

WHALE HUNT IN THE DESERT

SECRETS OF A VEGAS SUPERHOST



DEKE
CASTLEMAN

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~ ~ ~

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~ ~ ~

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—Howard Schwartz

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IN THE DESERT

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Deke Castleman

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Whale Hunt in the Desert is dedicated to
Mim and Lou Castleman
and the memory of Susan Berman and Melissa Rubin

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

A few people, places, and pieces in the chronology and narrative have been combined, compressed, or otherwise gently manipulated in the interest of flow and continuity.

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PROLOGUE

THE GREED AND THE FEAR

Whales are big. At up to 100 feet long and 180 tons, the blue whale is the largest creature this planet has ever seen. Not all whales are monsters. Still, one of the smallest, the pygmy right whale, is 20 feet long and ten tons—longer than a giraffe and twice the weight of an elephant.

Whales are rare. The 45-foot-long humpback is one of the most common and it numbers only 35,000. Fewer than 5,000 blue whales are known to exist. The northern right whale population is estimated at 500.

Whales are intelligent. Roughly 50 killer whales in captivity in aquatic theme parks and aquariums around the world are trained to do elaborate tricks, including interact with young humans.

Whales are mythical. No lesser legend-spinners than the Bible, Melville, and Disney gave us Jonah's savior, Moby Dick, and Pinocchio's Monstro.

Finally, for their valuable meat destined for exotic markets, whales are hunted to the ends of the Earth.



Somewhere along the line, the term whale was also

inserted into the gambling lexicon to describe the biggest bettors in the casino universe. In the lingo, “whale” denotes the world’s richest men and women (but mostly men) who play casino games at the highest allowable stakes.

No one knows for certain how many of these highest of high rollers there are. The largest table-game bet currently taken in Las Vegas is \$250,000, but only seven or eight human blue whales can handle that kind of action. The second stratum tops out at \$150,000 per hand, a level manageable by up to 50 players worldwide. A hundred more can fade (afford) \$100,000 a hand.

Theirs is a firmament of 35-person entourages, flown in to Las Vegas on business jets, private aircraft, or chartered jumbos. They’re shuttled by fleets of stretch limousines — stocked with Dom Perignon and Beluga caviar — to places such as the Mansion at MGM Grand, among the world’s most exclusive accommodations. There, concierges, VIP hostesses, casino hosts, casino executives, limo drivers, butlers, personal chefs, and hookers cater to their every whim.

Whales can receive as much as \$250,000 in free play simply for walking through a casino’s door, with the promise of up to a 20% discount on their gambling losses. If they don’t feel like partaking in private dinner parties prepared in person in their 15,000-square-foot penthouse villas by flambé, salad, and pastry chefs, they can strut their stuff into five-star restaurants and scribble their names on \$20,000 dinner and drink tabs.

For a quickie spending spree at the Forum Shops at Caesars or the Grand Canal Shoppes at the Venetian, they’re given \$25,000 or \$50,000 — in gift certificates, so they don’t have to sully their hands with filthy lucre.

Cases of \$600-a-bottle champagne. Boxes of \$100 hand-rolled cigars. Thank-you cards attached to Beemers and Hummers and Vipers shipped direct to specified addresses or kept on hand for their exclusive use in Las Vegas.

Fishing trips to Alaska. Whitewater rafting in Costa Rica. Cruising the Greek Isles on private yachts. Annual courtesy calls by casino-corporation presidents, chief executive officers, or chairmen of the board.

These are the perks routinely lavished on casino whales.

In return, the gambling leviathans are willing and able to risk from \$50,000 to \$250,000 a hand and can win or lose up to \$20 million over the course of a gambling holiday.

How can this breed lay down mortgage-sized wagers play after play, hour after hour, day after day? The same way a working stiff can spend \$20 a week on lottery tickets. A comparison between gambling bankrolls of \$20 and \$2 million might be incomprehensible to the worker (and, for that matter, to the whale), but it's all relative. The stakes make even the largest casino owners sweat, but to whales it's Monopoly money. A \$150,000 bet to a man with \$1 billion is the same as a \$15 bet to a man with a \$100,000.

