

YOU

LIE!

A Cautionary Tail

By Greg Wagner

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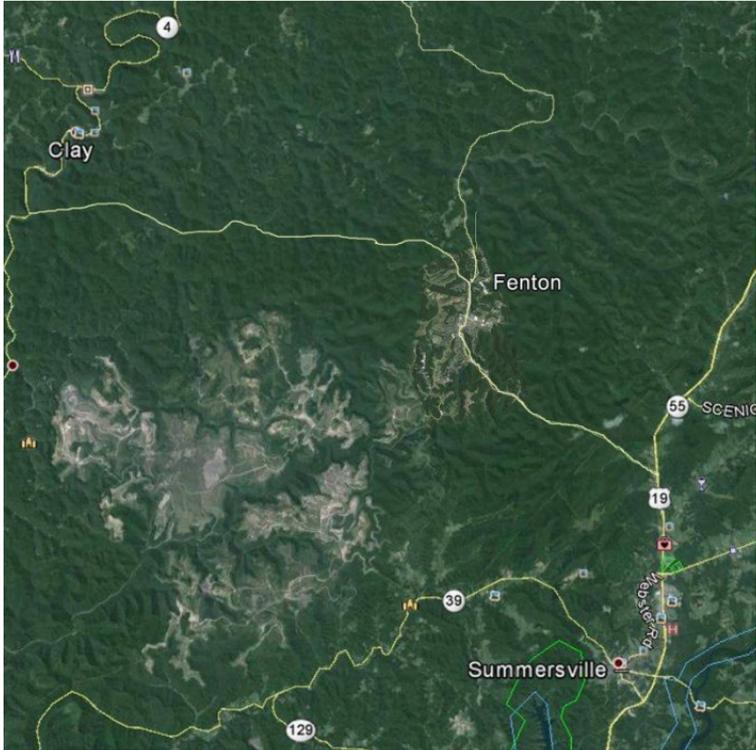
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Fenton, West Virginia



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Here be dragons...

Chapter 1 – So Far Away

The early morning sky was dark and overcast.

Heavy sodden clouds hung close to the East Andean foothills like a cold wet blanket, obscuring the twilight heavenly bodies and all their glory, completely with its nebulous, impenetrable, nimbostratus deck.

Pedro looked long and hard at the donkey beside him and then took another drink from the bottle of tequila.

“...and another thing,” he swayed a little and fell back against the bar, cracking his head, but then he jumped back up again, “and as for you Gringo,” he pointed at his friend. “I’m getting a little tired of ylou an fyour shhfacesh.” This last part, he said through the rough fur of his donkey Roosevelt, as Pedro slowly slid to the ground face first.

Stone staggered over, propped his friend up, and took the bottle away from him. As soon as the tequila left Pedro’s hand he jerked back to life, “did I ever tell you about the time?” and then he fell back over again.

Stone shook his head, got an arm under his friend, and helped him back to his apartment. In the three blocks that they had to travel, Pedro woke up singing twice, cussing like a sailor once, then crying and moaning, telling Stone the rest of the way home, how much he appreciated him being there for his difficult first pregnancy.

Stone negotiated the sleeping streets of suburban Bogota, Columbia, in a tequila soaked haze that rivaled even some of his more recent inebriations. All the while the donkey, “Roosevelt” tagged along, chewing on the edge of Pedro’s tee-shirt and looking around nervously at some of the city’s poorer residents, who it knew, *had the ability to cook up equine meat “oh so” tender...*

Once inside the apartment Stone dropped his friend on the sofa, where he hit the cushions and rolled off onto the floor

groaning. “Ohh,” Pedro moaned holding his head, “why did you make me drink all that?”

Stone looked at his watch, *Oh great*, he thought, *two more hours and I have to get up for work*. He staggered next door to his tiny apartment, plopped down in the old threadbare recliner, and drifted off to sleep.



Herman settled in for the long overnight shift.

The mists hung heavy in the air across the high wooded ridgeline, depositing its blanket of dew on the sleeping camp. The “dusk to dawn” lights that dotted the barbed wire fenced perimeter, barely shone through the pervading gloom, instead making dull cones of yellow that hardly penetrated the darkness anywhere, but directly underneath them. Heavy buzzing, and crackling sounds filled the air from the high voltage power lines running parallel to the military installation, the steel tower’s insulators, expending their immutable coronal discharge in the dark late evening’s dampness. The moon shyly peeked out from around a bank of fluffy white clouds up in the dark sky.

Usually a warehouse clerk, Herman was called into to work early this evening, to pull guard duty on the “Sugar Shack.” The “Shack” as it is affectionately known, is a special steel and lead, reinforced concrete building, in a little fenced off area that’s part of the main complex. It is also “off limits” to anyone with a security clearance under a level six, and that’s all that Herman needed to know.

Private First Class Herman Mullins is an active member of the West Virginia National Guard. His main job is to go out on the lot, on a forklift and pick up the steel reinforced containers, that the big C130 Hercs airdropped daily on the old surface mine-turned military base. Herman then takes the containers to the depot, unloads them, performs an inventory of the contents and then either

ships it out or takes it over to the cavernous “Section B” warehouse and buries it somewhere on the building-long, five-high skid racks.

They got anything from condoms and Q-Tips, to rocket launchers and canned hams in the airdrops. The “top secret” National Guard supply depot, is located at the old Aquila Mine Complex just south of the town of Fenton, WV.

The original Dog Ridge #2 “above ground” mine, that at one time employed a third of Nicolas County, had closed its doors forever four years ago, when it was purchased secretly (although all the locals knew about it) by the government, to be used as a military storage facility.

