

Hotshot

“Okay Hotshot! You’ve made me miss my bus with all your high jinks. Now what am I going to do?” Waterfalls gushed from my eyes as I spied the two red taillights, from my only means of transportation, fading in the distance.

The cowboy hustler reached both hands toward me, and I slapped them away. Stamping my foot, I erupted. “You egotistical jerk. I told you I wasn’t interested, but you wouldn’t take no for an answer. Too busy showing off for your buddies.”

The same buddies, who were slinking toward the doorway between the bar and the dining room, shot him smirks and sent commiserating smiles my way.

He took his stained, well-used cowboy hat off his head and slapped it against his knee, concern written over his face. Not giving him a chance for a word in edgewise I continued. “My purse, my suitcase, everything I need is on that dam bus, everything but me. I’m here fighting off unwanted advances from a swelled-headed oaf who can’t take it when a woman says **No**.” My voice rose until I heard myself screaming like an overemotional, hormonally-challenged idiot.

“Sweetheart, I’m truly sorry.” His voice, like warm honey, mesmerized. “I didn’t believe you. I thought you were just playing along.” His soft brown eyes, now sincere, had lost their teasing twinkle. He kept filing his right hand through his ruffled, wavy dark hair, an unconscious gesture, and one which brought my attention to just how powerful his arms were and how soft and clean his hair looked.

His big body had blocked my way as I’d tried to step past while ignoring his invite for a drink-coffee-tea-hot chocolate-maybe donuts? He’d seemed kinda cute showing off for his chums, and I’d grinned playing along never realizing he’d take it as an invite to carry on past all good sense. My obvious distress finally registered, now that it was too late.

“Look, don’t cry. I’ll drive you to the next town to catch up with the bus.”

“I wouldn’t go anywhere with you. Do I look like the idiot you took me for?” Obviously my mouth had disconnected from my brain.

His grin broke up the features on his face and revved up his looks from average to eye popping. Teeth, gleaming white, contrasted against his tan. The mint green plaid of his pearl-snap-buttoned-shirt reflected the exact colour of his eyes and fitted his form, while emphasizing the picture of a healthy hunk.

I flipped my long, blonde hair back over my shoulder and turned to the eavesdropping waiter, but before I could ask if there was a taxi to be had, the cowboy cut me off.

“Eddy, tell this little lady I’m a good guy, and she can trust me.”

Eddy, looking respectable and earnest, talked at the same time as his head bobbed up and down. “Don’t you worry Missie. Cory Raye is cool – you’ll be safe with him.”

The image of my three-year-old son, waiting for his momma to come and get him, made me look closer at the muscled, jean-clad teaser, and as my instincts kicked in, I knew the words of the bustling employee were probably true. Unfortunately, anger still churned, and I had to grit my teeth as I gave him my blue, eagle-eyed glare.

“Fine. I’ll take your ride, but only because I have no choice. No monkey business, you hear?”

“Yes ma’am.” He plopped his hat to the back of his head, and aimed his hand toward my back to guide me to the door, which he speedily opened, acting like the rare gentleman he purported to be. The fact that his body towered over my five and a half foot frame caused me a slight niggle of discomfort, but my need to catch up with the bus prevailed.

In the truck's deluxe cab I felt my tension dissolve slightly. The soft western beat from the radio combined with the panel of blue, red and yellow lights from the dash, the darkness of the surrounding night, and last of all - his relaxed attitude, worked it's magic.

"Where's your final destination, Honey?"

"My name is Debbie Langston, not Honey. I'm going to Las Vegas to pick up my son."

"Is he with his dad?"

"No, his grandma. He has no dad." My voice switched from conversational to icy.

"Humm, I sense a story." He waited.

I sat silent.

He kept waiting and looking my way, an obvious managerial technique. His arm rested over the steering wheel as he slouched comfortably against his door.

I broke first. It was the way he cocked his head that did it. The sneaky devil had that manoeuvre down pat.

"My son's sperm donor, which is all that man ever did for us, is a prime example of why there's so many single mothers out there. He's a womanizing creep who stole my baby away when he realized I wouldn't put up with his sneaky ways another minute. He then dumped our baby boy with his mother, and hasn't been back to see him since. It's taken me six months to find the woman, and she's just lately agreed to let me come and get my baby. She's an older person, set in her ways, and finds it a struggle to look after little Ashton."

"Why would she agree to take the child away from his mama in the first place?" Cory's voice had lowered, and his questions were pointed.

"Ricky, my boyfriend, told her I was an unfit mother, and promised he'd help her with Ashton both financially, and by being there to take on the majority of the work. Of course, he'd lied."

