



## THE MINOTAUR

By

Eric Ian Steele

Tyler smiled. It was his now, and that suited him fine. In fact, it suited him right down to the ground. All the way, with no stops. He roared with laughter as Drew glared at him across the Demon's cabin. Beneath them, gears groaned and air brakes screamed in a cacophony of compressed air. Before the windshield, the road sped away like a dark uncertainty. From up here in the cab they had a good view over the highway, which disguised the fact that they were already doing seventy. Tyler pressed his foot down further on the pedal. They hit a pothole, and the wheel struggled to yank itself out of his hands. He laughed again as Drew crushed himself into his seat.

“Jesus, Ty, slow down!”

There was a jerk as Tyler flipped gears. Then the road continued to flash past, the white lines down the centre of the highway becoming one murderous streak. Reflective chevrons indicated a sharp turn in the canyon road up ahead.

“There's a bend coming'.”

“Reckon this is how he got it?” Tyler said. In the green neon of the dashboard Tyler's grinning face resembled a Halloween skull mask.

Drew forced himself to breathe out.

“Those are sheer drops on either side. You miss a curve, you go all the way down. Probably explode.”

“Slow down, man. I’m serious! This is a bad road.”

“Ain’t it just?” Tyler said.

Trees waved them on like lost souls. The bend neared. With a little acceleration, Drew hoped, their momentum would carry them around it. But if they slowed at all now, he knew the tires would lose their grip on the road. They would lose traction and skid. Then there would be no way they could avoid the barrier.

A choking rattle sounded beneath their feet. Something metallic slipped under the hood and clanged. It spun like a whirling flail. The Demon belched grey fumes.

“Shit!” Tyler said, banging the wheel “Damnit, don’t do this to me!”

The breathless juggernaut grinded down several gears and slowed to thirty - a virtual crawl compared to its earlier speed.

“Christ man, what you doin’?” Drew asked. He braced for impact. They were headed straight for the chevrons.

Tyler steered the truck onto the wrong side of the road, taking a huge gamble nothing was coming in the opposite direction. Fortunately, the highway was empty. With a torturous whine the truck slewed onto a patch of rough ground on the inner bank, away from the calamitous drop. It buried itself in gravel.

Drew leaped out of the cab, saw fumes billowing from the hood, wiped his forehead and gave the truck a heavy kick.

Tyler jumped down. Drew barrelled into him. He pinned Tyler up against the truck by his lapels. As if in sympathy, the beast shot out a last gasp from its air brakes.

“Are you nuts?” he yelled. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Is that all you can say?” Am I nuts”? You couldn’t think of anything better?” Tyler

laughed - an unnerving, high-pitched sound. He pried his friend's fingers from his collar.

"Reckon you must've pissed your pants back there. "

"Almost."

"Well, you're right about one thing, I am nuts. Totally certifiable. But that still doesn't explain why the damn thing's not working right. After all we did. Sounded like a compression valve blew."

Tyler opened the bonnet. It popped up just like a coffin lid. A cloud of hot steam belched from the truck's innards. He peered deep inside, shaking his head with a grave expression. "Still sick, baby. Gonna have to call Uncle Ray"

"What the hell's wrong with you?" Drew felt anger work its way out of his lungs to be replaced by freezing night air.

"She's got to go the distance, man," Tyler replied. "She has to handle curves like that if we're going to win."

"You scared me shitless! Kill yourself if you want to while you're trying to prove you're just as good as your dad was. Don't take me with you, asshole!"

"Hey. Look, I'm sorry I scared you. But look...isn't she a beauty? Look at her."

He did look. The huge eighteen-wheeler lay crouched like a tiger, ready to spring. Brimstone flames fanned the length of its green painted bodywork, forming the word 'THE DEMON'. The paintjob was good, Drew thought, even if he did say so himself. Yet you could still see some of the original scratches in the bodywork.

"Sorry for the crack about your old man," Drew said

"S'alright. No biggie."

