

The Winner

“It’s been an exciting day in junior-college basketball, but with just seconds left on the clock, it looks like the Southside Flying Squirrels will maintain their one-point lead over the Westside Kangaroo Rats. No, wait! Number thirty-eight of the Kangaroo Rats has just stolen the ball. He’s racing down the sideline. With one second left he shoots from half court. There’s the buzzer. The ball’s in the air. Swish! The basket’s good. What a shot! The Westside Kangaroo Rats win the—”

“Ha! I told you so,” Vicky Ventura said, switching off the car radio. “Pay up, mister.”

“I don’t believe it,” Chance muttered. “I swear if my last name were ‘Luck,’ my first name would be ‘Rotten.’” He reached in the breast pocket of his jacket, pulled out his wallet, and drew forth a twenty to hand to his wife.

“This rabbit’s foot”—he eyed the furry appendage hanging from his rearview mirror—“hasn’t brought me any more luck than it did the rabbit.”

“Well, if you wanted to double your money, you should have folded it and stuck it in your pocket. Now give me the dough, the bread, the moolah, the smackeros.” She snatched the twenty from his hand, gloating with a good-natured laugh provoked by the affectionate banter.

“Thank God all our money is in joint accounts. Otherwise, I’d go broke paying you off.” He chuckled too. “As it is, we’re just robbing Peter to pay Paul.”

“And, oh, how sweet it is,” Vicky said, kissed the bill, and stuck it in her pocket. “Kaching.”

“Yeah, it’s always sweeter to win money than to work for it. But you’ve got to give me a chance to at least break even. Are you ready to try your luck again?”

“That’s what luck is for, isn’t it? So, go ahead, Mister Money Bags. Put all of your nest eggs in my one basket. I’ll bet you twenty dollars the next song we hear on the radio will be a Beatles song.”

“You’re on.”

Vicky switched the radio back on and quickly turned the dial. A moment of silence. Then a measure of piano doubled by bass guitar. Lead guitar and drums in the second measure. Next, rhythm guitar in the third. Finally, vocals. It was John Lennon singing “Give Me Money.”

Chance sighed, took out his wallet again, and handed his wife another twenty. “You’re on a roll. How in the world did you know?”

Vicky sang along with the song, smiling at her husband, bobbing her head, and swaying in time to the music as she took his money.

Two minutes later, the song ended, and the announcer came on the air. “You’re listening to K109.4, all Beatles, all the time.”

“Hey, that’s not fair. You cheated,” Chance said in mock indignation.

“Ah, it’s true. There really *is* a sucker born every minute.” She winked at him and giggled, stuffing the twenty in her pocket along with the other one.

As they approached the red light at the northeast corner of City Park, Vicky was the first to notice a shabbily dressed man on the curb up ahead holding a cardboard sign that said HOMELESS. HUNGRY. PLEASE HELP.

“Why don’t you give that poor man some money?” she suggested.

“Why don’t you? You’re the one with two twenties in your pocket.”

“Oh, come on. He’s on your side. And he needs our help.”

“Hmpf. Any money we gave him he would just waste on getting wasted. His sign ought to read *Sober. Sad. Please souse*. Those homeless guys are all alike. They’re too lazy to work, so they just stand around and beg until they get enough money to get drunk on.”

“You don’t know that. How can you say such a thing?”

“I didn’t. Oscar Wilde did.” Chance raised his right index finger as if to make a solemn pronouncement and said in a pompous, pontifical voice: “Work is the curse of the drinking class.”

“That’s horrible.”

“No, it’s true. I’ll bet you anything.”

“Anything? Okay, Mr. High Roller, I’ll bet you fifty bucks he doesn’t spend the money you give him on alcohol.”

“I’ll see your fifty and raise you fifty.”

“High-stakes gambling, huh? I’m in. A hundred dollars it is, buster.”

“Oh, this is too easy.” Chance snickered. “It’s like taking candy from you, baby.”

When he came to a stop at the light, Chance took out his wallet again, rolled down his window, and handed the beggar a crisp hundred-dollar bill.

“God bless you,” the beggar said before he looked at the bill.

Right then the light changed. Chance rolled up his window and turned left.

“Well, this is the safest bet I ever made. Talk about a sure thing. It will be worth the hundred dollars I gave him to win a hundred dollars from you.” He turned and grinned at his wife. “Keep your on eye on him. We’ve got to see what he does next.”

Vicky turned back to look at the beggar.

