



2021 Second Place

THE PRETENDER

Karen (K.S.) Jones

The saloon doors swung wide under the forceful hand of a scowl-faced man. He walked to the middle of the barroom then glanced table to table, his presence alone demanding attention and quashing conversation.

"I'm lookin' for Lou."

The town of Tarnation in the Pine Nut Mountains of Nevada was too paltry to interest anyone but a gambler or a man in search of an easy woman, so when strangers arrived for any other reason, folks took notice.

Lou shifted, eyeing the imposing man. "You found her," she said, holding tight to the deck of half-dealt cards. "I'm Lou."

With narrowed eyes focused solely on the woman in red, the man moved closer, shoving an empty chair out of his way. "Not lookin' for a whore. It's a cardsharp named Lou that I'm here to find."

Lou stood, her long auburn ringlets falling behind her bare shoulders. "Look, Mister," her feminine tone deepened. "I'm the only Lou in Tarnation and the only dealer, and I resent being called a cardsharp. I deal a fair game."

His gaze considered her and then took measure of the men at her table. "The Lou I'm lookin' for is a dirty, cold-blooded killer."

"Then you got the wrong Lou." She nodded toward the door, knowing the barkeep had a sly hand on his Colt by now. "You can either be on your way or sit for a friendly game, but we don't take to troublemakers. Already got enough of those in this town." When he hesitated, she said, "You got a name?"

"Cannon," he said. "Jack." He flinched when several men scarpered out the door, then his steely-eyed stare hardened on the dealer. "Heard a cardsharp named Lou murdered my brother when he laid down four aces in this saloon last month."

Cannon. Lou placed the deck of cards on the table, sliding her fingers off the rough wood edge. Hidden by the flair of her skirts, she felt under the table for her concealed derringer. Slight as the movement was, her gamblers

dropped their cards and scattered, setting the stranger on edge again. His hand jerked up, even with his holster.

"You *that* Lou? I'd sure hate to think you were. Never killed a woman a'fore, but I ain't opposed to it. Can't let Joe's death go unavenged."

The man, wearing suspenders over a sweat-stained shirt, was too far away for the double derringer to be reliable. Her stance stiffened. "You know well as I do that your brother was a liar and a cheat. Of those four aces he had, one didn't come from my deck." Without taking her eyes off him, she gave a side nod to the cards on the table. "Mine are almost new. His fourth ace was bent and yellowed. Overused, if you ask me. When I made that clear to him, he called me a cheat and drew. Gave me no choice."

By the time Jack Cannon's pistol cleared its holster, a bullet from the barkeep's Colt sent him reeling, knocking him to the floor, but his gun came up pointed at Lou. Edged in closer than before, she fired her double derringer—one shot to the heart, a second to the head.

II

There was one sure way to meet every man, woman, and child living in the remote rocky hillside town of Goldfinny, and that was to attend Pastor Owen's hellfire-and-brimstone Sunday sermon.

Owen Smyth, the thirty-three-year-old son of a dead Pennsylvania clergyman, loved God, his parishioners, and Miss Luella Denton. He did not, however, love the stuffy, near-windowless



church that barely seated twenty. Its whitewash was all but gone after the March rains, and its clapboard walls needed a few more nails.

But spring on the east face of Bald Mountain in Nevada's Pine Nut range brought renewed hope for prosperous growth and revival now that the Transcontinental Railroad was complete.

April and May had been unusually dry months, which brought hotter than expected temperatures to June. Sunday last, even before the pastor's *Is Hell Real?* sermon ended, the overcrowded assembly of parishioners were fanning their faces.

Pastor Owen promised this Sunday would be different.

With the church door propped open by a foot-long wedge of pale granite, all thirty-nine residents of Goldfinny gathered early to move the pews outside to an airy clearing in front of the church.

Though the hilly area was mostly treeless, five pinyon pine short in stature, grew in a horseshoe-shaped cluster, giving partial shade and an evergreen backdrop to the outdoor setting. The cooling breeze carried a clean juniper and sage scent.

On the front pew, beneath the morning sun, sat Luella, her hair bundled and pinned atop her head so that her new hat—a light shell of layered crepe, laced-trimmed with the tiniest of flowers—lent reserved femininity to her high-necked, barely lavender dress. Seated next to her were Mrs. Planter, the town seamstress, and the widow Maxwell with her young twins.

