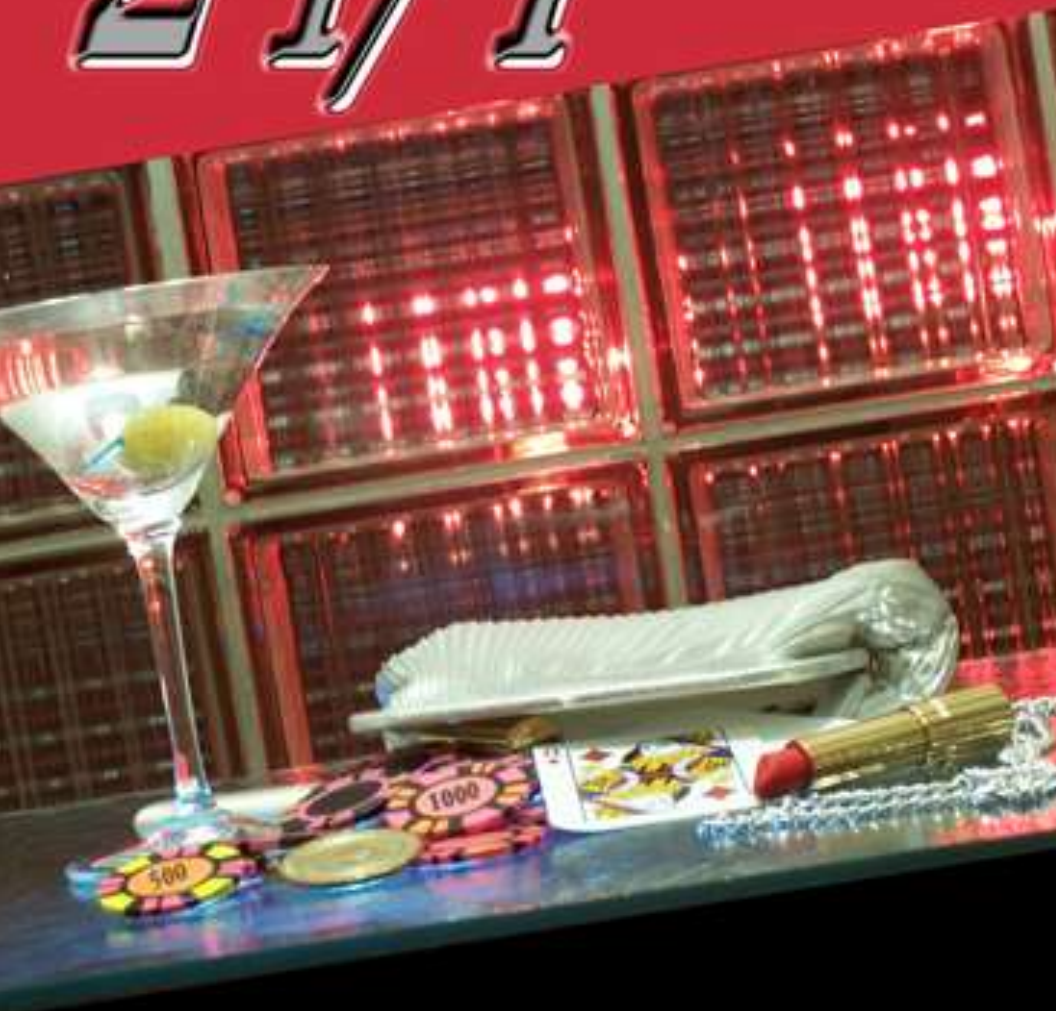


# 24/7



*A Novel by*

**Susan DiPlacido**

24/7

BY

SUSAN DIPLACIDO

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental

24/7

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## DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to all the dealers, bartenders, waitresses, chefs, cab drivers, housekeepers, bellmen, pool hosts and every other worker in Las Vegas. You are the ones who make the place dazzle and shine, and keep its heart beating. Specifically, to the wonderful folks at Caesars Palace, especially those late-night dice dealers and the quick-pouring bartenders.

For Kirk.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to Liz Burton for taking a gamble on me.

Love and appreciation to my gorgeous, glorious Palacitas. I hit the jackpot with friends like you. Ann, Diane, Kristin, Shannon, and Meghan for their years of encouragement and friendship. To Laura, for her time and thoughts on this project. And Shelbi, for her deliriously over-loving help. You guys put the zing in my bling.

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Even knowing the count, I'd have never wagered high without the words of one of the all-time greats. Chuck P., if nothing else, please know that your writing made me not only want to create, but to also take the risk of sharing it with the world.

WINNING IS A HIGH. AND I'M ABOUT TO TOUCH THE CLOUDS.  
The odds are against me, but I can change that. Because I may not be lucky, but I'm damn good.

During lunch break, I wind my way out of the convention area and into the main casino. Beneath the yellow lights and with purple carpet under my feet, I grab a seat at the closest blackjack table. It's a chick dealer, and when she greets me, I just drop my eyes, smile and nod. I fish in my pocket and check my bankroll. Only a couple grand. I peel off four hundred and tuck it back in my pocket, place the rest on the felt. As she scoops and counts it, I scan the pit. A few slot machines whirl and ding and clink while some of the men from the morning meeting settle at a craps table across the room. But there's not much action, which makes this a little stupid. Puts even more eyes on me.

