

Some Days Later . . .

Thirty

Stopping for gas in Glenwood Springs, David visited the men's room. In the mirror, he saw why the attendant had been visibly impressed by his appearance; he looked like he'd just walked away from a plane crash. He washed his face and went back out to ask where he could buy some clothes.

"Not much open here on a Sunday," he was told. "Might find something in Grand Junction, though."

Before leaving, he bought a map.

At a men's store in Grand Junction, he explained he'd been in an accident and needed a bit of everything from underwear on out. An extra fifty dollars produced someone willing to do alterations on two pairs of jeans, two pairs of slacks, and a sport coat. He proceeded from there to a small department store where he picked up everything else he needed to fill a new suitcase.

Finally, looking fairly presentable but not smelling quite right, he checked into a motel and spent an hour in a hot bath. Then he shaved, got back into the tub for a shower, and washed his hair three times. Feeling clean at last, he pulled the spread off the bed, lay down naked, and stared up at the ceiling, luxuriating in the feel of cool, smooth sheets against his back.

He wondered if he'd feel any different if the safety catch on Robbie's pistol had been off—if the harmless-looking, weak-chinned Charles were now lying up in the mountains with a big, bloody hole in his chest and flies congregating in his astonished eyes. He decided he wouldn't.

When he began to get hungry, he dressed, checked out, and went looking for a drink and a steak.

Then he was on his way again—to Las Vegas after all.

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The Corvette seemed to want to cruise at eighty, and David, feeling reckless, let it have its way, so it was only a little after nine when he turned onto the Las Vegas Expressway to go downtown. He knew the city somewhat, from a convention reluctantly attended, and he despised the pretentious posh of the Strip hotels. The gaudy carnival of Fremont Street was at least honestly vulgar.

He checked into the El Moreno, one of the smaller hotels, had a typical Las Vegas meal—tasteless and cheap—and went into the cocktail lounge, where he drank until the trio started in on its second round of *Satin Doll*. Then he took himself blearily off to his room upstairs, fell into bed, and slept like a hunk of granite until four A.M., when a slaughterhouse dream jerked him awake, sweating and wanting to be among people—lots of people. He splashed some water on his face, got dressed, and hurried downstairs. After wading through a tasteless breakfast in an empty dining room, he wandered into the casino.

Finding a stool at an empty blackjack table, he sat down to watch the action, which seemed at once more subdued and more intense than at midnight. Under the sea of smoke that hung inverted from the ceiling, the players looked like corpses, blinking down at their choices with dull, indifferent eyes.

David reflected that the gambler's idea of heaven is a scene straight from hell at five in the morning, when, without the midnight crowds to hide it, the truth lies exposed. The players aren't there to play; they're there to work. Under the watchful eyes of their warders—the dealers and the bosses—the players shuffle hopelessly from table to table, condemned to an eternity of grinding out the club's percentage, of systematically leaving behind just a little more than they pick up.

Finding this a more agreeable nightmare than the one he'd left behind in his room, David slid off his stool, stretched, and went over to the roulette wheel to study the betting layout. The red-jacketed dealer, arms folded and idle without any players, nodded pleasantly and watched him with very bright, very dark eyes set in a good-humored, intelligent face. Unlike the players, he seemed fresh and alert. David handed him a hundred dollar bill and was given twenty casino chips. Seeing nothing more attractive to do with them, he put them all on the number one, and the dealer set the wheel in motion and flicked the plastic ball along the rim.

After sizzling along for a while, it drifted down from the rim, clicked off a few buffers, and settled in a pocket. The dealer saw which it was before David did and calmly announced it: "One."

For nine times you can't miss.

Faster than David could follow it, the dealer picked up two stacks of chips, slid five off of one of them, and added them to the original twenty.

"How much is that?" David asked.

"Thirty-six hundred, sir—with your original bet."

"I'll let it ride on one."

The dealer smiled indulgently. "You bet the limit, sir."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The limit on a straight-up bet is one hundred dollars."

David frowned. "Only one hundred?"

"It used to be fifty, but we have the *en prison* rule now."

Leaving the hundred behind, David scooped off the thirty-five hundred he'd won and asked what the *en prison* rule was. After listening to the explanation without comprehension, he asked about even/odd and red/black. He bet the limit on odd and red—one thousand on each.

The ball was sent spinning in its slot and after a few moments clattered into a pocket. With studied indifference, the dealer blinked and said, "One."

