

## Chapter One

The Mustang gave out about a hundred miles northwest of Austin, slowly easing onto the shoulder of the road. Claire Lance climbed out of the car and stood on the asphalt, staring at the gauzy white cloud of smoke lifting lazily from beneath the faded blue hood. She wished, for the first time since the damn things had been invented, that she had a cell phone.

Lance put her hands on her hips and looked back down the road in the direction from which she had come. The road stretched for miles of nothingness, the scenery occasionally broken up with scrub brush or the corpse of a mangy coyote. She looked ahead, at the road she would have been driving if the car hadn't given out, and saw more of the same. She hadn't paid much attention to the scenery while she drove, and this road had been perfect for that. No gas stations, no quaint little towns promising last chance gas, just her and her memories, which was probably why she hadn't noticed the car's pleas for help until it was too late.

The sun was beating down, making the road shimmer under her black cowboy boots. Already sweating in the heat of the day, she was hot, tired, and hungry. She had been driving for so long, her feet were sore, and her back ached from being pressed against the seat for too many miles. She bowed her head and pushed her hair out of her face. It hung heavy with sweat, and she closed her eyes, exhausted. She had come so far, and still had farther to go. She didn't have any particular destination in mind, other than the vague idea of "away", but she knew the road wasn't going to end any time soon.

She had been driving incessantly since Missouri, not stopping for anything other than a quick bathroom break at the front and back ends of Arkansas. Her trip had been mindless, focusing on the road only to make sure she was still on it and that no one was in front of her. The radio was broken, not that it would have picked up any radio stations out in the boonies she was driving through. The only thing keeping her company was her mind, her thoughts, and they were no match for the painful memories — *Elaine* — that haunted her.

Sometimes it felt like yesterday. Some mornings she woke up without the memory of what happened and what the past year had been like, but then she found herself in a solitary bed in a cheap hotel room, and it all came rushing back at her. The crushing weight of it was almost enough to overwhelm her. She knew she couldn't stop moving, so she would throw off the blankets, shower away the night, and head out for another day of...nothing. Moving forward, never looking back. It wasn't much of a life, but it was all she was prepared to allow herself.

At the moment, she wasn't even sure where she was. Texas, for certain, but she didn't know if she was closer to Dallas or Houston. In the distance, dark storm clouds hung behind a mesa as if caught on the rocks. She could hear the quiet rumble of thunder, could smell the ozone in the air, and she knew a storm was in the offing. She couldn't remember the last time she had passed any semblance of civilization, and sitting in the stationary car held no appeal, so her best bet for shelter before the storm hit was to keep walking in the direction she'd been driving. She was bound to hit a town eventually.

Hoping the storm would push cool air ahead of itself, or at least offer some wind to make her trek a little more bearable, she opened the car door, her dark chestnut hair picked up by a stray gust of wind as she bent inside.

The duffel bag that held all her worldly belongings was on the floor of the backseat. Grabbing the strap, she hoisted it up onto the driver's seat. She dug around for one of the water bottles that had been rolling around on the back floor, unzipped her bag, and stuffed it inside. The water would be tepid at best, but it was better than dehydration. She took a denim jacket out of the bag in anticipation of the rain, and rolled up the windows but left a crack so the car wouldn't become an oven. She draped the coat over the bag and settled the strap on her shoulder.

She thought about her treasure on the top side of the sun visor, but decided not to take it. Her clothes were probably going to get sweaty long before she found a town with a garage, and it would get damaged. Besides, even the shadiest mechanic in the state wouldn't think to steal it. It only had value for her, so, for the moment, it was safer in the car. She locked the door and slammed it shut.

Lance stepped back and looked at the car. It had been her faithful companion for so many miles, that it was a pity to leave it behind. Still, she hoped they would be reunited soon enough.

She rearranged the duffel bag against her shoulder and rested her hand on the side of the car. It was almost hot enough to scald her flesh, but she kept her hand there for a long moment, long enough for the touch to be a tacit promise to the vehicle that she would come back. She had left behind too many precious things lately.

