

Broke Heart

By Kevin Wolf

CHAPTER 1

1879

The hole wasn't six feet deep. Only paying customers got the full six feet. I threw the last shovels of dirt out of the grave and then used the notch the undertaker had scratched on the handle to measure its depth.

I had jumped down from a freight wagon early that morning. My pockets were empty. A sign in a storefront window offered twenty-five cents to dig the final resting place for some poor soul whose luck had run out.

When I touched the shovel's blade to the bottom of the hole, the mark, halfway up the handle, lined up with the rim of the grave. I'd earned that two bits.

A breeze from the creek bottom tried its best to cool me, but it was a hot breath across my salty skin. My hands found the small of my back. I straightened and scanned the fringe of brush just uphill from the graveyard. Some thought from deep inside of my head told me that someone was watching me. But no eyes looked back. Still that thought hooked its fingernails into my soul like some bad dream that refused to melt away in the daylight.

My shirt and hat hung on a splintered wooden cross a few steps away. I dressed and picked up my carpetbag, tucked the Sharps buffalo gun under my arm, and left the cemetery with the undertaker's shovel over my shoulder.

I'd trade the undertaker his shovel for the money he owed me. Then I'd find the newspaper office. Word had it that this town might have use for a man of my talents. The cemetery gate squeaked shut behind me and a coyote's howl answered from the hillside.

Maybe not a coyote. More like a wolf.

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Heat as merciless as that on Graveyard Hill made drawing in a breath difficult. Wilson drummed inked-stained fingers on a battered roll-top desk. Sweat drops shined on the man's bald head. He pivoted in his chair and looked at me.

"Kepler, newspaper men talk among themselves. I know why you need work." He leaned back in his chair.

I curled my lip over my teeth and bit down. Sweat ran down my back. I started to speak but Wilson waved his hand.

"I'm just a printer. When the mine went down ten years ago, this town went bust. I bought this newspaper for a song. Everyone thought I was out of my mind. But I held on."

He jerked his head toward the next room. A black-iron press sat silent among stacks of paper. I'd been around newspapers enough to see that while the old machine was not what they were using in Denver, Cheyenne or Leadville, it was cared for and in good working order.

"It's 1879, man. Things have changed since statehood," Wilson continued. "Broke Heart was made the county seat last April. The mine's working again. New folks are moving in." He pushed gold-rimmed glasses up his nose. A smudge of black ink separated the two little pig eyes that looked up at me. "I can't do it all myself. I need a reporter."

The editor raised an eyebrow, wanting me to say something, but I thought it best to let the conversation pause.

Wilson pushed at his glasses again, then lowered his voice. "I'll pay you six dollars a week."

"The mine pays ten."

"You're no miner."

"There are other papers and other towns."

"But you're here in Broke Heart." His nose wrinkled and the ink in the crevices darkened.

“With two bits in your pocket from digging a grave. That won’t pay for the train fare to the next town.”

Outside, a steam whistle shrieked. Wilson took his watch from the pocket of the vest that circled his girth. He checked the time and tapped the watch on his desk. “Tell you what. Take six and you can sleep in the room in the back.”

“Seven and the room.” My eyes held his. “And three in advance.”

“You’re in no position to bargain. Every reporter I know thinks all the stories come from the bars and bawdy houses on Front Street.” He fussed with a stack of papers on the desk. “Six and one in advance. And I’ll only try it for a month.”

His hand reached into a vest pocket, and he laid a single silver cartwheel in front of me. “Now, the paper comes out at five each day. That mine whistle runs this town. When it blows, the paper must be on the street.” He fumbled at his glasses again. “I want your stories on this desk by ten. Three stories each morning. Good penmanship is important. I don’t want to guess at what you’ve written while I’m setting type.”

I tucked the silver dollar into my own pocket. “Where can I clean up?”

Wilson lifted himself from the chair. He pointed toward the room at the back. “Put your things away. I’ll have my wife fetch a basin and towel. And there’s a Chinaman down the block that will boil your shirts. While he’s doing your laundry, he’ll feed you and get you a bath, if that’s what you’re wanting.”

Eyebrows as bushy as his mustache followed the furrows up his forehead. “I can see where a tall man like you with all that blonde hair might get to thinking he was something special.” His voice was low again. “I told you newspapermen talk. I know what cost you your last job. If you’re thinking of messing with my wife, I’ll do more than just fire you.”

I recalled the whiskers on the chin of the large woman at the desk in the next room. “I’ve learned my lesson, sir.”

“Kepler, I expect your first stories on my desk in the morning.”

“Anything in particular you were thinking of, sir?”

He huffed his flabby cheeks. “The murder.”

“There was a murder?”

“It’s all they’re talking about on Front Street. The rabble down there says an evil demon killed him.” Wilson leaned toward me. “You’re not afraid of spirits are you?”

I shook my head. “I don’t believe in spirits, and I’ve seen enough of this world to know there’s no evil. Just good and bad rolls of the dice.” I studied my new employer’s face. “When did the murder happen?”

“Just last night. I thought you knew. You dug his grave.”

