

The Vegas Kid



Barney Vinson

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by Barney Vinson

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Prologue

The stranger in black turned to the driver. "There she is," he said, waving expansively at the city down below.

Sam peered through the glass. Down below, he could see lights of every color twinkling in the distance. After a hundred miles of mesquite and cactus, it looked like the bejeweled necklace of some giant goddess, flung carelessly across the sand.

Sam's arms tingled and his breath came in ragged bursts. This was the place Lady Luck called home, and he was going there to join her. If someone had told him a month ago that he would be heading to Las Vegas in a motorhome with a complete stranger ... why, he would have laughed himself silly.

Then again, a month ago Sam was a television star with a beautiful home in the Hollywood hills, a beautiful sports car in the driveway, and a beautiful wife in the bedroom.

Yeah, well, that was a month ago.



June, 1972

The alarm clock buzzed and Sam Durango didn't move. It buzzed again and he rolled onto his side, pulling the pillow over his head. It buzzed again and his hand shot out, knocking the clock to the floor.

Sam lifted the pillow just enough for one eye to find the glow-in-the-dark clock dial, which read 4:45. Slowly he sat up, then swung his legs over the side of the bed. He reached out to cover up Monica, then remembered she wasn't there. She and her friend Gladys were in Carmel on a shopping trip, and they wouldn't be back until this afternoon. He rubbed his eyes, got to his feet, and slipped on his robe.

He padded down the hallway to the kitchen and poured himself a tall glass of orange juice. He felt fuzzy, unable to get his thoughts straight. It was like having the television on channel two and trying to watch channel three. Everything was slightly out of focus. And no wonder! An empty vodka bottle on the table lay next to his script. Damn, he hadn't even looked at his lines.

After a long shower, he felt a little better. He dressed, then squinted at himself in the full-length mirror, seeing nothing but a blurry reflection. With a sigh, he fumbled for his contact lenses. He hated those things, but he couldn't make western movies wearing a damn pair of horn-rims. Why, they'd laugh him right off the lot. He smiled wistfully, thinking of what Monica usually said when

she watched him go through his morning ritual.

“It’s a bird, it’s a plane, it’s Sam Durango!”

His alligator boots needed polishing, but for now he swiped at them with his towel. Then he walked to the phone and called for a cab. His station wagon was in front of the house, out on the long winding driveway, and his sports car was in the garage, but he needed time to go over the script. He couldn’t afford to slow things up on the last day of shooting.

Just as he finished his second orange juice, a horn sounded outside. Sam tucked the script under his arm and jogged to a waiting cab through a light drizzle.

“I’ll be dogged!” the cab driver exclaimed as Sam let himself in the back seat. “You’re Sam Durango, right?”

“Yup,” Sam grunted. “Pioneer Studios on Sunset. And take it slow. I’ve got some reading to catch up on.”

“Yes sir, Mister Durango!” the cab driver called, smiling into the rearview mirror. “We don’t want to run down any redskins or school marms, right?”

Ignoring the driver, Sam flipped on a light, opened his script, and thumbed to the last scene. There wasn’t that much dialogue. All he had to do was walk into the saloon just as the deputy was squaring off against the two gunfighters. Just walk in nice and easy, stop at the far end of the bar where a piece of tape on the floor marked his place, and —

“— your show every week!” the cab driver was yelling above the thump of the windshield wipers. “My wife ain’t gonna believe this.”

Sam slapped the script shut and groped for his cigarette papers and tobacco pouch. Might as well enjoy the ride.

“I got a brother going to UCLA!” the driver hollered back at Sam. “He wants to be an actor. Even knows how to ride a horse. I don’t suppose you could do anything for him? You know, introduce him to the right people? Help him get his foot in the door?”

There went this guy’s tip. “Hell,” Sam grumbled. “I’m having a hard time keeping my own foot in the door.”

The driver nodded. “Yeah, I guess things are tough all over.”

Sam leaned forward. "Hey, he's going to college. Tell him to get into something with a real future. Like geology or zoology. Or—uh—scientology."

The driver touched the brakes and the cab rolled to a stop in front of Pioneer Studios. Then he turned in his seat. "I know a lot of people take advantage of celebrities like you, Mister Durango. So I won't insult you by asking you for your autograph."

