



Weird Western Quarterly #7
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1870:

The two men stared each other down, neither willing to move an inch. A hush had fallen around them as the gathered crowd waited to see who would make the next move. Then one of the men, a large fellow known only as Smitty, finally spoke.

"I'm calling you out, Lash."

The second man didn't flinch, seemingly unaware of the building tension. Despite the high stakes laid before him, there wasn't so much as a bead of perspiration on his brow, which was more than could be said for Smitty. It seemed a full minute slipped by before the second man's fingers flew into motion, carrying out the actions they'd performed on so many other occasions, and always with the same devastating results.

"Straight flush, with the Queen of Hearts leadin' the way."

"Damn-*nation!*" Smitty slammed his fist down on the table with enough force to make the cards jump a bit, while a mixture of laughter and groans came from the crowd ringing the poker table. "I thought for sure you were bluffing."

"See now, that's your problem, Smitty," Bat Lash told him as he began to rake the chips towards him. "You know thinkin' ain't your strong suit... an' apparently, Five-Card Draw ain't, neither." He gave a wink and a grin to the crowd, which responded with more laughter.

"C'mon, Lash, you already beat the guy," one of the other players said — he'd wised up early and folded before he lost his shirt. "No need to rub it in."

"I ain't rubbin' it in, I'm merely advisin' him to sit the next hand out," he replied as he stacked his newly-acquired chips into neat little towers. "My conscience would never forgive me if I sent him home a pauper."

Smitty grunted as he got up from his chair, saying, "You don't have to tell me twice." As he stepped away, he gave the side of the table one last bang with his fist, causing the whole thing to shift and Lash's earnings to fall into disarray.

"Awful rude," the gambler muttered, and started over again — call it superstition, but he liked to have his money in order before beginning the next hand. And it certainly was a good deal of money, more than enough to keep him comfortable over at the Empire Hotel for at least another week. It would probably be in his best interest to quit soon, before he completely wore out his welcome here like he'd done at so many other gaming halls. Maybe I should throw the next couple hands, he thought, *just to win back their confidence*. Of course, the notion of doing such a thing was nearly as abhorrent as losing through normal channels, and he immediately dismissed it from his mind. *Like Pappy always said: It's good to be charitable, but remember that you've gotta eat too.* "So," he said to those still gathered near the table, "would any of you be so inclined as to fill that empty seat?"

A good deal of people muttered and backed away in response — they'd seen Lash trounce too many players over the course of the night, and no one was interested in being his next victim. As the crowd shifted, it gave him a clear view of the front entrance, and he found himself witness to the entrance of a lovely young lady in a red velvet dress. Though he'd seen a couple other women around the saloon that night, there was no way someone could mistake this new beauty for just another soiled dove: she seemed to carry herself above the grit and roughness pervasive in a cow-town like this, setting herself apart from it both in her stride and in her choice of fashion, which was considerably more high-end than the majority of women in the West. Either she'd just gotten off a train from somewhere more civilized, or she refused to give up on the notion that a lady could live out on the frontier and still look like a lady.

Now this, Lash thought, is someone I'd like to get to know better. After managing to pry his eyes away from her velvet-clad curves, he said to the

dealer, "I'm cashin' out."

"That's not fair, you gotta give us a chance to win back some of our money from ya," one of the men still at the table said.

"Boys, if you ain't won it back by now, it ain't never gonna happen." He tucked the cash into the inner pocket of his crisp white suit coat as he left the table, a couple of the players grumbling very un-Christian oaths under their breath. He then made his way over to the bar, where the lady in red had taken up residence, her silk-gloved hands resting daintily on the bartop as she perused the selection of bottles behind it. He sidled up to her, leaned nonchalantly against the bar, and said, "It's not often that I see a lady like you in a place like this."

At first, it didn't seem that she'd honor him with a response, then she turned towards him and gave him a bit of a once-over. He didn't mind in the least: what was the point of him getting his clothes hand-made in San Francisco if pretty gals didn't look him over from time to time? Once she was done, she smiled and said, "Considering the selection offered, I'm not surprised. Nothing but third-rate liquors as far as the eye can see." Her voice had a smooth polish to it, free of the lazy, rounded syllables most Westerners spoke in.

Good taste in clothes an' food, plus an Eastern accent... this is gettin' interesting. "Yes, it is a sad state of affairs," he replied, "but they've got some of the best gamblin' tables in town, so I consider it a small price to pay." He glanced around them, then said in a conspiratorial whisper, "However, I do know of a lovely place not too far from here that serves the finest in spirits this side of the Mississippi, not to mention a fantastic *duck l'orange*. If you feel so inclined, I could be persuaded to escort you there."

"That's very kind of you, Mister..."

"Lash. Bartholomew Aloysius Lash... but you may call me Bat."

"Well, Mister Lash," she continued, "I am flattered by your invitation, but how do you know I'm not waiting here for someone?"

Without missing a beat, he said, "I considered that possibility, but to be honest, any man that would ask a delicate flower like yourself to meet

him in such a disreputable establishment probably ain't worth waitin' for."

"*Touché.*" She playfully ran a finger across the bartop, coming very close to Lash's elbow before skirting away, and said, "You've very quick, Mister Lash."

