

The Lula Belle, on the Mississippi

Monday, May 10, 1:20 a.m.

Finkle burned hotter than the boilers he was tending, and that was saying something. His encounter with the strangers still stung him—and not just the wounds from that damned owl or the hand getting stomped by the skinny fellow. He had wrapped the claw cuts with a strip of cloth he had salvaged from his locker. It wasn't real clean, but it stopped the bleeding.

The captain had sent him to the boilers soon after the incident. Smitty's take was that the blame rested squarely on Finkle's shoulders. The fat Scot was always siding with whoever was on the other side, when he should be backing Finkle's pot—he was courting Finkle's sister, after all, and that had to count for *something*.

The captain's idea was that Finkle would have time to cool off whilst manning the boiler, and to Finkle, that was an unjust punishment considering it was that young pup's rudeness that started the whole thing. Besides, toiling in front of a fire box and cooling off were wildly contrary notions. It was then he realized he was the only soul aboard who not an idiot.

Hours passed as he fed the box, restocked the fuel, checked the water levels and emptied the ashpan. Then it all went on again, and again, and again. He kept the steam as hot as he was. Finkle toyed with the idea of letting the steam drop just to vex his captain, but the Lula Belle was all he had and despite his low standards in life, he did have some.

Night had fallen and while he was allowed to light a lantern, Captain Smitty had warned him about carrying it outside the boiler room. He peered at the glass water check tubes and saw, slowly, more and more mud coming in, which was an inevitability.

They were rolling down the *Mississippi*, after all. A high mix of mud would clog up the valves and thus the flow of water, but Finkle wagered this was not near being the thick slop that could do any damage. He stared through the small, thick glass windows watching the mud swirl and become diluted.

He tapped them ineffectually.

He had been offered the dinner prepared by the reprobate Silas, and despite the alluring aroma, he refused to sup on *that* man's creation. His only company—and it was welcome—was the bottle of whiskey he had pilfered last week from the captain's cabin. Unlike the company of the new passengers, the liquor was smooth and powerful and settled easy upon him.

He had drained the bottle pretty well and soon was having to concentrate quite hard on keeping wood and coal in the furnace. In fact, it was getting to be a challenge to simply open and close the heavy furnace doors. His back had long ago passed from seizing pains to general numbness and his shoulder muscles were an achy, tangled knot. The pain fed the hate like the man fed the boilers.

The coal and whiskey mixed and made everything in his mind bubble wildly. He ran through many retaliations as he shoveled in and shoveled out. It simmered down to one thing: he had been wronged. He was clawed, beaten and humiliated and his knife and hat were tossed into the *Mississippi*. Only one thing could make it better. They owed him a hat, and by God, he was to have that boy's new Stetson.

He reckoned the scoundrels were most likely asleep. He had gotten the layout of their encampment during his brief visit. He could slip right down mid deck, liberate *his* hat and be back before anyone was the wiser. Yes, it was the thing he would do. He shoveled in one last load of coal for each fire box. He used a wrench to bang on the

tanks to hear the levels of water in each. The starboard boiler was a wee bit low, but he decided it was enough until he returned with his reparation.

He entertained the idea of bringing his shovel for protection from the bullies, but worried he might alert them by whacking it against the deck in the dark. He set the battered shovel outside the boiler room door and slipped along the cabins down the main deck.

Despite the slapping of the water against the hull, and the pistons and other machinery churning, Finkle thought his shoes scuffed the deck loudly. He removed his footwear, nearly falling over, and padded barefoot across the deck.

He knew the planks like the back of his hand and therefore was able to plot a course across the old boards free from unwanted squeaks and groans. But he also knew he was a bit drunk, so he prayed some too.

On the edge of the boat, Finkle nearly stumbled into the fellow crew member on watch there. He could have reached out and touched him. He did not, yet he was so quiet the other man did not notice him—or the fellow was asleep at the pole. He could not tell which crewmate it was.

He peered up into the eaves of the pilot house. He wondered if that damned owl was up under there watching him. He would not be caught by surprise again by that molting sack of feathers.

