



MODERN VICES ♦

# Bugsy Siegel and the Birth of Las Vegas

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

### MARTY

Come in close, friends, for tonight our vice is the oldest thrill of all, the roll of the dice, the turn of the card, the hope that this time the wheel comes up your number. And we tell it through the story of one dangerous, handsome, dreaming gangster who looked at an empty patch of desert and imagined a glittering city of chance, and who was murdered before he ever got to see it come true. This is the birth of Las Vegas, Carol, and the strange, doomed vision of Bugsy Siegel.



### CAROL

A city built on the roll of the dice, dreamed up by a gangster. Marty, I have been to the idea of Las Vegas a thousand times in the movies, but I never knew it had a founder, and a murdered one at that. Who was this man?



#### MARTY

His name was Benjamin Siegel, Carol, though you must never, ever have called him Bugsy to his face, for he hated it, it hinted that he was crazy, bugs, and he was a proud and vain man. He was a childhood friend of the great crime bosses of the age, a charming, good-looking, ferociously violent man who had come up through the roughest rackets in the east and helped run the organization's murder-for-hire business. But Ben Siegel had bigger dreams than a back-alley enforcer. He was drawn west, to the sunshine and the movie stars of California, and he loved to move among the famous and the glamorous. And out there, Carol, he saw an opportunity that the plodding men back east could not.



**CAROL**

A killer with a taste for glamour and a head for dreams. Marty, that is a dangerous combination. What did he see out west that the others missed?



### MARTY

He saw a loophole and a landscape, Carol. In most of the country gambling was illegal, a thing done in secret back rooms, always one police raid from ruin. But in the state of Nevada, gambling was perfectly legal, out in the open, respectable. And in the southern part of that state there was a dusty little railroad and highway town called Las Vegas, sitting in the middle of nothing, hot and empty, on the road between California and the rest of the country. Where others saw worthless desert, Ben Siegel saw the one place in America where a man could build a palace of vice in broad daylight and the law would tip its hat as it walked in.



**CAROL**

Legal, in the open, with no fear of the raid. Marty, I can see the gleam in his eye already. So he built his palace?



#### **MARTY**

He seized upon a half-built hotel and casino someone else had started to struggle with, Carol, and he poured himself and a fortune of the mob's money into finishing it as something never seen before. He would not build a sawdust gambling hall. He would build luxury in the desert, a glamorous resort with fine rooms and a swimming pool and famous entertainers and beautiful people, a place where an ordinary person could feel, for a weekend, like a movie star, and lose his money in style. He named it the Flamingo, said to be after the long legs of the showgirl he loved. And it was a magnificent, extravagant, wildly expensive dream.



**CAROL**

The Flamingo, luxury blooming out of the sand. Marty, it sounds wonderful, and terribly expensive. I have a feeling the mob's money did not stretch as far as his dreams.



#### **MARTY**

It did not, Carol, and here begins his undoing. The costs ran wild, far, far over what he had promised the eastern bosses, ballooning to a staggering sum, and the dark whisper went around the organization that Siegel, or the showgirl he loved, was skimming, secretly siphoning off the missing money into a foreign bank account. Now understand, Carol, these were not investors who wrote a stern letter when displeased. And Siegel compounded it all with a disaster of an opening. He threw open the doors of the unfinished Flamingo in the winter of nineteen forty-six, with the hotel rooms not even ready, and it was a flop. The gamblers came, lost, and then drove back to their finished hotels to sleep. The dream lost money hand over fist.



**CAROL**

Over budget, whispers of theft, and a grand opening that fell flat, all with the most dangerous men in the country as his creditors. Marty, that is a coffin with the lid half down. Did he have any chance to turn it around?

**MARTY**

He fought for it, Carol, closed it, finished it properly, reopened it, and slowly, slowly it began to find its feet and even to turn a profit. But for the men back east, the accounts no longer balanced and the trust was gone, and in that world a broken trust is a death sentence. On a June evening in nineteen forty-seven, Ben Siegel was sitting on a couch in his girlfriend's home in Beverly Hills, reading a newspaper, when someone outside put a rifle to the window and fired, and the handsome dreamer of the desert was killed instantly. And here is the coldest detail, Carol. Within minutes of his death, mob associates walked calmly into the Flamingo and announced that they were now in charge, as if the whole thing had been scheduled.

**CAROL**

Shot on the couch reading his paper, and the new managers strolling in before the body was cold. Marty, so he never got to see whether his dream would work. And did it work, in the end, without him?

**MARTY**

Oh, Carol, it worked beyond anything even he had dreamed, and that is the great irony that crowns the whole tale. Ben Siegel had the vision exactly right and only the timing and the arithmetic wrong. In the years after his murder, the organization poured in, and then more of it, and hotel rose beside hotel along that desert road until it became the most famous boulevard of chance in the world, the Las Vegas Strip, a river of money and light and luck flowing out of the empty sand exactly where he said it would. He was the prophet of it, Carol, and he was murdered for being a few years and a few million dollars too early.

**CAROL**

The man was right about everything except how to survive being right. Marty, there is a terrible lesson in that. And the whole glittering city, then, is a monument to a vice, is it not?

**MARTY**

It is the grandest monument to a vice ever built, Carol, and that is precisely the meaning I take from it. Because here is the quiet truth beneath all the light and the free drinks and the showgirls and the endless entertainment. Every bit of that dazzle exists for one reason, to keep you at the table, to make losing your money feel like a wonderful time. The whole city is a machine, beautifully engineered, built on the plain mathematical fact that over enough rolls of the dice the house always, always wins. Ben Siegel understood that fact better than anyone, and he built a cathedral to it. He simply forgot that in his own game, the game of the organization, the house always wins too, and this time the house came collecting from him. I'm Marty Shepard.

**CAROL**

And I'm Carol, and tonight I am thinking of the handsome dreamer shot on his couch, who saw the whole shining future in an empty desert and did not live to gamble in it. The house always wins, friends, in the casino and out of it, so know when you are the one being played. Come back to the fire.