

### Sherri and the Stitched Man

Sherri noticed the three men enter the Deadcherry bank behind her, all with guns at their waists. Through a dusty window, she spotted a fourth man outside the door with a thick shoulder sticking out from out of frame. This was Deadcherry, a small town on the western side of the continent where everything was dusted with red and wind storms howled through the streets. There was nothing for the fourth man to see other than the general store across the street, the tavern right next to it, and thin spirals of dirty winds roaming like hungry dogs.

No, Sherri thought to herself as she tried not to tense, *that man's a lookout*. The three men—all gruff, dirty, and in need of shaves—were here to rob the bank. Two got in line while one hung back in a seat as if waiting for them to be done. The two legitimate bank patrons in front of her—one old man in a brown vest, and a young woman in gray shirt and trousers—paid the men no mind. All they wanted to do was talk to the tired clerk beyond the oakwood counter and be speedy with their business.

Sherri shifted in her red dress and matching beret with dark netting nestled over her short brown hair. She felt the edges of her small, holstered gun dig against the white flesh of her thigh. She had another, more obvious gun in her handbag (this was the west, everyone had a gun) but truthfully, she had never fired the large revolver. Its purpose was to be left at the counter.

When one leaves their gun at the door, people tend not to think they have a second one strapped to their thigh. Once the Clerk took Sherri into the back room with the safety deposit boxes, Sherri had planned to pull out her hidden gun and take everything inside.

That plan was before the men came. Now Sherri felt waves of anxiety roll over her as once again, her plans fell apart. Ever since she was a girl, nothing had gone the way it should have. Her first cancelled marriage proposal had turned her into such a wreck that her ex-fiance forced her to shoot him in the foot and make him limp miles back into town. It was all just so upsetting!

“Ma’am,” one of the men said, a bit of whiskey on his breath, “Excuse me for asking, but are you here by yourself, or do you have a husband outside waiting?”

Sherri examined the man up and down. His garbs were uninteresting, tan pants, brown shirt, and a dark coat, with the only flare being his gloves. He had streaks of grime over a tanned face and a jaw wider than the top of his head, yet he had striking hazel eyes like a smoldering thorn bush.

“Why do you ask?”

"Well, and I'm sorry if this is too forward, but just I didn't expect to see such a beautiful lady at the bank today and was hoping that maybe..."

"No," Sherri said quicker than intended. She knew a lie would have been smarter, but darn it, why lie to a man with such pretty eyes? "I'm here alone. I'm afraid I've yet to have the good fortunes of a man in my life. Its almost happened a few times, but no one seems to want to stay. Maybe I'm doing something to scar them away?"

"Nonsense. Only poor fortune you've come across is a a poor streak of cowards, That is, right up 'til now."

"Until now, you say." Sherri didn't smile at the man—a proper lady never does—but she felt the hot bite of a blush burning over her cheeks. "I'm Sherri."

"Thom." He eyed the woman in gray at the front of the line. She had been arguing with the clerk for minutes. Sherri imagined Thom and his men wanted as many people cleared out as possible before pulling their guns out.

"What brings you here today, Thom?"

"My father recently passed. Came to empty out his deposit box."

"Funny, I'm here for the reason."

"Huh. That is funny."

A knock came from the front doors from the man outside. Thom heard it then sighed. He stepped back a few paces, putting his hand out to make sure his cohort followed suit. The man from the chair rose as well, stepping to the otherside of Thom. The three pulled out their heavy looking revolvers, and Thom started shouting.

"Hands up! This is a robbery!"

The old man jumped as he spun around. The young woman turned around wide-eyed and paled. The clerk, first to listen, raised both hands. Sherri lifted her hands up, letting her purse slip into the nook of her elbow.

"Now, my name is Terrible Thom. You might have seen my poster around. You might have not. What you need to know is I don't plan on hurting anybody. Here for the same reason as all of you: to make a withdrawal. Annit, check 'em."

