

CALIFORNIA TOWHEE

© 2000 by Adrian Spratt (revised October 2018)

1

Standing on the sidewalk, Melissa watched Derek shift his white cane under his left arm and climb into the bus. The back of his hand shielding the coins from the driver's view, he let two quarters and two smaller coins slip through his fingers into the fare box. No beep confirmed he'd paid exact fare.

On the way to the bus stop, he'd told her he planned to do it. "So what if I'm caught? 'A penny, a nickel, a quarter—officer, they all look the same to me.'"

Though she knew better, she'd remonstrated. "Derek, you're crazy. Why risk going to jail over a few cents?"

But sure enough, Melissa looked at the bus driver to find him gazing stolidly at the windshield as Derek edged further inside. She stepped up and dropped four quarters into the fare box, which this time did beep.

A woman stood to give Derek her seat by the door, and the young man next to her did the same for Melissa. She glanced at him, but when their smiles met, she turned away.

"Thanks," Derek said, "for helping me select the shrimp."

"Why don't you let me prepare them, too?"

"A blind man's gotta prove he can do things on his own," he boomed in reply.

Melissa wondered if he realized he was speaking his mind to the entire bus. Two women clinging to Gucci bags across the way stared as they'd never dare at someone who could stare back. What did they see? His tousled, brown hair, the broad smile, the dark glasses? She caught

the slight man who had given up his seat for her looking at her again. Cute moustache. She turned to look out the windows at the bright San Francisco street.

Okay, she decided, if Derek didn't mind what people heard, neither would she. She said, "There's a story in the paper about a blind guy attempting to rob a bank."

"Cool. Bet you figured it was me."

"I saw the headline and said, 'Can't be Derek. Could only be Derek.' But they give the guy's name, and it wasn't yours. I have the article with me. Want to hear?"

Determined not to feel self-conscious, though her determination itself meant she was, she brought out the cutting from her purse and read aloud:

BLIND MAN CHARGED WITH ROBBERY A blind man tried to rob a bank as the security guard who helped him to the teller's window stood nearby, police said. Philip Boyle, 48, entered the bank Thursday and asked for the guard's assistance. At the teller's window he handed over a note demanding money, police said. The teller mouthed 'It's a robbery' to the guard and gave Boyle some money. The guard stopped him as he walked away. Boyle was not carrying a weapon. He was charged with robbery.

Pretending to be looking down at the article, Melissa glanced around and saw that Derek and she still had the attention of all the nearby passengers. The women with the Gucci bags had broken out into wide grins, but Cute Moustache frowned.

Putting the clipping away and closing her purse, she asked Derek, "Wasn't he an idiot for not figuring the teller would signal the guard?"

"Maybe he wanted to get caught."

"Why?"

"Make a statement. It does kind of expand on what people think blind folks can do."

"Anyone could do what this idiot did."

At their stop, she clambered down the bus's steps and he followed, graceful for a big man. She said, "I'll take a nap while you do the shrimp. What time are Chuck and Jodi coming down?"

2

"Melissa and I were flower children today." Derek had just put Big Brother and the Holding Company on the stereo. Decades after it all happened, he thought he'd finally got the flower thing. He returned to the table while still half singing "Take another little piece of my heart now, baby." Apt, he thought, considering they were playing Hearts. He ran his index finger over the brailled top left corners of the otherwise regular playing cards.

"Six of spades," Chuck said for Derek's benefit. "What was the occasion?"

Derek picked out the jack of spades and tossed it in the middle of the table. "I heard about Strybing Arboretum all these years, so I said to Melissa we should take the afternoon off and spend it with the flowers. She went for it."

Jodi's turn. "Ten," she said.

Melissa put down the seven and announced, "Your trick, Derek."

Hearts was a game of absolutes. You won either by collecting all the points, which rarely happened, or by getting the fewest tricks and the fewest points. At thirteen, the highest-point card was the queen of spades. So far, four spades had been played, leaving the toxic queen in wait.

