

### \*\*\* Chapter XVIII

#### Degenerate Gamblers

##### Part I

Regina was still livid. As they left the Greasy Spoon, she spewed several Yiddish and English invectives, none of which Vergil understood, and most of which he tried to ignore.

His half-hearted attempt to apologize fell on deaf ears as Regina stormed ahead of him into the casino. Headed to their room, she stepped into the elevator, then turned around. No Vergil.

Feeling helpless to deal with Regina's manipulative personality and passions, Vergil felt pulled apart spiritually between the inbred residue of his Catholic obligations and Regina's unbending insistence of raising their child as a Jew, in custom, tradition, and religion.

He knew that his loyalty to Catholicism was based mostly in fear and guilt rather than love. He suspected, too, that Regina's anger about the Church was not without basis. He now felt deeply about the horrors suffered by her father in the Holocaust.

Depressed and needing relief, he headed straight for the nearest blackjack table. *Even if Regina is one hundred percent correct*, he thought to himself, *she's got to be a bastard descendent of Catherine de Medici*. This is hell on earth, and it's only the first day of my marriage!

Up in the elevator, Regina was pissed. Her efforts to sway her new husband only pulled him further away. Some marriage. Well, *I'll be damned if I'll stay alone in my bridal suite while my husband is out on the town!*

She found her way back to the casino area – row upon row of banks of slot and video poker machines. Some of the slots had the “Wheel of Fortune” chant competing with the ding-ding-ding and other bell and whistle noises. Sitting down on a stool, she blindly shoved quarters into a machine, not thinking one way or the other about winning or losing. Her thoughts were scattered, and she felt the pain of her marriage falling apart before it ever began. Ever looming was the image of her disapproving parents.

As the coins plinked in to the metal tray, the ding-ding-ding was reassuring, and Regina's mood entered the hypnotic comfort zone that the casino designers plan on. Like an automaton, she fed coin after coin into the machine, pushing buttons and seeing the whirl of the wheels spin. In a funk about life and marriage, she ignored the excited yells and shouts of players nearby.

Vergil, at the other end, pulled out a was of bills from his pocked and threw it on the green felt table for change. As he drank, he became focused on the game. But more important, he was able to temporarily blot out Regina's heavy-handed words. The costume and skill of the dealer shuffling and dealing, along with the lights shining down on the printed green felt, never failed to soother his nerves.

Like any gambler, he set out to win, yet he seldom left Vegas with any money. When he was losing, he kept gambling to get a lucky streak. And when he was lucky, he kept gambling to win more. The very act of gambling was comforting, for it distracted him from his problems. He had always played out his money to the end – and the end always came – instead of leaving when he was ahead.

At some level, Vergil thought it an immutable law – like gravity – that you couldn't leave town until you were dead broke.

Surveying the blackjack scene from his vantage point, Vergil was presented with an electric mix of human characters. Blackjack promised a somewhat social experience, since the players are ostensibly not pitted against each other, but against the house. Generally, the players like to see each other win. It makes for a more congenial session, even to cheer and encourage one other, unless one player is winning big while the rest are going bust.

Usually, Vergil enjoyed meeting the various players and listening to the thumbnail sketch biographies, cheering or groaning at wins or losses. All were drinking and smoking, but not all were laughing or joking.

Seated next to Vergil was a good-looking young man with several piles of chips in front of him. From Texas, the man had curly golden brown hair and was quite friendly and quite inebriated. No one sought to curtail his drinking or gambling, and Vergil could see that there was more than \$1000 in colored chips spread before him. The drinking had not proven to be a handicap to his winning ways, and in addition, let the others know he was not one to hoard his good fortune.

“Chips for everyone!” he sang out like the town crier. He deposited a number of chips on Vergil's spot, which Vergil gladly accepted with thanks. The two men formed a quick bond – gambling and drinking – two kindred souls.

“Tex, what the hell are you doin' in Vegas?” Vergil asked.

“A good friend of mine is getting married tomorrow, and I'm the best man.”

“I'll bet you are!” Vergil laughed. “I'll drink to that,” he cheered as they clinked glasses enthusiastically. “I got married last night – or was it this morning?”

“Congratulations!” Tex shouted, giving Vergil a high five. “I wish you all-“

“Forget it,” Vergil cut in. “We’ve already had a donny-brook.”

