

CHAINSAW REDEMPTION

Tommy changed the flat tire within minutes. Having helped his daddy a few years back at the age of fourteen, came in handy on days like today. But now, the engine failed to turn over. He gave it some gas, tried it again, but it was no use; the battery was dead. His parent's AAA roadside service would finally pay off, if not for the last bullet of his cell disappearing. No more juice and nothing to recharge it with. It was still daytime, mid-afternoon; the sky an even dullness of milky-gray. The two-lane blacktop road snaked up into the hills and disappeared into a forest. What sounded like a two-stroke chainsaw could be heard in the distance, but it was impossible to tell just how far.

"What now?" Loretta asked, trying to keep the irritation out of her voice. The nail in the tire could have been picked up anywhere, but the car should have been checked over before leaving Shiprock. On top of it all, she wasn't feeling well. Halfway to their final destination—Las Vegas—the Gambling Capitol of the World, was of little consolation. Loretta knew that some still referred to the place as Sin City; their pastor, for one, but she didn't want to think about that now. Not in her condition. The entire situation made her feel sick inside when she really wrapped her mind around it. This was not how she planned it.

"You mad at me?" Tommy asked, reaching for something in the backseat. Loretta was mad, sort of, but she didn't quite know why, and she wasn't about to admit it, as silly as it sounded. Not now, anyway; with a deader than dead car battery, an even deader cell phone, while out in the middle of nowhere. "No." she answered finally. "What are you looking for?"

"The roadmap. Where'd you put it?"

"I thought you had it."

"No, I gave it to you when we got to the station, remember? After filling up. The clerk told us to take 98W to 89 in Page."

Loretta remembered now. She folded the map, slipped it in her purse, and then waited her turn for the ladies room. She seemed to have an overactive bladder these days, which may be how it was supposed to be. She couldn't possibly ask her mother, being how she still hadn't gotten up the nerve to tell her the news. God, how she dreaded that moment. It wasn't exactly the kind of thing a parent wished to hear of their sixteen-year-old daughter, the one they bragged about to their friends, the one that would go places, who even had a five-year plan already mapped out. What they didn't know could wait a little longer.

"Well . . . do you have it?"

Loretta opened her purse, but knew the moment she looked inside it wouldn't be there. "Please don't kill me," she cried.

"What, you left it?"

"I waited to use the bathroom, and when I finally got in there, you know how it takes me a while sometimes when I'm not at home?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I knew if someone knocked at the door, I wouldn't be able to go . . . so . . ."

"You read the roadmap."

"It was all I had, and I wanted to see how far we were. Afterwards, I set it aside to wash my hands, and must have left it on the tank lid."

"Guess we'll have to manage without it."

"Can't we just wait for someone to come along, then hitch a ride to the nearest station, get another one?"

"You won't find too many people willing to pick up hitch-hikers. Just a couple weeks ago, some girl left for school one morning, and didn't return home. Once police got involved, her friends claimed she hitched a ride to Colorado to see her boyfriend, but never made it. Heidi something was her name."

"I remember that story. She was a junior from Camden High. It's been awhile; do you think she ran off to be with her boyfriend?"

"Could be. But the parents didn't think so, offered a reward for information. What little I saw on the news, they checked out the boy, nineteen years old, said he hadn't seen her, looked pretty shook up about it."

"Could have been an act," Loretta said. "We're always hearing about missing children. Volunteers go searching for the child, and next thing you know, it's the parents who did it. What kind of a monster kills their child, anyway?"

"Some sick, deranged one, you ask me. Come on, let's get out and stretch our legs. Maybe someone will take pity on us."

They waited a good ten minutes when the first vehicle came into view. Loretta held up both arms, waving, and then turned on her heel to watch the car careen on up the road. "She didn't even slow down!"

"A woman is not going to pull over for anyone, not if she's alone, anyway, and has any sense about her. We may look harmless, Loretta, but people can't be too careful these days."

