

LUCK OF THE DRAW
(working title)

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an original work of fiction by Larissa Dahroug

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dedicated to those with the wisdom to keep ancient knowledge and traditions

CHAPTER 6

You Don't Pay My Mortgage

Eberly had refused to speak with Doug the entire car ride back from Buca. Doug and Jack had a particularly embarrassing argument and the manager had told Doug he was no longer welcome at the restaurant. Eberly almost had told him to leave by himself, but Stephanie took him aside and told him it was OK. They could get together later in the week. She and Jack did not hold Doug's behavior against him.

Everything had been fine until the waiter had come by with the dessert tray and Jack ordered not one but two desserts...a slice of cheese cake *and* tiramisu. Jack had laughed with the waiter saying he could splurge because all he had ordered for brunch was soup and salad. Under his breath Doug had said, "Yeah a giant bowl of cream soup and some lettuce with your salad dressing and bread." Eberly had kicked Doug as hard as he could under the table. Brunch had been so pleasant up until this point other than Doug being distant and inattentive to the conversation. Usually Jack let Doug's rude comments and digs roll off his back as if he didn't hear, but not this time. It had come as a shock to everyone when Jack looked at Doug and told him, "Go fuck yourself." Doug erupted in a tirade of telling Jack he should be ashamed to speak that way in a family restaurant with children seated next to them. However, the mother of the children seated at the table next to them, a portly woman herself, turned to Jack and pat his quivering hand on the table and told him to not "think a thing of it". At which point Doug had asked her if she just made babies or did she eat them too. Eberly and Stephanie sat in silent horror as Jack actually began to cry. At that point the waiter ran away and returned promptly with the manager who told Doug he needed to leave immediately and not return. Doug pushed away from the table and skulked out. Eberly apologized the woman and her children and hugged Jack then asked the manager if they required he leave as well. The manager said no, but not to bring Doug back ever again to that or any other Buca location. Stephanie then hugged Eberly and told him not to worry. Eberly had opened the small attache he carried and produced a slender leather envelope and pulled out four crisp one hundred dollar bills, placing two on the table where he had been sitting and two in front of the mother at the adjacent table and followed after Doug who was sitting in the Escape with the engine running waiting for him. They road back to Doug's downtown Mountain View townhouse in tense silence.

As Doug pulled into his parking space Eberly cleared his throat before he spoke.

"I should leave and not ever come back. What you did back there was an embarrassment to me and your profession. But since I Love you, I'm going to come in and give you a chance to explain yourself." Eberly spoke deliberately while looking at Doug's unmoving profile. Doug let Eberly finish then turned his hands over in his lap and sucked his teeth before getting out of the vehicle and walking to his front door leaving Eberly to open his own door for once. Eberly got out and slammed the door of the Escape behind him.

"Seriously, Mister. You are walking a very thin line right now." Eberly said to the back of Doug's head as he unlocked the door. Doug turned to Eberly and looked at him with mild irritation. He agreed his behavior had gotten a bit out of hand, but after the past 24 hours he really didn't care. He wasn't sure what was going on. He had never felt both so entirely trapped and liberated at the same time. The cognitive dissonance created by Mike and Oleg was messing with him and whether he wanted to admit it or not, the guilt of what happened to Amy was clawing at him from the inside like a caged animal desperate to live. He spoke flatly to Eberly. "Come in if you want and let's get this over with." Then Doug turned and disappeared into the townhouse. When Eberly walked in Doug was in the dining room pouring himself a double shot of bourbon.

"I'd prefer to have this conversation sober, then you can get smashed all you want after I leave." Eberly announced. Doug took a sip of the drink and swished it in his mouth then turned to Eberly.

"You're free to leave. I will do as I please in my house. You don't pay my mortgage."

