

# KISS A KILLER



A SHORT STORY



# WILLOWY WHISPER

Kiss A Killer

© 2018 by Willowy Whisper

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, scanning, or other—except for brief quotations in critical reviews or articles, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Published by Willowy Whisper

This short story is a work of fiction. The characters in this story are fictitious. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is coincidental.

---

Cover design by Willowy Whisper  
[www.willowywhisper.com](http://www.willowywhisper.com)

# KISS A KILLER

Maisie sat very still. "Dan."

It was barely spoken, but the boy across the room immediately rose. Beneath his freckles, his cheeks went pale. He waited.

Maisie finally nodded. "Go get Pa's rifle."

He disappeared into the bedroom.

She was left alone. She took another glance at the window. No moon tonight. Not even a sliver of light. The world was black, silent as a churchyard grave.

Dan returned with the gun. He thrust it at her. "Maybe I ought to hold it," he whispered, straightening his young shoulders.

Maisie shook her head. "No." She shuffled backwards, pulling her brother with her. Then they both stood there. Watching the door. Neither breathing much. Both waiting.

Then it happened again.

Something rapped on the door . . . then the knob turned. Finally, it stopped. Whoever it was must have realized, must have guessed they'd already locked it. His first mistake was looking in the window . . . his second was pounding on the glass. Now the door. She had the rifle cocked.

Dan moved closer to her. "What do we do?"

She never had time to answer.

The person behind the door lifted his voice, "Open up." It wasn't a command, merely quietly spoken words.

Dan looked at her. His eyes rounded.

Maisie stared hard at the door. "Who are you?"

Nothing.

She stepped closer to the door, Dan on her heel. "I said, who are you?"

"Nobody." The voice was deep, thick, quiet. "I'd be obliged if you'd open the door, ma'am."

Maisie lifted her rifle. "Alright, Mister. But one wrong move, and I'll kill you." She motioned to Dan . . . he slid the lock, then opened the door.

A man stood in the dark. Rugged, dirty. Saddlebags were strapped across one shoulder. A gun belt was strapped low on his waist, but his hand stayed far away from it. With weary, luminous eyes, he stared at the pair of them.

Maisie scrutinized. "What do you want?"

He never answered. His legs buckled beneath him . . . he collapsed to the ground.

"Maisie!" Dan moved forward—

"Dan! Stay away from him!"

"But he's hurt." Dan lowered and touched the man's torn shirt. "He's got a bullet in him, Maisie."

"A bullet?" Her chest tightened. She hesitated for only a minute, biting the edge of her lip. "Alright." It came out on a sigh. "Help me haul him inside."

---

Dan was swabbing his face with a cool rag.

Maisie was opening the saddlebags. She thrust her hand inside and pulled out a derringer. She swallowed. Laid it on the table. Pulled out something else . . . a small sack. She opened it. Dry jerky and hard tack. If he'd been living on this for very long, that could account for at least part of his illness.

"Hey, Maisie." Dan looked over his shoulder. "He's fevered something awful."

"I know."

Dan paused. "You gonna take out the bullet?"

Maisie closed her eyes. Quietly, calmly, "You know I ain't never done nothing like that before."

"You got to, Maisie." Dan withdrew the cloth, dipped it in fresh water, then bathed the face again. "Else he's gonna die."

She nodded and rose to her feet. She took Dan's place beside the stranger. "Go boil some water. Get me clean rags and . . ." She hesitated. "Pa's knife. Get that, too."

Dan scooted away.

The stranger tossed his head. His eyes were crammed shut, his breathing was heavy. His brows squeezed together, then they relaxed, then they squeezed again. He mumbled, but his words never made sense.

She wished they did. She wished he'd slip a name . . . a place, anything. He wasn't just a lost stranger, he was a person. A wealthy rancher, fallen into misfortune and robbed? A rough frontiersman, living in a cave, shot in a hunting accident? An eager romantic, wounded by some woman's angry husband?

"Here's the rags, Maisie." Dan laid them on her lap. "The water is boiling."

She nodded.

Dan left again.

Her chest constricted. She reached out . . . touched the crusty fabric of his bloody shirt. She ripped it away.

