

# Hacking the Game: One Woman's Life as a Professional Gambler

by

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## Part one of six

Not long ago I took my last bottle of Chateau Lafite-Rothschild 1979 from the cupboard where it had been lying on its side. It would not be replaced: I liked fine wine, but I couldn't afford it. I knew there would be no more where that had come from. I wasn't celebrating anything in particular. There was no reason to open my last bottle of hoarded wine, except that I would soon be off to Africa, and the wine called out to be drunk before I left. I've never cared to wait for special occasions to drink a good bottle of wine anyway—wine has a voice of its own and when it calls, it should be drunk.

This wine came from what I now consider to be one of my "romantic phases." I have led a rather irregular life; never had a proper job, owned a home, or thought about having children or saving for retirement. I had finally accepted that it was too late for me even to attempt to live a "normal" life. I'd given in to being eccentric, grown used to my friends shaking their heads and speaking of me as an eternal adolescent. By drinking this bottle of wine, I suppose I was celebrating my own acceptance of my irregular life.

What was this wine's story? This particular bottle had come from a casino in Las Vegas. But the wine's origins, like those of the story I am about to tell, were in France.

Six years ago, I hit upon the brilliant idea of writing a novel to earn fame and fortune. I traveled to France, settled into a writer's colony, and started writing *The Novel*. I soon met another writer who, being wiser than myself, had realized that novels are rarely published and almost never provide an income. In order to support himself he had taken the "sensible" step of becoming a professional gambler. Moreover, he was looking for a partner—a woman preferably—to assist him. He felt I was an excellent candidate: My advantages, according to him, were that I was attractive (although I knew perfectly well that I was hardly model material), and that I spoke French.

He convinced me that gambling would provide the economic freedom I needed and, more importantly, that it wouldn't interfere with my precious writing time. A moment of conception: romantic gambling days in the French Riviera. I began a new life that led me to Lake Geneva, Lake Tahoe, Atlantic City, and Las Vegas. A new life of drinking fine wines and pretending to be rich. A life I preferred to the insidious threat of a five-day-a-week job.

After two weeks practicing blackjack at the writer's colony with "derek" (one of his many pseudonyms that later became famous in certain circles worldwide), the time arrived for a trial-run in the Monte Carlo casinos. I dressed that night in a tight black dress, tastefully but deeply cut, black stockings and running shoes, since the paths that wound around the cabins at La Fondation Karolyi were unlit and treacherous at night. Derek knocked on my cabin door and asked if I was ready. He was dressed in a dark blue suit with a white handkerchief in his breast pocket. As we left the cabin, I inhaled the pungent, smoky autumn air. It was eight o'clock at

night and the air was still warm, even though the sun had set. Smoke from burning weeds and olive prunings still hung low over the hills. During the day, this same smoke muddied the famous clear, golden light that had drawn painters here for centuries.

It would soon become a three-night-a-week routine, but this was the first night that I exchanged the quiet smoky hills for the rich smoky casinos in Monte Carlo and Nice. In less than a week, I would think nothing of sitting down at a gaming table in stately European surroundings, playing blackjack for hours, throwing out bets of \$2,000 a hand, and winning—consistently and predictably.

Derek gambled with other peoples' money. This is what had convinced me that the job would be lucrative, and what made me decide it was a serious endeavor and not a fantasy dreamed up by someone who belonged in Gambler's Anonymous. We would use money that belonged to "the Team," an eclectic group of blackjack players and investors most of whom were former students and teachers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In return for our professional gambling services, Derek and I received a percentage of the profits. Our days would be spent in artistic endeavor at La Fondation, nestled on the back of a hill overlooking the old Roman fortress-town of Vence. Our nights would be spent roaming the casinos at no cost to ourselves.

Vence is a quiet town located on a 1,400-foot-high plateau that separates the low, wooded Mediterranean hills from the Maritime Alps to the north. The climate here is pleasant year-round, remaining warm into late autumn. In the surrounding hills, wealthy retirees inhabit villas flanked by olive groves. Higher up in the mountains, goats graze treeless meadows. Nearer to town sits the Chapelle du Rosaire, with its magnificent white walls transformed hourly by the sunlight streaming through stained glass windows designed by Matisse. To the south, less than an hour away along the French Riviera famous for its night life and soft sweet breezes, lie the glittering casinos of Monte Carlo, Nice, and Cannes.

We approached the blackjack tables armed with strategies for beating the house. I had learned basic strategy, a simple method of play that reduces the casino's advantage to less than 1%. Most regular blackjack players know basic strategy: standing pat with 18 or 19, and hitting on cards totaling 10 or less. The casinos recognize players who use the basic strategy, but they don't feel particularly threatened by it. It had taken me two weeks to master, including its fine points. Fortunately, as a rookie, I had a little more time to learn a far more complex way to beat the odds: card counting.

