

Word of a Liar

by Sally Beauchamp

Chapter Five - part 1

Ellen's heart roared in her ears as she ran down the dark path. The slick soles of her sandals, slid on the dew covered ground. She kicked them off. The shiny blade of the man's knife still flashed before her. He's going to be dead, before I find Mason. Oh God, please let me find him.

Coming upon the campsites, she stopped at the first tent. A group of women sat by a fire. "Have you seen Mason--I mean Rambo?" she gasped.

The women shook their heads.

"What's up sister?" one of them asked.

"There's a man... with a knife...." Ellen grabbed her knees, trying to catch her breath. "I've got to find him."

Elbowing her way through the crowds, Ellen forced herself to keep moving. She frantically scanned the tents, trying to remember where Dee Dee was camped. Finally, Ellen got a glimpse of Dee's red hair.

"Dee Dee," she tried to yell, but it came out barely above a whisper. Pushing forward, she recognized Mason's rifle bouncing across his back, the steel barrel reflecting bits of moonlight. She halted, took a deep breath, cupped her hands around her mouth and screamed like a mad Siren, "Mason! Dee Dee!"

Her frenzied voice reverberated through the cacophony of conversations, shushing the crowd. People turned and gawked. She saw Dee Dee stand and look in her direction. Ellen jumped, waving her hands above her head.

"Rambo, Mad Dog! There she is!"

The men turned and then forced their way through the bewildered throng, Dee Dee trailing.

"Where the hell have you been?" Mason scolded like a parent upon finding his missing child.

Dee Dee wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. "We've been looking all over for you."

Mad Dog's deadly eyes interrogated her. "Did someone try to hurt you?"

"No, no, you've got to follow me.... He's going to kill him.... He has a knife...." Ellen breathed heavily, sharp pain stabbed her sides. She grabbed Mason's hand, pulling him along.

"Dee, get Spider and the guys; tell them we have trouble," Mason called over his shoulder. "Where are they, Ellen?"

"By the barn. Oh, Mason, he's probably killed him by now!"

Mad Dog ran alongside. "It's Apostle and Squinch, isn't it? Fuck! I knew something like this was going to happen."

When they reached the two men a crowd had formed a circle around them. The front of Apostle's denim vest was sliced in half, but his attacker didn't appear to be giving up.

"Thank God he's still alive," Ellen murmured, sinking to her knees. Mason watched Squinch swing his knife in a slicing motion then suddenly change tactics and stab at Apostle until Squinch backed him up to the side of the barn. Sweat rolled down the cornered man's face, his chest heaved. Apostle swung with his right, missing his target. More determined now, Squinch raised the knife above his head and brought it all the way back. Mason aimed his M-16 and stitched a five-round burst around the two men. The shots exploded the night, ripping up sod and spattering pieces of the earth like shrapnel. An aftermath of dust floated around the men.

"Gentlemen," Mason called out in a calm, detached voice, "I think I know what started this, but it ends here and now! And you," Mason pointed the rifle at Squinch, "drop the fuckin' knife, or I'll cut you in half!"

Apostle looked down at his ripped clothing, his eyes wide. He made a move for Squinch, but a couple of bystanders grabbed him by his hair, pulling him out of harm's way. Squinch stood dead still. He pointed the long blade in Mason's direction. He shifted his weight.

"Oh, you think you're such a bad ass standing there with a machine gun," Squinch sneered.

Mason kept his eyes riveted on the man. Obviously drunk or high or both, Squinch didn't know not to pick a fight with someone aiming an assault weapon at him. Mason pushed the magazine, released the button, and the magazine fell to the ground. Next, he pulled the charging handle back and out, popping the cartridge from the chamber. Maintaining eye contact, he laid the gun on the ground.

"Come on, ole man, put the knife down. I don't want to have to hurt you."

Mason waited. Squinch showed no sign of relinquishing the weapon. Mason sighed.

"Well, brother, looks like you're just aching to get your ass kicked. Okay, let's get this over with. Get ready to dance!"

Mason crouched, cautiously moving in. Squinch's knife whooshed past his ear. Adrenaline and rage tightened Mason's throat. His heart thundered. Taking a step back, he positioned himself like a field goal kicker and swung his leg high. The steel-toed end of his boot struck Squinch's chin with vicious force. Squinch's head snapped back. Blood sprayed, pitting Mason's face and T-shirt. The knife dropped into the wet, shimmering grass.

Squinch teetered and then fell to the ground with a hard thump. He moaned, clapping the sides of his head. Mason walked over to the prostrate figure and squatted. He accessed the damage. Squinch's chin was split wide open and a few teeth looked broken, but he would be okay in a few days.

"Why'd you make me do that, Squinch? If you would've put that knife down, you'd be partying now." Mason sighed. "Dumb bastard, you're the one paying for the shit your wife started."

Mason rose.

"Get him the hell out of here!" Mason shouted to a couple of the spectators wearing the Highway Men's insignia. "And find Scarlet. Tell her she'd better take care of him, or I'll come looking for her."

The men jerked Squinch to his feet. Blood trickled down in his beard; his eyes began to swell. They put one of Squinch's arms around each of their shoulders and walked slowly towards the tents.

Chest heaving, Mason picked up his rifle and then inserted the magazine. He pulled his bandana from his pocket to wipe the blood and sweat from his face, then remembered Ellen. He surveyed the scene. Most of the crowd had gone back to the party. He checked the fence line and saw Mad Dog's silhouette bent over a figure lying in the grass. Ellen? Mason rushed over; he knelt opposite Mad Dog. "What happened to her?"

Mad Dog looked up.

"Rambo, you've got a whole lot of style, but while you were doing your Clint Eastwood impersonation, I think you damn near killed our damsel in distress. Just what the fuck were you thinkin' back there?"

Mad Dog shook his head.

Mason didn't answer. He tapped Ellen's cheeks. "Wake up! Wake up, Ellen!"

Panic caught in his throat. He slipped his arm around her back. She felt so cold. He lifted her limp torso off the ground, her head wobbled. His other hand came round to support it. He should take her home--borrow someone's vehicle and drive her to Westwood--but he couldn't. It would make him look weak to these men. Mason swiped his hand over her pale clammy face. Her eyes shut, cheeks smeared with dirt, and lips slightly parted, he wanted to kiss her so badly he physically ached. He leaned forward, bringing his mouth to her ear.

"Wake up, Ellen!" he begged in a whisper.

Mason laid Ellen's lifeless body back on the grass, smoothing back her tangled hair.

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