"When you make your livin' the way I do, you have to be."

"And how exactly does a man of your obviously refined stature make a living?" He noticed her eyes wandering down to his waist, and after he pushed his ego aside, he realized she was looking at the pistol strapped to his hip. "A gun-for-hire, perhaps?"

"Mostly by the turn of the card, though I have been known to pull leather when the need arises. In fact, I was involved in a harrowin' adventure just a few weeks ago out on the trail to Two Pines. Made a new friend, saw justice done, and managed to earn a little money in the process."

"Really... " She moved a little closer to him, her blue eyes sparkling. "I'd love to hear about it. I do so enjoy a good story."

"Well, it's a rather gruesome tale, and not really proper conversation for a lady such as yourself." He took a couple steps closer himself, until there were but a few inches between them. "But if you would be so kind as to take me up on my previous invitation, I'm sure I could be persuaded to spin a yarn or two."

"Then I'm afraid I have no choice but to accept."

"I'm honored, Miss... "

"Penelope Dreasney," she said, and offered Lash her hand. "But you may call me Penny."

"With pleasure, my dear Penny," he replied and, after taking the hand offered, led her away from the bar.

The Empire Hotel was the highest-class establishment in town, so naturally it was where Lash had chosen to set himself up the moment he arrived. The room cost him five dollars a night, plus another dollar for the bath, but it was worth it to know the place was free of bedbugs and that the sheets (and bathwater) got changed every day. Adding to the hotel's appeal was the fine restaurant off of the lobby, which is where Lash took his newfound companion for the aforementioned *duck l'orange*, amongst other delicacies. In between courses, he regaled her with various tales of adventure, from his days as a blockade runner during the War to the dangers that he now sometimes faced out West. Penny seemed to drink in every word, gazing across the table at him with that lovely little smile on her face as he went on and on — Lash could not recall ever having such a perfect audience before, and that only fueled his desire to talk. All the wine he'd imbibed during their meal probably helped loosen his tongue as well, and he was polishing off his fourth glass as he finished his current tale:

“Common sense told me not to follow, but my better nature was naggin’ at me too hard to just let Hex ride off with the fella. So I followed — discreetly, of course — until we reached a low canyon sometime after sunrise, an’ that’s when I saw ‘em.” Lash set down his glass for a moment and spread his hands before him, as if pushing aside curtains. “Hundreds of Apache warriors, as far as the eye could see, an’ they didn’t look the least bit happy. From a distance, I watched them seize upon that murderin’ sheriff, dash him to the ground, an’ set to work upon him with a knife. I was afraid that Hex might be next, so I steeled myself an’ rode down there, only to realize that I had misread the situation: these Apache had hired Hex to bring the sheriff to them, an’ make him pay for what he’d done to their tribe.” Lash picked up his glass and drained it. “An’ believe me, my dear lady, that man most certainly paid for his crimes.”

“Oh my goodness,” Penny breathed. “You mean the two of you just left a white man to the mercy of savages?”

“I thought it rather cold myself at the time, but after thinkin’ on it for a day or two, I decided that those Apache had just as much right to justice as that poor young lady I’d found dyin’ on the trail. Maybe more, seein’ as how the sheriff was doin’ the whole thing just to make ‘em look bad.”

“Still, to turn your back on your fellow man like that... ”

“I’m sorry, but I’m not fool enough to stand up to a mob of angry Apache,” the gambler replied, “especially to defend a man who’d let innocent folks die, both white an’ red, just to make himself look good.” He picked up the near-empty bottle to refill his glass, then went to freshen up Penny’s — to his surprise, her glass was still half-full. “The wine not to your liking?” he asked.

“Oh no, it’s perfect.” She held up her glass and let him splash in the last of the wine, then took a sip. “So tell me: this Jonah Hex fellow, is he in town as well?”

“Hex? No, we parted ways ‘bout a week later... after I received my fair share of the bounty, of course. While I thought our continued partnership would be profitable to the both of us, I soon learned that Hex isn’t what you’d call the sociable type. To be sure, he’d stick out like a sore thumb in a place like this.” Lash gestured to the restaurant about them. “He is a man of the trail, while I am a man of refinement, as you can plainly see.” He drank some more wine, then said, “But what about yourself? I’ve been gabbin’ the night away, while the only thing I know ‘bout you is your name. I take it by your accent that you’re from back East?”

“Indeed. New York City, to be precise. I’ve been traveling across country for a few months now, taking in the sights by rail.”

“All by your lonesome? That’s rather brave for a sweet little gal like yourself. What would possess you to do such a thing?”

“Oh, I suppose it was the stories I’ve heard about life in the West. They intrigued me, all these wild tales of Indians and frontier men... I just had to see if they were true.” Penny treated him to that beautiful smile once more. “To be honest, Bat, I never expected to meet a man like yourself out here. From the moment I saw you, I just knew that I’d have to get to know you better.”

“Would you believe that, when you walked into the saloon, I had the same thought about you?” Lash replied. “Perhaps it’s fate then, the two

of us meetin' the way we did."

"Perhaps it is. Whatever the circumstance, I know I'm glad it happened." She set down her glass and said, "I hope you don't mind me being so bold, but all this talk of adventure has got my blood flowing. What say we move on from dinner and go straight to dessert?"

