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The Gambler's Daughter

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Introduction

Welcome to Las Vegas—the city of endless lights, perpetual motion, and the constant, tantalizing hum of chance. Here, fortunes change with the flick of a card and secrets linger just beneath the glare of a thousand neon signs. Tourists flock to the Strip for a taste of the extraordinary, dazzled by spectacle and lured by the hope that, for once, luck will tip their way. But for the locals, especially those raised in the shadows of casinos, Las Vegas is something else entirely: a relentless game of risk, survival, and knowing when to keep your cards close.

Cassie Reynolds understands this better than most. As the daughter of a blackjack dealer and an infamous craps player, she grew up watching lives unravel over the clatter of dice and the soft click of chips. The glamorous facade of Vegas has always been paper-thin for Cassie, barely concealing the heartbreak, desperation, and betrayal that persistently pulse through its hidden corridors and back rooms. Her own family has been tested by luck—both good and bad—leaving scars that have never fully faded.

Cassie's childhood was a lesson in uncertainty. Her father, Hank Reynolds, was once a legend among gamblers, known for his sharp eye and even sharper temper. But luck is fickle, and the Reynolds name carried as much notoriety as it did respect. Estrangement carved its way between father and daughter, pushing Cassie further from the tables and deeper into a life where trust was a currency she couldn't afford to spend. Yet, no matter how far she tried to escape her legacy, the city's heartbeat kept calling her back.

Now, with her father's sudden disappearance and a cryptic message hinting at a secret buried within Las Vegas's glittering maze, Cassie finds herself drawn into a game more dangerous than any she's dealt before. With unanswered questions and dangerous enemies lurking around every corner, she must navigate a labyrinth that echoes with her family's reputation and the ghosts of past mistakes.

But Cassie is no stranger to risk. Armed with sharp instincts and an unyielding resolve, she's determined to uncover the truth—even if it means facing the darkness she once tried to flee. At her side stands Rafe, an ex-cop whose own past is tangled with regret and redemption. Together, they venture beneath the surface of a city built on illusion, searching for answers in an environment where the only certainty is uncertainty itself.

In Las Vegas, every story is a gamble—and Cassie is ready to place her bet. The cards are on the table, and the stakes have never been higher.

CHAPTER ONE: Shadows on the Strip

The siren wail sliced through the humid desert night, a familiar lament in a city that never truly slept. Cassie Reynolds didn't even flinch. It was just another Tuesday, or maybe Wednesday—the days blurred when your shifts ran from dusk till dawn, the fluorescent glow of the casino floor replacing any natural rhythm. She stood at her blackjack table, the green felt a vast, unchanging landscape before her, the clinking of chips a relentless soundtrack to her life. Above her, the ornate, gilded ceiling of the 'Oasis Grande' swallowed the sound, along with the hopes and dreams of a thousand restless souls.

Tonight, her table was slow. A couple of tourists, already half-drunk and convinced they were channeling winning streaks, were making predictable mistakes. Cassie dealt cards with practiced ease, her movements fluid and economical, her face a mask of polite indifference. It was a skill she'd honed over years: revealing nothing, absorbing everything. It was how you survived in Vegas, especially when your last name was Reynolds.

A shadow fell over her hand. Not a new player, but a familiar one. Tony 'The Grin' Moretti, head of security at the Oasis Grande, leaned against the velvet rope, a smirk playing on his lips. Moretti was all tailored suits and coiled aggression, his eyes missing nothing, his smile never quite reaching them. He had a way of making you feel like he knew every secret you'd ever kept, and a few you hadn't even realized you had.

"Long night, Cassie?" His voice was a low rumble, barely audible above the din.

Cassie met his gaze, a slight tremor in her chest she refused to acknowledge. "Just another night, Tony." She'd known Moretti since she was a kid, a shadowy presence around her father, Hank. Moretti had always been a step behind Hank, cleaning up messes, pulling strings. He was the kind of man who'd offer you a hand, then use it to lead you into a trap.

"Heard your old man's been making the rounds." Moretti's grin widened, a shark sizing up its prey. "Seen him at a few high-roller tables lately. Big bets. Bigger losses."

