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The Slaughterhouse

**Written by Blue Kitty Tales on commission for SaltirePhoenix.
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Tuesday April 14th 2020, 20:45 Eastern Daylight Time. With the loss of his money and his plan for revenge against his former lover ruined, Johnny is desperate to escape his debtors.

He didn't know where he was now. He had never been able to stay in one place for longer than a day. He had to do something – anything to evade his debtors before they had any chance of being able to catch hold of him. He knew they were dangerous, and his profile had been a high one after his many years spent playing American Football. He had already had one close call with them, and he wanted to do all it took to make sure it couldn't happen a second time.

Soon after arriving back in America, he had been shot at on leaving the airport terminal by two humans in a black BMW he'd recognised in an instant, only managing to escape due to the presence of an open manhole near him. He had fortunately been able to lose the men through the winding maze of the sewer system before dropping as much as he could afford on a hire car, but he knew he would have to do more than that to make sure they stayed off his tail. He heard no sirens. He saw it as a good thing. He was certain they would soon come after him after what he'd done.

He hoped at least that Freya regretted ever breaking up with him. However, while he still harboured bitter hatred for her, she wasn't who was on his mind at that moment. He'd thought it impossible, but there was now someone he hated even more than that cow and her reptile secretary, whatever species she was. That someone was none other than the strip club owner who had foiled his plan, that cursed dragoness Brenda. She had not only taken his video camera and his main means of getting his own back on Freya – his hand still felt sore from when she'd blown her fire onto her bracelet and burnt him with it.

He gritted his teeth at the memory of the dance she had forced him to put on for her patrons in that frilly pink and white outfit she'd made him wear, and the embarrassment this had brought him. In the first bar he'd tried to take refuge in, he had found himself being laughed at when somebody had recognised him from the video she'd filmed of it. His humiliation was truly complete.

He was a long way away from the airport by now. So far, in fact, that he wasn't sure which State he was in. It wasn't the same one he'd arrived in, that much he was aware of. But wherever he was now, it seemed like he had finally found sanctuary. Indeed, the bartender looked quite concerned when he finished his third beer of that evening, his breath already smelling strongly of alcohol.

"Hey buddy," said Johnny, "you got another one?" He pushed his empty tankard towards him, which the bartender filled.

"I don't know who you are or where you came from," said the bartender when he paid him. He was a slender collie with light brown fur, and he hadn't been able to help but look over him. "But you should not drink to escape from your problems. That's your fourth or fifth beer tonight, pal."

"I'll escape them however I want to," retorted Johnny. The bartender paid him no more mind as he went to another customer. As he started to gossip with the younger man, a bull just like he was but much less muscular, he sipped from his beer, the cool liquid doing only a little to distract him. As much as he liked the taste, he still couldn't blank his mind no matter how he tried. Images of Freya and Brenda appeared in his head, gloating at his failure to completely break Freya how she'd deserved to be. Thanks to luck swinging in Freya's favour and that dragoness placing a convenient stumbling block, there was no way he was ever going to be able to repay his debts now. Not without some kind of miracle.

If only those women hadn't got in his way. Then he would have been rolling in it. *You just wait until I meet you again, dragoness.* he thought with a snarl. *You can't do this to me! I'm Johnny Campbell!* But there came no further time for him to dwell on this, for the door opened behind him just as he'd taken another long gulp, letting a breeze of the cold spring air rush in. When he turned around, he was stunned by what he saw before him. His heart gave a jump and he nearly spilt what remained of his beer.

"Who the fuck?" he whispered to himself. The woman allowed the door to swing shut behind her, and the bartender found himself staring as he cleaned out an empty shot glass. Johnny looked over her form as she removed her Stetson hat and laid it on the bar. She was a light grey rhino who looked about the same age he did, with a small pointed horn atop her nose and a head of hair as blonde as the wheat fields he remembered passing. Her clothing didn't leave much to his imagination, consisting of a white tank top, a black pleather jacket, and a short blue denim skirt. And he could scarcely believe his luck when she sat down next to him, looking up at him with those garnet brown eyes of hers.

"You new in town?" drawled the rhino.

"This is the first time I've seen the guy," the bartender answered for him. "What can I get you, my lady?" Johnny noticed her looking unfavourably at his tankard.

