

Chapter Sixteen

Salle Europe, Monte Carlo Casino, Monaco

After entering the Salle Europe gambling room, Bret briefly left Zhu and the girls to go visit the casino cashier, where he withdrew €15,000 from his account.

“Why don’t we go back to Salle Blanche?” queried his brother-in-law. “You had such good luck there.”

“Because I’d like to see more of this casino, and want to try my hand at Blackjack and Baccarat. Salle Europe is renowned for its ornate gold décor, and has both games.”

Bret and his entourage cruised the room’s action until he found an empty seat at a Blackjack table. He purchased a stack of €25 chips from the cashier, and bet one. He lost that hand and two more, before winning four in a row. The dealer cleaned up next, with 21, and then repeated the feat, before going bust, and paying the table. Bret raised his voice level, and told a few jokes between hands.

“Hey, I had my credit card stolen the other day, but I didn’t report it . . . because the thief spends less than my wife.” Then he laughed uproariously.

The girls standing right behind him would squeal with delight at his jokes and when he won, and moan when he lost. To the dealer’s dismay, Bret let them take turns deciding and placing the number of chips bet before the first card of each hand.

Meanwhile, Zhu had moved to stand opposite him, an aisle away between multiple tables. He quietly captured some of the Bret-centered activity on his hidden lapel camera, but recorded nothing exciting.

Over the course of an hour, Bret won many times, and lost many more. He was going nowhere, no big gains, no big losses. Of more concern, he and the girls had been able to attract only a small number of onlookers. So he tipped the dealer, moved to a higher-stakes table, and immediately started talking loudly to everyone nearby. Most ignored him, wishing he’d go away, but a small crowd of onlookers who’d seen him gambling at Salle Blanche’s roulette tables started to gather.

"Hey, any big winners or losers here?" Bret questioned noisily, then quickly added, "There soon will be."

No one responded. The dealer scrunched his shoulders.

"Well, that's about to change, one way or another. Hey dealer, what denomination chips are those black ones?"

"One hundred euro's, sir."

Throwing €2000 on the table, Bret emphatically said, "Here, give me twenty of those."

The giggling girls crowded close, one on each side.

Bret put a stack of ten chips on the table in front of him as his first bet, and said aloud, "One thousand euros. Come on baby."

The dealer placed first one, then another card in front of him. He picked them up, looked at them, and laid them down face up, an Ace of Hearts and Jack of Clubs. "Blackjack," he yelled. A winning Blackjack hand pays 3 to 2, or €1500. He now had €2500 in play.

Each squealing girl gave him a kiss on the nearest cheek. One of the other players at the table left, grumbling to himself in French. A nearby casino security guard moved to a table's length away. Many "shhhhs" emanated from nearby tables.

After the dealer pointed at the table in front of Bret, advising him to make his next bet, he slurred, "Let it ride," loudly enough for all to hear three tables away. The crowd grew in number, laughing at his jokes, waiting for the big bets, big wins, and to see if he'd soon be thrown out.

But he won that €2500 bet with three cards totaling 20. And before anyone could quiet him down, he slurred out again, "Let it ride, all €5000." Some of the onlookers exclaimed delight; others whistled; all crowded closer to watch every card fall.

Two cards dropped into place in front of Bret. He announced aloud, "Now we're gonna see how Lady Luck treats Steffan Doevendans."

As he turned the cards over, a 10 and 7 of clubs lay in view. The onlookers held their breaths as the dealer turned over a King of Diamonds, then a 6 of Hearts, and then an 8 of Spades. 24. The dealer had busted.

"She loves me!" Bret shouted. "Thank you Lady Luck. When I'm good, I'm really good."

His hand paused above the €10,000. The crowd gasped as he said, "Let it ride one more time."

The dealer reshuffled the cards, and when the first card came to Bret, he smiled. When the second one came, he threw both cards face up on the table: a pair of Aces.

