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BETWEEN THE RIVERS

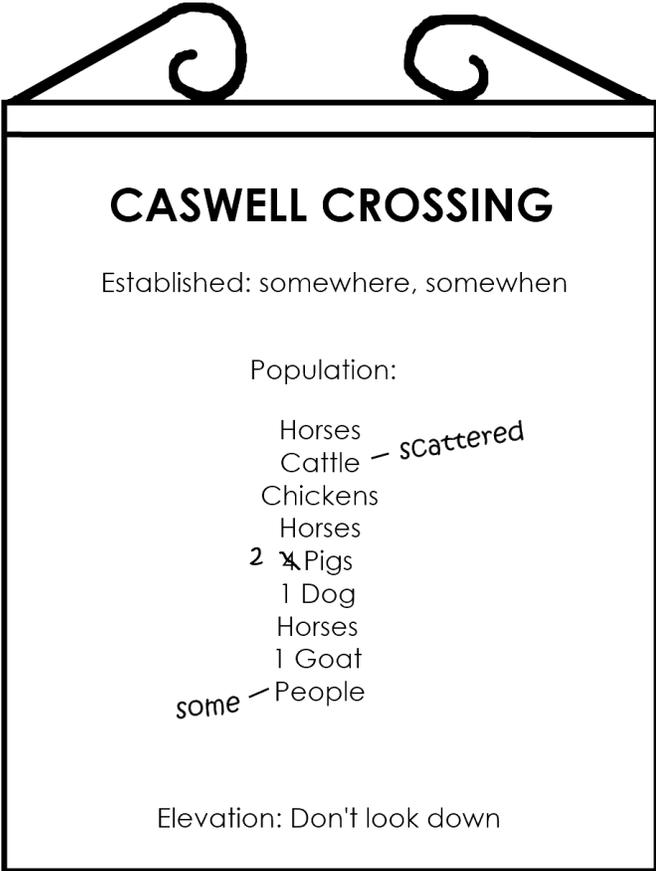
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Between the Rivers

When I first met Gideon— well, I say met— actually I arrested him, and I didn't rightly know what to do with him. Thing is, Caswell Crossing is full of good folks. Some would even call themselves upstanding citizens. Ever try to change the minds of 'good folks' when they're more than half convinced the swift application of a rope will solve all their problems? The way it looked, Gideon Fletcher was set to hang, thief or no thief. Of course, from his perspective, that was the least of his worries.

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CHAPTER 1

Gandy's Question
Vultures For Prospects
Ring Around The Mountain

“I am asking you a question.”

Well that sheriff sure enough was, only Gideon had no idea how to answer. It had been an eventful few months in which a jail cell constantly topped the list of possibilities. At the moment, it was edging around the trail ahead to jump him with a vengeance. His best option was likely to light a shuck, get clear out of the territory and then some. Thing was, bullet holes tended to slow a man down— and Gideon had already acquired three. If he tried it, Sheriff Gandy could collect the body at his convenience.

That’s really where this whole mess had started: with a body and with a vengeance.

GIDEON sat listening to a bunch of grown men argue over who would haul him to jail, possibly his first step to an overlong visit to whatever stood as a prison in this fine territory of Utah. New Mexico? Kansas? Whichever side of the line he currently straddled, the up side was that no one had suggested a rope, a definite possibility when a man is found standing beside a hundred head of mixed stuff wearing a brand that was not his own. If it could be ridden or eaten it had been stolen. There had even been a few madly flapping chickens. . . well, up until yesterday anyway.

“You ain’t bossin’ this outfit Rivers! You—”

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“No, I am!” the young sheriff interjected his five foot nine into the growing ruckus. He leaned in, inches from the angry face of a gray-haired rancher. “And I am giving the orders, Herrick, not you. I’ll need all the men I can get when we catch up to those rustlers. One man is plenty to handle a half grown boy. You have a problem with that?”

Rancher and sheriff held in a stiff tableau, horns locked, and Gideon wondered who would blink first. The rancher was older and bigger but, if he figured to square with that lawman, he was going to have it to do.

Gideon had given his own measure of trouble and all it had earned him was rather tight ropes. Awkwardly, he shifted his weight away from a rather bothersome rock digging into his backside.

The one called Herrick gave a heave of his shoulders and a burst of a sigh.

“So long as that thief ends up hung, I guess it don’t matter who drags him to the noose.”

So much for no one suggestin’ a rope.

