

**VALLEY OF THE LESSER EVIL**

By  
CARL DANE

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## Chapter 1

Mrs. Adler tried to keep a poker face when I point-blank offered to do her killing for her. She wasn't very good at it, and didn't blink for so long it must have actually *hurt*. I read something into the fact that she was trying to keep from *being* read: She was over her head and scared.

I'm pretty good at reading people, which is one reason I am, most improbably, still alive.

She hadn't come right out and asked me to kill anybody but these things always wind up with somebody dead and I like to start the game with all the cards on the table. After a full minute she gave up and blinked, and then said what I expected, what I usually hear, in some version or another.

"But...you seem like a nice man. I mean, for someone who kills for a living."

Now, part of that's true and part isn't, and I'll get to the distinction in a minute. First things first, though. My name is Josiah Hawke. I was a professor before the war. I taught philosophy, mostly, and some politics, at a small college in the south end of Illinois. It was the kind of place where kids from rich families orbited for a while before moving on to careers in law or the military or politics. I was never really poor but certainly not rich, coming from a long line of bankrupt blacksmiths and foreclosed farmers and the like.

I was largely self-taught. What I lack in breeding and book-learning I compensated for by being a quick study. I wasn't a bad teacher, and I liked the work.

But things changed for me and a few million other people in 1861, when I joined up with the 6<sup>th</sup> Illinois Cavalry, where I developed a set of unusual skills that has kept me gainfully and legally — for the most part, depending on semantics — employed ever since.

"I'm not necessarily hiring you to *kill* anybody," Mrs. Adler said, after I'd waited her out and she couldn't take the silence any longer. Most people hate awkward pauses and likely as not they'll blurt out what you want to know without you having to ask.

"Just...if it happens," she said. "If you have to. If it's self-defense. I mean, if there's no choice."

"There usually isn't."

Her cigar-store-Indian expression melted away and she looked scared and confused. In other words, like a normal person in her situation.

"Look, please, I don't know what to do. This was a peaceful town until the marshal was killed. It was just in the last couple of weeks everything turned strange, and that's when Billy told me to contact you if anything happened to him. He said you'd fix things. Those were his words exactly. You'd *fix* things."

I regarded her silently a while and let her figure out what to say next. She was a beautiful woman, to be sure, though she wasn't a kid by any stretch. I pegged her to be about my age, 40 or so. Her eyes were as blue and clear as a shallow lake. Her hair was a buttery yellow streaked with a little bit of glossy silver, not the kind of rusty steel gray that shows in my beard when I let it grow out. She had lines around her eyes and mouth, but they were like fine etchings in a coin, not the claw marks that life sometimes ravages into the faces of women in her line of work.

She couldn't take it any longer and blurted out what was on her mind. "I didn't mean to doubt you," she continued. "Billy told me you were the toughest man in his unit, and the smartest. I just meant that you don't look like a killer."

I nodded and told her that was one reason why I am so good at what I do.

"And you," I added, "don't look like a whore."

She thought about that for a second. I'd said it to test her. You learn a little more about people when you prod them.

"That," she said without irony or anger, "was why I was so popular."

And with that, the tension broke and we got down to business.

Mrs. Adler needed me to fix her problem with the goons and gunmen who had swooped in on her establishment, the Silver Spoon, a second-rate bar and bordello in what appeared to be the decidedly third-rate Texas Hill Country town of Shadow Valley. Her customers were being scared away, she said, and her help harassed. A giant goon they called Toad stood sentry and manhandled anyone brave or foolish enough to head toward her door.

The trouble, she said, seemed to be orchestrated from the only other bar in town, the Full Moon.

The owner was named Eddie Moon, hence the name of the joint. Moon wanted to buy her out, and had made several offers, she said. Good offers, but not enough to make her sell. She couldn't sell, she told me, partly because this was all she had and she didn't want to start over.

I didn't think I was getting the whole story, but I couldn't get anything more out of her and sensed that if I pressed more she would shut down entirely. It could be true: Preserving property and a way of life have motivated people to do far crazier things than holding on to a bar and whorehouse, and I've done some pretty foolish things on principle myself, including coming to this town and offering to hire on as marshal.