"Splendid idea... I'd say some peach cobbler would polish off the meal nicely." Lash began to raise his hand to catch the waiter's attention, then saw that Penny had got up from her chair and was walking around the table to where he sat. She then leaned down over him and placed a hand on his knee.

"I was thinking of another sort of dessert," she said, and slowly moved her hand up his leg, smiling all the while. "Up in your room."

At first, Lash was speechless, then a wicked grin spread across his face. "My oh my, you are definitely a bold one. Are all the gals in New York like you?"

"I like to think of myself as a progressive woman. I mean, why should the boys have all the fun?"

"Well, never let it be said that I stood in the way of a lady havin' fun." He stood up, slipped his arm around her waist, and pulled her close. It was a good thing he did, too, because he felt rather unsteady on his feet — between the alcohol in his system and the smell of her perfume, his head was almost swimming. A slight case of intoxication wasn't enough to deter him, though, and he waved to the waiter, saying, "*Garçon*, I believe the lady and I are finished here. I'd appreciate it if you could add this meal to my hotel bill... "

"And another bottle of wine," Penny whispered in his ear.

"... an' another bottle of wine," Lash repeated without a second thought, "which you can send up to my room."

The next morning, Bat Lash was awakened by the sun streaming through the window and smacking him right between the eyes. With a groan, he pulled the feather pillow over his head and cursed the dawn for being so dang bright. Normally, he wasn't such a grump in the morning, but he had a respectable hangover at the moment, and that was enough to make anybody surly. *Reckon it serves me right*, he thought as he inspected the underside of his pillow. *I should've known better than to keep poundin' back the wine... but we was havin' such a good time last night, I didn't want to stop.* Not that he could remember much of it now: in his mind, it had degenerated into a blur of laughter and booze and tangled bed sheets. A smirk came to his lips as he recalled that last part. *That Penny sure is a feisty one... I hope she doesn't feel as awful as I do, 'cause I could go for another round of that.*

Lash screwed up his courage and removed the pillow — the light still smarted, but he could stand it. He then turned on his side and reached out for his lovely companion, only to find an empty spot on the mattress. “Penny?” he said groggily, then sat up and took in the room, but she was nowhere in sight. *Maybe she went down to the bath to freshen up*, he thought as he slipped out of bed and searched for his clothes. After making himself somewhat presentable for anyone who might see him, he stepped out into the hall and headed for the bath, but found the room empty. “Awful peculiar,” he mumbled, then saw a bellhop coming up the stairs at the other end of the hall. “Boy... hey, boy!” he called out to him.

The bellhop made his way to Lash, taking in his rumpled look as he did so. “Do you need me to draw some hot water for you, sir?”

“Actually, I was hopin’ you could help me in another matter. You seen a dark-haired woman in a red velvet dress walkin’ about the hotel this mornin’? Or maybe down in the restaurant?”

The bellhop shook his head. “No sir, nobody like that. I could check with the front desk if you like... do you know what room she’s in?”

“As of last night, she was in mine.”

“Oh.” The young man got a sympathetic look on his face. “Your lady-friend gave you the mitten, eh?”

Lash's own expression soured. Though he was loath to admit such, it was beginning to appear that Penny had left him without so much as a fare-thee-well — hard to believe, considering how well they'd hit it off last night. He padded back down the hall in his stocking feet, mulling over the situation, and decided to finish getting dressed and take a walk about town in the hopes that he'd stumble across her. When he returned to his room, however, he found that the answer had been right in front of him the whole time: his hat was hanging on the bedpost, and in place of the flower he normally kept tucked under the band was a neatly folded piece of paper. Plucking it out, he sat down on the bed and read it:

My Dearest Bat,

Please forgive my leaving so soon, but my train is set to depart early this morning, and I am terrible at saying good-bye. Do not think me rude, for I wanted to tell you last night, but I was afraid it would ruin our time together if you knew it was to be cut short. I hope you will look upon the brief moments we shared with fondness, for I know that I shall be thinking of you often in the coming months, and of all the thrilling tales you told. Perhaps someday we shall meet again, and talk of more adventures. Until then, be well, and thank you for your kindness.

*With Love,
Penny*

He folded the note back up, saying to himself, "Hard to stay mad at a gal that can sweet-talk as well as that." It was a shame she'd given no hint as to her destination, or else he'd catch a train himself and surprise Penny at her next stop. That such a thought occurred to him was rather strange: it had been a long while since any woman had struck his fancy enough for him to want to continue the relationship beyond a night or two. Perhaps he was starting to mellow with age.

"What a horrible notion," Lash said, and continued getting dressed for the day.

Six months later:

Another town, another gambling hall. Lash had only arrived yesterday, so the other men were still being sociable, but considering the streak he was having that night, he knew it wouldn't be long before the dirty looks started. He saw no point in worrying about it until it happened, however, and stayed focused on the new hand he'd just been dealt. *Jack of Diamonds, 9 of Diamonds, 8 of Hearts, 3 of Hearts, 5 of Clubs... well, I've had worse.* He discarded the 3 and the 5, then scooped up the two new cards the dealer gave him. *8 of Diamonds an' Queen of Spades... not great, but better.* "I'll bet five," Lash said, and tossed a chip in the pot.

