

# Cripple Creek



by

Morgan Chai

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Published in the United States of America  
by Further Beyond, LLC  
FurtherBeyond.com

Printed in the United States of America

Cover Design by Further Beyond, LLC

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2004094321

ISBN 978-0-9744380-3-0



## Acknowledgments

It is my norm to acknowledge the people who help me and support me with every book I write, but how do I say thank you to a wild and crazy, high elevation Rocky Mountain gambling town? How do I say thank you to hundreds of the funniest and most unique people I've ever met?

Every book I write takes place in real settings, and many characters are based on real people, with their permission of course. When I wrote this book (back in the beginnings of Cripple Creek's Gaming madness) I not only worked in Cripple Creek, but I lived in Divide. In Cripple Creek I took on every job I could get my hands on to do the research that I needed for the story's realism. I worked as a maintenance person in Johnny Nolan's Casino, painting, repairing things and in general keeping the casino running smoothly, all during its most busy hours. It was crazy, but it gave me the chance to capture life in motion. I worked as a cook at Calamity Jo's, one of only two places a person could get food in town. Then for months I was employed as a cleaning team member of the only cleaning business in town, which gave me access to all but two casino's from two o'clock in the morning to sunrise. That was a *real* eye opener as to the security, or the lack thereof, in all the casinos.

But, the genuine idea for this book came because of my past career as a Senior Intelligence Agent, because no matter where I looked, I saw huge flaws, susceptibilities and vulnerabilities in the security systems of every casino. A very good analogy is that when Gaming came to Cripple Creek, it was the cart—and it took over a year for the horse to follow.

So back to expressing my gratitude, I guess all I can say is thank you Cripple Creek, and to the several hundred people who lived there, those who worked there, and the thousands of people who visited. It was a once in a lifetime experience and I was blessed to have been involved in its gambling beginnings.

I also want to thank Diane Rader for the first round of editing on this book. I once called her the Gold Mine in the mountains of my dreams. I still feel that way, especially since now there's a possibility of a movie from this book.

And a million thanks go to Spence and 'Calamity' Jo Burtis of Colorado Springs.

Last but not least, I have to thank my dearest friend Dagney for all that she has done, is doing and will continue to do to support my love of writing.

I truly hope I've done my beloved Cripple Creek and its people justice.



## *Dedication*

I dedicate this book to all who at some time or another, lose their way in life either through biorhythm madness, the Dog Days of summer, love, loss, boredom, fear, or even the aging process.

But more importantly, I dedicate this book to those who find their way back through honour and integrity.

Losing our way is not nearly as important as being able to find ourselves in the process.



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## Prologue

Life in Cripple Creek, Colorado, from the mid 1900's up until late 1990, was that of a lazy, high altitude, old gold mining community (okay, it's safe to call it a ghost town) of about six-hundred residents. It rests at nearly ten-thousand-foot elevation on the western shoulders of the famous Pike's Peak, nestled in a splendid open valley overlooking the beautiful Collegiate Mountains of the Continental Divide. It's also considered by many to be in a banana-belt zone, an area where the climate year round is mostly pleasant and enjoyable. Within an hour's drive west are thirty mountain peaks whose claim to fame is that they all tower above 14,000 feet. The nearest large city is Colorado Springs, forty-four miles to the east. During the gold rush in the early 1900's, determined gold seekers risked life and limb in wagon trains traversing the rugged Ute Pass from Old Colorado City, the origins of Colorado Springs, to the prosperous Cripple Creek. They also arrived by train over the shoulder of Pike's Peak, as well as from the south at Cañon City, and from the west from Florissant. Over sixty trains a day traveled in and out of the sprawling mining community carrying people, supplies, gold, and whatever else was needed. Stagecoach lines traveled the same routes as well, and with a population of over sixty-thousand it didn't take much imagination to understand why Cripple Creek was dubbed "The World's Greatest Gold Camp".

Over ten billion dollars worth of gold has been removed from the valley since its discovery in the 1850's. Initially, over five-hundred mines were in the area, but after President Roosevelt's gold moratorium, and World War II, all mining done now is surface and heap leach processes done by two enormous corporate mining operations requiring gargantuan equipment and minimal personnel.

In 1990, forty-three Cripple Creek residents, the 'Initial 43' as they were known, each raised ten-thousand dollars to fund the effort to get gambling, or as it's officially

called Gaming, into Colorado. The original idea was to save the crumbling historic structures of the state and to revitalize local communities using revenues from the Gaming.

Before Gaming was passed, Cripple Creek had settled into near historic oblivion. Spreading over nearly one square mile, it had one barely functional general store, a little post office, a small bank's branch office, no hardware store, a hole in the wall of a liquor store, two small gas stations, a small convalescent home/partial emergency room, and a myriad of crumbling buildings that spoke of its once lavish wealth and history.

In 1990, voters overwhelmingly approved Limited Stakes Gaming in three quietly decaying mining towns nestled high up in the Rockies — Black Hawk and Central City, both in the mountains west of Denver, and of course, Cripple Creek in the mountains west of Colorado Springs. Life in Cripple Creek instantly changed from that of laid back and mellow to fast-paced and aggravating, yet most of the time it was fun, wild and entertaining.

At first, most of the casinos were small Mom-and-Pop owned, rickety, hundred-year-old historic relics that lined Bennett Avenue, the main street through Cripple Creek. Without really knowing what they were getting into, the owners quickly applied for Gaming Licenses, incurred costly renovations to upgrade the historic buildings as casinos, and crammed the interiors with hundreds of slot machines and a few limited-stakes Poker or Blackjack tables. The historic buildings were gutted and all but their historic façades were removed to house even more slot machines and card tables. Some saw it as a desecration to the history of the area while others simply saw dollar signs. Housing was not just in short supply, it was virtually nonexistent, and of the people who lived in Cripple Creek few worked in the casinos. Getting Gaming approved was nothing compared to getting people to show up for work. Specially trained and licensed employees and security personnel were needed to conduct the daily counts of money; porters were needed to maintain the casino cleanliness during business hours; licensed change girls and dealers were needed; bartenders were vital; and then there was the necessity of licensed administrative and financial personnel who did all the rest. Owning a casino also meant enhanced security measures, alarms, video taping equipment, guards, et al, not only to protect the building, but to keep an eagle-eye on the tightly controlled Gaming money.

From the beginning, all the casinos owners found themselves in the same boat— they desperately needed employees and support personnel. For Cripple Creek the nearest town was Divide, about eighteen miles away, a treacherous eighteen miles at that, but Divide's residents could barely keep their own country store, bar and gas station open. Woodland Park was another nine miles farther down the mountain from Divide, toward Colorado Springs, and its work force was and still is focused in Colorado Springs. Florissant and Lake George, about twenty miles to the east of Cripple Creek were in the same condition as Divide and Woodland Park.

As was expected, the vast majority of employees came from Colorado Springs. But it was a costly and timely commute from the valley, traversing the steep and dangerous Ute Pass, across more narrow and winding roads, even through a converted one-way train tunnel then finally to Cripple Creek. Gamblers are willing to make the trip based on weather and mood, but employees had to be there regardless of the weather or traffic.

