

Frisson

By Albert Tucher

Diana stood at the sink and out of habit used a washcloth. She didn't have much to clean up. The bathroom door stood slightly open, allowing her to hear what the clients said.

"I just can't do it, Toni."

"You promised, Carl. It's my birthday."

"I said I would do anything to turn you on. I meant us."

Diana heard the swish of bare feet on the rug, then a knock. Toni pushed the door open without waiting for an invitation. Men often thought they had bought the right to forget their manners. Apparently, some women did too.

"He'll be okay. Can you stay another hour?"

"Sorry. I have another date to get to."

Diana didn't have a date. She had limits. One hour under a man who couldn't finish the job was enough.

"Just ten minutes? I'll pay you for the whole hour."

Diana felt herself weaken.

"You know," said Toni, "he dipped his dick a lot of places before we met. He can do it."

"Maybe he got tired of that."

"When I need input from the help, I'll be sure to let you know."

Diana shrugged. By now she should have learned to tell clients what they wanted to hear or keep her mouth shut.

Toni went back toward the bed where Diana had nearly shredded the sheets trying to inspire Carl.

"One more try?"

"Toni, it's not going to work. I can't do it when you're watching me."

"Well, it's not going to happen when I'm not."

"Then why do you want me to do it at all?"

"I want that little frisson of jealousy. It's such a turn-on when I see you flirting. This will be even better."

"How about you get down with her? That would do it for me."

"Not my thing. You know that. And I hear she doesn't go for girls either."

'She' isn't deaf, Diana thought.

"So come here," said Carl.

Diana heard the rustling of sheets and clothes and the sounds of make-up sex in the making. That was fine for them but a problem for her. She had her money in her bag right next to her by the sink, but her clothes lay on the other side of the reconciliation.

"Diana?" Toni called. "He's ready."

"God damn it, I said no!"

Diana heard the bed squeak, as the clients decided that they needed their feet on the floor for this fight. Their voices became a jumble. Diana leaned the door shut to reduce the volume, but a hard slap cut through the barrier.

That would be Toni, Diana thought.

Right after the slap she heard a punch, the kind that made a referee stop the fight

without consulting the corner man. Something bounced off something else with a dull thud that gave her a sick feeling.

Then came silence. Someone had started thinking so hard that Diana could feel it on her face.

Idiot, she thought. Now you're a witness.

It was the worst thing she had ever called herself.

She looked at what she had to work with. Toni had insisted on meeting in an upscale hotel room, with amenities that Diana seldom saw.

Nothing looked useful until she spotted the coffee maker behind her bag on the counter. She grasped the handle of the glass pot.

"Carl?" she called.

She heard breathing.

"Did you hit her too hard?"

She took the silence as a yes.

"Think about this, Carl. I didn't sign the register. Nobody saw me come here. I have no reason to talk to the cops. None at all. If I just walk out of here, you don't lose a thing."

His breathing quickened. He was about to do something, even if he didn't realize it yet. Diana took a hand towel in her left hand and flipped it several times, wrapping it around her wrist. She held the towel in front of her face to shield her eyes. With her other hand she lifted the coffee pot.

Diana brought her hand down hard. The pot shattered on the edge of the countertop. The door bounced open, and Carl lunged at her. She thrust her right hand forward and jabbed at his face with the shards of glass still stuck in the handle. He gasped and lurched backward. She thrust her weapon again, this time at his chest. He fell hard on his back and clutched his face with both hands.

Diana let the towel fall. It draped over Carl's face. She put the shattered pot back on the heating pad and picked up her bag. Glass fragments surrounded Carl on the floor. They glinted helpfully at her. It took a major stretch to avoid them as she stepped over him. She turned right out of the bathroom.

Toni lay on her back diagonally across the bed. Her head would have dangled if the night table hadn't supported it. Her left eye had swollen shut, and blood oozed from her nose.

That's weird, Diana thought. Would that happen if she was dead?

Toni's other eye flickered. Diana turned and found Carl standing right behind her. He held his hand to his left eye. Blood showed between his fingers, but he looked ready for action. Either he was very tough, or Diana hadn't hurt him as much as she thought.

"I can't let you walk out of here," he said.

"That's where you're wrong," Diana said. "Letting me walk out of here is the smartest thing you could do."

"I don't think so."

"You didn't kill her. Listen."

Toni breathed through her mouth.

"You don't have much time, so I'm going to say this once and I'm going to say it fast. You save her life and you're home free."

"I'll go to jail."

“She’ll refuse to cooperate with the cops. Trust me - that’s what I would do. You let her die, and you can’t run far enough.”

Toni breathed.

“But here’s the thing. You forget I was ever here. Both of you. That way you don’t have to explain what you were up to.”

The cops had heard it all before, but she didn’t plan to tell Carl that.

“Up to you,” she said.

That struck her as a good exit line for a naked woman. She gathered her clothes, stuffed her shoes in her bag, and made for the door. Her nerves screamed at her to hurry, but she ignored them. Moving deliberately was the right choice. His indecision let her get by him. She stepped into the hall and let the door shut behind her.

Down the hall on the left she found the alcove with the ice and snack machines. She stepped inside. As she started dressing, a couple in their sixties passed by. The man took in as much as he could through the corner of his eye. His wife made a point of turning her head to look at him.

Frisson, Diana thought. It’s called a frisson.

Albert Tucher is starting to feel less real than Diana Andrews, who has also appeared in Lynx Eye, Muzzle Flash, Mouth Full of Bullets, Crime Zine, Demolition, and Out of the Gutter. Comments are welcome at Alberttucher@aol.com.