

Chapter 1 Pg. 1

*Lydia! Wake up, Lydia! You have to run!*

*G U H!!*

Burning.

Lungs and eyes are burning.

Thick black smoke engulfs her vision as she coughs and writhes to life in a small ditch. Her entire body aches and her head is throbbing, but she claws her way out of that ditch and manages to stumble away. Making it about a hundred feet before collapsing again. Head spinning, head pounding. So much smoke, but at least she's managed to get out of the thick of it. With shaky limbs, her petite body raises to its feet again. Head turned to look back at the small school that was engulfed in flames. Green eyes take in the sight of her home being destroyed, before they shift to the old Maple tree standing a few yards away from the school. From its branches hung the students. Lydia's students. The children she took care of, the children she gave her heart and soul to teach. Murdered for simply living in the south. A south that already treated its poor like dirt, sending its men to fight barefoot for the plantation owners slaves.

The scream Miss Lydia Lynch let off that day was said to be the call of a banshee, though the only ones that heard it were the men responsible for the murder. Heads held high as they rode away from the scene, not a lick of regret or remorse in any of them. They joked about those wails of pain, laughing at the idea of some wailing spirit of vengeance. What they didn't know yet, was that some legends are true...

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Southern Texas is a wide open and barren country. Sharp and spiny scrub brush grows from the inhospitable rock and sand, both of which fry underneath an unforgiving sun. On the horizon today was an odd sight though. It was a scrawny little woman in a torn up blouse, stumbling her way through the Texas heat. Red hair dull and caked to her freckled face from blood, sweat and dirt. The poor thing looks like she was thrown from a moving train, or at least, that's what the man who spotted her thought.

He was your typical dusty outlaw. An ugly mug with scratchy stubble growing on a chin split with a scar. Teeth stained yellow from cigarettes and an old horse that's probably stolen.

"What in the Sam-Hell do we have here?"

He says as he rides up to Lydia. Her head refused to raise or acknowledge the man, though he was soon dismounting in order to stand in her way.

"Now hold on lil lady, you look like shit."

There was an almost snarky and jeering tone to his voice, as if he found Lydia's condition funny. Already, she hated him. A lot. Anger bubbling deep inside like a pot about to boil over.

"Hrm...Wouldn't look too bad after a wash though. I think ah'll take ya with me, scrub ya down in the crik~"

His rough, filthy hand reached out and grabbed her arm. It was the last thing he did, because Lydia immediately grabbed the knife sticking out of his belt with her free arm. It happened so fast that the bewildered outlaw had no idea how to react, not until the blade was stuck a few inches deep into his chest.

"You...bitch-"

Blood spurts from his mouth as he shoves Lydia back, only for her to move to the side and trip him. His body landed face first, driving the knife deeper into his heart. His horse was now her horse, via the rule of finders keepers. So was his water, which she drank so fast she puked. Bacon and biscuits were also in his pack, but she wasn't hungry. All she cared about was the gun on his belt and the horse. Now, for those of you unfamiliar with riding, it can be brutal on someone not used to it. There's also pants and boots made specifically to make things more comfortable, and Lydia had none of them. She knew how to ride from her time growing up on a farm though, so she saddled up and went North.

What was North? A small town where she could bathe and rest. A place for her to process what happened, though it was still a few days away. Lydia would have to camp under the stars with the supplies she's gotten from her first kill. Her very first murder. That man probably deserved what he got, but Lydia doesn't know that for sure. Her hands are literally stained with the blood of a total stranger, but her expression hasn't changed since she left the school. She hasn't said a word or made a sound either, her mind and body were on autopilot as she galloped across the horizon on her new horse.

Getting off that horse would end up being the hardest part once it was time to set up camp. The inside of her legs, her crotch and her feet were so sore she could hardly move them. Riding hard in a saddle was painful when you weren't equipped for it. It was so bad she literally fell out of the thing, crashing against the ground before sucking air through her gritted teeth. Her hands were bloody and practically skinned from how torn up they were. That little Irish woman still got up though. She got up and gathered firewood. She tied the horse next to a babbling brook nearby and drank her own fill. She lit her fire and ate her bacon and biscuits. Then, she had nothing else to do. She finally had a moment of silence, a moment where her mind could come out of autopilot. She cried. She cried big, ugly tears with big ugly sobs. The dirt and blood on her hands stained her freckled cheeks as she wiped them. Her entire world had suddenly crashed down onto her with the weight of everything that had happened.

The entire time of war, the men that hit her over the head then left her in a ditch to die, The fact that what she loved the most was gone. Her school house and her students, murdered and burnt to the ground. Lydia is a farm girl born from two poor Irish immigrants. She grew up pushing a plow and feeding their two hogs. She wasn't built to survive like some coyote, noor could she handle the fact that she just killed a man. It was all too much and it crashed over her all at once.

