



Hitched to My Enemy (Viva Las... Oh, Sh!t)

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Category: Romance

Description: One explosive night, two sworn enemies, and a Vegas marriage that could change everything

HARLOW:

I came to the Jade Petal Hotel Casino with a razor-sharp plan—inspect the place, prove Easton Hardwick was cutting corners, and walk away victorious. He was the same arrogant magnate who tried to smooth-talk his way past my regulations once before. This time, I wouldn't let his magnetic charm or that sinful smile rattle my composure.

But a few top-shelf drinks, a dare that went too far, and we stumbled into a Vegas chapel with “I do” on our lips. My strict professionalism vanished the moment he pulled me closer, and I hated how badly I wanted him to do it again.

Now I'm trapped in a tangle of lust, sabotage, and high-stakes secrets—and I can't decide if I'm more terrified of losing my career or losing myself.

Will I risk everything to keep a husband I never meant to marry?

EASTON:

The Jade Petal was supposed to be my crowning achievement—a gleaming empire that put my name on every VIP list in Vegas. Then Harlow Clarke came storming in with her ink-dry regulations and that unshakeable sense of justice. She had every intention of shutting me down, and I had every intention of proving her wrong. One wild night later, we woke up with rings on our fingers and no easy way out.

Now the press is circling like sharks, my investors are growing nervous, and someone inside my operation is feeding the rumor mill with fresh scandals. Meanwhile, every time I catch her glare or feel her body pressed close, I'm tempted to gamble it all.

Will I double down on the marriage that was never meant to happen—or fold before I lose the only thing that's ever made me feel alive?

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Harlow

I sat in my black Audi for a full minute, staring up at the gleaming facade of the Jade Petal Hotel & Casino, gathering my nerve for what could either crown my career or destroy it completely.

The late afternoon sun caught the building's emerald glass panels, making them shimmer like captured starlight.

Impressive, I had to admit. But then again, Easton Hardwick had always excelled at creating beautiful illusions.

Taking a steadying breath, I stepped out and smoothed my charcoal blazer, checking my reflection in the tinted window.

My appearance was perfectly assembled—hair pulled back in a sleek chignon, minimal makeup that enhanced rather than transformed, sensible heels that wouldn't betray me if I needed to make a quick exit.

I looked exactly like what I was: a Nevada Gaming Commission investigator here to do a job. Nothing more, nothing less.

Three years, two months, and sixteen days.

That's how long it had been since I'd shut down Easton's smaller operation, resulting in millions in losses and earning what I could only assume was his eternal hatred.

The memory still burned with uncomfortable clarity—the way his eyes had flickered with something between fury and disbelief as I'd served the shutdown order.

Security had escorted me out while he stood frozen behind his mahogany desk, watching his empire crumble with each step I took toward the door.

The local media had called it "the most dramatic regulatory action of the decade." The gaming industry had dubbed it "Clarke's Crusade." Easton Hardwick had called it—well, I could only imagine what he'd called it in private.

Today marked the final licensing review—one last inspection before the Jade Petal's grand opening. One last chance for Easton to prove he'd learned to play by the rules. Or one last opportunity for me to prove he hadn't.

My phone buzzed. A text from my supervisor, Camilla Duarte: Remember to play nice with investors tonight. Politics matter more than perfection.

I grimaced, sliding the phone back into my purse.

Politics. As if ensuring public safety and fair gaming practices was somehow a chess move.

But I understood the subtext. There were forces within the commission who wanted the Jade Petal to succeed—powerful people with their own agendas.

Just as there were others who wanted to see it fail before it opened its doors.

My job was to navigate those competing interests while maintaining my objectivity.

Right. No pressure at all.

The brass-and-glass revolving door spun me into a world that stole my breath, and I hated myself for the reaction. This wasn't supposed to happen. I was supposed to be immune to Vegas spectacle by now.

The lobby of the Jade Petal defied every expectation I'd formed about Easton's aesthetic sensibilities.

Instead of the gaudy excess typical of Strip casinos, I found myself surrounded by understated elegance that whispered rather than shouted.

Soaring marble columns stretched toward a ceiling painted with an intricate mural of koi swimming through jade-colored waters.

Crystal chandeliers cast prismatic rainbows across every surface, and the gentle murmur of a fountain created an almost meditative atmosphere.

This wasn't the flashy monument to ego I'd anticipated. This was sophisticated, tasteful, breathtaking.

I pulled out my tablet, making careful notes as I walked. Lobby design promotes calm atmosphere rather than gambling excitement. No obvious violations of spacing requirements. Emergency exits clearly marked and accessible. Sight lines allow for adequate security surveillance.

Observations, nothing more. Certainly not admiration for whoever had the vision to create something this beautiful.

"Well, well. If it isn't the woman who loves to crash parties."

The voice made every nerve in my body snap to high alert.

I looked up to find Easton Hardwick at the top of the marble staircase, one hand resting casually on the bronze banister.

He wore a midnight blue suit that represented serious money, the color so dark it was almost black.

His hair, still that rich brown I remembered with annoying clarity, was styled with effortless perfection.

Those eyes—gray as storm clouds—were fixed on me with laser focus.

Our gazes locked across the expanse of the lobby, and the years seemed to collapse between us. The air practically hummed with tension—part antagonism, part something I absolutely refused to acknowledge.

He descended the stairs with deliberate slowness, like a predator who'd spotted his prey and had all the time in the world to close the distance. That familiar smile played at the corners of his mouth, equal parts charm, and menace.

Those eyes still had the power to make my heart race. Damn him.

"Mr. Hardwick." I kept my voice level, controlled. "I trust you received notice of my arrival."

"Indeed I did, Investigator Clarke." He stopped just close enough to invade my space without making it obvious to anyone watching. "Though I have to say, you're even more beautiful than I remembered."

Warmth crept up my neck, and I cursed my body's traitorous response. "I'm here on

official business. I'll need access to your financial records, security protocols, and employee files."

"Of course you will." His smile widened, revealing perfect white teeth. "I've learned quite a lot about playing by the rules since our last... encounter."

The way he said 'encounter' made it sound intimate, scandalous. My pulse hammered against my throat despite my brain's frantic warnings. This was exactly what I'd feared—that seeing him again would affect me in ways that had nothing to do with duty.

"I'm sure you have," I replied coolly. "Shall we begin with the gaming floor?"

"I have a better idea." He gestured toward a hallway lined with what looked like original artwork—actual paintings, not prints. "Let me give you the complete tour. You'll want to see everything before you pass judgment, won't you?"

There was a challenge in his tone, a dare wrapped in politeness. And curse my competitive nature, it worked. I'd never been able to resist a gauntlet thrown down, especially by him.

"Lead the way."

We walked through the casino in relative silence, my heels clicking against the polished marble floors as I took careful notes.

He was right—I needed to see everything.

But I was acutely aware of his presence beside me, the subtle scent of his cologne that reminded me of expensive whiskey and warm skin, the way he moved with fluid confidence through his domain like he owned not just the building but the very air

inside it.

"Impressive," I admitted grudgingly as we paused at the high-limit gaming area.

Tables upholstered in butter-soft leather, crystal tumblers that caught the light like captured stars, dealers who looked like they belonged on magazine covers.

"You've clearly invested significant resources in security measures. "

"I told you I'd learned from my mistakes." His voice dropped lower, meant for my ears alone. "The question is, Investigator Clarke, have you?"

I turned to face him fully, lifting my chin in defiance. "Learned what, exactly?"

"That not everything is black and white.

That sometimes the rules need to bend to accommodate reality.

" He stepped closer, close enough that I could see the flecks of blue in those storm-gray eyes, close enough to count his ridiculously long eyelashes.

"That maybe the world isn't as simple as your reports make it seem. "

"The rules exist for a reason, Mr. Hardwick. To protect people from those who would exploit them."

"From people like me?" His voice carried a note of genuine curiosity. "Tell me, do I look like a predator to you?"

Yes. But not in the way the gaming commission cared about.

"Danger comes in many forms," I managed, my voice slightly breathless despite my best efforts.

"Indeed it does." His gaze dropped to my lips for just a heartbeat before returning to my eyes. "Shall we continue?"

The Dragon's Crown VIP lounge occupied the entire top floor of the Jade Petal, a testament to understated luxury that made my government salary feel embarrassingly inadequate.

Floor-to-ceiling windows offered a panoramic view of the Strip that was worth a fortune per square foot.

Leather seating areas were arranged for both privacy and spectacular views, while original artwork lined the walls—pieces I recognized from auction catalogs that had made headlines with their astronomical selling prices.

Easton moved to a bar that looked like it belonged in a high-end whiskey distillery and poured two glasses of what I recognized as exceptionally fine Scotch. The amber liquid caught the light like liquid gold.

"I don't drink on duty," I protested as he offered me one of the crystal tumblers.

"It's after five o'clock, and technically you're off the clock until tomorrow's inspection." He pressed the glass into my hand, his fingers brushing mine in a contact that sent unwelcome heat up my arm. "Besides, I have a proposition for you."

I accepted the drink but didn't take a sip, studying his face for tells. "I'm listening."

"Tonight is our grand opening gala. Celebrities, high rollers, media—the works. I insist you attend." He settled into the chair across from me, completely at ease in his designer suit and surroundings that screamed old money despite his relatively recent success. "Consider it... educational."

"I don't think that would be appropriate—"

"Why? Because you're afraid you might actually enjoy yourself?" His eyes sparkled with mischief that was probably illegal in several states. "Or because you're afraid of what people might think?"

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Both, I realized with uncomfortable clarity.

Camilla's text message echoed in my mind: Politics matter more than perfection.

Perhaps showing up would demonstrate my commitment to thorough oversight.

Or perhaps it would be walking directly into whatever trap Easton was setting with his trademark cunning.

"The commission expects me to maintain boundaries," I said carefully.

"The commission expects you to do your job thoroughly and fairly.

How can you assess the Jade Petal's operations without observing how we handle our biggest night?

" He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and for a moment the polished facade slipped to reveal something more genuine underneath.

"Unless you're concerned you can't remain objective around me. "

Another challenge. Damn him and his ability to find exactly the right button to push.

"My objectivity has never been in question."

"Then prove it." For just a moment, his smile turned genuinely warm, transforming his entire face from handsome to devastating. "Come tonight. See what we've built

here. Judge for yourself whether it meets your impossibly high standards."

I should say no. Every instinct I possessed screamed at me to politely decline and maintain appropriate distance. But something in his expression—vulnerability beneath the confidence, genuine pride in what he'd accomplished—made me hesitate.

"I'll consider it," I heard myself saying.

"Excellent." He stood and moved to an antique desk in the corner, returning with a business card made of heavy stock that felt substantial between my fingers. "That has my direct line. Call if you need anything. Anything at all."

As I took the card, he caught my hand and held it just a moment longer than necessary. His skin was warm, callused in surprising places that suggested he did more than sit behind a desk all day.

"I'll have a dress sent to your hotel. Consider it a peace offering."

"That's not necessary—"

"Humor me." He released my hand, and I immediately missed the warmth of his touch, which was problematic on multiple levels. "I have excellent taste, and I'd hate for you to feel underdressed among Vegas royalty."

After leaving the Jade Petal, I drove home on autopilot, my mind replaying every moment of our encounter. The way he'd looked at me, the careful dance of words that said everything and nothing, the undeniable fact that the years hadn't diminished whatever this was between us.

Back in my Summerlin condo two hours later, I stared at the garment bag hanging on my closet door like it might explode. The hotel concierge had delivered it personally, along with coordinating shoes and what I suspected was a jewelry case. I hadn't opened any of them yet.

Instead, I'd been pacing my minimalist living room for the past twenty minutes, my phone clutched in my hand as I debated calling Giselle. My younger sister was the only person who could talk sense into me when I was spiraling, which I definitely was.

Finally, I hit her number.

"Please tell me you're calling with juicy details about your mysterious Vegas assignment," Giselle answered without preamble, because my sister had never met a conversation she couldn't dive into headfirst.

"I might have made a mistake," I said, collapsing onto my leather couch.

"Ooh, this sounds promising. What kind of mistake? Professional? Personal? Fashion-related? Please tell me it involves that gorgeous man who's been all over the society pages."

"I agreed to attend a casino gala tonight. With the owner."

"The one you shut down? The one who's been rebuilding his empire specifically to show you up?"

Trust Giselle to cut straight to the heart of it. "The same."

"Harlow, honey, that's not a mistake. That's called having a life. When's the last time you went to anything that didn't involve a conference room and PowerPoint

presentations about regulatory compliance?"

"This isn't about having a life, Gis. This is about maintaining boundaries with someone who..." I trailed off, unsure how to finish that sentence without admitting things I wasn't ready to acknowledge.

"Someone who what? Makes your pulse race? Makes you forget you're supposed to be the Ice Queen of Gaming Regulation?"

"I am not the Ice Queen of—"

"Harlow. You married your job, and frankly, it's been a boring marriage. Go to the party. Wear whatever devastatingly gorgeous dress he sent you and have some fun for once. You've spent years building your reputation as the most ethical investigator in Nevada. One night won't change that."

After she hung up, I finally opened the garment bag with hands that trembled slightly.

The dress inside made me gasp audibly. Champagne gold silk that seemed to shimmer with its own inner light, cut in a style that would showcase my curves while remaining tasteful enough for any boardroom.

The designer label made my eyes widen—this represented serious investment.

In the coordinating boxes, I found strappy heels in the same champagne shade, along with a clutch purse and jewelry that looked suspiciously like real diamonds. Everything fit perfectly, as if he'd somehow memorized my measurements during our brief encounters years ago.

I held the dress up to myself and stared at my reflection in the full-length mirror. The woman looking back at me was a stranger—glamorous, mysterious, dangerous.

Everything I'd trained myself not to be in pursuit of credibility.

My phone rang again. Camilla's name flashing on the screen like a warning.

"Clarke."

"I hear Hardwick invited you to his little party tonight," she said without preamble, because apparently nothing happened in Vegas without the commission knowing about it within hours.

"Word travels fast."

"Everything travels fast in Vegas. I want you to go."

I blinked in surprise. "You do?"

"There are rumors swirling about the Jade Petal's financing.

Political pressure to fast-track the approval process.

Sources suggesting certain commissioners might have conflicts of interest." Her voice carried that edge I'd learned to associate with commission politics at their ugliest. "If there's dirt to be found, tonight might be your best chance to find it. "

"And if there isn't any dirt?"

"Then you do your job and write an honest report. But be careful, Harlow. Hardwick is charming, and charming men are dangerous to women in our position. Don't let him manipulate you the way he manipulates everyone else."

After she hung up, I stared at my reflection again. Political pressure. Rumors about

financing. The commission wanting me to find dirt rather than simply determine the truth.

I was caught between competing agendas, powerful people with their own motives, and suddenly the dress felt less like a gift and more like a weapon—though I wasn't entirely sure who was wielding it.

An hour later, I stood in the elevator at the Jade Petal, my heart hammering against my ribs hard enough that I worried the other passengers might hear it. The dress fit like it had been designed specifically for my body, which should have been impossible unless...

Unless Easton Hardwick had an even better memory than I'd given him credit for.

The elevator doors opened to reveal the most elegant party I'd ever seen, and there he was, standing near the entrance as if he'd been waiting for me. When our eyes met across the crowded ballroom, his smile was pure sin wrapped in expensive fabric.

I stepped into the controlled chaos of Vegas high society, acutely aware that I was walking into whatever trap he'd so carefully prepared.

"Game on," I whispered to myself, and entered the arena where my career would either reach new heights or crash in spectacular flames.

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Easton

I stood before the floor-to-ceiling windows of my penthouse, adjusting platinum cufflinks as the Vegas sun painted the sky in shades of amber and rose.

The Strip stretched out below me—a river of light and ambition—but my mind wasn't on the view.

It was entirely focused on Harlow Clarke and the dangerous game we were about to play.

Tonight had to be flawless. Everything I'd built, everything I'd reconstructed from the ruins of my humiliation three years ago, hinged on the success of this evening.

The Jade Petal's grand opening wasn't just a party—it was my resurrection, my proof that Easton Hardwick didn't stay down when knocked to the ground.

The elevator chimed, and I turned to see Bryce Delacroix emerge, tablet in one hand and his perpetual cup of coffee in the other.

My CFO and oldest friend looked impeccable as always in his charcoal Tom Ford, but I caught the tension in his shoulders, the slight tightness around his eyes that spoke of shared pressure and sleepless nights.

"Final numbers," he announced, setting the tablet on my granite kitchen island. "Pre-opening reservations are at ninety-seven percent for the next six months. High-roller commitments exceeded projections by thirty percent. The media coverage alone is

worth eight figures in publicity."

I nodded, scanning the figures with satisfaction, but my attention kept drifting to the window. Somewhere down there, Harlow was preparing for tonight. The champagne gold silk I'd chosen would fit her perfectly—I possessed an almost photographic memory for details, especially when it came to her.

"She's here to destroy us," Bryce said quietly, following my gaze toward the glittering Strip.

"Let her try." I turned back to him, straightening my tie with deliberate precision. "Harlow Clarke thinks she's solved the equation of Easton Hardwick. She thinks she understands exactly what I'm capable of."

"And you're going to prove her wrong?"

"I'm going to prove I've evolved beyond her expectations."

The memory struck like a blade between my ribs—three years ago, standing in my smaller casino's office as Harlow served that damned shutdown order.

The way her hazel eyes had remained steady and professional while she systematically dismantled everything I'd built.

The exquisite humiliation of watching investors flee like rats from a sinking ship, of seeing my reputation crumble with each headline about "compliance violations" and "regulatory oversight. "

The local news had called it "the fall of a Vegas golden boy." The gaming industry had whispered about my arrogance finally catching up with me. But I'd rebuilt myself from that wreckage, forged something stronger in the flames of failure and

disappointment.

Tonight wasn't just about proving the Jade Petal deserved its license. It was about proving I'd learned to play this game better than anyone, including her.

"Easton." Bryce's voice carried a warning I'd heard too many times over the years. "Whatever you're planning with her, tread carefully. You've invested too much to let old wounds—"

"This isn't about wounds." I moved to the window again, watching neon signs flicker to life as darkness claimed the desert sky. "It's about showing Investigator Clarke that some rules were designed to be bent. And that not everything fits into her neat categories of right and wrong."

Bryce remained silent for a long moment, then sighed deeply. "Just remember, we need her signature to get our final license. Don't let whatever power struggle you two have brewing jeopardize that."

My smile turned sharp as steel. "Trust me, Bryce. By the end of tonight, Harlow Clarke will see exactly what I want her to see. Nothing more, nothing less."

The main ballroom of the Jade Petal had been transformed into a glittering wonderland that surpassed anything the Strip had to offer.

Crystal chandeliers cast prismatic rainbows across walls draped in midnight blue silk, while towers of champagne glasses created geometric sculptures throughout the space.

Fresh gardenias—flown in from Hawaii that morning—perfumed the air with their

intoxicating sweetness, and a world-class jazz quartet provided the perfect soundtrack for the most crucial night of my professional life.

A-list celebrities mingled with politicians and media moguls, their laughter blending with the crystalline clink of champagne flutes and the whisper of designer fabrics.

Everyone who wielded power in Vegas was here, along with influential figures from Los Angeles, New York, and beyond.

I'd leveraged every relationship, called in every favor, and invested a fortune to ensure this evening would be legendary.

I navigated the room like a master strategist, moving from cluster to cluster with practiced charm.

A carefully timed comment about future expansion here, a shared laugh about Vegas hospitality challenges there, always keeping conversations light while systematically building alliances that would matter long after the last guest departed.

"Easton!" Senator Patricia Voss approached with her trademark political radiance, her husband trailing behind with his own well-rehearsed expression of engaged interest. "This is absolutely breathtaking. You've redefined elegance on the Strip."

"Senator, your presence honors us." I clasped her hand, maintaining eye contact just long enough to convey respect without deference. "I hope you'll consider the Jade Petal for your next campaign gathering. We have several private dining spaces that would be ideal for intimate donor events."

Her eyes sparked with interest, but before she could respond, I spotted a familiar figure across the room.

Enzo Ricci stood near the bar, his silver hair gleaming under the chandeliers, dark eyes cataloging every detail of the evening with predatory focus.

My jaw tightened imperceptibly. Enzo owned the Mirage Continental, one of the Strip's established properties, and he'd been publicly vocal about his opposition to new competition.

"Excuse me for just a moment," I murmured to the senator, already moving toward where a small group of investors had congregated near the panoramic windows.

As I approached, I caught the tail end of a conversation about "market oversaturation" and "reckless expansion." The speaker was Marcus Kellerman, whose investment firm had bankrolled three of my competitors over the past five years.

"Gentlemen," I said smoothly, inserting myself into their circle. "I trust you're finding the evening to your satisfaction."

"Hardwick." Kellerman's smile was polite but assessing. "Impressive spectacle. Though I have to question the wisdom of such extravagant expenses in an uncertain market."

A direct challenge, wrapped in conversational silk. I smiled back, projecting confidence without arrogance. "Excellence attracts excellence, Marcus. Our pre-opening numbers suggest the market was hungry for something transcendent."

