

Alex was elated that Ellie had agreed to move to Las Vegas. The success of his plan lit up his face with a broad, boyish grin. Though two hours late to meet his friends at the Watering Hole, he didn't care. The phone call with Ellie had taken longer than expected, but to him, it had been worth every minute.

As he got ready to leave, memories of his own turbulent past came flooding back. Like his father before him, he'd failed Mikhail. But with Ellie, things would be different. He was determined to break the cycle, determined to be the kind of father she deserved. He vowed to give her nothing but respect, support, and unwavering love.

Springing out the front door with the energy of a much younger man, Alex hurried to his Bentley. Before getting in, he dropped to his knees and scanned the undercarriage, checking for bombs or tracking devices. Paranoia wasn't new to him, he'd lost too many friends to car bombs in Vegas. It was a dangerous town, but Ellie would be safe. He'd see to it.

Alex lived large. His success skimming profits and manipulating games had afforded him a lavish lifestyle, and he couldn't wait to share it with Ellie.

He arrived at the Watering Hole and made a beeline for the corner booth near the stage where his closest friends were gathered. One look at his face told them everything, they knew Ellie had agreed to come.

The celebration began instantly. Lila, the glamorous bar manager, sent over bottles of champagne. A tall, statuesque blonde with long legs and a sharp mind, Lila had been a Vegas showgirl in her younger years. Now in her fifties, she carried herself with elegance and confidence. Born and raised in Vegas, she was part of the city's living history.

Her claim to fame was her close working relationship with the legendary Howard Hughes. Thanks to her business degree and sharp instincts, she became Hughes' personal assistant during his reclusive years in the Desert Inn penthouse. She had been by his side as he quietly built an empire, acquiring casinos, hotels, and media outlets. When the owners of the Desert Inn tried to force Hughes out, he simply bought the entire property.

Hughes once described his vision of Vegas as “a well-dressed man in a dinner jacket and a beautifully jeweled and furred woman stepping out of an expensive car.” Lila helped him shape that vision.

She advised him during the purchases of the Castaways, New Frontier, Sands, Landmark, and the Silver Slipper, often guiding his decisions with her intuition. When Hughes died, Lila was shocked to receive a check for two million dollars in his will. She used it to buy a stake in Fandango’s and purchased a home at the Las Vegas Country Club, next door to the ruthless Louie McCoy. Her white Lincoln with red leather seats and suicide doors was her signature ride.

Lila was nobody’s fool. She kept high-value chips, purple \$5,000s, stashed in safe deposit boxes all over the city. And she proudly framed the Hughes check, now hanging behind the bar at the Watering Hole.

Alex joined Deuce and his girlfriend at the bar, where Henry was already holding court. On Henry’s left sat three slick-looking Italian men Alex recognized immediately. They’d been banned from the Dunes Casino for marking cards and walking out with sixty grand before getting caught. Their scheme had included a corrupt dealer, and they were now facing criminal charges. The trio was part of a European crime syndicate with a reputation for scamming casinos across the globe.

Alex’s instincts kicked in. He made a mental note to ban them from Fandango’s. He didn’t trust them, and he suspected the Mob had pressured Henry into representing them.

The Italian card cheats had made their profits by exploiting predictable human behavior, bluffing when their opponents were weak, folding when someone else held a stronger hand. If another player had a flush, they’d lay down a lower flush or a straight. When a full house appeared, they’d bow out with grace. Their strategy worked, until it didn’t. Their recent takedown revealed they were just pawns in a much larger operation. Ironically, the method they used wasn’t new to Alex. He had invented it.

The FBI had contacted Alex for insight. They needed help cracking open the car-cheating ring and uncovering how these men had convinced casino employees to get involved, an extremely rare breach. In Vegas, getting caught cheating as an employee wasn’t just a crime, it was career suicide. A guilty verdict meant

permanent blacklisting in the Nevada Gaming Commission's notorious "Black Book."

Henry, with his murky legal ethics, had made a name for himself defending cheats. His most recent client, a small-time hustler who used hand signals to tip off his buddy, was now serving five years and barred from every casino in the state.