"I'll see that and raise you ten," the man next to him said as he added his share. More chips followed as the other players pitched in, and one fella dropped out when the ante got too high for him.

Lash hesitated when his turn came around again — a pair of eights wasn't exactly the greatest hand to stand on — but he felt that a few of the guys were bluffing. Never mind that he was *also* bluffing... "I'll bet another ten," he said, clinking his chips down on the rest, then he settled back to see what came of it. Just as he figured, the men remaining were giving him a very serious look. Hell, they looked *scared*. Then he realized that their eyes weren't focused on him, but rather directly behind. Puzzled, he turned around to see just what had their attention, and got a pleasant surprise. "Well, I'll be damned... I didn't know you fellas was in town."

"Just got in," Scalphunter replied, his arms folded across his chest. Jonah Hex stood beside him doing the same. Neither one of them looked very happy. "We need to talk. Right now."

"After this hand. How 'bout I meet you over at the bar?" Lash started to turn back to the game, but the two men each grabbed an arm and pulled the gambler right off his chair. He protested and tried to twist free, but Hex and Scalphunter both had a firm grip on him as they dragged him towards the back of the establishment, patrons clearing a path for the trio as quickly as they could. When they neared one of the private rooms, Jonah banged the door open, revealing a saloon gal getting friendly with

one of the regulars, both of whom let out a yelp as the newcomers intruded on their privacy.

"Y'all might want tuh get the Hell out now," Hex said to them, and the couple did as they were told, dashing out half-dressed. The two men then pulled Lash into the room, unceremoniously dumping him on the powder-blue divan that the amorous couple had just evacuated. Leaning over him, Hex growled, "Ah'm givin' yuh ten seconds tuh explain just whut in blazes y'all was thinkin'."

"Well, I *was* thinkin' that I could win the pot with a pair of eights, but y'all draggin' me away like that sort of put a damper on it."

"Don't play coy, Bat. We know about..." Scalphunter stopped, a look of disbelief on his face. "A pair of eights? You were betting that big of a pot on a pair of stinking eights?"

"Yeah." Lash showed them the cards he was still holding. "You got a good enough poker face, you can win with a totally busted hand. Done it before."

"Boy's as stupid as he looks," Jonah muttered, then tried to get back on track. "Stupid ain't a good enough excuse fer whut yuh did, though. That was nothin' short of insultin', especially from somebody thet claims tuh be muh friend."

"You mind fillin' me in here on what I did, 'cause I'm lost."

The bounty hunter reached into his Confederate-gray coat and pulled out a battered dime novel, shoving it under Lash's nose. "Does this help yuh out any?"

"*All-Star Western Library*... never heard of it." He glanced up at Hex. "Don't tell me you actually read this junk?"

"Thet's it!" He threw down the book and went to grab Lash by the throat, but Scalphunter held him back. "Let me go, dammit! Weren't bad enough he talked me into givin' him part of the bounty, he had tuh go an' start spreadin' lies 'bout the whole thing just tuh make himself look good!"

The Kiowa brave forced Jonah down into a chair well away from Lash, then looked over at the gambler, saying, "You'd better start explaining yourself right quick, friend, 'cause I don't know how long I can hold him back."

"What am I supposed to be explainin'?"

"The stories, you dope!" He nodded towards the book laying at Lash's feet. "We want to know why you made up a bunch of cock-and-bull stories about us to sell to some dime novel house!"

Lash picked the book up, muttering, "I really don't have a clue what you're talkin' about." Then he took another look at the finely-rendered image on the cover. It depicted a well-dressed man with a flower in his hatband standing firm between a group of stereotypical Indians and a hulking brute in a Confederate uniform. The latter was holding a gun on a seedy fella kneeling on the ground. A box beside the picture read:

EYE FOR AN EYE
~ or ~
THE SLAUGHTER AT TWO PINES
Another True Tale of the West
by Penny Dreadful

"Oh, Lord... this is a joke, right? Y'all are havin' fun with me." He flipped through the pages and read bits of the story, which was appallingly familiar beneath the clichéd veneer it had been dressed up in, right down to the names of the parties involved. "You don't really think I'm responsible for this nonsense, do you?"

"Either that, or one of them Apache we brought the sheriff tuh must secretly harbor a literary bent," Jonah quipped, then immediately turned venomous again. "Of course Ah think yuh done it, yuh dandified horse's-ass! Who else would talk yuh up like y'all was biggest toad in the puddle?"

"I think I might have an idea," Lash said, looking at the name on cover

again. "Y'see, there was this gal I met a few months back..."

Both men rolled their eyes almost in unison. "I should've known," Scalphunter said. "If there's a girl around to impress, his gums flap faster than a flag in a high wind."

"Tell me 'bout it... if'n yuh put a pig in a skirt, he'd try an' buy it a drink."

"At least I don't *sleep* with the pigs," Lash snapped at Hex. "When was the last time you saw the inside of a bathtub?"

"Muh bathin' habits ain't the issue here," he replied, avoiding the question. "Y'all makin' us look like fools so's yuh kin kiss up some girl, that's the concern of the moment." Hex leaned forward in his chair, scowling. "So 'fess up, son: was that piece of calico worth the beat-down Ah'm a-plannin' on givin' yuh?"

