

Abigail Drake Stands Her Ground

By Richard Prosch

The way Clay Chandler saw it, Walker Day thought the Day family fortune, locked away in the Tucker Creek Cattleman's Bank and Trust, belonged exclusively to him.

And why not? It's what he'd been told every day of his youth. Well-meaning neighbors, good natured relatives, even old Mother Day had assured the only-child Walker, "As the sole heir to the Circle-Bar-B ranch, all of this is yours."

Of course, that was before Walker took to robbing stagecoach lines and killing the drivers.

As a cowboy and trick roper working for the Circle-B, Clay had heard the conversation often enough.

And the kid apparently believed it even more now that his old dad, John Day, was finally dead of natural causes.

On a bright Tuesday morning, Walker addressed the assembled audience in the bank's lobby. "I'm a gentleman cattle baron," he said. "Not a man of violence."

“If you’re so dag-gum nonviolent, how come you’re pointing a gun at us?” said white haired Avery Slocum, owner of the bank.

“Seems you could make a better argument without the hogleg,” said Clay.

Clay had known the Day family for more than five years, and he knew how the old man had felt about his only son, Walker: disappointed, disgusted, and shamed.

That Walker didn’t legally inherit so much a dime from his father wasn’t a surprise.

John Day was more than embarrassed by his son’s outlaw status, of the raids the boy had made on neighboring ranches when he was young.

In spite of what Walker might believe about the contents of the bank vault, none of the ranch money therein was bequeathed to him.

Instead, John Day had left his substantial wealth to the town council of Elm Springs to distribute as they saw fit.

Walker shook his head with dismay. "I know some of you hold my unfortunate incarceration in Laramie against me. I know you don't believe a man can reform. I know you don't think--"

"You seem to know an awful lot for a man dropped out of school halfway through," said a pretty young woman, stepping out of the crowd.

"And just who are you?" said Walker Day. "And what do you know about my education?"

“I’m Abigail Drake,” said the woman. “And I make it my business to know plenty.” She smiled with amusement. Dressed in a white blouse with embroidered gold stars at the shoulders, patent leather belt and dark blue riding skirt, she looked like she stepped off the stage of a Wild West Show.

Which wasn’t far from the truth.

Abby arranged her long raven black braid over her shoulder and tipped back the front of

her Stetson hat with one index finger.

Clay rolled his eyes.

Abby was such a show-off.

Her father was a United States Marshal. Likewise, her brother was a law man, For all Clay knew, Abby's mom was justice of the peace somewhere. Equality wasn't an issue in the Wyoming territory. Unless it came to Abby, Clay thought. She definitely was no man's equal.

She was better.

That gal would be the death of him yet.

"You shut up, girlie," said Walker, "or so help me, I'll splatter that pretty white shirt red with blood."

The crowd gasped at the outlaw's obscene threat, and old Myrna Thompson fell back with a swoon into Avery Slocum's arms. "Be careful, Abby," said Avery.

"He's got a good point there," said Clay.

"Oh, pooh," said Abby, walking straight toward Walker, turning his gun quickly away with a brush of her hand. "I had a long talk with Mr. Day's dad before he died."

"You did?" said Clay. He'd seen Abby out at the ranch with her horse quite a few times during the last weeks of John Day's life, but he assumed she'd been there in her capacity as Mother Day's riding instructor.

Maybe the pretty equestrian had been closer to the old man than anybody reckoned?

"Your daddy was right shamed of you, Walker," said Abby.

Now she'd gone and done it.

Clay saw the rage building in Walker's face and knew that his gal pal had pushed the villain too far.

"You got no right to say nothin' about my pa," said Walker, spit flying from his lips

while blood pumped through the veins on his forehead. "You ain't got no right at all."

Even as Walker raised his gunhand, Clay shot forward.

But too late.

The hard blue barrel of Walker's Colt revolver came up and across Abby's jaw, drawing a bright red gash across her smooth white skin. Immediately he pushed her to the side and swept the gun across the crowd.

"Stay where you are, Chandler," said Walker. Then he pointed the muzzle straight at Avery. "Open the vault," he said.

"So if you can't get your dad's money legal, you'll get it at gunpoint. Is that right?" said Abby.

"Shut up," said Walker.

Avery gently handed Myrna Thompson off to one of the old farmers next to him and walked backwards away from the gun toward the rear of the bank with its big room-sized vault and locked steel door.

"Open it," said Walker, poking the gun forward.

Clay watched as Avery turned his back to the crowd, spinning the door's central dial with shaking, knobby old fingers.

Then a fleeting move drew Clay's eyes back across the room.

Even as Walker inched toward the old man and the vault, his gun arm held straight out in front of him, Abby Drake was rushing ahead.

CLICK. The last tumbler in place, Avery gave the iron door handle a hard yank down, pulled back, and the heavy door swung open on well-oiled hinges.