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I changed into the cleanest of my dirty white shirts, rolled up the sleeves, and took my trail clothes and other shirts to the Chinaman. Then, with my stomach filled with rice, and a dime gone from the two bits I’d earned, I began to explore the town of Broke Heart.

Wilson had pointed out Sheriff Beard’s office. Most lawmen in worn-out mine camps welcome the opportunity to talk with a newspaperman. They tell stories of how dangerous their jobs are and how brave they must be. They hope I will weave their lies into a dime-novel which they become the hero of.

The sheriff’s boots rested on the desk, and he tilted back on the rear legs of his chair. A large Bible lay open in his lap. He closed the book and unfolded his long legs.

“Kepler, isn’t it?” He stood. “I guessed you’d be down to visit ‘fore long.”

My mouth opened.

“Wilson sent word with that old Indian.” Beard smiled down at me. “If you haven’t Joe yet, you will.”

Because of my own stature, I look up to few men. Sheriff Beard towered a full head above

me.

He placed the Bible on his desk. “Welcome to Broke Heart, Mr. Kepler.”

“It’s Kepler. Just Kepler. No mister.”

“Kepler your first name or your last name?”

“Neither.”

He started to speak, when a voice came from behind a thick wooden door at the rear of his office.

“Parson?” The tone was weak.

The big lawman nodded for me to follow. “We’re comin’, Cap’n.” Then to me, “You’ll want to talk to the Captain. He’s the witness to our little murder.”

The way he said “little murder” made death sound insignificant. Life and death in these boomtowns often was.

“Did I hear him call you ‘Parson’?”

The sheriff smiled. “I preach the Sunday meetin’s at the Baptist Church.”

The Captain huddled on an iron cot behind the open door of an otherwise empty cell. Despite the heat of the afternoon, I was sure I saw the man shiver. He looked up at us with eyes as milky as opals.

The sheriff hooked his finger in the iron bars and nodded. “The Captain here was at the top of the hill when Pickett sent his boys up the ridge the last day of Gettysburg. Ain’t that right?”

The old man straightened his back, and a smile curled across his face, exposing toothless gums. “Sixth New York Artillery.” Gnarled fingers touched his eyebrow in a half salute. “We gave them Rebs double canister at ten yards.”

In that instant, his pride in whatever he had done that day chased away the years of rotgut whiskey and black-pit mining.

“We held our ground. We surely did.”

“That’s right, Cap’n.” The Sheriff used his pastoral voice. “Now, tell Kepler here about what you saw in the alley last night.”

The soldier’s ramrod in the Captain’s back crumbled in a dozen places, and he slumped forward. Bony hands pushed back his hair, and he shivered again.

“An angel.”

“Tell ‘im, Cap’n.”

“An angel. Dressed all in white. Dark hair a flowin’.” The Captain tugged at the front of his shirt. “But it weren’t no angel. Standin’ over Jeff. Drippin’ his blood from her lips. And I heard her scream.” The Captain’s chin dropped onto his chest and he began to sob.

“Get some sleep, Cap’n. The Chinaman’s gonna bring your food ‘fore long. Rest up, hear me?” Beard motioned toward the door, and I followed him back to his office. “He started talkin’ about an angel drippin’ blood and got a bunch of drunks laughin’ at him. The more they laughed, the more he swore it was true. I thought it best for him to rest here for a day or two.”

“You don’t believe him?”

“Would you? The man’s half-blind.” The sheriff dropped into his chair. “The Captain has had a life full of what this town was named for. Now he swamps out The Months Saloon for the pennies the girls give ‘im. Empties spittoons and mucks out the privy. And he’ll lick out what’s left in the glasses if the girls don’t catch him. No, I don’t believe ‘im.”

“Then what happened to this Jeff?”

The lawman ran his hand across the stubble on his chin. “Jeff got busted up in an accident over at the mine ten-twelve years ago. He was ‘bout as bad off as the Cap’n. The mine lets ‘im sleep in a shack over there. Gave him a few cents a month to run errands.” He nodded for me to sit, but I shook my head.

“I think old Jeff got a little too much whiskey in him. Railroaders were drinkin’ up their pay checks. Somebody bought him a few. He staggered out into the alley to sleep it off. Slipped,

fell, and hit his head. Cap'n found 'im."

"What about the blood he said he saw?"

"Oh, there was blood, all right. The ground was still wet with it." The sheriff tapped his temple. "A gash in his head. I think some coyotes wandered into town and got to his throat and face 'fore we found 'im in the mornin'."

"You didn't find him until morning? Wasn't it sometime at night when the Captain saw the . . . angel?"

Beard shook his head. "But no one believed 'im. The Cap'n tells a lot of stories. So no one thought anythin' of it." He tapped his fingers on the Bible on his desk. "Tell you what, meet me an hour after dark tonight. I'm goin' to take a scattergun and lantern over to that alley. If that angel coyote is thinkin' 'bout comin' 'round again, I'll pepper his butt. Come with me. It'll give me a chance to introduce ya to the folks you should know on Front Street."