But it had been a biggie, the night old man Tyler had died. Rig racing was not just a sport to him, it was in his blood. Beating his wife and son had been in his blood as well. He had almost killed Tyler's mother one night with the flat end of a meat cleaver. But she

continued to live with him of her own volition. Drew could never understand why. Some people just need other people. But it had been Tyler who suffered the most.

Their final salvation had come in the Sebring rig racing championship two years ago. Because Tyler's dad had lost the big race in a fiery spectacle as his rig, The Minotaur, collided with another truck and careened into the crowd. In a finishing stroke that would have made him proud Old Man Tyler had taken twelve more souls with him into the grave that night before his truck crashed through the barrier and exploded in a ball of purifying flame. No more Old Man Tyler. No more truck.

But that wasn't strictly true.

Nobody could have guessed Tyler's son would uphold the family tradition by resurrecting his old man's rig. He refused to let them take it to the scrapyard. There was just enough left of the chassis and engine to reconstruct the eighteen-wheeled behemoth. Now, five years later, with a new name, new paint, and new driver, it was back on the road.

"Don't worry, baby." Tyler stroked the door with all the intensity of a teenage hotrodder. "Bet you didn't know uncle Ray could fix you up again just like new. Wish I could see the old man's face, cursing us all the way from Hell."

"You're warped, Tyler. It's just a machine."

"Shit," Tyler said with a split grin. "You think just a machine could live through anything like that and not be different? It's more than just spare parts welded onto a frame, it's - I don't know what it is. Alive, maybe."

Drew considered the truck. He didn't like semis in general. Loud, noisy things that stopped him getting to work on time. But this particular truck made him more than uneasy. The headlights didn't just shine. They glared. The radiator was upturned in a mocking, toothy grin. And the flaming decor reminded him just a little too much of its hellfire past. The name Tyler had chosen was just right.

“I’ll tell Marsha you’re in love with a truck. Maybe then she’ll get rid of you and see who’s the better side of this partnership,” he said.

“She’d probably like that.” Tyler said. “Well, we better call Ray.”

Tyler flipped open his cell phone. “Shit. No power. Wouldn’t you know it? Well, I think I saw a gas station up the road. Best get walking.”

“You’re damn truck’s going to give us both hypothermia.”

The air brakes let out a noisy hiss, making Drew jump.

“I told you not to upset her,” Tyler said.

\* \* \*

“I asked if we were still going over to see Jane and Howard tonight. You remember? My friends? Real people? Flesh and blood?”

Marsha lectured him with her hands on her hips, standing in the middle of the cold garage, surrounded by spare bits of cars and motorcycles, old tires, dismantled headlights and decapitated handlebars.

Tyler was busy welding something together that looked like a smokestack off the back of his racing rig. He yelled over the sparks and noise: “Depends how long it takes to get her ready. You know the big day’s coming up soon. She’s got to be perfect.”

“Well, don’t put yourself out on my account.” Her voice grew cooler. “I know how much it means to you.”

Tyler smoothed the patch he’d welded with his gloved hand then carried on welding.

Marsha slammed the door and decided to get ready anyway, although she couldn’t enjoy the evening anymore. Her mood was too sulky. Tyler was working like a robot these days. She knew he’d invested a hell of a lot of time in the garage that belonged to him and

Drew since Tyler's dad had died. But Drew was at home now while Tyler was still labouring over his damned truck.

She went to her bedroom and sighed as she held up her latest outfit in front of the mirror. Totally wasted on him. She had always feared something would come between them. She just hadn't expected it to be a lump of metal.

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*(Extract from the Sebring Reporter, August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019)*

### ***FREAK ACCIDENT KILLS MECHANIC***

*Mechanic, Ray Norton (43) was killed in an unfortunate accident while working on restoring a semi-trailer racing rig. Mr. Norton was crushed under the five-ton weight as he was working beneath the vehicle in his auto garage on Dale Barn Lane. The incident was reported by his friend, Terence Drew (34) who made the grisly discovery. Mr. Norton worked alone. Police are treating the death as an accident.*

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“So how did it go?” Tyler asked Marsha and Drew, who sat around the table, consuming the last of Marsha's beef casserole.

