

She's Having A Ball



Alex Miller



A "Her TV" Novel



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For information address
Reluctant Press
P.O. Box 5829
Sherman Oaks, CA 91413
USA

Call toll free (800) 359-2116

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SHE'S HAVING A BALL

by Alex Miller

Zack just graduated at the age of twenty-four. It had taken more than a few years of hard work at his uncle's garage to finally have enough money to pursue a degree in the fine arts. Not at a place with fame, just one of the many schools of fine arts that were out there and one he could afford. He kept the cost at a minimum; close by, living at home and so on.

He even got a student loan. His parents weren't very happy about that, but they accepted it. At least they didn't have to pay for it. They wouldn't have, either.

A bachelor in the fine arts wasn't a degree, it was a joke. That's what his parent's thought, anyway. And honestly, they weren't exactly wrong. It couldn't give you the talent an artist needed to make name, to make a future. If one had talent, one didn't need a degree.

So, you had to take a job in commercial media; advertising - and the ones who got those jobs were the

lucky ones. Lucky was something Zack wasn't and had never been, but he was confident that he would find something.

But for now, he had no job and a lot of time for soul-searching - and that was what he intended to do. He had planned to follow in the footsteps of Jack Kerouac.

When Zack told his parents about his plans, they couldn't stop laughing. Zack wasn't the type to go drifting through the country. He was the silent introvert type, the one who never took the first step, because he lacked the confidence. That was a big handicap for the artistic type. That was also a reason for him to go on this trip, to make him harder and more confident. But until now he had been someone who never would take such a big risk. He was a slender, rather short guy, compared with other guys of his age. People with bad and other intensions would consider him an easy victim. His parents told him that more than once and he believed them, but he had to try. He packed a backpack and headed south. That's where he wanted to start his quest.

Spring was showing itself. If everything went right, he would be back home before winter could ruin things. His parents believed that he would be back in days, however.... and he would have, except for the misfortune that was heading his way.

Zack couldn't say how long the trip took but somewhere on the way he just got off the train without thinking. Not that he had to go much further to reach the southern limits of his trip, but something said that he had to get off. He found himself in a little town that was no different than most.

Once outside the station his stomach protested loudly and left him no other option than to step into the nearest diner. After that, he would take the first

bus northeast and see where it would bring him. This town seemed nice enough but it looked too much like his hometown. There was no reason to stay much longer. Not when the unknown was waiting.

He found the right place to eat. The diner was the retro kind, a reminder of better days, but unlike most, it was clean and comfortable; just the place to satisfy his needs.

“Can I help you, dear?”

“Coffee and scrambled eggs, please.”

What he saw was what he expected; all those diners looked the same - as did the people who worked there.

So, he didn't look further - but *she* did. What she saw was a young man with long brown hair tied up in a ponytail and a goatee. He had a face that one never would call male without having some doubt about it, even with his beard.

With that beard gone and his hair hanging loose, one could make a mistake about his gender, especially from the back. However, it had to be the right circumstances and if nobody had heard his voice. He was a woman's height. Not that gender had a height. It just meant that his height didn't make him stand out. But that day, he stood out.

The waitress was talking about him to the cook while waiting. Not loud enough for him to hear anything. Otherwise he would have been more than surprised of the content of the conversation.

“This one just looks like her type. Shall I make the call or not? Maybe it's better to let things be? He probably will run like the others and that only makes

it worse. She had so much hope with the last one. Even when I thought it wasn't the right choice."

"But you think this one is, don't you? It's the first one you like. The other ones all had flaws, but you haven't said anything about this one. You seem to like him too much."

"Maybe, but you're right. I like him. He has potential to make her granddaughter Catherine happy. He has something the rest didn't have. This isn't just a drifter. He looks educated, too."

"And when she's happy, the town's happy. Make the call and let fate handle it. The guy may like what we have in mind for him."

The town would be happy because most of its inhabitants were dependent in one way or another on the economic accomplishments of *that* family. Most of the land was theirs and always had been since they bought or stole it from its original owners. A happy boss won't make a happy employee, but an unhappy boss will make an unhappy one.

