

## Hawkmoon excerpt

...By the end of the following day they met up with the horses and the wagon. The confluence of the Green River and the Big Sandy was surrounded by lush grass and dense stands of willow. It made a fine place to camp. Carla knew Ice was headed for a trading post not more than a day's ride away. They had been there before.

He sent Eli on ahead to scout it out. Without a herd of horses to push, Eli could make it there and back in several hours. He questioned the necessity, but Ice made him go anyway.

"I want to know if the same man is still there," Ice said. "He's an amiable fellow, if you remember. If it's somebody different, I need to know."

Eli left, but returned not a half an hour later, his horse lathered and blowing hard. Eli himself was no less worked up. Ice stood to meet him.

"There's a mess of Indians camped not a mile down river," he said breathlessly, dismounting.

"How many?" Ice asked.

"Maybe ten or twelve," Eli replied. "No women and children. Looks like a Sioux hunting party."

Carla, who had been standing nearby, filled with dread. As much as they had lived on the plains, the mere mention of Indians still terrified her. She thought it incredible that they had not met with some savagery thus far, although, she had to admit, that was part of Ice's cunning as well. He often traded with Indians and they knew he had as little respect for white laws as they did. They weren't allies, but they weren't enemies either.

But she knew tensions were escalating. In the two years since Custer had been massacred, the plains had become increasingly dangerous. Just because Ice had done business successfully with one tribe didn't mean another would be as receptive. The look on Ice's face seemed to reflect this.

"All right," Ice said. "Forget your scouting trip. Let's just sit tight—we'll put up a full watch rotation tonight. Nobody leaves camp."

"Don't you think we should camp someplace else?" Eli asked, dismayed. "They ain't far at all."

Ice ignored him. He looked around at the other men, who had by this time gathered to hear the news. He frowned.

"Where's Hawkmoon?" he asked.

Carla spoke up. "She's by the river, watering her horse."

"Fetch her here."

Carla found Sadie by the water's edge. She had her pistol out and was idly rotating the cylinder as Blackjack, her gelding, drank. Carla thought she looked pensive and sad.

"Sadie?" she said. "Ice is looking for you."

Irritation darted across the young woman's face. "My horse is getting a drink. I'll be there in a minute."

Carla glanced furtively downstream. "We might have us some trouble, is all. Eli spotted some Indians downriver. Ice wants everyone in camp."

Sadie rose and looked in the direction Carla pointed. "How far?"

“Eli says not a mile. Hunters, he thinks.” Carla paused. She had expected Sadie to immediately gather her horse and start for camp. Instead she merely stood, looking keenly to the south. The wind blew a long strand of hair across her face and she combed it away absently.

“Do you remember that monkey I had, Carla?” she asked suddenly. “Her name was Lolo. She was more like a sister than a pet. I always wanted one. A sister, I mean. Sometimes I wonder what happened to her.”

“I expect it died,” Carla replied, eyeing the girl curiously. “There ain’t nothing much out here for a monkey to eat.”

“You’re probably right.” Sadie turned to her. “Either way, she’s free though, right? Free is free.”

Carla didn’t know what to say to that. Why Sadie was so interested in the monkey when there were Indians around was baffling. She didn’t remember the monkey anyway—it had run off almost immediately, and Carla had never seen it. Smart monkey.

“Shall I tell him you’re coming?” Carla prompted finally.

Sadie’s gaze shifted toward the camp, which was about fifty yards away. Carla looked too, but the willows were thick and all she could see was a thin wisp of smoke.

Sadie mounted her horse. “Carla, I need you to do something for me.”

“My Lord, where are you going?” Carla asked, alarmed.

“I need you to tell Ice that I went to get firewood. Make sure you tell him I went upstream. Can you do that?”

“I guess I can,” Carla said, confused and anxious. “He ain’t going to like it.”

“Tell him I’ll be right back.” She turned the horse. “Don’t worry. I won’t be gone long.”

Carla’s confusion deepened as she watched Sadie ride downstream and not upstream. Apprehension curled around her like smoke, and as she started back toward camp, the weight of it nearly crushed her while she considered what she had to do next.

Ice was talking to Caleb about something when she walked up. His scowl was so dark that Carla felt faint. She swallowed hard.

“She—she told me to tell you she went to get firewood.”

“Firewood?” His look of incredulity was shockingly unfamiliar. “You told her I want her, and she went to get *firewood*?”

Carla felt herself shrinking. The men gaped at her in astonishment. She wasn’t surprised—Sadie had never gone from camp, anywhere, without Ice’s say so. Ever.

