

E O Y O T E

BOOK 1

THE OUTLANDER



CHANTAL NOORDELOOS

Cover art by Jonathan de Vries

Coyote: The Outlander
(Chapter 1)

Chantal Noordeloos

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Chantal and Coyote: The story behind the story

Some stories are written merely from the imagination of a writer, and some exist long before they appear on paper. These stories, these dreams, these alternate realities, they come from somewhere in our collective consciousness, and they are the ones who choose where and when to come to life. Coyote is one of those dreams, and she chose Chantal Noordeloos to share her stories with us.

While working with Chantal, we became friends. With our six-hour time difference, we juggled edits and revisions, shared triumphs and trials, and swapped stories about our children as well as the weather. Through it all, Coyote was our ever-present companion. She's the one who led the way, and showed Chantal her story. I'm privileged to have participated as an editor and a friend, and to have Coyote looking over my shoulder to make sure she shone through the way she wanted to.

So now we have a tall, strong-hearted woman with long, blonde hair and beautiful eyes, wearing a bowler and winking at us, inviting us to read her story.

Oh, and there's Coyote too.

Welcome to their world.

~Apple Ardent Scott

Lafayette, Indiana 2013

Foreword

A little under a year ago I was handed the first draft of the book you're about to read. Until then most of the work of Chantal Noordeloos I'd read was visceral, hard hitting horror, the kind that makes you look away from the page in fear or disgust, only to come back and see that yes, that was really what she wrote.

Coyote turned out to be a completely different kind of story, a step away or even beyond the material I had come to expect, in a good way.

Even in first draft, the main character appealed to me immediately, likeable, tough, faced with difficult challenges, both physical and mental and a personal history that made me want to know more about her.

It was also around that time we discussed all the ins and outs of world building. Reading Coyote it became obvious Chantal paid good attention, resulting in an intriguing, obviously steam punk world in a Weird West setting, with limitless possibilities and extensive backgrounds. The story blends fact and fiction into a believable, coherent and highly entertaining yarn.

Best of all, Coyote and the people she meets along the way, each have their own tale to tell. Together with the beautiful world Chantal created, this opens up scores of possible stories for us to enjoy in the future.

Welcome to the world of Coyote. Look around, enjoy, and if you meet her, tell her I said hi.

Mike Jansen

Amsterdam, June 2013

To Daan and Apple,
the Larry and Curly to my Moe

The Outlander



Go to www.coyotethebooks.com and visit the village to unlock this safe. The code is: 230207

Barman Bill, a large man with a ruddy face and freckled hands, spotted trouble from the moment it walked through the swinging doors of his saloon. A few of the regulars sat at little round tables staring into their glasses, ignoring the newcomer. The stranger wore a long dark coat, and his suit underneath looked pristine. His reddish-brown moustache and beard were neatly trimmed and showed wisps of grey. Two sharp blue eyes peered beneath his Stetson, drinking in his surroundings with a solemn, serious glare. His eyes glanced over the patrons, the bar, and Bill could see that the man looked for the location of the exits. Everything about the man screamed “trouble” to Bill, as his regular patrons lacked both the air of authority and the immaculate grooming of this newcomer.

The thin layer of dust on the man’s coat and hat told a silent tale of his long journey travelling through the country. ‘*Strangers always bring strange dealings with them,*’ Bill thought.

Barman Bill felt nervous because this man looked like some sort of official. He anticipated a Prohibition Party Officer since that trouble started over in Michigan with the nonsense Chairman John Russell was trying to set up. The man took a stand against producing and selling intoxicating beverages, and those happened to be the main source of income in the Bullhead Saloon . Bill hoped it would all blow over soon, and in the meantime, he would fill his pockets with profits. He slapped the dishrag over his shoulder and walked to the table where the newcomer took a seat.

“What can I get you, Stranger?” Bill asked. He wiped the table with his spotted rag and smiled courteously at the man, who in turn ignored him, and removed his hat. With a gloved hand he gently wiped the dust off the top and the brim. Bill watched, hypnotized, following his new patron’s every movement. There was something about this stranger that irked him; he was just too damn neat, and too damn cocky. Bill fidgeted with his apron, and waited for the man to speak to him.