The casinos only offered minimum wage and all wondered why it became increasingly difficult to keep their doors open because of the lack of employees, not to mention keeping up with the increased burdens of the Gaming regulations. Over time the officers of the Division of Gaming were also learning what they had to do, and they diligently tried to teach casino management how to comply with the newly implemented Gaming regulations. It was a catch-as-you-can situation for everyone for well over a year.

Initially, Cripple Creek's local law enforcement officials, one police chief and two deputies, were caught off guard by the huge influx of gamblers and tourists, even though most of the offenses were minor ones, to include the surge of drunk drivers. The department also struggled to increase its force size, but because of the lack of housing few deputies were willing to change job locations due to the costly and time-consuming commute up and down the mountain.

As for law enforcement and Gaming officers working together, it was virtually nonexistent. The Gaming officers made it adamantly clear that they were not cops and had a specialized role to play. Plus, the two Gaming officers in Cripple Creek were far too worried about exposing their covers if they were to meet with local law enforcement officers in public. Ironically, most everyone knew who they were because they both carried their Berretta's in small leather fanny packs that were nearly zipped into their jeans, and we all couldn't help but laugh at the officers false sense of cover and grand sense of self-importance. Granted, they played a vitally important job but contrary to their inflated self-aggrandizement they didn't work for the CIA and weren't responsible for national security. It was Cripple Creek, after all.

Then there were people like Jo Marsh, a resident of nearby Divide, who had the foresight to recognize that the greatest hurdle for the town would be casino cleanliness — a job that no one wanted. She knew that those who wanted to work in Cripple Creek sought the thrill and excitement of working in a casino, not scrubbing bathrooms, polishing slot machines, brushing tables, cleaning behind the bars, vacuuming, removing trash, wiping down the walls, and cleaning windows. Jumping on the opportunity, she created the Four C's, the Cripple Creek Casino Cleaners, and out of over forty casinos she quickly obtained contracts for nineteen of them.

Cleaning doesn't sound like much to the uninitiated mind, but the contracts called for immaculate casinos seven days a week, after thousands of people visited them daily. During normal business hours the casinos had porters who provided cursory

cleaning, but the bulk of the work was saved for the after hours teams. But back in 1990, due to the degenerating work ethic prevalent not only in Colorado, but throughout America, Jo quickly learned how hard it was to keep employees, no matter how much they were paid . . . and she paid twice the minimum wage.

For the most part, people who come to Colorado know that it's a rough and rugged state, demanding more of its residents and visitors than most any other state, and dishing out more than a fair share of harshness of its own. If the mountain roads don't scare the hell out of you then the weather and wildlife will.

Colorado is rugged . . . and it's tame.

It's gorgeous . . . and it's stark.

Its people are normal, or they're crazy . . . and . . .

the story of just how crazy is about to unfold.

Hold on tight!



## Chapter 1

# Boredom-based Biorhythm Madness

*When boredom strikes, you're suddenly aware of all the sounds around you. The chirping of the crickets, or sounds of birds you've never heard before. Even the sound of the refrigerator captures your attention. Everything around you becomes so much more noticeable that you realize you can't stand it anymore and you look for anything, or anyone to help you ignore that otherwise silent noise. Your mind runs amuck thinking of things to do, yet your body does not necessarily want to go along with it. Conflict happens and it immobilizes you. That's what happens when boredom strikes.*

*Some may even know it as biorhythm madness, where the three main aspects of self, your physical, mental, and emotional, are inexplicably not on the same wavelength. Maybe your physical self wants to do something but your emotional and mental self rebels. Or maybe your mental self is in high gear thinking of things to do, but your body just flat out is not into it.*

*Quite often you will set out doing something or going somewhere simply because you cannot stand the inner debate of what to do. And whether you are bored, or caught up in the strange biorhythm-madness, your mind can think of the craziest things to do.*

Jo Marsh, the owner of the Four C's, the Cripple Creek Casino Cleaners, mulled over the changes that were slowly taking over the once pleasant little town. She was taking a lazy stroll on the main drag, Bennett Avenue. Cripple Creek was a small town and in the four short blocks comprising the heart of town, there were thirty-six casinos, several of which weren't even open yet. Gaming approval came so fast that only a very few

people had the foresight to be ready for it. But the real difficulty was that only registered historic buildings could be converted to casinos. That meant that they all had to undergo major renovations and at break-neck speed. That, of course, meant that virtually anyone who could swing a hammer was desperately needed in town. And Cripple Creek was by no means easily accessible. Even as late as a year after gaming had been approved, casino owners and investors were still frantically trying to get their doors open, and every day a casino was closed meant that thousands of dollars were pouring out of their pockets and into nothingness.

Jo sat down on the bench in front of Lucky Lola's. It was on the north side of Bennett and still had sunlight on that side of the street. She was in the center of town and felt surrounded by the thrills and excitement found only in the historic gold mining town turned gambler's heaven. All but two of Cripple Creek's thirty-six casinos lined the four short blocks of Bennett Avenue.

She stared across the street at the Brass Ass and couldn't help but smile at the kids chasing up and down the street as their parents gambled inside. The average casino was only twenty-five feet wide, and up to two floors high, but the floor space was actually found in the depth of the building, some going back as far as fifty feet.

She again thought about a recent offer to buy one of the still closed casinos, but after checking into it she backed out. She knew that it took money to make money, but Cripple Creek wasn't even making it yet. It was struggling just to keep its head afloat. But that wasn't the only money sucking monster of the not-so-affluent of Cripple Creek. The Mom-and-Pop owned and run casinos were forced to pay higher device fees per quarter than anywhere else, totaling \$300 per machine and table (poker and black jack). Add to that, the everyday cost that goes into any business i.e., city taxes, state taxes, federal taxes, workmen's comp, utilities, parking assessments, employment, etc.. She shook her head and wondered why the little city government put such a strangle-hold on its own town. *No wonder they don't give free drinks to gamblers.*

Jo watched as a motorcycle club of about twenty bikes cautiously navigated around the orange stakes that marked a large hole at Bennett and Second street. It was the beginnings of a \$4 million dollar water and sewer system project that was designed to support the tiny little city as the casino monster grew. It was quite a feat, replacing wooden sewers with concrete ones. She couldn't help but laugh at the satire in greed, like how The Black Diamond's renovation project was brought to a grinding halt when gold was found in its rear wall and foundation. Since it was illegal to stake a claim in the city limits, they had to make do with a handful of slots and draw in tourists to see their wall of gold. They barely made enough money to stay open, yet they were sitting on a gold mine, literally.

Then there was the Long Branch that had enough vacant land behind it that the owners decided to cash in and build a multi-level parking garage, since parking was a premium in town. They were convinced they would make tons of money on parking,

but after several million dollars were spent, on concrete supports, steel structure, et al, they were forced to abandon their dream when they struck a natural spring. In a few short days the entire sub basement level was under ten feet of water, and they didn't have the money to stop it or fix it. *Now that's a real money pit*, Jo softly giggled to herself.

