

GOOD TIME GIRLS

EXCERPT



K.T. BLAKEMORE



SYCAMORE
CREEK
press

CHAPTER 1



I Meet an Old Friend

“ I’ll take a box of *Peter Schuyler’s*.”

I knew that voice. *Her* voice. Part alto, a lot tenor, the essences elongated like the silks in a spider’s web, and complicated with gravel and rock.

My hand froze halfway to settling a carton of (quite stale) *Romeo y Juliets* on a shelf. There had been no comforting ding of the bell, nor warning of a potential customer. And this was my fault directly, for the chain had broken last week, or perhaps the week prior to that. And I had been much greater concerned with the boys desecrating my wooden Indian out front, and greater concerned than that with the abysmal sales of the *Romeo y Juliet* Cubano cigars to pay heed to the bell. I had become careless. Which meant this woman - whose voice I so sadly knew - now stood behind me, and for all I knew had a pistol pointed right at my back.

The brown cigar box hung from my fingers. I had a flash that I should sling it at her. But my luck would be to miss her head and end up with a cracked window of which I did not have the funds to repair.

An ice of sweat fizzed down my spine and pooled at the waist of

my corset, collecting and sloshing around my rib cage. I kept my movements slow and indifferent, as if old friends who might kill me commonly visited my shop.

"*Peter Schuyler's*," I said, "are harsh on the throat. I've got better cheroots, should you be of a mind."

"But I only like *Peter Schuyler's*."

I had but the counter and register as a barrier between us. With a gritted jaw, I slid the cigar box to its place, shrugged out my shoulders, and bent to pick up another. I gave a quick click of my tongue. "I've got a good sale on *Romeo y Juliet's*."

"But I asked you for *Peter Schuyler's*." There was a rasp of her boot heel against the floor. "That's what I asked for."

I yearned to scrape my tongue across the roof of my mouth, but it felt all of a sudden too thick, too swollen, and any words I wanted to let out scuttled back down my throat. I dropped to a crouch behind the counter, ready to grab the big long shotgun from its hooks. But it was too long in the tooth to be of much use except for waving around and smacking things. Another item I had grown careless of. "Are you going to shoot me?"

"Maybe when you stop quivering on the floor and stand up."

I tucked my knees into my chest and stared up at the bead wood ceiling. "I got a gun down here."

"I'm very disappointed. I thought you were finding me my cigars."

With a quick twist, I grabbed the shotgun, shoved the stock against my shoulder and stood up. The barrel smacked against the edge of the counter; I stumbled back to give it clearance and swung it round to face her.

I squinted, for the light was bright through the glass, and expected to find her pointing a pistol right back at me.

But she wasn't armed. She wasn't even looking at me. Various news cuttings I'd framed and hung on the side wall of the shop caught her attention. Her split skirt was a fine burgundy velveteen, cut to ride, generously fringed at the knees. She twirled a wide vaquero hat in her hands, rolling and unrolling the brim. Her hair was still a horse mane of black that struggled against the heavy ribbon she'd tried to

tame it with. She still had that straight forehead and thick eyebrows and the nose with a notch at the bridge.

"You might want to put down that gun." She took a side step to peer at another picture. "It's wobbling, you have the wrong eye shut and you're about to shoot out the glass."

"Put your hat to the floor and show me both your hands."

"Well."

"I mean it."

She did as requested, and I lay the shotgun on the wood, though I kept a finger hooked over the trigger.

She turned, arms and palms out, and I caught my breath and held it as she approached. A dreadful jagged scar cut her face from right cheek to left chin. It glowed a sallow yellow against the sun-worn hue of her skin and puckered at the corner of her mouth and up along her cheekbone, as if the knife that cut it was withdrawn and plunged in again.

She smiled, her teeth white and even; one of the many things she prided herself on. "Hello, Ruby Calhoun."

"Hello, Pip Quinn." I could not continue to stare at her, at the pieces left, at the copper penny eye that regarded me when she stared one way, and the green scheming one when she looked the other. I busied myself with maneuvering the gun back to its hooks.

"Well, it's nice to see you."

I took a swipe under my nose and sniffed. "I'da been happier with a postcard."

"Kansas City?"

I spread my fingers on the smooth wood counter and felt the sticky sweat. "Nothing wrong with Kansas City."

She shrugged, and the fringe along her short jacket swung until she slapped a hand to it to stop it.

"Where'd you get the costume?" I asked.

"You don't remember it?"

I lifted a shoulder. "I vaguely remember the act. Vaquero Vixens or—"

"Vivacious Vaquero Gals." With a purse of her lips, she meandered

back to the picture frames, leaning in as if reading the headlines and such and such. She tapped the glass that contained a pen and ink of me.

