

Excerpt/Once An Outlaw

Veronica had hoped to ride alongside Caine helping with the horses, enjoying the sunshine. Instead, she was cooped up inside the coach with Janis and Fannie. She looked at Fannie sitting next to her and wondered what was going on in her head as she knitted that ridiculously long scarf.

The ride was pleasant enough as far as the padded cushions on the velvet seats were concerned, but her companions were not the best of company in light of the previous night events.

Murdock's death hit Brad hard, causing him to lose control so bad that Mark was concerned that he would try to find Black Jack in the dark while half-crazy with anger and grief, allowing his futile actions to risk his own safety. Amazingly, Janis was the only voice he would hear and he allowed her to lead him up to his room to finally get some rest.

All that happened while she enjoyed a lovely time with Caine discussing their future until she fell asleep in his arms. She woke up alone thinking everything was going well at last and then at breakfast Fannie told her the news about Murdock's being gunned down in the street and Brad's reaction to it.

Veronica watched Janis sleeping on the seat across from her. The poor thing was exhausted from sitting up with Brad and then taking her leave of Gerald that morning somehow securing her loan to open a diner in Gingerville. He even watched her load up and settle in the coach before lighting his first cigar of the day. If it were anyone else but Gerald, she would have thought the man watched Janis with a touch of ironic admiration.

Veronica looked at Fannie again discovering the other woman already had her eyes on her profile.

"Why do you keep sneaking peeks at me? If you want to talk just say something," Fannie suggested sweetly.

"Thank you, but I learned how to start a conversation years ago," Veronica retorted just as sweetly leaning into the cushioned backrest closing her eyes, deciding she really didn't like Fannie Cagle very much, even if she couldn't think of a real reason. "What was that?" Her eyes flew open at the loud high sound.

"Gunshots!" Janis cried fully awake reaching into her purse for her pistol. Fannie screamed for Mark sticking her head out of the small window.

“Get in here!” Veronica pulled Fannie back inside. “Are you crazy?” Not waiting for a reply she quickly grabbed the Winchester from under the seat and made sure it was fully loaded. The coach began to pick up speed and Mister Johnson yelled for them to get down to the floor. She heard Caine yell at the driver to stop. Either he didn’t hear the order or he decided to ignore it. Risking a peek outside her window she saw Caine pulling up alongside the driver’s seat. A bullet whizzed by her face and Caine must have felt it too, because he abruptly took a quick glance over his shoulder aiming his pistol intending to shoot, instead he yelled at her to get her head back inside.

“What’s happening?” Fannie asked with wide frightened eyes.

“Johnson won’t stop. Now, we have riders behind us.”

“Oh no. That means Mark and the others are sitting ducks!” Fannie cried putting her hand to her chest.

“Not if I have anything to say about it. I’m covering this side,” Veronica announced as she positioned herself and took aim with her rifle outside her window and began firing. She counted six riders. Without having to see it, she knew Janis was diligently covering the other side.

She looked ahead and around for Caine on her side, all she saw was Brandy trailing after Mark and Brad. “Caine!” she screamed fearing he was shot and fell from his horse. “Caine!”

“Ronnie, keep firing from the rear!” It was his voice, but from where?

“He’s on top driving,” Fannie informed her.

“I got one!” Janis shouted. “Come on Ronnie, shoot!” Janis fired until her gun was empty, while she reloaded Veronica hit a rider square in the chest, knocking him off his ride. Her next shot hit one of the horses sending its rider flying. The remaining three split up in three directions. Janis somehow got the center bandit in the head.

The last two pulled back, seeing they were being picked off like flies they cut off heading toward the trees.

“We’re slowing down!” Fannie said.

“Aaah!” Janis screamed falling back inside the coach holding her hand. “Damn it.”

“Janis, you okay?” Veronica asked watching the bandits disappear in the trees. One of them had gotten lucky and shot the pistol from Janis’ hand.

“I lost my pistol,” she whimpered. “I loved that pistol.”

Veronica felt the coach pulling to a halt. Fannie screamed and pointed out of Janis’ window. Two riders were emerging from the trees.

“Get out, now!” Caine commanded jumping from the driver’s seat to usher the women into the trees then joined Brad and Mark taking cover from behind the coach.

