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HAPPILY

CLAYTON FINDS THE BEAUTY QUEEN IN THE BACK-SEAT OF A NEW 87 MONTE CARLO ON A COLD, COLD JANUARY NIGHT, AND HIS LIFE BOARDS A GREYHOUND FOR A DESTINATION UNKNOWN.

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Clayton finds the Beauty Queen in the backseat of a new 87 Monte Carlo on a cold, cold January night, and his life boards a Greyhound for a destination unknown. It's Monday, just a week from his twenty-first birthday, and he's been rambling through the old Sugar Creek strip mine, cruising deserted haul roads since well before dark. He tops a small rise that opens to coal pit and finds the Monte Carlo parked at the edge of dark water. He high beams the car, races his old International pickup's engine and waits for the Monte Carlo's taillights to flare. Nothing. He reaches under the seat for the Smith and Wesson .357 that his granddaddy willed to him and lays on the horn. He waits. Five minutes later, still nothing, so he sets the emergency brake and steps out on frozen ground.

"Well, what have we here?" he says, peering through the Monte Carlo's window.

Of course there's no one to answer. Most of the mines in this part of south-central Kentucky have been abandoned for close to a decade, and there's nothing out here now but hundreds of acres of weeds, rusting machinery and overgrown trails that curl back upon each other like sleeping snakes.

Clayton pushes his glasses back up to the bridge of his nose, smiling the slow, loopy smile that had made his teachers nervous and his classmates swear he was retarded. He goes to the International, digs out a big Black and Decker flashlight that he's stolen from his old man's Peterbilt and hurries back to the Monte Carlo. He opens the rear door. No dome light, so the battery's shot. He spotlights the Beauty Queen and Lover Boy and stares as hard as he can, wanting to scorch the scene into his memory. The Beauty Queen is sprawled in the backseat, a thick, white sweater patterned with Christmas trees balled up and pitched into the front, a lacy, cream-colored bra unsnapped and hanging loose from her shoulders, her stonewashed Levis unzipped to grant access to searching fingers. Lover Boy is slumped forward, his head touching the front seat, his pants and BVDs down at his ankles. There's a fifth of vodka on the seat between them, a half case of Falls City Beer in the floorboard beneath the Beauty Queen's feet. Clayton reaches in for the vodka, unscrews the cap and takes a swallow.

Wiping his mouth on his wrist, he listens to a stray dog's howl from the far side of the pit. Clayton holds his breath, waits for the sound of a motor. Nothing. During the summer the strip mines are party central for high school kids looking to drink beer or score

pot or fuck without worrying about prying parents, but patches of snow still linger on the hillsides and the place is the way he likes it—quiet and empty, a ghost world that belongs only to him.

Satisfied that no one is coming, he sets the vodka bottle on the ground and swings the flashlight's glare into the front seat. A plastic baggie of grass on the dashboard, a half-smoked number in the ashtray, a prescription bottle open on the passenger seat. He opens the front door, drops the pot and the prescription bottle, Valium, into his parka's big front pocket and then turns his attention to the backseat again. It doesn't take Sherlock Holmes to figure it out. The Beauty Queen and Lover Boy came out here to fuck and get fucked up. It's been brutally cold for the better part of a week, so they would have been running the heater. They'd passed out or maybe she'd blown him and they were stoned and sleepy and it sneaked up on them. He doesn't know and it doesn't really matter. What does is that carbon monoxide got the best of them. Clayton checks his watch. It's early yet, just a little past eight, so he figures they must have come out here last night or maybe even the night before. He runs the flashlight over Lover Boy's face, doesn't recognize him and doesn't give a damn. It's the Beauty Queen that matters. Traci Greenwood, the daughter of the School Superintendent. She'd been a year behind him at Harp's Station High, a cheerleader, without a doubt the most popular girl in school. He licks his lips. A year and a half ago, right after her senior year, the town made it official and crowned her Miss Harp at the county fair. Clayton stood in the sweaty, sour-smelling crowd at the Ag Center and watched her ass twitch as she paraded across the makeshift stage in her powder blue swimsuit. Lately, he's been hearing that the Beauty Queen has fallen on hard times. She dropped out of Murray State after her first semester, came back to town to party, got kicked out of her parents' house after they caught her screwing a married man right on their living room sofa. He's heard she moved in with Carol Seegers, a thirty-year-old pill-head divorcee with a half dozen arrests for dealing and solicitation. Clayton didn't believe the rumors, but now he thinks maybe they're true since times don't get any harder than dead.

