

Eliot

A short story
by
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The asphalt was boiling under the scorching sun of July; the air seemed almost still, not even a faint breeze stirred to provide respite from the mugginess. Kid found a bit of relief in the shadow of a building, but the heat emanating from the black pavement was nevertheless unbearable. Sweat was dripping from his forehead, running down his eyebrows, and then to his eyes. He remembered his third-grade teacher once told him that the primary function of the eyebrows was to stop body fluids from reaching the eyes and blurring the vision. Bullshits. It was clear she had never been under the Fourth of July sun, in downtown Los Angeles, on a motorcycle with a helmet on. If she had, she would have known that the sweat was so profuse it would run over that thin protective layer of hair and right into her eyes, burning and blurring her sight. If only he could take off his sunglasses and dry them, but he couldn't, he had to be ready at any moment.

The California Market Center was almost deserted that day; the Fourth of July holiday seemed to have driven people away from that part of Los Angeles. Even the homeless usually there had gone somewhere else. A smart move, given that the heat would have probably killed them. He actually preferred it that way—not having too many people around while he worked had its perks.

Suddenly, a burglar alarm gave a piercing shrill. Kid felt the rush of adrenaline run through his veins; he had less than twenty seconds to get away from there, with or without his partner.

“One, two, three...” he started to count under his breath.

It took less than twelve seconds, then a man with a mask came flying out of the glass doors of the center, struggling to put on a backpack. He was holding a rifle, and when Kid saw him coming, slowed down his motorcycle to give his partner time to get on; he wasn't even properly settled on the seat when Kid sped up, almost knocking him off the bike. The man was cursing at him as he gripped Kid's jacket with his only free hand; the mask of President Carter, along with the wind that roared from the speed, muffled the profanity. Kid didn't care. He had only one job: get him out of there, not coddle him. At the same time, Kid was wondering if there was a dress code for armed robberies, like forcing them to wear masks of some president as if it was some directive of the thieves' union; he never fully understood why everyone he worked with wore them. Maybe they just had little imagination, but this was the umpteenth president he's helped evade capture through those streets.

The blaring police sirens were increasingly getting closer behind them, and it irritated Kid. He rarely allowed them to get that close to him when he was still so far away from his hideout; it was exhausting trying to keep them at bay for so long. The man he had with him was heavier than the others or, rather, the currency plates he stole were decisively slowing them down.

Charles had schemed the heist of the century, at

least for them. It wasn't about small bank robberies anymore. He ingeniously came up with the idea of intercepting a delivery of currency plates that had to be destroyed in a foundry designated by the government. The plan was that they were to be deposited that same morning in the vault of the Bank of America Financial Center and then destroyed the next day, putting an end to their glorious life. Someone was willing to pay a massive amount of money for them, as he would then be able to print as much as he needed. But those plates were slowing him down.

The man in the back of his motorcycle turned around and fired several shots, Kid had no idea if the shotgun was still loaded but hoped not. The sound of gunshots was distracting him from what he did best: drive. He was practically born on a motorcycle—his father taught him to drive a motocross at a very young age, up and down hills, fallen trees, and across creeks. Since he was ten, he chased him with his motorcycle. His father taught him to outrun those following him, to think quickly, and to find the best escape routes where others only saw walls. Ten years later, he was there to show the world he was the best in what he did, even better than his old man, who, unfortunately, wasn't there to see him because Charles himself put a bullet in his head when he tried to fuck him over. Charles then married his mother and took in her two sons, forcing them to do these types of jobs to repay their father's debt. Kid wasn't angry with him. If his father was

alive, he would probably have forced him to lead the same kind of life until he ended up in prison, like his older brother.

Kid took a particularly congested street, but not enough to keep the police far away that day. He glanced over his shoulder and counted four cars, not enough to give the distance needed to reach the getaway van waiting for them. So, he used the cement traffic divider like a trampoline to jump onto the opposing traffic and darted against cars traveling in the opposite direction. They were dodging them as drivers violently blared their horns. He took advantage of the delirium to take the first ramp, still against the flow of traffic, into a secondary street. He knew that, in a matter of minutes, the police helicopter would eventually catch up with him, and it would then become impossible to hide. The man behind him couldn't stop punching his shoulder with the same hand that firmly gripped the shotgun; Kid smirked—he wasn't the first (nor will he be the last) passenger who feared for his life on that motorcycle.