My partner Derek was quite adept at card counting, the oldest and best-known method for winning at blackjack. (It is the method portrayed in the movie *Rain Man*.) A player who counts card keeps track of how many high cards (10s, face cards and aces) are dealt and how many low cards (2s, 3s, 4s, 5s, and 6s) are dealt. The high cards are each assigned a value of -1 (minus one) and the low cards a value of +1 (plus one). The remaining cards—7s, 8s, and 9s—have a value of zero. The player keeps a running tally, adding or subtracting as each card is dealt. When the count is high, or positive, many low cards have been dealt. When the count is low, or negative, more high cards have been dealt. In blackjack a high count is to the gambler's advantage; a low count is to the casino's advantage.

Unfortunately, casinos caught on to card-counters long ago. If a player starts winning too regularly, the pit boss and the managers in the overhead viewing rooms shielded by one-way glass will count the cards themselves. If a casino manager discovers that the player is betting high when the count is high, he will ask the player to stop playing. Casinos are not in business to lose money.

Card counting is like rubbing your stomach and patting your head at the same time. It's difficult because it involves so many calculations. One must be able to play basic strategy, count every card that is dealt, estimate how many cards remain in the four- to eight-deck shoe

(the container that holds the cards), and then perform some quick division and multiplication in order to bet correctly. This must all be done extremely rapidly while simultaneously talking to casino personnel. Management is constantly on the lookout for card counters and eject them immediately if detected.

For my first forays, however, I could take some of the heat off Derek by merely playing my cards according to basic strategy, chatting up the dealers and pit bosses in French, stalling for time when Derek needed to make a complex calculation in his head, and by making outrageous plays that only a “silly woman” without a head for figures would make. Damn, if it didn't work, too.

- End of part one -

## Part two of six

Derek and I were about to head off for the casinos for our first night of work. We had our gaming strategy set; all we needed now were the proper accouterments and personas. A few days earlier Derek purchased a lovely old white Simca with a top speed of 45 miles per hour. As we drove down through the Maritime Alps toward the Mediterranean Sea, we psychologically transformed ourselves from bohemian artists into rich hedonists. I knew my character: She was so rich, so filled with ennui, so removed from reality that throwing a little money around was the only reliable method to relieve her boredom. Derek's role was to be the distinguished gentleman, leaning more toward reserved Englishman than “vulgar” American. His character had been born wealthy, but had behaved responsibly and made good investments. I played the younger woman on his arm. He wore me as if I were an expensive wristwatch that he would discard when another timepiece caught his eye.

As the little white Simca carried us along, I changed from running shoes to high-heels and applied lipstick. Derek reviewed our intricate strategy for the upcoming night. Then, at last, we swooped down the steep-cliffed Grande Corniche road into the dazzling brilliance that was Monte Carlo.

Monaco's 468 acres rest on a rocky promontory that juts into the Mediterranean. At night its lights sparkle and twinkle against a backdrop of water and cliffs, a magical enclave peopled by the rich and adorned with opulent buildings of gleaming white marble and gold filigree. Monte Carlo is a playground, a place where chic evening dresses and black tie are *de rigueur* at night. A place where pampered men and women float aimlessly from one glittering spot to the next. The denizens of this world hover like shimmering fairies, never landing; always circling the tables as if tethered to a mesmerizing flame, unable to break away into the night's heavy darkness. I found myself curious about the soporific effects of money, luxury and power. Why did they induce such a trance? What would it feel like to pretend that I never worried about money, to pretend that I had so much of it that I could literally throw it away at the gaming tables?

But for the moment (and perhaps luckily, at that) I would never truly experience the life of the rich since Derek and I were anything but reckless at blackjack. Nevertheless, by assuming the guise of a wealthy young woman, I came close to understanding the experience of being wealthy: I was waited upon, pandered to, and flattered. After my initial surprise and momentary pleasure, however, I soon became numb to these attentions. I began to feel that rich people must know that they aren't well-liked, just envied. At some level they realize that behind each sycophantic smile lies disdain and covetousness.

After parking, Derek and I entered the resplendent Casino de Monte Carlo. The grand old building, topped by a magnificent patinated copper roof, was designed in 1878 by Charles

Garnier who was also the architect of the Paris Opéra. Inside was a *salon privé* reserved for high rollers and a *salon super privé* available by appointment only. To reach the inner recesses of the elegant *salon privé* required a membership fee and the presentation of passports. Inside, the room's high ceilings were decorated with ornate moldings and the walls were paneled with wood polished to a high luster. Patrons were required to dress appropriately. The formal decorum in the *salon privé* was a striking contrast to the tackiness of Las Vegas casinos: the room was quiet, voices were hushed. There were no slot machines. Good taste and old-world restraint reigned. This is where a tuxedoed James Bond faced his nemesis at baccarat.

