

Spunk
by
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The stage tore into Cornerstone at a full gallop. It always did. Everyone knew that no matter how slowly it had climbed the hill into town, Happy always cracked his whip and let out a loud, "Yee-haw" as they rounded the last bend, charging up to the hotel at a breakneck speed. The squeak of breaks always accompanied the cloud of dust that settled on the coach as Happy pulled the horses into a panic halt right in front of the hotel. No one in town could imagine it being any other way.

Matt watched unobtrusively as the passengers piled out of the coach for dinner at the hotel. It was his job. He was nearly always on hand to see who came in with the stage, and more importantly, who didn't pile back into it when it departed after dinner at the hotel. All kinds of people rode the stage, and his practiced eye could size them up pretty well at a glance.

A couple of eastern businessmen were the first to disembark. They appeared unarmed and were obviously passing through to a distant destination. Next was a cowhand with a sunburned face shaded by a dilapidated Stetson. He wore a single well-worn Colt 45 that was not strapped down. He'd probably mind his own business unless challenged. Finally, a petite young woman with blond hair and a beautifully tanned complexion hopped lightly to the ground despite the full skirt she was wearing. She appeared to be the only one around that was unconscious of her startling figure.

The young lady called for her bag, which Happy grabbed from the rack atop the coach. Matt stepped up to help as he handed it down. It was heavy, so He carried it to the covered walkway in front of the hotel, setting it down by her.

"Where would you like this, Ma'am," he asked respectfully.

"I'll take it, thanks," she replied pleasantly, as she picked up the bag as effortlessly as he had, and walked into the hotel.

Forcing her from his mind, Matt walked over to the undertaker's office to arrange the burial of the stranger that had been found shot to death on a little used trail south of town that morning. He had just gotten back from picking up the body when the weekly stage had arrived. He would mail the victim's belongings to his family after dinner, if he could find an address in any of his belongings.

The sun was directly overhead when he stepped on to the street again, so he headed back to the hotel to get his dinner. Besides, the stage hadn't left yet, so "She" might still be available for another look. It was a pity she didn't live around here.

The intriguing young lady was sipping coffee alone by the front window when Matt came into the hotel. He took a seat a safe distance away, ordered a steak, and just drank in the sight of her as he waited for his meal. It wasn't often that he paid attention to women, but she was undoubtedly the most beautiful woman he had ever seen—modest, too.

The young beauty seemed fidgety, looking down the street from the window most of the time, and going to the door for a better look occasionally. Finally she left her bag at her table, and came over to take a seat at his table.

"Sheriff," she said, "I was supposed to meet my brother here before noon. I'm starting to get worried. It's not like him to be late."

"How'd you know I'm the Sheriff?" He asked, since he wore his badge inside his vest—only showing it when needed.

"Simple," she replied. "Two guns, not tied down. Acutely aware of what's going on around you, but no attitude like a gunfighter. What else would you be?"

"Sharp," he said admiringly. "What's your brother's name? What does he look like?"

"He's about your size and build," she replied pensively. "His name is Rod Macey."

It was the name on the papers he had found in the dead stranger's pocket this morning.

"Ma'am," he said sympathetically, "Rod Macey was shot to death on a deserted trail about three miles south of town this morning. I'm sorry."

Tears trickled from her eyes as she struggled for control. Matt asked the Lord to help him comfort her as he unwrapped a napkin from an extra silverware set and handed it to her. When she got control she asked where the body was.

"Across the street at the undertaker's," he told her.

"Can you show it to me?" she asked.

Grabbing her bag, he walked with her to the mortuary.

"Tom," he addressed the undertaker, "This is Rod Macey's sister. She'd like to see the body."

"My condolences Miss...," he said, halting.

"Macey," she filled in for him. "I'm Sherry Macey."

Matt fell in a few steps behind Tom and Sherry as they walked through the double doors to the back room where the body was. She stared at its face while Tom pulled back the window curtains to let in more light. Then she gently unbuttoned the shirt for a look at the bullet wound over the heart. Finally, she re-buttoned the shirt, smoothed the coat back in place, and asked that the burial take place immediately, if a preacher was available to officiate.

"The town's minister is available and the grave's already dug, so we can do it right now," the surprised undertaker replied.

