

THE QUEEN'S EXPRESS

By

Billie Bierer

Frigid wind danced across jagged peaks, through pinion and juniper and slid down the slopes, gusts pummeling cypress that hugged sharp crevasses. Lower still, the cutting gale whistled between salt cedars and greasewoods and finally buffeted the ancient cottonwoods growing along the shore of the shallow, rock-strewn river: the San Pedro River, one of only a few that run north in the United States.

During the afternoon the dog lay curled tight on the sandy bank, basking in the brilliant sunshine, oblivious to the wind. The large dog's once beautiful, thick silver fur, now dull and yet still, silver glittered in the bright light.

She was part Husky and part wolf. The dark gray fur brightened along the sides of her muzzle and circled her slanted, yellow eyes. They were haunting eyes. Predatory eyes, much the same as her predecessors, remaining unchanged from generation to generation, sharp and intense and, sometimes to us humans, frightening. Any movement was seen by the dog. Any sound was heard.

The dog grew too large for confinement in a small backyard owned by an exasperated master, tired of hunting her down, had brought her to this dead-end dirt road. He had opened the

squeaky door of his station wagon and watched momentarily while she'd jumped out. He'd left her there in this wild place. She had waited for his return, not understanding.

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The dog waited faithfully for a week, until one day, curled tightly on the riverbank, as the sun dipped behind the Western mountain range and the roiling winds pesky torment brought the scent of food.

She raised her head, her pointy ears pricked, her wet black nose quivered. Patiently, she again laid her head on her front paws, her eyes continued to search as she listened. Until darkness engulfed the river valley and the wind calmed and bright stars appeared overhead. Orion looked down upon the hybrid as she raised her head to test the air once more. A large owl swooped low and as if the big bird had pulled a night cloak over her, darkness descended around the dog. No human sound came to her and the dog laid her head down once more. Her small pointed ears continued to twitch as the trickling of water and the night sounds of small animals hunting, kept her alert. A half moon rose. Hunger gnawed at the dog's belly. She groaned as she curled herself tighter, her bushy tail covering her nose, only her eyes and ears still alert.

Moonlight made a quivering half-light. Earthly monsters waved across the water and tap danced over the land, reaching out with long snaking fingers, they flicked over the dog's body and rose against the hillside. The dog watched a raccoon at the waters edge. The fur on the back of her neck rose and a low rumble began deep in her throat.

The raccoon did not hear the dog, whether the sound of the water, or the clattering of business at hand, who could know. The raccoon continued to dip one tiny paw after the other

into the river silently examining the thing that he held. Curiosity, and hunger got the best of the dog and she rose as if in a crawl. In a flash, she rushed the raccoon. Tiny, glittering eyes met those of the dogs. The raccoon dropped his meal and scurried to the low overhanging bushes jutting from the near bank.

After a thorough investigation of the raccoon's hole that included a two foot dig, the dog trotted to the ground where the raccoon had been and found the small fish, dropped in haste. She crunched the fish head with determined relish. A mussel shell, however, presented a problem. Pushing it with her nose, the dog flopped on her belly, shell between her paws. She mouthed the hard shell and crunched down. A sweet juice squirted into her mouth bringing with it enough encouragement to call for a harder crunch. This time the shell gave. Rolling her long tongue the dog was able to eject the sharp shell fragments, and the chewy mussel slid down her throat. She licked her mouth and cleaned the tops of her paws. The meal had been small, accomplishing nothing more than to stir the dark, growing hunger inside.

Loyalty held her to the place she had been dropped. The dog retraced her steps and sniffed out the spot she had rested in, and dug deeper into the indentation her body had left in the damp river gravel. Once more she curled her body against the night.

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The next day was clear and harsh, but her undercoat retained her body heat. The cold would never be a problem for her. Starvation was the threat. Loneliness was stirring her. Stretching luxuriously as if taking delight in the bright Arizona sun, she threw her body onto the sand and gave herself a thorough back scratching. Upside down, legs punching at the sky like a

comical prizefighter, she twisted, then leapt up in a rush of energy. Shaking once again, she sent sand flying. Hesitating, she lifted her muzzle to the air. Nostrils twitching, she studied the breeze and in a flash, the dog was trotting downstream, the wind at her back. The familiar scent of food beckoned her, pulling her into an unknown landscape.

Stopping short, the dog lowered her nose to the ground and sniffed, then lifted her head, her sharp eyes watching intently as a ground squirrel dashed across the path ahead. The chase was on. The squirrel squeaked when the dog's front paws cuffed it and sent it rolling. The squirrel recovered instantly and scurried into a secret hole under a ledge of thick tangled tree roots. Though the squirrel was tempting, something else was more enticing. The dog was off, trotting with purpose, up river. What the dog smelled was more exciting than any squirrel.