Drew wiped his mouth. If Tyler shaped up, he could still have himself a wife who was a damn good cook. Marsha wasn't anything special to look at; grey-brown roots showed

through her dyed blonde hair, and she was getting a little mousy-looking these days. She was no longer the high school cheerleader Tyler had married, that was for sure. But being able to cook could make up for a hell of a lot. And in the dim light she still looked like she was in her twenties.

“I had to answer a couple of questions, then they let me go,” Tyler said.

Drew thought back to the accident. He didn't tell them how he had found Ray lying under one of the truck's huge wheels, stomach slit open to reveal fresh, pink intestines, or how the pressure on his abdomen had lifted his skull right off his neck. He'd reversed the truck off the body in his panic. The wheels had made a sound like boots being pulled out of mud. Then he had gotten out of the cab to inspect Ray's remains, only to hear the awful, deafening sound of the truck's horn filling the empty garage. For a moment he thought it was going to accelerate towards him. Then the horn had died, and he was left staring at that malevolent radiator grill.

“You know that place was a mess,” Tyler said in a husky voice. “No wonder it happened. Ray always was sloppy.”

Marsha flung the pot towel at Tyler.

“You asshole. Ray was a nice guy.”

“Yeah, you know what they say about nice guys.” He turned to Drew. “So what did he look like when you found him? Give you nightmares?”

Tyler's eyes glimmered with cold light. He had been drinking since they had sat down, two hours ago. Drew stood. “I think I'd better be going.”

“Hey, I was just kidding,” Tyler replied.

It's not you,” Drew said, lying. “I guess I'm just more tired than I thought. Thanks for the pot roast, Marsha.”

“No problem. You need anything, you just call.”

She gave him a smile on his way out. He remembered that smile. He had seen her give it to a lot of the boys in high school.

\* \* \*

Once Drew was gone Marsha turned to Tyler. “What is the matter with you?”

“What’s the matter with you two? You and Drewy-boy. I’ve seen the way you look at him. Maybe I should spend more time alone with the truck. Give you more time to get to know each other.”

She gasped, exasperated. She thought he was stupid. But he would show her. As she leaned over to clear the tableware, he grabbed her wrist, forcing her to drop a porcelain plate. It smashed into two pieces on the linoleum floor. His fingers dug into her wrist hard enough to leave bruises. He knew they would.

“I’m serious,” he said. “I can tell when you’re keeping a secret. You two been going at it like jackrabbits behind my back?”

She yanked her wrist back and slapped him hard across the cheek.

He recoiled, shocked. She had never hit him before. What was he doing? This was Marsha, his girlfriend. The woman he loved. It had been the booze, that was all. He began to apologize. But there was another, more seductive voice in his head, one that urged him not to quit. *Just this once, stand up and show her how tough you are. Women respect a strong man, the kind that tells them what to do.*

He was uncertain what to do, so he stormed upstairs away from her.

\* \* \*

Marsha stood alone for a moment in the dining room. She heard their bedroom door slam and bent down to gather up the plate. As she put the two halves together, tears flooded her vision. A sob escaped her lungs. She went to the kitchen and threw the broken pieces in the garbage.

When Marsha went to bed at midnight, Tyler was already asleep. But about two in the morning, something woke her. A loud noise. She thought it had been a deep bellow on a horn, but there was only silence now.

She turned to Tyler. The bed beside her lay empty.

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*(Extract from the Sebring Reporter, August 11<sup>th</sup> 2019)*

### **SEARCH FOR HIT AND RUN DRIVER**

*Two fatal, fail-to-stop accidents occurred within four hours of each other in the quiet suburb of Dalesville, last night. John Hardwick (54), owner of the Angel Tavern, was run over as he left his premises in the early hours of the morning. He died at the scene. Shortly before 6 a.m., mail boy Sam Evans (14) was knocked from his bicycle while making his deliveries and died in hospital from his injuries. His mother has described him as a "Happy and fun-loving boy".*

*Police have stated they found red paint traces on the boy's bicycle and urge anyone with any information to call them on the following number...*

\* \* \*

Tyler was having a bad dream.

