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Coin Toss

By: Dominique Cobb

“Can I have a shot of...” Valerie starts before looking to the ceiling to complete her sentence, “Vodka or whisky?”

Valerie flips a coin. If it’s heads, whisky. If tails, vodka. She catches it and shows the bartender.

“Vodka, please.”

The bartender nods his head and sets a shot down in front of her. She downs it without hesitation and takes a deep breath. This sucks. She clenches her jaw and crosses her arms. It isn’t fair to be left alone in a place where people are meant to mingle. After all the effort Valerie put into her hair and makeup, not to mention the dress. The dress! The little black dress that hugs her waist and highlights her curves. It takes her forever to put it on and even longer to take it off. All of the breathing techniques to zip it up. She looks stunning, and for what? *Andre?*

It was stupid! She got all dolled up and didn’t just wait thirty minutes. She waited for three hours at the restaurant across the street. There should’ve been a call, a text, a messenger pigeon. Something! To add salt to the wound, *Andre* unadded her on Instagram. They’d been talking for weeks. She knew about his goals and aspirations. How he spends his free time and where he works. They talked for hours each day and night. It was *Andre* who suggested the date.

“Another shot?” The bartender asks.

Valerie nods. She takes the shot and looks over at the people dancing. Most of them are bouncing and spinning, moving in the way people do when they don't know how to dance, but they know how to have fun. There are couples scattered around the dancefloor, hugging and kissing as they sway to an upbeat song. What's up with that? Valerie wouldn't know. She has never been in love. She'd like to join them. It would be fun to dance in delusion. As if there is a slow song playing, and there aren't sweaty people surrounding the lovers. What would it be like to be so lost in someone else, with not a care in the world?

“Must be nice.”

Valerie turns to the bartender to find him observing her. His gaze immediately shifts to the drinks he's fixing. His shaggy hair falls over his brow as he pours a shot for another patron. Valerie's finger circles the rim of her shot glass. He isn't looking at her. He's probably watching all those people doing their crazy dances. Valerie should be doing crazy dances, too. She could've gone out with her friends instead of going out with some guy, only to get embarrassed. A lump forms in her throat, even though the last thing she needs is to cry in public. She should've just gone home and sat with the disappointment alone. Instead, she's sitting under dimmed lights, highlighting her heated cheeks, listening to music that's giving her a headache.

“You look nice. What's the occasion?” the bartender asks.

Valerie glances up. “What makes you think it's an occasion? I sulk in bars all the time,” she jokes. “It's a special hobby of mine.”

“Hey, me too. That's how I got my job,” He cleans his shaker tin. “If you come here often enough, they won't let you leave. But the pay is nice.”

Valerie cracks an actual smile. She shakes her head and turns away to continue watching the dance floor. The bartender doesn't turn away. He steps closer, rests his elbows on the counter, and watches with her.

"This place is so fun."

The bartender nods in agreement. "So why are you sulking?"

"Why would anyone be sulking in a place like this?" she huffs before hesitantly admitting. "I was stood up."

The bartender takes a rag and wipes down the counter as Valerie fidgets with her shot glass. She eventually scoots it over to the man, and he grabs the bottle of vodka. He doesn't pour. He just sits it beside the glass. Valerie's eyes trail from the glass to meet his gaze. He twists his lips and focuses back on his work. The bartender takes the shot glass and holds it firmly in place as if it might tip over.

He fills the glass as his chest fills with air. "You know, you could fix that."

She raises a brow. "Fix what?"

"Being alone."

He glances at Valerie as he slides the shot glass back to Valerie. Their fingers graze each other as she grabs it. When their eyes meet again, Valerie bites her bottom lip. Maybe she doesn't need another shot. Either she's tipsy, or the bartender is flirting. She can't figure out which was which. She could continue playing her solitary game and flip a coin. If heads, she'll flirt back. If tails, she'll call a cab. When the bartender wanders off, Valerie takes her coin and tosses it.

The coin goes up and flips a few times before hitting the counter and falling to the floor. Valerie hurries to peek over the bar. The bartender looks down at the coin on the floor and reaches for it.

“What’s it say?”

The bartender shows Valerie the coin and Valerie purses her lips. Tails. She takes the coin back and looks down at the full shot glass. She studies the bartender. It’s his job to be nice. Most servers have the ability to read people and know what they need. It comes with the territory. Valerie’s not special. He’s just doing his job. She doesn’t know anything about him. He doesn’t even have a nametag, and they only spoke for a minute.

Valerie puts her credit card on the counter, and the bartender takes it on his way to the register. She continues to fidget with the shot glass as she looks for a ride home. She’s had a long night. There’s no way she’s getting rejected twice in one day. The coin has spoken!

When the bartender returns with the receipt, Valerie takes her shot.

“Would you like to dance?” She asks.

The bartender tilts his head with raised eyebrows. The coin said go home for a reason Valerie! Too late to take it back now. Her face heats up in an entirely different way.

“Not now! You’re working. But, maybe if you’re not getting off too late…” She purses her lips.

He rubs the back of his neck and sheepishly laughs. “I get off in fifteen if you don’t mind the wait.”

Valerie never imagined fifteen minutes could last so long. As soon as the bartender clocks out, he takes Valerie by the hand and leads her to the dance floor. They dance like people who don’t know how to dance. The dim lights highlight his hazel eyes. The music mimics the rhythm of her heart. Eventually, their crazy dancing slows into careless swaying. She hugs the stranger, then laughs.

Valerie beams up at him. “By the way, what’s your name?”

“Flip a coin. Heads, I’ll tell you. Tails...” He jokes.

Valerie tosses her coin up, and the bartender catches it. He doesn’t look at it or let her see.

He just leans in close to her ear and whispers.