He flashes the light on the Beauty Queen's face, thinking how peaceful she looks even with the bluish tinge around her lips. This is the way he always imagined Sleeping Beauty looked when she was discovered by Prince Charming. He leans into the car and kisses her dry, cold lips, but there's no resurrection. He wonders what would happen if there were. Would she scream or call him a weirdo or would she be so grateful that she let him touch her breasts, maybe even put his hands in her pants? Thinking about it gets him hard, and he shivers like a horse waiting for the saddle.

"There's no harm in it," he whispers.

And surely there isn't. No one's here to see, and the Beauty Queen's past caring, so he hunkers beside the car, pulls down the straps on her bra and cups her heavy, chilled breast in his hand. Moaning a little, he leans forward and takes her nipple in his mouth and suckles. His heart hammers in his chest, and he feels feverish and dizzy. He thinks of the way he'll stroke himself when he's home in bed, what he'll have to remember and that makes him even harder. As smitten as he's been with Beauty Queen, he's never jerked off to her before, the same way he's never jacked to the posters of Samantha Fox and Christie Brinkley even though they grin down at him from his bedroom wall. Even in his fantasies, Clayton is humble. Middle-aged waitresses with varicose veins and saggy breasts,

the pimpled fat girl at the drive thru window at Druthers and his cross-eyed cousin Lorraine are the best looking women he can imagine being with a fat, four-eyed weirdo like him. The Beauty Queen? To him she's every bit as majestic and unattainable as Hollywood celebrities or the girls on the pages of *Playboy* magazine. But now she's here within easy reach.

He slips his hand inside her panties and yanks it out when the dog howls again. This is crazy, he tells himself. He needs to leave it alone. No one's likely to come out here tonight, but if they do and they see him, he might get in trouble. The thing to do is get back in his truck, head on home, eat some dinner, forget about it. When someone finds them out here, Sheriff Simmons won't look twice. He'll just shake his head, call for an ambulance to take them to the morgue and have something to talk about at his next Stay Straight and Stay Alive lecture at Harp's High. But if someone sees Clayton fooling around with the body...there's no telling what they might think.

Still, he doesn't want to leave the Beauty Queen behind. How can he give her up? If he lives a thousand lifetimes he'll never have such a beautiful and pliable female in his grasp again.

He stands up, shivering in a gust of wind. His hands are aching, half numb. He glances back at his pickup, an idea taking hazy form and then suddenly becoming clear and possible as he seizes upon the image of the old smokehouse near the back of his parents' fourteen acres. He reaches into the car for one of the frozen cans of beer, heaves it towards the dark water, giggles when he hears the splash. It hasn't been above thirty for nearly a month, and in the last week, it's gotten as cold as seven below. If the water's not frozen this close to the bank, the pit must get real deep real quick. Why not, he thinks. What harm would there be in it? Who would ever know?

Two and a half hours later, Clayton sits at his parents' kitchen table, crumbling crackers into a bowl of tomato soup and reliving the last couple of hours in his mind. He's had the Beauty Queen twice since he unloaded her in the smokehouse, and he's cold and spent. He slurps his soup and thinks about her, nude and covered with an old blanket, lying on a stack of milk crates, waiting. The idea of rats troubles him. It would be wrong to let them get at her. The Beauty Queen deserves better.

"You didn't come in to say hello," his momma says on her way to the fridge for yet another light beer.