He was sitting behind the wheel of the Demon. He turned his head to the figure beside him. It was his father, Randy Crane. Randy was fresh from a racing rig defeat, by the looks of it. The left side of his face was burned away, revealing one set of his molars. His skin bubbled like roast pork. Several tiny black hairs still fizzled on his scalp. “Howdy, son,” the old man’s voice rasped.

Then he too felt the blistering heat. The air beyond the windshield quivered in a heat haze. Green paint flaked from the Demon’s hood as though somebody was applying an invisible blow torch to the paintwork, revealing a raw red underbelly. Two sharp buffalo horns rose up from the fender, splitting the road before them into three.

“Knew you’d carry on the family tradition,” Randy said. His scorched face leered at his son. “See what I mean?”

He reached across Tyler with one roasted stump of an arm, and with the few fingers he still possessed flipped down the sun visor above Tyler’s face. There lay a small mirror. Randy’s good luck token – The Ace of Spades - was still firmly fixed in place.

His father’s charred face stared back at him in the mirror. Melted skin, lidless eyes glaring, lipless grin frozen in a ghoulish rictus.

Tyler awoke with a scream.

Marsha woke beside him. “You okay?”

Morning light filtered through the window blinds. He sagged back on his pillow and murmured that he was fine. He staggered to the bathroom and checked his reflection in the medicine cabinet. It was normal. He stifled a laugh.

\* \* \*

Drew headed into work that morning as usual. He wasn't surprised to find that Tyler wasn't there. Nor was The Demon. He was a little relieved about that. Something about the rig bothered him. Instead of feeling cold to the touch, it always felt hot, like the flames on its side were alive.

He was being stupid, he knew. But these days something about Tyler and his truck just felt plain wrong. He had even considered suggesting a psychiatrist to his friend, but of course Tyler wouldn't have stood for that.

He wandered to the rear of the garage, into the little office, and put on a pot of coffee. Now where was the damn sugar? He yanked open a battered desk drawer, one he hadn't looked in for months, maybe years. Inside, he saw a collection of old family photographs. Ray, friend to Tyler's father, peered out of many of them, grinning. And there was the old man himself, along with Tyler and Drew. And here was a vacation snap of Tyler and Marsha.

He froze.

Leafing back through the photographs, he saw more instances now. His stomach churned and he no longer craved coffee. He pulled out the photos and examined them in the light. But there was no mistake. On at least one photograph each of their faces had been scratched out with the sharp end of a pair of scissors or a knife or something. Ray, Marsha, and Drew had all been defaced. So had Tyler. The only face that wasn't damaged, that still stared out unblemished with that handsome, devilish smile, was Tyler's dad.

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It was night. Tyler had been working Marsha opened her eyes. Tyler was leering over her with a lopsided grin. She gasped, startled. He clamped a sweaty hand on her mouth.

“Ssssh.” He grinned from ear to ear. “I have something to show you.”

She removed his hand. “What is it?”

“Truck’s finished.”

“Tyler.” She checked the alarm clock. “It’s six o’clock in the morning.”

“I know. Come on. Take a look. It’s finally finished, baby. We can be together again. It’s done.”

He seemed sincere. Hope blossomed in her chest. Could this have been the reason behind all his strange behaviour? Maybe he was just exorcising all those old demons, the ghost of his father, his sudden death. Maybe now he could be just plain old Tyler again. She hoped that was true. She had hated his father. There had been something twisted about the old man. Tyler had hated him too, even though he had been afraid of him. After all, he had put Tyler’s mother in a mental asylum with all that talk about blood sacrifices on the tractor’s hood before he won a race. In the end, it was ironic that his own vehicle had killed him.

“You got to come, baby,” he said, pleading. “I got to let it out. Let me take you for one last spin, then it’s truly finished.”

“I need to change,” she said. She hoped beyond hope that this might be the start of sanity in their relationship.

He grinned. “You’re fine as you are.”

