



## A WELL-PLAYED HAND

by Jacob Graysol

Euphoria, finally, at 4 a.m. After concealing all signs of emotion for seven hours, Warren ran upstairs, turned on his wife's nightstand lamp, and shook her.

"Wh—what?" Angela sputtered.

"I won the Eastern Online Pokerama, Queens and sevens against Jacks and sevens. That's a free buy-in to the Borgata Winter Open. Three-million-dollar pot."

She sprang up in bed. "You won three million dollars?"

He stroked her cheek. "No, babe. I'm sorry. That's the Borgata prize pool. But any top-ten finish nets six figures, and now I don't have to pay to enter."

"The payoff's always later."

"That's the tournament I wanted most. It's right before our fifth anniversary. We can make a week of it, in Atlantic City."

"AC in winter?" She flopped down under the blanket. "Push my alarm back fifteen minutes, and we'll talk about it after work."

Warren kissed the top of her head. Angela's excitement when she thought he'd struck it rich, the dimples and the brown eyes wide as quarters—all he really wanted was to get that back in their lives. "I'll hit it big," he whispered. "You'll see."

#

At lunchtime, Angela griped to her friends about Warren all the way to Awesome Wok. When they were brought to a table, Angela sat and pushed the fourth place setting toward the hostess, then waved her away. "We don't need menus."

Soon a young waiter poured tea, and they each ordered a Combination Lunch from memory. "And a mai tai for me," Angela said. "Three cherries on the stick, not the sour fruit." She looked at the others, who held up their hands.

After the waiter left, Angela continued her rant. "Whatever last night was supposed to be, for me it was the last straw. He's becoming a poker-addicted curmudgeon."

Missy shook her head. “That’s no relationship for you. No fun ... no life.”

“Yeah.” Angela bit her lip. “Do you think it’s my fault? I went for nice; I thought I could make him more adventurous, draw him out of his shell—”

“Grow him a pair?” Diana grinned.

“I guess,” Angela replied. “It’s hard because I think he loves me the same as always.”

The waiter returned with Angela’s drink in an umbrellaed clear tumbler. She took a sip and eyed four muscular men being seated across the restaurant.

“Too tart?” Missy asked. “Angela?”

Angela realized she’d been staring at one of the men, dark and handsome in a burgundy button-down shirt. “Oh, the drink’s fine. I’m done venting about Warren, though.”

“Good,” Diana said, “because I’ve been bursting to throw shade about that birthday celebration for Cindy. Worst office party ever!”

Angela ate mindlessly, half-in on a conversation about bitter punch and tasteless cake, watching the alluring man command the attention of his tablemates without seeming to try. Another of their foursome mostly moped and downed three shots before their appetizers arrived. When her Adonis cracked a playful smile and juggled his flatware to get his despairing colleague to laugh, she knew it was time to undo a button and make an introduction.

#

In the three months since Warren secured his entry to the Borgata Open, he’d joined dozens of online chats, gleaning insights into the patterns of the top players he might face. He’d also quizzed everyone who’d competed there, learning which pit bosses were sticklers with the anti-stalling rules, which dealers were lax about side conversations, and where to get smoothies late into the night.

It became his obsession, and surprisingly, Angela didn’t mind. “It frees me for meditation classes after my workouts,” she’d told him.

Then his neighbor Chet came by, gathering signatures on a poster-sized get well card. “For Spencer Berman, down the street. Horrible, stroking out at Fit Jim’s last night.”

Angela hadn’t said a word about it.

Warren couldn’t stop his pen from shaking.

He found the story online. The ambulance had arrived at Angela’s gym twenty minutes after she would have. *After*. She’d been sneaking away.

He jumped up and knocked their wedding photos off the bookshelf. One landed faceup, and he raised his foot over it. Then he took a deep breath and brought it back down to the carpet, remembering all the money he’d won letting novices believe he was falling for their bluffs. He wouldn’t confront Angela, he’d uncover the details of her affair himself, strengthen his hand, then set the terms for ending their marriage.

Or maybe take first at Borgata and win her back still.

#

For four months after charming Gabriel at Awesome Wok, Angela burned through cash—always cash—as they drank together at dive bars and slept together at no-tell motels, where their trysts would remain secret from their spouses and middle-class friends. One night, in bed, Gabriel said, “I hate that you’re paying for everything, draining your emergency fund.” He shook his head. “So stupid, guaranteeing my nephew’s lease.”

She ran her fingers through his hair. “The last thing you are is stupid. You were being generous, helping your family. I mean, I wish he hadn’t left you holding the bag ...”

“It blew my credit. And now Old Man Flannery says he’d sell me the store for two hundred thousand. Now, when nobody would lend me half that. If I could inventory that place the way I want, the net would be incredible. We could get the life we want.”

