



One

## *Not Just A Cowboy*

1869, Whittletown

**A** stray tumbleweed manically rolls through the dusty terrain; its jostling movement similar to the erratic motion of an unhitched train. Each performance of the traveling debris creates a faint trail of sweeping dust that adds character to the landscape's desolation. As the clustered twigs embark on the long journey across the desert floor, an oddity of built civilization lures the parched bones to take a closer look.

Inspired by hopes of life, the single skitter quickens its speed to investigate the distant structure. As it reaches the architecture, it finds an opening and squeezes between a gap in the boards of an oak picket fence. Inside the isolation of the barricade stands a curious structure--a small white chapel with clusters of gingerbread shingles draped along the roofline and windows constructed from multi-colored pieces of stained glass. A single eave houses a new bevy of cobweb spirals, and the sinister ambiance created by the arachnids' recent

occupancy, reveals the structure's harsh reality of abandonment.

Gusty air currents carry the ball of misguided dust further across the terrain. spurts of wind whistle as they grace the sides of the building's freshly painted baton-board siding. Dancing around the chapel, its jarring traveling motions reveal a mysterious graveyard stationed behind the dead silent edifice. The ancient burial ground of chipping tombstones contrasts the church's exterior, with each chunk of carved stone partaking in the lineup appearing more weathered than the last.

Contrary to the parched presentation of the ancient stone markers, hills of moist soil rest atop the dusty ground, signifying the addition of new graves. The last burial in the lineup is marked by a piece of wormholed wood carved in the shape of a crooked cross. In front of the nameless marker, a newly excavated pit awaits a body, and next to the trench sits a monumental heap of dampened silt. A worn shovel stabs the top of the soil like a flag to claim hold over the territory.

Sounds of low moans echoing from human lips reverberate in unison with the slight gusts of wind. As the tumbleweed continues its journey, it skips across the freshly packed barrows protecting the peacefully sleeping bodies of the deceased. The abrasive tune of a snoring man breaks over the lonely acreage, adding a base-toned accent to the wind's whistling orchestration.

With no hope of changing course, the ticklegrass falls unannounced into the last grave's opening and lands on the man taking a nap. His dirty hand appears rugged and reveals a plethora of blisters as it lifts from an empty bottle of whiskey. Fumbling for the pistol around his hip, he frantically swats the tumbleweed off his body and shoots a stray bullet into the clear blue sky.

As he orients himself to his surroundings, his fingers slowly tilt the brim of a dark brown cowboy hat from his eyes. Around the felt Stetson's border is a braided piece of black leather with flecks of silver that shine in the sun. His eyes are a piercing shade of ice blue and his hair is a hue of dirty blonde.

Lifting the hat from his head, he runs his fingers through each strand of greasy, messy hair. A sun-kissed lock escapes his combing digits and falls forward, gracing the tips of his eyelashes. Effortlessly slicking it into an unruly style, he lightly places the cap back on his head to shade his weary eyes.

Sitting upright, he pushes himself to the grave wall, brushes the soot from his camel-brown chaps with fringe, and flicks gritty particles from his open shirt and matching leather vest. "Goddamn. It's brighter than a pinto's coat."

Quickly tilting his hat down, he allows his hands to feel for the bottle of booze. He pulls the cork and tips the container to quench his parched lips. Not sensing a single trickle of alcohol upsets him, and he

tosses the empty glass container into the sky. "Get gone."

Raising his pistol, he fires a single bullet into the airborne bottle, shattering it into a hundred pieces. The fractured glass sprinkles across his body like an unwanted rain shower, and he holds his hands up in a defensive position to shield himself. "Blam-jam bottle!" he shouts as his hands wildly swing at the attacking shards.

Annoyed by the tumbleweed watching him, his face exudes a mean glare as he lifts his dirt-packed fingernail to point at the stationary observer. "If you don't watch out, you may be next." Inching forward to intimidate the uncaring scrub brush, he braces his swaying body against the compacted dirt walls and kicks the ball of twigs with the silver spur of his dusty black cowboy boot.

A discolored piece of paper pokes out from a pile of collected debris at the base of the hole, piquing his curiosity. He leans forward to pull it from the rubbish and quickly realizes it is a wanted poster with a picture bearing an extreme likeness to him. Holding it close to his face, he admires the man's square jawline and reads the text underneath.

"Alonzo Bill... I'll be damned. That's me." As he lifts the sketched portrait to his pupils, he chuckles at the pitiful bounty offered for his capture. "Fifty cents and an extra helpin' of communion, dead or alive. I would have thought my hide'd be worth more than a couple of coins and a stale piece of bread." Folding up

the yellowing paper, he tucks it away in his pocket as a souvenir.

Alonzo caresses the stubble on his tanned face and smiles. *You may be wondering how a drifter like me ended up being a wanted man. I take the commotion as flattery. My Momma always told me that if you don't ruffle the feathers of at least a dozen people in your path, you're not doing something right. Based on those truthful words, I must be doing a whole lot right in the world.*

Swiftly, he stands up to his feet and places a hand on each side of the freshly dug burial pit. Using all his strength, he heaves himself out of the earthen hole to sit next to the adjacent wooden cross.

As he admires the even row of newly dug graves, a black raven squawking interrupts his thoughts as it perches on the worn wood next to him. He turns his body to address his new acquaintance. "Hey there, friend."

The raven adjusts its spindly feet to look him directly in the eyes and answers him with a shrill squawk. Alonzo smiles. "I tell you what, loners like you and me are the best company to keep. If you don't mind excusing me for a moment, I have some unfinished business to tend to."

