

In one blurred motion, Max Wells busted his Rolling Rock off the bar and stuck the jagged neck end in the kid's throat. Everybody who saw it said Max was justified and the county attorney agreed. But Max couldn't get past it. Maybe the Wildcatter gang figured Max was so hardened killing an asshole didn't bother him. But it did bother him. Asshole or not, he was only a kid, 21, he had parents and siblings, maybe a girlfriend. Max put up a front, but he was tore up inside, riven with guilt. He couldn't stop the image of the kid's face from flashing in his mind — his mouth in a silent circle, his stomach heaving and his eyeballs spinning — as blood spurted from around the bottle in his neck. And the nightmares were always the same. The kid got up off the floor, pulled the bottle out of his neck and said, "You killed me, you fuck." Kid's name was Lance and his brother, who started the whole mess, was Yancey. Yeah, Yancey like some Old West train robber. Turned out Max knew their father, a sand trucker. He'd seen him around the well pad. A good hard working Christian man from what Max could tell. And, of course everybody knew Yancey, drunken asshole par excellence he was. Nothing like his Dad. And Lance, he just did what Yancey wanted.

Knowing the father only made the guilt heavier. He wanted to go to the wake, and what? Apologize? Maddy and his friends talked him out of it. Max fantasized going back in time, and doing something different, but he couldn't stop reliving the reality.

After their Friday shift Max and the guys from the drilling rig, brimming with TGIF fever, ran to the trailer, washed up, tore off their coveralls, ripped off their work boots, put on civies and got over to the Wildcatter Happy Hour. Max found a Beatle T-shirt in his bag. Maddie must have bought it for him at a yard sale. He slipped it on. Who knew it would cause an asshole to wind up dead with a bottle in his throat.

While his work buddies challenged the pool table winner and hung on a side rail, Max got the last stool at the Wildcatter bar. He ordered a Rolling Rock, looked at the Phillies game on the big screen and watched the Penneatles, his favorite bar band, set up. So, Yancey, wearing a Tractor Supply lid and playing outlaw cowboy, sidles up to Max with his brother Lance on his flank and says, “So, you like the fucking Beatles, wuss?”

Assholes like these came with the rep. Max never set out to be the Lord Protector of Potter County, Pennsylvania and the Wildcatter Bar, but here he was. It started not long after he got out of the Army and came back home to Bennett, the old rural Pennsylvania coal, farm and lumber town where he grew up. A New York writer once dubbed Potter “Appalachia without the drawl.” The coal played out years ago, family farms were plowed under for trailer parks or left to nature and with half the county either state or national forest only pockets of lumber stands remained. Tourism bucks from leaf peeping, sky gazing, (Potter claimed the darkest sky in the East) elk watching, hiking, trout fishing, black bear and whitetail hunting and snowmobiling and cross country skiing kept the economy off life support long enough for the natural gas fracking boom to explode. Though not so mountainous by Rocky standards, Potter had some 3000 foot peaks and miles of hollows and dirt roads where hunting and fishing cabins — as well as tweakers’ trailer meth labs, pot grows and stills — were easily hid.

Anyway, Max’s first weekend back some hot head at the Wildcatter wanted a piece of the Penneatles drummer, because he “looked at” the hot head’s girl, who was, as everybody knew, a Penneatles drummer groupie. Anyway the drummer was a skinny, little peacenik. The hot head wailed on him the second he walked in the backdoor after the first break. Max broke it up and, well, bent the hot head’s wrist back till it sounded like ice cracking on the river.

A couple weeks later some hoodie drunk hit on Maddy, Max’s girl. Like what else is new?

Maddy was a redhead dental assistant so smoking hot her patients had the cleanest teeth in the hills. Maddie let the drunk lead her onto the dance floor by the wrist. She looked back over her shoulder at Max and they both laughed. When the song ended it wasn't funny anymore. The drunk gripped both her wrists. He backed into the emergency exit and in a couple seconds they were in the alley. Max ran out after them and saw Maddy had her teeth buried in the drunk's wrist, "Aaaah God you bitch," he screamed squeezing her neck with his other hand. She let go her bite just as Max uppercut the drunk with a left that lifted that him off the ground, then drove an overhead right into his throat as he fell. He crawled away whimpering and Max rammed the toe of his boot up between his legs.

"I'm ok," Maddy said, rubbing her neck and laughing at the asshole crawling down the alley.