Before he could respond, I sensed a familiar presence at my elbow. Liv Chen, entertainment reporter for the Las Vegas Tribune, materialized with her usual hungry smile and a recorder she made no attempt to conceal.

"Mr. Hardwick, could I get your thoughts on the regulatory hurdles the Jade Petal has faced? Sources suggest there's been some unusual political pressure regarding

expedited approvals."

The investors' attention sharpened like bloodhounds catching a scent, and I felt the weight of multiple assessments as they processed this information. This was exactly the kind of minefield I'd anticipated tonight, but Liv's timing was particularly inconvenient.

"The Jade Petal has exceeded every regulatory benchmark," I replied smoothly. "We've maintained complete transparency with the Gaming Commission throughout our approval process. Any suggestion otherwise is pure speculation from uninformed sources."

Liv's eyes glittered with predatory anticipation. "And what about your personal history with the lead investigator? Some might find it curious that Harlow Clarke is attending tonight's celebration."

The question hung in the air like a loaded weapon. I watched Kellerman and the other investors recalibrating their assessments, weighing the implications of perceived impropriety.

"Investigator Clarke is here in her professional capacity," I replied, allowing just enough steel into my voice to discourage further probing. "The Gaming Commission takes a comprehensive approach to oversight, which we wholeheartedly welcome and support."

But even as I spoke, my attention was drawn to the entrance, where conversations seemed to pause and heads turned in subtle recognition of someone's arrival. And then I saw her.

Harlow stood in the doorway like a vision that had stepped from my most dangerous dreams. The champagne gold silk I'd chosen flowed around her curves like liquid

sunlight, and her dark hair was swept into an elegant chignon that showcased the graceful column of her neck.

The diamond earrings I'd selected caught the light with every subtle movement, and the entire effect was nothing short of devastating.

She was magnificent, and she knew it. But more tellingly, her posture betrayed barely contained tension—shoulders held just a fraction too rigidly, fingers gripping her clutch with white-knuckled intensity.

She was as apprehensive about tonight as I was, which meant I wasn't the only one with everything to lose.

"Excuse me," I murmured to Liv and the investors, already moving across the room. I was drawn to Harlow like a man possessed, and I couldn't have cared less who noticed.

Harlow had positioned herself at the bar, and I watched as she ordered what appeared to be club soda with lime. Playing it safe, even here. The choice was so quintessentially her that I nearly smiled.

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"You clean up beautifully, Investigator Clarke," I said as I approached, signaling the bartender for two glasses of our finest whiskey. "You look like you were born to rule Vegas society."

She turned to face me, and the full force of her attention hit me like a precision strike. Up close, the dress was even more perfect than I'd envisioned—it brought out the amber flecks in her hazel eyes and made her skin glow like warm honey.

"Mr. Hardwick." Her voice maintained its professional coolness, but I detected the slight breathlessness that suggested I wasn't the only one affected by our proximity. "Quite an impressive gathering. The commission will be fascinated to observe your crowd management protocols."

"Always analyzing, aren't you?" I handed her one of the whiskeys, gratified when she accepted it without protest. "Tell me, do you ever simply experience a moment? Or is everything a potential compliance issue in your universe?"

"My universe is about protecting people from establishments that prioritize profit over public safety."

"She took a measured sip of the whiskey, and I found myself mesmerized by the way her lips touched the crystal rim."

"Speaking of which, I've been hearing fascinating rumors about your financing arrangements."

My carefully constructed expression faltered for just an instant—genuine concern

breaking through before I could suppress it. Who had been spreading information? And more critically, what exactly had they revealed?

"Rumors tend to multiply exponentially in their retelling," I replied with measured caution. "Perhaps we should focus on verifiable facts."

"Oh, I always prioritize facts." Her smile could have cut diamonds. "That's precisely why I'm here, after all. To distinguish reality from carefully constructed fiction."

The challenge in her voice sent heat racing through my bloodstream.

We were standing close enough that I could detect her perfume—something sophisticated and expensive that made me want to eliminate the remaining distance between us.

Around us, I was acutely aware of other guests monitoring our interaction with varying degrees of fascination.

Senator Voss was observing openly, clearly weighing the political ramifications of whatever she was witnessing. Kellerman had repositioned himself, probably attempting to eavesdrop on our conversation. Even Enzo Ricci had shifted to gain a better vantage point of the unfolding drama.

"You know," I said, lowering my voice to a more intimate register, "for someone who claims to prioritize facts, you seem remarkably comfortable operating on suspicion and conjecture."

"And you seem remarkably adept at deflecting direct inquiries." She stepped closer, bringing us into each other's personal space in a maneuver that appeared flirtatious but felt like strategic warfare. "It makes me curious about what you're concealing."

"Perhaps I'm not concealing anything. Perhaps I'm simply savoring the opportunity to watch you in action.

" I allowed my gaze to travel deliberately from her eyes to her lips and back.

"You're absolutely riveting when you're in investigator mode.

All that laser-focused intensity... it's remarkably compelling. "

Color bloomed in her cheeks, but her voice remained steady. "Charm won't alter my findings, Mr. Hardwick."

"I wouldn't presume to try to influence you." The lie flowed easily, wrapped in mock sincerity. "But since we're both here, and since you clearly need to evaluate our operational capabilities..."

I extended my hand, noting how her gaze immediately dropped to it with something that resembled fascination.

"Dance with me," I said suddenly, surprising both of us.

For a heartbeat, she appeared ready to refuse. I could practically watch her internal conflict—the consummate professional who needed to maintain appropriate boundaries battling the woman who had chosen to wear the dress I'd selected and jewelry that transformed her into royalty.

"One dance," she said finally, placing her hand in mine.

The instant our skin connected, electricity surged up my arm and straight to my chest. I led her onto the dance floor, hyperaware of every point of contact as I placed my hand on her waist and drew her closer.

The jazz quartet had transitioned to something slower, more intimate, and as we began to move together, I realized with startling clarity that our bodies synchronized perfectly. She followed my lead with effortless grace, as if we'd been dancing together for years instead of moments.

"You're full of revelations," I murmured against her ear, feeling her shiver in response.

"So are you." Her voice had turned breathy, and when I pulled back to study her face, her professional mask had completely dissolved. "This dress... how did you know my exact measurements?"

"I have an exceptional memory for important details." I spun her slowly, watching the silk spiral around her legs before drawing her back against me. "Especially when those details involve someone significant."

"And I'm significant?"

The question hung between us, heavy with implications neither of us was prepared to fully explore. The chemistry was undeniable—I could feel it in the way her breath caught when I held her closer, in the way her fingers tightened on my shoulder when I leaned down to speak directly into her ear.

But beneath that magnetic attraction lurked the threat we represented to each other. She possessed the power to annihilate everything I'd reconstructed. I possessed the ability to seduce her into compromising her treasured objectivity.

The question was: which of us would surrender first?

"You're more significant than you realize," I admitted, the truth escaping before I could censor it.

Around us, I was dimly aware of other couples dancing, of conversations and laughter continuing, but it felt like we existed in our own isolated sphere of tension and attraction.

Her hand in mine was warm and impossibly soft, her body pressed against mine was both exquisite temptation and maddening restraint.

"Easton..." she began, but whatever confession she was about to make was interrupted by an ominous flicker of the lights overhead.

The lights flickered again, more dramatically this time, and I sensed rather than saw the subtle shift in the room's atmosphere. Conversations paused as guests glanced up at the chandeliers with growing concern.

Then the electrical surge struck.

Alarms began shrieking throughout the casino, and the lights died completely before emergency illumination activated, casting everything in an eerie crimson glow. Guests began to panic, voices rising in confusion and alarm as security personnel immediately mobilized to maintain order.

My crisis management instincts activated instantly. I'd spent three years preparing for every conceivable contingency, including power failures. I grasped Harlow's hand, feeling her grip tighten reflexively around mine.

"Come with me," I said, raising my voice above the cacophony. "I need to check the control room."

To my surprise, she followed without hesitation, swept up in the emergency just as I

was. We pushed through the crowd toward the elevator bank, my mind already racing through emergency protocols and backup systems.

The elevator doors sealed, enclosing us together as we began ascending to the executive floors. But halfway to our destination, we lurched to a complete stop.

"Emergency lockdown," I muttered, pressing the call button. "Standard protocol during power failures."

The emergency lighting cast dramatic shadows throughout the confined space, transforming Harlow's face into a study of light and darkness. We were trapped, likely for several minutes, in an enclosed space that suddenly felt dangerously intimate.

"This better not be some elaborate manipulation," she whispered, her voice carrying suspicion even as her eyes remained locked on mine.

"Even I'm not that devious," I replied, though the irony wasn't lost on me. I'd spent weeks orchestrating every detail of tonight, but this particular development was completely beyond my control.

The silence stretched between us, filled with the hum of emergency power and the distant sounds of controlled chaos from below. In the crimson-tinted lighting, Harlow looked like something from a fevered dream—beautiful and dangerous and utterly unexpected.

"Are you?" she asked softly.

"Am I what?"

"That devious." Her voice dropped to barely above a whisper. "Because standing here

in the darkness with you, I'm beginning to question everything I thought I understood about tonight."

Before I could respond, the elevator lurched back to life, and the doors opened to reveal my penthouse. Main power had been restored, and through the floor-to-ceiling windows, I could see the Strip's neon brilliance blazing against the night once again.

But as Harlow stepped out of the elevator and into my private sanctuary, her dress shimmering in the restored lighting, I realized that whatever game we'd been playing downstairs had fundamentally changed.

The real danger wasn't the power failure.

It was the woman standing in my penthouse, studying me like she was seeing me clearly for the first time—and wasn't entirely certain she could trust what she was discovering.

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Harlow

The elevator doors slid shut behind us with a soft whisper, sealing me inside Easton's private domain. My heart still raced from the crisis below, adrenaline mixing with something far more perilous as I took in his penthouse for the first time.

This wasn't what I'd expected from a man whose public persona screamed excess and ego.

The space was sleek, almost austere in its minimalist beauty.

Floor-to-ceiling windows wrapped around the living area, offering a breathtaking panoramic view of the Strip that stretched out like a constellation of vice and dreams. The furniture was modern but understated—clean lines in rich leather and dark woods, everything perfectly placed yet completely natural.

It was sophisticated. Tasteful. Nothing like the ostentatious shrine to wealth I'd imagined.

"Impressive," I murmured, moving toward the windows despite myself. The city sprawled below us, neon signs painting the darkness in vivid blues and crimson. From this height, Vegas looked almost beautiful instead of tawdry.

"You sound surprised." Easton's voice carried a note of amusement as he moved to a bar cart in the corner—crystal decanters catching the restored lights like faceted jewels. "What did you expect? Gold-plated everything and a tiger in the bathroom?"

Heat crept up my neck. "I expected..." I paused, realizing I didn't have a good answer that wouldn't insult him further. "Something different."

"Something more befitting the arrogant bastard who tried to circumvent gaming regulations?" He poured two generous measures of what looked like very expensive whiskey, his movements precise despite the evening's chaos. "Sorry to disappoint your preconceptions, Investigator Clarke."

I turned away from the window to study his face.

His usual composed mask had slipped slightly—there were stress lines around his eyes I hadn't noticed downstairs, a tension in his jaw that spoke of barely controlled pressure.

For the first time tonight, Easton Hardwick looked human rather than untouchable.

"That wasn't planned," he said suddenly, holding out one of the crystal tumblers. "The power outage. In case you're wondering if this is all some elaborate setup."

I accepted the drink, my investigator instincts automatically cataloging details. His hand trembled almost imperceptibly as he passed me the glass. His breathing was slightly elevated. Whatever calm facade he'd maintained downstairs, he was shaken.

"I know," I said, and realized I meant it. "Your reaction was too genuine. No one's that good an actor."

Something flickered across his features—surprise, maybe relief. "You'd be amazed what desperation can drive a man to do."

The honesty in his voice caught me off guard. I sipped the whiskey, letting the burn ground me as I processed this different version of him. Not the polished charmer

from downstairs or the arrogant entrepreneur from my memories, but someone more... genuine.

"Is that what this is? Desperation?" I gestured to encompass the party below, the casino, everything he'd built. "Because from where I'm standing, it looks like success."

His laugh was short and harsh. "Success?"

Harlow, I'm three signatures away from losing everything again.

Half my investors are already spooked by the regulatory delays.

The other half are waiting for any excuse to pull out.

"He moved to the window, staring down at the city as if it held answers.

"Senator Voss's husband owns shares in Enzo Ricci's property group.

Marcus Kellerman's firm is heavily invested in the Mirage Continental.

And that's just the beginning of the political web I'm tangled in. "

I blinked, processing this admission. "You're telling me your investors have conflicts of interest?"

"I'm telling you that everyone in Vegas has conflicts of interest. The question is whether you're going to use that against me." He turned back to me, those storm-gray eyes intense. "But then again, you've never needed much ammunition to destroy what I've built."

The words hit like a slap. All my professional defenses snapped back into place, barriers slamming down to protect the vulnerable parts of myself that had started to respond to his unexpected honesty.

"I destroyed what you built?" My voice rose despite my attempts to stay controlled. "You destroyed what you built, Easton. I just documented the wreckage."

"Right. You were just doing your job." His tone dripped with derision as he moved closer, close enough that I could smell his cologne—expensive and warm and distinctly male. "Tell me, did you enjoy it? Watching me fall?"

The question was so unexpected, so raw, that I felt something crack inside my chest. For a moment, I saw past his anger to the hurt beneath—the humiliation of a man who'd lost everything in a very public way.

"No," I whispered, the truth escaping before I could stop it. "No, I didn't enjoy it."

Something in his expression shifted. He stepped closer, backing me toward the window until the cool glass pressed against my spine. The city glittered below us like scattered diamonds, but all I could focus on was him—the heat radiating from his body, the way his eyes had darkened to stormy pewter.

"Why do you hate me so much?" I asked suddenly, the question torn from somewhere deep and unguarded.

His laugh was harsh as winter wind. "Hate? You think this is hate?"

Before I could respond, he braced one hand against the window beside my head, leaning in until we were breathing the same air.

"You didn't just shut down my business, Harlow.

You destroyed everything I'd worked for.

My reputation, my relationships, my investors' trust—all of it gone because of one report. "

"The violations were real," I shot back, my own anger flaring to match his. "People could have been hurt. The money laundering, the rigged machines, the safety violations—"

"Safety violations that were being corrected," he interrupted, his voice dropping to a dangerous whisper.

"Money laundering that was the result of one employee I fired the week before your inspection.

But you didn't care about context, did you?

You saw an opportunity to make your mark and you took it. "

"I was trying to protect people!" The words exploded out of me, three years of second-guessing and doubt crystallizing into fury. "I was doing my job!"

"Your job." He repeated the words like they tasted sour. "Your precious, untouchable job that matters more than anything else in your life."

"Yes!" I shoved against his chest, but he didn't move. "Someone has to hold people like you accountable. Someone has to care about more than profit margins and investor returns."

"People like me." His thumb traced along my jawline, the gentle touch completely at odds with the sharpness in his voice. "You have me all figured out, don't you,

Investigator?"

My breath caught as his touch sent heat spiraling through me. This was treacherous territory—the way he was looking at me, the way my body was responding despite my brain's frantic warnings.

"Maybe I should have fought harder," he murmured, his gaze dropping to my lips. "Maybe I should have fought dirty."

"You wouldn't have won," I whispered back, even as my traitorous pulse accelerated.

"Wouldn't I?" His thumb traced my lower lip, and I had to bite back a sound that would have been my complete undoing. "I think you underestimate what I'm capable of."

The air between us crackled with tension so thick I could barely breathe. Part of me wanted to lean into his touch, to see where this dangerous game would lead. But the rational part of my brain—the part that had built my career on being untouchable—screamed warnings.

I pushed away from him abruptly, grabbing the whiskey bottle from where he'd left it on a side table. "You think you know me?" I challenged, pouring myself a generous measure with hands that shook only slightly. "You think I'm just some uptight regulator who's never stepped outside the lines?"

He watched me with those calculating eyes as I downed the whiskey in one burning gulp. "Aren't you?"

"I can be just as reckless as you, Easton." The alcohol hit my empty stomach like molten copper, spreading warmth through my veins and loosening the tight control I'd maintained all evening. "I just choose not to be."

He raised an eyebrow, moving closer with that fluid grace that made my pulse skip. "Prove it."

The challenge hung in the air between us, loaded with implications I wasn't ready to examine. But the liquor was working its magic, blurring the sharp edges of my professional paranoia, and replacing them with something far more perilous.

"Fine." I poured another measure, this one even more generous than the last. "What did you want to know about me, Easton? What burning questions keep you up at night?"

He poured his own drink, studying me like I was a puzzle he couldn't quite solve. "Why gaming regulation? With your background, you could have gone anywhere—FBI, SEC, private sector. Why choose to police people like me?"

The question hit deeper than I'd expected.

I found myself thinking about my father, about watching him come home exhausted and defeated after dealing with corrupt officials and rigged systems. About my mother's stories of clients who'd lost everything to predatory lending and shady business practices.

"Because someone has to," I said finally, surprised by the honesty in my voice. "Because the system only works if someone's watching. And because..." I paused, taking another sip of whiskey. "Because I saw what happened when no one was."

"Personal experience?" His voice had gentled, losing some of its earlier edge.

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I nodded, feeling barriers crumble that I'd spent years building.

"My father was a cop in a small town owned by one family.

They controlled the casino, the banks, half the businesses.

When he tried to investigate irregularities, they made his life hell.

Transferred him to night shifts, gave him the worst assignments, made sure he never got promoted.

"The words came easier with each sip. "He never said anything, but I saw what it did to him. Saw what it did to our family."

Easton was quiet for a long moment, his expression unreadable. When he spoke, his voice was softer than I'd ever heard it. "I'm sorry."

"Don't." I held up a hand, not ready for his sympathy. "Your turn. Why hospitality? Why not stay in tech where you were already successful?"

He refilled both our glasses, the silence stretching until I thought he wouldn't answer.

"Because tech is about algorithms and code.

Predictable. Safe." He moved to the window, staring out at the neon chaos below.

"Hospitality is about people. About creating experiences, moments that matter. It's

messier, riskier, but..."

"But?"

"But it's real. When someone walks into one of my properties, I want them to feel something they've never felt before.

I want to give them a story they'll tell for the rest of their lives.

" He turned back to me, and for a moment, his mask slipped completely.

"The first casino I built—the one you shut down—it wasn't much.

Small, local clientele mostly. But there was this regular, Mrs. Patterson.

Seventy-something widow who came in every Friday night to play the penny slots.

She told me once that it was the only time all week she felt alive. "

Something twisted in my chest at the pain in his voice. "Easton—"

"When you shut us down, she had nowhere to go. The other places on the Strip were too expensive, too overwhelming for her." His laugh was self-deprecating. "I used to tell myself I was building something meaningful. Turns out I was just another businessman cutting corners and calling it vision."

The admission hung between us, raw and honest in a way that made my chest ache. Without thinking, I moved closer, drawn by the vulnerability he was showing me.

"That's not true," I said quietly. "What you've built here—it's beautiful. Sophisticated. Nothing like..."

"Like the dive you shut down?" He smiled, but there was no humor in it. "That's the point, Harlow. This time, I did everything right. Every regulation, every guideline, every piece of paperwork filed in triplicate. Because I couldn't afford to give you another reason to destroy me."

The words hit like a physical blow. "You think I wanted to destroy you?"

"Didn't you?" He stepped closer, close enough that I could see the amber flecks in his gray eyes. "Young investigator looking to make her mark, taking down the cocky entrepreneur who thought he was untouchable?"

"No." The word came out fiercer than I'd intended. "God, no. Do you have any idea how much I questioned that decision? How many nights I lay awake wondering if I'd been too harsh, too rigid?"

His eyes widened slightly, as if my admission surprised him. "Then why?"

"Because the rules matter," I said, but the conviction in my voice was weaker than usual, blurred by whiskey and proximity and the way he was looking at me. "Because someone has to be willing to make the hard choices, even when..."

"Even when what?"

"Even when it hurts." The confession slipped out before I could stop it. "Even when the person you're investigating is..." I trailed off, realizing where that sentence was heading.

"Is what, Harlow?"

I stared up at him, lost in the intensity of his gaze, feeling like I was standing on the edge of a cliff with no idea how far the fall would be.

The whiskey had turned my thoughts fuzzy and my inhibitions paper-thin.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, my professional alarm bells were screaming warnings, but they seemed very far away.

"Is someone who makes you question everything you thought you knew about right and wrong," I whispered.

The air between us went electric. I could see the moment his control snapped, the way his pupils dilated and his breathing changed. But instead of moving closer, he stepped back, running a hand through his hair.

"Jesus, Harlow." His voice was rough, strained. "Do you have any idea what you're doing to me?"

The vulnerability in his tone undid something inside me. Here was this powerful, successful man looking at me like I had the ability to destroy him all over again. But not professionally this time—personally.

