

STANDOFF

SANDRA
BROWN

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Dear Reader,

I'm so pleased that you've ordered a copy of STAND-OFF.

This is a book I couldn't wait to share with you. When I was invited to write a "thank you" book for club members, I enthusiastically accepted. It gave me a rare opportunity to show my appreciation for each time you selected a title by Sandra Brown.

But STANDOFF is also special to me from a creative standpoint. You see, I'd always wanted to write a book written in real time. In other words, all the action transpires in the amount of time it takes the average reader to read it.

This story presented me the perfect chance to undertake that ambition. Except for the final scene, which occurs a week later, the entire story unfolds over the course of several hours. It was tricky, but it was such fun to write because it moves along at such a quick clip.

I placed the characters in a confined space. In a remote area of West Texas, under life-threatening circumstances. Because there are no flashback scenes, the characters' personalities are revealed strictly through action and dialogue. The main characters valiantly strive to prevent bloodshed, of course.

But they also do what most of us would do when facing mortality—they unburden themselves, revealing more to a stranger than they would expose to close friends or family. Often what was said and done amazed even me!

As you might have gathered by now, I relished writing STANDOFF. It wasn't without its challenges, but I thoroughly enjoyed the cerebral gymnastics required of me to tell this story in the manner in which it begged to be told.

I set out to create a dangerous and dramatic situation in which ordinary people are confronted by extraordinary circumstances. The people inside that convenience

store become microcosmic of society. There are heroes and heroines, victims and villains. I had a great time watching them distinguish themselves.

I hope you'll find STANDOFF as gripping to read as it was for me to write.

Sandra Brown

January 2000

I JUST HEARD THE NEWS BULLETIN ON MY CAR RADIO.”

Tiel McCoy didn't begin this telephone conversation with any superfluous chitchat. That was her opening statement the instant Gully said hello. No preamble was necessary. Truth be known, he had probably been expecting her call.

But he played dumb anyway. “That you, Tiel? Enjoying your vacation so far?”

Her vacation had officially begun that morning when she left Dallas and headed west on Interstate 20. She had driven as far as Abilene, where she stopped to visit her uncle, who'd lived in a nursing home there for the past five years. She remembered Uncle Pete as a tall, robust man with an irreverent sense of humor, who could barbecue a mean brisket and knock a softball out of the park.

Today they had shared a lunch of soggy fish sticks and canned English peas and watched an episode of *Guiding Light*. She'd asked if there was anything she could do for him while she was there, like write a letter or buy a maga-

zine. He had smiled at her sadly and thanked her for coming, then gave himself over to an attendant who'd tucked him in for his nap like a child.

Outside the nursing home, Tiel had gratefully inhaled the scorching, gritty West Texas air in the hope of eradicating the smell of age and resignation which had permeated the facility. She had been relieved the family obligation was behind her, but felt guilty for the relief. By an act of will she shook off her despair and reminded herself that she was on vacation.

It wasn't even officially summer yet, but it was unseasonably warm for May. There'd been no shade in which to park at the nursing home; consequently her car's interior had been so hot she could have baked cookies on the dashboard. She flipped on the AC full-blast and found a radio station that played something other than Garth, George, and Willie.

"I'm going to have a wonderful time. The time away will be good for me. I'll feel a lot better for having done it." She repeated this internal dialogue like a catechism, trying to convince herself of the truth of it. She had approached the vacation as though it were equivalent to taking a bad-tasting laxative.

Heat waves made the highway appear to ripple, and the undulating movement was hypnotic. The driving became mindless. Her mind drifted. The radio provided background noise of which Tiel was barely aware.

But hearing the news bulletin was like getting goosed by the driver's seat. With a lurch, everything accelerated—the car, Tiel's heart rate, her mind.

Immediately she fished her cell phone from her large leather satchel and placed the call to Gully's direct line. Again declining any unnecessary conversation, she said to him now, "Give me the skinny."

"What's the radio putting out?"

"That earlier today a high school student in Fort Worth kidnaped Russell Dendy's daughter."

"That's about the gist of it," Gully confirmed.

"The gist, but I want details."

"You're on vacation, Tiel."

