

A movie poster for the film 'Brokenheart'. The top half of the image is dominated by a massive, dark, textured face of a bear, with its two large, orange-tinged eyes staring intensely at the viewer. Below the bear's face, the title 'Brokenheart' is written in a large, flowing, orange-gold cursive font. The bottom half of the poster shows a small, rustic town with several wooden buildings and a church, situated in a valley. The landscape is rugged and mountainous, with sparse vegetation and a dirt road winding through the scene. The overall tone is dark and atmospheric.

Brokenheart

K E V I N W O L F

Chapter One

1879

The hole wasn't six feet deep. Only paying customers got the full six feet. I threw the last shovels of dirt out of the grave and then used the notch the undertaker had scratched on the handle to measure its depth.

I had jumped down from a freight wagon early that morning. My pockets were empty. A sign in a storefront window offered twenty-five cents to dig the final resting place for some poor soul whose luck had run out.

When I touched the shovel's blade to the bottom of the hole, the mark, halfway up the handle, lined up with the rim of the grave. I'd earned that two bits.

A breeze from the creek bottom tried its best to cool me, but it was a hot breath across my salty skin. My hands found the small of my back. I straightened and scanned the fringe of brush just uphill from the graveyard. Some thought from deep inside my head told me that someone was watching me. But no eyes looked back. Still, that thought hooked its fingernails into my soul like a bad dream that refused to melt away in the daylight.

My shirt and hat hung on a splintered wooden cross a few steps away. I dressed and picked up my carpetbag, tucked the Sharps buffalo gun under my arm, and left the cemetery with the undertaker's shovel over my shoulder.

I'd trade the undertaker his shovel for the money he owed me. Then I'd find the newspaper office. Word had it that this town might have use for a man of my talents. The cemetery gate squeaked shut behind me, and a coyote's howl answered from the hillside.

Maybe not a coyote. More like a wolf.

Heat as merciless as that on Graveyard Hill made drawing in a breath difficult. Wilson drummed ink-stained fingers on a battered roll-top desk. Drops of sweat shined on the man's bald head. He pivoted in his chair and looked at me.

“Kepler, newspaper men talk among themselves. I know why you need work.” He leaned back in his chair.

I curled my lip over my teeth and bit down. Sweat ran down my back. I started to speak but Wilson waved his hand.

“I’m just a printer. When the mine went down ten years ago, this town went bust. I bought this newspaper for a song. Everyone thought I was out of my mind. But I held on.”

He jerked his head toward the next room. A black iron press sat silent among stacks of paper. I’d been around newspapers enough to see that while the old machine was not what they were using in Denver, Cheyenne, or Leadville, it was cared for and in good working order.

“It’s 1879, man. Things have changed since statehood,” Wilson continued. “Brokeheart was made the county seat last April. The mine’s working again. New folks are moving in.” He pushed gold-rimmed glasses up his nose. A smudge of black ink separated the two little pig eyes that looked up at me. “I can’t do it all myself. I need a reporter.”

The editor raised an eyebrow, wanting me to say something, but I thought it best to let the conversation pause.

Wilson pushed at his glasses again, then lowered his voice. “I’ll pay you six dollars a week.”

“The mine pays ten.”

“You’re no miner.”

“There are other papers and other towns.”

“But you’re here in Brokeheart.” His nose wrinkled and the ink in the crevices darkened. “With two bits in your pocket from digging a grave. That won’t pay for the train fare to the next town.”

Outside, a steam whistle shrieked. Wilson took his watch from the pocket of his vest. He checked the time and tapped the watch on his desk. “Tell you what. Take the six and you can sleep in the room in the back.”

“Seven and the room.” My eyes held his. “And three in advance.”

“You’re in no position to bargain. Every reporter I know thinks all the stories come from the bars and bawdy houses on Front Street.” He fussed

with a stack of papers on the desk. "Six and one in advance. And I'll only try it for a month."

His hand reached into a vest pocket, and he laid a single silver cartwheel in front of me. "Now, the paper comes out at five each day. That mine whistle runs this town. When it blows, the paper must be on the street." He fumbled at his glasses again. "I want your stories on this desk by ten. Three stories each morning. Good penmanship is important. I don't want to guess at what you've written while I'm setting type."

I tucked the silver dollar into my own pocket. "Where can I clean up?"

Wilson lifted himself from the chair. He pointed toward the room at the back. "Put your things away. I'll have my wife fetch a basin and towel. And there's a Chinaman down the block that will boil your shirts. While he's doing your laundry, he'll feed you and get you a bath, if that's what you're wanting."

