



the
EDENS

JASPER VALE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DEVNEY PERRY

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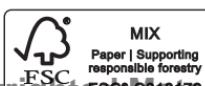
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CHAPTER ONE

ELOISE

The Bellagio fountain sprayed water high into the air as lights lit up the streams. The white hotel stood proudly in the backdrop as the water twirled and danced in time with the music, a dramatic violin concerto.

“It looks like moonbeams.” I sighed, leaning my head against Lyla’s shoulder. “This is magical. We should put a water fountain in The Eloise.”

My sister giggled. “Good luck convincing Dad.”

“Can you imagine?” I snorted. “First, he’d tell me no. Then, he’d give me that scowly face where his eyebrows come together and he tilts his head to the side.”

“Whenever he gives me the scowly face, he adds the blinky eyes,” she said.

“Oh, yeah. The blinky eyes. I forgot about those.” Dad would blink ten or eleven or twenty times in a row, like he was trying to figure out if I was joking or serious. “You know what I think is crap? I’ve never seen Dad give the scowly-blinky combo to Griffin, Knox or Mateo.”

“Right? He saves it for us girls.”

“Unfair.”

According to Dad, our brothers didn’t typically cause him the same kind of stress he claimed came with daughters. Whatever that meant.

“Are you drunk?” Lyla asked.

“Yep.” I nodded. “You?”

Lyla hiccupped. “That meant yes.”

I looped my arms with hers, snuggling closer as a dreamy smile settled on my face.

My limbs were a little loose. My head was a little fuzzy. My heart was a little light, floating through the air like mist. Drunk and happy, like the water fountain show.

“Tonight was fun,” I murmured.

“Super fun. I’m glad we came. And I’m glad Foster won his fight.”

“Me too.” I let go of her arm, standing tall, then I cupped my hands to my mouth. “Go Foster Madden!”

“Eloise.” Lyla swatted my arm as the people clustered around us shot me glares. “Would you shut up?”

I laughed. “Oh, who cares if I’m loud? We’ll never see these fun haters again.”

Tomorrow, we’d fly home to Montana. We’d say goodbye to the moonbeams and hello to reality.

Lyla and I had come to Las Vegas to watch a UFC event. Foster Madden, our sister Talia’s boyfriend and the reigning middleweight champion of the world, had defended his title and defeated his opponent in tonight’s fight.

He’d surprised Talia by flying us down—he hadn’t wanted her to sit in the arena alone. But this was just a quick trip. Lyla and I each had to get back to Quincy for work on Monday, and tomorrow’s early alarm clock would be brutal.

We’d decided to party tonight anyway. To have a few

drinks. To dance. To make the most of our cute outfits. Lyla had on a navy, one-shoulder jumpsuit that brought out the blue of her eyes. I'd opted for a simple black tube top with my tightest jeans and tallest heels. It was rare that either of us dressed up these days—demanding jobs were hell on a social life.

Tonight had been a much-needed break. I only wished it weren't coming to an end.

The fountain show finale finished too soon, and the crowd beside the Bellagio's lake dispersed.

Chase, the kid assigned to hang with us tonight, was standing a few feet away, dutifully waiting for Lyla and me with his hands clasped in front of him like he was our own personal security guard. Technically, he was.

Before Foster had swept Talia away to celebrate his victory in their hotel suite, he'd insisted Chase accompany us tonight. He worked for Foster's manager as an assistant and didn't look a day older than eighteen. I suspected that the ID he'd used to get into the club tonight wasn't exactly legal.

Considering he'd been relegated to babysitting duty, he was probably at the bottom of the UFC food chain. Poor guy. He'd followed us around all night without complaint but he looked dead on his feet.

"Ready to go to the hotel?" he asked.

I leaned in close to whisper in Lyla's ear. "Think he'll cry if we say no?"

She covered her laugh with a hand. "Yep."

Chase yawned. That damn yawn was the reason we'd left the club before midnight.

"Do you think Jasper is still at the club?" Lyla asked.

