

Last Man To
Kill

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ISBN 10: 1-58776-034-7

ISBN 13: 978-1-58776-034-1

Library of Congress Catalogue Number: 2001088010

An original Publication of Vivisphere Publishing.

Printed in the U.S.A.



675 Dutchess Turnpike
Poughkeepsie, NY 12603
1-800-724-1100
www.vivisphere.com

Chapter One

Beckey was dead. Rance McCall slumped in the saddle and stared at his sister's still form, lying on the porch, like a discarded doll, nude, ravaged, and bloody. Her eyes bulged wide, her mouth hung open, distorted as in a silent scream.

A wave of nausea surged through his stomach. Pain stabbed inside his chest. On the outside, his blood-soaked shirt had a hole where a bullet pierced his shoulder. He didn't remember getting shot. He had ridden to town to buy a new tarpaulin.

He had a vague memory — or was it a dream? — that when he returned, he had heard gunfire and had ridden in on five men on horseback as they were leaving the courtyard.

His heart skipped a beat. What about his father and his brother, Toby? He jerked his horse, Twister, around and let out a shriek. His father lay in a pool of blood by the well. His brother lay face down, twenty feet to the left, the back of his head blown away. Tracks from several horses filled the yard.

Weak and dizzy, his mind whirled like a tornado. He needed to get to town and a doctor, but he had to stop the flow of blood from his shoulder or he'd never make it to town. On the other hand, if he dismounted, he'd never have enough strength to climb back into the saddle.

A half dozen buzzards circled the yard. He glanced over his shoulder as a determined bird swooped close to Beckey's

inert form. He shook his head. He couldn't leave her for the predators.

He turned back to the house and grasped the saddle horn. His left leg buckled when he swung to the ground. He grabbed a support post to break his fall and sat hard on the edge of the porch. Two holes in his Levis. A bullet had traveled through his leg. He couldn't remember that, either. Maybe he had not just heard the gunfire, maybe he took part in it.

He twisted his bandanna around his leg, then tore off a piece of his shirt and secured it against his shoulder. Pain from his wounds shot through his body, but didn't hurt as much as the pain inside.

He leaned back and scooted toward Beckey. Tears clouded his vision as he stroked her cheek with the back of his fingers, then covered her eyes and closed them for the last time.

The buzzards' wings flapped behind him. He forced himself to stand and pull Beckey into the house. "You won't get my sister today," he yelled.

He covered her body with her torn, red dress and hobbled to the door. The birds' patience for their supper was evidently growing thin as they plunged closer to the silent forms in the yard. He didn't have enough strength to drag his father and brother into the house. He could cover them, but his father kept the canvas in the harness shop. He could never make it that far.

He snapped his fingers. The large tarpaulin strapped to the back of his saddle would do the job. He crawled to his horse and managed to cut the tarp in two and cover his father the best he could. It would have to do until he could get help from town.

Exhausted after wrapping Toby, he rolled on his back and breathed deeply. Anger filled his chest as he watched the buzzards. One swished close enough he felt the wind from its wings. He was their target now. His death would come slower than that of his family.

No! Not slower than Beckey's.

He raised his head and looked at the well. It was the money the killers had come to get. Although he had never seen it, his father said he had hidden the pouch in the well. He had told everyone who would listen he would soon have enough money

saved to buy a ranch in Montana and leave the constant winds and dust of Kansas behind. He yearned to go where the air was pure and clean.

Most of his friends just grinned at each other, as though they didn't believe him. They had heard the boast too long. But it made interesting talk for selling whiskey. Dolan, the bartender at the Corey Saloon, relayed the stories to every stranger who bought a drink.

"It's the money!" Rance turned on his stomach and looked toward his father's body. "It's the damn money," he yelled again. "It's got us all killed." He decided to get rid of it.

Rage urged him to use all the effort he could muster to drag himself to the well. After pulling off two boards, he lay on his stomach and stuck his arm inside the wall over the slimy, slippery, rough stones. The loose stone on the second row was the one his father had told him to search for if anything should ever happen. He worked it away from the wall, but he was too weak to hold it. It slipped from his grasp and splashed to the water below. He intended to do the same with the leather pouch hidden behind it, but as he pulled it from the hole, his fingers tightened. With strong determination, he rolled on his back and pulled the money pouch with him.

Holding the bag above his head toward the eagles soaring high above the buzzards, he uttered an oath. "This is blood money. I'll use every dollar to track and kill the men who murdered my family."