The man with the \$100K isn't a whale; he's a mere high roller. But make no mistake — anyone who can fade \$5,000 per hand or even as relatively little as \$2,500 or \$1,000 a pop is a coveted casino customer and there are thousands upon thousands of them in the U.S. alone. High rollers are mini-whales, but they're big fish all the same: corporate executives, investors and traders in the financial markets, superstar entertainers, actors, and athletes, owners of cash businesses, as well as bookmakers, loan sharks, drug dealers, and robber barons.

But from the pygmy to the blue, all casino whales have two things in common: a boundless bankroll and the gambling gene. The former imparts the capacity to risk \$1,000 and up per hand. The latter consists of specialized chromosomes that govern the production of testosterone and adrenaline, oversee the acquisition and disposition of an excess of capital, and manage the pursuit of the unknown.

This is the gene that compels the gamblers among us to

get in the action, expressing itself initially with love ("I'm winning the casino's money!"), then greed ("And I want to win more!"). Or first with fever ("I've lost my money to the casino!"), then fear ("And I've got to get it back!"). The gene and the bankroll join in a double helix that has neither beginning nor end: Risking the bankroll stimulates the gene, which motivates the risk.

The casino business is nothing if not the master manipulator of boundless bankrolls and gambling genes. And the specific casino employee who's the stoker of the love and stoker of the fever is the casino marketing executive, also known as the player-development representative and host.

Upwards of 500 hosts ply their trade in Las Vegas. And of them all, the host among hosts, the manipulator among manipulators, the champion harpooner in the modern-day whale hunt in the desert is a character named Steve Cyr.

PART ONE

WHALE HUNTERS

“Canst thou draw out Leviathan with a hook?
Upon earth there is not his like ...
Will he speak soft words unto thee?”
—Book of Job

“Players are power, baby!”
—Steve Cyr

1

ALL IN A NIGHT'S WORK

Steve Cyr (pronounced seer) is standing at the back of the Joint, the Hard Rock casino's chic concert hall. He's rocking out to the wailing guitars and pounding drums of a makeshift band consisting of a blackjack high roller and three of his musician friends. It's been a dream of this player, Jeff Armstrong, to perform at the Joint, and Cyr sold the idea to the Hard Rock bosses. In return, Armstrong will spend a couple of hours at the tables betting \$10,000 a hand. But for now, he's up on stage, opening for the Fabulous Thunderbirds.

Cyr's cell phone rings. He answers, listens, then speaks. "Okay, I'm on my way. I'll be there in five minutes. Hold tight." He pauses, then says, "Relax, Kirsti! Who's the man, baby? I'll handle it."

He hurries down toward the stage and gives a thumbs-up to Mr. A. (Unless the two are extremely friendly, a casino guy addresses his player by the first initial of his last name. Calling him by his first name is too familiar, while using his full last name could, inadvertently, compromise his privacy.) Cyr signals that he's got to run, but he'll be back in a while. Then he blows through the casino and out the front door, where his silver Trans Am sits at the curb, as if he's

the only car owner who happened to drive to the 600-room Hard Rock that Saturday night. He dukes off a ten-spot to the parking attendant in the valet cubicle, who hands him his keys. He hops in the car and peels out for points north.

This little errand is a favor for Mr. B, the multimillionaire owner of a Midwest foundry and a frequent megaroller at the Las Vegas Hilton. Mr. B likes to stay in the Conrad Villa, one of three penthouse suites on the 30th floor of the 3,174-room resort.

Cyr screeches up to the Hilton's porte cochere, tosses his keys to the valet, rushes into the casino lobby, and storms the VIP Services office. "Mister B! Great to see you again! Hi, hi," he greets Mr. B's stunning girlfriend, and the girlfriend's stunning girlfriend, standing on either side of the gambler.

"Cyr — what the *hell* kind of bullshit are you pulling *this* time?" Mr. B launches into a tirade. "Not only do I not get my Villa, but there isn't a single *suite* in this whole fucking hotel? You're gonna put the *three* of us in a *room*? With *one* bed? I'm going to the Mirage!"

"Wait a minute, Mister B. C'mon now," Cyr cajoles, taking the short balding 60-year-old steel man by the elbow and maneuvering him out of earshot. The superhost's shrug, directed toward the statuesque early-thirtysomething women, says it all: *Hey, what can you do? Shit happens.*

After Cyr whispers in his ear, Mr. B sputters, "You mean to tell me that there's not another room in the whole hotel? Not even *one* with two queen beds?"

