

Thirty-Two

He woke at six, took a long shower, pulled on a white velour robe, and opened the drapes to contemplate the sunset over a glass of Wild Turkey. With some amusement, he realized he was feeling more than relaxed. He was feeling smug—inordinately and irrationally pleased with himself. It was something new for him, and, even though he recognized it as essentially childish, he rather liked it. In the past three days, he'd escaped death in several forms, held a man at gunpoint (and very nearly killed him), stolen a car, become a legend in gambling history, and won enough money to keep him very nicely for a year or so. Not bad, for a stodgy, young-old man whose previous experience of excitement had been discovering a nifty way of introducing fourth-graders to division of fractions.

There was a knock on the door. He made a face and then shrugged his displeasure away; whatever it was, he wasn't going to let it disrupt this rare feeling of well-being.

What it was made him blink.

She was tall—in heels, an inch taller than David—built like a showgirl, with wide shoulders, narrow waist, and delectable breasts, sleekly packaged in a white silk evening gown designed for display and easy access. Professionally made up and softly glowing, her heart-shaped face was framed in a complex arrangement of glossy black hair. A playful smile tugged at her lips, and, when she blinked back at him, David expected to feel a draft from her eyelashes.

A bit breathlessly he said: "Yes?"

The smile twitched. She said in a low, velvety voice: "*Room service!*"

Feeling like an idiot, David said, "I didn't order anything."

She raised her brows, and her eyes became very wide and serious. "You could order something *now.*"

"Did you bring a menu?" he asked, deciding it was time to win a few points in this match.

She giggled. "Oh, I'm sure I did." She snaked a hand into the waist-deep cut of her neckline and seductively explored the area under her left breast. "It's here somewhere. Could you help me look for it?"

Mouth suddenly dry, David gave up and gawked. She laughed and swept past him into the living room. "Oh, this is nice! The El Moreno is so crummy I never would've guessed it." She turned and gave David a solemn look. "I've never been here before."

"No? I suppose it would be silly to ask why you're here now."

"It certainly would." She held out her arms and did a sensuous pirouette. "All yours. On the house."

"Wow. All the comforts of home."

"Oh," she said, slipping an arm through the side of her dress and shrugging aside the silk to expose one breast, "I'll bet home was never like *this.*"

And in the hour that followed, David would have had to admit it wasn't.

"I know your type," Michelle said, lying on her stomach beside David, her chin propped on crossed arms.

"You do?" David was watching the lights from the street winking across her broad back like sequins.

"You're the type who desperately wants to ask me what a nice girl like me is doing in a place like this but is afraid of sounding like a hick."

"I expect you're right."

She pulled herself up on an elbow. "You probably won't believe it, but I'm a published poet."

"Oh?"

"Yes, and not in those rinky-dink journals that pay you in copies printed in purple ink. I mean *The New Yorker, Atlantic, Partisan Review.*"

"I'm impressed."

"You should be. But of course there's no money in poetry. What I make on poetry wouldn't keep me in pantyhose."

"Always supposing that you want to be kept in pantyhose."

"Ha ha. Anyway, now you know."

"What a nice girl like you is doing in a place like this. There's a lot more money in it than poetry."

"You bet."

"Good. I'm glad I didn't ask. Is there any place for dinner in this town that isn't just for tourists?"

"What do you mean?"

“A place where they don’t bring Keno cards to your table. A place where lovers go to stare yearningly into each other’s eyes and the tab is over a hundred dollars.”

Michelle snorted. “Are we going to stare yearningly into each other’s eyes?”

“Sure, why not?”

“There’s the gourmet dump at Caesar’s Palace. I can guarantee the tab will be over a hundred dollars.”

“It’s not so much the tab as the atmosphere for staring yearningly. Soft lights, soft music, plush banquettes. No slot machines.”

“You’re dreaming, honey. This is Las Vegas. The only place they don’t have slot machines is in the operating room at the hospital. But I think I know a place you might like. / like it anyway. It’s in a new joint on the Strip.”