Kid jumped on to a less crowded street, and the police sirens continued blaring as they approached the interchange; if they reached him before he could go around that block, he would be screwed because he wouldn't be able to jump into the van waiting under the next overpass. A green clearing between two rows of shops was at reach; he turned sharply to his right in the middle of the park, and the people gathered there for a Fourth of July celebration ran

screaming. Making his way through the park, he ran over a few blankets and plates, effortlessly dodged a bicycle, and avoided crashing into a stroller, which was fortunately empty. When he took to the streets again, cars screeched to a halt with blasting horns. In the distance, he saw the white van on a side road coming toward them in the opposite direction; he accelerated, launched himself under the overpass, and swerved abruptly, reversing their direction of travel. The van's back doors were already opened with its tail lift lowered; he propelled the bike inside the truck and stopped just a few inches from the metallic bulkhead partition. When he turned around, Jack had already raised the metal ramp and closed the doors; they proceeded with the flow of traffic, and only then did Kid allow himself to relax a bit.

"You're completely insane, you know that?" The man he was carrying roared at him after jumping down the motorcycle.

"You're alive and didn't get caught, right?" he retorted with a grin.

The man collapsed on the side of the van keeping his head between his hands; Jack chuckled, and Kid thought they were lucky he didn't throw up. Five seconds later, he ate his words.

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They drove smoothly until they reached the warehouse where they had the appointment. Nobody said a word, and everyone finally relaxed as soon as they crossed the threshold. They jumped down the van, and Kid carefully took out the motorcycle.

He was the one who took care of it, tuning it after every robbery, checking its tires, changing the color between jobs; it was his work tool, his passion, something he had grown up with, and knew better than anything else. He grabbed the bag he dumped in a corner before the robbery, picked out a towel, and dried the sweat running over his face from his brown curly hair. If from his father he got his driving skills, from his mother, he inherited his physical traits: dark brown hair, green eyes, delicate features with full lips, and a toned body, depicting someone in his twenties, which was his age. Some of his peers have a thick beard and looked older; he barely shaved once a week and didn't care, actually, he was okay with it, his childish look suited his name, Kid.

"So? The money?" asked Kid, walking toward Charles.

"It's not like the other times. We can't just split the haul; we have to sell the plates first," he explained with an air of superiority that made Kid feel stupid.

Kid despised him. He hated him from the moment he killed his father; the only reason the boy stuck around him and that family was his mother, he didn't want to leave her alone with that animal. He knew she married him only to save her children from having the same fate of their father, but Kid didn't understand; they could have run away together but didn't.

"You haven't pawned the shit yet?" he accused,

trying to hide his disgusted face.

“I have buyers; I’m not an idiot! Tonight, at two, I want you here when we seal the deal. Hopefully, you’ll learn something,” he rebutted, pounding his fist on Kid’s head.

Kid was used to being treated like shit from that man. He’s been doing it for years, and Kid didn’t even let it get to him anymore; but whenever that man tried to hit his mother, Kid became deranged, and not even Charles dared to challenge him because he knew he could break his bones. He had already done it before.

Kid walked away. He wanted to get as far away from there as soon as he could. Spend as little time as possible with those people. If only he could start a new life somewhere else, with a regular job, annoying friends, watching sports once a week, maybe a girl to have a family with.

“Don’t forget a gun,” Charles shouted at him from the far end of the warehouse.

Kid didn’t even bother to turn around. He just felt his blood like ice in his veins but didn’t show any emotions. He hated guns. It could seem bizarre considering his line of work, but he had never shot anyone; he couldn’t even think of taking someone else’s life, he was repulsed just thinking about it.

When the sun hit his face, a half-smile appeared on his lips. He was out of there and could finally go to the only place that made him happy.

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Kid looked through the window of the diner and

was surprised he saw no one inside. The place seemed deserted, and, considering it was in the middle of the day, he wasn't sure if it was open or not since even all the lights were off. His heart was fiercely pounding against his ribcage; he needed that place to see the only reason life was worth living.

