

The Devil You Don't

Elizabeth Bear

The stranger's wide-brimmed hat cast a darkness across his face that the slanting sun could not relieve. He forked a dust-dun gelding as if he slept there, his big, spare frame draped in a worn poncho that might once have been black, his shadow spreading ragged black wings over the earth behind him and the flanks of his pale dappled mount. The gelding's trudging feet raised yellow puffs of dust from the hardpan between the sagebrush; perfectly round, they tasted of fear.

No-one stepped into the street to meet him. A curious hush descended over our little town, which squatted on the edge of the desert like a sunbaked lizard on a rock.

I didn't go out to meet him, either; I was already strolling down Main Street's clapboard sidewalk in my severe rust-and-grey dress, an open parasol shading my head. I wore a blued-steel, ivory-handed eight-shooter strapped to my hip and a derringer tucked into my corset, but my ancient and powerful sword was hidden under the floor of a little three-room house on the outskirts of town. It didn't suit the times.

Following my Sunday evening habit, I was on my way to dinner at the Ivory Dog.

The stranger's gaze swept over me without pausing. His eyes burned turquoise above a dust-streaked red bandanna, his nose gaunt and broken behind it. I didn't think he'd miss much, but I strolled along the right-hand side of the street, and the bustle of my skirt hid the gun hung on my left hip. What passed for women's clothing in this country and century was awkward--worse than the bliauts and surcotes we robbed ourselves in, when the world and I were young.

But here, out from under the eye of the fervent new Church that was rising in the Old World, I could be a schoolteacher and a doctor. I was of service, and the restlessness of my shame and failure only chewed my heels a little, in this place, and that only deep in the night.

I turned sideways and slipped into the saloon, as if disconcerted by the stranger's gaze. Something about it, indeed, disturbed me: something about he and his horse the color of desert sand and salt flats. I felt him appraise and dismiss me: small, drab, inconsequential. It did not distress me to be underestimated.

Duncan behind the bar glanced up at me when I entered, smiling across the room. Half-a-dozen customers, including old John Jeremiah Kale, the cattleman, dotted the big dim room, but the bartender managed a grin only for me. A big man, Miles Duncan, with flaming red hair, missing two fingers on his left hand and one on his right. He used to be a railwayman, a switcher. When the cars claimed his dexterity, he took to tending bar, and he kept a ten gauge under it and his old fiddle hung up on the wall behind.

"Evening, Miss Maura," he greeted me in his slow, endless drawl. It wasn't my name, but it was close enough, and the one he knew my by, and it would do. I had been living in Pitch Creek for two years. The name I was using, Maura MacAydan--'fire-child'--amused me, and was close enough to the real one that I turned around when I heard it called. And though the islanders are dark, if any commented that 'MacAydan' did not go with my dust-fair hair and pale grey eyes, I could always smile and answer, "It doesn't, does it?" People don't ask a lot of questions on frontiers.

Duncan's hand trembled as he slid my whiskey across the bar, betraying nervousness, as did a quick

flicker of desert-sky eyes toward the door. "Booth in the back?"

"If you please, Duncan." I liked Duncan. He reminded me of one of my long-dead brothers, a Child of the Light named Arngeir whom I'd watched die on a snowy battlefield, over a thousand years before.

As I slipped around the corner of the bar and picked up my drink, I murmured so just he and Kale could hear me, "Trouble brewing?"

Duncan looked puzzled, but Kale shrugged, tipped his bottle and then set it back. "Question of the devil you know and the devil you don't," he answered, just as softly.

"Where's Sheriff Brady?" I asked. Rumor had it Marlowe Brady beat his wife, who was the mayor's daughter, but the mayor didn't seem to care and Brady had a shining star, so there wasn't a hell of a lot to be done about it.

A gnawing unease chased the whisky down my throat. Well, perhaps I could have done something, but in the time since the Light failed, I've learned a few things. One is that Evil persists in the world, and another is that no good deed goes unpunished, and the third... The third thing I've learned is that even my kind can grow tired, in time.

And sometimes the best place for a blazing sword is wrapped in oilcloth, under the parlor floor.

Kale snorted into his liquor. "Passed out under a cot in his jail, no doubt. He was on a two-day bender as of Friday evening, and I didn't see him in church this morning."