They waited some more, until a Suburban headed their way; this time two or more passengers accompanied the driver. Tommy and Loretta waved with excitement, only to have a dusting of dirt hit them in the face. Loretta squinted, swatted the dust away, and then watched them disappear into the hills. The standing and waiting was starting to get to her. Or maybe it

was the lunch she ate earlier. Feeling funny now; she took a few steps, leaned over, placing one hand against the frame of the El Dorado, and then chucked up her Big Mac and fries, and the one half of cherry pie she split with Tommy.

"You okay?" he asked, handing her a handkerchief.

"Do I look okay?" She hadn't meant for it to come out that way, spiteful.

"I'm just trying to help."

"Yeah, sure. Mr. Helpful! Let me count the ways."

"Are we seriously going to do this now?"

"Well . . . I did tell you, didn't I; it was the wrong time of the month?"

"And, I used a condom, didn't I? It's not like I knew the stupid thing would break. The important thing is I want to do right by you, the reason we took this trip in the first place."

Loretta snorted, turned to look away. There was no telling what she was thinking driving out all this way, as if getting married would solve all her problems. Maybe her sister was right. Renee was always saying how men were all the same, with only one thing on their mind. Loretta refused to believe a word of it. All men were not the same, and even if some of them were, Tommy was the exception. He didn't have to marry her; he wanted to. In fact, it was his idea to keep the baby. Loretta had contemplated the right thing to do—abort, give it up for adoption, or keep it. When Tommy found out, there was no debating. "Loretta . . . I know this might not be the perfect time, but this is our child. And we'd eventually get married anyway, don't you think?" When she didn't answer, he went on. "I'll be graduating in eight months; then I can work full-time."

"What about college?" she had asked. "You always talked about being the first in your family to graduate high school and go to college."

"Yeah, well, maybe that's just some pipedream. There's no scholarship money, and my family wouldn't be able to help. I can't see paying thousands of dollars per semester, especially now, with a baby on the way. And I believe that some things happen for a reason."

"You're a lot more optimistic than I am."

Just then, Loretta noticed a flock of crows overhead, hovering conspicuously, with two of them landing on the hood of the El Dorado.

"You see that?" She pointed to the crows, and the splatter of dung drip on the windshield. Tommy stared, watched, thinking about who knows what? It always freaked Loretta out, as if he were in some hypnotic trance, with that far away look. And then, just like that, he snapped out of it.

"Did you know that crows are among the smartest animals in the world? They can effectively reason cause and effect."

"So . . . what are you saying—they know we have a problem and can somehow help?"

"Not saying anything. I just remember reading that. They know and understand a lot more than we think they do. I mean look at them," he pointed to the ones hovering on a draped power line, their heads cocked just so as if contemplating their next move. "Don't you get the feeling they know something is up?"

Loretta didn't respond. She needed something cool to drink. She took a long swig of Dasani before screwing the cap back on. A chainsaw buzzed again, appearing to be coming from up in the forest. Tommy turned away from the crows, reached in the backseat for his own bottle of water, locked the doors, and then shoved the keys in his pocket. "I think we should follow the

sound of the chainsaw. There's someone up there; maybe he can help." He reached for Loretta's hand, steered her towards the forest.

Loretta imagined someone cutting down a tree, or sawing up logs for firewood. Maybe there were homes up there in the hills, a small village for all she knew. There was no path to follow, just a gradual upward slope. The ground was hard, covered with leaves and Ponderosa pine needles, fir and spruce trees everywhere. After climbing a good stretch, Loretta stopped, her breaths rapid, she gulped down some water from her bottle.

"Pace yourself, Loretta; you don't want to run out before we get there." Just then, the chainsaw ceased. There was nothing but pure solitude.

"How much further you think?"

