

lare could beat aces. It was the flush she was worried about. She studied the old man across from her. "What do you have? Aces?"

"Nah, I don't got aces," the old man said, meaning *Maybe I do, maybe I don't.*

Clare tried to find a clue on his face. Deep lines made his skin look more like leather than anything human. The eyes, of course, were blank.

"Raise." Clare shoved some chips in forcefully. What she meant was *Please fold*.

"Re-raise you all in." The man touched the rim of his cowboy hat. A real tell, or a fake one? And how was Clare supposed to single out a killer in a room full of professional bluffers? "Go home, kid," the old man said, meaning, *You're out of your league in this card room*.

But Clare wasn't going home. She wasn't going anywhere until she'd proven she could do this job. "Do I threaten you?" she asked.

The old man snorted and Clare thought she saw his nostrils flare. "Sure," he said. "Kids like you threaten my game every day.

DPP_1.indb 3 20/04/11 11:37 AM

You make it so profitable I get lazy and forget how to take on real competition."

Clare drummed her fingers on the black table felt. If she called the bet and lost, she'd be out of the game. She could already hear Sergeant Cloutier's scorn as he pulled her off the case and sent her home to dreary beat work chasing graffiti artists and bicycle thieves in Toronto.

But she couldn't keep folding either. This man had been bullying her — or bullying Tiffany James, Clare's fancy new cover character — all day. He couldn't have the best hand every time. And the nostril flare — that had to be involuntary, right?

"Call." Clare pushed the rest of her chips past the bet line. She could feel her hands trembling. The chip stack nearly toppled on its way into the pot.

The old man squinted at her. "You got something wrong with your brain? Unless you got a flush, Princess — which you shouldn't, the way you've been betting this hand — that was an easy fold."

"The bets have been made," the dealer said. "Mr. Jones, please show your cards."

The old man flipped his cards over, muttering, "Trip kings."

"Straight." Clare could hardly believe it. She'd just conquered T-Bone Jones in a battle of wits. She set to work organizing her new larger chip stack, and let out her breath with relief.

The old man peered at her. "That your daddy's cash you're burning?"

"No." Clare faked indignation as she examined the manicure she'd been given the previous morning. It felt funny on her hands — she was so used to chipped nails with motor grease riding the crescents. "Every penny I spend is from my own trust fund."

"Well, then." T-Bone's eyebrows lifted, and Clare wondered why he didn't lick his chops with greed. "Let me help separate you from it."

Clare's heart was still thumping, but she gave him the coolest

grin she could muster. "You just tried to take my money; I took yours instead, remember?"

"I'm not talking about some piss-ass tournament chip stack." T-Bone's lips curled into a sneer. "I'm talking about putting your money where your mouth is. In a cash game tonight."

Shit. Clare had just told this guy she was loaded, but before she could say yes to a cash game, she would have to get the funds approved from her handler. "I don't think I'm ready for a side game. I want to get my legs in this tournament first."

T-Bone narrowed his eyes. "You got a big trust fund for gambling, but you won't bring a few grand to a side game?"

Yeah. The guy made a good point. "I'm not gambling." Clare tried to inject a haughty tone into her voice. "I've been reading tons of theory, and this poker tour is a solid investment. I think it's smarter than playing the stock market, given the state of the global economy."

"It's not an investment if you can't play the game."

"I learn fast." Clare met his eye, with maybe more Clare than Tiffany. "Tell you what: if I cash in this tournament I'll play in a side game in Vancouver."

"Just play with us," Joe Mangan said from down the table. Clare recognized him from TV, though his frosted tips and smooth skin were well hidden behind a white hockey mask. To complete the ensemble, Joe wore an L.A. Kings shirt with the number 99. "What's a few grand from your trust fund?"

Clare flicked her wrist dismissively, flashing a sparkly pink watch that cost what she made in a month. Good thing the RCMP was footing the bill for her wardrobe. "If I want to give money away, I know more worthy charities than you guys."

Joe raised his eyebrows and the mask shifted upward on his face. "Says the girl with the Piaget on her wrist. You're not giving the money away if you have a good time playing. You're buying entertainment."

"A 'good time' is a shopping trip to Paris." Clare wrinkled her nose and tried to look disdainful. "My time spent here is work."



She didn't want to alienate herself, but Clare could not afford to seem overly ingratiating. Willard Oppal had been made and killed before his handlers had even seen it coming. Clare had to play it cool, like she could take or leave the players' friendship.

