Wanted is published in the United States in 2015 by Switch Press, a capstone imprint
1710 Roe Crest Drive
North Mankato, Minnesota 56003
WWW.switchpress.com

First published in 2014 by Curious Fox, an imprint of Capstone Global Library Limited,
7 Pilgrim Street, London, EC4V 6LB
Registered company number: 6695582
WWW.curiousfox.com

Text © Hothouse Fiction Ltd 2014
Series created by Hothouse Fiction
WWW.hothousefiction.com

The author’s moral rights are hereby asserted.
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in whole or in part, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher.

Library of Congress Catalog-in-Publication data is available on the Library of Congress Website.

ISBN: 978-1-63079-001-1 (paper over board)
ISBN: 978-1-63079-008-0 (ebook)

Summary: When Grace’s parents and siblings are murdered by the Guiltless Gang at their Arizona horse ranch outside Tombstone, she vows to devote her life to revenge—but the Chiricahua she finds sanctuary with try to teach her a better way.

Designer: K. Fraser
Photo credits:

Printed in China.

Grace AND THE GUILTLESS

BY ERIN JOHNSON

Switch Press
Grace felt her heartbeat quicken with a spark of panic as she ran toward her brother. She watched the horse rear and whinny as it dragged him by the lead rope. Daniel flew into the air and fell down hard in a cloud of dust. Bullet reared again, his eyes wild and darting, his hooves stamping inches from Daniel’s head.

Grace’s throat tightened, but she kept her voice steady. “Let go of the rope. Roll to your right.”

Daniel quickly curled into a ball and rolled aside. Grace gave a shrill whistle, and Bullet wheeled around to charge across the yard straight for her. But Grace held her ground, and he skidded to a halt, flanks heaving.

She grabbed the swaying rope. “It’s okay, boy.” She
reached out slowly, making sure Bullet’s gaze followed her hand before she patted his neck. “Calm down.”

“Everything all right out there?” Pa shouted from inside the barn. The whinnying and crashing in there sounded like he was having his own problems with the mustangs.

Daniel got up, wincing, and looked pleadingly at her. Pa had strict rules about an eleven-year-old going near an unbroken horse like Bullet, and Daniel had disobeyed all of them.


Daniel grinned and began examining the rope burns on his palms. Grace looked him up and down for injuries, but apart from a bruised ego, he was unhurt. Her brother loved horses as much as she did, but he hadn’t learned the firm yet gentle approach needed to control a wild horse.

He hitched up his sleeve, examining a couple of scratches. There’d be a few more before he got it, but Grace knew he would catch on. She knew that every Milton was as stubborn as the horses they tamed, though none of them would admit it.

She led Bullet into the paddock, patted his rump, and watched him take off across their piece of desert. Daniel’s hat lay in the dirt near the corral fence, and she picked it up, dusting off the worst marks before handing it over. He put it on and frowned, watching Bullet canter along the skyline. Grace shook her head at his frustrated expression.

“Even Pa can’t get near Bullet,” Grace said.

“You can.” Daniel kicked at the dirt.

She shrugged. “I couldn’t when I was your age.” They had still lived on the East Coast then, but Daniel didn’t need to know that. “Takes time.”

When her family first arrived in Arizona to homestead, Grace had never expected to fall in love with this red-clay, rocky desert dotted with tall columns of saguaro and spiny branches of ocotillo. But now she felt she belonged in the West.

The noise inside the stable quieted, and a few minutes later Pa emerged, caked in sweat.

“Those mustangs will be tough to break.” He was tired, but Grace could hear in his voice the relish for the challenge. He nodded at her. “Good job today.”

He glanced at Daniel’s burned palms but said nothing. Grace bit her lip to stop herself from smiling. Nothing got past Pa.

Behind him, the sun dipped low on the horizon, tipping the Dragoon Mountains with orange fire and streaking the scrubby tufts of grass with gold. No dust clouds appeared on the road that stretched between their ranch and the distant town of Tombstone. Grace caught Pa looking for them too. Riders churned up puffs of grit when they made that half-day trip to the ranch, and her family didn’t get many friendly visitors.