The pay was not much of an inducement – fifteen dollars a week plus fees for serving papers and collecting taxes – but the badge would give me some latitude and some legal cover when somebody wound up dead. I also wanted an agreement in writing that despite holding office, the town will still let me collect, personally, the five thousand dollar reward being offered by the state for the capture or killing of the murderer of Marshal Billy Gannon.

Bounties are a long shot but almost always worth a try, and in any event I owed it to Billy. He'd been my captain in the war and probably saved my life more times than I had saved his. Whoever managed to kill Billy would not be easy to catch, because Billy was one of the cagiest men I've ever known, and that was truly saying something.

The badge and the contract would probably be no problem, Mrs. Adler assured me, but the town council would take some convincing before hiring me because they were as scared as she was of the new thugs in town, and didn't want to incur their wrath by hiring a marshal if that marshal really couldn't protect them.

So we had a chicken-and-egg dilemma. A real problem, to be sure, if Mrs. Adler was the bravest member of the town council. She told me she inherited, in an informal way, her husband's seat after he disappeared several months ago.

The disappearing-husband scenario was a new rabbit hole, but I wasn't in the move to dive down it because I was already losing patience.

I would have gladly walked away at that moment. This, certainly, was not a plum job. But I was on the hook to Billy Gannon, even in death.

"Tell anyone involved in the decision concerning whether I'm up to the job to be outside the Silver Spoon at seven," I told her as I slid my chair back. "They don't have to meet or talk or be seen. They can even look out a window as long as they can see your front entrance. I'll reassure them as to the soundness of their investment. Then you all decide what you want to do. I'll be back here tomorrow at nine and we can either sign the papers or say our farewells."

I dropped my horse off at the hostler and checked into the hotel and prepared to get down to business.

Now, about that business: What Mrs. Adler said about me was only partly correct. I *am* a nice guy when I'm dealing with nice people. I'm polite to old folks and gentle with children. I've never run a horse to death, and in fact I love animals, even though I also love them medium rare, which is what I believe Aristotle would have defined as a conflict of virtues. At least that's what I'd told my students in another lifetime.

I do my best to cope with moral dilemmas and stick to my moral code as best I can while practicing my profession.

As Billy told Mrs. Adler, I make my living by fixing things. I fix bad situations for good people, or at least people who I think have more good in them than bad. I enforce the law on occasion. Sometimes I kill people, but for the record, I don't kill for a living any more.

Nowadays, I do it for fun.

## Chapter 2

After dinner I started scouting the Silver Spoon, and while I couldn't identify the whole cast of characters, nor immediately separate the bad guys from the good, I figured my first logical move would be to deal with this fellow named Toad.

I'm not sure if that was a name anybody called him to his face but it fit. He had oval-shaped eyes that bugged out, no neck to speak of, and a vague reptilian expression. He was also swelled-up like a toad. He was at least six-foot-five and three hundred pounds, most of it muscle. I noticed that he rolled his sleeves up past his shoulders to show off his meaty arms, even though it was a chilly late-October evening. When he thought nobody was looking he wrapped his arms around his chest for warmth.

I watched Toad for half an hour. He appeared to be the point man for the harassment operation Mrs. Adler told me was headquartered down the street at the Full Moon, a bar, casino, and whorehouse. I hadn't seen that place yet; I'd need to scout it soon.

Toad spent his time lumbering back and forth in front of the batwing doors of the Silver Spoon. He veered toward anyone who even looked like he might even be *thinking* about heading toward the entrance. While most of the passersby, cowhands and miners and such, must have been mighty thirsty or horny or both, every one one of them subtly changed direction and kept on walking – like Toad exercised some sort of reverse gravity that altered their orbits.

Toad was wearing a gun. I was not. Not tonight, anyway. Gunplay was – for now – the last thing I wanted. Only in those dime novels does a lone gunman shoot it out with an entire town and emerge unventilated.