"Split the aces," he said, as he moved his €10,000 over the first ace, then took €10,000 in bills out of his wallet, and covered the second ace. "Hit me," said the gambler. The dealer laid a King of Hearts over the Ace of Hearts. A Blackjack. The crowd roared in delight.

"Hit me again," yelled Bret. "A Queen of Diamonds! Another Blackjack!"

The onlookers went beserk. Women screamed. One fainted. Celeste and Gabrielle hugged him and covered his cheeks with kisses. Three security men joined hands to push the gathering onlookers back. Zhu clicked away silently to catch it all. Bret smiled.

The hand paid €15000 for each ace, €30,000 total, plus the €20,000 he had bet. Bret casually picked up the €50,000, tipped the dealer €2000, and got up from the table, saying, "A good gambler knows when it's time to fold 'em. Besides, I'll need the €50,000 as my stake for Baccara, where I'm heading now. Y'all are welcome to follow me."

Zhu and the girls caught up with him, asking where he was headed. "I'm just staggering towards those tables over there," he answered, pointing to the opposite end of the room.

"Well, I looked at those tables earlier," said Zhu, "and I was told they're for playing Punto Banco."

As they walked toward the Baccara area, Bret explained, "Punto Banco is a variant of Baccara. It's not as impressive as the private roped-off-table versions that you see in James Bond movies, but according to the book I've read, it's straight forward and fast. A player can win or lose a fortune in short order. Million dollar bets are not rare."

"I hope you know what you're doing," cautioned Zhu.

"Back home, I practiced online until I clearly understood my betting option for each card dealt. Relax Zhu. My bets will be modest, at least to start. I truly believe I'm ready to play on a live Punto Banco table."

Bret found a vacant seat, discerned the table rules and stakes, got his chips and started playing. Zhu positioned himself where he could be both bodyguard and secret photographer. The girls excused themselves and went to the ladies room. Beefed-up security kept the crowds away from Bret as much as possible.

An hour and fifteen minutes later, Bret cashed in his Punto Banco chips, adding the winnings to his account, and left Salle Europe. After sending Zhu and the girls back to the Fairview, he visited the casino cashier, made sure his night's winnings had been added to his account, and then arranged a transfer of the rounded total, €250,000, to his KB account, placing the surplus €15,245 into his wallet.

To his astonished delight, as soon as he reached the public area, a reporter approached him and asked, "Are you Steffan Doevendans?"

"Yes."

A photographer took his picture.

"I understand you won over a quarter-million euros gambling. Is that true?"

"Yes."

"Wow, I'm with the *Monaco-Matin*, our local daily newspaper, and we always try to interview the big winners. Very few agree. Would you be willing to take a few minutes of time to tell us about yourself and how you did it?"

"Sure thing." And Bret did just that, and when finished, turned to leave.

But a woman was waiting to speak to him. "My name is Sherrie and I'm with Coastal News TV. We'd also like to interview you on our morning news show, Mr. Doevendans. It'll only take a few minutes tomorrow in our studio, just two blocks away, if you can make it?"

"Sure. Why not."

"Here's my card. The studio address is right at the bottom. How about 10:00 a.m.?"

"See ya then."

Happy with his success, Bret headed back to the Fairview, and joined the others in their suite. Zhu and the girls each had a well-deserved drink in hand, considering the night of abstinence in the Salle Europe. Bret addressed the girls: "Celeste and Gabrielle. You were both terrific. You certainly did everything we asked you to do. I hope you had a good time too. Thank you."

He opened his wallet and gave each girl their €2000 fee, plus a €1000 bonus. They smiled and nodded their delight. Bret then turned and started pouring himself a drink. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the two girls and Zhu tip-toeing out the door, arm-in-arm.

"Hold it Zhu," he shouted. "I need you here tonight."

"Oh, come on Bro, the night's still young," Zhu pleaded.

"Please tell the ladies 'Good Night,' and stay put here in this room with me. We have work that has to be done tonight."