

Candy Cane on the Case

by Debra H. Goldstein

Candace Cane, Private Investigator, looks good on the door to my office and my business card, but when the Lowell Chief of Police or my on-or-more-often-off boyfriend, Detective Todd Burns, calls me “Candy,” I cringe. I’ve asked Dad why, considering he used to be a cop and surely would have made fun of someone by using the nickname, Candy Cane, he stuck me with the moniker. His response is to bluster something about Candace being a perfectly lovely name to go with Cane unlike those Hogg sisters whose parents tagged them with Ima and Ura.

Let’s face it, I’m never going to win this one with Dad. Nor will he ever bless the fact that after a year at the academy, unlike fair haired Todd, I dropped out and did what it takes to become a licensed P.I. To him, private investigators are a hindrance to the police force. That’s why, when he retired, he refused to follow that path like so many of his fellow early retirees. But just maybe, he’s beginning to see the light.

Last week, he sent one of his former partners, Eddie Norville, to my office. Eddie had to leave the force because of a gambling problem, which he apparently still has. “I got fleeced,” he said.

“How?”

“Ever since I got a settlement from when that drunk plowed into my car, I’ve played a lot of poker at the Palm Lounge over in Huntington. That’s a few towns west of here.”

“I’m familiar with it. That place has a legal license for that type of gambling,” I observed.

“Right. I play there because it’s always been a clean operation. Win some, lose some.”

Eddie chuckled. “Okay, the house wins more, but at least I have runs where I do come out ahead. Enough runs that a year or so ago I moved into the back high rollers room.”

“From what I understand,” I interjected, “that back room is completely legal.”

“Until recently, I’d have agreed with you. There are two tables in the room. I played at table one with guys like me for about nine months. Three months ago, I ended up seated at Table Two with a few hotshots like that former quarterback Robbie Worth. Things were the same as at the other table except that Robbie did seem to bet high and win a lot of hands. We all kidded him about wanting to rub his thick hair for luck, but being afraid the only thing that would happen was that we’d get the black shoe dye he used on it on our hands. Anyway, about six days ago, he took me for six figures.”

“That can happen when you gamble with the same people over long periods of time. They hit a streak of luck while you don’t.”

“No, this was more than that. I’m telling you that he somehow cheated. Based upon the exposed cards, he and everyone else should have folded at the level we were at.”

“The others folded.”

“Yeah, but he stayed in and raised me again. When he put down his cards, he had the only hand that could have beaten mine. I swore he cheated and well, I made a scene. The result was that Trent Mitchell, whose run the place since his uncle retired, came over and asked me to leave. He kept my IOU, but banned me from playing for six months at the Palm Lounge.”

As Eddie leaned over my desk, I instinctively sat further back in my chair. “What is it you want me to do?”

“Prove that I’m not crazy. That the room is rigged. I talked to Detective Burns at the station. He basically dismissed me as being a broken-down old grunt.”

“He acted like you were a snorting pig?”

Eddie threw his hands up in the air. “Gather you were never in the military. It’s a low infantry position. I served honorably and I want justice now. When I told all this to your father, he suggested that I contact you. Said you were creative, but safe, with your investigations. Will you help me prove that there’s more to the game than is meeting the eye? I’ll pay you.”

It wasn’t like I had a lot of other investigations going on. Especially ones that were offering me a paycheck. I accepted.

Eddie pulled a roll of bills from his pocket and peeled off five one-hundred-dollar bills. “Enough for a retainer?”

I swallowed hard and said, “Yes.”

He threw them on my desk and stood. As he started out of my office, I found my voice, “Wait. Let me give you a receipt.”

“Not necessary. If you’re your father’s daughter, like he says you are, you’re as honest as they come. Just get to the bottom of this for me.”

I mumbled something like, “Yes, sir.” After Eddie left, I called Dad.

When Dad answered, I didn’t mince words. “What’s going on? You actually sent Eddie Norville and his problem to me?”

“Yes,” Dad said. “Eddie may be a gambler, but he’s nobody’s fool. If he thinks something crooked is going on, I’m inclined to believe his gut feeling. Your Detective Burns didn’t take him seriously, but I do. That’s why I thought you might have the ability to help me run a little con.”

“A con? You, Dad?”

“Look, even when I was on the force, I knew Trent Mitchell and his uncle sometimes cut corners, but we never could prove the Palm Lounge was anything but an up and up operation. For me or any of my other cop buddies to go in and play a few rounds wouldn’t accomplish anything. Plus, not being sanctioned with department funds, we wouldn’t have the time or money to earn our way into the high rollers room.”

“And you think I can?”

“You and a friend of mine.”

“Sounds like you’ve already worked this out in your head.”

“Not entirely. I need to introduce you to my friend, Cassie Smith, and let the two of you take it from there.”

“Her name sounds familiar, but I can’t place her.”

“She’s a P.I. like you. Does acting and other odd jobs since she got fired from the agency she was working with, but Cassie is a good egg.”