Clayton winces at the sound of her and wills her to get her beer and head right back to the living room. "I thought interrupting Carson's monologue was forbidden at all costs," he says.

She opens the can, sips and sits down with him at the kitchen table. "Your daddy called tonight," she says. "He's in Fort Myers, Florida. Says it's warm enough down there to ride with the truck window open."

“Huh,” Clayton says “He coming home soon?” he says, thinking please god no.

“A couple of days,” she says. “He’s picking up another load in Panama City and running it over to Shreveport then he’s heading this way.”

It’s too soon, but Clayton figures a couple of days without his old man’s constant nagging and his greasy farts stinking up the living room is better than no days at all. *Get a job, go to work, get a job.* The old man has been as persistent and repetitive as parrot since Clayton quit high school.

“You should have come in and said hello,” his momma says, her beer-addled mind chasing itself in circles. “I get nervous with your daddy gone. I might have shot you as a burglar.”

Clayton shrugs and then grins at her over his bowl. “What kind of burglar breaks in and makes a can of soup?”

“A hungry one.”

Clayton smiles a genuine smile despite himself. He hates it when she catches him off guard with her goofy humor or with displays of almost-true affection. It makes the rest of the time when she is distant, judging, disappointed even worse. He doesn’t blame her for feeling that way. She’s thirty-nine, an attractive woman just edging towards a plumpness that would fall away if she’d give up her nightly six pack. She has strawberry blonde hair and a playful smile that can be flirtatious when she’s dressed in one of her “business suits” and showing a reluctant client around a three bedroom ranch or a four bedroom split-level at Cherry Wood Estates. She was never a cheerleader or a Beauty Queen, but he’s seen her high school yearbooks. She was a pretty girl who got better looking with time. The same isn’t exactly true of his dad. Too much time sitting behind the wheel and too many truck stop meals have thickened him and worn away his muscles, but he still looks alright with a fresh shave and a haircut. How such “normal” looking parents ended up with a close-to-three-hundred-pound, myopic, greasy-haired and acne-scarred kid is probably the great mystery of their lives, the one question they’ve been asking themselves since he was five years old.

“So what have you been up to tonight?” she asks, her tone light but the question not casual.

The lie comes easily. It should. He’s been telling the same one for the last four years.

“I was down at the pool hall.”

“Beasley’s?”

He tries to keep the impatience out of his voice. “It’s the only one in town, Mom.”

She runs her thumbnail along the rim of her can. “I’m not sure I like you hanging around there. Mabel Clemmons says they sell drugs out of that place.”

“She doesn’t know everything.”

“She knows more than you think.”

“A lot of people know more than you think.”

Her head ticks to the side and her jaw sets. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

For a second he holds her eyes. He wants to say to her, you know exactly what it means. Things have been tense between her and the old man recently with fights roaring up from nowhere and without warning the way thunderstorms churn up in the summer when the air is too hot and too heavy to do anything else. But those fights-- over a joke that his mother deemed inappropriate or the money needed to pay an unexpected bill-- never give rest to anything, just the way those quick summer storms never seem to break the heat and humidity. Lately, his mother has become restless, complaining about the time she spends alone, suddenly dissatisfied with the old farmhouse they’d bought when Clayton was four. Now she wants a place closer to town without the overgrown fields, the crumbling barn used to store junk his daddy hasn’t gotten around to hauling away, the ivy-covered old smokehouse with its low roof just visible over the weeds and pawpaw bushes. Clayton suspects that the real tension around here has come from how often his mother mentions Ray Massey, her boss at Massey Real Estate. A couple of weeks ago, Clayton spotted the two of them, his momma and Ray Massey, leaving the Royal Palm Restaurant. When he mentioned it she said it was a “working” lunch. He didn’t comment, but he was pretty sure you didn’t come out of a working lunch and linger by the side of the building for a quick kiss. Now he holds her eyes, wanting to let her know that below her makeup and quick smile, she isn’t so pretty after all. But then, as usual, he loses his nerve.