People will argue the point heatedly, but the Dog Ridge mine and many others across the state at the time, closed mainly due to two reasons. A drop in demand for coal on the world market, and the EPA reinstating many of the original clean water and air restrictions, that had been done away with by big money corporatists, in the early parts of the new millennia.

None of that really mattered to Herman.

What does matter to Herman, is that he does what he is ordered to do, and tonight he is supposed to be guarding this building. Herman thought drowsily, *now if I can just stay awake.*

He yawned and looked out across the empty parking lot. Last night around midnight, a “black truck” convoy had pulled in to the complex.

Herman was outside on his lunch break at the time and watched as the trucks, escorting an oversized “carbon black” tractor-trailer, came in the gate and went straight to the Sugar Shack. They quickly disappeared behind the heavy steel doors of the “Top Secret” building for several hours, before appearing and pulling out again just before dawn, leaving a small crew behind to take care of whatever it is that they had dropped off.

Most of the time the building is empty, but Herman had heard rumors that the “Shack” sometimes is used by other government agencies, for special top secret “terrorist” renditions and that *anyone caught snooping around it, gets to find out what really goes on inside.*

Herman knew better.

He originally enlisted in the National Guard straight out of high school as part of the ROTC program. The recruiters made all kinds of promises, *paid college, no deployments, retirement benefits, you name it, but it seemed like as soon as the ink dried on the enlistment papers, most of those promises disappeared.*

Herman was also under the impression when he first signed up, that being part of the National Guard meant that he’d be defending the home land, here...at home. However, in his last three and a half years of service, Herman has been deployed to the Middle East four times, *once to Afghanistan, once to Oman, and twice to Jordan.*

Now he’s five years into an eight year commitment and just counting down the days. Luckily, he landed an assignment close to home, as the Dog Ridge facility is just a couple of hollers over from where he grew up in Maysel.

Herman never did like the graveyard shift too much, *people are supposed to be sleeping when it’s dark.*

He glanced down at his watch and shivered a little.

The mountain peeper frogs were on the prowl this evening. Looking for love, the little anurans filled the night air with a symphonic crescendo of croaks, shrills, and peeps. The noise was oddly hypnotizing, making it even harder for him to stay awake. A lonely howl went out across the wilderness and just then, something momentarily blacked out the moon. He looked up, but didn’t see anything near the now solitary pale white glowing orb.

Herman shook his head, *must have been my imagination*. He looked at his watch again.

Twelve-Thirty! He thought frantically, *How am I ever gonna make it to seven?*

He slapped his cheeks and rubbed his eyes, working his jaw and moving his head from side to side, hoping desperately for a second wind. He blinked hard a few more times.

There, that's a little better.



A winged, dark, vaguely bird shaped silhouette, passed in front of the moon, followed by another, and then two more, darkening the scenery for just split seconds, like a strobe light between the bright blinding flashes. Four other shapes followed them on the ground, dark patches on an even darker backdrop, running at full speed, shapeless blurs to the unwary viewer.

A lupine call splits the night and echoes from hillside to hillside, causing smaller creatures in their warrens and holes, to turn and kick out fitfully in their nocturnal rest.

“Ok guys, I think we need to head back now,” a female voice could be heard above the other denizens of the night.

“Aww come on, just a little longer,” a male voice whined back.

“No, we have to be at school tomorrow and I don’t know about you guys, but I have a big math test tomorrow and I better get at least a ‘B’ or I’m screwed.”

The four dark shapes stopped and morphed into four teenagers. The group of winged lizards flew down and landed beside them while they talked.

The tallest of the group offered compromise, “How about if we take the long way home?”

Amanda Wilson put her hands on her hips, “Justin, you of all people should understand my position.”

“I know,” he hung his head.

Her boyfriend tilted his head and piped up innocently, “We don’t get to do this very often Mand, let him have his fun.”

“Don’t you start Devon!” she pointed at him, half-smiling, half-threatening, her bright red hair shining in the moonlight.

“I’d say majority rules,” Tiffany laughed, “that’s how they do it down in Charleston.”

“Yeah well,” Amanda sneered, “Charleston doesn’t have to be at work until nine.” She turned to her best friend, “and they also don’t have a big math test tomorrow, first period.”

She crossed her arms in front, but then looked around at her friends and gave in with a sigh. “Oh, all right, but I have to be back by one at the latest.” She counted off with her fingers, “That will give me a whole five hours to sleep,” she rolled her eyes, “oh joy.”

The four dragons that were milling about beside them, looked up as she finished the sentence. She smiled at her little saurian charge; *they’re like dogs in that sense*, she thought, *whenever they hear anything that sounds even remotely like “go out?” or “are you hungry?” and their ears automatically perk up.*

She had to admit it felt good to get out and run. Trying to keep secret, that you have magical powers and are the caretaker of a dragon, can be difficult even under the best of situations. The dragons didn’t seem to mind too much, most of their existence so far has been spent *somewhere*, on another dimensional plane anyways. Amanda didn’t really understand it all, but she somehow couldn’t help thinking that maybe it’s better that way, less chance that the vulnerable, “baby” dragons will get discovered or hurt.

Having the ability to take any shape she puts her mind to, is a pretty handy talent to have. *Somehow though, I don’t think my teachers would understand.*

She “*thought*” herself into a great, grey wolf shape and took off running, growling over her shoulder playfully to her friends, “Last one to Summersville Lake is a baby bat.”



Bored almost to tears, Stacy Lizemore sat staring out the heavily tinted, front picture windows of the restaurant section of the Lizemore Family “Quik Trip” truck stop.

