
Preacher's Girl©

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I thumbed back the hammer on the big government .45 and I dug the muzzle into Flinty Cole's forehead

"You know who I am," I said to the weasley little man kneeling in the gravel.

"J-J-Jack Riley."

"Then you know I'm looking for the preacher's girl."

"S-S-Sure."

"I'll ask one time. Where is she?"

"I don't kn-"

The thunder of the .45 echoed around the quarry walls and I swung it toward Cole's bonebreaker, Fatty Gordon.

Gordon screamed like a girl.

I jammed the muzzle into his mouth to cut off the screeching.

"Your turn."

Fatty's eyes widened, and he made grunting sounds around the warm steel.

I unplugged him, and he started wailing, "Petey. Petey Post. Petey's got her."

"The little fairy cameraman? Why?"

Snot leaked from Fatty's nose, mixing with the blood drooling out his pie-hole.

"Pictures. Hired for some special pictures. Girly stuff this time."

"His studio?"

"Some house. Out past the county farm."

"The one with the star painted on the barn?"

Fatty nodded.

I patted him on the head. "Good boy, Fatty."

His eyes brightened. "You ain't gonna kill me?"

I shrugged. "You ever leave witnesses, Fatty?"

He hung his head and mumbled, "No."

The sound of the gunshot quit ricocheting around the quarry walls by the time I reached my car.

I got in, fired her up, and headed down the road. On the way to the farmhouse, rain started to spray across the windshield.

I used to hate rain. I hated the rain until I hit the ground in some stinking green Pacific hell a couple years ago.

The rain never seemed to end, and the Japs used it like magic. They'd just appear out of the dark and the wet and cut our boys down like cane.

But, I figured out their tricks.

I killed enough to save a few guys.

I even killed enough to get some medals.

But I never killed enough...

Too feel anything...

Just aim and shoot.

Aim and shoot.

Like a machine.

When I came home, no one had much use for a machine that killed.

I tried the cops. Figured one uniform and gun's the same as another. Lasted a year before some desk-monkey decided I was too dangerous.

I tried the mob guys, but they said they didn't want an ex-cop. I figure they just didn't want a man they couldn't scare.

I got my paper and became a private dick. Spent a couple years doing it right. Nothing too hard, maybe a few dirty pictures for the divorce judge, or pick up a skip once and a while for the bounty.

Then the preacher's wife showed up.

Always a woman, isn't it?

She was dressed all buttoned up, fiery red hair tucked up in a bun, trying her best not to look as beautiful as she was. She opened a pouty mouth, and in the smoky voice of a starlet, gave me the story.

Her husband, Samuel Stoner of Samuel Stoner's Traveling Salvation Show decided to take their daughter, Charity, on this year's circuit. Charity's always stayed home with Mama Stoner getting schooling.

Now Charity's all grown up, and Daddy wants to take her into the business. But, mama doesn't want her baby out on the road, where evil men might see her and lust in their heart.

I think maybe it's Charity's lusting heart she's worried about.

Mama's also afraid, because of news stories about the Wandering Devil, that loon that snatches girls and leaves their bodies scattered along roadways throughout the heartland. Rumors of a horned man-thing sweeping out of the dark and snatching the girls away only made things worse.

Of course, Mother Stoner's worst fears are realized, and the girl disappeared without a trace.

I figure the Devil business is all crap, and the girl just ran off with some local farmboy stud. I'll have to find her and drag her kicking and screaming back to Mama.

She gives me a photo of the girl, and I see that she's not a "girl." She's a *woman* with all the right curves in all the right places, and the prissy dress she's wearing can't hide them.

Even though the picture was black and white, you could tell she had her mother's deep red hair and creamy skin. I imagined the girl's pouty mouth speaking with the same smoky voice.

Between the voice and the barely restrained curves of a preacher's wife who could be in pictures, I feel a twinge of something. I can't explain it, or understand it, but I looked up from the picture into Mama Stoner's soft blue eyes, and said, "I'll find your girl. I promise."

So I go looking for Charity Stoner, figuring a good place to start is daddy's little traveling tent show.

But, dad's no help. He wrings his hands, tells me the name of the last place they visited, and gives me a description of a couple hooligans he noticed were sniffing around his little girl.

"I fear for her," he said in a voice practiced in battering the faithful into submission. "She's so much like her mother... And... Well, her mother was a fallen women before I brought her to God."

I nodded, and thanked him for the lead. As I turned to go, he told me that he's praying for me.

I figure the joke's on him. Between the women, the booze, and the blood on my hands, I doubt God's gonna do me any favors.

One thing after another got me to Cole and Fatty, and now the trail led me to the private hideaway of Petey Post, photographer.

No lights in the house, but a glow in the barn.

I push two more rounds into the .45's clip to replace the ones in the quarry. Two more clips into my coat pockets, and I slip from the car.