The wound was exposed.

She felt weak. Sick. *Can't do this.* She rose to her feet and almost backed away—but a stronger urge lowered her down again. *I have to do this.* If it were Dan at the mercy of strangers, wouldn't she want them to help?

*Of course I would.* She drew in a breath and let it out. *That's all there is to it—*

"Maisie!" Dan rushed back to her side. He thrust something at her . . . a paper . . .

She opened it. "Wanted." The word came out slowly, barely breathed. "Dead or Alive."

Although the man in the picture looked different—clean-shaven, less sinister—the resemblance left no question.

Dan pointed to the words. "For murder, Maisie. You see that? He killed someone."

She didn't speak. She folded the paper. Handed it back.

"Maisie?"

*I don't know. Don't ask.* She wanted to slip away and hide until the mess was over, until the man was gone, the danger past.

"I wish Pa were here." Dan balled the poster in his hand and threw it. "We got to get help, Maisie."

*Help.* Yes, that made sense. If they could get the sheriff out here, it would be out of their hands—

"I say we leave him." Dan grabbed her arm. "Me and you, we can go into town. If he's not here when we get back, the sheriff can track him down—"

“He’ll be here.” Maisie cut him off. “If I leave that bullet in him, he’ll be dead.” She glanced at the stranger. So handsome, despite the dirty face, the growing beard. Young, too. Probably her age. Twenty or so . . . new at life, eager. What would make him kill?

“You’re not staying, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“I don’t see we have a choice.”

“Maisie—”

“You ride for the sheriff. If you get started now, you can be back in two days.”

“I’m not leaving you alone.” Dan wagged his finger at the stranger. “Not with no killer.”

“Well, he can’t do me much harm, now can he?”

“I don’t like it.”

“You don’t have to.” Maisie rose to her feet and touched his cheek. “When Pa left to Rocky Flats, he left me in charge. Now until he gets back, it’s gonna stay that way.”

Dan’s jaw clenched. “Leave the bullet in him, Maisie.”

“I can’t.”

“Maisie.” Tears welled in his eyes. He blinked them quickly, lest she notice. “Let him die.”

Maisie lowered back into her chair and clasped her hands. “That water is probably boiling, Dan. Fetch it here. When we’re done, you better get some sleep.”

Dan stood motionless behind her.

Maisie went on softly, “You’ve got a big trip ahead of you, come daybreak.”

---

Dan left at the break of dawn. The moment she heard his horse riding away, Maisie felt a sense of cold fear envelope her. For all her bravery the night before, today she was ready to saddle up and leave with him.

She poured herself a cup of coffee, stifling a yawn. She took a seat beside the man in bed. Last night had left her exhausted. She’d made so many mistakes . . . almost fainted more than once . . . cried at least twice.

The stranger had screamed, gritting his teeth, even fainted himself. Dan had to hold him down. She’d been convinced he’d die. Raging with fever, mumbling out of his head, tossing and turning.

Now that the bullet was out, though, he seemed calm. He slept peacefully all through the morning.

It was late afternoon before he awoke.

She was standing at the stove, boiling up another pot of coffee, when she heard the sound. She turned slowly.

The stranger snagged her eyes. Bleary, blood-shot . . . he slid them shut.

Maisie moved to his side. She pulled the chair closer to his bed and swept her hand across his forehead. “No fever,” she whispered.

The eyes opened again.

She withdrew, gasping.

The stranger squinted. “W-water?” he groveled out.

Maisie stumbled to her feet, fetched a glass of water, then returned. She slid one hand under his head and lifted, allowing him to sip.

He was breathing hard by the time she laid him down again.

Neither spoke.

Finally, she said quietly, “You’ve been shot, Mister.”

He turned his face toward her. “You think I don’t know that?”

Maisie blinked. “You showed up at my doorstep.”

“You pointed a rifle at me.”

“I took out your bullet.”

He coughed, a raspy sound. “You’re a butcher, not a nurse.”

Maisie’s lips pursed together. “I could have let you die, you know.”

“Maybe you should have.”

Maisie jerked to her feet, her voice straining two octaves higher. “It’s not too late, you know. I can snap my fingers and send you packing—”

Barely, he lifted his head. “You asking me to leave, Miss?”

