

Fools Die Mario Puzo



BY THE AUTHOR
OF THE CLASSIC
BESTSELLER
THE GODFATHER

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About the Author

Mario Puzo was born in 'Hell's Kitchen' on Manhattan's West Side and, following military service in World War II, attended New York's New School for Social Research and Columbia University. His best-known novel, *The Godfather*, was preceded by two critically acclaimed novels published in the early sixties, *The Fortunate Pilgrim* and *The Dark Arena*; his subsequent novels included *Fools Die*, *The Sicilian* and *The Fourth K*. Mario Puzo was also the author of ten screenplays, including *Superman* and *Superman II*. For both his screenplay adaptations of *The Godfather* he won Academy Awards. Mario Puzo died in 1999, leaving the completed manuscript of his last novel, *Omertà*.

Also by Mario Puzo

FICTION

The Dark Arena
The Fortunate Pilgrim
The Godfather
The Sicilian
The Fourth K
Omertà
The Last Don
The Family

NON-FICTION

The Godfather Papers
Inside Las Vegas

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

The Runaway Summer of Davie Shaw

MARIO PUZO

Fools Die



arrow books

For Erika

BOOK ONE

1

‘LISTEN TO ME. I will tell you the truth about a man’s life. I will tell you the truth about his love for women. That he never hates them. Already you think I’m on the wrong track. Stay with me. Really—I’m a master of magic.

‘Do you believe a man can truly love a woman and constantly betray her? Never mind physically, but betray her in his mind, in the very “poetry of his soul”. Well, it’s not easy, but men do it all the time.

‘Do you want to know how women can love you, feed you that love deliberately to poison your body and mind simply to destroy you? And out of passionate love choose not to love you any more? And at the same time dizzy you with an idiot’s ecstasy? Impossible? That’s the easy part.

‘But don’t run away. This is not a love story.

‘I will make you feel the painful beauty of a child, the animal horniness of the adolescent male, the yearning suicidal moodiness of the young female. And then (here’s the hard part) show you how time turns man and woman around full circle, exchanged in body and soul.

‘And then of course there is TRUE LOVE. Don’t go away! It exists or I will make it exist. I’m not a master of magic for nothing. Is it worth what it costs? And how about sexual fidelity? Does it work? Is it love? Is it even human, that perverse passion to be with only one person? And if it doesn’t work, do you still get a bonus for trying? Can it work both ways? Of course not, that’s easy. And yet—

‘Life is a comical business, and there is nothing funnier than love travelling through time. But a true master of magic can make his audience laugh and cry at the same time. Death is another story. I will never make a joke about death. It is beyond my powers.

‘I am always alert for death. He doesn’t fool me. I spot him right away. He loves to come in his country-bumpkin disguise; a comical wart that suddenly grows and grows; the dark, hairy mole that sends its roots to the very bone; or hiding behind a pretty little fever blush. Then suddenly that grinning skull appears to take the victim by surprise. But never me. I’m waiting for him. I take my precautions.

‘Parallel to death, love is a tiresome, childish business, though men believe more in love than death. Women are another story. They have a powerful secret. They don’t take love seriously and never have.

‘But again, don’t go away. Again; this is not a love story. Forget about love. I will show you all the stretches of power. First the life of a poor struggling writer. Sensitive. Talented. Maybe even some genius. I will show you the artist getting the shit kicked out of him for the sake of his art. And why he so richly deserves it. Then I will show him as a cunning criminal and having the time of his life. Ah, what joy the true artist feels when he finally becomes a crook. It’s out in the open now, his essential nature. No more kidding around about his honour. The son of a bitch is a hustler. A conniver. An enemy of society right out in the clear instead of hiding behind his whore’s cunt of art. What a relief. What pleasure. Such sly delight. And then how he becomes an honest man again. It’s an awful strain being a crook.

‘But it helps you to accept society and forgive your fellowman. Once that’s done no person should be a crook unless he really needs the money.