I shrugged. "I dunno."

Jasper Vale was Foster's trainer and best friend. He'd

told us about the after-party at the club and invited us along. It had mostly been guys from the UFC world, acquaintances of Jasper's and Foster's from when they'd lived in Vegas. But it had been nice to know at least one face in the crowd besides Lyla's.

"Do you want to go back and find out?" *Say yes.* More dancing. More drinks. *Say yes say yes say yes.*

Chase's face fell. He gave me this pitiful, helpless plea.

Oh, damn you, Chase.

At the club, after his twentieth yawn, I'd told him he could leave, but he'd refused. And so even though we'd been having a blast, I'd told Lyla it was time to make our way back to the hotel. I hated it when other people weren't having a good time.

Chase might be young but he was clearly smart. In just hours, he'd figured out I was the bleeding heart of the Eden family. He was wielding that yawn to shoo us along for bedtime.

Boo. "Oh, never mind," I muttered. "We should go."

"Yeah, my feet are killing me in these shoes," Lyla said.

"March on, Chase." As we started for our hotel, the chill in the night air raised goose bumps on my forearms. It was cold tonight, even for the desert. In early March, after the sun set, the temperatures dropped.

"Brr. It's co—" I gasped, patting my arms. "Oh, shit. Where's my jacket?"

We'd been on our way back to the hotel from the club when we'd passed the fountain, and I'd made our group detour so we could watch the show. I spun around, scanning the spot where we'd been standing, but my jacket wasn't anywhere in sight.

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“I must have forgotten it at the club.” I groaned. *Stupid Eloise.* “I love that jacket.”

It was my favorite black leather coat. Not too thick. Not too thin. The sleeves were even long enough for my arms, which wasn’t easy for me to find.

“We can go back and get it.” It was Lyla who yawned this time.

She owned a coffee shop at home in Quincy, and considering that her normal wake-up time was well before dawn, I was proud of her for staying up so late. Normally she was in bed by nine. Lyla probably wouldn’t even need an alarm in the morning. Meanwhile, there was a very real chance she’d have to drag me out of bed.

“We’ll go to the suite so you can go to bed,” I said. “Then me and Chase will hike back to the club for my jacket.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded, linked my arm with hers and signaled to Chase. “Lead on, Crouton.”

Chase’s lips pursed.

“I don’t think he likes my nickname,” I told Lyla.

She giggled as we fell in step, our heels clicking on the sidewalk as we trudged to our hotel, stopping outside the bank of elevators. Foster had gotten us our own suite for tonight with two separate bedrooms. Thank God. Lyla was a bed hog.

“Don’t go anywhere without Chase.” Lyla pointed a finger at my nose.

I raised a hand in salute. “Ma’am, yes, ma’am.”

“Eww.” She scrunched up her nose. “Don’t ma’am me.”

“Madam?”

“Queen Lyla will suffice.” She tried a curtsy but stumbled, too tipsy to keep her balance.

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“Oh my God.” I jumped to snag her hand, helping her stand upright.

“Heels are the enemy.” She shot a frown at her feet, then stepped into the open elevator. “See you in a bit?”

“Be back in a flash.” I waved as the doors slid closed, then gave Chase my evilest smile. “Let’s do shots.”

His jaw dropped.

“Kidding,” I singsonged, retracing our steps through the lobby and outside.

We’d just passed the fountain again, the water dark and calm, when a familiar face appeared on the sidewalk ahead.

“Oh, hey. There’s Jasper.” I pointed.

Chase raised a hand.

Jasper did the same. And in his hand was my jacket.

“Yay.” I clapped my hands together, stopping as Jasper joined us on the sidewalk. “You’re my hero. Thank you.”

“Welcome.” He held out the black leather, helping me slide it onto my arms.

I smiled up at him, having to crane my neck to keep his gaze. Wow, he was tall. Why hadn’t I realized how tall he was before? He was about the same height as my brothers. “You’re tall. How tall?”