Although the town was packed with gamblers seeking their fortune, there was much more to do in Cripple Creek than hammering on the slot machine's automated spin buttons. There were the fun-filled Donkey races, tongue-blitzing jalapeno pepper eating contests, energizing battle of the bands, and watching the noisy, almost unnerving, Harley Davidson clubs who rode through town often. If that wasn't enough, one could marvel at the scenery while experiencing the Narrow Gauge train ride between Cripple Creek and Victor. And just about anything else imaginable was in the offing.

Jo Marsh considered herself to be a good-looking, forty-two-year-old, average height, average build, long wavy dark brown hair, hazel-eyed, average woman. *Average. I'm just plain ol' average*, she mused. *Yet I'm not really. Why do I feel so . . . so . . . plain and boring? I'm rich, I'm smart, I have two businesses. What's wrong with me?* She couldn't help but continue the inner dialog as she absent mindedly got up and strolled east on Bennett, casually making her way toward Johnny Nolan's Gaming Emporium, a fancy name for casino. At ten-thousand-foot-elevation anything faster than a lazy stroll left a person gasping for air.

During this particular walk she caught herself constantly slipping her hands into the deep pockets of her khaki cargo pants. She again pulled her hands out of the pockets, realizing it was not a very lady-like pose, and mindlessly adjusted the tan macrame belt after checking her white tucked-in shirt. *What's wrong with me?* she again wondered. *My cleaning business is thriving. My construction business in Colorado Springs is thriving. Everything is thriving but me.* She had never felt so out of sync with herself, but since she didn't know what or why it was happening, she couldn't change it. She needed something, but what? *Maybe a change? Maybe a move?*

Even though it was nearly eight in the evening, the sun's fading light would take another hour or so before dissolving into the blackness of the star-studded night. The eight short blocks of Bennett Avenue were bumper to bumper with cars, buses, vans, campers and motorcycles, not to mention people. Jo waited patiently on the corner of Bennett and Third in front of the Imperial Hotel and Casino, before crossing over to Johnny Nolan's. She was supposed to meet five of her friends at Nolan's for a couple of Fourth of July drinks before leaving town for her home in Divide. Divide was only eighteen miles north, but on the dangerous mountain roads it took forty minutes to drive.

Before entering the large, double-door entry of Johnny Nolan's on the corner of Bennett and Third Street she glanced down the steep slope of Third and saw one of Cripple Creek's major landmarks sauntering up the crowded, narrow street. It was

Sully. Sully and his precious little Foxtrot Sally, his donkey. He would be a welcome, unplanned addition to the group for the night.

Those who had lived in Cripple Creek all their lives said Sully was there long before anyone could remember. He looked to be in his mid-seventies, but he was quick to tell everyone that he was born during the turn of the century, 1898 to be exact. No one knew his exact birthday, not even himself, but at least he knew that he was ninety-four years old.

Sully was slender, a little hunched over and bowlegged, and on rare occasions, shaven. Jo guessed him to be about six-foot-four, if he could stand straight. His voice was gruff, his mannerisms brusque, and he dressed like an old western movie character. He wore weather-beaten, handmade leather clothes, the style with the leather tassels hanging off his sleeves from one cuff up across his shoulders and down to the other cuff. The same leather tassels were on the outside seams of both pant legs. The only color to his mountain-brown attire was the neck of his long-ago faded red long-johns that now looked pale pink. He looked like an old mountain man, which he took offense to being called, and corrected everyone that he was a gold miner and 'that was that.' The years had taken their toll on what she thought had once been a very tall, handsome man.

Foxtrot Sally was an old, gray-nosed donkey that followed him everywhere. She was decked out with stiff, dark, old leather saddle bags, strapped to a wooden miners brace, along with an old shovel and miner's pick. She was the sixth Foxtrot Sally for old Sully, and on bad days he simply called her Six or Sally Six, which brought on a tantrum—a true hoof-kicking, braying, biting, stubborn rebellion that only she understood.

Nearly everyday Sully would appear out of nowhere to go to Nolan's for a few beers and a shot or two of whiskey. He was extremely friendly, yet his appearance would frighten nearly anyone. It wasn't so much his appearance as it was the ominous ten-and-a-half-inch barreled .45 caliber, Long Colt revolver holstered in the ammunition-filled belt that was strapped on his right hip. Its complement was a fourteen-inch, Moose antler-handled Bowie knife strapped on his left hip.

He and his aged Foxtrot Sally would amble up to Nolan's where he would tie her to the hand rail on the corner of Third and Bennett outside the corner doors to the casino. Sally would patiently wait for him as he drank his daily dose, as he called it, while she reveled in the overwhelming attention of the tourists dotting over her and feeding her snacks and treats. She also posed for their many photographs. Sally never seemed to mind the added attention and rather enjoyed the children who loved to stroke her graying face and pat her tired nose. When Sully was finished for the night they would disappear into the darkness going south down Shelf Road as he sang his favorite songs to her braying harmonies.

Jo shook her head at the scene, smiled, then entered the smoke-filled casino and negotiated her way toward the bar through the elbow-to-elbow noisy, rowdy July

Fourth crowd. An even greater part of the casino cacophony were the bells, whistles, chimes and whatever else the slot-machines played on each spin, and more so on the jackpots.

The bar, in the center of the downstairs, was a huge twenty-foot by twenty-foot square-shape with one counter facing Third Street and one facing Bennett Avenue. The other two counters faced the smoky interior of the casino. A husband and wife musician team were situated on a platform that hung over the center of the big bar, and were playing loud rock and roll which obviously energized the casino patrons.

Jo leaned in tight against the only open spot along the front part of the bar to keep from being bumped by everyone walking by.

Tom, one of four bartenders on duty that night, thought he was quite the ladies man, although Jo couldn't stand him most of the time. Neither could most of her friends, but strangers were taken in by his southern, albeit mock southern, politeness.

"Hey, Tom, how's it going?" Jo asked, threading her fingers up through her hair and pushing it back away from her face and forehead.

"Ball bustin'," Tom answered quickly, reaching for a bottle of icy cold beer from the large refrigerator beneath the bar.

"Good for business though," Jo commented as she removed two dollars from her wallet. She unknowingly winced at the photo of her parents and quickly closed the wallet and slid it back into her pant's pocket.

"Here ya are, doll," Tom grinned. He knew Jo didn't like being called pet names, and for the most part she just ignored him.

She took a swallow of the beer and nonchalantly nodded to the man who sat to her left. He smiled and started to say something when another woman interrupted.

"Jo," the woman blurted, "glad I caughtcha. I was hopin' to collect my paycheck."

Jo pulled a folded envelope from her hip pocket and handed it to her. "Sure. I wasn't sure if we'd bump into each other tonight, but I—"

"Thanks," the woman interrupted as she quickly peeked inside the envelope to see the amount of the check. "Oh, and by the way, I won't be in tonight," the woman added, trying to avoid eye-contact with Jo.