"That's nice of you," Sam said, opening his door. "How much do I owe you?"

"Fifty-seven dollars."

After sitting through an hour in the make-up chair, Sam greeted everyone on the set. He knew them all, from the script girl right on up to Jay Cohen, whose father built Pioneer Studios back in the early forties. In fact, Jay Cohen was walking toward Sam now.

"Hello, Sam," Cohen said with a nod. "Wrapping it up today, eh?" He offered Sam a limp white hand, then cleared his throat. "Stop by my office after lunch, will you? We need to have a little talk."

Sam watched him walk away, wondering what Cohen had up his sleeve. This was the last show of the year, and Sam wasn't stupid. He knew his show was slipping badly in the ratings and he'd heard the rumors it might not be renewed. But he had a contract, as well as an agent who was supposed to handle things like this.

The trouble was that every time he made one of these television westerns the plot either got a little flimsier or it had been used half a dozen times. The one he was doing now was typical. The grand finale took place in a saloon with a big showdown between the good guys and the bad guys. Some scriptwriter must have stayed up half the night thinking up this one.

"Places everybody," the director called. "And ... action!"

Sam gives the swinging door a push and walks inside. There is a sudden screeching of chairs as the piano player's song stops abruptly. Sam walks to the end of the bar. The two gunfighters stand watching him. One of them is holding the deputy. The other

drops his hands slowly to his sides, his six-shooters within easy reach.

"Well, if it ain't the Vegas Kid," he sneers. "We've been waiting for you."

"Let him go," Sam says softly.

"You hear that, Spike? The Kid's giving orders."

"I'm telling you for the last time," Sam says. "Let him go."

"He's going, all right. Straight to Boot Hill!"

With that, the gunfighter goes for his guns. Sam goes for his in the same instant.

"CUT!"

Sam had forgotten to strap on his gun. "Sorry," he said meekly.

The crew broke for lunch. With a dry mouth Sam started down the studio street to Jay Cohen's office in the administration building, which stood over the lot like a concrete mountain. The rain had let up, but the humidity left Sam's clothes damp to the touch by the time he got to Cohen's office on the third floor.

Two secretaries looked up as Sam came through the door. "Hello, Mister Durango," said the one at the closest desk. "Mister Cohen isn't back from lunch yet. Would you like to wait?"

"Yeah, but I'd like to wash up. Is there a men's room or something around here?"

"You can use Mister Cohen's washroom. I'm sure he wouldn't mind."

Sam turned on the light and locked the bathroom door. Then he let out a low whistle. What a layout. Everything was highlighted in gold: the fixtures, the carpeting, the walls, even the toilet seat. Sam had busted his chops making TV westerns half his life, and Jay Cohen's bathroom was worth more than he was.

All things considered, though, the years had been good to Sam. Well, his eyesight wasn't too good, but contact lenses solved that problem. He still had most of his hair, even if it was turning prematurely gray. He had his own teeth, somewhere underneath fifteen thousand dollars worth of caps. He was still on the slim side, except for a slight paunch, but a couple of workouts at the health club and he would be as good as new.

At the moment, none of that really mattered. Right now the only thing worth thinking about was Jay Cohen, and why this sawed-off little runt wanted to talk to him. Sam was not fond of the man. Sure, he had money and power, but only because he just happened to be born to the right father.

Sam washed his hands and dried them with a gold face towel. Then as he turned to leave, he dropped the towel into the commode. Humming softly, he flushed it.

"Sit down, sit down," Cohen said primly, motioning to a chair in front of his massive desk. Sam stiffly settled into it.

"So ... did you finish filming this morning?"

"Not quite," Sam said evenly. "I've got to get back, so I hope this doesn't take too long."

"No, no, not at all," Cohen said. "I was going to talk to your agent about this, but — what the heck — we're old friends, aren't we?"

Sam didn't answer.

"We're civilized people. No reason why we can't talk to each other in private, without a bunch of strangers hanging on every word."

Sam shook a line of tobacco into a rolling paper.

"I never dreamed you did that in real life," Cohen laughed. "I thought that was just part of your image."

Sam licked the paper and blew on it softly. "Nope," he said, lighting up.

Cohen let out a mechanical chuckle, then cleared his throat. "Sam, how long has your show been on the air?"

"The Vegas Kid?"