“Awh, too bad. Here, take some more chips. Chips for everybody!” as he game some to all.

On Vergil’s left was Dave, who thanked Tex for the much-needed chips. Fiftyish, he wore a hat at all times to cover his dome’s thinning strands. Dave was neatly dressed, and during the course of their gambling he admitted that cards gave him a rush like nothing else – a classical gambling addict’s story. He explained that, at the time his downward spiral started, he was a college graduate with a good-paying job as a magazine editor. His luck ran out, his job was the next to go, and then the wife walked out with the kids.

His *raison d’etre* was to win it all back – a goal that would never come to pass, for inside, his incessant craving for action foiled all attempts.

“Hit me,” he told the dealer, as he continued. “From a four-bedroom house, I went to a cheap one-room studio pad with a toilet. From editor, I’ve got to being a busboy in a North Vegas casino. And I won’t even mention the salary drop. But for a man like me, Vegas is the only place to be – heaven and hell in one bright package!”

“Ever try to seriously quit?”

“Not really,” Dave answered. “It’s all I have left, it’s what I am,” he said, putting out a chip for the next deal. Both watched in envy as Tex raked in another \$35 in chips on a five card twenty-one.

“Chips for everyone!” Tex called out. His good humor and generosity was infectious on the other players – all except one. An old, white haired man wearing a dirty blue Dodger baseball cap, thick-lensed glasses, and a scruffy white beard.

“Keep your stinkin’ chips!” he growled, throwing them back at Tex. “I’ve got my own goddamned chips!”

“Hey, if you don’t want ‘em, give ‘em to me, you dumb ass ol’ Dodger coot!” yelled a second ol’ codger with thick gray hair beneath a New York Yankees baseball cap.

“Who you callin’ a dumb ass Dodger coot, you ol’ piece of a dried out Yankee turd!” the Dodger guy griped.

“You’re the only dumb ass I see sittin’ there!” the Yankee man bellowed. “Man tries to be nice to you, and what do you do? YOU insult him. Y’know what that makes you? A dumb ass, that’s what!”

“That’s my business, and none of urine. What I need is a beer and some decent cards.”

Down the row was Edna, a fortyish rotund black woman, her hair in braids, and wearing large red-rimmed glasses. Edna was the only sober player at the table, and she took on the role of peacemaker. She did her best to calm the two grumpy old men lest the pit boss call security to bounce them.

Her efforts bore fruit as the two old med settled down to an uneasy truce as the new relief dealer – a young black woman – smoothly dealt cards from the new double deck.

But the peace was not to be. The Dodger codger took four cards, then screamed in rage.

“You black bitch, you slipped me a big card. You’re hiding the small ones in your hand. You’re dealing seconds!”

At a signal from the pit boss, two burly uniformed security guards positioned themselves beside the irate ol’ Dodger codger and lifted him from his chair.

“You can’t do this to me! I’m a taxpayer!” he yelled in righteous indignation.

Several times, security bounced him up on his feet, and several time he sprang for his chair as if propelled form a slingshot, so grimly determined was he to retake his seat.

“You don’ unnerstan’!” he wailed. “You can’t kick me out now without giving me a chance to win back my stake. It’s a denial of my constitutional right! I’ll sue your pants off for every cent you got in this rotten whorehouse.”

“You’ve had enough for one day, old timer. You can sue us tomorrow. Right now, it’s time for you to go home and sleep it off,” said a guard, as they carried him off.

Tex, on the other hand, continued to win as he continued to drink and was soon dealt three straight blackjacks. Vergil’s fortune, like his stomach, was going up and down, and with some success, managed to drink away his headache. He continued to bond with Tex, since threw as nothing like the gift of chips to realize how much they had in common. To some degree, Tex’s luck seemed to be catching, as Dave began to win, the third time he was resupplied with Tex’s chips.

Vergil had once read a book on how to count cards strategically, but had never practiced it. Trying to count was a lost cause, for when he drank, he couldn’t remember if the count was plus one or minus one. The cards began to blur, and he made mistakes identifying the suits and numbers.

For Dave, however, this was office hours. He drank sparingly, and his modest winning streak buoyed his spirits. He dark thoughts of self-mutilation or suicide were pushed aside as he displayed a bit of his vast reservoir of erudition.

