

Rattler Chili

We were never serious pinheads. As a young couple newlywed and newcomers to the small town only two months, bowling seemed like it might be a fun way to make friends. Rolling Thunder, the local bowling alley, served as gathering place in our new, rural, blue-collar town. It was birthday party and reunion headquarters, venue for dances and wedding receptions, polling station and post-election celebration or commiseration site, and local watering hole. Naturally, local patrons like us were drawn there as if on a pilgrimage to Graceland.

Kingpin, the colorful sidekick of Rolling Thunder owner Max Purdee, greeted my wife and me at the door. He wore a khaki jumpsuit with a utility belt hanging off his waist, which he said was ‘as handy as hip pockets on a hog’. He was a walking hardware store.

“Folks ‘round here call me ‘Kingpin’. Maybe ‘cause I keep the beer cold and the toilets clean.”

“Sounds like royal treatment,” Dolores said.

Taking his outstretched hand, I introduced us. “We’re Darrell and Dolores Hennings. We thought we’d bowl a few frames.”

“Ya’ll at the right place, follow me for your shoes. New in town?” Kingpin escorted us to the rental counter. He fitted us with green with red-striped shoes, provided a score sheet, and pointed to what he called the best ‘beginner’s luck’ lane assignment. He picked Brunswick balls from the rack matching our weights and grips then led us to our lane. “How’d you two wind up here in West Texas?”

“We want to start a family in a small, quiet, easygoing place in Hill Country,” I offered. “After chasing our tails for two years in Dallas, we left city life. With less than thousand people within a twenty-mile radius, Tarpley seemed like a good fit.”

“Thousand maybe when them UFO freaks show up for a harmonic convergence. You’re midstream in the Milky Way, lots of stars and flying saucers to gaze at. Course, that’s not countin’ rattlesnakes. What line of work ya’ll in?”

“In Big D we were securities brokers. In the pressure cooker sixty to eighty-plus hours every week scrambling to fill company quotas selling junk bonds, subprime mortgages, hedge funds and derivatives,” Dolores said. “We made loads of money on commissions, but decided it was time to trade greenbacks for green pastures.”

“Not one bank here, but we got an ATM. Not much green of any kind, ‘cept for cedar trees, live oak, and Martians. So, you made off like Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow with lots of loot, then landed your golden parachutes in our peaceful crossroads.”

“Bonnie and Clyde wound up riddled with bullets,” Dolores shot back. “We don’t want that, just away from all the frenzy.”

“Well, you found the right place, but what’re ya’ll doin’ for a livin’ in these parts?” Kingpin grinned.

“We bought a dilapidated ranch in bankruptcy to turn it into a bed n’ breakfast on the bluebonnet trail,” I said. “Dolores makes the world’s best rattler chili. Spread the word.”

She picked up her bowling ball, swinging it backward and forward at her side loosening up.

“Say, got any insider tips to share with me?” Kingpin asked.

“Never mind all that, we’re in another game now. Let’s bowl,” Dolores smiled.

“All right, carpetbaggers,” he snickered, “even if ya’ll is all ‘hat and no cattle’ welcome to town. Care if I join you for a few frames?”

“Sure, we need all the instruction we can get, especially from a guy named ‘Kingpin’,” I replied.

He sat down and opened a worn, cracked black leather bag to pull out an old pair of brown and white wingtips with plaid laces and salmon-colored rubber soles.

“Good ole dogs,” he said tying on the bowling shoes. Then, like a magician pulling a bald, earless ebony rabbit from a hat, he thrust a big hand into the bag and retrieved a chipped, scarred old black ball whose varnish had long since lost its luster.

“This here’s ‘Bollocks’,” he beamed, “Mr. P. Bollocks.”

“What’s the ‘P’ for?” Dolores asked, elbowing me with a stifled giggle.

“Petrified,” Kingpin responded, “he’s old mesquite wood, hard lignin polymer.” Winking, he hurled the misshapen ball crashing into ten pale, trembling pins.

“Bollocks!” he bellowed as all the pins splintered loudly and spun dizzily in the pit.

“Let me buy you two a beer to make your first night at Rolling Thunder official,” Kingpin said. “Afterwards, Dolores can check out the toilets.”