Eyebrows as bushy as his mustache followed the furrows up his forehead. "I can see where a tall man like you with all that blonde hair might get to thinking he was something special." His voice was low again. "I told you: newspapermen talk. I know what cost you your last job. If you're thinking of messing with my wife, I'll do more than just fire you."

I recalled the whiskers on the chin of the large woman at the desk in the next room. "I've learned my lesson, sir."

"Kepler, I expect your first stories on my desk in the morning."

"Anything in particular you were thinking of, sir?"

He huffed his flabby cheeks. "The murder."

"There was a murder?"

"It's all they're talking about on Front Street. The rabble down there says an evil demon killed him." Wilson leaned toward me. "You're not afraid of spirits, are you?"

I shook my head. "I don't believe in spirits, and I've seen enough of this world to know there's no evil. Just good and bad rolls of the dice." I studied my new employer's face. "When did the murder happen?"

"Just last night. I thought you knew. You dug his grave."

I changed into the cleanest of my dirty white shirts, rolled up the sleeves, and took my trail clothes and other shirts to the Chinaman. Then, with my stomach filled with rice and a dime gone from the two bits I'd earned, I began to explore the town of Brokeheart.

Wilson had pointed out Sheriff Beard's office. Most lawmen in worn-out mine camps welcome the opportunity to talk with a newspaperman. They tell stories of how dangerous their jobs are and how brave they must be. They hope I will weave their lies into the hero's story of some dime novel.

The sheriff's boots rested on the desk, and he tilted back on the rear legs of his chair. A large Bible lay open in his lap. He closed the book and unfolded his long legs.

"Kepler, isn't it?" He stood. "I guessed you'd be down to visit 'fore long."

My mouth opened.

"Wilson sent word with that old Indian." Beard smiled down at me. "If you haven't met Joe yet, you will."

Because of my own stature, I look up to few men. Sheriff Beard towered a full head above me.

He placed the Bible on his desk. "Welcome to Brokeheart, Mr. Kepler."

"It's Kepler. Just Kepler. No mister."

"Kepler your first name or your last name?"

"Neither."

He started to speak, when a voice came from behind a thick wooden door at the rear of his office.

"Parson?" The tone was weak.

The big lawman nodded for me to follow. "We're comin', Cap'n." Then to me, "You'll want to talk to the captain. He's the witness to our little murder."

The way he said "little murder" made death sound insignificant. Life and death in these boomtowns often was.

"Did I hear him call you 'Parson'?"

The sheriff smiled. "I preach the Sunday meetin's at the Baptist church."

The captain huddled on an iron cot behind the open door of an otherwise empty cell. Despite the heat of the afternoon, I was sure I saw the man shiver. He looked up at us with eyes as milky as opals.

The sheriff hooked his finger in the iron bars and nodded. “The captain here was at the top of the hill when Pickett sent his boys up the ridge the last day of Gettysburg. Ain’t that right?”

The old man straightened his back, and a smile curled across his face, exposing toothless gums. “Sixth New York Artillery.” Gnarled fingers touched his eyebrow in a half salute. “We gave them Rebs double canister at ten yards.”

In that instant, his pride in whatever he had done that day chased away the years of rotgut whiskey and black-pit mining.

“We held our ground. We surely did.”

“That’s right, Cap’n.” The sheriff used his pastoral voice. “Now, tell Kepler here about what you saw in the alley last night.”

The soldier’s ramrod in the captain’s back crumbled in a dozen places, and he slumped forward. Bony hands pushed back his hair, and he shivered again.

“An angel.”

“Tell ’im, Cap’n.”

“An angel. Dressed all in white. Dark hair a-flowin’.” The captain tugged at the front of his shirt. “But it weren’t no angel. Standin’ over Jeff. Drippin’ his blood from her lips. And I heard her scream.” The captain’s chin dropped onto his chest and he began to sob.

“Get some sleep, Cap’n. The Chinaman’s gonna bring your food ’fore long. Rest up, hear me?” Beard motioned toward the door, and I followed him back to his office. “He started talkin’ about an angel drippin’ blood and got a bunch of drunks laughin’ at him. The more they laughed, the more he swore it was true. I thought it best for him to rest here for a day or two.”

“You don’t believe him?”

“Would you? The man’s half-blind.” The sheriff dropped into his chair. “The captain has had a life full of what this town was named for. Now he swamps out the Months Saloon for the pennies the girls give ’im. Empties

spittoons and mucks out the privy. And he'll lick out what's left in the glasses if the girls don't catch him. No, I don't believe 'im."

"Then what happened to this Jeff?"