Matt and Tom stood, one on either side of Sherry, while the minister read a few words from the Bible, and prayed over the deceased man's body. Then the simple pine coffin was lowered into the grave and covered with dirt as the officiate and three attendants of the funeral looked on.

"Thanks for your help, Sheriff," Sherry said as they walked away from the grave. "As soon as I get a room at the hotel, I'd like to see the place where Rod was shot."

"If we hurry, we can get there while there's still plenty of light," Matt answered.

Matt helped her to get registered at the hotel, and carried her bag up to her room. He waited in the hall while she changed her clothes. When she was ready, he took her to the livery stable.

"Ain't got nothin' a woman kin ride," the hostler grunted. But Sherry insisted on a well-built grey gelding with alert ears from the lot. Matt saddled his horse while the hostler saddled hers, and they were off. She rode astride. The gelding tried side stepping and crow-hopping a bit, but she controlled him with a firm hand, and he settled right down. They rode silently to the place where Rod had been shot.

When they dismounted at the site of the crime, Matt showed Sherry the place where he had picked up the body. There was still a small spot of blood on the ground where it had lain. "The murderer ambushed your brother from behind that rock," He told her, pointing to a large bolder about forty yards from the trail. "If it's any comfort to you, your brother injured him too. He must have been quite a shot to do that with a revolver."

They climbed the slope beside the trail to the bolder as Matt continued, "He waited up here quite a while before Rod came along. There were four cigarette butts, as well as an empty 44 caliber Henry cartridge on the ground. And, as you can see," he added, "There's a large pool of blood on the ground up here, too."

"There was a bank withdrawal slip for eight thousand dollars in Rod's coat pocket," Matt went on, "But no money in his saddle bags. That's a pretty strong case for robbery as a motive," he continued.

“Sheriff,” Sherry replied pensively. “There’s something strange going on here. I don’t really know who I can trust, but I saw you bow your head in thanksgiving before you ate, so I’m going to assume that you are a trustworthy Christian. The less anyone else knows, the better—at least until we figure out what’s happening.”

“In the first place,” she divulged, “That body may have had Rod’s papers on it, but it was not my brother. That’s why I wanted it buried so quickly, before anyone else found out.”

“Secondly,” the bullet hole in my brother’s coat was high on the left shoulder. The bullet hole on the dead man was directly over the heart.”

“Are you sure that it was your brother’s coat?” Matt asked as he berated himself for failing to notice so significant an inconsistency himself.

“Definitely,” Sherry answered without hesitation.

“What are you thinking?” Matt asked.

“I think someone knew that Matt would be along with the money he had withdrawn to buy cattle, or something. When the attack came, Rod was injured, but still managed to return the assailant’s fire. Rod must have suspected that several people were in on the plot to kill him. When he saw that his assailant was dead, he drug his body down to the trail, switched coats and horses with him, and left his identity on the body. Then he took his money and high-tailed it out of here on his assailant’s horse, so any accomplices would think that the bushwhacker took the money for himself and fled.

“Excellent!” Matt answered. “Let’s see if we can find any drag marks between here and the spot where the body lay.”

A careful search of the area did not reveal any drag marks, but they found several deep boot heel-prints and ten or twelve scattered drops of blood. “Looks like he carried the body, even though he was wounded,” Matt surmised. “He must be strong as an ox.”

“He is,” Sherry replied softly. “So don’t try to double cross me,” she added with a winsome smile that none-the-less let Matt know that she was still unsure if she could trust him.

“Sherry,” he answered, “I really want to help you. In a way it’s my job, although the shooting didn’t technically happen in town. Your brother is injured, possibly even lung-shot. We’ve got to find him before whoever’s after him does. I need to know everything you can think of so I’ll understand what we’re up against.”

“OK,” she said reluctantly. “But God help you if you do anything to hurt my brother!”

"I've been a Christian since I was a kid," he assured her. "I serve the Lord with this badge just like the preacher does with his Bible. It gives me lots of opportunities to tell troubled people about Christ," he added. "Why don't you tell me the whole story while we try to trail your brother? If we're moving, we'll know there aren't any evesdroppers."

"Good enough," she agreed more readily, as they started out along the obvious trail that Rod had left through the scrub brush and junipers on his initial breakneck gallop from the site of the ambush.

