

FATE\_\_\_\_\_

by Pristine Kathryn Rusch

She held a deck of cards in her left hand and cut it easily, sliding the top of the deck to the bottom. Her skin was pale white, her hair even whiter, and she wore a backless white evening dress. Grif could almost imagine her in the glassed-in cage on the lower levels, astride the white tigers.

Around him, the clink, clink of coins echoed from the slot machines. Occasionally a buzzer would ring and a red light would flick on and off. The murmur of conversation almost covered the Christmas muzak.

The casino had stuck mistletoe to the plants running along the ceiling, but no one noticed. Not even the hotel patrons who wandered through the casino, following a wide swatch of carpet leading to the elevators. The rooms above, several thousand of them, were all done in jarring jungle motifs. Outside a fake volcano spit fire at sunset, and inside half a dozen animals paced the basement waiting for their turns in the glassed-in cages so that bleary eyed patrons could go to the zoo without leaving the hotel.

She seemed impervious to the bizarre surroundings.

She didn't fit, despite her expertise with the cards.

Grif pushed past an obese man clutching a bucket full of nickels- She sat on a stool just outside the ring of blackjack tables, watching the patrons play. The casino was nearly empty tonight—only the hard-core

230 Kristine Kathryn Rusch

gamblers and the loners haunted a casino on Christmas Eve—and would remain so until the New Year's crowd started to appear on December 27th.

Grif liked to think he didn't belong in either category—hard-core gambler or hard-core loner—yet here he was, on the strip in Vegas, as if it were any other Friday night.

He tugged the sleeve of his tux over his shirt cuffs, and rounded a row of one-armed bandits. She was still sitting there, cutting the deck over and over with her left hand.

He put his palm on her back, found the skin cooler than he imagined. "That's a great way to tip off the guys upstairs that you know your way around cards."

She didn't jump. Instead she looked up at him, a slow luxurious movement that sent a tingle through him. Her eyes were pale blue, almost colorless, but her features had a rounded Mediterranean cast. Her gaze continued past him to the camera lens hidden in the plants above him.

"I'm not hiding anything," she said. He half expected an accent, and was surprised when he didn't hear it.

"How come you're not playing?" he asked. He didn't take his hand off her back.

She smiled, revealing an even row of white teeth.

"I'm waiting for someone."

He sighed, touched the nape of her neck, then re-

moved his hand. She took his wrist between her fingers. Her grip was surprisingly strong. "But he's not here- Perhaps I could go with you, and be your luck,"

The tingle ran through him again, a wave of desire so thick he could hardly stand. "Maybe—" he stopped himself. His apartment was on the other side of town. He hadn't made the bed in weeks, and dishes filled the sink. Once it had been an-impressive place to take

FATE 231

women, but since his losing streak this fall, he let almost all appearances go.

Except the tux. It remained important for him to play Vegas casinos as if he were in Monte Carlo. It lent an air of dignity to a life with little dignity left.

"What's the lady's preference?" he asked.

She dropped the deck of cards into the small beaded clutch purse she was carrying. "Craps," she said.

And that time he did hear it. A faint lilt that spoke of romance languages and ancient cities beside the sea, of years gone by when casinos were more than a hobby, more than a place to spend Friday nights. He had quit the circuit with two million dollars in several banks. Investments had built that up to five million, and last fall's losing streak brought him down to four. One fifth of all he owned, gone in a heartbeat. That happened to careless men, not to Grif Petrie.

He touched the wad of bills in his pocket—more than enough to impress a lady—then extended his arm. She took it, her touch sending a chill through

him. Maybe after a bit of luck, he would get lucky. He smiled a little to himself. On Christmas Eve, the hotel was nearly empty. He would get a high-roller's suite on the twenty-fifth floor. They were garish too, but impressive garish with a view of the entire city. Grif led her to the only operating craps table, where a tall man wearing a stetson and cowboy boots played with a row of five-dollar chips, and a woman beside him hid in a puff of smoke. Occasionally she would snake an arm out and place a dollar chip on a sucker bet, swearing as she lost. Grif pulled ten hundred dollar bills from his money clip and tossed them in front of the dealer. He spread them out, then counted ten hundred dollar chips, and set them on the table. The stickman shoved them over to Grif and Grif put one on the pass line, and placed the others in the groove

232 Kristine KathTyn Rusch

above the table. The boxman gave Grif an odd glance. The boxman usually handled the late-night poker tables; he had never seen Grif play anything but cards. The stickman pushed the dice in front of Grif. He offered them to the lady, but she shook her head. Then he tossed them at the end of the table. He rolled three sevens before rolling a ten and placing some of his winnings on the come line. Then he upped his bet, rolled five tens, a nine and a six, placing the winnings beside his original stash.

