

Detained

By J. Troy Seate

The street looked like a movie set. Tumbleweeds had found homes in front of a gas station, the Sheriff's Office and two other buildings that stood on opposite sides of the wind-swept two-lane blacktop.

"The only way in hell Sara would stop here is if she was running on fumes or had to pee, or both," Sam muttered, stepping out of his car. He wondered if the wind always blew like this. The decaying automobiles and a few scattered trailer houses strewn across the landscape were the only windbreaks in this sad and lonely place . . . and these four pitiful brick buildings on either side of the highway.

Sam shielded his face from the swirling sand and debris and walked into the Sheriff's Office. An officer with a crew cut and a thick neck looked up at him from behind a desk.

"I'm looking for Sheriff Layton," Sam said.

The officer twisted his neck a half-turn. "Sheriff!" he shouted out the side of his mouth. His head swiveled back and trained on Sam who tried to act nonchalant in the dismal two-desk office.

A tall, well-built man entered from a rear door. "What's the problem?" he asked. His gunmetal gray eyes seemed to burn a hole through Sam.

Sam fished a typed letter from his pocket. He handed it to the man who studied the note and nodded sagely.

"Well?" Sam said.

"Well what?"

"You sent this letter about my wife."

"Guess I did."

Sam's mouth formed a begrudging, crooked smile. *He's going to play games with me, drain it for all it's worth.* "Look, Sheriff, let's work this out so Sara and I can be on our way. If I could see her, I'd appreciate it."

Layton smiled. "Okay, Sam Bingham from Scottsdale. You can see her but first, I have a few questions."

"Your letter said my wife was being detained for obstruction of justice. I tried to reach you by phone but all I got was a recording."

"Sara said you'd come."

"Of course." Sam was losing patience. "Why didn't you let her call or pay a fine? Three days is a long time for a woman to be missing. I contacted the Highway Patrol two days ago."

"Sorry for your inconvenience," Layton said apologetically. "Way out here phone service tends to be a crap shoot. I'll straighten it out with the Patrol." He laid the letter on the thick-necked officer's desk. Sam noticed the deputy, or whatever he was, had been looking at a *Hustler* magazine. "Now about those questions."

"What questions?"

"Would you like to have a seat, Mr. Bingham?" Layton said.

"I'd like to see my wife."

"Sure you would. But first, why would you let her drive across the desert alone? Lot's of things can happen to a woman traveling alone."

Sam sighed and shrugged his shoulders. "She had a business appointment. I'm sure she told you that."

"Yes, I guess she did mention that."

"You haven't told me why she's being detained."

"Do you believe in eternal life?" Layton asked.

Sam looked at the sheriff, then at the other man and shuddered. Their expressions reflected anticipated humor awaiting a punch line.

"I think I'll make a phone call." Sam took his cell phone from the clip on his belt and started to dial.

Layton stood next to Sam before he could react. He grabbed Sam's phone and tossed it to the seated officer who plucked it easily from the air. The officer grinned at his accomplishment and shoved the cell phone inside his desk.

Fear gripped Sam like a blow to the chest. He could smell the dried sweat in the creases of Layton's uniform and his onion-laden breath on his cheek.

"Now, wait a minute . . ." Sam stuttered while horrible images assailed him. What if two prisoners had broken out and killed the real sheriff and deputy? What if two lunatics had escaped from an asylum, tortured and killed Sara? What if . . . ?

"Answer my question and we'll get this business over with," Layton said, taking a step back. "Do you or don't you believe in life after death? Do you believe you'll be with your loved ones?"

What have they done to her? Sam's fear curdled his stomach, making him feel ill. "I don't know. Maybe."

"That's a pretty piss-poor response," Layton breathed, "but I guess it'll do." He patted Sam on the shoulder. "Since you cared enough about your wife to come for her, it'd be a shame to keep you apart any longer."

Layton turned away and started toward the rear door. Sam momentarily considered reaching for the pistol in Layton's holster but the man behind the desk had shown he was quicker than he looked.

"If anything has happened to Sara or happens to me, the Highway Patrol knows about this place," Sam said with a touch of bravado.

"Oh really," Layton said, turning and raising his eyebrows. "That's not surprising seeing as how the Patrol for this part of the state is my cousin. He and I and Deputy Dog here have a lot in common." Layton continued toward the door while talking to Sam. "Don't go getting yourself all worked up. We're just funnin' you. Gets pretty boring way out here in the sticks. Lots of people come through but not many single women. It's dangerous on these long stretches through the middle of nowhere but we've taken good care of Sara."

Sam looked past Layton and the deputy at the door in back . . . where the cells must be.

"You can see her, but last time I checked, she was having *a siesta*, so wake her slowly. She's been pretty jumpy."

"How about my phone?"

"Greg, let Mr. Bingham have his phone and wife's personals when we come out."

Layton opened the backdoor, which featured a square of wire glass. "You coming?" he asked Sam.

Sam followed the sheriff into the connecting room. It was dark. He could only make out the bars on the few cells.

"Can you turn on a light?" Sam asked.

“We’ve got a full house today. Our customers are more tolerable in the dark.” Layton walked to the first cell and put the key in the lock.