Maisie stepped back again. Hurriedly. Bumping into the table. She snatched up the rifle and held it in her arms. “Maybe you should.”

The stranger coughed again. “I always do what a woman says,” he grumbled. He swung his legs around the bed, clutching his bandaged side. He struggled to his feet, wincing.

Maisie felt a pang. “Be careful,” she whispered.

He didn’t answer, merely inched forward. She’d demolished his shirt last night, so he merely strapped his suspenders over a bare chest. “I’ll need a horse.”

Maisie laid her finger on the trigger. “We don’t have any to spare.”

“Then give me my saddlebags. Behind you.” He nodded at the table.

Maisie shook her head. “I’ll just keep your guns and your saddlebags.” She glanced down for one second and grabbed the sack of food. She tossed it at him. “You can have this.”

The man closed his eyes. His cheeks drained. He took another step, clutching the sack . . . then toppled over.

“Oh!” Maisie laid down the rifle and rushed toward him. She turned him over, laying his head into her arm. “You’re bleeding again. Look what you did.”

He grunted and pushed her away.

“I didn’t bandage you last night just so you could die this morning.” She helped him sit. “Can you make it to the bed?”

He grunted again, struggled to his feet, and leaned into her with each step. Finally, he dropped onto the bed and crammed his eyes shut. He didn’t open them again, and from what she could tell, he seemed to be unconscious.

Maisie wrung her hands. *Oh Dan.* She buried her face. *Please hurry home.*

---

It was almost dark before he awoke again. This time, he had all the guns hidden except the rifle. She kept that in her lap.

The stranger peeled open one eye first, then the other. She glanced at the rifle for a long second. “If you’re planning to use that, do it now.”

Maisie’s chair was scooted a good five feet from his beside. She merely frowned. “How do you feel?”

“Like I been shot.” He let out a breath of air. “Who are you?”

“Maisie.” She narrowed her eyes. “Who are you?”

“Maisie?”

“Yes.” She caught the tone. “What’s wrong with it?”

“Why not Daisy?” He quirked a brow. “That would make more sense, wouldn’t it?”

Maisie ignored him. "I said who are you?"  
"Bill, George, Henry." For the first time, he managed a small smile. "Pick a name."  
"How about Arsen Isaacs?"  
"You found the poster."  
Maisie cut him deep with her stare, but didn't answer.  
Arsen managed the smiled again. "My ma wasn't so good at names, either. I always wished she had named me something intelligent, like James or John." He paused, brows furrowing together.  
"Where's the boy?"  
Maisie hesitated—  
"Where is he?" Arsen jolted up, then lowered back down, rasping in breaths. "Might as well tell me, Miss."  
"He's gone for the sheriff."  
Arsen nodded. "I figured."  
"So you just rest up. As soon as he gets here, the sheriff will want you to ride."  
Arsen shook his head. A dimple formed on his cheek. "I ain't going with no sheriff, Miss. Not unless I'm strapped to the saddle dead."  
Maisie glared at him. "You don't have a choice."  
"Everyone has a choice." Arsen closed his eyes. His breathing became even, his features turned lax . . . she almost thought he was asleep. Then he spoke, his voice soft, "You and the boy . . . you shouldn't be living out here alone."  
"We don't." She lifted her chin. "Our Pa is in Rocky Flats. He'll be back by the end of the month."  
"What's he doing there?"  
"Selling this spread. When the deal is done, we're moving back to Boston. That's where my ma was from."  
"She live there now?"  
"No." Maisie swallowed. "She's been gone four months now."  
Silence. Arsen opened his eyes again. Dark, handsome . . . grabbing. "Why'd you let me in?"  
"I don't know." She felt fear. It was real. Choking. She stumbled out of the chair and stepped backwards . . . little knowing why, suddenly breathless.  
"You shouldn't have." He smiled again. "You saw the wanted poster."  
"You try anything and I'll kill you." She raised the rifle. "Don't think I wouldn't."  
"You afraid?"  
The question hung.  
She felt heat rising to her cheeks, up her neck . . . she lowered her eyes. "I don't know."  
"Stop lying."  
"Yes!" Tears sprang to her eyes. "Why wouldn't I be afraid?"  
Arsen didn't look away. She felt his stare. "You shouldn't have answered the door," he said again, deeper this time. "You shouldn't have let me in."  
She felt chilled.  
"Because when that sheriff comes, I'm not going with him." Arsen's eyes sank shut.  
"Whoever's stuck in the middle could get hurt."