"You are my luck,"\* he said to her, his hands shaking.

The cowboy at the end of the table was following Grif's betting strategy. The woman lost her pile of dollar chips and left. The noise from the table attracted a few other players, and Grif continued his streak, with the stickman calling him the hottest shooter of the night.

Finally, after he had turned his thousand dollar stake into five thousand dollars with only hundred dollar bets, he rolled another seven, and lost the point. The collective groan around the table echoed through the casino. The cowboy lost five hundred on the bet, pocketed the rest of his earnings and left. A young man with the intensity of a compulsive gambler plucked the dice off the table. Grif cashed in his chips, took his lady's arm, and left.

"Quitting so soon?" she asked.

"I don't want to press my luck." Craps were fun, but not a professional's game. The dice were as fickle as a woman.

She smiled and shrugged. "Little blackjack?"

"Maybe later." He put his arm around her back.

"First we got some winnings to celebrate."

She seemed to understand his meaning. She accom-

FATE 233

panied him through the lush greenery to the registration desk.

"This'll only take a minute," he said.

She nodded. He went up to the desk, asked for, and got a suite. While the registration clerk gathered

all the pertinent information, Grif stared at the aquarium covering the wall behind the desk. Fish moved at a leisurely pace, not caring that it was Christmas, not caring that people were making or losing money in the rooms beyond. He wondered what it was like working here, with the heat of the fish tanks adding humidity to the air, and then decided he didn't want to know. He had never held a real job. His father had taught him to count cards at the age of ten. By the time he could legally go into a casino, he was already an experienced high stakes poker player, and a successful card counter. He had gotten out, as his father had trained him to, when he had enough to live on for the rest of his life, but the boredom got to him. And that was why he came to Vegas, why he returned to the casinos, and probably why he had been losing. Losing was a treat.

The clerk used a little machine to punch the room combination in a pair of plastic room cards. Maybe he thought losing was a treat because he could find no other rationale for his behavior. He had been away from the tables for six months, and in that time his hands shook and nothing interested him- Clarisse, when she left him, called him a sick fuck and a compulsive gambler, but compulsive gamblers don't earn and save over five million dollars in the space of ten years. He had told her that and she had laughed at him, and continued to move out.

He took back his gold Visa card, and the room

cards the clerk slid to him. Then he turned. His lady was talking to a tall, broad-shouldered man wearing south-of-the-border denim. Grif's shoulders tensed, all the good feeling from the win disappearing under a layer of panic.

"Found him," she said.

Grif nodded and was about to step away when she put her hand on his arm.

"Cal Dooley," the big man said, extending his hand.

"Grif Petrie." Grif took the man's hand, noting the firmness of the grip, the calluses on the fingers. Somehow he couldn't picture this woman with this man.

"Good," she said. "Now that we have introductions, I'm going to the ladies room. I'll meet you gentlemen in the bar beside the blackjack tables."

Grif slipped the room cards in his pocket beside the full money clip.

"Some woman, hey?" Cal said. "I told her I always come here Christmas Eve, and what does she do but fly across an entire ocean and half a continent to meet me."

Grif swallowed, and nodded, unable to see the attraction. She was slender and aristocratic. He was rough and crude, an LBJ Texas farmer. Money probably. Grif had seen enough women over the years hang onto men with money so that the women could travel to exotic places, lose lots of cash at sucker craps or

roulette, and wear expensive clothes.

Cal started through the breezeway leading to the back portion of the casino, "Met her in Italy last summer. One hell of a drink of woman. Alli's short for Alcina, did she tell you that? Give you one of those lines about the fates?"

"She said she'd be my luck," Grif said, trying to keep the misery from his voice.

"She can be that, too. Damn if I didn't win close  
FATE 235

to a million dollars last summer having Alii by my side."

"We had a good run at the crap table tonight," Grif said.

They entered the bar and took a table without a video poker display on top. The chairs were leather and Grif sank into his as if all the energy had left him. Usually winning highs stayed with him, but he was striving for a sexual high—and he knew he'd missed it by the space of a few minutes.

