

## CHAPTER 1



"She's here."

He knew he didn't have to say anything more than that—standing there in front of the big man's equally large desk, surrounded by the subdued opulence that was his boss's office—looking disgusted and annoyed, jaw set and fingers uncharacteristically primly laced before him.

Said boss became preternaturally still, although other than that he betrayed no emotion. "And where is she, exactly?"

The other, older man, who was nearly as small as he was large—proving that you didn't have to be built like a brick shithouse to be a kick-ass head of security, although it didn't hurt if the man who hired you was a man who knew you excruciatingly well and still liked you—snorted derisively. "Where do you *think*?"

Richard rubbed the edge of his index finger over his lips for a few short seconds—one of the few times Rev had ever seen so much as an instant of hesitation in him—then rumbled, "Bring her to me."

He stood still for a long moment, considering the younger man, then, shaking his head and mumbling under his breath to himself,

he turned and left the office, viciously slamming the door behind him as he did so.

When his friend had left, he rose and went to the small bar to the left of his desk that was kept well stocked and poured himself a half a rocks glass of good whiskey, downing it in one gulp, thoroughly enjoying the way it burned all the way down into his gullet, then refilling it—not heeding the impulse to down that, too, but forcing himself to simply bring it back to his desk where he eased himself back into his chair and turned it around, so that it faced away from the door, looking out over the large, beautifully lit complex. He was unable to keep himself from wondering what the hell she was doing here now.

By the time, moments later, he heard Rev's surprisingly soft, controlled knock on his door—which also served to reveal just how concerned he was about him—Richard was startled to realize that he had spent the past fifteen minutes rock hard and pulsing painfully against the constrictions of his immaculately tailored trousers.

Proof positive that Rev's concern was well founded, he smiled wryly, turning his chair back around, and issuing a firm, commanding, "Come."



SHE'D BEEN WINNING.

She'd been careful about it—no enormous, ostentatious bets and, therefore, no ginormous wins that would have set off alarm bells in the back offices—but there was no doubt she was up. She'd slowly, calculatingly—literally—amassed a considerable number of chips, while being as discreet as she possibly could about it, moving from table to table, mixing up the stakes—letting her rolling hips speak for her. Just another distraction in a largely male dominated environment, but she was dressed to blend in, moving languidly between the more private, high roller, thousand dollars a hand

tables to the crowded, ten dollars a pop ones on the main floor, always in different areas of the casino, and at different times of the day—forcing herself to play as if there wasn't a limit to how long she had to acquire the money.

Some days, she didn't play at all, spending her time mostly holed up in her room, only venturing down once for something to eat, preferring to spring for a Ben & Jerry's coconut seven-layer bar sundae or a meal at the Hard Rock rather than blowing her money on room service. She wasn't quite broke—yet—but she had to be careful with what little she had in order to build it into more. She'd brought her own sodas and snacks so that she wouldn't be tempted to eat the fifty-dollar jar of cashews the honor bar so generously offered. She'd even brought her own liquor, although she hadn't descended quite low enough to taste of it yet, but she knew herself well enough to know that moment probably wasn't too far off, especially if things didn't go as well as she needed them to.

If she hadn't been in such a financial pickle, she would never have taken the chance—on several levels—of being here at all. At least she'd convinced him to let her pay in installments.

Still, despite all of her precautions, she knew she was being watched. Everyone was, but she would bet that they were paying her special attention. She had no illusions about the current state of casino security—she knew the hazards of what she was doing. And they tipped their hands a bit, since—not long after she'd gotten there, and as soon as she began to accumulate money rather than lose it uncomplainingly as they expected their patrons to—she started to notice that every time she sat down, a new dealer was brought in. At least one burly guy from security—uniformed or not, she could spot them in a second—always appeared at the table or hovered protectively around it, as if the money the casino was losing to her was their own.

At least, she hadn't recognized any of them yet, which was a distinct hazard to picking this habit up again. Although she looked quite different from how she used to, she knew that a lot of big

casinos also had facial recognition software to catch cheaters—which they all considered her to be, even though she was only using her mind to tip the odds in her favor rather than theirs—before they had the chance to place their first bet.