The sun was low in the sky as she came trotting around the bend of the river. A large long, overhead bridge crossed the river above her. The dog glanced up at it, the sound of moving traffic above her. She bounded up the bank and moved away from the dense undergrowth beside the river. The smell of food was getting stronger, but there was also the droning of trucks, heavy vehicles slowing, air brakes screeching, the whine of gears shifting and engines accelerating and moving away, caused her to slow.

A block building loomed ahead, bringing a smell of oil and grease along with the biting tang of gasoline and diesel. She watched people coming and going, entering the building, boarding the trucks and driving away. More came.

The scent of food pulled her closer. The dog weaved between scrubby bushes and finally crawled until she was within mere feet of a large white metal container. She lay there head on

paws, waiting and watching as the sun once again began to sink below the mountains, until traffic lessened and the human flow diminished.

Unable to resist further, the dog walked toward the dumpster and rose up on hind legs as if to satisfy herself that the scent was indeed coming from this place. She turned and trotted several feet away, faced the container and bounded forward. Drool ran from the corners of her mouth as she leapt into the air and cleared the edge of the dumpster. She found herself embedded in yesterday's special: Chicken Ala King.

The dog was eating greedily when a long, red diesel pulled along side the block building and parked. A tall man wearing a cowboy hat and boots stepped out. He was singing and the melody carried to the dog, but she knew nothing about songs, only that the sound was familiar. The man's voice was pleasing and she cocked her head sideways and listened.

The man moved to the side of the tanker where he pulled a tarp out and threw it on the ground beneath the truck. Disappearing under the big rig, he continued singing as he pounded on something beneath the truck.

Matt Hanahan worked quickly, in a hurry to get inside the restaurant; in a hurry to see a wonderfully, familiar face.

The dog's nose edged to the lip of the dumpster, twitching with curiosity. She sat on a large cardboard box inside the dumpster, the fine hairs above her yellow eyes pinched together. The hammering stopped, the singing stopped and still the dog waited.

Susanne Smith patted her long, straight hair, now tucked behind and tied with a bright blue ribbon. She straightened her already stained apron. "Hello, Matt." Her voice was light and musical even in the clinically stark environment of the café. Her eyes remained on the road warrior coming toward her.

Matt's eyes lingered on Susanne. The sun was streaming through the plate glass window, lighting her classic English looks and the light sprinkling of freckles across her cheeks. Hair that he knew would have already acquired the faint smell of today's special. He wished he could paint. He wished Michael what's his name had painted her, before he'd died. Matt was no fool, Susanne Smith was not a raving beauty. She was almost too thin, with a tightness around her eyes that came from hard work and harder knocks. But he knew she was a survivor, a kindred spirit. And what he would have wanted Michael to catch in the painting he would commission was not the obvious about the woman, but the light that lit her eyes when she cast her glance his way and how her face softened when she looked at him.

Matt, most often than not, had grease beneath his nails. He was just now filling out his lanky skeleton when most men had peaked structurally in their twenties. He was thirty-one. He took off his baseball cap and ran a hand through his thinning, dark hair. He was fighting to make something of himself before it was too late, before Susanne Smith disappeared from his life. With a quick movement of her head, Susanne caught him looking and smiled—that smile. He blinked and pushed back his baseball cap. It was good to be home.

Matt wondered if he would think home was anywhere this woman was. He thought so. He fought the urge to jump the counter and hold her in his arms. Instead he said, "Hi yourself, Susanne. Been a long time."

Matt swung a leg over a bar stool, and placed his cap on the stool next to him, then sat down. Elbows on the surface of the bar, he smiled at Susanne.

There were others sitting at the counter, but to her he said, "Schools over." He nodded at her and ran his hands up the sides of his face. "Sorry, I didn't shave before I got here, but on the bright side, I do have a degree in Business Management." He'd been applying for jobs for over a month and had come up empty handed. Things were not going smoothly, but he was trying to hang on to his enthusiasm.

"Cheer up," she said, noting the deflection of his voice. "It's great you got your degree. At least now you have the credentials to land a good job."

His slow Texas drawl was evident when he replied, "Yes, Ma'am, that's right. And that is the crux of my problem. Unless I find something better, Miter Trucking will have me driving cross-country the rest of my life. The rate they're pushing me, no tellin' when I'll get to see your pretty green eyes again."

She rolled those eyes. "I imagine you'll see them soon enough."

Just then Patty O'Brian stuck his head out from the kitchen. "Say, Matt. Did I hear you say you finished school?"

"I did." Matt smiled. "Even made the Dean's list. So it proves my Daddy was at least half wrong. I was, at the time ungrateful, but I'm not stupid." He shook his head. "The Dean's list was a surprise."

"Aw, you're a smart young man and just in time, too. I need to sell this place. I could make you a good deal."

Matt shrugged his broad shoulders. "I don't know much about the restaurant business."