"The same thing you're doing to me," I admitted, the words tumbling out before I could censure them.

We stared at each other across the space of his living room, the air thick with want and confusion and three years of unresolved tension. The smart thing would be to leave. To call a cab, go back to my condo, and pretend this conversation never happened.

Instead, I found myself moving toward him. "I'm tired of being careful," I said, surprised by the steadiness in my voice. "I'm tired of always doing the right thing, always following the rules, always being the responsible one."

"Harlow." My name sounded like a warning on his lips.

"You want to see reckless?" I challenged, reaching for the whiskey bottle again. "You want to see what happens when the uptight regulator decides to cut loose?"

Before he could answer, I filled both our glasses and raised mine in a toast. "To being thoroughly, spectacularly irresponsible."

He hesitated for a moment, studying my face like he was looking for signs of a trap. Then his mouth curved in a smile that was pure sin and trouble. "To spectacularly irresponsible decisions."

We drank, and I felt the last of my professional armor dissolve under the combined assault of alcohol and his proximity. The room seemed to tilt slightly, or maybe that was just the effect he was having on me.

"So," I said, settling onto his couch with less grace than usual. "What do spectacularly irresponsible people do in Vegas at—" I checked my phone, squinting at the numbers. "Holy hell, is it really two in the morning?"

"Time flies when you're having an existential crisis," he said dryly, joining me on the couch but maintaining careful distance. "What do you want to do, Harlow? What would completely responsible, by-the-book Investigator Clarke never do?"

I considered this, my whiskey-soaked brain conjuring up images that ranged from mildly rebellious to career-ending. "Dance on tables? Get a tattoo? Steal a car?" I paused, struck by a sudden thought. "Go somewhere normal people actually hang out in Vegas instead of fancy penthouse parties?"

His eyebrows rose. "Normal people?"

"You know—tourists, gamblers, people who didn't spend more on their outfit tonight than I make in a month.

" I gestured to my champagne gold dress, which had somehow managed to stay pristine despite the evening's chaos.

"People who go to the cheesy chapels and the tacky shows and all the places that make Vegas actually fun instead of just impressive. "

Easton was quiet for a moment, and I worried I'd somehow insulted him. Then he started laughing—not the polished chuckle I'd heard him use with investors, but a real laugh that transformed his entire face.

"You want to see the real Vegas?" He stood, extending his hand with a grin that made my stomach flip. "Come on, Investigator. Let's go be spectacularly normal."

The night air hit us like a wall of heat and noise as we stepped out of the climate-controlled perfection of the Jade Petal.

The Strip stretched out before us in all its neon glory —flashing signs advertising everything from buffets to magic shows, crowds of tourists stumbling between casinos, street performers and hawkers calling out their wares.

It was loud and bright and completely overwhelming, and I loved it.

"Where to first?" Easton asked, and I realized he'd loosened his tie and rolled up his sleeves, looking more relaxed than I'd seen him all night.

"Surprise me," I said, feeling giddy and reckless and more alive than I had in years.

We wandered the Strip like ordinary tourists, stopping to watch a street magician

make playing cards appear and disappear, sharing an enormous slice of pizza from a place that stayed open all night, taking silly photos with the costumed characters who posed with anyone willing to tip them.

Easton was different out here, away from the pressure and politics of his own world.

He was funnier, more spontaneous, occasionally self-deprecating in a way that made him seem almost..

. approachable. When a particularly aggressive street performer tried to rope us into his act, Easton played along with such good humor that I found myself laughing until my sides hurt.

"You're not what I expected," I told him as we paused in front of the Bellagio fountains, watching the water dance to some soaring orchestral piece.

"What did you expect?"

"Someone who'd be horrified by this." I gestured to encompass the tourists around us, many of whom were clearly several drinks past sobriety. "Someone too sophisticated for the regular Vegas experience."

He was quiet for a moment, watching the fountains cycle through their choreographed routine.

"I grew up coming here with my parents," he said finally.

"Back when Vegas was more about the experience and less about the luxury.

We'd stay at the places that gave away free shows with dinner, spend hours watching the magic acts and the lounge singers.

It was..." He paused, searching for words.

"It was magical. Corny and tacky and absolutely magical. "

Something warm unfurled in my chest at the soft nostalgia in his voice. "What changed?"

"I did. Got older, made money, started thinking I was too good for the things that used to make me happy.

" He turned to me, and even in the flashing neon lights, I could see the sincerity in his eyes.

"Tonight's the first time in years I've remembered why I fell in love with this city in the first place. "

We started walking again, no particular destination in mind, just drifting through the crowds and the lights and the wonderful absurdity of Vegas at three in the morning. The alcohol had settled into a pleasant warmth in my veins, making everything seem slightly dreamlike and full of possibility.

That's when I saw it.

"Oh my God." I stopped so suddenly that Easton nearly ran into me. "Look at that."

I was pointing at a small chapel wedged between a gift shop and a 24-hour wedding photography studio. The sign read "Little Chapel of Love" in pink neon cursive, with smaller text promising "Quick Ceremonies - No Waiting - Elvis Available Upon Request."

"Vegas wedding chapel," Easton said, following my gaze. "Tourist trap

extraordinaire. Why?"

But I was transfixed by the tackiness of it all—the plastic flowers in the window, the blinking heart-shaped lights, the sign advertising wedding packages starting at \$99. It was everything I'd always associated with Vegas: cheap, quick, and completely divorced from reality.

"Have you ever been in one?" I asked, still staring at the chapel.

"Can't say I have. You?"

"Never." The word came out wistful, and I realized I was swaying slightly on my feet. "Always wondered what it was like. The whole spontaneous, impulsive, throw-caution-to-the-wind thing."

Easton moved closer, and I could feel the warmth of his body against my back. "Curious about getting married by Elvis?"

"Curious about being the kind of person who would," I said, then hiccupped slightly. "God, I'm drunk."

"Very drunk," he agreed, but his voice was gentle. "We should probably get you back."

"No." The word came out sharper than I'd intended.

"I don't want to go back. I don't want to be responsible Harlow who makes sensible decisions and follows all the rules."

"I turned to face him, and the movement made the world spin pleasantly."

"I want to be the kind of person who does crazy things. Just once."

Something shifted in his expression, his eyes darkening with an intensity that made my breath catch. "What kind of crazy things?"

I stared up at him, this man who had been my professional nemesis and was rapidly becoming something much more complicated. The neon lights painted his face in shades of pink and blue, making him look like something out of a fever dream.

"Dare me," I said suddenly, the words spilling out before I could think them through.

"Harlow—"

"Dare me," I repeated, pointing at the chapel with its flashing "Open 24 Hours" sign.

"Dare me to be somebody different for once in my life."

He stared at me for a long moment, and I could see the war playing out behind his eyes—caution battling with desire, responsibility fighting against the same reckless impulse that was driving me.

Finally, his mouth curved in a smile that was part challenge, part invitation, and entirely dangerous.

"I dare you, Investigator Clarke."

The words hung in the air between us, loaded with implications neither of us was sober enough to fully consider. All I knew was that I was tired of being careful, tired of always making the smart choice, tired of being the woman who let life happen to her instead of grabbing it with both hands.

Without giving myself time to think, I grabbed his hand and started walking toward

the chapel doors.

"Harlow," he said, but he didn't resist as I pulled him along. "Are you sure about this?"

I paused at the threshold, looking back at him. His tie was crooked, his hair mussed from the night air, and he was looking at me like I was either the best or worst decision he'd ever made.

"No," I said honestly. "I'm not sure about anything right now except that I'm tired of playing it safe."

And with that, I pushed open the door to Little Chapel of Love, pulling Easton Hardwick—my former enemy, my current obsession, and quite possibly my future husband—into the most spectacularly irresponsible decision of my entire carefully planned life.

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Easton

Consciousness returned like a sledgehammer to the skull. Merciless Vegas sunlight streamed through uncovered windows, my mouth tasted like concrete, and my head throbbed with relentless percussion.

None of that compared to discovering I wasn't alone.

Dark hair spilled across my Egyptian cotton pillow. Bare shoulders rose and fell with gentle breathing. Skin warm as honey in the morning light.

Harlow Clarke. In my bed.

The woman who'd dismantled my empire three years ago was sleeping beside me like we were lovers instead of enemies.

Broken memories surfaced through the alcohol haze. The chapel's neon glow. Her fingers intertwined with mine as we stumbled through doors that should have stayed locked. Elvis's gravelly voice pronouncing us husband and wife while she laughed like this was an adventure instead of career suicide.

Christ. What did we do?

I sat up too fast, and the room spun. My left hand moved toward the nightstand, and the simple gold band around my ring finger froze me solid.

"Fuck."

The whispered curse stirred the woman beside me. Harlow's eyes fluttered open—those hazel depths that had haunted my thoughts for three years. For one unguarded moment, she looked soft, vulnerable, beautiful. Then awareness hit.

She bolted upright, clutching silk sheets to her chest, scanning my bedroom like she'd woken in enemy territory. "Tell me this is a nightmare."

I raised my left hand. The metallic ring glinted accusingly.

Her face drained of color as she stared at her own matching band. Then she did something I'd never seen the unflappable Investigator Clarke do in all our encounters.

She screamed.

Not a delicate gasp or ladylike shriek. A full-throated, lung-emptying wail of absolute horror that probably rattled windows three floors down.

"WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK DID WE DO?"

"Well," I said, biting back laughter because apparently my response to catastrophe was dark humor, "I believe the technical term is 'got hitched.' Congratulations, Mrs. Hardwick."

Her eye twitched. "Mrs. what now?"

"Don't tell me you don't remember Elvis asking if you'd take me to be your lawfully wedded husband? You said 'Hell yes' with enough enthusiasm to raise the dead. Quite touching, really."

"I did not say 'Hell yes!'" But even as she protested, recognition dawned across her features. "Oh God. I did, didn't I?"

"Right after asking if Vegas marriages came with a money-back guarantee."

She covered her face with both hands. "This isn't happening. This is some rare alcohol-induced psychotic break. Any minute now I'm going to wake up in my own bed with nothing worse than a hangover and vague memories of terrible pizza."

"Hate to break it to you, sweetheart, but—"

"Don't. Call. Me. Sweetheart." Each word was delivered with surgical precision. "We are not married. We are accidentally licensed for marriage. There's a difference."

"Tell that to the State of Nevada. And the extremely legal document we both signed with surprisingly steady hands for people who could barely walk straight."

More memories surfaced in vivid, mortifying detail.

How she'd insisted on reading the entire marriage license before signing.

How I'd twirled her around the chapel afterward while she laughed like we'd won the lottery instead of signing our professional death warrants.

How we'd stumbled back to the Jade Petal at three in the morning, her shoes in my hand and my tie around her neck.

And the kiss. Jesus Christ, the kiss outside my penthouse door that had tasted like whiskey and reckless decisions.

"How much do you remember?" I asked.

"Too much." Her voice was muffled behind her hands.

"The chapel. That Elvis impersonator who kept calling you 'stud muffin.

' You spinning me around like we were starring in some romantic movie instead of destroying our careers.

" She peeked at me through her fingers. "The part where I apparently decided I was the kind of person who makes life-altering decisions based on neon signs and liquid courage. "

"In your defense, you did ask practical questions. Like whether Nevada marriages came with a cooling-off period and if we could get bulk pricing if we divorced within 48 hours."

"Please tell me you're making that up."

"Scout's honor. You also made Elvis promise the ceremony would be 'extra tacky' because, and I quote, 'If I'm going to ruin my life, it's going to be memorably ridiculous.'"

"Oh God." She flopped back onto the pillows. "I'm going to have to resign. Not just from this case—from everything. I'll have to move to Alaska and become a wilderness guide."

"Alaska's loss would be Nevada's gain. You'd make a terrible wilderness guide anyway. Too much hairspray."

She shot up again, glaring with enough heat to melt steel. "Are you actually critiquing my hair care routine while we're in the middle of the biggest catastrophe of both our lives?"

"Just saying, the wilderness doesn't appreciate good grooming the way Vegas does.

And you do have spectacular hair." I couldn't help myself—even in crisis, she was magnificent when angry. "Especially when it's spread across my pillow."

Her cheeks flushed. "You're impossible."

"Impossibly charming? Impossibly handsome? Impossibly good at making questionable life choices? You'll have to be more specific, wife."

"Stop calling me that!" But she was fighting a smile now, which was somehow worse than her panic. A smiling Harlow Clarke was dangerous to my sanity.

My phone erupted in buzzing. Bryce's name flashed insistently.

"Answer it." Her voice carried that razor-sharp tone I'd learned to fear. "Something's wrong."

She was right. Bryce wouldn't call repeatedly at eight in the morning without good reason.

"What's the emergency?"

"Thank Christ." Bryce's voice crackled with panic. "I've been calling for an hour. We've got problems—multiple problems involving reporters and words like 'impropriety' and 'scandal.'"

My stomach turned to lead. "What kind of reporters?"

"The hungry kind. Liv Chen called my personal line asking for comment about your 'romantic evening' with a certain commission investigator. She has photographs, Easton."

I closed my eyes. Vegas thrived on surveillance and scandal—privacy was just another commodity to be traded. "Photos of what?"

"You two at the gala. Dancing. Looking... intimate. She hinted at more."

Across the bed, Harlow had gone pale, clearly catching enough to understand we'd graduated from personal catastrophe to public relations nightmare.

"Buy us time," I said. "No comments until I figure out damage control."

"What exactly am I controlling damage from? If there's more to this than dinner and dancing, I need to know."

I glanced at Harlow, who was frantically mouthing "Don't tell him." She was right. The fewer people who knew about our accidental marriage, the better our chances of quietly undoing it.

"It's complicated. Keep everyone away from the hotel. Give me an hour."

"Easton—"

"One hour, Bryce."

I hung up and found Harlow already climbing from bed with military efficiency.

She'd slipped into my dress shirt sometime during the night—probably when the air conditioning turned arctic—and seeing her in my clothes sent an unwelcome jolt of possessive satisfaction through me.

The shirt hit her mid-thigh, revealing legs that belonged in fantasies.

"This is a disaster." She paced to the windows, staring down at the Strip like surveying a battlefield. "If the commission discovers last night, I'm finished. Not reassigned or demoted—obliterated. Blacklisted from every regulatory agency in the country."

"They won't find out." I injected more confidence than I felt. "We'll get an annulment. Quietly. Today."

She whirled to face me, and even disheveled and panicked, she was breathtaking. "You think it's that simple? Nevada has waiting periods, paperwork trails. Any legal filing creates records that can be subpoenaed or leaked."

Of course she was right. Harlow's mind worked like a precision instrument, dissecting problems to expose their most vulnerable points. It made her a formidable investigator—and dangerous to men who operated in regulatory gray areas.

"Then we don't file anything yet." I headed for my walk-in closet, grabbing a fresh shirt. "We control the story. Present a united front until media attention dies down."

"A united front?" Her laugh held no warmth. "Easton, I'm supposed to be conducting an impartial evaluation. How do I maintain objectivity when I'm..." She gestured helplessly between us.

"When you're what?" I emerged with the shirt, noting how her gaze dropped to my bare chest before snapping back to my face. "When you're married to me?"

The words landed like grenades. Marriage implied partnership, intimacy, a future neither of us had planned. It suggested feelings we hadn't acknowledged and commitments we'd never made.

"This isn't real," she said, though her voice wavered. "Just paperwork. A mistake to

be corrected."

"Absolutely." I pulled on the shirt, using the mundane task to steady myself.
"Temporary complication. Nothing more."

But I remembered how she'd looked at me in that tacky chapel, the trust in her eyes as she placed her hand in mine. For those alcohol-soaked hours, it had felt like something good instead of a nightmare in the making.

My phone buzzed with a text from building security: Mr. Ricci here to see you. Says urgent.

The timing reeked of opportunism. Enzo showing up the morning after my very public evening with Harlow meant he knew more than I was comfortable with.

"We have a visitor who thinks he can use last night against us," I said. "Enzo Ricci. He owns the Mirage Continental as you're already aware and has been hunting for excuses to sabotage the Jade Petal."

"What does he want?" Harlow asked, then her gaze dropped to our hands. "Oh shit. The rings."

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I looked down at the cheap gold band on my finger—clearly chapel-provided, probably worn by hundreds of drunk couples before us. The metal had already started to turn my finger slightly green. "Right. Evidence removal time."

"This is so fucked up," Harlow muttered, twisting at her ring. "We're literally hiding evidence of our own—oh, come on." She tugged harder, her face reddening with effort. "It's stuck."

I tried mine first, working it over my knuckle with difficulty. The damn thing had been loose last night, but apparently my fingers had swollen overnight. "Must be the alcohol. Or stress. Or the fact that this ring is probably made of tin foil and desperation."

"Very funny," she said through gritted teeth, still wrestling with hers. "Mine won't budge. Oh God, what if it's permanently attached? What if I have to wear this crappy piece of costume jewelry for the rest of my life?"

"Let me help." I moved closer, and she held out her hand. The ring had definitely gotten tighter—her finger was slightly swollen around it.

"Just pull harder," she said.

"I don't want to hurt you."

"Easton, if Enzo sees this ring, my career is over. Hurt me if you have to."

I grasped her finger gently, working the ring back and forth. "It's really stuck. We

might need soap, or—"

"Wait." She stared down at our joined hands, her face suddenly bright red. "I could... I mean, sometimes when rings are stuck, you use..." She trailed off, her gaze dropping to my mouth and then quickly away.

"Use what?" I asked, though something in her expression was making my pulse accelerate.

"Saliva," she said in a rush. "It's more slippery than water. I could..." She gestured vaguely toward my hand, then seemed to realize what she was suggesting. "I could use my mouth to get it off. The ring, I mean. Not—this is not the time."

The air between us went electric. I was still holding her hand, her ring finger between my thumb and forefinger, and suddenly all I could think about was her lips wrapped around my finger, her tongue working the base of the ring...

"That's..." I started, my voice coming out rougher than intended. "That's actually not a terrible idea."

"Right?" But her pupils were dilated, and she pressed her thighs together slightly. "Just practical. Problem-solving."

My cock twitched in response, which was exactly the wrong reaction to have when we were facing a career-ending crisis. "Harlow..."

"Right. Not the time. Definitely not the time." But she was still staring at my mouth, and I was still holding her hand, and the tension between us was thick enough to cut.

"Soap," I said firmly, stepping back before I did something spectacularly stupid. "Kitchen. Dish soap will work."

"Yes. Soap. Good plan." She followed me to the kitchen, both of us trying to ignore the fact that we'd just spent thirty seconds thinking about her mouth on my finger while we were supposed to be preparing for annihilation.

The dish soap worked, though it took several minutes of careful maneuvering to work her ring off without taking skin with it. By the time we were both ring-free, we were standing closer than necessary, both breathing slightly hard from the effort.

"Evidence destroyed," she said, dropping the cheap gold band into my palm.

"Mission accomplished." I dropped both rings into a kitchen drawer, sealing away the physical proof of our alcohol-fueled decision. "Now let's get you some clothes that don't scream 'walk of shame.'"

"Sarah, I need you to do something unusual and urgent," I said when my assistant picked up on the first ring.

"I need a complete women's business outfit in my penthouse within twenty minutes.

Size 8, conservative but high-quality. Blazer, blouse, skirt or slacks, appropriate shoes, and undergarments.

Don't ask questions, just make it happen. "

"On it, Mr. Hardwick," Sarah replied without missing a beat. One of the many reasons I paid her exceptionally well was her ability to handle unusual requests without batting an eye.

Harlow stared at me as I hung up. "Did you just order me clothes like I'm some kind of call girl you need to make presentable?"

"I ordered you appropriate attire for a business meeting because showing up in last night's evening gown would be like hanging a sign around your neck that says, 'I spent the night in Easton Hardwick's bed.

" I moved toward the bathroom. "Unless you prefer to conduct commission business in designer silk that screams walk of shame, Pretty Woman? "

She opened her mouth, probably to deliver some scathing retort about my presumption, then closed it again. "Point taken. But I'm paying you back for whatever this costs."

"With your government salary? Sweetheart, this outfit probably costs more than your monthly rent."

"Stop calling me sweetheart," she snapped, but there was less venom in it now. "And stop being right about things. It's insufferable."

"Add it to my list of charming qualities. Right after 'impossibly good at making questionable life choices.'"

Twenty minutes later, we stood in my private elevator descending toward the executive conference room.

Sarah had outdone herself—the peach-colored blazer and matching pencil skirt fit Harlow like they'd been tailored for her, paired with a crisp white blouse and low heels that managed to be both professional and subtly sexy.

She'd twisted her hair into a French braid and erased any trace of last night's makeup, transforming herself back into the formidable investigator who'd once destroyed my

world.

But I'd seen her in my shirt, tousled and vulnerable and magnificent. That image was burned into my memory now, another layer of complication in an already impossible situation.

"Remember," I said as we approached the executive floor, "we control this conversation. Don't let him set the terms."

"I've been handling hostile interviews since before you owned your first slot machine," she replied, but warmth flickered beneath the coolness. "Trust me to do my job, husband."