Gideon couldn't have prevented the thought even if he tried; dark humor had become a close companion. He did wish he could have done something to make the rancher press his point though. A fight would have been a useful distraction. Unfortunately, with the details of legal authority and prisoner custody put to rest, the sheriff’s posse looked to settling themselves for the night. Huge pine trees surrounded them, filled with the tiny rustlings of creatures who inhabited the dark. A campfire whispered and popped whilst the sounds of men gradually grew quiet.

If a man wanted to escape, waiting until the guard changed once or twice would be his best bet. Then again,

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they probably expected that. So, maybe the thing to do was jump the first guard and get on with it. The risk was higher but the odds might actually be slightly in his favor, since anyone with half an ounce of sense knew only a fool would try it. Unless they had the right motivation and nothing much to lose.

That's got you a-comin' an' a-goin', ain't it?

Yep. Only I'd prefer the goin'.

Dark humor wasn't the only habit Gideon had acquired. After countless miles of only cactus for company and vultures for prospects, he had become quite comfortable talking to himself. What he had yet to grow accustomed to was the notion of listening to himself and, just at the moment, he kind of wished he had.

The first guard sized up somewhat bigger than Gideon, was lean, black-haired and sun-browned, with barely the need to shave and boots so new they hardly showed a lick of wear. The important thing though, the thing a prisoner would do well to keep in mind, was the guard was not the one tied up. At least not yet.

Ya sure ya don't wanna wait 'til mornin'?

Nope.

You done heard 'em. Ain't gonna be but one fellah 'round to drag ya to jail.

Reckon he's gonna be mighty lonely then.

Ya do know there's a dozen armed men just itchin' for an excuse to help ya to a grave?

It might have seemed crazy, even to himself, but there were reasons Gideon would not, could not, wait. In the darkness he fished out a cutting tool. To call it a knife would have been a grand overstatement; this was nothing more

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than a sliver of metal sharpened for an inch or so on one side.

Under his blanket, Gideon set the blade to the ropes around his wrists—

—and paused.

The young guard sat with his back to the firelight, watching.

“Hand me that canteen will ya?” Gideon bluffed, mentally cursing lawmen in general and this one in particular, even if he were only a temporary deputy.

“That all you wanted?” said the guard and, though Gideon couldn’t make out the angular features very clearly, the tone neatly added ‘If you say yes, you are the biggest liar ever known to mankind’.

Gideon secreted his knife, took a long swallow from the canteen, and then scrunched back down to the sound of what might have been a muffled snigger. Several thoughts came to him regarding what might be done to that upstart of a tin-star and he amused himself with the possibilities until the guard eventually changed.

Impatiently, Gideon waited. This new man needed time to grow bored; a sloppy guard gave a prisoner a fighting chance. Gideon knew about fighting. He knew a little about running too, but mostly he knew about fighting.

Din't do neither so good this time, did ya?

Shutup.

Just sayin'.

I telled ya, we're a-gettin' out-a here.

You keep a-travelin' by dark an' you're gonna plumb forget what daylight looks like.

Ain't me as asked for nothin' nor started it.

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Gideon really hadn't seen much daylight lately and it wasn't looking too likely any time soon. Besides, if he waited until morning to make his play, with all the world as witness, he'd likely end up right back as a prisoner— only with twice as many ropes and much tighter knots.

When next he inched himself up, the click of a hammer suggested this might not be an entirely healthy option. Where Gideon was certain about his ability to escape, he wasn't so sure about his ability to outrun a bullet. Like it or not, he was going to have to wait. He didn't like it, but maybe the morning might be more conducive after all.

There are times when a man makes a choice knowing it will be one of those critical, life altering decisions. Gideon Fletcher had not known. If he had, he would have gladly taken his chances with the bullet.

THE posse rattled and banged it's way through sunrise. Gideon rolled over and pointedly ignored them. They were no longer his concern, only their leaving mattered. He could feel them moving about and, eventually, heard them ride away.

In no particular hurry, he sat up and stretched as best he could. Across from him, a man hunkered by the campfire, its black coals already quenched and cool. The deputy might have been twenty-two or nearer thirty; Gideon had never been good at guessing ages. He would be tall when he stood and his trim frame suggested good meals balanced with hours of hard work. Light brown hair could not quite decided whether it might like to be blond, yet clearly felt agreeable to being fashionably trimmed. Store bought, dark gray

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britches— precisely tailored— a green cotton shirt— buttoned down and tucked in— and an unblemished broadcloth coat all pointed to a single verdict: gentleman. The only mar upon this picture of perfection was a cut along one cheek surrounded by a nasty bruise.

“Dodge faster,” Gideon greeted unsympathetically.

“Run faster,” his guard countered, and his eyes seemed to smirk, though his face showed none of it. “Coffee?”

