

What I'd always liked about Biloxi was the decay, the things falling apart, the crap along the beach, the skeletons of abandoned hotels, the trashy warehouses and the rundown piers jutting out into the dirty water, so I wasn't thrilled that in the last five years our dinky coast town had been turned into an outlet-mall version of Las Vegas, with a dozen cartoon casinos, lots of gussied-up Motel 6 hotel rooms, an ocean of slicked-back hair, and a big increase in unsavory tourists. We'd had plenty of unsavory tourists before the casinos. Anyway, it was August, and things were way past steamy, and I guess Jewel and I were doing O.K., but I didn't have any architectural work so we were living on savings and her income, which was enough to get by, but not more. On Sunday, after the NFL preseason game, there wasn't anything to do, and we were sitting on the porch quiet as mice when she held up the newspaper and said, "Raymond. Let's go here and do this," and *here* was the Paradise casino, a dozen blocks away on the beach in Biloxi, and *this* was gambling.

I'd been to Vegas on the standard teenager-leaves-home trip when I was eighteen, playing slots, craps, getting a close-up look at a real prostitute, the rest of that, so I wasn't dying to see the inside of a casino, although I guess I was curious about adult gambling, like the kind you did when you had a bank account. Still, I resisted the invitation.

"I don't think so," I said.

The porch was a glassed-in room at the back of our renovated three-bedroom wood-siding bungalow, looking out at a small back yard rimmed in crepe myrtles, most of which we'd planted ourselves half a dozen years before because we liked the blooms and the body-builder skin. Jewel shoveled me the *Sun-Herald* and nicked it with a fingernail to point out the place-mat-size photo above the fold, printed in gaudy out-of-register color. The Paradise.

I crimped the paper for a better look at a chart that used gold coins to show how much money the casinos were making on the Mississippi coast.

"We can blaze a trail through the night sky and all that," she said. "That's what you promised."

"I was trying to seduce you," I said. "Besides, that was fifty years ago." I held up the paper. "It says they're getting us for two billion a year."

"Maybe they are," she said. "But that doesn't mean *I* won't win."

"What, you got a magic wand?" I went back to the paper, hoping she'd forget it.

"We roll," Jewel said, getting out of her chair.

"Wait a minute. What about RV? Is she around?"