Alex spotted the same slick Italians seated beside Henry at the Watering Hole bar. Their eyes met his, and the knowing look Alex gave them sent a cold shiver down their spines. Within minutes, they downed their drinks and left without a word.

Alex smirked. "There's only room for one cheat in this town, boys, and it's me. I'll rat you out in a heartbeat if you mess with my turf."

He turned to Lila and, grinning wide, gave her a lingering kiss on the lips and pulled her close. "You work too damn hard, Lila. Marry me, and I'll take you away from all this. C'mon, sit down. It's time to celebrate, Ellie's moving to Vegas!"

Assuming Ellie was his ace in the hole, Alex could barely contain his excitement. His trust in Henry had long eroded, especially after the attorney stopped repaying a sizable loan. With Ellie preparing to take the Nevada Bar, Alex was ready to cut ties with Henry and hand his legal affairs over to someone he trusted. The mounting attorney fees were killing him.

Lila, ever the poised businesswoman, usually had a dozen responsibilities pulling at her—but she set them aside for the night. Sliding into the booth beside Alex, she poured two tall glasses of champagne.

"Sure, I'll marry you," she teased, raising her glass. "But it'll be a freezing day in hell when I do. Is it true? Ellie's really coming to Vegas?"

Alex raised his own glass, pride beaming from his face. "That's right. My kid's a lawyer. Smart as a whip. She's got charm, brains, and southern manners, and let me tell you, she can debate like nobody's business. Must've gotten that from her old man. I may be a no-good cheating bastard, but no one messes with my Ellie. She's off-limits."

The party carried on for hours. At midnight, Lila noticed Alex was beyond drunk. Concerned, she offered to drive him home.

“Let’s get out of here,” she said firmly. “You’re not driving in this condition.”

Alex, too far gone to argue, handed her the valet ticket. “Thanks, Lila.”

She drove his Lincoln to the Las Vegas Country Club and waited until he’d stumbled inside before heading home herself. It had been a long week, and she needed sleep.

Inside, Alex made it to his bedroom and collapsed face-down onto the bed. He awoke at dawn with a splitting headache. The champagne had taken its toll. As he sat up groaning, he rubbed his temples and tried to piece together the hazy memories of the night before.

Who the hell drove me home?

His mind was foggy, drawing a blank on most of the night. The last thing Alex remembered clearly was talking to Ellie on the phone. Despite the jackhammer pounding in his skull, a smile tugged at his lips. Ellie was coming to Las Vegas. That thought alone was enough to lift the weight of the hangover.

His body ached as fragments of the previous night crept back. He remembered the trio of goons sitting with Henry and how they had disappeared within minutes of Alex arriving. He’d recognized their faces, but not from Fandango’s. They were new to his turf, and that made him uneasy.

When he pressed Henry about them, the lawyer had shrugged him off.

“That’s privileged information,” Henry said, defensive. “Attorney-client stuff. Jesus, Alex, you trying to get me disbarred?”

The FBI had asked Alex to dig into the Italians. But after that call from Ellie, his priorities had shifted. He wasn’t anyone’s snitch anymore. Let the feds find another informant. He had a daughter coming to town, a life to build, and secrets to keep buried.

He glanced at the clock. Nearly noon. Damn, it hit him, he’d agreed to meet Henry for lunch.

“Getting too old for this crap,” he muttered, dragging himself out of bed. His joints protested every step toward the shower. *Need to get a full checkup before Ellie arrives*, he thought. *Can’t have her seeing me fall apart.*

The hot water worked some magic on his aching bones. As steam filled the bathroom, his thoughts drifted to Ellie again. He'd teach her everything, how the business worked, how to survive in this town. She was smart. She'd do fine.

An hour later, shaved, dressed, and back in his signature dark sunglasses, Alex stepped into a taxi waiting outside the Club House.

"Fandango's," he told the driver. "Skip the Strip. It's a mess this time of day."

The cabbie weaved expertly through backstreets, pulling up in front of the casino minutes later.

"Morning, boss," the doorman said with a grin, opening the door.

