

## INCIDENT AT LONELY ROCKS

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

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Winter on the Oregon beaches was unlike winter anywhere else. Winter on the beach meant fifty-degree temperatures and the occasional rain. The surf was high, but the beaches were empty—tourists spent their vacation dollars on Maui or the Virgin Islands, or even Las Vegas in December.

But Oscar loved the beach. And he loved the fact that his route took him there every single week.

Mondays were his beach days. He drove from the warehouse, which was on a side road exactly between Seavy Village and Anchor Bay, and headed north. His first stop was always at the Lonely Rocks Wayside, and he'd always think it was incredibly well named.

Not once had he ever seen a car parked there, not once had he watched a tourist walk along the beach. When he arrived, there was only him, the crumbling parking lot, and the POTS portable toilet, which was as close to the highway as he could get it.

He would pull up alongside the toilet, get out his scrubber and bucket, then put on his gloves. He'd keep the ignition on—he had to; the hose wouldn't work without it—and then he'd get out. He'd open the toilet's door, stick the hose through the hole, and let the machine suck the waste into the large container at the back of his truck.

He also had another portable toilet strapped into the back in case he had to switch one out or he got called to a new job. Usually that toilet remained there for most of the week.

Then, when he finished vacuuming out the waste, he scrubbed the interior and added new chemicals in the portable toilet's storage container. He had become a fast cleaner, and a precise one. His motto was simple: He wanted moms and grandmoms to comfortably use his toilets.

He particularly liked the Lonely Rocks Wayside. It had been built in the 1950s as a large turnout where tourists could watch the waves. Over the years, it had had slight upgrades: The parking lot was now asphalt instead of flattened dirt, a guardrail had been placed along the cliffside, and state-produced signs told idiots not to climb over the side. POTS got the wayside's first and only portable toilet contract in 1991, and Oscar had been servicing Lonely Rocks ever since.

Oscar figured it was the highway warning signs that kept the casual tourist away. In addition to the BEWARE SUNKEN GRADE signs that dotted every mile of the old road (it wasn't Highway 101 anymore; the state had gotten terrified of the erosion this high up and had moved the highway two miles inland, away from the

ocean), there were DO NOT WALK signs posted along the shoulder and CAUTION: UNSTABLE GROUND signs even closer to the wayside itself.

Most out-of-state tourists didn't know Oregon terminology, so the "sunken grade" signs wouldn't bother them. Sunken grade meant the same thing that the unstable ground sign meant with a slight twist: Sunken grade would most easily be translated as "sinking road."

He was a native Oregonian, which was why he always stopped his heavy truck on a turnout on the east side of the highway, just before the sunken grade signs started. Then he'd walk the length—again on the east side, away from the ocean—and inspect the road, just to make sure it was sturdy enough for the one-ton-plus he would drive across it.

So far, he'd been lucky. But a few times, he had come across crumbled asphalt on the far end of the wayside about a hundred yards past his delivery spot. Then he'd turn around and go the ten miles out of his way on the highway, heading to the next wayside. He'd call the deteriorating road into both the State Police and the Oregon Department of Transportation, figuring that he would be the first to discover it, even if the slide had happened in a storm three or four days before.

In the winter, hardly anyone used this road. In the summer, he mostly saw folks he called "environmental tourists," people with PROTECT THE EARTH bumper stickers or bikes or camping gear on the back of their car. The SUVs or the families whose kids had iPods hardly came here.

This morning, the road had seemed stable. There hadn't been serious storms or high surf in the past week, so he gave the road only a cursory inspection. Then he drove up alongside the portable toilet and started his ritual.

He put the truck in park and left it idling. He set the emergency brake and got out. He paused, mostly because he couldn't help it, and took a big sniff of the fresh ocean air. A touch of salt and a bit of brine all mixed with the chill that suggested the water itself. He loved it.