“Lead on, then.”

David laughed when he saw the Hotel Casablanca, but he liked it as well. It had started out to be a tribute to the Bogart film, but the decorators had evidently had too much money for such a drab concept, so they ended up doing it in the sinisterly lavish art deco style of the Dr. Phibes movies. Nevertheless the restaurant (predictably called *Rick’s*) was beautifully lit and offered acres of plush banquettes in subtle brown and black stripes. The maitre d’ showed them to a table, took their drink orders, and presented them with a menu that, except for its vast size, sleek design, and higher prices, was virtually identical to the one at the El Moreno.

“The idea,” Michelle explained when he commented on it, “is to bore you to death with the food, so that you’ll sit here and stare yearningly out at the slots.”

“I suspected as much,” David commented dryly. And then, after tasting his drink: “Do many men fall in love with you?”

She shrugged. “They fall in love, but not with me.”

“Meaning?”

“They fall in love with a fantasy. That’s what I’m here to provide. Not sex—fantasy. And that’s why I’m tops in the business, because I know it.”

David nodded, smiling. “Interesting: Knowing it doesn’t change it. I mean, for me.”

“Why should it? Men always fall in love with something in their heads, and I’m just something in your head.”

“You’re a solipsist,” he remarked in mock disapproval.

“Sure. I’m the solipsist sex-queen of Sin City West.” She gave him a snooty, lidded look. “See? You’re not the only one around here who can talk dirty.”

The dishes had been cleared from their table and coffee poured when the hum of conversation around them suddenly died away. Looking up, David saw the maitre d’ leading a man dressed in black to a table nearby. The man, who looked to be about David’s age, seemed regally unaware of the attention he was getting, though he would have been worthy of attention in any crowd whatever. Although not particularly tall or noticeably muscular, he radiated a kind of animal power; it was something in the way he moved—a restraint he exercised to avoid sending people bouncing off the walls. The impression was heightened by his clothes; they looked like they’d been chosen for their clerical severity, but the simple act of putting them on that body endowed them with an almost flamboyant elegance.

He sat down, spoke a few words to the maitre d’, and nodded, and one realized that his face was as extraordinary as his bearing. Far from finding him classically handsome, one looked for a likeness in the animal kingdom—and thought of the bull. His complexion was dark, nearly swarthy, and his eyebrows met across the thick arch of his nose; his heavy black hair grew so far forward on his temples that it almost met his eyebrows. Yet there was nothing really coarse in any of his features. His mouth was wide but delicately shaped and good humored. His eyes were dark, swampy pools—warm and glinting with light but alive with daunting possibilities; when he casually sent them around the room, conversations were resumed as if a command had been issued.

“A local celebrity?” David asked.

“No, I’d know him if he were—a man like that,” Michelle said. “But he will be if he sticks around.”

David felt a twinge of jealousy but recognized that even he found the man’s magnetism fascinating. Over after-dinner drinks, they considered film roles they would cast him in, and the conversation gradually became a literary contest as they passed through Macbeth, Faust, Ahab, and Dmitri to the Steppenwolf, K, and Wozzeck.

Finally Michelle said, “Definitely Joseph in *Little Drummer Girl*, instead of that doe-eyed wimp they used.”

The waiter appeared at their table and set another round of drinks before them, and David looked up, puzzled.

"Compliments of the gentleman over there," he said, nodding toward the object of their discussion.

"Oh," David said, disconcerted. He and Michelle exchanged a bemused glance. "Would you ask him if he'd care to join us?"

"Certainly, sir."

There was another momentary lull in conversation as the man rose and approached their table. He looked down at them gravely, almost apologetically, and asked in a surprisingly pleasant baritone if they were sure he wasn't intruding.

"You're most welcome," David said formally. "Please join us."

He slid gracefully into a chair opposite them, and the waiter appeared to deposit his drink at his side.

"I am Pablo." Although he said it without emphasis, it was subtly clear there could only be one.

David nodded and introduced himself and Michelle.