"Holy, Mother of Mary, you're a business major and you know all about truckers, too." Patty nodded toward Susanne. "This gal here knows all about this restaurant, inside and out. There are three hired helpers to keep up on everything else. I sell a lot of gas and diesel in this lonesome place, no one else within fifty miles. You'd do just fine. You worry too much, son. Me, I'd like to retire and head for Florida. My brother has a shrimp boat down there. It would suit me fine to work in the sun my last years. You'll see. When you get old as me, you'll want to spend your time with family, who to better know your own stubborn, cranky ways, but family?"

Matt scratched his head. Always a cautious person in financial matters, he said, "I don't have a lot of money saved, Patty. I just finished school."

"I'll make you a deal, I told ya. All's I need is a little boost to add to my monthly social security check. You fit the bill. Susanne is always talkin' you up. Need be, I could help you with the loan at the bank."

Matt looked over at Susanne, in time to see her cheeks brighten with color.

"You think on it," Patty continued. "For now, since my helpers are out assisting customers at the pumps and since you're the only bloke about. Would ya mind throwin' these

scraps into the bin out back?" Now rounding the counter, Patty produced a tall white bucket. "Me kitchen mate is off sick. Probably hung one on last night watchin' Miami get their tails whooped. Not that I mind. He doesn't take much time off, and every soul needs a break."

Matt chuckled and slid from the barstool. "Sure. I'll be glad to do that for you." To Susanne he said, "I'll take the usual, Susanne and I'll be right back. I have to fix something under the truck. Didn't quite get the job done." He stepped toward Patty, touched the old man's shoulder with a gentle hand, grabbed the bucket and headed for the back of the diner.

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The dog had finally trotted over and inspected the rig while Matt's singing echoed off the bottom of the aluminum tanker truck. Sniffing along the ground where the scent of man was strong, she lifted her head and continued toward the open cab door. Placing her front paws up on the step, she jumped inside the cab. Sniffing the steering wheel, the dash and the seat, she discovered a Slim Jim Sausage roll and promptly ate it. Nose swipes appeared on the front and side windows, the result of her meticulous investigation. When the screech of the CB radio filled the cab, she sat up on the seat, cocked her head and barked. Beneath the truck, Matt stopped working. The radio squealed again and the dog lifted her head and gave a forlorn howl. Matt appeared at the door. The dog backed her haunches against the passenger side of the truck and growled. Menacing fangs glinted in the dim light.

Matt blurted, "What the— hey, get out of there, now!" He grabbed for his cap and swished it at the dog. The dog reached out and snatched the cap, jaws locked and she tugged hard until it slipped from Matt's grasp. The dog sat looking at him, a self-satisfied look gleamed in

her yellow eyes. A threatening snarl lifted her upper lip. Slimy drool trickled onto his new Padre's cap.

Matt looked skyward and back at the dog. "Come on, dog." He whistled, trying to coax the dog to move. The radio screeched again and the dog barked. "Look, I don't blame you." He reached a cautious hand over and turned off the radio. Matt saw the empty Slim Jim Sausage wrapper. Picking it up between two fingers, he said, "You ate my last Slim Jim. I see you've made yourself at home." The dog lay flat on her belly and looked at him with those still menacing eyes. She released the stained baseball cap and Matt reached out slowly to retrieve it. The dog snarled. "Geez everyone's got issues. That is my new hat you've managed to dribble all over and I want it. I paid for it and—" He reached into the breast pocket of his blue checked, flannel shirt. He pulled out a tightly wrapped stick of beef jerky and opened it. "I don't usually share with strangers," he said. "But under the circumstances—" Taking a breath, he broke off a small piece of jerky and offered it to her. He held back the remaining jerky. The dog's nostrils quivered. Her head stretched toward the prize at the same time that Matt reached for his hat. With a delicate extraction performed as expertly as any heart surgeon, the dog clamped onto the beef jerky, held it between sharp teeth and placed it gently between her paws. The yellow eyes never left Matt's.

He settled his cap back on his head and sighed. Lowering his voice, he muttered, "Trusting soul, aren't you? You're full of burrs and skinny. And what is that smell?" His nose wiggled. "Rancid chicken? This cab is going to need a scrubbing. A lady should always be presentable. You could be pretty if you had a bath and a few square meals, but I can't say much

for your attitude.” With that, the dog picked up the jerky and swallowed, her black-lined lips pulled back in what seemed to Matt to be a doggy smile. Quite possibly she was thinking about eating him for breakfast.

Matt tried to keep his voice light. He'd heard that that sometimes worked with animals, but found he had to work at it. Those yellow eyes were disturbing. “You should try my cooking. It's even better than that. Anyone ever tell you, you look like a wolf?” At the sound of Matt's voice, the dog seemed to relax. Still holding the remaining beef jerky, he let his guard down while staring into the dog's eyes. Matt said, “You have to wait here. I've got breakfast ordered—inside.” In a flash the remaining jerky was gone and the dog was back against the passenger door. “I get it—you only love me for my food. Okay, I'll bring you something for being polite enough to leave my fingers.” He wiggled them, a chill making him shiver.

