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By Lauri Robinson

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*The Shopkeeper's Shame*

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*The Cowboy's Secret*

Carter Buchanan knows all about secrets. It's his job to know. And Molly sure has something to hide. But the fear in her eyes touches a place he thought long-ago dead—and now this cowboy can't help but consider exchanging his pistol for a band of gold....

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## **Editorial Review**

### **About the Author**

Lauri Robinson lives in Minnesota where she and her husband spend every spare moment with their three grown sons and their families—spoiling the grandchildren. She's a member of Romance Writers of America and Northern Lights Writers. Along with volunteering for several organizations, she is a diehard Elvis and NASCAR fan. Her favorite getaway location is along the Canadian Border of Northern Minnesota on the land homesteaded by her great-grandfather.

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*Dakota Territory*

*August 1884*

Carter Buchanan kept the hat pulled low on his face and his feet propped on the seat across from him, waiting for the others to gather their bags and bundles and head for the exit. He was as ready to get off the rumbling box on wheels as the rest of them, but he never let anything show—feelings or thoughts. That was how he liked it.

He did let out a pent-up sigh and cast a little glance around, checking how many other passengers still had to depart the Chicago and Northwestern railcar. Several, including the woman with a dozen kids. True, it wasn't a full dozen, but she had a horde. With red hair and freckles. Irish. He was, too. Black Irish. That's what they called him all those years ago when he roamed the streets of New York. His hair was still black, his eyes still blue, but no one had called him that for years now. Not that it mattered. It hadn't then and it didn't now.

Once the commotion slowed, he pushed back his hat, planted his boots on the floor and gathered up the bedroll he'd tucked his well-worn dictionary in earlier. Sampson would be glad to see him. The gelding hadn't been impressed with his accommodations. Neither had Carter. What the railroad advertised and what he'd just experienced were as far apart as the east and west coasts. He knew. He'd been to both. Coasts, that is.

Right now he was smack-dab in the middle of these good old United States of America. The land his father never got to see. Mother, either. The trip over from the old country saw to that. Carter had seen this country though. Lots of it. And now he was in Huron, South Dakota. Named after the Indians that once roamed the prairies, founded to become the headquarters of the western division of the C&NW railroad, and where his latest case took him.

The only place bills had surfaced from last year's train robbery was right here in Huron. Ironic, that's what he'd called it. Told Mr. Pinkerton that himself. The man agreed and told him good luck.

Good luck. That, too, was ironic. What other kind of luck would you wish upon someone?

The outside air wasn't a whole lot better than inside the train car. Hot and heavy. He drew in a good portion anyway and set off in the direction of his horse.

Full of muck and mud, a recent rain no doubt, the ground surrounding the depot platform stunk from droppings left about, which he stepped around as if sashaying a woman across a dance floor. Not that he did that too often. Unlike dancing, sidestepping piles he was used to.

Sampson was nickering before the gate to the stock car dropped and upon bounding down, the palomino made his own offering to the stench and muck.

"That happens every time," a young kid said, handing over Sampson's reins.

"I'm sure it does," Carter answered, giving the curly-haired boy a coin for his troubles.

"If you're hungry, there's a restaurant in the hotel, or the mercantile sells breads and such, if'n you want to make your own." The boy waved a hand toward the buildings lining both sides of the muddy street. "It's a bit farther away, but I'd recommend the mercantile. Miss Thorson makes the best cinnamon rolls you'll ever eat."

"Obliged," Carter said, tying his pack behind the saddle. He led Sampson away then, but just far enough to examine the surroundings. A cinnamon roll did sound good. He'd always had a soft spot for pastries, and the mercantile was one of the places he'd visit, but first he'd get a feel for the town.

This assignment didn't require him to be undercover—he was using his own name—but that didn't mean he wanted anyone to know who he was, what he was doing. One never knew how folks would relate to a Pinkerton man. Some were impressed, others angered, and there were always a few who really didn't care. He'd be one of the latter, if he was in anyone else's boots. Plenty of Pinkerton operatives, even some he knew well, were little more than thugs with a cross to bear.

Carter took to walking again, down the muddy street, giving Sampson a chance to get his bearings while surveying the buildings on both sides. Connected, one to the next, they went on for half a dozen blocks. Several were standalones, had little walkways—muddy ones—between them, and most had two stories, a couple with balconies. Some were made of bricks, even had the dates they were built—last year—displayed in the top row below the crowning eaves. Others were made of wood, but painted. All in all, it appeared to be a well-laid-out and prosperous town.

