

Bernie's
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She opened the coin purse of her wallet worn thin. Seventy-five cents.

“God damn, you, Donnie. God damn you to hell.”

She closed the coin purse, then the wallet, and slipped it into an equally tired shoulder bag. She turned to the six stair-step children clustered around the Formica table, the top abused from age and children's elbows. “Mommy needs to get a job, and I need your help.”

“What do you want us to do?” the oldest asked, the girl – Lanny.

“You're all going to have to come with me because I can't leave you home alone. And this isn't a party we're going to, so you'll have to be extra good.” She gazed down the line. “Any of you have to go to the bathroom before we leave?”

One of the boys raised his hand, the third youngest – Emon.

“Lanny, take your brother.”

“I don't need no help.”

“All right, but don't you dawdle.”

The boy shoved off his chair. He went down the hall while she herded the others out the door. Outside she swept the youngest up into her arms as they walked through the dirt yard to a rusting Chevrolet. It had been a new car before she had married – a four-door, a practical gift from her father.

“Alan?” she asked.

“Yeth?”

“You all right with this?”

“Whath thith?”

“Mommy getting a job.”

“I gueth.”

“You're going to have to sit next to Lanny, and you're going to have to do everything she says.”

“Yeth.”

She opened the front passenger door and slid the boy into the center of the seat. Lanny got in beside him.

She opened a back passenger door and three boys scrambled in, ages seven, six, and four. She raised a finger, and their eyes turned to her. “No slapping. No pinching. None of this ‘he did it to me first.’ I didn't raise you to be little wolves.”

The fourth squeezed in.

She closed the door and went around to the driver's side. There a brindle mongrel waited, whipping his tail from side to side. She patted his head. “Teddy, you can't come this time. You go over under the trees, all right?”

The tail continued whipping and the eyes remained bright, expectant.

“No, Teddy,” she said and pointed off.

The dog's eyes saddened, and his ears and tail drooped. He shambled off as she slipped in behind the steering wheel.

“Why can’t Teddy come?” a voice asked from the back.

“It would be too hot for him.”

“Can we roll down the windows?”

“Yes, you can roll down the windows.”

She twisted the ignition key, and the little six came to life, stuttering. When the engine settled down to a steady rumble, she pushed the column shifter into reverse and backed the car around. She shifted again, into low, and bucked the car across the rutted drive out to the county road where she turned east, toward Manhattan.

“Where’s Daddy?” a voice asked from the back.

She glanced up at the reflections in the rearview mirror.

“Gone.”

“For good?”

“Yes. I think so.”

“Good. I didn’t like him. He hit me.”

“He hit all of us.”

“Why’d he do that?”

“I don’t know.”

A new voice came from the back. “Mommy, why do you need a job?”

“Because we need money for food and rent.”

“I thought that’s what Daddy was for.”

“He’s not going to help us anymore.”

“Oh. . . . Can I get a job?”

“Nathan, I’m afraid you’re too little.”

Shoot for the top her father had always told her. In Manhattan, that was the Wareham Hotel, so she guided the Chevrolet up Blumont Hill and down the other side, through the college district and Aggieville before she cut over to Poyntz, the main business street. She nudged the car into a parking place across from the hotel and the county courthouse.

She got out and leaned back in the open window. “When I come out, I don’t want to hear one complaint. Not one, do you understand? This is important. You listen to Lanny. She’s in charge.”

She brushed the wrinkles from the one dress she owned as she crossed the street. She glanced at the luster on her leather shoes, adjusted her bag on her shoulder, brushed back her hair, and went on inside, through the oversized glass doors that were, with the arched and rococo overhang, the mark of the Wareham.

“Elaine Mars,” she said to the man at the desk. “Who do I see about getting a job?”

He snapped his fingers at the maitre d’, and the tuxedoed gentleman responded. He swept across the lobby.

“Oscar Brown,” the man said. “May I help you?”

Such attention. For a moment Elaine lost control of her voice, but managed to generate an “I-need-a-job-I-can-wait-tables.”

The maitre d’ stepped back. He appraised the woman. “I’m sorry, we only use men on our wait staff.”

“I can bus tables.”

“Only men.”

“I can cook. I have six children.”

“I doubt you cook the kind of cuisine we serve.”

“Wash dishes?”

“No openings.”

“Housekeeping? I can make beds, clean rooms.”

“Full up. Have you tried the college?”

“I’ve heard you pay better.”

“I’m sure we do. If you would be willing to leave your telephone number?”

“I don’t have a telephone.”

“Then I am indeed sorry.”

She left and went across the street to Baker’s Department Store. She struck out there, and at the Murphy Five & Dime, the office supply store, the flower shop, and the newspaper office. Business offices were out of the question for she had never learned to type. But a woman reporter at the newspaper, walking out the door with her, offered a glimmer of hope.

“I’ve got kids of my own,” the reporter said. “You know the Root Beer Barrel Drive-In on Eighteen, out by the airport? Somebody’s bought it, added onto it, and put in gas pumps. It’s a truck stop now and restaurant. They may not be all hired up yet.”

Elaine wanted to touch the woman, to squeeze her hand, say thank you. Instead she teared up.

“Hard day, huh?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll say a prayer for you.”

The walk back to the car, though only four blocks, seemed to be the longest in the world. She knew her children would be hungry, but with only seventy-five cents . . . and she couldn’t afford to drive out to Keats and make lunch for them, then back into town and out onto Eighteen

. . .

In the car came that voice from the backseat. “I gotta pee.”

“Nathan, can you hold it for five minutes more?”

“I can try.”

Elaine herded the car into the Standard station, to a gas pump. A mechanic trotted out, wiping his hands on a shop rag.

“A quarter’s worth. And can we use your restroom?” she asked.

He twisted the gas cap off the filler tube. “Right around the end there. You’ll find it.”

Off Elaine marched, Alan in her arms, the rest strung out like a gaggle of goslings.

She went into the “Women’s” with Alan. While Elaine supervised him, she splashed her face with water, then dried herself on the towel that hung from the towel machine. Alan done, she pushed him out and hauled in the next, and so it went.

“You have no idea how hard it is being the mother of six when they all have to go to the bathroom,” she said when she placed a quarter in the mechanic’s grease-stained hand.

“Lady, that’s why God invented gas stations. You sure you can afford that half-gallon of gas?”

“Do I have a choice? I got to get out to the Root Beer Barrel and get me a job.”

“It’s Bernie’s now.”

“What?”

“The place. It’s called Bernie’s now. If you get on there, you can get gas there at a discount.”

She parked in front of the plate glass window on which someone had painted the outline of a semi and, on the side of the trailer, “Bernie’s.” Beneath the name, “Open 24 Hours.”

“No monkey business while I’m inside,” she said to the boys in the backseat. “See that window? I’ll be able to see you from inside.”

