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'Jesus, who's this guy?' Stella Mitchell sipped the double mocha she'd sneaked behind the table. She hadn't dealt a hand all morning, a shitty rotation for tips: 7:00 to 11:00 on a Sunday. Half the city was upstairs, sleeping off tequila shots or getting blown by some whore who wouldn't turn to dust when the sun hit her body. In the corner a slot machine plunked a digital melody, and across the pit, Martha dealt face cards to a drunk, too stupid or too pissed to know when to quit.

The gambler coming through the rank of slot machines was older than Stella but not old, nothing like the busloads of geezers who would arrive once they unveiled the brunch buffet. Stella secretly feared that one day a smoker would wander too close to an octogenarian silver hair trolling an oxygen bottle, and *shazam* the whole place would go up. The man approaching now was a loser, a two-hand run by. He'd hit on 17, drop twenty bucks and then wander off without tipping. 'Top o' the morning, dumbass,' she whispered, 'find another job.'

'What's that?' He took the center stool, unrolled a crumpled single.

'Just talking to myself,' Stella watched him struggle. 'The casino's been quiet this morning.'

'Well, I'll see if I can liven things up for you.' He was bandy, too thin, and filthy, weeks since he had bathed.

'I'll play for a dollar.' He tossed the bill on the table.

'Uh, sorry sir,' Stella glanced back for Steve McAllister, her pit boss. 'There's a five dollar minimum on this table.'

'Jim.'

'Sir?'

'My name's Jim.'

'Five dollars, Jim.'

He rooted unhurriedly in his poncho, one of those half-hemp, half-cloth frocks radical leftists made popular in the 60s. His threadbare pants had nearly rotted off. Stella hoped the guys in security enjoyed watching from overhead.

Jim mined four equally rumped bills from his pockets. He placed them beside the first and tucked a few strands of greasy hair behind his ear. 'Alright, then. I'm in for five dollars.'

'Very good, sir.' Stella dealt him two kings, then busted hitting 16. 'Congratulations, you've doubled your money.'

'Huzzah,' Jim clapped. 'Let's leave it all out there.'

His 19 beat her 17.

‘That’s twenty dollars, Jim.’

‘Let’s go again.’

‘You sure?’

*That* was an infraction of casino policy: never ask willing gamblers if they wish to part with their money. Steve McAllister stood next to Martha, watching as she changed a handful of hundreds for her sloppy night owl. Steve hadn’t overheard.

‘Please.’

Stella dealt him blackjack. ‘Look at that,’ she feigned enthusiasm. ‘That’s thirty more I owe you.’

‘Leave it out there.’

*Your mistake, stinky. Eventually, we get you all.*

Two 10s, and Stella busted hitting 12: one hundred dollars.

He sat on 13; she busted again hitting 16: two hundred dollars.

20 over 18: four hundred dollars.

19 over 17: eight hundred dollars.

And on it went.

Jim sat quietly. Between each hand, he simply said, ‘thank you,’ or ‘let’s go again.’ And every time, he let the burgeoning stack of multicolored chips stand untouched.

By sixteen hundred dollars, Steve watched over Stella’s shoulder.

At sixty-four hundred, he approached the table.

When Jim, motioned that he wanted to let the pot ride, Stella paused. ‘I’m sorry, sir-’  
‘Jim.’

‘Jim, but for anyone to bet over five thousand dollars, I have to get permission from my pit boss.’

Jim glanced behind her; Steve took his cue.

Grinning, he said, ‘A pleasure to meet you, Mr . . .’

‘Jim.’

‘Mr . . .’

‘Calloway.’

‘Mr. Calloway, may I get you something to drink? I apologize that none of the girls have come around, but you’ve been playing – and winning, I might add – so handily, that I don’t suppose any of them have noticed you over here.’ Steve searched the casino for any of the half-naked staff still on duty. Summoning a pretty brunette, he added, ‘you understand, Mr. Calloway, that your current wager is six thousand four hundred dollars?’

‘I do.’

‘Very well, then,’ he nodded to Stella.

The brunette interrupted, leading with her breasts. ‘What can I getcha?’ Across the table, Stella smelled perfume: *Eau de Something I Hit With the Car*.

Jim smiled. ‘Good morning. Do you have *Chateau Lafite Rothschild*, the *Pauillac* from 1818? Although, I suppose the 1795 will do in a pinch?’

The waitress looked as though she had been asked to perform brain surgery. ‘Um, I’ll check.’

‘Never mind,’ Jim said. ‘Just black coffee, thanks.’ He watched her leave.

‘You like to make jokes?’ Stella tried to get him talking.

‘No. Not really. I’m a wine drinker; that’s all.’

A handful of onlookers gathered around the table; no one sat down. It would have been bad form to interrupt the shoe with Jim on a winning streak. Even Sunday morning gamblers understood that.

Stella heard them whispering strategies and advice. *Sure, everyone's an expert with someone else's money.*

She dealt Jim another blackjack, and the little host gave a noisy whoop, drawing other spectators, off-duty dealers and wait staff from the casino floor. Steve McAllister watched without blinking.

'That's sixteen thousand, Mr. Calloway,' she said.

'Jim, please,' he sipped his coffee.

'Sorry.'

'Let's go again.'

Ten minutes later, Stella had lost nineteen hands of blackjack, and Jim Calloway had won four million, ninety-six thousand dollars.