"Liz Brady was there," Duncan offered. The sheriff's wife never missed a sermon. I nodded and would have replied, but there was a heavy step on the creaking wood porch and Kale's head hunkered down over his shoulders again in the posture of an indifferent drunk. Both hands curled loosely around his squat blue drinking bowl as though he cradled something precious. I ducked into that dark booth that Duncan had mentioned and watched the stranger's entrance in the bartender's looking glass.

The stranger had pulled the bandanna down off his face, revealing a nose even more broken than it had seemed on the street. White lines of scars bisected it in two places, standing out stark against the sun-leathered brown of his skin. His left cheekbone had also been shattered long ago, and his face was not symmetrical. Pistol-whipped, I thought. Probably left for dead. They didn't look like the kind of scars you got when somebody just wanted to teach you a lesson.

Grey hair poked out from under his dust-covered black hat, and the blue eyes were framed by grizzled brows. He frowned--no, sneered at the world with lips that betrayed a certain sensuality, arrogance, and old pain.

Met by silence, he surveyed the Dog from the doorway, and then his bootnails clicked as he stepped inside. His spurs made a little sound as he walked, reminding me of the sound made by a rattlesnake, or dried leaves blowing across stone. His step was certain, although he walked with the heavy trace of a limp. I stifled a familiar sensation below my breastbone, a rising answer to his purpose as the Light within me sought to flare in response.

This man traveled on the purpose for which I was made, and which I abandoned, so many centuries ago.

He had come in the name of vengeance.

A rush of lavender scent and musk, the rustle of satin and lace. Susie intercepted him five steps into the room. Her locks were gold, her looks were free, and if a superabundance of makeup and care made her

look older than her twenty-two years, that was the price of her profession. Her dress was deep scarlet today, and she moved with surprising grace for all its weight and her tottering shoeheels. Duncan was sweet on her, but Susie said she'd rather whore any day than ever rely on another man's kindness again.

"Hey there, stranger," she cooed, "Buy a girl a drink?" She laid one manicured hand on his arm as he glanced down at her. Susie was not a little woman, but this stranger was one long pour of ice. His grimace deepened, and he shook his head.

"You ain't the lady I was looking for," he muttered. His voice ran over me like charged fluid: the voice of my brother. A voice I had last heard raised in wrath and fury, on a battlefield long ago... a battlefield I survived, to my eternal disgrace, because I fled it, while my brethren's blood and vitals stained the snow. It was all I could do to keep my seat, and not rise and spin and cry his name. It's not Strifbjorn, I calmed myself. You buried Strifbjorn. And besides, this man doesn't look like him. I swallowed, studying that ruined old face in the looking glass. Look under the scars. What do you see?

His reflected eyes met mine, a puzzled expression clouding them. He must have seen my head jerk up and my body shudder when he spoke. I was grateful for the shadows of the booth, more grateful to see no shadow of recognition in his eyes--which were too blue, anyway, not the Light-filled silver of my long-dead brother's. Worlds and centuries away. It cannot be him.

But it felt like him. I wondered if he might somehow have returned, be looking for me, to deal out the wrath I so richly deserved. And then I dismissed the thought as his gaze turned away from me, disinterested again.

Duncan's help, Millie, brought me over my chicken and biscuits a moment later, and the stranger's eyes skipped from the mirror to Duncan's face. The stranger stepped forward, brushing past Susie as if she wasn't there. "You the proprietor?" he asked Duncan, meeting the bigger man's eyes. Duncan nodded, and men cleared out from between the two of them.

"Miles Duncan," Duncan told him, his thick lips twitching just a bit. "What can I get you?"

The stranger nodded, as if Duncan had asked him his name. "They call me Stagolee. And I'll have what the little lady in the corner is having."

He means me, I realized, feeling the weight of his eyes in the mirror again. Stagolee. The name nagged at me until I remembered where I'd heard it before. An old ballad, in another place, in a different time, about a bad man by that name, who gunned down a lady's lover and was slain by the lady in turn.

Four hundred years before, in another part of the world.

He did not, to my relief, sit down beside me. I picked at my meal in silence as he sat at the bar and nursed one whiskey and ate and ate some more. When I could no longer stomach staring at my trencher, I got up to leave, almost forgetting my parasol. There was no way out but past him, and when I stepped out of the booth he knew about the pistol. His gaze was cool, appraising. I left without looking back.

#

The night came on with an unusual thunderstorm: almost no rain, savage heat lightning. The misting precipitation dampened the weathered sides of my house, which had been whitewashed once and might someday be again. Thick walls and a sod roof muffled the thunder. But I lay awake in my bed, the image of Strifbjorn's ruined face before my eyes, and I wondered what had come before, and what might happen next.

