

WHOSE TURN IS IT?

by: C.J. Henderson

Paul stared at the window, watching the snow and the night crowd up against the glass. His fingers dug into the sheet under his palms, tearing to grip the mattress as if a firm hold in his hand might give him one on his situation. Sweat slid down the back of his neck, across his forehead, down his sides, freely from any pore with moisture left to spare.

Jeez o'man, he thought to himself, the cords beginning to chaff, How could she do it? How did she even know? I thought for sure--there was no way. No way. No Way.

Paul's mind went back to earlier in the evening. It had been one of their perfect dates. One of the few things New York can be good for is supplying breath-taking backdrops for romance. Paul and Sally had just walked--from Times Square, where they'd arranged to meet after work, over to the waterfront, up to Lincoln Center--it had been the nicest evening they'd spent together in a long time--none of the usual tension hanging between them.

Of course, it was not as if they fought all the time--Paul was always quick to point out that he and Sally rarely had shouting matches, or guilt bickers--to most of their friends they were "that perfect couple." But none of that explained what had happened in the park.

They'd eaten at that little Jamaican cafe on Broadway--the one with the bizarrely colored rattan chairs--the one they always wanted to stop at but never had. His mind raced through the steps they'd taken after that.

Which of them, he tried to remember, suggested the walk in the park. Which one? Was it him or her? Did she suggest Central Park? Did she?

"Are you all right, dear?" Her voice came from the bathroom, a hint of sarcasm in her lilt. "Are you ... comfy?"

He winced, the terror creeping through his brain making him nearly frantic. Quietly, for the first time ever fearing to let her hear him move, he strained against his bonds, making sure he really was tied too tightly to move.

"Sweetheart," her voice laughed, "I can't wait to see your face when you see the surprise I have for you."

He shut his eyes involuntarily in a shudder of anticipation.

"I'll bet you can't guess what it is."

Black images of dangerous objects, some blunt, some sharp, all in Sally's hands, swam in his brain. If the wad of silken underwear tied in his mouth had not been so perfectly positioned to strangle all sound, his screams would have shattered the windows.

Grasping at his nerve, Paul chased back his fears, trying to somehow get his thoughts ordered. He thought himself back to the restaurant and then struggled over their conversation to try and find who had suggested the park. He could see their meals come again, could smell her scampi, taste the pepper in his cream sauce--the wine finished, dessert tray in view, picked over, coffees lingered over, drained, brown rings drying, bill discreetly slipped between them in the chic Manhattan non-assumption of recipient. Laughing, standing, up and walking, out the door, down the street, turning the corner ...

"Let's walk through the park; it's not too late."

Him! He had said it.

"Oh, and it's snowing. That would be so nice."

And she had agreed. But he had done it. He had said the park. Not her. Him. Damn. Damn. Damndamndamndamndamn. Maybe it ...

No.

She'd steered their route. He remembered now. When they'd stepped out of the restaurant. She pointed them toward the east, toward the park. It had been her! Oh, god--it had been her.

It all started falling into place. Yes, he'd set up a date, but she had picked ending up at Lincoln Center, right across from Central Park. He'd suggested the restaurant, but she had put them in the direction of the park when they'd left. Then, he'd seen the tops of the snow-bound trees and been maneuvered into his line.

"Let's walk through the park; it's not too late."

She knew she could count on him to want to walk through the park. She knew he'd say what he did. She knew. Oh, god ... what's she going to do to me? Just because of two stinking dates.

Dorrie had started working at the same firm he did only a month previous--a New Yorker for only two weeks. It hadn't taken Paul long to spot her. She was a lot like Sally, physically, same legs, same thick, down-the-back hair, thin, nicely drawn smile, green eyes--but not so clever, so hard, so searching, so smugly in charge.

It had been nice, his date with Dorrie. Like with Sally, only back at the beginning, before they had grown used to each other, before the boredom with each other's jokes and ideas and goals had set in, before the games had started. They had talked for a long time, he hearing about why she had come to the city, she listening to his dreams--plans that sounded big and fresh and reasonable being reflected back at him by her newness and enthusiasm. And then the sex.

Dorrie had proved no stranger to double occupancy. They had taken a room in a mid-town hotel to avoid their respective roommates, to cut themselves off from phones and doorbells, television and the evening mail, to be alone with each other and a bed and hours of darkness--new bodies against each other, old tricks and tired habits suddenly as inventive as if they were high school kids. Sweat had pasted them together,

the freshness of their love dragging heights out of them both had forgotten. It had been wonderful.

They met again on the weekend, going to a movie, eating Italian, back to "their place." Their manners were so different that even their second time together seemed exciting. Paul had been transformed, made younger, walking straighter, acting happier about most everything.

Even his life with Sally seemed better. He found himself talking to her, feeling good about his little affair, and the way it was helping his main relationship. He and Sally had been in a rut for such a long time. They had exhausted each other as things of interest months earlier--maybe a year earlier. Everything between them had become pretty much routine, which is, of course, where the games had come from.

It had been his idea at first; stockings, garters, full costumes, and the restraints of hemp and plastic, nylon, tape, leather, metal. Poles to keep the back straight, to separate legs--cuffs to bind, belts to discomfort, masks to hide faces from each other, to build suspense, terror, anticipation.