Her instruction delivered, Elaine got out of the car. Once more she brushed the wrinkles from her dress and hurried inside, the air pungent with the aromas of barbecue, strong coffee and sweet pie. Was it cherry? “I need a job,” she said to the woman washing the counter.

The woman, older than Elaine, in a white uniform dress with lambchop sleeves, set her cleaning rag aside. She rescued a cigarette from the lip of an ashtray and took a drag as she eyed the person in front of her. Without so much as a hello, she called over her shoulder, “Bernie!”

“Yup?” came a whiskey tenor voice from the kitchen.

“Girl out here wants a job.”

“Tell her to keep her panties on.”

The woman gestured to a stool, and Elaine sat down.

“Coffee?”

“I don’t think so. Water would be all right.”

The woman glanced out the window at the car as she scooped a glass into an ice bucket under the counter. She finished by filling the glass with water from a metal pitcher and set the glass before Elaine. “Those your kids out there?”

“Yes.”

“That why you need a job?”

“Uh-huh.”

“How many?”

“Six.”

“Nice.” She flicked ash from her cigarette into the ashtray. “I got three myself. One married and away, one in the Army in Germany, one be a senior in high school come fall. They do grow up fast.” She sucked again on her cigarette. “So let me guess, you’re on your own.”

Elaine did not answer.

A stout woman in a grease- and food-stained dress and armed with a scrubbing block hustled in through the swinging doors that separated the diner from the kitchen. She wore a K-State baseball cap at a rakish angle over her close-cropped gray hair. “Megs,” she asked, “this the girl?”

Elaine stood before the waitress could answer. She held tight to her bag as she said, “I’m Elaine Mars, and I can do anything that needs doing around a diner.”

“Uh-huh. Got any experience?”

“I’ve cooked and cleaned for six kids and a husband.”

Megs Randall, the waitress, turned to move away, to take an order from a trucker at the end of the counter. She whispered to Bernie as she went past, “Husband’s left her.”

Bernie's eyebrows knit together, shaping up a furrow between them. "Wash dishes?" she asked.

"Anything."

"Got one job open, honey. Dishwasher on the graveyard shift."

"Are you offering it to me?"

"Only if you can start tonight."

The widest smile that would warm even a banker's heart brought new life to Elaine's face. "I'll take it," she said. "What time should I be here?"

As promised, Elaine Mars came through the door of Bernie's Truck Stop & Diner at eleven-thirty. She wore jeans, a checked shirt, and had her auburn hair tied back in a ponytail.

Bernie, sucking on a cup of coffee at a corner table, waved her over. "Sit and let's talk," she said. "You get something to eat before you came in?"

"Supper with the kids."

"That's, what, six hours ago?"

As Elaine sat down, Bernie let out a whistle that had the volume of Gabriel's trumpet. In response, a man's face appeared above the swinging doors.

"Robert," she said, "scrambled eggs and sausage here, Texas toast. . . . You want coffee with that, honey?"

"Milk, but I really don't have any money –"

Bernie turned again to her cook. "Milk with that."

He waved and disappeared.

Bernie leaned back in her chair. "Honey, the work here's hard and the pay's poor – sixty-five cents an hour. I'll stake you to three meals a shift as long as you keep them cheap."

"I don't eat much."

"I can see that. You're on the skinny side. Skinny employees is no recommendation for a diner, so I want to see you get some meat on those bones."

"Mind if I ask a question?"

"Shoot."

"Do I really call you Bernie?"

"It's Bernice Dawson, but only my mother ever called me Bernice."

Robert-the-cook, balding beneath his paper cap tipped forward, clomped out from the kitchen. He dropped a plate of scrambled eggs and sausage, and eating utensils rolled in a paper napkin in front of Elaine. "Toast be up in a minute," he said and left before she could get out a thank you.

Bernie motioned for her to eat. "That's about the most you're gonna hear from Robert. He comes off as a mean sonuvabitch, but if he likes you . . ." She gave a thumbs-up.

Elaine tried the eggs. "This is good," she said, pointing her fork at her plate.

"Old Robert does things with herbs I'd never think of. . . . Shame he's gotten himself thrown out of every restaurant from Wamego to Junction City."

Elaine cut a bite of sausage. "Is it all right to ask why?"

"You'd find out sometime. He tends to pop off to management and at the worst times."

“You?”

Bernie laughed. “Some diner people keep a pistol under the cash register. I keep a Little League baseball bat. Robert popped off to me one night, so I laid him out. He’s never argued since.”

The cook reappeared. He dropped a saucer of buttered toast on the table and left.

“Robert! Milk for the lady.”

“Right.”

Elaine bit into the toast.

“Honey, when you get back in the kitchen,” Bernie said, “you’re gonna find a pile of dishes waiting for you. My afternoon dishwasher goes off at eight, so from eight to midnight, the dishes accumulate. You get that mountain done, then you clean the kitchen, and I mean you scrub it, everything except the grill and the ovens. That’s Robert’s, and you don’t mess with his area. Morning cook comes in at six – that’s Earlene Hobbs – and I’ll tell you now, everything had better be right or she’s gonna fan your ears. Cleanliness and order isn’t next to godliness. For Earlene, it is godliness.”

The cook appeared a third time. Before he could drop the glass, Bernie swiped it from his hand. “You are a gentleman, aren’t you, Robert?” she said.

“I guess.”

“This is Elaine Mars, your dishwasher.”

“Right. You tell her to leave my grill alone?”

“That I did.”

“You tell her I don’t like talk?”

“Think she figured that out.”

“Right.”

Bernie waved toward the kitchen, and Robert-the-cook left. She sipped her coffee. After she set her cup aside, she asked, “You dry your dishes?”

Elaine, her mouth full of scramble egg, nodded.

“We don’t here. Your rinse water, I want that scalding hot. China comes out of that, they’ll dry themselves in a minute if you don’t pack them tight. Glasses, though, I want you to hand-dry them, I mean polish them. Knives, forks, spoons, you’ll have to dry them, too.”

“Pots and pans?”

“Got a separate sink for those. You see Robert sling something your way, you quit whatever you’re doing, rake it out, and wash it right then. He may not need that pan for a couple hours, but you never make him wait. You stay ahead of him, and he’s a happy man. You ready to go in there?”

Elaine gulped down her milk, set the glass aside, and levered herself out of her chair.

“Bring those with you,” Bernie said, gesturing at the dishes.

Elaine stacked them. She followed along, pausing before the swinging doors, timing them, then shot through before they could whump her. She stepped into the third ring of hell, the kitchen horribly hot, but the smell was not of scorched flesh but of bread. Robert-the-cook opened one of his ovens as Elaine went by. He took from it a sheet on which six loaves of bread rested in their pans, the loaves done, their golden top crusts mounded high. He set the sheet aside, picked up a second sheet with six bread pans on it, and shoved it in the oven.

Bernie, at the sink, had the hot water running by the time Elaine caught up, the steam roiling up, giving the impression the stainless steel sink was a witch's cauldron.