Rolling Thunder was most popular after Kingpin tugged on a cord tied to a salvaged locomotive steam whistle mounted on the roof that he rigged to a boiler out back. He delighted in sounding off the screaming bursts daily to announce that four o’clock happy hour commenced in the bowling alley’s ‘RT-66’ bar. Lots of Hill Country visitors in washed jeans and locals in patched up hand-me-downs rethreaded their way to Rolling Thunder. With a genial smile and knuckle bump, Kingpin welcomed the many parishioners he knew personally to the shrine.

“What took you? There’s pints and pins to down!”

Barbecue beef brisket sandwiches and cold beer attracted a packed house. The throng thumped to country-and-western and rock-n-roll oldies belting from a chrome-trimmed, turquoise and red jukebox. They crowded the length of a 22-foot long hand shuffleboard table with a black light tube suspended low over its length illuminating score lines, watching pink and

yellow glow-in-the-dark pucks glide and stop. Others draped on ever-popular Hayburner pinball machines. Rolling Thunder was ‘the hot spot’ for miles around.

“Kingpin, have another beer on me,” someone shouted.

“Let me buy you a drink, KP,” another patron said, slapping him on the back.

“Here, Kingpin, put a paw around this longneck,” someone else barked.

Accommodating all offers, at happy hour’s end he leaned on his mop for balance as the crowd thinned out.

“See you tomorrow, Kingpin,” another customer belched. “Keep the faith.”

“One more to tump back for the road, KP?” another pal asked.

“Got your back, brother,” someone else said. “Later.”

“You been at it since six this morning. Take a load off,” Max, the owner of Rolling Thunder, said, grabbing the mop and sitting down at the bar with his friend.

“Nobody never drowned in sweat,” Kingpin replied genially.

“How ‘bout something to eat or a cup of coffee?” Max persisted. He had lived this ritual a thousand times with his former army buddy.

“No, ain’t hungry, Max. I adjusted the pinsetter on lane nine, so it’s workin’ fine now,” Kingpin said. “Good crowd tonight.”

“Here, drink some coffee. I’ll give you a lift home. Let’s call it a day.”

“There’s no one there. Why would I wanna go home?”

“I’ll stay awhile for some checkers or dominoes. Finish your coffee while I tell Barb to lock up.”

At Kingpin’s trailer, Max set up the checkerboard as usual. “You takin’ your meds?” Max asked.

“Yeah, the VA ships ‘em to my doorstep every month through the postal service of the good ole US of A.”

“Okay, so you get ‘em, but do you take ‘em?”

“Yeah, I take ‘em. Lay off, Max, a smart ass just don't fit in a saddle.”

“Your move.”

“Don’t bring up Nam neither, don’t dig up the past. To hell with it, Max.”

“Lots of folks care about you, Mike, ‘specially me. Drinking more won’t make it any easier.”

“I’m goin’ to bed. Let yourself out.”

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At nightfall, the bowling alley’s monumental electric light marquee mounted atop the building flared to life. Thousands of alternating gold and silver bulbs sparkled letter-by-letter spelling of ‘R-o-l-l-i-n-g T-h-u-n-d-e-r’, then flashed the fully illuminated name repetitively in five short, colossal blasts; followed by a steady ten-second dazzle in towering majesty. The pulsing marquee was dramatic advertising, drawing crowds like a bonfire to a backwoods revival.

This evening was Tuesday night’s team bowling at Rolling Thunder. Looking up from mopping spilled beer at the entry, Kingpin stopped and hollered.

“Hey, Hennings, dadgummit, ya’ll missed happy hour again!” He appeared genuinely pleased to see us.

As we fortified our strength and stamina with a couple of cold ones and a plate of nachos at our practice lane, we invited him to a warm-up game with us. Dolores bowled one of her better rounds preparing for league play with the Sweet Rolls, her ladies team.

“I guess bowling, even when it doesn’t count, comes with a price,” she declared, lightly shaking her winner’s hand to soothe an emerging blister. “You know, Darrell,” Dolores reflected as she applied a band-aid, “that Kingpin beat us both by over sixty points. He can really bowl.”

“Dolores, you owe me a big steamin’ cup of your famous rattler chili. Won it fair and square!” Kingpin smiled. She winked at me, nodding acknowledgment to Kingpin for his victory prize.

“You know, despite rolling his usual winning tally, he seemed distracted to me,” I told Dolores.

“You mean drunk distracted, don’t you?”

“Maybe, but he’s fine. Not in the gutter. I mean, look at him, cracking those old jokes of his and talking up all the patrons with all that twang. I’ll ask him if everything’s tickety-boo to make you happy.”

“We can count our friends on one hand since we moved here, Darrell, without thumbs, pinkies, and ring fingers. So, yeah, go talk to him like friends do.”