Mid-oration, Pastor Owen stopped, impeded by Luella's beauty. After his pause, the sermon turned from wages of sin to a personal nature. Reflectively, he raised his eyes from hers and glanced about the congregation. With his handwritten sermon tucked between the pages of his Bible, he closed the book and stepped out from behind his lectern. "When God led me to this fledgling town of Goldfinny to faithfully execute the scriptures, I expected little in return. Instead, I found friends, a sturdy-enough church, a home, and chickens who give freely of their eggs to me so that I may earn a few dollars each month. More than that though, He brought me to a future I saw only in prayer."

Pastor Owen Smyth walked to Luella, reaching for her hand. When she stood, he said, "Luella, today, here in

front of God and His flock, I can wait no longer. I have loved you since I first saw you, and I want you always by my side." Holding her hand in his, he knelt. Looking up, he said, "Will you be my wife?"

Whispered sentiments passed among the parishioners in wait of Luella's answer.

She'd come to Goldfinny mid-May, never expecting her heart to beat so wildly for a man. Her hand went softly to Owen's cheek. Delicately, her fingertips moved along the line of his jaw, then brushed the full length of his bottom lip. When she felt a quiver in him, she withdrew her hand and smiled.

"Yes, Owen, I'll be your wife."

The sermon never returned to wages of sin, but instead focused on marriage and love.

The pastor ended, "Whatever you ask in prayer, you shall receive, if your faith is true."

After many congratulations, men from the congregation moved the pews back inside the little white church, and soon everyone except the pastor and Luella went home. The newly engaged sat inside together, hand in hand.

"When would you like the wedding?" he asked her.

"Soon," Luella said.

"It'll be another few weeks before Reverend Webb reaches Tarnation on his six-point charge."

"Not there, Owen. Not Tarnation. I want a church wedding, and they don't have a church in that god-forgotten town." Luella held his hand tighter. "What if I stop in at the sheriff's office tomorrow morning, before any pupils arrive for school, and ask him to send the

preacher here for a wedding? We can be married in this little church of yours."

Owen nodded. "Speaking of that, once we're married, you'll be resigning your post as schoolmarm right away, won't you? I don't like you making that hour-long trip over the high ridge to Tarnation every Monday morning and then back to Goldfinny on Friday evenings."

Luella smiled at him. "I'll give the school board my notice. As soon as we're married, I'll live full-time in Goldfinny as your wife." She stood, her reticule slipping off her wrist and falling to the floor. Through its silk, two door keys clinked, drawing the focus of their eyes downward. The exposed corners on a deck of cards showed, but Luella flared her skirt over the handbag, and then she leaned in with a kiss for Owen.

III

Maudie was folding undergarments and stacking them into a drawer when Lou entered the room.

"Mornin', Miss Lou." The rotund Black woman continued folding. "You miss'd a wallopin' fight Saturday night. Sure was glad you wadn't here for it."

"Anyone I know?" Lou asked.

"Yes'um. The one with the bloodiest nose was that Burns boy, the one you had throwed out few weeks back."

"That wide-eyed bumpkin? What was he doing here again? I told him poker wasn't a kid's game."

"He know it now, Miss Lou," Maudie told her. "Sam give him a whiskey and af'er drinkin' it, he pour'd all his coin on the dealin' table and said, 'deal me in!'"

Lou turned to Maudie with a shaming eye. "Sam shouldn't have given him a whiskey. That boy can't be more than thirteen."

"He fifteen, Miss Lou—or said he was af'wards." Maudie came close. "I was sweepin' 'round them tables and saw that boy pull an ace card outta his boot." She lowered her wide eyes. "I sucked a breath too hard, and when I did, all eyes was on him." She glanced up at Lou. "That new dealer, that mean ol' Thornton, he near smash that boy's nose to smithereens."

Lou cringed, stiffened, and then went to the bureau. She picked up her horsehair brush and looked at Maudie reflected in the mirror. "I'll talk to Sam again about not letting any boys younger than sixteen gamble."

"Why cain't you stay and run the table on Saturday 'stead of that Thornton man? Nobody like him, not even Sam, and theys the biggest days of the month! You be earnin' big

money again and be able to sen' plen'y more home to your sick mama in Saint Louie."

"You know I can't, Maudie," Lou said. "You're the only one who knows the truth about me. I can't ever let on that the card dealer Lou Thomas in Tarnation is the same person as Luella Denton, the schoolmarm who goes home to Goldfinny every weekend trying to make a better life for herself." She turned, facing Maudie. "But I have good news. Owen, the man I told you about, has asked me to marry him."

"Lord a'mighty!" Maudie said with a handclap. "We's gonna have a weddin'!"

"I can hardly believe it myself." Lou smiled at Maudie. "You'll like Owen. You and I will finally be able to live a respectable life away from all the whiskey, guns, and gambling."

"You sure I be welcome in his house?"