Just like he loved the view: the Lonely Rocks, all five of them, standing (that's how the brochures described them) in the surf, looking forever like people in a semicircle with their backs to each other. He would've named it the Angry Rocks—he could almost imagine their fronts, the scowling faces, the crossed arms—but he supposed people would want something more dramatic with a name like that, instead of one of those silent stand-offs his ex-wife used to give him in the last few years of their marriage.

Then he squared his shoulders and headed to the portable toilet. POTStoilets were a light green. The company got its start renting toilets to logging companies, and for some reason, some designer thought it would best to have the toilets blend into the scenery.

Here, the light green looked slightly out of place. The trees along this cliff face were scraggly, wind-raved pine, with needles so dark they almost looked black. Against the asphalt, the green seemed festive, and more than once, he'd found one of those see-through Oregon Ducks stickers pasted onto the door. If the company hadn't minded, he would've left the sticker on—he understood team spirit; it had taken him through that glorious season when the football team he'd played for couldn't do anything wrong—but he had to follow regs. Nothing but the company logo on the outside (a big P with a toilet-bowl-shaped O, a T behind that in a way that kinda looked like a toilet, and an S that seemed to brace the entire mess up) and a spotless, pine-fresh interior.

This toilet looked relatively new. It had the new curved door handle that informed someone outside whether the toilet was occupied or not, and it didn't have a lot of scratches or polished-off graffiti marks.

He walked around the toilet first, making sure nothing had happened to the outside. He braced a hand on the side of the toilet and accidentally shoved it, which made it rock.

Something banged inside.

In fact, it banged so hard, he nearly toppled over. Weight had shifted.

Someone had planted something inside his portable toilet.

Then his breath caught. Had he interrupted a customer? A hiker maybe? Someone frightened by the required beep-beep-beep of the truck as it backed up?

He could just imagine some scrawny hiker in his Birkenstocks, huddled inside, waiting for civilization to go away.

“Hey!” he said. “C'mon out. It's okay.”

He almost banged on the reinforced plastic wall, then thought the better of it. That would probably scare Mr. Birkenstock even more.

So he went around front and stopped as he peered at the door. It wasn't latched from the inside. The little red sign that changed as the handle latched read VACANT.

He felt a little relief at that. Never once, in all his years as aPOTScustomer service representative had he ever tried to clean a toilet with someone in it.

Although that didn't explain the weight shift. He might have to amend his record to never cleaning a toilet with someone obviously in it. There was no way to tell this thing was occupied. The parking lot was empty, there was no backpack or camping gear outside (not that there was a place to camp anywhere near Lonely Rocks, although there was a great hiking trail—if you didn't mind that it could crumble out beneath you at any minute), and the door wasn't latched.

He couldn't be blamed for making this kind of mistake.

"Hey!" he said again. "My name's Rollston. I service these toilets. No need to be scared of me. Are you okay?"

No one answered. And he had the odd feeling that no one would.

Then he frowned. Kids. Kids were the only downside of this job. Not little kids, who actually loved outdoor toilets, seeing them as an exotic novelty. Not even the local high school crowd, which mostly found the toilets gross, if they thought of them at all.

No, the kids that bothered him were the college kids. Old enough to come to the coast unsupervised for the weekend, but young enough to forget that the word "responsibility" applied even here.

Those kids would get drunk, build fires on the beaches, and toddle up to the nearest portable toilet to get rid of the excess beer. Then they'd get the bright idea in their head that they needed to mess with the toilet somehow. Sometimes that messing was just a team sticker. But most often, it manifested in the urge to turn the toilet turtle.

Oscar never understood why. Did the kids think there was a hole underneath it? The toilet just had a receptacle under the seat, a receptacle filled with chemicals to dissolve the waste and get rid of the smell. The things were designed so that they could be turned on their side and not spill (too much) unless they were overfull—and he never let his get overfull. So the irritation was just that he had to right the toilet before he could clean it.

An extra five minutes, which bothered him in the summer and usually didn't disturb him at all in the winter.

