

POKER

by pwatson1974

"I'm going to kill her!! I'm going to kill her! I'm going to kill her so much I'll kill her grandparents in the backwash!"

"Well, it's good t' see ye're takin' this well an' have got yer anger under control."

"Oh, shut up, Jackie! She ^&£%ing shredded me!"

"And? Ye think that's the worst that's ever happened around here?"

"What??"

"Oh, come on. Ye think we sat around doin' nothin' of an evenin' before we caught ye? Maybe did a spot o' knittin'? Ye just mean we haven't had to play cards fer it fer a month."

"You what?"

"Ye think the boss hasn't thought o' playin' poker fer some really odd stakes? \$5 chips aren't gonna cut it when you can ante yer elbow."

"You are kidding."

"Would I lie t' ye?"

"Yes."

Jackie smiles, "Ok, would I lie t' ye about somethin' as stupid as playin' poker fer body parts?"

"Probably not. Just about eating me."

"Ye're never gonna let me forget that, are ye?"

"Any reason I should?"

"Well, by my count, I've only got to put up with it fer another coupl'a days, so, knock yerself out."

"What?"

"Ye mean ye haven't been keepin' track? Yer month is almost up, girl. Ye'll be a free woman again, God help the rest o' us."

"You're that anxious to get rid of me? I didn't think my driving was that bad."

"I'd have thought ye'd be happy. Especially as not five minutes ago ye were threatenin' Sam with death cubed fer what she did t' ye. No more bein' at our mercy. No more bein' eaten by lyin' Irish temptresses. Back to the real world where things make sense."

"Well, yeah, when put it like that, it's great."

"An' how would ye put it? Ye're not tellin' me ye want t' stay?"

“Well, you'll need someone to help you guys out while Sam's on honeymoon. I suppose I could be persuaded to stay until she gets back. Maybe.”

“Well, I suppose I could have a word with the boss, see if he's willin' to take on a teenage troublemaker like you. Fer a short while.”

“Troublemaker? Me?” she bats her eyelids, “Surely you have me mixed up with someone else. A sweet, innocent little thing like me couldn't possibly be a troublemaker.”

“Ha! If ye're innocent, I'm the Pope.”

Del shrugs, “Can't blame a girl for trying.”

A short while later, Jackie lounges back into Paul's lap, her legs dangling over the arm of the chair, “So, what're ye gonna do about it?”

“Me? Why me?”

“Well, I jus' thought, what with you bein' the boss an' all, this was the sort o' thing ye should be decidin'?”

“You know you only ever call me 'boss' in a spirit of irony, Jaks.”

“Well, tha's true, I s'pose.”

“But you still mean I'm the one who gets the blame when Sam gets back and goes thermonuclear.”

“O' course.”

“What do the others think?”

She shrugs, “They both get on alright wi' 'er. Z likes her enough, and Petra's prob'ly already forgotten she's only s'posed to be here fer a month.”

“And we know what Sam thinks.”

“That Del should be hung, drawn, quartered, boiled in oil, put in the chair and given a lethal injection. Fer starters.”

“She'll adjust.”

“Sounds t' me like ye've made a decision.”

“It does, doesn't it?”

“An' ye'll let her stay?”

“Assuming we can sort out the legal side of things. She is a minor, after all.”

“An' ye're thinkin' her dad will say no?”

“I'm thinking asking him might not be a smart move given what started this.”

“Ah, I dunno. We could always blackmail him.”

“That's what I love about you, Jaks, your interesting approach to right and wrong.”

“Ye're sayin' we should leave her behind if she wants t' come?”

“Well, obviously not, but she's 16, she can't work for us without her dad's permission.”

“Sure she can. She just runs away from home. It's not like she hasn't been gone the last month anyway. If he doesn't know where she is, what's he gonna do?”

“Go out of his mind worrying about her?”

“Ah, she can phone 'im.”

“Well, thank you, counsel, for that legal solution to the problem.”

“So ye're gonna let her stay?”

“If that's what she wants.”

“If? Ye're thinkin' she's no' got the taste fer it? Are ye mad? Ye've caught her as easily as ye've got the rest of us.”

“Oh, so I've got you, have I? Despite this thing for young, studly construction workers?”

“Ye're a daft man, sometimes. Ye know ye've got me. A girl can eat fast food once in a while and still like t' have a real meal, y' know.”

“Or in your case be a meal?”

She smiles up at him. “Now there's an idea. I knew there was a reason ye were the boss.”