‘Then on to one of the most amazing success stories in the history of literature. The intimate lives of the giants of

our culture. One crazy bastard especially. The classy world. So now we have the poor struggling genius world, the crooked world and the classy literary world. All this laced with plenty of sex, some complicated ideas you won't be hit over the head with and may even find interesting. And finally on to a full-blast ending in Hollywood with our hero gobbling up all its rewards, money, fame, beautiful women. And ... don't go away—don't go away—how it all turns to ashes.

'That's not enough? You've heard it all before? But remember I'm a master of magic. I can bring all these people truly alive. I can show you what they truly think and feel. You'll weep for them, all of them, I promise you that. Or maybe just laugh. Anyway, we're going to have a lot of fun. And learn something about life. Which is really no help.

'Ah, I know what you're thinking. That conning bastard trying to make us turn the page. But wait, it's only a tale I want to tell. What's the harm? Even if I take it seriously, you don't have to. Just have a good time.

'I want to tell you a story, I have no other vanity. I don't desire success or fame or money. But that's easy, most men, most women don't, not really. Even better, I don't want love. When I was young, some women told me they loved me for my long eyelashes. I accepted. Later it was for my wit. Then for my power and money. Then for my talent. Then for my mind—deep. OK, I can handle all of it. The only woman who scares me is the one who loves me for myself alone. I have plans for her. I have poisons and daggers and dark graves in caves to hide her head. She can't be allowed to live. Especially if she is sexually faithful and never lies and always puts me ahead of everything and everyone.

'There will be a lot about love in this book, but it's not a love book. It's a war book. The old war between men who are true friends. The great "new" war between men and women. Sure it's an old story, but it's out in the open now.

The Women's Liberation warriors think they have something new, but it's just their armies coming out of their guerrilla hills. Sweet women ambushed men always: at their cradles, in the kitchen, the bedroom. And at the graves of their children, the best place not to hear a plea for mercy.

'Ah well, you think I have a grievance against women. But I never hated them. And they'll come out better people than men, you'll see. But the truth is that only women have been able to make me unhappy, and they have done so from the cradle on. But most men can say that. And there's nothing to be done.

'What a target I've given here. I know—I know—how irresistible it seems. But be careful. I'm a tricky storyteller, not just one of your vulnerable sensitive artists. I've taken my precautions. I've still got a few surprises left.

'But enough. Let me get to work. Let me begin and let me end.'

BOOK TWO

2

ON THE LUCKIEST day of Jordan Hawley's life he betrayed his three best friends. But yet unknowing, he wandered through the dice pit of the huge gambling casino in the Hotel Xanadu, wondering what game to try next. Still early afternoon, he was a ten-thousand-dollar winner. But he was tired of the glittering red dice skittering across green felt.

He moved out of the pit, the purple carpet sinking beneath his feet, and moved toward the hissing wheel of a roulette table, pretty with red and black boxes, punishing green zero and double zero. He made some foolhardy bets, lost and moved into the blackjack pit.

The small horseshoe blackjack tables ran down in double rows. He walked between them like a captive through an Indian gauntlet. Blue-backed cards flashed on either side. He made it through safely and came to the huge glass doors that led out into the streets of the city of Las Vegas. From here he could see down the Strip sentinelled by luxury hotels.

Under the blazing Nevada sun, a dozen Xanadus glittered with million-watt neon signs. The hotels seemed to be melting down into a shimmering golden haze, an unreachable mirage. Jordan Hawley was trapped inside the air-conditioned casino with his winnings. It would be madness to go out to where only other casinos awaited him, with their strange unknown fortunes. Here he was a winner, and soon he would see his friends. Here he was shielded from the burning yellow desert.

Jordan Hawley turned away from the glass door and sat down at the nearest blackjack table. Black hundred-dollar chips, tiny cindered suns, rattled in his hands. He watched a dealer sliding cards from his freshly made shoe, the oblong wooden box that held the cards.