The way she said the word—part mockery, part something else entirely—sent heat straight to my core. "Keep talking like that and I might start to enjoy this marriage."

"Don't get any ideas, Hardwick. This is still a temporary complication."

"Of course. Though I have to say, you wear my name well."

She shot me a look that could have incinerated steel. "Your ego really knows no bounds, does it?"

"Just appreciating the irony. Three years ago, you cost me everything. Now you're stuck with my last name."

"Temporarily," she emphasized. "Very, very temporarily."

The elevator doors opened to reveal Bryce waiting, his expression grim enough to confirm my worst suspicions about Enzo's motives.

"Conference Room A," Bryce said without pleasantries. "He brought a briefcase full of documents and what looks like a very expensive attorney. Also been making calls since he arrived—to people who matter."

"How much does he know?" I asked as we walked down the hallway.

"More than he should, less than he wants us to think. But Easton..." Bryce's voice dropped to barely audible. "He mentioned having 'interesting photographs' from last night. We need to assume he knows about your evening with Harlow."

Harlow's expression remained neutral, but her hands clenched at her sides. She was preparing for battle, marshaling defenses against whatever attack Enzo planned to launch.

"Let's finish this," she said.

As we walked toward Conference Room A, I realized that despite everything—the accidental marriage, the career threats, the impossible situation we'd created—I was grateful to have her beside me walking into this fight.

Conference Room A occupied a corner of the executive floor, its floor-to-ceiling windows offering panoramic Strip views that normally reminded me of everything I'd built. Today, it felt more like surveying everything I stood to lose.

Enzo Ricci sat at the conference table's head like he owned the building, silver hair immaculately styled despite the early hour, his pin-striped suit probably worth more than most people's annual salaries.

A leather briefcase sat open beside him, documents arranged with military order.

The attorney—a swarthy-faced man I recognized as one of Vegas's most ruthless legal minds—occupied the chair to his right, tablet and recorder suggesting this was being documented.

"Hardwick." Enzo rose with predatory grace, extending a hand I had no choice but to shake. "Thank you for making time in what I'm sure is an extraordinarily busy morning."

"Enzo. Mr. Matamoros." I nodded to the attorney, then gestured toward Harlow. "I believe you know Investigator Clarke from the gaming commission."

"Of course." Enzo's smile could have carved marble as he turned his attention to Harlow. "Ms. Clarke. How fortuitous that you're here. Saves me requesting a separate meeting."

Harlow approached the table with fluid professionalism, revealing nothing of the tension she had to be feeling. "Mr. Ricci. I understand you have concerns about the Jade Petal's operations."

"Concerns, yes. About operations, among other things." He settled back in his chair, savoring the moment. "I've recently acquired some fascinating information about this establishment's compliance with gaming regulations and ethical business practices."

My jaw tightened, but I kept my voice level. "Any investigation will show we've exceeded every required standard."

"Oh, I'm certain your financial records are pristine."

"Enzo's tone suggested he found this tediously predictable."

"But compliance isn't just about money laundering and tax obligations, is it, Ms."

Clarke?

It's about conflicts of interest, improper relationships between regulators and the regulated, maintaining the appearance of objectivity. .."

The room's temperature seemed to drop. Harlow's expression remained neutral, but calculation flickered behind her eyes as she processed his implications.

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"If you have specific allegations, Mr. Ricci, I suggest presenting them through proper channels," she said coolly.

"Allegations?" Enzo laughed, pulling a manila folder from his briefcase. "My dear investigator, I don't deal in allegations. I deal in documentation."

He opened the folder with theatrical flourish, revealing surveillance photographs. Even from across the table, I could make out images of Harlow and me dancing at last night's gala, leaving the hotel together, standing close enough to suggest intimacy.

"Fascinating evening you two shared," Enzo continued conversationally. "Though these particular images raise questions about the gaming commission's commitment to impartial oversight."

Harlow leaned forward, studying the photographs with detachment. "Those images show two adults at a public event engaging in legal social interaction."

"Social interaction." Enzo savored the phrase like fine wine. "Because my sources suggest your 'social interaction' continued well into the early morning hours, visiting some rather... colorful... establishments around the Strip."

Adrenaline spiked through my veins. If he had photographs from the chapel, if he possessed any documentation of our marriage, both our careers would detonate instantly.

"Your sources are welcome to document any illegal activity they witnessed," I said

carefully. "Though I suspect you'll find two adults having dinner and visiting publicly accessible venues hardly constitutes scandal."

"Perhaps not." Enzo's smile widened. "Though I imagine the gaming commission might view their lead investigator's... enthusiasm... for Vegas nightlife differently. Particularly when that enthusiasm involves the very subject of her investigation."

The threat crystallized—he could destroy Harlow's reputation without ever mentioning marriage, simply by painting her as unprofessional and compromised. The commission would have no choice but to remove her from my case after a very public censure that would shadow her entire career.

"What do you want?" I asked bluntly.

"Easton—" Harlow started, but I held up a hand. This was business now, and business was something I understood better than anyone in this room.

"Want?" Enzo's expression projected innocent surprise.

"I want what's best for Las Vegas, naturally.

Stable markets, ethical business practices, public confidence in our regulatory systems." He leaned back, fingers steepled like a man holding all the cards.

"I'd hate for rumors of impropriety to undermine any of those important foundations."
"

"And how would you propose preventing such unfortunate rumors?" Harlow asked, her voice carrying arctic chill.

"Oh, I'm sure we could reach some mutually beneficial arrangement.

" Enzo's attention shifted between us like a shark circling wounded prey.

"Perhaps a delay in the Jade Petal's final licensing while these concerning photographs are.

.. properly contextualized. Maybe a more thorough investigation into Mr. Hardwick's business practices, conducted by investigators who haven't been compromised by personal relationships. "

Each word hit like a physical blow. He was offering to bury the photographs in exchange for destroying everything I'd worked to rebuild. Delay the licensing, sabotage my opening, drive away investors already nervous about regulatory approval.

"You bastard," I said quietly.

"Business is business, Hardwick. Nothing personal.

" His smile revealed perfect, predatory teeth.

"Though I admit curiosity about exactly how personal your relationship with Ms. Clarke has become.

My sources suggest there were some rather interesting developments after you left my photographer's range. "

He was fishing, probing to determine exactly how compromised we were. If he had proof of our marriage, he would have produced it already. But his continued exploration meant we might have a chance to control the damage.

I looked at Harlow, seeing my own recognition reflected in her eyes. We were

balanced on a razor's edge, one wrong word from mutual annihilation.

"I think this meeting is over," Harlow said, rising with regal composure.

"Mr. Ricci, if you have specific allegations about regulatory violations, you're welcome to file formal complaints through appropriate channels.

Otherwise, I suggest focusing on your own establishments rather than manufacturing conspiracy theories. "

"Oh, this is far from over," Enzo called as we moved toward the door. "I think you'll find that interesting developments have a way of surfacing at the most inconvenient times. The question is whether you want to control the narrative or let it control you."

The conference room door closed behind us with finality. Harlow and I walked in silence toward the elevator, both processing the magnitude of the threat we faced.

"He doesn't have proof," Harlow said quietly as the elevator doors closed. "About the marriage. He's fishing."

"But he has enough to destroy your career anyway," I replied. "Those photographs, spun correctly, would be enough to get you removed from my case and probably suspended pending investigation."

"I know." Her voice remained steady, but I could see the fear beneath her armor. "The question is: what are we going to do about it?"

As the elevator carried us back toward my penthouse, I realized our situation had fundamentally shifted.

We were no longer dealing with a private mistake that could be quietly corrected.

We were trapped in a high-stakes political game where our accidental marriage might be the only thing standing between us and complete destruction.

"We're going to fight," I said finally. "Together."

The word carried implications neither of us was ready to fully examine. But as I looked at Harlow—brilliant, fierce, standing beside me despite every reason to run—I realized that somewhere between the chapel and this moment, our fake marriage had started to feel like something worth protecting.

Even if it destroyed us both.

"Just remember," she said as the elevator climbed toward my penthouse, "this is still temporary."

"Of course," I agreed, though the conviction in my voice wasn't quite what it had been an hour ago. "Completely temporary."

But the way she looked at me when she said it—like she was trying to convince herself as much as me—suggested that we were both starting to realize that maybe some complications were worth keeping.

Even the ones that threatened to ruin everything we'd ever worked for.

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Harlow

The conference room door closed behind Enzo with the finality of a judge's gavel. I waited until his footsteps faded before turning to Easton, who was gathering the surveillance photographs scattered across the polished table like crime scene evidence.

"Arrogant bastard," Easton muttered, his fingers tightening on the glossy prints. "Probably has copies, but at least we know what we're facing."

"Those photos are the least of our concerns.

" My mind was already mapping possible threats and vulnerabilities.

Less than twelve hours since our impromptu wedding, and we were already fighting for our professional lives.

"If he's invested in this level of surveillance, what else might he have uncovered? "

"You think there's more?"

"Enzo Ricci didn't build his empire by playing fair." I moved toward the elevator, strategies already forming. "We need to get back to your office and assess what game he's really playing."

Easton's penthouse offered sanctuary after the confrontation downstairs. I kicked off the heels Sarah had provided and felt my shoulders relax fractionally.

"Coffee?" Easton asked, loosening his tie with one fluid movement.

"Please. Strong as you can make it." I pulled out my tablet, catching myself following the shift of muscles beneath his shirt as he worked. Focus, Clarke. "I need access to your financial systems. If Enzo's orchestrating something beyond blackmail photos, he'll need insider intelligence."

"You suspect a mole?"

"In Vegas, information trades like currency." I accepted the cappuccino he offered, our fingers brushing momentarily—sending an unwelcome spark through my veins. "The question is who's selling and at what price."

Easton settled beside me with his laptop, close enough that his cologne—sandalwood and something distinctly masculine—undermined my attempts at professional detachment.

"Where should we begin?" he asked.

"Financial records, access logs, vendor contracts." I opened my commission database. "People who betray trust leave patterns, even when they think they're being careful."

We worked in unexpectedly comfortable silence, documents and data filling our screens. His periodic lean toward my monitor, each accidental contact between us, echoed the magnetism that had led us to that chapel.

I paused on a sequence of vendor payments processed without proper documentation—all falling just below automatic review thresholds.

"Look here," I said, highlighting the pattern. "These transactions were all approved with the same executive code, but the documentation is conspicuously incomplete. Our culprit knows precisely how to evade standard review protocols."

"Remarkable," he said, studying my screen with genuine appreciation. "Most people would miss that completely. The way you identify these hidden connections... it's extraordinary."

His praise settled differently than the hollow compliments I'd grown accustomed to—from supervisors who wanted something, from my ex who had been mining me for information. This felt genuine.

"Pattern recognition," I said, unable to prevent the warmth rising to my face. "The commission pays me to see what others miss."

"It's more than that." His proximity registered like a physical touch. "You understand how people think, anticipate how systems can be exploited. That's rare, Harlow."

Our eyes locked, and the air between us transformed from professional to something dangerous. The way he looked at me—like I was valuable beyond my usefulness—threatened every boundary I'd constructed.

"Easton..." I began, unsure what warning I meant to deliver.

"I know." His fingers brushed a strand of hair from my face with unexpected gentleness. "This complicates everything. But I can't pretend last night was merely alcohol and bad judgment. Can you?"

His phone chimed, breaking the moment. He checked the screen and exhaled slowly.

"Torres says there's a situation on the casino floor," he said, his reluctance evident in

the way his eyes lingered on mine.

My phone rang before I could respond. As I answered Carmen Torres's urgent call, the ghost of his touch remained, a distraction I couldn't afford.

The casino floor buzzed with controlled tension. Security personnel had cordoned off three slot machines in the high-limit area while early gamblers watched from a safe distance, their curiosity palpable.

"What happened?" Easton asked Carmen Torres, the Jade Petal's head of security—a woman whose compact frame and vigilant eyes suggested she could neutralize threats twice her size without breaking stride.

"Overnight maintenance found these machines tampered with," Torres reported. "Programming altered to favor the house beyond legal parameters. If players had used them, they would have been systematically cheated."

My investigative instincts crystallized into focus. "Has anyone accessed these machines since discovery?"

"No ma'am. We secured the area immediately and contacted Mr. Hardwick."

"Good." I examined the nearest machine, noting the nearly imperceptible signs of manipulation that most would overlook. "Who possesses access to the programming codes for these units?"

Torres consulted her tablet. "High-level maintenance personnel, IT department heads, and anyone with executive override privileges."

"A very select group," Easton observed, his expression hardening.

I traced my fingers along the access panel, conscious of Easton studying my movements.

"This isn't random vandalism. The precision here indicates someone with technical expertise and the right equipment.

" Rising, I smoothed my borrowed skirt. "They also navigated around security patrols with suspicious expertise. "

"Inside job," Torres concluded.

"Coordinated inside job," I clarified. "This has the hallmarks of a systematic operation, not an isolated incident. Someone's manufacturing evidence of regulatory violations."

Easton's jaw tightened as he processed the implications. "They're framing us for running rigged games."

"Which would trigger immediate license suspension," I continued. "Potentially forcing the Jade Petal into bankruptcy before you even officially open."

The puzzle pieces aligned with disturbing clarity. Enzo's surveillance, the sabotaged machines, his convenient timing—this was methodical corporate sabotage designed to destroy Easton's business and my career simultaneously.

"Sir?" Torres glanced at her phone. "Mr. Delacroix is heading down. Should I brief him?"

"Yes, he should see this," Easton replied, though something flickered across his

features—a shadow of uncertainty.

Moments later, Bryce Delacroix emerged from the elevator looking distinctly disheveled. His normally impeccable appearance had deteriorated—tie askew, hair mussed, dark circles beneath bloodshot eyes.

"Christ, what's happened?" he asked, taking in the security cordon.

"Someone tampered with the programming overnight," Easton explained. "Rigged to cheat customers."

The color drained from Bryce's face. "How many machines?"

"Three confirmed," Torres replied. "We're examining the entire floor."

"This is catastrophic," Bryce muttered, pulling out his phone. "The investors will panic if this leaks. We're already navigating regulatory delays—"

"It won't leak," Easton interjected firmly. "We're handling this internally with commission oversight."

Bryce's attention snapped to me, his expression more anxious than relieved. "Has she uncovered anything? About the... irregularities?"

"Investigator Clarke's expertise is exactly what we need," Easton said smoothly.

I studied Bryce's reactions carefully. Most financial officers would immediately question operational impact, security protocols, potential liability. Instead, his concern centered on what I might have discovered.

"What's your assessment so far?" he asked directly, tension evident in his clipped

tone.

"Still analyzing," I replied carefully, noting how his jaw muscle twitched at my non-answer. "Mr. Hardwick has provided complete access to all systems."

"Of course," Bryce said, something discordant in his response. "I should review the financial implications—"

His phone buzzed, and visible relief washed over him. "Urgent call from our insurers. I'll circle back later."

He retreated before anyone could respond, leaving me with the distinct impression of someone fleeing further questioning.

"We need security footage from the past week," I told Torres. "Cross-reference access logs with personnel files. And keep this investigation contained."

"Why the discretion?" she asked.

"Because our saboteur is someone within Easton's inner circle," I replied, watching his expression darken. "Someone with legitimate access who wouldn't trigger security protocols."

"Mr. Hardwick!" Liv Chen's voice cut through the corridor as we approached Easton's office less than two hours after discovering the sabotaged machines.

She materialized with her camera crew in tow, ambush gleaming in her smile.

"Perfect timing. I'd like your statement on this morning's irregularities. "

My stomach tightened. The information's rapid leak confirmed my suspicions—someone with immediate knowledge had contacted her almost instantly.

"Ms. Chen," Easton replied, maintaining his composure despite the tension radiating from him. "I'm not certain which irregularities you're referencing."

"The gaming machines discovered to be rigged in the house's favor," she said, barely containing her excitement.

"Sources indicate this could represent a broader pattern of compliance issues.

" Her gaze shifted to me with calculated interest. "And Ms. Clarke, what fortuitous timing.

I hoped to follow up on last night's events. "

Someone had deliberately fed her information within minutes of our discovery.

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"Actually," I stepped forward, professional smile in place, "this presents an excellent opportunity to highlight the gaming commission's innovative oversight approach."

Liv's expression sharpened with journalistic interest. She sensed a story, though not the scandal she'd anticipated. "Your presence is related to an active investigation?"

"The commission employs comprehensive compliance verification," I explained in my practiced media voice. "When Mr. Hardwick identified potential system irregularities, he immediately requested commission oversight for collaborative investigation."

"Collaborative investigation?" Liv repeated, her recorder capturing each word.

"As you witnessed at last night's gala, Mr. Hardwick specifically requested the investigator who previously identified violations at his former establishment," I continued, watching understanding transform her expression.

"This demonstrates exceptional confidence in his current compliance measures and commitment to transparency. "

Easton nodded with appropriate gravity. "After my previous... educational experience... with regulatory matters, I prioritized ensuring the Jade Petal exceeds every standard. Inviting commission oversight during our pre-opening phase reflects our dedication to complete transparency."

"Regarding the machines reportedly rigged—" Liv probed.

"They were identified during our proactive compliance review and immediately secured," I finished smoothly. "This exemplifies the collaborative oversight model that protects consumers and legitimate operators alike."

I watched Liv recalculate as she realized her potential scandal had morphed into an innovative business strategy story. "This collaboration formalized after last night's gala?"

"The event provided an optimal environment for comprehensive operational assessment," I replied. "Mr. Hardwick's invitation to commission oversight during his preview event demonstrated remarkable strategic foresight."

"Your attendance was strictly professional?" Liv pressed, clearly recalling the photographs she'd captured.

"The commission routinely requires investigators to observe establishments under authentic operating conditions," I stated truthfully. "Last night's event provided exactly that professional development opportunity. When issues emerged this morning, we were positioned to respond immediately."

Twenty minutes later, we'd delivered what might be the most consequential interview of our careers. As Liv's crew packed their equipment, cautious optimism replaced my earlier alarm.

"Brilliant," Easton said once we reached his office, admiration evident in his expression. "You transformed a potential disaster into positive coverage. That performance just saved us millions in damage control."

"Partnership," I replied, his appreciation warming me more than it should. "We're effective together."

"We are." His gaze intensified, shifting from professional to something far more personal. "In more ways than one."

As he closed his office door, I confronted how dramatically my approach had shifted.

Three days ago, I'd arrived determined to find violations and shut him down if necessary.

Now I was actively protecting his casino from sabotage.

The commission would call it compromised objectivity, but it felt like discovering a better regulatory path—collaboration rather than adversarial enforcement.

By late afternoon, the atmosphere between us had subtly transformed. Perhaps it was the shared crisis, or our seamless handling of the media, but my carefully maintained professional distance was eroding.

I'd abandoned my peach blazer hours ago, and somehow we'd migrated from opposing sides of his desk to working side-by-side on his leather couch, laptops balanced on the coffee table, documents surrounding us like exam preparation.

"Anything useful in the security footage?" I asked, stretching to relieve tension in my neck. The movement pulled my silk blouse taut, and I caught Easton's momentary glance before he redirected his attention.

"Three individuals accessed the gaming area between midnight and 4 AM," he replied, his voice carrying a rougher edge than before. "All with seemingly legitimate purposes."

"What about the machine access logs?"

"That's where it gets revealing." He shifted closer, his proximity registering like static electricity. "The programming alterations were executed using executive override codes."

"How many people possess those codes?"

"Five. Myself, Bryce, the IT director, security chief, and night operations manager."

I set my laptop aside and turned toward him, suddenly hyperaware of our closeness. "Any of them experiencing financial pressure? Gambling debts? Family emergencies?"

"Not that I'm aware of, but..." He raked fingers through his hair, disheveling its perfect styling and revealing vulnerability beneath his polished exterior. "I'm discovering significant blind spots about the people I've trusted implicitly."

His quiet pain resonated unexpectedly. This wasn't merely business—it was betrayal by someone in his inner circle, undermining everything he'd rebuilt.

"We'll uncover the truth," I said softly, my hand finding his arm before rationality could intervene. "Evidence always reveals patterns, even when we'd rather not see them."

"Does it?" He turned, our faces now inches apart, his gaze dropping momentarily to my lips before meeting my eyes again. "Because right now, every indicator points toward people I consider family."

"I understand how difficult—"

"Do you?" His voice roughened with emotion. "Have you experienced someone you completely trusted selling you out for money?"

His question struck deeper than he could know. "My ex-boyfriend," I admitted quietly. "He leveraged our relationship for inside information about pending investigations. Sleeping with a casino lobbyist while extracting confidential commission data from me."

I rarely disclosed this—not even Camilla knew the complete story. The humiliation of discovering I'd been exploited both professionally and personally had reinforced every wall around me, solidifying the "Ice Queen" reputation my sister occasionally referenced.

Easton's expression darkened. "Harlow... I had no idea."

"The betrayal was multifaceted," I continued, surprised by how naturally the confession emerged with him. "Beyond the infidelity and professional compromise was the realization of my own blindness—how completely I'd trusted someone who saw me as merely useful."