Finally, she pushed away from the car, shifted the duffel bag back so that it bumped against her ass instead of her hip, and started to walk. Behind her, the car continued to send smoke signals into the sky.

The bar was open for business, but there were no customers on the cracked red vinyl stools. Gwen Morse stood at the door, holding it open with one foot as she looked out into the street. She was well aware that she was letting the cool air out, but she couldn't help herself. The heat burned itself into her skin, and the way the air smelled when the sun baked it, she loved it all.

She was still standing there when her husband, Roy, came downstairs from their apartment. He had slept in again. He looked at her, squinting into the sunshine. "Yeah, that's good, Gwenny," he said. "Let's cool off the entire outside."

Gwen stepped back into the room and let the door swing shut behind her. "Sorry."

She walked behind the bar as Roy headed for the office. He stopped, grabbed her wrist, and squeezed. Gwen gasped quietly and hunched her shoulders. "Roy..."

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry I was holding the door open. I-I wasn't thinking. I apologize."

His face relaxed. "Much better. Don't let it happen again." He pinched her chin between his thumb and forefinger, smirked, and then let her go.

Gwen turned away from him as he went into the office, focusing on the cash register until she heard the door click closed. She looked at the front door of the bar and fought the urge to go over and open it again. He had literally shut the door on the rest of the world, locking her inside this bar. She scoffed at the symbolism of it.

She took her paperback novel out from under the counter and settled in for another long day of boredom. The town of Saxe had long ago given up all of its surprises.

The old wooden sign hung between two white braces. The name "SAXE, TEXAS" was written in wide, white letters bordered with sloppy black lines. Underneath, a thinner brush had added "Pop. 1,025, plus you!" Lance came into town from the south, following the potholed road that led past a ramshackle church to the town square. She didn't know how long ago the sign had been painted, but at the moment, Saxe, Texas looked like a ghost town.

The storm had ended up not following her, so the denim jacket was still hanging off her duffel bag like a dried out animal pelt. At one point Lance considered wrapping her tank top around her head to keep the sweat out of her eyes, but she couldn't bring herself to strip down to a bra, even in the middle of nowhere. Not to mention the sunburn that would inflict. She kept reciting a mantra, a saying she had first heard from a strung-out drug dealer: *If you're going through hell, keep walking.* She knew the quotation originally belonged to Winston Churchill, but it somehow had more meaning coming from a toothless meth junkie using a garbage bag for a throne, mumbling as he tried to stop his fingers from shaking.

And of course, at the back of her mind, the pain of her headache and the scorching burn on her shoulders and back were not at all eased by the small voice whispering, "*You deserve this.*"

Her outfit, perfect for driving through a heat wave, now seemed to be making a serious attempt to kill her. Her feet ached in her boots, her jeans were chafing, and her tank top was clinging to her in the most uncomfortable way possible. She was ready to drop next to the road, lie on her back, and count the vultures.

She finished her bottle of water and was about to decide the town was abandoned when she spotted the bar. It was a two-story wooden building, standing strong on a block with two other buildings that seemed to be shut up tight. The windows on the second floor were covered with once-yellow curtains faded almost white, and the words FOUR ROSES were written over the door in fancy, Old English script.

Lance pushed through the swinging door and felt her entire body relax as the air conditioning hit her. She paused for a moment in the doorway to let the cool air wash over her body, and then let the door swing shut behind her. Pushing her sweaty hair out of her face, she realized she had stepped directly into the set of an Old West movie.

There was a sea of empty round tables scattered underneath a single chandelier. A player piano stood against the wall at the far end of the room, next to a Wurlitzer jukebox that bathed its corner of the room in red, yellow, and white neon. The jukebox was quietly pumping the song "Texas in 1880" by Radney Foster. Once Lance saw the jukebox, she realized there were a few other modern anachronisms in the room. Neon signs on the mirror behind the bar advertised the beer on tap, while an alcove at the far right was furnished with three pool tables.

