



Claude the Specter



“Earl Claudius Wade,” said the spirit, “time ta fess up. Wad ya do?”

Earl said nothing, but managed to keep staring at Claude the Specter backlit by flames dancing and crackling in the sooty fireplace. He and the ghost shared an exactness right down to a hawkish face, shorn blonde hair, a pair of double-action Colts strapped in holsters, and clothes—tattered britches and gray shirts sweat-stained to near black at the armpits. Like Earl’s, Claude’s stretched open at the collar to expose a sinewy neck still showing marks from the hanging Earl counted himself lucky to escape.

Perchance, he reckoned, he hadn’t fully survived. His mirror-image Claude had appeared moments after the branch broke.

The ghost—seemingly catching his thoughts—glared through close-set eyes. The lifelessness of those brown irises caused Earl to drop his gaze and study the dirt floor of the dilapidated cabin. Spots floated in his vision, similar to after staring at the sun for too long. His body took on the lightness of that hot-air balloon straining to break free of its tethers he saw once at a state fair. He grabbed hold of his Colts’ grips. Secured his basket, so to speak.

“Wad ya do?” Claude insisted.

Earl whispered, “Nary a thing the bitch din’t deserve. She *needed* ta die.”

“Why?”

Because she had sniggered... “Shad-up, Claude.”

“She poked fun at yer tally-whacker, din’t she, Wade?”

Belinda, she of feathery chocolaty tresses, had possessed boobs that jiggled whenever the whore erupted into laughter. Bitch had never guffawed harder than when Earl dropped his baggy, shit-colored trousers and thrust his hips forward to give Belinda a view of his pecker. Right

spooky it was how fast the woman he looked at changed from a shakester of plump features naked and spread-eagled on a bed to a she-pup bouncing and yapping. Could have been one of them doppelgangers in a dime-novel he had struggled to read.

No choice but to bash in Belinda's skull.

That was—what?—two weeks ago her blood splattered his face and tongue.

Claude nodded. "Ya liked the flavor, din't ya?"

Earl rubbed his stiffening member.

"Good, huh?" Claude pointed at a window akin to the cabin's every other see-through. The window sported a busted frame from which shards of mucky glass jutted and glowed in the snow-brightened moonlight. "They're out there, the posse. Idjuts, ridin' in the night, horses makin' a ruckus. Hooves poundin' the ground. Thump-thump! Thump-thump! Hellfire, if'n I were deaf and standin' miles afar, I could hear them beasts stomp. Comin' for ya they are, Wade. Watch ya gonna do?"

He yanked his pistols free of their holsters. How the steel whisked against leather and the grips melded with his palms sent a bolt of electricity straight to Earl's hardened manhood. Zest spring-loaded his every muscle.

Time to take on the devils pursuing him.

"Hellhound heathens," he cackled.

"Uh-huh." Claude sashayed his hips. "Put 'em in their graves, Wade. Fuck 'em in their asses 'til they six feet under, pushin' up daisies, catchin' a ride with the ferryman, takin' a dirt nap. Call it how's ya want. Just go on. Send 'em ta Hell ridin' lead!"

Earl whirled and drove his boot heel into the shoddy door. Rotted wood splintered and crashed to the fallen-in porch. Past the mess, he dashed into the teeth-chattering outside, snickering and figuring to paint the snow crimson. Stain the white, twinkling carpet that went uninterrupted by sinister shadows of spooky aspen.

The first of the posse cleared the trees bent over his horse's neck, peashooters popping and hitting everything except Earl, who calmly raised his Colt then squeezed that trigger nice and slow. The bullet found its target, sound redolent of smacking a flabby ass. A few gallops later the slumping rider dropped from the horse that got scared off by another heathen charging into the clearing. This chowderhead was dumb, too, spraying bullets at nothing in particular.

Panic ate at men afraid of dying.

Earl snorted, got off a kill-hit, and waited for the next chump while jigging to a joyous mental tune, recollecting how he panicked his own failure of a mare off a cliff and spewed cum in his britches at the sight.

The more deaths he caused, the looser he got, and by God's heavenly balls, he was ready to be a wind-blown sheet hanging off a clothesline and snapping.

Metal clicked from behind a thick bush. Earl shrugged, shot blind. His luck had always been great for killing. A rifleman stood, moaning, and crumpled onto the branches. The dolt's appaloosa galloped into the open. Earl thought what the shit did it matter and plugged the hoss, too, then spun on the motion caught with the corner of his eye.

Two gents.

Fatty rode a sorrel; Skinny a fine charger. Smart and patient these two. Calm. Though both men's guns bobbed in accordance to their horses' high-stepping trot, the men kept their barrels trained on Earl.

"Wade," the portly fella claimed, "got you dead in our sights."

He let fly a slug as Fatty sent a bullet whizzing by. Earl crouched, threw away a Colt, and fanned the other pistol's hammer with his palm, the smell of spent gunpowder filling his nostrils.

Thumps, groans, and gurgles. Fatty and Skinny stopped breathing.

Claude moseyed up beside him. "Wanna eat watch ya kilt?"

Earl shook his head.

"Dumb, but have it yer way. Fetch us that charger yonder so we can get. Yessir, a vault inside a Deadwood bank requires emptying. May as it happens, a teller will insist on a slug twixt the eyes."

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ISBN: 0996755527

ISBN-13: 978-0-9967555-2-8