"Give me a Jack Daniel's Honey and lemonade, my good man," she answered. As the bartender obliged, she turned to Johnny, meeting eyes with him when he turned in her direction. Suddenly, his troubles seemed much further away. There was no resisting those garnet coloured eyes of hers, and it wasn't long before his mind was set ablaze with images of where they would go once they left. But was it him she was here for? He really hoped so.

"What brings you to this part of the country?" she inquired.

"I'm only passing through," answered Johnny with a smile that bore his blunt teeth. "Nothing beats a drink on the road."

"I know what you mean," smirked the rhino.

"So what's your name, sweetheart?"

"My name's Darla," she answered. She shuffled her stool closer to his. "And what's yours, hm?"

"I'm Johnny." He took another sip of his beer. Even though she didn't know who he was, something seemed...familiar about her somehow, but he could not pinpoint what it was. But he was quick to dismiss this when she smirked at him. If it was a fling she wanted, then there was no way he was going to deny himself that chance.

"Your accent seems different," observed Darla. "Is this your first time in this state?"

"Yeah, I picked up on that as well," said the bartender. "I can't quite figure out where he's come from, but it's not Tennessee." *Tennessee?* he thought, not being able to hide his shock. *You mean that's where I am? I thought I'd reached Colorado!* Thankfully it appeared as though his wide eyed expression had gone unseen.

"Heh, oh hell no," said Johnny. "I'm from down south."

"I thought you had a drawl from down that area," smirked Darla. "I like it. Really, I do."

"I can't fault your accent, my lady," said Johnny, drinking another mouthful of his beer. "I'm liking how you sound already. Where are you from? Are you local?" He caught her looking at his beer glass again as she sipped from her own drink.

"Born and raised," answered Darla. "My parents moved to New Orleans, but I came back here six years ago."

"I remember the last time I went there," said Johnny. He opened his mouth to speak again, but stopped himself. He'd been about to go into detail about one of the championship games he had taken part in whilst in that city, but the last thing he wanted this woman, whoever she was, to know about was his overwhelmingly high debts.

"I haven't seen you around there," noted Darla.

"I've got some family who live there," he lied. "It's been a while since the last time we met."

"Mine are all over the place. My brother stayed behind, and I'm on my way to pay him a visit right now. But I was starting to get a certain itch along the way." Darla took another sip, and Johnny couldn't help to stare

unblinkingly at her breasts. *I don't see many rhinos, but this woman's a pretty one, she is.* he thought. *I don't know anything about her, but I can't wait for her to wiggle that ass of hers for me.*

"You wanted to wet your whistle, Darla?" asked Johnny, drinking the rest of his beer in one gulp. "Or did you have more in mind?" Her eyes glinted when another patron came in and sat down at the bar. Then, she shuffled closer to him, looking his way again. He thought he saw her looking over his body as though he was a test subject in a laboratory, but her eyes did not drift downwards. She sipped again, the scent of her drink and her perfume amalgamating and awakening something deep within.

"My brother has often asked me about why I'm still single." said Darla. "I say to him, things like this take time. But I didn't realise this country was so small, because look who I've managed to find."

"Who's that?" he asked, sounding absent minded. His question was answered when she reached for him and stroked him on the chin. *Now we're getting somewhere!* he thought. "I can't say I can turn you down, Darla."

"You're not so bad yourself, big boy." simpered Darla. "If this is where my search for a stud has taken me, then call me very lucky indeed." *You bet you are.* he thought as she finished the rest of her drink. *How many women like you get to spend a night with a football player like me?*

"This mean I...got a date with an angel?" he asked. Darla's nose twitched. Could she smell the alcohol on his breath, or was it something else?

"You don't know how much I'd like that." she grinned. It was only when the bartender cleared his throat when he realised he'd been staring at them for a long time.

"Finished with those glasses?" he inquired.

"You know, Johnny, beer isn't any different from piss." she commented. "That stuff will never hit the spot. We'll have two JDs."

"I suppose you're right." agreed Johnny haphazardly. "I've had four beers and I'm not even slurring my speech yet." The bartender and the customer sitting at the other side of the bar both stared. "Hey pal, what's the proof of this beer?"

"Eight."

"You know what?" grinned Johnny. "Darla makes a good point. Give us a couple of those JDs!" And before he could draw out his wallet again, Darla slapped two notes on the counter.