Finkle crept to the stranger's tent, knelt down and slowly lifted the tarp, slipping under and immediately crouching stock still. Drunk and barely able to see straight in good light, this darkened tent was a struggle, but when he squinted just right he made out a couple shapes.

He found the slender lad asleep and Finkle's new hat lying next to him. It was opposite from where Finkle had snuck in, and instead of risking unwanted attention

by backing out and going around, he decided to try and reach it over the sleeping youth.

He held his breath and stretched across, being careful not to touch him. His fingers grazed the edge of the fine felt brim. He could not pull it closer without falling on the boy.

Finkle felt a sharp object poking up forcefully at the center of his ribcage from under the boy's rough blanket. Then he heard the familiar sharp, thick, double-click of a well-oiled pistol being cocked. He saw the boy's head turn up to him in the darkness. He instinctively pulled back an inch or two, but got no further, for another object was pressed against his neck below his left earlobe. It was cold and he felt the vibration run through it as he heard another frightful double-click.

All breath escaped him. Then, when he figured things could not get more dire, he heard a stirring behind him—a soft ruffle of clothing—and then a third weapon, this one behind and below his right ear, and the vexing, increasingly common *click, click*.

"I cannot see your face, Finkle, but I dearly wish I could, so I might see your expression," Silas said. "I wager it is priceless."

"How can you be sure it's him?" Herc asked. "Hold that—I can smell him now. No other man aboard has that wet rat stink about him. You was warned, boy. Everybody done heard it. I would be well within my rights to paint the inside of this here tent with what little brains you do have."

"H-h-hold on now, fellas! This is all a misunderstanding between me and the boy," Finkle sniveled. "I can explain everything. Let's not get all emotional and tense up any fingers . . ."

Silas patted him down for weapons while Emma rose and lit a lantern they had hung from a beam. All three had their pistols trained on Finkle as the light grew. His face was unrecognizable from the layers of smeared and streaked coal dust. He shook visibly and a dark wet spot grew at the crotch of his already dirty trousers.

”Awww, Finkle!” Herc complained upon seeing the urine stain. ”Back out of here real slow like—but not too slow, for you may flood out our supplies.”

Preacher stood asleep at the port side of the Lula Belle near the bow. The rhythm of water and the fatigue from working without rest since late last evening had long since taken him under in slumber. He drifted awake to the sound of voices from the nearby tent.

Ezra Bean, the frightening owl, gave a hoot from below the pilot house, swooped into view and circled the crane. Preacher hated that bird, for he had seen what it had done to Finkle. He didn’t care much for Finkle, either, but out of the two, the bird irked him more. He made out the bird’s dark silhouette against the clouds and ducked every time Ezra Bean came around his way.

It was after the third quick circle of the owl that Preacher realized he was no longer holding the sounding pole. It had slipped from his grasp while he dozed. Shame temporarily outweighed panic or duty, for he did not call out to Captain Smitty or anyone else. He no longer knew how deep they ran and kept silent about it. He turned to find a lantern lit inside the tent. He watched as the shadows rippled across the canvas. He spied Finkle in the lamp glow as he came backing out of the tent with his hands raised up over his head.

Inside the unoccupied boiler room, the high mix of wood and coal in the fire boxes heated the boilers to an alarming degree while the water supply valves clogged from more mud coming in with the river water.

Up in the pilot house, Smitty's night sight was not so much hampered as it was completely obliterated by the fool passengers Silas and Herc, who had lit a lamp against his strict orders. He saw nothing but long shadows playing down the deck and figures moving about outside their tent. Enraged, he left the side of the pilotwheel and darted out of the house. He leaned down and bellowed, "Douse that light, ye fools! I cannae see the river!"

"You could not see a thing before, anyways!" Herc shouted back, still holding his pistol on Finkle. "It is a true wonder we ain't run aground yet!"

"Smitty!" Silas said, gripping his own weapon tighter. "You best slow us down so we can deal with this development here!"

