

Only the Rich

“Money is like muck, not good except it be spread.”
Francis Bacon, “Of Seditious and Troubles” *Essays*.

“Who the hell are you?” Jeff Stewart had just entered the front hall of his Rancho Palos Verdes mansion. A large man in his late forties, dressed in a charcoal silk suit, white shirt and red and purple striped tie, his gray eyes ablaze, filled the door frame as he loomed over me.

I had been anxiously anticipating this moment.

“Deirdre Connelly. Your new housekeeper, Mr. Stewart,” I replied as confidently as I could manage.

Meantime a large furry black dog had rushed out to greet his master and get affectionate pats from him.

“What are you talking about? Where’s Alejandra?” he demanded angrily.

“She had to return to Guadalajara. It was an emergency.”

“What emergency?” He was getting more frustrated and furious with each answer. His cheeks burned red, and his eyes bored into me.

“H-her father has been rushed to the hospital. They said he could go any moment.”

“And why didn’t Alejandra tell me this herself?”

“She tried calling you since she heard yesterday, but you weren’t picking up.”

“Did she say when she’ll be back?” he asked peremptorily.

“I wouldn’t count on that.”

“Why?”

“Her family wants her to stay and help with the family business. She’s been thinking about returning to Guadalajara. She’ll call once she knows what’s happening.”

He looked simultaneously confused and angry.

“So, who are you?” he demanded.

“A friend of Alejandra’s.”

“Well, you can get the hell out of here. I’ll choose my housekeeper. Not Alejandra.”

I remained silent. Stupid, thinking I stood any chance of getting away with this.

“Come to think of it,” he said, “I’ll call the agency right now.”

“Yes, sir.” I paused, then summoned up the courage to say, “But may I fill in until you find someone else?”

He hesitated, raising my hopes.

“Alejandra said you like scrambled eggs for breakfast,” I said.

“Not this morning,” he responded before realizing that he was accepting my offer. “I just want coffee and a croissant. You’ll find the croissants—”

“—In the freezer.”

“Serve it in the breakfast room. As soon as possible,” he said curtly, trying to recapture control of this turn of events.

“Yes, sir.”

As I made for the kitchen, I heard him call his dog to his side. “Sit, Nero.”

When I entered the breakfast room carrying a tray with his breakfast and now wearing a white apron, he was in the middle of a conversation with the employment agency, while simultaneously rubbing his dog’s floppy ears.

“Yes, I want to see three. Tomorrow morning. I prefer Central or South Americans. No one over fifty. What? Two thousand a month to start with, plus room and board. . . Yes. . . Goodbye.”

“Anything else, sir?”

“Yes.” He hesitated. “I have no idea what Alejandra’s schedule was for Thursdays, but—”

“No problem, sir. She left me a list of what to do each day. Today’s changing the sheets and cleaning your bedroom and bathroom.”

He immediately lost interest.

“If you say so. I’ll need that list once I’ve hired a permanent replacement.”

“That could be me,” I replied uncharacteristically with a shy smile.

He refused to be won over. “Don’t get your hopes up.”

“Oh, but they are up,” I made myself say as I closed the door on him staring at me indignantly. Beneath my assumed bravado I was not surprised at his hostile reaction. That was like normal. When had a man ever done me a favor?

Alejandra had warned me that Jeff Stewart lived in his own enclosed world here in Palos Verdes. According to her he showed no interest in the lives of his staff. He paid them generously and expected them to go about their work unobtrusively. But he had never once asked Alejandra

about herself or her family. He took no interest in her private life or what she did on her day off. She was just another commodity, like those he traded at his hedge fund firm. Did he even know she had family in Guadalajara? Also, he was a bit of a control freak. He expected Alejandra to be as pliable and invisible as possible, a ghostly presence to him.

Alejandra had added that Mr. Stewart seemed to want his girlfriends to act in the same passive manner. Apparently, he had divorced Maya, his wife until a couple of years ago, because she had developed an independence that he found abrasive, even threatening. According to Alejandra, his succession of girlfriends all assumed a demure manner and a fake subservience that he expected. Probably they acted the same way in bed, Alejandra had joked.



Watching Mr. Stewart's yellow Lamborghini disappear down the bend of his private drive an hour later, I flopped down in a chair and breathed a deep sigh of relief. On the table the *Wall Street Journal's* headline read PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: THE FIRST 100 DAYS. I couldn't read further. I had my own problems.