Alex shoved his sunglasses into his shirt pocket, paid the fare, and made a beeline inside. He was starving. The booze from last night still clung to him, despite the hot shower. His hands trembled slightly.

Henry waved from a booth near the buffet. "Hey Alex, over here!"

He was elbow-deep in an assortment of buffet dishes. "Try the meatballs! Lila hired a new chef, the guy actually knows what he's doing."

Alex slid into the booth and reached straight for one of Henry's meatballs, popping it into his mouth and barely chewing before swallowing.

"Damn good. Fandango's has the best buffet in town."

Henry scowled as Alex reached again. "You're gonna eat all my lunch before the waiter even gets here."

A server approached. Alex grinned. "Bring me a Reuben, fries, and a Chivas on the rocks."

Henry added, "Make mine a Chivas too, straight up. And another plate. He's already inhaled half of mine."

Alex pulled out a thick money clip and dropped it on the table. "Keep the drinks coming, pal."

As the drinks arrived and the afternoon slipped into easy banter, the old friends relaxed into their usual rhythm.

Henry lit a Camel, blew a perfect smoke ring, and leaned back. “Tell me something, how do you know so damn much about poker? You always seem one step ahead.”

He slid the crumpled pack across the table. Alex pushed it aside.

“No thanks. I quit. But I could use one of those toothpicks.” He picked at his teeth, smirking. “Let’s just say I walk both sides of the line. I know how to catch cheaters because I taught half of them how to cheat.”

Alex slugged back the last of his scotch and pulled a stick of Juicy Fruit from his shirt pocket. He tore it in half and offered some to Henry.

“No thanks,” Henry muttered. “I hate mixing sweet shit with good scotch.”

Alex shrugged and popped the gum into his mouth, chewing with loud snaps. Juicy Fruit was his dessert, his comfort, maybe even his therapy. It reminded him of the days when his mother would hand him a stick after one of his father’s beatings. It was a habit soaked in twisted nostalgia.

Henry flagged the waiter for another round and turned back to his bragging friend. “So what makes you different from all the other cheats in this town? There’s no shortage of ‘em.”

Alex leaned in, chewing and smirking. “I don’t just cheat, I manipulate the whole damn room. I lie to confuse the masses. I use extortion, the media, and my fame to control the game I love.”

Henry stretched out, propping his snakeskin boots on the opposite seat. Alex eyed the scuffed soles with disdain.

“Jesus, Henry. Those boots are older than your last divorce.”

Before Henry could fire back, Alex sneezed, violently. He couldn’t stop. A string of them erupted one after the other. He grabbed a cloth napkin from a nearby table, honked into it, and tossed it under the booth.

Henry recoiled, horrified. “Christ, Alex, that’s disgusting. Ever heard of manners?”

“Manners?” Alex laughed, his jowls bouncing. “I was raised in a goddamn orphanage. You think they handed out etiquette lessons?” He wiped his nose on his

sleeve and glanced into the mirror behind the bar, cackling at his reflection. “Poker’s how I make a living. I’m a cheating son of a bitch, and I’m *damned* good at it. How do you think I bought this joint?”

Henry rolled his eyes. “You’ve also got the reputation for being the biggest cheat in Vegas. You might be a decent poker player, Alex, but you’re a world-class drunk. I’d start practicing some manners before Ellie gets here.”

Alex ignored the jab and puffed up with pride. “I’m the best. Show me a rookie and I’ll mop the floor with him. Cheating’s part of the game, it always has been. If you can palm chips or mark cards, you’ve got an edge. Your Italian clients? Amateurs. They’re going to prison, and you know it.”

Henry’s face twitched. “I’m working a plea. They’re not going to jail. Not if I have anything to say about it.”

Alex leaned back, grinning. “Good luck with that. Meanwhile, I’m still king of this town.”

They ordered another round. Alex tossed his gum, replaced it with a chewed-up cigar stub, and kept rambling.

“It gives me chills, Henry. I love it. No one can touch me. You run outta chips, you reload. Or you walk. But play by my rules or I’ll walk away with your last dime.”

