

## Chapter One

There are only two schools of thought about the desert – either that it has no memory, or that it forgets nothing. I would love to believe the former; I am only able to believe the latter. As many times as I have tried to disappear, something always resurfaces.

My name's Greg Sumner. I play cards for a living.

Or at least, I did, until this whole mess.

Now I don't know *what* I do. I'll figure it out eventually, I guess.

This is a rubbish way to start a story, so let me wind the tale back to the origin point, the D-day, ground zero moment when the whole thing begins. It was two a.m. in Reno, I was up three grand, and I desperately wanted this whale to stop rebuying, because as fun as it was to keep cutting stacks off him all night long, sooner or later my exhaustion was going to get the better of me, and I needed to get to goddamn bed. But I have a very strict rule – never leave free money on the table. And this fucking guy just could not stop *giving* it away.

"Queens over sixes!" the mark said with the confidence of a man who's convinced himself that there isn't any possible way he could lose this hand.

"Four of a kind," I said, flipping over my pocket sixes to match the two in the communal cards. "You limped in with a pair of pocket queens? Jesus, kid, did you think you were going to lure me in or something? All you did was give me a free nuts flop, and from there on out, I fucking owned you."

"Hey, buddy, fuck you!" the mark said, finally standing up, having been at the felt for the third time in as many hours and storming off.

"Tell me he's not going over to the ATM again, is he, Don?" I asked the dealer.

"No, Mister Sumner," Don said to me. "I don't think he's allowed to withdraw any more cash from it until tomorrow anyway."

"Great. Good. Fine. Color me up so I can go cash out for the night, will you?" I said, pushing my stacks over his direction.

The sound of Don sifting and sorting the chips from the pot, lining them up with my stacks, and then changing all the lower denominations to higher denominations (known as coloring up), is one I'm intimately familiar with. It's technically a Wednesday, but when I started this run it was a Tuesday, meaning I was playing at the Silver Legacy. Different casinos for different nights. The Silver Legacy, the Peppermill, the Grand Sierra, the Eldorado, Atlantis, Circus Circus on the nights when I'm truly desperate. I knew'em all, and visited each one several times a month, watching for chum in the water, tourists who want to have 'the authentic poker experience' and are willing to splash a bit of money here and there.

You might wonder why I'm grinding up in Reno when I could be playing down in Vegas for a lot bigger stakes. It's a fair question, but Vegas, you gotta worry about the Mafia taking a cut off you if you're doing *too* well, and I was too damn tired to be giving up my hard-earned cash just for some fucking peace and quiet. Up in Reno? You try grifting a protection racket on the card sharps here, and they're just as likely to leave you with a hole in your neck in some alleyway as they are letting you live to

spread the tale about not to fuck with us. Up here, the game's the thing, and the money's never enough for them to make it worth it. Last time some punk told me he wanted a cut of my action in exchange for 'looking out for me,' I offered to play him for it and if he couldn't beat me, he could fuck right off. Guy went to pull a knife, but the dealer already had a gun pointed at him.

That's Reno for you.

"\$30,700 in chips, going out!" Don announced to the pit boss, although I took two one hundred chips off the top, gave one to Don and the other to Ashleigh, the waitress who'd been keeping my ice water flush all night. "Thanks, Mr. Sumner. Good fortune to you."

"Sleep easy, Don," I said with a laugh. "There's plenty to go around."

I grabbed my brick of chips and headed my way over towards the cage, where Darling Debbie at the counter had already prepped my cash and my forms for me, as I slid the trays of poker chips beneath the metal screen to her.

"Not a bad haul, Greg," she said, as I filled out the forms, as I'd done a thousand times before. "Probably could pull a couple grand more off that whale you were gutting. He was running over to the pawn shop to try and flip his watch, I think."

I rolled my eyes. "Fucking hell, Debbie. Some people do not know how to die gracefully. Tell you what. If Fatso comes back in here looking for another piece of me, tell him I'll be over at the Atlantis tonight around 8, and I'll happily keep fileting steaks off him. Say it just like that. Maybe he'll wise up and go home."