After a sip of scotch, Derek started the round with another spade.

Melissa said, "We checked out plants from all over the world. Have you all been lately?"

Chuck mumbled a noise to the effect of "No," while Jodi announced she was playing the eight of spades. Then she said, "Can't say I've ever been."

Melissa played the ***** ace of spades.

“Ace of hearts,” Chuck said, his card giving away that he wasn’t going for broke.

“You should see this plant they have from Chile, I think it is,” Derek said. “Spikes all over.”

Melissa, who liked to set her hair in spikes, said, “Spikes have their place.”

“We could have predicted your position,” Chuck said.

Derek had been struck by how soft Melissa’s spikes were to touch, which told him their shock value was visual. As such, they went along with her jagged jewelry and piercings. He liked the jewelry, and pierced ears were normal, but he still wondered if his face had betrayed his horror on touching the ornaments in her lip and eyebrow and most of all the unornamented piercing in her navel.

“I wish I had Melissa’s hair,” Jodi said, her way of telling Chuck he was being rude.

“Look at all the things she can do with it. And I’d kill for that red.”

“Give me your gorgeous dark brown hair any day,” Melissa said.

Janis Joplin began “Summertime.”

“Jodi?” Chuck said. A tax accountant, the job of score keeper naturally fell to him.

“My turn?” Jodi’s ennui conveyed some obscure reproach.

Derek sensed that Chuck and she were on the verge of an argument. They lived together on the upstairs floor he rented out to them, and friction often simmered between them. He worried that one day they’d have the ultimate argument, after which they’d go in separate directions and leave him short a month’s payment or more.

He gazed toward Melissa and wished he could have caught her eye. She must have picked up something, because she murmured, “Hmm, hmm.”

Jodi took a reasonable gamble, this early in the hand, of starting the round with another high diamond, the jack. Apologizing profusely, Melissa, who must not have had any diamonds, threw down the queen of spades. Her apologies were insincere, which made Derek laugh, but Jodi didn't react. Chuck and Derek played out the hand with lesser diamonds, leaving Jodi stuck with the queen.

"Lady Luck just don't shine on me," she said.

"What could be luckier than guessing what will be in fashion months from now?"

Melissa said.

Assistant buyer for a Union Square clothing department store, Jodi demurred. "Those are educated guesses, based on research and good instincts. There's some luck, but you narrow luck down to a pinprick."

"Reveal the secret. Have an example?"

"Well, take colors. There's this organization that determines which colors will be made available for the coming year."

"Available to who, or what?"

"Anyone who designs clothes. They put out their color card a few months before spring fashion season. That's the education part. The instinct part is anticipating our shoppers' tastes. I can be sure about black—black is always in. But if that year's colors are going to be muted, are my clients going to want a muted pink or a muted green? Ditto if the colors are on the bright side. Maybe they're going to want a green that makes a statement."

"I buy that," Melissa said. "Well, maybe not the green. Wouldn't go with my hair."

"That's what I do—buy that and a few other ideas. Now is that luck or analysis and good taste?"

“Don’t lay it on, love of my life,” Chuck chided. “You’ve made your case.”

“I’m not making a case, dream of my youth.”

“Give her credit,” Melissa said. “She’s right again.”

“It’s a problem always being right,” Jodi said. “You always know what’s going to happen. It’s not very exciting.”

“You have Chuck the tax man for excitement,” Melissa said.

“I’m very exciting,” Chuck monotoned.

“The question,” Jodi said, “is why I’m so right all the time and yet so poor.”

“This city’s so expensive, it makes everyone poor,” Melissa said.

“Not everyone,” Chuck, a stickler for accuracy objected. Jodi shuffled the cards.

The tension between Chuck and Jodi was weighing on Derek. Before Jodi could start dealing, he pushed back his chair and said, “Pasta anyone?”