Cyr mumbles something.

"The hell you say! Not another room in the whole friggin' city?"

Cyr hangs his head and shuffles his feet.

Mr. B is apoplectic. "No way! Not one night, not one minute! Fuck the hotel room, fuck the Hilton, fuck Las Vegas, and fuck you!"

After a suitable amount of fawning and wheedling and laying it on with a trowel, Cyr manages to calm Mr. B and talk him into just one night in the room, with the promise that he can have the Conrad Villa tomorrow and for the rest of his stay and for the rest of his life. Mr. B grabs the key from Kirsti, the young VIP hostess, then marches out in a huff, barely pausing to collect the two women.

Cyr watches them go, then turns to Kirsti, whose wide eyes and quivering lips betray her panic over the thought of getting fired for screwing up Mr. B's reservation. He smiles and asks, "Think he'll get lucky?"

Kirsti's countenance goes blank, then slowly rearranges into a smirk as she realizes that the whole scene was a set-up, straight out of the standard opening of a low-budget porn video, the one where the one man maneuvers the two women into the one bed.

Steve Cyr has done his job.



Cyr dictates the night's itinerary to Kirsti, who dutifully logs it in her appointment book. He then cruises the Hilton casino to check on his other players and finds one, Gus Johnson, at the cage (casino cashier). Gus is feeling fine tonight. He's first in line at the cage, waiting to cash out a mess of checks (casino chips) he's just won playing \$15,000-a-hand blackjack. The stocky six-foot-two 39-year-old is dressed in blue jeans, T-shirt, etched leather boots, and a varsity jacket sporting the MGM Grand logo. He's in town for his regular weekend jaunt of gambling, partying, and chasing women. Emphasis on the chasing women.

A twentysomething supermodel-type is standing at the cage counter. She's six feet tall *without* the purple four-inch stilettos. Her miniskirt matches her shoes, with nothing but sheer stockings and perfect legs in between. Thick blond

hair cascades down her long back.

She's alone, but she's excited – wiggling around, fluffing her hair, grabbing the bars of the cage after tossing two handfuls of checks on the counter. She even coos at the cashier as she watches him deftly stack her chips in neat piles of reds, greens, and blacks, tally them up, and announce, "Nine big ones."

The girl squeals, "And I only started with fifty small ones!"

For Gus, watching her squirm confirms the old gambling adage: "Money is the ultimate aphrodisiac." If this blond gets laid within an hour, it'll be a night to remember. Only thing is, she doesn't know it.

But Gus does. He licks his lips. He sidles up to her as the cashier counts out the bills. He stands close.

Surprised, she turns her head, leans away, and looks at him with barely concealed suspicion and distaste.

Gus doesn't miss a beat. He leans in and murmurs in her ear, "I'll trade you for it."

Suspicion morphs into confusion, scrunching up her face. "What did you say?"

"I said, I'll trade what you have for what I have."

Confusion first gives way to puzzlement, but gradually the girl relaxes and the corners of her mouth turn up just so. Now she knows he's coming on to her, just another horn dog sniffing around. Still not sure what he's selling, though, she asks, "What do you have?"

It's Gus' turn to crack a smile. His eyes gleam as he answers, "Well, that's what you're gambling on, isn't it? I know what you've got" – and he looks her down and up, for just a fraction of a second, though long enough – "nine hundred dollars. But you don't know what I've got." He shoves his hand into his jacket pocket and rattles his own mess of checks.

"Oh! Is *that* it?" The light bulb switches on and this

girl positively sparkles. "You wanna trade chips!" You can almost hear the gears turning—"You wouldn't *believe* this guy"—as she plans how to spin the tale to the girls at the office on Monday, or maybe even to whoever gets lucky with her later. "You must think I'm crazy!" she exclaims. "This is almost a thousand dollars!" She grabs the bills and turns her back, then reels around again and repeats, "*A thousand dollars!*"

Gus watches her flounce off and disappear into the crowd, turning horn-dog heads every step of the way. He chuckles to himself. The soft-spoken hustler is the founder and chairman of a dot-com that on this particular weekend boasts a market cap of \$500 million.