"Keep the change." she smiled. "And slip a little cola into these too."

"You've got it."

"You don't quit, do you?" smirked Johnny, feeling himself starting to sway before clutching onto his stool, managing to steady himself after a moment.

"It's good to finally meet a man who likes a drink as much as I do." replied Darla. "A real man isn't afraid to outdrink a woman."

"You said it!" cried Johnny enthusiastically. "I used to do this with my friends all the time!"

"Then you know how this works, right?"

"Right."

"And you know what happens next, right?"

"Right." At that moment, the bartender whisked the drinks their way, and he had to admit – despite starting to feel tipsy, these drinks looked and smelt very good. Darla was the first to drink, and soon, he followed suit, sipping from the drink and then quickly downing the entire glass before the rhino could take another sip.

"Wow, that's good." he said gladly.

"You seem like you enjoyed that, Johnny." said Darla in a sing song sounding voice.

“Oh, you bet.”

“Maybe you can have a little more later on.” she suggested. “I’m sure my brother won’t mind if you’re a little out of it. He knows how it is.”

“You got any sisters?” asked Johnny. *If they’re as lovely looking as you are*, he thought, *then I’m gonna have even more fun!*

“No.” said Darla.

“You said you had a brother.”

“Yes I do. But you’d be forgiven for thinking he’s a girl.”

“Sounds like he probably should have been born one.”

“You have no idea how often he says that. I say that too.” She finished the rest of her drink in one gulp. “Ah, that’s good stuff. I don’t know how you do it.”

“I think he’s got a degree in mixology!” hooted Johnny.

“I didn’t get this liquor license for nothing.” answered the bartender, gesturing to the framed document on the wall.

“What do you say we hit the streets?” suggested Darla. Her expression was seductive, her voice inviting, and her form open to him. It was like a dream come true, even if his head was starting to pound. “On the way, you must tell me a little more about yourself.”

“I’d be happy to, lovely.” grinned Johnny as he climbed down, letting her take his hand into his.

“Catch you later, sweet cheeks!” called a patron at one of the tables, while the bartender watched them leave as he cleaned their glasses.

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The night was still young, but so were both him and this rhino. He didn’t know why she had taken such an interest in him, but he didn’t care – an opportunity was an opportunity. And once she learned more about him, he was sure her attraction to him would get even stronger. But where was she leading him now? He thought the bar seemed so far away, until she finally directed him to the car park.

“So where’s your car?” he asked.

“Over there.” He gestured to a white hatchback. “I’m living somewhere just outside of town.”

“Don’t you worry about a thing, handsome.” she said as they climbed into her vehicle, a black four door sedan, and reversed out. “That car’s not going anywhere. Just give me a street name and I’ll get you there.”

“Christiana. I’m staying with a friend there.”

“That’s not far.” And as she started the vehicle, his heart started to race. There were so many things he wanted to say that he couldn’t decide what to come out with first.

“You asked to know more about me.” said Johnny. “Well, you’re going to like this – I used to be a professional football player back in my home state.” Darla almost crashed into another vehicle behind them on hearing this.

“Really?” she exclaimed. “I know you’re a lot of things, but I didn’t think this was one of them.”

“Back in the day,” he said brightly, “I was playing with one of the biggest leagues of my State.”

“Which is?”

“Florida. I bet you anything my team are wondering where my ass got to.”

“That’s a couple of states away. Your family certainly didn’t pick the most convenient place for you.”

“That’s why I come here sometimes.” he said. “They’ve kept some of my trophies for me, and I wanna show them to you sometime. You know you’ve got a winner on your hands here, Darla.”

“I always did want to date a football player.” she said, sounding fond. “And I’m glad it’s you.”

“I’m glad I found you too.” he said, before releasing a hiccup and then belching. “This might be all the beer talking, but you’re one sexy rhino, you are.”

“That’s very kind of you.” she smirked the very second before she activated the car’s central locking. He paid this no mind until, upon stopping at a set of traffic lights, she climbed over her seat and grabbed a small white handbag.

“Hey Darla,” he said with a grin when he caught a sight of her rear, “that’s a lovely –” He never finished, for the last thing he remembered was a heavy blow to the back of his head before everything went as black as the night all around them.

