

# CHAPTER 1

## *The Ranch Carson City, Nevada*

### PRESENT DAY

**W**ay too much velvet for three in the afternoon. Even for an oasis in the middle of the desert, a place that reeked of perfume and cigar smoke and Jack Daniel's, a place that I had been directed to by a cocktail napkin scarred by bright red lipstick. The velvet seemed to flow from everywhere at once; snaking down the wood-paneled walls, erupting from the low, tiled ceiling in voluptuous, pulsating waves, bursting from the shadowy corners, undulating beneath the plush daybeds and aging sofas that lined both sides of the ornate parlor. The stiff, blustery air-conditioning wasn't helping matters; the blasts of frigid air made the velvet dance and shimmer like living tissue. As a visual, it was more nauseating than enticing,

It had been a long taxi ride from the Strip, and I was dead tired from the heat outside. Arid, desert heat, not the kind that makes you sweat. Rather, the kind that cooks your brain. It was early September, and in this part of Nevada, that still counted as summer. You had to be crazy to come this far out into the desert in summer. Crazy still, to come to a place like this in the middle of a Friday afternoon.

I stepped deeper into the parlor, calming my nerves with deep breaths of frigid perfume, smoke, and whiskey. I wondered if the taxi was still waiting outside, as I had asked, or if the driver had simply pulled away as soon as I'd passed through the metal gate and made my way to the wire-screened front door. I certainly wouldn't have blamed him. Anyone deviant enough to pay three hundred bucks for the ride out to this ranch in the middle of nowhere deserved what was coming to him. I was no exception.

The truth was, this wasn't my first time in a place like this. For the past ten years, I'd traveled the world in search of stories, and sometimes those stories took me to places you really couldn't talk about at cocktail parties. Places like this ranch of paneled wood and velvet; a low, squat building that from the outside seemed to blend into the horizon—except for the neon sign on the roof and the decorative hitching posts in the driveway.

I took another step into the parlor, a circular space cluttered with anachronistic furniture, braced on one side by a long, mahogany bar. The bar stools were the same color as the velvet, a dusty crimson, and the sofas and daybeds had been upholstered to match. There were paintings on the walls, most of them of horses, a few of women and men in Wild West getups: hoop skirts, cowboy hats, boots with spurs. Kitschy, except I was pretty sure some of the paintings were authentic, since I knew that this place had existed, in some form or another, since the days of boots with spurs. An institution, of sorts, certainly more permanent than the neon behemoths of the Vegas Strip, built on something more primitive, seductive, and, indeed, human than the vice that had founded Sin City itself.

I'd almost made it to the middle of the room when I saw the woman sitting at the stool at the far

end of the bar. Midfifties, short, squat, wearing a pink summer dress and white, high-heeled shoes. Her hair was a mop of curls, and her lipstick was an unnerving shade of orange. There was a glass of brown liquid on the bar in front of her. It could have been Coke, but just as easily whiskey. She heard my progress through the parlor and turned, but there wasn't any surprise in her gaze. I guessed that despite the heat and the time of day, this place still had its fair share of visitors.

She slid off her stool and turned toward me, smiling an orange smile.

"Welcome, stranger." She didn't seem to really look at me, instead focusing on a point just left of my ear. Seemed like force of habit; maybe she didn't want to remember my face. "Have a seat on any of the couches, and I'll show you what we've got."

I lowered myself onto one of the daybeds, tucking my legs under the plush material. I was trembling beneath my white cotton button-down shirt, but the truth was, it was more anticipation than fear. Even though I was there for different reasons than the average client, the thrill was impossible to ignore.

The woman leaned back against the bar and clapped her hands. Then she cleared her throat.

"Ladies from the right!"

There was a shuffling sound, then a door opened along the right wall of the parlor. The first woman who came through the open doorway was ridiculously tall, maybe six feet, and her eight-inch stiletto heels made her seem almost gargantuan. She had flowing blond hair, glowing strands twisting down over her bare shoulders, gold rivulets dancing down the cavern of her surgically enhanced chest. Her bright red lingerie left little to the imagination. She was pretty, certainly, but more than a little terrifying as well. And she wasn't alone.