Angela’s eyes widened. “We? You’re ready to leave Jennifer?”

“I love you, Angela. My heart does say we should run away now. But my parents, splitting up over money.” He looked down. “It weighed on everything. I can’t risk our relationship souring like that.” He looked back up. “We can still keep doing this.”

“I want to be yours every day. Warren’s crushing me.”

“I know. But getting out of debt should come first.”

“Playing by the rules is how I ended up with Warren.”

“We’ll have forever together”—he bit his lip and looked down again—“eventually.”

Angela gently lifted his chin. “There’s another way. A quick way that’ll solve your money problems, too. Just tell me that us being together is everything, no limits. Like I feel about you.”

“I do love you, so I guess—”

She put a finger on his lips. “No guessing. Nothing uncertain you might regret later.” She moved in for a long kiss.

#

Gabriel’s message to Angela the following Tuesday ended *I’ll be waiting*. He’d never asked her to leave work early before.

Room 2F was unlocked. Gabriel hugged her, then handed her a yellow envelope.

“I can’t keep anything Warren might find.”

Gabriel smiled. “I think you’ll remember it.”

She pulled out a card, an elderly man extending a bouquet of roses to a beaming woman of similar age, black-and-white except for the red petals. “Aww!”

On the blank interior, he’d written *No Limits* inside a heart. She held back a tear.

“What you asked last week,” he said.

“I know.” She swallowed hard. “I know.” She embraced him, then basked in his warmth.

They eventually showered and dressed. Gabriel said, “I take it you’re not planning an amicable divorce.”

“You’ve overheard those barflies, seen how problems get fixed at Lucky’s: gripers come in with bulging envelopes, Shawn takes them to that back room, and they come out empty-handed and content. Violent boyfriends, cheating business partners ... troubles eliminated. For me, it’ll be inheriting enough so you can buy out Flannery.”

“If Warren’s that rich, why not just go legal, get your half from the divorce court, then buy up another store?”

“There’s nothing tangible to halve. He’s been dumping all our money into poker.”

“You said ... If he’s blown everything that you’d inherit ...”

“It’s not gone, but it’s all buy-ins to tournaments, nonrefundable entry fees. Nonrefundable, unless he dies.”

Gabriel rubbed his chin. “He only plays because he wins more than he pays in, right? Half those tournament stakes would go to you.”

“You think he’d keep winning if I were taking fifty percent? He’s confided about throwing hands to advance his friends and getting paid off later. He’d relish making deals to leave me broke. Taking him out is the only way.”

Gabriel nodded. “If you’re sure, I’m sure. But the problem-solver at Lucky’s won’t be cheap.”

Angela grabbed her phone and scrolled to a photo of herself in a red cocktail dress, then enlarged the bust and showed it to Gabriel. “I can take care of that on my lunch break tomorrow.”

#

The next day was overcast, with wind whipping cigarette butts over the curb in front of Harry’s Pawn For Bucks. Angela walked in and spread the ruby necklace that had been Warren’s mother’s on the counter. Harry said, “I’m a busy man.” He had a newspaper on his lap, and nobody else was in the store.

“Pardon me?”

“A rock that big, a sharp-dressed lady like you, you’re going to take my quote and shop around. It’s not like I get uptown buyers in here, you know? I can’t pay more than I can possibly get.”

Angela glanced about. “You come highly recommended.”

“Recommended? By who?”

“No one who’d use their real name.”

He stared at her for ten seconds, then nodded. He stepped to the cash register and pulled out a gun.

Angela ducked behind her side of the counter, keeping her hands up. “Don’t shoot! Please!”

He plunked the pistol on the glass. “It’s okay, lady, you can get up. Just making sure you’re not a cop.”

She took two deep breaths and looked up through the display to make certain the gun was down, then stood up. “What’s the matter with you?” She scooped up the necklace, then pointed at him. “And drawing a gun on an undercover would just get you shot!”

“I was pretty sure about you, before I did it.”

Angela shook her head.

“Read it however you want,” Harry said. “You can Uber yourself uptown, or you can settle down and do business with someone who doesn’t leave anything to chance, who blanks out when actual cops ask questions.”

She scowled, and thought. She laid the necklace back on the counter. “I know it’s worth twenty thousand.”

Harry pinched the chain so when he lifted his hand, the ruby dangled above his palm. He squinted, then pulled out a jeweler’s loupe and studied the oval. He put the necklace down and stared at her for another ten seconds. “You don’t know what I’m going to say, do you?”

“No. What?”

“Fake.”

She flushed and snatched it back. “That’s impossible! It’s insured for twenty thousand. With a real company, Travelers or Allstate.”

He shook his head. “Maybe some other ruby you showed them, but not that glass.”

#

Warren was preregistering online for the eight-o’clock tournament when Angela came home from work. She walked into the den, lips pursed, eyebrows drawn down. Her right fist was balled.