"But I didn't do anything! I told some tales, sure, but I only told the truth... and I sure as Hell didn't think she was takin' notes!" Lash waved the book in the air like a flag of truce.

Scalphunter narrowed his eyes at his old partner, saying, "So you didn't tell this 'Penny Dreadful' person that I was your... how did she put it? Your 'faithful Indian manservant'? Or that I apparently spoke English like some half-wit?"

The gambler slapped a hand over his face. "Aw no, not you too..."

"Yeah, me too. At least Hex only got embarrassed once over... I'm featured in at least a half-dozen stories about the great Bat Lash, the Genteel Gunman of the Plains. That's the actual title of one of 'em, by the way. I got it out in my saddlebag if you want to see."

"I'll pass." Lash sank back onto the divan, wishing he could disappear into the upholstery. This certainly explained why Penny was so close-mouthed about herself. "Look, fellas, I don't know how, but I'll do my best to get this mess straightened out. You have my word."

"Ah'd rather have yer stinkin' head on a platter," Hex growled.

Ke-Woh-No-Tay kicked the bounty hunter in the shin. "Word's good enough. Besides, I think he knows what'll happen if he goes back on it... am I right, Bat?"

The gambler nodded silently. He'd been witness in the past to the handiwork of both men, and didn't relish staying on their bad side for longer than he had to.

"Matter of fact," Scalphunter continued, "I bet he feels so bad about what he's done, that he's willing to let us run up a bar tab on his account while we're in town, just as a gesture of goodwill... aren't you, Bat?"

Another nod, though this one was more difficult. He'd also been witness to the amount of alcohol Jonah Hex could put away without so much as a thought.

"That's very generous of you, friend. C'mon, Jonah, let's give him some room to think." The two of them filed out, with Hex lingering in the doorway just long enough to glare hard at Lash before closing the door behind him.

Once they were gone, Lash stared up at the ceiling, thinking, *How in the world am I gonna fix this? I ain't got the foggiest notion of where Penny ran off to.* He picked up the dime novel again, thumbing through it at random — some of the writing in it was too awful to read more than a few sentences at a time — then slapped it shut in frustration and stared at the cover. After a moment, his eyes caught sight of something below the main title in small type:

Printed by National Periodicals, New York

A smirk came to his lips as he mused aloud, "I wonder how much a telegram to New York costs?"

One month later:

Penny Dreasney made her way up the stairs of her hotel, eager to get back to her room and start jotting down notes. She'd arrived in this little California town a few days ago, and had just about given up hope on finding anything print-worthy, but then she came across a drunk *vaquero* in a saloon who was spinning a wild yarn for everybody within earshot. He claimed that he'd had a run-in with someone (or something) called El Diablo a couple weeks back, and the event had left him so shaken that he'd gathered up his bedroll and fled the ranch he'd been working at. The tale was absolutely implausible, of course — he claimed the man was bulletproof and that his horse snorted fire — but with the proper write-up, Penny was sure she could sell her editors on it. All it needed was the right angle, a good hook to suck the readers in and make them plunk down a dime for the next installment. Like the Bat Lash stuff... .who knew the folks back East would eat up stories about a guy like *that*?

A man tipped his hat and smiled at her as she approached her door, and she gave him a flirtatious look in return. *Never hurts to cast out an extra line*, she thought, *you might reel in an even bigger fish*. For the moment, he'd have to wait until she got her latest acquisition down on paper. She entered the room, her mind fixed on the story, and was halfway to her writing desk when a voice said, "Y'know, I really don't see how anybody can make a livin' off writin' this garbage."

Penny whirled around to see Bat Lash reclining on her bed, leafing through a fistful of manuscript pages, occasionally tossing one on the floor. Her first impulse was to yell at him for messing up her work, but she composed herself and said in her sweetest voice, "Why, Bat... my darling, I didn't expect to see you again so soon."

"You mean you never expected to see me again *at all*." He stopped shuffling papers and held one close to his face, squinting at the handwriting. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I'm pretty sure I never saved any Indian princess from a band of marauding Rebels," he muttered.

"It's called artistic license," she retorted, and ripped the pages out of his hand, then proceeded to pick up the rest scattered about the room. "A few of your tales needed a little punching up."

"'Artistic license'? Is that Yankee talk for bald-faced lyin'?" Lash got off the bed and walked over to her, intentionally standing on a piece of

paper she was trying to pick up. “Do you realize how much grief your stupid dime novels have caused me? I got a couple of friends that want to make me the guest of honor at a necktie party, thanks to you.”

“So they want to throw you a party, is that so bad?” She yanked on the paper, which promptly ripped in half.

“It means they want to *hang me*, you little... ” He balled his hands into fists, fighting the urge to call Penny every dirty word he knew — she may have conned him, but she was still a lady. Regaining his composure, he said, “You’d think that somebody that writes ‘bout the West would pick up on the lingo.”

“I do my best,” she said as she stood up, running her finger up the front of his vest as she did so. “Maybe you could teach me a little more. It would add some authenticity to my stories.”