One Sunday morning three losers from the Caissons motorcycle gang took over the Wildcatter just as it opened. They whipped the bartender with pool cues and threw him in the walk-in. They helped themselves to his phone, beer and booze and money from till. As customers came in, the Caissons rope-tied them onto chairs, emptied their wallets and crushed their phones with boot heels. Two girls came in. The Caissons ripped of their tops and shoved them around to each other cackling like monkeys. What they didn't know was the bartender had a second cell and sent a 911 text to Max.

Max showed himself at the front door and when the Caissons saw him he held up his phone said, "Nine-one-one" and ducked outside. The Caissons went out after him. As they walked toward him, Max went around to the back of his F-150 and pulled a tire iron out of the bed.

"Whataya gonna do with that?" The fat one said. "How about we take it and shove it up your..." The sound of the tie iron cracking the dude's head froze his buddies just long enough for Max to put a steel-toed boot into the closest guy's junk. He rolled on the sidewalk with his hand between

his legs making a rumbling “oooh” sound. Max grabbed the third dude pushed him inside where the unleashed Wildcatters were waiting.

In 18 months time Max Wells was a legend around the Wildcatter as the numero uno “dude not to fuck with” and “a good friend to have.” He never started shit, but he cleaned up a lot of it. Max’s reputation kept Max out of, and sometimes put him into, trouble. There were always assholes around who suffered from the fastest-gun-in-the-West syndrome and wanted a shot at Max. So it was with brothers Yancey and Lance facing him now. Yancey strutted right up to Max’s stool showing off his chest, biceps and Yosemite Sam tattoos and went nose-to-nose to on Max.

“Again I say,” Yancey said in Max’s face, “the Beatles suck.”

“Yeah. Whatever. That’s why they call it taste.”

“Well, your taste sucks.”

“And you, sir, are a fucking loser,” Max said.

Yancey shoved Max. The stool tipped and Max landed on the floor. The Yancey tried to kick him, but Max grabbed his cowboy boot and used the leverage of the leg to get himself on his feet, and Yancey off his. With one foot in the Yancey’s gut Max twisted the leg like he was screwing the asshole to the floor. Yancey stayed down gasping for breath and whimpering about his leg.

Max looked up, Lance, asshole cowboy number two, was fumbling with a revolver. Lance was so scared he was crying and his hand was shaking. He pulled the trigger twice. One bullet went into the back bar busting the mirror, the other wizzed Max’s ear, somehow missed the customers on the other side of the horseshoe and hit the back wall. Most everybody ran for the exits knocking over tables, chairs and each other and screaming a bloody din. Two of Max’s work buddies ducked behind the pool table after the second shot, then scrambled to help just as the asshole got the gun shakily pointed at Max. Before he could fire again, Max stuck him in the

neck. The asshole staggered back and fell. The gun clattered onto the floor next to him. The jolt to his head hitting the floor loosened the bottle. Blood spurted and stained a memory in Max's mind. One of Max's buddies called 911. In the chaos, Yancey crawled away.

Max killed men before in the chaotic fog of war, but not men who looked him in the eye as this kid did. Not men who bled to death at his feet. Max Wells was a lover not a killer. He loved his girl, his friends, his bar, his life. He was a roughneck on and off the rig, but his looks were deceptive: blonde and blue, pink cheeked, 5-11, maybe 180, but he had huge hands with a gorilla grip, long sinewy arms and lightning reflexes. Ex Army Ranger, Iraq tour. He worked out every other day with a boxing trainer. Jump rope, speed bag, heavy bag, sparing. And he was smart, more street than Jeopardy, but smart. He could build anything, fix anything and he could love. He and Maddy, lived in cabin they built on a 10-acre spread on a dirt road on the edge of the National Forest. They had no kids, two dogs and goats. Life was good.

Two township cops, one of them an old high school football teammate, half-heartily arrested Max, cuffed him as he stood at the bar looking down at Lance. Stepping around the spreading pool of Lance's blood, the old teammate led Max out to the cruiser, uncuffed him, opened the shotgun door and Max got in. His old buddy got behind the wheel. On the way to the cop shop, they talked about the Thanksgiving game when they were seniors. In an interview room Max told his story. The other township cop stayed at the Wildcatter and got the witness stories. Max called Maddy to come and get him. Charges were dismissed at the arraignment the next day. It was a no-brainer for the magistrate because the little fucker had a gun. The magistrate wagged a finger at Max and said, "You're getting a huge break here. You killed a young man. Now get outta my sight and stay outta bar fights."

