

VerbSap

Concise Prose. Enough Said.



Lost Son



By Eva Schultz

Gabe knew he had to make the call, but it was the last thing he wanted to do. The guys already gave him enough grief about having a lousy sense of direction. Now he had to ask for their help. Once he got back, he'd have to tell them all about the fight, which he and Rick hadn't exactly won. He glanced at his friend, slumped in the seat beside him, and decided to let him sleep.

Gabe looked out at the empty land before him, trying one last time to figure out where he was. The sun was busy overcooking the desert landscape. He took a deep breath that left him coughing sand.

He placed the call, sitting taller and gripping the Jeep's wheel as if to make up for getting lost by at least having an alert gaze and a straight back.

Gabe was astonished by the voice on the other end. "Dad?" What was he doing there? This was just great. He could imagine his father's lecture when he got back: "You're 22 years old, and you still haven't learned one thing about navigating, have you?"

Gabe forced the thought away. "I need some directions. Please. Sir."

"Give me your location. Is your GPS working?"

Gabe closed his eyes and forced the words out. "I don't have the GPS, sir."

The silence at the other end was worse than an upbraiding. "Dad?" Gabe forgot to act calm, and his panicked cry rang out into the open air. The Jeep dipped into a shallow hole and bounced back out. Gabe glanced at Rick, who still hadn't woken up. Of all times, Rick chose now to be of no help at all.

Dad's voice rumbled over the static. "...you there?"

"Here, sir. I think I took a wrong turn at the crossroads."

"How far back was that?"

"Oh..." Gabe glanced behind him as if he might suddenly notice a friendly billboard with directions to the nearest 7-Eleven. "Six miles? I think? There's no road out here."

"No, there wouldn't be. You said your GPS is bad?"

"Yeah." Gabe wasn't about to explain that he didn't have it. Let Dad assume it was broken.

"Which direction are you headed?"

At least the location of the sun made that one easy. "Due south."

There was more silence. Gabe felt terror crawling up his arms and neck like spiny desert lizards. He felt something slide down his stomach and slapped at his shirt, his breath locking up in his throat. It took him several seconds to realize it had been a bead of sweat rolling down his skin.

He struggled to breathe normally again. Was it the heat making him feel so crazy and panicky? He wasn't sure when he had last slept. He must have taken a worse beating during the fight than he'd realized.

There's nothing to be scared of, he tried to tell himself. He knew there was plenty of gas in the Jeep. It should be easy to get back once Dad helped him.

Dad's voice came on again. "Son, you've got to head east. Now. Go."

"Yes, sir." Gabe turned the Jeep and accelerated too hard, sending up sprays of sand that choked him again.

It was that voice that was making him so nervous. It was Dad and his hopes for his only son's future. Gabe had never felt smart enough to juggle everything his dad expected of him. And he never got credit for trying.

"Heading east," he said. Dad's voice jolted through the static. "You're breaking up," Gabe told him.

"...picking up something... another voice... stand by..."

Had Dad said there was another voice on the line? Gabe knew there was only one possibility of whom he might meet out here. His body started to shake so badly that he had to hunch over the wheel to keep driving.

He saw movement up ahead. He blinked his stinging eyes and counted ten dark figures before he shook off the trance of fear. He saw machine guns in their hands. They were running toward him, trying to get in range.

"Turn around! Gabe, turn around right now! You're driving into a squad of resistors!"

Gabe was already turning the Jeep, but he spun it too hard and it tipped, sending him and Rick crashing onto the desert floor.

Gabe struggled upright, pushed his helmet back so that he could see, and reached up to pound on the radio. "Dad? Dad!" He checked Rick. The bloodstain on his friend's uniform had grown much larger since Gabe had hauled him into the Jeep after the fight. Rick didn't respond when Gabe called his name.

The voice on the radio was clear now, the static gone. "I'm here, son."

Gabe leaned around the side of the vehicle and saw the troop bearing down on him. He fought the tears. "Rick's dead. We got caught in a gunfight on patrol this morning. I'm sorry. I tried—I wanted to make you proud. Dad, I'm sorry..."

"I'm here, son. It's all right. I love you."

At the base ten miles away, the sergeant adjusted her headphones and looked up at her lieutenant.

"You've got the missing soldiers on the horn, Sergeant?" he asked.

She frowned. "I did, sir, but I've lost contact. The corporal got them both into the Jeep after the ambush and got away, but he must have been wounded during the firefight. He didn't seem to know who he was talking to. He kept asking for his dad."

"Anything on the line now?"

"No, sir. Just static."

Eva Schultz works as a business proposal writer for a Fortune 200 company and has drafted three novels. Her publishing credits include *The SiNK*, *Calliope*, *Downstate Story*, *Peeks & Valleys*, *ChiMe*, *Santa Maria Sun*, *New Times*, and *The Pegasus Review*. Later this year, her work will appear in *Buffalo Carp*.

Photo "Hand In Sand" courtesy of **Dan Colcer**, Brasov, Romania.

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