

## AS MUCH HER'S AS MINE

~~By: Steven Lake~~

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The sun was cowering behind the earth as I drove through the crisp desert air at that ungodly hour. My nerves were electric, and amplified in that way they get when a person is reminded that survival is not guaranteed; that there are dangers everywhere. The wound in my ribcage where the blade slid in seemed to have stopped bleeding, but I just couldn't tell. The only thing that kept me awake was the powerful impulse to flee the area, and hammer a serious wedge between myself and the past few days...

The car was Kim's. I would have loved to see her stupid face as I tore out of the parking lot of that deli in New Orleans in her Blazer. Oh well. I was in too big a hurry, and she shouldn't have left her keys on the table when she went to the restroom right after telling me she wanted nothing to do with me any more. If a guy breaks his parole and spends three days on a Greyhound bus to go be with a woman, only to get there and learn he's been played, it has a tendency to push the fellow over the edge. And I have leapt straight over that motherfucker.

I had decided to go to Phoenix to find the bastard she'd been fucking, but I only had a name. It would take me too long to locate him, and as I drove on I realized it wasn't his fault. It wasn't anyone's fault. It simply was what it was. As the hours passed and the sky slipped away to darkness, every mile I put behind me seemed to heal my beaten ego that much more. By the time I was halfway through Texas I had forgiven Kim, and was over the whole thing. She wasn't getting her car back though. I chuckled to myself as I realized I had pretty much screwed any chance at a successful parole in Michigan, and decided to make Alaska my final destination. Fate, destiny, and all the unseen forces of the universe that play tricks on guys like me, however, were to see to it that my journey would not go smoothly.

I had filled up the gas tank in New Mexico. Using the last of my parole money, I paid for the gas, bought a can of chew and a gallon jug of water for the drive. I made it through the tip of Arizona, and as I crossed the border into Nevada, the warning light was on. I realized that I was going to have to figure something out for gas, so I pulled into a truck stop off the side of the highway. It was a large compound that had filling stations for both cars and big rigs, a restaurant, mini-store, motel and so forth. Plenty of people around. I would probably be able to hustle myself a tank of gasoline.

I certainly didn't set out to rob anyone, and my intentions are usually peaceful, but intent and actions seldom fit each other like the pieces of a puzzle, and often need to be violently forced together. I had been sitting there for a while, watching the area where the big rigs were parked so their drivers could sleep. I was looking for someone I thought I could lay a sad story on and mooch forty bucks off to get me a few hundred miles down the road. Finally I saw what I thought was a good mark when a red truck with a big sleeper cab pulled in. The driver climbed down from his perch and looked around the lot with a friendly face. I decided I would try him first. He didn't seem to notice as I slid out of the Blazer and started to approach him.

I had walked up to within a foot or two of him before he noticed me.

He was wearing a pair of jeans with a grey t-shirt that said something about San Francisco, and a greasy old ball cap. The look on his face as he turned to find me so close to him was wild, and I could see that he had been given a good dose of The Fear. I didn't have time to wonder what mishaps and bad deals had befallen this man to make him this jumpy. Maybe he was just naturally excited. Or maybe it was the fact that a gnomish looking fiend, who had been awake for something like 48 hours driving a stolen vehicle, and hadn't eaten anything in that time except water and Copenhagen had just crept out of the shadows and was now close enough to count his whiskers. Whatever it was that motivated him didn't matter much to me as he began to flail his arms about wildly, screaming something about killing me. I raised my hands in a sign of peace, and began to tell him I meant no harm. That's when I felt it. Somehow, in all the jerking motions and wild hooting, the bastard had managed to pull out a pocket knife and bury it in my side.

I have been stabbed before, and there is no mistaking the coldness of a blade penetrating your body. I was now in a fight for my life. The problem with fighting someone with a knife is that you're going to get cut. The trick is to try and control whichever hand holds the thing, then go from there. He was still screaming at me and waving the blade in my face with his right hand. I quickly shot in like a wrestler about to scoop his opponent. My left arm was raised and fit perfectly over the top of his right shoulder, and as I brought my body into a lock with his I used my right hand to clamp down on his throat. I knew that the knife couldn't do much to me since I had his arm pinned back, so I just concentrated on squeezing his lymph nodes. The instinct was alive in me; kill or be killed. Once a person is locked firmly in that action, there is little that will break the spell. This man had plunged a weapon towards my vitals, and all I wanted to do was ask him for a few bucks to get me down the road. His fate was sealed, and I increased my grip on his neck as he began to lose his footing and go limp in my arms. Once he was unconscious and lying by the front tire of his truck, I decided to loosen my hold.

