

STRICTLY BUSINESS

JESSICA ASTIN

Lizzie DeWitt walked carefully on the rough planks that made up the sidewalk, hitching her skirts slightly in order to avoid the mud stirred up by the recent rain. Now, the air was thick with a fog, one that would no doubt be burned off by noon, but now made a chill surround her like a second skin. Lizzie was glad she had worn her warmest shawl, the thick grey wool giving her some protection against the chill. She passed the mayor's wife and gave her a polite nod. The woman pointedly ignored her, almost stepping off the sidewalk and into the muck-ridden streets to avoid her. There were some chills you couldn't hide from, Lizzie mused, as she reached a deceptively plain looking wooden building.

Her soft leather boots were coated in mud, so she stomped on the rag rug just inside the building, wanting to keep her establishment as neat as possible. It was tough in a place like San Francisco, which had sprouted up so fast that things like sanitation often fell to the wayside, but Lizzie DeWitt was a tough woman. If she decided to have the cleanest brothel in all of San Francisco, then she would have it.

She glanced over the lobby, a simple but comfortable room. A pair of tasteful leather davenports were available for clients use while they waited, but the focus of the room was the front desk. It was large, made of carefully carved dark wood, with a shelf behind it. Lizzie shrugged out of her shawl, neatly folding it and storing it behind the front desk, next to the money drawer and the ever-present rifle, which had been used more than once to escort an unruly patron to the door. The girl seated there, Charlotte, greeted her, and Lizzie asked if any customers had been in. It was early yet, but the men of San Francisco were always about, either working until the last flickers of light died or merrily spending the results of their hard labor. Their pleasure was Lizzie's business, and her business was booming. It hadn't been too many years ago, before they found gold at Sutter's Hill, when Lizzie was barely eking out a living, selling the only thing she had to offer, herself. Now, she ran a brothel of her own, making fine money, with

a dozen girls working for her. She could stay strictly on the business side, and it was there where she felt happiest. Most in control. A smile curled at the corners of her lips, but it faded when she saw Charlotte start shaking, all the while saying a familiar name.

Deputy Marshal Blye. The most troubling man she had met in her thirty-odd years, and she had met more than her fair share of rogues, scallywags, and scoundrels. It was easy to see why—take a man with no character or interest in doing anything but satisfying his basest desires, give him a position of power—and you’ve got a disaster waiting to happen. If he was just crooked, it would have been bearable, as paying the law to turn a blind eye was an important part of her business, but he also demanded time with the girls, and he often became violent.

Like with Charlotte. Normally, Charlotte worked in one of the back rooms, not behind the counter, but the last time Blye came to visit, he had roughed her up so badly that almost a month later, she still wasn’t ready to get back to her normal work. Lizzie hoped she’d be ready soon; the men loved the petite French girl with her large dark eyes and were willing to pay more than they were for American girls with less charming accents. If any other man had done that to one of her girls, Lizzie would have marched him off her property at gunpoint, but Blye she couldn’t touch—and he knew it. Not only was he a marshal, but his brother was one as well, high enough to wrangle a job for his neer-do-well brother, and tangling with him would bring down the full force of the law upon her. She’d end up shut down, in jail, or worse, leaving her little choice but to tolerate him.

Steeling herself, Lizzie asked how long he had been there, and with who, learning that he had only arrived a few minutes prior, and that he was with Mary. She breathed a little easier; Mary was a strong young thing, and she had a spirit that was not easily cowed. If he tried to get too rough with Mary, she was likely to handle it. Still, she was wary, walking down the hall lined with bright red doors, each with a different girl behind it. Some waiting for the next client, others in the midst of entertaining. It was a well-traveled hall, its rug thinning in the middle from use, but it still served its purpose to make the place look welcoming and to muffle the sounds of feet. Lizzie pulled out a kerchief to wipe away a speck of dirt from the door frame, then continued down the hall. She paused in front of Mary’s door long enough to

listen for signs of trouble. Hearing nothing unusual, she continued on to the back of the building, making rounds like she was on patrol.

Even when there wasn't anything pressing to do, Lizzie had a problem resting; she always had to be on the move. Back and forth, back and forth, cleaning a smudge, looking for patrons, always listening for signs of trouble. It was more than second nature to her. Ever since she was small, she always had to be on guard. It had always been her and her mother—her father ran off before she was born—and her mother had never gotten over his betrayal. For as long as she could remember, her mother had taken refuge the only way she knew how, through drinking and men.

