

## **Easter Mayhem in Wampum**

Lenny surveyed the hordes of excited children scrambling on the grassy slope behind the Value Mart. It was a perfect Sunday. Sunshine. A robin's egg sky with puffy white clouds. Temperatures in the high 60s. Could have been warmer, but not bad for Missouri in April. "Easter Sunday Egg Hunt at Value Mart," the banners read, rippling in the breeze. It wasn't exactly a hunt, since the brightly colored eggs were scattered all over the hillside, plainly visible to the parents and children jostling each other and scooping them up with both hands.

It had been his boss Mel's idea. "So they've got Easter sales at Penney's and Target. Let's give them something they don't have. The biggest Easter egg hunt that Wampum has ever seen. Colored plastic eggs. Cheap, and we can reuse them next year. We'll swap the eggs out for candy when it's over." Mel rubbed his bald head, something he always did when he was excited. "How about this: prize vouchers in some of the Easter eggs. That'll get them here. I gotta say, this is inspired."

The following week he had another brainstorm. "Giant Easter bunnies. When it's almost over giant Easter bunnies will come out of the store with empty baskets for eggs and baskets full of candy to trade." Mel drove all the way to Kansas City to rent two costumes, one pink plush and one yellow plush, with white satin vests and detachable mascot heads.

Darryl and Weston had gotten roped into that. No way Lenny was going to put on a giant Easter bunny costume and circulate among the customers. He'd persuaded Mel that he needed someone to oversee things. "I'll be kind of a baby bouncer," Lenny joked to his girlfriend Paula. "You know, in case one of the toddlers gets rough."

Paula had been miffed that he wouldn't be going to her parents' for dinner, but he didn't really mind working on Easter Sunday. He wasn't religious. They were saving for first and last on a bigger apartment, maybe a wedding like Paula wanted, and he was glad enough for the extra hours.

At first there wasn't much to do. Lenny stood sentry at the top of the hill, looking beyond the crowd on the grassy slope to the abandoned gas station and used car dealership down the rutted road, which really needed to be repaved, but the city of Wampum wasn't repaving anything these days. A half hour into the egg hunt, the mood

started to change. There were a lot of eggs, but there were also a lot of people, and competition had escalated.

Kids started to shove and kick each other while parents glared at their rivals. When the elderly man who'd won the second prize—an electric popcorn popper—did a victory dance, waving his voucher in the air, a group of pimply teenagers snatched eggs out of his jacket pockets and ran off with them. No one had found the first prize yet—a small TV that Value Mart had been unable to sell with their Christmas merchandise—and several parents were loudly speculating that there was no first prize egg. “Where’s the TV? That’s what I want to know.”

A fat woman near Lenny shouted at a short guy dressed in a suit and tie for church, “That was our egg. My son had his hand on that egg before your daughter.”

“The hell it was. Finders keepers.”

She tore the egg out of the girl’s hand. The girl’s father swatted at the egg, which fell to the ground, where he stomped on it.

No one seemed to care about Lenny standing guard. He was a skinny guy, not exactly intimidating in his black jeans and white shirt and red Value Mart vest. He didn’t even have a whistle, not that it would have done much good. Hundreds of grownups were elbowing and pushing each other. Little kids ran in circles around their angry mommies and daddies, tripping on their feet and wailing. It was complete chaos, and the giant Easter rabbits weren’t even out yet. Lenny thought they should probably cancel the rabbits, but figured they’d have a riot on their hands if they didn’t come through with the promised candy. Really, it was Mel’s call anyway. Lenny’d just do what he was told. It was obvious that the parents weren’t going to form orderly lines for the egg-candy swap. There was no megaphone to shout instructions, and Mel had nixed the idea of leasing a portable PA system. “What do we need that for? It’ll just scare the kiddies.” Turned out, Mel hadn’t even come close to predicting what would scare the kiddies.

A small blonde girl in a grass-stained pink dress was the first to start screaming as the giant Easter bunnies emerged from the metal double doors behind Value Mart. Other kids immediately started shrieking as they stampeded up the hill, away from the outsize mutants. Weston, the shorter bunny, was running after them, a bad call. Darryl was holding his furry yellow rabbit head in place with both hands and skipping, probably thinking it made him seem playful and less threatening, but it didn’t. He looked menacing, like a monster pretending to be a child. Children were crying as parents raced up the hill to rescue them.

A little girl in overalls clutched Lenny around the knee, snuffling and sobbing, snot and tears streaming down her face. “I want my

mommy. Where's my mommy?" Lenny tried to shake her off. He had a record, something he'd omitted from his job application. He wasn't going to start walking around in a crowd of angry grownups holding some little girl's hand. He could see the headlines now. Ex-con. Attempted kidnapping. Attempted child molestation. He'd been in for felony marijuana possession, a stupid decision he wouldn't make now. "I know this guy's trying to move some weed," his old buddy from high school had said. "Easy money. It's not like we're dealers or nothing." Drug possession didn't have anything to do with pedophilia, but it wouldn't matter. He knew the score. He'd be crucified for someone else's sins.

Lenny wasn't the only one at Value Mart with a record. Darryl had done a stint at county after some shoplifting convictions. Weston and Darryl were both light-fingered, but it was small stuff—cigarettes, batteries, energy drinks, the occasional toy for Darryl's nephew. In general they were good guys. Lenny was a good guy too.

"Listen kid," he said, prying her fingers off his leg. "Find some nice lady and tell her your problems." Too bad Paula wasn't there. She was great with kids.

He pointed at a curly-haired matron bouncing a bawling infant on her hip and pushed the girl in her direction. "Her. She knows where your mommy is."

