

Issue IV, Fall 2015**The Case of the Stolen Jackpot**

(a short story by Phillip Levin, MD)

The sun glared off the peeling paint on my ten-year-old jalopy, its air conditioner wheezing in a failed attempt to fight the Mississippi heat. I pulled into a spot in front Beach Boy's cabana, its white lettering proclaiming, "The Biloxi Beach Co." A half dozen wooden chairs spread out on the beachside like land crabs.

I killed the engine and slammed the door, walking across the white glaring sands until I slipped under the shade of the hut. Taking a last drag on my Marlboro, I ground it out in the sands.

Butch sprawled out on his lounge chair like a water spider, limbs at all angles, one arm in a cast, and his belly peeking out from his Hawaiian shirt knock-off. The sweet smell of marijuana lingered on the sultry air. Stepping up, I kicked him.

He jumped up, pulling off his aviator glasses to reveal a nasty shiner. "What'd you do that for, Dick?"

"Don't call me Dick. What's up with the injuries?"

Holding up his broken wing, he whined. "That's what I called you about. The casino beat me up and ripped me off for forty grand."

I shook out a cig from the pack, lit it, and took a deep drag, blowing the smoke in Beach Boy's face. "Forty grand, huh? What's the scam?"

"I wandered in to use the men's room couple days ago. On the way out, I slipped a fiver in the Lucky Seven Jackpot. On my second pull rang up all sevens! Big bells and stuff. Floor manager rushed up and shook my hand and told me to follow him. I thought he was taking me to get my money.

Instead he yanked me into a back room and beat me up.” He waved his cast around for show-and-tell.

“I want you to go get my money. The floor boss who pummeled me is named Gregario. I got in a punch on his nose.”

I looked out beyond the beach to the strange gray murk that passed for water. Funny how the beach was so nice and the water so nasty. I took another drag and dropped the cig, watching it glow.

Turning back, I stared into his crystal blues. “My fee’s ten percent.”

“Four thousand?” Beach Boy popped the wall once with his good hand. “Well, okay, Dick. If you can get my money, it’ll be worth it.”

I kicked him again and he howled. “Don’t call me Dick,” I said, and walked off.

I headed over to the casino, rambled in, and got directions from the entry guard to the Lucky Seven machines. Four of them sat in a row, one of them with a user, pulling the handle, losing, losing, losing. Gotta wonder. As I watched, another loser waddled up, musta been a three-hundred pounder if he was an ounce. Sat down and reached up to put his ID card in the slot; first pulling out one someone had left behind. He dropped the old one on the floor and loaded a century note in the machine. Pumped away. Loser. Loser. Loser.

I wandered over to the game tables and picked out the floor boss, standing with legs spread, arms crossed. Greasy hair pulled back in a ponytail. Chewing gum. Bruised nose. Had to be the guy.

“Hey.” No response. Louder this time. “Hey, you.”
Chump turned to me. Stared. Beady eyes. “Hey, you
Gregario?”

He raised his chin in a half nod.
“Got a moment?”

He looked me up and down, decided to give me a try,
and signaled to the other floor boss to come watch his tables.
I stepped to a quiet space beside an unmanned blackjack
table and handed him my card. He glanced at it, crumpled it
up in his fist, and dropped it on the floor, grinding it up a
little bit with his heel.

“So you’re a private dick, huh Dick? Whatcha want,
Dick-head?”

Not Mr. Sociability. “Don’t call me Dick. My name’s
Richard. Got a client says you ripped him off.”

Gregario shrugged. “Losers always got a beef. Cards
don’t go their way, they bitch. Not my problem.”

“Wasn’t cards. Slots.”

Grease Head snorted. “Gaming commission checks
our machines. Your fellow lost his paycheck? Tough nuts.”

I pointed at the Lucky Sevens. “Guy named Butch
Wallace. Claims he won forty big ones. You ripped him off.”

You can always tell it in the eyes. He looked away, but
it was too late. Mr. Hot Shot knew something – something
bad. He shrugged.

“Your kid got any witnesses?”

“You tellin’ me you didn’t have a winner?”

Gregario turned back to me, all smiles. “Yeah, we had a winner. Forty grand all right, but not to no Butch What-a-sucker.”

For just a moment I wondered if maybe Beach Boy was trying to pull a fast one on me, like, maybe he was here and saw someone win, or maybe he read it in the paper and had a drug dream. But Butch didn’t read and there was something false about Gregario’s bravado. Story stunk. “Yeah? So what was the name of the winner?”

Gregario shook his head. “Privileged info. Client don’t want his name told.”

“I thought you gotta report that kind of win to the IRS?”

“IRS, yeah. Not you. Got any other questions, Wise Guy?”