The lawman ran his hand across the stubble on his chin. "Jeff got busted up in an accident over at the mine ten to twelve years ago. He was 'bout as bad off as the cap'n. The mine let 'im sleep in a shack over there. Gave him a few cents a month to run errands." He nodded for me to sit, but I shook my head.

"I think old Jeff got a little too much whiskey in him. Railroaders were drinkin' up their paychecks. Somebody bought him a few. He staggered out into the alley to sleep it off. Slipped, fell, and hit his head. Cap'n found 'im."

"What about the blood he said he saw?"

"Oh, there was blood, all right. The ground was still wet with it." The sheriff tapped his temple. "A gash in his head. I think some coyotes wandered into town and got to his throat and face 'fore we found 'im in the mornin'."

"You didn't find him until morning? Wasn't it some time at night when the captain saw the ... angel?"

Beard shook his head. "But no one believed 'im. The cap'n tells a lot of stories. So no one thought anythin' of it." He tapped his fingers on the Bible on his desk. "Tell you what, meet me an hour after dark tonight. I'm goin' to take a scattergun and lantern over to that alley. If that angel coyote is thinkin' 'bout comin' 'round again, I'll pepper his butt. It'll give me a chance to introduce ya to the folks you should know on Front Street."

Chapter Two

I left the sheriff's office and let the toes of my boots lead me down the boardwalks of Main Street. I wanted to visit the Months Saloon on my own. Barroom conversations would be more forthcoming without the big lawman at my side.

Women in their summer bonnets strolled by, keeping to the little shade afforded by the false fronts of the buildings. A team of horses pulling a farm wagon stirred fine dust into the still air. Hot sunlight sparkled off the suspended grit.

Where the boardwalk ended, I turned west toward Front Street. New, white-washed buildings gave way to a block of shacks and empty corrals. I dodged a wagon and team, then crossed the rutted street to the saloon.

Hemp twine tied back the front doors. Three workers in railroad stripes shared a table. Rough-cut planks nailed to empty beer barrels made the bar.

"We don't get many white shirts in here." The folds of flesh on the arms of the woman behind the bar swung in the same cadence as the newspaper she used for a fan. "You Kepler? Word's already out 'bout ya."

"Is the beer warm?"

"Sugar, on a day like this it's almost hot."

"Got any good whiskey?"

"Ain't had good whiskey in the ten years I've run the place." Powdered jowls and extra chins framed what had once been a compact face. Gaudy red daubed her cheeks and lips. Limp, dark hair fell to the apron tied at her thick waist. "No un's gone blind from this batch. That's as good as whiskey gets in this place."

Over the bar, a dusty, faded painting of another woman stared at the saloon floor. The woman in the portrait was younger, slimmer, and naked, but as worn-looking as the real woman in front of me.

"I'm May." She took the stub of a cigar from a fold in her dress and hung it in the corner of her mouth. She put down her fan and struck a match with her thumbnail. "That ain't me in the picture, case you're wonderin'." She

sucked the flame into the tobacco. "It was here when I bought the place. Old-timers tell me her name was June. Been a lot of other Junes since her."

"Will I find a card game here tonight?"

May nodded toward a backroom. "Liquor up front." Smoke curled from her lips. "Poker in the rear."

I fought the smile that tightened my face.

"Hankerin' for one of the girls?" May blew gray smoke in my face.

"Not now. But I will have some bad whiskey."

"The first one's on me. And play your cards down the street. This here's a workin' man's bar. I ain't gonna let them men lose what few cents they got to the likes of you." She wiped out a glass with a rag and then sloshed two fingers of whiskey into it. "Why ya in here, Kepler?"

"Tell me about Jeff."

"Like, do I believe an angel kilt him?"

Turpentine fumes stung my nose as I tilted the dirty glass to my lips. The whiskey burned down and sent hot fumes back up. My lungs found breath again. "I'll pay for the next." I coughed and May laughed.

Just then, the sound of men's voices came down the street. The railroaders hurried from their table. The men outside shouted, and I could make out a few words of Spanish from a high-pitched voice.

"Muerta ... Agua ... Mujer ... Muerta."

Then a loud voice yelled out, "This pepper-belly sez there's a dead woman down by the creek."

Another voice called, "Git the sheriff."

I hurried out onto the street. Behind me, May shouted up the stairs for her girls. I jostled my way into the group of a dozen men and followed them around the side of the Months Saloon. We crossed a narrow alley that separated the buildings on Front Street from a row of slanting shacks and cabins at the top of the steep creek bank.

A burly, red-bearded teamster pushed a dark-skinned boy ahead of him. "Show us where ya saw her, Paco."