Along with the cocktails, the shrimp Derek had deveined and patterned on a bed of lettuce had gone over well before the evening’s serious work of cards. In anticipation of the main meal, he’d put out the box of pasta and bottled tomato sauce. In the kitchen, he pulled out a saucepan and turned on the faucet. The pan’s weight told him when he’d filled it high enough. He turned off the faucet and centered the pot on the burner. With a quick flip of the knob, the gas lit up. He loved that moment of ignition.

Melissa came in. Derek joined her at the table while waiting for the water in the pot to build to a roar.

She said, “How are things at Systematic?”

“I fucked up.”

“Again?”

“I realized what I’d done right away, but so did Tim.”

“Doesn’t he remember how you found the flaw in the Dynamo Port software before the company installed it at Reapers?”

“How do you remember these names, Melissa?”

“If I didn’t remember names, I wouldn’t be much use as a legal secretary.”

“The answer to your question is, this is a ‘what have you done for me lately’ world.”

“So unfair.”

“So I’m thinking what can I do instead.”

“That’s what you said the last time. What are you thinking about doing?”

The water on the stove gurgled. Jumping up, Derek went to the counter where the box of pasta waited. He broke up a bundle of brittle sticks, pushed them into the boiling water, turned down the heat and pressed down with a wooden spoon. He always found it a struggle, stirring while keeping the pasta submerged.

“Here,” Melissa said behind him, “let me do this part. The last time it came out mushy.”

He hadn’t noticed, but come to think of it, sometimes the pasta was, well, mush.

Relinquishing the spoon, he opened the fridge door and brought out a bottle of white wine.

“Recommended by the guys at Ashbury Market.”

“Turn the bottle around so I can see the label.” She experimented with the French words before pronouncing, “Sounds good. Open up, monsieur le sommelier.”

Derek arranged four wine glasses on the kitchen table and applied the corkscrew. The little pop as the cork escaped the bottle’s mouth was another of life’s satisfactions.

After pouring, he said, “Be right back,” and carried two glasses to the living room. Chuck was speaking in low tones to Jodi, who replied in monosyllables.

“Don’t want to interrupt,” Derek said, “but I assume you’d appreciate some fresh libation.”

“I hope we’re not being rude, sitting out here,” Chuck said.

“Melissa and I are close to solving the world’s problems. We’ll keep you updated.”

“Do,” Chuck said. “We have a stake in the outcome.”

Derek gestured a glass in Jodi’s direction and she took it.

“Thanks.” She spoke as if coming from a million miles away.

Chuck half stood and accepted the other glass. After taking a sip, he exhaled loudly.

“You display excellent taste in these matters, sir.”

Melissa was still at the stove when Derek returned. “So,” she said, not turning her head,

“Mr. Schuster, what will you do about the job?”

Sprawling in a chair back at the table, Derek said, “I like that idea of robbing a bank.”

“Be serious, Derek.”

“I am serious.”

Chuck appeared at the kitchen entrance. “Serious about what?”

“Here to help us solve the world’s problems?” Derek asked him.

“We’re still trying to solve yours, Derek,” Melissa said from the stove.

“Which of our lord and master’s many problems do you have in mind?”

Derek had long ago learned that landlord status over Chuck and Jodi earned him no deference. “Not the two of you,” he said.

“Maybe it takes two,” Melissa sighed. “I’m not getting anywhere.”

“Problems with the job again?” Chuck asked. “Why this time?”

“Oh, you know how impatient they are. And a little of my own fault, too.”

“You mean Derek Schuster admits it could be his own fault?” Chuck was now leaning, as Derek realized from his voice, against the kitchen’s lone free wall. “We should examine that butterfly while we have it under our lens.”

“Now I’m an insect?”

“Tell him, why don’t you?” Melissa said.

“Okay, if you really want to know. The job I’m doing is to migrate the client’s ancient data to a new database. I assumed it had been written in upper case, the way they used to do it. It wasn’t. I should have known because they’d figured out how to print address labels, which meant they were using both upper and lowercase letters.”

