, sure as the sun rises. But it ain’t for us to decide when.”

Silence settled again, heavier than before. The sheriff drummed his fingers on the desk, the sound sharp in the quiet.

Finally he stood, sliding his hat onto his head. His face was hard, but his eyes carried the weight of a man caught between two worlds. “I’ll keep my gun loaded all the same. Law’s my calling. Mercy’s yours. Let’s pray neither one of us has to test it.”

The preacher gave a single nod, his eyes following Elias with a quiet sadness. “Then we’ll both keep watch. You on the streets. Me on my knees.”

Elias stepped out into the night, the lamplight catching the badge on his chest. Across the street, laughter spilled from the saloon, rough and sharp. But beneath it ran the low hum of fear—fear of a man whose name had grown larger than life.

The man they called Six Gun.

Scene Three – A Test in the Saloon

The saloon was thick with smoke that night, the kind that clung to your clothes and followed you home like a curse. Cards slapped the tables, coins clinked into pots, boots scraped wood, but every sound fell a little softer under the shadow that had settled over Redemption.

Six Gun Devil sat in his corner again, the same place he always chose—back to the wall, eyes on the room, revolvers close as skin. He didn’t drink much, never laughed, never told stories. He didn’t need to. His silence was heavier than a man’s shouting.

The piano man plunked out a hymn twisted into a dance tune, fingers trembling just enough to sour the notes. The barkeep polished the same glass for twenty minutes, his eyes darting toward the outlaw, then away again.

And that’s when the stranger walked in.

He wasn’t old, but his eyes had seen too much road. His coat was worn, his boots dusty, but his gun belt was oiled, the leather dark and supple. He moved with the careful ease of a man who’d lived by the draw, and the crowd knew it before he even spoke.

He stopped in the center of the room, scanning the tables. His gaze landed on Six Gun.

“I heard they call you Devil,” the stranger said, his voice carrying clean across the saloon. “Heard you’re the fastest hand from here to Santa Fe.”

A hush fell. Men froze mid-sip, gamblers set their cards down, the piano went silent. All eyes turned.

Six Gun didn’t look up right away. He let the silence stretch, then finally lifted his eyes. Cold, flat, iron eyes. “And you?”

The stranger’s hand brushed the butt of his revolver. “They call me Larkin. I’ve been faster than every man I’ve met.” His voice grew sharp. “I came to see if the Devil bleeds.”

A murmur rippled. The barkeep cursed under his breath. Someone slipped quietly toward the door, not wanting to see what came next.

Six Gun leaned back in his chair, his hat brim shadowing his face. “You aim to find out?”

Larkin’s jaw tightened. “Out front. Dawn.”

The outlaw’s lips twitched—maybe a smile, maybe a sneer. “Why wait?”

He stood, slow and steady, chair scraping against the floorboards. He stepped into the open, boots heavy, spurs ringing sharp in the silence. The two men faced each other, only a few feet apart, the air between them taut as a drawn rope.

Larkin's fingers twitched near his holster. His eyes narrowed. "You're just a man. And men die."

Six Gun's hand hovered near his revolver. His voice was low, deadly calm. "Then be first."

The room held its breath.

And then, quicker than thought, it happened.

Larkin's hand blurred for his gun. But Six Gun's revolver cleared leather first, the hammer falling, the report thunderous in the closed room. Larkin staggered, his pistol half-drawn, blood blooming across his chest. His knees buckled, and he collapsed, his gun clattering useless on the floor.

The smoke curled upward. The smell of powder bit the air.

Six Gun holstered his revolver with a motion as smooth as glass. He looked at the crowd, eyes cold. "You wanted to see if the Devil bleeds. Looks like he don't tonight."

No one moved. No one spoke.

Finally the barkeep crossed himself. The piano man began playing again, soft, shaky. The gamblers shuffled their cards with trembling hands.

But the preacher, who had been standing in the doorway, spoke above the silence:

"The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 6:23)

Six Gun turned his gaze toward him, eyes unreadable. Then he walked out into the night, spurs jingling like funeral bells.

Behind him, Larkin's body bled into the sawdust floor. The legend deepened.

But so did the weight in his saddlebag.

Scene Four – The Preacher's Reflection

The morning after the gunfight, Redemption's streets smelled of whiskey and gun smoke. Men shoveled fresh sawdust onto the saloon floor, trying to cover the bloodstains, but the red seeped through anyway. Children on their way to school peeked into the doorway and whispered, their voices quick and sharp: *"That's where the Devil shot him."*

The widow Sarah stood at her fence, arms crossed, jaw hard. "Another grave," she muttered to herself. "Every time he stays, the ground takes another man."

Inside the chapel, Reverend Josiah Markham lit the oil lamps though the sun was already high. The light pressed through the stained glass, casting long streaks of crimson and gold across the pews. His Bible lay open on the pulpit, its pages worn from years of turning.

The townsfolk gathered, some out of habit, others because fear had driven them to the one place they thought safe. The pews filled—merchants with dust still on their boots, wives clutching children, even a handful of men who hadn't darkened the church door in years.

Josiah looked at them, his eyes weary but burning. He knew what they expected: comfort, answers, maybe a curse on the outlaw who carried their fear in his shadow. But he hadn't come to curse. He had come to warn.

He laid his hand on the Bible, his voice steady. "Last night, you saw again what men call him—the Devil with the six-guns. Fast, merciless, feared. Some of you think that name tells the whole story. But let me tell you something: names don't save a man's soul. Legends don't save a man's soul. Only Christ does."

The room shifted, uneasy.

He raised his voice, the echo carrying through the rafters: "*Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.*" (Galatians 6:7)

Heads bowed, a few nodded. Sarah's lips pressed tight, eyes glistening.

Josiah went on, his tone fierce. "The man you call Devil sows blood. And he will reap death. Don't doubt it. But mark me well—if he bends the knee, if he calls on the Lord, then even the Devil's name will be broken under the name of Jesus."

He turned a page, his voice trembling with the weight of it: "*Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.*" (Romans 5:20)

The silence grew heavy. Mothers clutched children tighter. Some men scoffed under their breath, shaking their heads.

Sarah rose from her pew, her voice sharp as glass. "Grace? For him? While widows weep and children cry? While graves fill and the streets reek of blood?"

Josiah met her eyes, his own full of sorrow. "Grace is for him most of all. Because if grace can't reach him, Sarah, then it can't reach any of us."

The room fell still.

At the back, Hannah's small voice rose, steady as a bell: "*Jesus said, 'I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.'*" (Luke 5:32)

Her words pierced deeper than her father's sermon. Even Sarah's face softened, if only for a heartbeat, before she turned away, tears slipping down her cheeks.

Josiah closed the Bible, his voice quiet but firm. "You can call him Devil if you will. But the Lord calls him sinner—and that makes him redeemable."

The congregation filed out slowly, murmuring, unsettled, the weight of the words heavy as the heat.

Outside, Six Gun Devil rode past on his black horse, the Bible still in his saddlebag. He didn't turn his head toward the chapel, but his jaw tightened. Somewhere inside, the words gnawed.

“For whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap...”

The legend deepened that day. But so did the pull of the Word.

Chapter Sixteen – Night Riders

Scene One – The Terror Begins

The night wind carried dust across the plains, rattling fence posts and whispering through the cottonwoods. Moonlight silvered the land, pale and unforgiving. Families huddled in cabins scattered across the countryside, shutters barred, lamps low. But no lock or bolt could stop what rode in the dark.

They came first as sound—hoofbeats pounding like war drums, growing louder, closer, until the ground trembled. Then came the riders. Masked men draped in dusters, faces hidden, pistols flashing in the moonlight. They swooped down on a farmstead, their laughter wild, their torches burning bright.

A barn door shattered under boot. Chickens scattered. A woman screamed as the riders circled her cabin, whooping and firing shots into the air.

One of them—tall, broad, his coat black as tar—rode ahead of the rest. His revolvers spat fire into the sky. His shadow stretched long in the moonlight, and those who watched swore it looked too tall, too crooked—like a devil had taken flesh.

Inside, a farmer clutched his rifle with shaking hands, his children pressed against him. “Stay low,” he whispered. His wife wept into her hands.

But the riders didn’t break the door. They didn’t need to. They left their mark in fire, torching the barn and scattering the livestock, then rode on, leaving only smoke and fear behind.

By dawn, the countryside buzzed with talk.

“Night riders,” folks whispered at the well. “Devils on horseback.”

And more than one voice swore they had seen the Devil himself among them—the Six Gun outlaw riding in the lead, his shadow black against the flames.

Scene Two – Rumors and Shadows

By midmorning, Redemption boiled with fear. Farmers rode in from the outlying homesteads, dust on their clothes, smoke in their hair. They filled the saloon and the general store, voices loud, words tumbling over each other.

“They came at midnight—masked, fast, like ghosts!”

“Burned the barn to the ground!”

“My boy swore he saw *him* ridin’ at the front!”

And every time, the finger pointed the same way—toward Six Gun Devil.

Sheriff Elias stood on the boardwalk, jaw tight, fists clenched at his sides. His deputy Tucker whispered, “What if it’s true, Sheriff? What if he’s leadin’ ‘em?”

Elias shook his head, though doubt flickered in his eyes. “He was in town last night. I saw him myself.”

“But the folks don’t believe it.”

The preacher stepped from the chapel, his Bible under his arm, eyes burning. “And that’s the danger. Fear makes liars out of shadows. The enemy of our souls loves confusion—it turns neighbors against neighbors faster than bullets.”

Elias turned on him. “Preacher, these ain’t sermons. These are barns burnin’, families losin’ everything.”

Josiah met his gaze. “And Scripture says: *‘The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.’*” (John 10:10)

The sheriff exhaled, weary. “So what are you sayin’? That the Devil himself is ridin’ with these men?”

The preacher’s voice dropped. “I’m sayin’ the Devil rides wherever fear opens a saddle. And right now, this town’s wide open.”

Across the street, Sarah stood stiff as iron, her voice sharp. “And you think God’s Word in a murderer’s saddlebag is gonna stop it? No. This is judgment. And it’s ridin’ with him.”

The crowd murmured, eyes sliding toward Six Gun, who leaned silent in the doorway of the saloon, his hat brim shadowing his face. He didn’t deny it. He didn’t defend himself. He just lit a cigarette, smoke curling from his lips, and stared at the horizon where the riders had vanished.

Scene Three – The Confrontation

The saloon air hung heavy, ripe with whiskey and fear. Men muttered in corners, eyes darting toward the outlaw standing silent in the doorway. His cigarette ember glowed, a small red star in the gloom, smoke curling like incense from a darker altar.

It was the widow Sarah who broke the silence. Her boots struck sharp against the boards as she pushed through the swinging doors, her black dress swirling behind her like a storm cloud. She marched straight for him, voice rising above the clink of glasses and nervous whispers.

“Tell them, Devil!” she spat. “Tell them it was you ridin’ with those masked killers last night. Tell them it was your shadow leadin’ the charge!”

The room froze.

Six Gun’s eyes narrowed beneath the brim of his hat. His hand dropped to his revolver—not drawing, just resting there, steady as a tombstone. “I don’t ride with cowards wearin’ masks.”

Sarah’s eyes blazed. “Then why did my neighbor swear he saw *you* torchin’ his barn? Why do children wake screamin’, sayin’ the Devil himself rode past their windows?”

He took one long drag on the cigarette, let the smoke curl from his nose, then flicked the butt into the sawdust. “Shadows lie.”

The sheriff pushed forward then, his voice sharp, desperate to keep control. “Enough! Folks, I was here in town last night. I saw him myself. He didn’t ride out.”

But the crowd wasn’t soothed. Fear buzzed like hornets. A rancher at the back shouted, “Then how do you explain what we seen?”

Another voice: “The Devil can be in two places at once!”

Laughter broke from some, but it wasn’t the easy kind—it was nervous, bitter.

The preacher stepped in from the doorway, Bible in hand, his voice steady as stone. “The Devil don’t need two bodies. Fear does the work for him. He only has to whisper, and men see what they want.”

But Sarah turned on him, tears streaking her cheeks. “And what if the whisper’s true? What if this man is the Devil? Would you still preach grace to a demon?”

Josiah’s voice softened, but it carried. “I would preach grace until my last breath. For *‘the Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.’*” (Luke 19:10)

The crowd shifted uneasily. Some lowered their eyes. Others hardened their stares.

Six Gun’s face betrayed nothing. But inside, his chest tightened. He had carried names before—killer, outlaw, murderer. But now they called him Devil in more than jest. And for the first time, he wasn’t sure if they were wrong.

The sheriff stepped close, his voice low so only the outlaw heard. “If you want the truth back, you’ll have to ride. Hunt those night riders down. Show this town you ain’t leadin’ ‘em.”

Six Gun’s jaw worked, his hand brushing the saddlebag where the Bible sat. He didn’t answer. He just walked past the sheriff, past the crowd, and out into the blazing noon sun.

Behind him, the whispers grew louder:

“Devil rides at night.”

“Maybe he rides in the day too.”

“Either way, judgment’s comin’.”

Scene Four – Fire in the Chapel

Evening fell like a lid over Redemption. The last of the heat bled off the roofs, and the street took on that quiet that comes when folks are too tired to talk and too worried to sleep. Lamps winked to life one by one. From the chapel, a soft hum of voices drifted across the dust—midweek prayer meeting, three pews’ worth, the sound of weary people trying to remember how hope sounds.

Six Gun stood in the alley between the saloon and the smithy, hat low, shoulder to the wall. He watched nothing in particular, which meant he watched everything—the way the wind pressed the signboard against its chain, the way the sheriff’s footsteps paced, the way Hannah’s braid flashed as she skipped

up the chapel steps and disappeared through the door. His thumb brushed the edge of the saddlebag at his side; the Bible was in there, heavier than it had any right to be.

The first warning came as a tremor, so faint most men would have missed it. He didn't. The ground had a tone under hooves; he heard it now, far off, a dull drum thudding up the road from the flats. He lifted his head and squinted east. Dust, low and rising, like breath before a shout.

He pushed off the wall and stepped into the open street.

Elias was already moving, stepping out of the jail with his shotgun. "You hear that?"

"I hear it."

"How many?"

"Enough."

The wind shifted and carried the sound clear: a pack at a gallop, fast and hard. Then the shapes came—a black smear boiling out of the dark, then riders, a dozen at least, faces hooded in sackcloth, hats pulled low, coats long enough to hide what they carried. Pistols flashed in their hands, muzzle blooms opening and closing as they fired into the sky to frighten children and warn no one.

"Inside!" Elias barked to the few who still stood in the street. "Get inside!"

The riders fanned wide at the mouth of town, splitting clean as a flock. Half streaked toward the livery and storehouse, torches bobbing. The other half bore down straight on the chapel, whooping like coyotes, firing at windows, the crack of glass bright and ugly.

Six Gun walked—not ran—into the middle of the street and stopped facing them. He set his feet the way a man does who means to plant and not be moved. His coat swung open; both revolvers rode low and ready.

"Devil!" one of the riders hollered, voice muffled by cloth. "You ride with us or you die with them!"

Six Gun didn't answer. He drew and fired, fast as breath. One torch leapt backward out of a rider's hand, shot clean in the oil cup; it flowered into a harmless ball and died in the dust. His second shot took the lead horse's bridle iron; the animal reared and spun, throwing two riders into each other in a tangle of legs and curses.

The pack split again, some veering to circle, some committing to the straight line of murder.

From the chapel steps, Josiah's voice rose—not a shout, not panicked, a bell struck in the right place. "*The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?*" (Psalm 27:1). The congregation answered with the sound a church makes when it remembers it is a choir: thin at first, then stronger. "*Whom shall I fear?*"

A bullet punched splinters from the chapel doorframe. Hannah flinched. Sarah grabbed her and pulled her behind the sill. "Stay down," she hissed, eyes never leaving the men in the street.

Elias strode out to the center line, racked the shotgun, and fired; a rider screamed and toppled. Tucker's rifle cracked from the jail window; another man jolted and slid sideways, boot hanging in the stirrup until the horse dragged him into the dark.

But the riders came on. Two torches sailed, spinning arcs of flame. One smacked the chapel roof where the shingles were dry with years; fire took like it had been waiting. Another crashed against the window frame and burped flame along the sill.

Six Gun pivoted and shot the roof torch where it clung—a neat hole through the can, oil misting into sparks—and when the burning shingles flared higher, he jerked the hitching rail free with a boot and shoulder and used it like a pike, levering the ignited section off the eave. It fell to the street and skittered in a line of sparks. He stamped it under his heel until the leather of his boot smoked.

A rider bore down on him from the left, pistol up, close enough that he could see the man's eyes behind the rough cutouts in the mask. They were mean eyes, not brave ones. Six Gun stepped into the horse's path and fired once at the animal's chest—not to kill, to startle—and slapped the muzzle with his free hand. The horse swerved; the rider pitched; his pistol spat into the sky as he hit the dirt on his shoulder. Six Gun's second revolver found the man's belt buckle and shattered it. The gun skittered away; the man scrambled, saw Death looking down the double sight, and didn't try for it.

"Run," Six Gun said.

The man ran.

Three riders wheeled together and lit fresh torches from one another, crouching in the saddle, choreographed as if they'd practiced it in a field. They came at the chapel in a V, torches back and ready to throw.

From the steps, Josiah lifted his Bible like a banner. "*When the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord shall lift up a standard against him.*" (Isaiah 59:19)

"Standard or not," Elias growled, "we need lead."

Six Gun moved to meet the V. He didn't hurry. He let them commit, let their hips settle in the moment a throw is born. Then he cut the left-hand man's torch out of existence; the center man's wrist caught a round that turned his throw into a cry; the right-hand man lost his hat and his courage when the brim fluttered away in a cone of splinters and fire. The V fell apart.

A rider in the back reined up on a big black horse and sat still. He was taller than the rest, coat blacker, hat brim wider. Even masked, his outline looked wrong—too long in the shadow, too sharp in the angles. He did not throw a torch. He watched. And when he saw Six Gun's face turn his way, he lifted one pistol and saluted with it like a man at a polite duel. Then he spurred forward, straight at the chapel steps, straight at the preacher.

Six Gun stepped to intercept. They came like lines crossing, and for a heartbeat horse and man and gun and gun were all that existed. The rider fired; the shot went wide, chewed a scar into the chapel door. Six Gun's reply took the rider's pistol out of his hand. The man came on anyway, swinging a length of chain like a flail. The chain sang through the air, bright and vicious; Six Gun ducked, felt wind on his hat brim, came up inside the arc, and slammed his forearm into the man's elbow. Bone gave. The chain

fell. The black horse shouldered him; he grabbed deep leather and shoved, twisting the rider half out of the saddle. They hung there, breathing each other's breath, and in that close the outlaw saw a flash of eyes through the slit in the sackcloth—eye color like old iron and river mud—and something moved behind them, the smallest flicker like laughter.

"Come ride with us," the man hissed, the words wet and wrong in his throat. "You already do."

Six Gun's answer was a head-butt that made the mask darken around the nose. He ripped the man down, threw him hard, and leveled both guns.

"Unmask him!" someone shouted. "Let's see the face!"

But the rider rolled with the grace of a cat and was up and gone in a knot of teammates that closed around him like ribs, drawing him back, back, out of range. He left a smear of blood in the dust and a fallen black glove with a sigil burned into the leather—three crossed lines like a brand you couldn't place.

"Fire!" Tucker shouted, and it was true: the chapel eave had caught again where pitch had seeped into old wood. Flames crawled like orange fingers under the ridge.

Josiah shoved the door wide. "Buckets! Line to the pump!" And the faithful—few, shaky, but faithful—answered. Men, women, even children formed a crooked chain. Water sloshed. The sheriff climbed the roof with two others and beat the flame with blankets and coats.

Six Gun holstered one pistol, kept the other up, and walked backward along the line, guarding. Two riders tried to flank. He put one round into a saddle horn, one into a stirrup, and both men found themselves on the ground with more problem than appetite.

Sarah broke from the bucket line and sprinted to where Hannah knelt in the doorway, clutching the pail with white knuckles. A rider peeled out of the pack and aimed for them, pistol low. Time did the slow thing it sometimes does. Six Gun saw it—the angle, the distance, the math a gunman does without numbers. He didn't think. He moved. Two steps and he was in the shot's way; he fired and the rider jerked like a puppet whose strings had been cut. The bullet that had been meant for the doorway chewed harmless dirt at the step.

Hannah looked up at him, face streaked, eyes too big. "Mister..."

Sarah stared at the outlaw across her daughter's shoulder. Her mouth tried to form hate and couldn't quite find it. The look she gave him was not mercy, not yet, but it had a crack in it where mercy might someday grow.

The riders felt it—the shift. Packs know when a kill goes wrong. They circled once, twice, seeking a corner to bite, and found none. Elias racked the shotgun and let both barrels speak in quick succession. From the roof, a man in his shirtsleeves beat the last tongue of flame to death with a smoking quilt. The hymn inside the chapel wasn't a hymn anymore; it was a chant, one verse over and over, weak and stubborn as a weed between stones: "*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil...*" (Psalm 23:4)

The tall rider wheeled at the edge of lamplight, face toward Six Gun. The sackcloth mask turned once as if listening to something no one else could hear. He raised his empty hand and drew a finger slowly across his throat in pantomime, then turned and kicked his horse. The pack broke with him, a dark smear pouring back into the night, hooves drumming until the sound unraveled into distance.

Silence landed hard. It carried the smell of powder and wet ash.

Elias stood in the street, shotgun open over his arm, chest heaving. “Anyone hit?”

“Jasper’s grazed,” Tucker called from the pump. “Mrs. Riggs twisted an ankle. Roof’s scorched, but it’ll hold.”

Josiah stepped down off the chapel threshold. The Bible was in his hands, thumb wedged where he’d left a ribbon. He looked at the outlaw. He looked past him, to the fallen glove in the dust. He crouched, picked it up carefully, turned it in his fingers.

“That mark,” he said.

“Brand?” Elias asked, stepping close.

“Looks like one. But it’s wrong. It’s... borrowed.” Josiah closed his fist around it and straightened. His eyes met Six Gun’s. “They wanted fire on the altar. They didn’t get it.”

Six Gun said nothing. He walked to where the black glove had lain and ground the spot under his boot, as if the earth remembered and he meant to teach it to forget. Then he looked at the faces, one by one—the sheriff, the preacher, the widow, the child. He tipped his hat to Hannah. She tipped her chin back like a soldier receiving orders.

Sarah found her voice first. “You saved my girl.” She seemed surprised to hear the words in her mouth. “You saved my girl.”

He looked at her and worked his jaw, as if unfamiliar sentences fought to be spoken. What came out was rough. “Keep her near the lamp at night. Shadows get long.”

The sheriff stepped in, not a hand on the outlaw’s shoulder exactly, but near enough. “You ridin’ after them?”

“They’ll be back,” Six Gun said.

“That wasn’t the question.”

The outlaw’s gaze tracked the road where the riders had disappeared, then dropped to the saddlebag at his hip. He touched it briefly—as if to make sure the Book was still there, or as if to tell it something he couldn’t say out loud. “Yeah,” he said at last. “I’m ridin’.”

Josiah’s voice was quiet, but it carried. “*No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper.*” (Isaiah 54:17)

Six Gun didn’t nod to the verse, but some small part of his face turned toward it, like iron filing finding north.

He swung into the saddle. The town watched; the night held still. He didn't look back when he rode, but his shadow slid long beside him in the lamplight and, just for a heartbeat as he passed the chapel door, it seemed not so long, not so crooked. Then he was in the dark, chasing darker.

Behind him, the people of Redemption did what people do when they have been spared by inches. They swept glass and carried water and held each other and told the story wrong already. Some said the Devil had led the riders and then turned on them. Some said an angel had stood on the chapel roof and batted torches out of the sky with its wing. Some said both. The only thing they agreed on was this:

The night riders had come—and they had not taken the church.

Not tonight.

Chapter Seventeen – The Burning Church

Scene One – Smoke on the Horizon

It was midafternoon when the smoke rose. Not the thin white of a cookfire, not the lazy curl of a homestead hearth. This was thick, black, rising in columns, miles out across the flats. The kind of smoke that said something holy had been desecrated.

Sheriff Elias saw it first from the jailhouse porch. He stood, jaw set, hat brim pulled low. “That’s too much fire for a barn.”

Deputy Tucker shaded his eyes. His voice cracked. “That’s the north road. Reverend Pearson’s chapel stands that way.”

The news spread like lightning. By the time Elias saddled his horse, half the town was in the street—wives clutching children, men whispering oaths, the widow Sarah pale with fury.

The preacher, Josiah Markham, stood on the chapel steps, his Bible under his arm. His voice carried low but firm. “*The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy...*” (John 10:10). His eyes swept the smoke. “But the Word cannot be destroyed.”

Then Six Gun Devil stepped out of the saloon, cigarette ember glowing. He looked at the horizon, then at the people, then back at the smoke. His voice was rough, even. “Saddle up. If it’s what I think it is, there won’t be much left.”

Scene Two – Ashes and Silence

By the time they reached the north road, the chapel was gone.

The little wooden church had stood ten years, whitewashed boards weathered by rain and sun, its steeple a finger pointing heavenward. Now it was a carcass of char and smoke. The bell lay cracked in the dirt, blackened. The cross that had crowned the roof had fallen sideways into the ash, half-consumed, glowing faint where embers still smoldered.

Families from the nearby homesteads gathered in a circle around the ruin. Faces pale, hands shaking. One woman clutched her rosary until the beads cut her palm. A boy sobbed into his father's side.

Sarah spat into the dust. "This is what happens when we let the Devil walk free. His shadow burns every holy place it touches."

The sheriff's voice was weary. "He didn't ride with them."

"How do you know?" she hissed. "Did you see him last night? Or was he out with his own kind?"

Six Gun didn't rise to her bait. He stood at the edge of the ruin, silent, eyes narrowing at the blackened timbers. His jaw worked, hard, like he was grinding down words that wanted out.

Josiah dismounted slow, his boots crunching in the ash. His eyes watered—not just from smoke. He walked straight into the ruin, past the twisted pews, past the collapsed rafters. His voice trembled but carried: "*Every plant, which my heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up.*" (Matthew 15:13)

The silence of the gathered was louder than wailing.

Scene Three – The Bible in the Ashes

Then Hannah's small voice cut the silence. "Papa... look."

The girl was pointing at the altar.

There, amid the ruin, sat a pulpit blackened with soot, its wood scorched deep. Upon it lay a Bible. Its cover was singed at the edges, but when Josiah lifted it, the pages fluttered whole. Unburned. Unbroken.

A gasp rose from the people.

One man whispered, "It should've burned with the rest."

Another woman crossed herself. "A miracle..."

Josiah held it high, his voice breaking but strong. "*The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.*" (Isaiah 40:8)

The townsfolk bowed their heads, some weeping. Even Sarah was struck silent, her eyes wide, her lips parted.

Six Gun stepped closer, staring hard at the Book in Josiah's hands. He had felt weight in his own saddlebag. Now he saw it with his eyes. A Book that fire itself had refused.

For the first time, his voice cracked, low and hoarse. "Why?"

Josiah turned to him, eyes burning. "Because men can burn churches, Devil. They can burn wood, stone, even flesh. But they can't burn the Word. It belongs to the flame that purifies, not the fire that destroys."

Six Gun's hand hovered near his own saddlebag. He said nothing, but his throat worked.

Scene Four – Six Gun's Reckoning

The sun dipped lower, painting the smoke blood-red. The people drifted back, shaken, whispering. Some clung to hope, some clung to fear. But the outlaw stayed by the ruins, staring into the embers.

The sheriff stepped beside him, shotgun cradled. "You see now? This ain't about law anymore. It's about somethin' bigger."

Six Gun's jaw tightened. "Bigger don't put out fire."

Josiah walked up, the unburned Bible still in his hand. He opened it, letting the ash fall from the pages. His voice rose, steady: "*Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.*" (Matthew 24:35)

The outlaw looked at the flames still licking faint at the crossbeam. His voice was bitter, quiet. "So your God saves paper while men burn?"

Josiah met his gaze. "No. He saves souls. And He's after yours."

The words hung heavy. The outlaw turned away, mounted his horse, and rode off into the smoke.

But he carried the weight of what he'd seen—the Bible in the ashes, untouched, like judgment waiting in silence.

Chapter Eighteen – Ashes and Prayer

Scene One – The Ruins at Dawn

Morning broke slow and gray, the air thick with the stench of smoke and charred pine. Redemption stirred uneasy, its people speaking in hushed voices as they passed each other on the street. No one laughed. No one lingered. Their chapel was still standing, but another church on the north road was nothing more than blackened ribs against the sky.

Reverend Josiah Markham had been up all night. He'd prayed with families who lost their sanctuary, bandaged burns on calloused farmhands, whispered Scripture into ears that only wanted silence. When the first thin line of sun broke the horizon, he saddled his horse and rode back out to the ruin.

The chapel stood like a skeleton, timbers twisted, bell half-buried in the ash. Smoke still rose in tendrils, curling like unholy incense. Birds had not returned yet. The place felt hollow, cursed, but Josiah dismounted and walked into the wreck as if it were holy ground.

He wasn't alone.

The outlaw stood there too, hat low, coat heavy with soot. His boots left prints in the ash where no one else dared step. His eyes scanned the ruin without expression, but his hands flexed, restless, as if the fire had crawled under his skin.

Josiah didn't call to him. He simply knelt in the ashes where the altar had stood, Bible clasped to his chest. His knees sank into the soot until it stained his coat. He bowed his head and began to pray aloud, his voice rough with smoke and sorrow:

"Lord of mercy... we stand in ruins. Men have mocked Your house, and flames have tried to silence Your Word. But You are not mocked, and Your Word endures. Hear me now, O God. Have mercy on this town... and on this man."

The outlaw stiffened. His jaw flexed. He turned his face away, but didn't leave.

Josiah's prayer grew stronger, steadier. "This man has stood in blood, has walked through fire, and carries shadows heavy on his name. But I call on the name above all names. Lord Jesus, You came '*to seek and to save that which was lost*' (Luke 19:10). He is lost. Seek him now. Save him now. Break what binds him."

The silence after was louder than any shot. The outlaw's breath came hard. He muttered, almost a growl, "You prayin' for me, preacher?"

Josiah lifted his head, ash streaked across his brow. "Yes. Even for you."

The outlaw's eyes burned. "Then you're a fool."

But he didn't walk away.

Scene Two – Sparks of Resistance

The outlaw crouched on the edge of the ruin, scooping a handful of ash into his palm. He let it sift through his fingers, gray and lifeless. "You pray like it'll change somethin'. But the dead don't come back. Burned wood don't grow green again."

Josiah met his eyes. "Ashes ain't the end. Not in God's book. '*To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.*'" (Isaiah 61:3)

The outlaw barked a humorless laugh. "Beauty for ashes? All I see is black. All I smell is death."

"Then look harder," Josiah said gently. He pointed to the pulpit, where the unburned Bible still lay from the night before. Smoke had touched it, but the pages gleamed white in the morning light. "That Book should have burned. It didn't. Fire bows to the Author of that Word."

Six Gun's gaze fixed on it. His throat worked. "I've burned enough in my life. Maybe the Book just don't want my touch."

Josiah stood, brushing ash from his knees. He stepped closer, eyes steady. "Or maybe it's waiting on your touch. Maybe God set it in the ashes so you'd see what can't be destroyed, no matter how hard men or devils try."

The outlaw said nothing. His jaw locked. His hand twitched near his own saddlebag, where Hannah's gift rode heavy. He wanted to throw it into the ruin, watch the flames lick it clean. But another part of him wanted—needed—to know if it would burn.

Scene Three – Prayer Over the Outlaw

The people of the ruined chapel began to arrive—farmers, wives, children. They came with buckets and brooms, thinking to clean, though there was little to clean but bones of wood. They found the outlaw standing beside the preacher, both in silence.

Sarah Schaefer, her face hard with grief, pointed at Six Gun. “He watched it burn. He didn't stop it. And now you pray for him?”

Josiah's voice rose so all could hear. “Yes, I pray for him. Because the Word says, *‘For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.’* (Romans 3:23) All, Sarah. Him. You. Me. None stand clean before the Lord.”

The widow shook with fury. “Don't you dare put me in the same breath with that butcher!”

But Josiah's voice only grew steadier. “And yet the same Jesus died for you both. The same blood. The same cross. *‘But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.’*” (Romans 5:8)

The crowd murmured. Some nodded, some turned away.

The outlaw's chest heaved. He muttered, low, “I didn't light it. But I didn't stop it neither.”

Josiah turned to him, eyes fierce with compassion. He laid a hand on the outlaw's soot-stained shoulder. “Then kneel with me. Not to the ashes. Not to me. But to the One who makes beauty from ashes.”

The outlaw froze. His hand twitched near his revolver, as if the weight of steel could shield him from the weight of those words. His mouth opened, but no words came.

Finally he rasped, “I can't.”

Josiah's voice softened, breaking. “Then I'll kneel for you.”

And he did. Right there, in the ashes, before God and men, the preacher knelt again and prayed—this time not just for the town, but for the outlaw's soul. The people watched, some scoffing, some weeping, all silent.

The outlaw stood stiff, every muscle coiled, his face shadowed. But his eyes—just for a flicker—looked less like iron, and more like a man who feared the fire might still be coming for him.

Chapter Nineteen – The Widow's Plea

Scene One – The Plea in the Dust

The air in Redemption hung thick with dust, the kind that never seemed to settle. Folks said the land was cursed, that no matter how much a man swept his porch or beat his rugs, the desert always found its way back inside. But that morning, the heaviness in the street wasn't just dust. It was grief.

They'd buried two men at dawn—farmers who had stood guard at the chapel when the night riders came. One shot down, the other trampled under a horse's hooves. Their families walked back from the graveyard with faces pale as chalk, lips pressed tight against screams they didn't dare let out.

Six Gun Devil stood at the edge of town, coat flapping in the dry wind, smoke curling from the cigarette pinched in his lips. His eyes were narrowed against the sun, but he wasn't looking at the horizon. He was watching the townsfolk move, slow and defeated, each step weighted. He didn't join the burial. He never did. Death was no stranger to him; it clung too close for ceremony.

That's when she came.

Sarah Schaefer. Widow, black dress worn to threads, face carved sharp by loss. She moved with purpose, skirts swishing in the dust, her boots striking the earth like hammer blows. Her eyes were fixed on him, blazing with something fiercer than sorrow—something that wanted blood, or at least justice.

The crowd noticed. They stopped their slow shuffle and turned, watching. Mothers pulled children close, men leaned on hitching posts. Even the sheriff, Elias Grady, narrowed his eyes from the boardwalk and muttered, "Lord help us."

Sarah didn't slow. She stopped three feet from him, dust rising around her hem, and stared straight into his cold eyes.

"You," she said.

He exhaled smoke, the ember at the end of the cigarette glowing hot. "Me."

Her voice shook, but not with fear. With fury. "How many graves do you need before you leave us be? How much blood soaks the ground before you ride on?"

The crowd whispered. Some nodded, others looked away.

Six Gun said nothing. He flicked the cigarette into the dust and ground it under his heel. His hand rested near the revolver at his side, not as a threat, but as if the weapon had become part of him—like a man resting his hand on his own hip.

Sarah's voice rose. "You carry death like other men carry their names. You don't need to draw. Just your shadow kills. My husband's gone. My neighbors are gone. And you—" Her voice cracked, her chest heaving. "You're still here. Why? Why won't you leave us to bury our dead in peace?"

Six Gun's jaw clenched. The wind tugged his coat, the spurs on his boots jingling faint. Finally he spoke, his voice low, gravelly. "I didn't put your husband in the ground."

“You didn’t stop it either,” she spat. “Every man that dies here dies because of you. Don’t you see it? You’re the magnet. You’re the curse. If the Devil’s huntin’, he’s huntin’ you—and we’re caught in the fire.”

Josiah Markham, the preacher, stepped forward from the chapel steps, Bible in hand. His voice was calm, but urgent. “Sarah—”

But she cut him off, eyes never leaving the outlaw. “Don’t you ‘Sarah’ me, Reverend. You preach grace till your throat bleeds, but grace don’t bring back the dead. It don’t put food on tables burned to ash.”

She stepped closer, almost nose to nose with Six Gun. Her finger jabbed his chest, hard against the leather of his coat. “If you had a shred of decency, you’d ride out. Leave us to heal. Take your guns and your shadow and go.”

The outlaw didn’t flinch. He let her words strike like blows, his face unreadable. But his eyes—his eyes flickered, just once, as if something in them cracked.

The crowd held its breath. Some nodded, muttering agreement. Others shifted, torn.

Then Hannah, the preacher’s little girl, spoke from the steps, her voice clear as a bell. “But Papa says Jesus came for sinners. Even him.”

Heads turned. The child’s braids swayed as she clutched her small Bible, eyes wide but steady.

Sarah spun, voice raw. “And how many more have to die while we wait for him to kneel? How many, Josiah?”

The preacher’s eyes filled, but his voice held firm. “*The Lord is not slack concerning his promise... but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.*” (2 Peter 3:9)

Sarah’s shoulders shook. Tears slipped down her cheeks. “Then let his repentance happen far from us. I’ve given enough.”

The outlaw looked down at her. His voice was barely more than a whisper. “You think me leavin’ will stop the riders?”

Her head snapped up, eyes blazing. “I think you stayin’ will kill us all.”

The silence after was suffocating. Dust swirled in the wind. A church bell clanged faint from the graveyard, struck by nothing but the breeze.

Finally, Six Gun pulled his hat lower, shadowing his face. “Maybe you’re right.”

He turned and walked toward the livery, boots grinding the dirt. The crowd parted like water, whispers rising like smoke. Some faces showed relief. Others, fear of what it meant if he really left.

Sarah sank to her knees in the dust, weeping, whispering over and over, “Lord, let him go. Let the Devil take his shadow with him.”

But Hannah’s voice carried after him, soft but certain: “*And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.*” (John 1:5)

The outlaw's step faltered, just for a heartbeat. Then he kept walking, his hand brushing the saddlebag where Hannah's Bible still rode heavy.

Scene Two – A Town Divided

The next morning, Redemption woke uneasy. The widow's words still hung in the air like smoke after gunfire. Some swore the outlaw would be gone by sunrise, his saddle packed, his shadow trailing him west. Others whispered that the Devil never left a place until it was bled dry.

The town square filled early, merchants leaving their shutters down, ranch hands riding in from the outlying homesteads. They gathered by the well, hats in hand, voices low but sharp with fear.

Sheriff Elias leaned against the hitching post, arms crossed, jaw tight. He hadn't slept. His deputy, Tucker, stood beside him, eyes darting nervously, one hand always near the rifle slung at his side.

Sarah was there too, black dress stark against the dusty street. She stood with her arms folded, chin high, a pillar of grief hardened into fury. Beside her, others nodded—wives who'd buried husbands, fathers who'd buried sons.

And then there were the rest: men who'd seen the outlaw's pistols speak faster than lightning, who remembered the night riders scattering when his shadow crossed the street. They shifted uneasily, torn between fear and desperate need.

It was old man Pruitt, the storekeeper, who spoke first. "I say she's right. Every time he draws breath, more of us die. We oughta run him out before the ground drinks more blood."

A rancher spat in the dust. "Run him out, and who'll stand when the riders come back? You? Your broomstick?"

Laughter rippled, nervous, bitter.

Sarah's voice cut sharp. "Better we die fightin' for ourselves than waitin' on a curse to protect us."

The rancher stepped closer, eyes blazing. "You call him a curse, I call him a shield. I seen him take down three men faster than I could spit. If he leaves, we're bare."

Voices rose, overlapping, the crowd splitting down the middle. "He's death on two legs!" shouted one. "He's the only reason we ain't all ash already!" shouted another.

Elias lifted his hand, voice booming. "Enough!" The crowd stilled, though anger still burned in their eyes. He looked from one side to the other, then toward the chapel where the preacher stood with his daughter.

"Reverend," Elias said, his voice low but carrying, "you been prayin' over him. You tell us—should he stay or should he go?"

The people turned, a wave of faces hungry for an answer.

Josiah stepped forward, Bible in hand, his coat still gray with ash from the ruined chapel. His eyes swept the crowd, weary but fierce. "You ask me if he's curse or shield. I tell you he's a man. A sinner, same as the rest of us. But he's also a soul, and souls ain't curses—they're battlegrounds. The fight for

his soul is why the riders press so hard. Don't you see? It ain't just about barns or bullets. It's about eternity."

Murmurs swept the square. Some scoffed, others nodded.

Sarah's voice trembled, sharp. "And how many more eternities must we bury while we wait for him to choose?"

Josiah's gaze softened, but his voice did not waver. "*For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world.*" (Ephesians 6:12) He lifted his Bible. "This battle's bigger than him, bigger than you, bigger than me. If he leaves, the darkness wins. If he stays, there is still hope."

The widow shook her head, tears streaking her cheeks. "Hope won't fill an empty bed."

From the edge of the crowd, a small voice rose. Hannah, clutching her worn Bible, stepped forward until she stood in the dust. "Mama says when Pa died, she thought Jesus forgot us. But Papa told me, '*I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.*'" (Hebrews 13:5)

The crowd fell silent. Some men looked away. A woman wept into her hands.

And then, from the livery, footsteps rang out. The outlaw himself emerged, saddlebags packed, rifle slung. He walked slow, steady, the spurs on his boots jingling soft like funeral bells.

All eyes turned. The square parted.

He stopped at the well, looking from face to face. His voice was low, gravel and smoke. "You want me gone, I'll ride. You want me here, I'll stay. But know this—whether I stay or go, the riders'll keep comin'. They smell blood, and this town's been bleedin' since long before I came."

He turned his gaze to Sarah, his voice softening just a hair. "Maybe you're right. Maybe my shadow's too black for your streets. But don't think my leavin' will stop the night. You'll still have to fight it."

He swung into the saddle. The crowd watched, breathless, divided, unsure whether to cheer or curse.

Josiah stepped forward, his voice urgent. "If you ride, know this: *Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence?* (Psalm 139:7) You can't outrun God, Devil. Not in the desert. Not anywhere."

The outlaw looked down at him, eyes cold, unreadable. Then he touched the brim of his hat, spurred his horse, and rode west, leaving the town split in half—some relieved, some terrified, all watching until the dust swallowed him.

Scene Three – The Road Out

The west road stretched flat and endless, a line drawn across the desert with no mercy for men who rode it. Heat shimmered on the horizon, bending the air into ghosts of water that weren't there. Six Gun Devil rode slow, the sun high, his hat pulled low, the weight of the saddlebag heavy against his hip.

He hadn't said goodbye. Didn't need to. The town had said enough for him—pleas, curses, prayers, all tangled in the dust. He heard Sarah's voice still, sharp as a knife: *"Every man that dies here dies because of you."* And Hannah's, softer, stubborn as a weed: *"Jesus came for sinners. Even him."*

He spat into the dirt and pressed his spurs to the horse.

But no matter how far he rode, the words followed. They tangled with the rhythm of hoofbeats, they rode the wind, they gnawed in the silence between breaths. He pulled out the cigarette he hadn't lit yet, turned it between his fingers, then shoved it back into his coat. For once, smoke wouldn't drown the voices.

By late afternoon, the road narrowed through a canyon where red stone rose like walls on both sides. The air grew still, the kind of still that made a man's hand twitch toward iron without thinking. His horse snorted, ears pricked.

Six Gun slowed. His eyes swept the cliffs. Nothing moved—no hawk, no shadow but his own. Too still.

The first shot rang out, sparking stone at his boot.

He hauled the reins and threw himself sideways, rolling hard into the dust as the horse screamed and reared. Bullets sparked from the rocks, echoing like thunder.

Masked riders poured down from the ridge, horses kicking up clouds, pistols blazing. Their whoops filled the canyon like a pack of wolves closing in.

Six Gun rolled behind a boulder, revolvers in hand, breath steady. His coat smoked where a bullet had grazed. He leaned out and fired, two quick shots—one rider toppled, another veered off, clutching his arm.

But there were too many. A dozen at least, circling like vultures, driving him toward the canyon's choke point.

Their leader rode at the center—a tall man on a black horse, face hidden under a mask, coat whipping in the wind. Even at distance, his shadow stretched long and crooked, wrong against the ground. His voice carried like gravel and fire.

"Devil!" he shouted. "You think you can outrun us? You ride with us whether you will or no!"

The pack cheered, their voices echoing off stone.

Six Gun's jaw tightened. He fired again, quick and precise, dropping another man from the saddle. Dust rose thick, horses screamed, gunfire split the air.

But he was outnumbered. The canyon walls closed around him.

And then he felt it—the saddlebag pressing against his side where he'd dragged it from the horse. The Bible shifted inside, pages whispering against each other. He cursed under his breath, teeth grit.

A bullet whined close, ricocheting off stone. He ducked lower. His hand brushed the saddlebag, almost by accident, and his fingers closed over the Book.

When he pulled it free, soot still clung to the edges. The same Bible Hannah had pressed into his chest. The same Word he'd seen survive fire.

The riders closed in, circling, torches in their hands now, ready to burn him alive in the canyon dust.

The leader pointed at him, voice booming. "Kneel to the fire, Devil, or burn in it!"

The outlaws laughed, torches flaring, smoke rising.

Six Gun crouched behind the boulder, revolver in one hand, Bible in the other. His eyes flicked between them—steel and Word, death and life, curse and promise.

And for the first time in his bloody years, he whispered—not to the riders, not to the wind, but to the silence above him:

"God... if You're there... show me now."

The riders charged, torches held high, the canyon a furnace of flame and fury.

Six Gun rose.

Both revolvers blazed. But the Book stayed in his other hand, raised high, as if he wasn't sure whether it was shield or curse.

The canyon thundered with gunfire, shouts, horses screaming, stone splitting. Smoke rose thicker, choking, but through it all, the outlaw's shadow didn't bend—it stood straight, tall, unbroken.

By the time the echoes faded, the canyon floor was scattered with torches dying in the dust, horses galloping riderless into the flats, and men groaning where they fell. The leader was gone, vanished into the smoke.

Six Gun stood alone, chest heaving, blood on his sleeve, the Bible still in his hand. Its cover was scorched from a torch's kiss, but the pages inside were untouched.

He looked at it for a long moment. Then he shoved it back into the saddlebag and whispered hoarse:

"Not yet. But maybe."

He mounted his horse, spurred it hard, and rode not west anymore—but back toward Redemption.

Because some battles you couldn't outrun.

Chapter Twenty – A Sheriff's Burden

Scene One – The Ledger and the Badge

The jailhouse smelled of oil and old wood, the sort of smell that lived in places where men tried to hold back chaos with hinges and locks. Sheriff Elias Grady sat at his desk in that smell, a lamp burning low, the wick trimmed neat, the light throwing his shadow tall across the plank wall where a rack held two shotguns and the town's only pair of iron cuffs. The star on his vest lay on the blotter, not pinned, just

sitting, the tin dulled by fingerprints and dust. He polished it with the edge of a clean rag and watched the way it caught the lamp and gave it back.

On the blotter beside the star sat a folded broadside: **WANTED, DEAD OR ALIVE — SIX GUN DEVIL — \$5000**. The likeness was rough, the eyes wrong, the jaw too square. Paper had a way of getting the details wrong while thinking it had the truth. Elias set the poster down and turned his ledger toward him instead. He had always trusted the ledger more than the wanted sheets; the ledger didn't shout, it remembered. In it, each week of Redemption's living lay captured in blunt ink—fights, fines, births noted by the doctor when he dropped by to jaw, deaths marked with a black line across the margin. The black lines had multiplied this month. He tapped the quill against the rim of the ink and listened to the hollow sound.

"Law," he said to the empty room, as if saying the word might let it stand up and help him. "Law and mercy." He spoke them like they were two men he might have to choose between.

On the window glass, night rode up and leaned its shoulder, the pane rattling with a friendly tap as wind slid down from the flats. Somewhere out there, beyond the circle of town lamps and the creak of the livery, coyotes worked the ridge and a black horse carried a man the world called Devil back and forth across the line that separated order from ruin. Elias rubbed the scar along his jaw, the one a drunk put there with a broken bottle his first year wearing a star. He'd won that fight and lost sleep over it for a month.

Tucker moved in the next room, careful like a boy who didn't want to make noise enough to draw the world's trouble. Elias heard him set the rifle against the wall and pour coffee. "You want a cup, Sheriff?"

"In a minute," Elias said. He opened the top right drawer, found the little Testament the preacher had pressed on him two years ago after a funeral, and thumbed it open out of habit. The thin pages fell where his thumb knew they would. "*Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.*" (Psalm 85:10). He read it twice, because he didn't feel how that could be true and wanted to give it a chance to get in anyway.

"Met together," he said softly, thumb pressing the margin so hard the page bowed. "If they've met, they ain't said much to each other lately."

He flipped on, stopping when another verse held him like a hand on his shoulder. "*For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid... for he beareth not the sword in vain.*" (Romans 13:4). He stared at the words and glanced at the sword he bore—the star on the blotter, the Colt in the drawer, the scattergun on the rack. Tools of keeping peace. Or of breaking men.

Tucker eased in with two tin cups, steam ghosting up like a prayer that didn't know where to go. He set one near the ledger. "He's gone, then," Tucker said, not asking, remembering the dust trail the outlaw cut when he left at noon.

"For now," Elias said.

"You think he'll come back?"

Elias didn't answer right away. He got up, crossed to the peg by the door, and lifted down the sackcloth glove the preacher brought in after the riders tried to burn the chapel. Three crossed lines were scorched into the palm—brand or sigil, a mark that didn't belong to any ranch around here. He turned the glove in his hand and let the light crawl across its seams. "He'll be where the trouble is," he said finally. "He don't run from fire. He carries it."

Tucker sipped and made a face at the bitter. "Folks are sayin' you oughta arrest him if he comes back."

"Folks say a lot of things." Elias hung the glove back on its peg. "Arrest him for what? For ridin' while other men do the shootin'? For bein' a story folks tell their kids when the wind moans? I seen him kill men who needed killin'. I seen him hold his fire when it would've been easier not to. I seen him stand between a torch and the Lord's house." He stopped, feeling the weight of his own words. "And I seen him walk away when he should've walked in."

Tucker's boot toe made a nervous circle in the dust. "You think he can be... saved?" He said the last word like it was a thing he wasn't sure he'd pronounced right.

Elias looked down at the tin star and then at the Testament. "I think it ain't my job to figure whether a man's soul is past the fence. It's my job to keep him from stompin' the garden while the Lord does His own work."

Tucker nodded, relieved that somebody had an answer, even if it wasn't clean. "Preacher says the same. Says grace can find a man in the bottom of a well if it needs to."

Elias half smiled. "Preacher says a lot of good things." He set the star back on his vest, the pin catching the lamplight. He did it slow, because the motion felt like a kind of vow and vows ought not be made quick. "But when lead starts flyin', it ain't grace men holler for. It's the law. And I reckon I'm the only law this side of the river."

Hoofbeats whispered past outside and paused. Tucker's hand went to the rifle before his thoughts did. Elias felt the hair on his forearms rise, the way a dog's hackles lift when a storm is near. He moved to the window and slid two fingers under the edge of the blind. The street lay like a held breath. The lamp over the mercantile guttered and recovered. Down by the livery, a dark shape moved—horse and rider—then was gone, like a thought you couldn't keep hold of.

"Could be any hand comin' late from the flats," Tucker said, but his voice was too light.

"Could be," Elias said. He didn't believe it.

He left the window and sat again, elbows on the blotter, palms to his brow. "You ever think on hangings, Tucker?" he asked, not looking up.

"No, sir."

"I do." He let the words find their own way. "My first county back east, before I came here, we strung a man at sunrise for knifin' a drover. He'd done it. Swore on his mama he hadn't, but the blood said otherwise. I stood there under that tree wearin' a star too big for my coat and said the words and heard the rope creak. And I went home and I was sick, and I kept sayin' to myself, *it's the law, it's the law*—like if I said it enough, it would be more than words. Took me a while to understand something: law's a

sword, like that Book says, but even swords are supposed to be carried by men who know when to keep ‘em sheathed.”

Tucker stared at the scar on Elias’s jaw and at the star on his chest as if both were maps. “So... what do we do if he rides back in? Put him in irons? Make him our fist? Which is it?”

Elias reached for the quill, rolled it between thumb and forefinger, and dipped it. In the ledger he wrote on a fresh line, *Night Riders—activity increasing; sigil found; chapel burned north road; two dead*. He lifted the quill, thought, and added a line that Tucker craned to read: *Six Gun—left town at widow’s plea; to return?* The question mark hung there like a noose.

“We do both,” Elias said. “We hold the line and we hold out a hand. If he puts his gun on me, I’ll put him in the ground. If he puts it on the men in sacks, I’ll stand at his shoulder.” He closed the ledger. “And all the while I’ll ask God to reach the piece of him I can’t get to.”

Tucker took that in and nodded like a boy takes in a hard lesson that isn’t finished teaching him yet. The clock on the shelf clicked its little brass tongue. Outside, the wind went higher, fretting the eaves.

Footsteps scraped on the boardwalk. Not the nervous trot of a drunk or the heel-drag of a loafer. A measured weight, one boot and then the other, like a man who knew where he was going and wasn’t afraid to get there. The steps stopped at the door. The latch didn’t move.

Elias stood and let his hand drop to the Colt, not drawing, only greeting an old friend. “Door’s open,” he said.

It swung in and there he was, taller than the rumor seemed to say, the brim of his hat casting everything above the cheekbones in night. Dust rode his coat. Soot rode his cuffs. The smell of burned oil walked in with him. Behind him, the street seemed to lean closer without moving.

“You left,” Tucker said. It came out half accusation, half relief.

“I tried,” the outlaw answered. His voice could have been a file over iron. He lifted the saddlebag from his shoulder and set it on the desk. It thumped heavier than leather should thump. He didn’t open it. He didn’t need to; its weight talked for it.

Elias’s eyes flicked to the bag and then to the man. He saw blood at the sleeve, dried in a dark comma at the elbow. “You run into trouble on the west road?”

“Trouble found me,” Six Gun said. “Masks. Torches. Your tall friend with the long shadow. Canyon ambush. They wanted me on my knees.”

“And?”

“I ain’t the kneelin’ kind.” He touched the bag with two fingers, a gesture so slight a man might miss it. “Not to them.”

Tucker’s breath left him in a sound he tried to swallow. “You bring any of ‘em in?”

“Brought their horses a taste of freedom,” the outlaw said. “Left the men to the dust. Leader ran. He’s good at that.”

Elias took all that in and felt the two men he'd named out loud—Law and Mercy—step up on either side of him like twins who didn't like sharing a room. He thought of the widow's tear-salted plea and the child's steady verse and the night the chapel eaves caught and the way this man's body had stood where a bullet meant for a girl had been headed. He thought of the rope creaking in some other county a long time ago. And he thought of the verse that told him the sword he bore wasn't a toy.

"You're under my law while you breathe town air," he said at last, voice quiet as a holstered gun. "That means you don't draw except to stop men who come in sacks and fire. It means you answer when I call. It means you don't settle old scores on my street or in my alleys. Break that, and you and me are gonna see which of us God wants to keep." He let that hang a breath, then added, "You ride with me after the ones who lit that church?"

The outlaw's mouth moved toward a smile and didn't arrive. "I didn't come to ask permission."

"No," Elias said. "You came to give me a choice. I just made it."

For the first time since the door swung, the outlaw's eyes lifted enough that the lamplight found them. They weren't red coals like drunks said in whispers. They were tired, and something—just the barest flake—looked like a man wondering what a word like *saved* weighed on a tongue.

From the doorway, the preacher's voice arrived calm and bright, the way a bell is when it knows what it's for. Josiah had come silent, as he had a habit of doing, and leaned there now with his hat in his hands and ash still in the seam of his coat. "*He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee,*" he said softly, eyes on the sheriff, then the outlaw, "*but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?*" (Micah 6:8)

Elias felt the verse find the place he kept the Testament and settle there. "I'll do my best to spend all three before the night's over," he said. He glanced at Six Gun. "You ready to work for the first one?"

Six Gun tapped the saddlebag once, the way a man might pat a holster before stepping off the boardwalk into whatever comes. "Let's go see who still feels like burnin' churches."

Elias picked up the glove with the burned sigil and tucked it into his coat. He pinned the star tighter. Mercy and truth, righteousness and peace—he didn't know how they kissed each other like the psalm said, but maybe the kissing didn't happen in an office with a lamp and a ledger. Maybe it happened in a street where a sheriff and a sinner walked out together with the sword of the law and a Book that wouldn't burn.

He blew out the lamp and the jailhouse fell into the kind of dark that makes men honest. Outside, the town watched two shapes cross the boardwalk and step into the dust. The badge glinted. The saddlebag thumped. Somewhere not too far, hooves found a rhythm that sounded like a verdict, or like a prayer. And in the sheriff's chest, where a burden had made its home, something shifted—not lighter, not yet, but settled in a way that let a man breathe while he carried it.

Section Two – Crossroads at Midnight

The moon was thin as a sickle when they left Redemption. The stars spread cold and sharp overhead, bright enough to throw a faint silver edge on the desert rocks. The night was the kind that carried sound—every hoofbeat seemed louder, every creak of leather more accusing.

Sheriff Elias Grady rode at the front, his hand resting on the stock of the Winchester propped against his saddle horn. He kept his jaw set, his eyes on the road ahead, but inside his mind worked harder than his horse. To his left, Josiah Markham kept his seat steady, the Bible strapped to his saddle like a weapon. And behind them, a half-length back, rode the outlaw—Six Gun Devil, head bent, coat trailing, his spurs whispering every time the horse shifted.

The three of them cut a strange picture: law, gospel, and legend, riding together under a sky that had seen too much blood.

No one spoke for a long while. The desert doesn't like chatter after dark; it listens for prayers and footsteps, not idle talk. Finally, Elias broke the silence.

"You ever kill a man you wish you hadn't?" he asked, his voice low, as if speaking to the road more than his companions.

Six Gun didn't answer at first. When he did, his voice was gravel. "I ever let one live I wish I hadn't? Plenty."

The sheriff's throat tightened. That wasn't the answer he wanted, but it was honest.

Josiah shifted in his saddle, the Bible bumping against his thigh. "The Lord weighs all blood spilt," he said softly. "But He also weighs the heart behind the hand. David's sword was red, but his heart found mercy."

Six Gun barked a laugh that had no joy in it. "You think God's got time to sort through hearts like a banker's ledger? Blood's blood. A grave don't care why it was dug."

Elias glanced at him in the moonlight. "Maybe the grave don't care. But God does. That's what the preacher's sayin'."

The outlaw didn't reply. His shadow stretched long behind him, bent by the moonlight, dark as tar against the pale earth.

They rode on, the silence heavier now, the hooves drumming like a slow clock.

They reached the crossroads near midnight. Four roads split the desert there, the dust beaten down by wagons and cattle. An old cottonwood stood twisted in the center, its branches bare, its trunk scarred with the cuts of knives where men had carved names, curses, promises they never meant to keep.

Elias drew up and swung down, boots crunching in the dust. He ran a hand over the bark, feeling the scars with his fingertips. One of them read *Justice*, another *Mercy*. Both words were half-erased by time.

He leaned his forehead against the tree, whispering low: “Lord, I don’t know which one to carry tonight.”

Josiah dismounted too, his boots whispering in the sand. He laid a hand on Elias’s shoulder. “Carry both. The Lord doesn’t ask you to choose between them. He asks you to walk with both in hand.”

The sheriff’s chest rose and fell. He whispered back, “And if I can’t?”

Josiah’s eyes shone in the moonlight. “Then the Lord will carry what you can’t.”

Behind them, Six Gun stayed mounted, silent, watching. His cigarette glowed, then flared as he drew deep. The ember lit his face just enough to show the hard lines, the tired eyes. He didn’t look like a devil. He looked like a man caught between fire and water, not sure which would take him.

The wind picked up, carrying a sound. Faint, then louder. Hoofbeats. Many.

Elias snapped upright. He grabbed his rifle and looked west. Dust shimmered under the moon. Dark figures moved in formation.

“Them,” he said. His voice was flat, a man’s verdict. “The riders.”

Six Gun dropped the cigarette, ground it under his boot in the stirrup. His voice was calm, deadly. “Then let’s see which road this night takes.”

Josiah opened his Bible with hands that didn’t shake. His voice rose above the wind: “*No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord.*” (Isaiah 54:17)

The hoofbeats thundered closer.

Elias gripped his star, feeling the weight of both Law and Mercy pressing down like millstones. He raised his eyes to the crossroads, to the tree scarred with words he couldn’t erase. His heart whispered the question he’d carried all day:

Can a devil be saved?

The only answer was the sound of riders breaking into the open, shadows splitting across the moonlit dust.

And Elias knew—whether tonight ended with blood or with grace—he’d have to find out.

Section Three – The Clash at the Crossroads

The thunder of hooves rolled across the desert like storm surf, echoing off the canyon walls. Dust plumed high in the moonlight, a red haze made silver. Elias Grady set his boots square in the road, rifle braced to his shoulder, his jaw locked. Josiah stood just behind him, Bible open in one hand, the other lifted as though he could hold back darkness with words alone. Six Gun Devil sat mounted, coat flapping, both revolvers drawn, his horse dancing beneath him like it wanted blood.

The night riders came fast, masks whipping, torches blazing, pistols spitting sparks. Their whoops pierced the night, raw and feral. And at their head—again—the tall rider in black, shadow stretched longer than it should have under the thin moon, his voice booming above the charge.

“Devil! The crossroads belongs to us. Kneel, or burn with the rest!”

Six Gun’s voice cut back, low and flat, carried by the wind. “Try me.”

And the desert exploded.

Gunfire cracked sharp, torches whirled, horses screamed. Bullets chewed bark from the scarred cottonwood. Elias fired steady, the Winchester’s kick pounding into his shoulder, each shot disciplined. One rider pitched sideways, another screamed, clutching his thigh.

Six Gun moved like a storm. His revolvers barked in rhythm, two shots, then two more, each finding its mark. A torch burst in midair, scattering sparks like dying stars. Another rider’s mask shredded as he tumbled off his mount.

The sheriff saw it, and a thought knifed through him even as he chambered the next round: *Law says he’s a wanted man. Mercy says he’s the only reason we’re still breathing.*

The riders circled, half breaking off to flank. Elias turned, cursing. “Tucker, left ridge!” But Tucker wasn’t there—he remembered too late the boy was still in town. He swung his rifle, fired again, teeth bared.

Josiah’s voice rose behind them, strong even over the storm: “*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me!*” (Psalm 23:4). His words were not shield or bullet, but they steadied hands, steadied hearts.

The black rider cut through the chaos, straight for the sheriff. His pistol flared, dust jumping at Elias’s boots. Elias answered with a slug from the Winchester, but the man ducked low and was gone into the swirl.

Six Gun spurred forward, blocking the path, both revolvers blazing at the pack. He dropped two, three, but the fourth bore down on him. The outlaw leaned out of the saddle, fired from near the ground, and the rider went spinning off his horse in a tangle of cloth and blood.

Elias cursed under his breath. The man was death incarnate, but not for them. Not tonight.

A torch arced high—straight toward Josiah. The preacher didn’t flinch, didn’t move. His voice rose louder: “*The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?*” (Psalm 27:1). But Elias’s rifle barked, splintering the torch midair before it struck. The preacher looked back, eyes meeting the sheriff’s, and nodded once.

Then Elias saw it—clear as a written word in fire. Six Gun Devil, his face grim, revolvers steady, standing where the night should have swallowed them whole. And Elias felt it—law and mercy, both, braided tight.

He fired again, and again, standing shoulder to shoulder with the outlaw.

The riders faltered. Fear is a horse; it smells when the tide shifts. Their charge wavered. Some pulled wide, circling. Others fell back. A few, too stubborn or too bound, pressed in close, but Six Gun cut them down with shots quicker than blinking.

And then—the tall rider reined up at the edge of the crossroads, cloak flaring, mask dark. His voice carried like a curse: “This ain’t done, Devil. Your shadow’s ours. Your soul’s ours.”

Six Gun’s eyes narrowed, his revolvers steady. “Come take it.”

But the black rider wheeled his horse, the pack breaking with him, their hoofbeats thundering away into the desert until only dust and silence remained.

Silence.

The cottonwood smoked where bullets had scarred it. The dust settled in thin sheets. The three men stood—sheriff, preacher, outlaw—alive.

Elias lowered his rifle, breath ragged. He looked at Six Gun, still mounted, revolvers cooling in his hands. His coat was torn, his sleeve bloodied. But his face—his face was more man than myth just then.

Elias spoke, voice hoarse. “You saved us tonight.”

Six Gun holstered one revolver, then the other. “Saved myself too.”

The sheriff shook his head. “Don’t cheapen it. You had a choice.”

The outlaw met his eyes, silent.

Josiah stepped forward, Bible still in his grip. His voice was gentle, but it carried like a bell in the empty night. “This crossroads will be remembered. Not for who bled, but for who stood. Tonight, Devil, you stood.”

Six Gun turned his gaze toward the desert where the riders had fled. His jaw worked, his eyes hard. “They’ll be back.”

“Yes,” Josiah said softly. “But so will the Word.”

Elias felt the badge on his chest, heavy as iron but no longer choking. For the first time in weeks, he breathed deep. Law and mercy, sword and prayer, sinner and saint—they’d all walked the same road tonight.

And maybe—just maybe—that road led somewhere other than ruin.

Part III: Redemption or Ruin

Chapter Twenty-One – The River Baptism

Section One

The sun was a hammer that day, beating down from a sky so hot and pale it looked more like brass than heaven. Redemption lay quiet behind them, its streets empty, its shutters drawn. The town had walked

out together—men in their Sunday coats, women with sunbonnets shading their eyes, children tugging hands and whispering with wide-eyed wonder.

They had come to the river.

It wasn't much to look at—just a sluggish ribbon winding through mud and sand, its banks grown thick with willow and cottonwood. The water gleamed brown where the sun caught it, and dragonflies hovered over cattails, their wings like stained glass. But to the people of Redemption, the river was more than water. It was life. And on this day, it was altar.

The chapel bell had rung them out, but it was Josiah Markham's voice that called them to the edge. The preacher stood barefoot on the bank, his trousers rolled to his knees, the hem of his coat off, sleeves pushed up. He had laid aside his pulpit dignity and looked like what he truly was—a shepherd willing to wade into the water for his flock. His Bible, worn and cracked, was clutched in one hand, open to the Gospel of John.

"All things made new," Josiah said, his voice carrying over the rustle of the cottonwoods. "That is what we come to see today. Not the washing of skin, but the washing of souls. The water itself has no power. But the One who spoke over the waters at creation—He still speaks now. And He says, '*Whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely.*'" (Revelation 22:17).

The people murmured, some nodding, some bowing their heads. Sarah Schaefer stood among them, her black dress stark as a raven in the sun. Her hands were folded so tight her knuckles whitened. Her lips moved in prayer, but her eyes were hard, cutting glances at the edges of the crowd. Her grief had sharpened into something that looked like iron, but beneath it was still a woman whose bed was cold, whose house rang with silence.

Children tugged at skirts and sleeves, whispering questions too young to understand the answers. One boy asked if the preacher would drown them. His mother hushed him quickly, but Josiah overheard and smiled.

"No, child," he said warmly, lifting his voice so all could hear. "They go down into death, but only for a breath. Then they rise into life again. For the Scripture says, '*Buried with Him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with Him.*'" (Colossians 2:12).

A hymn began, halting at first, one woman leading, then others joining until it swelled across the river like a fragile yet defiant chorus:

*Shall we gather at the river,
Where bright angel feet have trod,
With its crystal tide forever
Flowing by the throne of God?*

The voices cracked in places, wavering under the heat, but together they wove something holy in the dusty air. Men sang low, children high, the women steadying in the middle.

And from the bluff above, sitting astride a black horse, a lone rider watched.

Six Gun Devil hadn't meant to come. His boots had carried him here without asking his mind first, same as they carried him into saloons and showdowns. He told himself he came to see if the riders would strike, if fire or bullets would test the preacher's courage. But he knew better. He came because he was curious.

Curious about water that claimed to wash more than dust. Curious about hymns sung by cracked voices that somehow sounded stronger than gunfire. Curious about words that promised a man could be made new when he knew himself to be worn down past fixing.

He pulled his hat low, the brim shadowing his scarred face, and spat into the dust. He told himself he didn't care. But his hand kept drifting to the saddlebag at his side, where the Bible Hannah had pressed into his chest still rode. Its weight was wrong—too heavy for leather and paper. It felt like it carried judgment itself.

Down by the river, Josiah lifted his hand and called the first name.

A young man stepped forward—barely grown, hair slicked down, eyes wide but sure. He waded in, the water rising to his waist. Josiah placed a hand on his shoulder, his voice strong: "Do you confess the Lord Jesus as your Savior?"

The young man nodded, trembling.

"Then upon your confession, I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

He lowered him under. For a moment, the water closed, ripples spreading outward. Then he raised him up again, water streaming down his face, sunlight catching every drop. The crowd cheered, children clapped, women wiped their eyes.

From the bluff, Six Gun leaned forward in his saddle. The boy's face shone with something he didn't recognize. It wasn't just relief. It was joy.

The hymn rose again:

*Yes, we'll gather at the river,
The beautiful, the beautiful river...*

Sarah watched, her lips trembling. Her husband lay in the ground, her nights were hollow. And yet, as the water dripped from the boy's hair, something in her face softened, if only for a breath.

The outlaw shifted, restless. He didn't like the ache building in his chest. He told himself it was the heat, the dust. But when he looked at the water, he saw not just the boy's face. He saw his own reflection—scarred, hollow-eyed, rimmed with smoke.

The river shimmered, holding his image in broken pieces.

He cursed under his breath and turned his horse slightly, as if ready to leave. But he didn't. He stayed, watching as another name was called, another soul stepped forward, another body went down into the muddy water and rose new.

And with each splash, each hymn, each cheer, the weight in his saddlebag grew heavier, like a stone dragging at his side.

Section Two

The sun climbed higher, pouring its heat like molten brass across the river. Sweat ran down the faces of men in their Sunday coats; women fanned themselves with kerchiefs; children shifted, restless, tugging at sleeves. Yet none left. Not when the preacher's voice carried hope louder than the cicadas, and the water itself seemed to shimmer with promise.

Josiah called the next name, and an older woman stepped forward—gray hair pinned back, hands trembling as she clutched her shawl. She had been the town gossip for years, sharp of tongue and quick with suspicion, but now her eyes brimmed with tears. She waded into the river, skirts clinging, lips whispering prayers.

“Do you confess the Lord Jesus?” Josiah asked.

Her voice cracked but held. “I do.”

And down she went, under the brown current, her hair breaking loose, her hands gripping Josiah's arm. For one breath she was gone, swallowed. Then she rose, dripping, and the tears that streamed down her cheeks mingled with the river, indistinguishable. The crowd gasped, then clapped. Even Sarah, standing rigid in her black, gave a nod.

On the bluff above, Six Gun Devil shifted in his saddle. He knew that woman—knew her sharp words, her cold glances. He had seen her hiss warnings to children when he walked by. Now she came up out of the water looking softer, like stone worn by the river's patient hands.

His jaw tightened. *Can water do that?*

Josiah called again. This time, two children stepped forward, sisters, holding hands. They waded in together, eyes wide, giggles breaking through their nerves. The preacher's voice gentled, and he laid them under together. Their laughter rang out as they rose, splashing, unafraid. The crowd's cheer broke louder, brighter.

Six Gun felt something twist in his chest. His mind dragged back—unbidden, unwanted—to another pair of children. Not sisters. Brothers. Boys he had left crying on the edge of a burned homestead when the gang he once rode with had taken all but their tears. He had turned his horse and ridden on, leaving the smoke behind.

He spat into the dust, trying to banish the memory, but the river shimmered below, reflecting the laughter of the girls and the cries of the boys, overlapping until he couldn't tell them apart.

Another name. Another splash. One by one they came. A ranch hand known more for whiskey than work. A mother carrying grief in her eyes but hope in her arms as she held her child and stepped into the water. Josiah's hands guided each one, his voice unwavering, his eyes alight with something not of this world.

And all the while, Six Gun watched.

He dismounted at last, boots crunching on dry grass, the black horse snorting behind him. He walked closer to the bluff's edge, hat pulled low, shadow falling long over the riverbank. Nobody turned,

nobody called to him, but some saw him—saw the dark figure looming above, revolvers heavy at his sides. Murmurs rippled. Was he guarding? Or judging? No one knew.

The hymn rose again, ragged but strong:

*On the margin of the river,
Washing up its silver spray,
We will walk and worship ever,
All the happy golden day.*

Six Gun's throat tightened. The words scraped against something raw inside him. He stepped closer, boots sliding on the slope, until he stood only yards above the water, where he could see his reflection clearly.

The river carried it back to him—a scarred face, eyes rimmed with smoke, jaw set like stone. The ripples distorted it, bending him into shapes not quite human. For a heartbeat, it looked like the stories they told—the Devil himself staring back at him, horns made by shadows, eyes glowing where the sunlight hit just wrong.

He bent low, splashing water across his face, desperate to blur the image. Cold bit his skin, shocking in the heat. When the ripples calmed, the reflection steadied. Not horns. Not fire. Just a man. Scarred, yes. Hardened, yes. But a man.

He stared, breath caught. Then, like a wound breaking open, memories flooded.

A boy of twelve, crouched by a creek, his father's rough hand on his shoulder, saying, "*Water cleans more than dirt, son. It cools a temper. It steadies a man.*" That hand had been taken by a stray bullet two summers later, and the boy had sworn never to steady again.

A woman's voice, softer—his mother's, maybe, or the memory of a woman he had loved once. "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow." He had laughed at her then, bitter. Snow never fell in his desert.

A flood—years later—when he was already riding outlaw trails. Rain had swollen the river, swept a man clean off his horse. Six Gun had reached for him, almost grabbed his wrist, then let him go. He remembered the man's scream, the bubbles, the silence.

Now the river showed him all of it at once—boy, woman, outlaw. Scarred face over muddy water.

His knees weakened. He caught himself on the willow's roots, gripping tight.

Below, Josiah's voice cut through: "Is there any among you who still waits? The water is here. The invitation is for all."

The preacher's eyes lifted, sweeping the crowd—and then finding the outlaw.

For the first time, their gazes locked across the water. Josiah did not flinch. He raised his hand.

"The water is for you too, Devil. *Whosoever will.*"

The crowd murmured, uneasy. Sarah gasped, voice sharp: “Don’t mock God by offering it to him!” Others whispered fearfully, some hopeful, some horrified.

Hannah stepped forward, small but steady. Her voice carried clear. “It’s for him too. Papa said Jesus came to save sinners. Even him.”

Six Gun’s jaw clenched. His hand drifted toward the saddlebag where Hannah’s Bible pressed heavy. He pulled it free. For a long moment, he stared at the worn cover, soot-stained but unburned. His thumb traced the edge.

The river lapped at the bank, reflecting both man and Book.

He whispered, too low for most to hear: “Not yet.”

But Josiah heard. Hannah heard. And something in the river seemed to hear too, for the ripples shimmered like they were waiting.