Elsewhere, Dell sits, she supposes, in the silent darkness, her engine off, and thinks, “*Was she serious? Was she really inviting me to stay? Hell, do I want to stay?*” she tries to move her head, to look around, feeling the van trying to respond, and sees only the same boring endless darkness. “*If it's like this, no way! But they wouldn't be that cruel, well, okay, the bitch queen from Hell would, but she's on honeymoon. Oh, I would so love to see her face when she gets back and finds me here and...*” she pauses, “*being victim to whatever sick, twisted fantasies the others can come up with. Which might be fun. And if I'm a member of the team, will I be able to have my own victims? Ooooh. That might be worth it just on its own. Ok, ok. Be sensible, Dell. What are the advantages: one: travel, they go all over the country; two: freedom, no dad watching over my shoulder and treating me like I'm a kid; three, (only three?): magic, the reason to hook up with this lot, fun, fun, fun, up to a point. Downsides: one: I'll be all alone, and I don't really know them; two: they might stick me in here and I wouldn't be able to enjoy myself; three: do I really want to be swanning around the country rather than getting ready for the real world? That doesn't even deserve an answer. The others don't seem to be doing too bad out of it, after all. Ok, three for three. Rational can't help any more. Shock. Guess I'll have to go with the gut. They don't seem like serial-killers, and Jaks is fun. I suppose Marcel isn't bad apart from his horrible, horrible taste in women, poor guy. And those sisters are weirder than weird, but not too bad. Hmmm. Don't know what the boss is like. Apart from weird. And a sadist. In a good way. That seems to be that settled then.*”

That evening, Dell feels the others moving about inside wherever the inside of the van with its apartments and endless rooms actually is, and all going to the same place. “*Now that is interesting. What could they all need to talk about? Maybe Jackie's getting them together to persuade them to keep me around. Well, I*

can't have people talking about me behind my back, can I?" she pushes her mind out through the darkness, swimming through the blackness, tasting the rusting metal of the van, mixed with a weird syrupy, electric taste, as she moves from the body of the van, with its silent engine and battered skeleton, into the strange world of the apartments, existing somewhere, well, else. It's not something she thinks about a lot, or about how she's doing this, just accepts it as part of being part of the van, just another bit of weirdness. She emerges into a world of noise, filtered light, and, above all, feet. The floor bulges under a table as her face pushes up against it, one pair of feet in unpolished black shoes one one side of the half-moon shaped table, and three in heels on the other.

"...so, are we all ready?"

"Yes, we're all ready. Ye decided not t' invite Dell, then?"

"Why would he invite Dell? This doesn't affect her."

"It might."

"Oh? Do you know something we don't?"

"Oh, I'm so not goin' there, Zil."

"Zrbtt!"

"Such language. Ye'd better hope I don't win too many days off ye. I might make ye regret it."

"Same applies back. I'll teach you to keep secrets."

"Do you want to stop listening under the table and join in, Dell?"

"What?"

"What?"

"What?"

"What?" Three heads dart under the table, staring at the bulge in the floor. "Uhm, hi."

"Someone get another chair." Paul leans down, casually shuffling cards with one hand reaching into the floor with the other. He pulls. Dell shudders as she's pulled out of the floor, the van sucking at her as she's pulled out. Dell stands up, a little unsteadily, brushing rust off her jeans. Then she looks up. "Wow." Zilvara sits at one end of the table, her black hair pulled back, a purple evening dress clinging to her, slit low on the chest and high on the sides. Petra's next to her in blue, complete with evening gloves, her hair piled into an ornate raven sculpture. Jackie sits at the other end, perched on her chair, her hair gleaming, a shimmering emerald off-the-shoulder dress swept over her body. "Where's the party?"

"Ah, we're just playin' dress-up. Got to look better'n a drunken mechanic's dressed ye t' sit at this table."

Paul rolls his eyes. Dell feels something caressing her, "Hey! What the?" and looks down at a fiery orange prom dress, her hair smoothed and cleaned, held back with a glittering tiara, teetering on a pair of high orange heels.

"Ah, Cinderalla, guess ye get t' come t' the ball after all."

"Yeah, yeah. If I'm Cinders, I guess that makes you my wicked step-mom and these two..."

"I wouldn't go any further. Ye might upset yer fairy godmother."

“And you might upset your magician.” he replies.

“Nah, ye're used t' me by now.”

“So, what's the occasion, now that I'm dressed for it?”

“Ah, we're just playin' t' see who gets t' be yer replacement. 'Course, if ye want to join in, maybe we'll let ye.”

“Why? She'll only get a couple of chips and we own her until then anyway.”

“So? It's not like I'll need too many chips to clean you guys out. And then I'll own you.”

“Sorry, Dell, but we can't let outsiders in to play. You'll have to watch.”

“I'll have to what????”

“We'll be moving. How would you play with them if we're in another state?”

“I'd come with you, of course.”

Paul arches his eyebrow, “Would you now?”