But sometimes the kids were creative. Sometimes they stashed things inside the toilet. The worst was the bearhide wrapped around a wooden frame. The hide still had a head, and damn if that thing didn't look real when he opened the door the first time, and damn if he didn't let out a little scream as he slammed the door shut—not something he'd want his old football buddies to know. But not many of his old football buddies would've opened the door again either.

He had, and he'd been fine. (He'd half expected that bear to lunge out at him, but it hadn't. It hadn't moved at all, which was the thing that tipped him off to its fakeness.)

He expected something like that here. Some kind of prank—a log, maybe, or a mannequin. He'd come across things like that before, things people had intentionally or otherwise left inside the portable toilets, and while they'd given him a start, they'd never scared him.

Not like that fake bear.

He knocked one final time, hoping that someone would open the door. When no one did, he squared his shoulders, put his fingers in the little half-moon handle, and pulled.

The door came open easily enough. That surprised him, and looking back on it, he wasn't sure why. Later, he realized that everything about the toilet had surprised him, and yet the parts registered separately, not as a cohesive whole.

First the door, then the flies—an entire swarm of them, buzzing around him as if it were summer. He tried to wipe them away from his face with his free arm.

Then the darkness. He thought the entire place was in shadow, even though he knew it wasn't: There had been sunlight on the door, after all. But the interior looked dark, and these places only looked dark when they were in shadow.

Only he tried not to leave them in shadow, so no one would be tempted to pull a prank or get hurt using the facilities.

What he saw as darkness was actually blood, great gobs of it, dried black against the molded plastic walls.

And finally, he saw the body, wedged—which was the wrong word because obviously, he'd heard the body flopping around—between the tiny sink and the side wall. The body belonged to a man, a Birkenstock wearer just like Oscar had initially suspected, only this guy had a knife stuck up to the hilt in the left side of his flannel shirt. He had a pair of glasses hanging from one ear, and his face looked naked. It also looked weird, with the blood spatter on one side, but not on the other. It took Oscar a while to figure out that the glasses had been in place when the guy died.

Oscar had probably dislodged the glasses. He'd probably moved the entire body when he shoved the portable toilet.

That made his stomach heave. He backed out of the toilet and ran toward the guardrail, planning to let go of his breakfast over the edge.

He didn't quite make it. He lost a great meal on the side of the asphalt, crouching so that he barely missed his shoes.

He stayed that way for a minute, afraid he'd lose more. He couldn't very well leave the guy here, but he couldn't take him either. That would be tampering with a crime scene, right? Oscar watched a lot of the detective programs on television—from CSI to all its spin-offs, and its nonfiction inspiration shows on Discovery and PBS—and he knew that touching stuff was the worst thing he could do.

So was panicking.

He swallowed against the bile still rising in his throat and made himself concentrate. No car, no other people, nothing obvious. He wasn't in any danger,

even though his heart was pounding.

He had time to consider his next move.

He stood slowly. His stomach was settling down. He headed to his truck. He had a cell phone in there, mounted on the sunflap. If he called for help, all he had to do was wait for it, here, with his portable toilets, and the poor soul who had died in one.

Obviously not in the act of using it either. The guy had died there, but he hadn't locked the door when he had gone inside. You'd think if some guy was being attacked by a maniac with a knife, he'd go into the nearest building—even if it was made of plastic and had thin walls—and lock the door.

Maybe the guy didn't have time. Maybe he had run inside, the killer had grabbed the door and stabbed him, and then left while the poor victim flailed about inside, trying to pull the knife free and failing.

Although, shouldn't a knife hold the blood in? Hadn't Oscar read somewhere that a stabbing victim should never remove a knife, that the knife would keep him from bleeding to death?

Oscar was breathing hard. He flipped open his cell and stared at the reception bar.

Nothing. He should've remembered that. One reason he loved this route was that his boss couldn't call him and make him veer off it, not without exquisite timing and a lot of luck.

"Damn," Oscar whispered. But he slipped the phone onto his belt clip and walked back to the scene.