“It doesn’t mean nothing, Mom,” he says. “I was just saying...”

He falls silent, thinking about the Beauty Queen, how she’s out there right now, waiting, thinking how she’s his and no one can take her away from him. She’ll never cheat, never slip off for a quick kiss with another man. Most of all she won’t look at him the way his mom’s looking at him right now—her expression distrustful and full of angry questions: *Why are you always smirking? How did you get so ugly? Why don’t you do something-- lose weight, cut back on the chocolate and sodas to clear your skin,, wash your greasy hair? Are you ever going to get a real job, a girlfriend, a life? Will you always be the cross I have to bear?* And the thought of the Beauty Queen makes it all better, nearly tolerable for the first time in as long as he can remember. He has something, someone, and the rest of it is just petty shit that doesn’t matter. Suddenly, he’s on the verge of laughing out loud.

“What’s got you grinning like the Cheshire cat?” his momma asks.

He shrugs, takes his bowl to the kitchen sink and runs water in it. When he turns from the sink, she's still watching him.

"I met someone tonight," he says.

"A girl?"

His resentment flares at the surprise in her voice. "Yeah," he says. "Believe it or not, she seems to *like* me. Or at least she hasn't told me any different."

"Well," his momma says. "Good, good for you."

"It's early yet, but who knows? Maybe I'll end up with happy ever after, after all."

Then he does something that he hasn't done since he was nine years old. He bends and kisses her forehead on his way to bed.

Three days later Clayton has come to understand: this is Romeo and Juliet, John and Yoko, Luke and Laura, baby. This is love with a capital L. For the first time in his life he knows why they play all those syrupy songs on the radio. Before the Beauty Queen, he'd been an Iron Maiden, Megadeath, Guns 'n Roses kind of guy. Now, he can't get enough of pop ballads on FM radio. It makes him feel foolish, but in a nice kind of way, and even his dad's presence can't spoil his good mood.

He goes to her at sundown, kisses her cool, dry lips and is warmed by her presence. The Beauty Queen is more beautiful than ever. He likes the whiteness of her skin, the exotic blue tinge to her lips, the grace and peace in her eyes.

The morning after he found her, he dug through the old barn for an old chest freezer his dad had moved out there three years before. He'd washed it and let it air out for a while and then about busted his spine loading it into his International and lugging it to the smokehouse. But the Beauty Queen is worth the effort. She sleeps her days away safe from rats and field mice and raccoons, awaiting his return.

They lie on a lumpy, mildewed mattress he rescued from the town dump-- not exactly the bed of roses of the Beauty Queen deserves, but it will do for now, he supposes. He tells her about his trip into town with his father, skimming over the way the old man harangued him about applying for a real job before finally asking, "What the fuck, Clayton? You think you can cut yards and rake leaves and pick up odd jobs for the rest of your life? You think your momma and I are always going to support you?" There's no point in getting too deep into that. The important news is that no one really thinks she's missing. Everyone in town seems to believe that the

Beauty Queen and her Lover Boy, who owed some not nice fellows a lot of drug money, took off for warmer weather—Florida or maybe even California.

“It’s just the way I told you it would be,” he says even though he hasn’t told her that at all, just hoped it would be true.

And in his head the Beauty Queen says how she never doubted it. He was always smarter than people gave him credit for. Then she confesses that unlike the rest of their schoolmates, she never really believed he was weird. In fact, she says, she always secretly thought he was kind of cute. She was just afraid to say it to her friends. He tells her not to worry about that, not to worry at all. He forgives her completely. He kisses her again and then opens her thighs and rolls on top of her.

Afterwards, he lies with her beneath the blanket, speaking of the things that trouble him in his life. He tells her that he never meant to be weird, didn’t know he was until the first day of kindergarten when Jeremy Mayes spotted him digging at a chigger bite on the back of his thigh and shouted, “Look at that! The weird kid’s an ass picker!” For a long time he hated Jeremy Mayes, he tells her, but he gave that up when he finally realized that if it hadn’t been Jeremy who branded him a freak, it would have been someone else. Everyone could tell by just looking at him. He forgave Jeremy Mayes. But he couldn’t forgive his parents.

