

HEATHER CARMEL



Double
OR NOTHING



SIN CITY KINGS 2



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BOOK 2

HEATHER CARMEL
MERAKEI COVER DESIGN

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PROLOGUE

Taking two steps closer to Vulcan, I hold out my hand. “Give me the gun. I’ll shoot him in the leg. Why should you have all the fun? That’ll make him talk. I’ll blow his kneecap off. Just stop this stupid game.”

Vulcan snorts and steps back away from me. “Have you ever shot a gun in your life? You won’t shoot him in the leg or anywhere else. You can’t even eat meat, for fuck’s sake! I realize what you’re trying to do, and it won’t work. Stop worrying, I’ll be fine.”

Vulcan is definitely not fine.

My heart is pounding so hard it’s threatening to burst out of my chest. How can I live if Vulcan kills himself right in front of me? How can I ever look Jade in the eye again? She will never forgive us if something happens to Vulcan. She cares deeply for him, for Seven, and even for me.

All our lives are ruined forever if he dies tonight.

I don’t dare glance over at Seven. I’m sure the same thoughts are running through his head. He probably figured out the game was real the same time I did. I’m afraid to make any sudden movements or do anything that will set Vulcan off and speed things up.

Somehow, someway, I need to end this.

But how?

There are three fucking bullets in the gun. The odds of Vulcan surviving the next trigger pull are fifty-fifty. Or less.

Hell, I'm not sure.

Statistics don't mean a damn thing in a situation like this. Sweat is pouring down my back from the tension.

"You're dead right about one thing," Vulcan suddenly says. "We're wasting too much fucking time with this bastard. Enough of that shit. I'm losing patience." He suddenly points the gun at his head, puts his finger on the trigger and starts rapidly counting. "One...two...*three*."

"No!" I yell and rush toward him.

The deafening explosion of the gun going off shatters my world.

God help me, I'm too late.

KIT

The next few seconds rush by in a hazy blur. “Grab the gun! Get the damn gun!” Seven shouts at me.

In the split-second I hesitated to act, Seven didn’t.

He tackled Vulcan from his blind side, right as Vulcan put the gun to his temple and pulled the trigger.

They both went down hard when the gun went off. I can’t tell who was hit or if they both were. Seven is sprawled on top of Vulcan, covering his body with his own.

“Where’s the gun?” I yell, unable to spot Vulcan’s gun in the dark. “Dammit! I can’t find it! Was Vulcan shot? Fuck!”

With a loud roar, Vulcan throws Seven off his back and struggles to his knees. Relief floods over me to see he’s alive until I realize he’s going for the gun which is lying on the ground a few feet away. Seven must’ve knocked it out of his hand as the gun fired.

“No!” I shout, diving onto the dirt, throwing myself between Vulcan and the gun.

Seven grabs Vulcan’s neck in a tight chokehold, but it’s not slowing him down. Not in the slightest. Vulcan is moving like a powerful monster possessed with ten times his normal strength.

Jesus Christ! This isn't over yet.

I grab the gun before Vulcan can and roll away from him, where he can't reach me.

This fucking nightmare is ending now.

Without hesitation, I turn, aiming for a spot right between the Russian's eyes, and pull the trigger. His head explodes with the first bullet. I fire again and the second bullet destroys what's left of his evil face.

I'm in shock, unable to believe Vulcan lined up three fucking bullets in a row. Realizing how close he came to killing himself makes me physically ill.

Vulcan twists his head to glance over his shoulder at the man. "No!" he yells. "You killed him!"

He surges away from Seven and piles on top of me, wrestling for control of the gun. Though there are no more bullets in the chamber, he's not getting the gun back tonight.

Maybe never, if I have anything to say about it.

I'm terrified of what he might do in his current frame of mind.

I throw the gun away from us as far as I can, then wrap my arms tightly around Vulcan's chest. Rolling over with my back on the ground, I hold on to him with everything I have in me.

The ground beneath us is rough and unforgiving, the dirt and rocks digging into my skin as I struggle to maintain my grip on him. He fights me with an animalistic fury, a wild desperation driving him mad.

His breathing comes in short, labored gasps, each exhale hot against my skin. The sounds of the struggle, grunts and curses, seem magnified in the night's stillness.

“Vulcan, stop! Stop!”

The taste of dust fills my mouth as I shout at Vulcan, my voice growing hoarse from the effort. My heart races in my chest, the frantic pounding reverberating through my entire body as I fight to keep him restrained. The muscles in my arms ache from the exertion, but I refuse to let go, my determination fueled by the knowledge that I must keep him safe from himself.

Seven tries to maintain a grip on Vulcan’s arms, and it takes every bit of strength both of us possess to subdue him. Despite the adrenaline coursing through my veins, I can feel my strength slowly beginning to wane, the fatigue and the shock of the night’s events taking their toll.

“Vulcan, please,” I beg, my voice hoarse and desperate. “You need to calm down. We’re trying to help you. Stop struggling.”

His muscles flex and strain beneath my grasp, the heat of his skin searing through my clothes as I cling to him, desperate to keep him from doing any more harm. Guttural growls punctuate the sound of his ragged breathing.

As I lie beneath Vulcan, the weight of his body pressing down on me, I’m struck by the intensity of the emotions that flood my senses. Fear and panic mix with a fierce protectiveness to keep him safe from the demons that haunt him.

Finally, as if my words have penetrated the haze of his rage, Vulcan’s movements slow. The wild expression in his eyes fades as he stares down at me, his expression a mixture of confusion and anguish. In that moment, our eyes lock, and an unspoken understanding passes between us.

Seven releases his grip slightly on Vulcan's arms, his chest heaving as he catches his breath. In the dim light, I glimpse the dirt smudged across his cheeks, evidence of our harrowing ordeal.

"Are you hurt?" I shout at Vulcan, still keeping a tight grip around his chest. "Did you get shot?"

Vulcan doesn't feel pain like a normal person, and he could be severely injured right now without realizing it. It's too dark to see if he's bleeding.

"Vulcan! Answer me! Are you hurt?" I repeat.

Vulcan is far off in another place and my words aren't getting through to him.

"I think I knocked the gun out of his hand as it went off," Seven grunts. "Maybe he wasn't hit." He's out of breath from wrestling with Vulcan.

So am I.

Wrangling six-hundred-pound tigers is nothing compared to this.

"Vulcan, talk to us," Seven urges, his voice gentle but firm. "Tell us if you're still with us. We need to know if you're injured."

The silence stretches between us, the tension in the air palpable as we wait for Vulcan to respond. To come back from the hell where his mind is.

At last, Vulcan's raw voice breaks the silence. "Why did you kill him?" he mutters, the words barely audible. "Now we'll never find her."

"Damn right, I killed that bastard," I reply, not loosening my grip. "To save you. I had to put a stop to that stupid

Russian Roulette game of yours. Are you hurt? Did you get shot?”

“I don’t know,” he answers after a moment. “Maybe.”

“Maybe what?” Seven asks. “Maybe you’re shot? Fuck Vulcan! You don’t know if a bullet went into your body? What the hell! Are you in pain?”

“We need to get up so we can make sure you’re not injured,” I say. “Can we trust you not to do anything stupid? The man’s dead, and we need to find Jade. Snap out of whatever crazy state you’re in and get your head back into the game. Focus on Jade needing you and calm the fuck down.”

“I will,” Vulcan mutters. “Just turn loose of me. I’m okay now and I don’t think I’m hurt.”

“We’ll be the judge of that,” Seven tells him. “Let’s move you into the light so we can check you out.” He turns his head to search for Leroy, who has been completely silent this whole time. “Leroy! What the fuck are you doing just standing there with your mouth hanging open? We need your help here.”

Leroy is staring at the man’s partially headless body as if he can’t tear his eyes away. “There’s a piece of his ear on my new shoes,” he mumbles before running to the side of the RV to puke.

“Oh my God! He’s no fucking help,” Seven says. “I’m going to turn you loose because we need to make sure you’re not hurt and then go search for Jade. Whatever shit you have going on in your fucked up head needs to stop right now. We don’t have the time or the energy to deal with it. Jade is missing, and we need to find her. If you want up, then tell me you hear me and understand.”

“I hear you,” Vulcan grunts out.

“One other thing,” I add. “Don’t make one goddamn move toward your gun. You’re costing us valuable time with your insanity. Got it?”

“I got it, okay?” Vulcan says in frustration. “I said to let me up. I’m fine, I swear.”

Reluctantly, I loosen my grip on him and Seven crawls off his back. Vulcan scrambles to his feet and steps into the glare of the RV’s floodlight for us to check him over carefully for injuries. Miraculously, there’s not a speck of blood on him anywhere.

“How the hell are you not dead?” I ask once we’re convinced the bullet missed him. “You had the gun to your temple, and you pulled the trigger. How did you live through that?”

He shrugs nonchalantly. “I told you I can’t die. Believe me now?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” Seven yells, throwing up his hands. “Don’t you dare start that shit again! Not after everything we just went through. You’re alive because I knocked the gun out of your hand. That’s the only reason. I saved your fucking life, and I don’t want to hear one more goddamn word ever about how you can’t die. You scared the shit out of us, and I never want to experience anything like that from you again. Now what the fuck are we going to do with this asshole?” He points to the headless body strapped to the lawn chair. “Or what’s left of him, I should say.”

“We’ve got to get rid of the body,” Vulcan says, pulling himself together. “I’ll bury him in the desert where he’ll never be found. We need to be quick though and do it before daylight. You all need to go back to Platinum and try to find Jade. I’ll take care of this bastard myself.”

He gestures towards the gruesome sight illuminated by the stark floodlight. Blood and gore mar the ground, a sickening reminder of the event that unfolded only moments ago. The scent of blood hangs heavy in the air, mingling with the faint odor of vomit from Leroy's earlier episode.

"I'm not leaving you here alone," I tell him. "Seven and Leroy can take the limo back to Platinum to search for Jade. They can ask around if she was there tonight. I'll stay here and help you clean up this mess."

"Sounds good," Seven agrees. "Leroy! Are you finished puking over there? We need to go back to Vegas."

Leroy regains his composure enough to join us, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand with a sheepish expression. "Sorry about that," he says. "I have a weak stomach. I've never seen someone killed right in front of me. It's a lot worse than in the movies. Did you see his head explode? It was just like a big old pumpkin. Brains and eyeballs going every which way. I'll have nightmares for weeks about this." He steps around the body and heads toward the limo. "C'mon, Seven. I'm headed back to the car. I'll take you back to Platinum while these two clean up."

Vulcan turns to me. "Since when do you know how to shoot a gun? You didn't hesitate and hit him right between the eyes."

"I picked up a variety of skills while working with the carnival," I reply. "Including being able to use a gun if I need to."

"Damn...learn something new every day," Vulcan says. "I'm impressed. Just for the record, I'm still pissed at you for killing him. He was mine."

“You mean as a trophy?” I ask. “You wanted to claim him as your kill? That’s sick, even for you.”

“I promised Jade I would kill anyone who hurt her, and you took my chance away to make good on that promise,” he explains. “I wanted to torture him before I killed him. I wanted him to suffer for trying to shoot Jade on the boat. He almost killed her. It’s a miracle she was able to swim away and escape. He didn’t deserve to live.”

“I get it,” I say. “But your life is worth more to me than a promise you made to Jade. The end result is the same, whether you killed him, or I did. He’s dead, and Jade won’t care who pulled the trigger. He would never have talked, no matter how much you tortured him.”

“You’re probably right,” Vulcan grudgingly admits.

“You stabbed him and that was painful enough,” I remind him. “Besides, there’s another man left for us to find and take care of. Do you have shovels here? We need to start digging his grave if we plan to get him in the ground before sunrise.”

“And that’s my exit line,” Leroy says, staggering towards the limo. “I’m not a gravedigger. We’re leaving now.” He stops to stare at Seven’s shoes. “Before you get into my limo, make sure you didn’t step in any blood or guts. I don’t want to be picking brains up off the floorboards tomorrow.”

“You bring up a good point,” Seven says. “We need to scrub the scene of any trace of evidence we were with this guy. From the moment we grabbed him at Jade’s car until we bury him, we need to make sure his DNA disappears for good.”

“Don’t worry, I got you covered on that angle,” Leroy says. “I love those true crime shows on TV. First thing we

need to do is chop off his hands and get rid of his remaining head. They can't identify him without those two body parts."

"What about all those fucking tattoos on his body?" Vulcan asks.

"Hmm...excellent point," Leroy replies, rubbing his chin. "Let me think about that and I'll get back to you."

"There's another big problem," Vulcan says. "I don't have any shovels here to dig a grave. You'll need to buy some supplies and bring them back here before daylight."

"I know what to buy," Leroy says. "I'll take care of it."

Vulcan glances over at me, but neither one of us says a word. Things never turn out well when Leroy takes charge.

"Do you have any clothes I can borrow?" Seven asks Vulcan. "The bouncers won't let me into Platinum looking like this. My suit is covered in dirt where we were rolling around on the ground."

"Sure," Vulcan replies. "Go inside and grab something out of my closet. My clothes aren't your style, but you're welcome to them."

"Thanks," Seven says. He hurries into the RV and comes back out five minutes later wearing Vulcan's clothes.

"Call us if you find out anything about Jade," I tell him. "And if you don't, keep searching for her and send Leroy back here with the shovels."

"I will," Seven promises.

JADE

“**W**ho the fuck are you, and why are you looking for me?”

I recognize Natasha’s voice immediately.

The sharp tip of her knife digs into the side of my throat directly above my carotid artery, its cold steel burning against my skin. She’s taller than me and her arm has my neck in a tight chokehold, her grip strong and unyielding. My instinct is to fight her, but instead, I consciously relax my body so she’ll realize I’m not a physical threat to her.

“My name is Jade, and I’m here to help you,” I reply.

“Help me? I don’t need your fucking help,” she snarls in my ear, her thick Eastern European accent coming through stronger. “What do you want?”

“I’ll tell you if you move the knife away from my veins,” I reply, my voice shaking slightly. “I’m a hacker. A good one, too. You put out word on the darknet that you need someone to reverse engineer the coding on a slot machine. I can do that for you.”

“I did no such thing,” Natasha replies coldly. “You’re mistaken. Why are you here?”

The elegant lady who escorted me to the office takes a seat on the white leather sofa on the other side of the room. She's watching us quietly without interfering, her light green eyes calculating and sharp. The faint scent of her expensive perfume lingers in the air. It's obvious she's confident Natasha can handle me without her help.

"It's the truth," I say, trying to maintain my composure. "I've had a tough time tracking you down, and it almost cost me my life. I've worked too hard to find you to play games with you now, so I'll tell you everything. Then it will be up to you if you believe me or not."

"Start talking then," Natasha says without moving the knife, the cold steel still pressed against my skin.

"I hack into the computers of evil men and then I blackmail them," I tell her, ignoring the blade against my throat. "Sometimes other people hire me. A man who is probably dead by now hired me to hack into a computer that belonged to the Russian mob. I translated the files I downloaded from them and that's how I learned about you. By the way, are you aware they're desperately trying to find you?"

"Why do you say this?" she asks before relaxing the pressure of the knife against my skin slightly, granting me a slight reprieve.

"The man who hired me ratted me out to them. They kidnapped me and took me onto a boat near where I live in Los Angeles. They tried to kill me when they realized I didn't have the information they were looking for."

"What information did they want?"

"The location of a woman named Natasha. A woman who stole a video slot machine from the Russian mafia and now

they want it back. But most of all, they want you, Natasha. I know you're the person I've been looking for. They're coming for you, and I'm here to warn you."

"I'm not the Natasha you're searching for," she says. "You've mistaken me for someone else."

I blow out a long breath. Her behavior is not surprising. I wouldn't have expected her to greet me warmly with open arms. She's wary of me and has every reason to be.

"Your suspicions of me are valid," I say. "I don't blame you one bit for not trusting me. I don't trust easily either. The two men who are looking for you are Russians. One is named Ivan. Sorry, I didn't catch the other man's name. They were both big, ugly men with blue eyes. Russian is not a language that I speak, so I wasn't able to pick up most of what they said to each other, only names and places, mostly. They mentioned another man. His name is Dimitri."

The moment I say Dimitri, I catch a panicked expression cross the woman's face sitting on the sofa. Her eyes fly to Natasha's.

Bingo!

"Let her go," the woman says to Natasha. "I want to hear what she has to say." She slides to one corner of the sofa and pats the cushion beside her. "Come sit by me, Jade. I apologize for the unwelcoming behavior of my associate. I'll introduce myself again. I'm Eva, the owner of Platinum."

Natasha slowly lowers the knife from my throat and drops her arm from around my neck before taking a step back.

"Don't try anything stupid," she says. "I can still cut you quickly."

I turn around to face her. “I wouldn’t expect anything less from you,” I say, giving her a slight smile. “If everything I’ve learned about you is true, we’ll get along just fine.”

I walk over to the sofa and sit beside Eva. Natasha settles down in a chair directly across from me. She’s wearing black jeans, leather boots and a tight black turtleneck sweater. Her long blonde hair is pulled back into a ponytail and her beautiful face is devoid of makeup. She doesn’t need it. Not with her perfect features and huge blue eyes.

“Would you care for a cup of coffee, Jade, or a drink?” Eva asks. “Once again, I apologize. We knew you weren’t here applying for a job, so of course we were suspicious of you.”

“You have coffee?” I perk up at the mention of caffeine. “I would love a cup, if it isn’t too much trouble.”

“Not at all,” Eva says. She gives me a smile that doesn’t reach her eyes, then texts someone on her phone. “They’ll bring it right up from the bar,” she says. “In the meantime, please tell us more about the men who kidnapped you.”

“There’s not much more to tell since I don’t speak the language,” I say. “They grabbed me when I got into their car instead of my rideshare. They thought I knew where Natasha was hiding. I didn’t, since I had no idea who you were. Ivan was the nastier of the two and much rougher with me. They took me out on a boat where they planned to kill me.”

“How did you escape?” Eva asks. “Russians aren’t known for letting people walk away.”

“I kned Ivan in the balls, jumped overboard, and swam away from the boat. They shot at me, but luckily their aim wasn’t accurate. It was at night, so they couldn’t spot me in the water. I’m a strong swimmer and could tread water until I

eventually spotted the lights of a fishing boat. The fisherman dragged me aboard and took me to shore. Twenty-four hours later, I arrived in Vegas.”

“And where have you been since you arrived in Vegas?” Eva asks.

“That’s a long story and not relevant,” I reply after a brief pause. There’s no need to involve the guys at this point. “The important thing is that these men are coming.” I turn to stare directly at Natasha. “You’re her, right? You’re the Natasha I’m looking for? I saw fear in your eyes when I called your name last night here in the club. Who is Dimitri?”

“I’m not telling you anything,” Natasha says curtly. “I don’t trust you. You could be working for them.”

I nod and lean back against the sofa cushions. “You’re right, I could be. What do I need to do or say to make you believe me? The Russians are coming for you. And once they realize I’m not dead, they’re coming for me too.”

“How did you track her here?” Eva asks.

At least she’s stopped pretending the blonde woman sitting across from me is not Natasha. Which is a good start.

“The downloaded files mentioned a strip club in Vegas. Once I arrived here, I narrowed the list of strip clubs down. When none of them checked out, I moved on to the male strip clubs. Platinum was at the top of the short list, and I came here last night on a whim. When I spotted Natasha, I realized she fit the physical description, and her Eastern European accent further confirmed my suspicions.”

“You’re smart and determined,” Eva remarks. “I appreciate that in a person. You mentioned you downloaded hacked files.

If you truly want us to trust you and believe what you're saying, we'll need access to those files."

"Done," I agree quickly. "I have several copies on zip drives." I glance over at Natasha. "I assume you speak Russian?"

"Of course," she replies. "Among many other languages."

"Good, then you can translate the files better than Google can," I say, standing. "I'll go get the zip drive and bring it back to you. Is the club open all night?"

"Not so fast," Eva says. "We can't allow you to leave here until we go through the files ourselves. How do we know these files even exist? Or if they have anything to do with Natasha at all? You could run straight to the Russians the moment we let you walk out the door. We can't take that chance by letting you leave."

It's not an unreasonable request. They have every reason to suspect me.

"I understand," I say, nodding. "In that case, do you have a computer I can use to download the files? I uploaded them to an online cloud service too. It won't take long. The files are useless to me; I'm happy to pass them along to you."

Eva points to a desktop computer sitting on a large executive desk in the corner. "You can use mine." She walks over and pulls out the large leather office chair for me to take a seat, then quickly logs into her computer before sliding the mouse over to me. "What guarantee do I have that you will not hack into my computer, too?" she asks.

I let out a sigh while trying not to get impatient with them, though they're beginning to test me. "Why would I do that? You're the one who said I had to download the files here rather

than going to pick up the zip drive. What could you possibly have on your computer that I would want? The addresses of the male strippers who work here so I can stalk them later? The two of you might need to take a little leap of faith if you want to keep Natasha safe.”

A knock comes at the door and a handsome man dressed only in tight black pants and a bowtie sticks his head inside. “Miss Eva, here is the coffee you ordered,” he says. “Where do you want the tray?”

Eva opens the door wider for him and he places a tray with a carafe and cups on the desk.

“Can I bring you anything else?” he asks.

“No, we’re fine,” she replies. “Thank you.”

She waits until he closes the door on his way out, then pours me a cup of coffee and hands it to me. “Natasha, would you like a cup, too?” she asks.

“Not unless it has vodka in it,” Natasha replies. She jumps up from the chair and walks over to the long two-way tinted window overlooking the strip club. From the office’s high vantage point, everything happening in the club can be seen; the dancers, the crowds and even the bartenders working fast and furious to keep the drinks flowing.

“Why did the Cat Man carry you out of here last night?” Natasha asks abruptly.

“The Cat Man?” It takes me a minute to understand she’s referring to Kit. Her name for him almost makes me laugh before I stop myself. “Oh, you mean Kit. He’s a friend.”

Of course, the episode with Kit throwing me over his shoulder and carrying me out of the club would’ve caught

their attention. He caught everyone's attention, including most definitely mine.

The thought of Kit waiting at his house for me makes me anxious. He'll be worried when I'm not back by the time I said I would be. God, I should've called him.

I've made so many mistakes where the guys are concerned.

"Do your *friends* always pick you up and carry you around?" Natasha asks. "I'm aware of who he is. Everyone in Vegas knows the Cat Man. He's a recluse and is never seen in clubs. To see him here was quite unexpected."

"He's more than a friend," I admit. "He's worried about my safety and didn't want me coming here alone."

"Does he know you were searching for Natasha?" Eva asks, a touch of alarm in her voice.

Oh, shit.

"Yeah, he does," I reply, not wanting to lie to them. "But he won't tell anyone, I swear. There's no reason to worry. He's on our side."

"Our side?" Natasha snaps. "*We* don't have a side."

"Yes, we do," I argue. "You need me to reverse engineer the slot machine code and we're both running from the Russian mafia, so yes, we have a side. We're on the same side and we need to work together. It's the best way."

"Work together?" Eva repeats, giving me a curious glance. "What exactly are you suggesting?"

I take a long sip of coffee before speaking. "I've had time to do a little investigating into Natasha and the slot machine she stole. I can reverse engineer the code. It would take time

for me to do it, maybe even a week. Believe me, I've accomplished more difficult tasks than this. I'm suggesting that you take me on as a partner. I have a general idea of how the scheme has worked in various casinos across the world. With the right team, we could do it faster and better than anyone else has before. Natasha put out the word on the darknet. You're looking for someone and here I am."

Natasha steps closer to the two-way window and peers out. "What did the two men who kidnapped you look like? You said one was named Ivan. What about the other one?"

"They were both tall, dressed in dark business suits. Their eyes were blue and cold, with no soul. They were both balding. My best guess would put them in their middle to late forties. It was dark when we were on the boat, so I couldn't see any identifying tattoos or marks on them."

I pick up my cup of coffee and walk over to stand beside her at the window. "Why are you asking me for more description of the men? Do you know them personally?"

She doesn't answer and instead lifts her long, slender arm to point to a lone man sitting at a table near the bar.

Oh my God.

It's one of the fucking men who kidnapped me.

They're already here.

JADE

“**T**hat’s him,” I say. “That’s one of the men who tried to shoot me on the boat. I’m going to kill that son-of-a-bitch with my bare hands.”

I set my cup down on the table and head for the door. Pulling my switchblade out of the purse slung over my shoulder, I flick it open. I’m already thinking of how damn good it will feel to sink it into the side of his ugly, thick neck.

“Whoa!” Eva shouts, rushing to block the door. “Stop! Where do you think you’re going?”

“To kill him,” I say. “Before he kills us. Move out of my way.”

“I’m right behind you,” Natasha says over my shoulder. “That’s Igor. I’ve known that man since I was twelve years old. Eva, call King to help us take him to the basement so I can hurt that motherfucker. I’ve been waiting all my life for this.”

“No! Wait!” Eva yells as I jerk open the office door and we rush out. “Don’t go down there without backup!”

Natasha rushes ahead of me in her black high-heeled boots, and I follow right behind her. I can’t imagine what Igor did to her, but it must have been bad. Whatever she has

planned for him in the basement, I'm here for it and hope she allows me to participate, too.

Our timing is terrible, and we reach the crowded floor of Platinum as a new performance starts. The club is filled, and we can barely squeeze our way through the crush of women to cross the huge room.

The atmosphere in Platinum is electric, the air thick with the heavy scent of perfume and alcohol. The strobe lights and pulsating music create a disorienting haze, the dim lighting casting shadows over the faces of the women, their expressions a mixture of elation and anticipation of the show.

As we push our way through the throng of bodies, the heat from the tightly packed crowd is suffocating. The thunderous bass of the music assaults my ears, making it difficult to think.

We weave our way through the maze of tables, the press of bodies making it nearly impossible to hurry. The dancing women, oblivious to the deadly game of cat-and-mouse unfolding around them, continue to laugh and flirt with the dancers. Each step we take is a struggle, the press of bodies a constant challenge.

"Can you spot him?" I ask Natasha. I'm shorter than she is and can't see well over the tall women in their high heels.

"No, but he won't get away," she replies. "His brother, Ivan, must be here too. Look for him. They're brothers and are always together. Bastards! I will kill them with my hands."

When we finally reach the table where Igor was sitting, it's empty. Only the lingering scent of Igor's strong aftershave remains, a pungent reminder of his recent presence.

"Fuck!" Natasha mutters. "He's gone. We must find him before he gets away. We can't let him leave. His blood is

mine.”

“Can’t you call one of your men to stop him at the door?” I ask.

“Do you see any men who could stop Igor or Ivan at the door?” she replies. “What would they do? Hit them with their fake firehoses or handcuffs? Dimitri’s men will kill without hesitation. I will not put my friends in danger to protect me. This is my war.”

“It’s our war now,” I correct her. “They’ll kill me too when they realize I’m alive, if they haven’t already figured it out.”

A terrible thought hits me. What if I led them here straight to Natasha? Maybe they’re here because of me, not her. Oh crap! Why didn’t I think of this before?

“Natasha, stop! Maybe you should go somewhere out of sight. What if the Russians somehow tracked me here? They might not realize you’re here, too.”

Natasha whirls around to stare at me. “Do you think they followed you? How?”

I shake my head. “No idea, if they did. I’ve been very careful to cover my tracks and have been in hiding in Vegas since I’ve been here.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she says. “No more looking over my shoulder. It is time to face them, and I will. I’m ready to fight. They’re in Vegas now, my home. Not fucking Russia or Ukraine. I have friends here. We must find him before he escapes.”

I turn to scan the large floor of the club in one direction for Igor, while Natasha scans the other side. How did he disappear so quickly? Where did he go?

Suddenly I'm grabbed from behind and a set of strong, muscular arms wrap tightly around me. The delicious scent of Seven engulfs me.

"Jade! Thank God you're safe!" Seven's familiar voice says into my ear. "Where have you been? We've been searching all over for you. I can't believe we found you. My God! I'm relieved to see you."

Shocked at the tone of his voice, I turn around in his arms and stare up at him. I've never seen an expression of pure panic on his face before. The concern etched on his face is clear, the lines of worry adding a new depth to his handsome features. Instead of his normal attire of expensive suits and blazers, he's wearing jeans, a black t-shirt and Vulcan's leather jacket.

"I'm fine," I say, gripping his arms. "What is it? What's wrong? And why the hell are you wearing Vulcan's clothes?"

"Everything is wrong, except that you're okay, and that's the only thing that matters," he replies, grabbing me in another tight hug and holding me close. "The fucking Russians are here, so we need to get you out now."

"I know they're here," I say. "We saw one of them sitting at this table a few minutes ago. Now he's gone. Help us find him."

"We?" Seven asks. "Who the fuck is we?"

I wave a hand toward Natasha, who has her back turned to us. She's still scanning the crowd for Igor. "This is Natasha, the woman I've been searching for."

"Why am I not surprised?" he says. "You need to leave with me now. There are things you aren't aware of."

“Tell me what’s going on,” I say. “I need to stay and help Natasha find Igor before he gets away. He’s dangerous to both of us.”

“Who is Igor? One of the men who tried to kill you?”

“Yes, and his brother, Ivan, must be here somewhere too. Natasha said they’re always together.”

“Oh, fuck!” Seven says. He tugs me closer and puts his lips against my ear so only I can hear him. As Seven pulls me close, his strong arms encircling me protectively, I feel the tension in his muscles, the heat of his body seeping into mine.

“Don’t worry about Ivan,” he whispers, his voice low and urgent. “He’s been taken care of, but you can’t tell anyone. If you care about any of us, you can’t tell a single soul. Not even Natasha.”

I draw back from him and nod. He doesn’t need to give me details now. I won’t put the guys in danger more than I already have. If he tells me to keep my mouth shut, I will.

Natasha whirls around at the sound of our voices and her mouth drops open in shock when she spots Seven. “First, it was the Cat Man and now the Magic Man is here with you, too? What special skills do you have, Jade?”

I quickly make introductions, as we don’t have time to lose. “This is my friend, Seven,” I explain. “Seven, this is the woman I’ve been looking for.” I don’t say her real name out loud in case her staff might hear me since I remember her going under another name here.

“Nice to meet you,” Seven says politely, as if we’re at a dinner party instead of trying to find a murderer. “I need to get Jade out of here before the Russians spot her. I’m sure you understand.”

Natasha raises her eyebrows at his comment. “Does the whole fucking world know about the Russians now?” she asks me.

“No, just me and three guys,” I reply, before spotting Leroy trying to make his way through the crowd to us. “Correction, four guys; and that’s it, I swear. You can trust them. I trust them with my life.”

When I say the words out loud, I realize it’s one hundred percent true.

I trust Seven, Kit, and Vulcan completely.

They’re on my side and are doing everything they can to protect me, while I’ve made things difficult for everyone. From here on out, things will be different between us.

“We need to leave now,” Seven says again, gripping my arm tightly. “I won’t take no for an answer if I have to carry you out of here.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time a man has carried her out of here,” Natasha says.

Leroy finally reaches us, sweating heavily, his breath coming in ragged gasps from the heat of the packed club. His wide, panicked eyes speak volumes. He points to the front of the club. “I saw another one of those ugly ass men heading out the door. He looked just like that other guy. How many are here? We’ve got to go!”

“He went out the door?” I yell. “Dammit! He’s getting away!” I twist out of Seven’s grip and start rushing toward the entrance with Natasha right on my heels.

By the time we reach the front door, Eva is already standing there with a tall, black-haired man dressed in an Elvis

impersonator costume. She grabs Natasha's arm to prevent her from going outside into the dark parking lot.

"He's gone," Eva tells her firmly. "King tried to stop him, but he pushed right past him. Knowing Igor is armed, I instructed King not to follow him into the parking lot. You're not going out there to confront him, either. Let him go. He'll be back and we'll be waiting for him next time."

"He got away?" Natasha spits out in a furious voice. "What about his brother, Ivan? The bastards are always together. Always!"

Eva shakes her head. "King didn't see a second man with him. We'll go through all the security tapes of the club and parking lot to check if Ivan was here, too."

Natasha lets out a frustrated sound. "I knew this day would happen and now it has. I can't believe he got away!"

"Calm down," Eva says. "This will give us more time to come up with a plan to keep you safe. We'll be watching and waiting for him next time."

"Do you believe what I told you now?" I ask. "This man was one of the two who tried to kill me. His brother, Ivan, is the other one."

"I never doubted your story," Eva says. "But I wanted confirmation from the hacked files to confirm it."

"Look, I don't know what's going on," Seven speaks up from behind me. "All I know is that I'm taking Jade out of here now. She's not safe." He slides a protective arm around my waist, and pulls me close against his side. "Leroy, go get the limo and pull it up to the entrance. I'm not walking Jade out through the dark parking lot."

"You got it, boss," Leroy replies and heads out the door.

“I should stay and talk more to Natasha,” I say. “We have a lot to discuss.”

“No fucking way,” Seven replies. “Get her cell number and call her later. You’re coming with me.” His grip tightens more around my waist, and I sense there’s more to the story than what he’s telling me.

“Take my number,” Natasha says, pulling out her cellphone. “Call me tomorrow; we have many things to discuss.”

All I have is the stupid burner cellphone I brought with me because I was afraid the guys were tracking my location through my phone. I’m a complete idiot.

The Russians are here in Vegas, and I was worried about whether the guys were following me. I take down Natasha’s number and give her mine.

“I’ll be in touch,” I promise.

SEVEN

I'm having difficulty keeping my cool and not blurting out to Jade that we killed a man tonight. The last thing I want to do is panic her. Especially since Ivan's brother is still on the loose in the parking lot somewhere.

My priority is to get Jade and her car away from Platinum as fast as I can and back to the safety of Kit's house. Then I'll tell her everything.

When Leroy pulls up with the limo, I quickly open the front passenger door. "Slide in," I tell her. "And scoot over."

"Why are we sitting up front instead of the back?" she asks, when I crowd in beside her before lifting her onto my lap.

"There's a bit of a mess in the back of the limo," I say. "I'll explain later."

"Leroy, we need to get Jade's car and drive it back to Kit's house," I tell him. "Did you see the other guy anywhere in the parking lot?"

"No, the vehicle parked beside Jade's car is gone," he replies. "He probably saw all the damn blood on the ground where Vulcan beat the shit out of that guy and split."

“Wait! What are you talking about?” Jade asks in alarm. “Vulcan beat up someone here in the parking lot? Who? When did this happen?”

“It’s a long story,” I say. “And one that you might not want to hear. Leroy, take us to Jade’s car and watch to make sure we get out of the parking lot safely. I’ll drive Jade to Kit’s house, and you can pick us up there after you swing by the hardware store.”

“He’s going to a hardware store in the middle of the night?” Jade says. “Why would Leroy need to make a run to the hardware store? My God! What happened tonight? You’re scaring me.”

“I’ll tell you everything once we’re safe in your car and out of this goddamn parking lot.”

Leroy drives the limo slowly down the row until we reach Jade’s car.

“If you come here again, don’t park at the end of the lot, for fuck’s sake,” I tell her. “You’re lucky you made it out of here alive tonight. In fact, don’t park at the end of a lot ever again. Stay close to the entrance or pay a valet, so you’re not walking alone in the dark.”

Leroy pulls to a stop behind Jade’s car, and we step out. I take the extra set of Jade’s car keys out of my pocket and go around to the passenger side to unlock it.

“Watch your step,” I caution. “There’s blood on the pavement and you don’t want to get it on your shoes.”

Jade inhales sharply as she takes in the grisly scene beside her car, the dark crimson stains on the asphalt a chilling reminder of the violence earlier in the evening.

“Whose blood is this?” she asks, her eyes growing wide as she steps around the still wet blood stains.

“It’s Ivan’s; the Russian guy,” I reply. “He broke into your car and was waiting here for you to come out. His vehicle was parked beside your car and now it’s gone, so we can assume the other man, Igor, has left in it.”

“Is Vulcan, okay?” she asks. “Did he get hurt too? Where are they now?”

“Get inside your car and we’ll talk on the way.”

“No! Tell me now,” she says. “Is Vulcan hurt? There’s something you’re not telling me.”

“He’s not hurt, just get in, please.”

She slides in, and I hurry to get into the driver’s seat. Quickly, I start the car and drive out of the parking lot with Leroy on our tail. He follows close behind us until we hit the main road and he’s satisfied we’re not being followed by Igor. Then he turns off to go to the hardware store and we head to Kit’s house to dump Jade’s car.

I constantly glance in the rearview mirror, my eyes scanning for anyone following us. The idea of Igor still being out there, possibly watching our every move, concerns me. We can’t let our guard down, not for a second.

The drive to Kit’s house is tense, the silence in the car only amplifying the weight of our situation. I feel Jade’s eyes on me, the questions she has yet to ask burning in her gaze. I owe her an explanation, but the thought of telling her about the violence and the bloodshed that took place tonight causes me to hesitate.

“I can’t wait any longer,” Jade says after a few minutes of silence. “Please tell me what happened tonight.”

“First, you need to tell me why you ran off again,” I say. “Kit went out of his mind when he returned home, and you weren’t there. What the fuck, Jade! Why did you leave a note saying you would be back if you weren’t coming home? How many times do we need to rehash this same scenario over and over? I never believed Vulcan when he said you would keep running, but he’s right.”

“I’m sorry,” she says quietly. “I knew Kit would be mad at me for returning to the club and I had every intention of being back home before he got there. Last night when I went to the club, I spotted Natasha. I wasn’t sure if it was her, but I had a pretty good suspicion that it was. I figured Kit wouldn’t want me going back to Platinum alone, and I also wanted to pick up my car. Then I underestimated how suspicious Natasha would be of me. When I walked into Platinum, the owner escorted me up to her office where Natasha held a knife to my throat.”

“Jesus Christ! Why didn’t you take one of us with you? We’ll never be able to keep you safe if you keep doing this!”

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I realize now how risky and stupid this was. Things are okay now with Natasha once she saw Ivan’s brother, Igor, in the club. She realized I was telling the truth about everything. You can’t blame her for being suspicious of me. For all she knew, I could be working with the Russians. Eva, the owner of Platinum, refused to let me leave the club until I gave them proof. I offered to download the hacked files of the Russians to her computer.”

“Meanwhile, we were all going insane, completely out of our minds wondering if the Russians had captured you,” I spit out. “Kit called us once he realized something was wrong. We went to his house and then rode over to Platinum to make sure your car was still there. When we arrived, we saw Ivan sitting

in a car parked beside yours. While we were watching, he got out and used a Slim Jim to break into your car. Vulcan went absolutely bat shit ballistic. He dragged him out onto the pavement and started beating the living hell out of him. He tried to get him to tell us where you were, but the man wasn't talking."

"Were they following me?" she asks.

"I'm not sure. Or maybe they found out Natasha's location and you being there was a coincidence. They knew it was your car, though. Otherwise, why would they have broken into it? It doesn't matter now either way."

"You said Ivan had been taken care of. What did you mean by that? Where is he now?"

I reach over to clasp her hand. There's no easy way to tell her what happened tonight at Vulcan's RV. "He's dead," I say. "We killed him. I'm sorry to drop a bomb on you without warning, but that's what happened."

As I recount the events of the ending, Jade listens intently, her eyes wide with shock and disbelief. The details are vivid in my mind, the images of the fight, the blood, and the ultimate demise of Ivan replaying in my thoughts.

"Is everyone okay? Is anyone else hurt?" Her grip on the door handle is white-knuckled, her eyes staring straight ahead as the reality of our situation sinks in.

"That would be according to what you mean by okay," I say. "Miraculously, none of us were physically hurt or killed. It was touch and go there for a few minutes. There's something important you need to understand about Vulcan. He did something tonight that terrified us, and it could've ended

tragically. You've heard him mention before about how he can't die?"

She nods back at me, her eyes wide.

"Well, he honest to God believes that because of things that have happened in his past. It's not my place to tell you the details, it's his. All I can say is that he truly believes it and isn't joking. Tonight, he showed us all how truly fucked up in the head he is."

She's gripping my hand tightly. "What did he do? I'm terrified to hear the rest of this story."

I blow out a long breath as I try to decide the best way to tell her. It's hard to put into words how frightening the whole situation was, and how close we came to losing Vulcan for good.

"Vulcan beat the guy up bad. I mean, really bad. Broke his nose and several bones in his face. The guy is a fucking mobster. Of course, he wasn't going to tell us shit, no matter what Vulcan did to him. We took him out to Vulcan's RV and tied the man to a lounge chair outside. We found his identification and put it together that he was the Ivan on the boat that you told us about. The longer the questioning continued, the crazier Vulcan became. He began playing Russian Roulette using real bullets with the man."

"What?" Jade exclaims. "Did he shoot Ivan?"

"No, that's not what happened, and you haven't heard the worst part. Vulcan took turns putting the gun to his own fucking head and pulling the trigger."

"You and Kit let him do that?" she yells. "What the hell? How could you stand by and watch him do that?"

“We thought it was a trick at first. Or at least I did, and I’m sure Kit did too. We would never have allowed him to do something so stupid if we’d known he was playing for real. Vulcan had some insane idea in his head that Ivan would be more willing to talk if he believed Vulcan was crazy enough to play along with him.”

“What kind of trick did you think he was using?” she asks furiously. “How do you fake playing Russian Roulette?”

“I honestly believed Vulcan knew exactly where the bullet was in the chamber. But then he started adding more bullets. He did a round with two bullets for each of them and the gun didn’t go off. By this time, Vulcan was completely bonkers, and he stabbed Ivan in the thigh up to the knife handle.” I shake my head at the memory. “I should’ve stopped things, right then, because I could tell by the weird look in Vulcan’s eyes that he was losing his shit.”

“What kind of look are you talking about?” she asks. “Have you seen it before?”

“It’s hard to describe. You’ll recognize it if you see it, and I hope you never do. The look means he’s mentally unraveling and losing control. Once that happens, he’s a danger to himself and potentially to everyone around him.” I glance over at her. “After he stabbed Ivan, he loaded three bullets into the chamber. Three fucking bullets, which meant he had a fifty percent chance of the gun going off. Then he stepped back and put the gun to his own head.”

“Oh my God,” Jade says, her voice breaking. “Please tell me he’s okay.”

“Vulcan isn’t physically hurt, but he’s definitely not okay. I don’t know what it will take to make him okay. Time, maybe. Too much has happened to him. He’s fucked up bad in the

head. By this time, we all realized things were going downhill fast. Kit started begging Vulcan to give him the gun. He offered to shoot Ivan in the leg himself. Vulcan just laughed at him. He knew Kit was trying to get the gun away from him. While Kit was talking to him, I moved slightly to shift out of Vulcan's peripheral vision. Then without warning, Vulcan puts the gun to his temple, counts down fast from three and pulls the goddamn trigger."

"Is he shot? He is, isn't he? You don't want to tell me because you're afraid I'll freak out. Take me to him now!"

"No, he's fine. I swear to you. I wouldn't lie about something as serious as that. As soon as he started counting down, I rushed toward him and hit him from his blind side. I crashed into him right as he pulled the trigger and knocked the gun out of his hand. If I'd hesitated a split second longer, or if the angle of the gun had been different, things could've easily ended tragically. I'm still shaken up by it. Seeing a man closer than a brother to me almost blow his brains out is life altering. I never want to go through something like that again, ever."

"You saved his life?" Jade asks.

"I guess you could say that. For now, anyway. Vulcan needs a lot more saving. He's messed up. We always knew it, but never realized how bad it really is."

"If Vulcan didn't kill Ivan, who did?" she asks.

"When I tackled Vulcan, the gun discharged and flew out of his hands. It was dark and none of us could see a damn thing. I yelled for Kit to get the gun and he scrambled for it, while I tried to slow Vulcan down. Vulcan fought me like a beast with inhuman strength. There wasn't a chance in hell I could control him physically, though I tried my best. Kit

reached the gun first, rolled over and shot Ivan with the remaining two bullets. Blew his head into pieces.”

“Kit was the one who killed Ivan?” Jade asks in shock. “I can’t believe it. He wouldn’t harm a fly. Does he even know how to shoot a gun?”

“Apparently, Kit can use a gun very well. He hit him right between the eyes with the first shot in the dark. I was stunned. Kit didn’t have a choice, though. The only way to end the game was to kill Ivan because Vulcan would’ve kept it going until someone died. And that someone would’ve been him if I hadn’t tackled him and knocked the gun out of his hands.”

“This is all my fault,” she says. “I’ve ruined your lives by being here. One day you’re all doing great and then I arrive in town. Kit must be terribly upset to have killed someone. Even if it was an evil man. It goes against everything Kit believes in to kill.”

“I don’t have a clue where Kit’s head is right now. We’re all shook up, and no one is thinking straight. When we were finally able to bring Vulcan back to reality, he was furious at Kit.”

“For what? Killing Ivan?”

“Vulcan said he promised to kill anyone who harmed you, and he felt as if Kit took that honor away from him. He’s fucked up in the head big time.”

“We need to go to the RV,” she says. “I need to see them both personally myself to make sure they’re okay. This is a nightmare and all because of me. Not to mention the Russian mafia will be after all of you now. I’ve dragged you down into my shit, and now we’re all fucked.”

“We’ll go there soon, but first we need to hide your car in Kit’s garage and leave it. You can’t drive it again. Leroy’s gone to pick up a few things, and then he’ll swing by Kit’s to get us. I’ve already texted Kit to tell him you’re with me. I’m sure they’re as relieved as I am to find out you’re safe.”

“We need to get rid of the body, so it can’t be traced back to any of you,” she says.

“That’s why Leroy has gone to the hardware store. To get shovels and other supplies, to help us dispose of him before sunrise.”

Jade closes her eyes and leans her head back against the headrest. “I’m so sorry,” she says. “I can’t wrap my head around everything you told me. It makes me physically sick to my stomach knowing what Vulcan did. You’ve hinted he had issues, but I never realized it was something this serious. I’ve even made a couple of smart ass comments to him about needing to get therapy. What if he had shot himself? How could I live with that?”

I grip her hand again in mine and squeeze it tight. “Please, don’t go there. You didn’t cause this to happen. There’s something else we only found out about tonight. When Vulcan was playing Russian Roulette, he told Ivan that he plays it almost every night alone at the RV. Every night after work, he’s out there by himself, rolling that fucking gun down his arm with a bullet in the chamber and then putting it to his head. Every time he pulled the trigger, and nothing happened, it only reconfirmed his belief that he can’t die.”

“Why would he do that? Please tell me how to stop him. I’ll do anything.”

I let out a tired sigh. “I wish I knew.”

JADE

I'm in a state of shock over everything Seven told me. The fact the Russians found me is nothing compared to Vulcan playing Russian Roulette with real bullets. My mind is continuously replaying every conversation I've ever had with him.

What did I miss?

The couple of times when he mentioned he couldn't die, I passed it off as nothing more than him being a tough bad ass. Typical male macho bullshit not to be taken seriously.

Now I remember his comments about not registering pain the same as normal people too.

"What happened to Vulcan in his life?" I ask Seven. "He didn't get this way overnight."

Seven shakes his head. "That's not for me to share. I'm sorry. Vulcan will need to tell you when he's ready. I won't betray his trust by oversharing."

"I understand," I say, nodding. "What about his inability to feel pain, though? That's weird as hell. Is it true? Can you tell me that much?"

Seven grows quiet for a few moments before speaking. "The mind is a powerful tool and can be used to overpower

physical sensations if given enough practice. For example, the way you trained your body to go without oxygen for a long period. It's mind over body. Vulcan's mind trained him to withstand and ignore the pain. To the point that he can't always recognize when he's injured. It took all of us a few minutes to figure out if he'd been shot when the gun went off. Can you believe he didn't know if he'd been hit by a bullet?"

"I'm so scared for him," I say. "I had no idea."

"Me, too," he agrees. "Right now, though, we have bigger issues to deal with. There's a man with half his head blown off sitting in one of Vulcan's chairs. We need to dispose of the body before the sun comes up, and we've got to move fast. All traces of Ivan need to be gone before sunrise."

"What's the plan? Or do you have one?"

"Vulcan suggested we bury him way out in the desert. He owns quite a bit of land, and no one ever visits him except us."

"Did anyone see Ivan with you at the club?" I ask. "Was there anyone else walking through the parking lot?"

"Hell, I don't remember," he replies. "It all happened so fast. As soon as Ivan broke into your car, Vulcan was on him like a hurricane. It took me and Kit both to pull him off Ivan to keep from killing him right there on the pavement. Vulcan has an unusual physical strength when he's out of control. We threw Ivan into the limo, which will need to be cleaned thoroughly. There's blood everywhere."

My mind is whirling, trying to take in everything. "Platinum has security cameras in the parking lot. The owner, Eva, will try to find out everything she can about Ivan and Igor. She'll see the tapes of Vulcan, if they exist."

“Then she’ll realize we took Ivan,” Seven says. “How much have you uncovered about her? Anything?”

“Not a damn thing,” I tell him. “But I will soon. I’ll make it my priority to investigate her. She’s very protective of Natasha, and I’m sure she’ll be relieved Ivan is dead.”

“Even if that’s the case, it doesn’t mean it’s safe for her to know we’re the ones responsible for his death,” he says. “She could hold it over us.”

“We’re all on the same page here regarding those fucking Russians,” I say. “If Eva sees anything on the tapes, I’m sure they’ll tell me. We’ll deal with it then. For now, we need to get to the RV and help with Ivan’s body.”

“We’re almost at Kit’s place,” Seven says. “I’ll hide your car in his garage, and it needs to stay there. Understood? Don’t take it back out under any circumstances. We’ll get you something else to drive. Any kind of car you want.”

“I understand and promise not to take it out again until we can switch the tags or something,” I say. “Ivan’s DNA is in here too, which means we’ll need to thoroughly wipe it down. There’s a lot to think about and we can’t miss anything.”

“We all have too much to lose to fuck this up,” he says.

I place my hand on Seven’s leg. “Thank you for everything you did tonight. If you hadn’t reacted as quickly as you did, things would’ve turned out differently. I’m grateful for that.”

He covers my hand with his. “No need to thank me. Vulcan is my brother in every sense of the word, except blood. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for him or Kit. We’ll get through this together. You’re safe for now, and that’s all that matters.”

I shake my head. “No, it’s not all that matters. You all matter to me. I won’t let you down again, I promise. I’ll always have your backs the same as you have mine.”

He glances over at me. “Does this mean you won’t run away again?”

“That’s exactly what it means. I’ll never run from you again, I swear.”

“We’ll hold you to that.”

A few minutes later, we’ve tucked my car safely out of sight in Kit’s garage. I go inside the house to grab an extra change of clothes and shoes for everyone. If this job turns out to be as messy as I expect, we’ll need to burn the clothes we’re wearing when we’re finished.

“Does Leroy keep extra clothes here too?” I ask Seven when I return to the garage. He’s already carefully wiping down the interior of my car. “I grabbed a clothing change for everyone else and spare shoes.”

“Yeah, he usually keeps a sweatsuit or two in my closet,” he replies. “He doesn’t stay over here that often, but there should be something he can use. Go check. He texted to say he’s five minutes away with the limo.”

I dash back inside to grab Leroy a sweatsuit. Even after all this time, it’s still a little weird to me how the guys co-live at each other’s places. It works though, so who am I to question it? When I return, Leroy is parked outside the garage in the limo.