“Did you know that cards are an ancient game, even dating back to the sailors on Columbus’s ship, back in 1492?” Dave asked. As the dealer shuffled, his fellow blackjackers seemed interested in his historical information about the color cards.

“See,” he explained, “you two have drawn very good hands to stand on. Tex has the King of Hearts, which was patterned after Charlemagne. Take special note this is the only king in the deck without a mustache. Legend has it that in one of the early printing blocks, the artisan’s chisel slipped and shaved the king.”

“Well, I’ll be dawged!” Tex marveled.

“And the Queen of Spades is Pallas Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom and war, the only queen that is armed.”

“What about my king and queen?” Vergil asked.

“Let’s see,” Dave observed. “You have the King of Spades, which is David, the father of Solomon, your Queen of Clubs is Argine, an anagram for Regina, the Queen.”

“Regina? My God!” Vergil recoiled in horror, “I wonder if this is a sign from the Almighty above.”

“How’s that,” asked Dave, now puzzled.

“I just married a Jewish woman named Regina, who’s been after me to convert. You’re saying this King represents the House of David? Maybe it’s in the cards to convert to Judaism!”

Dave laughed. “My friend, you may be reading too much into the tea leaves. Be glad you didn’t get the Queen of Diamonds.”

“Why?” a spooked Vergil asked.

“Well, the Queen of Diamonds is Rachel,” Dave explained, “the wife of Jacob, and mother of twelve sons who founded the twelve tribes of Israel.”

“Holy Mother of God, I’m being surrounded!” shrieked Vergil. “My wife is in a family way!”

The dealer began a new shuffle.

“The thing is, each queen carries a rose symbolizing the union of the House of Lancaster—a red rose—and the House of York—a white rose. After the War of the Roses, Elizabeth of York married Henry of Lancaster, uniting the two roses and both houses.”

“You’re a regular professor,” Vergil said admiringly, as a new player approached.

Into this sea of green felt tranquility and smoke stepped José, with a liquored-up roar and bulging pockets of chips.

“Do you know who I am?” José challenged the table with a bellow. The others shrugged, shook their heads. “You think I’m just another poor, dumb Mexican, don’t you? But I’m not.”

Out of the shadows stepped the pit boss. Six foot four inches tall, arms crossed over his bulging belly in a hostile posture, he counter-challenged.

“No. Tell me, who are you, sir?”

“I’m José, that’s who the hell I am,” José answered defiantly, dumping a pile of chips on the table and taking possession of the middle chair. “Bring me a tequila, I’m thirsty!” he ordered.

José’s first act was to place a black chip—worth \$100—in front of the newly arrived blond, male dealer.

“That’s for you,” he stated.

Without missing a beat, the dealer picked it up and deposited it in his shirt pocket.

“Thank you, sir,” he smiled, and snapped his clacker to summon the cocktail waitress.

The other players watched José’s performance openmouthed, for no one missed the fact that José played only with the hundred dollar black chips.

It was time for a new deal, and the dealer shuffled. Once again, the game was in motion. José received a pair of tens and promptly proceeded to split them—a move known among the knowledgeable players to be a bad bet and in poor taste. When he lost, Vergil and Tex exchanged knowing glances. Soon José’s mood took a downward turn while Dave and Vergil were kept in the game, owing to Tex’s generosity.

As the game went on, Dave spoke softly. “The Jack of Clubs is Lancelot, chief of the knights at King Arthur’s Round Table. The King of Diamonds is Julius Caesar.”

Tex tossed more red chips around the table, singing his mantra, “Chips for everybody, chips all around!”

“Tell me, Dave, what makes you such a gambler?” asked Vergil.

Dave sighed, looked away, then answered. “No respect for money!” All at the table chuckled.

While his luck held, Tex continued to share his chips. Not forgetting the current dealer, now a short, chubby woman, Tex placed a bet at the top of the betting square for her, so she could share in the spoils. Tokens are a dealer's lifeline, and they're always glad to share in the streak. A party for all. José protected his chips, as he continued to take the different dealers directly as the mood suited him.

