

## Chapter 1 - Lucky 13

Janice Hastings, a tall, attractive blonde with the quintessential Vegas showgirl figure, drags a large suitcase across the parking lot of her now-empty apartment. She lifts the hatch on her blue Toyota Corolla, affectionately named "Veronica," and struggles to heave the heavy case into the trunk. Years of bad decisions have condensed her life into this one battered piece of luggage. The rest of her belongings? Gone to hock.

A debate rages in her mind. Fire up Veronica and skip town? Or return to her apartment and deal with the storage men she can't afford to pay? In Vegas, dilemmas like these are often decided by chance. Janice flips a coin, watching as it lands in her palm before rolling onto her forearm. Taking a deep breath, she lifts her hand. Tails. She's heading back inside. With no cash, she'll need to negotiate another way to take care of the movers.

Janice steps inside and faces the two men. "Hey, fellas, let's renegotiate my down payment."

One of them shakes his head. "I don't think so. We want our money."

Janice smiles, undeterred. "Guys, how about a Vegas-style offer? You cover my down payment, and if I don't pay you back in thirty days, you both get a special date with me." She punctuates her pitch with a slow, sexy wink.

The movers exchange glances, skeptical. "How do we know you won't back out?"

Janice turns away and begins to unbutton her blouse. It slides down her shoulders and onto the floor, exposing a black bra that accentuates the small of her back. She reaches behind and unhooks the clasp, letting the sheer fabric slip down. The men catch a glimpse of the curves that tease beyond her ribcage.

"Still think I'd chicken out?"

They hesitate. “We need more convincing.”

Janice responds by unzipping her skirt and letting it pool at her feet, leaving her in only a sliver of lace. “How about now?”

They nod, the deal sealed.

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Las Vegas, 1980. The city is in transition. Mob control over the gaming industry is waning, and the first modern mega-resort is still nearly a decade away. The Vegas of the seventies was shaped by the influence of Howard Hughes and Elvis Presley, who brought legitimacy and glamour to a city once defined by organized crime and backroom deals.

Now, new pressures loom: rising competition from Atlantic City, inflation fueled by the energy crisis, and an evolving gaming landscape. Yet, despite these challenges, food and entertainment remain shockingly affordable—a holdover from the Mob era, when every aspect of a hotel’s operations was designed to funnel customers into the casino. The iconic \$1.99 steak and eggs special, heavily subsidized by gambling profits, is a staple of the time. The idea of an equivalent \$8 meal in 2025, when every operation is a profit center, would be unthinkable.

Beyond the economy, Las Vegas pulses with indulgence and reinvention. It’s a city where fortunes are made—or lost—in a single night. High rollers command the gaming tables, while performers chase stardom in the showrooms. The air is thick with cigarette smoke, the clink of cheap cocktails, and the hypnotic whirl of slot machines. Neon lights cast the Strip in perpetual twilight, a stark contrast to the desert’s blistering daylight.

The casino industry is built on relationships. Management treats loyal gamblers like royalty, knowing they’ll return time and again. A gambler betting \$25 a hand is considered high-value, earning free drinks, comped meals, and even discounted—or entirely free—rooms.

The Strip is a world unto itself—a dazzling, self-contained universe of excess, ambition, and luck. Nowhere else in America—or perhaps the world—compares.

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Jim "The Jeweler" Collins—a nickname he earns from his days selling gems out of the trunk of his Cadillac—trades the hustle of Brooklyn for the neon allure of Las Vegas. He isn't an academic, but he has street smarts and has developed a foolproof method for beating the casinos at blackjack. The kids from MIT use mathematics to outmaneuver the game, but Jim's approach relies on elegance and finesse. He tried their way but found it required constant mental calculations and unwavering focus—neither of which suited him. With a keen sense of self-awareness, he knows he needs a different strategy.

Jim takes a seat at an empty blackjack table, placing three crisp hundred-dollar bills on the felt. "Six quarters and the rest in nickels, please," he says, using the lingo for six green \$25 chips and the rest in red \$5 chips. Spreading a \$5 chip across all seven open spots, he prepares for a one-on-one showdown—David versus the Goliath casino. The dealer begins dealing, and off to the side, two pit bosses observe.