“I told her about the Indians,” Carla stammered. “She went upstream. In the other direction. She said she’d be right back.”

Carla trailed off lamely, this last assurance ringing hollow beneath the magnitude of the lie. She’d never lied to Ice before, incredibly. This day was full of firsts. Later, she would marvel at the final tally.

Caleb cleared his throat awkwardly. “You want me to go after her, Ice?”

Ice made no reply. He stood looking north, his face a jumble of things—things Carla, or any of them she supposed, had never seen before. Shock, mostly, and confusion. And unease. Carla would not dare to go so far as to call it fear.

“No,” he said finally.

He walked away and stood in the middle of camp, never taking his eyes from the direction Sadie had supposedly taken. Somewhat relieved, Carla started for her tent, only to be brought up sharply by Jesse. He dug his fingers painfully into her arm.

“You stupid bitch,” he hissed. “What the hell is wrong with you? Why didn’t you stop her?”

Carla ducked her face to the side, protectively. “I can’t tell her what to do. She ain’t a child.”

Jesse’s fingers bit deeper. “If something happens to her, life will be holy hell for all of us. But it’ll be nothing compared to what it’ll be like for you. I’ll see to that.”

Carla shot him a hot, miserable look. “Worse than now?” she asked bitterly.

His fist struck her like a cannonball, squarely on the chin. Lights burst in a familiar pattern as she hit the ground. She felt the men’s eyes again. Their contempt. She knew Luke stood among them.

Her vision cleared. Jesse loomed over her, smug. He spat. The stream hit her chest.

“Try that on,” he said.

Carla’s head rolled. Luke was indeed there. His eyes held a mixture of disappointment and hurt. It was almost more than she could bear.

She watched Jesse as he walked away. Never had she felt such hate.

Ice was still rooted to the same spot an hour later when Sadie rode back into camp, a load of wood tucked beneath one arm. Carla noted she came from the north. She drew rein a few yards from Ice and let the wood fall. He stood silently, his arms folded across his chest. Carla could sense the whole camp caught in some strange suspension, like animals poised for flight.

He reached up and dragged Sadie from her horse. She fell, landing on her hands and knees. He lifted her up and began shaking her so violently that Carla thought her head would fly off. Her hat did, and rolled all the way to Carla’s feet. She picked it up, clutching it fearfully.

“*Where have you been?*” Ice demanded. His words were like flung stones. He released her and sent her stumbling. She kept her feet, but just barely.

Slowly, Sadie brushed the grass from her knees. She straightened and met his eyes. “Fetching wood,” she said. “Carla told you, I expect.”

“You don’t get wood,” he snapped. He threw a smoldering look at Carla. “*They* do. Didn’t she tell you about the Indians?”

Sadie nodded. “That’s why I went upstream. There was no danger.”

Ice glanced down at her hip and then looked at her as if she were daft. “You didn’t even take your gun.”

“I had my rifle,” Sadie said quietly. “And I took my horse, in case I needed to scoot. I was just trying to be a help.”

She stood with her hands at her sides, her back straight. To Carla she appeared extraordinarily calm, while everyone watching seemed about to faint. Except Ice. He looked like he might fly apart with rage.

Ice walked over to where Sadie stood, closing the distance between them with lithe speed. He took hold of her chin, nearly swallowing her face in his hand.

“Put your horse up,” he said. “Then get in the tent. I don’t want you out of my sight again. Even to piss.”

He let her go and started for their tent. Sadie stood motionless for a minute and then walked to her horse. Carla watched her, still marveling at her calm, until she saw the woman’s hands were shaking so much she couldn’t loosen the cinch. Carla went over to help her.

“Didn’t I tell you?” she said in a low voice.

Sadie's head snapped up. She looked across her horse's withers at the tent she shared with Ice, and her eyes popped with fury. It was such an abrupt change from a moment ago that Carla took a step back.

"That son of a bitch can watch me from a high chair in hell," Sadie said. She turned to Carla. "It ends. Today."

"I don't know what you mean," Carla faltered, avoiding the young woman's hot iron gaze. "What ends?"

Sadie pulled her saddle from the gelding's back. "Best stay in your tent tonight. With them Indians so close, there's no telling what might happen."

Without another word Sadie trudged off to her tent where Ice waited, his fists at his side. Carla shivered. There was plenty of truth in what Sadie said, but to Carla, it didn't feel like a warning.

It felt like a goodbye.

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