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His head was hazy, yet it felt heavy. His arms were in his control, yet he couldn’t move them. His legs were made for walking, but yet they could not. And when he looked around him, he could see nothing but seemingly endless darkness. He could feel ropes around his limbs, and there was a copper muzzle strapped around his head keeping his mouth closed. His hearing came back in the space of a heartbeat, and then he felt a bump to his head when his surroundings jolted.

Then he noticed two dim red lights, one above his head and one below his feet. Then came the sound of a car’s engine and he felt his surroundings start to move. And then he realised where he was in a part of a car he hoped never to end up in. That rhino! What had she done? Where was she taking him, and why? Was she associated with the creatures who wanted his blood? Or was she simply in the mood for torture?

“Darla!” he cried, opening his mouth as far as the muzzle would allow. “Stop! Get me out of here!” But there came no response at all except her changing gears. “Open this trunk right now! At least tell me where we’re going! You want me to rip this trunk open?” He swung his feet into the first solid thing there was in front of him, but still there came no more reply from her. Instead, there was the sound of one of the indicators flashing, before he cried out as his head whacked into the side of the boot.

“DARLA!” he yelled. “Open the fucking door! You can’t keep me in here!” This time, the car suddenly pulled over. Then, light stung his eyes as the boot opened. However, what he saw next made his heart fill with dread. It was like his worst nightmare was coming true before him.

“Amelia? What’s going on?”

*

Amelia’s luck had finally taken a turn for the better. After many years spent on the road pulling favours, she was glad she had started taking on contracts, for right from the start, this one had been a mission of revenge. She could barely wait to get her hands on this repulsive creature again. A friend of Freya’s, she recalled the last time she’d met Johnny. She had confronted him over his cheating on Freya, but he hadn’t understood what the big deal was. As far as he had been concerned, it was perfectly fine to have what he called a side chick. His fright told her that her face was the last one he wanted to see, even when she removed the muzzle.

“Yes, Johnny.” she said, glaring at him. “I do have a nice trunk. And I didn’t expect to see you still upright when I found you.”

“Where’s Darla?”

“You’re looking at ‘her’.” she said glacially. “You’re still a boorish shitbag like you used to be. I can’t believe how easy it was to trick you into coming with me.” Her blonde hair dye was gone, replaced by her natural pink, while her eyes were no longer brown, but instead sapphire blue.

“Why did you tie me up?”

"It's more fun for me." she answered. "I needed something to take the edge off so I could finish my mission."

"Mission?"

"I felt sick having to give you the sweet talk, but you fell for me like a domino. The real picture is, you owe somebody a lot of money and he's sent me to collect you. He's given me a bounty and it's already getting plump and juicy."

"No, no, please!" he begged. "Not them! Don't take me to them! I'll do anything for you to let me go."

"Really?" she asked dryly.

"Anything!" She scowled at him.

"You haven't learned anything in the past ten years, have you?" she sneered. "When you're at the mercy of someone like me, you're supposed to be able to convince them why they shouldn't keep you as their prisoner or entertain them. You're not managing to do either of those things, Johnny."

"I can't go back to them." he said pitifully. "They'll rip my throat out. Come on, I'll even tell you where Freya is! You're friends with her, right?" Amelia's eyes widened, and she could not keep herself calm any longer.

"What the fuck did you just say?" she demanded. He stayed silent. *What's the matter, you piece of shit? You're too scared to answer me?* "Come on, tell me!" She grabbed hold of him by the scruff of his neck. "That means right now, not next week or next month!"

"I know where Freya is, Amelia." he said weakly.

"How did you come across that information?" she snarled, tightening up the ropes binding his wrists and making him grunt in pain. "Talk!"

"I...tracked her down. And I followed her all the way to Scotland and –"

"You don't fucking listen, do you?" she growled. "I thought I made it clear that you don't *ever* come near her again. You're going to tell me everything you've done to her, otherwise I'll do to you what I should have done ten years ago."

"She owed me a lot of money from the day she broke up with me." he started to desperately explain.

"She didn't owe you shit."

"She did, so I hoped to get it out of her – make her pay for what she did to me. I made her get nearly a million Pounds from me as ransom money."

"Ransom? You aren't telling me you sank that low?"

"I wanted to wreck her new business just like she wrecked my reputation."

"What fucking reputation?"

