

## *Strip Search*

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July 11

I don't care what you've seen on television. This is the truth: Most days, being a cop is one of the most boring jobs on earth. Except when it isn't. Or to clarify, it's huge patches of tediousness punctuated by brief moments of stark terror. That's why so many cops turn in their badges before retirement. That's why eight times more cops die from suicide than homicide. The badge ain't for sissies.

I love it. All of it—the tediousness and the terror—even now, six months since my badge was officially yanked. I was a cop for almost ten years; now I'm a consultant, which means I work twice as many hours for half as much money. At least I'm in the game. Tediousness and terror. But still in the game.

The officially designated casino escort met Darcy and me at the front door. He was dark and muscular and obviously worked out and I disliked him almost immediately. "You the chick Chief O'Bannon sent over?"

Just to prove that I'm not high-strung, hot-tempered, rabidly feminist, or any of those other female cop clichés, I let that one slip. "I'm Susan Pulaski."

"You're the shrink?"

"I'm a psychologist. I work as a behaviorist for the LVPD."

"Whatever." Sure, it sounded rude, but I suspect he was compensating for the fact that he didn't know what a behaviorist is, so I let that one slide, too. "The boss says I'm supposed to take you upstairs to see the floor boss captain."

"Then let's do it."

"Sure. And afterward . . ." His eyes narrowed and he got that smirky expression that you only get from men who think everyone finds them as sexy as they find themselves. ". . . I could give you a personal tour of the casino."

"Thanks, but I've been here before."

"You have gorgeous eyes, you know it? I bet you get that a lot. Unusual. One looks darker than the other."

"Cat scratch. I was five. Now if you don't mind—"

I tried to push past him, but he grabbed my arm. “I could show you parts of this place you’ve never seen. Including some very private rooms. Huge suites. Mirrored ceilings.” And then, I swear to God, he actually winked as he added, “Vibrating beds.”

Grotesque. Repellent. Wildly inappropriate. But I am a trained professional, cool and detached, and I was sent here to do a job. So I let it pass. “Maybe it would be best if you just took us to the captain.”

“Us?” He glanced behind me for the first time. “Who’s the punk?” He was pointing at Darcy, the tall, lanky twenty-six-year-old hovering uncertainly behind me. “The boss didn’t say anything about some kid coming along.” Darcy flushed, stared at the floor, talked some barely audible gibberish, then began flapping his hands. “Why is he here?”

“I’m babysitting,” I said. “You know how lousy cop pay is. I have to moonlight.”

“I don’t want to get into any trouble with the boss. The kid looks . . . weird. What is he, some kind of retard or—”

I flattened him. One punch, on the nose, down and out.

Yeah, I know, I shouldn’t have done it. Someone will report me to IA, and they’ll throw it in my face the next time I make my periodic pathetic application for reinstatement.

But honestly. A girl can only put up with so much.

It was your typical Vegas casino, if there is such a thing, an exquisite blend of tony, trendy, and tacky. No windows, no clocks, nothing to remind gamblers of the outside world, everything designed to encourage them to settle in and play, play, play. So noisy that Darcy covered his ears and I was tempted to follow suit: the cacophony of slot machines, the clinking of glasses, the jingling of chips, the whirring of security cameras, the incessant chatter about what place dealt the smallest number of decks and who had the cheapest buffet and whether to split tens. And the smoke—my God, what a stink! Darcy was practically gagging and who could blame him? I suppose they still have to cater to the old-timers, the high rollers who can’t put down the big money without a weed dangling from their mouths. Give it another ten years or so and those dinosaurs will die out and casinos will go no-smoking like the rest of the civilized universe.

In an attempt to stifle the stench, I focused my attention on the décor—the fake gold wall paneling, the gaudy, dark (to disguise spills) and durable (because a million dirty shoes trod upon it daily) carpet. The gorgeous smoked glass ceiling, which would be even more gorgeous if I didn’t know there was a platoon of security officers beyond it watching everything happening on the floor.

There was even something different about the air. The rumor is that casinos pump oxygen through the air vents to keep everyone awake (and thus playing longer) and to deliver a mild O2 buzz, thus ensuring that even those not partaking of the free drinks enjoy themselves. I don’t know if it’s true or not. But as I surveyed the room—the tourists, the suckers, the sharks, the

skills, the obvious hookers, the less obvious and thus much more expensive hookers, the dealers, even the pit bosses—I did notice one thing they all had in common. They were having a good time. They were losing money, blowing hours of their lives playing some of the stupidest games ever invented—but they were having fun.

Eventually Steve, the replacement flunky, got us through the casino. Steve was blond and looked more like a tennis pro than a casino employee, but maybe I'm just working off stereotypes formed by watching *The Godfather* films way too many times. He seemed a little nervous, uneasy, but I suppose being called in to replace a guy I'd just decked might induce a certain wariness in anyone.

Frank Olivestra, the owner of the casino, the man with sufficient pull to get me sent here unofficially, was waiting with his floor boss captain, Dominic Castle, in the latter's office.