"Changing sixteen hundred," she calls out then stuffs it down into the bank and slides me chips. "Good luck."

I start with a twenty-five-dollar bet. The shoe is full with six decks lined up, and as she deals me I glance at the discard pile. It's empty.

Unbelievable. Perfect.

I tend to have good luck at the Hard Rock anyhow, and this looks bright right off the bat. I get dealt a hard sixteen, and she has an eight showing. I take the hit because I have to and pull a three. I stand. She flips and has a four showing, making it a hard twelve. She hits and draws a three. Hits again, draws a seven. Bust. That's one for me. I finish my count before she sweeps the cards up.

I place fifty dollars down for the next hand. As I handle the chips, I make a conscious effort not to flip them through my fingers. It's a dumb little idiosyncratic move I have, but it's a

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flashy hotshot move. Making myself fade out, blend in and become completely unmemorable is what I rely on.

I repeat the count in my head as she deals me. I play my hand by textbook: add the points, then watch hers unfold and add those points to the count. It's easy, because it's rote. I just add and subtract and play by the numbers. Plus is good, minus is bad. That simple.

The only loopy thing I have to keep in mind is that I'm at the Hard Rock. As the Chili Peppers music pipes around me and I glance at the funky-colored chips in front of me, it's easy to remember. They hit the soft seventeen here, so that changes the way I play a few of my hands.

As the hands unfold, I feel lulled. Tranquil. All I have to do is play my cards, keep the count, sidetrack the aces and keep an eye on the discard. Increase and decrease my bet appropriately.

Skill and deception, that's all it is.

I get lost during the second shoe. Not on the count—I have that perfectly tracked. Lost in the game. It's formed its own rhythm. Silently, I say the count. I watch the cards go down and mentally name what I'm looking at and what to do, taking my time to slow the pace. Seven facing nine, hit. Eleven facing eight, double down. Ace/six facing seven, hit. And then I make the count. First my hand, then hers. Say it to myself so I don't get lost. As she passes chips or picks them up, I say the count again. And so it goes. Count, play, count.

Everything else drips away. The rest of the casino, the meetings, my life. It all slides to my periphery, tucked away somewhere safe. Lingering, but unobtrusive. Like vapor.

I get a really high count going toward the end of a shoe. I'm sure it's stacked with aces, too—I've only seen five of them so far. I play a huge hand, shoving seven hundred bucks with just seven black chips onto the betting circle. The dealer looks over her shoulder at the pit boss. That tells me I'm done after this hand.

I draw two aces. I laugh. I have to split. After all this work and knowing that I've gotten my bankroll up, this could bust me if it goes bad. The pit boss comes over and watches the hand. The dealer has a queen showing. Tranquility gone, I'm wired on

this action. I swallow hard and choke back the nerves.

I split and double the first hand. Draw a nine. Double the second hand. Draw a face. Jack of hearts, to be exact. He's gorgeous.

I don't even bother subtracting from the count at this point. I'm not out of the woods yet, though, if that dealer's holding an ace under her queen, I still lose one hand and only push on my blackjack. I hold my breath and watch as the dealer flips her hole card over. Seven. She draws an ace and I exhale, letting the winning euphoria seep all through me.

The pit boss hovers.

Stretching in my seat as the dealer slides the chips my way, I look around and see more people in the casino. It's noisier, more traffic.

"Can you color me up?" I ask.

The pit boss walks away. I drop a couple chips on the felt to tip the dealer, scoop the rest and hustle over to the change booth and realize I'm screwed as I look at my chips. Six thousand, nine hundred dollars. Charming. Just freaking charming. I can only cash out half.

Technically, I could cash them all in and not really worry about it, but I stay clear from tax liability for my gambling. Anything over \$10K, the casino must report to the federal government. It helps discourage money-laundering schemes and protects them from sharks. Like me.

Sixty-nine hundred is well below the limit for them to flag me for my Social Security number and file a Cash Transaction Report on me. Nevertheless, I try to stay way under that \$10K mark. Especially when the heat from the floor could have been on me, and they could be salivating for a reason to hassle a counter. Because they're allowed to file a report for less than the \$10K, and plenty of them ask for ID at \$5K.

The pit boss is still eyeing me.

I stuff most of the chips into my pocket, toss two little ones onto the counter and wait as the cashier counts me back twenty brand new Bennys. The green is nearly as sweet as the high itself. I slide one back and ask her to change it for me, give her a taste then go to the bar to check the time.





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It's one-forty-five. Madone, I'm late.

Back at the meeting, everyone is already hunkered down, listening attentively. I sneak in and grab a seat in the back until they break things up early at three-forty-five. I love Vegas-style workdays.

And paydays.

I tap my pocket to make sure the rest of the chips are in there then head outside and hightail it back home to Caesars.

 2 

THE POOL IS CROWDED, BUT THE POOL HOST KNOWS ME SO HE GETS ME SET UP IN a nice area. I swim then go back upstairs and watch a few innings of baseball and order dinner.

As dusk sets, I shower and get dressed for the night and go to the bar, as usual. I don't live in Vegas, but I'm here often enough. This time, I'm on a business trip. I'm going to need to keep that in mind and make this an early night.