---



Maisie was asleep. Something awoke her. She felt strange, disoriented . . . she peeled through the layers until the fog fell away. *Dan?* She threw back her covers and reached for the rifle. *Dan is gone.* The thought struck her hard. *The rifle.* She groped in the darkness. Where was it?

Should have stayed awake. Never should have gone to bed.

She slipped out of bed and left her bedroom.

There was a light at the table. Arsen Isaacs was seated at a chair, a mug encircled in his hands. He must have washed and shaved, because his skin fairly glowed. He looked up and curved a smile. "Coffee?"

Her stomach clenched. "The rifle." It came out breathless. "Where is it?"

"Here." He lifted it, then slid it across the table. "But it won't shoot, so don't even try."

She felt numb. Weak. "What did you do to it?" she managed.

"Took out the firing pin."

"Why?" Tears sprang to her eyes. "Why would you do that?"

"Even the odds, let's just say." He took a drink of coffee. He wiped his mouth. "Since you hid both of mine."

Maisie's chest constricted. *Run.* The thought slammed into her. She didn't have the courage. She stood planted, helpless, shivering. She glared at him . . . a cold-blooded killer, and suddenly, she was at his mercy.

Only he had no mercy. No killer did.

She bolted for the door . . . stumbling into the darkness, yet she heard him coming after her. Seconds later, a hand grabbed her arm and pulled her back.

He hauled her back into the house, slammed the door, and held her tight against his chest. His face was in hers, but his voice was quiet, "I'm not accustomed to holding a lady against her will, but I'm afraid that's just what I'm doing."

"Get out of here," she whispered. "I don't want you here. Take a horse and leave. I'll give you the guns, the saddlebags . . . anything." Now she was crying. Shaking. "Please, just leave . . ."

With one hand, he swept the tears off her cheeks. He released his hold and stepped back. "If I were well enough to ride, I would."

"Then let me go."

"I can't do that."

"Why not?" she cried, sucking in a breath.

"A woman has no place out there, not alone." He nodded toward the chair. "Sit down, Miss, and I'll pour your coffee."

She obeyed, but when he handed her a mug, she never touched the coffee. She stared into the black rings. "Did you poison it?"

"No." He lifted his cup. "You made this pot, so maybe I should ask the same. Did you poison mine?"

She pushed her mug away. "I don't understand it."

"What?"

She lifted terrorized, rounded eyes. "How anyone could kill another person."

"You believe everything you read?"

"You're saying the poster is wrong?"

He shrugged, taking another drink. Then, "Would you believe me if I said I was innocent?"

Maisie didn't answer, not right off. She merely looked, tried to understand, tried to see deep—to the depth of him. Finally, on a sigh, "I wouldn't know what to believe."

"If I had come to your door with a suit and rig, smiling with flowers, you would have said yes."

Maisie clenched her fists. "You insult me—"



“People believe what they want to believe.” He paused for a long time. “Whether it’s true or not.”

“Well?” She bit the edge of her lip. “Are you innocent?”

He smiled and the dimple appeared again. “If you want me to be, I am.”

Maisie rose from her chair. “I’m going to bed.”

Arsen handed her the rifle. “Here, you want this?”

She jerked it from his hand. “It may not fire, but if you come close to me, I’ll club it over your skull.”

Arsen nodded. “I’ve no doubt you would, Miss.” Another smile. “I’ve no doubt you would.”

---

The next morning, she found Arsen Isaacs in bed, though not asleep. She fixed breakfast, set two plates, and tried to imagine that Dan was still here—not a killer.

“Hey, Miss.” Arsen called to her, his head propped up on his hand. “You aren’t going to make me come to the table, are you?”

“You seemed perfectly able last night.” She slammed down the pan of eggs. “If you’re hungry, come and get it. If not, starve to death. I don’t care.”