"Hey, Frank," I said, waving a hand.

"Hiya, Susan. How's it hangin'?" I'd worked with Frank before—strange as it might seem that a casino would have any links to the world of crime. Or aberrant personalities. We'd always gotten along well. I assume he asked for me personally or in all likelihood, I wouldn't be here.

While we small-talked, I strolled unobtrusively and soaked in as much of the office as I could without being too obvious. Nothing overtly unusual—standard desk and chair arrangement—but it told me a lot about Olivestra's floor boss captain, Mr. Castle. He was a detail man, which I suppose is exactly the quality you'd want in the employee supervising the transfer of large sums of money. He was a neat freak, extremely fastidious. The stapler on his desk was perfectly symmetrical to the telephone and the pen cup, and I spotted the corner of a Dopp kit in his bottom desk drawer. Judging from the absence of photos, he was single and childless. The bookshelves behind his desk told me even more. He was smart, patient, and he liked to fish. He was a Republican, a member of the NRA, and he preferred nonfiction to fiction.

And I could tell one other thing from his office, too. He did it. He took the money. Don't ask me to explain how I knew. I get people. I can absorb them, their environments, key into their thoughts. But trying to explain the process makes it sound more calculated than it actually is. I'm not Sherlock Holmes and I didn't go through a long series of logical deductions. I just knew.

Now all I had to do was prove what I knew.

"Thank you for coming over, Susan." Olivestra was short, rotund, and had a harsh quality to his voice. He couldn't have looked more like a casino boss if he'd been chomping a half-gone stogie between his teeth. "Haven't seen you since . . . well, that business with the clown from Dubuque and his magnetic slots gizmo. Thank God you were able to figger that one out."

"Just wish I'd done it about five grand sooner."

"Heard you had an altercation with one of my men out in the lobby."

“Well, yeah.”

“Tell me he wasn’t pushin’. I know you hate pushers.”

“No, no. It was just a . . . personality conflict.”

“What was the problem?”

“The problem was . . .” I sighed. “I’m trying to think of a nice way to put this. He was annoying as hell and made me want to rip off his testicles.”

“Well, then,” Olivestra deadpanned, “I’d say he got off easy.” He took me by the arm and lowered his voice. “The money disappeared a little over an hour ago. We’re still hoping we can handle this internally. Don’t like the negative publicity. People visiting the Florence need to know they’re safe.”

“Understood. Can you show us where you think the theft occurred?”

He and Castle led the way to a much smaller room with a few chairs, curtained windows behind a high riser all along the far wall, and an elevator with only a down button.

“You’re certain this is where it happened?” I asked Castle. He was short, especially standing beside me, but he had that Napoleonic swagger you sometimes find in guys his size. He was overcompensating with muscle, manner, and manicure. Immaculately groomed. Even wore French cuffs.

“It’s the only place it could have occurred. We’ve reviewed the tapes. No one intercepted the money on the floor. If someone had stashed the dough in the elevator downstairs or intercepted it on its way to the vault, we’d have tape. And once it’s in the vault, Superman couldn’t get it out.”

“Why don’t you have a camera in here?”

Olivestra answered. “We did. The line was cut. The security officer in the video control room noticed immediately, but by the time he determined it wasn’t a power or monitor blip—which was only about five minutes—it was all over. The thief thumped poor Dominic over the head, took the cash, and climbed out that window—we found it gaping open. It leads to a parking lot. From there, he could be halfway down the Strip in sixty seconds.”

“And you’re sure it wasn’t taken from the vault?”

Castle looked at me as if I were stupider than stupid, but I got the general impression he thought anyone with breasts was stupider than stupid. “Let me guess—you’ve seen Ocean’s Eleven? Let me assure you that in the real world, getting into a casino vault isn’t that easy. You’d have better luck trying to steal plutonium from Los Alamos.”

Which I believed, because I knew perfectly well he’d taken the money. But I didn’t want him to

know that I knew. “How much was swiped?”

Castle gave his boss a look, got the nod, then replied. “Two hundred sixty-eight thousand, four hundred twelve bucks.”

I whistled. “Day’s take?”

He gave me another withering look. “One hour.”

“And none of your videos show any unauthorized personnel coming in here?”

“Unfortunately, none of the cameras are trained on the outer door to this particular room.”

“That is unfortunate.” Or perfect, if you’re the thief. Or a person picking a place to pretend there was a thief. “Darcy, what do you think?”

Darcy was standing on a chair, his face flattened against the windowpane, sniffing the curtains.

“Darcy?” I repeated, wiggling my fingers. “Yoo-hoo?”

He looked up, startled. His foot slipped off the chair and he tumbled to the carpet, barely avoiding a head injury. He pulled himself up, tugged down his T-shirt, and grinned his goofy, angelic grin. “Did you ever know that humans spray two-point-five drops of saliva into the air for every word they speak?”

I was mildly puzzled. The expressions on the faces of Castle and Olivestra suggested that they were, well, more extremely puzzled. “No, I must confess I didn’t.”

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