

Death
of the
Drunkard

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CHAPTER ONE

No crime is more heinous than murder. That is without question. Nonetheless, what particularly grieved me about the murder of Mr. Thomas Hewitt was that it was utterly needless. The state of Mr. Hewitt's dissipation was such that, with some patience, the malefactor's ends would have been achieved in but a month or two and no one else would have died.

I stood with Mrs. Hewitt on the street that night outside of the new social hall here in Los Angeles, in close conference regarding her husband. In fact, it was very early in the morning of December 1, in the year of Our Lord, 1872, the clock having struck midnight some minutes before. We had been at a fete being held by Mrs. Glassell in the hall. Mr. Hewitt had disgraced himself by getting very sick all over the ballroom floor. Mr. Judson and Mr. Jessup had been kind enough to help Mr. Hewitt from the room to his buggy, hitched in front of the hall, and both had returned to the party.

I pulled Mrs. Hewitt several paces away so that Mr. Hewitt would not hear us as we waited for her foreman, Mr. Ledbetter, to come drive the two of them home.

"Your husband should not have come," I said softly.

I am a medical doctor and had been tending to Mr. Hewitt, who was in the final weeks of liver disease.

“I know, but he insisted,” she said, weeping freely. “My poor daughters. I don’t know how they will be able to show their faces at school after tonight. And with their exams so close.”

I glanced back at the hall. Social ostracization was a very real possibility after such a humiliating event. As terribly difficult as it would be for Mrs. Hewitt’s daughters, such shame could also spread to the buggy-building business the family had, with disastrous consequences.

“Pray forgive my unseemly display.”

“There, there,” I said, patting her arm. “As tried as you have been, especially this evening, I don’t doubt that you are strained to your very limit.”

“I’m afraid it’s not only that.” She applied the handkerchief to her eyes. “Yes, Mr. Hewitt has been a considerable trial to me, and especially after tonight’s utter mortification. But now that his demise seems imminent, I find that I have a far greater affection for him than I would have thought.”

We both wore solid capes over our party finery, I, in my yellow silk polonaise gown with flowered trims, she wearing a neat shade of blue. She was a tiny woman who could be quite fierce when angered. Indeed, I had been surprised that she had contained herself after Mr. Hewitt’s gross indiscretion, but then I remembered that she kept her temper in check when among the pueblo’s society.

I could barely see her in the darkness, as the street lamp outside the hall was not lit, although it should have been. The night air was crisp and cold. We’d had hints of rain

coming, but none had actually fallen. I patted her arm again as she dabbed at her eyes.

The report of gunfire very close by startled both of us into screaming, although our cries were drowned out by panicked neighing from several nearby horses. The dark figure on the other side of the Hewitt's buggy fired several times. Alas, I was so startled that I failed to count how many. The figure hurried away into the darkness, a cloak or coat flapping in the light breeze.

"Thomas!" Mrs. Hewitt screamed, this time even more loudly.

The buggy's horse neighed again and reared in terror, snapping the rein that had held it to the hitching rail. Fortunately, the horse did not bolt and run. I had to hold Mrs. Hewitt back as she tried to run toward the buggy.

Mr. Judson appeared from the hall's front lobby. He leaped toward the horse, which continued to stamp and neigh. It took a moment to calm the beast, but Mr. Judson managed it, then retied it with the other rein. The Glasell's buggy nearby rattled as its horse continued to neigh loudly.

"I heard gunfire and screaming," Mr. Judson gasped as he approached me and Mrs. Hewitt.

"I'm afraid so," I said.

Mrs. Hewitt wrested herself from my arms and ran to where her husband's corpse lay on the floor of the buggy, having been jostled there when the horse reared.

There was no moon that night, but in the faint glint of starlight, I could see that the bullets had landed in Mr. Hewitt's chest. Mrs. Hewitt howled in misery. Other party-goers emerged from the hall, and confusion reigned until Mr. Lomax, one of our policemen, appeared from

the police station with Mr. Resendez, another policeman, close behind. Mr. Lomax, tall and square-jawed, took over getting the crowd settled, whilst I pulled Mrs. Hewitt away from the buggy. Mr. Resendez, of average height, with black hair and an unruly beard, found a serving boy to alert Mr. Sutton, the undertaker.