He was already thinking of it as a crime scene. How TV of him. He wasn't any kind of detective, and he couldn't figure things out. He had just stumbled on something awful, and now, it seemed, his brain wasn't working quite right.

He had to get calm before he took the next step, whatever that would be. He walked away from the truck and headed toward the guard rail. Maybe the Lonely Rocks would know. Maybe they would help him remember where the cell reception started again or where the nearest police station was.

Or ranger station. Or some kind of coast guard unit. Any place with someone official.

The ocean was bright blue with a topping of snow-white foam near the rocks. In the distance, the horizon blended with the ocean, looking like the kind of smudge an artist would deliberately make with chalk by rubbing his finger along a firm line.

Oscar made himself concentrate on that smudge as he crossed the parking lot,

trying to remind himself that this was just a blip in his day, a bad event, one that he could cope with if he only tried hard enough.

He just didn't want to be alone with it, nor, for some reason he didn't fully understand, did he want to leave the poor victim alone. The guy had been alone long enough already.

The far edge of the guard rail was battered, and a section was missing. Oscar frowned. He hadn't noticed that before, but it meant nothing. He hardly ever came this far down the parking lot, both because he never needed to—you could see the ocean from the road—and because the sliding earth made him nervous. The asphalt already had big cracks in it, and he, with his oversize footballer's frame, didn't want to be the guy to send another section tumbling toward the sea.

He stopped, his heart pounding. He needed to leave this all for the experts.

But he couldn't. He needed to go forward, to see if the break in the rail had something to do with the poor slob in the portable toilet.

Cautiously, he took the next few steps, putting a foot down, then easing his weight onto it, then taking the next step. The ground felt stable enough. There hadn't been a lot of rain, so the ground shouldn't have been saturated. And there hadn't been a lot of wind or high surf, so nothing should have been eroded from underneath.

In other words, he had nothing to fear.

Except that hole in the guard rail and that body in the toilet.

He squared his shoulders again—a trick, he realized, he'd learned from his old coach—and continued forward, reaching the middle of the still-intact guard rail and peering over.

The upside-down station wagon didn't surprise him. Its undercarriage was scratched and dented, probably from going end over end as it headed toward the water.

It got hung up on one of the larger lava rocks near the edge of the surf. The car's front end pointed toward the sky, the wheels looking oddly vulnerable in the morning light.

An expensive bicycle had been thrown clear, its frame twisted and flattened, probably by the weight of the car.

To the car's right, he saw camping equipment scattered on the cliffside, and one of those pointed cyclist's helmets hanging from a bush.

It took him another minute to realize that what he thought was a pile of blankets was actually another human being.

The bile rose in his throat again. Two dead? How could that happen out here?

“Hey!” he shouted down, mostly out of hope rather than any thought that someone would be alive after that crash. “Hey! You okay down there?”

His voice sounded faint and ineffective against the surf pounding against the rocks below. On this side of the parking lot, he would have trouble hearing cars as they passed. He doubted anyone could have heard him talking to the poor dead guy in the can, or the beep-beep-beep of his truck as he’d parked.

“Hey!” he shouted again. “You okay?”

The person—a woman?—raised her head. He took two steps backward in surprise. He really hadn’t thought that person was alive at all.

But, he realized as he went back to the edge, she couldn’t have gotten there by falling out of the tumbling car. She had to have slipped down the side, or pulled her way up from the bottom. She was resting on a rock ledge, and the reason he’d thought she was all blankets was because she had made a nest of her clothing.

She had been there a while, and judging by the claw marks in the loose dirt above her, she’d tried to climb up more than once.

“Hello!” he shouted. “You all right?”

She nodded but held up hands scraped and filthy, just in case he didn’t get the point. She shouted something at him.

“I didn’t get that,” he yelled back.

She shouted again, only slower. He read her lips more than heard her. She said, “The ledge is crumbling.”