"It's my house, Maudie. What I mean is, Owen has a house, but it's not much more than a one-room, wind-whistling-through-the-slats shack that the town provides as payment for his weekly preaching. The house I bought last month is well built and bigger, and it's far enough outside of town that no one comes snooping around. I'm sure Owen will agree that we should all live there." She took hold of Maudie's calloused hand. "And you'll always have a home with me. You're my only true friend. Besides, I wouldn't know what to do without you after all our years together."

Lou changed out of the drab blue day dress into her two-piece sage faille gown decorated with gray satin bands, low-cut, revealing cleavage. The long cuffs were silvery lace, eliminating all possible suspicion of carrying a card up her sleeve.

Downstairs, she went to Sam, who was wiping the bar top clean. "I heard about the Burns boy. Why did you let him back in after I had him thrown out of here?"

Sam stopped and then leaned with one elbow on the bar. His brown eyes settled on hers. "Why do you think? He had a pocketful of money."

"He's too young to drink. I asked you not to serve him." Lou shook her head. "He's just a kid, Sam."

"Not my kid. Yours neither." Sam straightened up tall again. "You gettin' soft, Lou?"

Maybe she was. She'd heard that maternal feelings made even hard women soft, and though she had hidden it well, her desire to have a child had been gut-strong for a long time. A boy someday, she hoped. One who could help Owen raise chickens, grow grain for mash, build sturdy coops, sell eggs, and maybe get the calling. He'd be a good, decent boy with a listening ear to God—not lured by the sins of gambling or have a drunkard's thirst. She would make sure of that. If she never saw a saloon again, it would be too soon.

And maybe one day she would become a real schoolmarm, instead of just pretending.

"I'll be back soon, Sam. I need to discuss a matter with the sheriff."

Although it hadn't rained in months, Lou had to lift her skirt ankle-high off the boardwalk to keep it clean and dry from the slop of piss, vomit, and horse-trough drownings. The stench, especially in the morning before the sun had time to dry the muck, was enough to gag any decent woman, but Lou lifted her nose and trudged on toward the lawman's office.

"Hello, Mike," she said to the sheriff upon entering.

A glance up from a new *Wanted* posting put his gaze smack-dab on Lou's cleavage. It was where the eyes of most men stopped.

"Mornin', Lou. Trouble already?" The sheriff stood.

"No, no trouble. I just need a favor." Discretion wasn't a given, so lying was a necessity. "I spoke to a man from a little town called Goldfinny. Do you know the place?" Lou didn't wait for him to answer. "It seems they need a preacher to perform a wedding. He asked me to talk to you about sending Reverend Webb their way next time he comes through town. Will you do that for him?"

"Goldfinny's already got a preacher of their own. What do they need with another one? Crummy church, but at least they got one."

Caught off guard by the sheriff knowing more about the insignificant town of Goldfinny than she thought, Lou stammered, "O-oh, do they?" She couldn't turn back now.

"Come to think of it, I guess he mentioned that it was their preacher who wanted to get married, so I guess that explains why they need another one, doesn't it?" *What else did he know?*

Mike nodded. "Sure would. I'd be glad to send the circuit rider over the ridge on his next pass through."

The following week wore hard on Lou's patience. She wanted to see Owen and longed to wake up with him in her arms. In her heart, she knew she belonged with him in Goldfinny, but Tarnation was her livelihood until the wedding.

Doctors in Saint Louis telegraphed with the news that her mother didn't have long to live. The stroke, a year earlier, had left her paralyzed, barely able to speak, and it had ruthlessly taken her memory. In one way, Lou was glad for that, for if her mother knew she was a card dealer in a saloon, shame alone would have killed her. All Lou could do for her was to be a dutiful daughter and pay for the best care available, which she had done. Accumulated winnings also secured her own future, and a few more weeks of dealing cards in Tarnation would easily cover her mother's remaining expenses. Burial, too. God's timing was uncanny.

Dusk had a way of calling men out of the woodwork—especially gamblers, drinkers, and prostitute seekers. By the time the evening sky darkened, Lou had a full table of poker players, and her hand was golden. Late June had brought a passel of new ranch hands and wranglers to Tarnation, all eager to play the "Lady of the House." Lou didn't look up when she heard the sheriff talking to Maudie.

"Got news for Lou."

Maudie stopped wiping a spilled whiskey. "Whats you got to tell her? I kin pass it on when she done workin' for the night."

"I got word the circuit preacher will be here next week." The sulfur scent of a struck match stung the air, followed by a billow of smoke left to drift over her table. "Tell her I'll send him on to Goldfinny when he gets here."

"You knows 'bout Goldfinny?" Maudie asked.

