

STELLA
by Deborah J Ledford

Stella hasn't said a word in three years.

I visit her every day, but still . . . nothing.

I remember the call that woke me at two a.m. Disoriented, receiver bobbing in my sleepy hand, I heard the frantic, faraway voice of my fifteen-year-old on the other end.

“Mama?”

“Stella?”

“Mama, come get me.”

Twenty minutes later I found myself in the parking lot of a run-down Eloy hotel I drove past every weekday on my way to the Cash 'n Carry, where I stood all day. Swipe. *Beep*. Swipe. *Beep*. Fake smile. “Have a nice day.” After four years, I saw inventory in my dreams. Only three more hours until I'd have to start all over again.

Teeth clenched, I was beyond angry. I replayed the words of warning I had spoken just the night before.

“Stella, this is it. No more sneaking out. No more next time.”

But here I was, shivering and annoyed, walking toward the “next time”.

The squeal of tires rounding the bend alerted me to a battered pickup bouncing through the lot, coming right for me. I took cover behind my beat-up Hyundai as the pickup passed the empty parking space beside me and skidded to a stop in a cloud of white smoke and burning rubber. The driver backed into the spot and jumped from the truck, slamming the rusting door after him.

Curious, I watched as the angry driver burst through the double doors of the hotel and disappear inside. When I walked past the ancient, massive truck I noticed a small figurine on the dashboard. A plastic horse stood on its back legs, reared back, front feet kicking out. I could almost hear it whinny.

Squinting in the bright, shabby lobby, I searched for the elevator. The man stood in front of it staring up at the numbers. While we waited, I studied him. Arms crossed over a substantial chest, cuffs of a denim shirt unbuttoned. Blond hairs curlicued around a scuffed, brushed silver watchband. Weathered fingers impatiently tapped his elbows. No wedding ring. My mood brightened. I wished I'd taken the time to apply lipstick.

Finally, the doors opened. We entered and faced them again. Slightly behind the man, I watched him in the reflection of the distorted mirrors of the doors. A rodeo belt buckle the size of a dessert plate caught my eye. The tapered waist. My head dropped lower. How long since I'd been with a man? Three years? Four? Blushing, I urged my attention back to the lit panel. We were headed for the same floor.

A ping filled the tiny compartment announcing our arrival. He shot out as the doors opened. Standing in front of a placard on the wall showing how the room numbers ran, we both stared from it to crumpled notes in each of our hands. He turned left, I went right. Scanning numbers on the passing doors, I stopped. Shaking my head, I turned around and hurried back the way I had come.

When I found room 408, I was surprised to see him standing in front of it.

He pummeled the door four, five, six times.

“Frankie! You in there? Open up the door!” His booming voice shook in anger.

Silence.

He mumbled something.

I shuffled one foot to the other and he noticed me for the first time. “You got one in here too?”

I nodded.

“Been lookin' all night.”

“I'm sure there's nothing to be worried about.”

“You don't know my Frankie.” He pounded again. “Open up the damned door!”

I felt anxious for the first time since Stella's call. She was constantly giving me hardship, but she had never gotten into any real trouble. My heart skipped, fearing she was in there with the boy named, Frankie. I joined him in the pounding.

Finally, the knob turned.

The door opened a couple of inches, and I saw one terrified eye and a sheet of long blond hair.

"Daddy?"

I took a step closer, first shocked, then relieved to hear the voice of a young woman.

"Yeah, Frankie, honey. Open up the door."

Frankie studied her father, hesitated, then shook her head. "Nuh u-uh. You're too mad."

"Frankie, open the door," the man said through clenched teeth.

Again the shaking head, eye wider now.

I glanced at him, then turned to the girl. "Frankie, your daddy's not going to hurt you. He just wants to be sure you're all right," I found myself saying. "Right, Daddy?"

He turned to me, veins on his flushed neck and furrowed brow standing out. He blinked three times.

