

As Luck Would Have It

by Karen Karlitz

For fifteen years Wendy waited for Harry to leave his wife. From time to time, there'd been ultimatums, break-ups too, but they never stuck. Now Wendy's luck was about to change.

It was Tuesday, Wendy and Harry's standing night to be together. His wife, Joy, thought Harry went bowling on Tuesdays or at least that's what she pretended to believe. Joy didn't complain, deliver accusations or stage sullen silences. She never let on what she knew or didn't. And if she stayed up nights smoking and waiting for Harry to get home, he never knew. Joy was the long suffering wife who didn't show her suffering. She lived in a big house on Long Island, hosted catered dinner parties and enjoyed the theater and summers in the Hamptons. Their two children attended ordinary private colleges, then went on to ordinary jobs in private industry. Except for an occasional weekend spent with the kids, their brick center hall colonial housed the two of them, several of Harry's bogus bowling trophies, and their standard poodle, Paris.

Strangely enough it was Joy's luck that ran out. She always had so much of it except, of course, for ending up with Harry. He married her for money, for her family's business in the jewelry exchange. The lucrative booth supplied him with the life he promised himself he would have one day. When he met Joy at a college mixer, he knew he struck pay dirt.

While Harry headed for Wendy's apartment straight from work, Joy sat in a black leather chair facing a Park Avenue cardiologist. The doctor knew better than to prolong her agony. "The news is not good. I'm so sorry, Mrs. Marshall." And Dr. Franklin truly

was. It was early in the week and already he had to tell several of his patients that their lives were careening to an early end.

Joy drove home chain-smoking in her white Mercedes. She hadn't smoked for three months, but before picking up her car at the garage, she ran into a deli for two packs of Marlboros. That, she figured, should take care of the ride back to Long Island and the long night ahead. Thinking it was Harry's bowling night, she called him on his cell phone.

The phone rang in Harry's breast pocket when he was in Wendy's elevator. Feeling particularly horny, it crossed his mind not to answer it. Even as he pulled it out, a voice in his head cautioned him to stop, but he didn't listen.

"Hello."

"Harry?"

"Yeah, Joy." The elevator reached the tenth floor. "What's up?" he asked, a sense of dread growing as desire dissipated.

"I have something to tell you."

He exited the elevator and strode to Wendy's apartment.

"What is it?" He paused at her door.

"Harry, I'm sick."

And standing in front of his girlfriend's apartment, his wife of more than thirty years told him the grim facts.

Hearing Harry's voice, Wendy opened the door. She wore a black silk teddy, but immediately knew she was dressed all wrong for the occasion. Harry's face was the color of the thick, white jar paste everyone uses in elementary school. He stumbled forward a few feet and finished the call sitting semi-comatose on Wendy's green and white striped sofa.

"I've got to get home."

"What's wrong, Harry?"

"It's Joy. She's very sick."

"Oh, no." But even at the very moment of discovery, Wendy's heart raced faster than a Mixmaster. The planets finally aligned. For incalculable nights she imagined this very scene or one involving a fatal car or airplane crash. She knew exactly how to

react. Tears were needed, lots of them. She would expertly commiserate with Harry during this horrific time, all the while soaring like a sorority girl getting an engagement ring from the quarterback of the football team.

"Go, Harry. Hurry. Joy needs you," she said, tears mixed with black mascara flowing down her cheeks. Harry walked out of the apartment forever altered.

Wendy blotted her face with a Kleenex, refilled her glass with Absolut, threw in a token ice cube, and smiled.

* * *

Wendy wasn't about to do anything to hurt her karma. She no longer gossiped about her friends. She performed at least one or two random kindnesses each day. She called her mother two times a week, instead of the obligatory one. She stopped acting like a witch to the women who worked under her at the advertising agency, and assisted an especially pretty blonde she detested with a presentation. She lay in bed at night and thought up ways to do good, something which did take a great deal of effort. But she wasn't taking any chances, this time she wouldn't screw up and anger the gods. At last she would be Mrs. Harry Marshall in the big house on the Island.

Harry, too, changed his spots. The sicker his wife became, the more he indulged her. In fact, he gave up "bowling night" to stay home and care for her. With Paris at their feet, the two ate cozy suppers and rented Netflix DVDs, attempting to drown their troubles in a sea of take-out food and entertaining movies. In spite of her illness, Joy glowed from the attention she had never before received from her husband. And as for Harry, for once in his life he was doing the right thing. Harry, it seems, turned into a decent fellow.

This, of course, left Wendy out of the loop but, she assumed, it was simply a matter of time. It would be impossible for Joy to survive, lucky as she might be. Wendy went about doing good deeds and suppressing evil thoughts.

And so it happened that after a pleasant evening of broiled chicken and a re-viewing of "An Affair to Remember," Joy drifted off

to a better place under her Ralph Lauren comforter. She died a happy woman.

By now, Wendy felt her wait had been long enough. She and Harry kept in touch by phone for the past difficult year, but several weeks after Joy's death they reunited to go out to dinner. And for the very first time, Harry was able to forgo scouting the restaurant for people he knew before Wendy could enter. She stood proud and close to Harry as side-by-side they walked to their table and sat down.

But something else was different, Wendy could feel it. Something wasn't right when everything should have been perfect. Harry looked the same, Harry sounded the same. But he had something on his mind, something infinitely important.

"Is anything wrong, Harry?" Wendy asked.

"No."

"You're acting strange."

"Just your imagination." He blinked.

Thinking Harry was grieving, Wendy didn't push the matter. And out of respect for the recently departed, she resisted the urge to hold his hand or fiddle with his private parts beneath the table. She waited this long, she could wait longer. Marriage to Harry Marshall and all that went with it was hers for the taking if she played the situation right.

But Wendy was wrong. There was something Wendy didn't know about Harry, something that would keep his granite kitchen counters, crown moldings and cherry hardwood floors forever beyond her reach. For eight years Thursday was Harry's "poker night" and, as luck would have it, a young woman named Laurie Johnson was about to be on the receiving end of Joy Marshall's legacy.

THE END