An apparently wealthy woman in her early twenties sat down at our table. She languidly chain-smoked cigarettes and tossed out 1000-franc chips with an air of complete boredom. She lost and lost, yet her expression never changed. She became my role model. For the remainder of my days as a professional gambler, whenever I felt my mask slipping, my act spoiling, I would picture this young woman's sang-froid at the tables. She was bored, miserable, beautiful, and completely capable of throwing everything away for one moment of real passion.

In the process of becoming a professional gambler, I had to learn to lose \$60,000 a weekend, then get up from the table and make plans for the next gambling trip. Real money became like Monopoly money. It was a tool, a device, one aspect of a great, complex game. For me, professional gambling was a paradox: In order to win enough to support myself, I could not acknowledge the actual value of the money in play. If Derek and I lost \$15,000 on one round, I couldn't allow myself to become depressed over the fact that that "meager" sum would have subsidized a full year of my broke, bohemian life.

After a slow hour at the *salon privé*, I settled into the game and felt confident about playing basic strategy. Occasionally Derek would touch my forearm, signaling me to slow down the pace of the game, or put his hand on my shoulder, telling me to double-down on my bet. Sometimes I squeezed his left knee to pass on information he needed. Our body signals were so natural and ordinary—a man and woman touching—that the casinos had difficulty deciphering them. That was one reason Derek preferred a woman as his partner. Casino managers, always on the lookout for pros, would become very suspicious of men touching each other. Derek had been trying to get this point across to the math-whiz team members in Boston who put up the money for our games, but they rarely recruited female partners.

The team had been in existence in various forms for about ten years and was run like a corporation; investors took half of the winnings when a "bank" ended, and the players took the other half. Each bank usually ran for six months or until it had increased to some projected total value. Occasionally a bank broke even; and although it was statistically possible for a bank to lose money, so far that had never happened. The investors' take was calculated according to the amount of money risked, just as in any other business venture. The players' take was divided according to each player's skill level and amount of play. There were four skill levels and each team member had to pass rigidly controlled testing procedures in order to move up a level and thereby earn a bigger cut of the action. Players were not paid a percentage of what they actually won or lost, but were instead paid a percentage of the projected statistical value of their play.

It was eleven o'clock and Derek and I were back in the *salon privé*.

"Darling," I crooned when Derek signaled me to slow down the dealer with a bit of small talk, "I do so want to buy that new racehorse we saw yesterday. Do you think we could afford it?"

Derek didn't respond. His mind was working like a computer. No problem: It didn't strike the dealer as strange that a girlfriends would babble away and be ignored. The dealer pointed at my cards, waiting for me to indicate how I wanted to play. "Do you like horse racing?" I

asked him in French. I smiled inwardly as I realized how easy it was to turn the dealer's sexism to my advantage.

"Oui," the dealer replied politely.

"Buying them is my hobby. I enjoy it more than gambling."

The dealer was growing tired. He shrugged and pointed to my hand again. "Madame?" Derek gave me a signal: Hit. Hitting a seventeen against a three is blackjack suicide. It's one of the stupidest plays around—but I was "merely" a woman—so I scratched the table with my forefinger indicating "hit."

The dealer looked at me with a twist of contempt on his lips: What else could one expect from an attractive but vapid woman who did not understand the intricacies of the game?

"Are you sure, madame?" he asked, trying to protect me from myself.

"You shouldn't hit a seventeen," Derek protested, making it clear with his body signal that he wanted me to do just that.

"I feel lucky."

The dealer hit. A five. I busted. But it didn't matter since I'd only bet 200 francs.

Derek had two hands of 20,000 francs (\$3,500) each in front of him. He doubled-down on one of his hands. The dealer busted. We won \$10,500.

I cooed at Derek like the well-kept woman I appeared to be. "I may be unlucky for myself, but I'm lucky for you, and that's all that matters."

- End of part two -

*Tara Lumpkin continues her tale on the intricate and edgy world of professional gambling. Part Three finds her stateside under the bright Las Vegas lights*

### **Part three of six**

We played the casinos in Monte Carlo for a two-month period until we had won too much and too often and were asked not to play anymore. So we moved on to the casinos in Nice and Cannes. When we became well-known along the Côte d'Azur, we drove to Lake Geneva and played at Evian, a late nineteenth-century gaming palace built next to the thermal baths, and at Divonne, a favorite resort of the international crowd from Geneva.