“So now that you’ve transferred the data, you have to convert it,” Chuck said.

“Conversion is hard when the case rules for the old and the new systems are different.”

“How come you know so much about programming?” Derek said.

“I know enough to realize it would drive me out of my mind.”

Leaving the pot and sitting at the table, Melissa laughed. “Coming from a tax man, that’s funny.” Then she explained. “Derek’s client does research on teenage drug and delinquency patterns. They have a real *noblesse oblige* attitude.”

“Noblesse what?” Chuck asked.

“They try to do good, even though they’re right wing.”

“The two are not incompatible. What’s their name?”

“Youth Research,” Derek said.

“Huh.”

“Huh what?” Melissa said. “You know them?”

“Well, yes. I did an audit. Keep that within these four walls, please.”

“Oh, well,” Melissa said, “I don’t imagine auditing someone makes for friends, so it doesn’t help our host.”

Chuck returned to the problem at hand. “Let me ask you this, Derek. Did you make the mistake because you couldn’t see the letters on the screen?”

“The braille terminal shows if a letter’s capped or not. Even if it didn’t, excuses won’t keep my job.”

“How do you compensate?”

“I keep a checklist of issues to look out for.”

“I guess the list just got longer.”

“It was on there already.”

“Our lord and master does appear to be in deep shit,” Chuck announced to the kitchen. But then he said, “I still think this is about the disadvantages you have because you can’t see.”

“I know other blind programmers who wouldn’t make a single mistake in a month, never mind two.”

Melissa asked, “Who are these superhumans?”

“Guys I knew from school, people on the Listserv I subscribe to.”

“You think they tell you about their mistakes?” Chuck probed.

“People are pretty open.”

“Have you gone online and told everyone about your mistakes?”

“I’ve talked about the frustrations.”

“But the mistakes?”

“It’s not just the mistakes. It’s how I handle the whole thing. I guess Tim—you know, my boss—thinks I might not care.”

“I can’t imagine why.” Melissa deadpanned.

“I don’t know either.”

“I’m teasing you, Derek. Have you ever wondered how that devil-may-care attitude of yours could give people the wrong impression?”

“He must know I care. I show up every day, don’t I?”

“On time?”

Derek winced. He had a history of lateness when meeting her. “It’s a long trip, and I have to change buses. But more or less.”

“I’m guessing less,” she said, sweetly.

Jodi spoke from the doorway. “Dr. Chuck, Dr. Melissa. Have either of you considered hanging out a shingle?”

Derek started. How long had she been standing there?

“I know you have,” she said to Chuck.

Chuck grunted a protest.

Melissa said, “Not I.”

Derek said, “I’d never thought about robbing a bank, either.”

Melissa said, “Keep it that way.”

Jodi broke into a laugh of pure mirth.

3

The receptionist buzzed through to Derek and announced, “Jodi to see you.”

“Jodi?”

“Says she’s a friend of yours. Jodi Truwell.”

“Oh, Jodi. Great. Show her in.”

He'd been lost at the keyboard, a screen from Youth Research's database before him and an electric pad with moving braille inside beneath his right forefinger. “Dexterous as a piano player,” Uncle Rich had said about his braille reading. That was the uncle who bequeathed the Ashbury Heights house to him. Derek had liked that, coming from Uncle Rich, but he'd replied, “If I could play the piano, no way you'd find me at a computer.”

At the entrance to his cubicle, Jodi said, “Working on the project you got that free therapy for last week?”

Recalling how she'd come to his rescue in the kitchen, Derek pushed away from his desk. “To what do I owe this first ever pleasure?”

“I took the day off to check out the boutiques up here. Free for lunch?”