The dog tilted her head, the black mask-like coloring above her eyes pinched as if in thought. “Forget I asked you to get out,” he said. Reaching down, Matt opened the window, in case his intruder needed an escape, then stepped away from the cab and closed the door behind him. The dog stood on the truck seat and watched the man enter the building. Since there was nothing else to do, she lay down, curled tightly and wrapped her tail over her nose. She slept.

Inside the diner again, Matt shared the news about the dog with Susanne.

“A dog would do you good, Matt. It must get lonesome on the road,” Susanne said as she poured him a coffee refill. “You should keep the dog. My uncle was a trucker, God rest his soul. He said there were times when his mind blacked out because of the hum of the tires. A dog would give you companionship. It's the perfect solution.”

“I don't know about a perfect solution. Trucking wouldn't be a proper life for a dog. I don't know where I'll settle.” Trying to be optimistic, he said, “I'll find a better job soon, but it could take awhile.”

“Scrounging for food along the highway isn't a proper life for a dog. With winter on us, you know yourself what the weather can be. You need company and the dog needs someone, too. It's obvious she was looking for companionship. It was her idea to jump in your truck.”

Matt sat his coffee down and wiped his mouth with a napkin. He looked at Susanne and they locked eyes. “You didn't see those canine teeth. That wasn't companionship. You sound like an animal activist. Besides, why would a dog stay with me? Most people I've known have left. I was married once, she left.”

“You told me that story.” Susanne nodded. “Dogs are different.” She appreciated anyone and anything that fought to survive. She had first-hand knowledge that life was a challenge. She'd once eaten peanut butter and bread for an entire week until she'd gotten her first paycheck. No one had to tell her life could be hard. Susanne looked toward the ceiling and back at Matt. “Look, forget your first marriage. It wasn't your fault. You were both young, too young to be married. Put it behind you Matt Hanahan. About the dog.”

“Why did I not know we'd get back to the dog?”

“Listen, I've had a dog or two in my lifetime. A good dog makes a fine friend, Matt. Besides, a dog is a whole lot easier to get along with than people. The dog might put a smile on your face, instead of that scowl you're wearin' right now.” She shrugged. “A dog would put up with you.”

“Thanks,” he snorted. “It would make me smile if I could see you after work. It’s been a month of Sunday’s since we enjoyed that movie, *Sleepless in Seattle*. That’s the reason for my scowl.”

Susanne looked at the counter, picked up a clean towel and wiped it. She said, “That movie was already two years old when we saw it, Matt. That shows how up on things we are. How about my place? I’ll order a pizza. I’ve got beer and wine. We could watch a new DVD I just bought. I wouldn’t keep you out late. You now have responsibilities.”

Matt nodded. “About the dog, she might not be as easy as you think. She’s a stray. If she ran away once, she might run again. If she’s here in the morning, I might give her a try, if she doesn’t bite me.”

“Sounds reasonable.” Susanne turned and poured fresh water into the commercial coffee pot and set out the fixings for a fresh brew and went off to check on her other customers. When she came back she was wrapping up two burgers, plain, in waxed paper and stuffed them into a paper sack just as three new customers came through the door. “Here are your burgers.” She stretched out her hand and smiled. “No pickles, no mustard, no onion or lettuce, just meat and cheese. It’ll work out Matt. Maybe it was fate that brought the dog to you,” Susanne winked. “I’ll see you at eight. Catch some sleep, if you can.”

Matt took the bag, stood and shook the paper sack. “Thanks,” he said. “See you later.”

Susanne watched Matt go, watched the easy walk and the way he always looked back at her one last time before exiting the door to leave.

Patty stuck his head out from the kitchen doorway. “He’s a good kid.”

“He’s a nice man, Patty,” Susanne said. To which Patty did not either confirm or deny, but merely set his mouth in its familiar line and disappeared once more into his realm: The Kitchen. Susanne headed toward her new customers.

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Matt was able to coax the dog from the cab and onto an old quilt he’d folded for her under the truck. There, he fed her the two burgers and she let him pat her head. He said, “I need some shuteye. See you in an hour.” He found himself hoping it was true. He found himself making accommodations, at least in his head, for his new passenger. Maybe it would be nice to have company.

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Opening her trailer door with her key, Matt held the pizza and looked around. “This isn’t such a great neighborhood. The owner of this park has circled all these single-wides like he was circling the wagons to protect against an Indian raid.”

Susanne spoke as she pushed open the door and turned on the harsh overhead living room light. “It isn’t so bad. There’s mostly old people living here and they’re quite. Actually, I’ve become attached to most of them. I’m sort of their long lost granddaughter. I’ve been invited to sit in on their weekly Pinochle games, but I haven’t worked up to it yet. Mostly, I get home too late and I’m ready to soak in the tub and watch the tube for awhile.” She turned toward Matt. “I have an exciting life for a thirty year old spinster. How’s your dog?”