Jordan bet heavy on each of two small circles, playing two hands. His luck was good. He played until the shoe ran out. The dealer busted often, and when he shuffled up, Jordan moved on. His pockets bulged chips everywhere. But that was no sweat because he was wearing a specially designed Sy Devore Vegas Winner sports coat. It had red crimson trim on sky blue cloth and specially zippered pockets that were optimistically capacious. The inside of the jacket also held special zippered cavities so deep no pickpocket could get at them. Jordan's winnings were safe, and he had plenty of room for more. Nobody had ever filled the pockets of a Vegas Winner jacket.

The casino, lit by many huge chandeliers, had a bluish haze, neon reflected by the deep purple carpeting. Jordan stepped out of this light and into the darkened area of the bar lounge with its lowered ceiling and small platform for performers. Seated at a small table, he could look out on the casino as a spectator looks on a lighted stage.

Mesmerized, he watched afternoon gamblers drift in intricate choreographed patterns from table to table. Like a rainbow flashing across a clear blue sky, a roulette wheel flashed its red, black numbers to match the table layout. Blue white-backed cards skittered across green felt tables. White-dotted red square dice were dazzling flying fish over the whale-shaped crap tables. Far off, down the rows of blackjack tables, those dealers going off duty washed their hands high in the air to show they were not palming chips.

The casino stage began to fill up with more actors: sun worshippers wandering in from the outdoor pool, others from tennis courts, golf courses, naps and afternoon free and paid lovemaking in Xanadu's thousand rooms. Jordan

spotted another Vegas Winner jacket coming across the casino floor. It was Merlyn. Merlyn the Kid. Merlyn wavered as he passed the roulette wheel, his weakness. Though he rarely played because he knew its huge five and a half percent cut like a sharp sword. Jordan from the darkness waved a crimson-striped arm, and Merlyn took up his stride again as if he were passing through flames, stepped off the lighted stage of the casino floor and sat down. Merlyn's zippered pockets did not bulge with chips, nor did he have any in his hands.

They sat there without speaking, easy with each other. Merlyn looked like a burly athlete in his crimson and blue jacket. He was younger than Jordan by at least ten years, and his hair was jet black. He also looked happier, more eager for the coming battle against fate, the night of gambling.

Then from the baccarat pit in the far corner of the casino they saw Cully Cross and Diane step through the elegant royal grey railing and move over the casino floor coming toward them. Cully too was wearing his Vegas Winner jacket. Diane was in a white summer frock, low-cut and cool for her day's work, the top of her breasts dusted pearly white. Merlyn waved, and they came forward through the casino tables without swerving. And when they sat down, Jordan ordered the drinks. He knew what they wanted.

Cully spotted Jordan's bulging pockets. 'Hey,' he said, 'you went and got lucky without us?'

Jordan smiled. 'A little.' They all looked at him curiously as he paid for the drinks and tipped the cocktail waitress with a red five-dollar chip. He noticed their glances. He did not know why they looked at him so oddly. Jordan had been in Vegas three weeks and had changed fearsomely in that three weeks. He had lost twenty pounds. His ash-blond hair had grown long, whiter. His face, though still handsome, was now haggard; the skin had a greyish tinge. He looked

drained. But he was not conscious of this because he felt fine. Innocently, he wondered about these three people, his friends of three weeks and now the best friends he had in the world.

The one Jordan liked best was the Kid. Merlyn. Merlyn prided himself on being an impassive gambler. He tried never to show emotion when he lost or won and usually succeeded. Except that an exceptionally bad losing streak gave him a look of surprised bewilderment that delighted Jordan.

Merlyn the Kid never said much. He just watched everybody. Jordan knew that Merlyn the Kid kept tabs on everything he did, trying to figure him out. Which also amused Jordan. He had the Kid faked out. The Kid was looking for complicated things and never accepted that he, Jordan, was exactly what he presented to the world. But Jordan liked being with him and the others. They relieved his loneliness. And because Merlyn seemed more eager, more passionate, in his gambling, Cully had named him the Kid.

