

Smoke

Lisa Gaines

The Grizzly Inn. A broken down excuse for a bar in the middle of a conglomeration of manufactured homes, tract houses, and hundred year old derelicts. Hard to believe people really lived in places like Beckwourth, California.

“I’m not sure how it happened,” Carl said. “One night I met this girl and the next thing I know we’re married.”

I nodded as Carl’s gaze roved around the room. Wasn’t much to see far as I was concerned. The wood rafters sagged and faded paper peeled from the walls. Cigarette smoke hung blue and heavy in the air, mingled with the pervasive sting of unwashed beer glasses and the enticing smell of aged urine.

All in all, not on my list of favorite places. Hell, the place looked ready for demolition – except for the heavy oak bar. A placard on the wall stated the entire piece had been carved out of a single tree, and the year “1889” was branded in the wood. An old man polished the flat top like it was gold, rubbing one spot over and over until he could see his desiccated liver spots reflected back at him, then moving down a foot and repeating the process.

A man stumbled off a bar stool. I waited for the inevitable crash on the floor – the man was built like a linebacker and had been pouring booze down his throat for as long as we’d been sitting here, a good two, almost three hours. He’d been quiet about it, though, and as I looked at the blue black dragon’s tail that wove up over what must have been twenty-two inch biceps, disappeared under a stained tank top and reappeared on the opposite arm as a head vomiting blue black flames, the man caught the edge of the bar and his balance at the same time. His reflection stared back at him from the mirror behind the neatly lined rows of liquor bottles. He nodded at the bartender, then strode out.

I grunted. Wouldn’t be long before that guy was sleeping it off in a tank somewhere, provided the cops in this little burg were on their toes. I looked back at Carl, my soon-to-be-ex partner.

“Now she’s disappeared, and I . . .”

He paused and I watched the way his eyes shifted back and forth, glancing at me as a child looks to his parent for support, then sliding away again as if afraid that support would be withheld. Or expecting it to be withheld.

I shook out a cigarette. He stared at the pack so long I offered him one, but he declined as I'd known he would. "Damn stuff makes me sick to my stomach."

But I knew there was another reason. And that reason bulged just beneath his arm – his dad's old .38 Smith & Wesson revolver tucked into a shoulder holster. He should have taken the time and the money to have his suit coat cut properly. A good tailor could make a jacket hang so the gun would never show. Course it would help if he'd carry something a little more appropriate for the job, like my Glock .45 semi-automatic. But details were not important to Carl.

Details were everything to me.

"Go on," I said. It was time he fessed up. Time to get this whole mess over with and get on with both of our lives. I took a drag on my cigarette, letting the smoke burn in my lungs and throat, enjoying the way Carl watched with naked envy. Then I let out the smoke – slow and even – puffed a few smoke rings, and waited.

Carl studied the smoke rings as they drifted past his nose, sniffed like he had a cold. I could feel his tension coiled like a snake. Hard. Tight. Ready to strike.

He shook his head, freeing himself from the fascination of the smoke. "Can't even remember the name of the place. Just remember her. Tall and thin. Too thin, but she moved with a grace that reminded me of a deer I once saw." A frown crossed his face and he looked at me. "I shot that deer."

I watched Carl struggle with words and waited, trying to keep my mind and attention focused on his struggle. Now was not the time to lose my concentration. My gaze drifted back to the bulge beneath Carl's jacket. In my mind's eye I saw his hand creeping beneath that jacket, pulling the pistol from its place.

"Anyway," Carl reached out and grabbed his beer from the table. Took a long swallow. Set the beer back down. The sound of glass on glass rang in my head and for a moment my vision blurred. I wiped a hand across my face. Probably didn't get enough sleep last night. Carl had been restless on the couch in the other room, and I had my mind full of today.

"Where was I?" Carl asked.

“You said she was like a deer,” I replied, leaving out the killing part.

“Yeah, like a deer. She walked over and sat down beside me, pretty as you please.” Again his concentration broke and he looked at me. “Who said that ‘pretty as you please?’” He crossed his leg, stared at his foot bobbing up and down.

I stared at his foot too. Things were not going well. I took another drag on my cigarette, blew the smoke directly into Carl’s face. The puzzled expression faded, replaced by a blankness that scared even me.

“The girl, Carl. You were telling me about the girl.”