"I kidnapped her secretary. She got me that money, so then I got her to dance at some piece of shit strip club. But then some dragoness, the owner, took my video camera from me and humiliated me in front of the whole club. She made me, Johnny Campbell, dance in some frilly fucking dress, while Freya ran off somewhere. I don't know where she went after that, I swear!" Amelia's face contorted as she took this in. She was so enraged, she released a roar where furious words would have been and began laying punch after punch into his face, the car's suspension rocking with every blow. Two of his teeth detached from his upper jaw from one punch, before she finished by whacking his skull with an empty whisky bottle, shattering on impact and showering the boot with its fragments. A welt carved into his head began to bleed into them. Breathing heavily, she stepped back, wishing she could do more to destroy this pathetic being.

"You want to know why I didn't kill you ten years ago?" she raged. "It's only because you were still in the public's eye. But thanks to this country worshipping celebrities, they're too ignorant to see you for who you really are."

"Amelia!" he cried. "Have mercy on me! My beef is with Freya, not with you!"

"You don't deserve to live." she said, her words dripping with utter contempt. "Just think yourself lucky I didn't decide to cut your dick off for this. Where the fuck is she now?"

"I don't know! I don't even remember what part of the country she's in." She whacked him with her handbag, thankful she'd still kept the brick inside it. A cry of pain coupled with a resounding crack revealed that one of his horns had snapped off.

"That's not good enough!" she snarled. "You want to lose your other horn too?"

"I can't tell you anything else!" She raised the handbag again, but instead tossed it at him, allowing it to whack him on the shoulder.

"Fuck it. I knew you wouldn't care enough to keep track of anything except your own desires."

"What are you gonna do to me now?"

"We're going home."

"No, I can't go back to Florida! Anywhere but there!"

"Yes we are." she said, showing him a demented smile. "And that's not all. Do you have any idea how delighted Freya's going to be when I tell her what happens to you once we get there?"

"This won't –" he began, but she slammed the boot door down on him, muffling the rest of his words. She slammed her foot down on the accelerator the instant she climbed back in, the bull's body making a thumping sound as his head hit the boot door. She showed no reaction to his whimpers of pain from rolling over the broken glass. Her only intention was to carry out her duty. *This beats hitchhiking any day.* she thought as she reached another set of traffic lights, only to be cut up and almost crashed into by another driver coming in the opposite direction.

Over the next two hours, she navigated the vast wilderness, weaving through a number of small towns in her travels. Johnny soon ceased struggling and stopped protesting, which had led to her suddenly slamming on the brakes in a bid to get him to resume. Even having to fill up at a petrol station did nothing to quell the overwhelming desire to watch him suffer, but she knew that the bounty held the highest trump card.

She passed city after city whose names she didn't care to keep track of. But their names mattered not. All that did was what States she was coursing through. In any circumstance, she heard not a peep coming from the boot now. Perhaps Johnny had fallen asleep. Or maybe he'd finally accepted his fate. There was no risk of suffocation due to a few of the vehicle's vents being inside there. The choice of vehicle was paramount, and the last thing Amelia wanted was a dead body.

By the time she reached Florida, daylight had started to break. She couldn't help but gaze in wonder at the sky as it slowly brightened up, the clouds momentarily being many beautiful shades of pink and gold. And in what felt like a mere moment, she had finally reached her long awaited destination. She knew to look for the underground car park of a block of flats, one of the many garages having her cherished motorbike inside. While the urge to sleep was starting to surface, this wasn't any concern of hers, for she was more than used to long drives. She pulled over and drew out her mobile phone, and on dialling her boss' number, he picked up in an instant.

"Did you find him?" he asked immediately.

"I'm in the parking lot now." she said with a smirk she knew he wouldn't see. And with that, a black BMW pulled in and positioned itself in front of her vehicle. The driver stepped out, revealing himself as a human man shrouded in a black trench coat and a wide hat that almost hid his face. He approached the driver's side window.

"Well, the car's not damaged." he said. "I'm surprised, considering how long you were gone for."

"Don't cut your hands cleaning it. There's broken glass in the trunk."

"You glassed him?" The human sounded amused by his own suggestion.

"He's a real piece of shit, this one." He glanced at the rear seats.

"I assume he's in the trunk for me now?"

"Yep." she smirked. "He's all yours." Just before she got out and gave the human the keys, she pressed the release button for the boot. "Wakey wakey, Johnny boy." she said tauntingly.