Downstairs, the black marble sunken bar is just off the main casino floor and the seats are comfy. SportsCenter plays on the TVs. The piano man taps away, echoing everything from Vegas glory-days jazz to modern slop to help fill the air, lest—as corporate-casino conduct rules certainly forbid—there be silence, dead air or—gambling gods help us—any sort of peace permeating the place.

People rest their weary feet on plush black carpet while soft, warm golden light holds the mood, keeping it dark enough to make everyone look better than they are yet still bright enough to keep them awake in case they're moved to drop a few Franklins into the hungry corporate machine that sponsors all this debauchery.

There's a couple of glitter-eyed hookers around, a few guys in suits looking to impress, some vacationing couples and a group of overgrown frat boys who just know they're *so* money. And several random scattered oddballs, including me.

My favorite bartender Vince has my drink waiting for me.

"How's it going, sweetheart?" he asks.

I just nod and thank him. He gets some customers so he goes to work, making drinks, chatting up tourists.

There's a guy a couple seats down who's all alone. I do my

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stupid routine to catch his eye. Light a smoke, flip the cigarette across my fingers, backflip it the other way then take a hit. Repeat. Flip, backflip, smoke. It's the same as my chip shuffling and flipping tricks. If anyone realized how much practice it took to learn it, they'd know just how dorky it is. Since they don't, it actually looks really cool. And it gets even cooler when they try to do it and either burn the shit out of their fingers and/or send a cascade of glowing embers all over the place.

Flip, backflip, smoke. The guy is watching, and I pretend I don't see him. He'll talk to me eventually because he's alone.

Because that is how it works. Most people, they can't stand to be alone in public. I suppose they're self-conscious, and they think other people are looking at them and wondering why they're alone. So as soon as they see an opening, they'll strike up conversation with someone nearby.

I don't mind it, the sitting alone. I'm used to it.

He sends me a drink. I accept it with a smile, and the guy gets up and closes the gap of empty seats between us. Before I can say thanks, Vince says to the guy, "Just so you know, she's gonna cost you a lot more than one drink, buddy."

Oh, Madone. Here we go. I roll my eyes at Vince, but he just grins at the guy, who's looking puzzled.

Vince elaborates. "She's pushing ass. Think you can afford her?"

The guy stutters, smile fading before he finally asks, "Pushing ass?"

"She's a hooker, buddy."

He turns to me. Stammering: "Are...are you really a...a prostitute?" He whispers the word.

"No." I laugh. "It's just a stupid joke. One time I told him that I wish someone would mistake me for a hooker, just because I would take it as a compliment because they're all so pretty out here. No one ever does, though."

His face cracks into an easier smile now. "Well, you're pretty. I like your eyes, they're really dark brown. I think you're pretty."

"Oh, and you've had a lot to drink, haven't you, guy?"

"I like your hair. You have pretty hair."

Yeah, he's drunk. I don't mind. I plan on catching up to him.

Him again: "I still don't understand why you'd want to be mistaken for a hooker, though."

Demurely: "I wouldn't actually do it, you know, follow through. I just think it'd be a compliment to have a guy be willing to pay money to have sex with me." I'm flustered suddenly and worried I'm going to say too much. "It's, ah, um, look, it's just a dumb joke we have, that's all."

"Okay," he says as Vince puts a couple lemon drop shots in front of us. Vince doesn't charge me. Vince never charges me. He's a *paisan*' from Jersey, like me.

I know the guy is deciding about me as he looks around the casino. He really is cute, with blond curly hair and broad shoulders. Suddenly, he looks back to me and scratches the corner of his mouth. Then he asks, "If you were a hooker, what would you charge?"

Game on.

I pick up my drink, swirl it around, lick my lips. Flip, backflip, smoke. "You mean what's the going rate around here? Is that what you're trying to figure out?"

"No, not exactly. Well, yeah, sort of. Why, would you be the average rate?"

"Well, I think average is about a grand, so..."

"Average is a *grand*?" He nearly shouts it.

"I'm serious. Ask one of them."

"Ask one of them?" He looks around. "How am I supposed to do that?"

"There's a few in here. They'll come talk to you sooner or later."

He scans the room. "They're gonna come and talk to me? Why?"

Laughing, I answer him, "Because you're a guy and you're alone. Or, well, you were. I might be screwing it up for you by talking to you. Stop talking to me, and they'll come over pretty quickly."

He leans in my direction. "No, I'd rather talk to you. I like talking to you."

"Why? Just 'cause I'm free?"

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“Cause I’m still trying to figure out how much you’d cost.”

“Okay, look here,” I say. “I suppose I wouldn’t have a flat fee—it would depend on the guy. Most guys, there wouldn’t be enough money.” Picking up my shot, I nod at his. “Listen, let’s do these.”

After he does his, he nudges my shoulder, asking, “So, if you were a hooker, and your prices were different for each guy, how much would you charge me?”

I smile but don’t answer him. He’s good-looking. And he seems nice enough. But I’m still not sure.

Well, let’s get the hurdles cleared first.

“Got a girlfriend?” I ask him.

“No,” he says and ducks his head. “I’d like to have a girlfriend, though.”

He’s cute, seems nice enough. A little dim, maybe, or just liquored up, but this is Vegas. I don’t get how he’s single. I’m almost afraid for him. He could get eaten alive in this city if he’s not careful. He seems so genuine—I bet he’d treat a girl like a princess.

But I don’t want to be a princess. I want to be mistaken for a whore.