"Not like you to leave money on the table, Greg," she said as I pushed the forms her way and she started counting out the bills for me.

I take the bills from her and roll them up, wrapping a rubber band around them. "Sometimes you just gotta convince them to lay down, Deb."

Even in the middle of the night, downtown Reno's full of lights, like a starfield someone knocked over and left littering the streets. I tucked the rolled-up bills into my pocket and then fished out my cellphone. It was mid-March, so it was barely in the 30s, and I wanted to get to the parking garage, get in my car and get home. I was about to pull out my phone to turn it on again when it started to rain, so I thought twice about it and just sprinted over to the covered garage. Once there, I fished out my crappy iPhone that was at least five generations old at this point and held the two buttons to turn the power back on again.

As a general policy, I don't ever have my phone on at the card table – it's a distraction, and the last thing I need is a split-second lack of focus preventing me from spotting the one detail that's going to give a mark away and let him keep his cash. I'd love to tell you that means I have, like, thirty or forty messages every night when I turn it back on again, but sadly, it's almost always a blank.

Tonight, though, the minute the phone turns on, it's lit up like a slot machine paying out a progressive jackpot – two dozen notifications all springing up at once across the spectrum: text messages, voicemails, missed calls. It's a barrage of information just pelting into my face, and it all seems to go back to the same name – Julie.

*WHERE ARE YOU?!?!?!?!?* screams the most recent message, and while I could dig through all of this shit to figure out what's going on, instead, I just cut through the noise, open up the contacts and call my ex-wife to figure who's put a bee up her ass.

It doesn't even have time to finish the first ring before she's picked up on the other end of the line. "Where the fuck have you been, Greg?"

"Working, Julie," I sighed, "like I usually do for the overnight Tuesday-Wednesday shift. I had a whale on tilt who kept throwing money at me, so what was I supposed to do, say no?"

"And you're still hung up on not having your phone on while you're playing? Jesus, Greg, who the hell do you think you are? Chris Fucking MoneyMaker?" There were a lot of reasons why Julie and I were divorced. This was simply one in a long list that I couldn't help but think about every time she pestered me. "What happens if somebody fucking needs you?"

"Yes, Julie, because I'm exactly the kind of person there's likely to be an emergency for. I think we're somewhere in the top three – brain surgeons, police officers and card sharps," I grumbled. "What the fuck is all the racket about?"

"I fucking need you, shithead! I'm in deep shit and I need fucking help!"

"Is that what your new boyfriend Daryl's for?"

"Daryl's the reason I'm *in* this fuckjam to begin with!" she said, desperation cutting through the tone of her voice like a back-alley switchblade.

"Then why aren't you talking to that nitwit instead of me?"

"Because he's *dead*, Greg! He's fucking dead! He died like eight hours ago and left me super fucked up shit creek with a goddamn knife in my cooch, so no, I can't fucking talk to him instead! I'm a world of shit here, and I need a good fucking card player to bail my ass out, so can you help?"

I sighed, rubbing the bridge of my nose with two fingers. "Don't tell me you're in with the fucking mob."

"I can't tell if this is better or worse," she said. "Daryl got him and me into the Sin River game, and we're supposed to be playing tomorrow... fuck! I mean tonight!"

"Bullshit," I said, unable to think of literally anything else to say at that moment. The Sin River game was a myth, a ghost story that gamblers had been chasing for almost as long as Reno's been around. I'd been playing long enough to know that the Sin River game was nothing but a giant fucking myth, nothing anyone had ever sat at. But, and here's the fucking kicker, I had to ask myself... what if it wasn't? What if the greatest game ever had been going on under my nose and I'd been the chump constantly missing out?

"Come over here and I'll show you the fucking invitation! It's on goddamn parchment and everything, just like the rumors always said it would be."