Section Three

The crowd hushed. It wasn’t the preacher who stilled them, or even the outlaw’s looming silence, but the strange heaviness that settled over the river like a hand pressing against every chest. Even the cicadas seemed to pause, their endless rasp broken. Only the water moved, slow and steady, glinting in the heat.

Six Gun Devil stood with the Bible in his hand, the river at his feet. His scarred reflection stared back at him from the current. Around him, murmurs broke like sparks from dry wood.

Sarah Schaefer stepped forward, her black dress dragging in the dust. Her voice shook, but fury lent it strength. “Preacher, don’t you dare. Don’t you dare offer heaven’s promise to him. How many graves has he filled? How many nights has his shadow made children scream? The river is for the repentant, not for devils!”

A ripple of agreement moved through the crowd—mothers clutching children, men nodding, old women crossing themselves.

But Josiah didn’t lower his hand. His voice was calm, steady as the current. “And who decides who may repent, Sarah? You? Me? Or the Lord who died for us all?”

She trembled, pointing at Six Gun. “He’ll never change. He’s blood and smoke and iron. My husband’s grave cries out against him!”

Six Gun’s eyes lifted to hers. For once, he didn’t sneer, didn’t threaten. His voice was low, rough, almost weary. “You think I don’t hear the graves? They follow me, widow. Every night. Every time I close my eyes.”

The words silenced her more than any sermon could have.

Then Hannah stepped forward, small Bible clutched tight. Her voice carried in the sudden stillness, clear and sure. “Jesus said, *‘I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.’*” (Luke 5:32) She looked at Six Gun, her eyes wide but fierce. “That means you.”

The outlaw's breath hitched. He looked at the girl as if she'd struck him harder than any bullet.

The river shimmered, reflecting him doubled: one image scarred and dark, the other bent and broken by ripples. He dropped to one knee, the water lapping against his boots. His fingers dipped into the current. Cold bit his skin, racing up his arm like fire turned inside out.

For a heartbeat, the world held its breath. The preacher's eyes burned with hope, the widow's with dread, the child's with pleading. Even the sheriff, standing back with his badge heavy on his chest, felt the balance of the town tilt on that single motion.

Six Gun bent lower. His hand cupped water, lifted it. The droplets slid down his scarred knuckles, shining in the sun. He stared, trembling.

"Do you confess the Lord Jesus?" Josiah's voice was strong, urgent, carrying across the bank.

The outlaw opened his mouth. His lips parted. For the first time in years, he wanted to say yes. The word gathered in his throat, heavy, waiting.

But memory crashed like thunder—faces twisted in fear, bodies sprawled in dust, barns burning, the sound of rope creaking, children screaming. Blood spilled, lives ended, all at his hands. His throat closed. The word choked.

He dropped the water. It splashed into the river, vanishing without a trace.

His voice cracked, hoarse, a whisper carried on the hot air: "Not yet."

The crowd gasped. Some wept, some cursed. Sarah covered her face with her hands. Hannah shook her head fiercely, tears spilling. "But you can! You can, now!"

He rose slowly, the Bible still in his hand, its soot-stained cover dark against the sun. He looked at Josiah, at Hannah, at Sarah. His eyes were haunted, hollow, yet not as empty as before. Something stirred there—something torn, unfinished.

Josiah's voice softened, almost breaking. "The water waits. It always waits. But do not tarry too long, Devil. Even rivers run dry."

Six Gun tucked the Bible back into his saddlebag. He touched the brim of his hat to Hannah—just a ghost of a gesture—then turned. He mounted his horse, spurs jingling like funeral bells.

The town watched as he rode from the riverbank, dust rising in his wake.

Some cursed him. Some prayed for him. All whispered of what they had seen: the Devil at the river's edge, water on his hands, almost stepping in.

Josiah knelt in the shallows, scooping water into his palms. He prayed loud enough for all to hear, his voice steady though his eyes brimmed with tears. "Lord, wash him though he will not yet wash himself. Keep his soul from the fire until he surrenders to the flood. Do not let the river pass him by."

Sarah wept into her shawl. Hannah watched the horizon, whispering to herself, "He'll come back. He has to."

The river moved on, slow and steady, carrying sunlight on its back. And in its ripples, those who looked closely swore they still saw a reflection lingering—a scarred face, bent but not broken, waiting for the day it would finally sink beneath the water and rise again.

Chapter Twenty-Two – Dreams of Hellfire

Night lay over the desert like a lid on a coffin, tight and airless. The wind had died, and the stars were so clear they looked carved into the black. Six Gun Devil made a small fire no bigger than a hat, more ember than flame, and bedded down with his back to a stone outcrop and his horse ground-tied nearby. Coyotes sang once on the ridge and went silent, as if even their hunger didn't want to cross what the night was holding.

The outlaw lay with his hat over his eyes, the saddlebag pillowing his head, the Bible inside a weight he felt through leather and bone. He closed his eyes on the river's shine, on the preacher's raised hand, on the small girl's fierce voice. He closed them on the word he hadn't said. He told himself he meant to sleep like a man who needed his strength for the day. He slept like a man being hunted.

The dream came on quiet, the way water rises in a wash you thought was dry.

First was the sound. Not wind, not coyotes. Gunshots—his own—cracking in the distance and then again, and again, echoing back from somewhere no ear could find the end of. *Bang*. The noise ran the length of a canyon without walls. *Bang*. The echo carried names he did not want to hear. He pressed his palms to his ears and heard them clearer, because the sound wasn't in the night; it was in him.

Then came the crows. They gathered along the fence posts of a place that had no fences, black bodies cut from the dream's dark, heads cocked, ember points for eyes. One hopped closer and opened its beak, and the croak that came out wasn't a bird's—it was the clatter of shells falling from a cylinder onto wood, each one another man, another ledger line, another echo headed for forever.

The ground broke. The land split under his boots and became a mouth, a black oval rimmed in red, an arroyo turned bottomless. Heat blew up out of it, and the stink rode the heat—sulfur and iron, burned hair and prayer turned to smoke. Chains rasped out of the pit and took the shape of hands. They seized his ankles, his wrists, his throat. Where they touched, skin burned in rings. He struck at them with his fists and felt his knuckles hit iron that didn't care.

A lantern bobbed out of the dark, far off and then near all at once. The man who carried it wore velvet and a smile sharpened to a point. The gambler from the crossroads. He held the light low so the glow climbed up his own face from beneath, turning his eyes into pits with fire on their floors.

"Well now," he said, smooth as oil poured on water. "You've been riding a long time, friend. You look tired."

Six Gun reached for his revolver, but his holster was empty. His hand fell on the saddlebag instead and met nothing but heat. The leather burned like it had lain all day on a stove lid. He jerked back as skin blistered and the smell of himself rose in his own nostrils.

“Where you’re going,” the gambler said, tilting his head toward the red mouth in the earth, “tired men don’t sleep. They listen. To this.” He snapped his fingers. Gunshots pealed again—his gunshots—one atop another, off into eternity. *Bang. Bang. Bang.* “Echo’s a funny thing. It don’t quit till somebody stops it.”

Six Gun’s throat worked. “And you figure you can?”

“Oh, no,” the gambler smiled. “I’m an usher, not a judge. I take a man to his seat. The judging’s been done already. ‘*For the wages of sin is death*’—you know that one? (Romans 6:23). You’ve been paid many times over.”

Chains scissored tighter at his wrists. From inside the pit, something breathed—wet, huge, patient. A barbed tail slid up over the rim, black as cooled iron and shining. The crows hopped nearer, lining the lip of the mouth like a congregation for an unholy service. The gambler raised the lantern higher. What it lit was not a floor but a depth, a fall that gleamed red like a river running fire. Shapes moved in it, not drowning, because nothing drowned here; things burned and did not burn out. “*Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.*” (Mark 9:48).

The gambler’s voice softened until it sounded almost kind. “Say the word,” he murmured. “Give me your hand. The echoes stop. The dreams stop. The fire still comes, mind you, but not for you. For them.” He gestured toward a line of figures on the far side. They stood in silhouette—sheriff’s hat, preacher’s coat, a woman with her hair tied back, a child with braids. “You’ve been their shield,” he said. “You could be their sword. Ride with us. Take the night riders as your own. The town will bow or burn. Either way, you won’t hear those shots in your sleep anymore.”

Six Gun stared. The figures across the pit were nothing but shapes. But when the wind shifted, he heard a child’s voice in it anyway: “*It’s for him too.*” And he heard the preacher’s: “*Whosoever will.*” And the widow’s, sharp and cutting: “*Leave us. Take your shadow.*”

He swallowed ash. “What if I say another word?”

The gambler’s mouth did not move, but the pit itself seemed to grin. “Try it.”

Six Gun opened his mouth and found the word he had carried all the way from the river to the dark. “Jesus—”

At the Name, the chains in his right hand loosened a breath, not more than the width of a hair. The gambler’s eyes flickered black on black. The lantern shook just enough for the flame to gutter and recover. From the pit rose the hiss of something scalded.

Six Gun dragged for air that wasn’t there. His chest hitched. He dragged the Name up again, raw. “Jesus.”

The left-hand chain sagged a fraction. Heat licked his face and failed to blister it. A crow squawked and sprang backward into the dark, wings beating like rags.

The gambler’s smile thinned. “Careful,” he said, still smooth, but the smooth had grit in it now. “You don’t know Him. He won’t know you.”

The outlaw bared his teeth. “Then He can ignore me like the rest.” He pulled hard against the chains, muscles corded, and snarled through them one more time, louder, not to the gambler or the crows or the thing breathing below, but to the sky he could not see: “Jesus!”

The chains cracked like ice in spring. They did not break—hell does not surrender what it thinks it owns—but they loosened enough for a man to pull one foot back from the lip of a fall without bottom. Between his boots and the red was a hand’s width of ground he hadn’t had before. It was enough to stagger on instead of over.

Fury slithered up the gambler’s face like oil catching fire. He raised the lantern high. The light whitened, no longer yellow, and showed what the gambler’s velvet had always hidden—edges too sharp for skin, angles that cast the wrong shadows, a smile that hinged where no hinge belongs. “You will fall,” he hissed. “If not here, then in your bed. If not in your bed, then in your pew. If not in your pew, then standing in your river. Men like you fall, Devil. You will fall.”

“Maybe,” the outlaw said. He could not find breath enough to say more.

From somewhere that was not the pit, another sound bled into the dream. Not gunshots. A voice—old, strong, breaking only because it loved—rising over water. “*He shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler... Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night.*” (Psalm 91:3,5). Josiah’s voice, praying like a man throws a rope. The rope came—of light, of words, threaded with a child’s “Amen.” It fell across the gap. Six Gun grabbed it with both hands. His palms burned where old iron had gripped him, but the burn took hold of the rope and not the other way round.

He hauled himself backward an inch, then another. The gambler stepped after him, lantern high, chains snapping like whips. The crows lifted as one and wheeled in a black circle, then dove, beaks hooked for eyes. The outlaw hunched, one forearm up, still dragging, still saying the only thing he had. “Jesus.” The syllables came like a cough, like a curse turned inside out.

And then the pit blew smoke. Not up, but inward, as if a wind had entered it from a place that burns didn’t know. The red dulled. The breathing below turned from patient to angry to afraid. The gambler snarled a word that sounded like every curse ever hurled at heaven at once, and the dream hitched.

It tore.

The outlaw fell backward hard onto stone that wasn’t there and woke with his heart punching at his ribs like a fist against a door.

The little fire had burned to coals. Three of them glowed in a line, and for a sick second they looked like eyes. His mouth tasted like iron; his hands shook. The horse stood with head high, ears forward, blowing softly through its nose the way a good animal does when it smells a catamount and can’t find it.

Six Gun pushed to his elbows. Night was still night. The stars were still carved overhead. The coals were only coals. And yet the air held the echo of gunshots far beyond any canyon. He got to his knees and bent over, palms in the dust, drawing breath, telling himself his lungs worked and his chest wasn’t caved in, telling himself the heat wasn’t rising from a hole in the earth to take him.

His hand found the saddlebag. He flinched before his fingers closed on it. The leather was cool. He pulled the Bible free. It had fallen open in the tumble to a place halfway through. His eyes dragged across the thin print that wavered because his hands did.

“And others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh.” (Jude 23).

He stared at the line until the letters steadied. The desert was silent except for his breath and the horse’s. He read it again. He mouthed the words as if they were something you had to chew before you could swallow. *Pulling them out of the fire.*

He closed the Book, then opened it again, because closing it felt like shoving away a hand he might need. This time his eye tripped on another line he hadn’t been looking for: *“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”* (Hebrews 10:31). Fearful, yes. His whole body agreed. But living—more living than the pit, more living than the gambler’s white flame and smooth lies.

He looked up at the strip of sky between the stone teeth. “I ain’t got the words,” he said, voice low, hoarse. “You heard me anyway.” He swallowed. His throat hurt from the names he had been shouting in a place without names. “If You want me, you’re gonna have to keep on pullin’. I ain’t light.”

Silence answered. But it was a different silence than before, as if the desert had leaned nearer to listen and decided not to leave. The little coals winked and dimmed, and they were only coals now, not eyes.

He lay back against the rock, the Bible on his chest like a weight and a shield, and let the tremor leave his hands. Sleep did not come again—not the kind with dreams, not the kind with rest. But a sort of holding came, like a hand at the back of a man who thinks he’s standing alone and finds he’s not.

Before dawn, he saddled the horse. The east was still the color of a bruise, but a thin seam of gray lay at the rim of the world where the light makes its first bargain with dark. He stamped the dead fire to nothing and swung up. His body ached in places a dream shouldn’t reach. His wrists bore pale rings where chains had not been. He decided not to think on that.

He rode for the river without meaning to. The horse seemed to know the way. When he reached the bend where the willows leaned out and the sand kept the prints of yesterday’s feet, the water ran flat and brown and honest. He reined in and sat a long time with the Bible across the horn, the leather warming under the first thin sun.

“Not yet,” he said finally. He said it without anger this time, and not like a dare. More like a man telling a truth that is already changing into another. “But soon.”

He looked down. The river reflected him, scarred and hollow-eyed, and beside his face for a heartbeat the water showed something that wasn’t him—a hand reaching down out of a brightness he could not look at straight. It was not the gambler’s hand. It was not any hand he had earned. He blinked, and it was only water again, and a crow flew low, and the horse tossed its head like a man waking from a pain to find he’s still got daylight to get through.

He turned the horse toward town. The day would bring what it brought—posters on posts, night riders in masks, a widow with a voice like a whip, a sheriff with a badge that felt like a millstone and a vow, a preacher with rope-words who had thrown them over a pit. And somewhere in it all, the echo of his

own gunshots would rise out of habit. He hoped—he did not dare say prayed, not yet—that one day the echo would find another sound to answer it.

He touched the saddlebag. “Keep pullin’,” he said to the Book or to the sky or to the river that had not taken him. “I’m comin’ as far as I can.”

Behind him, the pit was only a dream. Ahead of him, the dust lifted in little puffs off the road. The sun climbed, and with it the fear that had hollowed him out all night did not vanish, but it sat down and let him ride without its hands on his throat.

And somewhere, at a window too small for a man’s shadow to fill, a child prayed for him by name. Somewhere, in a room with a star hanging on a peg, a sheriff thumbed a thin page and whispered, *mercy and truth*. Somewhere, a widow gripped the edge of a table until her knuckles whitened and told God she didn’t know how to forgive. Somewhere, a preacher set his hands on a pulpit that had not burned and said in a voice that shook the rafters, “*Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light.*” (Ephesians 5:14).

The outlaw rode into that light. Not saved. Not damned. Dragged, still, by echoes and almost-burns and a rope of words that had found his wrist and would not let go. He rode like a man who has seen hell’s mouth open and has heard a Name that shuts it, if only by an inch, and he did not say *not yet* again that morning. He did not say anything at all. He just kept riding.

Chapter Twenty-Three – When Demons Ride

Section One – Rumors in the Dust

The heat of the day had finally broken, but the town of Redemption did not breathe easy. A strange stillness clung to the evening streets, as if the desert itself were holding back. Dogs lay restless under porches, ears twitching. Chickens refused the coop. Even the horses in the livery stamped and tossed as though they smelled something sour riding the wind.

Sheriff Elias Grady sat outside the jailhouse, sharpening his knife against a whetstone more for habit than need. His eyes swept the boardwalks as dusk bled into night. Tucker, his deputy, leaned against the hitching rail, hat pushed back, humming tunelessly to keep his nerves busy.

That was when the rider came.

A lone figure staggered into town, half-falling from his horse before it even stopped. The animal was lathered, ribs showing, eyes wild. The man hit the dirt hard, rolling to his knees with a cry that silenced the street. His face was pale under a crust of dust, his hands trembling as he clutched at the sheriff’s boots.

“They ain’t men,” he rasped. “They ain’t—” His words broke, catching on the dryness in his throat.

Elias crouched, steadying him. “Easy. Who ain’t men?”

The ranch hand’s eyes were wide, pupils blown black. “Riders,” he gasped. “Come outta the gulch. I seen ‘em in the moonlight—faces carved, scarred deep, glowin’ red like iron pulled from a forge. Their

leader—Lord help me—eyes black as coal, no white left in ‘em at all. They laughed, Sheriff. They laughed while they burned the house.”

The crowd that had gathered around the mercantile murmured, fear rippling like wind through dry grass.

“What house?” Elias pressed, though dread had already settled in his gut.

“My neighbor’s. The Carvers. Burned it to ash. Took their cattle, poisoned the well, shot John Carver where he stood beggin’. And the children—” His voice broke. “They made ‘em kneel in the dirt and pray... then mocked the prayers, spat the words back twisted. Sheriff, they—” His body shook so hard Elias thought he might break apart.

Josiah Markham, the preacher, stepped forward, laying a hand on the man’s shoulder, murmuring words of comfort, verses meant to soothe. But the townsfolk only grew more restless. Mothers pulled children close, whispering hurried prayers. Old men shook their heads and muttered of curses, of devils loosed in the desert.

Elias stood, his jaw hard. “Get him water,” he ordered. Tucker obeyed, rushing to the trough, filling a dipper.

But while the sheriff handled the ranch hand, another pair of eyes watched from the edge of the street.

Six Gun Devil leaned against the post outside the saloon, cigarette ember glowing faint in the deepening dark. He hadn’t moved when the rider fell, hadn’t spoken when the words “not men” shivered through the air. He just listened, smoke curling around his scarred face, his shadow long in the lamplight.

He’d dreamed of hellfire the night before. Of chains and pits and laughter that wasn’t laughter. Hearing the ranch hand speak, he knew dreams and waking weren’t so far apart.

Josiah’s voice lifted, steady but firm: “*For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world.*” (Ephesians 6:12). His eyes swept the crowd, then lingered on the outlaw.

Six Gun’s jaw twitched. He ground the cigarette out under his boot.

The ranch hand slumped unconscious after the water, his strength gone. They carried him into the doctor’s office, his words still echoing in every ear.

By full dark, the town was thick with whispers. Some swore the riders were the ghosts of hanged men come back to claim vengeance. Others said they were Indians calling spirits of the underworld. Still others—lowering their voices—said the Devil himself had branded them, and that the mark was proof of a pact.

Sarah Schaefer, standing rigid in her widow’s black, spat the words bitterly: “They’re his kin.” Her eyes cut toward Six Gun. “He draws them like flies to a carcass.”

Elias turned sharp. “That’s enough.”

“No, Sheriff,” Sarah shot back, her voice breaking. “It ain’t. We’ve buried too many. You think God don’t see? He walks among us, and hell follows. You tell me it ain’t true.”

Six Gun met her gaze. His eyes were cold, unreadable, but his voice was flat. “I seen devils, Widow. I don’t ride with ‘em.”

“Not yet,” she hissed.

The crowd stirred, unease and fear twisting into anger. Elias raised a hand, cutting them off. “Enough. Rumors don’t shoot straight, and fear don’t keep a town safe. Go home. Bar your doors. If these riders are real, they’ll show themselves. And when they do—” He tapped the badge on his chest. “Law’ll meet them.”

The words sounded strong, but Elias felt the hollowness in his gut. Law was iron and ink. But this... this smelled like sulfur.

The townsfolk drifted back to their homes, whispers still burning like embers.

Only three men lingered in the street: the sheriff, the preacher, and the outlaw.

Josiah’s voice was low, urgent. “You felt it too. The evil in those words.”

Elias nodded grimly. “I seen killers. I seen men mean as rattlers. But I ain’t never heard a ranch hand talk like that. Not like he seen the pit itself walkin’ in boots.”

They both looked at Six Gun.

He pulled the satchel from his shoulder, set it on the hitch rail, and opened it. The Bible inside gleamed faint in the lamplight, its pages catching a breath of wind. He stared at it a long moment before shutting the flap again.

His voice was hoarse. “If they ride, they’ll come here. And when they do, guns won’t be enough.”

Josiah’s eyes burned. “Then you know Whose Name you’ll need.”

Six Gun said nothing. He just turned, coat flapping, and walked into the dark.

But his silence was louder than any vow.

Section Two – The Riders Appear

Midnight came like a thief. The moon was only a fingernail, pale and sharp, and the stars burned bright enough to cut. The town of Redemption lay hushed under that thin light—doors barred, lamps doused, shutters nailed tight. Only the sheriff walked the boardwalk, rifle in his hands, boots creaking like thunder in the silence.

Elias had patrolled a hundred nights, but this one was different. The air carried weight, heavy and sulfurous, as if the desert itself was holding its breath. Even the cicadas had fallen silent. He caught himself listening harder than he meant to, waiting for something he couldn’t name.

The wait ended with laughter.

It came thin at first, high-pitched, riding on the wind. Laughter without humor, the kind that prickled skin and stiffened hair. It grew louder, multiplied, until the street itself seemed to echo with it. Horses snorted in the stables, stamping, panicked. Dogs cowered under porches.

Elias froze, rifle up. “Lord have mercy,” he whispered.

The laughter became hoofbeats.

They poured from the eastern ridge, torches held high, a dozen riders in long coats and wide hats, their faces bare. Every one bore the mark—the same burned sigil carved deep into the left cheek: three lines crossing, glowing faint red as though the flesh itself still smoldered.

Their leader rode at the front, taller than the rest, astride a black stallion with eyes like embers. His grin split wide, teeth too white, too sharp. His eyes were pits of coal, no whites left, only darkness with fire burning deep.

The gang thundered into the street. Torches flared, shadows danced long across the walls. They fired pistols into the air, the sound booming like thunder. One hurled a torch onto the mercantile roof; another shot a barrel of water, watching it burst and bleed into the dust.

But they didn’t just destroy property. They delighted in cruelty.

One rider dismounted and yanked a goat from its pen, laughing as he slit its throat and smeared its blood across the doorpost. Another dragged a man from his home, forced him into the street, and branded his arm with a hot iron pulled straight from the torch flame. The man’s screams mingled with the riders’ laughter until it was impossible to tell where one ended and the other began.

Josiah Markham stumbled into the street, Bible clutched in one hand, his voice breaking but strong: *“Resist the devil, and he will flee from you!”* (James 4:7).

The leader reined up before him, torchlight spilling across his grinning face. He leaned down in the saddle, voice low and mocking. “You think words’ll stop us, preacher? You think your Book scares men who’ve sold their souls?”

He held up his cheek, the brand glowing brighter. “We bear the mark already. This is our covenant.”

Josiah lifted his Bible higher. His voice did not waver. *“Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.”* (Galatians 6:7).

The leader’s grin faltered, just for a breath. His stallion tossed its head, snorting, uneasy. Then the grin returned, sharper. He spat in the dust. “We’ll reap blood.” He jerked the reins, sending the stallion surging forward, nearly trampling the preacher. Josiah stumbled back, clutching his Bible to his chest.

Sheriff Elias fired. The shot cracked the night, hitting the stallion’s flank. The beast screamed, rearing, but did not fall. The bullet left no wound.

The sheriff’s stomach dropped. “Lord help us.”

The riders shrieked laughter, their voices rising higher, sharper. They fanned out, circling the street, torches trailing smoke. Fire licked at the saloon porch, at the livery roof.

And then another figure stepped into the lamplight.

Six Gun Devil.

He walked slow, deliberate, his spurs whispering, his revolvers already drawn. His coat swung around his legs, his hat brim shadowing his scarred face. The crowd that huddled in doorways gasped. Some whispered prayers, others curses.

The leader reined in, eyes narrowing. “Well, well. The Devil himself.” His grin widened. “We’ve been waiting on you.”

Six Gun’s voice was flat, gravel in the silence. “I ain’t yours.”

The riders laughed, high and shrill. Their torches flared higher, flames twisting into shapes—faces screaming, wings beating, hands clawing. The fire danced unnatural, mocking the cross that still hung over the chapel door.

The leader leaned forward, eyes burning. “Not mine? You carry more graves than all of us. You breathe smoke. You bleed fire. Look at you. You’re already marked.”

Six Gun didn’t flinch. His guns didn’t waver. “I’ve seen hell. I ain’t ridin’ with it.”

The leader’s grin snapped wide. “Then you’ll die by it.”

The torches arced high. Pistols flared. Bullets screamed.

The battle began.

Section Three – The Battle in Redemption

Gunfire tore the night open.

The first volley came from the riders, a ragged storm of flame and lead that chewed splinters from porch rails and rang sparks from the anvil outside the smithy. Windows burst; shingles spat dust. The torchlight strobed across faces—men snarling behind their marks, eyes black and wrong, teeth bared in hungry grins. The air tasted like sulfur and old pennies.

Elias Grady didn’t think; he moved. He dropped from the boardwalk into a knee, the Winchester shouldered, breathing steady like he had taught himself to do when he had nothing else. He picked a target—one of the flank riders whooping past the mercantile—and stroked the trigger. The man corkscrewed off his saddle, hit hard, rolled, and came up laughing. Laughing, with a hole ragged in his coat that should have put a man in the ground. He touched the glowing brand on his cheek as if it were a charm and came on.

“Sheriff!” Tucker’s voice broke high from the jailhouse doorway. The boy fired too quickly and too high, shattering a window across the street. “They ain’t—”

“I know!” Elias slammed another round home and fired again at a different rider. This one fell and stayed down, the brand on his cheek flaring bright once, then cracking like fired clay dropped on rock.

The corpse looked suddenly, blessedly human: a young man with bad teeth and a scar along his jaw, his grin gone. Elias swallowed bile, chambered again.

Down the street, the preacher stepped off the chapel threshold into firelight and chaos as if it were a pulpit. Josiah's hat was gone, his hair wet with sweat, his Bible in both hands. The mark on the leader's cheek burned like a coal; torches guttered in the hot wind the riders had brought with them. Josiah lifted his voice until it rang above gunfire: "*The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?*" (Psalm 27:1).

A rider lunged for him, pistol up. Six Gun Devil was already there.

He moved like the hinge of a storm, pivot smooth, both revolvers barking in a rhythm as certain as a clock's. One round took the rider's pistol from his hand, another shaved the brim from his hat, and the third drove into the glowing cross-lines on his cheek. The mark split with a hiss. The man screamed—not from the shot, but from the brand itself as it spidered and popped, smoke spilling from the cracks as if the flesh had been a lid.

"Back to the livery!" Elias yelled to townsfolk who had frozen in doorways. "Form a line! Buckets!" He saw flame licking up the saloon's porch posts, the livery hay loft already snapping dry straw into fire. A woman with a baby in one arm and a pail in the other stumbled toward the pump; Tucker sprinted to help, dragging the handle like a man bailing out a sinking ship.

Three riders slashed down the center of the street in a V, torches arcing, pistols spitting. The leader anchored the point, black horse eating distance, grin cut wide and bright. "Bow!" he howled, his voice scraping the ears like grit. "Bow or burn!"

Hannah's voice answered, high and fierce from inside the chapel door, the words too big for so small a throat: "*Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you!*" (James 4:7).

The cry sliced the charge like wire. Horses stumbled; two riders' torches guttered in a breathless draft that hadn't existed a heartbeat before. One looked over his shoulder as if something taller than the chapel had stepped between him and the girl. His brand went from red to angry white, then fissured.

"Hold the lane!" Elias roared to the handful of men behind upturned tables. "Don't give 'em the steps!"

Six Gun was already a step into the riders' teeth. He went low under a torch, the brim of his hat puffing to smoke at the edge; his left pistol coughed—one, two—and a pair of mounts reared without riders, leather hanging empty. His right barked across the point of the V.

The leader's grin never moved. He raised his pistol and fired point-blank at Six Gun's chest.

The slug hit leather and spun. Six Gun staggered, breath knocked raw, coat fluttering. The leader's eyes flared, blackness bright with a deeper red. He fired again.

Josiah's hand landed on Six Gun's shoulder at the same instant the shot came, and the preacher's voice shoved the words like a blade: "*No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper!*" (Isaiah 54:17).

The round screamed into the street and chewed a furrow in the dust. The leader's smile thinned—not gone, but strained as if taught a new angle. "Preacher," he hissed. He yanked his horse aside and wheeled for another pass.

Out by the livery, flame clawed the loft like orange animals. The bucket line shook itself into a working rhythm—pump, pass, throw, repeat—while Tucker stood on the watering trough and fired between pails, teeth bared like a boy trying to grow up in a minute. A rider peeled toward them at a gallop, torch lowered to drive them like cattle.

“Drop him!” Elias shouted, already swinging the Winchester. Tucker’s round hit first—wild, but true enough to take the rider in the shoulder. Elias’s shot followed and smashed the torch. It burst into greasy fire halfway down the street and fizzled. The rider yanked at his rein; the horse slipped on wet, went down, rolled. A hoof snapped. The man screamed. Elias’s stomach lurched; he looked away and aimed at the next.

The leader blew past the preacher again, took a slice at the chapel door with a short saber he had produced as if the night had handed it to him. The blade bit the lintel and threw a spark that skittered up the cross like lightning in reverse.

“Enough.” Six Gun was done playing the center of the street. He ran.

He ran not away, but under—cutting the leader’s horse at the hocks, sliding on dust like a man who had danced with speed all his life. As he passed the animal’s shoulder he fired upward; the shot shattered the sabre’s hilt. Metal fell with a bright, surprised sound. In the same breath he came up inside the leader’s reach, shoulders brushing the horse’s ribs, and drove the nose of his other Colt at the mark on the man’s cheek.

The leader jerked, too quick for the angle to give Six Gun a clean sight. The round carved a trench across the brand but didn’t break it. The smell of scorched flesh shoved hot in Six Gun’s face; he tasted copper and smoke and something like old graves. The leader’s pistol slashed down for the outlaw’s temple.

Elias saw it, too far to help. He threw his voice instead: “Devil! Down!”

Six Gun ducked. The pistol butt blew his hat off and took hair with it. He tumbled, rolled through a tangle of thrown sawdust and glass, and came up on a knee behind the water trough. Pistol smoke drifted; the world went edge-sharp the way it does when a man is one decision from lying still forever.

He lit both guns.

The street became a box he knew: angles, distances, sightlines. He saw the left edge of a rider’s coat and put a slug where the man would be when he finished rising from the lean. The rider arced in his saddle and fell backward, his maskless face frozen in a snarl that died mid-curve as the brand cracked. Six Gun pivoted. His next round took a man’s gun-hand and turned the pistol into a screaming firecracker; the man stared at his fingers, appalled, as if the body’s betrayal shocked him more than the pain.

A rider at full gallop snapped a loop from his saddle horn and flung it at the preacher, the rope hissing. Josiah lifted the Bible like a man lifts a shield. The noose hit the cover and stopped. It smoked where it touched; the smell was like hair and tallow and fear. Josiah flung the rope aside and shouted over it, voice breaking into something that sounded like a shout and a hymn: “*They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony!*” (Revelation 12:11).

The leader bared his teeth. “Testify to this.”

He spurred for the bucket line.

Sarah Schaefer was there, skirts soaked from passing pails, hair stuck to her cheeks. When she saw him coming she didn’t scream; she reached for the next bucket and heaved it, not at the fire but at the rider. It struck his chest and burst. He laughed—laughed at water—and rode through it like it was nothing.

Six Gun didn’t get a shot; townsfolk bunched between him and the line. Elias did. His round hit the leader’s shoulder and spun him half-around in the saddle; the black horse checked and skittered, iron shoes sparking on stone. The leader’s head snapped toward Elias. The grin came back, bare and bright. “Lawman,” he crooned, and raised his gun.

The round never landed. A small form slammed into the leader’s stirrup and clung—Hannah, of course, the child who did not know how to be afraid when the Book had told her what to say. She shouted the only verse her mouth could hold at that pitch: “*In the name of Jesus Christ!*” Her voice cracked on the last word, but the Name did not.

The brand on the leader’s cheek flared like a crucible too hot, then fissured a hair’s width. He howled—not fear, not yet, but surprise that tasted like it might ripen into it. He kicked; the stirrup shook; Hannah flew into the dust, rolling toward the chapel steps.

“Get her!” Sarah cried, and ran.

Six Gun closed the distance. He yanked the leader from the saddle. The two men hit the street in a tangle of coats, gunmetal clanging against nailhead and stone. For a heartbeat the leader’s face was inches from Six Gun’s—eyes pits, grin a gash, brand a wound that licked its own heat. The voice that came out of him carried layers, like more than one throat talked in the same mouth. “You are ours.”

Six Gun’s answer wasn’t words. He drove the butt of his Colt into the brand. It gave like old pottery—hairline cracks widening under the blow. Smoke bled from it that wasn’t like any smoke from fire—a sweet, rotten reek that clawed at the gag reflex.

The leader raked a clawed hand at Six Gun’s eyes. Nails left four lines across skin. Pain burst white. Six Gun shoved backward, rolled as the leader’s pistol fired, felt the heat of the muzzle along his jaw. He came up with blood in his eye and steadied his hand with anger.

“Say it!” Josiah’s voice came from everywhere at once, like the street had learned to speak. “Say the Name!”

Six Gun’s throat closed on pride, on habit, on years of nights that had taught him that names don’t save you, guns do. He looked at Hannah scrambling to her knees, at Sarah hauling her up, at Elias with his rifle braced and his jaw set and fear in his eyes that he owned instead of letting it own him. He looked at the preacher with his Bible raised against a sabre that no longer had a hilt.

He said it like a man striking a match under rain. “Jesus.”

The match did not go out.

It became a line of light you couldn't look at directly. It ran from his mouth to the leader's cheek, found the cracks Six Gun's gun-butt had opened, and forced them wider with a sound like frost splitting rock. The brand shattered. Red light spilled out and then collapsed on itself with a scream that made the dogs under the porches whine in harmony, as if even animal bodies recognized the pitch of a fall.

The leader lurched to one knee, clutching his face. Where the mark had been was char, and below it—only for a heartbeat, only enough to see—something that wasn't flesh. Angles too sharp. A hint of depth where skin should make surface. Six Gun fired into it, not because he thought lead could kill what peered, but because a man does what he can while he can. The round went somewhere that didn't have a name and the night bucked.

Half the riders went to pieces. Not bodies—nerve. Laughter broke mid-peal and turned to a noise with human fear in it. Two threw down torches and bolted; one climbed over his saddlebow to put his horse between him and the word that had just cut the street in two. Another clawed at his own cheek as if trying to scrape off the brand before it cracked by itself.

Elias seized the turn. "Push 'em!" he roared, and men who had been cowering became what men become under a sheriff they trust: a line. Store counters flipped into barricades, rifles slammed into shoulders, a blacksmith's hammer became law in a big man's fist.

"Back!" the leader snarled, voice shredded. He reached for his horse, a hand leaving a smear on the animal's neck that smoked like acid. The stallion went mad-eyed and fought the bit. "Back!" The pack gathered him without knowing it had done so, herd instinct stronger than covenant when the covenant cracked. They fell away down the street in clots, firing wild to keep men's heads down.

The livery roof gave in one place with a cough of flame. Josiah planted himself between it and the bucket line like a standard-bearer, water slopping his boots, and read aloud over crackle and curse, not as a charm but as a defiant roll call of what he believed: "*He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust... Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day.*" (Psalm 91:4–5).

Something shifted in the air, as real as a breeze. The fire that had been climbing like a greedy thing hesitated, then slumped into sullen flame that men could beat with quilts and pails. Tucker whooped like a boy and nearly fell off the trough in his joy before catching himself and slinging another bucket.

The leader flung himself into the saddle. He wheeled, face blackened, eye-pits burning deeper. He stared at Six Gun with a hate that was also a bargain he was trying to renegotiate. "Not yet," he grated, torn mouth drawing the words around heat. "You'll fall. I'll be there to see it."

Six Gun stood very still, both pistols pointed at the ground, because he didn't trust his hands not to go shaking if he lowered them. "Maybe," he said, and his voice, for the first time, had something like humility in it. "But not tonight."

Hannah took a step from Sarah's side and raised her small voice once more—no verse now, just the Name that had split a mark and a gang. "Jesus!"

The leader flinched. Just a tremor, but enough. He ripped the reins. The black horse lunged, and the pack broke with him. Hooves pounded; torches fell and hissed out in puddles and troughs; gunfire

snapped wide and then was gone. The laughter bled last, fading to a thin scrape that the wind refused to carry far.

Silence didn't rush in. It limped, breathing hard, broken by the snap of small flames as the bucket line choked the last of them. The smell was wet ash and blood and the sour stench of whatever had steamed out of those brands when they fractured.

Elias lowered the Winchester. His arms shook now that they were allowed to. He looked at the outlaw in the center of the street and found a man instead of a legend: hat gone, hair singed, cheek bleeding in four neat lines, coat scorched, eyes too tired for triumph.

Six Gun thumbed cartridges into an empty cylinder because his hands needed something to do that wasn't reaching for the water that ran a few blocks west and had not yet taken him. He felt the street under his boots like a verdict deferred. He felt the word he had said sitting behind his teeth like a coal that warmed without burning. He felt the weight in the saddlebag at his hip like a hand he had not yet taken and had, somehow, taken anyway.

"Check the wounded," Elias said, voice rough. "Tucker, count heads. Somebody tell Mrs. Riggs her goat's gone." He swallowed and pointed at the chapel. "Preacher—"

Josiah was already moving, laying hands on shoulders, speaking quiet and fierce, binding a boy's forearm with his own handkerchief, pressing his Bible into a weeping woman's grip until her fingers remembered how to hold something that wasn't fear.

Sarah—who had thrown water at a demon for want of something better to throw—stood with Hannah in the shadow of the chapel door. She watched the outlaw and did not know what to do with the fact that her daughter had hung on the stirrup of a man whose name she could not pray without bitterness. She set her jaw and whispered to the God she was still angry at. He could hear anger; He had heard worse from deserts.

Six Gun holstered both guns like he was putting tools away after a day's work. He looked at Elias. Words passed between them that had no sentences. Elias nodded, and they both understood the same thing: this was not over.

Down the street, the brand-scarred body Elias had first dropped lay with its face to the stars. The glowing lines had crumbled into soot on skin. Underneath, there was only a man with a bad shave and a broken tooth and a little leather bag of somebody else's rings in his pocket. Evil had worn him thin, and then it had let him go when it ran. Elias felt the old sorrow bite, the one the badge makes when it presses a heart into a shape it wasn't born with. He tipped his hat a fraction without knowing it, the way a man does when he recognizes a grave, even if there's no dirt piled yet.

"Sheriff," Tucker called, counting with his eyes wide and damp. "We... we got 'em all?" He meant the townsfolk.

"For tonight," Elias said. He did not say the rest.

Six Gun turned his face to the dark beyond the lamps where dust still hung. Somewhere out there a stallion was blowing hard and a grin had learned how to grimace. Somewhere a road bent toward a river, and a dream waited with chains that had loosened but not yet fallen. He touched the saddlebag,

where a Book that had not burned rested against his leg, and he did not say *not yet* this time. He said nothing at all. He stood in the street he had helped keep and let the ache in his chest be what it was: the hurt a man feels when a rope has caught him by the wrist and begun to pull.

Behind him, the preacher's voice rose once more—not to charm the dark away, but to make the town hear its own courage back in its ears: "*The Lord shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace.*" (Exodus 14:14). The words settled on the boards and the barrels and the scarred cottonwood like dew on a burned field.

The battle for Redemption had not ended. It had only changed shape. Tonight, demons rode and fled. Tomorrow, men would wake with smoke in their hair and remember that fire can be beaten with water and rope and hands. And somewhere between the two, an outlaw had spoken a Name and seen marks crack.

The street exhaled. The bucket clanked one last time into the trough. The little flames died and left only coals, and coals can warm as well as burn. The stars stared down like witnesses who had seen worse and better and would keep on watching until the end.

And the night—finally—remembered how to be only night.

Chapter Twenty-Four – The Psalm in the Desert

Section One – The Ashes of Morning

The dawn came weak, as though the sun itself had been scarred by the night before. The eastern sky held the color of old bruises, purple and yellow against the ridge, and the smoke from the raid still clung low, drifting through the streets of Redemption in a haze that stung the eyes and bit the throat.

No rooster crowed. No dogs barked. The silence was thick, broken only by the rasp of shovels against dry earth.

Three men dug behind the chapel. Their coats were off, their shirts damp with sweat though the air was chill, their hands blistered from swinging shovels through ground hard as stone. Each clang of iron into dirt was a sentence in a language of grief. Elias Grady dug like a man paying a debt, steady, relentless. Tucker dug fast and uneven, his youth showing in the way he leaned too much on the handle, shoulders trembling. Beside them, John Miller—who had lost no kin in the raid but came anyway—drove his shovel deep, pausing only to wipe at his face when tears blurred his vision.

The townsfolk gathered in clusters, watching, waiting. Women held children close, their voices hushed to whispers, if they spoke at all. Old men sat with hats in hand, their eyes empty, as if they'd seen this too many times before. Sarah Schaefer stood stiff, her black dress stirring in the morning breeze, her shawl tight around her shoulders. Her eyes were hard, rimmed red from crying, but her mouth pressed into a line that dared anyone to speak comfort.

Near the chapel steps lay three canvas-wrapped forms. A boy, a girl, and their mother. The children's bundles were heartbreakingly small, the mother's larger but fragile, her arms wrapped around them

even in death, as though she had tried to shield them from bullets and fire. Someone had laid wildflowers across the shrouds, pitifully few blooms gathered from the riverbank.

Josiah Markham knelt by the bodies, his hands trembling as he tied the knots that would not come undone. His Bible lay open on the steps beside him, the pages stained by soot and damp with dew. Every so often, he closed his eyes, lips moving without sound.

At the edge of the yard, apart from the rest, Six Gun Devil stood in the shadow of a half-burned cottonwood. His coat was singed from the fight, his cheek still raw with claw-marks from the leader's hand. His eyes, hidden beneath the brim of his hat, never left the shrouded children.

He had seen death in every shape—a boy with a bullet through him after stealing from the wrong saddlebag, a woman cut down in the crossfire of a saloon brawl, men left for vultures in the canyons. He'd stepped over bodies as if they were stones in the trail. But this—two children and the mother who tried to shield them—this cut different. It wasn't the first time innocents had died in his presence, but it was the first time he couldn't shove the blame off on someone else. These were the wages of evil, and the shadow of it had followed him into Redemption.

He touched the saddlebag where the Bible rested. His hand lingered, then fell away. He spat into the dirt and muttered, "Not mine." But even he didn't sound convinced.

The Digging

Elias's shovel hit a stone. The clang rang sharp in the still air. He set his jaw, pried it loose, flung it aside. Sweat streaked down his temples, cutting lines through soot.

Tucker paused, panting, leaning on his shovel. "Sheriff," he said, his voice breaking, "why'd it have to be the children?"

Elias didn't look at him. "That's what evil does. Don't ask it to make sense. You'll go mad tryin'."

"But—" Tucker's words caught. He swallowed hard. "If God's real—like the preacher says—why would He let it happen?"

Elias stopped digging. For a moment, he just stood there, the handle gripped in both hands, his breath heavy. His eyes went to the chapel, where Josiah knelt beside the bodies. Then to the street, where Six Gun leaned against the tree, shadow stretched long.

"I don't know," Elias said finally. His voice was raw. "But I reckon it ain't for lack of Him fightin' the same battle we are. Maybe He cries louder'n we do."

The answer didn't satisfy Tucker, but he nodded and went back to digging, shoulders trembling with each stroke.

Sarah's voice cut the silence. Sharp, bitter. "Or maybe He don't fight at all."

All eyes turned to her. She stood rigid, her arms tight around Hannah, who pressed her face against her mother's dress. Sarah's gaze burned at Six Gun.

“This town never knew devils until he rode in,” she said. Her voice cracked, but she pressed on, louder. “Now children lie in the ground. And we bury them with his shadow over us.”

Murmurs rippled through the crowd. Some nodded, some looked away, ashamed of agreeing, others muttered protests.

Six Gun didn’t move. He just flicked ash from a cigarette he hadn’t lit. His voice, when it came, was flat. “I didn’t put bullets in those kids.”

“No,” Sarah snapped, “but hell follows you. And it’s our children who pay.”

Elias dropped his shovel into the dirt with a thud. “That’s enough.”

But Sarah’s eyes never left the outlaw. “One day, Sheriff, you’ll have to choose. Law or devil. And if you choose wrong, we’ll all be buried here.”

Six Gun’s jaw tightened, but he said nothing. He turned his face toward the horizon, away from her, away from the graves. His silence was an admission, or maybe it was defiance.

The Weight

The graves grew deep. The earth piled high. The children in the crowd began to fidget, not fully understanding but sensing the heaviness pressing down on the adults. One girl asked her mother why the people were sleeping in sacks. The mother wept silently, unable to answer.

Josiah finally rose, his knees creaking, his face lined with weariness. He looked at the graves, then at the people. “We will lay them down soon. But not without words. Not without remembering.”

He picked up the Bible from the chapel steps, brushed ash from its cover, and held it close. His eyes lifted to the sky, then swept across the people, finally resting on the outlaw under the tree.

Six Gun met his gaze for a heartbeat. The preacher’s eyes said more than his lips: *Stay. Listen.*

The outlaw shifted, muttered something under his breath, but he did not leave.

Section Two – The Burial

The earth gave way at last, three graves carved side by side, raw mouths waiting to close again. The digging men leaned on their shovels, chests heaving, sweat streaking their soot-marked faces. Their hands trembled, not just from the work but from the weight of what the earth was about to hold.

Josiah Markham motioned, and the boards were lifted. Four men carried each body with reverence, stepping carefully through the ash-smeared grass. The canvas-wrapped bundles seemed unbearably small, especially the children’s. A hush fell over the gathered town, broken only by the crunch of boots and the low sobs of women.

They laid the mother down first. The canvas was tied at her feet and shoulders, arms pinned where they had clung to her children even as fire and lead found her. The men lowered her gently into the ground, then stepped back, hats pressed against their chests.

Next came the boy. He was barely ten. His small shape wrapped in canvas looked like nothing more than a bundle of firewood. His father had been killed years before; his mother had raised him alone. Now she lay beside him, and the dirt would soon swallow them both.

Finally, the girl. She was perhaps eight, hair the color of river reeds, braided the day before by a mother who had not lived to braid it again. Hannah clung to Sarah's hand, staring with wide, wet eyes as the men lowered her into the grave. She whispered, "She was my friend."

The words tore through the silence like a knife. Women wept openly; even hardened men wiped their eyes, unashamed.

Sarah pulled her daughter close, her own tears hot and bitter. She raised her face skyward, her voice breaking as it spilled out. "Why, Lord? Why the children? If You are Shepherd, why leave the lambs to wolves?"

Her cry echoed, raw, unanswered. The only reply was the rustle of smoke-stained willow leaves in the morning breeze.

Josiah bowed his head, his lips trembling, but he did not answer yet. He knew the Psalm would answer better than his own mouth could.

Sarah's Accusation

As the first shovel of dirt fell, Sarah's grief hardened to rage. She stepped forward, her voice ragged but sharp as a whip. "We bury them because the Devil walks our streets."

Every eye turned, first to her, then to the outlaw under the charred tree. Six Gun Devil stood with arms folded, revolvers heavy at his hips, smoke curling from the cigarette he hadn't lit. His eyes, shadowed under the brim of his hat, flicked to the graves, then back to her.

"You think it's coincidence?" Sarah demanded, pointing at him with a trembling hand. "Children dead. Mothers burned. Demons riding with laughter in their mouths. All since he came. He brings the shadow. And now we bury the ones we loved in it."

A murmur rippled through the crowd. Some nodded grimly, others shifted uncomfortably, unwilling to speak but unwilling to deny.

Six Gun's voice was low, rough, barely carrying. "I didn't put the bullets in them."

"No," Sarah shot back, "but death follows you like a dog. You'll ride on one day, but the graves you leave won't rise up and go with you. They'll stay with us."

Hannah tugged her mother's sleeve, whispering, "Mama..." but Sarah's grief was too sharp to hear gentleness.

Sheriff Elias stepped forward, face set hard. "That's enough." His voice was iron, but not unkind. "We've all lost. Pointin' fingers won't fill graves or keep more from bein' dug."

Sarah's chin trembled, but she didn't drop her gaze from the outlaw. Finally she pulled Hannah close and turned away, weeping into her daughter's hair.

Six Gun shifted, jaw tight. His hand brushed the saddlebag, feeling the Bible's weight. For a breath he looked as if he'd walk away, mount his horse and leave Redemption to bury its dead without him. But his boots stayed planted in the dirt. He spat once, muttered something under his breath, and stayed.

The Tension

The townsfolk stirred uneasily. Some whispered prayers, others muttered curses. The graves lay open before them, yawning, waiting. The preacher stood between the dead and the living, his Bible pressed to his chest, his lips moving without sound.

Finally Josiah lifted his eyes. He looked over the faces—Elias worn with duty, Tucker pale with youth, Sarah tight with grief, Hannah wide-eyed with innocent sorrow, Six Gun silent with shadow.

He raised the Bible high, his voice unsteady but determined. "We will not bury them without the Word. We will not let the enemy have the last voice. When the desert screams death, we will answer with life."

The crowd hushed, leaning forward.

Josiah opened the pages. His fingers trembled, but his voice rang clear in the morning air.

*"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
He leadeth me beside the still waters."* (Psalm 23:1–2)

The words floated over the graves, over the smoke, over the bitterness. They carried a strength the preacher himself did not have, strength rooted deeper than the desert, deeper than grief.

Some bowed their heads, others wept. Sarah bit her lip, shaking. Hannah closed her eyes, whispering the words with him.

Six Gun leaned against the tree, his eyes narrowing. He heard the words like a hammer against iron, ringing through his chest. *Shepherd. Still waters.* He saw again the river where he had nearly stepped in, nearly said yes. He cursed softly, but he didn't move.

Josiah's voice carried on, verse by verse, each line laying itself over the grief like a balm, like a defiance. The Psalm was not finished yet, but its beginning already stirred something in the crowd.

And in the outlaw's scarred heart, the words echoed against walls he had spent a lifetime building.

Section Three – The Psalm

The desert held its breath. No bird stirred, no wind bent the grass. Even the smoke seemed to wait, curling lazily in the morning light as Josiah Markham's voice rang over the graves.

"He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake." (Psalm 23:3)

The preacher's words trembled at first, but as he spoke, strength welled up from somewhere deeper than his own weary bones. He looked down at the graves, then lifted his gaze to the people.

"We bury them in dust," Josiah said, his voice carrying, "but they are not lost in dust. The Shepherd restores souls. Paths of righteousness don't end at the grave. They begin beyond it."

Some wept quietly. Others closed their eyes and clung to the words. Even Sarah's trembling stilled, though her lips were still pressed hard, her grief not ready to yield.

Six Gun stood apart, his shadow stretched long across the dirt. *Restoreth my soul*. The words echoed in him like the gunshots in his dream of hellfire. He pressed his lips tight. His soul wasn't just worn—it was scorched, twisted. Could something so blackened be restored?

Josiah's voice deepened.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me." (Psalm 23:4)

Every head lifted at those words. The valley of shadow had come close—too close. They had seen it in the riders' faces, in the flames that gutted homes, in the bodies they now lowered into the earth.

"You saw death's shadow last night," Josiah said, his hand trembling as he gestured toward the graves. "You feel it now. But listen—'I will fear no evil.' Not because death isn't real, not because grief doesn't ache, but because He is *with us*. His rod protects. His staff leads. Even here. Even now."

A murmur rippled through the crowd—not of dissent this time, but of something steadier. A woman whispered, "Amen." A man nodded, tears streaking his dusty face.

Six Gun's jaw clenched. The valley of shadow was his trail, every step of his life. He'd never known anything else. And yet—*fear no evil*. He had feared plenty. He feared the chains of his dream, the cackling laughter of the riders, the graves left behind him. He feared his own name.

His hand brushed the saddlebag where the Bible lay. His fingers trembled, but he left it there.

Josiah's eyes closed as he spoke the next lines.

"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over." (Psalm 23:5)

The words sounded strange in the desert, with enemies so close. But they struck deep.

"In their presence," Josiah said, his voice ringing, "not after they are gone, not after victory is won, but here—in the presence of enemies—God prepares a table. His goodness does not wait for peace. It is peace, even when riders still threaten, even when grief burns hot. His mercy runs over, more than our need, more than our sorrow."

A quiet strength moved through the crowd. Men who had feared the riders straightened their shoulders. Mothers wiped their tears and held children tighter. Sarah's grip on Hannah softened, her sobs quieting.

Even Elias, standing with his hat in his hand, felt the truth of it. He had thought the law was all that stood between Redemption and ruin. But here was a Word older and stronger than any badge.

Six Gun's chest tightened. A table before enemies. He thought of the night riders, laughing as they branded flesh and mocked prayers. He thought of the leader's sneer, "You are ours." He thought of his own voice, hoarse but breaking out one Name that had made them flee.

His cup did not run over. His was empty, cracked, stained. Yet the preacher's words said otherwise. He shut his eyes, as if to drive the words out, but they clung like burrs.

Josiah's voice rose, strong now, ringing with hope that seemed to echo against the desert hills.

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." (Psalm 23:6)

The final words hung in the air, heavy and holy. The crowd stood still, listening, as if the desert itself leaned in to hear.

"Goodness and mercy," Josiah said, lowering the Bible but keeping his voice steady. "Not just today, not just in peace, but *all the days of my life*. Even the ones shadowed by grief. Even the ones torn by fire. All the days."

He turned, looking toward the graves. His voice broke, but he pressed on. "They dwell now in the house of the Lord. For ever."

The people wept openly now—not the bitter sobs of despair, but the raw tears of mourning wrapped in a strange, fierce hope. Children clung to mothers. Men gripped one another's shoulders.

And Six Gun stood under the burned cottonwood, the Psalm hammering through him like shots in the night. *All the days of my life*. His days were blood and shadow. Could mercy follow those? Could he ever dwell in the house of the Lord?

He didn't say "not yet" this time. He just stared at the graves, jaw clenched, the saddlebag heavy at his side, the words of the Psalm echoing in his chest like a song he didn't know how to sing.

Section Four – The Aftermath

The Psalm hung in the air long after Josiah's voice went still. It clung to the people like dew, soaking into skin, settling into lungs filled with smoke. Nobody spoke. They only stood, staring at the three open graves, the canvas-wrapped bodies resting within.

At last Elias cleared his throat. His voice was hoarse, worn thin. "Fill 'em."

The men lifted shovels again. Dirt rained down on canvas with a muffled thud. The sound struck deep into every heart—final, inescapable. Each fall of earth was a nail closing the day, each heap a reminder of what the night had stolen. Women bowed their heads. Children hid their faces against skirts.

Sarah sobbed as the dirt covered the smaller forms. Hannah held her hand, whispering something too soft for others to hear. Elias's jaw clenched; Tucker's hands shook so badly he spilled dirt on his boots. Still they shoveled, steady, relentless, until the earth swallowed the last glimpse of canvas and smoothed over into three mounds.

Josiah knelt, laying his hand on the fresh dirt. His lips moved in prayer, not for the dead—they were in God’s keeping—but for the living, whose grief pressed down heavy. His words did not rise above the whisper of the breeze, but the people felt them.

One by one, wildflowers were laid across the graves. Women had gathered them from the edges of the river, fragile blooms that looked out of place in scorched earth. They rested now as fragile defiance, color against brown, life against death.

The people lingered, reluctant to leave. No one wanted to be the first to walk away from the graves, as if leaving would mean abandoning the ones laid within. Finally Elias spoke again, his voice steadier this time, carrying authority not just of law but of love for his town.

“We bury our dead,” he said, “but we don’t bury our courage. We’ve been struck, but we ain’t broken. These riders’ll come again. But when they do, they’ll find a town that stands. Redemption don’t fall.”

The words rippled through the crowd like wind across grass. Men straightened their shoulders, women held their children closer but with less fear in their eyes. Even Sarah, though her face was streaked with tears, nodded once, as if taking Elias’s vow into her own bones.

Tucker wiped his face with the back of his sleeve. “We’ll stand, Sheriff,” he said, voice breaking. “We’ll stand.”

Josiah rose from the graves, his Bible pressed to his chest. “The valley of death may shadow us, but the Shepherd still leads. Goodness and mercy will follow us, if we follow Him.” His eyes swept across the people, lingering on Six Gun at the edge.

The outlaw stood apart, as always. His face was unreadable, but his eyes burned. He had not moved while the graves were filled. He had not flinched at Sarah’s accusations, nor softened at Josiah’s Psalm. Yet something in his stance was different now—not the arrogance of a gunslinger untouchable, but the heaviness of a man carrying grief like a brand.

His hand brushed the saddlebag. Slowly, he opened it, pulled the Bible halfway out. The worn cover caught the morning sun, edges frayed, soot still clinging from the burning church where it had survived untouched. He stared at it, thumb rubbing the spine.

“Not yet,” he whispered.

But this time the words carried no defiance. They broke in his throat, rough with grief, almost pleading. Not yet—but closer than before.

No one heard him, save perhaps Josiah, whose eyes softened, and Hannah, who glanced his way as if her child’s heart knew.

The people drifted back to their homes, slow, weary, shoulders bowed but steps steadier than before. Elias remained by the graves, hat in hand, head bowed. Sarah led Hannah away, her sobs quieter, though her bitterness had not yet loosed its hold. Tucker lingered by the fresh earth, staring as though trying to memorize the lesson carved into it.

Josiah closed his Bible, kissed the worn leather, and tucked it beneath his arm. He looked once more at the outlaw, then turned toward the chapel.

Six Gun stayed a moment longer. His eyes burned holes into the graves, into the wildflowers laid across them. He had carried many memories of death, but this would not leave him. These weren't men who'd drawn first, nor enemies who'd earned their graves. These were innocents. Children. And their faces, though wrapped in canvas now, would ride with him in dreams darker than any hellfire.

He turned at last, spurs whispering in the dirt. The Bible slid back into the saddlebag with a thud that sounded heavier than any iron. He mounted his horse, eyes fixed on the horizon where smoke still lingered.

The Psalm echoed in him. Not the verses of peace. Not the promise of green pastures or still waters. The one that haunted him was the line Josiah had spoken with fire in his voice: *"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."*

Six Gun was in the valley. Had been all his life. But for the first time, he wondered if he had to walk it alone.

He nudged his horse forward, slow, steady, leaving the graves behind. But the words followed him, clinging to his heart like burrs:

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life..."

He cursed softly under his breath, but he did not spit it away this time.

The desert stretched ahead—dry, endless, merciless. But somewhere in it, the echo of a Psalm lingered, and the shadowed outlaw carried it with him, whether he wished to or not.

Chapter Twenty-Five – The Lone Cross on the Hill

The desert had its way of keeping secrets. Bones sank into the sand and vanished, fire left scars only wind remembered, and men rode into the horizon never to be seen again. But sometimes, the land bore witness. Sometimes it left a mark.

Six Gun Devil came upon it near midday. The sun was high, hammering down hard, the sky bleached pale. His horse plodded slow, head low, sweat darkening its neck. The outlaw's coat was dusty, his hat brim pulled low, shadowing the scars across his face. He had ridden without aim, but not without weight—the Psalm from the graveside still echoing in him, every word clinging like burrs: *The Lord is my shepherd... Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...*

And then, on a rise of red rock, he saw the cross.

It stood crooked on the hilltop, two beams lashed and nailed, weathered gray by sun and storm. No fence surrounded it. No flowers rested at its base. Just a wooden cross, stark against the sky, guarding a mound of earth that time had nearly flattened.

Six Gun reined in at the bottom of the hill. His horse snorted, ears flicking, restless. The outlaw sat still in the saddle, staring. He had seen many crosses before, most marking graves dug in haste by rough

hands, but something about this one stopped him cold. Alone, unmarked, it seemed to carry a weight heavier than its wood.

He swung down from the saddle, boots crunching in the dry gravel, and began to climb. Each step dragged as though the hill resisted him, pulling him back with invisible hands. His breath grew heavy, though the slope was not steep. When he reached the top, he stood before the cross, hat in hand without realizing he'd taken it off.

The wood was rough, splintered, nailed through with rusting iron. No name was carved. No date. Whoever lay beneath had been given no remembrance but this.

Six Gun knelt, brushing dust from the mound. His fingers sifted through the dry earth until he found stone—perhaps part of the soil, perhaps a marker that had lost its inscription to wind and sun. He let the grit run through his scarred fingers.

“Who are you?” he muttered. His voice rasped, dry as the desert air. “Who lies under this?”

The wind answered with silence. A crow called far off, its cry harsh and lonely.

Six Gun sat back on his heels, eyes fixed on the cross. He had buried many men, shot more. Most of their graves he never looked at twice. But this one unsettled him. It was not just a grave. It was a question, standing tall on the hill, pointing upward when everything in him was weighed down.

He thought of the Psalm: *He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul.* He snorted softly, bitter. “Restored, huh? You get restored, friend? Or did the desert take you same as it'll take me?”

The horse shifted below, uneasy, snorting again. Six Gun ignored it, his eyes still on the cross. He imagined the man beneath—was he a gunman who fell in a duel, a ranch hand lost in a raid, a preacher who wandered too far? Whoever he was, someone had cared enough to raise wood. To mark his place.

And that thought burned worse than the sun. Because Six Gun wondered—who would mark his?

Would anyone plant a cross? Would any hand lay flowers? Or would his bones bleach in a gulch, his name whispered only as a curse, his memory fading with the wind?

His throat tightened. He cursed under his breath, shoving the thought away.

He rose, laying a hand on the cross. The wood was rough under his palm, hot from the sun. He meant only to touch it, to feel its reality. But as his fingers lingered, an unease crept through him, deeper than grief, sharper than guilt. It was as if the cross itself stared back, weighing him.

He pulled his hand back sharply, breathing hard. “It's just wood,” he muttered. “Just wood.”

But the truth clung—this was no ordinary marker. This was a reminder. Of death. Of judgment. Of something beyond both.

He replaced his hat, turned, and walked back down the hill. Yet when he mounted his horse and glanced back, the cross seemed taller than before, its shadow stretching long down the slope.

He muttered again, softer this time, almost a prayer though he would not name it so: “Not yet.”

And as he rode on, the lone cross stood behind him, stark against the empty sky, a question planted in the desert that would not leave him.

Section Two – The Whisper of Temptation

The outlaw rode down from the hill slow, his horse's hooves thudding dully in the dust. He didn't look back, but he felt the cross behind him all the same, its presence riding his shoulders like a weight.

By late afternoon, the sun was dipping, its light bleeding red across the desert. Six Gun found a patch of shade beneath a sandstone bluff. He dismounted, let his horse graze on the sparse tufts of grass, and built a small fire from brush and broken mesquite. The smoke curled straight into the sky, carrying the bitter scent of ash.

He sat with his back to the rock, revolvers on his belt, hat tipped low. The saddlebag rested at his side, the Bible within pressing against the leather like a hidden heartbeat. He didn't open it. Didn't dare. The words from the burial still gnawed at him: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...*

He shut his eyes, but sleep did not come. Not truly. He drifted instead into that twilight place where the mind wanders and shadows gather.

That was when he heard the voice.

"Lonely grave, ain't it?"

Six Gun's eyes snapped open. Across the fire sat the gambler. Same fine coat, same crooked grin, same eyes too dark, too deep. The lantern he had carried in the dream flickered beside him, though no oil burned within. Its flame danced with colors that weren't natural—green, blue, a red that cut sharper than blood.

Six Gun's hand went to his Colt, but the gambler only laughed, spreading his hands wide. "Oh, come now. I ain't here to draw." His smile gleamed. "I'm here to talk."

Six Gun's voice was gravel. "I told you once—I ain't yours."

The gambler leaned forward, the firelight twisting his grin into something hungrier. "Not mine? Then why do you keep my company? Why do you hear me when the preacher's words fade? Why does the cross on that hill unsettle you more than bullets ever did?"

Six Gun said nothing. His silence was answer enough.

The gambler's eyes narrowed, glinting like obsidian. "That cross behind you—it ain't just wood. It's a reminder. A mark. You felt it, didn't you? Like it was watching. Judging."

Six Gun's jaw tightened. He remembered the rough wood under his palm, the way it had seemed alive, heavy.

The gambler's voice softened, almost kind. "You don't need its judgment. You don't need His mercy. You need freedom. Power. A way to silence the gunshots in your sleep."

He leaned closer, his words dripping honey and venom. “I can give it. All you have to do is ride with me. No more nightmares. No more graves. Just power. Fear. The world will bow when it hears your name. And when you die—” His grin widened. “If you die—you’ll ride eternal, your legend never fading.”

Six Gun spat into the dust. “And what’s the cost?”

The gambler’s smile thinned. “Nothing you haven’t already paid. Blood. You’ve spilled oceans of it. This is just... making it count.”

The outlaw’s hand twitched near his saddlebag. He could feel the Bible’s weight pressing against the leather, heavier now than iron. The gambler’s eyes flicked to it, his grin cracking for a heartbeat.

“Don’t open that,” he hissed, his smoothness breaking for just a breath. “That Book’s chains, Devil. Words to bind you, not free you. Better to ride with fire than kneel in dust.”

Six Gun’s fingers brushed the bag anyway. His scar burned hot on his cheek, as though the very cross on the hill behind him glared down into the firelight.

The gambler’s voice dropped to a whisper, coaxing, urgent. “Choose. Ride with me and never fear chains again. Or cling to that cross and be broken by it. You can’t walk two trails.”

The outlaw stared into the flames. His mind filled with faces—innocents laid in graves, riders with burning marks, Hannah whispering, “*It’s for him too.*” He heard Josiah’s Psalm ringing again: “*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me...*”

He clenched his fists. The gambler’s whisper coiled tighter around him. The Bible weighed heavier. The cross burned in memory.

The choice pressed hard.

Section Three – The Choice at the Cross

The flames fell to coals, three red eyes staring up from the ash. The gambler’s lantern burned without oil, its strange colors licking the rim like tongues that knew other alphabets. Six Gun stared into both lights and felt the heat of them fight under his skin—the campfire warm and honest, the lantern cold and hungry though it glowed.

“Choose,” the gambler murmured, drawing a card from nowhere—diamond, bleeding red—and letting it spin between two fingers. “Ride with me and your nights go quiet. You’ll sleep like a babe. Your name will be a door men shut from inside—locked twice. Or ride with that Book and wake screaming the same screams you’ve brought to other men. Either way, Devil, you ride.”

Six Gun rubbed his jaw where the leader’s nails had cut him. Four lines had scabbed brown, tight as wire. “I ain’t yours,” he said again, but the words felt thinner than he wanted. The cross up on the rise had put a weight in his chest; this man’s voice slid around it like water looking for a crack.

The gambler’s smile tilted. “Not yet, I’ll grant you. But you lean.” He tipped his head toward the hill in the failing light. “That wooden thing unsettles you because you know it cuts. It’s a blade pointed

straight through a man's pride. What you want?" He tapped his own breastbone. "You want the power to be your own cross. To carve your own right. Forget shepherds and rods and staffs. Make the desert your pasture and men your sheep."

Six Gun reached for the saddlebag. He didn't know he would until his fingers were on the flap. The leather was warm; beneath it the Book's corners pressed like knuckles. The gambler stiffened. For an instant the smooth face creased, something old and raw peering out from behind the velvet and the grin.

"Careful," he breathed, and it bled into a hiss. "You say that Name too often and it lays tracks in your mouth. Roads you'll walk whether you mean to or no."

Six Gun drew the Bible out and held it by the spine. Soot blackened the cover, yet the gilt along the edges had survived fire as if gold loves flame more than it fears it. His thumb found the crease that had fallen open to Jude in the hell-dream; another part of the paper had dog-eared to the Psalm from the graveside. He did not open it. He only held it like a man holds a weight to decide whether it is one he can lift.

"Here's the bargain plain," the gambler said, the lantern-light twitching against his teeth. "Let the cross go. Leave the Book shut. Ride with me as you have always ridden—with a faster hand and a colder heart—and I will make you what men already say you are. Not rumor. Reign." He wagged the card. "Tell me where you want the night riders and I'll break their horses' legs on the same rocks that split their marks. Tell me which widow to comfort and I'll fill her table until she forgets to weep." He leaned forward. "Tell me which sheriff to spare and which to hang, and I'll make the rope do what you whisper it to."

Six Gun's lip curled. "And the price?"

"A man who asks for prices," the gambler said, almost fond, "hasn't fallen yet." He met Six Gun's eyes and, for the first time, dropped the smile. "All right. Here it is, Devil. Quit standing at riverbanks like a boy afraid of his reflection. Quit waiting under psalms like a dog under a table hoping for crumbs. Step away. Say 'not yet' and mean *never*. Throw that Book into your fire and make your peace with iron. That's all. No signature in blood at midnight, no kiss on my ring. Just a choice plain as dust: yours or His. You, or Him."

Wind hissed across the rock. Somewhere out in the dark a night bird called, then called again, and then thought better of it and went silent. The horse lifted its head and blew softly, the sound of an animal asking whether the herd was near or far.

Six Gun looked at the cross without turning his head. He could feel it. The way you feel the muzzle of a gun aimed at the soft under your ribs from behind a saloon door. The way you feel a rope's itch before you ever touch it. He remembered his hand on the wood. He remembered flinching. He remembered the graves and the Psalm and a child's small voice that had said the Name like a bell, not a bargain.

He set the Bible on his knee. "I ain't ever been anything but my own," he said. "And I ain't ever been enough."

The gambler's eyes flickered. "Sentiment," he said lightly, but the lantern flame hissed.

Six Gun thumbed the Book open. He didn't mean to; he meant to keep it closed and test the weight and decide tomorrow. But the pages found themselves—thin, quick, familiar to fingers that had held them before. He looked down.

"He restoreth my soul... I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me."

He shut it, breathing through his teeth. "I don't know how to be with anyone."

"Don't learn," the gambler said, quick as pounce. "Don't kneel and don't say please and don't let that wood make you small. You're the biggest thing you know. Keep it that way."

Six Gun stood. The coals washed red up his boots; the lantern painted blue on the edges of his coat where it shouldn't. He picked up the Bible and the gambler's eyes tracked the motion like a cat watches a fly. "Walk back up there," the gambler said lazily, nodding toward the hill. "Put it at the foot of that cross. Tell Him you're done. Or toss it in here and I'll do the rest." He brushed ash from his sleeve with two immaculate fingers. "Either path gets the same man to morning—breathing, unbothered, his guns clean."

Six Gun eased the Book into the saddlebag instead, slow, like returning a borrowed thing. Then he took up his canteen and poured water across the little fire until the coals sighed and went black.

The lantern did not dim.

He slung the saddlebag over his shoulder and started walking toward the hill. The gambler rose too, not hurried, matching him step for step at the edge of vision, so near the shoulder that if Six Gun flung a fist he'd hit velvet and teeth. They climbed without speaking. The slope was steeper in the dark, or the choice made it so; the outlaw's breath rasped a little and he hated that the other man did not breathe at all.

The cross stood against a sky salted with stars. Up close, it looked no cleaner, no holier—only rough wood planted in stubborn earth. But it cast a shadow where the moon should have cut none at that angle, and the shadow ran downhill toward them like a path. Six Gun stopped at its edge. His boots pressed into the line as if it were shallow water.

The gambler shifted the lantern so the light threw the cross long and weird. "There," he purred. "Kneel to it and die slow. Or turn your back and live large. I ain't patient, friend."

Six Gun looked up the length of it. He thought of another cross, not wood in desert but wood on a hill men had named, a story he had heard as a boy and mocked as a man—sun dark at noon, curtain torn, a thief promised paradise in his last breath. He heard, unasked, a line that had not been read at the grave but might as well have been: *"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."* He had always been sure he knew exactly what he did.

He took off his hat. He did not kneel. He placed the hat on his boot toe and balanced it there with the practiced care of a man who doesn't want dust on felt he cannot replace.

"Make your speak," the gambler said, the easy tone spoiled by a speck of hunger. "Say the word that closes one road and opens the other."

Six Gun swallowed. He lifted his face to the wood. His voice, when it came, wasn't the street-iron he threw at men; it was the rough talk you aim at the animal that knows your ways. "I ain't got prayer," he said. "Don't know the right words. Just this." He turned his head not to the gambler, not to the night, but straight up beyond the wood and the stars. "Jesus."

The Name left his mouth without flourish. It walked out, plain. The lantern popped. Its colors guttered as if someone had given the chimney a smart tap. The gambler didn't move, but the corner of his smile tore, then rebuilt itself, then tore again, like a seam under stress.

Six Gun kept going because if he stopped he wouldn't start again. "I don't know what bargain you got for men," he said, and nodded at the gambler without looking away from the cross, "but I know mine. I got sins by the saddlebag. I got graves by the mile. I got a child's voice sayin' You came for the likes of me and a widow's voice sayin' I bring hell when I ride. Both might be true. I ain't sayin' I'll kneel. Not tonight. I ain't ready. But I ain't throwin' this Book in the fire neither. I ain't sayin' 'never' no more."

The wind came up the hill and went around the cross the way water splits around a rock in a stream. It lifted the hair at his brow and cooled the sweat under his hatband. Somewhere in it he thought he heard the barest shape of a word. Not his name. Not any word he could spell. Something like *hush* spoken to a bolting horse. He exhaled, long, shaky.

"Enough," the gambler said, and the voice lost its velvet. "You think that syllable saves you? You think speaking it buys you out of debts you signed with powder and lead?"

"No," Six Gun said, quick, before the pit could open and the chains could find his wrists again. "I think it keeps me from forgetting there's someone to owe."

He took a step. Not toward the cross; he didn't have that in him. Not away from it either. Sideways, closer to its shadow, so that the black line lay across his boots without him bending to it. He stood in it. It stood on him. The gambler's lantern hissed louder, then dimmed to a mean, steady glow.

"You'll fall," the gambler whispered, voice almost tender again, anger filed to patience like a knife brought back to whetstone. "If not here, then in the street. If not to fire, to tiredness. Men like you always fall."

"Maybe," Six Gun answered. He put his hat back on. It felt heavy and right. He slid the saddlebag across his shoulder so the Bible lay over his heart because that was where the strap found its rest, not because he planned it. "But not with you to catch me."

They went down the hill without looking at each other. At the bottom, where the lantern's circle of light began again, the gambler lifted his brows and gave him the same empty courtesy a cardsharp gives a man he's bled: a hat-tip that means *next time*. He did not vanish. He dimmed, like heat on the horizon, until the eye that wanted to see found nothing to fix on. The lantern burned alone for three breaths more and then winked out, and it did not leave the smell of oil.

