

*South
Of
the
Deadline*©

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I was walking into the Long Branch the night we collided. The lights from inside blinded me, and it took a moment to realize I'd nearly knocked down a woman.

"Sorry, ma'am. Didn't see you."

She held her chin down, one hand pressed to her mouth. "It was my fault."

I stepped aside. It sounded like she was crying. At the door I turned and called over my shoulder, "Are you all right?"

Foolish. Utterly foolish.

"Yes. No! It's my sister. She's missing. This is the fourth saloon I've tried. I've been leered at, propositioned and pinched. And the next one touches me is gonna lose an eye."

I stepped back, the boards creaking beneath me. "You sure your sister's in a saloon?"

"Pretty sure." She tucked away a handkerchief. "It's not how you think. She isn't one of those..."

With my back to the windows I could see better. The woman in front of me was tall and thin. Kind of a long nose but a pert mouth that was probably quite capable of smiling. Not that she had reason to.

"This fellow comes by the boarding house after dinner. He stinks but she finds him amusing. She's seventeen." She looked away.

Had to be a buffalo hunter. They stink like no one else. The music rippling out of the Long Branch was inviting. I could see some of the youngsters inside, slurping beers and laughing, hats pushed back above their sun burnt faces. Mr. Riley, my boss, had asked me to check on them. The drive was over and they were paid off, but he hoped to hire a few of them for the trip back to Texas. I figured the odds of that were low. There is nothing more irresponsible than a nineteen-year-old cowhand with money. We planned to leave the day after tomorrow and in a week most of them would be broke.

"How about that one over there?" She pointed at the Variety.

Since when did I join the posse? "Yes, ma'am, the Variety is a saloon."

We tried Ham Bell's Variety, and a half dozen others, too. Some had music, most had girls, and all had liquor. I spotted a well-lit place up the street and started across the railroad tracks that run east and west through town.

"Are you carrying a pistol, Mister?"

I stopped. I had an old Colt .31 shoved into my belt at the small of my back, beneath my coat. How she spotted it in the dark, I'll never know. "Why?"

She toed the steel track. "They call this track the Deadline. City ordinance says no one can carry a gun north of the Deadline. Besides, that place is a restaurant."

"How about south of the Deadline?"

"Anything goes."

Just then we heard a shout, then a gunshot.

My mouth ran dry.

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I didn't even see the name of the place. First we followed the music, then the smell of tobacco smoke and perfume and spilt beer. I bought a glass of something thick and red for a miner who told me his name was Mickey three times while we talked.

He also told us a drunk girl and a buffalo hunter went upstairs just before we arrived.

I glanced at the thin woman and started up the stairs. We passed a girl on the way. She wore more paint than an Indian war party. "Pardon me, ma'am. Did you notice a young girl, looks like this one, come up?"

"Sure, cowboy. But she already has company."

I almost blushed. "This is her sister. Do you know which room?"

"Take a right. Last door on your left. I'd go easy, cowboy. Tiny's got a temper."

Tiny. How hard can a guy named Tiny be? Then again, it's the sawed off little guys who've been picked on all their lives that fight dirtiest. Fight? Who said anything about a fight?

We stopped outside the door. The frame was recently splintered and repainted. I raised my knuckles to knock and heard a groan. I opened the door and took one long step in, the woman right beside me.

Tiny was about the largest man I have ever seen. His massive neck and forearms were scarlet, and his belly as white as a fish. When he got up, it was like standing in the shade of a tree. He stank of cologne, strong enough to make my eyes water. I guess it covered the smell of the buffalo hides.

"Evening!" I put on a big smile. My stomach churned. I leaned to look around him. A skinny girl with brown curls knelt on the floor, vomiting into a spittoon. Her hair had come loose and gotten involved. She was a mess, but she still had her dress on. Strangely, she was missing one shoe.

My new boss darted to her side. "Katie! Good lord, look at you." She plucked at her sister's hair and held it up like a horse's tail. I didn't think that much food could come out of one skinny girl.