“And you?” he nods. “Boyfriend? Are you married?”

And there it is.

“Nope,” I say cheerfully. Lots of single chicks my age have a problem with that question, but it really doesn’t bother me.

Cocking his head to the side, he asks, “Why not?”

And there *that* is. That question really does bother me. I never know how people expect me to respond. Honestly. So I do my best.

“Because that would take the spontaneity out of dating,” I say even more cheerfully.

He laughs. I get friendlier.

“So, what’s your name, guy?”

“Robert,” he says, and just then a gorgeous platinum-blond whore in a fur jacket takes a seat on the other side of him. I know her. Calls herself Diamond. I also know I’ve probably just lost any chance I had with Robert as she strokes his arm, leans toward him and with a saucy grin introduces herself, because

she's braless, flawless and painted and inflated in all the right areas.

Sighing, I order another drink. As Vince slides it in front of me, Robert makes an effort and introduces her to me.

"This is Diamond," he says.

I nod at her politely while she gives me the dumb-fucker look. You know the one. She's not sure yet if she should give me a nasty look to make me leave or if she should back off and let me have him.

"We know each other," she tells him.

Her eyes wander around the room, and I guess she's decided to throw me a bone because she moves down a seat.

Robert lights the wrong end of a cigarette, smashes it out and gives up. Turning back to me, he asks me out. I tell him it's a little late to go anywhere.

"Tomorrow?" he asks hopefully.

"I'll probably just hang out at the pool tomorrow."

"I like the pool. I can go to the pool. It'd be nice to have a lovely lady to hang out with while I'm here."

Vince comes to talk to him.

"Look, buddy," he tells him. "You want a girl for when you're here? Forget this one." He nods at me. "Forget hookers." He directs that comment to Diamond, but if she heard him she doesn't show any reaction. "Just go to a strip club, pick up a chick there, show her some money, she'll do whatever you want while you're in town."

"But she'll only want money from me, right?" Robert asks. "No, I don't want that, I want someone I like to hang out with."

"Then forget that, buddy," Vince tells him. "They're all gonna be crazy bitches. With drug problems. I'm telling you, though, it works. Unless you don't have enough cash."

"I have money," he says. "I have plenty. I'll spend it on someone, but..."

Diamond slides back and leans against him as he says that. She reinforces Vince's idea he could easily find himself a nice girlfriend if he'd like. She offers to be his girlfriend for the night. His head swivels in her direction.

Vince rolls his eyes and pours me another lemon drop. I stand

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and take a step away from them to do it. I won't compete for a guy's attention. I know Diamond can win him over. Like Sun Tzu says, if you know the enemy is stronger, don't engage. It's not because I'm afraid of rejection. I've had that happen enough that it's something I can deal with. I'd rather take the chance and know for sure it wasn't going to happen than always wonder "what if."

But this is different than a "what if." It's not taking a chance because I know I have no chance. If he wants her, he wants her. Period. I don't really care anyhow. I've never invested much in retaining a man. Which is not to say I've never invested in getting a man; I just don't want to hold on to them. Luckily, the feeling seems reciprocal.

"I'm going to gamble," I tell Vince. Hearing that, Robert looks back and forth between Diamond and me then asks if he can come with me. Pleasantly surprised, I nod, playing with the notion of giving Diamond some competition just for sport.

But before he's even out of his seat, she's up and at his side, saying she'll tag along, too, holding his hand, and the three of us go to check out the action on the floor.

## 3

IF YOU'VE NEVER BEEN IN CAESARS, IT'S A PRETTY EASY SET-UP. THEY HAVE TWO casinos. The front casino—that's the old one, the famous one—has the lower, vaulted ceiling with the gold lights in a carousel pattern. It's glamorous and ritzy, just enough to tip over into being baroque. Decadent and swank old-school ambience.

When you walk into this casino, you expect to see movie stars. The men wear suits and smoke cigars. Dealers stand straight and look crisp. The carpet is soft and thick, and the tables, the lights and the ceiling all sigh with history.

The legacy is as palpable as the smoke, but the smoke gets sucked up while clean, new air gets pumped in to keep it all seeming fresh. The vacuums run and the filters whir and polishers scrub to keep it all shiny, but the one thing they can't remove, and would never want to, is all that history. Almost as though when they shake out an old rug or rip off wallpaper it releases not only dust but some of the essence of Jay Sarno's 1966 dream.

It's one of the few places on the strip like that, stinking of history and with the illusion of romance and class. The Flamingo, right across the street, should have the magic allure, but it doesn't. Instead of dripping with character and old-time gangland style it just looks like a big, corporate, mirrored nightmare that puked up Pepto-Bismol to hide its sins after a drunken orgy.

I don't know how Caesars does it. It's been corporatized, modernized and sanitized. It's been ripped, nipped, tucked, buffed, polished, painted, waxed, gilded, gaudied and glamorized as much as any other place around. But somehow, unlike



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everything else, they haven't managed to eviscerate its soul quite yet.

The older front casino is definitely the "richer" one. The high rollers play up there. There are levels of gamblers; the big ones, they're called whales. Those are guys who can drop a million and not even blink. I'm not a whale. I'm not even a fish. I rate as plankton.