“Help me spread this plastic tarp down on the floorboard of the limo,” Leroy says to me. “There’s goddamn blood everywhere. Next time those assholes decide to let someone

bleed out, they need to do in their own damn car instead of mine.”

The dark blood staining the carpet inside the limo contrasts sharply against the pristine exterior. It’s a sickening sight that makes my stomach churn, the thick, metallic scent of blood overwhelming my senses. I can almost taste the coppery tang in my mouth, as if the blood were pooling around me.

Leroy tosses one end of a big blue plastic tarp to me, and we spread it out on the floor of the limo.

“What’s the purpose of this?” I ask. “The blood is still on the carpet. All we’re doing is covering it up.”

“There’s no reason to smear that DNA shit around anymore than necessary,” Leroy replies. “We should contain the mess until I can thoroughly clean the carpet.”

“What’s all this other stuff in here?” I ask. There’s a large assortment of shovels, bleach, a sharp hatchet, and even a chain saw piled on the limo’s leather seats.

“I watch a lot of crime shows on TV, so I knew what to buy,” Leroy replies. “Don’t worry, I’ve covered every angle.”

“Oh shit,” Seven says, peeking over my shoulder into the limo. “We’re in big ass trouble now. What if we get stopped by the police? What’s with the barrel in the front seat?”

“Have you never watched CSI or Breaking Bad?” Leroy asks with an irritated huff. “You always need a barrel for something when there’s a dead body to get rid of. I thought I’d better buy one just in case, to dissolve the body parts in acid or something.”

“Surely you didn’t buy acid?” Seven asks, horrified.

“Hell no, I didn’t buy acid,” Leroy replies. “Only because they didn’t have it in stock. We’ll figure out something when we get there.”

“Why do I get the feeling you’re actually enjoying this?” Seven asks him.

“You should be grateful I know what to do,” Leroy replies. “Hurry up and climb inside so we can go. Kit and Vulcan are waiting for us.”

“I’m ready.” I toss the bag of extra clothes inside and climb into the limo with Seven right behind me.

“Don’t drive too fast,” Seven tells Leroy. “We can’t afford to get pulled over by the police. Not with all these suspicious tools and blood. Take it slow and easy.”

“I’ll drive smooth as a baby’s butt,” Leroy replies.

“Did you have any trouble at the hardware store buying all this stuff?” Seven asks. “Didn’t you think it would look strange for a man to buy shovels and saws in the middle of the night? I’m sure you’re on the store’s cameras loading up a shopping cart.”

“You worry too much,” Leroy says. “I already thought of that. I chatted up the girl at the checkout when she asked what I was doing. I told her I worked for you, and all this stuff was for your show. She believed me. I promised to get your autograph for her, though, so I’ll have to make good on that.”

Seven nods. “That’s a smart alibi because I really could use all this stuff, except maybe the bleach.”

Leroy chuckles to himself. “I knew you’d appreciate the story. I told her to keep it hush-hush because of your new show on New Year’s Day. I said you didn’t want anyone to find out about the tricks you’ll be doing. She felt special

thinking that I'd let her in on a secret. She won't say anything."

"You did good, Leroy," I say. "Thank you."

Seven moves closer to me and puts his arm around me. He tugs me against his body, and I snuggle closer to him. The night has been exhausting and the worse part isn't over yet.

"Are you holding up, okay?" he whispers against the top of my head. "Everything that happened tonight is a lot to take in."

"I'm okay," I reply. "Shook up, for sure. For the Russians to have found me is one thing, but nothing compared to what happened with Vulcan. I'm very upset, but I'm not the type of girl to fall to pieces when bad things happen. Don't worry about me, because I'm fine and can handle most anything that comes my way."

"When we arrive at Vulcan's, I want you to stay in the limo," Seven says, tightening his grip around my shoulders. "I'll tell the guys to come over to talk with you."

"Surely you don't want me to sit helplessly in the car? No way."

"You shouldn't see Ivan's body," he says. "It's not something you'll forget easily."

"That's an understatement," Leroy pipes up to say from the driver's seat. "I puked my guts out when a piece of his ear got stuck on my shoe. When Kit shot him, his head exploded like a pumpkin. Kaboom! Brains, eyeballs and goo everywhere. Actually, I'd better stop talking about it, or I'll have to pull over and throw up again."

"Damn Leroy!" Seven says. "Will you please stop comparing his head to a pumpkin exploding?"

“I can handle it,” I say. “I’m not sitting in the car while you’re disposing of his body. You killed him to protect me. The least I can do is try to help.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re stubborn?” Seven asks.

“Not really,” I reply. “No one ever paid enough attention to me to call me anything except another mouth to feed. You’re all in this mess because of me. I can pull my own weight. Don’t try to protect me, okay?”

“That’s something I can’t promise,” he says. “But you’re right. It’ll take all of us pulling together to get through this. It’s only a matter of time until the Russian mafia connects us to Ivan’s disappearance. Maybe they already have. We should plan and be prepared for when they come for us.”

“How do you prepare for war with the Russian mafia?” I ask.

“That’s a good damn question,” he replies. “I wish I could talk to Dad. He could advise us what to do. Unfortunately, it’s not as if I can pick up the phone to call him. Even if he called me from the prison, our conversation wouldn’t be private.”

“Don’t take the chance,” I say. “And we already have enough people involved in this situation without dragging your father into it, too. Didn’t you say he has a parole hearing soon? Don’t jeopardize that.”

“You’re right,” Seven says. “I can’t involve him. It’s too risky.”

Leroy turns the limo off the main highway and onto the dirt road leading to Vulcan’s RV. The last time I was here, I tried to escape from Vulcan in the dark while coyotes were stalking me.

So much has happened since then.

I can't imagine running *from* Vulcan now, when all I want to do is run *to* him.

In some weird way, it feels as if my true authentic life began the day they kidnapped me from the casino. Up to that point, I'd been plodding along with no true purpose or feeling of belonging anywhere.

Now my home is not a physical place.

Home is where these three men are.

My heart starts beating fast when Leroy pulls the limo to a stop. Up ahead in the glow of the RV's floodlights, I spot Vulcan and Kit standing there waiting for us. A flood of conflicting emotions washes over me.

Before Seven can stop me, I jerk the door open and jump out. The night is chilly, and the wind whips through my hair as I leap from the limo and sprint towards Vulcan. As I draw closer, I can make out the lines of worry etched into his face, his dark eyes filled with a storm of emotions.

I'm so fucking furious with him right now. How dare he take a chance with his life when he has so much to live for?

Before I realize what I'm doing, I slap his face as hard as I can, the shocking sound of the impact ringing out loudly in the silence.

My breathing comes out in ragged gasps, my chest tight with a mixture of anger and fear. My heart races, pounding in my ears as I prepare to strike Vulcan again, my hand shaking with the force of my emotions. The air around us crackles with tension, a palpable energy that threatens to consume us all.

Vulcan remains perfectly still, his expression inscrutable, not flinching away from the next potential blow.

It's in that moment, as I stand there with my hand raised, that I realize just how much these men mean to me.

And how much I'm willing to fight for them, no matter what the cost.

Vulcan stands there silently watching me, his eyes giving away nothing, his arms at his side. When he doesn't react or do anything to protect himself, my eyes unexpectedly flood with tears, and I slap him hard again.

"Dammit, Vulcan!" I shout.

I'm so angry at him, and so damn terrified *for* him.

The thought of losing him scares me more than I can believe. I'm trying my best to snap him out of whatever hell he's in, but he's just standing there, staring at me.

Why the fuck isn't he trying to protect himself?

VULCAN

I failed Jade, and she knows it.

I've been dreading this moment since Kit killed the Russian.

When Jade and I were in the cave, I swore to be her executioner if anyone dared to harm her, and I meant it. I wanted and needed that honor more than anything.

Instead, I fucked up everything.

I've let her down and now feel nothing but shame.

It's taking everything in me to return her gaze without flinching, but I won't back away from her anger or disgust with me. I wasn't surprised when the first thing she did was run over and slap me. Anything she wants to throw at me, I deserve tenfold.

Any punishment, any pain.

Anything as long as she doesn't banish me from her life forever.

The heat of her anger radiates off in waves. Her face is a beautiful storm, her eyes flashing with anger. Her skin, usually smooth and flawless, is marked by the tear tracks that streak down her cheeks.

Seven and Kit stand nearby, their expressions a mix of concern and wariness. Their eyes flicker between Jade and me, assessing the situation and preparing to step in if necessary. Their bodies are tense, muscles coiled and ready for action, but they maintain their distance, allowing Jade to vent her fury.

When I don't react to her first slap, she slaps me again full force. I stand perfectly still, realizing she's hitting me, but not registering the pain. I won't stop her or move away. I'll take whatever she dishes out.

Suddenly, her beautiful brown eyes flood with fresh tears, and they overflow down her cheeks. My heart squeezes tight at the sight, and I can barely breathe.

Why is she crying?

I've never seen Jade cry. Even when we kidnapped her, she never showed weakness.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" she screams at me. "Why aren't you stopping me? Or protecting your face? Damn it, Vulcan! Say something! What is wrong with you?"

"I'm sorry," I manage to say. "I failed you."

"Failed me?" she yells. "What the hell are you talking about?" She whirls around and points at the man missing half his head, still sitting tied to the chair. "Him? You think I give a fuck who pulled the trigger to take him out? I care about you, dammit! You're scaring the crap out of me, and I'm so damn mad at you right now. I can't believe you played Russian Roulette with real bullets. What the actual fuck, Vulcan! What's going on in your head?"

Jade screams at me, her voice raw with emotion. Her anger and fear fill the air like a thick fog, suffocating and

inescapable. My own shame mixes with her emotions, creating a bitter cocktail of misery that threatens to overwhelm me.

She chokes on a sob when I don't answer, and I can't take it any longer. I was willing to let her punch me all night, but her tears are more than I can handle. They're twisting up my insides and all I want to do is make them stop.

I'll do anything.

I reach for Jade and grab her at the same moment she reaches out for me. Our bodies collide with an almost magnetic force, her softness melting against me. The warmth of her in my arms is both comforting and agonizing, a stark reminder of what I stand to lose if I can't fix things between us.

Jade clings desperately to me, her body shaking as she sobs. Wrapping my arms tightly around her, I lean down to press my face against her neck, inhaling deeply to drink in her sweet smell.

I hug her tightly, making a silent vow to myself and to her. I will do whatever it takes to protect her and to prove my worth once more.

In that moment, the world around us seems to fade away, leaving only the two of us in our shared hell. Time seems to stand still as we cling to one another, our hearts beating in unison.

"Forgive me, baby," I mutter hoarsely into her warm skin. "I vowed to protect you, and I didn't."

She wraps her fingers tightly in my hair and holds me close. "The only thing you need to be sorry about is almost killing yourself. Nothing else matters, Vulcan. If you die, you'll take me with you. I'm so scared by what you did.

Please, please swear to me you'll never play Russian Roulette again ever. I'll never ask another thing from you if you'll only promise me this."

I draw back my head to look down at her. Tracing her tears with my thumb, I wipe them away, one by one.

"That's why you're mad at me?" I ask. "For playing Russian Roulette?"

Her teary eyes grow troubled. "You weren't playing," she replies. "And it wasn't a harmless game. Those were real bullets, and you almost killed yourself. Promise me right now, you'll never play that game again." She grips my head in both hands to force me to gaze into her eyes. "I need to hear you say it. Please, Vulcan. Do this for me. I can't lose you now."

Slowly, I nod back at her. "I won't do that again. I give you my word."

She lets out another sob, and I bury my head in her hair. "Please don't cry, baby. You're killing me. I know I fucked up. Don't cry. I'll make this right, I swear. Tell me what I need to do to fix this."

She snuffles and pulls back to wipe her face. "I'm holding you to your word. I need you to stay alive. We just found each other. You can't leave me now."

"I'll never leave you," I tell her. "Never."

"Okay, I believe you," she says, still sniffing. "This conversation is far from over, but we've got work to do. The sun will be up in hours, and we need to get rid of Ivan."

She reluctantly steps out of my arms and walks over to Kit. "Are you okay?" she asks him, gently rubbing his arm. "You saved us all and I'm so very grateful to you." Wrapping her arms around his waist, she gives him a big hug. "Thank you

for killing Ivan and stopping that stupid game. Seven told me what happened.”

“I’m okay,” he says, holding her against his chest and stroking her hair. “He deserved to die, and I don’t regret killing him. And you don’t need to thank me. It was either him or Vulcan, so there wasn’t a choice.”

“You’re really okay with killing someone?” she asks, tilting her head to look up to search his face. “You wouldn’t harm anything.”

“I don’t believe in harming or killing defenseless animals,” he replies. “My beliefs and rules don’t apply to evil humans. To be honest, it felt good to take him out. If his death means there’s one less person in this world who wants to harm you, then so be it. We didn’t have any idea of where you were or what was going on at the time. The only thing I knew was that he sure as hell wasn’t going to tell us anything useful. Ivan had to die. It was the only way. He was a threat to you alive.”

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I shouldn’t have gone back to Platinum without you. I fully intended to be back by the time you returned home. I found Natasha and they wouldn’t let me leave.”

“How did you get away then?” he asks.

“It’s a long story and one that we don’t have time for right now,” she replies. “Just know that everything is okay with Natasha. We’ll talk about it later.” She steps away from Kit and goes over to stare down at Ivan. “Even with his head blown off, I can still recognize this bastard from the boat. He tried to kill me and would’ve if I wasn’t able to swim for hours. Thank you all for protecting me. Now, how do we get rid of him?”

JADE

“We need to bury him in the desert before the sun comes up,” Vulcan says. “I own several acres here, so it’s the best place to put him. If we move him anywhere else, there’s always a chance of someone seeing us.”

“I don’t like the idea of him being buried on your land,” I tell him. “What if the body is discovered at some point? It would lead straight back to you.”

“That’s a risk I’m willing to take,” he says. “We don’t have the luxury of time. We need to bury him now.”

Leroy walks over to take a seat at the picnic table. I notice he takes great care not to walk close to the body or even to glance at it. I understand why. Ivan is in gruesome shape, and I’m glad to possess a strong stomach.

“I bought a bunch of supplies at the hardware store,” Leroy says. “The first thing y’all need to do is cut off his head and hands. That way, he can’t be identified if his body is found later. There are handsaws and a chainsaw in the limo. Before you ask, I’ll tell you right now that I’m not helping. This is your mess. You clean it up.”

“Are you sure that’s necessary?” I ask, frowning at him. “What are we supposed to do with his head and hands? Bury

them somewhere else? Feed them to the coyotes? Throw them in the fire?”

“We don’t have time to cut him up,” Vulcan says. “Did you bring the tarp and shovels? That’s all we’ll need to do the job. It’ll take all of us to load him up and carry him. I’m thinking a couple of miles back into the desert should be far enough.”

“Yeah, I got the equipment,” Leroy replies. “And several of those headlamp thingies that miners wear on their heads, so you don’t have to hold a flashlight in the dark.”

“Good thinking,” Vulcan says. “Jade, go get the tarp while we figure out the best way to load him up. Once we get him on there, we’ll each grab a side to carry him out of here.”

“There are extra tarps in the front seat,” Leroy says to me. “Leave the one down on the floorboard in the back. I’ll toss it later.”

I hurry to the limo and search through the bag of items Leroy bought. Quickly, I grab the tarps, gloves, and the headlamps.

Seven meets me halfway. “How are you holding up?” he asks. “I hated seeing you upset. Are you sure you’ll be alright? I really think it’s better if you stay here in the limo or in Vulcan’s RV. Let us handle this.”

“I’m okay now,” I reply. “Don’t worry about me. It was a lot to digest, that’s all. Take this stuff and I’ll go back for the shovels.”

He doesn’t argue with me and takes everything. I pull the four shovels out of the limo and struggle to carry them. They’re awkward and big, but I’ll manage. If they’re willing to carry the man they killed to protect me for two miles, then

the least I can do is carry the shovels to dig the hole to bury him in.

“Jade! What are you doing?” Kit asks, running over to help me. “Give me those shovels. You might trip over them in the dark and hurt yourself. We’ve had enough tragedy for one night, and don’t need you to get hurt on top of everything else.”

“I can’t stand around and do nothing,” I tell him.

“You can walk with us to keep us company,” he replies. “That’s enough.”

Vulcan and Seven have already laid Ivan on the large tarp. Kit places the shovels on top of his body.

“Jade, grab some gloves and help us wrap him up,” Vulcan instructs, his voice barely more than a whisper. I’m happy to help, pulling on a pair of rubber gloves and taking my place beside them. The cold, lifeless weight of Ivan sends a shudder down my spine as we work together to wrap him up.

“Everyone put on a headlight,” Vulcan says. “Watch your step and don’t twist an ankle because I don’t want to carry any of you back. Jade, stick close by me.” He glances over at Leroy, who is screwing around with his headlamp, trying to figure out how to strap it on. “Are you coming with us?”

“Nah, I don’t think so,” Leroy replies. “I’ll wait here for you and hold down the fort.”

“There’s a pack of coyotes that come around here at night,” Vulcan warns. “Jade ran into them when she tried to escape. They’ll be smelling blood. Don’t hurt them if they show up. I mean it. Leave them alone.”

“Coyotes?” Leroy says. “In that case, I’ll come along with you. You might need my expert advice on something,

anyway.” He pushes up from his chair and lumbers over to join us. I step into place behind Vulcan and reach down to grab a piece of the tarp, too.

“Everyone ready?” Vulcan asks. “Let’s get this shit over with.”

Our hands grip the fabric tightly, the tension in our bodies evident as we struggle to lift the dead weight. The effort required to carry Ivan’s heavy body is immense, our muscles straining and aching with each step we take.

We begin silently walking through the desert behind Vulcan. The night is pitch black with only a sliver of moonlight, our headlamps barely lighting the path.

It’s slow going since Vulcan is the only one who knows the way, while the rest of us can’t see more than two feet in front of us. A couple of times, I stumble on loose rocks, and he quickly reaches around with one hand to steady me.

I never could’ve imagined being in a scenario like this in my wildest dreams.

The day started off enjoying a spinach drink with Kit in his kitchen. Now here we all are, hours later, trudging along in the dark carrying a dead body between us.

Vulcan’s face, illuminated by the headlamp’s dim glow, is etched with determination. Sweat beads on his forehead, despite the chilly breeze.

The tarp, with its gruesome cargo, shifts with every step we take, and the metallic scent of blood lingers in the air. The tension in the group is palpable, a heavy burden weighing us down as much as the dead body we carry.

Kit, his headlamp casting a focused beam on the ground, navigates the rocky terrain with caution. Seven, on the other

hand, keeps his gaze forward, his jaw set, and his expression determined. The air is thick with uncomfortable tension. Finally, I can't take the silence anymore.

"I'm sorry, guys," I say. "This is all my fault."

"No, it's not," they all start talking at the same time.

"It was my stupid ass plan to kidnap you in the first place," Seven argues. "This is my fault because I talked everyone else into going along with me. I was the one who set things into motion."

"Don't apologize for that!" Kit says. "Meeting Jade is the best thing that's happened to us. I regret putting her through a kidnapping and holding her captive, but not for anything else."

"I still feel like it's my fault for not being able to make Ivan talk," Vulcan says. "Even if he didn't know where Jade was, he knew who was still looking for her. I blew the interrogation and now we have a dead body to deal with."

"There was always going to be a dead body for us to deal with," Seven reminds him. "Ivan was never leaving here alive. We all realize that now. He sealed his fate the moment he broke into Jade's car."

"Well, I don't feel guilty about a goddamn thing," Leroy says, his breathing labored. "Can we rest a minute? I'm out of breath. This dude is a heavy motherfucker."

"We're almost there," Vulcan says. "Only a little bit farther if you can hold on a few more minutes."

"Okay," Leroy replies, huffing and puffing. "Why didn't we think to bring water bottles? What if the sun comes up before we get him in the ground?"

“It won’t,” Vulcan says. “Not if we hurry. Keep moving your ass.”

We walk another ten minutes and then he stops. “We’ll bury him here,” he says.

“Thank God,” Leroy says with a relieved sigh.

We lower Ivan to the ground with a collective sigh. We’ve carried him far enough from the RV that discovery seems unlikely, but the task ahead still feels daunting.

“Everyone grab a shovel and start digging,” Vulcan says, his voice a mixture of determination and weariness. “We need to make the hole at least six feet deep, so it’ll take some time.”

We pick up our shovels and begin to dig, the sound of metal striking the hard, compacted dirt echoing through the silent desert. We don’t stop, the rhythmic sound of the shovels cutting into the earth mixed with our labored breaths.

The hole deepens, the mound of displaced dirt growing larger with each passing minute. An hour passes, and the hole is finally deep enough. We carefully lower his body into the hole.

“Fuck you, bastard!” Vulcan mutters, standing over the grave. “I wish I could’ve killed you with my bare hands. Rot in hell, motherfucker!” With one last look at his lifeless form, he throws the first shovelful of dirt on top of Ivan’s body. Stepping back, he waves me closer. “Your turn to do the honors,” he says. I throw a shovelful of dirt in, and the others quickly start filling in the hole with me.

As the first faint light of dawn begins to break on the horizon, we finish our grim task, and Ivan’s body disappears beneath the desert floor. When we’re done, Vulcan smooths the dirt to blend it in with the surroundings.

The landscape now appears undisturbed, its secrets hidden beneath a layer of sand and rocks. Exhausted and dirty, we trudge back to the RV, each lost in thought about the hidden grave we leave behind.

KIT

“**T**he sun is almost up, and we need to take Jade to a safer location,” Seven says when we reach the RV. “Igor is still out there somewhere. She’s in more danger now than she was before.”

“My ranch is the safest place for her,” I say. “I’d planned to put in extra security measures there anyway for the animals. I’ll call the security company today and have them come out to add more cameras.”

“Please stop talking about me as if I’m not standing right here,” Jade says, crossing her arms in a defiant stance. “I understand your concerns for my safety, but I don’t think we should leave Vulcan here alone. I’m staying here with him today.”

I glance toward the RV where Vulcan has stepped inside to grab water bottles for everyone.

“No fucking way,” Seven says. “There’s no way in hell we’re leaving you here after the state he was in last night. We won’t even consider it.”

“I can take care of myself,” Jade says. “And Vulcan would never hurt me.”

“No, not intentionally, he wouldn’t,” I tell her. “But you weren’t here last night to witness what happened and honestly, I’m glad you weren’t. He unraveled into an insane state of mind, and we could barely drag him back out of it. You need to trust us on this. You can’t stay here.”

“Then Vulcan has to come back with us,” she says. “We can’t leave him here alone. *I* can’t leave him.”

“Stop worrying about me.” Vulcan steps out of the RV with a six-pack of beer, instead of water. “I’m fine. No one needs to hang around here to babysit me. You’re all overreacting. I lost my shit with Ivan because I was worried sick about Jade. That’s all. It’s not like I’ve gone completely off the deep end.”

“Oh, really?” Seven says sarcastically. “You could’ve fooled me.”

“Jade’s fine, I’m fine, Ivan’s dead and buried, and we’ve all got plenty of shit to do today,” Vulcan continues. “All this hovering around me is starting to piss me off. We need to act normal today. Like nothing out of the ordinary has happened. Go to work and keep to your regular routines.”

“I’m not leaving you here all by yourself,” Jade says firmly.

Vulcan stares at her a moment before speaking. “As much as I’d love you to stay, for the time being, you’re safer at Kit’s. You should get some rest after being up all night digging a grave. I’ll be busy cleaning up the blood and any spare body parts lying around, and you shouldn’t be involved in that. We don’t have time to waste talking about this. All of you need to get out of here. Go change into the clean clothes you brought, and I’ll burn the clothes we’re wearing now.”

“He’s right,” I say. “We should keep to our normal routines and not draw suspicion in any way. Let’s load up the limo and head back to Vegas. Leroy can drop us off at my place and I’ll bury the shovels somewhere on the ranch.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Vulcan agrees. “Before you leave, I need my gun back. Where is it?”

“Hell no!” I reply, shocked he would even ask. “You’re not getting the gun back today. I can’t believe you would ask me to give it to you. Have you lost your mind for good?”

“You realize I have plenty of other guns, right? What’s one more?”

“Where?” I ask.

“Everywhere,” Vulcan replies. “Do you think I’d live out here alone in the desert without guns hidden everywhere?”

I let out a long sigh. Of course he does.

“Besides, that gun is special, and it means a lot to me,” Vulcan explains. “If you won’t give it back to me, then give it to Jade. I taught her how to use it, and I’d feel better knowing she has a way to protect herself when she’s alone. Are you okay with that, Jade?”

“Sure,” she replies. “I’ll keep your gun with me. Thank you. I will feel safer being armed.”

A look passes between them I can’t quite decipher.

“Be careful with it and remember everything I told you,” Vulcan says. “Everything.”

She nods back at him. “I will,” she says.

Vulcan goes over to start a fire in his pit while we all quickly strip off and change into the clothes Jade brought for

us.

“Here you go, Leroy,” Jade says, handing him the sweat suit she brought for him and a pair of sneakers. “I brought you a change of clothes, too. I found them in Seven’s room at Kit’s house. I hope they fit.”

Leroy snatches them from her and heads up the metal steps to the RV. “Is it necessary to burn our clothes? I’m wearing one of my favorite outfits.”

“You’re the one who said we should burn them,” Seven reminds him. “Something to do with DNA.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Leroy says wearily. “We’d better burn everything we can, but I’m not stopping anywhere on the way back wearing this stupid red sweatsuit. And you owe me a new set of clothes, Seven, so add that to my next paycheck. A pair of new shoes too, since these have smashed body parts on the bottom of them.”

We can still hear him grumbling to himself inside the RV while he changes clothes. When he returns, he’s carrying an unopened bag of marshmallows.

“Hey Vulcan! You got any chocolate? Or graham crackers?” He holds up the marshmallows. “I was thinking smores might taste good for breakfast. We might as well make some if you’re building a fire. I’m starving after all that grave digging.”

“Fuck no! I don’t have ingredients to make smores!” Vulcan mutters. “This isn’t a goddamn picnic. If you want to roast the marshmallows, just poke a stick through them and catch them on fire until they melt.”

“Alright,” Leroy says, squatting down beside the fire. “That’ll work. Hand me a stick. You haven’t started burning

our clothes yet, have you? I'd hate to think my marshmallows were getting flavored by burning blood and guts."

"No, I'll wait until you're gone." Vulcan shakes his head. "Hurry up, would you? We don't have all day to finish this."

Jade walks over and grabs the bag of marshmallows out of Leroy's hands. She sticks one on the end of a stick and hands it to me, then does the same for Seven. "We should have a quick bite to eat," she says. "It's been a long night and I'm hungry, too. Grab a spot around the fire, fellows. We should try to end this hellish night on a positive note."

Five minutes later, we're all eating melted marshmallows off the end of our sticks as if we're on a summer camping trip. Jade laughs and reaches over to wipe the corner of Vulcan's lips with her thumbs where the marshmallow has stuck to his face. He smiles back at her, and I can't help feeling relieved.

He'll be okay; we all will. After tonight's ordeal, one thing remains clear: our unbreakable loyalty makes us stronger together.

JADE

After devouring an entire bag of marshmallows, we load up the dirty shovels. Seven and I carefully climb into the back of the limo with the shovels while Kit sits up front with Leroy.

Once we're on the main road, I lean my head against Seven's shoulder and quickly fall asleep.

"Wake up sleepyhead," he whispers into my ear when we arrive at Kit's ranch. "We're here."

I groggily sit up and wipe my eyes with the back of my hand. I'm exhausted and am sure the guys are too. Unfortunately, they're all expected to show up for their jobs tonight, while I can rest. I feel an enormous amount of guilt for everything I've put them through. There's a lot of making up for me to do.

Leroy pulls the limo into Kit's huge garage, and they unload the shovels for Kit to hide later. Seven tugs me close for one last hug. "You'll be safe here," he says. "I'll call you tonight to check in on you. Try to get some rest today."

I nod at him and move away to give Leroy room to back out of the garage. Kit unlocks the kitchen door and waves me inside in front of him. "Are you hungry?" he asks. "Can I fix you anything to eat?"

“No.” I give him a slight smile. “The only thing I need is a shower to wash the dirt and dust off me, then a soft pillow and a bed.”

“Same here,” he says. “If you need anything, yell for me. I’m always right down the hallway.” He leans down and kisses me gently on the lips before folding me into his arms in a comforting embrace. “Don’t worry. Everything will be okay. We’ll protect you and keep you safe.”

“I’m worried about all of you, not me.”

“Don’t be,” he says. “We’re big boys and can take care of ourselves. We’re in this together now.” He kisses the top of my head and releases me. “Go shower and get some rest. No one can hurt you here. Where is Vulcan’s gun?”

I press my hand against the purse that holds Vulcan’s gun. “I’ll keep it close to me at all times.”

“Are you comfortable using it, if you need to?” he asks.

“Absolutely.”

“If Ivan’s brother finds you, don’t hesitate to use it, because he won’t hesitate to kill you.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t,” I assure him.

“Okay, go take a shower and I’ll do the same,” he says, clearly hesitant to let me go.

I slowly pull out of his arms and head toward my bathroom. Quickly, I strip off my clothes and step under the hot water. I lose track of time as I stand there under the spray, washing the dust, dirt, and blood from my skin and hair.

When I’m finally clean, I turn off the water and reach for one of the thick, plush towels hanging on a rack. But a distant rumbling noise stops me in my tracks.

Is that a motorcycle?

In a surge of adrenaline, I hastily wrap myself in a short, white robe. My bare feet pad quickly down the long hallway. I unlock and throw open the front door.

Vulcan's motorcycle is already parked in front of the house. He climbs off and glances up at me standing on the porch. I run straight to him, and he grabs me, lifting me off the ground with his muscular arms.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, drawing back to look up at his face.

"When all of you left me, I realized I don't want to be alone anymore." His anguished words, honest and laced with unmasked pain, drive a knife straight into my heart. For him to admit he needs us is everything.

I raise my hands to his face, my fingertips tracing the rough stubble on his cheeks, locking onto his dark, wounded eyes. "You'll never be alone again," I vow.

In a swift motion, he pulls me closer, his fingers threading into the damp hair at the nape of my neck, our lips colliding in a deep, intoxicating kiss. His hands roam feverishly, slipping under my robe to cup my bare skin, and his low growl sends a thrilling shiver down my spine. "Bedroom now," he says.

His command has me instinctively wrapping my legs around his waist, and he turns to carry me up the front steps of the house. Suddenly, he abruptly halts, causing me to glance over my shoulder in confusion.

There, in the softly illuminated doorway, stands Kit. He's silently watching us, the hurt visible in his eyes. Vulcan hesitates only a moment before continuing up the steps with me wrapped tight around him.

When we reach the doorway, Kit's hand shoots out, landing on Vulcan's broad shoulder, stopping him. "I'm glad you're here," Kit says, and Vulcan nods back. Something deep and intense passes unspoken between them. "Stay as long as you want," Kit continues. "My house is yours. I mean that."

The expression on Kit's face says everything. He desires me for himself, but he's willing to sacrifice his own needs for Vulcan's happiness.

He's a true one-of-a-kind prince of a man and he's mine.

If I choose him.

Instantly, I know what to do.

The answer is clear, and has always been there, lurking in the shadows, waiting for me to see it.

Reaching up, I squeeze Kit's hand, still grasping Vulcan's shoulder in a firm grip.

"Can Kit come too?" I ask.

VULCAN

Jade's question lingers in the air, stunning us all into silence.

I'm not sure she realizes exactly what she's suggesting when the question slips out. I don't dare look at Kit, knowing he's probably equally shocked.

And also immensely relieved.

"Hell yeah, Kit can come," I reply, chuckling. "He can come as many fucking times as he can get it up. I'm game if he is. Lead the way to the bedroom, brother. The question is how many times we can make you come, baby? It's double or nothing for you this time around."

In an instant, the mood between us changes, and it's *on*.

"Oh, I'm definitely in," Kit says, grinning broadly, the relief evident on his face. "No way am I turning this down. Your bedroom or mine, Jade?"

"Mine," she replies. "Since I have that huge, awesome shower stall in my bathroom and Vulcan's still covered in grime." She reaches up to wipe the dirt off my forehead. "You're not crawling under my clean sheets smelling like a gravedigger, buddy."

"I wouldn't dream of it," I reply, hiding a smile.

Kit walks ahead of us and opens the door leading to Jade's suite. Without asking, he hurries straight to the massive shower in her bathroom and reaches in to adjust the numerous water jets.

By the time I step inside the bathroom and put Jade down, he's already stripped off his shirt. Jade pulls my head down to give me a long, slow kiss, then reaches for the tail of my shirt to tug it loose from my jeans.

"In the shower now," she orders. "I'm scrubbing you clean."

She steps between us and drops her robe on the tile floor. Her skin is still slightly damp from her shower and glistens under the bathroom lights. The chill of the air hits her, causing her rosy pink nipples to swell and harden.

Taking a step toward Kit, she reaches up to trail her hands over his bare chest muscles. "I'm happy you agreed to join us," she murmurs to him, her voice barely a whisper above the water running in the shower. "I want us all together."

He doesn't lift his hands to touch her or move a muscle as she reaches for his belt buckle and unfastens it. She drags the zipper down and slides her hand inside. Kit sucks in a breath as she pulls his huge cock out and strokes it slowly.

"Fuck," he mutters through clenched teeth.

"I love how hard you already are for me," she says. "Strip and get in the shower."

I should be mad or jealous seeing my girl stroke another man's dick, but fuck...I'm intensely turned on. I can't avert my eyes from them. Watching her stroke Kit's cock is hot as hell.

Jade glances over her shoulder at me. “Does this bother you?” she asks, purposely giving Kit’s dick another slow stroke up and down to test me. “Speak up. If it does, tell me. Now or never.”

I strip off my shirt, drop my jeans and underwear to the floor, and kick them out of the way. Moving up behind her, I tug her ass against my hard cock while I reach around to cup her breasts with both hands. She’s sandwiched tight between mine and Kit’s bodies.

“Here’s your answer,” I whisper in her ear, before nipping her earlobe. “Does my cock feel upset to you?” I ask, rubbing my hard erection between her ass cheeks.

“Maybe hot and bothered,” she says, smiling at me over her shoulder. “Definitely not upset.”

She drops her hand from Kit and moves away from both of us to step towards the shower, her backlit silhouette painting a tantalizing picture against the frosted glass. The cascade of water from the shower head drenches her instantly, her hair darkening and sticking to her back. The sight is sexy, an invitation for Kit and me.

Turning to face us, she crooks her finger in a beckoning motion. “What are you waiting for?” she asks, her voice dropping to a sultry tone. “The hot water will run out if you both keep standing there. I hope you boys can keep up with me.”

I glance at Kit and see the same raging desire as mine mirrored in his eyes. We’re in sync, united by a common goal; to ensure our girl is pleased beyond her wildest dreams.

And to make sure she never regrets this decision.

As I step into the spacious shower, a wave of hot steam washes over me, the heat penetrating my skin and loosening my tense muscles. The scent of Jade's shampoo becomes stronger, sweeter, intoxicating.

Her eyes sparkle with mischief and anticipation when she extends a soapy hand towards me. I move into her reach, allowing her to draw me under the shower stream with her, the water coursing down her curvy body.

Kit steps in behind her, his large hands gliding over her wet skin caressing, and exploring. She sighs, a soft, satisfied sound. Kit gently washes her back, his hand smoothing and lathering the soft, soapy cloth over her shoulder blades and down her spine.

The shower fills with hot steam, billowing and fogging up the glass enclosure. The world outside no longer exists; it's just the three of us here. There's no awkwardness, no missteps. Instead, there's an unspoken understanding, a shared rhythm.

Everything feels right.

Kit's hands roam all over her from the back to the front, sponging in between and underneath her breasts, slipping his hands in between her thighs.

Jade grabs another cloth and runs it with equal care over every inch of me. Her touch is soft, yet firm. As I let her wash away the grime of the day, my body involuntarily shudders and stiffens in response to her touch. Her hand strokes my chest, circling my nipples, her fingertips tracing the outline of my tattoos.

Turning her to face me, I reach for her chin and lift it towards me, tilting her head back to meet my lips. With a trail

of soft kisses, I move from her forehead down to her cheeks, and the sweet curve of her neck.

Kit's hands slide around her hips and down her thighs, washing her stomach and her hips. Jade moans softly as Kit's hands go down on either side of her ass cheeks and lower in between her legs. She leans back against my chest and her eyes close, her breathing coming in short, shallow pants.

"My turn," I say, taking the cloth from her. First working up a lather, I start with Jade's arms, letting my fingers glide down the smooth skin. She tilts her head back, letting the water rush through her hair, and sighs deeply. The sight of water cascading down her neck and tracing a path between her breasts is an image I'm sure neither Kit nor I will ever forget.

Slowly, she turns around in my arms. "I'm not finished with you yet," she says in a low voice. "You're still a dirty boy and I need to clean you up."

"I thought you liked dirty boys," I tease.

"Oh, I do. I love a man with a dirty mouth," she replies, smiling up at me as she trails the soapy cloth down my abs. "Not desert sand and blood dirty."

When the cloth skims over my dick and then goes lower around my balls, I suck in a breath. I'd love nothing more than to shove her against the tile wall, and fuck her raw, but this time we're taking it slow.

I'm not alone in this.

There's a lot to consider here with Kit in the picture, too. I've never been a guy to share a girl, so we're stepping carefully through new territory, learning our way.

I've fucked up enough in the last twenty-four hours to last a lifetime, and I sure as hell don't want to screw this up, too.

So, I'll grit my teeth, and let her set the pace as goddamn slow as she wants.

Even if it kills me, and it might, the way my dick is throbbing.

Jade slowly continues to wash each of our bodies with the sudsy cloth, taking her ever-loving, fucking time while both of our cocks are straining, rock hard. No doubt she knows what she's doing, driving us insane, making us blind with want for her. When she's finished lathering us up, she pushes us both under the water jets, letting the water cascade over our heads and down our backs, making sure we're rinsed off.

"Fist your cocks to keep them hard for me while I turn off the water," she says.

"Keeping my dick hard isn't going to be an issue," I reply as I wrap my fingers around my shaft, stroking in long motions.

"Same here," Kit says, closing his big hand around his dick. "I can easily go all night and will. Never worry about us staying hard for you."

Jade reaches out and turns off the faucets. Steam continues to rise as Kit opens the shower door, letting in a rush of cooler air. He steps out and reaches for a large terrycloth towel that he tosses to me.

Jade's long, wet hair is dripping all over the floor and her body. Kit moves close behind her and grabs another towel to dry her off. She turns her head to kiss him as he rubs the towel briskly against her ass and back.

When he's finished, she turns her attention to me. She tosses another soft towel onto the tile floor and kneels on it in

front of me; her face upturned. There's a flicker of heat in her eyes, telling me she likes what she sees.

I sure as fuck do, too. Damn, how I love seeing her on her knees, staring at my dick.

Kit steps back, and towels off while I stand over Jade, my cock hard and ready. Without a word, her hot mouth closes in on the tip and then she takes me deep inside. The sensations rush through me; the warmth of her mouth, the heat of her tongue, the wetness of her saliva.

"Fuck, baby, that feels good," I mutter.

She curls her hand around my shaft and begins to suck me off faster, using her mouth and her hands in tandem. I thread my fingers through her wet hair and surrender to the moment. I allow her to go at her pace, to do whatever she wants, letting her control my pleasure.

And she does so, masterfully.

She works me, sucking hard and bobbing her head up and down, pushing her tongue against me as well, her hands gliding along my shaft, and my balls. Her head bobs faster as her mouth slides up on my shaft, caressing the head of my dick with her lips and tongue. Saliva drips out of her mouth and down her lips.

I glance over at Kit, who is leaning against the bathroom counter, slowly stroking himself, watching her suck my cock. He's clearly enjoying the show.

The familiar sensation builds up in my balls and I know I'm close to coming in her beautiful mouth. "Fuck, I'm going to come."

"Not yet," she says, pulling my dick out of her mouth. "Don't come yet. Not until I say you can."

I can't hold back much longer. I'm too close. I need to let go. Just when I'm about to grab her head and shove my cock down the back of her throat, she gives me the word I was waiting for.

"Now," she moans around my cock, the word barely audible.

That's all I need to hear, and I come, releasing my hot load into her mouth. She eagerly swallows my come, taking it all in, her tongue lapping up every drop, drinking me, devouring every last drop.

I stand perfectly still, watching her do her thing, unable to utter a single word. The sight of her lips wrapped around my cock is the most beautiful sight I've ever seen. She doesn't stop until she's sucked every drop of my come.

When she finally releases me and takes a deep breath, I pull her to her feet. She presses her lips to mine, her mouth open and inviting. I run my fingers through her hair as she kisses me, and I taste myself on her tongue.

Eventually pulling away from me, she moves back to Kit, who has been patiently watching us. "Your turn, big guy," she says to him, reaching over to take his cock in her hand. "Did you think I forgot you? I hope not, because I would never forget about you."

I watch as his hands go to work on her, kneading her breasts and stroking her skin. He kisses her, his tongue pushing inside her mouth, tasting my come like I just did. His hands move to her ass, and he cups her cheeks in each big hand, pulling her against him, pressing her breasts against his chest.

“I want you, Kit,” she says, her voice husky with desire. “I want you to fuck me now.”

“I never imagined you’d want us to share you,” he says. “Are you sure you’re okay with this?”

“Absolutely, I’m okay with it. It’s the only way,” she replies, drawing back to search his face for any doubt. “Right? We’re all together now. This is good. *Very good.*” She presses the palms of her hands against the side of his face, kissing him again and opening her mouth for him.

“Take me to my bed,” she tells him.

In a smooth move, he picks her up and carries her into her bedroom. When he starts to place her on her back, she rolls over instead and gets on her knees.

“I want to fuck both of you at the same time,” she says.

“No argument from me,” Kit says. “Where do you want me?”

“On your back, so I can ride your big cock,” she says. Grabbing his arm, she tugs him down onto the bed, and motions for him to lie on his back.

I can tell from the expression on his face, that he’s not entirely sure how this is all going to work. He’s probably concerned we’ll hurt her, which is a concern of mine as well. Kit is a huge fucking guy with a massive fucking dick. We’ll need to take it slow and easy if we’re doubling up. Especially with this being our first time doing this.

“Kit, lie down on your back,” I tell him. “We’ll double team her. She can ride your cock while I fuck her in the ass. Don’t worry, I’ve got lube in my jacket pocket.”

Jade shoots me a surprised look and laughs. “You brought lube? No surprise there,” she teases me. “You’re always prepared. Were you a boy scout?”

“Definitely never a boy scout. If you’ll remember, I warned you this was coming when I fucked your ass with my gun.” I walk over to my leather jacket and unzip the pocket to retrieve a tube of lube. “Aren’t you glad I came prepared? I doubt Kit keeps lube in the house.”

“Wait! What?” Kit asks, his eyes shooting to mine. “You fucked her in the ass with your gun? What the fuck! What the hell were you thinking?”

“The gun wasn’t loaded,” I explain. “And the barrel of the gun is smaller than my dick.”

“Is that supposed to make it okay? When was this?”

“The day I took her on a helicopter ride.” I reach over to run a hand down Jade’s back and ass. “You loved it, didn’t you, baby? You should’ve seen her, taking my gun deep in her ass like the glorious fucking good girl she is. I’m already hard again just thinking about it. Maybe we’ll do it again sometime.”

“No wonder Seven tried to kill you when you came back,” Kit says. “You deserved to get slugged by him.”

“It’s all water under the bridge now,” I say. “Jade, show him what turns you on, baby. So, he’ll stop worrying. Jade isn’t a fragile doll. Sometimes she likes it hard and rough.”

“He knows I do,” Jade says, running her hands down his chest. “Don’t you, Kit?”

“Is that a fact? Interesting,” I say, cocking an eyebrow at her. “I promise to go slow and easy to make sure we don’t hurt you. If it’s too much, just say the word and we’ll stop. Got it?”

I motion towards Kit, who is lying back against her pillows. “Slide down on his dick and we’ll go from there. This is going to be a tight fit, and we don’t want to hurt you.”

Kit nods at me, grabbing onto her hips as she straddles his legs and slowly lowers herself onto his dick. Her eyes close as she sinks onto him.

“Fuck...you’re huge,” she murmurs. She splays her hands on his chest to steady herself and slowly rises up and down to give him a tease.

“Goddamn! That’s hot, watching you ride him.” I scoot up closer behind her and straddle Kit’s legs as well. I slide my arms around her and cup her breasts, teasing her nipples as she slides up and down. “Do you enjoy fucking him?” Moving my hand down to her clit, I rub it as she moves.

“Oh god, that’s good,” she moans. “I’ll come too soon if you keep doing that. I want you both inside me when I do.”

I blow out a long breath, figuring out the best way to do this. Double teaming isn’t my normal style. “Okay, but we need to take it slow to stretch you out first,” I reply. “There’s no hurry. We’ve got all night.” I place my hand on the small of her back. “Lean forward a little bit.” I grab the tube of lube and squirt a generous portion into my palm. “I’m going to lube you up first to make you nice and slippery.”

She gasps when my hand with the cold lube slides between her ass cheeks. I smear the lube from her pussy stuffed with Kit’s cock to her ass, then coat my dick with it too.

“Damn, that’s cold!” she yelps.

“Sorry,” I tell her, caressing her hip. “I’ll warm you up in just a second.” When she’s lubed up enough, I slide a finger into her ass to test how tight she is. It slips in easily and she

moans when I work a second finger in too. “How does that feel? Good? Think you can take me now?”

“Yes,” she whimpers, instinctively moving again on Kit’s cock. He groans and closes his eyes.

“Once I’m inside your ass, you need to keep still and let us do the moving,” I say. “We’re going to stuff you so fucking full.” I glance over her shoulder at Kit, who is using superhuman willpower to remain perfectly still while Jade is sitting on his cock. “How are you holding up, Kit?”

“Barely,” he grits out. “Every time she moves, it’s goddamn sweet torture.”

“Want me to make you come, big guy?” Jade murmurs, moving on him again.

“Whoa, not yet,” I say. “I want you to feel both of us rock hard inside you. Then we’ll take turns filling you up with our come. Hang on, Kit. Not much longer.”

“Easy for you to say,” he mutters, closing his eyes to help keep his shit together long enough to do this.

I hide a smile, realizing he’s tougher than I am, and holding up much better than I ever could if our situation was reversed.

“Okay, baby, we’re doing this,” I tell her as I push the head of my cock against her anal ring. “I’m going in easy and slow.” Holding my breath, I watch as her asshole opens and stretches around the tip of my cock, inviting me in. “God! I love your beautiful ass so much and I’m going to love fucking it even more. I’ve been fantasizing about this forever.”

She moans when I go in deeper and hit resistance. “Are you okay?” I ask. “Push back against me. Just like you did with my gun. You need to open up for me. I can’t push my

way in.” She obeys without hesitating and rocks back slightly, taking more of me into her. “That’s it. Good girl. Keep rocking back and forth on my cock until you take it all in.”

She works it slowly, gasping each time I go in deeper. Suddenly, she stops moving. “I can’t go any deeper,” she says. “I’m stretched to my limit. I can’t take any more. You’re both so fucking big.”

“Almost there, baby. Just a little more. You can do it. You’re the one in control here, so go at your speed. I can feel Kit’s big cock through your skin. We’re both going to be fucking you, with only your skin separating our cocks.”

“Damn, the thought of that turns me on,” she says. “Is that what you want too, Kit?” she asks. “Is this good for you? Can you feel Vulcan’s cock sliding against you?”

“Hell yes, it all feels fucking amazing,” Kit says. “I’m dying here, trying not to come and make it all be over too soon. Our cocks are side-by-side in you. I can feel it every time he moves.”

“Okay, I can do it,” Jade says, pushing back against me again. “Slide it all the way, Vulcan. I can take it. Give me everything you’ve got.”

That’s the order I was waiting for. I grab her by the hips and push my cock deep into her ass. She gasps out loud and I pull back to drive into her hard again and again. “Fuck, your ass is hot and tight,” I mutter. “So fucking tight. You wouldn’t believe how goddamn good you feel to me. I will never want another woman except you. Ever. No one but you, baby.”

“Oh god,” Kit moans, tightening his hands on her hips to hold her captive for me to pound. “That’s so good. Don’t stop,

keep fucking her, just like that. Jesus Christ! This is fucking fantastic.”

“I’m almost ready to come,” Jade gasps as I increase the speed of my thrusts. “Oh, god, I’m coming,” she yells, leaning forward over Kit’s chest. He grips her tighter, so she won’t slip off.

Her pussy explodes in a series of contractions around Kit’s cock, and I feel every pulse, every tremor. “Holy shit! Can you feel that too, Kit? Fuck!” The sensations are incredible and I’ve completely lost track of where I end, and Kit begins inside her.

“That’s it, baby, that’s our girl,” I say, fucking her ass faster and harder. “Come all over Kit’s cock and then I’m going to fill your ass with my come.”

I thrust one last time and come, spilling hot come deep inside her. My cock throbs inside her ass, pulsing and pumping more come into her as I push against her, over and over. “Oh fuck,” I moan. “Oh fuck. Fuck.”

“Oh my god,” Jade moans. “Your come is burning hot in my ass.”

“Finish off Kit,” I tell her, sliding out of her so she can move on him again. “Ride him hard and make him come. He deserves a great fuck for being so patient, don’t you think?”

I roll onto my side, watching as she bounces up and down on his cock, her wetness dripping down and soaking his cock and thighs. It takes less than a minute before he comes too with a loud roar, grabbing her with his big arms and pulling her down on top of him.

“Don’t move,” he says to her. “Oh god, your tight pussy feels so good. Don’t move away. Stay right here.”

She collapses on top of him, with his cock still inside her, and we all lie there together, panting and completely out of breath.

“My god, that was the most unbelievably fucking fantastic sexual experience of my life,” I say to them both when I catch my breath long enough to talk. “Completely and utterly mind-blowing.”

“I agree,” Jade says, lifting her head from Kit’s chest to grin at me. “How long will it take the two of you to be ready for another round?”

Groaning, I drop my head back down on her pillow. “Kit, you’re up next,” I say. “I might need a minute to regroup. Or a few minutes.”

“I’m ready when you are,” Kit tells her, his chest rumbling with deep laughter. “I can’t believe I might have actually found something I can beat Vulcan at. *Stamina.*”

VULCAN

The next morning, I jolt awake, my heart pounding against my chest, startled to find myself in someone else's bed. The realization settles in as I struggle to get my bearings.

Jade's warm, naked body is nestled against my back, her arm draped protectively over me. I turn my head to steal a glance over my shoulder, and there I see Kit, deep in sleep, sprawled on the other side of Jade, his hand resting on her bare hip.

I'm not accustomed to waking up in bed with anyone, much less another guy. Strangely enough, it doesn't feel as weird as I expected it to. Which is saying a lot for a man who usually sleeps outside in a sleeping bag by an open fire, miles away from another living soul.

Being careful not to wake her, I lift Jade's arm and slide out of the bed. After the nightmare night we spent burying Ivan, she's exhausted. I'm already craving another round or two, but I won't wake her to satisfy me. Not after everything she's gone through.

Quietly, I slip out of the room, walk into the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee. Knowing Jade, she'll come wandering out in search of caffeine, and I doubt Kit has learned how to competently make it yet.