"Fair enough, but really...what is your problem? Jack is a good person and it's not like you're sticking your dick in him. It's not like you live with him. It's not like he's your family! You know, we didn't bring it up over brunch, but Jack's father just died last week. He took a bottle of sleeping pills and Jack found him when he went over to drop off some begonias for his mother's planter boxes. Can you think of someone other than yourself for once? Jack is big, but he's not *that* big and like I said earlier, you've packed on some weight yourself these past few months so you really should check yourself. Now, I'm going to be quiet and give you a chance to explain to me why you've had a bug up your ass all day and why I shouldn't just go upstairs and gather the things from my drawer and not come back." Eberly sat down in the chair Mike had sat in the afternoon before. The sunflowers he had brought in that morning were arranged in a vase on the coffee table obscuring his face from where Doug was standing in the dining room. Doug

downed the shot and poured himself a second before sitting on the couch on the side farthest from where Eberly was righteously seated, in the same place he sat while being instructed by Mike and Oleg. He sat his drink on the table in front of him and sighed deeply before looking to Eberly and telling him everything that had happened the day before including how the rats weren't left by Alex. He stopped for a moment after talking about leaving Amy's apartment to gauge Eberly's reaction. Eberly had a complete look of terror on his face.

"You can leave and never come back if you want, but please, don't tell anyone, if not for my sake, for Galeena's." Doug told Eberly. Eberly began to cry.

"Oh my God, Doug! What are you going to do? You have to go to the police."

"No. I can't. They told me they'd kill Galeena, and they threatened Stewart."

At the sound of his name, Stewart sauntered down the stairs into the living room and meowed a long lazy meow. Eberly looked at Stewart.

"Oh, Stew-pie! What are we going to do? You can come live with me and Micah I guess, but your Daddy is in a lot of trouble." Eberly looked back to Doug. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know, Eb. I really don't know. Promise me you won't say anything."

Eberly got up from the chair and looked around the room before approaching Stewart and rubbing the kitty's ears. "I don't know, Doug. I'll keep my mouth shut, but I don't know if I can be with you anymore. I need some time to think things through." Eb said still rubbing Stewart's marmalade ears.

"Yeah. I would too." Doug replied leaning forward in his seat and staring at the palms of his hands against the corduroy of his pants. Eb walked over to Doug and kissed his forehead and whispered, "I Love you and I'm going home. Don't call me tonight. I'll call you tomorrow after work." Eberly turned and walked out stopping just briefly to touch one of the sunflowers on the table. As the door closed behind him Stewart trotted over to the couch and situated himself in a ball next to Doug. Doug began to cry.

In his classic VW Type 4, Eberly pulled on his driving gloves and sucked back his tears. He looked at himself in the rearview mirror. "Eberly, you need to cut this one loose." he said out

loud to himself. Then looked back to Doug's front door and sighed heavily before backing out of the parking spot and driving off. He got half way to his Los Gatos flat and decided to turn around and head back to Palo Alto to Stephanie and Jack's. Stephanie and Jack lived in married student housing on Stanford's campus. Stephanie was finishing a doctorate in Art history. Jack owned and ran a small flower shop not far from campus. That's where Eb had gotten the sunflowers for Doug. Flowers were how Jack and Stephanie had fallen in love. He had just opened his shop when Stephanie had began her masters at Stanford. She had ordered flowers from the shop for the tables at a faculty honors event and Jack had delivered them himself because he didn't have a delivery person and it was his first big order. He fell in love with Stephanie the moment they spoke. Jack had sent Stephanie flowers every day for a month until she accepted a dinner date, and the rest, as Stephanie explained, was history. On first appearance the couple had nothing in common, but that was in fact not true. Jack was a serious Art lover and specialized in flowers that were favored as subject matter by famous artists. This time of year he sourced and carried fifteen different heirloom varieties of sunflowers and all were arranged in greenish two tone vases like the famous painting by Van Gogh. Stephanie was set to graduate in the spring. Living in married student housing they finally had enough money saved for a down payment on a modest house. Jack was looking forward to growing his own sunflowers in a postage stamp yard in Willow Glenn.

As he approached the student apartments on campus he saw Stephanie and Jack's Bronco parked slightly crooked in an end spot. Eberly was lucky and found a visitor spot near by. He slipped the driving gloves off his graceful hands and placed them on the dashboard. Then he grabbed his bag and walked over to the apartment's call box and pushed the button for Stephanie and Jack's unit. Stephanie answered the buzzer.

"Hello? If this is Doug, go away."

"No Steph-Steph. It's Uncle Eb. Can I come in?"

"Oh. OK. Sure. Hold on."