In it, I wore a hat so jaunty angled it threatened to slide from my head. The newsman who came to interview me at the prison added in a few more costume pieces: a white shirt and boy's trousers, a holster and kid's toy six shooter to angle in the belt, and a pair of tall-heeled brown boots. I was particularly fond of those, as the espadrilles the prison assigned me came apart at the toe. The piece de resistance was a long heavy shotgun which the photographer handed me. I said I did not use such a weapon. He replied it would balance the composition. Then he rolled down a canvas with a stage painted upon and that was that.

"He said he'd sell it to *Cosmopolitan* what with the Pearl Hart craze," I said. "It ended up in *The Youth's Companion*. As a warning."

"Uh huh."

"There's another somewhere up there of me with the raccoon an admirer sent."

She tapped the picture again. "You're tiny as I remember. Like a bug."

"I'm tall enough."

"How'd it go, having a raccoon in your jail cell?" She lifted a photograph from the wall, wiped a gloved finger to the plaster that had loosed, and ambled over to the plate window to get a bit more light. "This isn't you. It says Ruby Calhoun but it sure isn't you." She waved the photo around for me to see.

I knew it to be of the Wild West Show, and I knew it to be the recreation of the stage robbery that I had attempted. My stomach grew sore from resentment. "Bill Cody hired someone else. Her name is Myra Somethingorother."

Pip narrowed her eyes at me. "To play *you*."

"That would be show business. As you know." I came around the counter and grabbed the photo. "I didn't like the terms, anyway." As I tried to hang the picture, the tack slipped flat to the wall. I dug my

nails to the head to pull it right, then put the picture of the much prettier than me and blonde to boot stage-robbing girl back in its place.

My foot caught the brim of her hat and sent it to skitter across the floor.

With a quick jerk, she grabbed it up and brushed the crown. I could tell she was angry; the scar got whiter as her skin grew redder. She just kept brushing the hat with the back of her gloved hand. "This is a new hat."

My hands shook so wildly I gripped my gingham dress at the buttocks and pressed myself to the wall. "What do you want, Pip?"

"I want a box of *Peter Schuyler* cheroots."

"Then you'll leave?"

"Then I'll leave."

"Where's Big Henry?"

She looked over her shoulder to the window, and her eyes searched around. "He's dead."

"Well. I'm sorry for that. You loved that horse."

"Yes, I did. I loved that horse."

"How'd you get here, if not—"

"You still got your nerve, Ruby Calhoun?"

I clamped my jaw and rubbed my tongue along the back of my teeth.

Pip pulled at the half of her lip that was good and stared at me with her more honest brown eye. She gave a quick nod, pushed her hat toward me to hold, dug an old leather wallet from her skirt pocket, and pulled out a small square card. "Take a look at this."

A coffin, an *X* and a *1*. Crudely drawn. But it had its effect.

"What is that?" I pressed my hand to my throat. Pip's hat slipped from my grip and dropped to the floor.

"A calling card. From Cullen."

"He's been released, then." My stomach soured greatly. "When?"

"Last week. He's on his way to Hutchinson."

"Why?"

"See his mama."

I reached to take the card from her, but the curse of it changed my mind. It meant you were good as dead. “When did you get it?”

“Ten days ago. It was on my pillow.”

“Jesus.”

She pushed it back in her wallet and shoved the whole away. “You got those cheroots?”

“Sure.” I slipped behind the counter, dragging a milk crate into place and stepping upon it. I grabbed a box and hopped down.

She dug around in a small waist purse for coins.

“You just take ‘em.” I slid the box across to her.

Her hand smacked down on mine. “I’m going to kill him first.”

We did not look away from each other. I had no words ready for such a pronouncement. So I just raised my eyebrows and left them there. “In Hutchinson?”

“In Hutchinson.”

Pip left the shop with the cigar box tucked under her arm. She had no horse, no money, and a great big target on her back. I suppose she came all the way to Kansas City from wherever she’d tucked herself up to see if I, too, had received such a burdensome threat. I suppose she’d come to ask for help. But I had foresworn violence, and thusly she went away with just her hat and the smokes and a lesser image of me.

“I’m going to kill him,” she’d said.

No doubt in the tumble of her mind, she was secure I’d jump at the chance to join her; that I would drop my entire rancid business and quiet life and say, “Sure, Pip! Count me in for murder in the first degree!”

I gave a quick wipe of my nose and pressed my thumb to my sinuses — damn headache from all the dust and fresh cut wood. The edge of the city would be brick and stone before the year was out, but now it remained a pile of timber and horseshit.

“Kill Cullen Wilder...” I shook my head. “He’ll get you first, and that’s a sad sad thing.”

