

AUBURN

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Chapter 7 - The Store

Joe had tilted his head a little. "How have you been getting by?"

I explained my style of crossing the country.

"And the dress? Why? Are you trying to be a woman?"

"I like it. I'm not trying to be anything. The last I heard this is a free country. Or did somebody ring a bell and declare that has changed?" Oops. I warmed a little at the ears at that last word. Did my diaper need changing? I didn't think so.

He had a nice soft laugh. "Need anything?"

I said. "Canned juice would be nice."

He didn't try to tell me. He led me across the store past small sections of many kinds of groceries. The place did have a wide range of good food, and also the junk food the truckers and tourists liked. He handed me a can of orange juice and another of V8. I picked up a second can of each.

Those three women watched us cross the store.

The bill came to \$8.18. "Sorry I have to charge you sales tax."

"That's OK." I opened my wallet, found I had a ten dollar bill, and laid that on the counter.

One of those two young woman rose and brought the tea pot to the counter. She had a good figure and gave me a little smile. He took the pot, filled it, and put it in the microwave. We all stood there for the time required for heating that pot of water.

I became acutely uncomfortable not thinking of a thing to say to this attractive woman. Nobody else said a word either.

He handed her the pot, and she returned to the table. Both the men and I watched the movements of her body as she walked.

I smiled. "I'm not fond of bottled water. Treated water keeps my teeth healthy."

He went to his coffee maker where he took a cup, put some tap water in it, and handed it to me. "Try that for taste. Local town water may be to your liking, or may not."

I took a small sip on my tongue. Nothing seemed wrong although it did have a faint taste of its own. I took a swallow. "Seems OK."

He held out his hand. "I'll fill for you."

I handed him my canteen on my hip. I brought that backpack down, and sat it on the floor. The pack of diapers in the bottom compartment was only about half full, and it wouldn't support the pack standing up. It leaned against the counter as I took the water bottle out of the top. My clothes were dry; the bottle remained full. "It's good." Most times I appreciated that backpack. At that exact moment my shoulders were tired of it.

He handed my canteen to me. "No charge."

I said. "Aw. Is there enough spare cash in that ten for a soda?"

He said. "Sure."

I selected an original Coca Cola which brought me nearer those women before returning to the counter. "There's only fifty cents or so change due. Would you keep it? You've been nice to me when some people have not."

He smiled. "Do you know the Native American tradition of two spirits?"

I said. "Never heard of it. What's that all about?"

He said. "At times it's been used for almost any unusual or backwards behavior. Big controversy in the Navajo Nation right now has been stirred up by Utah's fight about gays and lesbians. That does seem an odd thing to fight about when they allow polygamy."

I asked. "Navajo is a separate nation?"

He said. "Yes. You're on the reservation right now."

My face must have given me away.

He held out his hand. "Welcome."

I said. "Thought I needed to know? Is there a big motel nearby? I've worked for those while crossing the country. What is the nearest one like?"

He grinned. "Oh, her. She's a bit of a meany. You can try. It's a half a dozen miles west of here. No idea what she thinks of two spirit people, but too often she has a sharp tongue. She's not liked all that much."

I could see the sun was low in the western sky.

He put that ten in his cash register. "You might get a job at the tourist trap of Fort Courage further west along the Interstate." He twisted his head around just a little. "The tourists won't know the shape of your face and your auburn hair is a give away you're an Anglo. Where are you staying for the night?"

I said. "Dunno. There's a lot of open space out there."

His eye went to my left hip with my big knife. "I see you're equipped for it. Come back. I'll ask around about jobs, but I doubt it. It's the off season for that elevator on the railroad tracks. Get on out of here before it's too dark to see unfamiliar ground under your feet."

I hefted my back pack "Thanks." I had the straps over my shoulders. The men were gone. The women were sipping their tea.

Outside of the store the sun was just a finger width above the western horizon. On this side of the Interstate and the tracks sat that grain elevator to the west. That seemed so unappealing I went the other way, to the east, along a dry creek. Or maybe a dry river.