Lydia eventually passed out from the exhaustion. She slept a deep sleep, deep enough to practically be a corpse. At this point, she looked like one.

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The sun peaks over the horizon, its illumination of the small valleys and peaks marking the arrival of Dawn. Fresh dew coats the little world that Lydia slumbers in. Her simple blouse, ripped and filthy, glinted in the light from the small droplets condensing on it. She hasn't moved or made a sound since she fell asleep last night. Even her little fire had completely burnt out, with just the faintest wisp of smoke to prove it was ever alive.

Alas, it was the huffing of the old mare that finally woke up Lydia. Her puffy eyes opened with the aftermath of her breakdown last night. Her body is now sore and stiff from the countless bruises and cuts. Survival was once again the first priority for the former teacher. A groan of agony escaped through gritted teeth as she forced herself to stand up once again. A short trip to the babbling brook where her mare is tied helps get the blood flowing again. Cool water helps ease the pain in her cracked hands, so she soaks them for a good fifteen minutes. The horse next to her looks refreshed and ready to go however, it's damp nose nudging Lydia's shoulder as if to say "let's go. We have to keep moving."

So they did.

Lydia steeled herself and saddled up before cutting off to the North. Towards that small town where she'd find some form of salvation, or at the very least, rest...

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Lydia's pace on her second day of riding was much slower than her first. She was no longer on autopilot, so she felt every bump and hitch in the saddle. It would have been impossible to handle the constant thumping of a gallop in her current state, so she sat back and let that old mare cut its own trail through the country. This might have been easier on her physically, but it gave Lydia time to think and reflect. The harsh beauty of her surrounding environment starts to sink in the more she looks at it. This was rough country. It could bake you under the sun, tear your skin and clothes to shreds, and feel like an impossible place to survive, yet there were those that did it. Dusty old outlaws, Apache war parties, coyotes, jackrabbits, and even wildcats thrived here.

Lydia became acutely aware that she'd have to become part of this environment if she wanted to take her revenge. And revenge was fresh on her mind. She saw the faces of the men as they casually rode up to her school. Their scruffy beards and crooked teeth. Their blue uniforms and their beady eyes. She never got their names, but those faces are burned into her mind. Adding constant fuel to a smoldering grief, grief that morphed into pain and pain that grew into a guttural hatred. Lydia hated those men. She hated the army they served. She hated the other army too, Hell, she hated this whole damn war. Anyone wearing a uniform could burn in the deepest pits for all she cared. In fact, she'd probably send a few down that way before long.

That's the thing about wrath and revenge. You never really know how someone will react when faced with something they hate.

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Traveling through the desert of South Texas was never fun during the heat of the day, though it was made bearable thanks to Lydia's upbringing. She was used to working long hours in the summer sun as a young teen. Helping her maw tend to the animals before toiling in the vegetable garden. She can remember an old stubborn mule named Poncho. Poncho was a pain in the ass, always knocking her against fence posts and barn walls. Lydia is thankful her stolen mare isn't anything like old Poncho. She actually gives it a name as it weaves through the brush, something along the lines of "Ole Beauty". A dusty, dark brown mare that's far past her prime, but Lydia couldn't be more thankful for the clever old horse. It was the only reason Lydia was going to survive her traumatic experience. It was the stroke of good fortune that would carry her into the future.

And as the sun hangs low on the horizon, casting long shadows across the rock and sand. Ole Beauty reaches the small town with Lydia on her back. She strolls as casually as any regular would into that town, with a battered and bloody Lydia sitting straight up in the saddle. Cow pokes and ranch hands watch the strange duo ride through the town, though none of them say a word. There've been far stranger folks here in the past, and there'd be far stranger folks in the future.

The first stop for the ladies would be a general store. It thankfully carried some cheap clothes that fit Lydia, not another blouse either. She used the money from her first kill to buy a pair of proper working pants and a pair of riding boots. She also spent a few coins on a few pieces of fruit for Ole Beauty. Now that she had that taken care of, she could head over to the tavern. Spending the rest of her money on a room and a hot meal. The poor bartender watched in awe as the 160lb Irish woman devoured a plate of beef and beans with the ferocity of a starving hound. He wasn't brave enough to ask what happened to her, so he just slid her a tall glass of water and a shot of whiskey, on the house. Lydia wasn't much for alcohol, but she downed that damn whiskey before heading in for a bath.

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“Tsss-!”

Hot water made all those cuts and bruises on Lydia's slender frame light up like coals as she sank into the bath. Teeth gritted and eyes shut tight.

