

carrot's choice | Brandi Kleinert Larsen

“For Chrissakes, Carrot, are you going to deal or sit there with your finger shoved up your yoo-hoo all day?”

Carrot's spine shot straight up, and he wheezed like an asthmatic. Rick saw this and smiled, trying to make peace of the situation, but his smacking gums only tripped Carrot up even further. Eisenhower tapped the table gently with his index finger, and Carrot closed his eyes and counted to ten.

Even though Carrot hosted poker, Rick got a severe sense of glee busting the poor guy's chops. The guys thought Carrot looked like the orange root because of his hair, but who looks like a vegetable? His hatred of the nickname was the exact reason Rick used it—even taught it to Carrot's parrot, that cheating bastard of a bird who beat them every week. Truth is, it had been so long that Rick couldn't even remember his host's real name. Let alone how he became the Carrotmeister.

Rick smacked his gums again. Carrot saw the shadow cast inside of Rick's open mouth. It matched the red embroidered “Rick” on his work shirt and Carrot remembered how much his wife Helene, buried four years, 228 days, and, glancing at his wristwatch, 6 hours give-or-take, had wanted him to wear a shirt that said “Saul” instead of the anonymous tie that came with his job in the mailroom.

“Okay, down and dirty for the final round. Quit daydreaming and deal the cards already, Carrot.”

Carrot snapped to attention and decided—no, knew that this would be the last hand he would deal to these sugar lumps. Maybe even one of them would take Irving, Helene's ridiculous macaw, who was only one hand away from winning his freedom. Maybe he should sell the bird to one of those goofy late-night talk shows and use the proceeds to buy a hammock in the Florida Keys. No. Then who would put flowers on Helene's grave? He'd just have to start playing better than his birdbrained friends.

“Eh, he's thinking of Helene, rest her soul,” said Eisenhower. “You deal when you're good and ready, Carrot.”

Eisenhower hardly ever spoke four words strung together, but when he did, dang it, it was something special. Carrot shuffled the cards, enjoying the smooth edges of his favorite deck; he laid its box out special even though the guys wouldn't

care how much time he put into making everything perfect. He slid the top card—face down, of course—to Eisenhower on his right, sitting so close that he could smell his peppermints. He knew that he was supposed to deal to the left, but old habits die hard, and it had been years since the guys called him on it. He returned to the deck and drew the next card for Rick across the table. Across the table wasn't very far, he only had to extend his elbow to sock him in the nose. Carrot told himself he didn't want Rick's blood everywhere and looked down at the deck, the cards taking the majority of space in his kid-sized hands.

Rick set down his Miller Lite, and the force shook the folding table. It annoyed Carrot. He should've kept the pink Formica dining set but couldn't bear to look at it after Helene passed. Like the bird, the table was really hers.

He couldn't think of her now. Instead, he focused on the pattern on the cards. It was different than the standard Bicycle deck, a pleasing pastel print like sunlight coming through the glass blocks of this room. He was happy he replaced the picture window with the squares so Helene didn't have to look at the ratty chain link fence of the white-trash couple next door. Carrot slid the next card to Irving and carefully clipped it to the bars of his cage so only the bird could see his final card.

“Aces, Carrot! Aces!” Irving cawed as Carrot dealt himself another lousy deuce from the top of the deck. Eisenhower sniggered, Rick grinned with another gum smack. Carrot realized he really should have folded.

“Irving won again,” Rick said.

“Double or nothing?” Eisenhower asked.

“No,” Carrot said. “The bird is free now.”

“He's a bird. He don't know the difference,” Rick said.

“Won it fair and square.” Carrot opened Irving's cage, but the parrot did not move. “Come on, you miserable bird, go.”

Irving didn't budge.

“Aces, Carrot! Aces!”

“Looks like the bird made his choice,” Eisenhower said.

“Guess so,” said Rick, smacking his gums.

“I hate you all,” Carrot said. The parrot and the guys just laughed. Carrot meant it. But it already didn't matter. Rick picked up the deck and began shuffling for the next hand.