Six Gun stood in the honest dark. The stars felt closer. The horse stamped and then relaxed, weight settling into one hip, the way horses do when they make their peace with night. He checked the cinch because that was what a man does when he needs his hands full; he ran a palm down the animal's shoulder and felt living heat; he looked up at the hill and saw the cross cut clear against the sky.

He spoke, not loud. “I ain’t ready to kneel.” The desert did not argue. “But I’m done sayin’ never.”

He climbed into the saddle. The leather creaked. Somewhere far off a coyote sang a line and gave it up. He turned the horse toward town. The Psalm rode with him, not the whole thing, not even a verse—just a fragment that fitted itself to hoofbeats the way a prayer fits to breath.

...Thou art with me... Thou art with me...

He didn’t know if it was true. He didn’t know if his mouth would find the Name in a street full of smoke again or if fear would tangle it on his tongue. He didn’t know if the cross would look like a gallows the next time he saw it. He knew only this: the offer behind him had lost its shine and the shadow before him had lost some of its teeth.

Back on the rise, the wooden arms threw their dark line down the hill. It didn’t reach him where he rode—not yet. But it followed, steady as a long memory, patient as dawn. And somewhere ahead, in a town that still smelled of ash and hymn, a preacher read by lamplight and a child whispered a Name toward the dark as if it had ears.

Six Gun Devil touched the saddlebag once, a habit becoming a habit, and let the horse choose the easy way down off the rock. He said nothing else to the night. But he did not spit, and he did not grind his teeth, and for the first time in longer than he could name, the road between one breath and the next felt passable.

Chapter Twenty-Six – The Gun That Wouldn’t Fire

Section One – The Challenge in the Street

The sun beat down merciless at noon, bleaching the street of Redemption into a strip of white dust. Heat shimmered off the rooftops, the kind of heat that made tempers short and shadows sharp. The town was restless—still licking wounds from the riders’ raid, still glancing at the graves behind the chapel when they thought no one saw.

It was in this unease that trouble came riding.

A lone figure approached from the south, spurs clinking, a long coat swinging around his boots. He was young, cocky, the kind of outlaw whose smirk carried louder than his boots. A pistol rode low on his hip, polished bright, his hand never far from it. He rode straight into the street, reined up before the saloon, and shouted loud enough for the whole town to hear:

“Where’s the Devil they whisper about? Where’s the gunman they say never misses?”

Heads turned. Curtains twitched. Mothers pulled children from the boardwalk.

Sheriff Elias stepped out from the jailhouse, squinting against the sun. “Best keep ridin’, son,” he called. “We’ve had enough buryin’ this week.”

But the stranger laughed, spitting into the dust. “Not ’til I test the legend. They say there’s a man here, scar on his face, death in his draw. They call him the Six Gun Devil. I came to see if he bleeds.”

A hush fell. The name carried weight, even when spat. Whispers rippled—*Six Gun, Six Gun, the Devil himself*.

And then he came.

Six Gun Devil stepped out of the saloon’s shadow, his spurs whispering on the boards. His coat swayed with each stride, his hat brim low, his scar catching the sun. His revolvers hung at his sides, black and worn, iron that had never failed him.

The crowd shifted back, making space, as though instinct knew where blood would fall.

The young outlaw grinned wide. “There he is. The devil in flesh. I heard you’re the fastest hand alive. Thought I’d stake my life on it.”

Six Gun said nothing. His silence was a weight heavier than words. He walked into the middle of the street, boots grinding the dust, and stopped ten paces away.

The air tightened. Windows filled with faces, voices hushed into silence. The desert seemed to hold its breath.

Elias muttered under his breath, “Lord, have mercy.”

Six Gun raised his eyes at last, his voice gravel, low and sure. “You don’t know what you’re askin’.”

The outlaw laughed. “I know enough. Draw, Devil. Let’s see if your soul’s still yours.”

The sun glared down. The street stilled.

Six Gun’s hand twitched near his Colt. But as his fingers brushed the grip, he felt it—the memory of the cross on the hill, the wood rough beneath his palm, the Psalm whispering, *Thou art with me*. His throat tightened. For the first time in years, he wondered what would happen if his gun failed him.

The crowd watched, wide-eyed, holding its breath for the draw that would decide more than a man’s life—it would decide whether the Devil’s legend still stood.

Chapter Twenty-Six – The Gun That Wouldn’t Fire

Section Two – The Gun That Wouldn’t Fire

The street was silent. Not even the horses tied along the hitch rails moved. The only sound was the faint rattle of a shutter in the wind.

Ten paces apart, two men stood—one young, arrogant, hungry for reputation. The other, scarred, heavy with shadows, a legend bound to iron and smoke.

Six Gun Devil's hand hovered near his revolver, his scar glinting in the sun. Across from him, the outlaw spat, grinning wide, his fingers twitching above polished steel.

Someone in the crowd whispered, "He never misses." Another muttered, "The Devil's gun always fires first."

The outlaw laughed, loud and sharp. "Then today the Devil bleeds."

Sheriff Elias stood on the boardwalk, rifle in hand but useless against the code of the street. His jaw clenched tight. "Lord, guide this town," he muttered under his breath.

The sun slid behind a thin cloud. Shadows lengthened. The moment stretched like a rope about to snap.

Then the outlaw shouted, "Draw!"

Two hands blurred. Two pistols cleared leather.

Six Gun's Colt came up smooth, faster than breath. His finger squeezed the trigger.

Click.

No thunder. No flame. No lead. Just a hollow sound, dry and final.

For the first time in his life, the Devil's gun did not fire.

Gasps ripped through the crowd. A woman screamed. Someone whispered, "God's hand stopped him."

The outlaw's pistol roared. The slug ripped through the air—straight at Six Gun's chest.

Time slowed. He saw it spin, saw sunlight flash off brass, saw death come like an old friend.

But the bullet missed. By inches. It tore a splinter from the post behind him, ringing off iron. Dust puffed at his boots.

The young gunman froze, eyes wide. "What—"

Six Gun cocked the Colt again, fired.

Click.

Again. Dead silence. The revolver would not speak.

The crowd erupted in shouts, some crying out in fear, others in awe. "The Devil's gun's gone silent!" someone shouted. "Judgment!" another cried.

The outlaw laughed wild, high, hysterical. "Your power's gone, Devil! Your curse is broken!" He leveled his pistol, thumbed back the hammer. "This street's mine!"

But his laugh carried too long. His aim wavered. And Sheriff Elias fired.

The crack split the chaos. The outlaw jerked, spun, and fell, his grin frozen as dust rose around him.

Silence crashed down again.

Six Gun stood motionless, revolver still in his hand, useless. His scarred face was pale beneath the brim of his hat, his jaw locked tight. He stared at the Colt as though it were a stranger. The iron that had never failed him. The iron that had spoken death for years.

Dead now. Silent.

He lowered it slowly, holstering with a hand that trembled, though no one dared say so. His eyes flicked to the cross street, to the chapel's steeple, to the horizon where the desert stretched endless.

Was it chance? A flaw in steel? Or was it a sign?

The Psalm rang in his memory, unbidden, unwanted: *"Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me."*

He swallowed hard, his throat dry. A question gnawed at him, sharper than any bullet.

Had the Shepherd's hand stopped him?

Section Three – The Aftermath

The outlaw's body lay twisted in the dust, his polished revolver half-buried where it slipped from his grasp. The sound of Elias's rifle shot still rang in the ears of the townsfolk, though the echo had long since died.

No one moved at first. They only stared — at the corpse, at the sheriff with smoke curling from his barrel, and most of all at Six Gun Devil, who stood frozen in the middle of the street, his Colt still in hand, useless as iron pipe.

The silence broke in whispers.

"Did you see it?" a woman gasped. "His gun wouldn't fire."

"Twice," another muttered, awe trembling in his voice. "The Devil's gun... silent."

"It's a sign," an old man rasped. "The Lord's hand. Judgment come on him."

Children clung tighter to mothers' skirts. Men shifted uneasy, not sure whether to be relieved or afraid.

Six Gun holstered his weapon slowly, deliberately, as though afraid it might betray him further if he moved too quick. His hand trembled once before he forced it still. He glanced at Elias, but the sheriff only gave him a steady look — no triumph, no fear, only the kind of grim acceptance a lawman wears when death comes too often.

Elias slung his rifle and spoke for the town. "It's over. He drew, he lost. Now bury him."

Two men moved reluctantly to the body, lifting it by the arms and legs, carrying it toward the edge of town. The whispers followed them, but their eyes lingered on Six Gun.

He felt the weight of those stares like stones pressing into his back. The Devil who never missed. The outlaw whose revolver had never betrayed him. The legend who had lived by iron and fire. And now... silence.

He turned on his heel and walked. Not to the saloon, not to the jail, not even to the livery. He walked out past the chapel, past the graves still fresh with flowers, past the burned cottonwood at the edge of town. His boots crunched gravel, his spurs clinked, but his revolver made no sound at all.

At the Edge of Town

He stopped on a rise where the desert opened wide, the sun sinking into streaks of blood-red along the horizon. He pulled the Colt from its holster, stared at it in his hand. The steel caught the last light, gleaming like it always had, but when he thumbed back the hammer and squeezed the trigger —

Click.

His stomach turned. The gun was loaded. He had checked. He thumbed again, spun the cylinder, squeezed.

Click.

The revolver would not fire.

He dropped to one knee, breath heaving, sweat dripping from his brow. His scar burned hot. He remembered the gambler's voice, whispering bargains by firelight. He remembered the cross on the hill, its shadow stretching across his boots. He remembered Josiah's words at the burial: *"I will fear no evil."*

He wanted to curse, to shout, to fling the Colt into the desert. But his voice cracked instead, hoarse and broken. "Why?"

Behind him, footsteps crunched. Josiah Markham approached slow, his Bible tucked under one arm, his eyes steady. He had followed, though Six Gun hadn't heard him until now.

The preacher stopped a few paces away, watching the outlaw wrestle with the weapon in his hand.

Six Gun's voice was low, ragged. "It never failed me. Not once. 'Til today." He lifted the revolver, shaking it as though to shake sense from steel. "Why?"

Josiah's eyes softened, but his voice carried firm, sure. *"No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper."* (Isaiah 54:17).

Six Gun froze. The words landed heavier than bullets. He stared at the preacher, at the cross-shaped shadow cast by his own gun barrel against the dirt.

Josiah stepped closer. "Your iron ain't what saves you, Devil. It never was. The hand of the Lord is stronger than steel. Today, He showed you."

Six Gun swallowed hard, throat tight. "Or cursed me."

Josiah shook his head. "No. If He meant to curse you, that bullet would've found your heart. Instead, it missed. He spared you. That jam wasn't a curse. It was mercy."

Six Gun looked back at the revolver, his reflection warped in its polished frame. His hand trembled. Mercy? He had buried too many to believe mercy had room for him. And yet the Psalm whispered again in his memory, unbidden: “*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.*”

He shoved the Colt back into its holster, rising slow. His voice was hoarse, half-muttered, half-prayer. “Not yet.”

But the words shook this time. Not in defiance, not in pride — in fear. Fear that his legend was crumbling. Fear that God Himself had touched his weapon. Fear that the cross on the hill would not let him go.

Josiah laid a hand on his shoulder. “Not yet, maybe. But closer.”

The outlaw didn’t shrug him off. He only stood in the desert twilight, staring at the horizon where the sun bled into night, wondering what would fail him next — his guns, his name, or his soul.

Chapter Twenty-Seven – Blood Money

Section One – The Job Done

The sun was sinking low when Six Gun Devil rode back into Redemption, the dust of the trail still clinging to his coat. His horse lathered, sides heaving, but steady. Across his saddle horn hung a body — tied at wrists and ankles, limp, a dark stain spreading across the shirt where the bullet had ended him.

The townsfolk saw him before he even entered the street. Children ducked into doorways, women pulled laundry from the lines, men muttered to each other in low voices. Whispers rippled ahead of him like a shadow: *The Devil’s back. The Devil’s collected again.*

Six Gun paid no mind. His eyes were hard, his face unreadable beneath the brim of his hat. But inside, something churned. The Psalm still echoed, the cross still burned in memory, the click of a silent Colt still haunted his ears. Yet here he was again — another job done, another life taken, another payday earned.

He rode straight to the saloon. The employer waited there, a cattle baron with a gut hanging over his belt and a gold watch chain gleaming across his vest. Two hired men flanked him, rifles across their laps, eyes sharp but wary. The baron’s smile was wide but nervous, the smile of a man who liked violence only when someone else carried it out for him.

“Dead or alive,” the baron drawled, tossing back whiskey. “Didn’t care which. You done good, Devil.”

Six Gun didn’t answer. He swung the body from his saddle, dropping it with a thud into the street. The crowd gasped. The baron’s hired men checked the face, nodded, and hauled it away like a sack of grain.

Inside, the baron poured coins from a leather pouch onto the table. Gold, silver, enough to make a poor man rich. The clink rang sharp, echoing in the hush of the saloon. Men leaned from their tables to watch.

“Blood’s worth its weight, eh?” the baron said with a grin.

Six Gun’s eyes flicked to the money. He scooped it into his saddlebag without counting. The weight sagged the leather, but it felt heavier than it ever had before.

The crowd stared as he turned to leave. Some in awe, others in fear. One man muttered, “The Devil’s purse never empties.” Another whispered back, “Ain’t no man gets rich on blood without payin’ twice over.”

Six Gun pushed through the batwings into the street. The sun caught his scar, and for a moment, it looked like fire.

But inside, he felt nothing. No thrill of gold, no pride of conquest. Only a sick hollowness gnawing deeper than hunger, heavier than coin.

Section Two – The Emptiness

The room above the saloon always smelled the same—old smoke ground into floorboards, lamp oil, sour whiskey, and the must of quilts that had seen too many nights and not enough washing. Six Gun Devil pushed the door with his shoulder and let it close behind him on the murmur of voices from below. He set the saddlebag on the table by the window, the one with a split plank you could look through if you stooped and the light was right. Evening poured up from the street in a red-gold haze. Dust danced in it like tired fireflies.

He loosened the strap and turned the bag over. Coins spilled out in a metal rain—gold first, then silver, then a sifting of smaller pieces that sounded cheap in the pile. The clink went on longer than it should have, piling into a mound that caught the last light and threw it back at him in little knives. Two coins rolled apart and spun near the edge until they settled flat with a final, smug ring.

He stood staring. There it was: pay for the job done, pay for a name men whispered, pay for the life he’d chosen. He reached out and sifted the money. Cold. Heavy. For a second—just a second—muscle memory reached for the old jolt, the quick, mean pleasure the shine used to throw into his veins. Nothing came. The handful of coin lay on his palm like stones that didn’t belong there. He let them slide back onto the table.

Below, the piano stumbled through a hymn half-remembered, then lurched into a waltz. Laughter rose and fell. A glass broke. Somebody cursed. The floor trembled under boot heels. Life went on, even after a body had been dragged down the alley to the back lot where strangers waited out their last sun in the dust.

Six Gun poured whiskey. It sloshed over the rim and ran into the cracks of the wood. He tossed it back. The burn should have scoured him clean for a breath, but it only painted his tongue with metal. He poured again. The second drink landed heavier and went to work slower. He set the glass down and listened to it wobble. The coins looked back.

A thin fly landed on the pile and cleaned its legs. He flicked it away with a finger and spat a curse at his own pettiness. The room felt too small for his chest. He shoved the window up and leaned into the

cooling air. Out on the street, a wagon creaked by; the driver lifted his hand without looking up, the way men greet trouble as if it were a neighbor you keep because you cannot see how to move.

He shut the window and turned back to the table. The Psalm from the graveside rose uninvited: *He restoreth my soul*. He laughed once, a short, rusted sound. “Restore this,” he muttered, and raked a fist through the coins until they scattered toward the edges like minnows under a hand. A few fell through the crack in the table and pinged on the chair’s rung. He left them where they lay.

He sat. The chair complained. He unlatched his holster and laid the Colt on the table among the coins. The revolver looked the same as always, blacked and clean, cylinder oiled, grips rubbed by a thousand draws into a dull luster. He thumbed the hammer back, feeling the notches, the predictable give, the way a man learns a tool until it feels like bone. He lifted the barrel an inch, aimed at the far wall where the plaster bubbled around an old nail. He pulled the trigger.

Click.

He closed his eyes and set the gun down like a sleeping child he didn’t want to wake to find dead. For a long beat he listened for his pulse. It thudded against his ribs, slow and hard. The jam had not left him. It rode with him, a hand laid across the muzzle by someone stronger than his pride. He reached for a coin to busy his fingers and felt a tacky drag that wasn’t there. He lifted his hand and saw no stain, but his mind insisted: blood.

He wiped his palm on his thigh and laughed again, softer, without humor. “Blood money.” He let the phrase sit in the room with him, see if it would blink. It didn’t. He remembered a story somebody’s mother had told him in a kitchen he hadn’t been welcome in for long—thirty pieces of silver, a rope, a field with a name no decent man wanted on his tongue. He had mocked it then. A man had to eat; a man had to pay for bullets. Now the coins on his table looked like the wrong kind of field sown with the wrong kind of seed.

He drank again. It didn’t help.

Memory flooded uncalled: the first time he’d been paid real money for a gunman’s work. He’d been sixteen, maybe, mean with a boy’s hunger and a grown man’s thirst. A rancher with red hands and a smile that never warmed had slapped three silver dollars in his palm for chasing a thief down and bringing back a horse that had more sense than both men combined. He’d wanted to whoop, to throw his hat, to taste sugar and buy boots that didn’t leak. He had done all that and more, and the coins had sung while they spent.

Years later, the numbers got bigger. He learned what a scatter of gold felt like in a pocket—heavy, handsome, convincing. He learned how a man’s blood settles when you tell yourself the kill was “clean.” He learned how to walk away from a job and let the money speak louder than the face you left behind. The coin sang, and the song drowned out sermons and sobs and whatever creaked in him at night.

Tonight the song was gone. Coins lay dumb as gravel. The only music was below—the piano losing a fight with its own keys—and the faint ring still living in his ears from a rifle fired at high noon because his weapon would not.

He shoved back from the table and paced the room, four long steps to the wall, four back. On the third turn he kicked the saddlebag out of habit, making sure no one had slipped a hand into it between door and stairs. The bag grunted, the Bible inside shifting against leather. He stopped.

He didn't open it. Not yet. He stood over the pile and said to the room, "What's a man profit..." The rest of the verse hung just out of reach, like a coat on a nail a little too high for a tired arm. He could hear the cadence of it in Josiah's voice, could see the preacher's hands opening like he was offering bread and not words. He shook his head hard, as if he could rattle the Scripture out into the dust.

On a reckless impulse, he scraped a handful of coins into his palm and threw them against the wall. They hit and fell, a scatter of bright, stupid birds with broken wings. One bounced back toward him and spun in a tight circle at his boot toe until it settled with the figure of Liberty staring up, her face cut by a gouge through the cheek. He ground his heel lightly on the image and then lifted it. A dent, nothing more. Still, he put that coin apart from the rest, away from the ruin. He did not know why.

The door thumped once under a knuckle and swung a few inches with the habit of a room used to being entered without permission. Bart the barkeep shoved his head in, weighed the scene in a glance, and worked his mouth around whatever greeting he'd planned until it came out like this: "I brung your change from the bottle, Mr. Devil." He set two coins down on the sill and left them there, half in, half out, the way a man sets food for a wolf. "You, uh... want a game sent up? Hank's runnin' a friendly table if you got the itch."

Six Gun looked from the coins at the sill to the coins on the table. The urge to play used to rise as sure as the river after rain. Hold cards, read eyes, win back what you'd just paid for bullets—that had been its own kind of Sabbath. Tonight the itch didn't come. He shook his head once. "Not friendly enough."

Bart disappeared with relief, scooping his change back off the sill so fast one coin clinked to the floor and rolled under the bed. Six Gun listened to him lumber down the hall and wondered when the barkeep had learned to fear a man on the second floor more than the men drinking on the first.

He poured again and didn't drink it. He sat instead and laid both hands flat on the table, palms down among the scattered metal and the quiet gun. Under his right hand, a coin warmed; under his left, the wood stayed cool. He slid the glass away, distant, like he might shove distance between himself and the man who had just earned this heap.

He could leave. He could take the money and ride for any horizon the map could hold. He could put days between himself and the graves, miles between himself and a cross on a hill and a preacher with a voice that carved sentences into a man's chest. He could buy new boots for a dozen men and a better horse and a softer bed and women who'd smile because coin taught mouths how to do that. He counted the things off and felt each one fail as quickly as he named it.

The floorboards creaked. Not footsteps—buildings settle at night—but the sound put a memory in him of the jailhouse, quiet in the hours when even a sheriff's courage takes a chair and puts its head in its hands. He saw Elias's face, the lines by the eyes, the way his mouth seemed set by a blacksmith's hammer into duty's shape. The sheriff had fired because Six Gun's gun had not. Whatever else the day had said, it had said that. The law had stood where legend had stuttered.

“What are you doing to me?” he asked the room—not to the coins and not to the Colt and not to the ceiling, but to the Not Yet that had been his shield and now felt like a rope around his chest. He expected no answer and got none. He closed his eyes, and the silence became a kind of seeing: the children’s graves, the river’s shine, cross-shadow on boots, a lantern with wrong-colored flame, a brand cracking, a Name shouted raw and plain.

The piano below tripped over a run and died. Voices filled the gap, then hushed, as if the building itself remembered there was a man above who had brought a dead body for pay and might be listening.

He stood again because sitting made his skin feel one size too small. He gathered the coins. The pile felt obscene now, a little mound of reasons. He took the leather pouch from the saddlebag—another job’s pay, another man’s absence measured out in ounces—and pushed tonight’s haul into it until the neck strained. He tied it and set it at the edge of the table. He could not bear the glitter. The pouch made the money look honest, like flour or salt. It was not.

He looked at the door. He looked at the window. He looked at the pouch again. Time stretched, thin and tight as wire. He could hear the preacher say the words he had half-summoned a minute ago; the voice spoke from memory as if standing right there, and now the coat on the nail met his reach: “*For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?*” (Matthew 16:26).

He flinched like the verse had hands. The glass he’d pushed away tipped and went down, whiskey sluicing across the table into the crack and dripping to the floor. The smell rose sharp. He stepped back. The spill made a brown river through the coins he hadn’t gathered yet, beading on the God-gouged face of Liberty before it fell.

“Profit,” he said softly, tasting the word like a man tastes iron when he’s bit his own mouth. He lifted the pouch and weighed it. His arm lowered an inch under the heft. He set it back down as if it might bruise the wood.

A thought came uninvited and sat on the edge of his mind the way a raven sits on a fence you wish it would leave: *Give it back.*

To who? The cattle baron? He pictured the man’s grin. The idea soured. To the family of the rustler he’d brought in dead? He pictured a woman he’d never seen, a kid he’d never know, a table with more emptiness than bread on it. The thought didn’t sour. It complicated. He could put that pouch on a doorstep and walk away. He could.

Another thought, slyer: *Keep it. Use it to buy bullets to shoot the men who need killing.* He could dress that up as justice until it fit in the mirror. He stared at himself in the window’s dark, at the faint white of scar, the flat line of mouth. He had lived long by that argument. Tonight it felt thin as paper held to a lamp.

He dragged a hand down his face and went to his knees because he had dropped something—he told himself it was a coin—and found his breath stalled out there with him. The floor smelled like pine and spilled beer and a hundred lives. He did not pray. He did not know how. He put his palm flat and said the Name under it like a man says a password to a door he isn’t sure will open: “Jesus.”

Nothing moved. But the pressure in his chest eased a hair, enough to pull air the rest of the way into his lungs without fighting for it. He got up, slow, like a man after a long sickness, and took the pouch again. This time he slid it into the saddlebag, not because he wanted to keep it but because he could not leave it looking at him. He buckled the flap and the sound of the strap tongue finding a hole calmed him more than the whiskey had. Leather surety. Horse-sense. Small mercies.

The Colt lay where he'd left it, black against tarnished silver. He should clean it. He could take it apart, oil the hand and the ratchet, check the spring, find the grit that had crept where it didn't belong. He knew every part blind. He laid a fingertip on the cylinder and felt the faint burr the misfires had raised. He did not pick up the screwdriver. Instead, he touched the saddlebag again and kept his hand there.

Below, laughter broke big and real, not mean—somebody told a story good enough to lay the whole room flat for a breath. Six Gun stood very still and listened like a man outside a house he hasn't dared enter. The sound surprised him, a reminder that joy hadn't moved out of the county yet. It cut him and it comforted him. He didn't know what to do with that, either.

He blew out the lamp. Evening became night without asking him, and the room gentled, shapes going honest in shadow. He sat on the bed and leaned forward, elbows on knees, looking at the dark window until it returned his stare without judgment. The coins he hadn't swept to the pouch cooled on the table, winking once when a wagon lantern angled past below and then going black like eyes closed.

He spoke once more into the room, voice low enough a man would have to be leaning over him to hear: "Not yet." The words had no teeth tonight. They sounded tired. Tired men change or die. He lay back without undressing, boots on, hat tipped down to block the sliver of street light, and let the emptiness sit on his chest like a cat that has chosen its spot. He did not fight it. He did not feed it. He waited.

The Psalm did not come. The gambler's voice did not creep. The cross on the hill did not rise in the window. Only the memory of the click—twice, at noon—stayed with him, clean and unavoidable. And under that sound, like a bass string thrummed once and left to ring, the verse would not leave: *What profit... what profit...*

Sometime toward morning, his body borrowed an hour of sleep from a future that would want it back. When he woke before dawn, the room was gray, the coins were the same, and the saddlebag was heavier with choices. He washed his face in the basin, buckled on the Colt he did not yet trust, and stood a long while with his hand on the door latch, the way a man stands at a fork he cannot ride both ways.

He didn't know it, but a pair of boots were already choosing the stairs—Josiah's—Bible under one arm, a verse bright in his mouth and a grief soft behind his eyes. The preacher would find him and set Scripture in the center of that table like bread, and Six Gun would have to decide whether to eat or throw it.

For now, the outlaw opened the door and let the morning in. The street smelled like last night's beer and first light's hope. He went down to meet both, empty and not yet empty enough.

Section Three – The Preacher’s Words

The saloon was quieter in the gray light of morning, its usual noise dulled by the hangover of a long night. A few men still snored with heads on tables, cards scattered around them like leaves after a storm. The piano stood silent, a glass of stale beer sweating on its lid.

Six Gun sat alone at a table near the back, the pouch of coins before him. He had poured some out, and they lay in little stacks, crooked towers of gold and silver leaning against each other. He had stared at them until the lamp burned out, until the first rooster crowed, until the light crept gray through the cracked shutters.

Now he sat with his elbows on the table, head bowed, hat tipped low. A glass of whiskey sat untouched at his side. The pouch still bulged heavy, but he felt lighter for having emptied part of it. Too light. Hollow.

The batwings creaked. Footsteps came steady, sure, without hurry or fear. Josiah Markham entered, hat in hand, Bible under one arm. He looked at the scene — the outlaw, the coins, the untouched whiskey — and said nothing at first. He pulled a chair opposite and sat down, the wood creaking.

Six Gun didn’t lift his head. “Come to preach me clean?”

Josiah’s voice was gentle. “I came to sit.”

For a long moment, they did just that. Two men, one with a gun at his hip, one with a Bible at his hand, sitting across from each other with the weight of silence between them.

At last Six Gun lifted his eyes. They were bloodshot, not from drink but from the lack of it. “What’s it worth, preacher? A man’s life. A man’s soul.” He nudged a coin with his scarred finger. It clinked and rolled. “How many of these?”

Josiah opened the Bible slowly, not even looking down at the page. His voice carried the verse as if it had been waiting all night in his chest:

“For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Matthew 16:26).

The words hit the table harder than the coins. They seemed to rattle the glass, to echo in the warped boards.

Six Gun stared. His mouth twisted. “I ain’t gained the whole world. Just pockets full of silver and hands full of blood.”

Josiah met his eyes, steady. “And how much of your soul have you traded for it?”

The outlaw laughed, short and bitter. He shoved the coins across the table. They spilled to the floor, clattering loud in the hush of the saloon. The few drunks still awake stirred, blinked, muttered, then sank back into sleep.

“Blood money,” Six Gun spat. “Every piece of it. Feels like it stains my hands, preacher. Can’t wash it out. Not with whiskey. Not with work. Not with killin’ more devils than I meet. It don’t come clean.”

Josiah leaned forward, voice low but fierce. “Because it was never meant to. You can’t buy back a soul with silver. You can’t pay off sin like a debt collector. Only grace washes blood from hands — and it comes from a cross, not a coin.”

Six Gun’s jaw clenched. He grabbed the glass of whiskey and hurled it against the wall. It shattered, amber running down like old tears. “I ain’t no saint,” he barked. “Don’t ask me to be.”

The preacher didn’t flinch. “I’m not asking you to be. I’m telling you what you already know: this money can’t fill you. That Colt can’t save you. That name folks whisper — Devil — it ain’t you forever. You’re still breathing. That means you still can choose.”

Six Gun’s hand dropped to the pouch, squeezing the leather tight. His voice cracked, low and angry. “I keep sayin’ it. Every time you come at me with that Book. Not yet. Not yet. You hear? Not. Yet.”

But even as he said it, the words turned sour in his mouth. He leaned back, disgust twisting his face. “And I’m sick of sayin’ it. Sick of ridin’ with emptiness. Sick of countin’ coin that feels like nails. Sick of seein’ graves when I close my eyes.”

Josiah’s hand rested on the Bible, steady as stone. “Then stop running. Stop saying ‘not yet.’ You know His mercy’s chasing you, Six Gun. You’ve seen it — at the graves, at the river, in the gun that wouldn’t fire. Mercy’s dogged your trail, and still you ride from it.”

The outlaw swallowed hard. His scar pulsed red in the dawn light. He wanted to shout, to curse, to reach for his revolver just to feel something certain. Instead, he sat still, his hand loosening on the pouch, coins clinking softly inside.

For the first time, he didn’t spit out an answer. Didn’t throw back a sharp word. He only whispered, “Then what’s left of me, preacher?”

Josiah’s eyes softened. “Enough. Enough for Him to restore.”

Six Gun lowered his head. His whisper came again, broken, weary, disgusted. “Not yet.”

But it wasn’t a shield anymore. It was a plea.

He shoved the pouch of coins across the table toward Josiah and stood, boots heavy on the floorboards. Without another word, he walked out into the morning, spurs ringing slow, leaving the blood money behind.

The preacher stayed seated, hand on the Bible, the pouch of silver before him. He whispered a prayer for the outlaw under his breath, words only heaven heard.

Outside, the town stirred awake, sunlight washing over the dust, and Six Gun walked into it — emptier than before, but maybe, just maybe, closer to mercy.

Chapter Twenty-Eight – A Child’s Faith

Section One – The Encounter

The street of Redemption lay quiet at dusk, the air cooling after another punishing day. The saloon lamps glowed faint against the darkening sky, and the dust of wagon wheels hung low, stirred only by the faintest breeze.

Six Gun Devil sat on the porch rail outside the saloon, hat tipped low, his scar catching the fading light. A half-empty bottle rested by his boot, but he hadn’t lifted it in a while. His revolver sat heavy at his hip, silent these days in a way that gnawed at him. He stared at the dirt road stretching into the horizon, where the last fire of sunset burned.

He heard the footsteps before he saw her. Light steps, quick but hesitant. He lifted his head, and there she was: Hannah Schaefer, clutching a little Bible so worn its cover was peeling. She stood before him in her patched dress, hair in braids, eyes wide and steady in the twilight.

Six Gun frowned. “Your mama know you’re out here?”

Hannah nodded, though he doubted it was true. “She says to stay away from you. But I don’t listen.”

That tugged something inside him he didn’t want tugged. He leaned back, voice gravel. “You oughta. She’s right.”

But Hannah just hugged the Bible tighter. “Why do they call you the Devil?”

The question hit harder than a bullet. Six Gun stared at her, then into the dust again. His voice was flat, bitter. “‘Cause I’ve done things no man ought. Things make folks believe hell rides with me.”

Hannah tilted her head. “Does that mean you can’t be forgiven?”

He almost laughed, a dry, broken sound. “Some stains don’t wash out, little one. Not with all the rivers in the world.”

She shook her head fiercely. “That’s not true. Mama says the Bible says different.” She flipped through her tattered pages, lips moving as she searched. Then she found it and read, her voice high but sure:

“But if we confess our sins to Him, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.” (1 John 1:9).

The words rang in the quiet street, pure as the evening bell. Six Gun felt them land heavy, sharper than iron. He shifted, restless, scar burning hotter in the dim light.

“You don’t know what I’ve done,” he muttered.

But Hannah stepped closer. “I don’t have to. God knows. And He can still forgive you. Even you.”

The outlaw closed his eyes, fighting the sudden lump in his throat. For all the sermons Josiah had preached, for all the graves and Psalms and crosses — it was this small voice, fragile yet fierce, that shook him most.

He opened his eyes, but Hannah wasn't afraid. She stood there, clutching her Bible, looking up at the man the town called Devil, and her gaze was clear as spring water.

And for the first time, Six Gun Devil felt something close to fear.

Section Two – The Prayer

The lamps along Main Street flickered to life, their glow stretching thin across the dust. The town had gone still, as if the night itself leaned down to listen.

Hannah held her little Bible tight against her chest. Her eyes never left Six Gun's. He had faced gunmen, night riders, even the whisper of demons in his dreams — yet the gaze of one child undid him more than any bullet.

"Little one," he rasped, voice low, gravel scraping stone, "you don't know what you're askin'. Devil's a name I earned."

But Hannah only stepped closer. Her braids swung against her shoulders. "No. It's a name people gave you. God has another one."

He almost barked a laugh, but it stuck in his throat. Another name? He thought of graves and coins and the cross on the hill. His hand twitched toward his saddlebag where the Bible lay heavy. He forced it still.

And then she did something no outlaw's pride could brace for.

Hannah bent her knees in the dirt. Right there in the middle of the street, in front of the Devil himself, she knelt. She laid her Bible open in her lap and folded her hands. Her small voice lifted, clear as a bell:

"Dear Jesus, please save Mister Devil. Please forgive him like You said You would. You died for everybody, even the worst. Please show him You still love him. Amen."

The prayer carried into every doorway. Curtains stirred. Lamps dimmed. People peeked out. The town saw it — the outlaw with scars and shadows, and a child on her knees praying for him.

Sarah Schaefer came running, apron flapping, her voice sharp with fear. "Hannah! Get up this instant! Don't you kneel before that man!"

But Hannah didn't move. She looked at her mother, then back at Six Gun. Her voice rose louder, trembling but unyielding.

"Jesus loves you, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

The words were simple, childish even, but they struck harder than lead. Six Gun's jaw tightened. His scar throbbed. He had heard men curse, plead, and bargain on their deathbeds, but he had never heard anyone pray for him. Not him.

Sarah reached her daughter and gripped her arm, trying to pull her up. Hannah clung tighter to her Bible. "Mama, don't! God can forgive him! He ain't too far gone!"

Gasps rose from the watching crowd. Some scoffed, shaking their heads. “She’s touched.” Others wept silently, moved by her faith.

Josiah Markham stepped from the chapel door, lantern in hand, his voice solemn. “Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings, Thou hast perfected praise.” (Matthew 21:16).

Six Gun felt the ground tilt. His chest burned, his throat knotted, his hands itched for the revolver at his side just to hold something certain. He wanted to curse, to walk away, to bury the moment in dust. But he couldn’t. The child’s prayer clung to him like a brand.

He whispered rough, almost to himself, “Not yet.”

But even he heard the break in his voice.

Hannah smiled, still kneeling, still bold. “One day you’ll say yes. I know it.”

Her words pierced deeper than any bullet ever had.

Section Three – The Outlaw’s Struggle

The street held its breath long after Hannah’s prayer faded. The night air was cool now, the kind that usually soothed tempers, but the silence felt sharp, bristling with something unseen.

Six Gun Devil stood rigid, scar burning like a coal. The crowd watched him from shadowed porches and half-open windows, waiting to see if he’d mock the girl, strike her down with words, or walk away as he always had.

But he did none of those. He only stared, jaw tight, eyes dark and unreadable under the brim of his hat.

Sarah pulled at her daughter again, voice breaking. “Hannah, please. You don’t know what you’re doing.”

The child clutched her Bible tighter. “Yes I do. I’m prayin’.”

The words seemed to echo, holy in their simplicity. Josiah stepped forward, lantern glow casting long shadows. He looked at the outlaw, then at the kneeling child, and his voice carried steady, quoting Scripture that fit the moment as if it had been waiting for it:

“Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.”
(Matthew 19:14).

The crowd murmured. Some nodded, others shook their heads. But no one dared laugh.

Six Gun’s breath came rough. The prayer had done what no bullet ever managed: it slipped past the armor he wore, past scar and iron and pride. It unsettled him, shook him, made him feel seen in a way that was more terrifying than any duel.

He forced a sound from his throat, hoarse and cracked. “I ain’t... I ain’t worth prayin’ for.”

Hannah stood now, dust clinging to her dress, but her eyes shone clear. “Jesus thinks you are.”

The words landed like a shot. Six Gun staggered back half a step, boots grinding in the dirt. He reached for his revolver, not to draw, but to feel its weight — to remind himself who he was. But even the gun felt traitorous now, memory of the jam echoing in his ears.

Josiah's voice cut through again, steady as iron. "*Out of the mouth of babes Thou hast perfected praise.*" (Matthew 21:16). He set the lantern down, his gaze steady on the outlaw. "God used her faith to reach where my words couldn't."

Six Gun turned away, eyes on the horizon, throat thick. He muttered his old line, the one that had kept him safe, kept him distant, kept him hard. "Not yet."

But this time it shook. This time it sounded less like defiance and more like surrender postponed.

The crowd began to disperse, murmuring. Some mocked softly — "The Devil undone by a child." Others wiped tears, clinging to hope. Sarah pulled Hannah close, half in anger, half in awe, and led her home.

Josiah lingered, his hand resting on the Bible he carried. He looked at Six Gun with something like sorrow and something like expectation. "You can keep runnin', Devil," he said gently. "But the prayers of a child ride faster than any horse you own."

Six Gun didn't answer. His scar throbbed. His chest felt hollow and heavy at once. He turned, boots crunching in the dust, and walked into the night.

For once, he wasn't haunted by gunfire or graves. Not even the gambler's voice whispered in his ears. What followed him into the desert darkness was softer, stranger, harder to bear — a child's prayer, spoken with faith too stubborn to let go.

And though he muttered "*Not yet*" again as he disappeared into the black, he knew in his bones the walls around his soul had cracked.

Chapter Twenty-Nine – Campfire Confession

Section One – The Lonely Fire

The desert opened wide around him, a sea of sand and scrub stretching to the mountains, the night sky blazing with more stars than he cared to count. Six Gun Devil rode until the town's lamps disappeared behind him, until the graves and the chapel steeple were swallowed by distance. Only then did he slow, pick a rise near a dry creekbed, and build a small fire.

The flames licked low, thin against the immensity of the sky. His horse grazed nearby, ears twitching at unseen noises, but calm. Six Gun sat cross-legged on the hard ground, revolver by his knee, saddlebag within arm's reach. From the bag came the faint outline of the Bible pressing against the leather. He hadn't opened it since the Psalm in the desert. He wasn't sure if he ever would.

He leaned forward, rubbing his scar absentmindedly, staring into the fire. Sparks drifted upward, swallowed by the darkness. His breath fogged faint in the cooling air.

All evening, Hannah's voice had clung to him: *"God can forgive you. Even you."* Her child's faith had shaken him worse than a bullet ever had. Now, alone under starlight, the words still gnawed at him.

He picked up a stick, stirred the coals, then dropped it in. The fire hissed. He muttered to himself, "You're losin' your mind. Hearin' kids' prayers in your skull."

But the silence answered back, heavy and pressing.

He glanced at the Bible again. His throat tightened. He spat into the dirt. "Don't reckon I'm ready for that."

Still, something in him cracked open. The fire's crackle, the stars' endless watching, the child's prayer echoing — it all pressed until he had to speak. Not to a man, not to the preacher, not to the town. Just out loud. Into the night.

His voice came low, ragged. "All right then. If You're listenin'—and I ain't sayin' You are—hear me out. Just me and the fire."

He drew in a long breath, the kind a man takes before pulling a trigger. "I've carried graves in my shadow. Men I shot for coin. Boys who thought they could draw faster. A woman once—caught in the way. I told myself it weren't my fault. But I see her face, every time I close my eyes."

He paused, staring at the coals. His jaw clenched. His words were hard, but they came anyway.

"Don't know how many I've killed. More than my hands could count. Names I forgot, faces I never learned. I called it work. I called it survival. But it was blood. All of it."

His voice cracked. He looked at the stars, fierce and ashamed at once. "You hearin' this, Lord? You keepin' tally? 'Cause I can't carry it no more."

The fire popped, throwing sparks upward, as if to answer.

Six Gun's shoulders sagged. He rubbed his scar and muttered, "This ain't prayer. Just a man talkin' to the night."

But deep down, he knew better.

Section Two – The Confession

The outlaw sat hunched by the fire, knees pulled close, hat tipped forward so the starlight caught only the scar across his cheek. The flames wavered, weak against the dark, but steady enough to listen.

Six Gun cleared his throat, though no one was there to hear. "All right then," he muttered. "Reckon I'll lay it out. Ain't never said it aloud, not to a man. Maybe not even to myself proper."

He stared into the flames until his eyes watered, then spoke, voice gravel-thick.

"I remember the first. Sixteen years old, green and mean. Fella accused me of cheatin' at cards. He weren't wrong. He swung first. I drew faster. Bullet caught him in the chest. He hit the floor like a sack of meal. Folks scattered. I stood there proud as a rooster. Proud. That was the day I learned I was quicker'n most. And I liked it."

He spat into the dirt. “Liked it too much.”

The wind shifted, carrying the scent of sage and smoke. He swallowed hard, words dragging like chains.

“From there, it was easy. Quicker hand, colder eyes. Rustlers, ranch hands, lawmen. Any man fool enough to step against me. I told myself it weren’t murder. Said it was fair — they drew, I shot. Truth is, I was lookin’ for excuses to prove myself faster. Killin’ was my trade before I knew it.”

The fire popped, sending sparks skyward. His gaze followed them, up into the black river of stars.

“Then came the jobs. Kill for pay. Run a man out of his land, or put him in it permanent. I didn’t ask questions. Just counted coins. Said it was survival, but I was greedy. Every coin bought another drink, another bullet, another reason to keep goin’.”

His voice roughened. He reached for a stone and threw it into the fire. It hissed and cracked.

“One of ’em still haunts me.” His face tightened. “A rancher’s wife. She stepped out the door when the bullets flew. She weren’t s’posed to be there. But my shot went wide. Took her down. Her boy screamed. I walked away. Couldn’t even bury her.”

He dragged a hand over his face, shaking his head. “I see her in dreams. More’n the rest.”

He lifted another rock, heavy, and set it into the fire like an offering. “There’s more. Stealin’. Cheatin’. Breakin’ men’s trust. Took food from mouths. Burned barns just to send a message. Lied so often I can’t recall the truth half the time.”

His chest heaved, as if each word carved him hollow. He sat silent for a moment, firelight painting the lines in his scar. Then his voice dropped, almost a whisper.

“I said once to a preacher, I ain’t afraid of hell. That was a lie. Truth is, I been walkin’ in hell a long time. Carryin’ it with me.”

The stars blazed above, indifferent, but the fire warmed his face as if it listened.

A verse came unbidden, remembered from a sermon half-heard long ago:

*“I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid.
I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord;
and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin.”* (Psalm 32:5).

The words startled him. He hadn’t thought he knew them. He looked around, half-expecting Josiah to be standing in the shadows, whispering them aloud. But the desert was empty. Just him, the fire, and the stars.

He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, voice hoarse. “I ain’t askin’ forgiveness. Not yet. Just... sayin’ it plain. For once. No hidin’.”

His throat tightened. His eyes burned. He muttered, “And if You’re listenin’... I don’t know how to carry it no more.”

The flames snapped, as if answering.

And for the first time in years, Six Gun Devil felt lighter — not clean, not whole, but lighter. As though each sin spoken was a stone thrown into the fire, leaving his hands emptier than before.

Section Three – The Weight and the Whisper

The fire burned low, flames falling into red coals that pulsed like a heartbeat. Six Gun sat forward, elbows braced on his knees, staring into the glow. He had poured out his sins like stones, each one heavier than the last, yet now the silence weighed heavier still.

He half expected the sky to crack. Thunder. Lightning. A voice booming judgment from the stars. Something to match the guilt churning in his chest. But the heavens stayed quiet, vast and steady. The stars only shone, cold and watchful, like eyes that had seen it all before.

His hand drifted to the revolver at his side. He lifted it, thumbed the hammer back. The cylinder spun smooth, oiled and clean. He pressed the muzzle into the dirt and squeezed the trigger.

Click.

No fire. No lead. Just the hollow echo of the noon duel, when his gun had failed him. He exhaled sharp through his nose. “Figures,” he muttered. “Even steel won’t listen to me no more.”

He holstered the Colt and sat back. His eyes lifted to the endless sky. The words came out ragged, unwilling but unstoppable. “So what now? You hear me, Lord? I said it. I named it. I ain’t hidin’ no more. But what now?”

The wind answered first — a soft breath rolling across the sand, stirring the embers until they glowed brighter. His horse lifted its head, ears twitching, then settled again as if reassured.

Six Gun frowned. His scar burned hot. “You ain’t gonna speak, are You? Not to the likes of me.”

But even as he said it, the stillness wrapped around him. Not silence — stillness. Not empty — full. It pressed against his skin, seeped into his bones. A Presence. Not visible, not loud, but near.

He rubbed his face with both hands, gritting his teeth. “Not yet,” he whispered, the old shield of words. But it sounded different this time. Not a wall, not a sneer. A plea. Almost a prayer.

He leaned back on his hands, eyes still on the stars. “I want to. But I don’t know how.”

The fire cracked. A coal popped, sent a spark arcing into the dark, then fading. The desert stayed steady. Patient.

For the first time, Six Gun felt the weight of his sins shift — not gone, not forgiven, but no longer crushing. As if Someone else bore them with him, unseen. He couldn’t name it. He wouldn’t. Not yet. But he felt it.

His breath came easier. He stretched out by the fire, saddle for a pillow, hat pulled low. Sleep didn’t come quick, but when it did, it wasn’t haunted by gunshots or burning churches.

Instead he dreamed of the cross on the hill, stark against the stars. He stood before it, not kneeling, not touching — just standing in its shadow, hearing a child’s voice praying for him in the distance.

When dawn crept over the desert, painting the sky gold, the outlaw stirred. The fire had burned to ash, but the stillness lingered, as if the Presence had kept watch all night.

Six Gun rose, brushing dust from his coat. He muttered, “Not yet,” as he saddled his horse. But the words were softer now. Less defense, more hunger.

He rode toward Redemption with the desert wind at his back, his sins confessed to the stars — and perhaps to Someone greater who had been listening all along.

Chapter Thirty – The Devil’s Bounty

Section One – The Poster No Man Printed

Morning found Redemption holding its breath again. Smoke from cookstoves drifted blue and thin; the bell rope at the chapel stirred but did not ring. Sheriff Elias Grady came up the boardwalk rubbing sleep from his eyes and found, nailed to the chapel door with a black iron spike, a notice no hand in town had written.

It was not paper. It looked like rawhide flensed too clean, edges curled and seared. Letters the color of old embers crawled on it—literally crawled, shifting as if the words breathed. A hot smell clung to it, not of fresh fire but of coal long burned, of cellars with no air.

Elias stopped short. “Josiah!” he called, though the preacher was already stepping from the side door, basin water still on his hands.

They stood together in the cool of morning, two men who had learned that fear and duty often wake earlier than the sun. The iron spike hissed faintly where it pierced oak. Elias reached, then thought better of it.

Josiah read aloud, and his voice tried not to shake:

B O U N T Y N O T I C E

WANTED: THE SOUL KNOWN AS SIX GUN DEVIL.

TERMS: SURRENDER—NOT OF BODY, BUT OF WILL.

DELIVER FEAR. DELIVER DESPAIR. DELIVER FAITH UNMADE.

REWARD: POWER. PARDON OF ALL LAW. NIGHT WITHOUT END.

CLAIMANTS MAY COLLECT BY SIGNING IN BLOOD OR BY DEED.

- ISSUED UNDER MARK AND SEAL.

At the bottom, where a judge’s flourished signature ought to sit, three scorched lines crossed—left cheek to jaw, the brand of the riders. As they watched, the lines brightened, then dulled, like a serpent’s eye catching light.

“Lord preserve us,” Elias breathed. “Who put this here?”

“No man,” Josiah said softly.

Bootheels clicked on plank. Folks drifted in—Tucker, jaw slack; Sarah Schaefer, shawl clutched, Hannah small at her side with her little Bible; Bart with a dish towel still over one shoulder; a pair of

ranch hands who hadn't come to church since Easter four years past. Word of a thing like this runs ahead of feet.

"A sick joke," someone said, too loud.

"Then pull it down," Sarah snapped—more dare than order.

Elias reached again. Heat rose from the iron spike without flame. He jerked his hand back as if a rattler had warned. "Hot as a stove," he muttered, flexing burned fingers.

"Read it again," an old man wheezed. "Reward says 'pardon of all law.'" His eyes, clouded and tired, flicked toward the jailhouse like a needle finds north. Somewhere behind him, a voice nobody wanted to place whispered, "Power." Another added, "Night without end," and made it sound like a good thing.

Hannah pressed tighter to her mother. "Preacher?" she said, looking up. "Does the Devil do posters?"

Josiah rested a hand on her head. "He does writs," he said. "And debts." His voice hardened, gathering itself like a man pulling a rope. "But he doesn't get the last word."

Spurs clicked in the dust behind them. Six Gun Devil walked up slow, hat low, coat shadowing the scar on his cheek. He had slept outside the town, a saddle for a pillow and ash in his hair. He didn't look surprised to see the thing on the door. He looked tired—not the tired of a man who needs bed, but the tired of a man who's carried more than a horse should.

He stopped, read. His name sat there in ember-letters that seemed to know him. For a heartbeat, the mark at the bottom brightened, and his own scar prickled hot, like brands recognizing kin. He did not flinch. His mouth set.

"Not yours to post," he said to the wood. To the air. To the one who had issued a notice without a hand to hold it.

The gambler was at the edge of the gathered crowd, because of course he was. Nice coat, wrong lantern, smile you'd rather not shake hands with. He balanced the lantern by its curved handle and let it swing. No oil inside. Flame anyway. Colors a man doesn't see in honest fire.

"On the contrary," he purred, voice smooth as a card sliding under a thumb. "Every court has its paper. Every debt, its docket. Consider it... administrative."

Elias half-turned, leveling the weight of his stare like a rifle he wished he could lawfully use. "You got a writ from any judge within a thousand miles?"

The gambler spread his hands. "Jurisdiction's broader than you're thinking, Sheriff."

Josiah stepped between the notice and the townsfolk, as if his narrow body could keep a whole town from seeing hell's stationery. He lifted his Bible, not as a club but as a candle. "*Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.*" (1 Peter 5:8). His eyes were on Six Gun as he spoke, not the gambler.

The letters on the rawhide writ wriggled and steadied. The iron spike hissed.

“Don’t look at it,” Josiah said. “Hear me. This is not a bounty for a body; it’s a bounty for despair. It pays out in ruin. It will hire any man who wants another excuse to do wickedness and call it wage.”

“Then pull it down,” Sarah said again, voice thin but fierce.

Elias squinted at the spike, at the seams of the hide. “I can get a crowbar,” he muttered.

“Or a word,” Josiah said, and looked at the outlaw.

Six Gun breathed through his nose, slow. He’d talked to the sky by a small fire not so many hours ago. He wasn’t ready to kneel. He wasn’t ready to bow. But the child’s prayer rode alongside him now, and the cross’s shadow had a way of finding his boots wherever he stood. He stepped up onto the chapel threshold, reached without hesitating, and took hold of the notice with his bare right hand.

The leather burned cold. It feels like a lie to say that, but it’s true: the chill of cellars that never see sun, the kind of cold that chews bone from inside. He gripped anyway, teeth set. The letters crawled under his fingers, searing paths in the prints. The room-of-outdoors inhaled as one—the town a single chest full of worry.

The gambler’s grin widened. “Careful. Contracts like to be kept.”

Six Gun didn’t look at him. He looked at the cross inside the chapel, simple wood against plain wall, and his mouth moved like a man trying to remember the shape of a word he doesn’t yet own.

“Jesus.”

It came out without flourish. It came out like a nail head driven flush. The letters on the notice flared, went from coal to quickfire, then blanched to ash-white. The iron spike screamed like metal does when it’s been asked to hold more than it was forged for. The rawhide tore under his hand.

Elias lunged and shouldered the door hard. The spike gave. The notice tore free in Six Gun’s grip and tried to writhe away—yes, tried; folks swore it did—but he tightened his hand and crushed it. Ash fell, ugly-gray, onto the chapel steps and the sheriff’s boots. Where it landed on wood, it left no stain. Where it fell on the gambler’s polished shoe, it steamed and vanished.

The brand at the bottom—those three crossed lines—split with the same sound pottery makes when frost finds a hairline. A rank sweetness came off it, like meat left under floorboards in July. Hannah gagged into her mother’s dress. Bart swore soft through teeth and made a sign he hadn’t made since his mother’s kitchen.

Six Gun opened his hand. The skin was reddened where letters had pressed; a few ridges raised like fresh rope burns. He flexed his fingers and did not let the pain show. The gambler’s eyes ticked to that palm and back.

“Blotting out handwriting,” Josiah said, voice gone fierce with relief and something like joy, and he slapped the Book with his other hand. “*Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us... nailing it to His cross.*” (Colossians 2:14). He said it to the gambler like a man slams a door; he said it to the town like a man flings open windows; he said it to the outlaw like a promise set on a table.

Hannah wriggled free of Sarah's grip and grabbed Six Gun's sleeve. "It's gone," she whispered, looking at the ash. "He can't have you."

"Not yet," Six Gun muttered on reflex, and the words were tired, honest, a man's answer who wanted to mean something else and hadn't yet figured how.

Elias ground the heel of his boot into what ash remained. "No posters on God's house," he said to no one and everyone. He pried the spike out of the oak with the claw end of a hammer fetched from the smithy. The iron fell hot into a bucket and hissed like a snake out of stories.

"You tear one down," the gambler said mildly, "and you think the bulletin board's empty? My dear Redemption." He gestured at the street, the horizon, the places where roads meet choice. "Every fence post between here and the pale hills is a place to tack paper. Men do my stapling for free when I pay them in fear."

"You overplayed your hand," Elias said. "Posting it here."

The gambler's eyes glittered. "On the contrary, Sheriff. Posting it here ensures the highest traffic. See?" He tilted his chin.

A handful of dusters had drifted to the far end of the street—bounty men by the look, some with eyes too eager, one with eyes too empty, all of them wearing the kind of hope that makes decent men into dogs. A ranch kid peered from behind his father's leg, hungry for a story to tell his own sons if he lived to have any. Up on the balcony, a cardplayer who had never prayed found his lips moving around words he'd forgotten.

"Disperse," Elias barked, and the law in his voice worked like a hammer on a bent nail. Men stepped back from the chapel. The gawkers remembered fence to mend and bread to buy, the way people do when they refuse to ask themselves why their feet had come.

"Read this," Josiah said, turning not to the gambler but to the street, to the air, to the town and the one who made it. He lifted his voice until it rang off glass and hitching rail: "*Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day... There shall no evil befall thee.*" (Psalm 91:5,10). The wind took the words and put them against the boards like posters of its own.

The gambler's lantern flame leaned inside its glass as if in a wind there was no sign of. He smiled with fewer teeth now. "We'll call this a first notice. Collection efforts continue." He set two fingers to the brim of his hat, mock-courteous. "Good day, Redemption. Mr. Devil."

"Elias," Six Gun said, eyes still on the ash. "Keep the watch doubled. He's stirred men, not just ghosts."

"I know," the sheriff said. He looked at the outlaw's palm. "You all right?"

Six Gun flexed his hand again and lied like a man telling the kind of lie people understand. "Fine."

Something cawed overhead. They looked up together. A crow, black as any coat the riders ever wore, beat its wings hard and went sideways in the air like a drunk in an alley. It dropped—no arrow in it, no bullet—and hit the street with a soft, ugly sound. When it rolled, they saw three raw, burned lines on the small skin of its throat.

The gambler's chuckle—it might have been only a man's breath catching, it might have been a wheel on gravel—sifted through the space he had occupied. He was gone when anyone thought to look.

Elias took his hat off his head, and so did half the men watching, without telling themselves why. Josiah bent, scooped the ruined bird into a grain sack, and tied the top with a firm knot. "He likes to sign what he thinks he owns," the preacher said. "We'll see who keeps the ledger."

Hannah slid her small hand into the outlaw's unburned one. "We'll pray," she said simply.

Six Gun didn't pull away. He looked down at her, then up at the chapel door with its scar where the iron had bit. The cross inside cast a shadow on the threshold. He stood in it without meaning to.

"Pray hard," he said.

And from beyond the livery, as if in answer or threat, a shot cracked. Not close. Not far. A warning. If it was meant to bring men running, it failed. No one moved. They had enough warnings for one morning. The town took a breath and let it out, the way you do when a doctor cinches a belt and says, "This will hurt, and it will save."

Elias shouldered past to the middle of the street and began to post a notice of his own in the voice he used when reading law: "By order of the sheriff of Paradise County, any man found tacking paper on the chapel door will be jailed, and any man chasing a bounty posted by hell will be treated as a threat to life and peace." He didn't have a spike that steamed, but he had a badge, and that is a hot thing in its own right when the man behind it means it.

Six Gun took his hat off, wiped the sweat band with the edge of his sleeve, and set it back. He turned his hand palm-up and studied the ridges the letters had left.

They'd fade. Or they wouldn't. Either way, he had read enough words today.

"Not yet," he told the part of himself that had leaned toward the cross when his mouth said the Name.

And yet.

The ash at his boots stirred, not by wind. It collapsed into itself and was gone, like debt paid by a ledger no one had seen balanced.

He holstered his emptiness and turned toward whatever came next.

Section Two – Hunters in the Dark

That night, the desert pressed close around Redemption. The stars burned fierce, the moon climbed silver, but the streets felt darker than they should have. Men swore the lamps gave off less glow, as though the notice ripped from the chapel door had stolen some of the town's fire.

Elias doubled his watch, true to his word. Deputies paced with rifles, boots crunching on gravel. Yet unease crept in. The air seemed to listen, waiting for a sound it liked better than prayer.

By the saloon, Six Gun Devil sat on the porch rail, eyes sweeping the street. His burned hand throbbed, though he kept it steady on the Colt at his side. The Bible still weighed his saddlebag. He hadn't

opened it. Not yet. But the child's prayer, the ash on the chapel steps, the hiss of the notice — they clung to him like burrs.

The gambler hadn't shown again. That made it worse. His absence felt like a shadow stretched too long.

Then came the first hunters.

Three riders at dusk, dust rising behind them. They weren't strangers; Six Gun recognized one from Dodge, a cardsharp who'd sworn he'd put him in the ground someday. They came bold, reins loose, guns glinting in lamplight.

The lead rider shouted into the stillness: "Six Gun Devil! There's a price on your head, and I mean to claim it!"

The townsfolk stirred, shutters cracking open. Some faces eager, some afraid. The words "price on your head" rang familiar, but twisted. Not the sheriff's bounty, not the law's. Something else rode in those words, a weight colder than silver.

Six Gun slid off the rail, boots heavy in dust. "Ain't no price you can collect," he said, voice flat.

The rider grinned wide. "Says different on the wind. Devil himself wants you. You think I care if it's dollars or damnation? I'll take the pay."

His pistol cleared leather. Quick. Eager.

Six Gun's Colt lifted—he squeezed—

Click.

His jaw tightened. The jam again. The scar burned hot.

The rider's bullet split the air—but missed, grazing his coat. Another shot followed.

From the boardwalk, Elias fired once. The rider toppled, horse screaming as it bolted. The others fled, spurring hard into the desert. Their shouts trailed in the night: "The bounty's real! He's marked!"

The echoes carried too long. Men listening behind shutters felt the words sink deep. *The bounty's real.*

The next night, worse came.

Hyenas — not natural to this land — slunk into the outskirts, eyes glowing sick green in lamplight. They laughed in the dark, circling the livery. The horses kicked and screamed until Elias and Tucker drove the beasts off with firebrands. But when morning came, three carcasses lay at the fence line, branded with three seared lines across their hides.

Folks whispered of signs. Some whispered louder.

By the third day, the gambler strolled into the saloon with his lantern, smiling easy. Men flocked to him without knowing why. He bought drinks with coin that steamed, spread cards that smoked at the edges, and murmured of rewards.

“They say the Devil pays in fear,” Bart muttered from behind the bar. “But tonight he’s paying in hope — hope for men too weak to stand on their own.”

Six Gun pushed through the crowd, scarred hand on his Colt. His voice cut through: “Anyone signs with him, you’ll answer to me.”

The gambler turned, lantern flame dancing unnatural colors. His grin was sharp. “How quaint. An outlaw threatening outlaws. But tell me, Devil — what do you answer to?”

The saloon hushed.

Six Gun’s hand twitched at his revolver. He felt the jam waiting. He felt the Bible in his bag, heavier than iron. And Hannah’s voice rose unbidden: “*God can forgive you. Even you.*”

His throat tightened. He didn’t draw.

The gambler’s smile faltered, just a crack, before returning smoother. He tipped his hat and drifted out, leaving whispers behind him.

That night, Six Gun didn’t sleep. He sat by the fire outside town, watching shadows gather at the edges of lamplight. Men might chase him for coin, but worse things rode now, drawn by a writ no sheriff had posted.

The Devil’s bounty was real. And every day it grew heavier.

Section Three – Breaking the Writ

By the fourth night, Redemption felt like a town under siege. Not by cannon or cavalry, but by whispers. Men who’d never held a gun kept glancing at Six Gun’s shadow as if weighing its price. Drifters lingered too long at the livery, asking careless questions with eyes too sharp. The smith swore he found another black spike on his anvil when he rose to work at dawn, though he’d left the shop locked.

And then, on Sunday morning, the gambler walked into the chapel.

The bell had just finished its call. The pews were half full—Sarah with Hannah tight at her side, Bart awkwardly near the back, Elias posted by the door with rifle in reach. Six Gun leaned against the rear wall, hat low, not for prayer but for presence. He didn’t come for sermons, but he came.

The gambler came smooth, coat pressed, lantern glowing wrong colors though no oil fed it. He didn’t bother with a pew. He strolled straight to the front, laid a piece of rawhide on the pulpit, and smiled wide.

“Collection time,” he drawled.

The room stilled. The hide smoked faintly where it touched the wood. Letters glowed ember-red across it, the same writ as before but clearer, sharper. This time the words carried weight enough that every man and woman could hear them without sound—etched across their minds like brands:

BOUNTY NOTICE – CLAIMANT SIX GUN DEVIL

TERMS: SURRENDER WILLINGLY. ACCEPT SEAL.

REWARD: REST FROM GUILT. POWER OVER FEAR. IMMORTAL LEGEND.

The gambler spread his hands. “You’ve spoken your sins to the night, haven’t you? I heard. You’re weary. Heavy. Here’s rest. Just put your mark. No more fire that won’t light, no more shame, no more children calling you Devil with tears in their eyes. Just power. Peace.”

His eyes gleamed, cutting to Hannah, who clutched her Bible harder.

Josiah stepped forward, fire in his voice. “*Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to His cross!*” (Colossians 2:14). His hand slammed down on the rawhide. Smoke rose where flesh met leather, but the preacher didn’t flinch. “This writ is void. This debt is canceled.”

The gambler hissed low, smile thinning. “Preacher,” he purred, “you speak law you don’t enforce. His name’s written here. And writs don’t vanish because you wish them to.”

The room leaned—hearts caught between hope and dread.

Six Gun pushed off the wall, boots heavy on the floor. He came slow, each step like thunder to ears straining. His burned palm tingled as if the letters still waited for him. He stood by the pulpit, hat brim shadowing his eyes.

“Power, you say?” His voice was gravel. “Rest?” He spat to the side. “I seen your kind of rest. Looks like graves. I ain’t signing.”

The gambler’s smile cracked, only for a breath. He leaned closer. “Then burn it. Say the Name. See if you dare.”

The outlaw’s scar burned hot. His throat closed. His hand shook over the writ. He heard again the click of his jammed gun, the cry of Hannah’s prayer, the whisper of his own voice under the stars: “*I don’t know how.*”

The gambler grinned wider, sensing the hesitation. “Say your line, Devil. Say ‘Not yet.’ Walk out, keep running. You’re good at that.”

Six Gun closed his eyes. His lips moved. He felt the child’s prayer press into his bones, soft and stubborn: “*Even you.*”

He opened his eyes, scar lit by firelight. His voice came low but steady. “Jesus.”

The word struck like a hammer.

The writ flared white, brighter than the lantern flame. The letters writhed, split, and collapsed into ash. The rawhide curled, shriveled, fell apart in the preacher’s hands. Smoke rose, not foul this time but clean, like cedar on a winter fire.

The gambler staggered back a step. His lantern guttered, flames inside flaring green, then shrinking to a coal. His grin was gone. “You’ve cost me ink,” he snarled.

Josiah lifted the Bible high. “No weapon formed against thee shall prosper!” (Isaiah 54:17). The congregation—shaken, broken, desperate—found voices of their own. Words spilled from every pew, ragged but fierce:

“He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty!” (Psalm 91:1).

“They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony!” (Revelation 12:11).

The gambler’s lantern shrieked, glass cracking. He swept his hat off with mockery, then bowed low with venom in his smile. “Not yet,” he whispered. “But soon.”

And in a blink, he was gone. Only the smell of scorched iron lingered.

Six Gun stood at the pulpit, burned hand trembling, chest heaving. Ash clung to his boots. He looked at Josiah, at Hannah, at the cross on the wall.

“Not yet,” he muttered again. But this time it wasn’t fear. It wasn’t disgust. It was longing—thin, raw, dangerous longing.

And as he turned to leave, the ash on the pulpit lifted in the breeze, carried out the chapel door, gone to nothing.

The Devil’s bounty was broken—for now.

Part IV: The War for His Soul

Chapter Thirty-One – A Bargain in Blood

Section One – Midnight at the Crossroads

The moon rose the color of watered wine, thin and mean above the rim of the world. The desert wore its hard face—creosote black against silver, ridges sharp as drawn steel—yet the air carried that hush that comes when a thing is about to be decided. Six Gun Devil felt it in the horse first: a restless toss of the head, a stutter step when the road split four ways at a lone mesquite that looked like a crucified shadow.

He dismounted anyway. The crossroads was nothing—just packed dust stamped by wagon wheels and sun—and yet it felt older than any boardwalk, older than the jail and the chapel together. The sky was too large; the ground seemed to lean. A coyote yipped once and then thought better of it and went quiet.

A lantern glowed ahead without throwing honest light. It gave off colors a man has no names for and heat that didn’t warm. The gambler stood behind it, boots clean of dust, coat pressed though there was no tailor for a hundred miles, hat tipped like the start of a bad deal. He’d drawn a circle in the dirt—salt poured thick, iron nails standing like little gravestones every few feet. Something in the circle crawled against the eye and then pretended it hadn’t.

“You came,” he said, as if Six Gun had been late to his own hanging.

“Wasn’t invited,” Six Gun answered, and the lie tasted like old pennies. He had felt the pull since sundown—a thought slipping into his saddle like a passenger, whispering *this way* each time a trail forked.

The gambler set the lantern on a flat rock and folded his hands. He didn’t smile yet. “Invitations are for dances and funerals. This is neither.” He nodded at the compass of ruts. “Four ways out. One way through.”

Six Gun kept the circle between them. His right palm, still ridged from the writ he had crushed, prickled as if the letters remembered. He shifted so the Colt sat easy. The memory of the click—twice in one noon—ran down his spine and made his jaw tight. “Say your piece.”

The lantern hissed softly, though there was no oil to burn. The gambler moved the way a man with leisure moves—every gesture measured like a dealer’s turn. “Protection,” he said, savoring the syllables. “From bullets that mean to find you. From lawmen who forget you saved their lives. From grief that bites like a drunk dog. From children who pray you into goodness you don’t want.” His eyes glinted with a humor that had no mirth in it. “From yourself.”

Six Gun said nothing. The crossroads wind brought up the alkali stink from a far wash and laid it heavy across his tongue. He looked past the gambler to the salt circle, to the nails hammered halfway into the earth like a carpenter had lost the plan and gone on pounding anyway.

The gambler tipped his head toward the town invisible behind the night. “Protection for Redemption too. I can keep riders from its roads. I can turn plague aside and famine south. No more widows on chapel steps, no more graves by dawn. You could be the wall that nothing breaches.” He let the sentence stand, then dressed it in finer clothes: “Power, Mr. Devil. Not the little kind you buy with gold and whiskey. The great kind. A word from your mouth, and the desert kneels.”

Six Gun worked his jaw, the scar twitching with the muscle. “In exchange.”

“Your will,” the gambler said lightly. “Your yes to my yes. Your life’s line drawn under my terms.” He spread his hands wider, no longer coy. “Your soul.”

The coyote yipped again, farther off, like an animal laughing from the cheap seats. Six Gun cut his gaze back to the circle. The salt glowed faintly as if it remembered oceans. He had known bargains all his life—bad horse trades and worse card tables, jobs written on whiskey breath and paid in blood. This one smelled truer than any lie he’d ever bought, because it did not bother with disguise.

“The Lord is my shepherd,” a voice said in him without permission. Hannah’s little voice, sweet and stubborn. He shoved it aside. “Power’s cheap when a man can write the bill himself.” He flicked his chin at the lantern. “What’s the fine print?”

The gambler’s mouth pulled thin. “Sign and you will not fall unless I allow it. Your gun will fire when you ask and jam when I please. You will be feared by all who live and remembered by those not yet born. You will be spared the petty pains men choke on—regret, pity, inconvenient love. In return, you will be mine. When I call, you will come. When I send, you will go. At the end, you won’t complain about the receipt.”

Six Gun breathed out. He could feel the old want rising—the brutal relief of not having to care, the sweet emptiness that comes when you cut out the part that aches. No more graves clawing at his dreams. No more child voices unraveling him. Just iron certainty, clean lines, a world that obeyed.

“For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” The verse rang in Josiah’s voice, then shifted pitch and came in his own like an echo off rock. He swore under his breath. “You always bring a book to a gunfight,” he muttered at the memory of the preacher, meaning it as an insult and hearing it land wrong.

The gambler laughed, real delight at last. “You’ve been reading more than ledgers, Mr. Devil. Scripture’s a lovely thing to quote while I write your contract.” He toed a gap in the salt with the tip of his boot, neat as you please, and the circle closed itself as if time had reversed. “You know what your Book calls a man like you who won’t choose? *‘A double minded man is unstable in all his ways.’*” His smile flashed like a knife. “Let me steady you.”

Six Gun rolled his shoulders to throw off a shiver. The lantern’s colors wormed against his eyes. He put his hand on the saddlebag because he had to put it somewhere, and his palm found the square weight inside. The Bible pressed back as if to say *still here*. He didn’t pull it out. He didn’t drop the bag. He let the strap cut a line across his chest.

“You figure I’ll cross your fence and hand you the rope?” he said.

The gambler clucked his tongue. “No need to cross. Stay where you stand. Just say yes. Circles are courtesy, not necessity.” He gestured lazily at the nails. “But they do keep out interruptions.”

“What interruptions?”

“Bell ropes. Child prayers. Psalm-slingers.” He said it like listing gnats. “I prefer a clean conversation.”

Six Gun stepped closer—not into the circle, but near enough to feel how the air over it was thinner, how sound warped across it like heat above track. The iron nails smelled like lightning had licked them. He thought of another circle—men with pistols at noon, faces turned to see if a legend would bleed. He thought of the two dry clicks, of the bullet that missed by inches, of the look on Elias’s face after the outlaw fell.

“Why me?” He surprised himself with the question. Pride would have said *because I’m worth the trouble*. Weariness found a truer edge. “There’s plenty worse.”

The gambler’s eyes warmed with something like pity, which made the back of Six Gun’s neck prickle. “Because you are close,” he said, very softly now. “Closer than you’ve ever been and closer than I like. Because a child’s prayer is a little thing and a dangerous thing, and I will not have it finishing a job I began. Because you keep saying *not yet* and you think that leaves you free, but all it does is leave you alone long enough for me to make you an offer that feels like a rescue.” He lifted a hand and held it steady between them, palm up. No burn. No mark. As if it had never done work. “Take it. You’ll rest. You’ve earned a rest.”

Six Gun stared at the hand. For a moment he imagined how it would feel to lay his own inside it—cool, nothing, the end of ache. The crossroads listened. The horse stamped once and fell still. The moon thinned by inches.

From somewhere behind the night, memory slid in like a blade finding a seam: the lone cross on the hill, wood under palm, the way the shadow had lain across his boots; the chapel full of voices breaking a writ into ash; Hannah on her knees in dust saying *even you*. He heard a line he had not wanted: "*Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve.*" (Matthew 4:10). It was Jesus to a tempter, desert to desert, and it made the gambler's lantern gutter just a hair.

The figure's smile pinched. "Decide."

Six Gun lifted his eyes to the sky one beat, as if looking for a star he knew by name. He found only a broad scatter of cold fire and the black that holds it. He looked back down into a circle of salt that made the ground lie and a man who made his own weather.

He said the truest thing he had. "I'm tired."

The gambler's fingers curled with delight. "Exactly."

Six Gun's mouth shaped the old shield. "Not—" He stopped. The word felt rancid. He changed it. "I don't belong to you."

The gambler's face went smooth as paper over a well. "Then say who you belong to."

Six Gun didn't. Couldn't. Not yet. But his hand slid along the saddlebag and closed until the leather creaked, and he took one slow step *back* from the circle, not forward.

The lantern hissed, then sang a high note a man could feel in his teeth. The gambler's voice shed its velvet. "Protection withdrawn," he said almost lightly, like a clerk marking a ledger. "Power withheld. Hunters released." He snapped his fingers and the nails in the circle brightened, just a touch, as if remembering another order.

Six Gun didn't flinch. "We'll see."

The gambler lifted the lantern, and the strange colors climbed the glass like eels. "We will," he said, and his grin returned—not wide now, tight, a man measuring the throat he means to cut later. "Soon."

The lantern winked. The salt circle slumped, ordinary, a line of pantry goods and scrap metal. The night took a deep breath and pretended it hadn't been holding one. The coyote laughed like a man who loses at cards and leaves with your hat anyway.

Six Gun stood alone at the crossroads, horse blowing soft, moon higher and paler. He put his hand to his chest where the strap crossed and felt the square weight again. He spoke to the nowhere he had lately been addressing more than the men he knew. "I didn't say yes. I ain't said yes to You either." He swallowed. "Not yet."