A storm had rolled in with the coming of dawn and looked to be winding up for a long soaking. Raindrops pocked the surface of newly formed puddles that dotted the half-empty asphalt parking lot. Freshly awakened actinobacteria were busy feeding after the short dry spell the town had been experiencing, gracing the few people caught out in the wet stuff, with their anaerobic earthy aroma, spiced up a little by “just a hint” of ozone and garnished liberally with the “drowned worm smell,” that usually accompanies most sudden downpours.

The entrance bell rang as an overloaded log truck wallowed into the parking lot and headed for the gas pumps.

Business is slow this morning.

A few old men sat huddled together over in the corner at the bar, but other than that, they were the only customers that Stacy had seen since coming on shift. She idly twirled a lock of her short, curly, black hair and stared out the window.

Stacy is the heir apparent to the great Lizemore’s Family Empire. The inheritance comes complete with a restaurant/dairy bar, gas station/service center, car wash, and a tiny strip mall downtown, which provides most of the money for the Lizemore family and their ancestral farm and homestead.

While Stacy appreciated everything her parents had accomplished in their life and admired them for it, but being an only child, placed a lot of pressure on her to carry on with the empire,

which is a problem, she thought wistfully, because I might have other plans.

The other waitress on duty, walked up just then and plopped down on the stool beside her. “Starting to really come down out there isn’t it?” She said with a lopsided smile.

Stacy nodded, and looked up at the other woman. *Thirty-five years in the waitressing business and look at what it’s done to her.*

Ginny Baldwin is a pretty woman, or at least she used to be *a very pretty woman*, at one point in time.

Easily over average height, Ginny possessed what reminded Stacy, of a dancer’s body *and she was so sweet, sometimes “saccharine” sweet.* She had the kind of personality that was quite possibly capable of bringing about world peace, *even on a bad day.* The older woman always keeps her short ash blonde hair, fastidiously cut and set, forming a loose bun of hair that just seems to *float* around her head, more than lay there.

That being said, the many years that Ginny spent on her feet waiting tables, had left her with a slightly hunched over look, deceptively creating the general impression, that she was tired all the time.

Ginny also coughed frequently and although she never smoked a day in her life, *except for in bed*, according to her, exposure to the “secondhand stuff” before the public smoking bans, left her voice rough and gravelly.

She had a sincere look on her face as she leaned down and lowered her voice conspiringly. “You look down in the dumps Honey, anything you want to talk about?”

Stacy shook her head. “No, Ginny I’m fine, thanks, just a little blue from the rain...I guess.”

“Well, keep in mind Sweetie, if you ever need a shoulder to cry on, I’m here.” With that she smiled, winked, and then turned

around and grabbed the coffee pot and headed over to the group of old men.

“Top you off gentlemen?” Stacy could hear her say from across the dining room.

Stacy smiled and shook her head.

I guess it could be worse.

Chapter 2 – Trouble Comes to Town

Seventy-year-old Clarence “Starman” Williams was lying underneath the front end of a Buick Park Avenue, when the phone on his workbench rang. He finished removing the bolt that he’d been working on, hoping that his wife would pick it up. He rolled his eyes as “elbow-deep” in the vehicle’s innards the phone rang again.

After struggling for the last fifteen minutes, Clarence had finally figured out the right combination of swivels and socket extensions to use, in order to reach the *one starter bolt*, that was hidden back behind the engine’s exhaust manifold, *and I’m not gonna stop until I get the damn thing out*, he frowned and kept turning.

The phone rang again.

“Dor, honey?” He yelled towards the doorway to the house, “Can you get that for me?”

No answer.

The phone rang again.

Clarence extracted his now partially numb arm and hand, from the tight spot that he had to get it into and slid out from underneath the car. The end of his long gray ponytail caught under the wheel of the creeper and yanked his head back violently, making him squeal.

“Oww, son of a...oops!”

Before he could stop it, a small ball of blue flames flew out from his index finger and scorched a three-foot circle on the ceiling, which continued to smolder a second or two, before going out completely.

Oh shit, he thought, looking up at the damage that it did to the ceiling. *I forgot it was loaded.*

He cringed, as the phone rang again.

Grumbling, he wiped his hands off and limped over to the workbench where he kept the cordless receiver. As he was halfway there, the ringing stopped. He picked it up anyway and hit the caller ID button.

Private Name

Private Number

What the hell is that, he thought, how am I supposed to know who called, if they don't leave a message and don't have a caller ID?

Oh well, he shrugged and put the phone back down, must not have been too important.

As far as he was concerned, the world is crazy, people are crazy, and it's just getting worse every day. All the politicians care about is furthering their career and they don't give a damn who they have to suck up to or step on, in order to do it. So what does that get the working man? Kicked in the teeth, because while he's working his ass off and paying taxes, the rich aren't even coughing their share.

Oh shit, Clarence stopped in mid-thought, wait a minute, that sounds progressive. He frowned and shook his head.

Clarence wandered into the kitchen, and peeked his head around the corner into the living room, but didn't see any sign of Doris. Then he went back the hall to her studio and stopped in front of the open door.

His wife of forty-nine years, was sitting on top of a thin rubber yoga mat in the "Lotus Position," *eyes closed, legs folded, fingers upturned and resting on her knees.*

"Didn't you hear the phone?" he inquired.

Without opening her eyes, she held up one finger.

He frowned.

I should have known. It's like this all the time. He thought; *Don't interrupt me when I'm meditating,* she told him, *because unless the house is on fire or you're having a heart attack, I will just ignore you.*

He stomped back out to the garage, picked up the phone, crawled back under the Buick, and lay there fuming for a little.

Doris is a tree hugger and Clarence is a neo-conservative, or at least he has been for the last two years, ever since he started listening to conservative-talk-radio shows coming out of a station up in Sutton.

