

The Pro

“What made you decide to pick me up that night in the casino?” Barbara asked Alexandre.

“I did not ‘pick you up’” Alexandre replied. “I was looking for a place at the roulette table. I was just very lucky that the only available space happened to be next to the most beautiful woman in all of Las Vegas.”

“Liar!” Barbara scolded. She blushed slightly and gave his hand a squeeze as she said it. She was an attractive woman, though not striking, in her mid 50’s. Alexandre looked to be about 10 years younger. He was slim, fit, and perfectly attired in a golf shirt and slacks. With his dark hair and pencil moustache he would have been called “dapper” in a previous generation. They were sitting on a bench at the 17’th tee, waiting for Carlo to return from a rest room on an adjoining fairway.

“Do you really think you can beat him?” Barbara asked.

“I believe I can” Alexandre replied. “I let him win the first two days to build his confidence. Yesterday I won with what appeared to be a lucky shot. That touched his pride. You see, this man used to be a professional golfer. He made a great deal of money playing golf, and he does not like to lose to the amateur. Especially,” he smiled as he said this last part, “to the French amateur. I knew if I won yesterday he would insist upon a rematch.”

“I have confidence in you” Barbara assured him.

“I have confidence too. This man does not realize that we are not playing his game. We are playing Las Vegas golf. It’s similar to the golf he knows, but in his golf you cannot lose money, you can only win money. In this golf you can lose money, and that adds a new pressure. In Las Vegas I am the pro. Today I am two strokes up and I intend to win. Still, he is very good and there is no such thing as a sure bet in golf.” He looked directly into Barbara’s eyes as he continued. “I wish you hadn’t bet your necklace.”

“He wanted to raise the stakes” Barbara replied. “And your money was tied up in investments. Besides, I’ll put my money on a French scoundrel over a Florida pro any time.”

“I am not a scoundrel” Alexandre insisted. “I am just a man who makes his living playing golf.”

“Oh, you’re a scoundrel all right” Barbara laughed. She ran the toe of her shoe up his shin as she said it. Then she saw Carlo and sat up straighter. “Look, he’s coming back.” A heavy set man with a swarthy complexion was walking across the fairway toward them. He wiped his forehead with a handkerchief as he walked.

“He is perspiring” Alexandre observed. “The pressure is building. I think he is tiring.”

Without a word Carlo pulled a driver from his bag and proceeded to hit a weak drive that failed to clear the hill that lay ahead of them. It landed on the right side of the fairway less than 200 yards from the tee. With unhurried grace, Alexandre launched a powerful drive that sailed over the hill.

“That was a beautiful shot!” Barbara whispered to Alexandre as they walked down the fairway.

“It is the longest drive I have hit today” Alexandre said with a touch of concern. “I hope it didn’t go as far as the arroyo. Still, that is nearly 300 meters from the tee.”

“What’s an arroyo?” Barbara asked.

“It’s a dry river bed” Alexandre replied. When they crested the hill they saw his ball had indeed gone into the arroyo, but it was lying on a clear patch of sand in the middle of the river bed. Carlo’s second shot had sailed over the arroyo and landed next to the green so Alexandre chose a five iron and tried to reach the green with his second shot. He didn’t hit it quite high enough. It caught the lip of the river bank and rolled back into the sand. It was too close to the bank to hit forward, so he was forced to chip it back to the fairway on the tee side of the arroyo. He hit it well from there, but he had given up his two stroke lead and they finished the hole all square.

Winning that hole seemed to re-energize Carlo and he played his best golf of the day on the 18th hole. Alexandre matched him shot for shot, but in the end he needed to sink a 30 foot putt to tie the hole. The ball curved around the lip of the hole and rolled a foot past it. Alexandre stared at the ball in stunned silence.

“You played a good game, Alexandre.” Carlo held out his hand, and Alexandre completed the formality of shaking it. “If you don’t mind, I’ll give you a call the next time I’m in town. I’d like to play again. Right now, though, I have to catch a plane to Miami. Madam, if you would be so kind?”

Fighting back tears, Barbara opened her purse and took out a black suede covered case. “This was my grandmother’s” she said to no one in particular as she handed the case to Carlo.

“Excellent” Carlo said as he opened the case and briefly admired the diamond necklace. “I promise you I’ll take good care of it. Now if I could also have the cash that I put up?”