Though I give him credit for trying. Despite his strict adherence to a health-conscious lifestyle, he's doing everything he can to make Jade comfortable here, even if it means breaking his own rules and bringing in non-vegetarian food and caffeine.

Jade is changing all of us for the better by smoothing out our sharp edges and making us better versions of ourselves.

Especially me.

Now, with Jade's presence in my life, the lines between survival and living are blurring. She sees through my layers of armor, reaching into the depths of my soul where no one else has dared to venture. Her unwavering acceptance of my madness is chipping away at the walls I've built around myself, exposing vulnerabilities I've long suppressed.

For the first time, I'm wondering if it's finally time to confront and control the chaos that swirls within me.

If it's even a remote possibility, which I have my doubts about.

I know I'm teetering on the edge of sanity.

No one needs to tell me some of the shit constantly circling around in my head is nuts. It doesn't mean I can turn off my brain like a light switch, though. Especially when the crazy thoughts sustained me through the darkest moments.

As a child, when my deranged foster father unleashed his fury on me, convinced that I was possessed by the devil, these twisted beliefs became my lifeline.

By believing he couldn't kill me, that I was invincible, helped me endure the relentless beatings and burns. No matter how much pain he inflicted or how close he came many times to ending my life, I clung to the certainty that I would survive.

And I did.

In his twisted mind, my resilience only fueled his suspicions, further cementing his belief that I was evil.

At the grand old age of eleven.

I taught myself to disconnect, to slip into a mental void of nothingness that shielded me from the searing physical agony. I honed this skill by being given countless opportunities to practice under his sadistic hands.

Undoing everything I've held onto for so long and untangling the web of beliefs that allowed me to survive won't come easily.

Do I even want to try?

The sound of footsteps approaching the kitchen interrupts my thoughts, and I glance over to find Jade standing in the doorway, her eyes heavy with sleep. Her tousled hair cascades over her shoulders, her face showing a touch of vulnerability in her gaze.

I offer her a faint smile. "Morning," I say, my voice betraying a mixture of emotions. "I hope you slept well."

JADE

“**B**etter than expected, considering everything,” I reply. “The enticing aroma of freshly brewed coffee drew me out.” I slip up behind Vulcan, who is standing at the kitchen sink. Wrapping my arms around his waist, I lean my head against his bare chest. “Thank you for putting on a pot.”

Vulcan rubs my arms. “I knew you would come out when you smelled it brewing,” he says. “You should go back to sleep. You must be tired.”

“Not really. I’m too hyped up to sleep. How are you feeling this morning? Are you okay with what happened last night with Kit?”

For a moment, Vulcan’s body tenses, and I hold my breath, awaiting his response, hoping he won’t tell me it was all a mistake. Instead, he lets out a long sigh.

“I realize I’m fucked up,” he says, his words heavy with resignation. “And I could never be one hundred percent what you need or deserve. Sometimes I need to get away from everyone to keep my sanity. And I might always be this way. Most likely will be. The bottom line is I want you. But how can I expect you to settle for half a man like me? To keep you in my life, I’m willing to share you with the only true family

I've ever had. The other guys can give you things I can't. They're good for you when I'm not."

My heart aches at his honest admission, and I reach up to smooth back a lock of his dark hair that's fallen across his forehead. "You're not half a man," I assure him. "And being with you would never be settling either. From the moment we met, there was an instant connection, something undeniable. We both have our issues and we're both missing pieces of our soul. Maybe together we can begin to repair and heal."

"I'm willing to try, though I can't promise a miracle," he says, the weight of his past clear in his words. "I'm damaged goods, more than you could possibly imagine. Kit can offer you much more with his stability and big heart. And Seven could give you an unbelievable dream life, not a life spent living in an RV in the desert. With Seven or Kit, you would never have to worry about anything ever again."

"You're all amazing men. With unique qualities that I'm drawn to equally. Since you brought up Seven, what are we going to do about him? How will he handle knowing the three of us were together last night?"

Just then, Kit interrupts, strolling into the kitchen. "Probably not well," he says. His long, blonde hair is tousled and wild. He's wearing only a pair of grey sweatpants with his magnificent chest bare, a sight that never fails to captivate my attention.

"Will he be mad?" I ask. "I don't like keeping secrets from him, and I'm worried about his reaction. I should tell him today."

"Why don't you let Kit talk to him first?" Vulcan suggests. "He's more diplomatic than I am, so I'm the wrong person for the job. Kit can smooth things over."

“No,” I reply. “I should be the one to talk to him about this. This is something I need to do alone.”

Stepping away from Vulcan, I weave my way around the kitchen table to Kit. Reaching up, I pull his face down for a long, slow kiss. “Everything okay?” I ask when I draw back for air. “Vulcan and I have already talked about it this morning. Are you still in with us?”

He smiles down at me, his grip on my waist tightening, pulling me closer against his sculpted chest. “I’m not going anywhere,” he assures me. “I’m all in, one hundred percent. Seven might be a different story, though. He’s more possessive of you than we are. He wants you all for himself.”

“I know,” I admit. “And that’s what I’m worried about. For this to work between us, we can’t have any of those things. The most important thing is, I don’t want to hurt the close bond between the three of you.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to talk to Seven about this first?” Kit asks, his voice gentle and persuasive. “Maybe he would handle it better if it came from me, instead of you.”

“Talk to me about what?” Seven asks from the open doorway, his voice cutting through the charged atmosphere.

My heart lurches as I turn to face him, his sudden presence causing a seismic shift in the room. In a swift motion, he takes in the scene, his expression changing from confusion to a stormy mix of emotions. I’m standing between Kit and Vulcan with Kit’s arms wrapped around me, while Vulcan’s hand rests on my ass under my short bathrobe.

His gaze moves from me to the guys, lingering on each of our faces as his mind tries to piece together the puzzle before him.

Time seems to stretch as silence settles in.

“What the hell is going on here?” he finally asks.

SEVEN

I'm not sure what I expected to walk in on this morning, but it sure as well wasn't a threesome about to happen in Kit's kitchen.

"What's going on?" I ask again when no one answers.

Kit goes dead still, his arms circled in a vise grip around Jade's waist. Vulcan's hand is on the curve of her ass, causing the fabric of her bathrobe to bunch up and reveal a tantalizing view of her bare skin underneath. There's a strange camaraderie between the three of them, an unspoken ease that reeks of recent intimacy.

Jade disentangles herself from Kit's hold and hurries over to me. She places her hand on my arm as if to stop me from acting irrationally. Her gaze meets mine.

"If you're getting ready to tell me it's not what it appears, please don't," I say. "It's obvious something is going on. Who wants to tell me?"

"I swear I was planning to talk to you today about this," Jade says, her voice slightly shaky. "Please don't be mad. Just give me a chance to explain."

"Mad about what?" The words spit out chillier than I intended. I'm straining against the tide of jealousy that's

threatening to wash over me, especially after I swore never to let jealousy get the best of me again. The memory of Jade getting hurt in a fight between Vulcan and me is still raw in my mind.

Silence returns to the kitchen, heavy and crushing.

“You’ve always known I have feelings for all of you,” Jade says, gesturing towards the other two men. “I’ve never hidden that fact. And I’ve always been aware of the tight bond between you. You’re a family and I would never wish to sever that. Choosing between you would be a heart-wrenching task, something I can’t and won’t do.”

I frown at her. It’s taking everything I have in me not to wrap my arms around her and draw her close. I still want her desperately, even after seeing her with them.

It’s not as if I haven’t watched the other guys hug her and even kiss her before, but something is different this morning. The way they both have their hands physically on her at the same time is causing alarm bells to go off in my head.

“Have I ever pressured you to choose between us?” I ask.

“No, but I’m afraid you might at some point,” she admits. Her eyes plead with me. “Can we go somewhere to talk about this privately? I want to explain things to you, to make you understand.”

“We should all be present for this conversation,” I counter. “We’re all involved.”

“Okay,” she says, blowing out a long breath. “Fair enough. Last night, Vulcan came here soon after you left. He didn’t want to be alone out at the RV, and I was relieved when he showed up. He needs us, and I need him in my life. Just like I need you and Kit. We all need each other.”

“I agree, but why do I get the feeling there’s more to this than you’re telling me?” I glance over at Kit, who quickly looks away.

Damn.

This might be worse than I imagined.

My gaze shoots to Vulcan, who is leaning back against the kitchen counter, casually drinking a cup of coffee as if he doesn’t have a fucking care in the world. I’m shocked, yet also glad that he’s here. It’s not Vulcan’s typical behavior to admit he needs anything or anyone. There might be hope for him after all.

He lifts an eyebrow at me in a silent question and takes another sip of coffee. That’s when the searing image of him and Kit, tangled up in the sheets with Jade, hits me.

Jade and Vulcan slept together last night. I see it on his face.

And Kit too?

“Are you in better spirits today?” I ask Vulcan, masking my hurt and anger.

“I am,” Vulcan replies. “Everything is fine. Don’t worry about me. It’s all good.”

“Where did you sleep last night?” I spit out the question burning my throat.

“With Jade in her bed.”

His reply is swift and without hesitation. That’s Vulcan for you, always brutally honest, a trait I both love and hate in him.

“And you’re okay with that, Kit?” My gaze swings back to him. “For another man to walk into your house and sleep with

someone you care about? Right under your nose? Where you can hear them through the walls?”

He takes a deep breath and looks me straight in the eyes this time. “Yes, I’m okay with it because I was there, too. We all slept in Jade’s bed. Together.”

“What the fuck, man!”

I’m shocked. I can’t believe Kit willingly went along with a threesome. It’s completely out of character for him. I’ve never known him to date, much less be sexually adventurous. This blows my mind and I’m having a hard time wrapping my head around it.

“Let me get this straight,” I continue. “After I left last night, Vulcan unexpectedly arrived. The three of you had a threesome in Jade’s bed, and then you all slept there together like a big slumber party.”

Kit nods back at me. “Yeah, that’s exactly what happened,” he replies in a calm, steady voice. “It wasn’t planned. We weren’t trying to sneak around and do something behind your back, if that’s what you’re thinking. It happened naturally and if you had been here, you would’ve been a part of it, too.”

“Fuck no, I wouldn’t have!” I reply, trying not to raise my voice. “I can’t believe you all assumed I would be okay with this.”

Jade moves closer, her scent washing over me, a blend of vanilla and jasmine that does little to quell the storm inside me. “Seven, please don’t be upset. We want you here. All of us do. We’re not complete without you with us.”

“Have you all lost your minds? This is nuts!”

“No, it’s the only way we can be a family together,” Jade says. “I need all of you in my life. I can’t walk away from

what we have here. It would kill me to do that. But I can't choose one of you either. How would you feel if I chose Vulcan or Kit over you? How do you think they would feel if I chose you over them? Would your relationship with them stay the same? No, it wouldn't."

A crazy thought suddenly occurs to me. "Hang on a second. Kit, did you and Vulcan get together last night? Are you both bi? How did I not know this? How long has this been going on?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" Vulcan mutters, letting out an exasperated sigh. "Do you really think Kit and I would be fucking each other off in a corner somewhere when we can have Jade? No! We didn't suddenly become bisexual overnight. Jesus Christ, Seven! Calm the fuck down. This is a good thing. You're blowing this way out of proportion."

His casual attitude about this is a punch to my gut. "I'm surprised you're up for this. You've been after Jade, hot and heavy, since the first moment you saw her."

"You're not lying," he says. "And if this is the only way I can keep her in my life, then I'll gladly share. You know I'm fucked in the head. What kind of boyfriend would I be for her? A nightmare, that's what. But I can't lose her."

"Tell me then how this is supposed to work. What are the rules?"

"There are no rules," Jade says softly. "Except monogamy within the group. That's it. If anyone strays, they're out. No excuses."

I can barely comprehend what she's suggesting. "So, every time you're with one of us, it has to be a group thing?"

“No,” she says, shaking her head. “Not every time, but sometimes, if the vibes are right.”

“This is a lot to deal with,” I tell her. “I’m not sure I can handle watching you with one of them.”

“Even if you were involved?” she asks. “It will be different if you’re taking part and not watching.”

“Maybe,” I reply. “I need time to think this through.”

Jade’s arms wrap around me, her head resting against my chest. I envelope her in my arms, the warm, familiar sensation of her body against mine doing nothing to ease my torment.

Resisting her will not be an option. That much is a given.

“I want you with us,” she whispers into my chest. “Please consider joining us, okay? Don’t let your head get in the way. I need you. Don’t leave us.”

A sigh escapes my lips as I press a gentle kiss to the top of her head. “I’ll try, though I can’t make any promises. This isn’t as easy for me as it was for them. I had dreams of you and me. A life together, a real future. And now I’ll need to adjust my dreams.”

“There’s still a great future for all of us if we stay together,” she says firmly.

Vulcan sits his coffee mug down and claps his hands together. “Now that we’ve got that out of the way, we need to regroup and talk about those fucking Russians. I’m working tonight and need to head back soon to the RV to finish cleaning up body parts. What’s the plan today for everyone else?”

“I’m working tonight as well, but I can stay here with Jade until I need to leave,” Kit volunteers.

“I’ll stick around for a while too,” I say. “Jade, I picked up something for breakfast. It’s in the car.”

“Donuts?” she replies, her face lighting up at the prospect.

“How did you guess?”

“Leroy always takes good care of me when it comes to food. Where is he, anyway?” she asks. “Outside in the limo?”

“No, I drove myself here today,” I reply. “He’s shampooing the carpet in the limo and sanitizing the interior this morning to get the bloodstains out.”

“You own a car besides the limo?” she asks.

“A couple of them,” I reply. “Speaking of that, we need to get you a new car. You can’t take your old car out again, ever. In the meantime, you can drive any of mine that you want.”

“Really? You’re loaning me a car?”

“Sure, you can even test drive it this morning,” I offer.

“What kind of car is it?” she asks.

“A Porsche 911.”

“Give me ten minutes to get dressed and I’ll be right back.” She pulls out of my arms and takes off, running down the hallway to her room.

“Wow, you sure know how to get a woman moving fast,” Kit teases with a grin. “Offer a girl a Porsche and she turns into an Olympic sprinter.”

“She needs new wheels,” I reply with a shrug. “I’ll gladly buy her whatever she chooses once we have time to go car shopping. Her car is safely hidden in your garage, where it needs to stay.”

He nods back at me. “We’ve got it covered,” he says. “It’s safe here. No one will stumble upon it.”

Vulcan shoves away from the kitchen counter with a weary sigh.

“Are you heading out now, Vulcan?” Kit asks. “You’re coming back tonight, aren’t you?”

“It’ll be after midnight, but I’ll be here,” Vulcan replies. “Leave the porch light on for me.”

“What do you think I’m running here?” Kit teases. “A Motel 6?”

“I’ll catch up with you later,” Vulcan says. “I’ll go tell Jade I’m leaving and then I’m out of here. Call me if there’s anything up. We left quite a damn mess out at the RV to clean.”

“Will do,” Kit replies. “Do you need help?”

“Nah, I got it,” Vulcan replies. “The sooner we put this shit behind us, the better off we’ll be.” His gaze briefly locks with mine. “This isn’t the end of the world, Seven. It’s just the start of a new phase. It doesn’t have to be bad. In fact, last night was pretty damn incredible, and you would’ve thought the same if you’d been here.”

I bite back a reply. There’s no need to let him see how much this situation is bothering me.

I watch Vulcan stroll down the hallway and enter Jade’s room without knocking. The sound of running water from her shower, and then her laughter floats through the open doorway. I try not to picture Vulcan’s gaze drinking in her naked body under the gushing waterfall shower.

Walking over to the coffeepot, I pour myself a cup while Kit gets busy making his morning spinach drink in the blender.

A sudden shriek rings out from Jade's room, followed by more laughter. I can only imagine what they might be doing in there. Vulcan probably turned the water to ice cold or God knows what else.

"Tell me again how that doesn't bother you," I say to Kit, waving a hand towards Jade's room.

He stops cramming vegetables into the blender, lets out a tired sigh and turns to face me.

"Listen, I'm going to lay out the facts for you, and you can either take them or leave them," Kit replies, his voice uncharacteristically stern. "If you keep on giving Jade a hard time about this, you'll be left out in the cold. She will never choose either you or I over Vulcan. Especially not after what happened last night with him."

"I have a special connection with her," I argue. "That's got to be worth something."

"I realize that, and so do I," Kit replies. "We both have good, solid relationships with Jade, but it's not like the one she has with Vulcan. What they have is fire. Their connection was instant and explosive. I've been watching the two of them together from the very beginning. You didn't want to see it, so you didn't."

"Those types of physical relationships usually burn out fast, though," I argue. "If their attraction is mostly based on chemistry, it might be a passing thing."

Kit shrugs. "Maybe, though I doubt it. Jade is good for Vulcan. I'm hoping she can get through to him and help him heal a little. We're all going to lose Vulcan eventually if he

can't get a grip on himself. Last night was the scariest fucking thing I've ever gone through, watching him put a gun to his head."

"Same here," I admit. "I'm glad he showed up last night. I was worried about him being out there all alone."

"We all were," Kit says. "When he pulled up on his bike, Jade ran outside to greet him. He picked her up, and they headed straight for her bedroom."

"How did you end up there, too?" I'm curious about how Kit was drawn into the threesome.

"Jade asked Vulcan if I could join them and he agreed," Kit replies. "I was grateful they included me, and I didn't need to be asked twice. And you shouldn't either. All you're doing is torturing yourself."

"Is this sharing arrangement a permanent thing?" I ask, still unable to grasp how Kit went along with it so willingly.

"All I know is that I'll be Jade's steady rock as long as she wants me," he says. "I'm not going anywhere and if she needs me, right here is where I'll be. I'll look after her and protect her the best I can. You're all my family now and I'll do anything I can to keep it that way. We want you to be a part of this. Don't cause problems. We have enough to deal with already."

"I appreciate that," I say. "I really do. It's just weird, and it was a shock, that's all. I would've gladly married her, anytime, anywhere."

"You're not the only one," Kit replies, his tone turning serious. "But that's not happening for any of us, so get your head back into the game. You're the smart one in the group and we need you. The Russian mafia will be after us soon, and

you can't be moping in the corner, sulking over hurt feelings. Or what could've been."

He's right.

I drain the rest of my coffee and wash out my coffee cup in the sink. "You're absolutely right, and I apologize if I came across as an asshole," I tell him. "Protecting Jade and keeping an eye on Vulcan needs to be our top priorities." I lean over to slap Kit on the back. "Thanks, buddy, for giving it to me straight. I needed that. You're not just Jade's steady rock, you're mine, too. When my head gets twisted up, you've always been able to help me put it back on straight."

"Anytime, brother," he says, smiling at me. "You'd better go get those donuts out of the car before Jade comes back. She's liable to slap me if I hand her another spinach drink for breakfast. You saved the day."

Five minutes later, we're all back in the kitchen, stuffing our faces with glazed donuts as if nothing has changed. Except for Kit, of course, who is eating healthy granola instead.

Kit was right about us being a family. Sometimes families aren't born, they're made. Together, we've made this one and by God, I won't be the one to tear it apart.

JADE

“I suppose you’re not interested in a spinach drink after gobbling down those three donuts?” Kit asks, arching his eyebrows at me.

He’s standing at his usual spot at the kitchen counter, chopping up vegetables to blend. After Vulcan and Seven helped me finish off the donuts, they both dashed off to work, leaving Kit and me alone.

“Were you counting?” I tease. “The donuts were small, so don’t accuse me of being a binge eater. Though I can be, occasionally, if I’m starving. And no thank you on the drink. I’m stuffed. Are you sure I can’t talk you into a donut? They’re delicious, and I saved one for you.”

“I try not to eat sugar,” Kit says, shaking his head in disapproval of my eating habits. He hits the button on the blender when I grin at him and reach down to pinch a bite off the remaining donut.

“Fine,” I say. “More donut for me.”

My cellphone vibrates, a metallic whirring that reverberates against the smooth granite countertop. The text is from Natasha asking me to meet her in a neutral meeting

location. I hastily type back a reply, asking her to give me an address, and then confirming I'll be there.

Kit looks up from his blender, his forehead furrowing into a thoughtful knot. "Who are you texting?" His deep voice barely cuts through the loud noise of the blender's whirring blades and crushed ice.

"Natasha," I reply, lowering the cell phone. "She wants me to meet her somewhere to talk."

"Alone?" he questions, a protective edge lacing his tone. "No chance. I'm going with you."

"And if you're tied up with work when she wants to meet? How do you guys manage to hold on to your jobs when you're constantly shadowing me?"

"If I'm at work, then one of the other guys can accompany you," he says, his tone firm. "Or Leroy. We're sticking close to you until we've taken care of Igor. Plus, Natasha isn't entirely trustworthy. Don't forget, she threatened you with a knife and kept you captive in Platinum. That alone is enough to warrant us tagging along when you meet her. We can't take any more chances."

"I don't have an issue with that," I say. "As long as it doesn't put a burden on the three of you to be my bodyguards."

A hint of a smile pulls at Kit's lips. "You'll never be a burden to us."

The phone vibrates again. "Natasha sent me an address. I need to be there in an hour. Can you accompany me?"

"Absolutely," he affirms, his voice laced with determination.

An hour later, we're on our way to the address Natasha gave me. We pull up to a dark, imposing structure and walk towards the entrance with its set of frosted double doors, glowing under the cool blue halo of LED lights.

Kit, the eternal gentleman, politely holds the door open for me. I step inside and am instantly assaulted by a wave of frigid air that takes my breath away.

"God, it's glacial in here," I mutter, already regretting my choice of a short-sleeved outfit and open-toed sandals. "What is this place?"

Glancing around the large room, I realize we've stepped into a bizarre, frozen paradise. The walls, ceiling, and even the furniture are all sculpted from glistening ice. The ambient lighting casts a cool hue, evoking a sense of stepping into an icy fantasy world.

"It's obviously an ice bar," Kit replies, sounding equally impressed. "I've heard of this place, but have never checked it out. You'll freeze to death in here. Why don't you text her and offer to talk with her in the car instead? You're not dressed for an ice bar. Even I'm feeling the chill, and I'm usually impervious to the cold." His muscular arms reach over to envelop me, forming a warm barrier against the chilly atmosphere. I press into his heat, my skin drinking in his comfort.

"This place is beautiful though," I say, my breath unfurling in soft clouds of frost in the arctic air. "It's impressive, that's for damn sure."

The empty seating area is furnished with sofas and chairs draped in what I can only hope is faux-fur. Crystal-clear ice tables topped with exquisite ice sculptures are strategically

placed throughout the room, adding an extra touch of elegance.

The main bar is the magnificent centerpiece, constructed entirely of intricately carved ice. Behind the bar, frozen shelves are lined with an array of premium liquors that glint like amber and obsidian jewels under the cool lighting.

The solitary bartender, dressed in insulating layers of winter attire, looks up as we cross the threshold into his icy kingdom. With a curt nod, he beckons us over to the bar and gestures toward the frost-coated stools.

“Have a seat,” he says, his voice tinged with an unmistakable Eastern European accent. “She’ll be here shortly.”

I perch on an ice stool, a shiver sliding down my arms when the cold seeps through the thin fabric of my pants.

“Are you a friend of the person we’re meeting?” I ask him.

“I am.” His response is curt, and I take the hint he’s not interested in chit-chat about Natasha. She’s probably threatened to cut him, too.

Kit doesn’t take a seat on one of the frozen stools. Instead, he remains a pillar of solid warmth behind me, his arms looped around my shivering form, radiating heat that pushes back against the relentless chill.

The abrupt creak of a side door breaks the silence, and Natasha slinks across the room, a glimmering apparition in a golden, sleeveless dress that captures and reflects the light, along with matching strappy heels. With an effortless grace, she slides onto the vacant stool beside me.

Without awaiting a cue, the bartender retrieves a bottle of vodka, its surface frosted over, and pours two shots. He places

a glass before Natasha and me, then reaches to pour a shot for Kit.

Kit holds up his hand to stop him. “No thank you,” he says politely.

Natasha raises her eyes at Kit in a silent question.

“I rarely drink,” he says.

She turns to me, a challenge dancing in her blue eyes. “I don’t trust men who won’t drink vodka with me,” she says.

“Well, I don’t drink and drive with precious cargo in the car with me,” Kit counters evenly, tightening his arms around me.

“An orange juice for him then,” Natasha announces with a sigh. The bartender wastes no time, his hands a blur as he prepares freshly squeezed orange juice for Kit, served in a tall glass. Kit accepts it graciously with a nod of thanks.

“Now, you go sit over there,” Natasha instructs Kit, her manicured finger pointing towards a larger frozen sofa nestled in the far corner. “No men allowed while we talk. Girls only.”

Kit frowns at her and holds his ground without budging.

“It’s okay,” I reassure him with a smile, rubbing his arm. “I’ll be fine. Go sit and enjoy your drink.”

He exhales, the audible sigh frosting in the bitter cold. His protective arms slowly drop from around me and he strides over to the sprawling, icy sofa. Lifting his frosty glass to take a sip, his gaze locks on me with unwavering vigilance.

The bartender takes his cue to retreat. Once we’re alone, Natasha raises her shot glass in a silent challenge to me. I realize she’s testing me, and I lift my glass in response, steeling myself for the potent bite of vodka.

Without missing a beat, she downs the vodka in a single gulp. I follow suit, my throat stinging with the burn of the liquor. Setting my glass back on the frozen bar, a surge of pride swells within me for masking my distaste for the straight vodka.

As if reading my thoughts, she reaches for the bottle and refills our glasses.

Damn.

So, this is the way it will be.

“Start from the beginning,” she instructs me. “Tell me the story again of how we arrived at this spot in time. We will drink while you talk.”

“Fine,” I concede, shivering slightly. “Doesn’t the cold bother you? Wouldn’t it be more comfortable to talk outside where our asses aren’t freezing solid to our stools?”

“No, this is a safe place owned by a trusted friend,” she replies, seemingly unfazed by the chilly surroundings. “And I don’t get cold in America. Cold is Ukraine.”

“Okay,” I agree, giving up on my effort to move. If the ice bar is the safest place for us to meet, then so be it. She won’t hear any complaining from me about the cold.

“I’ve already told you most of this, but I’ll recap everything. I’m a hacker and was hired by a man to hack files, which turned out to be from the Russian mafia. Long story short, they tracked me down, most likely from the man who hired me. They kidnapped and took me onto a boat near Los Angeles. For some reason, they thought I knew where you were located, which, of course, I didn’t. Once they realized I was worthless to them, they tried to kill me and dump my

body into the water. I broke free from Ivan and jumped over the boat's railing while they shot at me."

"How did you survive in the water?" Natasha questions me.

"I'm a strong swimmer and was determined to stay alive until someone spotted me in the water. Luckily, there was a fisherman on a boat, and I was able to make it to him. He hoisted me onboard and then helped me get back to safety. Twenty-four hours later, I was in Vegas looking for you."

"Why were you trying to find me?" she asks.

I've already told her and Eva all this once before. I can't shake the feeling she's probing for inconsistencies, attempting to catch me in a lie.

"Two reasons," I answer. "I was able to gather from the hacked files that you put out a feeler on the darknet for someone to help you reverse engineer a video slot machine. I can do that for you. The second reason was to tell you the Russians were coming for you. I hoped to find you before they did. I was too late."

"You expect me to believe you came to Vegas out of the goodness in your heart?" she asks, her eyes shrouded in suspicion. "To warn a stranger? Why would you do that?"

"I already told you I want to partner up with you and reverse engineer the slot machine. I can do it easily. I've done my research. This scheme has been pulled off successfully in international casinos, such as Macao and Nice."

"Are you aware of its catastrophic failure in other places, where the people ended up dead?" she interjects.

I nod. "Yes, I found that out, too. The people who were caught were careless and sloppy, not smart."

“And you believe you’re smarter?”

“I don’t just believe it, I know I’m smarter. Every detail, every potential situation, would need careful planning. A large, reliable team would be required, made up of only those we can entrust with our lives.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Why do you say ‘we’? I haven’t agreed to any of this.”

“Do you have a better alternative? You must be desperate to broadcast your need on the darknet. Who better to collaborate with than someone who shares a common enemy? The Russian mob wants us both dead. Together, we’re stronger.”

“What do you know about Dimitri?” she asks, suddenly changing the subject.

“Only what you’ve told me. Who is he to you?”

“Trash,” she snaps. “That is all. He is garbage.”

“What’s his connection to you? Is he part of the mob?”

“Now it is my turn to tell you a story,” she begins. “When I turned twelve, a rich man began to visit me in an orphanage where I grew up in Ukraine. He taught me many skills.”

“Gambling?” I take a wild guess.

“Yes that, and other things,” she replies, her voice dropping lower.

“Are you any good?”

“I’m very good,” she says, perking up with a confident smile. “I can play cards on a professional level. The men are easy to distract at the poker table. There was a time in my life when I traveled across Europe playing card games.”

“By yourself?”

A shadow darkens her beautiful features. Her blue eyes grow troubled. “No, not by myself. They never allowed me to be alone. *Ever*. For years, I was never alone.”

Her words give me pause, and I frown at her. “Were you being held against your will? Who were you with?”

“Bad men,” she simply answers.

“Did the rich man who visited you at the orphanage adopt you? Is that legal? How old were you?”

“Adopt is perhaps not the correct word,” she replies. “He took me from the orphanage two years later, when I was fourteen. Money talks and rich men can do anything they want. Laws and rules do not apply to them.”

“Who was he?”

“A very powerful, dangerous man by the name of Dimitri. He’s a top man in the Russian mafia.”

“Does he know where you are now?”

“I’m still alive, aren’t I?” Her humorless laugh fills the air. “Proof enough that he didn’t know until his goons found me. Now, I’m certain Dimitri is aware. He’ll come for me.”

“And then what?” I dread hearing the answer.

Her answer comes out in a laugh, a sound as chilly as the sculptures around us. “He will either kill me or take me back to Russia, where he’ll keep me prisoner.”

“How would he get you out of the country? This is the United States, not Europe. You can’t kidnap someone and fly them out of the country.”

She regards me with raised eyebrows, a small incredulous smile playing on her lips. “You truly believe that?” she asks, her words echoing with a tint of mockery. “A man with unlimited resources can command the impossible. He has an arsenal of private jets, yachts, and an army of men. His influence reaches far and wide. Yes, even here in the United States. Taking me from here would be as simple for him as breathing.”

A nervous knot forms in my stomach, twisting and pulling tighter as I contemplate the implications. “There’s something I’ve been thinking about,” I confess, my voice wavering slightly. “I fear I might have led Ivan and Igor straight to you.”

She dismisses my worries with a flick of her hand, the diamonds in the ring on her finger catching the light before reaching for the bottle yet again. She pours a third shot for us both. “No need to worry,” she reassures me. “If you could find me, they certainly could too. Worrying won’t help us now. We have a bigger game to play.”

“Does this mean you’re willing to work together?”

“Only if you understand the risk. Dimitri will destroy anyone and anything in his way. Not only did I escape from him, I also stole from him. Are you willing to go up against the Russian mafia?”

“They tried to kill me, remember?” I remind her. “I didn’t choose this battle, they chose me. It’s not as if I have many options. I’m cornered unless I’m willing to tuck my tail between my legs and hide.”

Natasha doesn’t know the guys killed Ivan. If she did, she’d realize we’re all already in deep shit with the Russians. There’s only one path for us and that’s to move forward.

“Did Eva go through the files I downloaded to her computer?”

A smile tugs at her lips. “Yes, otherwise why would I agree to meet you today? We needed to verify your story. I translated anything important on them to her since she doesn’t speak Russian. Thank you for the files.”

“Has Igor shown back up at the club?”

Her expression turns grim. “No, but he will. And when he does, we’ll be ready for him. And for his brother, Ivan.”

I don’t correct her about Ivan being dead and no longer being a threat. It’s better to be guarded and cautious where she’s concerned, since the guys are involved. There’s more than only me to consider.

“You have a history with Ivan and Igor, too?”

“I’ve known them since I was a little girl,” she replies. “I want to hurt them and make them pay for what they did to me. I prefer not to dwell on the dark times.”

“And Dimitri?”

“I want to make him suffer as much as possible,” she replies. “Only then will I kill him. There is no death too painful for him, or any torture too cruel.”

The pain in her eyes is evident. I can only imagine what she’s gone through being groomed from the time she was twelve to serve a mob boss.

“There’s one thing you should know before we begin working together,” I tell her. “I basically have three bodyguards who insist on accompanying me everywhere. Four bodyguards, if I include the real bodyguard who is supposed to be protecting one of them.”

A long sigh escapes her lips. “And who are these men?” Her eyes dart over to Kit, huddled awkwardly on the edge of his ice sofa, his eyes pinned on us. “Cat Man is one? Magic Man is two, I presume?”

I nod back at her.

“Who is the third man?” she asks.

“His name is Vulcan,” I respond, noting the slight flicker of recognition in her eyes.

Her lips curve into a knowing smile. “Ah...Motorcycle Man. Yes, I’ve heard of him too. And who does the bodyguard belong to?”

“He’s Seven’s bodyguard, Leroy. You saw him at Platinum. He sticks close to us, but he’s not directly linked to me.”

“By linked, do you mean lovers? The other three men are your lovers? All three?”

I consider lying and don’t. “Yes, all three.”

“They’re each aware of your relationship with the others?” she continues with a faint hint of amusement.

“Yes, they are,” I admit.

“Interesting,” she remarks. “You must possess truly unique talents, Jade. Perhaps one day you’ll share your story. Until then, I won’t pry. Privacy is a privilege I cherish, and I shall respect yours.”

“Thank you.” I’m touched by her understanding. “I trust them implicitly. They would do anything to protect me.”

“Then I’ll take your word for it,” she says, putting an end to the discussion about the men.

For now.

I take a deep breath. “Okay, then, how do we get started? We need to work out the details for the payout split.”

“What do you suggest?” Natasha asks.

“Fifty-fifty,” I offer without hesitation.

“I could hire someone to do the job without splitting the payout for much cheaper,” she says.

“You could,” I say with a shrug. “But then you would still need someone to implement the plan. And you would need other people to pull it off smoothly.”

“Let me guess,” she says. “You want to bring in your bodyguards as your team?”

“Possibly.”

Her eyes scrutinize me for a long moment. “I admire your audacity, Jade,” she finally admits. “However, I must consult with Eva, who is a crucial part of my team.”

“Is Eva your partner?” I ask, my curiosity piqued. “Are you a couple?”

“No, she is my savior,” she replies, amused by my question. “Not everything is about sex or even love in this world. I have other priorities.”

“Such as?”

“Revenge.”

Feeling an unexpected resonance with her ruthless determination, I raise my glass towards her. “And I appreciate your perspective, too,” I declare before downing the remaining vodka. I’m almost getting accustomed to the piercing bolt of

fire down my throat. Either that or my throat has gone completely numb from the previous shots.

Natasha reaches for the bottle to refill my glass for the fourth time. I'm not sure how much longer I can keep this up since I'm already feeling the delicious buzz of the liquor spreading through my body.

When I reach for my glass again, Kit springs up from his perch and moves quickly to stand behind me. His welcome heat envelops me as he wraps his arms around me from behind.

"Your skin is freezing," he says gruffly. "Are you almost finished here?"

"Yes, we're finished, Cat Man," Natasha responds as she slides off her stool. "I will contact you, Jade, once I have consulted with Eva. If she agrees with the financial arrangement, we'll begin soon."

Eager to move things forward, I press on. "Where is the slot machine?" I ask. "I'm ready to get started right away."

"I'll tell you everything soon," she says. She then turns to Kit, her gaze running over his imposing figure. "Pleasure to see you again. You left quite an impression at Platinum the other night. Your grand entrance and exit were quite the talk among the women. Many of whom asked when you would be returning. If stripping ever strikes your fancy, our stage is yours."

Kit frowns, his arms tightening around me. "No, thank you," he replies, his voice politely clipped. "I don't dance."

Laughing, she dismisses his discomfort with a wave of her hand. "I'm joking," she says. "Clearly you're already spoken for."

“Yes, I am,” he agrees.

“I’ll be in touch soon,” Natasha says to me before disappearing through the same door she arrived from.

“Well, I guess that means it’s time to go,” I say, standing. “If I can make it to the car after drinking all that vodka. I thought she’d never stop pouring.”

“I’ve got you.” Kit slides an arm around my waist and ushers me quickly out the door and back into the bright sunshine. “I should’ve warned you about drinking with Europeans. They learn at an early age how to hold their liquor better than we can.”

“I’m fine,” I tell him. “For now. Ask me again in thirty minutes when the vodka hits me full force.”

“By then, you’ll be back in your own house, safe and sound,” he assures me.

“You mean your house,” I remind him. “I’m homeless at the moment.”

“My house is your house,” he says, squeezing my hand. “I want you to think of it as your home now.”

“What about the other guys? How would they feel about me moving in permanently at your ranch?”

He doesn’t speak for a moment. “I’ve been meaning to bring up an idea I have to them. Especially after last night’s developments. My house is huge, with tons of empty space. Plus, the ranch has many acres that’s not being used for the animals. What would you think about Vulcan and Seven moving out to the ranch, too?”

“Really?” I’m shocked. “You would invite them to live there?”

“Sure, why not?” he replies as if it’s no big deal. “Our first priority right now is to keep you safe. We can’t expect you to keep moving from ranch to penthouse to RV every other day, depending on our work schedules. It’s ridiculous and you need space of your own. If nothing else, maybe they would consider staying at the ranch temporarily until things calm down.”

“Would they agree to do that? Personally, I love the idea of everyone being together, but I can’t see either of them giving up their own place to move.”

He turns to smile down at me. “You underestimate how much we all want to be with you. Maybe you can be the one to convince them to give it a try. There’s one other reason it might be a good idea, and that’s Vulcan. I’ve never liked the thought of him being out in the desert all alone as much as he is. Now that we know he’s been doing stupid stuff like playing Russian Roulette every night out there by himself, it’s even more incentive to bring him in closer to us. He needs us now more than ever.”

I nod back at him. “I couldn’t agree with you more about Vulcan.”

“There’s even room for him to bring his RV or another one if he misses his personal space,” Kit suggests. “He could park it way out on the back side of the ranch. If he needed space to breathe, he could go hide out there to be alone.”

“That’s a wonderful idea,” I tell him. “What about Seven, though? He’s the one who is having the toughest time dealing with everything. Would he be happy giving up his fancy penthouse to stay with us?”

“Seven doesn’t care about his luxury lifestyle and never did,” Kit says. “It’s all a front he puts on for his celebrity image. It can’t hurt to invite him, right? The worst he can do is

say no. Don't worry about Seven. He needs time to accept how things are now and then he'll be onboard."

"I hope so," I say. "I'm still worried. He seemed quite upset this morning."

"I talked to him while you were in the shower and laid things out," Kit says. "Trust me, he'll come around. Things will be fine. We caught him by surprise, that's all."

"We can't let him walk away from us for good. He told me he'll be back at your house tonight, so I'll present your plan to them then. There's something else I need to go over with you, too."

"Did Natasha agree to work with you?" Kit asks, his tone growing more serious.

"Not yet. She needs to run everything we discussed by Eva first. But if they agree to work with me, I would like to hit the ground running. And I need you all by my side when I do."

"What exactly does that mean?" he asks, frowning down at me.

"You'll find out tonight," I tell him as we reach his car in the parking lot.

JADE

He unlocks my car door, his fingers briefly brushing against mine, and helps me inside. His warm touch lingers as I watch him slide behind the wheel of his Jeep. I kick off my shoes, a sigh of relief escaping my lips, and put my bare feet up in his lap.

With a soft laugh, he grabs my freezing feet in his warm hands and briskly rubs them. “Your feet are frozen,” he observes, frowning. “Why didn’t you bail out of there sooner? Your toes are turning blue.” He lifts a foot to his mouth and kisses the top of it with gentle affection. “They’re still gorgeous toes,” he teases. “Even if they are on the verge of being frostbitten. We’re not leaving here until I get you warmed up.”

“Do you have a jacket or extra shirt in the back?” I turn around to check out the back seat of his Jeep. “You’re right, I’m chilled straight down to my bones.”

His expression softens and he shakes his head. “Afraid not.” Quickly, he strips his shirt off and tugs it down over my head. “Here, take mine,” he offers.

The warmth of his skin lingers on the shirt, and I cross my arms, snuggling deeper into the seat. Contentment washes over me. “I love wearing your shirts,” I tell him with a smile. “It

makes me feel like I'm being wrapped up in your big, strong arms. Plus, they smell like your soap. All manly and sexy."

As I'm talking, he's trying to warm up one of my cold feet between his hands. His touch is gentle, yet strong, and the sight of his muscular, bare chest is turning me on as always.

I glance down at his lap. Unable to resist the temptation, I slide my other foot over his zipper. Slowly, I rub him, my eyes meeting his, desire hanging in the air between us. Through the fabric, I feel his cock lengthen and harden under my foot.

"Jade, what are you doing?" he asks, his voice gruff, the words slightly choked as he looks down at my foot's movements, a flicker of surprise and something deeper in his eyes.

"Entertaining myself while you warm me up," I answer, my tone light and playful, but with a hint of mischief.

"We're in the middle of a busy parking lot," he warns, his eyes darting to the windows. "Don't get any big ideas because we don't want to be arrested for lewd acts, if that's what is on your mind, young lady." His use of 'young lady' is tinged with a teasing reprimand, his lips twitching in an effort not to smile.

I grin back at him. Kit rarely loses control, and it always works out in my favor when he does. The memory of those rare moments fills me with anticipation.

"The top of the Jeep isn't down, so no one can see my foot," I assure him. "In fact, no one could see me at all, even if I did this." I curl my legs back under me and lean down. "Put your seat all the way back," I order, my voice dropping to a sultry whisper. "Because I'm taking your cock out of your pants. Considering how fucking huge it is, you might need

more room to spread out. Give me room to work here, big guy.”

“C’mon now, Jade,” Kit says sternly, his eyes betraying his inner turmoil. He reaches down, his hands wrapping in my hair. “You’ve had too much to drink, and the alcohol is going to your head. You’re a little tipsy and it would be wrong for me to take advantage of you like this.”

He’s wavering, caught between desire for me and the need to be a responsible, good guy. The heat in his gaze is at odds with his words.

“Fine, then I’ll take advantage of you. Sit back and relax because I’m about to slide your gigantic cock down my throat.” Growing bolder now, I unzip his jeans and tug his cock out. It’s ridiculously long and thick. I wrap my hand around his cock, causing him to suck in a breath and arch up into my hand.

“Oh fuck,” Kit mutters. “You really need to stop now, okay? We shouldn’t be doing this in a parking lot. Seriously.”

“Seriously, your cock is a fucking monster,” I tease, stroking him again, long and slow down to his base. I love screwing around with Kit, especially when he’s trying to hold back on me. The more he holds back on me, the more I try to push him. He closes his eyes and leans his head back. As I stroke my hand slowly up and down on his cock, he groans out loud and places his hand over mine, guiding me.

“Still want me to stop, Cat Man?” I tease, loving the uncontrolled sounds coming out of his mouth. “Tell me again to stop, if you really mean it.”

“Oh hell, no, don’t stop,” he says, tightening his grip on my hair. “Never stop.”

I lick my lips and lower my mouth to his tip. I've never wanted a man's cock in my mouth more than I want Kit's. If I can take it all in, and that remains to be seen.

He grabs both sides of my head and pulls my face up to look at him. "You don't have to do this," he says, his blue eyes turning almost grey with desire. They burn like fire and ice, setting my body aflame. "I love you, Jade. This is never expected or demanded from you. Ever."

As my answer, I slowly and purposely close my wet lips around the thick head of his cock and suck the tip, allowing my saliva to dribble down the sides.

He lets out a deep rumble, finally leaning back into the seat and loosening his hold on my hair. I glance up at him and hold his gaze before lowering my lips to the tip again, licking and sucking. A few beads of moisture from his cock drip onto my lips, and I lap them up eagerly, moaning as his taste swirls on my tongue. Hungry for more, I part my lips wide and greedily suck on his crown.

"Oh fuck!" he groans, his hands cradling my head. "God, Jade. What are you doing? Trying to drive me mad?"

"Showing you how much I love you," I reply. "What does it feel like I'm doing?"

I love it when Kit curses, since he so rarely does around me. Hearing him lose control is the best aphrodisiac, and I'm craving more. I close my eyes and slide my lips halfway down his shaft. Kit's cock is fucking huge, and taking him all in isn't an easy task, but I'm determined.

Slowly, I work my way down his cock, my lips stretching wider and wider each time. His hands in my hair guide my movements as I increase the tempo. I take as much of him as I

can, gagging slightly when he hits the back of my throat over and over. My jaws ache from trying to take all of him. Damn, it's worth it, though, to feel him pulsing and throbbing.

“Your mouth feels fucking amazing,” Kit tells me hoarsely. “Look up at me.”

My eyes fly open, and I stare up into his icy blue eyes. I'm mesmerized by the burning hunger in his gaze. He reaches down to lean his seat back even more, and then grabs my head again to hold me steady as he begins to move, thrusting up into my mouth.

“Don't close your eyes,” he says. “Look at me.”

His eyes burn into mine as he fucks me, owning me completely. Saliva drips from my lips and I widen my mouth to take him deeper. I can't breathe, and tears are springing from my eyes, but I'm not stopping him.

I let him thrust hard and fast at the ragged pace he sets, loving every movement he makes. He's using my mouth exactly how he wants, holding my head in place with his hands as he drives himself in faster. A wild beast lives inside Kit and I'm making it a life goal to bring it out.

The fact that he's conflicted about coming in my mouth makes it even hotter for me. I love knowing I can push him past the tight control he tries so hard to keep.

“If I don't stop now, I'll come down your throat,” he groans, tugging my hair and suddenly trying to lift my head off him.

Instead, I speed up, urging him to do exactly that, to come in my mouth. I want to feel his release and swallow his come. Though my jaws ache from being stretched, I could spend all day sucking his cock and listening to the raw, animalistic

sounds torn from his throat. He swells, pulsating on my tongue, and I mentally ready myself for his hot come squirting down my throat.

“Fuck!” he yells, spilling his hot come onto my tongue. I swallow and suck, swallowing even more, greedy for everything he can give me. When he keeps coming, I can’t swallow it all, and the liquid spills out of my mouth, dripping down my jaw. I glance up at him, to find him watching me intently, transfixed.

“God, you’re so fucking beautiful,” he says.

When he’s fully spent, I raise my head and lick the corner of my lips clean to savor every last drop. Grabbing my head, he pulls me up to him, kissing me deeply, driving his tongue into my mouth, tasting himself. His kiss is hungry, hot, and possessive.

When he finally breaks the kiss, he smiles down at me. “I have a new favorite flavor,” he teases in a mischievous tone.

“What would that be? I’m almost afraid to ask.”

“The taste of expensive vodka and my come in your mouth,” he replies. “The absolute best flavor in the world.”

I pull his head down to me for another kiss. “Let’s give you another taste then,” I say.

KIT

“Will you be okay alone here at the house this evening while I’m at work?” I ask Jade as we pull into my garage. “I don’t like you being isolated out here, miles away from us when we’re working. What if Igor tracks you down here?”

Jade shoots me a quick smile. “Stop worrying. Vulcan gave me his gun, remember?” Her voice is strong, carrying a hint of amusement. “If Igor shows up, I’ll shoot first and ask questions later.”

“Would you really use the gun if you needed to?” I press, unable to shake the grip of worry that has settled in my chest.

“Damn straight, I’d use the gun,” she replies defiantly, her chin lifting with determination. “He’ll kill me the first chance he gets. So yes, I’ll use the gun.”

I let out a worried sigh; the sound filling the car. “I never thought I’d be in a situation where I was encouraging someone to end another person’s life, but don’t hesitate. Not for one second. Just end him the same way I ended Ivan. We don’t have a choice.”

Her eyes lock onto mine, fierce and resolute. “I will,” she replies firmly.

The tension momentarily breaks as I open the door for her, and we walk into the warmly lit kitchen, the comforting scent of home momentarily pushing away my worries. “Do you have all our cell numbers if you need anything? It’s getting late and I need to head back out to work.”

She leans up on her tiptoes to give me a long, lingering kiss, her lips soft and reassuring. “I have everything I need. Go to work and stop fussing over me. I’ll be here when you all get back tonight.”

“You promise?” She told me the same thing before and didn’t return home. So much has happened since then.

“I swear, I won’t leave,” she promises. “Besides, I’m making dinner tonight for my guys.”

“Really? You can cook too? Wow! Will you stay here forever?” My tone is light, but I’m not joking. There’s nothing I want more than for her to stay here forever.

Snuggling up closer for one last hug before I go, she says, “I’m warming up to the idea if we can bring the other two guys on board.”

“Do you have a sneaky plan to win their hearts through a home-cooked meal?” I tease. “Because I can think of a few other ways that might be more persuasive than food.”

She playfully slaps my arm, her laughter a beautiful sound. “Who said anything about a home-cooked meal? I said I’d make dinner, which means putting something edible on the table. That’s all I’m promising.”

“Sounds good to me.” I smile down at her, feeling a warmth spreading through me at her words. “I love knowing you’ll be here when I get home. You have no idea how happy it makes me.”

“Me too,” she whispers against my chest.

I kiss the top of her head, inhaling the sweet scent of her hair before reluctantly heading for the door.

“If the other guys arrive before I do, don’t start without me,” I yell over my shoulder.

“You mean dinner?” she asks.

“Dinner and anything else you’re serving up.”



IT’S WELL after midnight when I return to the ranch. Vulcan’s motorcycle is parked out front in its usual spot, while Seven’s sleek Porsche sits beside it. When I walk into the kitchen, Jade is busy setting the table with plates and silverware. Her hair is pulled back in a messy bun, a few stray strands escaping to frame her face.

The scent of Chinese takeout food hangs in the air, a tantalizing mixture of ginger, garlic and soy. I never remember walking into my house to the homey smell of food before.

The sight of the white cartons and paper-wrapped chopsticks lined up on the counter causes a pang of guilt in my stomach. I make a mental note to give her one of my credit cards tomorrow, so she can buy anything she needs from now on. The least we can do is take care of our girl financially. It’s time for her to share in our wealth. The thought of her using the little money she has saved up to buy us food bothers me.

I break the silence with a light-hearted tease, “I see you’ve been slaving in the kitchen all night,” as I approach her from behind. My hands find their way around her waist, and I push her hair back to nuzzle her neck. “Miss me, pretty girl?”

She turns around and draws my face down for a slow, deep kiss, her lips welcoming. “I always miss you when you’re not with me,” she murmurs, her breath warm against my mouth.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch Seven watching us intently from the doorway, his arms crossed and his expression unreadable. Though his presence is a tad unsettling, I’ve already decided not to hold back anything around Jade for fear of ticking off Seven or hurting him. He knows the deal now, and it’s up to him whether he wants to join the program. There’s an undercurrent of tension in the room, but for now, all that matters is the woman in my arms.

“How was work tonight?” I ask Seven, a normal question to bring us back into routine. The same question I’ve asked him a million times before. Seven is always full of amusing tales of mishaps during his illusionist show or crazy things someone in the audience does. I watch him closely, aware of his reluctance to engage. He’s never at a loss for words, but something about tonight feels different.

“Good,” he answers tersely, his voice tight as he avoids my gaze. “Everything went smoothly for a change.”