"What?" Jo asked incredulously. "Why not? You know we're short-handed."

"Yeah, I know, but I need to quit."

"Quit?" Jo repeated somewhat amazed. "When I hired you last month you said you needed a good paying job. I pay twice than anyone else up here."

"Yeah," the woman downed a big swallow of her beer, "but I hate the drive up and down the mountain. Thanks Jo, but I gotta run. Catch ya later."

Jo could hardly believe her eyes as she watched the woman leave the casino.

The man sitting beside Jo had been listening to the conversation and couldn't help but notice the expensive, gold and diamond-studded bracelet she wore. "Hey, Jo."

He grinned at Jo when she looked at him, but she as quickly turned her back toward him as she sipped her beer.

He tried again, "Sounds like you're having a bad day."

"Bad day?" she answered. "Yeah, I guess so."

"My name's Jerry."

She tried to ignore him.

"How 'bout I buy you a drink? Maybe we could do somethin' to lighten up your day."

Jo stared straight at him. She hated come-ons. She hated forward men. "You've got to be kidding," she quipped as she turned away from him to look out at Bennett Avenue toward the crowded street.

Jerry shook his head at Jo's back, mumbled, "stupid bitch," downed the last swallow of his beer, tossed a dollar casino token at Tom, and stormed out of the casino.

"Hey, fella," Tom called out after Jerry, "you can't pay for drinks with tokens!" It was too late, Jerry was gone.

The entire front of Nolan's was glass and offered a great view of that part of Bennett Avenue, the main street's hustle and bustle. Cripple Creek was a wild world of its own on holidays and weekends, but nothing happened that the lone sheriff and two deputies couldn't handle at any given time. *God, Jo wondered as she watched the crowds, a sheriff and two greenhorn deputies. How do they do it?*

She turned her attention from Bennett to back inside and noticed how it seemed that very few people were genuinely having fun and laughing at their gambling experience. Most of the people were staring blankly at the machines and feeding quarters or nickels into the little coin slots as fast as they could. People pulled the slot handles less and less anymore, instead choosing to bang the spin button that rotated the wheels automatically. They only paused in feeding the hungry machines long enough for it to pay a winning spin, or to glance around for a better paying machine.

The card tables were up on the mezzanine, the open floor above the bar, but Jo could still see several players through the white picket railing. Occasionally, laughter was heard at the tables but it usually suggested that a newcomer or novice was playing, which the hardcore locals barely tolerated. She watched as they played their hands of blackjack or poker, studying their cards, and betting, winning, or losing as the dealer dealt. A huge white cloud of cigarette smoke encased each table and swirled around only when someone walked by quickly.

"Why are you so rude to the patrons?" Tom asked Jo.

"I'm not rude to the patrons," she responded, taking another sip of her beer.

"Well, you sure shut Jerry down."

"You know him?"

"Nope. I've only seen him in here recently. I just heard his name when he introduced himself to you. He looks pretty rich with that fancy three-piece suit, don't you think?"

Jo smiled at Tom, "Contrary to what most people think, clothes do not always make the man, and I don't come in here to get picked up by suits or otherwise."

"I know." Tom lifted her beer bottle and wiped the water ring off the bar top. It didn't really need it, he was just making busy-work to talk with Jo. "That's why I try to keep an eye on you when you're in here."

Suddenly, a loud crash beside her immediately pulled her attention to her side as she nearly jumped out of her skin. She was too startled to say a word. On top of the bar, laid the ominous .45 caliber, Long Colt revolver wrapped in a leather belt of shiny brass ammunition. Try as she did, she could not hide her grin. Old Sully had purposely slammed the gun on the counter in hopes of riling Tom, who Sully adamantly despised most of the time. He definitely succeeded, both with Tom and everyone else sitting at the bar near him. He flashed a wink at Jo.

"You sorry piece of—" Tom started.

"Hold on there, youngun'," Sully smiled. He knew exactly how to upset Tom. "There's ladies present. Besides, it's yur damn rules that I hafta check my gun, so here it is."

"Give me the knife, too, you old—"

"Bowie," Sully interrupted. "It ain't jes' a knife, junior. It's a genuine Bowie . . . junior. A genuine Ar-Kansas toothpick." Sully, amiably pulled the fourteen-inch Ar-Kansas toothpick out of its sheath, and with a quick flick of his wrist spun it into a high speed propeller. Flashes of the chrome blade were intermittently broken by the heavy Moose antler handle. As miraculous as the spin was, so was the catch when he fearlessly reached into the deadly propeller and caught it by the handle. He gently laid it on the counter as though daring Tom to make a comment.

"Don't call me junior," Tom growled. "And I keep telling you, it's Colorado law. You can't wear guns and knives into banks, bars, churches, or casinos." Tom sneered at Sully as he put the gun and knife below the bar and into a small safe. He knew Sully was only trying to attract attention. He wished he had the nerve to tell Sully to get out of the casino but he also knew that no one would back him up if he did. Sully was well-liked, more as an out of place, out of time curiosity, and shy of harassing Tom, Sully didn't bother anyone else.

*Mutual animosity*, Jo thought, as she winked back at Sully. It was a dangerous game to play and she was glad she wasn't part of it. Sully's bright, blue eyes almost sparkled as he flashed Jo a warm but mischievous smile. Jo didn't know why, but she dearly loved the hunched over, worn out, beaten-down old miner.

The gambler beside Sully moved to another machine and Sully quickly offered the seat to Jo.

"Go ahead," she answered, "I've been sitting all day."

He flagged Tom for two beers then sat down as he glanced around quickly and shaking his head at the noisy slot machines. "Girl," his voice was gruff, "I can remember back when this buildin' was one of the first gambling houses in these parts. Dang but it was fun back then. Livin' was a helluva challenge, but we made up fer it by playin' as hard as we worked." He rubbed his week-old shiny-white stubble as he remembered the past. "No matter how bad it got we still had lots to be thankful fer. Nowadays people jes' ain't the same."

She watched him looking around at the people and couldn't help but think that he was really watching a memory playing in his mind's eye. She had known Sully for less than a year but from the first moment they met she respected him. He was a survivor. He always teased her that she came too late 'on the scene of his life', and if he was a 'tad' bit younger he would've 'laid claim' to her immediately.

"Jo, fer well over eighty years I been walkin' into this old town to get my beer and whiskey, but I'm honestly thinkin' 'bout givin' it up." As always, his sparkling blue eyes held mysteries beyond what she could ever imagine.

"Quitting?" she repeated, shocked.

"I'm gettin' danged tired of everone's rotten attitude. Seems like folks oughtta be glad fer the work that's come back to the Creek. But they ain't. Everone's still a pissin' and a moanin', and it's makin' me downright sick!"

She never noticed before how he said Creek like ick. She shook her head at the comparison. She knew exactly what he was talking about. She too was disturbed that everyone was complaining so much. After all, they should be glad for the work, glad for the income, and glad for the improvements in the area, thanks to Gaming revenues. Instead, it seemed like most of the locals were more discontented now than before. Jo hoped it was just a phase. *Maybe it's the moon.* She shook her head to herself as she watched Jessie approach them. Jessie was tired from a long day's work and ready to enjoy the evening.