"That's the right attitude, kid," said Mickey Mills, whom Clare also recognized from Tv. Like Joe, Mickey had an average height and a stocky build. Unlike Joe, he was wearing dress pants and a pressed shirt. And Mickey was in his sixties — nearly double Joe's age. "Don't let these no-lifes talk you out of your money. You can dress 'em up and stick 'em on Tv, but that don't change their basic nature. Everyone's a hustler here. You want to survive, you gotta learn to hustle back."

"And let me guess," Clare said, rolling her eyes, "you're just the man to teach me."

"Nah, I'm a hustler too." Mickey tipped a small plastic peanut bag so five or six nuts fell into his hand. "But at least I say so up front."



lizabeth Ng set her comb on the counter and appraised her reflection in the hotel bathroom mirror. She wished they were getting ready to go anywhere other than this stupid poker party.

"People like Tiffany James should not be allowed to play in these tournaments," Elizabeth said, loudly enough to be heard in the bedroom. "You know what hand she busted me out with?" She glanced out at Joe, whose attention was focused on the flatscreen TV. "Ten-seven suited."

"You'd play that, in position." Joe Mangan kicked off his sneakers and pulled his sockless feet onto the king-sized bed.

"But I'd play it for deception, or drawing odds." Elizabeth picked up a sparkly earring. "Not because I felt lucky that day. You know that your feet even *look* smelly."

"They do?" Joe seemed to like this. "What do smelly feet look like?"

"Gross. You can practically see the vapors rising from your shoes."

Joe grinned. "You played a good game, Liz. You can't control when luck runs the other way from you."

DPP_1.indb 7 20/04/11 11:37 AM

"Easy for you to say." Elizabeth put in the second earring and studied herself anew. She hadn't been looking her best lately — her skin seemed oilier, and her long black hair, normally totally manageable, was riddled with flyaways. "You coast into every final table like you were born to be there."

"I'm on a good streak." Joe paused to take a sip from the Coke can on the bedside table. "I'd love to win first place one of these days. But whatever; we can't have everything we want. So does Tiffany bug you because she can't play, or because she's another hottie on the scene when you've had that spot to yourself for the past few months?"

Elizabeth spun around and glared at Joe from the bathroom doorway. "Because Josie died?"

Joe shrugged and shoved a handful of Sun Chips into his mouth from the bag in his lap.

"That's a horrible thing to say. Josie and I had our differences, but we were friends, at the end of the day."

"You mean frenemies?" Joe turned the volume up on *Jersey Shore*.

"Are you Lindsay Lohan? I mean friends. I didn't like what she was into, but I liked who Josie was. She didn't deserve to die."

"What was Josie into?" Joe glanced at Elizabeth. "Drugs?"

"I guess she did a bit of blow, but no, that's not what I mean." Elizabeth went over to the bed and took a Sun Chip from Joe's pack. "I think — I don't know for sure — but she hinted that she was involved in some kind of cheating ring."

"Why would she cheat? And if she did, why would she tell you about it?"

"I haven't figured that out." Elizabeth wanted to peel off her blouse, wrap herself in the plush white robe, and forget about poker for one night. Instead, she returned to the bathroom to try to do something about her tired-looking face.

Joe turned the TV volume back down. "Did Josie tell you what kind of cheating?"

"She didn't tell me anything." Elizabeth picked up her mineral

foundation and scrutinized the label. It was supposed to be all natural, but maybe it had chemicals that were causing a reaction. "It was more of a 'Hey Liz, if you had the chance to know other people's hole cards, and you weren't technically doing anything illegal to find out . . ."

"That's a theoretical question," Joe said. "Not an admission of guilt. It's like asking what you'd do if you found a magic lantern and a genie to grant you three wishes."

"It was the lift in Josie's voice. Like she was so clever to be hiding something." Elizabeth caked on another layer of powder.

The sound of chips crunching accompanied Joe's voice. "Aren't you finished getting ready yet? It's just a bunch of poker players. There won't even be cameras there."

Elizabeth took out her earrings. They were too flash for a night with a bunch of poker players. She came back into the main room where Joe was still sprawled in his jeans.

"You look great." Joe crumpled his chip pack and tossed it into the garbage bin. "I love you in that buttoned blouse. It makes you look so stern and secretary-like — all I can think about is ripping it off. We should get you a pair of glasses."

