

Chapter 2 - Showtime

Marvin scans the Keno race board and sighs—Latisha's number, 13, didn't hit. She returns with a polite smile.

"Sorry, your ticket didn't win. Want to try again?"

Marvin shakes his head. "Not sure I can beat this game, Tisha. Are you sure 13 is your lucky number?"

Latisha grins playfully. "Of course. You should play it again—it's due. Law of averages."

Marvin knows probability doesn't work that way, but he's entertained enough to keep going. "Alright, let's do it. But Tisha, if I lose again, you have to join me for a drink."

Latisha hesitates. She's drawn to his charm but wonders if she's ready for something new. "I don't even know your name."

"Marvin." He extends his hand.

She takes a breath. "Well, Marvin, I'm not sure it's a good idea. You know—the whole customer thing."

Marvin fills out his ticket and hands her a ten-dollar bill.

"Only ten this time?" she teases.

Marvin smiles. "Gotta save some money to buy you that drink."

Latisha lingers for a second longer than she should before heading back to the Keno station. As she walks away, Marvin watches her go, a small grin forming on his lips.

Jim collects his thoughts and immediately shifts into detective mode. *How do I find this woman? Is she a tourist or a local?* He quickly concludes she must be a Vegas

native—it's unlikely a visitor could pull off that kind of hustle. *Does she prowl the casinos looking for marks, or could she be an employee of the hotel?* Jim decides to pursue the hired-hand theory. But even if he's right, she could have one of a hundred different jobs. Feeling hungry, he decides to begin his search at one of the hotel's restaurants. As he walks, he replays their brief interaction in his mind, dissecting every detail—the way she moved, her confidence, the way she took his breath away as she disappeared behind the closing elevator doors.

He seats himself at the counter of the hotel's diner, ordering a draft beer and a steak sandwich. As he waits, his mind drifts back to his past. He learned long ago that people are never what they seem at first glance. His juvenile officer, Nico Marino, had drilled that into him. "The smartest con artists are the ones you never suspect," he used to say. Jim had spent his life on both sides of that lesson. *So what does that make her?* He takes a bite of his sandwich and makes a decision. He's going to find her, one way or another.

The Keno numbers light up on the board. 3, 11, 56, 25, 44, 72, 1, 17... and then 13.

Marvin groans. 13 was his only correct number, a result that returns his original wager. He didn't win, but he didn't lose either. Latisha returns to refund his bet.

"Well, Marvin, looks like you broke even."

Marvin shakes his head. "Breaking even is like kissing your sister—it's worse than winning or losing."

Latisha raises a brow, scribbles on a Keno slip, and hands it to him. "Maybe you should play more numbers. The odds are on the back."

She turns to leave. Marvin flips over the ticket. Written in neat, playful handwriting: *Meet me in the cocktail lounge at 8. And don't be late if you wanna find out if I kiss better than your sister.*

Marvin leans back in his chair, reading the note twice before slipping it into his pocket. *Well, well. Tonight just got interesting.*

Jim leaves the hotel diner, his stomach satisfied but his hunger to find Janice still gnawing at him. He wanders the casino floor, scanning dealers, slot attendants, and cocktail servers, searching for the woman who, for some reason, he can't shake from his mind. Every so often, he stops at a blackjack table or a roulette wheel, pretending to be interested in the game, but his focus is elsewhere. He listens to conversations, watches movements, and picks up on the subtle ways employees interact with each other.

Eventually, he finds himself near the Ziegfeld showroom. A massive poster catches his eye: *Hallelujah Hollywood!*—a musical tribute featuring a lineup of dazzling showgirls. His eyes linger on the silhouettes in the image. Could she be one of them? He steps closer, inspecting every detail. The showtimes are listed: 7 PM and a 10 PM topless performance.

He exhales slowly. *If she's a performer, I'll find out soon enough.* He heads to the ticket counter.

Janice sits at a well-lit dressing table, carefully applying mascara to her wide-set green eyes. Her full lips, upturned nose, and heart shaped face give her an effortless beauty. An assistant secures a three-foot-tall, twenty-five-pound headdress on her head.

She takes a breath. It's time.

Like gladiators stepping into the coliseum, she and her troupe move in single file through the winding backstage corridors. Their destination: a massive staircase beneath the largest stage in the world. The energy is electric—an intoxicating mix of nerves, excitement, and sheer adrenaline.

From behind the curtain, she hears the murmur of the audience, the shifting of chairs, the occasional burst of laughter. Then, an assistant signals the performers.

One minute to showtime.

An usher guides Jim to his seat—seventh row, dead center. The showroom hums with anticipation. Then, the music hits with the familiar lyrics of “*Viva Las Vegas*.”