"Rod and I grew up on a ranch in Nebraska," Sherry began. "My mother died when I was born, so Dad raised me the only way he knew how--as a boy. I learned to ride and rope and shoot just like the men."

"Dad remarried when I was fourteen years old," she continued, "My poor stepmother did her best to teach me to be a girl. They eventually sent me to school back east to learn to be a teacher, but the real reason was to make a lady out of me. I hated it, but I endured it for Dad and Mom's sake."

"After I came home, our ranch house got hit by lightning and burned to the ground while I was at work at the local one-room school. Mom got trapped upstairs, and Rod and Dad went up to rescue her. Both Mom and Dad died when the house collapsed, but Rod was right by a window, and survived by jumping out as the roof fell in."

"Every time Rod saw the place where the house had been, it brought back such horrible memories of watching Mom and Dad die that he wanted to leave the area. The idea appealed to me, so we sold the place, and Rod went further west to find us a ranch while I finished teaching out the school year. He found a place he liked out here in Wyoming, about thirty miles north of Cornerstone."

"When I finished teaching, I came out here on the stage. I was to meet Rod at the hotel in Cornerstone so we could travel to our ranch together. I don't know why he would have had so much money with him," she added pensively. "Maybe he just had the withdrawal slip in his coat pocket, and the money's hidden away somewhere."

Rod's trail away from the spot where he was ambushed had been plain enough for the first mile or so. Then the trail started to get more and more difficult to follow, and they lost it all together within another mile.

"Sherry," Matt finally said, "I hate the idea of leaving an injured man out here alone all night, but from his trail he seems able to look out for himself. We didn't come out here prepared to spend the night, and we can't hunt for his trail in the dark anyway. I think we need to get back to town and make some plans. Maybe he's already there looking for you."

“You’re probably right,” the concerned woman answered. “If he doesn’t show up, I can resume the search the first thing in the morning.” With that, she turned the grey and struck out cross-country for Cornerstone without the slightest doubt of her bearings.

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Matt and Sherry parted when they left their horses at the livery. He checked for any messages at the Sheriff’s office. Finding none, he made a cursory round of the business district. Nothing seemed awry, so he made his way back to the hotel dining room for a bite to eat.

The lawman chose a seat near the back door, where he could keep an eye on the entire room. The local banker was seated with his back to him at the next table towards the front of the dining room. Matt was familiar with everyone in the establishment except the well-dressed stranger sitting across the table from the banker,

When Sherry came in the front door, He heard the banker say in a low tone, “That’s his sister by the door.”

Sherry’s eyes roved around the room until she saw Matt. When she started in his direction as their eyes met, he gave her a barely perceptible negative head- shake. She immediately averted her eyes and took a seat nearer the front, giving him the distinct impression that she fully understood.

Matt strained to tune in to the low toned conversation next to him. Every now and then he forced down a bite of his dinner to throw off any suspicion of eves-dropping. But try as he would, he only caught an occasional phrase, like, “She identified him,” followed by, “Already buried.” Once he heard, “Looks like Slick double crossed us,” spoken in a louder angry tone. Finally, the men rose and went to the cashier, where the banker paid the tab before they went out the door.

Matt slipped out the back door and crept back to the street in the narrow space between the hotel and the dry goods store. The stranger had already mounted one of the horses tied in front of the hotel. He turned the animal southward and rode out in the darkness at a good clip. The banker walked towards his own home, north of town, while Matt mentally berated himself for not having noticed the brand on the stranger’s horse earlier, while it was still light.

Matt returned to the Sheriff’s office and lit a lamp so Sherry would know he was there. Sure enough, he heard a light rap at the door within a few minutes, and rose to let her in.

"Hear anything significant?" she asked.

"Maybe," he answered. "Nothing for sure."

After some discussion of what Matt had heard, they agreed that the banker and the stranger, whoever he was, bore watching, but might not be involved at all.

"Sherry," Matt warned, "If you are going to hunt for your brother tomorrow, be careful. If they suspect a double cross they'll have an expert on Rod's trail too. Carry a weapon and watch your back trail."

"I may go on foot tomorrow," she answered, "And I'll be ready for them."