Vergil's luck took an upturn when the opportunity was afforded to double down and split pairs, hitting winners on most of them. The drinks commanded more of his attention as, inversely, he paid less attention to the cards, even to abandoning the basic strategy. The cards soon turned against him. Only the steady supply of chips furnished by Tex allowed him to stay in the game.

Time, however, belongs to the casino, and the inevitable turnaround eroded Tex's stockpile of chips, noted especially from the time the pit boss introduced new decks in the game. The tide had reversed on the players—downward.

On top of that came a crashing blow to Vergil and Dave's blackjack fortunes. Behind Tex's chair stepped a cute young thing with golden curls and a figure to match. With a charming southwestern drawl, she flung her arms possessively around Tex's neck in a voice dripping with honey.

"Come on, honeybuns, you've done enough gambling for one day. You need a few hours rest before the wedding, and I have to get ready."

Looking at her with adoring eyes, Tex was putty. Taking charge, she firmly helped the husky Texan to rise on the shaky side from his chair and requested a rack for his chips. Gathering the chips—less than a quarter of what he once had—she had everything under control. Tex was leaving with chips totaling under \$500, but not until Tex introduced his fiancé, Jennifer, to his "good buddies" at the table. Then he allowed Jennifer to lead him off to the cashier's cage.

"I can see what a lucky man Tex is to have such an attractive young lady like you looking out for him!" said Dave, a charming man of the old school. "I can't tell you how much we're going to miss Tex's company. But it's clear he's in good hands, and you have our best wishes for the future!"

As she smiled and left with Dave, there was a collective sigh.

"Sad to see him go," Vergil mused aloud. "But let's face it—looks like we're down to picking each other's pockets."

Morning had arrived, the only telltale sign being that the entry doors opened and closed briefly to let bodies walk in and out.

In Vergil's fatigued and depressed state of mind, he came to a momentous decision. In order to play on more even terms with the casino, he needed more money. He looked at the dealer, then down at his few remaining chips.

"My luck's bound to change for the better, I know it. I gotta get my hands on some money!" he told the dealer.

The dealer directed Vergil to the cashier's cage. Once Vergil was able to establish himself as a guest of the hotel, the okay on the credit moved right along. The casino confirmed the amount of \$3,500 in his Los Angeles savings account. In just a few minutes time, the technology of computers and the Internet enabled his credit to be approved in that amount.

Vergil signed the marker to guarantee the amount drawn. Pleased, there was just one problem: the money represented all the earthly goods Vergil had managed to squirrel away.

Carrying the rack of black chips back to the table, he felt positively triumphant. *It's good to be in the chips!* Vergil thought. *I'll have this paid off in no time. Right now, I fell real lucky!* he smiled through his alcoholic haze.

Welcomed back to the table by Dave, it was like a reunion of two long-lost friends, especially when Dave put the bite on him for a hundred dollar loan.

"Hell, take two!" he said, flipping two black chips nonchalantly over to Dave. "I know you'll pay me back as soon as you hit pay dirt!"

The new man at the table, Nat, studied Vergil's outfit.

"Say there, what's the big occasion for being all duded up in a suit?" asked Nat. "You been to a wedding or a funeral?"

"Yeah, one of each—my own," Vergil answered. "I married what is known as a Jewish American Princess, and I'm in trouble already. Discouraging, isn't it?"

"Oh, I can tell you I know an awful lot about that," Nat offered. "I'm Jewish, and I was once married to one, too. Didn't last six months."

Vergil moaned.

"You know why Jewish women shut their eyes when having sex with their husbands?" asked Nat.

"No, why?"

"Because they can't stand to see their husbands happy."

As everyone laughed and exchanged high fives, the dealer completed the deal.

“What’s it going to be, Mister? Hit or stand?” he asked.

Dumbfounded, Vergil stared at the dealer.

For some reason, the room seemed to be spinning. And, hey! *Where the hell did Regina go?* he wondered.

## **Part 2**

Regina wandered from machine to machine, looking for the “luckiest” one. With more than a thousand to choose from, the array was dizzying. Slot technology had produced higher and flashier visual delights, presenting entirely new forms of interactive multimedia gaming. As she meandered through the glitzy maze, the old-time slots were still there, offering cherries, oranges, plums, and lucky sevens, but there were glossier ones everywhere, even an Elvis Presley-themed slot, featuring fourteen gold record hits and classic concert footage, on CD-ROM.