"You know those are biodegradable now?"

"Secretary glasses?"

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. "Sun Chip bags."

"You want me to find a compost heap in a casino hotel?"

Elizabeth shrugged. Joe didn't want children; what did he care about leaving the world how he found it? "Hey, do we have to go to this party?"

"You don't," Joe said. "But I want to win some money."

"You win money every day." Elizabeth gazed out the window at the giant waterfalls, lit up with pink, purple, and blue like they were some kind of carnival attraction instead of a natural wonder. "We don't have to stay in. What about a night on the town?"

"In Niagara Falls?" Joe arched his eyebrows. "Sure, baby. Let's go to a wax museum and the Olive Garden."

"Good point."

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"Come on," Joe said, getting off the bed finally and grabbing Elizabeth's hands. "Maybe you'll even see your best friend Tiffany again."

"Ugh. Why did you have to mention her name?" Elizabeth shook Joe's hands off hers.

"I bet you'll like her if you give her a chance," Joe said. "She's bankrolled to stick around for the whole tour. You might as well be ready to pounce when her luck runs out."

"How do you know so much about Tiffany's bankroll?" Elizabeth had to find a way to rein in her jealousy. She either trusted Joe or she didn't; she couldn't stay in this place in between. She grabbed some clean socks from Joe's drawer and handed them to him.

"Thanks. I was at her table when T-Bone was giving her the gears. She held her own pretty good against him."

"Yay." Elizabeth could hold her own against T-Bone Jones or anyone.

"I saw her with one of Dan Harrington's books in the lobby when I was checking in. She's committed to learning."

"Yay again." The bitch could read. "If we're going, let's go. Wait — are you not even planning to wash your feet before you put new socks on?"

Joe laughed. "I guess that means you want me to." He stopped short of putting his right foot into the clean sock, stood up, and headed for the bathroom. "You know what's weird, though?" Joe said. "She smokes."

"So?" Could they get off the subject of Tiffany fucking James? "Rich people don't usually smoke."

"Who says she's rich?" Elizabeth put the earrings back in. Maybe she *should* look flash tonight. "She might have backers."

"The way she plays?" Joe was shouting over the running water in the tub. "I said she was learning, I didn't say she was good."

► 10



ergeant Cloutier sawed a chunk off his rib-eye, looked at Clare, and lifted his fork to his mouth. Before taking the bite, he said, "You're still in the tournament after the first day. That's better than I thought you'd do."

"Believe me, it's luck." Clare took a sip of Corona and leaned back into the leather booth. The beer tasted watery and bitter, but orders from Amanda were premium only for Tiffany's precious tastebuds, and Clare had yet to find an import that came close to replicating Bud. "I thought I knew how to play poker — I've been reading every book there is and practicing online with my own money. I've already won enough for a killer new pair of motorcycle boots. But when you're thrown in with a bunch of seasoned professionals, the normal rules get tossed out the window. Those players are mean."

Cloutier chewed deliberately. His thick jowls reminded Clare of a hippopotamus. When he'd finished, he said, "I know. That's why I'm recommending you don't move on with the tour to Vancouver."

Clare sat up straight. "What?"

"You're not ready. This game is hard, and the players are

DPP_1.indb 11 20/04/11 11:37 AM

harder. I know you like to think you're tough, but I can't send you on. You're new at this. You could get killed; I can't have that on my conscience."

"Will the RCMP even listen to you?" Clare knew Cloutier didn't think much of her job skills, but after the last case they'd broken together involving political murders on the University of Toronto campus, she didn't think he'd sabotage her. "You're just some handler from Toronto. *They* think I'm ready."

"The RCMP will hear my advice and make their own decision." Cloutier began to cut another piece of steak. "For now, you can tell me what you saw today. You learn anything about the players?"

"Mostly that they're assholes." Clare felt her jawbone tighten. She was not going to let Cloutier push her off this case. "But there's this one guy, Joe Mangan, who was decent to me."

"Mangan. A young guy, right?"

"Mid-thirties?" Clare was guessing. "He came third in the World Series of Poker main event last year. He's been on TV at a few other final tables."

"I know the kid. No bracelets, right?"

"Huh?" Clare sliced a morsel from her striploin. She could have cut it with a bread knife, it was so smooth. "No, I don't think he wears any jewelry."

