

Bad Spirits

A Kate Jones Short



By DV Berkom

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by

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For Mark

BAD SPIRITS

Something didn't feel right.

Dark.

Dirt floor.

My left side ached, and I could barely swallow. I sat with my eyes closed and tried to recall what happened. The events from the previous night came crashing back into the present, and the fear of discovery threatened to overwhelm me again.

I peeked around the corner of the corrugated steel building. A lone goat munched on some dried grass near a split-rail fence. A few yards away a rooster pecked at the hard, dry earth. An older woman with salt and pepper colored hair and skin like a walnut scattered seed in front of him. She clutched a brown and white serape around her against the early morning chill.

Everything appeared calm, bucolic, even. I leaned back against the metal wall and took stock of my position.

Salazar ruled this little section of Sonora with an iron hand. The woman outside would not help me, for fear of payback. In fact, no one who knew him would be fool enough to assist Salazar's crazy American woman.

Especially when she took something that belonged to him. Something he valued above all else. And it wasn't only his pride, although that would be enough to get me killed.

I opened the canvas backpack next to me to make sure the contents were still safe, that I hadn't somehow lost it all in my mad rush to escape.

The cash was all there. I breathed a sigh of relief. It meant my survival. Without it, I would have nothing with which to bargain for my life, if it came to that. As it was, the stash wouldn't get me the immediate help I so desperately needed. It wasn't like I could call a cab in this part of Mexico, even if I had a phone.

If I knew Salazar, he'd already locked down the small airport a few miles away, and was probably trying to bribe aviation officials in Hermosillo, Obregón and even Puerto Peñasco, although each of the towns lay miles from his hacienda.

I needed to get to San Bruno, a small fishing village on the Sea of Cortez. Salazar didn't have much pull with the ex-pats who lived there. Besides, they'd help a fellow American.

Especially one with a boat load of dinero.

I zipped the backpack closed, stood up, and heaved it over my shoulders. Funny how much money weighed.

I waited until the older woman had stepped inside her weathered home, and then I quietly slipped away down the dirt road, careful not to disturb El Gallo as he strutted past the disinterested goat.

I tucked my blonde hair up under a baseball cap to hide it and hitched a ride west on the back of an ancient Ford pickup. The driver looked me over once and waved me into the truck bed to sit with the alfalfa, probably thinking I was some silly gringa on a turista's adventure. I was glad I had grabbed an older jacket from one of Salazar's bodyguards. All of my clothes were too new, too expensive. I'd be a prime target for bandits. As it was, I was a sitting duck lugging around the cash, paranoid that everyone knew I'd stolen millions of dollars from a notorious drug lord.

What I'd seen last night confirmed my worst fears, and then some. I'd been in denial about Salazar's true nature, and it hit me like a bullet to the brain. His expression held no remorse, even as he sliced through the man's throat- a man who, until that moment, had been a loyal soldier in Salazar's increasingly bizarre attempts to own the Sonoran drug trade. My sense of self preservation skyrocketed, and I took the only way out.

It seemed like the Hand of God had intervened, and I'm not given to religious hyperbole. I'd abandoned the delivery van a few miles from the ranch the night before, and grabbed as much cash as I could stuff in the backpack. The vehicle had been parked in the drive with the keys and money in it. I simply took the initiative.

I made myself comfortable, and had to inhale great gulps of dusty air to counteract the nausea and shaking as I watched the sun rise in the distance, and the road race away from the back of the pickup.

I woke as soon as the pickup stopped. We'd parked next to the imposing white mission of the town of Santa Theresa.

"This is as far as I am going," the driver said in Spanish. I thanked him and asked where I could get a good breakfast. He pointed down a nearby street and indicated the second restaurant I would come to served the best Huevos Rancheros in town.

I sat in the shade under the palm roof, aviator sunglasses on, a can of Fanta in my hand, as the aged Mexican woman prepared my breakfast. A dark-haired boy, about four years old, played hide and seek with her while she cooked. I'd always loved the casual, family-centered

vibe of Mexican restaurants. No hurry, enjoy your meal. It didn't matter what you looked like, or where you were from, you were there to share in one of life's greatest gifts: food.

The woman set my plate down in front of me and smiled shyly. The little boy stood next to her and peered over the edge of the table, curious to see how the gringa ate her breakfast. I grinned at him and thanked her, and poured her homemade salsa on my huevos. Then I topped it off with a few jalapeños. The woman walked away and after a moment's hesitation, the little boy scurried after her, giggling.

I finished my soda and had walked to the counter to pay for my meal when a white SUV with smoked windows drove by, slowing as it passed the restaurant. I moved behind one of the roof supports. The truck looked familiar. The woman behind the counter glanced at me, then shoved the little boy underneath the brick counter with a terse admonition.