He took hold of her hand gently, then pulled it away from his vest — her feminine wiles were not about to sway him this time. “Considerin’ how badly you botch up the plain truth, I don’t think it’d help any. What in the world possessed you to go an’ malign my reputation like that, anyhow?”

“I did it with the best of intentions, darling,” she replied, pulling free of his grip. “Besides, I thought a man so full of himself like you are would be flattered to see his name in print.”

“Maybe I’d be more flattered if you’d actually *asked permission*, did that ever occur to you?”

“Well, it never has in the past... ”

Lash cocked an eyebrow. “You mean I ain’t the first fella you done wiggled your hips at for a story?”

Penny turned away from him, saying, “A lady never tells,” then walked over to the door. “Now, if you wouldn’t mind excusing yourself, I have some more work to do.”

The gambler hitched his thumbs in his vest pockets and rocked back on

his heels. "Oh, I think your work is just about done," he said.

Now it was Penny's turn to cock an eyebrow. "Now, Bat, I know you're upset about how I tricked you, and you have every right to be... but the stories are out there now. It's not like I can travel across the country and retrieve every copy. You'll just have to be satisfied with my promise that I'll never do it again."

"I know for a fact you'll never do it again," he said, still rocking. "Not to me, an' not to any other poor sap that comes along. Y'see, *darlin'*, before I traveled all the way out here to California, I sent a wire to your lovely editors at *All-Star Western Library*, tellin' them about how one of their writers had the unmitigated gall to use the names an' experiences of both me an' my friends in her stories without givin' us the least bit of compensation. I then said that I was fixin' to hire some fancy Yankee lawyer an' sue the lot of 'em for libel unless they resolved the issue right quick." He reached into his suit coat and pulled out a telegram. "It's amazing what sort of response you can get when you mention lawyers: not only did they wire me a healthy sum of money for my pain an' sufferin', but they also promised me that they would no longer accept any material from the writer responsible for this whole debacle."

The woman suddenly went very pale. "You didn't... "

"Oh, yes I did." Lash stepped forward until he was right in her face. "You made the same mistake that most folks make about me: y'all see the nice clothes an' the better nature an' you think I'm harmless, a real easy mark that you can walk all over. Truth is, if you push me far enough, I can be just as mean an' hard as anybody else. I don't like it one bit, but I can do it. An' you, little missy, pushed me a mite too far, abusin' my trust like that, so I pushed back where I knew it would hurt you the most." With that, he took the telegram and slapped it in her hand, saying, "Congratulations, my little Penny Dreadful... you're out of a job."

Penny didn't respond right away. She merely stood there, looking at the telegram in silence. Then her lower lip began to quiver, and Lash thought for sure she'd burst into tears. It broke his heart to know he'd driven her to that, but he meant what he said about being pushed too far... and the fact that the majority of the money the dime novel house

had sent was now in the hands of Ke-Woh-No-Tay and Hex didn't exactly help his mood either. *Let her cry*, he thought. *Considerin' the embarrassment she's done put me an' Lord knows how many other fellas through, a few tears is nothin' much.*

But to his surprise, she didn't cry. She did, however, begin screaming. Not a grief-stricken sort of scream, either, more like a bloody-murder sort of scream, which caused Lash to jump back a few steps in surprise. Then she grabbed hold of the neckline of her dress and tore at it savagely. *Okay, this is a bit too much*, Lash thought, and put out a hand to calm her down, only to get his face slapped, her fingernails actually gouging his cheek. He cried out himself and stepped back even further as Penny grabbed the door handle and rushed out into the hall, still screaming. "Good Lord, I done drove her over the edge," he said aloud, and followed after her.

He'd barely taken three steps away from the door when he heard Penny cry out, "There he is!" Down the hall, he could see the woman pointing in her direction, and flanking her were two rather large men, one of whom had an arm wrapped protectively around her shoulders. "He's the one that attacked me in my room!" she continued, a hand clutching at the rip in her dress that she herself had made.

"Don't worry, we'll take care of that skunk for ya," the man coddling her said, while his companion cracked his knuckles.

Lash zipped back inside Penny's room as quick as a wink and slammed the door, thinking, *That gal missed her callin'... she should've been an actress.* He then grabbed hold of the writing desk and dragged it in front of the door — it wouldn't hold those two gorillas back for long, but it would at least buy him some time to climb out the window and make an escape. He ran over to it, tossed up the sash... then remembered that Penny's room was on the third floor, and had no ledge or balcony to speak of. "If it ain't one thing, it's another," he muttered as he stared down at the street. There was a chance he could jump from that height and be fine, but it was outweighed by the chance that he could break both his legs in the same attempt. *Now them is some lousy odds*, he thought.

There was a crash behind him, and Penny's pair of "saviors" barreled into the room. One of them grabbed hold of Lash and hoisted him by the

front of his shirt, growling, "Never would've figured a skinny runt like you to be a masher."

"Sir, I've been called many things, but 'masher' is definitely a new one," Lash replied as he dangled in the man's grip. "I take it any attempt at a reasonable explanation for this mess is useless?"

"After what you did to Miss Penny?" the other man said. "You're lucky you're still drawin' breath yet."