I left Dolores with her teammates and saw Max signing for a delivery at the back door. I decided to chat with him before having a word with Kingpin.

“The Sweet Rolls banished you from girls night out, huh?” Max chuckled. “That’s dandy.”

“Max, you and Kingpin seem almost like brothers. How did you meet?”

“Follow me.” He led us outside to a picnic table under a big live oak. “We can hear ourselves think out here.” Lighting a Marlboro, he threw his head back looking at the flashing marquee.

“Mike...Michael Townsend...that’s Kingpin, and I ain’t brothers, but close to it. I brought him to Tarpley ten years ago. We’d been in the army together long before that. Anyway, I was at

a bowling equipment tradeshow in Houston and ran into him. I needed someone trustworthy to help me with the bowlin' alley and offered him a job. Lucky for me, he accepted on the spot."

"I heard that Rolling Thunder used to be a roller rink," I said. Max guffawed with a cough.

"Yeah, but the roller rink never made a dime. Not one of my shinin' accomplishments. That's why I converted it into a bowlin' alley and bar. After buyin' the rink and hostin' kiddie skatin' birthday parties for six months, I hired small circus acts and unknown musicians to stimulate business. But those sideshows didn't make money neither. Thank God the taxpayers supplemented my income as occasional part-time mayor in those days."

"You're a politician, too?"

"Whatever it takes. After convertin' from skatin' to bowlin', my fortunes changed. With the remodelin' and expanded operation, I needed a business partner to help maintain the building and equipment in the kitchen, bar, and lanes. And I needed a new name with more pizazz than the first one, 'Neighborly Lanes'." He lit another cigarette, took a drag and coughed, short of breath.

"That brings me back to Mike. He and I were in basic trainin' together at Fort Benning, Georgia in '64. Remiscin' our boot camp days, Mike recalled that in '65, good ole LBJ approved the U.S. Air Force's 'Rolling Thunder' air strikes in North Vietnam, the sustained bombing campaign to convince them to discontinue their support of the Viet Cong insurgency in the South. Didn't work, just made 'em madder than June bugs in January. That same year, both of us grunts in the 'Big Red One' 1st Infantry Division deployed at different times to Nam. That's when we lost touch. My unit stationed north of Saigon and Mike's outfit was deployed to the west. As I said, I'd been searchin' for a new name for the bowlin' alley, all bollixed up over it. Anyway, that's how the place got its new name, 'Rolling Thunder'."

Max paused, lost in thought, then continued, “Mike was declared ‘missing in action’ within six weeks of landin’ in Nam. That’s when I lost track of him, thinkin’ he was dead. Turns out he was captured behind enemy lines. First, they stuffed him in a bamboo cage in a river and later frog-trotted him through the jungle almost to Hanoi. Threw him and other POWs into dark, infested hellhole for over two years. Over time, I tried to get him to open up and purge all that shit, but he won’t talk much about it, even with me. Living alone, keepin’ it all bottled up inside. I hope he don’t crack. He’s strong, you know, but everyone has limits.”

“I’ve noticed that whenever a vet at the bar rehashes Vietnam experiences and asks Kingpin about his tour, he always changes the subject,” I said. “Otherwise, he’s as amiable and talkative as they come. Dolores mentioned that she thinks Kingpin is drinking more lately, but I don’t know about that.”

“No family. More lonely as the years pass.”

“That’s tough. Why don’t you and Kingpin come out to our place for dinner. How about on Sunday?”

“Somewhere away from the bar in a real home with people in it sounds good,” Max replied. We walked back inside just as the Sweet Rolls were finishing their last frame.

Pointing a longneck at us, Kingpin hollered, “You boys been out in the parkin’ lot stealin’ hubcaps again?” Max told him it was time to close up. I invited him to Sunday lunch, but to my surprise, he declined.

“Thanks, but I’m goin’ coon huntin’ on Sunday. Maybe some other time.” Max winked at me and nodded they would be there.

On the way home I relayed all Max had said to Dolores.

“All that beer washes over a deep hurt from those war wounds, Darrell,” she said. “Don’t go looking for skeletons in the closet, now that you know what he’s dealing with. Just be a friend and listen if he wants to talk, don’t probe.”