"Up there," he pointed. A few moments later, the buzzing sound in the hills resumed. They picked up their pace, hand-in-hand, Tommy leading the way until Loretta jerked his arm, and shrieked. Tommy turned quickly, saw the snake curled up in a patch of weeds, its head slightly elevated, the forked tongue protruding. "Don't move!" he told her. The heavy bodied snake had a triangular shaped head with two dark diagonal lines on each side of its face running from the eyes to its jaws. "I'm not a hundred percent sure, but that looks like a diamondback rattlesnake."

"Is it poisonous?" As far as Loretta was concerned, they were all poisonous; she wanted nothing to do with them.

"Yes, but he won't hurt you if you leave him be. He wants nothing to do with us; trust me."

"Okay. Can we go now?"

"I've never seen one before," Tommy said, "just caught an episode on *Wildlife* one time."

At the sound of their voices, the snake began to slither away. It was a good five, maybe six feet long. "Come on, he's gone now."

"Are there lots of snakes out here? Maybe we should head back to the car. What if we get lost, Tommy? We don't even have a flashlight."

"It's still light out, Loretta. Don't be scared. Nothing bad is going to happen, not if I can help it."

"Well, what if you can't help it?"

Tommy slowed his movements, strained to hear. "Hey, did you hear that?"

Loretta listened, waited, hearing nothing unusual. "You mean the chainsaw that stopped?"

"I could have sworn I heard someone, a man's laugh; probably where the chainsaw work is coming from."

Loretta looked over her shoulder to make sure the snake hadn't turned back to follow them. She tried to see how far up they were from the road, could see nothing but trees through the forest. Encouraged by the prospect of finding help, she picked up her pace again, hung on to Tommy's hand. Together they managed another hundred paces or more, when the ground leveled to a small clearing. The area to their left was wide open, empty land. Directly in front, was a rocky incline. To their right was forest, similar to what they trekked through. Tommy steered her in that direction until Loretta felt a stitch in her side.

"You okay? Can't be much further."

Loretta straightened up, took another sip of water, her bottle half empty now. Tommy did the same. The area grew quiet again, until Loretta nearly jumped out of her skin at the deafening sound of a gunshot. "It came from over there;" he pointed in the direction they were

headed. The two of them walked in steady sync until they came upon a wooded area with a narrow path. Whatever sounds there were before, it was completely quiet again. Loretta looked around, a weird feeling she was being watched. The trees seemed to be miles high, the area surrounding them dense, when she saw the single black crow. It was perched on a low branch, curiously watching them. "Do you think he's following us?"

"If he is, maybe he'll steer us in the right direction."

Loretta sometimes wondered how Tommy was always able to stay positive, even during times she would have expected him to react differently. It was just one more thing she loved about him. "Tommy, I've gotta pee, like right now. I can't hold it anymore."

"Okay, well . . . take your pick of trees. Just look down before you squat. Can't be too careful out here."

"Oh great! Just what I need, a snake to bite me on the ass."

Tommy handed her the handkerchief again, glad for its many uses. Loretta chose a nearby tree, a dozen yards or so from the gaping crowd, still intent on hanging out with them. The ground was clear of snakes, so she lifted her sundress, slipped her panties down, squatted low, her feet far enough apart to allow the flow to come strong and steady, yet away from her feet. When she finished, she dried herself off good before standing up, folding the handkerchief to maybe use again later, and froze at the sight of so much blood. Quickly, she lifted her skirt again; saw the spotted blood on her panties.

"Hey, you okay back there?" Tommy's voice came. The moment he saw her, he knew something was wrong. "What is it? You look like you saw a ghost!" She hesitated before handing over the evidence, her eyes never leaving his. "You're bleeding?"

Loretta nodded. It was all right there, the awful truth of it, and could only mean one thing. Tommy pulled her close, just held her, with Loretta feeling numb, more than anything. Not sad. Not relieved. Just numb. She'd had moments of fear and regrets, not just about having to fess up to her parents, the sneers that would follow from Renee, but fleeting thoughts that maybe she wasn't ready to be a mother. She wanted to finish school first, work her way towards a Radiologic Technologist, have the wedding she deserved, and then settle down and start a family. There were other times, too, when she visualized the growing child inside her; its cutest nose, ten fingers and ten toes, a ball of love that she and Tommy made together. She had no doubt he would be an amazing father, would do whatever was needed to provide for them as a family.