The waitress filled his cup with steaming hot coffee and put the eggs and toast in front of him. He didn't let it get cold. He was in a bit of a hurry. He had to take the bus. If he missed that one, he had one more he could take, but that was the last one that day that would head the way he wanted to go. That meant that he only had half an hour to fill his stomach.

Zack looked at the clock while he put the last piece of bread in his mouth and washed it down with his last bit of coffee. Before someone could stop him, he had paid the bill and walked out.

All the while, he was being watched by the waitress and the cook. Something he wasn't aware of. He would have seen the relief on their face when a

well-known car passed the approaching bus. The car pulled up as closely possible to the bus when it came to a stop. Zack was just about to board the bus when someone grabbed him and held him back.

“Sorry young man, but you have some questions to answer.”

A man that according his uniform and badge, was the sheriff, gave the driver a signal to move on and so he did. Zack was scared and worried, about the sheriff and about getting the next bus on time.

“Let’s go to the diner.”

Someone else would have made a big fuss, but Zack was as always, compliant. But that didn’t mean that he didn’t have any questions. Normally, he wouldn’t be that bold. Challenging authorities wasn’t his habit.

“Am I under arrest? Have I done something wrong?”

He was intelligent enough to know that this wasn’t normal procedure. There was no reason for an arrest. And if there was, the sheriff wouldn’t be so friendly. So why did it have to happen at such a critical moment? It just wasn’t his lucky day.

“Don’t worry. I just must check your identity so I can rule you out as a suspect. We don’t have enough information to do that yet.”

Zack was surprised that he even could be a suspect. He just had set foot in this town.

The sheriff waved to the waitress.

“Donna, coffee please, and something for this young man, too. He looks like he can use something

strong, so make it a black coffee. You know how I like mine, lots of milk.”

He got a black coffee without asking and all he wanted was to take the bus. He could take the next one but he wasn't happy about it. And his unhappiness only got worse when he heard the questions.

The sheriff asked him the stupidest questions one could imagine. The questions themselves weren't stupid, the fact that he needed the answer them, however, was.

Why would he want to know if Zack had family, children, and all kinds of other personal information? After an hour, the sheriff knew almost everything about him.

Strange, inappropriate things, like if he preferred women or men. It wasn't something one should know but he said it anyway. He didn't want people to think the wrong way about him, even if we were talking about people he would never see again.

“Women, of course! I'm not gay. Why, do you shoot gay people in this part of the country? Then I'm glad I won't be here much longer.”

Zack was surprised at his own outburst - its intensity. It was indeed very important for him that nobody even imagined the wrong thing about him and his gender identity. Maybe because a lot of people already had assumed things when they met him.

“So, you're planning to leave us quickly? No need for that. It's a nice little town. The next one is a few hours away. Enjoy your stay a while longer. For now, I know everything this town needs to know.”

“I just need to know one thing, when the next bus leaves,” Zack replied. He had just gone to make use of

the sanitary facilities... when he sat down again, the sheriff was gone. He probably had nothing to ask anymore. Funny, now that he had missed the bus, he had more than time enough to answer them. The only thing he could do was wait. His disappointment was visible on his face.

“You don’t look very pleased, young man,” Donna said. “Has our sheriff been too hasty again? He always likes to talk with newcomers. It keeps him busy in this peaceful town.”

The cook smiled. He had seen this same situation more than once before. He also knew what would be coming next, so he knew what to say.

“Well nothing to do about it. He’s just doing his job. For as far as we know, you can be wanted for bank robbery.”

“I’m sure he does, but this looks me the wrong way. He only asked me questions that were meaningless if I had been a bank robber.”

“It may look like that, but the sheriff has his reasons. Why don’t you stay a few days in town? The motel near the station has cheap rooms.”

“No thanks. That’s the last thing that I want to do. Stay here for longer than I need to. I’ll sleep in the next town.”

Now it was Donna’s face to show disappointment. Something he didn’t get at that point. Why would he? There was no reason to think that she had any interest in his travel plans. He just furrowed his eyebrows when she left him behind without saying a word.

Seeing her making a phone call would have made him perhaps a little suspicious, but he didn’t see that. He had left to ask when the next bus would ar-

rive. He came back after that. There was no other place to go if he didn't want to wait at the station and Donna had told him that he could wait there. From that moment on she never left his side. Not even to attend to other customers.