Matt was mounted and on the trail before dawn the next morning. As he approached the site of the shooting, he pulled his mount into some trees and proceeded on foot. The sun was just peaking over the horizon when he reached the boulder that the bushwhacker had hidden behind. He carefully scooped the blood-stained dust from the area and dropped it in a crevasse several hundred feet away. Returning to the hiding place, he stooped and smoothed over the ground he had disturbed, scattering a bit of dried grass over the area.

When Matt was satisfied that his alteration of the scene was undetectable, he rose to find himself face-to-face with Sherry. She was dressed in doeskin trousers with a matching doeskin jacket, complete with Indian embroidery. Her doeskin moccasins had matching beaded decorations. The outfit fit her as perfectly as if it were tailor-made in a New York fashion store. The gasp that escaped his lips was more at her beauty than at his surprise at seeing her.

"I was going to do that before I resumed searching for my brother," she said, amused at his chagrin at not detecting her approach. "I think maintaining the illusion of a double cross might work in our favor; and I definitely don't want whoever was after Rod to know that he's alive."

The girl turned to check the trail below them as she spoke, and her profile burned a picture in Matt's memory that would be his standard for beauty for the rest of his life. It was not until she started to blush that he realized how invasive his stare had become.

"Sorry, Sherry," he stammered. "It's just that you're so...so...beautiful."

"I guess I should say 'Thanks,'" she answered, lowering her eyes. "You'd dress up well enough for any woman yourself, you know." Then the incident was over.

"I guess we're both expecting someone from the other side to be here pretty soon," Matt commented. "My guess is that it won't be long. I think I'll move my horse further away so he won't whinny at theirs."

“Move mine too,” she requested. “It’s beside yours. I’ll be looking around for the best spot for us to watch ’em from.”

Matt didn’t get the horses moved any too soon. He had barely gotten back and settled into the vantage point Sherry had chosen when they heard traffic on the trail. A few moments later the stranger Matt had observed at the restaurant showed up with an Indian tracker. Without dismounting, the white man pointed out the dust-covered bloodstain on the trail. The Indian dismounted, studied the scene a moment, and headed up the slope to the boulder where Rod’s assailant had hidden. He spent a moment or so there, returned to the trail to get his horse, and trotted off along the obvious trail Rod had left with his assailant’s horse.

When the tracker was out of sight Sherry started to rise, but Matt pulled her back down with a cautionary “Shhh.” A few moments later the tracker’s horse appeared in the shadows where it had disappeared from. “I figured he’d check to see if anyone was snooping on him,” Matt whispered. After all, he’s seen our tracks on the same trail as Rod’s.”

When the Indian went back up the trail, Matt and Sherry returned to their horses. “What do you think I should do?” Sherry asked Matt. “He’ll see me if I try to follow him.”

“I think we should slip back into town by different routes,” Matt reasoned. And much as I hate to say it, we should also avoid being seen together so they won’t suspect that you’ve got the law working on this. My office is generally unlocked. You leave a note in the top drawer of my desk if you need to contact me, and I’ll leave a lamp on with the window shade up just a bit if I need to contact you.”

“And Sherry,” he continued, “Can we try that dress-up thing together after we get this resolved?”

“I think I’d like that, Matt,” she answered without hesitation.

As they neared town, Sherry drew up near some trees, and drew a long brown skirt from her saddle-bags. “Helps avoid scandal,” she explained as she pulled it over her trousers. She rode on into town on the trail while he took to the scrub and followed a bridle path that led directly to the livery stable.

When Matt stabled his horse, he checked on Rod’s dun. “Sherry could be using him,” he told himself, “Except that anyone combing the area for the supposed double crosser might recognize his tracks.” “Unless...” he thought as he checked its shoes. “Yes,” he told himself, “he could use re-shoeing right now. Then he’ll have different hoof prints.”

There was an excellent smithy in town, so Matt led the dun to his establishment and left him for a new set of shoes. “The shooting victim’s sister will pick him up later this afternoon.” he told the blacksmith.

“She that good-lookin’ little thing I been seeing around town?” he asked.

“Sure is,” Matt replied.

“Think she can handle a powerful animal like this?” the smith asked.

“Positive,” Matt replied as he headed up the street towards his office.