She was followed across the parlor by three more women, all in brightly colored lingerie and stripper heels. Two of them blond, one African-American. One of the blondes was short, a little more rounded, with a circular face and ovoid eyes. She could have been nineteen, if not for the spiderweb of lines at the edges of her overly pursed lips. The other blonde was much older, though she carried herself well. Surgery, again, and a lot of makeup, expertly applied in thick swatches across her cheeks, under her eyes, across her lips. The black girl was the only one of the four who was smiling, and it helped her stand out even more; she was by far the most beautiful of the girls, and she wouldn't have looked out of place on the pages of a magazine. Five nine, thin, smooth, brown legs, and a rounded, natural chest. Her outfit was lacy and white and fit perfectly over her curves.

It was a feat to pull my eyes back to the woman with the orange lips. She winked at me, then cleared her throat again.

"Ladies from the left!"

The door to my left had already swung inward before she'd finished her command. Four more girls entered the parlor. Two more blondes, a brunette, and an Asian. Again, lingerie, again high heels treading across the velvet sea. The blondes looked like sisters; matching green bras, panties, and garters, matching green eyes, matching, egg-shaped boob jobs. The brunette seemed to be Eastern European, with dark slashes for eyes, a sharp, upturned nose, and a jaw that could cut glass. The Asian girl had her hair back in a severe bun, and her outfit was all black leather and silver studs. She was playing the part, her lips curled down at the corners, her charcoal eyes smoldering with faux anger.

"Take your time," the lady of the house woodenly encouraged, obviously reciting by rote. "And take a good look. The finest ladies in the business. Money-back guarantee. Make your selection

whenever you're ready.”

She glanced at her watch, elbow on the bar, chin resting in the crook of her palm. I wondered how long the average customer sat in the parlor, ogling the girls lined up in front of him. Did most of the men who came here have something particular in mind, or was it a point-of-purchase kind of business? In Amsterdam, the girls wore gowns and stood on a raised stage behind the bar. In Tokyo, the clientele sat in small booths, and the girls paraded through, one at a time. In Vancouver, like Bangkok, you chose girls from behind one-way glass. In New York, it was all passwords, descriptions, and of course, the Internet.

Yes, I had been through this many times before in the course of my research, but it was never the same—every place had its own characteristics. Even a hundred miles out in the desert, this was still a Vegas thing. The lineup was a show of sorts, and these were show-girls. The understated cowboy theme, the routine of the “madam” and her girls, all of it choreographed in the way an amusement park choreographs its attractions. In effect, the Ranch was just another ride in the neon, adult Disney that was Las Vegas. And I was simply another paying customer.

I took a deep breath, thinking of the cocktail napkin in the pocket of my jeans. The name scrawled beneath the directions to the Ranch hadn't come with a description. I pretended to look over the girls, scanning the skin, silicone, and smiles.

“I'll take Gina,” I finally said, praying that the crack in my voice was resounding only in my own ears.

The madam raised her eyebrows. I hadn't identified myself as a frequent customer, and she certainly didn't recognize me. But it didn't really matter; I was a man with a wallet and I'd made my choice. She shrugged, snapping her manicured fingers. For the first time, I noticed that the nails matched her lips.

“Thank you, ladies. The rest of you are excused. Gina, take this fine gentleman upstairs, and show him the ropes.”

A few of the girls had disappointed looks in their eyes as they shuffled back through the opposite doors. I didn't pretend their disappointment had anything to do with my geek chic appearance; I knew they were thinking of a Friday-afternoon score, a good start to the weekend. As the doors closed simultaneously with a whiff of mingled perfumes, only one girl remained behind—the African-American woman in white lace with the pretty smile. She approached my daybed, holding out her hand, and I stumbled to my feet. Her fingers were warm against mine as she led me past the madam toward another door behind the bar.

“Glad that's over with,” she whispered as the woman with orange lipstick went back to her drink. Gina opened the door with her free hand, revealing a short stairway ascending to the Ranch's second floor. “We all hate the lineup. Boobs out there getting compared like melons in a supermarket. That sort of thing is the reason most of us left stripping. But I guess nobody's buying melons without checking out the competition, right?”