“Six two.” His deep voice had a rasp, like he didn’t use it enough so it wasn’t smooth.

“You have a nice voice.”

The corner of his mouth quirked. “Are you drunk?”

“Oh, yeah.” Even after all the walking, my buzz was solid. Would I feel great in six hours when I had to be at the airport? Nope.

Jasper’s eyes crinkled at the sides, like he thought I was funny. Not laugh-out-loud funny, obviously, but amusing funny.

Was I funny? I thought I was funny. “Chase, do you think I’m funny?”

He looked at me and blinked too many times.

I frowned. “My dad does that. The scowl-blink combo. I hate it. Maybe it’s a guy thing. I talk a lot when I’m drunk.”

“Huh?” Chase turned to Jasper. “I didn’t understand any of that.”

“You can take off,” Jasper said, coming to Chase’s rescue.

“But Mr. Madden said I had to stay with them until they were back in their suite.”

“I’ll make sure she gets back.” Jasper jerked his chin. “Go. Have fun.”

“I’m going to sleep.” Chase took a step backward. Then another. Then he turned, walking so fast it was nearly a jog.

“Bye!” I called. “Thank you for babysitting us!”

That’s when Chase actually started running.

“I don’t think he liked babysitting,” I told Jasper. “Can we watch the fountain show again?”

“Sure.” Jasper walked toward the concrete half wall that bordered the lake, finding an open space.

I squeezed in beside him, resting my forearms on the flat surface. Then I propped a foot up between the rounded columns beneath. “I like water fountains.”

“Then you’re in the right place.” Jasper kept his eyes aimed forward, overlooking the quiet water as I stared up at his profile.

It was the nicest profile I’d ever seen. He had a perfect forehead. Not too round. Not too flat. His dark brown hair was longer on top and shorter at the sides, a few strands sticking up out of place. He had a strong chin, square at the bottom. Soft lips with a full pout. A classic nose except there was a bump on the bridge, like it had been broken before.

“Does it hurt when you break your nose?”

“Yes.” He glanced down at me, his brown eyes catching the Vegas lights and giving them a sparkle.

Jasper had lived in Montana for months. There weren’t a lot of single, handsome men in my small hometown, so when Jasper had arrived in Quincy, he hadn’t gone unnoticed.

Or maybe he had.

Seriously, he was hot. Smoking hot. I should have been crushing on him for months.

Was this beer goggles? I’d never had them before. Except I hadn’t had any beer tonight. Just those vodka tonics and the shots Lyla and I had taken before we’d left the club, but they hadn’t hit me yet.

“You’re extremely hot.”

Okay, maybe the shots were kicking in after all.

Jasper arched an eyebrow the same dark shade as his hair.

“You’re kinda grumpy and brooding too. Also hot.”

“Do you always say what’s on your mind?”

“Only when I’m drunk, remember? I talk a lot.”

Jasper stared down at me, something flashing in his gaze, but I couldn’t make it out. The fuzzy edges of my mind were beginning to get fuzzier.

“What else?” Jasper asked.

I studied his mouth as he spoke, the way he formed the words. The flex in that sharp, chiseled jaw. “What else what?”

“What else is on your mind?”

“Oh.” I let my gaze trail down his chest, taking in his broad frame stretching the black T-shirt he wore with faded jeans. The shirt’s cotton molded like a second skin to his biceps and shoulders but was looser against his stomach. Did

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he have a six-pack? I bet he had a six-pack. “I’d kill to see you without your shirt on.”

Jasper barked a laugh. It was hoarse too, like he didn’t laugh enough.

Sad. Should I give him a hug?

Too busy contemplating that question, I didn’t realize what he was doing until it was too late.

Jasper reached a hand behind his head, fisting his shirt. *Whoosh.*

Shirt gone.

“Holy. Freaking. Abs.” My jaw dropped. “Six. Definitely six.”

“Eight,” he corrected. “Count again.”

