

Finder's Fee

by Bill Judge

1

Laura pop opened her eyes and stared into a howling blackness. A terrible wind rattled her old wooden window frames and the sand in the wind grated on the glass. She stretched across her bed as she tried to see the furniture in her bedroom. She rolled the other way to check the time but the red LED digits were gone - blanked into blackness. The utter darkness scared her.

She listened for noises beyond the raging storm and realized it was hopeless. The wooden house groaned and creaked from the blast. Stretching again, she tugged at the nagging snags in her blue jeans that rode high and bit into her stomach, straightened the long sleeves of her denim shirt and, underneath, ran her finger underneath the constricting band of her bra. She decided to keep it on and adjusted the cups. Sitting up on the edge of her mattress, she touched the cold linoleum floor with her toes, as if she were testing the water in a pool.

Guessing at the noise that woke her, she walked toward her rear window, with her toes pulled up so she wouldn't feel the entire cold, and she pulled back the curtain. Normally the back yard was lit by a halogen street lamp at the corner of the garage. But she saw nothing. Not even the outline of the building. The sand made an eerie scraping, tapping, tipping noise and she let go of the curtain before it could find its way inside. She knew if she were outside, her skin would be stripped.

And she knew the sand had filtered through anyway as she licked the thin film of dust and grit from her front teeth and gums. She had lain across the bed just as the dust storm had started. She left the TV on in the living room, tuned to the news station, figuring she would catch just ten minutes with her eyes closed. She could no longer hear the drone of the talking heads. No telling how long she slept. She kept a watch in the top drawer of her dresser but it wasn't luminous. She'd have to get the watch, feel her way down the hall to the kitchen, feel her way to the leftover drawer that held everything from a screwdriver to a deck of cards and feel for a pack of matches. She didn't want to go down the hall in her bare feet. Her boots and socks were at the base of the bed. The boots were too much to pull on. She figured she might go back to sleep, so she pulled on last night's socks and stood up. Two steps to her simple Clarke high boy dresser, she felt for the top, slid the drawer open, grabbed the watch in the right corner under her folded white handkerchiefs, pushed the drawer closed, turned to face where she knew her bedroom door would be and took another step. Holding her right hand out, she touched the top of the dresser, lightly touched the shade of a standing lamp, bent down to touch the arm of a rocking Lazy Boy and then reached out for the door.

She reached too far and ended up pushing the door closed but it was easy to open. Trailing her hand on the wall, she walked about ten steps and turned through an open doorway into the kitchen. The catch-all drawer was just to her right. Sliding it open, she pushed around a mixture of items until she found a match pack. Finally striking one, she looked at her watch and, damn! It was already one fourteen. Too early to get up. Too late to find out why she had no electricity. She could guess - that part was easy. Something had knocked down the line strung from the combined generator battery backup and the house. She'd have to wait it out. Digging through the drawer, she found a short tea sized candle, lit it and turned back to her bedroom.

First, she stopped in the hall bath and shut the door, though nobody lived with her then. Thank God. She glanced in the mirror, and even by the poor light of the little candle, she could see the fading bruise under her eye. Seeing that, she rubbed at her wrist where it still hurt from when he grabbed her in a drunken or drugged craze. She peeled back the sleeve of her shirt and saw the bruise that he had left

there, too. She craned and twisted her neck and felt the kink in it and knew she still had a bump on the back of her head. He had worked her over pretty good. If she hadn't been able to get to her Winchester, she wasn't sure what else he would do.

Cocking it, she ran him out of the house. That was the good news. The bad news was, he stole her pick up. She splashed a little water on her face. She didn't want to wake up but she knew she couldn't go back to sleep with dust on her face. Sliding the straps of her bra off her shoulders, she rotated it around under her shirt and unsnapped it and threw it in the hamper. That felt better.

She hadn't expected him to leave for good in the truck. She figured he'd either drive away, sober up and try to worm his way back, or he'd drive into town and find another way out. But, no, he was a rat bastard. He stole her only ride and also her cell, which she had left in the truck.

She finished washing up and, then, changed clothes in her room, switching her day wear for nights. This time she climbed in and under the covers and let her brain imagine the sand came from a fairy shaking pixie dust. A woman from West Texas doesn't let bad luck get her down.

2

Once again, Laura woke up but this time more easily. She slid her arm out over the bed to turn off an alarm that never sounded. While the haboob blew itself out, it didn't restart the electricity. Groaning with that realization, Laura rolled out of bed and dressed like she did every day of the week – long sleeve cotton or denim work shirt, blue jeans, leather belt with a big buckle, and scuffed leather cowboy boots. The early morning sun shone through the curtains of both windows and she pulled on her wrist watch. Barely five forty five. She slept late.

She had planned to do some more painting of another desert scene after her morning chores but knew her day would be spent in repair. Since her power came from the rear of her place, she pushed open her door and screen door and then stepped outside. She whistled and shook her head before she said, "Hot damn." She blew bubbles through her lips like a catfish.

Not only was the wire down between the house and the hangar, which is what she called her large detached work shed and garage, but the windmill teetered on the side of the hangar. And her satellite dish had blown off its stand. She stood on the back stoop with her hands on her hips. No TV, no phone, no power, no truck - just trouble in doubles.

She grabbed her Dickies work jacket off a hook inside the back door and walked to the hangar to check on Rosie, her horse. The corral and stables were attached to the other side of the hangar. With a spring on the stable gate, Rosie knew how to let herself in and out. On the outside, she'd pull on a rope hanging off the handle until she could get her nose between the door and jamb and then she'd open it wide. From the inside, she'd nudge the big handled door knob and then push it open. She was already out in the corral yard.

Laura picked up a brush that had been blown off the bench next to the corral gate and let herself in. Rosie ambled towards her with an early morning puff showing from her nostrils. The start of February was its usual nasty self. Dust, snow, wind, rain. God's country, she thought.

"Hey there, girl. How's my baby?" She stroked Rosie's dusty back with the brush. "Quite the storm, huh, kiddo? You, okay?" Rosie whinnied and swung her full tail. Mostly white, though dull with dust, and some brown, she was a paint horse with more than her share of hard working quarter horse in her.

"That's right, the worst is over. Now we've got to get back to normal." Laura kept brushing her neck and her back as she looked for more damage to the hangar and the house. But it looked like the shingles on the homestead held and the tin roof of the hangar was fine. A minor miracle, considering hell had passed by through the night.

Laura bent over so she could brush her horse's legs. "We'll need to straighten the windmill, Rosie," she said, just to prepare the horse for some chores. "I don't know how I'll secure it. Have to see which cables snapped. Maybe we can pull it up and then I can string another cable and tighten it down." The paint

turned her head to watch as Laura moved to her back haunches. "A lot of work ahead of us and that doesn't even include the cleaning." Laura filled Rosie's feed bucket and patted her forehead one more time. "I need a cup of coffee and a couple of eggs. Good thing I haven't been to the grocery, huh? Or I'd have a fridge full of food that I wouldn't know what to do with." Laura passed through the gate and draped the gate tie over the post. "I'll be back."

After breakfast, she brushed her shoulder length auburn red hair, gathered it with one hand and slipped a band around her hair to hold it, then she plopped a dark beige Conner cowboy hat on her head. She knotted a large blue plaid kerchief around her neck. After getting her jacket back on, she grabbed a pair of leather gloves and pushed them into a back pocket.

The electricity had been knocked down but, luckily, the reinforcement cable had broken away from the post fastened to the hangar and that had dragged the electric wire out of contact. All she had to do was run new reinforcement cable, tighten it down, and reconnect the electricity. Simplicity. She flipped the breaker on the post and got to work. Lots of ladder work. First at the house and then back to the post where she cinched the cable, tightened down the clamps with a wrench, and reset the electrical wiring.

She flipped the breaker switch. She knew the halogen lamp up above wouldn't turn on. It had sensors for the daylight hours but she had hoped to see her back door light turn on. Nothing. "Damn it!"

She climbed back up the ladder at both ends to check the connections and they were solid. She walked inside the hangar and kicked the generator though she knew it wasn't the generator. The batteries should have been enough to get things started.

Tilting her hat back, she walked over to the corral and draped her arms on the fence. "Come here, girl." She rubbed Rosie's nose and looked up into the hills. What was wrong, she tried to picture the connections. The water pump worked or she wouldn't have gotten any water. She wiped her sleeve across her forehead and looked up into the hills way beyond her property. The early afternoon sun had heated the day to about fifty. Something glittered or glinted out there. Like a mirror.

