

## Spider's Good Luck

It was probably cooler in hell. The sun's fiery stare made mirages shimmer off the broad span of interstate streaking away in the distance. Mountains were a flickering blur of brown and splotchy green flame against a flawless blue sky. Air whipping through the windows of the old Chevy pickup felt like it came from a blast furnace.

Wiley Jack eased the Chevy along at forty-five miles an hour trying to save gas and avoid being hit by the occasional road-rockets whistling by. Despite the Jornada de Muerto's heat, the old truck's slow speed, failed air conditioner, and voiceless radio, he was smiling as he croaked an off-key *Pancho and Lefty*. A good payday was coming if he haggled well with Sam Carley. The silver belt buckles and rings he had spent so many hours on were wrapped in a towel stuffed under the seat and read for sale.

He started slowing down as soon as he saw the lone figure trudging along the white line wavering in the distance. It was twenty miles to the next water; in the heat, it was easy to get disoriented, wander off the road, and leave your bones to be found months later in the creosotes and mesquite. Wiley halted the old truck off to the side of the burning concrete thirty yards in front of the hiker and waited. The vagabond was wearing a stocking cap pulled down to the ears, a heavy dark-blue Peay jacket, a man's dress coat, a farmer's bib overalls, and a shirt buttoned all the way to the collar. Even though figure trudging along had a leathery face of bronzed patina creased by hard, slashed wrinkles, a brow that lay under dirty, mousy-brown hair, and a square jaw under straight, thin lips, it didn't take Wiley more than a few seconds to realize he was staring at a woman in his rear view mirror. She came on toward the truck, not hesitating, but not hurrying either. As she got closer, Wiley saw the tops of a couple of water bottles sticking out of the Peay jacket's side pockets. *At least*, he thought, *she has a little sense*.

She walked up to the truck, stopped, and stared inside without saying a word. Wiley flicked up his hand. "Howdy! Ma'am its twenty miles to the next water and this here is a long hot road. Climb in. I give yuh a ride."

Looking Wiley and the Chevy up and down with hard, glinting eyes, she said, "You a Indian?"

“Get on in. I ain't gonna bother yuh. Just thought I'd give you a ride in this here Cadillac's all.”

She pulled the door open and slid up on the seat, all the time staring straight ahead like he wasn't there. Wiley ground the transmission back into gear, and eased back on to the highway. A white Lexus blew by, making the old truck shudder in its wake.

“Where yuh headed?”

She reached in her coat and pulled out a wrinkled cigarette and lighted it with amazing ease in the window's swirling wind. Blowing the smoke out the side of her mouth, she said, “Goin' to the Albuquerque shelter. Learnt other day ol' Tom Bean's up 'ere bad sick. I'm a gonna see him 'fore he dies. Where you a goin'?”

“Oh, I'm going to see Sam Carley.” Wiley said, trying not communicate too much of his business.

“Old geezer that runs a tourist trap down to Old Town?”

“One and the same.”

“So you makes it, an' he sells it?”

“Yeah, that's about right.” Wiley ground his teeth. She was too smart and he was too honest to keep his business private. He tried to redirect the conversation away from jewelry and his association with it. His usual taciturn self disappeared.

“What's your name ma'am? Mine's Wiley Jack.”

“My friends call me Spider, short fer Spider Woman.”

“How do you keep from passin' out in the heat with all them clothes on? Just lookin' at cha makes me sweat in this here heat.”

She looked at him and grinned showing surprisingly white teeth. “Awe, a feller gits used to it. Have to wear 'em cause I's the only closet I got, and it gits cold in the win'r time.”

“Yes'am, I guess that's about right. What's the matter with your friend at the shelter?”

“I think he musta 'bout drunk his self to death. I's partnered up with him fer a time. We run up 'n down these here roads together fer a few years. But, I left him. Tol' him I warn't gonna partner up with him no more, and I's movin' on.”

“Was he a mean drunk? That why you left him?”

“Naw. He warn't mean when he's drunk, he's a pussycat. I jus ain't gonna have no truck with his sorry attitude.” She rubbed the ash off the end of the cigarette in the truck's ashtray. There was about an inch of tobacco left, so she pulled out an old ZipLoc bag holding several butts of varying length and dropped it in with the rest.