The line outside the hotel suggested most of the train passengers had decided on a meal at the restaurant. It was close to noon. He'd get himself one of those cinnamon rolls later, but just now he was moseying. He was good at moseying, and liked it, too. It was amazing what a man learned just by keeping his ears open, walking about, and Carter set a slow pace, doing precisely that.

It was close to an hour later when he found himself at the edge of town. The sun was high, drying out the ground, and Carter was satisfied he knew enough particulars to dig in to his assignment.

Thorson's Mercantile, a big wooden structure, and a standalone one, was at the end of the main street, a considerable distance from all the other buildings, making him wonder if it was one of the first ones built several years ago, before the railroad bought up the land on the west bank of the James River for their western division headquarters. The store looked as if it had been a house at one time that someone had added a big front room to, complete with plate-glass windows and a sprawling porch to display odds and ends for sale. There was a barn and a couple other buildings nestled around it, as though the original owners were building a ranch, but changed their minds.

That's what he'd decided was in his future. A ranch. He'd have it someday. Soon. Just had to decide where. That's one of the things he'd come to like about being a Pinkerton man. Assignments rarely sent him to the same place twice, giving him a chance to explore where he wanted to finally hang his hat. It paid well, too, being a Pinkerton operative. He had no complaints on that either.

Carter swung into the saddle, ready to ride, give Sampson a chance to stretch his legs. There'd be plenty of time to get that cinnamon roll, see Ted Wilcox and then settle in the hotel before nightfall.

The thunder of hooves had Molly Thorson lifting her head and resting a hand on the end of the hoe handle. Cowboys were nothing new, they rode through town, even visited the mercantile on a regular basis, but the horse this one sat upon deserved a second look. Big and glistening like a gold coin in the sun, the palomino was magnificent. The never-faraway longing in her heart sprang to life; however, this time it was quickly overshadowed by a unique fluttering in her stomach.

Molly pressed her free hand to her abdomen, held it there. Waited.

The movement didn't repeat itself and she went back to hoeing. It was too soon. At least she thought it was, and there was no one she could ask. No one to tell her what to expect, what to do. It was only here, when she took an hour after lunch to hoe the garden, that she could even let herself think about the baby.

That wasn't true. She thought about the little life inside her all the time, but it was only here, when she was alone, that she could pretend things were different. That being pregnant was something to behold and cherish.

Time was ticking by and soon everyone would know about the baby. They'd be telling her what to do, too, and what they thought. Especially of her. A harlot. An unwed mother. A woman like that.

Hoe in hand, Molly attacked the weeds, releasing frustration all the way to the end of the row.

It didn't help. Only made her sweat and brood over things more intently. Loathe herself.

Disgusted inside and out, she blew out a breath. If she lived forever, she'd never take another sip of Afton Smith's cherry wine. She'd never been so sick in her life and now she knew life could always get worse than what a person thought it was. If only she could have that day back. Things would be different, that was for sure. But she couldn't have that day back, and she had to find her backbone instead of her wishbone, figure out a way to live with what she'd done.

Her anger renewed itself, or maybe it had never left, she'd just forgotten about it for a moment. With vigor, she took after the weeds in the next row until a little beet got caught on the end of the hoe. Pausing, Molly took a moment to stretch the discomfort from her back before leaning down to stick the tiny bulb, stringy root down, back in the earth.

As much as she loathed herself for what had happened, she loved the little life growing inside her. If it was just her, she'd face down the entire town, not really caring what they thought, but more often than not she witnessed the residents' reactions to those they considered were beneath them, saw and felt it when people looked upon Ivy. They'd do that to her baby, too.

"Molly!"

Lifting her gaze, she waited for Karleen to shout the rest of what she had to say from the side of the store.

"Mr. Ratcliff needs your assistance!"

Molly waved a hand, signaling she'd heard, and then dug out the last two weeds trying to grow at the end of

the row. She also carried the hoe to the barn before making her way toward the store. It was their livelihood, the mercantile her father had started back when there was nothing out here except a few farmers and some Indians—Ivy's tribe. Father's plan had been to start a horse ranch when they'd left Ohio all those years ago. It hadn't happened—a ranch—being a merchant had been more lucrative. The store was still profitable—barely—since the railroad opened a dry-goods store that was always well stocked. Their shipments were never delayed.

The weight on her shoulders was too heavy to shake off. Of course it was. There weren't just the worries of the store weighing her down. There was her sister, and her ward, little Ivy—a treasure for sure—the baby growing in her body, and a slew of other things she couldn't pull up right now. There was work to be done. Her hour of solitude was over.