I laughed, letting her lead me up the steps two at a time, trying not to notice how long her legs were, or how tight and sheer the white material was that hugged her rounded curves. She seemed much younger up close, maybe twenty, twenty-one. Her perfume was delicate and flowery, and her skin was pretty much flawless, a caramel brown. I wondered—why her? Was she part of this story, or was she just of the moment, locational, a prop of the scene?

“Right about now,” she continued, taking me down a long hall-way lined with nondescript doors,

“I’d be giving you the menu. Then we’d be haggling about prices. By the time we made it to my room, we’d have everything locked down, and you’d be all ready for the inspection.”

I raised my eyebrows. My heart was beating fast as I kept pace with her. This girl could move. “The inspection?”

She winked back at me. “That’s where it gets fun. You take out your cock and I look it over. Then I rub it down with alcohol and Bactine. All free of charge, honey.”

Her bluntness seemed incongruous with her youthful appearance. What she was describing was equal parts titillating and clinical. And it was also fairly distinct. Though there were establishments like this all over the world, in the United States, the Ranch represented something totally unique. A legal brothel, regulated by the Nevada Health Department, servicing one of the few prostitution-legal counties in the country. Just over the line from Clark County, where Las Vegas was located, which was supposedly prostitution-free, the Ranch was the closest place where a Vegas-based tourist could buy sex, or whatever else he desired.

“But the Bactine rubdown’s about all that’s free here, honey,” Gina said as we neared the end of the long hallway. “Two fifty for oral. Five hundred for a half-and-half. Seven fifty for two cups. And a thousand if you want to go around the world. But everything is negotiable. I mean, even though I know you’re not here for me, maybe I can interest you in some fun?”

She pulled my hand to her chest, running the back of my fingers against her bare flesh. I felt a tinge of heat in my stomach. I reminded myself that I was here for a story, nothing more. I wasn’t sure what it meant to go around the world, but I was pretty sure it couldn’t be considered a travel write-off.

“I don’t think my publisher would consider it a necessary expense.”

She laughed as we reached a door at the end of the hall. There was a gold number in the center of the wood: 232. From the outside it looked like a motel room, but I knew from my research it was much more than that. Gina was a private contractor, and this was her office. She lived and worked in 232, for a tour of duty lasting a few months, maybe as many as six. In that time, she could make a hundred, maybe two hundred thousand dollars. Some of the higher-profile girls made even more. It was all highly regulated work; weekly visits from a doctor to test for STDs, monthly HIV screenings, consultations with stylists, makeup artists, even visits from therapists and tax experts. Ethics aside, in terms of professionalism and health standards, the Nevada brothels were a paradigm of the form.

Gina pushed the door to her room open and stood to one side.

“Well, if you change your mind, I’ll be back in ten minutes. Hell, for a few hundred extra, your friend can watch.”

Before I could respond, she waved me inside, shutting the door behind me.

Her room was much more sparsely decorated than I would have guessed. A bank of wooden dressers along one wall, white shag carpeting, mirrors on the ceiling, and a single, king-size bed in the center of it all. No pictures anywhere, no windows, no knickknacks. No real sign of her personality in the room, which made sense when I thought about it. This was a place of business.

“Gotta love a room with a view.”

I saw him on the ceiling first, because that’s where my gaze had settled, and he was smiling down at me, framed by a cloud of off-white pillows. I shifted my view to the bed, where he was lying, spread-eagled against her king-size sheets, arms crossed behind his head. He looked relaxed, completely unfazed by the strangeness of the location for our first meeting in nearly three months. But that’s how it always was with Semyon; as far as I could tell, he was comfortable in any setting, a true

chameleon. More than a character trait, it was a calling, one of the keys to who he had become.

He rolled off the bed as I crossed the room, and we shook hands. He was a few inches taller than me, but I probably outweighed him by a good ten pounds. Everything about him was angular and narrow, from his build to the shape of his face. He had high, Slavic cheekbones, a thin jaw, a narrow forehead. His smile—and he was nearly always smiling—had more than a hint of wolf to it, stretching a little too far back, showing a few too many sharp teeth. He was good-looking, not matinee-idol handsome, but a character actor, an Ed Norton type. When he spoke, the words came out fast, tinged with enough hint of a Russian accent to force you to listen carefully, to catch every word.