Pablo gazed at Michelle for a moment and blinked, plainly dismissing her as an object of small interest. He turned and gave David a conspiratorial smile. "You must tell me if my intuition is correct."

"Yes?"

"As I entered the room, I felt that something remarkable had happened to someone here." He shrugged. "I'm that way, sometimes—very rarely. A touch of my mother. I sat for a few minutes before my attention was drawn to this table and to you."

"And?"

"And then I considered: Has something remarkable happened in Las Vegas recently? Yes, it's the sensation of the day. An extraordinary win at a downtown casino—a quite impossible win. Was it yours?"

David nodded.

"Ah," he sighed, with evident pleasure. "Is it true? The same number came up nine times running on two different tables?"

"Yes, it's true."

"Remarkable indeed. A staggering phenomenon. And they say that, after the ninth win, you withdrew all your bets except one, as if you knew the run was over."

"Also true."

"You knew it was over?"

David laughed uncomfortably. "Well, yes."

"How? If I may ask."

David glanced uneasily at Michelle. She was looking around the room with an air of injured boredom.

"I'm afraid it'll sound like a very silly story."

"No, no. I'm sure it isn't."

"Well . . . have you ever heard of the nine strokes?"

Pablo frowned. "The nine strokes?"

When David finished, Pablo fell back in his chair, astounded, and Michelle muttered, "Pushkin, *The Queen of Spades*," as if mildly disgusted.

Still sprawling gracefully, Pablo shook his head. "Even on such short acquaintance, I can only believe that it happened exactly as you say. But this story moves your win out of the realm of the extraordinary into the realm of the marvelous—into the realm of magic."

"Oh, I hardly think so," David said, feeling embarrassed.

Pablo raised his massive brows incredulously. "You think the prediction and its fulfillment may be unconnected?"

"I have to think so, honestly. I think that winning nine times is just what it seems—an incredible freak of luck. I mean, the ball was due to fall in the one slot nine times in a row whether I bet on it or not. And if I hadn't had the stupid prediction in the back of my mind, I would have moved my bets around just like any other player and ended up losing."

Pablo gave him an amused frown, as if David were trying to deceive him with a fairy tale.

David was sorry now that he'd allowed himself to be drawn into telling the story.

"And what do you think, Petal?" Pablo asked the girl.

She returned his smile coldly. "Why do you call me Petal?"

"Ah, because you are so very beautifully *white*, my dear." His tone was chillingly venomous. "I refer of course to your lovely gown," he added.

"I think it's all bullshit," she said, answering his question in a bored tone.

"Ah. A charming and most illuminating opinion, to be sure." He turned to David and raised a brow. "In contrast to Petal, I must say that I believe the man of the nine strokes should be prepared to meet an unusual destiny."

"Meaning what?"

He shrugged elegantly. "That it may be as foolish to pass off the mysterious as ordinary as it is to pass off the ordinary as mysterious."

"To tell you the truth," David observed dryly, "you make all this sound a bit . . . menacing."

"Menacing!" Pablo seemed genuinely startled. "Just the opposite! You yourself said that you wouldn't have made your fabulous win if you hadn't had the boy's prediction in mind. Isn't that so?"

"Yes."

"Then why belittle it now? Why turn your back on it? I can only think that the gods have something special in mind for you, David. But how can you discover what it is if you shrug it away in advance?"

David laughed and shook his head in embarrassment.

A sudden flush mottled Pablo's face, and for a moment a scrollwork of paler lines stood out on his features like the normally hidden scars of some old operation; then he smiled and waved away David's recalcitrance.

"Ah, there's no greater bore than one who becomes importunate over a gift. Isn't that so?" He neatly finished his drink and arose. "It has been a pleasure making your acquaintance, David. And yours, of course, Mademoiselle Petal." Without waiting for a reply, he nodded once and strode out of the room.

"Wow," David said.

"A con man," Michelle stated.

"Why do you say that?"

"He has the style. 'A touch of my mother' indeed. He knew who you were when he came in. He was here looking for you."