A shot of nerves raised Lou to her feet, even though a good dealer would never move mid-game. "Maudie," she called above complaints from her table players. "Quit yap-ping with Mike and get back to cleaning up this spill." Lou glanced at the sheriff. "I got the message. Now be a good boy and move along. You're disturbing my game."

Maudie, wide-eyed, stepped back with a stare for Lou.

"Go on now, Maudie," Lou said with a gentle nod to the drying spill. "Then see if Sam needs your help."

A scold came from a man at her table. "You playin' or not, Lou?"

She looked back at the player. "I'm playing."

IV

Cackling jays warned Luella that visitors approached. Though she'd owned the Goldfinny house and its one-hundred-and-sixty acres for almost a month, no one had ever stopped by. That's the way she wanted it. For now, anyway.

At the knock, Luella slipped her Winchester rifle between the folds of her long skirt, then opened the door. The haggard man's eyes widened at the sight of her. "Hello," she said. He held his wide-brimmed hat waist-high and gave a nod. A lanky, bonneted woman stood beside him, and behind them was a wagon full of children and belongings.

"Name's Gordon." The man half-turned, motioning to the woman. "This here's my wife, Aggie. Is your husband 'round? I'd like to talk to him."

"I don't have a husband. Is there something I can do for you?"

His scrutiny traveled the length of Luella. "We heard this place is for sale."

"No, I'm sorry," Luella told him. "I bought it last month from the Wilmers. I'm afraid you're too late."

The man's head dropped down, his chin nearly smacking his collarbone.

"Gordy." The woman reached for his arm and gave a tug to his long shirtsleeve, which raised his gaze.

"How much you pay for it? I'll give you five hundred more."

"Why would you do that?" Luella asked. "Pay so much more, I mean." Granted, the well-built, rambling house with four bedrooms was perfectly suited for a big family, and

the barn, less than ten years old, or so said, seemed solid, and stood no more than a hundred feet away. Between the two buildings was enough good land for a chicken pen and henhouse. It was ideal for her and Owen and their future children. Maudie, too. "Surely there's another home, just as big, with an affordable price for you and your family."

"But this one is ours—I mean was," he stammered a bit, then said, "before."

"Before?"

"Owned this place 'til I took my family north to build the railroad station in Reno. When the earthquake came last week, half our house tumbled down on us while we was sleepin'." He glanced at his wife. "Aggie won't stay there with the kids no more. She wants to be home." His head tilted upwards, then his sight traced the roofline. "Built this place myself. Never should've sold it to the Wilmers." He looked back at Luella. "Heard they was selling it, so we loaded up ev'rything and come back for it."

"I see." Luella's glance landed on the wife. Gently, she said, "But the house rightfully belongs to me now." The words raked up her throat with a raw sting. "I'm sorry. Truly, I am."

"C'mon, Gordy." The woman patted her husband's shoulder. "Let's go."

Gordon shirked his wife's hand but kept steady eyes on Luella. "In a few more weeks, God'll turn up the heat and dry this land to dust for months on end. You cain't grow hardly a thing, and I don't see no cattle around. What's a woman out here without a husband want with a place like this?" He narrowed his eyes. "You don't look much like a settler to me."

Luella stiffened. Her frame of mind hardened into the businesswoman she'd become. "I don't much care what I look like to you. This place is mine now.

Bought and paid for—lock, stock, and barrel. I have a deed to prove it." Sunlight glinted yellow off the newly exposed Winchester, drawing the man's attention.

He took a step back, nudging his wife off the plank porch. "Not doubtin' your legal right," he said, his eyes fixed on Luella. "Just your morals about it. It's God who'll judge you and your needs, not us."

Luella watched them climb onto the wagon. When the snap of their reins commanded their mules, she closed the door. Leaning with her back against it, she whispered, "I suspect God has lots of things to judge me for."

V

Tarnation was unusually quiet when Lou arrived Saturday night, but she knew it was because the cowhands and drovers on the range had settled in, waiting for Independence Day. Rumor had it they had over two-thousand head of cattle headed west to San Francisco, and their trail boss was a lenient man, allowing Sunday, July fourth as a day off for celebration. That meant both dealer tables would be open for business, and Lou would miss the Sunday sermon in Goldfinny for the first time in almost two months. Another lie to Owen—maybe her last—excused her absence when she told him that she was set to meet with Tarnation's school board to give formal notice of her resignation by announcing her upcoming wedding.

By ten Sunday morning, every saloon table in Tarnation was full, and twelve bottles of whiskey were already empty with a thirteenth on its way. Beer flowed like water from a fast-running river, and the boisterous men, lusty as goats, lined the stairway up to the prostitutes.