The woman behind the bar had been smiling since Lance stepped inside. She was petite, with curly blond hair that rested on her shoulders like foam on a wave. She wore a red work shirt that was a little too big for her, the sleeves rolled up to her elbows. The shirt was unbuttoned to reveal a T-shirt with "Four Roses Bar" printed across her breasts. She put down the paperback novel she was reading, facedown to mark her place, and smiled brightly. "Good afternoon; what can I get for you?"

Lance's duffel bag had gained weight during her trek through the Texas desert, and she gladly dumped it unceremoniously on the floor next to the stool. The muscles in her legs and back relaxed as she sank onto the cracked vinyl. "Just ice water, for now," she said. "Lots of it. A pitcher."

The woman turned and scooped a pitcher into the freezer. The clinking of ice against the glass was almost enough to make Lance whimper. "Heat catch up with ya?" the woman said as she filled the pitcher from the tap. She placed a glass on the counter in front of Lance and filled it.

Lance snatched the glass up and took three long drinks from it. When she was done, she wiped her bare arm across her lips and tasted the baked in heat of the sun and the dust that had caught in the fine, dark hairs. She emptied her glass, letting the ice rest against her mouth for a second before parting her lips to suck it inside. She crunched it, refilled the glass from the pitcher, and said, "You'll probably need to refill this in a minute."

"Plenty more where that came from," the bartender assured her. "Don't you know this kind of weather ain't for walking?"

Lance paused between drinks long enough to say, "Car broke down."

"Whereabouts did you leave it?"

"About six miles that way."

The bartender reached under the counter and came up with an old-fashioned rotary phone. "You call Jolly. Mechanic, works down the street. He'll tow the car back for you, figure out what's wrong. He's not exactly cheap, but he's fair."

Lance looked at the phone. "Jolly got a number?" The bartender dialed for her, and after two rings, Jolly picked up. Lance explained what had happened, where her car was and what it looked like, and he said he would drive out to pick it up as soon as possible. She gave him her name, thanked him, and hung up. "Thanks."

Lance finished off her second glass of water and emptied the pitcher with another refill. She raised her glass to salute the bartender. "Much obliged. I promise I'll actually pay for something once I get cooled down."

"Don't worry about it. Beer dries you out," the woman said. "It's better to stick with water for right now. And don't worry about paying me for something I get free out of the tap."

Lance nodded her thanks and took a lingering drink of water. She savored it this time, letting it rest on her tongue before she swallowed. She licked her lips, watched the ice cubes swirl in her glass, and then pushed away from the bar. "Ladies room?"

The bartender nodded toward a small corridor leading off the main room. "Through there, second door on the right."

Lance slid off the stool and went to the hallway. The doors were marked with "Ladies" and "Lords". Lance rolled her eyes and pushed through the door to the ladies. Calling it a room was overly polite. There was a toilet under a thin, cracked window that was covered on the inside with chicken wire and on the outside with thick metal bars. The toilet paper stood on the edge of the sink, the loose end trailing down into the bowl of the toilet. Old newspapers were splayed across the floor under the window, and stains better left unexamined covered the yellowing tile floor. The mirror appeared to be a dirty sheet of polished metal, but at least she could see her reflection.

That wasn't necessarily a good thing. On the road, she could ignore the dark bags under her eyes. She was tanned from her slouch toward Bethlehem, but she could see the pallor creeping in underneath. *How long can you go on like this?* she questioned her reflection. *How long do you really think you can keep on like this?* She shook her head, pushed her hair out of her face, and

focused on the sink basin. It was ringed with a brown stain and chalky white deposits circled the drain.

Lance turned on the cold faucet as high as it would go and cupped her hands under the meager stream. She scrubbed her arms up to the elbows, cupped her hands under the water again and splashed her face. It wasn't as good as a shower, but it would do to revitalize her. She wet her hands again and lifted her tank top, scrubbing the sweat off her stomach and upper chest. She would have to change clothes as soon as possible, but it was as good as she would get for a while.

