

## Word of a Liar

Part 2 of Chapter 7

Knees drawn up to her chest, arms hugging them, Ellen watched Mad Dog spread the sleeping bag over the inflatable mattress and toss two pillows at the far end.

"Come my damsel in distress, your bed chamber awaits." Mad Dog waved his hand over the crude mattress.

Giggling, Ellen crawled onto the open sleeping bag and rested her head on the pillow. Mad Dog sat next to her, covered them with a blanket then lay back, turning on his side. A small LED lantern turned the interior a gentle blue. They faced one another.

Ellen studied him. The coal blackness of Mad Dog's eyes no longer looked cold and menacing. Mellow, like a dense red wine, they drew her to safety. The earthy scent of his clothes, the smoke tangled in his hair and the soft blush behind his beard accentuated his masculinity. "So what do we do now?" Ellen braved the question.

"What do you want to do?"

Self-conscious, she swallowed. "I don't know. I never had a one night stand before."

Mad Dog smiled.

"What's so funny?" Sweat beaded across her hairline. Nervous energy accelerated her pulse.

He rose up on his elbow. "What makes you think I have?"

"You never had a one night stand?"

Mad Dog shook his head.

"I don't believe you. You're making fun of me. All guys have had one night stands."

"Really? And how, may I ask, do you know that?"

"I don't know. Isn't it an unwritten law of manhood? All the love stories I've ever read, the hero is always a roguish ladies' man. Love um and leave um type."

"I haven't read too many love stories unless--Playboy counts--but I've never had sex with a woman one night and not seen her again. I'm sure I could be persuaded to give it a try though." His dark eyes twinkled. "Mrs. Abrams, does this mean you consider me your hero?"

"Well let's see... First, I was threatened with my life if I didn't return with you. Second, I suffered a third degree burn on my ankle--"

Mad Dog winced. "How's that doing anyway?"

"I can't feel a thing. I'm too drunk. But to get back to this hero business..." She continued to count off his transgressions on her fingers. "Thirdly, some drunk wanted a foursome. Fourth, I witnessed a vicious fight. And fifth, Spider wanted me to pet his tattooed dick. That's not even counting Desi wanting to bitch slap me around all night and, oh yeah, you taught me how to smoke an illegal substance. So what do you think?" Ellen arched her eyebrows.

"Shit. When you put it like that, I guess I'm not exactly the hero kind of guy."

They laughed.

"So, Ellen, I know your husband passed away, but there's not some jealous cowboy going to come looking for me when you get back home, is there?"

"No," she sighed. "There's no one. There hasn't been anyone since Paul died. I've resigned myself to a quiet life of celibacy."

Ellen looked up at the canvas ceiling. The early morning dampness clinging to the tent walls chilled her. She tucked the blanket under her chin.

"I know how you feel," Mad Dog replied.

"I know. Dee started to tell me about your wife's--" Ellen stopped, recognizing Mad Dog's vulnerability in his eyes. Despite his size, she knew pursuing the conversation would rip away the thin façade of strength he desperately clung to. She changed the subject. "I can't wait to tell my sister I spent the night with a biker." Mad Dog grinned. "I'm sorry we forced you to come back with us. We had no right. But we wanted you to be safe."

"I know that now." She sat up, pulling her knees to her chin. "It's been quite the experience, but I'm glad I'm here. Think of the stories I have to tell. And sleeping with a handsome biker dude in his tent is so much better than telling people I slept alone in my car."

Giggling, Ellen covered her face with her hands and then wrapped them around her knees. "It seems like forever since I've had fun. I've never done anything like this before. I don't go out much. It's hard getting into a relationship when there's a kid involved. I think the last date I had lasted about an hour before the guy went screaming into the night."

"Come on, you're an attractive woman. I'm sure there's been a lot of guys who wanted to date you."

Ellen looked at him then lay back down, turning to face him. She propped herself up on her elbow, resting her head in the palm of her hand. "You're very sweet. There's been a few... but not a lot. If I don't scare them off, my son does. Not too many men want to take on a ten-year-old autistic boy."

Ellen looked into his dark eyes and wondered why their close proximity didn't

conjure the same edgy energy as Mason? Why didn't his eyes strip her naked? She reached up and patted down the collar of his flannel shirt.

"Did you do that for your husband?"

"Do what?"

Mad Dog's eyes moved to her hand.

"Oh!" Ellen smiled. "Paul was a landscaper. He wore T-shirts mostly."

"I'd have thought he'd have a desk job."

"Paul? No. He loved being outside and doing physical work."

Mad Dog put his hands behind his head. His chest expanded.

"Why aren't you with a woman tonight, Mad Dog?"

"I thought I was with a woman."

"You know what I mean?" Ellen frowned.

"I haven't even thought about dating yet." He sighed, reaching for the lantern behind him, then switching it off.

The white light of the moon soaked the tent's interior with a gentle brightness. Mad Dog's strong, angular features softened. "Besides there aren't too many women who want to take on an ornery-assed biker and his three kids."

"Three kids." Ellen put her hand on his shoulder. "It must have been hard... to lose their mother so tragically."

Mad Dog slipped his arm beneath Ellen's neck, pulling her closer. She felt the heat of his body.

"Tell me about them."

"My son Sean is twenty. He's the oldest. He's going to NWTC, majoring in forestry, and don't ask me where he got his brains. Certainly not from me. And then there's Tess, my seventeen-year-old daughter. She's a junior. I don't know what she wants to do except take care of me and her younger sister, Amelia. Amelia is twelve, going on twenty-five. She's my devil child. Exactly like her old man." He looked at Ellen, grinning.

Ellen smiled. "Are you implying I might be seeing Amelia at my school some day?"

Mad Dog laughed. "Wouldn't surprise me at all, Mrs. Abrams."

Ellen snuggled closer, listening to the night sounds outside the tent. In the distance people laughed. A warm breeze rippled against the tent.

"You know, Mad Dog, when I was sitting out there on the highway, I realized how alone I was. Even if my cell phone had worked, I had no one to call. If something would have happened to me, no one would have known." Ellen sniffled. "It was the most terrified I've ever been."

"You're not alone anymore Ellen. You have all of us now. The Sons of Thunder will take care of you," Mad Dog said as he wiped a tear from her face with the cuff of his sleeve. "If you need your car fixed, I can do it. Spider is as good a carpenter as they

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