Wiley had never heard of a woman leaving a man over attitude unless it was mean and ugly. This man of hers must have a ringtail cat's personality. Curiosity overcame his natural inclination to avoid prying. “Well, what made you leave him?”

“He didn't like my spiders.” She saw Wiley raise his brow.

“See, spiders and me we's like this.” She crossed her fore and middle fingers for Wiley to see. She fumbled around in the pocket of the inner jacket and pulled out a clear square plastic food container about two inches thick and five inches on a side. The removable lid had several nail holes punched through it. A thick white web stretched across the middle section of the box and there were small insects randomly entwined on the web's surface. A velvety, chocolate brown spider about the size of Wiley's calloused thumb rode at the center of the web.

“You skeered of spiders?”

Wiley smiled and shook his head. Pueblo people spoke of the Spider Woman in their myths. She had taught the people to weave. Her web caught dreams just like real spiders caught insects. Spiders were to be respected.

“Me and my spiders, we been together a long time. Ol' Tom he tried to git me throw this 'ne here out after we parted up. I tol' him that there warn't gonna happen. So, we went our ways. I headed south, an' he stayed in Albuquerque a drinkin' up ever thang he begged.”

She smiled. “I give ol' Tom a gift 'fore I lef' tho'. Put one her babies in one of them pill bottles he carries around whiles he's a sleepin'. Fixed her up real nice. Put paper on the side so's its dark, made a little hole in the top fer air, and left some bugs in it fer her to eat. I reckon if he ever gits around to opening that pill bottle an tries to shake out what he thinks is a pill he'll be more surprised than she is. Ha! She'll give him good luck; maybe he ain't gonna die from drinkin' too much booze. I'm gonna go see if'n she took care of him like I hoped.”

Wiley, staring at the spider, almost ran off the road. It was a Brown Recluse, beautiful and deadly poisonous.

“How long ago did you give ol’ Tom his spider?”

She shrugged her shoulders, still staring at the motionless spider. “Don’t know. It’s back when the winds was a dyin’ down. Heard he’s sick yestidy, probly dyn’. So I hit the road rat then.”

The winds were dying down in May. Now it was late June. Maybe ol’ Tom had a chance of surviving if the doctors knew what bit him. Wiley started trying to coax more speed out of the wheezing Chevy. By the time they topped a rise and saw Albuquerque’s skyline in the wavering distance, the speedometer pointed just past sixty and the old engine was straining.

When they rolled over the bridge across Rio Grande, he asked, “Which shelter’s ol’ Tom in? I’ll take you over there.”

“Hit’s the one over to Central. That there is mighty nice of you Mister.”

“It’s almost right on the way. Ain’t no problem at all.”

He took the off-ramp chewing on the inside of his lip, hoping they weren’t too late. He found the old brick shelter. Miraculously, there was a place to park right in front. While Spider disappeared inside, the parking meter swallowed his only change and gave him a half an hour. He rushed past several men lounging under the stoop’s shade, threw the door open and stepped into the cool, dark hallway. He saw her at the far end standing under a bright light talking to an old man dressed in a Salvation Army Captain’s uniform.

She saw Wiley’s form outlined in the door’s light and waved him forward.

“Captain Diaz, this here is Mr. Wiley. He brung me here!”

Captain Diaz nodded and with a little grin, stuck out his hand and shook Wiley’s. “Glad to meet you, Mr. Wiley. The shelter’s doctor is in with Mr. Bean now. It doesn’t look like the bite will kill him, but he’s been mighty sick. It’s a good thing his friends brought him here when they did or he’d be with Jesus now.”

Spider was nodding and smiling. “I knowed I give ol’ Tom good luck. That there’s just what I did. I’s gonna give him some more too.”

Diaz smiled like a patrón acknowledging a servant's good work. "The doctor will be done in a little while, and then, you can see Mr. Bean. I have to get back to the kitchen. You're more than welcome to stay with us for the evening meal." She nodded as he marched back down the hallway.

