

THE 7-11 GIRL

The fluorescent lights of the 7-11 accomplished their purpose in that, even at 3:30 in the morning, they kept the inside of the store visible. The light, however, was that sickly pale yellow of old bulbs, and somewhere among them one of the ballasts had developed that telltale buzz that seemed to have the ability to suck the soul from living creatures. They also provided just enough light for the annual “fish fly” swarm to cover the floor to ceiling glass windows that were the front of the store. The door swung open, bringing with it several of the insects and the polite ding of the bell over the door.

The man that entered wore a gray shirt - which was slightly lighter than when it had been new - with the sleeves rolled up to just below his elbow and dark gray janitorial pants. He looked around nervously, then walked over to the coffee machine, considering the options.

The clerk paid him little attention, instead continuing to peruse the magazine she'd pulled from the rack when her shift began. The store was open twenty-four hours, and the overnight shift - her preferred schedule - was primarily quiet with only a small number of regulars and an occasional post-bar clientele. She flipped to the next page and the next article when the visitor spoke.

“Open the register,” he said.

She looked up, directly down the barrel of the pistol he held pointed at her.

“Sorry?” she said.

“I said open the register,” the man repeated.

“There's only a few bucks-”

“And the code for the safe,” he raised his voice, “so just do what I tell you! I don't got time!”

The girl stared at the pistol. The man stared back.

From the far side of the store, there was a loud slurp. The two turned to see a man standing by the coolers at the back wall, a bag of chips in one hand and a large soda in the other, from which the slurp had come. He was around six feet tall and clad in a tan t-shirt and jeans. His brown hair was short, but unkempt, and he had several days growth of beard. He was looking at the scene in front of him with an expression of bland disinterest.

“Sorry,” he said, “I think I'm interrupting,” he said.

The man with the gun took a step back from the counter, and now swung the weapon back and forth between them. “What the hell?” he said.

“I was in the back,” the newcomer said, indicating the bag of Better Made potato chips in his hand.

“Open the register!” the gunman said, turning his attention back to the clerk. She shifted, watching the gun closely.

“If I may,” the other man said, “you don't really want to be doing this, do you? I mean, it seems like this is new to you.”

The gunman stared at the clerk for another second, then shot him a look. “What are you talking about?”

“Well,” he said, “to start with, you don't seem very comfortable with that gun. You're choking up on it so much your knuckles are pale. You're also holding it with your trigger finger outside the guard.” He made a little wiggle motion with the index finger of his right hand on the soda to make the point.

The gunman involuntarily wiggled his hand on the gun, readjusting his grip. The trigger finger now inside the guard. “What's your game?” he snarled, then coughed.

The other took a step forward, holding his hands up as if to show he meant no harm. He glanced at the clerk, then back at the gunman. “Look, I don't really know you, but I don't honestly think you want to do this. Your hand is still shaking too badly to fire with any accuracy, and I'm going to guess that your lungs and your knee aren't going to take a foot chase.”

The gunman's eyes changed shape, and some of the tension left his shoulders. “What?” he said.

The other man cocked his head slightly, then continued. “I know that working in the steel mill probably took your health, right? Lung damage I expect?”

The gunman stared at him.

“And healthcare being what it is, that probably left you in a bad way when your wife got sick, right?”

“How do you know that?” the would-be robber said, staring at the other man. The barrel of the gun was no longer pointed up, but had drooped to the level of the counter.

“It's what I do,” the man said. “And more importantly, this isn't what you do. If you take this money, you're trading in the memory of the man she loved for someone else. Someone likely with a prison sentence in his future. I can't believe that's what she would have wanted.”

The gunman stood frozen, his eyes unfocused as tears formed at the memory of his wife.

"I don't..." he sputtered.

"Listen," the other man said, taking another step forward, "Give me the gun. Let me have—" he shot a look over at the clerk's nametag, "—Kathy here give me a pen and a piece of paper. I'll give you a phone number of an attorney I know. She specializes in medical bankruptcy and OSHA and hazard claims. Will you let me do that?"

The gunman let his hand drop and stood very still, emotion and anxiety wrestling with the calm, helpful offer. After a moment, he looked down at the floor, the adrenaline draining away. He sighed, and reached out, offering the gun to him, handle first.