I raise my eyebrows at him over Jade’s head, but don’t comment. His response tells me he’s clearly uncomfortable with my show of affection and Jade’s return of it to me. His usual spark of humor is absent.

Vulcan chimes in, cutting through the tension with a teasing smirk, while reaching for a water bottle in the refrigerator, “How was your pussy show? Did anyone get bit tonight?”

A laugh escapes me, and I shake my head, trying to keep the mood light. “I’d never let anyone else get close enough to the tigers to get bit,” I reply. “The tigers were cranky. They

don't enjoy putting on a show under bright lights late at night, or anytime. They'd rather be lounging around here in their pool or enclosure. I hate making them work for their keep."

"Well, maybe you won't always need to do that," Jade says, her voice soft and thoughtful as she pulls out of my arms. "There might be another way to make enough money to let them live out their days relaxing here." She motions for us to gather around. "Let's eat, guys, and I'll catch you up on recent developments."

The guys take their seats while she serves up helpings from the containers onto our plates. "I ordered several vegetarian options for you," she says to me. "You can pick out what you want."

"You're a sweetheart," I tell her. "Thank you."

I hate to admit how much I'm enjoying watching her putter around in my kitchen, teasing the guys and laughing at their jokes. After a while, even Seven begins to relax.

"There's something I want to talk to you about," Jade begins after we've all finished eating, her voice suddenly serious. "Kit has come up with a fantastic plan, and I'd like the two of you to consider it. At least temporarily, if nothing else."

"What's the plan?" Seven asks, his piercing gaze swinging my way.

"I want to invite you both to live here, to move in with me and Jade," I say. "We can't keep expecting her to shift around every night going to different places to spend the night. Jade needs a place to call home. She's still living out of a suitcase. The ranch is the safest place for her right now with my security systems, and I'll add more."

“Damn,” Vulcan says, shocked. “You want us all to live here together at the ranch like one big, fucking happy family?”

“Yes,” Jade answers, smiling at him. “That’s exactly what I want. One big, happy family with three big, happy guys. Please say yes, or at least consider it.”

“I would describe us as more dysfunctional, than happy,” Vulcan says. “Everyone here is well aware I need my space at times. It’s not that I do not enjoy your company, but sometimes I need to get away. For everyone’s sake. I’m not sure I can live twenty-four-seven in tight quarters with other people. Don’t take offense, it’s just the fucked up way I am.”

His words are raw, but his honesty deserves respect. “We’ve already thought of that,” I say. I lean forward, resting my arms on the table. “You can bring either your RV or another one and park it way back on the ranch. You could go out there anytime you wanted or even live there. At least you would be closer to us, and not out in the desert alone. We could even build an entire village of tiny houses. I own enough land here to do anything we want.”

“Your house is enormous and you’re suggesting that we build pastel-colored tiny houses on your back forty acres?” Jade laughs at my silly suggestion. “While we’re at it, why don’t we build a cute little dwarf village for my favorite gentle giant?” She leans over to squeeze my leg. “Can you imagine watching you walk through the front door of a tiny house? You would take up the entire room.”

“Well, I wouldn’t be the one living there,” I remind her, smiling at her playful teasing. “I already have a house and so does everyone else if they live here. My offer is a serious one. I would love to have everyone under one roof. At least until the Russian mafia situation is taken care of.”

“I can’t give up my place in the desert.” Vulcan shakes his head. “Not yet. But I’ll gladly take you up on your offer for me to bring a smaller RV to put somewhere on the ranch. I appreciate it. That’s damn generous of you. You’re a true friend.”

“You’re my family,” I say. “I’ll even deed some land to you if it makes you feel better about it. In fact, Jade, I’ll have my lawyer draw up paperwork to give you some of my land, too. I want you to feel as if this is your real home, not just my house where you’re temporarily staying. I never want you to feel homeless again. And it would make me feel much more secure if you would unpack your suitcase.”

Jade gives me a shocked look, visibly moved. “You would give me a piece of your ranch that you’ve worked so hard to keep?” she asks, her voice shaky. “Kit, I can’t take your land.”

“Maybe not yet, but I’d like to deed some of it to you soon.” My eyes lock onto Jade’s, wanting her to understand the depth of my commitment. “There’s something else. Tomorrow, I’m giving you one of my credit cards, so you won’t have to use your money to buy us takeout Chinese or for anything else. You can use my card to order anything you want or need. Keep your money tucked aside.”

Seven’s eyes widen. “Wow, now I feel like a monumental asshole,” he says. “I should’ve thought of this. I’m sorry, Jade. We should take better care of you.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out his wallet. He slides it across to Jade. “Take out any and all cards you want to use. Keep as many as you need. Even my American Express Black card. Take it.”

“What is this?” Vulcan asks with a snort. “A pissing contest? Should we whip out our dicks and compare size? Actually, that’s a terrible idea since Kit’s got us all beat hands

down on that front.” He reaches into his pocket and drops a big wad of cash wrapped up in a rubber band in the middle of the table. “Cash is king, baby. It’s accepted everywhere and doesn’t leave a paper trail. I prefer staying off the grid as much as I can.” He nudges Seven with his elbow. “I’ll up your ante, Seven. Here is the key to my motorcycle.” He pulls a shiny key out of his pocket and drops it on the pile.

“And here is the key to my Porsche,” Seven throws back with a grin, before adding his keyring.

I can’t resist joining in. I walk over to grab my keys hanging on a hook on the wall. Picking out the Jeep key, I toss it onto the table. “And the key to my favorite Jeep,” I say. “Or you can have the SUV if you prefer, Jade. What’s mine now belongs to you.”

Jade bursts out laughing. “Guys, stop! This is ridiculous! I’m not a kept woman or a sugar baby. I’ve always prided myself on being independent. You don’t need to give me money, land, or cars, though I very much appreciate the offers.”

“We love your independent streak, but we want to take care of you now,” Seven tells her in a soft, but firm voice. “Please let us do that. We make substantial salaries. What’s the harm in pampering our Queen?”

Jade leans back in her chair and crosses her arms, studying us intently. Her eyes scan each of us, evaluating, weighing our sincerity. “If you really want to do something for me, then agree to work with me. Partner up with me. I talked with Natasha today. I’m sure Kit has already told you about our meeting with her at an ice bar. If Eva agrees to my terms of a fifty-fifty split, we’ll begin working together soon on reverse engineering the slot machine.”

“Wow, things are moving faster than expected.” Seven leans forward, his eyebrows raised in surprise. “Do you think Eva will agree to the split?”

“I hope so,” Jade says, lightly shrugging. “It’s fair for everyone. I told Natasha that one of my terms is to bring in my own team.”

“Your team?” Seven echoes. “And who would that be?”

“The three of you, of course,” she replies, her eyes twinkling with a mixture of invitation and challenge.

“Are you officially asking us to be a part of your scam?” Seven asks, a spark of excitement flashing in his eyes.

“I prefer the word scheme to scam,” Jade says, grinning. “It sounds better, don’t you think? The answer is yes, I’m inviting you to join me and be a part of my team. We all have strengths, and combined, we could make this work. We’ll split our share of the proceeds evenly.”

“Does this include Leroy?” Seven asks. “Is he invited, too?”

“Absolutely,” Jade replies. “He’s a crucial part of the plan because of his security clearance with the casinos. We need him. He’s already deep in our shit due to what happened with Ivan. If he’s going to accept the risks, he should benefit the same as all of us monetarily.”

“I agree. Leroy is as loyal as they come.” Seven nods appreciatively. “Thank you for including him. It sounds as if this is a done deal if Eva agrees.”

“That’s what I’m hoping for,” Jade says.

“Then count me in one hundred percent,” Seven continues. “I’ve been thinking about this ever since you mentioned it the

first time. I have several ideas I'd like to run by you, if you're interested."

"I thought you were against her getting involved with Natasha?" I frown at Seven. "What changed your mind?"

Seven grins back at me. "I've always been intrigued by the idea of pulling off this scheme, probably too much, if I'm being honest. My mind has already gone over a million different ways we could pull this off. My only concern was the risk Jade would be putting herself in. If we're involved too, we can minimize her risk. I wasn't going to encourage Jade to go forward with the plan, but if her mind is made up, then I'll be right beside her. Count me in, Jade. I'm with you every step of the way."

Damn, that's huge.

I turn to Jade. "Are you sure you're aware of the danger you'll be putting yourself in by pulling a scam...excuse me, scheme in the Vegas casinos? We've warned you about Giovanni. The other casino owners are bad men, too."

"I'm aware," Jade replies, her voice calm and determined. "If we plan out every detail, we can greatly reduce our risk. I'll go through with it if Eva agrees to the split, and the plan seems viable once I reverse engineer the slot machine. I'm not as reckless as you seem to believe. We'll be very careful and meticulous about everything. That's why I need Seven. His mind works the same as mine, and he can double check me on every detail. I'm counting on him to be my righthand guy. Everyone knows how damn smart he is."

"I appreciate your confidence in me," Seven says. He glances over at me, curiosity in his eyes. "What are your thoughts on Natasha? Were you able to get a read on her today at the ice bar?"

“Not really,” I reply, recalling Natasha’s demeanor. “She’s tough on the outside, cool and emotionless. I can’t see her and Jade become besties anytime soon, but she struck me as being both competent and smart.”

“Kit is a little intimidated by Natasha,” Jade interrupts me to say. “She offered to give him a job as a stripper at Platinum. You should have seen him the night he carried me out of there. He was magnificent. Like a Viking god, throwing me over his shoulder and taking me out. All the women wanted to be me.”

“No, they didn’t,” I correct, a little embarrassed. “They were just worried about your safety.”

“I guess that’s why they were threatening to throw you down on the floor and have their way with you,” she replies, grinning. When she makes eye contact with me, her eyes soften and I know she’s remembering what happened when I brought her home later that night.

The absolute best night of my life.

There will only be one first time with Jade, and that night was it. A night to remember over and over in my dreams. Her touch, her scent, the special way she looked at me.

“Is it settled then?” Jade asks. “Is everyone joining me in my little scheme, or only Seven?”

“There’s no fucking way I’m letting you do this without me,” Vulcan says. He leans back in his chair, crossing his arms, a determined grin spreading across his face. “I live for thrills. The more dangerous, the better. Of course, I’m in. Like Seven, I didn’t want to encourage you, but if your mind is already made up, then hell yeah, I’m in.”

“And you, Kit?” she asks, turning back to me.

“I’m in,” I say, a tad reluctantly. “Anything I can do to keep you safer, I will.”

“Great!” Jade says, her face lighting up with relief. “There’s only one thing left to settle.” She gets up and moves over to Seven. Looping her arm around the back of his neck, she slides down onto his lap, surprising everyone. The room’s energy shifts, the atmosphere thickening with expectation. Seven places his hands on her hips as she cups his face in her hands and stares directly into his eyes.

“Are you with us in every way?” she asks. “Or just my crazy scheme? Will you move in here too and live with us? We need you, Seven. We all need you. We’re not complete without you. I want all of us here, for breakfast, coffee and midnight Chinese.”

The room goes dead silent.

The question hangs in the air. We all hold our breath, waiting for Seven’s response, knowing that his answer will shape our path forward.

SEVEN

The pivotal moment of truth is finally here. Her eyes, warm and brown, lock onto mine, and within them I see the promise of everything I've ever wanted. Tenderly, my thumb traces her bottom lip.

“How could I ever say no to you?” I confess, finally willing to take the leap of faith she's asking me for. “I'll do anything you ask of me, including moving in here if that's what you want. You're our Queen now in every way. Never forget that.”

Her face lights up with a radiant smile. “How soon can you move? Tomorrow? I'll help you pack.”

I laugh at her infectious excitement. “Sure, why not?” I reply. “I'll only need to bring a few clothes, for starters.”

“Oh, my God,” Kit groans, dropping his head into his hands. “I forgot all about Seven's extensive wardrobe. We'll need to clear an extra room or two just for his clothes. Jade, that's your job for tomorrow. Make room for Seven because he's moving in.” He jumps up and rushes over to grab my shoulders, squeezing them hard, before playfully slapping me heartily on the back. “You're moving in, buddy. I can't believe it. This will be great.”

Jade slides off my lap and moves over to Vulcan. “Make room for me,” she teases. He promptly scoots back, welcoming her onto his lap. “What about you? When are you moving in? Have you made a decision yet?” she asks, wrapping her hands around the back of his neck, her fingers playing with his hair. She draws his head down and he kisses her.

“Will you promise not to freak out if I sleep outside some nights if I can’t breathe indoors?” he asks, drawing back just enough to look into her eyes.

“Only if you promise not to freak out if I sneak into your sleeping bag with you,” she replies. “We want you here. The details can always be worked out later. I’m a flexible girl.”

“Want to show me how flexible you are?” he challenges, sliding his hand up the back of her shirt.

“Maybe later, if you’re a good boy. Or if you’re a very bad man.” She smiles at him, then turns to grin at us. “I have an idea. Who is up for a little challenge? Or are you too tired to play a game?”

“Oh, I can never resist a challenge,” Vulcan says. “What are we playing?”

“Not fucking Russian Roulette, if that’s what you’re thinking,” she snaps back at him. The memory hangs in the air, heavy and unwelcome. “Never again, Vulcan, you promised.”

“And I will keep my promise to you,” he replies, his tone turning serious, a silent vow passing between them. “What’s the game we’re playing tonight? Strip poker? I’m ready. Seven, hand me the deck of cards you’re always carrying in your pocket. Time to get this party started.”

Jade's eyes light up. "No, not strip poker. I have a better idea." She turns to Kit. "Do you put all the animals up at night? Are any of them roaming around loose on the ranch after dark?"

"No, of course not," he replies, puzzled. "There are too many coyotes prowling around to leave the animals out at night, especially any of the large birds. Everything is tucked away safe and sound until morning. Why?"

"Just checking," she says. "Who wants to play hide-and-seek with me?"

"Whoa, now you're talking," Vulcan says, smiling. "You're singing my favorite song, baby. What do we get if we win?"

"Whoever wins gets to call the shots for tonight."

"For everyone?" he clarifies.

"That's right," she says. "If you play, you agree to the rules. The winner calls the shots for tonight. If you can't find me, then I'm in charge."

"Damn, I love it!" Vulcan says. "I'm in. There's nothing better than a good chase."

"I'm in, too," Kit says. "Are we playing outside or inside the house?"

Jade snorts and rolls her eyes at him. "What fun would it be to play inside? We're going outside boys to play hide-and-seek in the dark. My only rule is to give me a five-minute head start."

"Let's make it more of a challenge and give you seven minutes, my lucky number," I say, setting the timer on my

watch. “We’re beginning right now. You better start running fast, Jade, because we’re coming for you. Go!”

She jumps off Vulcan’s lap with a shriek and dashes for the front door. She’s out the door in a flash, not even taking time to shut it closed behind her.

“Six and a half minutes left!” I yell after her. “Run!”

“Are we really going to give her seven minutes?” Kit asks. “She could be halfway to Vegas in seven minutes.”

“That’s the whole point,” Vulcan explains. “It wouldn’t be fun if we found her right away. The hunt is the best part.”

“Are we allowed to use flashlights or the light on our cellphone?” Kit asks, always the stickler for rules. “We should’ve clarified the rules better.”

“Nah, not any artificial lights,” Vulcan says. “She’s not using them, and that would make it unfair.”

“What makes it unfair is that you live outside at night, so you have skills we don’t,” I remind him.

Vulcan chuckles. “Damn straight, I have skills you don’t. What are you afraid of? That I’ll win and make you watch me fuck your girl? Because that’s exactly what’s going to happen. But here’s the thing, Seven. You’ll be fucking her, too. And you’ll fucking love it.”

“How many minutes are left?” Kit asks. “There are sheds and hiding places all over the place. She could be anywhere. We’ll never find her.”

“Four minutes,” I tell him.

“You two motherfuckers should give up right now,” Vulcan says. “There’s no point in you even playing. I could

find her blindfolded. I hope you have stamina, because if I'm in charge, this is going to be a long fucking night."

"Should we split up to find her faster?" Kit suggests. "Pick a direction and I'll take what's leftover since I know the layout of the ranch better than you. Whatever you do, don't go inside any of the animal enclosures. Not that you'd be able to get the locked doors open."

"Damn Kit!" Vulcan says. "We don't have a death wish. You don't need to warn us not to crawl into a tiger pit. Jesus!"

"Just making sure you don't do anything stupid...again," he adds.

"When we exit the house, I'll go left, and Vulcan, you go right," I say. "Kit, you go anywhere else."

"Sounds like a plan," Vulcan agrees. "How many minutes left?"

"Two," I reply.

"Ah, fuck this shit," Vulcan mutters, getting up from the table. "I'm too excited to wait. I'm out of here. Want to join me?"

"Hell yes," I say, right behind him.

We dash out, pausing on the front steps to allow our eyes to adjust.

"Jade!" Vulcan yells out, cupping his hands to force the sound out further. "Ready or not, here we come!"

We sprint into the dense darkness, propelled by adrenaline and the thrill of competition. Vulcan veers right, his figure soon a dark blur against the trees, while Kit takes off to the area behind the garage, the soft thud of his footsteps fading

into the night. I push to the left with the moon casting long, eerie shadows.

A rustling in the bushes beside the house piques my curiosity. I crouch down low. “Jade?” I call out softly, my voice barely above a whisper. Nothing but silence.

I keep moving, not having a clue where she could be hiding. Up ahead, I remember there is a shed where Kit keeps his gardening equipment and lawnmowers. I move toward it, the crunch of gravel beneath my shoes reverberating in the quiet.

In the distance, Vulcan lets out a curse, his frustration cutting through the darkness. He’s already made it quite a distance away from the house. He’ll be the one to find her unless she intentionally allows me or Kit to win. Vulcan tracks for fun and can probably smell the direction she went. It wouldn’t surprise me at all if he already knows exactly where she is at this very moment. He might extend the game for everyone else’s benefit.

I wonder what tonight holds, especially with Vulcan in charge.

Because of course the motherfucker will win.

There’s no doubt in my mind.

I stumble over a low bush and almost twist my ankle. Fuck, I can’t see shit out here. Yet, I hear his footsteps running steadily through the dark, guided only by the moon. I’m realizing Jade’s game is a test for me.

To see how well I’ll play with others tonight.

Only time will tell.

The night might be full of surprises.

VULCAN

We've only been hunting Jade for five minutes, and I've already found her. I've spent years in the unforgiving desert, my senses honed to the slightest change in the air, the softest hint of movement.

That's how I know she's nearby.

Her delicate, sweet fragrance is woven into the dry dust of the land. She smells of wild honeysuckle mixed with fresh rain and a touch of her vanilla hand cream. Her scent calls to me from the west, an invitation to find her and take what's mine.

Closing my eyes, I stand perfectly still and listen. I sense her presence in the desert's whisperings, carried by the slight breeze. The nocturnal insects, normally chirping, have gone dead quiet.

My boots, softened and worn by countless miles, tread lightly, making little more than a murmur against the coarse dirt and gravel. Up ahead, I spot a shadow blending silently with the night.

Leaning down, I pick up a small stone, its rough texture still warm from the sun. I throw it, a perfect arc that lands far to her right, a deceptive sound in the quiet. She whirls around,

her silhouette cutting a sharp line in the glow of the moonlight before she takes off running.

My pulse quickens.

The hunt is on.

She dashes behind a tall shrub to hide, her breathing coming fast and hoarse. I stop running and creep up on her silently, wondering how close I can get before she realizes I'm there.

If she doesn't know already.

I move up closer until I can almost touch her. Her ragged breathing slows to a calm and steady pitch. She's only an arm's length away, her back to me. I drink in the sight of her, hoping to etch it forever in my memory.

Silently, I reach out and softly trail my fingers down the length of her arm. She jumps, her startled gasp slicing through the quietness.

"Guess who?" I whisper.

Seizing her, I tug her against me, my arms forming a sturdy, inescapable cage around her. As we collapse on the ground, I soften the fall, cushioning her with my body before rolling over.

The dust beneath us is cool, a stark contrast to our heated bodies. I feel the prickly stubble of dry desert grass against my palm as I support myself over her. She stares up at me, her heart pounding in a rhythm that matches mine, a rapid beat of primal instincts and raw desires.

Leaning down, my lips search out the silken warmth of her neck, and I give her earlobe a sharp nip.

“Vulcan,” she murmurs, breathing out my name like a prayer. Her voice is the melody that haunts my dreams, a song I hope will be the last sound I hear on this earth. “I knew you would find me,” she says, her hands tangling in my hair and pulling me closer.

“Was there any doubt?” I ask, chuckling against her skin.

“No,” she responds, her voice a rich, velvety whisper echoing with the truth I already suspect. “Why do you think I created the game?”

Her confession illuminates the deeper layers of our playful hunt. She pretended control of the night would fall to the victor, when all along she’s the puppet master of the game, pulling every string.

The realization that she wants *me* in control, that she trusts me with the power, fuels a surge of desire that renders me steel hard.

“You love the hunt as much as I do,” I whisper against her skin, tasting her excitement. “Now, it’s time to claim my prize before the others uncover your hiding spot.”

“Claim me?” she teases, biting my ear hard. “You’ll need to catch me first.”

She twists out from under me, springs to her feet and takes off, sprinting into the darkness. I bite back my roar of laughter as I launch myself off, the thrill of the chase electrifying every step, my heart pounding with anticipation.

It’s a game we both relish, an endless dance of predator and prey, of hunter and the hunted. I watch her silhouette blend into the night, her essence mingling with the magic of the desert. She ignites the hunter inside me and a passion that is as untamed as the wild desert wind whipping up around us.

The hunt is not over. It's only just begun.

I'm on to her game now.

Inside my head, I scream out one word to her.

Run!

I give her a minute's head start to make the chase more fun before I take off after her, realizing she'll make me work harder for her this time around. She hasn't slowed down, and I worry she'll trip or fall in the darkness. She's quick and steady on her feet, though.

For a split-second, I wonder where Kit and Seven are. Probably wandering around lost themselves in the dark. Or at least, Seven might be, not knowing the layout of the ranch. I'm sure Kit is holding back, and not putting forth his best effort in order to throw the win to me. I can't imagine him wanting the power to control the group tonight. He would be too intimidated to force Seven past his comfort zone, and too concerned about his hurt feelings.

I'm not.

And that's why Jade wants me to win. She knows I won't hesitate to push Seven past his limits. That I'll do or say whatever is necessary to draw him back into our group where he belongs. If I have to piss him the fuck off, then so be it. He'll thank me later, of that, I'm sure.

I've almost caught up to Jade now. When she stops and leans over for a second to catch her breath, I tackle her, taking her down to the ground.

VULCAN

“G otcha,” I say.

“You certainly do,” she murmurs in reply, her voice a soft hum of satisfaction. A low, throaty laugh escapes her, and I press my lips against hers to mask the sound, losing myself in her taste.

Her lips are soft and pliant against mine, stoking the ever-present heat between us, a wildfire burning out of control. I deepen the kiss, my tongue exploring the corners of her mouth, tasting her sweetness. Her hands slide up my back, pulling me closer, and I feel her warm breath against my face.

“Tell me what you want,” I whisper, breaking the kiss for a moment.

“You,” she replies, her voice husky with desire. “You’ve won the game.”

I kiss her again, harder this time, my hands roaming over her body, exploring every curve. She moans into my mouth, and I’m desperate to claim my prize.

Quickly, I unzip her jeans and tug them off over her hips. I’m burning to possess her now, here in the dark, before the others find us. Her silky panties soon follow and instantly my

face is buried deep between her legs, licking and kissing, devouring her pussy.

My prize.

“Shhh...baby,” I whisper to her when she can’t hold back a moan.

The last thing I want to do is draw attention to where we are. I want to take my time to savor her in the darkness, to taste the night in her wetness, but my need for her is too great, the ache in my cock too urgent to slow down.

Raising my head, I slide my fingers inside her to find her already slick and wet for me. Her hips buck against my hand, and I drag my thumb over her swollen clit. Her hands reach down to grab my hair, her fingers tightening around my skull. She’s biting her lip, fighting to keep her moans quiet.

“Harder,” she whispers, and my fingers rub faster against her clit. My other hand slides under her shirt and tugs at her nipples, rolling them between my thumb and forefinger as I lean down to tongue her again. She’s going to come apart.

With a loud cry, she comes, and the delicious waves of her orgasm pulse against my tongue. I keep licking her, prolonging this moment when she’s completely and totally mine.

“Vulcan, please,” she whispers. “Fuck me here, now.”

I tug my jeans down over my ass. We don’t have time for me to get completely undressed. The other guys will soon be alerted by the sounds coming from her throat, and they’ll come running.

“I need to be inside you, with your tight pussy squeezing me,” I say. “We don’t have much time. I want you so bad, I could explode all over you right this instant.”

“Hurry,” she whispers. “I’m ready.”

I position myself between her legs and sink deep into her. She’s so slick with desire, I slide into her easily, my cock hitting her deepest spot. We both moan at the sensation, my mouth covering hers to stifle the sounds, and she wraps her legs around my hips. Nowhere in the world is there a feeling as perfect as being buried deep inside my girl. If I died at this moment, my life would be complete.

“Move,” she whispers urgently, begging me to take what’s mine, to claim her over and over again.

With one hard thrust, I’m moving in and out of her, rocking over her sweet spot with every stroke. She holds on to me, her fingernails digging into my back, urging me on with her soft groans. I pump hard and fast, and she meets my every thrust, her body undulating with pleasure under me.

The heat builds between us and I’m holding back, waiting for her to come again. I want her shuddering around me, her mouth crying my name.

And only my name.

I move faster, my hands on her hips, keeping her anchored to me as I pound into her.

“Oh, my god! Fuck! Vulcan!” she cries out, shattering into a million pieces with her orgasm.

My orgasm is building, all my pent up desire for her threatening to escape from my cock. With a loud groan, I pull out quickly, shooting my come onto the ground beside her in a gut-wrenching explosion. When I’m fully spent, I collapse heavily onto her, my weight on my elbows and my face buried against her neck. We lie like that for a long moment, breathing heavily, our hearts beating in unison.

“Jade,” I breathe out, nuzzling the sweet smelling skin of her neck.

I want to tell her how much I need her. How I can't imagine a life without her.

But I can't say the words.

How do I even begin? All I can do is show her with my actions how much she means to me.

“Why did you pull out?” she asks, confused. “You didn't need to do that.”

I raise my head and rub my thumb against her lips. “You'll find out soon,” I say. “Tonight is about bringing Seven back into our group. I want to watch him eat your sweet pussy and I don't think he'd appreciate it being filled with my come.”

“Oh, so you took one for the team, huh?” Laughter bubbles out of her and I kiss her again to muffle the sound of both of us laughing.

In the distance, I hear Kit and Seven talking. They're moving in on us and will figure out where we are at any moment.

“Hurry and get dressed,” I say.

I move off her and tug up my jeans, then reach down to help her up. She holds on to me as she steps into her clothes and smooths down her hair.

“Am I presentable?” she asks.

Reaching over, I pick a piece of a twig out of her hair. “Now you are.” I cup my hands around my mouth and yell at the guys. “Found her!” I shout. “She's over here.”

“You found her?” Kit yells back. “Great! Bring her on in!”

“Okay, be there in a minute!” I turn to smile at Jade. “Are you ready for this? Things might get a little tense with Seven. I’m not sure how he’ll handle all the caring and sharing.”

She draws in a deep breath. “I’m ready as I’ll ever be. He said he wanted in with us, so tonight’s the test. You’re in charge since you won the game. Make me proud, Vulcan.”

“You’re sure?” I confirm. “It was just a game, and I already won my prize.”

She leans closer and takes my face in her hands. “Vulcan, you’re the one I chose to be in charge tonight. You’re in complete control starting now. Let’s go.”

I pick her up and sling her over my shoulder. “Your wish is my command.”

SEVEN

“I found her!” Vulcan calls out from the darkness, his voice ringing with triumph.

No surprise there.

“Bring her on in!” Kit yells to Vulcan.

I walk towards their voices, unable to spot them yet. The damp night air clings to my skin, and I’m apprehensive about what the night will hold.

As I approach, I see Vulcan’s silhouette against the moonlit sky, carrying Jade over his shoulder. She laughs and squirms, clearly enjoying the game.

Vulcan sets her down on the ground, and she immediately moves closer to Kit, her body language playful and teasing. I’m the odd man out, and I remind myself it’s a position I put myself in.

“I won!” Vulcan shouts to me, holding up his fist.

“Congratulations,” I call back, being a good sport.

“What took you guys so long?” Jade teases. “I was starting to get bored waiting for someone to find me. What were you planning to do? Leave me out there all night by myself?”

“We were giving you a chance to hide,” Kit jokes, grinning from ear to ear.

“I’m just glad Vulcan found you, so I can stop stumbling around in the dark,” I say, rubbing the back of my neck. “I can’t see jackshit out here. Guess I’m not cut out to be a wilderness guy.”

“That’s okay.” Jade moves to stand in front of me, her eyes softening. “There are a lot better things you’re cut out for, Seven. Want to go back to the house and find out what some of those things might be?”

I reach out to draw her to me, and she takes off running again. Her laughter rings in my ears, both inviting and challenging.

“What the fuck?” I turn around to the guys and throw my hands up in the air. “Now we need to chase her? Damn, she’s full of energy tonight.”

“Well, it’s a good thing there’s three of us to help burn off some of that energy of hers, right?” Kit says to me, winking. “Because I’m not sure one of us could handle her all by ourselves. She’s one hot firecracker.”

“Run along, Seven,” Vulcan says, waving a hand toward Jade’s disappearing figure. “She threw that challenge down to you. We’ll meet up with you at the house in a few minutes. Go catch our girl and warm her up for us.”

I take off after Jade, running fast. Her laughter echoes through the darkness, spurring me on. As I catch up to her, I reach out and grab her waist, pulling her towards me with a force that almost makes her lose her balance. She looks up at me, her eyes sparkling with mischief and desire.

“You caught me,” she says, her voice husky. “What are you going to do with me now?”

I wrap my arms around her, pulling her body close to mine. “I’m going to make you scream my name,” I whisper in her ear. I kiss her neck, my lips trailing down to her collarbone, her hands gripping my shoulders. She responds with equal fervor, her tongue darting out to meet mine. Her hands roam over my body, pulling me closer to her.

As we break apart, gasping for breath, Jade whispers in my ear, “I want you. Take me back to the house and show me what you can do, Seven. It’s been too long since you were inside me. I missed you.”

I lift her up into my arms and carry her the short distance back to the house, my heart pounding with anticipation. As we enter her bedroom, I gently lay her down on the bed. She watches me with hungry eyes, her fingers playing with the edge of my shirt.

I crawl onto the bed and hover over her. She arches her back, pressing herself against me, her heat seeping through her clothes. With one swift motion, I tug off her shirt, revealing her lacy red bra.

“You’re so beautiful,” I whisper, trailing kisses down her neck and chest to her breasts. “How did you know red is my favorite color?” She laughs softly, her fingers tangling in my hair.

“Are you sure you want this?” I draw back to ask.

“More than anything,” she replies, pulling my face back down to hers. “I want you here with us more than anything. We’re not complete without you.”

Her lips are soft and warm against mine, and I lose myself in the moment. She breaks the kiss, her eyes dark with desire.

“Take off your shirt,” she commands, her voice husky. “I love touching your chest muscles.”

I do as she says. I’m not sure what to expect next, but I trust her. And I trust the other guys too.

The front door to the house slams, and the sound of voices startles us both. Before I can move, Kit and Vulcan open the door and step inside. Vulcan crosses his arms and leans against the doorway, watching but not speaking a word.

Kit glances at us, quickly taking in the scene, then walks over to sit down carefully on the bed beside Jade, the mattress sinking under his weight. Leaning down, he captures her lips in a slow kiss. She shifts her hands from my chest to his neck, pulling him closer as the kiss deepens.

As my lips travel down her body, Kit’s hands move to her shoulders, massaging them slowly as she arches her back to give me better access. She trails her fingers up his arm, and he breaks the kiss to smile at her.

When I glance up, I catch the tenderness in his eyes and my chest constricts. Jade belongs to all of us, and I need to get past my own insecurities before I fuck everything up. I’m so fucking lucky to be one of the men she’s chosen to give her body and heart to.

Yet, I’m still slightly surprised when Kit moves from her lips down her chest to the valley between her large breasts. His touch is intimate, familiar, as if he’s done this many times before. When she moans her approval, he quickly undoes the front clasp to her bra, and slides it off her arms before

returning to her breasts. He takes a hard nipple into his mouth and sucks softly, tugging and nipping.

Jade arches her back with pleasure. Her hand moves to Kit's shirt, pulling it up over his head and throwing it aside. She runs her fingers across his chest and back, her eyes wide with desire.

I slide further down her stomach, my lips leaving a trail of wet kisses. My cock is hard and throbbing as I take in the erotic scene in front of me.

This is what I've been waiting for, what we've all been waiting for.

When I slide my hand between her legs, Jade gasps and arches her back even further, one of her hands now moving to clutch my arm. I feel her wetness as I tease her, circling her clit with my fingers. She moans, her body almost shaking with pleasure.

"Fuck," she whispers, her eyes still closed. "Don't stop."

I glance over to see Vulcan still standing in the doorway, arms crossed, casually watching us with an inscrutable expression on his face.

"Enjoying the show?" I ask.

"Oh, yeah," he says, his voice deep. "So much that I may have to jump in." He walks over to the bed and leans down to leisurely kiss Jade. He slides a hand down to caress her breast while Kit is sucking the nipple on the other. "How are you doing, baby?" he murmurs to her. "Are these boys treating you good?"

"Oh, yes," she breathes.

He strips off completely and tosses his clothes into a pile on the floor. Crawling onto the bed behind her, he pulls her up to rest her back against him, his legs on either side of her body.

“Have they not made you come yet?” he asks her, nuzzling her ear. He reaches around her to play with her nipple.

“Not yet,” she says.

“Want me to tell them what to do since I won the game?” he asks, a tinge of amusement in his voice.

Oh boy, here we go.

“Yes,” she says. “You’re in charge tonight, that’s the rules.”

Fuck.

“Then spread your legs wider, baby, so Seven can eat your sweet pussy the way you deserve,” he says. “Give him room to get in there deep with his tongue.”

I use my hands to spread her legs wider apart, giving me better access to her sweet pussy. I kiss a path between her thighs, then dip my tongue between her legs to lick her sweet nectar. The taste is heaven; sweet, salty and addictive as fuck.

I can’t get enough. I want it all.

“Oh my God, Seven,” she whispers, her voice breathy when I slide my tongue inside her, eating her like a starving man.

“You’re fucking delicious,” I say, raising my head from her thigh to look up at her.

It’s not just the taste alone, but the sounds she’s making, how wet she’s getting. The taste of Jade’s pussy is so fucking sweet. I’ve never come across anything like it.

“Are you ready for me to make you come with my tongue?” I ask her.

“Yes,” she whispers.

“Isn’t her pussy the best fucking taste in the world?” Vulcan asks. “Nothing better, except when she comes on your face until you’re soaked. Do you want Seven to make you come on his face?”

“Yes,” she whispers, spreading her legs wider for me.

Damn, this is a turn on that I wasn’t expecting.

I use my mouth and tongue on her pussy like a man possessed, licking and sucking on her clit, swirling my tongue inside of her. She moans as I lick her, her hands fisting in my hair, pulling it tight.

Her eyes are closed, her head thrown back on Vulcan’s shoulder. He has a possessive arm wrapped around her waist, a hand on her breasts, playing with her nipples.

Fuck, this is so much hotter than I imagined.

Seeing her sprawled naked in front of me, Kit sucking her tits and Vulcan watching us, talking to her, urging her towards orgasm. My cock is throbbing and I’m dying to sink into her tight pussy.

She opens her eyes and looks at me, a hot flame of lust burning in them. Her thighs quiver against my head. I know she’s getting close.

“Oh, my fucking God, Seven, what are you doing to me?” she cries out, her voice rising in pitch. “Oh, fuck yes, right there!”

Her body trembles, and I grip her thighs tightly, holding her still as she comes in an explosive orgasm on my tongue

and mouth. Vulcan grins at me, knowing how much I'm fucking loving all this, his fingers twisting Jade's nipple roughly while Kit pulls her other nipple taut between his teeth.

When her orgasm ends and her breathing slightly slows, Vulcan slides out from behind her. "Get on your knees," he tells her. "I want to watch Seven fuck you from behind."

Jade scrambles to do as he says and spins around to present her backside to me like a goddamn gift. She's gorgeous, kneeling there with her ass in the air, her wet pussy glistening wet.

I position myself behind her and spread her ass cheeks with my hands, then line up my cock and push it into her pussy hard. She gasps at the suddenness of the intrusion. I don't move for a moment, savoring the sensation of her hot pussy clenching around my cock.

"Fuck, you're so tight," I whisper, almost losing my composure. I begin to move faster, picking up the pace. As I thrust into her, I feel her tightening around me. "Is that good?"

"Yes, don't stop!" she whimpers.

"Kit, move around and get in front of her," Vulcan orders, motioning to him. "Jade, can you take Kit's cock in your mouth? Will he fit? Just look at that goddamn monster hanging between his legs. He's a freak of nature."

Jade nods and Kit moves to get in front of her, his eyes locked on hers. He grips his cock and strokes it slowly, then leans forward, pressing the huge head between her lips. She takes his shaft deep into her mouth, opening wide as if she's done this before to him.

"That's it," Vulcan murmurs, smoothing his hand down her back and over her hip. "You're taking them both inside you

like a good fucking girl. You're so beautiful like this, baby. I love watching you fuck." He slides behind Kit to watch us over his shoulder. "Don't close your eyes, Jade. Keep your eyes on me. I want to watch your face when they both come inside you. Eyes on me."

Her eyes fix on his as Kit thrusts faster into her mouth and I fuck her from behind. She gags when Kit's cock hits the back of her throat, and she opens her mouth wider to take it all the way in. Tears spring from her eyes and slide down her cheeks.

I grip her hips tighter and keep thrusting into her, and she whimpers around Kit's cock.

"Fuck her harder, Seven," Vulcan says, watching us. "Feel how tight she is? Make her come all over your cock. Don't stop until she comes."

I don't stop, and I don't slow down.

I don't even fucking mind that Vulcan is giving me orders and telling me what to do because it's exactly what I want to do. It's like he's a goddamn fucking mind reader.

I up the pace, slamming into her harder. It's clear she can take it and wants it raw and fast.

"Slap her ass," Vulcan says. "Not too hard," he adds quickly when I draw back my hand. I deliver a sharp slap to one side of her ass and then the other, turning her pale skin slightly pink.

"Fuck, your mouth is so wet," Kit groans as drives into her mouth deeper. Her lips tighten and clench on his cock, milking him.

Vulcan's hand is on his dick, and he's stroking himself as he watches. Jesus Christ! This is a fuck fest.

“Come for us,” Kit says in a low growl as he grabs the back of her head and thrusts faster. “Fuck!” he says, holding her tight as he shoots his come into her mouth. She doesn’t pull back and swallows as much as she can until it overflows onto her chin.

“Keep your eyes on me,” Vulcan tells her again, sensing she’s ready to come too.

I slap her ass one more time and sense the start of her orgasm as she tightens around me, and the sensation sends me over the edge. I can’t hold it any longer, and I slam into her one more time, coming deep inside of her. I strain against her, trying to catch my breath as her muscles clench around my cock. Her legs shake and her fingers dig into the sheets, her whole body convulses as she comes with us.

The sight of her coming, the sounds from her throat are glorious. Seeing her like this is every man’s fantasy come to life. She takes everything we give her and still wants more.

With a loud groan, Kit slides his cock out of her mouth and rolls out of the way. Vulcan switches places with him and takes her face in his hands. He slides his thumb through the wet liquid sliding down her chin, a mixture of saliva and Kit’s come, then rubs her lips with it. She opens her mouth and sucks his thumb clean.

He lines up his hard cock to her mouth and traces her lips with it before rubbing the head against her wet lips. “Open for me,” he says. She opens her mouth eagerly, and he pushes his cock past her lips. “Suck me,” he orders, threading his hands through her hair.

He thrusts his cock into her mouth, holding her head tight to keep it at just the right angle for him to fuck. He reaches down with one hand to grasp her breasts and pinch her nipples.

With his other hand, he holds her head tight to make his cock slide even deeper.

“Want me to fuck your pussy too?” he asks.

She moans around his cock, and he slides out of her mouth. “Which way do you want it?” he asks, rubbing the tip of his cock across her wet lips.

“Missionary,” she says, “I want to wrap my arms around you and feel your weight on me.”

In a flash, he flips her over, spreads her legs wide again, and sinks his cock deep into her. I roll to the side, out of his way to watch. I’m unable to take my eyes from the bliss on Jade’s face, her lush breasts jiggling with every thrust, the way her hands slide from his shoulders down his arms, then to grip his ass, pulling him in deeper.

“Play with her tits,” he tells us, and we gladly oblige. Both of us reach over to fondle the heavy weight of her breasts and pinch the nipples.

Jade licks her lips, her breathing heavy. *Fuck!* She’s almost ready to come again.

Kit and Vulcan were one hundred percent right. Sharing Jade is fucking amazing in every way. Anything I had with her on my own is nothing compared to what we’re sharing together.

“Fuck, I’m coming,” Vulcan roars, sinking deeper into her pussy. He collapses onto her, pressing our hands under his weight against her breasts. He nuzzles her neck and whispers words into her ear that we can’t hear.

She grips his muscular ass tightly in both hands and holds him completely still when he starts to move off her. “No, stay,

don't move," she tells him, running her hands up and down his tattooed back. "Don't pull out yet."

I slide my hand off her breast and out from under him, and she reaches over to grab it. "Don't you go anywhere either," she tells me before grabbing Kit's hand, too. She throws her head back in contentment and lets out a long sigh. "That was amazing," she says, laughing softly. "I think you guys might've finally worn me out." Her head turns and her eyes seek mine. "How are you holding up, Seven? Is everything okay? I'm glad you're here now."

"Me too," I reply, leaning over to softly kiss her lips. "I'm never leaving."

JADE

The next day at Platinum...

“I need everyone to be on your best behavior today,” I say to the guys, my gaze lingering on Vulcan, who’s reclining in the plush limo seat, his arms crossed. His tattooed biceps shift beneath his black shirt as he raises his eyebrows at me.

We’re all in the limo together on our way to Platinum for our first official planning meeting. After being up most of the night, I’m surprised any of us can keep our eyes open. Yet, the guys look alert and refreshed, and I’m wired up tight with excitement about finally moving forward with Natasha and our plan.

“Why are you staring at me?” Vulcan asks, his dark eyes challenging me. “What do you think I’m going to do? I can behave when I need to.”

“Is that right?” I reply, folding my arms and leaning back, my tone laced with skepticism. “I have my doubts. Just don’t say or do anything to antagonize Eva or Natasha. This is a good deal for us. We can’t screw it up or do something to cause them to back out of the deal.”

“I won’t say a word,” Vulcan assures me. “I’m merely here to observe. Seven can do all the talking for the three of us.

Besides, Kit and I are only here as bodyguards to protect you. Our role is to be silent and scary. Nothing more.”

“Where do you want me to let you all out?” Leroy yells over his shoulder from the driver’s seat. “At the front door of the club?”

“No, definitely not,” I reply. “She said to pull around the building and park near the back door. I’ll text her to tell her we’ve arrived. She’ll unlock the back door and let us in where we won’t be noticed.”

Leroy pulls the limo around to the empty alley behind Platinum. I send a text to her, and we wait for her to unlock the door.

“Maybe I should wait here in the limo,” Leroy says. “I’m not fond of leaving it unprotected in a back alley.”

“Suit yourself,” Seven says. “It doesn’t make a difference to me. I doubt I’ll need a bodyguard in an empty male strip club. If you’re more comfortable sitting out here, it’s fine.”

The back door to the club swings open and Natasha motions for us to come in. I lead the way, followed closely by the three guys.

She raises her eyebrows at me when we reach her. “I see you brought your bodyguards,” she says, giving the men a closer inspection.

“You’ve already met Kit and Seven.” I reach for Vulcan’s tattooed arm and tug him closer. “This is Vulcan. Vulcan, meet Natasha.”

She appraises him coolly, taking in his tattoos and scars. “I’ve heard of you, Vulcan,” she says. “The man without fear.”

I frown at her, wondering how she knew that since I haven't said anything to her about Vulcan. Vulcan gives her a curt nod in return.

“Come inside to meet Eva,” Natasha says, stepping back to hold open the door for us to pass through. “She’s waiting for us downstairs. There’s something there I wish to show you, Jade.”

We follow her along the hallway, to a double-locked door. She punches a keycode to unlock it before pulling it open. In front of us is a long set of metal steps leading down into a dimly lit basement.

Kit shoots me a concerned glance and hesitates at the top of the stairs, his protective instincts on high alert. He’s worried about us going down into the basement. I’m not crazy about the idea either.

“One of us should wait here,” he says. “In case there’s trouble.”

“Are you scared of dark basements?” Natasha asks in an amused tone. “There will be no trouble, Cat Man. We’re all on the same side here. You’ll want to see what is down there.”

“I’m certain it’s fine,” I reassure him.

“Be careful walking down the stairs and hold on to the railing,” she advises, going in front of me. “I’ve almost fallen before. Only King, Eva and I are allowed in this room. And now all of you. I hope you realize the great trust we’re placing by sharing our secret.”

I make my way carefully behind her down the narrow metal steps. When we reach the basement, I glance around the big, windowless room. It’s chilly, empty, and drab except for one thing.

A fully functioning slot machine is in the middle of the room with a high-backed leather chair sitting in front of it. The game's name 'Peggy Penguin' is scrawled across the front of the machine in glowing, bright pink lettering, a startling contrast to the bleak surroundings.

I recognize the machine immediately. I've seen several of them before in various casinos. It's a popular game, particularly with older women. The slot machine is colorful, cheerful, and fun. The appeal is understandable. After all, who can resist penguins? Along with the game's white baby seals, seagulls, and colorful treasure chests filled with glittering jewels.

I hear high heels clicking on the metal stairs behind us and I turn around. Eva is carefully making her way down. Her auburn hair is neatly pulled back, and her dress accentuates her curvy figure as she approaches.

"Welcome to our secret," she says, waving a hand at the slot machine.

I quickly make introductions, exchanging formalities, then walk over to examine the machine more closely.

"Do you want to see it in action?" Eva asks.

"Of course," I say.

She inserts a special key into the side. Instantly, the machine sparkles to life. The bright neon lights sparkle, casting a warm, cheerful glow across the dreary room. Loud carnival music blasts from the speakers, interrupted only by the occasional clink-clink-clink noise designed to imitate falling coins.

"Want to try it?" she asks me with an amused smile. "Sit down in the chair. Make yourself comfortable. This might be

your new office for a while.”

I walk over to inspect it, running my hand over the smooth surface. “How did it end up here in the basement of Platinum?”

“I’ll let Natasha explain,” Eva says. “She knows the history of the machine better than I do. If you have questions, ask her first. She’s the one who brought it here.”

Natasha walks over to the slot machine and runs a hand with perfectly manicured nails along the top. Flicking off a tiny speck of dust with a finger, she rubs the spot until it shines.

“Peggy Penguin is my baby,” she says, giving it a loving pat. “Straight from Russia. She traveled on a long, difficult journey to arrive here in the United States. Along the way, there were many stops. Now she is finally here with me.”

It’s weird how she’s talking about it, as if it’s a living, breathing thing.

“Before I tell the story, do you already know how Peggy Penguin arrived here?” Natasha asks.

“No idea,” I reply. “Please tell me. I’m curious to hear how you managed to steal something this big from the Russian mob.”

“Okay,” she says. “I will tell you. Putin shut down almost all the casinos because of the Russian mafia. His plan was to take away their power by removing the casinos. When he shut down the casinos, over one hundred thousand slot machines were put on the open market. They were sold to casinos all over the world. Peru, Macao, Nice. Some were secretly sold to private buyers. These wealthy buyers brought in hackers to open the machines and crack the computer code.”

I nod, though I don't know much about Putin and the Russian mob. Until I started doing research on Natasha, I didn't realize they ever had casinos in Russia. Math is my game, not world history.

"How long have you had this slot machine?" I ask.

"Long enough," Natasha answers. "We have patiently waited."

"For what?"

"For you," she says with a smile. "Or someone with your precise skills. Do you know how slot machines work?"

"Of course," I reply. "They work by randomly generating numbers. But as I've already explained to the guys, there's no such thing as a random sequence of numbers in anything man-made. Only events in nature are truly random."

Natasha nods her head. "Smart is this girl," she says to Eva. "Jade already knows what needs to be done."

"Do all the Peggy Penguin slot machines contain the same source code?" I ask.

"Not only the Peggy Penguin slot machines," Eva replies. "Every single machine made by the Australian manufacturer, Prestige Gaming. They were sloppy and lazy in their work. Russian hackers were able to reverse engineer the codes with only a fast laptop computer and time."

"How long did it take them?" I ask, already knowing the answer from my research. I want to make sure everything I've discovered about the scheme is correct. So far, she's confirming everything I've already told the guys about the machines.

“From two days to no more than a week if they knew what they were doing,” Eva replies.

“Once the machines were reverse engineered, then what happened? They shipped those hacked machines out to casinos?”

“No,” Eva answers. “There was no need to tamper with the machines themselves. That would be too risky. The code repeats itself over and over. If you know your position in the code, you can predict wins. All you need to do is synchronize your clock on a laptop to the machine. And then practice on a real machine hidden away.”

She glances at me to make sure I’m understanding the process, and I nod back at her.

“Casino security becomes suspicious when they spot someone with a high-powered laptop sitting for hours in front of a slot machine,” she continues. “This process requires a team. One person can’t possibly pull it off alone. And now we have our team...you, me, Natasha, and my assistant, King.”

“Don’t forget I brought my own team with me,” I say, pointing to the three men standing behind me.

“Including your team is still up for discussion,” Eva says firmly. “I haven’t agreed to that point yet. This is a very risky operation, and these men are all well known in Vegas. Their involvement will draw attention, which is the last thing we want to do. Not to mention the most obvious question of what their roles on the team would even be?”

“We haven’t worked through all the details yet,” I explain. “In the meantime, they’re part of the team as my protection. I need them with me and they’re staying. We’re a package deal.

Obviously, we won't be sending them in to play the slots at the casinos. But they *will* be part of the plan."

Eva lets out a resigned sigh. "As you wish," she says. "Are you confident of your ability to reverse engineer the code?"

"One hundred percent," I reply.

"The slot machine can't be moved from this secure location," she says. "You'll need to complete the work here in this room."

"No way!" Seven interrupts to say. "Jade can't work in a gloomy basement. She'll go nuts down here. Why can't we move it somewhere else? At least upstairs where there are windows and light."

"The machine isn't going anywhere," Eva replies. "We can bring in anything Jade wants or needs. She won't be working down here for more than a few days. Surely, she can tolerate the conditions until the reverse engineering is finished."

"I don't like this setup at all," Vulcan says, frowning at her. "Especially with her being cooped up in a basement. We'll stay with her as long as she's here."

Eva arches her eyebrows at him. "All of you? How is she supposed to concentrate with the three of you sitting there staring at her?"

