

Charity: A Western.

The stranger came in from the desert and death rode with him.

Young Billy Blakelock sat in the street of the small town of Charity, population 105, licking a lollipop. He had spent all of yesterday working in his father's blacksmith shop and the lollipop was his reward. Billy studied its swirl of colours, and then licked it again. It was a good lollipop.

He looked around at the town where he was born. Most of the buildings were only a few years old but the desert had not been kind to Charity. The desert storms had sandblasted the wood into splinters, and paint hung in strips from the walls.

And then there was the sand. It got into everything, into people's houses and shops, in their clothes, and even their food. To the desert sand, the town was only a temporary obstacle. Eventually, Charity would disappear beneath it. The townspeople knew this, but still persevered, sweeping the sand from their homes, washing it from their clothes, and picking it from their food.

Suddenly a shadow fell over the boy and he looked up in surprise. He watched the stranger ride by, shoulders slumped forward, hat pulled down over his eyes. Although he was covered in desert dust it was easy to tell his clothes were dark, as was his horse. His spurs jingled lightly with every step his steed took, but it was a sound that was far from merry. His guns, slung low on his hips, brushed against his saddle, and the boy could see his holsters were well oiled. If Billy's poppa was here he could tell him what type of man wore guns like that. Billy felt apprehensive as he watched the stranger ride by. He had never seen this man before, but he knew instinctively he was a bad man. Billy decided to finish his lollipop inside his father's shop.

The stranger rode along the main street, attracting covert glances as he went. He rode up to the saloon and stopped. Passersby noticed that the man made no noise, gave no indication to his horse to stop there. His horse seemed to know his master's wishes without a signal of any kind. The stranger swung one leg over the saddle and slipped noiselessly to the ground. Without a backward glance he strode up the steps and entered the dim saloon.

A woman in a green taffeta dress with a tousle of red hair stood there, her elbow resting on the bar. She watched the stranger enter and moved her hand to her breast. Her eyes went to his face, trying to see under the brim of his hat, but all she could see was an unshaven jaw and sun bleached hair clinging to the back of his neck. He wore a faded old poncho pulled back over one shoulder to reveal his dust covered shirt and trousers. Even under all that dust she could tell he was no trail bum. He walked with confidence, striding across the wooden floor with long, measured steps.

He made his way directly to the bar, passing a table where a group of gamblers were involved in a game of cards. He brushed against one of the players, causing him to drop the chips he was about to place in the kitty. The chips bounced off the surface of the table and scattered across the floor. The angry cowboy stood up quickly, knocking his chair back with a thump. The red-haired woman knew what was coming and moved to the far end of the room, never taking her eyes off the newcomer.

The stranger propped his boot on the foot rail at the bar. He slid his hand across the bar then removed it, leaving a nickel behind. The bartender, a black man with a rapidly greying beard, slid a glass of whiskey in front of the stranger before making the nickel disappear.

“Hey you!” the cowboy yelled, staring at the stranger. He looked mean as a rattler about to strike, and his hand went straight to his gun. It was clear that the thought of gunning someone down was more tantalising to him than gathering up some dropped gambling chips.

The stranger ignored him, choosing instead to fondle the cool glass of cheap whiskey. His hat, still pulled down over his eyes, hid what he was thinking.

“I’m talking to you, stranger. You dropped my chips.” The cowboy’s hand slowly caressed the handle of his Colt .45.

“I think you better leave this one alone, Leroy,” the bartender said to the cowboy, his voice slow and measured. He had seen something in this stranger, something about the way he walked. Crossing this man would be a big mistake. He valued Leroy’s business, he spent most of his pay here, but Leroy couldn’t do that occupying a plot in the Charity cemetery.

“Keep your nose out of this, Zeus,” Leroy snapped. “This here’s between me and him. Now turn around and face me, stranger. Turn around by God, or I’ll shoot you where you stand.”

The stranger slowly turned to face Leroy, his mouth drawn into a thin, cruel smile.

Leroy had seen a few gunfights in his time, and one thing he learned early on was that the man who walked away at the end was usually the man who went into the fight with an edge. Lots of things can give a man an edge. The sun in your opponent’s eyes, a sudden noise from behind, even the intimidation of a well-chosen word. Leroy always looked for an edge and this time he thought he had found one.