They picked up focaccia sandwiches and walked five blocks to Alta Plaza, on top of Pacific Heights. It was a climb even by San Francisco standards, the sidewalk so steep that Derek felt as if it rose up almost to his face. Glancing his knuckles along building walls, he admired how neatly the stones had been laid. Man one, nature zero. They found a bench just off the sidewalk where the hill peaked and flattened. The morning mist had lifted. After the cramped cubicle, Derek luxuriated in the sun and open air.

“I'm so bored,” Jodi said.

“What we need is to get rich,” Derek said.

“Good idea. Why didn't I think of that?”

“That's 'cause you a worker bee, lil' lady.”

“Drop the 'lil' lady,' will you. So how we gonna get rich, pardner?”

“Like I said, I'm gonna rob me a bank.”

“Why don’t I think up these things?”

“Cause you just don’t need to worry your little head. Leave it to Derek.”

“Quit it, Derek.”

He started peeling the top off the Styrofoam coffee cup, then stopped, alert. “Hear that bird?” He gestured past her to the right. “Over there. It goes tweet, tweet, then does a kind of blithering noise.”

“Blithering ...,” she began, but then the bird repeated its song. “Oh, yeah. What is it, do you know?”

“A towhee. A California towhee.”

“It’s such a tiny brown thing. Amazing song.”

“That little flourish at the end makes me think of ‘Wipe Out.’”

“You lost me.”

“An old guitar instrumental by the Surfariis. They have some guy with his voice speeded up saying ‘Wipe out’ then going into an insane laugh.”

“Warped.”

Derek took a swig from his cup. “This is heaven, being up above this beautiful city and having lunch with a friend.” He waved his coffee cup at San Francisco like a conductor his baton.

But Jodi sighed. “They’re not paying enough for my talent. I’m feeling exploited.”

Euphoria dampened, he said, “Makes two of us.”

“Derek, I’m wondering if there’s something we can both do, together.”

“Together,” he echoed. “That’s nice.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“No.” He spoke emphatically, frustrated she hadn’t believed him. “I mean it.”

“I had a thought last night,” she said. “It’s going to sound a little crazy, but you’re the one who got me started. Something you said during your torture session with Chuck and Melissa.”

Derek groaned.

Jodi continued. “I remember in some old TV spy show, the good guy—it was always a guy back then—needed to get into a building to look at some secret document. But how to get past security? So he had his female partner walk by the sentry post, hitch up her skirt and fix her stockings. Those were the days when women still wore garter belts. It got the guard’s attention while the hero slipped past.”

“You’re getting me all excited, but what does it have to do with that torture session?”

After she explained, Derek offered his hand. “Shake, pardner.”

“Chuck and I are going away tonight for a long weekend in the Sierras. How about when I get back?”

4

Back in his cubicle, Derek felt high from Jodi’s visit. He was brought crashing back down by a perfunctory knock on the side wall, the hallmark signature of his boss.

Derek said, “How’re they hanging, Tim?”

“What progress are you making on the big fix, Derek?”

“I’m checking out the documentation. Make sure this baby was written like it was supposed to be.”

“Good thinking.”

The fatuous compliment made Derek want to punch Tim out. He said, "Except for their writing in caps and lower case as we'd expected, looks like they followed a basic routine."

"Give me a date when you can be ironclad certain you'll be done."

"Next week on Friday. I don't want to rush things."

"The client does, and we did promise this past Monday."

Derek was tempted to say, "You did. I didn't." He settled for, "Who can blame them, but they'll be happy when their system's up and running and there are no more problems with their operation."

"Right then, a week on Friday."

That evening, after absently eating a frozen dinner, Derek went out to sit on his stoop and called Melissa from his cellphone. "So, are you going to take care of me after the end of the month?"

"I'm sorry, Derek, but are you speaking into the phone? I can't hear you."

He'd wanted to sound off-hand. Now resigned to having her hear just how worried he felt, he twisted the mouthpiece above his chin. "Tim dropped in this afternoon and made a veiled threat. Get this done by the last Friday of the month or you're out of here."

"He gave you an ultimatum?"

