

## Chapter One

BY H. LEE BARNES

**B**elow to the east the lights of Las Vegas stretched out to the base of Sunrise Mountain. Brady, leaning against his Ford sedan, watched Axel set the kickstand and swing his leg over the saddle. The burly biker removed his helmet and set it on the seat, then unzipped an inside vest pocket. He took a folded paper from the pocket and stared at the distant lights. Brady stepped away from the car. Only then did Axel look at him.

“Quiet out here,” Brady said.

“Yeah. Time was,” Axel said, “you could bring a girl out here, sit in a car and . . . Well, that’s gone. No doubt they’ll build some mall here. Yuppieville, that’s what they’ve done to it.”

“It was better then.”

“Better ’an what? It’s just Vegas. More lights now. Here, I got what you wanted. Maybe not all but . . .” Axel extended the folded paper to Brady. “Phone numbers and addresses for a few of them.”

Brady slipped the paper in his shirt pocket. “How’s she doing?”

Axel rubbed his jowls with his free hand. He looked behind him at the shadows of the Spring Mountain Range where a new moon hung above the ridge. “The doctor said she took five units of blood. They stitched her arms. She doesn’t talk much. But at least she ain’t tried nothin’ stupid again.”

“Well, I wish you the best.”

“The best? I been prayin’. Funeral’s Saturday. She’ll be better after that. Least that’s the hope.”

“Yeah. Look, I’m still working on the money.”

“Okay. It ain’t so important right now. We made arrangements with the mortuary. Look, I gotta get back. Ilene’s half-sister’s gotta go to work. Can’t leave her alone for long after what she tried.” Axel faced Brady, who nodded. Then Axel pointed a finger toward the paper in Brady’s pocket. “It’s not about money. I mean, the money will help with the funeral. See, she loved that old woman. You make it work. Elsewise they get away with it. If I can find something else, I will.”

Brady reached over and shook Axel’s hand, then dropped his to his side. He felt obligated to assure Axel. “In the right hands

the names will help.”

Axel nodded. “Don’t try my number. I’ll have to call you. You know, same as before.”

“Are you scared?”

“That’s not somethin’ I’d answer if I was.”

“Right.”

Brady kept his spot at the side of the road as Axel, illuminated in the headlights of an oncoming vehicle, mounted the Harley and strapped on his helmet. A pickup, its tires whistling on the pavement, sped by heading west toward Red Rock Canyon or beyond. Axel raised his hand in a salute. The pipes thundered to life and Axel swung the bike in a half circle and followed the path of the truck.

Brady turned and walked to his car. By the time he flipped on the dome light and unfolded the paper, the motorcycle was no more than a fading taillight. For him it *was* about money. Hand over the names. A payday and gone. As he read down the list of names and addresses, he recognized the first on the list, Joseph Don Walker, a thug who’d once been a union organizer, and the fourth, Andy Sachman.

Sachman he knew from the ’80s before machines went electronic, before buttons and poker combinations and payout slips replaced gears and handles and images of fruit and slot trays that clattered with coin. Sachman had been a slot man, a member of a loosely linked cheating ring that took off casinos in a variety

of scams ranging from setting slot jackpots to slipping coolers into blackjack games. Three in that crew had served or were still serving time. Now, cheaters were mathematicians. Card counters or computer geeks. Sachman's trade was old school, finding a machine with worn handle gears and pumping the bank dry of coins or drilling the side and setting a jackpot.

The other names were unfamiliar. Andy, he thought, most likely. He copied the names and information onto a notepad, placed that in the glove box, and stuffed the original list in his shirt pocket.

He couldn't make a connection between Walker and Sachman, except that both were slime. Still, there could be a connection. A jail cell. A dope deal. Who knows? Those types can recognize one another for what they are among a horde crowded in the stands of the Rose Bowl. Gotta be in the genes, Brady thought, some basic instinct among assholes, not unlike horses finding water in a desert. For humans like Sachman and Walker, it's the slime instinct.

He flipped off the dome light and started the engine. A sixty-seven-year-old woman, he thought, left to choke to death with a rag stuffed in her mouth. Then a granddaughter who tried suicide on pills. The random crap of the world. Well, at least now he could pass it on. It was someone else's concern. But he was cursed with curiosity, the detective's disease. He opened his cell phone, scanned the directory, and hit the call button.

