

# 26

There were no telephones, but word spread quickly through the small town. By the end of the day, everyone in Green Lake had heard that the schoolteacher had kissed the onion picker.

Not one child showed up for school the next morning.

Miss Katherine sat alone in the classroom and wondered if she had lost track of the day of the week. Perhaps it was Saturday. It wouldn't have surprised her. Her brain and heart had been spinning ever since Sam kissed her.

She heard a noise outside the door, then suddenly a mob of men and women came storming into the school building. They were led by Trout Walker.

"There she is!" Trout shouted. "The Devil Woman!"

The mob was turning over desks and ripping down bulletin boards.

"She's been poisoning your children's brains with books," Trout declared.



They began piling all the books in the center of the room. "Think about what you are doing!" cried Miss Katherine. Someone made a grab for her, tearing her dress, but she managed to get out of the building. She ran to the sheriff's office.

The sheriff had his feet up on his desk and was drinking from a bottle of whiskey. "Mornin', Miss Katherine," he said.

"They're destroying the schoolhouse," she said, gasping for breath. "They'll burn it to the ground if someone doesn't stop them!"

"Just calm your pretty self down a second," the sheriff said in a slow drawl. "And tell me what you're talking about." He got up from his desk and walked over to her.

"Trout Walker has—"

"Now don't go saying nothing bad about Charles Walker," said the sheriff.

"We don't have much time!" urged Katherine. "You've got to stop them."

"You're sure pretty," said the sheriff.

Miss Katherine stared at him in horror.

"Kiss me," said the sheriff.

She slapped him across the face.

He laughed. "You kissed the onion picker. Why won't you kiss me?"

She tried to slap him again, but he caught her by the hand.

She tried to wriggle free. "You're drunk!" she yelled.

"I always get drunk before a hanging."

"A hanging? Who—"



"It's against the law for a Negro to kiss a white woman."

"Well, then you'll have to hang me, too," said Katherine. "Because I kissed him back."

"It ain't against the law for you to kiss him," the sheriff explained. "Just for him to kiss you."

"We're all equal under the eyes of God," she declared.

The sheriff laughed. "Then if Sam and I are equal, why won't you kiss me?" He laughed again. "I'll make you a deal. One sweet kiss, and I won't hang your boyfriend. I'll just run him out of town."

Miss Katherine jerked her hand free. As she hurried to the door, she heard the sheriff say, "The law will punish Sam. And God will punish you."

She stepped back into the street and saw smoke rising from the schoolhouse. She ran down to the lakefront, where Sam was hitching Mary Lou to the onion cart.

"Thank God, I found you," she sighed, hugging him. "We've got to get out of here. Now!"

"What—"

"Someone must have seen us kissing yesterday," she said. "They set fire to the schoolhouse. The sheriff said he's going to hang you!"

Sam hesitated for a moment, as if he couldn't quite believe it. He didn't want to believe it. "C'mon, Mary Lou."

"We have to leave Mary Lou behind," said Katherine.

Sam stared at her a moment. There were tears in his eyes. "Okay."

Sam's boat was in the water, tied to a tree by a long rope. He untied it, and they waded through the water and



climbed aboard. His powerful arms rowed them away from the shore.

But his powerful arms were no match for Trout Walker's motorized boat. They were little more than halfway across the lake when Miss Katherine heard the loud roar of the engine. Then she saw the ugly black smoke . . .

These are the facts:

The Walker boat smashed into Sam's boat. Sam was shot and killed in the water. Katherine Barlow was rescued against her wishes. When they returned to the shore, she saw Mary Lou's body lying on the ground. The donkey had been shot in the head.

That all happened one hundred and ten years ago. Since then, not one drop of rain has fallen on Green Lake.

You make the decision: Whom did God punish?

Three days after Sam's death, Miss Katherine shot the sheriff while he was sitting in his chair drinking a cup of coffee. Then she carefully applied a fresh coat of red lipstick and gave him the kiss he had asked for.

For the next twenty years Kissin' Kate Barlow was one of the most feared outlaws in all the West.



# 27

Stanley dug his shovel into the ground. His hole was about three and a half feet deep in the center. He grunted as he pried up some dirt, then flung it off to the side. The sun was almost directly overhead.