I remembered yesterday morning when I had arrived at the back door bleeding from a head wound, crying, incapable of explaining myself to Alejandra. Instinctually she'd put her arm round me and led me into the house.

Who else could I have turned to but Alejandra? I'd first met her in our early twenties when the two of us rented a car from Rent-A-Wreck and wandered down the west coast from LA as far as Ensenada. I had paid for that trip with a settlement I'd received for being bitten at a pet grooming service where I had been an assistant. That trip had been a great experience, filled with too much booze, bronzed guys, and lazy sunbathing on wide sandy beaches. After a few weeks in Ensenada, I'd been robbed of my savings by a couple of good-looking young men who'd left my and Alejandra's beds in the early hours of the morning with all my money. That cut that trip short. We barely made it back hitchhiking and trading meals for sexual favors.

The following year, I'd landed a job providing live-in homecare for Alejandra's fragile elderly aunt Judy who was beginning to suffer from dementia. Her aunt was as warm and lovable

as Alejandra. The years I spent with her before she died were much the best years of my life. The only really satisfactory years of my sad existence. After that everything had turned to shit.

Once my sobs had died down, Alejandra had asked me what had happened.

Since I'd last seen her, I explained, I'd finally left Tom, something Alejandra had long urged me to do. That was about four months ago. When I could no longer pay for a cheap motel, I told her, I'd gotten myself a tent at the thrift store and camped out on Beacon Street in San Pedro. One of the homeless at the age of forty. Brilliant. Every week we had to move for a street cleanup. That was the doing of the local city councilperson who was thought to be planning to run for mayor of Los Angeles next time around. I had to stay awake in my tent at night to prevent having my stuff stolen, usually by others in need of a fix. Evenings on Beacon Street offered a compensation. By then everyone was high on something, and it turned into a bizarre kind of street party. Mornings were for sleeping—when you could.

“But last night,” I told her, “Tom suddenly turned up at my tent. He wanted sex, of course. When I refused, he started beating up on me, the very reason I had left him. I started screaming. He grabbed my only saucepan and hit me on my head. I passed out. When I came to, I was lying on the street surrounded by the others in the encampment asking each other if they should call 911. My tent was burnt to the ground. They said they had put it out. But everything in it had been consumed by the fire. You were the only real friend to whom I could turn.” Tears filled my eyes. “Please can you help me?”

“My poor Deirdre. Of course. Let's get you cleaned up.”

Alejandra was so caring, watching over me as I showered (the first time in over a week), offering me a luxuriously thick warm towel and selecting a change of clothes from her own wardrobe while mine were being washed and dried. She made me a large breakfast in the kitchen and took me to her bedroom at the back of the house where I instantly fell into a deep sleep.

Late that afternoon Alejandra woke me with a mug of sweet tea. Her face was now drained white.

“What's the matter, Alejandra?”

“My mother phoned to say my dad is failing.”

“Failing?” I asked.

“He's got stage 4 cancer. It spread from the colon.” A few teardrops fell down her cheeks. “I have to leave for Guadalajara this evening.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“The question is, what are we going to do with you?”

“I don’t know. I’ve got nothing left, except some cash and my cellphone that I always keep hidden in my bra. I’ve nowhere to go.”

“Didn’t you say you have a sister who lives in Inglewood?”

“Yes. Gloria. But we haven’t talked in years.”

“That’s a shame. Do you think if she knew your situation, she’d help?”

“No. She wouldn’t even open the front door to talk to me.”

“Why?”

“She blames me for what happened to my dad. She thinks I’m responsible for his death.”

“Oh, Deirdre.”

After a pause I said, “I could sleep in the garden. It has all those shrubs. No one would notice me.”

Alejandra shook her head. “Not a good idea. Mr. Stewart often goes for a walk in the garden before dinner. Not that he’s going to be home before tomorrow morning.”

That gave me an idea.

“What if I offered to take your place?”

Alejandra furrowed her brows. “I don’t see him agreeing to that. He’s someone who always has to control everything around him.”

“But you have to leave so quickly. Don’t you think he’d appreciate someone filling in?”

“Look. I won’t be here. So, it’s up to you.”

“If he let me stay, I’d leave when you got back.”