"I know what you mean, Sully," Jo agreed. "Its got me down, too."

"Then whatta we do 'bout it?" he snapped, slamming his beer on the bar like he did his gun. A splash of beer leaped straight up out of the bottle, suspended itself two feet above it, then promptly disappeared right back where it came from. They burst out laughing, knowing no one would ever believe it if they hadn't seen it with their own eyes.

"Getting rowdy, Sully?" Jessie teased as she hugged him from behind. She sat next to Sully, unclipped the Gaming Support license from her black shirt collar and tucked it into her black shirt pocket, the same black that matched her black jeans and black shoes. The concealed Support license indicated she was finally off duty and ready for a couple of drinks. As methodically, she removed her red bandana, folded it, and slid it into another pocket. Her short, wavy, dark-brown hair matched her dark eyes.

She ordered her drink, a vodka and cranberry juice, and let out a deep sigh as she watched people in the cramped casino. "Thank heaven I'm not working tonight. The day's been a pistol!"

Before anyone responded, Jessie quickly jumped up from the bar stool and laid claim to a newly vacated table and pushed it closer to their favorite spot in front of the large picture-windows facing Bennett Avenue. Just as quickly, she found three more chairs to add to the four already there then waved for Jo and Sully to join her. They all loved to relax at the end of the day, sip their drinks and watch the people strolling up and down Bennett. The prospective gamblers all had a look as if they were being led by an invisible guide toward the right casino that would bring them their big jackpot.

Abigail Dougherty, a Johnny Nolan's aspiring cashier but current change girl, was the first to join them. Most of the casino's change girls wore the attire from back in the late 1800's and looking inside from the street, the women oftentimes resembled the prostitutes of times gone by. All the casinos were painted and decorated in the colors of the past, and Nolan's was no exception. The big dark bar, white pillars, light-mauve colored walls, and decorative gold trim all matched perfectly with the old dresses of the past. Sully always teased that Nolan's looked more like a brothel than a casino.

Abby plopped herself down in the chair nearest the large, double entry doors and picture window as she waited for her free end-of-shift drink. She was exhausted and her feet and back ached after wearing the thirty-five-pound change belt for eight hours. "Gawd, can you believe it?" Abby groaned, in her thick Oklahoma accent as she quickly brushed at the wispy, gray bangs across her forehead, "they're talking about replacing us with automated changers. What a bitch. If I don't get that cashier job soon, I'll be out of work. Damn!"

Abby adjusted the low slung shoulders of her floral gabardine dress, then yanked the floor-length skirt aside, revealing her short muscular legs from mid-thigh down. She pulled a vacant chair in place with her booted foot then propped both feet up on it. She was only five-foot one-inch tall, and the top of the laced, high-heeled, brown leather boots nearly reached her kneecap. Abby winked at Sully who was admiring her legs then she tossed the long, gabardine skirt back over her legs.

*If women still wore guns, she would be one of them,* Sully thought, as he smiled at her.

"You dirty old man, whatcha starin' at?" Abby laughed, slapping Sully's arm.

Sully grinned sheepishly, "Now that's a stupid question. I was starin' at yur legs. Yur purty little legs! Whatcha spec me to do?"

Jo was amazed that no matter how tired Abby was, she never lost her smile. Her short, gray hair would lose its bounce, her soft blue eyes would fade to gray, but her smiles and laughter were warm, tireless, and inviting.

"I'm gawd awful beat," Abby groaned as she leaned back to stare at the original hammered-tin ceiling. For a moment Jo thought she was looking for stray bullet holes from days gone by.

"Hey, Abby," Tom shouted from behind the bar, "here's your drink!" He could've carried the drink to Abby, as most bartenders would've, but not Tom, not for an employee.

Before anyone could move, Sully was already on his feet, had retrieved the glass and handed it to her like a professional waiter.

"Thank you, Sully. You're a dear."

"I'm jes lookin' out fer my retirement benefits," he explained. "You girls a gonna hafta look after me when I quit findin' gold, and that ain't long off."

She raised her drink to him and toasted, "Here's to poverty!"

"Auto-changers, huh?" Jesse chuckled. "I think they need auto-cops, too."

"Don't laugh," Abby answered, "they'll do anything to save a buck. That's why none of the casino's give free drinks to the gamblers like they do in Las Vegas."

"Yeah," Jessie agreed, "and it really ticks folks off after they've driven all the way up here to find that out."

"Then the patrons take it out on us and we hardly get any tips, even from the big winners."

Jo sighed to herself. It seemed lately, that no matter what, every conversation turned to work sooner and sooner, and people, both employees and patrons, were getting more and more disgruntled. She wondered if the thrill of gaming was wearing off.

Abby was overly sensitive about other people's perceptions of her, a forty-nine-year-old change girl. What they didn't know was that six months earlier her husband of thirty-one years had left her for a younger woman. Because Elliot could afford a shark of a divorce attorney, he was able to leave her nearly penniless as well as homeless. Elliot had also been able to turn both of their children against her, which made for a more lonely life than she ever dreamed possible.

She had just turned eighteen and was fresh out of high school when they got married, but now for the first time in her life she was discovering what it meant to be a working woman and making it on her own. It was a task that wasn't easy to do, especially starting out in mid-life. Today she was especially resentful about being called a 'Change Girl'. She didn't think the word 'girl' was appropriate, at least not at her age.

Jessie was trying to convince her that nothing was meant by it and looked to Jo for support when she realized, as usual, that Sully and Jo were off in another world, drinking their beer and watching the gamblers.

"I'm a wunderin'," Sully asked Jo, as he leaned closer to her, trying to keep his voice low but loud enough to be heard over the casino din, "I'm a wunderin' why, if they's so miserable workin' up here, why keep talkin' 'bout the job?"

"I don't get it either," Jo answered, pushing her hair back again.

"Back in my day we called it 'wallowin' in the pity-pit'. I guess thing's the same now, ey?"

"Sounds like it."

"Sorry we're late," Dona greeted from behind Sully as she patted him on the shoulders. Her soft, almost flowing southern bell of an accent was unmistakable. She had bumped into Bernie outside and they walked in together. Dona and Bernie both worked for Jo, but that night they were off and boasting that they were ready to get down and party. To them, 'partying' consisted of a couple of drinks then off to their respective homes and to an early bed.

Jo chuckled at the many different ways women like Dona, Bernie, Jessie and Abby, as well as herself, tried to maintain the expected façade of outgoing, wild and crazy women, when in truth, they just wanted good conversation, a few laughs, then a safe trip home.

Dona glanced around to see if she recognized anyone else nearby. "The line gets longer and longer through that damned one-way tunnel," she explained absentmindedly, hoping to recognize someone. "When are they going to do something about it?"

Jo agreed. "I heard they've got plans to blast it out and replace it with the normal two lanes of Highway 67."