The stranger placed the hat on the table and took off his gloves. The smell of the road, the scent of dirt, rain, and fresh air, clung to the stranger like a pungent cologne. He produced a white handkerchief from his pocket, and used it to wipe the dust off his face. Only then did he pay attention to the fidgeting barman.

A little muscle twitched in Bill’s face, and caused his cheek to tremble ever so slightly. The barman did not like the disrespect he felt the man was showing him.

The man replaced the handkerchief in his pocket, and his large hand patted his thinning hair. "Just get me a beer," he finally said. His voice was deep, with a hint of a Scottish accent.

The Barman nodded, relieved and agitated at the same time. With slumped shoulders and a heavy tread, he walked back to the tap with an instant feeling of fierce dislike for the stranger.

His back turned, Bill dropped the jovial barman charade. His smiling eyes looked sour, not friendly at all, and the corners of his mouth twisted with contempt. He felt as if the man looked down on him, as a lesser creature. Bill could have made a big deal out of the stranger's demeanor, mocked him in front of his customers, or treated him with equal indifference, but Bill had been in the business long enough to not let his emotions get him into trouble. He considered spitting in the stranger's drink, but thought better of it. Instead, he tried a charm offensive. With an inaudible sigh, he twisted his face back into a pleasant smile.

"You're not from around here." The barman made light conversation as he poured a mug of beer and served it to his strange customer. A thick layer of foam peered over the rim of the cup and spilled over in thin, long streams.

"I'm not," the man said. "I come from Dundee, Illinois." He put the mug to his lips and looked at Bill.

"You don't sound like you're from around *there* either." Bill saw the man's lips curl into a smile behind the mug, and could tell the man was warming up to him. That made him inwardly smile. No one could resist a good barman.

"I was born in Scotland," the man confessed. He put the mug down. "The name is Allan Pinkerton."

The barman nearly swallowed his tongue. He *knew* this man was trouble! Bill had to be on his best behavior. This here was a lawman. And not just any lawman like a sheriff or a deputy, this man was the law in the whole country.

Before Bill could respond, his attention was drawn to the movement of the batwing doors when a woman stepped through. Bill was about to protest that this was a man's establishment when he realized who she was.

This was no ordinary woman. She stepped inside as if she owned the place, and she wasn't dressed like an ordinary woman either. She wore trousers with the same confidence as any man. Her journey must have been a long one, since thick layers of dust covered her long black leather coat and Derby. Two pistols hung around her waist, and a bullwhip coiled around her slender shoulders like a thick snake. Two long, blonde braids cascaded down her back and reached as far as her knees. Her heart-shaped face, attractive in a young and confident way, scanned the near-empty saloon until she found what she was looking for.

He knew who this woman was. Everyone knew. She was not the kind of woman a humble man like himself would refuse patronage. Her presence made him as nervous as the presence of Pinkerton.

Behind her, the doors opened again, revealing a figure of what initially looked like a child. Bill instantly corrected this mistake as he realized an unnaturally short man followed the blonde woman in. His thin, wiry frame was clad in ordinary traveling

clothes and a long, light-brown coat. On his head he wore a hazelnut Stetson that was a stark contrast with his black hair and dark skin. The skin of this man was as dark as Bill had ever seen. It was so black that he had the hue of coal: blue-black instead of brown.

The barman held no great respect for women. He never married, and they were not his patrons. *Silly creatures with frilly clothes*, he thought, yet he liked black men even less. Bill spat on the floor, a gesture of contempt and silent protest. He wanted to tell the man that he would not tolerate 'colored' in his saloon, but he was too much of a coward to do so. The black man was *her* companion, and insulting him could invoke her wrath. Instead, he bit his tongue, and pulled his face back into a friendly smile.

He wondered what this strange duo sought in his saloon in the middle of the day. Surely there was no business for them here, but to his surprise, the woman sat down at the same table as Allan Pinkerton, and the black man followed suit. That ominous feeling of 'trouble' stirred in his belly again. He hoped that their business was not in his town, and he hurried towards the table. If he played his cards right, they would drink, then leave, and nothing would happen in his saloon.