There were no notes on Matt’s desk, and a slow walk around town did not stir up any inklings of trouble. He busied himself sweeping the floor and straightening up a mite, in case Sherry dropped in to leave a note. At noon he went into the hotel dining room for lunch. He took a seat where he could keep an eye on the road, and ordered a light meal.

Sherry came in and took a seat at the next table from Matt just as he was being served. He stood up and addressed her in the most officious voice he could muster. “Miss Macey,” he said, “I would appreciate it if you would drop by the Sheriff’s office and pick up your deceased brother’s belongings. We can talk about how to dispose of his horse while you are there.”

“I’ll be over right after dinner, Sheriff,” she replied disinterestedly. “Maybe you can help me sell the horse,” she added.

As Matt re-took his seat, a dusty cow hand rose from a few tables away and came to Sherry’s table.

“Are you Sherry Macey?” He asked.

“Yes,” she replied in an intonation that sounded more like a question than a statement.

“I knew your brother,” he said in a low voice. “We need to talk.”

“Drop by the Sheriff’s office in a few minutes,” she answered softly.

Matt finished his meal quickly, asked for some coffee to take out, and sauntered nonchalantly back to his office. Sherry showed up a few minutes later, and he told her about getting the horse re-shod. “I told the smithy you’d pick him up,” he finished up.

Just then the expected cowhand showed up.

“What do you know about my brother?” Sherry asked anxiously.

“I’m Clint Collins,” the man replied. “Rod and I competed at bull riding together at rodeos while you were away to school,” he told Sherry. “I got busted up by a bull, and had to quit, so I came out here and started ranching. Just before round-up time rustlers hit me so hard that I couldn’t make the last payment on the ranch. When Rod heard that

the bank here at Cornerstone was foreclosing on me, he offered to loan me the eight-thousand I needed until next year's roundup. He was going to bring it by after he picked you up, but he never arrived, so I came to town to see if anyone had seen him."

"Maybe I shouldn't be telling his business here," he said as he shrugged his shoulders, while cocking his head questioningly towards Matt. "He's OK," she assured the suspicious cowpoke. "He's helping me find Rod."

"I thought Rod was dead!" the cowpoke exclaimed.

"Not the way we've got it figured," Matt replied.

"No one else knows it, but the body Matt picked up wasn't Rod," Sherry interjected.

While Matt and Sherry told their story, Clint was putting two and two together. "The way I figure it," he said when they had finished, "The banker here at Cornerstone didn't want me to make that payment, 'cause he'd be getting my ranch for way less than it's worth; and someone from Rod's bank was collaborating with him, or he'd never have known that Rod had the money. I wonder if the other guy in that conversation you heard was Rob's banker."

"Sounds good," Matt and Sherry agreed.

"We know they'll be lookin' for whoever has that money," Collins mused, "So I think we'd better find Rod before they do. There's an area that's so rugged no one can ranch it between where he got shot and my place. I'm guessin' he holed up somewhere in there to nurse his wound, and he may not be well enough to protect himself."

"How do we search while that Indian's out there?" Sherry asked.

"They're startin' from this end, we'll start from my place," Clint suggested.

"Why are you so sure he headed for your place?" Matt asked skeptically.

"Cause he needs to get the money to me, and he wants everyone except Sherry and I to think he's dead," Clint explained. "He can't afford to be spotted trying to contact Sherry in town. Also," he continued, "The enemy's not going to expect their supposed double-crosser to show up at the very place where the money was supposed to go."

"I'm turning in my badge," Matt bantered. "You guys are better detectives than I am."

"Let's meet just north of town and strike out for my place," Clint urged. "We can stock up for the search there."

"What if they saw you come in here?" Matt asked.

“I’ve still got a week before the pay-off is due,” Clint answered. “Maybe if I drop by the bank and beg for more time it will alleviate any suspicions that we’re on to them.”

Sherry went to the blacksmith’s to pick up Rod’s horse. Matt went to the livery to get his, and Clint went to the bank. The three of them met on horseback in a clump of trees a bit north of town; and Clint lead the way across the scrub to his place. They arrived at Clint’s ranch as an orange sun was setting in the western sky.