She stared at it and saw that when the blinking lights landed on one of the song titles, the machine would play a snippet of the hit in stereo, showing video footage of the King’s bumps and grinds in live action before the screen revealed the number of coins won. And there was a bonus. While the game was still blinking and buzzing, the player was invited to answer Elvis trivia questions.

Over the ka-ching of dropping coins, she heard sporadic cheers and hollers of a crowd hooting it up around a crap table. As they jumped up and down and pumped their fists in the air, Regina’s deflated spirits raised. Being alone was a state Regina intensely feared, like aging; it was a state she did not want to deal with.

Gathering up her coins hurriedly, she elbowed her way to the craps rail between two male players. At first, the two men reacted in annoyance, but when they got a good look at her, they had a quick change of attitude and courteously allowed her the space.

One was a distinguished-looking gent, Fiftyish, with thick white hair parted down the middle, wearing gold-tinted aviator-style glasses. He was dressed in a white suit, white shirt, and black string tie. A pair of hand-tooled beige cowboy boots completed the outfit. The other, a younger man with thinning black hair, had a smelly half-smoked stogie in his mouth. Though he was dressed in a western outfit with cowboy boots, he had a Brooklyn accent. A Panama hat was perched on the back of his head, covering his squat build.

Only too aware that male gamblers often believe that a pretty, young female brings good luck, Regina wasted no time in playing up to both men. Because she knew the effect that she had on men's libidos, the intricate rules of crap didn't concern her; she played the "mind" game. Manipulation was her weapon, and her experience as a barmaid gave her the equivalent of a college degree in clinical psychology.

With Regina's zaftig figure now wedged between the two men, the shooter to her left crapped out.

"New shooter!" called the imposing stickman in a soft Jamaican accent. Regina felt attracted to the black man with the deep tan complexion that shone like an orange hue under the table's overhead bright lights. Well over six feet tall, with well-defined muscles from top to bottom. A warrior—an Othello-like presence was impressive in his Silver Spur's standard uniform—his long-sleeved white shirt, red neckerchief, fringed-style western vest, and form-fitting light brown western pants with red stitching around the crescent-shaped pockets. His clean-shaven head glistened in the intense table light, which gave him a dramatic, menacing appearance. To top it off, he possessed a deep, rich, baritone voice. His name tag read "Vince." As Regina took in the whole package, she stood still, staring at the stickman, her knees weak.

The stickman controls the action of the dice and the pace of the game. The boxman, dressed in a dark blue business suit, was seated at the middle of the table on the opposite side of the stickman. As the table "super," or boss, he must be vigilant in overseeing that the play is proper and according to house rules. Watching out for cheaters, he scrutinized all payouts to assure that all payouts were made correctly.

Stationed on each side of the boxman, dressed in the same type outfits as worn by Vince and the stickman, were two dealers. Their main duties were to book the bets, pay off the winners, and rake in the losing chips on their side of the table with both hands.

"New shooter!" Vince sang out. The stick was bent as Vince's arm was held low and straight over the table as he expertly used it to rake five pairs of dice to the end of the table where Regina stood.

"Whatta I do with all these dice?" a perplexed Regina asked.

"Pick two, honey, and give the rest back," he instructed.

Doing as she was told, Regina bent over to pick up the dice and shake them. But before she could throw, Vince warned.

"Hold it, Missy! If you shoot, you have to lay a bet on the Pass line or Don't Pass line!"

"Coming out!" Vince announced. "New shooter, coming out!"

“Allow me,” the white-haired benefactor said with the flip of two red chips on the Pass line.

“Roll ‘em, sweetheart!” the man with the dead stogie on the other side of Regina said. “Hey, baby! Time to give those cubes a high-flying ride. Let’s see if you’re a lucky broad or not!”

The casino lighting highlighted her full figure as she bent over the rail, ready to throw the dice. Regina had balls. She was a powerful sight, even without wearing a low-cut dress. Her full, round breasts bulged against the draped fabric of her dress—a fact no one missed around the table—man or woman.

Another blond—skinny with stringy hair—was also dressed in a low-cut dress. There was no chance, however, of her out-titting Regina.

A Chinese lady with her gray streaked hair in a bun took a deep drag of the cigarette hanging off her lips. Her only interest was in the roll of the dice.