"What can I get you, Coyote... Ma'am?" Bill asked humbly. His freckled hands betrayed his nerves with their wringing motion. The barman made a little respectful bob, as if he were meeting a queen instead of taking an order. The woman turned to him and smiled. Something in the way her lips curled, the way her bright white teeth gleamed, made him weak at the knees. Such a pretty face. A little nose, big blue eyes, and a pair of soft pink lips that were shaped as only a skilled artist could shape them. All her features made it difficult to imagine that this was the most dangerous bounty hunter of his time. *Beauty could have such an innocent look*, Bill decided. But in this case, beauty lied.

"My friend and I would like some whiskey," she said with a hint of an English accent. "And please don't give us any of that stuff you've tampered with. I don't want Tanglefoot or Tarantula juice or any of that nonsense." Bill nodded and almost stumbled over his large brown boots as he ran to fetch a bottle.

The barman fumbled with her beer mug, and his hand shook a little when he poured her drink. He tried to hide his nerves, but almost dropped his bottle. Bill noticed the corners of her mouth curled into a knowing smile, and her eyes held his for a moment. The barman groveled a little more, paid them a trivial compliment, and then scurried back to his bar.

Coyote chuckled under her breath. Her reputation preceded her yet again.

Being a female bounty hunter made men nervous. Being an official made them wary. But being the best gunman, or in her case, gunwoman around, made everyone downright anxious. The popular consensus was that women shouldn't be allowed to be bounty hunters, but no one dared say this out loud when Coyote was near.

Great gunmen had challenged her and great gunmen had lost. Those memories made Coyote smile even wider. She had little mercy for arrogant men.

Coyote turned her attention to the man at her table. “Mister Pinkerton, always a pleasure.” She tipped her Derby, and flashed him a different smile, one that spoke of business and courtesy.

“Miss Webb.” He nodded, but did so with respect.

Coyote noted Pinkerton's stern face. He was a serious man, and his face was like sun-browned stone. His eyes were kind, though, and she knew it didn't bother him that she was a woman. He was a professional, and all he cared about was working with the very best. And there was no one better than she.

“We've been over this, Mr. Pinkerton,” she scolded, “people I do business with call me Coyote.” There was a mocking sparkle in her eye. One eyebrow was slightly raised and she continued, “You have a job for me.”

It wasn't a question. Allan chuckled and pulled a drawing from his coat. He unrolled the thick paper and handed it to her. The face of the ugliest man she had ever seen stared up at her from the page. His face looked like that of a weasel with a bad haircut.

“Handsome,” Coyote quipped. “How much is Prince Charming worth?”

“Two thousand dollars.”

“Big catch,” she said, and she pushed her Derby back slightly with her thumb, as was her habit. Coyote leaned back in her chair and whistled. The man next to her did not bat an eyelash.

“*Very* big catch, this...” she scanned the printed name beneath the uncomely face, “Alfonso Martine.” Her large round irises were a strange shade of cornflower blue that gave the illusion of being violet in the soft light of the saloon. “Unusual name for an Outlander.” Her eyes fixed on Pinkerton to see his reaction.

A corner of her mouth pulled up, creating a little dimple in her soft, tanned cheek, and she gave Pinkerton a crooked smile. Without breaking eye contact, she handed the drawing to the silent black man next to her. The little man pulled the paper from her hand and studied the face that stared up at him.

“Caesar?” Coyote looked away from Pinkerton and tried to read her companion's face. As usual, she found that difficult. His features lacked all forms of expression, and presented nothing more than a blank stare.

Her slender fingers pulled a silver box from the inner pocket of her coat and picked out a cigar. Without much ceremony she bit off the head. The tobacco scraped against her teeth and poured in little specks on her tongue. She spat out the head and lit the cigar.

The scent of the smoke soothed her. She liked the feel of the tobacco leaves against her lips, like being kissed by a comforting friend with rough dirty lips. A good cigar was appropriate for so many occasions, and one of those was the start of a good deal. And this, she knew, was going to be a *good* deal.