I would make my point with my fists, and while there's no guarantee that guns won't come into play during a hand-to-hand dust-up, it doesn't usually happen. Even the lowest species of thugs usually have too much pride to pull iron at a fistfight — at least when there is a crowd watching. In all my prizefights I only remember gunplay twice, and never involving me or the other fighter. It was a betting dispute both times, and I guess you could say that both times all parties lost, winding up either dead or in jail.

I'd had about a hundred bareknuckle prize bouts, fought under different rules or sometimes no real rules to speak of. I replayed a few of them in my mind while I leaned against a post and surveilled the Silver Spoon.

Prizefighting was an odd profession for a teacher and soldier, and it started by accident, on the same night my teaching career ended, a month to the day after my unit was discharged.

I had killed my opponent in my first fight. I didn't set out to kill him, but neither did I show much concern for his welfare after he'd tried to gouge my eye out. He'd been a strongman and fighter with one of those traveling shows, and he goaded me – in front of a local crowd of friends and students — into accepting a challenge of his hundred dollars versus my ten that I couldn't last two rounds.

Another man's goading never bothered me that much because I know it's generally a tool to try to manipulate me, and if I ignore it, I win. The money was good but not enough to risk a beating. I'd stepped into that circle because something was missing in my life after my discharge. I'm not saying I *liked* the war – no sane man would even think that. And I'm not saying that I was bored, exactly, after coming back to the classroom.

It's just that a part of me woke up from hibernation when that carnival pug called me out.

I assume he picked me because I was the biggest man in the crowd. It was a small crowd in terms of number and size because I'm not all that big. I'm a little over six feet and on the lean side, but I have broad shoulders and long arms and big hands. There are plenty of bigger and stronger men, but during the war I was in a very special unit where I picked up a world of experience fighting with guns, knives, fists, and – most importantly – my head.

The carnie pug was strong and fast, and moved with a grace that you wouldn't expect, given his bulk. I pretended to be afraid and danced with him until I figured out the steps to his dance that he repeated, without being able to discern his own pattern, like clockwork. It had the rhythm of the one-two-three of a waltz: Left jab toward my head, right to my body, and then a roundhouse right brought up to my head when I lowered my arm to protect my body. About the fifth time he'd stamped out the routine and began to throw his low right toward my ribs I hooked over the top and caught him on the point of the jaw.

When he wobbled back to his feet he was badly hurt and couldn't make his legs work right. I don't know why, but a blow on the point of the jaw will do that — make your legs fall asleep. He stalled, wrapping me in a bear hug, which is technically against the rules but given the circumstances, I could live with his transgression. But when he bit me and stuck his thumb in my eye I took strong exception, so I worked on his ribs until he could not hold his hands up any more and then I clubbed him to the head a dozen times with everything I had, even getting in three hard shots while he was in the process of toppling to the dust. He fell face-down and never got up.

Prizefights were illegal in that county. The law generally looked the other way but not, apparently, when someone wound up dead. I got out of town a step ahead of a county deputy and headed west — the path that led me to this strange spot in life, ten years later and ten paces away from this creature they called Toad.

Dusk was gathering, the streets were getting busy, and it was time to start the show. I need to get people's attention and get this act over and done with quickly and dramatically. I certainly did not want a protracted roll-around in the dirt with someone who could, if he got on top of me, rip off my arms like wings from a roasted chicken.

So I walked right around him toward the batwings and let him make the first move, which I figured would be him grabbing me from behind and yanking me back. He was nice enough to comply.

I wanted to get him in the habit of pulling me.

I was taking a chance, of course, giving him my back like that. If he'd laid the barrel of the revolver he carried across the back of my head my brains would be a sidewalk omelet. But I knew he wouldn't.

I could read him.

After all, what would be the use of all that muscle that he took such pains to show off if he took me out with something an old lady could do if she could heft a two-and-a-half pound .45?

He spun me around and grabbed the front of my shirt in a huge fist. I pulled back, showing a little more strength than he expected, so he compensated by pulling me again, pulling me closer, hard and fast.