With the government take over and too many beltway insider liberals running things, is it any wonder this country's going to hell in a handbasket?

Classic example, last fall Doris got involved in protesting a “proposed” coalmine that was coming to town, picketing for weeks, angry grandmothers, glorified media hounds, the whole bit.

Of course, in the end it was actually a good thing though. Mainly because it turns out that the town of Fenton just happens to be built on the back of a millennia old, giant, sleeping, “Great Sky Wyrn” *and the last thing that anybody wanted at the time, was to wake that dragon up.* The drilling for core samples alone, caused 7.0 Richter scale earthquakes, as the great serpent came dangerously close to being aroused from its ancient slumber.

As a side effect, magic came to the town of Fenton.

Fenton has always been a magical place as far as Clarence was concerned, but suddenly, people with even mild latent magic talent, were full-blown sorcerers. The appearance of all sorts of pixies and hobgoblins was so prevalent at the time, that you couldn't swing a tire iron around town, without hitting some sort of faerie creature or another.

The Williams family talent for enchantment, had awakened that summer too, not only just in Clarence, but in his lawyer son

Nathanial too, who developed a propensity to throwing fireballs and making things disappear.

Everybody in the town was affected, but only a handful of people, including the sheriff, the town maintenance guy, the richest man in town and a few others, ever knew the real story.

Clarence has always been sensitive to the occult. After spending five years in a witch's coven with Doris back in the seventies, he couldn't help but have some of it rub off on him.

Something is happening again. He thought, I can't put my finger on it yet, but I have a funny feeling...



Herman was awakened by the rumble of trucks, pulling up to the front gate.

Oh great, I fell asleep!

He hurried to straighten his uniform and wipe the drool from his mouth.

That's what they get for giving me guard duty, hell; I'm the guy that fell asleep in the middle of the "Total Recall," when it played at the Bijou's Saturday afternoon thriller matinee.

He saluted the driver of the lead truck, as they drove past his post on their way to the Shack. The same Special Security Clearance ID that got the convoy through the main gates, also opened the big, steel reinforced, blast proof, front doors of the Shack.

Herman watched as the convoy disappeared inside the hulking, flat black painted building. Thankfully, no one was paying much attention to him.

The sun was just creeping over the ridge, and in fifteen minutes, Herman was off duty. It had been quiet last night and he was just ready to go home. He slowly made his way back to the barracks to change into his civvies.

Just then, his commanding officer came around the corner and bellowed. "Private Mullins!"

Herman whipped out one of his sharpest salutes, which because of his soft physique, ended up looking more like a confused Bali dancer than a martial gesture.

"Yes sir!" he said, body finally coming to a stop.

"You were supposed to be watching the shack last night private, why didn't you report an escape?"

Herman felt something pinch his neck and he absently slapped at it. The Captain did the same thing, pausing only long enough to give Herman a sour look and rub the side of his neck.

"I'm waiting Private."

Herman was scared and he felt a little funny as he swayed on his feet and blurted out, "I wouldn't know sir, I was asleep for the last couple of hours."

The officer's eyes went wide and it looked like he was going to stroke out, but then he just blinked and replied, "I don't blame you son, I'm no good past 8:00 and that's even on the weekends."

They both stopped and looked at each other for a second and then looked off to the side, neither one understanding what had just happened.

Oh crap, I'm in trouble now, he thought worriedly.

Herman broke the spell, "I'm sorry sir, but I didn't see anything and I wasn't sleeping *all* night."

"I understand Private, but there's an alien ship in that building and two days ago, sensors indicated that there were five life forms in it and now there are none." Again, the two exchanged uncomfortable glances. "You didn't hear that from me," the captain said, looking skyward. "Either way, we need to find out what

happened, the surveillance cameras aren't showing anything. I guess I was hoping you saw something.”

Herman just shook his head, too shocked to form a proper reply without getting himself into more trouble.



Stone Rodriguez got off work and headed home. The working class Columbian neighborhood he lived in was alive with the late afternoon noise of children playing in the street and cars going past on their way from the business district, out to the hillside suburbs. As he parked his car and walked down the street, he saw Pedro sitting on the front porch with his hat pulled down over his eyes. Roosevelt was standing stolidly beside him, chewing contentedly on the next-door neighbor's already decimated flowering bush.

“Rough night my friend?” He offered.

“Fuck you Gringo,” Pedro said without lifting his hat, “you know damn well I was plastered. By the way, thanks for making sure I made it home ok, Roosevelt said I was really out of it.”

“Yeah well, you'd have done the same for me right?”

“Not, if I was trashed too.”

“Ok,” Stone raised an eyebrow slightly and tilted his head back, “I'll have to keep that in mind.”

“Oh now don't be that way,” Pedro looked up, “you know if I'm able, I would fight through the gates of hell with you, but if I'm drunk,” he waved his hand, “forget it, you're on your own *file mou*.”

Contrary to his stereotypical nickname, Pedro is the spitting image of “Dudley Do-right of the Canadian Mounties” from the old Saturday morning cartoons.

Born on a tiny island off the coast of Greece, Pedropolis Constantinople grew up an army brat, of a fifth generation enlisted man and a Danish dowager princess. In the DNA battle that ensued

his conception, the Danish side won out, leaving Pedro over six feet tall, skinny as a rail and pasty white, with bleached blonde hair and a chin that you could crack coconuts on.

While he rarely rides the little donkey, he does take Roosevelt with him just about everywhere he goes, and on weekends, the donkey hauls the tools that Pedro uses when he goes emerald hunting in the jungle.