Matt squinted through the yellow glow at the cheap brown and cream plaid couch and matching chair. He made himself smile. “Still there.” Matt put the pizza on the divider that stuck

out to let anyone know you were either in the kitchen, or the living room. He put a hand on each of her coat lapels and pulled Susanne close and kissed her. Her breath tasted minty. They embraced, arms holding each other tight as if never to let the other go. "I've missed you," he whispered into her hair.

"I've missed you too, Matt. Do you think you will take Patty's offer for the truck stop?"

"I am thinking about it. It wouldn't be fair if I didn't tell you that I'm concerned about jumping into a business. Possibly, I'm edgy that you might get tired of looking at my scowling face."

She laughed. "You said you wouldn't be scowling if I was around."

He looked her in the eyes and lifted her chin. "True. Have I ever told you how much you mean to me?"

Her arched brows rose, the light making her eyes glint with green fire. "Yes you have, especially after you've been gone over two weeks." She grinned. "That's okay. I like to hear it."

"Good."

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Later, sometime after he'd fallen into a sound sleep inside the sleeper in his rig, he woke. At first it was unclear to him what had roused him. His heart was racing and his hands were sweaty. He sat up and peeked out the small bunk window above his head. A three-quarter moon had risen and gave the surroundings a misty glow, an eerie quality. He only saw two rigs other parked and filling up their tanks. The neon light glow was spooky enough to hide a goblin or two, maybe even Dracula himself. Cold air had settled, meeting the warmer air from the

riverbed. Matt listened. It was then he heard the chilling howl: An unearthly sound, primeval, the cry sent cold waves racing up his back, making the hair stand up on the back of his neck. Then—he remembered the dog.

He pulled on Levis over Jockey shorts and shrugged into a sweatshirt. His tennis shoes sat waiting beside the bunk. No since in putting on socks and boots, this would only take a minute. The dog was probably lonesome and needed comforting.

He stumbled out the small door, holding the hand grip he swung down onto the pavement, the dog was nowhere in sight. A forlorn howl came from the river. Matt rubbed his face in his hands and set out at a slow jog. Bathed in moonlight and swathed in mist he moved steadily toward the riverbank.

There on the opposite bank sat the dog. She stared at him with those haunting yellow eyes as if expecting him. When he edged closer, she stood and shook herself. From across the gentle flow Matt said, “You’re waking the whole neighborhood.” A joke because there wasn’t a neighborhood. She was close enough across the thin river that he could see her black lined lips pulled back. She was grinning at him. The dog trotted up her side of the riverbank, stopped and looked back at him as if to say, “*What’s keeping you?*”

“What? Isn’t it sort of early for a walk?”

He heard her whine. She scratched the river gravel with a front paw, looked at him and barked. She trotted a few more steps and stopped again. She turned to watch him. “*Follow me. Come see my world.*” The dog sat and stared at him.

Matt shrugged. "Holy smokes." He shivered. He knew the dog's words had only been in his head. He tried to see into the swirl of fog lacing the riverbank beyond the dog. "This is really weird—but why not?"

As if she understood, the dog jumped to her feet, the fur on her back bristling. She was ready to spring to action. "*Come on,*" the words echoed in Matt's mind. "*Moonlight's a burnin'!*"

Later, Matt would know the dog was presenting him a gift, but not now. Now, he simply followed.

Matt crossed the river at a shallow spot, soaking his shoes and the bottom of his jeans. The dog and the man followed the river where they scared a raccoon stripping the flesh from the bones of a perch. The raccoon scurried for his hole in the bank, leaving behind a pile of mussels, some clean, some waiting. Here, the dog stopped and proved her skills at opening a mussel shell.

Matt stood watching, fascinated. The dog licked her still-smiling lips. "I hope you didn't get me out here because you have an addiction to mussels. You're drooling, you know—not a very lady-like quality." The dog's grin deepened.

"Who, who." A monster owl called, swooping low over head, the sound of air buffeting its wings, iridescent eyes glowing, it soared off between cottonwood trees, elders and ash, and even further into the deepest mist of black tree trunks and hanging limbs, until finally lost from sight.

The dog jumped to her feet and was off. The owl quickly reappeared and flew above the dog. Man and dog ran, sand and pebbles scattering. Matt was pulling up the rear of this unlikely

trio. Jumping downed logs and river-rock, the dog led on, the owl taking over the lead, Matt felt he was living some latent boyhood dream.

Crossing the shallows, the dog bounded up the side of the hill to a rock outcropping. Matt scrambled over boulders and grabbed at what little growth there was, panting and clawing to keep from sliding back down to the river. The dog stopped on the sharp ledge and watched while Matt bellied up onto the boulder. When he finally crawled atop the ledge, the dog looked from him, turned her head and stared over her kingdom. He was out of breath and panting. "I can see you're happy to see me," he puffed.