He asked, “What’s wrong?”

“My ruby necklace—your Mom’s—the setting had worked loose, and when I took it in, they told me it was fake.” She tossed it onto the coffee table.

*Of course I switched the ruby. Moved some money and changed my passwords, too. But no way it worked loose in a month.... String her along.* “That’s impossible. We had it appraised for insurance.”

“Warren, be honest. If it’s our finances, I need to know.”

*She’s preaching honesty?* “I’m telling the truth.” He gazed at the necklace, stalling, thinking. “It looks the same. Are you certain?”

“I did a scratch test myself. But it does look the same. Someone planned this out, carefully.”

*She shopped it to someone who knows gemstones. Why would she need five figures?* “I guess anyone with a picture of it ... of you wearing it ... could’ve—”

“No, Warren. Matching it so closely *and* switching it out. When I’m not wearing it, it’s in our bedroom.”

*She’s up to something worse than adultery. But what?* “I’m calling the cops.”

Angela’s jaw dropped. “It—it wasn’t you? Desperate for cash? For gambling?”

“Desperate? I’m running hot. Even players who hold their own against me online crumble when they face icy stares at live games. That’s why I’m not just letting our money linger in the bank, like I’ve explained before.”

She looked away for a moment. “Is there a reason to get the police involved?”

“Of course! You’ve—we’ve—been robbed. Maybe insurance will pay for this. It had to have happened after the appraisal, when the coverage kicked in.”

“What if they charge us to appraise all my jewelry?”

“Maybe we *should* check the rest.”

“Your mom’s ruby is really the only piece worth anything. I don’t think—”

“I’m going to call.”

#

Bluffing had been harder over the phone, but Warren needed to get to the bottom of Angela’s lies, so he made sure the police would question them together. *We’ve been robbed. It was a family heirloom. We never let strangers wander the house.*

Detective Corey Esposito settled in across the kitchen table from them. He whistled when Angela showed him the fake. “I see why you’d call. But it’s been”—he scrolled his tablet—“five years since it was authenticated. Unless there’s a particular suspect, it’s probably gone for good.”

“Maybe it happened recently,” Warren said.

“Is there anyone new in your lives you don’t trust?”

“No, but we really want the ruby back. It was my mother’s.”

“Yes, you’ve said.” The detective strummed his fingers on the table. “Do either of you remember anything over those five years that seems suspicious, even if it didn’t at the time? Maybe a hotel returned it after a stay?”

Angela said, “I’ve never lost it.”

Warren held up his hands. “I’d remember panicking if she’d ever lost it.”

The detective looked at Angela. “Is it usually on, like a wedding ring?”

“It’s usually in my jewelry box. I don’t wear it around the house, or to work.”

He nodded. “Your jewelry box is in the bedroom, like most?”

“On my bureau,” Angela said. “We hid it in my closet a few times, like when a plumber’s coming upstairs.”

“And no one goes into the bedroom? No cleaning service.”

Angela shook her head. “Puh-leeze!”

“Friends getting a tour?”

Warren and Angela glanced at each other and shrugged. “No,” Warren said.

Esposito pointed at each of them. “Quick ... Two newest friends?”

“Five Aces and Derrick Hobson,” Warren blurted out.

Angela glanced down and right, her guilty tell. “Samantha Gold and Rita ... I’ve forgotten her last name.”

The detective raised an eyebrow.

“She’s new at work, in Accounting. Sam’s also from work. Neither would’ve seen my necklace.”

He nodded and turned to Warren. “Aces? And the other one?”

“Five Aces, online poker handle. We side-chat about opponents who overplay their favorite hands. Derrick’s another flextime web designer. We’ve had lunch, but he’s never been to the house.”

The detective extended an index finger to keep Angela silent. He asked Warren, “What led your wife to notice the gem was loose?”

“It was ... I don’t know.”

He lowered his hand and looked at Angela.

“I was moving it to get another necklace, and felt a little give.”

“Hmm.” He leaned back. “Anything either of you want to discuss with me alone?”

“No,” they said, Warren immediately and Angela right after.

“A thief wouldn’t want you to notice the switch right away, so they wouldn’t have been sloppy with the setting, letting it work loose quickly. I’m not hopeful this happened recently enough for us to catch anyone.”

Warren frowned. “You won’t try *anything*?”

“I’ll check if we’ve come across a ruby like yours, we arrest thieves and fences—middlemen who traffic hot gems. But short of that ... well, your insurance company will know you *reported* it stolen.”

Angela cast an angry glance at Warren, and he glowered back at her.

The detective handed a card to each of them. “The report will be ready in two weeks. Call if you think of anything else before then.” He stood and left.

“Were you lying to him?” Warren asked, pretending not to know.

“Of course not, I’m the victim.”