"You can't score if you don't take shots, right?" he says to Cyr, who's been watching the encounter from a few steps away. Gus reaches into his pocket, pulls out 12 brown chips, and tosses them onto the counter. "That's the difference between men and women," Gus intones. "Women fear loss. Men pursue the unknown."

"You would've done it, too," says Cyr, as the cashier stacks up the bundles of hundreds.

"Sure I would've. I'd've taken her nine hundred and handed over my chips—just to see the expression on her face."

Cyr laughs as Gus stashes \$60,000 in cash—12 bundles containing 50 hundred-dollar bills each—in an inside pocket of his jacket.

At the Hilton, a brown check is worth five thousand dollars.



Cyr and Gus make plans to meet for breakfast in the Verona Villa—at 1 p.m. the next afternoon. "After church," Cyr says with a straight face.

World-class chefs whip up anything they want for breakfast – and butlers serve it to them in the Verona Villa. (Gus likes his waffles with fresh strawberries; Cyr likes eggs Benedict with hollandaise sauce. Even if Gus is still sleeping at 1 p.m., Cyr goes up and starts eating.)

Walking to the private express elevator up to Gus' villa, Cyr relates the story of Mr. B and how he'd convinced the two girls that the "whole friggin' city" was full.

Gus asks, "How many rooms *are* available here tonight?"

"A thousand or so. And a dozen suites."

Gus laughs. "A thousand?"

"That's the thing about a three-thousand-room hotel. Even when we're seventy percent full, there's still nine hundred of them left."

"Hey," Gus has a sudden thought. "If the second girl doesn't like the cramped quarters, tell her she can spend the night in my Villa."

"She'd rather have Mr. B spend the night in your Villa," Cyr shoots back with utter certainty.

The elevator arrives and a security guard keys Gus up to the Villas on the 30th floor. Cyr, meanwhile, heads down the back hallway that connects the Villa elevators to the Hilton's high-limit pit. He slides through a side door and strolls toward the lone dice table in the far corner of the room, out of place among all the baccarat and blackjack games. It sounds wrong too: The crap-table cacophony disturbs the typically tense and tempered air of a high-roller room.

Whooping it up at the table are Moe Cohn and a half-dozen of his dice-shooting cronies. The set-up is complete with a full crap crew – two dealers, stickman, boxman, and floorman – and the highest maximums in the dice universe. Cohn is Cyr's new biggest player, with a \$10 million line of casino credit. He's the CEO of a major California corporation and he has the gambling gene. Tonight's his first time

playing at the Hilton. Cyr has already met him at the airport with a limo and a \$5,000 bottle of Chateau Lafite Rothschild; ushered him up to the 13,200-square-foot Tuscany Villa; made sure his credit line was ready at the cage; secured a reservation for eight at Le Montrachet, the Hilton's *très chic* French restaurant at that time; and had the crap table moved into the high-limit room (the first time such a thing had ever been done at the Hilton).

A day's worth of details, to be sure – but Cyr's toughest challenge was arranging for Mr. C and his friends to be served by the casino's hottest cocktail waitress. Typically, in a union house like the Hilton, the senior (oldest) drink runner gets the shot at the big players' tokens (tips). But Cyr pulled a few strings and tonight luscious little Lisa is schlepping Chivas and dressing up the place – the only difference between her two-ounce uniform, size four, and a bikini is that it's one-piece.

The hoopla from the players indicates that the table's hot. Cyr stands back a bit at first and watches as Cohn tosses the cost of a new Cadillac across the crap layout. The boxman, Mel, signals Cyr with three fingers pointing up: He's ahead three hundred large.

Cyr's mentors, the old-school Las Vegas player reps and operations bosses, taught him that you don't host a sucker while he's gambling. You don't stand at the table. You don't distract him. You let him play his game. When he's through, you can do all the hosting you want. But Cyr has never subscribed to the conventional wisdom. He's especially irreverent when it comes to the gospel according to the old school. He enjoys hanging around his players at the games. He gets a thrill out of watching whales make bets the size of an average worker's annual wage.

Cyr gets caught up in the love. He cuts into the middle of the table and starts whooping it up and high-fiving Mr. C and his cronies as they make their points.