Still, she was going to remain here as long as they let her get away with it and then she'd move on, until she'd amassed the money she needed, which was going to be quite some time. The minor indulgence she'd secured really hadn't helped her any—it had simply added to her debt.

But as he'd said, with that dangerous smile of his, he wanted her alive and well enough that she could keep paying.

Not that he hadn't offered her another way to pay; he had, quite bluntly, and with very generous terms, too. But the very idea made her shiver. She'd broken out in goose bumps all over, automatically lowering her eyes to the floor and saying, in a soft, small voice she barely recognized as her own, "No, thank you," praying she wasn't going to pay for refusing him.

Her adversary had merely nodded, not looking in the least insulted. "No disrespect intended. The way you look, I'd have to be dead not to at least extend the offer." He'd smiled at her then, and it had almost been enough to calm her nerves—but not quite, although she had left his presence completely unscathed, if terrified, her busy mind already working on what she needed to do to extract herself from the hole she'd dug herself.

But her luck came to an end while she'd been happily investing five hundred a hand, somewhere near midnight of her fourth day there, after she'd just doubled down and won a tidy sum—her biggest yet—when she suddenly realized that she was not alone.

Of course, this was a casino, and one was never truly alone.

But this was different.

She looked up and saw that there was no longer anyone watching her from near the dealer. Instead, there were two of them, and they were standing right next to her, one on either side, glaring

at her. Play had, of course, halted, at their appearance, and the other players were staring at her, too.

Before either of them could bend down to whisper the all too familiar phrase, "Please come with us," in her ear, she rose, startling them a bit by offering no resistance and knowing better than to try to argue that she wanted to take her chips with her, although one of them glommed roughly onto her upper arm, anyway, his fingers wrapping entirely around it and squeezing, as if she wasn't a third of his weight and not much of a flight risk.

"Please come with us," the other guy said, looking a bit askance at the way his partner was manhandling her.

She did, not that they were giving her a choice about it, anyway.

As she expected, she was taken to a secure area away from what players usually saw, but she wasn't then shoved into a small windowless room and grilled about what she was doing—her methods and techniques—as she expected. Instead, she was led to a small elevator—so innocuous and secure that it wasn't even labeled private, although it positively screamed that it was, if one bothered to pay attention, since it required an entirely different key card—as well as an actual key—in order to access it—and she was maneuvered, her arm still held at an awkward, close to painful angle by one of the gorillas, up to the floor just beneath the top one.

The doors opened and her jaw as well as her stomach hit the floor at the same time.

"Lexi," Rev greeted in a stiffly formal—if more neutral than she expected—tone.

Doing her best to hide her surprise, she returned in the same manner, "Rev."

If Rev was here, someone she desperately did *not* want to see wouldn't be too far away. She knew to whom she was being taken now—yet another adversary, of sorts, if one from her past.

Although he neither said nor did anything about it, Lexi could see that he was none too happy with the way the guard was holding

her arm. He turned and knocked softly on the door that was directly behind him.

"Come."

Speaking of hazards...

The four of them entered the large, well-appointed office, Rev stepping smartly well away from the three of them, but not so far that he couldn't lend a hand, if that became necessary, although it was doubtful it would be. Richard, who stood out of habit because a woman had entered the room—a leftover habit from his starched and ironed childhood years with very loving but strict parents he adored—noticed immediately—as Rev had—that she was probably hurting, based on the way the guard was yanking her, holding her hauled up, forcing her to stand on her tiptoes in order to keep her arm in its socket.

He came around his desk like a bull after a matador and leaned into the face of the man who had his hands on her like that, his voice deathly grim and quiet. "Release her immediately, Simmons, and draw your pay. You're fired, and you'd damned well better hope that our guest here doesn't file assault charges, because I'll help her hang you out to dry. Don't even bother to try to get a job at another casino in the States or elsewhere—I'll make sure you're blacklisted everywhere I can manage to do it."

Richard had been in the game long enough—and had such a sterling reputation—that that would, indeed, be an impressive list of casinos.

The other man opened his mouth to protest, then, based on the look in his former boss's eyes, thought better of it and turned to leave.

"I'll escort him out," Rev offered.

Richard held up his hand to halt him, addressing Lexi, and asking, "Did this man touch you, too?" He tipped his head toward the other guy.

"No, he did not."