Great. Now if he went away and she died, it would be his fault. He had to get her out of there, without hurting her or him, or killing them both.

He didn’t have rope, but he did have the thick cords, which his colleagues incorrectly called bungees, that he wrapped around the new portable toilet in the back. He had extra cords just in case he had to do a pick-up or seal a door on a malfunctioning toilet until he could come back to it.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” he yelled to the woman, hoping she could hear him over the surf. He ran—he hadn’t run since college; his knees ached, and he suddenly realized how out of shape he had let himself become—and reached the side of the truck in what seemed like forever. He could imagine the crumbling ledge in his mind, the way that the rock shifted, the unsteadiness of it; a slight movement would make it fall away altogether.

First, breathe. Thank God for Coach Stevens. The man’s instructions were in his head—they were about football, but they’d have to do. Oscar had never been in



another situation like this.

He breathed. Then he realized he had to test the cords to see if he could hook them together in a way that would hold. The older ones had frayed hooks and pulls. He tossed those in the truck bed and removed the newer ones from the new toilet. If someone drove up on this deserted road and stole the damn thing, so be it. His employers would have to understand.

It took him a minute to hook the cords together, but they seemed stable enough to get a small woman up a crumbling hillside. Not that he had any way of measuring this.

Still, he wasn't sure his back could take the weight. He unhooked the bungees at the back of the truck, then he lowered the gate. He eased the new portable off, using his back and knees like he always did when he put a new toilet in place.

It looked kinda funny next to the old toilet, but he couldn't worry about that.

He raised the gate, then hooked it in place. He got in the truck and backed toward the guard rail.

He tried not to think about the cracking asphalt. He told himself that the broken guard rail had happened when the station wagon went through it, not when the ground fell away, but he didn't lie that well, not even to himself.

He stopped the truck several yards from the guard rail. He couldn't quite bring himself to get as close as possible: The last thing he wanted to do was save her and then have the entire cliffside crumble beneath her, him, and the truck.

He didn't want to hook the cords to the back gate—it was too unstable—so he found a thick piece of metal near one of the wheel wells. Then he unspooled the cords and hurried to the guard rail.

As he looked over, he prayed that she was still there. The movement of the truck could shake earth this unstable, and that would be the last straw for that ledge.

But she was still there, crouched against the side, the blue ocean beneath her, crashing into the rocks and spraying foam up the grass and sand hillside.

He held up the cord, but before he tossed it, he mimed tying it around his stomach.

“Knot yourself in,” he shouted. “You got that? Tie this around you. Don't rely on your hands to hold it.”

He wasn't sure how much she got of that, but she nodded. He swallowed hard and tossed the cords, listening to them clang as the metal hooks hit rock on the way down.

The cords curved over the guard rail because he couldn't think of any other

way to do it. She reached up, missed, then reached again. He kept feeding cord to her. As he did, he studied the guard rail.

This part looked safe enough. The base was embedded into the earth, and the ground looked solid—not that he could tell, really, but he had to trust something.

He'd try to pull her up himself first, and if that didn't work, then he'd use the truck. If he just used the truck by itself, he was afraid he'd use too much speed, or it wouldn't work and she'd fall and he wouldn't know until the cord came up empty, bouncing on the asphalt.

He almost wrapped the loose back end of the cord around himself before it tightened in the woman's hands, but at the last minute, he decided not to. What if she was heavier than he expected? What if she pulled him over the edge?

Then they'd both be screwed.

He wiped his hands on his pants, then gripped the cord tightly. She was balanced precariously on that ledge, trying to make a half hitch with the cord and her own body. She seemed to have some kind of wilderness experience, or maybe she was just one of those really competent people who knew how to do things like hitch a rope to themselves.

He watched her, his mouth dry.

Then she gripped the cord, much like he was, and tugged just a little. He started to pull, but as he did, she placed her feet on the cliffside wall and climbed like she'd done this before.

