

**Short Story by**

**R.G. Peterson**

# **Dead Man's Tell**

## **GNM Books**

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## Dead Man's Hand

I'm a professional gambler, Chancy Evans.

Samantha Summers, my housemate, best friend, and private eye, lacked work. It isn't easy or pleasant hanging with Sam when she's employed, but when she's bored, she'd annoy a corpse.

To save what little sanity I had left, I made plans to participate in a small poker tournament in Minnesota at the Canterbury Park Casino southwest of the Twin Cities. Sam thought it was a great idea. So much so, she invited herself along.

We took my Tesla and stopped in Tomah, Wisconsin – the halfway point between Milwaukee and Minneapolis – to recharge my car, and Sam to recharge her high metabolism. As she ate, Sam remained uncharacteristically quiet.

I broke into her thoughts, "What do you plan to do for the three days we'll be in the Cities?"

"I thought I'd enter the tournament," she said without a hint of sarcasm.

"No, really. What're you going to do?"

She ignored me.

"Seriously. What are you going to do for three days?"

"You know I don't like repeating myself."

"Fine. Do you have the thousand dollar entry fee?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"Really?"

She cocked her head slightly to the side and offered me dead eyes.

"You expect me to stake you," I said.

"Thanks," she said.

"Anything for my biggest fan."

"I don't think that last word means what you think it does."

"When we're back on the road, do you want me to give you some tips?"

"I've watched you play poker. It's not rocket science."

"But math *is* involved. You have to calculate the odds. Read your opponents. Know when to hold 'em. Know when to fold 'em."

Sam had just speared a forkful of her Waldorf salad, raised it toward her mouth and paused. She smiled and said, "That's rather lyrical and poetic. Maybe you should write songs for a living?" She shoved the salad into her mouth, then said, "Trust me. I can handle it."

Unwilling to hide my skepticism, I laughed.

Sam, her eyes at half-mast, stared at me until I shifted in my seat.

“At least let me tell you how to calculate the odds,” I said.

“Not necessary,” she said and went back to eating as she stared out the diner’s window.

“Suit yourself,” I said. “No pun intended.”

I was confident she’d last about ten minutes and lose all of her money. Meaning, all my money.

We made it to the casino around seven that night and checked into our adjoining rooms. I was still hanging up my clothes when Sam knocked on the door that separated our rooms, and announced she was heading down to the casino floor to study the people playing poker.

I joined her twenty minutes later. She was focused on the game and studying players, I didn’t think she noticed when I sat next to her. I should’ve known from past experiences I was woefully mistaken.

“Don’t say a word,” she said. “I’m cramming for an exam.”

After a few minutes, she whispered to me, “The guy in the dark blue shirt is bluffing. And the guy in the gray suit doesn’t know it. He has the winning hand with a pair of aces. One in his hand, the other showing on the table.”

I started to ask her how she knew the guy had an ace because his cards were face down, and, besides, he was sitting across from us, but she shushed me.

Blue Shirt raised Gray Suit, doubling the size of the bet. Gray Suit hesitated, then folded. The look on Blue Shirt’s face was as easy to read as a Berenstain Bears book. Sam had not only hit the nail on the head, but she’d countersunk it deep into the wood. Gray Suit tossed his cards on the table, face-up, showing he indeed had an ace among his hole cards. Blue Shirt’s smirk let the rest of us know how pleased he was for pulling off the bluff.

“How?” I asked.

Instead of answering my question, Sam said, “And all this time, you made it sound like it took talent.” She got up.

I followed, my ego dragging like a wagon with no wheels.

We got to the elevator and waited for it to arrive. As it did, the doors opened, and a man spasmed and staggered out, grasping his chest. “Pomogite. Ubiystvo,” he stammered, then fell face-first to the floor at our feet.

I bent over to help the man, convulsing on the dark red and black carpet, but Sam grabbed me by the arm and dragged me away. “What are you doing?” she asked.

“I was going to give him CPR,” I said perplexed and, to be blunt, irritated, thinking Sam had reverted to her old self, insensitive and thoughtless.

“Not unless you want to die,” she said.

I looked back at the man. He’d gone still. A white foam covered his mouth as if he’d been drinking a vanilla shake from a trough. His eyes stayed open, staring at the netherworld.

“Holy shit!” I said.

A casino security guard rushed over. Before he reached the man, Sam said, “Don’t touch him. He’s been given a nerve agent. Probably A-234.”

The guard hesitated, wondering how Sam knew what had happened. And what the hell was nerve agent A-234, anyway? He glanced at me. I shrugged to indicate I had no idea either.

“Call the police,” she said. “Tell them to bring their homicide unit, and they need to be wearing Tyvek protective gear. Then seal this area off. Keep people at least thirty yards away.”

When he still hadn’t moved, Sam, as if talking to a slow-witted child, said, “Now!”