“He thought you were Pinocchio, those times he cocked his head a bit left.”

Angela shook her head. “Maybe he wasn’t playing poker, Warren.”

#

Detective Esposito’s report was ready to be picked up when promised. Warren brought it home, and when he heard Angela pull into the garage, he sat at the kitchen table behind papers he’d arranged.

Angela came in and sat across from him. “What’s that hideous Impala doing in the driveway? You can make out that it used to be a cab.” She looked over his papers.

“I guess I’m feeling generous, considering I hold all the cards.”

“You won that piece of crap in a poker game?”

“Not poker. I’m playing life.”

“Warren, you’re not making sense.”

“You know I’ve loved you. Trusted you, too, until Spencer Berman’s stroke at your gym. Everyone who was *really* there knew about it, but you said nothing.”

She made a quick glance to the right. “That must’ve been that night I got my period early. I went for raspberry leaf tea, for the cramps.”

“Hmm. That lie might’ve worked if I’d confronted you about it then. Good thing I tracked your car afterward with an AirTag instead. How about we both stick to the truth?”

“Warren ... it happened fast. Your nonstop playing was wearing on me. Even when you got excited about poker, it just felt like lost time to me ... lost life. And then I met ...” She closed her eyes for a moment. “I should’ve told you.”

“Save the sham apology. I also know that cheating on me was only the beginning. That ruby wasn’t loose.”

“It *was* you who switched it!”

“Of course, after I discovered the affair. Then your dishonest rant about the jeweler ... it wasn’t hard to figure out you’d tried to hock it. I just couldn’t narrow down why, until you flubbed Esposito’s questions. Lying to the police like that, you had to be planning the worst. You wanted money to have me killed!”

“No, Warren. I was going to hire a lawyer, that’s all.”

“Liar!”

“It’s true!”

Warren picked up a lighter with his right hand and flipped over a wallet-sized card with his left, revealing Gabriel’s name and address on the registration for a 2018 Mazda. “*Loveboy* confessed ... under extreme duress.”

“How did you get that? What did you do?”

“Nothing worse than you were plotting for me.”

“Gabriel!” She pulled her hand over her mouth.

Warren set the registration card aflame. “There goes the only evidence that I ever had contact with him.”

Angela jumped up, brows furrowed, cheeks flushed.

Warren pulled a gun from his belt and pointed it at her chest. Projecting confidence was harder now than when he’d practiced aiming at her portrait, but his hand was steady and he was sure he looked capable of anything. “Grieve later. We have to settle up.”

“Settle up?”

“You broke my heart, I’ve broken yours. So emotionally, we’re even.”

“This isn’t a game!”

“You started the murder plots. Had to have it all, right? So, it’s only fair that I get the same—everything.”

“You won’t get away with shooting me!”

Warren smirked. “I don’t have to.” He slid papers across the table. “You’ll declare you’ve been abusing me for three years, and that to avoid the embarrassment of a trial, you’ve agreed to an uncontested divorce, all marital assets going to me. I’ve crammed your personal effects into that jalopy and put five hundred dollars in the glovebox.”

“How about I call the cops about your stunt, and you rot in jail before you rot in hell!”

Warren huffed. “The last thing you want is cops. You’ve been discreet with Gabriel, no giveaways on our credit card statements or phone bills, so if his body isn’t found, you shouldn’t be a suspect. Or even if the police do link you to him, there won’t be any proof you were involved in his death. I’ll even vouch for you then—keep you in the clear so you won’t get scared and smear me.”

“But ... if you don’t sign these papers and drive at least two states away, Detective Esposito gets a tip and finds Gabriel’s body, savaged like a betrayed lover would, and they start flashing his picture at all the sleazy hotels. It’ll look like you suspected him about the ruby and blew a gasket. Esposito already thinks you’re a liar, and I timed Gabriel’s death for when you didn’t have an alibi. Even if it boils down to your word against mine, you’re forever the notorious lying adulterer, whether you’re imprisoned or not. I think you should leave.”

She stared at Warren for a full minute. “Screw you.” She pulled the papers close and signed.

He scanned the signatures, then held out a car key. “I only got the one.”

She snatched the key, grabbed two beers from the refrigerator, and stomped out the door.

Warren put the gun on the table, walked to the sink, and splashed cold water on his face. He’d been sleeping poorly, struggling to devise a better plan, a fantasy where Angela would love him as before. He shook his head, then counted her lies. Lies from before. Lies from today. Finally, he saw her as ugly, cruel. There wasn’t really a marriage to salvage after all.

He stepped to his side of the table, aimed the gun where her heart had been, and pulled the trigger, hammer clicking on an empty chamber. He smiled and did it again and again.

Then he scraped up the ashes of the registration card he’d painstakingly forged. *Greatest bluff ever.*

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