He approached the door, and the sign "Welcome, we are open" made him sigh in relief. He pushed the door open and entered. The bell rang, and the cold air welcomed him like an oasis in the middle of a desert; he had goosebumps on his arms and didn't know if it was because of the cold air or because he was eager to see her.

"I'm coming," he instantly recognized the voice that came from the room where the staff kept their belongings, making his heart skip a few beats.

He knew that staff room very well because every Friday night when he came to the diner, he pretended to go to the bathroom and slipped into that room to take pictures of the schedule of the following week's shift. He had been doing it for the past six months since the perfect girl started to work there.

Betty came out with a confident stride while Kid took a seat at the counter. He didn't usually sit there. He often sat in the corner of the room where he could see both sides, but that day the diner was empty, and he didn't want Betty to have to move from behind the counter like she usually did.

Kid took his time checking out her blond hair pulled up in a ponytail, the oval shape of her face that perfectly framed two big gray eyes, her small

and delicate nose, and the two pink lips so perfect they seemed painted on. When the girl saw him, she put a genuine smile on her face, the smile she reserved only for him. He had never really talked to her aside from giving his orders, but she definitely recognized him, and he felt a strange and pleasing sensation in his stomach.

“I’m warning you, the kitchen is closed today so you can only order what I can make,” she moved toward him with the coffee pot and filled his cup without asking.

Kid observed how much concentration she used, pouring the coffee, and smiled.

“Okay, better yet, you choose. Bring me whatever you want.”

Betty looked at him at first with surprise then followed with a massive smile on her face, like a little girl in a candy store.

“Really?” she asked for confirmation.

“Really. I trust you,” he sounded almost too serious with his reply and blushed a little.

The girl thought intently about his request furrowing her eyebrows, and Kid figured he would die; he loved those small wrinkles she had between her eyebrows while she meditated over something.

“Chocolate or vanilla?”

“Vanilla.” He beamed at her.

Betty gave a surprised expression, raising his curiosity.

“Wrong answer?”

Betty blushed, lowering her gaze and smiling.

“Absolutely not. I don’t know why, but I thought you were more of a chocolate kind of guy. You usually order black coffee and a bacon, ham and egg sandwich...I don’t know why I associated that with chocolate. Sorry.” She rushed to explain.

Kid couldn’t help but chuckle.

“I don’t know if you’re this attentive to all your regular customers or I’m just so boring I always order the same thing.”

He smiled at her.

“I have a good memory when it comes to cute customers,” she revealed, flirting a little but, at the same time, slightly blushing as she headed over to the side of the counter where they kept the desserts.

Kid was dumb stricken. That was the most extended conversation they had ever had, and he didn’t want it to end. Never. The knowledge she knew he existed made him delirious. For the first time in his life, he thought that maybe there was something good, something worthwhile to make him think about the future.

Betty came back with a slice of cherry pie with two scoops of vanilla ice cream, whipped cream and a cherry on top. In her other hand, she held a huge vanilla milkshake.

“This pie is amazing, trust me,” she confidently stated, as if her previous admission that he was cute didn’t change anything.

Kid dug the spoon into the creation and tasted it; it was the best thing he had ever tasted.

“Oh, my God! How is it even possible that this

is so good?" he insisted with his mouth still full and eyes wide.

Betty seemed to beam. She leaned over the counter by resting on her elbow.

"See? It's delicious, right? The cook bakes it every morning before we open. It's his recipe, and nobody knows his secret," she explained enthusiastically.

Kid took a piece of the pie, put ice cream and whipped cream on top, and handed it to her. She seemed caught by surprise but then looked around, saw nobody was there and tasted it. Kid studied her perfect mouth enveloping the spoon in what he thought was too damn sensual. At that exact moment, all he wanted with his heart was to be able to kiss those lips.

"Me, too. I would hide it if I had the secret of happiness," he confessed.

Betty became suddenly serious.

"You wouldn't share the secret of happiness with the rest of the world?" she challenged astounded.

"Being happy doesn't necessarily mean being good. Evil people don't deserve to be happy, why should I give them the chance to be happy while they hurt other people?" he countered in a severe tone.