The stranger’s hat.

The brim was still pulled down over his eyes, blocking his vision. Leroy had often found that a gunfighter’s eyes would give away his movement. A glimmer in the eye just before a man drew was enough of a warning for Leroy, and he figured the stranger would be the same. But the stranger’s hat was pulled down so far he couldn’t see Leroy’s eyes, which gave Leroy the edge he was looking for.

“Reach for em, stranger,” snarled Leroy, as he slapped leather. His gun had just cleared his holster when two bullets crashed into his chest, throwing him back over the table behind him. As he died in a scattering of cards and poker chips he realised he couldn’t see the stranger’s eyes either.

The stranger slowly slid his smoking guns back into their holsters and turned back to the bar.

Zeus looked over the man’s shoulder at the carnage he had caused, noticing that at least two of the gunfight’s eyewitnesses had already left. It didn’t take a genius to figure out where they were headed. “Stranger,” he said, “I think you better drink up and leave.”

The stranger picked up the glass from the bar and knocked back the cheap whiskey, then calmly placed it back down on the bar. “Reckon I’ll stay here and wait for the sheriff. I don’t want a posse riding after me.” His voice was low and deliberate. It was a voice you took seriously.

The woman in the green taffeta dress now spoke, “Well, you won’t have to wait long, stranger. That sorry son of a bitch you just killed was the sheriff. And those boys who lit outta here so fast were his deputies.”

The stranger glanced at her, noticing she was a woman of uncommon beauty, hair as red as fire and eyes of pure jade. The clothes she wore were colourful and neat, not a thread out of place. She had an air of confidence about her, a rarity in these desert towns where the constant heat and dryness wore people down faster than the heels on a cheap pair of boots.

“And who are you?” he said to the woman.

“My name is Ariel Goodson and this is Zeus, my partner and friend.” She placed a hand on the bartender’s shoulder. “We own this place, or we will, once the mortgage is paid.” Ariel placed her hands on her hips, adopting a stern demeanour as she addressed the stranger.

“This is our only livelihood and I would appreciate it if you moved on. We don’t want any trouble here.”

The stranger glanced at Leroy's body lying behind him on the floor. “Any trouble you might have had, Ma’am, died with him.”

The woman was about to open her mouth when the bartender interrupted her.

“Ariel,” he said, the warning in his voice obvious.

“Now don’t you hush me, Zeus. He has a right to know just how much trouble he’s caused.” She turned to the stranger.

“Those two men that ran outta here? They’re headed out to the Double D ranch to see Mr. McKenna. Take my word for it. He owns this town, lock, stock and barrel. You killed one of his best men, stranger, and he won’t take kindly to that.”

The stranger lifted up the brim of his hat, finally exposing his sun-ravaged face. He looked at the pair with eyes as blue as new denim and as cold as a December morn.

“I can take care of myself,” he drawled, as he pointed to his empty glass.

“Against fifty men? Take my advice stranger, get out of town while you can,” Ariel replied, ignoring his unspoken request for another drink. She wanted the stranger to go, but something in her wanted him to stay too. She shivered as the stranger turned his eyes towards her.

“Later.” He turned back to the bartender. “Are there rooms upstairs? I need to rest.”

“Sure,” replied Zeus, “they’re all empty so take your pick.”

“Now hang on one damn second.” Ariel was obviously unhappy with the thought of this killer staying the night. “You can’t give him a room, Zeus, he just killed the sheriff for God’s sake.”

“He drew down on me, ma’am.” The stranger refused to be ruffled by Ariel’s onslaught, which merely served to infuriate her more.

“I don’t care if he dropped his pants and wiggled his ass at you. I want you outta here.”

The stranger refused to move. Ariel came around to the front of the bar and tried to shove him, but he was too quick for her and grabbed her by the wrists.

“Let me go, dammit.” Ariel struggled in his grasp but his grip was too strong. She swung a foot at him, trying to connect with his shin. The stranger responded by holding her in a bear

hug, then bent down and kissed her roughly on the lips. She broke free and looked at him, a blush rising on her cheeks.

“How dare you.” She was outraged at his behaviour, and yet something deep inside her responded to his roughness. She went to shove him again, and again he grabbed and kissed her. She melted inside but continued to resist.