She was using his strength and his balance to give her a foundation, but she was pulling herself up. One hand over the other, one step at a time, she was coming up that hillside.

He kept the cord taut, praying it wouldn't separate, praying he had the right ones—the ones that wouldn't fray.

What if they frayed whenever pressure was applied to them?

God, he had to make that voice in his head shut up. He hadn't realized how very annoying it was until now.

The woman stopped halfway and shook one of her hands like it hurt. He bit his lower lip, tasting blood.

C'mon, honey, he thought. Just a little more.

He didn't want to pull and dislodge her.

She put her hand back on the cord and continued, shaking that hand whenever it wasn't the dominant one.

As she got closer, he realized she wasn't as young as he thought. Her face had that unnatural thinness that middle-aged smokers or those weird vegetarians who didn't eat anything good or people with cancer had. Her skin was tan and sallow at the same time, but he figured that might be because she had been on the ledge. Her hair was tangled with leaves and brush and dirt.

He could hear her breathe, which reminded him to do it. He breathed, feeling the strain in his back as she got closer.

Finally she was within his reach. He bent over the guard rail—metal poking into his stomach—and offered her his hand. He had as firm a grip as he could on the cord with his other hand.

She looked at it, like she was unwilling to let go of the cord. Then she let go with her bad hand and reached toward his, missing his fingers entirely and clamping onto his wrist.

He had no choice but to take her wrist. Considering how wet her hand felt against his skin, this was a better choice. No sliding apart—no bad movie moment when their hands touch and then separate, followed by a scream as she fell to her death.

He tugged, the muscles in his back pulling as he yanked her from an odd angle. She scrambled up the side, collapsed against the guard rail, and let him pull her over it.

He had to grab onto her belt to do it. They fell backward. He took the brunt of the fall, landing on asphalt and still-wrapped cord. Pain shuddered through him, the familiar pain of a bad tackle, and his eyes watered.

She lay on top of him, and for a minute, he wondered if he'd hurt her. Then she rolled off and let out a huge sigh.

“Oh God,” she said in a curiously flat tone. “Did I hurt you?”

“No,” he lied. He wanted to stay on his back, but he didn't dare. As Coach Stevens used to say, only babies rested.

He sat up. She was peering at him as if she didn't quite recognize him, as if she didn't remember what he had done.

He smiled reassuringly, but she didn't smile back. Instead, she wiped at her face with the back of one hand. The dirt flaked off her cheek, and that was when he realized that she wasn't covered in dirt; she was covered in dried blood.

“What happened to you?” he asked, thinking he could mask his growing panic, but something of it must have shown in his face or in his voice because her eyes widened.

“I fell,” she said in that flat tone. Emotionless, almost cold. Was she talking like that because she was in shock?

“I can see that,” he said. “Were you in the car? Is anyone else in the car?”

She wiped at her face again, then licked her chapped lips. Her hands were the worst. They were covered in real dirt and dried blood. On her right hand, her fingernails were gone.

“I don’t remember,” she said, but this time her voice warbled.

“You don’t remember if anyone else is in the car?”

She shook her head. “What happened?”

He frowned. She was wearing black leather shoes with some kind of heel. Scuffed and ruined now, they had the look of shoes that cost money.

They weren’t Birkenstocks.

“Was that your car?” he asked, sure it had to be. Two accidents and a murder couldn’t have taken place at the same site, could they? Not in the same week.

She swallowed, then glanced at the portable toilet. The look sent a chill through him. He was about to reach for her when she took off.

She ran for the truck. He lumbered to his feet and hurried after her, but she would reach the door long before he’d get close. She dragged the bungee cords behind her, and he stomped on the nearest one.

It held and she kept running. He bent over and grabbed the end, then yanking on it so hard that he had to take three steps backward.

She flew backward, and landed, hitting her head on the asphalt. She didn’t move.

He prayed she was all right—he didn’t need another body here, not one wrapped in his bungee cords—and he hurried to her side. Her eyes were rolling, but she was conscious, and when she saw him, she started to scramble up.