A phone at the high-limit room's main podium rings. Chester the floorman signals Mel the boxman to send over Steve the host. It's the president of the Las Vegas Hilton, the big boss of operations. He's calling from the surveillance room, where he's watching Mr. C's action. Cyr puts the phone to his ear and hears hysteria at a high volume. "What the hell do you think you're doing, Cyr! Quit high-fivin' 'em! You're bringing *them* luck! You're *jinxin'* us!"

"Yes sir. Sorry sir," Cyr appeases his boss' boss. Thinking: *Yeah, right. He's not counting cards, for cryin' out loud. He's shooting dice. He's playing the field, taking the hardways. He's fading like an eight percent edge and you're sweating a little action like a floorman on his first shift.*

"And tell those dealers to stop cheering when a point's made!"

"Yes sir." Thinking: *The dealers're only pocketing five hundred in tokes every time a player hits his number. I'll tell 'em to look real downhearted.*

"In fact, why don't you just disappear. You've done your job. Now let the bosses do theirs."

"Yes sir." Thinking: *Look at these guys. They're having a blast. The Hilton's Mr. C's new playground and I'm his new best friend. This degenerate lost nine million at the Mirage last year. Sure, I'll leave it to the limp-dick bosses like you – to chase him away.*



Cyr wishes Mr. C continued good luck, quietly. Then he hurries out of the high-limit pit. Charging into the main casino, he waves at floormen and pit clerks and dealers and other hosts as he goes. He stops short at a crowded crap table and puts his arm around the shoulders of a white-haired player in a light leather jacket. "How they rollin', Mr. D?"

The player turns his head and says, "Up and down, Stevie, up and down."

Ed Duvall, a k a Fast Eddie, is Cyr's second biggest player, one rung down the leviathan ladder from Moe Cohn. With a \$5 million credit line, it's routine for Mr. D to bet as much as \$80,000 any time the dice fly. A retired Montana timbermill operator, he's old-school. He can stand at the same table as long as 24 hours without a break — the guy's a camel — riding out the cold streaks, pushing the hot hands. When he gets tired of standing, a floorman brings him a captain's chair so he can keep playing.

Eddie jets down to Vegas every few months to shoot craps at the Las Vegas Hilton, MGM Grand, or Caesars Palace. And each time, Cyr or his counterparts at competing casinos cater to Eddie's appetites, dishing out the biggest suites, meals at the best restaurants, five-figure shopping sprees, wildly expensive gifts. Cyr has taken Mr. D on trips to Baja, Jamaica, Costa Rica, and Hawaii, and on a week-long yacht tour of the Greek Isles, all on the Hilton's dime.

Players are power — and tonight Cyr's got it. But he's still seething. Both of the biggest gamblers in town this weekend are at the Hilton. Both are his customers. And he's *still* taking shit from the limp dicks upstairs.

Cyr stands and chats with Eddie. Unlike a lot of whales, Mr. D enjoys kibbitzing while he shoots craps. He trades the lighthearted banter with the best of them. But he doesn't like being questioned about his gambling, which is why he prefers dealers familiar with his style of play.

The point's eight. The good dealers know that Eddie'll place the six and lay a grand on the hardway 8 — the high house-edge proposition bet that pays 9-1 if the eight is rolled 4-4, but loses if it's rolled any other way or if the seven comes first. He also likes the hardway 10 for \$5,000; if he pops the 5-5 combo, he wins 35 large. (Cyr negotiated the maximum laydown on the prop bets for Eddie; the

normal limit is \$500.)

The dice bounce, then stop. "Eight the hard way!" the stickman announces and the dealers get busy. Eddie retrieves a stack of checks from his line and odds bets, plus his hard 8—a big enough payout on the one roll to retire the credit-card debts of the average cocktail waitress.

The crap dealers and bosses at most of the high-limit tables at the big casinos know Mr. D so well that they trust him. One night at the MGM Grand, the same night, in fact, that Mike Tyson bit off half of Evander Holyfield's ear, a lot of tension filled the air as the fight-goers worked their way from ringside at the MGM Grand into the casino. Championship fights are magnets for a menagerie of American culture—movie stars, dot-com moguls, pro athletes, L.A. gangbangers, and every breed of whale and high roller, along with the square tourists, pikers, and fanny-packers from middle America who happen to be in the gargantuan MGM Grand at the same time. It's an odd and volatile mix.