"Damn, lady." smiled the human. "You really did a number on this guy!"

"With him, it was personal." said Amelia.

"You had a score to settle with him too, did you?"

"He blackmailed and nearly ruined someone very close to me."

"Great." he answered, sounding disinterested. "I know him, you know him. Point is, we've still got a deal to complete." He looked down at Johnny with a menacing smile. "Since you seem to feel great about owing creatures money," he continued in an eerily calm voice, "you're best giving up that one remaining horn. You won't need it where you're going."

"You can't leave me like this, Amelia!" pleaded Johnny. "Please let me go!"

"Me and my men will do the rest. Your bike's in there, Amelia." He handed her a tied up stack of notes, which she pocketed.

"No! No, don't leave me!" begged Johnny. *You seriously think I want to dignify that with a response?* she thought. True to her thoughts, she hawked up and spat a mouthful of phlegm at him, grinning as it landed on his cheek.

"Karma is a bitch." she said with a gleeful smile. With that, she took off on the bike, drawing out her mobile phone again once she was clear of the city's outskirts. She pulled over once she'd reached a sign reading *Welcome to Tallahassee*, and then went to dial the number of her brother, Theo. But midway through, she decided against it. *Maybe it would be better if I surprised him.*

*

Amelia had to admit – she had always liked riding through Florida's largest settlements. She had sometimes wished she had been able to move into Tallahassee, as had her brother, although the rents had proven prohibitively high. She thought it looked lovely at night, if her last time passing through was anything to go by. This soon left her mind as she crossed another city border, whose name she didn't catch this time. *Just you wait, Theo.* she thought. *Big sister is coming home. It's been so long.*

However, her train of thought was soon interrupted by the sound of an irritatingly familiar siren. *No. Not here.* she thought. *What did I do wrong?* Not feeling much like fighting, she pulled over to the side of the road. Only now did she see where she was. She was in a seedy looking district, and the buildings looked neither familiar or welcoming. However, once she looked in her bike's mirrors, she was surprised by what she saw.

"This'll be easy. she thought aloud when the police officer approached her. She recognised him immediately as the light brown fennec she had encountered while she was riding through Colorado not very long ago. And she had recalled the sexual favour she had granted him to get him to waive a speeding ticket. But if he was aware of what she'd just done, she would be finished. She removed her helmet, and just the sight of her mane of pink hair was enough to catch his attention. She felt her heart starting to race.

"Nice to see you here, Ms Richardson." he said dryly.

"I didn't forget about you, Officer Hornchurch." smirked Amelia.

"Do you realise you were doing twenty miles per hour over the speed limit?" he said sharply. It took all of her self control not to breathe a sigh of relief. "I warned you that next time, I wouldn't be so lenient towards you. Speeding isn't something the law takes lightly."

"What are you doing in Florida?" she asked.

"I got transferred." he answered. "I left my wife, so I decided I wanted to return to my home State."

“Too many favours on the side, huh?”

“No. She cheated on me. But enough about that. I know you, you know me, but I have to still uphold the law.” He drew out a notepad from his belt and started to write out a ticket, but Amelia wasn’t slow to pick up on his well hidden smirk.

“Gary,” she said, “I’m really glad you’ve stopped me.”

“Why?” he asked. “Because if it’s another favour you’ve got in mind, I don’t want it this time.”

“Sure you don’t.” smirked Amelia. “It’s good to finally be able to stop for a breather. My feet are killing me!” And with that, she slipped off her boots and removed her socks, the dry air feeling so good on them.

“Be that as it may, I still have to...oh, you know how to get me going, don’t you? I remember everything like it was only yesterday.” His ears swivelled down to them, much to Amelia’s amusement. Her ruse was working, and she wasn’t going to stop pressing now.

“I did.” she said. “Did you think I’d forget about that?” His widening eyes indicated she had made him nervous, yet thankful that nobody else seemed to be paying them any attention. *There’s got to be a way to get him off my tail for the time being.*

“Um, no.” he said sheepishly. This seemed far too easy. The bump she saw in his trousers told her everything she needed to know. “All this time, I secretly hoped I’d run into you again.” Amelia noticed her staring at her feet again. “Now that it’s finally happened, I hope you’ve got time. I can rip up that ticket if you do me another favour.” Amelia smirked, an idea forming in her brain. *Of course! I should have thought of that before.*

“Well, perhaps I can interest you in an offer.”

