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It was hot in the old wooden garage. Wet with sweat, he had to get out from under the vehicle and move the large, dirty fan that he'd had for twenty years. He was amazed the thing still worked.

Montana. Just the thought of the cool mountains and cooler breezes kept him motivated enough to crawl back under the motor home. Installing new U-joints had busted the skin on his hands wide open. The grease and dirt in the cuts and scrapes burned like Texas fire ants. The old man had practiced several dance steps, trying to rid himself of the ants that infested the garage. Since he hardly used the old building except for junk, he'd made the mistake of lying on the floor to check the motor home's undercarriage. The ants had him up and hopping, tearing off his shirt. The war against the insects took a week and he finally won by driving all the way into town and buying a plastic bottle of ant killer at the feed store. He'd added a six-pack of long-necked Lone Star beer to his purchase and drank it as he watched the powder slay the enemy. He added an extra day to the war just to let the hot, west Texas wind blow stale air out of the garage. The breeze did an even better job of clearing his head; he wasn't used to any kind of alcohol. Before going back to work with the fan and a broom he'd decided to put the place in some kind of order. He found things that had been missing for years and got more than a few lumps from stuff falling on him. The old wooden playpen that fell from the rafters banged him up and the metal beach pail and

shovel inside the playpen opened a bad cut to his head. The bike had come down at the same time as the playpen. Limping badly, he moved the motor home completely out of the building and continued the cleanup.

One of the first things he found was his old bayonet from Korea. He wanted to find a rifle in the junk. His fanciful thought was, *so I could fix the bayonet on it and kill the fuckin' garage*. Instead, he started to make piles of everything. The stuffed animals were the worst; ripped and torn, they bled dirty stuffing everywhere. Just moving them to the burn heap made him sneeze all the rest of the day.

He piled the good stuff that he wanted to keep on the covered wooden porch up at the house. He wondered what pile he should put the never-used lawn mower on. The yard in front of the old house had never been cut, mainly because he'd never been able to grow any grass. All he got when he tried were the most beautiful weeds he'd ever seen. The mesquite tree had grown very nicely on its own. The garage cleaning took two days because he kept going back to the burn pile and moving items to the porch. He figured the bonfire could be seen all the way to El Paso. It was still smoldering the next morning.

He felt wonderful, backing the motor home into the now clean garage. He'd bought it on a whim. It had been used to transport drugs, seized, and up for auction. He'd gone to the auction just for something to do, bid on the RV and was surprised that his was the only offer. He had the time of his life driving the thing home. The forty-mile-an-hour breeze had him wandering all over the interstate, like some of the drunk drivers he'd pulled over. The passing eighteen-wheelers scared him and by the time he managed to get home he was shocked that he hadn't even scratched the paint. He was sure he'd bounced off at least two of the semis, but from the airhorns blowing and the truckers throwing him the finger

he'd figured they got their licks in, too. He'd let the thing sit there until he retired, still not sure if he was brave enough to try taking it anywhere.

After a year of retirement he still hadn't figured out what he was going to do with himself. Relaxed, letting Carmen's dinner settle, he was reading when she turned on the TV. Most of the time he ignored the "noise box," but for some reason the program about Montana caught his imagination. It got him fired up enough to start planning a trip. It also led to another fight with Carmen. He wanted her to go with him but she wasn't going unless he married her. *Thirty fuckin' years I've been coming around and hell, twenty of those years we've lived together, and she still isn't satisfied.*

Lindy Lou kicked his ass every chance she got. He never had a chance against his daughter. Then Carmen got her licks in. As soon as Lindy Lou left for college, Carmen moved out and got a place of her own. He was still scratching his head over that. When she came for a visit, his own daughter stayed at Carmen's and just to piss him off the ladies would speak Spanish, even at the dinner table. She didn't even come by the house on her last visit home. He wouldn't have known Lindy Lou was in town if he hadn't seen her convertible at the grocery store.