"His catastrophic mistake," Easton said with unexpected fierceness. "Anyone who'd violate your trust that way is profoundly unworthy of it."

"Careful, Hardwick. That sounded dangerously like admiration."

"It was." His palm cradled my cheek, thumb tracing my jawline. "You're remarkable, Harlow. Your intellect, your principles, your determination to protect what's right... it's extraordinary."

My breath caught at his touch's tenderness.

We'd crossed into hazardous territory, the space between us charged with tension that had been building steadily.

Every casual contact, every shared glance, every moment of professional respect had been kindling to a flame threatening to consume my better judgment.

"This crosses every line," I whispered, yet made no move to retreat from his touch.

"I know." Desire roughened his voice. "This complicates everything imaginable. But Harlow, I can't stop thinking about you. About us. About what happened in that chapel."

"We were intoxicated, making reckless decisions—"

"Were we?" His thumb traced my lower lip, sending an electric current through me. "Because this doesn't feel like regret when you respond to my touch. When you look at me with those eyes."

The distance between us vanished incrementally, his breath warm against my lips. One movement would bridge the gap. One moment of surrender would transform everything.

A text message chimed loudly, making us both start. Easton checked his phone with visible frustration, then set it aside.

"Torres with an update," he said, his gaze never leaving mine. "Nothing urgent."

"Easton," I whispered as he leaned in again.

"Tell me to stop," he murmured, our lips nearly touching. "Tell me this isn't what you want."

But the words wouldn't come. Despite every rational argument, despite the professional catastrophe this might trigger, despite everything logical—I wanted him. I needed to know if our chemistry was genuine, if his touch could ignite the reckless abandon I'd glimpsed last night.

"I should tell you to stop," I admitted.

"But you won't." The certainty in his voice reflected in his eyes.

"No," I confessed as the last of my resistance dissolved. "I won't."

His mouth hovered a breath from mine when my phone rang.

We separated like startled teenagers, both breathing unevenly as I fumbled for my phone.

"Torres," I said, registering the caller ID. "Another incident."

Easton swore under his breath, running both hands through his hair. "More machines?"

I answered, already reaching for my discarded blazer. As Torres detailed the latest sabotage—five additional gaming machines, identical pattern, same inside access—I tried to ignore Easton's expression.

He watched me with the unmistakable intensity of a man interrupted mid-decision.

A man determined to finish what we'd started at the first opportunity.

"We need to go," I said, ending the call.

"Harlow..." he began.

"I know." Our eyes met, mutual desire reflected there, along with the unspoken promise that this wasn't concluded. "But not now. Not with someone actively dismantling everything you've built."

He nodded, though his expression made it clear that our next private moment would proceed without interruption.

As we headed toward the door, I attempted to convince myself I was maintaining professionalism. Making responsible choices. Preserving appropriate boundaries.

But my body's lingering response to his touch, my lips still anticipating a kiss that hadn't materialized, confirmed that my capacity for wise decisions regarding Easton Hardwick had already dissolved.

I was falling for my accidental husband.

And for once in my carefully protected life, I had no desire to stop the fall.

Easton

"Five more machines." Torres's voice through the phone carried unmistakable tension. "Same tampering signature as before. You need to see this."

Harlow and I sprang apart, the moment between us shattered. She grabbed her blazer from the back of the couch, already shifting into investigator mode despite the flush still coloring her cheeks. I ran both hands through my hair, trying to recalibrate from desire to crisis management.

"We're on our way," I replied, ending the call.

In the elevator, we stood carefully apart, the air charged with unfinished business. Harlow stared straight ahead, her professional mask firmly in place, but her breathing hadn't quite returned to normal.

"About what almost happened—" I began.

"Later," she cut me off, though not unkindly. "When we're not surrounded by security personnel and compromised equipment."

The subtle promise in her voice—that there would be a "later"—sent a jolt through my system that had nothing to do with sabotaged machines and everything to do with the woman beside me.

The casino floor buzzed with controlled activity as Carmen Torres directed her security team around the cordoned-off high-limit area. Five more slot machines had

been isolated, their access panels showing the same subtle signs of tampering we'd discovered yesterday.

"The pattern is identical," Torres explained, pulling up diagnostic readings on her tablet. "Programming altered to favor the house beyond legal parameters. But they've escalated—these machines were set to trigger only for specific player card numbers."

"Targeted victims," Harlow murmured, leaning close to examine the screen. Her shoulder brushed against mine, and I felt the contact like an electric current. "Whoever did this was planning to cheat specific players."

"High rollers," I confirmed, recognizing several of the flagged card numbers. "Our platinum-tier VIPs who regularly wager five figures per session. If they'd been systematically cheated..."

"The lawsuit would have been devastating," Harlow finished my thought. "Not just financially, but reputationally. The commission would have no choice but to suspend operations pending full investigation."

She circled the machines, her movements precise and focused despite her obvious fatigue.

I found myself watching her work—the slight furrow of concentration between her brows, the methodical way she documented each detail, the quiet authority in her gestures as she directed Torres's team.

Even exhausted and under pressure, she was magnificent.

"Mr. Hardwick?" Torres's voice snapped me back to the crisis at hand. "We've also discovered a server breach attempt at 2:13 AM. Someone tried to access the financial database using executive credentials."

Harlow's head snapped up. "Were they successful?"

"No. The secondary biometric authentication blocked them after three failed attempts."

"So we're dealing with someone who has executive access codes but not biometric authorization," I said, the implications settling like ice in my stomach. The list of people with that level of access was very short—and populated exclusively by those I trusted most.

"I need to see the server logs," Harlow said, her investigator instincts visibly shifting into higher gear.

For the next hour, we worked side by side in the security office, reviewing footage and access records.

Every time she leaned toward my screen, her scent—subtle vanilla with something distinctly her—clouded my concentration.

When our fingers brushed as we exchanged tablets, the momentary contact sent heat spiraling through me that had no place in a professional investigation.

"The timing is precise," she noted, creating a digital timeline on the main monitor. "The machine tampering occurred between midnight and 2 AM. The server breach attempt at 2:13. Whoever's doing this knows exactly when security rotations change and which systems to target for maximum impact."

"An inside job," I confirmed grimly. "Someone who knows our protocols intimately."

Her eyes met mine, and for a brief moment, the professional facade slipped to reveal something softer. "I'm sorry, Easton. I know how difficult it is to consider that

someone close to you might be involved."

The genuine compassion in her voice touched something deep within me. This woman who had once been my professional nemesis now seemed to understand me better than most people who'd known me for years.

"We need to check David Wilson's whereabouts," I suggested, redirecting to safer professional ground. "As IT Director, he has both the access and technical skills."

The employee records showed Wilson had badged into the server room at 1:48 AM and out at 2:32 AM—exactly when the breach attempt occurred.

"That seems convenient," Harlow said, frowning at the timeline. "Almost too convenient."

"What do you mean?"

"If Wilson wanted to breach the system, why do it while logged in under his own credentials?

Why not wait until he was off-premises and use the executive codes remotely?

" She tapped her pen against the tablet, her analytical mind visibly processing possibilities.

"It's like he's being set up as the obvious suspect. "

Her logic was impeccable, sending a chill down my spine. If someone was creating false trails and deliberate misdirection, we were dealing with a far more sophisticated adversary than I'd initially believed.

Torres returned with additional security footage, and we spent the next several hours tracing access patterns and system vulnerabilities.

Throughout it all, I remained acutely aware of Harlow's presence—her sharp insights, her methodical approach, and the undeniable attraction simmering between us despite our professional focus.

By early evening, exhaustion had settled over both of us. The saboteur had covered their tracks expertly, leaving just enough evidence to raise suspicions but not enough to identify them conclusively.

"We need to look deeper," Harlow said finally, rubbing her temples. "Financial records, personnel files, possible motivations. This level of sophistication suggests planning and insider knowledge."

"My office," I suggested. "We'll have privacy and access to the confidential systems."

The unspoken subtext hung between us—privacy to continue our interrupted conversation as well.

Night had fallen by the time we retreated to my office, the Vegas skyline a glittering backdrop through the floor-to-ceiling windows. I'd ordered dinner, and we spread financial records across my desk while eating Thai food straight from the containers.

"These vendor payments," Harlow said, highlighting a sequence on her tablet. "They show a pattern over the past six months. All approved with the same executive code, all falling just below the automatic review threshold."

I leaned closer, our shoulders touching as I studied the data. "They look legitimate on

the surface. Standard vendors, appropriate amounts."

"Except when you cross-reference with delivery records." She swiped to another document. "Three of these vendors don't exist beyond paper corporations. Two others delivered only partial orders but were paid in full."

My stomach tightened as I recognized the approval code on the transactions: BDFX-7734. Bryce's personal authorization key.

"There could be explanations," I said, though the words sounded hollow even to my own ears. "Clerical errors, system glitches—"

"Easton." She set down her tablet, her voice gentler than I'd ever heard it. "These aren't errors. They're systematic siphoning by someone who understands exactly how to stay under regulatory radar."

The implication hung in the air between us. Bryce. My oldest friend. The man who'd stood beside me through every professional triumph and disaster since college.

"I've known him half my life," I said quietly, a lead weight settling in my chest. "He helped me rebuild after you shut down my first operation. He's been with me through everything."

Harlow set aside her food, moving to perch on the edge of my desk. In the soft lighting of my office, with her professional armor lowered by exhaustion and shared purpose, she looked both vulnerable and strong in a way that made my chest ache.

"People who betray us are often those closest to us," she said softly. "They know our blind spots, our vulnerabilities. We trust them implicitly, which gives them the perfect cover."

I looked up, meeting her eyes. "Like your ex?"

She nodded, a shadow crossing her features. "He used my trust against me. Extracted information while I thought we were building a future together."

"I'm sorry that happened to you," I said, meaning it more than she could know.

"It taught me to be careful," she admitted. "Maybe too careful."

We fell silent, the unspoken connection between us growing stronger despite—or perhaps because of—our shared experiences with betrayal.

I found myself standing, moving around the desk until we were face to face. "Harlow, about what almost happened earlier..."

"We shouldn't," she whispered, though she made no move to increase the distance between us. "It would complicate everything."

"It's already complicated," I countered, drawn inexorably closer to her. "Has been since you walked into the Jade Petal wearing that devastating dress."

A hint of a smile touched her lips. "The dress you selected."

"I have excellent taste." My hand moved of its own accord, brushing a strand of hair from her face. "In fashion and in women."

Her breath caught, but still she resisted. "We're in the middle of an investigation. One that could determine both our professional futures."

"I know." My fingers traced the line of her jaw, feeling her pulse quicken beneath my touch. "I know all the reasons why this is a terrible idea."

"Then why are you still moving closer?" Her voice had dropped to a whisper.

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"Because some things are worth the risk." I paused, needing her to understand what I was about to confess. "Harlow, I need to tell you something. Something I should have said years ago."

Her eyes searched mine, wariness and curiosity mingling in their hazel depths.

"Three years ago, you were right." The admission felt like releasing a weight I'd carried since she'd shut down my first casino.

"I was cutting corners. Taking risks I shouldn't have taken.

I was so focused on success, on proving myself, that I didn't see—or didn't want to see—the dangers I was creating. "

Surprise flickered across her features, followed by something softer. "Easton..."

"I blamed you for years," I continued, needing to complete the confession. "Told myself you were just making an example of me, climbing the career ladder on my back. It was easier than admitting I'd failed."

She reached up, her hand covering mine where it rested against her cheek. "I never wanted to hurt you. I was doing my job, but..." She hesitated, then added with unexpected honesty, "I questioned that decision for months afterward. Wondered if I'd been too harsh, too rigid."

The admission stunned me. Harlow Clarke, the paragon of regulatory certainty, had doubted herself? Because of me?

"Why didn't you say anything?" I asked.

"What would have been the point? The decision was made, the consequences in motion." Her smile held a trace of regret. "Besides, would you have believed anything from the woman who shut down your casino?"

"Probably not," I admitted. "I was too angry, too humiliated."

"And now?" The question hung between us, carrying implications beyond our professional relationship.

"Now..." I met her eyes, finding myself drawn into their depths. "Now I'm grateful you held me accountable. Without that wake-up call, I might never have built the Jade Petal the right way. Might never have learned what really matters."

"And what's that?" Her voice had softened, the professional edge completely absent.

"Integrity. Doing things right, even when it's harder." My thumb traced her lower lip, feeling her shiver in response. "Building something that matters, something real—"

She closed the remaining distance between us, her lips meeting mine in a kiss that ignited everything that had been building between us since that first night. Her arms wound around my neck as I pulled her against me, years of antagonism transforming into a different kind of heat entirely.

The kiss deepened, her lips parting beneath mine as her fingers threaded through my hair.

I lifted her onto the desk, stepping between her knees as her legs wrapped around my waist. The taste of her—warm and sweet with a hint of the spicy food we'd shared—intoxicated me more thoroughly than any alcohol.

"We shouldn't be doing this," she murmured against my lips, even as her hands worked at the buttons of my shirt.

"Do you want to stop?" I asked, pulling back enough to see her face.

Her eyes had darkened with desire, her professional composure completely undone. "God, no."

I kissed her again, my hands sliding beneath her silk blouse to find warm skin. "I've wanted you since you walked back into my life," I confessed between kisses. "Even when I told myself I hated you."

"I know the feeling." Her clever fingers had finished with my buttons, pushing the shirt from my shoulders. "I kept telling myself it was just physical attraction. Something I could control."

"And now?" I traced kisses down her neck, feeling her pulse race beneath my lips.

"Now I'm not sure I want to control it anymore."

Her admission broke the last of my restraint. I swept the financial reports aside, laying her back across my desk as I reclaimed her mouth. Her legs tightened around me, pulling me closer as her hands explored my chest and shoulders with undisguised appreciation.

I tugged her blouse free from her skirt, my fingers finding the buttons with clumsy urgency.

She arched up to help me remove it, revealing a lace bra in a shade of deep burgundy that made her skin glow in the low light.

I traced the curves of her breasts with reverent fingers, watching her eyes flutter closed as my thumbs brushed over the hardened peaks visible through the delicate fabric.

"You're beautiful," I murmured, bending to press my lips to the sensitive skin above the lace.

Her fingers threaded through my hair, holding me to her. "Less talking," she commanded, her voice husky with need.

I unhooked her bra with practiced ease, drawing it away to reveal perfect breasts tipped with dusky pink nipples already tightened with arousal.

When I took one into my mouth, she gasped, her back arching off the desk.

I savored her response, using my tongue and teeth to tease her until she was writhing beneath me.

Her hands weren't idle, finding my belt and working it open with determined focus. "Too many clothes," she muttered, tugging at my waistband.

I straightened just enough to help her, kicking off my shoes as she pushed my pants and boxers down my legs. Her eyes widened appreciatively as she took in my fully aroused state, her teeth catching her lower lip in a gesture so unconsciously seductive I nearly lost what remained of my control.

"Now yours," I insisted, reaching for the zipper of her skirt.

She lifted her hips, allowing me to slide the garment down her legs along with her silky underwear. The sight of Harlow Clarke—composed, professional Investigator Clarke—naked and wanting on my desk was more erotic than any fantasy I'd ever

harbored.

I bent to kiss her again, our naked bodies pressing together in a contact that sent electricity through every nerve ending. Her legs wrapped around my waist, bringing me against her core where I could feel her wet heat against my hardness. The sensation nearly undid me.

"I want to taste you," I whispered against her ear, delighting in the shiver that ran through her body at my words.

I trailed kisses down her throat, between her breasts, across her stomach, until I knelt before her.

She propped herself up on her elbows, watching with dark, hungry eyes as I pressed her thighs wider apart.

The first touch of my tongue against her center made her cry out, her head falling back as pleasure overtook her.

I savored her thoroughly, alternating between gentle exploration and focused attention on the bundle of nerves that made her thighs tremble.

When I slid first one finger, then two inside her, curving upward to find the spot that made her gasp my name, I knew I'd found a rhythm that was driving her toward the edge.

"Easton," she panted, her internal muscles clenching around my fingers. "I'm going to—"

I intensified my efforts, wanting to witness her surrender. When her release came, it was with my name on her lips, her body arching in a perfect curve of pleasure.

Before she'd fully recovered, I stood and positioned myself at her entrance. Her eyes opened, meeting mine with startling intimacy as she reached up to cup my face.

"I want you," she whispered, no trace of her professional persona remaining. "Now."

I pushed forward slowly, watching her expression as I entered her inch by inch. The tight heat of her body gripping me was nearly overwhelming, and I had to pause once fully seated, my forehead pressed against hers as I fought for control.

"This changes everything," she whispered, vulnerability and desire mingling in her gaze.

"Good," I replied, brushing my lips against hers. "I want it to change everything."

I began to move with deliberate strokes, watching her response to find the angle and rhythm that made her breath catch. When I found it, her nails dug into my shoulders, her hips rising to meet each thrust.

"Harder," she demanded, surprising me with her boldness.

I complied, driving into her with increasing force as the polished wood of my desk creaked beneath us. Her second climax built visibly—in the flush spreading across her chest, the tension in her thighs, the gasping breaths she couldn't control.

"Look at me," I commanded as I felt her approaching the edge again. "I want to see you."

Her eyes locked with mine as she shattered, her inner muscles pulsing around me in waves that threatened to pull me over with her. I held off through sheer determination, wanting to prolong her pleasure.

When her tremors subsided, I withdrew despite her murmur of protest. "Turn over," I whispered, helping her to stand on shaky legs.

She complied, bending over the desk with her palms flat against the wood, looking back at me with an expression of such raw desire that my cock twitched in anticipation.

I positioned myself behind her, running my hands over the perfect curve of her ass before gripping her hips and entering her again in one long stroke.

This new angle allowed me to go deeper, and her moan of pleasure confirmed the intensity of the sensation. I established a steady rhythm, one hand sliding around to find the sensitive bud between her legs. Her response was immediate, pushing back against me to take me deeper.

"You feel incredible," I growled, watching the point where our bodies joined. The sight of myself disappearing into her was almost too much to bear.

"Don't stop," she gasped as my fingers worked in time with my thrusts. "Oh god, Easton, I'm going to come again."

Her words pushed me closer to my own release, but I was determined to feel her come around me once more before I surrendered.

When she cried out, her body clenching around me in rhythmic pulses, I finally let go.

My climax hit with stunning force, pleasure radiating through every cell as I emptied myself inside her with a hoarse shout of her name.

For several moments, we remained joined, both of us breathing hard as aftershocks of

pleasure rippled through our connected bodies.

Eventually, I withdrew gently, turning her to face me.

The vulnerability in her expression—a Harlow I'd never seen before—made my chest tighten with emotions I wasn't ready to name.

I pulled her against me, her head resting on my chest as our heartbeats gradually slowed. There was something unexpectedly tender about holding her this way, more intimate somehow than the passion we'd just shared.

Eventually, awareness returned. We were in my office, surrounded by scattered financial reports and discarded clothing, having just crossed a line that could never be uncrossed.

Yet instead of regret, I felt a strange sense of rightness, as if we'd been moving toward this moment since our paths first crossed.

Harlow stirred in my arms, her expression unreadable as she straightened. I braced for professional panic, for the inevitable retreat behind regulations and propriety.

Instead, she smiled—a genuine smile that transformed her face and sent my heart racing all over again. "Well," she said, her voice husky from our activities, "I guess we finally found a way to work together effectively."

The unexpected humor broke any potential tension. I laughed, pulling her against me for another kiss. "Extremely effectively, I'd say."

She traced patterns on my chest, her professional focus temporarily abandoned. "I should feel guilty about this."

"But you don't?" I asked, searching her face.

"Strangely, no." She looked almost surprised by her own admission. "It feels like crossing a line I didn't even realize I'd been approaching for days."

I brushed back her tousled hair, marveling at how different she looked with her careful composure undone. "So where does this leave us? Still just an accidental marriage we're planning to dissolve at the first opportunity?"

Something flickered in her eyes—uncertainty, possibility, perhaps both. "I don't know. This complicates things even further."

"Life is complicated," I pointed out, dropping a kiss on her bare shoulder. "Especially in Vegas."

She laughed softly. "That's one way of looking at it."

We dressed in comfortable silence, occasionally stealing glances or casual touches that spoke of newfound intimacy.

I watched her transform back into Investigator Clarke—smoothing her hair, straightening her blouse, becoming once again the composed professional I'd first encountered.

Yet now I knew what lay beneath that careful exterior, and the knowledge felt like a precious secret.

"We should get back to the investigation," she said finally, though her eyes lingered on me with unmistakable warmth. "The saboteur isn't going to identify themselves while we're... distracted."

"Excellently distracted," I corrected, earning another of those rare genuine smiles.

As we returned to the scattered financial records, reorganizing them on my desk where moments before we'd been lost in each other, I found myself wondering if our accidental marriage might have been the best mistake of my life.

Whatever came next—the saboteur's identity, the commission hearing, the Jade Petal's future—at least we'd face it together. And "together" with Harlow Clarke was rapidly becoming my preferred way to face anything.