“They knew,” he says. “Once I saw the way people at school looked at me I could see it on their faces, too. My whole life they knew I was a weirdo, but they didn’t tell me. I wasn’t prepared. They just sent me off to school like it was a big fucking joke.”

He cries then, can’t help himself, but the Beauty Queen doesn’t mind, doesn’t think of him as less of a man. He can feel sympathy and love rising from her cold skin.

“It doesn’t matter,” he says. “I’ve got you now. And we’re going to have each other forever.”

But he hears the Beauty Queen in the back of his mind, and her words make him shudder. It’s been warmer today, she tells him. Spring will be coming soon. And then I’ll rot. There’s no electricity in here, no way to keep me fresh. I’ll rot and be gone and you’ll be alone again. It breaks my heart to leave you, she says. But it’s bound to happen.

He promises her that he won’t let it. He’ll do something. Stop the rotation of the earth, banish both spring and summer, whatever it takes for them to be together. But he knows even as he says it that those are hollow words, boastful nonsense from a terrified and inexperienced lover. This isn’t the way happily ever after is supposed to end. But it will. And he realizes that there’s nothing he can do about it.

Yes, she says. There is.

And Clayton is sure that the Beauty Queen has spoken aloud. He knows it's impossible, but he can still hear that voice, feel its vibration in his ears and the boards of the building.

"Tell me," he says.

She does and of course he's known all along. And he resists at first. And of course he gives in because, after all, true love inevitably demands sacrifice.

His parents are sitting down for dinner -- pork chop casserole with Minute Rice and cream of mushroom soup-- when Clayton kills them. In the moment before he lifts the .357, so heavy and reassuring in his hand, he leans against the kitchen door, watching them. His mother pushes food around with her fork, a glass of ice water by her hand. She never drinks beer when the old man is home. That's okay though. He drinks enough for both of them. Three empty Pabst cans sit beside his place, as head down, he shovels the food in, pausing only long enough to wash down a mouthful with a swallow of beer.

Clayton on a memory from when he was five or six. His mother in a loose white dress sitting in a lawn chair and shouting out "warm" or "cold," while he runs through the back yard, an Easter basket banging against his chubby thighs as he searches for the colored eggs his old man hid for him. His eyes water, not because of what he's about to do, but because there are so few of these good memories and the ones he has are getting harder to recall every day.

"Your supper's on the stove," his mother says, barely glancing at him. "Wash your hands before you sit down."

His old man doesn't bother to look back at him at all. "The least you can do is show up to eat it on time. If I had my way I'd have dumped your plate in the garbage."

"Dad," Clayton says.

"What?"

"I love you."

That stops the old man. His shoulders tense, and he drops his fork on his plate, turns in his chair, his eyebrow raised in a question.

"Is something wrong?" he's asking.

Clayton squeezes the trigger. The .357 bucks in his hand, its roar setting his ears to ringing. The shot hits the old man just below the breast bone, punches him back against his chair, one arm flailing out wildly, knocking empty beer cans from the table. He grabs at the wound, his mouth working the way a fish's mouth will work when it's dropped on the bank, the hook still biting deep into its gullet. Clayton fires again. This shot catches the old man in the throat, comes out the side of his neck in a spray of blood and skin and bone, ricochets off the sink.

Wide-eyed, his momma holds up her hands like a cornered suspect in a television show. They're trembling, Clayton sees, and her skin is nearly the same bleached white as the Beauty Queen's. She doesn't try to run or fight back or even scream. She just sits there with her hands up, her lip quivering. Finally, when he turns the .357's barrel to her, she finds her words.

"Oh, Clayton," she says, more sad than surprised or frightened. "Oh, Clayton."