Pedro calls Stone, “Gringo” as a sort of ironic joke between friends, even though Stone fits in around here ethnically, way more than he does. They both work for the US Embassy in Bogotá, Columbia, where Pedro is the general maintenance person for the fifty some acre complex and Stone is a security guard.

Bogotá is the largest city in Colombia, with over 15 million residents, it figures among the top 40 largest cities in the world and is the third-highest capital city in South America. At 8,660 ft above sea level, most of the city’s residents live in the urban areas, with only a small population living in the north and northeast foothills, where the richer neighborhoods are located.

Stone prefers to live in the old neighborhood. *The people are more down to earth here, he thought, it’s funny, I feel more comfortable with the people of Bogota, than I ever felt, growing up in rural West Virginia, where his ancestry mattered more, than any good that he ever could have accomplished.*

Chapter 3 - I Cannot Tell A Lie

Randy Herford pulled his bumblebee yellow, 1-Ton Ford, F-350 "Powerstroke Turbo Diesel" 4X4 pickup, off to the side of the road and shut the engine off.

Steffy smiled nervously at him, as he shifted his considerable bulk around in the seat, so that he was now facing her.

The moon was hidden behind a thick shroud of cloud cover, leaving the night sky and that section of forest, black as ink. Randy glanced off to the left and thought he could see a faint glow on the horizon that marked where he used to work, when he was up on the strip mine. *That was before I got laid off indefinitely*, he thought bitterly.

He returned his attention back to Steffy and smiled. "You all don't have to sit so far away sweetheart."

He reached back behind the seat, pulled out a bottle of "Spiked Melon" MD 20/20 and twisted off the cap. Then he tilted the cheap wine back and took a long swallow before handing the bottle to Steffy, who backed away reflexively.

"You know Randy," she started out carefully, "I don't think we should even be up here, 'sides, mama told me I wasn't allowed to be alone with you anymore." Steffy held her chin up and looked at him defiantly, as if just the mention of her mother would change anything. She sniffed and turned her back on him.

He reached across the seat and grabbed her shoulder hard, spinning her around to face him.

Then he stopped and forced a smile back onto his face again.

"Come on baby loosen up. Here try a little bit," he held up the bottle again, this time jiggling and sloshing the lime green liquid around for emphasis.

Her answer was the silence between them.

Well now you blew it, Randy thought to himself, as he recognized the fear in her eyes. He turned away, grunted, took another swig of the wine, and sat staring out the windshield of the truck.

Roads that intertwined with the Aquila Mine property and went way up into the hills, most roads (and in some cases goat paths) dead-ended out in the middle of the woods, like the one they were sitting on now.

Far enough back in, so that no one can hear you scream, he chuckled at the thought.

Randy wasn't worried.

He grew up around these woods. That and he'd been a coal miner long enough to grow an impressive, if not intimidating mid section, one that would make even the baddest of them, think before messing with him.

He took another drink, while they sat in silence.



Steffy knew now, that she shouldn't have gotten in the truck with her mom's boyfriend.

Randy told her he was taking her to the store and by the time she realized he lied, it was too late.

Better to just do what he says and hope he doesn't try anything crazy.

Randy had been coming on to her for the last three months that he'd been living with her mother, but every time Steffy tried to mention it, her mother told her to *just keep quiet and don't make trouble.*

Randy sat in the darkness drinking and brooding.

Steffy was just starting to think that she might be safe after all, until she saw his eyes widen and he turned around to face her

again. This time he was smiling the kind of smile, which incorporated *all dozen of his remaining teeth*, but was completely devoid of any goodwill or humor.

She scooted over on the seat, sliding up against the door so hard, that the handle dug into her side. She'd tried the latch earlier, but found that Randy had the locks disabled so that she was effectively trapped.

Just then, pinpricks of headlights appeared on the road below and slowly grew, as they got closer. Randy slid back across the seat again and squinted into the glare.

“God dammit,” he snarled, “I can see you already, turn your hi-beams down.” He started to get out, but when the blue and red flashing lights came on and then went back off again, Randy slowly slid back into the cab of the truck.

Bud Wilson, the Sheriff of the town of Fenton, stepped out of his black SUV cruiser and hitched his gun belt up, then slowly made his way up to the side of the pick-up.

Steffi jumped, as just then, Randy reached up and slapped at his neck in annoyance. “What the hell was that?” he whined, rubbing at the spot with his hand.

“Randy Herford is that you?” Bud called out, shining his flashlight in on Steffy. “What the hell are you doing out here at this time of night?”

Randy smiled, closed his eyes to the glare, and opened his mouth, “Actually Sheriff, I was just getting ready to have my way with little Steffy here...” suddenly his eyes went wide and he covered his mouth with both hands.

Steffy's mouth dropped open too, as she listen to Randy spilling his guts.

“You want to repeat that for me Randy,” the Sheriff frowned and tilted his head, “I'm not sure if I heard you right.”

Randy kept his hands over his mouth and just shook his head back and forth. When he didn't say anything else, Bud leaned into the window. "Can I give you a ride home Steffy? It's getting kind of late to be out here on a school night."

She nodded, looked at her captor and pursed her lips, he growled and hit the unlock button on the door. As she got out of the truck, Randy cautiously pulled his hands away from his mouth, "but all I wanted was to get a little..." he started to say and then slapped his hands back over his mouth again and rolled his eyes wildly.

Steffy got in the cruiser, closed the door, and watched, while Bud went back to the truck and had a little talk with her mom's boyfriend. He was frowning and pointing his finger a lot, leaning in occasionally for emphasis while Randy just looked at the ground and shook his head the whole time.