I use the rain like those Japs on the islands. I learned their tricks, and used them on the little bastards.

Now I'd be using them on Post and his buddies.

After blackjacking four sentries, I reached the barn, and, even through the rattle of the rain, I heard the girl scream.

All the ground floor doors were closed, and I'd be obvious if I opened any of them. But, any kid who grew up on a farm, even a dead piece of dirt like my granddad's knows there's other ways in.

What sounds I could hear came from the front of the barn, so I circled around back, looking for my ticket in.

A second-level loft door flapped in the wind. With the assistance of a half-collapsed corral fence, I caught the lip of the doorway, pulled myself up, and slithered into a loose, sweet-smelling pile of hay.

The first thing I saw was the girl dangling a few inches from the ground, as exposed as Eve in Eden. Her hands were pulled above her by the chain that held her aloft. Her pale skin gleamed in the glow of lamp lights, except for the bright red paddle marks.

A man in a black robe, wearing some sort of devil mask, swung a paddle across her backside. The slap of the paddle was matched by the snap of a camera flash, and a shriek of pain from the girl.

Petey Post stood a short distance away from the dangling girl moving a variety of

camera gadgets. He shifted around, then paused and nodded to the man with the paddle. The devil slapped the girl again, and Petey snapped another picture.

Near the main door stood a pair of Petey's pals. Both men looked like beer kegs on legs, and each was strapped.

Another man perched on a stool near the other end of the chain holding the girl. The chain looped up over a pulley hanging from the ceiling, and at Petey's command, the guy lowered Charity Stoner slightly, until her toes just touched the floor. As she stepped, trying to stand, the chain man pulled, and the girl lifted a foot from the floor and swung around.

Near Petey, another guy stood, wearing nothing but a devil mask. He held a short-handled pitchfork with one hand, and himself with the other

"I've got plenty of the spanking," Petey said to the robe-wearing devil. "On to better things."

The disrobed devil chuckled. "Now it's my turn."

"Not yet," snapped the robed devil. "This sinner must face further punishment."

He strode to the other devil and snatched the pitchfork from him, then returned to the girl.

The guy controlling the chain lowered the girl slightly. She did a slow pirouette on the tips of her toes.

The robed devil grabbed her wavy red hair and pulled her head back.

"Have you sinned?" he roared at her.

Tears streamed from the girl's eyes and her voice shook as she said, "N-N-No-oo."

"Liar!" the robed devil roared. "You have lusted, and you have fornicated!"

"No," the girl sobbed. "I've been good."

The robed devil slid the handle of the pitchfork along the girl's leg. He moved slowly from her ankle to her thigh.

"You've know men, haven't you? You've felt their attention?"

"No," the girl cried. "No. No. I've never-"

The robed devil released her hair, stepped back, and whipped the handle across

her backside.

She shrieked in pain.

"Liar!"

He swatted her again.

"Liar!"

Then he gestured for the man controlling the chain.

The girl fell to her knees, arm still suspended over her head.

The robed devil circled the girl, brushing up and down her body with the pitchfork handle.

He gestured to the chain man.

The girl flew from the floor, and swung wildly a foot off the ground.

The robed devil struck her backside.

"Whore!"

He swatted her again.

"Whore!"

The devil gestured for the chain man to lower her. Charity collapsed to her knees. Her head slumped forward, and I could hear her crying.

The devil grabbed her hair, pulled her head back, and screamed into her face. "I have seen you with those boys! I know what girls like you do!"

He swung the small pitchfork like a short bat, and rocked the girl's head. She tumbled sideways, and the chain man hoisted her to keep her from hitting the floor.

The devil, panting, turned to Petey, who stood frozen.

"Pictures! Why aren't you taking pictures?"

Petey blinked, realized he'd been watching, too stunned to shoot.

The flash started popping and I made my move.

The two gun men first.

The .45 roared, and the face of the bigger man disappeared. The second guy actually got a hand on his rod before he collapsed to floor.

The robed devil threw the pitchfork at me, and I dodged. The pitchfork hit a beam, and clattered to the floor.

In the few seconds it took me to drop from the loft, the robed devil had disappeared.

I put a round through the guy holding the chain. His hands went to his chest, and the girl crashed to the floor, crying, screaming, and covering her head.

Petey dropped his camera equipment and made a move for a door. I fired again, and he fell, screaming and clutching his leg.

The disrobed devil stood there, stunned. I swung the .45 in his direction and both hands came up.

"Don't shoot!"

I stepped toward him, and he wailed, "Please. I'm just an actor. I just star in the pictures with the girls. I never hurt anyone."

I glanced toward the shaking girl on the floor.

The .45 roared again, and that devil fell to the floor, shrieking and clutching a wound that would keep him from "starring" with girls ever again.