"If they did that," Dona added, still half paying attention, "I bet it would shave at least twenty minutes off the drive. Good Lord, it takes nearly forty-five minutes to go eighteen miles as it is now."

"How do ya do it?" Sully asked Dona, as he patted the empty chair beside him for her to sit down. "I mean ya always look like one of them highfalutin' fashion models in them magazines."

"Oh, Sully, you big flirt," Dona grinned as she sat down.

Dona Jensen was a fun, likable fifty-eight-year-old widow. She was short, five-foot tall, a bit on the petite side, had short stylish, salon cared for gray hair, and tattooed eyebrows and eye liner. And with her beautiful acrylic nails no one would ever guess that she worked on a cleaning team. She had taken early retirement from a prestigious position at Rockwell International, a major computer electronics firm in Colorado Springs. She would have worked for several more years but she needed to spend more time with her husband, Bob, after he had been diagnosed with lung cancer. Unfortunately, his prognosis was much shorter than anticipated and his early death left her alone far sooner than she was ready to deal with.

At Rockwell, Dona had been the head of accounting for over twenty-eight years and couldn't find a job that compared with it, neither professionally nor financially, and she resented that she couldn't go back to work for Rockwell. In the end, she went to work for Jo, certainly not for the measly ten dollars an hour, but because it was a new experience. The people were fun to work with, the hours were short, and she was able to escape the emotional ravages of the long, lonesome nights. To her, anything was better than staying home.

Bernie grabbed the chair between Dona and Jessie, spun it around then sat down and rested her arms on the back of it. She knew it shocked people to see a woman saddling up like a man, but she didn't care. In fact, she did it for effect. "It'd be a shame if they got rid of that old tunnel," she explained, "it's on Colorado's historic list."

Dona was always shocked at Bernie's social rebellion and rather than comment on it she simply ignored her as she pretended to check her perfect acrylic, designer fingernails with imbedded flags. They were her Patriotic nails, done for the holiday. "What do you think, girls?" she asked, showing off her fingernails.

Bernie shook her head, "You got more sets of fingernails than most kids have toys."

Jessie laughed, "Those *are* her toys."

Dona frowned at Bernie, "Don't shake you head at me sweetie, after all you've got purple shoestrings in your hair."

Sully winked at Dona, "I think them nails are downright purty."

Bernie had a unique story of her own, one she kept to herself. Christened Bernadette Simms, she was four years younger than Dona, but looked at least ten or more years older. She, along with Sully, were what Jo called the 'real secrets' of Cripple Creek. Bernie also worked for Jo and demanded to be paid in cash because she refused to give her social security number. Jo knew it was illegal, but she liked Bernie and decided to go along with it. Besides, she didn't have much of a choice since she was always in desperate need of employees.

Bernie wore old torn-up blue jeans, faded cowboy shirts, and cowboy boots that were splitting at the seams. Her cracked leather belt was at least twelve inches too long for her slender waist and the loose end hung down nearly to the middle of her left thigh. Occasionally, she would tie back her long, brownish gray hair with brightly colored ribbons, but, for the most part, she tied her pony-tail over the top of her head, and wove anything from dog harnesses to shoestrings to a bicycle chain to hold it in place. Like everything else, she did it to shock people, and shock them she did, but she could care less what anyone thought about her. If that wasn't enough, her looks were always accentuated by the gaudiest eyeglasses she could find in the dumpsters as well.

The locals called her 'Dumpster Bernie' behind her back because she was constantly seen climbing in and out of the big, metal trash dumpsters scavenging for unknown treasures. What most people didn't know was that she repaired broken and discarded items then donated them to the homeless shelters in Colorado Springs. Jo couldn't figure her out either. Bernie was very well-spoken, smart, obviously well-read and educated, yet it seemed that Bernie pretended to be someone else. One day Bernie called herself an escapee from society, which to Jo said it all.

"Hey you old coot," Bernie challenged Sully, "what about me?"

"Whatcha mean?" Sully answered curiously.

"If Dona's a fashion model, what about me?"

"Dang, what aboutcha?" Sully laughed. "I've known ya fer a year and still cain't peg ya."

"Old man, you couldn't peg me with a hard on!" Bernie shot back, slapping her knees as she laughed.

The women were shocked at her comment but laughed with her. Jo figured Bernie must have begun her societal rebellion somewhere very close to birth.

"I see Bernie's in rare form," Jessie warned.

"I'm puzzled," Bernie began, "why's everyone want the Midland tunnel removed?"

"It has a name?" Abby asked.

"Originally," Bernie explained, "the Midland Railroad went from Colorado Springs to Cripple Creek, but in 1924 it was auctioned off. The county then had the old rail bed removed and it eventually became Highway 67. The tunnel's an important part of the area's history."

"History, smistory, I need a drink," Dona blurted. "Come on Bernie." Dona took Bernie by the arm and went to the bar to order.

"Gawd, I never knew that about the tunnel," Abby answered.

No one knew it, except Sully and Bernie, but it wasn't his way to give history lessons to a bunch of purty women, as he called them.

Jessie was still thinking about the tunnel. "Too bad they can't just widen it. I've seen busses get stuck in there."

"Hell," Jo offered, "I've seen at least three fistfights in that tunnel because someone jumped the signal light and halfway through couldn't back out when the other traffic started in."

Abby nodded knowingly, "I think the worst is driving home with the rest of the drunks from here." She herself, on too many occasions, had driven home after drinking too much, but she rationalized it by not being a fast driver and she pulled over every time someone wanted around her. The real danger was the people who, after a few drinks in the high elevation, thought they were on the Monte Carlo circuit, and there were a lot of them.

A few minutes later Anna May Botts joined them. Unlike the others, when she said she was ready for a party, that's exactly what she meant. She was off work for the night and geared for rowdiness, real rowdiness. She was known for drinking too much and sleeping in her car nearly as often as she did in the little room she rented in Woodland Park.

Anna May, seeking a quick fortune in the casinos, moved to the Rocky Mountains from Florida. She was thirty-two years old, five-foot nine inches tall and too skinny. Her long golden-brown hair was either loose and flowing or tied back as though she was an Army Drill Sergeant. This evening her hair was down, which added a hint of softness to her otherwise intense features. Interestingly, she also seemed to have a

natural hate for men yet no attraction for women, and anyone who knew her, even slightly, could tell that she was dangerous to be around when mad.

She was a porter at Nolan's and cleaned slot machines, ashtrays, toilets and more, but it was only temporary, she reminded everyone. She took the job until she could get her Gaming Support license which would enable her to land a better paying job. A Gaming Support license enabled the holder to take on a higher paying job that involved the handling of gaming funds, to a limited degree. The license cost one hundred dollars, which mostly paid for a limited Background Security Check. However, the more prestigious Key license cost one thousand dollars, required a more in-depth Background Security Check, and allowed the holder greater access to gaming funds and jobs with more decision-making responsibilities. Of course, the pay was much higher as well.