"Don't take this wrong, Loretta," he began, smoothing down her hair, her face buried against his chest, "but maybe it wasn't God's plan. These things happen for many reasons, sometimes it's His way of saying it's not the right time." Loretta said nothing, just thought about his words. She knew it was true, and nothing that either of them did to cause it. She pulled away slowly, before looking up to the man who seemed wiser than his years, always knowing the right thing to say.

A muffled cry shattered their silence. The two of them eyed each other to affirm what they heard. As they waited, a gruff sounding laugh followed. Tommy placed a finger to his lips, reached for Loretta's hand to gingerly follow the sporadic sounds. The muffled cry. Muted words. Gruff laughter. Several dozen paces later, between the woodsy areas full of foliage, stood an old wooden shack. The smell of smoke and food cooking filled the air.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Tommy whispered. "It's best you stay here while I make sure it's safe."

"I'm coming with you!" There was no point in trying to change her mind, so he urged her to step quietly, not make a sound. They crept along, step by step, their hands clutched tight, their shallow breaths, until they reached a brush patch a short distance from the shack when the crusty voice came again.

"Just a few more minutes, we'll have us some dinner. You can thank me later," the male said, and then chuckled.

Loretta waited to hear who he might be talking to, but heard no response. She glared at Tommy, who was considerably taller than she was, compared to her average height and small frame. Her eyes pleaded for what to do. He stretched his neck to get a better look, saw the woodsman reach for a log from the wood pile—his long, greasy hair and even longer beard braided down the middle of his chin; a heavier, slightly shorter man than himself. The man turned back away, when he spoke again. "You ever eat rabbit before?" When no one answered, the woodsmen went on. "You'll like it. Meat is white, soft, real tasty."

Tommy motioned to Loretta he wanted to get a closer look, see who the other person was—or if there even was another person, Loretta thought. Maybe the fool was crazy, just talking to himself, in which case he could be harmless. "Wait here," he merely mouthed the words. "I'll be right back."

Loretta didn't want to be left alone, especially now. *What if the guy was some lunatic axe murderer? Some pig in a blanket ready to poke someone, or the next Freddy Kruger! Calm down, Loretta . . . just calm down . . . You've seen too many movies.* It was what Tommy would say. Before she could tell him to wait, he crept around the brush patch, made his way to the stack of firewood piled high against the wall of the shack. The muffled sound came again.

Loretta wanted to know what it was, and began to cautiously make her way over. When Tommy saw her, his expression was of deep-seated fear.

"See anyone?" Loretta mouthed the words. Tommy gave an awkward nod, his face now pale and sickly. Still, he held a finger to his lips. Loretta attempted a peek, but Tommy reacted fast, grabbed her wrist, and shook his head. Loretta was about to freak out now. *What could be so bad?* She gave him that look that said just try and stop me. Tommy released his hold. The woodsman spoke again.

"We're just about ready. Don't it smell good?"

Loretta peered around the wood pile; saw the rifle leaned up against the woodsman's chair, his hairy arm stirring the pot as he mumbled something incoherent. It was then she saw her. The girl was seated across from him, stark naked, her legs apart, her ankles shackled to each front leg of the Adirondack chair. Her wrists, too, were secured to the arms of the chair. A cloth was shoved between her teeth, tied behind her head. Her thick, curly hair, tangled and messy, rested against her bare shoulders, just above her full breasts that were dirty and bruised. She appeared to be young, of high school age. As the shock of what she saw sunk in, the weary girl's eyes locked in with Loretta's.

Loretta quickly looked away, motioned to Tommy. "She saw me!" He pulled her along, to the other end of the shack, putting more distance between them and the woodsman.

