

TORTILLA

by **Colin D. Smith**

Sometimes it's hard being friends with Jasper Quinn. I mean, a lot of the time it's cool, especially when he's trying to solve some kind of mystery and you're along for the ride. That can be awesome. But when he's taking a rare break from being a high school detective to go to the mall with you, and he's sucked into playing a pre-release version of Minecraft on an Xbox 360 in GameStop, it can be hell. Especially when you're hungry.

"Come on, Jasper. I'm serious, man—I need to eat!"

"Wait, Daniel—I'm nearly done... crap! Permadeath!" Jasper sighed and returned the control to its clear plastic holder on the display case.

"Does that mean we can go now?"

"Serves me right for playing Hardcore. What?"

"Eat. Food. You ready?"

"Sure." I smiled and made for the doors, Jasper following behind. He seemed a bit dazed. Probably just his way of coming back down to Earth from Planet Geek, or wherever he'd been for the last half hour.

"You up for El Taco?" I nodded to the Mexican restaurant across the car park.

"Sounds good," Jasper said. "I am a bit hungry."

"Welcome back," I said. Jasper squinted at me like he does whenever I make a joke he doesn't get. That happens a lot.

El Taco isn't a huge restaurant, but it can get really busy at lunchtime on a Saturday. Some of our friends from school work here, and we saw a couple of them in their yellow and red El Taco t-shirts taking orders and bringing food. The inside is decorated in the kind of Mexican style I doubt very much actually exists in Mexico. The walls are the color of sand with large green, black, and red stripes on the bottom half, and sombreros hanging from the walls. The sand-colored circular tables each have four sand-colored chairs decorated with green, black, and red stripes around each leg. We sat near the back and looked over the menus while we waited.

"Katy Perry," Jasper said. I hadn't been paying him much attention. Erin Holladay was busing a table not far from us; that was enough to distract me. I managed to tear my eyes away from Erin to see that Jasper was staring at a man sitting at a table near where Erin was standing. The man can't have been younger than forty, and wore a suit and tie. Earbuds hung from his ears. He chewed on his burrito while listening to whatever was on his iPod, oblivious to my friend's attention.

"Katy Perry?" I said.

"That's what he's listening to," said Jasper nodding at the man. I tried listening, but all I heard was the noise of the restaurant. Apparently, squinting doesn't increase your ability to hear, though I gave it a try.

"How can you tell? I can't hear a thing."

"Body language, Daniel. Can't you see it?"

"No." Jasper shook his head and sighed.

"The eyes give most of it away," he said. "The way he sits, you can tell he's a man who's acutely aware of his age, but doesn't want to grow up. I knew the music wasn't going to be of his generation. And then if you can read eye movements, you can take an educated guess at what's going through his head. I

believe there is a Katy Perry song that says something about fireworks, yes?”

“Uh, yeah,” I said. Jasper never ceases to amaze me. Of course he could have been making it up. I could barely see the man’s eyes from this distance, let alone his eye movements. But I’ve known Jasper long enough not to underestimate his powers of observation. “What about that guy over there?” I pointed to a man at another table across from the Katy Perry fan.

“You mean the troglodyte with the Walkman?” The man was large with a bald head, thick eyebrows, and enormous arms. I hoped he was too engrossed with his music to hear the troglodyte comment or we’d be dead.

“That’s the one,” I said, lowering my voice. Jasper looked long and hard at him. I could see Jasper’s eyes flit from side to side, up and down, performing some kind of intricate analysis, observing and deducing on a minute level.

“What do you think?” he said, turning and smiling at me. I gave the man my best examination, carefully watching his eyes, and taking in his posture, his clothes, and everything else Jasper always said was important when reading people. All I could see was a troglodyte.

“I don’t know,” I said, “Megadeath?” Jasper chuckled.

“You’d think. Actually, his eyebrows make it a little harder to tell. It’s either Adele or Justin Bieber.”

I was about to accuse Jasper of lying when, to my delight and surprise, Erin came walking up to our table. Only she didn’t seem too pleased.

“Hey, Daniel,” she said, acknowledging me with a nod, the hint of a smile, a flash of her dark brown eyes, and I think after that she said, “I’m so glad you’re here Jasper...” but I kind of lost track of things for a moment. When I realized she was still talking to Jasper, I tuned back in. There were tears in her

eyes, and her voice trembled. “And so he’s accusing *me* of taking the money, and I didn’t. Really I didn’t!”

“And why is Mr. Roberts accusing you of stealing tip money, Erin? What possible motive could he have for making this up?” said Jasper. Erin sighed.