Upon my return to the United States, I met the members of the Blackjack Team, the sponsors for whom Derek and I had been working. After more exposure to the Team's expert gamblers, I began to understand some of the finer points of the systems they used. The Team had several methods of beating the odds, which were used simultaneously in order to confuse the casinos. The simplest method was card-counting. The other two methods were complex card-tracking methods. I had passed my basic card-counting test, so I was now eligible to receive a level-one share of the profits garnered by the Team. Now I wanted to learn more.

The less complex of the two advanced methods required tracking high cards (aces, face cards and tens) through the shoe. This was best handled by players with photographic memories who could remember the order in which some of the high cards were dealt. They would then follow the memorized cards through the shuffle in order to predict the next time they would come up. A player who knew that a high card was going to be dealt had the advantage; he or she could place a big bet at the spot on the table where the high card would turn up.

Tracking was an old method for beating the odds in blackjack. Needless to say, they were only a few persons on the Team talented enough to pursue such a strategy. Derek was

one of them. I resolutely tried to develop this skill over my years of playing for the Team, but I never became adept enough to risk betting the Team's money.

The Team's second method was even more complex. It required tracking cards, deliberately giving those cards to oneself or to the dealer, *and* memorizing pages and pages of statistical tables showing the best play. For example, if the player knew that a face card was the 95th card in the shoe, the player would keep track of the number of cards dealt. When that face card approached the front of the shoe (meaning that it would soon be played), the player had to try to control how many cards were dealt so that the desired face card could be played to the best statistical advantage. Since controlling access to that card often involved making unusual (read: stupid) plays, it helped to have an apparently unsophisticated foil like myself make those plays. If Derek had made them, it would have been noticeably counter to his apparent use of basic strategy, prompting unwanted attention from the casino management.

Some casinos where we played knew we were up to something but were not sure what. Not just anyone could play for the Team, and the top players put in months of hard practice to hone their skills. Even the lower-level partners such as myself practiced daily for an hour to keep up our skills, and we were always trying to learn the more complex strategies so that we could earn more money. The casinos seemed to think that we were using simpler methods than we actually were, or that perhaps we were using hidden computers—which, incidentally, is a felony in some gambling areas, such as Las Vegas.

Six months after I left France, Derek and I were relaxing in a limo that was taking us from the airport to our suite in the Las Vegas Hilton. The suite had two bedrooms, each appointed with a huge mirror over a king-sized bed and a bathroom with a marble jacuzzi; the management had thoughtfully provided a fruit basket and a bottle of Bordeaux Grand Cru. The other Team members were staying at various hotels around town, wherever they could get “comped”—complimentary accommodations provided by the casinos. The casinos know that the amount of money a high-roller loses at the gaming tables more than makes up for free airfare, free hotel rooms, and free meals. No self-respecting Blackjack Team member ever paid for a room or a meal in Las Vegas. The casinos' formula was simple: The richer you were, the better they treated you. Not so different from the workings of the real world, actually.

The Team gathered for a strategy session at a modest room at the Dunes hotel and casino. There was no jacuzzi, no bar; the beds did not have ceiling mirrors. The player to whom the room belonged made it clear that he hoped to upgrade his accommodation as soon as possible. Since he had just created a new identity for himself, it would take several hours of high-stakes play for he casino personnel to become really friendly and offer him better perks. When a Team member started betting \$5,000 a hand, even the casinos famous for taking big action, such as Caesar's Palace and the Mirage, sat up and took notice. At the smaller casinos, it took far less money to become a favored customer.

The computer jocks on the Team were dressed in sweatshirts and jeans but would soon assume new identities. Their characters had differing backgrounds, but they all had one thing in common: They were rich. Before his transformation, one Team member looked like a typical engineering undergrad—except that he was carrying \$100,000 in his backpack. He was also one of the most well-known blackjack players in the world, and was having trouble devising a disguise to hide his identity. Several Team members told him he should consider cross-dressing, but he wasn't ready for such a radical step.

The Team discussed at what time the pit bosses who should be avoided came on duty. They also related which casinos had read the Trespass Act to Team players. Casino managers usually asked a blackjack player whom they suspected of beating the odds to stop playing, although he or she was free to play other games. If, however, the player persisted in returning to the blackjack tables, the casino would “hard-bar” that person. Hard-barring meant reading

the player the Trespass Act. The player was told that once ejected, if he or she returned to the casino a charge of trespassing would be pressed and the player would be subject to arrest—which, in fact, was patently false. The Nevada courts ruled that if the admonished player left the establishment and then returned, all the casino was allowed to do was reread the Trespass Act. The casinos preferred to ignore this fact, however, and used hard-barring to make life difficult for professional players.