"I know this guy. He wins all the time," one says.

The other boss, intrigued, watches in silence. After several hands, he shakes his head. "This guy's terrible. Sometimes he hits 17, other times he stands on 12. He can only win if Lady Luck is on his side. Keep him playing—eventually, his bankroll will be ours."

At the next table, Ronnie and Marvin, two blackjack experts from Vancouver trained in the MIT method, see what the pit bosses miss. Jim's strategy, though disguised as reckless, is brilliant in its simplicity and deadly in its effectiveness.

Jim believes in the power of small and simple—an axiom that shapes his life. As a child in Brooklyn, he sees how a small fire in the cargo hold of a docked freighter turns into an inferno that destroys over 200 buildings. That day, at just 13 years old, he became

homeless and orphaned, left to navigate the unforgiving streets of New York alone. He learns how to hustle, how to read people, and most importantly, how to survive.

By the time he hits his twenties, Jim carves out a reputation in the diamond trade. He isn't just selling gems; he's selling the dream—one glittering rock at a time. But the game in Vegas is different. Here, the only thing that matters is the next hand, the next deal, and staying one step ahead of the house. He plays in countless casinos, always adapting, always moving. He learns which dealers are superstitious, which pit bosses are easy to distract, and how to push just enough without drawing too much attention.

One night, after a particularly lucrative streak at the Flamingo, Jim has his first real run-in with casino security. Two burly men in suits ask him to step away from the table, leading him to a quiet hallway where the air smells like stale cigarettes and danger. "We know what you're doing, Collins. Take your winnings and don't come back."

Jim nods, flashes a charming smile, and strolls out as if he hasn't just been warned by the house. It's all part of the game. He knows that as long as he isn't caught counting cards outright, he can always find another table, another way to win.

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Betty Garcia, the MGM housekeeping manager, shifts uncomfortably in the office chair across from George Roberts, the Vice President of Hotel Operations. She has been in this position before. Eleven years at MGM have taught her the drill—more cuts, more demands, less appreciation.

George, ambitious and ruthless, leans forward, his tone sharp. "Betty, rooms that are not ready for check-in is unacceptable. If you can't schedule your staff to get them done on time, maybe I need to find someone who can."

Betty bites the inside of her cheek. She knows how this works. The pressure will roll downhill, right onto her housekeepers. They are already stretched thin—some covering as many as twenty rooms a shift. But George doesn't care about that. He wants results, no matter the cost.

She forces a smile. "We're working on it, Mr. Roberts. I'll make sure my team prioritizes check-ins."

He leans back, unsatisfied but unwilling to push further for now. "See that you do, Betty."

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Fresh from a tense negotiation with the men from the storage company, Janice turns the key in her Corolla, bringing "Veronica" to life. *"That was a close one, V, but we've got 30 days to get our stuff back."*

A voice inside her head, the ever-present Veronica, responds. *"What are you doing, J? You're 27 and nearly broke. Now this thing with flirting—it's turning into another problem."*

*"Relax, V. I have it under control."*

*"Do you? You've gone from smoking to prescription drugs to alcohol to gambling. You're addiction-hopping. Have you found one you like?"*

Janice tightens her grip on the wheel. *"I'm doing the best I can. Fighting off my demons isn't easy."*

*"You have self-determination. Use it."*

The internal debate fades as she exits I-15 onto Flamingo Road. The bright lights of the Dunes marquee come into view, its neon outline flickering against the night sky. She drives past it and into the MGM parking lot, arriving with an hour to spare before her first show.

As she walks through the casino toward the Ziegfeld showroom, a man at a blackjack table catches her eye—ruggedly handsome, with sharp features, dark hair, and piercing blue eyes. He's sporting a five o'clock shadow and playing seven hands at once, chip stacks rising like towers. A successful day at the office for Jim the Jeweler.