“What?”

But he tugged on her with such insistence she decided it was better to end this now rather than wait any longer. Ray’s obsession was more than just unhealthy, it was frightening. Thank God he could finally get it out of his system, even if that meant doing something crazy herself. She grabbed her nightgown and let him lead her outside.

The Demon seemed unchanged, although he assured her he'd made a lot of adjustments under the hood. He helped her inside the cab, slamming the door. The engine throbbed, pulsating through the chassis. It was like being in the mouth of a dragon. Tyler jumped in beside her. He shimmed the lever. She had always hated the noisy, grating way it jarred into gear. Then the truck roared off into the night.

Tyler said nothing. He only spoke to the truck, coaxing it, as though it was his lover, not her. When they finally reached a deserted gas station he reached across.

"I guess this is far enough."

She thought he was going to kiss her. Instead, he held her arm like a vice. His grin was all wrong. It reminded her of...

"Remember me, Marsha?" Tyler said in a husky voice.

"What is this? Another practical joke?" she said. Had working too long on this damn truck finally snapped his mind? "Let me go."

"I'm hurt. Don't tell me you forgot about me already?" he said, and flipped down the sun visor. She stared at the cracked, little mirror there. Two hateful, old eyes glared back at her, surrounded by crab flesh. Her stomach leaped.

"Well I didn't forget you, darlin'," he said. "You took away my son, my only heir. But I got him back. Now it's just the two of us."

Tyler licked his lips. For a moment he was before her, Randy Crane, in the flesh. Skin blistered, features running like molten wax, as he disappeared in the fiery wreckage of his own vehicle.

She screamed, tried to pull away, but he held her tightly. He hauled her out of the cab. She saw with mounting terror that Tyler's skin had become red, almost sunburned. She could smell roast pork.

He dragged her over to the bonnet. Only as he ripped aside her robe did she guess his

intent. Then she screamed some more.

Clack!

Tyler's eyes rolled back in his head as something descended upon his skull. He slumped to the ground.

Drew was standing behind them. He gazed at Marsha. For a moment couldn't take his eyes away from the sight of her, half-naked. She caught his gaze, hastily pulled her robe together. A pool of blood spread out the base of Tyler's neck.

"I saw the newspaper reports about the truck," Drew said, seeing her confusion. "Then I found something else. He thinks he's his old man. I waited for him. When he got into the rig I wanted to see where he was going, so I hid. It scared me half to death," he added. "I heard things I don't ever want to hear again."

She knew exactly what he meant. She reached out for him, and they embraced. He felt her soft body beneath her robe. Her curled hair brushed his face. Ten years' of longing welled up in him.

"My God," she said, "the truck..."

\* \* \*

He followed her gaze. Her eyes were as wide as an owl's.

Tyler's blood had splattered across the green paint of the hood. Now those red blobs spread out, joining together, forming a red pool that widened across the metal, dissolving the green paint beneath it.

The yellow flames that scrawled "The Demon" across its length were smothered by a burgeoning tide of crimson. The hood bubbled like liquid. An acrid smell of burning rubber filled the air. Suddenly white flames cascaded down the side of the wagon, writing a new

name. He knew what it would be even before it was completed. Two prongs erupted from the molten metal of the hood, like something being born. The monstrous horns curved wickedly outwards from the fender.

“Drew!” Marsha shrieked, dragging him back.

But he could only gaze at the words that had clearly formed along its length now, burning a new name.

The Minotaur screeched, roared, strained at its brakes. The cab shuddered. Pistons thrummed inside its metal shell.

“Run!” Marsha screamed.

The tractor spit fountains of boiling blood out of its smokestacks. Sulphur stung his nostrils. A hand descended upon Marsha’s shoulder. It was Tyler. He dragged her back toward the truck.

“Marsha!” he yelled, doubling back. But by then she was already sealed in the cab. The door locks came down of their own accord. She scrabbled at them to no avail. Tyler was sitting in the driver’s side. His skin was shedding itself in crackling flakes.