He glanced at his canteen lying beside his hole. He knew it was half full, but he didn't take a drink just yet. He had to drink sparingly, because he didn't know who would be driving the water truck the next time it came.

Three days had passed since the Warden had scratched Mr. Sir. Every time Mr. Sir delivered water, he poured Stanley's straight onto the ground.

Fortunately, Mr. Pendanski delivered the water more often than Mr. Sir. Mr. Pendanski was obviously aware of what Mr. Sir was doing, because he always gave Stanley a little extra. He'd fill Stanley's canteen, then let Stanley take a long drink, then top it off for him.



It helped, too, that Zero was digging some of Stanley's hole for him. Although, as Stanley had expected, the other boys didn't like to see Stanley sitting around while they were working. They'd say things like "Who died and made you king?" or "It must be nice to have your own personal slave."

When he tried pointing out that he was the one who took the blame for the sunflower seeds, the other boys said it was his fault because he was the one who spilled them. "I risked my life for those seeds," Magnet had said, "and all I got was one lousy handful."

Stanley had also tried to explain that he needed to save his energy so he could teach Zero how to read, but the other boys just mocked him.

"Same old story, ain't it, Armpit?" X-Ray had said. "The white boy sits around while the black boy does all the work. Ain't that right, Caveman?"

"No, that's not right," Stanley replied.

"No, it ain't," X-Ray agreed. "It ain't right at all."

Stanley dug out another shovelful of dirt. He knew X-Ray wouldn't have been talking like that if *he* was the one teaching Zero to read. Then X-Ray would be talking about how important it was that he got his rest, *right*? So he could be a better teacher, *right*?

And that was true. He did need to save his strength so he could be a better teacher, although Zero was a quick learner. Sometimes, in fact, Stanley hoped the Warden was watching them, with her secret cameras and microphones, so she'd know that Zero wasn't as stupid as everyone thought.

From across the lake he could see the approaching dust



cloud. He took a drink from his canteen, then waited to see who was driving the truck.

The swelling on Mr. Sir's face had gone down, but it was still a little puffy. There had been three scratch marks down his cheek. Two of the marks had faded, but the middle scratch must have been the deepest, because it still remained. It was a jagged purple line running from below his eye to below his mouth, like a tattoo of a scar.

Stanley waited in line, then handed him his canteen.

Mr. Sir held it up to his ear and shook it. He smiled at the swishing sound.

Stanley hoped he wouldn't dump it out.

To his surprise, Mr. Sir held the canteen under the stream of water and filled it.

"Wait here," he said.

Still holding Stanley's canteen, Mr. Sir walked past him, then went around the side of the truck and into the cab, where he couldn't be seen.

"What's he doing in there?" asked Zero.

"I wish I knew," said Stanley.

A short while later, Mr. Sir came out of the truck and handed Stanley his canteen. It was still full.

"Thank you, Mr. Sir."

Mr. Sir smiled at him. "What are you waiting for?" he asked. "Drink up." He popped some sunflower seeds into his mouth, chewed, and spit out the shells.

Stanley was afraid to drink it. He hated to think what kind of vile substance Mr. Sir might have put in it.



He brought the canteen back to his hole. For a long time, he left it beside his hole as he continued to dig. Then, when he was so thirsty that he could hardly stand it anymore, he unscrewed the cap, turned the canteen over, and poured it all out onto the dirt. He was afraid that if he'd waited another second, he might have taken a drink.

After Stanley taught Zero the final six letters of the alphabet, he taught him to write his name.

"Capital Z - e - r - o."

Zero wrote the letters as Stanley said them. "Zero," he said, looking at his piece of paper. His smile was too big for his face.

Stanley watched him write it over and over again.

Zero Zero Zero Zero Zero Zero Zero . . .

In a way, it made him sad. He couldn't help but think that a hundred times zero was still nothing.

"You know, that's not my real name," Zero said as they headed to the Wreck Room for dinner.

"Well, yeah," Stanley said, "I guess I knew that." He had never really been sure.

"Everyone's always called me Zero, even before I came here."

"Oh. Okay."

"My real name is Hector."

"Hector," Stanley repeated.

"Hector Zeroni."