"Dish detergent and your cleaning supplies are on the shelf there," Bernie said, motioning to the side. She picked up a rubber scraper as wide as a plate. "Use this to get all the slop off. One swipe across a plate over the garbage can. Can gets full, you take it out back, and bring in another."

She tossed the scraper aside and pulled over a blue plastic tub. "Your dry dishes you stack in tubs like this. Glasses, cups, saucers, dessert plates, and silverware you carry out to the diner. Tibby will show you where she wants them. She's my graveyard waitress." Bernie waved toward the grill and the prep table. "Plates and bowls go on the counter over there for Robert. Put the pots and pans there, too. He'll stow them tonight until you figure out where he wants them. Starting tomorrow night, you put them away. Questions?"

Elaine swiped her sleeve at the sweat beading out on her forehead. "Cleaning the kitchen?"

"You work your way through that mountain of dishes, Robert will tell you what to do. Listen close and memorize. He won't tell you anything a second time. 'Nuther question?"

"Drying towels?"

"Drawer behind you. Anything else?"

"Guess not."

"Good. Tomorrow night, honey, wear a tee-shirt. It's too damn hot in here for long sleeves." Bernie held out a pair of rubber gloves with shanks long enough to reach to a person's elbows. "You wear these or you'll boil your hands. And your hair."

"What about my hair?"

"Health regs. You wear a hair net or a cap."

"I don't have a hair net."

Bernie handed over her K-State ball cap. "Then you wear this. I got another at home."

Elaine put the cap on and the gloves. She reached for the bottle of dish detergent.

"You all have a good time," Bernie said and walked away. "See you tomorrow night."

Elaine watched her while she shot some soap in the water. Suds mounded up, and she swung the faucet over the rinse sink, to let the hot water run there. Scraper, dirty dishes, garbage can . . . from the corner of her eye Elaine saw Bernie leaning into Robert, Robert brushing melted butter over the crusts of the bread that had come from the oven. *What's she telling him? She's pointing at me.*

A plate twisted from her hand. She grabbed for it, didn't catch it, instead knocked it further away, and it fell to the concrete floor . . . the sound like unemployment, chunks of china skittering . . .

Bernie hustled back. She scooped up the largest piece and held it in front of Elaine, her face frozen in horror. "I'll give you this one, sweets. Next one, and any after that, comes out of your pay."

She tossed the evidence of carelessness in the garbage can and left by way of the swinging doors.

Elaine went down on her knees. She gathered the big pieces and put them in the trash, leaving the bits and slivers to be swept up later. Water splashing on the floor interrupted, hot-hot water boiling over the rim of the rinse sink.

Elaine bent over the garbage can, stripping gobs of dough from a dough hook. Robert-the-cook, drying his hands on his apron, kicked her foot.

“Break time,” he said and thumbed toward the diner.

Elaine tossed the hook in the wash water. She shed a glove. “What time is it?”

“Four-oh-two.”

She pulled off her other glove, threw it aside, and swept back a sweat-soaked strand of hair. “I’m dead, Robert.”

“Then get outta my kitchen before you stink.”

“You’re real sweetness, know that?” She swiped her hands through the wash water and, as she slouched out of the kitchen, dried them on a dish towel. Elaine pushed through the swinging doors to see Tibby Watson sitting at a table, smoking, waving to her.

“You gonna make it through the night?” Tibby asked.

Elaine slumped into a chair. “I thought looking after six kids was hard work, with all the cooking, cleaning, and laundry. And bath time.”

“Two hours, you can go home.”

A trucker at the counter, stirring a stream of sugar into his coffee, glanced in the direction of the table. “Who’s the new kid, Tibby?”

“Elaine Mars.” The graveyard waitress blew a lungful of smoke toward a ceiling fan lazily stirring the air. “Elaine, the hunk there is Eddie Wilson. Drives for Humphrey. Guy at the pinball machine is J.D. Castro, ’nuther Humphrey driver. Whatcha hauling, Eddie?”

“Blue jeans from a sewing factory in Tennessee to California.”

“J.D., too?”

“Drums of grease.”

“We see ’em every couple weeks.”

“You married, Elaine?” Wilson asked.

“Kinda.”

“Too bad. If you were single, I might sweet talk ya into ridin’ along with J.D. He’s single.”

Castro fired a new ball into the game. He watched the ball ping off pins and bumpers and catch a chute that carried it toward a star burst and big points, but a spinner whipped the ball away. Castro slammed the flat of his hand against the machine.

Wilson sampled his coffee. He grimaced and poured another stream of sugar in.

“You making syrup there, Eddie?” Tibby asked.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

Robert-the-cook appeared beside the table. He dropped a platter with a hamburger and hash fries on it in front of Elaine. “Bernie says you’re supposed to eat. You want milk with that, you know where it is. You get it yourself.”

He walked away to a far table and pulled a paperback and a pouch of raisins from his back pocket before he threw a leg across a chair. Robert-the-cook read and popped raisins.

The bell over the front door jingled. All ignored it if they heard it. A man in tans and a cowboy hat, a star pinned above his breast pocket, and a pistol on his hip came in. “Mornin’,

all,” he said and went behind the counter. There the deputy sheriff helped himself to a heavy china mug. He filled it from the Bruns machine, all the while glancing in the mirror at the images of Tibby and Elaine.

“Somebody new here, Aunt Tib?” he asked.

The waitress took another drag on her cigarette. “My nephew,” she said to Elaine.

The deputy grabbed up a fresh cinnamon roll before he came over. “Bailey Devlon,” he said as he sat down. He shoved his hat onto the back of his head revealing a scar just below his hairline.

Tibby aimed the glowing end of her cigarette at the deputy’s hat. “You ever take that off?”

“Only when I go to bed.” Bailey winked at Elaine working on her burger.

“Elaine Mars,” Tibby said. “She’s as married as you are. Six kids.”

“I got three and a fourth on the way,” Bailey said between bites.

Tibby stubbed out her cigarette. “My nephew is a good person to know. He’ll tote your groceries, fix a sick car. Last winter – now you might think this is bragging, but this is true – Bailey got Wally Smith, the road grader operator up by Leonardville, to plow a trail through the drifts to the Morton ranch, and he hauled the old man to the hospital with lights and sirens. Old Horace got himself busted up by his bull.”

Bailey blew across his coffee, cooling it. “Hey, I just look after the people who elect my boss.” To Elaine, he asked, “You vote Republican, ma’am?”

“Last time, yes.”

“You won’t go wrong there.”

Robert-the-cook appeared at Elaine’s elbow, book in hand. “Bailey,” he said.

The deputy raised his coffee mug in a salute.

Robert slapped his book against the side of the table. “Mars,” he said, “break’s over. Let’s get at it.”

Elaine picked up her platter and silverware as she stood, and Tibby put her cup and saucer on the platter. “Good to meet you, Deputy . . .”

“Bailey. Bailey Devlon.”

