

MUTATING PLUMES OF DUST AND DESERT TAILED A SPEEDING CRIMSON SUV as the barren landscape of Albuquerque glowed brightly from a magnificent full moon. The woman behind the wheel muttered to herself as if her thoughts were leaking, and though the surrounding passenger seats were empty, she seemed to desperately keep up the appearance of sanity.

Her knuckles gripped tighter on the wheel as she constantly checked her rearview mirror. Dangling from it was a keyring with a picture of a small boy dressed as a cowboy. In the mirror's reflection, she eyed her package in the trunk. It was large, flat on the top, and covered with a coarse wool blanket.

A devious howl in the distance snatched her attention. While scanning the shimmering, moonlit horizon, she passed a parked pickup truck attached to a small trailer out amongst the sagebrush-dominated shrubland. Despite the trailer's heavy weathering, it was the only other sign of life out in the desert, and she was quickly distancing herself from it.

*'Better* be a fucking coyote . . .' she continued to mutter, when something darted out into the middle of the road ahead of her.

Streaks of rubber tattooed the tarmac behind her as she simultaneously slammed on the brakes and reached for the glove box.

In the middle of the lane, a young woman in a voluptuous faux-fur coat draped over a pink silken slip trembled in the headlights. Plumes of condensation billowed out of her mouth, and her nose leaked red. As soon as the driver realised it was a woman before her, she retracted from the glove box.

The stranger scrambled up to the hood of the car and clambered around to the passenger side, clawing at the door handle before getting in. Her bare feet were chalked with dust and her cheeks were tracked with mascara and eyeliner. 'I'm so sorry for doing this! Please drive!' she begged, scuffling for the seat belt.

She clicked her belt in place and whipped around to check the rear window.

'Hey!' snapped the driver, before calming herself and continuing. 'Get

out.'

'I can't!' the woman replied. 'I'm sorry, I can't. You gotta help me!'

'You being hunted?'

'What?'

'Full moon tonight,' the driver said, knowingly. 'Little thing such as yourself shouldn't be out on a night like this.'

'I just need to get away—'

'Nope,' the driver interjected. 'Not taking hitchhikers—'

A wailing ensued in the passenger seat as the hitchhiker wept uncontrollably. The driver looked her over, taking in her attire, her smooth and delicate knees, her highlighted hair—and then plotted out her back story.

'You running from that trailer way back there, sweetie?' she asked.

'... Yeah,' was the response, through finishing snuffles.

'A lady of the night shouldn't be working all the way out here.'

'Lady of the night?' the hitchhiker replied. Any other day she would've laughed. 'I haven't heard *that* in a long time. Something my mother used to say,' she said, fiddling with the hem of her slip.

'I'm sure it'll all work out when the sun comes up,' the driver said, 'but look, I've got to keep moving—'

'Please, just drop me off wherever you're going.'

'For Pete's sake! There's nothing out where I'm going! You want me to drop you off in the middle of the desert?'

'... Anywhere but here,' she replied.

The driver couldn't bear to look at the hitchhiker's face which was glistening with fluids, so she slowly reached back over to the glove box. 'Sweetie, you need to clean yourself up,' she said.

The glove box door flipped down and revealed a box of tissues tucked behind a small silver revolver with a rich rosewood grip. The driver casually picked up the gun and placed it in her other hand, and then retrieved the tissue box and kindly offered it over. Unfazed by the pistol, the hitchhiker took one and began to wipe her face clean.

'Thanks,' she said, quietly.

'Not at all . . .' the driver replied. '... Now get the fuck out of my car

before I blow you out.' The hitchhiker lowered her sodden tissue to see the gun was aimed directly at her chest. The driver cocked her head and added, 'I know this pistol has no hammer, but if it had I'd have pulled it back already.'

Defeated, the hitchhiker slowly scrunched up the sodden tissue, and, equally as slowly, retreated out of the vehicle. Her eyes began to fill again as she stepped out into the cold and closed the door. The gun was then returned to the glove box, the gear stick was shifted, and the SUV tore away from the hitchhiker. She stood there watching the red tail lights begin to blur as her eyes filled with tears once again—until there was an ear-splitting pop. In the distance, the SUV pattered to a stop and the engine was turned off.