So I go into the back casino, the newer one. Robert follows along next to me, and Diamond hangs closely to him, whispering things in his ear I can't hear. I like the back casino better. It has a higher ceiling, with the sports book at one end, a long strip of tables and then the entrance to the famous Forum Shops at the other end.

Tonight, the craps tables are crowded with men—it's always just jammed with guys at the craps tables. I find the coolest craps crew, Edward's crew, working the back room on a \$25 table, and I can afford that tonight so I stop to play with them, 'cause Edward's always been lucky for me.

I believe in luck. I shouldn't. I know better. But I do. I'm a sucker just like everyone else. I blame the lemon drops.

First time I tried craps, I was totally clueless and a little intimidated. I told the guy dealing my end that I didn't know how to play.

"Dice virgin," he yelled out. Man, you should have seen the heads at other tables perk up. Guys came running over to play. Supposedly, a brand-new female shooter is good luck.

I was.

I rolled a long time, hit lots of numbers and points. The whole time, the dealer—Edward—just kept explaining it to me. He kept taking my money and kept handing me back even more.

After playing that night, I researched the game. Learned everything I could about it. He wasn't lying about what the good bets are and what the sucker bets are.

If you're going to gamble, you really should know how much to expect to lose. Most people don't give a fuck and don't want to know. They just ride on luck alone. I don't have that much faith.

It's all about the odds out here. I know the odds, I know I'm

giving an eleven-percent house edge when I place certain hard-way bets. But I do it anyhow. Why? Cause hot is hot and luck is luck and sometimes you gotta gamble.

As I get to the rail, I smile and nod at Robert to take a place next to me, but Diamond keeps her arms twined through his and leads him to the other end, where he settles with a sheepish grin cast in my direction. There's a point set, so I wait for the roll then get my money and player card on the table. Stickman Bill sees me, winks and calls the roll.

"Eight, easy eight. Ladies, better to get eight easy than not get eight at all!"

"Sweetheart," Edward greets me, handing off my player card to the pit boss as his eyes flit to Robert and Diamond with a wry grin. "I saw you last night, called your name, but you didn't come over to see me."

"Did I hear you?"

We watch as the shooter rolls, Bill calls it out: "Eight's the point, who's up for the hard eight?" Winking at me: "It's what the ladies dream of, isn't it, a hard eight?"

Bill's a funny stick caller. He gets randy when there's no heat around.

Picking up our conversation again, Edward says, "I don't think you heard me. You were just walking around. I was just surprised to see you so soon again—it's only been, what, a week?"

The shooter sevens out, so Bill calls it.

"Oh, three and four, now we're poor."

"Two weeks," I tell Edward. "Been a loooong two weeks away from here. Sorry I didn't hear you." I reach down and start to place my bets, straining with my minimal height to reach where I want.

Edward holds out his hand. "Come on," he says, "you know better than that. Toss 'em to me. Did they give you a good room this time? Get that Rain Man Suite yet, sweetheart?"

I toss my chips into his palm and shake my head. "No Rain Man. They keep promising it to me but I never get it. I'm in the Palace, though. It's pretty nice."

I lean against the railing, and Diamond leans against Robert,

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indignantly asking me, “Hey, girl, why you let him call you sweetheart like that?”

I just shrug and search around for a drink waitress but don’t see one handy.

Bill on stick calls, “Bet craps eleven, any seven, bet now while the dice are in the middle.”

A big guy crowds in next to me. He’s dripping in gold jewelry, wearing a dark suit and smoking a cigar. Wannabe gangster. Pinkie ring and everything.

The roller craps out immediately, Edward sweeps away my chips with a mumbled, “Sorry, hon.”

“He just did it again,” Diamond bitches to me as she glares at Edward and rubs cattishly against Robert. “That’s bullshit, woman,” she says. “You think they’d call him something like that?” She points to the guy with the pinkie ring next to me. “Hell, no. They call him ‘Mister Whatever,’ I guarantee it.”

“I really don’t mind it,” I tell her as I notice Edward roll his eyes. The roller craps out and I crane my neck, searching for a cocktail waitress, smiling up at Robert, but his eyes are focused on Diamond now.

Next to me, Mr. Pinkie Ring grunts and bumps into me as he throws his chips across the table to Edward. They scatter and one of them rolls across the felt into the middle section with the prop bets.

“Sir,” Edward says flatly. “Would you please not toss your chips like that? Just hand them to me.”

Pinkie just grunts again, nudges into me, and Diamond perks up.

“Did you hear that? Did you? He just called him sir.”

“Diamond, I really don’t mind, it’s fine.”

“Yeah, well, you should mind, little girl, it’s not respectful, the way they call you those things. You are a woman.”

“Can I call you sweetheart?” Robert asks her with moon eyes. It annoys the hell out of me.

“With enough cash, you can call me anything you want,” she answers.

It’s her turn to roll, so she has Robert throw some money down for her. Bill slides the dice in front of her but keeps them

far enough away that she has to lean over the rail, barely keeping her boobs in her shirt. She calls him on it, saying, “Oh, you did not just short-stick me!”

“Short what?” Robert asks.

“He’s trying to make me flash him! For free!”

Robert puts his arm around her. Edward rolls his eyes and holds his hand out for me, so I toss him my chips, and next to me, Pinkie grunts audibly as Diamond rolls another three craps.

“Where the hell is that drink chick?” I say out loud.

“Relax, sweetheart,” Pinkie-ring says, annoyed.