He wasn't even sure if he deserved to be happy, but he put that thought aside deep in his mind where he couldn't reach for it.

"That's true, but people are not all good or bad... maybe some just need a little happiness to be able to

abandon the idea of being bad,” she grinned at him.

Kid didn't reply but continued fixing his gaze on her eyes. That girl was really convinced that happiness could change the world. He smiled at the vision of such an optimistic way of seeing the human race.

“You didn't have a lot of people today, huh?” He tried to change the subject before they touched on something that would ruin the mood.

Betty shrugged and smiled.

“I sent Tom, the cook, home at noon. He has a family, children, it's only fair he gets to spend the Fourth with them.”

Kid didn't believe she was in the position to do something like that but was also sure that, if she thought it was the right thing to do, no rule would prevent her from doing so.

“And you? Don't you have a family to be with? A boyfriend?” he casually remarked.

Betty smiled and shook her head.

“Nobody who pines for me,” she stated firmly with a veil of sadness in her eyes.

He wanted to tell her he came by every day just to see her big gray eyes and hear her beautiful voice, even if it was only to order something.

“And you? Nobody waiting for you at home?” she asked.

“Nobody who pines for me,” he heartily echoed her answer as he continued eating his pie and sipping his milkshake.

“Wait here,” she ordered him as she ran to lock the door and turn the sign to show, “Sorry, we are

closed.”

“What if someone wants to come in?” he exclaimed with surprise.

Betty rolled her eyes and sat down next to him.

“Except for two boys who came for pie this morning, there’s been nobody else. They’re all home enjoying this day,” she stated for a fact.

Kid turned toward her and leaned an elbow on the counter. She was so beautiful, he couldn’t breathe.

“So? Why did you keep it open all day?” He was interested to know.

“Because I was hoping you’d come by today,” she mumbled, lowering her gaze embarrassed.

The pounding of Kid’s heart was unprecedented. That confession was what he needed to hear to give him courage. He reached out his fingers to caress her face. She was surprised. She looked up as Kid shortened the distance between them; he laid his lips on hers. They were soft, warm, and a perfect match for his. He jumped off the stool without breaking away from her lips and placed his arms around her. She rested hers on his shoulders, and then slipped her fingers through his hair, making him shiver with pleasure. When he pulled away, he looked at her for a few seconds. Her eyes were still closed, and there was a faint smile on her lips. When she opened her eyes, the intensity of their gray made him almost stumble.

“Was it worth the wait?” he whispered, beaming.

“Definitely,” she stated firmly with a smile on

her face.

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Kid and Betty walked out together from the dinner and went up to the rooftop of her apartment building. The sun had gone down for some time now, and it wasn't as hot as it was before. The girl lived in a two-story house near Venice Beach, in the poorer area, not along the canals where only the wealthy could afford to live. She shared the apartment with two other girls, and one of them was in the middle of having loud sex with her boyfriend, very loud, to be honest, so they chose to go up on the roof with a bucket full of ice and some beers. They put some pillows and a couple of blankets on the floor, laid down, and waited for the Fourth of July fireworks to start.

"Have you ever thought about leaving this city?" he asked her, keeping his eyes fixed on the sky as Betty's head rested on his chest, and he kept an arm around her shoulders.

"Every single day," she replied without hesitation. "You?"

"I'd like to go to New York. I've always been fascinated with that place," he admitted.

"I wish I had the money to go there. If I did, I'd pack my bags and go right away," she sighed, almost hoping she was doing it at that exact moment.

Kid thought of the thirty thousand dollars he saved from the robberies and, for a moment, allowed himself to think only of himself, forgetting about Charles, his mother, and his brother in jail. He dre-

amt of buying a car, picking her up, and traveling across the country until they reached the other coast. But his mother was real; she would never leave, and Charles would kill her if she even tried.

“Would you come with me?” he appealed to her with a serious tone; he knew he couldn’t do it but couldn’t stop dreaming a bit.

Betty raised her head and looked at him straight in the eyes.

“I don’t even know your name.” She pretended to be outraged. “What makes you think I would run away with you?”

Kid chuckled.

“Well, I know yours, isn’t that enough?”

The girl seemed uneasy with the question.