The knock came before sunrise. I opened the door on it carelessly, inured by years of peaceful living, expecting a frantic mother or husband who would drag me into the night with my little black bag in hand, to the sound of my chestnut mare's grumpy snorts and stamps. Instead, a specter leaned out of the darkness beyond my door, a nothing drizzle splattering off his hat and onto my porch, his gun already in his hand. He pointed it at my midsection and smiled. "Miss MacAydan," Stagolee whispered, "I do hope you won't mind if I come in."

I nodded and backed up a step, feeling my skin itch as it tried to crawl out of the path of a potential bullet. I didn't enjoy having bows pointed at me when I was far more immortal than I am had become, and experience and improved technology had not improved the sensation. Stagolee held the weapon with familiar ease, and I did as I was told. "Come on in then, Mister Stagolee."

He grimaced and dripped on my knotted rag rug. "Not Mister," he answered. I turned my back on him, praying that he wouldn't shoot a woman in a nightgown in the back, trying to look small and slack and harmless. "You're the doctor in this pissant town."

I nodded. "And the schoolmistress." I took two steps forward, did not hear him following, glanced back. He was right behind me, and I suppressed a shudder. His spurs hadn't even jangled. "Can I take you into the parlor? Get you a cup of tea or a drink? You must be wet through..."

His laugh was a flat, bitter thing like burned coffee. "Please yourself, Miss MacAydan. I just want a few answers."

I entered the parlor and sat, and he and the gun followed me. I moved fairly quickly, and he never complained, and the barrel of the revolver never wavered. Worse and worse. I tried to keep my own expression pleasant, but felt it sliding toward a frown. This is not Strifbjorn. Not my brother. Strifbjorn is dead. This is simply someone very much like him, as is bound to be born every once in a very long life.

"What are the questions, Stagolee?"

I had chosen a hard, straight-backed chair. The one facing it was deeper and softer, difficult to get out of. He defeated my purpose by sitting on the edge of the desk. Damn and damn him.

His lips writhed into something that might be a smile. "I'm looking for a woman named Elizabeth Browning." He hesitated. "At least, that was her name. She married a man named Marlowe Brady." The gun never shivered. I felt its point of aim like a pressure--a slow, unwelcome caress.

"He's the sheriff in this town. What's your interest in Liz?"

That cruel, crooked smile crept an inch wider. "Suppose I tell you? What do you care? You're awful brave, for a lady with a revolver pointed at her belly."

"This is not the first time I've had a gun pointed at me," I mentioned casually. I was searching his eyes for any sign of recognition, finding only that confused familiarity.

He nodded. "I imagine not. No tears or hysterics, and you carry that pistol of yours like you know how to use it. You haven't got it now, though, and no fast draw in the world could save you if you did."

"I know." I sighed, and forced myself to sit back. "What do you want to know about Liz?"

It took five minutes. When it was over, he had me stand and turn to face the wall. I heard the click of the hammer being cocked, and braced myself to drop, spin, and kick. His breathing stopped, and I began to move...

Only to find myself facing an empty room.

#

I was up before sunrise, and I did not put on a dress. I dressed in canvas pants and flannel shirt like any man, high boots on my small feet. I had my red mare, Rowan, saddled before my bad-tempered brown and gold cock crew. As my housekeeper walked up to my door I bid her good day and rode off toward town.

Rowan was feeling her oats, or perhaps the tension running down the reins made her prance. The earth showed no dampness from the night's drizzle, the early mist burning off without a trace. Another suffocating day, a prickle of anticipation soaking the air, and the restive mare between my legs did nothing to reassure me. I checked my gun twice, and stopped outside of town to chamber a eighth and final round.

Duncan was sweeping the porch of the Dog. He glanced up grimly as I hitched Rowan out front. "You usually walk."

"Today is different. What do you know about this Stagolee?"

He studied me intently for a moment. "Trousers suit you, Miss Maura. But this is no mess for you to be interfering in." He turned back to his broom, though the porch was twice swept already.

"Stagolee showed up on my doorstep last night with a gun, Miles," I said. "I want the story. I don't want to get involved. I'm out of the business of rescuing maidens. But I do want to know what's going on in this town."