At the cue, fifty showgirls rise from below the stage, emerging in a dazzling cascade of sequins and feathers. Their arms are linked in a seamless chain, and as the music swells, their legs snap into motion, kicking high with razor-sharp precision, each pointed toe reaching eye level in flawless unison. The sheer power of their movements sends ripples through the feathers of their elaborate headdresses, their shimmering skirts lifting just enough to reveal the toned strength beneath their glamour.

The glittering stage lights catch the rhinestones on their costumes, sending a rainbow of colors across the theater. Their smiles are radiant, their movements effortless, honed through hours of practice to achieve perfection. Each kick lands with a rhythmic pulse, the sharp snap of their heels striking the stage merging with the beat of the orchestra, creating a hypnotic cadence. The audience gasps, captivated by the spectacle—a breathtaking display of confidence, poise, and precision, as the line of showgirls executes each movement with machine-like synchronization, never faltering, never breaking formation.

Jim scans the line. And then—

Halfway through, one dancer makes eye contact. She holds the look just long enough for him to feel it. Then, with a sultry, unmistakable wink, she moves on.

It's her.

Jim has found his mystery woman.

And now, she's more than just beautiful—she's enigmatic. A Vegas showgirl, elegant and untouchable, standing beneath the stage lights, commanding the room.

Jim exhales, a slow smile forming.

The game has changed.

Marvin arrives at the cocktail lounge fifteen minutes before the 8 o'clock meeting time set by Latisha. A waitress promptly approaches to take his drink order.

"I think I'll wait for my date before ordering," he says.

The waitress raises an eyebrow. "Afraid she won't show?"

Marvin nods. "Actually, I am."

The waitress strolls away just as Latisha enters. Marvin notices how her switch from a Keno runner's uniform to her own clothes enhances her beauty. Her dark hair trails over her shoulders, and the subtle shimmer in her dress catches the dim lounge lighting just right.

"Hi ya, Tisha. You look fantastic."

Latisha pauses before responding. "Thank you. I'm glad you think so."

Marvin grins. "And I'm glad you're having a drink with me."

Their conversation starts with small talk, easing into comfortable banter.

"So, Marvin, what brings you to Vegas?" Latisha asks, stirring her drink lightly.

Marvin hesitates. Should he tell her the truth? Will she even believe him? Finally, he decides.

“Well, Tisha, you’re not going to believe this, but I’m putting myself through university by beating the casinos at 21.”

Latisha laughs. “Sure, Marvin. I believe you.”

Marvin leans in, grinning. “I’m serious. It’s all about knowing the odds, betting strategically, and keeping a cool head.”

She eyes him skeptically. “And you say the casino hasn’t noticed?”

“Oh, they notice. The trick is knowing when to leave before they do something about it.”

“Sounds like a dangerous game.”

Marvin shrugs. “Everything worth doing has its risks.”

Latisha tilts her head, considering his words. “Maybe I should try it sometime.”

Marvin chuckles. “I’d be happy to give you some pointers.”

As Hallelujah Hollywood reaches its dazzling finale, Jim watches from his seat, the echoes of the last triumphant note still reverberating through the showroom. The stage lights dim, the curtain falls, and the audience erupts into applause. He claps along, but his mind is already on his next move.

A bold gesture, but not too much. Something clever. Memorable.

He settles on flowers—elegant, understated—and a handwritten note, which he carefully pens before sending them backstage:

*To the girl from the 7th floor, this performance was even better than the one at Macy’s.
I’d love to buy you a drink. Meet me in the lounge. – Jim*

He figures the odds are about 3-1 that she’ll show. A solid bet.

From his vantage point, he watches as the cast filters out from backstage. The performers are still glowing, their faces touched with the lingering magic of the stage. A few linger near the wings, exchanging breathless laughter and post-show chatter. Others hurry toward the dressing rooms, the excitement of the performance still pulsing through their veins. Sequins catch the light as they move, the scent of perfume and powder hanging in the air.

Jim scans the faces, searching for hers.

He waits.

And wonders.

Will she come?

He hopes she does.

Latisha and Marvin's conversation deepens, shifting from playful banter to something more personal.

"So, Tisha, what brings you to the MGM Keno lounge?" Marvin inquires, resting his elbow on the table.

Latisha hesitates before replying. "I'm in the witness protection program."

They both laugh, but Marvin notices something behind her humor. A flicker of something unspoken.

Marvin leans in. "Seriously, I'm interested."

"My last answer isn't too far from the truth."

"Tisha, now you've definitely piqued my interest. Should I be worried?"

“No need to worry. I’m not a criminal, and no one has filed a restraining order against me.”

They laugh again before Latisha continues, swirling the ice in her drink.