"Glad to see her here," Cal said. "She'll add a touch of spice to my holiday. Sure as hell surprised me."

"She said she was meeting you."

"Hmm." Cal signaled a waitress. "She didn't let me know. Just appeared here, sure as you please. Always knew that girl came from money- But between us, I didn't expect to ever see her again—and especially not smiling. We didn't part on the best of terms—"



"I see you're making yourselves at home." Alii slipped into the chair between them. Her skin seemed fresher, her eyes sparkled more. Grif sank deeper in the leather. A woman in love.

"You fucked up, hon. You didn't tell poor Grif here about the fates."

She looked at Grif, then took his hand and played with his fingers. Cal watched, smile remaining. Grif felt himself grow hard. He couldn't pull away. "We've only known each other a short time." She let go of his hand and put hers on his thigh, her fingers tracing the sensitive skin. "Cal got sick of me talking about it. Why do you want me to tell Grif?"

"So I don't have to hear it the rest of the holiday."

Cal got up. "I'll go see what's keeping that waitress."

Alii watched him go. "When I met Cat, I told him my name was Alcina, like the Fate, but that people

236 Kristine Kathryn Rusch

called me Alii. He thought I meant the Greek fates, and so one afternoon, he was explaining that to a group of his friends and I corrected him. He didn't like that."

"I didn't know there were other fates."

Alii shook her head. "You Americans should really rebel against your school systems. You get such a poor education. A fate, in my country, is like a dryad or a sprite. A wood or water spirit of great beauty and kindness, who will bestow good fortune on those it favors. But if someone treats it cruelly, well, the fate

will exact revenge—taking either that person's health, beauty, or good luck. Cal didn't like hearing that. I had embarrassed him in front of his friends. He has quite an ego."

Her fingers had moved up his thigh. Grif caught her hand in his. "If that's true, you'd better quit."

She smiled. "Oh, no. You'll see just how big soon.

He doesn't mind other men because he believes that no one can take his place."

"I know that no one can take my place." Cal set the drinks down—a rum-and-coke for Alii, a beer for himself, and a martini for Grif. "You didn't look like a man who went for a brew," Cal said.

Grif nodded, and took the martini. He needed something strong- The entire evening was making him feel odd.

"I saw you slip those room cards into your pocket," Cal said. "And Alii's got her eye on you. How's about we take these drinks upstairs, and see if we can keep the little lady occupied?"

Grif glanced at Alii, but she was already standing, drink in hand. Grif stood too, feeling wobbly. He thought he had done everything in his years gambling, but never had a couple approached him with such ease and assurance. He didn't want Cal there, but he did

FATE 237

want Alii as bad as he used to want a win. He suspected without Cal, he wouldn't get her at all.

They said nothing as they took the elevator to the

twenty-fifth floor. The suite was at the end of a long hallway painted in white, with green leaves and orange accents rising from the floor. The carpet was green and the room doors were done in a fake white wicker, giving everything a cool 1940s jungle look.

Grif opened the door to the suite and stepped inside. A row of floor to ceiling windows faced him, giving him a view of the city's lights. Wicker furniture covered the mirrored floor. To his left, a door opened to a huge bathroom complete with a Jacuzzi that sat ten. To his right, he could see into the bedroom. The bed was jumbo king-sized and rimmed in mirrors.

Not a suite made for sleeping.

Alii came in behind him and put her hand on his bottom. Desire made Grif dizzy, Cal closed the door and locked all the locks. "You got style, bud," he said.

On the table near the windows, a fruit basket sat with an unopened bottle of champagne beside it. Alii rubbed her body against Grif's, ran her hands forward along his hips, and cupped him, feeling his hardness. She made a small purring noise, then pushed him away.

"Why don't you turn down the bed, Grif?" she said.

"Cal and I will pour the champagne and join you in a minute."

They needed their privacy. They hadn't spoken alone since they linked up. Grif knew that he was being dismissed and didn't care. He wandered into the

bedroom and Alii closed the door behind him. He jumped a little but didn't lose the horniness that almost consumed him. He tugged off his shoes,

238 Kristvne Kathryn Rusch

FATE

239

cummerbund, and Jacket, then ran a hand along the satin coverlet.

