

## *Chapter 5*

Jewelle was in her cabin getting ready for dinner, giddy with joy. Already, she'd made two new friends, gotten a start on a fantastic tan, had THE drink as promised by Oliver and filled her lungs with the incredible ocean air. She was hungry and couldn't wait to meet her dinner companions.

She chose a soft, floral sundress scattered with bright yellow sunflowers. She slipped on open-toed shoes and accented her ears with long, dangling earrings made of bright yellow and green beads. Her makeup went on flawlessly. A little of her favorite fragrance behind her ears, and she was ready and excited.

As Jewelle entered the formal dining room, she was met by the maitre d', who asked the number of her table. As she related her information, a waiter was summoned to escort her. The dining room was exquisite. The lighting made the ceiling sparkle. A harpist was situated on an elevated platform in the center of the room. Her long golden hair flowed over her left shoulder. Her white, flowing gown made her look angelic.

As Jewelle approached her table, her escort assisted her to the one remaining unoccupied chair at the table set for eight. Three elderly couples were already seated. The seat next to hers was occupied by a relatively-young looking-Spanish lady.

As Jewelle settled herself, she turned and introduced herself to the Spanish-looking lady. "Hello, my name is Jewelle Dawson."

The lady looked at her and seemed to struggle with her response. "I, ah no espeak Ingles."

Jewelle battled with her memory and tried to remember her Spanish from college.

“Yo soy Jewelle. Como se llama?” she finally managed.

“Me llamo Maria Llovio. Es un placer enconoserle.”

“Gracias. It’s nice to meet you as well,” said Jewelle.

Jewelle shifted her eyes from Maria and looked around the table. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to ignore you. My name is Jewelle Dawson.”

One by one the elderly couples introduced themselves. “I’m Helen Eller and this is my husband, Alexander.”

Helen seemed to be about eighty years old but looked quite lovely with her white hair, and delicate, flawless, fair skin. Mr. Eller hadn’t aged quite so gracefully as his wife. His face was filled with dark, keratotic lesions. His white hair was thin and seemed to want to go its own way.

“I’m Frances Wakefield, and this is my husband, Gordon.”

“I’m Susan Dellarusso, and this is my wonderful husband of fifty years, Ralph.”

“Oh, it sounds like an anniversary cruise,” probed Jewelle.

“Well, actually, we like to think of this as a honeymoon cruise,” snickered Mrs. Dellarusso as she smiled lovingly at her good-looking husband. He was definitely Italian. In his youth, he was probably a real lady killer.

“And where are you from, dear?” inquired Frances Wakefield.

“I’m from Minnesota. How about you, Mrs. Wakefield?”

“Oh, my goodness, you must call me Frances. After all, we’re going to know each other quite well before this cruise is over. Gordon and I have been on thirty-two cruises, all with Royal Oceanic Cruise Lines. Believe me, after spending two hours with each other every night for thirty days, we’ll know a lot about one another.”

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Maria was staring at everyone like a deer in headlights. Jewelle felt badly for her. She knew that Maria didn't understand a word.

Just then, the head waiter interrupted her thoughts. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I am your waiter, Antonio. My assistant here is Chysa." He presented each of the eight passengers seated at Table 44 with the evening menu while his assistant took beverage orders and filled the water glasses.

Once the orders were taken, Jewelle just had to ask. "Frances, I don't want to sound like some silly teenage groupie, but I just have to say what a privilege it is to meet you. I'm a great fan and can honestly say I've read every one of your books. In fact, I'm re-reading *With Dishonor* right now. I can't tell you how thrilled I am to be your dinner mate."

"Well, aren't you sweet, Jewelle? Thank you so much for the accolades. Actually, in addition to celebrating our sixtieth, Gordon and I are on this cruise to do some research on my final book. Gordon is a lot of the inspiration for many of my books. Perhaps, later in the cruise, I can share a little preview of *The Exchange*."

"That's the name of it?" inquired Jewelle excitedly. "*The Exchange*? But you said your last book. Don't tell me you're retiring?"