"Yes."

"Four years."

"And before that?"

"'Cactus Classics.' That ran for six."

Cohen shuffled through a stack of papers on his desk. "I've got some figures here somewhere that I want to show you."

Sam got to his feet and walked to the window, his back to Cohen. Through the glass he looked out at storm clouds sitting

low over the soundstages and foothills that had been home for most of his adult life. The studio lot looked like a little toy city, but suddenly it wasn't his anymore. "You're scratching the show," he said quietly, turning to face Cohen.

Cohen turned his hands up. "What else can I do? I'm a businessman, Sam. I can't let my personal feelings get involved."

"I wouldn't expect you to," Sam replied. "After all, I've only given you ten years of my life."

Cohen leaned back in his chair. "If it makes you feel any better, think of all the little kids out there who learned the history of this great country of ours—thanks to people like you."

"Sounds like you've made that speech before."

"I learned it from my father."

"Your father never said anything of the sort," Sam said. "Your father was a brilliant man. He was an artist. It's a tribute to his memory that this studio is still standing."

Cohen's mouth tightened. "I'm not going to get into a personality conflict with you. I can only go by figures, and they show that people are tired of cowboys and Indians. They want something new, something different."

Sam felt a hard knot form in his stomach. "Don't tell me you're giving me until sundown to get out of town."

"I'm paying off your contract. I'm sorry."

Sam dropped his cigarette in Cohen's ashtray without bothering to squash it out. "Tell me, have you ever thought about getting together with your father again?"

"My father's dead," Cohen said blankly.

"I know."

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Sam walked out the studio gate, expecting to have a thousand different thoughts clawing inside his head. Instead, he felt strangely at peace, with a fierce awareness of everything around him. He could feel the city's vibrations. He smelled rain and flowers and food, mixed together in a sweetly nauseous way. He saw six birds in a tight V formation overhead, winging their way toward the

mountains in the distance, and from somewhere nearby he heard music. It sounded like a Beatles song.

He walked down the wet sidewalk, swaying to the music, watching the birds until they were specks in the sky. To hell with Jay Cohen. To hell with the studio, and television ratings. The sun suddenly broke through the clouds. It was going to be a beautiful day, and at the moment nothing else mattered.

Then his feet shot out from under him and he fell into the street.

2



The doctor was wrapping Sam's right arm. "Sorry about your shirt," he said. "I had to cut the sleeve off."

"So I see." Actually, Sam didn't see, at least not that clearly. Somewhere between the ambulance and the hospital he'd lost one of his dad-blamed contact lenses.

"And you'll have to keep that arm in a sling for a couple of days. You can take it off as soon as the swelling goes down."

When the doctor was finished, Sam eased to his feet. "Is there a phone around here I can use?"

"You'll find some pay phones next to the cashier's office."

"Thanks, doc. By the way, would you do me a favor?"

"Sure."

"Would you get some change out of my pants pocket for me? I can't reach it without using my right hand."

The doctor laughed, reaching into his own pocket. "Here's a dime."

"Thanks, I appreciate it."

"Oh, no problem. I'll just add it to your bill."

Sam called Larry Noble, his agent and the husband of Monica's friend Gladys. "Larry? Sam Durango. There's been an accident, and I'm at General Hospital. Could you get over here? I need to talk to you."

"You okay, Sam?" Noble barked into the phone. "You weren't doing one of your own stunts, were you?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Was it Monica? What happened? She was with Gladys, and they were in Gladys's car! Oh my god! I'll be right there!"

"Larry! Larry!" Sam shouted, but it was too late. The phone was dead. Sam shook his head, then laid the receiver back in its cradle. He turned to see a young boy in a wheelchair staring up at him. The boy's face was pale, but his eyes were wide with excitement.

"You're the Vegas Kid," the boy said haltingly.

"Yup," Sam said softly, squatting in front of the boy.

"What happened to your arm?"

"I—er—got bushwhacked."

"I see you on TV every week. Could I get your autograph? And can you sign it to Tim?"

"Well, sure, little fella. 'Course, it's kinda hard for me to sign anything with my writing hand out of commission and all, but I'll try."

"Thanks, Kid. I can show it to my friends and to Doctor Hollis, and they'll know I really met you."