"And, what, Daryl just up and dies the day before he's supposed to be playing in the most notorious poker game of the last hundred years?"

“He... he fucking killed himself, okay?” I’d known Julie a long time, and I’d never heard her sound so utterly defeated. “I’m... I’m fucked if you don’t help me, Greg. Please? Get me through this and I’ll do whatever you want. You want me to disappear from Nevada and lose your fucking number? I’ll do it. You want me to spend the rest of your life wearing nothing but a dog collar with ‘Greg’s Bitch’ on it, curled up at your feet for any time you want to take out your frustrations on me? I’ll do it. There is nothing, literally nothing, that I will not do if you get me out of this shit.”

“Then I want you to shit or get off the pot, Julie,” I said to her, wearily.

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“If I do this, and I’m not saying I will yet, but *if* I do this, you have to decide between one of two choices – either you get the fuck out of my life, my town, my profession or you get back together with me with the unbreakable promise that you will never fuck around on me ever again, that you will get clean and *stay* fucking clean, that this time when you say you’re done cheating and you’re done with drugs, you mean it, on promise of your life,” I told her, the anger clearly still running hot in my voice. “You ain’t gotta decide which now, but if I’m gonna white knight your ass through this, you’re *gonna* make it worth my fucking while, because you have fucked up my life in so many ways I’ve lost count. You robbed me, you cheated on me with your fucking shift manager and you pawned off my late mother’s wedding ring, and that’s for fucking starters. You agree to that?”

There was a long pause on the other end of the line, which was good, because it meant she was actively weighing her options, trying to decide which of those two choices she would take if it came to that, and if there was anyone else who she could turn to get her out of this jam.

She decided, and there wasn’t.

“I can make one of those two work,” she said in carefully measured words. “Can you come over here now?”

“No,” I told her. “I’m going home, getting a shower, getting some sleep and I will be over at your place in the afternoon or early evening after I’ve got a clear head again.” Then I hung up on her.

I did what I told her I was going to do. I went home, I took a shower, I crawled into bed and then I passed out for the better part of twelve hours. It was somewhere between noon and one in the afternoon when I woke up, and I headed over to Julie’s condo, because the last thing I wanted to do was have her railing at me nonstop, although I’m not too proud to admit I drove through Del Taco on the way, so that I wasn’t going blind with food need. When I got to her door, I was about to bang my fist on it to let her know of my arrival, but she opened it up before I even got a chance. That didn’t make me feel any better, because it meant she’d probably been waiting by the door awaiting my arrival.

“I was going to yell some more,” she said, “but I realized that wasn’t going to do any fucking good. I’ve tried to sleep some, but it wasn’t what I’d call ‘good sleep.’ Thank you for coming and hearing me out at least.”

She looked like shit, but even when she looked like shit, she looked good. Julie had been an exotic dancer and a prostitute (a legal one, at one of the ranches about twenty minutes outside of Reno) when I first met her, in addition to being a relatively good gambler. She was a little pocket rocket, barely 5’2”, naturally blonde, naturally busty and naturally flexible in all sorts of ways that were good for her

career. Her light blue eyes were lined with bags of darkened flesh that she'd unsuccessfully tried to hide with makeup. Her blonde hair was done up in the loosest, sloppiest ponytail she'd ever worn around me. She had on a tanktop with a luau shirt hanging loose over it, and a pair of jeans that did nothing to conceal the fact that she was still in shape, despite having spent most of the last year working as a proposition player and little else, although I'd heard tell she was still hooking on the side every now and again, just to stay afloat. We weren't dating anymore; it wasn't my place to judge, not that I'd been bothered when she'd been doing it when we *were* dating. It was just sex.

"You said you have an invitation to the Sin River game, Julie," I said, stepping into her condo, seeing the inside looked like a fucking hurricane had blown through it. She had rifled through everything in the place apparently, and then hadn't put anything back. "How the holy fuck did you score one of those?"