"Kind of."

"Did he or didn't he?"

"He didn't put it like that, but they never do at Systematic. They call you in like for a friendly talk, and the next thing you know you're walking out the door with a pathetic little severance check in your fist. So the question of the day is whether you're going to invite me to live in your condo or consent to move into my mansion."

“Either way we’d kill each other.”

“Selling this house would rake in enough cash to last a few years.”

“Chances of mutual murder in my two-room condo are even greater than they would be if we lived at your place.”

“Then I guess I’ll be joining the homeless guys outside Golden Gate Park.”

“Okay. I’m going to die one day. No reason why it shouldn’t be sooner than later.”

When he hung up, there was only the night and a car driving along in the distance. He went inside and turned off the porch light. For once he was glad to know he’d be completely alone, with Chuck and Jodi away for three or four days. Even though they entered by a separate entrance, he was aware when they were in the house.

He passed through to what he thought of as “the rec room,” formerly the dining room, picked up his sonic basketball and continued outside. In the back, there was a small platform where he and guests ate on warm nights.

Down the steps, on an equally tiny patch of grass, he smashed the ball against the wall.

On the rebound, following the ball’s beeps, he plucked it out of the air before it hit the ground and smacked it back against the wall. He kept track of his position to make sure he didn’t break a window.

Again, he smashed the ball against the wall. Again, smack, leap and reach out to the right, ball in hand, shift ball to left hand, hurl, smack!

5

Derek felt the cellphone inside his shoulder bag vibrate. He waited for a second electronic spasm, but none came and he pushed his way through the revolving door into Deep

River Savings. A survivor of the Wells Fargo and Bank of America merger binges of the nineties, then of the financial failures during the so-called Great Recession, the little bank would no doubt also be swallowed up one day and this branch replaced by a couple of personality-challenged ATMs.

The friendly guard greeted him in the small foyer. “You’re in early, Mr. Schuster. I can show you to a teller right away.”

“What’s happening, Jackson?” Derek reached for his back pocket. “Oh no, did I forget to take out my bank card?”

“Can I help you there?”

Derek produced his wallet. “I always separate my bank card before getting here so I’m not fumbling around at the teller’s.”

“Let me help.”

Derek hesitated. “Well, it’s got all my ID’s and stuff in there.”

“Long as one of them isn’t for some terrorist cell.”

“Whoa, in that case ...,” Derek returned the wallet to his pocket. Then he grinned, brought the wallet back out and handed it over.

“Didn’t take you for no terrorist.” Jackson leafed through the plastic sleeves. “Braille.”

“Nothing if not observant, Jackson.”

“Here.” The guard nudged one of the plastic sleeves against Derek’s hand. “What’s it say?”

“Turn it the right way, toward you. Check out the pattern. See how each character is no more than three dots high and two dots wide?”

Jackson took his time. “Well, yeah, I guess so.”

“Look at that first dot. It’s all by itself.”

“I’ll take your word for it, but it looks mighty close to what comes after. How can you tell? I couldn’t tell a pepper shaker from a screwdriver with my callouses.”

“Practice.”

“So what’s it say anyhow?”

“That one? Let me check. Yeah, it says ‘work ID.’ See, there’s that lonely dot I was pointing out to you, and that’s followed by the letter ‘w.’ When you put them together, you get ‘work.’ Then there’s a space and the letters ‘I,’ ‘D.’”

“Fantastic.”

“I don’t give it any thought.”

“I guess I don’t think about print letters, either.”

“That’s right, Jackson. Now where’s that bank card of mine?”

Someone rushed by and bumped Derek’s elbow. Behind him the door revolved with a rhythmic squeak.

“Jackson!” a woman yelled from the tellers’ windows.

The guard turned. “What’s going on?”

“That blonde running to the exit,” the teller yelled.

Jackson turned as if on a dime. “Mr. Schuster, here’s your wallet. Let me pass.”