"I'll be fine," I reassure them. "You're being overprotective, and I'm eager to get started. Plus, you all have jobs to go to. Remember? Once I begin, this will be an almost twenty-four-hour a day project for me with very little sleep. I don't need you all hovering around me, breaking my concentration."

"Then one of us will stay here with you at all times," Kit says. "We'll take turns. That's non-negotiable. If Eva can bring

in a sofa or comfortable chair for us to use, we promise not to be a distraction. We want this to be done fast.”

“I can certainly bring in more furniture,” Eva says, nodding at his suggestion. “Jade, you’re welcome to use my personal bathroom upstairs, which also has a nice shower. I also work long hours. We can bring in a cot or small bed for you to take naps when you’re tired.”

“A cot will work,” I say.

“Then tell me what else you need to get started, and I’ll make sure you get it,” Eva says.

I blow out a long breath and sit down in the chair to scrutinize the machine. “I brought my laptop with me,” I say. “It’s out in the limo. The laptop is strong enough to work. I’ll also need a large external disk drive for storage space. I’ll give you a list of exactly what to purchase.”

Eva pulls out her cellphone and starts typing in the list that I quickly ramble off. “That’s it?” she confirms when I finish.

“Along with a tool set to open the back of the machine and a big pot of coffee,” I say. “Black, no cream or sugar. A basket of snacks would be nice and lamps to give me better lighting. If I’m spending days down here, you need to brighten this basement up. Otherwise, I’ll go stir crazy. You could grow mushrooms in this place. A dehumidifier is a necessity too.”

“I apologize for the less than optimal conditions,” Eva says. “Secrecy is crucial. The risk was too great to keep the machine upstairs where someone could stumble upon it.”

“I will buy the lamps,” Natasha offers, giving me a genuine smile. The first one I’ve seen from her. “And food. Don’t worry, we will take good care of you. I will make this a happy place for you to work.”

“I have a few remaining questions before I begin,” I say. “How much money are we talking about here if we can pull this off?”

“The Russians pulled down nearly half a million per week with just a small crew in European casinos,” Eva says. “The key is to move around quickly, hitting as many machines and casinos as possible. In and out before the casinos realize they’ve been hit.”

I blink in surprise. “Wow, that’s quite a haul. Are we limited to one win per machine?”

“No,” she replies. “That’s the key. You can win more than once on each machine as long as you don’t draw attention.”

“If the manufacturer knows there’s a bug in the code, why don’t they fix it?” I ask.

“The manufacturer has sold thousands of these machines to casinos across the world,” Eva replies. “It would be too expensive to repair them all. It’s cheaper to take the occasional hit from hackers.”

“This is mind-blowing,” I say. “What is the possible payout on the upside?”

“In Vegas on a busy night such as Christmas Eve?” Eva says. “Over a million easy with a large team. If all goes well, we can do a repeat run soon. There would be costs, of course. We would need to pay a small cut to people willing to redeem the winning tickets for cash. I have many loyal friends who would gladly do this for me.”

“Do you trust them?” I ask.

“With my life,” Eva says. “I’ve helped many people over the years.”

“I’ve heard that you save people,” I say.

“Yes, and sometimes they save me,” she replies.

“Okay,” I say, rubbing my temples. “We need to break down the math on this so it will make sense to everyone. How many casinos can we safely hit in one night?”

“We could hit five to ten big casinos, while blending into the Christmas Eve crowds,” Eva replies. “This will be easy once we put our system in place. We’ll do several small trial runs until everyone is confident in their roles.”

She turns to Natasha. “Why don’t we get started on Jade’s shopping list and give her breathing space for a few minutes? We’ll be back as soon as we have the items you requested. If you need anything while we’re gone, here is my assistant, King’s, number.” She hands me a slip of paper. “He’s upstairs, working on his routine for tonight.”

When they go back upstairs and leave us alone, I walk around to check the back. The thought of breaking open the slot machine and diving headfirst into the source code gives me a huge shot of adrenaline.

“Well, what do you think?” I turn to ask the guys who are standing there watching me closely with concerned expressions.

“I don’t like the idea of you working here,” Vulcan says. “I would go batshit crazy in this basement, not being able to be out in the fresh air or see the sun. I hate it down here.”

I reach over to squeeze his shoulder. “I don’t think it would be healthy for you to spend much time down here with me for that reason. Why don’t you allow Seven and Kit to babysit me while I’m here?”

“And go days without seeing you?” he asks. “Not going to happen, baby. I might not like it, but I’ll deal with it. You’re not getting rid of me that easily. Besides, who else would bring you junk food and soft drinks? I’m not giving up my spot due to lack of lighting.”

“Do you really think you can reverse engineer the code?” Seven asks.

“There’s no doubt I can do it.” I smile and give the machine a pat. “I think Peggy Penguin and I will become good friends. I can’t wait to break her code and discover how she works.”

“We’re all in with you now,” Seven says. “Tell us what you need, and we’ll be here for you.”

I reach up to cup his face in my hands. “Have I told you lately how happy I am that you didn’t leave us? You’re my righthand guy and I need you for this. I wouldn’t dream of going forward without you.”

Reaching over, I draw the other two men closer into a football huddle around me.

I whisper in case there are hidden cameras in the room, “When I finish this, Eva and Natasha won’t be the only ones with the valuable source code. We’ll have our hands on it, too. The sky’s the limit, gentlemen. This is the beginning of something big.”

JADE

Thirty-six hours later in the basement of Platinum...

“It’s time to take a break,” Natasha says firmly. She places a steaming hot mug of black coffee on the table beside the Peggy Penguin slot machine. “I insist. You need sleep and real food. You must stop working.”

“Only a few minutes longer,” I reply. I reach over and take a sip of the coffee. “Thank you. The coffee will work wonders to perk me right up again. It’s a miracle drug.”

“Living on coffee and donuts is no good,” she says, frowning down at me. “Tell me what you want to eat, and I’ll get it for you. But only if it is healthy food.”

“I’m not hungry,” I say truthfully. “Or tired.”

She glances around the empty basement. “Where are your bodyguards? I thought one was supposed to be with you at all times?”

“That was their ridiculous rule, not mine,” I reply. “They’re making me nervous, sitting there watching me every second. I sent Kit upstairs in search of orange juice, hoping you would sneak down while he was gone and bring me coffee instead. And here you are, being a lifesaver.”

She gives me a worried look. “We’ve waited this long to learn the secrets of Peggy Penguin,” she says. “A day or two more won’t make a difference. Please eat. It makes me worry when you don’t eat. You’re too thin.” She touches my forearm. “Your arms are too skinny. Why won’t you come upstairs to sleep on the sofa in Eva’s office? It’s more comfortable than a cot. I will stand guard outside the door to make certain you are not disturbed by dancing men wearing thongs.”

I laugh and take another sip of coffee. Natasha is a mystery that I can’t figure out. Who could ever imagine the beautiful, blonde to be the motherly type?

Yet, here she is.

Hovering over me constantly, like a worried Momma Hen. Every few hours she comes downstairs into the basement carrying trays of assorted snacks, muffins, candy bars and coffee to tempt me.

Last night, she hauled down a deep-dish pizza in a cardboard box. She scolded me when I reached over to grab a slice of pizza with my left hand while still typing nonstop with my right. I didn’t want to stop long enough to eat.

I’ve been working on reverse engineering the code for thirty-six hours straight. I’m so close now, I can taste it. The finish line is in sight, and I won’t stop until it’s done.

“I’m fine, really,” I say, trying to reassure her. “I’m used to working without sleep for long stretches of time. In college, we would do three all-nighters in a row while cramming for exams. We also did weekend team coding contests. Those were the worst. Sometimes we’d fall dead asleep right onto our laptops in the middle of the competition.”

“You did those contests for fun and not money?” she asks, lifting her eyebrows in question. “Why would you do that?”

“For the challenge and also to prove something,” I explain. “Most of my classmates were male, so it was always a double victory when our all-girls team won. We needed to prove to ourselves and to the men we were as capable as they were.”

She nods her head in understanding. “Ah...so the girls stick together in American schools. That is smart. We need to show the men we have brains too. They think we’re all tits and pussy. That we cannot think for ourselves.” She taps the side of her head. “They do not realize what we have in here,” she continues. “Until it’s too late. Then they’re sorry for thinking we are stupid with no brain.”

I stop typing the code on my laptop and stare up at her in curiosity. “It sounds as if you’re talking about one man, not men in general. Am I right?”

“No, not one man,” she says with a shake of her head. “All men. They’re all the same. They give women no respect. The men believe we are there to cook for them, clean their house, suck their cock. Tell them how strong and smart they are. Make them feel good about themselves while they treat us like dog shit. All the time we know deep down in here,” she pats her heart, “that we are the smart ones. You and me. We know. Do we not, Jade?”

I smile and nod in agreement. “No argument from me on that point.”

“Now we will show them.”

I stand up to stretch my sore back and shoulders. I’m getting stiff from sitting in the same position for too long. I rub the back of my sore neck, then bend over to touch my toes.

“I hope so,” I say, reaching up high toward the ceiling with my arms to work out the kinks.

“You can do this,” she says in a confident voice. “We all have faith in you.”

“When you go back upstairs, tell Eva that I’m almost done. It shouldn’t take much longer for the program to finish running.”

Natasha beams at me. “You’re a clever girl. We’re happy you’re here. I hope you’ll stay in Vegas a long time. There will always be a place with us for someone with your special skills.” When I don’t answer, she raises her eyebrows at me. “You don’t believe me?” she asks. “You think I’m insincere?”

I glance back down at my laptop and say nothing.

“You don’t trust me,” she says in a disappointed voice.

I let out a long sigh and turn toward her. “No, I don’t completely trust you. I would be crazy to. Nothing personal. Maybe if we had all met under different circumstances, it would be different.”

“Trust doesn’t come easily in my country, either. It’s better to be that way. Trust no one, only yourself. When the other person proves themselves to you, only then can you give your trust away.”

“Do you trust Eva?” I ask. “The two of you seem close.”

“With my life,” she says firmly. “More than anyone in this world. I owe her everything. She saved me.”

“What’s the deal with her?”

“What do you mean?” she asks, her eyes narrowing at my question.

“Eva already has money and a successful business,” I say. “Why would she want to be involved in this? Why take the risk? I don’t get it.”

Natasha’s face grows guarded, and she glances away from me. Talking about Eva makes her uncomfortable.

“Eva has her reasons for the things she does,” she replies carefully. “I don’t question why. My reasons are simple. With me, it’s all about money and the security money brings. I never want to go hungry again.”

“Your relationship with Eva seems to be more than business,” I say. “Are you sure you’re not together as a couple? You can tell me, you know. No judgement here.”

Natasha bursts out laughing. “This is the second time you’ve asked me this. No! Eva is a widow. And I prefer men...when they’re good to me. If they’re bad, then not so much.”

“Eva’s husband is dead?” I ask, shocked. Eva can’t be more than in her mid-thirties at the most. Too young to lose a husband. “What happened?”

“There was a house fire,” she replies casually after a moment’s hesitation. “Her husband was passed out drunk in his bed. He didn’t wake up or smell the smoke until it was too late. They didn’t find his body until the next day, charred beyond recognition among the ashes.”

I’m stunned. What a tragic thing to happen to a young woman.

“Where was Eva when the fire broke out?”

“Not there,” Natasha replies curtly. “She was out of town visiting friends. Don’t waste tears for her husband. He was a bad man. Eva is better off without him. She is free now.”

I blink and take another long sip of coffee. There is much more to Eva than I first thought.

“How did the fire start?” I ask. “Did they ever find out?”

“Johnny was a chain smoker and a heavy drinker. He fell asleep with a lit cigarette on the bed. Luckily for Eva, he had a large life insurance policy through his employer. She bought Platinum with the money and made a new life for herself. A safe life. Now there are no more bad men. Only friends who care about her, the same as she cares about us. We will protect her now.”

“Wow,” I say, unsure of how else to react. “That’s a crazy story.”

“Yes, sometimes tragedy works out for the best.”

Natasha is blunt, if nothing else. Something else she said sticks in my mind.

“At least he had life insurance,” I say. “That’s good, because most people don’t. Who was her husband’s employer?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Just curious,” I reply, shrugging.

“Johnny worked for a hotel in town.”

“Which hotel?”

“The Imperial Hotel and Casino.”

Interesting.

The same hotel owned by Giovanni, and where Seven’s show is located.

I hear Kit slowly coming down the stairs and I hastily pass off my cup to Natasha.

“Here’s your freshly squeezed orange juice,” Kit says, handing me the glass. “I hope Natasha talked you into resting for a while.”

“I tried,” Natasha says. “I will leave you now.” She wags a finger at Kit as she walks past him to the stairs. “Don’t bother her while she works. She won’t rest until it’s finished.”

“I promise I won’t,” he says, once again taking up his spot on the sofa Eva provided for him.

“I’m almost finished,” I tell him when Natasha leaves. “Only a few more hours and this part will be done, and then I’ll rest.”

“I can’t wait to take you home,” Kit says with a smile. “You look exhausted. Still as beautiful as ever. I’m worried about you. We all are.”

“Don’t be,” I tell him. “I live for this kind of thing. I love it! You look worn out, too. Why don’t you close your eyes and rest? I’m not going anywhere.”

He nods and tries to arrange his large body on the small sofa in an attempt to get comfortable. Finally, he crosses his arms, closes his eyes and falls dead asleep. I’m envious of how fast he can do that when my mind usually whirls for hours when I’m trying to sleep.

I’m tempted to go over and lay my head down in his lap for just a minute. But I know if I do, I’ll lose precious time when I’m so close.

I rub my eyes, put my head down, and keep working.



TWO HOURS LATER, the code finally finishes running.

“I’m done,” I text Natasha.

“Coming down now,” she texts me back.

I’m eager to test the slot machine to see if my reverse engineering works. The basement door opens and shoes clank loudly on the metal stairs as Natasha and Eva make their way down. Natasha dashes across the concrete floor of the basement and wraps her arms around me in a big hug.

Her impulsive action catches me off guard. “You did it,” she says, releasing me with a big smile before hugging me again.

Eva walks up behind us and gives me a quick pat on my back with her manicured hand. “Good job, Jade. Show us what you’ve accomplished. We’re excited.”

“The code is finished running, but I haven’t worked out the exact details of the best way for us to use it,” I say. “I’m not that far along in the process.”

“Don’t worry about that part,” Eva says. “We already know what to do with the code. We’ll do the same thing the Russians did. Except improve upon their method and be smarter about it so we won’t get caught. The plan isn’t complicated. In fact, it’s very simple.”

“Okay,” I say, taking a deep breath. “Here goes nothing.”

I reach for one of the twenty-dollar bills Eva supplied me with for testing. Unlike the slot machines I’ve played at the casino, this one accepts cash along with credit cards. Sliding it into the machine, I hit the spin button.

An assortment of cute penguins, puffins, treasure chests, letters and numbers pop up. The colorful characters are spaced four rows across and five down. The screen remains still for

only a split second before spinning again. I quickly memorize the characters each time before they rapidly change.

“Each spin’s twenty characters are linked to a code in the machine,” I explain. “They look random, but are actually predetermined. Without a computer, it’s near impossible to crack.”

It may be impossible for them, but not for someone with a photographic memory like me. That’s the one secret of mine that I haven’t shared with anyone.

Not even Kit, Seven or Vulcan.

After ten spins, I stop to rapidly type in the numerical code for each character combination into my laptop.

“Now I’ll input the numbers to figure out the machine’s state,” I say. “Once we know that, we can predict the next win. Timing is crucial; hit the spin button too late, even by half a second, and we lose.”

“Whoa! Wait a minute. Are you suggesting that we memorize every spin?” Eva asks in amazement. “And then jot it down on a piece of paper or memorize that, too?”

I nod at her. “That’s right,” I say. “You’ll probably need to write it down.” Sometimes I forget that not everyone has a memory like mine.

“That’s too complex,” Eva argues. “It takes at least twenty spins to get enough data, and no one can remember that many characters in a split second. I can’t even remember my grocery list. How about you, Natasha? Could you do it since you’re Jade’s backup?”

Natasha rolls her big eyes and shakes her head in an emphatic ‘no.’

“There’s a much easier and faster way to do it,” Eva says, smiling at me. “Use your cellphone. Try recording a video of twenty spins and then feed it into the program on your laptop to find the precise location of the code. That’s how the Russians did it.”

“But you can’t videotape in casinos,” I argue. “It’s against the rules. You’ll get caught and thrown out, or maybe even legally prosecuted.”

“Everything we’re doing is technically against the casino’s rules,” she reminds me. “What’s one more thing?”

“Videotaping the machine would place an electronic device into play,” I say. “This would make it riskier legally. As long as everything is in your head, there’s nothing the casinos can do except ask you to leave.”

Eva raises her eyebrows at me. “I see you’ve done your homework. Jade, being prosecuted legally won’t happen if we get caught. I’ve lived in Vegas long enough to know that’s not how things work here. The owners of the casinos are who we’re going up against, not the legal system. Do you understand? They handle this kind of thing in-house without involving the police. It is bad publicity and embarrassing for the casinos if news gets out that someone was able to scam them.”

I slowly nod back at her.

“Good,” she says. “For everything to work correctly, we need several people on the team. Two people working the slot machines, with others serving as lookouts in the casino. At least one to two people in a remote location with the laptops, and an inside person to keep track of casino security movements.”

“That’s the same plan I came up with as well,” I say. “How soon can we implement the plan and start the test runs to practice?”

“As soon as you’re rested up and ready,” Eva replies. “It isn’t as complicated as it sounds. The Russians trained people straight off the street to do it in two hours. Reverse engineering the code was the hardest part. The rest will be easy.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” I say.

“Don’t worry,” Eva says. “Here’s what we’ve come up with so far. We’ve worked on the details for a very long time. Your bodyguards are a wrinkle we didn’t anticipate, but we can always use extra eyes on the ground as lookouts.”

Eva explains every detail, from the time we leave the basement until we split the money among us. It doesn’t surprise me to learn my involvement or someone of my skills was an integral part of their plan from the very beginning.

The plan is simple and will happen on Christmas Eve, one of the busiest nights of the year in Vegas. I’m shocked the scheme hasn’t been pulled off here before. Then again, how many people have access to a Peggy Penguin slot machine from Russia to break open and reverse engineer?

“Give me twenty-four hours before the first test run,” I tell her when she’s finished detailing the scheme. “Once I catch up on my sleep and eat a couple of decent meals, I’ll be ready and able to go.”

“Fantastic,” Eva replies. “We’ve been waiting for this moment forever. We’re happy you’re here. Now go! Get some sleep and get ready.”

I walk over to nudge Kit gently, who has slept through the conversation. “Wake up, Sleepy Head,” I say to him when he opens his eyes. “It’s time to take me home.”

“Thank God.” He springs up from the sofa. “Let’s get out of here.”

KIT

I glance over at Jade, who is leaning against the car window, already sound asleep. She's exhausted from coding nonstop for thirty-six hours. No matter how hard any of us begged, she wouldn't rest until it was finished.

I'm immensely proud of her for accomplishing what she set out to do. She has a fierce intensity about her when she works, hunched over her computer, her brow furrowed, her fingers flying over the keyboard, and we didn't dare interfere.

We all agreed beforehand to be quiet and not slow down the process. We wanted it over quickly so we could bring our girl back to where she belongs.

I can't wait to see her face when I pull up to the front of the house. We have a little party planned for her if she can stay awake long enough to enjoy it. Leroy offered to pick up the food, which means the kitchen table is probably loaded with unhealthy goodies. Plus, plenty of alcohol to wash it down.

Given how deeply she's sleeping, I'm not sure she'll be up for much of a party today. Which is perfectly fine because her second surprise is that Seven and Vulcan have both moved into the ranch house.

At least temporarily.

Their belongings are scattered everywhere in an unorganized mess, but already the house feels more like a home. I'm surprised they both went along with the idea as readily as they did since I expected pushback from them both. Seven's penthouse is much more convenient to his work. And Vulcan has always spent most of his time alone at the RV, so he surprised me the most of all.

Rather than spreading out in the house, the guys chose spare bedrooms along the same hallway as mine and Jade's. If she were to need us for anything, we will all be close by. If not actually sleeping in the bed with her, which is always a possibility. Unfortunately, her bed is a queen size that doesn't come close to being big enough for four people. Especially if I'm one of them. The arrangements still need some figuring out.

I pull the car to a slow stop, the gravel crunching underneath the tires, and turn off the engine. A wide smile spreads across my face when I spot the huge "Welcome Home Jade" banner they've carefully hung across the front porch.

I reach over and gently shake her shoulder. "Wake up," I whisper. "We're here, beauty. It's time to wake up."

Her eyelids flutter open, revealing a pair of drowsy, soft brown eyes. Confusion and then realization cross her features as she takes in the decorations and the sight of Vulcan and Seven waiting for her on the steps.

Her gaze meets mine, and a warm, grateful smile graces her lips. "We're home," she murmurs, her voice thick with emotion.

I reach over to squeeze her hand. "Yes, we are. The guys have gone all out decorating the place to welcome you back here."

Seven and Vulcan rush down the steps to greet us. Vulcan jerks open her car door and Seven unbuckles her seatbelt and pulls her out into his arms.

“Welcome back home where you belong,” he says, lifting her off her feet and twirling her around. “We’re so damn happy you’re finished. You’ve been gone forever.”

Laughing, she pushes against his arms. “Put me down. You’re squeezing the breath out of me.”

“Fine,” he replies, slowly setting her back down while he kisses her softly on the lips.

The moment her feet touch the ground, Vulcan moves in and scoops her away from Seven. He throws Jade over one shoulder, her legs flailing in surprise, and runs up the steps into the house with her, their laughter trailing behind them.

“She’s happy to be back,” I say to Seven as we follow them inside. “And I’m thrilled you’re all here.”

“It’s for the best,” Seven says. “Thank you for opening your house to all of us. You’re being very generous and thoughtful, as always. It’s appreciated and doesn’t go unnoticed.”

I glance at him, touched by his words, and make a further offer. “Leroy can stay here as much as he wants, too. There’s enough space for him. There’s no need for him to drive back into Vegas every night. Especially after he’s been drinking. Just because we’re all with Jade, doesn’t mean we’re trying to push him out of our group. We care about Leroy, too.”

“Thanks! I’ll tell him,” Seven says with a relieved smile. “You know how he is about his Mama, though. He worries about her when he can’t check on her every day.”

“I’m not sure if he’s worried about her, or if he prefers her cooking. Leroy’s a Mama’s boy and always will be. I’ll fix up an extra room for him in case he wants to hang around.”

“I think he’s weirded out a little bit by our situation with her,” Seven says, his brow furrowing in concern.

“Well, whatever he’s most comfortable with, works for me,” I say. “My house is open to everyone.”

We head inside, following Vulcan’s laughter, as he places her down on the couch. Her cheeks are flushed from the whirlwind welcome, but she’s laughing, her face glowing with joy.

Vulcan and Seven rush to fix her a plate of food and a drink, their movements quick and attentive, while I sit down next to her, placing a gentle hand on her knee. She leans against me, and I feel the weariness in her body.

“Are you okay?” I ask softly, brushing a strand of hair from her face, my fingers lingering on her soft skin. “We know you’re exhausted. As soon as you eat something, I’ll run a bath for you.”

She smiles up at me, barely able to keep her eyes open. “I’m so happy to be back and you’ve all gone to so much trouble fixing a party for me. I don’t want to miss anything by passing out.”

“The party isn’t going anywhere, sweetheart, and neither are we,” I reassure her.

“What do you mean?” she whispers.

“Seven and Vulcan moved in, so when you wake up, we’ll all be here,” I tell her, watching her face light up.

“I’m awake,” she says, pushing herself upright with a determined effort. “You’re right. I am exhausted, but I wouldn’t miss this for anything. I’ll eat with you all and then maybe take a long bath.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Seven says, placing a plate piled high with food on the table in front of her. “How about a bath and a cuddle? Or cuddles? You appear on the verge of crashing hard.”

“It’s great to have you back,” Vulcan says, leaning down behind her to nuzzle her neck. “We’ve missed you, baby. This place isn’t the same without you.”

“I’ve missed you all, too,” she replies, her eyes almost misty with emotion. “This feels so right, being here with all of you. Things will only get better from here on out.”

“Well, look what the cat dragged in,” Leroy teases, walking into the room, a big grin spreading across his face. “Seriously Jade, you look like one of Kit’s big tigers has gone a round or two with you. And you lost big time. You need to get some rest, girl, before you fall straight into that bowl of guacamole.”

“Hey, Leroy, how are you?” She replies, smiling and reaching up to squeeze his arm affectionately. “Have you been watching after these guys while I was gone?”

“Yeah, it’s a tough job, especially the way they’ve all been moping around here, worrying about you,” he replies. He looks at her intently, his eyes softening. “I’m glad you’re back. I picked up your favorite foods and stocked the refrigerator, so you won’t starve. Sometimes these assholes get too busy and forget to eat. You’re the same as me. You appreciate food. I’ll take care of you in that department.”

“Thank you,” she says.

Our meal continues, filled with teasing and work stories. Jade’s eyes shine with happiness, as if the weight of the past few weeks has lifted from her shoulders.

When we’re finished eating, Vulcan goes into the kitchen and comes back with a bottle of champagne and glasses. “We should share a toast to Jade for cracking the code on that damn penguin slot machine,” he says, handing the bottle to Seven. “Seven, I’ll let you do the honors, since you have more experience with champagne bottles than I do.”

Seven expertly opens the bottle and pops the cork, intentionally sending it flying across the room to draw a laugh from Jade. We lean closer, holding out our flutes for him to fill, then raise them.

“I’d like to propose a toast to our brilliant girl,” Seven says. “Not just for breaking the code, but for bringing all of us together to enjoy this moment. To Jade, our Queen.”

“To Jade,” we echo, lifting our glasses.

Her eyes fill with rare tears, and she blinks them away, her face flushing. “Thank you,” she says, her voice cracking with emotion. “Thank you for giving me a home, a family, and for making me feel wanted for the first time in my life.”

“We’re the ones who should thank you,” Seven tells her. “You created all this, the family, the home. This is your doing, not ours.” The conviction in his voice leaves no room for doubt, and we all nod in agreement.

Jade curls her legs under her and leans against Seven’s shoulder on the sofa, her body settling comfortably against him. Eventually, she yawns behind her hand, her eyes

fluttering shut for a moment, and can't hide her fatigue any longer.

“Okay, it's time for you to take a hot bath and go to bed,” I say. “Stay here and I'll go run it for you.”

“I hate to be a party pooper, but you might be right,” she agrees. “My batteries need to recharge. I'll be good as new tomorrow and ready to rumble again. Though I'm so excited about finishing the coding, I'm not sure I'll be able to sleep.”

“That's what the hot bubble bath is for,” Vulcan tells her. “To calm you down enough to relax. Come on,” he says, reaching down and scooping her up in his arms. “You can carry the champagne with you, but one way or another, you're getting into a bubble bath, and then you're going to bed. Alone.” He glances around at me and Seven, his eyebrows raised. “Right, guys? Isn't that what we agreed? Jade sleeps alone tonight to get some rest?”

“Yes, absolutely,” Seven and I both agree, nodding our heads.

I lead the way to the bathroom and begin running hot water in the big freestanding bathtub. When the tub is halfway filled, I add a generous amount of bubble bath liquid and soon there's a thick layer of bubbly foam on the top, the scent of lavender filling the air.

“Wow, the bubble bath looks awesome,” she says, when Vulcan steps into the bathroom, carrying her effortlessly in his arms. She reaches down to trail her fingers in the bubbles. “You don't need to keep fussing around me. I'm fully capable of giving myself a bath.”

“To tell the truth, we're too scared to leave you alone in the tub,” Vulcan says. “You've been running on adrenaline for

days. What if you pass out, slip under the water and drown?”

“She’s not intoxicated. She’s simply worn out,” Seven assures him. “She won’t drown in the bathtub, don’t worry. Usually, you’re the one we need to worry about and here you are freaking out over her being in a foot of soapy water.”

“Seriously guys, you’re talking about me like I’m a child,” Jade protests.

“You’re not a child, you’re our Queen,” Seven reminds her, following behind them. “What good is it to be a Queen if you don’t have royal servants taking care of you?”

Vulcan puts her down on her feet and Seven moves over to help her undress. His movements are tender and deliberate as he gently tugs her shirt over her head and then undoes the front clasp of her bra, releasing her heavy breasts.

“Are you sure this is something a Queen’s servants would do?” she teases. “Because I don’t remember reading about this in history books.”

“Obviously, you didn’t read the same books we did,” Seven replies, grinning at her. “And sometimes with history books, you need to read between the lines and fill in the blanks.”

“Something tells me you plan to be filling something besides blanks,” she counters, lifting her eyebrows at him.

“You’re wrong,” Seven says, his eyes locked with hers, his hands moving down to the button of her jeans with familiarity. “Not until you’re rested up. We can wait as long as we need to. Tonight is all about you, not us. Believe it or not, we’re not sex-starved maniacs. Allow us to show you how much you mean to us.” His voice is sincere, and his touch is gentle as he unbuttons her jeans, slides them down over her ass, and down

to her ankles. She steps out of them, and with a flick of his wrist, he tosses them out of the way.

Kneeling on the cold bathroom tile in front of her, he hooks his fingers into her silky panties and slowly peels them off her the same way.

Vulcan tugs her back against him for support, his arms encircling her waist as he reaches around to cup her breasts in his hand, rubbing the now hard nipples with his thumb. Jade closes her eyes and moans softly as he rolls and tugs at the nipples while he kisses the side of her neck. His eyes meet mine over her head and he tilts his head, motioning for me.

I move over to her and gently pick her up in my arms. She loops her hands around my neck and holds on tight, trusting me completely as I step closer to the tub and gently lower her into the warm water. I'm stronger than the other two and wouldn't trust them to place her in the deep tub. They might let her slip in the soapy water or even drop her.

"Oh, my goodness," she says with a long sigh, not opening her eyes. "This feels sinfully delicious."

Seven picks up one of her hair barrettes from the vanity counter before gently pulling her long hair up and securing it to keep the tendrils from getting wet. Vulcan grabs a stack of washcloths and tosses one to each of us.

We position ourselves on opposite sides of the tub and leisurely soap up her arms, legs, shoulders and between her breasts. This wasn't our original plan for the welcome home party because we didn't have a plan, but from the look of pure bliss on her face, it's working out just fine.

JADE

Vulcan was right. The steamy hot water and scented bubbles are relaxing me to the point I could fall asleep right now and slip under the water. My limbs feel so heavy and tired. I'm not sure I could climb out of this tub without help, even if there was a house fire.

It is pure heaven when the guys begin smoothing soap all over my body with soft cloths. They move in small, circular motions all over my back, shoulders, arms, and breasts. Even with my eyes closed, I can tell by the location and movement of the cloths whose hand is on them.

When one of the cloths moves down my stomach and dips between my thighs, I jump and stir to life again. The familiar tingle of arousal rushes through me when the cloth sweeps over my clit.

"Relax, beautiful," Kit whispers softly in my ear. "This is totally therapeutic, I promise. Nothing more."

Soon, I hear the wet cloth hitting the floor when Seven tosses it aside and is now using his hands and fingers to ply my body. Vulcan and Kit do the same, and the cloths are replaced by their long fingers and hands.

Kit massages my tight neck and shoulder muscles with just the right amount of pressure on my tense spots. All the places that ache from hunching over a computer. Kit has such nice big hands. His large fingers and palms are soft with the perfect touch.

I sense more than hear Vulcan and Kit swap places, with Vulcan kneeling down on the floor behind the tub. “How are we doing so far?” he asks, his teeth lightly nipping my ear.

“It’s very nice,” I whisper, leaning my head back against him.

“I love the way your skin glows in the bubbles,” Vulcan murmurs. “So smooth and soft.”

He slides his lips down my neck, nuzzling, kissing and nipping, the way he knows I love. His hands slide around to cup my breasts again, teasing and tugging on my nipples. Vulcan is a breast man, and I figured he wouldn’t be able to keep his hands off them for long. Especially when my nipples keep bobbing above the bubbles.

“Seven’s up to something dirty down there between your legs,” Vulcan whispers in my ear. “Better watch out.”

“Whatever he’s up to, I like it,” I murmur.

Seven lifts my knees up gently above the water and spreads them wide apart for better access. He washes my legs, from my thighs, down my calves to my feet, just stroking and teasing.

“Don’t fall asleep yet, beautiful,” Kit urges from the side of the tub. “Stay awake until you’re completely taken care of.”

The three men work in tandem, always making sure one of them is touching me at all times. Seven’s hand slides between

my thighs again and brushes over my clit, sending a bolt of fire through me.

My heart races at his touch. “Please,” I whisper.

“Please what?” Kit asks.

“Please touch me.”

Vulcan’s hand slides around my breast and tugs on my nipple. “Where do you want us to touch you, baby?”

“Everywhere.”

Kit reaches for the lube on the bathroom counter and tosses it to Seven, who pours it on his palm and his fingers.

“Lube will make this better for you,” Seven murmurs.

He slips two fingers inside my pussy, stoking a fire that is already burning hot. Kit reaches his hand under the water, too, and rubs my clit in slow, languid circles.

They’re touching me everywhere.

“How does that feel now?” Vulcan asks.

“Amazing.”

Seven withdraws his fingers and adds more lube to his hand before reaching under the water again. He rubs my ass with a lubed finger then slides it in, before sliding another finger into my pussy.

“Oh, God! That feels good,” I moan, bucking against his hand.

Seven finger fucks my pussy and ass, while Kit rubs my clit.

“Do you like this?” Kit asks.

“I love it,” I reply, barely able to speak.

Their fingers move faster, while Vulcan tugs on my nipple hard, causing delicious pain to push me over the edge.

“Come for us, baby,” he says.

“Fuck!” I cry out, wracked with an orgasm that completely takes over my body. I come so hard my head flies back and hits Vulcan’s shoulder behind me.

He grabs my head with his hand and presses it against his neck. He holds me tight as I’m wracked over and over with my pussy spasming. Kit doesn’t let up on my clit until I’m completely spent, and Seven seems reluctant to remove his fingers from me.

After a long moment, I open my eyes to see three gorgeous men staring at me intently with satisfied smiles on their handsome faces.

“You look very pleased with yourselves,” I tease. I’m slightly embarrassed and try to sink down lower into the tub.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” Vulcan says, sliding his arms under my armpits to hold me up above the water. “No hiding your beautiful body from us. Never. We live for moments like these.”

I turn my head slightly and draw his face to mine for a long kiss. “If I have many more moments like this, I’ll be dead.”

Seven slowly removes his fingers and stands up. “I think she’s ready for bed now,” he says, moving to grab a towel. “Let’s get her slippery body out of the tub and into her nice, soft bed. Our queen needs her beauty sleep.”

Three pairs of powerful hands scoop me up, and I’m lifted out of the tub, dripping water all over the floor. Kit stands me

on my feet, supporting me with his arms around me as Vulcan and Seven briskly dry me off with thick towels.

When they're satisfied I'm dry, Kit carries me to my bedroom. Seven pulls back the sheets and they tuck me in as if I'm a tiny child. Snuggling deep under the covers, I smile happily up at them.

“Are you really serious about making me sleep alone tonight?” I ask. “We could just cuddle.”

“We're serious,” Kit replies, leaning down to give me a soft kiss on my lips, followed by Seven and Vulcan.

“Goodnight then, guys,” I whisper groggily, unable to keep my eyes open for another minute.

I'm dead asleep before the door closes behind them.

JADE

Sometime later, a faint noise tugs at my consciousness, pulling me from a deep slumber. The sound of the front door opening and closing quietly permeates the otherwise still house.

I sit up, my heart beating faster as I glance out the window to find it's still pitch dark outside. The red numbers on the digital clock on the bedside table glow brightly, telling me it's a little after two a.m.

I'm curious who is up, wandering around in the middle of the night like a restless spirit. A knot of concern forms in my stomach because I suspect who it might be. Not taking time to slip on my shoes, I tiptoe down the hallway, trying not to wake the others. When I reach the heavy front door leading to the wide front porch, I tug it open and slowly pull it shut behind me, the latch catching softly.

It takes a minute for my eyes to adjust to the dark. As I suspected, there, lying on the far corner of the porch, is Vulcan in his worn sleeping bag, a lone silhouette bathed in darkness.

"Jade?" he calls out softly. "What are you doing out here, baby? Shouldn't you be in bed? Is something wrong?"

“You tell me,” I say, walking over and looking down at him. “Why did you come outside? Are you okay? It’s cold out here. Really cold.” The wind nips at my skin, carrying with it the scent of dew and damp earth.

“Come here,” he says, unzipping the sleeping bag and sitting up. He throws back the top layer and pats the interior, that is toasty with his body heat.

He doesn’t need to ask me twice, and I quickly crawl into the warm sleeping bag with him. He wraps his muscular arms around me, and with a deep, contented sigh, I snuggle back against his heated body.

“Better?” he whispers against my hair.

“Much better,” I answer, snuggling even closer.

“You’re supposed to be sleeping alone tonight,” he reminds me with a hint of teasing. “We all agreed. Remember?”

“No, the three of you agreed,” I say. “I don’t remember voting on the matter. In fact, I was so tired when I arrived here, I don’t remember much of anything. Besides, how can I rest comfortably, when you’re spending the night out here on the front porch? What’s going on?”

“I’m weird and fucked up, that’s all,” his words raw and vulnerable. “Same as always. Nothing for you to worry your pretty head about.”

I turn around to face him, our mouths so close we’re breathing the same air. “Talk to me,” I whisper. “Tell me what’s going on in your head. You can trust me.”

He lets out a tired sigh and smooths my hair back from my forehead, his touch gentle. “Sometimes when I’m lying in bed, staring up at the ceiling, the air feels so hot and heavy,

like there's not enough oxygen," he says. "I know there's nothing physically wrong with the air. But the longer I lie there, tossing and turning, the more suffocated and uncomfortable I become. When that happens, I usually drag my sleeping bag outside where it's cooler and the air is crisp. I'm able to breathe outside, which means I can also sleep."

"Do you have any idea why it happens?" I ask.

"I have a pretty good idea, yeah," he replies, his voice heavy with unspoken pain. "The night was when he would usually come get me, dragging me out of my bed for punishment of one kind or the other. There was a shed at the back of the property where he would take me to 'put the fear of God in me,' as he liked to call it."

"Who was he?" I ask, dreading the answer.

"A foster parent, a sadist, plain and simple. An upstanding man in the community whose hobby was torturing an eleven-year-old child."

My breath catches at the pain in his voice and my heart aches for him. "What did he do?" I ask, the horror building in me.

"Everything he could think of short of killing me. You've seen my scars. They're a constant reminder of that period in my life. He got off on instilling fear in me, and the begging for him not to hurt me. When that stopped working, when I was no longer afraid of the pain, he became even more evil and violent. By that point, I no longer felt the pain, the burns, the slice of the razor blade on my skin. Whatever he dished out, I could take because I realized he wouldn't kill me, he *couldn't* kill me," he explains, recounting the memories that are both a nightmare and a permanent part of him.

I'm almost afraid to speak, to break this moment of trust between us. The things he's telling me explain his irrational belief that he can't die. Because that belief gave him something to hold on to and kept him alive when he was being abused.

The stories of his past are devastating, and I want to shield him from the memories that haunt him. But I know that's not possible.

“How did you get away from him?”

“A teacher glimpsed my scars at school one day. He always insisted on me wearing long sleeves and pants, even in the heat of summer. He never marked my skin anywhere that wasn't covered by clothing, so no one ever knew. I was at the blackboard reaching up high and the tail of my shirt rode up. My teacher saw the ugly purple bruises on my lower back where he'd beat the shit out of me. She immediately called social services, and I was out of his house by the end of the day.”

“How long were you with this man?” I ask.

“Two years, from eleven to thirteen. A lifetime to a child.”

I reach out and touch his face, my fingers trembling as I try to make sense of the horror he's revealed. “How could anyone do such terrible things to a child? How could anyone enjoy inflicting pain on a child?”

“They're sick bastards, and they're out there. They present themselves as regular people, but they're monsters hiding in plain sight.”

I hold him closer, blinking back the tears in my eyes, aching for the child he was and the scars he carries forever.

“Where did you go then?”

“From one family to another. From then, until I ran away at sixteen, is mostly a blur. I was damaged and fucked up, full of anger. I started getting into trouble; alcohol, drugs, stealing cars. Nothing was too crazy to try at least once. None of the foster families wanted me and I kept being passed around. I don’t blame the families that tried to take me in after him. I was too much for anyone to handle.”

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper. “No one should ever go through what you’ve been through.”

“I survived, didn’t I? And in a sick, twisted way, it made me who I am today. Strong and resilient.”

My mind flashes back to the terrifying scare of the Russian Roulette game. Vulcan isn’t as strong and unbreakable as he believes. The scars from his past are eating him alive from the inside.

“But at what cost?” I ask. “You’ve been through so much, and it left deep scars, both physically and emotionally.”

“Yeah, it has,” he admits. “I’ve found ways to cope. The outdoors, the fresh air, it helps me to breathe, to live. When I’m in bed even now, I still remember the fear of waiting to hear his footsteps coming down the hallway and opening my door. After all this fucking time, I’m still waiting for those goddamn footsteps.”

I reach up to cup his face in my hand. “I can’t take away the pain, but I can stand by you. I’m here for you and I’m not leaving. I swear to you, I’m never leaving again. You shouldn’t have to deal with this alone. Let me help you.”

“Thank you,” he says softly, taking my hand in his. “It means more to me than you’ll ever know.”

“You don’t have to sleep inside the house either,” I say. “I’m sorry if you felt pressured by us to do that. It must be awful for you, sharing a bed not only with me, but the other guys too sometimes. Between my constant tossing and turning, and their snoring, it’s a miracle you’re still functioning.”

He chuckles softly. “No, believe it or not, I’ve been able to sleep just fine with all of us piled up like a litter of puppies in your bed. Isn’t that strange? It doesn’t make sense.”

“Maybe you’re so worn out by the time we all go to bed that you don’t have the energy to stay awake and stare at the ceiling,” I tease, trying to lighten the mood. “Or maybe, the demons inside you affect you more when you’re alone.”

“Maybe,” he replies. “But either way, I don’t want my issues to affect you. That wouldn’t be right. You have enough on your plate as it is and you sure as hell don’t need to worry about my fucking issues. You should go back inside to your comfortable bed and rest. I’ll be fine out here, I swear.”

“Nope, not going anywhere,” I argue. “That would mean crawling back out into the cold with bare feet. Not going to happen.”

“Will you promise to rest if you stay?” he asks, a mixture of concern and tenderness in his words. “I don’t want to be the one responsible for keeping you awake all night.”

“I swear,” I promise.

We lay there in the darkness, wrapped tightly in each other’s arms, the connection between us deepening with every heartbeat. Instead of the night being a place of fear, tonight it’s a sanctuary, a place where we can be honest and vulnerable, and possibly heal together.

“Vulcan? Are you asleep?” I whisper a few minutes later, still wide awake.

“No, of course not,” he replies. “What’s wrong?”

“Tell me the name of your foster parent, the man who hurt you.”

“Why?” he asks.

“So I can destroy him and everything he cares about.”

He stiffens, his breath catching. “He’s dead,” he finally says, his voice cold and hard. “I took care of him to make sure he could never hurt another child.”

“Good,” I say, relieved the man is dead. “You did what you had to do. I just wish you didn’t have to go through that alone. If he was still alive, I would’ve gladly destroyed him in revenge for you. I wish I could do that for you, but I’m very glad he’s rotting in the ground.”

“You’re here now,” he says. “That’s all that matters. You’re here, and you understand, and you don’t judge me. You accept me the way I am.”

“Yes, and I would never change a thing,” I whisper. “I want you just the way you are. You’re perfect for me.”

He buries his head in my shoulder and tightens his arms around me. “I love you, Jade,” he murmurs. “I just want you to know in case anything ever happens to me.”

“And I love you. So don’t you dare ever let anything happen to you.”

Slowly, as the night wears on, I hear what I’m waiting for: the sound of his breathing slowing and deepening in sleep.

Only then do I allow my eyes to close.

JADE

“**H**ow did it go at Platinum today?” Seven asks when he arrives back at the house after his show.

He walks over to give me a kiss and then sinks down wearily at the kitchen table to watch me. Vulcan and Kit have both texted me to say they’re on their way home too, and I’m heating pizza for a midnight snack.

“Good,” I reply, leaning down to pull the pizza out of the oven. “We’re ready for the test run.”

“When are you doing it?” Seven asks.

“Tomorrow night,” I answer. “When I met with Eva and Natasha this morning, we agreed to keep it simple. If we run into any issues, we can fix them and do another trial run. Christmas Eve is ten days away, so we have plenty of time to get this right.”

“Are you sure you’re up for this so soon? You were completely exhausted when you came back home yesterday. I thought you would want to sleep for a week after coding non-stop.”

“No, I’m caught up on sleep,” I assure him. “If I’m ready to go, there’s no point in delaying it. We need the extra time between now and Christmas Eve to work out the kinks. When

the guys get here, I want to go over everything to keep us all on the same game plan.”

“Sounds good,” he says.

“Here they are now,” I say, hearing Vulcan’s motorcycle coming down the driveway at the same time Kit opens the garage door leading into the kitchen.

I sit them all down and buzz around, handing out plates and dishing up pizza for my guys. I’ve never considered myself as the domestic type, but I’m enjoying taking care of them. Not that serving takeout pizza is quality care. To make up for my lack of cooking skills, I take time to move around the table, rubbing their shoulders and kissing the backs of their necks. Little things to show them I care the same way they showed me.

“Jade mentioned they’re planning to do the first test run tomorrow night,” Seven says, when we’ve finished eating.

“So soon?” Kit asks, surprised. “Wouldn’t it be better to wait a couple of days to recuperate?”

“I’m fine, really,” I say, softly laughing. “I was dead to the world yesterday, but now I’m raring to get this done. I’ve been working towards this for a long time and I’m eager to give it a go.”

“Is anyone off work tomorrow night?” Vulcan glances at me in concern. “Jade needs backup.”

“This isn’t the real deal,” I explain. “We’re only testing to determine how well the camera I’ll be wearing will function. To make sure it can transmit the video back to Eva with the laptop. We won’t be playing for money and will wear disguises, so there’s no need to accompany us.”

Kit leans back in his chair and crosses his arms. “I don’t like the idea of the two of you going into the casinos without someone watching your back. This is risky.”

“No, it isn’t,” I argue. “It’s just a test. That’s all. If you needed to be there, I would ask for your help. We’ll take a cab there and have them drop us off at the front entrance. We’ll be perfectly safe inside the casino.”

Kit doesn’t appear convinced and glances over at Seven. “What are your thoughts on this, Seven? Will they be okay without us since we’re all working?”

“Can’t you reschedule to a time when we’re not working?” Seven asks. “We were supposed to be part of this.”

“You are part of this,” I argue. “I definitely will need all of you onboard for Christmas Eve when we do it for real. All hands on deck that night, and Leroy too. Especially Leroy, since he’s helping us with the security personnel. Besides, is there ever a time when you’re all off? Or even two of you? You work every night, it seems.”

Seven shakes his head. “That rarely happens. Giovanni keeps us busy performing nightly during the busy season. I’m booked every night until Christmas. I’m sure Kit and Vulcan’s schedule is the same. Right?”

They both nod back at him.

“Damn, we should’ve thought this through better,” Vulcan says. “We were all eager to help you and now we’re all saying we have to work. We’re total assholes and are letting you down here.”

“No, you’re not,” I argue. “Stop, okay? This will be simple. You’re overreacting.”

“Nothing about your plan sounded simple to me,” Vulcan says. “When you were explaining it all to us in the basement at Platinum, I felt like my head would explode. Can you break it down in simpler terms for me one more time? Pretend I’m a preschooler.”

I smile at him. “Sure, it’s not as complicated as it sounds. Think of it this way. By reverse engineering the slot machine, we were given a window into the future payouts of the slot machine. Now I’m able to understand the machine’s logic, how it generates random numbers and determines the payouts. I’ll use a modified cellphone to communicate with a laptop which will analyze the timing and sequences of the slot machine’s operation. As I’m playing, the concealed cellphone will send info back and forth to the laptop, allowing us to pinpoint the precise moment when to bet or press the button. The laptop will send a signal when the machine will pay out. I’ll hit the button and we’ll make it rain money.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Vulcan says. “And I won’t ask again. Too much math hurts my head.”

Seven is listening intently, following along easily. Kit seems to grasp it too, not that it’s necessary for any of them to understand the technical details.

“Are you satisfied now? Any more questions?”

“Will you text me to keep in touch?” Seven asks. “We’ll be worried until you’re back here safe.”

“Of course. I’ll keep you in the loop.” I give them an encouraging smile. “Please stop worrying about me. Everything will be okay.”

JADE

Our first test run...

The yellow taxi's worn brakes emit a loud screech as we ease to a halt at the archways leading into the artificial Polynesian paradise of the Bora Bora Hotel and Casino. The entrance beckons invitingly, a faux bamboo gate guarded by stone statues with stoic expressions, glowing with a kaleidoscope of colors dancing across their surfaces.

The fleeting scent of gasoline from the taxi mixes with the hot desert air and the scent of the exotic flowers landscaped around the hotel. Distant sounds of laughter and the tantalizing clink of slot machines seep from the hotel's entrance.

My bare thighs scrape against the taxi's sun-heated vinyl seat as I slide out. While Natasha pays the driver, I self-consciously tug down the hem of my daringly short dress.

I catch my reflection in the taxi's dusty side mirror and barely recognize the girl looking back. I'm overdressed and uncomfortable, though I'm trying not to show it. Natasha spent a great deal of time selecting tonight's outfit for me; a slinky gold dress that hugs my body with strappy heels to match.

Unfortunately, the upper portion of the dress is designed out of an itchy, metallic mesh that I'm already hating because

it's irritating my sensitive skin. I'll be lucky if an ugly red rash doesn't cover me before the evening is over.

The mesh material was chosen because of its ability to conceal my cellphone, and yet thin enough to allow video transmission through the dress. The high collar, rigid and uncomfortable, encases my neck like a golden choker while hiding the tiny camera pinned to the lace of my bra.

After the cab pulls away from the curb, Natasha steps closer and places a comforting hand on my arm. "Stop fidgeting with the dress," she whispers. "It's meant to be short. You are beautiful. Do not worry."

"Okay, I'll try," I say, reaching up out of habit to adjust my glasses that are threatening to fog up from stepping from air-conditioning into the heat.

She extends her manicured hand towards me. "Take your eyeglasses off and give them to me."

"No." I adamantly shake my head. "My glasses aren't for decoration. They have a purpose. I need them."

"Do you need them to see close up or far away?"

"What difference does it make?" I fire back. "I need them! My eyes are bad."

"Can you see the slot machine without them? Do not lie."

"Maybe," I admit reluctantly.

"Give them to me," she presses, holding out her open palm. "The glasses do not match your hair and makeup. Have you ever thought about contact lenses?"

"Not really," I reply, squinting. "I don't want to stick a foreign object in my eye. This isn't a good idea. I should keep them on."

She doesn't take her hand away. "I will be your eyes tonight," she promises. "Hand them over. You should wear contact lenses. The glasses hide your brown eyes. How long have you worn them?"

Natasha isn't one for fake compliments. I can always count on her to be brutally honest.