"Take a walk," he said, looking down on me. I could feel his breath and smell it, too, redolent of a strange mixture of cabbage and slaughterhouse aromas.

"Walk in the other direction," he said. "While you're still able to walk."

I said nothing, betrayed no emotion, and just fixed him with a level gaze. That confounded him, and I got the distinct impression he spent a lot of time puzzled about most things.

I kept my eyes locked on his, watching for his next move, but at the same time using my ears to monitor my surroundings. I could hear the soft shuffle of boots on the dusty street and a buzz of muted murmurs as a crowd gathered, as they always do, when there is the promise of some street theater.

So I backed away again, pulling hard, and fury blazed in his eyes. Toad took my shirt in both hands this time and pulled me again, back toward him, and then tried to throttle me by twisting the cloth.

"I'm going into the Silver Spoon," I said, in a very soft voice. "The place is officially open for business and anyone who wants a drink can have one. In fact, I'm buying. But no drink for you. You're leaving. Now."

The crowd hushed, some from surprise and some because they couldn't hear what I said. I could sense them leaning in, which was the way I wanted it. I had their attention.

Toad searched for a response but whatever machinery lay behind his reptilian eyes seemed to turn slowly and after a few seconds of indecision he settled for telling me to go fuck myself.

So I spit in his face and threw my right arm up, over, and across his hands, spun a half-circle to my left, pretty much turning my back on him, and pulled away with all my strength, going low so I could put the full strength of my legs into the effort.

I knew that Toad's reptile brain would telegraph his body to hang onto my shirtfront, even though his wrists were trapped for the moment under my right armpit and my spinning motion had imparted to me considerable leverage. I'd dragged him two steps in my direction and he almost fell forward.

If Toad were smart he would have let it happen because he would have been right and top of me and could have had his way. But the unfocused fury in his mind was instructing him to show me that he could pull harder than I could. He braced himself, let out an enraged grunt, and yanked me back toward him.

He was, in fact, monstrously strong – so strong that when he drew me toward him with such violence he probably tripled the force of my elbow as I uncoiled like a spring and landed it on his temple.

There was an impossibly loud crack and a crunch. More than a few onlookers gasped.

Then there was dead silence for a moment as his eyes lost their light and he crumpled straight down, collapsing into a pile of himself like a giant candle melting into a puddle of wax.

He was a tough son of a bitch, I'll give him that. Hurt as he was, arms and legs quivering, his head lolling on his chest, he kept repeating – this time in a strange mewling whimper – his instructions to perform that particular action on myself that as far as I can tell is anatomically impossible.

I kicked him until he stopped.

## Chapter 3

Mrs. Adler kept her eyes fixed on me like I was a cobra poking its head out of a basket. She slid the badge across the desk with her fingertips.

“Here,” she said, and snatched her hand back.

“I am overwhelmed by the majesty of this ceremony and flattered by your confidence,” I told her, and it was obvious my sarcasm was not appreciated nor understood. She just nudged her chair back a little more.

“But before we seal the deal I need some answers,” I said.

“You cracked that man’s *skull*,” she said, apropos of nothing. “My God. The *sound*.”

“He’ll live. I checked with the doctor last night. He’ll heal up no stupider than when I found him, which is probably not possible anyway. And I might remind you that it was he who laid hands on me. And I might further remind you, Mrs. Adler, that you hired me for rough work and knew what you were getting into. Don’t you get on a high horse because I got *my* hands dirty.”

“I know,” she said. “I’m sorry. I guess I’m just tired of all the fighting and hoped against hope it could be solved another way. Don’t *you* get tired of violence sometimes?”

“An inevitable part of the human condition, I believe. Plato said that only the dead have seen the end of war, Mrs. Adler.”

She sighed and bit her lip, and we both regarded each other across the oak desk until her eyes dropped to her folded hands. The early-morning sun slanted through the window, a harsh and dissonant element in an environment that is more suited to amber lantern light. Saloons, even the back rooms, just don’t look right first thing in the morning, nor do they smell right. The lingering aroma of last night’s beer, piss, and puke is astonishingly rank at 9 in the morning.