“A few weeks ago, he asked me out, and I said no. I mean, I tried to be nice, told him I didn’t think I should since he’s my boss and all. He looked disappointed, but I didn’t think anything of it. Why would I? Now it looks like he’s holding it against me.”

“Isn’t there something you can do?” I said. Erin faced me and I tried not to grin.

“I can’t prove anything. And he’ll fire me if money keeps disappearing off the tables.”

“Won’t your co-workers back you up?” She sighed again.

“I’m still fairly new. They’ve all been working here forever so they don’t trust me—at least I don’t think they do. Anyway, none of them want to argue with Mr. Roberts. If he says I did it, none of them are going to deny it. What can I do?”

I noticed that for the last few minutes, Jasper had been scanning the room, watching people.

“Do you have a suspicion who it is?” he said, his eyes still wandering around the tables.

“I can think of one person,” said Erin. “Kelly Bright.”

“Blonde girl, about five-nine, faded blue jeans, hair pulled back in a braid?”

“That’s her!” said Erin, her face the picture of amazement.

“You’re absolutely right, Erin. She’s the one.”

“How can you...?”

“Funny, but Daniel and I were just talking about body language, and hers just screams ‘something to hide.’ So I watched her. She’s definitely up to something. The way she moves in front of the tables after people leave. I saw her putting things in her apron—”

“That’s where we’re supposed to put tips.”

“—but I can’t be sure if those are legitimate ones, or if she’s stealing someone else’s. So right now, we still can’t prove anything.”

Erin looked like she was about to cry. I wanted to get up and hug her, and let her rest her head on my shoulder, and stroke her soft dark hair...

“I have an idea,” said Jasper, breaking my train of thought. “Are we at one of your tables?”

“No,” she said. “That one over there is one of mine.” She pointed to a table at the other end.



“Okay,” Jasper said. “We’ll move to that table. I’ll have a bean burrito, and Daniel will have a Mexican pizza, and could you bring two Cokes and a big bowl of tortilla chips and salsa?”

“And this will help?” said Erin.

“Well, it’ll stop us being hungry,” said Jasper, “and I think we might be able to get Kelly too.” Erin cheered up a bit.

“Thanks, guys,” she said then left to get our order.

“What if I didn’t want a Mexican pizza?” I said, watching Erin walk away.

“You always get a Mexican pizza, Daniel. Anyway, bear with me.”

Erin brought our drinks and tortilla chips first. The chips came in a large clay bowl, and our salsa was in two smaller matching bowls. She had just turned her back when I started in on the chips. I think the salsa was good; I was eating so quickly my tongue barely had a chance to taste anything. Jasper was more sedate in his eating. He was still watching the restaurant, particularly Kelly Bright. Every so often he lifted his Coke and sucked through the straw, all the time his eyes fixed firmly on her.

Our burrito and pizza soon followed, and after eating, Erin came to collect our dishes. Jasper's told her to leave the chips and salsa. He then handed her some money, and she took our plates away.

As soon as Erin was gone, Jasper pulled a couple of dollar bills from one pocket, and a stick of gum from the other. He unwrapped the gum, put it in his mouth, and chewed on it for a few minutes. When the gum was good and sticky, he removed it from his mouth and stuck it to the dollar bills. He then stuck the dollar bills to the underside of the tortilla bowl.

"Are you sure that'll work?" I said.

"I've been watching how she takes the money. Yes, I'm sure. But for good measure—" Jasper dipped his fingers in the leftover salsa and smeared some in between the bills. "That should do it." He smiled at me, then motioned for us to get up. Kelly was busing a table nearby, and Jasper made a point of walking past her. We were almost to the door when Jasper pulled me aside, hiding in an alcove near the entrance to the restaurant. From there we could see Kelly look around, then move over to our table. A moment later there was a crash as the tortilla bowl toppled off the table and hit the floor. I saw Kelly jam her hand into her apron just as Jasper pulled my arm again.

"Thief!" he yelled as we made our way back to the table. Kelly looked startled, but didn't try to escape. "Someone get the manager, we have a thief here!" Jasper pointed at Kelly. Every eye in the

restaurant was on us now. “Don’t try to get away, Kelly Bright,” said Jasper.

“Who are you, and what are you talking about?” said Kelly, doing a very good job of looking innocent. A large dark haired man in a yellow shirt and red tie approached.

“What’s going on?” he said, marching up to the table. “Who are you? Kelly, do you know these people?”

“No sir,” she said, and I was sure there was the hint of a scowl on her face.