Lately the threats had been getting worse.

She followed her father and brother over to the pump,
where they washed up. Then they stomped the muck from their boots and stepped through the open doorway of the log cabin. Grace hung her hat on a peg by the door and smoothed back the strands of long blond hair that had escaped from her braid.

Two-year-old Abby toddled over and tugged at Grace’s legs. Ma had cut down a pair of Pa’s old buckskin leggings for Grace to wear under her calico dress — she had grown out of it over a year ago, but they had no money for new clothes because every extra penny went into the horse ranch. It would be worth it though. In one more year they would own their land outright. If only their land wasn’t so highly sought after and they didn’t keep hearing rumors of ranch owners forced out. There were also Indian attacks to worry about.

Grace picked up Abby, feeling the burn in her muscles from the day’s work, and settled her little sister on one hip. Abby beamed, chattering away to her cornhusk doll in a language known only to her.

Ma’s face was flushed from bending over the iron pot hanging in the hearth, and she wiped her hands on the flour-sack apron tied over her dress. Steam rose from the bubbling broth, and the tang of onions perfumed the air.

With the fire going, it felt hotter inside than it had been under the blazing sun earlier. Already used to the heat, the littlest Milton, Zeke, slept soundly in the hand-carved cradle near the hearth, one tiny pink fist clenched.

“Supper’s almost ready,” said Ma, as Pa wrapped his arms around her.

“Good. I’m hungry as a horse,” he said, giving her a swift kiss.

Ma laughed. “Daniel, go get some hay for your pa’s dinner.”

“You mean it?”

Grace rubbed her knuckles over her brother’s head.

“Come help me set the table.”

Still balancing Abby on one hip, Grace handed bowls and spoons to Daniel, who thumped them down on the table quickly. When they were done, she settled Abby on the bench and began to slice the corn bread.

Ma handed Pa a mug of water as he stretched out in a chair. “What do you plan to do about that deed, Bill?” she asked in a low voice.

“If Hale and the Guiltless Gang think they can . . .” Pa’s voice dropped to a whisper.

Grace leaned closer to hear, but Ma held up a hand to stop his words.

“Daniel, bring in more branches for the fire. And Grace, I need you to fetch more potatoes and carrots for the soup.”

Grace sighed. Ma was still treating her like her younger siblings — maybe they hadn’t picked up on the tense atmosphere lately, but she had. She dawdled, hoping Pa would start talking again before she went outside.
“Now, Grace.” Ma issued the command in her obey-or-else voice.

Grace trudged outside to the root cellar, which was dug into the ground a few feet from the side of the house. She tugged on the handle to lift the hatch and, holding the door up with one hand, started down the rough-hewn steps that led into cool darkness. The sharp scent of garlic and onion mingled with the earthiness of potatoes and string beans, and the unique aroma wafted up from the cavernous underground space.

Almost at once, her boot toe struck something and sent it clattering down the stone steps. She swore, safely away from Ma’s ears, realizing she had kicked the long wooden stick they used to prop the cellar door open. It would be almost impossible to find in the slivers of dying daylight coming in from the slatted cellar door.

Inching her way down into the stone-lined pit after it, she struggled to keep the hinged lid open with one outstretched arm. The moist air cooled the sweat that had begun to bead on her brow as she peered into the dark. But then the sole of Grace’s leather boot slid across the damp stone, and she fell the last few steps, smacking her funny bone on the hard surface.

The hatch slammed shut overhead, shrouding her in darkness. Pain radiated through her arm and vibrated through her clenched teeth, and she lay on the wet dirt and cradled her elbow, groaning.

The sound of thunder shook the ground above her. No, not thunder. Pounding hooves. Whooping and hollering filled the air. A stampede from behind the ranch? An Indian attack? But how?

She hadn’t seen the telltale kick-up of dust in the distance. They must have come from another direction.

Grace’s heart thumped against her ribs as she scrambled up the steps and pushed on the heavy door with one hand. She strained her muscles, but the hatch didn’t budge. It was wedged shut.

Before she could call out, the crack of a rifle bounced off the stone walls and echoed through the hollowness around her.

