

Excerpt from THE ADVENTURES OF ELIZABETH FORTUNE

(From Elizabeth's diary) *A horrid day. If it weren't such a useless effort, I'd have myself a long hard cry.*

31 July [1870]

Elizabeth rolled across the warped floorboards, scooted behind the bar and grabbed up the double-barreled shotgun the bartender had dropped when he was shot. A bullet careened off a nickel-plated beer spigot, sending six bystanders closer to the walls.

"She's been playin' you for a fool all evening!" came a rough voice from ten feet away. "You can't let her kind better you, Johnny."

Elizabeth gritted her teeth and checked the load on the gun. Both breeches were ready. She had learned firearms eleven years ago, at age eight. Her father taught her, and always insisted that guns were tools to provide food and to protect against varmints. Right then, the long-haired blond in striped denim pants, leather chaps and gray calico shirt was a varmint.

She could taste blood on her lower lip, feel the warmth of it along her chin, and was again astounded that this drunk—that anyone!—had hit her. Even Grandfather Clark, with all his bitterness, had never struck her.

Two more shots whizzed from the single-action Colt. One smashed into the floor, the other cracked the four-foot mirror above Elizabeth's head. Glass tinkled and fell, and a sliver spiked the back of her hand. As her blood welled, Elizabeth's anger erupted to action. She came up with the shotgun leveled at the drunk and his mean-eyed friend. Five men bolted away from the nearby poker table.

"Get her, Johnny!"

"Don't. Please don't!" Elizabeth's heart pounded. She had never ever aimed a firearm at a person. She eased the barrels to the right.

The blond grinned and pointed his pistol at Elizabeth, arms outstretched, legs wide. He cocked the hammer. Elizabeth clenched her teeth and fired the shotgun.

Boom! The roar filled the big room and the man lurched and spun back as if jerked by a rope. His pistol thunked on the shot-pocked wall after skidding out of his hand. That hand swung crazily, too, two fingers shattered, white bone protruding; then blood soaked the arm of his shirt and flowed off the thumb like water from a red icicle.

Elizabeth felt queasy as the assailant's head lolled back. His stocky companion caught him as he fell. The sound of the big gun echoed and blue smoke meandered out of the barrels. To Elizabeth, it suddenly weighed a ton. Four bystanders scrambled for the door while a bird-like woman in a beige linen-and-lace gown screamed at Elizabeth: "My God! What have you done!" She was Faye Wentworth, Elizabeth's boss.

"She killed him!" the dark-haired thug declared.

Elizabeth shook her head, certain she hadn't. The blond moaned and leaned against the other man as he tried to sit up. The loud mouth bent to give comfort, and Elizabeth, her nerves tingling like drawn piano wire, hurried to the bartender who still lay motionless near the faro table. Blood trickled from his thinning black hair. She put her hand on his chest, grateful to feel the steady rise and fall of breathing through his leather vest and striped cotton shirt.

“Get away!” Lady Faye’s hazel eyes snapped with anger as she yelled at Elizabeth. Light brown curls flopped around her thin face when she stooped to the man.

The shattered mirror reflected Elizabeth’s tall form in pieces when she stepped back. She propped the shotgun in its corner against the bar. She couldn’t believe she had really shot someone! She pressed the back of her hand to her cut lip and frowned at her two adversaries, especially the dark-haired man; he was the one who had started the trouble.

The tough jerked up from where he had propped the fallen man on a bunched jacket. “You red-bone bitch,” he growled, glaring at her.

Elizabeth flinched at the hatred she heard. He was thick-set, with lank hair hanging around his square jaw. He reached for the gun in his waistband. Someone screamed.

Three men crashed in from the street through the green-painted bat wings, delaying the tough’s revenge. “Hold it!” the tallest of the newcomers ordered. He held a sawed-off shotgun, butt to his shoulder, and wore a six-pointed star on the pocket of his dark shirt. “You’d think at seven p.m. a man could stop and get a meal, even if he is the county sheriff,” he said. “What the hell is going on?”

The angry man, his gun still in his belt, pointed a stiff finger at Elizabeth. Hatred filled his voice when he declared, “That tramp just shot my brother!”

Elizabeth drew an alarmed breath. His brother! She thought it might be nice to be the fainting type right then, but she wasn’t.