She pushed her hands into her thick hair and tried to finger-comb the dust out. If she had been exhausted from driving, after the walk she had just taken, she was about to fall over. Her legs felt wooden, her muscles finally free to shriek in protest. There was a knot in her lower back and she pressed a knuckle against it to try and release the contraction. It didn't help, but the sink-bath at least made her feel closer to human again. She tugged at the front of her tank top, separating it from her clammy skin and cooling herself at the same time as she stepped out of the bathroom.

The bartender was still leaning against the bar, back into her book, and the rest of the bar was still empty. Lance walked back to her stool and fished an ice cube out of her glass, put it into her mouth and sucked on it. She stared at the bartender for a long minute, watching the woman's green eyes move across the page as she read. Her bangs were caught in her eyelashes and they moved slightly whenever she blinked. Lance pushed her thumb through the water ring on the bar and said, "Claire Lance."

The bartender looked up from her novel. "Pardon?"

"My name is Claire Lance," she said again. She used her tongue to press the ice cube against the inside of her cheek. "You can call me Lance."

"Nice to meet you, Lance. I'm Gwendolyn Morse. Gwen."

Lance nodded hello and then took another long drink of her water. She gestured at the rest of the bar. "Guess the heat is keeping everyone away, huh?"

Gwen shrugged. "Not really. It's usually pretty quiet around here."

Lance nodded and twisted her glass to make rings on the bar. After recreating the Olympic rings, she realized Gwen would have to clean them up and used a napkin to wipe them away. The jukebox had moved on to Josh Ritter singing "Good Man". Lance listened to the song, thankful for a not-too-hot place to sit and just be. For the past year, she had equated sitting still with committing suicide. Like a shark, constant movement was her means of survival. She looked up as Gwen turned a page of her novel. "How about a Budweiser?" she said. Gwen raised an eyebrow and Lance added, "Just so I'll have something to nurse between glasses of water."

Gwen laughed. "Bottle?"

"That's fine."

Gwen used a bottle opener mounted under the bar to pop the top and placed the bottle next to Lance's pitcher of water. Lance thanked her with a nod and finished her water as Gwen went back to her book. Lance turned around on her seat, holding the beer bottle against her thigh as she scanned the room again. The wall directly across from her stool held a rack of pool cues. Though her back and knees protested the thought of standing up again, let alone bending over, she pushed off the stool and weaved between the tables.

She put her beer bottle down on the corner of the nearest table. The balls were racked, ready to go, and Lance went to the rack to pick a cue. She picked one that looked like it hadn't been too abused, tested its balance in her hand, and went back to the table. She lined up her shot, bent forward, and threaded the cue through her fingers.

On the break, she pocketed three stripes. She smiled to herself and straightened. Her back almost creaked in protest, but she didn't let it distract her. A little pain was good. Besides, playing a quick game would loosen her up, relax the muscles that were aching from her trek through the barrens. She worked her neck and bent over again, lining up her next shot.

She sank the number thirteen ball, the number fifteen ball coming to a halt perilously close to the corner pocket. Not too shabby, especially in light of her aching muscles and the start of a headache. If only there was another customer to join her, she might have gotten them to pay for her next few rounds. The money from her bartending stint in Missouri was starting to run low. But even playing against herself was a good distraction. As long as she was focusing on the game, she didn't have to think about her next move in real life. She didn't have to worry about keeping moving so long as she was focused on the balls and the green felt of the pool table. The car was

going to be fixed, and then she would be able to continue her journey to...wherever. Until then, she was planted to the ground here, in Saxe, Texas. She would have to make the best of that.

Lance eyed the four. She could use it to bank in number fifteen and sink it. She'd have to do it just right to make sure the four didn't follow it in, though. She bent over the rail and lined up the shot. She had just threaded the cue through her fingers when the swinging door slapped open. She didn't jump; she kept the cue still and lifted her eyes to the door to see who had made the grand entrance.