She gave him a tentative smile as she turned away. Again she timed the swing of the doors and shot through to the kitchen. When she arrived at the sink, there stood Robert-the-cook wagging his book at the garbage can.

“Best get that outside and get a fresh one in here,” he said. Message delivered, he went to the cooler.

Elaine grasped the can’s handles. She jerked up, and the can came up and as quickly went down. It hit the floor so hard globs of gravy splashed up onto Elaine’s face and shirt.

“Problem?” Robert asked when he came by with a box of bacon.

She raked the back of her hand at the gravy on his cheek. “This is too heavy.”

“You shouldn’tna filled it so full.”

“Nobody told me. Will you help me?”

“Not my job. If you can’t lift it, drag it.” He plunged a butcher knife into the top of the box and sawed it open.

Elaine eyed the can. She wrapped the fingers of both hands around one handle and lifted

and pulled, and the can scraped a couple inches on the edge of its bottom. . . . Lift/pull, life/pull, she scrunched backwards toward the screen door that led to the world outside, the world behind the diner, the garbage can following. Elaine felt her butt against the screen and heard the hinges squall as she backed through the doorway, and her heel caught on the doorjamb, the can in mid-slide. Elaine spilled over backwards. And the can came with her – tipping, falling, its contents flooding out into her lap.

“Robert!”

* * *

Elaine hunched over her kitchen table, counting her week’s pay into envelopes – rent, groceries, electric, school supplies, kids’ clothes, gas, doctor, Christmas. Nothing went into the Christmas envelope or the kids’ clothes envelope, and precious little into the doctor’s. If the kids stayed healthy through the fall, maybe she could chip away at it.

An exhausted teenager, her hair in pin curls and an algebra book in the crook of her arm, pushed through the outside door. “Sorry to be late, Missus Mars,” she said, “but Mom and Dad just got home. I couldn’t leave my little brother.”

“That’s all right. The kids have been asleep.” Elaine scooped the envelopes into an oatmeal box. She glanced at the clock above the kitchen sink as she tucked the box away on the top shelf of her cupboard. “I’ve still got a half an hour. I should be able to make it to work on time.”

“Is it all right if I study in the kitchen? If I have the light on in the front room, it might wake them.”

“That’s fine.”

The girl – Debbie Gibbs – opened her book as she sat down. Elaine had worked a deal with her to be with the children from eleven at night to six-thirty in the morning, a no-strain babysitting job because Elaine’s children were asleep. “You can sleep on the couch,” she had said. “It’s just important that you be here.” . . . A dollar a night, almost two hours of her pay.

Elaine peered in the big room where the children slept in three beds. The smallest three boys had kicked off their sheet, so she pulled it up, taking time to touch each one on the cheek before she left.

Back in the kitchen, she gathered up her wallet and keys from the counter and went outside to the car. Gracie she called it. Faithful, but it had been getting harder to start, and the old girl’s brakes squealed. One of the truckers said that meant the car needed new brake pads and maybe the drums turned. It was an expense Elaine didn’t need.

She pumped on the gas pedal before she keyed the ignition. “Come on now, come on,” Elaine said as she turned the key. The starter ground away, and she held the key in and pumped more on the gas pedal, and the cylinders fired.

The drive in from Keats to Manhattan went by without event – no one on the road at that hour, although a pair of glistening eyes watched from the grass in the ditch as she guided Gracie around a bend. A cat out hunting, Elaine figured. She jogged south on Seventeenth Street to Highway Eighteen and headed west out of town.

As she rounded Sunset Hill, she saw the beacon at the airport, turning, rotating . . . a

nightly presence, always there. Comforting.

A shot and Gracie's front end shook with the violence of a mad machine flinging parts of itself away. Elaine, her eyes as large as dinner plates, clung to the steering wheel. She rode the brake pedal, the brakes howling, and, when Gracie had slowed enough, Elaine nudged the car off, onto the shoulder, the shaking slowing to a thumping bounce on the right.

She turned the engine off, but left the headlights on. Her fingers ached from holding so tight to the steering wheel, real white knuckles. She massaged them as she forced herself out of the car. Whatever it was . . . whatever it was, Elaine discovered when she came around front, was a flat tire. The right front.

"Gracie, how could you? I don't have time for this," she said and kicked at the gravel. Change the tire or walk the mile to Bernie's, which would be faster? She couldn't afford to be late.

Well . . .

Elaine went back to the driver's door. She pulled the ignition key and trudged back to the trunk. She opened it, not quite as dark as a coal mine, and felt around for the tire iron, the jack, and the spare. The spare, something about it didn't feel right. Elaine pushed on it, and the tire gave, gave too much. Had it gone flat? She wanted to cry, wanted to beat on Gracie with the tire iron, wanted to . . .

Headlights came around Sunset, and a red light flashing. The car – a sheriff's cruiser – slowed and pulled over onto the shoulder, and rolled to a stop behind Gracie.

"Trouble?" a voice asked.

Elaine shaded her eyes from the glare of the headlights. "That you, Bailey?"

"Mighty Mouse here to save the world."

"Tire blew out, and my spare's flat."

The deputy, wearing his ever-present cowboy hat, came forward into the lights. "Makes you want to spit, doesn't it? We can put my spare on. Oh hell, we can't do that. Ford has a different lug bolt pattern than Chevy."

"What am I going to do?"

"Ride with me, I guess. I'll drop you at the truck stop, but that's still gonna leave you with a car with two dead tires. Tell you what, get the jack out."

"Is this gonna make me late?"

"Hey, I got pull with management. Tibby's my aunt, remember?"

Bailey grubbed a couple rocks out of the ditch and blocked the three good wheels. When Elaine brought him the jack and tire iron, he rammed the jack under the frame and ran it up enough to begin to lift the right front corner of the car. Bailey wrenched the wheelcover off, and he broke the five lug nuts free, each in turn, and spun them off.

"I crew for a buddy who drives stocks on the dirt track up at Clay," Bailey said as he ratched the jack up. "Nobody faster at changing a tire than me."

He pulled the flat off and threw it in the backseat of his cruiser. In the light from the dome, he gazed at the tire, ran his hand over the tread. "Jeez, Elaine, this is a skin. Your others this bald?"

"I don't know. I never look."

Bailey rescued his flashlight from the front seat. He marched around Gracie, shining a

beam on the tread of each of the remaining tires. He shook his head as he came back around. He turned off the car's headlights, rolled up the driver's window, and waved Elaine toward the passenger seat of his cruiser.

Inside, Bailey noted the time of his stop on a log sheet.

Elaine twisted around. "Why's your car smell so bad?"

"A drunk threw up his guts in the backseat last night. Hosed it out as best I could."

"You should get one of those pine trees to hang on your mirror. We have some by the cash register."

"I was thinking about that." He made a couple more notes. "Here's what I can do. In the morning, I can take you home. We'll drop that baldy at the Mobile station. Maybe Ernie can fix it."

"Bailey, I don't have any money for that."