“His real name is Qu'arth Slevanko.” Pinkerton's eyes darted around the saloon while he spoke, though he kept his body still and inconspicuous. Coyote admired the man, and his regal posture. *He's a lot more cunning than he lets on.* The saloon was empty except for the curious bartender and three drunken customers out of earshot. He threw the barman a warning look, making it clear that the beer-slinger ought to

keep his distance. From the weary expression on the man's ruddy face, Coyote knew he understood what Pinkerton wanted from him. He was probably glad that this place, like most saloons, was quiet during the afternoon hours. There would be no trouble. Pinkerton was the sort of man who abhorred trouble. Most lawmen were. Coyote, though she often mingled with the law, still liked a little bit of trouble now and then. She liked to play her own game, and felt no qualms with rubbing people the wrong way. Yet she respected Pinkerton, and was willing to play by his rules. Up to a certain point.

"What kind of Outlander is he?" she asked, waving her hand in the direction of the warrant poster in Caesar's hand. A ring of smoke freed itself from her soft, shapely lips, hovered in the air, then grew larger and larger until it dissipated.

"A different species from the ones we have encountered before."

"Crimes?" Coyote gave him a hard stare, and her eyebrows furrowed together at the bridge of her nose.

Everyone knew she was the best at hunting Outlanders, but she had a rule: she only hunted Outlanders that were guilty of a crime. Coyote was unrelenting when it came to that rule. She had a past with Outlanders, and a good reason for hunting them, but she also knew that Outlanders consisted of many different types of creatures. She did not have a beef with all of them.

The Pinkerton Agency was probably the most famous of the U.S. fronts for the IAAI, the International Agency of Alien Investigation, which killed *all* Outlanders, without exception. The Pinkertons were famous throughout the whole country, and everyone heard of the prestigious agency. They had a lot of authority and often quipped that they *were* the law. No one argued. Coyote decided that she agreed with most of their laws, but not all, and she stood up against what she didn't believe in.

Finding and exterminating Outlanders proved to be a real challenge to the Agency, as some of these creatures were a lot trickier than human criminals, and not all could be killed with human weapons.

Not every Outlander posed a direct threat, but the IAAI refused to take risks. Their agencies had a lot of connections, and they were tied to several bounty hunters. There were a few special hunters the agencies particularly liked to work with, the kind who knew the ins and outs of the trade, and Coyote was one of those hunters. She never failed her assignments, no matter how tough her foe was. Her prices were high, but she was fast, and she always delivered. Coyote made sure that she did her job well. She met some of the other hunters, and some were arrogant men who were gods in their own minds. It took a special person to hunt the creatures that came through the rips.

There was only one disadvantage to working with her –she played by her own set of rules. She knew that not all Pinkerton agents appreciated that, but she and Allan understood each other very well. The Outlander had to be guilty of murder, or Coyote would not take the time to hunt him down. If an Outlander posed no threat, she saw no reason to bring him to the law, it was as simple as that. She was quite stubborn, and the agency knew that she would turn a job down flat, and charge a hefty fee for

wasting her time. Pinkerton had to offer her a damn good reason for her to hunt. If she wasn't convinced, she would walk.

"At first he only killed cattle, young cattle," Allan said. "Baby cattle." His voice was low, and he looked from Coyote to her black partner. "But it seems this gentleman has a craving for anything young." He paused for dramatic effect, and then added, "Likes children too. Very young children. Anything under four."

It was enough to draw her in. A familiar heat burned in her mind, and flashed under her skin, her cheeks burning with anger. Her eyes were aflame and she leaned towards him with an eager, listening expression; she did not want to miss a single word he had to say. She already had a bullet with the name Qu'arth Slevanko, but Coyote could see in Allan's smugness, the glint in his eyes, that he had something to sweeten the deal, to make her really *want* this job. He leaned forward and tweaked his moustache with the tips of his strong fingers. Coyote watched the hairs roll between the callused digits. *He has the hands of a hard working man*, she noted.

"I'm also told that Alfonso Martine is part of the James Westwood crew," Pinkerton said in low, conspiratorial tones. "Mr. Westwood located the Outlander and took him under his wing several weeks ago."

The muscles in her face twitched, and he must have seen her flinch. The long dark lashes that crowned her eyes fluttered slightly. He kept his face straight, but she could almost see the inward smile of victory. *He's got me*.