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Harlow

Sunlight spilled across unfamiliar sheets, warming my face and pulling me from sleep.

For a moment, I drifted in that hazy space between dreams and consciousness, aware only of comfort and a lingering sense of satisfaction.

Then memory crashed in—Easton's office, scattered financial documents, his hands on my skin, my name on his lips as we'd lost ourselves in each other.

My eyes flew open.

I was in Easton's bed. Again. But this time, without the excuse of alcohol or accidental matrimony. This had been a conscious choice.

The enormity of what I'd done sent panic flooding through me.

I'd slept with the subject of my investigation.

Willingly. Enthusiastically. Repeatedly.

The ethical breach was staggering. My career, reputation, years of building credibility—all at risk.

Worse, I might have compromised the very regulatory system I'd sworn to uphold.

I sat up, clutching the sheet to my chest, scanning for my clothes. Unlike our wedding night, I remembered exactly how they'd been removed—Easton's deft fingers, his appreciative gaze, my own impatience as I'd pulled at his belt.

The bedroom door opened, and Easton appeared with two steaming mugs, wearing only pajama bottoms that rode low on his hips. The sight of him—sleep-tousled, bare-chested, a hint of stubble darkening his jaw—momentarily derailed my rising panic.

"You're awake," he said, his voice roughened with sleep. He approached, offering one of the mugs. "Perfect timing."

I accepted the coffee, inhaling its rich aroma. "Thank you."

He settled beside me on the edge of the bed, a careful distance between us. His consideration touched me—he was giving me space, allowing me to process.

"You're overthinking," he observed, sipping from his own mug.

"Professional hazard." My attempted smile felt brittle. "I've crossed every ethical line the commission has."

"Only some of them," he corrected with a hint of the charm that had gotten us into this situation. When I didn't respond to his humor, his expression sobered. "Harlow, do you regret last night?"

The question cut through my anxiety, forcing me to examine what I truly felt beneath the professional concerns. Did I regret it? The pleasure we'd shared, the vulnerability we'd shown each other, the way he'd looked at me as if I mattered beyond my usefulness?

"I should," I admitted, meeting his eyes. "But I don't."

Something softened in his expression, relief mingled with something warmer.

"Neither do I."

"But that doesn't change the complications," I continued, clutching my coffee mug like a lifeline. "I'm conducting your regulatory review. There are strict guidelines about personal involvement with subjects of investigation."

"Those guidelines exist to prevent biased oversight," he pointed out. "Has what happened between us compromised your ability to assess the Jade Petal fairly?"

I considered this carefully. "No. If anything, I'm being more thorough because I know you're watching."

"And I'm cooperating more fully than I might have otherwise," he added. "We're achieving exactly what regulation is supposed to accomplish—transparent operation and rigorous oversight."

His logic was surprisingly sound, though I doubted the commission would appreciate the nuance. "Where do we go from here?" I asked, voicing the question that had hovered between us since our first kiss.

"Professionally, we continue our investigation. We find the saboteur, secure your commission's approval, and open the Jade Petal as scheduled." He set his mug on the nightstand, turning to face me more fully. "Personally... that's more complicated."

"Because of our accidental marriage?"

"Because of what's happening between us that has nothing to do with paperwork or alcohol." His hand found mine atop the sheets, warm and solid. "This isn't just

physical for me, Harlow."

The confession hung in the air between us, both terrifying and exhilarating. I opened my mouth to respond when his phone rang from the nightstand.

He checked the screen, frowning. "Torres." He answered with a clipped, "Hardwick."

I watched his expression shift from mild annoyance to sharp focus as he listened. "When?" A pause. "Lock it down. No one enters until we get there." Another pause. "Thirty minutes."

He ended the call, already rising. "Someone accessed the main server room at 5 AM. Disabled security cameras for eight minutes before the backup system engaged."

Professional urgency instantly overtook our personal moment. "Did they get anything?"

"Unknown. But they knew exactly how to navigate our secondary security protocols." He moved toward his closet with purpose. "They're getting bolder."

I slipped from the bed, gathering my clothing from where it had been discarded the previous night. "Or more desperate."

We dressed with efficient speed, the intimate conversation temporarily shelved in favor of crisis management.

Yet as we moved around each other in the morning routine—him passing me a spare toothbrush, me borrowing his comb, both of us navigating the space as if we'd done it for years—I was struck by how natural it felt.

How right, despite every rational reason it shouldn't be.

"We should keep this private," I said as we prepared to leave. "At least until after the licensing approval."

He nodded, understanding immediately. "Agreed. The fewer complications right now, the better."

Yet as he helped me straighten my collar, his fingers lingering against my neck, I knew we'd already crossed too many lines to find our way back to simple professionalism. Whatever was growing between us had taken root too deeply to simply uproot when convenient.

By mid-afternoon, I'd returned to my condo for a change of clothes and a moment to gather my thoughts. The server breach had yielded few clues—the intruder had been careful, but their intimate knowledge of Jade Petal security systems further confirmed our suspicion of an inside job.

Before leaving Easton's penthouse, I'd done something impulsive. I'd asked him for my wedding ring.

"Why?" he'd asked, brows lifting in surprise.

I hadn't been entirely sure myself. "Evidence," I'd claimed. "Just in case."

He'd retrieved it from the kitchen drawer where he'd stashed both rings that first morning, studying it for a moment before placing it in my palm. The cheap metal had left a greenish mark on his finger. "Just in case," he'd echoed, his expression unreadable.

Now the tarnishing chapel-provided band sat in my dresser drawer, nestled among

my winter scarves.

I told myself it was merely a precaution—potential evidence for whatever legal proceedings lay ahead.

Even as I thought it, I recognized how ridiculous the excuse sounded.

What legal proceeding would require a cheap ring that was already turning my finger green?

But acknowledging the real reason I wanted it felt too dangerous to contemplate.

I was reviewing security logs on my tablet when insistent knocking startled me. Three sharp raps, a pause, then two more—Giselle's signature pattern since childhood.

"Coming!" I called, hastily shoving the tablet under a cushion as if hiding contraband.

I opened the door to find my sister looking fresh in an artist's smock over distressed jeans, paint splattering her hands. Her hair twisted into a messy bun with a paintbrush stuck through it—classic Giselle, creating beauty while embodying beautiful chaos.

"Two days, Harlow," she announced, striding past me. "Two days of unanswered texts since you went to that gala. I was starting to think you'd been abducted by aliens." She turned, studying me with narrowed eyes. "Or that your casino mogul had whisked you away somewhere."

"I've been busy with the investigation," I said, closing the door. "Things are... complicated."

"Complicated?" She raised an eyebrow. "Last time we spoke, you were just attending his gala. What happened after that? Are you in trouble? Is the casino in violation?"

Details, please."

I moved toward the kitchen, desperate for coffee and distance. "There's been a security breach at the Jade Petal. Possible corporate sabotage. I've been working around the clock."

"Around the clock," she echoed, following me. "At the casino? Or somewhere else?"

My hand jerked, nearly spilling coffee grounds across the counter. Her intuition had always been unnervingly accurate.

"Oh my God," she gasped, reading my expression. "You slept with him, didn't you? You actually slept with the casino guy. The one who shut you down. The one you were just 'professionally investigating' two days ago."

"Giselle!"

"You did!" She hopped onto a barstool, leaning forward with gleeful interest. "Harlow Clarke, Ice Queen of Gaming Regulation, finally thawed by a handsome hotelier. I knew that gala wasn't just professional. This is delicious."

"It's not—" I started, then stopped, recognizing the futility of lying to my sister. She'd always been able to read me like one of her art books. "Yes. Last night. It was a mistake."

"A mistake," she repeated, grinning now. "So when you didn't answer my texts asking how the gala went, it was because things went really well? Sure doesn't look like you regret it."

I abandoned my coffee preparations, turning to face her. "It's complicated, Gis. He's the subject of my investigation. There are ethical considerations—"

"Is he married? Engaged? Your boss?" she interrupted, ticking options off on her paint-stained fingers.

"No, but—"

"Then the complications are professional, not moral." She waved dismissively. "You're a grown woman who had consensual sex with an attractive, available man. The apocalypse remains unscheduled."

"The horror is that I could lose my job, my career, everything I've worked for," I shot back.

"Because of one night?" She snorted. "Seems extreme."

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I turned away, busying myself with the coffee maker. If she only knew it wasn't just one night—it was an accidental marriage followed by a very deliberate night together. But that revelation would have to wait.

"There's something else," she said suddenly, her tone shifting. "You're not telling me everything. When I encouraged you to go to that gala, I meant have fun, maybe flirt a little. But you've gone from professional antagonism to disappearing for two days. What really happened that night?"

I froze, my back to her. Giselle had always possessed an uncanny ability to sense when I was hiding something.

"Harlow." She slid off the stool, coming to stand beside me. "What's really going on?"

I sighed, knowing resistance was futile. "It's more complicated than just sleeping with him."

"How complicated?"

"I can't tell you yet. Not until after the licensing approval." I met her eyes. "I promise I'll explain everything then, but for now, I need you to trust me."

She studied my face for a long moment. "Are you in danger?"

"No. Nothing like that."

"Are you making choices that feel right to you, even if they break your usual rules?"

The question caught me off guard with its perceptiveness. "Yes."

Her expression softened. "Then I trust you. But I want to meet him."

"What?"

"This man who's got you breaking rules and keeping secrets. I want to meet him. Properly. Not just hear about him from society pages."

"Giselle, I can't just—"

"Yes, you can. Call him. Dinner tonight. Neutral territory." Her expression brooked no argument. "I need to see this guy for myself—the one who managed to get my sister from reluctant gala date to overnight guest in less than 48 hours."

I recognized the determination in her stance. There would be no dissuading her. "Fine. One dinner. But we keep things professional in public."

"Cross my heart." She made the childish gesture we'd used since we were kids. "Now call the man who's got my rule-abiding sister breaking protocol and tell him her sister can't wait to meet him."

While I made the call, Giselle wandered through my condo, stopping at my bedroom door. "Can I borrow your coral sweater? The one with the scoop neck?"

"In the second drawer," I called, waiting for Easton's assistant to connect me.

A few moments later, I heard Giselle's voice from my bedroom. "Harlow? What's this?"

I looked up to see her standing in the doorway, holding the cheap chapel-provided band between her thumb and forefinger. The metal had already started to tarnish, a faint greenish tint visible along the edge.

"Holy shit, Harlow." Her eyes widened comically. "You actually married him. This is real."

I ended the call hastily, rushing to take the ring from her. "It's not what you think."

"It's a wedding ring. What else could it be?"

"It's complicated."

"You keep saying that." She folded her arms. "Start explaining."

I sank onto the edge of my bed, suddenly exhausted. "We got drunk after the gala. Ended up at one of those 24-hour wedding chapels. It was a mistake, a drunken accident we're going to fix as soon as the licensing review is complete."

Giselle stared at me for a long moment, then burst out laughing. "You? Harlow 'I-have-a-ten-year-plan' Clarke? Got drunk-married in Vegas?" She collapsed beside me on the bed, shoulders quaking with mirth. "This is the best thing I've ever heard."

"It's not funny," I protested, despite my lips twitching traitorously. "It's a disaster."

"It's hilarious," she countered, wiping tears from her eyes. "And weirdly perfect."

"Perfect? This could destroy my career if anyone at the commission finds out."

"Or it could be the universe kicking you out of your comfort zone." She picked up the ring again, studying it. "Why did you keep this? If it's just a drunken mistake, why

not throw it away?"

The question caught me off guard. Why had I kept it? I could have left it in Easton's drawer, thrown it away, melted it down. Instead, I'd asked for it, brought it home, placed it among items I kept safe.

"Evidence," I said weakly. "In case we need to prove the marriage was real for the annulment."

"Bullshit." She placed the ring on my nightstand with deliberate care.

"If this was just about legal evidence, you'd have taken a photo of the marriage certificate.

You wouldn't be keeping a cheap ring that looks like you got it out of a carnival vending machine.

" She studied my face with her artist's precision.

"You kept it because this means something to you. He means something to you."

"That's ridiculous. Four days ago, I considered him my professional adversary."

"And now?"

"Now he's... I don't know." I ran a hand through my hair. "It's complicated."

"You said that already." Giselle sat beside me, her expression softening.

"Look, I'm not here to judge you. I just want to understand what's happening.

One minute you're investigating him, the next you're married to him, then you're sleeping with him.

.. It's a lot of change for someone who color-codes her sock drawer. "

Despite everything, I laughed. "I do not color-code my socks."

"You absolutely do. And your hangers face the same direction. You're the most meticulously organized person I know, which is why this whole situation is fascinating." She nudged my shoulder with hers. "Harlow Clarke, breaking rules and following her heart instead of her rulebook."

"I'm not following my heart," I protested. "I'm... I don't know what I'm doing."

"That's the best part." Giselle's eyes sparkled. "You've spent your entire life following every rule, planning every step. When was the last time you felt truly, messily happy? Not just satisfied with a job well done, but exhilarated?"

The question struck deeper than she could know.

When had I last felt real joy, the kind that bubbles up unexpectedly rather than arrives on schedule?

I thought of Easton's office, of laughter shared over Thai food, of the way he'd looked at me with those storm-gray eyes as if I were precious rather than merely useful.

"I think I'm falling in love with him, Gis," I whispered, the words terrifying in their truth. "And it terrifies me."

"Good." She squeezed my hand. "The best things usually do."

"You don't understand. If the commission finds out—"

"Then you'll figure it out." She stood, pulling me to my feet. "But first, I need to meet this man who's managed to make my rule-abiding sister throw caution to the wind."

The commission building's hallways hummed with tension as I made my way to my office that afternoon.

Conversations died when I passed, only to resurface in hushed whispers once I was beyond earshot.

Colleagues who normally greeted me warmly gave tight nods or suddenly became fascinated with their phones.

I caught fragments as I walked—"compromised integrity" and "sleeping with the enemy" and "career suicide."

Each whispered phrase confirmed my fears: word of my collaboration with Easton had spread, and the narrative forming wasn't about innovative oversight. It was about professional impropriety and ethical compromise—exactly what Enzo wanted people to believe.

I kept my expression neutral, my posture straight, refusing to reveal how deeply the whispers cut. Yesterday, these same people had sought my guidance and cited my standards as models.

My office door stood ajar—unusual enough to put me instantly on alert. Inside, I found Camilla waiting, her tailored suit and perfect coif a stark contrast to the turmoil I felt.

"Close the door," she said without preamble.

I complied, taking the seat across from her with carefully constructed composure. "I assume this is about my collaborative oversight approach at the Jade Petal."

"That's what we're calling it now?" Her perfectly sculpted eyebrow arched. "Three commissioners have requested a formal review of your involvement. There's a hearing scheduled for Friday morning."

My stomach dropped, but I kept my expression carefully neutral. "My investigation has been thorough and unbiased. The collaborative approach has already uncovered significant evidence of internal sabotage that traditional methods might have missed."

"So I've heard." She tapped her manicured nails against my desk. "The governor's office is intrigued by the concept of regulatory partnership. They see potential for streamlining oversight while maintaining compliance. It fits their business-friendly agenda for the next legislative session."

And there it was—the real reason behind her unexpected tolerance. Political opportunity.

"Then you'll support my continued involvement?" I asked, meeting her gaze with my own. I'd been told the amber flecks in my hazel eyes became more pronounced when I was determined about something.

"Conditionally." Her gaze sharpened. "You need to make a compelling case at the hearing. Data, results, clear evidence that this approach serves the public interest better than traditional methods."

"I'm preparing comprehensive documentation."

"Good." She paused, studying me with uncomfortable intensity. "Now, about these rumors regarding your personal relationship with Mr. Hardwick..."

My heart rate accelerated, but I kept my expression neutral. "My interactions with Mr. Hardwick have been professional."

"Have they?" She raised a perfectly sculpted eyebrow. "Because I have reports of you leaving the gala together, spending consecutive nights at the Jade Petal, and working in close quarters with minimal supervision."

"The investigation requires extensive on-site presence," I said firmly. "Particularly given the evidence of internal sabotage."

"Harlow." Her voice softened marginally. "I've supported your career from the beginning because you've always put the commission's integrity first. Whatever is happening between you and Hardwick—professional or otherwise—don't let it compromise everything you've worked for."

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"I won't," I promised, the irony not lost on me. I'd already compromised plenty, starting with that impulsive walk into the wedding chapel.

"See that you don't." She stood, smoothing her skirt. "The hearing is scheduled for 9 AM Friday. I've arranged a preliminary meeting with the three primary commissioners this afternoon. Consider it a preview of what you'll face."

After she left, I allowed myself one moment of closed eyes and deep breathing before straightening my shoulders and heading to the conference room.

The meeting was as brutal as I'd expected. Three commissioners with distinctly different agendas waited around the polished table:

Commissioner Frank Watts, a silver-haired traditionalist who'd spent thirty years in regulatory roles and viewed innovation with the suspicion of a bomb squad technician.

Commissioner Josephine Diaz, a political pragmatist whose primary concern was the commission's public image and relationship with the current administration.

Commissioner Naomi Montgomery, a younger reformist who genuinely believed in modernizing regulatory approaches but needed data to support her positions.

"Investigator Clarke," Watts began without preamble, "explain to me how spending your evenings with the subject of your investigation constitutes proper regulatory oversight."

I kept my voice level, professional. "My presence at the Jade Petal during off-hours has provided invaluable observational data on operational practices that wouldn't be visible during standard inspection windows."

"Observational data," he repeated skeptically. "And these observations required you to leave the gala on Mr. Hardwick's arm? To spend consecutive nights in his establishment?"

"The investigation took an unexpected turn when we discovered evidence of systematic sabotage," I explained, sliding a preliminary report across the table. "The timeline necessitated immediate and continuous presence."

Commissioner Montgomery leaned forward, genuinely interested. "These sabotaged gaming machines—you believe they were deliberately compromised to create compliance violations?"

"The evidence supports that conclusion," I confirmed. "The programming alterations were sophisticated, designed to create the appearance of systematic cheating while avoiding immediate detection."

"Convenient," Watts muttered. "Alleged sabotage that requires you to work closely with Hardwick, just as his licensing deadline looms."

"With respect, Commissioner," I said carefully, "the evidence is documented and verifiable. The machines have been secured for independent examination, and the access logs clearly show unauthorized programming changes."

Commissioner Diaz, who had been silently observing, finally spoke. "The governor's office has expressed interest in your collaborative oversight model. They believe it could represent a more efficient regulatory approach."

"It's showing promising results," I agreed. "By working directly with the Jade Petal's security team, we've identified patterns that might have been missed in a traditional adversarial investigation."

"Or you've been manipulated into seeing what Hardwick wants you to see," Watts countered.

"Your history with him creates an additional complication.

You shut down his previous establishment, correct?

How do we know this isn't some elaborate revenge scheme—or worse, a capitulation due to personal feelings? "

The question sliced uncomfortably close to my own doubts, but I maintained a neutral expression. "My professional record speaks for itself, Commissioner. I've never allowed personal considerations to influence my findings."

"Until now," he said pointedly.

Before I could respond, the conference room door opened, and Enzo Ricci entered with the smooth confidence of someone who knew exactly how much power he wielded.

"Commissioners." He nodded respectfully. "I apologize for the intrusion, but I was informed you were discussing the Jade Petal investigation. As a concerned industry member with relevant information, I requested permission to join."

I kept my expression neutral despite the fury building inside me. This was a calculated ambush, and someone on the commission had facilitated it.

"Mr. Ricci," Commissioner Diaz greeted him. "What information do you believe is relevant to our discussion?"

Enzo took a seat, his expensive suit and manicured appearance projecting the polished image of Vegas old guard.

"I have concerns about the objectivity of the current investigation.

" He withdrew a manila folder from his briefcase.

"These photographs were taken the night of the Jade Petal's gala opening. "

He slid several glossy prints across the table—professional-quality surveillance shots showing Easton and me dancing, his hand at the small of my back, our faces close together. Another showed us leaving the casino, his fingers intertwined with mine.

"Can we truly trust the judgment of an investigator who spends her evenings with the subject of her investigation?" Enzo asked, echoing Watts's earlier question. "Particularly given the Jade Petal's numerous regulatory concerns?"

"What regulatory concerns would those be?" I asked evenly. "Our investigation has found no violations in the property's current operations."

"How convenient," Enzo said smoothly. "Perhaps because you've been distracted by more... personal interests."

The insinuation hung in the air. I breathed steadily, focusing on facts rather than the anger simmering beneath my professional veneer.

"The collaborative oversight model has proven remarkably effective," I stated, directing my comments to Commissioner Bryant, who seemed most receptive.

"This approach uncovered sabotage attempts that traditional methods would have missed—specifically, the internal tampering that could have compromised customer protections. "

"Alleged sabotage," Enzo corrected. "Conveniently discovered just as questions about Ms. Clarke's objectivity began circulating."

"The physical evidence has been secured," I countered. "Independent technical analysis will confirm our findings."

"Assuming the evidence hasn't been tampered with," he suggested with practiced concern.