"I'm coming back. Next exit, I'll make a U-turn." She consulted her dashboard clock. "I'll be at the station by—"

"Hold on, hold on. Where're you at, exactly?"

"About fifty miles west of Abilene."

"Hmm."

"What, Gully?" Her palms had become damp. She experienced the familiar tickle in her belly that only happened when she was following a hot lead to a super story. That unique adrenaline rush couldn't be mistaken.

"You're on your way to Angel Fire, right?"

"Right."

"Northeastern part of New Mexico . . . Yeah, there it is." He must have been reading a highway map as he spoke. "Naw, never mind. You don't want this assignment, Tiel. It would take you out of your way."

He was baiting her, and she knew he was baiting her, but in this instance she didn't mind being baited. She wanted a piece of this story. The kidnaping of Russell Dendy's daughter was big news, and it promised to become even bigger news before it was over. "I don't mind taking a detour. Tell me where to go."

"Well," he hedged, "only if you're sure."

"I'm sure."

"Okay then. Not too far in front of you is a turnoff onto state highway Two-oh-eight. Take it south to San Angelo. On the south side of San Angelo you're gonna intersect with—"

"Gully, about how far out of my way is this detour going to take me?"

"I thought you didn't care."

"I don't. I'd just like to know. Rough estimate."

"Well, let's see. Give or take . . . about three hundred miles."

"From Angel Fire?" she asked faintly.

"From where you are now. Doesn't count the rest of the way to Angel Fire."

"Three hundred round trip?"

"One way."

She expelled a long sigh, but was careful not to let him hear it. "You said highway Two-oh-eight south to San Angelo, then what?"

She steered with her knee, held the phone with her left hand, and took notes with her right. The car was on cruise control, but her brain was in overdrive. Journalistic juices were pumping faster than the pistons in her engine. Thoughts of long pleasant evenings spent in a porch rocker were swapped for those of sound bites and interviews.

But she was getting ahead of herself. She lacked pertinent facts. When she asked for them, Gully, damn him, turned mulish on her. "Not now, Tiel. I'm as busy as a one-armed paperhanger, and you've got miles to cover. By the time you get where you're going, I'll have a lot more info."

Frustrated and supremely irked with him for being so stingy with the details, she asked, "What's the name of the town again?"

"Hera."

The highways were arrow-straight, flanked on both sides by endless prairie with only an occasional herd of cattle grazing in irrigated pastures. Oil wells were silhouetted against a cloudless horizon. Frequently a tumble-

weed rolled across the roadway in front of her. Once she got beyond San Angelo, she rarely saw another vehicle.

Funny, she thought, the way things turn out.

Ordinarily she would have elected to fly to New Mexico. But days ago she had decided to drive to Angel Fire, not only so she could visit Uncle Pete along the way, but also to get herself into a holiday frame of mind. The long drive would give her time to decompress, work the kinks out, begin the period of rest and relaxation before she ever reached the mountain resort, so that when she did arrive, she would already be in vacation mode.

At home in Dallas, she moved with the speed of light, always in a rush, always working under a deadline. This morning, once she had reached the western fringe of Fort Worth and put the metropolitan sprawl behind her, when the vacation became a reality, she had begun to anticipate the idyllic days awaiting her. She had daydreamed of clear, gurgling streams, hikes along trails lined with aspens, cool, crisp air, and lazy mornings spent with a cup of coffee and a fiction best-seller.

There would be no schedule to keep, nothing but hours in which to be lazy, which was a virtue unto itself. Tiel McCoy was way past due to engage in some unabashed ennui. She'd already postponed this vacation three times.

"Use 'em or lose 'em," Gully had told her of the vacation days she had accumulated.

He had lectured her on how her performance, as well as her disposition, would greatly improve if she gave herself a breather. This from the man who hadn't taken more than a few vacation days in the past forty-something years—counting the week required to have his gallbladder removed.

When she reminded him of this, he had scowled at her.

"Precisely. You want to wind up an ugly, shriveled, pathetic relic like me?" Then he'd really hit the nail on the head. "Taking a vacation isn't going to jeopardize your chances. That job'll still be up for grabs when you get back."