3

"What do we have there, old girl?" She asked as she stared across the plain. Could be a road sign twisting in the light breeze that followed the dust storm. Could be some aluminum foil. Could be a lot of things. Could be somebody in trouble. But it was a long ride out on a horse for a wild goose chase and she had chores to do.

She saddled Rosie up and led her to the windmill. Placing the ladder against the hangar, she climbed up, tied a rope to one side of the windmill and threw the loose end next to Rosie. After descending, she let out about twenty five feet of slick and then tied it off to the saddle.

"Come on, girl, you know what to do," Laura said as she led Rosie away. The tower had a ten to fifteen degree angle to it which was easy enough for the paint to pull straight.

Laura planted the ladder against the tower. She wrapped a tool belt around her waist, filled some of the pockets with pliers, wrenches, screw drivers and connectors. She hoisted the coil of reinforcement cable over her shoulder and climbed up again. An hour later, she had stabilized the windmill.

She climbed again to secure the paddles and made sure the connection to the generator was tight so the free electricity could flow to the batteries. The generator was housed halfway up the tower.

While up there, she gazed up into the hills. There was something out there. She groaned. She knew what she had to do.

She climbed down again, got a pair of binoculars from the house and went back up again. Leaning against the top of the ladder, she focused the glasses on the hills. "Damn." There was something up there. Looked like the back of a red Jeep. Maybe a Range Rover. She shook her head. She wasn't a car dealer, or even, a car aficionado. All it meant was, she had to ride up into the hills. "Damn."

4

She climbed back down and led Rosie to the corral. Tying her outside the gate, she went in the house and unhooked her tool belt. She thought for a moment about the things she might need. If what she saw was a Jeep, someone might be hurt. She rummaged through her medical supplies and packed a saddle bag with a couple of hand towels, bandages, gauze, tape, scissors, a neosporin tube and an Ace wrap. She packed another bag with water, sandwiches, and apples for Rosie. She strapped on her gun belt and slid a Kahr CW9 nine millimeter handgun into the holster. She picked up her Winchester Model 70 and a box of bullets. She added a ten inch Sheffield Rogue hunting knife and sheath.

Going back out to Rosie, she tied off her rifle scabbard and saddle bags. She added another canteen of water.

Stepping into the stirrup, she swung her right leg over the saddle and sat up straight. "Okay, girl, let's go." She nudged her knee into Rosie's ribs and lightly tossed the reins. Neither Rosie nor Laura were in a particular hurry and they both kept an eye out for rattlesnakes. She couldn't afford to be thrown out there.

Her eyes looked side to side and up ahead but her brain was back home. Still no electricity in the house though there must be some to keep the pump working. The windmill was going to help a little, too. Her mind skipped a little more and went back to when she really had trouble. She sucked air through her teeth.

She never felt so stupid to take up with a drifter who ended up stealing her truck. But that's what a few drinks and sex could do - make a girl very stupid.

He was tall and gorgeous with dark curly hair, broad shoulders, a little stubble on his face, and he could talk. And laugh. And dance. What was a girl to do. He was unlike any of the ranch hands from almost anywhere. There was an eagerness in his eyes that just ate her up. She should have been more cautious. He did say he was just passing through but he didn't say from where or to where. He carried a large leather back pack with a bed roll, just like an old cowboy on the open range. He seemed exciting. Living from town to town, ride to ride. Said he caught a lift from a cattle truck that dropped him off just on the edge of town and headed south down T. Laura figured the truck could have been bound for the Jimersons' or the Franklins' place. But he didn't know. He grabbed her hand and they two stepped to Hank Jr.

She didn't want it to end so she asked him back to her place. He seemed sweet that first night - and insatiable. But he got up early and made her breakfast in bed the next morning. Then they showered together and made love again before they got dressed. He helped with a few chores. He was definitely high octane. A little grumpy by evening but he stayed another night.

She had a number of warning signs that she ignored. Rosie didn't like him. That was evident by the way she stood on the other side of the corral when he came to the fence. She never moved, just swished her tail and snorted. His energy and insatiability were not normal either. He began to wear on her nerves.

Constant talking with nothing to say.

By the late afternoon of the third day, before the sand storm hit, she asked him if he needed a lift somewhere. And that's when it turned ugly.

He scowled and said no, but if she didn't want him there to just tell him so. She must have hesitated too long because he started ranting.

She asked him to leave.

He wouldn't.

She asked again.

He wouldn't. He was going to spend the night. Maybe leave the next god damned day when he was good and ready.

Her eyes and mouth opened wide. She couldn't believe the change. She got scared but she was West Texas bred. Her stubbornness kicked in.

"No." She was stern. "You're going now. Come on," she continued, as she reached for his back pack. Big mistake.

That's when he grabbed her arm and shook her. He was so strong and he turned instantly mean with scores of tiny red threads running through his eyes, while the skin around the eyes also turned red and moist. He must have been on something. Meth, maybe. Coke, heroin, mescaline. She didn't know. She had no experience with drugs.

"Don't you ever, ever touch my bag," he screamed. He struck her hard in the face, under the eye, with the back of his hand. She saw stars but didn't quit. She wanted to head to the door. He pushed her away and she fell back and struck her head against a cabinet. Stars again. But luckily the gun cabinet was one over and she snatched her old reliable Winchester out of the stand while she sat on the floor.

That got his attention. "Hey, slow down," he said as he backed up. "I'm going." He hoisted his pack and walked backward.

She didn't move to get up. She didn't want him to lose sight of her pointing the rifle directly at him. The back door opened, the screen door slammed. That's when she heard her truck start and that's when she realized she had left the keys in it. And her cell phone. Damn.

Roger. That was his name.

Rosie puffed and brought Laura out of her reverie. She saw an old red Jeep Cherokee nose down in a gully about three hundred yards ahead. She couldn't imagine how it got there, unless the driver was foolish enough to try off-roading out in the middle of nowhere.

She thought about that for just a second and thought about her and Roger. Could be. There were fools everywhere.

5

Dismounting, Laura approached the upturned vehicle with her eyes everywhere at once. She noted the tilt of the back end of the Jeep, its wheels barely touching sand, and, if not all-wheel drive, the owner would have one hell of a time getting it out of the ditch. She noticed how the sand had piled up against the passenger side of the car.

She saw the number of footprints around the back end and driver side of the vehicle. A lot of people had been in that Jeep.

Figuring the people had left, she peered through the back window and expected it to be empty. But she saw a body up front in the driver's seat. Her pulse quickened as danger pumped adrenalin into her bloodstream. She unhooked her holster and rested her hand around the pistol grip. She was confused and hesitant. She hadn't expected to see a body after seeing footprints. Trying the handle, she also stared at the body which didn't move. It was bunched up against the door. She eased it open and braced the body with her shoulder, then her hip. He was handcuffed to the steering wheel. Both hands were cuffed with the bracelet threaded through the spokes of the wheel. What did she have here? A prisoner? Where were the authorities? What were those footprints doing all around the vehicle? Why were the keys still in the ignition? It didn't make sense.

With the man's back against her, she could tell he was still pliant and warm. She felt for a pulse in his left wrist, nearest to her. His heart was beating. She had no idea if he had a strong pulse or weak. She wasn't a nurse or a doctor. For God's sake, she thought, she was an artist who happened to inherit a ranch. She painted wildflowers, cactus, agave, coyotes, roadrunners, scenery. But she used her talents of observation to make some guesses and fill in some blanks.

A white male. Maybe forty. Tall, maybe very tall once his legs were out of the Jeep. Long, sandy colored hair, sand-dirtied hair, tan and burnt. Very dry lips. Desert issued fatigues with a tan jacket over a beige t-shirt. He was a beach bum in the middle of the desert. She shook him gently and said, "Wake up." But he didn't respond. She quit shaking and kept looking.

He had a pretty bad cut on the right of his forehead. There was some drying blood on the left side of the steering wheel. A large contusion on his left temple. She guessed that the Jeep had bounced around but

really slammed to a dead stop into the gully. His head might have bounced from the wheel to the window frame. That could knock someone out. She had no idea how long.

Knowing it was a stupid idea, she yanked at the handcuff chain. It was impossible for her to separate him from the bracelets with her present tools. Ignoring that problem for a moment, she leaned over and tried the key. It had been left on so she rolled it off and tried again. She didn't even get a click from the ignition. The battery was dead. She wanted to ask, how many things could go wrong? But she knew better than to say something like that out loud.

She had to get this guy loose. She had no idea how bad his injuries were. He hadn't so much as grunted. She rummaged through the back of the Jeep for some tools but there was nothing to rummage except garbage. It looked as if someone had already rummaged and taken anything of value. She leaned against the side of the Jeep and tried the handcuffs again but she knew they wouldn't give. She'd have to get them off somehow.