This Sunday shooting really drew people’s attention, especially in Ellsworth, Kansas, a town sorely lacking in activity. Excitement had flurried the previous week when David Hastings arrived with his caravan of fifteen wagons filled with wool and copper ore. David once owned a store in Ellsworth, but sold it just that spring for a move to Trinidad, Colorado Territory. Since people knew him, they held genuine curiosity when he came all the way back to Kansas for supplies. And he had been attacked by Kiowas along the dry branch of the Santa Fe Trail, one of his teamsters killed. But even with this personal interest, the information came second hand. The shooting of Johnny Tillison was here and now.

Elizabeth had been in Sheriff Sieber’s office only ten minutes when Nathan Suggs pushed through the clot of citizens gathered outside. Suggs, slender built with narrow shoulders, ran the two-week-old (and floundering) Ellsworth Chronicler. He still had a napkin tucked into the waist of his suit pants. A large crumb of cornbread nestled in the long beard under his dark mustache. Elizabeth looked away, surprised to find something amusing in this evening.

“I say, Sheriff. Someone’s shot young Tillison?” Elizabeth was certain Suggs’s precise way of talking was fake. “I trust you’ve apprehended the floozy who did it. Can’t have decent citi”

“Johnny Tillison is an upstart,” the sheriff growled. “And it was self-defense. He had already knocked Miss Fortune, here, around and clipped Lester Nims.”

Suggs looked at Elizabeth for the first time. “She shot him?” He stepped back and took in Elizabeth: brown hair pulled neatly into a twist on the back of her head, wearing her college glee club dress—a dark blue challis with white piping around the peplum, white ruffles at neck and sleeve. Elizabeth wore it to work just to make certain the customers didn’t take her for one of the other women at Lady Faye’s. “Why, she doesn’t look the type,” Suggs concluded.

The cornbread swayed in its dark, hairy nest. Someone chuckled and Elizabeth covered her

twitching lips with the damp cloth the dance hall swamper, Lost Johnson, had given her.

“I was told that Hank said his brother was shot by some dance hall tart and for no reason!” Suggs said, sidling toward the sheriff’s desk.

“Well, if you’ve already put that to press, I’m sure Miss Fortune, here, will want you to print a retraction.”

“No! Of course I haven’t.” He coughed into his hand. “And what caused the altercation, Miss Fortune?” The cornbread fell to the floor, and with it the slight humor Elizabeth had felt. From the pocket of his poorly-made suit coat, Suggs pulled out a pad of cut foolscap and a stubby pencil.

“Johnny lost at her table a few times and accused her of cheating,” Sheriff Sieber answered for her.

“You’re a dealer?” Suggs’ eyebrows rose.

“Yes. And only a dealer!” Elizabeth said.

Suggs asked questions in more detail than those of the sheriff. She gave vague answers about how long she had been in town and where she came from. Her stomach soured over remembrance of how her grandfather had turned her out. Nathan Suggs sounded like a doctor when he gave a detailed rundown of Johnny’s injuries. The sheriff nodded wearily; outside men coughed and scratched and spat. The smells of tobacco and too many people smothered Elizabeth. She leaned her hands on the dusty desktop, her head aching. Suggs addressed her again.

“It’s a good thing you’re a poor shot, Miss, or you’d be a murderer.” Suggs eyed her resentfully, probably wishing she had killed Johnny; it made better press. “Shooting a man at that range. You even drew blood on his brother.”

“If I’d intended to kill the man, he’d be dead,” Elizabeth muttered.

“How’s that?”

“Nothing.”

A clean-shaven man standing nearby snickered. Elizabeth frowned at him. He grinned, brown eyes mischievous. She turned away, morose and achy.

“And how are you going to explain this to Gabe Tillison?” Suggs was saying to the sheriff.

“Gabe’s not in town, thank the righteous.” The sheriff stroked his long mustache, frowning over the deposition Elizabeth and the two most sober witnesses had signed.

“Sheriff Sieber,” she started. The throb in her head grew worse.

“But that bunch he’s got working for him is tough,” Suggs went on. “The Tillison name carries a lot of weight, from here all the way to Texas. What if they expect some legal action—some retribution?”

“Like what? Johnny started it. There were witnesses.”

“Sheriff?” She leaned on his desk.

“Sheriff Sieber.” The brown-haired man who had snickered spoke loudly to get the sheriff’s attention. “Is there anything else? The other witnesses have been allowed to leave and Miss Fortune’s had a rough time of it.” His boiled white shirt looked bright under a dark broadcloth vest. Suit trousers.

Elizabeth gave the man a tight smile, not wanting to be beholden for his help.

“Uh. I need where you’re staying,” the sheriff said to her. “It ain’t the dance hall, I take it.”