A breeze came up the southern road and touched his burnt palm with cool fingers. He let his shoulders drop, the kind of relief a man feels when a rope is loosened but not cut. Then he mounted, turned the horse toward the dark line that meant Redemption, and rode.

Behind him, the crossroads looked exactly like what it was—dust, ruts, a tree that had not asked to be a witness. But the ground where the circle had been smoked a hair as if frost had met ember and made a truce.

Section Two – The Ledger and the Knife

The next night he felt it again—that tug, not of saddle or spur, but of something deeper. Six Gun tried to ride west and found the horse balking, ears pinned as though a predator paced the trail. He tried east; the moon looked wrong, as if it had been moved. So he turned south without meaning to, and before long he saw it: the same crossroads, the same bent mesquite, the same hush over the land.

The gambler was waiting, lantern lit, but this time he had a book under his arm. Not a Bible, not any man's ledger. Its cover was dark hide, edges stitched with wire, corners capped in black iron. When he set it on the flat rock inside the salt circle, it hissed faintly, and Six Gun swore he smelled copper and old rain.

"Business tonight," the gambler said cheerfully. "No more pleasantries."

Six Gun stayed on the far side of the line. His scar burned hot. His hand hovered near the Colt, though he half expected another click if he drew. "What kind of book you carrying?"

"A record," the gambler purred, stroking the hide as if it were alive. "Every soul that's signed with me. Every debt marked. Every bargain kept. Yours could be here, Mr. Devil, and the ledger would be proud."

He opened it. Pages fluttered like wings, though no wind blew. Names glowed in a script Six Gun had never seen yet understood at once: killers, kings, paupers, men who had sold for drink, women who had signed for vengeance, whole towns that had bent the knee. At the bottom of one page, space waited like a mouth unfilled.

The gambler turned the book toward him. "Here. See what you gain."

The letters shifted, became images. Six Gun saw Redemption as it might be: no graves by the chapel, no widows crying on the steps, no riders burning fields. He saw Hannah running in grass tall and gold, Sarah smiling with peace instead of grief. He saw Elias grayer, slower, but alive, leaning against a post with nothing to guard. He saw Josiah in the pulpit with a crowd unafraid.

And he saw himself—not hunted, not haunted. A figure men tipped hats to in awe, not fear. His Colt never jammed. His scar faded. His hands were steady as stone. His name was legend, but it carried no stain, only power.

The vision burned sweet, aching in places he hadn't known were tender. He reached forward before he realized it. His fingers brushed the air above the page, and the faces smiled at him. Hannah laughed, Sarah sang, Elias rested.

The gambler's grin widened. "All you must do is sign."

A knife appeared in his hand—slender, curved, silver bright. He held it like an ink pen, laying it across the page. "Blood writes deeper than ink. One cut, one name, and it is done."

Six Gun's throat tightened. His burned palm throbbed, itching as if the letters from the writ long torn still called to him. He thought of the emptiness he had confessed by fire, the weight that had lifted when he spoke aloud the names of his sins. He thought of Hannah's little voice praying, "*Even you.*"

His lips parted. The words were there, waiting. He almost said them. Almost.

But another verse cut across, clear as if Josiah whispered in his ear:

“For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mark 8:36).

The images flickered. Hannah’s laugh warped into a cry. Sarah’s peace bent into a hollow smile. Elias’s rest became a coffin. His own scar faded into a skull’s grin. The book hissed.

Six Gun jerked his hand back, swearing.

The gambler’s smile thinned. “You’re stubborn, Devil. You could end all this with one cut. You could have peace, power, legacy. There is a way that seemeth right unto a man...” His voice dropped to a serpent’s hiss: “...but the end thereof are the ways of death.” (Proverbs 14:12).

Six Gun’s heart slammed. He knew the verse, though the voice quoting it twisted it, made it threat instead of warning.

He drew the Colt and leveled it—not at the gambler, not at the lantern, but at the book. His voice was hoarse. “Close it. Or I’ll close it for you.”

The gambler laughed low. “You think iron can pierce covenant? Fire maybe. Blood surely. But lead? Lead is only lead.” He tapped the knife against the page. “The pen is mightier than the gun, Mr. Devil. Even yours.”

Six Gun’s scar burned hotter. He lowered the Colt, shame and rage wrestling inside him. He had no word to end this. Not yet.

The gambler leaned back, savoring the stalemate. “Soon,” he said softly. “Soon you will sign. You’ve already written half the mark with your life.”

He snapped the book shut. The sound echoed like a gallows trap falling.

Section Three – The Answer Under the Cross

The book shut with a crack like iron doors sealing. Dust stirred though the air was still. The gambler’s lantern flared sick green, shadows lengthening wrong across the crossroads.

Six Gun stood taut, the Colt still in his hand, his scar hot as brand fire. His throat worked. The book called to him even closed. He could feel the space where his name wanted to lie, tugging like a hook behind his ribs.

The gambler smiled slow, knowing. “You want it. Don’t deny. I see it in your hands—the tremor, the ache. You want power that won’t falter, rest without guilt. You want the gun to fire when you tell it, not when Providence meddles. You want to stop feeling the prayer of a child like a weight you can’t shake. All of that could be gone with one stroke of a blade.”

He slid the knife across the ledger’s spine, metal ringing soft. “All men pay, Mr. Devil. Best to pay for peace, not torment.”

Six Gun swallowed hard. His hand fell to his side. He heard again the click of his revolver at noon, the gasp of the crowd, the Psalm in Josiah's voice. He heard Hannah kneeling in the dust, praying for the Devil. He heard himself at the campfire, whispering, *"I don't know how to carry it no more."*

The gambler leaned closer, eyes glinting, voice almost tender. "You do know how. Carry it to me."

Six Gun's mouth twisted. "And when the bill comes due?"

The gambler's grin sharpened. "You won't care then. You won't be you."

The outlaw's heart pounded. The crossroads spun. He felt the circle close tighter, the nails gleaming faintly as if each one held a man's scream. He saw the knife, the book, the faces he'd lost. He wanted to end the fight inside, to stop the war in his bones.

Then a bell rang.

Faint, distant, but clear. The chapel bell in Redemption, pulled by Josiah's hands. It echoed through the desert, a low tolling that seemed to bend the night. The gambler flinched, only slightly, but Six Gun saw it.

The verse came unbidden, sharp and true:

"Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." (James 4:7).

The gambler sneered, recovering. "He may flee, but he always returns. Say yes, and you'll never need bells or verses again."

Six Gun's burned palm ached. He pressed it flat against his chest where the saddlebag lay heavy with the Bible. His lips shaped words rough, cracked, but steady. "I resist you."

The lantern shrieked. The salt circle split in a line, breaking its hold. Wind rose sudden, scattering the powder, knocking nails sideways like twigs. The book quivered, rattled against the rock.

The gambler's smile shattered. "Careful," he snarled. "You won't always have strength for 'not yet.'"

Six Gun's voice lifted louder, firmer. "I don't belong to you."

The gambler hissed, eyes burning coal-red for a flash. "Then you belong to no one."

Six Gun's throat tightened. He forced the word out anyway. "Jesus."

The book wailed, slammed itself shut, and burst into ash that whirled on the wind. The lantern guttered, flame shrinking to a coal, then gone. The gambler stumbled back, shadows tearing from his feet like mist.

The night exhaled. Stars returned to their places. The moonlight fell honest.

The gambler straightened, fury thin on his face. "You'll sign yet," he whispered. "The wages of sin is death, Mr. Devil. Don't forget." His form wavered, flickered, then dissolved into the desert dark, leaving only the smell of scorched copper.

Six Gun stood shaking, revolver limp at his side, scar throbbing, hand pressed to the weight of the Book in his bag. His chest heaved.

The verse rose again, not from the gambler this time, but from somewhere deep: *“But the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”* (Romans 6:23).

He sank to his knees in the dust, head bowed, not yet praying, not yet surrendering, but nearer than ever before.

The crossroads was empty. No salt, no nails, no book. Only ash on the wind.

And in that emptiness, Six Gun Devil whispered, “Not yet.”

But the words trembled toward “yes.”

Chapter Thirty-Two – Tempted in the Wilderness

Section One – Hunger and Heat

The desert swallowed him whole. No trails, no towns, no graves—just dust and rock and sky so wide it mocked the man under it. Six Gun Devil rode until the horse staggered, then walked until his boots burned, then sat in the shadow of a dead tree until the sun bullied him back to his feet.

Water was nearly gone. The canteen sloshed thin, and every swallow felt like stealing from tomorrow. Hunger gnawed too, but he was used to hunger; he’d lived lean most of his life. What he wasn’t used to was silence that pressed like a hand, as if the land itself wanted him to answer a question he couldn’t yet hear.

By the second night, the stars burned harder than fire, and coyotes laughed too close. He drew his Colt once, thumbed the hammer, and still it clicked dry. He wasn’t surprised anymore. He wasn’t sure if the jam was steel or heaven’s hand, but either way, the lesson bit deep.

As he trudged over a ridge at dawn, words came back to him. Not his own. Josiah’s. He could see the preacher under the little chapel roof, hand raised, voice rough but sure: *“Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He was afterward an hungered.”* (Matthew 4:1–2).

Six Gun stopped, bent double, hands on knees, sweat dripping into dust. He laughed once, bitter. “Forty days. I can’t last four.”

He straightened, scar burning with the sun. “If Christ had to face it... maybe I’m facin’ my turn.” He spat. “Difference is, He was the Son of God. I’m just a killer.”

The desert wind sighed like it disagreed.

He walked on, slower now, whispering as though afraid the sand might answer back. “This is my test, ain’t it? Same devil, same lies. But I ain’t Him. I’ll break.”

Yet he kept walking, because the wilderness left no other choice.

Section Two – Voices in the Sand

By the third day, heat shimmered so hard the desert bent in front of him. Stones danced like water he couldn't drink. His tongue felt leather-dry, his boots rubbed his feet raw, and the scar on his cheek burned hotter than the sun.

Six Gun Devil staggered into a wash and dropped to his knees, breathing like a bellows. His Colt knocked against the rocks as he fell, a weight that mocked him — iron useless as a toy. He pressed the canteen to his lips. One swallow left. He closed it tight instead of drinking.

That's when he heard it.

A voice, not loud, but close — the way a rattlesnake's hiss lives under your boots before you see it.

"If thou be worth saving... command that these stones be made bread."

Six Gun looked down. The rocks at his knees blurred, twisted. They looked like loaves, hot from an oven, steam rising, crust breaking. He smelled flour, butter, a meal he hadn't touched since boyhood. His stomach cramped so hard it hurt.

He reached a hand toward one stone.

Then another voice came — not his, but rising from somewhere deeper. A verse he hadn't thought he knew:

"It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." (Matthew 4:4).

His hand froze. The smell vanished. The stones lay cold and gray again.

Six Gun swore under his breath and pushed himself upright. "You're in my head." His laugh was bitter, cracked. "And I'm still hungry."

He stumbled on. The desert stretched endless, the sky burning white. Hours passed. Maybe minutes. The land looked the same whichever way he turned.

Then he found himself on a cliff edge, though he hadn't climbed. Wind tore at him, and below yawned a drop sheer enough to break any man. He blinked, confused — hadn't he been in a wash?

The voice came again, sly, coaxing.

"If thou be chosen... cast thyself down. Prove it. For it is written, He shall give His angels charge concerning thee."

Six Gun's breath hitched. He remembered Josiah's voice, reading the Psalm: *"He shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways."* (Psalm 91:11). The words twisted now, bent against him.

He looked down at his Colt. "Ain't that what you been sayin'? Fire the gun, make it speak, show 'em I'm the Devil or the chosen or both. A miracle. Proof."

His hand trembled at the thought of stepping off, of forcing heaven's hand.

Then the counter came, fierce, from the same deep place that had stopped his reach for bread:

“It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.” (Matthew 4:7).

He staggered back from the edge, nearly falling anyway. Sweat poured down his face. “Not tempt,” he rasped. “Not test. Just walk.”

The cliff was gone when he turned. Sand stretched again, endless. His legs shook, but he kept moving.

By nightfall, he collapsed under a rock overhang, too weak to start a fire. Stars shone cruel and cold. Coyotes howled far off.

And then the voice rose a third time — not hiss, not whisper, but thunder-soft, as if the desert itself spoke.

“All these things will I give thee... if thou wilt fall down and worship me.”

Six Gun’s eyes snapped open. Before him lay not desert, but a vision: kingdoms, towns, ranches, men bowing hats, women singing his name. Redemption thriving, graves green with grass instead of dirt. His Colt never missing, his legend sung in saloons without shame. Power. Dominion. Fear bent to his will.

His breath caught. He wanted it. He ached for it. All the emptiness inside screamed yes.

But then — Hannah’s voice cut through. Small, stubborn, fearless: *“God can forgive you. Even you.”*

And another, louder: *“Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve.”* (Matthew 4:10).

The vision shattered. Dust. Dark. Stars. Only the desert again.

Six Gun fell forward, face in the sand, trembling from head to toe. His whisper was ragged. “This is my test. Same devil. Same lies. Different fool.”

He stayed there till sleep dragged him under, not restful, but merciful.

Section Three – The Realization

Dawn came like a blade of fire over the ridge, cutting through his half-sleep. Six Gun Devil woke with his face still pressed into sand, tongue swollen, lips cracked. His body ached with thirst, but his mind burned worse.

The echoes of the night still clung to him. Stones that had looked like bread. Cliffs that had begged him to jump. A vision of kingdoms bending to his name. All gone when the stars faded, but the weight of them remained.

He sat up slow, joints stiff. His Colt sagged in its holster, silent as ever. He touched the saddlebag at his side. The Bible pressed solid against his palm, square and stubborn. He didn’t open it. Not yet. But he left his hand there longer than before, as if strength could seep through leather.

He drew a ragged breath. “If He was tempted... then I ain’t the first fool to hear lies in the desert.” He spat, dry and bitter. “Difference is, He didn’t fall. I almost did.”

The verse came again, unbidden, like a voice carried on the wind: *“For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.”* (Hebrews 4:15).

Six Gun’s scar twitched as if struck. He muttered, “If Christ could bear it... maybe I can too. Not by my hand. By His.”

He pushed to his feet, swaying, but steadied. The desert stretched endless still, but it looked less like a grave and more like a forge — fire that burns a man down to the steel inside.

He stumbled forward, whispering words half-prayer, half-curse. “Not yet... but maybe soon.”

The sun climbed, heat pressing hard, but the voices didn’t return. Instead there was silence, vast and waiting. For the first time in days, it didn’t press him down. It steadied him.

By dusk, he saw the faint line of smoke in the distance — Redemption’s cookfires. His heart beat quicker, not in fear but in resolve. The gambler would come again, he knew. The bounty still rode on whispers. His Colt might still click when he needed it most. But the wilderness had taught him something: he wasn’t fighting with lead alone. His test was Christ’s test, and though he had stumbled, the Word that had carried Christ now echoed in him.

He crested the last ridge as stars pricked the sky. He looked back once, out at the desert wide and empty. “You tried,” he said into the wind. “You’ll try again. But I ain’t yours.”

The silence held.

Six Gun turned and walked toward the town lights. He wasn’t clean. He wasn’t whole. But he was closer. And for the first time, his “not yet” carried hope instead of despair.

Chapter Thirty-Three – Gospel Under Gunfire

Section One – The Saloon Pulpit

Evening found Redemption hovering between songs and gun smoke. The piano in Bart’s place limped through a tune the keys didn’t deserve, cards slapped felt, laughter came hard and short. Since the Devil’s bounty, men drank with their shoulders up, eyes on doorways, hands never far from iron. The gambler hadn’t shown tonight, which made it worse; an empty chair sometimes frightens more than a man sitting in it.

Six Gun Devil leaned on the porch post, watching the street. His burned palm throbbed where hell’s writ had pressed a message into flesh; his saddlebag lay at his feet, square weight of the Bible inside like a beating heart he didn’t dare hear. He told himself he’d walk on, that he wouldn’t plant his boots anywhere long enough to grow roots. Instead, he stared through swinging doors at the room where he had won and lost and bled and not once prayed.

The batwings parted. Josiah Markham walked in with his hat off and his Bible under one arm, thin coat buttoned against a chill that wasn't in the air. Conversations frayed and stopped. A drunk near the piano snorted, then thought better and studied his glass. Bart froze polishing a tumbler that had been clean when the sun rose. Sheriff Elias sat near the back wall with a cup of coffee he didn't enjoy, eyes making their slow, familiar circuit. He didn't rise, but his jaw tightened a notch.

"Preacher," Bart said carefully, "you're a long way from your pulpit."

Josiah smiled like a tired man who had carried a river uphill and still meant to talk kindly to it. "I am the pulpit, Bart." He stepped into the center of the room and set his Bible on a poker table scarred by a decade of knives. "And the Word of God walks." He opened the Book. The pages made a soft sea-sound in the hush.

A thin chuckle leaked from a corner. Three dusters hunched there, hats low, one with a scar like a worm across his brow. Bounty men—the kind who'd read the wrong notice and liked its terms. One of them flicked his cigarette into the spittoon. "Read us our rights, padre."

"I will," Josiah said gently, and his voice lifted with something that didn't belong to dust and whiskey. "*The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?*" (Psalm 27:1).

The words reached every wall. A few men frowned as if the verbs stung. Another duster slouched deeper, but he didn't smile. At the door, Six Gun's scar twitched with the syllables—light, salvation, fear—three things he understood more in lack than in plenty.

The man with the worm-scar spat sideways. "If the Lord's your strength, preacher, He picked a poor horse to ride." He stood, hand brushing a pistol like a pet. "There's a price on a soul in this room. I'm here to collect."

Elias set his cup down and let the chair legs thump. "You're here to get your fool self jailed."

"No law on hell's paper," the man sneered.

"Then hear a higher law," Josiah said. He lowered his eyes to the page. "*He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty... A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee.*" (Psalm 91:1,7).

The air shifted, a loose board giving under the whole room's weight. Somebody on the rail coughed. Somebody else made a half-sound that might have been a prayer. Six Gun slid inside without knowing he'd moved, posted three steps from the preacher, body turned to the door and the corner both, hands loose, gun low. He didn't plan it. His boots did.

The worm-scar laughed thin and high as wire. "You can read over my bullets." He drew and fired.

Glass shrieked. Bottles burst. The piano gave a final, outraged chord. Josiah didn't flinch. He didn't even look up. He read, voice steady, while wood splintered an inch from his shoulder.

"*Bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you...*" (Matthew 5:44).

"Lord," Bart breathed, nowhere near ready for that kind of blessing.

“Sheriff!” someone shouted.

Elias was already rising when the second gun cleared leather. Six Gun moved faster. He stepped in front of the preacher and took the worst of the spray—the rain of glass, the shower of plaster. The bullet that should have found heart hit the Bible instead.

The Book snapped shut with the impact and staggered Josiah’s hands. A dark, angry welt bruised the leather where the slug struck and lodged. He looked down, surprised, then up with eyes hot and wet at once. “*The word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword...*” (Hebrews 4:12). He didn’t say anything about bulletproof. He didn’t have to. Everyone could see the dent.

Elias fired once. The worm-scar blew back into a chair and didn’t make another joke. The other dusters jerked their guns up in that slow way men do when they realize their courage was rented, not owned. Tucker crashed into one from the side, knocked him silly with a chair back. The third shot the mirror and discovered the mirror didn’t bleed.

Josiah turned a page with calm hands. “*For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.*” (Romans 10:13). His voice gentled. “Even you.”

“Drop it!” Elias barked. Two pistols clanged like bad bells on the floor.

Hannah’s voice came, small and bright from the doorway—because of course she had followed. “Preacher?” Sarah dragged her back, fear and fury in her hands.

“It’s all right,” Josiah said without looking around. “It’s all right.” His eyes mapped the room like a doctor measuring wounds. “We will read where the bullets fall.”

Six Gun shifted, broad in the space. Something in him braced for the click, the shame of it, the way his Colt had embarrassed him twice at noon. He lifted anyway, not to end a man, but to keep one from ending the rest. The hammer came back under his thumb. He breathed with it. A memory of a bell crossed his mind like a shadow.

“Try it,” the third duster snarled from the floor, hand creeping toward iron.

“Don’t,” Six Gun said, and for once the word carried more weight than metal.

The room held still a full heartbeat before men remembered how to lower their hands.

Section Two – Bullets and Verses

Bart’s saloon breathed smoke and prayer at once. A round pinged off the cast-iron stove and fell whining into a corner. Somebody whimpered through cut lips and pretended it was a cough. Hannah’s eyes shone like wet pennies as Sarah hunched her behind a table leg. Elias, bless him, didn’t try to empty the room; he laid his law over it like a lid and kept the pot from boiling.

“On your faces,” he snapped, and half a dozen men found the floor they’d been built to fear. He kicked a pistol away, then met Six Gun’s eyes. They both nodded—an old agreement: I watch left, you watch right.

Josiah kept reading.

“While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8).

The words floated in a room that stank of spilled whiskey and cordite, and they didn’t feel out of place. They felt like the only sentence that had a chair to sit in.

The gambler appeared then, not in smoke but as if he’d been standing there all along where men’s eyes refuse to focus. Lantern in one hand, oil-less flame crawling in colors no child would draw. He smiled without teeth this time. “You’re making a habit of trespass, preacher.”

Josiah at last lifted his gaze. “I preach where fear lives.” He looked at the lantern and did not blink. *“The light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.”* (John 1:5).

The gambler’s grin cracked. He rocked the lantern gently and the flame hissed like a cat that didn’t care to be named. “You risk your flock when you leave the fold.”

“The Shepherd leaves the ninety and nine for the one,” Josiah said, and his eyes flicked—fast, fond—to the tall shadow standing between him and gun barrels. “You know the parables you hate best.”

“I know bargains,” the gambler said. “And theater.” He lifted his chin toward the ceiling where bullet holes pocked the plaster like a constellation nobody had asked for. “Read them a psalm while they sign outside.”

“Not tonight,” Elias said. He turned his rifle half an inch, enough to declare a new kind of law. “No notices. No writs. No collections. This room is Scripture or jail and nothing between.”

“You don’t own between,” the gambler said softly.

“Neither do you,” the preacher returned.

The gambler’s eyes cooled to old coal. He brushed his thumb over the lantern glass. The flame leaned as if in a wind that couldn’t possibly be inside. Shadows in the corners thickened; the room went three degrees colder. “Make your sermon quick,” he said. “I’d hate to interrupt with funerals.”

Josiah smiled—not taunting, not brave for bravery’s sake, just the way a man smiles after he’s seen a grave opened and left empty. “I’ll be brief.”

He turned a leaf already marked by soot and a bullet’s bruise. *“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”* (1 John 1:9). He shut the Book gently on the lodged slug. The dent showed like a fist that had changed its mind. “Confess,” he said to the room. “Out loud, if you dare. Under gunfire, if you must. He hears over everything.”

A cardplayer at the bar choked a laugh and then didn’t. His mouth formed a word he used to use only in surprise. “Jesus,” he breathed, and looked startled that it hadn’t burned him.

“Good place to start,” Josiah said.

A fresh shout crackled from the street—more riders, too eager, boots and brass and reputations for sale. The gambler’s lantern brightened, delighted. “See? Collections. Noon or midnight. Paper never sleeps.”

Six Gun looked at the door, then back at the preacher. “You done?”

“Almost.” Josiah’s eyes softened. “One more line for a man who says ‘not yet.’ *That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.*” (Romans 10:9).

The outlaw’s throat worked. He didn’t make a sound. He didn’t have to. The preacher already knew the answer and its direction.

“Finish it outside,” Elias said, moving. He and Six Gun slid toward the batwings in a choreography they hadn’t rehearsed but had always known. Bart ducked behind the bar and came up with a scattergun like a man showing a hymn nobody expected him to know.

The gambler stepped back to watch his own storm. He tipped his hat to the preacher with exaggerated courtesy. “Read on, Reverend.”

“I intend to,” Josiah said, and he picked up the Bible, heavy now with lead, and followed the law and the outlaw into the street.

Section Three – Testimony in the Smoke

Night clung to Main like a coat worn past its usefulness. Four riders fanned in front of the saloon, lantern light chopping their faces into masks. Two others held back by the livery, the sort of men who shoot when everyone’s watching someone else. The air tasted of iron and fear.

“Six Gun Devil!” the lead called, making his name a dare. “Contract says you belong to the dark. Hand yourself over and we’ll let the rest keep breathing.”

“Lie,” Josiah said, stepping into the open. He didn’t raise the Bible like a shield. He raised it like bread. “*Having spoiled principalities and powers, He made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it.*” (Colossians 2:15).

“Shut him up,” a rider snarled, and the first shot split the night.

Six Gun shoved the preacher left and took the right, the shove as gentle as a man can make it with death riding hard. Elias’s rifle cracked—one down. A second gun barked from the livery; Bart’s scattergun answered with a sound like a door slamming shut on an argument. The two in the middle came on, the way fools do when they’ve told themselves a story about glory and don’t know how to rewrite it.

“Hold!” Josiah’s voice rang like a hammer on steel. “*Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.*” (Luke 23:34).

The words didn’t stop bullets. They stopped a hand. The youngest rider flinched the way boys do when they hear their name at church and don’t expect to. His muzzle climbed into the stars. His horse, wiser than the man, balked and saved two lives.

The fourth tried for spectacle. “If your God keeps you,” he jeered, “let Him keep you from this.” He fired at Josiah’s chest point-blank.

The Book caught it again.

Leather screamed. Paper thumped. Josiah staggered, then squared, breathing hard. He looked down at the new welt and laughed once, a wet, relieved sound that made the rider lose half his courage and most of his aim.

“Enough,” Six Gun said, and his Colt came up in a line as clean as any psalm. He didn’t fire. He didn’t need to. The rider saw in the set of his shoulders a decision different from murder. He froze and dropped the gun because living frightened him less than dying proud.

Elias swept the line. “On the ground!” Boots hit dirt. Tucker came panting with rope.

The gambler stood by the hitch rail, lantern a sulking coal. His smile returned by degrees, thin and unfunny. “Little revival,” he murmured. “Shall I take notes for the newsletter?”

“Take a step back,” Elias said, “or take a cell.”

“Your jail doesn’t hold my kind.” Still, the gambler took the step. He always obeyed the laws he could turn to his own ends.

Josiah, chest heaving, opened the Bible again with hands that shook. He set the bullet-dented spine across his palm like a man weighing a friend’s old scar. “Hear me,” he said, softer now, so the crowd had to quiet to catch it. “You think I read to shame you. I read to set a table in the presence of our enemies.” He smiled faintly at Six Gun, at Elias, at Hannah peering from the doorway, at Sarah clutching her shoulders into a prayer she didn’t yet trust. “*Thou preparest a table before me... Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.*” (Psalm 23:5).

A hush fell like a blanket over a shivering child.

The youngest rider, face blotched with fear and something newer, lifted his head from the dirt. “What... what if I’m tired of runnin’ for paper I didn’t write?” His gun lay a yard away as if it had crawled there to confess too. “What if I want out?”

Josiah’s voice didn’t rise, but hope did. “*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.*” (Acts 16:31). He nodded like a man pointing out a seat. “Right now.”

The boy swallowed. “Even me?”

“Especially you.”

The gambler’s lantern coughed a bitter spark. “Recruitment drive?” he drawled, glossy and bored. “How quaint.” His eyes cut to Six Gun. “What about the one who matters?” He tilted his head toward the outlaw. “Still ‘not yet’?”

Six Gun’s mouth moved. He felt the word rise and hated it. He looked at the preacher’s Bible, at the bruised leather and the two bullets that hadn’t gotten where they were sent. He looked at Hannah’s hands knotted around themselves in the doorway, at Elias with his jaw like the edge of a plow, at Sarah whose grief clung like a dress too heavy to wear.

“Not yet,” he said, and the sound of it wasn’t a door slammed anymore. It was a man standing with his hand on the latch, hearing music inside.

The gambler's smile tightened. "Soon," he said. He turned the lantern, and the flame crawled like an old snake and went small.

Elias hauled men to their feet and toward cells, duty heavy but simple for the first time all week. Bart leaned his shotgun against the post and began sweeping glass with the gentleness of a man tidying a room after a birth.

Josiah closed the Bible and pressed it, dented and warm, into Six Gun's burned hand. "It's been catching bullets all night," he said with a weary grin. "Might as well carry it where it keeps taking them."

Six Gun stared at it like a man stares at the last letter he expects to receive. He tucked it into the crook of his arm the way a father who has forgotten how to hold a child might still remember the angle.

"Read it," Hannah whispered from the doorway. "Please."

He tipped his hat to her—awkward, grateful, guilty—and didn't trust his voice. He looked past her to the dark street. Somewhere beyond the last lamp, the crossroads waited. Somewhere ahead, a bargain would offer itself a new way, or not at all. He shifted the Book against his ribs and felt, for the first time, that it didn't make him heavier. It steadied him.

The town began to breathe again, the way lungs do after a long dunk. Above the saloon, the first stars opened like eyes. And under a sign that used to mean only whiskey and lost wages, a preacher had read gospel and found men listening—even with bullets flying.

Six Gun turned toward the door, the Book tucked, the word he hated warming in his chest until it didn't hurt quite so much.

"Not yet," he said.

And heaven, patient as desert dawn, did not hurry him—only followed.

Chapter Thirty-Four – The Prayer of a Dying Man

Section One – The Ambush

The trail north out of Redemption was narrow, hemmed by red rock and scrub. Six Gun Devil rode it knowing full well it was no place for a man with enemies. He was right.

The crack of rifles split the air. Bullets whined off stone. His horse reared, nearly throwing him, but he wheeled into a dry wash for cover. Smoke curled from the ridge above — three men with hell's bounty in their eyes.

The firefight was short and mean. Elias had followed with two deputies; the law's return fire dropped one and scattered another. But the third, a young rider not much more than a boy, caught lead in the belly before he could get clear.

When the smoke cleared, dust and cordite hung heavy. The boy lay on his back, pale, blood dark on his shirt. His rifle had fallen yards away. His hat rolled into brush. He wasn't going to see another sunrise.

Six Gun stood over him, revolver still in hand, scar burning with the memory of too many deaths like this. Usually men cursed in their last moments — cursed God, cursed the man who shot them, cursed fate. But not this one.

The boy's lips moved, cracked and bloodied, whispering words broken but familiar:

"Our Father... which art in heaven... hallowed be Thy name..."

Six Gun froze. The sound cut deeper than any bullet.

Section Two – The Whispered Prayer

The outlaw dropped to one knee beside him. Dust caked his coat, his own hand trembled. He leaned close.

"Say it again," he rasped.

The boy's eyes, glassy with pain, shifted to him. A faint smile tugged at his lips as he whispered on:

"Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done... in earth, as it is in heaven..."

A rattle shook his chest. Blood flecked his mouth. But the words didn't falter.

Six Gun felt the world spin. He remembered Josiah's voice in the chapel, Hannah's prayer in the street, the Psalm read under gunfire. But here it wasn't a preacher or a child. It was a dying man, bleeding out, choosing to pray when most men cursed.

"Give us this day our daily bread..."

Six Gun's scar burned like fire. His throat closed. He whispered hoarse, as though dragged into the prayer against his will: "And forgive us our trespasses..."

The boy's lips moved, and though no sound came, Six Gun knew the words: *"...as we forgive those who trespass against us."*

A tear he hadn't felt coming cut a line through the dust on his cheek. He clenched his jaw hard. "Lead us not into temptation..."

Together, outlaw and dying boy, one voice failing and the other breaking, finished it: *"...but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen."*

The boy exhaled. Long. Final. His chest stilled. His eyes fixed on the sky.

And in the silence that followed, Six Gun Devil felt something crack inside that bullets had never touched.

Section Three – The Outlaw’s Reflection

He sat there long after the boy’s breath had gone. The law moved in the distance, voices low, but they didn’t intrude. The outlaw’s hands, so used to killing, hovered above the body like he might lift it — then fell useless to his knees.

He stared at the still lips, remembering the prayer. The words tolled in his skull like chapel bells: *Our Father... forgive us... deliver us from evil.*

“Why’d you pray it?” Six Gun muttered. His voice cracked. “You knew you were dyin’. Why not curse? Why not spit?” He pressed a hand to his own chest. “Why pray?”

The silence gave no answer, but the weight of it was enough. He thought of all the men he’d watched die — faces twisted with rage, fear, despair. None of them had left this behind. None of them had breathed hope into their last breath.

He thought of his own end, someday soon. He wondered if he would have prayer on his lips, or just the word “not yet.”

The verse came, one Josiah had thundered not long ago: *“For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”* (Romans 10:13).

The boy had called. With his final breath, he had called.

Six Gun rose unsteady. His hand lingered over his saddlebag, where the Bible waited. His scar burned, his palm throbbed, but his heart felt heavier than both.

He whispered, not to the dead boy, not to the lawmen, but to the desert air: “Deliver us from evil.”

It wasn’t salvation yet. It wasn’t surrender. But it was the closest he had ever come.

And as he mounted, the sky seemed wider, the sun less cruel, the desert less empty.

Chapter Thirty-Five – The Road to Jericho

Section One – The Traveler in the Dust

The sun hung low, gold bleeding into red, when Six Gun Devil found the man on the road.

The trail stretched barren, nothing but dust and mesquite. Vultures circled overhead, slow and patient. At first, Six Gun thought it was just another body left for the earth — another tale written in blood on the desert floor. He would have ridden past; he had done it before.

But as his horse clopped nearer, the man moved. Barely. A hand twitched, thin and broken, fingers clawing at the dirt. His coat was torn, boots gone, face swollen from a beating. Whoever had done it hadn't left him much — not coin, not water, not dignity.

Six Gun swung down, boots crunching. He crouched, hat brim shadowing his scar. The man's lips parted, whispering dry. "Help... please."

Six Gun cursed under his breath. He'd heard that tone too many times — the last gasp before the desert finished its work. He looked up and down the road. No riders. No wagons. Whoever had robbed him was gone.

The outlaw's scar burned. His gut said ride on. This wasn't his problem. Never had been. But Hannah's voice echoed: "*God can forgive you. Even you.*" And Josiah's reading in the saloon: "*Bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you.*"

Six Gun muttered, "I ain't no preacher." But he bent anyway. He slid his canteen from his saddle, pressed it to cracked lips, tilted it slow. The man drank, coughed, drank again.

When he slumped back, eyes wet, he whispered, "Thought... I was dead."

"Not yet," Six Gun said. The words felt different this time. Less shield. More mercy.

Section Two – The Good Samaritan Remembered

Six Gun half-lifted, half-dragged the man beneath a scraggly mesquite. The horse shifted, nervous with the scent of blood, but held. He tore a strip from his own shirt, pressed it to a wound at the traveler's side. The man groaned.

Six Gun's hands shook — not from fear, but from strangeness. He had bound wounds before, but only his own, or comrades bound by coin. Never a stranger. Never for free.

The desert wind stirred, carrying a memory from the chapel — Josiah's voice steady, the Book open: "*A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.*" (Luke 10:30).

Six Gun muttered, "That's you, friend." His scar pulled tight as he thought of the rest: the priest who passed by, the Levite who did the same. Men who looked, saw, and rode on. Men like he had been, all his life.

He tore another strip, bound the man's arm. Blood seeped, but slower now. The traveler's eyes fluttered. Six Gun gave him another sip, then poured a trickle over his face.

He whispered, "And then a Samaritan came."

The words hit like a hammer. He remembered Josiah explaining: Samaritans were despised, outcasts. Yet the Samaritan showed mercy where holy men hadn't.

Six Gun's hands froze on the bandage. "An outcast." He barked a laugh, rough, broken. "That's me."

The verse pressed in harder, unshakable: *“But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him.”* (Luke 10:33).

Six Gun closed his eyes. Compassion. A word he had spent years choking down. Yet here he was, bleeding his own water and cloth for a stranger.

He whispered, voice shaking, “Ain’t much, Lord. But it’s all I got.”

Section Three – Mercy on the Road

By twilight, Six Gun had the man lashed across his horse, slow and careful. The outlaw walked beside, leading the animal toward Redemption. Each step crunched steady, the kind of march a man makes when he’s decided, for once, not to turn away.

The traveler drifted in and out, groaning, but alive. Six Gun’s scar burned less now, the ache in his palm dulled. Something heavier still weighed him — but for the first time, it wasn’t shame. It was responsibility.

At the edge of town, voices rose. Some pointed. Some muttered. Bart came out with his apron still on; Sarah pulled Hannah back from running forward. Elias met them halfway, eyes sharp.

“What’s this?” the sheriff asked.

“Found him on the road,” Six Gun said. His voice was flat, but not empty. “Beat near to death.”

Elias’s brows rose. He looked at the outlaw long, then nodded. “You carried him.”

Six Gun’s jaw tightened. “Figured it was his turn to make it.”

Josiah arrived last, Bible in hand, lantern light catching his tired face. He saw the man, saw the outlaw’s hands bloodied with bandages, and his voice caught. “The Samaritan,” he whispered.

Six Gun shot him a look sharp enough to cut. “Don’t preach it.”

Josiah only smiled, soft. “I don’t need to. You lived it.”

Six Gun turned away, leading the horse toward the clinic. Hannah’s voice carried after him, bright with wonder. “Mama, he helped!”

Sarah’s answer was harder, heavy with grief. “Even devils can do a good deed.”

Six Gun’s shoulders sagged, but he kept walking. The traveler stirred, whispering faint thanks. The outlaw only muttered, “Not yet.”

But as he laid the man gently down in care, the parable echoed clear as day: *“Go, and do thou likewise.”* (Luke 10:37).

For the first time, Six Gun Devil wondered if he just had.

Chapter Thirty-Six – Wolves in Sheep’s Clothing

Section One – The Posse Rides In

They came at noon, dust rising from the south road — a line of riders with stars pinned to their coats and rifles polished bright. From the boardwalks, townsfolk squinted into the glare. To the weary eye, it looked like salvation had finally come: lawmen, strong and stern, ready to sweep the Devil’s bounty from the streets.

But Six Gun Devil felt it before he saw it. His scar burned hot. The horses moved wrong — not steady with law’s discipline, but jittery, frothing. The men’s eyes shone too sharp, smiles too thin.

The leader reined up before the saloon. He was broad-shouldered, with a black mustache and a badge polished to blind. He raised a hand in greeting. “Sheriff Elias Grady,” he called, voice loud and booming, “we ride under warrant, sworn to bring justice to these parts.”

Elias stepped forward, rifle resting in the crook of his arm. His eyes narrowed. “By whose warrant?”

The leader grinned wide. “By Heaven’s law, and man’s.” He pulled a folded paper from his vest and held it high. The crowd leaned to see — parchment cracked, ink glowing faint red in the light.

Josiah’s voice carried sharp. “That’s no writ of heaven.”

The leader’s eyes flicked, sharp as a knife. “Preacher, you’d best stay behind your pulpit. Wolves ain’t welcome in sheep’s houses.”

The words sent a shiver through the street. Hannah clutched her mother’s hand. Sarah pulled her back, eyes fixed on Six Gun.

The outlaw’s scar burned hotter. He saw through the polish, through the badges, through the smiles. He muttered, “Sheep’s clothing.”

And in his memory came Josiah’s sermon: “*Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.*” (Matthew 7:15).

Six Gun’s hand drifted to his Colt. Not to draw — not yet. But to be ready.

Section Two – Teeth Behind Badges

The posse dismounted in a line, boots thudding hard on Redemption’s dirt. Each wore a badge — tin stars, silver crosses, polished iron. But their hands lingered too long on gun grips, their eyes scanned too hungrily over townsfolk.

The leader strode toward Elias, paper outstretched. “This here writ,” he said, “commands us to take custody of the one called Six Gun Devil. To carry him south, to stand trial.”

Elias didn't take it. "Trial where?"

"Where justice lives," the leader said smoothly. "In the hands of those fit to wield it."

Josiah stepped forward, Bible in hand. "No trial of men glows with the fire of hell's ink."

The leader's grin soured. "You call us wolves? Then see our teeth." He flicked the paper open — the letters burned red, spelling Six Gun's name in shifting lines. The townsfolk gasped.

Six Gun felt the pull of it, the old hook behind his ribs. His scar burned, his palm ached where the last writ had seared him. He spat. "Hell's contracts dressed as law."

The leader's grin turned wolfish indeed. "Better to sign with wolves than die with sheep."

He lifted his hand. The posse drew in unison. Tin stars caught the light — and warped. What had gleamed as silver dulled black, edges sharp as knives. What had looked like law was nothing but another mask for the bounty.

Hannah cried out. Sarah pulled her close, trembling. Elias raised his rifle, voice steady. "This town answers to God's law, not yours."

Josiah thundered, louder than the rifles cocking: "*Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones.*" (Matthew 23:27).

The badges hissed, smoking against coats.

The wolves bared teeth.

Section Three – The Showdown

The street erupted in chaos.

The posse fired first — wild, furious, bullets meant to terrify. Windows shattered, bottles burst, men ducked behind barrels. But the townsfolk had learned from fire and bounty before. They didn't scatter. They stood.

Elias fired clean, dropping one badge-bearer to the dust. Bart swung his shotgun from the saloon door and loosed a roar that knocked another flat. Tucker leapt from the livery with a hayfork like Gideon's spear.

Josiah strode into the street, Bible lifted high, voice like thunder in the smoke: "*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want... Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil!*" (Psalm 23:1,4).

The words clashed with bullets. For a moment, the air itself felt split between two kingdoms.

Six Gun stood at the center, scar burning, Colt heavy. He drew slow, steady. For once, it didn't click. It fired. Clean. True. One wolf fell, then another. Not for bounty. Not for pride. But for defense. For the town.

The leader snarled, lunging forward. His badge cracked, falling from his chest. Beneath it, seared into skin, burned the three-line mark of the riders. He lifted his pistol, fire in his eyes. “Your soul belongs south, Devil!”

Six Gun’s eyes narrowed. His Colt leveled. “Not yet.”

The shot echoed down the street. The leader fell, badge shattered, mark still smoking.

Silence rolled in, broken only by the wheeze of horses and the crackle of burning wood.

The townsfolk stared, half in fear, half in awe. Josiah lowered the Bible. Elias lowered his rifle. Hannah whispered into her mother’s dress: “The wolves are gone.”

Sarah looked at Six Gun, face torn between hate and something softer. She whispered, “But the Devil’s still here.”

Six Gun holstered his Colt slow. His scar burned, but his hand lingered on the Bible in his bag. He said nothing, only turned his eyes heavenward as if waiting for another verse to carry him through.

The wolves had been unmasked. But the sheep still feared the shadow among them.

Chapter Thirty-Seven – The Judge’s Gavel

Section One – The Arrest

The morning was still when it came, too still. Redemption’s streets were swept by the dawn wind, lamplight fading as the sun cracked the horizon. But the silence broke with the sound of boots and chains.

Sheriff Elias Grady, rifle at his side, walked into the saloon where Six Gun Devil nursed a cup of black coffee that tasted more like ash than drink.

“Six Gun,” Elias said. His voice was flat, hard. “It’s time.”

The outlaw didn’t look up at first. His scar itched, his hand rested on the Bible he still hadn’t opened. “Time for what?”

Elias’s eyes were iron. “For the gallows. You’ve walked free too long. Bounty’s stirred men like wolves, the town is breaking under fear. One more gunfight, one more grave, and Redemption’s gone. If blood has to be paid, better it be yours.”

Six Gun lifted his eyes, steady. “You gonna kill me to save the town?”

The sheriff’s jaw tightened. “Not kill. Hang. By law. And by Scripture: *‘For he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.’*” (Romans 13:4).

The words stung harder than iron. The outlaw almost laughed, but it came out a rasp. “You reckon I’m evil, Elias?”

“I reckon you’ve brought evil with you,” Elias answered, voice low. “And if God means to spare you, He’ll do it at the rope. Until then, I carry the gavel.”

The outlaw stood slow, chains waiting. For once, he didn’t reach for his Colt. He muttered, “Not yet.” But this time it sounded less like a shield and more like a sentence he was willing to walk toward.

The irons clinked shut around his wrists.

Section Two – Gallows at Dawn

The gallows stood outside town, a simple frame of rough pine beams, rope hanging like a crooked finger. Men and women gathered in silence. Some wore faces of grim justice, others sorrow, others relief. Sarah Schaefer held Hannah tight, her grief burning like a torch.

Josiah stood by the steps, Bible open, his eyes heavy.

Six Gun walked steady between deputies, boots dragging dust. His scar burned, but his face was calm — or maybe numb. He mounted the steps, chains clinking, rope waiting.

Elias faced him square, hat in hand. His voice carried to the crowd. “By order of the county and the conscience of this town, this man is condemned. His deeds have stained the earth, his gun has filled graves, and his shadow has drawn death on Redemption. But hear this: *‘For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body.’*” (2 Corinthians 5:10).

He laid a hand on the lever. “Only God can judge rightly. But today the gavel falls here.”

The crowd shifted, uneasy. Some nodded. Others whispered. Hannah’s voice piped up small, trembling: “God can forgive him!” Sarah hushed her quick.

Six Gun raised his head. His voice was gravel but steady. “I ain’t askin’ for forgiveness. Not yet. But if you mean to drop me, Sheriff, you better pray God’s watching close.”

The rope slipped around his neck. The crowd held its breath.

Josiah’s voice rang out sudden, sharp: “*For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*” (Romans 6:23).

The words hung heavier than the rope.

Section Three – Stay of Execution

The lever never fell.

From the ridge outside town, a gunshot cracked. The bullet split the noose clean above Six Gun’s head. Rope fell to the platform, frayed ends swaying. The crowd gasped, scattered. Deputies scrambled, rifles up.

Riders appeared on the ridge — not wolves in disguise this time, but men who had smelled the bounty, guns hungry. The Devil’s writ had drawn them like flies.

Elias cursed under his breath. The gallows turned from judgment to battlefield in a heartbeat.

Six Gun ripped the broken noose from his shoulders, chains rattling. His eyes burned. “Guess God answered.”

Elias met his gaze, torn. “Don’t waste it.”

Josiah closed his Bible, voice like thunder even over chaos: “*Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged.*” (Matthew 7:1–2).

The words froze the sheriff for a breath. He lowered the lever. The gallows stood unused.

Six Gun dropped into the dirt, chains still on, but his will unbroken. The fight belonged not to the rope but to the street.

As lead filled the air again, the outlaw whispered under the din, “Not yet.”

But in his heart, for the first time, he wondered if “not yet” was the same as “soon.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight – Shackled in Darkness

Section One – Iron and Stone

The cell was nothing more than four walls of stone, a cot too short, and bars that rattled when the wind found them. Sheriff Elias locked the door himself, jaw set, saying nothing. He left a lantern low and the Bible still tucked in the outlaw’s bag.

Six Gun sat on the cot, wrists still bruised from shackles. The gallows replayed in his mind — rope heavy on his neck, the crowd’s silence, Josiah’s voice cutting through: “*The wages of sin is death.*” He had told himself he wasn’t afraid. Now, in the dark, fear found him easy.

The scar on his cheek throbbed like fire. He rubbed at it, muttering. “Not yet. Not tonight.” But the words rang hollow against stone.

Sleep came grudging, heavy. The lantern sputtered out. The cell filled with shadow. And in the silence, chains clinked though none moved.

Section Two – Nightmares of Chains

He dreamed of a courtroom with no windows, only firelight. The judge’s bench was higher than sky, and the gavel struck like thunder. His name rang out, not spoken by men, but carved into the air.

Chains coiled around his wrists, heavier than iron. He pulled, strained, but they only tightened, biting deeper. Voices rose from the dark — men he had killed, widows left weeping, children robbed of fathers. They whispered one word: *“Guilty.”*

The chains dragged him down. The floor split, revealing a pit glowing red. Heat seared his skin, but worse was the sound — gunshots echoing forever, every bullet he had ever fired, each one ringing back against his soul.

He fell, shackled, scar burning hotter than flame. He cried out, “Not yet!” But the words broke, powerless.

A voice thundered: *“For the wages of sin is death.”*

He twisted, desperate. And another voice whispered through the fire: *“...but the gift of God is eternal life.”*

He woke with a shout, drenched in sweat, shackles still biting though they were gone. The cot creaked under his trembling frame.

Section Three – A Cry in the Dark

Six Gun sat up, breath ragged. Moonlight cut through the bars, laying silver lines across the stone. His wrists ached as though chains still bound them. He buried his face in his hands.

“Not yet,” he whispered. But this time, it wasn’t a shield. It was a plea.

From the far side of the jail, Josiah’s voice came — soft, steady. He had stayed in the office, keeping watch. *“And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”* (John 8:32).

Six Gun swallowed hard. His voice cracked. “I ain’t free. I’m chained, preacher. I feel it every time I shut my eyes.”

Josiah’s reply was gentle, like water on parched ground. *“If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.”* (John 8:36).

The outlaw leaned back against stone, eyes burning. He didn’t answer. Couldn’t. But for the first time, he wanted those words to be true.

The night stretched on. He slept no more. But when dawn touched the bars with pale fire, the chains of his nightmare felt weaker — not gone, but loosened.

And when Elias opened the cell door with tired eyes, Six Gun stepped out slow, scar burning, whispering, “Not yet.”

But in his chest, hope stirred, like a lock straining against its key.

Chapter Thirty-Nine – A Midnight Hymn

Section One – The Stillness of Night

The jailhouse held night like a lidded pot holds steam—tight, humming, ready to scald. Outside, Redemption slept in the way towns do after too much fear and too many funerals: lamps doused early, rifles leaned close to mattresses, a prayer or a curse spoken into pillows and no one sure which counted more. The alley cats quarreled once and went silent. A drunk in the distance tried to sing and remembered halfway through the first verse that men were listening, so he let the tune fall out of his mouth and walked on quiet.

Inside, iron and stone made a small kingdom with a single subject. Six Gun Devil sat on the cot with his forearms balanced across his knees, hat brim pushed back just enough to leave his scar in the moon stripe that came through the bars. The sheriff had left a lantern turned down to a coal, but even that small flame had guttered an hour ago, the wick surrendering with a last wet sigh. Silver light took its place—cold, impartial, laying the bars across the floor in neat little rungs as if to teach a schoolboy how to count the ways out that weren't there.

He had not slept. He had shut his eyes, yes—against the gallows that flared up when he blinked, against the boy's last breath saying *Our Father*, against the writ's crawling letters he still felt ridged in his palm—but sleep had declined his invitation and stayed in another town. When he felt himself leaning toward the edge of it, a click would sound in his skull, clean and empty, like a hammer falling on a prayer instead of a primer, and his body would jerk upright again, hands fisted in the blanket, breath ragged like he'd been running.

"Not yet," he said once to the stone, just to hear the words and measure their strength. The stone did not answer, which somehow helped. "Not yet," he said again, softer, less as a boast than a report—a ranch hand telling a foreman the fence still stood, though the posts shook.

His saddlebag lay in the corner where Elias had set it after booking him—no need to inventory a sinner's kit when the sinner wasn't going anywhere. The Bible inside gave it a squareness that didn't belong to leather meant for spare rounds and jerky. He had carried the Book like a hot coal all week, shuttling it from saloon to street to cell as if he were trying to return a baby he hadn't asked to hold. He could feel it now the way a man with a broken rib feels the weather coming: a pressure under the skin that meant a change he had not ordered.

Midnight reached its hand across town. He heard the bell in the chapel strike the hour—soft, as if the rope were in cautious hands. Maybe Josiah's. Maybe Hannah's, if the preacher had let the child stand on a pew and set both small fists to the pull. The sound walked the street and slipped through the bars and took a chair without asking. He didn't chase it out.

A long, thin minute stretched. The moon climbed. The wind shifted. Somewhere, a coyote laughed once and stopped. He rolled his shoulders, as if he could shake a coat loose that had dried tight on his back.

Then it came—so faint at first he might have mistaken it for the wind plumbing a bottle—one note, held true without courage or apology. Another found it and made a harmony so shy you’d miss it if you were trying. A third, stronger, took the melody and set it down steady like a plate on a rough table. The words arrived last, plain as bread:

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me;
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

He didn’t move. He couldn’t. You don’t move when a memory arrives carrying your mother’s hands.

He had not thought of her in months—not because he didn’t wish to, but because a man who keeps the road does not set precious things in the dust for the wheels to take. Now she was there, not in features—those blur with use—but in posture; in the way she used to stand by the window when the field went copper and the creek threw fire at the sky, humming to herself while she mended the same shirt twice because boys make quick work of elbows; in the way she sang the word *grace* like it wasn’t a church thing or a preacher thing but the name of a well that never ran out. Her voice—no fancier in memory than it had been in life—went right on with the others:

*’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.*

He breathed through his mouth because his nose had stopped working right without warning. Fear and relief in the same verse. He had known the one as a companion, the other as a rumor. The first had taught him to draw first and think second; the second had tugged at his coat from time to time and asked if he was tired. He was. He had been for years and did not say so out loud.

The hymn climbed a notch in courage, the way a roomful of people does when they realize the song belongs to them and not only to the one who started it. He could pick Josiah out of the weave now—low and sure, riding underneath. He could hear Bart, of all men, catching the third line half a beat late and then deciding to own the fourth as if he’d always meant it that way. He could hear two women—one older, one in the middle—braiding the top into the bottom, and between their voices, as clean as spring water on stone, Hannah:

*Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
’Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.*

“Home,” he said under his breath, and the word startled him. He had stood outside so long he had forgotten rooms with chairs that waited for you and doors that knew your knock. *Home* was a gallows word lately, tied to a rope and a last step. The hymn said it like a place you could reach without dying first.

He pushed his palms against his eyes until stars burst under the lids. The scar on his cheek ticked in time with his pulse. He did not cry. He hadn't cried since a winter horse went down in ice and broke something in him besides a foreleg, and even then he had done it behind the barn. But the body has its own scriptures, and they read him despite his objections. When he lowered his hands, his fingertips came away damp.

"Quit it," he told the singing in a voice he had used on men larger than him. It did not oblige. The next verse came on gentle feet and set itself in the cell beside the bell's cooled shadow:

*The Lord has promised good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be,
As long as life endures.*

Shield. Portion. He stared at his saddlebag. The Book inside had stopped bullets enough times this week to make a man superstitious if not devout. He told himself that was all it was—good leather and pages tight-knit, the luck of angles and the mercy of poor aim. He told himself a dozen things at once and believed none of them entirely. He could feel it there now, as if the hymn had set it glowing through canvas and hide. *His word my hope secures*. He did not open it. He moved it with his boot so it lay nearer the cot.

A gust shouldered the jailhouse door and made it complain on its hinges. The bars in his window clicked together like teeth. Footsteps passed in the street—measured, familiar, a lawman's clock. Elias, keeping circuits he had kept since he was a younger man with a quicker back and a wife who'd put coffee on in the blue hour and kiss a badge like it were a Bible. The outlaw watched the shadow go by on the wall—hat, shoulder, rifle—and wondered how many men had kept towns stitched tight with habits no one thanked them for. He had been quick to judge the sheriff when rope brushed his neck, slower to admit that the same hands that tied knots also held floodgates. He did not plan to apologize. He made a note in himself to stop despising where another man's duty hurt him.

The hymn turned to a verse he did not know well—maybe Josiah had taught it last winter when he wasn't listening:

*Yea, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
And mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess, within the veil,
A life of joy and peace.*

He flinched. Flesh failing had been a hobby of his. Heart failing had been a profession. Ceasing he understood as the end of a job and the start of quiet. *Within the veil* meant something he had not bought a ticket for. He pictured the curtain in the chapel that covered the rough space behind the pulpit where the broom lived, and he nearly smiled. Then he remembered the preacher saying once, voice bright like a man pointing to sunrise: "*The veil was rent*." Torn from top to bottom, he'd said, like a strong hand had started where no human hand could reach and made a way where no door had been. He rolled the words around in his mouth until they lost their varnish and tasted like wood. Torn. Made a way. He could use a way.

The singers did not hurry. They let the notes rest where they landed and lifted them again like careful farmers turning a field. Somewhere in the middle of a held line, he realized he had stood without remembering the order to do so. His boots set him by the bars as if the air just beyond them were thinner and easier to breathe. He leaned his forehead against iron that had been warmed by moon. The skin there complained—the scar is a tattletale—but he left it.

He heard Sarah's voice then—he would not have sworn to it under oath, but he would have bet his last coin with his eyes closed. It wore a rough edge and a weight, the first from tears that had not dried, the second from a load with the handle broken off. She did not sing on pitch; she sang on truth, which is a different key and harder to carry. He did not imagine the way Hannah's tone tucked itself under her mother's like a child putting a shoulder to a trunk too big for her and somehow making it budge. He looked through the bars and saw the chapel windows lit—three lanterns, maybe four—and shadows moving the way bodies do when the soul stands straighter than the spine.

“Why?” he asked the night, not hostile, not even loud. “Why sing when your men are tired and your women are empty and the ground keeps taking what you plant?” The night did not answer in words. It answered in bodies that had decided together not to let fear draw the set list.

Footsteps again, but lighter. A child crossing, careful with her weight in the dark. The jailhouse door eased on its hinge. Someone small slipped in and stood just inside—didn't come to the cell, didn't speak, just stood where the moon stripe could play with braids. He did not turn. He didn't need to.

“Thought you'd be asleep,” he said.

Hannah whispered, “We're praying.”

“Sounded like singing.”

“It is,” she said, as if that solved more than one problem. She held something in both hands and fussed with it, nervous without fear. “Mama says I shouldn't be out. Sheriff says I can stay a minute.”

“He would.”

She cleared her throat the way kids do when they are about to step onto a bigger stage than their size.

“Preacher says to tell you... um... *‘For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God.’*” (Ephesians 2:8). The words came in little pieces, like a string of beads counted with care. “And he says a gift is to be taken, not worked for.”

“Preacher's fond of gifts,” he said, aiming for jest and ending nearer confession.

Hannah took one step closer, the sound of a small boot on old wood. “He said sometimes folks stand by the tree and won't open the package because they think it's not for them.”

“What if it ain't?” He kept his forehead on iron.

“It is.” No wobble. If the Almighty had wanted a lawyer, He'd have hired a child early.

He was quiet long enough to hear the hinge groan a little under the door's weight. He lifted his head, rubbed the moon-mark from his brow, and turned enough to see her face in the slice of light. She was a weather vane of a girl—if hope moved, she moved with it, and pointed more than she knew.

“Go on back,” he said. “Sing.” The word surprised him, bigger in his mouth than it looked on paper.

“We will.” She hesitated like a sparrow deciding whether to chew bread in your palm. “You... want us to sing a special one?”

“Pick it,” he said, and he meant *please don’t let it stop*.

“Kay.” She went as soft as she had come, and the door took her, and the hinge told on both of them.

He stood a while longer at the bars, then returned to the cot because a man’s knees will vote even when his pride filibusters. The saddlebag looked stubbornly square. He toed it, then pulled it up onto his lap. The buckle answered like a friend with no patience. He opened the flap. The Book was warm from the bag’s nearness to his body all day, from the heat of his worry, from the borrowed warmth of the church across the street.

He did not know where to put his finger. The preacher could find chapter and verse in a storm with his hat on crooked and his thumb numb from hammer blows; Six Gun’s hands were built for other tools. He let the pages fall where they would. They opened somewhere with print that walked in two columns and a verse he had heard shouted in the saloon under gunfire only a day before: “*For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.*” (Romans 10:13).

“Whosoever,” he said to the letters, not as a dare but as a man asking a clerk to spell a name on a parcel he’s not sure he’s paid for. The jailhouse took the word and set it on the table with the rest.

Across the street, the hymn found a new tune—lighter, a child could steer it, and likely did:

*Jesus loves me—this I know,
For the Bible tells me so;
Little ones to Him belong—
They are weak, but He is strong.*

He tried to picture the Almighty finding anything to love in the shape he made in a doorway—long, mean, full of regret. The picture would not resolve. Another one did: a hand he could not see pulling a rope he had worn around his neck earlier, not to cinch it but to lift it off. He shut the Book on his thumb and let it rest there, as if to keep the door ajar against a draft.

“Don’t stop,” he said, not to the singers, who could not hear him, not to the sheriff, who would not obey him, but to the One who might. “If You’re out there and You can hear a man who’s broken more vows than he ever made—don’t stop.” The request embarrassed him. His voice was built for other tasks. Still, the room did not laugh. The room was busy with mercy.

The hymn quieted of its own accord, like a fire that knows when to throw sparks and when to glow. The bell did not ring again. The wind forgot its errands. In the small kingdom of iron and stone, a man sat with a Bible on his knees and a song in his chest he had not asked for and could not return.

He looked at the bars one last time before the hour turned. They looked back. He laid down with his boots still on because he did not yet know how to be comfortable. “Maybe,” he said to the ceiling he could not see, which was as close to God as he could look without flinching. “Maybe soon.”

The word did not clatter like “not yet.” It did not swagger. It made a space and waited. The jail, having done its work for the night, let him close his eyes without dropping him, and when sleep came—it came the way a good horse returns after a gunshot: cautious, step by step, then all at once with its head against your shoulder, unafraid.

Section Two – Memories and Conviction

The singing didn’t stop when the hour turned. If anything, it grew steadier, like a river swollen with tributaries. Six Gun Devil lay on the cot, the Bible still resting on his lap, thumb caught in the page that whispered *whosoever*. He hadn’t moved for ten minutes, afraid the spell might break. The hymn rose across the street like smoke from a chimney, and every time it drifted through the jail bars it filled the air heavier than gunpowder.

He had always said bullets were louder than anything, but that night, he was proved wrong.

The outlaw shifted, sitting straighter, elbows on his knees. His scar prickled as if it resented what his ears were hearing. He muttered, “Not yet,” out of habit, but the words came thin, like a worn coin passed too many times. They didn’t carry the iron they once had. They sounded like surrender waiting for an excuse.

The singers had turned to another hymn now. A tune steadier, slower, more solemn:

*Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee;
Let the water and the blood,
From Thy wounded side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure;
Save from wrath and make me pure.*

The outlaw bowed his head hard into his hands. He hadn’t heard that one since boyhood, since a circuit-rider preacher had come through his father’s cabin in a Kentucky hollow and sung it while men leaned against fence posts pretending they weren’t listening. He had been ten, maybe eleven, already carrying a slingshot and a mean streak, already mouthing back at his pa and looking for any reason to leave. He had sat on the step with his little sister in her calico dress, both of them pretending the words weren’t climbing into them like seeds that never asked permission.

She had died before she was twelve. Fever took her in a night, sudden as a pistol crack. His mother had sat by the bed humming *Rock of Ages*, voice cracked but sure. And he, stubborn and wild, had walked out of the house and hadn’t sung another hymn for thirty years.

Now it came back to him, midnight in a jailhouse, carrying her ghost with it. His chest hurt worse than any bullet he’d ever carried.

He whispered, “Stop. Stop diggin’ up graves.” But the hymn went on, plowing through the years like a mule that doesn’t heed its handler.

He saw his mother bent over her work—darning socks, kneading bread, drawing water—and always humming. She didn’t hum saloon songs, didn’t hum marching tunes. Always hymns. She had prayed

over him when he was asleep, had laid a hand on his head when he pretended to dream. He had shrugged it off, told himself prayer was just air with guilt tied to it.

But now, in the midnight jail, her hand was on him again. He could almost feel it.

He cursed under his breath. His fists tightened against his knees.

The singers shifted verses:

*Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to the cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress,
Helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Savior, or I die.*

The last line split him wide open. He heard again the boy dying on the trail, whispering the Lord's Prayer with his final breath. He remembered how the child in town had prayed for him, voice stubborn, certain God could forgive even the Devil. He remembered standing on the Jericho road, binding wounds for the first time without being paid. All those pieces piled together like bricks building something he didn't want to live in but couldn't ignore.

"Wash me, or I die." The words rang like iron bars in the cell.

He thought of the chains in his dream, dragging him toward the pit. Thought of the gambler's ledger, the knife, the blood he had nearly spilled across his own name. Thought of the gallows, rope heavy, lever waiting, sheriff's voice steady: *Only God can judge rightly.*

What if the hymns were God's judgment too? Not judgment to condemn, but judgment to call?

Six Gun slammed a fist into the cot. The iron frame shrieked. His breath came harsh, shoulders shaking.

"Why now?" he rasped at the ceiling. "Why not years ago? Why after all the graves I dug? Why after I've turned every good thing foul?" He pressed a hand to his scar, feeling it pulse. "Why not let me die with my guns, not with hymns eatin' me alive?"

The only answer was more singing, softer now, but unyielding.

And then Josiah's voice rose, not in song but in Scripture, carried through the open windows of the chapel:

"Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow." (Isaiah 1:18).

Six Gun froze. The scar on his cheek burned hotter than ever, as if the verse had found it. Scarlet. White. He remembered the gambler's writ, glowing red across his hand. He remembered the child's prayer, simple and clean.

The outlaw's throat closed. He whispered, "Scarlet's all I got."

The voices across the street answered without knowing they did:

Wash me, Savior, or I die.

He dropped his head into his hands and stayed there a long time, tears finally breaking through dust and pride.

The hymn kept going. He didn't stop it anymore.

Section Three – The Stirring of Hope

The hymn in the chapel softened after the final verse, the way coals glow after flames die down. A lantern flickered in the window, shadows moving as townsfolk bowed in prayer or gathered their coats to slip home. The night air grew still again.

But inside the jail, the song hadn't ended. It echoed in Six Gun Devil's chest, vibrating against his ribs like a bell rung and still humming long after the rope was still. He sat on the cot, elbows on his knees, face streaked with sweat and dust and something wetter he didn't want to name. His thumb still marked the Bible at Romans, words he hadn't read aloud but couldn't shake: "*Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.*"

"Whosoever," he muttered, voice hoarse. He said it again, quieter. "Even me?"

The cell answered with silence, but it wasn't empty silence. It was the kind that waits, patient, like a preacher standing still with his hand out until you're ready to take it.

The moon had wheeled higher, spilling more light across the bars. He rose, restless, and paced the narrow floor. Chains still circled his wrists in his memory though Elias had removed them. Every time he looked down, he swore he saw the red glow of the gambler's ledger etched on his skin. He rubbed hard, as if he could scrub it off.

"Scarlet," he muttered. "That's all I've ever been."

But Josiah's voice still rang in his head: "*Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.*"

He stopped pacing. He closed his eyes. For a long time he didn't speak. Then, finally, he whispered, broken: "I want that. God help me, I want that."

From across the street, faintly, a single voice rose again. High, soft, but strong in its own way: Hannah.

*Yes, Jesus loves me,
Yes, Jesus loves me,
Yes, Jesus loves me,
The Bible tells me so.*

The outlaw pressed a hand to his chest. It shook under his palm. That little voice cut deeper than every sermon he'd ever ducked, every verse he'd ever mocked. *Jesus loves me*. Not in general. Not in theory. *Loves me*.

His scar burned hot, but not the way it had under the gambler's writ. This burn was different. Cleansing. Like a brand that marks not shame, but belonging.

He staggered to the bars and gripped them tight. He whispered hoarse, "If You love me... show me. Please."

The night air slipped cool across his face. The hymn faded into silence again. But something had changed. He felt it in his bones, in his blood. He wasn't clean yet, not free yet. But hope—real hope—had stirred.

He backed from the bars, sat down hard on the cot. He opened the Bible again at random. His eyes fell on a verse underlined in someone else's hand, maybe Josiah's:

"Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." (2 Corinthians 5:17).

He read it once. Twice. His throat closed. He whispered, "New. God Almighty, make me new."

The lantern guttered in the sheriff's office beyond, throwing shadows across the stone. Elias coughed once, shifting in his chair, but didn't stir. Josiah's steady breath carried through an open window in the chapel as he prayed the town into rest.

Six Gun Devil lay back on the cot, the Bible on his chest. His eyes closed, but this time no nightmare came. The chains in his dreams loosened. The pit closed. The fire dimmed.

In their place, a single word floated, heavy and kind. Not "not yet." Not "soon." Just *hope*.

And when dawn brushed the bars with gold, the outlaw whispered into the morning, "Maybe it's time."

Chapter Forty – Chains Broken

Section One – The Jailbreak

The morning after the midnight hymn, Redemption stirred uneasy. Folks rose slow, like the town itself had sung too hard in the night. Dust clung thicker to the street. The sheriff's lamp still glowed in his office where Elias had sat through the dark, rifle within reach, chin dropping to his chest and snapping back up again.

Six Gun Devil dozed light on the cot, Bible still balanced across his chest, when the sound came. Not the hymn this time. Not the bell. Boots. Too many of them. Coming quick.

He sat up straight. His scar burned.

A shout split the dawn: "Sheriff! Hands off the Devil. He rides with us now!"

Rifle fire cracked. The jailhouse windows shattered, glass raining across stone. Elias sprang up, cocked his rifle, returned fire. Deputies shouted from the street. Horses screamed.

Six Gun stood, heart hammering. He knew the sound of that voice. Colter Hayes, a wolf he had once ridden with, back when the only law he knew was the gun on his hip and the blood on his boots. Colter had sworn they'd meet again — and keep him from hanging if ever the rope tightened.

Now he was here.

The back door of the jail blew open, hinges shrieking. Two riders barreled in, scarves around their faces, pistols drawn. "Come on, Devil," one shouted. "We're cuttin' you loose!"

Keys clattered across the floor. The cell door swung wide.

Six Gun stared at the open way, scar burning hot. His hand went to his chest where the Bible rested. *Chains broken.* But by whom? And for what?

Section Two – The Ride Out

Gunfire raged as Colter's men pulled him out. Deputies fell back. Elias shouted curses. Josiah's voice rose from across the street, heavy with grief, "*Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage!*" (Galatians 5:1).

But his voice was drowned in hoofbeats.

They threw Six Gun into a saddle, cut his wrists loose, and drove the horses hard out of town. Dust boiled behind them. Shots chased them, but none found their mark.

For miles they rode, sun climbing, until the sound of Redemption faded into silence. The gang whooped and hollered, free as coyotes with a carcass. They slapped Six Gun on the back, laughing. "Told you we'd break you out! Sheriff can't hang the Devil — not while we're ridin'."

But Six Gun didn't laugh. His hands were free, yes, but his chest felt heavier. He fingered the scar on his cheek, the place where the gambler's writ had burned. He heard Josiah's voice in his mind, louder than the gang's victory shouts: "*If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.*" (John 8:36).

Free indeed. Not free to kill. Not free to run. Free *indeed*.

He looked at Colter riding beside him, face hard, eyes sharp. "Where you takin' me?"

"South," Colter grinned. "New Mexico territory. We got a score to settle with a bank that thought it could cheat us. You're ridin' point."

Six Gun's gut twisted. Same life. Same chains. Just no irons this time.

He muttered under his breath, "Lord, what kind of freedom is this?"

Section Three – Freedom’s Question

By nightfall they camped in a dry arroyo, fire throwing crooked shadows across stone. The men drank hard, passed bottles, bragged of the next raid. But Six Gun sat apart, Bible heavy in his saddlebag, untouched.

Colter swaggered over, bottle in hand. “Don’t tell me Redemption tamed you. You still the fastest draw alive. Ain’t no preacher’s song gonna chain you.”

Six Gun’s scar burned. He looked up, voice low. “Funny thing about chains. Sometimes the ones you don’t see choke tighter than the ones on your wrists.”

Colter laughed, mean and sharp. “You talkin’ like Josiah now. Careful, Devil — next you’ll be prayin’.”

The outlaw’s hand lingered on the saddlebag. He didn’t draw the Book. Not yet. But his throat tightened. He thought of the hymn. He thought of Hannah’s little voice: *Yes, Jesus loves me.*

He whispered, too low for Colter to hear, “Lord, You broke the iron. But are You askin’ me to break from this too?”

The fire popped. The stars burned overhead. The gang laughed and cursed around the flames. But Six Gun’s eyes stayed on the Book in the dark, heart pounding with a freedom that felt close — so close — but not yet claimed.

And as sleep finally dragged the men down, the outlaw lay awake, whispering, “Not yet... but maybe soon.”

Part V: The Ride of Faith

Chapter Forty-One – The Desert Prophet

Section One – The Hermit Appears

The gang moved at dawn, south through the wastes, dust rising like smoke from a funeral pyre. But Six Gun lagged behind, scar burning hotter than the sun. Every hoofbeat carried Josiah’s voice, Hannah’s prayer, the midnight hymns. Every laugh from Colter’s men sounded like chains rattling.

By noon, the desert stretched wide, cruel and empty. Rocks baked, buzzards circled, and the air shimmered with heat. They stopped at a dry wash to water the horses, though no water waited there. The gang cursed, spat, and finally decided to push east, chasing the promise of a spring Colter swore he remembered.

But Six Gun drifted west, reins slack. No one stopped him. Maybe they thought the Devil could take care of himself.

He rode until even his horse staggered, then dismounted and walked. The heat pressed like a hand on his skull. His scar throbbed. He muttered, “Not yet,” but even the desert laughed at the words.

That’s when he saw the hermit.

An old man, tall and bent, with a beard white as salt and eyes burning like coals. He stood barefoot on the rocks, leaning on a staff. His clothes were ragged skins, patched a dozen times. But his posture was steady, strong as stone.

“You wander far, gunslinger,” the hermit said, voice rough as the desert wind. “Far enough to meet the truth.”

Six Gun squinted. “You a preacher?”

The old man smiled faintly. “A prophet, some call me. A fool, others. But I speak what is written: *‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’*” (Mark 1:3).

Six Gun’s hand twitched at his holster, not to draw, but because something in the words made him nervous.

The hermit stepped closer. “And you, Devil, are called to repent.”

Section Two – The Words That Cut

They sat in the shade of a cliff, the old man’s staff propped beside him, Six Gun slumped against stone. His throat burned with thirst, but the hermit’s words burned hotter.

“You’ve killed,” the hermit said plainly. “You’ve sown fear. You’ve worn the name of the Enemy as though it belonged to you.”

Six Gun snarled. “You think I don’t know that?”

The prophet’s eyes narrowed. “Knowing is nothing. Repenting is everything. *‘Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out.’*” (Acts 3:19).

The outlaw’s scar seared. He pressed a hand to it. “My sins are carved in deeper than skin. Ain’t no blotting that out.”

The hermit’s voice thundered: “*Come now, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.*” (Isaiah 1:18).

The words struck harder than bullets. Six Gun shook his head. “White as snow... for somebody else. Not me.”

The hermit leaned forward, eyes sharp as knives. “You are not the first killer called. Did not Saul breathe murder before he became Paul? Did not David stain his hands with blood and still be called a man after God’s heart? Your scar is not the last word. The cross is.”

Six Gun's throat closed. His hand brushed the saddlebag where the Bible rested. His voice cracked. "Why me?"

The hermit's gaze softened. "Because you are not beyond Him. None are. '*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.*'" (1 Timothy 1:15).

The outlaw turned his face away, eyes wet. The desert wind howled through the rocks, carrying the words deep whether he wanted them or not.

Section Three – The Call to Repentance

The sun sank low, bleeding red across the horizon. The hermit rose, leaning on his staff, and pointed west where the light faded.