“If you tell me what happened,” he said, “I can help you.”

She kicked him, hitting his left knee. He gasped at the shuddery sensation that went through him; he knew, suddenly, that she had shattered something.

She was reaching for the metal edge of one of the bungee cords. He growled like the linebacker he used to be and lunged for her, ignoring the pain, dragging his malfunctioning leg. He slammed her into the back end of the truck and held her in place as he wrapped the bungee cords around her until she looked like a tied-up character in a Warner Brothers cartoon.

He hoisted her into the back of the truck but knew he couldn't keep her there. She'd free herself. He was shaking. He limped to the driver's side, got in, and drove to the two portable toilets. Then he got out again, went to the back of the truck, and picked her up as if she weighed no more than a child.

It was hard to carry her when he couldn't brace his leg, but he did anyway. He used a fireman's hold, making sure her feet were on his backside. She wriggled and kicked and called him names; he wasn't sure if she was in her right mind. He'd been trying to help her, for heaven's sake, and now she was trying to hurt him.

She must have figured he'd seen the cuts on her hands. The missing fingernails—those came from trying to climb free. But the cuts were the kind that could only come from a knife blade. He'd seen a few knife fights in his day; he knew what offensive wounds looked like. Defensive wounds were on the palms. Offensive were on the backs and sides of the hand.

Like hers.

He shoved her wrapped body inside the clean portable toilet and closed the door. Then he took one of the old bungee cords and wrapped it around the door, pulling it tight.

She'd be okay in there for a little while. But he couldn't risk leaving her here, not even for the short time it would take to drive to where he could get reception on his cell phone.

So he got in the truck again, drove it to the edge of the highway, and backed it up. He kept the keys in the ignition, got out, and lowered the gate.

Reloading would be hard. His leg felt like it was on fire. He could scarcely move his entire left side. But he'd have to, one last time.

Getting portable toilets back on the truck took some doing. Normally, he would brace his legs, rock the thing, and move it just enough that it would sit on the lip of the truck gate. He'd have to do that now with only one leg and a lot of determination.

Coach Stevens still spoke in his head. Their only bowl game—not the Rose Bowl, but so damn close that it mattered to them—was his last game. Coach pulled him aside and said, “Give it everything. This is your last chance for glory. Don't worry about how it hurts. Just see how superhuman you can be.”

Oscar dragged himself behind the portable toilet and grabbed it on both sides. Then he shoved with the shoulder opposite his good leg and rocked the thing.

The woman screamed, the sound muffled through the plastic. The damn toilet was heavier because of her. He wasn't sure he could move it even with two good legs.

Then she slammed herself against the door, and that was enough to loosen it. He rocked it just a little, and it came to rest on the lip. He shoved, and the toilet slid into place.

He leaned for a minute, sweat rolling down his face, his breathing harsh. But he didn't have a lot of time to rest. She was still screaming and rocking, and if he didn't move fast, she might knock the entire toilet over.

He closed the gate, then slammed the button with his fist. The lift rose and she screamed louder. At least he didn't have to worry that she couldn't breathe. With those lungs, it was clear she was doing just fine.

He used the three remaining bungees to strap the portable toilet in place. Then, bracing one hand on the side of the truck, he hobbled to the driver's seat. He got in, closed his eyes, and tried to breathe away the throbbing in his knee.

It didn't work.

At least it was his left knee and the truck was an automatic. He could drive away from here. His hands were shaking. It took two tries to get the truck in gear. He wasn't thinking clearly, he could feel it. He felt like he was underwater.

He'd felt this way before, after the big game. He'd cracked two ribs and had a concussion and had been going into shock. But they'd won. Coach had praised him. The papers had praised him.

He still had them framed on the wall of his apartment. Not even his greedy ex-wife had gotten those.

Shock. He didn't have a concussion now, but he wouldn't be making good decisions. He couldn't be on the road long. He got out his cell phone and propped it on the dash, waiting for the reception bar. Nothing.