"I didn't," she said, pacing nervously around her living room. "Like I told you, Daryl did."

"Okay, how did Daryl get one?"

"I don't know, okay? Jesus fucking Christ! He came home about two weeks ago, all high on his own supply, telling me how we were going to get the fuck out of this town, how he'd been out drinking with a couple of guys and some guy at the bar asked him if he was a gambler, and then offered him and me a spot in the Sin River game."

I waved my hand at her. "You're full of shit."

"I said the same thing to him, but he had an actual invite. Look." She moved over to the little breakfast bar dividing her living room space and her kitchen space, and picked up a piece of paper, holding it out to me. I took it from her and considered it. It was, in fact, on parchment, as it had always been rumored to be. And it had clearly been delivered as a scroll, as part of a wax seal was still clinging to one end of it. The lettering was decorative and formal, more calligraphy than actual handwriting. It felt less like an invitation to a card game and more like a contract to sell your soul.

That should've been my *first* clue.

"You and your partner have been formally invited to take part in this year's Sin River Game, to start at the stroke of midnight between March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023 and March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023, and to be concluded when there are only two winners standing, one male player and one female player. The location is The Middle Of Somewhere, 40 miles southwest of Reno. When the game is concluded, one trade will be permitted, and accounts will be settled. You were asked if you wished to participate and said yes, so refusing to attend will result in your immediate forfeiture, and you will simply be thrown into the pot. This clause has not been invoked in decades, but it will be should you choose not to arrive in a prompt and honorable fashion. The game is No Limit Texas Hold'em. Any questions, contact this number – XXX-XXX-XXXX. Tell no one other than your partner about this invitation, and we wish you the best of luck. – mgmt."

I let out a *very* deep sigh. "What the fuuuuuuuck, Julie?"

"Who else do I call, Greg? I don't even know that I'm supposed to have called *you* but without a partner, I think I just fucking forfeit and I don't want that!"

“Why did Daryl do it, Julie?” I asked her, waving the piece of parchment around in my head. “Because of this?”

“He left a note saying he couldn’t handle the pressure. That he didn’t understand the rules of the game when he’d signed up for it. That he’d been drunk and high when he’d agreed to it, and now that he understood what was involved, he didn’t think he could compete and he wanted to get me out of it, and the only way he thought he could do that was by killing himself.”

“Fucking hell, Julie,” I sighed. “Did you call the number? Tell them your partner had died?”

“You don’t think I didn’t *think* of that, Greg?” she hissed at me. “They said either I could find a replacement partner, or I could be considered forfeiture, and the woman on the other end of the line *insisted* to me I didn’t want to be the second option. She practically *begged* me to find another partner, and asked if I knew anyone, so I gave them your name.”

“Wait, you already signed me *up* for this bullshit?!” I asked, suddenly very much on the defensive. “I told you I’d *consider* it, Julie! Not that I’d agreed to fucking do it!”

“Well I didn’t have a fucking choice, Greg, so now neither do you!” she shouted, tears starting to flow from her eyes again. “I’m sorry, okay? I’m very *fucking* sorry, but I didn’t know what else to do! I needed help and you always told me if I ever found myself truly, deeply and hopelessly fucked, I could call you and you would *fucking help me*. Was that a lie, too?”

I inhaled a long breath and let it out slowly. “I never fucking lied to you, Julie. Not then, not now. And you’re right – I did make you that promise. But I wish you’d told me that when we started this conversation rather than you beating around the bush about it. Do you even know where this The Middle Of Somewhere place is?”

“I looked at where it’s supposed to be on the map, out by Thomas Creek off of NF-049, but all I can see is a handful of dirt roads. When I asked about it when I called them, they insisted that if I drive there, it will *be* there.”

“Christ,” I muttered. “I bet it’s some portable game in the back of a semi, hauled around so nobody can find the location. That’d make sense, considering nobody can find the damn thing. What more do you know, Julie?”