I'd never called him by his given name before, and he studied me. He grimaced then, and nodded, and leaned the broom up against the wall. "Come inside then. No sense standing out in the heat."

A hawk called over the desert as I followed him into the Dog. He sat me down and poured us both black coffee settled with eggshell, before sliding into a chair across from me. "What did he want?"

I drank the coffee, all but boiling, bitter and good. "Liz Brady. If I've ever treated her for anything."

"And?"

"I haven't. So he left."

Miles Duncan picked up a spoon and turned it over. Fluid light caught in the bowl, and he held it there like a magician might. For a moment, my breath ached painfully homesick in my throat. "It's an old scandal, Miss Maura. It doesn't bear much repeating. Mayor Browning doesn't like to hear it told."

James Browning was a great tall bear of a man, with hair that had been gold before it burned to ash and muttonchop sideburns. A widower in his late fifties, and if he wasn't any better than he should be he didn't seem a lot worse, either. I cupped my mug in both hands and nodded encouragingly, but Duncan just sat for a long moment and stared up at the dust-covered old violin that hung on the wall above the looking glass behind the bar.

"I had the story from Bart Cashman," he said finally, "Who had the Dog before I did. It's a local legend, but it's not told much these days..."

"It was about thirty years ago, the first time Stagolee came into Pitch Creek. Mayor Browning was Sheriff Browning in those days, and he had a pretty young wife, and... Well, he had a pretty young wife,

and that Stagolee was a handsome man, they say. About a year after Stagolee came into town looking for work, he and Celia Browning slipped out again together, she leaving behind her house and husband, he all his clothes in John Kale's bunkhouse, except what he had on his back.

"Browning was wild, and lit out after him--after them--like a madman. He came back two weeks later with a bullethole in his knee, a baby girl swaddled in a rabbit's skin, and his wife's body sewn into a canvas sack. He put it about that Stagolee abandoned Celia when labor took her, and she bled to death birthing the child."

Duncan paused to finish his coffee. "So I'd say the sonofabitch has balls, walking back in here. I can't for the life of me imagine what he wants."

I remembered what Kale said to me, soft and low, and I found myself nodding. "I think I understand."

Duncan raised an eyebrow, but I shook my head. "I'm not involved."

"Uh huh," he answered, pouring more coffee into the bowls. "Me neither."

I sipped my coffee. "Miles, did I ever tell you I used to play the fiddle?"

"Really?" He fussed with the spoon some more, balancing it across his mutilated hand. He looked up at last and met my eyes. "So did I."

#

Things learned before the Light failed can deceive, now. I knew Strifbjorn. I knew him to be stronger, faster, wiser, more skillful and more honorable than I. I also knew that I had been tougher and smarter and a damn sight meaner, once upon a time. Now all I had to do was remember that Stagolee was not, could not be Strifbjorn. Because otherwise I would expect him to react as Strifbjorn would react, and that could be fatal. Strifbjorn might have pointed a revolver at me--if revolvers had been invented--but Strifbjorn was dead. Unless I had been somehow deceived into believing I had buried his half-eaten corpse. But that is another story entirely.

Yes, Strifbjorn might have pointed a revolver at me. Stagolee might have pulled the trigger.

Pausing in the street, I realized I could still smell him, in my mind: damp leather, horse sweat and gun oil. Fear cramped my tongue like a mouthful of dust. I shook my hair back out of my eyes and turned toward the railing where my mare was hitched, put one boot into her near-side stirrup.

I can't say why or how I found myself walking into the jailhouse.

Marlowe Brady sat with his feet propped up on his battered flat-top desk, a half-penny Lone Rider serial with a lurid cover open on top of the shotgun propped across his knees. His lips moved as he read, but at least he was trying.

His dark hair was greasy and unwashed, but his clothes were spotless and his silver star shone more like a moon, it was so brightly polished. He glanced up as I came in: he had the jowls of an bullfighting dog and the shoulders to match.

"Afternoon, Miss Maura." There was a faint sneer in his voice, but he swung his feet down off the desk. My spine locked: I might be shamed and exiled, but I had once been accustomed to a certain amount of respect.

"Afternoon, Sheriff."

I could feel his gaze traveling the length of my body, lingering at my crotch. I simply stared back at him, knowing how cold my grey eyes got when the Light wasn't in them. "And what brings you here, little lady?"

I drew up a chair, because he had not asked me to sit. "I have a question for you, Sheriff. What was your wife's mother like?"