The night of the severed ear, as 15,000 particularly aroused fight fans made their way through the packed casino, the crowd was startled by a loud bang. MGM executives later explained it away as the pop of a champagne bottle in a nearby restaurant, but many ear witnesses swear it was a gunshot.

Fast Eddie was rolling the dice when hundreds, maybe thousands, of people began pushing and shoving to escape from whatever caused the big pop and the situation quickly got out of control. Slot players clung to their machines, blackjack tables were pushed over, and Eddie's son had to shove his father under their crap table to avoid the stampede. In the melee, the table got knocked askew, scattering checks all over the layout.

(A pair of National Basketball Association players were caught on surveillance cameras stealing about \$75,000 in

\$5,000 checks from a blackjack table during the mayhem. MGM management put out the word – discreetly, through their agents – that they expected the money to be returned. The two pro athletes quietly complied.)

After the dust had settled, Eddie turned to the boxman who oversaw his game. “What about my chips?” he inquired, pointing at the mess on the table.

“Mr. D,” the game supervisor told him, “what you say you had, we’ll give you.” And \$60,000 in casino checks was returned to him, no questions asked.

“Seven out!” the shooter’s roll ends and Eddie groans as the Hilton dealers sweep all the chips into the house’s pile.

The cocktail waitress comes by and Eddie orders water. He doesn’t drink alcohol when he’s gambling, wanting to maintain his focus and discipline, so he downs only Evian or Perrier. The waitresses like him just the same; although he sticks to dollar bottles of water, he always tips at least a red \$5 check. Eddie once accidentally toked a waitress with a yellow \$1,000 “banana.” He didn’t take it back. Wouldn’t have been right. He’s known as a George (a big-time tipper).

Eddie places two brown checks on the pass line for the come-out roll. The shooter rolls a four, Eddie’s favorite number. He backs up his line bet with triple odds, six more brown checks.

“Sir, how much *are* those chips?” a bystander asks Cyr.

“Five thousand apiece.”

The man calls to his wife. “Hey, honey! You have to see this.”

The wife waddles over to the table.

“Check this out – a forty-thousand-dollar bet.”

“I can’t look at that. It’s disgusting,” she says and waddles away.

The shooter tosses the dice.

“Four!” the stickman croons. “Pay the line.” And Eddie

wins enough in little clay discs to buy a new Lexus SUV.

Fast Eddie's riding a hot streak. As Cyr stands watching, Eddie drains the brown checks from the table's rack and the pit boss sends a security guard to fetch another million-dollar box of the \$5,000 tokens. Sometimes the boss'll send for three boxes at once, so the game's not delayed.

"How's the lawsuit going, Eddie?" Cyr makes a little small talk as they wait for chips.

"Up and down, Stevie, up and down," Eddie laughs. "Actually," he adds, "it's different this time. My other ex-wives were all excellent housekeepers. After divorcing me, they each kept the house. But not this one."

Eddie lives in the middle of western Montana's Bitterroot National Forest in a relatively isolated compound surrounded by millions of trees. Sleeping Child Hot Springs runs through the middle of his property. The 100-degree water heats the 16-bedroom main house through a system of sub-flooring pipes. The spring flows through a pool, half as long as a football field, where guests swim and bathe, summer and winter. The dead-end road leading to the house is heated by spring water that runs through pipes beneath the pavement. While snow and ice cover the rest of Montana, Fast Eddie's "driveway" is bare steaming asphalt.

The house is five stories, serviced by an elevator. Each floor is 5,000 square feet, twice as large as a good-sized suburban abode. The first level consists of the recreation area, with snooker and pool tables, a movie theater, and a dice table Cyr gave him for a birthday present. The second level houses the guest rooms, 14 of them, each with its own bath. On the third level is the huge master bedroom with his-and-her baths and one guest room (where Cyr sleeps). The fourth level has the office and library. On floor five there's a big solarium.

The last time Cyr was up to the estate, he was there to give a deposition in the legal dispute between Eddie and

his ex-girlfriend, a former \$14,000-a-year card dealer at a small Missoula-area casino. She claimed that she and Eddie had a common-law marriage and she wanted millions. He argued otherwise. Cyr testified that he'd traveled with the couple on casino-sponsored trips to the Bahamas, Costa Rica, Greece – and never once heard them speak of each other as husband and wife.