“I’m hiding from someone in a past life.”

“That must be scary.”

“It is... I mean, it was.”

“You can stop anytime if it’s too difficult to talk about.”

“No, it’s good for me to get this out. Besides, I feel like I can trust you.”

“You can. Your secrets are safe with me.”

“I was a singer in my past life. I was getting close to a breakthrough—not easy for a Black girl from the deep South.”

“Go on.”

“My previous boyfriend—who was also my agent—wanted me to sign a personal services contract where I did all the work, and he got all the benefits. When I refused, he became violent.”

Marvin absorbs her words, his expression softening. “Tisha, that’s awful. How did you get away?”

“I packed my bags and left in the middle of the night. I had to change my number, my address—everything. Working in the Keno lounge is my fresh start.”

Marvin nods slowly. “You must be strong to walk away like that.”

“Sometimes I wonder if I’m just lucky.”

“No, that takes courage.”

Jim enters the lounge, passing a young couple deep in conversation. He settles at an empty table in the corner of the cocktail bar. As he waits, nerves creep in. What if she shows and it doesn't go well? What if she doesn't like him?

He recalls Nico's advice about women:

"Always be yourself, so you don't fake your way into an unhappy relationship. Treat a woman with respect, especially if you're trying to get in her pants. And never use money to impress a lady—watch your manners instead."

Nico always wrapped a dollar bill around his bigger notes. Jim beams at the memory but is suddenly pulled back to the moment.

"Better than Macy's, huh?"

The voice startles him. He looks up to see a tall blonde showgirl standing before him.

"Ahhh, I, umm—" he stammers.

Janice smiles. "It's okay, Jim. I have that effect on people. My name's Janice."

He finally finds his words. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"I know," she teases. They both laugh, and Jim feels his worries fade. The ease of their connection surprises him—it's as if they've known each other for months.

"Janice, there's something I'm curious about," Jim says.

She tilts her head. "What's that?"

"How did you spot me in the sold-out showroom?"

"In Vegas, nothing is as it appears," she replies. "I figured you might ask around and find your way to the show, so I had a spotter keep an eye out for you."

Jim raises an eyebrow. "A spotter?"

“We use them to find friends and family in the audience.”

“I’m flattered.”

A waitress arrives, interrupting their conversation.

“Can I buy you a drink?” Jim offers.

Janice shakes her head. “I’ll have a club soda—I have a late show tonight.”

Jim turns to the waitress. “A Gibson and a club soda, please.”

Janice arches an eyebrow. “A Gibson?”

“Yeah,” Jim says. “I hate olives.”

Janice grins. “Me too.”

“Speaking of your late show,” Jim says, “you perform topless, right?”

“Yes, I do.”

“And the cost of the show is \$30 for 90 minutes?”

“Right again.”

“But earlier, you charged me \$50 for a five-second show.”

Janice smiles. “Well, that’s inflation.”

Jim bursts into laughter, and Janice joins in. He’s impressed—not only is she stunning and confident, but she’s got a great sense of humor.

He leans in. “In that case, you must allow me to get my money’s worth by having dinner with me.”

She laughs. “You got your money’s worth. But I will have dinner with you—meet me tomorrow at seven in the Keno lounge, and we’ll go from there.”

“Looking forward to it. See you tomorrow.”

Janice flashes a smile before heading off to prepare for her late show. Jim watches her go, already looking forward to their next encounter.

Donna Kleiman, a stunning, gray-eyed brunette of German heritage, patrols the blackjack tables, plying the 21 players with just enough alcohol to loosen their inhibitions—but not enough to stop them from playing. She fantasizes about being a showgirl but lives the dream vicariously through her friend Janice. Ten pounds too heavy to meet the exacting standards of the chorus line, Donna tells herself it's genetics, not fate, that keeps her in cocktail heels instead of feathered headdresses.

Just after midnight, Janice, now showered and dressed in street clothes, arrives on the casino floor.

“So, Donna, you're sure this guy wins all the time?”

Donna nods. “Not every time, but most of the time. The guy just keeps winning.”

“Nobody's that lucky.”

“What do you mean, Janice?”

“He must have some sort of system.”

“But Janice, the game can't be beaten.”

“I'm not so sure about that. Some smart people with PhDs in mathematics are writing articles suggesting it can be.”

“What do you think?”

“I'm not sure... but I'm going to find out because I'm having dinner with him tomorrow night. I hope he does have blackjack figured so that I'm not wasting my time. No matter how it turns out, thanks for putting me on to him.”

Donna replies. "No problem, if nothing else, he is easy on the eyes."

Janice agrees. "Very."

Donna reflects. *Maybe I should go after him.*