“Nothing, Greg! Nothing! I know what’s on the card.” She looked down at her feet. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, for what that’s worth, but I was... I *am* fucking scared. You’ve heard the same stories I have, people going to the Sin River game and never coming back because they lost everything they had. I guess we’ll find out together?” She looked up at me, her face still streaked with half-dried tears on it.

“I guess so...”

I made her try and sleep some more, because the last thing I needed was a partner who was too strung out to play cards properly, and around ten o’clock at night, I woke her up so we could go and get some food beforehand. She tried to eat, managed to keep some of it down. I ate well, knowing I was going into an insanely stressful environment, and that the calories would help calm my nerves down a little bit. Then after that, we put in the address into my phone, climbed into my beat-up Escalade and drove up into the goddamn mountains.

I don't like being in the desert at night. I don't like being in the mountains at night. And I especially didn't like being in the desert in the mountains at night. It was going to remember me, or maybe it already had, and that was why I felt so uneasy. There's almost no sound up there, as if even the crickets have given up and decided to pack it in for less harsh climates. It was cold and dry, an annoying combination, as if the snow had also decided 'fuck that,' leaving us chilly beneath the penetrating silvery light of the full moon.

The directions were windy and treacherous, with us traveling by dirt road for at least half an hour, but sure enough, just shy of eleven o'clock, we found ourselves outside of a small building smack dab in the middle of nowhere. It wasn't large, more like an oversized log cabin, or something just barely large enough to be called a small bar, a tavern maybe, with a handful of cars parked out front. The sign at the top of it said "THE MIDDLE OF SOMEWHERE" in bright green neon cutting through the slight fog that had fallen on the mountain.

The cars were a mixed bag – a couple of beaters, a single stretch limo and one of those ugly ass Cybertrucks that Elon's always on about. I hadn't even thought they were on the market yet, so it must've been a prototype or an early release. There was also one 1960s Corvette Sting Ray Convertible that stood wildly out of place. Nobody seemed to be parked in any sort of logical fashion, so I simply pulled over to a relatively empty spot around the bar where I wouldn't be in anyone's way, and we exited the car and headed inside.

Standing at the door was a man so large, I'm not sure I ever saw all of him in my frame of vision at once. Knowing what I know now, I'm not entirely sure he was human. He was mostly just the most imposing wall of flesh I've ever seen, and I've spent a good amount of time in a town filled to the brim with mobsters, goodfellas, loan sharks and bouncers. I'm sure there was a head somewhere, but all I could see was muscle, and the giant hand twice the size of my head stuck out at me. "Invitation."

Thank god we'd remembered to bring the invitation with us, because I have no idea what would've happened to us if we hadn't. Julie grabbed the piece of paper from her purse, laid it within the giant hand, which closed around it before stepping back, parting way more like a door than a person, allowing us to step foot inside of the bar.

The inside of Somewhere was the most frontier saloon looking thing I'd ever set foot in. The walls, the floors, everything as far as I could see was constructed of wood, including the two poker tables that were in the center of the room, with a full bar off to the left, a woman in a long, blue velvet dress standing behind it, a rather intense vision of radiance, but I almost felt bad to be looking at her, as if I should be sizing up all my opponents scattered across the room.

Before I could take stock of the people around it, a very tall, gaunt, elderly man stood up and made his way onto a little platform over by the bar. He was dressed all in black, with a golden bolo tie and a silver cattle skull tie clasp. He had a thick bushy silver mustache with flecks of black in it, and his eyes were so deeply sunken I couldn't clearly see what color they were. "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for agreeing to take part in the 175<sup>th</sup> Sin River Game. As you should all know, you are only wagering what you brought in with you, which is to say yourselves, nothing more and nothing else. We have two tables – the men's table and the women's table. Each player will begin with a hundred thousand in chips. When you are zeroed out for the first time, you enter limbo state. During limbo state, you may do anything non-violent to the chip leader of the opposite table. If you are able to successfully distract them