Regina glanced at the blond and tripped as she bent over the rail to throw the dice. One die, however, bounced up against the rail and popped up in an arc, plopping down in the blond’s gown, smack dab between her breasts.

“Oh, heavens!” shrieked the blond.

The table exploded in a wild whoop and holler by everyone. All was still, however, when she coolly stuck two of her fingers down the bodice to deftly extract the lost die. As she held it up, the audience cheered and gave her a round of applause.

“Hold it, Missy! Don’t throw it in. let me have it,” Vince commanded, and he turned the fallen die over to the boxman to inspect.

The table was divided by the center box of proposition bets. The stickman stationed in the middle had the duty of handling the prop bets as well as keeping track of the dice at all times. Since the stickman was unable to watch his side of the crap layout and the dice at the same time, the other dealer always had to observe the end of the layout where the stickman could not because his back was turned.

Both dealers shared duties on there respective sides of the layout. The four-person crap team, working in concert under the watchful eye of the boxman, was to see the action of a human computing machine. For different bets, there are different odds and varying wagers, and the dealers needed to keep track and identify each player’s bet with the player.

The rail opposite to the boxman’s seated position was fitted with a nine-inch mirror. This protective device assists in spotting crooked or gaffed dice that a cheat may have slipped

into the game. The mirror allowed the boxman to see five sides of each die while it's resting on the table layout.

"New shooter!" Vince sang out.

"let me have the same dice, especially now that they're warmed up!" Regina said wickedly.

Under the house rule, Regina was entitled, the boxman okayed it, and Vince courteously obliged. He then called out again, "New shooter! Come out roll!" which brought a snicker of more laughs from the male players.

The Chinese woman remained inscrutable, refusing to take her eyes off the table. Only the roll of the dice mattered.

A little bald man was jumping up and down, gleeful at the extra-curricular activity. Next to him, a black man with a pencil mustache and dark shades yelled, "C'mon, baby! Show 'em what you got! Shake, rattle, and roll those bones. Go, girl!"

Feeling the drama of the moment, Regina straightened up, cupped the dice in her fist, and shook them hard.

As the men shouted encouragement, the softened lights on Regina, in her wedding dress, gave her a soft feminine look. She threw the dice hard. They skidded across the blue felt covering, bounced off the rail, and came to an abrupt halt, the silence was broken by a roar of victory.

"Winner, seven! Take the don'ts and pay the line!"

The stickman pushed the dice to Regina once more. As she reached for her payoff, her benefactor told her, "Let it ride, honey! I got a good feeling about you!"

"I'll bet you do!" she replied sarcastically, but inside, she was pleased. She added another chip to her bet.

Regina felt a sense of control returning—not over the game, but over the men. Only a few hours after saying her wedding vows, she felt depressed at getting off on the wrong foot. But there was magic in the air, and now, feeling the rhythm of the game, backed up by the men's excitement, she felt whole again.

The atmosphere was electric with anticipation as Regina wound up to make her third pass.

"Winner! Yo, eleven! Front line winner, eleven. Take the don'ts, pay the line and field!" Vince sang out as he raked in the dice.

After that, Regina rolled three more sevens in a row, and her chips piled up. Everyone in the crowd was worked into a frenzy, that is everyone except the Chinese woman and the little old bald man.

“The broad can’t keep this up!” he muttered, and he continued to lay his bet on the Don’t Pass line.

The Chinese woman was immutable, and she was now on a winning streak with Regina.

The skinny blond, disgusted by the action, pulled her reluctant boyfriend from the table to look elsewhere for greener pastures. Two others quickly stepped to the rail in their places.

By now, Regina was hailed a solid gold “star,” and loving it. The nagging thoughts about Vergil receded into a never-never land. There was only NOW!

The red and white dotted cubes in her hand—the crowd cheering her lustily on—all waiting—this was her moment.

Four more times, she flung the dice, and four more times, she heard a “Winner, seven!”

The chips were piling up with the help and advice of her two new friends, but she couldn’t take her eyes off Vince—a showman in his own right. Persuasive in his soft, seductive Jamaican accent, he was provocative.

“Hard ways, field bets, craps, eleven, come bets!” stimulated Regina. His velvet voice and his unavailability became a turn-on for Regina.