“You fucking animal,” she screamed and swung an open handed slap at his face. He ducked beneath it and moved forward in a crouch, grabbing her around the waist and lifting her up and over his shoulder. He made his way towards the stairs.

“No, wait,” shouted Ariel. “Zeus, stop him.”

Zeus smiled. He could see the flush on her face and bosom, and he knew it was not all outrage. He had been around for a good many years and seen a good many things. Ariel didn’t fool him in the slightest.

The stranger carried her upstairs and kicked open the door of the first room he came too. He walked over to the bed and dropped Ariel onto it, watching as her body first bounced and then settled into the covers.

“You bastard,” she said, but all the fury had left her voice. Ariel could feel warmth growing in that special place. He lay down on top of her and kissed her again, not roughly this time but long and passionately. Ariel wrapped her arms around his neck and returned his kiss.

Lucas McKenna was a big man, 6 feet 4 inches of solid muscle. Over the years he had bought up all of Charity by fair means or foul. He had torn down and rebuilt with his own hands, shed his own blood and sweat and the blood and sweat of everyone else. He was mean and he was hated. The townspeople were terrified to cross him. That kind of power could be addictive, and McKenna was hooked

Right now he was about to reap one of the benefits of that power. Abigail Jones had just turned 16 and now she was kneeling before him, fumbling with his fly. She was a gift to McKenna, torn from her sobbing mother, an interest payment on the Jones family farm. Or, to be more precise, her virginity was. And now it was time to collect.

He looked down at the inexperienced girl trying vainly to release him from his pants. She had been at it for several minutes and had gotten nowhere. He reached down, grabbed her by the hair, and shoved her back onto the floor.

“Stupid bitch. How hard can it be to open a man’s pants?”

He quickly unbuttoned his fly and shoved his trousers down his legs, exposing his member to the air. He smiled when he saw the look of shock on the girl’s face.

Lucas McKenna was a big man indeed.

Ariel gasped as the stranger entered her. She might have protested about the idea of sleeping with this man, but by the time he slid into her she was as wet as a spring thaw. She reached up and ran her hands over his muscular chest, tracing her fingers over every ridge and hollow. She felt four small, round, scars. Old bullet wounds, no doubt.

The stranger pushed himself deeper, causing Ariel to bite her lower lip. She could feel every inch as he plunged into her, and it felt like heaven. He started to pump rhythmically, causing her to grunt with every thrust. Ariel wrapped her arms around him, running her fingers up and down his spine, scratching him as she came.

Afterwards she lay beside him, gazing at the ceiling and basking in the warmth of the bed. She wondered who this man was, a man with no name that she knew, a man who lived by the gun.

“Who are you? I mean, what is your name?”

“Does it matter?”

“It does to me.”

He didn’t answer her, choosing instead to light up a cigarillo that he pulled from his crumpled shirt.

“Okay then, where do you come from?”

“The desert.”

“But you weren’t born there. Where did you come from before that?”

Silence greeted her question.

“You don’t say much, do you?”

Silence again.

“Well then,” she said, rolling on top of him, “at least show me what you can do.”

He showed her.

McKenna poured himself a drink and glanced at the huddled girl lying next to him in the bed. She had been reluctant but McKenna was not about to take any lip from a mere slip of a girl. After a quick, severe beating she was more cooperative. He taught her what she needed to know to satisfy him, and she learned quickly under his fist. When he finally took her she bled.

A lot.

He was grateful she had at least stopped that infernal sobbing. McKenna was about to roll her over for another lesson when Seth Green burst into the bedroom.

“Mr. McKenna...” He stopped when he saw the shotgun McKenna had pulled from under the bed and levelled at him.

“Talk or die,” he growled.

“Mr. McKenna, it’s Leroy.”

“What about him?”

“He’s dead.”

Ariel reached out in the darkness, looking for her lover, noticing that night had fallen as they slept. She felt him sitting up in bed, his muscles taut as steel cables.

“What’s wr...” She felt his hand clamp over her mouth and heard him quietly shush her. Something was badly wrong here. She heard a faint sound from outside, the noise of a creaking floorboard. Ariel glanced at the gap under the door and saw a shadow formed by the light from the main room of the saloon. The shadow was moving. Suddenly she felt the stranger push her out of the bed just as the door flew open. Thunder roared and lightning flashed in that small room. Ariel screamed as she heard the wet sound of hot lead punching into soft flesh, then more thunder, more lightning, and the sound of glass shattering.