Derek took his wallet and stepped to the side, just as Jackson sprang to the same spot. Jackson apologized as they disentangled, then broke free for the exit.

Derek headed for the new account tables to avoid the commotion at the tellers’ windows.

“Hi there.” No one answered. He bided his time.

A woman came over. “I’m afraid there’s been a problem. Do you need help right now, or can it wait?”

“I was going to take out two hundred bucks, but twenty will do. I’ve run out of cash.”

“Give me your card.”

He opened the wallet. “Jackson was just helping me find it. Do you see it there?”

“Yes, third section, right on top where you’ve opened it.”

He removed the card and handed it over. Then he produced his checkbook. “Give me a pen. I’ll fill it out and sign.” Inside the checkbook he kept a template of a check with spaces cut out showing where to write in each line of information.

She said, “Make it out for two hundred,” and left. When she returned, she had ten twenties and a receipt. “Sorry for the inconvenience.”

“You’ve been great. Thanks, Ms.—what’s your name?”

“Sandra.”

“Derek.” He stuck out his hand and they shook.

Outside, sirens approached.

Sandra said, “The police are coming. That woman just robbed one of the tellers. I’ve got to go. Have a nice day, Derek.”

“I hope no one was hurt or anything.”

“No, thank God. Just money. Not that a bank employee should bad-mouth money.”

At the revolving door, he got out of the way as someone hurtled through. Counting to three, he stepped inside the still-moving door and pushed his way out. On the sidewalk the cops didn’t stop him. No doubt his cane suggested unpromising witness material.

6

Waking up the next morning, on what looked like his last Friday at Systematic, Derek had an inspiration about the database problem with that noblesse oblige client, Youth Research. Reaching the office, for once early, he confirmed he'd figured out the programming rules he would need to correct the data he'd prematurely transferred from the old system. Then he zipped through lines of code hardly thinking. Think. Concentrate. There was no room for error. He'd been an idiot to let Tim sucker him in to setting this day as the deadline, but maybe, just maybe, he'd make it.

Melissa called in the afternoon. "How's that fix coming along?"

"The job is signed, sealed and delivered."

"You're kidding."

"I exaggerate, but I kid you not. I gave the completed project to Tim an hour ago. He's going to have someone look it over, though there isn't time, and then I'll go to the client's and install it. Derek one, Malignant Universe zero."

"What a relief."

"You sound funny, Melissa. What's up? You figured Tim fired my butt?"

"Of course not," she said. Her tone said otherwise.

7

"I know what will make Chuck happy," Jodi said at Derek's card table. "We'll play for cash."

"Are you serious?" Melissa said. "You were telling us you're Lady Luck's biggest victim, and now you want to turn this into a gambling den?"

“Just spice things up a bit. Chuck’s been saying lately life isn’t exciting enough.”

“Mr. Excitement isn’t excited enough?”

“Thank you, Melissa,” Chuck said.

“So how about it, lover?” Jodi asked him.

“Where’s this money coming from that you propose to put at risk, honey bun?”

“None of your business.”

“I think I beg to differ.”

“Think all you like but don’t beg. It’s unbecoming.”

“How serious are you, Jodi?” Melissa asked.

“Totally.”

“I’m not sure our fellow players are up for this, love of my life,” Chuck said.

Derek perked up. “I like spice. Let’s go for it.”

“Wouldn’t that change everything?” Melissa said.

“What kind of stakes are you talking?” Derek asked Jodi.

“If we’re going to do this at all,” Melissa proposed, “let’s start with a penny.”

“No, no, no,” Jodi protested. “Where’s the thrill in pennies? A dollar a point. Just tonight.

See how it goes.”

“A dollar! I don’t think I have ten on me,” Melissa said.

“You brought cab fare,” Derek pointed out.

“That’s cab fare, for tomorrow. One queen of spades and I’m done.”

“I’ll loan you,” Jodi said.

“No way.”

