

KM Rockwood

Liquor Store Holdup

The gun was heavy in my jacket pocket. A Raven Arms .25 semiautomatic. A classic Saturday night special.

I'd paid \$100 for it. That put me down to less than \$5 cash. And cash was the only way I ever saw money. I suspected I'd been ripped off, but once I decided my plan was a go, I needed it.

Somebody had been holding up convenience stores in the neighborhood in the last few weeks. He hadn't openly displayed a gun. He would keep his hand in his pocket and point toward the clerk. Maybe he had a gun, or maybe he didn't. None of the clerks wanted to find out.

How much could you get from robbing a convenience store? I figured not that much. I planned to do a liquor store. A lot more cash on hand. And, probably, a clerk who wouldn't be intimidated quite so easily. I'd have to show the gun.

Maybe I could sell it later and recoup my money. But that had its own set of problems. Suppose someone was shot with it later and it was traced back to me? Best bet was to dump it down a storm drain later tonight, when I was done with it.

The bitter wind clawed at me as I turned the corner onto Second Street. Streetlights cast a harsh glare on the wet asphalt. I pulled the watch cap down low over my eyebrows and wound the ridiculous scarf around my neck and over my mouth and chin.

My gloves weren't heavy enough to keep out the cold, but I didn't want ones that would interfere with handling the gun. And since I didn't want my fingerprints

on it, or anywhere in the liquor store, I'd worn them ever since I'd picked up the gun.

I stepped into the sheltered entry to a closed store, standing between the plate glass windows. Both to get out of the wind and to build up my courage.

This was going to be a one-time deal for me. I had just landed a decent job in a small machine shop, assembling casings for controls.. If I could make it to my first payday, we'd make out all right.

But that first payday was three weeks away. The rent was due. We didn't have any food. My car, without which I couldn't get to the job, needed a new fuel pump. Audrey, my wife, had to take off from work with a bad back. And Molly, my little girl, had bronchitis. Her medicine, which I hadn't bought yet, was outrageously expensive. The doctor wasn't happy about not being paid right away, but he'd wait. They wouldn't give me the medicine, though, if I couldn't pay for it up front.

Five hundred bucks would do it nicely. The liquor store should have that much on hand, easy.

I wasn't about to embark on a life of crime. If I could have figured out some other way to get the money, I'd have done it. But I'd been out of work for a while, and my unemployment had run out. Nobody would lend me any more money.

In some ways, I knew this was a stupid thing to try. Too risky. Mess it up, and I'd be locked up. Minimum of five years mandatory for possession of a firearm during the commission of a felony. Not to mention whatever I'd pick up for the robbery itself.

Then what would happen to Audrey and Molly?

Some of the older guys in the neighborhood, the ones who'd spent their whole lives doing nickels and dimes in the state prison, sometimes laughed about it. Sooner or later, they said, everybody gets caught. And when you do the math, dividing the amount of money into the time you end up doing, it usually works out to something

like twenty cents an hour. Then they ask for restitution. Court fees. Parole charges. Drug tests. So in the end, you don't even get that much.

And with a felony conviction, you might never find a decent job again.

But I was only going to do it the once. It wasn't very often somebody actually got picked up during a robbery. The clerks were told to cooperate. Surveillance video would record the whole thing. They'd shown pictures of the robber on TV and in the paper. I'd studied them, and I would be indistinguishable from him. Plain navy blue jacket, jeans, work boots, watch cap. And that hugely long scarf. My face was almost completely covered.

Average height, average weight, average in everything. Except in money—I had a lot less than average of that.

With any luck, they'd put it down to another in the string of holdups by the same guy.

My hand gripping the gun in my pocket, I stepped out onto the sidewalk. I planned to pull it out as soon as I entered the store so the clerk would know I meant business.

I walked past the liquor store one time, trying to see how many people were in there. The windows were covered with advertising posters. When I glanced through the glass door, all I could see were narrow aisles cluttered with bottles.

A few people could be in there, if I was not fortunate, but it couldn't be that crowded.

Taking a deep breath, I turned and went back.

It was now or never.

I opened the door and stepped inside.

When I pulled the gun out of my pocket, it seemed to have gotten much heavier, and it was hard to keep it from wobbling in my gloved hand. I glanced down at it.

All hell broke loose.

Someone back by the cash register was shouting.

This guy ran smack into me, knocking the gun out of my hand. He scrambled in an attempt to keep his balance, dropping whatever he was carrying. We fell into a big display of margarita mix, me on top. Bottles shattered.

An alarm sounded.

He shoved me off him, hard. I staggered, fell back and my head slammed into the door frame.

Everything got a little fuzzy. My head hurt and my legs refused to cooperate when I tried to stand up. I felt like I was going to vomit. The lights started to fade. I closed my eyes, just for a minute, to try to stop the room from spinning. But they stayed stubbornly shut.

When I finally got them open, I was being strapped onto a gurney on the sidewalk just outside the liquor store. It was freezing and I couldn't move.

Flashing lights stabbed the darkness. The alarm still sounded. All I could see was a paramedic cinching down the restraints on me and a big policemen hovering over me, notebook in his hand.

An old man came up and leaned over me, peering into my face. "Is he gonna be okay?"

"We won't know anything for sure until we get him to the hospital," the paramedic said.

“Man, I hope he’s all right. He saved my bacon.”

“Oh?”

“That guy—the one they arrested—he might have gotten all the night’s receipts. Would have really thrown me into a bind.”

The paramedic was still busy with the straps, but he answered. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. People think you make a fortune with a liquor store. But they don’t have any idea how expensive it is to run it. Insurance alone is sky high. And it goes up if I have a claim.”

“You don’t say.”

“The guy said he had a gun. But he never showed it. So I figured he just had his hand in his pocket, pointing his finger like that.”

“People do that sometimes.” The paramedic gave the straps one last tug.

“So I hit the alarm. But he really did have a gun.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him shake his head. “The cops found the gun on the floor. It was loaded and everything. He could have shot me.”

The paramedic moved to the end of the gurney. “You think he was the same guy been holding up all those places around here?”

“Sure do. Looks just like the pictures.”

“Well, if it is, this ought to settle the neighborhood down considerably.” The paramedic pushed the gurney with me on it toward a waiting ambulance.

“I hope so. The merchants, they got together a two-thousand-dollar reward for getting the robber. I’m gonna see that it goes to this guy.” He nodded to me. “He’s earned it.”

KM Rockwood is an author of both novels and short stories. She draws on a varied background for her stories, including laborer in a steel fabrication plant, glass melter operator in a fiberglass manufacturing facility, and inmate work crew supervisor in a large medium security state prison. She has also worked as a special education teacher in an alternative high school and a GED teacher in county detention facilities. Learn more about her at kmrockwood.com.