Nodding, he addressed his friend again. "Yes, please, Rev, could

you see that Simmons is escorted off the property and get this other gentleman back to work, please. Thank you."

They were gone before he'd turned around and headed back to his desk to reclaim his chair, remaining stubbornly silent as he stared intently at her—trying to make her feel ill at ease, of course—acting against type, too, by not offering her one of the seats in front of his desk. Normally, Richard was every inch the gentleman with the fairer sex and not in the least smarmy or obsequious about it, either. As long as you were on his good side, it just seemed to be a natural part of his personality. He was very intense but also very charming, and most women—from giggling teenagers to ninety-year-old blue hairs—fell hook, line and sinker for his door opening, chair holding out, ladies first tendencies without a qualm about what might be their own feminist leanings.

She ought to know—she counted herself among them.

Or she had at one time, anyway. Hopefully, this time, she would be better at resisting his charms, although, if her racing pulse was anything to go by, it wasn't looking very good for her.

She didn't wait for him to offer—the bastard—she simply claimed one of the—she suspected deliberately uncomfortable chairs—that were positioned in front of his desk, feeling much like a schoolgirl facing the principal, which was—again—probably exactly how he'd intended her to feel.

Lexi only hoped he didn't mean it on more than the most superficial level. That way lay only heartache, as they both well knew.

Stubbornly refusing to knuckle under to his tactic, she pasted a serene smile on her lips—that belied the way her heart was thumping painfully against her breast bone—she drew a slow, deep, supposedly calming breath as she met his eyes and simply sat there quietly. Lexi fully intended to sit there all night, if she had to, quickly having already decided that she would indulge in her own little power play. She was *not* going to be the first to speak. And she won, although she knew it was too tiny a victory to really count.

"Can I offer you a drink?" he asked, bringing his own empty glass to the bar with him when he got up.

"No, thank you," she demurred primly, taking the moment to asses him while he wasn't doing the same to her.

He was just as impressively tall and burly as most of his security team, perhaps more so than some, still wearing his dark brown hair cut short, but she could see a bit of stubble on his jaw and knew that was from neglect rather than choice. He was still running himself ragged, and he needed to shave any time he thought of it. He hadn't gained a pound that wasn't pure muscle, but he had a few more wrinkles—and the majority of them probably had her name on them.

He gave her one of those achingly familiar lop-sided grins of his that brought her mind back to the matter at hand. "Really? You? On the wagon?"

Inclining her head a bit, Lexi drawled, "Around you? Fuck, yes!"

Richard chuckled reluctantly. "I take it you didn't expect to find me here?"

She snorted. "I assumed you were still in Vegas. My bad."

Her *very* bad. Vegas was where the money was, but she should have remembered that he had enough of his own when she'd know him before, and acquiring more was no fun for him unless it was a challenge.

Richard did enjoy a challenge immensely—of varying kinds.

He sat back down. "A reasonable assumption."

Lexi folded her hands in her lap as his eyes settled heavily on her. She could feel it as if it was one of those big paws of his, although that was a bit of a misnomer, except for the size. His nails were always impeccably manicured and he was never clumsy or ham-handed with her in the least—just the opposite, in fact. Those hands were very big and very strong, and they knew *exactly* what to do to make her melt into a puddle before him.

Almost worse than that, though, was his voice—but she reeled

her thoughts away from wandering down that path towards her own inevitable doom.

She badly wanted to ask him how he'd ended up here, but she knew that the fewer interactions she had with him, the better. All she wanted out of this unexpected, impromptu—but not entirely unpleasant, she was annoyed to note—encounter with him was to leave—preferably with her dignity still intact, because he—above anyone else she'd ever met—knew how to expertly strip it slowly from her and make her enjoy every single second of it as he did so.

Just being in the same room with him was tempting fate. Neither of them had a very good history of controlling themselves around each other.

The wry thought flitted through her mind that she was surprised she wasn't already beneath him on the desk—or, more accurately, considering her situation, bent over it. She counted it as a small mercy that she couldn't see whether or not he was wearing a belt.

"Why are you smiling like that?" he asked suspiciously. "A smile is a bit out of place, since you've just been caught cheating in my casino, don't you think?"