“Hello, Daniel,” a woman’s voice said.

“Lil, I’ve got some more names.”

“Can’t help on them. I’m sitting in the ’Shoe. Come see me.”

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Brady parked in the lot by Fitzgerald’s and walked to Fremont Street. The Experience looked to him like the world’s largest batting cage, no view of the sky; in summer it was hot and in winter cold. He didn’t even like the dancing laser light show. Hell, he thought as he looked up at the mesh ceiling, next they’ll replace dancers and showgirls with computer images and flash them on a screen. Fremont Street was one of those changes to progress that a segment of natives to Las Vegas, Brady among them, resented. That along with the sprawl. He took small satisfaction in the fact that progress that had come so fast and so easily was backfiring on the city and things like the downtown laser show brought little tourist money.

The list Axel had given him was in his shirt pocket, but the names were circling around in his head, especially Sachman’s. The old woman had been a jackpot collector for a crew. That much was certain. The names on the list may or may not be those of the ones who set up the jackpots. Brady figured she’d welched on somebody. Three-hundred-sixty thousand would be a temptation.

Brady wove his way through the crowd waiting for the laser show and stepped inside the Horseshoe. He found Lillian waiting at the bar. She lifted her glass to him as he took the seat next to her. It was obvious the drink wasn't her first of the evening. They'd met when he was a state Gaming Control Board agent working the Cooler Crew, a gang of cheaters who ran fixed decks on baccarat tables. She'd been on loan from Metro working undercover as a baccarat shill. The gang had recruited her into the scam along with the whole baccarat shift at the Dunes. Petite and pretty then. Aging now, but still sexy, he thought. He'd made a move on her when the case was over and they were celebrating at the Holy Cow. Married then, she kissed him on the cheek and told him, "Nice thought." Now, two husbands and three divorces later, she was a sergeant at the police academy and went for younger men. He didn't blame her.

"What're you drinking?"

She raised an eyebrow and grinned. "Vodka martini. I like the Tomolives."

"The what?"

"Nevermind."

The bartender laid a second martini in front of her and reached for the first.

"Leave it, Tommy," she said. "I eat the Tomolives."

Brady looked at the pearl-shaped vegetable in the glass and understood.

“Tommy, this is Daniel. He probably wants a Coke.”

Tommy wiped his hand on a towel and shook Brady’s hand. “Pleased. So, a Coke?”

“Diet. With a lemon squeeze.”

“Diet with lemon.” The bartender gave Lillian a sly grin and turned away. Lillian used a toothpick to spear the Tomolive from the glass. She let it rest in her teeth for an instant, then chewed and swallowed it. “Love ’em. So, Dan, how are you?”

“All and all, okay. Still got that gorgeous red hair.”

“Cept now I have to use dye to cover the gray. Happens.”

Tommy set the Coke down before Brady. “Enjoy,” he said and grinned. “If you need a cab later, let me know.”

Lillian chuckled and raised her martini. “To the old days.”

“To them. So, what did you dig up?”

“Are you going to tell me what this is about?”

“I can’t yet. It’s . . . I have to keep this confidential.”

“Sure, confidential. Does my department have a case going on this?”

“I can’t say.”

“I’ll assume it does.”

She leaned close to him. “You know I could be brought up on charges for doing this?”

“Old friends having a drink?”

“You don’t drink.”

“Right. No one’ll charge you for what’s not mentioned.”

Lillian smirked. "It's not like the old days. When I joined, there were guys left over from the Intelligence Task Force who'd beat the crap out of pimps and pushers and run them out of town. Remember them?"

"Yeah. Maybe it's better now."

"Money's better. Anyhow, your James Allen Axelrod has two convictions. Possession of a controlled substance with intent to distribute and another for battery with a deadly weapon. My man in Intelligence tells me he left the outlaw life, had his tattoos cut off, and joined a Christian motorcycle club. Lives in Blue Diamond."

"That fits. His girlfriend?"

"The woman who tried suicide?"

"Yeah, I guess I left that girlfriend part out."

