

CHAPTER TEN



CHARLES BRONSON

So, where're we going?" I asked. Now that we were back on the road, it was time to get some answers.

Dan turned toward the window, letting me know by his posture that he didn't want to be part of this conversation.

"Just keep driving," Grover said.

I was about ready to slam on the brakes and put the two men out on the highway when Grover tapped me on the shoulder and pointed to a small dot in the distance.

"Turn in there," he said.

"What is it?" I asked.

"You'll see."

As we got closer I could see that the dot was actually a small oasis of human habitation. There was a battered house trailer sitting about a hundred yards off the highway up a small dirt path. An abandoned school bus with a tattered black and white prisoner of war flag fluttering above it on a makeshift flagpole stood in the tall grass behind it.

“Good place to stock up,” Grover said.

I didn’t like the sound of *stock up*. It spoke of a longer journey than I had in mind. And I couldn’t imagine what kind of “stock” we could get at someone’s house trailer.

I assumed this was the residence of one of their friends, until I saw the small hand-painted sign in the window: Lila’s Place.

Dan stepped out first. The heat was overwhelming.

“Christ, it’s toasty,” he said.

A scroungy little dog wormed its way out from under the stoop and wiggled its way toward us through the heat and dust. Dan made a few *tsuk* sounds, and the little dog ran over to him, wagging its scrawny tail vigorously. Unlike most rez dogs, it seemed trusting of people and hungry for affection.

“This is a good dog,” he said.

In the field near the school bus I could see six children’s school desks set in formation in the weeds. Old teddy bears were seated in three of them.

“School’s in session,” Grover said.

“Or a teddy bears’ picnic,” I offered.

We walked together through the dusty scattering of overturned tricycles and old tires and climbed the single wooden step into the trailer. Dan actually took the lead, though Grover and I stayed close behind him. There was no doubt that the sweat and the time in the open air had improved his mobility.

Lila’s Place was nothing more than a few racks set up in the living room of the trailer. A few cans of Spam and SpaghettiOs sat on the otherwise empty shelves. Several bags of potato chips and other junk food lay on a card table, along with a selection of cheap candy. A few locally made God’s eyes hung on the wall with hand-lettered price tags reading \$4.50.

An old refrigerator was whirring and wheezing in the corner. A

sheet of paper with “bottles of water. 50 cents” written on it was pasted on its door.

Dan tapped me on the shoulder. “Amana,” he said, pointing.

“Don’t look inside,” I said.

A woman, who I assumed was Lila, was sitting behind a makeshift counter playing solitaire with a worn deck of cards. The little dog had followed us in and made its way behind the counter.

“Shoo,” the woman said. The dog flattened its ears and ran out the door.

I looked around for something that would serve as lunch. The cans of Spam and SpaghettiOs didn’t appeal to me, but I didn’t see a lot of other options.

“Got any baloney?” Grover said.

“Just the Spam,” the woman answered. She was focused on her solitaire game.

“Get it, Nerburn,” Grover said to me.

“No,” I said. “I’m not buying Spam.” I knew the purchase was going to land on me.

He gave me one of his mock punches in the shoulder. “What? You a vegetarian now?”

Dan was nosing around, peering at the various shelves and looking at a painted turtle shell hanging on the wall. He shuffled over to the door and stared out at the little dog sitting on the front stoop.

“What you want for that dog?” he said.

The woman looked up slowly. “Well, I don’t know.”

She shouted into the back room, “Carlene, want to sell that little dog?”

Another woman’s face emerged from a room in the back of the trailer. “Oh, I don’t know. How much you give me?”

“I’ll give you twelve dollars,” Dan said.

“That’s good.”

“Nerburn, give her twelve bucks,” he said.

I was dumbstruck. I didn’t want to say “yes,” but I couldn’t say “no.” Not only was Dan spending my money, he was spending it on a dog that appeared to have a dangerously contagious case of mange.

