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# *A Horse Named Poker*

*By*

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Wayland Maddock swallowed the frog creeping up his tightening throat. With a quivering, clammy hand, he reached for the glass to his left, leaned his head back and consumed the bitter tasting dregs that lingered at the bottom of the cup before slamming it down on the green felt embroidered on the tabletop.

Seated on the opposite side of the table was his hard-faced opponent, Phineas Dudley. His chair groaned under his weight as he shifted himself into an upright position. It was hard not to grimace at the black stubs that lined the inside of his mouth that smelled nothing short of a barn. A quirkly dangled from the corner of his lips, blanketed by a grime-infested walrus mustache that Wayland was sure would come to life at any moment.

Lazy notes sounded from the half-drunk piano man that played in the corner of the room. His lackluster efforts prevented the silence that lingered from taking over the gambling hall. A mob consisting of sour-drunks, doll-faced doves fanning themselves, cowhands with leathery skin, and drifters with forgettable faces assembled around the table only sparing a foot of space for Wayland and Phineas. The pitying glances Wayland received from the meddlesome onlookers and the pair of 10s that stared back at him from the poker table gave him a hunch that he would soon wish that his face could be just as run-of-the-mill.

But Phineas Dudley had yet to reveal his hand. He waved off the meek looking barmaid that squeezed her way through the crowd to take the empty shot glasses he finished off. Wayland pushed down a gnawing feeling in his gut as he rebuked the thought of another drink. Raising his hand to his face decorated with wiry stubble, Wayland wiped the pool of sweat that collected in the dip of his lip. His other hand grabbed at the handkerchief that grew tighter around his neck with each passing minute.

Gambling had never been Wayland's strong suit, but the night began with him being ahead for once. It seemed like such a long time ago, that with each hand he won, Wayland found himself atop a wicked cloud of greed and ecstasy. He allowed the liquor to entertain a beast hidden within, giving in to a dark passion that embraced his psyche. Wayland relished in the stimulation of his manhood as he took in the sight of the plump beacons belonging to the half-naked whores that cooed and giggled as they swallowed his money and soul. As the night unfolded, Wayland's delusion of belonging to the high roller life saddled him on a high horse, but as sure as the gravity extends the rope that beckons a man to the other side, what goes up must surely come down.

Wayland knew he should have cut his losses the first few hands he lost to Phineas Dudley. The memories of the two gentlemen who threw up the sponge upon his arrival crept back in his mind, while he and the other beef-headed gumps engaged in the balderdash that awaited them thinking they could take on one of the slickest black-legs Colorado had to offer. Phineas may have gotten the mitten on a regular basis on account of being as ugly as a mud fence, but his love of money and competitive nature placed him above and beyond the rest. He possessed a unique kind of luck, the kind that drained the good fortune of others, leaving his victims over head and ears in defeat.

However, in his drunken foolery, Wayland had pissed away all the money he knew he didn't have, flapping off at the jaw as he did it. The worst part of it all, however, was that Wayland had wagered the one thing he was once certain he would have left of value and of his dignity at the end of the night—a horse to get him home.

“Ya’ betta be ready ta’ walk home t’night, cowboy,” Phineas hooted. Wayland was the only other player that remained at the poker table. As he continued to sober up, he saw the

previous players, batting their eyes as they blended into the crowd. A collection of head shakes, nervous coughs, and stifled yawns fanned over the sea of brown faces that judged Wayland and his imminent demise. In his head, he pictured his horse hitched just outside. A painter with a strong gait and a loyalty that surpassed any hound fond of its master. Wayland's fear of losing him quickly settled, sobering him with each passing moment.

But just when he was starting to wonder whether it was too late to back down, the bar maid sauntered over with fresh new drinks. Her gaze studied the splintering floorboards with each step she took. The vein in her slender neck jutted out as her twisted face knelt beside the wide frame of Phineas before she served a single shot glass from the tray that held a total of two. The coils on top of her head were neatly drawn back into buns that reminded Wayland of two round robins resting on a hickory branch. Earlier, he had been too drunk to notice the odd behavior of the young woman, and while he had been preoccupied with the ladies of the line she couldn't hold a candle to, Wayland admitted that she did blend in like a chickabiddy in a meadow.