Steve McAllister had ordered and gulped two black coffees of his own, and a crowd of several hundred people had pressed their way in to wait for the aromatic, tired-looking stranger to lose everything on one turn of the cards.

Most whispered; others shouted.

'Get out now!'

'You're goddamned crazy, young man.'

'Sweetie, I will hump you all day if you walk away this minute.'

'Crush 'em, dude! Do it for all of us! Balls of steel!'

Steve McAllister had a security team flank the table. He was on the pit phone to one of the executives. Stella heard Martha say that the shift manager had Alvin Jacobsen, the CEO, on the line from Curacao. She didn't know where that was, but it sounded expensive.

Steve shouted to be heard above the din. 'Let him play?'

Stella watched the pit boss's face. Steve nodded. 'Yes, sir. I'll stay on the line.'

Stella dealt and busted hitting 15.

The crowd roared, and another detail of security officers encircled Mr. Calloway.

At thirty-two million, seven hundred and sixty-eight thousand dollars, the Las Vegas police arrived. They established a perimeter, keeping the mob at bay and closing off the entrances. Outside, traffic on the Strip stopped. People ran between cars, beat on windows and shouted to get inside. News and police helicopters circled overhead.

Steve McAllister sweat, discoloring the collar of his suit. Stella Mitchell's hands shook as she dealt the first card: a 7 of diamonds.

'Do you need to take a break?' Jim asked.

'Why are you doing this?' she whispered. 'You should leave. Take what you have, and go.'

One card, face down, to the house.

'It isn't quite enough yet.'

'Enough for what?'

'Enough.'

His second card, face up: a 6 of spades.

'It's you. Isn't it?'

'What makes you ask?'

The house's second card, face up: a queen.

'Jim Calloway? Isn't that a bit obvious?'

He smirked. 'Am I that transparent?'

'I thought it would be . . . more . . .'

'Majestic?'

'Yeah, I guess.'

'It isn't time for that yet.'

'Oh,' Stella's knees weakened. She thought she might topple over, invalidate the hand and cost the casino sixty-five million dollars. She swallowed hard, waited.

'Hit me.'

When Stella turned the 8 of clubs, the city of Las Vegas erupted. The floor rumbled with pounding feet; a slot machine was wrenched from its perch, spilling a silver river of Kennedy half dollars. Windows in the doors outside the casino shattered from the sheer press of those wanting to witness a miracle.

For the first time all morning, Jim seemed to be enjoying himself. 'Let's go again.'

Stella trembled. Her eyes unfocused, she staggered back and turned to Steve McAllister.

The pit boss, still on the phone, nodded.

'That would be over a hundred and thirty million dollars, sir,' she said.

'Please, Stella, call me Jim.'

'You know my name?'

'Of course. It's on your nametag.'

She blinked a few times, then dealt. 'What will you do with it all?'

'Get it where it's needed.'

'But I thought you were . . .'

'Oh, yes, but I've managed to do a few things since then.'

'I've . . . we've never heard of you . . . and all that.'

'Uh, no. I'm not surprised, really.' Jim finished his third coffee and looked at his cards: 16.

The house had a 6 showing.

'I'll stay.'

'Why aren't you surprised?' Stella whispered unnecessarily.

'Something always gets in the way.'

She turned the hole card: a jack of diamonds: 16. '*Something?*'

'You'll see.'

Stella gripped the shoe with trembling fingers; she dealt the house a hit. 'I hope not, truly.'

When Stella Mitchell turned the 5 of hearts, the Las Vegas police, the hotel and casino security staff, even Steve McAllister converged, tackling the two players and ushering them roughly into a secure area behind a steel door adorned with a gaudy acrylic of the Nevada desert.

It took the remaining officers and S.W.A.T. team over an hour to restore order to the casino and the streets outside. Jim Calloway, starting with just five dollars, had lost over sixty-five million in one hand.

Later, having been escorted out a service entrance, Jim wandered along the Strip. He passed an elderly couple outside the Venetian.

'Look, Marty, it's the Bridge of Sighs.' Obviously from Brooklyn, the woman pronounced the word *soys*.

‘Hey, whaddya know? The Bridge of Sighs.’ Her husband, a childhood sweetheart, looked and sounded as though he had grown up on the same block.

‘Actually,’ Jim corrected, ‘it’s the *Ponte de Rialto*. It spans the Grand Canal in central Venice; this version has been there since the late 1500s. There were others, one dating back as early as the twelfth century.’

‘Look who’s Mr. Know-It-All.’ Marty took a menacing step forward, ‘Why don’t you go take a bath, kid?’

Jim retreated toward the street, ‘sorry.’

A limousine rolled to the curb. A rear window opened, and Jim heard someone call out.

‘That was a nice try today.’

‘Mr. Jacobsen?’

The tourists wandered away, snapping photos of the architecture.

‘A very nice try, but that’s just not how we do business.’

‘I know.’ Jim looked down at his shoes, a tattered pair of canvas basketball sneakers.

‘Do you have cab fare?’

‘I’ll walk.’

‘Money for food?’

‘I’ll manage.’

‘You want a drink? Maybe a glass of that wine you love so much?’

‘No, but thanks.’

‘Alright, then,’ the window closed smoothly. ‘Good night.’

‘Good night, Dad.’