"I'm guessing you left a lot out. I'm guessing you don't want the cops involved."

"Like you said, you're guessing."

"Don't let this backfire in my face, Dan."

"It won't."

"Ilene Georgia Davies, nothing but work applications. She's currently a dealer at Red Rock Station. Lives in the southwest off Russell Road, one of those half-sold developments." Lillian took a sip from her drink and winked at Brady. "Daniel Brady. And why couldn't you be fifteen years younger?"

"Age keeps me outta trouble."

“No going back, is there? Well, as for your other name, Quinton Lee Samuels. He’s got no record here. Only three traffic citations in Orange County. What I did find out is he’s a high-roller, something I imagine you already knew. Is he your payday?”

Brady smiled and downed half his Coke. He pulled a hundred out and placed it atop the bar.

“What’s that?” Lillian asked.

“Two more drinks and cab fare home.”

“Well, it’s nice to know you care.”

“Thanks. I gotta go.”

“Brady?”

“Yes.”

“Kiss me before you go.” She presented him her cheek.

He kissed her and squeezed her shoulder.

“This was for old times,” she said. “We put that whole gang away, didn’t we?”

“Every asshole and the dealers and bosses. Best attorneys in town didn’t crack you on the stand.”

“Hell, two of them tried to date me afterward. But I was married.”

“I remember. Take it easy and have Tommy call you a cab.”

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Brady pressed the button to the penthouse suites. He wondered what a penthouse suite ran a night. It wasn’t likely that

Samuels got a bill for it. Lillian said he was a high-roller, but to be entitled to a suite like this he had to be a whale. When the doors opened, he looked up at the camera. Everywhere, he thought, electronic eyes. That's what the casinos depended on these days. Gone, the reformed cross-rovers who once manned the eyes in the sky and the spotters who patrolled the slot aisles. He remembered when the casinos wouldn't use computers. Now they track play with them, and of course, cameras.

At the top floor, he knocked on the third door on the left. The door cracked open and a young man exposing half his face gazed out. He nodded and opened the door. Tall, dark haired, neatly dressed in a gray three-button suit and clean shaven, he had the look of a college athlete. Not a football player, more the lacrosse type, Brady thought.

"Mr. Samuels is out on the deck." He pointed to the sliding glass doors. "Would you like a drink of some kind?"

"Water will do. Tap's fine with me. No ice."

Samuels looked over his shoulder as Brady slid the door open. "I like promptness, Mr. Brady."

"Yes, sir. I had to meet someone to get information."

"Well, we meet face to face at last." Samuels stood and offered his hand. He was at least two inches taller than Brady, six-foot-four, perhaps six-five, and slender. His hair was silver gray and wavy. He wore a red Fila tennis shirt, white shorts, and sandals. "Have a seat, Mr. Brady. Did Kevin offer you a drink?"

“Yes, sir.”

Samuels held up a half-full wine glass. “Malbec, from Mendoza Valley. You should try it.”

“Thank you, sir. I don’t drink.”

“Was it John Wayne who said he didn’t trust a man who didn’t drink or a woman who did?”

“I don’t know.”

“I guess we’ll get to business. You seem that type, Mr. Brady. What do you have for me?”

“Names. A few addresses.” Brady took the list from his pocket and handed it over.

Samuels looked over the list, nodded, and turned back to Brady. “Would you say he’s a reliable source?”

“I have no reason to doubt him.”

“Did you copy these down somewhere?”

“Sir?”

“The names, did you copy them?”

“No.”

“I paid you for names. That was our arrangement. You were to get names, nothing more. Unless I decided. And you’re to forget this came to my possession.”

“Yes, sir. Something else. The granddaughter, Ilene, the one who tried suicide?”

“I know who she is. Yes, what about her?”

“She doesn’t have enough money for the funeral. Her boyfriend

wanted to know if . . .”

“Assure them I’ll take care of any funeral expenses, anonymously, of course. I don’t feel comfortable giving money to . . . You said he was an outlaw biker, right?”

“He was an outlaw. Apparently he’s a born again, belongs to one of those Christian biker clubs now.”

“Christian bikers? Makes one wonder.”