She had two options, really three but she tossed the first one. Nobody would recommend shooting at the bracelets inside a car while fastened to a man. Nobody. That was stupid. A ricochet could kill them both. So she figured could either stay there and wait for him to wake up. But that was no good. Who knew how long that would take? Or, she could ride back to the ranch and get her bolt cutters. The large one with the three foot handles. She had heard that cuffs had reinforced steel. She tried to drown out that doubt and push on. She had nothing else to cut it.

Leaving a canteen of water and an apple between his legs, she guided Rosie back to the ranch but she added some urgency to their trip. It was mid-afternoon. She didn't want to try to free him in the dark.

6

Back on the ranch, she led Rosie to her corral. She left the saddle on but filled her water and feed buckets. She slapped Rosie on the haunch and walked back to the hangar. Putting on a pair of canvas work gloves, she took down her strongest center cut bolt cutters, a three foot Porter. She stripped off the rubber grips and measured the width of one of the handles. Stepping over to a small crib full of long metal rods, pipes, and fencing, she turned over the odds and ends until she saw an eight foot piece, with a one and a half inch inner diameter, that looked just right. She slid an end over one of the handles. It fit easily without binding. Thankful that the hangar had electric, or at least battery powered electric if not generated electric, she turned on a single over head light rather than the entire area. She really wanted to work on the generator and figure out why it didn't turn over.

Instead, she walked over to her circular chop saw and changed out a 24 tooth ten-inch wood cutting blade to an abrasion blade and tightened it up. She lifted a table extension and braced it against the saw table. Then she laid the long iron pipe and pushed the pipe about an arm's length past the blade. She measured it and scratched a mark on the iron. Taking her time, she drew the saw downward in an easy motion and let it rest on the mark, always bearing down a little harder, keeping a nice, straight line. Cutting off a three foot section, she made an identical piece. She checked the fitting again with the bolt cutter and it was perfect. She left the pieces of pipe on the tool handles.

She found a small piece of chain that was about twice as thick as the handcuff bracelet. Thinking that the extra thickness compensated for the reinforced steel of the handcuffs, she placed the chain on a workbench and snuck a link between the jaws of the bolt cutter. She inched her way to the back of the cutters, being careful to keep the link between the sharp jaws. With one handle on the workbench and her hands about eye level, she pulled down hard on the tool. It bit but she had to let up. Undiscouraged, she took a deep breath and pulled down again. Snap! The tool cut through one part of the link and deeply into the backside. She scooped the link deeper into the cutter and kept a hand on it until she could pull down again. It snapped in half. In her mind, the cuffs were off.

Satisfied, she placed the bolt cutter and the new pieces into a canvas bag. She added a diamond chipped hacksaw, another canteen of water and a couple of flashlights and cinched them off of the saddle. She

flipped her canvas gloves on the work bench. Turning out the lights, pulling the plug of the saw, she closed the hangar door. Stopping in the house, she stuck an apple in her pocket and ate another. She walked over to Rosie and fed her the apple while she ran her hand along Rosie's neck. She gave her the other half of her own apple and said, "Time to go." She pulled her leather riding gloves on. Standing on Rosie's side, she put her hand on the saddle horn. She swung up, sat straight, adjusted her balance and headed back to the Jeep again.

She knew the extra length of pipe would give her the best chance of sufficient leverage to cut through the handcuffs. All she could do was try. The hacksaw probably had no chance to cut through it, diamonds or not. But she didn't want to leave behind any chance.

The long trek gave her time to think about the man in the Jeep. He could be almost anybody. Most likely a prisoner. It would explain why a crowd of people found him, circled the Jeep, and then left him inside. Most likely, they also stripped the vehicle of its supplies. Illegal immigrants. Antifa types? In West Texas? Maybe gypsy wanderers. She read about them. Traveling the country like locusts, they preyed on the stranded or the lone car at a rest stop. But it still didn't explain who or what the man was. If a prisoner, where was the law?

An awful thought occurred to her. She hadn't checked the countryside. Maybe the lawman's body was out there. Somewhere.

God, she couldn't do everything. She heaved a deep breath.

Nearing three thirty in the afternoon, she needed to get down, set up the tool, break the chain, wake up the almost dead man, probably dangerous, get him to his feet, get him up on Rosie and get back home by dark. Not too much to ask.

Drawing close to about fifty yards of the Jeep, she looked through the back windows. She saw movement in the front seat. Which was good. And bad.

7

The first sound he heard was a deep guttural sucking of someone's breath and he instinctively shrank back into a corner. Faster than a switch, a bolt of pain shot up his left side from his foot to his brain. He jerked awake with his eyes still closed and threw his hands up – the pain, the breath, the hands - all at once. "Oh my God," he gasped. Both of his wrists jarred to a stop with a sudden jab of steel. Surprised by the breath and the grunting, and struggling with his hands, he squinted to get his eyes open. Encrusted with grit and dried sweat and tears, he suddenly realized that he had been cuffed and what he heard was his own breath. He fought with the handcuffs for a moment and groaned with the immense pain that emanated up his left leg. Even as he twisted to see what was wrong with his leg, the sear of white hot agony traveled in a constant overlapping, oscillating rhythm from his foot, ankle or his lower leg. He tried to reach for his pants leg but a canteen obstructed him. It jammed up between his leg and the steering wheel and prevented his right hand from weaving through the wheel to give his left hand some slack.

In a stupor, he almost pushed it out from under the wheel and onto the floor but stopped just in time. Stupid things are done in rashness. God, he was thirsty. So thirsty, and sweaty and dirty. Then he tried to reach the top of the canteen. If he could just get his fingers around the stopper and inch it back into the position it had been in. If his damn leg ever quit hurting, he didn't notice. It felt like one, long, continuous torture. The leg, the thirst, his throbbing head, the sweat in his eyes that also burned his temple and his face. His hands, clapped in steel. Oh God, how did this happen, he wondered without trying to figure it out. The pain in his leg radiated up into his groin, into his stomach. He felt sick. A drink of water might make him puke but he didn't care. His burning throat and lips ruled.

He managed to unscrew the cap and, by balancing his hands back and forth, raise the canteen to his lips. He sipped. He didn't gulp, not because of self-control but because he couldn't raise the canteen high enough to gulp. The tepid water, heated to about seventy degrees inside the Jeep, was enough to wash away the dust and sand, even if some of the bilge also went down his throat. It burned but felt good. He

took another swig and then capped it. He didn't know how long he'd be out there. Wherever there was. He wasn't positive about how long he had been stranded either. Or how he got there.

He leaned back against the driver side door and guessed at the time, though he wasn't sure of the day. The sun was above the roof of the car so he couldn't use its position to be accurate, so he had to estimate. It was afternoon, before evening. If it were near five, he'd probably be able to see the sun dropping to the earth.

Based on the slant of light on the hills, up above the road to his left, far to his left, he guessed about two, two thirty. He wondered again about how he got from the road to the gully. He closed his eyes and fell asleep.

8

Laura dismounted behind the Jeep and drew out her pistol. A two and a half inch striped bark scorpion scurried from a rock right in front of her. For some reason, with its stinger curled up behind its back, it reminded her of Roger. With a scowl, she kicked it under the Jeep with her boot.

Hunched down, she approached the driver's side by letting a shoulder brush against the side of the car. If the man had a gun, and she knew she hadn't seen one, she didn't want to be an easy target. She'd be a fool to rush to the rescue, especially when she knew almost nothing about him. Most men, it seemed, couldn't be trusted. She wondered if she should be even helping the guy.

She knew he was at least six foot, thick, long, curly, sandy hair. A stubble for a beard. And he was handcuffed. At least he was when she left.

She looked into the window and peered over his shoulder. He was still cuffed. Good, she thought. Then she thought how stupid that was. She came back to cut him out. It would have been better if he weren't cuffed. As he leaned against the inside of the door, the man seemed to still be sleeping or knocked out. He must have moved while unconscious. She didn't want to yank open the door and have the man fall as far as his cuffs would carry him. That would be cruel. She was in a foul mood, but she was not yet cruel. With her eyes on the captive, she took hold of the door handle, pushed the button in and eased the door back. Even with the caution, the man fell backwards. But, with that movement, he suddenly woke and wretched away from her. Turning his face and eyes to her, he stared at her gun.

"Don't shoot. I'm unarmed," he said. He had blue eyes. They were a little blood shot, possibly from the sweat.

"You take it easy," she said, without lowering her gun. She said that as advice and as a warning.

"I can't hurt you. My hands are tied." He held his hands up as high as he could. He stifled a groan that came out as a sniff and a backwards jerk of his head.