Yancey's leg ligaments were ripped to shit. And his brother, Lance, was dead. "Fucking Popeye,"

he said to himself “ain’t gonna slide on that shit.”

Anyway, Yancey was a dishwasher at the Mountainside Resort, which was probably the best job a no-account drunken hick could have. Yancey worked hard, asked no questions. Job paid more than you’d think. He started a little quarter pound business, selling primo California red for 30 bucks a gram to the waitresses and bartenders who were flush with cash and tension from dealing with carpetbagging, boomtown assholes. What’s the difference between a waitress and a toilet seat? At toilet seat only serves one asshole at a time. Yancey cracked up very time he heard it. So Yancey had some money. Enough to buy a gun. Cheap? Loud? He didn’t care, just so it would kill Max’s ass. The second cook got him a girly little .22 pistol. Yancey traded a full pound for it and the fucking thing was pink. Didn’t matter, if he got close, a couple shots to the head would do it.

Yancey had to get Max into the alley behind the Wildcatter. Yancey figured he’d wait, back against the wall, next to the backdoor and blam, blam the wicked Max is dead. Yancey offered Charlotte, the Wildcatter’s resident junkie, \$200 to lure Max out the backdoor.

“What for?”

“Don’t worry about it, I just need to talk to him. Just do it. Get him in the alley at 9.”

“How am I gonna do that?”

“I don’t know, tell him you’ll give him a blowjob he’ll never forget. Exactly nine o’clock.”

Charlotte may have been a junkie, but she knew a set up when she heard one and she could use a laugh.

When the door opened Yancey’s problem was he had the gun down at his side in his right hand with the backdoor to his left. In the split second it took Yancey to raise the gun up and across his body, Max, tipped off by Charlotte, broke Yancey’s wrist and put him on the ground with the

barrel of the girly pink gun in his mouth. Yancey's hat skittered down the alley plowing cigarette butts and broken glass.

“Now what are you going to do cowboy?” Max said.

Yancey tried to say something. It came out, “Mmmh, oh mi ogg.”

“Nothing, right?”

Eyes bulging, Yancey shook his head, yes.

Max stood up, put the gun in his pocket and turned to Charlotte and said, “He tried to shoot me with a pink fucking gun?” They laughed their asses off as they watched Yancey limp down the alley. Max gave Charlotte three twenties and they went back in the bar.

Max put up a front, laughing about the pink gun part of it, but he was tore up inside, riven with guilt. He couldn't stop reliving what he'd done. Couldn't stop the image of the kid's face from flashing in his mind — his mouth in a silent circle, his stomach heaving and his eyeballs spinning, blood spurting from his neck. Max fantasized going back in time, and doing something different.

He asked Maddy. “Could I have done something different? Hit him over the goddamn head”

“I wasn't there,” she said, “but no. The Wildcatter gang was on your side. He had a gun, for God's sake. You saved people and maybe your own ass.”

After the pink gun incident, Randy, who ran the Wildcatter, asked Max, pleaded with him really, to stay away for a while. Another shooting or bar fight and the state might take his license.

Maddy didn't mind when Max stopped with the boys after work on Fridays, but she didn't want him going to the Wildcatter either. So he stopped at Crandell's. It was closer to home anyway, so Maddy could meet him there. He liked that just fine. So did she. And they had karaoke night, so

Maddie could sing “Stand by Your Man.”

Yancey saved up five grand. He knew a biker who might take five grand to kill a dude. Happened before. The biker’s name was Ted. He was big as a Penn State linebacker and meaner than a rodeo bull.

“So how you gonna do it. I ain’t got a gun no more.”

“I’ll strangle the fuck.”

“He’s pretty damn tough.”

“I’ll bring my Bowie knife.”

“You’ll find him at the Wildcatter.” Yancey showed the biker a picture of Max from Maddy’s Facebook.

Couple days later Ted the biker said, “He hasn’t been in the Wildcatter in months.”

“Shit. Well, he lives at the end of Kisset Road over by Hallsville.”

Ted found a spot to hide in the woods around Max’s spread where he could watch the house. He wasn’t expecting her, but Maddy got home first. He watched her climb out of her pickup. Holy shit, what a dish. With her red pony tail swishing over her back and her butt jiggling in purple scrubs, she was the hottest thing he’d ever seen. He had an hour to get a piece of that. He ran up to the door. She hadn’t locked it. He went in. She turned. “Who the hell?” She said and ran into a bedroom, but Ted pushed his way in before she could close the door.