Anna May had her eye on a security job down at the soon-to-be opening, classiest casino in town, Calamity Jo's. Calamity Jo's however, was getting mixed reviews while still under construction. Some people agreed with its elegant decor, while others said that wild and rowdy decor would ensure its success. No one would know how it was going to fare until after it opened in September, two months away, but it was where Anna May wanted to work.

Until she got her Support license, which should be any day, she was a woman with a cause who wore tight jeans, lacy western shirts, and new, brightly polished cowboy boots with real silver toe-tips that matched her decorative concho belt. To match all that she had an attitude ten times bigger than life itself.

Anna May shouted at Tom for a fresh round of drinks. "Hey Dickhead, we need a round of drinks over here!" Looking back at the table she grumbled, "That son-of-a-bitch thinks he's God's gift to women." She said it loud enough to be heard by him.

"Your problems is," Tom said as he brought the tray of drinks to the table, "that you're attracted to me, doll."

"Just like I'm attracted to fuckin' spiders, you fool."

Again laughter abounded.

"Yeah, you'd better bring those drinks to this table," she chastised. "I had a talk with your boss about your lazy ass."

"See," he grinned to everyone, "she loves me."

Within minutes they were all sharing their latest complaints, comparing notes on who or what was the worst so and so, what the lousiest job was, and in general, how bad everything was.

Sully was exasperated with their complaining. "If things are so bad why spend yur hard earned nickels in a place ya cain't stand?"

"Good question," Abby agreed. *He's right. Gawd, but we need something new to talk about. I think I'll spark up the evening . . . just a little bit.* "Instead of complaining, I

should be plotting. Every time I go into the cage I could palm a stack of hundreds and no one would be the wiser."

"Jesus, Abby!" Jessie scolded over the casino din. "Keep your voice down!"

"Cage?" Sully asked.

"The cashier's cage," Abby explained, leaning a little closer to Sully and trying to talk softer.

"Darlin', you're just dreaming," Dona teased, enjoying her drink and watching everyone. Occasionally she'd nod to one of the younger, better looking men in the casino. She was a flirt, but that's usually as far as it ever got.

Abby grinned mischievously at Sully, "The stacks have a hundred bills in 'em. That's ten thousand bucks a whack. It wouldn't take me any time at all to get what I need. In fact, I could do it all in one shift."

"That's impossible," Anna May challenged. "We all know that the cage has cameras."

"Yes, they do," Abby countered, "but Nolan's cameras don't work."

"Bull!" Anna May answered in disbelief.

"Really!" Abby argued. "Just ask Jessie. She knows all about it."

"Keep your voice down!" Jessie snapped at Abby again. "For crying out loud!"

"Is that true?" Bernie asked Jessie, trying to keep her voice down.

"Well, close, but not—"

"Gawd, Jess," Abby defended, "tell them the truth so they don't think I'm just blowing smoke."

"Actually, it's the cabling," Jessie explained, as she leaned in toward the center of the table so the others could hear her. "When the cabling and wiring were installed during construction last year it was done wrong."

"You're shittin' me!" Anna May declared. "All these cameras don't work?"

"Anna May, for God's sake," Jessie scolded, "put a cap on your big mouth!" Jessie glanced around then back at the others. "And no, just the cage cameras don't work. Nolan's and the Gaming Commission have been going around and around about this for three months, ever since Gaming found out about it. That's why Nolan's is so protective about who gets access to the cage."

"See, I told you," Abby smiled at Anna May sarcastically. *One for the Christian, nill for the Lion!*

"So what're they gonna do?" Anna May asked as quietly as her excited-self could.

Jessie shook her head. She didn't know if she should be telling them or not. "It seems they're going to be running the cabling out on the exterior of the walls and up to the second floor security office where the VCR's are."

"That's really secure," Jo stated, sarcastically. Coming from a background of engineering design and construction she knew far more than the others did about the

topic. "Exterior cabling is extremely vulnerable, but then again, that's about the norm up here."

"I shouldn't even be telling you this," Jessie commented, keeping her voice down as low as the casino noise would permit.

Dona couldn't help but be worried about Jo. She seemed so lackluster lately. "Jo, honey, what's wrong. You seem a little down."

Jo released a deep sigh, "I'm just fed up with . . . with everything I guess. I pay twice the hourly wage up here but no one wants to work. The work ethic has gone straight to hell. I bust my butt filling in for the lazy asses who don't want to work and I'm as fed up with it as you guys are with your lives."

"I'm not fed up with my life," Anna May countered, "but when you do it, Abby, grab a stack of bills for me, too."

"Me, too," Bernie challenged. "Hell, get enough for all of us."

Everyone laughed, then suddenly the laughter stopped and they all exchanged glances, wondering what the others were thinking.

Bernie couldn't hide her grin. "Hey, Abby, if you're gonna do it, why not do it once big time instead of a piddle here and a piddle there."

"Now yur talkin'," Sully answered.

Jo swore she could see his eyes light up.

"Jesus!" Jessie snapped, nervously searching the casino. She lowered her voice again, "All you guys, knock it off! We could get thrown in jail just for talking about it!"

"Don't get your tits in a twist. It's just idle talk," Anna May droned as she finished her whiskey and caught Tom's eye. "Hey, Dickweed, we need another round!"

Dona shook her head at Anna May. "Sweetheart, why do you have to be so rude to Tom. He's just doing his job."

"And so am I," Anna May bit back.

Jessie was clearly worried about the robbery conversation. She again leaned in toward the center of the group. "Remember when they arrested Dirk two months ago? All he was doing was talking about it, too."

"Dirk was an idiot!" Sully quipped. "You gals got more smarts in yur baby toes then he had in his whole danged body."

Everyone laughed.

"By the way," Abby asked, swallowing the last gulp of her drink, "what exactly was he arrested for? He didn't do anything that I know of."

Bernie leaned in, "He planned a toxic waste thing, right?"

Again Jessie leaned toward the center of the table, slowly getting the others to join in. Although the noise in the casino was loud, very loud, she was still afraid that the wrong person would overhear their conversation. "Dirk planned a hazardous spill outside of town which would've caused a mass evacuation. Then, with the police diverted away from town, Dirk intended to rob a casino."

"So big deal," Anna May droned, "it was just hot air."

"Jess is right, though," Bernie agreed. "This is a pretty ignorant conversation, that is if we could get busted for just talking about it. I mean we're talking about robbing a casino. Right?"

"It's a danged crazy idea, but Gawd," Abby leaned back in her chair and stared off into nothingness, "I know exactly what I'd do with the money. I'd leave this damned mountain, and I'd fix it so I wouldn't have to ever work again."

"Oh yeah?" Dona asked, interested. "How would you do that, darlin'?"

"I'm a woman, ain't I? I mean, I'd have the money to find me a man who could take care of me. A woman ain't meant to be alone in her later years. It just ain't right."

"Yeah, sure," Anna May murmured, sipping her second whiskey, "dream on."

"I'd go to Mexico," Dona boasted, joining in on Abby's dream. "I'd live on the beach and dance myself into oblivion with the sexiest men around." She rolled her eyes as she watched the scene in her mind.