The security guard thumbed his mic and asked for help. He gave them our location and relayed, to whoever was listening, Sam’s orders. When the guard noticed he was well within thirty yards of the victim, he backed away.

His actions prompted me to move farther away as well. It was then I noticed, Sam had already stationed herself a reasonable distance from the dead guy.

I glanced in her direction and asked an unspoken question.

“I’ll explain it to you and the police when they arrive.”

The police responded within five minutes and approached the security guard. As they spoke, he motioned toward Sam. The detective (Howard, we would find out later) made his way to us, keeping enough space between him and the body, even a tropical storm wouldn’t have blown the nerve agent that far.

“And you are?” Howard asked.

“I’m Samantha Summers. And this is...”

“Samantha Summers from the Reverend Jonathan Cooper case?”

“Yeah. And this is my partner, Chancy Evans.” She motioned to me with her head.

As per usual, he ignored me, not willing, or able, to take his eyes off of the stunning Ms. Summers.

Samantha “Sam” Summers – ex-cop, disbarred lawyer and, at least for the moment, a private investigator – is 6’1”, with dark brown eyes that double as black holes that draw both men and women in alike. She’s often mistaken for Charlize Theron’s better-looking sister. She’s a confirmed lesbian, and sees me as the brother she always wanted. Which makes my life interesting. And unfulfilled.

“What happened?” Howard asked.

“We were waiting for the elevator,” Sam said. “When the doors slid apart, that gentleman staggered out of the elevator and dropped dead at our feet.”

“But you told the guard he’s been poisoned with a nerve agent of some kind.”

“Yes.”

“And?” Detective Howard grew more impatient the longer it took for Sam to enlighten him.

“He’s Russian.”

“Wait. What? How do you know that?”

“He spoke two words in Russian. The first was ‘help.’ The second was ‘murder.’ He’s journalist Sergei Turgenev. I recognize him from a story I’d read a year ago about the corruption in Russia. His pupils were pinpricks. He was having spasms, and he clutched his heart. All signs he’d been poisoned with a nerve agent. The foam on his mouth happened after he fell to the floor.”

Detective Howard looked at the body, then the police agents dressed in Tyvek, who were examining the deceased. “Jake,” he called out. When one of the men looked his way, he asked, “What does it look like?”

The guy shook his head. “Poison, maybe?”

Howard returned his attention to Sam. “Anything else?”

“Yeah. The guy who killed him is in the room across the hall playing poker.”

“What?”

“The guy who killed...”

“How do you know that?”

“He has all of the features of a Russian or Ukrainian. He’s wearing an open-collared blue shirt. You can see the top of the double-headed eagle and the tip of its wings just above its opening. He has a tattoo on the inside of his right wrist. It’s a skull over a gun and a knife, indicating he’s killed before.”

“That’s all great and everything, but I can hardly arrest someone because they look Russian.”

“He smells like Troynoy Novaya Zarya cologne. It has a distinct citrus smell.”

“So?”

“You’ll find that’s how he poisoned the victim. He must have gone into Turgenev’s room replaced his Troynoy cologne with a second bottle after mixing the binary agents together. When Turgenev...”

“The what?”

“Binary agents. The nerve agent is harmless until you combine the two separate agents into one. He would have carried them in two different vials to keep from contaminating himself.”

“Okay. Go on.”

“Anyway, Sergei Turgenev splashed the cologne on himself – I got a whiff of it when he fell. He didn’t realize it’d been switched. It was absorbed through his skin. He must have rubbed some onto his face and neck just before he left his room, caught the elevator within seconds, and came down here. Where he died.”

“Okay. But I still don’t see how that proves the guy in the other room killed him.”

“You’ll find the bottle in Blue Shirt’s room. When you dust it, it’ll raise Turgenev’s fingerprints, as well as the guy’s in the blue shirt. The bottle in Turgenev’s room will only have

his. Turgenev's fingerprints. I noticed as I watched Blue Shirt play poker, he's arrogant and over-confident. I'm sure using Turgenev's cologne was his way of thinking he'd gotten away with murder."

Sam pointed out the blue-shirted card player, and the police took him in for questioning. They got a warrant and searched his room. Just as Sam had predicted, they found the bottle of Troynoy with both the victim's and the blue-shirted player's fingerprints on it. They also located the second bottle of Troynoy in Turgenev's room that had been laced with A-234.

We drove to the police headquarters, where Sam gave her statement to Howard's partner. He shook his head in disbelief as Sam laid out what she believed happened.

The night ended with the arrest of Demetri Ivanov, the man Sam had labeled as Blue Shirt, for the murder of Sergei Turgenev.

We arrived back at the hotel around one in the morning, only to find it sealed off. The tournament had been moved to another casino, Mystic Lake. Everyone was given new rooms and told all of our belongings were being thrown away as a precaution. We checked in and were given a suite. Sam took the main bedroom. Somethings never change.