Annit produced a sack from beneath a green shirt and went over to them. He grabbed Sherri's purse, opened it, and smirked as he pulled out her revolver. The thought was clear in

his brown eyes, *Too big for such a little lady*. He snickered as he dumped it and her purse into teh sack. Annit searched and robbed the other two.

“Everyone stand in that corner huddled together.”

They herded Sherri and the rest to the far corner of the bank, out of sight of the building’s one window.

“Good,” Thom said, holding his revolver gingerly in his hand. “I’m some of you know what a spelled bullet does. For those that don’t, a demonstration.”

Thom aimed his revolver at the ceiling above their heads and fired. The bullet lodged into a beam of auburn wood, and Sherri heard the soft hiss of the spell activating. The bullet exploded into a massive mass of water that crashed over their heads with a hard and heavy smack. In an instant, all three of them were knocked to the floor, as the wave of water rolled off them and over Thom’s dirty boots, washing them a little.

“Imagine that but inside you. What’s going to happen next is my friend and the clerk are heading to the back so we can make our withdrawal. After, we’ll make our way out. Once we’re gone, you upstanding folks can resume usual banking activities, but be warned, they’re not gonna have a lot left for you. What’s not going to happen is any of you causing a fuss.”

Thom gripped a gloved hand beneath his armpit and slid it off, revealing a hand wrapped in paper. Strange black glyphs were inked onto the white page, and someone had carefully cut and folded it around Thom’s entire hand; palm, fingers, and thumb. Thick stitches lined every side and corner, keeping the paper neatly stuck to his flesh.

“Those that read my poster will know I’m a Stitched Man. Please note how all of you are soaked. If even one of you tries to be a problem, I will take this hand of mine and touch the puddle at my boot where upon all of you will freeze to death *instantly and painfully*. Have we reached an understanding?”

They all nodded. Thom smiled approvingly. He gestured with his head at the clerk, and Annit hopped over the counter. He dragged the clerk by the collar into the backroom. The third man returned to his chair. Thom leaned back into a crouch, keeping watch on their dripping faces at eye level. His paper hand dangled from the wrist over the puddle.

Sherri felt the added weight of her soaked dress. The arms felt restrained, and the fabric of her chest piece clung to her as if trying to suffocate. Strangely, when the side of her hand trailed against her ankle, she found it dry. The spelled bullet dropped a small pond on them, not a torrent. It was just one big blast of water that ended as quickly as it began. It hadn’t had time to soak through the outer layer of her skirt into the billowy fabric beneath it. Sherri wondered if her legs were actually dry, including anything strapped to them.

"I am sorry about this, ma'am." Thom sounded bashful as he spoke to Sherri.

"You don't plan on killing us right?"

"So long as everyone stays calm."

"Then there's no reason for me to worry." Sherri gave him a little laugh. "I must say though, robbing a bank must be terrifying."

"It certainly does have its nerve-racking moments, doesn't it?"

"But you seem so cool-headed right now. I can't help but marvel."

"Well its like I was saying to you before about there being two kinds of men; cowards and the bold."

"You are certainly quite bold." Sherri stared at Thom's striking eyes. She thought she saw a bit of red beneath his grime before the gruff man turned his face away. "I don't think I've ever quite met a man like you."

Behind Sherri, she could feel the opened jaw expressions of the other captives. *They would never understand*, Sherri thought, *they don't know what it was like to be single!* If Sherri was ever going to end her life as a spinster, she needed to hunt for a possible husband in whatever situations life presented. Who could judge her so harshly for simply chatting with a handsome man?

"That must have hurt to get," Sherri said, pointing a wet finger at Thom's stitched up hand.

"Little pain is nothing. Honestly, it's more annoying to live with. I've got to be careful about tearing or staining it, otherwise hand won't work. On the other hand--" Thom smirked at himself as if summoning a fond memory--"I once froze a man's jaw solid before kicking it clean off. That was a sight, wasn't it Marcus?"