And then silence.

Ariel was tangled in the sheets from the bed, a cocoon of cotton fabric, and she wanted more than anything to stay hidden in there until the hell that was outside it left. She felt a strong hand on her shoulder and yelped in fear.

“Come on.” It was his voice. Her heart leapt and she scrambled out of the sheets, grabbing for him.

“What happened?” she asked.

“No time. Grab your clothes, we’re leaving.”

She saw he was naked and for a second remembered how his body felt on top of her, inside her. She shook her head, clearing her thoughts, and picked up her dress. Ariel tried to slip it on but he grabbed her arm and dragged her out of the room past a body slumped across the shattered windowsill. Once outside, she saw a splatter of blood on the wall across from the doorway with another body slumped beneath it. She was about to protest when she heard his guns roar again. Instinctively she clamped her hands over her ears and watched as someone slowly fell backwards down the stairs, somersaulting like a child’s discarded rag doll. Then that strong hand was pulling her down the stairs after it.

They reached the ground floor and she looked around for Zeus. Zeus, who had taken her in when she had needed a roof over her head. Zeus, who had given her a room upstairs and food in her belly, and never once asked for money, had never asked for anything but friendship. Zeus, who had offered her an equal partnership in the saloon when she inherited money from a deceased relative back east. Zeus, who was now lying behind the bar, blood streaming from an ugly head wound. She ran to him to see if he was still alive. As she rolled him over he groaned and her heart leapt again. Without a word she ripped a strip of fabric from the green dress she carried and used it to bind his wound. Zeus looked up at her gratefully, then down at her naked breasts.

“Well I guess I know what you were doing up there now,” he said with a lopsided grin.

“Sure looks like that blow to the head didn’t knock any sense into you,” she replied with her own smile. She was overjoyed that her friend was still alive and able to joke.

“When you two finish gabbing,” the stranger growled, “I’d like to get out of here before we’re trapped with no place to go.”

Ariel looked over and was secretly disappointed to see he had managed to put his pants and boots on. He was just pulling on his shirt and still clutching his hat. When had he found time

to grab all his clothing? All she managed to grab was her dress. She slipped it over her head and smoothed it down over her breasts and hips.

“Let’s go,” she said to Zeus.

“One second.” Zeus reached under the bar and pulled out an old Winchester rifle. He cocked it, loading a bullet into the breach. “Right behind you.”

The trio rushed outside and into the maw of hell.

Lucas McKenna had listened to Seth Green ramble on about the gunfight in the saloon, about the stranger who had blown Leroy clean out of his boots. McKenna was proud of his town and the last thing he wanted was some trail bum coming out of the desert and shooting his sheriff. He told Seth to take two ranch hands into town and deal with the trouble. After Seth left, McKenna got to thinking about something the frightened man had said about the stranger. The way he described him was familiar. An old memory rose in his mind, a memory about a dead man. McKenna made a decision there and then, a decision that had him standing outside the saloon with 50 armed men as the trio burst out through the batwing doors.

The stranger took one look at what lay around him and instantly knew it was over. He could probably unload both guns, taking down 12 of them, Zeus might be able to get a half dozen more, but there were far too many for them to take on and win. He watched as the reason he came to town separated from the crowd and walked towards him.

“Hello Lucas,” said the stranger through gritted teeth.

McKenna stared at him for a second, trying to remember who this was, and then his eyes widened as it struck him.

“You!”

“Are you ready to die, Lucas?” The stranger levelled his gun at the rancher but McKenna refused to back down.

“I have 50 guns trained on you right now. Do you really want to pull that trigger?”

The stranger just glared at him, his finger tightening on the trigger.

“Okay, let me put it this way. Do you want the girl to die?” He nodded toward Ariel. Lucas smiled as he saw uncertainty cross the stranger’s face.

“Drop your guns.” McKenna turned towards the bartender. “You too, Zeus.”

Reluctantly the two men dropped their weapons into the dust.

“That’s much better. It’s been a long time, hasn’t it?”