I trudged to the front door and flipped the latch. Turned the sign over so it said ALL CLOSED UP, walked to the back of the room and

shoved the waxed calico curtain aside. Then I lifted a bucket from next to my food stores and retched.

In a wash of fatigue, I dropped to my bed, grabbing an iron bar on the bedstead as I sat. Then I rested my chin upon my fist. The four-paned window above me had a crack to each corner and a view of the latrine that I shared with the haberdasher next door. Last year, there was no latrine, so I was grateful for the facility if not the view. There was no haberdashery, either, nor the need for one until Olaf Hagerstrom built it and stocked it last March. There had been no barber shop across the street nor the blind seamstress down at the turn. There was always Lady Anne's Dance Emporium three doors to the right and I surely did owe the establishment money. Otherwise, I might slip through the back alley for a sip or two of ale.

All of this industry and business comforted me. I went to bed tired from an honest day's labor and woke up with the groans and griping of anyone in the working class. I did not have a need to watch my back anymore, or count the tips China Mary chose to share with Pip and me and count them again to figure what she'd shorted us. I didn't have to think of Cullen Wilder. Or Pip's scar and how it came to be and how once I spent three days under the opium just to escape my guilt for its untimely occurrence.

My new life had very little drama. The worry over selling those damn *Romeo y Juliets* occupied the majority of my attention, and I took comfort in that, too.

I gave a sigh as big as my stays allowed and glared up at the rusted punched-tin ceiling. An ache came upon me, quick and sharp and familiar. For the ache came with a wish for my snug room at the Tucson jail where I had a quince tree just outside the cell and a canary that liked to sit on my shoulder. At least until Charley the raccoon came and ate the poor bird.

But then I thought back further to the why's and wherefore's of my incarceration and that led right back to Pip Quinn. Who I had spent a good six years forgetting. I was not in any way going to follow her on some quixote-ish mission to kill a man. I wasn't about to follow Pip Quinn anywhere.

She had her wretched and now doomed life to lead. I had mine. That was that.

With a slap of my knee and my guts and brain mass more settled, I returned to the front.

And stopped on a dime. Right outside the glass, I caught the rolling walk of Willie Bledsoe as he paced directly in front of my wooden Indian.

“Hey hey hey.” I raced across the room and grasped the door handle. It jiggled and caught as I worked to unlatch it. Willie held his pocket knife out and glared at the statue, as if the boy was angry for being ignored. I pounded the plate glass with my open palm. Then the door gave and I reached out and grabbed up Willie’s collar. He stumbled back, his arms stretched out in front of him, his legs flailing and heels digging into the walkway boards. I thought: he’s six months away from outgrowing my hold on him. Which made me truss up his collar just that much more until the skin rashed and swelled at his neck. He blinked those washed blue eyes and tried not to cry.

“You stay away from my wooden Indian.” I shook him hard so his shoulders jiggled, then shoved him to the bench against the store wall.

His head clanged on the tin sign for Red Dot Junior Cigars. “I haven’t done nothing.”

“You’re desecrating my Indian. That is a work of art.”

His fat lips pursed and wobbled. “Who cares?”

“You cut off his nose last week. He had a fine nose and now it’s a nigger of a nothing. I think I should cut off yours.”

“I didn’t do nothing to your stupid Indian.”

“Maybe I’ll just cut off your stupid head.”

The boy’s mouth yawed so wide I could see the back of his throat. He screamed. I clamped my hand to his mouth and glared around. But no one paid attention; they were concerned with avoiding the manure that never got picked up but only ground down.

“You listen to me. I see you out here one more time with that knife, I will turn it directly on you. The first time I see you, I’ll cut off your head. The second time, I’ll cut off your pecker. Do you understand

me? For I am not lying. I am Ruby Calhoun, a most fearsome bandit you should think twice about crossing.”

Willie’s eyes grew round and a satisfaction warmed my chest. My words had gotten through to him.

He twisted away from me and lurched from the bench. A sweat-dark glove grabbed his arm and whipped him around. He was nose-to-nose with Pip Quinn and upon witnessing her terrible smile, he wet himself. His piss-drowned wool trousers puckered and stuck to his skin.

“You’re going to have a hard time finding that pecker, Ruby.”

He squeaked and peed some more.

Pip released him, giving him a good kick in his backside as he tumbled away. She resettled her hat and stepped off the walkway. “I’ll be at Lady Anne’s.

READY FOR MORE?

THE GOOD TIME GIRLS releases April 4th, 2023.

Stay in the know about this and other K.T. Blakemore releases by subscribing to the monthly newsletter: Join the Ride

Visit K.T.'s website at ktblakemore.com

Thanks for subscribing and see you on the ride!