I swung the big pistol around, looking for more people to kill.

Aim and shoot. Aim and shoot.

The barn was empty, except for the wailing men and the crying girl.

I grabbed a blanket from the floor near Petey's camera equipment. Draping it over the girl, I whispered, "You're mother sent me to find you."

"Mama," the girl wailed. "Mama."

"I have to find the other man that hurt you. Will you be okay, here until-"

"No," she wailed. "No. Don't leave me. Please. He *hurt* me. He hurt me."

"If I don't kill him, he'll come b-"

"No!" she screamed. Then she began chanting and blubbering,

"Daddydaddydaddy. God help me. Daddy."

As I rose, the girl clutched at my feet.

"No. Don't. Daddydaddydaddy."

I tried to shake her loose.

"I'm not your-"

The bullet hit me high, paralyzing my arm, and spinning me to the ground.

**I landed hard, decorating the wailing girl with speckles of my blood.
I still gripped the .45 in the uninjured hand, and I flopped around, trying to find a target.**

A shape moved into view, and I swung the pistol.

Aim and shoot.

Suddenly the robed devil shrieked, and he fell back against the wall with the pitchfork buried in his gut.

Charity Stoner pulled the fork free, then tried to thrust it in again, but the chain wrapped around her hands slowed her

The robed devil pistol whipped the girl and she fell away.

I fired two quick shots.

The devil flew back, robe flapping like wings. He crashed against the wall and slumped, ragged gasps of air coming from behind the mask.

The devil struggled to get the rubber thing off his face, but his hands weren't working right.

I stepped toward him, kicked his pistol away, and knelt to look at him.

I set my own pistol near my feet, out of the devil's reach.

I grabbed the mask with my good hand and yanked it away, revealing Samuel Stoner

The words, "She's a whore," bubbled from his lips. "Like her mother... I had to teach her..."

I picked up my pistol, made the sign of the cross on his forehead with the muzzle.

"Go and sin no more," I whispered, thumbed the hammer back, and sent him to hell.

Then I freed the girl, and we stumbled out into the rain. After tucking her away, I went back to the barn, and took care of things.

Then I drove away from the farm, with the girl in the back seat, unconscious and covered with the blanket. My reloaded pistol rested on the front seat beside me.

The glow of the barn fire reflected in my mirror as I drove away down the rutted road. On the big bumps, the girl would cry out, and I had to bite back the pain in my

arm.

Eventually, we reached a house, and the frightened couple inside called for a doctor and the cops.

The girl was bruised in a lot of places, and she had a gash on her face from the pistol sight. The sawbones fixed her up, and after some discussion with the county cop, examined her like I asked.

"Intact," the bony little doc said. "Near as I can tell, she's never known a man."

I nodded, and let him look at my arm.

"Bullet went through. You'll have some trouble moving it, but I don't have to dig the lead out."

He glanced at my chest which he'd exposed cutting my shirt off. I could see him mentally tallying the scars.

"Looks like it wasn't the first time."

"Nope."

"France?"

"Pacific."

The county dick whistled. "Kill many Japs?"

Aim and shoot. Aim and shoot.

I shrugged.

"Well," the doctor said to the county cop. "I suppose you should ask him some questions about what happened."

The deputy took a notebook from his pocket, licked a pencil tip, and said, "What happened?"

"I suspected my client's daughter had been abducted by the Wandering Devil. I tracked them to the barn, and I freed her. During our escape, a lantern fell over, and the barn caught fire."

"That's it?"

I nodded.

"You know who the Devil guy was?"

I shrugged.

"Will she be able to identify anyone?"

I shrugged.

The deputy looked at the doctor. "Now what?"

I said, "I'm gonna go see the girl."

I went into the couple's bedroom where the preacher's girl lay sleeping under a handmade quilt.

A bandage square covered the ragged tear in her cheek. A few other bruises decorated her face, and I knew more of them colored her body. If she actually remembered what happened to her, there would be wounds even the doctor couldn't fix.

I touched her hand, and her delicate fingers gripped mine. I smiled slightly when she murmured, "Daddy."

If my life had been different, I might have had a daughter her age. I certainly wouldn't have been a worse father.

At the thought of Stoner, I felt my smile fade.

I hoped he spun on a spit in the hell he frightened his flock with I'd watch the papers for a while. See if any more girls ended up dead by the roadside.

It seems obvious once it's laid out.

Stoner travels the country, picks up girls for pictures, then leaves them dead. A rubber devil mask for color, and he's got a legendary boogeyman.

He's got money from the freaks who buy the pictures, and money from his flock praying to be saved from the freaks.

A sweet deal for him.

Any more preachers figure how profitable hypocrisy can be, and I'll be mighty busy.

Aim and shoot.

Aim and shoot.

The End