"I detest slime like him." The rage in Cory's voice became more pointedly noticeable. "They give us good guys a bad name. How old is your son?"

"He's three. I've been going crazy since he's been gone. I own a day care in Portland, and with the help of friends in the police department, I finally found a link to Ricky, and through him I found his mother. I had to sell my car to afford the bus fare, but it was worth it. After I located her, I called every night begging to be able to come and get Ashton. I need to get him away before Ricky turns up again. Seems he'd dumped the baby with his mom and left as soon as he stole her savings."

"You must be frantic. I've never been married, and don't have any kids of my own. But if this had happened to any one of my sister's babies, I would have had a private investigator on the case immediately."

"There speaks a man with money." My tone must have denounced his lack of sensitivity.

"Sorry. That was crass. Forget I said it. What did grandma say when you finally caught up with her?"

"Rick had pulled fast ones before, but this was the worst. She came around eventually. I guess my weepy misery, plus the numerous friends and workmates, who wrote to her about me, did the trick. The fact that Ashton would be with me at work each day helped sway her also. This week she finally agreed I could come and see him, and if she felt I was who I said I was, and if I had the proper documentation, then she'd let him come home with me."

God, Debbie. I'm really sorry. No wonder you were so angry about my goofing around. The papers are on the bus, aren't they?"

"Uh huh!" I gulped back the fears that had risen with his words. "Cory, I can't be without my baby any longer. It's about killed me these last six months. I ache to hold him in my arms." The

tears in my eyes echoed in my voice as I carried on. “All I’ve done is work, try to sleep, cry and pray. We searched through everything Ricky had left behind but there was nothing. At first it was like looking for the proverbial needle because Rick had used a fictitious last name, but then one particularly bad day I remembered he’d told me the name of his high school. It was that which broke the case. My friends were able to get old yearbook copies of the pertinent years from the school, and I identified him from his picture. It listed his real name.”

“Smart girl!”

“I phoned all the Warners in the book around the Las Vegas area, and found her after a few hours. She’d never moved. I heard the baby crying in the background, and knew instantly I’d found my son. That was two weeks ago. It’s been pure hell holding back and waiting for her to give me permission to come. Because she sounded like a good woman who was doing her best to look after Ashton, I’d made up my mind not to take the legal path, but to try and work everything out between us.”

“You poor, sweet thing. Don’t you worry anymore.” Cory reached over and his fingers entwined with mine. We’ll get back your boy. I promise. Look there’s the bus depot up ahead.”

He pulled the fancy truck up behind the bus, and I jumped out and ran up to the driver.

“Do you remember me? I got on in Portland. I was sitting in one of the middle seats on the right side and I missed the bus at the last stop. All my things are still here on the bus.” I ran out of breath.

“Sure I remember you, but there’s nothing left behind. Everyone had to get out here, and transfer to other buses. I’ve just been checking for anything forgotten. It happens all the time, but today the bus is clean as a whistle. Look for yourself.”

My wail brought Cory hurrying up the steps. I flung myself toward the area where I had been sitting and frantically checked below the seats, and in the compartment above. “It’s all gone. My bag is gone.”

“Sorry lady. Someone else must have made off with the stuff.”

My spurting eyes and trembling limbs had both men reacting with kindness. But I couldn’t be soothed. I looked at my only friend and pleaded in a whisper. “What am I going to do now?”

“Shush, Honey. You’re breaking my heart here. I’ll take care of you. Don’t worry. I’ll drive you to Las Vegas, and we’ll find the little lady and explain. Things’ll work out. I promise.” His warm arms gave me solace, and his spontaneous kisses on my hair, my forehead and my hands soothed the pain as he led me back to his truck and tucked me in. The knee-weakening fear dissipated slightly, and for the first time in a long while I felt protected – not so alone.

Within a short time the truck was speeding towards our final destination. With borrowed money I’d called Ricky’s mother Freda, explained my situation, and found her sympathetic about me missing the bus. My made-up story, about helping an old woman find a taxi, did make the difference. The real tale, that I’d been picked up by a cowboy, no matter how charming, would have ensued the phone being slammed down, of that I had no doubt.

It was a long drive during which time Cory and I found a lot to talk about. He explained that he loved kids, and being an uncle to his sister’s brood of offspring brought him great joy. He liked his horses more than any mechanical vehicle, and he owned his own ranch next to his parent’s spread.

He found out that I valued my treasured son Ashton first and foremost, then my friends whom I loved, and last my job, which had helped me keep it together over the past traumatic months. At one point his hand had reached for mine. It felt so comfortably right that our fingers stayed linked.

