

Prologue

The line extended back nearly to the entrance. Complete disgust overwhelmed the smile he came in with, but little choice in the matter lead him to his place in line.

Checking the date on his watch didn't help or change anything. The line remained what it was. Leaning out, none too subtlety, he looked forward and counted twelve ahead of him.

It's not the first of the month, he quietly deduced, but too damned close to it.

First of the month always meant long lines, but this was the sixth and still the place was full. It appeared that all of humanity was represented in this small post office. The line was a cross-section of today's society. Each one there had their own personal and singular agenda that would take time... precious time. The attendant appeared to move slower as the line increased.

Another deep breath followed another quick look at his watch.

"Why do I do this to myself?" he thought nearly out loud. So loudly, the woman in front of him turned to offer her own look of contempt.

Tipping his large hat, he smiled and shifted weight from one boot to the other.

It's my fault. He kept the thought internal this time. The package had to go, today. It was a birthday gift for his mom and he had all but forgotten.

Thank God, Sis called, his mind remembered. Things could be worse.

He probably should have planned a trip to see her, but with all he had going on that was almost an impossibility. This was his only hope.

The post office had four windows, but only one was open. The line, now around him, was a virtual eclectic salad mix. No particular race, nationality or anything else was represented more than another. From appearances, this was the first trip to a post office for most, or at least they acted like it was. The slow moving clerk had to explain everything in detail... twice if not more, to each customer.

His awareness of surroundings was keen to start with, then something triggered those senses to a higher level.

He had noticed the man in the denim jacket and blue shirt with the red bandana more than once. This man wasn't in the line. He stood beyond the string of humanity staring at the wall. His attention seemed focused on a row of closed post office boxes. The big problem was, this guy had been doing that far too long.

The line itself moved forward and the impatient cowboy checked the time again.

Ten minutes...not so bad really, he told himself. But his real concern and concentration was now more on the man in the blue shirt with the red bandana.

After several more minutes, which seemed an eternity, the lady in front of him was finally called to the counter. Her head down, she dug deep into a large purse while shuffling her feet forward. In what seemed like a continuous motion, she pulled out a massive wad of bills and raised the money nearly head high. Then, in a loud and clear voice, she proclaimed, "I need a \$500.00 money order."

That's when everything got weird.

The man in the blue jacket with the red bandana quickly slid over to the lady at the counter. He grabbed her by the neck and reached for her handful of cash.

Screams filled the post office as the man next in line dropped his package and moved a step closer to the bandit. The blue shirted bad guy kept hold of the woman's neck. With his other hand he laid the money on the counter and pulled a .44 Caliber handgun. It was leveled at the approaching man's face.

"No hero-crap today, bud," he growled. "Got it?"

Freezing in place, the cowboy managed to keep a steel eye on the bad guy as he moved toward the door. Dragging his victim with him and threatening her all the way. "Anybody moves before I'm gone..." he swore, "and she's dead."

Once outside, he climbed on a large, older model motorcycle. Stuffing the cash into his blue shirt, the thief then shoved his victim to the ground and fired up the bike. As he rode away, the cowboy rushed to the door and held out a cell phone, clicking away at the escaping motorcycle. Helping the woman up, he then dialed a number on his phone. It soon was answered, many miles away.

"Hey... you got time to do me a favor?" the cowboy asked calmly.

"Absolutely," the voice responded.

"I'm gonna send you some pictures. See if you can make out a license number on this bike for me, quick."

"I suppose you'll want a name and address to go with it?"

"You would be correct, my young friend. I'd appreciate that."

"Okay, I'll be back to you in a few minutes."

The cowboy had yet another question. “I don’t suppose my friend has gotten tired of playing dead, has he?”

There was a pause on the other end. Then Ben Shaw responded in an odd tone of voice, “I don’t really know what you’re talking about.”

“Okay,” Murray Bilstock accepted, “Just thought I’d ask.”

“Let me get on these pictures for you. I’ll try to have answers on those in about an hour.”

Ben rerouted the subject.

The cowboy listened. He considered another shot at his pointed question, but decided to let it go for now. “Thanks my friend. I’ll be right here,” he answered.