I felt a flash of genuine anger. "Are you accusing me of evidence manipulation, Mr. Ricci?"

"I'm merely raising questions that the commission should consider," he replied smoothly. "The timing is remarkable, wouldn't you agree?"

Before the conversation could deteriorate further, Commissioner Bryant intervened. "I believe we've heard enough for this preliminary session. The full hearing will provide opportunity for complete presentation of evidence from all parties."

As the meeting adjourned, Enzo caught me in the hallway, his voice low enough that only I could hear.

"You're playing a dangerous game, Investigator Clarke."

"I'm doing my job," I replied evenly. "Something you seem intent on preventing."

His smile never reached his eyes. "Easton Hardwick took something from me years

ago. I'm simply returning the favor."

The personal nature of the vendetta surprised me. "This isn't about regulatory concerns at all, is it?"

"It's about justice," he said quietly. "Something you claim to value." He studied me with calculating precision. "He'll destroy your career without a second thought when he's done with you. Just like he did to others who trusted him."

Before I could respond, he turned and walked away, leaving me with more questions than answers about the tangled web I'd found myself in.

"So you're the guy who's got my sister breaking protocol," Giselle announced the moment Easton slid into our booth at Vérité, an upscale restaurant far from both the Strip and the commission offices.

I nearly choked on my water. "Giselle!"

"What? It's true." She extended her hand to Easton. "Giselle Clarke. Artist, straight-shooter, and very protective sister."

To his credit, Easton didn't flinch at her directness. He shook her hand with a genuine smile. "Easton Hardwick. Casino owner, rule-bender, and man currently trying to salvage both our careers from said protocol-breaking."

Giselle's eyebrows rose appreciatively. "Honest. I like that." She settled back, studying him with the same intensity she applied to her artistic subjects. "So, Easton. Tell me how a man who built a casino empire ends up working so closely with the regulator who once shut him down."

"Giselle, this isn't an interrogation," I protested.

"It's fine," Easton assured me, his focus on my sister. "The short answer? Unexpected circumstances and the strange alchemy that happens when adversaries suddenly find themselves facing a common threat."

I blinked, surprised by his candor while still maintaining our secret.

"And the long answer?" Giselle pressed.

"The long answer is more complicated." His expression turned thoughtful. "I spent three years rebuilding after your sister shut down my first venture. Blamed her entirely, told myself she was just making an example of me to advance her career."

He glanced at me with a sincerity that made my chest tighten.

"I was wrong. She was right to shut us down.

I was cutting corners, taking risks I shouldn't have taken.

Working with her these past few days, seeing her integrity, her precision, her refusal to compromise even when it would be easier.

.." He shook his head slightly. "Let's just say my perspective has changed. "

Giselle's expression softened. "And what about your current relationship? When I suggested Harlow attend your gala, I didn't expect things to progress quite so quickly."

"The circumstances are less than ideal," he acknowledged with diplomatic care. "But I can't honestly say I regret how things have evolved, despite the complications it's

created."

His admission hung in the air between us, loaded with implications I wasn't ready to address in front of my sister.

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When Easton excused himself to take a call a few minutes later, Giselle leaned forward, her voice low and urgent.

"He looks at you like you're the answer to a question he's been asking his whole life."

"You're being dramatic," I whispered back, heat rising to my cheeks.

"I'm an artist, Harlow. I notice things.

The way his eyes track your movements, how he instinctively shifts toward you, the softening in his voice when he says your name.

" She squeezed my hand. "That man is falling for you, and I'm guessing you didn't just accidentally marry him—you accidentally fell for him too. "

"We have bigger problems," I deflected, though her words sent a flutter through my chest. "The commission's called an emergency hearing. Enzo Ricci is actively trying to destroy both our careers. And someone inside the Jade Petal is sabotaging operations."

Giselle's expression turned serious. "What's your plan?"

I glanced toward the restrooms, ensuring Easton was still out of earshot. "We're setting a trap. Planting false information about a 'smoking gun' document in Easton's safe that supposedly contains evidence of financial irregularities."

"Bait for the saboteur," she nodded appreciatively. "Smart."

"We'll monitor who accesses it through security systems. If we're right about who's behind this..."

"It's someone close to him, isn't it?" Giselle intuited. "Someone he trusts."

I nodded grimly. "The evidence points to his CFO, Bryce. His oldest friend."

"Ouch." She winced. "No wonder he needs you."

"He doesn't need me," I protested. "We're working together because our interests temporarily align."

"Keep telling yourself that." Her expression softened. "Maybe this marriage isn't fake anymore, Harlow. Maybe it never was."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means there are no accidents in Vegas," she said cryptically. "Only chances the universe gives us to be honest about what we really want."

Before I could respond, Easton returned, his expression tight with concern.

"Everything okay?" I asked, professional instincts immediately alert.

"Torres called. The trap is set." His eyes met mine with significant meaning. "The document is in place, security protocols active."

"Now we wait," I said, the investigator in me taking over despite the personal complications swirling around us. We'd discussed the trap earlier that day—planting falsified financial documents in Easton's private safe that would only interest someone looking for evidence of misconduct.

"Now we wait," he agreed. "And hope we're wrong about who'll take the bait."

After dinner, Giselle hugged me tightly, whispering, "He's a keeper, sis. Whether you meant to catch him or not."

As I watched her leave, I found myself at a crossroads I'd never anticipated. Behind me lay the structured, predictable life I'd carefully built. Ahead, a path filled with complications and uncertainties—but also with possibilities I'd never allowed myself to imagine.

I returned to Easton's penthouse that evening, part of me still marveling at how natural it felt to step into his private space—the minimalist luxury of his design choices reflecting the understated elegance of the Jade Petal itself.

The floor-to-ceiling windows offered a breathtaking view of the Strip, the emerald glass panels of his casino gleaming among the city lights below.

I felt his arms wrap around me the moment the elevator doors closed.

"Rough day?" he murmured, his lips finding my temple.

"The worst," I admitted, allowing myself to lean into his strength. "Enzo ambushed me at the commission. There's an emergency hearing scheduled for Friday."

He pulled back enough to study my face. "What do you need from me?"

The simple question—focused on my needs rather than his agenda—undid something inside me. I reached up, tracing the line of his jaw, marveling at how this man who had once been my professional nemesis now felt like an ally I couldn't imagine facing this battle without.

"Just this," I whispered, rising on my toes to kiss him.

What began as comfort quickly transformed into heat.

His hands slid beneath my blazer, warm against the silk of my blouse.

Mine found the buttons of his shirt, needing to feel his skin against my fingertips.

We stumbled toward the bedroom, shedding clothing as we went, our bodies remembering the lessons of the previous night.

His phone rang as we reached the bed, the shrill sound cutting through our shared desire.

"Ignore it," I breathed against his neck.

"I can't." He pulled away reluctantly, reaching for his phone. "It's the security office."

I sat up, instantly alert. He put the call on speaker, Carmen Torres's voice filling the room. As the Jade Petal's head of security, she ran a tight operation that made this breach all the more concerning.

"Sir, someone just accessed your private safe. Used the executive override code."

Easton's eyes met mine, all desire replaced with sharp focus. "Do you have visual?"

"Yes sir. Security footage shows Bryce Delacroix entering your office at 11:42 PM, accessing the safe at 11:47. He photographed the documents with his phone, then replaced them exactly as they were."

The confirmation landed like a physical blow. Bryce. Easton's oldest friend, his right-

hand man, the person who'd stood beside him through every triumph and setback.

"Send the footage to my private server," Easton instructed, his voice remarkably steady despite the betrayal unfolding before us. "Lock down access to all financial systems. Change the executive codes. No one gets in or out without my direct authorization."

"Already done, sir."

After he ended the call, Easton stood motionless in the center of the room, still shirtless, his expression utterly blank. I'd seen that look before—the shock of someone whose world had just imploded.

"Easton," I said softly, approaching him carefully. "I'm so sorry."

He didn't respond immediately. When he finally spoke, his voice was hollow. "Fifteen years. He's been with me for fifteen years. Stanford dorm room to Vegas. I trusted him with everything."

I placed my hand on his arm, feeling the tension vibrating through him. "I know. I know how much he means to you."

His eyes finally focused on mine, raw pain visible in their steel-gray depths. "How do you even begin to process something like this? The person closest to you, secretly destroying everything you've built?"

I didn't have an answer. Instead, I did the only thing I could—I wrapped my arms around him, holding him as the reality of Bryce's betrayal washed over him in waves.

As we stood there in the half-light of his bedroom, I realized with startling clarity that I was falling in love with my accidental husband. And tomorrow, we would confront

the man who had betrayed him.

Easton

The first hint of dawn filtered through the floor-to-ceiling windows of my penthouse, casting Harlow's sleeping form in gentle golden light.

Her dark hair spilled across my pillow, one arm draped possessively across my chest, her breathing deep and even.

I allowed myself a moment to simply watch her—to memorize the peaceful curve of her lips, the fan of her lashes against her cheeks, the solid warmth of her body pressed against mine.

Just days ago, this woman had been my professional nemesis. Now she was my accidental wife, my unexpected ally, and something far more dangerous—someone I was beginning to need.

As if sensing my thoughts, her eyes fluttered open, hazel depths with amber flecks adjusting to the morning light. Confusion registered briefly before recognition dawned, followed by something softer that tightened my chest.

"Morning," she murmured, voice husky with sleep.

"Morning." I brushed a strand of hair from her face, letting my fingers linger against her cheek. "How did you sleep?"

"Better than I should have, considering." She stretched against me, her body a delicious friction that threatened to derail my thoughts. "You?"

"In fits and starts," I admitted. The betrayal had played on endless loop behind my closed eyelids—Bryce accessing my safe, photographing the documents, the calculated precision of his movements. A friendship of fifteen years transformed into evidence of treachery.

Harlow propped herself up on one elbow, studying my face with that penetrating gaze that seemed to see through every defense I'd built over the years.

"You're thinking about confronting him," she said. Not a question.

I nodded, tracing idle patterns on her bare shoulder. "I've arranged for him to come in for what he thinks is a routine budget meeting. Nine o'clock."

"How do you want to handle it?"

The question held no judgment, no directive—just the simple acknowledgment that this was my call to make. Another surprising gift from this woman who had once shown no mercy in her professional judgments.

"Directly. With evidence. No room for denial." I closed my eyes briefly, memories flooding back unbidden. "God, Harlow, I've known him since Stanford. Freshman dorm. He's the one who convinced me to pivot from tech to hospitality in the first place."

Her hand found mine, fingers interlacing with a reassuring pressure. "Tell me about him. The Bryce you knew."

The invitation to share this piece of my past felt oddly intimate—more so than the physical closeness we'd shared. I spoke without the careful filters I typically employed.

"We were roommates by random assignment.

He was pre-law, I was computer science. Complete opposites on paper.

But we both came from middle-class families, both had something to prove.

" The memories carried a bittersweet ache now.

"When I launched my first startup, he dropped law school to handle the business side.

Said he believed in my vision more than his own. "

"And when you sold the company?"

"He followed me into hospitality without hesitation.

Learned an entirely new industry from scratch.

Stood beside me when you shut down my first casino.

" The irony wasn't lost on me—the man who'd supported me through Harlow's regulatory crackdown had been undermining me all along.

"He was the best man at my cousin's wedding.

Godfather to my sister's kid. Family, not just a colleague. "

Harlow's expression held compassion without pity—a distinction that meant everything in this moment. "You don't have to face him alone," she said softly. "I can be there, or not. Whatever you need."

The offer struck me with unexpected force. How long had it been since anyone had asked what I needed rather than what I could provide? Even in business relationships where I held all the power, there was always an undercurrent of expectation, of performance.

"Stay," I said, the word emerging more vulnerable than intended. "I want you there."

She nodded, her fingers tightening around mine. "Then I'm there. Professional capacity or personal support?"

"Both," I admitted. "Your investigative perspective. And..." I hesitated, unaccustomed territory for a man who prided himself on always having the right words. "And I think I'll be steadier with you in the room."

Instead of responding verbally, she leaned forward and pressed her lips to mine in a kiss that held none of last night's desperate passion but something equally powerful—understanding, alliance, a promise of standing together against whatever came next.

When she pulled back, her expression had shifted to something more practical. "We should establish a strategy. What's your endgame here? Criminal charges? Private settlement? Public statement?"

I pushed myself up against the headboard, grateful for the pivot toward tactical considerations. "All of the above. I need a recorded confession for legal purposes, but I also need to control the narrative before Enzo turns this into a scandal that tanks the Jade Petal before we even open."

"You're thinking several moves ahead." Approval colored her tone. "I'll need to prepare questions that establish intent, timeline, and extent of damages."

"While I focus on getting him to admit to everything," I added. "The embezzlement, the sabotage, his connection to Enzo."

"Partners," she said, and though the word was simple, it carried weight far beyond our immediate crisis.

"Partners," I echoed, realizing how right it felt—this woman who had once been my professional adversary now standing beside me as we faced a far more personal betrayal.

I leaned in to kiss her again, needing the connection, the reminder that not everything in my world was falling apart.

What began as comfort quickly evolved into something more heated as her hands slid up my chest and into my hair.

Her body pressed against mine with delicious intent, momentarily driving thoughts of betrayal from my mind.

"We have an hour before we need to get ready," she murmured against my lips, her meaning unmistakable.

"An hour," I agreed, rolling her beneath me as sunlight spilled across the bed. "Let's make it count."

At precisely nine o'clock, Bryce Delacroix stepped off the executive elevator into my office.

One look at him confirmed what the security footage had already told us—he was

unraveling.

His normally impeccable appearance showed subtle signs of distress: slightly creased suit, shadowed eyes, a faint tremor in the hand that clutched his tablet.

"Morning," he said, his gaze immediately landing on Harlow, who sat unobtrusively in the corner of my office. Surprise flickered briefly across his features before he masked it. "I didn't realize we'd have company for the budget review."

"Investigator Clarke has some insights on our financial projections," I replied, gesturing for him to take a seat opposite my desk. I kept my tone deliberately casual, reining in the anger simmering beneath the surface. "Particularly regarding some interesting patterns she's identified."

Bryce's eyes darted between us, calculation evident in his expression. "Patterns?"

"Mmm." I turned to my computer screen, pulling up the quarterly financial summary. "Before we get to that, walk me through the Q2 numbers. I'm seeing some discrepancies in the operational expenses."

Relief visibly washed over him as he shifted into familiar territory. "Right, so we're tracking about four percent above projected on the construction side, but we've offset that with efficiencies in staffing and procurement."

For the next twenty minutes, I let him talk, watching as his confidence returned. Harlow remained silent, though I felt her attention like a physical presence—sharp, focused, missing nothing as Bryce dug himself deeper with each fabrication.

Finally, when he'd finished his presentation with a flourish about our "strong position heading into opening," I reached into my desk drawer.

"Impressive work, Bryce," I said, pulling out a manila folder. "Just one question, though."

"Shoot."

I opened the folder and withdrew several surveillance photographs, laying them carefully on the desk between us. "Why did you access my private safe at 11:47 last night?"

The blood drained from his face so rapidly I thought he might faint. His mouth opened and closed, no sound emerging.

"We have it all on video," I continued, my voice deceptively calm. "The executive override code. The photographs you took of the documents. Your careful replacement of everything exactly as you found it."

"I—I can explain," he stammered.

"Please do." I leaned back in my chair, fighting to keep my expression neutral despite the betrayal burning through my veins.

Harlow shifted slightly in her seat, the movement drawing Bryce's panicked gaze.

"Mr. Delacroix," she said, her voice carrying the professional authority I'd once resented, "I should inform you that this conversation is being recorded as part of an ongoing investigation into financial irregularities and potential criminal sabotage. "

His face crumpled. "Easton, please. It's not what you think."

"Then what is it?" I asked, sliding another document across the desk—a spreadsheet highlighting the vendor payments Harlow had identified. "Because it looks like

systematic embezzlement followed by deliberate sabotage to cover your tracks."

Desperation rolled off him in waves. "I was going to pay it back. All of it. I just needed time."

"Time for what, Bryce?"

He buried his face in his hands, shoulders slumping in defeat. When he looked up, tears streaked his cheeks. "I got in over my head. Started with just a few hands of poker at the Mirage Continental. Then it was weekends in Macau. Private games with stakes I couldn't afford."

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The confession tumbled out in broken fragments—gambling debts that spiraled into hundreds of thousands, threats from loan sharks, increasingly desperate attempts to dig himself out that only buried him deeper.

"They were going to kill me, Easton," he said, his voice cracking. "These aren't people who give extensions. They sent me photographs of my sister's kids at school. Said next time it wouldn't just be pictures."

Ice spread through my veins. "So you stole from me. From the company we built together."

"I was desperate! I thought I could win it back, make it right before you ever noticed." His eyes pleaded for understanding I couldn't give. "Then Ricci approached me. Said he knew about my... situation. Offered to clear my debts in exchange for information about the Jade Petal."

Harlow leaned forward. "What kind of information, Mr. Delacroix?"

"Financial projections at first. Investor lists. Nothing that wasn't public record anyway." He swallowed hard. "Then he wanted more. Security protocols. Access codes. Details about the gaming systems."

"And the sabotaged machines?" I asked, barely maintaining control. "The rigged programming that could have sent me to prison for fraud?"

Shame twisted his features. "That was his idea. Said if the commission found compliance violations, they'd shut you down before opening. The inspection delays

would spook investors, and he'd be able to buy the property for pennies on the dollar when it went under."

"All while you continued to embezzle funds," Harlow added, her tone matter-of-fact.

"I had to create accounting discrepancies," he admitted. "Make it look like operational losses instead of theft. I thought—" He broke off, a bitter laugh escaping. "I thought I was being clever."

"Not clever enough," I said coldly.

Bryce leaned forward, desperation edging his voice. "Easton, please. We can fix this. We've fixed everything else together for fifteen years. I'll make it right, I swear."

The plea hit like a physical blow—the echo of a friendship I'd thought unbreakable now shattered beyond repair.

For a moment, I saw the roommate who'd stayed up all night helping me debug code, the friend who'd believed in my vision when everyone else called it fantasy, the brother who'd stood beside me through every triumph and disaster.

But that man was gone, replaced by a stranger who had betrayed everything we'd built.

"Not this time," I said quietly.

With three words, fifteen years ended. I pressed the intercom, summoning security. Two officers arrived within moments, their faces professionally blank as I instructed them to escort Bryce from the building.

"Easton, please," he begged as they approached. "Don't do this."

I turned away, unable to watch as they led him out. The door closed with a soft click that seemed to echo through the sudden silence of my office.

For several minutes after Bryce's departure, I stood motionless before the windows, staring out at the Strip without really seeing it. The city stretched below me—all glittering promise and ambitious dreams—while inside I felt hollow, gutted by a betrayal I should have seen coming.

Behind me, Harlow remained silent, allowing me space to process. I could feel her presence, solid and steady, not intruding but simply there. When I finally turned, I found her watching me with quiet understanding.

"I keep thinking I should have known," I admitted, the words torn from someplace raw. "The signs were there. The unexplained absences. The growing secrecy. The way he'd deflect whenever I asked about certain expenses."

"People who betray us are experts at hiding in plain sight," she said softly. "Especially those closest to us. They know exactly what we want to believe, what we need to hear."

"You spotted it." I ran a hand through my hair, frustration mounting. "You identified the financial patterns within days. I had years and saw nothing."

"Because I was looking with objective eyes." She approached, close enough that I could feel her warmth but not touching. "You trusted him because that's what friendship is. Trust isn't a weakness, Easton."

"Feels like one right now."

Her hand found mine, a simple point of contact that anchored me. "I know."

Two simple words, but something in how she said them broke through the careful control I'd maintained throughout the confrontation. My shoulders sagged as the magnitude of the betrayal finally hit full force. The man who knew all my secrets, my fears, my ambitions. Gone.

Harlow stepped closer, wrapping her arms around me as the first shuddering breath escaped.

I buried my face in her hair, allowing myself a vulnerability I'd never have shown anyone else.

She held me without words, without judgment, simply offering the strength of her presence as everything I thought I knew crumbled around me.

"I'm sorry," I said eventually, pulling back slightly.

"Don't." Her hands framed my face, her gaze direct and unwavering. "Don't apologize for being human."

I covered her hand with mine, turning to press a kiss to her palm. "How did you go from my biggest professional threat to my strongest support in less than a week?"

A hint of a smile touched her lips. "Vegas moves fast."

The unexpected humor broke the tension, drawing a reluctant laugh from me. Before I could respond, my phone rang—Carmen Torres, head of security.

"Sir," she said when I answered, her voice tense, "we have a situation in the lobby. Press has gotten wind of Mr. Delacroix's departure. They're gathering outside, and

Enzo Ricci is giving what appears to be an impromptu statement."

I put the call on speaker so Harlow could hear. "What's he saying?"

"That there are 'serious financial irregularities' at the Jade Petal. That Mr. Delacroix's termination is 'merely the tip of the iceberg.' He's suggesting the commission should suspend our license pending a full investigation."