“Whoa.” I reached out to pet a muscle, just to make sure it was real. The muscles bunched beneath my fingertips.

“That tickles.”

“You’re ticklish? Aww. That’s adorable.”

He frowned. “I think I liked it better when you called me grumpy and brooding.”

“Ow, ow!” A woman walking behind us did a catcall. “Sweetie, if you’re not gonna drag that man to your hotel room, please send him to mine. Planet Hollywood. Room 1132.”

My cheeks flamed.

Jasper was Foster’s best friend. I couldn’t drag him to my hotel room, right? *Right.* That could get awkward. But I really wanted him to lose those jeans too. What did his legs look like? Were his thighs as bulky as they looked? Were they dusted with the same dark hair that trailed from his navel to the waistband of his jeans? How far did that trail go, anyway?

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“Eloise.”

My gaze whipped up to his face. “I like how you say my name.”

“You’re blushing.” Jasper’s voice dropped to barely a whisper. Something else crossed his gaze, maybe teasing, maybe flirting, but it happened too fast for my sluggish brain to catch.

“I’m drunk,” I blurted.

“So am I.”

“No way.” My mouth parted. “You are?”

“Yep.” He leaned in closer, his eyes, slightly unfocused, drifting to my lips.

“Um, are you going to kiss me?”

Jasper hummed. “Thinking about it.”

For the first time tonight, I was speechless.

He leaned in.

I lifted my chin.

But then a gurgle filled the air and beside us, the quiet pool of water erupted into those moonbeam streams.

The people around us surged forward, forcing us against the concrete barrier and breaking the moment.

Bummer. I sighed, shifting to watch the show.

Jasper tugged on his shirt, then leaned forward too, our shoulders brushing as music filled the air.

The song was different this time, an intense symphony with a fast tempo and a heavy drum beat. The timing of the music and lights and movement was synchronized flawlessly.

“It’s perfect,” I murmured. “How many tries do you think it took for them to get this perfect?”

“I don’t know.”

I leaned into his arm, my head hitting his shoulder. He didn’t shift or nudge me away, so I didn’t move. “I think perfect is overrated.”

“Agreed.”

“When I was a kid, I used to get so mad when stuff wasn’t perfect. Like if I was drawing a picture and messed up, I couldn’t just erase the mistake or live with it. I’d have to get a new piece of paper and start all over again.”

There’d be piles of crumpled paper around me and tears dripping down my face because I couldn’t get the picture just right.

“I don’t know what happened or why I did it,” I said. “One day I was trying to color my dad a birthday card. He loves horses, and when I asked him what he wanted for a birthday present, he told me to draw him a horse. Have you ever tried to draw a horse?”

“No.”

“Well, trust me. They’re hard. I couldn’t do it. I kept trying and trying. I just wanted to give him that horse and make him happy. And I had this special paper that was really thick. What do they call that paper?”

“Cardstock.”

“Yeah, cardstock. It’s hard to crumple so I ripped my mess-ups in half instead. Anyway, I was on my last sheet and screwed up the horse. But I didn’t have any more paper. So I stole Talia’s box of paints from her bedroom and covered up my ugly horse. It was just random swirls of color but I covered the whole page, all the way to the edges. There was paint everywhere by the time I was done. Talia got mad because I used her brand-new paints. Mom got mad because I made a mess and splattered some on the floor. But I loved that card. Dad hung it in his office, even though it wasn’t the horse he wanted. It’s still there too. And he doesn’t know that underneath all the pretty colors is a really ugly horse.”

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The fountain show began the finale, the water jets spraying shoots as high into the air as they'd go.

"I like perfect," I murmured. "I like imperfect too. I like wild and reckless moments that you never forget."

Like tonight.

Once more, the show ended too soon, the water dark and slowly calming. But I wasn't ready for calm. There was energy bubbling in my fingertips. Humming beneath my skin. So I moved away from the barrier, spinning in a circle with my arms out at my sides. My footing faltered, but before I could trip, a strong hand clamped over my elbow, helping me keep my balance.