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The three searchers were packing their saddlebags by lantern light in Clint’s barn before dawn the next morning. The plan was to ride together over the plains until they reached the hills to the east. Then they would spread out within gunshot-hearing range of each other and search for signs of the bushwhacker’s horse, or any likely place where an injured man would hole up.

As they approached the hills, Clint pointed out helpful landmarks they could use to keep their bearings. He told them that the tallest visible hill was about half-way between the crime scene and their present location. A distinct red cliff near the top marked the center of the six by ten mile rugged area he had in mind. They would rendezvous every hour or so.

Before they separated Matt asked if they could pray together that they would be successful.

“Good idea,” Sherry responded.

“Couldn’t hurt nuthin’,” Clint added.

Matt removed his Stetson, bowed his head, and prayed; “Dear Lord, we need your help finding Rod. We don’t know what condition he’s in, so please be with him until we find him. And, Lord, there are unscrupulous people out here who want to find whoever has that money first. Please protect both Rod and us from their evil intents. Amen.”

“Amen,” Sherry chimed in.

As the terrain became increasingly rugged, the search became more and more grueling. Each member of the party was having to dismount more and more often to check out places that horses could not negotiate. Everyone was pretty discouraged when they stopped for lunch on the fourth rendezvous. “At the rate we’re going we won’t cover a third of this area by dark,” Matt declared. “I think we should spread out more.”

“Probably should,” Clint agreed.

“Why don’t you two spread out and do a once-over for tracks while I stay behind look more for hideouts,” Sherry suggested. “We can meet under that red cliff about dusk if we haven’t found Rod by then.”

The group had some hot coffee and a snack of beef jerky and hard bread while Matt and Clint divided the remaining area in two. Each man was to cover his part as thoroughly as he could before dusk. Sherry continued on a more methodical search of every likely spot she could find in the whole area.

It was mid-afternoon when Clint ran across a clear and unmistakable footprint of the missing horse. He followed the deer trail it was on, and found other less defined hoof prints scattered sparsely along the way. When he was certain he was on the right trail he fired three shots in the air in rapid succession. A three shot volley confirmed that it had been heard, so he waited for Matt in an open area where he would be easy to spot. Matt rode in to meet him about twenty minutes later. Since Sherry did not answer their volleys, they assumed she was too far back to hear.

The two men trailed the horse into a blind canyon that widened into an idyllic ten acre meadow rimmed by a forty-foot rocky wall. At the far end of the meadow a small stream spilled over the ledge in a picturesque waterfall. The horse they were trailing was grazing beside the stream as it meandered through the scene.

Matt and Clint separated, each circling around one edge of the rim. When they met at the far end, they found a deep cave-like overhang that stretched under the falls. A sleeping man was huddled under a blanket at the deep end of the overhang, behind the falls.

“Rod,” Clint called softly, laying a hand in the sleeping man’s shoulder, “Rod, wake up.”

The man stirred, and opened glassy confused eyes. He was shivering uncontrollably.

“Rod, it’s me, Clint.”

Rod’s eyes finally focused. A look of relief flooded his face.

“I got shot,” Rod explained in a weak voice. “Tried to reach your place, but got I got so weak I could hardly ride. Lost too much blood! I holed up here, but I just can’t do anything...” his voice trailed off.

Matt had taken the scene in at a glance and was already gathering wood for a fire. They soon had a warm blaze going, with water heating in the coffee pot. Matt shredded some jerky into a tin cup, adding hot water when the pot started boiling. Rod drank half the

broth and fell back semiconscious on his blanket. Clint covered him with his own blanket and let him sleep

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At about the time that the men had found Rod's trail, Sherry had made a difficult climb on foot to an isolated high point to look over the area for likely hiding spots. From her vantage point she could see a grassy valley nestled between the surrounding rocky hills. It was so packed with cattle it couldn't be anything but a holding site. Remembering that Clint had said no one was ranching in the area, she slipped close enough to read the brand on the closest cattle. They all wore a lazy eight.

As Sherry slipped back to her mount she detected the smoke from Matt and Clint's fire. She dropped everything else and began working across the rugged terrain towards the smoke. An hour later she was standing on the rim of the valley the men were in. Although they were in the cave, their ground-hitched horses assured her that the fire was theirs.