A disheveled man stormed through the door and went directly to the bar. Gwen had jumped at the sound of the door and stood frozen behind the bar, mouth open and book trembling in her hands. The man was unshaven, his curly hair forming a wild halo around his head. He wore dirty, ripped jeans and an old sweatshirt with a hood that flapped against his shoulders as he walked. His sneakers pounded the wooden floor and he stopped a few feet away from the bar. He was turned slightly, the pool tables out of his line of vision.

Lance forgot about her game and slowly straightened. The guy didn't look like a pool player, at least not one she could hustle, but he had her undivided attention. It was an old habit, something she couldn't turn off even if she wanted to. The man reeked of danger and threat, and Gwen was obviously not capable of coping with him. She moved closer to the wall to make herself even more invisible.

The man's voice was hollow and trembling when he finally spoke. "Hey, bitch, where are they? Huh? Are they hiding back there like little pussies?" The last word was shouted at a door behind the bar marked Employees Only.

Gwen's eyes were wide, her mouth opening and closing like a beached fish as she struggled to speak. "Boris. You—"

He lifted up his sweatshirt enough to yank a gun from his belt. Gwen gasped and her face went pale. He thrust the gun toward her. "I want my money! I want my cut, and I want..." He ran his tongue over his lips and his eyes swept from Gwen to the door as if he couldn't decide which to watch. "I want twice. Okay? I earned it. He screwed me, Gwen! You know that! Give me my money. I earned it!"

Lance's instincts took over as soon as she saw the gun. As much as she wanted to fade into the woodwork, she couldn't turn a blind eye. She slowly stretched out and plucked the cue ball from the pool table. She let the pool cue slide down in her other hand until she was holding it by the narrow tip. She flipped the stick around so that the weighted end was on top, like an extremely narrow baseball bat. Knowing her clumping boots would make too much noise, she slid her feet across the floor as she tightened her grip on the makeshift weapons.

Gwen was too focused on the man with the gun to notice Lance's approach. The man with the gun — Boris, apparently — was too focused on his rant to notice anything else in the room. He brought his free hand up and rubbed his eyes, and then barked at Gwen again. "Give it to me! I know he keeps it here somewhere. Where? Under the bar?" He made a move as if to climb over the bar, which was far enough for Lance's taste.

"Hey, asshole," she said.

Obviously having thought the room was empty, he spun at the sound of her voice. Before he could bring the gun around, Lance threw the cue ball at his head. It connected with his eyebrow with a solid "thock!" He wailed and careened backward, his free hand going to cup his wounded eye. Lance closed the distance between them with a single step. She brought the pool cue up and down in a smooth arc. It came down between the wrist and elbow of his gun hand. He howled as his fingers twitched and he dropped the weapon to the floor.

Lance used her whole body to bring the cue around again. She hit him in the stomach and he doubled over. The third blow was to the back of his knees, dropping him to the ground. She kicked the gun aside with her boot and then planted her heel on his hand. Flipping the cue in her hands, bringing the narrow end to the top again, she pressed the chalked tip against his throat with enough pressure to let him know how far she could go.

"Walk away, Boris," she said.

He swallowed, and the cue poked painfully deeper into his windpipe. He flicked bloodshot eyes toward the bar, then nodded as best he could. Lance stepped back, moving her foot from his hand. He scrambled to his feet and she watched him consider picking up the gun. He looked at the cue in her hand and backed away, keeping his eyes on her as he said to Gwen, "I'll get my

money. You can count on that, bitch.” He slammed into the swinging door and disappeared into the Texas sun.

Lance bent down and picked up the discarded gun. It was a beauty of a piece—a polished silver pistol with a long, blocky barrel and a black grip on the butt. She walked across the barroom and picked up the cue ball where it had eventually ended up against the base of one of the tables. There was a smear of blood across the middle of the ball. She put it on the bar next to the pool stick and looked at Gwen. “Sorry about that.”

“You saved my life,” Gwen said.

Lance shook her head, uncomfortable. She looked down at the gun. “He was probably just a junkie. He wouldn’t have—”

She was cut off by Gwen screaming. Lance didn’t hesitate; she dropped into a crouch and moved to her right as the mirror behind the bar exploded in a shower of shards. Lance turned to see Boris racking his shotgun for another shot. There was no time to think, no other option. She lifted the gun she had taken from him and fired once.