Several of the women who had been at the party surrounded Mrs. Hewitt and started walking with her toward the house next to the buggy manufactory that Mr. Hewitt owned. I suppose I should say that Mrs. Hewitt owned it as well, as she had the primary responsibility of running the place. Regrettably, Mr. Hewitt was seldom sober enough, although that had been a closely guarded secret. Mrs. Hewitt was inconsolable. As I watched the women walk away, I briefly considered sending for my medical bag and giving Mrs. Hewitt a dose of laudanum, but decided against going to her house. Instead, I followed Mr. Lomax and Mr. Resendez as they walked the horse and buggy to the Suttons' home and funeral parlor.

My dear friend, Angelina Sutton, stood in the doorway to the back room, where she prepared the bodies for burial, wearing a blue chambray day dress buttoned askew, her dark hair in its night braid hanging down her back. Mr. Sutton, a somber fellow barely taller than his petite wife, stood behind her with a glowing lamp. He gave it to Angelina, then went to help the policemen with the body.

"Another murder," Angelina sighed.

We did not see, as one wag put it, a murder a day in the pueblo. But we saw it often enough. Los Angeles, at the time, was still very rough and there was a great deal of violence among the many saloons and in the streets.

"I'm afraid so," I said. "Mr. Hewitt, no less."

Angelina gasped. "Oh, dear! What happened?"

"He was shot," I said, swallowing. "I didn't see by whom. It was too dark."

"Poor Mrs. Hewitt." Angelina stepped back from the door as the men brought the body inside.

"Indeed," I grumbled. "Well, I won't keep you from your rest." Both of us were accustomed to being roused from our beds at all hours of the night, but that is not to say that we enjoyed it. "Besides, as I saw the deed being done, I suspect there will not be much to learn from the body itself."

Angelina's eyebrows rose, but then she yawned. "Excuse me. Well, we shall see."

"I will try to come by after services," I said.

Angelina nodded, and I left to find that Ramon Ortiz was waiting for me in the alley with my buggy and my roan mare, Daisy. Ramon was the oldest son of Sebastiano Ortiz. Sebastiano and his brother Enrique were my partners in the winery and vineyard that I owned. Ramon, who was in his early twenties at that time, worked at the Pico House Hotel during the days and some evenings. However, that evening he had chosen to be my driver for the party at the social hall.

There was a faint whiff of pomade about Ramon as he helped me into the buggy. I guessed that there was some lass to whom the young man was paying his attentions, and my being occupied with the party had given him a chance to offer a buggy ride to her and, quite probably, some other friends. I didn't mind as long as I was fetched in a timely manner. He got onto the buggy's box, then clucked the reins.

“Who died?” Ramon asked over his shoulder as the buggy began to move.

“They didn’t tell you at the hall?”

“No. Mr. Medrano simply said that he saw you heading to the funeral parlor with Mr. Lomax and Mr. Resendez.”

“Mr. Medrano?” I frowned. “He wasn’t at the party.”

Ramon shrugged. “He was on the street, looking at the crowd near the social hall.”

“That is very interesting.” I mused, wondering if Mr. Medrano could have been the figure I’d seen or if he’d seen something.

“Why?” Ramon asked.

“Mr. Hewitt was shot and killed, I’m afraid.” I said.

“The buggy maker? Why would anybody kill him?”

“I can’t imagine why,” I replied. “I hope I will not be expected to find out.”

Ramon laughed. “I’m sure you will. There is nobody else in the pueblo who is as good at that sort of thing as you are.”

I couldn’t help letting out a very unladylike snort. Alas, he was right in that I had found out more than one killer. Even more aggravating was that I was already wondering who might have some sort of grudge or complaint against Mr. Hewitt, who, in spite of being a drunkard, was largely inoffensive otherwise. Mr. Medrano was another buggy maker in the pueblo, but I couldn’t see how killing Mr. Hewitt would benefit him, as it was clear that there was more than enough work for both manufactories, and that Mr. Hewitt’s manufactory managed quite well without his active oversight.

On Sunday mornings, my habit was to sleep quite late. Given my medical practice and the fact that Saturday

nights were generally the longest, I frequently saw the dawn break before going to sleep. That Sunday, I had gotten to bed in comparatively good time, and so, rose at an earlier hour than usual for a Sunday. My maid, Marisol Velasquez, got me dressed in my ochre visiting dress for services at the Congregational church, but well ahead of when I needed to be there. I found the pan dulces that Olivia, my cook and Sebastiano's wife, had left out for me. The rest of my extended household, which included both of the Ortiz brothers and their wives, their children, and several ranch hands, some of whom also had wives and children on the rancho, were all Catholic, and as such, did not break their nightly fast until after services at their church. I hesitated, but then ate and headed out to the pueblo and the social hall with my spirits in considerable turmoil.