He sat Indian style, blinking, he looked out across the glowing valley to see what the dog saw. "Wow," he uttered. His breathing slowed. Bathed in moonlight, the misty valley of cottonwood along the river below was perfect and peaceful. Just then Orion peeked from clouds and became visible overhead, the brightness gave the river a sheen as it headed northward. The owl hooted. Pebbles cascaded down the bank beside them and headed toward the riverbed below. Matt looked up and saw a Muley buck staring down at them. Steam rose skyward from the deer's nostrils as it determined the pair below was danger. The deer disappeared and Matt inhaled and said, "So this is your world?"

A southerly wind rustled the dried leaves in the trees. Fog swirled and lifted. Magical. Dog's World. Matt inhaled again, familiarizing himself with the scent of damp earth, fallen, rotting leaves and wood: decay and rebirth. His eyes shifted to the dog's profile: ears pointed and alert, eyes moving, scanning . . . everything. The dog was majestic, surreal, a queen, deserving of royalty and she'd shown him everything and demanded nothing. With sudden clarity, he realized

that if he took her, the dog would be giving up everything. “This is heavy stuff, girl. I’m not so sure we should work up a partnership. I can’t give you anything close to this.” He swept his arm outward. The dog turned her head, stretched her neck and touched his cheek with a cool, wet nose. She stared at him—and him at her. “You’re not a kissy kind of girl, are you? But, maybe you’re saying something.” Matt looked back down at the river. “It is beautiful.”

They sat on the rock slab for what seemed a lifetime, until night became morning, until the mist lifted and the birds fluttered, singing their hopeful songs. But Matt was now filled with dread thinking that now he should leave his new-found friend behind. His life, was not compatible with that of the dogs. For him, the return to the truck stop was joyless, possibly the end of something he’d never before experienced and might well never experience again.

Matt checked his truck and the dog jumped up into the cab and curled into a ball, tail covering her nose in typical wolf fashion, green eyes piercing his own. “Yeah, it was great, wasn’t it?” he murmured to her and shut the door securely.

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Of course, the thought of Patty’s offer still bounced around in his head. How did anyone ever know the correct choices to make? There was a sweet woman living here that he always dreaded leaving behind. Now there was a dog he didn’t want to lose.

Since he was late getting started, he went back into the diner for coffee and a biscuit and, of course, one for the dog. He knew he was dragging his feet, trying to come to some sort of intelligent decision and praying he would do the right thing.

“I thought you’d be long gone, Matt.” Susanne grinned at him.

“I had an unexpected delay. The dog took me for a walk. I guess I got carried away and stayed out by the river too long.”

“Oh. I thought maybe you'd decided to hang around.” Susanne shrugged and headed for the coffee pot. She poured coffee and looked back at him. “Like maybe you didn't want to leave—me.”

He smiled and said, “I'm not sure I'd be good at running a truck stop.”

“There are other jobs you could do.” She sat the steaming coffee in front of him.

His brows rose. “I know.” A moment later he felt a conspiracy in progress because Patty O'Brian stuck his head through the service door.

Patty said, “I told you I want someone to take this place off my hands, Matt. Would you be up to it?”

“Cooking?”

“No.” Patty nodded. “That woman right there is the best cook around these parts. But no one should try to operate a truck stop single handed. Too dangerous these days.”

“I'm not sure I'd be good at it.”

“No one's ever sure. You just have to do it.”

“I don't have the name. It's Patty's Diner. I'm not Patty.” He shrugged.

“That's a flimsy excuse!” Susanne inhaled so sharply that both men looked at her. Her face reddened and Matt laughed. “Any woman knows that a name is easy to change.”

“It was lame, huh?” Matt sipped the coffee and sat it on the countertop.

Patty hadn't given up. "Sure would be a load off my mind to have some strong young man in here with this woman. I wouldn't have to worry all the time about leavin' her alone."

Matt leaned forward, looking up at Susanne. "Speaking of which, are you busy tonight?"

Susanne glanced toward the ceiling and back at him. Her hand fluttered over her heart.

"You know I'm not busy, Matt Hanahan. But, I thought you had to leave?"

Matt shrugged. "Say Patty, you wouldn't know who owns that property behind the diner, down along the river, would you?"

"The property belonged to my dear friend's Granny. Course, she's long gone. They's a cemetery out abouts there where she is planted, and there's the old homestead, too. House is as old as the state of Arizona. Thirty-seven acres all. He might sell it. I don't know. He's an ornery old goat. You'd have to get to know him first."

"I should start with the truck stop first and if I could make it work, I'll look up your friend."

Patty nailed him with his sharp blue eyes. "Yep. Good logic, lad. Sometimes things work out, sometimes they don't."

Matt returned the old man's stare. "True." His glance slid to Susanne, who looked like a delighted child on Christmas morning, green eyes wide with anticipation.