Grace gasped, but the noise caught in her throat. The thundering hooves quieted. A horse snorted close by. Whoever had ridden in was almost overhead.

“William Milton, you signed that deed yet?”

Pa’s boots clomped across the wooden porch of the house. “This ranch is mine, Elijah Hale.” Grace’s fists clenched when she heard the tremor in his answer.

A muffled, mirthless laugh.

Stirrups jingled and heavy footsteps tramped across the ground toward the house. There was the sound of a scuffle overhead. Grace’s mouth went dry. What’s going on? She shoved again at the wooden hatch with both hands, ignoring the pain shooting through her throbbing elbow. Open! Just open! Grace pleaded silently, but it was stuck fast.
“No!” came Pa’s strangled cry. “Don’t hurt her!”

Don’t hurt who? A bubble of panic rose inside Grace. Are the men hurting Ma? Abby?

“You had your chance.” The voice was cold.

“Don’t!” Pa sounded desperate. He was panting hard.

“Take the horses, the ranch, whatever you want.”

“Thanks. We will.”

A shot rang out.

Pa moaned: a keening sound from the depth of his being. She heard Ma break down, sobbing. Abby? They couldn’t have . . .

Grace felt sick to her stomach, and tears stung her eyes. Everything was happening too quickly. The sound of the gunshot still rang in her ears.

She took two steps up, gritted her teeth, and thrust her shoulder against the hatch, feeling nothing at first except the weight of the door pushing down on her. But then finally it gave, and she had to stop quickly before it flung open. Palms shining with sweat, she carefully lifted it an inch.

As the air outside the cellar hit her, her arms trembled so much she almost dropped the door. There was a scorched smell — a sickening odor of burned flesh and the sulphurous stench of discharged gunpowder. In the commotion, no one had noticed the cellar door lifting.

She could see her little sister lying on the ground, not moving.

Daniel ran toward Ma, calling out in fright. Grace’s heart broke. Her little brother’s voice — a voice she’d heard boisterous, excited, even delirious with fever — had never sounded so small.

One of the men unsheathed his knife, and Grace squeezed her eyes shut on instinct, hearing Daniel’s cry of surprise, then the light thud of his body against the dusty earth.

Nausea rolled over her in waves. Heat prickled her skin, and saliva built up in her mouth, making her want to spit, to choke, to lean over and heave, but she didn’t dare make a sound.

Suddenly Ma broke free from the man who was holding her and ran toward the children. A man with a drooping mustache quickly glanced at Hale and received a nod. He raised his gun. Grace nearly shouted out, but Pa got there first.

“Eliza!”

Ma looked up, tears streaming down her face, and their eyes met.

The man pulled the trigger.

Two gang members stepped forward — one wrenched Pa’s arms behind his back, the other bound them tightly. Pa, weakened with grief, put up no resistance. He couldn’t stop staring at the heap of crumpled gingham that disguised his wife’s body. The soft flour-sack apron glowed gold in the dying sun.
Grace forced herself to look away. She had to do something. *Move! Get a weapon!*

If she had a gun, she’d shoot the whole gang dead without a second thought. She glanced frantically around the dark cellar, and her eyes finally fell upon the stick that was lying at the foot of the steps. It was all she had. Grace lowered the hatch lid as gently as she could, closing it off against the horror above her. She went quietly down the steps into the blackness and ran her hands over the stone floor until her fingers closed around the stick. Snatching it, she scrambled back up the steps on her hands and knees.

If she caught someone by surprise, maybe she could grab a gun . . .

She pushed her shoulder against the hatch again and then peered out cautiously. A short distance away, Hale bent over Daniel’s unmoving body, a smile on his lips.

“Shame, such young ’uns.” A woman’s voice came from directly overhead and startled Grace so much that she almost dropped the door.

Although she craned her neck, all Grace could see through the crack in the hatch were the forelegs of an Appaloosa and a snakeskin boot with a stovepipe top and a snake design stitched into it. Custom-made boots, not the kind most ranchers wore, and a smaller size than Grace’s own feet.

“Going soft, Bella?” Hale taunted. “We can’t leave no witnesses.”