“Then bring Sara out,” Sam demanded.

“Who’s running this place?” Layton said jovially. “She’s probably asleep. I’ll stand here with the door open so you’ll feel safe.”

“I’m not going in there. I can’t see past the bars.”

“All right, ya big baby,” Layton teased and stepped into the darkened chamber.

As Sam’s eyes adjusted, he could see a shape on a small bed covered with a rough blanket.

“Mrs. Bingham, your husband’s here,” Layton said softly. “Mrs. Bingham, time to rise and shine.” He grasped the shadowy figure and sat her upright on the mattress.

A dim, dusty glow from the office shone through the bars onto the figure. Sam could make out the oval of a face surrounded by dishwater blond hair.

It was Sara. He could see she was awake and smiling slightly. “Sara,” he called.

“It’s time to go, Sara,” Layton said, standing up.

“What’s wrong with her?” Sam asked, his anxiety pouring out through his words.

“Oh, she’ll be fine. She’s smiling and waiting for you,” Layton said cheerfully, his features masked in the dark haze within the chamber. “Waiting for you to die.”

Sam’s shoulder blades were jolted as the deputy shoved him from behind into the cubicle. Layton quickly sidestepped Sam and rushed out of the small space, locking the cell door behind him.

Sam rushed the bars. He reached through them, his hands becoming claws, trying to get to the sheriff and his deputy.

“Sara’s going to be very good to us,” Layton said as a high-pitched giggle erupted from the deputy. “You can have her for a little while. That’s only fair. Then, you get to join the other husbands and boyfriends out in the cactus and sagebrush. But take heart. Since you’re a believer, sort of, you’ve got eternity to be together, later on, when were done with your pretty wife.”

Layton began to laugh, a small laugh at first, then rumbling into a roar that echoed through the room of cells. Sam put his hands over his ears trying to shut himself away from the mocking sound of a man enjoying his victory, a man no longer concerned about disturbing the supposed tenants in the other cells.

The laughter faded as Layton’s persona turned somber. “We’ll give you and Sara some privacy. Make the most of it, Mr. Bingham.”

The door between the cells and the office closed with a sickening click of finality. Light shone through the door’s small square of glass. It illuminated Sara’s face. She smiled pleasantly at Sam. He cautiously approached and sat next to her on the bed. “Sara, are you all right?”

Was she in some kind of trance? The dark woolen blanket draped her neck and shoulders. Sam pulled her to him and placed his head next to her silken hair. “Sara,” he whispered. He put his hand between her shoulder blades and felt something on her back. Something coarse and alien. He ran his hand down her bare spine.

Sam gasped and backed away. The blanket slipped off her shoulders and fell onto her lap. She was naked. The outlines of her breasts were familiar and provocative. But the line on her back . . . a seam with stitches . . .

Suddenly, the room lit up with the force of a thousand watts from overhead florescent tubes and Sam saw his wife clearly. Her smile was almost natural except for tiny stitches in the

corners of her mouth. Her eyes were bright but the wrong color. They were made of glass. And the seam down her backbone . . . Her skin had been sliced open and sewn back together.

“Christ! She’s stuffed! Holy God!” Sam flew from the bed and cringed against the far wall of the cell. He didn’t realize he was screaming. He lunged at the bars, using all his energy to tear his way through them somehow.

There was a knock on the door that pounded into Sam’s psyche like a sledgehammer against the outside of a crypt. Sam saw Layton’s hideous face against the square of glass. His finger pointed to the right, inviting Sam to look in the adjacent cell.

Sam didn’t want to look but he had to, the haunted act of a man going insane. In the other cell were the bodies of a half-dozen naked women, life-sized Barbie Dolls, but with one notable difference. The bodies had been manipulated into grotesque erotic positions, human mannequins frozen into various *Hustler* poses.

The sheriff reentered the cellblock. “Did a good job on Sara, don’t you think?” he smiled. “I’m not only the law for two hundred miles; I’m also a damn good taxidermist. Not quite finished with her though. We tried to find out what she liked best. Any suggestions, Sam?”

Sam made forlorn grunting noises at Layton, unable to form words; his saliva had dried up like dust.

“You’re probably wondering why I bothered to write a letter. It’s important to remove the *pater familias* and frankly, we get such a kick seeing the reactions when men reunite with their sweeties, how different all of you act. Like I said, it gets kinda slow out here.”

Layton looked at Sam curiously. “I guess the cat’s got your tongue. Don’t worry about Sara. Greg and I are going to keep her nice and pliable for a long time, but I’m afraid your time is up.”

Sam backed to the rear of the cell and looked one last time at what was left of his wife. Sara’s corpse smiled its human smile. Then, it slowly tilted and collapsed on its side with a thud. One blue glass eye popped out of its black socket and bounced across the cement floor toward Sam.

His mouth opened to scream again. Nothing came out but dry air followed by thick blood. He hadn’t heard the sound of the gun and barely felt the bullet’s sting.

“Remember, Sara is waiting for you just over the rainbow,” Layton was saying. “Bet you won’t let her cross the desert alone in your next life.”