Wiley puffed up his cheeks and blew the air out in a loud puff of relief. His mind whirled trying to decide what to do. Ol' Tom must be mighty lucky. Spider's good luck hadn't killed him. How was he going to stop her from giving others some good luck? How was he going to keep her from dying from her own good luck? She'd never give those spiders up. He couldn't call the sheriff – no evidence – and, ol' Tom's brush with death was much more an accident than attempted murder or even manslaughter. He'd never call the law down on a homeless, crazy woman, anyway. Besides, if she'd been one of his people, she'd be respected and powerful. Maybe she was a manifestation of the original Spider Woman; maybe he ought to be thinking of her with a lot more respect. The swarm of questions and thoughts made Wiley's head hurt trying to sort them out as he sat with Spider on rickety folding chairs in the dark hall outside ol' Tom's doorway.

Resting his elbow on his knee and his head on his hand, Wiley turned to look at Spider who sat up straight and calm with her hands folded in her lap. He said in his best pleading voice, "Spider, don't you think it's mighty dangerous to be giving folks spiders? I mean that spider you got in your pocket, if it bites yuh, it can kill yuh! Ol' Tom, he's mighty lucky not to be dead from the bite he got. Don't you think you and your friends would be better off if your spider had a permanent home rather than ya carrying her everywhere?"

Spider was quiet for a couple of minutes. Wiley saw light from the end of the hall glistening in tears running down her cheeks. Her voice cracking, she shook her head saying, "Can't part with my spiders. They's my best friends. They's good luck. Ain't nobody ever been bit by my spiders. Ol' Tom musta been mighty mean fer it to bite him. No sir, I ain't givin' up my spiders cause o' ol' Tom."

The doctor came through the door, closing it behind him. Wiley and Spider stood to meet him.

"How's he doin' doc?" Wiley asked, a quiver of anxiety in his voice.

“Oh, he’s going to be okay. He’s a little groggy from painkillers, but you can see him now if you want. He’s a mighty lucky fellow. He had friends that knew to get him over here when they did. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to let Captain Diaz know Mr. Bean’s medication schedule. Take care of yourselves.” He nodded smiling at them and headed for the kitchen.

They opened the door to Ol’ Tom’s room. His cot was jammed against the far wall. About twenty other cots with their mattresses thrown back surrounded it. No one else was there. A sheet covered him, his eyes closed, his skin pale and sickly looking. She crept up to his cot and sat down on a bed next to his. His eyes snapped open as soon as he heard the other cot creak.

“Wah! Who is it? Stay away! You ain’t gittin’ my stuff in here ... Oh, oh. It’s you Spider. I’s a layin’ here a wondering if I’d ever see you again. Who’s that there Indian feller with ya?”

Her red eyes made a river of tears down her cheeks. “Tom this here is Mr. Wiley. He give me a ride when I’s way out in the desert. I coulda been another three or four days gittin’ here if he hadn’t picked me up. I come soon as I heerd you’s sick. I thought the booze had finally got ya, but Cap’n Diaz says you was bit. Tom, I’m mighty sorry about you being bit. Never meant for you to git bit when I give you one o’ my friends. I just thought it’d bring you luck’s all.”

“What’re you talkin’ ‘bout? That spider ain’t bit me. Me an’ the fellers drunk a little too much vino down by the Rio. We’s a stomping round in the bosque lookin’ fer a place to flop when I felt this sticker in my laig. I looked down an’ damn if it warn’t a rattlesnake. I took a stick to it an’ yelled fer the boys to help me.

“I knowed when you put that spider in one of my medicine bottles. She stayed there and growed fer a right good while. I kept feeding her flies when I found ‘em or could catch ‘em/ Long as she minded her business, I minded mine. I usually sleep off a drunk by myself, but not this las time when I’s bit. If’n I’d had to git help on my own, I’d never a made it. I spec yore little spider brought me some good luck after all.”

Spider grinned and nodded. Wiley shook his head. It always amazed him that people, no matter what culture, assigned providential interference to good fortune. He told Spider and Tom he had to get down to Sam’s and wished them well. Stepping

outside, he saw a parking ticket stuck under his windshield wiper. He stuffed it in his shirt pocket thinking, *Now, where's Spider's good luck when I need it?*

Two blocks later he stopped at a red-light. The light changed. Just as he started through the intersection, the grumbling engine died. A brilliant-red, four-door pickup racing the light, roared through the intersection just missing the nose of the old truck. The memory of Spider's pet flashed in Wiley's mind's eye as traffic began stacking up behind him and his pounding heart began settling down. Certain of what would happen next, he laughed as the truck cranked right up and moved on.