"You can ride with the wolves," he said, "bound by chains they call freedom. Or you can bow your head, cast your burden down, and live. But the hour is late, gunslinger. Very late. '*Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.*'" (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Six Gun staggered to his feet, swaying. His scar throbbed like fire, his chest ached. "You're sayin' I got to choose."

The hermit nodded. "Choose life, Devil. Choose Christ. Or death will choose you."

The outlaw closed his eyes. The hymns from the jailhouse rang in memory. Hannah's voice. Josiah's sermons. The boy's dying prayer. The cross on the hill.

He whispered, shaking, "Not yet..." But the words broke halfway. They sounded less like defiance, more like a plea for one more chance.

The hermit laid a hand on his shoulder. "Not yet is running out. Do not tarry in the dust."

The old man turned and walked into the desert, vanishing into shadow as if the wilderness swallowed him whole.

Six Gun stood trembling, staring at the horizon. He touched the Bible in his bag. His scar burned. His chest pounded. And for the first time, he dropped to his knees in the dust.

He didn't pray. Not yet. But he bowed. And the desert felt it.

Chapter Forty-Two – The Book of Romans in Dust and Blood

Section One – None Righteous, No, Not One

Morning rasped its dry throat over the desert. The light didn't so much arrive as scrape across the rocks, revealing what the night had left behind: boot-tracked dust, the hollows where lizards slept, a few brittle stems pretending to be plants. Six Gun Devil was still on his knees where the hermit had left

him—hat fallen beside him like a surrendered shield, hands braced in grit, breath coming in hard, honest pulls.

He had bowed without praying, which felt like an insult to both bow and prayer. He didn't know how to do better. The memory of the old man's hand on his shoulder burned warmer than the sunrise.

Sand whispered under bare feet. The hermit returned as if he'd been standing two breaths away in the thin air all night, waiting for dawn to give him permission to speak again. He carried no book, no bag, nothing but the staff that looked like it had once been lightning and had decided to retire into wood. His beard moved faintly in the wind. His eyes did not. They were a steady coal-glow, the kind that warms without torching.

"You stayed," he said.

Six Gun didn't bother with pride. "I fell," he said, and there was nothing of romance in it. The dust on his knees made sure of that.

"Good," the hermit said, which was a strange way to describe a man face-down in sand. He set the staff across two stones so it bridged the small space between them, then crouched beside the outlaw and took a pinch of dust in his fingers like a preacher might take bread. He let it trickle back through his hand. "We begin where all men begin," he said. "Low."

Six Gun pushed himself upright onto his heels. His palms were raw where grit had been grinding under his weight. He wiped them on his trousers and made two red streaks; sometime in the night he had split the skin over his knuckles. The blood turned flour-dry dust into smear-dark mud.

The hermit noticed and nodded as if the desert had finally brought the right props for a lesson. "Listen," he said, and his voice took on that lean cadence men get when they're speaking lines carved deeper than memory. "*What then? are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin.*" He did not have to search for the verse; it lived in him. "*As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one.*" (Romans 3:9–10).

Six Gun huffed through his nose. "I never claimed righteous." He meant it as deflection; it landed as confession.

The hermit's mouth thinned. He drew the staff closer and, with its burned tip, dragged a straight line through the dust—east to west, clean enough to shame a surveyor. The wind tried to soften it and failed. "You don't have to claim it to be judged by it," he said. "The line is there whether you approve." He pointed beyond the line to ridge and sky. "*There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God.*" The staff tapped the outlaw's chest, not hard, just true. "*They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.*" (Romans 3:11–12).

The words didn't thunder. They landed like measured blows from a craftsman's mallet—right where they were needed, no wasted force. Six Gun found himself wanting to argue the way a man wants to argue with a mirror on a bad morning. He thought of the traveler on the Jericho road he'd lifted out of dust. He thought, too, of the boy he'd shot by accident and left where he fell years ago because a job didn't pay for burials. He didn't put those on a scale. He didn't dare.

"I've done... some good," he said weakly, hating the sound. "Lately."

"And all your life you did not," the hermit said without venom. "Which ledger do you prefer to hold up to the sun?" He swept the staff tip across the line he'd drawn and flicked a cloud of dust onto it, like a judge proofing fresh ink. "*For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.*" (Romans 3:23).

Those words did not feel like a verse. They felt like a verdict. Something in Six Gun that had sat forward to listen now sat back hard as if a chair had been kicked from under him. The phrase "come short" chewed more than it swallowed. He pictured the straight line in the dust, pictured trying to jump it and leaving a heel mark an inch shy. Most men would call that close. The hermit's eyes said otherwise.

"What's the glory," Six Gun muttered, "to measure against?" He meant it honest. A man has to know the standard before he can admit he failed it.

The hermit answered by lifting his own gaze to the sky. "A weight. A light. A perfection that breaks no bargains and lies under none." He brought his eyes back and softened the edge of truth with a human look. "Not your reputation. Not the town's opinion. Not the badge. Not the gun." He flicked the staff toward the horizon where the high sun was already bleaching things bone. "*That every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.*" (Romans 3:19).

Every mouth may be stopped. Six Gun's closed without being told. He found his own jaw tight and wondered when it had learned obedience.

The hermit dropped to one knee, surprising for an old man whose bones looked carved from mesquite. He put his hand flat in the dust next to the outlaw's and left an honest print. "Here's law," he said, indicating the line he'd drawn. "Right, straight, and not one inch shorter for your sake or mine. And here's man." He lifted his hand to show the print. A small swirl of wind came up the wash, flowing around the stones like water around ankles. It kissed the print and blurred it. "*By the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin.*" (Romans 3:20). His palm hovered over the fading mark. "The law shows you where you're crooked. It does not make you straight."

Six Gun stared at the line. He wanted to hate it. He wanted to accuse the man who drew it of cruelty. Instead, he thought of the rope brief around his neck, of the townspeople holding their breath, of Elias's voice saying only God judges right. He heard Hannah's hymn like a bell under the sand. The straightness of the line felt less like meanness and more like mercy—an end to guessing, at least.

"Fine," he said after a long breath. "I fall short. I ain't righteous. Never claimed." The old bravado tried to crawl back into his throat and stalled out at the scar. "What do I do with that?"

The hermit didn't answer. He held out the staff.

"Write it," he said.

"Write what?"

"What you just said."

Six Gun frowned like a man asked to sign a thing he hasn't read. Still, his hand moved. He took the staff—surprised by its warmth, surprised again by how the charred end didn't stain his fingers—and pulled it toward him. The motion cracked the healing cuts over his knuckles. A single dark bead swelled and tipped. One small drop fell into the dust and made a perfect coin of mud.

He swallowed and wrote with the staff tip four halting words in the space between his knees and the law's line:

I FALL SHORT.

The wind did not remove those letters. It leaned over them as if to read. The desert waited.

"Again," said the hermit, not unkindly.

Six Gun added the verse he had mocked as a boy when a circuit rider rattled it at a cabin door. He had not forgotten the cadence, only pretended to.

ALL HAVE SINNED.

The staff shook in his hand. He had killed men who had looked steadier in death than he felt now with a stick in sand. "I knew this already," he said, hating how thin and small the sentence sounded next to Scripture. "Didn't need an old man to tell me I'm crooked."

"Men know," the hermit said. "Then they defend. Then they bargain. Then they blame. Then they drink. Then they say 'not yet' until the gallows remind them clocks were not built for their convenience." He pointed at the words the outlaw had written. "Knowing is only the door. Repenting walks through."

"Repeating," Six Gun echoed, and made it taste like rope.

The hermit smiled, sudden as a coyote flash. "You think repentance is a hangman," he said. "It is a surgeon." He took the staff back with a nod and drew, on the other side of the straight law-line, a crude shape—two crossed beams, a child's cross sketched by a hand that had sketched it too many times to forget. He held the staff upright over the crossbar and let it fall once like a gavel. The sound was nothing. The meaning was not. "*But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested... Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe.*" He let the words warm the air. "*For there is no difference.*" (Romans 3:21–22).

No difference. The phrase swelled, ridiculous and perfectly sensible at once. Six Gun felt the sentence run a hand along his cheekbone and under his jaw, weighing him and finding him no heavier and no lighter than any other man. Not worse; not better. A strange ache eased under his ribs, the kind that is not pain so much as pressure giving way.

He laughed once and heard the hollowness flee it. "No difference," he said, and it wasn't argument now. It fit his mouth.

"Grace," the hermit said, and he said it like he was pointing at water in a desert and daring the man next to him to keep pretending he wasn't thirsty. "*Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*" (Romans 3:24).

Freely. Six Gun had worn that word the way a thief wears a borrowed coat. He looked at the cross in the dust and felt a better tailor at work. “Freely,” he repeated, and his tongue didn’t spit it out.

The hermit shifted, bones popping, and sat cross-legged. He dipped his thumb in the little coin of blood-mud the outlaw had made and, with a tenderness that undid Six Gun worse than any bullet had ever done, he drew a faint line from the letters *I FALL SHORT* to the sketched cross. The line darkened as it drew, dust gathering to the wet.

“What are you doin’?” Six Gun asked, voice low.

“Showing,” the hermit said. “*Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood.*” (Romans 3:25). He did not speak the word *propitiation* like a scholar showing off a Latin colt. He said it as if it were the only bridge left standing after a flood.

Blood in dust. A road the color of old rust from a man’s confession to Christ’s cross. Six Gun stared until the rough shapes blurred. Wind hummed and did not dare erase the line.

He swallowed, the old dryness back but easier to bear. “And if I don’t walk it?”

The hermit didn’t flinch. “Then this remains your truest name.” He touched, with the clean end of the staff, the words **ALL HAVE SINNED** and the line of law. He wasn’t cruel. He was accurate. “And this remains your only wage.” He met the outlaw’s eyes. “We’ll speak that sentence plain soon enough. You already know it. But hear this before you hear that.” He took a breath that was almost a prayer and released it like bread shared. “*But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*” (Romans 5:8).

While we were yet sinners. Not after. Not when you clean up, pay old debts, go six months without drawing on a man. While. Six Gun felt the word find somewhere deep that hadn’t been named in years. He put his hand to his chest and left a dust print over his shirt, half a palm that looked like he’d been touched by ash.

“My ledger...” he began, and then stopped because he did not want to open the book where he’d kept himself recorded in lies. He tried again. “The blood on my hands—” He looked at his knuckles, raw and dirty and honest. “It don’t belong near a cross.”

The hermit lifted his old face, lines cut by sun and Scripture, and it softened until Six Gun almost looked away. “Son,” he said, not mockery, not condescension, just the word men use when they remember their own fathers and forgive them, “blood is the only way any man ever gets near a cross.” He pointed, gentle, to the line he had drawn from confession to wood, thin and dark and real in the dust. “Yours is admission. His is atonement.”

Six Gun’s eyes burned. He reached without meaning to and pressed two fingers into the blood-mud, then paused, ashamed at his own reverence. He dragged those two fingers along the little road the hermit had marked, slow, as if he were learning how to write by tracing a teacher’s hand. His breath shuddered out.

“Ink,” he muttered, and almost smiled at the thought that the desert was giving lessons with nothing but dirt and a drop of a killer’s blood.

“Better,” the hermit said. “A covenant men do not draft, cannot amend, and dare not notarize.”

Silence climbed up and sat with them. A grasshopper landed near the cross, did its bold mechanical worship, and leapt off. A vulture made an unmusical circle and went elsewhere. The world continued being itself. Two men stayed still, one old as a hill, one feeling older than his bones.

Six Gun cleared his throat. “I thought the Book would feel like a weight chained to my chest,” he said, surprising himself with the ease of calling it “the Book” and not “that preacher’s Bible.” “Last night, with the hymn, it didn’t. It steadied. Like putting your back to a wall in a fight.” He looked up. “I ain’t saying yes. Not yet.” The old shield came out of habit and lay there, duller than it used to gleam. He added, because he couldn’t help it, “But I ain’t running from this either.”

The hermit nodded as if a star had moved a finger’s width. “No man is saved by admitting that the law is straight,” he said. “But no man is saved who won’t.” He tapped the words in the dust one more time, then rose, slow but sure. “Rest,” he said. “Drink.” He gestured to a shadowed cleft in the rock where Six Gun had assumed there was only shade. There was water, a thin curtain of it spilling from a seam and pooling in a little hollow scooped by centuries of thirst.

“Was that—?” Six Gun began.

“It was here,” the hermit said, amused at some private argument with providence. “Men don’t always see until they kneel.”

Six Gun crawled to it, cupped his hands, and drank. The water hit his teeth and tongue like mercy and then settled in his gut like truth. He let some run down his chin and into his shirt and didn’t care.

When he wiped his mouth, he looked back at the line, the cross, the words—*I FALL SHORT. ALL HAVE SINNED.*—and his own faint bloody trace. The desert had not wiped them.

He pushed to his feet and, for the first time since he’d learned to draw faster than men could think, didn’t feel the need to prove anything to air or rock or old prophet. He stood in front of what he’d written and didn’t hate the man who had written it.

“What now?” he asked.

“Now,” said the hermit, “we keep walking the letter that became a road.” He held the staff lightly, like a man with no fear of thieves. “We spoke guilt. Next comes the wage and the gift.” He looked at Six Gun with the kind of pity that has no contempt in it. “And then, if you will, a mouth that has spent its life saying ‘not yet’ will learn another sentence.”

He stepped back and let the sun draw the shadows long, as if it were pointing, too. Six Gun glanced once at the line through the dust and blood. He didn’t step over it. Not yet. But he did not step away.

The old prophet’s eyes warmed. “You hear the Scripture,” he said, “and you know it’s you.” He didn’t make it a question.

Six Gun breathed, and the breath tasted like stone turned to bread. “I hear,” he said. “And I know.”

The desert accepted the admission like an altar accepts an offering—without comment, with joy.

Section Two – The Wage and the Gift

The desert stretched silent, broken only by the whisper of wind combing the stones. Six Gun stood stiff, eyes locked on the dust writing: *I FALL SHORT. ALL HAVE SINNED*. The blood-streak road still gleamed faint, connecting his confession to the hermit's crooked little cross.

The prophet stooped again, staff balanced across his knees, and drew a circle around the cross so wide the dust blurred at its edges. "You know your condition," he said. "Now you must know the cost. '*For the wages of sin is death.*'" (Romans 6:23a).

The words dropped like rocks into a dry well. Six Gun's jaw tightened. "I already earned that wage ten times over." He glanced at his hands, scarred, blood-caked. "Death's followed me like a hound my whole life."

The hermit's eyes narrowed but not unkind. "Not death of the flesh alone. Death of the soul. Separation. The pit that haunted your sleep in chains." He leaned in close, voice rough as stone. "The wage is not just the noose or the bullet. It's eternal."

Six Gun felt the nightmare chains wrap again around his wrists. He heard the echo of his gunshots in eternity, saw flames licking at his scar. He whispered, "I've seen it. In dreams."

The hermit nodded slowly. "Dreams tell what the conscience knows. You have carried your own gallows in your chest."

Six Gun's throat closed. "Then it's over. That's the wage."

The prophet's voice shifted, sudden and sharp as lightning splitting sky: "*But the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*" (Romans 6:23b).

The desert itself seemed to breathe at the words. A vulture overhead tilted its wings and drifted higher.

"Gift," the hermit repeated, softer. He took his staff and drew a second road in the dust — this one beginning at the cross and stretching far, far out until the desert swallowed it. "Wages you earn," he said. "Gifts you receive. Wages kill. Gifts give life."

Six Gun shook his head, stubborn. "Don't feel right, old man. Ain't no justice in that. I've filled graves. Ruined lives. That verse can't just wipe it."

The prophet's gaze sharpened. "Justice was served — not at your hands, but at His. '*But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*'" (Romans 5:8). His voice cracked like a whip. "He bore your wage. Do you mean to bear it again out of pride?"

Six Gun's breath caught. The scar on his cheek flared. He wanted to argue, but the image came: a Man nailed, beaten, bloodied — the only innocent, wearing guilt that wasn't His. His hands twitched like they wanted to set down his Colt and pick up a hammer, admit he'd driven the nails himself.

"While we were yet sinners," the outlaw murmured. "Even me?"

"Especially you," the prophet said. "Especially all."

Silence pressed heavy. Six Gun turned away, ashamed, staring at the endless desert. The law-line, the cross, the blood road — they all stared back at him, waiting.

The hermit pressed on, voice now gentler: *“Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”* (Romans 5:1).

Peace. The word hit harder than death or wages. Six Gun had lived decades in gun smoke, shadows, guilt. Peace was a language he didn’t know.

“I ain’t had peace since I was a boy,” he whispered.

The hermit smiled faintly. “And still it waits. *‘By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.’*” (Romans 5:2).

Grace. Hope. Peace. Words softer than lead, but sharper than steel.

Six Gun rubbed his scar, muttering, “Why’s it sound like you’re readin’ my life out loud?”

“Because Romans speaks of all lives,” the hermit said. “But yours bleeds loud enough to prove it true.”

The outlaw crouched again, staring at the dust. He traced the blood road with his finger until the stain smeared across his skin. He muttered, voice breaking, “Wage or gift. That’s the choice.”

The hermit nodded, solemn. “Death earned. Life offered. Which will you take?”

Six Gun closed his eyes. For the first time, “not yet” trembled in his throat, as if even the words knew they were losing ground.

Section Three – Confession’s Edge

The sun sank west, shadows growing long across the desert floor. The hermit stood, staff planted firm, as if the wasteland itself bent around him. Six Gun Devil remained crouched, finger tracing and retracing the faint line of blood in the dust. His throat burned with thirst, but more with the weight of words that had been spoken over him.

The prophet broke the silence, voice softer now, low as a father’s in a quiet room. “We’ve walked far enough to see the road clear. You’ve heard the wage. You’ve heard the gift. Now hear the call.”

He bent, took his staff, and drew two new words in the dust beside the cross: **BELIEVE** and **CONFESS**.

Six Gun’s scar burned hot. He touched the letters as if they might bite. “Believe what? Confess what?”

The hermit lifted his face, eyes sharp, voice steady. *“That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.”* (Romans 10:9).

The outlaw’s hand fell away from the letters. His chest heaved. His voice cracked. “Saved? After all I’ve done?”

The prophet did not flinch. “*For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.*” (Romans 10:10). He pointed his staff like a judge’s finger, like a shepherd’s crook. “Your heart knows the truth already. Your mouth must follow.”

Six Gun’s eyes burned. He wanted to spit out *Not yet*, but the phrase turned brittle on his tongue, like old leather cracking. He whispered instead, almost against his will, “I... I do believe.” His voice cracked, breaking over dry ground. “I’ve seen too much not to. The cross in the fire, the Bible stopping bullets, the hymn in the night... the boy prayin’ the Lord’s Prayer as he died.” He shook his head, tears streaking dust. “I believe He’s real. I believe He’s stronger’n me.”

The hermit’s voice rose, ringing like a bell across the rocks: “Then say it plain. Confess Him Lord.”

Six Gun’s chest heaved. He pressed both hands into the dust, trembling. His scar throbbed. His mouth opened — but nothing came. Pride warred with surrender, guilt wrestled hope. His lips quivered.

Finally he rasped, “I can’t. Not yet. My sins... they choke the words.”

The hermit did not rebuke him. Instead he placed a hand on the outlaw’s shoulder, steady as stone. “Then whisper His name until it breaks the choke.”

Six Gun’s lips moved, voice hoarse. “Jesus.” The name shook. He said it again, louder. “Jesus.” His chest eased. He whispered it once more, softer, but this time not as a curse, nor as a stranger’s name. As if it belonged to him.

The desert wind hushed. The vulture wheeled away.

The hermit smiled faintly. “The dust has your blood. Soon, let His blood write your name in heaven. You are closer than you think, gunslinger. The Romans wrote your life in ink and Spirit long before your mother gave you breath. Do not turn away now.”

Six Gun bowed his head, tears dripping into the dust beside the words: *BELIEVE. CONFESS.* He hadn’t crossed fully. But he knew the line was right before him, and the call louder than his scar.

“Not yet,” he whispered one last time — but even as he said it, the words trembled with surrender, like a door half-open, waiting for the final push.

The hermit turned, staff in hand, eyes bright as flame. “Then soon. Very soon.”

And as the desert night spread its cloak over them, Six Gun Devil felt that “soon” ring truer than any “not yet” he had ever spoken.

Chapter Forty-Three – Baptized in Bullets

Section One – The Ambush in the Dust

The sun was halfway down the sky when Six Gun Devil rode north along the arroyo, saddle creaking under his weight. His scar burned, but not like before. It wasn’t just pain — it was heat, a reminder. The

hermit's words echoed in his skull, verses drawn in dust and blood. *All have sinned... the wages of sin... but the gift of God... believe and confess...*

He hadn't confessed yet. Not fully. But the name "Jesus" had passed his lips, broken and trembling, and he knew it had changed something inside him.

He was turning those thoughts over when he heard the gunfire.

Sharp cracks shattered the quiet, bouncing off canyon walls. Then screams. Horses panicked.

Six Gun kicked his own mount forward. The canyon bent, and there before him lay the ambush.

A stagecoach had been stopped dead on the trail. Two riders were down already, blood dark in the sand. A woman clutched a child inside, screaming. Bandits circled — six, maybe seven — rifles trained, eyes hard.

Six Gun didn't hesitate. He pulled his Colt — the same Colt that had betrayed him before, the same Colt that had clicked dry in his moments of pride. He leveled it, whispering hoarse, "Lord... let it fire."

He squeezed.

The hammer struck. The gun roared. One outlaw pitched backward off his horse.

The Colt fired again. Then again. Each shot true, each one burning into Six Gun's chest not pride, but awe. He wasn't missing. The weapon that had jammed at the gallows now sang like judgment.

The bandits turned in fury, bullets whining past. He spurred forward, eyes sharp. This wasn't bounty. This wasn't coin. This was protection. Innocents.

He fired, reloaded, fired again. Blood spilled. Dust rose. Lead flew like rain.

And as the last bandit fell, the stagecoach still stood, the woman clutching her child, alive.

Six Gun Devil sat in the saddle, Colt smoking, scar burning — and for the first time in his life, his heart whispered, *This wasn't murder. This was mercy.*

Section Two – The Weight of Blood

The woman stepped down from the coach, still shaking. The child clung to her dress. Six Gun holstered the Colt slow, hands trembling for a new reason.

"You saved us," she whispered, eyes wide. "You... saved us."

The words hit him harder than any bullet. Saved. No one had ever said that of him. Never. He swallowed hard.

The child looked up at him with eyes wide as coins. "Mister... are you an angel?"

Six Gun barked a laugh, bitter and broken. "No, kid. Not even close."

But the scar on his cheek throbbed, and the hermit's voice echoed: *"While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."*

Blood stained the dust, but this time it wasn't innocent blood on his hands. It was wolves cut down before they could devour sheep. He looked at his palms, trembling. "Lord," he whispered under his breath, "I've spilled rivers for pride. But today..." His throat tightened. "Today it feels different."

The sheriff's words echoed: *"Only God can judge rightly."*

And Josiah's: *"Bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you."*

Had he just done good? Could God use even his revolver as a shield instead of a sword?

The woman pressed his hand, voice trembling. "God sent you. I know it."

The words seared him. He wanted to deny them. But deep down, something whispered maybe — maybe — they were true.

Section Three – Washed in Fire

Night fell. The bodies of the bandits lay buried shallow, the woman and child carried safely to the next outpost. Six Gun built a fire alone, the desert silent except for the crackle of flame.

He stared into it, hands trembling, heart racing. His mind replayed the fight — the bullets flying, the Colt firing true, the innocents spared.

It felt like baptism, but not in water. Fire had washed over him. Lead had fallen like rain. He had stepped into it filthy and come out... not clean, not yet, but changed.

He whispered hoarse, "Lord, I don't understand You. I ain't prayed proper, I ain't confessed it all. But I feel it. Something broke today. The chains ain't as tight."

The verse rang in his head: *"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."* (John 15:13).

He muttered, "I didn't die for 'em. But I was ready to. For the first time."

Tears burned his eyes. He wiped them with the back of his hand, left streaks of blood and dust across his face. "If this is baptism... then baptize me again. 'Til I'm new."

The fire popped, sparks rising like prayers. His scar throbbed, but not as curse — as reminder.

For the first time in his life, Six Gun Devil whispered not "Not yet"... but "Lord, maybe now."

And the desert night held him in silence like an answer.

Chapter Forty-Four – A Widow's Psalm

Section One – The Vigil at the Graves

Dusk slid down the hills like a shawl. Wind worried the sage, set the dry grass whispering. Six Gun Devil rode in slow from the south road with dust on his coat and a new quiet in his bones—quiet born

of gun smoke and a spared child, the kind that doesn't brag. The scar along his cheek ticked to the beat of his horse; his palm—once burned by hell's writ—rested on the saddlebag where the Bible's square weight steadied him more than iron ever had.

He didn't head for Bart's saloon or the sheriff's office. He veered to the cemetery above Redemption, where crosses leaned like tired men and the evening bell carried further than a bullet. He wasn't alone. A woman's voice braided into the wind—low, worn, carrying the ache of years and the stubbornness of hope.

Sarah Schaefer stood by a wooden cross that bore no paint, only a knife-scratched name and a date that still felt like freshly turned earth. Hannah held her mother's skirt in one fist and a lamp in the other. The flame threw a small, defiant circle.

Sarah sang, not sweet, not polished—true. The tune rose and fell the way water does against rock. The words were older than the town, older than the desert, older than every gun in every holster:

*He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High
Shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.
I will say of the LORD, He is my refuge and my fortress:
My God; in Him will I trust. (Psalm 91:1–2)*

Six Gun stopped at the fence and didn't put a boot to the ground. The sound pinned him better than shackles. "Refuge. Fortress." He tasted the syllables like a man at a strange well, not yet sure it's water.

Hannah saw him first, lifted the lamp, then checked her mother's face before waving. She didn't wave. She just watched, as children do when they've decided a story is changing and are afraid to scare it off with sudden movements.

Sarah's voice didn't falter. She laid her palm on the cross as if steadying a friend who would not stay upright.

*Surely He shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler,
And from the noisome pestilence.
He shall cover thee with His feathers, and under His wings shalt thou trust:
His truth shall be thy shield and buckler. (Psalm 91:3–4)*

He swung down at last, hat in hand, dust shifting around his boots. He stayed on his side of the fence—one step from entering, a lifetime from belonging. "Ma'am," he said, voice low, the word carrying apology it hadn't carried before.

Sarah didn't look up yet. Her throat worked around the next line, and when it came, she gave it to the graves and the sky and the man just beyond the pickets in equal measure:

*Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night;
Nor for the arrow that flieth by day;
Nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness;
Nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday.
A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand;
But it shall not come nigh thee. (Psalm 91:5–7)*

The words cut through memory—gunfire in the arroyo, a child’s scream, bullets singing past his ear, the Colt answering true. *A thousand shall fall... but it shall not come nigh thee.* He could hear the hermit’s voice in the sand: *The wage and the gift.* He could hear the jailhouse hymn: *Amazing grace...* He could hear Hannah whispering: *Yes, Jesus loves me...*

“Mrs. Schaefer,” he managed, and his own name for her felt too formal, too small. “I... rode to say—” He stopped. For a man who could draw faster than thought, words were slower than winter.

Sarah lifted her hand from the wood and finally turned. The lamp gilded the lines grief had carved into her face. It did not erase them; it honored them. “You came to the right place,” she said, voice even. “Say it where it matters.”

Six Gun looked at the cross he’d never dug, the grave he’d helped fill with his choices, even if not with his hand. “I can’t give him back,” he said. Truth first, because lying here would be a second murder.

“No,” she said. She looked at the raw earth, then up, somewhere beyond stars. “But you can stop taking.”

Silence took a slow breath. Hannah set the lamp on a stone, folded her hands with the solemnity of a judge and the gentleness of a child.

Sarah sang again, softer now, as if the psalm itself were laying a coat over shivering shoulders:

*Only with thine eyes shalt thou behold and see the reward of the wicked.
Because thou hast made the LORD, which is my refuge,
Even the most High, thy habitation;
There shall no evil befall thee,
Neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling. (Psalm 91:8–10)*

Six Gun’s breath snagged. *Habitation.* Not a visit, not a favor, not a deal—*home.* He rested his forearm on the top rail, hat pinched in his other hand. “I don’t know how to live anywhere but the edge.”

“Then step inside,” Sarah said simply, and the sentence held more gospel than argument. She glanced at Hannah; the girl nodded like a deacon.

A coyote called from the far ridge. The bell in town gave one slow tong. Night folded itself closer, but the graves didn’t feel colder. They felt covered.

Sarah finished the psalm’s middle with a steadiness that sounded like defiance turned holy:

*For He shall give His angels charge over thee,
To keep thee in all thy ways.
They shall bear thee up in their hands,
Lest thou dash thy foot against a stone. (Psalm 91:11–12)*

Six Gun thought of the cliff that had appeared under his feet in the wilderness, the voice that had dared him to jump, and the verse that had been twisted at him. He heard the true line now, unbent, sung by a widow who had buried more than rings. He bowed his head.

"I heard about the coach," Sarah said at last. "Hannah told me what folks are saying. That you stood between wolves and lambs." Her eyes held his. "It doesn't raise the dead. But it tells me you're listening."

"I am," he said, and the words sounded like someone else's voice—someone he wanted to know better.

Hannah picked up the lamp, and the three of them—widow, outlaw, child—stood in a triangle of light at the edge of the world, Psalm 91 shaping the dark into something less hungry.

Section Two – Shelter of the Most High

They left the graves together, walking slow along the fence line while the sky turned indigo and stars pricked through like nails hammered from the other side. Sarah carried the psalm as if it were both shield and song. Six Gun carried his hat and the ache that comes when a hard heart softens where it swore it wouldn't.

At the gate she stopped and faced him square. "You wronged me," she said without flinching. "Not with your hand, maybe. But with the shadow your name cast. My man died in the wake of it—the bounty, the fear, the way death followed you like weather." She didn't make a fist. She didn't need to. "I wanted you dead. I said it to God. I said it to the sheriff. I said it to myself. I said it to this cross. But God kept on answering me with a psalm instead of a rope."

Six Gun didn't try to beg. He stared at the dust near his boots. "I ain't here to make you forgive me."

Sarah almost smiled, a tired thing with more truth than teeth. "Forgiveness isn't a favor you pry from me, gunslinger. It's a verdict I receive and then pass along so it doesn't rot in my hands." She lifted her face toward the chapel's roofline across town. "The psalm says *refuge*. If I hide in Him, I don't have to hide from you. That's math even grief can do."

Hannah stepped half behind her mother's skirt and half out, as if torn between hiding and heralding. "Mama says God can keep us even when the Devil's close."

Six Gun gave a rough laugh that didn't quite hurt. "I'm trying to stop being the Devil, kid."

Sarah's eyes softened. "Then stop," she said. "Not by walking off alone—by walking under wings."

She didn't quote a preacher. She sang. Verse by verse, plain as bread:

*"He shall cover thee with His feathers, and under His wings shalt thou trust:
His truth shall be thy shield and buckler."* (Psalm 91:4)

She let the melody hang, then spoke. "Protection isn't you drawing before anyone else. It's God hemming you in before and behind so you don't have to be your own wall." She angled her head toward town. "Men think righteousness is a holster trick. Psalm 91 says righteousness is address. Where you live. *'Thy habitation.'*"

He exhaled, long and frayed. "I don't know how to move in."

Sarah glanced down at his saddlebag. “You been carrying a key for a while. You just won’t put it in the door.” She wasn’t cruel. She was accurate.

“Romans,” he said, surprising himself with the ease of the word.

“Romans,” she agreed. “And this.” She tapped the pocket of her dress. When she drew her hand out, she held a little pocket psalter, edges rounded by years and tears. She thumbed to Psalm 91 and pressed it into his palm. “My husband’s,” she said. “He used to read it before he rode fence or wintered cattle in the breaks. I never understood why he smiled when he hit *‘a thousand shall fall at thy side... but it shall not come nigh thee.’* Thought it was bravado. Learned it was trust.”

Six Gun stared at the tiny book like it might bite. It didn’t. It warmed his hand. He slid it next to the Bible in his bag as if adding coals to coals.

“Folks will say,” Sarah went on, “that Psalm 91 is only for the righteous. And they’re right. Only—” she lifted a hand before he could drop his eyes— “the righteous aren’t the ones who never spilled blood. They’re the ones who hide in the Only Righteous One. That’s the shelter. Not your change of habits. His unchanging mercy.” She let that settle, then sang again, just above a whisper:

*“Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder:
The young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under feet.”* (Psalm 91:13)

He thought of the gambler’s lantern, the oil-less flame, the contracts that smoked. He thought of the hermit’s staff and the cross scratched in dust. He thought, unbidden and unashamed, of Jesus.

“Sheriff tried to hang me,” he said at last, voice careful, like a man testing a bridge. “Rope snapped by a rider’s bullet. Could’ve called it luck. I didn’t. Not after the way the jailhouse sang.” He swallowed. “I ain’t confessing to you like a priest. I’m telling you as the widow I wronged. Something’s turned in me. I pulled iron today to keep a child breathing. And when it was over, I didn’t feel taller. I felt small.” He tapped his chest with the edge of his hat. “Small can fit under wings.”

Sarah’s jaw trembled once and steadied. “Then stay there,” she said. “Stay long enough that people stop needing to check your shadow for knives. Stay long enough that Psalm 91 starts sounding like your address more than your alibi.”

Hannah, unabashed, reached for his burned hand. “It’s a good place,” she said. “Under His wings.” She looked at his scar, then up. “You can sit by us at church if you want.”

He blinked against a sting that had nothing to do with dust. “Might start at the back.”

“Front’s better,” Hannah said, absolutely certain. “Closer to singin’.”

Sarah squeezed her shoulder, half-chiding, wholly proud. “Back is fine. Wings are wide.”

They started toward town together. The road had not shortened, but it felt straighter. Somewhere between fence and first lamp, Sarah’s voice rose again—tired, beautiful, unpolished, undefeated:

*“Because thou hast made the LORD... thy habitation;
There shall no evil befall thee.”* (Psalm 91:9–10)

Six Gun let the words step ahead of them like scouts who knew every draw and ambush. He didn't hide behind them. He walked in them, slow, unsure, willing.

Section Three – The Blessing and the Scar

The chapel door was propped open to let night air trade places with the day's heat. Lamps burned inside—three hung from rafters, one stubborn by the pulpit, one near the back pew where men who feared "Amen" more than bullets usually took their stand. Josiah Markham stood near the front with his sleeves rolled and his Bible open, the look of a man who had prayed the town to the edge of sleep and then stayed up to make sure no nightmares leaked.

When he saw the three shapes in the doorway—widow, child, outlaw—he did not startle. He did not smile big either. He gave the small, grateful nod of a shepherd counting heads and finding one more than yesterday.

"Evening," he said.

"Evening," Sarah returned, and the word carried its own benediction. She walked to the front without drama, set her hand on the pulpit like she was greeting a friend who kept no ledger, and said, "Preacher, if you've any objections to the Psalms in this house, say them now."

Josiah laughed, once, softly. "I've none," he said. "They outrank me."

"Good," Sarah said. She didn't ask permission. She began to sing.

Her voice filled the small room the way a river fills its bed after a long drought—gently at first, then with a force that is not about volume but about rightness. She didn't look at Six Gun; she looked at the cross above the pulpit, plain wood that had seen too many tears to be called decoration.

*"Because he hath set his love upon Me, therefore will I deliver him:
I will set him on high, because he hath known My name.
He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him:
I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him, and honour him.
With long life will I satisfy him, and shew him My salvation."* (Psalm 91:14–16)

The words changed person—no longer the widow to the Lord, but the Lord to the widow, to the town, to the man in the doorway who had worn the Devil's name like a brand and was tired of being owned by it. Six Gun felt the shift like a hand on his chest easing him down into a chair he hadn't dared to sit in.

He stepped inside. Not to the front—Hannah would have to win that fight next week—but farther than he'd ever come on a day without bullets. He sat on the end of a middle pew, hat in his hands, head half-bowed, as if listening through the wood for a heartbeat.

Elias slipped in the side door and leaned his shoulder against the post with the slow satisfaction of a man discovering he has been relieved by Someone with broader shoulders. He caught the outlaw's eye and didn't nod exactly, but something in his jaw gave way. Bart stood in back with a broom he had not used, pretending he was there to check the lantern wicks.

Josiah closed his Bible and let the psalm hang in the air like incense you couldn't see. Then he came down from the pulpit, stopped at the end of Six Gun's pew, and spoke low so the room's silence didn't have to be broken to hear him. "You've been living on the porch of this psalm," he said. "Might be time to move inside."

Six Gun's throat worked. "I'm closer."

Josiah's mouth twitched. "Close is good for horseshoes. The psalm is a door."

Across the aisle, Sarah took Hannah's hand and came the few steps over that feel like miles when grief must walk them. She didn't ask, *Do you repent?* She said, "Do you want to be covered?"

He didn't pretend he didn't understand. He stood; the pew complained. He lifted his burned hand—the one that had once pressed a hellish writ—and set it on the back of the bench as if the wood could steady a man who could no longer steady himself with pride.

"Say it," Sarah urged, not stern, not soft—midwife sure. "Say the Name. Say the thing Romans drew and Psalm 91 shelters."

Silence kneaded the room. The outlaw looked down at his scar as if deciding whether to keep it as a story or surrender it as a testimony. Then he raised his eyes, found the cross, and let his defenses go, one by one, like shells falling off a man who has stopped needing armor.

"Jesus," he said. Not as a curse. Not as a dare. "Jesus... Lord." The second word was a bridge, and he walked onto it, not graceful—*willing*.

Hannah's lamp flame danced in a draft that wasn't there. Elias cleared his throat like a man who just saw weather change for the better. Bart forgot his broom. Josiah shut his eyes for a heartbeat, then opened them bright. Sarah didn't cry. Her tears had work to do better than escaping. She sang—just a line, just enough to set the seal:

"I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him, and honour him." (Psalm 91:15)

Six Gun wasn't baptized in the font that night. There'd be water soon enough, and witnesses. But something washed him anyway: a widow's psalm, a church's hush, a Name that did what bullets never could. He didn't feel lighter the way men say when whiskey lifts them; he felt *held* the way a cliff holds a nest.

He looked at Sarah. "I can't undo what I done."

"No," she said. "You can live different under the wings that outstretch what you've broken."

He nodded once—like a man accepting orders he wasn't ashamed to follow—and sat back down, the Bible and the little psalter tucked against his ribs where a gun had long kept vigil. The scar on his cheek didn't fade. It didn't need to. It became a mark of where mercy had met him.

Outside, night flowed over Redemption without malice. Coyotes sang a lullaby instead of a threat. Somewhere along the graves, the wind read Psalm 91 to the crosses in a voice only the dead and God can hear, and both were satisfied.

And in the chapel, under rafters that had seen more fear than faith and were ready to balance the books, a man who had been called Devil learned the address of a new home:

**“He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High
Shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.”**

He whispered it once, then again, not as a visitor repeating the rules, but as a tenant signing the lease.

When the lamps were turned down and people filed out slow, he lingered. He didn’t say “Not yet.” He didn’t say “Maybe soon.” He touched the wooden cross with his fingertips—the way a son might touch a father’s sleeve to make sure he’s real—and said the only words that fit in his mouth and the psalm at the same time:

“Thank You.”

Chapter Forty-Five – The Wages of Sin

Section One – Ledger at Dawn

Dawn came in quiet, pale and honest, the kind of light that doesn’t flatter or lie. Six Gun Devil stood on the rise above the town with the cemetery at his back and Redemption yawning itself awake below. Chickens fussed in pens. A single stove pipe sighed a thread of smoke. Somewhere, a milk pail clanged like a small bell clearing its throat. He set his hat on his knee and read the verse again from the little psalter Sarah had pressed into his hand, lips moving soundlessly as if he feared to wake the dead with words they already knew:

“For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”
(Romans 6:23)

Wages. Gift. The two words stared at each other across a canyon, and his whole life lay in the gulf between them.

He looked over his shoulder at the crosses—rows of plain wood, knife-scratched names. Some he had carved himself as penance he didn’t yet believe counted for anything. Some he had avoided carving because guilt had a way of stiffening a man’s fingers. He could smell the cedar, the soil still learning the weight of new sorrow, the faint, clean sting of lamp oil from the night before when a widow sang a psalm until grief ran out of breath.

“Wages,” he said aloud, and the word felt like coins dropping one by one into a paymaster’s hand. He had worked for that pay his whole life. Every job taken for spite or coin, every card table turned into a battlefield, every name he’d let rot on his tongue. The currency had always been the same—blood paid out, soul paid down. The account never closed; interest gathered in the dark. He’d dreamt the company ledger itself: a book that wrote in red and never showed a balance due, because the debt was the wage and the wage was death. Not just the grave—he understood the grave—but the echoing pit the hermit had named. Separation. Chains in the night.

The wind rolled up from the valley and pressed the page flat. His burned palm—the old writ’s mark—held the psalter steady. He remembered the gambler’s circle and the oil-less lantern. He remembered the ledger that had offered him power like a loan at terms he didn’t read until he heard them in hell’s accent. *Protection withdrawn. Power withheld. Hunters released.* The voice had sounded like a contract clearing its throat before foreclosing on a soul. Wages.

Below, the street blinked itself into morning. Elias crossed from the jail to the pump with the slow purpose of a man who’d decided to live long and honest rather than hard and short. Bart turned his broom at the saloon door and, for once, used it. Josiah stood by the chapel steps, hat off, Bible open, mouthing his own verse into the day. Hannah chased the cat and kept losing on purpose.

“Gift,” Six Gun whispered, and the second word reached into his chest and unknotted things pride had tangled. Gift wasn’t wage; gift wasn’t earned; gift didn’t carry interest or a sheriff. Gift was a hand with a scar of its own, not asking to see yours first. *Eternal life*—not the coyotes’ kind, not the gambler’s counterfeit, not a legend sung until it turned to smoke. Life through a person. Through *Jesus Christ our Lord*.

He tested the Name again in the open morning. “Jesus.” No lightning. No lantern hiss. Just air that smelled like sage and bread. He had spoken it last night with the widow and the preacher and the town holding its breath. *Jesus... Lord*. The second word had felt like stepping onto a bridge he didn’t build.

Now the verse set two ledgers in front of him. In one, he recognized every entry in his own hand: wages he’d collected until his pockets tore. In the other—no columns. Just a single line written across the top in a script that looked like sunlight burned into water: *the gift of God*. He touched the page in the psalter the way a man tests the surface of a river he means to cross. It was cool. It was real. It did not argue.

“Wages... gift,” he said again, and this time the space between the words sounded smaller.

Bootsteps crunched behind him. “If you’re plannin’ to preach, I’ll go fetch my hat,” Sheriff Elias said, but his voice had a cracked-smile in it. He came to stand shoulder to shoulder, elbows on the fence.

“I ain’t the one to preach,” Six Gun answered.

“No,” Elias said, “but you’re the one to testify.” He nodded at the psalter. “Romans again?”

“Romans,” Six Gun said. He let the verse fall between them so the sheriff could read the same line and weigh his own wages.

Elias grunted. “I used to pay my anger double time,” he said after a bit. “Collected it too.” He glanced sideways. “Gift’s an odd way to square a town’s books.”

“Only way that leaves us breathin’,” Six Gun said.

They stood while the day slit itself wider. When the bell gave one soft stroke from the chapel, Six Gun closed the psalter and set his hat back on. He had a strong sense that the day wanted something from him—a return, a refusal, a reckoning. Romans 6:23 rang like a depot gong: *Last call for death. First call for life*. He holstered the psalter in his bag beside the bigger Book and felt the pair of them steady him as he started down the hill.

“Payday,” he said.

“For somebody,” Elias agreed.

Section Two – Blood Money Returned

By the time the sun stood one fist above the roofs, word had spread the way words do in a town hungry to live: the Devil had said the Lord’s Name and hadn’t choked on it. Some folks smiled into their sleeves. Some checked their rifles. Some did both. Six Gun walked their street with his shadow on a shorter leash than it used to run.

The gift had been offered; the ledger still lay open. He aimed himself where the worst entries had been written.

Bart looked up from washing glasses when the outlaw came through the batwings. For a heartbeat, the saloon tasted like old days—spilled whiskey, a piano that only knew two keys well, talk that bled into trouble. Then the picture shifted. The mirror behind the bar still bore the white star cracks from the night the preacher read under gunfire, and the shelf on the back wall had two bullets lodged in a Bible that now lived somewhere else. History had left nails in the boards. Mercy had pounded them flat.

“Devil,” Bart said, out of habit and not unkindly.

“Name’s changin’,” Six Gun answered, and set a canvas roll on the bar. It clinked like coins hunting a conscience.

Bart narrowed an eye. “What’s that?”

“Wages,” Six Gun said. He unrolled the canvas, and the coins glowed like snakes in the light. Some edges were nicked where men had tested them with knives; some were dull from pockets where sweat had turned them into little moons. He folded his burned palm over them like a benediction held until the right time. “Blood money,” he said. “Jobs I took that paid for other men’s graves. I kept it when I should’ve burned it. I’m returning what I can, where I can.”

Bart stared at the pile with a bartender’s old wisdom: money was a good servant, a bad god, and a worse alibi. “Ain’t all of it traceable.”

“Enough is,” Six Gun said. He named three names. Bart nodded, quietly surprised. He named two more. Bart swallowed and reached for a ledger that had never seen daylight. Most saloons keep two. The one with the broken spine he pulled now had entries in a barmaid’s tidy hand: loans to widows until the cattle drove; notes paid in goods when harvests failed; debts forgiven when graves got there first.

Bart ran a finger down a page. “Schaefer’s was cleared,” he said, glancing at the door as if Sarah might appear and sing the truth to confirm it. “Hollis still owes the undertaker. Peers across the creek—burnt out last winter—took a loan and made the first two payments, then lost the cow. I can see to those.”

Six Gun pushed the roll across. “Start there. Quiet.”

Bart didn’t grin. He did something rarer—he looked relieved of a weight he hadn’t realized he’d been carrying for the whole town. “Quiet’s my first language,” he said. He reached under the bar and

brought up a small blackened iron box. He set the coins in it the way a man sets kindling—careful, purposeful, ready to light them for heat instead of spectacle. “You stay for coffee?”

“I ain’t thirsty for old rooms,” Six Gun said, not unkind. He turned to go, then paused, hand on the batwing. “If Colter comes through—”

“He won’t get my welcome,” Bart said.

“He’ll try anyway,” Six Gun said. “Wolves don’t need invitations.”

Bart tapped the iron box lid, then the Bible dent-scar on the shelf. “We been learnin’ to bar doors with more than wood.”

Six Gun tipped his hat and stepped back into sunlight.

At the mercantile, he found a different ledger—receipts for cartridges and oats bought with cash whose stink didn’t wash off. He counted coins into Mr. Loomis’s shaking hands while the man’s wife pretended to price ribbon for Hannah and blinked hard enough to call it dust. At the livery, he paid for a saddle he’d never made right after a rider hadn’t come back. At the clinic, he set a little stack in Dr. Kinney’s palm and said, “For the stitches you didn’t bill because the kid was scared,” and the doctor said, “I bill fear,” and they both laughed once and stopped quick because the joke had more truth than humor.

Every place he left some coin behind, the verse rang again. *The wages of sin is death*. He could hear it in the clink of metal like shovels tapping stone. Then the second line walked in behind it and turned the room. *But the gift of God is eternal life*. In a saloon tin box. In a livery ledger. In a doctor’s clean hand. Life is where gifts go when you refuse to spend them on yourself.

At the end of the circuit, he stood at the jail door and looked at the last bag in his hand. The coins in this one had come from darker places—ranches that hired him to break men, men who hired him to break worse. No ledgers could track those debts; the debtors were dust or gone.

He walked past Elias’s desk, through the office, out the back to the ash barrel. He struck a match and held it until the flame bit his fingers, then dropped it into the dry paper he’d stacked earlier. The barrel took the spark into itself and grew a small, faithful fire. He laid two bills from Colter across the coals and watched them blacken and shrug into lace, then into nothing. He added five more. Ten. Twenty. He stayed until the bag lay empty, and the smoke curled straight up without stinging his eyes.

“Funeral?” Elias asked from the doorway, coffee in one hand.

“Payday,” Six Gun said again, and this time the word sounded like a man clocking out from a job he would never do again.

Elias sipped, looked at the smoke, and nodded as if someone he’d been tracking had finally crossed a state line he would not be following. “The town’ll hear about some of it,” he said. “Let ‘em. The rest can be between you and the ash.”

“Between me and the gift,” Six Gun said, surprising himself with his own boldness.

Elias tipped his cup toward the barrel. “Grace makes a fine fire.”

Section Three – A New Paymaster

Evening found the south road dusting itself with riders. Six Gun knew the lead silhouette before the sun turned it to face: Colter Hayes rode like a man who thought the horizon took orders. Four men flanked him. Their bandannas were clean; their hearts weren't.

They drew rein in front of the saloon, which was brave or stupid depending on what you believed about what had changed inside. Six Gun was already waiting in the street. He could feel Psalm 91 like shade at his back and Romans 6:23 like a judge's sentence softened by pardon in his chest.

"Boys," he said.

Colter smirked. "Heard you found religion." He looked past Six Gun to the chapel door where a small hand had propped it with a stone. "Town says you're switchin' paymasters."

"Town's right," Six Gun said.

Colter flicked his reins and leaned forward in the saddle. "Ain't no gift in this world, Devil. Only wages. We earn what we take, and we keep what we can hold." He tossed a leather pouch that hit the dirt at Six Gun's feet with a sound that used to make him salivate. "Bank south of the river. Easy run. You on point. Double shares. You owe me from the jail. I collected your rope. Time you collect your due."

Six Gun looked down at the pouch and didn't move. The old hunger stirred and found a different stomach than the one it used to feed. He heard again the hermit's staff scratching a cross in dust; he felt again his own blood smear a road a child could follow. He said the verse the way some men say a creed:

"For the wages of sin is death," he said, and the gang laughed because they had heard Scripture used as spice on a story, never as steel in a man's spine.

Colter's smile thinned. "And?"

Six Gun lifted his eyes and let the second clause carry out into air that mouths had stained and prayers had rinsed. "But the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Silence kissed the street. Windows breathed. Somewhere, a boot creaked as Elias shifted his weight by the jail door. Hannah's lamp wasn't lit yet, but hope had learned to make its own light.

Colter spat. "You talk like a man dying."

"I've done my dying," Six Gun said. He hooked the pouch with his toe and sent it skidding back. "I won't take your wages. I quit."

"You don't quit me," Colter said, and the sentence wasn't rage yet. It was habit resisting eviction.

Six Gun's hand settled on his Colt, not to sermonize, not to impress, just because wolves still used teeth, and sheep still deserved shepherds with staffs and slings. "I belong to Another," he said simply.

Colter's eyes snapped to the holster. "Prove it with iron, then. Draw."

Old muscle memory stretched its limbs like a dog in sun. The outlaw felt the familiar narrowing of the world to a breath, a trigger, a heartbeat where a man becomes mathematics. For years he had lived there, collected his pay there, slept above the noise of blood because he had learned to call it music. Now the moment arrived again, sober and uncloaked.

He did not feel invincible. He felt covered.

He drew second and fired first. That had always been his trick—read the tremor in the other man’s wrist, smell the intent, start moving the instant the thought in his enemy’s mind turned into muscle, and let providence or practice do the rest. This time, when the world narrowed, it narrowed around a verse:

...but the gift of God is eternal life...

Colter’s shot went wide. Six Gun’s nicked his shoulder clean and left him thudding back into the dust. Two of the flanking men twitched like colts and half-drew; then they looked down the street and saw the sheriff standing loose and steady, rifle in the crook of his arm, and decided wages weren’t worth the penalty. The other two stared at the chapel door as if something inside had already stepped onto the porch.

“You can ride,” Six Gun told them, voice flat as iron laid across a rail. “Or you can work. But I don’t pay in death anymore.”

Colter, teeth clenched, pressed a hand to his shoulder and glared up with the personal affront of a man told his god had died. “You’ll come back,” he hissed. “The world’s a pay window. Men like you can’t walk past it.”

Six Gun slid the Colt home and let peace finish the sentence. “Maybe you’re right,” he said. “But the pay window I stop at now has nails in it and blood on it. And it pays what I can’t earn.”

Colter’s lip curled. He hauled himself into the saddle and jerked his horse around. “This town’s a fever,” he said, voice like oil catching fire. “It’ll break.” He kicked south. The others followed, angry dust in their wake.

Bart leaned out of the saloon and released a breath big enough to wash the mirror. Elias scratched his jaw and didn’t bother hiding a smile that looked like a man discovering his own face in clean water. Josiah stepped to the chapel door, lifted two fingers in a benediction nobody heard and everybody felt. Hannah, audacious as sunrise, darted out to fetch the leather pouch from where it lay and handed it to Elias without even a glance inside.

Six Gun picked up the same verse again, not from the page, from the place where it had carved itself under his ribs. He looked up at the cross above the chapel door and said it softly, like a promise to a Paymaster who never docked the wrong man:

“For the wages of sin is death;” — his eyes flicked to the south road and the dust — “but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

He felt the weight of the old wages fall a little more. He felt the shape of the new wage—gift, not earned—fit his hands like a tool finally used for what it was made. He touched the psalter in his bag; he touched the bigger Book; he touched the scar on his cheek. None of them burned. All of them blessed.

Night would bring more reckonings. Wolves don't retire. Old ledgers don't go quietly. But when the lamp-light gathered and the chapel filled and Psalm 23 rose soft under the rafters, Six Gun Devil stood in a pew—not at the front yet, not hiding in the back—and sang with a voice that had just learned its own work:

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever. (Psalm 23:6)*

Not wages. **Gift.** And—for the first time since he had put a gun on his hip—he believed it.

Chapter Forty-Six – A Hymn over Graves

Section One – The Procession

The bell tolled slow, one note at a time, as Redemption filed up the hill toward the burying ground. Dust clung to skirts, boots, trouser hems, every step laying another layer of grief on the trail. A coffin rode on the shoulders of four men — Elias among them, hat pressed down, jaw set the way a lawman's jaw sets when he cannot arrest disease, cannot cuff old age, cannot lasso tragedy.

Six Gun Devil followed behind, not among the pallbearers, not among the front rows of mourners, but not hiding either. His scar burned in the evening light, and the psalter in his bag pressed against his side like a coal. He carried his hat in his hand out of respect. The gift of God — eternal life — still thundered in his ribs from the verse that had chased Colter down the street only yesterday. But the wages of sin had to be buried again, and wages always left weeping behind.

The coffin settled by the hole, ropes creaking like tired knees. Sarah Schaefer held Hannah close, both dressed plain but neat. The widow's face was lined with the kind of strength only psalms can write. Josiah Markham stood at the foot of the grave, Bible in one hand, hymnbook in the other. His voice carried quiet authority even before he spoke.

"Another gone," he said. "And we gather here because the wages of sin is death, but we remember also — the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." He set the Bible open on the coffin lid a moment, palm resting on it like a benediction.

Six Gun shifted his weight, staring down at the dirt. He thought of every grave he'd helped fill, every mound that should've had his name on it. His throat closed.

Josiah lifted the hymnbook, nodded once to the crowd, and began low and sure:

*"Abide with me: fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide.
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me."*

The town joined, rough and uneven, some out of tune, but together. The hymn rose like smoke, covering the grave, covering their weakness. Six Gun's scar burned hotter, and his eyes blurred. He turned his head, pretending to watch the ridgeline for riders, but he was hiding tears.

Section Two – The Outlaw's Ache

The hymn moved into its second verse, voices firmer now, grief harnessed into harmony.

*"Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away;
Change and decay in all around I see—
O Thou who changest not, abide with me."*

Six Gun clenched his jaw. *Change and decay*. That line hit like a bullet. He'd seen it — saloons full of laughter one night, empty chairs the next. Cards turning to curses. Wives to widows. Children to orphans. He had been the cause more than once.

He glanced at Sarah. Her lips moved steady on the words. Her husband's grave lay just yards away, yet she sang of a Lord who abides. It made his heart twist. He thought of his mother singing by lamplight, darning socks, voice plain and sweet. He hadn't cried then. He wouldn't cry now. Not where men could see.

But inside, the ache was hot.

Josiah lifted his hand for the third verse, and the words seemed written for a man with a gun on his hip and blood on his soul:

*"I need Thy presence every passing hour;
What but Thy grace can foil the tempter's power?
Who, like Thyself, my guide and stay can be?
Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me."*

Six Gun's chest shuddered. *Every passing hour*. That was his life. Every hour a draw, a debt, a danger. He mouthed the words without voice, and they cut deeper than bullets. He whispered in his heart, *Lord, abide with me. Please*.

Section Three – Tears in the Shadows

The coffin lowered, ropes groaning, dirt waiting to receive. Josiah closed the hymnbook and prayed, voice trembling but sure. "We plant in weakness, but we trust to rise in power. We bury in sorrow, but we cling to the promise: 'I am the resurrection, and the life.' Lord, abide with us in the valley of the shadow of death."

"Amen," the crowd murmured. Hats lifted. Dirt began to fall.

Six Gun stepped back to the shade of a cedar tree, chest heaving. He pressed the heel of his hand hard against his eyes. He had wept in nightmares, in chains, under a widow's psalm — but this was different. These tears weren't for himself. They were for the man in the box, for the widow's voice, for the child who would grow without a father. For all the graves he couldn't unfill.

He whispered hoarse, "The wages of sin is death." The words tasted like iron. Then he touched the psalter in his bag, pulled it close to his heart, and added: "But the gift of God is eternal life." The words tasted like water.

When he finally lifted his head, Josiah was looking straight at him across the grave. The preacher's eyes said, *It's all right to let it show. It's all right to be broken where God can mend.*

Six Gun gave the smallest nod. He turned to go before anyone saw his wet face in the fading light, but the hymn still rang in his chest like an echo:

*"Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;
Shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies;
Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me."*

He whispered once more into the wind, not for show, not for fear, but for truth:

"Lord... abide with me."

And as he walked down from the graves, the scar on his cheek burned less like a curse and more like a reminder that even devils can pray.

Chapter Forty-Seven – The Demon's Ride

Section One – Hooves Like Thunder

Redemption had learned quiet again. After funerals and hymns, after ashes and psalms, the town walked softer. Doors stayed open a little longer in the evening, laughter leaked through shutters, and Josiah's bell on the chapel called not only the faithful but the curious. Even Bart had been known to hum a hymn under his breath, though he called it "just keepin' time with the broom."

That peace cracked when the riders came.

It started as a tremor. The dust on the north road jumped like beans on a skillet. Then a low thunder — not storm, but hooves. Folks stepped into the street, shading their eyes. The bell rope twitched in Josiah's hand, but he didn't ring it. He didn't have to. The riders announced themselves.

Out of the dust storm came twelve horsemen, black scarves over their mouths, rifles glinting in the sun. On each man's coat, crudely painted in white, was a leering skull branded with horns. Their leader rode tall in a black hat wide as the horizon, a scar down his jaw, eyes bright with mockery. He raised his arms as they circled into the street and shouted, "We are the Devil's Horsemen — and your God can't save you!"

Gunshots split the air, not aimed, just meant to scatter chickens, splinter shutters, and punch holes in calm. Laughter followed.

Six Gun Devil stepped out of the sheriff's office, scar burning hotter than the sun. He had heard the name already — whispers on the wind, rumors of a band that mocked the very faith he was stumbling toward. They called themselves “the Devil's Horsemen” because fear always rode ahead of them. And now they were here, in the town he was trying to call home.

Josiah stepped into the street, Bible in hand, voice steady: *“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.”* (1 Peter 5:8).

The Horsemen laughed louder. Their leader spat. “Your lion's dead, preacher. We ride him now!”

Blood ran in the dust where their horses' hooves had trampled a dog. A woman screamed as one bandit tore a cross from above her door and flung it into the dirt.

Six Gun's scar seared. He laid his hand on his Colt — not for bounty, not for blood, but for protection. His throat tightened. “Lord,” he muttered under his breath, “show me if my fight's Yours now.”

Section Two – Blood in the Dust

The Horsemen didn't just mock — they spilled. Two young men tried to bar the saloon doors; the gang dragged them into the street, beat them bloody, tossed them into the trough. Bart reached for his rifle and froze when a barrel was pressed against his chest.

“Where's your singing God now?” the leader jeered. He fired a shot into the sky. “Come pray Him down!”

Six Gun stepped forward, slow, steady. “You found me,” he called, voice rough but clear.

The leader turned. Recognition flickered. “Well, well — the Devil himself. Thought you'd gone soft, hidin' in psalms and widows' tears.” He sneered. “Tell me you didn't trade in the wages of sin for fairy tales.”

Six Gun's scar burned, but his hand stayed steady. He spoke loud enough for all to hear: *“For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”* (Romans 6:23).

The street went still. Some townsfolk gasped. The Horsemen howled with laughter.

“Death, huh?” the leader smirked. “Then let's pay out.” He jerked his rifle down and fired at a man cowering by the water trough.

Six Gun moved before thought. His Colt barked. The bullet struck the rifle barrel, jerking the shot into the dirt. The leader swore, wheeled his horse, and the gang answered with a storm of lead. Windows shattered. A child cried. The air stank of powder.

Six Gun ducked behind a trough, reloaded, heart hammering. This wasn't vengeance. This was war for souls. Each shot he fired, he prayed under his breath, “Lord, guide me.” And the Colt — the same gun

that had jammed under judgment — sang true again. A Horseman tumbled from his saddle, another's hand was shattered, a third's horse bolted into the hills.

Still, the gang pressed, their laughter twisting into rage. Six Gun's scar burned like fire, but for the first time, it didn't feel like a curse. It felt like a brand — marking him as a man claimed by another Master.

Section Three – The Shadow of Psalm 91

The fight raged. Townsfolk huddled in doorways, praying aloud, voices mingling with the gunfire. Josiah stood in the street, Bible raised, voice unshaken even as bullets whined past:

“He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler.” (Psalm 91:4).

The words rang louder than rifles.

Six Gun rolled, fired again. Another rider fell. The leader cursed, circling back, hate burning in his eyes. “You ain't the Devil no more,” he spat. “You're a traitor. And traitors burn.”

Six Gun rose from behind cover, dust streaking his face, tears burning in his eyes. “I was the Devil,” he shouted back. “But now I belong to the Lord!”

The street exploded with a final volley. When the dust cleared, three Horsemen lay bleeding, two fled, and the leader's black hat lay trampled in the dirt. He rode off wounded, swearing vengeance, his voice fading like thunder down the canyon.

Silence. The only sound was the preacher still reading Psalm 91:

“A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee.” (Psalm 91:7).

Six Gun lowered his Colt, breath ragged, scar hot. He looked at the bodies, the blood, the broken. He whispered, half prayer, half confession: “Lord, I don't understand why You still use these hands. But if it's for them” — he nodded to the widows, the children, the trembling shopkeepers — “then keep me Your instrument.”

Sarah Schaefer stepped out from the chapel, Psalm 91 still on her lips. She looked him in the eyes. “You are no demon's rider anymore.”

Six Gun bowed his head, tears streaking the dust. For the first time, he didn't hide them.

Chapter Forty-Eight – The Angel's Whisper

Section One – Lead and Silence

The sun leaned west, throwing long spears of light through the canyon when the ambush came. Colter Hayes hadn't limped far after Redemption — he had gathered wolves thicker than before. The Devil's Horsemen, what was left of them, had teeth enough still.

Six Gun Devil rode the canyon floor when the first shot cracked rock to splinters beside him. His horse screamed, reared, and he was thrown. Dust swallowed him whole. Bullets tore the stone.

He rolled into shadow, Colt already in hand, chest heaving. The fight blurred: fire, smoke, curses in men's throats. One round found him — hot iron in his side. He staggered behind a boulder, blood seeping fast.

The gun slipped from his hand. He pressed his palm against the wound, breath ragged. The canyon tilted. Gunfire rang far, far away. Then silence.

His eyes fluttered. The scar on his cheek burned white hot. And in that haze, on the edge of dark, he heard it — not thunder, not mocking laughter, not the hiss of demons in his dreams.

A voice. Low as wind through pine, steady as water over stone.

“Choose life.”

He strained to lift his head. “Who—?”

“Choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live.” The words rang clear, lifted from Scripture he'd heard Josiah thunder: *“I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live.”* (Deuteronomy 30:19).

Six Gun blinked hard. The canyon light shimmered, and through the haze stood a figure — no rifle, no brand, no scar. Just brightness, not blinding, but whole. Wings? Maybe. Or maybe just the sense of wings, vast as sky, sheltering.

“You've carried wages long enough,” the voice said. “Take the gift. Choose life.”

His lips moved, dry, cracked. “I... I want to. God help me, I want to.”

Section Two – Between Two Worlds

The canyon around him dissolved into half-light. He lay on ground that wasn't dust anymore, but something softer — like ash blown into meadow. Above, the sky turned the color of a hymn hummed by his mother, back when he was a boy with scuffed boots and too much pride.

The voice spoke again, closer now. “You've stood long on the edge. You've whispered ‘Not yet’ until your throat bled. But eternity doesn't wait for ‘maybe.’”

Six Gun's hands trembled. He looked down — blood seeped through his shirt still, but the pain dulled, as though mercy had set a hand there. He saw his mother's cross, the widow's psalm, Hannah's lamp, the preacher's voice, the hermit's staff in dust. Each moment lined up like markers on a trail.

His chest hitched. “I ain’t worthy.”

“No man is,” the voice answered, not harsh, not soft — true. “That’s why the Lamb was slain. You’ve seen wages. Now take gift.”

The outlaw’s heart hammered. He thought of Colter’s sneer: *Ain’t no gift in this world, Devil. Only wages.* He shook his head, tears burning. “There is. There is.”

The voice swelled like a hymn: “*For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*” (John 3:16).

“Whosoever,” Six Gun whispered. His hand tightened into a fist, blood on his palm. “Even me.”

“Even you.”

The canyon light returned sharp — bullets whining, shouts echoing. But the voice lingered, clear as a bell rung close: “Choose life.”

Section Three – Back from the Brink

Hands dragged him. Elias’s voice, rough: “Hold on, Devil, don’t you dare!” Bart cursing. Sarah crying out for cloth. Josiah’s prayer rising.

Six Gun gasped, lungs searing. The angel’s whisper still clung to his ears: *Choose life.*

He coughed blood, eyes rolling, and rasped, “Jesus... Lord...” It wasn’t polished, wasn’t planned — it was the cry of a drowning man grabbing rope.

Something shifted inside him. Not the wound — that still burned. Not the scar — that still marked. But his soul. Where chains had dragged, they snapped. Where “Not yet” had lived, it died.

Peace slid in — fierce, solid, not fragile. A gift.

He fell back into the arms of townsfolk lifting him, but he wasn’t falling into dark anymore. He was falling into hands stronger than death.

Josiah bent close, whispering as they carried him. “You chose life.”

Six Gun’s lips moved again, weaker, but sure: “Eternal life... gift of God.”

The bell tolled over the canyon as they bore him back. Behind them, the Horsemen scattered, their laughter broken, their power cracked.

And above, unseen but not unfelt, wings stirred the air.

Chapter Forty-Nine – Crossfire Redemption

Section One – The Streets Ignite

Redemption had just begun to breathe easier when gun smoke rolled in again. Colter Hayes wasn't gone. Wounded but unbroken, he had gathered the scraps of the Devil's Horsemen and doubled them with drifters hungry for coin. At dawn they descended, hooves pounding, rifles blazing.

The townsfolk scattered. Shutters slammed. Elias barked orders, rifle in hand. Josiah clutched his Bible at the chapel steps, eyes lifted, praying loud. Sarah pulled Hannah into the cellar hatch behind the mercantile, whispering psalms over her daughter like armor.

And in the middle of it all, Six Gun Devil stepped into the street. His scar burned bright, but his eyes burned brighter. Colt in hand, hat low, his boots chewed the dust as bullets spat splinters from fence and wall.

The gangs thundered through, shouting, laughing, trying to make the town choke on fear. Six Gun answered with fire. He dropped one rifleman clean, winged another so his weapon spun away, and ducked behind a trough as lead raked the boards.

The old him would have fired until the street lay red. But today—today something pressed harder in his chest than rage. Something he had whispered in blood only days before: *Choose life*.

And as the battle swirled, he knew this wasn't just about bullets. It was about Redemption—town and soul both.

Section Two – The Enemy in His Sight

The smoke thinned enough for him to see Colter himself, black hat low, scar split, pistol drawn. Their eyes locked across the street—devil to devil, past to present.

Colter sneered. "Should've let you hang. You're nothin' but a preacher's parrot now."

Six Gun steadied his Colt, exhaled. He had the shot. One squeeze, and the town would cheer, the gang would scatter, and his own legend would swell.

But another voice rose inside him—quieter than Colter's, stronger than rage: "*Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you...*" (Matthew 5:44).

His finger trembled. The outlaw inside him screamed: *Kill him!* The man he was becoming whispered: *Spare him.*

Colter fired first. Six Gun's Colt barked. The bullet slammed into Colter's pistol, ripping it clean from his hand. The outlaw leader froze, stunned. Six Gun could have finished it. His aim never wavered.

But he didn't.

He lowered the gun.

"Go," he said, voice iron. "This town ain't yours. I won't kill you. But you won't kill them."

The street froze. Townsfolk peeked from doors, stunned. The gang muttered, confused. Bart's jaw dropped, Elias blinked, Josiah whispered something that sounded like *Thank You, Lord*.

Colter's face twisted. Humiliation warred with fury. He spat blood into the dirt, backed his horse, and snarled, "Mercy'll hang you faster than hate ever did." Then he wheeled and rode, his gang splintering after him.

Section Three – Shock and Scripture

Silence fell heavier than smoke. Windows opened. Breathless townsfolk crept into the street. Elias lowered his rifle slow, as if he couldn't trust his eyes. Bart muttered, "He... he let him live."

Josiah stepped forward, voice ringing over the dust: "*Recompense to no man evil for evil... If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.*" (Romans 12:17–18).

Sarah stared from the mercantile hatch, tears shining. Hannah whispered, "He didn't shoot him..." as if mercy itself were a miracle.

Six Gun holstered his Colt, scar still burning. His chest heaved—not from restraint of rage, but from the weight of mercy. He muttered hoarse, mostly to himself, "I spared him. God help me, I spared him."

Josiah laid a hand on his shoulder. "You chose life again."

Six Gun's throat tightened. He turned from the crowd, eyes hot. He had killed more men than he could count. But for the first time, in a crossfire, he had given life instead of taking it. And that act shook him more than any bullet ever had.

That night the town gathered at the chapel, voices rising in a hymn of thanksgiving, not for victory, but for mercy. Six Gun sat in the back pew, tears hidden in shadows, whispering the verse like a creed:

"For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

And in the silence after the hymn, he prayed a prayer he never thought he'd pray:

"Lord, keep my hands from death, and my heart on Your gift. Make Redemption more than a town. Make it me."

Chapter Fifty – The Last Supper at Sundown

Section One – Bread and Beans at Dusk

The sun slumped low over Redemption, bleeding orange across the rooftops. The air smelled of mesquite smoke, horse sweat, and the faint salt of tears left on the wind from too many graves. Six Gun Devil had spent the day patching fence for Elias, not because the sheriff needed his hands, but because his own hands needed work that didn't leave blood behind.

When the shadows lengthened, Josiah Markham called to him from the chapel steps. “Come eat, brother. The table’s laid.”

Six Gun almost said no. He was more used to whiskey at the saloon than stew at a preacher’s table. But something in Josiah’s voice tugged. He followed him inside.

The room was small, plain: rough-hewn table, two chairs, lantern glow warming the timber. A pot of beans simmered over the stove, bread cooling on a tin plate. A pitcher of water sat between them. It wasn’t much, but it smelled better than coin ever had.

They sat. Josiah bowed his head, hands folded, and said grace: “*Give us this day our daily bread, Lord, and let us never forget who broke Himself to feed us.*”

Six Gun bowed awkwardly, scar twitching. The words sank deep, heavier than the bread Josiah passed him.

They ate in silence a while — beans rich with onion, bread rough but filling. Every bite tasted like peace he hadn’t earned. Outside, the sun dropped lower, painting the table gold. Josiah looked across at him, eyes warm, and said, “Do you know what this is, son?”

Six Gun shrugged. “Supper.”

Josiah smiled. “A shadow. A rehearsal. Every meal shared in His name points to the Supper He gave His friends the night He was betrayed.” He broke his bread clean in two, hands steady. “He took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, *This is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me.*” (1 Corinthians 11:24).

The outlaw froze, bread half-lifted. The scar on his cheek burned hot.

Section Two – Wine of Mercy

Josiah poured water into a tin cup, the liquid catching the lantern light like wine. He slid it across. “And after supper, He took the cup, saying, *This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me.*” (1 Corinthians 11:25).

Six Gun’s hand hovered. He thought of every drop of blood he had spilled. His throat tightened. “His blood... for me?”

“For you,” Josiah said, voice steady. “For the man who called himself Devil. For the widow who sang psalms over graves. For the child who prayed you home. For the whole broken world.” He leaned closer, eyes glinting. “Son, He died so you wouldn’t have to keep dying.”

Six Gun’s hand shook as he lifted the cup. He didn’t drink yet. He stared into it as if the water might turn crimson. His voice cracked: “I’ve killed men at tables like this. Played cards, won coins, drew fast, left widows. Why would God let me drink His mercy?”

Josiah’s gaze softened. “Because mercy’s not earned. It’s given. ‘*While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*’” (Romans 5:8).

The outlaw swallowed hard. Tears burned his eyes. “I don’t deserve it.”

“None of us do,” Josiah said. “That’s why it’s grace. That’s why it’s called a gift.”

Six Gun lifted the cup to his lips. He drank deep, water sliding down his throat like fire that cleans instead of consumes. He set it down slow, trembling, as though he had just swallowed hope itself.

Section Three – The Invitation

The sun finally dipped, shadows claiming the town. Lantern light painted the preacher’s table in gold and flame. Six Gun sat back, breath ragged, the scar on his cheek strangely cool for the first time in years.

Josiah leaned forward. “You’ve eaten bread and drunk water with me. But there’s a greater table waiting. The Lord’s table. He’s asking not for your skill, not for your speed, not for your scar. He asks for your heart.”

Six Gun stared at his hands. The same hands that had dealt death now trembled over crumbs of bread. He whispered, “What if I’m too late?”

Josiah’s voice grew fierce. “It is never too late while you draw breath. *‘Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.’*” (2 Corinthians 6:2). He laid his palm flat on the table. “Son, He’s waiting. Choose life. Choose Him. Tonight.”

The outlaw’s eyes filled. He bowed his head. His lips moved, shaky, broken: “Jesus... Lord... I give You what’s left.”

The words hung in the lantern glow. They weren’t eloquent. They weren’t long. But they were real. And heaven leaned close to listen.

Josiah whispered, tears shining, “Welcome, brother.”

Outside, the chapel bell tolled sundown, one long note. It sounded not like mourning, but like beginning.