As if to emphasize his point, he gave Daniel a swift kick with his boot.

Fury twisted Grace’s insides. She tensed, poised to explode from the cellar and knock that grin from his face.

But from across the yard, Pa wriggled frantically on the ground where they had dumped him. He was unable to signal with his bound arms or legs, but his movement drew her gaze.

Their eyes locked, then he glanced quickly over to his captors, who were still watching the gloating Hale. Grace suppressed the rage roaring within her and concentrated on Pa. He was trying to tell her something.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, her father shook his head. His mouth silently formed the words “stay put.” He flicked his chin toward the house. He wanted her to stay hidden because there was still Zeke to protect. So far, the baby hadn’t cried.

Grace clenched her teeth. Standing by was almost more than she could bear, but Pa’s pleading eyes kept her quiet. Her fingers stayed tight around the stick as Hale barked out another order.

“Search the house,” he shouted.

A couple of the men sauntered inside, and Grace panicked, wondering if Ma had had time to hide Zeke.

Just then, Hale turned and began to stalk lazily toward the cellar.

He was headed straight for her.
So be it, she thought. She braced herself for whatever might come next.
Then Pa's voice rang out. “Hale.”
Hale’s steps faltered. He glanced over his shoulder. “You talking to me?”
Pa snarled, “You're a dandified city slicker with no guts.”
No, Pa, don’t provoke him, Grace screamed silently.
Hale whirled, one hand on his gun.
Pa kept on. “You're a damn coward, Hale.”
Hale’s laugh held the meanness of a rabid dog as he gestured toward the bleeding bodies of Grace’s family. “That the act of a coward?”
“Yes,” her father said through gritted teeth. “A coward who lets others do his killing for him.”
In one swift movement, Hale whipped his revolver from his holster.
Grace clamped a hand over her mouth and squeezed her eyes shut as the gun’s sharp report ricocheted. The sound reverberated off the stones and ripped straight through her heart.
When she finally opened her eyes, Pa lay motionless beside Ma.
Elijah Hale glanced around. “Anyone else got something to say?”
No one answered.
Grace stared at her parents’ lifeless bodies, hardly able to breathe. Her father had sacrificed his life for hers. She had to stay alive for him and get to Zeke, or this hell would have been for nothing.
Fierce tears burned in her eyes, but she knew one thing: Hale had been wrong when he had said “no witnesses.” Her arm ached with the strain of holding the door aloft only a crack, but in the dying light of the sun she imprinted every single detail of the Guiltless Gang’s faces into her memory. The man with pockmarked cheeks and a scraggly beard, and the other with a similar build but a clean-shaven face and slicked-back hair. Another, squinty eyes with a drooping mustache. The ruthless knife-wielder with the hawk-like nose. The woman with the custom snakeskin boots. All of them.
And Grace would never forget Elijah Hale’s face. It would haunt her nightmares.
He glanced at the bodies of her family. “One place we still didn’t check, though . . .” he said.
Hale strode back toward the cellar, his gun still clenched in his fist.
Grace’s eyes widened, and she gritted her teeth, trying desperately to stiffen her arm, but she couldn’t steady the hatch lid. She thought about letting it close, but she had to know what was happening above her. If Hale was coming to check the cellar, she was as good as dead anyway. As he stalked toward her hiding place, her heart stuttered the way it had once when she’d surprised a rattlesnake — but the cruelty in Hale’s eyes terrified her more than any rattler poised to strike.

Part of her wanted to back away into the darkness, to hide, even bury herself under the vegetables . . . but she couldn’t.

If the gang was searching, they would find her soon enough, and if she was going to die, she would not die a coward. Grace gritted her teeth, ready to pop the hatch door into Hale’s face when he leaned down to open it.

His spurs jingled with each step closer. Six paces away.
Five . . . four . . .
“We better move out!”

Hale stopped as one of his men galloped around from the side of the cabin, shouting. It was the man who’d killed Daniel. Bile rose in Grace’s throat, and she crouched to see his face more clearly. He was clean-shaven, and the bandana tied around his neck was as black as his eyes.
“Pretty Boy already done set the place on fire,” he said.

Hale spun and spat. “Grab some of the horses first.”

