

LASTING IMPRESSIONS



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ONE

It amazed Dale Hawks how his mind shut out all noise around him, no matter how close its proximity. He realized this as he tripped over a large rock, breaking his concentration. He stood bewildered for a moment, trying to re-establish where he was and where he'd been headed. Looking up from the gravel, he stared at the outstretched highway before him. He hadn't heard a car go by for hours, or so it seemed.

Cars had sped past, equally oblivious to him on the side of the road; the shoulder's dust and dirt swirling around Dale, encasing itself on his skin and clothes, but he paid no attention. He looked ragged and tired, although he was certain he'd only been hitchhiking a few hours. He believed the next vehicle that stopped would be his ticket to freedom; a new start. The last few weeks were like a dream from which he'd just awakened. The images were so real, but their meanings were now lost.

Somehow he knew that was for the better.

As the first warm rays of daylight began burning off the morning fog, the highway became busier as more suburbanites headed to work. Walking backwards, Dale held out his thumb hoping for a ride, though even he'd admit he probably didn't appear very trustworthy on this particular day. He hadn't shaved in three days. His once soulful eyes were sleepy and crimson red. His wavy brown hair was greasy and tangled. He concluded the sole person he could expect to stop was someone with the same general physical attributes.

Lost Boy Chic.

By 8:50 the traffic thinned as the sun climbed majestically into the cloudless blue sky. Dale checked his watch and continued up the road, trusting a motorist would take pity on him. However, as the minutes stretched to hours, Dale's

patience frayed. With each step he felt his body temperature rise. It was a feeling he dreaded; one he'd had the last time he found himself alone looking for a lift. Where those three weeks had gone was anyone's guess. Dale didn't know. The one thing he was certain of was that if this sensation managed to overtake him, he would lose valuable time out of his life, a life that already had as many holes as it had memories. Exhausted, he decided to sit for a minute to collect his thoughts and calm his growing anger.

As he picked a spot in the ravine, he knew it was too late. The damage had already been done. The metamorphosis was already taking place. Sitting helplessly, the last thing Dale remembered was a snake advancing toward him in the tall grass.

Whether it was real or a hallucination, he wasn't sure.

Referred to as The Dirty Diner by truckers, The Five Star Roadhouse, was empty when Dale strolled in, and he headed straight to the bar. From the overhead speaker system a country twanger was lamenting about the woman and her dog who'd recently left. From the stage area and accompanying posters on the walls, Dale assumed there'd be a similar sounding singer performing later in the evening. The cold and gloomy atmosphere was anything but festive. The wagon wheel light fixtures were running at half their normal wattage and the floor was still soiled with splashes of beer and cigarette butts.

None of this mattered to Dale.

"Where can I find a washroom in this place?" he yelled toward the back room.

Within a few seconds a woman in her mid-thirties (she'd seen better days), walked out of the kitchen. "Are you shouting at anyone in particular, or just at me?" she asked, stone-faced.

"I need to use your facilities, lady. If you could help me, I can do my business and get out of this hole."

Sara could tell this creep was deadly serious and she wasn't about to tell him the washrooms were for customers only. Normally she'd have no reservations telling him where to go but her eyes locked with his. His pupils were unmoving, as if he was looking deep within her, not merely at her. As much as she wanted to turn and get on with her day, she couldn't stop returning his stare, strangely excited by the presence of this stranger.

Without shifting his gaze, Dale walked toward Sara, dropped his knapsack on the bar and noted the name embroidered on her employee shirt.

"Sara," he spoke softly, "that's a pretty name. I used to have a girlfriend named Sara. That was a long time ago. She's what you'd call ancient history. They found her body in the woods, stabbed fourteen times." He paused and smiled. "They tried to blame it on me."

Sara could feel his breath as he circled her. Her mind kept telling her to run. Or yell. *Do something! This kid is crazy! Get out!* For some reason, she couldn't. Her justification was that he didn't really sound dangerous, even though he was talking about his murdered girlfriend. With every word she was drawn in by this wild-eyed young man.

"Sara," he whispered in her ear.

"Yes," she sighed like a teenager. She remembered this mixture of emotions: hope, coupled with anxiety. She took a deep breath and whirled around to face Dale.

"Do you remember why I came in here?" he said seductively.

"Yeah, sure. Through those doors on your right."

Dale followed Sara's outstretched hand. Before leaving he leaned forward and placed a soft kiss on her lips. "I'll be back in a few minutes. Will you still be here?"

Sara felt weak and giddy. "I'll be here."

She watched him walk away. When he finally disappeared from view, she sat on a bar stool. Her heart was racing. She felt silly for acting like a virginal schoolgirl. Regardless, she was also thinking how it would feel to make love with . . . *What is his name?* She'd ask when he returned.