Kevin stepped out on the balcony. He handed Brady the glass of water and turned to Samuels. “Do you need anything else, sir?”

“Yes, I want you to search Mr. Brady here. Mr. Brady, if you would stand.”

“What am I looking for?” Kevin asked.

“A piece of paper with some names on it. A list.”

Brady stood as asked while Kevin reached in his pockets and emptied the contents of each on the table. When Kevin was finished, a wallet, car keys, two pens, a money clip with four \$100 bills and some loose change lay atop the table. Kevin thumbed through the address book and handed it to his boss.

“Kevin,” Samuels said as he looked through the address book, “has an MBA from Stanford. Entry-level jobs are few these days. He auditioned for ‘The Apprentice,’ but Trump didn’t find him suitable. Sad state of affairs.” He laid the address book back on the table. “You can go, Kevin. Have a seat, Mr. Brady.”

Brady settled into the chair. Below to the east the Strip was

teaming with traffic, cars backed up from Tropicana Avenue to Desert Inn Road. The restless city, Brady thought. People chasing dreams in slow motion. He drank from the glass and held it between his hands. Finish the glass, get your money, and excuse yourself, Brady thought. He drank the remaining water and stood.

“Well, I guess that’s it then?” he said.

“Relax. Stay and enjoy the view. Isn’t it odd how quiet it is up here? All those cars, but silence here.”

Brady wasn’t into chitchat. He wanted his pay and to take his leave. “Quiet. Really, I should be going.”

“Kevin has an envelope waiting. Bonus money in it as well. Now, I’m paying you very well, Mr. Brady. Please indulge me.”

They sat silently the better part of five minutes, Samuels sipping occasionally from his wine glass, Brady staring off, uncomfortable, anxious to leave. Then Samuels downed the last of the wine, walked to the balustrade, and shattered the glass. It splintered into shards, most of which flew over the face of the hotel. He smiled at Brady and went to the sliding door.

“Kevin, I’ll be needing another glass,” he said and closed the doors.

When Kevin came, he brought a wine glass, broom, and a broom pan as if this were a common occurrence. He swept up the broken glass and left. Samuels sat and poured himself a fresh glass from the bottle.

“An old man can’t punch walls,” he said.

“Probably not,” Brady said.

“The dead woman,” Samuels said and went silent.

Brady waited a minute before saying her name. “Colleen Winters.”

“Winters, Moore, Harrison,” Samuels said. “She married three times. Her maiden name was Colleen Depeau. Cajun. When I met her, she was twenty-seven, divorced, and had a daughter nine. The girl’s name was Lenore. She died four years ago from cancer.

“As I said — no, I guess I didn’t yet — Colleen was beautiful. She was a baccarat shill at the Sands. In some casinos back then it was the same as being a house girl for high-rollers. I had made a lot of money as real estate boomed in Los Angeles. I saw the future, you might say. At thirty I was a multimillionaire. I’m not saying this to brag. I took a chance and came up lucky. So I met Colleen.

“I loved her. She, I like to believe, loved me. But I was married, two children, two boys. Too much was at stake for me to leave my family. The divorce might have cost twenty million. So it was weekends in Las Vegas. What do you know about 1969, Mr. Brady?”

“Not much. I was ten. Woodstock, I guess.”

“Yes, Woodstock. Young people trapped in filth on a farm. No toilets.”

“Really?”

“You see, history is a matter not just of experience but who interprets it. The press has turned the era into a dreamland of love among flower children. I lost a younger sister, one of the flower children, to hepatitis. A dirty needle, bad water, some other contact with the disease. She, like myself, came from money. She rejected it.

“By 1969, I was earning millions, with more to come. Along the way, I’d married a woman I didn’t love and had two sons.”

Brady’s cell phone vibrated. He looked at the display.

“Am I boring you, Mr. Brady?”

Brady returned the phone to its holster. “No, sir. Sorry.”

“The flower children disappeared, replaced now as we see by cell-phone children. Quite a shift in two generations. Maybe I’m just old. I’m seventy-two now. But to Colleen. I spent lavishly on her. It wasn’t what she wanted. She wanted a family. I wanted her to myself when I wanted her. You see, I couldn’t divorce. I loved my sons and truth is, I valued money too much to give it to . . . I stayed with my wife. Four years, Colleen and I kept our affair going. I knew my wife suspected, but figured it meant nothing. She, ah, had long seemed indifferent to whatever I did.”