As the new day broke, spreading a hue of gold over the distant mountains, we decided to stop for breakfast. Sitting side by side he grinned down at me. I stared into his eyes and lost myself in their warmth. His head lowered and stopped inches from mine. I looked at every feature, his soft eyes, full lips, and the two engaging dimples appearing in his cheeks. My hands lifted and smoothed over his stubbly face until I found them weaving through his hair, reaching and pulling at the same time. Our mouths met, and I was lost.

The waitress, standing next to our booth balancing fragrant plates of bacon, eggs, hash browns and toast, coughed and sprung us apart. As soon as she left, grinning conspiratorially, we resumed searching each other's eyes. Cory cupped my face in his big rough hands, and his thumbs gently rubbed my lashes.

"Debbie! Honey! I never want to see tears here again. It breaks my heart."

"When I have Ashton back there'll be no more tears." It was an easy vow to make, but after hearing the words, I knocked on the side of the wooden table.

He chuckled. "I saw you knocking Miss Superstitious."

I closed my eyes hoping he hadn't seen the love shining from inside the blue.

"Me too!" He whispered the words against my lips as he tasted the spontaneous affection I couldn't hide.

It was soon after our meal that we pulled up in front of a small, older home with a lone, tiny tricycle leaning against the front steps. Seeing a familiar car parked in the driveway, revved my heart up, and it began hammering away inside me. Ricky's old corvette! My stomach clenched along with my fists. I felt my breakfast churning and swallowed repeatedly.

"What is it Debbie?"

I'd startled Cory as I lunged for the handle before he'd even stopped the truck. My moan of panic resonated, and urged him to quickly catch up. First, he blocked the driveway with his truck, a sensible move.

I was unaware of anything other than getting to my baby before his father stole him away again. I'd dashed halfway to the front door when it opened, and Rick pushed his way out, carrying my sleeping child.

An older woman followed close behind, wringing her hands and beseeching him. "Bring the boy back here, Ricky. Don't do this!" She spied me running, blatant fear stamped over every inch of my face. We all three stopped as if someone had pushed a remote control pause button. Strength fled from my knees as I sunk to the ground, my shaking arms extended. The crying from under the blanket roused all the players, and the flushed childish face poking out drew our eyes.

"Mama!" My baby's arms reached towards me, and his heartrending screeching increased with each cry. "Mama! Mama!"

I felt a presence behind me, supporting me to stand, as I continued to reach blindly for the precious bundle. Rick whipped Ashton away and twisted, holding him tightly against his shoulder where the angry wails intensified. His mother and I both urged Ricky to stop. Stop and think! But he tried forcing his way past us. I scrambled to yank my heartbroken baby from his father's arms but his left fist caught me in the side of my face, and sent me sprawling.

Cory's roar of fury shocked us all. He lunged. His huge fingers closed around Ricky's throat, lifting him almost off the ground, while with his other hand, he scooped Ashton out of suddenly limp arms, and passed him into my waiting ones.

“You ever touch Debbie or that boy again, you no-good loser, and you’ll answer to me.” A quick shake to empathize his seriousness, and Cory threw the sorry-assed coward towards his car, where he huddled on his knees and clutched his throat. Cory then walked over to the panic-stricken, grey-haired woman and asked gently, “Are you alright ma’am?” After she nodded, he pointed at the small suitcase near her. “Are these Ashton’s things?”

“Yes, they’re his clothes and some toys.” With gloomy eyes she approached me as I cuddled and kissed my precious son. “If I promise not to interfere, may I see my grandson from time to time?” She visibly swallowed while pleading.

“Yes, of course you may. I’ll keep in touch, I promise. We’ll send lots of pictures and plan get-togethers whenever you want them.”

I turned toward Rick who was slouched against his car, rubbing his bruised throat. My glare of hatred had him shifting, turning his back to me.

Cory’s arm guided my baby and I toward the truck, and as he helped us in, his sexy wink for me, and a tickle for Ashton brought smiles to both our faces, and put the sunshine back into my heart. Once he settled beside us, he threaded both hands through his dark curls, and turned to me, his face serious and reflective.

“You know why I wouldn’t let you go by me at the restaurant?”

“Why?” Puzzled by his behaviour, I stared at him.

“I just knew - I couldn’t watch you walk out of my life. You were meant to be with me.” He reached a gentle hand toward Ashton. “Both of you.”

I smiled, and reached over to caress his cheek.

“Works for me, Hotshot!”