

The Bull on Road 109

After I looked at thirty two places to rent and didn't like any of them, I decided to rent the house on road 109 as soon as I saw it. The rent was reasonable. The house was close enough to town; I could easily commute four days a week to teach, and friends and students could come out.

Road 109, with a hundred and nine other roads, divides up farm ground so the farmers can get to their fields to work them.

Mr. Perkins asked, "How many children do you have?"

I answered, "I don't have any children. I'm not married."

We looked at the house and grounds, and Mr. Perkins said, "You have my phone number, Miss Childe. You can call me if you're interested. I have several other appointments to show it this afternoon."

"Mr. Perkins, I want to rent it now."

"Oh. I see."

"Mr. Perkins, you apparently don't want to rent the house to me. If you'll tell me why, perhaps we can deal with whatever the problem is, forthrightly."

"Miss Childe, forthrightly then, I'd rather not rent to a single woman. The nearest neighbor is quite a ways off. This is a peaceful area, but anyone from anywhere can drive out these roads. It's isolated, and that makes me uneasy."

"Don't all of us, male and female, live in danger of our lives every moment, Mr. Perkins? Am I safe in an apartment in town?"

"If you live in an apartment in town, I have no responsibility for your being there."

"Mr. Perkins, I'll bet you the cleaning deposit I'm more able than you are to defend myself from harm. I have a permit to carry a pistol. I have had some unpleasant experiences, some close calls, so I do carry one, and I know how to use it. I have advanced degrees in several martial arts. If you wish, attempt to do me harm, and I can demonstrate without hurting you."

I hated doing that. Next, I'd be showing him the pistol, blowing cans off fenceposts, and flexing my arms so he could feel my muscles. But I wanted the place. I was tired to illness with wasted hours of pounding the pavement and driving everywhere, searching for a workable place, and I shortcut from

step one of negotiations to step 19, final wrap-up, with very little finesse.

He said, "Miss Childe..."

"Call me Sue. That's what my friends call me, and that's what I'll do if you say no."

He sighed, "My wife said, 'Carl, sell the place. We're getting too old to deal with all the problems of rentals.' Maybe she's right."

"Mr. Perkins, absolutely no harm will come to the place while I'm here. I lead a well-protected, orderly, quiet existence. That's why I want the place. I need a place that's quiet."

When I said that, I had no idea how rapid, violent, and absolutely out of control subsequent events would become.

It took me two weeks to get the place the way I wanted it, to move in, and to get settled. Then I felt like I'd been here for a long time. It was so familiar, as if I had always known the place, and it was so comfortable.

Three big, old cottonwood trees grew along the south side of the house, and two grew on the west side, close enough to overhang the roof, shade the house, and help keep it cool on hot days. A field that could be hay or pasture surrounded the house on three sides. Black walnut trees and huge old black oak trees grew along the south edge of the field.

Mr. Perkins wanted me to rent the field with the house, but I didn't have any animals, so I didn't rent it.

After I got settled, though, I walked at night in that forty-acre field, quiet walks, with the sky above me and the spring soil soft under my feet. I called Mr. Perkins and told him I would rent the field. I didn't want him to rent it to someone else, and I'd have cows or machinery invading my private park.

Spring days turned warm, and the grass in that field greened and grew. I discovered that, once you're out of the city, there is no such thing as a totally dark night, outdoors.

I walked through the field one cloudy, rainy night, with moonlight and starlight blocked by dense clouds. I carried a flashlight in my pocket, but I didn't need it. I saw the dark form of the house and the trees around it, and I saw the trees along the field, so I knew where I was, and I walked around the field. I was delighted that I blended so well into the dark night and the rain.

I put all social plans off. I wanted the place to myself a while first.

Thursday afternoon, when I came home, a herd of cows grazed in my field. I hadn't met the man they belonged to, but I

knew his name from his mailbox, and I called him as soon as I got in the house. "Mr. Jensen, this is Susan Childe. I'm renting the Perkins place, next to you. Your cows are in my field."

"Oh yes. Mrs. Childe, uh, Miss Childe, you see, I've rented that field from Mr. Perkins. Just yesterday, I sent him a check."

"Mr. Jensen, I rented that field myself, two weeks ago."

"You don't say? Uh, Miss, or is it Mrs.?"

"Susan Childe is my name."

"You know, Mr. Perkins lived in that very house you're renting for twenty years, a neighbor. A close neighbor. In all that time, I never suspected he was the kind of man who would do such a thing."