Sharp, who was positioned farther down the port side from Preacher, could not see what was happening but realized his brother had not called out a depth in some time. He was about to yell to him when his own sounding pole struck bottom and was nearly ripped from his grasp. He quickly drew it out of the water, counting the notches cut along the pole to find their depth.

They were drifting up on the eastern shore—and fast. He sounded a warning, but Smitty's shouting drowned him out.

"I am the captain here! We dinnae stop till we reach my wreck! Now cut that light and get back to your posts. And you two," Smitty could be seen faintly, belly hanging over the rail and finger jabbing the air violently. "You two get your arses up here so you can explain yourselves." He spied Finkle. Shocked at seeing him, he cried, "What are ye doing out here! Who is tending my boilers!"

The lower valve of the port side boiler was completely clogged with mud and the upper valve sputtered and spit a viscous shower out into the tank's quickly evaporating water level. The starboard boiler was beginning to follow suit.

Finkle backed away from his captors when Herc warned, "Not another move, rat."

Finkle froze, looking up over his shoulder toward his captain, as if Smitty might reach down and swoop him off the deck and up to safety.

Smitty reiterated his orders, but in much coarser language.

Finkle stole another few steps back.

"I'm warning you . . ." Silas hissed, raising his gun, level to Finkle's eyes.

Ezra Bean circled tighter and lower, but his arc swept close to Silas and Herc and not the intruder. His sharp cries went out across the wide river and returned as faint, haunting echoes.

Struggling to fathom the events unfolding across the deck, Preacher was trapped in shock and indecision when he heard the sounds of snapping twigs and night fauna rustling wildly behind him. He turned to the shoreline in time to get slapped in the face by a thick branch. He was blinded by white light with the impact and the rough bark scraped across his scalp and face, drawing blood instantly.

A loud, mournful groan came from deep inside the hull as the Lula Belle struck ground on the port bow. Wherever they were, all aboard lurched forward and then were immediately thrown back.

Silas and Herc scrambled to keep their feet under them and righted themselves.

Smitty would have flipped right over the top rail if he had not been gripping it so tightly in anger.

Preacher slipped overboard, yet managed to grab hold of the edge of the deck. Hanging from the side, his chest and legs scraped against the rust and jagged welds of the iron hull. He knew he swung over shallow depths, but he was afraid to let go, for the Lula Belle might draw off the shore and leave him stranded.

Sharp used his sounding pole as leverage to not be sent into the river. No longer able to see the dim shape of his brother, he dropped the pole into the water and ran to find him.

Emma, still in the tent, was struck by the lantern as it swayed wildly from the impact. Shadows swirled about the tent walls. The ship lurched backward and she fell to her knees, dodging a large crate sliding across the tent. She slipped the pistol into her holster as she struggled to make her way out to the deck.

With the Lula Belle atilt, the last of the water inside the boiler sloshed to the side, leaving the boiler plate bare and dry. The quivering droplets around the edge sizzled and bubbled away as the plate glowed red hot.

Smitty moved himself back into the pilot house hand-over-hand. He located the big bell pull in order to yank on it as a warning but realized the bell was already clanging loudly with the violent movement of the boat. He reached for the next bell to sound the engine room. This cord with its small weighted brass ring swung about wildly. Smitty stabbed the air with his fist and snatched it firmly.

He yanked furiously on the cord and moved to the tall brass speaking tube, that tunneled through the deck to the men below. "Full reverse, boys! We've grounded!"

Muffled cries of distress in the engine room poured back up through the tube.

The stern wheel had stopped. The paddles dug into the packed mud of the river bank. The wood planks groaned and cracked as the pitman arms struggled to turn the wheel. Mud roiled to the surface and thick clumps of wet grass hung from the blades into the water.

Sharp slapped at his brother's arms, slick with blood and sweat. Preacher's hands clung to the edge and slowly, Sharp hauled his brother up. Preacher flopped a leg up



over the deck, but could not gain further purchase aboard, hanging partway off as he paused to recoup some strength.