He began to start upright, and then forced himself to lean back into the chair. Deliberately, he turned his head and spat. His dark eyes swiveled back to me, and he grimaced. "She was a whore. Maybe I shouldn't say that in front of a lady..." "...but you ain't dressed like no lady, Ma'am. "...and maybe I shouldn't speak ill of the dead, but she was a thief and a liar and a loose woman and she deserved what she got. Why the hell should I be telling you this?"

I smiled and stood, and turned back from the threshold to regard him. He knew already, of course. But it felt good to say it, anyway. "Because Stagolee is back in town."

I left him sputtering. By the time he reached the doorway to stop me, I had slipped around the corner and was gone.

Stagolee might be better than I was. But Brady was a bully and a fool.

#

I walked and thought for a little while before heading back to the Dog. Too long, it turned out: a big, big man with very little swagger, leaning only slightly on the walking stick he used to counter a left knee that would not bend, Mayor Browning sauntered up to me as I was climbing the stairs to the otherwise deserted porch of the saloon. He laid a heavy, paternal hand on my shoulder and smiled. "Aren't you all gussied up?"

He stepped back a pace as I raised my eyes to his, letting a little of the Light show in them. "Evening, Mayor. What can I do for you tonight?"

"Evening, Ma'am." He paused. "My son in law tells me you know something about this... Stagolee." His mouth twisted as though the name tasted bad on his tongue.

"I've seen him around," I offered. I could feel him searching my face for the lie.

Browning shook his head at last. "Liz isn't safe with him here," he told me. "That murdering son of a bitch is going to swing."

"He scares me," I said, quite, quite honestly. "I worry about what he's going to do." The threat in his voice might have been more than he had intended me to hear; his next words confirmed it.

"You just be careful, little girl." He smiled, patted my shoulder once more. "And keep away from that Stagolee. He's been the death of women before."

And he turned and stumped away, leaning on his cane, and I fought the urge to let my left hand fall to my gun. He tried to look fatherly and safe and stolid and slow. But the porch didn't creak under his footsteps, and he was two hundred fifty if he was a stone, and not more than twenty of that was where it should not be.

Light and shadows. And damn it to Hel.

#

The next dawn was just coiling across the sere landscape when I saw Marlowe Brady shutting the door of his house behind him and swinging into the saddle of his horse before heading into town. Rowan, hidden by halfflight and a stand of creosote, wanted to stamp and snort when the rangy bay went by, but I quieted her with a hand on her nose and left her tied behind the brush as I walked up to the door.

Muire, you really ought to know well enough to stay the Hel out of other people's marriages by now.

I knocked anyway.

The knees of Liz Brady's calico dress were dirty and she held a scrub brush in her right hand: she had been waxing the kitchen floor. The dress was too hot for the weather, though, and though she'd splashed her face at the kitchen pump when she heard my knock, she could not hide the redness of her eyes. She moved stiffly, as if her bones ached.

"Hi, Missus Brady. May I come in for a minute?" My voice and face were as open and honest as I could make them. She hesitated, glanced over her shoulder. I stepped forward.

"I don't know, Miss MacAydan. I'm awful busy..."

I lowered my voice. "Liz, let me in. Your husband's gone to town. It will be safe for a moment."

My candor shocked her, and she stepped back the quarter-inch necessary for me to bustle past. She trailed me into her own kitchen forlorn as a shadow, and I looked from her to the half-waxed floor and found myself thinking about the oddity in the way she moved. Then I sat myself firmly down at the kitchen table while she hovered over me, wringing her hands on the handle of her brush. "Miss MacAydan..."

"Liz, call me Maura," I interrupted. "And listen. You have to get out of this house, and do it now, before he kills you."

"He'd never hurt me," she began, and then she dropped the brush in terror as I surged across the floor toward her and caught her wrists in both hands. She screamed--in agony, not in fear-- tears starring her eyes. She glanced down then, the pain in her face replaced by awe and then terror as I stripped the long sleeves back from her arms with casual, inhuman strength and a horrid rending of cloth.

Black, cracked scabs encircled her wrists almost completely, thicker and worse by the knobs of the slender, birdlike bones. The marks were laid over other, older scars, and I had seen enough prisoners in my long life to recognize the like.

She was not much bigger than I, and infinitely less strong. I thought of Brady's bulldog shoulders, and felt the blinding white current of my rage rise up in me.

"Not Stagolee," I told her. "I'm not worried about Stagolee hurting you. Brady, Liz. And Browning too."