“This is bullshit.” Diamond gets loud. “Don’t we deserve respect? The same respect they show these men they call sir? Short-stick me!”

“I didn’t see it.” Robert seems glum over missing a free skin shot.

Gruffly, Pinkie pipes up, “You here to talk or here to gamble? Move down, gimme some room on the rail here.”

He jostles me as he leans down to place his bet, defiantly tosses a few chips, knocking over one of Edward’s neat stacks as he barks his request.

“Sir,” Edward warns him, “please stop throwing chips. And you give my sweetheart there some room.”

“You see!” Diamond shouts. “Make him call you ‘Miss’ or ‘Miz!’ You have to demand respect in this town, woman. You gotta be lion-hearted.”

“I’ll call you ‘Miss’ if you want me to,” Robert says to her. His subservient demeanor makes me want to smack him. I found it blandly appealing when it was directed at me, but directed at Diamond, it suddenly seems pathetic.

“Really, it’s fine, I like it,” I assure her as I toss my chips to a smirking Edward.

She finally rolls a number, and, “Six, hard six, the national average!” Bill dares sing out with a wink at me.

I place odds for myself and the dealers as Pinkie chucks a couple chips with a high arcing toss to the center.

“Hard six,” he says.

“Sir, I’ll book your prop bets for you,” Edward chastises.

“All about respect, girlfriend.” Diamond’s still jawing. “Well,

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respect and money.”

“I have money,” Robert says hopefully.

Bill sinks into that remark. “Then let’s see it, sir. Get in on the action here while it’s hot. Play a hard six—we all like some hard six now and then. This hard six costs less than it does from her! Thank you, sir, good choice. Anyone else? Shoooooter! Dice down!”

He slides the dice to her again, obnoxiously short-sticking her. She leans over, way over, and her breasts tumble forward, way forward, showing plenty of cleavage and skin. Robert sees it this time, his eyes go wide.

“He short-sticked me again! Did you see that?”

“I saw that,” Robert answers, eyes still riveted on her chest, agog with delight as she shakes and chicken-feeds the dice down the table.

“Where is that drink girl?” I ask again.

Bill retrieves the dice, announces the roll, waits for people to bet. Now he slides the dice back to Diamond, singing loudly, “Okay, shooter, come on, now—throw that six. Anybody coming? Book with your dealer now. Let’s get a cocktail waitress over here for my baby.”

“Baby! They’re all doing it!” Diamond yells as she leans her boobs over the railing again. “And you! Stop short-sticking me! I’d never let them get away with calling me ‘sweetheart’ and ‘baby’ like that!”

As she rolls, Bill snarks, “Miss, you don’t ever have to worry about that happening. A six and a five, we’re all live! Yo-eleven, that’s the call, good field, pay the comes. That’s why it’s always good to be coming, people, always nice to be coming.”

Pinkie gives me a rough hip-check as he retrieves his come bet chips, so Edward snaps at him.

“Hey, sir, back off. You can’t push her around like that. Move down this way.”

Pinkie flips some chips at Bill. “C-and-E bet. Get some fucking numbers going at this table instead of yapping. I have the hard six—you booked the hard six?”

Diamond goes, “You don’t fight for anything, do you, girl? Not your men, not respect—nothing.”

The pit boss returns, slides himself between Pinkie and me to hand me back my player's card, saying, "Here you go, honey."

Oh, Madone, does that bring the house down. I mean, honestly.

"Don't you be calling her 'honey!' Show some respect!"

"I'll show you respect! I want to show you respect."

"You wanna back off? I don't have any fuckin' room on this rail!"

"Hey! Sir, don't you push her! And stop throwing chips!"

"Ten, hard ten, it's a myth everywhere but the craps table, people. Ten, hard ten, line 'em up, let's roll 'em again."

"Stop short-sticking me!"

"He is short-sticking you. I can see it. I see it now."

"Where is that cocktail waitress?"

"You want a drink, I'll call for her." The pit boss scampers to the phone.

Chips are flying, Pinkie is bumping, Robert is drooling, Edward's booking, Diamond's steaming, Bill's rhyming and I'm thirsting.

"Lion-heart, baby girl! Respect! You even let me steal your man tonight!"

"She wasn't interested in me. I respect you."

"Did you book my hard ten? Gimme some room so I can reach the prop bets! Someone book my hard ten!"

"Hand me your chips! Sir!"

"Ten! Came hard! No field, but a good hard come!"

"No one booked that hard ten for me! Call the pit boss! I want my fucking money! I won that money!"

"Stop pushing her!"

"My lion-heart won you tonight, didn't it, baby?"

Robert actually growls, looking directly at the area close to her heart, just slightly lower.

The pit boss returns, saying, "I called for a cocktail waitress for you, hon."

"Don't call her hon! And you stop short-sticking me!"

"I saw that, you short-sticked her! I saw it!"

"This dealer over here didn't book my hard ten! I told him hard ten!"

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“He’s past posting!” Edward shouts. “And you, stop pushing her!”

“Well, well, this ain’t no jive, shooter just rolled a double five! Hard ten—again! That’s a shame, sir. If you’d have pressed you could afford to get the shooter here undressed! Hard ten, pay it right here, my baby doll had a two-way with us. Come on now, shooter, still waiting on that six!”

“I had that hard ten! I would have pressed it up!”