“I counted four,” Mark said reloading.

“Is that including those two coming down the hill?” Caine asked.

“Damn it!” Mark roared. “Ronnie, toss me that Winchester!” She didn’t hesitate to comply. Mark pointed the rifle at the riders and fired twice. Both riders hit the ground dead. “Now, it’s four.” He tossed the gun back to its owner then claimed his position opposite Caine with both guns drawn.

Brad joined the women in the trees offering Janis one of his pistols. “You and Veronica help watch the rear,” he suggested before climbing slightly up the hill a short distance away.

“Oh, look at poor Mister Johnson,” Fannie said sadly. “I think he’s dead.”

“He should’ve followed orders.” Brad was unsympathetic to the man lying across the driver’s seat. “He jeopardized us all by taking off like that.”

The kid was right, Caine silently agreed, although he wished he had at least tried to pull the man to safety, but everything had happened so quickly and his mind was on the women. More than likely, Fannie was right about him being dead. He shouldn’t have panicked like that.

Veronica and Janis handled themselves better than a lot of men in their situation, the way they picked off those bandits and was taking it all in stride. Veronica’s back was to him standing against a tree scanning the area calmly just as Brad told her. As if sensing his perusal she looked over her shoulder and gave him her best smile, warming his heart. She was so brave.

“Caine, look sharp! Over in that thicket,” Mark indicated with a toss of his head. “Caught a flash of something shiny. They’re signaling each other.”

Caine saw some tall bushes come together on the other side proving Mark’s assumption. They fired into the bushes while Brad, Veronica and Janis handled the wooded area behind them. Seemed at least one shooter thought he could get the drop on them. After a few minutes, the gunfire ceased and Caine asked, “Is everyone still with us?”

“No, Brad went up there,” Veronica said pointing her rifle barrel up the hill.

Caine yelled Brad’s name at the top of his lungs then waited for a response. The voice that yelled for Caine was not Brad’s.

“I want to talk to Fuller!”

“You got me!”

“Name’s Quik”

“And?”

“We want the horses and we want you- for the death of our pal, Lucien Graves! You come out and we’ll let the others go!”

Caine looked at Mark. “How many men did Graves have?”

“About ten, according to Gerald. It was his lucky number or something. Which if that is true, there’s three men out there and we know exactly where one of them is,” Mark smiled. “What say we empty our guns in that loud mouth?”

Caine reloaded and Mark drew his second. There was a scream for help. “That you, Quik?” Caine asked. “Need some help over there?”

“Fuller! I want to come out!” It didn’t sound like Quik.

“Murphy, you coward! Get back here!”

“I’m hurt! I’m getting the hell out while-”

“Murphy, I’ll shoot you myself if you walk away from this! Red is out there! He’ll-”

A shot rang out followed by several more and someone, probably Murphy screamed for a few second then all was quiet.

“It’s Brad,” Mark smiled. “He sneaked around. “Hey kid! You okay out there!”

“Hell yeah!” He strolled out of the thicket placing his gun in its holster.

“That took grit, Bannon,” Caine said impressed putting his own weapon away.

“I wasn’t looking forward to spending the night out here,” Brad said adjusting his hat then went to stand with Janis. He grinned for the first time that day when she placed his other pistol inside his other holster.

“Brad, that was something special,” Janis said throwing her arms around his neck marveling at his bravery. Gerald never would have picked up a gun let alone risk his life to help his friends. “Oh Brad,” she whispered.

“Just did what I’m good at,” he said putting his arms around her.

“Looking out for you,” he added solemnly hugging her close.

“Caine?” Veronica was in his arms being crushed as he silently rocked with her kissing her hair.

“If I had lost you darlin,” he said quietly.

“Don’t think about that, sweetheart. We are safe.” Then she thought of Mister Johnson. Fortunately, Fannie and Mark thought to render the wounded man aid. He was not dead, just fainted from the strain of trying to control the horses with a bullet in his upper back. He was placed in the back of the coach with Fannie to look after him, while Janis rode shotgun with Brad in the driver’s seat. Veronica got her wish to ride horseback with Caine driving the horses home.