They're on a first-name basis with her... lovely. "Then you've left me no choice," he said, and swung his leg up to connect with the first man's crotch — dirty pool, to be sure, but there was no way he could beat a fella that big in a straight fight. The moment the first man loosed Bat from his grip, the other man tried to wrap his own meaty paws around him, but the gambler dropped flat to the floor and tripped him up instead. "Sorry I can't stay, gents," Lash called over his shoulder as he bolted for the door, "but it looks like me an' a certain lady still have unfinished business."

Penny had long vacated the hallway, so Lash ran for the staircase in the hopes that he could catch her before she hit the street. He took the steps two at a time until he reached the second-floor landing, which overlooked the hotel lobby, and found his luck hadn't all run out just yet as he spied Penny heading for the main doors. "Somebody stop that woman!" he hollered, and went to continue on down the stairs. Then he heard something very large thumping on the stairs behind him, and turned just in time to see one of the men from upstairs sailing through the air at him.

If I live through this mess, I just might kill that woman, Lash thought before getting knocked backwards down the stairs and cracking his head on the floor below.

"Hey... hey, fancy-boy... you awake yet?"

With a groan, Lash rolled over and tried to figure out why everything

was sideways and striped. Then he realized he was laying on a jailhouse bunk, and the groan worsened.

“Well, I reckon that means ‘Yes’,” the deputy on the other side of the bars said. “Y’all up for some grub?”

Another groan, this time accompanied by a weak “go away” wave — in his condition, food was the last thing on his mind. The back of his skull was throbbing, and he felt like he was developing a decent black eye, not to mention a dozen or so other spots on his body that would probably be tender for the next few weeks. *I hope that idiot who done jumped me looks worse*, he thought, and slowly sat up, looking over to the other cell. “Where’s the big fella?” he asked.

“Probably down at the bar,” the deputy replied. “Him an’ his friend explained ‘bout how you attacked that poor girl, so I let ‘em go. You, on the other hand, can cool your heels ‘til the sheriff gets back.”

“When will that be?”

The man pulled on his bottom lip, thinking. “I believe he said his sister’s wedding was Sunday, an’ today’s Thursday, so...”

Lash groaned and waved him off again, thinking, *Great, by the time the sheriff gets back so I can plead my case, Penny will be long gone*. He should’ve just let her editors deliver the bad news, but Lash wanted to see the look on her face when she found out he was the one responsible for spoiling her little racket. Now he’d have to spend a week in the pokey for his trouble. *At least she’s learned her lesson ‘bout playin’ with a fella’s heartstrings like that*.

“Oh, I almost forgot.” The deputy walked over to his desk and picked something up. “Somebody left a note for ya... said it was from a friend.”

The gambler took the note through the bars, wondering who it could be from — he hadn’t mentioned to either Hex or Scalphunter where he was headed. The moment he saw the distinctive handwriting, though, he knew exactly who the “friend” was:

Dear Bat,

I hope this letter finds you well, for I meant no permanent harm to come to you. I realize now that perhaps I overreacted, but you must understand how hurt and upset I was by what you did. I worked very hard to obtain my position, and you yanked it out from under me just for spite. In time, I may be able to forgive you, but for now, I must concentrate on rebuilding what you've ruined. Perhaps this was for the best: a writer should challenge themselves every so often, lest their work grow stale. I will abide by my word, however, and omit you and your cohorts from any further endeavors. Whatever else you may think of me, please remember that.

*Sincerely,
Penny*

That woman has some nerve, Lash thought as he crumpled up the note. She'd best hope the next fella she double-crosses is illiterate, or else she's bound to get caught again.

The deputy leaned against the bars, saying, "Guess it wasn't good news, huh?" Lash didn't say anything, instead rubbing at the sore spot on the back of his head. "Well," the deputy continued, "since you ain't goin' nowhere, an' I ain't got nothin' else to do but watch ya, looks like we've got some time to kill... got any suggestions?"

Still rubbing his sore noggin, Lash replied, "Y'all got a deck of cards?"

THE END

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Jonah Hex: Death & Gunsmoke, Part 1 (of 4): Once Upon a Time in Texas.

The origin of Jonah Hex begins here! Before he could become the most feared bounty hunter in the Old West, he had to survive childhood. You're guaranteed to never look at the man the same way again!

Weird Western Quarterly #2 (2006)

Jonah Hex: Death & Gunsmoke, Part 2 (of 4): Into the Wilderness.

The origin of Jonah Hex continues! Just when it seems things can't get any worse, Jonah's father makes a fateful decision, and the path of the boy's life takes an unexpected turn. It's frontier action at its finest as Hex moves closer to his destiny!

Weird Western Quarterly #3 (2006)

Jonah Hex: Death & Gunsmoke, Part 3 (of 4): Life During Wartime.

The origin of Jonah Hex continues! He's finally got the life he wants, but will Jonah be able to keep it when war breaks out between North and South? Sides are taken, choices are made, and Hex dons a familiar-looking uniform for the first time!

Weird Western Quarterly #4 (2006)

Jonah Hex: Death & Gunsmoke, Part 4 (of 4): When Jonah Comes Marching Home.

The final chapter in the origin of Jonah Hex! As the Civil War ends, Hex's new life begins, but first he faces an old enemy for the last time. It's the moment you've all been waiting for, and it ain't pretty! Don't say we didn't warn you!