A nurse handed him a pen and paper, and Sam carefully wrote his name with his left hand.

A handwritten signature in cursive script. The first name "Sam" is on the left, and the last name "Durango" is on the right. The "S" in "Sam" and the "D" in "Durango" are capitalized and have decorative loops. The "a" in "Sam" and the "u" in "Durango" have small loops above them.

Sam eased the pistol from his holster. He thumbed the cylinder open and emptied the blank cartridges into his pocket. Then he held the gun out to Tim. "I can't run things one-handed," Sam said. "Take this. From now on, you're my sidekick."

"Gosh. Thanks, Kid!"

The nurse gave Sam a grateful smile as she wheeled Tim away, but he ducked his head. He needed a smoke and a drink.

Sam was walking through the hospital's front door just as Larry Noble pulled up in his car. Noble flooded him with questions, but Sam cut him short. "Larry, the girls weren't in an ac-

cident. I was."

A look of relief crossed Noble's face, then he smiled. "Hey, this might be good publicity. What did you do, wrestle with a bear?"

"No."

"Stop a bank robbery?"

"No."

"Catch somebody jumping from a burning building?"

"No."

"Well—what happened?"

"I slipped on the sidewalk."

"You slipped? On the sidewalk? That's what happened?"

"Well, hell, Larry, it was wet. I'm surprised no one else got hurt."

Noble didn't answer, so Sam let the conversation die. He turned awkwardly in the seat and cranked down the window. They drove toward the ocean, the screeching car radio filling the silence. Finally they came to a weathered wooden building with a big sign out front: THE FISH HOUS. The E on the last word had been missing for as long as Sam could remember. It was Noble's favorite restaurant.

"Hungry?" Noble asked, uttering his first word since they left the hospital.

"I could eat something, I guess."

They entered through a small cluttered bar, the smell of stale beer hanging in the air. Two men sat at the counter, and they gave Noble and Sam a short curious look before returning to a rummy argument.

"Let's go outside," Sam said. "I need some peace and quiet."

"Fine."

They took a table by the railing, and a waitress gave them menus. Sam squinted to make out the name tag on her uniform, "Valerie." She was one of those California girls that all the songs had been written about. Sam's blurry gaze flew to her hair, then circled her lips several times before crash landing on her shapely tan legs.

"How's the seafood today?" he asked.

"Fresh," she said, her eyes meeting his.

Though he couldn't see her clearly, she was a looker, no doubt about it. Long blonde hair, full sensuous lips, eyes that were—well, it was kind of hard to tell about the eyes. She wore a huge pair of glasses with red lenses, so he couldn't tell what color they were. Probably blue. Blondes always had blue eyes.

Sam watched her go, then come back with their drinks: a beer for Noble and a double martini on ice for Sam. "This is like my career," Sam said, hoisting the glass. "On the rocks."

Noble lit a wooden-tipped cigar, then he leaned across the table. "So what happened today?"

"I told you already. I slipped on the damn sidewalk."

"No, I mean before that. At the studio."

"Oh, that."

"Jay Cohen called me and he was furious. He said you walked off the set, and now they've got to rewrite the whole ending of the show."

Sam poked at the olive in his glass. "He fired me, you know."

"He paid off your contract. I know all about it. And then you walk off right in the middle of the last day of shooting." Noble shook his head. "I don't know, Sam. Cohen is really pissed. He's talking about filing a complaint with the Screen Actors Guild."

Sam turned toward his agent. "Larry, I've been grinding out that cowboy crap for ten years. I go in today and Cohen gives me the ax. What am I supposed to do, hang around there the rest of my life in case he changes his mind?"

Both men were quiet as Valerie brought food and fresh drinks to the table. Sam watched her walk away again, then Noble broke the silence. "You should have finished that last scene, Sam. That's all I'm saying."

Sam started on his new martini. "Well, the truth is, I forgot. I really did, Larry. Cohen had just fired me. When I walked out of his office, I wasn't thinking straight." After a pause, he added, "And I obviously wasn't walking straight."

Noble held up his hand. "The thing you've got to remember is that Jay Cohen is a pretty important person in this town, regardless

of how you feel about him personally. At this point in your career, you don't need to make any enemies."