Laura said nothing. She stood back from the door and assessed him. He didn't seem dangerous. Except for his size and strength and what seemed like a statue to testosterone, he might not be any trouble. He didn't smile but she didn't detect harm in him. Not that she was a particularly good judge of character, she reminded herself.

"How did you get like this?" She didn't move closer nor did she lower her pistol.

"I don't know." The man slowly shook his head from side to side.

"You don't know?" Her voice raised a pitch as she thought bullshit. She narrowed her eyes. She saw that he saw.

"No. I woke up and I was cuffed." He winced and sucked in his breath.

"You hurt?"

"My leg." He moved his left hand down and his right hand up. "Down there," he said and pointed to the left.

"Broken?"

"I don't know. Feels like it."

"What were you doing out here?"

"Driving."

"Yeah," she said. "I figured that." She shifted her weight. "Who was driving?" She emphasized the word, who.

His brow furrowed. "I was. What do you mean?"

"You're alone?"

"Yes."

She nodded. She was glad she didn't need to look for the body of another driver. She admitted to herself that it wouldn't have made sense to have him cuffed and then the driver wandered off to get himself killed. But she didn't want to let go of any skepticism.

"You got a cellphone?"

"I do. My right front pocket. Can't reach it," he said, though he made a movement to try.

"No you don't. I checked your pockets. Nothing. No phone, no wallet, no keys, no money. What's your name?"

"Case."

"Well, Mr. Case, where were you going?"

"Not Mr. Case. Case Cavanaugh. Mr. Cavanaugh, I guess. Heading to Big Lake."

"Ah," she thought about that. "Why? Nothing but flat down there."

"Business. I was hoping to meet someone."

"Business? In Big Lake? What do you do?"

"Geologist."

He kept his answers simple but that sounded like a flat out lie. She hated liars. His hands were large and strong and a little rough, but she figured a geologist would have one big callus of a hand. She wanted to challenge him. "What kind of rocks are around here?" She asked but didn't know herself. She thought it was mostly sand and sandstone.

"Limestone, dolomite, chert and caliche are the most common rocks. That's what all this sand and dust comes from. Back in the hills, there's pink granite. Can be kind of pretty when it's cut and polished."

He sounded like he knew what he was talking about. "Who you work for? One of the oil companies?"

"No," he smiled. "University of Colorado."

Another lie though she could tell that he was practiced at it. But it would explain why his hands weren't what she expected.

He kept his gaze even. "What's your name?" he asked.

She didn't like it. She wanted to be the one asking. But she answered. "Laura."

"Miss Laura." He gave a little grin. She knew why.

"Nope, not Miss Laura. Laura O'Connell."

"Miss O'Connell."

She didn't correct the Miss but said, "You can call me Laura." Time was slipping away on her but she had a few more questions.

"What are all these tracks?" She pointed her gun towards the back of the car.

"What tracks?" He lifted his head but couldn't see.

"Footprints really. Looks like several people. I wonder why they didn't help." She said it as a statement, but it hung out like a question.

"I don't know. I can't see the tracks. My guess is they cuffed me." He looked to the back of his Jeep.

"And stole my supplies."

That was the truth. He had no supplies.

She wanted to ask about the cuffs but couldn't think of the right question. He didn't have many answers.

She decided there was no one else who could help and she couldn't leave him, even if he did tell a couple of lies. "Well, I came back to get you out." She dusted off her jeans.

"You were here already?"

"A couple of hours ago. I couldn't get the cuffs off you." She hesitated but then continued. "Rode back to my place to get some tools." She didn't want him to know where she lived but then decided that's where she would have to take him. She could free him and leave him. He'd probably just follow anyway. Hers was the only place around. Most of the land around the area was either government or an oil corporation's property.

"You left me the canteen?"

She noticed that he didn't ask about her place and that was a good thing. She answered, "Yes."

"Thank you."

Another plus. Good manners and not the kind of good manners that Roger showed with getting her drinks and pulling his chair up next to her. She shuddered at her stupidity.

"I'll get my tools." She walked back to Rosie and led her to the Jeep. She tied her off on the luggage rack. Pulling out the bolt cutters and pipes, she assembled her tool. She wasn't sure how she would get the leverage she'd need to snap the bracelet. Maybe.

She reached in for the canteen which was in the way. "You need a drink?"

"Yeah, a good one. With an umbrella in it." Another smile.

She actually surprised herself and smiled at that. "Here you go. Say when." She lifted the canteen to his lips. He guzzled and let some of the water dribble down the sides of his mouth and down his neck. He backed off just enough to let her know he was done. "Thank you."

"Welcome." She capped off the canteen and stood it on top of the Jeep. She rolled down the driver side window. It was an old enough model to still have cranks. She passed the jaws through the open window and, leaning in over the window, she rested them on the bottom of the steering wheel. Her breasts fell just on the inside of the door. She saw Cavanaugh look and then saw him look back to the wheel. She was used to men looking. She hated men who stared.

He maneuvered the bracelet inside the jaw and kept pressure. She adjusted the door so she could get maximum leverage while pulling down on the handle. "Ready?"

He kept a light pressure by pulling back on the cuffs. "Okay."

She reached up and tugged down as hard as she could. They didn't snap. She readjusted and then pulled and even lifted her feet to use her entire body weight. They didn't snap but they did score the chain a little.

"Damn," she said.

"Double damn, damn," he agreed, his eyes fixated on the chains.

"Reinforced steel." Probably titanium, she thought. "I don't know what to do." She sighed.

"Too bad we can't use your horse."

"Let me think about that." She tried to picture any useful way she could get Rosie involved but nothing sprung to mind. "Damn. I got nothing." She pulled the bolt cutters out. "I'll get my saw."

His face lit up with a little bit of hope.

She brought it over and had him lay the chain on the wheel. "Diamond dust blade." Resting the hacksaw blade on the scored part of the handcuff chain, she drew backward and let the blade attempt to bite. But after five minutes, she made imperceptible progress.

"What do we do now?" He asked.

"Don't know. Jeep's too big for Rosie to pull."

She reached up and took a swig from the canteen. "You want some?"

He did. She held it for him.

"I've got an idea," he said.

She looked away from the problem and up at him.

"How about attacking the steering wheel?"

"What do you mean?"

"The wheel is probably not reinforced steel." He thought for a moment. "They make them so they bend upon impact."

"They do?" She looked at him. "How'd that work out for you?"

"Looks like I hit the side of the wheel." He nodded to the left side.

"Well, we've got nothing to lose." She stuck the bolt cutters through the window again. Working together, they got the jaw around the bottom wheel. She pulled down. The jaws bit deep but not through. She pulled again and felt the cutter break through. "Good."

Cavanaugh tried to pull the handcuffs through but they wouldn't wriggle through.

Laura pushed the tool up to the wheel. "Let's cut a bigger piece."

He moved the jaws an inch over. She yanked on the handles and bit through the wheel.

"Free."

"We still need to get you out of there."

"Right." He reached down to his left leg and then patted towards the foot. The pain made him gasp when he reached the ankle. "Found the spot." He felt around the joint. The talus didn't sit directly under the tibia and fibula. "Dislocated."

"A geologist can tell that?"

"Lots of things I know."

"Can we pop it back into place?"

"It's normally a medical emergency."

"Think I should call an ambulance?"

That got him to smile despite the pain. "I can pop it back." He clenched his jaw. "If I can get my hands around it." He sucked in a lot of air through his nostrils. "And if I don't pass out."

"Jesus."

"Yeah. And even then, the ankle's got to be immobilized. As in a cast. We don't happen to have one of those, do we?"

"No, but I did bring an Ace bandage."

"You did?" Then he blew breath out through his mouth. "You're a regular Boy Scout."

"Almost."

She turned back to Rosie and reached into the medical supplies.

He sat sideways on the driver seat with his legs out. He crossed his left leg over the top of this right leg. He took a deep breath. "OH MY GOD!" Cavanaugh yelled as he grabbed his ankle with both hands. He pushed his foot out as far as he could and then twisted.

She whipped around to look. She didn't see his manipulation but she did hear the pop. It made her stomach turn.

"You did that by yourself? Is it alright?"

He panted and said, with one of the huffs, "Yes." Sweat poured down his face.

"How would you know how to set an ankle?"

"Boy Scouts."

She mouthed 'Whoa' and stared at him. He might not be a geologist, or maybe he was. But he was a whole lot more.

Finished with wrapping his ankle with the Ace bandage, Laura strengthened the area with a roll of first aid tape.

"Not exactly a cast," she said as emptied the roll and straightened up from her squatting position.

"It'll do. Thank you."

"Now we've got to get you up on the horse."

