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unny how a chance encounter, a casual conversation, a perfect stranger, can turn your life upside down. What is it about that Tuesday morning that makes me decide to drop by the Brooklyn movie set where my friend and fellow film executive is working? Maybe I'm hoping an old pal can take my mind off the fact that my boss just let 100 staff members go. Maybe having a husband whose job forces him to travel constantly is taking its toll. Though lucky to be employed, I am attempting to survive a full 30 minutes without worrying about how we'll manage to afford braces and summer camp for our two sons. Maybe I'm just hungry for a change of scene.

Enter Duke Stevens,* who my friend laughingly introduces as "yet another movie guy" visiting the set that day. But Duke is not just another movie guy; he is the quintessential film producer: savvy and charismatic, given to extravagant gestures and grand pronouncements. He is simultaneously ambitious and laid-back, wily and wise—a world-class flirt if ever there was one. As we stand in the shadows, watching a hungover actor blow his seventh take, he offers me a bottle of water, and we chat for a bit. I find myself telling him that, like everyone else these days, I'm anxious about money.

Duke tells me that in addition to being a film producer, he's also a professional blackjack card counter, which means that he has mastered a system of assigning numbers to a deck of cards, walking into a casino, and turning a game of blackjack to his distinct financial advantage. I laugh and let him know, "In addition to being financially insecure, I'm also a professional

math moron." But Duke remains unfazed. I don't know if it's because we're in the same business or because we've discovered we have a few friends in common, but we seem to get each other immediately. He likes me, and I like him right back.

"Ruth," he says, his voice cool, his manner warm, "there's no doubt in my mind that I could teach you how to count cards, just the way I've trained other people. And," he adds, "we could make more money than you've ever imagined." He explains that card counting allows a player to recognize when there are more high cards than low cards left in the deck and to raise his bets accordingly. "If you know what you're doing," he says, handing me his own card, "you can actually win at blackjack pretty consistently. I know what I'm doing." And on that note, he disappears into the tangle of cameras, cables, and lights that surrounds the busy soundstage.

ON A SCALE OF ONE to crazy, the notion of my sitting at a blackjack table falls somewhere between getting crowned Miss America and bungee jumping off the Chrysler Building. But the next morning, after my sons head to school and I fix myself a strong cup of coffee, I dial Duke's number.

"Did you really mean what you said?" His answer is straight to the point: "I always mean what I say." I take a deep breath and come back with two words: "Prove it."

Next, I call my friend Jill. "What are you doing?" I ask. "Reading about double-digit unemployment, contemplating the next round of cutbacks at my office and my future as a checkout girl at Food Emporium." Jill is not having a good day. "I'm 53 years old, and I'm going to end up trying not to bruise people's nectarines when I throw them into their eco-friendly shopping bags." I can hear the sound of paper coming off a Kit Kat bar. "Jill, what if I were to tell you I've come up with a way to earn thousands of extra dollars every month?" There is a long pause. "Does it involve dancing on a pole?" She's only half joking.