“He’s jumping up and down and waving the money at two guys sitting at a picnic table. Now he’s dancing. How funny.” She slapped her husband lightly on the right thigh.

Chance parked the car in the first empty space on the left side of the street. “Let’s get out and watch him from behind that big tree over there.”

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A minute later they had taken their positions, each peeking out from one side of the thick trunk. The beggar had ended his dance and was strutting across the street.

“Ha! I knew it,” Chance said. “He’s going into Booze and Bites. That place has every kind of liquor, beer, and wine you can imagine. It’s hooch heaven. Potation paradise.

Bacchanalian bliss. Inebriate nirvana. Come on. Let’s go.”

“Not so fast, my little alliterator. Let’s wait till he comes out.”

“You know you have a better chance of winning the lottery than winning this bet, don’t you? Come on. The jig is up. The game’s over.”

“I haven’t heard the fat lady sing, and don’t you dare say it was me in the car. I’m warning you.” She pointed her finger at him and peered over the rim of her glasses, though she couldn’t suppress a playful laugh. “Besides, you said these jeans didn’t make me look fat.”

“You women fall for that one every time,” Chance joked back at her.

A couple of minutes later, the beggar came out of the store with two big white bags, one under each arm, obviously too heavy to hold by the string handles.

“Looks like he’s carrying quite a load,” Chance said. “Must mean he’s about to get loaded.”

The beggar crossed the street, walked over to the picnic table where his two friends were sitting, and unpacked the bags.

“What did he buy?” Chance asked.

“Looks like barbecue, pinto beans, potato salad, coleslaw, some rolls . . . and bottled water.” She sounded the last two words with a note of triumph.

“Are you sure it’s not vodka?”

“Not unless Ozarka has bought a distillery.” Vicky held out her hand.

“I’ve had a rash of bad luck here,” Chance said, making a sour face. “While you’re basking in four-leaf clover, I’m sitting in poison ivy.” Shamming reluctance, he got out his wallet again, took out a hundred-dollar bill, and laid it in Vicky’s open palm.

“Now that’s what I like, a man who pays his debts promptly. I would hate to have to send someone to break your kneecaps.”

“Well, maybe that guy isn’t a drunk, but he’s still a bum.”

“Or maybe he just got a bum rap.”

“I doubt it. Hard luck doesn’t come from hard work. If he had any job skills, he wouldn’t be in this position.”

“Oh, yeah? Then how about another bet?”

Chance feigned a grave expression. “Woman, I’m beginning to think you have a serious gambling problem. You might need to go to Gamblers Anonymous.”

“Gambling is only a problem when you lose, my dear,” Vicky shot back, her right hand on her hip and her head cocked. “That makes *you* the one with the problem. I might have to send you to L.A.”

“Los Angeles?”

“Losers Anonymous.”

“Very funny, Miss Happy-Go-Lucky. But I think my luck is about to change. I’m ready to roll the dice, spin the roulette wheel, pull the handle on the slot machine. What are the stakes?”

“Quite the player, aren’t you? In that case, I’m upping the ante. If he has a job skill you can use, then you give him a job, and you get him set up with a place to live and a means of transportation. And that goes for his friends too.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

“Then you get back the hundred and forty you lost today plus bragging rights forever.”

“Bragging rights?” Chance rubbed the palms of his hands together. “I’d say that’s better than two-to-one odds in my favor.”

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Chance and Vicky left their lookout post behind the tree and walked hand in hand toward the picnic table. When the beggar looked up and caught sight of them, he rose and hurried to meet them.

“I can’t thank you enough, sir,” he said. “We haven’t had a meal like this in I don’t know how long.”

“Glad to help. By the way, this is Vicky, and my name’s Chance. What’s yours?”

“Val Hammer, sir.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, Val. How did you end up like this anyway?”

“It was just dumb luck, sir. I was a roofer—”

“A roofer,” Vicky said to her husband. “Did you hear that?”

“Yeah, I heard it.”

“And one day,” the beggar continued, “I was kneeling down, nailing a shingle over a gable. The pounding must have rattled a hornets’ nest under the gable because a whole swarm of them came whirring out. I started flailing my arms to protect myself since I’m allergic to their stings, but three of them stung me in the face. I jumped to my feet, lost my balance, and fell off the roof.”

“That *was* an unlucky break,” Chance said.

“It was two unlucky breaks: my right arm and my left leg. After that, I couldn’t work for quite some time, so I didn’t get any checks, and I had medical bills I couldn’t afford. Then, I missed a payment on my truck, and they repossessed it. I couldn’t make my rent the next month, and they evicted me. So, here I am.”