Relief coursed through Grace when Hale changed direction and strode quickly toward the paddock, but her body still trembled uncontrollably. She could make out curls of smoke beginning to rise from the far corner of the cabin.

Zeke!

If her baby brother was still safe, she had to find a way to get to him. Her eyes darted furtively left and right, watching for an opportunity. Graying twilight silhouetted the men as they ran toward the stable.

Chaos whirled above her hiding place — horses whinnying, men swearing, hooves stamping. The slaps of saddles being thrown on horseback, reins jangling as horses were being yanked viciously into a group.
“Let them wild ones go!” the man with the drooping mustache shouted. “They’s nothing but trouble.”

The freed mustangs bolted from the barn, heading for the hills, and Grace choked on the clouds of dust kicked up by their hooves as they stampeded past the cracked cellar door. All her father’s work . . . for nothing. As two of the men tossed tack and equipment into a heap by the stable, the ache in her chest grew.

One whinny stood out from the rest of the bedlam. *Bullet! Please don’t let them take Bullet* . . .

Keeping the hatch lid steady, Grace squatted lower to keep an eye on the horse, swallowing hard as Hale opened the paddock gate. He lunged at Bullet, grabbing for the halter, and the stallion pulled back his lips, revealing his teeth. He snapped at Hale, who stepped back to avoid the horse’s chomping jaws. Grace cheered silently as Hale was unable to get close.

He stormed away and vaulted the fence. Mounting his own horse, Hale galloped back to the paddock gate. “Toss me a lead,” he shouted to the nearest man, who was loaded down with tack.

The man threw him a rope, and Hale caught it in one hand, then charged toward Bullet. Bringing his pinto alongside, Hale leaned out from his saddle and grabbed for Bullet’s halter again, but the palomino screamed and reared, his hoof clipping Hale in the face. He tumbled from his horse and landed in a heap as Bullet flew toward the open gate. Hale sat up quickly, clutching his cheek. Blood trickled through his fingers, and Grace felt her lips twist into a bitter smile.

“Stop that horse!” he snarled.

“Leave it.” The woman’s voice came from somewhere above Grace’s head again. She must have already mounted her Appaloosa — Grace could see its hooves stamping impatiently right outside the root cellar’s hatch. An icy chill slithered down her spine. They were so close to her — what if Hale remembered his intention to search the cellar?

“We need to go.” The woman’s voice was strained. The Appaloosa edged past the opening.

Hale staggered to his feet and went for his gun.

Bullet rounded the stable at a gallop and, before Hale could aim properly, wove back and forth between the saguaro, heading for the mountains. Grace clenched her teeth and willed Bullet to go faster.

*At least one of us should get away from here* . . .

* * *

After an unbearable delay, the Guiltless Gang finally galloped off in a clatter of hooves, neighs, and churning sand.

Grace carefully peered out from her hiding place, staring into the gathering night as the gang fanned out in different directions like spokes on a wagon wheel. Within moments, they had disappeared into the blackness.
As soon as the hoof beats faded, Grace burst from the root cellar.

Zeke . . .

Tongues of flame were already licking the night sky behind the cabin, and smoke rose from the back corner. The gang had set the woodpile on fire, but the cabin’s heavy logs chinked with adobe caught more slowly. On shaky limbs, Grace stumbled toward the door.

Her stomach lurched. Furniture pushed over. Chairs flung in a jumbled heap against the log walls, legs snapped off. Bedding slashed. Crockery smashed on the floor. And the upended cradle splintered against the stone hearth.

“Z-Zeke . . . ?” Grace said hoarsely.

Burning wood spit and crackled like gunshots, and a second later, the straw mattress in the back corner of the cabin burst into flames. She dropped to her knees, panic clawing at her insides as she bunched up her skirt and crawled across the floor, searching desperately among the broken furniture. She ducked low to stay beneath the bil-lowing smoke, dodging the shooting sparks. She had to find Zeke.

Fire ate along the back wall, consuming the chairs. Ma’s overturned soup pot had doused the embers in the fireplace, and broth had soaked into the dirt by the hearth. Pieces of vegetables lay scattered on the dirt floor. She thought of Ma stirring the soup for the dinner they would never have.