There not having been any rain in quite some time, the earth around the hitching rail outside the front of the hall was packed quite solidly. There was some dust, but that was filled with the prints of all manner of boots, ladies' slippers, and hoofs. Sighing, I looked toward the back of the hall, then headed that way, my eyes on the ground in front of me. So engrossed was I that I nearly stumbled into Mr. Lomax.

"Good Heavens!" I gasped.

He smiled. "I see you're looking for the same thing I am."

"I dare say I am." I looked at him fondly. He was a good friend. "And what, if anything, have you found?"

"Nothing." He shook his head, then yawned. "Pray forgive me, Mrs. Wilcox. Had jail duty last night."

Which meant he had been up all night, as Mr. Lomax was far too principled to sleep on duty.

“Oh, my goodness. Why, in Heaven’s name, are you not headed to hearth and home at this very instant?”

“I am,” he replied, laconic, as always. “Just thought I’d stop here first and see if there was anything to find.”

“Alas, I have found nothing here,” I said. “Have you learned anything else?”

He shook his head.

“Oh. I have found out that Mr. Medrano was on the street outside the hall just after the shots were fired,” I said.

“I saw him.” Mr. Lomax nodded. “And that big German fellow. Gluck?”

“I should hate to think he had anything to do with this.” I frowned. “He’s a laborer, is he not? Do you know for whom he’s working?”

Mr. Lomax shook his head again.

“Well, I suppose I shall have to find out,” I said. I smiled at Mr. Lomax. “And how is Mrs. Lomax doing?”

His eyes lit up and he smiled broadly. “Quite well.”

“And the children?”

“Growing like weeds. Hannah has a cold, though.”

“All too common this time of year.” I reached for my leather satchel that I carried with me everywhere. “I do believe I have some lozenges in here that should help with the cough. And they taste quite pleasant, too.”

“No spirits?” Mr. Lomax chuckled at the memory of my first meeting with his daughter.

“None whatsoever.”

I handed him the small tin and sent him to his home while I went to services. For a change, Reverend Elmwood did not fulminate on the various evils in the pueblo, but

instead chose to preach on Jesus meek and mild. I was relieved, but still paid little attention. Actually, it is perhaps a sad commentary on the good reverend's abilities that I actually paid more attention to him when he was fulminating that I might eventually point out the errors in his text.

That Sunday morning, however, I could think of little but the murder of Mr. Hewitt. I had no reason to consider it, no personal involvement in the act beyond that I had been a witness to the foul deed. Mrs. Hewitt and I were friends, but without any particular intimacy. As for justice, Mr. Hewitt was not some forgotten and forlorn soul without anyone to see to it that justice was done on his behalf. Indeed, many in the pueblo would be clamoring for it.

I tried to convince myself that I had a duty to see to it that the killer was caught before he (or she) killed someone else. I had certainly seen enough of that happen. In addition, I was horrified by how callous the act had seemed. However, as much as I wanted to excise that bit of civic cancer, I felt a deep reluctance to engage in the pursuit.

I did not get much of an opportunity to consider that particular bit of thinking. Immediately after services, a young woman hurried up to me.

"Mrs. Wilcox?" Maria Carranza was a timid thing, slight, with glossy, black hair and russet skin. "Mr. Brownlow asked me to fetch you. The girls are sick again."

Mr. Brownlow was a title attorney who had arrived in the pueblo the previous summer with his three little daughters and Miss Ritter, their nursemaid. His wife had died the year before. Miss Carranza was the housemaid, errand girl, and general lackey, although I had no reason to believe that she was treated harshly in any way. From

what I had seen, Mr. Brownlow was a kind master, and his housekeeper and cook, Miss Roberts, no less so.

After gleaning from the maid that the girls had no fever, nor any symptoms that would require my immediate presence, I sent Miss Carranza back to her household with the reassurance that I would be there as soon as I could. Sick children do tend to overflow with all manner of noxious things, and I did not want to soil my good visiting dress unless I had no choice. Marisol, and her immediate predecessor, Juanita Navarro, had been grieved many, many times by the many odorous stains and spots that often decorated even my best dresses.

I dined with my household. We had dinner early on Sundays thanks to the before mass fast. Then Rodolfo Sanchez, one of the hands on Rancho de Las Flores, the proper name of the vineyard I owned, saddled Daisy, my roan mare. Rodolfo was a very large man with a back that was bent over, black hair, and a drooping mustache and whiskers.

