

REAL WRITERS CONTEST #5 - The Write Track

ENTRY #1 - **NO MAN'S LAND**

The brothers huddled together on the older one's bed. Mommy and Daddy were in another room fighting. The brothers knew that they were fighting about them. The yelling became louder while the brothers snuggled closer together. The older one put his arm around the younger. He said, "It'll be okay."

The door opened. A man walked into the room. They knew the man. Mommy had told them that he would be coming to get them. The man smiled at them and said, "It is time to go. Do you have everything?"

The brothers nodded. The younger grabbed his teddy bear, Mr. Bear. The man asked the older brother, "Do you have a teddy bear?"

"I'm too old for teddy bears. I have Mr. Puddles." The older brother said as he picked up his stuffed Dalmatian dog.

The man scooped up the brothers, Mr. Bear, and Mr. Puddles in his arms and left the room.

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ENTRY #2 - **CAROLERS AND SHOTGUNS: Christmas Tabletop Style**

The shotgun blast that decapitated my Christmas tree was a sign: these would not be happy holidays. Sometimes the folks around here get a little riled up over the stupidest thing, sometimes they get really riled up, and sometimes well, let's say someone has to be mighty mad to shoot up the Sheriff's cabin and his brand new four hundred dollar tree. I might get a little riled myself.

I'm sure the shooter checked to see if anyone was home before blasting away. He or she left a note: *Matt Clifford, You get that damn robber or get out of town.*

Tabletop Arizona is a town in name only; it's a cluster of a few crumbling adobe houses, a gas station, a restaurant, and an elementary school serving the kids who live for thirty miles in all directions on the high desert. Our village is so small it's almost a ghost town and I know everyone. It's not hard for me to figure who wrote the note. I'll bet I find a matching pen at Betsy Boyd's place. She's the mother of five kids and widower since she shot her husband dead in what the court ruled self-defense. Betsy is a good old gal, but she got robbed three weeks ago and she's madder than the one horned bull the robber stole. And Betsy is one damn good shot.

My friends would be shocked to learn I'd spend four hundred dollars on a Christmas tree. I'm shocked myself. I haven't decorated for Christmas since my Josie died over ten years ago. But I met a woman in Tucson, Sierra Morris, a petite blond with a smile that lights up the world. I looked in Sierra's eyes, and I was hooked. That night Josie visited me in a dream and said she approved. Sort of gave me her permission and told me it was time to move on.

Sierra loves the holidays and all the decorations and the next thing I know, we're buying a tree together. She pointed to the one she loved, and I paid for it while trying to hide my surprise at the price. I try to put the tree back together but it's no use, the poor thing is dead. This afternoon I'll drive up to Tucson and buy another one, but Betsy Boyd and me are going to have one tough talk.

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ENTRY #3 - J CUBED

The would-be mourners hastily covered the still warm body with some desert sand. Seconds later the man in the business suit mumbled a few words and signaled the other men back to work. The last one to leave this temporary grave site was the pilot, head hung low. As he climbed back into the helicopter, two members of the ground crew wiped the blood from the lower part of the windshield. The pilot started the engine again.

The headlights of two vehicles, an old, white Cadillac and a new, extended cab pickup, illuminated the ground crew's actions. Two men leaned against the hood of the Cadillac watching the preparations through large goggles. Bandannas covered the lower part of their faces. Their attire - a study in contrasts - was visible through the reflection of the headlights off the sand. The shorter man wore tan pants, a pale blue western shirt with pearl snaps and cream colored western boots. A fist-sized, turquoise-studded, silver belt buckle adorned his ample gut. The other wore a light gray business suit, white shirt, red tie and black wingtips. He turned his nose up at the smell of the turbine engine's exhaust, then thrust his arm into the headlight's beam - his Rolex read 4:15.

Although the eastern sky was still black, the impending dawn would make this the last attempt of the day. The helicopter blades beat out an increasing cadence for the ground crew. Their voices strained to be heard over the growing din.

Blazing from the nose of the helicopter, the landing light dramatically punctuated the action. Across from the two vehicles the beam revealed one of the heavy costs of this endeavor - nine white, wooden crosses, each accompanied by plastic flowers and now buffeted by the man-made wind.

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