Arsen breathed a laugh. He sat up and unstrapped his suspenders. He touched the bandage. “I’m bleeding pretty good again.”

Maisie glanced over. “Oh.” She hesitated. “What happened?”

“Too much moving last night, I think.”

She nodded. “You fool, you could have bled to death.”

“That would have pleased you well.”

Maisie grabbed some rags and a basin of water and moved forward. She unwrapped the bandage, cleaned the wound again, then reapplied fresh linens.

Arsen nodded. “Your Pa didn’t leave a clean shirt around, did he?”

“Don’t ask, just steal it.” Maisie squinted her eyes at him. “That’s your *way*, isn’t it?”

Arsen sobered. “I don’t steal, Miss—and if you’d rather see my bare chest, then just forget I mentioned it.”

Maisie gasped. She reared back to slap him . . . he caught her hand.

He held it tight, fingers curling around her wrist. “Don’t do that again, Miss.”

Maisie tugged free. “I’ll find the shirt,” she stammered. Minutes later, she threw him a clean flannel, a faded shirt her father seldom wore. “Don’t bleed on it,” she warned sharply.

Arsen didn’t answer. He stood up. His face was pale . . . he looked past her.

Maisie followed his eyes to the window. She saw nothing. “What is it?”

“Go in your bedroom and don’t come out.”

“What—”

“Do as I say,” he cut her off.

Maisie shook her head. “Someone is outside. It could be Dan—”

“Maisie, no!”

But it was too late. She was already running for the door.

---

A hand clamped over her mouth . . . yanking her into hard arms. A voice seethed into her ear, “Make a move and I’ll kill you.”

She bit at the hand . . . the man cursed, swerved her around, then slapped her.

He dragged her forward. “I’m coming in, Isaacs!” He kicked open the door. “Fire at me and I’ll kill the girl.” His arm wrapped around her neck, choking her. They stepped inside.

Arsen stood with the rifle in his hands. “Connor.”

The man tightened his arm.

Maisie gasped—

“Do that again and I’ll kill you.” Arsen didn’t look alarmed. Didn’t even raise his voice.

Connor must have been afraid, because his arm loosened slightly. Even so, he said with a laugh, “Shoot at me, the girl still dies.”

“I should have known it was you.” Arsen’s mouth twitched. “You’re just the type to shoot a man in the back.” He paused. “For a reward.”

“That’s my occupation, cowboy.” Connor motioned towards the rifle. “Throw it down.”

“Not until you let her go.”

“You’re pressing me. I might just shoot her.”

“And get on one of those wanted posters yourself?” Arsen shook his head. “No. I don’t think so.”

“You resisted arrest and started shooting . . . it wasn’t my fault the girl got caught in the fire.”

“Nice story.” Arsen waved his rifle. “No deal.”

No one moved.

Maisie’s tears spilled down her cheeks, but she made no sound. Her eyes flew to Arsen.

A smile touched his face. The dimple appeared. So calm . . . he must have put in the firing pin. Why didn’t he shoot, save himself? Surely he didn’t care about the bullets, who they hit. He was a killer. What would it matter if she was shot down in his escape?

Connor threw her down . . . kicked her away.

She wailed, inching away.

Connor spit out the words, “Alright, Isaacs. No more excuse. Lay down the rifle.”

Arsen glanced at her. A long minute . . . what was he thinking? Finally, he nodded. He slung the rifle to the floor. “Let’s go.”

Maisie jolted. *Arsen, wait—*

But he didn’t. He walked out the door, Connor behind him.

She stared. Bewildered. *No.*

Outside, Connor raised his gun, cocked—

“Arsen!” The scream ripped out of her, just as he turned.

The derringer flashed in Arsen’s hand. He shot.

Connor fell.

Maisie didn’t move, merely sat there, framing her cheeks with both hands.

Arsen stepped over the body and into the room. He knelt next to her, blowing the smoke from his derringer. “You weren’t very good at hiding this,” he whispered.

She tried to breath . . . the air trapped in her lungs. She opened her lips, but no words came forth.