“Certainly not!” She held her head higher. “I am at Larkins House. Room two-oh-four.”

He scrawled that on the edge of the deposition. “Thank you, Miss. You can go.”

The helpful man put on his dark brown hat and started to the door with her, but she gave him a hard look. “Thank you,” she said, dismissing him. He pursed his lips, then gave her a courteous nod.

Curious onlookers stepped back when Elizabeth went out. They examined her like she was a circus star, and she swept passed them, feeling weak and lonely. Dust from a passing group of riders made the July twilight murky, but the long breath Elizabeth pulled in helped to clear her head.

“Miss Lizabuth, ma’am?” came a drawl. “Are you all right?”

Relieved to hear a friend, Elizabeth turned, but the pain in her jaw kept her from smiling at Lost. “I believe so, Mr. Johnson.”

She always called him properly, although against his wishes. “It ain’t seemly for no white woman to show me courtesy,” Lost had told her. “Well, I ain’t no white woman,” she had snapped.

Elizabeth wished she could let down her guard and allow Lost to baby her. He was a chocolate-brown man and not much taller than she, with arms like sinew—a fatherly type who was good at nurturing. A father was what she wanted right then, and if her own father’s cavalry regiment had been encamped at nearby Fort Harker rather than on the hot, barren lands of the southwest, then she wouldn’t have been dealing cards at Lady Faye’s and none of this would have happened.

“How’s Mr. Nims?” she asked. Taking long strides, she held her skirt primly and continued down the edge of the cinder-flecked street past a group of men from the railroad.

“Doin’ all right.” Lost followed a half pace behind her. “Got a crease in his skull, but he’s awake and back at work. But Lady Faye...” Lost sighed. “She sent me to fetch you back to the dance hall, and she’s real riled.”

Elizabeth’s shoulders sagged. She knew Faye didn’t like her. Faye’s husband, Bob, had hired Elizabeth. He even gave into Elizabeth’s insistence that she would only deal cards, and would never work past midnight; he even allowed Elizabeth to keep five percent of her table’s take, too, a stipulation no one ever before got out of Bob Wentworth. Bob smiled a lot when Elizabeth was around. But tonight, Bob was over in Wichita at the Wentworth’s new establishment. Tonight, Lady Faye was in charge.

Lost escorted Elizabeth into the office at the back of the dance hall and Elizabeth frowned to see her own handbag open on the walnut desk, its contents spilled out. Faye Wentworth, her thin arms akimbo and hazel eyes hard on Elizabeth, screamed: “You’re fired!” and went into a tirade about Elizabeth’s continual impudence, and the proper way to treat customers. “Search her!” the woman ordered.

“Now, Lady Faye. You’re bein’ too hard on her,” pot-bellied Lester Nims said from where he stood near the door, a wrap of white bandage on his head. Lester shifted from one foot to another and chewed the corner of his black mustache.

“I said search her!” Faye’s eyes narrowed to slits. “She cheated Johnny Tillison or none of this would have happened.”

“Johnny was bad drunk, ma’am,” Lost started.

“You keep out of it!” Faye marched around the desk. “Where’d you hide it? Coins will be easy to feel, even if you slid them in your corset.” Faye slapped her hands along Elizabeth’s bodice and indignant Elizabeth shoved her away. “Don’t push me, you no good,” Faye snapped. “My husband gave you a job, met your terms, then you do this to us!”

Faye reached for Elizabeth, and again Elizabeth jerked away. “I’ll not be pawed at!” she said. “Just give me my wages and I’ll be out of your way.”

“Wages! When you’ve been stealing from us?”

“That’s a lie! And you owe me for last week.”

“It’ll cost that much to get the bloodstains off the wall. Hold her, Lester. I’m going to find that money.”

“Now Faye,” came his feeble protest. But Faye’s mood made him more concerned for his job than for Elizabeth. Not much employment in this town, and he had a family to feed. So when Faye demanded, “Hold her!” Lester grabbed Elizabeth’s arms and pinned them to her side. “Sorry,” he muttered. Lester left the room, embarrassed.

Elizabeth wrenched against Lester’s hold. She knew that if she kicked Faye in the teeth, like she wanted to, the woman would press charges. Losing her job was bad enough, but being in jail was unthinkable, and considering the racial pretense under which she had gained employment, she wanted as little digging into her background as possible. She clenched her teeth and balled her hands to fists. Faye whipped up Elizabeth’s blue skirt and reached to feel in her garters. Tears of outrage stung Elizabeth’s eyes. The woman ripped a petticoat and squeezed all the material around Elizabeth’s arms and legs, and by the time Faye was convinced Elizabeth had nothing on her but her clothing, Elizabeth had decided to fight regardless of the consequences. But Faye stalked back to her desk and Lester’s grip eased.