into missing their action three times, you will be gifted a second life, which means a return to the table with a new, albeit shorter stack, fifty thousand in chips. You may not distract or disturb the other players at the table who are not the chip leader. If you fail to distract them three times by the time another player is knocked out, you are out, and will quietly await your fate. When both tables are settled, the winning player from each table may select three of their five winnings to keep, one to be offered to the House in tribute, and have one to throw back, who will be given an invitation to next year's Sin River Game. After winnings have been selected, one trade may be offered – although this is extremely uncommon. Also, should both you and your partner win at your respective tables, you will each keep all the other players, including the House's tribute, and next year will be an entirely fresh game. I am obligated to list this, although this has never happened in the history of the game. The game is Texas Hold'em, No Limit, one deck per table. As always, we have provided the dealers, and any other questions may be asked while play has commenced. After every hour of play, there will be a five-minute mandatory break, so that everyone can stretch their legs, get a drink or a snack, and keep their wits about them. Let's get to it."

As I was about to start heading towards my table, the older man motioned my way. "Mr. Sumner? A word before you begin if you will?"

I moved over towards him, standing below him, because even as tall as I was, Stretch had a good six or seven inches on me, even without the little platform he'd been standing on. "Yes sir?"

"I understand you're a substitution in our game? And that you were not the person to whom our invitation was originally extended?"

"Yes sir," I confirmed. "Julie Wintervale's previous partner, Daryl Blaise, died yesterday, and she was told she needed a substitute."

"Indeed she did," Stretch said to me, sighing a little. "The problem is that we normally like to do a little bit of homework on the participants for our game in advance, and you, sir, are nearly a complete unknown to us. So I'm going to ask you three questions, and either you're going to answer them correctly, or I'm going to have Rocco take you outside and reduce your body to a tenth of the size it is now. Am I making myself clear?"

I've been shook down by mob bosses before, so the threats weren't all that new, but there was something different about Stretch, something that said he basically considered this all an inconvenience, and that he was genuinely hoping I'd give the right answers. And there was something about the casual dismissiveness that made me absolutely certain that he could easily back up such threats. "Yes sir."

"Good lad. Question number one: Do you agree to accept the consequences of this game, win or lose?"

"I don't really know what we're betting, so..."

"Your soul, Mr. Sumner. Your heart, mind and soul."

"That's... a lot to put on the line for a game of cards, but I did say that I owed Julie a favor and this was what she chose to collect on, so I agree to the consequences of this game, win or lose."

"Good. You are a straight man, yes? Heterosexual, I mean?"

“I am.”

“Good. And one final question – as part of the terms of this game, should you win, you will be responsible for selecting next year’s contestants, and those people alone will be the only ones you will ever be able to tell about what’s transpired here, other than those who remain with you from the game, win or lose. Can you agree to that?”

“I can.”

“Excellent. Then I wish you good fortune, and I will be watching your gameplay with great interest.”

I moved away from him over to the table, where we were all being dealt cards to determine seating order. I drew the three of clubs, so I sat to the dealer’s left, the first player to be paying small blinds. Nobody ever exchanged names, so I had to give each of the players a nickname. To my left was The Accountant. I called him that because he was squat, bookish, wearing a cheap suit, and played like every chip he had held his life in it. To his left was The Movie Star. I can’t tell you who he is, but you’d recognize him. He’s been in a lot of very expensive movies, and even been nominated for a couple of Oscars, though he’s never won one. Next over was The High Roller, a Middle Eastern man of immense wealth, who I’m guessing might have been royalty somewhere. Next was The Mercenary, a soldier of some kind, probably of eastern European or western Soviet background. And the last was The Tech Whiz Kid, a twenty-something Silicon Valley upstart who’d probably gotten a long way using as close to pure math when playing poker. I ear marked him as the first to drop out right from the start.

“Alright,” I said, sitting down in my assigned seat. “Let’s play some fucking cards.”