A lot of hosts, the old schoolers in particular, consider their players pains in the ass. Casino marketing executives older than 55 or so might call Fast Eddie a prima donna. He drinks Pabst Blue Ribbon in a glass and wants miniature Mr. Goodbars and Kit Kats waiting for him in his suite. He always gets a window seat on the plane. He likes thin down pillows; the Hilton butlers keep them in a closet, just for him. No incoming calls before 9 a.m. Breakfast is always scrambled eggs, fresh corned beef hash, and well-done home fries.

If he wants a helicopter to go to the top of Mt. Charleston, the 12,000-foot peak northwest of Las Vegas, it'll be landing on the Hilton roof in 30 minutes and Cyr and Eddie and his friends will be on top of the mountain in another 30. One hour from a stray whim to fruition. The world at his beck and call, courtesy of the casino.

Fast Eddie loses, on average, upwards of a million dollars a month at the crap tables. Steve Cyr is not unhappy to host him. A player like Mr. D gives him power. Mr. D wants to go to the Greek isles and cruise around on a private yacht? Cyr hosts the trip. Mr. D wants to be picked up in Montana in the Hilton jet and make a four-day detour to Hawaii? Cyr goes with him. Why didn't Mr. D get a dozen ringside tickets to the Tyson fight? Because he only asked for 11 (one for Cyr). Cyr wants to take a few days off in L.A. without being charged for vacation time? He says Mr. D wants his host to meet him there.

Fast Eddie is neither a prima donna nor a pain, at least

not in Steve Cyr's ass.

That's Stevie's job — giving the premium players whatever they want. Emphasis on the whatever.



Cyr makes a few more rounds. Then, just before leaving the Hilton, he checks in on his whale in the high-limit pit. He notices that Mr. C and his crap buddies are laying back. There's only \$25,000 or so on the layout, which means the table's cold, which means they're losing. The boxman, Mel, signals Cyr with all ten, then five fingers pointing down: Mr. C's behind a million-five. Cyr doesn't react, even as he mentally adds \$15,000 to the running total of his year-end bonus. He also calculates the night's action so far: from up \$300,000 to down \$1.5, a \$1.8 million swing in ... he checks his watch ... an hour and forty-five minutes. The Hilton president, no doubt, now considers Cyr a hero, but the players are quiet. The dealers are even quieter. And Lisa the waitress is nowhere to be seen.

Cyr switches on the discretion. "Well, Mr. C," he says, holding out his hand. "I'm taking off for the night. Anything I can do for you before I go?"

"Yeah, you can light a fire under these bones. Colder'n a whore's heart on a sailor's payday."

"Keep at her," Cyr smiles. "They'll warm up. If you want anything, anything at all, Mel here knows where to find me twenty-four-seven."

"Sure, kid."

Cyr flings open the front doors of the Hilton, tosses the valet a ten-spot, catches his keys on the fly, and roars back to the Hard Rock, to find Jeff Armstrong. He's easy to locate, playing blackjack in the Peacock Lounge, the Hard Rock's high-limit pit. He's all revved up from his stint on-stage at the Joint and after an hour at the tables, he's ahead

\$200,000. Still, he's steamed that a pit boss has just slashed his maximum bet from \$10,000 to \$5,000, and he lets Cyr know about it in no uncertain terms.

"Whoa, baby! Whoa!" Cyr backs up two steps from the verbal assault and makes the sign of the "T" for time-out. "They cut your maximum? I don't blame 'em. You're short-timin' them. You wanna bet big? Fine, but you gotta give 'em a fair shot at your money, four hours, not just one. Besides," Cyr moves in and puts a hand on Armstrong's shoulder. "You just played the Joint. You're up a couple hundred. What could be bad?"

The L.A. multi-millionaire smiles, shrugs, sits back down at the table, and picks up his next hand of blackjack.

Arranging for a premium player to perform onstage in the Joint at the Hard Rock. Flying to Montana to help resolve a high-stakes personal dispute between a whale and his ex-girlfriend. Standing by as a megaroller dares a libidinous beauty to swap her chips for his. Reorganizing the Hilton high-limit pit to accommodate a private crap table and crew for a titan of southern California industry.

They're all just routine episodes in the life of a Las Vegas superhost.