

PROLOGUE

Four men sat drinking and gambling at a lone, oak table in the lobby of the only hotel in Walthill, Nebraska. It was a small crossroads town left over from the old west. The hotel had once been its brothel complete with an overhanging balcony where the ladies plied their trade. The town sat within the borders of the Omaha Indian Reservation, a train stop from which to transport corn to Sioux City, and little had ever happened since its construction. It was primarily a place for white and Indian farmers to congregate, purchase supplies, and socialize before returning to their farms and ranches in the surrounding hills of northeastern Nebraska.

There was little to do in this quiescent section of the prairie, which made gathering at the hotel to gamble and buy drinks a popular pastime, despite the fact that both were illegal. Anti-gambling laws had never been heavily enforced, and went primarily unnoticed by the populace, who saw it as a common entertainment. In most places imbibing alcohol was not itself illegal. The recent passage of the Eighteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, backed by the passage of the Volstead Act to enforce it, had outlawed the manufacture, transportation, and selling of alcohol. It said nothing of its consumption.

However, laws on Indian reservations had gone farther, prohibiting consumption of alcohol within reservation borders. Ever since the introduction of alcohol into their cultures, many American Indian tribes struggled with alcoholism, and the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment had inspired a movement to dry up their populations. While most of the rest of the country regarded Prohibition as government overreach, it was a godsend for Indians who desperately needed to overcome what was, in effect, a cultural illness.

These restrictions caused people in the area who wanted to drink to look upon bootleggers, who transported alcohol, and moonshiners, who manufactured it on nearby ranches and farms, as heroes. They were willing to pay many times the amount they had previously paid for a single glass of beer or flask of whiskey. Oftentimes it was not clear what they were drinking. The concoctions moonshiners put together barely resembled beverages before Prohibition when it had been regulated. Now a drink could be almost anything. Thus it was often dangerous, not only because it was illegal, but the homemade alcohol sometimes resulted in a poisonous mix.

But such dangers didn't stop men from gathering at the hotel and partaking of what the moonshiners smuggled in from stills they had hidden in the fields and ravines outside of town, or what bootleggers had driven in from distant regions. Purchases were discreet, but drinking was in the open. The law seemed far away and they would have plenty of warning if they saw those who enforced it coming.

So the four men who were gambling did as men always did at the Walthill Hotel, they sat their glasses on the table where everyone could see, making no attempt to hide what they were doing.

One of the men, who had a thick-set jaw and wide nose and wearing dusty overalls, was new to town. He was a migrant worker, like so many who had come through the area. The northbound train out of Omaha passed by on its way to Homer, and then on to Sioux City, Iowa, where a lot of drifters traveled to work. Though clearly a white man, the stranger's skin had an olive complexion, something he explained as evidence of his Indian heritage and his constant work outdoors. Aside from clarifying this one mystery, he spoke little, mostly listening and watching the others at the table and studying them.

The others, men who knew one another, talked about their lives their families, eventually turning to the subject of the drink they were sharing. The one who had made it disclosed its name, what was in it, and how he had brewed it.

The stranger in the dusty overalls abruptly stood. “You’re all under arrest,” he said sternly enough for them to know he wasn’t kidding.

They looked at him surprised, but no one moved. Something in his voice made it clear he was not to be trifled with, and they knew they were going to jail. He might even be armed, and none of them wanted to get into a gunfight. Everyone in Nebraska had heard of the notorious lawman, a master of disguise who carried two pistols and could outshoot anyone. It was obvious to all the people in the room, who were now staring at him, that this was that famous Prohibition officer.

Then the man said something strange. “Now I know who all of you are, and where you all live, so don’t you go anywhere or I’ll go find you. I’m going to be right back, so stay here.” Then he left the room and walked up the stairs and out of sight.

The three men sat dumbfounded at the table, unguarded and unwatched. Others in the room who were not under arrest stared at the men to see what they would do. Aside from looking at each other, none of them moved. Where would they go? They knew the stranger was probably telling the truth. There weren’t many places to hide, and he likely did know where they lived, especially after they had been talking for some time. He had listened to their entire conversation and knew everything about the booze that was being made and consumed in town. They didn’t want any more trouble, so none of them tried to escape. None of them even budged from their seats. They just waited in the uncomfortable silence.

They were still seated when they heard footsteps on the mahogany stairs again, this time much thicker than before, sounding almost like a hammer coming down on each step accompanied by a faint clang. A pair of cowboy boots complete with spurs and embossed with a heart appeared, followed by white pants, a white button-down shirt, and finally, a tall ten gallon cowboy hat. Strapped to his waist were two ivory-handled six shooters. He looked like he had walked straight out of a silent western movie. This was the man they suspected; this was “Two Gun” Hart. Little did anyone know that Officer Hart kept a secret bigger than anyone could imagine. His real name was Vincenzo Capone, and his brother Al was the most infamous criminal in the world.