The afternoon of his twenty-first birthday Clayton stands at the living room window and watches a Sheriff's Department cruiser bounce along the ruts in the drive. His legs tremble when he thinks of how lucky it is that he decided to put his family away before he ran to town to shop for his birthday dinner. In the last couple of days he's taken to leaving them out more and more, his parents on the living room sofa, sitting with their legs touching, their hands interlaced, happy and in love, the Beauty Queen either at the kitchen table to share a romantic meal or, more often, waiting for him in his parents' marriage bed, her smile knowing, her legs parted in invitation. But this morning the Beauty Queen spoke up. Better safe than sorry, she said, so he dragged them all into the bedroom, drew the curtains and shut the doors.

Now he pulls on his parka, thinks of the .357 magnum lying on the nightstand in his bedroom. He wants to get it, but the knock on the door comes before he's three steps down the hall, and he stops, panicking, unsure what to do. He wants the gun, but maybe Sheriff Simmons will get suspicious if he's made to wait.

He's kept the thermometer on fifty since he carried the Beauty Queen into the house, but sweat breaks out on his forehead and runs down the small of his back. His heart wallops in his chest. There's another knock at the back door, and he gives up on the idea of the gun. On the way through the kitchen he thinks of his father's skinning knife in the catch-all drawer beside the sink. He takes the time to get it and to slip into his pocket, knocking be damned.

"I thought I heard you in there," Sheriff Simmons says, grinning a little.

Clayton closes the door behind him. "That was me alright."

Sheriff Simmons is a tall man, six two or three, raw boned and wiry in his youth but pot-bellied and slump shouldered now as he creeps towards retirement. He's balding on top, wears a thick black and gray mustache, has kind eyes.

"How you been getting along?" Simmons says. "I'm asking cause I ain't seen you in town very much lately."

"I was there this morning."

"Huh," Simmons says.

"I been busy lately."

Simmons glances over his shoulder, but there's nothing for him to see on the other side of the small pane of glass in the door. "Say you have? You working?"

"Well, I..." He thinks of lying but something like that would be easy to check. "No," he admits. "Just watching a lot of television."

"That keeps you busy?"

"I've pretty much made it a full time job," Clayton says.

Simmons smiles at the attempt at humor, but it's not a genuine smile. Clayton can tell that. It doesn't even come close to reaching his eyes, which are sharp now and distrustful and not at all friendly.

"You got any idea why I'm out here?"

"I figure..."

"It's got something to do with your momma and daddy," Simmons says. "Ray Massey called me this morning, said your momma hasn't been to work all this week and no one out here's answering the phone."

"Huh," Clayton says because he can't think of anything else.

"He's worried."

"I bet he is," Clayton says quickly, picturing Ray Massey's suntanned face and white-toothed grin and wanting to take a chopping axe and split his head wide open.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.”

Now it’s the Sheriff’s turn to say huh and then, “I called out to Peterson Trucking. They say your daddy’s had a load waiting for two days . They been calling too. Nobody’s been answering.” He reaches into his coat pocket for a pack of Pall Malls, thumbs one out. “I figured I ought to swing by here and see if everything’s okay.” He lights his cigarette with a Zippo engraved with crossed pistols and exhales smoke at the sky. “Is it?”

“Is what?”

“Everything okay.”

“Sure it is,” Clayton says, trying to force himself to smile. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I’m here.” He exhales another little cloud of smoke. “Your daddy home?”

“No.”

“Even though his rig’s parked down there by the barn and his Ford Ranger’s sitting right there in the drive?”

“Even though,” Clayton says.

“What about your momma?”

“No.”

Simmons smiles around his cigarette. “Even though that’s her Plymouth I parked beside?”

“Right.”

“Say, you wouldn’t happen to have some coffee in the pot would you? Cold gets to me these days, and I need all the warming fuel I can get.”

“We don’t have none.”

“No coffee?”

Clayton feels his face burn and his tongue wanting to tie up into a stammer. “Instant,” he says quickly. “We don’t have one of those Mr. Coffee’s. Instant’s all we got.”

