

LAWMAN

By Mary Ball

It's 4:00 AM and I call the dispatcher in Bisbee. "Hi Carrie, Matt Clifford here, I wanted to remind you I'm off for the day and my pager will be out of range." I told everyone in the sheriff's office I was going fishing in Lawton's stream, up in the mountains. Some believe me, but some know what day this is. They know I need to be alone, and don't question where I'm going.

It's summer and the sky is turning light, the sun will be up by 5:00, and hotter than hell by 9:00. I figure Bo and I will have left the desert for the mountain by then. I strap on my holster, I'm a Lawman and I'm required to be armed, even when off duty, but I don't expect to see anyone today, not where I'm headed.

I saddle Bo, wait a minute, and then punch him in the ribs as I tighten the girth. Old Bo blows up like a dirigible when a saddle hits his back. You'd think he'd know by now he ain't getting away with it, but he still tries. Bo is a good ole boy buckskin, rodeo bred and loves to run the barrels, but he's a social animal and doesn't like hitting the trail alone. He jumps at every shadow when he's by himself. He's even thrown me a time or two, panicked at the sound of his own hooves.

We ride out of Tabletop alone, and head down to Snyder's Wash. Bo is whining every five minutes, calling to any horse that might be out. Sometimes he gets an answer and that settles him. When we get to the wash and head up that familiar trail into the mountains, he knows where we're going. He lowers his head, and I think he's mourning for Ginger, the dapple gray mare that

stood by his side for so many years. I relax the reign and let him have his head. He'll take us where we have to go and we'll find Ginger again.

I remember this day ten years ago. I got up that morning at 4:00 A.M. too. I was headed to Phoenix to represent the county at a lawman's convention. I tried not to wake my wife, Josie, but she jumped out of bed with me. She slid her hands around my waist, pulled me to her, and whispered, "Come back to bed, just for a few minutes?"

I groaned. The drive to Phoenix would take three hours and the meeting started at 7:00 AM. "Babe, I can't."

She pouted, but handed me my holster and then my hat like she always did when I headed to work. "I'll be home late," I warned her as I climbed into my jeep. Those were the last words I spoke to my wife. I didn't say, "I love you and damn right I'll come back to bed." I didn't tell her she was the light of my life. Nope, "I'll be home late."

The meeting in Phoenix was wrapping up around 3:00 in the afternoon when I got the call. Her mother was panicked. Josie had promised to take her to Tucson, but when she got to our place, the door was open and a chair was thrown against the back window. A few minutes later I got a call from another sheriff's deputy, "I think you'd better head home," he said, "It looks like guns were fired in your house."

I drove like a maniac, bubble light and siren going all the way past Benson and up to Tabletop, and I made it back by 5:30. Half way up the drive to my house I saw Bo charging around the paddock raising a storm of dust. Then he would stop and sniff the air and whinny and then charge again. I met a deputy from Wilcox at the door. "We figure someone broke in, took your wife by surprise. We found a couple shell casings, and holes in the wall, but no blood."

“What have you done to find her?” I recognize the sound in my voice, that panic under the surface I’ve heard from husbands and wives I’ve interviewed through the years.

He fumbles for some way to comfort me, “Roadblocks, and we’re asking if anyone saw a strange vehicle come through.”

“Her horse and a horse she was boarding for a friend are missing.” I tell the deputy.

“Helicopters from the border patrol, and search and rescue are over the desert. Sheriff Deputies and a group of locals organized by Donnie Stevens are out on horseback.”

“I’ll join them.”

“Matt, you’re a lawman so you know the chances of finding ...”

He stopped before he said her alive. I finished the sentence for him in my head and then charged out the door.

I saddled Bo and for once he didn’t bother swelling up. Bo was in as big hurry as I was. Josie and Ginger were out there and we had to find them. I gave Bo his head and he didn’t hesitate, he started toward Spencer’s Wash, and then onto the trail that would take us over the mountain, the trail that would take us to Mexico.

I had to use a hard hand holding Bo back, he wanted to charge up that mountain at full speed, but he would wear himself out long before we caught up with them. I held him down to a slow trot and kept my eyes on the trail looking for any sign. We stopped at the water tank by the Davis ranch and I checked for tracks. Ginger was a big half quarter, half draft horse and her foot is distinctive. Her tacks are plain in the mud from sloshing the water.

I tried to use my radio to alert the team that I’d found the trail but this whole mountain was in a communication dead zone at that time. Back then the Border patrol complained that the drug cartels in Mexico had better radio-communication systems. I could take the time to go back,

or continue on. I didn't waste a second deciding which to do.

Bo put his nose on the print left by Ginger's foot. Horses aren't tracking animals but when one is looking for his stable mate of fifteen years, well he'll track better than most. We followed Ginger's trail into the pines.

It was getting dark, and I slowed Bo to a walk. He could find his way in the dark but I didn't want any surprises. We'd reached the pass and started the descent toward the border. I knew if I didn't catch them before they crossed, I'd never see Josie again. Bo turned hyper, reared and took off through the pines. He'd caught me by surprise and it took a minute for me to get him collected again. But Bo was in a fighting mood and I figured he knew better than me where to find Ginger. We came to an old miner's camp and found Bo's stable mate.

She was standing with legs spread apart and head down almost touching the ground. Bo ran to her, and I jumped off to give them space. He put his head over her neck. She leaned against him while I scanned her and saw the blood on her right flank.