"Yes, dear, it's a promise I made to my dear Gordon. It's time we both take it easy. Writing is a lot of hard work. Lots of behind-the-scene stuff no one knows about. Mostly it's a lot of red tape with the publishers, editors, lawyers. That's the part that wears us down. Gordon has always managed my career, so I agreed to finally give him a break. After sixty years, I certainly think he deserves it, don't you?"

Dinner progressed with ease as seven of the passengers exchanged basic information about their lives and their experiences on other cruises; Maria could only watch.

Just after eight, after finishing her Apple Strudel and a great cup of coffee, Jewelle rose to excuse herself. “I’m sorry to leave so soon, but I hear the ka-ching ka-ching of the slot machines and have twenty dollars burning a hole in my pocket!” Everyone laughed except Maria, who only smiled.

On her way out of the dining room, Jewelle sought out the maitre d’.

“Excuse me, sir. I’m seated at Table 44. There is a young lady assigned to our table named Maria Llovio. She speaks absolutely no English. I would like to recommend that you either reassign me to another table and move a Spanish speaker to our table or move her to another table where she can share her native language with someone. With all the Spanish speaking passengers on board, surely you can change the seating to make the trip more enjoyable for her.”

“Of course, Madame. It was probably an oversight by our dining room captain. I appreciate you bringing this to my attention. I will take care of this matter before breakfast tomorrow.”

“Thank you very much,” said Jewelle as she swiftly headed in the direction of the casino.

The excitement of the casino was electric and contagious. Assorted colored neon lights were glimmering everywhere and were reflected on the mirrored peripheral walls. Coins dropping in metal trays were only muffled by the victorious yells of a group surrounding the craps table.

Jewelle slowly walked around the various areas taking in all the sights, sounds and smells. She studied the different slots. There were so many machines. Some had balloons that went up and down. Some had pigs that grunted. Some had electrical plugs that spun multiple times. The one that really caught her eye was a series of slots called Coyote Moon. She loved nature so there was

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an attraction to tempt luck with wild animals. She'd play those later. First she wanted to sit by the bar, have a drink, and watch everyone. That was exciting in itself.

On the far left hand side of the casino, beyond the black jack tables, was a very elegant bar with cushy velvet covered bar stools. She sauntered up to the bar and chose one of the stools near the end. She ordered a Vodka Collins with five cherries. Just as the bartender handed Jewelle her drink, a gorgeous man moved himself into the empty seat beside her.

"Anyone sitting here?" asked the handsome stranger.

"No," answered Jewelle as she studied the man.

He looked to be in his mid-fifties and was absolutely gorgeous. He had mesmerizing brown eyes, and dark brown, almost black hair, with a slight wave. He wore ecru colored linen slacks with matching double breasted sports jacket. A dark brown, finely starched shirt was accented by a coordinating silk tie. The smell of an expensive cologne wafted toward her.

"Waiting for someone special?" quizzed the stranger.

"Nope, just sitting here taking in the sights," replied Jewelle.

"I'm enjoying the sights myself," replied the stranger as he watched her.

"Does that pickup line usually work for you?" laughed Jewelle.

"Not really. Actually, I don't have any pickup lines. I try not to pick up, so to speak, my female companions. There are much more interesting and less vulgar ways to accomplish the same goal. I'm sorry; I didn't mean to offend you."

"You didn't," responded Jewelle, trying to assess the man without being obvious.

He extended his hand. “By the way, my name is Max Caldwell.”

“Jewelle Dawson,” she answered as she accepted his hand.

“It’s a pleasure meeting you, Jewelle Dawson. I truly mean that. You’re probably one of the only English speaking women on board who doesn’t sport orthopedic shoes, wear support hose, and carry an AARP card.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” said Jewelle.

“May I buy you another drink, Jewelle Dawson?” offered Max as he noticed Jewelle’s nearly empty drink. Jewelle could see Max looking at her right hand, so she quickly removed it from the drink, and placed it out of sight near her side. If Max noticed, he didn’t comment.

“So what is the lady drinking?” asked Max.