The smoothness of the fabric made him harder. He couldn't picture what they would do there, the three of them, but he knew he would enjoy it, even though he usually didn't like sharing women. For a moment he hesitated, then he stretched himself full length on the bed. He wanted them to hurry. He wanted to feel her, all of her, naked against him—

A scream echoed from the front room, followed by a thud, and then another shout. The sounds shot through the haziness Grif felt. He sat up, heard another bang, and yanked the door open.

Blood coated the mirrored floor. Cal sprawled against the bar in the far corner, a bar stool toppled across his lap. His throat was a bloody pulp and his eyes were open, staring, unseeing.

A white tiger paced the room, blood on its muzzle.

Grits heart stopped for one panicked instant, then he forced himself to move. He grabbed the edge of the door and was about to slam it, when the tiger transformed itself into Alii.

She was naked. Her body was slender, perfect, with

melon sized breasts, and long legs that tapered into a pair of beautiful feet. Grif's desire returned so powerfully that he nearly dropped everything and went to her. Then she wiped the blood from her mouth with the back of her hand, and the moment was gone.

"Sorry," she said. "I owed him."

Grif swallowed. "That? You owed him that?"

"All we ask is a little gratitude," she said. "And all he did was take."

"We?" Grif's mind was beginning to function again.

He looked for the tiger, didn't see it. His grip on the door frame tightened.

She smiled and sat on the couch, crossing those delicious legs and giving him a view of her backside. "You Americans have no appreciation for subtlety. I'm a Fate, darling. We appreciate a little warmth in return for our kindness."

"The tiger?" he asked, unwilling to let go of the door until he knew what happened to the beast.

"What did your eyes tell you?" she asked.

He didn't respond. He had seen the tiger, and then he had seen her. And he hadn't believed it.

At his blank look, she sighed. "We're shapeshifters.

A white tiger was a bit more useful to me at that moment than a human woman."

It made some kind of crazy sense: the odd run of luck at a game he rarely played; the deep desire that controlled him more than any other he'd ever experienced; her knowledge of Cal's whereabouts even

though Cal hadn't spoken to her in six months; the blood on the back of her hand.

Cal's head slumped to the side. A trickle of blood ran down the stairs leading to the doorway.

Grif didn't move. Shutting the door wouldn't matter. She could change into some kind of bug and crawl underneath it. His heart was pounding in his throat—"What did I do to you?" he asked.

"Took my luck," she said.

He could hardly breathe. He wished he still carried a gun. She had to be a living creature, something he could kill. "What are you going to do to me?"

"Depends," she said. "I could leave now and call security- There's no way you could hide Cal. I wonder how many men still kill each other over beautiful women?"

"But I wasn't going to hurt you," he said. His voice had a whine in it he had never heard before. "I was going to bring you up here and—"

"Enjoy me, for your own sexual pleasure." She

240 Knstine Kathryn Rusch

stretched out on the couch, her body even more beautiful in repose.

The blood was beating in his head. He was trying not to move, trying not to go to her. The desire was back, stronger than ever, but he wouldn't let it swallow him. "When I first saw you," he said, "I warned you about your actions. I was afraid the men upstairs would throw you out."

Something ran across her face, something that made her eyes brighter for just an instant. "So you did," she said, and sat up. "So you did." She got up and came over to him. He could smell Cal's blood on her, but he didn't care. She tilted her face to his, and as he leaned into the kiss, she caressed his mouth with her fingers.

"How very unusual," she murmured. "You gave first."

They made love through that night and into the next morning. He wanted to continue, but she stopped, afraid that she would hurt him. "No," she said. "We have something else to take care of first."

She led him into the living room, and he stopped when he saw Cal. Grif had forgotten about Cal, forgotten, in the depths of his passion, about the strangeness of the night before.

His mouth went dry, and all the fear returned.

"We need to clean up," she said.

Grif stood for a moment, and stared at Cal. What had the man done to deserve a death like this? Did anyone deserve to die for being insensitive? Grif wanted to reach out to the other man, to talk to him, to convince him to change his ways. But it was already too late.

"Got a razor blade?" Alii asked.

FATE 241

"Hmmm?" Grif turned to her, feeling vulnerable without clothing.

"Never mind." She walked over to her clutch purse and removed a package of razors from it. Then she wiped the razor clean, placed it in Cal's fingers and ran it through the gape in his neck. His hand fell, the razor blade skittering from it. "Holiday time," she said to Grif over her shoulder. "Lots of suicides. No one will think twice."