Gideon didn’t care for stuff, but it was warm whilst the morning was not. Besides, why not let this man get a nice friendly feeling?

Poor innocent, that’s me.

What, when ya were three?

Gideon snorted softly and passed back the tin cup.

“You a-whistlin’ daisies or the real kind?”

The sheriff’s man frowned. “How’s that?”

“You packin’ a star or passin’ time?” Gideon repeated.

“Fulfilling a civic duty.”

“A do-gooder?”

“I suppose you could say that. So, what’s your name?” the man asked, stowing the last of his gear. “Come on, everybody has a name. Well, you’re entitled to keep it. Mine’s Aspen Rivers. You ready to ride?”

“Like, to um, see a man ‘bout a horse,” Gideon stammered, “if’n ya get my meanin’. I’m, uh, kind-a shy.”

Easy, boyo. This fellah mightn’t be entirely addle-headed. Then again. . .

Against all expectation Rivers actually untied the ropes. Gideon promptly tucked behind a clump of bushes, taking no mind of the revolver held somewhere close behind him,

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because it was already too late. The day before, he had stumbled upon a steep skree that seemed like a nightmare waiting for any luckless soul to fall upon its sharp edged misery.

Gideon slipped off his boots and, judging the timing roughly dead on, ran for it. From first to last, his fate rested with the doubtful mercies of the mountain. Although 'rested' was far too serene a word for what came next. Sliding, slipping, tumbling, careening— even these descriptions couldn't quite sum it up. The net result was that Gideon had become an insignificant bit of flotsam, a play thing for the mountain.

The clatter as several thousand rocks put in their teeth and kicked up their heels, as if they couldn't wait for the next geological shivaree, left Aspen Rivers without any doubt at as to what had happened. For a fraction of a second he wavered, but he had no decent choice. Circling around would take far too long and standing there hollering politely for his prisoner to stop probably wouldn't work. Decision forced upon him, Aspen ran.

He hit the skree, stared in momentary horror, and then committed himself to the rocky slope. Within seconds, he too had been hoisted onto ancient granite shoulders and carried will-or-nil into a highly questionable future. It was possible the experience might just see the end of every bone in his body. It was absolutely definite, if he survived, he would be having a word with his prisoner.

It took an eternity to reach the bottom which, paradoxically, also happened in about two great thumping heartbeats. By some miracle Aspen arrived in one piece,

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leapt to his feet and legged it for the thick pine trees stretching out ahead.

Gideon heard the pounding of feet catching him up. He ducked a branch, hurdled a half decayed tree, and skidded around an inconvenient clump of underbrush.

Left, duck— *Mind the tree!* —swerve— **Jump!**

The message reached Gideon's brain a might too late to leapt to his feet and legged it for the thick pine trees stretching out ahead.

Gideon heard the pounding of feet catching him up. He ducked a branch, hurdled a half decayed tree, and skidded around an inconvenient clump of underbrush.

Left, duck— *Mind the tree!* —swerve— **Jump!**

The message reached Gideon's brain a might too late to do him any good. His foot snagged and the ground rose up to meet him. Arms flailing wildly, he tried to catch himself—

And was too late.

Aspen Rivers had done the catching for him. Gideon tugged, yanked, twisted and kicked, slipped from his coat and ran again. Whereupon, he was tackled flat.

"Stop will you? You're hurt," Aspen tried to talk sense to the madly scrabbling boy beneath him and received an elbow in his eye for his troubles. "Oww!! Hold still! You hear me? You're caught for Pete's sake!"

Gideon reapplied his elbow, felt it connect, and then felt both arms twisted smartly up his back. He fought and bucked, but nothing doing. Stuck he was and stuck he stayed. When he finally quit, his breath came in great billowing heaves.

"Worked that out of your system?" the duly deputized nuisance straddling him inquired.

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Gideon remained still. The fingers biting into his wrists cautiously eased. The weight on his back lifted. In a sudden burst of energy, he twisted hard and shot up— only to be shoved back down, pinned by Aspen's knee.

"No, you haven't. Oh, well. You don't mind if I borrow this do you?" Aspen said, and tugged loose the handkerchief from around Gideon's neck.

Metal clinked as handcuffs were secured, followed by Gideon's own kerchief being used to bind his ankles.

That there's dirty, so it is.

You got you any helpful suggestions?

Don't get caught?

Oh, you're right funny, you are.

A hand touched Gideon's right leg and he yanked his feet up swiftly, to clobber his guard upside the head.

"Try that again and you will be hog tied, my friend," Aspen said, leaning away from the clumsy blow.

The way Gideon reckoned it, he could just about come to hate Aspen Rivers.