Stephanie buzzed Eberly in and he made his way to their ground floor unit's door. Stephanie was standing in the doorway in her stocking feet sipping a glass of white wine. Eberly extended his arms in a hug motion as he approached her.

"Oh, Sweetie, I'm so so so so so sorry. Can I come in?" he asked as he hugged his niece.

"Of course Uncle Eb. You're always welcome. Jack's taking a nap. Do you want a glass of wine?" she asked as she turned toward the kitchen.

“That sounds divine.” Eberly answered following her.

“Jack is not taking a nap.” Jack said plodding down the hall from their bedroom rubbing his eyes and yawning. Eberly could see he had been crying. “Jack is right here.” he finished as he reached where Eberly and Stephanie were standing now both with a glass of sauvignon blanc.

“Jack, I am so sorry for how Doug behaved. I told him not to call me tonight that I needed to sleep on things.” Eberly offered a hug to Jack who only half heartedly accepted the contact.

“It’s OK, Eb. I know I’m not attractive, and I know Doug has a fat issue, but that was just too much today. I don’t want to see him at all for a while. If you’re staying with him, I understand. Love is Love, but I just can’t be around him for a while. Everything is too fresh.” Jack intimated while accepting a glass of wine from his wife.

“Oh, Honey, I completely understand. And I need to tell you guys something but you have to PROMISE to not tell ANYONE. It’s a matter of life and death...for Galeena, and if he’s not careful, maybe Doug too.” Eberly explained to the young couple.

“Come in here Uncle Eb. Let’s sit in here and you can tell us.” Stephanie said over her shoulder walking into the small living room and sitting in an authentic Deco chair that had been in Eberly’s family for almost 100 years. Jack situated himself on the floor with his back against the love seat and Eb sat in the bentwood rocker he had purchased for Stephanie’s birthday on his and Doug’s last trip to Maine. Eberly took a sip of his wine and explained everything that happened from the time he arrived at Doug’s in the morning to when they had gotten back to Doug’s place after the incident at Buca.

“Oh my God! Uncle Eb! What are you going to do?” Stephanie was genuinely concerned. The look on Jack’s face was another story.

“I don’t know Steph-Steph. I don’t know...I have to sleep on it. In the morning I’ll see how I feel. But you can’t say ANYTHING to ANYONE or they might kill for Galeena. That poor old woman. I thought something wasn’t right when Doug told me about her trip, but who am I?”

Jack got up scowling and headed back for the hallway to the bedroom.

“Jack-Jack, please, don’t say anything. I understand you don’t like Doug. I don’t like Doug right now either, but Galeena is totally innocent. Galeena Loves you and Stephanie.” Eb said desperately towards Jack’s wide spread back.

“I know Eb. I know.” was all he said before disappearing into the bedroom and closing the door. Stephanie looked at Eberly apologetically.

“It’s been a long day. Jack is tired. His Mom found a note from his Dad yesterday. He had been cheating on her for the last twenty years with her younger sister. Jack is devastated.”

Eberly gasped. “Oh, Steph-Steph. I am so sorry, Sweetie. Is there anything I can do?”

“No. Just keep Doug away, and maybe, if you’re over in Sunnyvale, pick up a box of See’s nuts and chews for next time you stop by. Chocolate always cheers Jack up.”

“Anything, Lovey. I need to be down that way on Wednesday for a meeting with an expert anyway. If you want I can pick up Spice Hut as well and swing by for din-din Wednesday night?”

“Jack Loves Spice Hut. Do you need me to write the order down?”

“Two orders of chicken lollipop, one chicken mahkini, one veggie korma, one saag paneer, two orders of rice, 4 orders garlic naan, one mango lassi, and one iced chai?”

“I don’t know how you remember these things Uncle Eb.”

“Oh, well, any editor worth his weight in salt has a good memory. Accuracy and consistency count for everything.”

Stephanie got up and hugged her uncle then picked up the remote and turned on the TV. “In the mood for some *Antique Roadshow*? I have some research to do for my paper and have a few episodes I need to watch for reference points.”

“Divine!” Eberly answered his niece and settled back into the rocking chair. “Bring that bottle in here!” he called after her as she was heading toward the kitchen.

“You read my mind, Uncle Eb. You read my mind.”