The SUV moved past us and turned the corner. Not waiting for the change, I grabbed the backpack and ran out the rear of the restaurant, into the alley.

The white SUV sat idling at one end. The passenger side door opened. I heaved the pack over the fence in front of me and scrambled after it, scattering chickens and dogs as I landed hard on my ass. The sound of squealing tires told me I needed to move, now.

I sprang to my feet, shouldered the pack, and sprinted through the backyard, headed for the door of the cinderblock house. The teenage boy sitting on the couch didn't have time to react other than to open his mouth in surprise as I burst through the door and plowed through his living room, knocking over chairs and leaping over plastic toys on the floor.

I skidded to a stop when I reached the front door and eased it open, careful to check each end of the dirt street that ran in front of the house. The SUV was nowhere in sight, so I slipped out the door and started to run.

I heard the SUV before I saw it and veered right. I ignored the heavy pack mashing my kidneys as I ran, determined to escape with both my life and every ounce of the money. I caught a glimpse of the kid from the last house out of the corner of my eye, running parallel to me. If he kept it up, there'd be two dead bodies in the street.

"Get back inside!" I yelled. He continued to match my direction and motioned for me to follow him. I couldn't think of a better plan, so I did. He slipped behind a rusty corrugated building and I tracked right behind him.

The sound of the SUV skidding to a stop on the gravel street, followed by angry male voices spilled over me. I ran like I'd never run before, knocking crates over, oblivious to anything not nailed down in front of me, never once losing sight of the boy's red shirt.

He led me into a rabbit warren of alleyways, jogging first one way, then the other. I was completely disoriented by the time we stopped. I bent over, trying to catch my breath, and let the backpack sag to the ground. He was breathing heavy, too, although not as much.

He held a finger to his lips. I struggled to slow my breathing and listened. A television commercial for a sports drink blared a few doors down. Somewhere a dog barked. There was no sound of Salazar's men or the SUV. I sighed with relief.

"Who are you?" I asked the kid in Spanish.

"Manuel."

I held out my hand. "Manuel, I am so happy to make your acquaintance." He smiled and shook my hand, nodding.

"Why did you help me?"

Manuel shrugged. "You were in trouble."

Good enough for me. I inspected the area where we stood. A six foot high concrete wall surrounded us, the space open to the sky. Mismatched plastic chairs surrounded a white plastic table covered with a cheerful flowery table cloth. A metal bird cage hung from a wrought iron stand, with no bird in sight. Two wooden cases of empty Seven-up bottles stood in the corner.

"How do I get out of here?" I asked.

Manuel frowned. Then his face split into a big smile.

"My Uncle Javier can give you a ride in his truck. He will take you wherever you want to go."

"I have a little money. I can pay him."

Manuel grinned. "Even better. My uncle will do almost anything for money."

The panel truck was a tad overcrowded. It appeared that Uncle Javier had a side business that involved smuggling humans.

There were a total of thirty two people besides me in the back. I sat between a young couple from Jalisco and an older, indigenous man dressed in a poncho. I didn't understand his dialect very well, and after a few attempts at communication, I gave up and talked with the younger couple. The smell of excitement and fear permeated the truck. Everyone there had paid dearly for the chance to cross the border into the US, and stories about disreputable 'coyotes,' as the smugglers were called, abounded.

I felt a small measure of safety, since I wasn't taking the same route. Once Uncle Javier dropped his cargo off at a prearranged place, he'd drive me to San Bruno, where I'd be able to find simpatico ex-pats who would help me leave the country.

The rest of the travelers, however, didn't have it as good. The US government had recently beefed up security along the Arizona border, and bandits had flocked to the area, attracted by the easy money of ripping off the migrants, who needed help to get across.

The compartment grew stuffy and uncomfortable, but no one complained. The young couple from Jalisco had dreams of opening a restaurant in a small town outside of Flagstaff, where several of the woman's relatives lived. They asked me many questions about what they could expect, and I tried to give them realistic answers, explaining that Arizona was not what you'd call immigrant friendly. They'd heard about the controversy, but had been told they'd be able to get work visas easily. I told them I thought there was a very long wait for these visas. They remained undaunted.

After a few hours, the truck slowed to a stop. The sound of slamming car doors and muffled voices echoed in the dark. Someone disengaged the handle on the other side of the door

and rolled up the panel. Silhouetted against bright headlights, two masked gunmen pointed AK-47s at us.

My hand moved instinctively to a zippered pocket on the backpack. Luckily it was dark, and the gunmen didn't notice. I slid my hand back to rest on my thigh. There was no reason to pull out a gun at this point. I'd be dead in seconds, as would the rest of the occupants in the truck.