They settled on a dime a point. As Jodi had predicted, Chuck got more into the game.

“Last weekend Derek and I took a ride to the Sierras,” Melissa said.

“I wondered why it was so quiet down here,” Jodi said.

“You and Chuck inspired us.”

“Rental car?” Chuck said, honing in on the finances.

“I charged, she drove,” Derek said.

Chuck looked across the table and said, “Sounds like our landlord is solvent, Jodi.”

“So you won’t mind if we skip next month’s rent?” she said to Derek.

Melissa said, “Great bed and breakfast. Let us know if you want the info.”

Jodi tossed a card on the trick Chuck was about to take. “Queen of spades. All yours, soul and inspiration.”

“My, are we competitive or what?” Melissa said.

“A dollar thirty,” Chuck mourned.

Derek said, “This was fun, but let’s go back to playing for no money.” Without realizing, he was looking toward Melissa.

“If you’re worried about me,” she said, “I’m beginning to feel the slippery slope under my Nikes.”

“Goes with the spikes,” Chuck said.

“At least mine are on the outside where everyone can see.”

“I think,” Chuck announced, “it’s time for chicken ratatouille.”

“Good idea,” Jodi said. Their turn to cook, they went off to the kitchen.

“I’ll stay out here with the lord of the manor,” Melissa called after them. She sounded tipsy. She turned to Derek. “Mind if I have a cigarette?”

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that. We shouldn’t have tobacco stinking up the joint.”

“Are you serious?”

“No. The only one who minds is Chuck, and he gave up on you long ago.”

She lit up. “So how was work this week?”

“Still sucks. Next?”

“Doing anything about it?”

“Oh, I have an interview coming up.”

“You didn’t tell me! Who with?”

“How about I explain if and when I get the job?”

“Why so mysterious?”

“You’ll see.”

“Derek, this is making me agitated.”

“Cool.”

She loudly blew out smoke. “We should be married, the way we go on.”

“Where’s the altar?”

“Know what would happen if—”

“You’ve told me a thousand times.”

“A hundred,” she corrected, adding, “And you agree with me.”

“Totally.”

“Okay,” she said. “So, next?”

Derek relented. “Youth Research.”

“What about them? You just survived that mess.”

“Au contraire, ma soeur. They love me for getting their system back online.”

“So they called Tim ...” she prompted.

“Uh-uh. Remember Chuck telling us he knows them from an audit he did?”

“He called them?”

“And arranged for me to have lunch with the executive director.”

“Is that ethical, I mean for an auditor to be on such cozy terms like that?”

Derek let that go. “And do you know what the director said about Tim?”

“Tell me.”

“He’s a phony. And you know what they said about me?”

“Let me guess. You’re a genius. Are you trying to tell me—?”

Jodi came in. “This is going to be one of Chuck’s best.”

“So we’re back to brunette,” Melissa said to her.

“I didn’t like me as a blonde.”

“I did,” Melissa said.

Derek turned to Melissa. “What’s she like as a blonde?”

“Even cuter.”

Jodi said, “As a blonde, I’m cute. As a brunette, I’m a bombshell, but no one notices.”

“I like your spirit.” Groaning, Melissa got up from her chair. “I have to take a leak.” She stumbled down the hall and happily slammed the bathroom door behind her.

Still standing, Jodi squeezed between Derek’s knees and the chair arm. She lowered her voice. “Do you realize it’s been a month to the day since our adventure?”

In the kitchen, Chuck clanged a saucepan as he grabbed it from a cupboard. The bathroom door hadn’t opened. Derek inferred an invitation and ran his hand along the backs of

her legs. Stockings over shapely calves. Under her skirt, he encountered the cotton straps and tiny metal clips of a garter belt. He caressed her naked thighs.

“In honor of the anniversary,” Jodi said.

Derek grinned up at her. “I used to think dots were just for reading. Who knew they had such power.”

She touched his cheek. “Oh, but they do.”

THE END