"Well, sometimes Ernie does favors. Anyway, I'll pick up the tire when I come on tomorrow night, drive you to your car, put the tire on, and you're back in business until the next one busts."

"Maybe it won't."

"We do live on hope, don't we?" Bailey said as he swung his cruiser back out onto the highway.

Tibby checked her watch, four-ten. She pulled a new stick from her pack of Camels and lit it.

Elaine worked at putting down a fried-egg sandwich. "I don't know what I'm going to do, Tib," she said. "Two flat tires and Bailey says my others won't last long."

Eddie Wilson turned from his peach pie at the counter. "Flat tire, you say?"

Tibby waggled two fingers, her cigarette between them.

"I'm haulin' a load of that new Fix-a-Flat stuff. Lemme go out to the truck, an' I'll getcha a couple cans."

"Eddie, I don't have any money," Elaine said.

"Tonight it's free. There's always something falling off a load. They never miss it at the warehouse."

The bell rang over the front door, and Bailey Devlon came inside. He went behind the counter and filled a china mug from the Bruns. He also helped himself to a second mug. This one he banged down in front of Eddie.

"I'm taking up a collection. Put two bucks in there."

"Why the hell should I?"

Bailey leaned his hand on the butt of his pistol. "So you don't get a ticket when you go out to your truck."

"Why would I get a ticket?"

"I'm sure I can find a reason. You heard about Elaine's flat tire?"

"Yeah."

"It's worse than flat. I checked it over, and she busted a sidewall. Gonna need a whole new tire. Your money?"

Eddie pulled a long black wallet from his back pocket, the wallet chained to a belt loop.

He excavated deep within the wallet's innards until he found two one-dollar bills. Eddie stuffed them in the cup.

Bells went off at the pinball machine. J.D. Castro, Eddie's driving partner, whooped and did his version of the monkey. "Ten thousand! I dare anybody to beat that."

Bailey ambled over and stuck his money mug under the nose of the happy driver. "Three bucks since you're feeling so good. Ante up, J.D."

Castro put in a fistful of nickels, but snatched one out. That he dropped into the slot in the front of the pinball machine and waited for a line of balls to roll out for a new game.

Bailey went to the back table where Robert-the-cook sat, engrossed in a paperback. "What you readin' tonight, Robert?"

He didn't look up. "Proust," he said and turned a page.

"He as good a writer as Zane Grey?"

Robert-the-cook ignored that.

"Put some money in the cup, pilgrim."

Robert grubbed a wrinkled one from his watch pocket.

"Your generosity is underwhelming, but I thank you." Bailey took the bill and went on to the women's table. He pulled out a chair, and, as he sat, he slid the money cup in front of Tibby. "Your tip money, Aunt Tib. All of it in there."

She emptied the pocket of her apron and dropped the contents in the mug. "Haven't seen you put any money in."

Bailey took a wad from his side pocket. He counted it out. "Two bucks from our other night deputy. Dollar thirty-eight from our dispatcher – that's all she had. And two bucks and a dime from me, the dime I was gonna pay for my coffee." He raked it all toward Elaine, astonished by it all.

"I can't take this," she said.

Bailey drummed his fingers on the table top. "We didn't ask you, so it's not something you can turn down. If there's not enough there for the new tire, we'll jew Ernie down on the price."

* * *

Headlights flashed through the side window of Elaine's kitchen, from a car turning into her driveway.

"That your ride, Missus Mars?" Debbie Gibbs asked from the table where she worked at a string of algebra equations.

Elaine, in clean jeans and a tee-shirt, glanced out the window. She hurried toward the door, but turned back. "I get paid tonight, so I can pay you in the morning, even catch you up for last week when I was short. Is that all right?"

"I never worry, Missus Mars. This is the easiest money I make."

"All right then, see you in the morning."

She went on outside and down to the driveway where a sheriff's cruiser sat idling, the passenger door open.

Bailey sat listening to his radio, a woman's voice coming from the speaker. *Got a*

disturbance up by Randolph. Who's closer?

The deputy squeezed the transmitter button on his microphone. "I'm in Keats."

A man's voice came back. *I'm on the plateau at Twenty-Four and Seventy-Seven. I'll take it.*

Caller says it's at the third house up from the bank. If it's a domestic and you need help, call me and I'll send Bailey up.

Roger that.

Bailey squeezed the transmit button again. "I'm going over to Eighteen to get a car back on the road. From there I'll go hang around Fort Riley, see if I can catch some drunk soldiers."

This that dishwasher's car?

"The same."

Get the new tire?

"Yup."

Very good.

Elaine closed the door.

Bailey threw the cruiser into reverse. He backed out onto the county road and tickled the pine tree hanging from his rearview mirror as he shifted into drive. "Like it?"

"It improves the air," Elaine said.

"Your new tire is in the backseat."

"Was there enough money?"

Bailey pulled an envelope from his pocket and held it out. "Old Ern was having a half-price sale. Enough money left so maybe you can buy new shoes for one of your kids."

"I really need to buy new jeans for the boys. I've been patching patches to keep them going." Elaine took the envelope. She squeezed it and felt a mass of coins and how many bills she couldn't tell. "You know, I still owe the doctor some from last summer."

"It's always something, isn't it?"

"It never lets up. It was easier when my husband was around."

Bailey glanced over. "Aunt Tib told me you've been on your own for a while. Maybe Bernie will move you out front as a waitress. The tip money would help, plus the hourly pay's probably better."

"It would be. . . . Do you like what you do?"

Bailey turned back to his driving, slowing as they rolled into Manhattan. "Most nights it's seven and a half hours of boredom and five minutes of panic, and you never know what the panic is going to be about – a speeder, some old drunk guy who's put his car in the ditch and wants to fight you when you have to haul him in, burglar from Topeka who thinks he's gonna have easy pickin's over here. Some of them don't want to be caught."

He turned onto Seventeenth Street and drove on in silence to the highway going west.

"You?" Bailey asked. "You always lived around here?"

"I'm from Junction. Been here for two years."

They rounded Sunset Hill, and Bailey flipped on his bubble light. The revolving flash and his headlights picked up Elaine's car still parked on the shoulder of the road. Bailey pulled up behind and stopped. He handed Elaine his flashlight. "Take this and check your car over, make sure you didn't get any dings while it was out here. I'll get this tire on for you."

“You need help?”

“I’m a big boy.”

Elaine slid out of the cruiser. As she walked toward her car, she pushed the flashlight switch to on, but no light came on. She slapped the flashlight into her hand once, twice, and a beam shot forward. Elaine played it over the back of Gracie. Nothing out of place. She went on to the side and moved the beam across the door panels and the fenders – fine. Then she aimed the light through the glass of the side window and surprise lightened her face. “Bailey?”

“What?”

“You do this?”

He came up, the new tire and wheel rim under his arm. “Do what?” he asked.

She pointed the light through the side window. “There are one, two, three, four tires in the backseat.”