“Unless you mean to keep me inside this rustbucket. Then I'd have to reconsider.”

“I think we'd have to reconsider first. I don't recall offering to take you.”

“Well, no, but you would, wouldn't you?” she looks up at him, batting her eyes. “You can't just dump me back into the boring real world.”

“She does have a point.”

“True. I suppose I'll have to wipe her memory.” he looks around, “Where did my MIB flashy thing go?”

“You wouldn't!”

He shrugs, “Anyone have any objections to letting this underage van thief and general troublemaker join us?”

“Ha. Nice unbiased summin' up there, boss.”

“Thank you, Jackie.”

“What's she going to do? I mean, is she going to be in the show, or just be a general playtoy, or what?”

“General playtoy? In your dreams!”

“It is a good point. What will you be bringing to the party?”

“Pffft.” Dell waves dismissively, “I'm your driver. And I'm younger and prettier than any of these old ladies, so, of course, I should be in the show as well. And you can be my playtoy, Zil.”

“Well, that seems t' be a role settled: driver and general agitant.”

“Any other objections?” silence, “Any objections at all?” silence. “Well, I guess in that case, we can let you join in the game.”

Dell settles into the chair, “Cool. What we playing? Stud? Draw? Hold 'em? Please God don't tell me its 'jack.” she looks around the table, “What? I'm a Vegas girl. I've been playing cards since I could hold them. Deal me in.”

Paul slides a pile of shimmering chips across the table towards Dell, the chips turning orange as soon as Dell touches them. “Ok, we're playing standard Hold 'Em. Each chip is a day as the person who holds it's victim, within reason. Ante is a chip. Any questions?”

“Yeah. Why are you taking so long to deal?”

Paul starts dealing.

Time passes, hands flop, Dell's chip pile slowly gets smaller, mostly passing across the table to Jackie, along with a fair amount of blue and purple chips, although all the piles have become slightly speckled. Except for Dell's, a small, monochrome orange.

“Lady Luck doesn't seem to like you, does she?”

“Zil, this is poker. Luck has nothing to do with it.”

“Then I guess your skills have deserted you.”

“Bite me.” she picks up her cards.

More time passes, more hands flop, the piles of blue and purple dwindle, Dell's pile swelling. “How come you're suddenly winning all the time?” Petra asks as another stack of chips passes to Dell.

“You ever watched Maverick? I had to lose a few hands to pick up on your tells. You always blink a lot when you get a good hand, by the way.”

More time passes, the blue pile vanishes, then the purple. Cards halfway across the table. “What is it with these cards? I haven't had a decent hand in forever!”

“Guess Lady Luck doesn't like you right now, Zil.”

“Oh, blaaah!” she sulks, folding her arms.

“Just you and me, stepmom. Let battle commence.”

More time passes, blue and purple chips are traded across the table vigorously, but green or orange are a rare sight.

“Are ye ever gonna risk one of yer own days? I c'n play with these two any day.”

“How about you? I've got so many things I want to try out on you, Jaks. Ketchup figuring highly.”

“Promises, promises. Raise.” she tosses three blue chips into the pot.

More time passes, and the trade becomes one way, blue, purple and green flowing over to Dell.

“Oh, yeah, come to mama!”

“Ye don't think ye're crowin' a bit? Maybe countin' ye're chickens.”

“Maybe.” she grabs a handful of chips, raining them onto the pile, “But I've got a lot of chickens to count. Oh, and you'd better watch that little drumming when you haven't got anything. Like now. Raise.” a pair of blue chips land on the table.

Finally, the last green chip vanishes into a rainbow pile, sitting in front of Dell. She beams around the table. “That's 30 days for you, and you, and you. Now, playtoys, you know they say revenge is best served cold. Don't believe them. It's much more fun when it's still piping hot. Like now.”

“Well, not now, technically.”

“What? But I won!”

“And when your sentence is served, you can collect. But as the game's over, I think we should all get some sleep, don't you?”

“Yeah, yeah, I can wait a few days.” she grins evilly around the table, “Oh, this is going to be so much fun.” and with that, she slips back into the floor. Petra and Zilvara leave, grumbling about Dell's luck. Jackie leans back in her chair.

“Ye were dealin' crooked t'wards the end there, weren't ye?”

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Course ye don't. That isn't going t' become a habit, I hope.”

“As I don't know what you're talking about, I really couldn't say, but if I did understand you, I might say that Dell needs to have some fun before things degenerate back to more equal playtimes.”

“Which is why ye not only cheated, but didn't stop the game 'til we'd all run out of chips.”

“I have no idea what you're talking about.”

Jackie shakes her head, “Ye're a wicked, sadistic, cruel, devious, sneaky man. No wonder I like ye.”



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