

Finally Ronnie came back with, “Rogers, I can already see what you mean.” Charlotte, bless her, turned and flashed me that special smile she saves for when she is really happy.

Ronnie took charge of his two eager cohorts and ushered us into Rory’s. Charlotte hugged my arm, leaned in to me, and whispered, “I feel like I’m in a movie and all these characters are actors. I’ve never been at a place like this. I’m tingling all over with excitement. Thank you for believing that I’d be fine here with you and Ronnie.”

R. D. walked her around the floor and positioned her at the least grubby table. I found an opening for myself and prepared to play poker.

It was going to be one of those nights when I was on fire. I was pulling good cards, pressing when the odds were favorable, bluffing now and then to be unpredictable, and reading the table accurately. The other players were rather obvious, except for a cagey older woman wearing an absurd “I Love Niagara Falls” sweatshirt. I couldn’t figure out why, but she kept winking at me.

Two players down on my right sat a pathetic case. He was a young factory worker still wearing the work shirt with his name, Everett, sewed onto his chest pocket. He was drinking heavily, J. T. S. Brown, sweating profusely and complaining that he was being dealt bad cards. He kept refusing to drop out of hands where he had no chance of winning. I found it difficult to sympathize with his predicament until I saw that he was cashing his weekly paycheck to play and that he was wearing a wedding band. As each hand was being dealt, he would look skyward, close his eyes, and inaudibly mumble some phrase. He was going to be the table’s big loser.

I felt Ronnie and Charlotte standing behind me. Ronnie leaned over my shoulder and said we should leave soon. I nodded and then Charlotte quietly mouthed, “Holy shit, you’re winning a fortune.” I would only know later that it would soon be time for another life lesson.

I was dealt a clear, no doubt winning hand, and everyone at the table dropped out but Everett, who refused to fold. I tried eye contact to convince him to quit, but to no avail. Then to my shock, he tried to bluff me out. I couldn’t help myself when I said, “You don’t want to do that. Listen to me.”

I pocketed my winnings and stood to leave. Between the tables and the door, Charlotte spun me around. She was crying. “You can’t take his money. He’s a desperate person who needs help.” I’d never seen her cry before. Her face was already red and swollen. Her eyes were intense and fierce and shined almost too brightly.

I looked over to Ronnie for support but got none. He didn’t say a word. I had always believed that a bet was sacred and refusal to honor it was the same as cheating. Nevertheless I searched out Everett and pressed the money into his hand. I told him that his prayer was being answered and I hoped he would keep his word to never gamble again. I said it even though I knew he would be back at Rory’s in the near future.

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