The threat was over now, and I knelt down to grab the knife. "Poor fool," I thought. "He was only minding his own business and now this." I checked his pulse and could see he was still alive. I rolled him over, dug into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He had three hundred-dollar bills, two tens, and a twenty, I took the twenty out and put the rest back in his wallet, returning it to his pocket. The price he had to pay for stabbing me, I figured. I got back into the blazer and checked my side. It was bleeding badly. I stuck a finger inside the wound and smelled it. There was no foul odor, so I reasoned that none of my serious workings had been punctured. I knew that I should wait to figure this problem out only after I got myself away from this crazy mess I had just been a part of. I drove ten miles or so, until I absolutely had to pull over for gas. I noticed a little station at the edge of an off-ramp, and decided that I would pull in and put as much gas in the Blazer as twenty dollars would get me.

As I walked into the gas station a bell chimed on the door. The woman behind the counter looked up from her phone at me with bored eyes. If she noticed that the left side of my shirt was covered in blood, it didn't seem to bother her. I probably wasn't the first person this week to stroll into this place with blood-stained clothes. Just another night for her, she would ask no questions. First glance showed me that she was

beautiful. Too pretty to be working in some lonely gas station on the edge of the desert, especially at this hour of night, by herself. I wondered what twists and turns in her life had brought her to this moment. Would this be as far as her path ever took her? I was quickly struck with a protective instinct. I wanted to take her away from this place and show her there was more out there to experience than she's been led to believe. Looking up, she must have sensed that I was analyzing her life. The beautiful face I had been enchanted by suddenly turned stern and sullen. Then the light hit her eyes in a different way and I could see her as an old woman. As if forty years had passed between us in one brief flicker. She instantly became ugly and obscene to me. I couldn't find a single word that seemed to want to pass my lips, so I just handed her a twenty dollar bill and nodded my head at the Blazer sitting out in front of the pump.

Fifty cents was my change and she gave me two quarters. As I turned to leave the gas station, I noticed a line of slot machines right by the door. Fifty cents doesn't get you very far these days, so I walked over to the first machine, put a quarter in, and pulled the lever. Before the dial finished spinning, I slipped the second quarter into the next machine in the row, and tugged it's arm down as well. As I watched in utter shock, the dial on the first machine had lined up two icons, and the third was slowing down. The icons were little treasure chests with gold coins spilling out, and to my complete amazement, as the third treasure chest came around and stopped, a light on top of the machine began to flicker wildly, and a siren began to sound throughout the store. I had hit the jackpot! The goddamn jackpot on a quarter slot at 2:30 AM in a deserted gas station in the middle of nowhere. I was struck stupid, watching quarters spill out of the thing when I noticed that the lights were flickering on the second machine. I looked over just as it too began to spew out it's contents like a drunken bum puking in an alleyway. I looked at the screen, and sure enough, it held three little treasure chests.

I had just hit two jackpots in a row on two different slot machines, on the first pull. Surely this was a sign. I was to take this to mean that all the bullshit in my past was gone, and that only good luck and fortune would lie ahead. I looked up at the woman behind the counter, her lips were contorted into the twisted little grin that porn producers look for. She came out from behind the counter and started to say something to me. I raised my hand to cut her off, and just as the sirens stopped I said, "I am going to need a bucket or something."

\$855.75 In quarters. That's 3,423 of the bastards. The gas station woman and I sat there and counted them out, took us almost an hour. We didn't talk much while we were counting, but somewhere in that short time my attitude toward her had changed. I sensed that she had befallen many misfortunes in her life, and that working late nights in a barren gas station was her way of guarding herself against the tragedies of the world. I understood this behavior. I know what the dull blade of fate feels like when it's dragged across your soul. It's just that I have always been too stupid to let it cower me like she had.

I figured that I would only need about \$400.00 or so to make it to Alaska. Without saying anything, I split the pile of quarters in half with my arm, swept my half off the counter top, letting the coins fall into the five gallon bucket she had gotten from the back room. I gave her a smile, turned around and left. Two lucky jackpots cannot be accomplished without the energy of two unlucky people. As far as I was concerned, the money was as much hers as it was mine.