Six Gun Devil lifted his head, face streaked with tears. For the first time, he felt the Devil’s name slide off his back like a snake shedding skin. And in its place, a whisper rose — not curse, not condemnation, but sonship.

He pressed his hand to the psalter at his chest, whispering with new voice: “*The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*”

And as the last light bled from the sky, Redemption’s outlaw became something else — a redeemed man at a Redeemer’s table.

Part VI: Blood and the Word

Chapter Fifty-One – Fire in the Canyon

Section One – Sparks on the Wind

The night smelled wrong. Six Gun Devil noticed it first — a bitter tang on the wind as he rode the canyon trail, scouting the outskirts of Redemption. His scar burned, not with guilt, but with warning. He reined in, scanning the ridgeline.

Then he saw it. Orange licked the black sky. Sparks spiraled upward like demons laughing. And from the north rim of the canyon, riders whooped like coyotes, tossing torches into dry brush. The Devil's Horsemen had returned, led by Colter Hayes, his shoulder still bandaged but his grin wider than flame.

The canyon floor carried the screams next. A wagon — family aboard, man, woman, two children — was trapped by fire rolling down both sides. The horses reared, panicked, as smoke thickened. The parents tried to shield the little ones, but the blaze crackled closer.

Colter's voice rang over the firestorm: "Let's see your new God save 'em, Devil!"

Six Gun spurred forward, heart pounding. This wasn't a duel. This wasn't about legend. This was life and death in the jaws of flame.

He prayed under his breath as the Colt cleared leather: "Lord, guide my hands. Save them, even if I fall."

The first bandit went down with a shot. The second lost his torch arm. But fire doesn't care for bullets. It roared, rolled, and reached for the wagon like a hand of hell itself.

Six Gun galloped straight into the smoke.

Section Two – Through Fire and Smoke

Heat scorched his lungs. Sparks bit his skin. His horse shrieked but kept charging under his heels. The family's wagon was boxed in now, fire gnawing at the wheels. The man waved desperately, the woman clutched both children, their faces streaked with soot.

"Hold on!" Six Gun shouted, voice raw. He yanked a blanket from his saddle, soaked it in his canteen, and flung it across the nearest flame to carve a path. The heat blistered his arms, but he pressed on.

He leapt from the saddle, grabbing the bridle of one of the wagon horses. The animal thrashed, eyes rolling white. He whispered hoarse, "Easy, boy, easy," and pulled hard, dragging the wagon toward the smoldering gap.

A shot cracked past his ear. Colter laughed through the smoke: "Die with 'em, preacher's pup!"

Six Gun fired back blind, the shot clipping Colter's hat. Then he turned, grabbed one child under each arm, and shoved them toward his own horse. "Ride!" he barked at the woman, slapping the reins into her hands.

Flames leapt higher. The wagon's axle groaned. Six Gun turned to the man, still tangled in harness leather. "Go!"

"I can't—"

Six Gun slashed the straps with his knife, yanked the man free, and shoved him hard toward the gap. The family stumbled into open ground, coughing, but alive.

A burning beam collapsed behind Six Gun. Fire closed in. His escape vanished.

Section Three – Out of the Inferno

The canyon roared like judgment day. Smoke swallowed sight, breath, thought. Six Gun staggered, scar searing, lungs clawing for air. For a heartbeat he thought, *This is it. These are my wages.*

But then, through the crackle, through the choking dark, he heard it — that voice again. The same one from the brink of death. Soft as wind, strong as thunder: "*When thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee.*" (Isaiah 43:2).

He stumbled forward, half-believing, half-desperate. Sparks showered him. His coat smoked. But the words carried him. He burst through a wall of flame into open air, collapsing in the dirt.

The family was there — coughing, crying, alive. The woman threw her arms around her children, sobbing thanks. The man bent over Six Gun, eyes wide. "You... you saved us."

Six Gun gasped, chest heaving, skin scorched. He whispered hoarse, "No... the Lord did. He... He spared us."

Behind them, the Horsemen cursed as the fire burned out of their control, turning back on their own horses. Colter's voice faded into rage and retreat.

The townsfolk arrived with buckets, forming a line to contain the last flames. They found Six Gun kneeling in the ashes, scar shining, tears cutting through soot.

Josiah stepped forward, laid a hand on his shoulder, and said softly: "*Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.*" (John 15:13).

Six Gun bowed his head. "Lord, I'll lay it down, whenever You ask. Just keep me Yours."

And as the canyon smoldered, Redemption saw it plain: the Devil had walked through fire, but what came out was not the same man who went in.

Chapter Fifty-Two – A Gunman's Gospel

Section One – When the Guns Speak

The morning broke red as a fresh wound. Redemption had been bracing for Colter's return, and the Devil's Horsemen came with it — a black river of riders spilling down the ridge, rifles flashing. Women and children were hurried into the chapel cellar. Elias and a handful of men took position along the fences, muskets and pistols ready. Bart handed out cartridges with shaking hands, muttering, "This ain't what I signed up for," though he stood anyway.

Six Gun Devil stepped into the street. His scar burned, but his eyes were clear, jaw set. He holstered one Colt, held the other loose, and called across the dust before the first volley:

"Colter! You ride for death! *For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord!*" (Romans 6:23).

The gang laughed, ugly and hard. "Preachin' with pistols?" Colter mocked. "Let's see if your Scripture bleeds."

Gunfire erupted. The air turned to smoke and screaming iron.

Six Gun ducked behind a trough, snapped two shots, dropped a pair of riders clean. He rose again, voice ringing louder than his Colt: "*Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me!*" (Psalm 23:4).

Bullets hissed past his ear. His allies froze, half-stunned — not at the shots, but at the words. Bart muttered, "He's quotin' Scripture... in a crossfire."

The outlaws cursed, unnerved. Some swore the verses made their hands shake, their sights blur. Colter's sneer twitched. "Shut his mouth! Kill the preacher with the pistol!"

Section Two – Word and Fire

Six Gun rolled, fired, reloaded in a blur. His lips never stopped. "*No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn.*" (Isaiah 54:17). His voice cracked with smoke but carried like a trumpet.

A rider aimed at Elias; Six Gun's bullet found the man's shoulder. He shouted over the crack: "*The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?*" (Psalm 27:1).

The sheriff blinked, steadied, and fired true. "Amen," Elias muttered, stunned at himself.

The gang pressed harder, but the verses cut deeper than lead. They laughed less, cursed more, spooked as though invisible hands shoved their rifles aside.

Bart leaned out the saloon window, eyes wide. "He's preachin' with bullets!"

Josiah stepped into the street, Bible raised, voice joining: "*Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you!*" (James 4:7).

The town roared back with their own shots, courage stoked by gospel in the smoke.

Six Gun stood tall in the street, his coat torn, blood seeping, but his voice thundered: “*If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed!*” (John 8:36).

For the first time in their reign of terror, the Devil’s Horsemen looked shaken.

Section Three – The Gospel Echoes

The last charge came like a storm. Colter himself thundered down the street, pistol raised, hate blazing in his eyes.

Six Gun stepped forward, scar burning, Colt steady, and shouted over the roar: “*Greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world!*” (1 John 4:4).

He fired. Colter’s pistol spun from his hand, clattering in the dust. The leader pulled rein hard, horse screaming, rage boiling in his throat. “What are you?” he snarled.

Six Gun’s voice rang like a bell, strong enough for every hiding ear to hear: “I was the Devil. Now I am Christ’s. His Word is my gun. His truth is my aim.”

The street hushed. The gang shifted, uncertain, looking at their leader, looking at the man who preached bullets and Bible in one breath.

Colter swore, spat, and wheeled away. Half his men followed. The rest broke, fleeing down the canyon trail as though chased by the very verses that had struck their ears.

When the smoke cleared, Redemption stood blinking. Elias lowered his rifle. Sarah stepped out, tears streaking her face. Hannah whispered, “He preached while he fought...” as though that was miracle enough.

Josiah clasped Six Gun’s shoulder. “Son, today you preached a sermon none of us will forget.”

Six Gun holstered his Colt, chest heaving, eyes wet. “It wasn’t me,” he rasped. “It was His Word. His Gospel. Even in the crossfire.”

And as the townsfolk gathered around, some touching him as though to see if he was real, the chapel bell rang — not for death, not for mourning, but for victory.

A victory not of legend, not of guns — but of gospel proclaimed under fire.

Chapter Fifty-Three – The Devil’s Posse

Section One – The Mirror Arrives

The news came on a hot wind: a new rider had gathered what was left of Colter’s men, and he called himself *the Devil’s Mirror*. His posse trailed him like shadows — killers, drifters, souls too far gone to be called men anymore. They rode under a banner painted black, marked with a single cracked mirror.

Redemption watched them descend the ridge at dusk, dust and smoke trailing like the breath of hell. At their center rode the Mirror, face scarred almost like Six Gun's, eyes as dead as glass. His hand rested on his Colt as though it were an extension of his arm.

He pulled rein in the street and pointed straight at Six Gun. "They call you the Devil," he sneered. "But I am what you should've been. No psalms. No mercy. Just death."

The posse laughed, cruel and hollow.

Six Gun stepped forward, scar burning. "You ain't my mirror," he said flat. "You're my past, dressed in black."

The Mirror's grin stretched. "Then let's see which past wins."

Section Two – The Gospel and the Gun

The first shots cracked like thunder. Dust rose. Windows shattered. Redemption ducked for cover as the Devil's Posse poured lead into the street.

Six Gun ducked, rolled, and fired back, Colt steady. But even as bullets screamed, his voice lifted in Scripture: "*For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds.*" (2 Corinthians 10:4).

The posse sneered, unnerved by the words echoing through smoke.

The Mirror shouted, "Stop preaching and shoot!"

But Six Gun's voice only rose louder: "*The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust.*" (Psalm 18:2). He dropped one rider with a clean shot, winged another.

The townsfolk, huddled behind wagons, watched wide-eyed. Bart whispered, "He's doin' it again — fightin' with the Gospel."

The Mirror laughed dark. "You think words save you? My words kill." He fired, grazing Six Gun's arm. Blood ran, but the outlaw's scar flared hot, almost glowing.

And in that fire he shouted back: "*Greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world!*" (1 John 4:4).

The words rattled even hardened killers. The Posse shifted, doubt flickering in their eyes.

Section Three – The Breaking of the Mirror

The fight narrowed until only two stood in the street — Six Gun and the Devil's Mirror.

The mirror outlaw spun his Colt with deadly grace, sneer never fading. "You can't run from yourself. You kill like me. You bleed like me. You *are* me."

Six Gun shook his head, voice low but clear: “I was. But I ain’t anymore.”

The Mirror drew fast. Six Gun drew faster. The shot split the night.

When the smoke cleared, the Mirror lay in the dust, his Colt fallen, eyes wide with shock. Six Gun stood, Colt still smoking, breath heavy. But instead of finishing him, he lowered the weapon.

“You ain’t my mirror,” he said again, voice breaking. “Christ broke the glass.”

The posse scattered, spooked not by bullets, but by mercy and gospel in the outlaw’s voice.

The town emerged, stunned. Josiah raised his Bible and declared, “*If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.*” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Six Gun holstered his Colt, scar still burning, but heart finally free. The mirror was broken. The Devil’s name was no longer his.

Chapter Fifty-Four – The Widow’s Revenge

Section One – A Gun in Her Hands

The night was still raw from smoke when they dragged Colter Hayes into town. Wounded, furious, still spitting threats, he was bound hand and foot and shoved into the sheriff’s office. Elias slammed the door hard enough to rattle windows. “He’ll hang at dawn,” the sheriff said.

The townsfolk murmured outside, voices thick with both relief and thirst for vengeance. But none burned hotter than Sarah Schaefer.

She came through the crowd like a storm, veil pulled back, eyes sharp as glass. Hannah tried to hold her sleeve, whispering, “Mama, please—” but Sarah shook her off. In her hand gleamed a pistol, old but steady, once belonging to her husband.

She pushed through the office door. Colter sat chained to a chair, smirk cracked across his bloody face. He saw the gun and laughed. “Finally. A woman with spine.”

Sarah’s hand trembled. Her husband’s face flashed in her mind — his body lowered into the ground, the psalm she had sung through clenched teeth, her nights spent begging God for justice. This was justice, wasn’t it?

She lifted the pistol, voice ragged. “For every grave you filled. For my man. For all of them.”

Colter grinned wider. “Do it. Prove you’re just like us.”

The hammer clicked back. The whole town seemed to hold its breath.

And then a voice cut through.

“Sarah.”

Six Gun stood in the doorway, scar glowing faint in the lamplight, eyes steady. He didn't reach for his Colt. He reached only with words. "Don't."

Section Two – Mercy in the Balance

Sarah's eyes flashed. "Don't? He murdered my husband. How many more would he have buried if not stopped? You don't get to tell me *don't*."

Six Gun stepped closer, slow. His voice trembled with memory. "I've buried more men than I can count, Sarah. I've stood where you are, hand shakin', heart screamin' for revenge. And every time I pulled that trigger in hate, the grave got deeper — inside me."

Colter chuckled, blood on his teeth. "Listen to him. The Devil who forgot how to kill."

Six Gun's scar burned. He ignored him. He looked only at Sarah. "You sang Psalm 91 over me when I didn't deserve breath. You prayed when all I gave was pain. Don't let him drag you into the pit with him."

Her grip tightened. Tears blurred her eyes. "Then who avenges us?"

Six Gun whispered: "*Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.*" (Romans 12:19).

The verse hung in the air like judgment. Colter stopped laughing.

Six Gun stepped closer still, voice breaking. "Sarah, if anyone deserves that bullet, it's me. But Christ spared me. He gave me mercy I didn't earn. Don't trade your song for his curse. Don't let the Devil write your last verse."

Her shoulders shook. The pistol wavered. Hannah's voice piped from the doorway, soft, trembling: "Mama... forgive."

The word cracked the stone.

Section Three – The Gun Lowered

Sarah stood frozen, pistol heavy in her hand. The room swam with silence. Colter sneered, waiting. The sheriff gripped his rifle but didn't move. Josiah prayed aloud, low and steady.

Six Gun whispered again: "Choose life."

Slowly, painfully, Sarah's arm dropped. The pistol sagged to her side. Her knees buckled, and she fell into a chair, sobbing. Hannah rushed to her, wrapping arms tight around her mother's waist.

Colter cursed, but the words were weak, hollow. For the first time, he looked less like a wolf and more like a man cornered.

Six Gun took the pistol gently from Sarah's trembling hand and set it on the desk. He turned to Colter, voice iron: "You'll face judgment — but not hers. Not mine. God's."

Elias chained Colter tighter and muttered, “Dawn comes quick.”

Josiah stepped forward, kneeling by Sarah, reading softly through her tears: “*The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit.*” (Psalm 34:18).

The crowd outside murmured as word spread: the widow had spared the man who killed her husband. Some called it weakness. Others, miracle.

Six Gun walked out into the night air, scar burning less like a wound and more like a seal. He whispered to himself, almost in awe: “Mercy’s stronger than vengeance.”

And for the first time, the town of Redemption began to believe it too.

Chapter Fifty-Five – A Song of Mercy

Section One – Ashes in the Streets

Redemption looked like a town half-burnt and half-risen. The gunfights had left shutters hanging, windows cracked, scorch marks licked high across the walls. The canyon fire’s smoke still clung to the air. Some buildings bore fresh boards, others sagged like old men.

The people carried the same weight. Mothers whispered as they fetched water, fathers watched the ridgeline with rifles at the ready, and children — usually shrill with laughter — played quieter now, as if afraid to wake the shadows still lurking.

Six Gun Devil walked the street with his scar hidden beneath a wide hat. His Colt rode on his hip, but lighter, as if it had lost its claim on his soul. He passed Bart hammering a plank across the saloon window, Elias barking orders for watch patrols, Sarah standing outside the mercantile with Hannah.

Despair clung like dust. Every face bore the same question: *How long can we survive?*

And then it came — faint, high, like a breeze threading through broken boards. A child’s voice, singing.

At first just one. Then another joined. Then another.

Section Two – The Children’s Hymn

The townsfolk turned toward the chapel ruins. Its door still hung half-broken, its bell rope frayed, but inside a cluster of children stood shoulder to shoulder. Hannah was among them, her voice clear as a spring.

They sang a hymn no bullet could silence:

*“Jesus loves me, this I know,
For the Bible tells me so.
Little ones to Him belong,
They are weak, but He is strong.”*

The notes weren't perfect. Some lilted off-key, some cracked in the throat. But innocence carried them stronger than trained choirs.

One by one, townsfolk stopped their work. Bart let the hammer fall. Elias lowered his rifle. Sarah pressed her hand over her mouth as tears slid hot down her cheeks. Even hardened men who had sworn they'd never set foot in church again found their boots carrying them closer.

Six Gun stepped to the threshold, scar burning faint, eyes wet. The children's voices filled the broken rafters until the ruins themselves seemed to mend.

The hymn turned to its chorus, louder now, stronger:

*"Yes, Jesus loves me,
Yes, Jesus loves me,
Yes, Jesus loves me,
The Bible tells me so."*

And in the street of a town scarred by fire and fear, despair cracked open like dry earth under rain.

Section Three – Mercy in Song

When the last note faded, silence didn't fall — mercy did. It settled over Redemption like a blanket. The guns at men's hips felt smaller. The smoke scars on the walls looked less like warnings, more like reminders.

Josiah stepped forward, voice catching. "Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise." (Matthew 21:16). He turned to the town. "Do you hear it? That's the sound of mercy stronger than death."

Sarah gathered Hannah in her arms. Bart muttered into his beard, "Never thought kids' voices would stop me in my tracks faster than bullets." Elias nodded, jaw hard, but his eyes glistened.

Six Gun leaned against the chapel post, whispering hoarse: "Lord... is this what freedom sounds like?"

The widow answered him, hearing the whisper. "No. This is what redemption sounds like."

The children began again, softer this time, carrying the hymn down the street where even the ashes seemed to glow.

And as Six Gun Devil stood among them, scar cool against his skin, he knew it clear: Redemption wasn't a town that had to be saved by the fastest gun. It was being saved by mercy sung in children's voices.

Chapter Fifty-Six – The Colt and the Cross

Section One – The Weight of Iron

Dawn spread pale over Redemption. The town bore scars of battles past, but this morning was quieter, almost holy. Smoke no longer choked the air. The chapel bell stood silent, its rope frayed, yet its silence spoke louder than war.

Six Gun Devil walked up the hill to the graveyard. In his hand hung one of his Colts — the revolver that had written half his legend, that had spilled rivers of blood, that had kept his name alive in fear. Its grip was worn smooth by years of killing. Every notch, every scrape was a ghost.

His scar burned, but not with rage. With remembrance.

At the top of the hill stood a wooden cross, plain, leaning against the cemetery fence. Josiah had raised it after the canyon fire, as a marker of hope. The widow often prayed there; children sometimes left wildflowers.

Six Gun stood before it, Colt heavy in his palm. He whispered, “This gun made me. This gun damned me. Every grave in this dirt has its share of my bullets. I can’t carry it no more.”

The words of Paul came back from Josiah’s preaching: “*I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me...*” (Galatians 2:20).

He sank to his knees, Colt trembling in his hand. “Lord... I lay it down.”

Section Two – The Nail and the Scar

The townsfolk began to gather, curious. Bart leaned against the fence, squinting. Elias came with his rifle but held it low. Sarah stood with Hannah, both silent. Josiah walked up slow, Bible under his arm, eyes knowing.

Six Gun laid the Colt against the wooden cross. In his other hand, he held a nail and a hammer borrowed from Bart. He set the barrel flat against the beam, raised the hammer, and struck.

The iron rang loud, echoing across the graves. Every strike sent a tremor through his scar, through his heart. He nailed the revolver tight to the cross, the wood splintering, the metal fixed. When it was done, he stepped back, chest heaving.

The Colt hung there like a crucified past. The outlaw stared at it, tears cutting through the dust on his face.

Colter’s voice haunted his memory: *You’ll always be the Devil.*

He answered aloud, for all to hear: “No. The Devil’s name ain’t mine no more.”

Josiah stepped forward, laying a hand on the wood, voice firm: “*Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin.*” (Romans 6:6).

The widow’s tears fell fast, not of grief but release. Hannah whispered, “He nailed it to the cross.”

The townsfolk murmured, half in awe. Redemption had seen gunfights, killings, hangings, vengeance. But never this: a man crucifying his own weapon.

Section Three – A New Weapon

The silence after was thick. Only the morning wind moved, rustling grass between the graves. Six Gun stared at the Colt nailed to the cross, and for the first time in years, his hip felt light. Empty — but free.

He turned to the town, scar still burning faint. “This gun’s done. My fight ain’t with bullets no more. My fight’s here—” he pressed his hand to his chest, “—and here.” He tapped Josiah’s Bible.

Elias crossed his arms, nodding slow. “Man’s got to know what he serves. Guess you showed us.”

Bart muttered, “Never thought I’d see the day.”

Sarah spoke clear, voice ringing over the hill: “He’s not the Devil anymore. He belongs to Christ.”

Josiah raised his Bible, declaring: “*For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds.*” (2 Corinthians 10:4).

The people echoed “Amen.”

Six Gun bowed his head. “Lord, let my hands build, not destroy. Let my tongue preach, not curse. And if I must carry any weapon again — let it be Your Word.”

The sun broke through clouds, spilling gold over the cross, over the Colt fixed there forever. The scar on his cheek cooled, and for the first time, he smiled through tears.

Redemption stood hushed, as though heaven itself had witnessed the burial of an outlaw and the rising of a new man.

Chapter Fifty-Seven – Broken and Remade

Section One – The Breaking

The night after he nailed his Colt to the cross, Six Gun Devil wandered out past Redemption’s edge. The sky above stretched wide, stars bright as lanterns hung from heaven. Coyotes yipped far off, and the wind pressed hard against him like a hand.

He walked until his knees gave out in the dust. His scar burned, but his chest burned hotter. All the faces of the dead came back: men he’d shot for coin, widows he’d made, children left without fathers. His throat closed until no air came. He dropped to his knees, palms digging into the dirt.

“Lord!” he choked, voice breaking. “I can’t do it. I can’t fix it. I can’t save myself.” His voice rose raw, like a man confessing under gallows. “I’ve tried to carry it, bury it, even nail it to wood. But the weight don’t let go.”

Tears cut his dust-caked face. His body shook with sobs he hadn't allowed since childhood.

The verse he had heard a hundred times came back, sharper now than any blade: *"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast."* (Ephesians 2:8–9).

He clenched his fists in the dirt. "Grace. A gift. Lord, I don't got nothin' to give back. Not one thing worth keeping. I ain't got works. I ain't got righteousness. All I got is me — and I'm broken."

The night did not laugh. It listened.

Section Two – The Prayer in the Dust

He fell forward, forehead pressed to the earth. His voice cracked, low and hoarse: "Jesus... forgive me. I've killed. I've hated. I've worn the Devil's name like armor. But I can't breathe under it no more. Lord, take it. Take me."

The words spilled without script. They weren't a preacher's polished sermon, just the cry of a drowning man. He beat his fist into the dirt until blood seeped from his knuckles. "I can't! I can't! Only You can!"

And then, softer: "Save me."

Silence stretched. Then — not thunder, not vision, not angel's voice this time. Just peace. A weight lifting, slow but certain, like chains slipping off link by link. His chest loosened. His sobs turned to gasps, then to breath.

He heard it clear in his spirit: *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* (1 John 1:9).

Six Gun sobbed harder, but now with relief. "Cleanse me, Lord. Make me new. I ain't the Devil no more. Make me Yours."

He collapsed fully, body trembling, until sleep finally stole him in the dust.

Section Three – Remade

When dawn cracked the horizon, the outlaw rose to his knees. His face was streaked with dried tears, his scar red as ever, but his eyes were different. Clearer.

He lifted his hands toward the light, voice rough but steady: "Thank You."

The town found him hours later, still kneeling, still whispering prayers. Elias stood back, hat off. Bart muttered, "Never thought I'd see the Devil pray like a child." Sarah wiped her eyes, holding Hannah's hand tight.

Josiah stepped forward, laying his hand on Six Gun's shoulder. "Brother," he said softly, "you've died — and been raised."

Six Gun lifted his head, tears fresh. “I ain’t worthy.”

Josiah smiled. “None of us are. That’s why it’s mercy.”

The preacher lifted his voice for all to hear: “*Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.*” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The town murmured amen. Six Gun bowed his head again, whispering, “New. Lord... make me new.”

And as the morning sun climbed higher, the outlaw who had once been called Devil rose from the dust — broken, yes, but remade.

Section Two – Whosoever

The words rang in his chest like a bell. “For God so loved the world...” His throat tightened. The world — not just townsfolk, not just preachers, but killers, gamblers, men with scars who had worn the Devil’s name.

He swallowed hard. “Whosoever,” he whispered.

Josiah nodded, voice low. “That means you. That means me. That means even Colter Hayes if he would turn.”

Six Gun’s fists clenched on the table. “I’ve buried too many, preacher. My name’s written in blood. You tellin’ me I’m in that whosoever?”

Josiah’s eyes gleamed in lamplight. “Yes, son. That’s exactly what I’m saying. *Whosoever* believes in Him. Not whosoever lived clean. Not whosoever never stumbled. Whosoever.”

The outlaw shook his head, tears pressing. “Everlasting life? For a man like me?”

Josiah leaned forward, voice tender but unflinching. “Not because of what you’ve done. Because of what He’s done. The Son was given — for you. The cross wasn’t wasted blood. It was blood spent to purchase you from death.”

Six Gun bowed his head into his hands. His scar burned, his chest heaved. “Preacher... if that verse is true, then maybe there’s hope for me yet.”

Josiah laid a hand on his shoulder. “It’s true. And that hope is already reaching for you.”

Section Three – The Outlaw Listens

The lamp sputtered, flame shrinking, then steadied again. Shadows danced on the walls like old ghosts retreating. Six Gun stared at the verse open before him. His lips moved, barely audible: “For God so loved...”

He repeated it again, stronger. “For God so loved... that He gave...” His voice cracked. “For me.”

Josiah sat back, letting the Spirit preach louder than any man. The outlaw read the verse again and again, each word sinking deeper, like nails driven not into a Colt, but into his own past.

Finally Six Gun lifted his head, eyes wet but burning with something new. “Preacher, I been hunted by death my whole life. But if what you say is true... if what this Book says is true... then maybe it’s time I stop runnin’ from mercy.”

Josiah smiled, tears in his own eyes now. “It’s already caught you, son. You just need to let it hold you.”

Six Gun reached for the Bible with both hands, trembling as he pulled it closer. He read the verse one more time by lamplight, whispering like a prayer: “*Whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*”

And for the first time, he believed the whosoever included him.

The lamp burned low, steady and warm, long into the night, as an outlaw listened not to gunfire, not to vengeance, but to the Gospel in one verse.

Chapter Fifty-Eight – Sermon by Lamplight

Section One – The Lamplight Room

The night outside Redemption was dark and uneasy. The Devil’s Horsemen were scattered but not destroyed, and the town knew Colter’s vengeance was still coming. Folks barred their doors early, lamps burning low.

Six Gun Devil sat in the preacher’s study, a little room at the back of the chapel. The boards creaked, and dust lay thick in the corners, but the lantern on the desk glowed steady. Its light flickered across Josiah Markham’s lined face, casting shadows like deep valleys across his cheeks.

Between them lay a Bible worn from years of use. The leather was cracked, the pages soft from turning. Josiah leaned over it, glasses perched on his nose, voice low but strong. “Son,” he said, “you’ve heard many verses. But some words bear repeating until they take root.”

Six Gun leaned forward, scar catching the light. His hands fidgeted, scarred knuckles scraping the desk. “I ain’t got much patience for sermons, preacher,” he muttered.

Josiah smiled gently. “Then we’ll keep to one verse tonight. The heart of it all.” He tapped the page. “John three, sixteen.”

The outlaw’s eyes narrowed. He’d heard the numbers whispered before, painted on signs, muttered at gravesides. But he’d never listened. Not really.

Josiah read slow, the lamplight catching the words: “*For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*”

The outlaw froze. The room seemed to still with him.

Section Two – Whosoever

The words rang in his chest like a bell. “For God so loved the world...” His throat tightened. The world — not just townsfolk, not just preachers, but killers, gamblers, men with scars who had worn the Devil’s name.

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Josiah nodded, voice low. “That means you. That means me. That means even Colter Hayes if he would turn.”

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Josiah’s eyes gleamed in lamplight. “Yes, son. That’s exactly what I’m saying. *Whosoever* believes in Him. Not whosoever lived clean. Not whosoever never stumbled. Whosoever.”

The outlaw shook his head, tears pressing. “Everlasting life? For a man like me?”

Josiah leaned forward, voice tender but unflinching. “Not because of what you’ve done. Because of what He’s done. The Son was given — for you. The cross wasn’t wasted blood. It was blood spent to purchase you from death.”

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Chapter Fifty-Nine – The Book of Job in the Badlands

Section One – Dust and Doubt

The desert stretched wide, a barren page written in dust and stone. Six Gun Devil rode into the Badlands at dawn, the land where even buzzards hesitated, where bones turned white under a pitiless sun. His horse's hooves clopped dull against cracked earth, echoing like a clock counting down time.

He had come here alone, away from Redemption, away from Sarah's forgiving eyes, away from Josiah's steady prayers, away even from Hannah's childlike hymns. He had come to wrestle with himself.

The wind moaned low through jagged rocks, and in its voice he almost heard a question: *Why are you still alive?*

He pulled rein, dismounted, and stood still, staring at the endless horizon. His scar burned, not in fire now, but in ache. He sat against a rock, Colt holster empty at his side — he had left the nailed revolver in the graveyard as a marker. Still, he felt its weight ghosting his hip, as though the years of killing clung to him even without steel.

The Book of Job surfaced in his mind, words Josiah had once read aloud when a child died in town and the whole place wore mourning black. Six Gun remembered the cadence of the preacher's voice echoing under rafters:

“Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble. He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down: he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not.” (Job 14:1–2)

The outlaw closed his eyes. “Few days. Full of trouble,” he muttered. “That’s me. Born in dust, lived in dust, killin’ in dust. A shadow with a pistol.”

He thought of Job, stripped of wealth, health, family, all comfort. Sitting on ashes, scraping sores with pottery shards. Job had asked why. Why him? Why pain without cause?

Six Gun whispered into the Badlands air, “Lord... why me? Why’d You let me live when better men lay cold? Why did You let my hands spill blood, then spare me when others prayed for justice? Why ain’t I in the ground with Colter’s bullet in my chest? Why?”

The Badlands gave no answer but wind. His scar itched like fire. He pressed his hand against it, heart heavy. “Job cursed the day he was born. I get that. I get it more than any hymn.”

He thought of Sarah almost pulling the trigger on Colter, of his own rage restrained by grace. He thought of children singing mercy in a ruined chapel. He thought of himself nailed to his own history like that revolver to the cross.

“Job had friends who sat with him,” he whispered. “But all they gave him was poison words, sayin’ he deserved it. Maybe they were right in my case. Maybe my suffering’s just the bill comin’ due.”

Tears stung his eyes, unbidden. “But Job... he said even if God slayed him, he’d trust Him. Could I say that? Could a man like me trust when all he’s got left is pain?”

He tilted his head back against stone, the Badlands sky wide as eternity above. The silence was suffocating, but inside it the story of Job pressed harder: a man broken yet refusing to curse God.

“Lord,” he whispered, “I ain’t Job. I’m worse. But I reckon I need the same answer he got. You.”

And so he sat, dust covering him, doubts pouring out, and the Badlands became his ash heap — his place of breaking.

Section Two – The Long Wrestling

By noon the sun baked his back. He had pulled his coat across his shoulders, hat down, but sweat still poured. Hunger gnawed. Thirst clawed. The Badlands stripped him down, same as suffering strips the soul.

He opened Josiah’s little psalter, pages worn, and thumbed until his eyes caught Job’s words written in the margins from an old sermon: “*Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.*” (Job 13:15).

The outlaw read it again, lips moving slow. “Though He slay me... yet will I trust.”

He laughed bitter, voice cracked. “How’d Job say that when everything he had was ash? His children gone, his wife tellin’ him to curse God and die, his body rotten. Yet trust.” He spat dust. “Preacher says trust is faith holdin’ on when the rope cuts your hand.”

He stared at his own palms, scarred from fights and burned by hell’s writ. They shook. “Lord, I don’t know if I can say them words true. But I want to.”

The wind carried voices to his mind — memories. Bart’s gruff whisper: “He let him live.” Sarah’s song from Psalm 91: “*He shall cover thee with his feathers.*” Hannah’s bright “Jesus loves me.” Josiah’s firm: “*Whosoever believeth.*”

The outlaw bent double, face in the dust. “Why do You keep givin’ me mercy? Why keep sparin’ me? Job said, ‘*What is man, that thou shouldest magnify him?*’ (Job 7:17). I ain’t worth magnifyin’. I’m worth buryin’.”

Silence. Then his own memory answered: “*The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life.*”

He groaned. “Gift. Always that word. Gift I can’t buy, gift I can’t earn, gift I can’t repay. Is that why You got me wanderin’ the Badlands, Lord? To break me enough to take it?”

He wept again. Harsh sobs. Tears mixing with dust until mud streaked his face.

The sun slid lower, shadows stretching long. He whispered Job's words one more time, broken but brave: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him."

And for the first time, he didn't laugh bitter after. He said it, and it stayed.

Section Three – The Redemption in Suffering

Evening came, soft as a hymn. The desert cooled. Stars pierced the sky one by one.

Six Gun lay on his back, staring upward, body weak but spirit stirred. He whispered Job's cry from the depths: "*For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth.*" (Job 19:25).

The words hit him harder than any bullet. Redeemer. Not just a judge. Not just a punisher. A Redeemer — one who buys back what's lost, who restores what's broken, who takes ashes and breathes beauty.

He sat up, trembling, eyes burning. "My Redeemer liveth," he said into the Badlands air, voice stronger. "Not my works. Not my name. Not my gun. My Redeemer. And He lives."

The stars seemed to blaze brighter. The Badlands didn't look barren anymore. They looked like a canvas painted with promise.

He pressed his psalter to his chest. "Lord, I've been Job on the ash heap. I've asked why. I've cursed the dust. But if Job found hope in You while his world burned, then so can I. I believe. You live. And maybe... maybe You'll remake me too."

Tears slid again, but these weren't despair. They were hope.

He rose, weak but steady, and turned back toward Redemption. His body was sore, his heart raw, but something inside glowed like a coal: the conviction that suffering wasn't the end. Endurance led to redemption. Pain to promise. Ashes to beauty.

At the ridgeline he stopped, looked back once at the Badlands, and whispered Job's final testimony: "*He knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold.*" (Job 23:10).

His scar still burned. But it burned like refining fire now, not a curse.

And the outlaw who once was Devil walked back toward the town with Job's story in his heart — not just a tale of loss, but of endurance, and of a Redeemer who still lives.

Chapter Sixty – The Psalms of the Outlaw

Section One – The Desert Cry

The night air in the desert was colder than a cell, sharper than a knife. Six Gun sat by a lonely fire, saddle for a pillow, his coat pulled close. Coyotes howled somewhere in the black, but he wasn't listening for them. His heart was the loudest noise.

He had walked through the Badlands with Job's voice ringing in his head, and he had come out alive. But now, as the stars spread across the sky like lanterns hung by angels, he felt something rise from his gut. A need. Not for food, not for water, but for words.

He bent forward, elbows on knees, and whispered into the flame:

"Lord, hear me. Don't turn away. I've been Devil more than I've been man. My sins pile higher than the mesas. My bloodguilt's louder than these coyotes. But I'm still here, breathin'. Don't let my enemies laugh at me. Don't let Colter's curse win. Hide me in the shadow of Your wings, like David prayed."

His voice cracked. He pressed a hand against his scar, hot even in the cold night. "I'm no psalm-singer, Lord. My songs were curses. My hymns were gunshots. But tonight—tonight I'll pray my own psalm, and maybe You'll hear me. Mercy's what I'm askin'."

The fire popped. Sparks rose into the dark like words carried on unseen wings.

Six Gun closed his eyes. And the outlaw's psalm began.

Section Two – The Outlaw's Psalm

He spoke rough, but the words came slow and steady, like bullets placed careful on a table.

"Lord, You know my trail. You know every man I dropped in the dust, every coin I took in blood. My nights are full of shadows, my days full of regret. My scar burns like hell itself, but You say You can turn curses into blessings. Do it with me."

He looked up at the sky, stars endless. His voice rose.

"The Lord is my light in this desert. The Lord is my strength when I'm weak as a colt. The Lord is my refuge when the Devil's Horsemen ride. Even if Colter comes at me with a thousand rifles, I'll stand, 'cause You stand with me. Not my Colt, but Your cross."

His throat tightened. His words shook. "But Lord... don't forget I'm still dust. I stumble. I doubt. I've been faithless more times than faithful. My enemies laugh: 'Where's your God now?' Show 'em, Lord. Not for me. For Your Name."

Tears welled, surprising him. He wiped at them with the back of his hand but kept praying.

"Search me, God. Find every sin hidin' in me. Burn it out. Don't let me walk crooked no more. Lead me to that still water, to that table You promised. And if my days are short, then let my last breath be a psalm, not a curse."

He sat silent, chest heaving, the desert answering only with the whisper of wind. But for the first time, silence didn't feel empty. It felt filled.

Section Three – Mercy in the Silence

Hours passed. The fire burned low. Six Gun lay back, eyes on the stars, heart still praying even when his lips stopped. The verses of David tangled with his own rough words, but together they made something new: a psalm of an outlaw who had finally learned to cry instead of curse.

A coyote wailed again, long and lonely. Six Gun whispered into the dark:

“Lord, don’t leave me alone out here. Be my shepherd. Be my fortress. I got no one else who can carry this weight.”

The wind swept through the canyon, cool as water poured over hot iron. And in it, he felt not emptiness, but presence. A whisper not of condemnation but of nearness: *“I am with you.”*

Six Gun exhaled, trembling. He pulled his psalter close to his chest, the same book that had carried Job’s words to him. His own psalm still echoed in his ears.

“Maybe one day they’ll sing it in town,” he muttered, eyes heavy. “Not a psalm of David... but the psalm of an outlaw who found mercy.”

And as the first light of dawn bled into the east, the scar on his cheek cooled. His eyes closed, his lips moving one last time before sleep:

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life... and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

The coyotes hushed. The wind stilled. And the desert itself seemed to say amen.

Part VII: Heaven or Hell

Chapter Sixty-One – The Temptress’ Snare

Section One – Shadows in the Saloon

The night after his psalm in the desert, Six Gun Devil drifted into the edge-town called Dry Creek, a place still standing only because the gangs hadn’t bothered to burn it. The saloon lanterns swung low, smoke curling under the rafters, piano man playing a tune too lazy to be cheerful.

He hadn’t meant to go inside. His plan was a meal, a bed, and a trail back to Redemption come morning. But the door swung open, laughter spilled out, and something tugged at him. For years this had been his church, his altar: tables sticky with whiskey, corners where men whispered sin into each other’s ears.

He stepped through, scar catching the lamplight, and the room stilled. Some recognized him, some whispered, some kept their eyes down. He didn't order a drink. Just bread, beans, and coffee. But even water tastes like whiskey when ghosts sit on your shoulders.

That's when she came.

Tall, hair black as midnight with a red streak pinned back, lips curved like trouble. She moved through the smoke with grace that silenced men quicker than a gunshot. Her dress caught lamplight like water, and her eyes fixed on him as if he were the only soul in the room.

"You're him," she said, sliding into the seat across from him without invitation. "The Six Gun Devil turned saint."

He didn't meet her eyes. "Name's gone," he muttered.

She smiled, slow. "Devil or not, you're still a man. And men get lonely."

The piano stumbled. Dice rattled. The room blurred. He kept his scar hidden under his hat brim, but his chest tightened. She smelled of roses and smoke, a perfume that stirred memories he'd nailed to wood.

"What do you want?" he asked, voice gravel.

Her hand reached across, touching his wrist lightly. "What all men want. Warmth. Someone who won't judge. Forget the preacher's chains. Forget the cross. Just be mine."

The words coiled like a snake. For the first time since he'd prayed mercy, temptation felt like home.

Section Two – The Snare Tightens

The outlaw's throat tightened. His mind flashed with old nights: soft arms in smoky rooms, whispers that dulled the guilt for an hour. He felt the heat crawl up his scar. His hand trembled on the table.

She leaned closer, voice low. "You don't have to be his dog, quoting Scripture like a parrot. You don't have to be their savior. Come with me. I'll give you peace without penance."

Peace without penance. The phrase rang in his chest. A cruel bargain dressed as comfort.

He pulled his wrist free, but slow, as if strength was leaving him. "Lady, you don't know me."

"Oh, I know enough." Her smile widened. "I know killers like you never change. You can dress it up in psalms, but sin's in your blood. Better to stop pretending and live free."

Her words sliced sharper than Colter's threats. Because part of him feared she was right. The scar on his cheek, the blood on his past — they testified against him louder than any preacher's benediction.

His breath caught. His eyes blurred. He whispered, almost to himself: "Why does the snare always look like comfort?"

The piano player shifted into a hymn, half-drunk but recognizable: "*Come Thou Fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing Thy grace...*" The tune clashed with her perfume, her voice, her promises.

He gritted his teeth, heart tearing.

Finally he looked her in the eye, voice breaking but firm. “I ain’t free if I’m yours. Freedom cost blood, and it wasn’t mine. I won’t spit on that gift.”

Her smile turned cold. “You’ll regret this. No one’s strong enough to resist forever.”

“Maybe not,” he said, scar burning. “But He is.”

Section Three – Escaping the Snare

Six Gun stood, chair scraping back. The saloon hushed, every ear turned. He set coins on the table, bread untouched, and tipped his hat to her, not in mockery, but in farewell.

“Lady,” he said, voice low, “I’ve walked with devils long enough. Tonight I’ll walk out.”

Her lips twisted, part fury, part pity. “You’ll be back.”

He turned, hand on the psalter tucked in his coat. His voice rose so all could hear: “*My son, walk not thou in the way with them; refrain thy foot from their path. For their feet run to evil, and make haste to shed blood.*” (Proverbs 1:15–16).

The room stirred. Dice stilled. The piano fell silent.

He stepped into the night air, cool and clean. The stars overhead looked brighter, the dust underfoot steadier. His body shook, not from battle, but from escape. He pressed the psalter to his chest and whispered hoarse:

“Lord, keep me. I can’t stand without You. I nearly fell.”

The desert wind answered, cool against his scar. And for the first time, he felt not chained by mercy, but freed by it.

Behind him, laughter tried to chase, but it rang hollow. Before him, the road stretched toward Redemption, steady and clear.

He whispered his own outlaw psalm: “Better one night with mercy than a thousand with sin.”

And with that, he walked away from the snare — bruised, tempted, but still redeemed.

Chapter Sixty-Two – A Child Shall Lead Them

Section One – The Weight of Doubt

The road back to Redemption stretched long and lonely. The desert wind carried grit that stung the eyes, and every mile weighed heavier than the last. Six Gun Devil had walked away from the temptress in Dry Creek, but her words lingered like smoke in his clothes: “*Killers like you never change. Sin’s in your blood.*”

He gripped the psalter tight in his coat, but doubt still gnawed. His scar burned, not with temptation this time, but with shame. *Was she right?* Could he ever be free of the blood on his hands? Could a man with his past truly wear mercy without tearing it to shreds?

By the time the sun dipped low, he came upon a wagon resting near the creek bed. A family had camped there — father tending the horses, mother stirring beans over a fire, children chasing each other through the sagebrush.

He almost passed them by. Redemption had taught him caution: strangers meant questions, sometimes worse. But the youngest child stopped him in his tracks.

The boy couldn't have been more than eight. Freckles scattered across his nose, hair the color of wheat. He darted toward Six Gun with no fear, holding a wooden slingshot in one hand and a crust of bread in the other.

"You're him," the boy said, chest puffed out like he'd spotted a legend. "The outlaw with the scar. My pa said you was Devil once."

Six Gun froze, shoulders stiff. The words cut sharper than any knife. "Your pa's not wrong," he muttered.

The boy grinned, gap-toothed. "But Ma said Jesus can save anybody." He jabbed the slingshot toward the outlaw like it was proof. "Even the worst man alive."

The words hit harder than a bullet. Six Gun staggered, scar searing. He crouched, voice hoarse. "And you think that's me?"

The boy nodded solemn, fearless. "Yessir. But Jesus is bigger."

And in that moment, the desert went quiet, as though heaven itself had paused to let a child preach.

Section Two – The Outlaw's Questions

The family welcomed him to their fire without hesitation, as if they'd been waiting. The father nodded polite, the mother offered beans, but it was the boy who kept his eyes fixed on the scarred gunslinger, unblinking.

Six Gun sat stiff, plate in hand, appetite gone. The boy leaned close, voice blunt. "Do you believe Him?"

"Believe who?" Six Gun rasped.

"Jesus. That He can save you."

The outlaw swallowed hard. His scar itched. "I've tried... but sometimes I wonder if I'm too far gone. Too many graves behind me."

The boy frowned, shaking his head as though the answer were obvious. "Don't matter. Bible says *whosoever*." He quoted it clumsy but sure: "*For God so loved the world, that He gave His only*

begotten Son, that whosoever—” his voice rose, bold, “*—believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life!*” (John 3:16).

The outlaw stared, stunned. The same verse Josiah had read by lamplight now fell from a child’s lips like lightning in the dark.

“Whosoever,” the boy repeated, poking his chest. “That means you. Devil or not. Doesn’t matter.”

Six Gun’s throat tightened. He stared into the fire. “Son, you ever seen blood spill? Ever buried someone you loved?”

The boy’s face softened. “I saw my baby sister die last winter. Pa says she’s with Jesus now. Ma cried, but she still sings hymns. Said one day we’ll see her again.”

Silence sat heavy. The outlaw blinked hard, eyes burning. He whispered, “You trust Him that much?”

The boy nodded without hesitation. “Course I do. He said He would. Jesus don’t lie.”

The words cut through the outlaw’s doubt like a clean knife.

Section Three – A Child’s Gospel

The fire burned low, embers glowing red as the night deepened. Six Gun sat with his hands covering his face, shoulders shaking. For years he had lived by speed, by steel, by rage. But now, under starlight, it was a child’s faith that cornered him like no gun ever had.

The boy’s voice carried soft but steady: “Mister, you don’t gotta be Devil no more. You can just be His.”

Six Gun lowered his hands, tears streaking his scar. He whispered, “I’ve prayed. I’ve wept. I’ve tried to believe. But hearing it from you—Lord help me—it feels truer than when the preacher says it.”

The boy shrugged like it was nothing. “Jesus said let the little children come to Him. Guess that means sometimes He lets us talk for Him too.”

The outlaw laughed through his tears, rough and broken. “Reckon He does.”

The mother began humming soft, a hymn that wound through the night air: “*Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so...*” The boy grinned and sang along, off-key but bold.

Six Gun closed his eyes. The words of the hymn wrapped around him like arms. He whispered his own psalm, low and trembling:

“Lord, I’m whosoever. Even me. Save me.”

And as the stars burned bright, the outlaw’s heart settled. Doubt didn’t vanish, but it bowed. Mercy stood taller.

When the family slept, Six Gun rose, scar cool in the night air. He looked down at the boy curled by the fire, wooden slingshot still in his hand. He whispered, “Thank You, Lord, for speakin’ through the least to reach the least.”

And as he walked back toward Redemption, his steps lighter, he carried with him the gospel not of a preacher, not of a hymn, but of a child who had told him plain:

“Jesus can save even the worst man alive.”

Chapter Sixty-Three – The Gallows at Noon

Section One – Shackles in the Street

Morning light cut sharp across Redemption as if the sun itself wanted to reveal every shadow. The town was tense. Riders had brought word: Colter Hayes and the remnants of his gang were massing in the hills again. Fear rode on every whisper.

In the middle of it all, the sheriff’s hand clamped on Six Gun Devil’s arm. Elias’s jaw was hard, his eyes shadowed. He didn’t draw his rifle; he didn’t need to. His badge glinted bright enough.

“Devil,” Elias said low, “you’re comin’ with me.”

Six Gun didn’t fight. He let the shackles click shut around his wrists. The sound rang like a verdict.

The townsfolk watched as he was marched down Main Street. Bart leaned on a broom, muttering, “Here we go again.” Sarah stood on the mercantile porch, Hannah clutching her skirts, both wide-eyed. Josiah followed at a distance, Bible in hand, lips moving in silent prayer.

The scar on Six Gun’s cheek burned hotter than the irons. He knew this walk too well. He’d been marched to gallows before, rope waiting like judgment itself. This time, there wasn’t a bounty poster or a crime fresh on his name. But Elias had spoken it plain the night before:

“You’ve spilled too much blood. Some folks say a man like you don’t get to walk free just because he carries a psalter now. Gallows waitin’ will settle the town’s fear.”

The outlaw’s boots scuffed dust as they reached the square. There stood the gallows, old wood bleached by sun, rope swaying faint in the breeze. The sight made his stomach twist. *The wages of sin is death.*

Elias chained him to the post at its base and faced the crowd that was gathering, murmuring, pointing. “High noon,” he said flat. “He hangs then.”

Six Gun lowered his head. He didn’t plead. He didn’t curse. He whispered hoarse: “Lord, if this is my hour, let it be Yours. Just... keep me from runnin’.”

The gallows loomed tall. Noon drew near.

Section Two – Voices of Mercy

By midmorning, the square was packed. Some townsfolk nodded grim, eager for closure. Others shifted uneasy, whispering of miracles they'd seen in this scarred man. The gallows creaked in the wind, every groan like a clock ticking down.

Josiah stepped forward first, Bible high. His voice carried steady. "People of Redemption, hear me. This man was Devil, yes. He sowed death, yes. But you have also seen what God has sown in him since: psalms in the desert, mercy in the crossfire, prayers where curses used to be. Will you deny the work of the Lord before your very eyes?"

Some scoffed. "Work of the Lord? He's just hidin' behind a Book."

Sarah Schaefer stepped forward then, Hannah by her side. Her voice trembled, but it rang clear. "This man saved my daughter when Colter's fire came down. He held me back from vengeance when I nearly lost my soul to hate. He is not the Devil anymore. He's a man remade."

Gasps rippled. Some shook their heads. Others nodded slow, remembering.

Bart spat in the dust but spoke louder than he meant to. "Man's still a killer. But I'll say this—he's the only one that stood between us and Colter's pack more'n once. You hang him, and you'll be hangin' the only shield we got."

The murmur swelled. Arguments cracked like whips.

Elias raised a hand, but his face wasn't iron now. Doubt flickered. He looked at Six Gun, chained below the gallows, scar burning but eyes steady.

"Speak," Elias said. "One last time. What's your word?"

Six Gun lifted his head, voice hoarse but clear. "Sheriff, folks, I ain't askin' for escape. My sins earned me that rope a hundred times. But I'm beggin' you not to mistake the Lord's gift. If I die today, I die His. But if I live, I live to serve Him — and you."

His words cracked, raw as the desert wind. "I don't deserve a second chance. But Christ gave me one. Maybe that's enough reason you should too."

The square hushed.

Section Three – Judgment at High Noon

The bell struck noon. The sound rolled across the square, deep and final. Elias placed his hand on the rope, eyes searching the crowd.

"Justice says hang," he said low. "Mercy says free. Which do we choose?"

The townsfolk erupted. Some shouted for death, others for life. The voices tangled until the square shook with it.

And then, clear as a gunshot, a child's voice rose — Hannah's, high and trembling but bold:

“Jesus already took his punishment! You can’t hang him again!”

The crowd stilled. All eyes turned to the little girl gripping her mother’s hand, face streaked with tears but glowing with faith.

Josiah stepped forward, seizing the moment. His voice thundered: “*For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.*” (John 3:17). He looked at Elias, at the rope, at the crowd. “Will we condemn a man Christ has redeemed?”

Silence.

Finally Elias’s hand dropped from the rope. He looked at Six Gun long, then turned to the people. “The gallows ain’t his judge today. God is. And if God’s given him a second chance... so will Redemption.”

A cheer rose from half the crowd, relief and joy mingled. The other half grumbled, but no one lifted protest. The sheriff unlocked the chains. The irons fell to the dust.

Six Gun staggered free, scar burning cool now. He lifted his hands toward heaven, whispering hoarse: “Thank You, Lord. For mercy once more.”

Sarah wept. Hannah smiled. Josiah whispered amen.

And the gallows stood unused, a wooden reminder not of death that day, but of a second chance granted in mercy.

Chapter Sixty-Four – The Devil Laughs

Section One – Midnight Shadows

Night lay heavy on Redemption. The gallows still loomed in the square, empty but whispering memory. Six Gun Devil couldn’t sleep. He walked the outskirts of town, boots crunching gravel, scar itching with fire that wouldn’t cool.

Every step echoed the words he had spoken: “*I don’t deserve a second chance. But Christ gave me one.*” The people had listened. The sheriff had unchained him. Yet doubt gnawed harder than ever.

He stopped at the chapel fence, leaned against the post, and tilted his head back. Stars wheeled bright above, but they didn’t bring peace. Instead, he felt it — a prickling in his skin, a chill in the wind that had nothing to do with night air.

Then it came.

Laughter.

Not the laugh of a saloon drunk, not the chuckle of a gambler at a lucky draw. This laugh was old, deep, hollow as a canyon. It rolled across the night, rattling in his chest like bones shaken in a box.

Six Gun froze. His scar burned. He spun, hand twitching for a Colt that wasn’t there. Shadows danced, stretched long, twisted.

“Who’s there?” he barked, voice raw.

The laugh echoed again, closer now, curling through the dark. His scar throbbed like a brand.

“You can’t shake me,” the voice hissed under the laughter. “You wore my name too long. Devil you were, Devil you remain.”

Six Gun staggered back, breath sharp. “You’re a lie,” he rasped. “Christ bought me.”

But the laugh rose louder, drowning his words, rolling through the town like a storm that only he could hear.

Section Two – Visions in the Dust

He stumbled into the graveyard, falling to his knees among the mounds of dirt. His scar seared white-hot. The laugh came again — and visions followed.

The ground shifted. Graves split open. From the earth rose faces he knew — men he’d shot, eyes wide with accusation. Their mouths opened, crying his name. “Devil! Devil! You killed us. You’ll never be free.”

Six Gun clutched his head, gasping. “No... no, I laid it down...”

The vision deepened. Flames licked the horizon. The gallows loomed taller, rope swinging like a serpent. At its base stood Colter Hayes, grinning wide, scarred jaw twisting. Behind him, the Devil’s Horsemen laughed with the same hollow chorus, mocking, jeering.

And over them all, louder still, came the voice: “Your prayers are ash. Your psalms are dust. You think mercy can wash this much blood? Fool. Hell waits for you.”

Six Gun screamed, “Lord! Help me!” His knees buckled. His palms scraped raw in the dirt.

The laugh shook the sky — but another voice broke through, quiet at first, then swelling: “*There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus.*” (Romans 8:1).

The outlaw lifted his head, eyes wide. The vision flickered. The graves blurred. The fire dimmed.

He gasped, clutching his psalter, whispering the verse aloud. “No condemnation... in Christ... no condemnation.”

The laughter faltered, grew jagged.

The voice snarled, “You’re mine.”

Six Gun forced the words out, broken but strong: “*For whom the Son sets free... is free indeed.*”

The vision shattered like glass under a hammer. The graves closed. The fire vanished. Only the wind remained.

Section Three – The Dawn After Laughter

He lay face down in the dirt, chest heaving, scar cooling slow. The laughter was gone. Silence stretched wide, broken only by his ragged breath.

When he finally rose, the stars had faded. Dawn's first light painted the horizon pink. The gallows still stood in the square, empty, just wood and rope. No demons. No fire. No graves.

He pressed his psalter to his chest, voice trembling. "Lord... the Devil laughs, but You speak louder. Don't let me forget that."

As he staggered back into town, Josiah found him, lantern in hand. "You look like you wrestled death itself," the preacher said quietly.

Six Gun met his eyes, tears streaking his scar. "I heard him, Josiah. Heard his laugh. Saw graves open. Felt chains again."

Josiah's grip tightened on his arm. "The accuser of the brethren. He still whispers, still mocks. But remember Revelation's promise: *'They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony.'*"

Six Gun swallowed, nodding slow. "Then I'll keep speakin' it. Even when I hear him laugh."

The preacher raised his lantern high, light spilling across the gallows. "Let him laugh. The cross outshines it."

Six Gun turned toward the sunrise, scar cool, breath steady. He whispered his own psalm into the dawn: "Though hell mocks me, I will not bow. For my Redeemer lives."

And in the silence that followed, no laughter came — only the sound of a town waking to light.

Chapter Sixty-Five – The Silent Prayer

Section One – Shackles and Silence

The cell was small, dark, and smelled of rust and old sweat. Iron shackles dug into Six Gun's wrists, the bite of cold steel sharper than any wound he'd carried from a duel. Elias had locked him up again — not out of hatred, but out of caution. The town feared Colter's final siege was close, and some said the outlaw was a danger inside Redemption's walls. Better him chained than loose, they whispered.

He didn't argue. He just sat on the cot, back bent, scar shadowed under the weak lamplight.

The night dragged slow. No voices from the street, no sound of boots in the hall. Just the scrape of chains when he shifted. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, hands heavy.

He thought of Job in the ashes. Of David hiding in caves. Of Paul and Silas, shackled in prison, singing hymns into midnight.

But he didn't feel like Job, or David, or Paul. He felt like what he had always been — Devil. His scar burned, his chest ached, and he muttered hoarse: "Maybe this is where I belong. Maybe the rope should've taken me. Maybe..."

He closed his eyes, and in the silence, something inside pressed him. Not words. Just a weight: *pray*.

His lips trembled. "Lord..." he whispered, so low even he barely heard it. His voice cracked, breaking off.

The shackles clinked. "I don't even know if You're listenin'," he muttered. "Don't even know if You'd want to."

The words died. But heaven was listening.

Section Two – The Prayer No One Heard

Minutes stretched like hours. He sat still, head bowed, whispering words that felt like dust:

"Jesus... if You hear me... I'm tired. I ain't askin' for freedom. I ain't askin' for life. Just don't leave me alone in here. Don't leave me alone in me."

His throat closed. He felt foolish, like a man talking to the wall. He dug his nails into his palms until they bled.

"God, I'm broken. I keep fallin' back into fear. I hear the Devil's laugh louder than Your promise. I try to believe I'm Yours, but I don't trust myself one inch. If mercy's real... if whosoever means me... then prove it. Not with fire. Not with guns. Just with You."

The words cracked, too quiet for the guards to hear, too weak for even his own heart to believe. He bowed his head against his shackled hands. "I ain't worth Your time, Lord. But if You'll have me still... take me."

Silence followed. Heavy, pressing, endless.

And then, like a breath across his scar, came a whisper not of earth but of Spirit: "*Before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear.*" (Isaiah 65:24).

The outlaw gasped, eyes wide, tears spilling sudden. He hadn't shouted. He hadn't sung. He'd only whispered. But heaven had heard — and answered.

Section Three – Chains and Heaven

The night shifted. No earthquake split the cell, no angel appeared with blazing sword. The shackles stayed. The cot stayed. But the weight on his chest lifted. The silence no longer felt empty. It felt full — alive.

He whispered again, voice trembling but sure: "Thank You. You heard me."

Peace poured over him like water over fire. His scar cooled. His eyes closed, not from despair this time, but from rest.

At dawn, Josiah came to the cell. He expected to see a broken outlaw slumped against chains. Instead, he found a man kneeling, head bowed, eyes closed in prayer.

“Brother,” Josiah whispered, voice thick, “you prayed in silence, didn’t you?”

Six Gun opened his eyes, tears still glinting. “I didn’t think He’d hear me.” His voice cracked. “But He did.”

Josiah smiled, laying his Bible against the bars. “The Lord is nigh unto all them that call upon Him, to all that call upon Him in truth.” (Psalm 145:18).

Six Gun pressed his shackled hands to the bars, whispering, “Then maybe chains ain’t chains if He’s here.”

The preacher nodded. “No chain stronger than His presence. And no silence too deep for His ear.”

And as the sheriff unlocked the cell to bring him into daylight, Six Gun walked with shackles still clinking — but with a heart freer than it had ever been.

The silent prayer had been heard. Heaven itself had bent low to listen.

Chapter Sixty-Six – Showdown in the Sanctuary

Section One – The Storm Breaks

The church bell hadn’t tolled in weeks. Its rope still frayed from the fire, its beam still scorched from raids past. But on that Sunday morning, Josiah Markham lit every lantern he could find and filled the sanctuary with light. The pews filled slow: widows, farmers, children clutching their mothers’ skirts. Fear lingered, but faith had drawn them.

Six Gun Devil sat near the back, scar glinting under lamplight, hands folded over his psalter. He wasn’t leading. He wasn’t speaking. He was just there, the man once called Devil now sitting in the Lord’s house like any other sinner needing grace.

Josiah stepped to the pulpit, voice steady: “*The name of the Lord is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe.*” (Proverbs 18:10).

The words had barely settled when the doors crashed open.

Boots thundered. Guns flashed. Colter Hayes stormed in with a pack of riders at his back, laughter thick and cruel. “Strong tower, preacher?” Colter jeered. “Looks like kindling to me.”

The congregation gasped. Mothers shielded children. The widow Sarah clutched Hannah close. The air turned to ice.

But Six Gun rose. The pew creaked under his weight. His hand settled not on his psalter but on the Colt at his hip — the one he swore he would use only to defend the innocent. His scar burned. His voice was steady.

“You’ll not burn this house, Colter. Not while I draw breath.”

Colter sneered. “Then bleed here. In your church.”

Section Two – Guns and Gospel

Chaos erupted. The first outlaw fired into the rafters, wood splintering. The children screamed.

Six Gun drew, faster than memory, faster than legend. One shot cracked, clean as a bell. The outlaw fell back, pistol spinning from his hand.

Josiah’s voice rose, thunder over the storm: “*The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?*” (Psalm 27:1).

He stood unflinching at the pulpit, Bible raised high, even as bullets split the pews.

Six Gun moved down the aisle, every shot measured, every verse in his chest. He fired again, dropping another Horseman, then shouted hoarse: “*No weapon formed against thee shall prosper!*” (Isaiah 54:17).

The congregation found courage in the words. Farmers hefted rifles. Mothers shielded their children but did not flee. Bart ducked behind a pew, loading and firing with cursing prayers. Even Elias, grim-faced, came from the side aisle to stand with his rifle leveled.

The sanctuary rang with gunfire and Gospel, bullets and Bible verses clashing like thunder.

Colter roared above it all. “You ain’t no saint, Devil! You can’t pray away blood!”

Six Gun leveled his Colt, scar burning bright. “No — but His blood covered mine.” He fired, grazing Colter’s shoulder. The outlaw leader stumbled, rage twisting his face.

Josiah’s voice carried steady still: “*Greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world!*” (1 John 4:4).

The pews shook, lanterns flickered, but faith stood its ground.

Section Three – The Sanctuary Holds

The firefight slowed, bodies sprawled, groans echoing. The air was thick with smoke and hymn dust. Only a handful of Horsemen remained, eyes darting, courage broken.

Colter staggered near the altar, blood staining his sleeve. His eyes burned hate. He raised his pistol, aiming straight at Josiah.

Six Gun dove forward, Colt barking. The shot struck true, knocking Colter's weapon from his grasp. The outlaw fell to his knees before the altar, breath ragged. His laugh came bitter, cracked. "You... defending a church? You think He hears you?"

Six Gun stood over him, chest heaving. He didn't raise his Colt again. Instead, he lowered it and spoke, voice like iron: "He heard me when I whispered in chains. He hears every soul in this house. And He even hears you, Colter — if you'll listen."

The sanctuary hushed. Smoke swirled in lantern light. The outlaws left standing dropped their guns, fleeing into the dawn.

Josiah stepped down from the pulpit, laying a hand on Six Gun's shoulder. "Brother, today you fought not for vengeance, but for mercy."

Six Gun bowed his head. His scar burned cool now. "I didn't fight alone. He was here."

The congregation rose slowly, voices trembling but rising into a hymn, shaky at first, then strong: "*A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing...*"

The sanctuary still bore bullet holes, shattered pews, broken glass. But it also bore witness to something stronger: that even in storm and smoke, faith had held.

Six Gun sat in the back again, Colt holstered, psalter open. His lips moved in a whisper, this time not silent but sure:

"Thank You, Lord. This house stands — and so do I."

And as the hymn filled the sanctuary, the Devil's laughter was drowned, replaced by the song of the redeemed.

Chapter Sixty-Seven – The Book of Revelation Opens

Section One – The Scroll Unsealed

The sanctuary was still scarred from the fire. Bullet holes pocked the walls, shards of stained glass littered the floor. The pews smelled of gunpowder and lamp smoke. But the people of Redemption filled it again, unwilling to let fear drive them from God's house.

Six Gun Devil sat near the front this time, hat in his lap, scar catching lamplight. He still felt the weight of the showdown, the gunfire in the Lord's house, and the way mercy had spared him yet again.

Josiah Markham stood at the pulpit with a heavy Bible open. His voice carried like a hammer striking iron. "Tonight," he said, "we read from the Revelation of Jesus Christ."

The outlaw stiffened. He'd heard whispers of this Book before — a book of beasts, of fire, of judgment. A book men quoted when they wanted to scare children into obedience or curse their enemies. He had never heard it read straight.

Josiah's hand shook as he turned the pages. His voice fell into solemn rhythm: *"And I saw in the right hand of him that sat on the throne a book written within and on the backside, sealed with seven seals... And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals, and I heard, as it were the noise of thunder, one of the four beasts saying, Come and see."* (Revelation 5:1, 6:1).

The words cracked like lightning through Six Gun's chest. Seals. Thunder. Come and see.

Josiah read on: the white horse, the red horse, the black, the pale. War, famine, death. Souls crying from under the altar. Earth quaking, stars falling, the sky rolled up.

Six Gun gripped the pew tight. His scar burned. He whispered hoarse, "Lord... is this what waits?"

The preacher's voice shook, but he did not stop. *"For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?"* (Revelation 6:17).

The sanctuary was silent but for the Word. And the outlaw's heart thundered like hooves.

Section Two – Trumpets in the Night

The lanterns flickered as Josiah read further, his voice trembling yet fierce. *"And I saw the seven angels which stood before God; and to them were given seven trumpets... The first angel sounded, and there followed hail and fire mingled with blood, and they were cast upon the earth..."* (Revelation 8:2,7).

Mothers held children closer. Men shifted uneasy. The very air seemed to shake with the weight of it.

Six Gun felt every trumpet blast in his scar. Visions leapt in his mind — fire falling on the Badlands, rivers of blood soaking canyon dust, stars crashing like bullets from heaven. He pressed his hands over his ears as if to stop the sound, but the words pierced deeper.

Josiah read on: *"The fifth angel sounded, and I saw a star fall from heaven... and to him was given the key of the bottomless pit. And he opened the pit; and there arose a smoke out of the pit... and there came out of the smoke locusts upon the earth..."* (Revelation 9:1–3).

Six Gun's breath caught. He remembered his dreams of demons riding, his visions of laughter in the night. He whispered hoarse, "I've seen their shadows already."

Hannah's small hand slipped into her mother's. The widow sang under her breath, a psalm of protection. Bart cursed low, muttering, "Sounds like hell on earth."

Josiah slammed his hand on the pulpit, voice cracking but bold: *"And the seventh angel sounded; and there were great voices in heaven, saying, The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever."* (Revelation 11:15).

The outlaw's scar burned, but his eyes filled. "Forever and ever," he whispered, clinging to the words like rope in a storm.

Section Three – Judgment and Mercy

The final reading shook the room like thunder. Josiah's voice dropped low: "*And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it... And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God... and the books were opened... and whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.*" (Revelation 20:11–15).

Six Gun bowed his head into his hands. His whole body trembled. *A book of life*. Would his name be there? Could a Devil's name ever be written in such a book? The thought cracked him open.

"Lord," he whispered, tears soaking the wood of the pew. "If judgment comes tonight, I won't stand. My sins are too many. My blood runs too deep."

Josiah's voice softened, yet carried through the hush: "But hear the promise, church. '*And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.*'" (Revelation 21:4)."

Six Gun lifted his head, eyes wet, scar burning cool. The words hit like mercy poured straight from heaven. No more sorrow. No more pain.

He whispered through broken lips, "Lord, if You can write even my name in that Book... let it be."

The hymn rose slow and trembling: "*When the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there.*" The townsfolk sang, voices cracked but rising strong.

Six Gun stood with them, lips moving to words he barely knew, psalter clutched against his chest. For the first time, he dared to believe the roll call of heaven might include him — not the Devil, but the redeemed man he was becoming.

The Book of Revelation had opened, and it had not destroyed him. It had shaken him — to his knees, to tears, to hope.

And when the lanterns dimmed, he prayed the simplest prayer of his life: "Write me in, Lord. Write me in."

Chapter Sixty-Eight – A Pale Horse Rides

Section One – The Rider Appears

The night after the reading of Revelation, Six Gun couldn't rest. The words of seals, trumpets, and judgment rolled through his head like thunder across the plains. "*Behold a pale horse: and his name*

that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him." (Revelation 6:8). The verse clung to him, gnawing, as though it had been read just for him.

At dawn, a dust cloud rose on the eastern ridge. The townsfolk thought it was Colter's gang returning. Elias rallied a few men to the barricades, rifles ready. But when the cloud broke, it wasn't a gang. It was one man.

He rode a pale horse, lean and spectral, its mane white as bone. The rider wore pale clothes, dust-colored, almost blending into the horizon. His face was gaunt, his eyes hollow, like someone who'd walked out of a grave. At his side hung a revolver with ivory grips, gleaming in the morning sun.

He reined his horse at the edge of town, and his voice carried clear and cold: "Six Gun Devil! Come forth."

The outlaw stepped into the street, scar hot, psalter heavy in his coat. He squinted against the glare. "Who are you?"

The rider's mouth curved in something not quite a smile. He spoke like he was quoting Scripture: "*And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him.*" (Revelation 6:8). His hand brushed the ivory grip. "I am that rider. And your time has come."

Gasps rippled through the watching crowd. Josiah gripped his Bible tighter. Sarah clutched Hannah close. Bart muttered, "Lord help us, it's Revelation ridin' on a saddle."

Six Gun's heart pounded. Whether man or vision, outlaw or specter, he knew this duel was no ordinary fight. It was judgment in the dust.

Section Two – The Duel of Death

The street fell silent. Even the wind seemed to stop. The pale rider sat tall, revolver loose in his grip, eyes never leaving Six Gun.

"You think you've escaped," he called. "But the blood cries louder than your prayers. Your sins demand a reckoning."

Six Gun swallowed hard. His scar seared, his knees wanted to buckle. Yet something stronger held him upright. His hand hovered near his Colt, but he did not draw yet.

"I know my wages," he rasped. "Death's followed me every step. But Christ paid 'em in full."

The rider's hollow laugh cracked the air. "Paid? You cannot pay for rivers of blood with one drop."

Six Gun's voice rose, steady now: "*But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God.*" (Hebrews 10:12). He set his hand firm on his Colt. "Your reckoning ain't mine anymore."

The rider's eyes flared. He swung off the pale horse, boots crunching in the dust. "Then prove it. Draw, and let the heavens decide."

The crowd scattered. Mothers dragged children into doorways. Men ducked behind barrels. Josiah alone stood tall, Bible open, voice ringing: “*O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?*” (1 Corinthians 15:55).

The rider sneered. “The grave is mine. Always mine.”

The silence stretched. Two men stood in the dust — one scarred, one spectral. The sun hung heavy. The town held its breath.

Then, like thunder, both drew.

Section Three – Victory in the Dust

The shots cracked as one. Smoke curled. Dust lifted. For a moment, no one moved.

Then the pale rider staggered. His ivory-gripped revolver slipped from his hand, clattering to the ground. A red bloom spread across his pale coat. His knees buckled, and he fell face-first in the dust. His pale horse reared, whinnied, then bolted into the horizon, mane flashing like a ghost fleeing dawn.

Six Gun stood, Colt smoking, scar blazing hot. His breath heaved, his knees shook, but he was still upright. He holstered slow, eyes locked on the fallen rider.

The street stayed hushed. Bart whispered, “He killed Death itself.”

Josiah stepped forward, voice fierce. “No — Christ killed Death. And today His Word held true.” He lifted his Bible high. “*For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death.*” (Romans 8:2).

Six Gun dropped to his knees beside the pale rider. The man’s eyes flickered open, not hollow now but almost human. He rasped, “Who... who are you?”

Six Gun pressed his psalter to his chest, whispering through tears, “Not the Devil anymore. Just a man Christ saved.”

The rider’s breath rattled once, then stilled. The dust settled. Death lay defeated in the street of Redemption.

Six Gun rose, scar glowing like fire but heart burning with something brighter. He whispered into the silence: “O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?”

The townsfolk spilled into the street, voices rising, some in awe, some in song. Sarah wept openly. Hannah clapped her small hands. Elias lowered his rifle, nodding slow.

And Six Gun Devil stood in the light of morning, the echo of Revelation still thundering in his ears, but hope louder still. He had faced Death — and lived to walk on.

Chapter Sixty-Nine – The Trumpet Sounds

Section One – The Sky Splits

Redemption's streets were still dusted from the fall of the pale rider when the heavens themselves seemed to wake.

Six Gun Devil stood in the square, chest heaving, scar still burning hot, the psalter pressed against his coat. The people had barely caught their breath when a low rumble shivered through the ground. Horses reared. Lanterns rattled in their frames.

Then it came — thunder so loud it shook the earth beneath their boots, rolling and echoing as if a thousand drums had been struck at once. Lightning split across the sky, jagged spears tearing clouds apart. The storm was no ordinary storm.

Josiah lifted his Bible, face pale but eyes blazing. "Trumpets..." he whispered. "*The first angel sounded... and there followed hail and fire mingled with blood...*" (Revelation 8:7).

Bart swore, backing against a post. "Preacher, you mean to tell me this is them angels blowin' horns?"

Another thunderclap cracked the sky, long and drawn-out, like a trumpet blast echoing through the Badlands. Even the air trembled.

Six Gun dropped to one knee, hat in the dust, whispering hoarse: "Lord, if this be Your trumpet, then make me ready."

The scar on his cheek throbbed like a brand, but not of the Devil's claim. It burned as though Heaven itself was marking him to stand in the storm.

Section Two – The Standoff

The lightning revealed them. On the ridge to the north, shadows moved — riders, dozens of them, their silhouettes etched by fire in the sky. Colter Hayes had come, and the last of the Devil's Horsemen rode with him.

The thunder boomed again, like a trumpet heralding their charge. The townsfolk gasped, some scrambling for cover, others gripping rifles with white knuckles. Children cried out, mothers pulled them close.

Colter's voice carried across the storm, cold and fierce: "Redemption falls tonight! No God, no Devil, no scar-faced saint will stand in my way!"

The Horsemen roared with him, their cries swallowed by thunder.