After twenty years, Kate Barlow returned to Green Lake. It was a place where nobody would ever find her—a ghost town on a ghost lake.

The peach trees had all died, but there were a couple of small oak trees still growing by an old abandoned cabin. The cabin used to be on the eastern shore of the lake. Now the edge of the lake was over five miles away, and it was little more than a small pond full of dirty water.

She lived in the cabin. Sometimes she could hear Sam's voice echoing across the emptiness. "Onions! Sweet fresh onions."

She knew she was crazy. She knew she'd been crazy for the last twenty years.

"Oh, Sam," she would say, speaking into the vast emptiness. "I know it is hot, but I feel so very cold. My hands are cold. My feet are cold. My face is cold. My heart is cold."



And sometimes she would hear him say, "I can fix that," and she'd feel his warm arm across her shoulders.

She'd been living in the cabin about three months when she was awakened one morning by someone kicking open the cabin door. She opened her eyes to see the blurry end of a rifle, two inches from her nose.

She could smell Trout Walker's dirty feet.

"You've got exactly ten seconds to tell me where you've hidden your loot," said Trout. "Or else I'll blow your head off."

She yawned.

A redheaded woman was there with Trout. Kate could see her rummaging through the cabin, dumping drawers and knocking things from the shelves of cabinets.

The woman came to her. "Where is it?" she demanded.

"Linda Miller?" asked Kate. "Is that you?"

Linda Miller had been in the fourth grade when Kate Barlow was still a teacher. She had been a cute freckle-faced girl with beautiful red hair. Now her face was blotchy, and her hair was dirty and scraggly.

"It's Linda Walker now," said Trout.

"Oh, Linda, I'm so sorry," said Kate.

Trout jabbed her throat with the rifle. "Where's the loot?"

"There is no loot," said Kate.

"Don't give me that!" shouted Trout. "You've robbed every bank from here to Houston."

"You better tell him," said Linda. "We're desperate."

"You married him for his money, didn't you?" asked Kate.



Linda nodded. "But it's all gone. It dried up with the lake. The peach trees. The livestock. I kept thinking: It has to rain soon. The drought can't last forever. But it just kept getting hotter and hotter and hotter . . ." Her eyes fixed on the shovel, which was leaning up against the fireplace. "She's buried it!" she declared.

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Kate.

There was a loud blast as Trout fired his rifle just above her head. The window behind her shattered. "Where's it buried?" he demanded.

"Go ahead and kill me, Trout," said Kate. "But I sure hope you like to dig. 'Cause you're going to be digging for a long time. It's a big vast wasteland out there. You, and your children, and their children, can dig for the next hundred years and you'll never find it."

Linda grabbed Kate's hair and jerked her head back. "Oh, we're not going to kill you," she said. "But by the time we're finished with you, you're going to wish you were dead."

"I've been wishing I was dead for the last twenty years," said Kate.

They dragged her out of bed and pushed her outside. She wore blue silk pajamas. Her turquoise-studded black boots remained beside her bed.

They loosely tied her legs together so she could walk, but she couldn't run. They made her walk barefoot on the hot ground.

They wouldn't let her stop walking.

"Not until you take us to the loot," said Trout.

Linda hit Kate on the back of her legs with the shovel.



"You're going to take us to it sooner or later. So you might as well make it sooner."

She walked one way, then the other, until her feet were black and blistered. Whenever she stopped, Linda whacked her with the shovel.

"I'm losing my patience," warned Trout.

She felt the shovel jab into her back, and she fell onto hard dirt.

"Get up!" ordered Linda.

Kate struggled to her feet.

"We're being easy on you today," said Trout. "It's just going to keep getting worse and worse for you until you take us to it."

"Look out!" shouted Linda.

A lizard leaped toward them. Kate could see its big red eyes.

Linda tried to hit it with the shovel, and Trout shot at it, but they both missed.

The lizard landed on Kate's bare ankle. Its sharp black teeth bit into her leg. Its white tongue lapped up the droplets of blood that leaked out of the wound.

Kate smiled. There was nothing they could do to her anymore. "Start digging," she said.

"Where is it?" Linda screeched.

"Where'd you bury it?" Trout demanded.

Kate Barlow died laughing.