Even though the casinos were skating on thin legal ice when they ejected a player who wasn't causing a disturbance, they usually didn't have any trouble getting local police to haul the player downtown. In Las Vegas it appeared to us that the police were squarely in the pocket of the casinos. Team members had been booked for trespassing but were always quickly released and charges dropped after a call from the Team's lawyer. Las Vegas lawyers didn't want to challenge this illegal bullying tactic for fear of losing their best clients: the casinos. I have always had a strong dislike for bullies in any shape or form; hence I never took kindly to casino personnel questioning my identity.

Another method the casinos used to intimidate the excessively lucky player was "back-rooming." A player would be forced into a back room, photographed and forced to identify him- or herself. This type of harassment was a blatant invasion of privacy and bordered on the illegal; however, Las Vegas lawyers were neither altruistic enough or stalwart enough to handle suits demanding reparations for this sort of behavior unless a player had been physically assaulted. From the lawyer's point of view, there was no guarantee that a plaintiff's settlement would cover legal fees and expenses.

After we discussed how to handle the casinos' efforts to keep skilled blackjack players away from the tables, the Team decided which members would play together. It was important not to compromise the anonymity of new players by pairing them with those who were known professionals. Several Team members, Derek among them, were so notorious that they had been forced to play in disguise for years. It appeared that their days as Team players were numbered.

- End of part three -

Incognito in Las Vegas

*In this installment of Tara Lumpkin's story of her life as a professional gambler, she and her partner put it all on the line at the Vegas blackjack tables.*

## **Part four of six**

On this foray to the tables in Vegas, Derek disguised himself as a gold-chained, cigar-chewing, loud, obnoxious, sexist creep—the sort of persona that, while setting my teeth on edge, put the casino managers entirely at ease. As usual, I would play Derek's girlfriend, although a far tackier girlfriend than I had been in France: brainless, with too much eyeshadow and constantly after her man to buy her presents and take her to shows.

Derek and I were going to play at the Hilton. We decided to avoid the other Team members as much as possible. We would call in to a central room every three hours to find out how much the other players were up or down and adjust our bets to reflect the team's current capital. Swings of plus or minus \$50,000 within three hours were not unusual.

We returned to our own hotel's room-of-mirrors to shower and dress. I put on a royal blue silk dress that wrapped around my hips like a turban, accentuating my buttocks. Although I found such attire degrading, I rationalized it by telling myself that I was an actress.

I convinced myself that I was only doing this in order to have enough money to be able to write. I figured that winning money from the mob was certainly more honest than working as a “legitimate” businessperson who stole money from people who really needed it. I found a life centered on accruing pots of money to be singularly cynical and sinful. So what was I doing here? I wondered.

To complete my “ensemble,” I added large blue feather-and-sequin earrings. Derek wore a fake silk jogging suit and brown-tinted aviator glasses. His shirt was unbuttoned just enough to reveal the gold chains nestled on his hairy chest. His gauche image was completed by a dark brown shaggy wig that made him look like an outdated ‘60s bachelor. But costume alone does not make the actor or actress. Downstairs in the casino, we put on a show to make the casino adore us. Derek ogled the cocktail waitresses, calling them “girls.”

“I want a drink. Send a girl over.” He stood at his seat and shouted, “Right on!” when he won a big bet, slamming his fist down on the table, occasionally spilling his drink. He was thoroughly obnoxious.

“Hey, babe, where do you want to eat dinner?” he asked me loudly after fifteen minutes of play. Somewhere expensive?”

“Sure.”

“Over here,” he hooted to the pit boss, “set us up for dinner—most expensive restaurant you have.”

It would be a comp, of course. The casino personnel, except for a few dealers, loved us. We drew a crowd to watch our action. I signaled to Derek that the card count was up plus twenty.

Derek put out three hands at \$3,000 each.

I sighed. “Too rich for my blood. I’m not playing anymore.” My withdrawal was tactical: If Derek played alone, it maximized our advantage since the count was high. I never bet high, and to do so would have aroused suspicion.

The dealer busted. Derek pulled in \$9,000. The crowd mumbled then clammed up when he bet another three hands at \$3,000. The card count was twenty-eight. Derek won those three hands, too.

“Man, this guy is good,” an onlooker said.

Within minutes, Derek had raked in \$3,000 by using a combination of card tracking and card counting.

“Come on, baby. I’m on a roll. Hot damn!” Derek swaggered and shouted loudly as he swigged Perrier. The Team forbade drinking alcohol while playing. Luckily, so many Americans had cut back on drinking that this didn’t arouse the casino’s suspicions as it would have in the days when a “real man” was expected to drink, and drink a lot.