Alonzo stares at a shovel perched atop an enormous mound of excavated silt nearby. He helps himself to his feet while the beautiful raven remains stationary, cawing as it watches his every move. "Let's keep this between you and me. It'll be our little secret," he says as he scales the giant heap of dirt.

Working his way to the top, he tightly grips hold of the shovel's handle and draws it from the loamy hill like King Arthur's sword Excalibur. As he lifts the dull blade to the sky, he releases a tribal call from his lips and points the rusted end towards the old church house. "I'm coming for you, Reverend!" he yells.

His eyes pan to the bottom of the slope as he takes in a vast inhalation of air. Clearing his throat, he lowers himself to sit at the top edge of the mound and uses the shovel like a boat paddle to row his way down. Once at the bottom, he jumps to his feet, proudly puffs his chest toward the sky, and adjusts the brim of his hat. Both heels of his boots plant into the ground as he fixates on the white painted sides of the church. *After all the shit I've had to endure, people shouldn't want to lynch me. They should want to honor the ground my boots have touched.*

Tilting his head from left to right causes his vertebra to let out a *crack* as he stretches his neck. He takes a deep breath to center his thoughts, and before taking a step, he uses the shovel to knock the grime from each spur.

Staggering towards the eerily quiet building, he tips the brim of his hat to every grave he passes. A special acknowledgment is given to the newest additions, as he tries to perform the sign of the cross. The added effort throws him off balance, causing him to jar backward with each "Amen."

"Bill, Sue, Lou, and whoever else you may be, I condemn y'all to rest in peace. Hell, I don't know

about you, but I am damn sure that is the best each of you sinners is gonna get."

Chuckling at his joke brings a warm smile across his ash-stained lips as he continues closer to the chapel. Swathed in his blissful moment, he performs a two-stepping motion with the shovel the rest of the way to the deteriorated structure.

He stops at the base of the stairs, takes a slight bow, and, being a gentleman, allows his dance partner to go up first. Following an arm's length behind, he hops each step to the top, and upon reaching the entrance, begins moving the shovel side to side as if it were conversing. "Thank you, kind sir. If only I could find a man with such honor," he says in a high-pitched tone.

Alonzo glances over his right shoulder before placing his opposite hand over his heart to address his partner. "Aw, shucks, little miss, anything for a beauty like yourself," he says with a bashful smirk.

His body stiffens, and his lean muscles flex from top to bottom over his tall stature as he wiggles his finger at the shovel. "Now, I know you think I am easy on the eyes, but there will be no funny business in there." Facing the door, he takes a glance back at the shovel. "You hear me?"

His hand moves the shovel to mimic a nodding motion. "Good."

He places his free hand on the door and turns the handle. A loud creak shatters the stagnant air as the door hinges slowly open, revealing the interior of the hallowed walls and the remnants of a massacre.

Gruesome textures and bullet holes taint every inch of the archaic structure. Scarlet handprints smear the walls, and spatter covers the pews as if a bloody rainstorm exclusively occurred within the church's confines. Sticky gore coats the aisles' floorboards like a crimson river running in the direction of the altar.

Looking down the aisle, he finds exactly what he is searching for and smiles at a decapitated man sprawled across a pew. The barely recognizable carcass wears what was once an all-white robe, and his severed head is located nearly a foot away from its born resting place. Its long beard soaks in unrelated body matter as it lies face-down in a pool of blood.

Taking a moment to secure the shovel under his arm, Alonzo walks over to the corpse, turns his eyes to the ceiling, and completes the sign of the cross. "Sorry it had to end this way, Reverend. We are all probably going to Hell after this rodeo." His left hand snatches a handful of hair from the back of the decapitated head, and, holding it an arm's length away from his face, he intently stares into its bloodshot eyes. "You're sure an ugly son of a gun, aren't ya?" he says with a chuckle.

Using his right hand, he grabs hold of the Reverend's ankle and begins dragging him to the door. As the body sweeps the floor, a trail of dark burgundy is left behind.

Alonzo takes a moment of pause, raising the man's head to his eye line. Using a patch of unsullied



hair, he wipes a bead of sweat away from his brow and allows an ample grunt to release from between his pursed lips. The extra effort helps him gather momentum, and with the body in tow, he finishes his departure through the church doors.

With his hands full of the Reverend's remains, he pulls the body down the stairsteps. Loud, deep thumps ensue from the impact of the wood with the limp dead weight.

He aggressively yanks the corpse by its ankle, leaving behind a rutted path, like the trail of a serpent through a pit of mud. Steadily, he drags the butchery past the row of occupied graves. Upon reaching the edge of the last and only open hole, he lets loose his grip.

Wanting to rid himself of the head, he swings it back and forth, then tosses it into the pit. It impacts the bottom of the dirt-packed cavern with a hollow thud. He nudges the decapitated remains and gory bits over the grave's edge using his foot, and they willingly comply in joining the severed head.

Alonzo removes the shovel from under his armpit and begins unloading the pile of dirt back into the hole.

*Right now, you may be wondering what the heck is going on. Well, it's simple. My name is Alonzo Bill, and you just saw me on the clock. Y'all, I am a cowboy--more like a cowboy vigilante of the unknown.*

*If I were in your boots, I would be wondering how someone with my good looks got roped into such a*

*bizarre profession. Let me tell you, it is far from an easy ride. You may not believe in the paranormal and unknown--trust me, I was once there myself.*

*Why don't I take you back in time, to the day when my way of looking at things changed? It served as one of those coming to Jesus moments.*

*I first got lassoed into this line of work thinking it was an easy way to swindle greenbacks, but boy, was I wrong. This rodeo is real, and the body you are watching me bury... well, we will come back to this here body in two shakes of a lamb's tail.*

*But first, I'm going to make you a believer.*