“Lenny! This flea past-posted, he threw his chips and he keeps shoving the other players!”

“Did you just call me a *hooker*? Mr. Bossman, I think your stick man here just insulted me! He don’t show women no respect! He even short-sticked me!”

“I saw him, I saw him! He short-sticked her!”

“You liked that, didn’t you, baby?”

“Growl!”

“I had that hard ten! I would have pressed!”

It’s too much for me. I tell Bill to take my open bets as tokens if they hit and get the fuck out of there.

\* \* \*

I go back to Vince’s bar. He sees me coming and sets me up with a fresh drink before I sit down. He checks his watch.

“That was really fast.”

“That was really weird,” I tell him, rapidly swallowing my annoyance and embarrassment over being bested by a hooker.

“Where’s your guy?”

“Ditched me for Diamond.”

“Get the fuck outta here!”

“You know I’m serious.”

“I’m serious,” he says. “Come on now. He did you like that?”

“Vince, he didn’t do me in any way. I got nothing. Nothing. He’s gonna do her!”

Picking up a bar rag, he sweeps the area clean and shakes his head. “Then he’s a fucking idiot. I knew he was a fucking idiot.”

“I know, it’s cool.”

He smirks and flips a peanut in the air, catches it in his mouth, saying as he chews, “All I’m saying is this, if that was me you were just flirting with, I’d have run upstairs with you.

No, fuck that, I'd have picked you up and carried you upstairs while running."

"You're sweet, Vince. You don't want to sleep with me, though."

"I would have, before I knew you. You were really fuckable before I knew you. You're just too nice now."

"Well, uh, thanks...I think."

"I'd have still carried you upstairs and been happy about it, though. I'd just feel bad about it later, that's all."

"No, you wouldn't." I smile. "You wouldn't feel bad at all."

"Yeah, you're right, I wouldn't. Ah, well, you don't want to fuck me, either. Too bad for us, huh?"

"Hey, you're hot. I'd have done you. Before I knew you."

"I'm not too nice," he says.

"No, you're a pig."

Him laughing and nodding: "I know I am. It works for me, though. At least I get action. So, you're pushing what now? The three-year mark for this dry spell?"

I just nod.

"Ouch. I don't know how you can stand it. I'd be fucking anything that stood still long enough."

"I think I'm hitting that point."

He strikes a pose, motionless in front of me.

"Yeah, well, like I said, we're just pals," I wink and stifle a yawn. He's not boring me, I'm just tired. And I do have those meetings for work tomorrow. I dig in my pocket to find cash to tip him. "I'm going upstairs," I tell him as I slide him the money.



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THE PHONE RINGING WAKES ME. I RUB MY EYES AND REACH FOR IT GROGGILY AS I check the clock. I still have an hour before I have to be at the morning meeting.

“Hi,” the voice says simply.

“Hello, Nephew.” I’m not being insulting. It really is my nephew. Good kid. A little lonely for a friend.

“Whatcha doing?” he asks.

“I was sleeping, but I’m glad you got me up.”

“So. What are you up to?” he asks again.

I know he wants something—he wouldn’t call me out here just to shoot the breeze. But this is how the game is played. He’ll never ask for what he wants. His mother taught him that. Thing is, he won’t ask, but he’ll angle. He considers it a loophole. He’s pretty sly at it, too. He’ll angle until I decide to give him a break and finally offer what I think he wants, if I’m willing to do it. It’s a subtle manipulation, but I’ll wait until he’s older to call him on it.

“I’m just enjoying the vacation out here,” I tell him.

“Guess what. Creed announced their tour dates.”

“Ask your mother. You know better than that with me. Frankly, I’m disappointed you don’t know better about them.”

“Yeah. I heard Eminem is going to tour with Papa Roach this spring, too.”

There it is. There it finally is. The Creed thing was a decoy—he does know better. I’m a little old to be going to see Eminem, but he’s entirely too old to be going with his mother. And she’s entirely too uptight to be allowed near an Eminem show. I’ll help him out.

“Well, I could go to that.”

“You can?”

“Sure. I’ll make a note to buy tickets for me and Sherri.”

“Oh.” He’s really not sure if I’m screwing with him or not.

I let him off the hook. “I don’t suppose you’d like to go, too?”

“Uh, well, yeah.” He tries to sound nonchalant. “If you want me to go, I could probably do that.”

“No problem. Just one thing, though—you don’t hate gay people, do you?”

“What?”

“I’m just asking. You know, he sort of pissed off gay people by saying a lot of really nasty stuff about them. You aren’t into all that, are you?”

“No. I just like the Slim Shady thing. I don’t know about that other stuff.”

“Okay, Nephew. Remind me next week the day they go on sale. Ciao.”

I hang up, shower off the smoke and booze from last night and then go to the meeting. The work goes quickly, and I resist hitting the blackjack tables again at the Hard Rock before leaving. I did well enough yesterday and don’t see any reason to press my luck and draw attention to myself. So I go back to Caesars to enjoy the day at the pool, but it gets windy in the afternoon, unbearably gusty by three.

I go upstairs, get cleaned up and walk over to the Bellagio to play some blackjack. I figure it’s a pretty good shot. It’s Friday, so it ought to be getting busier. And since it’s where all the rich people go, they shouldn’t even notice my small money.