Cloutier groaned. "First place finishes. I thought you said you knew this game. A bracelet's what they give you if you win a major tournament."

"Seems like a girly prize in a field full of men." Clare popped the steak into her mouth. She had to admit it was delicious, even if she thought it was a rip-off at forty-five dollars without any side dishes.

Cloutier grunted into his cloth napkin. "Nothing girly about the prize money."

Clare scowled. "Everything is always about money. I believe in capitalism, but I don't understand how people can be so fascinated by pursuing dollars for their own sake." "Your time in that university paid off." Cloutier smirked.

"Oh, shut up," Clare said. "So listen, there's this guy T-Bone

"T-Bone Jones?" Cloutier stared.

Clare nodded.

"You met fucking T-Bone Jones? Were you playing at the same table?"

"If I get you his autograph, will you let me stay on the case?" Clare asked. "And he's one of the assholes. He's one of the meanest guys here."

"So he thinks you're a spoiled dumb rich kid."

Clare frowned. "No, he doesn't. You said I didn't have to act dumb or spoiled."

"Looking like you do, you'd have to speak like fucking Einstein for anyone to give you credit for a brain."

Clare remembered why she never wore makeup in the first place. "That sucks."

"It doesn't suck. You want these players to underestimate you."

"For what? Five minutes, before you send me back to Toronto?"

"You gotta see this as more serious, Vengel," Cloutier said. "You forget what happened to Willard Oppal?"

Chills ran through Clare. "No."

"Good. Because this job was nearly yours in September. They gave it to Oppal instead because I said I didn't think you were ready then either."

"Thanks. It's great to have a handler who believes in me. I can see myself really going places with support like that behind me."

Cloutier set his glass down hard. Some beer splashed up, but none spilled out onto the table. "This isn't some dress-up game, Vengel. Your cop skills are hit and miss at best, and Willard Oppal showed us that when you miss too much you end up dead."

"You think it's Oppal's fault he died?" This struck Clare as impossibly cold.

Cloutier shrugged one broad shoulder. "It's his fault if he got made. It's his handler's fault for not pulling him sooner. The point

is, you're here now because you're about the furthest thing from

"And because I figured out who killed the mayor."

what people think a cop looks like."

"You got lucky on that one. But yeah, it looks good on your record."

Clare set her fork and knife down. "What about the other victims? You think it's Josie Carter's fault she's dead?"

"No one deserves to be murdered. But nor are they often completely innocent in their own demise. Josie was a party girl — she liked to snort coke and watch the sun rise with a new man each day. Not saying that's what got her killed, but when you live on the edge, you sometimes get sliced up real bad . . ."

"Harsh," Clare said. "And Jimmy Streets?"

"Old-time poker player. Came up through the ranks with T-Bone Jones. They were new kids together in Texas. The man was no saint."

"Wow," Clare said. "Anyway, I guess T-Bone does think I'm stupid. He invited me to play in a cash game tonight."

"You got invited to play in a cash game with T-Bone Jones?" Cloutier's hippo jaw hung open.

"Don't look so jealous," Clare said. "The idea terrifies me."

"Why? It's not your money."

"No," Clare said. "But this game is in the back room of a bar."

"And what? You're afraid you'll get killed for your winnings if you do well?"

"That's not it. I don't want to ask the RCMP for more money. I can't use the casino credits they've set up for me in an illegal side game."

"Are you stupid?" Cloutier tapped two thick fingers against his head. "You're not asking for a new car. You need money for the job, you can't be shy about it."

Clare picked up her beer bottle and set it down without taking a sip. She'd forgotten for a second that she was supposed to be drinking from the glass beside it. "I hate asking for things."

Cloutier gave her a look that felt like it was piercing into her brain. "Vengel, grow a pair."

"Good one," Clare said. Bite me, she thought.

"I'll run this by the finance wizards. For tonight — because I doubt I'll have their answer in time — consider yourself authorized to gamble. You got enough spending money left?"

"Yeah." Clare hadn't touched the ten thousand dollars the RCMP had deposited in Tiffany's name in a bank account.

"Good. Feel free to lose it."

Clare felt her eyes bug out from her face. "The whole thing?" "I'll make sure your account is replenished tomorrow."

"But that's, like, the entire entry fee to each tournament. I can't blow that kind of cash in one night."

"We've been over this, Vengel. Ten grand is nothing to these guys. You gotta show them you can play on their terms, or they're not going to have any respect for you."