"He has a gun!" Loretta whispered. "He could kill us!"

"Did you see her? That's the missing girl on the news. Heidi. They showed her picture. The tattoo on her shoulder is the same."

"What do we do, Tommy; I'm scared?"

"We can't leave her."

The muffled moaning started up again harder than before. Loretta froze. *What if she tells him she saw someone?*

"You hungry?" the woodsman said. "It's coming. We need to get some meat on those bones, fatten you up a bit. Always did like my women with some pudding to grab onto." He let out a howl of laughter that sickened Loretta. The moaning grew louder, and more insistent. Loretta and Tommy snuck a peek. The woodsman set down the spoon he was stirring the pot with, and removed the gag from Heidi's mouth.

"I have to go to the bathroom, real bad," she said, hoarseness to her voice.

"You can go right here, I don't mind," he told her.

"No, I have to go number two. I haven't been in days. Please. I just need a few minutes."

The woodsman undid her four ties, leaving the longer rope, the one reinforced around her right ankle and secured to a chain bolted to a concrete slab on the ground. Heidi rubbed the soreness from her wrists, staggered slightly as she rose, before making her way behind the wood pile, the distance she was allowed.

"Don't try anything funny back there, little missy, not if you know what's good for ya." He laughed at the sound of his own voice.

A mere thirty feet away, Tommy motioned for Heidi to keep quiet. He looked away when she squatted, keeping an eye on the fire pit. Loretta watched the girl, their eyes meeting again, detecting a desperate hopefulness, a plea to not leave without her. Tommy surveyed the scene: the large stones stacked around the fire pit, the burning wood under a cast iron pot, a poker stick one might find beside a fireplace, a chainsaw, and a bolt action rifle propped up beside the woodsman. It was the same kind his daddy owned; only this one had a scope

attached. Tommy whispered in Loretta's ear, turned back to Heidi to see her pull something from between the log stack. She eyed it in the palm of her hand before slipping it behind her ear, beneath the matted hair, and then made her way back to her chair.

"Everything come out alright," the woodsman garbled. He'd already started without her, his mouth full, juice running over his lip, mocking her with a wink. Without a word, Heidi took her seat, the rope dragging behind her. The woodsman leaned over, proceeded to secure her ankles to each leg of the chair, an act she'd obviously become accustomed to. In a casual manner, Heidi raised her right hand, as if to push back a lock of her hair from her eye. The movement was slight, so natural; the woodsman paid her no mind. With his head lowered, he kneeled, while focused on the tying. Heidi removed the three-inch rusty nail she'd found, clutched it tight in the palm of her hand. The timing had to be right, when he least suspected, and now while her wrists were still free. In one swift movement, she raised her fist, the woodsman taking notice a moment too late, when Heidi jabbed the motherfucker straight in the eye. The contact was spot on, and the nail stayed stuck where it landed.

"God damn bitch!" He swung for Heidi's head, halfway missing her when she tried to duck. The strike hurt, though not as much as the others. The woodsman latched on to the rusty nail, attempting to remove it, when Tommy, in a few long strides, snatched the firearm. Loretta, from the other end of the shack, leapt out and got hold of the poker stick. The stunned woodsman spun around, doing a double-take. "Hold on there, boy, you got this all wrong." He gave Loretta a quick glance, and then back to Tommy, he started towards him.

"Don't move!" Tommy said, taking a step back, the rifle aimed at the woodman's chest. "Or I swear to God, I'll pull the trigger." He immediately manipulated the bolt by rotating, pulling and pushing the bolt handle, ready to fire.

The woodsman did not hesitate; he lunged for Loretta, yanked the poker from her hand, and held her in a choke-hold with it. "Your choice," he said. "Hand over the rifle, or I snap this sweet thing's neck."