"Everyone out!" The taller of the two gunmen waved his weapon to indicate where we should go. People began to gather their things. Husbands wrapped protective arms around their wives as they murmured in fear. I helped the indigenous guy to his feet. His eyes had an intensity I found oddly reassuring. We moved toward the open door. Once ten people had climbed out, the gunmen barred the rest from getting off the truck.

I barely overheard the other gunman's orders as he demanded the people hand over all their valuables, or they would be shot. They opened their belongings and he rifled through, looking for money or jewelry. Once the first group had been robbed, the next ten were told to come out of the truck. The younger couple, the indigenous guy and I stayed behind in the last group. I wouldn't give up my backpack without a fight. I moved to the back of the line, quietly pulled out my gun and shoved it into the waistband of my jeans. It was loaded with a round chambered. Eduardo had taught me well.

We inched closer to the gunmen. Adrenaline took the place of the fear I'd been feeling, and everything appeared crystal clear. I was probably going to die, but would damn sure try to take out the gunmen before they hurt anyone. The thought didn't surprise me. After living with a man like Salazar, I'd never again be the same person who'd traveled on her own to Mexico three years ago.

It seemed like a lifetime.

I watched as the rest of the passengers stepped off the back of the truck. The gunman motioned for the older man to get out. He bent over as though to tie his shoe. Then he straightened and whipped his poncho to one side, revealing a sub machine gun. He let loose with a barrage of bullets, mowing down both of the gunmen. The assault was so unexpected neither of them could get a shot off before the old man's aim found its mark. Miraculously, he hit none of the passengers.

With a sharp cry Uncle Javier ran blindly into the creosote bushes. The old man let him go.

At first stunned, soon everyone clamored to touch his hand and thank him. I slumped against the wall of the truck in relief and closed my eyes against the grisly sight of the dead men.

The young couple I'd been talking with said something to the old man that I didn't catch. He replied and nodded his head. I moved closer to the couple and asked what he'd said.

The young woman had tears in her eyes. "He said he was sent to protect us." She wiped her eyes with her hand. "He said the spirits moved him to come to this place and bring a gun. He also said to tell you to trust no one on your journey."

Apparently. How the hell was I going to make it all the way to San Bruno without trusting someone?

After recovering the items taken from them, a few of the male passengers dragged the dead gunmen out of sight. The older man in the poncho guided everyone else into the back of the truck. His eyes held mine for a moment. He seemed to look through me, as though he knew my mind. The young couple walked up beside me and the woman took my hand.

"He says you are not coming with us." Her expression mirrored the concern on her husband's face. "You must be careful."

The old man murmured something to her and she turned to me.

"He says there are bad spirits surrounding you. He will say a prayer to intercede for you, but you must not rest- not even when you think you are safe. It is for this that the spirits wait." The old man leaned over and pointed at me as he spoke again.

The woman's eyes darkened. "He tells me your destiny is to live looking over your shoulder, never knowing when these spirits will come for you- until you give up everything. Only then will you be free."

Okay then. Well. I'd never been good at taking advice, and tonight was no different.

"Tell him thank you, and that I will consider his warning."

She spoke in rapid sentences. The old man looked up, shook his head and laughed, then walked away. She shrugged and said, "He's an old man," by way of explanation.

I said goodbye to them both and walked over to the gunmen's truck. The keys dangled from the ignition.

I took the initiative.

I drove through the night, glad for the anonymity of the darkness. I had to swerve to avoid a small herd of steers somewhere outside of Moctezuma. Otherwise, the trip was uneventful. I stopped for fuel at a tiny roadside station and woke the proprietor, who did not appreciate the interruption.

I'd made it to the outskirts of Hermosillo by sunrise, and decided to try my luck by continuing to drive in daylight. The truck didn't agree.

The four-wheel drive coughed and sputtered its way to the side of the road, and then died. I got out and lifted the hood and checked the belts, the hoses, and whatever filters I could find. I had no idea what was wrong. It had been a long time since I'd worked on a vehicle, and my skills were rusty. Not to mention the truck was a later model, and most of its components were either electronic or impossible to get to.

I lowered the hood and reached in the passenger side for my backpack. With a sigh, I shrugged on the pack and started to walk.

The first couple of cars zoomed by me so fast I barely had time to stick my thumb out. The third slowed and stopped just ahead, waiting for me to catch up. It was an old Ford Galaxy convertible- long, low and sea green, with a trunk the size of Manhattan. The driver had a goatee and wore Wayfarer sunglasses, a Hawaiian shirt and a baseball cap with a purple Vikings logo.

I threw the pack in the back seat and sat in front. The gun was still in my waistband, just in case this guy turned out to be a serial killer. Or a Fox News anchor.

"You like the Vikings?" I asked.