“Of course” Barbara said, shaking herself out of her stupor. She opened her purse again and took out a thick envelope which she handed to Carlo. He glanced inside it and then tucked it into a compartment on his golf bag.

“Well I’d love to stay and have a drink at the clubhouse, but I do have to catch that plane so I’ll say my good-byes here. I enjoyed our game.” With that parting comment he set off toward the clubhouse, whistling as he walked. Alexandre and Barbara stayed at the eighteenth green for a bit longer, each lost in their own thoughts, and then trudged back to the clubhouse. They drove to Barbara’s hotel in excruciating silence.

“Shall I pick you up for dinner at six?” Alexandre asked as he helped her out of the car.

“Don’t” she said, withdrawing slightly from his touch. “I think I’ve had enough of Vegas for a while. I’m going back to Omaha.” She was staring at the ground as she said this, but then she looked directly into his eyes. “Good-bye, Alexandre.” She turned and walked into the hotel. Alexandre watched until she disappeared from sight inside the lobby. Then he slowly got back into the car and drove off.

The man who had called himself Alexandre sat sipping a beer in a bar a few blocks off the strip. The elegant golf attire had been replaced by a bright, open collared Rayon shirt. Without his pencil moustache and hairpiece he looked older than he had looked on the course. The man who had called himself Carlo entered the bar, sat beside him, and ordered a beer. “She give you any trouble, Bill?” he asked.

“No, Sam. No trouble at all.” He chuckled to himself. “As a matter of fact, she dumped me. That made it easier.”

“You sure can pick ‘em” Sam said.

“It’s not that hard” Bill answered. “An older woman alone in a casino is bound to be a widow or a divorcee. They gravitate to the roulette tables because it has the excitement of gambling but the rules are easy to understand. She was betting enough to show me she was rich, but she was too nervous to be a regular. That told me she was probably from out of town, looking for a little romance and excitement in Las Vegas.”

“She turned out to be a little richer than you thought, didn’t she?” Sam laughed. “I thought that wig was going to fly off your head when Louie appraised her necklace at ninety grand!”

“Yeah, and I think he lowballed it, too.” Bill answered. “He didn’t have any reservations about loaning you the money to bet against it after we left, did he?”

“He knows we’re pros. We’re good for it.” Sam drained the last of his beer. “Speaking of Louie, we better go see him before he sends his goons after us.” Bill finished his beer, and the two of them walked across the street to the Paradise Jewelry Store.

The man behind the counter looked up from his newspaper as they entered the store and then called to the manager. "Hey Louie! Bill and Sam are here." A short, heavy set man in a three piece suit came out of the back office.

"Didja get it?" was all he said.

"We got it" Sam said proudly. He set the jewelry box on the counter. "You shoulda seen us, Louis. We coulda got an Oscar. Bill's playing this fancy French golfer, and I'm a pro from Miami with more money than sense. She thinks I'm the mark and. . ."

Louis wasn't listening to a word Sam said. He got out his loupe and looked at the diamonds. "Fake" he said, and tossed them back into the box with disgust.

Bill and Sam looked dumbstruck. "But this morning you said. . ."

"The diamonds I looked at this morning were real. These are paste. Rich people sometimes have copies made of their best jewelry. They wear the copies when they don't want to take the real ones out of the safe. Where's the cash?"

Sam took the envelope out of his pocket and handed it to Louie. Louis pulled a bill out of the middle and held it up to the light. "Counterfeit" he said. "The bills on the outside are real, but the rest are counterfeit."

"But those are the bills you gave me this morning!" Sam protested.

"Christ!" said Louis. "You two have been scammed and you don't even know it. What'd you do, let her hold the bets for safekeeping?" Bill and Sam exchanged guilty looks. "She switched 'em." Louis said. "Oldest trick in the book. She didn't care who won that silly game you played. Either way she was walking away with the diamonds and the money."

Bill and Sam shifted uneasily, not knowing what to say. Louis continued talking. "You two are going to have to start hustling like you've never hustled before. You borrowed ninety grand from me this morning, and the first interest payment is due in one week." He tossed the envelope onto the counter next to the jewelry box and walked back to his office.

"Why do I always have to work with losers?" he grumbled. "Half-wits and amateurs. Why can't I work with people who know what they're doing? Like that lady. She was a real pro."