“Please, call me Elmira,” she said.

“Princess.”

She began to stare at me again.

“Your first name is an Arabic word for princess,” I said.

“You are the goddamned strangest hired gun *in the world*,” she said, balling her hands into fists and glancing toward the ceiling, as if imploring for divine guidance. “I just want to get these goons off my back and I get a head-breaker who lectures me about Plato and translates my name.”

I held up a hand. “Fair enough. Let’s stick to business. Look, it’s my neck on the line and I have to know what’s going on...what’s *really* going on. You’re telling me half the story. Now, I’m not saying you’re dishonest. Everybody has their own recollection of events, but something you don’t mention because you think it’s unimportant or embarrassing to you could cause me to miss something and maybe get myself killed. So let’s hear the story from the beginning.”

She sat immobile as a sphinx. Sometimes, when you’re trying to get someone to tell you things they don’t want to tell you, you have to prime the pump to get the words flowing.

“But fair’s fair,” I said. “Do you have anything you want to ask me?”

She chewed on her knuckle for a second.

“Does my name *really* mean Princess?”

## Chapter 4

About an hour later I had extracted what I would guess was half the true story, which is about all you can hope for when you're pulling on a string connected to sex, politics, and murder.

And it was quite a story.

Mrs. Adler – Elmira – was captured by Apaches when she was a young child. The Apaches killed the rest of her family but kept her to be raised as one of their own. That was not uncommon. While it made little sense that some children in a family would be massacred and some raised as Indian children, I've learned, from books and life, that it also doesn't make sense to assume that everyone thinks and reasons the same way you do.

She escaped when she was eighteen, after her Apache husband was killed by Comanches. But her return to the white world was not a smooth journey. She was viewed as "tainted" — her words — and marriage and a traditional job were not in the cards. She played the only hand available to a woman in her circumstances.

Prostitutes, or as she referred to them, doves, had hard existences. I told her that her words reminded me of how Thomas Hobbes had described the despairing state of mankind — lives that were solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

She rolled her eyes and kept on with the story. She had had a head for business and after a few years in the trade and opened up a series of bordellos in which, if you believe her version of events, she took good care of the doves, seeing to their medical needs and protecting them from the more violent clientele.

Her husband – now missing – partnered with her to start the Silver Spoon, and turned it over to her during the war, when he served with a cavalry unit for less than a year before losing a leg on the battlefield and returning home.

The Spoon had prospered but not spectacularly so. It was a tough business. Running a bordello requires keeping a delicate balance of payoffs and power. Gannon did what most lawmen did to make ends meet: He took a cut for not enforcing the local ordinances against gambling, laws that many towns in the West have on the books but ignore when it is convenient or profitable or both.

Gannon was basically honest, she told me, and most importantly he kept the peace because he scared even the strongest and craziest of the local parasites.

But when Gannon was killed, all the predators slithered out in the open.

Eddie Moon, who'd always been sort of amiably ruthless, seemed to grow a mean streak and hired an increasingly devolving species of thugs to run her out of business. The campaign started with some local toughs, including the currently incapacitated Toad, and recently moved into a new phase involving some Mexican brothers named Duran.

Elmira stopped and asked me if I still wanted the job, knowing what I now knew. I thanked her for her honesty and told her yes. And then she told me there was one more thing.

There's always one more thing.

She'd heard rumors that Zach Purcell was somehow behind all this. When she said it, she unconsciously whispered his name.

Elmira asked me if I'd heard of Purcell, and I said yes, but didn't elaborate. We finalized the money arrangements, I signed some papers, pocketed my key, and left to check out my new office, pinning on my badge as I closed the door behind me.

**KEEP READING**

CARL DANE

# VALLEY

OF THE LESSER

# EVIL

A HAWKE & CARMODY WESTERN NOVEL

At the end of a deadly  
trail lurks an  
unspeakable secret.