Simmons smile is broad and friendly. “Well, hell, son that’s fine with me. Beggars can’t be choosers. That’s what they say, isn’t it?” He steps closer and Clayton can smell the aftershave, English Leather like his old man wears. “How about we go in, have a cup of coffee where it’s warm and see if we can’t make sense out of all this?”

“No,” Clayton says. “I mean I don’t have time. I got to...”

And now Sheriff Simmons isn’t smiling at all. His eyes—how could Clayton have ever thought they were friendly—are as hard and narrow as a hawk’s catching sight of a rabbit breaking cover.

“You’re telling me I can’t come in?”

“Yes,” Clayton says, his voice barely above a whisper, his eyes turned away. “That’s what I’m saying.”

Simmons shakes his head and sighs. “So I’ve got to go to all the trouble of driving back to town, waiting around until Judge Watkins cuts me a warrant and then coming back out here? Because that’s exactly what I’m going to do. Come back with a warrant.”

“It’s just that...” he lets the words trail away and tries again. “The place is dirty,” he says. “And I haven’t been feeling all that well lately, not like myself. I didn’t mean to be rude.”

“I don’t need a warrant?”

“No,” Clayton says. “My momma’s probably going to kill me when she finds out I let you in with things looking this way, but I don’t want you to go to all that trouble for nothing.”

Clayton opens the door and stands aside, ushering him in. Simmons claps his shoulder and crosses the threshold.

“Cold in here,” he says, stepping into the kitchen.

Clayton closes the door behind them. “Furnace hasn’t been working all that well lately.”

Simmons glances down at the birthday cake, the slowly thawing steak, the melting ice cream Clayton’s left on the table. Then his eyes move to the hallway.

“Smells funny in here,” he says.

And when he says it, he seems to recognize the scent for what it is. His hand drops to his gun belt, his thumb unsnapping the trigger guard on his holster. But it doesn't matter. The old Sheriff has made the rookie mistake of allowing someone to get behind him, and Clayton has the knife in hand.

Clayton has finished his porterhouse and baked potato and is waiting to light the candles on his birthday cake when he hears the cars approaching. He gives in to temptation and rushes to the living room to see how many are coming. Five of them, three locals and a couple of state troopers, are rushing into the drive, lights dim, sirens off. He lets the curtain fall closed and hurries back to the kitchen where his family is waiting.

Before joining them at the table, he takes a second to admire the scene. On the night of the murders he'd carefully washed and then bandaged his parents' wounds, and now, his father is dressed in the charcoal gray suit he only ever wore to weddings and funerals, his mother in her favorite skirt and sweater, the one that always made her seem like a college girl. The Beauty Queen, stunning in her nakedness, sits at the head of the table next to Clayton's chair. He smiles at her and sits down as he hears the thud of slamming car doors.

He uses his left hand to hold hers, grips the Sheriff's lighter in his right. He hears them out there, taking up positions, hears someone say, "That's the Sheriff's cruiser sitting right there in the open."

That surprises them but Clayton isn't sure why. What would have been the point of moving it? When Simmons didn't come back to the office or answer his radio, they would have come looking anyway. He had better things to do with his time-- like make love to his woman and cook his birthday dinner and then, when he was finished, unhook the gas line from the stove. They're moving around out there. Sooner or later one of them will knock on the door. He shakes his head. They're too close to the house, too close to the big old propane tank that's likely to blow once things get started. For a second, he thinks about stepping to the door and warning them but decides against it. Why bother? It wasn't like anyone had ever done him any favors.

He takes a deep breath. It's almost over now, but he has no regrets. The last few days have been the best of his life. And isn't that what true love really is? A few snatched moments of solace on the way from one darkness to another?

"Happy birthday to me," he says like Frosty in that old cartoon.

Still holding the Beauty Queen's hand, he fires the lighter. And in the stuttering heartbeat before the explosion, he has time to wish for happily ever after—whatever that might mean in the blackness that is to come.