The ladies had decided he was going to give up on the Montana trip. He had news for them: Carmen would be going with him. He already had a bottle of her favorite wine. Three glasses of that and she was game for anything. He had it all planned out. Get her a little drunk, then a little lovemaking in the motor home. *Hell, when she wakes up we'll be halfway to Montana.*

First he had to get the thing running right. He'd bought enough cleaning supplies for the interior. Even if he lived to be ninety and cleaned the home-on-wheels every day, there'd be enough left over for another ten years.

Wesley John Hardin, sixty-two, had been a Texas Ranger. Kicked out right in his prime, he was still pissed about being forced to retire. His daughter had said that he acted like a spoiled brat when he refused to go to his own retirement. He later claimed he was fishing and forgot all about it. He'd never been fishing in his life. He was going to try in Montana, though. He had a rack screwed to the wall in the motor home with six rods and reels. He figured he'd practice up there.

He scratched his head, still not accustomed to working without a hat on. He'd ruined two Stetsons by crawling around under the motor home. Grease and oil stained them and he'd finally decided not to wear them under there. He'd had one of the Stetsons since way back when he'd worked the stockyards in El Paso. In those days, when he was eighteen and had money to burn, he'd bought it right out of the display window. It was during that time that his lady had called him Hardon Hardin. He grinned, recalling her—and the other ladies. *Hell, Lulu even sent me a letter when I was in Korea.*

The next mail call had brought him a letter about his dad being killed on an oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico. They'd never recovered his body. One of the few memories Hardin had about his old man was how he'd named him after the Texas badman, John Wesley. "So you'd grow up with a set of balls." He was with the Rangers for two years before he checked and discovered his dad had gotten his first two names backward. He'd never known his mother and had given up wondering what had happened to her. Once, when he'd asked his dad, the old man choked on his beer, spit on the floor and said, "Dallas." To this day he still wasn't sure if that was her name, or where she was from, or where she'd gone.

He applied for the Rangers at the same time he applied

for the Texas National Guard. The recruiter did such an excellent job he found himself in the infantry, on his way to a place called Korea. The closest he came to being a member of the National Guard was when he served with some of them on the line, fighting gooks. The second closest he came was when he and his outfit got pulled off the line and they were hit by a California National Guard truck. The driver had lost control on the icy roads and knocked him and some buddies into a ditch. Fortunately, the ditch was deep and full of snow. The same day the armistice was signed, he was asked if he'd like to attend officer candidate school. Already a buck sergeant, he was still thinking about what to do when mail call came. Since he never got mail he was more than a little surprised when he saw the letter, embossed with the seal of the state of Texas. He sat back against the wall of his foxhole and read it. It had taken two and a half years for the Rangers to hire him.

The last six months of his enlistment dragged. He was sure the Ranger position would be given to someone else. He'd never taken a leave and he took no time for himself when he was discharged. He reported to Austin and went from soldier to cop just as fast as he could raise his hand.

He was assigned to Troop A, in Houston. He met Tracy Ann because she had the parking space next to his at the apartment building where they both lived. A full-time college student, she was also a dispatcher for one of the ambulance services. The only reason she gave him the time of day was because, as she put it, "I just knew you were from West Texas."

Tracy Ann had grown up in the small town of Pecos and "WJ"—as everyone called him—thought the reason the pretty girl spoke to him at all was because she was homesick. She spoke to him even more when he kept fixing her car. The 1949 Mercury had a three-speed transmission that

got hung up between gears. WJ would crawl under the car, hammer softly on the linkage, and the gears would work for about a week.

WJ bought Tracy Ann a new car as a wedding present and it wasn't long before she presented him with Lindy Lou. In the high humidity of East Texas, their daughter was sick all the time but once they moved to West Texas Lindy Lou didn't even catch a cold. WJ didn't mind at all being back in West Texas. Six years working out of Houston and a four-year-old who was constantly sick had about done him in. WJ and Tracy Ann bought two full sections just outside of Valentine; they liked the name. When they drilled for water they laughed, hoping for oil, but they were very happy just for the water—and their healthy girl.