She straightened after serving the glass that contained Tarantula juice or something of the other before darting through the gathering of folks around the poker table. Phineas shifted once more in his seat before he made a sucking sound with his teeth. It was a revolting, distracting sound, but Wayland had no trouble keeping his eyes fixed on the dainty figure of the woman as she slithered to the back of the crowd.

As Wayland contemplated his next move, he heard Phineas' voice crack through his thoughts like a whip.

“Imma go ahead and finish this heah’ game. ‘Bout time fo’ me to bunker down ‘dis time o’ night.” Finally, Phineas revealed his hand. He had an ace high. He then laid out the cards on the table before retrieving the deck in the center. He drew one final card to complete the community of five that were lined up for Wayland and everyone to see. It was an ace of diamonds, giving Phineas three of a kind. Wayland had lost.

“Looky that,” Phineas exclaimed. “I gots me a new hoss!”

“I wouldn’t be too sure of that,” Wayland’s voice trembled.

Some of the onlookers had slowly begun to make themselves scarce, satisfied in seeing the outcome of an intense poker game. Phineas was right, it was late, but Wayland was wide awake. He leaned in, taking in the cheap cologne that lingered on the vest that was busting at the seams in a feeble attempt to hold in Phineas’ girth.

“You had me going there for a while,” Wayland said insolently. “But you ain’t getting my horse. Now start emptying your pockets.”

Phineas blinked hard. A curious murmur circulated throughout the crowd that remained at the poker table. Wayland hadn’t spoken loudly, but during the commotion, the piano player had gone on his way, more than likely to crash and wake up come morning with barrel fever. A pin drop could have awakened the dead in the deafening hush.

“What you lettin’ on about,” Wayland watched as Phineas’ eyes darted back and forth from the cards to the curious glances of the players that lost earlier in the night. “I won fair and sqaeh’! I have three of a kind!” his voice amped. Wayland rose from the table, his sinewy legs emerged from beneath, displaying his height and vigor. In lightning speed, Wayland drew his Colt Navy and pointed it at a befuddled Phineas.

If he had known that visiting this godforsaken establishment meant getting it in the neck, Wayland would have ridden on through without stopping once, not even to water his horse. The bitterness that flowed through his blood gave Wayland renewed determination. He glanced at the frightened folks remaining in the gambling hall then returned his blackened glare to Phineas.

“Give me my money back you son of a bitch!”

“Ya’ crazy,” Phineas found his words. “Shootin’ me ain’t gonna change the cards!”

“That bar maid did it for you,” Wayland replied. “I ain’t stupid, and I ain’t leaving here without my money.” The sound of Wayland pulling the hammer back made Phineas jump right out of the chair. His lard belly was now hanging out over his belt. Fumbling to correct himself, Phineas retreated, taking a few steps back only to bump into one of the other poker players that had also been euchred throughout the night. He was a dark-skinned man even taller than Wayland and had an expression on his face that could have made the Devil himself shit a brick. Phineas launched himself out of the way before one of his giant hands took hold of him. He stumbled over chairs and folks frozen like petrified sheep.

“Move! Outta my way!” Phineas thrashed his way through the people but tripped up on a spittoon. “Gah,” Phineas bellowed as the disgusting contents shot out onto his pants leg.

“You wanna take this outside we can,” Wayland was hot on his trail. The other players followed close behind him, forming a wall of angered, half drunk, half sober men with a target in their sights.

Phineas hauled himself to his feet. “I ain’t cheat! Ya’ wanna draw fo’ it, fine!” He was no longer running. He charged through the batwings and down the steps onto the soft dirt illuminated by a dawning sun peaking over the rolling hills several miles outside of Flatvale.

Wayland kept his pace, instantly relieved at the breath of fresh air he was able to take after being crammed in the stuffy saloon all night. The other players and the crowd from the table instigated their way outside, their excitement from the poker game quickly evolving to a dark fascination in seeing a man die on the street. The bar maid had also made her way outside, tears streaming down her face. As she stood there trembling, Wayland struggled to picture her willingly having part in any of the events that took place, but he didn't put it past her or anyone in the dodgy settlement.