Unlike Lizzie, her mother never sold herself; she gave herself away freely, for love and for drink. The parade of men in her mother's life was constant. What was also constant was the low-quality of those men. As she wasn't a respectable woman, no respectable man would have her, and so the men in her life ranged from shifty to criminal. After the latest in her mother's string of men assaulted her, Lizzie took off on her own, and it was then she turned to prostitution. She moved further and further west until she found herself in California, at the precisely perfect moment to monetize on the gold rush. Yes, life was so much better now for Lizzie, but she still couldn't relax, couldn't escape from the hold of her past.

Lizzie heard the front door open before she saw it, the solid wood groaning as though it was pained to be moved. She walked over to greet him, the crimson fabric of her dress rustling softly with every step. Pleasantries exchanged, she showed him to the shelf by the desk, which displayed a row of dolls. It was a simple system: each doll represented a girl working at the brothel. Each was cunningly made to best depict the girl and display her charms to the customers. When a doll was lying on her back, it meant the girl was with another customer, but when the doll was sitting, facing the potential customer, the girl was open. Lizzie fancied the method as it wasted less time; no need for the girls to fritter away outside their rooms, bored and waiting to be chosen. Instead, they could pass their spare time as they pleased, only having to see the customers when they were actually hired. For the men, they could easily see if their favorite girl was available and, if she wasn't, decide if she was worth waiting for or if he wanted to give another one a try. Sure, some men wanted to be able to look first, and she

would of course accommodate, but for the most part, the dolls worked as intended.

The customer chose a doll with lovely red curls and bright blue eyes—Clarice, a bold Irish lass—and Lizzie escorted him down the hall to her room. She made a brief introduction and then left the two to get to know each other on a more personal level. Again, she paused by Mary's door, but again, nothing sounded suspicious. No cries of pain, no shouts of anger. She allowed herself a brief smile. Mary was capable of handling this situation; she had no need to fret.

Lizzie returned to the front of the brothel, deciding to take a look through her books. She knew her letters and numbers, but they came slow to her, so she hired someone else to do them for her. Still, she liked to check and make sure things added up, that her business was still running the way it ought to be. She had a goodly sum banked and more hidden away, and that was the way she liked it. With money came security, luxury, and, perhaps one day, respectability. It was a far off dream, especially now, standing in the middle of a brothel, but she could never have imagined before that she'd make it this far, a madam rather than a prostitute, a woman of means rather than a beggar. Was being respectable such an impossibility after all that? Carefully, she put her books back into place, aligning them neatly in their drawer.

She had hardly closed the door when she heard a sudden scream. Without a moment's pause, she grabbed the rifle, loaded and ready, from behind the counter, and headed down the hall. In the heat of the moment, she didn't register which room the scream was coming from, but as the doors in the hallway opened, most (but not all) curious to find the source of the sound, she had a sinking feeling that she already knew which room it was coming from.

Mary's room.

She felt as if she ought to lay down the gun and go at that very moment, there could be no good coming from threatening a marshal—deputy or not—with a rifle. In fact, she knew it would only bring her the kind of trouble everyone wished to avoid. But the rifle was melded to her hands like it was cast in iron, and so she kept it, a talisman against evil. As she came to Mary's room, she tucked it under one arm so she could open the door, perhaps talk some sense into that damned Deputy Marshal Blye. Try to threaten to report his behavior to his brother, who was the only person he'd listen to, and then only

just. Or maybe—hopefully—open the door to find that Mary had only screamed as a result of accidentally slipping off the bed. Lizzie knew it wasn't that, knew it with everything in her, but still she prayed as she opened the door that what she found would be innocent.

At first glance, the tableau that greeted her was almost normal. There was nothing broken in the room, not the bedside table, nor the wardrobe, and not so much as a tear in the canopy of the large bed which was in the center of the room. The two figures in the bed could have passed as a couple in the act of passion, if you looked only for a moment before averting your eyes.

Lizzie, however, was never a woman who could simply look away. She saw the way he straddled the woman, with his hands not at her waist nor on her breasts but instead around her suddenly so small and delicate-looking neck. Mary was writhing, yes, but not in real or faked throes of ecstasy—she was trying to escape, struggling to breathe. For a moment, Lizzie could have sworn it was she being strangled, feeling the grip tighten around her throat, wanting to speak but suddenly helpless. What was there to say?

