

So this must be the Paradise Club.

James knew that gambling was supposed to be illegal in England, and although this casino was hidden inside a disused factory, it was still big and noisy and obviously very popular. Hoping nobody would notice it was a little like hoping nobody would notice an elephant in Oxford Street. This meant nobody here had any fear of the police. Including the owner.

James decided he'd been here long enough. It was only a matter of time before somebody spotted him. He hadn't been expecting any of this. He wanted to get away and think things through.

He saw a door and headed towards it. It led into a smaller room, which, if anything, was even more packed and noisy than the first one. There was a makeshift boxing ring in the centre and two men were stripped to the waist having a bare-knuckle fight. Their faces were battered and gashed and they looked dead on their feet. The smartly dressed men and women in the front row were cheering loudly and laughing. Their clothing was spotted with blood.

James backed out and glimpsed another exit on the far side of the gaming floor. Two men stood guard, but they were checking the people coming in and ignoring anyone going out. James pushed through the crowds.

A laughing sailor offered him a beer, which he refused. A woman in a fur stole and pearl necklace winked at him and ruffled his hair. But he kept moving, weaving between the tables.

Then a man grabbed him. A short man in a cheap suit and shabby grey shirt. He had an unhealthy look about him. His small baggy eyes were unfocused, his hair lank and greasy, his nose broken. He had a cigar clamped between his teeth and appeared to be as drunk as everyone else.

'Hey, kid,' he said in a thick American accent. 'I need some good luck. You got a lucky face. Help me out here.'

'I was just leaving, actually,' said James.

'Yeah?' said the man and he smiled. As James tried to walk on, however, the man grabbed him again and waved a yellow gambling chip in his face.

'Look at this!' he said, 'I'm down to my last chip. Five English pounds. You know how much I came in here with? Five hundred.' He turned to a man at his side. A fat, pasty-faced fellow with receding hair. 'How much is that in real money. Abbadabba?' he said.

'Two thousand four hundred and thirty-five dollars.'

'You hear that?' said the American. 'Two thousand bucks down the swannee. Here...' He pressed the yellow chip into James's palm.

'Put it on the table for me, kid. Turn my luck around.'

'No,' said James, but the man leant in close and tightened his grip on James's arm. He was surprisingly strong and his fingers dug painfully into James's flesh.

'Nobody says "no" to me,' he murmured with a hint of menace. 'Now put this chip on the table. If you win I'll give you a cut. If you lose...' He raised his eyebrows and nodded at James.