“You’re not hurt.” Gently, he lifted her to her feet. He smoothed her hair down with one hand. “Go and finish your breakfast, Miss.” His eyes blinked heavily. “I’ll take care of the body.” Before he walked out the door, however, he returned to her side. He handed her the derringer. “Here.” The smile again. “You take care of this.”

---

“Why did you do that?”

The fireplace lit the room. It cast a warm, sullen glow over each of their faces.

Arsen was on the floor, stroking the fire with a stick.

Maisie sat beside him. She said it again, “Why did you save my life, when you could have shot him?”

“Too risky.” He slid over a grin. “For me. He could have shot back, you know.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I don’t lie—”

“You could have bolted out the back door. You could have been gone before that man made it inside.”

“I didn’t know there was a back door.”

“There is.”

“I didn’t think of it.” The fire threw sparks when he nudged a log into place. “Besides, I’m not much for running away from a fight.”

“Isn’t that what you’re doing?”

“Nope.” Arsen shook his head. “I’m running from a noose. There’s a difference.”

“You could have shot him inside, face to face. Instead, you let him get the advantage.”

Painfully, she looked at him. Her voice was soft, impressionable, “Why did you do that?”

He reached out . . . touched her neck with one light fingertip. “You must bruise easy.”

“No.” She looked down. “He just squeezed hard.”

Arsen nodded. “Any pain when you swallow?”

“No.”

“The bruises will fade soon enough.”

“Arsen?”

He stood up to add a log. When he sat back down, he sat close to her. Then he answered, his voice thick, “What?”

“It isn’t true, is it?”

“The poster?”

“Yes.” Her eyes swept the length of his face. “The murder.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“The truth.”

“You don’t want the truth.”

“Yes, I—”

“Believe what you want to believe.”

“I want to believe you’re innocent.”

“Why?”

“Because a killer wouldn’t save my life.”

“Maybe he would.”

She tilted her head, mouth opened partly. “Arsen, I—”

He cut her off . . . his lips sought hers. At first, she jerked backwards, only his hand caught the back of her head and kept her still. He kissed softly, gently. Within seconds, her own lips yielded to his and she leaned into him . . .

The lips parted.

She closed her eyes. Kept her face near his. “Arsen.”

“No, Miss.” Deep, stirring . . . painful voice. He rose to his feet and gripped the mantel. Then he looked down at her. For a long time he stood, never speaking, and then he shrugged. “You’d better get to bed.”

He walked away.

---

*He’s innocent.* He hadn’t said it in words, not exactly, but she knew. She sensed it, felt it . . . it had to be true. A killer wouldn’t have saved her life. A killer wouldn’t have those eyes, that smile. A killer wouldn’t have kissed her. Not like that.

And she wouldn’t have let him.

Not if he was a killer.

When the dawn light spilled through the bedroom window, she hurried out of bed. She dressed in her mother’s dress, the red one that used to make Pa feel proud.

Not to catch Arson’s eye. That wasn’t the motive, wasn’t the point.

But when she walked into the main room, she felt beautiful in ways she never had before.

Until he didn’t look up.

She cleared her throat and practically stood in front of him.

He ignored her.

Finally, cheeks hot, she went to the kitchen. Wordlessly, she started breakfast.

“You can make that for one,” he said from behind her.

She turned. “Aren’t you hungry?”

“I won’t be here.” In her father’s flannel shirt, he looked taller and broader, more genteel. “I don’t have any money, so I guess you could say I’m stealing your horse.”

Her chest tightened. “You’re what?”

“Here.” He thrust a watch into her hands. “My father’s. It should cover the cost.”

She squeezed her hand around it. It was cold against her palm. “You’ll die if you try to ride.”

“I’ll die if I stay.” He threw his saddlebag over his shoulder, then settled his hat on his head.

For one second, his face softened and his features were less rugged. “You remind me of someone.”

“Who?”

“Just a girl.” A tiny smile, almost sad. “My sister, actually.”

“She wouldn’t want you to kill yourself.”

He merely nodded, half-smiling. He started out the door, then slammed it shut behind him.

Maisie held her breath for the space of two heartbeats. Then she followed him. She flew outside, caught his arm. “You can’t, Arsen! You’ll kill yourself—”

“Kill myself?” He threw down his saddlebags and turned on her. He grabbed her arms, voice dropping, “And what do you think is going to happen to me, when that sheriff shows up?”