"Fucking materialists. If you don't have money you're not good enough."

"It's not materialism; it's gambling." Cloutier shook his head. "Shit, you really just don't know enough."

"I can learn," Clare said.

Cloutier took a deep breath. "I'm going to insist they pull you."

Clare slumped in her chair. "You always want to pull me. It's like your favorite thing to want. Have you ever thought maybe *that's* my whole problem? It's like driving with someone sitting beside you pointing out all your mistakes — you're going to screw up even more because you're self-conscious."

"You want a boss who doesn't care if you live or die?"

Clare wrinkled her nose. What *did* she want? "I want to dive into this role, play this spoiled rich kid, and find out who's been killing all the poker players."

"I want that for you, too." Cloutier frowned. "But the stakes are too high. There will be other cases as exciting as this one, but I think you should tackle them later, once you've wet your feet on smaller, safer cases."

► 15

"Come on. You know I won't be given smaller cases if I'm pulled from this. I've been waiting for a transfer to undercover for six months; no one's in a hurry to make that happen." Clare widened her eyes in case pleading would work.

"Vengel, kill the puppy-dog look. You're just proving my point. You're twenty-three. You don't know this job. You still think it's a game."

"I'm not working any more break and enters. If you pull me from this case, I quit. I'll go be a mechanic. And you should hope I never work on your car."

"That's not how to make me change my mind." Cloutier spoke more softly than usual.

"What will it take for me to convince you I can do this?"

"You need to understand that you could die."

Clare felt the same chills that she'd felt earlier when he'd mentioned Willard Oppal. "Okay," she said. "I get it."

"I don't like the idea of you going off to Vancouver."

"Why? Because Vancouver is such a dangerous city? Are the hippies going to attack me with their lava lamps?"

"But," Cloutier said. "I'll strike you a deal. If you can cash in this tournament, it will show me you're serious, that you can play on the same level as these guys."

"And if I can't magically find my way into the money?" Clare asked, because he was really talking long shot odds.

"Then I'm going with my gut and having you pulled."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard," Clare said. "You can't strike gambling deals over someone's career."

"Vengel, does the whole cop hierarchy thing mean nothing to you? You're supposed to at least pretend to treat me with respect."

"Okay, that's one thing I like about you," she said. "You can take it if I challenge your authority."

"Yeah? Well, Amanda can't take being challenged so well."

"Who said I was challenging Amanda?" Clare shook her head when the waitress offered her another beer. If she did have another, it would not be that watery piss they called Corona. *

"And anyway, I'm on loan — I don't have rank with the RCMP, so I don't have to answer to their hierarchy."

"Amanda's going to be your handler in Vancouver. If you go." Clare dropped her empty bottle to the table with a clunk. "No."

Clare had never met anyone more different from her in her life. To morph Clare into Tiffany, Amanda had spent nearly a full week with her. They went shopping in Yorkville, where snooty boutique employees exchanged smug glances because Clare didn't care about the distinction between two shades of blue. They ate sushi and other precious food that Clare was shocked cost so much more than a decent pub meal that would actually fill you up. They went to Civello on Yonge Street, where Clare was wrapped in seaweed by a smug woman named Serenity, and manicured by one of the shallowest bimbos she'd ever met. And Amanda seemed to enjoy every minute of this.

"I know it's hard to part with me." Cloutier smirked. "But Amanda's a pro. And she'll look the part — a fashionable friend you can go shopping with."

"I already went shopping with Amanda. I have enough nice clothes to last the rest of my life."

"Tiffany James might beg to differ. In fact, she wouldn't wear the same dress to two parties with the same people."

"How do you know?" Clare glared at her soon-to-be ex-handler.

"I've dated a high-maintenance woman or two in my time." Cloutier sucked in his cheeks and picked up his beer glass with his pinky sticking straight out. He looked more like a blowfish with a broken finger than anything posh, but Clare got the point.

"Are you calling me high-maintenance?"

"I'm saying you have it in you."

"So if you think I have it in me, why would you recommend I get pulled?"

"Because having it in you and using what you have are two completely different things." Cloutier pulled in his pinky and took a sip of beer.

DPP_1.indb 17 20/04/11 11:37 AM



"I did fine on my first case."

"You were posing as a student where the victims were politicians. Here you're posing as a poker player where the victims are poker players. You don't get a second chance when your first fuck-up gets you dead."

+ 18 →