#

A short ride and a pot of tea later, I got her settled at the Ivory Dog. Then I got back on my red mare, rode home, and got the crowbar from the tool room in the little barn. I paced up and down the length of my house, swinging that short length of iron in my hand. The sun was moving faster than I wanted it to, and I had no way to control too many of the players in this little game.

I kicked the wall, cursed hard when an oil lamp tumbled and broke against the raw pine wallboards. Then I hefted the wrecking bar in my hands and started ripping up the parlor floor.

#

The sun ached on my head, despite the welcome shade of my hat. Liz lay hiding in the cool back room where Duncan kept his bed, three floors below, bandages seemingly all over her body. Duncan was with her, and the Dog was shuttered and closed, just like the rest of Main Street.

I lay on my belly on the roof, a carbine and my revolver by my side, and waited for the short shadows to appear on the street below. Sweat prickled out across my neck; lank strands of hair clung to my forehead. A familiar-unfamiliar weight rested between my shoulderblades--the sheath of a sword I had not touched in years. I stole a pull from my water bottle without raising my head, tasted leather and warm spit.

A horse stamped in the corral down the street, followed by the jingle of chains. The reek of my own sweat, oil and powder, horse manure, the midden out back of the Dog clogged my nose. A hawk called, far off, answered by another. Lovers or enemies: no way to tell from the sound of their cries. The tar on the roof under my hands was melting. I thought of the texture of things with no place on this world, in this time. Sealing wax, ski resin, rosin for a fiddle's bow.

No, rosin belongs here.

Stagolee stepped into the street first, and my thumb moved with practiced strength on the safety of the carbine. He glanced around, but from where he stood he never could have seen something that was not a breeze ruffle the white eyelet curtains in the half-open window of the upstairs bedroom of Miss Pamela's boarding house, across the street. I did, however, and I saw as well the gleam of steel and a flash of ash-colored hair.

My carbine roared and choked simultaneously with the tigerlike cough of the rifle. The gun slammed into my shoulder, and a pane of glass starred and shattered. In the street, I heard Stagolee grunt and then curse.

Another gunshot rang out of the first floor of the Ivory Dog. I was already moving when the shotgun roared its answer.

I abandoned the carbine on the roof: it would only have impeded me. Perhaps the leap was superhuman: had I not been what I am, I would not have cared to try it. As it was, the three-story drop to the ground was jarring, but my knees took most of the shock of landing. Crouched, I rolled with the landing, letting gravity take me to one side with a wind-breaking thud. I needed to keep moving, suspecting that I hadn't done more than wing Browning. The sword across my back bruised my spine.

Blood lay like a banner in the street, but no body. I gasped painfully as I dragged myself to my feet, pulling my sword over my shoulder and into my right hand.

She flared suddenly at my touch, singing with a lost and abandoned Light that might have brought tears to my eyes another day. I had more immediate concerns. Raising the sword-bearing arm to protect my face from the shards of broken glass, I threw myself in through the tavern window.

The big window at the front of the Dog had been broken before, but usually as a result of the forceful expulsion of a brawler. It exploded inward quite satisfactorily, and I caught Marlowe Brady with most of my meager weight across the back of his neck. The eight-shooter skated out of his hand and across Duncan's polished pine floor, fetching up against the base of the upright piano with a musical thump, which was echoed by the sound of the pommel of my blazing sword striking the back of Brady's head and Brady's forehead striking the floor. He fell quiet, and I rolled off him and around behind the bar.

The bullet had gone through Miles Duncan and broken the looking glass. The blood had already slowed to a trickle, still pulsing weakly from the ragged wound in his side. I knelt in the puddles and spatters of it,

remembering other pools of red, another time. As I reached for him he shook his head and might have coughed, but he had no air in his lungs to do it with. His maimed right hand lay inches from where the shotgun had fallen after discharging its useless burden into the bar-room ceiling. It made an interesting tattoo, and would make a better story, one day.

"Miles..."

"Doesn't hurt," he mouthed, and then paused as if to gather breath and strength. He braved a painful smile. "Miss Maura..."

"My fault, Miles..."

"No blame... Miss..."

I shook my head. "My name is Muire, Miles. Long story."

His hand clutched mine weakly. "Always knew... on the lam..." His face contorted as he struggled to breathe. "Last request, Muire?"

"Name it." My words had the force of a vow.