When he turned around, Mel was making a beeline in his direction, agitated and red-faced. "What the *fuck* is going on?" Mel only swore when he was really pissed. Probably not a good idea in front of all of these kids and parents but no one seemed to be listening to anyone anyhow. Sirens wailed in the distance. Cops, or paramedics. Apart from scraped knees and general hysteria, nobody looked hurt as far as Lenny could see, but someone with a bad ticker could croak just like that in this melee. Anything could happen, in Lenny's opinion. Any minute now one of the more belligerent fathers could start throwing punches.

Mel had brought in two photographers on commission to take pictures of kiddies with the Easter bunnies. They were dashing through the crowd, snapping away. Lenny was pretty sure that the pictures were going to end up in the newspaper, maybe in the national news, maybe on TV. Wouldn't that be something? The Value Mart in Wampum, Missouri, on the evening news. Easter mayhem! Lenny held an empty Easter basket in front of his face and edged toward the service entrance. No sense in getting his mug on the front page, him having a record and all. He was clean, but he didn't want to talk to any cops either. No point in taking any chances.

"Lenny. Where the fuck you going?" Mel grabbed his arm.

"I thought I'd find our First Aid kit and some more bags of candy," he lied. "Thought we could just start throwing the candy in the air. Or

at least give it out without the egg trade.”

Mel followed him, somewhat mollified.

But when they got inside, Mel decided to lock the back doors and evacuate the store. “Attention Value Mart shoppers. Due to unforeseen circumstances, we’re closing early today. Get your free Peeps at the front register. And have a very happy Easter.”

“Christ on a crutch,” Mel said, as the handful of customers filed out. Rumors were already circulating in the store. Outside a police car sped by the entrance and turned the corner toward the back lot with a screech. One of the cashiers started sobbing and Mel made a chopping gesture in the air, signaling her to stop.

“Yeah,” Lenny said. “Jesus fucking Christ.” The row of white Easter lilies in foil-wrapped flowerpots by the registers was starting to wilt, filling the air with a sickly sweet fragrance. Mounds of unsold candy were on display under a sign that said “Save More at Value Mart.” Lenny tore open a bag of jellybeans and tossed back a handful.

He wondered if he should call Paula to tell her he was okay, but she probably wouldn’t have heard anything yet. They could watch it on the news together. He liked watching the 11 o’clock news with Paula, snuggled on the couch under her grandma’s afghan. Other people’s crimes, other people’s problems, clips from the latest baseball games, the lowdown on the next day’s weather. It made life seem manageable, predictable. There was a lot to be said for that, life just going on. Ordinary time together.

“People will forget this ever happened,” he told Mel, who snorted and shook his head.

Lenny hoped it was true, and that Value Mart would recover. The store was barely scraping along as it was, and there was talk of a Wal-Mart moving in where the bowling alley used to be. That would be the end of Value Mart, the end of Lenny’s job, probably the end of jobs for Lenny. Word was, the big-box stores didn’t hire felons, and all of them did background checks. No “you paid your debt to society,” no belief that a man could redeem himself. Just us and them, good and bad. Well, the good citizens of Wampum weren’t looking so good today. And he wasn’t a bad employee. Hell, he liked Mel and Value Mart.

He rummaged through the jellybeans, picking out the red ones, and offered the bag to Mel, who took a handful.

Two giant Easter bunnies flattened themselves against the glass doors, and Lenny rushed forward with the keys.

“You okay?”

“Shit,” Weston said, pulling off his rabbit head. “What do you think?”

“It’s a goddamn zoo out there. Get me out of this rabbit suit.” Darryl was pulling it off as he loped to the back of the store with Weston

and the cashiers.

Lenny and Mel stood side by side for a while in silence and watched the tangle of cars in the parking lot. The sun was still shining. A policeman with a whistle was directing traffic toward the exit.

"You know, I've got some ideas for a comeback," Mel said, rubbing his bald spot. "We've got Mother's Day and Father's Day coming up. The Fourth of July."

"You're kidding, right?"

They both laughed, watching the blinking taillights as the cars stopped and started, lining up to leave. A cloud of exhaust hung in the air. Lenny wasn't expecting any miracles, but who knew, maybe the Value Mart would pull through. They'd managed so far, hadn't they? He'd put his life back together, made a kind of comeback after some dumb moves of his own. Paula was talking about getting married, and he'd been dragging his feet, but really he was ready too, just worried about money. It goes to show, he thought, nothing's really final. You think your life is over, but it isn't.

"We should put up a sign," he told Mel. "Tell 'em they can redeem the eggs for candy tomorrow."

"Yeah," Mel said. "Good idea. And the prizes and that goddamn TV." He patted Lenny on the shoulder. Mel was cool, really. Like the dad Lenny wished he'd had.

Crouching on his knees in aisle three, Lenny tore open a rainbow 8-pack of Magic Markers. "Redeem your Easter vouchers!" he wrote in large looping letters on an 11 × 14 pink poster board. "Value Mart loves you!"

As he outlined Easter eggs in black and colored them in, he felt a rush of love for them all. The customers, battling to survive in a shitty economy, fighting tooth and nail for candy for their kids, and for steak knives and a popcorn popper and a worthless TV. The crying cashier. Darryl and Weston with their petty thievery and rabbit costumes. Mel, who was doing the best he could to keep it all going. Paula, beautiful Paula, who kept him going. Lenny couldn't wait to get home to tell Paula about his day.

"Let's pick out rings this week," he was going to say, "and set a date. We're gonna make it, money be damned. Why wait?" He knew she'd smile. She had a knockout smile.

At the bottom of the poster, he lettered in careful cursive—Value Mart Is Family!—and punctuated it with a big heart.