Tears stung Grace’s eyes. Don’t think about it. Find Zeke. Now.

Grace dug furiously through the broken cradle slats, flinging them behind her. Trapped under the shattered cradle, she came across the tintype photograph Ma kept on the hearth — it must have fallen to the ground in the con-fusion. Grace snatched up the only picture of her family and quickly tucked it inside her bodice before returning to her task, tearing at the cracked headboard of her brother’s crib. The pointed iron edges of the tintype scratched her skin, but she hardly noticed.

She finally moved the last of the wood away and sucked down the sob that rose in her throat as she saw what she had exposed.

Zeke lay on the floor.

Grace rocked back onto her heels, and acrid smoke choked her as she stared at Zeke’s motionless body.

She started suddenly as the back corner of the roof caved in, and smoke quickly swirled toward them. She didn’t have time now to check if he was alive or dead. Scooping her brother up, she tucked him against her with one arm. Crouching low, she arched her upper body over Zeke to protect him from falling debris as the smoke curled lower, and then she crawled one-armed toward the door. Her lungs burned with each breath. Grit and ash filled her mouth, scratching her throat, and she slapped at sparks on her dress and skin.
By the time she reached the porch, the knees of her leggings were shredded. Gasping with relief at getting outside, Grace gulped ragged breaths into her air-starved lungs and then, gripping her brother, stood up and raced from the cabin toward open pasture a safe distance from the caving timbers. She collapsed into a sitting position against the rough wood of a fence post, coughing and panting hard. The darkness of the evening was illuminated by the roaring fire, shedding flickering light on the nightmare all around them.

Finally, reluctantly, Grace looked down at her little brother's limp body, reaching out a tentative hand and placing it on Zeke's chest. For one moment, she thought her hand rose with his breath, and her heart expanded until her own chest ached.

*He's alive?

She was filled with hope for a brief instant, but the crackle of flames, imploding walls, and plumes of smoke rising into the night sky brought reality hurtling back. She closed her eyes, and the fire's heat seared her eyelids as terrifying visions danced in her mind. The rest of her family lay scattered around her in the smoke-filled yard. Grace hugged the baby fiercely to her chest. “It's going to be all right, Zeke. It's going to be all right . . .”

Maybe someone had seen the smoke. Maybe the law would be coming soon. Maybe she and Zeke would be fine. She struggled to draw more air into her tortured lungs, choking and coughing in the drifting haze. She had to get up, move farther away from the fire, but her muscles were rubbery, useless. She had no strength, no energy, no willpower.

And, as she looked down again at Zeke, she realized he remained unmoving, his eyes still closed.

“No! No. No. No . . .” she whispered, her voice just a croak. She laid her ear against his chest. Not a whisper of breath. Not a faint heartbeat.

He hadn't made it.

Numbness crept through her. Nobody was coming to save them. Grace slumped against the fence with Zeke lying in her lap, staring into the distance as his body grew stiff and cold, and the cabin crumbled into ash. Her will to live drained away, leaving behind only a soulless, empty shell.

* * *

A coyote howled nearby, echoing around her like the wail of a ghost.

With Zeke's body still clasped in her arms, Grace sprang to her feet, as if it were a call to action. Her family. She had to bury them — now, before the animals circled for them. She could at least give them that.

Setting Zeke gently on the ground, Grace ran a hand over his curls and then reached into her bodice to pull out the tintype, so its sharp iron edges wouldn't poke her as
she worked. She placed it beside her baby brother, then she began to dig like a dog, shooting the sand behind her — but two feet down, she struck hard-baked clay.

A shovel. She needed a shovel.

Grace stood, a little unsure on her feet at first, and then rushed to the stable. She rooted through the jumbled pile the gang had left behind and found the manure shovel. Returning to the hole, she attacked the ground with a vengeance. Stomping on the edge of the blade, Grace sent the shovel deep into the resistant clay, twisting out chunks the way she wished she could twist a knife into the heart of every one of those murderers.