Sara dashed to the back room to locate her purse and pulled out a small mirror and makeup. She applied a little blush here and a little there. Next, she put on a liberal amount of red lipstick and furiously brushed her hair, trying to look her very best. Satisfied with the results, she hurried back to the bar area, anticipating the moment her mystery man returned to sweep her off her feet.

Dale entered the battered door marked *Dudes*, not knowing what dangers lay behind it. Inside he found grimy floors, paper towels scattered everywhere, and enough cigarette butts in the urinals to fill a pack. He located a relatively clean area on the floor, put his knapsack down and walked to the sink. Turning on the water, he scooped it onto his face and looked at the cracked mirror. The deep penetrating eyes that stared back disturbed even him.

"Hey there, good buddy. Long time no see."

He grabbed a small towel and a leather knife case from his sack. Continuing to stare at his reflection, he pulled the knife from its sheath. A smile washed over his dusty features as the gleaming four-inch piece of metal was released from its covering; the light from the washroom's single bulb danced on the blade. Setting the cover aside, Dale placed the knife on the basin. Combining soap and water he produced a thick lather, which he applied to his face before picking up the knife again, bringing it close to his skin.

"Like Sara out there, be gentle with me and I'll bring you out to play more often."

With a rock-steady hand he scraped the knife's sharp edge across his cheek; the sound reminding him of ripping apart Velcro - both sides desperately trying to hold onto their grip. The knife brought a new identity - a new look - to the man in the mirror. One that was different, but the same. More honest. More sincere. More trustworthy.

The white soapy lather progressively turned reddish-pink as numerous nicks and cuts were made by the unforgiving blade. Undaunted, Dale continued to place the cold metal to his skin. As his hand made the final sweep of his throat, his eyes lit up as though wishing his accuracy would be off, and fate could step in to stop his internal madness. Regrettably, as in the past, today he would be given another chance to prove his worth.

Next he changed his clothes: the old thrift shop jeans replaced by a trendy brand name pair; his shabby shirt giving way to a fashionably striped one; his boots replaced by expensive leather loafers. Once satisfied with his new persona, Dale stuffed his old clothes inside the knapsack and slicked his hair back, Elvis-style.

"Wait until that bimbo gets a load of me," he growled at his reflection, splashing on some cologne. "If she thinks she's good enough to sample this merchandise, we'll have to show her otherwise."

His smiling face seemed to take on the form of several people all at once.

"It's good to be back. Now let's go out and play," he declared as he kicked the washroom door open.

Hearing her patron's approach, Sara straightened up on her stool. Her mind was reeling with the possibilities of what might occur next. As Dale entered the room, Sara wasn't sure her legs could support her if she was required to stand.

Regardless what he was about to ask of her, she assured herself she was ready, able and very willing.

"Thanks for the directions," Dale said as he brushed by her. "You really should clean those toilets though. I was afraid something was going to bite me."

Dale stopped and assessed Sara, who looked utterly mystified. As had happened earlier, her eyes locked with his. Her heart felt as if it might pound its way through her chest.

"I trust you didn't assume I'd want to get down and dirty with an old tramp like you? If you did, I feel really sorry for you, Sara."

The eyes appeared the same, but Sara sensed some change had occurred. "You're a bastard," she said, getting off the stool.

"I'm glad you're taking this so well. I was afraid you'd crumble under the humiliation of yet another man turning down your sagging body." Dale smiled as he spoke and stepped toward the front doors.

In full pursuit and seething with anger, Sara cried out, "You're not as hot as you think you are. Most sons of bitches aren't!" She had almost reached him when he spun on his heels and grabbed both her arms.

"I was the best thing you ever had, baby," he grimaced. "You're never going to forget me or what happened here today. You'll replay every second in your scattered head, but you'll never discover the truth of what went wrong. I'll give you a hint though: we're not going to be together because of something that you did, not me, sweet Sara - you."

The gritty edge in his voice gave it a sinister quality. He released Sara, who from sheer fright had fallen to the floor paralysed. The rage she felt a moment earlier was gone, replaced by overwhelming bewilderment.

What did I do? Why is he leaving? What's wrong with me?

Outside, Dale inhaled the fresh morning air and proceeded toward the road.

"If they don't know the rules, they shouldn't be in the game,"

he said to himself. Smiling, he opened his knapsack to retrieve a pair of sunglasses. "And of course, if you're playing against me you should expect to lose anyway." He glanced back at the roadhouse and his grin widened. "Isn't that right, Sara?"

With his shades in place, Dale stuck out his thumb and prayed it wouldn't take long to be picked up. With this warm-up round behind him, he was raring to start a new game in which the stakes would be much higher.

To be continued ...

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