

OF GUNSMOKE AND GOLD
- SAMPLE

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CHAPTER I

Purgatory, Wyoming, 6 months later

Moira Grant lay dead in a pool of blood. There was so much blood. Gabriel's chest heaved and his stomach churned. Quickly, he found a bucket and retched into it. Grabbing the edge of his desk, he grabbed a bottle of whiskey and took a swig to get rid of the sour taste left behind. He turned back and looked at the lifeless form on the ground as a tear slipped down his cheek. Another gulp of whiskey burned down his throat.

His wife, Moira, wouldn't be dead if Jacob Creek, the town's reverend hadn't been so stupid and let his hot anger get the better of him. Of course, Gabriel ran just as hot. The Preacher came here to arrest him and in those final moments, before Moira got shot, Gabriel taunted the Preacher into a fistfight that ended Moira's life. Everything he touched ended up dead.

Moira.

The Preacher's family.

The Sheriff.

Clyde Heller, a nosy little prick of a lawyer from Cedar Grove.

He suddenly remembered a scripture: "So I looked, and behold, a pale horse. And the name of him who sat on it was Death, and Hades followed with him."

Surely, Gabriel Grant would burn in hell for the lives he'd taken in cold, calculated aggression. The frenzy of the house staff pulled him from the moment as his head butler grabbed the doorjamb. Gabriel could read the horror and shock written across his face. He didn't blame the man. Jacob came onto the property, guns blazing.

"What?" Gabriel growled.

"I'm so sorry, sir."

"If you're so sorry, go fetch my boy. He snuck out of the house a little while ago, headed toward the wooded area behind. Call the lad home."

The butler stared at Moira's corpse before swallowing.

"Quit gawking at my dead wife and get my boy."

"Yes, sir. Right away, sir," the butler said before turning around and leaving.

Once alone, Gabriel walked out of the study, leaving behind his dead wife. Surely the Preacher would be back to collect. Probably on his way to gather a posse to haul him back to jail for Sarah and Virginia Creek's deaths. He shuddered at the thought of hanging from a noose.

Down the hallway sat his smoking lounge. He needed to collect a few papers before heading out of this godforsaken town. The need to run and start over consumed him.

"The boy's on his way back," someone called.

He thought for a moment. "Send the lad to my study. I'll meet him there." After gathering a few more papers from his drawers and a box of cigars, he stuffed them into a satchel sitting under his desk. He slung it around his shoulders and heard Felix cry out from the study.

Gabriel braced himself for the difficult task of telling Felix that the Preacher killed Mommy. The boy continued crying, and no doubt stood in the hallway.

"Where's Father?"

A moment later, Gabriel set down the bag and exited the smoking room and knelt down to receive Felix in his arms. The boy wept with hot tears seeping into Gabriel's shirt.

"Shhh... It's okay," Gabriel said. "He can't hurt you."

Felix pulled back and wiped some tears from his eyes. "Who?"

This would be difficult for Felix to hear, as Moira coddled the boy and no doubt told him that Jacob Creek was a man righteous, holy, and just. "The Preacher. I'm sorry I have some sad news for you."

Felix sniffed something back. "Worse than mother dying?"

"Yes." Gabriel took off his hat. "The man who killed your mother is the preacher."

"No!" Felix pushed away and shook his head. He sobbed harder.

Did Jacob really kill Moira? Might as well have, even though Gabriel pulled the trigger. It was a mistake to admit he had made a judgmental error in trying to wrestle the gun away from Jacob, a sign of weakness. He couldn't admit as much to the boy. How should he word it? "I'm afraid so, son. Jacob Creek caused your mother's death." A little

better, and it was mostly right—Jacob caused Moira’s death and...

Something switched in Felix’s eyes that frightened Gabriel. “I want to kill him,” he said.

The tears still stained the boy’s cheeks, but something sinister had gathered behind his small brown eyes. No way could he take the lad with him.

Felix would only slow him down. Then he remembered a couple just on the edge of town. They’d take Felix for a while. Besides, they owed him for allowing them to remain on his land.

He looked at Felix and said, “We’ll talk later about what needs to happen next. Now, I need you to go and pack a few things. We’re going on a trip.”

Felix sniffed, then rubbed his nose. “Just you and me?”
“Just you and me.”

CHAPTER 2

It didn't take long to gather a few belongings, and he called for two horses. Little did his staff know that Gabriel Grant was never coming back. He was done with Purgatory because Purgatory was done with him. He took one last look through the door at his wife, lying there, and wondered if he'd made better decisions and choices, there wouldn't be a bullet hole in Moira's chest. Being weak and simple-minded was stupid and trivial. He hated weakness and hated that his son saw it on full display.

"I'm sorry, Moira. I didn't mean for you to get in the way of the gun. That shot was supposed to be for the preacher man, and if it weren't for him, you'd still be alive." A tear forced its way down his cheek, and he quickly wiped the weak intrusion away.

"Sorry to bother you, sir, but the mortician has arrived."

Gabriel turned, not saying a word, and greeted the mortician in the reception room.

“I’m deeply sorry for your loss, Mr. Grant. I would have called the minister, but...”

Gabriel stared him down, begging him to continue with that line of thought, which he quickly abandoned.

“Thomas, you can take my wife and bury her now.”

Thomas pulled out a piece of paper. “Would you like to discuss holding a wake for your wife?”