“I made a deal with the man downstairs,” the thing that had been Tyler said. Part of its jaw, hung down, exposed. “He’s gonna let me go if I bring him some fresh meat. I’m gonna show you how it happened to me. Don’t worry, it only hurts for a minute.”

He shimmied the gear stick.

Drew watched as the seat belt leaped across Marsha’s chest. It slotted into its metal fastener, pressing her against her seat. The inside of the cab was smoldering. Marsha hammered against the glass but recoiled with pain. The temperature in must have been excruciating. The dials on the dashboard were melting. The windshield bubbled.

The whole monstrosity came roaring toward him.

Drew sprinted. But the truck was gaining. Yellow headlights picked up his heels. He

felt the truck nudge him from behind. He staggered, almost fell, but somehow kept running.

A smile twisted on the remains of Tyler's features, and he floored the accelerator down hard.

\* \* \*

Marsha watched the ghoul beside her, fascinated. Then self-preservation kicked in. She tried the door the recoiled. The windows were too hot to touch. The air scorched her lungs. She couldn't breathe. She had to get out!

She reached across and clawed his face with her nails, but it was pointless; there was hardly any flesh left on the bones. He didn't seem to bother that she was gouging at his skin.

"Marsha?" Tyler said. When he turned to look at her Randy Crane's face was gone. He had suppressed the old man somehow, for a moment.

"Tyler?"

He reached across, unfastened the seatbelt and opened the door. The truck still speeded down the road. Hot tears stung her cheeks.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Jump,"

She nodded and threw herself from the vehicle.

She contacted the ground heavily, scraping the flesh from her elbows. Her shoulder whacked the concrete. White spots danced in front of her eyes before a black curtain fell without so much as an applause.

\* \* \*

Drew glared over his shoulder, braced for the impact, as the truck hurtled onward. Suddenly it swerved, back toward the gas station.

The truck's horn sounded loudly. The last he saw, a split-second before the impact, was Tyler sitting in the passenger seat, beside his Old Man. He looked resigned. Then the rig collided with the gas pumps.

The world flared orange. A huge ball of flame exploded outwards from the gas station. The shock flung him to the ground. Heat passed over him in a wave like the Martians' death ray from War of the Worlds, singeing his hair.

Drew glanced up, and saw Marsha lying a few yards away, face down. He staggered over and flung himself on top of her as burning debris rained down.

Something creaked within the inferno.

He squinted into the blaze. In the flames, he thought she could see a whirlpool of fire. The Minotaur drove straight into the blazing vortex. It grew more distant, like a mirage disappearing. Its horn blared into the night then faded to nothing.

Marsha sported a few nasty cuts and bruises on her face, arms, and legs. Her lip was puffy. The flesh below one eye was turning purple already.

"You all right?" he asked.

She winced, sat up, touched her shoulder and yelled. "

"Yeah, I am."

She turned back to the gas station. The white, charred skeleton of the Minotaur lay amid the flames. In the distance, sirens wailed.

"I guess it's over," Drew said. "Again."

A burning timber fell from the gas station roof. The truck's fender grinned at her, mockingly, as plumes of flame licked it. The chassis was relatively undamaged, although the wheels were gone. Soon the fire crews would be here to put out the blaze. An unsettling

thought crept into Drew's mind. The rig had been in exactly the same condition when Tyler had reclaimed it.

The Demon was not alive, never had been. It was just a heap of metal. But how then could it die? How long would it be before some other man came along and reconstructed it? Before someone else felt the emotions locked within its frame, and it reached out to them? Drew glared at the truck, wishing it to go away. Instead, it just sat there, burning. It was a Demon, borne of hate. And such things do not die easily.

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*(Extract from the Sebring Reporter's classified advertisements section, October 14<sup>th</sup> 2019)*

***SEMI-TRAILER FOR SALE***

*For sale, one eighteen-wheel semi-trailer and truck. Some signs of minor smoke damage to the trailer, but other than that she hasn't got a scratch on her. Distinctive red flame lettering along trailer. Comes with its own pair of bison horns! Sensible offers considered.*



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