I hung up and called Carl Perkins. He said, no, he hadn't rented it to Mr. Jensen nor even talked to him about the field or anything else. He said he would call the sheriff. He said, "It doesn't take long for that many cows to eat a lot of grass."

I walked out into the field to see what I could do myself. I couldn't do anything. I know enough about cattle to know holstein bulls are among the most dangerous. A holstein bull grazed with the cows, and as soon as I walked into the pasture behind the barn, he turned and trotted toward me, head held high and alert, about a ton of beef, coming for me without hesitation.

I circled the barn, slipped in through the small door on the west side, and shut it behind me. I looked out through spaces between the boards. The bull trotted around the barn and stopped. He walked closer and sniffed near the door like a dog picking up scent. He pawed the ground and dug in the dirt with one horn. He stood there several minutes and looked at the barn. He knew I stood just the other side of the thin wall from him. Finally, he turned, walked back out, and joined the cows eating my grass in my park and leaving wet, sloppy manure for a night-walker to step in.

I ran from the barn into the house. I looked out the kitchen window. Mr. Jensen stood under the trees by his house, with his arms folded across his chest, watching.

I heated up the phone line to the sheriff's office. They no longer had a case of trespassing cows to take their time about; they had a complaint of a dangerous and aggressive animal. If they didn't hop to it, they were going to have a suit for negligence of duty. They did get there shortly. Mr. Jensen saddled his horse and got his cattle gathered and put on the right side of the fence.

It was almost dark when the sheriffs left the Jensen place,

drove up road 109, and pulled into my driveway. I'd made tea, and they both accepted a cup, Dave, about fifty, balding and paunchy, and Ramon, younger, shorter, and powerful looking.

Ramon said, "Mr. Jensen says he didn't know his cows were out until we told him. He says they rubbed against the gate until they knocked it down. He says he never talked to you on the phone."

"Do you believe him?"

Ramon started to say something, but Dave interrupted and said, "Doesn't matter. Can't prove anything. He says he'll get the gate wired shut, and they won't do it again."

After they left, Mr. Jensen called, "Sue? This is Doug Jensen, your neighbor with the outlaw cows. Listen, Sue ..."

"Mr. Jensen, my name is Ms Childe until I give you permission otherwise."

"Sure, Ms Childe, whatever you say. Listen, I'm short of pasture for my cows. Why don't you rent me that field? The grass is just going to waste on it now, and we could both gain from that arrangement."

"I don't want cows on the field. Especially, I don't want that aggressive bull."

"He wouldn't hurt you. Gentle old bull, he is. But I could keep the bull over here and just put the cows on the grass, if you're nervous about him."

"I don't want cows on the field at all."

"Sue, I mean Ms Childe, let's get together and talk this over face to face. After all, we're neighbors."

"Mr. Jensen, did you stand and watch that bull chase me around the barn?"

"No Ma'am. Didn't even know he did it."

"Mr. Jensen, you told the sheriffs I hadn't called you on the phone."

"Did those boys say that? I'll have to have a talk with them about that."

"Mr. Jensen, I don't want any of your cattle on my field at any time. I'm telling you that, and the sheriffs know that, too."

"Okay, Ms Childe. I just thought I'd call and try to work it out between us, see if we could keep from being mad over it."

"Are you going to keep your cattle off my field?"

"Sure. If that's the way you want it, it'll have to be like that. Course, a man can't help it if cows hit the fence and break it and get through."

"Course. And if they break it and get through, and I quote what you said, you'll deny you ever said it."

“If you change your mind about renting it, let me know. I’ll give you a fair price. Quite a bit of good grass on it.”

“Goodby, Mr. Jensen.”

“Goodby, Sue.”

A week after that, the cows got in again. I drove home, and as soon as I could see the field, I saw cows and the bull. I was immediately so angry, I almost couldn’t continue driving, but I held on. I drove across the cattle guard at the beginning of my driveway. I drove out into the field and honked at the cows. It didn’t worry them much. Some of them ambled slowly away from the car. Some of them didn’t even look up but went right on tearing the grass off short and chewing it.

The bull pawed at the ground and growled, a deep, threatening sound, eighteen hundred pounds, more threatening than any dog I ever heard from. He lowered his head and shook it from side to side, as if he might charge the car. I backed up and turned around.

As I drove through the spring green grass in the field, I saw Mr. Jensen. He stood back under the trees along the edge of his place. I drove as close to the house as I could, shut the car off, and ran in and phoned. He didn’t answer.

I called the sheriff’s office, and they said they’d be right out. I got the 9mm. from my briefcase and buckled on the shoulder holster it came in when I bought it.