"I don't think I can put any weight on it."

“Yeah, somehow we need you up high enough so you can swing your good leg over Rosie’s saddle.”

“Rosie?”

“Yeah, my horse. Come on, stand up and then lean on me with your bad side.”

He complied, draping his left arm over her shoulder.

“Let’s close the door and move up front to the hood. I want you to sit on it.”

They hobbled to the front and Cavanaugh slid his butt back on to the hood.

“Now keep sliding up the front window and onto the roof, pushing with your good leg.”

He did as he was told.

“Scoot over to this window and put your feet on the ledge.”

He sat.

She led Rosie along the side of the Jeep and stopped with the saddle right in front of him. She waited.

“I can keep telling you what to do or you can figure it out.”

That got a tiny half smile out of him as he put his weight on his right foot, his right hand steadied him, and he stood. It was awkward since he had to lean over the roof in order to keep his hand on it.

“Now you can sit side saddle on her but it would be safer if you could swing that right leg over.”

“Couldn’t help yourself.”

“Guessing not.” She sniffed and looked like she might have a smile of her own.

He sat side saddle and then pushed his butt up high on the back of the saddle and, with both hands behind his left knee, he managed to swing his leg over. He shifted forward in the saddle.

She watched his movement, lifting her hands to help but ultimately refraining. Some things were best done alone. She took the reins.

“You jumping up behind me?”

She looked at the four or five inches of leather left behind him and said, “No. Think I’ll walk.”

“How far is it?”

“You’ll see it when we get to the back of the car.” She turned Rosie around and then pointed south south west. “See?”

He saw a large utility shed, a ranch house, a windmill and a couple of outbuildings about two miles away. “Yeah.”

“That’s my place.”

“Anybody else there?”

“No.”

“You live alone?”

“That’s what ‘no’ means.”

He remained quiet. Laura figured he must have gotten the hint.

They ambled back slowly as the sun dropped behind the hills. She knew they’d make it before dark. They passed the windmill, next to the hangar and then she opened up the big overhead garage door and dropped the reins. She walked in and picked up a lantern and a can of Coleman’s fuel.

“Here, make yourself useful,” she said as she handed him the lantern. She led Rosie to the front of the house, which had a porch, and directed Rosie into position next to a post.

“Made to order,” he said. He handed the lantern to her as he swung his right leg over Rosie, slid down off the saddle and grabbed the post for balance.

“You can sit on the chair, there.” She pointed. “I need to take care of Rosie.” She set the lantern and fuel next to him and dropped the saddle bag with the medical supplies next to the post. She dug into the bag, pulled out a box of wooden matches and tossed them to him.

“Can you get the lantern going?”

He laughed, “I’m not going to tell you the bear joke even if you force me.”

She nodded. “Good.” Then she picked up the reins and started walking.

He sat and watched her turn behind the house. She could feel his eyes on her. A different kind of feel than the kind she got in town. Which was her next problem. How was she going to get him to town? It was twenty six miles away and that ankle needed a doctor. It was possible that it was broken and likely that he suffered ligament damage. She had never heard of a dislocated ankle but it looked a hell of a lot worse than a dislocated shoulder, which she had seen.

She could ride over to Schwabb's place. That was only ten miles away but that meant riding double on Rosie. A lot of weight for her. She lifted the saddle and dropped it on a saw horse inside the hangar. He might not be home, she thought. Could be visiting his daughter in Dallas. Mr. Schwabb was a retiree, living on a pension as cheaply as he could. His only extravagance was a semi-monthly visit to Carol Lee Lynn and his grand kids. His pride and joy. Laura and Carol went to the county school together. She thought it over. The trip to Schwabb's would be a long way for nothing. Not totally out of the way, if she were heading to town but enough to drop the idea.

She refilled Rosie's water and feed and then brushed her while Rosie stuck her head in one of the buckets. "You did good, girl. I've got to go." She ran her hand down the mane and walked to the back door. She crossed through the kitchen, the hall and the living room and opened the front door. Cavanaugh had the lantern going pretty good. She took it from him and set it on a wooden chair next to the door. She placed the fuel on the floor next to it.

Picking up the saddle bag, she stepped to him so he could place a hand on her shoulder. "Let's go inside." She leaned a shoulder towards him.

"No. I got this," he said as propped his left hand against the outside wall and hopped the couple of steps to the front door. He looked for a place to sit and headed for the nearby cushioned arm chair.

"No. You get the couch. May as well get used to it. That's where you'll sleep tonight." She leaned a shoulder and let him use his left hand for balance. He sat.

She turned away. "I'll make us something to eat."

She returned with two plates, one had two sandwiches and a piece of apple pie, the other had one sandwich and pie. "Roast beef. That's what we do best down here."

She watched him take a bite and then another. "Let me get some water."

She returned with two glasses, no ice.

Despite the lantern, the room seemed dark.

"Electricity out?" he asked.

"Yep. From the haboob. Blew a line down."

He nodded.

"You have a car?"

"A truck."

"Can you give me a ride?"

She shook her head.

He looked at her with a question on his face.

"Don't get me wrong, I want to. But the truck's been stolen."

"Out here?"

"Yeah."

"That's like stealing a man's horse in the old days. They'd shoot a man that would do that."

"Yeah, that's just what I thought."

"We should clean you up. I didn't even give you a chance to wash your hands."

Laura saw him glance at her hands.

"I washed up in the kitchen."

"Where should I go?"

“Let’s get you down to the bathroom.” She picked up the lantern and placed it in the hall, just past the bathroom door.

She walked into the living room and stood in front of him with her hand out.

“Be easier if I used the arm of the couch.”

She dropped her hand and said, “This way.”

Then she pointed down the hall. “Just in front of the lantern. Take it with you. I have a candle in the kitchen.” She walked off. “Let me know if you need something,” she called over her shoulder.

While he was in the bathroom, she lit a candle in the living room. She brought the dishes to the kitchen sink and washed them. She filled the glasses with water and checked the freezer above the refrigerator for ice cubes. There were still some. They melted a little but not much. Plopping a couple of cubes in each glass, she brought them to the living and set one on the coffee table and one by her arm chair. She gathered blankets and pillows and set them at the end of the couch. Picking up one of the blankets, she unfolded it and spread it out like a throw over the sofa. She got a quilt from her room and set it on the arm chair.

Hearing the door, she peeked down the hall. Cavanaugh came out shirtless, holding his jacket with one hand and the wall with the other. He was barefoot. His shoulders and chest rippled with muscles. He had some hair on his chest and a flat stomach. His upper body was shaped more like a V than a straight line barrel. He hobbled closer to her. She saw a round half inch scar in directly under his right collar bone. He had a few other jagged scars on his shoulders, chest and stomach.

“I washed my t-shirt and socks, wrung them and hung them to dry.”

She nodded while she counted the scars. She saw four. She didn’t quit looking.

He came near her. She didn’t move, she didn’t want to move. She wanted.

Shame crept in that she wanted to ignore. But this guy isn’t that guy she thought. She took a deep breath. And found some words to say. “Everything okay?”

“Great. Thank you.”

He was polite and his breath smelled fresh.

He seemed to know what she was thinking because he said, “I used my finger and some toothpaste. Army training.”

She might have had a smile. “Let’s get you settled on the couch.”

He hopped over to it and sat down.

“You can spread out and get that foot up. I’ll sit up for awhile over here. But first, let me put away some things.”

She took the lantern to her room and turned it down. She fished his t-shirt and socks out of the bathroom and hung them on the line just outside the back door. She brought her bedroom candle with her to another bedroom and pulled a very large denim shirt from the closet.

Holding it out as she entered the room, she said, “Here, you can wear this. I think it will fit.”

“What size?”

“Extra large.”

“Oh. Good. It’ll be fine. Thank you.”

“Here’s your boots. I hung your shirt and socks outside the back door. They’ll dry quicker out there.” She set the boots next to the sofa.

“I’ll be back. You rest.”

Thirty minutes later she entered the living room dressed in sweat pants, a t-shirt, slippers and a terry cloth robe that was cinched at the waist. She sat down, across from him, in her arm chair. The living room candle was between them.

He made an odd coughing noise, like he was clearing his throat with something uncomfortable.

“I found this hanging up in the bathroom.” He held out a necklace with some odd little things hanging from it.

The necklace itself, she knew, was leather. It had a feather, two keys, and an ugly painted twisted thing. She frowned at him. "Why did you pick it up?"

"I want to know what you know about it."

"Not much. Except it's nasty."

"It is nasty. Is it yours?"

"I found it." She half lied.

"Where? In the house? In the yard? On your door, maybe?"

