

CHAPTER ONE

Saturday morning

I woke up smiling for the first time ever in my memory. I was lying on my left side in the immense king-size bed, duvet up to my chin, my head nestled into the feather pillow, facing the panoramic floor-to-ceiling windows.

The heavy drapes were open to their fullest, and I looked out at the striking skyline of Vegas and the faint mauve outline of the Spring Mountain range in the distance. The sky had taken on that unearthly early morning glow that only seems to happen here in the desert just before the sun rises. I inspected my surroundings. The just-short-of-tasteful art on the wall. The bedroom furniture. Simple. A bit on the modern trendy side perhaps, but it worked in this space. Nothing was too terribly gaudy. I had to admit, this hotel suite was more than suitable.

The clock radio, that I had set last night, had switched on and was playing in the background. Dvorak's Bagatelles. It was rare to hear that piece played on the radio. So serene and soothing. And most certainly unexpected in a barren uncultured place like Las Vegas.

I played the scene from last night over and over again in my mind like a cherished old classic film. I had been a bit concerned that something might go wrong. That it might be more difficult than I had imagined. How silly of me. I felt slightly foolish for entertaining any doubts about my abilities to see this through. It was clear now that this was the beginning of something extraordinary.

There had been no mess. No struggle. No scream. Totally seamless. What an achievement. He was dead. And I had never felt more alive in my life.

The previous night

He heard the knock on the door as he was rummaging through the bar fridge for something to calm his nerves. *Who the hell could it be?* He vividly remembered putting the Do Not Disturb sign on the door handle outside. *If that's the maid I'll be giving the hotel management a fucking earful later. No, that's*

impossible. It's nearly eleven at night. He figured maybe it could be a hotel guest in a nearby room, or security, reacting to his earlier noisy outburst. He contemplated not answering at all. No one could know for sure if he was there. He'd been quiet for the last few minutes after his initial eruption upon arrival back in his hotel room. He tiptoed to the door and looked through the peephole but only saw the door across the hall. He pressed his ear against the door. Silence. He backed away and sat on the edge of the bed.

Fuck. If it was some poker player I'd made "friends" with in the casino, coming to give me sympathy about my big loss, I'd show them where they could put their damn patronising pity. Christ, more bloody knocking. To hell with it, may as well answer the damn door. I'm in the mood for a battle.

He stood up and stalked over to the door, opening it quickly with his left hand and reaching around with his right hand to grab hold of the privacy sign, ready to wave it in the face of the intruder.

"Ryan, I'm so very sorry."

What the fuck? She was gorgeous, standing in the hallway outside his room. She was wearing black satin capris that looked painted on her body, a red halter top barely covering her breasts, big Jackie Onassis sunglasses, and a flying saucer of a yellow sun hat. A black straw beach bag was slung over her shoulder. The outfit was topped off with silky white gloves, like his Gramma used to wear to go to church. His brain raced for a suitable greeting but he just stood fidgeting with the Do Not Disturb sign in his hand.

"Ryan, don't talk. Let me explain." She leaned against the door jamb and removed her sunglasses. Her eyes were a muddle of grey and blue. The colour of a winter sky. "I saw what you went through downstairs in the poker game. Who could blame you for losing your cool? I decided to follow you up here to help you unwind." She bent down and set the straw bag on the floor, giving him a clear view of her breasts. "Let you blow off steam. I even brought up a few cold beers from the bar. Trust me. I'm here to be your friend. One night only." She let out a giggle like a teenager at the mall. "I only ask one thing in return. Call me Lady MacBet. That's my on-line poker name. She's my wild impulsive side. She's who I want you to meet. Humour me and you won't live to regret it."

Never taking her eyes off him, she confidently slid the cardboard sign from his hand, and replaced it on the door handle. He backed slowly into the room as the heavy door swung closed, with this pin-up of a woman following step by step. Ryan's mind transitioned from rage to horniness. He wasn't convinced that he was reading her signals right. This was unknown territory. But he also realized there was only one way to find out.

"Sweet Ryan. I have some naughty plans. Are you up for it?"

His heart was pounding and his blood was rushing, and it sure wasn't travelling to his head. He barely managed to say yes, his voice cracking like a twelve year old boy hitting puberty.

She walked past him into the bathroom, and came back out with the hotel's fluffy white bathrobe draped over her arm.

