



Short Story from the Vault

Heartbreaker

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1988

Stuart didn't do one-night stands. Never had. At his worst, the need to belong to someone had been more important than sexual gratification.

Although last night, the sexual gratification had been damn good. Smiling, he watched her as he got dressed. She lay on her stomach, her head profiled on the pillow. The temptation to touch one more time slammed into his awareness as did the sunrise.

Tracey had been coming into *The Catfish Crawl* for two months. She had been dropping hints for one. Outright invites had started two weeks ago, and Stuart's dry run had been long enough to make him think about it.

It had been amazing. He took a step back. It was good to have a woman beside him again. Sighing, he smiled and turned toward the door.

He came down the narrow staircase and into the kitchen. The cheap, metal table still held two chairs in the small space, his coat hanging over one. Dropping his bag to the floor, he pulled the leather on, zipped up the front.

Veronica, Tracey's roommate, leaned against the counter five feet away. In a barely there outfit. She smiled at him.

"Did you have fun?" she asked.

His gaze came up and he didn't dignify that with an answer. His lips barely curling, he nodded and picked up his bag, heading toward the door. He had about forty-five minutes to walk the six blocks home.

He got to the door.

"Stuart," Veronica said.

He stopped and turned but didn't say anything as she pushed off the counter, with a tall drink in her hand, and moved toward him.

"We haven't been introduced," she said.

They had been, of course, in the bar. The satin robe she wore might be tied in a knot at her waist, but it opened low enough to leave no imagination to her cup size or lady parts. Stuart might like to touch and feel but he liked it on his terms, when the time was right and not when it was being flashed in front of him.

"You serve drinks, right? At a bar?"

He had served her. "Aye."

"Oh good." She smiled, looking in the glass. "I tried to make a Zombie but I think I got the rum wrong." She held the glass toward him.

"I'm sure it's fine," he said.

She got too close and held the glass near enough for him to take it and taste.

He pushed her hand away, while she batted her eyelashes.

"Tracey is right upstairs," he said. "You know that."

"Tracey asked me to have the Zombies waiting when the two of you came down."

"Go ahead," he heard Tracey say.

He turned. Tracey stood on the bottom step, her hand on the railing. She kept her gaze down while nibbling on her lower lips. She hadn't bothered to put on much more than what Veronica was wearing.

She smiled and moved forward. "You can stay here today. We can expand our fun."

"Are you serious?"

"What do you think?" she asked.

A chuckle left him. Ah, twice the fool. Travis was right. Stuart fell for the wrong line at the wrong time. Two months of bar talking was just not enough to see a woman's truth. Clarity hit him.

He reached over, took the drink from Veronica, saw both women smile, and downed the drink in three swallows. He handed the glass back and leaned toward her.

"Too much sugar. Not enough lime." He looked at Tracey, seeing her clearly for the first time. Stupid. He was so stupid.

"Do not contact me," he said. "Stay away from the bar."

Her smile fell. "What?"

He turned and headed toward the door, his hand already on the handle before she caught him.

"What? No." She tried to laugh. "Stuart, this was a joke. We've been planning it for a week. We don't do that. You know that. Come on, you can laugh at it."

He pulled her arms off him and opened the door.

"Stuart. You can't leave." She said, grabbing onto him again.

He walked with her following, until her grip broke, by then he was on the walkway outside.

"Stuart."

He took the time to turn and face her. It might be before dawn, but it was not an excuse to be outside dressed in only an open robe, exposing yourself to the neighbors.

"You can't break up with me," she laughed. "We just started."

"Think hard, Tracey. Maybe you can figure who ended us in our tracks. Until you figure it out, get back in the fucking house before you freeze."

He turned, and this time walked away even as she called his name.

Home before dawn, he climbed the stairs, let himself in, dropped his bag onto the chair and headed for the cupboard to the right.

Ignoring Travis sitting at the table, his paper and pre-sleep coffee in his hand, Stuart reached in and pulled out a bottle and grabbed a glass.

"Before breakfast Bacardi. Must have been a great date. You didn't come home last night."

Stuart faced the cupboard and drank.

"You were going to introduce me to Tracey next week. Dinner, remember?"

"If you head over quick, I think you can meet both Tracey and her roommate in ways even you can't imagine. Dinner might be included, I'm not sure on that one."

He turned to smile at Travis.

Travis drank some coffee, nodded his head and looked up. "You wait out a woman that long and she didn't have a clue what would make you run fast?"

Stuart looked at him. "I don't think she was dressed for any type of opinion."

"What are you planning on doing? I mean besides giving up on women again?"

Stuart laughed and poured another drink. "I don't think I want a lot," he said slowly. "I know you think I have this list but it's really not long. Having a girlfriend, you really enjoy and who don't offer a threesome with her roommate, I wouldn't say that would be a bad thing."

"I should talk to Rhonda," Travis said.

Stuart's gaze shifted to him.

"No," Travis laughed. "I didn't mean for that. She's got this cousin. I met her once. She's pretty nice and not bad to look at."

"You're setting me up? It hasn't been an hour."

"If I let you go any longer, it'll be decades."

Once more, Stuart shot back the rum. He screwed the lid on the bottle to put away then rinsed his glass. "I'm going to take some time off. Maybe find a gig at the other end of the town."

"You think she'll be that persistent?"

"I can afford a little break from work."

He got his bag, hooked it over his shoulder and smiled his good-bye, heading toward the door.

He stopped, facing away and thought for a long second.

"Blonde?" he asked.

"Brunette. Kinda tiny, too. But not too short."

"I like brunettes," Stuart said, turning.

"Green eyes."

Stuart heard Travis' smile in his words.

Stuart didn't say anything, but he didn't move away either. He looked at Travis.

Travis got up, went to the phone and dialed.

He put the receiver to his ear and waited while Stuart watched and listened.

"Hey, yeah I know," Travis said into the phone. "I'm usually asleep about now. What do you think of your cousin joining us this Friday? Say seven o'clock for dinner and maybe a movie afterwards? I was thinking *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*? I have someone I want her to meet."