"Why? What difference does it make?"

"Plenty." He stopped for a second as if to gather his words. "If you believe in voodoo, or hoodoo." His face was hard. For the first time, he seemed scary. She didn't believe.

"You've got to be joking."

"No joke. If somebody left this here, they were placing a curse."

"No."

"The painted chicken foot. The chicken feather. Those are voodoo symbols and are used to place a curse, or, if worn, protect from a curse."

"Oh," she said.

"It's not yours?"

"No."

She could tell he wanted to ask some more questions but waited. The talk of voodoo unsettled her. There were many Native American tales that made the rounds when she was a kid. Told just to scare them. But voodoo was closer to black magic than the old stories of dogs that talked and bears that sang. And Cheyenne spirits that hunted in the night.

They both looked at the front window. She saw the reflection of the candle on the glass. Five minutes passed.

"What about the keys? Do you recognize them?" he asked.

"No, they're not mine."

"Whose keys are they?"

She didn't answer. She just sat with her hands together on her lap.

"Did you try to use them?"

"Use what?"

"The keys."

"No. They're not mine."

"Do you know what they go to?"

"The keys?"

"Yes, the keys."

"No," she said, irritably. "I told you. They're not mine."

"Then where did you get them?"

She said nothing. The silence was painful as she wrestled with her thoughts. She didn't want to tell Cavanaugh the truth. It was none of his business. She regretted what she did. But, then, a part of her wanted it to be his business. There was something about him that could right a wrong.

"A man," she began.

He waited.

"I met a man at the country bar in town." She stopped again and considered her words. "We had some drinks and danced. He seemed okay. I invited him over. I don't know why I did. I never do that. Ever. It's like something got a hold of me."

The living room grew darker as the sun sank outside.

"I've never felt so ashamed in my life," she said, as she sat with her head down. "One weak moment," she glanced up at him with a strain in her voice. "One weak moment and there's always a man there to take advantage of it." She glared at him.

He didn't say anything.

"I wasn't myself."

"I'm not judging," he said and he gazed up into her eyes.

That glance hurt her. His eyes were so blue and piercing. Like a slap in the face or the shriek of a horn blast. His regard went right into her and it scraped at her heart. She hated the scrutiny. She shot back, "I don't need your god damned opinion." She set her jaw, ready for a comeback.

He said nothing. He just sat there, looking out the window. That hurt more. She knew it wasn't his fault but it was somebody's fault. Hers, yeah. But something larger than her. Where all you get is tough luck in spades. Things have been stacked against her since... well, forever. God? Maybe. She lived in a God fearing Texas. She did believe, once. But, now, people talked more about karma than God.

They stared at the floor, stared at the window. Waiting.

"Ever married?" He broke the silence like a glass window. Her head jerked up and her eyes followed. The question was totally unexpected. She didn't answer right away. She waited for his two words to dissipate. How could he know?

"No." She didn't lie.

"A boyfriend, maybe?" He persisted and she didn't like it.

She dropped her head a little lower. "Yeah. Sure," she answered. "I wasn't a nun."

"No, I expect not," he said, and chuckled.

That startled her. "What?"

"Nothing."

"No, what? You're thinking something. Go ahead. Speak your mind." She waved her hand but it wasn't friendly. She expected some wise ass remark like every guy she ever knew would make. Except they'd be too chicken to talk, now that she called their bluff. Her change from embarrassment to indignation and rudeness fed her shame and that flared her anger like tossing tinder on a fire. She clenched her jaw and let the quiet dare him to continue.

He shifted his position on the couch like he was uncomfortable. Good, she thought, you should be.

"You're about the prettiest woman I've seen out here. I'd expect you to be married." He stopped and then added, "Not alone."

He looked up at her. She felt his eyes on her. Too surprised and, now, a different kind of embarrassment. She couldn't look back.

"Okay," he said, with a little resignation in his tone. He must have realized that she wasn't going to answer.

They sat quietly again, each in their own thoughts.

"I was engaged."

He looked up.

"Robert Entell." She played with the sash of the robe with her fingers. "We were a year out of high school and got engaged. He had already enlisted for three years. We figured he'd do his time and learn some skills and we'd get married and move out."

He nodded. "I've heard this one before. What happened?"

"He was killed in Iraq. An IED blew up his transport. Robert and two others were killed. Others injured."

"I'm sorry. I thought you were going to tell me something different. I'm so sorry."

She nodded her head in acknowledgement.

"You said early, 'Army training'. Were you in the Army?"

"Yes. Ranger."

She nodded but she had a puzzled look on her face.

“Special forces. Like the Green Beret.”

She had heard of them. There was an old, old song about the Green Beret. They played it on the AM station on Memorial Day, the Fourth of July.

“They teach advanced combat skills, demolition, medical procedures, anything to keep you alive and accomplish your mission.”

“Is that how you knew about your ankle? How to pop it back in.”

“Yes and no. I popped a guy’s shoulder back, once. During a fire fight. I figured an ankle wouldn’t be much different.”

“Is it?”

“It hurt me a whole lot more than I hurt him.”

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“I wouldn’t feel so bad about the stranger,” he said, softly. She looked over at him. The candle light flickered across his face. “Voodoo has been used on people to make them do things they normally wouldn’t do.”

“What in the world are you talking about? Where would I run into voodoo?”

“That man you mentioned from a couple of nights ago. I’m just saying, weird stuff happens and you wouldn’t know it.”

She scoffed. “Like hypnosis?” She thought hypnosis was like a card trick. For entertainment value. It was never serious.

He smiled. “Well, don’t dismiss anything just because I called it voodoo. But I wasn’t thinking of that.

There are also drugs that they can mix. Fertility drugs, drugs that affect your hormones, your inhibitions.” His voice dropped low. “Make you do things that you regret.” He halted for a moment. “If it’s the guy I’m thinking of, he could do that. He has that kind of knowledge.”

“How could you possibly know him?”

“What’s his name?”

“Roger.” She tried to think of his last name. “Fountainebleau. Roger Fountainebleau.”

“Is that what he said?”

“Yes, like the hotel in Florida.”

“More like the neighborhood in New Orleans.” He reached inside his jacket, up near the breast and pulled out a photo. “They missed this when they picked my pockets.” He stuck his hand out. “See if you recognize him.”

She stood up, took it, held it next to the candle and nodded. “That’s him. That’s Roger Fountainebleau.”

He raised his eyebrows. “That’s Roger but that’s not his last name. That’s Roger Picardes.” He pronounced it Pee-card-days. “Son of an old Cajun family. His father is a crime boss and steeped in voodoo though I think he uses it for status and fear. But his son doesn’t. His son is much more practiced.”

“How do you know him?” She handed back the picture.

“I’ve been tracking him.”

“Tracking him? Like a hunter? How does that work?” She had a dozen questions.

“Yes, exactly. He’s really a serial killer. Women, mainly. At least that’s what I believe but the FBI hired me to find him for some large robberies.”

She sat back with her mouth and eyes wide open. She understood the implication. “He could have killed me.”

“I’ve been wondering, why didn’t he.”

“You think I’m mixed up with him.”

“I did, at first. I wasn’t sure. I heard he had taken up with a woman. That’s why I was driving down here. A little hole in the wall, near Big Lake.”

She considered the info. A little hole in the wall sure described the nearest town. Word travels fast she guessed. She thought of all the talk that must have gone on between Odessa and Big Lake. She decided to ignore it, the gossip angle. She didn't really care what fat Charlie or his wife thought. Or anybody else. Then she considered the possibility that she had been drugged. She guessed it was possible. Roger did buy the drinks and was alone with them long enough to slip something into hers. She hadn't felt right at all over those couple of days.

She wanted to get a little more information about the man on her couch. "So tell me who you are. Why would the FBI hire you?"

"I already told you." He turned his hands up. "Case Cavanaugh. Ex-Ranger. Loner. Drifter. Lover of nature. Hunter." He smiled.

She didn't smile. She tried hard to understand. "What does all that mean?"

He chuckled. "The FBI knows my skill set. I've done similar things. So they hired me for contract work. They weren't getting anywhere and they needed a specialist."

"So you work for the FBI."

"Yes."

"And you followed Roger here?"

"Almost. I followed him as far as the hills." He paused just for a second. "He's the one that ran me off the road."

"Yesterday." She didn't ask a question, just a statement of fact. "Was he driving a white Ford F-150?"

"Yeah."

"That was mine."

"He swung wide on the curve as I was coming down. I guess, in a way, I was lucky to get out of the way." She didn't reply.

"He drove like his tail feathers were on fire," he said.

That brought a smile from her. "He was scared."

"Scared of what?"