He watched the deftness with which she moved. All the desire had fled him, and he was left with a deep tiredness and growing repulsion. "It's still my room. They're going to know—"

"No, they're not," she said. She pulled the dress over her body, then grabbed Cal's wallet from his jeans. As Grif watched, her body transformed into his, her clothes becoming his clothes, her skin becoming his. Only her eyes remained unchanged. "See?" Her voice was deeper—CaT's voice.

Grif began to shiver. He retreated into the bedroom and pulled on his clothes. He had seen strange things in casinos, but this was the strangest -

"Hurry," she called from out front.

As he went into the living room, he found her on the phone requesting that housekeeping skip the room today. "I'm entertaining and don't want to be disturbed." Seeing two Cals, the dead one and the imposter, was almost more than Grif could bear. Alii put down the phone and took Grif's arm. He resisted the urge to pull away. He didn't want her angry at him, too.



"Now," she said, "we need to get you out of this.

Just come with me."

She took his arm and led him out of the room. They walked side by side, silently, two men leaving a suite

242 Knstine Kathryn Rusch

where they had shared—something. Something horrible. Grif made himself stare ahead.

They took the elevators down, and once they were in the casino, AUi became completely Cal. She greeted people she didn't know with loud hellos. She spoke to stickmen and dealers, promising to return and to haul off most of the casino's money. She led Grif to the registration desk, and leaned over it.

"We got a room in my buddy's name," she said,

"and he's leaving. I want to take it over."

The woman behind the desk punched a few numbers in the computer, asked Alii questions, and she answered them all.

"You're Mister Petrie?" she asked Grif.

He nodded.

"And you didn't want maid service today?"

"It was a late night. One of my friends is still asleep." His voice was rough. He had to struggle to force it through his throat.

"All right, sir. Whose name will this be under?"

Alii pushed forward one of Cal's credit cards- As she signed the documentation, Grif started to leave.

She grabbed his arm. Her grip was surprisingly strong.

He remembered the blood on her hand.

"There we go," the registration clerk said. "Thank you for your patronage, Mr. Petrie, and Merry Christmas"

The words startled him. He nodded in response, then let Alii lead him outside. The volcano was silent. A group of Japanese tourists took pictures from the bridge over the small moat around the volcano.

"I frighten you, don't I, Grif?" Alii asked, no longer speaking in Cal's voice.

He turned. She stood beside him, still wearing Cal's south-of-the border denim, but in the female body that had attracted him and started this whole mess.

FATE

243

He didn't know how to answer her. If he lied she would probably know it, and yet he didn't want to be rude,

He would never be rude to anyone again.

"I—I don't know what to think about all this."

She smiled, and tucked a loose strand of his hair behind his ear. "You and I have flirted since you were ten years old, and you gained a lot from me. But it's time to let go, Grif."

He blinked, feeling the same confusion he had felt the night before.

"If you don't let go, you'll start expecting luck, and then demanding it, and then—" she shrugged, a graceful movement, "—well, look at Cal."

Grif had looked at Cal. He would never forget. "Is

that why you brought me here? To warn me?"

"So human. So egocentric." She smiled. "You brought yourself here. And you came to me, the attraction so deep you would do anything for me. Doesn't that scare you, Grif? There's a dead man in your room."

She leaned forward, kissed him, and even through his exhaustion, he would gladly have carried her back inside. But she pulled away, slid into Cal's body again, and disappeared through the revolving door.

Grif started after her, then stopped. If he chased her, she said, he would end up like Cal, dead on a mirrored floor in an anonymous hotel, an apparent suicide, alone for the holidays. Grif's hands were shaking like those of a man who had gone too long without a drink.

Behind him, the volcano exploded. He ducked and covered his head with his hands, then rose slowly, relieved that no one on the sidewalk had seen his action. A shower of flame and sparks rose in the morning sky. He had never seen the volcano go off in

244 Kristine Kathryn Rusch

the daytime before. It must have been a Christmas thing.

He glanced at the door, then turned away from it.

Maybe next year, he would be on some Hawaiian beach with some beautiful woman—a real woman—away from any cards, away from any temptation. He still had a lot of money. He could do whatever he

wanted—within reason.

He already knew he would never again do anything  
that would test his luck.