Cully himself was the youngest, only twenty-nine, but oddly enough seemed to be the leader of the group. They had met three weeks ago here in Vegas, in this casino, and they had only one thing in common. They were degenerate gamblers. Their three-week-long debauch was considered extraordinary because the casino percentage should have ground them into the Nevada desert sands in their first few days.

Jordan knew that the others, Cully 'Countdown' Cross and Diane, were also curious about him, but he didn't mind. He had very little curiosity about any of them. The Kid seemed young and too intelligent to be a degenerate gambler, but Jordan never tried to nail down why. It was really of no interest to him.

Cully was nothing to wonder about or so it seemed. He was your classical degenerate gambler with skills. He could

count down the cards in a four-deck blackjack shoe. He was an expert on all the gambling percentages. The Kid was not. Jordan was a cool, abstracted gambler where the Kid was passionate. And Cully professional. But Jordan had no illusions about himself. At this moment he was in their class. A degenerate gambler. That is, a man who gambled simply to gamble and must lose. As a hero who goes to war must die. Show me a gambler and I'll show you a loser, show me a hero and I'll show you a corpse, Jordan thought.

They were all at the end of their bankrolls, they would all have to move on soon, except maybe Cully. Cully was part pimp and part tout. Always trying to work a con to get an edge on the casinos. Sometimes he got a blackjack dealer to go partners against the house, a dangerous game.

The girl, Diane, was really an outsider. She worked as a shill for the house and she was taking her break from the baccarat table. With them, because these were the only three men in Vegas she felt cared about her.

As a shill she played with casino money, lost and won casino money. She was subject not to fate but to the fixed weekly salary she received from the casino. Her presence was necessary to the baccarat table only in slack hours because gamblers shied away from an empty table. She was the flypaper for the flies. She was, therefore, dressed provocatively. She had long jet black hair she used as a whip, a sensuous full mouth and an almost perfect long-legged body. Her bust was on the small side, but it suited her. And the baccarat pit boss gave her home phone number to big players. Sometimes the pit boss or a ladderman would whisper that one of the players would like to see her in his room. She had the option to refuse, but it was an option to be used carefully. When she complied, she was not paid directly by the customer. The pit boss gave her a special chit for fifty or a hundred dollars that she could cash at the casino cage. This she hated to do. So she would pay one of the other girl shills five dollars to cash

her chit for her. When Cully heard this, he became her friend. He liked soft women, he could manipulate them.

Jordan signalled the cocktail waitress for more drinks. He felt relaxed. It gave Jordan a feeling of virtue to be so lucky and so early in the day. As if some strange God had loved him, found him good and were rewarding him for the sacrifices he had offered up to the world he had left behind him. And he had this sense of comradeship with Cully and Merlyn.

They ate breakfast together often. And always had this late-afternoon drink before starting their big gambling action that would destroy the night. Sometimes they had a midnight snack to celebrate a win, the lucky man picking up the tab and buying keno tickets for the table. In the last three weeks they had become buddies, though they had absolutely nothing in common and their friendship would die with their gambling lust. But now, still not busted out, they had a strange affection for each other. Coming off a winning day, Merlyn the Kid had taken the three of them into the hotel clothing store and bought their crimson and blue Vegas Winner jackets. That day all three had been winners and had worn their jackets superstitiously ever since.

Jordan had met Diane on the night of her deepest humiliation, the same night he first met Merlyn. The day after meeting her he had bought her coffee on one of her breaks, and they had talked but he had not heard what she was saying. She sensed his lack of interest and had been offended. So there had been no action. He was sorry afterward, sorry that night in his ornately decorated room, alone and unable to sleep. As he was unable to sleep every night. He had tried sleeping pills, but they gave him nightmares that frightened him.