“Max will be home any minute and he’ll fucking kill you,” she said.

“He ain’t due for an hour,” Ted said, stepping toward her.

“Sooner than that,” she said. “I just texted him a 911.”

But Ted was frenzied. “I’ll take my chances for a piece of you,” he snarled. “And I ain’t afraid of that gashole anyway.”

The bed was between them. He pulled out his knife.

“Don’t fight me and you won’t get hurt.”

“I’d rather die,” she said.

“If that’s the way you want it, at least you’ll still be warm.”

He went around the bed. A mistake. Maddy jumped on the bed and bounced to the other side and out the door.

Ted growled and ran after her. She made it out the front door. Got her shotgun out her truck turned and pull both barrels. Lucky for him, she was a bird hunter. She didn’t kill him. The shot rocked him onto his ass where he sat moaning when Max pulled up.

Max got out of his pick up and said, “What do we have here?”

“Fucker was waiting for you and then decided he was gonna rape me,” Maddy said and sat on her tailgate. Max sat with her, put his arm around her waist, pulled her close and they watched old Ted pull birdshot out of his arms. Max loaded a shell into Maddy’s shot gun. Ted shook his head pleading, crying, apologizing. “Yancey made me do it man,” he yelled as he ran for the woods.

Max fired into the air at a slight angle toward the woods. What goes up must come down. They laughed like hell watching Ted scramble into the trees with the shot raining down around him.

They could have called the cops, or Ted could have disappeared, but they let him go with a warning for Yancey.

“Those two are crazier than rodeo broncs,” Ted told Yancey. “They told me to tell you to piss off or else and if I were you I’d take their advice.”

But Yancey was so tore up about his brother couldn’t let it go. He learned from the stupid horny biker’s mistakes, he couldn’t trust anyone but himself. But the biker did have a good idea —

Maddy. She might have been as crazy as Max, but she was nowhere near as dangerous and fucking her up would be better revenge in Yancey's mind. Why wait?

After Yancey sent the biker, Max went looking for Yancey, not to hurt him if he didn't have to, but to explain, to ask forgiveness. He rehearsed to himself as he drove to the resort. "He tried to kill me and he might have killed someone else, too," he'd say. "It's tearing me apart, man. What can I do for you? Any way I can ease your pain?"

Bad idea.

Charlotte told Max Yancey lived in a cabin at employee village behind the resort where he worked and gave him the cabin number. He found it. Nobody answered. A neighbor, thinking Max was a weed customer, yelled over. "He's probably in the dish room, working." Max decided to wait. He really needed to spill. The neighbor shut his door, but then came back out, "Come on," he said, "I'll show where he's at. I need some of that shit, myself."

The neighbor yelled through the back screen door of the kitchen for Yancey to come out for a sec. "Ain't here," a busser said through the screen. "He called off sick. Said he was goin back to the cabin and crawl in bed."

But he wasn't there. Alarms were going off in Max's head. He turned to the neighbor. "Where do you guys park?"

The employee lot was behind the worker cabins. Yancey's piece of shit Focus was gone.

"Have any idea where he went?"

The neighbor shrugged his shoulders. Max grabbed the neighbor by the labels of his jean jacket. Got in his face. "Where did he go?"

"Take it easy man. He mighta went to his cuz's place. He's got an apartment over the Willis

garage. Cuz went to the races. Yancey crashes there once in a while.”

At the garage, the mechanic was fixing to close. He was in the office with a pounder of Bud.

Max asked about Yancey.

“Was here, left maybe 10 minutes ago. Said he had a date with a hot redhead. If he has a date with a hot redhead, I’m fucking Jeff Gordon.”

Max didn’t hear the joke, his pickup was trailing a stream of gravel out the garage drive.

“Damn it, bitch stop fighting,” Yancey yelled holding tight grips on Maddy wrists. She kicked him in the shin with the toe of her boot. He grunted and bent over but didn’t let go. He looked up and she drove the top of her head into his face and kicked him in the other shin. He let go of her wrists and fell back on his ass. “I’m not getting in your car Yancey. You’re going to have to kill me,” she said and ran toward the house.

She ran up the porch steps, but he tackled her from behind. She was kicking at him as he tried to climb on top of her. He pinned her down and she yelled, “Shit, shit. You little fucker, you’re gonna be sorry as hell. I’m going to kill you, or Max is,” just as Max gunned his pickup up the driveway, one hand on the wheel, the other on the girly pink gun.

He missed the Wildcatter.