I woke at ten a.m. and put my ear to Sam's bedroom door to see if she was up yet. I didn't hear anything and assumed she was still in bed. Twelve minutes later, I heard a thump on our door as if someone had kicked it with their foot. When I looked through the security hole, I saw Sam standing outside the room. She had two cups of coffee in one hand, and a bag of bakery in her teeth. With her other hand, she gave me the finger.

I opened the door, she handed me one of the coffees and dropped the bag of bakery into my free hand. "Mocha, extra shot, no soy, but skim milk. No whip. Here, take these." She handed me five packets of Truvia.

"Thanks," I said. "You're up early."

"Yeah. I wanted to get an early start. My mind kept going over the odds of certain hands, and I stopped fighting it and went and got coffee. We'll leave here when we're finished and get some new clothes and toiletries."

"You look a little wired."

"This is my fourth cup of the morning."

"You nervous?"

"Are you?"

"Why should I be nervous? I do this for a living."

"Exactly."

"Huh?" I was thoroughly confused. I knew I'd missed something, but what it was, was beyond my very limited understanding of women.

"What do you mean by, 'Huh?'" Sam asked.

“A straight face and a sincere-sounding ‘Huh?’ have gotten me out of more trouble than I can remember.”

“Not today, Ace.”

“So, what did you mean by ‘exactly?’ ”

“Just what it implied. I’m not counting on making this my living. So, why would I be nervous.”

“Gotcha.” Plus, she was playing with my money. Sam walked past me and sat on the two-seater couch. She leaned back, crossed her legs, and asked, “What are the odds of getting a Royal Flush?”

“Just under 650,000 – 1.”

Sam lowered her head a tad and stared at me through her eyebrows. Okay, so she wanted to know the *exact* odds.

“649,739 to 1,” I said.

“How about a straight? Mixed suits.”

“254 to 1.”

“No pair with a high card.”

“995 to 1.”

“And the odds of getting a pair?”

“137 to 1.”

“That doesn’t seem right.”

“Trust me. It’s correct.”

“What do you look for in a tell?” Sam asked.

“Really?”

For that, I got a half-closed glare for about the thousandth time. Well, the 986<sup>th</sup> to be exact.

For the next fifteen minutes, I went through every possible tell people exhibit when they are either bluffing or had, what they believed, was a winning hand. I finished with, “You know the old saying, the eyes are the window to the soul. In poker, it’s the hands. They fidget, they move differently, the player touches his face more, or less – just the opposite of what he or she’d been doing before. Or you can see he’s concentrating on keeping them still. So, be sure to watch the hands.”

I paused and looked at Sam before asking, “Got it?”

Sam nodded. I waited for some sort of smart-ass remark, but none was forthcoming.

I added, “You’ve seen plenty of people look nervous when you were a cop and a lawyer. It’s the same thing. They’re lying and trying to convince you they’re not. The most obvious tells are the most accurate.”

“Thanks,” Sam said. “That helps.”

I didn't know how to respond. I know a, "You're welcome," was in order, but I rarely heard Sam thank me for anything. It threw me.

Seeing my consternation, Sam said, "You're welcome."

"Thanks," I muttered.

At noon we went to the casino floor and found our designated places at the tables. Ten games were played at the same time. Eight people at each table. I was in the A Flight. Sam was in B. Seven and a half hours later, I took home the first-place prize of \$25,000. Sam took second and walked away with \$10,000.

I congratulated Sam on doing so well.

She seemed disappointed. I didn't have to wait long to find why. "That was way too easy. I was bored to death. Solving cases is much more fun. Even if I almost got killed on the last two. Talk about your adrenaline rush."

I stopped dead in my tracks and stared after her. When she gave me a what's-up-with-that look, I shrugged my shoulders and asked, "Did you remember to tip the dealer?"

As we made our way back to our suite, Sam's phone rang. She glanced at the number. It was evident from her expression, she didn't know the caller.

"Sam Summers," she said, then listened for the next five minutes. "We'll see you early tomorrow morning," and disconnected the call.

"Now what are *we* doing?"

"We're headed to La Crosse in the morning."

"La Crosse?"

"Yeah, a city in Southwestern Wisconsin, on the eastern side of the Mississippi. Old Man River. The Big Muddy. The Father of Waters. The second-longest river..."

"Yeah, yeah. It was rhetorical. What's in La Crosse? Besides the city, the university, and the bluffs."

"A murder. Some doctor supposedly killed his wife a few days ago and tried to make it look like she'd committed suicide. His lawyer, a guy named Edwin Edger, got my name and phone number from attorney John Anthony Thomas. The doctor is wealthy and agreed to pay my fee whether I prove him innocent or not."

"When have you *not*?"

"That's why he called."

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