“Vodka Collins with five cherries, please.”

Max turned to the bartender and raised his hand.

“Yes, Mr. Caldwell, what can I get you, sir?” inquired the bartender with a charming English accent.

“Scotch on the rocks and a Vodka Collins with six cherries for the lady,” ordered Max.

“Five cherries, not six!” interrupted Jewelle.

“What difference does it make? Five, six?”

“Not six, not four. Five!” stated Jewelle firmly.

“Give the lady exactly what she wants. I love that in a woman,” Max commented to the bartender as he again gained eye contact with Jewelle.

Her entire body was alive with exciting sensations. She was having fun, real fun with a handsome stranger who liked her. Was life great or what?

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“So, Jewelle, explain this crazy name you have. How do you spell it, and how did you get such a semiprecious name?” asked Max.

“Semiprecious. Cute, Max. You’re real clever. Actually, it has nothing to do with jewels. My real name is Julie Anne. When I was in first grade, a best friend gave me this nickname. I never can recall how he got Jewelle out of Julie Anne, but I liked it. I guess ‘cause I liked this little boy.” The lie came smoothly now, after seven years of living as Jewelle.

“Oh, already seducing little boys in the first grade, were we?” teased Max.

Jewelle was enjoying the lively banter. “How do you know the little boys weren’t seducing me?”

“You have a point there. A beauty like you probably had the male gender interested since you arrived as a newborn in the nursery.”

“Again, I think there’s a compliment in there somewhere but, gee, so hard to decipher.”

“So, Jewelle, I assume there is presently no Mr. Dawson, or should I be looking carefully over my shoulders?”

“No, you’re correct. No Mr. Dawson in the picture.”

“Is there a Mr. Wonderful in your life?” Max queried with a serious look on his face.

“That’s why I’m on the cruise, to find Mr. Wonderful... have I shocked you?” asked Jewelle when he didn’t respond immediately.

“No, you’re just painfully honest. I really respect that in a woman. It’s a rare quality these days.”

“I would venture that it’s rare in both sexes, not just women,” countered Jewelle. “So, Max Caldwell, what brings you

on this cruise filled with Medicare-carrying senior citizens? I noticed the bartender knows you by name. Do you work for the cruise lines?"

"Actually, I'm a professional gambler. When a passenger puts up a significant sum of money with the casino, the casino staff is required to learn their names and cater to him or her as the case may be."

"A high roller. Wow! I've never met one before. May I inquire as to how you came into enough money to be considered a special guest of the casino?"

"If I tell you that, then I'll worry that you're only after my money and not my good looks, incredible charm, and romantic nature!" exclaimed Max, blatantly flirting with Jewelle.

"How do you know I don't have more money than you do?" asked Jewelle, looking Max straight in the face with a serious expression.

"Touché," relented Max. "Actually, Jewelle, it was all about being in the right place at the right time. When I was in my twenties, I was very reckless with my life, challenged death every day. No risk was big enough. So when I was twenty-four, I signed on as a treasure diver with a captain out of Key West; one year contract, no wages, just room and board. The crew split fifty percent of any booty we recovered during the contract period. The captain took the other fifty.

"It didn't take me long to figure out that the captain was short changing the crew...big time. So I stopped bringing up my finds. I kept a detailed log of where I discovered sunken treasure. I finished my twelve-month contract, waited three years, and then went back and to retrieve my findings based on the notes from my log. It turned out to be some three hundred and fifty million dollars worth of emeralds, gold chains, gold bullion, doubloons, and various other trinkets."

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“Trinkets worth three-hundred and fifty million dollars! And that was some thirty years ago. That would probably be worth about a billion dollars today!” exclaimed Jewelle.

“Pretty close,” he confirmed. “Well, I didn’t get *all* that money. First I had to fight with the State of Florida. Then Uncle Sam took his share. Between the lawyers, Florida, and the IRS, I only ended up with a little under two-hundred million dollars.”

“Oh, poor boy. Only two-hundred million! You’re joking. This is your second pickup line if the first one doesn’t work, right?”