“If she’s such a good egg, why did she get fired?”

“She was hired to find out ‘Who Shot J.R.?’ Through some clever and hard gum-shoe work, she succeeded, but then, because of circumstances she felt were right, she refused to turn over the information to her boss. He and his agency lost a big fee, and she lost her job. I’ve already talked to her and she’s willing to come on board as an independent contractor to your agency, Candace.”

Me, myself, and I, I thought. Some agency. I fingered the five hundred dollars Eddie had left on my desk, maybe Candace and Cassie would have a nice ring to it. I listened to the rest of my father’s idea, hung up, and called Cassie. She answered on the first ring.

“This is Candace Cane,” I said.

“Oh, yes. I’ve been waiting for your call. Walt said he was sure you’d call.”

Walt? Dad had said Cassie and he were friends, but other than my late mother, I didn’t know anyone who didn’t call him Walter.

“Well, here I am. Did he fill you in on the details of his plan?”

“Yes. He thought, based upon my age and grey hair, I would take on the role of being your mother, and we should present ourselves to Trent Mitchell or whoever his hiring person is as a mother and daughter cleaning team. Your Dad didn’t think anyone would believe we were dealers, but we could easily slip into the background if we were hired as cleaners. Nobody pays attention to servers or cleaners. I’m game to work for you, including doing the paperwork and most of the cleaning, if you’re willing.”

“Why not? Let’s meet for coffee and work out the details. Rock Around the Clock Café at two?”

“See you there. You’ll recognize me by the bird pin in my hair.”

Great I thought when I hung up. Dad has either paired me with a new girlfriend he’s never mentioned or with a bird brain. When I met Cassie at the café, I realized she was neither of these two things. Rather, while she might have a touch of ADHD, she was a bright woman willing to get her hands dirty while seeking justice.

Cassie told me how, in one case, where the firm she worked for represented the husband in a custody dispute, she discovered, by posing as a survey taker, that the mom was keeping the child out of school and planning a move to a different state. In that instance, to seem believable, she spent most of a day going from the furthest point in a trailer park to her goal trailer knocking on doors while carrying a clipboard and asking questions. It had worked. By the time she reached

the trailer in question, the information she gained from the child who answered the door, was sufficient for the father to win custody and the firm she worked for to get a big fee.

Maybe, by combining our talents, not to mention our cleaning skills, we could achieve the same success. I hoped we were as successful as another cleaner I'd read about. She and her husband had been the loyal house people for a multi-millionaire who was getting on in age. The woman was used to being ignored when she did her tasks throughout the house. One day, from the next room, she overheard her employer complain to his finance man that he'd been surprised that neither she nor her husband had thanked him for the sizable gift he'd recently told the finance person to bestow upon them for their years of service. Knowing she hadn't seen this money, she discussed the situation with her husband.

After much thought, they approached the millionaire, explained what she'd overheard, and swore they had never received such a gift. The millionaire made some calls about other things he'd asked the finance person to do and when the answers he received were all unsatisfactory, he contacted his lawyer. The lawyer, not a lover of the finance person, brought the matter to the local police. An investigation, based upon what the woman overheard, resulted in it being discovered that the finance man had swindled the millionaire out of most of his fortune.

For Cassie and me, the first step of dressing for the part was a cinch. We both had things in our wardrobes that worked. The second step, getting hired, proved easier than we anticipated. When we presented ourselves at the Palm Lounge, ostensibly to offer our services as cleaners, we discovered that the personnel manager was desperate as the regular cleaning crew had had a family emergency that necessitated them being gone for a week or two. We were hired on the

spot. Before we left the manager's office, we were told where to obtain uniforms and to report back to work at four p.m.

Cassie and I did as we were ordered. For that night and the next one, we made ourselves useful cleaning ashtrays, wiping up drink rings, and of course keeping the floor and anything else that needed cleaning in the facility spotless. On the third night, as I was addressing the mess made by a spilled drink in the main room, Mr. Mitchell, himself, waved me over to him. I responded like a summoned cab, quickly and directly.

"We're running two tables tonight in the next room. The folks in there are high rollers. The room must always appear perfect. You also need to understand that some of the players may get confused and ask you to get them a drink from the bar in that room."

"No problem. I clean, serve drinks, and do windows as necessary. So does my mom."

Mr. Mitchell laughed. "I like your attitude." He handed me a ten-dollar bill. "For giving me a good chuckle."

For the next three nights, Cassie and I blended in and out of the big roller room. Robbie Worth was at Table Two, with his back to the bar and mirrored wall, each night. In the beginning of the night, he played alone, but most nights, a little after ten, some patsy would be ushered into the high roller room. The patsy would fawn over Robbie and be thrilled when he invited the guy to take the table's empty seat across from him. Cassie and I kept an eye on everything and compared notes each night, or should I say morning, when we went back to my office to debrief each other.