Sure enough, Max showed up with Kingpin at our ranch on Sunday. We threw horseshoes before having fried chicken with all the fixins and sweet tea. During mealtime conversation, Kingpin, who was captain of the Pin Pricks men’s team, ‘recruited’ me to join. He explained I was the only warm body available when one of the guys fell off a roof hammering shingles and broke his right leg and arm. We cleared the table, taking dishes to the kitchen, and moved out onto the porch. Dolores came out with a tray of beers. As Max crumpled his empty Marlboro box, he asked,

“Can I bum a smoke after that fine meal?”

“I’ve got some inside. Be right back,” Dolores said. She returned with a small leather purse and sat down next to Max.

“Max, are you feeling all right? You look a little pale.”

“Fine as horned frog’s hair,” he replied. When she opened the handbag, inside something metallic glistened. “What you got in there? Looks like a small pistol.”

“Yes, a snub nose thirty-eight. Everyone carries these days. You can’t be too careful.”

“You fellas ever been to a rattlesnake roundup in Sweetwater or Big Spring, or maybe the diamondback jubilee in Lometa?” Darrell asked, changing the subject. “Dolores, I’ll introduce our guests to the honeymooners staying here.”

“Who’s the ‘honeymooners’?” Kingpin asked. “I’m blamed if I know what honeymooners got to do with snakes.”

“Living in the Hill Country they’ve seen lots of rattlers, Darrell,” Dolores said. “Let’s just sit, relax, and digest.”

“Ralph, Alice, Ed, and Trixie, our pet rattlesnakes we caught on the place, our pride and joy. I keep them by the carport in a metal trashcan with a tight lid and a big rock on top,” I explained. Banging my snake hook on the side of the honeymooners’ apartment, I fetched the can.

“I hear ‘em rattlin’ and spittin’ in there barkin’ up a knot,” Kingpin said. “Sure sound mad!”

“No, they just want to come out and play,” I said.

“Maybe another time, Darrell,” Max said. The afternoon rolled by as Max and Kingpin talked about how happy they were with Rolling Thunder’s success, their ‘million-dollar baby’.

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Only a short time before Dolores and I arrived in the community, Max discovered and kept secret that he had advanced lung cancer. When he feared he could no longer hide his ‘unexpected’ condition and its increasingly visible symptoms of a racking cough and fatigue coupled with pasty complexion and sunken eyes, he spoke to his friend and business partner.

“Mike, I’ve been diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. They can’t operate because it’s spread throughout my body. The doctors say it’s a matter of a few weeks. I’ve had a good life.”

“Nah, Max, that’s altogether catty whompus. Let’s get you another set of sawbones, good ones,” Kingpin said. “I’ll drive you to Houston. Yessiree bob!”

“Thanks, but no thanks, partner. You tell folks I’ve gone to San Antonio for a few weeks ‘on a lark’.”

“I’m goin’ with you, Max. No two ways ‘bout it.”

“No, Mike, I’m goin’ into hospice...alone. It’s all arranged the way I want. I’ve got to ride this out myself. Listen to me. Take better care of yourself and live strong. That’s what I want from you. You’ll take over Rolling Thunder, too.”

Max signed over his entire estate, worth over two million dollars including the Rolling Thunder, to Mike. Nineteen days later, Max Purdee died. Still feeling the loss of his best friend, Kingpin went on a bender. Within six weeks he had made a jumble of the books, missed vendors’ calls, and stopped making payments. He was arrested in Bandera for driving while intoxicated and destruction of public property. The public property had been a playground set at a primary school he demolished before running into a big mesquite tree.

“I’m lucky. Thank God no school children was anywheres on that playground late at night,” he told the judge. “And, your honor, if anybody tries to bail me out, tell ‘em I decline. I’m gonna do my time. It’s nobody’s responsibility but mine.”

“Mr. Townsend, you are sentenced to thirty days in Bandera County jail. You are required to attend all scheduled alcohol and drug rehabilitation sessions during your incarceration and during six months’ probation afterward. You are ordered to pay three thousand dollars in damages for destruction of public property payable to the Bandera County Clerk upon your release after serving your jail term,” the judge announced.

After his thirty days of incarceration, I picked up a sober Kingpin from the county jail and took him back to our ranch. Kingpin’s eyes welled up when he saw the spread that Dolores had set on the dining table—rattler chili, Spanish rice, guacamole, tortilla chips, and lemon meringue pie.