Her brain, however, wouldn’t allow her to forget that she had a purpose. Without the least understanding of the varied bets, she found the odds fascinating. She watched the more experienced players throwing down chips, and she fingered her pile.

“Wow, look at all those wild odds. I’ve got to bet something on the four—the hard way!” she yelled.

“Whoa there, darlin’!” Doc—the distinguished-looking gentleman admonished. “Hold up just a darn minute, there! Those are sucker bets. Those odds don’t mean a thing. It’s pie in the sky. You’re on your own with those bets.”

Undeterred, Regina threw a green chip at Vince and yelled, “Twenty-five dollars the hard way on the four. At eight to one, I love it!”

“Crazy broad!” Benny muttered.

“Same shooter. The point is four!” Vince announced, pushing the dice toward Regina with a soft smile.

Feeling invincible, she threw a five, then a six, then an eight. Then, at last, two twos—four the hard way.

“Winner four, hard, front line winner, four!” Vince sang out in his melodious voice.

The crowd went wild. Vince paid off \$175 in chips, and left the original green chip bet standing, as was the custom.

“And still up!” he announced.

The dealers paid off the winning bets on the Pass line for Regina’s making the point. Regina eyed Vince cheekily.

“You’re like the genie that popped out of a magic bottle. I wish I could pop you back in, and take you home with me!” she said huskily, feeling the sexual pull toward the sepia hunk.

“Missy, you can pop my cork anytime!” he answered easily, with a deep-throated laugh. Then he added slyly, “Now, little lady, be so good as to throw the dice,” and booked the prop bets.

“Look at all the numbers you can win on!” was Regina’s rationale for the Field bet.

Doc and Benny now doubled their respective bets on the Pass line, just before Vince announced, “No more bets! Same shooter! Come out roll!”

The dice bounced off the rail and landed on the table, showing a six and five come eleven. Regina screamed and shook her fists in the air.

“See? I told you so!”

“Unbelievable!” Doc and Benny could only shake their heads in disbelief.

Vince thanked Regina for the token as he picketed the two red chips she tossed to him, and resumed his sales chant. Advertising the high odds—sucker bets—usually lured in inexperienced players. For Regina, she got lucky. She hadn’t the slightest knowledge of the odds and cared even less.

“Folds, place your bets on the hard ways! Get yourself ten-for-one odds on the hard six or eight! Get yourself eight-for-one odds on the hard four or ten!”

Regina was winning, and nothing else mattered. The crowd was kept in a constant uproar by Regina’s play, and the dealers enjoyed it as well, for tokens are the core of their income. An economic boom around the table usually meant extra money for the dealers, beyond that, catching a glimpse of Regina’s torrid wriggling was a bonus show for all within view.

The excited players yelled, jumped, and high-fived each other, which acted as a magnet to the surrounding casino population. The whispered word quick spread about the “really built” blond setting the casino back on its ear with her amazing winning rolls.

“Come out roll! Same foxy shooter!” announced Vince, alluringly. “Craps, eleven, any seven, Horn, Hi Lo!”

Regina flung the dice once more, and a deep-throated cheer rose up. The dice showed the happy news: lucky seven! A burst of applause.

“Winner, seven!”

“I love this game!” Doc enthused, kissing Regina on the cheek. “This is your night, Babydoll! We’re riding the money train to the end of the line!”

The Don’t Pass player, beyond disgust, leaned over to lay his last chip on the Don’t Pass line. His bald dome shone under the lights as in his overexcitement, his dentures accidentally popped out and landing on the crap table. Instantly, the boxman leapt from his seat, popped out his own set of dentures. “You’re faded, Pops!”

That brought the action to a complete halt. People screamed in uncontrollable laughter as all witness what happened.

Regina had the dice again. At this juncture, Regina had been metamorphosed from a sex object to a moneymaking machine to the gamblers. She rattled the dice in her hand and threw.

Before she saw the numbers on the dice, she heard the emptiness of the silence, filled by long loud groans of disappointment. Mighty Wonder Woman had crapped out and fallen to earth.

“Aw, shit! Boxcars!” a player moaned into his hands, as a number of players and gawkers abandoned the table.

“New shooter coming out!” Vince sang in his hypnotic voice. He turned to Regina. “That was some run you had, Missy! The gods must be with you.”