The jazz combo would be coming on soon, the lounge filled up. Jordan noticed the look they had given him when he

had tipped the waitress with a red five-dollar chip. They thought he was generous. But it was simply because he didn't want to be bothered figuring out what the tip should be. It amused him to see how his values had changed. He had always been meticulous and fair but never recklessly generous. At one time his part of the world had been scaled and metered out. Everyone earned rewards. And finally it hadn't worked. He was amazed now at the absurdity of having once based his life on such reasoning.

The combo was rustling through the darkness up to the stage. Soon they would be playing too loud for anyone to talk, and this was always the signal for the three men to start their serious gambling.

'Tonight's my lucky night,' Cully said. 'I got thirteen passes in my right arm.'

Jordan smiled. He always responded to Cully's enthusiasm. Jordan knew him only by the name of Cully Countdown, the name he had earned at the blackjack tables. Jordan liked Cully because the man never stopped talking and his talk rarely required answers. Which made him necessary to the group because Jordan and Merlyn the Kid never talked much. And Diane, the baccarat shill, smiled a lot but didn't talk much either.

Cully's small-featured, dark, neat face was glowing with confidence. 'I'm going to hold the dice for an hour,' he said. 'I'm going to throw a hundred numbers and no sevens. You guys get on me.'

The jazz combo gave their opening flourish as if to back Cully up.

Cully loved craps, though his best skill was at blackjack where he could count down the shoe. Jordan loved baccarat because there was absolutely no skill or figuring involved. Merlyn loved roulette because it was to him the most mythical, magical game. But Cully had declared his infallibility tonight at craps and they would all have to play with him, ride his luck. They were his friends, they couldn't

jinx him. They rose to go to the dice pit and bet with Cully, Cully flexing his strong right arm that magically concealed thirteen passes.

Diane spoke for the first time. 'Jordy had a lucky streak at baccarat. Maybe you should bet on him.'

'You don't look lucky to me,' Merlyn said to Jordan.

It was against the rules for her to mention Jordan's luck to fellow gamblers. They might tap him for a loan or he might feel jinxed. But by this time Diane knew Jordan well enough to sense he didn't care about any of the usual superstitions gamblers worried about.

Cully Countdown shook his head. 'I have the feeling.' He brandished his right arm, shaking imaginary dice.

The music blared; they could no longer hear each other speak. It blew them out of their sanctuary of darkness into the blazing stage that was the casino floor. There were many more players now, but they could move fluidly. Diane, her coffee break over, went back to the baccarat table to bet the house money, to fill up space. But without passion. As a house shill, winning and losing house money, she was boringly immortal. And so she walked more slowly than the others.

Cully led the way. They were the Three Musketeers in their crimson and blue Vegas Winner sports coats. He was eager and confident. Merlyn followed almost as eagerly, his gambling blood up. Jordan followed more slowly, his huge winnings making him appear heavier than the other two. Cully was trying to sniff out a hot table, one of his signposts being if the house racks of chips were low. Finally he led them to an open railing and the three lined up so that Cully would get the dice first coming around the stickman. They made small bets until Cully finally had the red cubes in his loving rubbing hands.

The Kid put twenty on the line. Jordan two hundred. Cully Countdown fifty. He threw a six. They all backed up their bets and bought all the numbers. Cully picked up the dice,

passionately confident, and threw them strongly against the far side of the table. Then stared with disbelief. It was the worst of catastrophes. Seven out. Wiped. Without even catching another number. The Kid had lost a hundred and forty, Cully a big three fifty. Jordan had gone down the drain for fourteen hundred dollars.

Cully muttered something and wandered away. Thoroughly shaken, he was now committed to playing very careful blackjack. He had to count every card from the shoe to get an edge on the dealer. Sometimes it worked, but it was a long grind. Sometimes he would remember every card perfectly, figure out what was left in the shoe, get a ten percent edge on the dealer and bet a big stack of chips. And even then sometimes with that big ten percent edge he got unlucky and lost. And then count down another shoe. So now, his fantastic right arm having betrayed him, Cully was down to case money. The night before him was a drudgery. He had to gamble very cleverly and still not get unlucky.