She easily inferred the meaning behind that sly remark. Miffed at him for homing in on the real reason behind her reluctance to leave work for any period of time, she had grudgingly consented to going away for a week. The reservations had been made, the trip scheduled. But every schedule should have a little bit of flexibility built in.

And if flexibility was ever called for, it was when Russell Dendy's daughter was allegedly kidnaped.

Tiel held the pay phone's sticky receiver pinched between the pads of her thumb and index finger, loathe to touch any more of the surface than necessary. "Okay, Gully, I'm here. Well, near, at least. Actually, I'm lost."

He cackled. "Too excited to concentrate on where you're going?"

"Well, it's not like I've missed a thriving metropolis. You said yourself, the place isn't even on most maps."

Her sense of humor had worn off about the time she'd lost all feeling in her butt. Hours ago, her posterior had gone numb from sitting. Since talking to him, she had stopped only once, and then only out of extreme necessity. She was hungry, thirsty, tired, cranky, achy, and none too fresh because she'd been facing into the setting sun for a long portion of the trip. The car's AC had gone humid from overuse. A shower would be bliss.

Gully didn't improve her mood any by asking, "How'd you manage to get lost?"

"I lost my sense of direction after the sun went down. The landscape looks the same from every angle out here. Even more so after dark. I'm calling from a convenience

store in a town with a population of eight hundred twenty-three, according to the city-limit sign, and I think the chamber of commerce fudged that number in their favor. This is the only lighted building for miles around. The town is called Rojo something.”

“Flats. Rojo Flats.”

Naturally Gully knew the full name of this obscure hamlet. He probably knew the mayor’s name. Gully knew everything. He was a walking encyclopedia. He collected information the way frat rats collected coeds’ phone numbers.

The TV station where Tiel worked had a news director, but the man with the title conducted business from inside a carpeted office and was more a bean counter and administrator than a hands-on boss.

The man in the trenches, the one who dealt directly with the reporters, writers, photographers, and editors, the one who coordinated schedules and listened to sob stories and chewed ass when ass-chewing was called for, the one who actually ran the news operation, was the assignments editor, Gully.

He’d been at the station when it signed on in the early fifties, and had mandated that they would have to carry him out of the place feetfirst. He would die before he retired. He worked a sixteen-hour day and begrudged the time he wasn’t working. He had a colorful vocabulary and countless similes, an extensive repertoire of yarns about bygone days in broadcast news, and seemingly no life beyond the newsroom. His first name was Yarborough, but only a few living persons knew that. Everyone else knew him strictly as Gully.

“Are you going to give me this mysterious assignment or not?”

He wouldn't be rushed. "What happened to your vacation plans?"

"Nothing. I'm still on vacation."

"Uh-huh."

"I am! I'm not canceling my week off. I'm just postponing the start of it, that's all."

"What's the new boyfriend gonna say?"

"I've told you a thousand times, there is no new boyfriend." He laughed his phlegmy, chain-smoker's laugh that said he knew she was lying, and that she knew he knew.

"Got your notepad?" he asked suddenly.

"Uh, yeah."

Whatever germs had been teeming on the telephone were probably living with her now. Reconciled to that, she propped the receiver on her shoulder and held it there with her cheek while she removed a notepad and pen from her satchel and placed them on the narrow metal ledge beneath the wall-mounted telephone.

"Shoot."

"The boy's name is Ronald Davison," Gully began.

"I heard that much on the radio."

"Goes by Ronnie. Senior year, same as the Dendy girl. Won't graduate with any honors, but he's a solid B student. Never in trouble until today. After homeroom this morning, he boogied out of the student parking lot in his Toyota pickup with Sabra Dendy riding shotgun."

"Russ Dendy's child."

"His one and only."

"Is the FBI on it?"

"FBI. Texas Rangers. You name it. If it wears a badge, it's working this one. Waco all over again. Everybody's claiming jurisdiction and wants in on the action."

Tiel took a moment to absorb the broad scope of this

story. The short hallway in which the pay phone was located led to the public rest rooms. One had a cowgirl in a fringed skirt stenciled in blue paint on the door. The other, predictably, had a similar silhouette of a cowpoke in chaps and ten-gallon hat, twirling a lasso above his head.