The Sheriff got back in the car muttering to himself, "What the hell was he thinking?" he turned towards her. "Is Randy always so honest about his attempts at involuntary rape?"

Steffy shook her head.

"Do you think he'll try it again?"

She shrugged.

"Damn," he said, "I think I put the fear of the law in him, for all the good that will do when he's drunk." He scratched his head, "Alcohol might explain the sudden psychopathic behavior, but I wonder what made him admit to it."

Steffy shrugged again, just as confused by Randy's actions.

Bud shook his head, "I'll have a little talk with your mother about this too, if you don't mind."

Steffy nodded; relieved that at least someone was on her side. "I really appreciate that Sheriff, I'm sorry to be so much trouble."

“Now don’t you talk that way, you didn’t do anything to deserve that.” He put his hand lightly on her shoulder, “don’t worry, we’ll get it taken care of.”



Stone sat in front of the wall of camera monitors, scanning the video feeds for anything unusual. As a security guard for the United States Embassy in Columbia, he is responsible for protecting the dignitaries that visit here.

He’d originally started his career right out of high school, enlisting in the marines for a hitch and then being stationed down here in South America as part of a drug interdiction exercise. *That’s where he met Pedro.* When Stone’s time was up in the military and at the advice of his friend, he applied for a position at the consulate, not really sure that he wanted to stay in Columbia, but not quite ready to go back home either.

That was four years ago.

Working in the hallow halls of the United States Embassy in Bogota isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. Along with the diplomatic end of the mission, the embassy also houses representatives from the DEA, SOUTHCOM, ICE, DOD and a whole list of other acronym lettered agencies, who in most cases, are there to do a lot more than liaising.

Ever since the dawn of diplomatic missions and embassies in other countries, it was understood, that the ambassadors were there for one reason and one reason only...*to spy.*

Recent NSA revelations have only served to bolster this obvious reality, when it was discovered that the NSA was tapping the personal phone calls of the heads of other countries, some who even consider us allies. To make things even worse, an independent investigation uncovered that US embassies all over the world had special panels on their roofs designed to hide radio reception and decoding equipment in windowless attics of the buildings.

In most cases, if Stone sees something out of the ordinary involving the staff here, he has a tendency to just look the other way. *The best way to keep your job is to not make waves.* With the many indiscretions that he'd witnessed in the last four years working here though, he has developed quite a kink in his neck.

Stone fit in here in South America much better than he ever did back home in West Virginia.

One reason is his ancestry.

Born in Miami, Florida, Stone's father, Javier Rodriguez-Marrero was Dominican and Puerto Rican, while Stone's mother, Madison Whitefeather-Rodriguez is of German and American Indian descent, Choctaw to be specific.

Ethnically, this made Stone, what would be considered a Mulatt-Ameri-Indian, with a just hint of Melungeon thrown in for flavor.

The end result, is a dark skinned 6'2" 240lb. version of the ever popular and flamboyant, pay-per-view wrestler, affectionately known as "The Rock," not to mention a look, that could easily pass for South American, Mexican or even Middle Eastern...*except for his size.*

Originally from West Virginia, the Rodriguez family lived in Miami until Stone was 14, when his mother moved him and his sister back to Appalachia, shortly after his "Gangsta" father went and got himself shot in the head, trying to rip somebody off in a drug deal.

The biggest problem that Stone has had since going to work for the consulate in Columbia, is sexual harassment. Never perpetrating it himself, *but as the victim.* Many times now he has been cornered, by unwanted attentions and forced to succumb to all sorts of groping and fondling, before being able to tactfully withdraw himself from the situation.

Needless to say, this has led to a lot of hurt feelings and even some vindictiveness on the part of the “groper” spurned. Which could be a problem in the politically charged atmosphere that is diplomacy, especially when, your boss is the one with the “Russian” hands and the “Roman” fingers.



Jasper Clark gummed at the piece of New York Strip steak that his wife Eunice just broiled for him. Hot juices ran down his chin where they had squeezed out.

Jasper hated his false teeth and rued the day when he had to have the last of his precious originals yanked out, in favor of sculpted hunks of plastic. *I have trouble even keeping them in my mouth without gagging.*

At eighty-three, Eunice still had most of her original teeth. The product of parents who spared no orthodontic expense, they also forced her to forgo most sugary snacks growing up, where Jasper was that kid that went to bed every night with a big wad of bubble gum in his mouth. By the time Jasper was fourteen, he already had cavities in most of his permanent teeth, and dental hygiene in his family, consisted of a dentist visit, once every five years, to fill in the gaping crevasses that had formed since then.

It's tough being a lion, when you don't have any teeth. He thought, Lionesses laugh at you and the males of the pride are embarrassed for you, because they know that someday it will be them.

Jasper had a short period last year when he was a lion again though. He rubbed his fingers together and a couple of sparks formed between them, before fizzling out. Just eight months ago, there were real fireballs coming out of there. *I showed that asshole, Amos Hamrick how much his seventy-year-old letterman jacket was worth, he nodded and chuckled, heh, heh, scorched the damn thing right off his worthless hide, when he messed with me.*

But now Jasper was back to being ineffectual again. He rubbed his fingers together a little harder this time. Two tiny sparks formed and then a little flame appeared, wavering for a second, and then fizzling again, just like before.

Eunice has learned to show him a little more respect since then, but for all of her caring and doting, she still treats him like a helpless old man.

Hunh, Jasper thought shaking his head, if I'da known growing old was gonna be this much trouble, I wouldn't have even bothered.

Chapter 4 – One Door Opens & Another One Closes

The wind was stiff this morning. The plane rocked back and forth a little on the runway in time to the buffeting winds. The FAA examiner had a concerned look on his face, but otherwise waited patiently for the control tower to give them clearance.