“Stop,” she managed, her throat feeling like it was filled with broken glass. Once the first word was out, the next came easier.

“You're going to kill her.”

Blye turned his head towards her, as if he hadn't noticed her before, which, she supposed, was possible, so intense was his focus on poor Mary's throat. His shoulders, tense in the act of strangling, loosened slightly, and Lizzie hoped that it was enough to allow Mary to pull a breath. It was his face, though, that held the most expression, and it held the strongest rage Lizzie had ever seen. In another situation, Lizzie would have wondered what would cause a man to hate like that, to be filled with a rage so powerful that the Devil himself would blanch, but a life was on the line, and there was no place for wonder. Only survival.

“Turn around and walk right out of here,” Blye said, his gaze flickering between Lizzie and Mary, “This is business between me and the lady.”

“You need to stop,” Lizzie said, hardly moving, hardly breathing, “I can't have you hurting my girls.”

There was a mean, mocking glint in Blye's eyes as he looked at her, up and down, like she too was for sale.

“I can do what I want, lest you want me to haul you in for running a whorehouse. There’s nothing here I can’t have, and both of us know it. So get out of here before I decide that I want more.”

A familiar revulsion flooded Lizzie’s throat, tempered by a flush of rage creeping over her face. Her grip on the rifle grew painfully tight, surprising her. She glanced down at the rifle, then back up at Blye. As if reading her thoughts, he said, “You and I both know you’re not going to use that. Go and put it back like a good girl. Get on now.”

Her gaze went back to the rifle. It was beautiful, its rich cherry-colored wood smooth and shining. Lizzie took good care of it, and it had taken good care of her. Just taking it out made her feel strong, powerful, and she had never yet had to shoot a man with it. Its presence alone was enough to drive most nêr do wells away, but Blye was not one of them. She tightened her grip on the rifle and, for the first time, aimed it at Blye.

“I told you to stop,” she said, and Blye laughed incredulously.

“Do you have any idea what trouble you’re getting yourself into?” he asked, standing up. He was naked, not as much as a sock on him, and as he stepped towards her, Lizzie was perilously aware of the height difference between them. If it wasn’t for the rifle she’d be quaking, but it strengthened her resolve, and she trained it on him.

“Take your clothes and leave,” she said, ignoring his question. “You’re not welcome here anymore.”

She could feel it, the shift of power as she spoke, as Blye realized she wasn’t backing down. Disbelief crossed his face, and she could tell that no one else had told him anything like that in a long, long time. He grabbed his pants, yanking them on, and then took another step towards her.

“You don’t know what you’ve gotten yourself into,” his lips curved into a snarl, “I’m going to take you in. You and every one of your whores!”

Lizzie felt his words, rather than heard them, and it was like lightning striking through her chest. She saw Mary past his shoulder, still gasping to recover, and her mind flashed back to the fear in Charlotte’s voice when she said his name. She saw a shelf of dolls, shattered, collapsed to the ground. It felt like forever, but it couldn’t have been more than a couple heartbeats.

She knew what she had to do. Staring straight ahead, she

pulled the trigger.

The rifle fired, reverberating through the room. The scent of the powder burned Lizzie's lungs, the shot echoing in her ears, and the sight of Blye filled her eyes. He collapsed onto the floor, his chest gaping open, blood so dark red it was almost black spilling out. She couldn't help but think how hard it would be to clean the floor after this, blinking numbly at the sight before her. The sound of Mary, coughing weakly, snapped her back to her senses, and she rushed over, helping her into a sitting position.

"You—you shot him. The marshal," Mary managed to gasp out between coughs, "You—his brother—he's not going to rest until he sees you dead."

"Don't you worry about me," Lizzie said, patting her hand, then standing up, "I can take care of myself. Now, I'll fetch Charlotte to look after you."

Quickly, she walked through the hallway, noticing few eyes on her. It looked like most people had made a run for it or hidden away in their rooms at the sound of gunfire—good. Charlotte was still at the front, albeit hiding behind the desk. Lizzie sent her off, grabbing her books as soon as the girl left, then left the building. She was going to have to disappear, start a new life, before Blye's brother could end her own.

Despite it all, she felt almost giddy. This time, she had money. This time, she could run away and be anybody. Not a prostitute, not a madam, not a fatherless daughter of a drunk, but anyone. Fear and excitement mingled, flooding her senses, and for a moment, she forgot the ugliness she'd left behind. She would be someone else. She would be free.