But Sally had taken to it all easily, especially since she got her turns, too. In fact, it was her inventiveness which had kept them together. Sally had introduced the reality twists, the moments where safety had seemingly gone out the window. She was a good actress, and she loved proving it to Paul. Not that he hadn't caught on to them quickly, enjoyed planning them as much as she did. Sally had still never equaled the time he'd let her see the metal rods heating on the stove and then masked her--told her it was time she was marked as his--and then touched her repeatedly with ice. She'd truly believed he'd burned her from neck to ankle. But tonight was no act. Things hadn't been set up to terrify him. When they'd gone into the park, found Dorrie, that had been no act.

Dorrie was dead. Face unmarked, only a few drops of blood reaching that high. The work had been abdominal; gutting strokes laying her open--insides spread in every direction. They had stumbled across her by accident--but it hadn't been one--going to

the top of the rock outcropping Paul loved so much for its view. There they had found her, eyes frozen in pitiful desperation, birds pulling away bits of her punctured organs, their frozen leakage worming through the new falling snow.

The horror of it had sent them stumbling down the rock face, running away through the darkened park. They agreed they did not want to be involved. Who wanted to be hounded by reporters, grilled by police, possibly be the killer's next victim? Or, as Paul realized, connected to the corpse as a recent lover? No--let's just get out of here, forget all about this. Let's go home--come on, we'll just go home and, get "comfy," okay? Whose turn is it, anyway?

Idiot, he thought. Idiot. Whose turn is it? Whose turn? What a chump. What an asshole. She'd set him up--she knew whose turn it was. She knew everything.

The realization had hit him then.

She knew! She knew about Dorrie. She ... had ... to. Coincidences like this just don't happen. Oh god, oh god please, pleasepleaseplease--oh Christ, oh shit, oh man--

Paul pulled at his restraints in earnest, praying for the slightest slack to generate hope for escape. How had she gotten Dorrie to the park? She had to have killed her there--the blood, the freshness--god, she must have done it just before their date. The storm would have kept people out of the park, certainly off the mount...

Mounting desperation doubled Paul's strength, the bed's headboard bouncing off the wall behind, banging with repeated fierceness. He no longer cared if she heard; what did it matter? She was going to kill him anyway. Panic knotted his muscles as he strained. He pulled this way then that way, harder, harder, all thought gone, erased by fear and the need for release, knowing that just another ounce of pressure, just another few seconds would do it, would free him, would...

"Paul?"

He froze. The clammy stain of sweat soaking the sheets chilled him. She had heard him.

"Paul; are you all right?"

She was coming. This was it. He could feel her moving, feel the air parting around her, knew she was reaching to push the door open.

"Oh, silly me. You can't talk with your mouth full."

He buried his tearing eyes in the pillow. "A mouth full of panties keeps you pretty quiet, doesn't it?"

She entered the bedroom. Ready.

"Keeps all those lies inside where they belong, not running around free getting you into trouble."

Paul braced himself, steeled himself. He had to look, had to see what was coming. He couldn't die and not even see the stroke--

"I guess you know what comes next, lover."

He opened his eyes, blinking at the unending tears, trying to see. He could turn his head far enough toward the mirror to catch sight of Sally moving toward the bed, toward him--of the look in her eye, knife in her hand. Ashamed, he buried his face again. The pain came quickly, nerves letting him know she'd started slicing.

He screamed into Sally's underwear until he fainted, which really wasn't very long at all.

* * *

Sally poured the second cup of coffee, leaving enough room for the milk to come. Placing it on the table in front of Paul, across from hers, she said,

"Here you go, nice and hot."

Paul took the cup without making a response, holding it in both hands as if it were the only warm thing in their apartment. Sally laughed.

"Oh, come on. It's daytime. Playland's closed. Stop sulking."

She put a hand on his shoulder, but he shrugged it away.

"What's the matter, dear? Don't like being the scared one for once?"

"Scared?" He put the cup down awkwardly, slopping coffee out of one side.

"Scared? I was more than scared. Goddamned plenty more than scared!"

Sally grinned widely with satisfaction.

"Of who? Little me?"

"Will you stop kidding? Who else do you think I was scared of?" His voice fell into whisper. "You murdered someone! What the hell are we going to do about that, for god's sake?!"

Sitting down across from Paul, Sally arranged a serious look on her face and told him.

"We're going to do what we've always done. Have fun." Going past the questions welling up in her mate, she continued. "All of this was your idea. I'm not saying I didn't see your point and get involved as deeply as you wanted me to, but you started it--so let me ask a few questions.

"Number one...isn't the point of these little games of ours to scare the hell out of each other? Isn't the idea to push each other to the edge so that the sex that follows is the best we've ever had?"

Paul nodded, avoiding her eyes.

"Number two...after I untied you, after you saw you weren't cut to shreds, that the blade you'd felt had just been a credit card, the running blood just water from a sponge, was or was not that the best sex we ever had?"

"Yes, yes--but..."

"No 'buts,' Paul. We play games or we don't."

"But you killed someone."

"You fucked her, I killed her. I could have killed you."

Sally put her arms around Paul's neck. He grabbed for her involuntarily, pulling her around the edge of the table and onto his lap.

"I didn't, though," she told him. "I just wanted to be yours. So some little slut from Kansas dies. So what? As long as it keeps us together."

Paul agreed. He kissed Sally then, wanting her as much as the first time they'd made love, wanting her as much as life. He knew he would never turn her in to the police. As they slid to the floor, kicking chairs out of their way, they tore each other's clothing away, attacking each other with a passion they had no idea they still possessed.

"We'll always be together," he told her.

And he meant it. The police might put her in jail. Probably only some mental hospital. But Paul, Paul could do better than that. He could think of much better things than that. After all, it was his turn next.