



*By Crystal Senter-Brown*

I have loved Amaya since the first time I saw her. Not the kind of love you're probably thinking about, though. I didn't have hearts in my eyes or jelly for knees. My love for her went far and above the usual. It was no secret back then that I liked to "play the field", but as soon as I met Amaya, all of that changed. That's how I knew we were meant to be together.

I met Amaya after work one night when a work buddy (Darius) and I went to the bar across the street from our office for a few drinks. Amaya was tending the bar and of course Darius went right to her. Darius was fearless in that way

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when it came to women, even though he had been married for over ten years. But as soon as Darius started running one pick-up line after another, Amaya shot him down.

But when Amaya saw me, her face immediately softened. Her grey eyes even seemed to sparkle a little when she asked me what I wanted to drink. As she slid my Guinness over to me, she smiled. Before I left, Amaya gave me her phone number and we had our first date the following night. I saw her every single day after that until our wedding day six months later. Like I said before, I loved her from the moment I first saw her. Who knew she would end up changing my life for the worse?

Things were going great with Amaya and I for the first year or so. We fell into a routine of church on Sundays, date nights on Fridays and pancakes on Saturday morning at the local diner. Although we were both settled in Albany, NY, Amaya's family lived in Hartford, CT and my family was scattered across the southeast. So we made a plan to visit her mother for Thanksgiving and my family on Christmas.

We packed the car with presents for Amaya's mother and set off for Hartford. The trip should

have only taken a few hours, but we still decided to stop for snacks.

I pulled off the highway to a roadside gas station. Amaya got out when I did and went to the pump to swipe her debit card. “You’re paying?” I joked. “Yes!” she said as she laughed.

“I won’t argue with that!” I said as I walked into the store. I gathered our usual road trip snacks (Slim Jims, cashews and sweet tea) and went to the counter to pay.

“That’ll be \$65.17,” the cashier said.

“Excuse me? For beef jerky, nuts, and tea?” I asked.

“And gas. You pumped \$55.00 before you came in here, remember?”

I shook my head. “No, my WIFE paid for the gas BEFORE she pumped it.”

“That’s funny, because I saw YOU pumping the gas.”

I laughed nervously. Was this guy playing a joke on me?

“My wife paid with our debit card. Now please stop playing around and let me pay for my snacks so we can get on the road.”

The cashier leaned over and looked out the window to my car. He squinted his eyes as he looked back at me.

"Look, man, I don't know if you've been drinking, but when you pulled up here there was no one else in your car. There's no one in the car now, either."

I looked out and sure enough, my car was empty. My stomach immediately twisted with anxiety, but I ignored it. "She probably just went to the restroom. Didn't you see her come in while I was in the back getting our tea? She was wearing a pair of those furry boots and a Red Sox baseball cap."

The cashier shook his head. "I definitely would have noticed a Red Sox cap in Yankees country."

I walked to the back of the store and knocked on the bathroom door.

"Amaya!" I said as I knocked. "Maya? Honey, let me know you're in there."

No one answered. I shook the locked doorknob and called for her again.

The clerk held up a block of wood with a single key hanging from it. It jingled as he shook it. LADIES RESTROOM was scrawled on the side of it with a black marker.

"You need a key to access the restroom. And guess who holds that key? That's right! *Me*. No one has asked for the key, sir." The cashier slammed the key onto the counter and continued. "Tell you what. Why don't you go ahead and keep the gas you pumped. The food, too. My treat. It looks like you've already had one hell of a morning and it's not even ten yet," he said with a chuckle.

"I don't need any handouts from you," I said as I reached into my pocket and pulled out three twenty-dollar bills. "I don't know what kind of a scam you're running here, but I know my wife paid for our gas. This should cover it."

I grabbed the snacks and tea from the counter and walked back to our car. I expected to see Amaya lying back in the seat, but she wasn't. In fact, she wasn't in the car at all. Even more disturbing was the fact that her purse was also gone from the front seat, as were her blanket and jacket.

I looked up and saw the cashier watching me from the window. I wanted to flip him off but instead I got into my car and dialed Amaya's cell number. After two rings, a male voice answered.

"Yup?" the voice said.

"I'm sorry, I must have the wrong number." I looked at the phone as I ended the call. The

number was saved under the name “Amaya”, but her photo was gone from the entry.

When I dialed the number a second time and the same raspy voice answered, I hung up. What was going on?

I scrolled through my contacts for the number to Amaya’s mother, but it wasn’t there. Nor were the numbers for Amya’s brother or sister. I decided to try to call my brother. He answered on the first ring.

“Hey JetPlane! What’s up?”

“Please don’t think I’m crazy. But I can’t find Amaya. We stopped to get gas...and...”

“Who is Amaya?” my brother asked. “Wait. Don’t tell me, let me guess: she must be your latest conquest on that seedy dating site.”

“What? Have you been drinking? Amaya is my wife, you idiot! Don’t play with me!”

My brother was silent. “Okay, JetPlane. You sound serious. Are you serious? Did you get married last night?”

The line was silent as my stomach sank. Why was my brother playing games with me?

“Jett, you okay man? Because you sound...”

“Sound what?” I fumed.

“I don’t know. Off. Maybe even high or something. You been smoking?”

“What? I’ve been clean and sober for almost a year! I gotta go. I’m really starting to get worried now. I’ll call you when I find her.”

As I ended the call, I looked into the backseat for Amaya’s duffel bag. It wasn’t there. When I walked to the back of the car and opened the trunk, the gifts for her mother were also gone.

I pulled out my phone again and began to dial 9-1-1, but as soon as I dialed the “9”, my phone lit up with a text message....

(To be continued...)