“I don’t know if I’ll come back. I’ve been thinking of going back home for a while now. So, you can stay in here if he lets you.”

“I’ll miss you, Alejandra.”

Alejandra hugged me reassuringly.

“If you’re going to try to step into my shoes, I better show you round the place. And I’ll need to write you out a schedule—of what I do each day.”

“Thank you so much. You’re such a good friend.”

“I’d love to be here to see his face when you greet him tomorrow.”

“Thank you, thank you, Alejandra. I’d reached the end of the line. I just couldn’t see any way forward.”

There was an awkward pause.

“Well, good luck running this house, if you can persuade him to let you. He’s a heartless bastard.”

He’d hardly be the first bastard I’d worked for. What is it, I wondered, about being someone’s boss? Why does it always seem to make them so mean?



Once Jeff Stewart had driven off, I went to his landline phone and pressed redial.

“Pacific Staffing Agency,” a woman’s voice announced.

“Hello. I am calling on Mr. Stewart’s behalf. He set up some interviews with you tomorrow for a housekeeping position.”

“That is correct.”

“He apologizes. He’s changed his mind. Please cancel the interviews.”

“Alright. Please ask him to contact us if we can assist him in any way.”

“I’ll pass the message along. Thank you.”

I hung up the phone and took a deep breath. What would Jeff Stewart do once he discovered what I’d done? I was shaking. This was so unlike me. Until lately I had played a passive role in my life. If a boyfriend made a decision affecting both of us, I would go along with it without questioning him. Where had I learned to do that? My mother, obviously. Ever since I could remember, my mother had acted that way. No surprise she had always urged me to defer to others, almost always men. That summed up her whole life.

I recalled the time I’d worked as a bagger at a Vons in Redondo Beach. I was there for three years while trying to put myself through college. That must have been over twenty years ago. I made \$11 an hour, not bad for that time. There I go, I thought, justifying a wage that barely supported me. No. That didn’t cover my basic living costs. Luckily, I was also receiving a college grant. At any rate, Vons worked out for me until a new manager arrived. What a nasty piece of work he was. He thought his position made him irresistible to any female employee

under forty. A balding, pot-bellied, middle-aged slime bag, he was too smart to openly harass us. Instead, he made tacky comments and unwanted contact whenever he cornered one of us on our own. After he had pressured several assistants into having sex with him—surprise!—he set his sights on me. It was a nightmare. I spent much of my time avoiding being trapped with him on his own in the store. Then he began calling me into his office. It culminated with his summoning me to his office and jerking off in front of me. After that I quit. Several of my colleagues had urged me to press charges. Me? Press charges? I'd been through too many similar situations with men to expect anything different. Instead, I slunk off and took a job as an assistant pet groomer.

So, what had caused my new assertiveness? Was it sheer desperation? Would it last? Certainly, it made me feel good about myself. It proved that I didn't have to accept the role life had dealt me. I didn't have to be one of its many victims. Even if my phone call led to my being thrown back out on the street, I would no longer tell myself that that was all I deserved. Come to think of it, what made Jeff Stewart the master of my fortune? What made him different? Only money. Anyone could accumulate that.

Who was I kidding? If that were the case, why was I penniless?

I decided to explore the house. I entered a room that felt like an exhibition space in a museum. It was filled with glass cases displaying a strange collection of obviously ancient objects—a decorated vase, a crudely carved sexless figure arms upraised, a bronze vessel in the shape of a ram. On one wall was a painting on a chunk of plaster of a warrior slicing off a serpent's head from an angry woman whose hair took the form of writhing serpents. On the opposite wall a carved marble slab portrayed a young boy and his dog. A side room was devoted to guns of all kinds, including some modern semi-automatic weapons locked in a case. Clearly, Jeff Stewart must be a collector.

The next room was the dining room filled with a long oak table capable of seating at least twenty people. That room opened into the living room with an enormous wraparound white sofa that looked readymade for sex. Next, I came across a media room with a television screen covering one entire wall and a hi-tech music system, both controlled by a remote so complex that you had to use two hands to hold it. I had already been in the breakfast room. The last room on the ground floor was an airy, well-lit fitness room with various exercise machines fixed to a glossy wood floor.