“No, Jewelle, it’s the unmitigated truth. Scout’s honor.”

The drinks arrived, and Jewelle carefully checked to make sure that there were exactly five cherries. Satisfied, she took a sip. “This is good. Just the way I like it,” remarked Jewelle.

“So, Jewelle, tell me a little about yourself.”

“Well, to start, I’m a lousy gambler and would love to learn how to beat the odds and leave the casino with winnings rather than loses,” answered Jewelle, knowing this wasn’t the answer Max was expecting. But she’d learned not to discuss her past. She wanted to concentrate on the present. “Would you consider sharing a few tips with a novice?”

“Your smallest wish is my command, Jewelle.”

Jewelle continued, “I realize gambling involves chance, luck, timing, whatever you want to call it, but there must be some do’s and don’ts I can learn which increase the odds a bit. And who better to learn from than a high roller? I’ve given myself fifty dollars per evening; I just want to feel the excitement of it.”

“I’d love to be your tutor,” Max enthused. “After I make a pro out of you in the casino, we can work our way to other parts of the ship and see where else we can excel together.”

Jewelle blushed, enjoying the escalating flirtation with Max. She was having fun. It was a charming and sophisticated fun.

And so the lessons began.

“First, you have to have the mindset for gambling. It’s an experience you have to learn to appreciate. It’s about having fun. You never want to sit down at an empty table, whether it be a blackjack table, roulette wheel, whatever. The electricity generated by other players is vital to success in a casino. Also, you have to watch before you play. Let’s start with roulette,” said Max as he put his arm around her waist and guided her toward the roulette table.

As they approached the table, Jewelle noticed that it was full of players. Stacks of chips covered the numbered felt. “See that board with numbers on it?” asked Max as he pointed to a digital pole adjacent to the left end of the roulette wheel. “That tells you what numbers have been coming up. There’s about twenty to thirty numbers up there when the game is in full swing. There’s always a trend. You just have to find it.”

They both studied the numbers.

“I don’t see anything even close to a trend. Just a bunch of random numbers,” said Jewelle with frustration.

“That’s what separates the winners from the losers. If you look closely, you’ll see that most of the numbers that have been coming up are black. So, I’d bet some money on black numbers and put a significant bet on the color black.”

“Amazing. I would have never noticed that,” said Jewelle admiringly.

“Rule number two; if you’re going to play roulette, you have to make a lot of bets on each play. The worst thing you can do is play one chip on one number. That’s an amateur bet. People who bet like that usually don’t last very long. I personally put no less than thirty chips on the table for each turn of the wheel.”

“Thirty chips, Max! I couldn’t even play two times before I blow my budget!”

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“Well, then you shouldn’t be playing this game. But even if you played twenty-five chips each hand, there’s a good chance you’ll win enough back to play quite a few more hands. With twenty-five chips strategically placed, you should get most of your bet back each play. Voilà! You can play more and hopefully win.”

“You make it sound so simple. If it’s that easy, then why do most people lose?”

“We’re not most people. I’m a winner, and before this cruise is over, you’re going to be one too.”

“So is it time to bet yet?” asked Jewelle excitedly.

“Let’s do it,” said Max as he pulled out a recently vacated chair, helped her get seated, then pushed it up to the roulette table.

Max threw five one-hundred dollar bills on the table and asked for yellow chips.

“Max, no. I won’t take your money. I have my fifty dollars,” whispered Jewelle desperately.

“Hush, don’t worry about the money. Get your mindset right and concentrate on fun and the numbers,” assured Max as his hand rested gently on her bare shoulder.

“Black, right, Max?”

“Atta, girl!”

With the grace of a veteran gambler, Jewelle placed thirty-two chips strategically on the table.

“I always play twenty-six, Max. That’s my favorite number. I’ll put two chips there and one chip on each of the surrounding corners,” said Jewelle almost apologetically.

“Do what feels good, Jewelle. Remember, fun is the most important aspect of this. It’s got to be exciting; pleasurable. When it stops being enjoyable and becomes serious, then you’d better quit. The game becomes dangerous.”