"Since eighth grade," I admit. "I can't afford new, stylish glasses every year. I've had to make do with what I have."

"Soon you can buy a new pair. For tonight, I will hold them for you."

With a reluctant sigh, I give my glasses to her. "Be careful and don't scratch them."

She opens the zippered side pocket of her dainty purse and slides them inside. "Can you see?"

My vision gazes across the busy street, the once sharp outlines of passersby now reduced to blurry smudges.

"Never mind," she blurts, anticipating my answer. "It doesn't matter. Time to go inside."

"Are you sure you're ready?" I ask. "For the plan to work, everything needs to fall into place perfectly. A million things can go wrong, and we can't afford mistakes."

"Don't worry," she assures. "This is only a practice run. We've gone over the plan many times; it's solid. There will be no mistakes. Everyone will handle their parts and we will do ours." She slides her arm through the crook of my elbow. "Smile, try to pretend as if you're having fun and come with me. The first Peggy Penguin slot machine is waiting for us inside."

Her unwavering confidence bolsters mine and gives me hope that we're ready. Today's trip is only a short practice run to test the plan on a single machine. If we make any mistakes, and I'm sure we will, we have plenty of time to correct them before the real deal on Christmas Eve.

Practice makes perfect.

I smile brightly and put on what I hope will pass for a happy, carefree expression.

"Stop trying so hard," she whispers to me when we step inside. "Your smile is fake. Plastered on like a mannequin in a store window. Act natural. Pretend we're out for a party night. Follow my lead."

I relax my fake smile a little and take a deep breath.

"Much better," she says. "This will be easy. As you Americans say...a piece of cookie."

"Piece of cake," I correct.

"Whatever," she says with an eye roll. "Americans eat too much sugar."

We step through the gold revolving doors of the casino and hesitate for a moment once we're inside. Now that we're here, I'm unsure of where to go or the best way to proceed.

"What's next?" I whisper. "Do we go straight to Peggy Penguin?"

"No, we'll walk through the casino first. Maybe stop at the roulette table. Or watch a poker game."

I nod and follow alongside her as we walk down the long row of blinking slot machines. Occasionally, we slow down, allowing our eyes to linger over the captivating narratives each game portrays.

“Remember, there might be big ears listening to our conversation,” Natasha warns in a hushed tone. “Play the part.”

We wander around for a few minutes like two tourists new in town who are unsure of what to do. Finally, she halts in front of a slot machine emblazoned with a fiery creature called Dragon’s Dungeon. “Dragons!” she exclaims without a trace of her normal accent. “C’mon, let’s play.” She points to the machine next to her. “You take that one and I’ll take this one. Let’s see who can win first.”

She excitedly pats the empty stool beside her, and I quickly sit. “This will be fun,” she says in a giggly voice, clapping her hands together. “Let’s try our luck.” Taking cash out of her purse, she slides several bills into the slot machine. “You should play too. Lady Luck is on our side tonight. First, we need a drink to start us off.”

She turns around and waves at a cocktail waitress. “Can we get a drink?” she calls out in a loud voice.

The waitress hurries over. “Sure. What would you ladies care to drink tonight?” she asks with a big smile.

“I would love a vodka tonic,” Natasha tells her. “And she’ll have a club soda with lime.”

The waitress gives me a curious glance. “Are you sure you don’t want something stronger than club soda? It’s Vegas.”

“She doesn’t drink,” Natasha answers.

I blink at her, trying to follow her line of reasoning. If she wants me to have a club soda, then I won’t argue.

“Club soda?” I whisper to Natasha when the waitress walks away. “Why did you order me that?”

“You’ll appear to be drinking alcohol when you’re not,” she replies. “In case security is watching us. They’re always watching. Drink a few sips. It won’t kill you.”

“If that’s the case, why are you drinking alcohol?”

“I’ve been drinking vodka since I was a small child,” she replies, rolling her eyes at me. “It’s no stronger than water to me. Put your money in and start playing.”

The next few minutes we play game after game on the machines, laughing obnoxiously and cheering each other on. We lose money on every spin, but it’s fun to pretend to be someone ditzy for a change. When our drinks arrive, Natasha takes her glass and stands up with an exaggerated sigh.

“Let’s go play another game,” she says. “These machines are rigged. Stupid dragons took my money.”

“Okay, where to next? How about blackjack? Do you know how to play? You can teach me, if you do.” I’m trying to keep up a normal conversation in case someone is eavesdropping.

“Card games are boring,” she whines. “Come on,” she says, taking my arm. “Let’s find something better.”

We wander around aimlessly, stopping at the roulette table and then watching blackjack. Natasha’s glamorous appearance and long, blonde hair catch a few of the big player’s eyes at the poker table. One man in an expensive suit tries to motion her over to his table.

“Bastard,” she mutters under her breath to me.

Meanwhile, we’re keeping a close eye on the three Peggy Penguin slot machines scattered around the floor. As soon as one frees up, I’ll grab it.

We wait patiently for our chance. When an elderly gentleman hits the cash out button and moves away from a Peggy Penguin machine, Natasha seizes the opportunity. She slides into the vacated spot; her face beaming with feigned enthusiasm.

“Oh, wow!” she exclaims loudly. Her eyes are wide, theatrically captivated by the machine in front of us. “Look at this one. Penguins and puffins! I love penguins. They’re my favorite! Why don’t you try it? You’re luckier than I am tonight. Here, sit on the stool.” She pats the stool invitingly, her hand leaving an imprint on the plush fabric.

“Penguins are my favorite animal too,” I chime in, my voice a notch too enthusiastic, a note too high, echoing our charade. My fingers trace the glowing outline of the animated penguin on the machine. “They’re so cute and cuddly!”

The act of playing an airhead is wearing thin. Keeping up with the dumb back-and-forth banter, the giggling, and the fake astonishment about everything is draining. I’m running out of idiotic comments.

“If you win, you have to split the money with me or buy me a stuffed penguin at the gift shop,” Natasha declares, her voice taking on an alcohol-induced slur. “While you play, I’ll order us both another drink. Where is a waitress when you need one?” She grimaces at her empty glass. “My damn glass has run dry.”

“I doubt they sell stuffed penguins here,” I tell her. “This isn’t Seaworld.”

“What the fuck is a Seaworld?” she replies, winking at me.

Her eyes dart around as she holds her glass high in the air, scanning for a waitress. Beneath the act of impatience, I

recognize the sharp gaze of a huntress. She's hunting, but not for a drink. She's after something far more elusive; the plainclothes security agents lurking within the crowd.

Leroy gave us photos of the security teams in every casino. We've drilled their faces into our memories.

Settling down on the stool, I make a big show of my cluelessness, feigning uncertainty about even the most basic operations.

"Put the money in here," Natasha says in mock exasperation, snatching the bill from me and sliding it into the slot.

The Peggy Penguin machine hums and sparkles to life. I smile when the familiar catchy music plays. They're all the same, but to see it in action in the casino surprises me.

I know this machine like the back of my hand.

"Showtime," she murmurs into my ear. "Time to play, smart girl." Her words, despite their light-hearted tone, carry a weight of gravity.

The moment we've prepared for is finally here.

As I feed the sparkling beast with a trickle of dollar bills, Natasha launches into a chatty, nonsensical monologue. We're not here to hit the jackpot, not yet. Tonight, we're merely testing the waters. Our primary goal is to confirm the video recording from the camera I'm wearing is functioning as planned.

Casino walls are unusually dense, their thickness and solidity designed to keep the outside world at bay. These thick walls can interfere with cellphone signals, hindering them from penetrating the building's walls. If the signal falters, then

the video won't transmit quickly enough to my laptop nestled safely back at Platinum.

I keep spinning, entranced by the machine's symbols. We need at least twenty spins to pinpoint the code, but forty would be better.

"I'm feeling lucky tonight," I announce to Natasha after a few minutes of steady play. "Do you have any more cash?"

This is our agreed upon signal. At my cue, Natasha reaches into her dainty purse, her fingers brushing past her cell phone. It's a discreet, yet crucial, check to make sure the video is smoothly uploading to my laptop. A swift glance down at her phone confirms the thumbs up from Eva, who is monitoring the laptop.

"Sure," she replies, a bill crinkling between her fingers as she hands it over. "Will another twenty dollars do the trick?"

"Twenty is more than enough," I assure her, a hint of a triumphant grin sneaking onto my face.

The program is running perfectly. Our extensive preparation is paying off. The thrill of the perfect plan unfolding sets my heart pounding. The success is as intoxicating as the most expensive French champagne. The pulsing rush of adrenaline floods my veins, fueling my enthusiasm and keeping my fingers dancing over the machine's controls.

With renewed energy, I keep hitting the spin button.

With each press, we inch closer to our goal. We've hit thirty spins, just ten more to go. My laptop is programmed to send a discreet buzz to the phone nestled in my purse, telling me the perfect moment to strike for the win.

Initially, I was naïve enough to believe someone would need to memorize the sequence of twenty characters on each spin. The idea seems ludicrous now. Once I cracked the machine's source code open, all we needed was a hidden camera, a cell phone, and my laptop, all synchronized, to make the plan come to life.

Eva's role is crucial, to ensure the video recording is uploading seamlessly, free of any glitches or delays. I've programmed everything to run remotely, so Eva doesn't need to do anything technical except make sure the video recording is uploading without interference.

As the machine hums and whirrs, I discreetly unzip my sequined purse, letting my hand nestle casually within. The moment my cellphone buzzes with the signal, I have only a fraction of a second to hit the spin button, and we strike gold.

My hand hovers over the spin button, muscles taut, every nerve tingling with anticipation. Any moment now, the signal will buzz in my left palm.

“Oh, God no!” Natasha suddenly exclaims.

JADE

“**W**hat’s wrong?” I swivel around, following the trajectory of her pointing finger.

“Igor is here, and he’s heading this way,” she breathes, a sliver of genuine fear worming its way into her voice.

“Igor?” I echo, my blood instantly freezing.

The name of the Russian mobster falls heavily in the air between us. I glance over my shoulder and squint, trying to spot him across the crowded room. Why the hell did I allow Natasha to take my glasses?

Damn!

Soon he’s close enough for even me to recognize his imposing figure weaving through the crowd. His large, burly frame towers over the casino patrons, an unmistakable predator on the prowl.

Quickly, I scramble off the stool, not caring about the unfinished game or the trail of half-spent money. Natasha and I exchange a panicked glance before we maneuver away and towards the ornate golden archway that marks the entrance to the ladies’ room.

Natasha springs ahead, her stilettos clicking hurriedly against the marbled floor, while I trail behind, constantly

glancing back at the monster that's stalking us. He is a beast of a man; each stride he takes is two of ours, his thick arms swinging menacingly by his sides.

We burst through the bathroom door and find it empty. The sudden transition from the bustling casino to the muted, white-tiled serenity feels jarring. Natasha rushes to the last stall, and gestures for me to get in.

“Lock it and don't make a sound,” she breathlessly instructs me.

I duck into the small space and latch the door shut. The walls go down to the tile floor for privacy, making the stall seem smaller, more claustrophobic than ever. Natasha remains outside, presumably to lure Igor away if he follows us in here. I'm left alone with the deafening thud of my heartbeat and the fear coursing through my veins.

It seems like forever, but it's only a few seconds before I hear the bathroom door swing open. Then I hear Igor's voice, as cold as the Russian winters. “We finally meet again, Natasha,” he says, the malice dripping from his voice. “Where's your friend?”

“I don't know who you're talking about,” Natasha replies, her voice a calculated mix of confusion and innocence.

“Do not play games with me,” he snaps.

I hear the shuffle of feet, the clack of Natasha's heels running for the door. My mind races, trying to visualize the scene unfolding outside this small cubicle. There's a sudden, sharp gasp from Natasha, followed by a whimper of pain. “Let me go,” she cries out, clearly struggling with him now.

My heart clenches with terror, my fingers instinctively reaching for my purse. I draw out a tiny canister of pepper

spray I always carry with me, though I've never used it.

The grating laughter of Igor sends a new wave of panic through me. Where the fuck did he come from? How long has he been stalking us?

I close my eyes, my breath coming in short, sharp gasps. Gathering every ounce of courage, I quietly swing open the stall door and step out.

He has Natasha pinned against the wall, his hulking figure completely dwarfing her, his hand around her throat. Her eyes are wide with terror, her usual confidence erased by her history with this monstrous man. The thought of what this man has done to her or witnessed being done, sends fury coursing through me.

I rush towards them, aim the tiny canister at his eyes and press down. A jet of pepper spray shoots out, catching him square in the face. He roars in pain and staggers back, releasing Natasha. She squeezes her eyes shut, ducking away from him and the pepper spray.

Temporarily blinded, he thrashes around, trying to find the sink. Seizing the opportunity, I grab Natasha's hand, pulling her back towards the door. But Igor recovers faster than expected. With a savage growl, he lunges toward us.

He stretches out his hand to grab me, and I scream as his fingers close around my wrist. He pulls me back, my body slamming against his chest, then wraps one arm around my neck and squeezes. Grabbing onto his arm, I try to pry it away from my neck as he squeezes harder.

“You fucking bitch!” he yells. “I knew you were hiding in here. I should've killed you on the boat when I had a chance.”

Natasha isn't giving up, though she's coughing and choking from the pepper spray. With a sudden surge of strength, she kicks back, her stiletto heel landing squarely into his knee.

He bellows in pain, his grip loosening enough for me to wrench my wrist free. We sprint towards the door. I grab the handle and start to swing it open when Natasha stops me.

"Wait," she says in a surprisingly steady voice. Her bright blue eyes are hard and cold. She pulls a small switchblade out of her purse.

"Natasha..." I warn.

She cuts me off with a sharp look. "He won't stop until we're both dead. We must fight. I can't run any longer."

She's right.

Igor is a merciless hunter. He will keep coming, and running will only delay the inevitable. But it's one thing to accept that, and another to watch as Natasha steps forward, switchblade in hand, to confront him head on.

His vision is clearing, the effects of the pepper spray wearing off. He sees Natasha approaching, her smaller frame dwarfed by his bulk. But there's a fire in her that makes him pause. He grins at her, a gruesome, wolfish smile.

The eerie dance of death begins in the claustrophobic confines of the bathroom. Natasha moves with a catlike grace, circling him, who roars and swings his beefy arms in a desperate attempt to catch her. Every time he lunges, she sidesteps, her high heels silent on the white tile.

"I'll enjoy killing you slowly," he threatens. "Dimitri should have killed you years ago. I'll make you suffer and will only let you die after you tell me what you did to Ivan."

Natasha narrows her eyes at him. “Ivan? Is that bastard missing? I can assure you I’ve done nothing to Ivan, though I would gladly kill him if given the chance.”

“You’re lying,” he growls.

Each second feels like an eternity as I watch, frozen in place, waiting for an opportunity to jump in to help her. Natasha’s facial features are set in grim determination as she concentrates. One bad move and it’s over with.

Finally, she sees an opening and strikes with a swift, brutal move.

The switchblade glints under the harsh bathroom light as it slices through the air and buries itself deep into Igor’s thigh. He yells, a terrifying, animalistic sound that echoes off the walls. His strong, towering form, which once exuded power and control, sways as his leg betrays him, unable to support his weight.

Natasha seizes the moment, capitalizing on his momentary weakness. She doesn’t hesitate or hold back her pent-up fury; she plunges her blade in again, this time into his side.

His guttural roars become gasps, his ferocious power waning with every drop of blood that splatters onto the white tile. He goes down on one knee, unable to stand any longer.

Her hand comes up again, the switchblade poised high above her head when he reaches inside his jacket. A gunshot rings out, a deafening blast that echoes through the bathroom. The bullet tears through the fabric of his dark suit, and hits a bathroom stall behind Natasha, barely missing her by inches.

“Run!” I yell, yanking the door open.

We rush into the hallway to make our escape, only to be blocked by a sea of senior women wearing sparkly red hats

and eye-catching, flashy purple dresses. Oh my God! The Red Hat Society has arrived in town.

“What is this madness?” Natasha mutters beside me. “Another American cult?”

“He has a gun!” I shout at them. “There’s a gunman! Run! Hurry! Go! Go! Run!”

Their reaction is immediate and loud. A cacophony of gasps, shrieks and startlingly crude curse words fill the space, adding to the chaos. The gray-haired women turn and rush back towards the casino, screaming about a gun at the top of their lungs.

At the word ‘gun,’ panic ensues inside the casino. Gamblers immediately abandon chips and cards, dropping everything in their haste to flee the casino. We stay within the crowd, allowing the human tide to carry us out along with it.

As the crush of people flood out the front doors and spills into the street, casino security in their black uniforms and radios rushes past us in the opposite direction, their faces set with grim determination.

Keeping pace with the terrified crowd, we exit and then move rapidly away from the casino. We go several blocks before slowing down. Finally, Natasha takes my arm and pulls me to a stop in a back alley that smells of old trash and urine. Leaning over, I try to catch my breath. Running in heels is a lot harder than it looks.

“Are you okay?” I ask, glancing up at her. She doesn’t have a single strand of blonde hair out of place or a drop of sweat on her face.

“I regret not killing him,” she spits out in a bitter tone.

“Maybe you did,” I say. “He was in pretty bad shape when we left him.”

She shakes her head. “No, it would take more than two knife wounds to kill Igor. He will live. Those two bastard brothers can’t be killed.”

I take a deep breath. It’s time to tell her about Ivan. She can’t go on believing Ivan is still out there somewhere, hunting her down.

“I need to tell you something,” I begin. “Please don’t be mad at me for not telling you sooner. I wanted to be sure I could trust you.”

Her eyes narrow suspiciously at me. “What is it? Spit it out.”

“Ivan is dead,” I reply. “He was killed the night they came to the club.”

“Your men killed him?” she asks, arching an eyebrow at me.

“Yes,” I slowly admit. “They did it to protect me. They caught him breaking into my car at Platinum. He was waiting for me to come out.”

Natasha leans her head back against the building and rummages inside her purse for a cigarette. “Good,” she says. “One less fucking Russian for me to kill.”

“You’re not mad?” I ask.

She turns to give me a small smile. “Eva has security cameras at the club. The camera footage showed that something happened in the parking lot, but the images weren’t clear enough to tell exactly what.” She lifts her shoulders in a shrug. “I knew you would tell me what happened when you

were ready. I owe your men. They can trust me with their secret.”

“I know we can trust you,” I say. “Whatever happens next, we’re all in this together.”

“Yes, and next time, there will be no mistakes,” she says.

SEVEN

“**T**ime for a break! Take ten minutes, everyone!” I push the damp strands of hair off my forehead, a thin layer of perspiration forming from the heat and my mounting frustration. As I hurry off the stage to clear my head, the scent of metal, sweat, and lingering traces of stage smoke fills the air.

Rehearsal for a new trick isn't going well and I'm quickly losing patience. The trick fell apart, and with it the thin veil of magic we weave for the audience. If a live audience were watching, they could see my assistant attempt to curl her body into an impossibly tight space inside a hidden compartment in the box. Instead of giving the illusion she magically disappeared, they could clearly tell that she is nothing more than a talented contortionist.

To an illusionist, there's nothing worse than the sharp sting of reality breaking through the world of magic. If that ever happens to me, I'm finished in this town.

As I leave, my assistant's voice, tinged with desperation, calls out behind me. “I'm sorry, Seven.” Her footsteps hurry to catch up. “My heel caught on the box, and I couldn't pull my legs up fast enough. I screwed up. Let's try it one more time before we quit for the day.”

“It’s okay,” I murmur, trying to calm my own frayed nerves. I give her a reassuring smile. “You’ll nail it next time. We could both use a break. I worked everyone extra hard today.”

She nods quickly in relief and runs back onto the stage to practice again without me. I walk down the hallway to the staff’s break room and grab a chilled water bottle out of the refrigerator. Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I check it for the umpteenth time.

Nothing from Jade.

I’m anxious, waiting for her call to let me know everything is going smoothly. I should’ve insisted on shadowing her today at the Bora Bora during the practice run. But as always, Jade had been stubborn, assuring me she didn’t need any of us there since they were only practicing on one machine.

Leroy walks into the breakroom, his hulking form making the room feel smaller, and barrels straight past me. During rehearsal, he always stands at the corner of the stage, observing my every move. If anything were to go wrong, he would be there in a split-second to help.

“Is there anything to eat in here besides the fruit basket over there on the table?” He points to a big basket of complimentary fresh fruit I supply the crew with every day. “Bananas and oranges don’t fill a big man up. They’re more of a tiny snack than a real meal, in my opinion. Do I have time to run out and grab a hamburger before rehearsal starts again?” He slowly rubs his stomach. “I’m craving a Big Mac.”

“When are you not craving a Big Mac? You need to stop eating that crap.”

“Save your breath,” he says, rolling his eyes at me.

“If you’re not going to eat those bananas, then I need you to do something quick for me.” Hurrying across the room, I grab a banana from the fruit basket and peel it. “Hold this,” I say, handing over the banana to him after I toss the peeling into the trash can. “Go stand over there on the other side of the room.”

He glares at me. “Are you fucking serious?” he asks. “Do I look like I’m in the mood for your silliness? Because believe me, I’m not. I’m on the verge of being hangry, both hungry and angry. My blood sugar’s dropping again and I’m feeling faint.”

“It’ll only take a second,” I assure him. “Come on! I need to practice this trick one more time before I go live with it on stage. Only two minutes, I promise.”

With an exaggerated sigh, he takes the banana out of my hand and walks to the far side of the room.

“Is this far enough away?” he asks.

“Yeah, that’s perfect. Hold the banana at the bottom with your arm out straight.”

I pull out the deck of cards in my pocket and shuffle them quickly. “Ready?” I ask, grinning at him.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” he replies. “Don’t you fucking dare hit me in the eye with one of those damn cards,” he warns. “If you do, I’ll swear, I’ll come right over there and punch you right in the nose. I’ll mess you up bad.”

“Then we’ll both be out of a job,” I tell him. “Who wants to see an illusionist who looks like he’s been in a street fight? Hold still. On the count of three.”

I grasp the deck of cards in my left hand and place the fingers of my right hand on top. Leroy holds the banana as far

away from his face as he can get it and pulls his head back dramatically.

“For fuck’s sake! Quit being hysterical. I won’t hit you. I’ve thrown cards since I was a kid. One, two...”

In a fast eye-blurring motion, I throw the cards one at a time toward the banana, slicing it into uniform pieces right down to his thumb and forefinger.

“Yes!” I say, pumping the air with my fist. “Not a single miss. Damn, am I good or what?”

Leroy is clearly unimpressed. “I’m not picking up those banana pieces,” he says with a doleful glance at the smashed banana on the tile floor. “That’s your mess. I’m not your maid. You made the mess, you clean it up.”

“Okay, okay,” I say, walking over to scoop up the banana with a paper towel. “The trick is cool, though, right? How the cards slice uniformly right through the banana?”

“Someone might think so. I’ve seen better. Much better.”

“You’re in a foul mood,” I say, frowning at him. “You should eat something.”

“I will.” He opens the door of the refrigerator, scans the contents, then slams the door hard. “There are no good leftovers in here tonight,” he mutters.

“What did you bring?”

“Who me?” he says. “Hell no, I didn’t bring anything. I meant other people’s leftovers. I find all kinds of good stuff in here...lasagna, meatloaf. One time I found a whole pecan pie sitting there waiting for me to come along.”

“Do you realize you’re eating other people’s meals?” I ask. “That they brought from home for their own lunch or dinner?”

This isn't a free food pantry where people drop off unwanted food for the needy."

"Then someone should put up a yellow sticky note," he argues. "How the hell was I supposed to know? I thought we were all one big family here. You're always reminding us of that during your stupid motivational pep talks in the middle of the night."

He opens the refrigerator again and snatches a strawberry yogurt out of the door. "Never forget that we're all one big family here," he says, mimicking my voice exactly. "Here's a newsflash for you. Nobody wants to be a happy family at three o'clock in the damn morning. You need to let your people get some sleep. Not call them into work when you get a creative, wild hair up your crazy ass."

"Maybe it's time I give the team another one of those talks," I say with a frown. "Am I difficult to work for?" I hadn't thought about it before. I always assumed everyone was as enthusiastic as I am about making the show the best it can be.

"Nah," he says, ripping the top off the yogurt. "You're not a bad boss. I'm poking fun at you. If anyone doesn't want to work for you, they can always leave. Ain't that right? People in this town are lining up to work for you. You're the hottest ticket on the strip these days."

I don't answer, my mind elsewhere.

"What's up with you today?" he asks, frowning at me. "You're out of sorts. You're not sick, are you? Because if you are, I can talk to Mama about it. She's an expert in natural remedies and cleansings, as she calls them. She can whip you up something if you're getting sick. She's always trying to force me to drink a weird concoction she's whipped up. Hell,

I'm afraid to even sneeze around her, because here she'll come, two minutes later, with her little toddy glass full of God knows what. Kit should've been her son instead of me. They should get together and start their own business selling green drink shit. They could probably make a killing."

"I'm not sick," I say. "I'm worried about Jade."

"Don't worry about the girls. They got this. Any word from them, yet?"

"Not one damn word." I drain the bottle of water and toss it into the recycling bin. "I can't help worrying. I thought they would've given an 'all clear' signal by now. I wish I'd insisted on being there for the first test run or sent you as backup."

Leroy is still prowling through the refrigerator with his free hand, searching for something else to steal. "You want me to run over to the Bora Bora and check on them?" he asks. "I'm friends with a bartender there. I could hang out at the bar and make sure they're doing okay without drawing suspicion." He pats his pocket. "Hang on. I'm getting a call. Might be one of my lady friends."

He pulls his cellphone out and reads it. "Oh shit!" he says, pointing down at his phone. "There's a shooter at the Bora Bora casino."

"What?" I reach over and snatch the phone out of his hand. "Is anyone hurt? Did they get him?"

"Doesn't say," he replies. "We'd better head over there and find Jade. Make sure she's alright."

"Hurry and pull the limo around back while I try to get Jade on the phone," I tell him. Quickly, I dial her number. To my shock, she picks up on the first ring. "Hello?" she whispers.

“Where are you?” I shout into the phone. “What the fuck’s going on? Are you okay?”

“Calm down, we’re fine,” Jade insists. “Everything’s fine.”

“Fine? How can you be fine? There’s a shooter at the Bora Bora.”

“It’s Igor,” she replies, her voice composed. “I’m the one who reported a shooter. We’re safe and several blocks away. He cornered us in a bathroom and Natasha stabbed him. She almost finished him off, but he got off a shot at her through his suit jacket. We ran out and started shouting about a gunman.”

“Fucking hell!” I mutter. “I knew I should’ve been at the casino today to watch your back. Did the police get him yet?”

“No idea,” she replies. “We blended in with the crowd to get out. Obviously, we didn’t stick around to answer questions from the cops.”

“Where are you now?”

“Several blocks away in a stinky back alley,” she says. “We’re waiting for the commotion to clear out before we hit the sidewalk again.”

“Stay put and we’ll be right there in the limo,” I tell her. “Don’t move. Give me the address. I’m on my way now.”

Five minutes later, we’re going as fast as we can in terrible Vegas traffic. “Damn, Leroy!” I say to him. “Is there a back way there?”

“If there was, I’d already be taking it.” His large hands grip the steering wheel as he maneuvers skillfully through the crowded streets. “Don’t worry. If Jade said she’s fine, then she’s fine. We’ll get there and then you’ll be able to see for yourself.”

His attempt to reassure me does little to calm my nerves. “I shouldn’t have let her go into the casino by herself. We knew Igor was still out there somewhere. He’s probably been stalking her for days. Or Natasha. We let down our guard and she almost got hurt, yet again. We suck at keeping her safe.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself,” he says. “You can’t keep her under lock and key forever, though I suspect that’s exactly what you boys would like to do. What is it with you three, anyway? You’re all crazy in love with her, which, if I’m being perfectly honest, is so fucking weird to watch. It reminds me of being back in middle school and all the guys having a crush on the same damn cheerleader.”

“It’s hard to explain,” I reply, my gaze drifting to the glittering city beyond the window. “She’s a part of us and it’s felt that way from the very first moment I saw her. I guess we were all missing something in our fucked up lives, and Jade fills that empty spot.”

“But aren’t you just a little bit jealous when she’s with the other guys?” he probes further. “That’s the part I can’t figure out. The three of you have always been competitive. You turn everything into one big game. You’re always trying to find out who is the fastest, the strongest, the smartest. Well, maybe not the smartest, because everyone knows that would be you. And there wouldn’t be any need to compare dick sizes, not with Kit’s big ole elephant trunk. Vulcan has the two of you beat on anything athletic. Hell, I don’t know why you play those stupid games, anyway, since you know who is going to win before you start. Then to see you sharing one girl is just freaky.”

“I hear what you’re saying. If someone had told me a month ago, that I’d be in a relationship with a girl and my two

best friends, I would've laughed my ass off."

His hearty laugh fills the limo. "Don't get any ideas about me joining your little circle jerk," he adds. "Because I enjoy keeping my ladies all to myself. Big Leroy is more than enough for any gal, if you get my drift."

"We won't," I assure him, trying not to smile. I'd wondered how long it would take him to bring this up. He's probably been sweating bullets worrying about us pressuring him into a gang bang.

"Don't get me wrong," he continues, his tone turning serious. "Jade's a fine woman, but she's more like a little sister to me."

"Perfect," I reply. "I'm sure she thinks of you the same way. I appreciate you looking after her, too. It makes me feel better."

"The address you gave me is up ahead," he says, nodding towards the glow of a neon sign. "I'll pull over at the curb because I'm not driving this limo down at creepy back alley. Not in Vegas."

I text Jade to tell her we're almost there. Soon Leroy is pulling the limo to a stop near the shadowy alley. The girls emerge from behind a graffiti-covered dumpster and climb inside. Jade immediately snuggles close to me, while Natasha, after giving me a cool, cautious glance, takes a seat at the far end of the limo.

The familiar scent of Jade's shampoo envelops me as I wrap my arms around her, pressing a gentle kiss to her hair. "I'm sorry I wasn't there to protect you. I knew that was a mistake letting you go off without backup. From now on, no more test runs without at least one of us shadowing you."

She nods against my shoulder, her voice shaky, but determined. “You’re right. We let our guard down and Igor took advantage of that. It could’ve turned out way worse. Trust me, next time we’ll be better prepared if we end up in another dangerous situation.”

The limo’s interior is momentarily illuminated as a nearby flashing billboard switches ads. Natasha’s piercing gaze meets mine.

“Did you kill him?” I ask. The heavy weight of my question hangs between us.

“I can only hope,” she replies, her tone dripping with ice-cold vengeance. “But I’m not that lucky. Igor will live on to terrorize us again.”

“Damn! That’s a shame he’ll survive.”

“Next time he won’t,” Natasha vows firmly. “He’ll strike again, and I’ll be waiting for him. And then he’ll be the same as Ivan, his bones turning to dust in the desert.”

In the dim light of the limo, I cast a glance at Jade. “You told her?”

She lifts her eyes to look up at me. “Yes, I told her about Ivan. She deserves to know the truth. It’s bad enough knowing that one brother is out there, constantly hunting her down. We’re all in this together now.”

“Don’t be alarmed, Magic Man,” Natasha’s voice cuts through the air, laced with an unexpected warmth for a change. “Your secret is safe with me and my friends. I owe you for taking care of Ivan. I give you my word that I will never reveal your secret. Never. That is my promise to you.”

I nod in response, a silent pact forming between us.

“Are there security tapes of the parking lot at Platinum?” I prod, leaning forward slightly, eyes searching hers. “Ivan was there that night until we... removed him from the premises.”

“Not any longer,” she murmurs, a slight smile tugging at her lips. “Why would we keep evidence of the Russians ever being at the club? We erase our security camera footage regularly. Do not worry. We are one step ahead of you.”

Jade’s voice breaks through my thoughts. “What will happen when the police find Igor?” she asks. “I assume if he’s still alive, he’ll go to a hospital to be treated for his knife wounds.”

Leroy’s voice chimes in from the front, the rearview mirror catching the glint in his eyes. “Want me to check around and find out what hospital he’s at?”

“Might not be a bad idea,” I tell him. “We need to keep tabs on him.”

“Dimitri will never allow him to sit in jail,” Natasha says. “He would kill Igor himself first. Russian mafia do not go to jail.”

“If you’re thinking you can finish him off at the hospital, don’t risk it,” Jade warns. “The police might be guarding him. Let it go.”

Natasha’s laugh is bitter and hollow. “Let it go?” she scoffs. “Never. Not until he is six feet under.”

The hum of the city outside is a distant echo as I probe deeper. “Jade’s been tight-lipped about your past. What’s the story with you and Igor?”

A dark shadow crosses Natasha’s face. “We have history. Dark, twisted history. My hatred for him burns as fiercely as it did for Ivan.”

“Then I’m glad we could help you out,” I say. “Where do you want us to take you? Back to Platinum?”

She nods back at me. “Yes, I need to tell Eva everything.”

“Was the operation going as planned until Igor showed up?” I ask. “Or was it a complete bust today?”

“Everything was working beautifully,” Jade replies. “We were so close. Within a couple of spins. Maybe it’s better this way without us going all the way through to the end. We’ll draw less suspicion. Personally, I don’t believe we need to do another test run. The plan will work.”

“Are you sure?” I ask. “There’s time to do another test one or two.”

“I’m sure,” Jade replies. “Every time we step foot into a casino, we’re raising our chances of getting caught. I’m confident the plan is solid. We should begin our preparations for Christmas Eve. It’s time to do this.”

“I agree,” Natasha says. “Jade is ready. All we need to do is make certain the rest of us can do our parts, too.”

“Natasha, do you mind if Leroy drops us off at my place before taking you to Platinum?” I ask, hoping to grab a rare, few minutes alone with Jade.

“No, I don’t mind,” Natasha replies.

“Leroy, drop us off at my penthouse and take Natasha to Platinum. I’ll meet up with you later, before the show.”

“Whoa...hang on a minute,” he says. “Shouldn’t you be asking me if I mind, instead of her? What if she draws a knife on me, and holds it to my throat? She’s already gutted and filleted one man today.”

Natasha laughs softly at his comment. “Are you afraid of me?” she asks.

“Fuck yes! I’m scared of you,” he replies, glancing back at her in the rearview mirror. “You remind me of one of those Russian spies in the James Bond movies. Whenever Bond would go to sleep, they’d try to stab him with an ice pick or strangle him with their pantyhose.”

“I’m not Russian, I’m Ukrainian,” she explains. “And I left my ice pick at home today.”

“Doesn’t matter,” he replies. “When Seven and Jade get out, I’m putting the partition up between us. When we arrive at Platinum, I’ll blow the horn, and then you can get out. I’m not giving you a chance to slit my throat. No sirree.”

Natasha laughs again, genuinely amused.

“Leroy!” I scold him. “You don’t need to be rude. We’re all working together now. Natasha won’t hurt you, for fuck’s sake!”

“Damn right, she won’t,” he mutters. “Because I won’t give her the chance.”

Ten minutes later, he drops us off at the private entrance to my building. Before we’ve stepped away from the limo, he’s already raising the partition between the front seat and the back where Natasha is sitting.

“I can’t believe Leroy is intimidated by Natasha,” Jade says, taking my hand in hers. “Natasha acts tough, but she’s a marshmallow underneath her cold exterior.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” I say.

JADE

Seven takes me up to his penthouse for the first time since I moved into Kit's place. I can't help but feel a small wave of nostalgia as memories flood back to me of our time spent together here.

"Do you miss living here?" I ask him, as he guides me inside with a gentle hand on my back.

The luxurious penthouse has a different vibe to it than before. The rooms are still immaculately decorated, filled with contemporary furniture and stunning artwork, but the vibe is sterile and cold now that Seven has technically moved out. The once vibrant and personal ambiance has been replaced by an elegance that lacks warmth. Even the bright Vegas lights streaming through the floor-to-ceiling windows appear distant and impersonal.

"I miss the convenience of being closer to my work," he replies. "That's all I miss about this place. The old saying is true about home being where the heart is, and my heart is with you. I would be more at home living in a crappy, rundown motel with you than living here by myself. Where you go, I will gladly follow. I grew up living in a car, and I can adapt easily to any living situation. This place isn't a home. It's nothing more than a fancy hotel room to me."

His words are filled with sincerity. I reach out, taking his hand, craving his warmth.

“Do you need help packing up more of your things to move?” I ask. “I can help you fold clothes.”

“Kit might throw a fit if I drag any more of my clothes into his house,” he replies with a laugh. “He’s being very kind to give me extra closet space and I don’t want to take advantage.”

I smile at him. “I can’t imagine Kit throwing a fit about anything as inconsequential as clothes. He’s as even-tempered as anyone I’ve ever met.”

“You’re right, but I can always swing by here to pick up anything I need. Besides, I didn’t bring you here to put you to work. I wanted to run an idea past you.”

“Sure,” I say. “Let’s hear it. What do you have in mind?” I’m certain he’ll suggest something sexy. Maybe a quick dip in the hot tub on the balcony or a steamy shower together in the master bath.

He tugs me down on his leather sofa with him. “I want to invite you to come to my performance tonight. It’s a late night show. I would love for you to finally see what I do for a living in order to pay for all this shit.” He waves a hand at the fancy penthouse. “It would mean a lot to me for you to be there.”

My mouth drops open in surprise. “Are you serious? You would allow me to do that? Oh my God! I would love to!” I throw my arms around his neck and crawl up into his lap. “Do you think it’s safe for me to be seen there?”

“The one thing we know for certain is that Igor is temporarily incapacitated. He can’t hurt you tonight. And you already have a wig on to help disguise you,” Seven reassures, his hands sliding down my back to rest on my hips.

“Ugh! I hate wearing wigs,” I complain, making a face. “They’re uncomfortable and hot.”

“But you’re so fucking sexy as a blonde,” he teases, his lips curling into a wicked smile as he tugs playfully at a strand of my fake hair.

“Don’t get used to it, buddy,” I tell him, jabbing him in the chest with my finger. “I’m not going blonde permanently. I don’t have any clothes to wear except what I have on. I can’t be seen in the same outfit I wore at the Bora Bora. What if someone spotted me coming out of the restroom?”

Seven rubs his short beard and appears slightly embarrassed, his eyes avoiding mine for a moment. “Clothes won’t be an issue. There are plenty of extra clothes for you here. I’ve ordered quite a few things for you.”

“When?” I ask, surprised, my eyebrows shooting up. “Why?”

He shrugs, a grin spreading across his face. “I enjoy buying things for you, but I didn’t want to come across as an asshole, so I didn’t give them to you. The boxes are piling up in the spare bedroom.”

“I don’t understand,” I ask, genuinely baffled by his logic. “Why would I think you were an asshole for buying me a gift?”

“I didn’t want it to appear as if I was using money or gifts to buy your affection,” he explains. “Even if you didn’t see it that way, Kit and Vulcan might. I wouldn’t want it to turn into a pissing contest between us for real. We joked around about buying you cars or giving you deeds to land, but we all knew we were offering those things for your security. Buying you clothes only because I want to is different.”

“It’s very sweet of you,” I say, touched by his thoughtfulness. “What did you buy?”

He stands and pulls me up beside him. “A little bit of everything. Keep in mind you don’t have to like the clothes, or wear any of it. Every item can go back because I kept the receipts. Seriously, don’t feel obligated to wear or accept something if it doesn’t jibe with your taste in clothes.”

“I’m sure I’ll love everything. I’m touched.”

He leads me into the bedroom I stayed in before, and I realize he’s telling the truth. There are several stacks of boxes on the floor, in the closet and on the bed, all bearing designer logos and tied with elegant ribbons.

“Are you planning on opening your own boutique?” I tease. “Or are all these boxes for me?” My heart swells with affection for this man who has gone to such great lengths to make me feel special.

“I’m afraid so,” he replies, his tone almost apologetic as he scratches the back of his neck and offers a sheepish smile.

“Any suggestions for what I should wear tonight to your show?” I ask, slightly overwhelmed by the thought of opening all the boxes and trying on the clothes.

“You’ll be lovely in anything. There are also boxes of shoes in the closet. The show begins in less than two hours. Can you be ready for Leroy to pick you up before then?” he inquires, as he checks his watch.

“You bet I can,” I reply with a determined nod, already mentally sifting through the potential outfits.

“Okay, then. I’ll leave you here to get ready while I head back to work. Leroy will take care of you at the show and then

I'll take you home afterwards. Does everything sound okay to you?"

"Everything sounds perfect," I reply. "Now go! I'm eager to go through these boxes and play dress up. I'll meet you later at the show. I honestly can't wait. After all this time, I finally will see what you do."

"I hope I don't fuck up tonight. Having you there will be awesome and nerve-wracking," he confesses. "Also, be forewarned, my show can be a tad cheesy at times."

His show of vulnerability touches me, knowing how he always projects an air of self-assured confidence.

He leans down to give me a quick kiss on the lips, a soft connection that lingers. "Don't be late. The show begins promptly, right on time."

"I won't. Good luck!"

When I hear the door to the penthouse slam shut and I'm alone in the room, I explore the boxes, each filled with delicate tissue paper and fresh smelling fabrics. The first box is a beautiful black dress, the color and cut carefully chosen to flatter my figure. The fabric of the dress is soft against my skin, instead of the scratchy material so many dresses are sewn from.

This tells me Seven is paying attention when I grumble about clothing tags bothering me or when I change clothes three times because a shirt is suddenly uncomfortable.

The reflection in the full-length mirror captures my smile as I hold up the dress, imagining how it would look on me. I can almost hear his approving voice, his laughter, his gentle teasing.

I move to the next box, and the next, each one a personal love letter from Seven. There are casual outfits, elegant gowns for special occasions, and even accessories. His hand is evident in every choice, and yet it's clear he's not trying to dress me to his personal tastes.

He respects who I am, and my individuality. By his selections, he's showing me he embraces my quirks and isn't trying to change me into a better or more sophisticated version. Any man can buy me clothes, but for him to encourage me to be myself means everything.

The more time I spend with him, the more layers he reveals. He's not the cocky and confident man I first met; he's vulnerable, caring, and complex. I'm seeing deep beyond the sexy, charismatic surface, into the soul of a man who genuinely cares for me.

In this room, surrounded by his proof of acceptance of me, I feel a deep connection to Seven, a bond that's growing stronger and deeper with each passing day.

He accepts me for who I am, and I'm finally beginning to see him, too.

JADE

Leroy escorts me down the red carpeted stairs and unhooks a plush velvet rope, blocking off a reserved VIP section. With a flourish, he points to my seat, right up front in the first row.

“Enjoy the show,” he says. “I hope you realize what a special treat you’re in for. With Seven, you never know what might happen. That’s why his show is the best one in Vegas. Every night it’s something different. He even surprises me sometimes and I’m there for every rehearsal.”

“I’m excited,” I tell him. “I’m still in shock he’s allowing me to come to the show, instead of keeping me hidden away. Honestly, I can’t wait.”

“Sit tight after the show and I’ll come get you to take you backstage,” Leroy says, his eyes twinkling with mischief. “We’ll meet up with Seven there. I’ll send a waiter over with a drink for you, too. It’s important to Seven that you enjoy the show. It means a lot to him that you’re finally here to watch him perform.”

“Okay,” I respond, my voice light and filled with anticipation. “I’m thrilled to be here.”

Leroy strides off, then quickly disappears into the dimly lit backstage area. A cocktail waitress, dressed in a shimmering outfit that catches the light, gracefully approaches soon after with a chilled glass of champagne for me. The bubbles rise enticingly, and I lean back in my comfortable seat, relaxing for the first time today. I take a sip of the crisp, expensive champagne. *Nice*. I could get used to this life.

In all the time I've spent with the guys, they've never talked much about their careers. Which is a little odd, considering how deeply intertwined their professions are with their identities. Seven, with his enigmatic illusions, Kit, with his wild tigers; and Vulcan, cloaked in secrecy, never quite revealing exactly what he does. When I dare to broach the subject, Vulcan's eyes, dark and unfathomable, cloud over, brushing aside my inquiries with a quick change of topic. I refrain from probing too deeply, trusting that he will unveil himself when he's ready.

Abruptly, the overhead lights in the theater flicker on and off, signaling the show's commencement in five minutes. Scanning the theater, I note the full seats. That's a promising sign. Leroy had told me that the show reaches capacity nearly every night.

Soon the lights dim, sending a wave of anticipation through the crowd, silencing them in eager expectation. Seven dashes onto the stage, seizing the microphone, and *damn*, how I adore a man in a black tuxedo. But it's more than just the tux on him; it's the tantalizing promise of what's hidden beneath—the tattooed, chiseled muscles concealed under that perfect fit. He's breathtaking. No wonder the women in the audience are drooling over him.

The moment he steps onto the stage, the audience is already his. They erupt into cheers and applause before he utters a single word. My heart swelling with pride, I carefully place my champagne flute on the table beside my seat, turning my undivided attention to the man on stage.

My man.

Seven flashes a smile, every inch of him alive with a magnetic aura, pacing the stage and holding the crowd spellbound.

“Good evening!” he calls out to the audience, his voice deep and captivating. “Welcome to my show. My name is Seven, and it’s my great pleasure to be performing for you tonight. If you’ve never seen one of my shows before, pay very close attention. I promise you’ll be amazed!”

In a fleeting pause, he turns, our eyes lock, and he winks. My pulse quickens, and my stomach does that familiar flip-flop. I flash a grin and sink back into my seat, ready for the show.

The next hour is a whirlwind of mind-bending illusions and his enthralling magnetism. He’s more than a mere showman; he’s an artist, painting a masterpiece with every trick, building on the crowd’s belief in the improbable.

His artistry doesn’t linger on corny, tedious buildups; it’s swift, moving from one spellbinding setup to the next, cramming in as much entertainment as he can into the hour-long show. I remember Seven telling me he wants his audience to get their money’s worth, and he delivers.

As he guides the audience’s gaze with his graceful hands, my eyes dart elsewhere. I scan the stage, the props, his sleeves; everywhere he doesn’t want the crowd to look, trying

to figure out how he does his tricks. I'm constantly searching for the secret behind the magic, knowing he's intentionally misdirecting their attention.

Every time I come up empty-handed.

His talents are boundless—from mind-reading and levitation to an entertaining, though bizarre trick where he cuts bananas with thrown playing cards.

With each illusion, the stakes rise, each one more complex, more daring. Midway through the show, to the audience's delight, he strips off his jacket and shirt, revealing the tattooed muscles underneath.

Whoa! Holy shit!

I'm not sure why he took his shirt off, but I'm sure as hell not complaining about it. Except the temperature in the already warm room has gone up another ten degrees, matching my flushed excitement.

And then the mood shifts.

The lights dim as Seven, bound in shining cuffs, suspends himself from a burning rope high above the stage. The glow from the burning rope illuminates his face, casting flickering shadows that dance across the stage. I'm sitting close enough to see there isn't anything to cushion his fall if the stunt fails.

He writhes and twists, his theatrical struggle making the rope slowly succumb to the flames. I'm calm at first, recognizing the rehearsed tension in his act.

But when the rope burns down to two threads, genuine concern sets in. What the hell is he doing? The raw danger of the act pushes me to the edge of my seat. My logical mind races, considering all the things that could go wrong. Any movement of air on the stage might cause the rope to burn

faster than normal. Even a slight burst of wind from the air-conditioning system could change the burn rate of the flame.

If he miscalculates the time to free his hands from the handcuffs, he'll fall straight on his head. I can see every strained muscle in his arms working furiously, the beads of sweat forming on his forehead. As the rope burns closer to its end, the tension in the theater becomes unbearable. I can't believe he never told me he performs dangerous stunts in his show. It makes me wonder what else the guys are keeping from me.

I notice Leroy taking tentative steps up the stairs to the side stage. He looks worried too, ready to run over if he falls. Not that he could do anything but call an ambulance.

Whispers of worry ripple through the crowd. A sick feeling settles in the pit of my stomach. The crowd gasps as the rope burns through until there's only one thin thread holding him up.

Was that supposed to happen? This can't be right. The thread is too thin to hold up his weight for long. The rope is burning faster than expected.

Something is wrong.

His hands should be free by now. He's genuinely struggling. My heart's racing in panic. Stagehands emerge from behind the curtains, faces filled with worry and uncertainty. They cast desperate glances at one another, clearly unprepared for this twist.

There's no backup plan? What the fuck?

I can't bear to watch and yet I can't tear my eyes away. My fingernails dig into my palms. Then, in a heart-stopping moment, he breaks free of the handcuffs as the last tiny thread

is about to give way. He pulls himself up the remaining rope, his sweat-slicked muscles rippling with exertion.

The crowd erupts into thunderous cheers. I jump to my feet and clap wildly for him too, though I want to punch the shit out of him. The stunt was too close, too scary. Without a doubt, he miscalculated and took a very real risk with his life. A fall from the height he was hanging from would cause brain damage, if not death.

Is he insane? Why do my guys keep placing themselves in danger?

When he returns to the microphone stand, he's still breathing hard. A female assistant throws him a white handkerchief, and he wipes his forehead and his glistening, muscled chest. I can't take my eyes off him, entranced by every drop of sweat, imagining tasting it as I slowly lick it off his body.

“For my final trick, I need a volunteer,” he calls out, his voice filled with mischief. “Someone fearless. Someone adventurous. Someone ready to take a chance. Any volunteers?”

Every woman in the crowd, and even a few men, spring to life, arms waving. “Pick me! Me! I'll do it!” they cry, their voices blending into a desperate chorus.

Seven flashes that devilish grin that always makes my heart skip a beat and signals to his director in the control booth. “A touch more light, please? Just enough to see the crowd. We don't want to blind them.”

The overhead theater lights slowly brighten.

“Ah...much better,” he says. “Now that I can see your beautiful faces, I realize I can't possibly pick by myself. I'll let

my trusty assistant do it for me. Where did she go? I'm sure she was right here a moment ago. Elsa! Where are you?"

He pats the seat of his pants, then tugs at the handkerchief he'd crammed into his front pocket. As he pulls out the cloth, a plump white dove magically appears in his hand.

Laughter erupts from the crowd, and I join in, amazed and clueless where the bird could've been hiding. She's too big to have hidden inside his pants pocket. I'm close enough to the stage to spot any hidden compartments, but I see nothing.

"Here she is," he says, holding up the bird in his hands. "The little devil. Hiding in my pocket. Elsa's favorite job is to pick a volunteer. To be honest, it's her one and only job. I must warn you though, she loves to land on shiny bald heads, so watch out, gentlemen!"

He gently tosses the dove into the air. She takes off flying, her wings a blur of white, in big, looping circles over the crowd, reaching higher and higher each time. A few bald men self-consciously touch their scalps, drawing more chuckles from the crowd.

"Uh oh!" he says. "Someone has forgotten to put Elsa's pigeon pants on her. Did I mention she's not potty trained yet? Incoming torpedo! Watch out below!"

The audience shrieks as she continues to circle right above our heads. After her third trip flying around the top of the theater with no sign of stopping, he lets out an exaggerated sigh.

"Any day now, Elsa," he chides, playful irritation in his voice. "I know it's hard to choose the perfect volunteer, but you need to decide. Hurry and pick someone! Our guests have dinner plans."

Elsa ignores him, flying to the highest rafter and preening her feathers, settling in as if ready to roost for the night. Tiny white feathers drift down like snowflakes onto the seats below.