Westwood was Coyote's Achilles heel, and she hated that it was common knowledge.

"You don't say," she said softly and slowly, with an edge of danger to her voice. The pretty young face looked murderous, and she snapped the piece of paper from her partner's hand. The black man looked solemn, but he did not protest. Instead he let the paper slide through his fingers.

Coyote could feel Pinkerton's eyes on her, watching her intently as she examined the picture more thoroughly. Her eyes had lost their joyful mocking expression, and she sucked in her lips so that her mouth was nothing more than a thin line. Anger ate away at her, and her heart pounded in a fast heavy beat. She quickly extinguished the cigar that she suddenly lost all taste for.

"So he'll be in Indiana?" She was short, and to the point, and no longer showed any of her flirty gestures or smiles. When Westwood was involved, Coyote's blood ran cold. Pinkerton answered her question with a nod. A sigh escaped her lips, and she handed the paper back to him. Her agitated fingers played with the rim of her derby.

"I should just set up shop in Indiana. Plenty of work for a girl like me." There was a ghost of that crooked smile again, but her eyes remained dark. "Indiana must have the most rips in all of the U.S."

Next to her, the black man stirred. Allan looked at him in surprise. It was as if the little man shifted in and out of the shadows, and it was difficult to remain aware of his presence. Coyote was used to this, she had a sixth sense to where Caesar was, but she liked seeing Pinkerton struggle.

“Indiana is called the crossroads of America,” Caesar said. His voice was a slow baritone, and he had a hint of an Haitian accent. “Many people do not know that there is a spiritual meaning behind that name.”

His teeth were a startling white against the blackness of his skin, like a line of pearls on an ebony windowsill. His gnarled dark hands, with skin dry as old, cracked leather, moved as if he were trying to weave his words in the air.

“The veil of reality is thin in Indiana,” Caesar continued. “There is much magic there. The rips occur easily at those thin spots in the fabric.”

“I don’t know anything about magic,” Pinkerton said. He coughed in his fist, and cleared his throat. The subject of magic clearly made him feel uncomfortable. Coyote knew that most men found Outlanders weird enough to deal with, and magic was a subject that did not work well with lawmen like Allan Pinkerton “But I do know that Indiana is a place of many rips, and their frequency seems to be increasing. The IAAI has been investigating a lot of the rips, and we have some records of the Outlanders who pass through them, but it is still unpredictable when and where a rip will appear.”

He scratched his neck, slick with moisture from the heat, and sighed. “We know so little about the rips, and each time we find one, we find more species of Outlanders.”

“Is there any new information about the other side of the rips? Do we know where they lead to yet?” Coyote asked.

The Scotsman shook his head. “Special agents have entered the rips, but few have ever returned. There are some small realities that we have investigated, some portal dimensions, but that’s about all. Nothing to indicate where the Outlanders come from. Most rips don’t stay open long enough for agents to return.” His face was grave, his jaw, set, and his eyes hovered half lidded and dark. Coyote looked past Pinkerton and she saw the barman cleaning his bar for the fifth time, shooting them nervous glances. “The only things we can determine are where the rips have been, and if we are lucky, where they are at present. That’s it. Everything else is still pretty much a mystery.”

Pinkerton wrapped his suntanned hand around his mug and brought it to his lips. He inhaled the comforting scent of the lukewarm liquid, and he closed his eyes for a second to savor it, and the soft foam speckled his impressive moustache with little white clouds. Placing the mug back on the table, he wiped his lips and moustache, then brushed away little flecks of foam from his whiskers with a single finger.

“IAAI is working on it, but so far with little result.” Pinkerton looked a little deflated, as if he wished he had more information to share. *He’s not telling me everything*, Coyote thought, *I wouldn’t tell me everything if I were him, either.*

“Shame,” Coyote muttered instead of sharing her thoughts. “Looks like Westwood’s people might have one up on IAAI.” There was a little twitch at the corner of his nostril, and she could see she hit the lawman where it hurt.

“Perhaps,” Pinkerton said cautiously. “I can assume you are taking the case then?”

Coyote sat back in her seat and pulled on her Derby, trying to hide a smile.

“Was there ever any doubt?”