Below the cutbank, the aspen trees on the hillside blended into a tangle of

old cottonwoods and willows. Weeds, gone brown from the summer heat, wove a thick carpet along the stream. Through the maze of branches, sunlight reflected back in specks and spots from the water. I squinted into the brush, trying to spot the body.

“*Aquí, aquí,*” the Mexican pointed.

Red-whiskers clamped a handful of the kid’s shirt in his big fist. “Where, damn it?” He shook the kid like a rag doll. “I don’t see nothin’.”

As those words left his mouth, an axe handle tapped the teamster’s wrist.

“Let the boy go.” Sheriff Beard pushed the blunt end of the handle under Red’s chin. He snatched the kid around the waist, and the two jumped down into the creek bottom.

I hopped off the edge. My boots caught in the soft dirt and I pitched forward, scrambling to keep my feet under me.

“I see her, Paco,” Sheriff Beard said.

I studied the grass and branches in front of me. Not finding anything, I turned to the sheriff and the Mexican.

Paco made the sign of the cross. “*Madre de Dios.*” He pointed at the largest cottonwood.

The sheriff turned his head to me. “She’s in the tree.” He stabbed the axe handle into soft mud at the edge of the creek and then splashed into the water.

I shaded my eyes and looked into the branches. Not finding anything, I followed. Creek water lapped over my boots and my feet made sucking noises when I pulled them out of the mud. A breath of breeze puffed at the cottonwoods’ leaves. A shape twisted ever so slightly. I heard the flies, and then in the shadows I saw the woman twisting at the end of a rope.

I slogged out of the water and kicked through the tangles to join the sheriff. Paco backed away. He turned when he reached the stream and ran. Beard said nothing. His chin dropped to his chest, and he clamped his eyes shut. I guessed the parson-sheriff was praying.

His eyes opened and he whispered to me, “Fifth one this year.”

“What?”

“Miner’s wife. Suicide.” His head shook slowly. “One of ya go tell

Madison at the mine office and send somebody to find the undertaker,” he called to the mob that had followed to the far bank of the stream.

Two men peeled away from the group. One headed toward the mine, the other toward town. The rest stayed on the other side of the little river. None of them spoke. May came down the hill, pushed her way through, lifted her skirt, and slogged into the water.

“Help me get her down.” The sheriff’s words made my stomach turn.

She was tiny, not much bigger than a child. Her feet hung a foot off the ground. Black flies swarmed over her face. A swollen, waxy, blue tongue covered with the insects stuck from her mouth. Blood stained the collar of a threadbare dress. One shoe clung to a foot, the other lost somewhere in the weeds.

“Get ’er ankles.” Beard took a knife from his boot, reached up and cut the rope above her long, dark hair.

I stepped closer and caught her bare legs. The touch of her skin chilled me, and sickness boiled in my stomach.

As gently as we could, we laid her on the grass.

“Look at ’er throat.” The sheriff licked his lips. “Put ’er head in the noose but didn’t weigh enough to snap her neck. Hung there clawin’ at ’er throat while she strangled.”

“How long ... er, when do you think it happened?”

“I’m guessin’ sometime late last night.”

“Poor thing.” May knelt down and whisked the flies away. “Came all the way across the ocean. Married off to some man she hardly knew. Thought she was in America and everythin’ would be better.” May lifted a long, silver chain from the dead woman’s collar and placed the cross between the woman’s breasts. “She found herself in Brokeheart, and this was ’er only way out.”

May untied her apron and spread it over the glazed eyes and protruding tongue. Black flies buzzed all around us.

“Judas Priest!” a new voice called. A short, wiry man splashed at edge of the stream. The man stopped and put both hands on his hips. “This is gonna cost me a whole day of production at the mine.”

May whirled around and pointed a finger at him. "This girl died here, Madison. And yer worried 'bout losin' money!"

The sheriff pulled May back and said something to her I couldn't make out.

"Do you want to look at 'er, Madison?" Beard asked. "See if you know who she is?"

The man stayed rooted where he stood. "I wouldn't recognize her." He dropped his hands and balled them into fists. "I'll send Giuseppe to look at her. He can tell her kin when they come up from the mine. Let the undertaker know I'll take care of things, like before. Bury her tomorrow. I don't want this to drag out."

"That's big of you, Madison." May tried to push around the sheriff but he caught a fold in her dress and pulled her back.

Madison shook his head. "You know these people. They'll make a party of this thing, cry and carry on. Judas Priest." He turned and sloshed away back down the stream.

May, Beard, and I stood by the body for a moment more. I swatted a blowfly that landed on the back of my hand. A tear ran down May's cheek.