His strength drained, the pouch fell to his chest. Who was he kidding? He wasn't much better off than the rest of his family. He couldn't mount his horse and ride to town, and he didn't have enough strength to climb the steps to seek sanctuary in the house. Unless someone came soon, the buzzards would pick his bones while he still breathed.

He turned his head and stared at the haystack thirty feet away. Maybe, maybe if he could light a fire large enough . . .

He turned on his stomach and used his good arm and leg to pull and push his way toward the hay.

Voices, mixed with his own senseless dreams, drifted in and out of Rance's semiconscious mind. A woman who spoke in a high-

pitched tone sounded like Beckey when he had upset her. "Why didn't Toby survive, instead of Rance?"

Doctor Walker's low, raspy voice from the other side of the bed was easy to recognize. "Martha, don't get so upset. I'm not sure Rance is going to make it, yet."

More dreams, more senseless thoughts, and more talking . . . "If he hadn't been such a coward," Martha said. "If he'd carried a gun like any real man, he could, at least, have scared them away. He might have saved his family."

"Rance carries a saddle gun. He just doesn't happen to believe in carrying a side arm."

"Maybe he does carry a rifle, but he's nineteen, for God's sake. It's time he acts like a man."

"Martha, you don't know what happened out there. The sheriff said they found Rance's horse saddled, standing by the house as though he might have ridden up while the trouble was going on. Maybe he did scare them away, or he may have been caught off-guard just as Tom and Toby were. No one can be sure what happened."

"He rode in on them all right. Hank said the horse was still wet under the saddle. If he'd just carried a gun . . ."

"He never has, Martha, you know that. Rance promised his dying mother he would never use a gun except for killing rattlers or coyotes, or maybe food for the table. He doesn't believe in killing or fighting of any kind. Everyone understood and respected his beliefs before this happened."

"Yes, I know! Toby did his fighting for him. It's too bad he doesn't have some of his brother's traits."

"I guess he does take after his mother more than Toby or his father, but she has to be a jewel in the Lord's crown."

"Well, now his whole family is dead."

The doctor's voice seemed tired and short of patience. "If he were the coward you accuse him of, he'd never have ridden close enough to get himself shot." The doctor paused and cleared his throat. "He may be a little stupid, but you can't call him a coward. Now, help me change these bandages. Then, I want you to get some sleep."

“I’m all right. I slept in the chair last night.”

When Rance awoke again, he managed to open his eyes. He was relieved to find the room almost dark, except for a lamp with the wick turned low inside a blackened globe burning on a small table beside the bed. Martha slept quietly in a large oak rocking chair, next to the table. Her head bent, her short black hair fell over an eye, partially hiding her face. She was not considered a good-looking woman. Her forehead was too high and her nose too big.

Martha Drake was Toby’s girl. They had set a wedding date for early fall. Many of the townspeople thought Toby was her last chance to find a husband, but they never said it in front of Toby.

Rance watched Martha as she slept. Her lips pressed together. Even in her sleep she couldn’t hide her irritation. He understood her anger, but she didn’t feel as bad as he.

Her words kept haunting his thoughts. He could no longer accept his reasons for not carrying a gun. Beckey was probably the only person who had understood. When he was twelve, against his mother’s wishes, his father taught him and Toby how to hold and shoot a hand gun. No one got any supper that evening. When he and Beckey sneaked into the house to snatch cookies from the cookie tin, they had overheard their mother and father arguing.

“You can do what you want with Toby,” his mother yelled. “He’s already enough like you that it’s too late to change him. But you leave Rance alone. He’s going to be the preacher in this family, and I’ll not have you teaching him your disgusting ways.”

Rance and Beckey ran from the kitchen empty handed. However, the shooting lessons were over.

A few months later, he sat at his dying mother’s bedside. She urged him to promise he would become a preacher. The disappointment in her eyes when he said he wasn’t sure he could make that promise would haunt him forever. She forced a smile and clasped his hand. The last words she spoke were clear and soft. “To thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man.” He had no idea what she meant, but he promised he would.

Doctor Walker returned after Martha spooned Rance his breakfast. He was a short man of slight stature. His slow movements revealed his sixty years. Tired eyes peeked over small-lens wire-framed glasses. His thin lips formed a slight smile in Rance's direction. "It's about time you came out of it." He pushed on Rance's shoulder and checked his wounds. "They splintered the big bone in your leg, but the bullet in your shoulder missed anything vital. It'll likely be stiff a long time, though."

"Thanks, Doctor, I appreciate your fixing me up."