Six Gun rose from the dust, scar burning bright, Colt heavy at his side. He stepped into the street, eyes fixed on the ridge. His voice carried, strong despite the storm: "Colter Hayes! This is your last ride. The trumpet's sounded. Judgment's here."

Colter laughed, high and mocking. "You think you're judge now, Devil? Then let's see who the Almighty favors!"

Lightning struck the hill behind him, blasting stone into the air. The Horsemen faltered, spooked, but Colter held firm, eyes blazing hatred.

Josiah walked to Six Gun's side, Bible lifted high despite the rain that now began to fall. His voice thundered with the storm: *"The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever."* (Revelation 11:15).

Side by side they stood — outlaw and preacher, gun and Gospel — against the coming tide.

Section Three – The Trumpet's Call

The standoff stretched long, thunder rolling like horns blown across heaven's ramparts. Lightning split the clouds again and again, each strike illuminating the ridge, the town, the scarred man in the street.

The people of Redemption gathered behind, torn between terror and awe. Sarah clasped Hannah's hand, whispering Psalm 91 under her breath. Elias shouldered his rifle, jaw set. Bart muttered curses, but his hands did not tremble now.

Colter raised his pistol high, lightning flashing in his eyes. "Ride!" he shouted. "Ride and burn this town to ash!"

The Horsemen spurred forward, a black wave against the storm.

Six Gun drew, faster than lightning, Colt flashing fire into the dark. His voice rose with every shot: *"The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?"* (Psalm 27:1).

Josiah's voice thundered beside him, no less fierce: *"For the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed!"* (1 Corinthians 15:52).

The clash began — bullets, thunder, lightning, Scripture. The storm itself seemed to fight alongside Redemption. Each thunderclap rattled bones, each lightning strike lit the battlefield like the hand of God painting judgment across the night.

Through it all, Six Gun stood tall, scar burning cool now, his shots sure, his words louder than fear.

And over the chaos rang one truth: the trumpet had sounded — not for death, but for redemption.

Chapter Seventy – Angels on the Wind

Section One – Whispers of the Unseen

The storm had broken, leaving the streets of Redemption soaked in mud and blood. The smell of gunpowder lingered like incense after a sacrifice. Broken glass glistened on the ground, lanterns smoldered, pews cracked. But through it all, one truth stunned the people more than anything: the church still stood.

Six Gun Devil sat slumped against the sanctuary door, Colt smoking at his side, scar cooled by the rain. His breath came ragged, his coat torn, but he was alive. More than alive. Untouched.

Inside, Josiah leaned against the pulpit, hands trembling over his open Bible. The widow Sarah sang low, a psalm to calm Hannah's shaking shoulders. Elias paced like a man walking off a nightmare. Bart cursed under his breath, staring at bullet holes in the rafters that somehow never found flesh.

It was Hannah who said it first, her small voice carrying in the silence. "Mama... I saw angels."

The room hushed. All eyes turned. The girl's face was pale but sure, eyes wide as the moon. "They stood by the windows. When the outlaws shot, the bullets... bent. They never touched you."

Sarah's lips quivered, tears spilling. "Child, you..." She broke off, because she'd seen something too.

Others chimed in, voices trembling. One man swore he'd seen shapes like wings in the lightning flashes. A woman said the bullets had curved midair, hissing past her ear but never striking. Elias stopped pacing, jaw tight. "Can't explain it. Men were aiming straight. They missed. Every time."

Bart spat in the mud outside. "You're all mad with fear. Angels? Pah. Just luck." But even his eyes betrayed unease.

Six Gun lifted his head, voice hoarse but steady. "Not luck. Psalm says, '*For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways.*' (Psalm 91:11). That's what I felt out there. Wings on the wind."

The whispers spread like fire in dry grass. *Angels on the wind.*

Section Two – Testimony in the Rain

That evening, the survivors gathered in the sanctuary despite broken pews and bullet holes. The rain pattered on the roof, steady as a hymn. Lanterns burned low, casting shadows that seemed to dance with unseen wings.

Josiah stood at the pulpit, voice rough but resolute. "Brothers, sisters... tonight we witnessed mercy with our own eyes. Not one child slain. Not one widow cut down. Not one bullet found the heart it hunted. Why? Because the Lord Himself stood guard."

The people murmured, some nodding, some weeping. Sarah rose, clutching Hannah's hand. Her voice shook. "I saw them. Tall as the rafters. Bright in the lightning. Their wings covered us."

A hush fell. Others added their voices — a boy who swore he saw a shining hand push him flat just as glass shattered above, a farmer who found bullet dents in the Bible he had clutched to his chest.

Bart grumbled, "Storm, smoke, confusion. You folks see what you want to see." But even he couldn't explain how the outlaw who fired point-blank at Josiah had missed the preacher's heart by a yard.

Six Gun stood slow, scar glinting, voice steady. "I've lived by iron long enough to know bullets don't miss easy. Not when killers aim true. But tonight, they missed. All of 'em. I felt the wind shift, strong as wings. I reckon angels did ride it."

Josiah lifted his Bible high. *“The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them.”* (Psalm 34:7).

The congregation broke into tears, prayers, even laughter. The fear of death had been shattered by testimony of mercy.

And over it all, Hannah’s small voice sang soft: *“All night, all day, angels watching over me, my Lord...”* Until the whole sanctuary joined her.

Section Three – The Outlaw’s Wonder

When the people had gone, Six Gun lingered. The sanctuary was quiet but for the rain. He walked the aisle slow, eyes tracing bullet holes, shattered wood, places where men had fired to kill and somehow failed.

He stopped at the pulpit, pressing a hand to the wood still warm from Josiah’s grip. His scar tingled faint. “Lord,” he whispered, “I don’t know why You spared me. Don’t know why You let angels guard a man like me. But I’ll never forget it.”

He stepped outside into the cool night. The rain had slowed, clouds breaking to reveal a sky swept clean. The wind stirred, gentle now, lifting the brim of his hat.

For a moment, in the starlight, he swore he saw them — faint outlines in the drifting mist, wings stretched, eyes like fire, watching. Then they were gone, as quickly as the wind shifted.

He sank to his knees in the mud, psalter clutched tight. His prayer was no sermon, no psalm. Just three broken words whispered into the night:

“Thank You, Lord.”

The scar cooled. The wind hushed. And in his chest, peace like wings settled deep.

By morning, stories would spread across the Badlands: how Redemption had been shielded by angels, how bullets curved like bent iron, how death itself had been turned aside.

And among the people, one phrase would echo again and again — a name for the night that could not be forgotten:

“Angels on the wind.”

Part VIII: Showdown at the End of the World

Chapter Seventy-One – The Devil’s Last Bargain

Section One – The Midnight Visitor

The town slept uneasy. Mothers hummed hymns over their children, men kept rifles by the door. The storm had passed, the angels had shielded them, but everyone knew Colter Hayes was not finished. His wrath was a coal waiting to spark.

Six Gun Devil could not sleep. He sat outside the chapel, psalter in hand, lantern dim at his side. The scar on his cheek burned faint, as if stirred by the memory of laughter. He whispered prayers, but his chest was restless.

That's when the air changed. The night wind stilled. The crickets hushed. Shadows deepened though the lantern flame did not move. A figure stepped from the darkness, tall and cloaked, face hidden, but voice unmistakable: smooth, sharp, cold.

"You've come far, gunslinger."

Six Gun's hand went to his Colt, but he did not draw. His scar burned hot. "You again."

The figure chuckled, low. "Did you think one prayer, one psalm, one hymn could end me? I am not so easily cast aside."

The outlaw rose, voice steady though his knees trembled. "What do you want?"

The figure spread his hands, palms gleaming with coins that shimmered like fire. "The same thing I've always wanted. Your soul. But I am generous. One last bargain. Wealth — more than you can spend in ten lifetimes. Power — enough to rule every outlaw, every town, every trail from here to the sea. You will be legend eternal."

The coins vanished. In their place appeared a Colt black as midnight, runes carved in its barrel. The figure held it out, smiling beneath the hood. "Take it. Wield it. And no man, no angel, no God will ever best you again."

The outlaw's scar seared. His hand twitched. For a moment, the offer glimmered like truth.

Section Two – The Temptation

The figure's voice coiled like a serpent. "Look at you — scarred, shackled, scorned. They still call you Devil behind closed doors. You think their psalms wash that away? No. But this—" he raised the black Colt high, "—this will. Fear, wealth, command. Take it, and the earth will bow."

Six Gun's throat tightened. He remembered the pale rider's fall, the gallows rope, the laughter in the dark. He saw Sarah's tears, Hannah's bold faith, Josiah's hand steady on Scripture.

He shook his head slow. "That's what you said to Him in the wilderness, wasn't it? 'Bow down, and I'll give you kingdoms.' And He told you no."

The figure's smile faltered.

Six Gun's voice grew stronger: "And I'm tellin' you no. I ain't His Son, but I belong to Him now. You can keep your gold, your gun, your false throne. My soul's been bought already — by blood not mine."

The figure hissed, the night air warping around him. “Fool! You will burn with them. Mercy will fail you. Grace will dry up.”

Six Gun lifted his psalter, scar glowing. “It ain’t my hand that holds me. It’s His. *‘Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.’*” (Matthew 4:10).

The figure snarled. The Colt in his hand cracked like thunder, but it fired no bullet — only smoke that vanished in the wind.

Section Three – Refusal and Resolve

The night split with a gust of wind. The dark figure staggered, cloak whipping. His laughter rose one last time, hollow and ragged. “You’ll regret this, outlaw. When Colter burns this town to ash, when your friends lie dead, when you hang at last — you’ll regret refusing me.”

Six Gun stepped forward, scar burning but voice steady. “No. The only regret I’d ever have is selling what Christ already paid for. My soul ain’t mine to bargain. It’s His.”

The figure’s shadow stretched long, then tore apart like smoke in a gale. The night air filled again with crickets, lantern flame steady. The dark one was gone.

Six Gun sank to his knees, trembling. His Colt hung heavy, but the psalter in his chest felt like armor. He whispered hoarse into the stars: “Thank You, Lord. I nearly reached. I nearly fell. But You held me.”

The wind stirred, cool against his scar, like unseen wings brushing past.

From the chapel behind him, Josiah’s voice carried faint, reading by lamplight: “*Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*” (James 4:7).

Six Gun rose, hat in hand, eyes on the horizon where storm clouds gathered over the mountains. Colter’s fire was coming, but the Devil’s last bargain had failed.

He whispered one word into the wind, steady and sure: “Ready.”

Chapter Seventy-Two – Valley of Decision

Section One – The Vision Opens

The night after the last temptation, sleep did not come easily. Six Gun Devil lay in the church pews, scar throbbing faint, psalter resting on his chest. Outside, storm winds gathered over the mountains where Colter’s men waited, but inside the sanctuary was still.

At some point near dawn, his eyes closed. And then he wasn’t in Redemption anymore.

He stood on a wide plain under a sky the color of iron. Mountains loomed distant, their peaks glowing red as though fire burned beneath them. In the valley stretched multitudes — endless people, faces blurred yet crying out, their voices rising like a river. The ground trembled under their feet.

A voice rolled across the valley, deeper than thunder: *“Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision: for the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision.”* (Joel 3:14).

Six Gun staggered, heart pounding. “Lord... where am I?”

The voice answered with Scripture, echoing from the very mountains: *“Let the heathen be wakened, and come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat: for there will I sit to judge all the heathen round about.”* (Joel 3:12).

The outlaw’s knees nearly buckled. This wasn’t just vision — it was judgment unfolding. He looked down and saw his hands, stained with blood that no rain had ever washed away. The scar on his cheek burned like a brand.

“Am I here to be judged?” he whispered, fear clawing his throat.

The multitudes surged, voices crying for mercy, for justice, for deliverance. And the valley groaned beneath the weight of eternity.

Section Two – Reckoning in the Valley

As he walked among the multitude, he saw their faces clearer: men he had killed, women widowed by his hand, children grown into shadows by his violence. They pointed, eyes blazing. “Devil! Devil! Your time is here!”

Six Gun fell to his knees in the dust, tears cutting streaks down his face. “Lord! I can’t stand here. Not in this place. Not in this crowd. I’m guilty.”

The voice rolled again, Scripture sharp as a sword: *“For the harvest is ripe... put ye in the sickle, for the press is full, the fats overflow; for their wickedness is great.”* (Joel 3:13).

The ground quaked. The sky darkened. He felt it — wrath pressing down, the harvest ready to cut. His scar seared white-hot, like the mark of a man already condemned.

But then — another sound. A softer voice, cutting through the roar like a stream through stone. *“The Lord also shall roar out of Zion, and utter his voice from Jerusalem; and the heavens and the earth shall shake: but the Lord will be the hope of his people.”* (Joel 3:16).

Hope.

Six Gun lifted his head, tears blurring his eyes. “Hope... even here?”

He clutched his psalter to his chest though it hadn’t been in his hands when the vision began. Pages fluttered open as if by unseen wind. His eyes fell on the words he had whispered many nights: *“There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus.”* (Romans 8:1).

The multitude’s accusations still thundered, but a greater voice drowned them: “No condemnation.”

The outlaw sobbed, scar cooling. “Then let it be true, Lord. Even for me. Let Your hope find me in this valley.”

Section Three – Mercy in the Valley

The vision shifted. The multitudes faded, their voices dimming into the wind. The valley grew quiet, sky softening from iron to gold. A river sprang up through the dust, clear and bright, flowing at his feet.

He rose slowly, breath shaking, and saw in the distance a throne — bright, burning, unapproachable, yet drawing him like a fire draws the cold. He could not walk closer, but he heard the voice again: “*But the Lord will be the hope of his people, and the strength of the children of Israel.*” (Joel 3:16).

Six Gun fell on his face, psalter clutched tight. “Lord... I choose. I choose You. In this valley, I make my stand. Not with death. Not with the Devil. With You.”

Silence fell. Then a whisper, warm as sunrise: “*Your name is written.*”

His heart broke open. Tears poured. The scar on his cheek cooled, not gone, but no longer burning as a brand of shame — now it felt like a scar of survival, a mark that mercy had reached even him.

The valley faded. The multitudes vanished. He woke with dawn light streaming through the shattered windows of the sanctuary. The psalter still lay on his chest, open at Romans 8:1.

He sat up slow, whispering hoarse, “No condemnation... not in Him. I stood in the valley — and He gave me hope.”

Josiah entered, Bible in hand. He saw the outlaw’s tear-streaked face and scar glowing in the sunrise. “Brother,” the preacher said softly, “you’ve been in the valley, haven’t you?”

Six Gun nodded. “Yes. And I chose. I’m His.”

The bells outside began to ring — not by hand, but by wind that swept suddenly through town. The people stirred from their homes. They didn’t know the vision he had seen. But they knew this: their outlaw had returned from the valley with hope in his eyes.

And with the mountain fire looming, that hope was worth more than bullets.

Chapter Seventy-Three – Blood on the Bible

Section One – The Battle Rages

The mountain storm had broken loose. Colter Hayes and the last of his Horsemen swept down on Redemption like locusts, rifles cracking, torches blazing. The town was fire and fury, the sky split with lightning, the ground trembling under hooves.

Six Gun Devil fought in the street, scar blazing, Colt barking flame. He wasn't fighting for his name anymore, but for Sarah, for Hannah, for Josiah and the widows, for the church that had sheltered his soul.

The air reeked of gunpowder, smoke, and blood. Bart crouched behind a water trough, firing and cursing. Elias barked orders, rifle steady, his badge glinting in the storm. Josiah shouted Scripture above the chaos, voice unbroken: *"The Lord is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust."* (Psalm 91:2).

Six Gun moved fast, ducking behind a wagon, reloading with hands slick from rain. Shots whizzed past, splintering wood. A Horseman lunged from the shadows, knife flashing. The outlaw fired point-blank, sending him tumbling into the mud.

And then it came — a shot meant for his heart. He never saw the gunman. He only heard the crack, felt the searing punch, and staggered back.

The townsfolk cried out. Sarah screamed. Josiah froze.

Six Gun clutched his chest, waiting for the end. But death didn't come.

Section Two – Blood and Paper

His knees buckled, and he dropped into the mud. He gasped, hands fumbling at his chest. His coat was torn, his psalter pressed against him, soaked in rain — and blood.

For a heartbeat, he thought the round had pierced him clean through. But when he tore the psalter free, he saw it: the bullet lodged halfway through the pages, buried deep in Revelation, blood staining the paper where it had stopped.

The outlaw stared, trembling. His scar seared, but his heart still beat. He turned the ruined book in his shaking hands. The words blurred by blood and rain were still visible: *"And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony."* (Revelation 12:11).

His breath caught. His tears mixed with the storm. He whispered hoarse, "Lord... You stopped it. You spared me. Not my skill, not my speed — You."

Josiah rushed to his side, eyes wide. "You're hit?"

Six Gun held the Bible up, voice shaking. "Not me. Him. This Book took it. This Book saved me."

The preacher's hands trembled as he touched the blood-stained pages. His voice broke into praise: *"Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path."* (Psalm 119:105).

The people nearby saw it, and whispers spread like wildfire: *"A bullet struck his Bible. It spared his heart. God Himself kept him alive."*

Even Bart, hardened as iron, muttered in awe. "Reckon that ain't luck."

Section Three – Conviction and Fire

Six Gun rose to his feet, mud dripping, psalter pressed to his chest though its pages were torn and bleeding. He faced the storm, eyes blazing with conviction he had never known.

The scar on his cheek cooled, almost glowing. He raised his Colt high, but his voice rose higher: “You hear me, Colter? You hear me, Devil? The Lord ain’t done with me yet! His Word stands between me and death — and I’ll stand by it till my last breath!”

The Horsemen faltered, spooked by the cry. Even Colter himself, looming on the ridge, snarled at the sight of the outlaw holding up a blood-stained Bible like a shield.

Josiah shouted from the pulpit steps, his voice cutting through the gunfire: “*The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever!*” (Isaiah 40:8).

The townsfolk rallied. Elias roared orders, Bart fired with new fury, Sarah lifted her voice in a hymn. The storm itself seemed to echo their cry, thunder rolling like drums of war.

Six Gun pressed the ruined psalter against his heart and whispered a vow. “This Book’s my shield. This blood’s my proof. I belong to Him — and not even hell’s bullets will take me back.”

The battle still raged, but something had changed. The outlaw who had once been Devil now stood as a living testimony: spared by grace, shielded by the Word, alive with fire no bullet could quench.

And in the heart of the storm, Redemption began to believe that maybe — just maybe — God Himself was fighting with them.

Chapter Seventy-Four – The Sword of the Spirit

Section One – A New Weapon

The battle for Redemption raged on. Smoke rolled through the streets, fire crackled on rooftops, and Colter Hayes’s Horsemen stormed the barricades with howls of hate. The people of the town fought tooth and nail — Elias at the line with his rifle, Bart behind a barrel reloading with curses, Sarah tending the wounded as bullets shattered glass.

And in the heart of it stood Six Gun Devil. His Colt barked flame, his scar glowed faint, but something deeper stirred in him now. In his coat pocket lay the psalter, torn, blood-stained, the bullet lodged between its pages. It had spared his life, and in that moment he knew: the Word wasn’t just ink on paper. It was a weapon sharper than steel.

Lightning cracked across the sky. Thunder boomed like a thousand drums. Six Gun leveled his Colt, eyes fierce. But when the next Horseman charged him, revolver raised, Six Gun shouted before he fired:

“*No weapon formed against thee shall prosper!*” (Isaiah 54:17).

His bullet flew straight, the outlaw dropped. The words rang louder than the shot.

The townsfolk froze for a heartbeat. They had heard gunfire before, but never Scripture riding with it. Six Gun's chest heaved. His voice rose again, strong: "This Book is my shield. This Word is my sword."

And he waded back into the storm, Colt in one hand, psalms in the other.

Section Two – The Word and the Gun

The fight turned fierce. Six Gun ducked behind a wagon as rounds whistled past, splinters stinging his cheek. A Horseman leapt atop the cart, knife raised. Six Gun fired from below, knocking him back into the mud. His voice roared with the shot:

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want!" (Psalm 23:1).

The words cut through the chaos. Hannah, huddled near her mother, whispered the verse along with him, her small voice steady.

Another outlaw rushed from the side, torch burning. Six Gun turned, Colt flashing, his shout shaking the street: *"The light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not!"* (John 1:5). The torch fell, sputtering in the rain.

Even Elias blinked, stunned. "He's preachin' with bullets," he muttered, reloading.

The townsfolk felt something shift. Fear thinned. Hope rose. The battle became more than survival — it became testimony.

Colter Hayes himself stood at the ridge, watching, face twisted with rage. His men hesitated under the rain of Scripture, their courage cracking. Colter spat in the dirt. "You think words will save you, Devil? I'll drown your verses in fire."

Six Gun looked up at him, scar glowing, psalter clutched against his chest. His voice thundered, unshaken: *"The Word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword!"* (Hebrews 4:12).

The crowd murmured amen through trembling lips. For the first time, Redemption wasn't just fighting with guns. They were fighting with the Spirit.

Section Three – The Sword Triumphs

The storm raged to its height. Lightning lit the streets in jagged strokes. Bullets flew like hail. And through it all, Six Gun Devil shouted verse after verse, each one striking like thunder.

"If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31) — bang, a rider fell from his horse.

"The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer!" (Psalm 18:2) — another outlaw dropped his rifle in fear.

“Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved!” (Romans 10:13) — Sarah’s voice picked up the cry, echoed by the wounded she tended.

Every verse was a bullet fired into the heart of despair. Every shot was an amen.

The Horsemen faltered. Some fled. Others froze, unnerved by the outlaw turned preacher who fought with fire and faith.

Six Gun’s coat was torn, his body weary, his Colt smoking, but his voice rose above it all, scar burning cool now: *“Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God!”* (Ephesians 6:17).

He holstered his Colt, raised his blood-stained psalter high, and shouted, “This is my weapon now!”

The townsfolk roared with him, voices lifted in hymn even as battle still raged. The Horsemen broke, scattering into the storm.

And for the first time in years, Redemption saw the outlaw not as Devil, not even as just a man — but as a living testimony of the Word, wielding the sword of the Spirit in the valley of fire.

The fight wasn’t over. Colter Hayes still loomed on the ridge, his fury unbroken. But Redemption had found its weapon.

And Six Gun Devil, scarred and bloodied, stood tall in the storm, psalter raised high, Scripture burning louder than bullets.

Chapter Seventy-Five – The Final Ride

Section One – Saddles, Leather, and Light

Dawn broke like a promise over Redemption, thin gold sliding down the chapel’s bullet-scarred boards and pooling in the street. The storm had wrung the sky dry, and the air felt scrubbed clean. Six Gun Devil was already in the livery, the door propped open so the newborn light could find him at his work.

He brushed his bay with slow, sure strokes until the horse shivered, not from fear but pleasure. He oiled the leather, checked the cinch, thumbed each buckle like a man counting prayer beads. The bay flicked an ear, breathing steam, as if it too understood: they were riding to an ending.

On the bench lay what he would take and what he would leave. He left a handful of silver and a gambler’s lucky coin — dead weights from a dead life. He took a canteen, a worn length of rope, the psalter with rain-wilted pages and a bullet buried in Revelation. His fingers traced the rip in the leather cover where the round had entered and stopped. *Spared by the Word*. It still didn’t feel like a metaphor. It felt like iron truth.

The empty holster on his left hip waited — the one that had once held his killing hand’s twin before he nailed that Colt to a cross on the hill. He slid the psalter into it, the book settling against his side with

the familiar weight of a sidearm. He fastened the strap over it, a small click that sounded louder than any vow he'd ever made.

He buckled on the remaining Colt at his right — not for vengeance, not anymore, but for shielding the lambs. He palmed the cylinder, spun, checked, holstered. Then he stood still, breath fogging in the cool of morning, and prayed as a soldier buckles armor.

“Helmet of salvation,” he murmured, laying a hand over his brow. “Breastplate of righteousness.” He patted his chest where the psalter had once stopped death. “Belt of truth,” he tugged at the cinch. “Gospel boots,” he looked at his scuffed leather and smiled. “Shield of faith,” he touched the torn Bible. “And the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.” (Ephesians 6:14–17)

The horse nosed his shoulder. Six Gun stroked its neck. “We ride for them,” he told the bay, voice rough. “For the widow, and the girl who sings, and the preacher who stayed when bullets flew. We ride for Redemption.”

Outside, the town stirred: shutters creaking, a kettle lid ringing, a broom knocking a threshold. The gallows in the square stood empty and gray, a relic of what could have been. He doffed his hat as he passed it, not in salute to death, but thanks for the mercy that had outvoted rope.

At the chapel steps he paused and lifted his eyes to the hill where a revolver hung crucified on timber. The morning set a crown of light around that rough cross. “Old man, stay dead,” he whispered, feeling the scar on his cheek cool. “Christ lives in me.” (Galatians 2:20)

He swung into the saddle as the sun cleared the ridge. Leather creaked. Hooves shifted. Somewhere far off a hawk called the day awake. Six Gun breathed deep and tasted dust, dew, and the faint sweetness of woodsmoke. The last ride had the clean smell of baptism.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,” he said quietly to the road itself, “I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me.” (Psalm 23:4)

And the town turned to face him.

Section Two – The Laying on of Hands

They gathered without being asked: all the faces the Lord had used to shepherd a devil into a son. Josiah Markham came first, Bible hugged close, his coat still powder-scarred from the sanctuary fight. Sarah Schaefer followed with Hannah, the child's hand small but sure in her mother's. Elias stood back a pace, badge dull in the morning, rifle slung but idle. Bart emerged from his doorway, broom in one hand, an awkward respect in the other.

“Brother,” Josiah said, and the word landed warm on cold morning, “you're set?”

“As I'll ever be,” Six Gun answered.

The preacher's eyes brimmed. “Then hear this one more time before you ride: *‘Be strong and of a good courage... for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest.’*” (Joshua 1:9)

Sarah stepped close, the lines of grief on her face softened into something like peace. “You brought me back from a cliff I might never have returned from,” she said. “Come back to us if God wills. But if you don’t—” her voice trembled, then steadied, “—go in His name.”

Hannah reached up with a small parcel wrapped in kerchief. Inside lay a strip of linen, stitched with uneven letters: **WHOSOEVER**. The child had stitched each crooked stroke like a psalm.

“For your holster,” she said, solemn as a judge.

Six Gun swallowed hard. He tied the strip around the strap that secured his Bible, the word riding his hip where steel used to. “Whosoever,” he repeated, the syllables filling his chest like wind.

Bart cleared his throat and shoved something forward without meeting anyone’s eyes: a tin of cartridges, cleaned and wrapped. “They ain’t holy,” he muttered, “but they’re straight. Figure the Lord don’t mind a miracle getting a little help.”

Elias stepped in, that old war between law and mercy softened now into fraternity. He gripped the outlaw’s forearm, not like a captor, like a friend. “You’ve stood between my people and hell more than once. Make it one more.”

“I’ll try,” Six Gun said.

“Don’t try,” Elias answered, eyes flint and kindness together. “Do. And if you fall—” he glanced at the cross on the hill, “—fall forgiven.”

Josiah lifted his hand. “Kneel, if you will.”

Six Gun slid from the saddle and knelt in the dust. The town drew near, a circle of rough hands and gentle. The preacher’s palm settled on the scarred head. Sarah’s fingers touched the torn shoulder seam. Elias laid heavy hand to the man’s back. Bart hovered, then landed his broom-calloused knuckles on the other shoulder with a grunt that passed for amen. Hannah pressed small fingertips to the psalter in the holster.

Josiah prayed, voice low and fierce. “Lord of Hosts, Captain of our salvation, we set apart Your servant for this ride. Hedge him round about. Make his feet like hinds’ feet. Let Your angels encamp. Put Your words in his mouth and Your courage in his bones. Let no bullet touch his heart You have claimed. And if he must lay down his life, let him do it under Your banner and wake to Your light. In Jesus’ name.”

“Amen,” the circle breathed.

Six Gun rose lighter than he had kneeled, not because the road had shortened, but because the burden had. He mounted. The bay danced as if it too felt hands of blessing on its withers.

He looked at them all a long moment. “If God be for us,” he said, voice steady now, “who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31)

“Go on, then,” Bart growled, swiping a sleeve over an eye. “Before I start believin’ I like you.”

Laughter broke the tightness, holy as any hymn. And the last thing Six Gun saw before turning to the trail was a town that had been his judge becoming his jury of love.

Section Three – The Road That Leads to Fire

The ridge path out of Redemption cut along the mountain's shoulder like a stitch through torn skin. The wind tasted of pine and distant smoke. Somewhere ahead, the last of Colter Hayes's fury pooled like black water behind a dam. Six Gun felt it in the way the bay shook its mane and snorted, in the eerie hush of birds, in the throb of his scar that no longer accused, only warned.

He rode at a patient trot, saving the horse, saving himself. The Bible tapped his hip with each stride, a heartbeat on the outside answering the one God had spared within. He spoke the trail out loud so fear couldn't: "Over the switchback, through the saddle, into the basin," like a Psalmist naming valleys and peaks.

Memories walked with him, not to haunt but to testify. A cross on a hill with a Colt nailed to it like a dead snake. A widow lowering her pistol. Children singing mercy in a room that still smelled of smoke. Angels — if angels they were — curling bullets away from soft bodies and hard faith. A pale rider falling in the dust as Scripture rang like a bell. A Bible catching a bullet meant to stop a story God was not finished telling.

He reined in at the high overlook where the land opened like a book, pages of mesa and canyon, arroyo and wash. Far below, a smear of riders moved — Colter's last pack, coals raked together, heat enough to set a county burning. Above them, thunderheads muscled up the horizon, their bellies bruised with rain and light.

Six Gun slid from the saddle and let the bay blow. He drew the psalter and flipped to the ragged place in Revelation where metal had met paper and lost. The verse still bled. His thumb found the line that had become the drum in his ribs: "*And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony...*" (Revelation 12:11)

"By *Your* blood," he said, looking past the text to the sky, "and *Your* word in my mouth."

He didn't ask to be spared this time. He asked to be spent well.

"Jesus," he prayed, hat in hand, the wind combing sweat from his hair, "this ride's Yours. If I fall, I fall in You. If I stand, I stand in You. Give me words straighter than bullets. Give me aim cleaner than my best shot. Make my fear kneel and my pride die. And when I go down there—" he nodded to the basin where dust plumed under hooves, "—let the Devil hear Your name and know he's out of time."

The wind rose, carrying the first peal of thunder — not angry now, but summoning, like a trumpet clearing its throat. Lightning stitched the far ridge. The bay tossed its head, asking the question with its whole body.

"Time to ride," Six Gun answered.

He slid the psalter back into the holster and snugged the strap over it. He checked the Colt one last time, then left it in leather. The true draw today would be from the left.

He swung up, settled deep, and pointed the bay down the trail. As they dropped into the switchbacks, he began to speak — not to the horse, not to the storm, but to the unseen that had always listened when he whispered from chains and deserts.

“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?” (Psalm 27:1)

Hooves rang on stone. The path narrowed. Sweat and leather and thunder salted the air.

“Be strong and of a good courage.” (Joshua 1:9)

The basin opened. Riders turned like a flock that had smelled lion. Somewhere among them, Colter Hayes lifted his face to the storm and laughed a laugh the outlaw had learned to answer with Gospel.

Six Gun loosened the psalter’s strap with his left hand. His right rested light over the Colt but didn’t close. The scar on his cheek cooled as if a palm had pressed it.

“For the Word of God is quick, and powerful...” (Hebrews 4:12)

He put his heels to the bay, and they broke from cover, a single figure riding out of high country with a Bible where an old life had kept its steel.

The last ride began — not to prove a legend, but to finish a redemption. And as thunder boomed like trumpets and the mountain breathed fire, the outlaw smiled through dust and prayed the simplest plan ever made:

“Speak first. Shoot last. Jesus, lead.”

Chapter Seventy-Six – Smoke and Thunder

Section One – The Basin of Fire

The basin opened before him like a wound in the earth. Dry grass bent low in the storm wind, black smoke curling from torches as Colter Hayes’s riders circled like wolves. Their laughter echoed sharp, swallowed by the thunder rolling overhead.

Six Gun Devil reined in at the ridge, scar glowing faint in the lightning’s flash. His bay shifted under him, ears pinned, nostrils flaring, but it did not balk. The outlaw’s psalter tapped his side with each heartbeat, the Bible riding where once a revolver had rested. His Colt was still holstered, but it felt lighter now. His true weapon was words.

Colter’s voice carried across the valley, booming with mockery. “So it’s true! The Devil rides Bible now!” He lifted his hand, torch flame crackling. “One outlaw against a hundred! Come down, scarred saint — let’s end this in fire!”

The Horsemen roared with him, their guns raised, their eyes mad with the fury of men who had sold their souls cheap. Thunder split the sky, so loud it drowned their cheer.

Six Gun bowed his head, hat brim dripping rain, lips moving in prayer. “Lord, if this be my hour, let me stand. Not as Devil, but as Yours.”

He nudged the bay forward. Hooves struck stone, sparks flying. The descent began, each step measured, each breath a psalm.

When he reached the valley floor, he drew — not the Colt, but the psalter. His voice rose with the thunder: “*The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust!*” (Psalm 18:2).

The Horsemen faltered at the sound. Some cursed. Some laughed. But all heard.

And then the gunfire began.

Section Two – Battle in the Smoke

The first volley cracked like hell’s own thunder. Bullets hissed through the air, sparks bursting off stone. Six Gun spurred the bay sideways, drawing his Colt now, answering with steel — but his voice was louder.

“*Though an host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear!*” (Psalm 27:3) — bang, an outlaw fell.

The smoke thickened, torches spilling embers as riders wheeled. Lightning lit the basin in jagged strokes, every flash a glimpse of faces twisted in rage.

Six Gun rode straight through the storm, psalter in one hand, Colt in the other. He fired, reloaded, fired again — but with each shot came a verse.

“*No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper!*” (Isaiah 54:17) — another Horseman toppled. “*The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?*” (Psalm 27:1) — a bullet missed him by inches, shattering only dust.

“*The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord!*” (Romans 6:23) — his Colt spat fire into the dark.

The townsfolk, hidden behind the barricades at Redemption’s edge, heard his voice carry even through the storm. Some whispered amen through trembling lips. Others shouted it full-throated.

Colter Hayes bellowed above the chaos, his pistol flashing. “You can’t preach and shoot both, Devil! Which are you — killer or saint?”

Six Gun wheeled his bay, scar burning, eyes fierce. “I’m neither. I’m forgiven.” His shot rang true, grazing Colter’s hat clean off.

The gang roared, more in fear than in triumph. The storm roared louder still.

Section Three – Thunder and Testimony

The fight raged until the basin was choked with smoke and thunder. Bodies sprawled in the mud, torches hissed in the rain, and the last of the Horsemen hesitated, their courage broken by a man who fought with Scripture as fiercely as with steel.

Six Gun reined in, chest heaving, psalter pressed against his heart. He raised it high, voice cracking but unyielding: *“And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony!”* (Revelation 12:11).

The storm answered with lightning, splitting the ridge in a blinding flash. The Horsemen scattered, spooked like cattle in a stampede, their cries lost in the thunder.

Only Colter remained, soaked and snarling, his pistol smoking. His eyes locked on Six Gun, burning with a hatred not just for the man, but for the mercy that had stolen him from hell.

“This ain’t over!” Colter roared, raising his gun.

Six Gun holstered his Colt, scar glowing cool. He lifted only the psalter. “It is. Not because I say so — but because He said so.”

Thunder cracked, drowning his words. Colter fired — but the shot went wide, lost in smoke and storm. His face twisted, fear breaking through rage. He turned his horse, spurring it into the dark.

The storm rolled on, but the battle was done.

Six Gun sat in the valley, scar cooled, psalter heavy in his hand. His body trembled, his soul burned. He whispered into the smoke, voice hoarse but steady: “You kept me, Lord. Through smoke and thunder, You kept me.”

And as lightning split the heavens one last time, the outlaw realized he hadn’t just survived the fight. He had borne testimony, and the Word had struck truer than any bullet.

The Devil’s Horsemen were broken. Colter had fled. And Redemption still stood.

Chapter Seventy-Seven – The Devil’s Chains

Section One – The Drifter Revealed

The storm had rolled on, leaving the basin quiet but for smoke curling off wet grass. Redemption’s folk tended the wounded, Josiah’s voice carrying prayers over the fallen, Sarah binding cuts, Bart muttering thanks in curses.

Six Gun Devil sat apart, scar cooled now, psalter clutched tight. He thought it was over. Colter Hayes had fled into the hills, his Horsemen scattered. But as twilight bled red across the mountains, a figure appeared at the ridge.

Not Colter.

A drifter in black, cloak whipping in the wind, walking slow down the trail. His face was shadowed under a broad hat. His steps stirred no dust. His presence pressed like a storm that hadn’t broken.

Six Gun rose, heart pounding. He knew that shape. He had seen it by firelight, in dreams, in the jail cell where laughter clawed his bones. This was no outlaw.

The drifter stopped ten paces away, lifted his head, and smiled. His eyes gleamed like coals, his voice rolled smooth as snake-oil and sharp as knives.

“Well done, gunslinger. You fought my Horsemen. You even turned down my bargains. But you can’t bind me. You never could.”

The scar on Six Gun’s cheek seared white-hot. He staggered, psalter shaking in his grip. “You...” His throat dried. “You’re the one who laughed. The one who offered power.”

The drifter tipped his hat. “Names don’t matter. Some call me Liar, some call me Tempter. Some call me Devil.” He spread his arms wide. “And I call you mine.”

The outlaw’s knees trembled. But something deeper held him upright. He whispered hoarse, “Not anymore.”

Section Two – The Binding

The drifter laughed, hollow, echoing across the basin. “Do you think psalms save you? Do you think a scarred outlaw can defy me with verses?” He lifted his hand. Chains of smoke coiled from the ground, black as midnight, wrapping Six Gun’s wrists, ankles, chest. They burned cold, biting deeper than iron.

Six Gun gasped, knees buckling. The chains dragged him down, dirt grinding into his palms. The drifter stepped closer, each footfall heavy as doom. “See? You’re mine. I marked you long ago. You’ll never shake it.”

The outlaw’s breath rasped. He forced his head up, scar blazing, and pressed his psalter against the chains. His voice cracked but did not break: “*Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*” (James 4:7).

The chains shuddered. The drifter snarled.

Six Gun shouted louder, every word a bullet of fire: “*For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds!*” (2 Corinthians 10:4).

The first chain snapped, bursting into smoke. Six Gun rose to one knee, psalter blazing in his hand.

The drifter’s smile cracked. He hissed, “You can’t bind me!”

Six Gun roared, scar glowing bright as dawn: “*And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony!*” (Revelation 12:11).

The chains shattered, scattering like ash in the wind.

The drifter staggered back, cloak whipping. For the first time, his coal eyes flickered — not with power, but with fear.

Section Three – Chains Broken, Chains Cast

Six Gun stood tall now, scar cool, Bible blazing like steel in sunlight. His voice thundered, rolling through the basin: “*Get thee hence, Satan! For it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve!*” (Matthew 4:10).

The drifter’s form twisted, smoke writhing. His laughter cracked into a scream. “You think one outlaw’s prayer binds me? You think one book breaks me?”

Six Gun stepped forward, psalter raised. “Not me. Him. The One who bought me with His blood. The One who set me free.”

He pressed the psalter against the drifter’s chest. The figure convulsed, cloak tearing, smoke pouring out. The basin shook as thunder rolled, not from stormclouds but from heaven itself.

Chains of light wrapped the drifter, shining where darkness had bound. He screamed, thrashing, but the chains only tightened. Six Gun whispered, tears streaking his face: “Lord, bind him. Not by my hand — by Yours.”

The chains yanked the drifter back, dragging him toward the shadows at the edge of the basin. His scream echoed, hollow and fading: “This isn’t over, outlaw! This isn’t over!”

Then he was gone. The smoke cleared. The wind hushed. Only silence remained.

Six Gun sank to his knees, psalter clutched tight. His voice trembled in prayer: “Thank You, Jesus. You broke his chains — and You broke mine.”

Josiah’s hand rested on his shoulder. The preacher’s voice was thick with awe. “Brother, you’ve faced him — and by the Word, you’ve overcome.”

The outlaw looked at the torn ground where smoke still smoldered. He whispered one last verse, his voice steady: “*Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*” (1 Corinthians 15:57).

The scar cooled. The basin grew still. The Devil’s chains lay shattered — and for the first time, Six Gun Devil felt fully free.

Chapter Seventy-Eight – The River of Fire

Section One – When the Mountain Caught

They said the storm had wrung the sky dry, but mountains keep their own counsels. All day the wind had pawed at the pines, teasing resin from wounded trunks and worrying the grass flat as a prayer mat. By late afternoon a heat like fever pressed down, and somewhere in the timber a spark — careless match, lightning’s afterthought, or the Devil’s last whisper — found breath.

Six Gun Devil felt it before he saw it: a taste of penny-metal on his tongue, a hush like a church waiting for the first hymn. He reined the bay at the saddle above the basin and watched the far ridge bruise. A smear of smoke lifted like a question. Then the question answered itself with a roar.

Flame shouldered out of the scrub with the ponderous certainty of a boulder rolling downhill. It took a tree and made a torch, took a gully and made a kiln, took the wind and wore it like a crown. In a blink the ridge became a row of candles, and then the candles ran together into one vast, licking tongue.

Below, Colter Hayes's remnants had regrouped — a hard knot of riders, torches still in hand, readying one more sweep at Redemption. They whooped when they saw the first smoke, believing it their ally. They would herd the fire like cattle, they thought, and drive it at the town.

But wildfire is no man's hireling.

The wind swung, a giant's breath. The fire laid itself low, took the gust under its belly, and then stood up twice as tall, as if it had learned a trick. It ran downhill.

Six Gun eased the bay toward a rocky spine and breathed the verse that had carried him through smoke before: "*When thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee.*" (Isaiah 43:2) The words didn't make the heat less hot. They made his spine steadier.

Across the basin, Colter's hat lifted with the updraft, and for the first time in years the outlaw's laugh faltered. "Mount!" he barked, voice cracking. "We ride ahead of it!"

They tried. But the fire had found its legs.

It hit a draw choked with deadfall and exploded. Pine cones popped like shot. A jackrabbit flashed by, already smoking. The roar deepened into a freight-train growl that made ribs buzz. Ash began to fall — soft gray as snowfall, only it stung the eyes and tasted like old sorrow.

Six Gun spared one look back toward Redemption — the chapel's bruised steeple, the palisade of wagons, the human shapes on the line — and then turned the bay into the only lane that wasn't yet moving flame: a rocky thread between two tongues of fire. "*The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them.*" (Psalm 34:7)

"Lord," he said simply, "show me the gaps."

The fire obliged him with a map of negatives: where it wasn't yet. And into that lack he rode.

Section Two – Through the Furnace

Heat became a substance. It pressed his coat tight, slid down his collar, sucked water from his mouth. The bay's sides worked like bellows, eyes rolling white, but the horse kept its feet, iron finding rock with a dancer's care. Sparks snapped against Six Gun's sleeves and bit through, leaving pepper burns on his forearms. The air carried a howl — not animal, not human, only fire, naming everything it touched and claiming it for ash.

Frames of trees advanced out of the smoke like gaunt giants and toppled, trunks roaring hollowly as they burned from the core. The trail kinked left where a snag had fallen; Six Gun ducked low, felt

embers comb the crown of his hat, smelled scorched felt. He let the reins slip, trusted the bay's nose more than his eyes, and spoke Scripture to the white roar as a man speaks to wolves: "*The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?*" (Psalm 27:1)

On his left the fire dropped into a ravine and found resin pools. It turned the gully into a forge and threw sparks thirty feet high, a fat, cackling greed. Ahead a curtain of grass ignited all at once — a ripple of orange sweetness that turned instantly to black. The fireline ran toward him like cavalry.

"Now," Six Gun hissed, and pushed the bay. They took the opening in the wind's next blink, a slip between two tongues. Heat slapped his face; tears blurred the world; the horse bunched and leapt a smoking log. For three strides his coat smoldered. He beat at it with his hat and kept moving.

Gunfire rippled somewhere inside the smoke. The Horsemen had discovered what bullets do to fire: nothing. He glimpsed riders caroming down slope, horses slipping on ash, men coughing their lungs inside out. One turned his mount toward Six Gun, eyes ember-bright under blackened lashes. The man raised a pistol to shoot the only thing he could still control.

Six Gun didn't draw.

He lifted the psalter, its strap black with soot, and shouted over the furnace: "*No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper!*" (Isaiah 54:17) The rider's horse veered at the last, panicked by a rolling log — the shot went into smoke, and the man vanished in a gust that turned him into a shadow on a screen. Six Gun whispered grief even as he rode on. Judgment and mercy can share a sentence.

A stand of juniper torched like a choir taking the same note. The sound made his bones want to run away without him. He found a seep in a rock and slewed the bay into it, water not even ankle-deep but wet enough. He yanked his bandanna down into the trickle, soaked it, plastered it to the horse's muzzle, then to his own mouth. Steam kissed his lips and brought a memory — children singing in a ruined chapel, *Yes, Jesus loves me* — and a smile cut through soot.

A shout punched through the roar. Six Gun turned toward it and saw three Horsemen trapped on a bench, flame above and below. One beat at his shirt with both hands; it flared anyway. Another fired drunkenly into the blaze as if God might drop a rainstorm from a muzzle. The third met Six Gun's eyes across a river of heat and made a child's face in a man's stubble.

Six Gun nudged the bay that way and found the wall invisible — heat hard as glass. He couldn't get to them. The scar on his cheek flamed, not with guilt now but with unshed tears. He cupped his hands to his mouth and spent breath like coin: "*Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved!*" (Romans 10:13)

One of them heard. He tore his bandanna free and screamed a name into the choking grandeur — not Six Gun's, not any man's. In the next flash of light, the bench let go and sloughed into the draw. Fire took them as cordially as it had taken trees.

"Lord, have mercy," Six Gun said. He did not add *on them* or *on me*. He meant everybody.

The wind swung again, a swordsman's wrist. Ahead, a slab of granite shouldered up out of the slope, slick as a baptismal font. He aimed for it, slid from the saddle, slapped the bay's ribs. "Up!" The horse

scrambled, iron skittering and catching, and together they clambered onto the rock's back, a gray island in a red sea.

Heat sheeted past. A fir on the lee curled like paper. The very air glowed. Six Gun lay along the horse's neck and prayed like Shadrach with dust in his teeth: *"Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace... and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king."* (Daniel 3:17)

The king here was fire. It raged on, unconvinced. But it could not climb stone.

Section Three – After the Burning

Night fell without darkness; the fire made its own day. Sometime after midnight the wind tired of its tantrum and curled down to sleep, and the river of flame, suddenly bored without its favorite toy, settled into a crawl. By dawn the basin steamed like a giant cup, edges still fizzing, center gone to charcoal lace.

Six Gun and the bay stood stiff on the rock. Ash had frosted them gray. When the first honest morning breeze slid down the slope, it lifted a powder of yesterday from their backs and carried it away toward the far mesas. Six Gun eased to his feet, feeling every joint answer with a complaint, and stroked the bay's neck till the tremors turned to breathing.

He looked out over what had been a battleground and was now a lesson. Here a wheel lay, burnt to a black daisy. There a line of fence posts looked like a procession of monks who had chosen martyrdom. In a hollow a dozen horses stood clustered, singed but alive, their riders absent. A charred hat rode a bush like a crown with no head.

He slid from the rock and led the bay down the cooling flank, testing each patch with the heel of his boot. The smell was half sweet, half bitter — sap and sorrow. He found a trickle where the spring still whispered under ash and let the bay drink, then cupped water to his own mouth and let it say *you're alive* against his cracked tongue.

Bodies lay where the fire had been quickest. He did not count them; he knelt. He did not excuse or accuse; he prayed. "Into Your hands," he said, because what else was honest now?

On the basin's lip he turned toward Redemption. Smoke still ribboned above the town, but the bell stood, black as a thumbprint against the morning. He put two fingers in his mouth and whistled. The sound skipped across the flats and came back with an answer: faint, then stronger — another whistle, Elias's old cavalry call. They were there. They had been spared.

Six Gun laughed then, once, a quiet bark that shook soot from his mustache. He pulled the psalter from its holster. The leather had blistered and gone soft; the bullet scar in Revelation had taken on a new, smoky gloss. He opened at random and landed on a line that felt chosen: *"The Lord also shall roar out of Zion... but the Lord will be the hope of his people."* (Joel 3:16)

"Hope," he said to the empty, generous ruin. "You followed me through." His eyes stung — not from smoke now.

A sound behind him. He turned, hand brushing the Colt, and saw a single rider picking his way across the black. Not Colter. A boy, hardly whiskered, one of the Horsemen who'd looked older behind a gun. He swayed in the saddle, eyes ash-bright with fever. When he saw Six Gun, he flinched, then sagged as if a rope had been cut.

"Help," he said, voice raw. "Please."

Six Gun holstered his hand and walked forward slow, palms up. He took the reins, eased the boy down, and half-carried him to the spring. He poured water into the child's mouth as if hydrating a seed. The lad coughed, then drank, then wept, the tears clean streaks on a charcoal face.

"Why'd you pull me out?" he croaked. "I rode with them."

Six Gun looked at the horizon where a line of green still insisted on itself. "Because *I* did too, once," he said. "And because mercy keeps finding me."

He tore a strip from his shirt and bound the boy's blistered hand. The psalter lay open beside them, the wind lifting a page and dropping it, as if God Himself were thumbing the Book. Six Gun read aloud, the words falling like cool water: "*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.*" (Psalm 23:6)

"Even here," the boy whispered, eyes closing.

"Especially here," Six Gun said.

They walked out of the basin after that — one man, one boy, one horse, and a Book that looked like it had fought a battle and won. On the high trail they paused and looked back. The burned country was ugly and holy at once, like a scar after healing: proof a wound had happened, proof it had also closed.

At the last switchback before the town he turned the bay and spoke to the mountain, to the ashes, to the invisible audience that had laughed and had been answered. "I did not come through by skill," he said. "I came through by providence. By a Hand I could not see, that opened gaps in the flame and put stone under my feet."

Wind moved, gentle, like the skirts of angels passing. Down in Redemption, the bell began to ring — not alarm, not mourning, but gathering.

Six Gun touched the psalter where a bullet had once buried itself and where ash now softened the leather. He felt his heart beat under it, as if the book and the man had agreed to pace each other the rest of the way home.

"Thanks be to God," he said, and the valley, still smoking, seemed to say amen.

Chapter Seventy-Nine – The Cry of the Saints

Section One – The Gathering

Morning bled gold across the battered valley. The smoke thinned to pale ribbons, the fire lay cooling in black scars, and the first rays of sun found Redemption still standing. Its bell tolled not in alarm but in triumph, and at the sound the people came.

They gathered in the square, faces streaked with soot and tears, boots caked in mud. Mothers brought children who had hidden under pews while bullets cracked. Men limped in from the line, rifles slung low, shoulders bowed. Elias leaned on his rifle like a staff, Bart with his broom worn from fighting more than sweeping. Even the wounded hobbled forward, drawn by something greater than pain.

Josiah Markham stood at the chapel door, Bible raised high. His voice rang across the town: “Brothers and sisters — the Lord has delivered us!” His hand trembled as he turned the page and thundered: “*O give thanks unto the Lord; for he is good: for his mercy endureth for ever!*” (Psalm 136:1).

The townsfolk murmured amens, some weeping openly. Sarah stepped forward, Hannah tugging at her skirts. “Pastor, let us not only speak it — let us sing it.”

A hush spread, as if the town had been waiting for the suggestion all along. Then Hannah, small voice bold, lifted the first line of an old hymn:

“A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing...”

Voices joined hers, hesitant at first, then stronger. The hymn spread down the street, across the burned square, through the shattered windows. It rose above the ash and smoke like dawn itself.

Six Gun Devil, leaning against his bay at the edge of the crowd, bowed his head. The scar on his cheek cooled as if washed by morning rain. His lips shaped the words, half whisper, half prayer.

The town had been a battlefield. Now it became a choir.

Section Two – The Cry of the Saints

The hymn swelled until even the children knew they were not singing to fill silence but to make a proclamation.

Men who had never lifted voice in church now bellowed verses through cracked throats. Women sang with tears running, their voices sweet as balm on wounds. Children clapped hands in rhythm, joy erupting like spring after drought.

Josiah’s voice carried steady above them all, Scripture braided with song: “*And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony!*” (Revelation 12:11).

The townsfolk shouted amen and sang louder. Their hymn became more than melody — it became testimony, a cry that declared not just survival but victory.

Six Gun stepped forward, psalter still scarred by bullet and smoke. He raised it high for all to see. “This Book caught a bullet meant for my heart,” he cried. “And this Book carried us through fire. The Devil said we were his — but the Lord proved him a liar!”

The crowd erupted in hallelujahs. Hannah lifted her little arms, voice piping: “Jesus won! Jesus won!”

Bart, gruff and half-ashamed, muttered, “Never thought I’d sing, but here I am.” And then he threw back his head and roared the chorus with the rest.

The hymn rolled like thunder over the ruins, not of destruction but of thanksgiving. The very air seemed to vibrate with it.

And those who had cowered, who had doubted, who had nearly surrendered — they felt strength flow through their bones as though heaven itself had joined the song.

Section Three – The Thanksgiving

As the hymn faded, Josiah lifted his hands for silence. His voice broke but carried strong: “Brothers, sisters — today the Lord has shown us that victory is His, not ours. The fire raged, but it did not consume us. The enemy rode, but he did not overcome us. The Devil himself laughed — and now he flees.”

Elias bowed his head. Sarah wept into her shawl. Hannah tugged free and ran to Six Gun, gripping his coat. “I prayed you wouldn’t die,” she whispered. “And God listened.”

Six Gun knelt, scar catching sunlight. He set a hand on her shoulder, voice rough: “Child, your prayers were stronger than my guns.”

The preacher raised his Bible again and thundered: “*Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!*” (1 Corinthians 15:57).

The townsfolk roared in reply, not with rifles or torches this time, but with hallelujahs that shook the square. They fell to their knees in the dust, many for the first time, confessing, praising, weeping.

Six Gun dropped with them, psalter against his heart. His prayer was no longer the whisper of a condemned man. It was the cry of a saint among saints: “Lord, You won. Not me. You.”

The square echoed with hymns, with Scripture, with thanksgiving until it seemed the valley itself rang with victory. Smoke still lingered, ruins still smoldered, scars remained — but the cry of the saints was louder than all of it.

And heaven, listening, added its amen.

Chapter Eighty – The Devil Defeated

Section One – The Vanishing

The storm had passed, the fire had cooled, and Redemption stood singing hymns in the square. But on the far ridge, the drifter lingered. Cloaked, hat shadowing his eyes, he stood unmoved by hymns or Scripture, his grin carved deep as a canyon.

Six Gun saw him as the crowd dispersed, as mothers carried children to their doors and men laid rifles aside. The scar on his cheek burned hot again, searing like a coal against flesh. He knew then — it wasn't finished. Not until the drifter was gone.

He walked through the square, psalter in hand, boots thudding on dust still streaked with ash. The drifter's laughter carried low, rattling like dry bones.

"You think hymns can drive me off? You think one scarred outlaw can bind me forever?" His cloak whipped though no wind stirred. "I've walked this earth since Eden's gate shut. You are a flicker, and I am the flame."

Six Gun raised the psalter high, voice rough but steady. "*Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*" (James 4:7)

The drifter sneered. "Then resist." He spread his arms wide, smoke curling from his palms, chains of shadow rising at his feet. "Show me your strength."

Six Gun dropped to one knee, not in chains, but in choice. His scar burned, but his voice carried like a gunshot. "I ain't strong. Not in me. But Christ is."

The psalter blazed, pages shivering though no wind touched them. The drifter staggered, grin cracking. His smoke chains faltered, then shattered like glass struck by lightning.

"No!" he shrieked, cloak writhing. "Not you — not now!"

And then he was gone, snuffed out like a candle in storm.

Only silence remained.

Section Two – The Surrender

Six Gun stayed kneeling in the dust, psalter clutched to his chest. For the first time in years, the scar on his cheek cooled — not gone, but changed. It no longer burned with shame. It tingled with something he had no name for: healing.

His voice cracked as tears carved paths through soot. "Lord... I can't outrun what I was. I can't shoot my way clean. I can't preach my own soul free."

He bowed his head until it touched the dirt. "So I'm givin' it. All of it. The killings. The hatred. The fear. The Devil's bargains. The Devil's chains. The scar. Take it, Jesus. Take me. I ain't Six Gun Devil no more. I'm Yours."

The psalter slipped open in his trembling hands. His eyes fell on words blurred by soot and blood but still legible: "*Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.*" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The outlaw sobbed, shoulders shaking, dust dark with tears. He whispered, "New. Make me new."

And for the first time since his first draw, since his first kill, since his first sin — he felt chains fall that no one could see but him.

Section Three – A New Man

Josiah Markham approached quiet, Bible in hand, boots scuffing. He saw the outlaw kneeling, head bowed, psalter clutched tight. He said nothing at first, only laid a hand on the scarred shoulder.

Six Gun lifted his face, streaked with soot and tears. His voice was hoarse but clear: “It’s done. He’s gone. And I... I gave it all to Christ.”

The preacher’s own eyes shone wet. He opened his Bible and read softly, voice trembling: *“If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.”* (John 8:36).

Six Gun laughed then, ragged, choked, but real — the laugh of a man not mocked but delivered. He stood, slow but steady, holstering the psalter at his side where steel used to ride. He turned toward the town, toward the people who had once feared his shadow, and spoke the truth plain:

“I was the Devil’s once. But no more. Christ set me free.”

The crowd hushed, the wind stilled. And then Hannah’s small voice rang out: “He’s not Devil anymore. He’s God’s.”

The cry rolled through Redemption like thunder, spreading from child to widow to farmer to sheriff: *“He’s God’s!”*

Six Gun bowed his head, scar glowing in dawn’s first light. His whisper was prayer, testimony, and vow all at once: “Forever Yours, Lord. Forever Yours.”

And as the bell tolled, its sound rang not of warning or mourning but of victory.

The Devil was defeated.

The outlaw was redeemed.

And the man who once bore a scar of shame now bore a mark of grace.

Part IX: A New Man

Chapter Eighty-One – The Dawn of Mercy

Section One – First Light

Morning came soft, like the hand of a mother on a fevered brow. The mountains, black an hour ago, turned the color of old brass and then brightened by degrees until the ridges wore crowns. Dew beaded along the chaparral where the fire hadn’t licked, and thin smoke threads drifted harmless as ribbon in the clean air.

He woke on the chapel steps with his hat over his eyes and the psalter holstered at his left hip. For a moment he didn't move. He only listened—to sparrows busying the eaves, to a bucket clanking a pump handle, to the bell rope creak as the wind tested it. Nothing in those small sounds asked him to draw, to run, to hide. The scar on his cheek, so long a coal, felt cool as river stone.

He sat up slow. The square was a quilt of ash and sunlight, of broken things and things that refused to break. The gallows stood gray as old bone. He tipped his hat toward it—not in apology, not in defiance, but in remembrance—and then he bowed his head.

“Lord,” he said, voice husky, “You did what I couldn’t. You set me free.” He drew the psalter and it opened to a page he had thumbed thin. His eyes read it like first words learned as a child: *“Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”* (Romans 5:1)

Peace with God. Not truce. Not cease-fire. Peace.

A laugh slipped out of him—small, unbelieving, then warm. He closed his eyes, and a verse he hadn’t dared claim until this dawn rose like the sun itself: *“Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.”* (Psalm 30:5)

Joy wasn’t a shout for him. It was the looseness in his shoulders; the way he could draw breath all the way down; the quiet knowing that if he died today he would not be falling, he would be *kept*. He looked east and let the light touch his scar. “I belong,” he whispered, surprised by the word. “I belong.”

He slid the psalter back into the holster—habit made holy—and stood. The day asked to be walked in.

Section Two – A Town Wakes

Redemption met the morning like survivors of a flood who still found bread on the table. Elias came first, rolling his shoulder, badge dull with ash. He eyed the outlaw a long beat and then stuck out his hand. “Mornin’,” the sheriff said.

“Mornin’,” the outlaw answered, and took the hand. No clang of irons followed the grip, no eyes looked for a rope. Just two men who had stood the same line.

Bart shuffled by with a wheelbarrow full of broken glass and hymnals warped by smoke. He grunted, then paused, dug around, and produced a small tin. “Found the rest of them cartridges,” he said, not meeting the outlaw’s eyes. “Figure you won’t need ‘em the way you been fightin’, but a man still mends with both thread and needle.”

“Keep ‘em,” the outlaw said. “Today I aim to hammer, not shoot.”

Bart’s mouth twitched like a man unused to smiling. “Huh,” he said, and rattled on.

Sarah Schaefer crossed the square with a pail and a loaf under her arm. Hannah skipped beside, a scrap of blue cloth fluttering from her fist. “For your holster,” the girl announced, solemn again, and tied the ribbon where the strap held the Book. The stitching read the same word as before, a child’s creed crooked and perfect: **WHOSOEVER**.

Sarah pressed the loaf into his hands. “For strength,” she said. “For staying.”

He did not say thank you with words; his eyes did it well enough. He tore the bread and shared half back, because mercy likes a circle.

By midmorning, the square had turned to a hive. Men reset joists and climbed ladders. Women swept pew boards and laid quilts to dry. Children formed expeditions for nails and—when they thought no one watched—rescued beetles from puddles. When the preacher called for water lines to the wounded, no one had to be told twice.

The outlaw took up a hammer. The first few swings were clumsy—the arm that had learned swiftness at a draw relearning slowness for a nail. By the third plank he found a rhythm that felt like prayer.

Josiah appeared with plumb line and smile. “You any good on roofs?”

“I’ve been better at puttin’ holes in ‘em,” the outlaw admitted.

“Then the Lord will enjoy the irony,” the preacher said. He laid the line, and together they set boards true.

Work has a way of fitting men together who once stood on opposite sides of a street at high noon. The talk that came was ordinary—where to brace, who to fetch, which corner to square—but every ordinary word was a miracle. Once he had been a shadow the town endured; now he was a pair of hands it trusted.

When the bell called a halt at noon, Josiah climbed the chapel steps and lifted his Bible. “Before we eat, let the word do what it does.” He read slowly, the way you sip a good drink: “*Let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful.*” (Colossians 3:15)

“Amen,” the square answered, and the outlaw felt the verse take a chair at the table of his ribs.

He ate on the steps with Sarah and Hannah and Elias and Bart, bread passing hand to hand, laughter daring the edges of grief. Not everything was fixed. There were names to speak at sundown, graves to fill, debts to forgive. But peace was no longer a rumor; it was bread and water and the way a town breathed together.

“Blessed are the peacemakers,” Josiah said quietly at his elbow, “for they shall be called the children of God.” (Matthew 5:9)

The outlaw nodded, eyes on his hands. “Teach these to make,” he said, “not just to stop unmaking’.”

Section Three – Walking in the New Day

Before the heat grew thick, he took the path to the hill. The cross still stood, rough and honest, the revolver he had nailed to it gone black with weather. A bluebird flicked from the arm to a branch, scolding him for coming without crumbs.

He laid his palm against the wood where steel had once hung on his hip. He did not feel accusation in the grain anymore. He felt a sending. “Old man,” he said softly, “stay dead.” And then, because it was the truer thing: “New man, walk.”

He drew his knife and made two small cuts in the beam's edge, crossing them in the shape of a letter more than a symbol. Under it he scratched, careful as he'd ever been with a sight: **Jn 8:36**. If anyone asked later, he would tell them plain: *"If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed."*

Below, Redemption shone the way towns only shine after fire—clean in patches, charred in others, beautiful in both. He watched Josiah measure, Elias direct, Bart complain, Sarah carry, Hannah wave the blue ribbon at passing clouds as if to decorate God's sky. He watched and, for the first time, did not wonder where he ought to be instead. Peace, quiet as a creek and just as stubborn, ran through him.

He prayed without kneeling, without closing his eyes, the way men talk to a friend walking beside. "Jesus... keep me. Keep me small. Keep me steady. Give me words before bullets, hands before boasts, and when I forget, tug me back."

Wind moved through the grass and set the cross humming like a cedar singing. He turned to go, the psalter tapping his hip with every step. At the trail's first bend he paused, looked up, and spoke one more truth to the morning, to the valley, to whatever listened in visible or invisible places:

"And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7)

His heart answered *kept*. His mind answered *kept*. The scar along his cheek tingled once, like a healed bone in rain, and stilled.

He walked down into work and laughter and the long, ordinary daylight of redeemed men. Behind him the cross held a dead gun like a museum keeps a dragon's tooth: not to fear, but to remember. Before him the town lifted hammers and hymns.

When Hannah spotted him on the slope she waved the ribbon and shouted a name that was not Devil, not legend, not a wound. "Brother!" she cried, and ran to meet him.

He met her halfway, because that is what grace had taught him to do.

And the sun—bright, unafraid—climbed higher over Redemption, over a man finally at rest. Peace did not just fill his heart; it made a home there.

Chapter Eighty-Two – The Town Reborn

Section One – Ashes to Foundations

The first weeks after the fire were hard, but they weren't hopeless. Redemption wore its wounds openly — blackened beams where roofs had fallen, scorched fences, a stretch of meadow gone to cinder. But no one spoke of leaving. Instead, they spoke of mending.

Men who had once drawn lines between ranch and saloon now carried lumber shoulder to shoulder. Women who had whispered grief in kitchens now boiled pots for crews in the square. Even children bent to tasks, picking nails from ash and stacking stones into neat rows. The air, though thick with the

scent of char, was pierced with laughter, with hammer-strikes, with Scripture recited as easily as nails were driven.

Josiah stood often in the middle of it all, Bible in hand, but he didn't just preach. He measured planks, fetched buckets, laid mortar. "The Lord will rebuild Zion," he told them, wiping sweat with the back of his sleeve. "So we rebuild Redemption." He opened the Word to Isaiah and read aloud: "*And they shall build the old wastes, they shall raise up the former desolations, and they shall repair the waste cities.*" (Isaiah 61:4).

The townsfolk answered amen, and then set another beam straight.

Six Gun Devil — though no one called him that anymore — worked quiet among them. He carried heavy loads without being asked, hammered frames under Elias's direction, and led the bay horse with bundles of timber down from the ridge. Folks no longer looked at him with suspicion but with nods that carried respect. Children lingered at his side, tugging at his coat, asking to touch the scarred psalter that still rode in his holster.

"Was it true?" a boy asked one afternoon. "Did it really stop a bullet?"

The outlaw smiled, ruffling the boy's hair. "It did. But more than that, it stopped me from bein' the man I used to be." He tapped the Book. "This here builds stronger than wood or stone. You remember that."

The boy nodded solemn as a deacon.

Ash still stained the ground, but each day, new timbers rose. Each day, life reclaimed what fire had stolen. And every evening, when the bell tolled, the town gathered to pray and sing, voices weaving hope into their work.

Redemption wasn't just being rebuilt — it was being reborn.

Section Two – New Patterns of Life

By midsummer, the chapel stood whole again. Its steeple, blackened before, now shone bright white against the sky. Its windows glimmered with new glass, some panes still mismatched, but every shard caught the light. The first service after the repair filled the pews to bursting. Men who had rarely darkened its doors before the siege now stood pressed shoulder to shoulder, hats in hand.

Josiah's sermon was simple, his eyes sweeping over scarred wood and scarred men. "This house stands because the Lord stands. This town stands because mercy held it up. We were enemies to one another. But the Word says, '*So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.*'" (Romans 12:5).

The congregation answered with tears and with hymns. And for the first time, the outlaw sat not in the back with his hat pulled low, but up front, scar catching the lamplight without shame.

Life found its rhythm again, but different now. Bart still swept the saloon, but he also built benches for the chapel with his broom-calloused hands. Elias kept his badge pinned, but his first instinct was no longer to grip his gun — it was to pray before he judged. Sarah baked bread for the town's work crews,

and Hannah's voice could be heard leading choruses of "Jesus Loves Me" in the square as if she were born to it.

And Six Gun? He became something no one had expected — a teacher of sorts. Boys came to him to learn how to mend fence straight, to ride a horse steady, to fire a Colt true. But each lesson ended not with a gun trick but with a verse. "A bullet may fly straight," he told them, "but a word of God flies truer."

He walked the streets without looking over his shoulder. He worked without fear of ambush. He prayed without shame. And when he looked at the cross on the hill — where one of his old Colts still hung — he no longer felt a weight in his chest. He felt gratitude.

The rhythm of Redemption beat steady: work, prayer, song, fellowship. Old feuds quieted. New friendships sparked. The town wasn't perfect — it still bore scars — but like the outlaw, it was learning to live new.

Section Three – The New Name

One evening, as the sun bled gold over the hills, the town gathered in the square again. The work of the day was done. The chapel bell tolled once, not for warning, but for thanksgiving. Josiah stood before the people, Bible under his arm, and looked toward the outlaw.

"Brothers, sisters," the preacher said, "this town called him Devil once. But the Devil's power is broken. The man is Christ's. It is time we called him what he is."

The square hushed. Eyes turned. The outlaw shifted, scar faint in the twilight, psalter heavy at his side. "I don't need a name," he murmured.

Sarah's voice broke the silence. "Then let him be Brother. For he has stood with us, prayed with us, bled with us."

Hannah clapped her hands. "Brother!" she cried. The word caught like fire.

"Brother," Elias said, nodding.

"Brother," Bart grumbled, eyes wet despite himself.

"Brother," the crowd echoed, voices rolling like a hymn.

The outlaw bowed his head, tears streaking the dust on his cheeks. For the first time in years, the name fit. Not Devil. Not outlaw. Not drifter. Brother.

Josiah raised his Bible high. "The Word says, *'Ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God.'*" (Ephesians 2:19).

The people shouted amen until the mountains threw it back to them.

Six Gun — Brother now — knelt in the square, psalter pressed to his chest. His voice broke as he prayed aloud for all to hear: "Thank You, Lord. You not only saved me. You gave me a family. You gave me a home."

The scar on his cheek tingled faint, then cooled. Peace filled his heart like sunlight spilling into a darkened room. Around him, the town sang — not songs of mourning, not cries of fear, but hymns of rebirth.

Redemption had a new name written across it: mercy.

And its people knew, as the outlaw did, that what had once been ashes was now light.

Chapter Eighty-Three – A Gun Laid Down

Section One – The Grave He Dug

The day was quiet when he chose to do it. Redemption’s streets hummed with work and laughter, but he walked beyond the town, past the pastures greening again, up toward the hill where the cross still stood with one old Colt nailed to its wood.

The psalter rode at his left side, its leather blackened by fire, its pages stiff with smoke, but his right hip felt different. The Colt he still carried there had become lighter each day, not in weight but in worth. He hadn’t drawn it in weeks. He prayed more than he practiced. He taught boys to mend fences straighter than he taught them to aim. Still, the gun whispered when he walked. Still, it clinked when he sat. It was a relic of a man who had died but hadn’t yet been buried.

So he brought a spade.

On a slope beneath a twisted cedar, he set the Colt down and pressed his palm against it. He remembered its draw, its heat, its killing weight. He remembered names tied to its report — men who fell, men whose faces still haunted. He whispered them like a litany, not to glorify but to confess.

Then he pressed the spade into the earth. The soil gave way, dark and damp, each turn of dirt like a chapter closing. Sweat streaked his temples, but peace steadied his arms.

When the hole was deep enough, he laid the Colt inside. It glinted once in the sun, then disappeared into shadow. He knelt, scar glowing faint, psalter heavy against his side, and prayed:

“Lord... this gun was my life. My pride. My chains. But now it’s just iron. My old man’s gone. Bury him deep. Keep him dead. Let only the new walk on.”

He shoveled earth back over steel, each clump a benediction. The grave rose flush with the hill. He patted it flat, pressed the handle of the spade like a cross, and whispered Romans 6:11: *“Dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”*

The gun was gone. The grave was shut.

Section Two – A Witness of Mercy

He didn't do it alone. When he turned, he found Hannah standing at the slope's edge, blue ribbon in her hair, eyes wide but steady. "You really buried it?" she asked.

"I did," he said, brushing dirt from his hands. "It's done."

She crept forward, peered at the patch of fresh earth, then looked up at him. "Does that mean you won't be Six Gun anymore?"

He knelt so his eyes met hers. "That's right. I'm Brother now. That gun's not who I am. Not what I'll be."

She nodded solemn as a preacher. "Good. 'Cause Mama says when we die to sin, Jesus makes us alive."

He smiled, scar soft in the morning light. "Your mama's right."

Sarah approached then, a basket on her arm, having followed her daughter's trail. She looked at the fresh mound and then at him. "It's over, then? Truly over?"

He touched the psalter in his holster. "Over. This Book's the only weapon I'll carry from here on."

Sarah's eyes shone wet. "Then Redemption really is reborn." She set the basket down, bread warm inside. "Eat. Work waits, but mercy first."

They sat beneath the cedar, breaking bread, the mound of earth between them a silent sermon. Birds trilled above, a breeze combed the grass, and the morning felt as if it, too, believed in new beginnings.

When they rose to go, Hannah skipped ahead, humming a hymn. Sarah lingered, her gaze on the fresh grave. "I'll remember this spot," she whispered. "Not where a gun sleeps — but where sin was buried."

The outlaw bowed his head. "Amen."

Section Three – The Old Man Buried

That evening, Josiah called the town to the square. He had heard what had been done — Hannah made sure of that — and he wanted the people to hear it too.

"Brothers, sisters," the preacher said, voice strong over the hush, "today our friend dug a grave. Not for a man, but for sin. He buried his last Colt. The weapon of his shame. And in doing so, he showed us the Gospel plain."

He lifted his Bible high and read: "*Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin.*" (Romans 6:6).

The crowd murmured amen. Some wept. Others smiled through tears. Bart muttered, "Reckon I'll never doubt again," and Elias bowed his head.

The outlaw stood among them, scar faint, psalter heavy. His voice carried steady, not for himself but for them all: “That gun’s gone. Sin’s buried. Christ raised me new. And I’ll walk in Him till my last ride’s called.”

The people cheered, not rowdy but holy. They sang a hymn, voices rising into dusk: *“I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back.”*

The outlaw knelt in the square, tears streaking his face, and pressed the psalter to his chest. He whispered hoarse but free: “No turning back.”

The gun lay silent in its grave. The man who had carried it now carried only the Word.

And for the first time, Redemption believed the Devil was truly dead.

Chapter Eighty-Four – The Bride’s Song

Section One – A Voice in the Night

The town had worked long into evening, hammers ringing until the shadows stretched. Supper fires burned low, and the square emptied until only the chapel lamps glowed. Six Gun sat on the steps, scar lit by lantern light, psalter resting heavy at his side. He had buried his last Colt that morning. His hands were still lined with dirt, but his heart was clean.

Then a sound drifted through the quiet — soft, low, steady. A woman’s voice.

Sarah Schaefer stood in the chapel doorway, shawl drawn around her shoulders, eyes lifted toward the rafters. She sang alone, but the air around her carried it wide, like the hymn wanted the whole town to hear. Her voice was not polished, but it was strong, as if grief itself had become a choir and found a single tongue to sing through.