The game resumed where it had left off, on a much quieter level, as if Regina had never made all those winning passes. Her reply was slow and distant.

“Looks like everybody has deserted me,” she said sadly. “Who was it that said, ‘fame is fleeting’?”

With the table half-empty, attention now turned to the new shooter and the next roll of the dice.

“you really had a run there, honey!” said Doc softly. “I haven’t seen anything like that in a long time, you lucky lady! Crazy bets and all!”

Regina’s rack held over \$1,800, plus nearly another \$1,000 in her purse and inside her bra, found later. Doc had won a little over \$6,000 while Regina held the dice. Benny’s winnings amounted to 3,800 in chips. At Doc’s nudge, Benny turned over six green chips—\$150—with gracious thanks.

“Until you showed up, it was nothin’ but crap city. You’re an all right broad in my book.” Doc, taking her hand in his, place six black chips—another 600. “You earned it.”

Regina felt a sense of pride and accomplishment in her winnings. At the cage, her spirits soared as the \$3,500 winnings were counted out.

She felt a need to share her gambling adventure and good fortune—*gelt*—with Vergil, and to spin the story of her winning and how she had been the star of the table. Imagine how thrilled Vergil will be when he hears the glorious details.

At the other end of the casino, at his blackjack table, Vergil watched the silky smooth flow of the pitched cards by the dealer. Each card seemed to float through the air in a graceful arc, landing accurately on each player’s betting square. Vergil was almost childlike, for winning and losing had no meaning anymore. There was only the hypnotic flight of the cards sliding in to land on the betting square. And then the dealer would pick up his bet and cards.

*A thing of beauty*, he thought. *What symmetry in the cards’ flash of color and the rhythm of the dealer’s delivery. That is poetic!* he thought. That his fortunes were nose-diving seemed to be beside the point.

“Oh, there you are! I’ve been looking all over for you!” Regina hailed him, bending over to give him a hug and a kiss. *Oh jeez, now what*, he wondered. Playfully sticking her tongue in his ear, she giggled, then happily flashed several hundred-dollar bills under his nose.

“Guess where I’ve been, honeybuns!” she teased.

Wrong question. Vergil found her attitude to cutesy, considering how lousy he felt about his losing streak.

“I don’t really give a rat’s ass. And where the hell have you been? You been screwing around with everyone in the casino?” Vergil shot back. *Was it a random comment. Or an accusation?*

There was a gasp by the other players.

“I guess this must be your new bride,” Nat remarked evenly. “Sounds more like it’s been twenty years, no your wedding night.”

“Take it easy, son,” advised Dave in a fatherly gesture. “I think your lady has good news.”

But Regina was devastated. She had come to Vergil filled with joy, eager to share her good news with her husband and was cruelly rebuffed.

“Look, I’m in a shitty mood now, okay? Besides, this is community property now. What’s yours is mine, and vice versa! You know what I’m saying?”

Regina’s fantasy of a joyous reunion fell to ashes. If Vergil had physically hit her, Regina could not have been in more pain. With depressing clarity, she saw a dim future ahead. She had managed to make another bad bargain, and a shiver coursed through her body as she envisioned her mother yelling at her for marrying another dumb *shaygetz*. *Knocked up by a goyim zhlub with no future, and worse, no money!* her mother would say.

“Why don’t you try craps?” she suggested.

“Don’t like it, I make all the wrong bets,” he answered.

“Hah! Like you’re making the right bets now on blackjack?” she yelled angrily. “Mr. *Pashudnik!* Low life! *Goy plotz!* You should blow up!”

“You cheap \*&%\$!” he cursed, his features twisted in anger.

“You mutha-@#\$\$%&’ sunavabitch! Shove it up your ass!” sobbed Regina as she ran off.

“*Oy gevalt!*” said Nat, slapping the side of his face in mock horror. “You really have a handful, in more ways than one!”

“Yeah,” agreed Vergil. “I didn’t know what happiness was until I got married, and then it was too late!” Vergil cackled.

Feeling good about starting fresh, he bought \$800 worth of chips.

“After all,” he philosophized, “if you don’t play the game, you can’t expect to win!” Then he signaled for a hit to his fifteen against the dealer’s eight. The dealer smartly snapped down a ten.