Going upstairs I explored the master suite. Opening the door of the walk-in closet, I was confronted with a long row of suits. I was vaguely reminded of Robert Redford mesmerized by his vast array of shirts in *The Great Gatsby*. Looking at the labels, I didn't recognize the brand names – Loro Piana, Brioni Vanquish, Kiton K50. Out of curiosity I googled a Kiton suit on my cellphone. It cost \$8,000.

No money had been spared on the enormous master bathroom with its double embossed glass doors that opened automatically as I approached. A long white cabinet with a marble top lining one wall featured two dark blue oval wash basins, a full-length framed mirror with concealed strip lighting, golden faucets issuing from the mirror, and two glazed pots containing white orchids. Opposite, the oval cream-colored tub sported a single gold faucet in the shape of a swan's neck and head. In an adjoining room was a dual flush toilet/bidet with heated seat. It had its own remote that looked as complicated as the one in the media room. Next to it a rack was filled with glossy magazines that on inspection were full of soft porn. Adjoining it was a dressing room that opened onto a balcony lined with boxes of geraniums. Above the cabinet hung a poster of a reclining young woman in the nude offering her butt to the viewer.

After briefly inspecting the four smaller (but still huge) bedrooms with walk-in closets and private bathrooms, the playroom, and the laundry room and the line closet on the landing with shelf upon shelf of linen, pillows, blankets, and towels, I abandoned my inspection. One part of me was in awe at how perfect and luxurious everything was. Another part remembered the sparse contents of my tent. Two utterly different worlds.

I wandered out into the garden. It was like a miniature park. Next to the patio at the back of the house was a long narrow swimming pool lined with square blue tiles. Behind that was a fenced tennis court. Circling round both pool and court was a grassy area dotted with fruit trees. I recognized orange and lemon, peach and apricot trees.

A man in his sixties with a large shaggy lab lying next to him was sitting against an orange tree.

“Good morning,” he greeted me. “And who are you?”

“I'm the new housekeeper,” I said. “Deirdre.”

“I'm the gardener. Mateo. And this is Lobo,” he said pointing to his dog. “Good to meet you.”

He offered me his hand. It was gnarled and powerful.

“What happened to Alejandra?”

I explained.

“She was a sweet one. I always had a secret crush on her. Completely innocent.”

“Of course.”

“At least once a week we would eat our lunch together out here on the patio. She would sneak out delicacies from the kitchen while Alice—she’s the cook, you know—wasn’t looking.” He sighed. “I’ll miss her.”

“Me, too. We were friends from long ago.”

“I hope you like the job. I know it was hard for her at times.”

“In what way?”

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

There was a pause while he took out a tissue and blew his nose loudly.

“I’d better go now,” I said. “See you around, Mateo.”

Back in the house I entered the kitchen and came face to face with a large red-faced woman in her fifties dressed in a white chef’s jacket and hat. She’d just showed up.

“And who are ye?” she demanded in a Scottish accent, transfixing me with her piercing blue eyes.

“My name’s Deirdre.”

“I don’t care what your name is. What are ye doing here?”

“I’m substituting for Alejandra.”

“Ye don’t think she would have told me that?”

That didn’t call for an answer.

“I’m wanting ye to leave this hoose immediately, or I’ll call the cops.”

“I suggest you call Mr. Stewart first and ask him if I’m here with his permission.”

For the first time the woman faltered. “So, where’s Alejandra?”

“In Guadalajara. Her dad’s failing.”

“It had tae happen on my one day off in the week.”

“That wasn’t her fault.”

“Don’t get cheeky wi’ me,” she said sharply.

I stayed silent.

“Well, sae long as you’re part of this household let me tell ye that the kitchen is my domain. Ye don’t shift a thing here without my say-so.”

“Of course,” I said meekly.

“Ye collect the master’s meals from here when I tell ye they’re ready. And once he is finished ye eat what I give ye at this table in the kitchen.”

“Whatever you say,” I replied, trying to placate her.

“My name’s Alice, and I’ve been cook here for the bygone seven years.”

“Nice to meet you, Alice.”

“Now get along with ye. Alejandra told ye what needs doing?”

“She sure did.”

“Well, off with ye,” Alice said.

I left the kitchen and made for the laundry room.

Back in Jeff Stewart’s bedroom I attacked the sheets as if they were their owner, stripping the bed in a fit, then slowly calming down as I remade it.