"Me and my gun." She smiled again.

"Hmmm," he mumbled. "He's seen a gun before."

"He seemed scared to me. I held it in his face." She defied him to reply.

He looked out the window and at the candle and the shadows in the dim places of the room. "He's going to come back."

"No, he won't," she discounted him with a slight flourish. "I ran him out of here pretty good."

"He'll be back."

She didn't like his persistence but somehow it rang true. She dropped her hand. "How can you be so sure?"

"He wants that necklace."

"For voodoo?" Despite what she went through, despite the possibility that she had been drugged, a wicked date rape kind of drug, she was still skeptical.

"No." He looked at her closely. "For the keys."

She frowned.

"They're safety deposit keys."

Her eyebrows went up a little, like she was surprised, like she knew what it meant. But other than that, she had no reaction. She didn't ask for the keys. She wasn't especially interested in them.

He smiled like something had turned out the way he hoped.

"What do we do?"

"Get your gun. Or guns," he said. "I'll take one, if you got one."

Her eyes darted down as she said, "I only have the one." She didn't trust giving one of her guns to a man she just met despite all the Ranger talk. She had heard enough bullshit for a farm over the past few days. He looked at her very carefully and she noticed. She relented. "I'll find something."

She went to her room and came back wearing a new set of jeans and a long sleeve western print shirt. She had strapped her nine millimeter pistol and holster back around her waist but she hadn't tied the holster to her leg. She carried her boots and her ten inch hunting knife. She held it out. "This is for you." He took it and didn't object. Setting it on the coffee table in front of him, he lay back on the couch.

"I guess we wait," he said.

She sat on the edge of the wooden chair by the front door and looked over at him. She had a question that had been forming in her for a while.

"When were you in the service?" she asked.

"Same time as your fiancée. I was in Iraq."

"Did you know him?"

"No, I doubt it," he shook his head. "I was one of the first guys in."

Her eyes widened with interest.

"They always send us first," he explained. "On a large scale operation."

"I remember the 'Shock and Awe' bombing. Were you over there then?"

"Yeah, but really before."

"Before? I thought that was the beginning." She tried to remember the sequence of events but she hadn't paid much attention until they showed the flashing bombs and missiles and explosions on the news.

"I was up north with the Kurds, preparing for their insurrection - even before the US ground forces were marshaled in Kuwait." He saw her puzzled look. "Before the bombing began."

She thought back to the maps of Iraq. She had studied them when Robert was deployed. She wasn't sure where the Kurds were located. "Robert went into Iraq in 2003 with everybody else. At least, that's what I remember."

"My team was dropped up north in 2002. To help soften the Iraqi forces by encouraging the Kurds to fight."

She sat quietly, thinking.

"It's complicated, I know," he said.

"Robert was in Baghdad when Saddam was captured. I remember thinking that was the end of it. But." She ended.

He shook his head, and said quietly, "No, Saddam's people kept fighting, just not in the open."

"No. I know. Robert was killed on a road outside Baghdad a couple of weeks after Saddam."

"It was very dangerous over there for our troops. Maybe more so after Saddam was taken prisoner. Your Robert was a brave man."

She pursed her lips and held back some tears. "Thank you. He was." Then she bit her lip. "His parents cried at the funeral. A military funeral back here. I remember seeing a sergeant." She suddenly remembered the scene, and continued, "All dressed up in white caps, gloves, starched jackets and pants, he handed Robert's mother the folded flag. The other servicemen stood at attention, staring straight ahead." She sobbed and started again. "That's when his daddy cried, when they gave his mom the flag. It's all they had of him, all packed in that flag." She wiped at her eyes. "I've never seen Big Bill Entell cry. Nobody did. That's what my own parents said." She took a deep breath. "They had me sit with Robert's family at the service. They were such good people. It broke their hearts." She absently looked out of the window. "They sold off their place in town a couple of years after that and moved. I don't know where. Robert was an only child." She sniffed. "There was nothing to keep them here, I guess." Neither of them said anything for several minutes.

"I tried to give them the engagement ring. It wasn't worth much in money, we didn't have any to speak of, but I thought they might want to have it." She lifted her eyes with a sad look on her face. "His momma told me to keep it. They'd rather I had it and remembered him." She sighed. "I have." Another long silence until Laura asked, "How much does a guy have to steal before the FBI hires a tracker?" She wanted to change the subject.

"I don't know. I'm not sure. I'm guessing they told me but that wouldn't matter to me. I know his last job was close to a million."

She whistled, which she wasn't very good at. "How do you carry a million dollars?"

"He had help. The Picardes are a crime family. They have plenty of help."

"Is that what's in the deposit boxes?" She had no real interest in the money. She was just talking to talk. To forget about those long ago years.

"I don't know. Maybe. Maybe not. He must have given a good chunk of it to his father. And also paid off his men." He sucked in a breath. "I think he's more interested in killing than in robbing. But a sneaky, nasty kind of killing. He could have killed the guards on his last job, but he didn't." Another breath. "But he ended up killing some schoolteacher in the same town. He dumped her in a dumpster and let her rot until trash day."

"How do you know it was him?"

"I'm guessing. All guesswork. After they gave me the job, I did all I could to learn about him. His habits. The voodoo signs." He rubbed his chin. "Coroner said she was covered in chicken blood and had feathers stuffed down her throat." He turned his head to watch her. "I know I had read up on the robberies so I guess I could figure out how much he stole. Or at least, give a ballpark figure. But I'm not interested, not after learning more about him." He blew out a breath. "His insanity impressed me. Look, voodoo is voodoo. Some think it's a funny game, like an Ouija board, a way to go bump in the night, so to speak, but others are so totally invested in it. It becomes their life." He shook his head. "But it's a diabolical perversion. A blood cult. A death cult. That's what I think he's been feeding. Some inner blood lust." Laura's face lost some color.

"I think the women are some kind of sacrifice." He looked at her. "I don't want to upset or scare you."

"What?" she said. "I know it's sick. Go ahead. I can handle it."

Scanning her face, he said, "I believe you can." He scratched his cheek bone. "The voodoo gods demand certain rituals. For whichever god Picardes serves, or follows, sex is always a part of it. It's happened everywhere I think he's been. He drugs the women, has sex with them and then kills them. I think he likes to travel so he can vary his victims." He took a drink of water. "All of this is related to the gods of sex and death, Ghedes and Samedi."

She shifted in her seat. She had never heard of stuff like that. Not in detail, not in real life. It did sicken her and it drained her. She wanted to go to the arm chair. It was getting late. She felt wrung out and sitting up straight in the wooden chair made her muscles ache.

"I know, I know. To a rancher in the heart of west Texas, it seems crazy and maybe it is. But it's not to the people in Haiti and to some in New Orleans. I'm just explaining how Picardes thinks, what motivates him. How he acts."

"He did seem crazy, like he might have been on something. I had no idea." She got up and went to the armchair. "At first, I thought he was just interested." She skirted the issue of what he was interested in.

"You know, animated. Then, irritating. Then, scary."

"He was probably coming down from some elixir or drug. You were lucky."

"I know I was."

Both of them sat with their own thoughts.

She yawned.

"One of us should probably stay awake," he said.

"I will."

"I should. I had enough sleep." He yawned, too, and tried to keep his eyes straight. "Though the knock in my head is making me woozy."

"It's my place." She was determined.

"I'm the Ranger," he said and closed his eyes. He kept them closed.

She waited a couple of minutes to see if he would wake up. He didn't and, despite all that she heard that night, it made her grin.

"So you say." She took off her holster and laid her pistol on the end table near her. She sat back into the armchair and placed her hand on the gun.

13

The sun had already begun spreading light when Laura stirred. She jerked awake and looked around the room. The candle was out but she could see that Cavanaugh had his eyes open.

"I must have fallen asleep."

"So did I," he said. She could tell that he was covering for her. She had no idea how long he had lay there awake but it was a lot longer than a few minutes. "No harm," he said. "We're still alive."

"I shouldn't have," she began and stopped.

"Neither should I, but we did."

Her brain was not awake. The past few days and especially the day before, had clouded her ability to think. Maybe Roger Picardes really had used drugs on her.

She needed coffee. She had an old drip grind coffee pot under the sink. "I need to get up and check on things."

"Okay."

She rubbed at her eyes as she entered the kitchen and turned right. Digging in a cabinet, she pulled out the old coffee pot and set it next to her Mr. Coffee. She turned on a burner and struck a match to light it. Filling a pot with water, she placed it on the flame and then walked back down the hall to the bathroom.

Almost ten minutes later, her face and hands still damp after drying them, she walked back into the kitchen. She filled the strainer within the pot with coffee and poured the water on top. She waited until the water had flowed through the grounds. Then she filled two cups and brought them to the living room.