The crowd was excited by Derek’s bravado and cheered him on. The casino manager, pit boss, and other casino personnel stared at us from the pit. To me they looked surly and suspicious.

Suddenly, the pit personnel started buzzing, glaring and running in circles. The heat was on. Soon a phone call was made upstairs. I made a point of not flinching. The phone call meant that the management wanted someone to check us out from “the sky”— the room situated just above the casino floor where management could watch and videotape players through a one-way ceiling mirror. Would we pass muster or would they tell us to stop playing? Would our disguises fool them? Both Derek and I were in the infamous Griffin mug book.

Griffin Investigations, Inc. is a private detective agency that collects dossiers and photos of card-cheats, dishonest casino employees, suspected gambling professionals, and anyone else the casinos deem threatening. Were casino personnel checking the mug book at this very moment or were they merely counting us down from the sky? Would they see through our disguises?

This was always the most stressful moment of play. I had to appear relaxed. I had to behave naturally. If the casino personnel suspected me, they might page me by my real name over the public address system to see how I'd react. Or they might walk up behind me and shout my name to see if I'd turn around. There was a lot of money riding on how I reacted, and if I could survive this scrutiny, I could get in enough play to make some real money.

The phone rang in the pit. The suited men conferred. I watched them peripherally. One of them walked toward us, smiling. "We've set you up in our finest gourmet restaurant, Mr. Andrews," the pit boss said, referring to Derek by his alias of the moment. Tension melted. We'd made it; we'd passed the first test.

Once this crisis was over, I soon realized that the casino rarely directed its attention to me. I was "just" a girlfriend, a nobody. In the meantime, the count went back down and I got back into the game. The dealer reshuffled and waited for us to cut the cards. Derek handed me the cut-card and said, "Go ahead," as he bet three hands at \$100 each. He chatted with the casino host and made a point of not looking at the table except when he had to play his hands. By not paying attention to the cards, Derek fooled the casino personnel into thinking that he couldn't possibly be a professional. All the while, however, I was using subtle body movements to signal Derek and tell him everything he needed to know. Due to the prevailing attitude among casino management that women were, at best, unimportant at the gaming tables, I attracted very little attention. This allowed me a great deal of latitude to communicate with Derek. After several rounds of play, my partner asked that our dinner reservation be pushed back to ten o'clock.

I finally settled into the casino mentality: a state of hyper-alertness and concentration made dreamlike by the constant assault of flashing lights, music, and the clattering crash of slot machines paying off. I fell into my familiar work rhythms: Sweep the table with my eyes, check for signals from Derek, order Perriers and remember to tip, ignore the excruciating tenseness in my shoulders and neck, keep my ears open for comments, and keep track of what was going on in the pit. Were they chatting with each other, whispering, calling the sky, talking to security? Adrenaline pumped through my body; my mouth dried up; my stomach twisted into a colicky knot; my palms sweated. But I hid these symptoms behind a smile and a calm exterior, reminding myself that this was part of the job.

After forcing down a perfectly prepared and elegantly served gourmet dinner that I couldn't enjoy due to the hours of stressful play, Derek and I resumed playing blackjack until two a.m. We'd been up sixty grand but finished the night by losing back twenty, leaving us at plus forty thousand for that night's play. Derek and I took a cab back to the Dunes to meet with the Team for the nightly money count. There were seven other Teammates on this trip. The count showed that the Team was up a total of \$55,000, which was a very good start for the weekend.

- End of part four -

Encountering Caesar's "Centurions"

*Despite disguises, secret signals, and hard-to-detect methods for beating the odds, things are heating up for Tara Lumpkin and her partner as they pursue their run on the Las Vegas blackjack tables*

**Part five of six**

The next day, Derek and I won an additional \$20,000 in a one-hour session. Then

the Hilton figured out who Derek was and barred him from their casino. We went back to our suite, ate a leisurely lunch, and decided to move on to Caesar's Palace. Derek changed into a new disguise: a rock-and-roll star flying high on cocaine. I, of course, was his rock-and-roll girlfriend. Derek's new wig was longer, and he was hipper and a little less sexist. When we hit the casino, we both acted as if we were coked up. I kept sniffing, rubbing my nose and forcing my eyes to dart around the room in a slightly hyper, paranoid way. Derek, claiming he didn't want to attract attention, wouldn't reveal his identity to a dealer who insisted that she had seen his picture on a record album cover.