“I see you bought lunch for your buddies there,” Chance said, pointing towards the picnic table.

“They’re the best friends I ever had, sir. We always pool our resources and share.”

“Tell me about them.”

“Well, the tall, skinny one is Rocky Steinmann. The first night I was on the streets, it was cold. When he saw I didn’t have any covering, he folded his blanket in half, took out his pocketknife, and made a slit at the top of the crease. Then he tore the blanket in two and gave me half. I’ve slept with that blanket every night since.”

“So, what’s his story?”

“His wife and son were killed in a car wreck. When he fell apart, everything else did too. You know how it is. You push the first domino, and they all fall one after another: job, car, house, everything.”

“And what did he do?”

“He was a bricklayer.”

“A bricklayer,” Vicky said. “Did you—“

“Yeah, I heard it,” Chance interrupted. Then, turning back to the roofer: “And the other guy?”

“He just goes by ‘Sarge.’ He doesn’t say much. In fact, he hardly talks at all. He was a Marine and did three tours of duty in Iraq. Probably saw some pretty horrible things. After I was on the streets for about a month, though, I reached a point where I couldn’t go on. I was about to end it all. Sarge put his hand on my shoulder, looked me straight in the eye, and said, ‘The Marines leave no man behind. I’m bringing you back, soldier, and I’m sticking by your side till we get you home.’ That was the most he ever said at one time, and he’s been by my side ever since.”

“I’m thinking he’d make a good security guard at one of your properties,” Vicky said to her husband.

“Here’s the deal,” Chance told the beggar. “I own a construction company, and I’m always on the lookout for a good man. I pay a fair wage for an honest day’s work. Now, I don’t usually place a wager on a long shot, but today I’ll make an exception. If you three want to work, I’ll give you a job.”

“And . . .,” Vicky said to remind him.

“And I’ll pay your first month’s rent on a three-bedroom apartment and make a down payment on a truck you can share to get to work and back. That’ll get you started. After that, you’re on your own.”

The beggar had tears in his eyes. “I-I don’t know what to say.”

“Say you’ll be on that corner eight o’clock Monday morning. I’ll pick you up.”

“Yes, sir. It’s a deal. We’ll be there.” He wiped the tears from his eyes but kept crying all the same.

“See you then,” Chance said and turned to walk back to his car.

Vicky lingered behind. “I’ll catch up with you in just a minute,” she called to her husband.

“It was so nice of you to buy us lunch yesterday,” the beggar told her, “but when you said you’d be back today, I had no idea it would turn out like this.” He couldn’t stop crying.

“I told you I had an ace up my sleeve. Let’s just keep this our little secret, okay?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

* * *

Back in the car, Chance said, “Well, Lady Luck really smiled on you today.”

“We girls have to stick together, you know,” Vicky said.

“As much as I hate to admit it, maybe you were right. Maybe those three guys weren’t bums after all. They might just be down on their luck.”

“Kind of like you today, huh?”

“Hey, you don’t have to rub it in. Don’t be a sore winner,” Chance said, playing hurt.

“Anyway, I have a good feeling about this. I bet those three guys are going to work out just fine.”

“Well, that’s one bet I hope you win,” Vicky said.

“To tell the truth, I don’t even mind losing the last one. I’m glad I can help them out. At least, I’m willing to take a gamble on them.”

“That’s what I love about you, Chance.”

“That I like to help people?”

“No, that you’re such a good loser. You really are a good sport, and that makes you a winner in my eyes.”

Chance started the car, and the radio came on, the dial right where Vicky had left it. Immediately, she recognized the voice of Paul McCartney singing “Money Can’t Buy Me Love” and started to sing along.

Chance looked at her, smiled, and, taking her hand, joined in the song.

Glossary of Names

Vicky: short for “Victoria” (Latin), meaning “victory.” Vicky wins all the bets.

Chance: both “luck” or “fortune” and “risk.” Chance is always willing to take a risk and try his luck, betting with Vicky.

Ventura: luck, fortune (Italian).

Val: short for “Valentine” (Latin), meaning “strong”

Hammer: the tool. As a roofer Val Hammer wielded a strong hammer.

Rocky: like a “rock”

Steinmann: stone man or stonemason (German). Rocky Steinmann was a bricklayer.

Sarge: short for “sergeant,” which comes from the Latin *servire*. Sarge served in the Marines.