“aahhh...”

It didn't take her long to get used to the change in temperature however. The steam and warmth soothing a body that was stiff and sore from head to toe. It hurt so bad all she could do was sit there and look at the ceiling, arms held up in front of her with fingers curled. Lydia Lynch had just survived Hell on earth. She survived the desert after being left with nothing, and all it took was grit and murder. Ah yes, she killed a man for the first time in her life. A mixture of his and her own blood staining the water in the bath. Did she have to do it? What would he have done to her if she didn't kill him? He acted like he was coming onto her, but there were no guarantees. It was a scenario that played in her head over and over again. The knife, the thud of it entering his chest, his last dying gasps. So much to think about as she slowly dozes off in that warm bath water. Stained with blood and grime...

Meanwhile, just outside, three men rode into town. By now the stars were out and the air was cool, but each one of those men looked hot and mad. They had been looking for their buddy. Their partner. Their gang member, and they had just spotted his horse hitched outside of the tavern.

“That's his horse.”

“I see that.”

“Think that long haired feller got him?”

“Naw...They don't need no old mare”

The one who dismounted first seemed to be the leader of this outfit. He wore your typical blue jeans and long sleeve shirt, complete with a gun at his hip. At least he had shaved recently, his two compatriots looked like they just got dragged out of the wilderness. Shaggy beards and windblown faces, with crooked yellow teeth. They were your stereotypical pack of thugs in the old west, each one nasty in about every way possible.

“Why don't we have a talk with the bartender...”

The three men strolled into the tavern after that. Beady eyes looking over every other man in there with suspicion and malice. The bartender, being used to these types, knew the drill.

“You boys looking for something?”

"Yeah, we are. Who rode that old mare into town?"

"Some little Irish woman, never caught her name. She looked all sorts of beat up though."

One of the scruffy bearded fellows spoke up next.

"Ron done fucked up trying to take another girl"

The leader looked utterly disgusted by what he heard, but it's obvious that Ron guy has pulled something like this before.

"That dumbass let a damn woman steal his horse. What room she in?"

"Third one to the left. Take any trouble outside!"

All three of them were already stomping off towards Lydia's room by the time the bartender finished talking. Poor guy could only shake his head and go back to polishing a glass. There was really nothing you could say in order to talk down thugs like that.

His shoulders flinch as he hears them kick down the door, the cost of new hinges popping up in his head. What came next was the sounds of a struggle. A woman's screech, a few cackles and curses, followed by some hootin and hollerin as Lydia managed to slip by. Running naked through the tavern until she reached the front door, where one of the men tackled her to the street from behind.

"You slippery bitch-!"

Exclaimed the thug as he tried to pin her to the ground, but Lydia wasn't about to just give up. It wasn't in her blood. With wild eyes full of anger and desperation, she swiftly lifts her head. Biting down on that dusty old cowboy's crooked nose, causing him to let out a nice scream as he goes scrambling back. Hands pressing against his face with blood running down it. Lydia was quick to get up herself, immediately sprinting over to old beauty in order to grab the big knife she'd used to kill Ron.

By then it was too late though.

When Lydia turned to face her attackers, they had already drawn and pointed their guns at her. Two men, aiming down their barrels at a naked Irish woman with a knife and an absolutely crazed look on her face.

"Holy fuck..."

Commented the leader of the gang.

"This bitch is feral."

The two men still standing were practically dumbfounded by this wild woman, but the one with a bitten nose didn't have that problem. He was real mad and he intended to make that bitch pay.

"I'm gonna kill that little whoo-"

He made it back up to his feet and about three steps towards Lydia when a gunshot rang out. The thugs limp body crashing back down into the dirt before the other two could even react. The leader managed to duck behind a water trough for cover, but his other goon wasn't so lucky. He tried to turn and return fire, only for about five rounds to hit him in the chest.

"WHAT THE FUCK!"

yelled the final gang member from behind his trough.

He knew most men carried six shooters, so he made the decision to peek over the edge at whoever shot down his men. Across the street, standing on the wooden deck of a barbershop, was a man in an old duster. With a big cowboy hat that hung low, and long bangs that covered half of his face. He stood right around five foot nine, and was also holding a second gun-

*SPLOOSH!*

A bullet slams against the side of the trough, splashing water directly in the outlaws face. Forcing him to duck back down and try to wipe his eyes clear. He wouldn't get to see much by the time he did, because Lydia went on the attack. She had snuck around to his side of the trough and pounced when he was blinded. Driving that knife into his throat without making so much as a peep. Those crazed eyes of hers taking in the utter fear and panic of the man's own as he died. Blood gurgled in his gullet as he tried to breath, but it was over. He was dead.