Sherry was studying the rim for a way into the sheltered meadow when she saw two horsemen coming through the entrance to the canyon. The one dressed in buckskins looked suspiciously like the Indian tracker they had seen yesterday. The other was a white man, possibly the diner they had observed with the Cornerstone banker.

Matt and Clint had just finished cleansing the semiconscious man's wound when the banker and the Indian slipped into the cave. The two Samaritans were caught flat footed, with no choice but to raise their hands and yield their weapons to the outlaws.

"Trying to horn in on someone else's money, Sheriff?" the banker asked mockingly. "I didn't think a lawman would sink so low."

"What money?" Matt asked in a surprised tone of voice. "We were trailing a killer's horse."

"You trying to deny that you have the money?" the banker snarled.

"No," Clint and Matt said together. "We haven't seen any money."

"Guess I'll have to force Slick to tell me where he stashed it," the banker grunted, jerking the blanket off the wounded man with one hand while keeping a gun on Matt and Clint with the other.

"Hey, that's not Slick," he exclaimed. "That's Rod Macey. "He's supposed to be dead!" Then, swinging his gun toward Rod he aimed between his eyes.

A loud report echoed through the cave as the banker fell dead at Matt and Clint's feet. The Indian jumped through the waterfalls and escaped as Sherry walked into the cave carrying her Henry rifle. Its barrel was still smoking. "Hated to do that," she stated almost apologetically, "But he was going to finish my brother off."

The rifle report awoke Rod. "Sherry!" he exclaimed as he rose shakily to his feet. She grabbed him around the body and hugged him. Then, noting his weakness, she helped him sit down on a stone.

"Say, Clint," she asked, "Who has the Lazy Eight brand around here?"

"Never heard of it," he replied. "Mine's the Double 'C'."

"When Sherry told of the Lazy Eight cattle held in the secluded valley, Matt asked slowly, "How hard would it be to change two side-by-side 'C's' into a sideways '8'?"

"Hey," Clint exclaimed, jumping up excitedly. "Those'll be my cattle. I bet the banker was going to move them right back to my ranch as soon as the foreclosure went through."

"Speaking of foreclosure, Rod," Matt asked, "Have you still got that money?"

"It's in the saddlebags buried behind that big stone at the back of the cave," Rod assured them. I covered them with Slick's saddle blanket and buried them the first thing when I got here"

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The four friends spent the night in the cave. The warmth of a fire, and some nourishment worked wonders for Rod. He felt able to ride to Clint's the next morning. They stopped long enough to verify that the Lazy Eight cattle Sherry had found were indeed Double "C's" with worked-over brands.

The following morning Clint and Matt rode in to Cornerstone with the money, while Sherry stayed at the Double "C" to tend Rod's bullet wound. Matt stopped at the telegraph office to send an official inquiry on who the Lazy Eight brand was registered to. By noon, he had an answer to his query. The brand belonged to Barry Milton, the

Cornerstone banker. The only problem would be to link him personally to the crime so he could be prosecuted.

That afternoon Clint paid off his loan, much to the banker's disgust. When the banker told him to come back in the morning for his title, Clint reached over the desk and grabbed him by the collar. "You will sign the papers now, you intolerable cheat," he said, twisting the collar tight.

"OK, OK," the banker complied, removing the title from his top drawer and signing it over to Clint. "But a ranch never did a dead man very much good."

"Neither did a bunch of cattle with altered brands," Clint replied. The banker's head jerked like Clint had slapped him. He stared pure hatred from across his desk as the rancher took his title and rose to go. The hair raised on the back of his neck as he went out the door, half expecting a bullet in his back.

Clint went directly to the Sheriff's office, where he reported Barry's veiled death threat. "Don't take it lightly," Matt warned him. "He's up to his ears in fraud and murder, and he'll send someone after you if he doesn't come himself."

"Matt," Clint said pensively, "He's got to do something with those cattle, now that he knows I'm on to him. Maybe you could arrest him for rustling if he goes out there himself."

"It'd stand up in court," Matt agreed, "But I think he'll send someone else to move the cattle. I think he'll personally try to ambush you. If I were you, I'd go right home and get your boys to move those cattle back to your range. If he claims them, all you have to do is kill one cow, and show the court the underside of the brand. Don't use any beaten trails on the way home, though."