Samuels poured a fresh glass of wine and leaned back. Brady listened, but he was impatient to leave. He’d heard enough to fill in the blanks. It was a common story. He played it through in his mind to the inevitable end. Loss years before. Regrets now.

Some way to make amends. Samuels held the glass to his nose and inhaled, took a drink. He looked. His mouth went slack as he disappeared into thought.

“So, why did it end five years later?”

“Why? Money. Plain and simple. Yes.” Samuels took a sip and set the glass aside. “My wife hired one of your kind. My activity in Vegas wasn’t hard to track. I was open about us, took her to dinner at the Bacchanal Room, the Dome of the Sea. I even took her gambling. They got photos of us. None in the casinos, of course, because . . . you know why. Anyhow, my wife threatened me with divorce. She wanted the boys, all of the property, most of the money, half the business. It was early 1974 then, a rough year. My sister died that year, the hepatitis, so did our mother, a stroke. The year was my Watergate, sort of. Caught cold, no chance of covering it up.

“Guilt is a powerful force in our lives. For the moral man, anyhow. I never divorced. I agreed to cease all contact with Colleen. I did, however, hire an attorney who for a time kept watch for me. I funneled money to her through him until he died.

“Age, Mr. Brady. She became a grandmother and gambler. Got into debt. I wasn’t there to help. As I said, guilt is a powerful force. When word came how she died, I flew up. The attorney I hired recommended you to make the inquiries. Said you were discreet. Are you, Mr. Brady?”

“Yes.”

“Is it true she was collecting illegal jackpots for a gang, as the police report claims?”

“Yes. She was what we call a claimer. Another agency, one that tracks this type of activity for the casinos, had her in photos, claiming over fifteen jackpots. Money ranged from eighteen thousand to just under seventy thousand over two years. Total figure nearly a quarter million. Then a big one, three hundred sixty big.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Two months before her . . .”

“These names, do you know any?”

“Two.”

“Are they cheats?”

“Cheaters? One yes. Sachman.”

Samuels took a drink of wine, set the glass aside, and spread open the list. He turned so the paper caught light through the sliding glass door. “Andrew Sachman. How old is he?”

“Mid-fifties.”

“Would he kill someone if he suspected she would put him in prison?”

“You’re not telling me something?” Brady’s other contacts at Metro had mentioned nothing about her being a potential witness.

“You used to be a cop, you can figure it out.”

Brady nodded. “Gaming Control agent, actually. I don’t know

if he would. Did you hire someone else as well?"

"I employed an attorney. What he discovered is another matter. If I pay you, can you find out about Sachman? Or if not him, who?"

"Find out." Brady looked at the Strip, still jammed with cars. He sighed. "You should let the police handle it."

"Yes, I should. Answer my question, can you?"

"Honestly, I don't know." Brady's cell phone vibrated again. He looked at the incoming number, the same as the last call. "Excuse me. I should take this."

"Go ahead."

Brady went to the balustrade. His back to Samuels, he pressed the talk button. "Hello, Brady here."

"Yes. You don't know me. I'm Ilene's sister. I was told to call this number if anything happened."

Brady cupped the phone and said, "Is Ilene okay?"

"Yes. Well, sort of. I haven't told her yet."

"Told her what?"

"Her boyfriend called me and said he was coming but had to stop somewhere for a few minutes. He knew I had to go to work. It's not like Axel to hang me up. It was two hours ago, and he won't answer his phone. I've tried and tried. He gave me this number, said to call you if something. . . . Do you know where he is?"

Brady's mouth went dry. He licked his lips. "No. You should

call the police.”

“He said I shouldn’t unless Ilene . . . I guess I should.”

“Hold on.” Brady placed the phone on mute and turned to Samuels. “Mr. Samuels, the boyfriend, Axelrod, he’s disappeared.”

Just then the sliding glass door slid open and Kevin poked his head out. “Sir, some detectives from Metro are here. They want to talk with you.”