Elizabeth spun away from Lester and glared after Faye. “Are you satisfied?” She marched to the desk in two strides.

Faye tossed a comb and coin bag, hotel room key and gloves into the blue drawstring purse and closed down the mouth.

Elizabeth’s eyes narrowed. “The derringer,” she said from between clenched teeth. She would truly fight for that silver-plated pistol.

“It’s probably not even yours,” Faye smirked.

“My brother gave me that gun, and my initials are on the side lock!”

Faye examined the side lock, frowned at Elizabeth and took the two .44 cartridges out of the little pistol’s side-by-side chambers before she shoved the gun into the bag. “Get out of here.” Faye’s words didn’t have the punch they held before.

“My pleasure!” Elizabeth snatched the handbag and strode to the door. Once outside, she slammed the door so hard it rattled the glass chimney on the brass desk lamp.

The sun set like an orange ball on top of the dust-covered cottonwoods and elms by the river, but the July evening hadn’t cooled much. From a nearby street came the clatter of a wagon, and a horse snorted from the saloon hitching rail. In the stockyard a few cows called plaintively to each other. The town seemed as sullen and depressed as Elizabeth felt. She tugged at the peplum of her dress and frowned when she fingered the place where the piping was ripped. One of her slips hung to one side, and after she adjusted the torn nether garment, she opened her bag and checked the contents. The leather coin purse still held her luggage key, but there was no

money. Three dollars, gone!

She whirled to the closed door of Faye's office. Her instincts nearly rushed her back in there to confront the thief, but common sense turned her away and set her shaky steps along the street. After she crossed the tracks, she sat on a split log that served as a bench before a vacant store. A dark mass of birds swept across the sky and settled into the trees, chirping madly while despair drained Elizabeth's energy.

That's what you get for trying to pass, nagged her conscience.

Of course, if she had let people know she was black, she wouldn't have been in the dance hall - would never have been hired. Then Hank Tillison wouldn't have gotten his hate nerve plucked and she wouldn't have shot his brother. "And I'd never have earned my stage fare to New Mexico," she muttered, trying to justify her deception.

But bitter irony darkened her thoughts. She still didn't have enough money and she had lost her ill-gotten job. In the long counting purse she kept in her portmanteau, her meager stash of coins amounted to forty dollars. Enough to buy a decent horse or an old wagon, or for a farm family to live on for six to seven months; but when stage fare cost twenty-five cents per mile, forty dollars wasn't enough to pay the 700-mile trip to New Mexico. Unless she could spin gold from prairie grass, she had little chance of getting southwest anytime soon.

Larkins House, where Elizabeth had leased a room, was one of many stone buildings in town. It had a wooden verandah and two gilt windows near the door. The window of her small, second-floor room overlooked Douglas Street. Spare though it was, it seemed a real haven to her then. She lit the bedside lamp and went to the beechwood commode in front of an oval mirror. Limp curtains swayed in the half-breeze from the open window. She gingerly bathed the cuts on her cheek with cool water she had poured from the glazed pitcher into a basin. How to get to New Mexico, was her main thought.

Discouragement hovered around her as she pulled off the dress, the small tie-on bustle, and two petticoats. She stripped out of the frilled pantaloons, a chemise and light corset, then put on her long muslin nightgown and combed her waist-length hair. While working her long legs out of the dark stockings, she thought bitterly about her grandfather. Elizabeth blamed everything wrong in her life on him.

Actually, she might have looked back earlier than that - back to 1846 when the fair-haired Anne Clark with an eager, curious mind (who liked to ride fast horses) met the pecan-brown Samuel Fortune with the quick smile and soft voice who read Rousseau essays in the evenings after they had both finished day work on the new school in the Roberts community. That was in Indiana. An industrious colony started by North Carolina slaves and Indians who escaped the tyranny of their old home.

Elizabeth flung the cotton stockings toward her luggage, still fuming about her grandfather. He could have at least waited until I graduated, Elizabeth thought. Although college graduation probably wouldn't have altered her circumstances any.

She wrote a brief line in her diary and lay it aside. "I can survive this," she muttered while cleaning the pen. With her thick hair pushed loosely into a sleeping snood, she turned out the lamp and slumped back on the bed.