The words were simple: *“Come, Lord Jesus. Come for Your bride. Our lamps are burning, our hearts are ready.”*

Six Gun bowed his head, the melody washing over him like clean water. He had heard hymns of sorrow, of pleading, of thanksgiving. But this was different. This was joy, waiting with expectancy.

Josiah appeared at her side, Bible in hand, and did not interrupt. He let her sing, his eyes shining. A few townsfolk gathered on the edge of the square, drawn by the sound. Soon mothers with children hushed their steps, men paused mid-conversation, even Bart leaned in the saloon’s doorway. The hymn gathered them all without command.

The widow’s voice rose, trembling but sure: *“The Spirit and the Bride say, Come. Even so, come, Lord Jesus.”* (Revelation 22:17,20).

And for a moment, it was not just Sarah singing. It was the Church itself, lifted in the voice of a widow, crying out for her Bridegroom.

Section Two – The Bride Awaits

When the hymn faded, silence clung to the square like dew. No one moved for a long breath. Then Hannah began to hum the refrain, small but steady. Others joined, voices stumbling but eager, until the town itself sang the Bride's song.

Sarah's eyes brimmed, but she kept singing. She looked not at the people but at the heavens. She sang not as a widow mourning what she had lost, but as a Bride rejoicing in what she would gain.

Her voice carried the truth Josiah later spoke aloud: "The Church is the widow who will not be widow forever. She waits. She hopes. She sings." He opened his Bible and read with trembling voice: "*And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*" (Revelation 21:2).

The people listened as if heaven had already split. The scars of fire and loss were still on their streets, but now they saw them as garments soon to be exchanged for white robes.

Six Gun watched Sarah sing, her voice rising pure. He thought of all she had borne — husband gone, home threatened, fear gnawing. Yet here she was, leading the town in a hymn of joy. He felt his scar cool as if her song reached even that wound.

He whispered Romans 8:18 to himself: "*For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.*"

The town sang louder, not as survivors, but as saints awaiting glory. Their voices, ragged and imperfect, blended into something more beautiful than trained choirs could ever muster.

Sarah lifted her arms, no longer widow but Bride.

Section Three – The Joy of the Bride

When the last notes faded, Josiah spoke softly but firmly: "This is our cry now — not fear, not vengeance, not sorrow. Joy. The joy of a Bride awaiting her Bridegroom. For He promised, and He will not delay."

The people murmured amen. Some knelt, others raised hands. Hannah clapped and shouted, "Jesus is coming!" And laughter rolled across the square like bells.

Six Gun knelt where he was, psalter pressed to his heart. Tears blurred his vision, but they were not of grief. For the first time, he understood the joy Sarah sang of. He had been spared from fire, chains, bullets, and the Devil's grasp. But more than spared — he had been betrothed. He was part of a Bride awaiting her Lord.

He whispered, broken but steady, "*Even so, come, Lord Jesus.*"

Sarah's hymn had become the town's anthem, and now it became his prayer.

Josiah lifted his Bible high one last time and declared: "*Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready.*" (Revelation 19:7).

The crowd shouted hallelujah.

The widow bowed her head, tears streaking her cheeks, but her smile was radiant. She had lost much, but in Christ she had gained more. She sang again, softly now, but the words settled deep in every heart:

“Come, Lord Jesus. Come for Your bride.”

And under the stars, with the scarred outlaw kneeling, the widow singing, and the town joining in, Redemption itself felt like the Bride — waiting, ready, rejoicing.

Chapter Eighty-Five – Children in the Streets Again

Section One – Morning Shouts and Sunlit Dust

They came like sparrows after a storm, sudden and everywhere. At first it was two boys rolling hoops with sticks across the square, then three girls chasing a ribbon of blue like it was a river they could outpace. By the time the bell marked nine, the street was a braid of laughter and dust—marbles pinging in chalked circles, jump-ropes slapping time, a kite stitched from flour sack and hope tugging the morning higher.

Brother (the name had stuck) leaned on a fence post near the chapel steps, psalter riding easy in the left holster, hammer in his right hand from mending the gate. He didn’t speak. He just watched, the way you watch a spring you feared had dried forever start up again between stones. The scar on his cheek warmed in the sun and then forgot to ache.

Hannah spotted him and waved the blue ribbon she’d tied to his holster strap weeks ago—

WHOSOEVER stitched crooked and perfect. “Race you to the well and back!” she shouted to a pack of boys. The pack exploded, legs and elbows, howls bouncing off boards. Somewhere behind them Sarah’s laugh followed like a blessing you could hear.

Josiah stood by the door with a broom he’d insisted on pushing himself—the shepherd happy to sweep. He lifted his Bible, eyes bright. “Hear it,” he said softly to Brother over the ruckus, as though quoting the wind. *“And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the streets thereof.”* (Zechariah 8:5)

Brother let the verse settle in his ribs. He answered with another that felt tailor-made for this dust and sunlight: *“Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing.”* (Psalm 126:2) The words tasted like cold water.

Bart shuffled out of the saloon with a crate of mismatched cups and a scowl that couldn’t stand up to the morning. “You break it, you fix it,” he barked at the hoop-rollers—and then set the crate down and poured lemonade he’d never admit he squeezed.

Elias drifted to the gallows that still stood gray at the edge of the square. He tested a plank, frowning, then glanced at Brother. They didn't speak, not yet. There would be a day for taking it down. For now the laughter itself was taking the worst of it apart.

A marble game stalled as a small, ash-scarred boy—one Brother had led out of the burn—hovered at the ring's edge. He kept his hands behind his back as if afraid of what they'd reach for on their own. Hannah broke off from her race, trotted over, and pressed a green marble into his palm. "Yours," she said. "Lucky one."

He looked to Brother as if to ask permission to be a child. Brother nodded once, slow and sure. The boy knelt.

Morning went on, busy as bees, light climbing the chapel spire as if it were a ladder you could sing up.

Section Two – Lessons in Playing Right

By noon the games had become a kingdom with laws only children fully understood. Sidewalk chalk turned to river and road. Two chairs, a length of broomstick, and an old bedsheet became a stage where Hannah organized a pageant about angels (wings made of flour sacks and the courage real). A stickball rolled under Brother's boot; he toed it back to its owner and found himself appointed referee by unanimous shriek.

"Safe," he said to the dust-streaked boy sprawled in the dirt, and laughter tossed a hat in the air as if it were a crown.

He set his hammer down and taught a knot instead of a draw—how to splice rope without cutting, how to lash two rails into a straight line. "Fences are promises," he told the circle of listeners. "They say where we are and where we ain't—and they stand better when they're true." He handed the rope around. Small hands copied, tongues stuck out in concentration, triumphs whooped when the line held.

When the stickball crowd drifted toward the shade, Josiah carried out a plank and a pocketful of nails. "School today's recess," he said. "Recess today's school." He rapped the plank with a knuckle. "Who'll help me make a bench for shorter legs?"

Half the square volunteered at once. Brother bowed to his new employer. "Preacher, you'll spoil 'em."

"I intend to," Josiah said, grin quick as a wink. He opened his Bible and read without raising his voice, as if the verse were part of the woodgrain: "*Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God.*" (Mark 10:14)

Sarah set a pitcher on the stage-that-was-a-table and crumbled cookies into smaller halves so there'd be more miracle to go around. Elias, catching Brother's eye again, jerked his chin toward the gallows.

"This afternoon?" he asked low.

Brother glanced at the children drawing hopscotch squares where shadows once pooled. "This afternoon," he said.

The ash-scarred boy—Jeb, he'd told Brother in a voice that expected to be turned away—stood at the fringe of a new game, weighing whether to enter. Two larger boys, pride-prone, squared up about who got the next turn with the hoop. The argument had the feel of old Redemption: hard, brittle, ready to splinter.

Brother stepped in—not with the sheriff's badge, not with the outlaw's stare, but with a teacher's calm. He knelt until he was eye-level with the heat. “Two roads,” he said, drawing a fork in the dust with his finger. “One says ‘Mine first.’ Other says ‘Yours first.’ Which road made the fire go out?”

The boys' eyes dropped. Hannah sidled beside them and, like a tiny bailiff, announced, “Sharing is the law.” She pressed the hoop into Jeb's hands. “New kids first.”

Something broke and mended at once in the boy's face. He ran. The hoop rolled true.

Brother stood, feeling Proverbs tuck itself into the scene like a nail driven home: “*Train up a child in the way he should go.*” (Proverbs 22:6)

Bart, watching from his doorway, snorted. “World's upside down,” he grumbled—and then smiled so quick you'd miss it if you blinked.

Section Three – Evening Bells and Easy Shadows

Toward sundown the sun softened and so did every voice. Work crews filtered back into the square, tools slung, shoulders loose. The hoop rolled slower. The chalk lines glowed faint. Mothers called names that, for a miracle, answered.

Elias climbed the gallows steps with a pry bar. Brother joined him. They didn't give speeches. The town didn't gather like for a hanging. It kept doing what it was doing—small things that make a place livable—while two men set their shoulders to the old wood. Nails squealed, timbers sighed, and the frame that had waited like a sentence for years began to come apart under honest labor.

When the crossbeam came down, they carried it between them like pallbearers who knew the dead ought never rise again. Josiah met them halfway with a measuring eye. “Bench,” he said. “Or a table for the children.”

“Bench,” Elias decided. “For short legs.”

They set the beam on sawhorses. Bart fetched a plane without being asked. Sarah brushed sawdust from it with the reverence of an altar guild. Hannah tapped the wood and declared it “unscary now,” which was as official as a county seal.

Children played hide-and-seek among wagons turned to pews while the grown-ups turned a gallows into furniture. The bell rang, not to call to judgment but to supper. Laughter drifted under it like the harmony line of a familiar hymn.

Brother sat on the chapel steps, psalter open, fingers finding Psalm 126 again. He read the whole thing this time, slow, breathing each promise as if it had been stored up for this dusk: “*They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.*” (Psalm 126:5)

Jeb flopped down beside him, breathless, ash still faint in his hair though the days had been kind. “Brother,” he said, “tomorrow can I help take more down? The old bad wood?”

“Tomorrow,” Brother said. “And the day after. We’ll make a habit of it.”

“Good,” the boy nodded, serious about hope. He sprang up again, pulled into another game by a shout that used his name and meant it kindly.

The square settled into lantern-glow. Sarah’s voice lifted a verse without asking permission of silence: “*All praise to Him who reigns above...*” It stitched the edges of the day.

Brother closed the psalter and looked at a town that had been a battlefield and was now a backyard. He felt the peace in his chest—steady, ordinary, a hearth-fire more than a blaze. He thought of Jesus’ promise and found it both truer and nearer than ever: “*Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.*” (Matthew 28:20)

Children ran. Men talked soft. Women laughed the kind of laugh that says tomorrow is possible. The gallows was becoming a bench.

And the street—haunted once—belonged to joy again.

Chapter Eighty-Six – The Preacher’s Blessing

Section One – A Brother Named Aloud

The chapel lamps burned low, throwing warm light on the new timbers the town had raised. The pews were crowded that evening — not for defense as before, but for thanksgiving. Smoke still smudged the rafters, but hymns filled the air so fully that no one minded the scars.

Josiah stood at the front, Bible open, eyes sweeping the gathered faces. “Brothers and sisters,” he began, “tonight we give thanks not only for what the Lord has spared, but for whom the Lord has saved.” His gaze fell to where the outlaw sat near the front, hat in his lap, psalter at his hip.

The congregation hushed, all eyes turning. The man once feared now looked down, scar faint in lamplight, fingers tightening on the brim of his hat.

Josiah stepped forward. “This man was known to us as Devil. A gunslinger. A drifter. A killer.” Murmurs rippled, but the preacher lifted his hand. “But the Lord has done a work. And the Word declares: *‘If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.’*” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

He extended his hand. “Brother, will you come forward?”

The outlaw rose, slow but steady, and walked the aisle. Each step echoed in the hush. He stopped before the pulpit, eyes wet, scar glowing in the lamplight. He whispered, “I ain’t worthy.”

Josiah smiled, tears in his own eyes. “None of us are. That’s why grace is grace.”

Section Two – The Anointing

Josiah laid his Bible aside and reached for a small vial of oil. He lifted it for all to see. “The Scripture says: *‘Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.’*” (James 5:14)

He uncorked the vial, dipped his thumb, and touched it gently to the outlaw’s scarred brow. The man trembled, tears falling unchecked. The oil shone faint in the lamplight, a mark not of shame but of new belonging.

Josiah’s voice carried, strong and tender: “Lord Jesus Christ, we set apart this brother, who once walked in darkness but now walks in light. Wash him clean in Your blood. Fill him with Your Spirit. Keep him from the snares of the enemy. Make him not a weapon of sin but a vessel of mercy. Let his testimony be sharper than any sword.”

The outlaw’s knees buckled, and he sank to the floor. The congregation gasped, but Josiah knelt with him, hand still on his head. The outlaw sobbed aloud, psalter clutched to his chest, voice breaking into prayer: “Thank You, Lord. Thank You for takin’ me. Thank You for keepin’ me.”

Josiah lifted his face to the people. “No longer Devil. No longer drifter. He is Brother. One of us. One in Christ.”

The congregation rose to its feet. Cries of “Amen!” and “Hallelujah!” filled the chapel. Sarah wept openly, Hannah clapped, Elias bowed his head, and even Bart muttered something rough that still sounded holy.

The outlaw looked up through tears, scar shining with oil. For the first time in his life, he felt not alone, not feared, not condemned — but home.

Section Three – A New Family

The preacher helped him to his feet, then took his hand and raised it high. “Church, welcome your brother.”

The people surged forward — hands on his shoulders, arms around him, prayers spoken aloud all at once. It was messy, it was noisy, but it was real. The outlaw swayed under it, not in weakness but in wonder. For every hand that once might have turned him out, now held him in.

When the clamor softened, Josiah opened his Bible once more. “Hear the Word: *‘Ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God.’*” (Ephesians 2:19)

The congregation shouted amen, voices like thunder — but not of judgment this time, of joy.

Sarah stepped forward, hands trembling, and pressed a hymnbook into his palm. “Sing with us now,” she whispered. “You’re family.”

He opened it, scarred hands fumbling, and when the hymn began — “*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me...*” — his voice cracked, but it joined. Not behind, not apart, but with.

Hannah tugged at his coat, eyes shining. “See? You’re really Brother now.”

He knelt, drew her close, and whispered through tears, “Forever, child. Forever.”

As the hymn swelled, Josiah prayed one last time, voice firm with certainty: “Lord, You have made the Devil Your son. Keep him until the day he sees You face to face.”

The outlaw bowed his head, psalter against his chest, and whispered, “Amen.”

And with oil on his brow, hymn in his mouth, and family at his side, peace settled into him like the dawn settling over mountains.

No longer Devil. No longer outlaw. Simply Brother.

Chapter Eighty-Seven – From Outlaw to Brother

Section One – Old Enemies, New Eyes

The square looked different now, though the buildings still bore scars. It wasn’t the boards or beams that made it new — it was the way people looked at him.

He had once walked down that same street and felt shutters close, hands twitch toward gunbelts, mothers pull children aside. Now, as he walked with the psalter at his hip and no Colt to answer with, eyes met his instead of turning away.

Elias, the sheriff who once wrestled between justice and mercy, stepped out of his office, badge gleaming in the morning sun. For a breath they simply stared at one another, remembering the times Elias’s hand had hovered near his pistol. Then Elias broke the silence with a slow smile. “Brother.”

The word landed heavy, not as law but as gift. The outlaw — no, the man — nodded, voice hoarse. “Brother.” They shook hands like men who had finally crossed a river that had once kept them apart.

Later, Bart shuffled from the saloon, broom under one arm. He had been the loudest critic, calling him Devil, muttering curses at his shadow. Now he paused, scratched at his beard, and muttered, “Ain’t right, but it is. You’re... Brother.”

The man grinned, scar soft in the light. “That’ll do, Bart.”

The saloon keeper coughed like the word had stuck in his throat, then gave a sharp nod.

The people who had once whispered his name like a curse now tried it as a blessing. *Brother*. It startled them, but it stuck. And each time he heard it, his heart steadied more.

Section Two – The Widow’s Words

Sarah approached him one evening, shawl wrapped against the cooling air. Hannah skipped ahead of her, ribbon trailing like a comet. The widow’s eyes were softer than he remembered from those first days, when fear and grief had carved them sharp.

“You know what it means, don’t you?” she asked.

“What’s that?”

“When we call you Brother. We’re saying the blood that saved us, saved you. We’re saying you’re family. You can’t outrun it now.”

He swallowed hard, psalter warm against his side. “I don’t aim to outrun it. Not anymore.”

Hannah tugged at his coat. “Say it back,” she urged. “Say we’re your family too.”

He knelt, scar glowing faint under the lantern light, and said the words plain. “You are my family. Every one of you.”

Sarah’s eyes brimmed. “Then Redemption is whole again.” She looked toward the chapel, where Josiah’s lamp glowed steady. “We lost much. But we gained a brother.”

The man’s throat tightened. He remembered when she had once begged him to leave town for fear of more bloodshed. Now she welcomed him as family. The difference was grace.

That night, when Josiah read aloud in the square, he turned to Hebrews: *“For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren.”* (Hebrews 2:11).

The preacher smiled, looking straight at the outlaw. “Christ is not ashamed to call you brother. Neither are we.”

The town thundered amen.

Section Three – A New Name in the Square

By week’s end, the name Devil was gone. No one whispered it, no one cursed it. In its place was a new name. Children shouted it across the street. Men spoke it at the well. Women used it in prayer.

“Brother, hand me that beam.”

“Brother, will you mend this rail?”

“Brother, sit at our table tonight.”

Each time, he felt his scar cool, his heart swell. He realized names carry weight. Devil had chained him; Brother set him free.

One evening, as the town gathered for supper in the square, Josiah stood and declared: “Once we feared him. Now we trust him. Once we called him Devil. Now we call him Brother.” He raised his Bible and read: “*Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!*” (Psalm 133:1).

The people shouted hallelujah, and the hymn rose: “*Blessed be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love.*”

The man who had been outlaw stood among them, tears streaking his face, and sang with a voice unashamed. He had been Devil, feared and hated. Now he was Brother, welcomed and beloved.

And for the first time in his life, he felt not like a stranger in the world, but like a son in a family.

Chapter Eighty-Eight – The Father’s Forgiveness

Section One – The Longest Paper

The night was still when he set pen to paper. The town slept, lanterns dimmed, only the soft creak of the chapel rafters above him. He sat at Josiah’s desk, the preacher having given it freely, and before him lay a stack of rough paper, an ink pot, and a heart that trembled more than his hand.

He had faced bullets, fire, even the Devil himself, but this task loomed heavier. For the first time in years, he would write not to boast, not to threaten, not to settle scores — but to beg.

He dipped the pen, scratched slow, each word like pulling a nail from his own flesh.

“To the family of the man I wronged...”

The sentences faltered, blotched, stammered. His scar burned faint as he listed names he remembered, faces he could not forget. A rancher gunned down in a quarrel. A boy who had raised steel too young. A gambler who fell because Six Gun had to prove he was quicker. Each memory was a ghost at his shoulder, and now he spoke to the widows, the orphans, the fathers and mothers left behind.

“I took from you what I cannot return. I left holes only God can mend. I am not writing to excuse myself. There is no excuse. I am writing to say I was wrong. I am writing to say I am sorry. I am writing to beg, if the Lord has put it in your heart, that you forgive me.”

Tears dripped onto the page, blurring ink. His hands shook, but he did not stop.

“I cannot undo what I have done. But I know this — Christ has forgiven me. And because He has, I must humble myself before you. I will spend the rest of my days seeking to mend what I can. If you curse me, I will accept it. If you forgive me, I will weep with gratitude. Either way, I will carry you in my prayers.”

He signed not “Six Gun Devil,” not even the name his mother had given him long ago, but simply: **Brother in Christ.**

By dawn, the pile of letters was thick. His eyes burned, his scar cooled, and his heart felt both bruised and freer than it had ever been.

Section Two – The Preacher’s Counsel

When Josiah found him at sunrise, the desk was littered with sheets, some damp with tears, some smeared where ink and weeping had mingled. The outlaw sat slumped, hands black with ink, face hollow but steady.

“You’ve been at it all night,” Josiah said softly.

“I have.” He gestured to the letters. “Each word felt like blood. But it had to be spilled.”

The preacher gathered a few pages, reading silently. His eyes grew wet as he whispered one aloud: “*I cannot bring him back, but I can bring myself low. I ask you to do what only grace can do — forgive.*”

He set the letter down with trembling hands. “This is the Gospel, Brother. You preach more with this ink than with a hundred sermons.”

“But what if they spit on it? What if they curse my name, burn the paper, send word back with hatred?”

Josiah leaned close, eyes burning. “Then you bear it. For that too is part of repentance. But some...” His voice caught. “Some will see Christ in these words. Some will forgive. And whether or not they do, you will have done what the Spirit commanded.”

The outlaw bowed his head. “It’s the hardest trail I’ve ridden.”

“The cross is always the hardest,” Josiah said gently. “But it always leads home.”

Together, they folded the letters, sealing each one. Josiah promised to send them on the next mail run, to towns near and far, to ranches scattered in the wide country. The outlaw placed his hand on the stack and prayed over them: “*Lord, take these words further than my bullets ever went. Where I once killed, let this bring life.*”

Section Three – A Father’s Heart

Weeks later, as the town settled into its new rhythm, replies began to trickle back. Some letters never answered. Some returned with curses, words of rage scrawled in shaky hand. He wept over those too, pressing them to his psalter and praying for their senders.

But others — ah, others came with words he never deserved but God had given.

One was from a gray-haired woman whose son he had slain in a saloon quarrel: “*I hated you for years. I wanted you hanged. But when I read your words, I saw Christ’s mark. I forgive you. Go in peace, and live for the Lord.*”

Another from a father: “*You took my boy. I cannot forget. But Christ forgave the men who nailed Him. So I will forgive you. May you use your life for His glory.*”

He read those words aloud in the chapel, his voice breaking, tears falling freely. The townsfolk listened, some gasping, some weeping, all stunned.

Josiah stood and declared, “This is what the Word means when it says: *‘If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.’*” (1 John 1:9)

The outlaw fell to his knees in the aisle, psalter pressed against his heart. “Thank You, Father,” he prayed aloud, voice shaking but strong. “You forgave me — and through Your people, I have seen it with my own eyes.”

The town gathered around him, hands resting on his shoulders, voices lifting in prayer. And though he knew not every letter would return with mercy, he also knew this: forgiveness was real, alive, and greater than his sin.

For the first time, he understood what Christ had promised: “*As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us.*” (Psalm 103:12)

And in that truth, the outlaw — no longer Devil, now Brother — found peace deeper than bullets, fire, or scars could ever take away.

Chapter Eighty-Nine – A New Name

Section One – The Old Name Buried

The day after his letters went out — after he had wept over paper, after he had begged forgiveness he might never hear — Brother walked to the hill where the cross stood. The old Colt still hung there, black with weather, its grip cracked, its barrel useless. It looked like a museum of who he had been.

He sat in the dust with the psalter in his lap. The scar on his cheek caught the afternoon sun, but it didn’t burn anymore. It only reminded.

The name that once chained him still echoed on the edges of his memory. *Six Gun Devil*. The syllables had followed him like vultures, whispered in saloons, spit from dying mouths. Even now, when he closed his eyes, he could still hear it.

But as the breeze stirred, Scripture rose in his heart: “*Thou shalt be called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord shall name.*” (Isaiah 62:2). He whispered it to the dust, his voice trembling. “If You’ll give me one, Lord, I’ll answer to it. I’m tired of being Devil. I’m tired of being what I was.”

The sun sank, shadows stretched, and when the chapel bell called the town to gather, he rose, knowing something would change tonight.

Section Two – The Naming

The square filled with people as the lamps were lit. Families gathered, children clung to their mothers, men laid aside tools and leaned on their knees. Josiah stood on the chapel steps, Bible in hand. His eyes shone as he spoke.

“Brothers and sisters, the Lord has given us a gift. He has given us a man we once called Devil — a man feared, a man lost. But Christ has made him new. And in the Scriptures, when God makes a man new, He gives him a new name.”

He opened his Bible and read: “*And he shall have a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it.*” (Revelation 2:17).

The people murmured amen. Hannah tugged at her mother’s sleeve, whispering, “He needs a name that says he’s God’s now.”

Josiah turned to the outlaw. “Brother, will you receive it?”

He swallowed, scar faint in the lamplight. “I will.”

The preacher stepped down, a smooth white stone in his hand. He pressed it into the outlaw’s palm. “We have prayed, and we believe the Lord has given a name. In the days of David, after grief and judgment, the Lord sent word: ‘*And he called his name Jedidiah, because of the Lord.*’” (2 Samuel 12:25).

Josiah’s voice steadied. “Jedidiah. Beloved of the Lord. We’ll call you Jed.”

The square hushed, then swelled. “Jed,” Sarah said, her eyes wet.

“Jed,” Elias echoed, firm.

“Jed!” Hannah cried, clapping her hands.

Even Bart grumbled from the saloon door, “Jed’ll do.”

The outlaw stared at the stone in his hand, white as mercy, smooth as grace. He lifted his eyes, tears streaking his scar. “Then Jed I am.”

Section Three – Living into the Name

The hymn began without command — Sarah’s voice, then others joining, until the square rang: “*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound...*”

Jed sang with them, not behind, not ashamed, but with. The white stone rested in his palm, the psalter heavy at his side, the scar no longer a brand but a testimony.

When the hymn ended, Josiah prayed: “Lord, let this brother walk as Jedidiah — beloved of the Lord — all his days. Let his life speak louder than his past. Let his name be not Devil but Beloved.”

The people shouted amen, and Hannah tugged his hand. “See? You’ve got a real name now.”

Jed knelt, pulling her close. “Yes, child. A name I’ll keep forever.”

As the town dispersed, he walked the square, every greeting different now.

“Good night, Brother Jed.”

“Rest well, Jed.”

“Tomorrow, Jed, we’ll mend the fence.”

Each word was a nail sealing the coffin of his old name.

Back at the hill, he pressed the stone against the weathered cross and whispered, “*Beloved.*”

For the first time, he believed it.

Chapter Ninety – The Gospel Rides On

Section One – A Farewell in the Square

Dawn stretched its pale fingers across Redemption, brushing gold on the new timbers of the chapel, on fences set straight, on children chalking hopscotch squares where gallows once stood. The bell rang not as alarm, not even as summons, but as benediction.

Jed stood by his bay horse at the edge of the square, saddlebags packed with little more than bread, water, and the psalter holstered at his side. The white stone Josiah had pressed into his palm rested in his pocket, smooth with promise.

The people gathered — not in fear now, but in love. Sarah stood near the front, Hannah at her side with the blue ribbon still tied to his holster. Elias, badge polished, offered his hand. Bart leaned on his broom and muttered, “Well, Jed, don’t get yourself shot preachin’. Bad for business.” But even Bart’s eyes were wet.

Josiah lifted his Bible, voice strong but thick with feeling. “Brothers and sisters, this man rode into our town as Devil. He leaves as Jedidiah — beloved of the Lord, brother in Christ. The Word says: ‘*Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.*’” (Mark 16:15). He turned toward Jed.

“And you, Jed, are obeying that Word.”

Jed bowed his head. “I came here with death in my shadow. I leave with life in my hands. Not mine — His.” He drew the psalter and held it high. “This is the only weapon I’ll carry.”

The crowd murmured amen, some lifting their own Bibles. Hannah ran forward, hugging his leg.

“Come back, Brother Jed.”

He knelt, scar soft in the morning light, pressing the ribbon in her hand. “If the Lord wills, child. But if not — I’ll see you where there are no more goodbyes.”

Section Two – The Long Trail Ahead

The bay snorted as Jed swung into the saddle. The town spread behind him — scarred but mended, singing when once it had been silent. He lifted two fingers in farewell, then turned his horse toward the rising sun.

The prairie opened wide, grass waving like a congregation. He rode steady, psalter tapping his side with each hoofbeat. His thoughts churned, then steadied into prayer. “Lord, let me carry Your Word true. Let me be light where I was once shadow.”

The trail wound past lonely homesteads, burned-out camps, saloons still thick with smoke and sin. In each, he found someone willing to listen: a barkeep who wiped his hands while Jed read John 3:16, a wounded rider who clutched water with shaking hands while Jed prayed healing over him, a boy who asked for a story and heard instead the parable of the Prodigal Son.

Not everyone welcomed him. Some spat when they learned who he’d been. Some cursed the name Devil, refusing to believe he was changed. But he bore it as Josiah had taught: not with fists, not with bullets, but with patience. He left towns behind with dust on his boots and seed in their soil, trusting God for the harvest.

Nights found him at lonely fires, stars burning holes in the dark. He would open the psalter, reading aloud though no one sat but his horse and the Lord. Sometimes he sang the hymns Sarah had taught, voice cracking, but heaven heard clear. And when sleep came, it no longer dragged him into nightmares of chains and flames, but into dreams of light and laughter — children in the streets, saints singing, a Bride awaiting her Bridegroom.

Section Three – The Gospel Rides On

Weeks passed into months. Jed became a legend again, but not the kind whispered in fear. Now they called him the *Rider with the Book*. The outlaw turned preacher, the scarred man with a psalter in his holster. Word carried faster than his horse — of saloons silenced by Scripture, of families comforted at gravesides, of bullets that missed when hymns were sung.

One evening, on a ridge lit with sunset, he dismounted and planted his psalter upright in the soil, spine to the wind. He knelt beside it and prayed: “Lord, the Devil rode once. But now the Gospel rides. Let every hoofbeat, every mile, carry Your name, not mine.”

The wind answered, soft as a hymn.

He mounted again, scar glowing faint but no longer burning, eyes fixed on the horizon. Behind him, Redemption lived up to its name. Before him, the frontier stretched wide — thirsty for the Good News.

As the sun dipped low, he whispered one last verse, carrying it like a banner into the dusk: “*How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation.*” (Isaiah 52:7).

His bay thundered forward, dust rising like incense. The psalter tapped steady at his side, the white stone rested in his pocket, and the name *Jedidiah* — *beloved of the Lord* lived in his chest.

And so the Gospel rode on, where once only the Devil had.

Part X: The Eternal Horizon

Chapter Ninety-One – A Cross Carved in Stone

Section One – Back to the Shadows

The canyon mouth hadn't changed much. The rocks still leaned jagged, like teeth gnashing at the sky. Scrub still clung stubbornly to the ledges. Coyotes still yipped from hidden clefts. But as Jed reined the bay up the narrow path, he felt the ghost of who he had been rise from the dust.

This had been his hideout. Once, firelight had flickered against these walls while stolen coin spilled across the dirt. Once, whiskey had been passed, guns oiled, and plans whispered. He had carved his old name into a post here, proud of it — *Devil* scratched like a scar.

Now, riding back years later, psalter heavy at his side, the place felt different. Not threatening. Empty. Hollow, like a shell long abandoned. The scar on his cheek tingled as memory pressed close. But instead of shame, something steadier filled him: gratitude.

He dismounted, boots crunching on gravel. His eyes swept the old campsite — the blackened fire ring, the rotted timbers of a shack, the cave's mouth gaping like a wound. He whispered to it all, voice low but firm: "I lived in you once. I sinned in you once. But I don't belong to you anymore."

He lifted his eyes to the ridge above. That's where the cross would stand. Not to erase the past, but to mark it with grace.

Section Two – The Work of His Hands

For three days he worked, alone except for the bay cropping grass nearby. He found a boulder, weathered but solid, and with hammer and chisel borrowed from Redemption, he began the slow, aching task of shaping it.

Each strike of the chisel rang like a confession. Each flake of stone that fell was like sin chipped away. His palms blistered, his back ached, but he pressed on. The cross slowly took shape — rough, uneven, but unmistakable. A new marker where his hideout had been.

At night he slept under stars, the psalter open on his chest, and prayed strength for another day's labor. Scripture became his song of endurance: "*Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it.*" (Psalm 127:1). He knew the stone wasn't saving him — Christ already had — but this was testimony. A monument to mercy in the very place he had served sin.

On the third evening, as the sun bled red over the ridge, he dragged the cross upright, wedging its base deep into a cleft. He leaned against it, sweat streaking dust on his face, scar glowing faint in the twilight. The cross stood tall against the sky, weathered hands holding it steady until it balanced on its own.

He stepped back, breath ragged, and whispered: *“Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.”* (1 Samuel 7:12). The hideout that once held darkness now bore a cross cut from stone.

Section Three – A Memorial of Grace

When the work was done, Jed knelt in the dust before the stone. The canyon wind whistled low, stirring his hair, tugging at the psalter strapped to his side. He pressed his palm to the cold rock, scar meeting scar, and prayed aloud:

“Lord Jesus, I mark this place not for what I did, but for what You did. Not for my hiding, but for Your finding. Not for my sin, but for Your mercy. Let this stone speak when I’m gone — let it say grace lived here.”

The bay stamped, snorted, as if to add its amen. Jed rose, brushed the dust from his knees, and looked at the cross one last time in the fading light. It was rough, chipped, scarred — like him. But it stood. And that was enough.

Before leaving, he carved one last word into its base: **Redeemed**. Not his name, not his boast, but his truth.

He mounted and turned his horse toward the open trail. Behind him, the stone cross caught the last rays of the sun, casting its shadow across the ruins of the hideout. Where once smoke from outlaw fires had risen, now a new kind of smoke lifted — the incense of prayer, carved in stone.

As Jed rode on, Scripture filled his mind, steady as hoofbeats: *“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.”* (Psalm 23:6).

The hideout was no longer his. The cross was. And its shadow stretched long over the land — a memorial of grace, standing in the place of sin.

Chapter Ninety-Two – No More Blood in the Streets

Section One – The Crossing of Wrath

Jed heard the news on a dusty trail outside Redemption: two towns, Dry Creek and Red Mesa, had raised rifles against each other again. The quarrel wasn’t new — water rights, broken fences, stolen

cattle — but now blood had already been spilled, and more was promised. The clash would come at Penance Crossing, a place that had seen too much death already.

He pressed the psalter in his holster. The scar on his cheek tingled as it always did when violence prowled near, but instead of burning with old rage, it reminded him of his vow: never again would his hand seek steel before it sought Scripture.

He rode into Dry Creek first. Holt Avery, the foreman, spat dust when Jed asked for parley. “They cut our ditch. They drew what’s ours. Only blood evens it.”

Jed met his eyes, calm. “Blood’s already been shed, Holt. But not one drop more will fix a fence. I’ll stand between you and them. At the riverbed, rifles laid aside. You speak truth, they speak truth. Then God’s Word speaks last.”

From there he rode to Red Mesa. Señora Valdez met him with folded arms. “Dry Creek killed one of ours. His widow still weeps. How do you ask me to lay down my gun?”

Jed bowed his head. “Because Christ laid down more than a gun — He laid down His life, and by His blood He made enemies into family. Meet them at the crossing. Let the Book be your weapon.”

The señora studied him long, then nodded once. “Very well. But if they cheat us—”

“Then I’ll be the first struck,” Jed said. “I stake my life on His Word.”

That Saturday, the two towns met at Penance Crossing. Dust hung thick, rifles glinted, tempers simmered. Jed walked into the middle, drew a circle in the sand, and set an empty saddle blanket inside it. On the blanket he laid his psalter, open to Proverbs 15:1: “*A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger.*”

“Guns stay out,” Jed said, voice steady. “Words come in. And when truth runs out, the Word of God speaks.”

Section Two – Scripture in the Sand

Accusations flew like stones across the circle. Fences cut, water stolen, boys goaded into violence. Voices cracked, faces flushed. Some hands twitched toward empty belts by sheer habit.

Jed lifted his hand. “New rule,” he said. “You speak not what *they* did wrong, but what *you* did wrong.”

The men grumbled, but he began himself. He told them of a man once called Devil, who had killed without thought, who had buried his last Colt in the ground, and who had written letters begging forgiveness he didn’t deserve. “If I can confess blood on my hands,” Jed said, “then so can you confess broken fences.”

Silence held. Then Señora Valdez spoke first. “We deepened the ditch. Took more water than fair.”

Holt Avery stared at his boots. “We ran cattle across the bank at night. We busted rails.”

The truth broke open the rest. One vaquero admitted he had fired first last winter, meaning to scare but hitting flesh instead. A Dry Creek hand confessed he had poisoned a well in secret. Each confession loosened the next, until both sides stood bare and tired, but honest.

Jed opened the psalter, reading Ephesians 2:14: *“For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us.”* He picked up two stones, one from each bank, and pressed them together in the dust. *“This wall just cracked. Let’s tear it down.”*

So they drew up new terms: water shared by days, fences mended by joint crews, restitution made for the widow’s loss. And before anger could rise again, Jed broke bread Sarah had baked, passing it hand to hand. *“Mercy eats first,”* he said. Children laughed as they grabbed the crusts, and something softened in the hardened faces of men.

At last, Holt cleared his throat. *“No more graves by this river.”*
Señora Valdez nodded. *“No more blood in the streets.”*

Section Three – A Covenant of Peace

Before leaving, they set posts at both banks of the crossing. On one, Jed carved Isaiah 2:4: *“They shall beat their swords into plowshares.”* On the other, Psalm 85:10: *“Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.”*

The two leaders tied their ropes into one splice — no cut, no break, stronger joined than separate. The people cheered, not with gunfire but with hands clapping, with voices singing. Someone played a fiddle, someone brewed coffee, children scrawled hopscotch squares where rifles had lain.

As the sun dipped low, Jed mounted his bay, the psalter heavy at his side, the white stone in his pocket pressing a promise. He looked once more at the crossing, at rivals who now shared bread, at children who laughed where enemies once bled.

He raised his hand in blessing: *“The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.”* (Numbers 6:26).

The townsfolk answered *amen*, and Jed turned his horse toward the horizon.

The Gospel had done what guns never could. There was no more blood in the streets — only peace in the dust, carved in Scripture, held fast by grace.

And as Jed rode on, he knew this truth: wherever the trail carried him, the Gospel would ride on too.

Chapter Ninety-Three – The Psalms of Peace

Section One – Ledger Under the Lantern

The prairie was hushed that night. Jed had made camp in a draw where the wind sighed instead of cut, and the bay horse cropped grass nearby. He strung a tarp, built a small fire, and opened the saddlebag Sarah had pressed into his hands weeks ago. Inside was the ledger she'd insisted he keep. "Your words are worth carrying," she had said.

He hadn't used it much. Preaching came easy enough, but writing still felt strange — like talking to himself on paper. Yet as the coffee bubbled and coyotes tuned their sorrow, he felt the nudge. His hand drifted to the psalter in its holster, then to the pencil stub rattling in the ledger's spine.

He sat by lantern light, scar glowing faint, and whispered, "David sang in pastures; I'll sing out here." He sharpened the pencil with his knife, set the ledger across his knee, and prayed until words became lines.

The first page smelled of flour sack and dust. He marked the date, drew a small cross in the margin, and began: "*O Lord my Light, the rimrock blushes with Your mercy. I was a man of shadow; You taught me sunrise.*"

He paused, read it aloud, and the words sounded less like poetry and more like survival. He smiled. "Psalms," he said softly. "Trail psalms. Peace psalms."

By the time the lantern guttered, he had filled several pages. The bay shifted nearby, listening. Jed closed the ledger, slipped it under his saddle, and lay down. For the first time in a long while, his dreams hummed instead of howled.

Section Two – The Trail Psalms

In the days that followed, Jed numbered the prayers as David once had, each page a new psalm for the road:

Psalm 1 – At First Light

O Lord, my horse breathes steam like prayer,
and coffee warms hands once quick to kill.
You spread the east open like a hymn.
Keep my feet from the ruts of ruin.
Your Word rides my hip; Your name rides my heart.

Psalm 2 – Over an Empty Holster

Iron once slept by my side,
fear was my blanket, rage my bedfellow.
Now a Book steadies me better than steel.
Bless the holster that keeps only Scripture.

Psalm 3 – For Enemies on the Road

If they spit, give me patience.
If they listen, give me words.

Do not let my scar speak louder than Your blood.
Lead us both to water clear.

Psalm 4 – At the Crossing

We laid rifles down, spread bread instead.
Your Word stood in the dust like a post set true.
Mercy and truth kissed where wrath once lived.

Psalm 5 – In the Canyon of Memory

Here I hid from daylight and called it freedom.
Now a stone cross sings when storms come hunting.
Grace lived here. Grace won.

Psalm 6 – For Children in the Streets

Turn gallows into benches.
Fill chalk lines with laughter.
Bless the ribbon that says WHOSOEVER.

Psalm 7 – When Loneliness Camps

The fire is small, the sky is wide.
My name is Beloved, whispered in the dark.
Your rod and staff keep me from wanting.

Psalm 8 – For the Work of My Hands

Put truth in my plumb line,
patience in my hammer.
Make me useful more than admired,
steady more than swift.

Psalm 9 – For Towns That Doubt Me

Let them take time; I stole enough already.
Make them see grace settle on me
like dust that never leaves.

Psalm 10 – For the Last Campfire

When my trail ends at the big river,
let me hand You the reins.
Let the psalter be worn soft,
the stone smooth from prayer.
Call me by the name You gave: Beloved.

Jed copied some into neat script, others he left rough, like prayers scrawled on canyon walls. When he read them back, he could almost hear David answering in older words, the two voices harmonizing across time.

Section Three – Psalms That Travel

He didn't keep the ledger shut. In mining camps, he read "Psalm 2" over men who leaned on empty bottles. At Penance Crossing, he carved "Psalm 4" into the post already branded with Isaiah's promise. In Red Mesa, children repeated "Psalm 6" like a chant while they drew hopscotch lines across the dust.

Sometimes, weeks later, he'd return to a place and find the psalms copied onto scrap paper, folded in breast pockets, tacked to saloon doors. A barkeep once pointed at a page pinned above the bar and muttered, "Don't know why I left it there, but it keeps trouble down."

In Dry Creek, Holt Avery found "Psalm 8" on his workbench. He read it twice, then set his plumb line straighter than Jed had ever seen.

One night in a new settlement, they asked Jed to speak before supper. He climbed two wagon steps, ledger in hand, and read "Psalm 1." As he said the words "*You spread the east open like a hymn*," the sky itself blushed with sunset, and the people gasped as if heaven had underlined the line.

He smiled, closed the ledger, and thought: *The Gospel rides faster when it's written as well as spoken.*

That night, as he lay under the stars, he prayed a psalm not for the ledger but for the Lord alone:

Keep peace in my pocket and on my tongue.

Let these psalms ride further than I can.

And let Your mercy outdistance us both.

The bay sighed. Coyotes fell quiet. And in the hush, Jed felt the truth: the Psalms of Peace would outlive him, because they were not his words at all — they were God's, dressed in trail dust and mercy.

Chapter Ninety-Four – The Old Gun Buried

Section One – The Ride Back to the Grave

Jed rode out alone one morning, the psalter heavy at his hip and the white stone warm in his pocket. The trail took him to a quiet ridge beyond Redemption, where cedars twisted against the wind and the soil turned dark as coal. Here he had dug the grave months ago — shallow, humble, but true.

He dismounted, boots crunching dry grass, and knelt at the mound. The scar on his cheek tingled, memory pressing close. He could almost hear the old revolver whispering from beneath the dirt: the times it had drawn faster than thought, the faces that had fallen when its hammer dropped, the nights when it had been his only friend.

But the mound was different now. The earth had settled. Grass had crept across the top, thin and wild, hiding the scar in the land the way mercy hides the scar in a man. Somewhere under that crust, steel was turning to dust. Rust was gnawing the chamber, water was softening the grip, time was burying the Devil one fleck at a time.

Jed laid his hand flat on the soil. “Stay there,” he whispered. “Never rise again. The man who held you is gone.”

He read aloud Romans 6:11: “*Reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.*” The words rang truer for being spoken into the wind, over a grave where death was being swallowed by life.

Section Two – A Memorial of Mercy

Jed gathered stones from the ridge and piled them over the grave — not as a cairn of warning, but as a monument of grace. With each rock he set, he prayed:

“For the men I killed — Lord, forgive me.”

“For the women I widowed — Lord, heal them.”

“For the child who prayed for me — Lord, answer her.”

“For the name I once bore — Lord, keep it buried.”

When the pile rose waist-high, he set the last stone flat, smoothed its face, and carved one word with his knife: **Redeemed.**

The letters were rough, shallow, but enough. Anyone who stumbled across the mound might think it marked a man’s bones. In truth, it marked the death of an outlaw’s soul — and the birth of a brother’s.

As he worked, a verse returned to him, steady and strong: “*As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us.*” (Psalm 103:12). He smiled, brushing dirt from his palms. “Then let the east winds take the Devil’s name. Let the west winds carry it where I’ll never hear it again.”

He sat by the mound till sundown, watching shadows stretch across the cedar ridge. Coyotes called in the distance, but their voices no longer made him reach for iron. His hand rested on the psalter instead, and peace filled the hollow where fear had once lived.

Section Three – The Old Gun Forgotten

That night he camped near the grave, fire small, stars sharp. He dreamed not of demons dragging him to pits of flame, but of grass growing tall over iron that would never fire again. In his dream, children played hopscotch across the mound, and their laughter rang louder than gunshots ever had.

He woke smiling. The scar on his cheek felt cool in the dawn. He stood, packed his gear, and laid his palm one last time on the stone that read **Redeemed.**

“Rust there, old friend,” he said softly. “Rust till nothing’s left. My fight is over. Christ has won.”

Then he mounted the bay and rode back toward the horizon, psalter tapping steady at his side. The revolver rusted beneath the soil, its grip cracked, its chamber hollowing. No hand would ever draw it again.

And in its grave, under the word *Redeemed*, the Devil lay buried too.

Chapter Ninety-Five – A Wedding Feast in the Desert

Section One – Invitation at the Oasis

The trail threw heat like a forge that afternoon, the kind that makes horizon lines wobble and turns every mesquite's shadow into a promise of shade. Jed rode with his hat brim low and the psalter tapping his hip, following the thread of a dry wash until the wash surprised him with water—an honest, shining pool tucked between cottonwoods. Voices lifted from its edge: laughter, a fiddle testing strings, someone calling for more cups.

An oasis wedding.

Lanterns hung from branches like small suns. A long table of sawhorses and planks waited under canvas—stacked with fry bread, stewed beans, peaches sugared in jars, and coffee already thickening the air. Women wove ribbon through a brush arbor; men set posts true; children ran in a bright tangle, their joy the only dust they kicked up on purpose.

A gray-bearded padre spotted Jed and waved him in with both hands. “Amigo, we lack a reader and a rider’s blessing. Will you lend the Word and your voice?” His smile had the unarguable logic of hospitality.

Jed swung down, tied off the bay, and felt his scar cool in the shade. “If the Lord lets me, padre, I will.”

The groom was a ranch hand with a sunburnt neck and nerves he tried to hide; the bride wore a dress borrowed and re-stitched and newly beautiful because hope had put it on. Her mother tucked a stray hair as if building a nest. The bride looked up at Jed with that particular mix of terror and joy that only covenant draws out of a human face. “Will you read the part about the feast?” she asked.

He knew which one. “*Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come... Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb.*” (Revelation 19:7,9) He nodded, and the padre patted his arm like they’d agreed on thunder at sunset.

Someone tuned the fiddle proper; someone else checked the coffee and pronounced it righteous. The wind came low off the water and cooled the heat’s teeth. Jed stood where he could see both the arbor and the pool, and he remembered Cana—water drawn, joy poured, a quiet miracle saving a loud celebration (John 2:1–11). “Do it again, Lord,” he prayed under his breath. “Not wine this time—hearts.”

Section Two – Bread, Cups, and Covenant

When the sun leaned west, the padre called them under the arbor. The crowd answered with the hush of people who suspect heaven's leaning in to listen. The bride and groom stood hand in hand, their fingers already telling the truth their mouths would soon swear to. Jed opened the psalter; the pages crackled like a campfire taking.

He read first from Hosea, because desert weddings like promises that outlast drought: *"I will betroth thee unto me for ever... in righteousness, and in judgment, and in lovingkindness, and in mercies."* (Hosea 2:19). The bride's mother wept without apology. The groom swallowed hard and squared his shoulders as if the future had weight he was eager to carry.

Then Jed lifted his voice and gave them Revelation's trumpet: *"Let us be glad and rejoice... Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb."* (Revelation 19:7,9). The amen that answered sounded like plates set down and chairs pulled close—the ordinary holiness of a people ready to eat together.

Vows came next, plain as fence posts and just as necessary. No florid words, just stout ones: to keep, to forgive, to stay. When the rings wouldn't slide thanks to sweat and nerves, the padre laughed and baptized the moment with a splash from the oasis. They slid fine then. "Living water," he grinned (John 4:10).

Jed stepped forward with the only gift he'd brought: a short length of hemp and a splice he'd tied neat—two lines joined without cutting either, stronger for being wound together. "A picture," he said, holding it up so the crowd could see. "Two made one, and the Lord the third strand keeping you tight. *A threefold cord is not quickly broken.*" (Ecclesiastes 4:12). The groom tucked the splice into his breast pocket like a pledge; the bride touched it with two fingers like a prayer.

They broke bread then—actual loaves, not merely symbols—and passed cups. The padre said grace that sounded like Psalm 23 in frontier tongue: "You set a table in a thirsty land; our cups run over; surely goodness and mercy are following this couple across every mile." (Psalm 23:5–6). Children wriggled, then stilled as peaches found their plates. Someone struck the first true chord on the fiddle, and a laugh went up that had been waiting all day to be born.

Jed lifted his own tin cup and, for the couple, for the town that wasn't quite a town, for the desert that had granted a pool at the right hour, he read one more—Isaiah's feast promise, because every wedding deserves a prophecy: *"And in this mountain shall the Lord of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things... he will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from off all faces."* (Isaiah 25:6,8). The groom's father said a rough amen; the bride's grandmother said a softer one that somehow sounded louder.

Then the music took over, as it should. Boots scuffed. Skirts swung. Stars pricked holes in the indigo and watched with old joy. Jed danced once with the bride because she asked, and once with a little girl who told him quite seriously he did it wrong and then taught him better. He learned fast. He always had; redemption had simply changed what he was quick at.

Section Three – Foretaste and Sending

Later, after the last slice of fry bread had been divided the way miracles are, the padre nodded Jed toward a stump by the water—the makeshift pulpit again. The crowd gathered, some sitting, some leaning, all content. The groom and bride held hands with the lazy grip of people who intend to keep holding them for fifty years.

Jed opened his ledger instead of his psalter and read a fresh entry he'd written while the coffee boiled earlier:

Psalm of the Desert Wedding

*O Bridegroom who needs no tent to shade His joy,
spread Your banner over this arbor like cloud and fire.
We have bread and beans and peaches enough—
but give us the feast that lasts when plates are empty.
We have a pool for rings that won't slide—
but give us living water, cold and clear,
that makes old hearts young and hard hearts soft.
Make this table a practice table,
this music a rehearsal,
this kiss a signpost that points our lips and eyes
toward a city where the lamps never gutter,
and the Bride is ready, and the Bridegroom smiles.*

He closed the book and let the quiet do what only quiet can. Then he spoke like a man who'd spent time at both kinds of tables—gun-cleaning and Gospel: "I've seen feasts end badly. I've seen them end in gun smoke and cussing. But this—" he gestured to crumbs and cups and a fiddle catching its breath — "this feels like the right ending because it isn't an ending. It's a beginning that points further on. If you ever doubt it, read Revelation 19 again and invite the whole street to dinner."

He blessed them with the blessing that had walked beside him since Redemption, hands raised, voice steady: "*The Lord make His face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee... and give thee peace.*" (Numbers 6:25–26). Peace arrived on the wind like the smell of coffee refilling itself.

When the stars were thick and the fire a red eye, Jed saddled the bay. The groom hugged him as if brothers were a thing you could become in an afternoon; the bride kissed his scar with the innocent gratitude of someone who knows a story ended badly and then, by mercy, didn't. The padre pressed two leftover peaches into his saddlebag as if sacraments came sugared in jars.

Jed turned once more at the edge of lantern light. The arbor glowed. Laughter braided into hymn. He could almost hear the line the Spirit loves to hum at such hours: "*Even so, come, Lord Jesus.*" (Revelation 22:20).

He rode out under a sky busy with promises, the psalter tapping time, the ledger heavier by one psalm, the white stone warm against his palm. The desert cooled and grew generous, and the trail felt less like leaving and more like carrying the party forward—table by table, town by town—until the day the invitations are not folded paper but trumpet sound, and the feast is not a rehearsal but Home.

Chapter Ninety-Six – Tears Wiped Away

Section One – The House of Mourning

The trail had taught Jed to tell the difference between a town in its ordinary rhythm and a town walking under sorrow. When he rode into Willow Bend, he knew it at once. Shutters stayed closed even in the heat, children kept to their porches, and hammer blows were hushed instead of proud. He dismounted at the well and asked a ranch hand drawing water, “What’s happened here?”

The man’s eyes were red. “Holt family lost their little girl. Fever took her in three days. Mama’s near broke, Daddy’s worse. We don’t even know if they’ll come to the service.”

Jed felt his scar tingle, not with shame this time, but with compassion. He had once been the cause of mourning. Now God had called him to step into it. “Where are they?”

The man nodded toward a cabin at the edge of town. Its porch sagged under shadows. No smoke lifted from its chimney.

Jed tied off the bay and walked soft up the steps. He didn’t knock hard, just called, “It’s Jed. A brother passing through.” Silence. Then the door creaked open and a hollow-eyed man looked out. His face was cracked with days of weeping, his shirt still unbuttoned as if he hadn’t cared to dress proper.

“What do you want?”

“To sit with you,” Jed said simply. “To read a Word that might hold you up when nothing else will.”

The father’s lips trembled. He opened the door wider. “Come in, then. If it’ll do anything.”

Inside, the mother sat with the child’s dress folded in her lap, rocking it as if it still had weight. She looked at Jed with eyes drained of fight. “Preacher man?”

“Just a sinner saved by grace,” Jed said gently. “But I’ve carried tears myself, and I know the One who bottles them all.”

He set his psalter on the table, the white stone glinting as he reached for it, and prayed silently, *Lord, give me Your words. Not mine.*

Section Two – The Word of Comfort

The silence in the cabin was heavy, broken only by the mother’s soft rocking and the rasp of the father’s breath. Jed opened the psalter to Revelation 21 and read slow, each word deliberate, letting the Spirit place them like stones in trembling hands.

“And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”

The mother clutched the dress tighter, tears spilling anew. The father bowed his head into his hands. Jed let the silence breathe again, then spoke low. “I can’t give you answers that make sense of this. But I can tell you this promise is truer than the ground under your boots. Death will not have the last word. Pain won’t be forever. And the tears you shed—He will wipe them away Himself.”

The father shook his head. “Feels like He’s far.”

Jed’s scar cooled as he leaned forward. “So did I, once. I thought I was too far gone for Him to hear. But He found me in the dust and the fire. If He came for me, He’ll sit here with you. The Word says He’s close to the brokenhearted and saves those crushed in spirit” (Psalm 34:18).

The mother whispered, voice thin, “Do you think... she’s safe with Him?”

Jed’s eyes shone. “Safer than she ever could’ve been here. Jesus said, ‘*Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God.*’ (Mark 10:14). Your little one’s hand is in His, and He won’t let go.”

The mother sobbed and at last set down the folded dress. The father reached for her hand and gripped it like a drowning man finding rope. Jed bowed his head and prayed aloud: “Lord, let this promise breathe in this house. Wipe their tears even now. Give them hope that the grave is not forever. And hold their child close, until they meet again.”

When he finished, the silence felt different. Still heavy, but not empty. Full, somehow, with Presence.

Section Three – The Comfort of Hope

That evening, the family walked with Jed to the chapel at the edge of town. The whole community had gathered, unsure how to comfort, afraid to say the wrong words. Jed stood with the Holts in the front row, scar shining faint under lamplight, psalter in his hand.

He read Revelation 21:4 again, strong this time, so all could hear: “*And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.*” He looked at the congregation. “We can’t wipe them all tonight. But He will. That’s His promise.”

Then he stepped back and let the people do what the body of Christ was made to do. Women hugged the grieving mother, men clasped the father’s hand, children laid flowers on the pew where the little girl should’ve sat. The Holts wept, but they wept no longer alone.

Afterward, as the stars pricked the desert sky, the father turned to Jed. “I thought I was done with God. But hearing that... maybe He isn’t done with me.”

Jed laid a hand on his shoulder. “He isn’t. And one day, brother, those tears you shed tonight will be the last. Till then, let us carry them with you.”

The Holts walked home hand in hand, steps slow but together. Jed mounted the bay, psalter thumping at his side. He looked back once, saw a candle glowing in their window where there had been only darkness before, and whispered the verse again into the night:

“*And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.*”

And under the stars, with dust rising soft from his horse's hooves, Jed believed it deeper than ever: the Gospel was not only for outlaws and sinners, but for the brokenhearted too.

Chapter Ninety-Seven – The New Jerusalem Rises

Section One – The Dream Begins

That night, after the long day in Willow Bend, Jed made camp under a cottonwood near the river. The Holts had gone home with a measure of peace, the town had sung itself quiet, and Jed lay on his bedroll, scar turned cool in the night breeze. His psalter rested on his chest, the white stone in his pocket pressing like a promise.

Sleep came heavy, but not empty. He found himself standing barefoot on ground that glowed like hammered gold. No dust rose, no mud clung — the street itself was clear as glass, and every step hummed with life.

He lifted his eyes, and what he saw made his breath catch even in the dream: a city rising like dawn itself, radiant, walls glimmering with jasper, foundations studded with colors no desert sunset could match. Gates tall as cedars swung open, each one carved from pearl, shining in a light that came from no sun or lamp.

And the voice — oh, the voice. Deep as thunder, soft as prayer: *“Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them.”* (Revelation 21:3).

Jed fell to his knees, tears burning but sweet, and whispered, “So this is Home.”

Section Two – The City of Light

The dream carried him further in. He walked the streets like a man afraid to blink in case the beauty vanished. Children ran ahead, their laughter echoing like bells, and he realized some of their faces were the very ones he had buried with sorrow — safe now, shining, alive forever.

He looked for a temple, but there was none. Instead, light poured from the throne itself, where the Lamb stood, scarred yet glorious. The Lamb was lamp and sun and morning all in one. Jed covered his face, trembling, and whispered the verse as if it had always been waiting for him: *“And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof.”* (Revelation 21:23).

He walked further. Nations streamed in, their banners lowered, their weapons gone. Kings brought gifts, not greed. No locks barred the gates, for there was nothing left to fear.

Jed touched the wall and found it warm, alive somehow, as if mercy itself had hardened into jasper. He knelt by the river flowing from the throne, water clear as crystal, and drank deep. It washed every scar inside him clean, every memory of gun smoke and grief dissolved into joy.

Looking into the stream, he saw not the scarred outlaw's face, but a beloved son's, radiant with reflected light. He laughed aloud, and the sound startled him — for it was full, free, whole.

Section Three – Promise in the Morning

The vision swelled, carrying him higher, until he saw the city's shape from above: foursquare, perfect, radiant as a bride adorned for her husband. A voice spoke again, nearer now, familiar as Josiah's blessing, stronger than any thunder: "*Behold, I make all things new.*" (Revelation 21:5).

Jed whispered back, "All things — even me."

As the voice faded into song, Jed felt the dream loosen, and the city blurred into dawn. He woke under the cottonwood, the river beside him murmuring like the water of life, the psalter still on his chest.

The scar on his cheek felt cool, as though heaven's river had touched it in truth. He sat up, whispering Revelation 21:4 once more: "*And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.*"

For the rest of the morning, he rode silent, the bay's hooves steady on the trail. But in his chest, the city still shone. He knew then that every mile ahead was not only a mission — it was a road home, leading straight to that Holy City.

And as the New Jerusalem rose in his dream, it rose also in his heart, steady as sunrise, bright as promise.

Chapter Ninety-Eight – Light Over the Badlands

Section One – Before the Light

Jed broke camp while the world was still a held breath. The stars were thinning, coyotes giving their last, uncertain yips as if even sorrow knew to hush before morning. He cinched the bay's girth, slid the ledger and psalter into their places, and palmed the white stone in his pocket until it warmed against his skin.

The badlands stretched ahead: mesas like broken altars, arroyos scabbed with shadow, a country that had taught men to keep their hats low and their tempers lower. He eased the bay up a shale spine and halted on a saddle where the whole desert tilted east. Wind smelled of dust and creosote and that cold, metallic promise the air keeps right before dawn.

He thought of Willow Bend, of the Holts' tears, of the way the candle in their window had pushed back a houseful of dark. He thought of the dream that had found him after—the City radiant, the river like crystal, the Lamb Himself the light (Revelation 21:23). It felt near now, as if heaven had ridden out ahead to meet the day.

He set the psalter across the horn and whispered the verse that stitched night to morning: *“It is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed... they are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness.”* (Lamentations 3:22–23) The words lifted steam-like in the chill and didn’t dissipate. They hung there, waiting with him.

Behind him, the horizon held a thin seam of pewter. Ahead, the badlands kept their color to themselves, the way old men keep stories until someone worthy asks. Jed waited, a speck on a ridge, a brother on a horse, a forgiven man expecting light.

Section Two – The Coming Gold

It started so quiet he almost missed it: the world softened around its edges, as if someone had set a hand to the rim of things and gentled them. The pewter seam became silver, then a vein of hammered copper, then—sudden as a laugh—the horizon yawned and spilled gold.

The first line of sun brushed the mesas and they blushed, honest and unable to help it. Greasewood lit like tiny lanterns. The dry river wore a sash of fire. Every thorn on every cholla caught a drop of morning and turned it into a jewel. The bay snorted and tossed his head as if even a horse knows when glory is walking by.

Jed tipped his hat back and let it hit him in the face. The scar along his cheek warmed—not the old burn of shame, but the clean heat a man feels when he steps out of a cold creek and stands in the sun. He laughed, low and surprised, and the sound had no iron in it.

“The night is far spent, the day is at hand,” he said aloud (Romans 13:12). It fit everything he could see. And rolling up behind it, sure as echo, another promise: *“Unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings.”* (Malachi 4:2)

He thumbed open Psalm 19 and read like a man reading his own diary: *“In them hath he set a tabernacle for the sun, which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber... his going forth is from the end of the heaven.”* The words didn’t just describe; they participated. The sun ran its race right there across the badlands, and the badlands cheered.

Jed watched shadow pull back from the arroyos like old fear deciding to move on. He watched a kestrel stitch the new light to the morning with neat, certain wings. He watched the color come back to a country he’d only ever seen in survival tones, and he felt the same thing happening inside his ribs.

He set the white stone on the horn, turned it once in the newborn light, and smiled. The New Jerusalem had been a dream; this was merely sunrise. But both said the same sentence in different accents: *I make all things new.* (Revelation 21:5)

Section Three – Daybreak Vow

The heat that would be cruel by noon was kind at first light, a shawl instead of a brand. Jed sat a while longer and let the sermon finish preaching. He didn't hurry it. Mercy deserves its full minute.

When the sun cleared the last low cloud, he bowed his head and prayed the way trail men talk when there's no one to impress: "Thank You, Lord, for a world that keeps offering practice at resurrection. Thank You that the light has a habit. Do it in me again."

He drew the ledger from his saddlebag and wrote a short psalm, wet ink waking in the gold:

Psalm of the Badlands Sunrise

You drape the mean ground in honey.

You turn knives of stone into altars of praise.

You run a river of light down every scar.

*If morning can forgive a night this long,
then surely Your mercy can forgive a man like me.*

Teach me to be dawn to the places still afraid.

He blew the page dry, tucked the ledger away, and reached for the psalter. One more line—trail-sized, heart-wide: "*There shall be no night there.*" (Revelation 22:5) He looked east and believed it. Until that day, this day would do.

He slipped the white stone back into his pocket, felt its smooth assurance, and gathered the reins. The bay set his feet and picked his way down the shale, hooves careful, head high. As they moved, the badlands quit being bad and became plain land—ranch land, church land, child-laughter land—just waiting for people to treat it like morning.

At the foot of the ridge, he paused and looked back. The sun had climbed; the gold had softened into something you could work in. He thought of the Holts, of every grave that still hurt, of every table that needed one more chair. He thought of cities that rise radiant because God lives there and little towns that start to shine because His people do.

He lifted a hand in quiet benediction over the whole wild country and over his own next miles: "*The Lord make his face shine upon thee.*" (Numbers 6:25)

Then Jed rode on, not to chase the light but to travel with it—Bible tapping his side like a friend, new mercies under his hat brim, and the certainty braided into every hoofbeat that heaven's dawn had already started, and sunrise was just the world practicing.

Chapter Ninety-Nine – The Rider in White

Section One – The Sky Splits

Jed had seen strange things in his dreams: fires that wouldn't burn a Bible, crosses glowing in desert storms, demons laughing from shadows. But nothing like this.

He was camped in the high mesas, sky spread like an ocean of ink. The stars blinked steady, coyotes quiet, the fire a small red eye. Sleep came slow, heavy with Scripture, until the world dropped away and he found himself standing on a plain wide enough to hold eternity.

The sky cracked. Not with lightning, not with storm, but with light — white fire ripping heaven wide open. Trumpets blared, not the echo of thunder but the song of victory.

And then He came.

A Rider on a white horse, galloping out of heaven's breach, robes dipped in blood but radiant as the sun. His eyes burned with flame, His crown bore many crowns, and His name — a name no man knew but Himself. Jed trembled, knees buckling, heart pounding.

He whispered the Scripture that flooded his spirit: *"And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war."* (Revelation 19:11).

The armies followed, clothed in white, riding behind Him. But it was the Rider alone that held Jed's gaze. Faithful and True. The One outlaw scars could never undo.

Section Two – The Conqueror of Conquerors

The Rider's sword was not steel. From His mouth came a sharp Word, glowing, living, cutting. Nations fell silent before it. Enemies Jed had feared — the Devil's Horsemen, the drifter cloaked in shadow, every whisper of death — all shrank like smoke in a gale.

Jed saw banners torn down, idols splintered, thrones overturned. No bullet, no blade, no army could resist the Word that thundered from His lips.

And on His robe, written bold where all could see: *KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.*

Jed's scar flamed — but this time not with shame or torment. It glowed as if even that old wound bowed to the greater scar borne by the Rider's hands. He dropped to the ground, crying, "Jesus! Jesus!"

The Rider's gaze met his, fierce yet tender. And Jed knew — this was the One he had been running from, and the One who had found him. The Lamb who became Lion, the Savior who became Judge.

Tears streamed as he whispered, "You win, Lord. You win forever."

Then he saw it: the Devil himself, the deceiver, chained by an angel, cast down. The laughter that had haunted Jed's nights was silenced. The chains that rattled in his dreams shattered like straw in flame.

He heard the shout of heaven's host: *"Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth!"* (Revelation 19:6).

Jed fell flat, hands pressed to the glowing plain, and all his outlaw past dissolved in the light of the Rider who conquers.

Section Three – Waking with Fire

The vision swelled, thundered, then gentled. The Rider drew near, reaching out His scarred hand. Jed thought his heart would burst as Christ whispered one word over him: “Beloved.”

Then the light folded, the sky closed, and Jed woke. The fire had gone to coals, the horse dozed nearby, dawn just stirring the horizon. But Jed’s face was wet, his chest burning with glory he couldn’t contain.

He rose to his knees, lifted both hands, and cried into the waking desert: “*Even so, come, Lord Jesus.*” (Revelation 22:20).

The bay lifted its head, ears pricked, as if it too had seen something beyond the night. Jed laughed through his tears. “He’s coming, old friend. Not as outlaw, not as drifter — but as King.”

He saddled up, the psalter heavy at his side, the white stone warm against his chest. But this time, the trail felt less like miles and more like minutes. Because after the Rider in White, after the vision of victory, Jed knew the end of the story.

Christ conquers. Forever.

And with that hope blazing brighter than any sunrise, Jed rode on.

Chapter One Hundred – Amen

Section One – The Last Psalm

The town of Redemption gathered at dusk. Word had spread: Brother Jed was back, not for guns or grief, but to give his testimony. The chapel glowed with lamplight, doors open wide, pews packed with neighbors, children perched on windowsills, even Bart polishing mugs at the saloon door but leaning close to listen.

Jed stood at the front, psalter in hand, scar soft in the glow. He had no sermon notes, no grand speech — just a chapter that had carried him through shadow to sunrise.

He opened the Book and read: “*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*” (Psalm 23:1). His voice was steady, each verse rolling like a river across the room. When he spoke of green pastures, people remembered how he had once walked wastelands. When he said, “*Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil,*” mothers wept, for they remembered his duels and his chains. When he read, “*Thou preparest a table before me... my cup runneth over,*” children smiled, remembering the day he broke bread at the river crossing.

And when he came to the last line, his voice broke but did not falter: “*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*” (Psalm 23:6).

Silence followed, then a rising chorus of amens that shook the timbers. Jed closed the psalter, placed it against his chest, and whispered, “Amen indeed.”

Section Two – The Outlaw Redeemed

Afterward, they feasted in the square — fry bread, beans, strong coffee, hymns sung under lantern light. Children ran free, laughter echoing against the clapboard walls that had once heard only gunfire. Sarah sang a psalm, Elias clasped Jed's hand, and Josiah blessed him again, calling him *Jedidiah* — *beloved of the Lord*.

No one spoke of "Devil" anymore. That name was gone, buried under stone and rust. What remained was Brother Jed, a man made new. His scar no longer marked shame but testimony. The holster at his side held no Colt, only the Word of God.

As the night wore on, Jed slipped away from the crowd and walked to the ridge above town. The stars shimmered, the wind whispered through mesquite, and he prayed aloud:

"Lord, You took a man who was your enemy and called him your son. You carried me from dust to dawn, from outlaw to brother. Whatever miles remain, I give them to You. And when this trail ends, I'll ride through those gates of pearl and lay down every burden at Your feet."

A peace deeper than silence filled him. The Rider in White still thundered in his heart, the New Jerusalem still shone in his dream, and the psalms of peace still rode in his ledger. The outlaw was gone. The redeemed man remained.

Section Three – The Word Triumphant

As dawn broke, Jed mounted the bay once more. He turned back to see the town of Redemption bathed in sunrise, golden as heaven's promise. He touched the psalter, the white stone, the scar on his cheek, and smiled.

"Not my story," he said softly. "His."

He rode on, not as a fugitive but as a herald. Each hoofbeat carried the Gospel further, each mile marked another chance to tell of grace. Behind him, Redemption lived up to its name. Ahead of him, the Kingdom drew nearer with every sunrise.

And somewhere in the wind, he heard the echo of Scripture itself, final and eternal:

"These words are faithful and true... Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus."
(Revelation 22:6,20).

Jed lifted his hand to the sky, whispered one last prayer, and let it seal his life's trail:

"Amen."

The scarred outlaw was gone.
The redeemed brother rode on.
The Word of God triumphed.

Forever.

Epilogue – The Legend of Redemption

Years later, when the dust of Jed's trail had settled and the bay horse no longer thundered across the ridges, his name was still spoken in the towns of the frontier. But not the old name. Never "Six Gun Devil." That title had rusted away beneath a cairn of stone.

Around campfires, drovers and ranch hands told the story of **Jedidiah Cross**, the outlaw turned brother. They spoke of the day he nailed his Colt to a cross, of the bridge at Penance Crossing where guns were laid aside for Scripture, of the stone psalms he left in ledgers and posts across the badlands. Children grew up hearing that once there was a man so feared that even shadows whispered his name — until Christ gave him another.

They called him *the Rider with the Book*. Some swore they had seen him in visions, riding trails of light with a psalter where a gun should've been. Others said that in their darkest nights, they remembered his words: "*No more blood in the streets. No more Devil in my soul. Only Christ.*"

In Redemption, the chapel walls still bore his testimony. Above the pulpit hung the word he had carved so many times in so many places: **Redeemed**. On the ridge outside town, the cairn where his revolver rusted away remained, marked with that same word. Travelers would pause there, lay a stone of their own, and whisper prayers over their sins, leaving them buried with the old gun.

The ledger he filled with his "Psalms of Peace" passed from hand to hand, copied until whole towns could recite them. Cowboys in line camps sang his sunrise psalms over their coffee. Widows prayed his canyon psalm when grief stalked near. Children chalked "WHOSOEVER" on boards and fences, carrying the ribbon story into another generation.

And in every retelling, the end was the same: the outlaw who once lived by iron died to it and rose in Christ. His scar no longer spoke of shame but of grace. His story was not one of death, but of life.

The Rider Lives On

Around one particular fire, an old preacher would end the tale like this:

"They feared him once. They whispered Devil. But God called him Jedidiah — Beloved of the Lord. And the last word over his life was the same word that closes the Book."

Then he'd lift his Bible, eyes wet in the firelight, and whisper with all the weight of the trail behind him:

"Amen."

And the cowhands, the widows, the children listening wide-eyed — they'd all answer together, voices ringing like a promise:

"Amen."

Note from the Author

Dear Reader,

This story was born out of a question: *Is anyone ever too far gone for redemption?* The character of Jed — once feared as the Six Gun Devil — is my answer. He embodies the truth of Scripture: “*Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.*” (Romans 5:20).

I wanted to write a Western not about the glory of the gun, but about the triumph of grace. The frontier was a land of dust, blood, and hard choices — but also of wide skies that seemed big enough to hold God’s promises. In those harsh lands, I set an outlaw who could not outrun his past, only to discover he could not outrun Christ either.

Every verse woven through this story — from Psalm 23 to Revelation 21 — is a reminder that God speaks across deserts, saloons, graves, and hearts scarred by sin. Jed’s scar was never erased; it was transformed. And that is the heart of redemption: not the erasing of our story, but the rewriting of its ending.

My prayer is that, as you close this book, you carry with you the same hope Jed found — that no matter your past, there is a Rider in White, Faithful and True, who comes to conquer, forgive, and make all things new.

Until the trumpet sounds and the trail ends, may we all ride with the Word in our holsters, the cross before us, and the cry of *Amen* in our hearts.

In Christ,

Dr. Paul Crawford

THE BIBLE WAY TO HEAVEN

1. Admit you are a sinner.

"For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God."

(Romans 3:23)

No one is good enough to go to Heaven on his own merit.

No matter how much good we do, we still come short.

2. Realize the penalty for sin.

"For the wages of sin is death..." (Romans 6:23a) Just as there are wages for good, there is punishment for wrong. The penalty for our sin is eternal death in a place called Hell.

3. Believe that Jesus Christ died, was buried, and rose again for you.

"That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved." (Romans 10:9)

4. Trust Christ alone as your Saviour.

"...But the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 6:23b)

"For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Romans 10:13)

Eternal life is a gift purchased by the blood of Jesus and offered freely to those who call upon Him by faith.

Anyone who believes on the Lord Jesus Christ will be saved forever.

Being saved is a one-time event.

Dr. Paul Crawford is more than just a Christian Author; His books are a source of inspiration and guidance on your spiritual journey. His books are created with a deep sense of faith and a desire to uplift and inspire all who read.