“Mr. Roberts, is it?” said Jasper, smiling and holding out his hand. “Jasper Quinn, and my friend Daniel Watts. We believe this girl has been stealing tips from her co-workers’ tables.”

“Is that so? I suppose you go to school with Erin Holladay. She put you up to this to try to clear her name, didn’t she?”

“Yes, sir, you are quite right. Erin is a school friend. But she had nothing to do with the thefts. That’s more Kelly’s department, isn’t it?” Jasper glared at Kelly with his piercing pale blue eyes. I’ve been on the end of that look, and with his long pointed nose it feels like you’re being threatened with some kind of laser knife. Kelly managed to keep her cool.

“I was just busing this table, that’s all,” she said.

“But that’s my table,” said Erin, walking up behind Mr. Roberts.

“Is it?” said Kelly. “I’m sorry, I was just trying to help.”

“Help yourself you mean,” said Erin. “Did you take my tip too?”

“What tip? There wasn’t one.”

“We left a tip, Mr. Roberts,” Jasper chimed in. “I vividly remember putting it right there, under the

tortilla bowl. The tortilla bowl that is now in pieces on the floor.” Mr. Roberts looked at Kelly, waiting for an explanation.

“I don’t remember there being a tip. I must have knocked the bowl over by accident as I was wiping the table. I’m sorry, sir.”

“Well, is that all?” Mr. Roberts said, looking at Erin and Jasper.

“I left a tip, Mr. Roberts.”

“Maybe the real thief took it before I came,” said Kelly, her voice sounding more confident.

“There’s one way to settle this,” said Jasper. “Search her apron.” Mr. Roberts frowned.

“I don’t think that will—”

“I’m a paying customer, Mr. Roberts,” said Jasper. I could see he was playing to the audience now, as everyone else was watching the performance. “Are you going to question my integrity when I say I left a tip? Are you calling me a liar, taking the word of your employee over the word of a guest in your eatery? That sounds to me like an insult on every person here!”

“No, no,” said Mr. Roberts, “Oh, alright. Take off your apron Kelly. I’m not sure what this will prove.”

“Quite a lot,” said Jasper while Kelly removed her apron. “You see, I marked the bills, so we should be able to see which ones she stole.

I noticed that Kelly didn’t seem at all anxious about her apron being searched. She willingly handed it to Mr. Roberts who then emptied its contents onto a nearby table. There were a couple of pens, some straws, and money, mostly ones, and one or two fives.

“You seem to be doing well for yourself in tips, Kelly,” said Mr. Roberts. “But that’s not surprising. She’s a good worker.”

“Oh, she works her tail off, I’m sure,” I heard Erin mutter.

“Any of these yours, Mr. Quinn?” said Mr. Roberts, waving a hand over the money. Jasper picked through the bills, but none of them had salsa or gum on them. He leaned toward my ear, his thin orange brows knitted in confusion.

“She must have some way of hiding the money,” he whispered. I glanced over at Kelly; she stood with her arms folded looking smug. It was then I noticed it. I grabbed Jasper’s arm and directed his attention to her jeans. He grinned.



“Well done, Daniel,” he said. Jasper then snatched up the apron and put his hand into the large pocket. “Aha!” he cried out. He held up the apron and turned it around so we could see. There was a hole in the back. Jasper turned his attention to Kelly’s jeans. “Did we have an accident with the salsa, Kelly?” he said.

Kelly looked down and saw tomato smudge marks around the top of her right pocket. Her fair complexion turned as red as the salsa.

“Would you mind turning out your pockets, Kelly?” said Mr. Roberts.

“I might,” she said, no longer looking quite as confident.

“Then I take that as a confession of guilt,” he said. Kelly put her hands into her pockets and dumped the contents on the table. Among the tissues and hair bands were dollar bills, two of which were lightly coated with salsa and had traces of gum on the edge.

“Okay, everyone back to work,” said Mr. Roberts. “Kelly, my office now.”

Mr. Roberts marched Kelly to the back of the restaurant. Kelly barely lifted her head the entire way.

Erin rushed up and hugged me.

“Thank you so much!” she said. I put my arms around her, but she didn’t stay long, quickly moving on to Jasper.

“I don’t know how I could ever repay you,” she said, hugging Jasper. Then she kissed him on the cheek.

“We need to be going now,” I said with unconcealed annoyance.

“Think nothing of it,” said Jasper. “Glad to help. See you in school.” I grabbed his arm and ushered him out of the restaurant.

Like I said, sometimes it’s hard being friends with Jasper Quinn.