"Who the hell are you?"

I jerked back around. Tiny stared down at me with mean, beady, bleary little eyes. "Everyone calls me C.H. Yup, that's what everyone does. Me and my sisters here are on our way now. Nice to meet you, sir. Have a nice night."

The older sister draped the younger over her shoulder, and was almost past me when Tiny caught her. "She ain't going anywhere."

I wasn't wearing my boots because I don't like walking in them. Even so, when my heavy Brogan disappeared north between his legs Tiny folded over. I yanked out my Colt and brought the barrel down across his forehead.

A spatter of blood hit my shoes.

Tiny grunted, then punched me in the stomach. I staggered. My gut felt like his fist was still in there. I swatted him with the barrel again. Tiny went to one knee and tried to grab my legs. I brought the pistol down once more and he fell over. My hands shook so bad it took me three tries to shove the gun into my coat pocket. I put my hands in the pockets to hide them, too.

I guess the three of us made it downstairs because suddenly we were outside and

the music was distant and rain tapped my shoulders and I could breathe again.

"C.H.? That's what you told him your name is, right?"

"Ma'am?" I looked up. The girls stood on the porch of a house. The rain fell harder.

"This is where we stay. Thank you."

"You're welcome." I felt mad all of a sudden. I'd assaulted a man who looked like the grudge holding type. A large, angry man who might have friends or cousins. It was her fault for roping me into this.

"And C.H., my name is Susan."

She steered her sister inside. I still felt sort of mad. But not as much.
Goodnight Susan.

* * *

I stayed the night in our camp outside of town. Slept bad. My gut ached. We spent the morning buying horses. That afternoon Mr. Riley told Stoop and me to take the wagon in and purchase supplies for the journey home.

Stoop stumped up the steps into the dry goods store, but I hesitated. I had it in mind to check on the girls. I didn't imagine Tiny would storm the boarding house and attack them because he'd be lynched before the sun set. I just wanted to see they were all right.

Sure.

Instead of visiting two young ladies, I stood at the bottom of the boarding house steps while an old biddy with a broom eyed me like a rattlesnake. "You're not that one who's been coming around. That Tiny. You one of his friends?"

"No, ma'am." I think I could honestly say that Tiny and I were not friends. "I just came to check on Miss Susan and her sister. There was some, well, an incident last night." And none of your business, you buzzard.

"She told me about it. You the one helped her?"

I nodded vigorously.

"What's your name?"

"C.H."

"What kind of a name is that? You look like a cowboy. I've little use for cowboys. You on the run?"

"Um. No, ma'am."

"You should be. Tiny's got a brother, Maynard. Tiny's the nice one. His brother's a gunfighter."

"A gunfighter?" My voice came low and strangled. Probably the lump in my throat.

"That's what people say. I guess you heard what happened to Tiny?" She pushed the broom and a swirl of dust hit my shoes. It was overcast and cool, but sweat soaked the back of my shirt.

"No, ma'am."

"Got stabbed in the neck last night. They found him right over there. I heard the knife was still in his neck." She pointed to a spot forty paces down the street. "And I've got a broken window. Know anything about that?"

I looked at the windows of the house. I couldn't see a broken one from where I stood, but I had no reason not to believe her. Had Tiny paid them a visit last night?

"Nope. Know where I can find Miss Susan?"

"At the dry goods store on the corner. She works there. They both do."

I pushed my hat down and turned away. Stoop was probably talking to Susan right now.

"Reach, Mister! Put 'em up high."

The man's voice behind me was serious. I heard a hammer snap back.

I reached.

A hand slapped at my coat, found the pistol, and removed it. He was very thorough; he even took my little two-bladed pocketknife. "Turn around."

I turned. Thank God it wasn't anyone that looked remotely related to Tiny. The man aiming the Colt at me wore a badge.