Gabriel snarled. “I want her buried, and this mess put behind me. Now, how much can I write a check for, to make this happen before I leave town?”

The man stood there for a moment. “I guess I might do this fast for approximately two hundred dollars. I suppose that would be fair.”

“Fine. I’ll be right back with your money. Let’s get this over with.”

Two hours later, the mortician placed Moira’s remains in a pine box he had available and had a couple of men dig a hole at the cemetery. Given that Jacob was the only preacher in the area, Gabriel delivered the eulogy for his wife.

Felix stood next to him, crying. A strange numbness washed over Gabriel’s body. He couldn’t think, couldn’t feel, and his mouth felt dry as cotton. A few birds chirped nearby, unaware of the incident that caused the destruction of both the church and the schoolhouse. Two fresh graves sat next to where Moira would be buried; the two spots where Sarah and Virginia Creek’s bodies were laid to rest.

“Father?”

“What is it?” Gabriel said softly.

“Are we just leaving Mother here?”

He blinked back some tears, trying his best not to show emotion.

“I suppose we are, son.” Gabriel reached down for a handful of dirt. “Let’s pay our respects and be on our way. I don’t want to be in town when Marshal Tan Bennington arrives.”

Gabriel wasn’t a preacher, nor did he care to become one. So he tossed a handful of dirt onto Moira’s coffin and said, “You were a good wife. I should have treated you better, more fairly. But it is what it is, and to God let your soul find rest.”

Felix did the same and said, “Goodbye, Mother. I wish you weren’t dead, like the rabbit I killed earlier today.”

Grant looked down at the boy, but didn’t say anything. The image of Felix with a knife in his back pocket, blood on his hands, and anger in his eyes was enough for him to dispose of the boy to an older couple outside of town.

“Mighty fine words there, Mr. Grant,” the mortician said.

“Let’s go, Felix,” he said, ignoring the bony man standing next to her grave with a shovel in hand.

As they walked away and toward the waiting horse, three men arrived with their shovels and began piling dirt on top of Moira’s pine box.

Gabriel didn’t look back.

CHAPTER 3

On the outskirts of town, a small farm sat nestled against a mountain bluff. Old man Healey and his pathetic excuse for a wife lived there. The land belonged to Gabriel; at least, that's what he told himself. They minded their own business, kept bringing cash into Purgatory through his tanning business. It was lucrative, and after Gabriel gave Steven Healey the cash to kick-start his business, but when push came to shove, Healey couldn't pay back the loan as he'd spent it all on the land. Gabriel took possession and allowed them to live there, so long as he got to keep and sell the very best hides Steven produced.

Smoke emitted from the chimney, and Gabriel could hear him crashing around inside his barn, probably looking for something to finish the hide he was working on.

The door creaked open, and Mrs. Healey stepped through. "Mr. Grant. What do we owe the honor of your coming out this way?"

The noise stopped inside the barn and Steven

stepped through, wiping his brow. “Now, Mr. Grant, I don’t have anything for you today, and besides, this isn’t your land any longer. Not after your arrest, and all.” Steven fiddled with a gunbelt that loosely hung around his waist.

Gabriel hated every interaction with them. He dismounted and left Felix sitting atop the animal. “I’m not here about business. My wife died today, and I need to leave town for a while. Would you...” Gabriel looked at Felix. This was a bad idea, but he couldn’t raise the lad, and besides, that was Moira’s job.

“I’m sorry for your loss. I’ll be praying the good Lord gives you strength,” Mrs. Healey said.

“Thank you. Would you be willing to...”

“No,” said Steven. “We’re not helping the likes of you.”

Stupid hick, Gabriel thought again. He tried again. “I’m wondering...” he said, fumbling about with cotton in his mouth. “I need someone to look after the lad while I head out of town for a while.”

“Papa, why do I have to stay here with these people?” Felix asked.

Gabriel hated mincing words, and a few days could be longer, but he needed to clear his head and not allow the lad to slow him down. No doubt the law would be after him soon enough.

Steven Healey loosely held a gun in his hand that Gabriel hadn’t seen him unleather. “Sorry about Moira. She was a fine woman, but I’d advise you to leave this property at once. We’ll take the lad, but if we see you again, I’ll shoot you dead and condemn your soul to Hades if I see the whites of your eyes.”

Mrs. Healey protested, "Steven, put the gun down. He's just a lad."

"And Mr. Grant here killed the preacher's youngling and a woman in town a few weeks ago."

Gabriel said nothing.

"Now pull the boy down off that horse and ride out of town. Leave before I put some lead into your gut."

Felix protested as Gabriel pulled him off. "I don't want to stay here."

"Boy, don't argue. These nice people will take care of you while I'm out on business."

"When will you be back?" Felix asked.

"Soon enough. Now, run along and Mrs. Healey will make you some food."

"Don't come back, Mr. Grant. You hear me?" Steven said again.

She motioned for the boy as he reluctantly approached her. She stroked his face and kissed the top of his head. "We'll take good care of you. The Lord will help you get through this."

Gabriel mounted, nodded his head, then rode off. He didn't turn to look behind, but could hear Felix crying and wailing as the woman tried to calm him down. A tear slipped down Gabriel's cheek as he fought to keep his composure. His boy continued screaming as the woods closed in around him like the darkness that wrapped its talons around his heart and soul.

Gabriel Grant was alone and broken as he pushed out of Purgatory and headed south toward Colorado.