"I'm not worried," she bluffed smoothly. Her only chance of saving herself was rapidly crumbling before her eyes, but she wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of watching her disintegrate.

There'd be a time and a place for that later, and that would probably be some Motel 6—or other comparable, dirt cheap motel—where she would lick her wounds, drink her rank, cheap whiskey and, eventually, try to decide what the fuck she could do to save her own ass.

It was on the tip of her tongue to debate with him about the term "cheating", but it was an old argument, and they each knew that the other one wasn't about to budge in their viewpoint on that matter, so why waste her time on it.

His eyebrow rose. "You knew what the consequences would be

if you were caught before you came in here. And it's only gotten better—and easier—since the last time I caught you to exchange information with other casinos about...undesirable guests."

"Obviously, I didn't expect to get caught."

Richard rose and came around to the front of his desk, leaning back against it, much, much too close to her.

*Damn.*

He *was* wearing a belt—an expensive looking leather one.

She wondered, errantly, how the end of it would look wrapped around his hand as he slashed the loose end of it down across her naked backside.

Almost reeling back physically from that thought—and from his potent nearness—Lexi clamped down hard on that reaction, knowing it would tip her hand to him—and this man didn't need any help. When he saw something—or someone—he wanted, he went for it and almost always attained his goal.

Except he hadn't with her, at first, but that had only served to intrigue him further, like the good hunter that he was.

And he *really* hadn't at the last, for which she knew he must hate her, even now.

"But you did. Apparently, the lesson I tried to teach you years ago didn't quite take. Obviously, I should have spanked you much harder and much more frequently."

*Don't look up at him or it's all over!* she screamed internally, somehow managing not to. Clearing her throat, Lexi asked quietly, "Well, since my fate has already been determined, then there's no need for me to remain here."

She knew she should have been trying to talk him out of it—for her own sake. Frankly, she should have been down on her knees with his cock in her mouth as soon as she saw him, begging him to get her out of this mess—but, despite the high stakes, she was too scared to attempt that. Not that she thought he'd ever hurt her physically—despite the spankings she always seemed to earn from him much more frequently than he remembered, apparently.

It was her heart that was going to be the worse for the wear if she became involved with him again, and it had nearly killed her to walk away from him the last time. She wasn't at all sure she could do that again when she inevitably needed to. He was just too potent.

She was just going to have to do what needed to be done the hard way.

Lexi made as if to rise, but Richard easily extended one of those freakishly long, muscled arms of his, wrapping it around her waist and guiding her—gently and carefully but more than firmly enough that, if she decided to fight him, she would lose—into a position that left her no choice but to lean her entire body against the length of his.

Trying to hide how nervous that move had made her, she nonetheless looked up at him. "Aren't you doing exactly what you just fired that guy for, Mr. Loomis? Manhandling a guest? Perhaps that lawsuit you mentioned isn't such a bad idea."

He frowned down at her questioningly, voice warm and husky as he asked, "Am I manhandling you, Miss Houghton?"

"Ms.," Lexi corrected pertly.

"Ms.," he said as he inclined his head with a slight, mocking smile.

"And, yes, you are, Mr. Loomis. I want to leave." She tried to push herself up—although he was the only thing she could brace herself against to do so, and she was loathe to touch him any more than she absolutely had to. When her palms connected reluctantly with his unyielding belly, she could feel the heat and hardness of him, and all of those wild, uncontrollable desires—the ones she'd been frantically stuffing down since she realized who was going to call her to account—burst free within her to dilate her pupils, quicken her breath, and find their all too familiar, home away from home between her legs, settling heavily there and inspiring an increased, acute awareness of that area—and of him—that she would much rather not have had.

"Do you, Ms. Lexi? I would wager that I could prove you wrong in that."

A big hand spread wide open at the small of her back, holding her in place but not overtly while touching as much of her as he could. The finger of his other hand sought and found the loose curls over her ears, delving into the long hair he found there, cupping her head and massaging her scalp at the same time.

A small, pathetic whimper escaped her lips before she could suppress it, although she *was* somehow able to suppress the "*dammit*" she was thinking because of it as her body encouraged her to surrender to the entirely innocent pleasure he was encouraging within her.

"I wouldn't advise a lawsuit—we have lawyers who will keep you tied up until your money runs out."