"Whoa." I giggled. "No more spinning for me. Drunk and heels don't mix."

"Want to head back to your hotel?"

I pouted. "Not really."

This was fun. This was the best night I'd had in years. Something about Vegas, the crowds, the energy, was freeing.

There were no responsibilities tonight. No expectations.

"Are you really drunk?" I planted my hands on my hips, studying Jasper's face. "You don't seem drunk."

He chuckled. "How should I seem if I'm drunk?"

"I don't know." I tossed out a hand. "I've never seen you drunk before. But most people . . . loosen up."

"I'm loose."

I rolled my eyes. "You're all stiff. We're supposed to be having fun."

"I took my shirt off for you."

"This is true. And that was fun for me." I tapped my chin. "Do something. Right now. Prove you're drunk."

Jasper's eyes crinkled again. "Like what?"

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“I don’t know. You’re the one who used to live here. What’s something spontaneous to do in Vegas?”

A man walking by answered for Jasper. “Get married.” I scoffed. “We can’t get married.”

“Why not?” the guy asked, still walking, his arms raised. “Yeah,” Jasper said. “Why not?”

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CHAPTER TWO

JASPER

The rustle of clothes being shoved into a suitcase filled the hotel bedroom. Then came the pad of bare feet as Eloise tiptoed to the bathroom. Seconds later, she tiptoed back. Then came a muffled plop, probably her toiletry case joining her clothes. That was followed by the click of a zipper, every notch joined so slowly it was painful to hear.

My wife was sneaking out.

My wife.

I fought the urge to curse into my pillow. My head was spinning. The headache throbbing behind my temples was less from last night's alcohol and more from this morning's situation.

But I didn't dare move. I lay completely still, my breaths shallow and nearly silent.

Eloise thought I was still asleep. We'd keep it that way. For now. Until I knew how to fix this.

What the hell had I been thinking?
I'd married Eloise. *Married.*

That word had been bouncing through my brain for hours. Hours I should have spent sleeping.

Except I hadn't slept for more than a few minutes at a time last night. Every time I'd drift off, Eloise would curl into my side or snuggle against my back. I'd spent most of last night pushing her back to the opposite side of the bed. But each time I'd shifted away, she'd followed.

A cuddler. Of course I'd marry a woman who cuddled.

I loathed cuddling.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

My head pounded with each silent curse. Of all the stupid decisions I'd made in life, last night's was by far the dumbest.

Eloise padded to the bathroom again, closing herself inside before she flipped on the light.

As I cracked my eyes open, a glow escaped from beneath the door. The faucet turned on so I shifted, burying my face in the pillow, and let out a groan.

Could this be more of a disaster?

For about an hour last night, I'd contemplated sneaking out while she'd been asleep to delay the inevitable, awkward conversation about unraveling this mess. Except the damage was done. This wasn't some random woman I'd fucked last night.

This was Eloise.

So I'd stayed. I'd cuddled.

Hell. Foster was going to skin me alive. I was a dead man for marrying Talia's sister. What if I just didn't go back to Montana? If I hid out in Vegas for the next decade, would he forgive me?

Tempting. So goddamn tempting.

Just like Eloise.

The light clicked off in the bathroom. I closed my eyes, once more feigning sleep like a goddamn coward. The door swept open almost silently except for a slight creak in the hinge. Then her bare feet crossed the room once more.

Another zipper. Another rustle.

An annulment. That was the answer.

Maybe I'd get lucky and Eloise would agree to keeping this shit show between us. No one really needed to know we'd gotten married, right? We could just deal with it on the sly.

Sort of like how she was trying to sneak out.

If she wanted to disappear this morning, I was going to let her. The annulment conversation could wait until I got back to Montana.

The sound of traffic, of the city stirring, hummed in the background. Muted light crept through the windows. Too busy stripping each other naked, we'd forgotten to close the blinds when we'd stumbled into the room last night.