Grover stepped out from behind the shelves. “We don’t need the dog, Dan,” he said. “They’ve got Spam.”

Dan shot him a withering glance.

“I got a pack of wieners in back,” the woman said, “if you don’t want Spam.”

“We’ll take the wieners and the dog and a loaf of bread,” Dan said. “You want anything, Nerburn?”

“What else could a guy want?” I said.

Dan cackled. Then he turned toward the door and made a few *tsuk* sounds. The little dog nosed open the screen door and squirmed its way in. It wormed over to him, squinting as if it hadn’t opened its eyes in days.

The little fellow was a mess. He looked like a chemo patient, with tufts of hair alternating with bald spots. His eyes were rheumy, and what hair he had was dirty and matted. His provenance was dubious, if not utterly impossible to trace. There was some kind of terrier involved, but beyond that it was anyone’s guess. His ears stuck almost straight out like airplane wings, and he had sad and soulful little eyes and a droopy Yosemite Sam mustache. His spindly little tail wagged his entire rear end as he dragged himself on his belly across the floor toward the old man.

“Looks like a rat,” Grover said.

“Just a mixed-blood,” Dan said, slowly lowering himself toward the floor with the aid of the counter edge. I ran over to offer him assistance, but he brushed me aside. His attention was on the dog, and the dog’s attention was on him. He was speaking to it in Lakota, and the dog was wagging its tail like it had just met the best friend it had ever had.

“You pay for the stuff, Nerburn. We’re going out to the car.” He scooped up the little pup and cradled him in the crook of his arm. He ignored me as I helped him to his feet, then shuffled off toward the car, making little cooing sounds to the dog that sounded for all the world like the gurgling of a pigeon. Grover followed close behind.

“I don’t suppose you have any, like, mange medicine?” I asked the woman.

She looked at me uncomprehendingly, so I just paid the bill, then picked up the wieners and white bread and hurried out the door.

Dan and Grover had already situated themselves in the car. Once again, Dan was in the front seat. I had hoped the little dog would be sequestered in the back area of the station wagon, but he was curled up on Dan’s lap, breathing contentedly.

I wanted to feel sorry for the little fellow, but my time on reservations had inured me to tragic dogs. Almost every convenience store had at least one arthritic, pus-eyed old hound scavenging around the parking area, and spinal, heavy-dugged mothers with no pups, loping along the ditches on the sides of highways, were an all too common sight. I remembered the first time I had driven to Red Lake in the winter and seen the frozen carcasses of dead dogs propped up against trees as some kind of winter sport. At a certain point the heart just hardens.

“Dan, that dog’s got mange,” I said.

“You’re not looking so good yourself,” Grover said from the back.

“I know. But mange is catching. For humans, too.”

“Then we’ll just wash him in kerosene,” Dan said.

“You can’t wash that little dog in kerosene,” I said. “It’ll kill him.”

Dan snorted contemptuously. “It was good enough for us kids in boarding school. So now it’s not good enough for some little dog?”

I gave up the fight. I'd find some way to clean up the little dog, and it wouldn't be with kerosene. But it wasn't worth an argument.

"So, you going to give him a name?" I said, trying to be conciliatory.

"Already have," Dan answered. "Charles Bronson."

"Charles Bronson," I said. "Of course. What else could you name a little dog?"

Dan saw no humor in my comment. "Could have named him something else. But I didn't. I named him Charles Bronson."

"Maybe the Great Spirit told him that," Grover said. In the rearview mirror I could see him grinning broadly.

There was nothing else I could say. I put the car in gear and headed off into the afternoon sun. Dan sat in stubborn silence. Grover blew smoke rings across the seat.

"I know something about dogs, Nerburn," Dan said testily. "You just drive."

"Hope you know how to give them baths," I groused.

Grover blew another smoke ring. I stared grimly at the straight-line highway extending into the distance. Charles Bronson was nestled in Dan's lap and sleeping happily. This was his lucky day. It was rapidly becoming obvious that it was not going to be mine.