Bailey leaned in for a better look. “Damn, they look new. Well, this has got to be a first, a break-in where the burglar leaves something rather than takes something.”

“I asked you, did you do this?”

“Heck no. It’s a bit early, but maybe you got a secret Santa Claus.”

* * *

Elaine, wielding a steel brush, scrubbed her way down into a mashed-potatoes pot that could have seen service in an Army mess kitchen. As she scrubbed, she huffed a breath up through an extended lower lip, to dislodge a strand of sweaty hair that had fallen onto her face. She came up for air and, irritated, raked the strand to the side with the back of her hand.

Robert-the-cook sauntered by, carrying a tray of pies he’d taken from the oven. He peered into the pot. “Missed some there,” he said and walked on.

“I know. I’m not finished yet.”

“That’s for certain. I’m gonna roll out the last of the dough for elephant ears and you can have the mixing bowl to clean up next.”

“Robert, I don’t know how to thank you.”

She again attacked the pot only to hear the graveyard waitress, Tibby Watson, clearing her throat. Elaine glanced up to see the woman leaning an elbow across the swinging doors, a cigarette in her fingers.

“Telephone for you,” she said.

Elaine grabbed up a dish towel. “Nobody ever calls me.”

“Until tonight, sweetie. She says she’s your babysitter.”

“If this is about Emon throwing up . . . I’ve got three kids down with colds.”

“There’s a lot of that going around.”

Elaine dried her hands as she pushed out through the swinging doors into the diner, to the wall phone behind the cash register. She waved her dish towel to the night deputy, Bailey Devlon, sitting at the counter in his cowboy hat and sheepskin winter jacket. He gave an easy wave without breaking his conversation with someone in coveralls hunched forward over a cup of coffee.

She rescued the handset and put it to her ear. “Debbie, if it’s Emon –”

It isn’t, Missus Mars, came a teenage girl’s voice from a distance, panic seeping through.

It's Lanny. She's crying.

"She never cries."

Her forehead's as hot as a stove and her stomach hurts something awful, she says. I don't know what to do.

"Oh Lord. Listen, Debbie, here's what you do. You put cold wash cloths on Lanny's forehead, you hear? That ought to help on her fever, but her stomach I don't know. I guess I'll have to come home."

I've never seen anyone this sick.

"Colds can be awful bad."

But what if it isn't a cold?

"I guess then we'll have to get her to a doctor."

It's snowing out there, Missus Mars.

"Debbie, it's the middle of December. It does that. Now hang up and get those cold wash cloths."

A click came across the line, and Elaine hung the handset back on its cradle. When she turned around, worry showed in deep trenches across her forehead.

"Tib, I gotta go home," she said.

"Figured that from your half of the conversation."

"I have a really sick kid. I have to go."

"With this snow coming down, you might as well. We're not going to have anyone else in before breakfast, if then. But you be careful."

Elaine hurried to the wall hooks where her mackinaw hung among a cluster of other coats. She pulled her mack down and stuffed her arms into its sleeves. While she buttoned herself in, a shadow came close – Bailey Devlon.

"You got snow chains?" he asked as he stood nearby, his hands in his back pockets.

"Snow chains?"

"Yeah, it's got kinda deep out there since you come on. Couple hours ago, I had to trade my cruiser for the sheriff's four-wheel drive, you know to buck the drifts on the county roads."

Elaine paused in cinching a knit cap down over her ears. "I don't have chains."

"Why am I not surprised as church-mouse poor as you are. Look, I couldn't help but hear you got a sick child. I'll drive you out to Keats 'cause you're not gonna get there with that car of yours."

"Bailey, I can do this."

"No, you can't."

"Yes, I can."

"Don't get stubborn on me."

"Oh all right, but we better go."

He detoured back to the counter with Elaine, to the person in coveralls he'd been talking to. "Elaine, this fella is Wally Smith, runs that big road grader out in the lot for the county."

The graderman gave a wave that showed three fingers missing from his right hand.

"Wall, you been out on the Keats road tonight?"

"Not yet."

Bailey grimaced as he moved the toe of his boot around the grit on the floor. "This

woman's got a sick child out there. I suppose my fastest way to get her home isn't the main roads, is it, but the old ranch road across country."

"Wind out of the north, most of it should be blowed free of snow, but you'd still got to ford the Wildcat."

"I got the sheriff's Power Wagon."

"Then I'd go for it."

The two went on outside, Elaine shocked that what had been a skiff of snow before midnight was well up over her ankles and the drift she stepped in twice, if not three times as deep. Snow swirled down off the roof of the diner, coating her and Bailey in white. He yanked open the passenger door for her and helped her up the step and into the cab of the tall pickup, the cab smelling of moist, sweet tobacco. The handle of a shovel poked up in the back window and a logging chain laid in a jumble on the floor, a coffee can and a pouch of Red Man among the litter on the seat.

Bailey slammed the door and came around to the driver's side where he pulled himself up and in. "Pardon the mess. It's the sheriff's, not mine," he said as he twisted the key in the ignition.

The engine came to life with a roar. "George put the biggest V-Eight he could find under the hood to make this his go-anywhere truck. You hang on now."

He backed away from the diner, then aimed the truck out of the lot and onto the airport road, the snow flying horizontal at a dizzying speed through the shafts of light from the truck's headlamps. At the end of the road, two-hundred yards on, Bailey bucked the truck off to the north, toward the bluffs that separated the airport valley from the Wildcat Valley, the bluffs lost in the night and the snow.

Bailey recovered a microphone from the mess to the side of him. He squeezed the transmit button. "Dispatch, you on?"

A woman's voice came through the speaker on the truck's dashboard. *I'm here.*

"I'm leaving Bernie's, going cross-country to Keats. Got a civilian on board."

The Mars woman?

"You got it. She's got a sick child and we got to get her home. Ronnie out there?"

He's up at Randolph. Decided to wait out the storm at his cousin's place.

"So I'm it if something goes wrong, huh?"

You get to be the hero.

"Thanks. Devlon out."

He tossed the microphone aside as the truck began its climb upward, jolting from rock to chuckhole, the transmission whining.

Elaine grabbed for the handhold above the passenger door. "We're alone, huh?"

"Appears so."

"I didn't know there was a road here."

Bailey held to the steering wheel shaking in his hands. "Abandoned."

"Guess I have to ask then, how do you know about it?"

"Back when I was a randy teenager, I found it was a great place where a guy could make out with his girl and not get interrupted. The girl who became my wife says we made our first baby up here."

“Warm memories, huh?”

“The very best.”

After some time of rouncing and bouncing and climbing, Bailey stopped the truck. Elaine sensed they were in a flat area although she couldn't be sure with the snow swirling in the headlights and the wind buffeting the truck.

Bailey leaned his forearms on the steering wheel. “We're at the top of the world, young lady from Keats. If it were daylight and clear, you'd see Manhattan over there about four miles –” he gestured toward the passenger window, then swept his hand across to the corner of the windshield on his side of the cab – “and your town yon way about six miles. Now from here it's all downhill, a splash through Wildcat Creek, up the lane past Charlie Kraft's and scoot on in.”