Bruised Nose wasn’t gonna help, so I strolled around the casino a bit, ending back at the Seven machines watching the losers. The first two were still pulling handles, keeping the monsters alive with dead presidents. A skinny witch with a burnt out jag in her lips took the third chair. She tried to put her ID card in the slot – since one was already there she left hers dangling on her neck and fed the machine. I sauntered over and gave her a light.

“Thanks, Junior,” she said.

“You like this machine?” I asked.

She shrugged. “It’s good if it pays off.”

“Ever does?”

She took a long drag, holding in the smoke while she pulled the gun, waiting for the wheels to stop, loser, loser, loser, and then blew it out. “Never for me.”

Fat boy next to her spoke up. “Did three days ago. I was sittin’ over there.” He waved in the general direction of a bank of slots. “Some beach bum walked up and won on his second pull. Over forty grand. Lucky stiff.”

Huh! “So what happens when someone wins like that?”

Fat boy shook his head. “Never been a winner, can’t tell you. This boy they hustled off. Guess they took him to the office to do some paperwork.”

I reached up and pulled the guy’s card out of the slot.

“Hey!” he shouted.

I read his name off the card before sticking it back in the slot. “Thanks, Bill Hanovich. I might need you to swear to that.”

Roaming around the casino some more, I came on a door marked “VIP Services.” Room was empty ‘cept for a cutie wearing too little sitting at a desk looking bored. Blonde hair in a poof. She gave me a toothy grin when I walked in.

“You Premium?” she asked.

“Just lookin’ for info.” I settled into the chair. “Name’s Richard.” I handed her a card.

For a moment Blondie looked like she was going to object, but maybe ‘cause it was the middle of the afternoon and dead, she patted my arm. “So what?”

“If someone wins a big jackpot on the slots, say over ten grand, how does that work?”

“Big jackpots we like to publicize. Take their photo getting their check, put it in the paper, you know.”

“I heard there was a winner a few days ago.”

“Sure was. \$40,310 on a Lucky Seven Jackpot. I’ve got the picture here.” She reached into a cabinet and pulled out a photo of some jerk in plaid flashing a goofy smile and getting a check from some bald fellow outfitted with a black suit. The caption read, “Jack Gregario wins big.”

“Gregario, huh? Don’t recognize the face, but the name seems familiar.” I waited for her to volunteer information, but Poof Top just sat there smiling. “So ... how do you know who won, like if someone else tries to claim the prize?”

“Oh, that’s all in the machine.”

“How’s that?”

She held up one of those ID cards. “Most players use their gaming card in the machine. It records who won the jackpot, as well as every dollar bet, win or lose.”

“Yeah? What if the player doesn’t have a card in?”

“Happens sometimes. We still need information to give out any money, you know, social security number, verification, and such.”

“This guy, Gregario, he ever win before?”

She turned to her computer and punched some numbers. “Hmm. Looks like he plays a lot. I’m not allowed to give out information, but, yes, he’s won before.”

“Often?”

“Got enough points to be Premium.”

“What does being Premium do for him?”

“Oh, all sorts of things. He gets free buffets and hotel rooms, complimentary tickets to shows, ... all sorts of things.”

I thanked her and headed back to the casino. At the Sevens, all four of the machines were lonely, flashing their come-on lights to the world. I walked up and noticed two of them had ID cards in their slots. Pulling out one, I read the name. *Jack Gregario*.

I canvased the casino until I spotted Gregario, standing next to a row of slots, ogling the waitresses. Coming up from behind I gave him a shove into a machine. Hard. He bounced off, turned around, hands in fist, face in snarl. “You lookin’ for a face full of trouble, Dick-Dick?”

“Depends. Your name Jack?” I held up the ID card. He grabbed it from my hand.

“Nah, Jack’s my nephew. He’s always leaving his card around.”

“And letting you beat up patsies for prizes?”

He glared at me. “You can’t prove nothin’. As far as our records show, Jack Gregario won that slot fair and square. Your boy is just out of luck.”

I held up a stack of Jack Gregario cards I'd pulled out of a dozen machines. "I don't think your bosses are gonna like that story. Especially when I bring out my witness who saw Butch win." Grease Top turned a nice shade of green and dropped the sneer. "Um. You wouldn't want to do that."

"Yeah? You gonna beat me up too?" I gave him a sucker punch in the gut and he jackknifed. I kicked him in the shin and he grabbed onto the machine so as not to fall. I slugged him a couple more times, just for good measure, getting that nose to bleed again. "I ain't no sissy, Fat Boy. You wanta get some more slapdown or you wanta write me a check for forty grand?"

Holding onto his gut with one hand he waved off the guards who had hustled up. Getting back to vertical he gave me a weak smile. "You got a pen, Dick?"

"Yeah. And don't call me Dick. Name's Richard."

A bit later me and Beach Boy were at the bank where I made him open an account to deposit his money, and write me a check for my fee. "How'd you do it, Dick?" he asked.

I kicked him in the shin. "By not lettin' anyone Dick me around."