That job was taken over by the cook, but Zack didn't care or notice. His mind was occupied with home - maybe this trip was the wrong idea? It looked that way. He considered his confrontation with the sheriff as a bad omen.

His soul-searching had started out on the wrong foot and his desire to continue was at its lowest. He thought that maybe was better to just go home... He could wait until the next town to decide, but he didn't. A train heading home was much earlier than the bus and he would be on it. He wasn't planning to push his luck and therefore would take up his normal life a little bit sooner than expected.

His mind made up, he stood up while emptying his cup of coffee. Donna tried to slow him down as much as possible, but he was determined. Filling his cup again did nothing. He said his thanks and walked outside. Just in time to see an old Bentley pulling up at the diner. He did stop to admire the car and discovered that the driver was an old man. Well, "old" to Zack. Being in his early fifties wasn't old, it just surprised Zack that the man was in a uniform. Here in this place a uniformed driver?

Zack kept on admiring the car. He walked slowly around it, wishing that he once would have the money to ride with such a car. At the moment, he would be satisfied with only sitting in it.

If he had heard what was said in the diner, he wouldn't have wasted his time. He would have walked home on foot. No, that is not true. He would have run.

“I’m sorry, Bill, you just missed him. I tried to keep him busy, but he stopped listening to me. He seemed to have made his mind up. He’s going back home. I think this one is no longer a possible candidate.”

The person Donna was talking to was the old man. He was listening with one ear. His mind was busy with the vision of Zack in the mirror behind Donna. There he had a clear image of him.

“Don’t worry, Donna. I know that you have done your best. Besides, I think that you have picked a winner. This one looks like he fits the bill. So, I’m not willing to let him go that easily. I already know how to do it. Get me the sheriff on the line. He can still save the day and my butt.”

Zack’s train was slowly pulling into the station. He couldn’t wait until the doors would open and he finally could leave this place. They would never see him this far south again. At least that’s what he thought.

The moment his foot was on the train, a hand grabbed his collar and pulled him back. The voice that came with the hand wasn’t unknown to him.

“Sorry young man, but you have some more questions to answer.”

Zack sighed deeply. Would he ever get home? What was it this time? He only spent time in the diner and the bus station. Not exactly the places to commit a crime. But he apparently had done something wrong. The sheriff would obviously tell him what it was. That he was sure of.

He was taken back to the sheriff’s office, where he to his surprise was locked behind bars. He started to panic. Was he under arrest?

“Sheriff, what’s going on? I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Tell that to Bill. He says that you have damaged Miss Tennyson’s car. That isn’t something we take lightly in this town.”

“Damage? A car? And who is Miss Tennyson? I never have heard of her and I surely don’t know which car is hers. So why would I damage it and I didn’t. I only walked from the diner to here and never touched anything and certainly not a car. I absolutely didn’t damage one. “

“That’s not what Bill says and there are plenty of witnesses that tell the same story as him. You made a dent in Miss Tennyson’s Bentley.”

“Wait a minute! A Bentley, you mean that dark red monster outside the diner. I didn’t even make a scratch. I just looked at it.”

“Not according to Bill. He found a big dent in his door and you were the only one who could have done it. Everybody in the diner confirms it. You were the last one there.”

“But, but? No, I never. I didn’t touch the bloody car, I’m innocent. This Bill is mistaken. Someone else must have done it.”

This time he was beyond panic, it was despair. He was innocent, but he couldn’t prove it. Normally it should be the other way around, but he was a stranger in a little town. Who would take his side? His word meant nothing and there were witnesses. Why would they lie? But they were.

“If Bill says that someone made a dent in his car then someone did and when he and other witnesses say that this someone was you, then it’s you. You’re

going to jail little man. We don't appreciate vandalism in this town and certainly not by strangers. And the judge won't either."

Zack was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Jail, judge, he didn't know what to think anymore. It couldn't be that he had to go to jail for a dent in a car. He had to call his parents. They could get him a lawyer.

"A phone call, I want to make a phone call because I seem to need a lawyer. He will sort this madness out."

"Not today. You aren't officially arrested yet. No phone call until Bill and the witnesses are here. Until then you better take a rest."