I stopped at a little grove of evergreen trees. I made a dinner out of freeze dried macaroni and cheese. Usually that hadn't been a favorite freeze dried of mine, but that night it seemed right. The stream had become so completely dry I had to use my own water making dinner.

I found a short sandy stretch where I dug all the rocks out near the surface. I smoothed it out where I could wiggle down into a comfortable place in that sand. The light had become low after the sun dropped behind the horizon, and there were no headlights in sight. I lifted my skirt and changed my disposable diaper. That's what I wanted to do, and this seemed a good place to enjoy it.

I wet and enjoyed the warmth.

A heavy freight train rumbled along. I wondered if that frightened the wild animals away.

A plastic sheet kept the sand out of my clothes. I had my light weight water proof blanket near at hand as I laid down. I strapped my backpack to my belt, wiggled a little making the sand fit my body, and went sound sleep.

I woke up to another train, and wet while laying there during the night much to my pleasure.

The sun blasted me in the morning when it came up over the eastern horizon. I had one of those cans of juice and another freeze dried meal for a breakfast. I put my trash and used diaper in a plastic bag, tied it to my backpack, hefted it onto my shoulders, and went walking around.

The other side of the Interstate didn't have much that I could see. A school sat on a low rise in front of colorful bluffs. Nearby had an abandoned gas station, and beyond that sat a boarded up small convenience store. Further away had a small church which I walked to. The sign said Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints meaning Mormons. Coming back to the Interchange a public library surprised me in front of that school on the bluff. An elementary school sat between the library and the bluffs. I found a water fountain between them that worked where I refilled my canteen.

I went into a grove of scattered cedar trees before the schools opened. I tied a towel as protection across the back of my backpack, set it against a tree, and sat down against it. I had a lemon drop and dug out a paperback book.

Heavy freight trains rumbled along as did a high speed passenger train.

An elementary class came outside for recess.

I didn't feel so comfortable being found by any kids. Instead I packed up, and walked out the other way of the cedar trees. Nearly a half a mile up the side road had a low building, but very neat and tidy. The sign announced a Justice Court. There didn't seem to be anything nearby beyond it so I turned around and went back to the Interchange.

I walked across the bridges back into town over the Interstate, the railroad, and the river. To the west on my right were grain elevators with dozens of railway cars parked there. Another industrial building sat there, but I didn't go in. No gate; that didn't seem a good place for me to go.

In town I walked past a fire station, looped around a few residential streets, and returned at the Joe Nelson store where I went in.

I smelled a good food aroma, which became a stew heating in a crock pot. Joe asked me how I was, which I answered, and he asked where did I sleep?

I said. "Along the river bed. There was a nice sandy spot."

His head jerked ever so slight as a sign of surprise.

I said. "Can I buy a bowl of that stew?"

He didn't answer as he ladled out a paper bowl full.

I said. "How much?"

He rubbed his chin. "Aw. I make that for the old people around here." He paused as if thinking. "Two bucks."

My wallet didn't have two one dollar bills. I laid a five on the counter. "Hold that a little." The stew smelled good. It tasted good. I had a second helping. "Can I sit in the back and read?"

"Sure. But if the tables fill up those are needed for the people who live here. Lunch time is coming."

"OK. Will that extra dollar cover a soda pop?"

His slight smile grew just a little. "Sure."

He had air conditioned in there. No cold; just better than outside in the sun.

When the other tables were filling up I went outside. I walked around as I enjoyed more of that cold soda, sat in the shade, and went all the way out of the south side of town. I didn't see anybody anywhere. When I came back I went in Joe's store where all the tables were vacant.

He waved fingers at me to come to his counter. "Set your pack down and come back here." He had his computer on where he gave me an introduction to the Navajo Nation on Wikipedia and with Google searches.

I said. "Quiet town. I like that. Does anybody rent a room?"

With a mischievous grin he went to YouTube and played an old country song *King of the Road*. There were two refrains of 'rooms for rent fifty cents' and an 'eight by twelve four bit room'. "Come back in an hour; better after dinner. I'll see what I can find."

He didn't find any rooms to rent that day. That evening we played computer games together until the evening customers arrived.

I went back outside, and found my camping place again along the dried out river bed.