We'd fucked. Hard. Bare. My cock stirred to life beneath the sheets. It had been a long, long time since I'd gone without a condom, but when Eloise had told me she was on birth control and it had been a while, well . . . I'd broken my own rule about protection. It had been a while for me too.

Eloise had met my passion with her own. There'd been nothing soft or gentle. We'd clawed at each other, rough and wild. It was the best sex I'd had in, well . . . a long damn time.

Why couldn't I have just screwed her? Why had I taken her to that fucking chapel?

Too far. I'd pushed much too far.

She wouldn't want to stay married, would she? Eloise had to know that this wasn't serious. That this was a drunken mistake.

She moved again, and even with my eyes closed, I felt her come close. Her feet, barely a whisper on the hotel room carpet, stopped beside the bed. The air shifted as Eloise crouched down.

I opened my eyes.

And saw blue.

Heart-stopping blue. Exquisite blue.

Her gaze was the color of sapphires. The cobalt of dawn. The azure of the hottest flame.

I'd gotten lost in that blue last night. First beside the Bellagio fountain. Then in this very bed.

We stared at each other, the weight of what we'd done settling between us like a ton of bricks.

Eloise's beautiful face was etched with regret. She opened her mouth, about to say something, but a knock came at the door. She jerked, nearly falling to her ass.

I shot out a hand, grabbing hers to keep her upright.

Eloise's gaze locked on my grip. Her fingers tightened, for just a moment, then she shook me loose. She held up a finger and pressed it to her lips.

Shh.

So she did want to keep me a secret.

Why did that burn? Wasn't that what I wanted too —*needed* too?

“Are you about ready to go?” Lyla called from beyond the closed door.

“Be right there,” Eloise answered, but she didn’t make a move for the door. She stayed crouched beside me for a long heartbeat, like she was trying to figure out what to say.

That made two of us.

“We’re going to be late,” Lyla said. Eloise’s shoulders fell. “One sec.”

Then she gave me a sad smile before she mouthed, “I’m sorry.”

Like this was her fault.

Why should she be sorry? It had been my idea. I’d been the one to hail us a cab. I’d been the one to direct the driver to the chapel. I’d been the one to rush inside, just before the midnight cutoff, and ask for a marriage license.

Me.

This whole fucking catastrophe rested firmly on my shoulders.

All because Eloise had told me that story about her horse drawing.

Damn it to hell. She wasn’t the one who should be apologizing. But before I could say a word, she was gone, rushing to the corner.

She pulled on a pair of tennis shoes, then swept up the carry-on suitcase she’d packed, extending the handle. Its sharp click was like a jab to the rib cage.

I shifted, lying flat on my back, quickly tugging the covers to my chin, hoping to hide from Lyla. Then I stared at the ceiling, watching the shadows shift as Eloise eased the door open just enough to slip out.

“Ready.” Eloise’s attempt at chipper came out forced. Too bright and too loud.

“Why are you yelling?” Lyla grumbled. “I’m hungover. Are you?”

“Um, yeah. Let’s go.”

The wheels of their luggage faded as they were dragged through the suite’s common room. Then the exterior door slammed closed, leaving me alone.

Foster had gotten this suite for Eloise and Lyla. He’d made sure that Talia hadn’t had to sit alone during last

night's fight. He'd told me all about this surprise for Talia. Not once as he'd explained the logistics had I thought I'd be sleeping in the room he'd reserved for them.

"Son of a bitch." I rolled to my stomach, burying my nose in the sheets.

Eloise's perfume clung to the cotton. Vanilla with an earthy depth. Floral but spicy, almost like a man's cologne. Except it was entirely female. Entirely Eloise.

The only good thing about her sleeping so close had been that smell. That, and my bride's naked body pressed against my own.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I pushed up on my elbows, twisting to a seat. The sheet was tangled around my legs, covering me to the waist. I dragged both hands through my hair, rubbing my eyes and the ache in my skull. Then I looked to the window, to the dawn creeping over the desert.