Matt wanted to hug her, but there were people around. Instead he drank the last of his coffee. "Did I tell you guys that I've named the dog Queen?" They both stared at Matt, bewildered looks upon their faces. "So, what do you think?"

Patty snorted. "Sounds a bit much for a dog, don't you think?"

Susanne was smiling, crinkling her nose and warming her eyes. Dimples appeared at the corners of her mouth.

“Wait until you meet her,” Matt said.

“Don’t allow no dogs in the eating establishment.”

“We’ll respect that,” Matt said.

Susanne’s smile broke into a wide grin. “This Queen must be something special.”

“She is. Her temperament reminds me of you.”

Susanne pointed a finger at him. “Watch it, buddy.”

Patty interrupted, his twinkling blue eyes narrowed with sincerity, “You’re a good man, Matt Hanagan. “You see value in simple things.”

“I’m learning, Patty.” He shifted his gaze toward Susanne. “Can you be ready by eight again tonight? This time we’re going out to eat.”

She nodded. “I’ll be ready. Should I invest in doggie biscuits to kiss up to the Queen?”

“You can. But it isn’t necessary. She’s been around the block a time or two. She’d most likely settle for a nice ear rub. I’ve got to fill up my tank. Could you start up the diesel pump for me, Patty? I’ll need to move my truck and call in to give notice. Guess I won’t be there to pick up that load in Sierra Vista, after all.”

#

Outside, Matt woke Queen from a nap and presented the biscuit as enticement, coaxing the dog out of the cab. “You stay right here, girl while I fill my tank. I’ll be right back. The dog sat down and cocked her head as if listening to his every word. Matt chuckled and swung up into

the big cab, put the key into the ignition and started up the big rig. Matt pulled the rig out, checked his mirror and saw Queen sitting where he'd left her, watching him. He drove around the corner of the large, block building and headed for the diesel pump.

#

Queen sat. Sat in the middle of the parking space where the man's truck had been, where the scent of the man lingered still. She whined and blinked her yellow eyes, then twitched her black nose as if trying to retrieve something identifiable. She sat until a light colored semi loomed above her and she heard the deafening sound of an air horn blasting, startling her and causing her to stand, whirl in a circle and bark at the intruder.

"Get outta the way you dumb, mutt," the driver yelled from his side window.

The dog barked, lowered onto her front legs as if ready to charge the offending mechanical beast.

The air horn blasted again. "Move it you stupid—" The driver's side door swung open and a large man struggled out, a wooden baseball bat in hand. "I'll teach you a thing or two," he growled and advanced on the dog. Bat held high, he swung it down on the dog just as she leaped into the air to attack. The blow hit the dog broadside and knocked the wind from her lungs. Crouching, the dog circled the man, growling, fangs showing, yellow eyes glinting in the bright light. She looked feral: a wild creature, menacing, ears pinned against her head, her body flattened in defense.

The big man hesitated. . . moved left, then right, trying to take aim. "I'll show you whose boss! Big Jake, that's who!" the man shouted and swung, coming down swiftly, a blow landing square on top of the dog's head.

Falling to the ground in a heap of bloodied fur, the dog lay motionless. The sight was more than Patty could bear as he hurried out of the diner's door. "What on earth is goin' on out here?" Patty shouted from the doorway. "What have ye done, man?" Susanne pushed out from behind Patty and in a rush, ran toward the hulk of the man holding the bat. She was on the attacker's back and pounding the side of his beefy jaw with her boney fist before Patty could stop her.

"Woman!" Patty screamed. "Dear Mother of God!" Patty looked around for a weapon, but not quick enough.

Susanne clamped her teeth down on the big brute's ear, a bite no less lethal than any the dog could have mustered. The man screamed a deafening roar. Susanne hung on. The bear-like man hunched forward and began to spin round and round, trying to grab at her. The motion threw Susanne from his back and landed her on asphalt, scraping hands and knees.

The man grabbed his bleeding ear. "You crazy woman!" the man began, but Matt came from around the corner and in three quick strides had an iron grip on the big fellows shoulder. He spun the brute around mid-sentence, grabbing the bat from his grip, he threw it aside.

Matt hissed from between clamped teeth, "Call the cops, Patty! Are you okay, Susanne?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Susanne puffed. She was already sitting next to the dog, the dog's head in her lap.

The old man spun toward the diner, in a lurching gait typical of the elderly.

“Call a vet, too!” Matt yelled. Patty waved his hand in the air in acknowledgment.

Susanne brushed hair from her face and stared up at Matt. “Matt?” she whispered, a crease between her brows and tears in her eyes. “M-a-t-t?”

From the side of his mouth, Matt said, “In a minute.”

“Let go of me,” the big man struggled to jerk free.

“Stay put,” Matt warned, “and I won’t treat you the way you did my woman and my dog.”