"What makes you think I don't like the asshole?" Sam took a fork in his left hand and tried to cut off a bite of fish. "I don't know what it is about big business nowadays. Some immigrant comes over here, works his butt off to build a multimillion dollar empire out of a pipe dream, then gives it to his son to run into the ground. Sometimes I wish this *was* the old West, and I really *was* a gunfighter. I'd round up every boss's son in town, and string 'em up by their long skinny necks."

Noble cracked a crab leg, then looked up at Sam. "Oh, so now you want to change the world. Here you are, out of work, your arm in a sling, mud on your pants, an empty holster on your belt. What happened to your gun anyway?"

"I gave it to somebody. I'm not using it anymore."

"Oh Sam, for crying out loud!"

Sam sighed, then set his fork down. He couldn't eat left-handed, and he certainly wasn't going to ask Larry Noble to hand-feed him.

"Sam, you're supposed to be a movie star."

"TV star."

"TV star. And look at you."

Sam looked down, then back at Noble.

"Image," Noble was saying. "It's all image, Sam. You look important, you feel important. Eventually, you'll be important."

"Don't talk to me about important. How am I supposed to look important when I'm always in this damn costume?"

Noble filled his glass with beer and lightly salted it. "I know you don't like Jay Cohen, but he's right about one thing. People are tired of television westerns. Yours was the last one on the air. People want sitcoms now. Look at 'All in the Family.' It's the number one show on the air. And you know why? Because people want to laugh, forget their problems. It's a changing world, Sam."

"I'm willing to change with it, Larry."

"Well, it's not that simple. I'm afraid you're typecast. You've been doing these cowboy shows for so many years that the public

won't accept you in any other role, Sam. I suggest you take a little vacation. Relax for a few days. In the meantime, I'll try to line up some work for you. Livestock shows, rodeos, county fairs, things like that."

"Gee, thanks."

Noble exploded. "If you don't like it, then maybe you should find yourself another agent! I mean it! I should be at six different places right now, and what am I doing? I'm sitting here trying to explain the facts of life to some washed-up movie star."

"TV star."

"Whatever. And I'll tell you something else. The only reason I took you on as a client in the first place was because Gladys and Monica were such good friends."

"If you're such a great agent, then how come I'm out of work?"

With a cold stare, Noble rose to his feet. "That's it. You can insult Jay Cohen all you want, but you're not insulting me. I've had it. Find yourself another agent!"

"Larry, wait," Sam said feebly, but Noble had already walked away. He drained his martini and waved for another. He tried to focus on his watch; it was after four. Monica should be home by now, but he wasn't ready to face her. Things were bad enough between them already. He couldn't just walk in and say, "Hi, I lost my job and I walked off the set and I hurt my shoulder and I don't want you running around with Gladys because I just had a fight with her husband and he's not my agent anymore." She'd be at her lawyer's office before he knew what hit him.

Valerie came with his drink. "Thanks," he said.

"What's the matter? You didn't like your meal?"

"I wasn't hungry. How much do I owe you, anyway?"

"Your friend paid for everything before he left."

"Oh."

Valerie turned to leave, then stopped. "By the way, Mister Durango, if you're ever down at the beach, look me up. I'll be at the Devil's Sink Hole Grill."

"That's where you live?"

"No," she laughed. "I'm going to work there."

"You've got two jobs?"

"No, this is my last day here. I can make more money on the beach."

Money! Maybe she was hinting for a tip. Sam turned sideways in his chair, trying to reach the money in his right pocket with his left hand. By the time he got his money out, Valerie was gone. Sam finished his drink and rose unsteadily to his feet. It was time to face the music.

As Sam walked through the bar, he noticed the two men again at the counter. The argument between them was getting louder, and Sam looked around for the bartender. They were just like cops, never around when you needed one. Suddenly, both men were on their feet. One swung at the other and missed. The momentum caused him to stumble, and he went down to his knees. The other man stood over him, his fists cocked.

"Hey!" Sam hollered, getting between them. "Why don't you two just shake hands? Come on, I don't want to see anybody get hurt."

He stretched out his left hand to help the fallen man get to his feet. In doing so, however, he took his eyes off the other man. CRACK! Sam blinked his eyes several times. Stars appeared, thousands and thousands of them, and then they blinked off, one by one.

"Don't wanna see anybody get hurt," he said again. Then he fell to the floor.