It was past five in the afternoon before the first brawl broke out. Lou's table was bumped, spilling drinks and disheveling cards—her own knocked from her hand.

"Jenks!" Lou stood, shouting to the giant of a man who was paid to stay sober and handle problematic men. "Get them out of here!"

With the fight moved outside, Lou retook her seat at the table and reached over her own splayed cards for the ones held by the men. "This will be a redeal."

"The hell it will!" The calloused hand of a wrangler drew his cards close, hiding a royal flush from questioning eyes. To Lou, he said, "Pick up your cards and play."

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Lou settled her eyes on his and toughened her voice. "My cards are face-up on the table. You've all seen them. It's a redeal."

"You're the only one with a loose hold—everybody else still has their hand." He glanced at her upturned cards on the table. "You were holdin' a losing hand for sure. Droppin' 'em was an easy way out." He leaned forward with an icy stare, his bulk nudging the table at Lou. "Now, I'll say it again—pick up your cards and play."

Lou hesitated, calculating. A fortune was on the table. "All right," she said. Gathering her cards, she fanned them in her left hand, then dropped her right.

A hammer cocked.

He gave a nod to Lou. "You might want to raise your pretty little hand up from under this table," he said. "'Cause I'll bet the gun I got pointed at you is bigger than the one you got pointed at me."

Lou dove left as her derringer loosed a bullet, but the slug from his revolver struck fast, piercing her thigh, marking her pale green dress with blood by the time she hit the floor.

The gambler stood, sending Lou scrambling under the table for cover only to watch him stumble, then fall. When the other players bolted, the man got to his feet, his shirt sullied with blood.

He staggered to the door and shoved it open.

"Jenks!" Lou yelled, but the commotion inside the saloon was so loud, half the room had missed the altercation completely. Up on her feet, she followed him outside. A man, wounded but alive, was still a threat.

Her derringer had one bullet left.

Lou stopped with a start when he whirled around, his left hand pressing

against his blood-soaked stomach, his other holding a Remington revolver. His eyes settled on her.

Gun cocked, he raised it and aimed as Lou fired her last bullet, landing it squarely between his eyes.

Two dozen men from the earlier brawl, along with the sheriff, crowded the street around the dead man.

"Luella?"

At first, Lou didn't differentiate between her two names. "What is it?" she snapped, examining the bullet hole through her dress and the bloodstain it bore.

"What are you doing coming out of a saloon, dressed like that?"

Owen! The well-known voice was soft-spoken but direct. Lou raised her eyes to his. "I can explain," she said.

"Explain what?" Owen pointed to her bare shoulders, the derringer, and then waved his finger at the rooms above the saloon. "That you're a whore, not a schoolmarm?"

"Schoolmarm?" The sheriff interrupted with a laugh. "Where'd you get the idea Lou was a schoolmarm? Tarnation don't even have a school."

Owen kept steady eyes on Luella. "Lou—is that what they call you here in Tarnation?"

Lou moved to him. "Owen, just let me explain." Softly, she said, "It's not what it looks like."

With a step back, Owen shook his head, his eyes glistening. "I came here to tell you that Reverend Webb is waiting for us in Goldfinny. Today was to be our wedding day." He glanced up, closing his eyes to the blaze of the setting sun. "Thank the Good Lord that He led me here today to see the truth."

"Owen, don't . . ." When he turned his back to her, she said, "Please listen."

But the pastor boarded his wagon without another word and snapped the reins.

The unshakable Lou stood trembling in the street, her heart beating in a rhythm of lies and regret. When dust was all that remained of his leaving, her eyes fell on the familiar wagon stopped at the mercantile. It still carried Gordon's caboodle of belongings, his wife, and all his children.

"Miss Lou," Maudie said, gently shaking Luella's shoulder. "Is you aw'right?" She looked at the dead man and the men who hefted him up onto the bed of the undertaker's buckboard. "He give you no choice. You's be dead now if'n you ain't kilt him first. You shouldn't be feelin' bad 'bout it, Miss Lou."

Fiery red whorls painted the far horizon.

"Maudie," Lou said, her gaze fixed on the wagon and the family in it. "Upstairs in my top bureau drawer is the deed to my house in Goldfinny." Tears welled, blurring her vision.

She drew a breath. "Get that for me, will you?" She started across the road. "Its rightful owner is here."

Karen (K.S.) Jones has two published novels, *Shadow of the Hawk*, a 2016 WILLA Award winner, and *Black Lightning*. Her book *Change of Fortune* (Five Star Publishing) will release February 16, 2022.