“Too long.” The stranger’s voice was full of menace but McKenna was not the slightest bit intimidated. He knew he held all the cards.

“You’re supposed to be dead. I put four bullets in you myself. I saw your body tied to your horse and sent off into the desert. No one else would live through that. What makes you so different?”

The stranger glared at McKenna. The hate he felt for this man was palpable.

Ariel watched the standoff between both men, a meeting of iron wills. But she needed to know something more and it looked like McKenna had the information she so desperately wanted.

“Do you know him?” she asked McKenna.

“Sure do,” said McKenna, turning to her. “He’s my son.” He turned back to his men. “Take the girl inside, I need a little entertainment. Do what you like to him,” he pointed over his shoulder at the stranger. “Just don’t kill him.”

“What about the bartender?” came a voice from the crowd.

McKenna looked at Zeus. He never liked black men, especially ones who thought they were good enough to own property in a town like Charity.

“Nail him to his precious saloon.”

The stranger looked around at his opponents. They were armed with pick handles, some slowly slapping them into the palms of their hands. No one had pulled out a gun and the stranger took this as his edge. Now all he had to do was arm himself. One of the mob walked towards him. This one didn’t bother with anything as clumsy as a lump of wood. Instead he brandished a large hunting knife.

“I reckon I’m gonna carve me some pig.” He deftly tossed the knife from hand to hand, trying to catch the stranger off guard.

“You’re going to look pretty silly with that knife sticking out of your ass.”

The cowboy stopped for a second, momentarily intimidated by the stranger’s words, then lunged at him.

The stranger easily slipped out of the way and grabbed the man by his knife hand, snapping the wrist with uncanny ease. The cowboy howled as he clutched his broken hand and fell to his knees. The stranger swiped at the next attacker, cutting him deeply across the face, then spun into the crowd before slamming the knife into the chest of a third attacker. He grabbed the pick handle of the man as he fell and smashed it into the stomach of another man.

It was a heroic effort but he was outnumbered. He dealt with another two men before the blows started raining down on his head and shoulders. He stumbled to his knees and grabbed a knife from a nearby boot, but before he could use it an axe handle struck his hand, breaking two of his fingers. He tried to stand but the effort was beyond him. He fell under the battering and felt no more.

McKenna dragged Ariel up the stairs towards one of the rooms. She could hear the shouts and pounding noises from outside. Ariel wondered how badly her lover, the stranger, was being beaten. She shocked herself by thinking that no matter what they did, she didn’t want them damaging his beautiful face. She soon had other things to worry about. McKenna kicked open a door and for the second time that day Ariel found herself flung onto a bed. Only this time it wasn’t a romantic scene. This time she was going to be raped.

McKenna reached down, grabbed her dress, and with one deft movement tore it from her body, exposing her nakedness beneath.

“Nice tits for a slut,” he said as he began to undress. “I always wanted to fuck you, Ariel, but I reckoned you would never give it up willingly. I knew I’d have to take it from you. And if there is one thing I like taking, it’s sex.” He finished undressing and turned towards her, showing her what he had in store. If he was hoping for shock he was disappointed. All he saw in her eyes was defiance.

Ariel looked at McKenna and saw his size down there. His cock was so big and heavy that it couldn’t stand up on its own, he had to hold it. She knew he was going to hurt her with it, but she didn’t care. No matter what he did to her it couldn’t possibly be as bad as what her lover was going through. And there was no way he could touch the part inside her that the stranger had touched. She braced herself as McKenna climbed on top of her, trying to stop him from entering her but he was used to women resisting him. He placed his hands between her thighs and pulled them apart. Then with one quick thrust he was inside her.

Ariel screamed.

McKenna walked out of the saloon two hours later. He had taken his time with Ariel, savouring every little bit of his conquest. He lit up a cigar and walked down to the street, looking around at the men surrounding him. He noticed a half dozen bodies lying in a pile across the street.

“Sanchez,” he called. Sanchez was his second in command, an ex-comanchero that McKenna had rescued from a posse. He was a loyal employee and quite possibly more brutal than McKenna himself. The Mexican half-breed walked up to stand in front of him.

“Yes sir, Senor McKenna?”

“My son better not be one of those bodies,” he barked as he motioned to the pile in the street.