A quick tally told David he'd won fifty-five hundred dollars. He asked about the odds and limits on the other bets, and the dealer explained about the columns, the dozens, and high/low. David bet the limit on everything on the board, and the ball was set in motion. When it hopped out of the double zero to rest in the neighboring slot for the third time in a row, the dealer's composure wavered: he gawked for a moment before beginning the payoff.

When David looked up from clearing off his winnings, he found the dealer conferring with the pit boss. A slender, dark-suited man with bitter eyes, the pit boss nodded, shot David a wary look, and took the dealer's place at the wheel.

"You're having a lucky night," he said with a grim smile.

"So it would seem."

The pit boss glanced at the layout. "You're playing one again?"

"That's right."

He nodded as if his worst suspicions had been confirmed and slotted the ball into orbit with a professional flick. As it wound its way around the domed wheel, a player from another table drifted over to see what the excitement was. He scanned the bets, moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue, and transferred his gaze to the wheel. His eyes popped and David felt an electric charge run through him when the ball dropped into the pocket.

"Jesus," he whispered reverently as the dealer began sliding chips out onto the layout.

The pit boss gave David a sour smile. "Would you object to moving to another table, sir? A closed table?"

"A closed table?"

"Just for you, that is."

The player at David's right said, "You can't do that."

"If the gentleman prefers it," the pit boss said levelly. David thought for a moment. "I think I'd prefer not to have a riot."

"Meaning?"

"A closed table."

The pit boss nodded and the dealer pulled the cover off the wheel at a nearby table. As David looked down uncertainly at the mass of chips in front of him, the pit boss swept them expertly onto a tray.

David was setting out his bets at the next table when a cocktail waitress appeared to ask him if he'd like a drink, and he said a Bloody Mary would be nice. By the time the wheel was spinning, another five players, sensing action, had arrived to watch. The ball went spinning into its slot, tripped over a few buffers, bounded off the partition between nineteen and eight, and curved up into a graceful arc that ended in the one pocket. The spectators ah'ed in appreciation, as if David had made a basket from mid-court.

At a whispered command from the pit boss, the dealer disappeared. By the time he returned with the shift boss, David had made his seventh win and all other games in the casino had come to a halt as news of the miracle spread.

The shift boss was a rotund man in his fifties, dressed in a shapeless blue suit, bald except for a puff of grey at each temple, with thick glasses and blue jowls. After surveying the scene from the pit with a look of amused disbelief, he made his way around to David and gravely took his hand.

"Jack Golding," he said, "one of the owners here."

David introduced himself.

"They say you're having quite a run."

"Yes, I guess so."

The fat man looked around vaguely. "Got everything you need? A drink?"

"I have one, thanks."

He lifted his head and bawled, "Jacqui!"

"I'm here, Mr. Golding," the cocktail waitress called, blocked outside by the circle of watchers.

"Get Mr. Kennesey another drink, for God's sake!"

"Right away, Mr. Golding!"

The shift boss turned and studied the layout.

"I hear you got a thing for the number one."

"Well . . . you know what the prophets say: God is One."

Jack Golding chuckled massively. "That's good. That's very good. My rabbi'll get a kick out of that. Got a sense of humor, God bless him. You don't mind me interrupting like this, I hope?"

"No, not at all."

"See, in five minutes every degenerate gambler on Fremont street is gonna be in our joint."

"That's good?"

"That's good." He nodded at David's chips. "It ain't as good as this is bad, but it's something, you understand?"

"Yes, I guess so."

Golding looked up at the pit boss and growled, "Let Angie handle it," and the dealer resumed his place behind the wheel; he paused uncertainly, as if waiting for instructions.

"So?" the fat man asked. "You expecting trumpets? Do it, for God's sake. But give us a twenty this time, huh?"

The dealer slotted the ball and sent it on its way. Then he stepped back a pace and folded his arms, disassociating himself from the disaster. When the ball finished its hectic journey, it was circling comfortably in the slot numbered one. The crowd sighed in awe, and an ancient crone at David's left stroked his arm, muttering reverently.

"Jacqui!" the shift boss bellowed.

"Coming, boss!" the cocktail waitress shouted back, fighting her way through the crowd.

Jack Golding nodded in approval as she served David his Bloody Mary.

"And you can bring me a double strychnine on the rocks," he added.

"With bitters?" Jacqui asked blandly.

"With lotsa bitters, honey."

"Coming right up."

The shift boss looked up at David and shook his head. "What've you got against the El Moreno anyway? Why ain't you gambling at Caesar's Palace?"

"I'm staying here," David answered simply.

"Ah. We got all the luck." He shrugged expressively, studying David's bets. "You got any idea what the odds are against the same number coming up nine times in a row on a roulette wheel? Trillions to one. *Trillions!*"

David shrugged back. "I feel lucky."