As she walked along the pathway from the barn to the store, Molly couldn't help but glance down the road, in the direction the palomino had galloped. The days of saddling a horse and riding for hours with no real purpose other than pleasure were gone. Long gone. But they still called to her. Stronger than ever.

She increased the speed of her steps.

As old as some of the trees on her property, Mr. Ratcliff met her on the store's wide porch, rubbing his bushy mustache. Without a word of greeting and as pleasant as a hornet, he informed her, "I got an issue with those nails you sold me."

His lack of pleasantries didn't disturb her, she wasn't overly agreeable either. Hadn't been for some time. "Oh, what's wrong with them?"

"They're rusty."

If rusty nails were her only problem, the world would be a glorious place. Molly pressed her tongue against the back of her teeth, telling herself to stay calm. They needed every sale to make ends meet. "Did you leave them in the rain?" she asked, keeping her voice even.

Mr. Ratcliff hitched one thumb under a suspender strap while stomping his walking stick against the porch boards with his other hand. "I just bought them last week."

Staying calm didn't come easy, and deep breaths weren't cutting it any longer. "I know when you bought them. I asked if you left them outdoors, in the rain."

Little more than five feet tall, Mr. Ratcliff lifted his chin, covered with several shades of stiff gray whiskers, as if that made him taller than her. It didn't. So he stretched his neck. "Your papa would never have sold rusty nails."

"I didn't sell you rusty nails, Mr. Ratcliff. I'm positive they were just fine when you purchased them. However, once left outdoors, in the rain, nails will rust. Rather quickly."

"They're rusty, all right. Come take a look." He turned around, which took several steps considering he had to get both feet moving and his cane all at the same time.

Molly had no choice but to wait, and then followed behind his shuffling feet, all the way across the porch and into the store. Karleen was making herself look busy by rearranging the bolts of material on the table Mr.

Ratcliff slowly made his way past and Ivy was dusting the set of shelves holding shoes—of which no one had bought a pair in over a year. Molly managed a tight grin for the child as she continued to follow the disgruntled customer—growing that way herself with each footfall—all the way to the far wall where on the counter sat a small rusted and dented can.

Once there, nerves thoroughly frayed, Molly skirted around to the backside of the high counter her father had built by hand, and plucked a wet and rusty nail from the pile in the bottom of the can.

"See?" Mr. Ratcliff said as if it was utterly unbelievable.

"I see the water in the bottom of the can," she pointed out.

"Now, listen here, missy. I know'd your pappy when he first moved to this here county. You weren't no taller than a weed back then. Your sister still creeping on all fours. I helped put up that barn out back and even worked on this here storefront when the time came. Didn't use no rusty nails either. No sirree. When Niles Thorson sold a man nails, they were good ones." Along with several thumps of his stick, he loudly declared, "I want new nails. Ones that aren't rusty."

Several things were vying for the tip of Molly's tongue. She knew exactly when her family had moved here and was more than ready to tell Mr. Ratcliff exactly what she thought of his demand; however, someone else spoke first.

"What are you building with those nails?"

In no mood to be interrupted, Molly turned her glare toward the door. Spurs jingled as a tall man made a direct path toward the counter, but it was the gun belt hanging low on his hips that kept her silent. A Peacemaker, which should make her nervous since they weren't good for much except killing a man, but the gun didn't make her uncomfortable. It had her adding up receipts. So did the Stetson on his head. Both the pistol and the hat were things she'd like to stock, but couldn't. They were too expensive to sit on the shelves, therefore could only be sold by special order. Men buying Peacemakers and Stetsons didn't hang around town waiting for their order to come in. The railroad's dry-goods store kept them in stock, and made a hefty profit on each one they sold.

Mr. Ratcliff had shuffled around to look at the stranger, too, and the old man asked, "What you want to know that for?"

"Just curious."

The newcomer's voice was low and slow, subtle, and the gaze of his cobalt-blue eyes was steady, unwavering. Molly kept hers just as solid, even when their gazes snagged. He nodded toward her and then the can. She dropped the nail amongst the others and pushed the container toward the stranger as he arrived at the counter. Little intimidated her, and though she couldn't quite say this man unsettled her, he had a commanding way about him few probably ignored.

After thoughtful surveillance of the can and nails, the man asked, "You were seasoning these, were you?"

"Uh?" Mr. Ratcliff asked, easing his way over to peer into the can.

"Seasoning the nails." The stranger looked at her again. "May I?"

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