Zack laid himself down and before he knew it he was sleeping. The coffee must have been decaf for him to be so sound asleep. More than a few hours later he was awakened by the sheriff. He carried a tray with food. Instead of bringing it into the cell, he just opened the door and left it open. There was a small table outside.

"Wake up sleepyhead. We have a verdict. Well not really, but it's clear that you are guilty. Luckily for you is that Bill isn't mad. He understands that it might have been an accident. So as long as you pay for it you can leave after you have finished this meal. He won't press charges. Like I said, you're a lucky guy. I wouldn't have been so lenient."

"What charges? I'm innocent. My lawyer will prove that."

"You can do that, but then you only fool yourself. Bill won't be so forgiving and the judge won't either. Every witness says that you are guilty. You can keep on telling us that you are innocent for the rest of your

life, but you won't escape a sentence and this judge is a hard one. He will give you the maximum punishment he can. If I was you, I would just pay and be done with it. It won't even get on your record. Just pay three grand for its repair and were done. Ooh and Bill only takes cash."

"Three grand and in cash? Where would I get so much money and that only for a dent? This is madness. I think I want my lawyer. At least he will be cheaper. He will know what to do, won't he?"

"I don't think so. Even your lawyer can't save you. There are too many witnesses to your crime. Take this deal or go to jail and do hard time. They will love a newbie like you there."

The sheriff wasn't wrong. He could get a lawyer, but that wouldn't make him innocent even when he was. If all those people were convinced that he was guilty, he would be a sitting duck. The judge only had to give him the finishing blow. But three grand, where would he get it?

"Can I call my parents? Maybe they can give me the money?"

"No, this is a one-time opportunity. Pay now and in cash and all is forgiven. And if you don't have it, we already have a solution."

Was this a scam? It sounded like it, but then the whole town had to be in it, impossible. And what was this solution the sheriff talked about? Zack said nothing. He only stared at the sheriff who wouldn't stop.

"And before you ask, it's a simple solution. You work for it."

“Work for it? It will take me weeks, months to do that.”

“Three to be exact. Bill agreed that three months of working at Misses Tennyson’s place would be just enough to pay for the damage. I know, it is cheap labor, but you are a prisoner.”

“Three months? That’s crazy. I can’t wait three months in this godforsaken place. What will I be doing there anyway?”

“Everything, everything they want you to do. You’ll be working from morning till evening. Sunday is a day off, but for the rest you are at Misses Tennyson’s disposal. Just keep her happy for three months and you’re free to go. So, what will it be? You have five minutes to think it over. We have wasted more than enough time on you.”

Zack was stunned. If this was justice then there was something very wrong. But could he take the risk or spend three months working for some lady or spend months in jail? It wasn’t really a choice.

“Ok, I’ll do it if it gets me off the hook. So, when does this crazy job start? When will I get out of here?”

Before the sheriff could answer someone came in and that someone happened to be Bill. He couldn’t have timed it better. It helped of course that he was waiting in the sheriff’s office while hearing everything.

“Well, what’s the answer? Do I have to wait until he finishes his meal or shall I file a complaint? My friend the judge will be glad.”

If Zack already hadn’t been sure to work for it, he would have been then. Bill’s words had made very clear that he had no other choice. Bill and the sheriff

had trouble hiding their smiles behind a straight face. But once Zack was seated at the front of the Bentley the sheriff's face lightened up. Things appeared to be as they should. If they were lucky this one would turn out the way they wanted and the way Miss Tennyson wanted. Hopefully her grandmother Misses Tennyson would get him into the right shape. That or scare him away like the rest.

Zack was sitting in the Bentley, but he wasn't enjoying the ride. He even had forgotten to look at the damage. Not that they would have given him the chance. There was nothing to see and it would have sunk their plan. Luckily for them his mind was busy with every scenario possible for what could await him. Even so, he still got surprised. The old wooden house wasn't what he had expected, nor was its inhabitant.

"Zack, this is Misses Tennyson, your boss. She says jump and you ask how high. If you make trouble for her, I'll make trouble for you. Got that? If I must come back to straighten you out, it will cost you."

Zack didn't answer. He still was mesmerized by Misses Tennyson. What he saw was an old lady and this time old was old. Misses Tennyson's age was seventy-five. She was dressed in black in a dress that wasn't of this century, not even the previous one. Her grey hair was rolled up in a bun. Zack found that it gave her a soft appearance, until he saw her eyes. Her voice made it only worse. She had to be as hard as nails.