Without Veronica's voice in her head to rein her in, Janice seizes the moment.

"Hey, fella. Wanna trade me a pair of those green chips for a better look at my pair?"

She cups her breasts with both hands and gives them a playful lift, finishing with a slow seductive wink.

Jim grins. "How about one chip for a look at one?"

Janice rolls her eyes. "When was the last time you bought just one sock?"

They laugh, the ice broken. Jim's instincts, honed on the streets, tell him this woman is trouble. Every warning in his head screams to walk away.

"You got a deal," he says instead.

The attraction is instant and undeniable—primal, even. Janice leans in close, her perfume intoxicating. "Seventh floor. Last elevator. Ten minutes."

Jim watches her walk away, knowing full well he's making a bad decision. He follows anyway, the hum of the casino fading as something far more enticing pulls him in.

Jim stands in front of the elevator doors, anticipation building as he waits for his rendezvous with Janice. His mind races through the possibilities. Does she have a room on the seventh floor? Is she about to make another offer? He barely has time to process the thoughts before the elevator doors slide open.

Jim's jaw drops. Janice stands before him, naked from the waist up.

"Macy's, seventh floor—women's tops and underwear," she quips. "Unfortunately, we're sold out."

Jim is too mesmerized to react, her words failing to register. He catches the faintest glimmer of amusement in her eyes, as if she knows she has him completely under her spell. As he regains his senses, the elevator doors begin to close.

"What's your name?" he blurts. "Can I buy you a drink?"

No response. No doubt. The diagnosis is clear—Jim has contracted a severe case of Janice Hastings. He remains standing in front of the now-closed doors, replaying the moment in his head, wondering if he'll ever see her again.

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The newest Keno runner at the MGM Grand introduces herself as Latisha Smith. At twenty-six, with a fresh wardrobe and a new hairstyle, she's reinventing herself—but her eyes still carry the weight of a mysterious past. In Vegas, Keno is technically a lottery, but the term "race" has been adopted to sidestep early laws that ban lotteries while permitting horse racing and gambling.

Latisha's first customers are two friends down to their last few bucks. As she hands them their Keno tickets, the race board lights up with the winning numbers.

Checking their ticket, the gamblers light up with excitement. They hit five out of seven numbers—turning a \$2 ticket into a cool \$32. "Alright," one says, "we save \$2 each for breakfast, put \$10 on the Dodgers tonight—Sutton's starting, and he's a lock..."

As their conversation fades behind her, Latisha approaches two new customers—Ronnie and Marvin. For them, Keno is just a way to unwind from the mental grind of blackjack, a game of pure chance and entertainment.

The Vancouver gambling buddies could hardly wait to turn 21, when they could legally put their blackjack training to use. Ronnie is tall and clean shaven, his nerdy glasses and easy smile gives him approachable appeal. Marvin, shorter and stockier, has a mop of beach blond hair and a pensive look that always made him seem a little on edge. Both have enough good looks and charm to hold their own, even with slightly older women.

Marvin, the more outgoing half of the duo, is immediately drawn to Latisha. "What's your name, darling?"

She smiles. "My friends call me Tisha."

"Well, Tisha, I need a number to bet on. How about I play your birthday? If I win, I'll split it with you."

"I was born on Friday the 13th," she says with a playful grin. "It's definitely my lucky number."

Marvin fills out the Keno slip, adds a twenty, and passes it back to her. As the numbers flash on the board, he leans in closer. "So, Tisha, tell me something...what's your favorite place to hangout in Vegas?"

She laughs softly. "Depends on the company."

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Janice checks her watch. She has time for a quick detour at the VIP slot lounge.

The room is dimly lit, the air thick with cigarette smoke that clings to the velvet chairs and patterned carpet. A soft chime rings out every time a jackpot is hit—though that's rare. The hum of spinning reels and the occasional groan of a losing player form the background music of the lounge.

"Hey, Janice," the slot attendant greets her with an easy familiarity. "What can I do for you today?"

She hesitates, rolling the thought around in her mind like the coins she's about to play. "Give me ten nickels."