Once they were cleared for takeoff, Stacy said a little prayer and then increased the throttle, letting the propellers' RPM's build a little before disengaging the brake. The airplane started rolling forward slowly, taxiing toward the main runway. Once in position, she throttled both engines almost to full. The roar of the twin 310 hp Continental Turbocharged engines drowned out any misgivings Stacy might have had about her ability to ace this test. She knew now, that the years of preparation, studying, and all of the cockpit instruction time, wouldn't let her down.

When the plane reached take off speed, she eased back on the stick confidently and felt the nose rise as the plane left the ground and started climbing into the clear sky above. When they reached 10,000 feet, she let the stick return to the center, allowing the plane to level off, then she reduced the throttle a little to conserve fuel. Stacy looked over at the FAA examiner and allowed an uneasy smile to crack the corner of her mouth, and for the first time today, he smiled back, signaling to her that she hadn't totally screwed up yet and that so far, everything was still ok. She'd heard that if at any point in time she were to do or not do something that would make her fail. The examiner would tell you and if they thought it was safe to proceed, they would let you finish the test, or let you go back to the airport of origin, your choice.

Part of the testing for a commercial pilot's license required her to prove that she could "fly blind" using only instruments to navigate by. That had turned out to be one of the easier parts compared to the over 250 hours of flight time required at \$150 an hour. Being a licensed pilot has always been dream of hers. When

she was a little girl, she used to marvel as she watched the crop duster planes working the fields over her parent's farm. She knew then that was what she wanted. She is so dedicated to her dream, that basically every spare penny that she has made for the last five years, has gone towards making this day happen.

The flight was going smoothly, the engines purred along like 350 lb. Bengal tigers in the open sky. Just then, the low fuel warning light activated, flashing and beeping annoyingly, telling Stacy that the plane was low on gas.

But I checked that all before we left! She thought frantically as she stabbed the button to stop the light from flashing. *It's OK Stacy, stay calm,* she told herself, as she reached for the switch to change over to the other tank.

The light on the warning button stopped blinking and then went out completely.

Whew that was a close one. She looked over at the examiner and shrugged, hoping he wouldn't hold it against her, and then focused on the instruments again.

The fuel gauges were both reading full. She poked at the obviously malfunctioning gauge with her finger, tapping it a few times just in case it was stuck. Suddenly the fuel warning light and buzzer went off again. This time both lights were flashing. She looked over at the examiner and felt a surge of panic course through her body. There was genuine look of fear in the man's eyes now, as he reached over and started poking the buttons too. The beeping was getting louder and now for some reason it was making her dizzy. She felt like she was going to faint.

...and then she woke up.

The alarm clock beside her bed was one of those kinds, that the longer it rang, the louder it got. From the looks of it, it had been going off for ten minutes now and was at full "blasting your brains out" volume.

Stacy rolled over, one hand holding her head and the other blindly hitting the snooze button. She rolled back into bed. The sun was shining through the side window and right into her eyes. She'd been up half the night studying for her final flight exam and now was feeling the worse for it.

It was Friday, and she didn't have to be at work until nine. Lacking any real motivation she closed her eyes again, knowing that she still had a little time to lay in bed before the real world forced her to get up.

Another day of slingin hash at the truck stop, Stacy thought anxiously, but soon, she smiled, hopefully, I'll be up soaring with the eagles.



Stone had just finished his shift and was walking down the diplomat's hall of the main building, when he heard what sounded like someone moaning in pain.

He backed up and the sound grew louder. It appeared to be coming from one of the many identical offices located in that section. He turned around and started back the way he came, listening for the sound again. He came to a door and leaned close, putting his ear right up against the cool wood.

The door must not have been latched too well, because when he leaned against it, it swung open slowly to reveal a man and a woman, standing with their backs to him.

The man was leaning over a desk, and his hands were tied down to the legs on one side, and his feet were shackled to the other set. He was naked, except for a black leather hood that obscured his identity. The woman had her back to him, and was also mostly naked, except for a skimpy leather bikini and red boots, that came up to her crotch. She was wearing some kind of harness around her groin area and appeared to be humping the man from behind.

Stone tried backing out of the office quietly, but his hand slipped on the knob and door swung away from him and banged against the wall loudly.

Both occupants turned to look at Stone.

It was then that he realized that the woman was his boss and the man looked to be one of the winos that hang out in front of the embassy every day, looking for handouts. The smell of rotten body odor and stale alcohol fumes, confirmed Stones suspicions.

“Rodriguez!” Special security attaché Victoria Smith yelled at him, “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

Stone had trouble keeping the smirk off his face as he answered innocently. “I thought I heard someone in pain.”

As if on cue, the drunk moaned again and tried to stand up. Victoria frowned, slapped him hard with her rider’s crop, and turned back to Stone.

Stone briefly allowed his eyes to travel once, up and down her mostly naked figure and the “get-up” she was wearing. She grimaced and brought her hand up in an attempt to cover up the foot long, purple ribbed, strap-on-schlong, that was currently bouncing back and forth at attention in front of her crotch.

“Get out!” her eyes bugged out, as she yelled so furiously that her nostrils flared to the size of marbles, “and you don’t come back either, I’m sick of you Rodriguez, YOU’RE FIRED!”

Stone was speechless. As he backed out of the room, he knew she was right. As a security consultant working for the consulate, he was employed “at will and pleasure,” meaning that even working for the government, he didn’t have any right to the grievance process, and that if she wanted to, she could get rid of him at any time, *for any reason*.