The son of a bitch had shot Josie's horse. Had my wife tried to run? A trail of blood ran down Ginger's back leg and puddled on the ground. I knew the horse was about to drop, and she'd never get up again.

I led Bo back into the pines and tied him up. He fought me like a madman, and I knew he'd break free in a few minutes. But a few minutes was all I needed. I walked over to Ginger, put my arms around her, caressed her with soothing sounds, and put my Glock in her ear. I was crying so hard that even if I hadn't put the plugs in my ears, I wouldn't have heard the shot.

I untied Bo and let him grieve while I checked for tracks, they would be riding double now, and that horse Josie was boarding was young and untried on the trail. The mare would be skittish and heading down hill in the dark on a frightened horse is mighty dangerous. But letting

a lawman catch up with you when you've abducted his wife is worse.

I'd wanted to give Bo more time with Ginger but we had to get going. Josie was still out there, and I planned to find her.

I thought Bo would fight me but he didn't, he knew one of his stable mates was ahead, and he knew Ginger was gone. People think horses are stupid, they couldn't understand death or mourn for a loved one, but those folks are wrong. Bo was as determined as I to find Ginger's killer.

And on that night of hell with only a sliver of a moon to guide us, heading down a trail no wider than a horse with a thousand foot drop off on one side, I didn't think it could get worse and then lightning flashed across the sky, and thunder echoed through the canyons of the mountains.

I thought of that skittish animal ahead and that drop-off and I felt a spear of fire in my gut. Josie didn't have a chance out there on the mountain on a night like this. I slowed Bo, no use getting ourselves killed before we found them.

A flash of lightning showed me what I didn't want to see. That poor frightened horse lay at the bottom of a gulch, maybe 500 feet down, its hooves in the air. If anyone was on her when she went, they're down there too. I got off Bo and drop the reins to the ground, his signal to stand. He doesn't always obey but that night with the thunder and lightning pouring down on us, and a stable mate at the bottom of the gulch, he waited for me.

I walked ahead, surveying the ground; I found tracks on the trail, two different size boots. They must have jumped off before the horse went over the edge. Josie was alive, on foot, and her tracks led on down the mountain. I would have liked to go down and check on that horse, make sure she wasn't suffering but we were damn close to the border now, and I had to keep

moving.

Bo whinnied a long lonesome cry and we moved on. I saw the halo of light on the horizon, the sun would be up before I reached Mexico, and I had no idea how far ahead they were. But she was alive when that poor horse went over the edge. I kept that thought in my mind as I continue down the trail.

We rounded a bend but I didn't see anyone on the trail. I wouldn't accept the obvious that they'd crossed the border. I squeezed Bo's side and he galloped down the hill. We both knew we were close to trails end and we almost passed him.

On a side trail a man stood with his back to me, holding a good size rock in his hand. He was so concentrated on his task, he didn't hear me. Bo managed one of those skidding stops like he was in the arena, rump down, back feet almost hitting the front, and I jumped off. The man whirled around and then I saw what he was doing, stacking a small mound of rocks. For a second I couldn't breathe.

I aimed my gun at him, and he raised his hands in surrender. "She fell," he said, "She broke her neck."

I was fighting to keep the gun steady and the tears from my eyes. I waited until I could control my voice. I fought for that distance a lawman feels for the scene of a crime, for that protective shell of impersonal emotions that allows a man to see terrible things and survive. I fought for that control, "She was my wife." I told him.

"I wanted her, I saw her in the grocery store, so beautiful, so lively, and I wanted her."

I knew I was hearing the words of a mad man. A person the law says isn't responsible for what he has done.

I could only repeat, "She was my wife."

He looked at me for a long time, and he looked at the gun I was holding, and he asked, “You aren’t going to take me in, are you?”

“You could have made it to the border, you could have gotten away.” I said. I don’t think I knew at that moment what I was going to do. But I guess he did.

“I loved her. I couldn’t leave her to the bears and coyotes.”

“Love? No, obsession maybe.” That was the lawman talking. The husband stared in disbelief, Love? This man didn’t even know my Josie. He didn’t know the beauty of her heart, and he didn’t know her heartbreak when the doctor said she couldn’t have a child. He didn’t know how she turned her loss into a life dedicated to helping young children, and he didn’t know how she wrinkled her nose if I suggested liver and onions for dinner. She wasn’t the light of his life.

“You aren’t taking me in, are you?” He’d asked again.

If he had stopped talking he might have lived, but then he said, “She fought like a tiger, but she was worth it, the best I ever had.” He turned and placed the rock he held on her small grave.

It wasn’t a conscious decision, I’d heard of momentary insanity but didn’t believe it, and yet at that moment the world turned red, my chest heaved, and my mind blanked as my Glock fired.

They never solved the murder of my wife. I doubt they ever will. It’s a good thing she called her mother after I left for Phoenix or I’d be the prime suspect. Tracker dogs came from Tucson that night but the rain had destroyed the trail.

And now once a year, Bo and I go up to that abandoned miner’s camp. I moved Josie’s

body and buried her with Ginger's saddle and blanket. Bo wanders around the grounds looking for any remains of his old stable mate while I sit beside my wife and tell her I love her and she is the light of my life. And I tell her "One of these days, I'll be coming back to bed."

The END