"Yeah. They haven't won a playoff in years."

So he was American. I looked more closely at him. He reminded me of someone, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Probably some celebrity. "You from Minnesota?"

"Nope. Virginia. I just like the Vikes. How about you?"

"Minnesota, born and bred."

We drove in silence for a while.

"What's in the pack?"

I tensed. Too personal. The old man's warning flashed in my mind. "Just stuff," I replied. He snorted. "Stuff? What kind of stuff?"

A feeling of dread swam through me. Just take it easy, Kate. He's a friendly American, that's all.

"Oh, you know, the usual. Clothes and things."

"Looks pretty heavy."

"Well, there are shoes, too." I hoped my smile looked innocent enough.

"What's a pretty thing like you doing out here in the middle of the Sonoran desert?" He glanced in the rear view mirror. "That pickup truck back there on the side of the road yours?"

"I wish. I've been hitching for days."

"You wouldn't happen to know a guy named Roberto Salazar, would you?"

I nearly choked.

He smiled. The scenery reflected off his sunglasses.

"I guess you do." He glanced at me. "Don't freak out. I'm one of the good guys." He reached for the glove box, hesitating until I nodded for him to go ahead. My hand rested under my jacket near the gun.

He pulled out a badge that read Drug Enforcement Administration, Special Agent.

Shit. A backpack full of drug money and I catch a ride with a DEA agent.

My options had just narrowed considerably. The larger question was how did he make the connection? Had news of my escape really spread that fast?

I was torn. If I told him who I was, he'd detain me for questioning, and possibly arrest me since I'd been involved with Salazar. On the other hand, I'd get a free pass to the states, maybe even a new identity if I volunteered information. It was possible he already guessed my identity.

I decided to test the waters.

"I've heard of him."

"What have you heard?"

"That you don't want to get on his bad side."

"Sounds about right. Ever met him?"

"Once, at a party, I think." Better to establish a slight link rather than play completely stupid. "Hey- do I know you from somewhere? You seem familiar." My hand inched toward the door handle.

He chuckled and pushed on the accelerator. The Galaxy's speedometer read sixty-five, then seventy. Alarm shot through me like a lightning bolt, and that old familiar panic returned.

"Why don't you slow down? You're making me nervous."

He sped up in response. "How can a little speed make you nervous? Living with Salazar was so much more dangerous."

I glanced out the windshield. We headed straight toward a bend in the road. I strapped on my seatbelt. His grin reminded me of Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*.

"Scared, Kate?" He turned to look at me.

"Stop-" The words died in my throat as the Galaxy plowed into the side of the black steer standing in the road.

As if in slow motion, my upper body and legs flew forward from the force of the impact, the center of my body anchored in place by the single strap of the seatbelt. Glass shattered and metal screamed, drowning out the animal's bellow.

A deathly stillness followed the crash. The punctured radiator hissed steam. Dazed, I unhooked the seatbelt and opened the passenger side door, and fell onto the roadside. My gun dropped onto the road with a clatter. I grabbed it, then dragged myself up onto the door to stand, gasping and choking from having the wind knocked out of me.

I felt around for broken bones, but didn't find any. The driver's seat held shards of glass instead of the driver. Warily, I stepped around to the front of the car.

The steer's dead body lay wedged underneath the front wheels. At least it had been quick. My backpack rested a few yards further up the road. It appeared to be intact. I walked over to retrieve it when I heard a moan.

He sat slumped against a mesquite tree on the side of the road. Blood from a head wound stained his Hawaiian shirt a dark red. His left leg canted out at an unnatural angle. The ball cap was nowhere in sight. He watched as I approached, his breathing ragged.

With no cap and sunglasses, I finally recognized him, even through the blood on his face. I aimed the gun at his chest.

"I thought you said you were one of the good guys."

"You won't make it, Kate. Salazar's got everybody out looking for you, and he didn't say he wanted you alive. I came to find you before they did."

"Gee, thanks John. That was real nice of you." I should have known the square jaw, the aquiline nose. John Sterling was DEA, all right, but not the good kind. He wanted the money, not me.

"Give me your gun." I pointed at his armpit.

He sighed as he slid his hand underneath his shirt to the shoulder holster I knew he always wore. The rhythmic rise and fall of his chest belied the difficulty he had breathing. After a couple of futile attempts, he let his hand drop to this thigh.

"I can't."

Careful to keep my gun out of reach, I leaned over and slid his Glock out of the holster, then stepped back.

He closed one eye and squinted. "You gonna kill me?"

I considered the question for a moment, let him sweat. Then I shook my head.

"No."

He nodded. "Didn't think so."

I turned to go. The backpack felt much heavier than before.

"He'll find you. Salazar never quits."

I shrugged the pack onto my back.

Neither did I.