Chapter 5 – Crazy Train

Pepsi Haverty turned back and beckoned to her new friend as they stepped off the bus and started walking up the driveway to her house. Twelve-year-old Julie Senft had just moved here from Pittsburgh. Her family had just bought the old “Baird place,” down the road from where Pepsi lives.

Julie had already suffered a series of major culture shocks moving to rural West Virginia and really freaked out when she found out that first, they didn’t have any Wi-Fi in town, except for a twenty-five foot radius around the public library, and second, and most importantly, when she realized that there wasn’t a mall around for miles.

Julie’s used to things being a little more up to date, Pepsi thought, and she’s probably just disoriented.

Pepsi knew that the Appalachian foothills were a little behind on the trends of the outside world, but she really didn’t think there was that much difference between here and the city of Pittsburgh.

I mean it’s less than 200 miles away.

“Oh my god!” Julie turned and blurted out as they passed the mailbox. “What is up with those guys on the bus that mutter all the time, I mean *hellooo* no one can understand you, open your mouth when you talk, *pulease*.” She finished the sentence with a headshake, that would have made an R&B diva proud. “Why do they all talk so funny? I mean don’t they watch *TEE VEE?*”

Pepsi just shrugged, partially agreeing with Julie and at the same time thinking that most folks around here would think, that she was the one who sounded funny.

“So what do you do around here for fun?” She asked, but before Pepsi could answer, she went on again. “I mean I saw the town,” she rolled her eyes, “they practically *pull in the streets* after dark.”

Julie stopped and stared at her, as if waiting for a reply. Pepsi really didn't have an answer for Julie's many questions, so she just shrugged again and muttered. "I have a horse."

She'd only brought Julie home with her today, because she pitied the new girl and wanted to help her feel at home in a town full of strangers. The whole time that they were walking though, Julie kept looking at her phone. Every now and then, she would mutter to herself and tap the screen a couple of dozen times and then focus on the real world again.

"A horse hunh? I never saw a horse up close." She muttered, barely looking up from her phone. "They don't have those in the big city." Pepsi had a phone too, but she was only allowed to use it with her parent's permission.

They dropped their book bags off at the picnic table and continued walking out to the stable. Snowball was out in the pasture, but came running up as soon as he heard them approach.

"Oh My God! He's beautiful!" Julie shoved her phone down into her pocket and gaped wide-eyed at the white horse. "I never knew they were so big."

Pepsi grabbed a handful of oats and fed them to him. When the food was gone, he stomped his feet and whinnied.

Suddenly Julie was acting like Pepsi was the coolest kid on the block. "You are sooo lucky, I wish I had a horse." She looked around at the lean-to-barn, "who did you have to kill to get one? I mean, this is like totally cool."

Pepsi cut a slice of some windfall apples that they kept for treats and handed it to Julie.

The city girl looked scared at first, but then took a piece gingerly and walked up to the edge of the fence. When the horse came closer, she turned away cringing, "oh my god, oh my god, he's gonna eat me!"

Pepsi turned her around, guided her hand to the fence, and Snowball took it from her hand gently, while Julie cowered in fear.

Suddenly Pepsi felt something bite the side of her neck. “Owww, that hurts,” She cried out slapping at the pain, at the same time that Julie did. The two of them stood looking at each other, rubbing the sore spots.

Just then, Snowball went nuts and charged the fence, snapping in the direction of Julie and making a low growling sound that she’d never heard before.

“SNOWBALL NO!” she yelled, with as much authority as a twelve-year-old little girl could command.

“What the hell is wrong with that nag?” Julie snapped, rubbing her elbow as she got up off the ground.

“Nag?” Pepsi felt the anger rise, as Julie insulted her beautiful horse, “look who’s talking, little miss, me so fricken cool, big city girl.” She blurted out but then put her hand over her mouth as soon as she said it, shocked that she would have ever been so rude.

Julie had a look of horror on her face too and appeared to be winding up for another tirade, but instead replied timidly, “actually I’m really not that cool, where I come from they think I’m a dork, because I still play with dolls.” She shrugged and kicked the ground with her sneaker.

Now it was Pepsi’s turn to look horrified, as her new friend continued to spill her guts.

She grabbed a hank of her hair, “and this hair color, it isn’t even real and neither are these,” she said holding her hands up to her chest, “it’s a padded bra, I’m like totally flat-chested.”

Pepsi looked dubiously at the unusual shade of Julie’s blue/pink locks and at the strange gesture that her new friend was making. She felt a big “*well duh*” trying desperately to escape, but she just kept her mouth shut instead.

This is really uncomfortable, she thought.

Snowball was now all the way at the other end of the pasture. He was running around in circles and biting at the air, all the while looking back at the two girls, and growling viciously, like they were in mortal danger or something. Pepsi never told anyone about Snowball and the secret of his wings, *that she may or may not have imagined last summer*, along with the dreams *or reality*, of flying across the countryside on his back. It all seemed like a farfetched fantasy now, because ever since last fall, she has only seen him as a regular white horse.

He charged the fence again and looked at her wildly as if trying to scare her off. She took this as a hint and turned a somewhat shaken Julie towards the house. As she looked back over her shoulder again, she thought that just for a second, she saw a huge flash of white appear at the horse's sides, as he did a complete flip in the air, in order to get at whatever was tormenting him.

Noooo way...



Greg Wagner lives with his wife Roberta and their three dogs Esme, Abby, and Jackie, on the side of Wagner Mountain (actually more like a big hill) in Maysel, West Virginia.

In between his many part-time jobs and honey-do lists, Greg manages to find time to spin yarns of wonder and amazement. In whatever spare time is left over, Greg enjoys making glass beads (www.randgswv.com), reading, riding motorcycles, splitting firewood, and playing music.

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