“Ya know, up in Bandera watchin’ them four gray walls gettin’ grayer hours on end got me thinkin’ I’m gettin’ grayer, too. Got me thinkin’ ‘bout important things, like fam’ly and friends,”

Kingpin said. “With Max gone, I still got lots of drinkin’ buddies for beer talk at Rollin’ Thunder, but not close friends... ‘cept Darrell and Dolores Hennings, I tole myself. It came to me in jail that ya’ll is the closest friends I got. Anyhow, I ‘preciate ya’ll fetchin’ me and makin’ a nice welcome home dinner to boot. It’s real fam’ly like.”

“We’re glad you feel that way because that’s exactly how we feel about you. You’re always welcome here,” Dolores said, smiling sweetly.

“Treat friends like family and family like friends,” I added.

From that time on, Kingpin came to dinner every Sunday. About six months after Max’s funeral at a usual Sunday dinner at the ranch, dinner conversation turned to our business hosting out-of-towners.

“How’s ya’ll gettin’ along with your bed n’ breakfast business? I never seen any guests here on Sundays. Mayhaps they check out before lunchtime?” It was obvious that Dolores and I hadn’t had any houseguests except him.

“Just scraping by, running on the fumes of our savings account,” I said. “It’ll pick up when people discover our new website and word spreads.”

“I got a better idey. No offense, but how ‘bout chuckin’ it? I need a partner to run Rollin’ Thunder. It’ll pay a lot more than ya’ll’s fetchin’ amongst them rattlers out yonder. I want ya’ll both to take on doin’ the business management for the joint. We’ll split profits fifty-fifty,” he added before we could respond. “Here’s the contract to make it all legal. If something happens to me, everything goes to you. We’re fam’ly now.”

Dolores and I looked at each other.

“No more rattlesnake chili for the ranch guests, Darrell. This means you’ll have to give up your snake wrangler job,” Dolores said.

“What guests? When do we start?” I replied. She gave Kingpin a hug and we all shook on it. Kingpin reached into his old, black leather bowling bag. He retrieved a dark green ledger book in one hand that he promptly gave to Dolores, the new bookkeeper. From his other hand, he presented me, the new business manager, a checkbook.

“Now...but only if Dolores here agrees to serve her rattler chili at the Rollin’ Thunder!” We signed the contract.

“I guess my snake wrangler duty is restored and my moonlighting continues.”

Reaching down again, saying, “Excuse me, Bollocks,” he pulled out a paper, which we first assumed to be some sort of contract. Slowly, humbly through inexplicable tears, he handed us a tattered, yellowing document. Bewildered by his strong display of emotion, our gaze shifted from Kingpin to the document. On official U.S. Department of the Army letterhead with a government seal, we held a Purple Heart award recipient letter to Corporal Major Michael A. Townsend for sustaining wounds in action against an enemy of the United States. Without speaking he presented a handwritten note:

“Dear Mike, since our renewed acquaintance in Houston ten years ago, I took the liberty to see that the Purple Heart medal you lost in Vietnam was reissued. I learned it would be sent to you when I was in the hospice facility. I hope it brings you some closure and peace of mind. Know that I left this world rejoicing our friendship and your life. Your pal, Max.”

* * *

It wasn’t long before Kingpin fell into old habits and started drinking again. Sitting under ‘Max’s live oak tree’ at the picnic table behind Rolling Thunder, Kingpin stacked his beer bottles in a ten-pin triangle. He had drained one through five and swigged from number six. He told us in long, heaving narratives about his POW ordeal. He broke down numerous times unlocking all

those past troubles and setting them free. We listened and comforted him. Shortly after he finished his story and his ninth beer, we were startled by a piercing break in the silence. Dolores, Kingpin, and I gaped upward on the rooftop at the source of the sound—the blaring whistle atop the glittering Hill Country beacon calling out happy hour.

“You know, I ain’t never had no fam’ly since joinin’ the army. Ya’ll come as close as it gets.”

“You bet we do, Uncle Mike,” Dolores said. “That what our baby will call you. If he’s a boy, then we’ll name him ‘Mike’. If she’s a girl, then it’s ‘Maxine’.”

“How ‘bout ‘Max’ if a boy and ‘Maxine’ if a girl?” Kingpin replied.

“Whatever you say, Uncle Mike,” Dolores said. “Let’s go home to finish that domino tournament we started. So, Kingpin, you’re a rich man now. That’s reason to celebrate.”

“Over two million buckaroos,” he said.

“Adding a huge purple wave of lights and a big crashing sound of scattering bowling pins to the marquee might attract even more customers and profits,” I said casually as the three of us stood to leave for the ranch.