Seven hangs his head in mock defeat. “Rule number one. Never work with animals, especially birds. Really, Elsa? You’ll leave me dying down here on stage while you’re screwing around up there? If you don’t hurry, you’ll be standing in the unemployment line tomorrow. Along with all the other out-of-work animals on the Vegas strip.”

His words are barely out of his mouth when the dove dives off the balcony and flies straight toward me. Before I can duck, she lands right on top of my head. Our image flashes up on the big screens on both sides of the stage. The audience laughs at how ridiculous I appear with a big white dove perched on my head.

She’s heavier than I would have expected, and I freeze, fearing I might hurt her if I reach up to remove her. Instead, I sit still as she leans down to preen my long hair with her beak.

His eyes meet mine, and he grins, a spark of mischief dancing in his eyes. For a fleeting instant, the theater disappears, and it’s just him and me. Elsa’s so-called random choice was a ruse. I realize he trained her to fly to my seat. This moment was meticulously orchestrated by the master illusionist himself.

He has played me once again, knowing I’d be too timid to volunteer. “We’ve finally found our volunteer,” he declares, approaching the edge of the stage and extending his hand. “Come on up, miss! It’ll be fun, I promise.”

I try to shake my head, but the stubborn dove won’t budge. I stand carefully, and Seven gently scolds, “Elsa! What are you doing still sitting on this lovely lady’s head?” She flies to his

upturned palm. “Fabulous job, my love. Now go backstage and enjoy a snack. Ladies and gentlemen, a round of applause for my assistant, please?”

The dove coos and bows, basking in the attention, before flying backstage as the applause dies down.

He extends his hand again, and this time, I accept it. Our fingers interlock, and a spark of something unspoken passes between us. My hands are cold, but his thumb rubs my knuckles gently. His grip is grounding, a reminder that this is all part of his game. He guides me up the steps to the stage, leading me to the center.

“Now that I finally have a volunteer, let’s find out your name,” he says, as if we’ve never met before. He holds the microphone in front of me.

“It’s Jade,” I say softly into the microphone.

“Jade is a lovely name,” he says, his voice oozing charm. “Very unusual. Are your parents geologists, by any chance?”

Laughter ripples through the theater, believing his words to be mere teasing. He continues, his eyes twinkling, “Just kidding. Now, where are you from, Jade?”

The question catches me off guard. It’s a standard question when a volunteer is pulled up on stage. Someone who isn’t trying to do everything possible not to draw attention to themselves.

“Orlando, Florida,” I lie, hoping my shaky voice doesn’t give me away.

“Did you hear that?” he calls out, turning to the crowd. “If you ever need a free place to stay while visiting Orlando, give Jade a call. What’s your phone number?” he jokes.

“Oh no, I’m not giving that out,” I reply, playing along.

“I can’t say I blame you,” he concedes with a warm, genuine laugh. “Ready to be the star of my show? It’ll only take a few minutes of your time.”

I hesitate a moment, then nod. I can’t refuse now, anyway.

He takes a step back and slowly studies me up and down while rubbing his neatly trimmed beard with two fingers. “Hmm...it’s a good thing you’re small. I need to warn you. It might be a tight fit.”

I don’t have time to ask him what he means before two women roll a standard magician’s black box onto the stage. He opens the lid with a flourish, then motions for me to walk up on the steps they’ve put down and get inside.

From where I’m standing, I can see that the space inside is tiny and cramped.

My heart beats faster.

Oh, shit!

He chose the wrong damn volunteer for this trick, because I’m extremely claustrophobic. Tight, dark spaces are the one thing I’m terrified of.

This is not happening.

Not today.

Not tomorrow.

Not fucking ever.

He cues the orchestra to play a loud drum roll while he gives another theatrical wave. “And now my lovely volunteer will climb into the box,” he says with a tilt of his head and an encouraging smile.

I unconsciously back up a step, feeling queasy, and shake my head, my stomach churning.

He turns away from the audience and raises his eyebrows at me in question. “What are you doing?” he mouths silently, his face etched with concern.

“Sorry, I can’t,” I whisper to him, my voice shaky.

A worried expression crosses his face, his eyes darting around the stage. A reluctant volunteer must be something he’s never had to deal with before.

Show or no show, I’m not crawling inside a tiny box.

I can’t do it.

I don’t care how many people are out there watching me make a fool of myself. This is the stuff of nightmares. The box reminds me of caskets and funerals. Memories of my grandfather’s funeral clash with memories of being a small, frightened child watching his casket lowered into the earth, and then the cold reality of foster care two days later. My life took a terrible turn back then, and the panic I’m feeling now feels eerily similar.

I can’t do this.

“My instructions must not be clear,” he says, feigning confusion, his eyes locked onto mine. “I’ll try this again. Please step inside the box, my most lovely and beautiful volunteer,” he pleads, each word laced with theatrical charm. “The fairest lady in the land.”

The crowd giggles at my reluctance. They’re not sure if my resistance is real or part of the act.

“I’ll show you how,” he offers. “It’s easy.” He rushes up the steps, his movements graceful and assured, and shows me

how to get inside as if I can't figure it out myself. "Do it this way. It's easy. Put one leg inside, then the other one."

"No, I'm not getting in there," I say, more firmly this time, beginning to panic.

He exhales heavily, theatrically slumping his shoulders, addressing the audience. "My volunteer doesn't want to get inside. This is a peculiar situation. A little encouragement, please?"

The crowd obliges, clapping and cheering.

This is just fucking great.

He steps closer, his eyes intense and searching, and pulls the microphone away slightly so his words won't be picked up. "Trust me," he whispers softly into my ear, where only I can hear. His breath on my neck sends familiar, delicious shivers down my body.

I roll my eyes at him, refusing to be swayed by his assurances. When I continue to hesitate, he takes my hand in his, his grip firm and reassuring, pulling me closer.

"Remember rule number one? To never work with animals?" he says into the microphone. "Rule number two is never let the animal choose your volunteer. Thanks a lot, Elsa!" His voice rises as he casts an exaggerated glare at the off-stage direction of Elsa, bringing another laugh from the audience.

I'm trapped, ensnared in a situation beyond my control. If I don't play along, I'll be a jerk. A poor sport. I'll ruin Seven's show. This is entertainment, a magic show.

All for fun.

People are here to have a good time. They've paid good money for their tickets and I'm spoiling it because I'm afraid of tight, dark places.

I take a deep, calming breath and decide to do it. This is humiliating enough as it is. My anxiety is making it worse. The only way for this to end is to get it over with.

How long will I be in there? A minute? Two at the most? Surely, I can deal with my claustrophobia for that long. I can hold my breath longer than that if I can't breathe.

"Okay," I say with a tentative smile. "I'll do it."

"Whew! Thank goodness!" he says, wiping his brow with his hand. "I was worried there for a minute."

He squeezes my hand in encouragement, the warmth of his touch steadying me, and helps me up the steps. I carefully climb into the box and lie down, noticing there is barely enough room for my legs if I bend them slightly. The interior smells of wood and varnish. He wasn't kidding about it being a tight fit.

"All comfy in there?" he asks, peeking over the edge. "I hope so, because it's too late to back out now."

He doesn't wait for my answer before shutting the lid and locking it into place. A shadow falls over me, then complete darkness.

"Do you get motion sickness?" I hear him say before he grabs one end and sets it spinning around and around. "I forgot to ask."

Yeah, he forgot to ask a lot of things.

The box spins again and again, disorienting me.

Oh my God.

Why, oh why, did I drink that flute of champagne on an empty stomach? I close my eyes against the dizziness, but the oppressive darkness envelops me, hot and stifling. Every nightmare I've ever had, every fear I've ever harbored—they're all closing in, magnified by the spinning and the crowd's laughter outside.

I've made a monumental mistake.

My breath comes in sharp, shallow gasps as I struggle against the panic rising within me. Why didn't I just tell him about my claustrophobia, about how tight, dark places send me into terror? Because admitting that would have been an even greater humiliation.

I fight against the urge to lose my composure—and that glass of champagne all over the new white sweater he gifted me.

Wouldn't that be a lovely sight?

I try to assure myself that it's going to be fine, but the dark thoughts loom larger. Why did I do this? Because Seven is irresistible with a smile that can coax me into almost anything. Like crawling into a cramped box better suited for a doll than a person. And because I trust him completely, and there's nothing he wouldn't do for me.

I take another deep breath, my chest tight. I've almost convinced myself things will be okay when I hear the deafening roar of a chainsaw revving up and coming closer.

Is that real? It sure as hell sounds real. I distinctively remember Seven complaining about how Giovanni didn't want him using chainsaws in his shows. The memory does nothing to calm my rising panic.

“All okay in there, Jade?” he calls out loudly, throwing me a lifeline and bringing me back to reality. “Yell, if you can hear me.”

“I’m here!” I yell back.

“Nice meeting you,” he says. “Thanks for volunteering! I’ll see you on the other side one day!”

The lid vibrates when he puts the blade of the chainsaw against it right above my stomach. The wood splinters, the noise terrifyingly loud.

Oh, shit!

The chainsaw *is* real.

He’s cutting the box into pieces with me in it. My heart is pounding so violently that it echoes in my ears. I’m on the verge of a full-blown anxiety attack, the sides closing in on me.

If by some miracle I make it out of this mess alive, so help me God, Seven is a fucking dead man! I’m going to strangle him with my bare hands for this.

Without warning, the bottom drops out of the box, and I scream, the sound tearing from my throat.

SEVEN

Tonight's show is on the verge of disaster. Sweat clings to my forehead as chaos erupts around me.

First, Elsa decided to go rogue and completely ignore me. There she was, playing around in the rafters of the theater, the spotlight on her white feathers, instead of flying straight to the front row.

I wasn't kidding when I joked about never working with animals. Luckily, the audience thought Elsa's screwing around was all part of the act.

Then Jade shocks the hell out of me by refusing to climb inside the box.

Who volunteers and then doesn't want to participate? To be fair, Jade didn't volunteer. I strong-armed her into coming up on stage and now I feel awful, the guilt gnawing at me. There was a genuine expression of terror on her face when she saw the box being wheeled onto the stage.

What the hell was up with that?

Surely, she's aware that no actual harm will come to her? I would never intentionally place her in harm's way. Everything is fake.

Except for the chainsaw.

My illusions and stunts are nothing more than sleight-of-hand card tricks, except bigger and more bad ass. Now the woman I'm crazy about is terrified and crammed inside a small box.

What if she doesn't forgive me? I don't have a clue why she's scared. Jade is the most fearless woman I've ever known. Her reaction to the box threw me off balance and I'm struggling to recover my momentum.

There's no time to think about all of that now.

I have less than four minutes to cut the box into pieces with my chainsaw, disappear from the stage, and grab Jade. We'll run underneath the stage to where a floating platform is waiting for us. Then we'll reappear near the back of the theater behind the audience.

Timing is everything in this business.

I've done this illusion hundreds of times, but always with a willing participant. If I'm off for even a few seconds, the illusion will fail. Surprising Jade by pulling her up on stage was a bad idea.

Stepping closer to the box, I place the tip of the chainsaw at the edge. "Are you still in there?" I yell through the box to Jade.

"I'm here," she yells back.

Maybe the insurance company was right, and my tricks *are* going too far. The thought of the chainsaw slipping with Jade in the box causes cold sweat to drip down my back.

I've never doubted myself before.

Taking a deep breath, I put light pressure on the box with the chainsaw and the wood splinters. That's the signal for my

crew underneath the stage to release the trapdoor, allowing Jade to fall safely onto a cushioned surface. I hear her scream in terror when the trap door unexpectedly opens, a sound that rips through me.

Fuck!

She might never get over this. If anyone else hears her, they'll think it's because she's terrified of being cut in half.

“Clear,” my stagehand yells says into my hidden earpiece.

Thank God! Jade is out of the fucking box now, and nowhere near the gleaming, dangerous blade of the chainsaw.

Time to finish the trick.

I bear down hard with the chainsaw, causing the box to disintegrate into a cloud of sawdust. The crowd shrieks when I rapidly slice the box into several pieces to show that Jade can't be curled up to hide in one end.

When using a volunteer, I can't expect them to know how to tuck their ankles around their neck like an experienced contortionist to keep from being sawed in half. Instead, I create a diversion to cause the crowd to focus in one direction when something important is happening in the other.

To conceal the box, my assistants and I gathered around in a circle to spin it while the secret compartment in the floor was sliding open. Mirrors are carefully positioned around the stage to trick the audience's eyes into seeing only what I want them to see, reflections playing a game with their perception.

I pick up the remaining larger pieces of the box and toss them to the two female assistants, showing the audience there's nowhere for Jade to hide. The girls catch the fragments with well-rehearsed flair.

“Forget about calling my volunteer about a free room in Orlando,” I tell the crowd, injecting humor into my voice. “Sorry about that! My lovely volunteer has disappeared.”

I wave my hand, and a shower of gold confetti drops from the ceiling. Large industrial fans on both sides of the stage blow the confetti into a swirling tornado to conceal me as I drop onto the same cushioned surface where Jade fell.

She’s standing beside my stagehand, pale and trembling slightly. My God! What have I done to my fearless girl?

“Come on, we need to run now,” I tell her, grabbing her hand tightly in mine. “Hold on and don’t turn loose.”

She doesn’t argue this time and runs with me down the hallway to the hidden exit leading outside, her footsteps matching mine. My staff directs us through the dark alley to another side door, which opens at the rear of the theater.

I step onto a floating platform and pull her onto it with me. Members of my staff are standing in front of the platform, posing as audience members to block the view from other guests.

The platform rises in the dark.

“Hang on,” I tell Jade, wrapping one arm around her waist to hold her tight against my side. “I don’t want you to fall off the edge. Don’t worry, I’ve got you. I won’t let anything happen to you, sweetheart.”

My crew steps away as the platform rises above the theater. The confetti tornado on the main stage stops swirling to show the audience I’ve disappeared. Less than a minute has passed.

“Are you okay?” I whisper, pulling her tighter against me. “Sorry about the box.”

She nods and gazes up at me with big wide eyes, like a frightened deer. Her rare vulnerability reaches deep inside me.

I lean down to capture her lips with mine while we're still hidden from view. A kiss filled with apology, longing and something more.

This isn't part of my normal act.

My lips touch hers softly for a split second before the spotlight hits us and I reluctantly pull away. "Guess who I found!" I say into my microphone. "My lovely volunteer is hiding way up here in the rafters with Elsa."

I hold up my hand for Elsa to fly to me on the platform, her wings glinting in the light. As soon as she went behind the curtains on stage, one of my assistants quickly carried her upstairs to the upper level of the theater. She's been sitting on a hidden perch eating millet while patiently waiting for me to appear.

The audience whirls around in their seats to see us floating high above them, a sea of wide eyes and open mouths.

Clasping Jade's hand in mine, I swing them both triumphantly above our heads, a grand gesture of success. The audience breaks out in spontaneous applause, a thunderous appreciation of our performance.

"Goodnight, everyone!" I shout. "I hope you've enjoyed the show!" The applause continues, with no sign of letting up. "Take a bow with me," I whisper to Jade. "This is the finale."

She smiles shakily and we bow toward the audience below us while the spotlight slowly dims into darkness, a moment frozen in time. The applause goes on for another full minute before letting up.

Once the theater goes completely black, the platform lowers, and I help Jade step off.

“Is that it?” she asks softly, still holding tight to my hand.

I laugh at her question while carefully handing off Elsa to my assistant. “What do you mean, ‘is that it’? What do you want me to do? Make you disappear for real? Saw you in half and then glue you back together?”

“No,” she says, laughing softly. “I meant, is the show over? Are we done? Do I go back to my seat now? I wasn’t sure if there is another act coming up.”

“Am I not enough for you? I’m it, babe. Sorry. The only act for tonight. The show is over.”

A disappointed expression crosses her face before she quickly hides it.

She hated it.

“I can take you to another show,” I quickly offer, trying to recover for my screwup. “If you want to go. Hell, maybe we can catch Kit’s show if it’s not already over by now. You know how he is about wanting to put the tigers to bed.” I pull out my phone to check the time.

She shakes her head. “No, you misunderstood me. I didn’t want *your* show to end. You were fantastic! I wanted to see more. I’m sad it’s over. An hour isn’t long enough. I could watch you perform for hours.”

“You liked it then?”

“Yes, I loved it,” she replies with an enthusiastic nod, her eyes sparkling back to life again. “Except for the part with the box.”

I gently squeeze her hand. Her small hand seems so familiar in mine I'd forgotten that I was still holding onto it.

"What happened back there?" I ask, concern clouding my voice. "I'm sorry for putting you on the spot. It didn't occur to me you might not want to come up on stage. Besides, it was my bird who picked you, not me. If you need to blame someone, blame Elsa."

"*Right*," she says. "It was a pure chance the bird flew straight to my seat and landed on my head?"

"She has excellent taste in volunteers," I say, attempting to lighten the mood with humor.

"You've trained her well. How many seats is she trained to fly to? Only one?"

"It's against the rules to ask a magician to reveal how he does his tricks. Everyone knows that."

"But that technically isn't a magic trick," she points out. "It was an animal training trick. A good one, but not magic, so you can break the rules."

"True. Okay, this one time I'll tell you and then you can never ask me about my secrets again. Deal?"

"Deal," she solemnly agrees.

I don't believe her for a second. Now that she's seen my show, it will bug the shit out of her until she figures out how I pull off my illusions. When I was up on stage, I noticed her paying careful attention to everything.

"I trained Elsa to fly to three different seats," I tell her, enjoying the way her eyes widen in surprise. "A code word command directs her to the right one. I switch it up to keep

things interesting for her. Birds bore easily. I try to add lots of enrichment to her life to keep her entertained.”

“What was tonight’s code word?”

“Unemployment line,” I reply with a straight face.

She raises her eyebrows in amusement, her lips curling into a smile. “You threaten to fire your bird and that’s her cue? Unemployment line?”

“I thought it was funny.” I grin at her. “It’s an inside joke with my crew. I threaten them with the same line too sometimes, but they don’t think it’s funny either. You didn’t answer my earlier question. What happened with the box?”

Her eyes cut away from me, and she doesn’t answer.

I gently touch her arm. “Hey, I’m sorry for freaking you out,” I say softly. “If you’ll forgive me, I’ll never make you get into a tiny box again. I swear. Or pull you up on stage. I thought you would get a kick out of it.”

“I’m claustrophobic,” she admits with an embarrassed laugh. “It freaked me out. I have weird phobias. I was expecting you to ask me to do something simple and easy. Pick a card or choose a number between one and ten. Normal magician tricks. Not force me to crawl inside a tiny, dark box that reminded me of a coffin. You could’ve warned me.”

“You’re right and I’m sorry. As for card tricks, I gave them up a long time ago,” I say. “They don’t show up well on stage. I still remember a few good ones if you want me to show them to you sometime. The guys are bored to tears with my tricks. They groan and run away if I pull out a deck of cards.”

“I would love to see them later,” she says. “But there’s only one thing I want to do right now.”

“Are you tired?” I ask. “You’ve had an exhausting day. Do you want to go home? Or to grab a bite to eat or a drink?”

“No, take me back to your place,” she replies. “The whole time you were up there on stage, all I could do was stare at you and drool. And I wasn’t the only one. Every woman in the theater had the hots for you. And then when you took off your shirt...oh baby...the heat shot up in a hurry. All could think was...that’s my man up there. My sexy as fuck man who is all mine.”

“Damn right I’m your man. Is that against the group’s rules, though? To be alone with you at my place? I’m still confused about exactly how everything is supposed to work. You mean I get you all to myself?”

She reaches up to take my face in her hands, her eyes filled with desire. “As I told you before, there’s only one rule. No going outside the group. That’s it. I want to be with you. Now.”

I grab her hand and tug her towards the back exit of the theater. “I won’t take the time to ask Leroy to bring the limo around. Knowing him, he’ll want to come up with us for a nightcap and a snack. My car’s in the garage. I’ll drive us there myself.”

JADE

On the drive back to Seven's penthouse, he keeps one hand on my leg, only moving it to shift gears on his Porsche. When we stop at a traffic light, he leans over and grabs my lips in a deep kiss.

The car behind us blows their horn angrily when the light turns green. "Fuck!" he says, breaking the kiss in frustration. "I can't wait to get you back to my place. My dick is already so goddamn hard, I'm dying over here."

He pulls the car into his building's parking garage, and starts the drive up the massive parking deck, squealing the tires around every tight curve as we climb higher. Finally, we arrive at his reserved parking spot, and he cuts the engine.

Without saying a word, he rushes around to help me out. Taking my hand in his, he tugs me towards the door leading into the building. After sliding in a keycard to unlock the door, he pulls me along the carpeted hallway, past the elevators we rode before up to his penthouse.

"Aren't we taking the elevators?" I ask, struggling to keep up with him. "You're in a big hurry. I'm not sure I can run up several flights of stairs in these shoes."

“Damn right I’m in a hurry,” he replies, grinning at me. “I want to show you something.” We reach the end of the hallway, and he takes me down a stairwell to another level that once again needs a special keycard to access. “We’re taking a different elevator,” he tells me, as he hits the button.

“Thank God,” I reply.

The elevator doors open and Seven pulls me into a small glass elevator running up and down the backside of the building. The lights of Vegas glitter all around us.

“Wow, this is amazing,” I say. “I didn’t know your building had a glass elevator. I can see all of Vegas from here. This is beautiful.”

The elevator starts to move, then suddenly lurches to a stop.

“What happened?” I ask, turning around. “Is the elevator broken?”

He shrugs at me. “Maybe. I haven’t ridden it in a long time. Why? Are you afraid of heights?”

“No, I’m not afraid of heights, only claustrophobic spaces,” I reply. “Why do you ask?”

In one smooth move, he steps close to me and whirls me around, facing the glass walls. He grabs both of my wrists, pulls them behind my back and fastens something cold and hard around each of them.

“Seven! What the fuck are you doing? Are those handcuffs? You put handcuffs on me?” I struggle to free my wrists from the cuffs and can’t.

“For this brief moment, you’re all mine,” he tells me, leaning close to my ear and speaking softly. “I’m about to

show you what it's like to be bound and helpless. I'll take you to the heights of pleasure, but you won't be able to stop me."

As if I'd want him to stop.

I stare out at Las Vegas, the lights of the city twinkling back at us. He kisses my neck, my shoulder, then sucks on it, hard, leaving a mark. His hands come up under my sweater and he unhooks my bra. Freeing my breasts, he squeezes them, pinching and pulling on the nipples until I feel a hot rush between my legs.

His hand slides down my stomach to my black pants, popping the button and then unzipping them. He pulls them slowly down my legs until they gather around my ankles. "Step out of them," he orders, supporting me with his arms while I lift one foot and then the other. He kicks the pants to the corner of the elevator.

He slips his hands over my panties, rubbing my clit through the wet silk. I spread my legs for him, inviting his touch. Grabbing the panties with both hands, he rips them down the middle, shredding the thin fabric.

"Don't worry about the clothes," he says when I gasp. "I'll buy you plenty more."

He quickly finds my pussy and slides a finger into me. I push my hips back against his hand as he leans in to kiss my neck again.

"Someone might be watching us," I say. "It's dark outside and the elevator lights are on."

"We're up so high no one will see exactly what we're doing or who we are, though our silhouettes might give them a general idea of what's happening," he says.

"You enjoy public sex, don't you? And elevators?"

“Fuck yeah,” he answers, chuckling softly. “So do you. We should make a bucket list of exciting public places to fuck, and check them off, one by one.”

“I’m game, if you are.”

His finger flicks my clit back and forth, teasing me, until another finger joins it, sliding up into me. My moans fill the elevator as he works my pussy with his fingers.

“God, Seven,” I say, sighing softly. “That feels so fucking good. Don’t stop.”

I’m so wet that my juices are flowing down my leg with every thrust of his hand. “Do you like it when I finger fuck your tight little pussy?” he asks me, his lips close to my ear. “Tell me what you want. Beg me.”

He presses me up against the elevator wall, my hands cuffed behind me, his arm underneath me the only thing keeping me from falling.

“Yes, I love it,” I moan. “Please don’t stop. I want you. Fuck me here.”

“Not yet,” he murmurs softly. “Spread your legs wider for me.”

I feel his hand slide down between my legs, his fingers pulling out of me. I let out a groan of disappointment. Then he turns me to face him and kneels in front of me. He lifts one of my legs and drapes it over his shoulder to give him better access before he buries his head between my legs. I feel the soft wetness of his tongue on my clit. He licks me gently, swirling around my clit and down my slit, pushing his tongue inside my pussy.

I’m panting for breath as his tongue sends waves of pleasure over my body. It’s all I can do to keep my balance

with my hands cuffed behind my back.

“Don’t come,” he orders, suddenly pulling his tongue away. “Not until I give you permission.”

“Please take off the handcuffs,” I plead, pulling against the handcuffs. “I want to touch you.”

“And I enjoy hearing you beg,” he says, shoving two fingers back into my wet pussy. “I love that you’re all mine, to do with as I please.”

My body tenses up at his touch. “Oh God,” I moan. “I think I’m going to come. Oh, please.”

“No,” he orders. “I said not yet. If you come before I give permission, I’ll spank your pretty ass until it’s pink. I might do it anyway just to see how rosy your skin will turn.”

Damn, this is a side of Seven I haven’t seen and it’s hot as fuck.

When I moan again, I feel the hard sting of his hand on my ass, then his hot mouth on my pussy. He sucks my clit into his mouth, flicking it back and forth with his tongue. I try to wriggle away from the sweet torture, but the handcuffs prevent me from moving. I can only stand there, my body one big raw nerve as he edges me, over and over again.

He presses his face against me, his tongue moving in and out of me, bringing me to the brink of orgasm and then pulling back at the last second. I’m dying for release, my body trembling, my legs ready to collapse under me.

“Please, Seven,” I beg him. “I can’t take it. You’re killing me with this torture.”

He laughs softly and slides his fingers into my pussy again. “You’re a good girl, not coming until you’re told. Come for

me.” He pumps his fingers roughly into me while rubbing my clit with his thumb.

The rush of pleasure comes all at once, and my body explodes. I can barely breathe from the intense sensation of my orgasm.

“That’s my good girl,” he says, rubbing my clit gently, his hot breath on my pussy. “You’re so fucking wet for me, soaking my hand, my mouth. Now turn around and face the glass.” He slides an arm around my waist for support and presses my cheek against the cold glass wall of the elevator.

“Remember when I told you before that everything you see can be yours?” he asks. “It still holds true. The four of us will rule Vegas one day if we stay together. It’s our destiny.”

“Yes,” I agree. “We can. I want that too.”

“Tell me what else you want,” he says, nuzzling the back of my neck while his hands tease my nipples.

“I want you,” I cry, unable to bear the torture of his teasing. “Please, hurry, I need you inside me.”

“Say it again,” he says, one hand sliding up to close firmly around my neck, squeezing it softly, almost cutting off my air, but not quite. “I want to hear you beg again.”

“I want you,” I say breathlessly, my body trembling in anticipation. “Fuck me, Seven.”

“You’re so damn hot with your wrists handcuffed behind your back.” He tugs hard on the handcuffs, pulling me back against him roughly. “Do you like being under my control?”

“Yes,” I moan.

“Would you like to be gagged and cuffed, tied spread eagle to a bed with all three of us fucking you senseless until you

begged us to stop?” he asks.

“Fuck yes,” I pant, already imagining the scene in my head.

“Because we’ll gladly do anything you want, any time you want,” he whispers. “We live and breathe to touch you, to fuck you. There’s nothing we won’t try for you. Absolutely nothing. All you need to do is say the word.”

He pulls his fingers from between my legs, leaving me gasping. I hear him unzipping his pants, then feel the hard tip of his cock between my legs as he guides his thick shaft into my wet pussy. As his thick cock fills me, he thrusts in and out quickly.

“Take it all,” he growls, pulling at my hips, and plunging in rougher. “Take my cock deep.”

He loops one arm underneath me, stabilizing me as he thrusts harder and harder. The other hand grabs my ass, digging into my flesh with every thrust. I moan and pant as his cock slides in and out.

“Oh God,” I moan as feel the pleasure building inside of me. “Yes. Yes.”

“Come around my cock,” he orders. “I want to feel your pussy milking me.”

The orgasm explodes through my body, tearing through me and sending me crashing in a tidal wave of pleasure. I hear myself screaming his name as I come, pressing back against him and taking his cock as deep as I can. My legs almost collapse, my body shaking, and he grabs me with both arms as I sag.

Suddenly, with a loud grunt, he comes with me, filling me up. He pulses inside me until he’s completely spent, and he

collapses against my back, breathing heavily.

Slowly, he slides his cock out of me and then pulls me back against him. I feel him quickly uncuff me and spin me around. Leaning down, he kisses me leisurely.

“Ready to take a quick shower and grab a change of clothes at my place before going home to the ranch?” He leans over to hit a button to restart the elevator. “I’ve ruined your new outfit, or at least the panties.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I reply, smiling up at him. “Let’s go home.”

SEVEN

The next morning at the ranch...

“Is Jade up yet?” Vulcan asks, moving past me in the kitchen, his dark hair tousled from the night. He heads to the coffeemaker and quickly gets to work, putting on a pot to brew for her, the aroma of fresh coffee beans filling the air.

As usual, he spent most of the night on the front porch again. For the life of me, I can’t imagine why he prefers sleeping on hard concrete instead of a soft, warm bed. I don’t ask questions because he seems happier than I’ve ever seen him. Whatever he’s doing must be working for him.

“Would you have a few minutes today to swing by the penthouse for a quick chat with me and Kit?” I ask him. “Leroy will be there too.”

“Sure,” he replies, throwing me a puzzled glance over his shoulder, his dark eyes narrowing. “You mean a chat without Jade?”

I nod back at him, my stomach tight. “I have a few concerns about her plan and wanted to discuss it.”

“You’re not the only one,” he says, leaning back on the counter and crossing his arms. “I’m glad you brought it up. I’ll swing by this afternoon before I go to work.”

“Great,” I reply, grabbing my car keys from the hook hanging on the wall. “Kit said he’s available anytime. We’ll see you then.”



“WHAT’S ON YOUR MIND?” Kit asks me, stretching his arm along the back of my leather sofa. “This feels weird having a meeting without including Jade. I doubt she’d appreciate us talking about her behind her back.”

“Hell no, she wouldn’t like it,” Vulcan replies, sitting across from him. “But sometimes we’ve got to do things to protect her, even if it means stepping on her toes. Spit it out, Seven. We’ve all got places we need to be. Tell us your thoughts.”

“I’m worried about her plan,” I say. “It’s not a secret that I grew up running scams with my dad. Until Giovanni gave me my own show, that’s all I ever knew. Something feels off about Jade’s plan, and I can’t quite put my finger on it. It’s not as if this is an original scam that hasn’t been tried out before. I researched it thoroughly, and it’s been successfully pulled off in several international casinos, but not in Vegas, as far as I know.”

“Which means it could’ve been unsuccessfully tried here, and the people were caught,” Vulcan says.

“Right,” I say.

“Are you afraid Jade will get caught?” Kit leans forward, his eyes growing serious.

“I’m worried,” I answer. “Not going to lie. Just because a scam worked internationally doesn’t mean it’s guaranteed to

work in Vegas. Our security systems are better, and the casinos work together when they spot a potential issue. All it would take is one small slipup for the dominoes to topple. Everything could go to hell quickly.”

“Where do you think the biggest risk is?” Kit asks.

“The whole fucking idea is risky,” I reply. “The casinos use all kinds of techniques to spot suspicious behavior. Everything from surveillance cameras watching everything to computerized algorithms that can detect unusual patterns that fall outside of statistical norms. Plus, there’s always the floor staff observing the gamblers. Luckily, Leroy is connected to the casino security alert system. If any other casino puts out an alert for suspicious behavior, he’ll receive it.”

“Then what?” Vulcan asks. “Hypothetically, if a casino thought they saw something suspicious, and an alert went out, would Jade abort?”

“Of course she would,” Kit replies firmly. “She’s not stupid.”

Vulcan raises his eyebrows at him. “No, but she’s stubborn and determined.”

“And that’s exactly what terrifies the shit out of me,” I say. “We need a backup plan in case everything blows up. No matter what happens or what we need to do, we can’t let anyone, especially Giovanni or his men, get their hands on Jade. Understood?”

“Absolutely,” Vulcan replies, nodding in agreement along with Kit, their faces set with determination. “Do you already have a worst case scenario plan in mind?”

I grin at them, the tension in me lightening. “Why do you think I brought you here?”

JADE

Christmas Eve in the dressing room at Platinum...

“The red hair suits you,” Natasha remarks, stepping back to admire her handiwork. “You look European and chic. Sophisticated and mysterious. Like a spy in an old movie.”

Her hand reaches for my face, sweeping away a few rogue strands of hair. When I flinch, she holds my chin steady. “Be still and stop wriggling,” she scolds. “I can’t tell if the wig is on straight if you keep moving.”

“The wig’s too heavy and it feels weird,” I grumble. “And it’s hot as hell. What if it falls off?”

“The wig will be fine if you do what I say. Let me fix it.”

Turning slightly, I try to glimpse myself in the mirror. It’s hard to concentrate when muscular male strippers are changing into cop uniforms right behind us for their next performance. They barely have time to switch outfits before the music of the next song blasts, signaling their cue to run back out on stage.

Despite it being Christmas Eve, Platinum is packed tonight.

“No moving,” she says, holding my chin firmly in place. “I will tell you when to view my masterpiece.” She carefully

smooths the hair down on both sides with her hands and smiles at me. “Perfect! Now you can see,” she says, handing me a big mirror to check the back of the wig.

I draw in a surprised breath at my reflection, barely recognizing the girl gazing back.

Who knew a wig could make such a big difference? My long hair is now hidden underneath the red wig that barely brushes my shoulders.

Natasha had also insisted that I wear colored contact lenses instead of glasses to change my eye color to blue. They’re uncomfortable and scratchy. I blink rapidly, hoping to lubricate them, but it doesn’t help. The long, false eyelashes she applied aren’t making the situation any better.

“What do you think of your new style?” she inquires with an expectant smile.

I hate it.

Not that I’ll be rude and tell her. She’s worked hard to change my appearance. She spent over an hour artfully applying makeup to contour my cheekbones and slim my nose. Or I assume that’s what she’s trying to do.

Eva felt it was important to not only alter our hair and eye color, but also to change the shape of our faces. We know the casinos are using facial recognition software, and we need to trick the cameras into not recognizing us.

Luckily, Natasha knew a man who specializes in a scary technique called ‘instant plastic surgery’. The combination of words ‘instant’ and ‘surgery’ was enough of a warning to me.

She had called him up yesterday and told him it was an emergency. He’d hurried over with a black suitcase full of liquid injectables. As soon as he began pulling out syringes

with sharp needles and placing them on Eva's desk, I'd backed away fast.

"Don't worry," he said to me. "If you don't like the effects of the injectables, I can put in a syringe of a solution to dissolve it later. It can be gone in twenty-four hours."

"No way in hell," I told him. "I'm not injecting a foreign substance into my face for any reason."

Natasha knew me well enough not to argue. She willingly sat down in the chair before him. Without wincing once, she'd allowed him to inject the volume enhancing liquid into her lips and cheeks. Not enough to be noticeable, only enough to slightly alter the shape of her face. The solution had plumped up her lips and increased the definition of her cheeks.

As interesting as it might be to watch, the process gave me the creeps.

Now that it's time to finally put our plan into place, I'm having second thoughts and wondering if my disguise is good enough. Maybe I *should've* sucked it up and let the fake doctor plump up my face.

"You didn't answer my question," Natasha says to me again while I stare at my reflection. "Do you like it?" She smiles patiently at me, waiting for my approval of her makeover. When I don't answer, she frowns at me. "You don't. Remember, for tonight, you are someone different. Not Jade."

"You're right. If I must be someone new, then this is perfect." I give her a grateful smile. "The hair style will grow on me. Where did you learn how to do makeup?"

"From some of the older girls at the orphanage where I grew up." She lets out a humorless laugh. "Certainly not from my mother, since she dropped me off there when I was five."

We were very poor. There was not enough money for two people to eat. When she left me, she said she would be back. I waited for many years until one day I realized she would never return for me.”

The hurt and pain are clear in her voice.

“She never came back for you? Did something happen to her?”

“I don’t know,” she admits. “I barely remember her, but I understand she didn’t have a choice. Times were tough, and a single woman could not raise a child on her own.”

“I’m sorry,” I say softly, reaching over to touch her arm.

“I survived,” she says with a shrug. “I learned to depend on myself for everything. To depend on someone else is to be weak. I watched and taught myself many skills; makeup, sewing, cooking. I begged people to teach me what they knew. The ladies at the orphanage told me I would have a better chance of being adopted by good parents if I learned a musical skill, too.”

“You can sing?”

“No, I play the cello. I practiced for hours every day when I was young, hoping to impress someone enough to take me home. Then one day the music stopped. The day Dimitri began to visit me. He taught me many new skills. Much more suited for survival than playing the cello.” She picks up a can of hairspray from the counter and shakes it furiously. “Enough talk about me. Don’t breathe,” she warns before coating my head with a cloud of toxic chemicals.

“Thanks for the warning,” I gasp, choking on the chemical smell when I accidentally breathe in the mist. “Hairspray is poisonous.”

“You are perfect,” she says, beaming at me. “Now for the dresses.”

She hands me a white, sleeveless bodycon dress to put on first. I make sure the male strippers have left the dressing room before slipping out of my jeans and sweatshirt. I slide the white dress over my head and stretch the clingy fabric down my body until it barely covers my ass.

“I can’t go out in public in this dress,” I say. “My boobs are falling out of the top and my ass is hanging out from the bottom.”

“It is a suitable dress for a party on Christmas Eve,” she says. “You will blend with the crowd.”

“I hope you’re right,” I say, tugging on the clingy fabric. “With any luck, no one will ever see me in this dress.”

She then hands me a flowing red dress with long sleeves to slip on over the bodycon. The red fabric covers the white bodycon completely.

If we run into trouble, our plan is to strip off the outer dresses and change wigs before we hit the next casino. That is a worst-case scenario and not something we expect to happen.

I stand up and move closer to the mirror. “I’m much more comfortable in this one,” I say, turning to view the red dress from all sides. “This is my favorite. I hope it can stay on.”

“I prefer the white one on you,” she says. “What do you think of mine?”

She’s wearing a black cocktail gown, hiding a tight blue dress underneath. Her blonde hair is tucked underneath a long, dark, curly wig.

“You’re stunning. With you around, I never have to worry about drawing attention. All eyes will be on you.”

“For tonight, that is the plan,” she replies. “I will watch your back and you will play. Are you ready?”

Taking a deep breath, I say, “Let’s do it.”



THIRTY MINUTES LATER, we’re riding in the back seat of Eva’s SUV while her assistant, King, drives us to the Vegas strip. He dropped off Eva earlier at the Imperial Hotel and Casino, where she has booked a suite.

King glances back at me in the rearview mirror. “Are you ladies prepared to do this?” he asks.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” I reply, taking a deep breath to calm my nerves.

Natasha pulls a cigarette out of her purse and flicks on a lighter.

“I need one last cigarette,” she tells King firmly.

“Hell no!” he yells back at her in a panic. “Not in Eva’s car, you don’t. Put those cigarettes away. If you must smoke, do it after I let you out. Eva can smell smoke a mile away; then we’ll both be in trouble.”

She lets out a long sigh and crams the pack of cigarettes back into her handbag.

“Why don’t you quit smoking?” I ask her.

“I will...tomorrow.”

“We can do this.” I lean over to touch her arm. “Don’t worry.”

“I’ve waited a long time for tonight,” she says. “This is important.”

For the first time, I realize Natasha hasn’t been truthful with me. She’d said it was all about the money.

It’s not.

Pulling off this scam with the Peggy Penguin slot machine code is personal to her. She’s doing this to send Dimitri a big ‘fuck you’.

I’m happy to help her do it.

“Putting our plan into action will be easy,” I reassure her. “The plan is simple, yet perfect. We’ve thought of everything. The holiday crowds are huge tonight. It won’t be hard to blend in.”

Since the night of our practice test run at the Bora Bora, we’ve discussed every detail and possible problem that might arise. We’ve worked nonstop and planned for every contingency.

Instead of setting up the laptop and Eva in the basement of Platinum again, we decided our headquarters should be in a hotel suite closer to the action. If something goes wrong, we need everyone close by.

Natasha and I will work together on foot in the casinos. I’ll be playing the slot machines and sending video footage to my laptop while she watches my back.

We’ve also practiced switching out positions, so we can fill in for each other in case of emergency. Eva insisted on Natasha learning my role at the slot machines. Everything from how to transmit the video to exactly when to hit the button after receiving the signal.

The key is for us to work very fast, moving from casino to casino along the Vegas strip, hitting as many slot machines as possible. Speed is of the essence.

The plan is to begin at the Bora Bora and finish the night at the Imperial. The guys will be strategically located along the way to watch our backs and will move along with us throughout the night. Once we reach the Imperial, everyone will be at the same location.

“Here we are, ladies!” King says. He pulls over into a parking lot a block from the Bora Bora Casino to let us out. “Shake a leg! Call me if you need me. I’ll be waiting on standby.”

“Don’t turn off your cell phone,” Natasha tells him.

“I won’t.”

Natasha and I step out of the SUV and pause for a moment on the crowded sidewalk.

“Are you sure you’re ready?” she asks me. “Don’t answer. You *are* ready.”

“Yes, we’re both ready,” I say. “Let’s go. Showtime, baby!”

JADE

Two hours later...

I'm walking down the Vegas strip alongside Natasha on our way to the Imperial Casino. One last stop for the night and then this will all be over. We've been riding a high, having smoothly hit several casinos already, and the thrill is intoxicating.

"I can't believe we're almost done," I say to her. "This was much easier than I expected it to be. Everything is working out exactly as planned. We were worried about nothing."

"You did the hardest part by breaking the code," she replies. "Everything else is easy. How shall we celebrate tonight when we're finished?"

"Sleeping for eight hours," I say, rubbing my temple. "I haven't slept well in forever."

"You can sleep when you're old," she says. "It's Christmas Eve! Everyone will go to Platinum later and drink all night. Eva promised me a chilled bottle of the best Russian vodka and I will teach you how to drink."

We smile at each other and she slips her arm through mine. If someone didn't know better, they'd think we were best friends out together to celebrate on Christmas Eve.

We beat the system, and our plan worked.

We're on the sidewalk, one block from the Imperial, when the prepaid cellphone in Natasha's handbag suddenly rings. We glance at each other in panic.

Only Eva has the number.

The disposable cellphone is only to be used in case of an emergency and then thrown away. Natasha grabs my arm to pull me to the side. She hits the answer button and puts the phone to her ear.

"Yes?" she answers, her voice wavering.

Twenty seconds later, she hangs up.

"What's wrong?" I ask. "What's happening?"

"An alert is being circulated with our photo to all the Vegas casinos," Natasha whispers urgently. "Eva said to abort and split up. Keep walking while we talk."

I hurry to keep up with her rapid strides. "She wants us to quit? Now? But we're so close. Dammit! The Imperial is the biggest score."

I'm not ready to give up. No way in hell.

"We must change clothes," she says. "Fast. In there." She points to a small boutique hotel squeezed between two high-rise casinos.

We hurry inside the hotel and go straight to the restroom. Fortunately, there isn't a line for the stalls. A rarity in Las Vegas. Natasha rushes into one stall while I take the other.

Grabbing the bottom hem of my red dress, I jerk it over my head and cram it into a plastic bag. The red wig is the next item to come off.

I pull out a short blonde wig from my handbag and tug it on. Without a mirror, I don't know if it's on straight or backward. Quickly, I stretch down the tight, white bodycon dress and step out of the stall.

Natasha is already waiting for me at the sink. She doesn't utter a single word, only rolling her eyes when she sees my wig. Reaching over, she turns the wig around to position it correctly. She has already stripped down to her skintight blue dress and is wearing a dull, mousy brown wig with a shaggy haircut, making her look almost ordinary.

"Give me your bag," she says.

I hand over the plastic bag containing my red dress and the wig. After tying a double knot to close it securely, she tosses it into the trash can.

"I hate to throw away the beautiful clothes," she whispers to me with a regretful glance at the trash can. "Eva said we must get rid of everything."

"You can buy plenty more with your share of the winnings."

"Yes, I know," she replies. "I went without for so long that I hate to be wasteful."

"These big handbags should go too," I suggest.

She nods and we remove our phones, along with the tiny purses we brought along as extras. I stuff my big handbag deep into the trashcan, then she does the same. As a final measure, I wet a handful of paper towels and cram them down on top of the bags. Hopefully, no one will be dumpster diving on Christmas Eve.

"Now what?" I ask.

“Call one of your guys to pick you up and I’ll go to Platinum,” she replies. “We’ll all meet up there as planned to regroup.”

“It’s over?” I say in frustration. “We’re bailing? Just like that? We were counting on a big score at the Imperial to make this all worthwhile.”

She shrugs, causing her full breasts to almost spill out of her low-cut dress before she tugs the neckline back up. “What else can we do?”

“Keep going,” I say. “Our appearance is different now. They won’t spot us. We can’t quit. I won’t quit.”

“Security is searching for two women,” she reminds me. “Trust me, they’ll spot us. We’ll be caught.”

“Then I’ll go alone.”

“No,” she protests. “You need someone to watch your back.”

“They’ll be searching for a tall woman,” I say. “You’re hard to miss, no matter what you’re wearing or your hair color. Go to Eva’s suite at the Imperial and switch places with her. She can back me up. I’ll wait for her to arrive downstairs in the Imperial before I begin playing.”

Indecision crosses her face. She doesn’t want to quit either.

“Are you sure?” she asks.

“Yes! We’re wasting time. You go out first and I’ll follow behind you in two minutes.”

“What about the camera?” she asks, pointing at the bodice of my dress. “Is it positioned correctly?”

I pull out the top edge of my bodycon dress to show her the tiny camera pinned to the lacy edge of my bra. “It’s fine. Go!”

She doesn’t argue with me. Slinging the gold chain of the dainty purse over her shoulder, she strides out of the restroom.

As soon as the door closes behind her, I quickly unpin the camera from my dress and palm it. Now that the casinos are on to us, using an electronic device is too risky. If I get caught using the camera to cheat at the casino, I’ll be in big trouble.

The plan has changed.

If we want to finish this, I must do it alone. I don’t need the camera or the signal from my laptop. All I need is my photographic memory and the uncanny ability to remember long sequences of numbers in my brain.

I can do it.

After checking my reflection one last time in the mirror, I straighten my shoulders to project confidence and go out the door. On my way through the hotel lobby, I pass a coffee bar set up in one corner. Picking up a napkin, I dab at an imaginary spot on my dress, then drop it into the trash can along with the camera in my palm.

All electronic devices are now out of play.

If I’m caught by casino security, they’ll find nothing.

It’s all on me now.

JADE

Something doesn't feel quite right to me at the Imperial.

Maybe it's because I'm working alone now without Natasha by my side for support. She should've reached Eva's suite in the Imperial by now and switched places with her. They don't know yet that I've dumped the camera.

I won't sit down at a slot machine and begin until I see Eva walk in. Until then, I'll wander around and try to appear interested in the various card games being played. I step up behind a group of men at the roulette table. A few of them glance up at me with interest in their eyes and smile.

I find it fascinating how differently men treat me when I'm a blue-eyed blonde in a sexy dress compared to my normal appearance. The man seated directly in front of me picks up a big stack of playing chips and places them on a number.

"I'm lucky tonight," he says to me over his shoulder. "You should stick around. I'll buy you a drink."

I give him a polite smile and don't respond. The roulette wheel spins and slows to a stop. The table of men let out a collective groan when the house wins, and they all lose their bets.

Out of the corner of my eye, I continue to watch the floor and the unoccupied Peggy Penguin slot machines on the other side of the room. As soon as Eva shows up, I'll grab one of them and then eventually move on to the other.

The Imperial contains at least thirty faulty slot machines made by the Australian manufacturer. Far more than any of the other casinos. If I take my time and methodically work my way around the room, I might be able to hit several of them in the next two hours.

Then this will finally all be over.

My nerves are unraveling and I'm impatient now to finish. Maybe I should've stopped when we were ahead, instead of risking one last run. We've already made plenty of money. More than I ever dreamed I'd earn in one night. Plus, now we know exactly how the scheme works. We can perfect it and try it again some place else.

Taking a deep breath, I force myself to calm down. Eva has lectured us over and over on the importance of not drawing attention by acting nervous. Now that the security alert has gone out across Vegas, there will be more eyes on the crowd. They'll try to spot any unusual behavior on the casino floor.

My only hope is that security is hunting for a team of two women working together, not one woman. By separating from Natasha and switching dresses and wigs, I should be out from under their spotlight. I'll still need to be extra careful. There are always several plainclothes security personnel patrolling. Tonight, their number seems to have tripled. I recognize many of their faces from the photos Leroy provided.

A hand brushes my back and I turn around slightly. Eva glides past me without saying a word or even glancing down at

me.

She's dressed for an elegant evening out in a copper-colored evening gown to complement her auburn hair tumbling loose around her shoulders. Normally, she wears it up in a fancy French chignon. Wearing her hair down makes her appear younger and more carefree. She settles down at the main bar, smiles at the bartender, and orders a drink.

Now that someone is watching my back, I can get back to work. I glance at the two slot machines and try to choose between them. One is near the front entrance if I need to make a quick exit. The other is by the main bar and closer to Eva, which would be better if she needs to run interference.

Hesitating for only a moment, I move away from the roulette table and head to the machine closest to her. There's a lot of activity going on in the bar area, with throngs of tourists passing through on their way to one of the Imperial's five-star restaurants. I might draw less attention if I hide in the middle of a crowd rather than sitting off in an empty corner by myself.

Reaching over, I give the Peggy Penguin machine two good luck pats, courtesy of Natasha.

"Come on, Miss Peggy," I whisper. "Time to sing one last time tonight."

SEVEN

Backstage at the Imperial Hotel and Casino...

“Does this outfit make me look fat?” Kit jokes. “Tell me the truth and don’t hold back.”

Kit tries unsuccessfully to squeeze his tall, muscular body into a red and green elf’s costume that’s at least three sizes too small.

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into something so stupid,” he complains, tugging the suit up higher and slipping his arms through the sleeves. “This is ridiculous, not to mention embarrassing.”

His chest muscles are bulging out the sides of the spandex costume. I laugh when he tugs on an elf cap with a jangling bell hanging off the end over his unruly mane of blonde hair.

“The only reason we’re doing this is to provide cover for Jade if she needs us,” I say. “Hopefully she won’t. I can’t believe she didn’t pull the plug on the plan once Eva warned her about the security alert.”

“I can,” Kit says. “Jade never gives up. She wants to see this through to the end.”

“And we’ll do every damn thing we can to make it happen for her,” I reply. “Are you clear on the plan? All you need to

do is concentrate on driving this damn monstrosity, and I'll entertain the crowd. You'll make one straight shot through the casino. In through the main entrance doors and out the staff exit at the back. My crew will be stationed by both sets of doors to open them and help us if we run into trouble. Vulcan is on standby parked outside in a back alley. God help us all if we have to call him in for reinforcement. If that happens, all hell will break loose at the Imperial tonight."

"I know my part," Kit assures me. "I'm just keeping my fingers crossed that we won't need to go out there and do this. Of all your batshit crazy ideas over the years I've known you, this one takes the prize."