It was past midnight when Lila had finally had enough. She marched over with two highball glasses of ice water and set them down firmly on the table.

“No more booze,” she said. “You’re both cut off.”

Too drunk to notice the switch, the men sipped their water like it was scotch.

Henry chain-smoked until the ashtray overflowed with cigarette butts and gum wrappers. Alex chewed his Juicy Fruit and the cigar stub simultaneously, bragging between mouthfuls about his legendary cons.

Lila returned with the check. “Let’s go, boys. I’ve hung the ‘Closed’ sign. Party’s over.”

Henry squinted at the bill. “Jesus, we didn’t drink *that* much.”

He fumbled with his wallet and slapped down a hundred. Lila snatched it without blinking.

“Don’t argue with me tonight, Henry. Or you’ll lose.”

“Pay her, you cheap bastard,” Alex slurred. “It’s your turn. Tip her good. Don’t be a tight ass.”

Henry glared but kept his mouth shut. Lila laughed, fed up but amused.

“Out. Now. Before I throw both your sorry asses into the parking lot.”

Henry groaned, pulling himself out of the booth. “Alright, alright. We’re leaving. Didn’t know it was so late.”

He reached down and grabbed Alex’s arm.

“C’mon, champ. I’ll drive you home.”

Lila knew the Watering Hole would lose its license if authorities were aware of the amount of liquor the men had consumed. "Great. Now, get on out of here. I don’t want a nosey police officer driving by and seeing I served you drunks. They’ll shut me down. I’ll lose my license." She was tired and needed a vacation. Her patience waned as she stood back and waited for them to leave.

Henry argued. "Relax, Lila. Alex has too much pull in this town you’ll never lose your license?"

"Yep, you got that right. All it takes is green backs, I’ll grease the liquor board’s palms with a little walking around money. They won’t shut us down." Alex’s eyes were half closed, and he looked like he may pass out.

Henry glanced around the dark room and was surprised to see the place empty. The waiters had left for the night. The drunk men deliberately put one foot in front of the other and staggered toward the front door and stumbled outside with their arms wrapped loosely around one another for support. Henry searched in his pockets for the keys to the Mercedes.

Lila flipped off the bar lights. She locked the door and followed the men outside. It was days like this that made her wonder why she’d invested so much money in Fandango’s. The amount of work she’d put in to achieve her level of success had

taken a toll. She wondered if the results were worth the effort. She thought. Where did the pity-party come from? My sense of humor is God's gift. What would I do without it?

Lila drove away feeling relieved to be alone with her thoughts. She looked toward the heavens. Thanks for everything Howard. You never said it would be easy.

Henry unlocked the older model Mercedes and helped Alex into the passenger side. He got in and shoved the key into the ignition. After several tries, Henry started the car. The engine roared and he stomped on the gas. Tires squealed as the Mercedes raced out of the parking lot. They arrived at the Las Vegas Country Club and Henry slammed on the brakes. "You're home, bud."

Henry was relieved the long day was over. The prosecutor had scheduled sentencing for the Italian crooks at nine the next morning, and hangover or not, the drunken barrister knew better than to be late for court.

Alex fumbled to open the car door. He was surprised when it abruptly opened, and he slid off the leather seat onto his ass on the concrete curb. Saluting as he went down Alex kicked the car door shut behind him.

As he drove away, Henry saw Alex crawling on his hands and knees toward the front door of his house.

Alex bounced off the walls as he made his way down the hallway to the bedroom and fell fully clothed onto the bed as he felt it spin out of control like a Tilt-a-Whirl.

In his drunken state, Alex believed he lived the perfect lifestyle. "I might be a big talker, but for a murdering man on the lam I can deliver. The truth is I'm a cheat who takes advantage of gullible people while professing to be an expert at the game. The sad part is, I have no shame." Tears rolled down his face as he passed out, thankful that Ellie was on her way.

Another typical day had come and gone for the gambling man. If Alex weren't playing poker or throwing dice, you could usually find him drinking scotch with his attorney friend Henry, at the Watering Hole in Fandango's.