"Lucky!" he chuckled bleakly. "I like that. That's good." He gave the dealer a nod, and the ball went whizzing into its track.

Except at its edge, where newcomers were being filled in on the prodigy, the crowd fell silent.

Losing speed, the ball hissed down the side of the bowl, leaped from one buffer to another, flirted with the nine and the thirty-one, and floated into the one as if drawn by a magnet. The old woman at David's side buried her fingers in his arm possessively, and the silence dissolved into gasps, shrieks, sighs, reverent curses, and cheers.

The fat shift boss turned gray and shrank into his shapeless blue suit, shaking his head in disbelief. "Too much," he whispered. "Too much."

David cleared the board of his winnings and all bets except the original stack of twenty five-dollar chips. He left that sitting on the one, and nodded to the dealer.

"Luck run out?" Golding asked.

"All run out," David replied, starting to move his chips onto the tray.

He was still at it when the ball clattered to a halt and the dealer sang out, "Twenty-four!" A groan sprang from the crowd, but it had a distinct timbre of relief and amused vindication.

"You're not *quitting*, are you?" the shift boss asked.

"When the luck runs out, you quit," David said.

The old woman dragged him down to whisper something in his ear: "Don't forget to tip the

dealer, honey!"

David counted out five hundred dollars in chips and pushed them across the table. The dealer glanced uneasily at his bosses and picked them up.

"Well, at least *somebody* made out here," Golding observed dryly.

A dozen players wanted to shake David's hand, and the old woman demanded a kiss, but the crowd quickly returned to the tables, leaving a few behind to see if there was any residual luck in the wheel that had paid off nine times running.

Golding led David to the cashier's window and hurried off, saying he'd be right back. The cashier started counting the chips, and David realized with annoyance that the little old woman had followed him from the table and was supervising the count with a distinctly proprietary air. Now that she was no longer clinging to his arm, he could see what a disreputable creature she really was, with her stringy, dishwater-colored hair and cheap cotton house dress.

He pointedly turned his back on her.

The cashier finished the count, announced the total as \$67,500, and asked David how he wanted it.

"Can you give me a check?"

"Sure."

The old woman punched him on the arm. "You send some of that to your family, you hear!"

"Now look—" David began and was interrupted by another punch.

"Don't you now-look me, sonny! You got a kid, don't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"You send some of that to your kid or you're a rat. A rat forever!"

Looking down into her thin, wrinkled face, contorted with earnest fury, David decided she was right. He turned back to the cashier and told him to make out two checks, one to Tim for twenty thousand and one to himself for the balance.

"Satisfied?" David asked.

The old crone gave him a raffish, snaggle-toothed grin and scuttled away.

"A local character?" David asked the cashier.

He shrugged indifferently. "Never saw her before."

David was slipping the checks into the breast pocket of his jacket when the shift boss returned and led him to the dining room.

"You had breakfast?"

"Yes."

"Want another drink?"

"Just coffee, thanks."

Golding beckoned a waitress over and ordered two coffees.

Then he slid a room key across the table.

"What's this?" David asked.

"The key to the Presidential Suite—not that we get a whole lotta presidents. On the house, for as long as you want."

David raised his eyebrows. "Are you kidding?"

"Somebody's already up there moving your stuff."

David laughed. "I wasn't planning to stay."

"You stay, kid. It's all comped—room, meals, drinks, the works. Just sign for whatever you want. You need a car?"

"I've got a car. What *is* all this?"

Golding blinked at this unexpected naivete and faltered for a moment over what lie to tell him.

"God, kid, in the gambling world you're gonna be like Charles Lindbergh. John Glenn. In the history of the whole goddamned planet, nobody ever sat down and beat the wheel nine times in a row. Nobody. We'll put a bronze plaque on that wheel—hell, we'll bronze the whole fucking *table*! You understand?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Look, when the news gets around—and in this town it'll be front-page news—our handle's gonna double for at least a week, maybe more."

"Your what?"

"Our handle—what moves across the tables. Not what we win, the total of what's bet, you understand? That's not gonna make up for what you beat us out of, but it's gonna help."

"You mean players are going to come here just because *I* won?"

"You better believe it. Gamblers are believers, son, and this place is gonna become a shrine, like

Lourdes or something.”

“And you want me to stick around so people can point at me and say, ‘There he is now!’ Is that it?”

“You got it,” Golding said, grinning but privately amazed that such an intelligent person could be so dumb.

And David, not wanting to disappoint the man by announcing that he’d probably be checking out the following day, merely shrugged.