Sully laughed, "Ain't no use partyin' alone, girl. If yur bent on Mexico, be sure an' take someone with ya."

"Why Sully, dear," Dona exclaimed, "I didn't know you were interested."

"Interested, yeah. Capable? Nah, don't think so."

Everyone broke into laughter.

Bernie thought for a moment then said, "I think I'd travel and see the sights. First, I'd go to the Yucatan to see the ruins at Chichen Itza then maybe go on down to Macchu Pechu in Peru." Bernie envisioned herself standing on a ledge overlooking the mountain-high ruins in South America.

"Macho what?" Anna May exclaimed. "Hell, sounds exotic, whatever it is. I'm game. I'd rather travel now than wait 'til I'm too damned old to." Anna May envisioned Bernie standing over ancient ruins wearing a safari hat with a hole cut in the center-top where her ponytail flowed up out of it like an inverted waterfall. She saw a colorful bow tied around the ponytail and envisioned Bernie wearing a chain of paperclips around her wrist. Anna May shook the thought from her mind. *Jesus, now I'm getting crazy like the rest of them.*

Jo smiled at her own visions. "I'd like to see all the sights from Colorado down to the tip of Argentina, then back up again. Remember how we talked about doing that one day, Jess?"

Jessie shook her head. "I hope prison completes your visions of grandeur." Jess imagined all six of the women being escorted into a courtroom wearing bright orange jump-suits and diamond-studded handcuffs. Bernie even wore an orange shoelace to tie up her ponytail. Dona was wearing matching orange fingernail polish. Anna May was wearing orange sandals and Abby wore orange boots. In the courtroom spectators lined the wall like slot machines, and the patrons booed the ladies as they entered, yet another row of change girls cheered rowdily. Jessie tried to shake the image from her

mind. "We'd be running for our lives, never mind visiting exotic, ancient ruins. Besides, we could never come back. What's wrong with all of you? Jo, if your dad was alive, he'd talk some sense into you."

Jo laughed heartily, "And if my mom was here she'd be the one orchestrating this whole scheme. 'We may never pass this way again, let's not miss this opportunity'," Jo recited in a perfect imitation of her mom which prompted peals of laughter from the others.

Sully slapped his leg. "I wish I coulda met her. She sounds like my kinda girl. Brave and darin'."

Dona teased, "Everyone's your kind of girl, Sully. I think I'm jealous."

Jessie leaned into the circle again, "We really shouldn't be talking like this. It's wrong and we know it."

Dona countered with another very ladylike laugh, "It's not wrong, just illegal, darlin'. None of us has a thing to lose. Abby's lost her man, I've lost mine, Bernie doesn't have any ties, you girls aren't hitched to anyone, and Anna May certainly doesn't have anything holding her to these mountains."

Abby grinned at Sully, "What about you?"

"I'm too old fer gallivantin' all over the world. I don't even reckon I could survive the news of your escapades." Sully's eyes darted from woman to woman then added, "but, I know more about these mountains than anyone, and I could tell ya where to stash the dough 'til the heat blowed over. Then I could tell ya how to get it outta here."

"For Pete's sake!" Jessie admonished, slamming her drink on the table. "We're going to talk ourselves straight into a jail cell, never mind a world trip. Wanting to travel and see the world is fine, everyone needs a dream, but robbing a casino isn't the way to do it!"

Bernie slapped her knee and laughed, "You're right! Why rob just one? Let's go all the way and do 'em all."

"Now ya got the right idea," Sully answered, pushing his stained cowboy hat further back on his head.

"Jesus, Sully, stop it!" Jessie snapped.

"Don't pick on him," Abby interrupted, "I'm the one who started this!" Abby's smile faded. "Jess is right. Not only is it a bad idea, we're just a bunch of women and don't have a clue about how—"

Dona hit the tabletop, grabbed her drink like a man would've then drawled, "Heck, we've all seen movies haven't we? Do ya mean to tell me that ain't none of us smart nuff to pull off the Casino Caper?"

That sent everyone into another round of giggles.

"What worries me," Jessie reflected, "is that we *could* do it. That's why it scares me to listen to this. We have to stop talking about it right now."

Jo agreed, as she stood to get Tom's attention for another round of drinks.

They all reluctantly agreed, but as the evening progressed, as much as they tried to avoid talking about the Caper, as it was now known, they constantly ended up on the subject, even if only with a look or a single word or gesture.

"You know," Anna May commented, after finishing her fourth whiskey, "I was thinking that we've got the best minds here if we decided to do it. Jessie's with Security and she knows it in and out. And Jo, well, you're always commenting about how your cleaning teams can come and go without anyone challenging them, and how you know every vulnerability in every casino."

"Anna May!" Jessie scolded. "We agreed to drop it."

"Sure, it's dropped, but I was just thinking out loud." She turned to Jo again, "Jo, who was it that got locked inside the cage at Diamond Lil's a couple months ago?"

"Steel House man!" Dona and Bernie laughed in unison. He was on their cleaning team and could vacuum faster and better than anyone.

Jo smiled, mostly to herself. "Now there's a character," she answered.

"Yeah," Bernie quipped, "and he didn't even get in trouble after that. Or did he?"

"No," Jo explained, "nothing was ever said. That next morning when the count-team arrived, they let him out of the cage, patted him down in case he took anything, and they all had a good laugh in the process."

Abby's laughter turned to a quick frown, "Why in hell do they call him the Steel House man anyway?"

"When he arrived in town in May," Jo began, "he didn't have any money, no place to stay, and well, you know the usual story for the transients up here. Anyway, he found an old trash dumpster down in Poverty Gulch and converted it to a 'nice little pad,' as he calls it." *The number of strange, interesting and unique characters in Cripple Creek was overflowing*, Jo mused, as the others got a good chuckle out of the tale.

"And," Bernie blurted, laughing at the story, "with a creek at his doorstep, he boasts of having running water, too."

Again everyone laughed.

Jessie knew who they were talking about. He had been arrested shortly after arriving at Cripple Creek, which is when the truth of his past was exposed. "He's some kind of genius who just finished his Doctorate in Psychology."

"That's the story," Jo agreed, remembering what he told her when she hired him. "He said he's taking the summer off to unwind before starting work back east somewhere."

"Genius?" Abby asked. "It doesn't take a genius to get a degree."

"No, but he's only nineteen," Dona remarked.

All evening there was a certain enigmatical energy in the air every time the Caper came up; an energy that they tried to deny, but mysteriously needed and wanted. The wheels were in motion, regardless of what any of them said. It could have been called the epitome of boredom, or perhaps it truly was boredom-induced biorhythm-madness roused to a critically dangerous level.

Whatever it was called, it was definitely a fun and crazy night that rolled on to eventually become one of the many holiday blurs, as the women called them. Blurs because of too much to drink, too much laughter, and for having gone on much too late. They weren't in the habit of closing down Nolan's but when it happened, the next day was hell to pay. At least they were all glad that Cripple Creek closed down at two in the morning.