Lexi managed not to say anything about the fact that that would probably be no more than a month or so, if that. No sense revealing any more of her weakness to him than he was already depressingly familiar with.

"You chose a beautiful color. I always wanted to see you with long hair," he whispered, big fingers tangling themselves in her hair and reminding her of how wonderful it felt to be as small as she was in comparison to him, yet feeling cared for and infinitely safe because of that size difference.

Just for a moment—just for a second—she allowed herself to relax against him, indulging her mind and her heart—and her body, which was way ahead of her in every respect—in everything being held like this was dredging up within her—all of it too good and much too powerful to resist.

Yet resist it she must, she knew, trying to draw away from him but held in place with ridiculous ease, as she knew she would be.

"There is the possibility that we could come to a...mutually satisfying...arrangement again, Lexi, if you would like me to keep what has happened here under wraps. A longer one—say a year—this time, though, and much more *binding*."

His emphasis on that word in particular—and the heavy connotations she knew it carried with it—made her catch her breath, and he was close enough to hear it. She hated to see the triumph in his eyes.

Amazed that he would even think of such an offer—much less actually give voice to it—after what she'd done to him before, and thinking quickly—hoping to leave—at some point, now, with the possibility of building the fortune she needed, Lexi returned, biting her lip as she calculated how much money she'd already amassed versus what she needed to make the first payment, "If that was to be the case, then I would want a much shorter commitment. No more than a month."

He stiffened beneath her—not that he wasn't already—he had been since he'd taken her in his arms. "Six," he countered, wrapping his arms around her and lifting slowly, gently, until they were at eye level.

She was surprised that he had lowered his demand so dramatically, so she raised hers. "A weekend."

Richard had to chuckle at that. "I don't think so. I've seen the figures of what you've earned—and I use the term very loosely—so far. A weekend—even with you—wouldn't cover it."

Lexi blushed, even though she wasn't quite sure whether he meant the compliment or not.

"Two weeks," she countered.

"Two months."

"One month." It wouldn't be easy to recover from such a period of non-earning, but it could be done.

"Two months."

"Six weeks."

Richard tilted her chin up, and she met those unfathomable eyes of his. "Two. Months."

She hesitated, knowing he would negotiate no further, and he knew he had her. "All right, two months," she agreed with genuine reluctance, wondering how she was going to do what she needed to

do once she was free. "But no spanking, and we're on completely equal terms."

His palm connected suddenly with her round behind and Lexi let out a startled and insulted yelp as a result. "You're in no position to dictate terms any further, young lady," he scolded, making her shiver once, hard. "Two months, and I don't expect to see you on the floor, even if you're not plying your trade."

When she wasn't trying to get away from him, she'd very carefully kept her hands at her sides, not touching him—or even herself—anywhere, but, as she bit her lip, wishing she didn't have to ask him this, her hand came up to rest on his chest. "Honestly, Richard, you make me sound like a prostitute!"

"Never that, Lexi," he returned gravely, having not intended to insult her.

"And you won't—rat me out to everyone else?"

"I won't—as long as you behave." He tapped the tip of his finger against the end of her nose in warning. "I mean it, Lexi. I don't want to hear about you tucking yourself away in the poker room or at some obscure blackjack table at three in the morning."

"Not even the slots? I can't count cards there, you know!" she dared to pout.

He was adamant. "Not even the slots."

Lexi sighed in defeat. Ironically, it was he who held all the cards.

"Oh, all right."

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, he lifted her off him, depositing her just slightly to his side, then he rose himself, going around behind the desk clear it off—cleaning and putting away his glass, grabbing his suit coat and heading for the door to open it.

He stopped and stood in the doorway, holding his hand out to her, palm up, neither saying nor doing anything more than that.

She knew he wouldn't to try to cajole or force her in any way. Her submission to him—and she had no illusions that he would

accept anything other than that from her—would have to be completely voluntary.

Her eyes found her feet for some reason—she didn't know why, and for several long beats, she stared down at them, unseeing, wondering baldly if she could really do this and survive it, but she didn't have much choice.

With a deep sigh, she forced her head up and moved to place her hand in his.

Strong, warm fingers wrapped firmly around hers, and she knew she was well and truly lost.

Again.