The pit grew deeper, wider, but she didn't stop. The moon rose higher in the sky. She kept digging. Her hands blistered. She kept digging. The blisters oozed clear liquid. Still she dug.

Just before grayness edged over the horizon, Grace finally flung away the shovel. She had to finish this in the dark — she couldn't bear it in the light. The pit was deep now, but it would never be deep enough to bury the horror of what had happened there.

Her palms raw, she tugged at the bodies of her family, dragging them to the pit, one by one, to bury them all together. She placed Pa first. Then Ma, with Abby beside her. Tugging Daniel by the boots, she settled him beside their sister. Darkness obscured her family's features, but their faces smiled at her from memory. Realizing that Daniel's hat must have fallen off, Grace backtracked and found it. She leaned down into the pit to set the hat over his face.

“There you go.”

She choked back tears and pulled herself up. Only Zeke was left. Grace sank to the grass beside him, taking him into her arms and rocking him back and forth as deep sobs racked her body, flowing up from her shattered heart in tidal waves. Eventually, she nestled him into the curve of Ma's arm.

“Goodbye,” she whispered.

Scoop and toss. Scoop and toss.

Each shovelful a prayer. A vow. A promise for justice. She was burying her family, burying the only life she knew. Grace mounded the clay into a small hill, packing it down as a barrier against coyotes and other wild animals that might steal the bones. Bile rose again in her throat at the very thought.

She needed a marker. A cross.

Fragments of splintered wood lay on the ground near the cabin's smoldering ruins. The pieces were crooked, with jagged edges. As she went over and picked up a shard, a splinter jabbed into her finger, but she barely felt it. She picked up Bullet's lead rope, which still swung from the paddock fence. She wound it around the wooden arms to hold them together, tied it off, and then reached down to pick up the tintype she had laid aside.
Grace climbed the mound with the cross in hand, and with the back of the shovel, she drove it into the hard-packed clay.

Then she lay down next to the cross and clasped the picture of her family tightly in her hand — so tight that the iron edges bit into her raw and blistered skin. Shivers racked her body, waves of grief rippling from the inside out, and the cold froze her tears into an icy block in her chest, constricting her breathing.

* * *

Why did I survive? Why am I still alive?

Slivers of pink now streaked the horizon. The earth kept spinning, but the world she had known stopped in that moment forever.

* * *

Grace tucked the tintype back into her bodice and pressed it against her heart while she sat watching the sun rise, the emptiness in her chest deeper than the pit she had dug. She had no idea what to do now. The old Grace lay beneath the ground with the family she loved. She would never be the same again . . .

Something cold and wet nudged her arm, and she jumped. A familiar huff followed.

Bullet?

She must be dreaming. The palomino snorted again and tossed his mane as she turned to face him. When she didn’t respond, Bullet moved closer and blew his breath into her face. Finally she leaped to her feet and threw her arms around his neck, her chest growing tight as she buried her face in his mane.

Bullet had come back for her. She wasn’t alone.

Pulling back from him, she gritted her teeth.

“This isn’t over,” she murmured. Suddenly, she had a thought. “Wait here, boy.”

Striding over to the barn, Grace dug through the debris the gang had left behind, fearing they’d taken what she was looking for. But then, hidden under piles of hay, she found the tin. Her father had hidden this old gun here in case of any rattlers or sudden Indian attacks. If only he’d had a chance to get to it before . . . she pushed the thought away.

Opening the metal box, she reached inside and closed her hand around the smooth handle of her father’s old Colt revolver. She slid it out of its holster and stared at it, her finger testing the trigger. Pa had shown her how to use it, telling her how he had wrestled it away from a soldier. If it had been hidden down in the root cellar, maybe none of this would have happened. If only.

Swallowing hard, Grace flipped open the cylinder. There were only three bullets inside, but no matter. She would find more if she had to. She attached the gun and holster to the waistband of her skirt and covered it with her bodice. Then she dug through the piles until she found a worn-out saddle, reins, scuffed saddlebags, and a hide water pouch that had been discarded in the commotion.
Striding back to Bullet, she strapped them on and mounted.

*Why am I still alive?*

Now she knew the answer to that question: To see that justice was served.

The Guiltless would hang.