Merlyn the Kid also wandered away, also down to his case money, but with no skills to back up his play. He had to get lucky.

Jordan, alone, prowled around the casino. He loved the feeling of being solitary in the crowd of people and the gambling hum. To be alone without being lonely. To be friends with strangers for an hour and never see them again. Dice clattering.

He wandered through the blackjack pit, the horseshoe tables in straight rows. He listened for the tick, of a second carder. Cully had taught him and Merlyn this trick. A crooked dealer with fast hands was impossible to spot with the eye. But if you listened very carefully, you could hear the slight rasping tick when he slid out the second card from beneath the top card of his deck. Because the top card was the card the dealer needed to make his hand good.

A long queue was forming for the dinner show though it was only seven. There was no real action in the casino. No big betters. No big winners. Jordan clicked the black chips in his hand, deliberating. Then he stepped up to an almost empty crap table and picked up the red glittering dice.

Jordan unzipped the outside pocket of his Vegas Winner sports jacket and heaped black hundred-dollar chips into his table rack. He bet two hundred on the line, backed up his number and then bought all the numbers for five hundred dollars each. He held the dice for almost an hour. After the first fifteen minutes the electricity of his hot hand ran through the casino and the table jammed full. He pressed his bets to the limit of five hundred, and the magical numbers kept rolling out of his hand. In his mind he banished the fatal seven to hell. He forbade it to appear. His table rack filled to overflowing with black chips. His jacket pockets bulged to capacity. Finally his mind could no longer hold its concentration, could no longer banish the fatal seven, and the dice passed from his hands to the next player. The gamblers at the table gave him a cheer. The pit boss gave him metal racks to carry his chips to the casino cage. Merlyn and Cully appeared. Jordan smiled at them.

‘Did you get on my roll?’ he asked.

Cully shook his head. ‘I got in on the last ten minutes,’ he said. ‘I did a little good.’

Merlyn laughed. ‘I didn’t believe in your luck. I stayed off.’

Merlyn and Cully escorted Jordan to the cashier’s cage to help him cash in. Jordan was astonished when the total of the metal racks came to over fifty thousand dollars. And his pockets bulged with still more chips.

Merlyn and Cully were awestricken. Cully said seriously, ‘Jordy, now’s the time for you to leave town. Stay here and they’ll get it back.’

Jordan laughed. ‘The night’s young yet.’ He was amused that his two friends thought it such a big deal. But the

strain told on him. He felt enormously tired. He said, 'I'm going up to my room for a nap. I'll meet you guys and buy a big dinner maybe about midnight. OK?'

The case teller had finished counting and said to Jordan, 'Sir would you like cash or a cheque? Or would you like us to hold it for you here in the cage?'

Merlyn said, 'Get a cheque.'

Cully frowned with thoughtful greed, but then noticed that Jordan's secret inner pockets still bulged with chips, and he smiled. 'A cheque is safer,' he said.

The three of them waited, Cully and Merlyn flanking Jordan, who looked beyond them to the glittering casino pits. Finally the cashier reappeared with the saw-toothed yellow cheque and handed it to Jordan.

The three men turned together in an unconscious pirouette; their jackets flashed crimson and blue beneath the keno board lights above them. Then Merlyn and Cully took Jordan by the elbows and thrust him into one of the spokelike corridors toward his room.

A plushy, expensive, garish room. Rich gold curtains, a huge silver quilted bed. Exactly right for gambling. Jordan took a hot bath and then tried to read. He couldn't sleep. Through the windows the neon lights of the Vegas Strip sent flashes of rainbow colour, streaking the walls of his room. He drew the curtains tighter, but in his brain he still heard the faint roar that diffused through the huge casino like surf on a distant beach. Then he put out the lights in the room and got into bed. It was a good fake, but his brain refused to be fooled. He could not fall asleep.

Then Jordan felt the familiar fear and terrible anxiety. If he fell asleep, he would die. He desperately wanted to sleep, yet he could not. He was too afraid, too frightened. But he could never understand why he was so terribly frightened.