How could I have let this happen? How could I have taken it so far? Of all the spontaneous things to do in Vegas, why marriage?

What now?

Eloise was on her way back to Montana.

I'd planned to stay in Vegas for a while. Now that Foster's fight was over, he'd take a break from training. He'd spend time with Talia and his daughter, Kadence. There was nothing waiting for me in Montana except a rented A-frame cabin and snow.

Since snow and I didn't exactly get along well, I'd thought a month in Nevada might be a welcome change. That it would give Foster some time to figure out his next move.

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He'd mentioned retirement, and as much as I'd hate to

lose my time with him, I wouldn't blame him for hanging it up. He'd had an incredible career with the UFC. I was honored to be a small part of that journey.

But if he did decide to stop fighting, then I had some decisions to make. Return to Vegas? Train another fighter? Try somewhere new? It was a lot easier to think when winter wasn't trying to freeze my balls off.

Except I couldn't exactly stay in Vegas for too long now, could I? Eloise and I had a problem to solve.

And I didn't even have her phone number.

"Shit." My fist hammered into the mattress at my side. How could I have been so stupid?

With a quick yank, the sheet ripped free from my legs. I stood from the bed, prowling to the bathroom. I eyed the shower, about to turn on the spray, but changed directions, returning to the bedroom to collect my clothes strewn across the floor.

Eloise's scent, still clinging to my skin, would be my punishment today. A reminder of the epic mistake I'd made last night.

I tugged on my boxers and jeans, then pulled on last night's T-shirt. The shirt I'd taken off beside the fountain all because Eloise had wanted to see me without it on.

Who took off their shirt in public? Hell, if she had asked me to strip out of my jeans, I would have done it.

There was a reason I didn't drink.

Drunk, I was a fucking idiot.

"Ugh." I rubbed my hands over my face, like that could turn back time. Erase this humiliation.

When was the last time I'd been embarrassed? *Years.* The last time I'd felt like this it had also been because of a woman.

But Eloise wasn't to blame for the icky feeling creeping beneath my skin. No, that was all on me.

I needed to get the fuck out of this hotel room.

I needed to get the hell off the strip.

I needed to never drink tequila again.

Eloise and I had both been drunk. Not blackout drunk. Not slurring, sloppy drunk. No, we'd been the dangerous kind of drunk, the kind when you thought you were still in control. When inhibitions were low and courage was high. When you were foolish enough to believe a wild, reckless idea was the challenge of a lifetime.

“Fucking tequila.”

With my shoes on, I left the room, digging my wallet from my jeans pocket. Then I took the elevator down two floors, rushing to my own hotel room. The bed was made, its white sheets crisp and undisturbed from yesterday's housekeeping.

I owned a house an hour from here, but Foster had wanted us all close to the strip for the fight, so he'd reserved me a room. Maybe I should have insisted on sleeping in my own damn bed. Then I wouldn't have gone to the club last night. I wouldn't have been anywhere near Eloise Eden.

My backpack was on a chair in the corner, so I hurried to pack it up, shoving my clothes and toiletries inside. Then I slung it over a shoulder and left the hotel, walking through the lobby to the main exit.

There were cabs waiting, but I passed them, needing to walk for a while before going home. To burn off some energy. To think.

The morning air was fresh. Crisp and cool. I drew in a long breath, smelling the water they'd used this morning to hose down the entrance. The concrete was still damp in a

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few places untouched by the sun. Clean, for now. Someone would probably puke on it later.

Nothing ever really stayed clean.

Especially in Vegas.

That had always been part of Vegas's appeal. No matter how many sparkling, neon bulbs they added to the strip, there was always some dirt. Grit, like the sand that waited beyond the city's borders.

People here flaunted their fake. There was freedom to be gaudy and loud. Judgment was loosened, usually by alcohol.

Last night was the ultimate example of Vegas's poison. Eloise, a pure, beautiful woman, had been corrupted by Sin City. Tainted by a man whose demons had come out to play.

