

## HOSTAGE SITUATION

by Carolyn J. Rose

Standing there in the bank lobby, with Len Dupew's arm around my neck and the barrel of his revolver grinding into my ear, I had a real good view of my life passing before my eyes.

I also a good view of Merle McGillivray. Through the big glass window I saw him come sprinting across Main Street. He hit the door like it was a tackling dummy and skidded to a stop on the fat rubber mat just inside.

A million thoughts and pictures careened through my brain, but I still had plenty of brain cells free to wonder what the hell Merle thought he was doing when he drew his gun and pointed it at Len.

Everyone knows you're supposed to keep a hostage-taker calm, not rile him up even more. You've got to convince him he has options. Let him think you're working with him. Get him to trust you.

Just last week we went over all of that at the yearly refresher course with the State Police up in Little Rock. But maybe Merle hadn't been paying attention. Meetings always bored him silly. Maybe he figured he had more cause to worry about livestock loose on the highway down here in our corner of Arkansas than about hostage situations. Maybe he just flat didn't like the state boys telling him what to do and how to do it. Or maybe, like always, Merle believed he could just fake his way through and come out okay.

The way I saw it, though, pulling a gun was only going to make things worse. Len was already edgy as a bachelor at a bridal shower. He'd got his tail deep in a crack and I'd bet my badge he was looking for somebody to share the blame, and the consequences.

Fact is, though, Len had a lock on the blame. The circulars I'd seen claimed he spent several days casing the banks he robbed, always made a big haul, never pulled a job in Arkansas where he was born and raised, and used make-up and phony hairpieces to disguise his appearance. But this robbery exhibited all the careful planning of a hen bolting out into a hailstorm to get a drink of water.

First off, everyone in town knew the vault had a time lock set for one o'clock and there wasn't more than a thousand dollars in the tills on a Monday morning. If you needed a big chunk of change on a Monday, you waited 'til one when Porky Wilkins got back from his regular long weekend in Hot Springs.

On top of that, Len's clever disguise consisted of a red toupee and some green wax vampire fangs.

I guessed those were what made Marliss Hunsaker hit the silent alarm, the one that rings in the Sheriff's office, the one that brought Merle running. Marliss is sharp. Cool-headed, too. When I heard the door swish open behind me, I saw her glance up, but she never gave a sign anything was wrong, just stood there, with that "next customer, please" smile on her face. But her foot must have been feeling for the button.

Vernie Blackstone's another story. She'd dated Len in high school and never forgave him for standing her up on prom night because he thought he could get farther around

the bases with someone else. If she hadn't been so fixated, she might have taken a few seconds to consider her actions. But no. She'd screamed out, "Len Dupew, you're a lousy excuse for a man!"

Before I could react, Len snaked an arm around my neck and fired one shot into the ceiling and another at the camera over the door. The lens splintered and the camera gave out an electronic yelp. Vernie emptied her lungs again and Len put a bullet through the velvet bow on top of her beehive. Hell of a shot.

After that, Vernie was downright eager to get out from behind the counter and hit the floor on the spot he pointed to. Marliss followed, stopping to look him in the eyes and tell him he was making a big mistake. He jerked his arm tighter around my throat and ripped off another round that stopped the clock on the back wall. Len might not be the sharpest pencil in the box when it came to planning, but the boy sure could shoot. Marliss shrugged, knelt, adjusted her skirt, and lay down beside Vernie.

And that's when Merle ran in and pulled his gun.

So there we stood, with the camera yelping every few seconds and me thinking about how Merle hadn't paid attention at the state police seminar, and how he hated loud noises. Even from twenty feet away I could see his eyes squinting and his mouth puckering like maybe he could pull his ears closed that way.

Gunshots irritate Merle, too. He makes all us deputies go to the gun range every month, but he always finds some excuse, like paperwork, or a trial he needs to testify at. To my knowledge, he hasn't taken target practice in two years. Of course, that's his privilege, him being the Sheriff and all, but you can see why the sight of him with a gun in his hand and the feel of Len's pistol against my skull made me a little shaky about the prospect of living to see the sun come up tomorrow.

Still, Merle had probably been to the range more recently than he'd been to the eye doctor. Who knows when he had his eyes checked last, or the wire-rim frames of his glasses straightened? They tilted downhill on one side and bowed out on the other and the lenses were smeared with fingerprints.

But it wasn't Merle's vision or marksmanship that worried me the most. Even a crack shot can miss when the pressure gets to him, and I could tell Merle had a bad case of nerves. Sweat glistened on his forehead, and his gun-hand was twitching.