Kathy the clerk had slid one of the paper fill-in lottery tickets across the counter along with the pen that was fastened by a little chain. The man put the gun on the counter, quickly wrote on the back of the paper marked "Daily Game," and turned back to the other.

"Here," he said, passing him the paper, "Ask for Rosalyn, and tell her that Caspian Harker told you to see her."

For a moment, they both stood unmoving, then the former gunman said, "Donnie. My name is Donnie Knowles." He took the paper.

"I'm glad to have met you, Donnie," Harker said, "I hope everything goes well for you."

Donnie nodded, "Mr. Harker." He turned to Kathy and nodded again. "Miss," he said. Then he turned and walked out of the store.

Harker turned back to the counter, finally putting his chips beside the soda and pistol he'd put there a moment before.

Kathy considered him, then said, "How did you know all that stuff?"

Harker shrugged and glanced back toward the door. "He was shuffling earlier, I could hear when he walked in. When I came around the corner, I could see his shoes weren't evenly worn, and there was a bulge under the one pant leg where he's wearing a brace."

She looked at him, waiting. He continued, "He had little scars on his arms, a couple inches above the wrist, right where protective gloves would end. That and the USW tattoo on his right forearm told me he was a steel worker, and his cough and that little wheeze in his voice told me about his health."

"And his wife?" she asked, leaning against the counter behind her.

"He's got a loose fitting wedding ring on his hand, and a woman's ring hanging on a

necklace. You take all of that and his terrible gun hygiene - the safety is still on, actually - and you could see he wasn't some hardened criminal."

"Well," she said, "you could see that."

He shrugged a shoulder, then nodded toward the soda and the chips.

She grabbed the hand scanner and pointed it at the scan codes, ringing up the price on the register, then punched several keys. The total appeared as "\$0.00."

"Heroes eat free," she said, smiling.

He smiled back. A moment passed, then he cocked his head slightly.

"Spetsnaz, right?" he said casually.

She froze, her eyes flashing wider for an instant. They stared at one another.

"It's none of my business," he said with another casual shrug of his shoulder, "I'm just curious."

"What—" she started, then let the remainder of the question hang.

"When confronted with a gun," Harker began, "a typical clerk has a few common reactions. They may freeze in terror. They may duck and hide or cry. Some will run. And some small few, the ones that have seen some stuff, will stand their ground." He shook his head slightly as he continued, "A vanishingly small number - perhaps with some training in law enforcement or something - will execute a defensive response."

"And?" she said.

"And an even smaller number will blade their stance, drop their center of gravity, and take a tactical scan of the immediate surroundings. All without increasing their respiration or heart rate," he said, "Like you just did. That small number has a very specific kind of training. Honestly, were you going to kill him?"

She stared at him.

"Add to that the way you can't seem to not chew on your 'W's' when you speak, I presumed Spetsnaz. How did I do?" he finished.

The clerk shook her head, then folded her arms over her chest. Harker watched her physicality change. Her shoulders squared and her back straightened into an almost impossibly perfect posture. Even the shape of her eyes changed as she considered him, the dull disinterest of a late-night clerk vanishing into a sharp, alert stare.

"Ладно," she said, "So tell me this, then, Mr. Harker. Which acronym claims you?"

Harker considered her while a million and one dynamics and factors played through his head. There was no rational reason whatsoever for this discussion to continue. He should just pick up his chips and soda and be on his way. But back to what? He was alone. An island.

“Federal,” he said finally. “Former. I am on my own now.”

They looked at one another then for a long moment, as if communicating with something other than words.

“It happens that I am too,” she said finally. “I do not enjoy it.”

“Yeah,” he said, “I get that.” He paused, considering again. “You think you'd like to get some coffee sometime?”

A very tiny grin curled her lip. “I would like that.”

He tapped the counter gently, an unbidden smile crossing his face. “Well, when does your shift end?”

She raised her eyebrows. “You don't want three-day cool-off period? I understand that is very American.”

“Nah,” he said, “Not my style.”

She took the pen, still chained to the counter, and wrote on another of the lottery slips, handing it to him. “I am off at six. You will either be here or you won't.”

Harker took the paper and looked at it - a phone number and the single word “Katya.”

“I will see you in a few short hours, Katya,” he said. He turned and walked out the door. A moment later he walked back in, retrieved the chips and soda, smiled at her one more time, then left, lighter than he'd felt in months.