The nearby mule, who was tethered to the superstructure of the Lula Belle, brayed and kicked in fear. As they struggled for Preacher's safety, the young men had to contend with dodging the animal's powerful hind legs lashing out over their heads.

At the crane, the other horses whinnied and ripped violently at their restraints. One by one, they bucked and fought. They managed to kick loose their light hobbles. They swung their necks hard enough to loosen the reins from the cranework. In their tight surroundings, Silas' mount backed up, still kicking. Herc's horse reared up and tried climbing over the back end of Shot, Emma's pony. Shot, in turn, made a tight circle and tried to push past the other two. They were free.

"Herc! You two reign them in before they run off boat and drown themselves," Silas ordered.

Herc and Emma, speaking in calming tones with hands held high, carefully closed around the agitated horses. Instead of being placated, the horses turned toward the bow and one, by one, funneled under the front end of the crane. Once out through the other side, they stopped at the starboard edge and milled nervously about, not wanting to venture over into the river.

The deck hand on post there, completely terror-stricken, raised the pole like a lance to protect himself from the approaching herd. This alone held the horses from running along toward the aft. Herc yelled at the man to back away. The crewman dropped his pole in the river and took off running back down the deck. Herc and Emma crossed between Silas and the tent to corral the horses there.

Silas kept his weapon on Finkle, but in the time he took to look away to his companions, the would-be thief turned and was running back to the boiler room. Silas,

not wanting to kill the man over a hat, fired a warning shot past Finkle which struck the handle of the boiler room shovel, splintering it in two. Finkle froze in his tracks and turned slowly back to Silas.

Smitty was not one to panic, but, red-faced and spitting, he shoved his face into the engine room speaker tube. "Cannae you hear me, ye bastards! Reverse. The Engines!"

The sound of the engines below did finally cease. He cocked an experienced ear, but did not hear them begin to reverse.

There was no steam to push the pistons—forward or reverse. The current caught at the aft of the hull and through the planks of the sternwheel. This pushed the Lula Belle out away from the banks, but drove the bow further ashore.

Herc and Emma had managed to snag the reins. He was holding onto his two horses' while she finally snatched Shot's. She rubbed his neck to calm him, but his eyes were wild and he pawed nervously at the deck.

All aboard felt another lurch as the bow pushed up on the sand.

This slight shift caused Preacher to lose his grip and he slipped into the shallow water up to his chest. Sharp, crying in fear for his brother, flailed wildly to reach him.

The vibration of the last impact dislodged a chunk of mud from the starboard boiler intake valve. A mix of brown and clean water spurting into the tank. It slapped and hissed against the scalding boiler plate, bursting into steam on contact. Soon the last of the mud was flushed from the tubes and the water gushed in and evaporated instantly. The pressure built rapidly.

Outside, against the wall of the boiler room, the huge pile of coal shifted again, spilling around the room and sending out an immense, low cloud of grey coal dust.

Silas and Finkle were rods apart in their stand-off. Finkle twitched and Silas lifted his gun a touch higher. Though the only light on deck was from the lamp inside the tent, Finkle saw Silas was eyeing him down the sight, signifying his next shot would not be a warning.

Smitty broke from his pleadings to the engine room and tried to move the steerwheel, but to no avail. The rudders were mud stuck.

Ezra Bean gave one last long, haunting call to his friends and wheeled away, out over the river. Most of the crew were either still inside the engine room or out below the pilot house, where they crowded for news or instruction.

A horrifying screech from the boiler room chilled all who heard it to the bone.

The faulty plate Romeo had urged Smitty to repair buckled and bowed. Both behemoth beasts of machinery started to vibrate and swell.

Finkle inched his way backward to stand directly outside the open boiler room door. He glanced inside. Silas watched him closely in the lantern glow spilling from the room. Finkle's face drew into a rictus of fear, with wide, whiskey-soaked eyes glinting in the lamplight. A loud crack came from inside the room and Finkle leaned forward, about to run toward Silas.

The fire box door nearest him bent under the weight of the contorting boiler. Before he took one step, the door swung loose, spilling out hot embers which lit the stirred-up coal dust.

