



## Whippoorwill (Letty & Eulis)

*Sharon Sala*

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DREAMERS ARE BORN NOT MADE

Sleeping with men for money was not something Leticia Murphy had planned on doing when she grew up, but then, neither had she planned on being orphaned at twelve, or winding up in a godforsaken place in the Kansas Territories like Lizard Flats. But here she was, like most of the other lost souls who'd come West, looking for something better, and in her case, wishing for a second chance. She knew the odds were against her, but it didn't stop her from yearning.

There was a ritual from her childhood that she performed each evening as the sun was going down. She would step out onto the balcony off her bedroom above the saloon, lift her face to the heavens to search for the Evening Star, then stand quietly in the growing shadows and listen for the call of the whippoorwill.

It came from a memory of her mother who had died when she was ten. Always, she was sitting in her mother's lap outside their clapboard house watching night fall across the land. They would sit on the front step with their bare feet planted firmly in the still warm dirt while enjoying the first cool breezes of evening. As they sat, they would search for the first star and wait for the call of the whippoorwill. Her mother had told her the bird was searching for its mate, but Letty had yet to meet a man who was worth the call. However, the memory was one of the few good ones she had left. Two years after her mother's untimely death, her father was killed by a Comanche hunting party. Letty survived by hiding in a hollowed out badger hole. That was the last time fate showed her any kindness. At twenty-seven, she was well past the marrying age and nearly too used up to care. Yet she didn't stop wishing, and she didn't stop dreaming about a different sort of life.

Then one day, something happened in Lizard Flats that had never happened before. Word began to spread throughout the area that a real preacher from back East was coming to perform a wedding. The news set off a whole series of unforeseen events. Caught up in the excitement of the occasion, Letty couldn't help but think that a change was coming for her, too.

\* \* \*

A gunshot sounded just outside Letty's window. It wasn't the first time she'd heard that sound in Lizard Flats and she would bet her next year's wages it wouldn't be the last. When the sound of an argument followed, she didn't even bother to get up and look out to see what was going on. Chances were she'd see both of the stupid louts who'd started the fuss before the night was out. Men were always the same. Drink. Fight. Then celebrate their victories or losses by paying for her pleasures. And since her friend, Truly Fine's exit months earlier, Letty was the only woman still working at the White Dove Saloon, which meant she got more than her share of fools in her bed.

Refusing to think about the boredom of her life, she pushed the coal oil lamp a little closer to the mirror and then leaned forward, giving herself a final check before going downstairs.

Her eyes were still blue. Her hair was still brown, but there were fine lines at the corners of her eyes that hadn't been there last year. She pouted her lips to check her lip rouge then gave a stray curl a final tuck. It didn't do to dwell on the inevitable. She was getting older. The day was going to come when she would no

longer be able to get a dollar for each man that she laid.

The strange thing was, she had never been able to see beyond that fear. What happened to old whores, she wondered? Did they just dry up and blow away like the earth in Lizard Flats, or was there something worse? Something more sinister than even she could imagine?

She made a face at herself just as Will the Bartender banged on her door.

"Letty! You come on downstairs now. I got customers wanting a little female attention."

"I'm coming! I'm coming!" she yelled. Just before she left her room, she blew out the lamp and then walked to the open door leading out onto her small balcony overlooking main street.

There was a faint breeze blowing, shifting the thin lace panels over her windows in an effort to get inside. She ran her fingers over the lace. Hanging the curtains had been a feeble attempt to give elegance to her life, but they also gave her a sense of satisfaction to know she'd paid for them herself. Her momma would have loved the fine lace, she thought, as she walked out onto the balcony, although she would have heartily disapproved of how Letty had come by the money to pay for them.

Once outside, she looked up. The sky was clear without a cloud in sight - the Evening Star already evident. The air smelled of dust and gunpowder. The thin slice of moon hanging just above the horizon would not cast many shadows upon the darkening land. For Letty, it was a night like so many others, yet she still listened, waiting to hear that call.

Just as she was about to give up and go inside, she heard the haunting, mournful coo of a lone whippoorwill. Even though it was what she'd been waiting to hear, it brought shivers to her skin. Somewhere beyond the lights of the town, a small brown bird was calling to its mate. The sound was a reminder of who she'd been and not what she'd become, and it gave her enough solace to face the oncoming night. Satisfied, she walked back into her room and closed the door. It was time to get to work.

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