He was tempted to try the sleeping pills again; he had done so earlier in the month and he had slept, but only with nightmares that he couldn't bear. And left him depressed the next day. He preferred going without sleep. As now.

Jordan snapped on the light, got out of bed and dressed. He emptied out all his pockets and his wallet. He unzipped all the outside and inside pockets of his Vegas Winner sports coat and shook it upside down so that all the black and green and red chips poured down on the silk coverlet. The hundred-dollar bills formed a huge pile, the black and reds forming curious spirals and chequered patterns. To pass the time he started to count the money and sort out the chips. It took him almost an hour.

He had over five thousand dollars in cash. He had eight thousand dollars in black hundred-dollar chips and another six thousand dollars in twenty-five-dollar greens, almost a thousand dollars in five-dollar reds. He was astonished. He took the big jagged-edged Hotel Xanadu cheque out of his wallet and studied the black and red script and the numbered amount in green. Fifty thousand dollars. He studied it carefully. There were three different signatures on the cheque. One of the signatures he particularly noticed because it was so large and the script so clear. Alfred Gronevelt.

And still he was puzzled. He remembered turning in some chips for cash several times during the day, but he hadn't realized it was for more than five thousand. He shifted on the bed and all the carefully stacked piles collapsed into each other.

And now he was pleased. He was glad that he had enough money to stay in Vegas, that he would not have to go on to Los Angeles to start his new job. To start his new career, his new life, maybe a new family. He counted all the money again and added the cheque. He was worth seventy-one thousand dollars. He could gamble forever.

He switched off the bedside light so that he could lie there in the darkness with his money surrounding and touching his body. He tried to sleep to fight off the terror that always came over him in this darkened room. He could hear his heart beating faster and faster until finally he had to switch the light back on and get up from the bed.

High above the city in his penthouse suite, the hotel owner, Alfred Gronevelt, picked up the phone. He called the dice pit and asked how much Jordan was ahead. He was told that Jordan had killed the table profits for the night. Then he called back the operator and told her to page Xanadu Five. He held on. It would take a few minutes for the page to cover all the areas of the hotel and penetrate the minds of the players. Idly he gazed out the penthouse window and could see the great thick red and green python of neon that wound down the Las Vegas Strip. And further off, the dark surrounding desert mountains enclosing, with him, thousands of gamblers trying to beat the house, sweating for those millions of dollars of greenbacks lying so mockingly in cashier cages. Over the years these gamblers had left their bones on that gaudy neon Strip.

Then he heard Cully's voice come over the phone. Cully was Xanadu Five. (Gronevelt was Xanadu One.)

'Cully, your buddy hit us big,' Gronevelt said. 'You sure he's legit?'

Cully's voice was low. 'Yeah, Mr Gronevelt. He's a friend of mine and he's square. He'll drop it back before he leaves.'

Gronevelt said, 'Anything he wants, lay it on him. Don't let him go wandering down the Strip, giving our money to other joints. Lay a good broad on him.'

'Don't worry,' Cully said. But Gronevelt caught something funny in his voice. For a moment he wondered about Cully. Cully was his spy, checking the operation of the casino and reporting the blackjack dealers who were going partners

with him to beat the house. He had big plans for Cully when this operation was over. But now he wondered.

‘What about that other guy in your gang, the Kid?’ Gronevelt said. ‘What’s his angle, what the hell is he doing here three weeks?’

‘He’s small change,’ Cully said. ‘But a good kid. Don’t worry, Mr Gronevelt. I know what I got riding with you.’

‘OK,’ Gronevelt said. When he hung up the phone, he was smiling. Cully didn’t know that pit bosses had complained about Cully’s being allowed in the casino because he was a countdown artist. That the hotel manager had complained about Merlyn and Jordan being allowed to keep desperately needed rooms for so long despite fresh loaded gamblers who came in every weekend. What no one knew was that Gronevelt was intrigued by the friendship of the three men; how it ended would be Cully’s true test.