The boarding house lady shuffled forward. "Cowboy, meet Charlie Bassett. He's the sheriff. Charlie, you reckon this is the one killed Tiny?"

Bassett stuck my pistol in his belt and dug in his coat pocket for a set of chains. "Maybe."

"Well maybe he broke my window, too. I don't give a hoot about Tiny but somebody's got to pay for that window."

Bassett gave me a look of long suffering. "Maybe."

*** * ***

Getting marched up the street with manacles on your wrists is embarrassing. I called over my shoulder to Bassett walking three steps behind me. "I didn't stab that fellow, Tiny."

"We'll see."

I wondered who'd accused me and for a horrible moment I pictured Susan in my mind, and me stepping onto the gallows and she and her sister just staring at me. No, surely not. But... "Who said it was me?"

"Your hat."

"What?" I stopped but he poked me in the spine with the big Colt and I stumbled forward.

"Fellow in the Lady Gay described a cowhand in a dusty brown hat with an arrowhead stuck in the band. Looks to be you."

I guess the name of that last place was the Lady Gay. Damn hat. The cowboy that traded me the thing said the arrowhead made it lucky.

It turned out my hat had some help from Mickey, the thirsty miner. He looked worse in the light of day than he had the night before, and he'd looked pretty bad then.

He nodded as Bassett explained, then pointed at me. "Yes sir, he's the one. Came looking for that girl and headed upstairs where Tiny was."

I glared at Mickey but he just smiled. After seeing him last night, I didn't think he'd be able to tell me from Abe Lincoln. "I slept in camp last night. You can ask my trail boss, Mr. Riley. We could talk to Miss Susan or her sister. We could--"

"We are gonna walk over to the jail and you are going to sit in the shade for a

while. My under sheriff is talking to the Misses Lane. He's interviewing everyone who lived nearby."

* * *

The jail was, indeed, shady. I don't own a pocketwatch, but I'm sure I spent the better part of the morning there. Finally, I heard voices in the outer office, and then a fellow with a mustache came in and unlocked the cell. I didn't get his name, but he was dressed like he was on his way to get his picture made. He might have been a gambler or something of that sort.

Old Stoop stood by the door, one hand holding the other. The lawman, Bassett, sat in a high-backed chair behind a desk. My pistol hung from a nail on the wall behind him. There were other guns hanging with it.

"Bat here told me he had a long talk with the Lane sisters. Seems you helped the younger one out of a tight spot last night?"

"Yes, sir." My hands weren't chained and suddenly I didn't know what to do with them. The dandy standing behind me made me nervous.

Bassett stared hard at me for a minute. He opened his desk drawer, removed my pocketknife, and pushed it across. "This your knife?"

I nodded, but didn't reach for it. "Yes, sir, you took it off me this morning."

"You own a pair of scissors?"

"What? No. What would I do with a pair of scissors?"

Bassett dipped into the drawer again and placed a long, thin pair of scissors on the desk. "Pulled these out of that fellow's throat this morning." He nearly smiled.

"Bat, when you went to the boarding house, which window was broken?"

"West side. The room where the Lane girls board."

The sheriff watched me for a long moment. "This investigation is concluded. Cowhand, you're free to go. I strongly suggest you and your friend here load that wagon and go find your outfit. Tiny has a brother and we don't need further trouble."

He stood, retrieved my gun, and handed it to me. I noticed it was empty. I thought about asking for the cartridges, but I figured it was time to get out of Dodge.

The dandy fellow walked us over to the dry goods store. When we passed the Lady Gay I noticed four men standing on the porch. One was Mickey. When he saw me, he whispered something to the tallest of the three, then ducked inside.

The three men stepped to the railing and gave us a careful look. The tall one in the middle started to advance, but the under sheriff suddenly stopped and faced him. The lawman switched the fancy cane he carried to his left hand and moved his right toward his belt. "Something I can do for you, Maynard?"

The tall man opened his mouth, then shut it and shook his head. After a moment, the three stepped off the boardwalk, mounted and rode away.