"I didn't do much. Better thank Martha here. She's the one who took care of you."

Rance turned his head toward Martha. He smiled his boyish smile, but found it difficult to look into her eyes, knowing how she felt about him. "Thanks for setting up with me last night, Miss Drake."

Walker whirled, with a scowl on his face. "Last night, hell! Young man, she sat up with you for three days and nights."

"Three days?" Rance's face felt hot. "I'm sorry, Miss Drake. You had better go to bed now. I'll be all right."

"She can't! You're sleeping in her bed."

Rance made an effort to get out of bed, only to lay back in severe pain.

Walker chuckled. "Don't look at me, Rance. I didn't tell you it wouldn't hurt to move. I knew you would figure that out for yourself."

Martha frowned and put a consoling hand on Rance's arm. "Don't let Doc's sense of humor get you down. And don't worry about me, either. There's a cot in the sitting room. I believe I'll try it out right now."

The following day, Sheriff Dan Wicks stopped by. Martha led the way to her room. Her tone was pleasant. "Got a visitor for you. The sheriff's been by every day to see how you're getting along."

Wicks wore an old sweat-stained Stetson, and a Colt lay in a holster, belt high on his hip. Any shooting he might do wouldn't start with a fast draw. His face, weather worn with deep wrinkles showed at least fifty-five years.

He had told the town council when they hired him that he had never tried to out-draw anyone. He said it was easier to talk the bad element out of mischief than to shoot it out.

Rance had always looked up to the old lawman. He had stood in front of the barber shop the day Wild Bill Hickok passed through town. Hickok was drunk, as usual, and delighted in shooting holes in signs on top of the false store fronts. Wicks actually removed his holster before meeting Hickok in the middle of the street. He talked in his low-pitched voice. Hickok finally shook his head and grinned before he turned his back and staggered to the hotel. That proved to Rance that guns were not necessary.

Rance waved a hand. "It's good of you to come by, Mr. Wicks. Have you got any leads on those killers?" A lump came to his throat when he spoke the words. He had remembered his family was dead, but now he felt the hurt deep inside his chest.

The smile on the big sheriff's face faded. "They didn't leave no trail, boy."

"There must have been some kind of a trail. They rode horses, didn't they?"

"Sure, Rance, you're right, except it was almost dark when we saw your light. By the way!" A sparkle came to his eyes. "Doc said if you hadn't set that haystack on fire, you'd have died for sure before anyone found you." It looked like Wicks tried to smile.

"I don't remember setting any fires. I wrapped Toby with a tarp. That's the last I remember." Rance turned his face to the window. "I'll never forget that."

"Well, you sure as hell made it to that hay, lit it, and moved back out of the heat. Lit up the whole sky." Wicks smiled this time. Then it faded from the old man's eyes again.

"I hate to ask you this, boy, but what else do you remember about that day?"

"I remember it all." After he said it, he knew it wasn't true. He still didn't remember what happened before he found Beckey lying on the porch. He told the sheriff all he remembered up to the point where he rolled Toby on his back. He felt sick to his stomach, as he had when he wiped the dirt from Toby's face.

He wiped his own eyes with the thick comforter. “I don’t know how long I was unconscious. Eagles kept soaring around in the sky,” he said without knowing why.

“There were probably more buzzards than eagles. We pretty well figured most of that out, reading the signs in the dirt. It looked like you dragged yourself to the well and removed a couple of boards. We figured you was trying to get a drink and couldn’t reach the pump handle.” Wicks glanced quickly at Martha, then returned his gaze on Rance.

“Well?” Rance frowned when he recalled the well was where his dad had hidden the money. Then, he remembered Martha already told him he was clutching the leather money bag when the sheriff found him. “That’s where dad hid his money. I must have pulled out the bag. Right now, I don’t remember doing it.”

Martha and the sheriff exchanged glances, then hung their heads toward the floor.

Rance looked at one, then the other. “What’s going on? You do believe me, don’t you?”

Martha retained her accusing look. “You don’t have to shout.”

“We believe you,” the sheriff answered. “It’s just that —”

“Just what, Mister Wicks?”

“Well, boy, some of the townspeople think maybe you wanted that money for yourself.”

“What?” The pain pierced Rance’s side as he jumped to a sitting position.

The sheriff held out his hand with the palm upward. “You can’t rightly blame them. There’s nearly five thousand dollars in that bag.”

“Five thousand dollars?” Rance had no idea how much his dad had saved. He never talked about it, but they all knew someday they would buy a ranch where the wind didn’t blow as much and get away from the miserable dust.