“I read your nametag on your uniform at the dinner,” he explained when he saw panic develop in her eyes.

Betty visibly relaxed.

“Okay, so at this point, it would only be fair if I know yours.”

She giggled.

“Kid,” he confided.

“Kid? Like...a kid? Seriously?” She was clearly taken aback.

“My father didn’t have much imagination,” he replied apologetically for his father’s shortcoming.

“Anyway, yes, Kid, I’d run away with you if you asked me,” she answered his semi proposal.

The boy moved closer and kissed her again. She responded to his kiss, resting on her elbow and lo-

sing herself in the passion. Kid was initially surprised but recovered quickly and grabbed her by her hips, pulling her against him. He worked his fingers between the buttons at the back of her dress and tasted her snow white and delicate skin; it seemed almost impossible she lived in LA because she was so pale. Betty reached out and buried her fingers in his hair, just like the first time he kissed her, and the turmoil returned to accompany his heartbeat. Kid could not believe that his dream girl was there in his arms. Pushing her delicately, he laid Betty on her back and got on top of her, supporting himself on his elbows, careful not to crush her. Betty wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down for another kiss; it seemed she couldn't get enough of him, and so, with subtle yet explicit movements, she intertwined her legs with his, making him blush.

Kid couldn't control his erection caused by her provocation and immediately sensed that Betty may become offended or even scared by the improvised salute of his penis. He didn't know if it was the best way to show how much he was attracted to her but, when she started to slightly grind her pelvis against his, tantalizing that area of his body, he knew he was doing the right thing. He swayed his hips, mimicking her movements, and heard her moaning against his lips, making him beam.

"Are you sure?" he whispered for confirmation; he needed to hear her voice.

"Very sure. I've been waiting months hoping you'd notice me," she confessed, blushing.

Kid was taken aback by her answer, which compelled him to spontaneously grin as he had never before. He slipped his hand under the soft fabric of Betty's dress and caressed her leg. He felt her quiver from his touch, arching her back and pressing her soft breast against his chest, heightening his arousal. He continued kissing her, sliding his lips to her neck, and then savoring her shoulder. He moved the light fabric of the dress from her shoulder until it slipped over her arm, exposing her white breast, admiring it as if it was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. He kissed her shoulder and slowly proceeded down toward the breast. He gently kissed, tasted, and sucked her nipple, making her moan and sink her fingers deeper in his hair. Kid kept his lips on her breast while he ran his fingers along the skin of her thigh, up to her panties. He could feel her tremble at his every touch.

He took out a condom he had in his wallet, which was in his pocket, and opened it. He was surprised when Betty tore it from his hand.

"I'll take care of it," she whispered, surprising him.

Kid lowered his pants and boxers enough to expose his erection and watched her delicate hands put the condom on over his fiery and throbbing hard-on. When the rubber was in place, he looked at her straight in the eyes and kissed her with passion. He slipped one hand under her dress and lowered her panties. His fingers then made their way back up on her leg and stopped at the point where until a

few seconds prior, there was that thin layer of cloth. She was ready for him; she was prepared to welcome him inside her. He settled between her legs and slowly entered her. He felt something he couldn't describe. He had had other women before, but no one had ever given him those feelings of ecstasy. Being inside Betty was pure euphoria.

She started to move slowly, and the only thing he could do at that moment was to emulate her motion, sinking more and more between her thighs, intensifying the pace until both reached a pleasure so intense that it left them trembling in each other's arms. At that exact moment, the fireworks started to color the sky, illuminating their two panting bodies.

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Kid walked quickly toward the warehouse with a smile plastered over his face nobody could rip off. Not even the thought of seeing Charles could ruin his mood, the memory of the night he just had with Betty was so profoundly carved in his mind he could still smell her scent and taste her sweet flavor. Not even Charles and his dirty money could take that moment away from him.

He entered through the front door and noticed his motorcycle was still in the same spot where he had left it a few hours ago; nobody dared to touch it because they knew that if they did, they would lose the best driver in LA, the only one who could save their sorry asses during a robbery.

“So? Did you bring a gun?” Charles pestered him.

Jack sneered while the other guy he drove away with from the bank that same afternoon, shook his head, disappointed and sat down on one of the many stacks of pallets abandoned in the warehouse.