With my chin down, I kept my gaze locked on the sidewalk as I headed toward Las Vegas Boulevard. Left would take me to the Bellagio fountain.

I turned right.

Not a chance I could face that fountain this morning. With no destination in mind other than *away*, I walked, my hands tucked in my pockets.

Block after block, I waited for the pressure in my chest to lighten. Exercise had always been my outlet. My refuge. Except the tension in my shoulders, the pit in my stomach, seemed to grow with every step.

That's when I looked up.

And realized this path I was walking was familiar.

"For fuck's sake, Vale."

I should have taken a left and faced that fountain. Apparently my feet had developed a mind of their own. And this morning, they wanted to return to the scene of last night's crime.

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The small, square building was out of place against the

backdrop of sprawling casinos and massive towers. It was too charming. Too real. It belonged anywhere else.

But that was another part of Vegas's appeal. This city welcomed all shapes and sizes. A couple could get married by Elvis beneath the glow of neon lights at a chapel that offered ninety-nine-dollar weekday specials. Or they could come here.

The Clover Chapel.

The white stucco walls were dotted with intricate, stained glass windows. Their blues and greens caught the morning light. A steeple with a brass bell sat atop the peaked roof. Vines with dainty flowers climbed the structure.

The pale wooden doors were marked with a small four-leaf clover tacked above the threshold. At my rental in Montana, there was a horseshoe in that spot instead.

Maybe if I believed in luck, maybe if I'd ever been lucky, I would have appreciated those symbols.

The chapel was closed now. Clover herself was probably at home, rolling in the cash I'd paid last night. The Clover Chapel didn't do ninety-nine-dollar specials, certainly not for last-minute walk-ins only minutes before closing.

But you paid for their ambience.

You paid for the wisteria blooms that filled the open ceiling. They charged a premium for guests wanting to get married beneath a pergola teeming with glittering twigs, fairy lights, greenery and magnolia flowers. For the aisle lined with short, wooden pews to make you feel like you weren't getting married in Las Vegas but in some quaint country church, surrounded by beloved guests.

Of all the places in the world, why would I come here again?

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The ugly horse.

I'd brought Eloise here because of the story she'd told me about that ugly horse drawing.

She'd created such a vivid picture with that tale. Of her as an angry child, painting over a sketch so she could give her dad the card he wanted. I could picture her as a kid, desperate to please her father and surrounded by her shredded attempts at a birthday card. Then her again, smiling and happy, her skin marred with every shade of paint as she flipped off the idea of perfection.

That was why I'd brought her here last night.

She wasn't the only one who wanted to take something ugly, something lacking, something painful, and cover it up with something beautiful.

"Pretty chapel, isn't it?" A woman walking a chihuahua on a sparkly pink leash passed by. Her rainbow iridescent visor matched the dog's collar.

I nodded, waiting for her to leave. Then I focused on the building again.

An ugly horse.

Covered in vibrant paint.

Yeah, this was a pretty chapel. I'd thought so the last time I'd been here.

The first time I'd gotten married in Las Vegas.

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CHAPTER THREE

ELOISE

“**M**iss?”

I jerked at the lady’s voice. Lost in my head, drawing invisible circles on the hotel’s mahogany reception counter, I hadn’t heard her approach.

Guests had been sneaking up on me for the last three days, ever since I’d come home from Vegas.

“Sorry.” I gave her a bright smile. “Welcome to The Eloise Inn. Checking in?”

“Yes.” She nodded, then gave me her name to pull up in our reservation system.

Five minutes later, I slid over two key cards tucked into a paper envelope with her room number written on its face.

“The elevator is there.” I pointed toward the foyer. “You’re in room 302. Take a right when you get off the elevator and your room is at the end of the hallway. Can I have anything sent up for you this afternoon?”

“No, thank you.” She smiled, glancing around the lobby. “This is my first visit to Quincy. Your hotel is delightful.”

“Thank you.” I beamed at the compliment. “I think it’s

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