We played for two hours when, suddenly, the "heat" came on—which is to say that the casino personnel started to eye us suspiciously. Derek, having been barred from Caesar's on a previous occasion although in a different disguise, collected the winnings and made for the cashier's window to cash out. At that moment, a casino host approached and asked him if he wanted to set up a comp for another trip. Thinking we had misjudged how hot it was, Derek and followed the host into a back room. As the casino host was talking to us, two security guards and a casino manager burst through the door and blocked our way out. Apparently the casino host had been sincere: He was more shocked than we were by this threatening intrusion.

What excuse did the security guards and casino manager have to prevent us from walking out of the office? Absolutely none. How could they find out our real names? By trumping up a bogus charge.

"You look under age," the casino manager said to me.

Picking up this cue, the security guard growled, "Show me an ID."

I looked at Derek, waiting for a signal as to what I should do. I considered making a run for the door: What could they do—gun me down? I had no inclination to show this authoritative, pompous, swaggering jerk my ID. I was shaking with fear and rage. What right did this guy have to ID me? I didn't look under age. I was thirty years old with noticeable crow's feet around my eyes. And despite my flashy outfit, by no stretch of the imagination was I under age.

Derek remained passive; no signal or word as to what I should do.

"Show me an ID," the security guard repeated.

Derek was still blank-faced.

"Now."

"Go ahead," Derek said.

I couldn't believe he was letting this creep get away with hassling me. Why didn't he tell him to call my lawyer? What was going on here? None of this made sense to me, but I figured Derek knew what he was doing. Still, I'd always thought the number one rule was: never show your ID. I handed my driver's license over. The security guard copied down my name, address, birthdate, driver's registration...everything.

"Hey, you said you just wanted to see if I was under age. Why are you copying all that down?"

No reply.

I repeated my question, but received no answer.

"I'm a journalist." It was half-true; I'd written a few articles for an environmental newspaper. "This is illegal. I'm going to write an article about this. What are your names?" The security guards looked away and refused to answer. "How about your name?" I demanded, speaking to the iguana-eyed casino manager.

Again, silence. Then a security guard read me the Trespass Act. Great, I thought, my first time at Caesar's and I get hard-barred. On top of that, my full name, place of residence, and date of birth is going into the Griffin mug book. Just great. Meanwhile, for some reason we were never able to discern, the managers and guards had left Derek alone.

I felt a hand on my elbow. One of the security guards was propelling me out of the office toward the casino exit. The other one had Derek in tow. We were unceremoniously shoved through the casino door into the neon-lit Las Vegas night. I stared in disgust at the fountains in front of me: statues of naked women with breasts that spouted arcs of water. As appalling as I found this spectacle, I had to believe that the management thought this display was sensual or, at least, sexy. Las Vegas was insane. The people were as warped, greedy and decadent as the Romans before the fall of the Empire. Derek and I had made a few thousand in our two-hour session at Caesar's, but was it worth it, especially since my share of the money would be so small? Was I cut out to play Mata Hari?

Finally, after making the rounds in Las Vegas, Derek and I found ourselves unwelcome all over town, no matter how we were disguised. We moved on to Lake Tahoe and had a long run there. But, unfortunately, at the end of the Las Vegas/Tahoe bank, the Team had only broken even, so all my hard work was for nothing. I began to panic. I had earned nothing for all my work and I had been counting on that money.

Derek and I started the next bank in London. In England, a player must show his or her passport to join gaming clubs. Derek had played—and won—there before, so he was barred from playing most places. So it was left to me to go around town, showing my passport and joining the clubs. Once I was a member, Derek could accompany me as my guest. Since passports were always required upon entering the clubs, we wouldn't be able to use pseudonyms or disguises. London wouldn't be a long run.

More troublesome was the fact that the Team as a whole wasn't making much money anymore. The Team's best players were becoming too well-known and were having trouble getting admitted to casinos in every major gambling center.

- End of part five -

Busted in the Desert

*In this, the final installment of Ms. Lumpkin's story of her life as a professional gambler, the scheme has unraveled and the partners find themselves with some unwelcome guests knocking on the door of their desert retreat. (Catch me up: [Archive](#))*

## **Part six of six**

Derek and I did very well during our London run. We were living in a friend's flat in South London; the bus from Clapham Common would take us to gaming clubs in Mayfair, Kensington, Regent's Park and Picadilly. But once again, at the end of the six-month bank, the Team did poorly overall. Clearly, our gambling days were numbered. Derek decided to retire and I wanted to take a sabbatical from the gaming tables. It was not until four months later that I convinced Derek to come out of retirement to play one more time. I knew I shouldn't insist that he play, but I was out of money. Even though I had cultivated a kept-woman image in the casinos, no one was keeping me in real life.