Glancing down the hall, Tiel spotted the real thing coming into the store. Tall, slender, Stetson pulled down low on his forehead. He nodded toward the store's cashier, whose frizzy, overpermed hair had been dyed an unflattering shade of ocher.

Nearer to Tiel was an elderly couple browsing for souvenirs, apparently in no hurry to return to their Winnebago. At least Tiel assumed the Winnebago at the gas pumps outside belonged to them. Through bifocal eyeglasses the lady was reading the ingredients of a jar on the shelf. Tiel heard her exclaim, "Jalapeño pepper *jelly*? Good lord."

The couple then joined Tiel in the hallway, moving toward their respective rest rooms. "Don't dally, Gladys," the man said. His white legs were virtually hairless and looked ridiculously thin in his baggy khaki shorts and thick-soled athletic shoes.

"You mind your business, and I'll mind mine," she retorted smartly. As she moved past Tiel she gave her a men-think-they're-so-smart-but-we-know-better wink. Another time, Tiel would have thought the senior couple cute and endearing. But she was thoughtfully reading what she'd taken down almost verbatim from Gully.

"You said 'riding shotgun.' Strange choice of words, Gully."

"Can you keep a secret?" He lowered his voice significantly. "Because my ass will be grass if this gets out before our next newscast. We've scooped every other station and newspaper in the state."

Tiel's scalp began to tingle, as it did when she knew she was hearing something that no other reporter had heard, when she had uncovered the element that would set her story apart from all the others, when her exclusive had the potential of winning her a journalism prize or praise from her peers. Or of guaranteeing her the coveted spot on *Nine Live*.

"Who would I tell, Gully? I'm sharing space with a fresh-off-the-range cowboy buying a six-pack of Bud, a sassy granny lady and her husband from out of state—I'm guessing by their accents. And two non-English-speaking Mexicans." The pair had since come into the store. She'd overheard them speaking Spanish while heating packaged burritos in a microwave oven.

Gully said, "Linda—"

"Linda? She got the story?"

"You're on vacation, remember?"

"A vacation you urged me to take!" Tiel exclaimed.

Linda Harper was another reporter, a darned good reporter, and Tiel's unspoken rival. It stung that Gully had assigned Linda to cover such a plum of a story, which rightfully should have belonged to her. At least that's the way she saw it.

"You want to hear this or not?" he asked cantankerously.

"Go ahead."

The elderly man emerged from the men's room. He moved to the end of the hall, where he paused to wait for his wife. To kill time, he took a camcorder from a nylon airline bag and began tinkering with it.

Gully said, "Linda interviewed Sabra Dendy's best friend this afternoon. Hold on to your hat. The Dendy girl is pregnant with Ronnie Davison's kid. Eight months gone. They've been hiding it."

"You're kidding! And the Dendys didn't know?"

"According to the friend, nobody did. That is, not until last night. The kids broke the news to their parents, and Russ Dendy went apeshit."

Tiel's mind was already racing ahead, filling in the blanks. "So this isn't a kidnaping. It's a contemporary Romeo and Juliet."

"I didn't say that."

"But . . . ?"

"But that'd be my first guess. A view shared by Sabra Dendy's best friend and confidante. She claims Ronnie Davison is crazy about Sabra and wouldn't harm a hair on her head. Said Russell Dendy has been fighting this romance for more than a year. Nobody's good enough for his daughter, they're too young to know their own minds, college is a must, and so forth. You get the picture."

"I do."

And what was wrong with the picture was that Tiel McCoy wasn't in it and Linda Harper was. Damn! Of all times to go on vacation.

"I'm coming back tonight, Gully."

"No."

"I think you sent me on this wild goose chase so it would be impossible for me to return."

"Not true."

"How far am I from El Paso?"

"El Paso? Who said anything about El Paso?"

"Or San Antonio. Whichever is closer. I could drive there tonight and hop a Southwest flight in the morning. Do you have their schedule handy? What time does the first flight depart for Dallas?"

"Listen to me, Tiel. We've got it covered. Bob's working the manhunt-law enforcement angle. Linda's on the kids' friends, teachers, and families. Steve's practically moved into the Dendys' mansion, so he'll be there if a ransom