“Go with him. You can get a lawyer. Me and Dan will help . . . we’ll help. I promise.” She paused and lifted her face to him. “If you’re innocent, we’ll prove it—”

His lips pressed into hers. One more kiss. Then it broke, harshly. His next words were cold, “I’m afraid that can’t be done, Miss.”

“Why not?” she breathed.

“Because I’m guilty.” He said nothing more.

She jerked out of his arms, as if he’d struck her.

The world was silent. Nothing moved.

And then a bullet—it struck the silence and rang from nowhere.

Arsen tackled her down, protecting her, shielding her. *A killer.* Her mind reeled. She felt weak. The shot came again.

“Maisie!”

She glanced up, squinting.

Dan stood on the outskirts of the woods, waving his hands. A taller man stood beside him. A tin star glinted off his vest. He fired his pistol in the air one more time. “Arsen Isaacs, I want to talk to you!”

Nothing.

“Put down your gun and step out!”

Arsen hauled her up with him. He kept one arm around her. “I won’t hang, Miss.” It was a desperate, hushed whisper.

She didn’t answer him. *Killer.* Pounding in her ear, in her heart. *Killer.*

“I won’t hang,” he said again. Then he threw her, tossing her away . . . he drew his gun. He fired once, but he must have missed.

The sheriff shot back.

Arsen dropped to the ground.

---

Maisie sat very still, Dan beside her.

The sheriff’s office was small, almost stifling. The tiny window above the desk did little to provide a breeze, and the interior reeked of cigar smoke and black coffee.

The sheriff began slowly, “When Dan here came to fetch me, I was a might startled.”

Maisie kept a stoic face. She listened silently.

“You see, a young woman had visited me just the day before, about the same man.” The sheriff leaned back in his squeaky chair. “She claimed to be his sister.”

“He mentioned a sister.” Maisie said this quietly, then nodded him on.

“According to the young lady, Arsen Isaacs had raised her since their parent’s death.” The sheriff lifted the wanted poster. He stared at it a moment before going on, “She said that a gambling man started giving her attention. Arsen had been against it from the start. She hadn’t listened.”

“Go on,” Maisie whispered.

“One night, when Arsen was gone, the man started giving . . . unwanted affection. His sister was fighting helplessly against the man when Arsen walked in.”

Maisie’s chest rose and fell. She tried to breathe.

“There was a fight and the gambler was killed, due to a strike on the head. The murder, according to his sister’s late testimony, was accidental.”

Dan tilted his head, speaking for the first time, “If she knew her brother was innocent, why didn’t she say so before?”

“She went into a sort of shock. For months, she couldn’t speak, according to the doctor she brought with her.”

“Then . . .” Maisie closed her eyes. “Arsen wouldn’t have been convicted.”

“No, ma’am.” The sheriff crumpled the paper in his hand. “In fact, that’s what I was trying to tell him.”

“Why shoot?” Maisie clasped her hands. “We thought you were taking him in—”

“I shot in the air, just a warning signal that we were there. We didn’t know how desperate he was. We didn’t want you getting hurt.”

Maisie was numb. She stood to her feet and left the office, not looking back, hardly even breathing. She was empty. Void. Listless, she wandered to his grave . . . even knelt down and laid her hands on the new dirt.

The cross bore his name, but that was all. No dates. Not even a reason why he had died. She cried.

Not for the stranger she'd cared for in her home, but for the man she'd found him to be. Not a killer. Not a danger or a thief . . . but a man that had held her face and kissed her lips, like no one else had ever done. A man that had protected her, even at his own risk.

She touched the cross, his crudely engraved name. *Arsen Isaac*. His face swam in her vision and caused an ache.

"I know." A voice startled her from behind.

Maisie glanced up.

A young woman in black forced a teary smile. A dimple formed in one of her cheeks. "If only I could have helped him for what he did for me. Instead, I let him die."

Maisie's words quivered when she spoke, "I made the same mistake."

Because she hadn't kissed a killer.

She'd kissed a man she might have loved.