Phineas, huffing and puffing, hobbled over to a dun and retrieved a Peacemaker from its saddle. Wayland's horse was hitched next to it. The creature's ears folded as Phineas marched past him. There was no way Wayland was about to give up his horse to a lousy cheat. There just wasn't.

Phineas followed Wayland's gaze to the black-and-white patterned mount that flicked its tail in response to the uproar. He sneered as he spoke up. "That 'der's my hoss! I ain't cheat."

"Okay then," Wayland retorted. "We'll shoot for it. Winner keeps *my* horse and the money. *All of it*. Loser goes home in a pine box."

Phineas chuckled to himself. His eyes never left Wayland's horse. "Fine breed ya' got," he inched closer to the heavy breathing animal as it nodded its head. "Imma call you Poker, cuz' I won ya after beatin' that sore loser o'er 'der!"

Phineas erupted into another fit of laughter. Wayland shrugged, shifting his weight evenly as he spread his feet apart into a dueling stance. He kept his hand hovering above his weapon with a stillness that mimicked the calm before a storm. Phineas wobbled away from his horse, still clutching his Peacemaker that he held in his left hand. His boots stirred up dust

particles as he dragged them across the dirt. The onlookers held their breath as they watched the unsightly man saunter slowly toward the middle of the street. Time moved inevitably slow as Wayland waited ever so patiently for his opponent to take his place, but something was off.

As his steps stalled, his breathing grew heavier. Wayland could feel his eyebrows rise like biscuits in an oven as he observed Phineas' stubby legs halt barely an inch from the horses. Before Wayland could react, a single shot rang out in the street. A piercing pain ripped through his shoulder as he fell to the ground. A buzzing sound muffled the shrieks of the onlookers as Wayland fought to return to his feet. The bullet only grazed him, but the nauseating sensation of being shot brought Wayland into a dizzying state of mind. It may have been fear, or a severe case of disbelief, but Wayland focused intently on his hands as he caught his breath and slowly rose. Wayland drew his pistol. His eyes wildly darted around as he searched for Phineas, only to find his beefy body lying motionless on the ground where he last saw him. The smell of gun powder hung in the air as the onlookers rushed from their places at the front of the saloon. They formed a circle a few paces from the hitch where the horses were stored.

Ignoring the pain that pulsed through his arm, Wayland trudged over to the commotion. A few concerned faces met his as he pushed his way through. The last few bodies that blocked his path sensed him approaching and parted like the Red Sea. Wayland held his breath as he finally took in the sight.

Phineas lay facedown in the dirt. A giant dent spanned the back of his head as pink flesh burst through the remnants of his skull. It was Wayland's horse that bucked again, encouraging the crowd to give the frightened creature some space. The horse threw his head and whinnied louder than a thunderclap.



“Well, I’ll be damned,” Wayland uttered.

A few of the other gamblers rushed over to aid Wayland in calming down his mount. His shoulder still throbbed, but all Wayland could think about was leaving the town and everyone in it behind. Almost as soon as the crowd gathered, they made themselves scarce, unwilling to deal with the inconvenience of disposing of a corpse after a tragic accident.

His anger subsided at having been cheated, but Wayland hadn’t planned on killing Phineas. As fate would have it, the cheater's lesson was delivered by a force beyond his control. Even in death, Phineas wanted to cheat his odds. Unlike Wayland, Phineas would never be able to recover from his poor choices. Reaching down, Wayland retrieved Phineas’ satchel and split the contents with the other players and helped himself to the rest.

Wayland did nothing to stop the grin that played on his lips as he counted the bills another time as he sat atop his paint horse. Phineas’ dun waited patiently at the end of the rope that trailed Wayland’s. With two horses, and two-hundred dollars cash, Wayland’s run through Flatvale wasn’t all that bad after all. He was still not much of a gambler, but he was certain that he had a different kind of luck. Setting aside his satchel, Wayland clicked his teeth as he readjusted his hat.

“Giddy up, Poker.”

The horse began a trot on the dust covered trail.