"Bar goes to Liz..." I nodded, and he shook his head to say he wasn't finished. "And Susie. You take my fiddle."

"A treasure." I squeezed his hand, not caring now if he knew my strength, and let the Light come into my eyes--perhaps to comfort him. His eyes widened, though whether he saw me or Death I will never know. "Scared." A long pause. "See you in Hel..."

"You're going to Halla, Miles." I felt myself smile. "I know it for a fact."

"Never was a... churchgoing man..."

"Churchgoing's got nothing to do with it. They'll take you in or they'll have me to answer to."

Surely I was not lying. Surely, though the Light has failed, souls like his are not lost forever? Surely, somewhere, I have some authority still.

He drew it in, what I knew would be his final breath, and expelled it with a silent tumble of words. I heard them anyway. "...angel? On the lam?"

There was blood on my hands as I closed his eyes, blood on my hands as I picked up his shotgun and stood, just in time to hear the click behind me of a hammer being pulled back. I tensed, and heard that soft, sharp voice cut through the smoke of death and gunpowder. "Don't worry, Miss MacAydan. I know whose side you're on now."

I turned around slowly. Stagolee stood over Marlowe Brady, on booted foot on the unconscious man's back, a revolver in his right hand. He looked directly at me and smiled a crooked smile, showing three missing teeth on the ruined side of his face. Then he glanced back down at Brady and shot him once, fastidiously, in the back of the head.

My shock must have shown, because he grinned at me again and stepped around the sudden runnel of blood and brains that dribbled across the floor to mingle with Duncan's. Stagolee's left arm hung stupidly useless, and his own blood dripped from the fingers of that hand. "Browning," I said to him, and he nodded.

"Missed him," he answered. "Son of a whore."

"Browning killed her. Liz's mom, I mean."

Stagolee pulled Duncan's apron from a hook behind the bar, laid his gun on the counter, and began to improvise a sling. After half a useless, one-handed minute, he looked at me with something that might have been pleading in another man. "What do you say, Doc?"

I bound his arm up while he remained silent, pouring himself a shot into an unbloodied wooden bowl and downing it with his other hand. Then he turned his head and spat, while I stared at him expectantly.

"Yeah, I guess he did." He looked at me straight, then, as I tested my knots. I felt his brutality in that sea-blue gaze, and I remembered how he had smiled as he killed the helpless sheriff. "And another thing."

I nodded. I already knew. "She's your little girl, isn't she? Liz." I felt desolation in the look he shot me like ice in my heart.

"She is not to know," he answered, pouring himself another drink. "Her momma deserved better men, and so does she."

I took the little bowl out of his hand and downed the whiskey myself. "She knows. She figured it all out herself."

He looked at me, and his lip twitched. "Knew I was going to like you."

The last piece of the puzzle fell into place then, with a satisfying click. "Kale knew too. He called you in, didn't he? For Liz's sake."

Stagolee just stared at me, eyes like chips of glass as he picked up the bottle and took three hard swallows. I watched the air bubble up in the bottle. He set it down with a click, wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

I set down the bowl. "Browning's still out there. I think I tagged him."

Stagolee looked at his gun, lying on the bar. He fumbled it open, replaced the empty, clicked it shut. It made a satisfying sound, like a closing door. He nodded his shaggy, gaunt grey head. "Believe you did. Hard man to kill, though."

The back of his hand rubbed across his cheekbone as he said it, and as it concealed the ruined half of his face I looked into the face of my brother: weary, fallen, lost and broken, but once far more worthy than I. I wondered if it would not have been better, to lose immortality and memory both, rather than to continue on as I have, as I will. I smiled at him, and laid a hand on his arm. "Come on, Strifbjorn. We've got a man to kill."

He reacted as if I'd poured whiskey down his throat when he was expecting iced tea. "Where did you hear that name?"

I picked up the eight shooter and held it out to him, butt first. He gawked at it for a moment as if it had grown eyes and were staring back, but he took it. "I have the second sight," I told him. "Come on. Time's wasting."

But Browning was gone. There was some blood upstairs at Pamela's and his best horse was gone from the ranch house, and his track led out into the desert. It made me damned uncomfortable to know he was still out there, but it wasn't my vengeance to follow.

Stagolee never came back into town. The last I saw of him, he was slumped in the saddle of his good-looking dappled dun horse, riding into the West with his shadow stretched out before him, looking for vengeance still.

I kept that fiddle.