“No sir, he is over there,” said Sanchez, pointing to the blacksmith’s shop.

McKenna walked to where his son was hanging, bare-chested, by his hands from the main support beam of the blacksmith’s roof. His body was a mass of bruises and cuts, and his right hand had several oddly bent fingers.

“You shoulda stayed dead,” he hissed. “Why couldn’t you just die like anyone else? What makes you so special?”

The stranger lifted his head and spat in his father’s face. That was his only response, no words, no explanations, no ranting or raving. McKenna was quietly proud of the steel his son had developed. Shame he’d have to die. But he couldn’t have just anyone riding into town and making a mess. It was his town, dammit, and an example had to be made. He wiped the bloody spit from his face and walked back towards the saloon. Sanchez walked beside him.

“Senor McKenna, what happened between you and your son? Why did you try to kill him?”

“I didn’t try to kill him, I did kill him. He’s just too stupid to lay down.”

“But why, Senor McKenna?”

“Over a woman.”

“And you both loved this woman?”

“In a way. It was his mother. She...died. And he blamed me. So he came after me with a gun. He was young, too young to use it right. But I knew I couldn't let him live so I killed him and sent his body out into the desert.”

“When did this happen?”

“Ten years ago today. Ain't that ironic, amigo?”

Sanchez looked nervously over his shoulder at the stranger hanging from the beam.

“Today? This is the tenth year of his death?”

“Yeah, sure is.” McKenna looked at his senior ranch hand, and saw his apprehension. “He's not a ghost Sanchez. Ghosts don't bleed.”

“I hope you are right, Senor McKenna,” mumbled Sanchez, not entirely convinced this was a real man.

McKenna laughed at Sanchez' superstition. He finally reached the saloon to find the barman, Zeus, crucified on an upturned hitching rail. He looked at the large nails hammered through the black man's wrists.

“Oh, that's got to hurt,” he chuckled, and drew deeply on his cigar. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Ariel appear at the saloon doors. She had wrapped a bedsheet around her body and was leaning against the doorjamb for support. She looked over at McKenna with hate in her eyes, and then she saw the bartender.

“Oh no, not Zeus.” Ariel rushed to his side, momentarily forgetting the bedsheet, which fell to the ground. She placed her hands on him and was rewarded with a groan from her dear friend.

“Oh, thank God you're still alive,” she whispered to Zeus, then turned to the man who had caused so much pain in one night. He looked at her naked body with the same brutal lust she had seen earlier. She clutched the bedsheet around her again.

“Get him down from there, you bastard.” Her eyes burned with a fire that matched the colour of her hair.

“Such a defiant young lass,” McKenna responded. “I'll tell you what. If your newfound friend,” he nodded down the street to the stranger, “can beat me in a gunfight, then you can all go free. But if he doesn't...well...we are going to have ourselves a little celebration barbeque.” He looked past her to the saloon. “An old tinderbox like this would burn easily, don't you think, Ariel?”

He turned back to his men and waved at the figure down the street.

“Cut him down.” The men raced to do his bidding. One of the Mexicans produced a large cane-cutting knife and severed the rope with one swipe. The stranger fell to the ground in a tangle of limbs. Two men grabbed him under his arms and dragged him up the street, the toes of his boots carving narrow furrows in the dirt. They stood him in front of McKenna and tried to hold him up, but it was difficult because he was unconscious. Someone produced a bucket of water and they poured it over him, snapping him back to the land of the living.

“Well, son, looks like you finally get the chance to throw down against your father. Someone get his guns.” The stranger’s guns magically appeared from the crowd of men and in no time they were buckled around his hips.

“Let me see those things,” said McKenna, reaching into one of the holsters to drag out one of the Colts.

“That’s a mighty fine piece you have there. What’s the trigger pull like?” He pulled the trigger and shot the stranger through the back of his left hand. The stranger’s eyes rolled back in their sockets but he didn’t utter a word.

“Gee, I’m sorry about that, son. Damn thing just went off. Well, this is what happens when you fool around with guns.” He turned to face his men. “I hope we’ve all learned a valuable lesson here. Never fool around with a loaded weapon.” His men nodded in sage agreement, playing along with him. McKenna leaned down and whispered in the stranger’s ear.