“Leave me alone?” He dodged him and reached Jack.

“Sooner or later, you’ll get a bullet in that baby face of yours, and you’ll regret not having one ready to kill that son of a bitch before he kills you,” he scoffed at him.

Kid shrugged and turned away.

“As if you care,” he hissed between his teeth.

The man approached him with fury; he already had his hand raised to hit him, but Jack jumped between them and stopped him.

“They’ll be here soon, Charles,” he hissed enraged.

The man lowered his hand and turned to face the entrance; they heard cars approaching, and a few seconds later, the headlights of two big black SUVs blinded them, preventing from seeing how many of them got out until their guests made their way in front of the lights. Kid noticed Charles had become remarkably tense, even he knew that it wasn’t the usual exchange they were used to. Five men wearing suits and ties were in front of them, four of them were menacingly showing their shotguns, and one, the one Kid assumed was the boss, had his arms crossed over his chest. He was tall, robust, pale skin, and very blond, almost white, with high cheekbones and a square jaw.

“I think you have something for me,” he broke the silence with an accent. Kid didn’t recognize it, maybe Russian or German, he wasn’t able to discern it.

Charles chuckled despite being nervous.

“First, show me the money, then we can talk.”

The man nodded to one of his bodyguards who walked over to one of the SUVs; he opened the trunk and pulled out two bags that, presumably, contained the money. The man laid them on the pallets in front of Charles and opened them so he could check what was inside.

Kid held his breath; the situation was much bigger than anything he had ever participated in before and didn’t like how things were currently stacking up. First, there was no trace of the backpack with the plates, then he counted at least twenty guns dispersed and concealed throughout the warehouse. Why did they have all those weapons, and what were they going to use them for? He nervously looked around without moving his head too much to attract attention. There was something profoundly wrong, but he couldn’t put his finger exactly on what.

Charles, evidently satisfied with what he saw inside the bags, waved his hand to someone hidden behind the pallets. Kid turned around to see who it was, and the blood froze in his veins.

“What’s my mother doing here?” he whispered to Jack, his voice was so low and trembling he didn’t know if the guy heard him.

“You don’t know? Your mom was the one who

found the buyers; it was all her idea. Did you really think that Charles was smart enough to organize something like this?" he replied just as quietly.

Kid's brain couldn't process all the information he had just received. His mother would never get involved in something like this; why was Jack making up something so absurd? He kept his eyes trained on the woman walking at a steady pace to reach Charles. She placed the backpack next to the bag full of money and opened it. The man took a plate in his hand, checked it with the light of the headlights, and then grabbed a flashlight from his pocket to verify its authenticity better.

"Perfect," he exhaled satisfied.

He did the same with the other plates, arranged them back in the backpack, and closed it.

"We have a deal," he stated, and Kid was relieved that it was finally over.

"Definitely, we keep the money...and the plates," his mother suddenly explained with a cold voice he didn't even recognize.

What happened next was so sudden that Kid didn't have time to react immediately. His mother grabbed a gun from behind her back and shot the blond man straight in the forehead. Meanwhile, Charles pulled out a shotgun underneath a pallet and shot at the remaining four men. Jack followed the lead of Kid's stepfather, and their other accomplice from the morning's robbery tried to do the same but was shot dead by the men on the other side as everyone took cover behind the SUVs.

Kid barely had time to throw himself behind the concrete's column and pallets when bullets hissed toward his direction. The noise was deafening, and his heart pounded uncontrollably in his chest like never before. He didn't even know if seconds, minutes, or hours passed since everything began, but it sure felt like an eternity. His mother took refuge next to him to reload her gun; Kid looked at her in disbelief with wide eyes and thought that the woman now next to him was not the one that gave birth to or raised him.

"Take this and make yourself useful for once," she reproached him, throwing a gun she had recovered from a dark corner at him.

Kid kicked the gun with his feet far away from him. He would never kill anyone for any reason, not even if it was a matter of life or death, which it was then.

"You're useless, just like your father," she revealed, looking at him with contempt.