On first impression, he was very amiable. Even after much time spent together, I liked Semyon, but I wasn't sure I trusted him. There was something dangerous about him, and it wasn't just that smile. I had spent many hours with him in Boston, and I knew his background.

"Now we're in deep, aren't we?" he asked, sitting back down on the bed. With a flourish, he pulled a wrapped deck of playing cards out of his pocket and tossed it between his hands. "A hooker's bedroom in the middle of the desert. I guess it's as good a place as any to start. This is as real as Vegas gets, isn't it?"

I knew what he meant. At least this place was honest, as honest as the mirror on the ceiling. Unlike the Strip hotels, with their neon and buzzers and bells, all of it a disguise to hide the gambling at their core. Semyon was right, this was a good place to start.

"What did you tell the girl?" I asked. "Gina?"

"I didn't tell her anything. I just informed the madam what room I wanted, and how much I was willing to pay for an hour. For all they know, we're just another kinky duo out here looking for kicks."

He rolled the deck between his fingers, looking at me. "I'm surprised you've never been here before. I know you've spent a lot of time in Vegas."

"Vegas, yes. But never out here."

He grinned. He liked the idea that he was showing me something new. When he'd first approached me, six months before, I'd basically shrugged him off. Another MIT kid with a story about beating Vegas, another twist on a tale I'd already taken as far as I thought it could go. I'd assumed his story was one I'd heard before. But then, over the next few weeks, I'd begun to discover things about the Russian whiz kid, things that made me think twice about completely blowing him off. When I finally sat down with him to hear his story, well, it made me want to dig deeper. The more I uncovered, the deeper I dug.

Semyon Dukach had indeed gone to MIT. He was a mathematical genius. And it was true, he knew how to count cards. But Semyon was more than just another MIT cardplayer.

He tossed the deck of cards to me, laughing as I nearly fumbled them to the shag carpet.

"That's because you never came to Vegas with me before. You've barely scratched the fucking surface."

At one point in time, Semyon was the most notorious high roller in Sin City, perhaps even the world. He had been known by many names, but the one that had stuck was as flashy as many of the personas he had taken on: the Darling of Las Vegas. A living legend. He had beaten the game of blackjack more than anyone in history, in a way that had never been documented.

Although he knew how to count cards, his system was a different animal entirely. He and his team of MIT students had made millions, many millions, hitting the casinos harder than anyone else in the

world—and yet, to this day, nobody knew how he had done it.

“Beneath the surface,” he said, still smiling. “That’s where it gets interesting. The gray areas. See, card counting is black-and-white. A fucking monkey can count cards. What we did, well, you need to be a little smarter to pull that off. And the casinos, they didn’t like us very much. Because we were winning, we were a real threat. More of a threat than anyone else. We were hurting them, and they knew it. So things got...tricky.”

His smile dimmed as he moved to the far edge of the bed. There was a hint of fear in his narrow eyes as he thought backward. It was unnerving to see him scared. He wasn’t the type to scare easily. He had grown up dirt-poor in the slums of Newark and downtown Houston. He had clawed and kicked his way to a first-class education. He had been in more fights by the time he’d reached MIT than probably anyone in the school’s history. He had built one of the most legendary teams to ever hit Vegas, kept it a secret for nearly fifteen years. Now, nearing thirty-three, he was most likely a millionaire many times over. And yet there it was in his eyes, fear.

He ran a hand through his hair, then suddenly pointed to a spot on the floor, a slash of shag carpeting beneath where the bed met the wall. His voice turned dead serious.

“This is where I found his body. Right here, halfway under the bed. His arms were twisted behind his back, and his head, well—”

He stopped, looked at me, then shrugged.

No, this wasn’t a story anyone had ever heard before. And this place, this brothel in the middle of nowhere, it wasn’t just a good place to start. For Semyon Dukach and his team of MIT geniuses, this was the place where it had all come crashing down.