Weird Western Quarterly #5 (2007)

Nighthawk: 'Til Things Are Brighter.

The soul of the Egyptian prince known as Khufu has passed through many lives, and, in each one, he's been a force for good...

or has he? For the first time anywhere, it's the untold origin of Nighthawk!

Weird Western Quarterly #6 (2007)

The Vigilante: A Lonely Soldier Away From Home

Weird Western Quarterly #8 (2007)

Windrunner: Inherit the Wind, Part 1 (of 2) - Secrets.

Before Barry Allen, before Jay Garrick, another man had been granted the power of the Speed Force. But who he was before he'd obtained those powers has always been a mystery...until now. A young man's quest for answers becomes entangled in magic and riddles in the first half of this 2-part tale!

Weird Western Quarterly #12 (2008)

It's the first annual Christmas issue of Weird Western Quarterly featuring a holiday tale with the Old West speedster, Windrunner as well as a Jonah Hex vignette, "Prelude to a Reckoning."

Weird Western Quarterly #9 (2008)

Windrunner: Inherit the Wind Part 2 (of 2) - Revelations.

Special extra-large issue! Torn between civilization and the wilderness, Chris Maxwell tries to find out where he fits...but when a strange old Indian shaman enters his life, he finds himself thrust into a power struggle beyond anything he can imagine, and a new legend of the West is born in a flash!

Justice League #15 (2008)

Lead Us Not Into Desecration, Part 1 (of 3).

What starts as a typical day for a group of Leaguers turns deadly as they are attacked by an unknown enemy. Who is the Lord of Time, and what diabolical scheme does he have that threatens both the past and the present with destruction? You won't want to miss what happens at the end of this issue!

Weird Western Quarterly #10 (2008)

Lead Us Not Into Desecration, Part 2 (of 3).

It's 1878: Do you know where your heroes are? Lost in time, their memories gone, four members of the Justice League have been marked for death by the Lord of Time. And if they want to make it

out of this one alive, they're gonna have to rely on the kindness of strangers...namely Jonah Hex, Scalphunter, Bat Lash, and making her DC2 debut, Cinnamon!

Justice League #16 (2008)

Lead Us Not Into Desecration, Part 3 (of 3).

It's past and present versus the future as the Justice League teams up with some of the greatest heroes of the Old West to take down the Lord of Time! Can they stop his scheme before it's too late, or will Arizona be blown right off the map?

Weird Western Quarterly #13 (2009)

Jonah Hex: Children of Heaven

When Jonah Hex gets caught up in a fight between Chinese railroad workers and their white bosses, he thinks it's a pretty straightforward affair. But after meeting a young Chinese woman named Mei Ling, his life gets more complicated than he likes.

Weird Western Quarterly #16 (2009)

Weird Western Quarterly: The Better Part of Valor.

Rogues Gallery #17 (2009)

Rogues Gallery: El Diablo.

Legends of the Old West still resonate even today. One of the most persistent legends is of El Diablo and Lazarus Lane.

Journey with us back in time to the yesteryear of the Old West... as Rogues Gallery continues to put its spotlight on our guest writers...

This time by the acclaimed Susan Hillwig.

Weird Western Quarterly #20 (2010)

Weird Western Quarterly: The Reckoning.

Driven to the brink by the events of the previous issue, Jonah Hex goes on the warpath...but at what cost?

Weird Western Quarterly #19 (2010)

Weird Western Quarterly: Domestic Disturbance.

Jonah Hex: Shades of Gray #1 (2010)

Jonah Hex: Shades of Gray: The First Day of the Rest of Your Life.

The Blackest Night is over, and the Brightest Day has begun for twelve newly-resurrected people...but unbeknownst to all, there's a thirteenth person that got brought back as well. A hero to some, a villain to others, Jonah Hex once again walks amongst the living, and Death itself is a closer companion than ever!

Jonah Hex: Shades of Gray #2 (2010)

Jonah Hex: Shades of Gray: Back In Black.

Wait a minute, how in blazes can we have a second issue if Hex was killed in the first? Well, y'see, that's the funny thing...

What, you think we're gonna spoil the surprise here? Go read the issue and find out for yourself!

Jonah Hex: Shades of Gray #3 (2010)

Jonah Hex: Shades of Gray.

What started out as a quiet visit to Paradise Corners has turned into a big mess, and now Jonah has to decide between running for his life or making up for past mistakes.

Weird Western Quarterly #21 (2011)

Weird Western Quarterly: Brothers in Arms.

In the midst of the Civil War, Scalphunter and Matt Savage try to help a mysterious black woman ferrying slaves out of the South, while circumstances beyond their control threaten to drive the brothers apart.

Weird Western Quarterly #22 (2011)

Weird Western Quarterly: How Can I Miss You If You Won't Go Away?

Bat Lash once again crosses paths with Penny "Dreadful" Dreasney. Has the gambler learned his lesson from their last encounter? Yeah, I don't think so either.

Weird Western Quarterly #23 (2012)

Weird Western Quarterly: At War With the Devil, Part One.

As the North and the South begin to clash, Windrunner finds himself on the front lines of a different, more personal war. When the smoke clears at the end of this issue, you'll know this is only the beginning of a battle that's been a long time coming.



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