“I can't see a thing. How do you know where we are?”

“I go someplace once,” Bailey said, talking with his hands, “every twist and turn of the way is locked in my mind forever. It's God's gift, I guess. . . . Going down.”

He let off on the clutch and the truck rolled forward. The nose dropped and the speed picked up, Bailey whipping the steering wheel this way and that, holding on with both hands when the truck bucked over what Elaine could not tell, but the bucking threw her and the clutter off the seat more than a half-dozen times. She heard the splash of water and saw a wave wash up into the headlights and over the hood. For the first time Bailey turned on the windshield wipers, and they thumped away the water and the snow that plastered itself to the wet glass.

The truck twisted. It rose and whammed down on flat ground.

“We're on Charlie's lane,” Bailey said. He flashed a crooked smile in the glow from the panel lights. “Easy going until we hit your road and the drifts.”

A Farm Bureau membership sign, shaped like a stop sign, loomed up in the lights to the side. Bailey did not slow the truck, but spun the steering wheel hard to the left, and the tires hammered over something and down onto a smooth run.

Bailey flexed his gloved fingers. “All right, we're on the highway. Here comes the first drift.”

Elaine blanched when she saw the world in the headlights go white and a wall of snow wash back over the windshield and the roof of the truck, the wipers thumping away.

Minutes ground on, and more snow drifts, before the wind ceased.

“Keats,” Bailey announced. “We're in the trees, protected now, and there's your little place.”

He guided the truck off onto a driveway that led down toward Wildcat Creek and a shotgun house, light filtering from the kitchen window through the falling snow. He stopped in the side yard, but before he could get his door open, Elaine was gone – out – running for the back porch. She banged through the kitchen door and into the warmth, the kitchen smelling of fear and disease. Debbie Gibbs, at the table, cradled a girl to herself, the girl half her age and wrapped in a blanket, the girl weeping.

“Mommy, it hurts,” the girl said through body-jerking sobs.

“Missus Mars, I got her quiet for a while,” the babysitter said, “got a bit of toast and juice in her, then she went all up.”

Elaine took her daughter into her arms. “It's all right, baby, I'm here now. You can stop crying.”

“I caaan’t. It hurrts.”

“I know. I know.” She rocked her, and Elaine put her cheek to her daughter’s forehead.
“You’re burning up, child.”

Bailey came in from the porch, stamping the snow from his boots. “Fever, huh?”

“I’ve never felt one so hot, and I’ve had sick children.”

The deputy came to the babysitter. “Debbie, she throw up?”

“Three times, Mister Devlon.”

“Where she hurt?”

“Her stomach. Won’t let me touch it.”

“Hmm.” Bailey swivelled back to Elaine and her daughter. “Mind if I check something?”

“What?”

“Want to see exactly where she hurts. May tell us a thing or two.”

“I don’t see how.”

“Trust me on this.”

“All right.” To her daughter, Elaine whispered, “Baby, Mister Devlon wants to touch your stomach, is that okay with you?”

“Nooo.”

“But he has to, baby.”

“Nooooooo.”

“It’s going to be all right. I’m here.” Elaine sat down and, after she settled her child in her lap, she peeled the blanket back, revealing thin flannel pajamas.

Bailey stripped off his gloves. He knelt before Elaine and her daughter, and eased the pajama top up at the waist. He touched the girl’s stomach around the navel and she howled. Bailey lifted his fingers away and brought them down again, this time with hardly a feather’s touch to the lower left side.

“Does it hurt here?” he asked.

She snuffled and whimpered out a no.

“How about here?” Bailey asked as he touched the lower right of her stomach.

Tears flowed once more.

“There’s swelling here,” he said to Elaine. “Stomach’s tense as a drum. She have her appendix out?”

“No.”

“It’s gonna happen now. She’s got appendicitis.”

“And you know this how?”

“If you need to know, I was a medic in Korea.”

“But appendicitis?”

“Hey, I’ve seen it at least four times, assisted the docs at the aid stations three times with the operations.”

“And the fourth time?”

“There wasn’t anybody else around, so I had to do it myself. Sure don’t want to do that again.”

Elaine looked to the babysitter. “Debbie, we’ve got to go. You stay with my boys, make them breakfast for me?”

“I can do that. There’s not going to be no school today, snowing like it’s been.”

“Soon as it gets light, promise me you’ll go next door and use the Wilsons’ telephone and call your parents, tell them what’s happened, all right? I’ll call them when I can, too.”

She did not wait for an answer, instead hefted herself up as she snuggled the blanket tight around her daughter. Elaine moved outside with the determination of a locomotive, into the dark and the snow, to the truck. Bailey whipped open the door and half lifted and half shoved the two up and inside. He slammed the door and ran to the other side. Once inside, he backed the truck around and drove out to the county road. He bulled the truck up onto the pavement, shifting up into second gear.

Bailey popped up the switch on his bubble light and grabbed his microphone out of the mess on the seat. “Etta Mae, you out there?” he said into the mic.

Your guardian angel as ever is here.

“I got a girl with appendicitis on board. Call Doc Walker, wouldya? Tell him to get down to the hospital. We’ll be there in fifteen, twenty minutes.”

The truck roared out of the protection of the trees at Keats and slammed into a drift. The truck plowed on through.

“Wally on the road?”

I’m here, Bailey, coming yer way, pushin’ the snow. Damn big drifts, I’ll tell ya.

“Where are you?”

Just passed Charlie Krafts’.

“Roger that, keep your grader coming.”

The truck banged into another drift. The impact jerked the steering wheel from Bailey’s hand and sent the rear into a swing. Elaine in terror crushed her daughter to herself, the girl shrieking. Bailey chucked the microphone and scrambled for control of the wheel. He got it and cramped the front wheels into the slide, slowed, straightened and stepped down on the gas pedal.

“Sorry ’bout that,” he said through rubberband-taut lips, all the time Elaine crooning “Shh shh shh, it’s all right, baby, it’s all right” to her daughter.

Bailey jutted his jaw to the side, jerked his head and the vertebrae in his neck snapped like popcorn pinging in a hot pan. He kept watch through the windshield, the bubble light’s beam arcing around in a ceaseless rhythm, raking through the driving snow. And then he saw it, faint at first and growing stronger with each passing moment, a second bubble light slicing through the snow. Was it moving his way or he toward it? Bailey couldn’t be sure. He held to what he hoped was his side of the road, watched the light and then headlights grow and pass to his left, a big yellow grader illuminated by his own headlights.

“Thank you, Wall,” he said as he eased the sheriff’s truck through a ridge of snow and into the newly cleared lane. He stepped down on the gas.

Perhaps it was the soft, steady rumble of the knobby tires on the pavement that Lanny became quiet, Elaine couldn’t be sure, or maybe the girl was just exhausted.

