

# one

SATURDAY, JULY 27

Two burly security guards hustled him from the casino pit and down a short corridor, one on each side, their viselike grip on his arms painful. One guard opened a door, the other gave him a shove through the doorway. A metal chair, its seat and arms padded with red vinyl, stood in the middle of the room. They marched him over to it, spun him around, and pressed down on his shoulders until he dropped to the seat with a jarring thud. They left him sitting there, shaking. Charlie had never been backroomed before.

He looked around. Other than the chair and a workbench with an assortment of power tools, the room was empty.

The door opened and a large man entered, his shoulders straining a cream-colored sport coat. He had a face like a prizefighter who'd stayed in the ring long past his prime. Grinning, he produced an iron pipe from his waistband and smacked it into his palm. The meaty sound echoed off the bare walls. "Ever seen what a pipe can do to a kneecap?"

Charlie didn't answer. Surely the thug was only trying to scare him. It worked. He was about to piss his pants.

Another man walked in and closed the door behind him. His expensive suit, highly polished shoes—the kind known on the street as "gators"—and his air of command tagged him as a casino big shot. He held out his hand. "Frank Borella, general manager of the Fontana."

The thug made a stay-put gesture, so he shook Borella's hand without rising from the chair. "Charles Delmar."

"Charlie the Barber, right?"

"Yeah." Charlie glanced nervously at the pipe. "Retired."

"Sonny, put that damn thing away," Borella said. "He's going to be very cooperative. Right, Charlie?"

Sonny tossed the pipe onto the workbench. It landed with a clang.

Borella turned back to Charlie. "Now then, Charlie the Barber, we need to . . . clear up some things."

"Okay," Charlie said. "Let's start with why your security goons manhandled me and dragged me here."

His close-set, intense eyes stared at Charlie for long seconds. When he spoke, his voice was soft. "You're a blackjack player, well known around this town as a regular. You make out okay?"

"I win a little and lose a little. Blackjack's just a hobby."

Borella examined his manicured nails and then looked up. "You a hustler, Charlie?"

Charlie's laugh sounded hollow, even to him. "Me? I told you, blackjack is just a hobby."

"Just a hobby," Borella repeated. "This week, four casinos had significant losses at their high-stakes blackjack tables—Cosmos on Tuesday, Casablanca on Wednesday, Skyview on Thursday, and Tropicana on Friday. You played each night at those same tables. How do you explain that?"

"Just a coincidence." A cantaloupe-size chunk of ice had formed in his gut.

"You intended to play at the Fontana's high-stakes table tonight. Another coincidence, I suppose." Borella smiled. "I'll ask you again. You a hustler, Charlie?"

Charlie shook his head. "You can't be serious. Okay, sure, I was at those casinos, but I either lost money or broke even. That would make me a piss-poor hustler."

Borella's smile faded. "Unless you're straight with me, motherfucker, we're going to have a problem."

"I'm telling you the God's honest truth."

"Yeah. Sure you are."

“Boss, let me have a crack at it,” Sonny said. “I can be very persuasive.”

Borella held up a hand for silence. “Tell me something, Charlie. You a card counter?”

Not a chance in hell Borella would swallow a flat denial. Better to shade the truth. “I bought Ken Uston’s book on card counting and I’ve been trying to use his method, but it’s no cinch. Too many distractions in casinos.”

“Bullshit. I got a feeling you’re a lot better counter than you’re letting on.”

Charlie shook his head. “Sorry, you’re wrong.”

Borella’s eyes bored into him. “You need to think carefully before you answer the next question.” He opened a spiral-bound notepad. “Do you know . . . Ada Delano, Jack Colvin, Wilson Wright, and Herman Chin?”

Charlie swallowed. Borella wanted him to give up his team. Not too damn much chance of that. “I don’t have the faintest idea who any of those people are, sorry.”

“Dwight Ayers?”

“Sorry.”

Borella sighed, shaking his head. “Guess we’ll have to do this the hard way.” He gave a slight nod to Sonny.

A ripping sound filled the room, the sound of duct tape being torn from a roll. He grabbed Charlie’s wrist and forced his right forearm on top of the chair’s padded arm. Then he wrapped the tape around and around both, so tight Charlie couldn’t budge his arm. “Just a goddamn minute,” he said, “you can’t . . .”

He was wrong. They could.

Sonny went to the workbench and plugged a circular saw into an extension cord. At Borella’s nod, he switched on the saw, a grin on his ugly kisser.

“Please . . .” Warm urine ran down Charlie’s legs, but he hardly noticed. His scream blended with the saw’s shrill whir.