He looked at Martha. “You believe me, Miss Drake?”

Her blue eyes glistened through tears. “Of course I do. You don’t think I could let you stay in my bed if I thought there was any truth in that gossip?”

“How about you, Mister Wicks?”

“Aw, I know you didn’t do it. Hell, you never shot nothin’ in your life, but I had to talk to you.”

“Is that why you didn’t bother going after them? You didn’t think anyone was there?”

“Naw, we could tell four or five riders entered the yard. Jason Cord and his boys were seen around Hays a few days before. We figured it was them.”

“Jason Cord? Do you have a description of his men?”

“There’s flyers on ’em. I don’t know how accurate they are. The poster said Cord has a fat, pocked face and wears his old army jacket. The story goes he was a sergeant in the Confederacy, but he killed one of his men and lost his stripes. Like I said, it’s hard to know fact from fiction.”

“A man wearing a Confederacy coat shouldn’t be hard to recognize.”

Wicks described Cord’s three followers from the posters. “The one named Earl has a big scar on the back of his neck. It runs all the way from his ear. Then there’s one called Bull Price. He’s got a big barrel chest with a small head setting on top and no neck between.” He paused a moment, then continued, “The last one’s name is Grady Duval. He’s a blond kid, probably about nineteen or twenty, not much older than you. Has light blue eyes. Some say a man with a limp rides with them. That’s about all I know about them.”

“You probably were hiding out somewhere and didn’t get a very good look at those boys,” Martha said.

Rance caught her tone and the inference to his cowardice. “I’m afraid I don’t remember anything that happened before I found myself at the porch, looking down on Beckey.”

Martha threw up her hands and rolled up her eyes in a gesture of disbelief.

Rance ignored her and looked back at the sheriff.

“You still haven’t said why you’re not trailing them right now.”

“We could tell by the tracks, they rode south.”

“Well?” Rance had a way of raising his right eyebrow when he thought someone was evading the issue or just flat out bullshitting him. He did it now.

“Boy, I couldn’t get no posse. Half the men thought there weren’t no gang, and the rest was afraid there was and were too scared to chase ’em.”

Rance tossed up his hands and winced with the pain in his shoulder. Anger reflected in his voice, yet he understood the men’s fears. “They’ve got families, too, I guess.”

“Look, I’ve got work to do, boy. It looks like a storm’s coming up, and I don’t like making my rounds in the rain. Try to put all this behind you. The sooner you forget it, the sooner you can get on with your life.”

Martha left the room with the sheriff, leaving Rance with his thoughts. He wondered about the rest of his life. It would never be the same. His thoughts soon lulled him into a troublesome sleep. He awoke to an awareness that someone was in the room with him. Martha stood by the window. A tear trickled down her cheek. She didn’t bother wiping it.

Earlier Rance had watched the silver-lined soft clouds. Now they had changed to black, threatening puffs, stealing the light from the day.

“I’m sorry, Miss Drake. I wish I had been able to stop them.”

Martha twisted her head toward him. Her eye lids were dark, blinking over red, fiery eyes. “Are you sorry, Rance? It’s too late now. Toby’s dead.” She breathed a sigh and looked back through the window. “I may as well be dead, too.”

“Don’t say that, Miss Drake. This will pass.” He wasn’t certain what he meant. Beckey used to use the phrase when Rance had a problem, but after saying it, he didn’t believe it fit.

Martha stepped to the side of his bed. Her fingers trembled, her lips pulled in tight, but still twitched. “Oh, will it? Look at me, Rance. Look at me,” she repeated, almost in hysterics.

He looked but remained silent.

“I’m plain. Behind my back, I’m called homely.”

Rance raised his eyebrow, ready to deny her observations.

“Oh, you don’t need to look as though you haven’t heard that before. You’ve probably said it yourself.”

“No, Miss Drake, I haven’t!”

Her voice pitched high and loud. “For goodness sakes, quit calling me Miss Drake! My name is Martha!” She looked out the

window and sucked in a big breath, then released it slowly. Looking back at Rance, she continued in a softer voice. “It’s true, just the same. I’m not attractive. Everyone knows it but Toby. He didn’t see it.” Martha held her hands open in a pleading gesture. “I’m thirty years old, Rance. No girl around here has a chance for marriage after she turns thirty.”

Rance studied her face. She was probably right. People hurt when their loved ones die. Maybe that was why he hated guns. He remained silent.