Len Dupew, on the other hand, might have been jumpy, but his gun didn't waver. Of course, its barrel was wedged in my right ear. And that was my one consolation—a shot like that surely would kill me instantly. No need to worry about a slow and painful death. Cops from all around would come to my funeral. And after the twenty-one gun salute, Merle might stick the medal of valor on the wall or on my tombstone.

"Put your gun down, Sheriff. All I want is to get out of here with the money."

Len's words came out in a garbled lisp. He spit the vampire teeth on the floor and tried again. "Put the gun down now, or you'll be looking for a new deputy. I'll shoot. You know I will."

Merle chewed at his moustache, looking at me and the two tellers sprawled on the fake marble floor at my feet. Vernie whimpered like a newborn pup and I wished I could do the same, but a law enforcement officer is supposed to set an example. Merle gave me a little smile and through the smudges and smears on his lenses, I thought I saw him wink.

"Fine by me, Len. That deputy ain't worth shit, anyway. Can't shoot straight, don't like to carry a gun, can't write a coherent report or make a decent pot of coffee—doesn't even meet the weight requirement. Don't know when I've seen such a tub of lard. Won't be no loss to me if you shoot."

I felt myself flush, opened my mouth to unload on Merle, then bit my tongue and told myself this wasn't a job-performance review. Merle was just establishing his position.

Len laughed, a harsh sound like shifting scrap metal. He tightened the arm around my neck, wrenching my chin higher and giving me a view of the chandelier with its two blown light bulbs and a host of dust-clotted spider webs clinging to the pressed-tin ceiling. Porky needed to get a new cleaning service. If I lived, I'd suggest that.

Len laughed again. "I'm walking out of here, Merle. Step aside."

"Can't do that, Len. Besides, even if you get past me, you're not going far. Most everyone in town knows you and half of them saw me run in here." Merle chuckled. "Most bank robbers have sense enough not to come back to their own home towns to make a withdrawal." He sounded as relaxed as if he was leaning back in his swivel chair, his feet up on the corner of his desk. "I'm staying put."

Len growled and punched the barrel further into my ear. "Then your deputy's DOA."

"That's a dumb move—shoot a deputy and every cop in the state will be after you. Think it over, Len. Put the gun down and I'll try to get the courts to go easy. You can trust me. We used to be friends, remember?"

Len snorted and yanked me up on tiptoe. His wool shirt stank of old sweat and cigarettes. "I wasn't never your friend. Nobody wanted to be friends with a do-gooder like you. I might have known you'd grow up and pin on a badge. Sissy britches."

Merle winced at the nickname from grade school. "I don't want to shoot you, Len. Don't make me do it."

"Bullet will have to go through your deputy first." Len flattened himself against my back.

Merle looked at me again, eyes as gray as November rain. "Don't matter. One way or another, you're dead." His gun hand trembled. A cold spasm rolled south through my gut.

"You're bluffing." Len shoved his left elbow up again. I gasped and thought my bladder would burst.

"Try me."

"I will." Len crouched until my heels touched the floor. "You walk when I do," he muttered in my ear. "Understand?"

I nodded, my nose rubbing against the sleeve of that wool shirt.

"Get ready. We're going."

I nodded again, felt the sneeze swelling at the back of my eyes.

"Kuh-choo." My head jerked forward.

Blam!

Marliss and Vernie clawed at the floor, screaming like their hair was on fire. Len's hold on me loosened. My bladder twitched, my knees turned to pudding, and I tumbled over beside them.

"He's dead," I heard Merle say after a minute. "Turn off the alarm, Marliss. But don't touch anything else. Take Vernie over to the diner and get a cup of tea. We'll have to shut the bank down for a while. I'll get your statements in a bit."

I heard them getting up, heard Marliss' heels tapping around behind the counter, heard Vernie telling Merle how Len left her waiting on prom night in her periwinkle chiffon dress and the shoes she'd had dyed to match.

After a moment I opened one eye, squirmed around and saw Len Dupew's surprised expression and the dark hole in his forehead. I stared at it for a long minute, and then peered up at Merle.

"Come on, Billie Jean." He bent down and helped me wobble to me feet. "You and that overdue baby go over to the office, change your clothes, get the camera, and get on back here and help me process this crime scene."

He strode to the phone on Porky's desk, not even looking back to make sure my knees hadn't buckled again.

I sighed and waddled to the door in my damp pants, his comment about my weight still stinging. A little sympathy would be nice right now. A big hug would be better. But I'd been his deputy long enough to know that while I was on duty, I'd have to do without either. Merle McGillivray doesn't believe in showing favoritism or mixing personal feelings with the job. He's forever reminding me to be professional when I'm on duty.

I swear, sometimes I don't know why I married that man.