“Yeah,” Kingpin bantered, “like a blue norther storm siren for all to seek shelter at our place might be good for business... or then again, they might flee in panic for higher ground!”

“Out to our old dude ranch for Dolores’ rattlesnake chili!” I yelled.

“Bollocks!” Dolores shouted, as we all laughed and climbed into our pickup. Kingpin draped his arms around our shoulders as we drove home. Upon arrival, he sat on the porch.

“Good buddy, gimme ‘nother beer,” Kingpin slurred. I put a bucket full of ice and beer in front of him. He grinned drunkenly ear-to-ear. “Atta boy. Where’s Dolores?”

“She’s making chili. Relax, have another beer.” He smiled and opened one.

“Darrell, I need some more meat for the pot,” Dolores yelled from inside the house.

Kingpin didn't seem to hear. Happily, he twisted the cap off a new bottle.

“I'll bring some fresh meat from the carport, no problem,” I said.

“The carport? Watch out fer them snakes,” Kingpin said, laughing. “I'll come help ya,” he said, belching then guzzling the remainder of his beer as he attempted to stand. Staggering, he fell on the porch deck. “You go ahead,” he said. “I'll jus' stay here and set a spell.”

I hefted and shook the trashcan full of honeymooners and more of their kin I collected on the ranch. More than two dozen big rattlers hissed inside. I returned with it to the porch where I found Kingpin snoring spread-eagled on the planks. Dolores sat beside him.

“Careful, hubby, with that can of lightning and thunder,” she said looking up at me.

“Fresh, spicy meat for your five-alarm chili, Dolores.”

Kingpin lay snoring. “You know, Darrell, I'm not very hungry after all. You?”

“I've sort of lost my appetite, too, darlin'.”

Kingpin snored louder. “Well, I guess you can empty that trashcan full of rattlesnakes then. Somewhere away from the house, please.”

“I'll put the can of vipers in the pickup. Maybe we'd better help Kingpin off the porch.”

“Wake up, sleepyhead.” Dolores shook his shoulders. “Let's go for a drive.” Momentarily, his bleary eyes opened.

“Whad ya' say?” he garbled in a confused stupor. He fell unconscious again.

I locked my arms under his armpits and Dolores grabbed his ankles. We toted him to the tailgate where I hopped up to put a blanket on the truck bed. With Dolores holding him to prevent a fall, I dragged him onto the blanket where he lay comfortably spread-eagled. I climbed down and latched the tailgate.

“Ready to go?” I asked, jumping behind the wheel.

Already in the cab, Dolores winked. “Never been more ready.”

I drove a dirt road to about a half-mile from Kingpin’s trailer near a spot he liked to fish. Despite the bumpy ride, Kingpin was dead to the world. Lifting him out of the truck, we carried him towards the nearby creek and laid him down in the grass. Kingpin uttered something unintelligible, eyes closed. Dolores stooped down over Kingpin and nudged him gently. No response. I went back to the pickup for the trashcan of agitated rattlesnakes.

I set the container down ten feet from the edge of the creek, “Will this spot do?” I asked.

“Good as any.”

We pulled him up into a seated position by the trashcan. He leaned and fell forward heavily with the left side of face against the thumping, teetering receptacle. He blindly wrapped his arms around the can, then fell backward pulling the can over on top of him. Upon hitting the ground the lid flew off. Like a thirty-headed monster with fiery red eyes, furious, snapping, hissing, striking diamondbacks exploded from the can. Sixty sharp white fangs dripping poison pierced Kingpin’s face, neck, arms, and hands again and again. His drunken, flailing arms swelled purplish black instantly. He lay motionless as the last of the vipers retracted their deadly stilettos and slithered into the creek together to regroup. A large writhing ball of tongue-flicking rattlesnakes floated away downstream in the current.

Replacing the lid on the empty trashcan, I returned it to the truck rejoined Dolores by the creek. “Better call emergency responders, sweetie, to report how we found Kingpin when he didn’t show up for Sunday dinner.”

“You have the signed contract, right, honey?”

“Yes, and Kingpin’s recently changed will and new double indemnity life insurance policy are safe and sound on his office desk. Nice and easy for any law officer or estate lawyer to find. All signed, legal, and paid for.”

“Bollocks!” she hollered, with a wide grin. “That expression sure grows on you.”

“Some rancher will report a hapless calf found dead in the creek from snakebites. I’ll make that 911 call now. Bollocks indeed!”

Dolores and I sat on the stream bank, snuggled arm-in-arm watching a beautiful sunset.

End