For the first time ever, Loretta feared for her life. Moments earlier, she was mourning the loss of her unborn baby, and now all that mattered was whether they would make it out alive. She knew that if anything happened to her, Tommy would never forgive himself. The woodsman held the metal rod roughly against her throat, his body pressed up against hers. She felt his heavy breathing in her ear, smelled his musty breath, his sweaty cheek rubbed up against hers. The stench reminded her of raw hamburger left out in the sun too long. If he didn't completely cut off her air supply, she thought she might pass out from the odor. If he snapped her neck, she wondered if it would be quick and painless, or if he was the kind of monster that would kill his own child. But Loretta wasn't ready to die. She forced herself to breathe through her mouth, and kept her eye on Tommy.

"Come on now," the woodsman said, "smart boy like you. Just put the gun down nice and easy, and nobody gets hurt." Blood dripped from his glassy, clouded eye, now bulging in its socket, the surrounding area beginning to bruise and swell. His wild bushy hair, his yellowed teeth and sweat-stained soiled clothes, gave him a crazed caveman look. Tommy held the rifle, his finger on the trigger, aimed for his head, and then paused. The move was too risky. Loretta pleaded with her eyes, didn't see Heidi coming, when she grabbed a jagged stone, and rammed it against the woodsman's head. The act was swift, and though she wasn't strong enough to do much damage, it was enough to throw him off guard, relax his hold on Loretta, to where she was able to kick and claw her way out of his clutches. The woodsman swung the poker at Heidi, barely grazing her shoulder as she leapt to move away. With the longer rope still tied to her ankle, she

began to retreat; he pulled hard on the rope, causing her to fall on her backside. Heidi let out a cry, begged and pleaded, while covering her head in a curled up fetal position. The woodsman raised the poker, and then spun around, his arm still in the air when Tommy pulled the trigger.

He had aimed for the shoulder, but the kick from the shot caught the woodsman in the neck. Blood spurted in pulse-like squirts. The poker fell to the ground when he clutched his neck, tried to speak, to breathe, but only made gurgling sounds. His eyes glazed over like a bigmouth bass having been hooked; he fell to his knees first, choking from lack of oxygen, and then collapsed into a pool of his own blood. Heidi was up in a flash. With a pointed stone, she stabbed the rope repeatedly to finally free herself.

* * *

The following day, after trekking down the mountain the evening before, just before dark, they managed to lure a trucker to take them to the nearest police station. Once the story was relayed, the sheriff's department made a few calls. After sixteen days, Heidi Lancaster was reunited with her family. A crew was dispatched to pick up the woodsman's body. The owner of a local garage agreed to send someone over first thing in the morning to replace the dead battery. And Tommy and Loretta, after contacting their parents, were put up in a hotel for the night.

Mid-morning, there were dozens of people gathered at the site where the car was left parked all night long. Policemen, reporters, cameramen, paramedics, and curious bystanders stood around exchanging pieces of the story. A reporter holding a mic approached Tommy and Loretta.

"How does it feel to be a hero?" the first question came.

"It feels good to be alive," Tommy stated, "to have found the missing girl, Heidi. I wouldn't call myself a hero though, more of a survivor."

Loretta spoke next. "I was never so terrified, so scared for our lives. Tommy was the brave one; he was our hero."

"You'll be receiving a handsome reward for this, you know. Any idea what you'll do with the money?"

Loretta had forgotten the promised reward, for any information leading up to the arrest or capture of the person or persons responsible for Heidi's abduction. It wasn't like they set out in hopes of finding Heidi. They simply stumbled upon her. But if they were to receive any money, it would be a good start for Tommy's college tuition. If anyone deserved it, it was him.

But Tommy made no comment, just waved a hand, thanked them for all their help and support, for replacing the dead battery, and for covering the cost. They made their way through the crowd and back to the El Dorado, where a crow waited for them from the hood of the car. They stood some distance away and watched the crow watching them. Another crow flew overhead and landed beside it. The pair of them squawked and then both flew away. They watched the crows disappear, looked at each other, and then got in the El Dorado to head back home.