I dress conservatively, make sure all my tattoos are covered up. I pull my hair back in a neat ponytail. I even go the extra yard and put on some mascara. Very respectable and normal-looking.

I like their casino. It’s so contrary to what casinos generally are. It’s bright and airy, very classy. I don’t fit in over here. But I’m comfortable. It’s hard not to be when sitting on buttery leather chairs and drinking the best cosmopolitans in the city.

I’m not going to drink a cosmo, though. Not yet. I might

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order a drink, but I won't drink it. It's time to do some work.

I have the odds in my favor right now. That's not supposed to happen in a casino. Ever. But it can. Might as well try to capitalize.

They call it cheating.

I call it using my brain.

We both call it blackjack.

It's a simple game. Whoever gets closest to twenty-one wins. It was originally called blackjack because a two-card hand of the ace of spades and the jack of spades was rewarded extra. It still is—that combination pays three-to-two on most blackjack games. But so does any two-card combo of a face or ten card paired with an ace.

Like I said, a simple game. Made even simpler by the fact that most of the work has already been done, it's just a matter of taking advantage of it.

Most people gamble because they hope they'll get lucky. I hope I'll get lucky. I just help nudge that luck along with strategy.

Basic strategy is the cornerstone of playing blackjack well. And it's easy. You just memorize what you're supposed to do with the hand you have based on the dealer's upcard. It's been mathematically worked out and tested—guys like Edward Thorpe and Stanford Wong did the genius work. It's statistically proven to be the correct way to play to win as often as possible and lower the house edge.

So, I play by basic strategy. The casinos don't mind that. Not at all.

I also count cards. The casinos really do mind that. It's not illegal to count cards in Nevada, but they are legally allowed to eject a suspected card counter from the premises.

I don't feel guilty when I capitalize by using my brain to cut their edge down. Or remove it. Or even beat it. A lot of people go through life—and especially gambling—thinking something will come to them because they deserve it. I never understood that. Whatever I want to come my way, I'll earn. No one deserves to win in a casino. Gambling doesn't work that way. But I can study and learn and earn some cash anyhow.

That goes beyond luck. It's an incorporation of logic, subterfuge, deception, basic math and a tiny bit of the warrior spirit. Sun Tzu said that skillful warriors wait for their enemy's moment of vulnerability. Counting gives you the ability to see when the casino is vulnerable; then the action is in your hands to attack and exploit that weakness.

Here's the thing. Counting isn't keeping track of every card that's played so you know exactly what cards are left in the deck. It's nothing like Rain Man. Counting is keeping track of what high cards and low cards have been played to determine if the deck is favorable or not. When the deck is favorable, you increase your bets. You strike.

Simply put, a deck that's rich in tens and aces is good for the player, bad for the casino. Among other things, there's more chance of a player hitting a blackjack, and more chance of the dealer busting. A deck that's rich in low cards is bad for the player, good for the casino. So all a counter has to do is keep a tally of high cards played vs. low cards played. Counting lets you make calculations; and based on those you know whether to retreat or attack. Because, as Sun Tzu also said, when the enemy is stronger, avoid him.

I knew all this about *The Art of War* before I'd played blackjack, but none of this other stuff about counting and strategy. Once I played, I got interested. And once I get interested, I get curious, and to satisfy curiosity, I need to research. And once I research, I start to learn. And then something clicks.

So I learned basic strategy. Then I learned how to count. And then I practiced. And practiced. And still practice. I use a pretty simple counting system—it's called the Hi-Lo. All it is, is this: every card is assigned a point value of either minus one, zero or plus one. Two, three, four, five and six are all plus one. Seven, eight and nine are zero. Tens and aces are minus one. There's no side adjustment for aces, which makes it simpler to keep the count good but also a little less precise. So, I keep a side count of those.

When you keep the running count, a plus total means bet higher because more low cards have just been played and good

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player cards are due. Minus means back off, because casino-favorable cards are due. That's all it is.

It's not hard to keep the count now. Frankly, it makes the game more fun. Every other game I play I expect to lose in the long run, which makes winning fun. It's that jolt, that rush. Walking away from a slot machine or dice table or baccarat room with extra money in my pocket is just absolutely invigorating. I feel lucky.

But walking away from a blackjack table with extra money in my pocket? There's the same rush, invigoration. But I don't just feel lucky. I feel smart. Even better, I feel bad. Naughty. Kid-in-a-candy-store, fist-in-the-cookie-jar, hand-in-the-casino's-pockets naughty.

Then add in the whole sport of not getting caught. Sun Tzu said all warfare is based on deception. I've never had much heat put on me while counting. I'm careful, I don't repeat my business too often. That's why I'm coming here today instead of the Hard Rock. Plus, I don't play big money, so I don't really put a big hurt on the places. They don't watch me as closely as they do high rollers.

I don't play for a living, I play for more gambling money. I don't think I ever could do it for a living. I'm not exactly faint of heart, but I think you'd have to be made of stone and have ice water running through your veins to endure the pressure of something like that. Sure, I can turn the odds to my favor. But just because you have a winning-expectation game going doesn't mean you're going to win. No one wins all the time, and the fluctuations can be killer.

The casinos have all the money for a reason. It's not just that the odds and numbers and statistics are in their favor; it's the resources and manpower and experience they have.

They're unbeatable.

Which is exactly why some people have to try.