"Right," he mumbled, then looked back to her. "Right, I just need to see you, Frankie." He attempted a smile. "See that you're okay," his voice steadier now.

The girl stared at him, her one eye going to his left then right, back again, and again. I had witnessed my Stella's same gaze so many times before. Judging, searching for truth. Waiting for betrayal.

The door shut.

Silence.

Nothing.

Standing just behind him now, I could smell his fear. Sharp and musky. New sweat on top of old. His breathing sounded labored, chest rising bigger with each intake. A low growl escaped from his clamped lips. He took a step back and raised a size twelve boot level with the doorknob, poised to propel what must be 235 pounds through the door.

Click.

I grabbed his arm. His rock of a bicep twitched under the soft cloth of his sleeve. He froze and stared at me. Did he wonder, as I did, if he really wanted to know what's going on behind this door?

The door eased open and he shouldered through. I followed, to find the waif-like presence of Frankie. Breasts much too big for her tiny frame, she stood like a zombie staring up at her father, on the cusp of tears.

"Where's Stella?" I heard my own voice say.

Nothing.

My voice shook. "Frankie! Where is Stella?"

Terrified eyes still locked to her daddy's grateful ones, she pointed.

Rushing past one dark doorway, I entered the main room and puzzled over what I saw. Two disheveled beds, shut drapes, TV muted, every light on, air filled with the stink of beer.

Nobody.

Confused, I doubled back to the only other room. I turned on the light. It flickered and finally caught, filling the tiny bathroom with blue light.

I knew right away something was wrong. I stared for a minute, unable to speak.

My Stella sat perched on the closed seat of the toilet. Her dirty hands clutched the dark curls covering her face.

My eyes ran down her body, taking inventory. Shirt unbuttoned lower than I ever would allow, a tiny leather skirt I had never seen. Bony knees, shiny, store-bought tan shins. Her perfect feet. Bloody feet. My horrified eyes took in her hands again. Not dirty.

I heard only the humming of the bright fluorescents, a drip in the tub, my heart pounding much too fast.

I rushed into the cramped bathroom and knelt in front of my Stella. My shaking hands clamped her thighs. Sticky. I forced myself not to pull away.

"Stella, baby. Are you hurt?"

She raised her head and I stared into her eyes. Not my daughter’s eyes. Old eyes. Eyes that had seen too much.

“Tell Mama what’s happened.”

Frankie’s daddy and I discovered the skinny body of a man much older than us lying prone, face down, between the queen-sized beds. Shards of dark glass were scattered on the floor around him, a bottle’s spout stuck out from between his shoulder blades.

I bit down on my bottom lip so my screams wouldn’t escape. When I turned to ask Frankie’s father what we should do, all I saw was his back as he hurried to his daughter peeking around the corner. Her face full of fright, she rushed away from him and disappeared down the hall.

Hands shaking so bad, I fumbled for the phone on the bedside table. I looked down at the man on the floor by my feet and willed breath into his motionless body. But I knew he was dead, and that my Stella had a lot, if not everything to do with the carnage laid out on the cheap green shag.

The buzzing in my ears sounded so loud I could barely make out what Frankie said to her father. “He just went nuts, Daddy. I wouldn’t do what he wanted and he hit me. Stella . . . She saved my life.”

In a fog, I talked to the front desk, giving them instructions, then rushed back to my Stella, now wound in a tight ball on the floor. I sat on the edge of the tub and reached out, but she tensed when I touched her. I wanted to lie down next to her, hold her, take her back to yesterday. Instead, my nails dug half-moons into my palms as I tried not to scream.

I heard Frankie’s muffled sobbing, then a smack. Knowing her father had slapped her, I closed the bathroom door and waited for our worlds to unravel.

Soon, room 408 filled with chaos. Police with their endless questions, the manager screaming lawsuit, looky-loos crowding the hall, a camera’s constant click and flash. My ears felt ready to burst with the noise.

Loudest of all, was my Stella’s silence.