"Breakfast."

He grunted and said thanks.

"We've got to figure out a way to get you to town," she said.

"Could you try the neighbors?" He suggested.

"Not near enough. And they might not be home. It would be a long walk for nothing."

"Nobody?"

"No, not really. Most of this is government land, or corporations. My parents didn't want to sell, it was my mom's parents place before them, so they were surrounded by prairie. And sand. And dust."

He sipped at his coffee while she just blew on hers to cool it.

"How do you make a living?" he asked.

Laura smiled and pointed up at a picture behind him, on the wall behind the sofa. "I paint. That's one of mine."

A red sun sunk behind the very hills he had just been in. Dotted with cactus, brown and pink speckled granite. The sunlight flung itself for one last moment across the road where a covey of quail pecked at the edge. He could feel the roughness and the age. And, also, the delicate beauty that belied the harsh landscape.

"I never thought of the desert that way. It's beautiful."

"Thank you."

"I've thought of it as something to endure. The heat, the dust, the thirst."

"I could always feel its magnificence underneath my feet and before my eyes, even as a young girl."

"You have a gift."

"I do sell a few. They keep me going. I have an inheritance from my parents, and grandparents. And odds and ends. As well as the eggs from the chickens. Which I do need to gather." She stood up. "You may have noticed the coop off to the side. I had the chickens locked up for the sandstorm and then I never let them out yesterday. They'll need me today." She picked up his cup. "Can I get you another?"

"Yes, please."

"That's another one of mine. On the floor, by the door."

She left with his cup and he examined the painting from the couch. A ten point mule deer buck lay alert and yet resting in some brush among the hills' rough rock.

"Here you go." She handed him the cup. "I'll be back."

He had just set it down when he heard the back door open.

"Oh my God!" Laura cried out. There were three headless chickens dead in the yard, covered in blood. Their heads were thrown up near the back door. Leaning out, she saw that blood had been smeared on the door portal and chicken feet thrown on the stoop.

"Don't go out there!" Cavanaugh yelled from the couch.

Just as she drew her head inside, the wooden jamb thudded, exploded and thundered all at once. She stumbled back.

With the main door still opened, she saw Picardes, with a deranged grin, run up to her with his gun. He fired again, through the screen door and it thudded into the hall wall behind her, where, on the other side, Cavanaugh lay. She heard an "Uggh," and a groan. With nothing to hold back her thoughts, she was sure Cavanaugh was dead. She was alone. Except for a mad man.

Picardes charged up to the door and flung open the screen. Terrified, she forgot the pistol in the living room and thought of her rifle in the bedroom. If she could just get there. She urged her brain to think and forget the fear. She raced down the hall and slammed her bedroom door closed. Picardes shot two more times and the bullets ripped through the closed door. She struggled with the gun case. He slammed against the door, the wood casing cracked, and he cursed all the while. She didn't understand the words. They were French, she thought. She caught the word, 'morte', which she knew meant death and she understood the word, 'bitch'. Dead bitch.

Of all the things she could have heard right before she died, she never thought she'd hear, 'dead bitch'. Her heart and hope sunk but she couldn't give up. She had to get that rifle. Her hand shook as she tried to turn the key. Her hand shook too much. Or the key wasn't inserted right.

She heard a siren. Picardes must have been insane with anger because the handle turned but it didn't open. He snarled and cursed constantly. He kicked the door open. She couldn't get the rifle in time. The sirens were very loud, a speaker crackled. But not in time for her.

Picardes stood in the doorway and raised his pistol. She dropped behind the bed and scooted. He shot again and a piece of the mattress poofed next to her head.

She did not dare raise her head but she had to. If she was going to die, she had to see. She held a pillow as protection.

Then she saw Cavanaugh, on one leg, grab Picardes by the neck just as Picardes shot again. The shot rang out wildly, up into the ceiling. Bleeding from the left shoulder, Cavanaugh pushed his butt against the door jamb for leverage and twisted Picardes' head with his right hand gripping the crazy man's chin, while he plunged the hunting knife into Picardes' chest and turned it. He tried to rip the knife upward but the progress was slowed by bone. But Picardes head was not slowed by bone. It turned and snapped like a twig. His crazed, blood shot eyes bulged one last time and then flamed out. Cold, empty, lifeless eyes that stared at nothing.

Laura jumped up from behind the bed and ran the few steps to him. He dropped the body and wrapped his arms around her.

"You're safe," he said, as he held her.

"Hands up!" A voice barked out. "Step away from her and knees on the ground."

Cavanaugh did as he was told, without turning around.

"It's alright, Jimmy," she called. "He's with me."

"Laura, is that you? Are you okay?" A cop stepped up behind a shirtless Cavanaugh and cuffed him with his hands behind his back. Blood trickled down Cavanaugh's shoulder as he gritted his teeth. He didn't resist.

Another cop entered the hall.

Jimmy turned and said, "Let's get him out of here." He guided Cavanaugh to the other cop and then took Laura's hand as he helped her step over the body.

14

Cavanaugh sat in the back of one of the cop cars for a couple of hours. He watched the foot traffic in and out of the house, some carrying cameras for documenting the scene. When most of the official people had left, an ambulance pulled up and backed to the house. After removing Picardes' body from the home, an attendant dressed Cavanaugh's wound. Laura stopped by and gave him a drink while standing in the open back door of his car.

"They are sorting through all of this," she said.

Cavanaugh nodded, "It will take a while. They don't know who I am."

Laura touched him on his arm as she bent down, "I'm not sure I do." She put on his socks and then picked up his boots.

"They'll prefer you take the laces out," he said.

She did take them out and then put on his boots. She draped the denim work shirt over his back as he leaned forward.

The cop named Jimmy stepped over to the car. "That's enough, Laura. Let's go." He took her arm and led her inside.

"Can you get my jacket?" Cavanaugh called to her. "I'll need that."

An unmarked vehicle rolled up the long dirt drive. Two men in suit coats exited the dark sedan and flashed their IDs to a nearby cop. Laura stepped out just in time to hear, "FBI." She crossed the yard with his jacket and placed it next to him on the seat.

The men huddled for several minutes. One of the cops showed a wallet to the FBI agents. They talked again and then all walked over to the squad car that held Cavanaugh. One of the officers helped him out of the back seat and uncuffed him.

"Well, Mr. Cavanaugh, you checked out with your handler in Denver." A uniformed cop handed him a wallet. "We found this near your Jeep up over there. Nothing in it but your ID."

"Glad to get even that," Cavanaugh replied.

"They said Miss O'Connell's truck was pulled off on the side of the road, up there," he pointed northwards, "near yours. One of them stopped to investigate. When they couldn't find her, they examined your vehicle and saw the blood on the wheel. When they couldn't find either of you, they decided to check her place."

"Picardes must have walked all that way here and then set up over there and waited for his shot," another officer said.

"I heard the shots," the cop named Jimmy butted in. "I called Ken there," he motioned towards the other uniform, "and turned on my lights and siren."

"Uh, yeah," the FBI agent stepped in front of Jimmy. "We'll need you to give a statement," he said to Cavanaugh, "after you get medical attention for your shoulder.

"It just grazed me."

"According to the attendant, it might need a few stitches."

"Maybe. We can sort that out," he said in a dismissive tone. "Where are you taking me?"
"Odessa should be fine. We have the facilities there that we'll need."
Pulling the necklace from his jacket, Cavanaugh said, "You'll want this." He handed it to the agent.
"Those two keys go to safety deposit boxes. I don't know which banks. Maybe Picardes' wallet holds a clue."
"We'll track them down."
The other fed added, "Probably half a million in them."
"Maybe more. I'm sure he has others," Cavanaugh replied.
"Let's go, okay?" The first agent said to Cavanaugh.
"Sure." He glanced over at Laura.
"I'll be back," he said.
"You will?"
"I want my finder's fee," he said.
"They give those?"
"No," he said, "but I'll still come back." He stooped down and kissed her.
"Let's go, Romeo," the first agent said and Cavanaugh followed.
Jimmy took a step towards Laura. "You know who that is, right?"
"Maybe," she said and the word trailed off.
"Case Cavanaugh. The son of Cap Cavanaugh."
Laura realized that he had said it like the name might mean something.
"Who?"
"Cap Cavanaugh. Died several years ago making the movie 'The Greene Affair'?" He said it as if to jog her memory. "That's his son, Case. The FBI said that, while Cap may have been a movie action hero, his son was the real deal."
"I agree," Laura said, and she walked across the yard to Rosie and held out a handful of grain for her.

THE END

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