“It was her, not me! Crazy woman jumped me. Most bit my ear off,” the man whined in pain. “I was just tryin’ to get shed of her.” He pointed. “That dog is nuts, too. Thing wouldn’t move outta the park. You ain’t got no right to press charges against me.”

“There’s twenty other places to park, pal. Are you blind?”

“Dog ain’t got no right to take up a park.”

Matt scowled. “Way I see it you don’t have rights at all. Shut up.”

“Matt?” Susanne pleaded. “We need to move her inside to a table and put a blanket over her, till a vet gets here.”

“Inside,” Matt ordered and shoved the trucker toward the door.

The trucker swiped at his ear with a dirty hankie he’d taken from his pocket. “What about my ear?”

Matt grinned, teeth flashing. “Let it bleed, it’ll clean the wound.”

The man dabbed. “What about my truck?”

"Maybe someone will take it off your hands," Matt snarled. "Get in there."

When the man was inside the diner he and Susanne picked Queen up and opened the door. Both were happy that Patty had already folded a blanket over a large table.

"Vet will be here in two minutes. She's right down the street."

"Good," Matt said and leaned over Queen. He ran his hand over the soft hair on her face toward her ear. "Hey, girl," he murmured. "Don't leave me now that I've just found you."

The dog began to pant, her tongue lolled from the side of her mouth and then she opened her eyes and blinked.

Matt smiled. "Good girl," he said. "Stay," he told Queen. "This is my fault, Susanne. I told her to stay when I went to fill my fuel tank. I had no idea she would take me literally."

"It isn't your fault. Who knows why she wouldn't budge from that parking spot." She shrugged. "Guess she thought it belonged to you. She's awake. Maybe it's a good sign."

Matt glanced at Susanne's cuts and scrapes. "Your hands and knees are bleeding," Matt frowned

"It's nothing. I'll get them cleaned up in a minute."

His eyes tightened on her. "Did you really jump that bully?"

Susanne shrugged. "Yes. What else was I supposed to do?"

A very doctor type woman burst through the diner's door, black satchel in hand she was checking the dog within seconds. "How did this happen?"

Matt nodded. "That man over there hit her with a hardwood bat." The vet turned her head and glanced toward the trucker, now sitting in a chair at a small table. The man averted his eyes.

“Did the dog bite the big fellow’s ear?”

Matt sighed. “No. The woman bit his ear.”

The vet blinked up at matt, a wicked grin on her thin lips. “Well—your dog has a knot the size of a goose egg on the crown of her head. As a precaution, I’d bring her over for an x-ray. But, if she doesn’t act sick to her stomach, she can probably sleep this off.” The vet nailed Matt with the darkest brown eyes he’d ever seen. “Most people don’t want to spend money on a dog, you understand? It’s up to you.”

“I’ll bring her,” Matt said.

The vet smiled. “Good. Could have been worse. I think she’ll be okay. As they say on Cops, it looks like the perp may have gotten the worst of this.”

Two Department of Public Safety officers entered the diner and Patty began to talk to them. “Matt?” he called.

“I probably have paperwork to fill out,” Matt said. Susanne was talking to Queen. They were obviously already fast friends. He saw a small thump of the dog’s tail on the tabletop.

#

Queen was tucked safely into a corner of Susanne’s living room area, her still-sore head propped on a bed pillow with double pillow cases, just in case of drool, Matt and Susanne sat on bar stools drinking just-made coffee. Susanne was now wearing shorts, bandages covering her knees. She smelled of the fresh lemon juice she used to rinse the diner smell from her hair. She reached onto the counter and cellophane crackled. “Cookie?” she offered, holding out a bag of Oreos.

Matt extracted one dark chocolate cookie from the horizontally layered package. "Hmm, my favorite, Oreos." He sniffed.

"Yeah, mine too," she smiled. "Please don't lick the middle first, okay? I just think that is so gross."

He laughed. "You've got Oreo issues?"

"That's just happens to be one issue that I have. There are others, like putting down the toilet seat."

"Yeah," he said. "And biting ears is another. You're a hard woman." He laughed.

She shrugged and dipped her Oreo into her hot coffee. She took a bite and grinned, mouth closed. She chewed, sipped and swallowed, Matt watched it all. Satisfied, she said, "I'm worth it."

Matt nodded. "I think so. Defender of wounded dogs, able to leap tall truckers in a single bound" He stretched toward Susanne and she toward him. They kissed a chocolate kiss. Queen lifted her head and whined. "She's jealous."

"Too bad. She'll have to get used to it."

"I'm going to rename Patty's Express to The Queen's Express."

"You're really staying?" He nodded.

"Is there a preacher within fifty miles?"

"I sure hope so."

They clicked their coffee cups together and looked toward the dog. Matt said, "She saved me, you know?"

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7,971 words

The Queen's Express 30
Romance-Contemporary

Susanne didn't reply, but she understood.

The End