“The trigger pull on these pieces is pretty heavy. I hope you will be able to fire them, what with your broken fingers and all.”

He stepped back, and then seemed to change his mind about something. He pulled out the gun from the stranger’s left holster and dropped it in the dust.

“There, that’s a bit better, no point in carrying around all that extra weight. But I think we can do better.” He pulled out the remaining gun and emptied all but one bullet.

“A master gun fighter like yourself needs only one bullet to get the job done. The rest is just extra baggage.” He slid the piece into the holster and patted the stranger on the head.

“Goodbye, boy.” He turned to his ranch hand. “Sanchez, take him down there,” he said pointing. Sanchez signalled one of his men and together they dragged the stranger down the street, turned him to face McKenna, then moved to the side out of harm’s way.

McKenna walked out to the middle of the street.

“Where are my guns?” A small form detached from the crowd, carrying the guns in her arms. It was 16-year-old Abigail Jones.

“Ah there they are. It’s about time you came in useful. After I clean up this mess let’s you and me head on back to the Double D where we can continue your studies.” He took the guns and strapped them on, then took them out one by one and opened the chambers to check that they were loaded. Satisfied, he re-holstered them and turned to face his son.

“Now, how should we start this? Oh I know, let’s get a pretty lady to drop something. When it hits the ground, we draw. Now where can we find a pretty lady?” He turned slowly towards Ariel, who was still standing beside Zeus.

“How about it, my dear?” he said with a large grin on his face. “Want to volunteer?” He didn’t expect an answer, but he got one anyway.

“Go to hell.” Tears welled in her eyes and she clenched her fists with rage.

McKenna turned to a young man standing near Ariel and Zeus. “Tommy?”

“Yes, Boss?”

“Kill the bartender.” He watched as Tommy drew his gun and aimed at Zeus.

“No, wait. All right,” yelled Ariel. “I’ll do it. Just leave him alone.” She walked towards the centre of the street, stopping short of getting in the line of fire.

“I don’t have anything to drop,” she said coldly.

“The bedsheet will do.” McKenna was enjoying himself immensely.

“You bastard.”

“Oh just shut up and do it,” McKenna had lost his patience with her. “I’ve got things to do.”

Ariel looked at him then turned to look at her lover. Her heart sank when she saw him. He could barely stand. Try as she might, she could see no hope for him at all, he was going to die. But he would not be alone. She would soon be with him. She would make sure of that. Maybe in death they would be together.

And then he looked at her.

His cold blue eyes burned into her very soul and suddenly she knew everything would be okay. She unclenched her fists and let the bedsheet fall. It sank to the ground leaving her naked before everyone, and at that moment the final chapter began.

The stranger stood tall and waited.

McKenna slapped leather and fired, the recoil pulling his arm up, the smoke from the discharge blocking his vision. He aimed true, squarely at the chest of his opponent.

“And that’s that.” He turned to his men but didn’t expect the look he saw on their faces. It was one of shock. He spun back to where his son should be lying in the dirt.

The stranger was still standing.

McKenna shook his head and aimed again. “I must be getting old,” he thought to himself. He fired again, and again the stranger remained standing.

“What the...” Again he fired, again with no result.

The stranger started to advance.

McKenna fired bullet after bullet at his son, each time aiming true, and each time missing the mark. He kept firing until the hammer fell on an empty chamber. With a yell of frustration he threw the useless gun at his adversary, striking him on the shoulder. The stranger staggered, but continued to advance.

“Fantasma el vegarse,” whispered Sanchez fearfully.

“Ningun fantasma! He’s not a fucking ghost!” screamed McKenna and drew his second gun. He fired again and missed again. He was yelling at the form before him now, counter-punching his words with every shot.

“Why...”

Bang!

“Can’t...”

Bang!

“You...”

Bang!

“Just...”

Bang!

“Fucking...”

Bang!

“Die!”

Click!

It was the loudest sound of all. The sound of the hammer falling on a spent bullet. A sound that echoed off the buildings of the town around him.

His town.

McKenna looked down at his empty gun, then back at his son who now stood before him. McKenna’s mouth hung open in shock. He wasn’t, couldn’t be a ghost. It just wasn’t possible.