“What kind of offer?”

“I’ve got to make a stop a few counties away.” she explained. “I’ll make it worth your while, even more than I did last time. I know that one of the ways to a man’s heart lies in what he likes in a woman, whether or not she’s his species.” Amelia caught his muzzle in her hand. “I’ll meet you at the Tallahassee city limits tomorrow.”

“You don’t even have to try to convince me.” he grinned. “You’ve got yourself a deal, Amelia. I can’t turn down another chance with you.” He scrunched up the ticket and crushed it under his boot. “Just don’t tell the Chief.”

“Don’t you worry about that. It’s our secret.” And with that, she put on a fresh pair of socks before replacing her boots and kicking her motorbike back into life, speeding off with a glance behind her. Hopeful though she was that nobody in the surrounding buildings had seen her, all that was on her mind now was Theo. By then, the last of the clouds had dissipated and it was looking to be a warm day for the time of year. But the desire for sleep was now starting to sap her remaining strength and energy. And finally, as she pulled into the street that was as familiar as it was empty of parked cars, she was unable to hold back a yawn.

She pulled into the empty driveway of 576 Hart Avenue and killed the engine. She crept up to the front door and knocked, her heart starting to race again. And when it opened, her face lit up like a candle. Standing in the doorway was a slender rhino adorned with light purple silk pyjamas, and he looked rather disorientated. Once he looked up, however, Amelia thought she would never forget the overwhelming joy on his face.

“A-Amelia?” he cried.

“It’s been way too long.” she smiled. They could contain themselves no longer. They caught each other in a tight embrace, and it was a considerable effort for Amelia not to weep with joy.

“Is it really you?”

“Get some glasses, Theo.” she said wryly.

“It’s amazing to have you back. I’ve missed you so much.”

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When Theo closed the front door behind her, she found herself gazing in wonder at her surroundings. She hadn't been here in years, and yet the house looked as though she had only been away for a mere day. The living room and its furniture and pictures were all unchanged, as were the pictures lining the walls. Was this a time capsule of some kind? Were her eyes deceiving her? This soon left her mind when her stomach let out a rumble, sternly reminding her that it had been nearly fifteen hours since she had last eaten.

"I've always wondered when you would come back here." said Theo, the younger rhino slipping on a black dressing gown. "It's been so many years."

"I'm just glad to finally be home." said Amelia, letting out a yawn as she meandered into the kitchen. She looked through the cupboards and grabbed a pair of pop tarts, then started to eat them uncooked from the pack. Theo stared.

"So what brings you back?" he inquired. "You just showed up out of the blue. Not that it's a bad thing or anything. I'm just wondering."

"There's something I've gotta know."

"From me?"

"Not exactly, but I'll need my passport for this. You know where it is?" Before he could answer, Amelia grabbed a sub sandwich and a bottle of yoghurt drink from the fridge and started to ravenously chow down.

"Hey!" groused Theo. "I was saving that!"

"Uh, sorry Theo." said Amelia sheepishly as she finished her morsel. "I'll make you another one later, okay? I've been out all day and all night and I've had nothing to eat."

"Yeah, but you could have asked first." he pointed out. He then gave a quick sigh. "It doesn't matter. Where have you been? And, uh, what do you need your passport for? You're going off on holiday or something?"

"Not exactly." said Amelia. "Look, I'm sorry to cut this short, but I really need to get some sleep. I've had a long night and I've just travelled halfway across the country. I'll tell you later, okay?" She finished with an affectionate smile.

"Alright, but I've got some things of my own I've got to sort out."

"Don't you fret about that, Theo. Big sister's here at last, and she'll help you out once she's all rested up."

"Yeah, okay. But just wait until Mom sees you. She'll be as overjoyed as I am, for sure!" Too exhausted by now to find a bed, she sat down on the sofa. And from the moment her head sank into the velvet, sleep overtook her, casting her world into darkness. Completing her mission and delivering her long awaited revenge felt like a great weight off her shoulders, but her journey was not complete. The last thing she thought of was where to start looking for her old friend. So many years she had yearned for any chance to meet her again and to find out where she had gone, and now, her search would be so much easier. Her next adventure was not far away.

The End