"Here it is, Mr. Day, for all the good it will do you."

That's when Abby shoved past Walker, knocked Avery aside, and ducked into the vault.

"Ladies first," she said, jerking the steel door from Avery's grip, pulling it shut and, with

a loud slam, locking herself inside.

"Now mffle, mffle. Mffle, mff," she said.

Clay shook his head.

Typical. Just typical.

Avery collapsed into an upholstered oak swivel chair behind his desk.

"Mffle, mffle," said Abby from inside the vault.

"I'm afraid I can't understand her," said Avery, digging his index finger into his ear.

"Get her out of there," said Walker.

"Drrp yrrr wppn," said Abby, a little bit louder.

"What? What's she saying?" said Walker. He pointed his gun at Clay. "Get over there and get her out."

Clay scratched his chin and measured his chances at ending the whole thing right now with a quick jump or flying kick toward the gun.

But when it was pointed at you, that Colt looked bigger than ever. He didn't think his chances were too good.

Better let things play out for a while.

No doubt Abby was impetuous, but most times when she did something stupid, she had a plan.

Clay slowly nodded toward Walker and walked over to the vault. Hitching up his belt, he leaned nonchalantly against the heavy door and knocked.

"Say, Abby?" he said. "Hello? Anybody home?"

"I'm doing the dishes," said Abby. "Try back later."

Laughter popped up from the spectators around the room, rankling Walker all the more.

"Tell her to open the door or I'll...I'lll..."

Everybody waited for Walker to finish the threat.

Momentarily uncertain, his eyes went back and forth across before landing on old lady Thompson.

"Open the door or I'll kill grandma Thompson," he said.

Clay relayed the message to Abby word for word.

Abby's reply was silent.

Wide awake, Myrna Thompson held her breath, swaying gently between two gents from the livery barn.

"Did you hear me, girl?" Walker shouted.

Clay breathed in deep. "I s'pect she did," he said.

Myrna closed her eyes and put her hand to her chest.

Clay's nose itched.

The usual lemon-scent of the bank had turned bitter.

"Somebody smell smoke?" he said.

He couldn't stop the chuckle that came from his throat as he saw the swirls of smoke drifting out from the edges of the vault door.

"Tell Mr. Day to drop his weapon or I'll burn everything. Stocks, bonds, cash."

"Hold on, Abby," said Clay, not bothering to disguise the concern in his voice.

"Lotta paper in here," said Abby, coughing.

"She's killing herself," said Walker. As smoke squeezed its way out around the corners of the bank vault door in wispy swirls, the gunman's face fell slack. "She's got to be bluffing."

Clay made a clucking sound with his tongue. "I sure wouldn't count on that, pard."

"You ain't never played poker with Abby," Avery told Walker. "You don't know how she is."

"You're telling me she's willing to burn everything in there, including herself? Just to keep me from getting what's rightfully mine in the first place? Why, that's...that's..."

"Crazy?" said Clay. "Yep, that'd be Abigail Drake."

"Put your gun down, Mr. Day," said Avery. "There ain't no more to be gained here."

"Ah, dang blast it!" Walker spun around, first tossing his gun to the floor with a petulant cry of frustration, then stamping his feet like a toddler. "It just ain't fair," he said.

Clay moved in fast and swept up the abandoned Colt, and when Walker lifted his red face, it was only to stare into the barrel of his own gun.

"Don't move," said Clay. Then without looking over his shoulder, he said, "Let Abby out of there, Avery."

Whod'a thought the old guy could move so fast?

Avery was out of his chair and spinning the combination like a spry youngster.

As he pulled open the door, smoke trails spun forward, some of the spinning to the floor like cottonwood whirligigs, others plummeting like downed firecrackers.

None the worse for wear, Abby walked through the dying white swirls, her boots stepping out stray embers as she went.

"Cigarettes?" said Clay, watching the last burning paper tumble away from the door jamb of the vault.

"So you weren't burning money at all," said Avery with more than a little relief in his voice.

"Nah, I just stuck a few of these into the crack of the door jamb." With a swift motion, she took a rolled cigarette from behind her ear and handed it to Walker Day.

Fingers trembling with nerves, he took it, a beaten man.

He breathed in deep while Abby lit the end with a match.

"Abigail Drake!" said Myrna Thomas. "I had no idea you smoked."

Abby shook her head. "I don't," she said, but holding up a package of tobacco and rolling papers, she explained. "These are for trick shooting."

“Trick shooting?” said Walker, a brand new look of alarm on his weary face.

“In the wild west show, we shoot them out of volunteer’s mouth.” Abby grinned. “Mr. Chandler? Will you do the honors?”

Before anybody could so much as snicker, Walker Day fainted dead away, hitting the floor with a resounding thud.