"I'd be watchful riding out to your cow camp. That was Tiny's brother," the lawman said quietly.

I started sweating again.

Coming abreast of Stoop's wagon, our escort turned and left, calling over his shoulder, "Good luck, boys."

*** * ***

Kate remained red faced and silent when Stoop and I left the store, the shopkeeper helping us carry the last of our order. When he went back inside, Susan came out on the porch.

"Did they arrest you?"

"I'm not sure. They held me all morning. They had questions."

"Do they still have questions?" Her face was tight.

I smiled. "No. I don't think there will be any more questions at all."

She smiled back. It wasn't exactly a happy smile, like when someone has been laughing. More like a smile of relief. But it looked pretty on her just the same. Sitting in jail that morning I couldn't wait to see Texas again, but now I wondered how many months would pass before the next drive brought me north.

She took a breath. "Mr. Masterson told me Tiny has a brother. I don't think I have to worry, but you might. He might assume..."

"Masterson?"

"The lawman? The handsome one."

"Oh. Him." I winced. While I spent the morning in jail, Mister Under Sheriff had been charming Miss Susan. "I'll be careful." I clambered up into the wagon, while Stoop rolled a cigarette and pretended not to listen. "My boss plans to bring another herd north soon. Maybe I could visit?"

She smiled, and this time it was the real thing.

Susan went inside and Stoop nudged me with an elbow. "We'd best get moving. You got everything?"

I shook myself out of my pleasant daze long enough to remember my pistol was empty. Shaking my head, I went back inside to the front counter. Susan and Kate were just stepping out the back, heading home for lunch.

I asked for a box of cartridges for the pocket pistol, then eyed the shop's newer wares. It was miles to camp, and I had little confidence in my .31 pocket pistol or the single barrel birdgun Stoop kept behind the seat.

Minutes later I left the shop with a nearly new Remington .45 and cartridges. I'd have bought a Colt, but I couldn't afford to spend a month's salary. Hauling myself up into the wagon, I began to load.

"Think they'll hit us on the way out to camp?" Stoop gently snapped the horses into motion. Something rattled in the back where we'd hurriedly packed the supplies.

I shrugged, and tucked the Remington under my arm while I loaded the little Colt. "They might. I'm sorry about this, Stoop. It started as something simple and now--"

Stoop coughed and fell forward when the gunshot pierced the air. I caught hold of his sleeve as the old cook fell sideways off the wagon. The shirt ripped and Stoop thumped into the dirt, a dark patch spreading across his back.

Someone yelled and I spun to see two men on horseback charge out of an alleyway, pistols smoking. A bullet yanked my hat off so I jumped off the wagon, nearly stomping poor Stoop.

I emptied the Remington at them. One man fell limp off his saddle, while the

other kicked free of his stirrups and jumped aside as his horse went down. It was a shame I hit that horse--a big gray thing that now wore an ugly hole in its forelock.

The second man was slow getting up so I snatched the .31 from my waistband and fired left handed. Missed. And missed. The fourth or fifth shot hit him, because suddenly he ran three steps and dropped.

A bullet smacked the wheel next to my shoulder and I turned to see Maynard marching along the boardwalk, firing each time his left boot struck wood.

With both guns empty I panicked and leaped into the wagon. I figured Stoop was dead and maybe I could get the horses moving fast enough to--but no, there was Stoop's old birdgun, its stock held together with bailing wire.

I shouldered the gun and prayed it was loaded. I aimed at Maynard's beard and fired.

Maynard went down screaming.

There was a lot of noise and confusion after that. People running. My ears rang so bad they hurt. Bassett and the under sheriff arrived, waving guns. Stoop rolled over on his side and groaned. We carried him on a door to someone's house. Susan was there. She handed me my hat. The arrowhead in the brim was shot in half. I sat down on the steps of the house. She sat next to me.

Lucky hat.

The End