Kid felt the heartbreak invading his chest. He had no idea of what had happened to his mother, but she wasn't that person he had in front of him at that moment. This person wasn't fragile or vulnerable. She had just killed a man in cold blood and ordered him to do the same. Kid was terrified of the person in front of him, and an expression of horror was readily visible on his face.

"Don't make that face," she scoffed at his reaction as she stuck her head out of the column to shoot. "I should have had you killed along with

him. You're a complete waste," she swore.

The words resounded in Kid's head more than the shots that continued coming. It was information his brain couldn't accept, but his heart suspected was right—his mind refused to admit it. Instantly, his expression turned to pure disgust. His mother turned to him, and Kid didn't know how to deal with the contempt the woman had for him.

"Do you really think I would have married the man who killed my husband if I hadn't asked him to do it?" she haughtily informed him.

Kid could not restrain his despair; he stood up and, without thinking of finding shelter or worrying about his own life, ran along behind the enormous columns of pallets. Because of the extreme chaos going on inside the warehouse, no one had noticed him trying to escape. He reached his motorcycle and crouched behind it, peeking to take in what seemed like hell. Bodies were stretched out on the floor, and he couldn't make out who they were, but the blood covering the concrete made him think they were all dead. Someone was still standing and, although it was drastically dim in the warehouse because of the shattered lights, shots continued to be fired.

Kid put on his helmet and jacket, jumped on the motorcycle, and was about to turn it on when he thought better—he would attract their attention if he started it there. He pushed it out of the warehouse as fast and as far as he possibly could to turn it on without being noticed and drive away. When the air whipped through his helmet, he realized his cheeks

were wet. He was crying.

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He arrived at the trailer where he lived with his brother and kicked down the door, he didn't want to waste time looking for the key. He rushed to his bed, moved the mattress and the bed frame, and jumped in the small space he had just created. With a couple of well-placed punches, he bashed in the false bottom of his hiding place—he didn't have time to be methodical. He grabbed the money (the thirty thousand dollars he put aside from his heists) and put it in the backpack. He stood up, walked to his brother's bed, grabbed his helmet on it, and left. He jumped on his motorcycle and sped away without looking back.

The thoughts running through his head were driving him crazy. He had always believed that his mother was the one who needed protection, the one blackmailed into marriage in exchange for the livelihoods of her sons, but it wasn't true. She explicitly told him that what he had always believed was a complete lie, disclosing to him callously how she premeditated his father's premature death. That night the memory of his father changed at the exact moment his mother broke his heart. He tried to remember his father: how he was, why his mother got rid of him, but he couldn't, he was too overwhelmed by his grief to even think straight, let alone process all this new knowledge. He just had to stop thinking and keep driving faster.

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He had been pounding on the door for at least five minutes when Betty's sleepy and scared face appeared in front of him. She had on a teddy that, under normal conditions, he would have ripped off in a few seconds, but on that occasion, would have been inopportune.

"Come with me," he blurted out without even greeting her, pushing her inside her apartment and closing the door behind him.

"Now? Where? Why?" she asked with panic in a trembling voice.

Kid grabbed her face between his hands and kissed her.

"Yes, now. You told me you'd come if I asked you to. I'm asking you," he murmured.

Her face was scared, and she seemed to be on the verge of crying.

"What's happening? Why do you want to go in the middle of the night? Why are you crying?" she continued terrified.

Kid didn't notice his cheeks were still wet with tears. He dried it with his sleeve and lowered himself to be at her same eye level.

"Do you trust me? I can't tell you what's going on right now, you'll just have to trust me, and do what I'm saying," he spoke the words with all the composure he could find inside him.

Betty nodded, and he felt a bit of relief in his chest.

"Put some clothes in a backpack, the things you can't live without, and get dressed. We're leaving

now. I promise I'll explain everything, but now we have to go," he rushed.

The girl suddenly looked like she wanted to back out on his proposition but then turned around, ran to her bedroom and started to throw everything in a backpack. Kid doubted she was carefully thinking about what she needed as she stuffed the bag but didn't comment on it. Betty put on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, taking the teddy off without bothering to hide from him; she put on shoes and a jacket, slipped the backpack on her shoulders, and looked at him straight in the eyes.

"Ready!" she exclaimed in an unconvincing voice and a half-smile.