"You really think so? I don't see that he got anything out of it."

Michelle shook her head slowly, in amazed disgust. "I didn't say he was a pickpocket, for God's sake. Meeting you is just step one."

"Ah well. They say you can't cheat an honest man."

"Huh. And they say love makes the world go round."

The phone at the bedside was ringing insistently, and David fought his way up to consciousness to silence it. He took the receiver off the hook and glanced at his watch. It was four-thirty, and he'd been asleep for less than two hours.

"Hello," he groaned.

"This is Pablo. Is the girl there with you?"

"What?"

"Is the girl there with you?"

David looked across the bed, where Michelle was sleeping heavily. "Yes, she's with me."

"Then go to the phone in the living room. We must talk, and there's no need to disturb her."

David frowned. "Talk about what?"

"Please, David. It's important."

"Okay. Hold on." David rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and went into the living room, closing the bedroom door behind him and picking up the phone. "All right," he said.

"How much did you lose?"

"What?"

"How much did you lose at the tables before you went to bed?"

David blinked groggily. On returning to the hotel, Michelle had wanted to play blackjack, and he had gallantly bought her a hundred dollars worth of chips. After a few hands, she complained that it made her nervous to have him just sitting there to watch, so he bought a stack for himself and listened dutifully as she explained the rudiments of play.

The cocktail waitress kept them supplied with drinks as they worked their way through their chips. They spent a while at the crap table, but David couldn't make head or tail of the betting and refused to take the dice himself. After that, she tried to drag him back to the roulette tables, but, with other plans in mind, he balked.

"Indulge me," she said with a coaxing smile. "And I'll indulge you."

They spent perhaps an hour at it, David becoming a little drunk but sticking doggedly to the

even-money bets while Michelle played the corners.

"Not much," David said in answer to Pablo's question.

"Five thousand?"

"No, not that much."

"Two thousand?"

"Well . . . maybe."

"David, David. Don't you understand yet what they're doing to you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"They mean to keep you there until you give them back their money."

"Give them back their money?"

"Across the tables, of course. Naturally they want it. That's why they've installed you in their finest suite. That's why they've given you the lovely Petal. To keep you there until you've returned their money."

David paused, thinking. "I can't believe it's that important."

"Oh, it's important, David. It's not just the money, though that's the greatest part of it. It's a matter of prestige—almost of honor. They've suffered a humiliating loss—and if you take your winnings away, it will be doubly humiliating. But if you give it back, then they will be made well. Don't you see? You just weren't drunk enough tonight. Petal will be vastly more persuasive tomorrow. In addition to her usual fee, she's down for fifteen percent of what they recover; she originally demanded a third, but of course that was just a ploy. If they have to, they'll literally prop you up at a table until you've disgorged what you've taken. Then Petal will kiss you goodbye, and you'll be informed that someone else requires your suite."

David sighed bitterly. "Yes, I see. I've been incredibly stupid."

"Just a bit naive."

"I appreciate the warning, Pablo."

"Don't just be warned. Leave. Leave now. I believe there's an exit directly to the parking lot. If you use that, you won't have to go through the lobby."

"Are you saying I'm in some danger?"

"No, no. I suggest that only to avoid a scene. If they let it be known—or even rumored—that winning at the El Moreno is an invitation to mayhem, they'd be ruined. The danger is one of seduction only, not violence."

"Yes, I see. I feel like a complete idiot."

"Don't lose heart, David. There are indeed times when one should trust blindly, just as there are times when one should not. Wisdom consists in being able to tell the one from the other."

"Yes. Thanks again, Pablo."

"It's nothing, David. Fare well."

Michelle never stirred as David dressed and packed. Before he left, he paused at the bedside and gazed down at her regretfully. Then he smiled, remembering that, in her own way, she'd warned him about her.

I'm just something in your mind.

Fremont Street south led him out of Las Vegas, becoming highway 93, which he followed to Boulder City, across Hoover Dam, and down to Kingman, Arizona, where he met the dawn and Interstate 40 East.