Silas watched in horror as a low cloud of fire belched out of the boiler room door, engulfing Finkle in a ball of flames. Though it lasted but a second, Finkle's clothes burned onto his skin as he ran. Silas saw the singed flesh through the open patches of smoldering cloth and wondered if he should shoot the poor fellow right there to end his suffering.

In unison, both boilers exploded. A roar erupted from the boiler room like a hundred claps of thunder. The very air around the ship was slammed away. A blast of steam and fire shot out from the open door. Silas saw the wooden door frame burst outward, sending shards of lumber flying into the river.

Finkle stumbled and ran blindly toward the river, but he lost his bearings. The force of the explosion was so great, Finkle was flung like a smoldering rag doll out into the river.

The entire boat, fore to aft shuddered violently.

Silas spun toward his companions, holstering his weapon as he ran.

The deck bucked and the entire building structure of the boat bowed outward. Fire and steam flowed forth from every weak point. The walls burst outward and the upper decks were flung to the sky. What wood not splintered instantly was engulfed in flame as plank and shingle ripped through the air in all directions.

One large, hunk of wood zipped end over end above Silas' head and flew into the night.

The hull below was pushed downward at the center with such force, it cracked, splitting right down to the bottom. Water rushed into the bilge.

The front of the building was thrown forward, the entire section sweeping into the defenseless crew as they were flung away and pinned against the cranework. Other crew members were being ripped from the deck, arms and legs torn ligament from bone by either the sheer force of the explosions or by the fusillade of debris. Several more men were whipped out into the river, where they splashed, lifeless, or were tossed high up toward shore only to be impaled by branches or beaten by the treeline.

The mule struggled against his tether, but was struck in the head by a jagged block of lumber. Dead instantly, it slumped to the tilting floor, hind quarters sliding

over the port side edge. The ropes and bridle kept it hanging off the boat, suspended over the muddy banks.

The buck and sway of the riverboat was almost too much for Preacher. He clung to the edge of the boat as Sharp leapt up to his brother's outstretched hands. Preacher bounced off the hull and his clothes were weighed down by water. The slick blood and mud made it impossible to lock arms.

Sharp was helpless as Preacher slipped under, into the water. Still bullied about by the eruptions, the hull slid over him. Preacher's legs were instantly crushed between the iron bottom of the Lula Belle and the muddy banks. His face and head were just below the waterline, but he could not free himself. Sharp looked on in terror as his twin slapped his hands against the hull.

Sharp leapt from the boat into the water. He splashed about in fear and found Preacher, whose arms gripped his instantly. Sharp tried valiantly to yank him from the wreckage. Preacher's hand clawed at his brother's arms, but Sharp had not the strength. The bubbles of air escaping Preacher's lungs soon ceased to break the surface of the muddy water. In his frantic snatching, Sharp caught hold of the old jute cord necklace Preacher always wore about his neck.

The thin rope snapped and he fell hard on his backside in the mud. He raised the necklace and looked at the battered old wooden cross that dangled before him. He covered his face with his hands and wailed a mournful lament for his twin.

The two smokestacks buckled outward. The cables holding them no longer tolerated the stress and with a loud twang, they gave up the effort and snapped. The tall, hollow tubes, with no support for their weight, fell impotently to the sides. The back of the building ripped away and was shoved aft and into the paddlewheel. From

this impact the wheel ripped away from the pitman arms, leaned and rolled over sideways into the Mississippi.

The most devastated was the pilot house. Being above the boilers, it was blown straight up into the sky. Lit by the intense flames and clouds of dense steam, it hung in midair until a concussive blast shattered it completely. Shards of glass from the little windows surrounding the room showered down in a deadly rain. The whitewashed siding and tar paper roof were pitched upward and away over the canopy of trees along the banks. Each piece, one by one, drifted off like smoldering florets of a dandelion in fall.

Though all were deafened by the initial explosion, Silas ran toward his friends howling, "Jump! Push them horses off and ju—"

A final blast sent a shockwave pushing Silas, his friends and their horses off into the black waters.