"Oh, and something very important! You can't go outside at night and during the day you must stay in sight when you move around the house. If you break this rule you will be considered as a fugitive."

"So, Bill, is this the scoundrel that ruined my car? The car I gave to my granddaughter for her twenty



first birthday seven years ago. The car that's in our family for decades and hopefully will be for many more. At least when vandals like this young fool doesn't ruin things for us. I still think that three months isn't enough for such a crime. So, I'll make sure that these months will count. He will regret to ever have laid hands on it."

"He is, mother. Now excuse me, Catherine expects me home."

"Of course, dear. You can't let your own daughter wait for her lazy father, can you? That's not how I raised you."

"No, you didn't, mother. I'll be back tomorrow to drive you to town for your weekly visit to the hairdresser."

"Of course you will, and if you are a minute late like last week you know what will happen, dear. As a mother, I have to be firm. I still think that your late wife was much too forgiving of you."

"Yes, mother. I won't be late. And Ellen was as firm as you. That's why you chose her to marry me and she never was anything less."

"I know, dear, I'm just teasing you."

Bill knew that his mother never teased. That meant that she had a soft spot and that was impossible. He had pity for this young man. His mother would make these three months hell on earth, but it was necessary. He wanted to see his daughter happy and that meant making sacrifices - and sacrificing this young man was part of that. He hoped that his mother would succeed this time. He couldn't bear to see his daughter this unhappy. The Tennyson women needed a special kind of man and his daugh-

ter needed one that was even more special than usual.

He left Zack where he stood and the young man didn't move an inch. He didn't dare. He was afraid of Misses Tennyson reaction if he would. The old lady walked around him and checked him out as if he was cattle.

“Umm, I think that you'll do. Yes, yes, you will do fine.”

“Excuse me? I'll do what? What is happening?”

“No, you're not excused and listen carefully. I will only say this once so you better get it into that thick skull of yours. You are not here to speak to me, only to listen and answer if necessary. If you have a complaint or some stupid question, you'll ask it to Lisa. And if you don't, you'll learn not to make that mistake again. Ooh yeah and if you have to address me, you'll call me Misses Tennyson. Everyone in this house does. That means that the only words I want to hear from you are yes Misses Tennyson. Whatever you say Misses Tennyson. Got that?”

Zack had a question, but one he didn't dare to ask it. If Misses Tennyson was that demanding being her usual self, he didn't want to know what she was like when angry. He just wanted to know who Lisa was. A normal question and an obvious one, even Misses Tennyson knew.

“Lisa, you can come in now. You and Brenda have your instructions. So I don't want to see his face.”

A woman came in. She had to be almost forty and she was dressed as a maid from around 1900. Only the skirt length wasn't old-style. The dress came down to her knees. The dress had a black high collar

dress with a lace apron stitched on it, a white cap and nothing about all of it was plain.

“Move you fool and follow me or you’ll soon regret it.”

Was she exaggerating or was it the truth? He didn’t want to find out so he followed. She led him upstairs, to the highest room of the house. It was small and cut in half by the sloping roof. Just enough place for a single bed, a closet and a wash table.

“Isn’t there indoor plumbing here?”

“There is, but not this high up. Misses Tennyson doesn’t want to spend money on unnecessary things or things that aren’t permanent, like you. A floor lower there is a bathroom. You can use it to shower, but always knock before you enter. It’s mine and Brenda’s. If you ever walk in without knocking we will tie you naked to a tree and cover you in honey. The ants will love such a tasty dish and that will be nothing when Misses Tennyson hears about it. She’ll skin you first and then the tree.”

There was a coverall on the bed. He didn’t have to guess who it was for.

They didn’t give him time to recover from his introduction. He was put to work as soon as he came down. The house was old and there was a lot to do. His reward was diner, but after half an hour he was put back to work. They made him clear that he was there to pay for his crime, with hard work. That would teach him a lesson while providing Misses Tennyson the reimbursement she was entitled to. He was glad that he finally was allowed to go to sleep, but not without a surprise... one he found on his bed.

It was a cotton nightdress. He screamed in more than one way, loud enough to wake half the county.