After the sheriffs talked to Mr. Jensen, they drove over to my place and got out of the car. I met them at the front door. Dave said, “He said he didn’t know they were in there. He said he’d get them right out.”

I said, “Will you come in?”

Dave said, “I think we’ll stand right here and watch and make sure he gets to it.”

I stepped outside and stood with them and watched as Mr. Jenkins rode his horse through the gate, circled the cows, and drove them toward the gate.

Ramon said, “Ms Childe, I know you have a permit for the automatic, but don’t you think making such a show of it invites trouble?”

“What do you think is a good alternative? Should I carry a stick, and then if the bull charges, I can whack him a good one with the stick and straighten him out?”

It was after sunset before Mr. Jensen got the cows out and the sheriffs left. I scouted the area while it was still light and figured out where I could walk without getting my shoes dirty. The moon was waxing, and the nights stayed soft and warm. I

didn't mean to miss my walks.

That night, about nine o'clock, the phone rang. "Sue, this is Doug. Listen, we're going at this all wrong. I think we should get together for a cup of coffee and get to know each other."

"Mr. Jensen, I might be interested in acting more like neighbors if you show me you can respect my rights and keep your cows out of my field. Until then, I will be unable to control my anger and animosity toward you enough to have any association with you."

"Sue, I like your spunk. I like a woman with a little ginger, not like ..."

I hung up.

The next night was a peaceful night for a long walk, and the night after that. But the next night, I was halfway across the field when shadows in the lower end of the field moved, and I realized the cows were in. I turned and headed back for the house, walking quietly and listening. Then I heard it. Thud, thud, thud, the bull came after me in a ground-shaking trot. I stretched my legs and headed for the house as fast as I could run. I drew my pistol as I ran. Thud, thud, thud.

He ate up the distance between us. I misjudged in the dim light, hit the corner of the house, spun, fell, but scrambled up in a hurry, ran in and slammed the door behind me, looked up, out the big picture window, just as the bull dropped his head and charged.

I ran through the kitchen doorway and turned as the bull hit the big window. The glass boomed, exploded into a thousand pieces, and flew ahead of the bull and all around him. A big piece of glass slammed into the ceiling and shattered into smaller pieces. One long, triangular piece spun from the ceiling, stabbed down between the bull's shoulders and worked its way rapidly deeper as the bull closed the distance between us.

I fired four shots and hit him low in the forehead, between his eyes. I tried to move, but he came forward so fast, my efforts seemed like slow motion.

His legs buckled under him. He died, but his momentum carried him across the living room. He crashed through the kitchen doorway. Wood, sheet rock, and plaster exploded into chunks and dust, and violent slivers flew in all directions. He brought the door frame and part of the wall on both sides of the door with him as he fell to the floor and skidded. He knocked me to the floor and halfway across the kitchen.

When everything stopped, I sat on the floor. The massive, dead, bloody bull's head pinned me from the waist down, one

horn gouged deeply into the floor beside me.

I wiggled and squirmed and pulled my legs from under him. It surprised me when my legs worked the way they should work. My arm throbbed with pain.

A splintered piece of wood had driven through the muscle of my lower left arm. Once it started hurting, it hurt like fire.

I took deep breaths. I shook like crazy, and tears, from pain, from relief at knowing I was still alive, wanted to flow. I stopped them. I worked on breathing steadily. I couldn't stop shaking for several minutes.

I found the pistol where it had skidded across the floor, nearly covered with shattered wood and plaster. I dusted it off, refilled the magazine, and checked the barrel and the action.

I turned the table upright. I put the pistol on the corner of the table and covered it with a dish towel. I couldn't do anything with the sliver. It was too jagged to push or pull, but I wasn't bleeding much. I could stay on top of the pain for a while yet if I had to, and I had to.

I made a pot of tea. Then I picked up the phone and dialed and shut the light off. He answered, "Hello."

"Doug, this is Sue, you know, your neighbor. Are you aware that your cows are in my field again?"

"No. I sure didn't know that."

"Listen, Doug, I've decided you're right. We should meet and talk this over face to face. Can you come over?"

"Well sure, Sue. I've been working. I'll have to get cleaned up."

"No. Skip that. Come right now. I have tea already made, and we can have a small, informal dinner. My place is a bit of a mess, but maybe that won't bother you too much?"

"I don't plan on looking at the place much. I'll be there in about two shakes of a cow's tail."

"Doug?"

"Yeah?"

"Bring a sharp knife. Something tells me these steaks are going to be tough."