An Indian with a face as wrinkled as a dried apple motioned to the sheriff from where he knelt by the stream's edge. I followed Beard through the weeds. The Indian pointed at marks in the mud.

The sheriff squatted and touched the tracks. "Big coyote. Near as big as a wolf. Probably smelled her blood."

He stood up and spoke to the Indian. "Joe, you stay with her body 'til the undertaker gets here. Keep everybody away, hear me?"

We went back to May. The minister part of the sheriff touched her shoulder. "Nothin' more we can do here."

She pushed his hand away and left us without speaking. The big woman waded through creek, pushed aside the men who had gathered, and marched up the hill.

"Sheriff, where did they find Jeff's body?" I asked.

"Right up there. Behind May's saloon. In the alleyway."

I looked at the piece of rope still swinging from the tree, then back to

where the sheriff had pointed. “Remember what the captain said about the angel? Dressed in white? Long, black hair? Dripping blood? Do you think he might have seen her hanging here?”

Beard pulled up the axe handle from the mud and tapped the toe of his boot. “Full moon last night, bright enough someone might just be able to see. If he knew where to look. But Cap’n’s near blind.”

Dread pulled my eyes back to the dead woman. I was thankful that May had covered her face.

“First Jeff, then this ’un.” The sheriff tucked the axe handle under his arm. “Somethin’ else is bound to happen. Bad comes in threes.”

Chapter Three

Rust-colored ants and shiny black beetles swarmed over the blood-soaked dirt where Jeff's body had lain. From the alley, I looked down to the creek bottom where Indian Joe squatted in a patch of shade a dozen paces from the woman's body, waiting for the undertaker. The sheriff was right. The tangle of limbs and weeds where the woman had died would be hard to spot.

If I took two steps up the alley, I could make out the rope that she'd hung from, still tied to a twisted branch. But this was afternoon and the captain had seen his angel after midnight. Even if a full moon lit the night, I doubted if anyone, let alone a half-blind old man, would be able to make out that terrible place beside the creek.

A yellow cat scampered across the alley and leaped on the porch at the back of May's saloon. A girl in a red dress scooped it up and nuzzled the animal's face with her own.

"Why ya lookin' at that place, mister?"

She was no more than sixteen. The sun had bleached her hair to the color of corn silk. Freckles splashed across her nose. Bright red makeup that matched her dress spread over her lips. She leaned on the door frame and crossed one bare foot over the other.

"I wanted to see where they found Jeff."

Her mouth trembled. "This here's Mr. Buggs." She hugged the cat tighter. "I named him that 'cause he eats 'em. You know, bugs." She nodded at the insects on the stained soil. "What's your name, Mister?"

"People call me Kepler."

"They call me June. I'm one of Miss May's girls."

"May told me that June was the name of the girl in the picture over the bar."

"There's been seven—maybe eight—Junes 'twixt her and me. June ain't my real name. Miss May says nobody cares about a whore's real name."

"What should I call you, then?"

“Call me June. I’ll call you Kepler.” She kissed the top of the cat’s head. “Men in the bar sayin’ a lady kilt herself down there. That true?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“I heard her scream out last night.” One hand held the cat, the other twisted a strand of her white-blond hair in her fingers. I moved closer to the door where she stood. Suddenly June pushed the yellow cat away from her so that it dangled from her outstretched arms. Her fingers wrapped around Mr. Buggs’ neck and she began to squeeze. The animal yowled. Its teeth and claws raked the girl’s arms.

“June!”

Her eyes squeezed into tight slits, staring at the struggling animal, blood welling in her scratches.

I grabbed June’s arms and tried to pry her fingers apart. The hard muscles in June’s wrists refused to loosen. As suddenly as it had all began, her grip relaxed. Mr. Buggs dropped to the splintered floor and dashed into the weeds along the alley.

June tilted her face up at me. The freckles on her nose wrinkled and she smiled. “Miss May don’t let jus’ anybody go upstairs with me. Bet she’d let you, Kepler.”

Notes played on an out-of-tune piano drifted from the saloon. June shook free of my hands.

“Be sure to speak with Miss May,” she said over her shoulder as she stepped through the door into the Months Saloon.

Sweat streamed down my face and I slumped against the rough board siding. My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth as my brain tried to sort out these strange events.

What tormented June so? Was it the same anguish that I had seen in the captain? Had some evil angel visited this place? One thing I was sure of: a woman choking at the end of a rope could not scream out.

The yellow cat stalked to the edge of the weeds and studied the teeming insects. Lightning quick, it pounced. Mr. Buggs plucked a carrion beetle from the bloody dirt.

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