“She’s settled down some, huh?” Bailey asked, ease returning to his own frame as he now steered with one hand.

“Seems to. . . . If you were a medic, didn’t you want to be a doctor?”

“Didn’t have the patience for all those years of college. . . . And when I got home, the sheriff was hiring and I needed a job and it seemed like a good fit. Besides, he was my uncle.”

“Family sure helps.”

“How about yours?”

“My daddy’s a merchant marine. I see him every couple years.”

“And your mom?”

“I guess she got tired of waiting for Daddy to come home. Short time after I got married, she just packed the car and left. I don’t know where she is.”

“Look up ahead there,” Bailey said, nodding at the windshield. “First lights of Manhattan – Ernie’s Mobile station. He stays open all night. ’Course it helps that he lives just the next street over. . . . Your girl still all right?”

Elaine put her hand on her daughter’s forehead. “Fever’s not changed.”

“Well, we’re only a couple blocks from the hospital now,” Bailey said as he shifted down. He cranked the steering wheel to the left and bulled the truck into what appeared in the headlights to be an unplowed street. Bailey held tight to the steering wheel as the tires chewed on. “Oh-oh.”

Elaine glanced across the cab.

“Car cattywumpus in the street,” Bailey said. “Musta spun out. You ready for a little front-yard driving?”

“What’s that?”

The deputy shifted down one more time. He herded the truck up and over a curb, across a sidewalk, missed a shagbark hickory and romped over a cluster of bushes poking through the snow.

“I’m gonna catch hell for this,” he said as he drove back out into the street. “That was Doc Walker’s place. Those rose bushes, he’s kinda proud of them.”

At the end of the street Bailey drove under a light that illuminated the front door of Memorial Hospital, the snow there filtering down rather than whipping horizontal. He stopped and hustled Elaine and her daughter out of the truck and up the steps. They kicked their way inside to where a man in an overcoat, his pajama top showing through the open throat, stood visiting with a woman in white. Both turned toward the new arrivals.

“Bailey, you get me out at the damnedest times,” the man said, peering over top of glasses that rode low on the bridge of his nose. “This as serious as Etta Mae said?”

“Have I ever been wrong?” Bailey pushed Elaine forward, her daughter stirring in her arms. “Doc, this is Elaine Mars and her girl, Lanny. It all musta gone bad around midnight and, well, you check her over.”

Walker leaned in. “How you doing, little one?” he asked.

The girl winced and whined. “My stomach.”

“Yup, well, I want to touch your forehead, is that all right?”

Lanny gave the slightest nod, and Walker put the palm of his hand on her forehead. “Tad warm there, isn’t it? I understand you threw up a couple times.”

She scrunched her face.

“Yes, it isn’t any fun. Now I’m going to touch your stomach like old Deputy Bailey did.” Walker slipped his hand beneath the blanket to under Lanny’s pajama top, and she cried.

“Shh-shh-shh, that’s all right.” He looked up over his glasses to Elaine, his forehead furrowing. “Hate to tell you Bailey’s right.”

* * *

“So you’re gonna get her home tomorrow, huh, for Christmas?” Eddie Wilson asked, a foot resting on a chair, his arms folded across his knee. J.D. Castro stood beside him, leaning on Wilson’s shoulder.

Elaine, seated and with a half-eaten porkchop in front of her, wiped at the exhaustion on her face. “That’s what Doctor Walker says. Having Lanny back, that’s gonna be our Christmas and nothing more now that I’ve got a hospital bill to pay.”

“There’s always Santy Claus,” Castro said.

“J.D., I found out at age ten that Mom and Dad were Santa Claus, and they’re gone.”

“Well, you never know.”

Wilson elbowed his driving partner who choked on his tongue, while Elaine focused her effort on cutting a bite from her porkchop. “I guess I’m just lucky that Gracie keeps running and we’ve got heat and food. We wouldn’t have that if it weren’t for washing dishes here.”

The bell over the door jingled and Bailey Devlon rambled in, kicking snow from his boots. He called out, “Elaine, you rob all the stores in town?”

“Pardon?” she asked, her fork midway to her mouth.

“Your car. It’s jammed with stuff.”

“There’s nothing in my car.”

“Hey, I know what nothing looks like, and there are sacks of groceries in the front seat and boxes of what all I don’t know in the back.”

“Can’t be.”

Eddie turned away from Elaine. He did a wave-off to Bailey, but Bailey only arched an eyebrow. “Go look for yourself,” he said.

She rose and hustled away from the table and on outside, not pausing to grab her mackinaw. Bailey came along. He aimed his flashlight at Gracie, and Elaine sucked in a lungful of crystalline cold air as she peered through the side window.

“This can’t be,” she said and opened the back door. She ran her hand up to the top of the carton nearest her, large enough that it could hold a dorm-sized refrigerator. She opened the carton and reached in, and brought out a pair of jeans. “A whole box of pants. Kids’ sizes it says here.”

Elaine pawed her way into another carton. “Shoes. I’d guess a dozen pair. And there’s a box that says shirts.”

Bailey opened the opposite door. He reached into a bag, and, when his hand came out, it held a Tonka truck. He brought it up to the dome light. “I’d say you got a raft of toys in these other bags.”

Elaine came around. She opened the front passenger door and poked into the sacks she found there. “A frozen turkey, and it looks like all the makings for a dinner and more. Did you do this?”

“Hey, I just got here.”

Elaine glanced up through the windshield, to the front window of Bernie’s. There stood Wilson, Castro, and Tibby Watson together, staring back. “Did they?” she asked.

“I wouldn’t know. My job is to investigate thefts, not gifts.”

“Well, somebody did this.”

“How about we chalk it up to Santa Claus?”

“J.D.,” Elaine said.

“Aw, he’s hardly got two nickels to rub together, and when he’s got two, he drops one in the pinball machine.”

Elaine slammed the car door. She stalked back to the diner with Bailey hustling after her. Inside she found no one at the window, all instead seated around Robert-the-cook’s table in the back corner, each holding a hand of cards.

Wilson threw two face down. “Gimme a couple fresh ones, Tib,” he said, and she shot two replacements his way.

Elaine marched up. She planted her hands, fingers spread wide, in the middle of the table. “All right, I want to know who did this.”

“Who did what?” Tibby asked as she winged three cards to Castro wagging three fingers at her.

“Put all that stuff in my car – jeans, toys, a turkey.”

“Maybe Santa Claus, who you don’t believe in, has some helpers.”

“You did it, all of you.”

Tibby laughed. She threw down her hand and dealt herself a new set of cards.

Robert-the-cook, staring at his hand, popped a raisin into his mouth. “Oh, I’m supposed to tell you from Bernie, you’re to take the rest of the gawddamn night off. I don’t know why, something about presents you gotta wrap.”

“I don’t have any wrapping paper.”

Castro scraped his cards against his whisker-shadowed chin, working at an itch. “You look on the floor in the backseat?”