Boris’ head jerked back as he fell against the door frame, bounced off, and twisted to land face-up on the floor. His shotgun landed across his chest, gripped tightly in both hands.

In the overwhelming silence that followed, Lance could hear the half panting, half sobbing noises coming from Gwen. Lance rose and walked to Boris’ body to make sure he was definitely dead. The bullet had entered just over his left eyebrow, opposite the wound she had made with the cue ball. This time, he wasn’t going to get up.

Finally catching up with the situation, her heart was pounding. The gun was shaking slightly, and Lance realized that her entire arm was starting to tremble. She tightened her muscles and the tremors ceased. She had killed before, but had never planned to do it again. Her first thought was the attention this incident was sure to bring. The quiet, deserted town was certain to get very crowded, very soon. She closed her eyes and waited for her body to calm. She did it in quadrants: first quieting the storm inside her head, steadying her shoulders, relaxing her fingers. She took a deep breath through her nose and released it through slightly parted lips, then opened her eyes.

Once again calm, Lance checked the pistol’s ammunition — something she should have done as soon as she picked it up — and saw there were three bullets left. She carefully took the shotgun from Boris’ cooling hands and looked at Gwen. “You’re going to have a hell of a mess to clean up.”

“I don’t care,” Gwen said. Her voice was tight, her eyes still wide in her pale face as she eyed the dead body across the room. “Oh my God, did you kill him? He was...I thought he was...I’m so lucky you showed up. I—”

The Employees Only door behind the bar finally slammed open. Gwen gasped, “Oh, shit,” as three men swarmed into the bar. All three were armed with handguns, all of which were aimed at Lance’s chest.

Lance slowly raised her hands, acknowledging she was outnumbered and not stupid enough to try and fight the odds. She let the trigger guard of the pistol hook on her thumb so she couldn’t possibly fire it. She twisted her hand on the rifle so it was clear she was holding the barrel, not the butt. Her heart, so carefully returning to a normal rhythm, began to pound against her ribs again. *Out of the frying pan, into the fire.* Just her luck that her car would break down outside of the last town still living in the Wild fucking West.

“Put the guns down now, please,” one of the men said. His voice was unnaturally calm, a disturbing counterpoint to the hardness of his eyes.

Lance knew he wouldn’t hesitate to pull the trigger, so she nodded that she would comply. “Okay. Putting the guns down.” She motioned at the bar with her head and stretched both arms out to put the weapons next to the cash register. “Let’s not do anything stupid, fellas.”

Gwen reached out and touched the arm of the man who had spoken. His broad chest and shoulders stretched the seams of a shirt bought two sizes too small for the very purpose of showing off his build. The sleeves were rolled up, revealing thickly haired arms. He had a thick red beard and curly red hair that was thinning slightly on top. His blue eyes were hard, emotionless, as he examined the stranger standing before him. “She saved my life, Roy. Please.”

Roy’s eyes stayed locked on Lance, but he lowered his weapon. The other two men followed suit a second later. Roy finally peeled his eyes off Lance and looked down at Gwen, putting one arm around her trembling shoulders. “Are you all right? What happened?”

“I’m fine,” Gwen said. “Thanks to her. This is Claire Lance. Claire, this is my husband, Roy Morse.”

One of the men who had appeared with Roy moved around the bar to look at the corpse. He grunted. "Fucking hell, Roy; it was Boris Younger."

Roy's jaw tightened and he moved away from Gwen's side. "Is he dead, Hadley?"

"As a doornail," Hadley replied. "Nailed him in the head."

Roy seemed to consider that and then looked at Lance. "Nice shooting."

Lance stared at him for a moment, wondering where his concern for his wife had been five minutes earlier. She shrugged and kept an eye on Roy and his boys until the guns disappeared into their belts. As long as the focus was off of her and the guns were all safely stowed, she wasn't in danger. But she wasn't going to forget they were there, just within reach.