Kid went up to Betty and kissed her on her forehead, then walked to the bed and grabbed the teddy.

"This comes with us." He smiled, shoving it in the backpack.

Betty chuckled, with a mixture of nervousness, amusement, and maybe excitement; there was almost no trace of the fear he noticed before. Perhaps she had just stopped thinking or worrying about what was happening and just trusted him—it warmed his heart when this idea crossed his mind. He grabbed her hand and dragged her outside to his motorcycle. He put on the helmet and gave her his brother's. Only then did he realize she was staring at the bike with terror plastered on her face.

"Don't worry. I'm one of the best riders in LA." He hated to boast about himself but didn't know

how to explain without hitting the topic of the robberies.

Betty didn't look very assured but nodded. Kid jumped on the motorcycle, turned it on, and then helped her. Betty climbed on the saddle, yet he didn't notice the added weight as she was so light. Her arms clung to his waist with a deadly grip; Kid smiled and then sped away. Every time he slowed down or stopped, she bumped her helmet against his back, it relaxed him because it was his confirmation she was with him, nothing else matters.

*

They traveled for hours, leaving Los Angeles behind them. They kept to an average pace to avoid drawing attention to themselves and stopped to refuel only once, departing immediately. The sun was already high in the sky when they decided to stop just after a bridge that crossed over a lake. They both got off and took off their helmets.

"We have to get rid of the bike here," he explained with half a smile.

"What? Why?" she asked, surprised.

Kid chuckled.

"You're never going to stop asking questions, are you?" he grinned at her. "This is too uncomfortable for travel, we need a car," he couldn't reveal to her that the bike was too flashy or that it wasn't such a good idea to be seen around with it.

"Where can we get a car?" she asked with apprehension

"I saw the sign for a car dismantling place about

a quarter of a mile from here,” he pointed out.

Betty nodded, a bit skeptical; Kid could see she had at least a thousand doubts and questions but didn't have the nerve to ask them.

“Don't worry, okay? We'll get a car, eat something, then you can ask me anything. I swear I'll answer honestly.”

She looked more relaxed and asked nothing when Kid let the motorcycle sink in the lake along with their helmets.

It wasn't particularly challenging to find a car, especially since he would pay cash. They got in their used and dilapidated Honda Civic and stopped at the next small town to eat something. Though they didn't exchange any words, there was no awkwardness between them either.

They had been driving for less than an hour when Betty finally broke the silence.

“Are you really going to answer all my questions without lying?” she blurted out.

Kid nodded; he had been truthful to her since he promised her. That was his dream coming true: leaving Los Angeles to start a new life and having the girl of his dreams by his side; he wanted to earn her trust.

“Yes, even if it'll scare you,” he warned her.

“Are you a drug dealer?” she asked him point-blank.

Kid looked at her in surprise before putting his eyes back on the road again.

“No. How could you even ask me something like

that?”

Betty looked down at her hands, resting on her lap and blushed.

“It’s been on my mind for a while. When you come to the diner, you’d always leave me huge tips...no one has that kind of money at such a young age...unless they’re drug dealers,” she explained embarrassedly.

“No, I’m not,” he reassured her, chuckling. “I gave you those tips because I liked you a lot!”

Betty smiled.

“How old are you?”

“Twenty and you?”

“I’m the one asking questions.”

She pretended to be offended.

“I’m sorry, I won’t do it again,” he chuckled.

“Anyway, I’m eighteen.”

“Thank God, I didn’t just kidnap an underage girl,” he teased her playfully.

Betty finally laughed with no restraint for the first time since they left, and Kid felt relieved.

“You didn’t kidnap me. I decided to run away with you and think it’s the best decision I’ve ever made,” she said, closing the distance between them and kissing him on the cheek before snuggling on his shoulder.

Kid felt his heart pound violently in his chest; if that was the recipe for the happiness, he definitely wouldn’t share it with anyone. Betty belonged to him; no one could take her away from him.

“What’s your real name, Kid?” she asked softly

out of the blue.

Kid thought back to when his father praised him for some good stunts he pulled with the motorcycle. They were sporadic moments, which was the reason he didn't hear his name very often.

“Eliot.”