Cassie's grip tightened on the deck of cards. Hank Reynolds. Her estranged father. The name was a phantom limb, always there, aching. She hadn't seen him in months, hadn't spoken to him in years, not since a particularly ugly incident involving a stolen car, a crooked poker game, and the entire Reynolds family reputation going up in flames. "My father and I don't exactly send each other Christmas cards, Tony. You

know that."

"Oh, I know." He chuckled, a dry, rasping sound. "Just thought you might be interested. He's been... agitated. Asking questions. Dangerous questions, if you ask me."

A flicker of unease, cold and sharp, cut through Cassie's practiced calm. Hank agitated was a bad sign. Hank asking dangerous questions was a five-alarm fire. "What kind of questions?" she asked, her voice betraying nothing but mild curiosity.

Moretti pushed off the rope, straightening his expensive jacket. "Oh, you know Hank. Always chasing a ghost. This one seems to be about some old money. Real old money. And a certain... disappearance from back in the day."

He didn't need to say more. Everyone in Vegas knew about the whispers surrounding Silas Thorne, the ruthless casino magnate who owned half the Strip. And they knew about the rumors of a massive sum of money that had vanished decades ago, tied to Thorne's rise to power. Her father had always been obsessed with urban legends, especially the ones with a payout.

"He's playing with fire, Cassie," Moretti continued, his tone shifting, a hint of something resembling concern, or perhaps a warning. "Thorne doesn't like old stories dug up. Especially not by a man with a reputation like Hank's."

The pit boss, a burly man named Gus who sweat perpetually, signaled Cassie for a break. She nodded, excusing herself from the table, her mind reeling. Hank was back in Vegas, stirring up trouble. That much she could have guessed. But dangerous questions about Thorne and missing money? That was new, even for him.

She stepped off the floor, the constant thrum of the casino fading slightly as she headed for the break room. The air outside the pit felt thinner, less charged. She pulled out her phone, her fingers hovering over Hank's number. She hadn't called him in years. He probably didn't even have her current one.

As if on cue, her phone vibrated in her hand. Not a call, but a text message. An unknown number.

"Cassie. It's Hank. Don't call me. They're watching. Met up with an old associate. Knew him from the Craps pits. He promised a lead on the Thorne money. But something's wrong. He sent me a strange message, a code. Something about 'The King's Gambit' and 'The Emerald Suite'. I think he's in trouble. Need your help. Don't trust anyone. Especially not Moretti."

Cassie froze, her blood turning to ice. Her father. A coded message. "The King's

Gambit" was a classic chess opening, one her father had taught her as a child. "The Emerald Suite" was a luxury penthouse at the very top of the Oasis Grande, where Thorne himself often stayed. And the part about not trusting Moretti? That hit home harder than she wanted to admit.

Her father was always chasing a score, but this felt different. More desperate. More urgent. The message wasn't a plea for money, but for help. And it mentioned a "Thorne money" that had supposedly vanished. This wasn't just about her father's usual antics; it was about a secret. A dangerous one.

Before she could even process the full weight of the message, her phone vibrated again. Another text, from the same unknown number. This one was just a single, chilling word: "Gone."

A knot of dread tightened in her stomach. "Gone." What did that mean? Her father? The old associate? Both? The glitzy, high-stakes world of the Oasis Grande, which had always felt like a second home, suddenly seemed to twist into something sinister. The casino's endless lights now felt like a thousand eyes watching her.

Cassie looked at the message again, her mind racing. "The King's Gambit." "The Emerald Suite." Coded clues. Her father wasn't just gone; he'd vanished after hinting at something big, something tied to Thorne, something that clearly put him in grave danger. She knew her father had a knack for getting into trouble, but he also had a knack for leaving a trail, even if it was a convoluted one.

She shoved her phone back into her pocket, her heart pounding a frantic rhythm against her ribs. The siren outside had faded, replaced by the relentless jingle of slot machines and the triumphant shouts of a new winner. But for Cassie, the silence in her own mind was deafening. Her father, the perpetual phantom, was now a missing person. And she, the daughter who'd sworn off his chaotic world, was the only one he trusted. Or the only one he thought could unravel his final, dangerous game.

She had to find him. Not just because he was her father, but because whatever he was mixed up in, it had the potential to explode and take down anyone standing too close. And right now, she felt like she was standing directly in the blast zone. The game had just begun, and Cassie Reynolds, the reluctant gambler's daughter, was now officially in play.

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