Roy stepped forward and extended his hand across the bar. When Lance didn't immediately take it, he raised an eyebrow. "Where I come from, if someone saves your wife, you shake that person's hand."

Lance reached out and took Roy's hand. She squeezed it, not hard enough to be a challenge but enough that he would know she wasn't a pushover.

He grunted slightly in acknowledgement and withdrew his hand. "Like Gwendolyn said, my name is Roy Morse. The man behind you is Garrett Hadley, and this is Kevin Keating."

Lance examined both men. Keating looked like a boxer gone to seed, his eyelids heavy and his light hair buzzed close to the scalp while his cheeks were rough with stubble. His shirt was rumpled and as unwashed as his dark skin seemed to be, and the man reeked of alcohol.

Hadley, on the other hand, was the picture of *haute couture*. His shirt was buttoned to the throat, despite his not wearing a tie. It appeared to be the only clean shirt in the room, and was tucked into the waistband of his trousers. He stood ramrod straight, shoulders back, and his thick black hair was combed away from his face. There were traces of gray at his temples, but it added an air of dignity. His lips were pressed tightly together, his eyes locked firmly on Lance. She felt like she was on display and he was deciding whether or not to let her live.

"Nice to make your acquaintance, gentlemen," she said, just to break the silence.

"It's lucky that you just happened to be here. Right time, right place?" Hadley asked.

"My car broke down about six miles out," she said. "This was the first place I came across with running water. By the way, I probably owe you a pool cue."

Roy picked up the cue that she had laid across the bar. He swung it, and Lance noticed Gwen cringing away from the motion, despite the fact he hadn't gotten anywhere near her. Lance kept her eyes on Gwen as Roy swung the cue again. This time, a weak spot along the center cracked and the cue broke in half, leaving him holding the blunt bottom. He looked down at the tip lying at his feet, looked at the sharp spike left behind, and then looked at Lance. For a moment, Lance thought that he was going to run her through with the pointed remnant, and she prepared to defend herself.

But then his lips spread in a wide smile, splitting his beard, and he began to laugh. Hadley and Keating eventually joined in, albeit uneasily. Finally, he dropped the remains of the ruined cue and said, "You aren't buying me a cue. Necessary expenditure. And you're not buying any more drinks. You save my wife, you drink on the house."

"Much obliged."

"Gar," Roy said, nodding his chin at the body on the floor, "you and Kay get that garbage out of my bar. Clean it the hell up." He squeezed Gwen's shoulder and kissed her hard. She put her hand on his chest, not trying to push him back but not caressing him, either. When he pulled away, he looked at Lance. "Were you planning to go anywhere?"

Lance was still standing where she had stopped when the three men came barreling in. Now she felt like she was center-stage in some bizarre theatre troupe. "Depends on what you mean."

"Did you have a destination in mind when you set out, or would you be willing to stay here in Saxe for a spell?" Roy said.

"Doing what?"

"Protection." He put an arm around Gwen. "I obviously can't watch her all hours. It'll be nice to have someone I can trust keeping an eye on her."

Lance hesitated, looking at Gwen. She was still pale and refused to look up from the floor. It was as if she thought looking up would invite flashbacks to what had just happened. Roy didn't seem concerned about how pale she looked, or the fact that her lower lip was still trembling. Lance ignored Roy and addressed herself to Gwen. "Do you have a lot you need to be protected from, Mrs. Morse?"

Gwen shrugged one thin shoulder and pressed tighter against Roy's side.

Lance looked out the front door of the bar. The truth was, she didn't have anywhere she needed to be. She was stuck in Saxe, Texas for as long as it took for her car to be fixed. If she was stranded, she might as well get paid for the inconvenience. She looked at Gwen and decided that maybe the little bartender would need someone there when the reality sank in about what had just happened. Lance looked at Roy again and discovered his eyes hadn't wavered from her. She feigned nonchalance. "What the hell, I'll stick around a while." She looked at Hadley and Keating. "Who knows? It might even be fun."

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