I should, perhaps mention, that we commonly used our Christian names among ourselves on the rancho. My late and greatly lamented mother had always treated our family servants with great respect and love. I had endeavored to do the same after my late and unlamented husband dragged me out to Los Angeles in 1860, bought the rancho, then promptly died. But the practice of using our Christian names began when I would call for one of the Ortiz brothers and without fail, the brother I did not require was the one who responded. Because most of the ranch hands were related in one way or another, many had the same last name, and so the practice continued.

When I arrived at the Brownlow house, Mr. Brownlow did not wait for Miss Roberts to open the door, but opened it himself. He was of medium height, and somewhat portly, though not excessively so. He ran his hand through his light brown hair, and the matching beard quivered with his anxiety.

“Miss Carranza said you did not think it was serious,” he said.

“It very probably isn’t.” I followed him to the stairs of the wood-framed house. “Still, you were right to send for me.”

“You are kindness, itself, Mrs. Wilcox.”

I left him in the hallway of the house. The poor man was prone to fretting over every sneeze or snuffle from his daughters. Given that the illness that had killed his wife had started with very mild symptoms, his concern was not entirely unwarranted.

The girls, Pearl, Carrie, and Ada, were quite charming and very polite. And they were feeling rather poorly, indeed. All three had nasty coughs and sore throats, but there was no fever, and the youngest, Ada, who was four years old, was still playing with her dolls. She, like her middle sister, Carrie, who was six, had perfectly golden curls. Pearl, who was seven, had her father’s light brown hair and a grave mien.

The room was whitewashed and very clean, with a cheerful patchwork quilt on the large featherbed that the girls shared. Mrs. Ritter, a large, brown-haired German woman, smiled when she saw me, as did all three of the girls.

I examined them and determined that while it was possible that their colds could develop into something worse,

it seemed unlikely. I told Mrs. Ritter to rinse their noses out with warm salt water, to apply a mustard plaster, and to call me if any one of them began to become feverish. There was little else to be done.

“Mrs. Wilcox, will you come again?” Pearl asked me as I readied my bag.

“Any time you need me, dearest.” Smiling, I touched her cheek.

“I’m glad,” she said.

“Good-bye?” Ada looked up, tears welling up in her eyes.

“It’s all right, Miss Ada,” I told her, stroking her fine, golden hair. “I will be back. You just be a good little girl, and do as your nurse tells you, so that you get well.”

Ada sniffled and coughed, but fortunately, did not burst into tears. I made my way downstairs, where Mr. Brownlow paced.

“Well?” he asked, his eyebrows rising in fear.

I smiled. “It is naught but a catarrh.”

“But...”

“Yes, it is possible that the congestion could develop into something grave. But catarrh doesn’t usually, and Mrs. Ritter knows to summon me at the first fever.”

“Mrs. Wilcox, I cannot thank you enough,” he sighed.

He most certainly could have, and I cleared my throat with a tight smile to remind him of that.

“Oh!” he gasped, digging into his pocket. “Pray forgive me. Here is your fee.”

He produced a dollar and two quarters.

“Thank you.” I smiled.

I will admit, I was prone to extending my services as charity to those who would find it difficult to pay, such

as the Lomax family or other impoverished families in the pueblo. However, it was the fellows such as Mr. Brownlow, who could well afford even my increased fee, who inevitably forgot to offer it.

I went to check on my other ailing patients, including a case of pneumonia that had only worsened overnight. Mr. O'Hare, a ranch hand, coughed hard as his fellows looked on, and the fever raged. I listened to his lungs and shook my head.

"I'm afraid it won't be much longer now," I told the five men.

"There's no hope at all?" one of them asked.

"There is always hope, I suppose," I said. "However, if by some miracle he does survive this, his lungs will be forever scarred."

I looked down at the coughing man, my heart filling with sadness.

The men shuffled, but between them, collected sufficient coins for my usual fee. One followed me outside the hands' barracks and helped me onto Daisy.

I made my way from the ranch to the center of the pueblo and the Suttons' home and funeral parlor. Angelina was in the back room, and happy to see me. Indeed, her eyes glowed with mischief.

"I believe you said last night that there would not be much to be learned from the body," she told me.

"Well, given that I was right there when it happened, it certainly seemed unlikely." I smiled as I shook my head. "But based on your expression, you must have found something, after all."

She shrugged. "Well, it isn't much, but it is something. I counted six holes in his chest."

“As in, the killer fired all of the bullets he had.”

“Exactly. And it looks as though it was from a fairly large six-shooter fired close by.”

I closed my eyes, trying to envision the scene.

“It’s hard to say how close the killer actually was,” I said.

“He was on the other side of the buggy.”

“But one thing we can say,” Angelina said. “Is that the killer was most probably very angry with Mr. Hewitt.”