Tracy Ann was pregnant again when they went up to Pecos to visit her folks and share the good news. They'd stayed an extra day, just for a rodeo and the big dance that followed the riding events. A pain-maddened bull that had thrown his rider and come right through the fence and into the stands killed Tracy Ann, trampled her to death. WJ was smashed unconscious and his leg was broken. Three other folks in the stands were killed at the same time. The retired deputy sitting four rows over from WJ had killed the crazed bull but it had taken six shots from his Colt .45 to finally end it. Hardin buried Tracy Ann in Pecos, said goodbye to her family and took Lindy Lou home to Valentine.

WJ was still in a cast from his broken leg, wondering what in the world he was going to do with a five-year-old-girl. Carmen was a waitress at the cafe and the whole town of 150 people knew that she was illegal. He sat outside the cafe one night until she got off and started hobbling down the street. He had no choice about what he did; Lindy Lou came first. He told Carmen she had to come work for him or he was driving her back to the border that very night.

Carmen hadn't yet begun to pack on her fighting weight but she nearly managed to break his nose with just one punch. Once he got handcuffs on her and took her to his house, their argument settled down. Lindy Lou did the rest. The five-year-old took to Carmen like a bird to flight.

Carmen lived in the house for five years before they became lovers and he thought it might have been longer than that except he was laid up with another broken leg. She wanted to get married but WJ said he was too old for her. Carmen ended their battle as soon as Lindy Lou went off to college. He'd driven her down to Austin to help his daughter get settled and had come home expecting to find Carmen. Instead, he wondered what had happened to the house. Every window in the house was broken except the one in the front door made of stained glass. He broke that one himself after he saw the love note she'd left pinned to his pillow. It was very easy for him to read: Fuck You. Love Carmen.

When he realized how much he missed her, he began doing the things she'd wanted. He had electricity brought to the house, but that wasn't enough. He added indoor plumbing, but all that did was piss her off. He added a big dish satellite so she could get any station she wanted. Still, she wouldn't move back in. He threatened to have her deported. She stood on the front porch of the house she was renting and told him she'd kick his ass if he tried that. Finally, he gave up. By the end of two years he found himself spending more time at her place than his own.

Carmen blamed WJ for Lindy Lou joining the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms right out of college. She hadn't bothered to tell either of them. He hoped Lindy Lou never found out that he'd called in more than one favor so his daughter didn't find herself in harm's way. Lindy Lou had called and chewed him out because he hadn't told her

about his retirement ceremony and she'd missed it. Before she hung up she told him she was now a field agent and, "I'm engaged." He ignored the part about her engagement but listened intently as she described the thrill of taking down a whiskey still.

Sonofabitch. Without my influence the ATF has her out in the field. Shit. I wanted my daughter married and giving me some grandkids. He did exactly what Carmen told him to do: he made all the right noises, and—biting his tongue—made his eyes fill with tears of pride.

Dammit! I don't want Lindy Lou running around out in the field getting hurt. Shit, the ATF has plenty of male agents to do that. What in hell's wrong with women these days that they want to do everything a man does? I have to admit, though... some of them do it a lot better.

"Is he from Texas?" was the first thing he asked about her fiancé.

He harrumphed when she said, "Dad, there's forty-nine more states other than Texas."

He'd had this argument with her before. "There's plenty of good men," he'd say. He scratched his head, remembering the lawyer she'd been so much in love with. *Fucker was from Vermont. Hell, the guy visited once in January and couldn't stop sweating in the forty degree temperatures of West Texas.* He told his daughter about the changes he'd made for Carmen and that they just weren't working.

"Tell her you love her, dad. I gotta go. You'll like this guy, Dad. Love you. Bye."

As he hung up the phone he wondered what his daughter meant when she said to tell her you love her. *Why in hell would I be doing all these things for her if I didn't love her? Hell, it's as plain as the nose on her face.* He looked around the kitchen at all the new appliances he'd bought at Sears and asked himself, *What the hell else is it going to take?*