He made himself breathe, then put the truck into drive. He rolled onto the highway and turned back the way he'd come. Behind him, he could hear the portable toilet thumping on the back gate. He hoped she didn't damage anything; it would probably come out of his salary.

The trees loomed over him like the living trees in the Wizard of Oz. It was dark here and the road twisty. He had to focus on the asphalt, driving so slow that he felt like he wasn't moving at all.

He kept glancing at the phone's reception bar, and when it finally jumped to full, he pulled over, put on his flashers, and dialed 911. He gave the dispatch the mile marker, asked for an ambulance and the sheriff, and then closed his eyes.

They had to shake him awake when they finally showed up.

\* \* \* \*

He got the story in bits and pieces, some of it from the cops in the hospital, some of it from the TV news, the rest from the papers. The station wagon belonged to Mr. Birkenstock, a hiker named Jorry Kling. He was single and unmarried. Near as the cops could figure, he'd picked her up. She'd been hitchhiking.

Her ruined clothes were expensive, but she had no luggage. Later, her defense attorney would claim she'd been ambushed in Astoria, raped and beaten and had managed to escape, hitchhiking south. Then Kling had picked her up and somewhere along the way, she'd forgotten he was her rescuer. When they stopped at the wayside, she'd tried to take the car.

But that didn't explain his body's position or the fact that the car had gone through the guard rail. She hadn't come back up the cliff to fight Kling and stuff him into a portable toilet.

Oscar had to testify at the trial, saying that she seemed okay until he asked her about the car, and then she'd attacked him too. Turned out that she had a history of attacking people—stabbing her mother in Longview, Washington; trying to shove another driver out of his car when he'd picked her up (and he'd shoved her out and drove away). She had had some kind of psychotic break, and the real victim of it had been Kling.

No one knew for certain what happened at that wayside. Only that Kling had ended up dead, and she'd ended up on the ledge, probably after losing control of the car she'd killed Kling to steal.

Oscar, though, had become something of a local hero, trying to save a girl only to have her turn on him.

And in those weeks of interviews—some even for big magazines in the East (Port-A-Potty Man Saves Psycho! read one headline, which really offended him because he worked for POTS, not Port-A-Potty), he kept getting the question he hated—How come you do this job?

No one liked his answer, about the pride in his work and the chance to drive to remote parts of the best state in the lower 48. So he finally had to give them an answer they understood: It paid well.

It did too. Commission on each toilet he delivered plus his weekly salary. He made more than some of the bozos who asked him questions.

Money they understood. The rest they didn't. Like how antsy he got during the rehab, how much he wanted to be in his truck again.

The first day back, a Monday, he had to drive with his boss in the truck, just to make sure he could handle the work. He did just fine, reveling in the narrow highway, the crouching trees, the ocean peaking through the spring leaves.

He stopped, like he always did, and checked out the asphalt before going to

the Lonely Rocks Wayside. His boss bleated at him, worried that Oscar was scared to return to the scene of the crime.

But Oscar ignored him and followed the routine.

The rest of the winter, the part he had missed, had come with heavy rains and high tides. The road looked even more unstable than it had before. But he could stand on it, and when he returned to the truck, he didn't say anything, just drove forward.

The guy who'd replaced him had put the new portable toilet in the wrong place. It was hard to get to.

But Oscar didn't complain. Instead, he got out of the truck and stopped, just like he had dozens of times in the past, taking a deep breath of the fresh ocean air.

He loved this place. It didn't matter that some psycho woman had committed murder here. It didn't matter that he'd have a permanent limp because of her.

She'd given him a second chance to go the distance, and he had. Twenty years and one hundred pounds after the last time, he found he still had the strength to push himself to the very edge.

It wasn't about being a hero.

It wasn't even about being more than a portable toilet serviceman, like the magazines had claimed.

It was about delivering at the right point in the game.

It was about being a winner.

Which he was—and always would be.

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