Clint went home cross-country the next day. Matt stayed in town, keeping an unobtrusive eye on the banker. Within a couple of days the town began to fill with strutting gunfighters who dressed well, wore tied-down guns, and spent money freely. Several gunfights erupted between the hired guns, but every shooting was declared a fair fight by the witnesses, so Matt made no arrests.

On Saturday morning the gunfighters began riding south of town by twos and threes. Matt watched for the banker, but he never showed. Finally he walked around back of the bank, where he found fresh manure where the banker's horse had been tied. His tracks headed south of town, and Matt was sure they would join the small army of gunfighters as soon as they were out of sight.

Matt rode north of town to the jumping off point where Clint had led them to his place before. He pressed his animal as hard as he dared, and rode into the Double "C" in the

midafternoon. Clint could only muster about a dozen cowhands in the short time they would have before the outlaws arrived.

Matt kept Clint, Rod, and Sherry in the house, with all but Clint stationed at upstairs windows. He stationed the rest of the outnumbered defenders carefully in pairs at strategic points near the buildings and along the road. "Let them come all the way into the yard," he instructed. "These guys are ruthless killers," he warned them. "They'll wipe us out if we don't get them on the first round. They'll open the game, but when the shooting starts, shoot without mercy. Each of you has got to account for at least two of them."

After a half-hour's wait, the outlaws arrived. The defenders held their fire as ordered. The banker called out to the house as the desperadoes grouped behind him. "Clint Collins, we've come to get the Lazy Eight cattle you stole from my holding area. We don't need any rustlers around here, so we're going to burn you out."

"Those Lazy Eights are illegally worked over Double 'C's, Barry," Clint called back. "Go back home or pay the consequences."

"I'll personally tend to you when we're done moving the cattle," Barry called back, taking a pot shot at the door. As planned, that shot brought a sustained crash of gunfire from the upstairs windows, the barn loft, the bunk house roof, and the closest vantage place along the trail. Horses reared, and confused outlaws hit the ground without ever clearing leather. Some wheeled their mounts to flee, only to meet the withering fire of Matt's enfilade along the trail. Thirty long seconds later half the hardened murderers were either dead or dying. Another quarter of them were wounded, some severely. Of the few that escaped, most would carry lead to their graves.

While the upstairs defenders kept the wounded covered, the rest gathered the guns of the defeated enemy. Unfortunately, when the dead and wounded were identified Barry Milton was not among them. "He'll show up and try to kill you some day," Matt warned Clint.

It was during dinner the next evening that Barry Milton materialized at the dining room door. "Reach," he ordered, and everyone's hands went up except Sherry's. "You too," he screamed at the little woman across the table as he stepped closer to her.

"I didn't think a gentleman would treat a woman that way," she answered, still refusing to raise her hands.

Barry swung his gun down on her, sighting between her breasts. Believing he would shoot at any moment, Matt jumped to his feet to draw his fire away from her. As the crazed banker swung his gun towards the heroic Sheriff, Sherry shot him from under the table with the derringer in her hand.

"Beaten by a woman, in the end," he muttered ruefully as he sunk to the floor.

"Actually," Matt told his dead body, "She beat you that day she had the presence of mind to not let on that a dead man was not her brother."

Later that evening Matt spied Sherry standing alone on the porch. As he approached her he saw a tear trickle down her cheek. He reached out a finger to wipe it away, and she burst into sobs. He put his hands on her shoulders and pulled her forehead to his chest. "Hurts, don't it," he sympathized when the sobs subsided.

"Yeh," she answered as she looked up into his face, "Do you think the Lord approved of me shooting him?"

"More people would have died if you hadn't," he answered, stooping to kiss her. Her lips rose to meet his as they each began to realize how much the other had come to mean to them.

"Bout that dress-up thing," he said as she pulled away, "do you think we could do it in Cornerstone before you and Rod leave for your ranch?"

"I'd be terribly disappointed if we didn't, Matt," she replied. "I'm going to miss you, you know."

"I'll be coming around pretty often if you promise not to shoot me," Matt responded with a grin.

"I'll hold my fire for you," she promised demurely. "Every bit of it," she added silently to herself.