"Yeah, sure Thom," the man in the chair said while rolling his eyes. "Shouldn't Annit be back?"

"None of you in the back get any ideas, thinking I just revealed my weakness." Thom ignored Marcus's words. "I can freeze you a lot faster than you can get over here."

"That doesn't include me though, does it?" Sherri asked, her eyes wide and pleading. "I can touch you, right?"

"Well, not my hand." Thom grinned wide. "Maybe a little later you can touch something else."

"Thom, will you shut up," Marcus said, aggravated. "Annit should be back."

"Don't fucking ruin this for me. You're worrying over nothing--"

From the backroom door stepped out the clerk carrying a rifle. His clean green and white uniform had been splattered in blood, and gore dripped from the butt of his short-barreled rifle. *He must have had it hidden in the back for this exact situation*, Sherri thought to herself as a chill traveled up her spine. The clerk raised the rifle and fired.

As he raised his revolver, the bullet hit Marcus in the chest, and his gun hung in a lifeless hand for a moment. A hiss leaked out from the wound, then a giant slab of black rock exploded through like the massive stone had been hurled through like a spear. The tip shattered out through the bank window. Marcus's legs stood up for a moment before the weight of the rock crushed the bones to dust and Marcus's body was dragged to the floor with a thud.

Thom cursed, hopping up from his crouch, and pulling back out his revolver. The clerk cocked the rifle, an empty shell flying out, and swung it at Thom. The two fired at one another, both missing. Behind the clerk, an explosion of water destroyed the back wall in a storm of waves and splinters. Beside Thom, another black slab appeared like a violent stab through the top corner of the bank. Gravity pulled the slab down, angrily ripping apart the wall in its way.

While no one paid attention to Sherri, she rose, slipped out her hidden pistol, and actually took a moment to aim.

A plain, normal bullet flew through the clerk's head and he dropped.

Thom breathed heavily, his revolver trembling in his gloved hand, staring at Sherri.

"Quick," Sherri said, leaping over the counter. "Tell your man to get our means of escape ready. We need to go!"

"R-right," Thom said, gawking at her wet back as she hurried into the backroom.

Opened safety boxes were everywhere, and Annit laid on the ground with a beaten face. A full sack sat beside him. Sherri snatched it.

"I've got it!" Sherri leapt over the counter, but as her feet landed on the floor, they slipped on ice. Her heart leapt as Thom caught her by the waist.

"Careful now," he said, regaining some composure. "We've got to go."

Sherri wanted to grab the back of Thom's head and kiss him while their faces were so close, but she knew they had no time. She paid no sight to the corner with the other hostages as Thom helped her across the icy floor.

The lookout led them through an alley to a wagon with two horses at the ready. Thom grabbed the bag from Sherri's hand and threw it in the back.

The lookout, just as out of breath as all of them, started to shout at Sherri before a gun went off.

Thom spun around to the sight of the lookout dead on the ground.

"He was pulling a gun out on you," Sherri said, her small pistol in her equally slender hand. She knew Thom would believe her. It wouldn't be true, spur of the moment love if he didn't.

"He... what? Fuck. *Fuck!* You're a crazy bit-"

Before Thom could bring his paper hand to Sherri's throat, she put a bullet through the palm. Thom howled and fell to one knee. He clutched his by the wrist as blood painted over the dark lines of ink.

"Don't call me that!" Sherri screamed. Love solved all, so she knew Thom would forgive her eventually, but just to be safe, Sherri pressed the hot barrel to his forehead. It sizzled against Thom's flesh, yet Thom didn't flinch. His gruff face endured, and his fierce, hazel eyes sent Sherri's heart aflutter again. "Now here's what's going to happen, you're going to climb into the wagon, and we're going to run off with these riches *together*. Understood?"

Thom nodded.

The two climbed into the wagon and raced out of Deadcherry. Thom manned the horses, and with one arm, Sherri entwined herself to his side. With the other, she pressed her gun to his ribs. All things considered, Sherri thought it a very successful robbery.