"It's the same M.O.," Cassie said. "Most of the players at Table Two win or lose in the normal course of action of a poker game. The patsy seat works differently."

“Right,” I said. “The patsy wins three or four of the first hands and for the next hour or so, he’s in the mix like the other men at the table. During that time, Robbie wins a couple and from what I can see, throws in some other hands that he could probably have won.”

“No question about that. I saw him fold with a straight in his hand.”

“That’s about the time things get more interesting. The patsy starts being on a winning streak and Robbie begins raising the bidding stakes. When they hit a crescendo hand about midnight, Robbie or the house wipes out the patsy. I looked, but I couldn’t see any sleight of hand tricks with the cards or indication of microphones or cameras.”

“But I have noticed one possible tell,” Cassie said. “Robbie puts his glasses on and off all night. About eleven-forty-five, when the lights are dimmed, he clutches and rubs his eyes with his fingers, then puts on his glasses. He never takes them off again.”

“Were you able to see a microphone in the glasses?”

“No. But they were lying on the table earlier tonight when I bent to give the man on his right his drink, so I glanced through them.” Cassie mimicked how she had bent over. “They seem like magnifiers, but I had the feeling they had night vision capabilities. What if the decks are marked and he’s reading the backs somehow with his glasses? It might seem wild but with today’s advances in AI and other things, maybe he’s getting some blue tooth messages through the glasses or something being flashed on the wall behind the patsy that only he can see.”

“Sounds plausible,” I agreed. “Here’s what I think we should do to try out our theory tonight. I’m going to ask a friend to be in the Palm Lounge in case we need some backup. Somehow, I have a feeling our days as cleaners will be coming to an end soon. I don’t think the family emergency for the regular cleaning crew will be extending too much more as the money keeping them away is running out.”

When we got to work a few hours later, we made sure Mr. Mitchell saw us cleaning both rooms. About eleven-thirty, we assumed our positions in the second room. Right after Robbie put on his glasses for what we thought would be the final time, I stood in front of the wall on which we thought messages might be being flashed. I acted as if I was cleaning a large concave mirror that I held up. Cassie positioned herself nearer the table cleaning ashtrays and refreshing drinks as the big hand was dealt.

Robbie looked up and suddenly said, "What are you doing?"

When no one answered, he pointed at me. "You. What are you doing?"

"Cleaning this mirror."

"Well, put it down. It's reflecting in my eyes."

"Yes, sir." I kept the mirror where it was.

In the meantime, Cassie, with a loud exclamation of "I'm so sorry," poured a drink on the patsy's chair, making sure some caught his sleeve. Grabbing napkins, she dabbed at his arm, then yanked him from his chair. She grabbed the chair and started pulling it away from the table. The surprised patsy went along with her while Robbie started yelling something at them.

"Relax sir," Cassie said. "I'm just getting him settled in a dry chair." She positioned the chair back at the table, but slightly off from where the first one had been.

"You're crowding the man next to him," Robbie said. "Move his chair over to where it should be."

With an apology to the man he was crowding, the patsy repositioned his chair while Cassie, talking over Robbie, said, "I'm so sorry. I'll be back in a moment with a fresh drink for you." Rather than going to the bar in the high rollers room, she opened the door and obtained a drink for him from the bar in the other room. Bringing it to him, she left the door cracked.

As the game resumed, Robbie glared at me again. I lowered my mirror and moved nearer to Cassie to watch the big play. The cards were dealt. The patsy's bet was called and raised by Robbie. Second cards were drawn by those who wanted them. Another round of betting ensued resulting in only the patsy and Robbie being left. As they lay down their cards and Robbie pulled his winnings toward him, Todd entered the room. Several men in blue followed swiftly. The lounge was being raided.

"What, the...

Todd flashed a piece of paper at Robbie. "We have a search warrant. I'll take those glasses, sir."

I'm not sure what happened next because Cassie and I slipped out of the room. We made our way to the ladies' restroom, shed our uniforms, and, wearing the shorts and t-shirt we had under our uniforms, helped each other through the ladies' room window. We jumped into the car we'd parked nearby. While others were being detained in the two gambling rooms, we drove away.

It took two days before the local paper announced the arrests of Trent Mitchell, Robbie Worth, and others for running an illicit gambling operation at the Palm Lounge. I may not have understood all the technical aspects of why the mirror deflected the light's reflection like Cassie did from a stint when she'd taught science, but I'd comprehended enough to do what I needed to do – including bringing Todd in for the kill.

As for our fee, we'll probably never see it. Eddie is going to be a witness against the men who were arrested, but it's doubtful he'll ever recover the amount he was fleeced. Cassie and I talked about the situation with Dad. Afterwards, even though I was angry at putting the work in without a paycheck, Cassie was the one who made me see that maybe I've earned something of

greater value than the lost money – an element of respect from my father. I'm thinking that in the future, Cassie and I might be a good team. We might even call ourselves Candace, alright, Candy and Cassie.