"Desperate times call for desperate measures." I struggle to climb up beside Kit on the seat of the big red sleigh. It's difficult and awkward since I'm dressed in a full Santa outfit, complete with a white beard, heavy black boots, and a red hat.

"Damn! This fucking outfit must weigh thirty pounds," I say. "How do shopping mall Santas do this for a living? I'm sweating like a whore in church already."

"At least your dick is covered up," Kit says. "Check out mine."

I glance down at his crotch area where the elf costume is stretched tightly, barely covering him.

"Don't stand up," I warn him. "Otherwise, you'll flash your balls to the crowd. They're hanging out of your costume."

"I won't, don't worry. What do we do now? Just sit here and wait while literally sweating our balls off?"

"We sit tight and hope we don't have to do anything," I say. "Leroy is upstairs in the security room, making sure

everyone is full of holiday cheer. And by holiday cheer, I mean his Mom's special ingredient brownies. He delivered an entire platter to his friends working the security cameras tonight. If he sees or hears anything worrisome, he'll send me a signal."

"Oh man, I'm not looking forward to this," Kit groans, stretching out his long legs and rearranging his balls again under the spandex. "Maybe Jade will get in and out of the casino quickly without needing our help. I can't wait for this to be over, so we can all go home."

"Tomorrow is Christmas Day," I remind him.

"I'm well aware," he says. "Our first family Christmas with Jade. I hope it's a good one and not one where she's sitting in a jail cell waiting for bail money. Do you have enough cash on hand if we need to bail her out?"

"Of course," I reply. "I always keep enough cash in the safe for bail money since I've been called out in the middle of the night more times than I can count to bail out Vulcan. He's calmed down a lot since Jade came into our lives. No more drunken fights or car accidents."

"She's good for him," Kit says, suddenly serious.

"She's good for all of us," I reply. "Oh, fuck! My damn phone is buzzing in my pocket." I stand up and dig way down in Santa's pants to pull it out. "This outfit is a goddamn nightmare."

"Is it Leroy?" Kit asks. "Is there a problem?"

"A big fucking problem," I tell him after quickly reading the text. "Leroy spotted Giovanni on the security cameras. He's walking into the casino with a team of his men. Shit! Shit! Shit! We've got to get Jade out of there now. We can't let

Giovanni get his hands on her. Not now, after everything we've gone through to keep her away from him."

I quickly call Vulcan, instead of texting. "Are you ready?" I ask him. "Giovanni is in the casino with his security team. We need to get Jade out now."

He replies with a laugh, "Fuck yes! I was born ready for this."

"Wait for our signal and then ride like a bat out of hell."

"Yes, sir," he replies, still chuckling. "God! I love this shit. Don't worry, we've got this. I can't fucking wait."

"I guess that means we're really doing this?" Kit asks.

I nod back at him. He leans down with a sigh to pick up the heavy leather reins connected to the eight reindeer pulling the sleigh. Like most of Kit's animals, he rescued them from a roadside attraction and now they live a life of luxury on his ranch.

Not that they're appreciative of his efforts. No, the reindeer are an ornery, nasty bunch. And unfortunately, much larger, and smellier than I expected. They're noisy too, breathing hard and snorting loudly. Giovanni is going to be royally pissed at us for taking them through the casino. But it's Christmas Eve and what could be better to use for a diversion, than a sleigh pulled by real reindeer? It's a perfect cover for what we have planned.

"Ready?" Kit asks, cocking an eyebrow at me.

"Ready as I'll ever be," I reply. "My crew is watching for us. They'll open the doors."

He makes a clicking sound to the reindeer, then calls out to them while lightly flicking the reins. "On Dasher, on

Dancer...”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I interrupt. “Those are really their names?”

“Hell no!” he says, giving me a mischievous look. “I’m trying to get you into the Christmas spirit.”

“Get me into the fucking casino Kit. I don’t give a shit about holiday spirit.”

“Okay, Santa. No need to be a grinch.” He turns to me with a wide grin. “Let’s see if these reindeer can fly.”

JADE

So far, so good.

With nimble fingers, I hit the spin button on the slot machine again, while keeping a running tally in my mind. The loud chaos of the casino fades into the background, replaced by the familiar symphony of numbers and probabilities.

There's a sweet spot at the thirty-spin mark. The win could come any time after that. Every cute character, every symbol dropping onto the screen is a cryptic dance step in a secret choreography towards the win.

The machine is churning out an algorithm that only I can perceive, a combination of number sequences that I've learned to decode over countless nights of solitary practice. A long sequence of codes will be running through my brain like a stock market ticker tape before I smash the button.

I've practiced and studied the machine's code long enough to know when the sequence will line up to pay out. With my brain, electronic accessories are unnecessary. No additional devices, no high-tech gadgetry, just the raw computing power of my mind, honed to a keen edge through relentless mental practice.

I fight the urge to position my hand above the payout button in anticipation since any deviation from casual gambling behavior could raise unwanted questions. Slot machine players are typically impulsive and erratic, their actions directed by luck, not deep contemplation. If anyone were to be watching, I can't appear to be concentrating too hard. My churning mind, impossibly flooded with numbers, must remain my secret.

A burst of noise draws my eyes. A tall, stunningly handsome man in a black tuxedo is striding rapidly across the casino floor, followed by a uniformed security team. He's dark-haired and tanned with distinct Italian features, his face drawn tight in a mask of deep anger.

He looks absolutely livid.

And dangerous as hell.

"Spread out and watch the crowd!" he yells to his men. "I'll be damned if I let someone scam my casino on Christmas Eve."

The man's booming command to his uniformed entourage is clear, he's searching for me. His group heads straight for my corner, their focused eyes sending ripples of anxiety through me.

A swift glance in Eva's direction reveals her perched daintily on a barstool, her long legs elegantly crossed while she stirs her pink cocktail with languid grace. When she spots the man heading my way, she quickly scoops up her drink and moves to intercept him. He crashes straight into her in his rush, causing the drink to slosh over onto the carpeted floor.

"Eva!" he calls out in surprise, stopping dead in his tracks. His hands instantly fly to her arms, steadying her in a

surprisingly gentle grip. “I’m so sorry,” he says, his voice softening. “Please forgive me. What are you doing here?”

“Celebrating Christmas Eve, Gio,” she replies with a warm smile, turning her full attention on him. “What else would I be doing?”

She knows him? Who the hell is he?

She called him *Gio*.

Gio...Giovanni...oh, shit! That man is Giovanni?

The realization hits like a bombshell, sending a shockwave of adrenaline through my veins. I’m in deep trouble now. The man the guys have continuously warned me about is standing mere feet away from me.

He’s a deadly hunter and I’m his prey.

He reaches for Eva’s hand. “A beautiful woman shouldn’t be alone on Christmas Eve,” he says. He tenderly lifts her hand to his lips and kisses it lightly before reluctantly letting it go. “Please allow me to buy you another drink.” He doesn’t take his eyes off her.

Is that a tinge of pink blush rising on her cheeks? What the hell is happening here? The tension between them crackles with an undercurrent of past history, of stories unfinished. I have a million questions for her, but there’s no time to figure it out. Behind me, there’s a loud gasp from the crowd near the back entrance.

“Ho! Ho! Ho!” A booming voice calls out near the front entrance. “Merry Christmas!” The amplified sound echoes across the crowded casino floor.

Oh my God!

I'd recognize that voice anywhere. Whirling around, I glance over my shoulder at the front entrance with dread.

The scene that greets me is both surreal and horrifying.

A big, red and gold vintage sleigh pulled by eight snorting reindeer is charging through the main aisle of the casino. Seven is dressed in a full Santa Claus costume and beard, while Kit, in all his massive Viking glory, is cheerfully sitting beside him, looking ridiculously out of place masquerading as an oversized green elf.

What the actual fuck is going on?

Kit tugs back hard on the leather reins, his massive arms flexing under the strain. The reindeer slow to a stop, their hot breaths puffing out into the air, their eyes wide and wild.

Why am I surprised Kit rescues reindeer too? Where on earth did he get them from?

As the sleigh comes to a stop, Seven moves into action. He rises, throwing his arms wide like Santa on a Christmas parade float, drawing a roar of applause from the enchanted audience. He reaches behind him, pulling out a velvety red sack filled to the brim with red and white striped candy canes.

He springs from the sleigh with the agility of a seasoned acrobat, a jolly twinkle in his eyes that sparkles with mischief. His hand disappears into the velvet sack and reemerges clutching handfuls of candy canes. Slinging the heavy red sack over his shoulder, he begins working the room.

“Merry Christmas!” he calls out to the smiling tourists as he hands out candy canes. “Did you mail me your Christmas list? Were you good this year?” He moves around the room, charming the ladies and drawing smiles from the men.

Even dressed in a Santa suit, the man is oozing hot, sexual charisma.

Eventually, he makes his way over to me.

“Merry Christmas, young lady! Have you been a good or naughty girl this year?”

He shakes a candy cane at me and gives me a wink, his blue eyes twinkling merrily behind the fake white beard. Leaning down closer, he whispers in my ear, his voice rumbling with barely suppressed laughter, “A very *naughty* girl, I bet. You’ve got three minutes starting right now to finish it up. Hurry! Watch the clock.”

I gape at him, speechless.

Three minutes?

I’m afraid to even think about what might come next. With a deep breath, I turn back to the machine, my fingers flying over the buttons in a frenzied dance of desperation. The glowing symbols spin on the screen while I memorize everything I see.

Thankfully, all eyes are on him, not me.

Giving me the opportunity to end this and get out.

He moves away and walks over to Eva. “You look lovely this evening,” Seven says to her, holding out a candy cane. Her responding smile is polite, tinged with a hint of amusement. She’s careful not to show recognition.

As she reaches for the candy cane, Giovanni steps closer, his presence a palpable wall of protectiveness. He watches with a thunderous scowl. His eyes darkening dangerously as Seven flirts openly with Eva.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” he grits out furiously, his voice dangerously low. “Get those barnyard animals out of my casino! Do you know how many violations I’ll be hit with?”

Seven laughs off his rage. “Oh, stop! Don’t be a grumpy elf!” Seven teases, sticking a candy cane up near the man’s nose for him to take. “Don’t you know it’s Christmas Eve? The crowd loves it. Keep watching.”

The tension crackles between them for a moment, Giovanni’s glower locked on Seven before he roughly snatches the candy cane out of his hand.

“That’s the spirit! Merry Christmas! Ho! Ho! Ho!” Seven’s booming laugh fills the air once again. He claps Giovanni on the back with a hearty slap before moving along to the next group of giggling women.

When his bag of candy is empty, he climbs back into the sleigh. Grabbing onto Kit’s shoulder for support, he stands up on the sleigh’s red velvet seat.

“Is everyone having a good time tonight?” he shouts. The crowd responds with enthusiasm, the loud cheers and shouts bounding off the ornate walls. “Don’t miss my brand-new illusionist show beginning right here at the Imperial Hotel and Casino on New Year’s Day. Merry Christmas everyone! And to all a good night!”

He holds his gloved hands up high toward the ceiling. At that moment, snowflakes, delicate and frosty cold, start falling. Around me, the fellow gamblers, their faces glowing with gleeful astonishment, look up in delight. They extend their hands upwards, palms open, hoping to catch the falling snow as it increases rapidly. The atmosphere is filled with excitement as the flakes intensify into a snowstorm.

Suddenly, a strange, almost surreal wind begins to circulate, its invisible tendrils wrapping around the sleigh and the reindeer. It grows in strength and speed, forming a cyclonic vortex around Seven and Kit. The falling snow increases to a blizzard, obscuring the scene. I strain my eyes, squinting through the blinding snow. I can barely make out the outline of the sleigh.

Or can I?

I blink in disbelief. The spot where the sleigh was parked is now only a swirling blur of peppermint red and white color. The reindeer and sleigh have vanished without a trace, leaving only a melting snowman wearing Seven's Santa hat in their place.

This is insane.

The line between reality and fantasy blurs. It's as if I've stumbled into an enchanting snow globe, the magic of the moment both entertaining and unsettling in its surrealism.

Thirty seconds left.

With a quickening heartbeat, I lean closer and focus every ounce of my concentration on the flickering screen before me. The characters are lining up exactly the way I want them. My hand hovers shakily over the button. Any moment now...

Bam!

I slam my hand down on the button at precisely the right moment.

Jackpot!

A symphony of lights and sounds erupts from the slot machine, a triumphant fanfare announcing my win. I pray no one else can hear. The snowy blizzard is providing cover for

me, and the noise of the excited crowd clapping for Santa masks the sounds.

The winning ticket spits out, and I grab it.

Time to get the hell out of here.

VULCAN

I rev the engine of my custom motorcycle, feeling the raw energy of it reverberate through my bones. Each rev sends adrenaline coursing through my veins, igniting an explosive fire within me. The sensation is electric, a thrilling anticipation lingering on the edge of chaos.

The sound rattles the walls of the 18-wheeler I'm hiding in, echoing as I impatiently wait for my signal. The metallic scent of exhaust, a familiar reminder of past risky adventures, fills my nostrils.

Seven told me he would buzz my phone at the three-minute mark. Enough time for him to provide cover for me to get in and take Jade safely out. Seven and Kit hoped it would never come down to this, while secretly I always hoped it would.

I live for fucking adrenaline.

So does Jade.

That's why we're an explosive match made in heaven. A pair of wild flames chasing the wind. Tonight, I'll finally get the chance to earn my namesake; Vulcan, the god of fire and forge. My mission is to extract a beautiful goddess disguised as a con artist from the heart of Sin City.

The signal from Seven finally arrives, a vibrating buzz that jolts me into action. With a surge of anticipation, I raise my hand to a staff member standing at the truck's doors. He swings them open wide, and I fly out of the back of the truck, hitting the road at full speed.

The cool night air rushes against my face as I burst out of the truck, a human projectile propelled by the motorcycle's untamed power. The wind howls in my ears as the pavement becomes my ally, propelling me forward at a reckless speed.

Straight ahead of me lies the Imperial Hotel and Casino, its ornate set of marble steps glistening under the blinking neon lights. They stretch up endlessly, their polished surface reflecting the dazzling lights of Vegas.

I've climbed mountains and jumped over desert canyons, but navigating these damn stairs might be my biggest challenge yet. Not to mention they're covered with a weird assortment of tourists, senior citizens struggling on each step, and intoxicated women staggering in heels.

"Move! Get the fuck out of the way!" I yell.

With unwavering determination, I roll back the throttle, unleashing the engine's battle cry as I fly up the steps. Gasps and shrieks escape the crowd as they jump out of my way, their expressions morphing from fear into awe. I lean forward, my body melding seamlessly with the bike, moving in sync.

Seven's crew are waiting by the front doors, their mouths wide and eyes terrified. Guess he didn't tell them exactly what to be watching out for. They throw the doors open when they spot me coming towards them full speed. I roar through the doors and turn down the carpeted aisle of the casino, where I know Jade is sitting.

Thick snow blurs my vision and stings my face, turning the casino into a chaotic haze. I can't see shit and slow down to keep from mowing over a gambler. Seven forewarned me about the snow, but nothing could've prepared me to drive through a wet, cold motherfucking blizzard.

My gaze seeks only one thing.

Jade.

And there she is.

Sitting in front of that stupid Peggy Penguin slot machine that's shouting full blast to the whole damn world that Jade just won the jackpot.

Fuck!

I slide the bike to a quick stop beside her as she snatches the winning ticket out of the machine, her hand trembling with excitement. Reaching over, I pull her onto her feet, and shove an extra helmet down over her head. Her shocked eyes meet mine, and despite the chaos, the world slows once again to where it's only the two of us.

"Get on," I shout. "Your ride's here, baby."

She doesn't hesitate or ask questions. In a split-second, she's tugged up her sexy as hell white dress, flashing her lacy panties to the whole crowd, and crawled on the bike behind me.

"Perfect timing, as always," she says into my ear, a smile in her voice that sets my pulse racing.

Her hands slide around my waist, uniting us in thrill-seeking passion. I gun the engine and head back toward the front doors.

A wall of security guards materializes before us to block our exit; their faces hardened, muscles taut, walkie-talkies crackling with shouted instructions. I don't slow down, confident they'll move. They won't challenge the crazed energy of the motorcycle.

When I speed up, they scatter like birds before a storm, tripping and falling over each other in their haste to get out of our way.

Jade's infectious laughter rings out, the sweetest sound I know.

"Hold on," I yell over my shoulder, feeling her tighten her grip on my waist. She trusts me and I won't betray her.

In one fluid motion, I roll the throttle back, pushing the limits of the motorcycle as we hurtle toward the top landing of the grand staircase.

The marble steps, an obstacle on the way up, now transform into a launching pad for our escape. The motorcycle roars as we're suddenly airborne over the steep marble steps, suspended in a moment of weightlessness, the rush of air against our faces.

I laugh in exhilaration, enjoying the highest of highs.

Jade has never asked many questions about my job or exactly what I do when I head off to work. I didn't want to worry her and never mentioned it.

I guess she knows now.

I'm a daredevil, a modern Evel Knievel, and the craziest motherfucking stunt driver in Vegas. The thrill of the jump, the roar of the crowd, the connection with the machine...God, I love this shit!

And even more, I love the girl laughing like a maniac in my ear; her joy a wild, uncontained force, a storm that sweeps everything bad away.

I love her.

She's my everything, the spark to my fire.

A pang of fear suddenly stabs me in the gut. What if something goes wrong? What if I accidentally lay the bike down on the asphalt and shred the flesh off her bare legs? She's wearing a short thin dress, her skin exposed, while I'm clothed in thick leather and jeans.

Fear is something I haven't felt in years, and the sensation is cold and unsettling. But it passes quickly when the tires of the bike hit the pavement smoothly at the bottom of the stairs. My hands are steady and the engine purrs beneath us.

"Fuck yeah, baby!" I shout in joy to Jade, who shrieks right along with me.

I'm in complete control and won't let any harm come to my girl.

I don't slow down. We're in the thick of it now, weaving through the glittering streets of Vegas, the world a blur of lights and motion.

Together we're unstoppable.

She leans closer, her breath warm on my lower neck. "We did it!" She shouts, her laughter ringing in my ears again.

The taste of victory is sweet and we're drinking it in.

We fly down the city streets, making sharp turn after turn, cutting through parking lots and deserted back alleys. I make one last turn and spot the 18-wheeler truck up ahead, parked just where we planned.

The crew has switched out the license plate and changed the truck's logos to a fake bottled water company. The back doors are open, and the ramp is down, waiting for us.

I drive up the ramp, and they slam the doors shut behind us. Jerking off my helmet, I slide off and take off Jade's helmet too, urgency in my movements. Grabbing her face with both hands, I kiss her hard on the lips, desperately trying to tell her everything I feel in one quick kiss before drawing back.

"Goddamn!" I yell, my breath ragged. "Was that a fucking rush or what?"

"You're amazing!" she says, grabbing the back of my neck and jumping up in my arms, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"What about us?" Seven says with a grin, stepping out from behind cases of water bottles piled high in the back corner.

Kit comes out of his hiding spot, too, and moves beside him, a mischievous smile on his lips. "Surprise!" he says to Jade, holding out his arms.

"What are you doing here?" she asks in shock, her eyes wide, disbelief etched on her features. "How did you get here so fast? How did you pull everything off? The snow? The sleigh? The melting snowman? My God, Seven, you're a fucking genius! That was incredible. You're all incredible!"

She rushes to embrace them both and they catch her, laughing, kissing and hugging.

"And guess what else?" She reaches into the purse still hanging across her body, and holds up the winning ticket from the slot machine, waving it in the air. "We hit the jackpot,

gentlemen! Mission accomplished. We did it! The plan worked.”

“But how?” Seven asks, clearly baffled by her revelation. “The camera wasn’t transmitting to the laptop. The connection was lost. How did you do it? I don’t understand.”

She taps the side of her head. “I didn’t need the camera,” she explains, shrugging. “I have a photographic memory for some things.”

Our mouths drop open at this very interesting new piece of information.

“Any other special skills you want to share with us?” Kit teases. “Or are you planning to drop them on us one at a time? Like the ‘being able to hold your breath for four minutes’ thing?”

She shakes her head. “No, sorry, that’s all fellows. I’m out of special skills. I didn’t say anything because I didn’t plan on using it unless I had to. Something I kept in my back pocket for emergencies.”

Our questions are interrupted by someone banging hard on the back doors, and we all freeze. “Shit!” I mutter, worried that Giovanni’s men have already found us.

“Let me in, assholes!” Leroy yells from outside, his tone demanding.

Seven hurries to unlock the door and pulls Leroy inside before slamming the doors shut. I bang on the wall and the truck pulls away from the curb. Soon we’re moving smoothly through the streets of Vegas, our earlier tension replaced by relief.

Leroy plops down heavily onto the floor, his large frame taking up considerable space. “Whew, glad that’s over with,”

he says, grinning. “Can you throw me one of those bottled waters stacked up there?”

“Sorry, those crates are empty and just for show in case we’re pulled over,” Seven tells him. “How did it go in the security control room?”

“Like a dream,” Leroy replies, smiling proudly. He turns to Jade. “Did I ever tell you about my Mama? She’s a leftover hippie love child from the seventies who still has a fondness for certain...hallucinogenic delicacies. Her special recipe brownies, to be precise.”

“What do you mean?” she asks, frowning at him.

“Mama fixed up a platter of her special brownies and other Christmas cookies for me to deliver to my friends in security. Let’s just say they were tripping mighty fine by the time I left. Giggling and stuffing their faces with food. When I left, they were on the phones ordering pizzas to be delivered.”

Her eyebrows shoot up. “You drugged the guys watching the security cameras?”

“Yep, I sure did,” Leroy readily admits. “And then I turned those damn cameras off and scrambled the videos. You can thank me now. I’d stand up and take a bow, except I nibbled a little bit of one of those brownies too. I’m a tad unsteady on my feet.”

Jade sinks down beside him and wraps her arms around his thick neck. “Thank you,” she says, her voice soft. “I love that you’re part of my family now, too. Growing up, I always imagined what it might be like to have a big brother or sister. And now I know.”

He reaches over to affectionately pat her arm, his large hand gentle. “Didn’t I tell you I’ve got your back?” he says.

“You and these other three fools. It’s hard work trying to keep you all straight, but somebody’s got to do it. And I guess that somebody is old Leroy here.”

“Thank you, Leroy,” I say. “You saved our asses. We owe you one.”

“So, tell me, what was all this?” she asks, waving a hand at the truck. “We never discussed any of this when we were going through the plans. Not the sleigh, the snow, Seven’s magic, and then Vulcan roaring in to save me at the last minute. When did you put this together?”

“We thought it couldn’t hurt to put together a backup plan in case the original plan went to hell,” Seven explains. “Your plan was solid, but we know Giovanni better. He’s ruthless and deadly. If something were to go wrong, we couldn’t take the chance of him getting his hands on you. He came too damn close tonight. His men were within a few feet of you when Vulcan whisked you out of there.”

“Vulcan, won’t you be recognized?” Jade turns to ask. “How many people in Vegas can ride a motorcycle the way you do?”

“It’s possible,” I reply with a shrug. “But I’m riding a different motorcycle than usual. One that I’ve never ridden in public before. And the helmets are full face helmets that only show our eyes. Giovanni might have a suspicion it was me, but no solid proof. Plus, the crew working with me tonight are willing to provide an alibi that we were partying together someplace else. There’s nothing concrete to put me at the casino.”

“What about the two of you?” She turns to Seven and Kit, her gaze shifting between them. “Won’t he be suspicious of you? You caused quite a scene in the casino. An amazing,

over-the-top spectacular scene, but still, it allowed me to finish the job and escape.”

Seven shakes his head. “No, I honestly don’t think he’ll tie our publicity stunt together with a woman trying to pull a scam on the casino. Why would he? He pays us very large salaries and we’ve never caused trouble. He would never dream in a million years that the three of his most profitable performers would work together to go up against him.”

“Seven’s right,” Kit says. “Especially me, since I’m a low-key kind of guy. I would be the last person he would suspect to do anything risky.”

Jade laughs out loud at his description of himself, her laughter ringing through the truck. “I wouldn’t call you low-key, Kit, under any circumstances. Will the two of you get into trouble?”

“Oh, I’ll definitely get into trouble,” Seven replies, grinning at her. “It was worth it. Giovanni will probably chew my ass out and threaten me with something outrageous. I’ll say it was all a publicity stunt for my new show coming up on New Year’s Day. Kit was kind enough to lend me his reindeer, and that’s the only reason he was involved. I can sweet talk my way out of it, I’m sure.”

“The only person we’re worried about is you,” Kit tells her, his eyes filled with concern. His usually happy demeanor shifts into something more serious. “As long as you can’t be identified, we’re good.”

“Where are we headed now?” Jade asks.

“Home,” we all say at the same time.

Relief lights her face, and she leans back against the cold metal wall. “I was hoping you’d say that,” she says, then

frowns when her burner phone buzzes. “Oh crap! I forgot to text Natasha and Eva. I bet they’re worried sick.”

“No, I got word to them that everything was fine,” Seven reassures her, reaching over to give her hand a gentle squeeze. His face is calm, but his eyes reveal a deep sense of protectiveness. “We’ve been in contact, and they know you’re safe. You can call them when we get home.”

“Thank God.” Her shoulders slump with relief. “As exciting as this has been, I’m relieved tonight is over.”

“Over?” I echo, reaching over to take her hand in mine, intertwining our fingers. “Oh baby, tonight isn’t over. The night is just beginning. Wait until we get you home.”

“Oh God, no,” Leroy moans, putting his hands over his ears. “Stop talking right this fucking minute. Please. I don’t want to hear any details about your freaky orgies. Can you drop me off at Mama’s place? It’s on the way. Hopefully, she saved me some leftovers because I’m starving.”

“How many of those brownies did you say you ate?” Jade asks, amusement dancing in her eyes.

“Enough to work up a big man’s appetite,” he replies, rubbing his stomach with a grin. “What time is it, anyway?”

“After midnight,” I say.

“Oh fuck! It’s already Christmas Day!” Leroy says. “Yeah, I definitely got to get home. Mama always fixes me a big breakfast on Christmas Day.”

“Hang tight and we’ll take you there,” I say.

I text the driver to make a short detour to let Leroy out. Soon, the truck slows down, and we approach Leroy’s drop-off

point. When we stop, I reach down to help Leroy to his feet and out of the truck. He's a little woozy on his feet.

"Take care, buddy, and Merry Christmas!" I tell him, slapping him on the shoulder.

"Merry Christmas, Leroy!" the others call out to him as we watch him stagger up the front path to his mom's house.

She'd left the porch light on for him. Apparently, she was waiting up too, because she quickly swings open the screen door for him to stagger in. "Merry Christmas, guys!" she calls to us, waving from the open doorway. "Do you want to come inside for chocolate chip pancakes?"

"No, ma'am," Seven yells back. "We'll come by soon. Thank you for your help! We appreciate it!"

"Anytime, boys," she yells back. "Merry Christmas."

We wave at her until she shuts the door and turns off the porch light. I climb back up into the truck, and bang twice on the wall to let the driver know we're ready to roll.

"Next stop is home," I say.

SEVEN

The day after Christmas...

Flipping my phone over, I check the text.

Oh fuck!

A sudden pang of unease makes my heart race faster as I read the message. It's from Giovanni, summoning me to his office with a text that drips with unspoken implications. I knew this moment was coming but had hoped to hold it off until after the New Year's Day show. He's certain to be furious with me for the stunt we pulled at the casino.

Not that I can blame him.

My staff told me about the mess left by the reindeer in the casino. Who knew they were so damn stinky and not housebroken at all? The pungent odor, unexpected from such beautiful creatures, and their unruly antics were a surprise.

Not to mention the water damage to the carpet and furnishings from the icy remnants of the snowman and the snowfall from the sprinkler heads. I'm sure Giovanni will deduct a hefty amount for damages from my earnings.

Money well spent.

While I quickly walk from the backstage to the elevator, I wonder what he will do. Will he straight up fire me and break my contract? Or will he be an asshole and keep paying me, while prohibiting me from performing anywhere else?

I'm not sure which would be worse.

Either way, I have no regrets.

Everything I did was worth it to keep Jade safe. She's an integral part of our life now and that's reason enough for my actions. No way in hell could I stand by and let him get his hands on her. Protecting her will always be my number one priority. There aren't many people in my inner circle; people that I trust and who can trust me. Only Dad, Kit, Vulcan, Leroy, and now Jade.

I'll do anything for them.

A metallic chime announces the arrival of the elevator, and as the doors close, I punch in the special code for the penthouse floor. The elevator ascends, a soft hum accompanying its journey upwards. The doors glide open to reveal Marla the Gatekeeper, her presence cold and imposing. Her glare penetrates me, as if she knew it was me riding inside.

It wouldn't surprise me to learn the woman is psychic. Or a witch in a tweed business suit.

"I'm very disappointed in you, Seven," she scolds, peering at me over the rim of her wire-rimmed glasses.

I fight the impulse to hang my head and stare at my feet.

"That was a stupid and irresponsible thing you did on Christmas Eve," she says. "Someone could've been injured by those reindeer. They're wild animals, not trained pets. And not only that...the fire department insisted that we replace all the

sprinkler heads that you tampered with. They fined us for breaking numerous fire codes because of your actions. I'm sure the health department will pay our restaurants a surprise visit, too."

"I'm sorry," I say, giving her an apologetic smile. "Things got out of hand. I promise it won't happen again."

"Damn right, it won't," Giovanni interrupts from the other end of the hallway. "Come inside my office, Seven. It's past time you and I have another talk." He motions for me to follow him into his office.

I blow out a long breath.

Here it comes.

The inevitable end of my glorious career. It was great fun while it lasted.

Tomorrow, when Dad calls from prison, I'll have the unenviable task of telling him I've single-handedly destroyed everything we've worked a lifetime for in a single night.

All for the love of a girl I'm sharing with two other guys.

He'll understand.

Love is the best reason to blow up everything.

With dread clenching my chest, I follow Mr. Giovanni into his office with its distinctive smell of aged leather and expensive cigars. The room is dimly lit, mostly by the neon glow coming in through the tall windows from the Strip outside.

I move to take a seat in one of the chairs in front of his desk.

“Don’t bother sitting down,” he says. “You won’t be here long.”

I nod and remain standing. Good to know my termination speech will be short and sweet. I’m not eager to hang around longer than necessary either.

He crosses his arms over his expensive suit, the silver of his cufflinks catching the light. His gaze is piercing, the kind that would terrify the shit out of most people in my position. Are his thugs waiting outside the door to haul me away? Break my legs? Shoot me in the kneecaps?

“What the fuck was that crazy stunt you pulled in the casino?” he spits out.

I absentmindedly scratch at the stubble of my beard while trying to get a read on him. How much does he know about the activities in the casino that night? As usual, his expression is a struggle to read.

“I was trying to drum up business for the new show beginning on New Year’s Day,” I explain. “It was a last-minute idea for a promotional stunt. Everyone was in high spirits because it was Christmas Eve. And I’ll be honest...I was a bit on the tipsy side. Kit had brought a few of his reindeer into town for the Christmas parade. I thought it would be funny if I dressed up as Santa and drove a sleigh through the casino. Kit was half-wasted too, and he volunteered to drive the sleigh.”

“You didn’t think to clear it with management before you crashed the casino with a herd of animals? The Imperial is not a barn. You turned my classy casino into a goddamn petting zoo. We have an outstanding reputation to uphold.”

I hold up my hands, trying to project an air of innocence. “I mean, yeah, it sounds crazy now, but at the time, it seemed like a great plan. The reindeer were well behaved.”

He raises his eyebrows at me, a silent challenge.

“For reindeer, that is,” I correct. “I apologize for the mess they left on the carpet and on one of the poker tables. Kit didn’t warn me about the amount of waste they produce or the awful smell. They were wearing bags under their butts, but I guess they must’ve overflowed due to their excitement.”

“Do you have any idea how difficult it is to get the smell of reindeer shit out of carpet?”

“No, but I can imagine,” I reply. “The crowd loved it, though! Did you see their faces light up when I rode in on the sleigh? It totally made their holiday. The videos immediately went viral on every social media outlet. Millions of views in just a few minutes. That’s free organic publicity that can’t be bought.”

“You don’t need to give me a lesson in public relations,” he says. “Frankly, I don’t care about any of that. What I want to know is how the fuck did you pull it off?”

Oh shit, he knows.

“What do you mean?” I ask, carefully hiding the unease in my voice. “Pull off what?”

“I want to hear how you did the illusion. How did you disappear into thin air and leave nothing behind but a melting snowman wearing your Santa hat? How were you able to rig the sprinkler system to cause a blizzard? I was less than ten feet away when you spun around, turned into the snowman, and then disappeared. Tell me how you pulled it off.”

I break into a grin, overcome by relief that he's not talking about Jade. I was prepared to go to any length to protect her, even if it meant walking away from my remaining contract.

“Magic,” I explain. “It’s what I was born to do. To entertain and amaze people. To make them smile and forget their troubles, if only for a little while. Illusions are my life. And I can never give away my secrets. Not even to you.”

He studies me for a moment, a slow nod of acknowledgement punctuating his silence. “You have a rare talent, Seven,” he says. “I was impressed, and I don’t say that often. There are very few things that wow me these days. Because of that, I’ll overlook your stunt this one time. I’ll talk to Kit too, but we both know you were the mastermind behind this.”

I’m stunned.

Of all the ways I expected this conversation to go, it wasn’t like this. I might walk away from here with all limbs intact.

“I talked to the insurance company again and they’ve come around to a different way of thinking,” he continues. “They’ve agreed to continue insurance coverage of your show without changes for a substantial increase in premiums. Luckily, the ticket sales for your new show have gone through the roof after the stunt you pulled and the resulting publicity. As a result, we’re doubling the ticket prices and adding several extra time slots. Be prepared to work your ass off this winter. We’re tripling the advertising budget and making plans to build a larger theater.”

I’m not fired.

I can’t fucking believe it.

He walks across the room to his desk and picks up a stack of papers. I recognize my signature where I'd signed weeks ago not to use a variety of dangerous devices in my show. The same day we kidnapped Jade and our lives changed forever. He rips the document in half and throws it into the trashcan beside his desk.

"I'm giving you back full artistic control of your show," he says. "I'm also giving you a second chance, which is a very rare occurrence. I'm warning you. Don't fuck it up. You won't get a third."

"Don't worry, I won't," I say; while already plotting how I can fuck him over again.

All is good with the world.

I'm back in business, and Jade is safe.

JADE

The *New Year's Eve Masquerade Ball at the Imperial Hotel...*

“May I escort you to the ball this evening, madam?” Seven says, bending before me with a gallant bow. He’s stunning, dressed immaculately in his black tuxedo, white starched shirt and bowtie. The Venetian mask, a vivid shade of blue, adds an air of mystery, drawing attention to his captivating eyes twinkling back at me.

He straightens and offers me his elbow.

“Yes, you may, kind sir,” I reply, smiling.

My gloved hand finds its place within the crook of his elbow, and we venture into the magnificent ballroom. The Imperial Hotel’s lavish New Year’s Eve Masquerade Ball is a long tradition going back decades.

“Wow,” I say when we step through the doorway of the grand ballroom. “This is incredible.”

I’m glad Natasha insisted on helping me choose my light blue evening gown. The cascading layers of silk and chiffon flow gracefully around me, and with each step, I feel as if I’m floating on a cloud.

The ballroom is alive with the excitement of New Year's Eve. Everyone who is anyone in Vegas will be here tonight.

Crystal chandeliers hang from the intricately molded ceiling, casting a soft glow that bathes the entire room in a warm radiance. Their shiny crystals catch the light, scattering shimmering patterns across the walls and polished marble floor. Soft music wafts across the room, the orchestra hidden behind a sea of masks.

Waiters in black and white uniforms move gracefully through the throng, carrying trays of bubbly champagne. The guests, dressed in an array of vibrant colors, sway with effortless grace across the dance floor, their laughter mingling with the tinkle of champagne flutes. Venetian masks conceal their identities, adding a mysterious air of intrigue to the festivities.

I scan the crowd, hoping to spot Eva and Natasha. Even if we can't be seen socializing in public together, it still gives me comfort knowing they're close by. At the last minute, Eva miraculously snagged a pair of the coveted tickets to the ball. No small feat considering the tickets are for the hottest New Year's Eve event in Vegas.

When I asked her how, she'd only smiled mysteriously without answering. Something tells me there's more to the relationship between her and Giovanni than she lets on. Maybe one day, I'll hear her whole story. Until then, I can only dream up my own conclusions.

As I continue to search the room of masked strangers for my friends, a pang of melancholy washes over me. The knowledge that we must keep our distance tonight tugs at my heart.

I've grown attached to Natasha, and even Eva, to a certain extent. But being seen together in public would be too dangerous for us now. We were lucky to make it through Christmas Eve without being dragged off in handcuffs.

All thanks to the guys.

They risked everything to protect me. While I stupidly fell into the gambler's trap of playing one more hand when I should've folded when we were ahead. I knew it and kept playing. The lure of a huge payout and my pride got to me.

I won't make the same mistake again.

Eva executed the last step of our plan this past week. It was too risky for any of us to walk up to the cash cage in the casinos holding fistfuls of winning tickets. We needed someone else to collect the cash, a buffer between us and the glaring spotlight of suspicion.

According to her, it was easy to find many people willing to cash in the tickets at the various casinos, collect a fee for their trouble, and hand over the rest. All they had to do was grab the cash and go.

True to her word, she'd distributed the winnings right away. I immediately divided up my fifty percent split between myself and the guys. Being noble, they tried to refuse it, but I wouldn't keep their shares. The money was the whole point in the first place, or so I've told myself, over and over again.

Or was it?

With the scheme behind us, a strange hollowness has settled in around me, a void that echoes with emptiness. It's a restlessness that I can't quite put my finger on, a yearning that gnaws at my insides, leaving me unanchored and adrift. I'm at a loss for what to do with myself now, caught between the

lingering exhilaration of success and the unsettling uncertainty of what comes next.

“What’s going on in that pretty brain of yours?” Seven glances down at me, his eyes warm and probing, and gives my hand a gentle squeeze. “Who are you searching for? I know you’re wishing Kit and Vulcan were here with us, too, but there was no way to talk them into wearing tuxedos. Especially Vulcan, and Kit couldn’t find a tuxedo to fit him. They’ll be waiting up for us with champagne when we return home tonight. Big masquerade balls aren’t their style.”

“I understand,” I reply wistfully, my eyes still gazing over the crowded dance floor. “I’m searching for Natasha or Eva.”

Seven frown deepens, a shadow crossing his face. “Aren’t you supposed to be staying away from each other in public now?”

“I wasn’t planning to talk to them. I only wanted to see what they’re wearing.”

“Sure, you did,” he says doubtfully, his tone teasing but his eyes ever watchful, ever protective. “Come and dance with me. That will take your mind off your friends. It’s too risky for you to be seen with them. You told me that yourself.”

“You’re right,” I agree with a regretful sigh, the truth of his words settling heavy in my chest. “Why don’t we grab a table first?”

I’m trying to delay stepping out on the dance floor, where I’ve always been awkward.

“I have a better idea,” he says, leaning down to whisper in my ear. “Let’s split. Why are we here in a room full of strangers when we could be upstairs in a private hotel room having hot sex?” He pulls my hair aside and kisses my neck

softly. “What do I need to do to convince you to escape with me?”

“Stop it!” I tease, playfully slapping his arm. “Try to control yourself. I’ve never attended a New Year’s Eve party before, and you need to indulge me. We only just arrived. Besides, there isn’t an empty hotel room in Vegas tonight, especially not at the Imperial.”

“No harm in asking,” he replies with a low chuckle. “I’ll behave, but only this one time. I have to warn you, though, I’m superstitious. It’s New Year’s Eve and I’m giving you a kiss at midnight.”

A waitress weaves her way to us, a tray of shimmering champagne flutes balancing effortlessly in her hand. Her costume is a stunning display of red and white; crimson feathers fan out from the sides of her mask, matching the fiery hue of her cocktail dress.

“Would you care for a glass of champagne?” she offers.

“Absolutely,” Seven says, removing two glasses from the tray with a smooth gesture. “Thank you.”

He hands one to me, the cool glass meeting my fingers, before lightly clinking our flutes together. The sound is delicate, a perfect note that rings in the air. “Let’s make a toast to the new year. I’m excited to see where it will take us.”

I smile up at him. “Me too.”

“How is it possible that we crossed paths at exactly the moment we did?” he continues. “Think about it. We found each other by accident and instantly you became the center of our universe. If you had left the casino two minutes earlier or if I hadn’t been walking through at exactly the right moment, we never would’ve met. Now that you’re in our lives, I can’t

imagine an existence without you. Before you came along, I never realized what I was missing.”

He reaches down and tilts my chin up so he can gaze directly into my eyes. “I love you, Jade. We all do. I know Jade isn’t your real name, but you’ll always be Jade to us. Jade is the girl we fell in love with, who hypnotized us from the very first moment. We’re all worried about what your plans might be now. Please stay here in Vegas with us forever. Not for a few weeks or until you find another location to run the scam. We want you by our side permanently. We need you.”

His words resonate deep within me, reaching my very soul. It’s hard to wrap my head around the fact that we’re all together now. A month ago, I was a hacker, a solitary figure lurking in the shadows, who made my living by blackmailing evil men.

Now every day I’m living a dream.

How did I ever get so lucky?

Meeting Seven, Kit and Vulcan is more than I ever could’ve fantasized. I always thought the term ‘soulmates’ was made up, nothing but a wild fantasy.

Now I realize it’s true.

“I love you, too, Seven.” I reach up to gently graze his short beard with my fingertips. “More than I can say. By now, all of you probably are aware I’m not good at expressing my feelings, but I’m working on it. I never want you to doubt me. If I can’t always tell you how I feel, I’ll try to show you.”

“I can work with that,” he says, giving me one of those sexy winks I find so endearing.

His smile, full of promise and love, is all the assurance I need.

“I don’t know how or why we met each other, only that it’s right,” I say, my heart swelling with emotion. “As if it were always destined to happen. Thank you for kidnapping me that day and setting all this in motion. You saved me, and I’ll always be grateful to you for that.”

“No, you saved us,” he says. “Now our lives are wide open with a million prospects. Together, there’s nothing the four of us can’t accomplish. The sky’s the limit!”

“It’s hard for me to believe this is all real,” I say, smiling at him. “Or is it another elaborate illusion of yours?”

“It’s as real as it gets. We’re all yours, if you’ll have us.”

“Oh, I’ll have you,” I tease, my lips curving into a playful smile. “Wait until after I get my midnight kiss, then you’ll find out. I’ll have you all night long if the three of you can handle it.” My words are a playful challenge, but behind them lies a promise, a commitment to sharing a future full of love and excitement.

“Is that a dare?” he asks, arching an eyebrow at me. “Who cares if my brand-new blockbuster show starts tomorrow? Sleep is for sissies. Give me two hours of sleep and I’ll be good to go.”

“I’ll need more sleep than that because there’s no way I’m missing your new show.”

“Hey look! There’s Leroy!” Seven suddenly says when he spots him moving through the crowd. “He’s hard to miss, even in a mask. What the fuck is he wearing?”

Instead of a Venetian mask, Leroy’s face is covered by a giant cat mask that is three times larger than it should be. It doesn’t do one thing to conceal his identity.

“Leroy! Over here!” Seven yells at him and waves. Leroy grins when he sees us and hurries our way. “Nice mask,” Seven teases him when he reaches our side. “What are you? A background dancer in a Broadway production?”

Leroy laughs good-naturedly. “I borrowed the mask from my nephew. He was the lead in a high school play.”

“It suits you, Leroy,” I tell him.

After ordering a round of drinks at the bar, we find an empty table in a corner to sit and watch the crowd. While the men make plans for Seven’s big show tomorrow, I watch the door.

Eva and Natasha are impossible to miss when they walk in together. Natasha is stunning in a low-cut, long black evening gown. Her blonde hair is pulled up high and elegantly styled. Dangling diamond earrings and a black mask with feathers completes her outfit. Eva is perfection in a bronze evening gown.

Natasha glances around the room, searching for me. When her gaze lands in my direction, I lift my hand in greeting. Smiling slightly, she nods discreetly back at me, a shared understanding passing between us.

“Are you ready for the last dance of the year?” Seven turns to me. “Less than ten minutes until midnight and we haven’t danced a single time tonight. We should end the year properly.”

He stands and reaches down a warm hand to me. I don’t tell him the last dance of the year is also my first. Taking his hand, I allow him to lead me onto the dance floor. He slides one hand around my waist and clasps my hand with the other.

“You’re beautiful this evening,” he says to me as we sway softly to the music. He pulls me close into his arms and I loop my arms around his neck. Suddenly, there’s a tap on his shoulder from a man in a black mask.

“May I steal your partner?” he asks.

I gasp when I recognize Vulcan’s smoldering dark eyes glittering behind the mask. He’s incredibly sexy in a tuxedo, his strong physique emphasized by the tailored fit, a sight I never thought I’d see in a million years.

“Vulcan! You’re here! My God, you look sexy as hell!”

With a knowing smile, Seven places my hand in Vulcan’s. Vulcan whirls me quickly back onto the dance floor, the world spinning around us as I lose myself in his arms. He twirls me effortlessly, his movements smooth and controlled.

“You never struck me as a dancer,” I tease him. “I’m surprised.”

“Oh, there are many things you don’t know about me, baby,” he says, grinning at me. “I have many skills left to show you. A lifetime with you won’t be enough.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” I say, a tingling sensation washing over me at the prospect. “Spending a lifetime with you is my kind of heaven. I’m so happy you’re here. This is a wonderful surprise. Ringing in the New Year wouldn’t feel right without you and Kit here, too. Where is he?”

“Right behind you, beauty,” Kit’s deep voice calls out, and I turn around to see his handsome smile.

“Kit! You made it!” I exclaim, switching smoothly from Vulcan’s arms to his, the transition seamless. “I thought you weren’t able to find a tuxedo to fit your giant body,” I tease, stepping back to take a good look, drinking in the vision of

him in formal wear. “You’re even more gorgeous than usual. I can’t believe I didn’t spot you walk into the ballroom since you’re a head taller than anyone else here.”

“The tux was specially made to fit me due to my size,” he says. “I wasn’t sure it would be ready in time. I didn’t want to promise you I’d be here, then back out due to lack of formal attire. I convinced Vulcan to put on a tux for once in his life, and here we are.”

“Thank you,” I tell him. “I’m thrilled you’re all here. My night is now complete.”

The guys spend the next three songs passing me from one to the other, twirling and spinning me. Every touch, every glance, every shared smile tells me I’m special and loved.

The night is the very definition of perfect.

“Only one minute until midnight!” the emcee on stage suddenly announces into the microphone, his voice booming with excitement. “The countdown is ready to begin. Is everyone ready with a glass of champagne? Here we go!”

A waitress glides by and we all grab a champagne flute from her tray. The men gather close around me, smiling.

“Ten...nine...eight...seven.”

I glance around at each of their faces, soaking up the love that binds us all together. They’re all I’ve ever wanted. They’re each vastly different, and yet perfect for me in their own special way. My heart fills, overflowing with love for these three men.

“Six...five...four...three...two...ONE!” we count together.

“Happy New Year!!!”

Showers of confetti and colorful balloons drop from the ceiling as the crowd erupts into loud cheers. The air is filled with laughter, shouts of joy, and the sound of clinking glasses.

Vulcan grabs me first, kissing me urgently with his deep, hungry passion always simmering beneath the surface. When he breaks the kiss, Seven gently cups my face with both hands and plants one of his long, soft kisses on me. Kit tugs me to him last, wrapping me up in those big, muscular arms of his that I love. His kiss is full of promise and protectiveness, the traits I adore in him.

When he finally breaks the kiss, I draw my men into a huddle around me, draping my arms around their waists.

“I realize Kit and Vulcan just arrived a short time ago, but I’m eager to start this year off with a bang,” I say. “Can we go home soon and ring in the New Year in our own special way?”

“By banging?” Vulcan asks, chuckling. “Hell yeah, we can. I’ve been waiting for you to say we could go home since the minute we walked in. I’m dying to rip off these clothes.”

“Don’t get in too much of a hurry,” I warn. “Because I intend to take my time and rip these tuxedos off slowly to savor every moment. In fact, I intend to take photos tonight too. My own personal boudoir photo session of you three.”

“Can we steal you away now?” Kit asks, taking my hand.

“No arguments from me,” I reply.

Laughing, we try to squeeze our way through the celebrating crowd, the air thick with the mingling scents of perfume and champagne. The guests are packed in tight, still cheering wildly and blowing paper horns. It’s a slow process trying to make it across the room.

Glancing back over my shoulder, I try to spot Natasha one last time before we leave. I hope she's having a good time tonight with Eva. She deserves a chance to have a little fun.

I see her on the far side of the ballroom. She's alone and moving fast through the crowd, her movements uncharacteristically tense. Her head is ducked down low as she squeezes her way quickly between the celebrating guests, her face partially obscured.

Why is she leaving now?

Skipping out on a great party isn't Natasha's style. Especially since she seemed so excited about coming tonight. It's all she's talked about the past three days with genuine excitement.

"Natasha is leaving," I say, dropping Kit's hand. "I want to catch her to tell her Happy New Year. I'll meet you at the front entrance in five minutes."

"Are you sure that's safe?" Seven asks. "Don't you dare disappear on us again. Now that we've found you, we can't lose you."

I lean up to give him a quick, reassuring kiss on the lips. "Never again," I promise, my breath mingling with his. "I'll be right back. I'll make sure no one sees me talking to her."

I head in the direction I last saw Natasha, my heels clicking on the floor, hoping to catch her before she leaves. After everything we've been through together, it doesn't seem right not to wish her a Happy New Year. I lose her in the crowd before I spot her again; the panic rising in my chest. She's moving too fast for someone simply bored with a party.

Something is wrong.

Before I can catch up to her, she disappears through the back door of the ballroom.

“Happy New Year!” An inebriated man blows a paper horn in my face and then grabs my arm as I try to move past him. His breath reeks of alcohol and his grip is clammy. “Where are you going in such a hurry?” he slurs. “Want to give me a New Year’s kiss?”

“Hell, no!” I snap, wrenching my arm away in anger.

I shove past him and finally make it to the exit leading out of the ballroom, my heart pounding. Hitting the door’s metal bar hard, I push it open and rush into the hallway.

It’s empty.

She’s already gone.

Disappointed, I abruptly stop walking and turn around to go back inside. In the corner, a crumpled black mask is lying on the floor. Several of the feathers are torn off and scattered nearby. I rush to pick it up, holding it gently.

It’s Natasha’s.

What the hell is going on? Why would she yank off her mask and throw it on the floor? Where is she? My hands tremble as I reach into my clutch purse, to pull out my cellphone to call her.

The screen shows she sent me a text only five minutes ago, the three words screaming at me.

Dimitri is here.

THE BONE-CHILLING REVELATION nearly brings me to my knees, my mind spinning with terror.

Dimitri.

The man powerful enough to snatch Natasha from an orphanage when she was a vulnerable child.

The man who never allowed her to be alone.

The man who unleashed his thugs on her with orders to end her life.

Dimitri is here in Vegas.

And now he has Natasha.

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