The stranger reached forward, grabbed McKenna by the back of the head and pulled his face down over the muzzle of his own weapon.

“Goodbye, father,” he whispered through clenched teeth.

He pulled the trigger and extinguished the life of Lucas McKenna.

The stranger pushed the corpse away, and sank to his knees. Ariel, naked and shaking in the noonday sun, raced to him, catching him as he collapsed. She pulled his head to her breast and held him, gently rocking his inert form.

Sanchez, who now found himself in charge of forty confused and nervous men, decided that some things were better off left alone. He walked quickly to his horse, saddled up, and rode as fast as he could back to the Double D, his men close behind him. In less than a day the ranch would be looted and burned, the men scattered to all points of the compass.

Some of the townsfolk who had been watching from the shadows came forward and cut Zeus down from his makeshift crucifix. The women produced cotton bandages and poultices and tended to his wounds.

Ariel rocked the man lying in her arms, not knowing if he still lived, not wanting to find out. She cried quiet tears for a man whose name she didn’t know. A small figure moved before her and Ariel looked up to see Abigail Jones, the young girl who had given McKenna his guns. The girl stretched out her arms to the older woman and opened her hands, allowing twelve bullets to fall to the dust of the reborn town.

... Twelve bullets that should have been in McKenna's guns, instead of the twelve blanks that she had replaced them with.

... Twelve blanks that were secretly made in Joseph Blakelock's blacksmith shop while the townspeople looked on.

... Twelve blanks that were given to Eli Jones, Abigail's father, just after young Billy Blakelock told his poppa about the stranger who rode into town.

... Twelve blanks that a father gave his only daughter after she returned battered and bleeding from the bed of Lucas McKenna.

A crowd gathered around the couple huddled in the dirt of a desert town, a town that had finally freed itself from a tyrant. Someone threw a shawl over naked Ariel.

Over the next two weeks, Ariel tended the wounds of the stranger, nursing him back to health. Outside, the town came to life, no longer under the heel of the brutal McKenna. A new sheriff was voted in and peace finally came to Charity. But there was still one thing left for the town to do. And that one thing was lying in Ariel's bed. On the evening of the fifteenth day the new sheriff, Joseph Blakelock, father of Billy, came to see Ariel.

"How is he?" he asked

"He'll live," she replied.

"Look I hate to do this Ariel, I know how much he means to you and all but..."

"He's leaving tomorrow. Will that make you and this spineless town happy? He saved your worthless lives and now you want him gone." She looked the new sheriff up and down.
"What's the matter, Joe? You look a little tired. Having trouble sleeping at night?"

"Now come on Ariel, that's hardly fair. Charity is a new town now, we don't have room for a hired killer."

"You had plenty of room for him when you wanted your dirty work done," she hissed. "And now you want to boot him out. Such courage!"

Joe slowly shook his head. There was no point in arguing with Ariel Goodman, most of the town knew that. The townsfolk had been hoping and waiting someone would come along to free them. Those blanks had been carefully hidden in the blacksmith shop for a long time. The stranger happened by at just the right time, and they took advantage of it. Any remorse they might feel for him was overcome by their new sense of freedom and a need to start fresh.

"One thing I want you to know, Joe. He's twice the man that you or any other poor son of a bitch in this shit hole is. Get out, Joe, get the hell out of my place."

Joseph started to leave but turned back for one last word. "Tomorrow, Ariel. If he is still here after sundown tomorrow..."

"You'll what, Joe? Throw down against him? Or will it be a bullet in the back while he's walking down the street? You people make me sick." She slammed the door in his face, and turned to the bed where her lover was watching her.

Ariel knew she loved this man, more than her own life. But she also knew he was leaving tomorrow and she was not going with him. His life was one of danger, travelling from town to town and never settling down. There was nothing she could do to change him, and she didn't think she would want him if he did change. He had his life and she had hers, in this town, running the saloon with Zeus. She slid her dress from her shoulders and stood before him, naked in body and soul. She had given herself completely to this man, hiding nothing from him. He held his hand out to her and she went to him.

They made love until the early hours, and, in the morning when she turned to face him in her bed, he was gone.

End.

The Author wishes to thank Clint Eastwood, Sergio Leone, Ernest Tidyman and Dean Reisner for making his childhood just that little more interesting.