

The Sagebrush Bar

I walked into the Sagebrush Bar in Bliss, Idaho, on Christmas Eve looking for a strong cup of tea and a break from the road. The Maverick isn't the place to find either, but at 11 pm on Christmas Eve it's the only place open in town. What I wasn't expecting to find was every mall Santa Claus from Southwest Idaho kicking off steam and tying one on to celebrate the end of their work year. I wound my way through the pack of red coats and white beards giving a few dead pan glares to all the "Hi dolls," I received.

I took a sit at the bar as far away from the pandemonium surrounding the pool tables as possible.

"What'd you have?" the bartender, a young woman with jet black hair and a spider web tattoo on her arm asked with the husky voice of a seventy-year-old chain-smoking granny.

"I don't suppose you have tea?" I asked, knowing it was a long shot.

She actually smiled. "I could probably dig an old tea bag out of a drawer somewhere in the back room, but I'm thinking you mean the good stuff and that," she shook her head mournfully, "I don't have. Not here."

"I'll take a coke," I said.

She grabbed a clean glass put a couple cubes of ice in and filled it with the gun. The sweet smell of coca cola syrup filled the air around us temporarily covering the smells of humanity and spilled beer. She sat down the glass in front of me and picked up her towel to wipe down the table, staying close like she was willing to talk, if I wanted to. I glanced around the room, confirming what I already knew, we were the only two women in the joint. I sipped the coke which was way too sweet but would keep me awake on the road and thought about how women instinctively know there's strength in numbers, it's why we always go to the rest room in groups.

"This crew always come here?" I asked.

She nodded. "Bikers 364 days of the year, Santas on Christmas Eve. And Santas," she looked me straight in the eye, "are way worse than bikers."

I heard a jingle coming from the floor behind the bar and rose up on my stool to peer behind it. At the woman's feet lay a large black dog, a very pregnant black dog, the size of a Lab Newfoundland cross.

"Yours?"

"I guess. I don't know where she's from. She just appeared one night and stayed for my whole shift. For a while she'd leave when I left and then just show up again the next day, but now ..." she hesitated, "well, I've been sneaking her home at night, but my landlord will kick me out if he finds her, no less the pups she's about to have."

"Is she much protection?" I asked.

"She slows the guys down," she smiled. "If only by tripping them up and licking them to death."

As if she knew we were talking about her, the dog wagged her tail, the huge plumbed appendage knocking rhythmically against the hardwood floor.

“You want something to eat?” the bartender asked. “Kitchen’s closed, but I could rustle you up a ham sandwich.”

“That’d be great. Thanks.”

I moved to a table near the kitchen door, the dog following close behind. She crawled beneath the booth and curled up at my feet, one eye on the rowdy Santa’s who were fighting over a pool game and waving pool cues around like swords.

The bartender returned with my sandwich and slide into the booth across from me, keeping a wary on the Santas. “You a trucker,” she asked.

“Only when I have to be,” I swallowed a mouth full of sandwich and answered. “Mostly, I do small supply runs and deliveries.” It was close to the truth. I waved my hand out toward the parking lot where my truck was. “Truth be told, I got a truck load of saffron and cardamom that was supposed to be in two weeks ago and now is worth next to nothing because I can’t get it to the bakery in time for Christmas.” I took a sip of coke staring out into the dark night. In the streetlamps I could see snow beginning to fall. “Don’t know why I even bothered to pick it up.”

“I love cardamom,” the bartender said, staring out into the falling snow. “I was going to be a baker,” she said with a sharp laugh. “I was heading out to Oregon for an interview for an internship, when my car broke down here and I didn’t have any money to fix it or catch a bus. Lost the internship and been working here ever since.”

“Really,” I said, “where was the internship. Portland?”

She nodded, not turning to look at me. The reflection of the lights on her eyes made them glisten. Or was it tears. “My gram was out there, too,” her voice was soft. “She died a few months later.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

She shrugged and then turning to me shook herself and smiled. “My name’s Kate by the way.” She offered me her hand.

I took it. “Kate, by the way, I’m Sarah. Sarah, the owner of The Mean Swede Bakery in Astoria, Oregon.”

“Really,” she said, genuinely smiling and laughing now.

A groan from below the table interrupted the conversation. We both peered under to see the dog’s belly heaving as a contraction rippled through. I lifted my head to find Kate, wide-eyed, staring back at me.

“What time does this place close?” I asked. “Because you’re about to be a grandma, I think.”

Kate did last call for the Santa’s, while I midwived the dog. Three pups had popped out by the time she’d got the Santa’s served, beer guzzled, and out the door. At midnight, we sat in the dark bar, the only light coming from the streetlights outside and watched five more pups enter the world. The squirming bundles were soon licked clean by mom and snuggling up for a drink at the doggie bar. In the silence, Kate and I watched.

“What’s your landlord gonna say now?” I asked.

“What’s my boss gonna say now?” she countered. “He’ll be here any moment. One of the Santas knows him and said he was gonna call and complain that I closed early.”

I looked down at mom and pups, who were snuggling together sound asleep. “Well, you better not be here then when he arrives.”

Kate looked at my quizzically, but I was already moving to the door. “I got a blanket, a warm truck, a bakery job for you, and a home for nine dogs and an apprentice baker, if you want it.” I turned to watch her reaction. And could see the moment she decided to take her chances with a stranger because she had nothing in Bliss to be holding onto. “Seems like I stopped at the exactly right bar tonight,” I said.

Kate nodded.

As I went out to warm the truck and made a bed for mom and pups, Kate ran to her apartment to pack a few belongings. I grabbed the blanket and box and headed back into the bar thinking Christmas wasn’t a half bad holiday, when I got to be Santa.

By Priscilla Berggren-Thomas