The driver stepped out and stared at her rear flat tyre for barely a moment before screaming loud enough for the screech to scratch her tongue. The hitchhiker wiped her eyes again and watched the erratic display of frenzied emotions until the driver tired herself out.

' . . . You got a spare?' the hitchhiker reluctantly called. The driver jumped as if she'd forgotten she wasn't alone. After a long sigh, the hitchhiker asked, 'Can you fix it?'

'Oh, I have no idea,' the driver replied. 'My husband usually does this kind of thing.'

The hitchhiker grudgingly approached as if a sour teacher had beckoned her for reprimanding. 'There should be a spare in the trunk,' she said. The driver hesitated, and the hitchhiker noticed. 'Problem?'

' . . . Just the flat,' the driver replied.

'I'll pretend you never pointed a gun at me.'

'You're lucky I didn't shoot you where you stood, dressed like one of them,' said the driver.

The hitchhiker looked down at her furry sleeves. 'You think they're out *here*?' she asked. 'In the desert?'

'They're everywhere,' the driver said, opening the door to the trunk. She stopped halfway and looked back at the hitchhiker. 'How long will it take?'

'I dunno. As long as it takes, I guess.' The driver opened the door,

pulled out the shovel laid before the blanket, and then stepped aside.

'What's under there?' the hitchhiker asked. 'Dog cage?'

'How did you—'

The hitchhiker shrugged, 'I had a lab when I was a girl. His cage was about that big.'

'... Funny ... how quickly they become a member of the family ...'

'And then suddenly they're not ...' said the hitchhiker. After a moment of silence, she added, 'I'm sorry for your loss.'

'Can we be careful lifting him out?'

They both securely locked their fingers underneath the cage and lifted, keeping the blanket securely wrapped over it. It was heavier than the hitchhiker expected. The two then shuffled a few feet away from the car and gently lowered the cage to the stoney earth.

'That your kid?' the hitchhiker asked. The driver just stared back with an unspoken question written on her face. 'I saw the keyring on the mirror.'

'Oh, yeah. That's Toby. He loves animals.'

The hitchhiker pursed her lips, hoping to not offend. 'How does he feel about ...?' She gestured towards the cage.

'He's gonna be devastated,' the driver replied, with muffled sorrow.

'He doesn't know?'

'Not yet. I wouldn't know how to tell him—my husband usually deals with that kind of thing.'

The hitchhiker lifted the spare wheel flap in the trunk and pulled out the tyre with a struggle. The driver stood by, keeping watch on the horizon.

'Why come all the way out here to bury him?' the hitchhiker asked.

'It's what Toby would want,' the driver replied, eyes fixed on the distance. 'He loves westerns. He's obsessed with the desert and cowboys. All that stuff.'

The hitchhiker dropped the wheel and it bounced to a stop. She walked back to the boot and retrieved the scissor jack and the four-way tyre iron. Soon after, she tied her bleached-blond hair up into a loose

and messy bun, dropped to her delicate knees, and then began unscrewing the lug nuts on the wheel. Her slip rode high up on her thighs, and the driver noticed.

‘You got kids?’ the driver asked.

The hitchhiker pretended to be wrapped up in her task, delaying the answer for as long as she could—but eventually, she conceded. ‘I’ve had two miscarriages,’ she replied.

The driver turned to the hitchhiker on the ground and said, ‘That’s not what I asked.’

‘Where’s your ring?’

‘My what?’ the driver stuttered.

‘You said your husband normally does this, but you don’t have a ring . . .’

‘You some kind of detective?’ she said. ‘Last I checked, you don’t have a ring either, but I’m not screaming it out to the world.’

‘I just notice things.’

‘Well, *pardon me*, but that’s none of your business!’ she snapped, knuckles turned in on her hips.

‘Now you know how it feels,’ the hitchhiker muttered.

The driver shuffled in her place—clearly uncomfortable in her predicament, in her clothes, in her skin.

‘How much longer is this gonna take?’ she asked.

The hitchhiker placed the scissor jack beneath the SUV’s rear lift point and replied, ‘As long as it does.’

The driver despised the apathetic response and the air grew thick with tension and animosity. The hitchhiker began turning the crank handle and the car slowly lifted. The bolt squeaked with every rotation.

‘What was your dog’s name—’

*Thanks for reading.*

*The entire short story is available upon request or online at leading eBook stores...*

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