The attendant counts out ten five-dollar coins—polished gold, heavier and larger than the dull silver dollars, designed to make players feel important. Janice cups them in her palm, their weight both familiar and strangely comforting.

She steps to her favorite Double Diamond machine and slides two coins into the slot. A pull of the lever sets the reels in motion. They spin, slowing one by one. Single bar. Red seven. Blank. Nothing.



She exhales through her nose, expression unreadable. Three more spins. More of the same. No payout.

The last coin lingers in her fingers for an extra second before she flicks it into the slot. A final pull. Nothing.

Janice presses her lips together, brushing her hands off as if shaking away the loss. Without a second glance at the machine, she turns and strides out, heading for her meeting with Betty.

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“Betz! How are you?” Janice greets, embracing her friend.

“Same old,” Betty mutters. “The asshole’s riding me again. Always the people at the bottom expected to sacrifice more.”

Janice listens but quickly shifts to her own dilemma. “I need a place to stay. Think you can find me a room?”

Betty has access to all the hotel room keys. It wouldn’t be difficult. She considers for a moment, then sighs.

“Jan, how about we help each other? You need a place to stay, I need more rooms cleaned. Five rooms a day covers the rent.”

Janice isn’t in a position to refuse. “Of course, Betz. One thing—does my room count as one of the five?”

They both laugh and seal the deal with a hug. Betty slides a key across the table.

“Room 1728. No minibar, but you’ve got a killer view.”

Janice grins, tucking the key into her pocket. “That’ll do.”

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A new residence secured, Janice returns to Veronica to retrieve her suitcase.

*“That was quite the adventure, J.”*

*“Easy come, easy go, V.”*

Veronica challenges. *“I think Dr. Lowenstein is right—you use your sexuality to control men.”*

Janice rolls her eyes. *“What does he know? I only see him because the court ordered me to.”*

*“He knows you haven’t dealt with what happened with your neighbor. That’s a lot for anyone, let alone a thirteen-year-old girl.”*

The realization hits like a gut punch. Her mind drifts back 14 years. She sees her thirteen-year-old self walking home from school during a torrential downpour. A car pulls up beside her.

“Janice, can I drive you home?” It is her friend Amanda’s father. They live a few blocks away.

“Sure, thanks, Mr. B! I can’t believe I left my umbrella at school,” she remarks, sliding into the backseat.

But he doesn’t drive her home. Instead, he heads to nearby Rigby Park and pulls into the empty lot. No one is around—who would be in such a storm?

“Why are we here?” Janice asks, feeling confused.

Her friend’s father gets out of the car and opens the back door...

He steps away from the car and, in an eerily calm voice, warns her, “If you tell anyone about this, that cute little brother of yours will be found dead in Higgins Pond, and it will be your fault. You understand?”

Janice nods.

He gets back into the driver's seat. "Get out!" he yells, his narrowing eyes meeting hers in the rearview mirror. "And remember what I said."

Janice runs. Her trembling legs tangle and she falls. Mr. B.'s car speeds past her. He is heading home to have dinner with his family.

Janice's life would never be the same. Her perfect school grades tumble. Her parents could see something was wrong and even had their own suspicions, but Janice never opened up. She was in constant trouble and was moved from school to school. Eventually, her parents hired a therapist, hoping for a breakthrough.

The dream of university was over. She took up dancing instead. Being physical helped distract her mind. She dreamed of Broadway but settled for Vegas.

She grew up stunning—men couldn't take their eyes off her—but emotional closeness remained a stranger. Sex, for her, wasn't about love or trust. It became a meaningless way to solve all her problems. She had very few inhibitions, a free spirit some called her... but in reality, she was very much imprisoned.

If anyone tried to become close, she pushed them away. It was safer that way. But one thing burned clear through all the confusion: she had to help women. She wanted to protect them from harm—the harm of abusive men. Maybe it was her way of protecting thirteen-year-old Janice.

*"V, I don't want to talk about it. I have to get ready for the early show."*