"Get out of your clothes and into this," she said, handing him the robe. She turned and went back into the bathroom. While he was undressing he heard the clink of the metal tub stopper being lowered followed by the gushing noise of the water flowing into the tub. He sat down on the edge of the bed drying his clammy hands on the bathrobe.

What he couldn't hear was the unscrewing of a small vial. And he couldn't see the blissful smile on her face as she poured the liquid into a can of beer, swirling and mixing the two together.

"Are you decent?" she called from the bathroom.

"Yes Ma'am," he replied, embarrassed that he was still using his puberty voice, and silently prayed that he wouldn't be decent for very much longer.

She walked into the room and offered him the beer. "Sit down on the loveseat, and drink that down. The tub is filling up quickly." She stroked his cheek with her gloved fingers, sending a shiver of pleasure from his head to his groin. His mouth felt as dry as the Vegas desert, and the welcome beer glided down his throat.

She winked before spinning back around and returning to the bathroom, explaining as she left, "I've got some preparations to make in here so that this will be an evening neither of us will ever forget. You drink up, and then we'll begin."

After a few minutes, the water stopped running into the tub, and she called out to him. He was light-headed and desperate to feel her touch again.

"Have you finished your beer?"

He guzzled the last few drops. She walked out of the bathroom, still dressed, much to his disappointment. She stood in front of him silently, taking the empty can from his hand and placing it on the nightstand. She still had those cute little gloves on but they were slightly moist now. She pulled him up from the loveseat and led him silently into the bathroom, which had been transformed. The light had been dimmed, and there were two lit candles, one on the vanity and the other on the inside rim of the tub.

"Take that robe off now and get into the tub. I can hardly wait to show you what we're going to do."

He felt a bit wobbly but lowered himself into the water, anticipating more orders to come. He lay back as she reached over and took the large bath towel from the door hook, folding it into a pillow

shape and positioning it under his head. He watched her from the tub as she stood up and stared down at him. She turned to look in the mirror and tuck some stray wisps of hair behind her ears.

Every movement she made was excruciatingly languid and sensual. She lowered the lid of the toilet seat, and sat down beside the tub, never taking her eyes off him.

“Are you alright, Ryan?”

He gave a little nod, expecting her to strip for him. Instead she leaned over, put her hands on his two cheeks, and straightened his head so that he was staring at the ceiling.

“Be patient, Ryan. Relax.” She left the room. He worried that if he got any more relaxed than this he would fall asleep. He could hear her moving about the hotel room, softly humming to herself. She called and asked if he wanted her to come back. He tried to answer but couldn’t speak. He heard the click of her heels on the bathroom tiles. He tried to turn to see her but his head had become as heavy as a bowling ball.

She knelt down on the floor and lowered her face to his so that he could stare into those beautiful bottomless eyes of hers. She was so close to him that he could smell her lemony hair. She placed her fingers on his forehead and asked him again if he was feeling okay. He couldn’t feel her touch. He thought his lips parted slightly, but he couldn’t talk. He realised at that moment that he could barely even breathe.

“Ryan? Can you talk? Nod if you understand me.”

He attempted to move his head but was uncertain if he had. He was getting so confused. He tried to swallow. He needed to tell her that he had to get out of the tub. The heat must be getting to him. But he wasn’t even sure how to speak anymore.

“Trust me, sweet boy. I’m here to help you.”

He heard her rustling in the straw bag. She lifted one of his arms out of the water. *Why can’t I feel anything?* She held his left arm up where he could see it, placed a straight edged razor in his right hand, and wrapping her fingers around his hand, she lowered both of his arms and the knife into the water. *Why the fuck can’t I pull my arm away?* He felt a faint stinging when the razor broke the skin just above his wrist, and slid down a few inches in a straight line. He felt nothing by the time she repeated the slice on his other arm.

She was searching again in the infinite pit of her beach bag.

“You understand now, don’t you? Thrilling, isn’t it?” She put one of her Sunday school hands on his left cheek and the other under his chin, leaning in close. She was wrong. He didn’t understand at all. She whispered goodnight and slowly pushed down on the top of his head until he was looking up at her through an inch of water. She took her hands away, but he couldn’t raise his head out of the water.

Water was flooding into his nostrils and gushing down his throat. His throat constricted and his lungs were on the brink of exploding. She blew him a kiss, and continued staring at him, adjusting her sun hat. Her eyes twinkled with happiness but he'd never seen a creepier smile. He realized that smile was the last fucking thing he was ever going to see. He stared up at her until she disappeared through the reddening haze of the water.