Derek agreed. We returned to the site where the Team was born: Atlantic City, New Jersey. Stretching his capacity for creative disguise to the limit, Derek dressed as an Indian businessman. He wore a dark blue suit and a turban, darkened his face with makeup, and spoke as if he had learned his little bit of English in England. I dressed as his wealthy, high-class girlfriend, the same woman I had played in France. But the trip went wrong from the start. Derek was recognized by a casino employee who hadn't seen him in years. We got in a little play elsewhere, but within two days the casinos had put the word out about us all over town. In

the meantime, Derek's appearance provoked young white punks to deliberately bump into him in the casinos and on the boardwalk. They called him "towel head," and asked why he wasn't playing at the Taj Mahal. Maybe this was the most valuable aspect of the trip: It was a first-hand lesson in racism for Derek.

Disgruntled, we flew back to Arizona and returned to our house situated at the end of a long dirt road. We settled in and considered a permanent retirement from professional gambling. My mother, who lived on the East Coast, received a phone call from someone saying he wanted Derek's and my address and phone number. Since her address had been on my original driver's license, we figured that had led the caller to start his search with her. She was savvy enough to put him off without giving him any information. Nevertheless, I was becoming concerned. It was not smart to mess with the mob, I thought. Why were they tracking us down? Would they kill us or merely break our knee caps? Or would they just shoot my dog?

The next morning, while staring out the window and watching two coyotes hunt behind our house, Derek and I discussed the possibility that the casinos might try to get even with us. We had heard from casino employees who had quit the business that the casino management believed that Derek and the other Team members had made far more money than they had actually pulled in. We couldn't figure out why their numbers were inflated, but it gave us added incentive to watch our backs. We knew we would have to be more cautious; we should make sure that no one followed us home. We agreed that if someone ever did follow us, we would drive straight to the police station. At the very moment we were discussing safety plans, we heard a car pull into the driveway.

Derek looked out and saw a new black sedan and two men in suits and dark glasses. This was the wilds of Arizona, a place of beat-up pickup trucks and old Valiants; I hadn't seen anyone in a suit since I'd lived here. Who would come down a dead-end dirt road in a sedan during spring melt? There was only one answer: Mafia hitmen.

Derek said, "Get your mace. Go back to the bedroom. If you hear me shout, run out the back door to the neighbors" and call 911."

I ran down the hall and pulled a can of mace from a drawer. Derek got his pocket-sized mace and tucked it into the back waistband of his sweatpants as if it were a gun. Then, ignoring his instruction, I knelt by the hall window as Derek went out on the porch to meet the two men emerging from the black car.

I waited for a shot to ring out. Derek stood outside the door, his hand behind his back resting on the can of mace, ready to draw.

"Do you have a few minutes? We'd like to talk to you about the Lord."

Jehovah's Witnesses. I couldn't believe it. From behind, I could see Derek's shoulders relax and lower. These people were lucky the Lord was looking after them. If I had greeted them, I would have maced first and asked questions later. I watched Derek take his hand off of the can of mace.

"This isn't a good time for me to discuss the Lord."

That's an understatement, I thought.

The young men in suits were persistent. "This will only take a few minutes. The Lord can't wait."

"He'll have to."

Dismayed that they couldn't save another soul, they shrugged, headed back to their car, climbed in, and drove away.

"We're retired for good. That's it," I told Derek.

"Agreed." He shook his head and started laughing. "If one of them had reached in his pocket for a Bible, I would have maced him."

"I can see the headlines in the local paper: 'Poet maces Jehovah's Witnesses.'" (Derek

had just won a poetry prize in the local literary magazine.)

Shortly thereafter, the Team folded. The good players, who were the backbone of the Team, had become so notorious that there was nowhere left for them to play. For me, the job hadn't paid much and the whole game had been a mix of Robin Hood, James Bond, and a bit too much sleaze. I assumed that the Team techies would eventually devise new ways to beat the odds and would play again some day—the challenge of beating the system and the number-crunching had always seemed to interest them more than the money anyway. But as far as I was concerned, it had been an entertaining part-time job that had outgrown its novelty.

My friends sighed with relief and congratulated me for coming to my senses; I don't think they thought about how I would earn enough to eat. But it didn't take long for me to disappoint them again: I began hatching a plan to become an anthropologist and move to Africa. Still, I believe they thought this was a bit more dignified than gambling. Unfortunately, it exacerbated my perpetual adolescence since I had to take out school loans and become a student again at the age of thirty-five.

I have my Ph.D. now. I don't often think about my blackjack years. Only occasionally, when I pull out a bottle of wine (compliments of a casino, of course), do I recall my life as a professional gambler. Drinking that last bottle of Lafite prior to setting off for Africa, I toasted those years. They were a turning point in my life. And the memories—like the wine, I suppose—had improved with age.

—The End—