Thirty-One

After finding the way to his new quarters on the top floor, David explored the Presidential Suite with amusement: two bedrooms (one with a circular bed), a vast living room with sultry leather furniture and a wet bar, all extravagantly carpeted, all with theatrical track-lighting and panoramic views of the Fremont Street light show. He smiled on finding his crisp new jeans hanging like waifs in a closet designed to accommodate a starlet’s wardrobe.

On his way out at nine o’clock, he paused to puzzle over something sitting on the ornate “Mediterranean-style” cabinet in the entry hallway. He hadn’t noticed it on his way in: a tray stacked with five hundred dollars in casino chips. He shook his head in bewilderment, still not getting the point.

After getting directions at the front desk, he went to the post office, where he mailed Tim’s check, and to the El Moreno’s bank, where he cashed his own, keeping out five thousand and opening an account with the rest. Then he went shopping, and discovered that it’s not just the lights of Las Vegas that are flashy. In the third men’s store he visited, he asked where the city’s funeral directors buy their clothes, and, after a grave consultation with the manager, the clerk directed him to a shopping center near the university. His hopes sagged when he saw it was on the same street as the Liberace Museum, but he managed to pick up a few things that were okay.

Driving back downtown, he took his purchases up to his room, walked to the Four Queens for lunch, then back to the hotel. As he entered the dim, postage-stamp sized lobby, two grinning figures rose from a sofa, and David stared at them in disbelief. It was the Hispanic hitchhiker and his son.

“Hey, man! You came after all! We heard about your luck!”

David felt his face flush with anger. “You bastard!” he shouted.

“Hunh?” Juan’s grin faded into blankness.

“Why did you strand me in the mountains?”

“Hunh?”

“*Why did you strand me in the goddamned mountains?*”

“Hey, man, we din’t strand you in no mountains.”

“You stranded me in the goddamned mountains!”

The man shook his head, baffled. “You said you wanted to go up to the mountains! We just pulled off the road a little bit and walked back!”

David found himself shaking with fury. If it had been a less public place, he would’ve knocked him down. “You’re a fucking liar. There was no road there.”

Juan gaped at him, thunderstruck. “Hey, man, it was right off the road. You couldn’ miss it!” He looked down at the boy for confirmation. “Ain’ that right, Toney?”

The boy gazed up at David and nodded guilelessly. “You could see the road from where we left you. Honest.”

David sighed in defeat and asked them what they wanted.

“Hey, man, we don’ want nothin’. We just heard about your luck and came to congratulate you, unh?”

“Okay,” David said wearily. “Thanks.”

Juan elbowed the boy and leered. “He smells good now, unh, Toney?”

David started to walk away, but the man caught him by the arm. “You all done here now, unh?”

“What?”

“Now you go back, unh?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Hey, man, it’s nice up in the mountains now. Warm spell. No more snow.”

David shook his hand off gruffly. "I'm not going up to the mountains."

The Hispanic gave him a stricken look. "Hey, man, you wanna go up there! You tol' me!" David turned away. "You go tonight, unh?" he called after him. "Really!"

David got into the elevator and pounded on the top floor button until the doors closed.

The message light on his phone was lit, and, calling down to the switchboard, he learned that a reporter from the Las Vegas *Review-Journal* had been trying to reach him.

"Oh shit," he muttered. "Can you keep him off? I'm going to take a nap."

"Sure, Mr. Kenesey. I'll tell him you're out."

"Thanks." David hung up, went over to the bar, and poured himself a drink, wondering why he felt in need of one. The visit of the old man and his son had left him shaken and angry. Why? For some reason, it seemed important to know. It wasn't because they'd denied stranding him in the mountains. He expected people like that to lie.

Interesting: *People like that*. What did he mean by that? Lower-class people? Hispanics? People with accents? No, he decided. He meant *people who would strand you in the mountains in the first place*. Okay, so he wasn't angry because they'd lied to him.

Then what was it?

He winced as it came to him. He was angry because what the old man had so offensively urged him to do was exactly what he *wanted* to do. Examining his feelings, it was very obvious. In spite of everything that had happened there, he wanted to go back to the mountains.

When he'd set out from Runnell, he hadn't had any specific destination in mind, but now it was plain that he'd overshot it. He certainly didn't want to go to Los Angeles or San Francisco, there was nothing for him there. And, God knows, there was nothing for him here. Whatever it was he was after was back there somewhere. With that settled, his good humor returned. He finished his drink and unpacked the clothes he'd bought. Then he drew the drapes against the white blaze of the sun, got undressed, and took himself off for a nap.

Not in the circular bed.