In his room Jordan fought the impulse to go back down into the casino. He sat in one of the stuffed armchairs and lit a cigarette. Everything was OK now. He had friends, he had gotten lucky, he was free. He was just tired. He needed a long rest someplace far away.

He thought, Cully and Diane and Merlyn. Now his three best friends, he smiled at that.

They knew a lot of things about him. They had all spent hours in the casino lounge together, gossiping, resting between bouts of gambling. Jordan was never reticent. He would answer any question, though he never asked any. The Kid always asked questions so seriously, with such obvious interest, that Jordan never took offence.

Just for something to do he took his suitcase out of the closet to pack. The first thing that hit his eye was the small handgun he had bought back home. He had never told his friends about the gun. His wife had left him and taken the children. She had left him for another man, and his first reaction had been to kill the other man. A reaction so alien

to his true nature that even now he was constantly surprised. Of course, he had done nothing. The problem was to get rid of the gun. The best thing to do was to take it apart and throw it away piece by piece. He didn't want to be responsible for anybody's getting hurt by it. But right now he put it to one side and threw some clothes in the suitcase, then sat down again.

He wasn't that sure he wanted to leave Vegas, the brightly lit cave of his casino. He was comfortable there. He was safe there. His not caring really about winning or losing was his magic cloak against fate. And most of all, his casino cave closed out all the other pains and traps of life itself.

He smiled again, thinking about Cully's worrying about his winnings. What, after all, would he do with the money? The best thing would be to send it to his wife. She was a good woman, a good mother, a woman of quality and character. The fact that she had left him after twenty years to marry her lover did not, could not, change those facts. For at this moment, now that the months had passed, Jordan saw clearly the justice of her decision. She had a right to be happy. To live her life to its fullest potential. And she had been suffocating living with him. Not that he had been a bad husband. Just an inadequate one. He had been a good father. He had done his duty in every way. His only fault was that after twenty years he no longer made his wife happy.

His friends knew his story. The three weeks he had spent with them in Vegas seemed like years, and he could talk to them as he could never talk to anyone back home. It had come out over drinks in the lounge, after midnight meals in the coffee shop.

He knew they thought him cold-blooded. When Merlyn asked him what the visitation rights were with his children, Jordan shrugged. Merlyn asked if he would ever see his

wife and kids again, and Jordan tried to answer honestly. 'I don't think so,' he said. 'They're OK.'

And Merlyn the Kid shot back at him, 'And you, are you OK?'

And Jordan laughed without faking it, laughing at the way Merlyn the Kid zeroed in on him. Still laughing, he said, 'Yeah, I'm OK.' And then just once he paid the Kid off for being so nosy. He looked him right in the eye and said coolly, 'There's nothing more to see. What you see is it. Nothing complicated. People are not that important to other people. When you get older, that's the way it is.'

Merlyn looked back at him and lowered his eyes and then said very softly, 'It's just that you can't sleep at night, right?'

Jordan said, 'That's right.'

Cully said impatiently, 'Nobody sleeps in this town. Just get a couple of sleeping pills.'

'They give me nightmares,' Jordan said.

'No, no,' Cully said, 'I mean them.' He pointed to three hookers seated around a table, having drinks. Jordan laughed. It was the first time he had heard the Vegas idiom. Now he understood why sometimes Cully broke off gambling with the announcement he was going to take on a couple of sleeping pills.

If there was ever a time for walking sleeping pills, it was tonight, but Jordan had tried that the first week in Vegas. He could always make it, but he never really felt the relief from tension afterward. One night a hooker, a friend of Cully's, had talked him into 'twins', taking her girlfriend with her. Only another fifty and they would really shoot the works because he was a nice guy. And he'd said OK. It had been sort of cheery and comforting with so many breasts surrounding him. An infantile comfort. One girl finally cradled his head in her breast while the other one rode him astride. And at the final moment of tension, as finally he came, surrendering at least his flesh, he caught the girl