Rage surged through me—cold and clarifying. "Of course he is. He orchestrated this entire situation; now he's trying to control the narrative."

"What do you want us to do?" Torres asked.

I met Harlow's eyes, finding the same determined focus I felt crystallizing within me. "Hold them in the lobby. No access to upper floors. I'll be down in thirty minutes for a formal statement."

After ending the call, I turned to Harlow. "He's trying to turn Bryce's betrayal into ammunition."

"Then we control the story," she replied without hesitation. "Complete transparency. Acknowledge the embezzlement and sabotage, emphasize that your proactive oversight caught it, and frame it as proof of your commitment to regulatory compliance."

"You're suggesting I publicly admit my CFO was stealing from me and tampering with gaming equipment?" I raised an eyebrow. "Most PR firms would recommend burying that as deep as possible."

"Most PR firms don't understand that in regulated industries, how you handle problems matters more than whether you have them."

" She moved to the desk, already pulling up documents on her tablet.

"Every casino faces internal threats. What sets you apart is catching it before customers were affected. "

I watched her work, marveling at how seamlessly we'd shifted into a partnership that felt both professional and deeply personal. "You're not worried about how this affects your position with the commission?"

She looked up, determination flashing in her eyes. "The commissioners are divided. Montgomery will see this as vindication of our collaborative approach. Watts will try to use it against us. Diaz will follow the political winds." She shrugged. "But hiding the truth only gives Enzo more ammunition."

"So we face it head-on. Together."

"Together," she agreed, something warming in her expression. "I'm starting to think that's how we're meant to be."

The simple statement hit me with unexpected force.

This woman who had once represented everything I resented about regulatory oversight now stood beside me as an equal partner—in crisis, in strategy, in something that felt increasingly like a future I hadn't planned but suddenly couldn't imagine without.

I crossed to her, drawing her into my arms for a brief, fierce kiss. "Whatever happens next, we face it together."

Her smile against my lips was answer enough.

The Jade Petal's grand ballroom had been hastily converted for the press conference.

Reporters from every major outlet filled the seats, cameras trained on the podium where I stood with practiced composure.

Harlow had positioned herself to the side of the stage—present but not central, a visual statement of professional collaboration rather than personal entanglement.

"Thank you all for coming on such short notice," I began, my voice steady despite the turmoil of the past twenty-four hours.

"This morning, Jade Petal Casino terminated the employment of Bryson Delacroix, our Chief Financial Officer, following the discovery of financial improprieties and attempted sabotage of gaming equipment. "

A ripple of excitement passed through the assembled press. I continued before they could interrupt with questions.

"Through our rigorous internal controls and in collaboration with the Nevada Gaming Commission's oversight team, we identified unauthorized financial transactions and attempts to compromise gaming systems before any customers were affected.

" I nodded subtly toward Harlow, acknowledging her role without drawing undue attention.

"Mr. Delacroix has provided a full confession, which has been turned over to the appropriate authorities. "

Questions erupted immediately. I pointed to Liv Chen from the Las Vegas Tribune.

"Mr. Hardwick, what is your response to Enzo Ricci's statement suggesting this is evidence of systemic problems at the Jade Petal?"

"I would suggest Mr. Ricci focus on his own operations rather than attempting to capitalize on a situation his establishment helped create.

" I allowed a hint of steel to enter my voice.

"Our investigation has revealed that Mr. Delacroix's actions were connected to gambling debts accrued primarily at the Mirage Continental, and that Mr. Ricci personally offered to clear those debts in exchange for corporate sabotage. "

The room erupted again. I fielded questions with measured responses, emphasizing transparency, commitment to regulatory compliance, and the effectiveness of our security protocols in catching the problem before opening.

Throughout the exchange, I maintained a careful professional distance from Harlow, though I was acutely aware of her presence—the slight nod of approval when I handled a particularly tricky question, the almost imperceptible shift when a reporter ventured too close to our personal connection.

When the inevitable question finally came—"Is there any truth to rumors of a personal relationship between you and Investigator Clarke?"—I was prepared.

"Investigator Clarke represents the Nevada Gaming Commission in a professional capacity.

Her expertise and thoroughness are exactly what helped identify these issues before they could impact our operations or customers.

Our working relationship exemplifies the kind of collaborative oversight that benefits

both the industry and the public. "

Not a lie, but not the complete truth. From the corner of my eye, I caught the hint of a smile on Harlow's face.

After forty-five minutes, I concluded the press conference, thanking the reporters and promising updates as the situation developed. As the crowd dispersed, Harlow approached, her professional mask firmly in place despite the warmth in her eyes.

"Well handled," she said quietly as we stepped into the private elevator.

"I had excellent preparation." The doors closed, sealing us away from prying eyes, and I felt tension drain from my shoulders. "Think it worked?"

"You controlled the narrative, showed appropriate concern without panic, and positioned the Jade Petal as responsible and transparent." Her analytical assessment was pure Investigator Clarke, but the smile that followed was all Harlow. "Yes, I think it worked."

As the elevator climbed toward the penthouse, I studied her face—the woman who had transformed from professional adversary to accidental wife to essential partner in less than a week. Something shifted in my chest, a certainty I hadn't expected to find amid such chaos.

"I'm falling in love with you, Harlow."

The words emerged without planning, simple truth amid the complicated web we'd found ourselves in. Her eyes widened, lips parting in surprise just as the elevator doors slid open to reveal the penthouse foyer.

The moment hung suspended between us—my confession, her unspoken response,

and the world waiting beyond the elevator's temporary sanctuary.

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Harlow

The Nevada Gaming Commission building stretched skyward, its glass facade reflecting the merciless morning sun. In my parked Audi, I gripped the steering wheel, struggling to regulate my breathing.

Three years building an impeccable reputation. A lifetime devoted to following rules, maintaining boundaries, enforcing standards that never bent. Now everything teetered on the precipice because of one reckless night that had somehow evolved into something I couldn't—didn't want to—abandon.

Easton's unfinished declaration from last night echoed in my mind. I'm falling in love with you, Harlow.

The elevator doors had parted before I could respond, reality intruding on a moment that had irrevocably shifted the landscape between us. Now, facing a hearing that might demolish my career, my mind fixated not on professional survival but on words left unspoken.

The rearview mirror reflected a woman armored for battle—hair disciplined into a tight bun, the charcoal suit I'd selected specifically for its authoritative cut. The quintessential Investigator Clarke, whose judgment had never been questioned.

Until now.

My phone lit with Easton's message: Whatever happens, we face it together. I meant what I said last night.

Heat bloomed beneath my ribs. Inhaling deeply, I stepped from the car and approached the building that had once represented my unwavering moral compass. The needle no longer pointed true north.

Tension saturated the commission hearing room. The imposing cherrywood table dominated the space, with three commissioners arranged at one end like a tribunal. In many ways, this was precisely that.

Commissioner Frank Watts occupied the center position, silver hair and rigid posture embodying three decades of uncompromising regulation.

On his flanks sat Commissioner Josephine Diaz, calculating political advantages behind her neutral expression, and Commissioner Naomi Montgomery, whose reform-minded reputation had earned her both admirers and detractors.

My supervisor Camilla Duarte perched at a side table, her countenance revealing nothing about where her allegiances might fall today.

Staff members lined the paneled walls like spectators at a gladiatorial match, their presence guaranteeing that whatever transpired would saturate commission gossip for months.

I'd nearly reached my designated seat when Enzo Ricci entered, silver hair gleaming under the recessed lighting, leather portfolio clutched like a weapon. The atmosphere calcified, charged with the understanding that this was no routine review—this was warfare.

"Investigator Clarke." Watts's voice sliced through the murmurs. "This emergency session addresses concerns regarding your objectivity in the Jade Petal licensing

review. Do you have any preliminary statement?"

Rising, I squared my shoulders and met his gaze without flinching. "Only that I welcome this opportunity to present the complete context of my investigative approach. The commission deserves absolute transparency, which I'm prepared to provide."

A curt nod. "Proceed with the timeline of your involvement."

For thirty minutes, I methodically deconstructed my investigation—from initial inspection through sabotage discovery to embezzlement identification.

Supporting documentation, access logs, and financial analyses bolstered each finding, emphasizing how collaboration had uncovered violations traditional methods would have missed.

"This partnership model facilitated immediate detection of compliance issues," I explained, directing attention to comparative data. "Our intervention prevented customer exposure to compromised systems and preserved gaming integrity."

Commissioner Montgomery leaned forward. "These outcomes are remarkable. You're suggesting direct engagement with management enhanced oversight rather than compromising it?"

"The evidence supports that conclusion. Maintaining system access while preserving investigative independence revealed sabotage patterns that might have remained hidden until after opening."

Watts cleared his throat, skepticism etched into every facial line. "We must address the elephant in the room." He nodded toward Enzo, who rose with theatrical precision.

"Thank you, Commissioner." Enzo's voice carried the practiced confidence of a man anticipating victory.

His portfolio opened to reveal glossy surveillance photographs.

"While Investigator Clarke presents an innovative theoretical model, these images raise profound questions about her actual independence. "

He distributed the photos—the champagne dress at the gala, dancing with Easton. Exiting the Jade Petal with his hand guiding me. Entering the chapel with our bodies intertwined.

My lungs seized.

"As demonstrated," Enzo continued, satisfaction threading his tone, "the relationship between the investigator and her subject extends well beyond professional parameters."

The room dissolved into whispers. Diaz examined the photos with arched brows, while Montgomery's forehead creased thoughtfully. Only Watts maintained his stoic demeanor, though his jaw tightened perceptibly.

"Investigator Clarke," he said, voice slicing through the commotion, "explain these images."

I inhaled deliberately, dismissing the whispers and focusing exclusively on the commissioners.

"Mr. Ricci presents a deliberately curated narrative designed to undermine legitimate regulatory work.

Yes, I attended the Jade Petal's preview gala—at the commission's explicit request to observe operational protocols.

And yes, Mr. Hardwick and I established a working relationship that facilitated effective investigation of internal sabotage. "

"A 'working relationship' including wedding chapel visits?" Enzo interjected, sliding forward the most damning image.

A peculiar calm descended over me. The worst had happened—our secret exposed—yet I felt strangely emancipated. The era of half-truths had concluded.

"What Mr. Ricci conveniently omits," I stated evenly, "is that these images were captured during a coordinated campaign to sabotage the Jade Petal's licensing. A campaign that included bribing Bryson Delacroix to embezzle funds and compromise gaming equipment."

I distributed my counter-evidence—Bryce's signed confession, financial trails connecting to Enzo's Mirage Continental, and security logs documenting deliberate tampering.

"My relationship with Mr. Hardwick evolved during our investigation of this sabotage.

This approach is undeniably unconventional.

However, I would urge the commission to evaluate my work based on results rather than appearances.

This collaborative model uncovered criminal activity that traditional methods would likely have overlooked. "

Montgomery examined the evidence, appreciation kindling in her expression. "These findings are compelling. And Mr. Delacroix's confession explicitly implicates Mr. Ricci in orchestrating the sabotage?"

"It does, Commissioner. Which invites scrutiny of Mr. Ricci's motives in presenting these surveillance photos today."

Enzo's composed facade fractured. "These allegations are absurd and defamatory—"

"They're documented and verified," I countered, matching his intensity. "Just as your photos confirm my presence at the gala, these financial records confirm your payments to Mr. Delacroix."

The debate intensified, commissioners firing questions from multiple angles. Throughout, I maintained my composure while acknowledging the evolution of my relationship with Easton—emphasizing that our personal connection developed after uncovering the sabotage, not before.

As the commissioners conferred in hushed tones, my thoughts circled back to Easton's unfinished declaration.

I'm falling in love with you, Harlow. Sitting there with my professional existence in jeopardy, the realization crystallized: what I hadn't yet told him mattered more than whatever verdict awaited me.

Commissioner Watts straightened, commanding attention. "The commission finds that while Investigator Clarke's methods were unorthodox, the results appear substantial and valid. We will approve the Jade Petal's licensing application, contingent on independent verification of the sabotage evidence."

Commissioner Diaz added, "However, we must note concerns about appearances."

Future investigations should establish clearer boundaries between personal and professional interactions."

Commissioner Montgomery concluded with unexpected advocacy: "I believe this collaborative model warrants further exploration, with appropriate guidelines. Investigator Clarke's approach has produced significant results deserving additional study."

Relief cascaded through me but felt curiously secondary to the epiphany that had solidified during the hearing: my career, while significant, paled compared to what—who—awaited me beyond these walls.

"Investigator Clarke, a moment."

Camilla intercepted me as I gathered my materials. The room had emptied, commissioners and observers filtering out with varying degrees of satisfaction or disappointment.

"Impressive performance," she remarked, securing the door. "You transformed what should have been career immolation into a methodology review."

"I presented the facts, Camilla. The evidence speaks for itself."

"Indeed." Her appraisal carried newfound respect. "Which explains the commission's proposal. They want you to develop formal guidelines for this 'collaborative oversight' approach—a standardized methodology for potential division-wide implementation."

Surprise momentarily silenced me. "They want to adopt the model?"

"The governor's office is particularly interested. 'Business-friendly regulation' creates compelling campaign rhetoric." She extended a folder. "The Jade Petal's final licensing approval. Signed and expedited."

I accepted the document, feeling its significance—not merely for Easton, but for regulatory innovation itself.

"Thank you."

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Camilla tilted her head, genuine curiosity animating her question. "Was it worth it, Harlow? Risking everything you've constructed for him?"

The question deserved candor. "Yes. He's worth it."

A knowing smile played across her lips. "Then congratulations are appropriate. Professionally and personally."

As she departed, an unusual sense of resolution settled over me. The division between my professional and personal identities—a boundary I'd guarded relentlessly—had finally dissolved. Strangely, I felt more authentic than I had in years.

My momentary tranquility shattered as Enzo Ricci materialized in the doorway, earlier composure replaced by barely restrained fury.

"Savoring your victory, Investigator? Or should I say, Mrs. Hardwick?"

I straightened, securing the approval documents in my briefcase. "The commission made their determination based on evidence, Mr. Ricci. The system functioned properly."

"Don't be naive." He advanced, voice dropping to a venomous whisper. "This was never about regulatory compliance. Easton Hardwick stole something irreplaceable from me years ago. I'm merely reciprocating."

His personal vendetta explained the ferocity of his pursuit. "What exactly did he take?"

A bitter laugh escaped him. "Ask your husband about Meridian Properties. About the development deal that destroyed my family's legacy and launched his first venture. Ask him what he'll sacrifice to win."

"Whatever transpired between you is history," I replied, moving toward the exit. "Your attempt to sabotage the Jade Petal failed. Perhaps focus on your own operations rather than cultivating vendettas."

His hand captured my arm. "He'll annihilate your career without hesitation when he's finished with you. Just as he did to others who trusted him."

I removed his hand deliberately. "You don't know him as I do. And you certainly don't know me if you believe vague accusations will manipulate me."

As I walked away, his parting words pursued me: "Everyone's manipulable, Investigator. It's merely a question of locating the right pressure point."

The threat lingered but couldn't eclipse the weight of the licensing approval in my briefcase—or the anticipation of sharing our victory. I retrieved my phone, hesitating briefly before dialing.

Easton answered immediately, tension evident. "Harlow? The verdict?"

"We succeeded," I replied, emotion coloring my voice despite my efforts. "License approved. The Jade Petal opens on schedule."

His exhale carried audible relief. "And you? Are you alright?"

The question—prioritizing my wellbeing over business outcomes—kindled something profound within me. "Better than alright. They've asked me to develop a formal collaborative oversight program based on our approach."

"That's extraordinary, Harlow. You've transformed potential catastrophe into innovation."

"We transformed it," I corrected. "Together."

The word suspended between us, laden with implications beyond our professional alliance.

Enzo's accusations echoed distantly, but I dismissed them.

Whatever shadowed Easton's past, I trusted the man I'd come to know—who had weathered his best friend's betrayal with dignity, who regarded me with genuine fascination.

"Come home," he said quietly. "Let's celebrate properly."

Home. Not his penthouse. Not the Jade Petal. Home. As if we shared one.

Perhaps we did.

"Twenty minutes," I promised, already moving toward the exit, toward him, toward whatever future we were constructing on accidental foundations.

The Jade Petal cast emerald radiance against the deepening Vegas dusk. Despite my frequent visits, I couldn't help appreciating its architectural restraint that distinguished it from the Strip's garish excess. Like its creator, it exuded sophisticated power rather than ostentatious spectacle.

Easton waited at the private elevator, his expression transforming upon seeing

me—relief dissolving into something more vulnerable.

He'd abandoned his usual corporate armor for dark jeans and a slate-gray Henley that accentuated his broad shoulders, appearing more authentic than the casino magnate who had initially been my investigative target.

"You prevailed," he said, reaching for my hand.

I shook my head, stepping into his space unhesitatingly. "We prevailed."

His arms encircled me, solid and warm, and I yielded to him without the resistance that had characterized our earlier encounters. The elevator sealed us into privacy, and I lifted my face to his.

"Say it again," I whispered.

Understanding immediately, he cradled my face, his gaze holding mine with an intensity that accelerated my heartbeat. "I'm falling in love with you, Harlow Clarke."

Rising on my toes, I eliminated the distance between us. "I'm falling in love with you too, Easton Hardwick. I think I have been since you first challenged everything I thought I knew."

The kiss that followed differed fundamentally from our previous encounters—no alcohol-induced recklessness, no desperate need born from professional friction or forced proximity.

This was deliberate, chosen, acknowledging something that had simmered beneath the surface since our first confrontation.

By the time we reached the penthouse, we were breathless, my blazer half-

unbuttoned, his hair disheveled from my exploring fingers. We stumbled into the living room, reluctant to separate even as he guided me toward the dining area, where champagne awaited in an ice bucket beside crystal flutes.

"You anticipated success," I noted, eyeing the elaborate dinner setting.

His smile carried a hint of characteristic confidence, tempered with genuine emotion. "In you? Absolutely. Even when you were shutting down my first operation, I respected your conviction."

He poured champagne, offering me a flute, bubbles capturing the subdued lighting like suspended gold. "To new beginnings," he proposed, gaze unwavering. "Professional and personal."

Crystal clinked musically as our glasses met. "What began as my life's greatest mistake might be its greatest blessing," I admitted, surprising myself with such honesty.

Easton set down his glass, taking mine and placing it beside his before drawing me closer. "I've been contemplating our marriage."

Nervousness fluttered beneath my ribs. "What about it?"

"It was supposedly temporary. A drunken mistake we'd correct when convenient." His fingers traced my jawline. "But what if it wasn't a mistake? What if Vegas recognized what we couldn't yet acknowledge?"

The vulnerability in his question dismantled my final defense against fully embracing what had developed between us since that first night.

"Are you suggesting we remain married?" My voice barely exceeded a whisper.

"I'm saying I want you as my wife. Genuinely, this time.

Not from inebriation or impulse or neon lights, but because I've never encountered anyone who challenges me, comprehends me, sees through my defenses as you do.

" His grip tightened slightly at my waist. "I want a partner, Harlow.

Someone who confronts my arrogance but stands beside me regardless. I believe that's you."

The directness of his declaration—so characteristically Easton in its confident delivery yet uncommonly vulnerable in its content—momentarily robbed me of speech. This was the man Enzo had warned about? The ruthless operator who destroyed those who trusted him?

No. This was the man who had exposed his flaws alongside his strengths, who acknowledged when I was right even at personal cost, who regarded me now as if I held answers to questions he'd spent a lifetime asking.

"I want to be your wife," I replied finally, the declaration feeling inexplicably right. "Genuinely, this time."

His smile transformed his features—unrestrained joy that seemed almost boyish on a face normally composed for business negotiations. Then his mouth reclaimed mine, and boyishness evaporated entirely.

The kiss deepened instantly, his hands slipping beneath my blouse as I worked the buttons of his Henley. We moved in perfect synchronization despite our urgency—a dance we'd been rehearsing since that first night in his office, each movement more assured than the last.

"Dinner will grow cold," he murmured against my throat as he guided me toward the bedroom.

"Food isn't what I'm hungry for," I replied, pulling his shirt over his head.

His laugh vibrated against my skin. "The meticulous investigator making suggestive comments? How have I corrupted you, Harlow Clarke?"

"By helping me discover what I truly desire," I answered truthfully, unfastening my blouse under his heated scrutiny. "And currently, I desire you."

We barely reached the bedroom, discarding clothing as we progressed. Unlike our first night together, when passion had emerged from months of tension suddenly unleashed, this was simultaneously more urgent and more deliberate—each touch an affirmation, each kiss a covenant.

When the cool sheets met my back, Easton followed me down, his body covering mine with exquisite weight.

His hands and mouth seemed everywhere at once—discovering the sensitive hollow of my throat, the curve of my breast, the dip of my waist. I arched beneath him, my own explorations equally thorough as I traced the muscular contours of his shoulders and back.

"You're exquisite," he whispered, reverence suffusing his voice as he beheld me. "Especially without your professional armor."

I pulled him down for another kiss, craving connection. "No more armor. Not with you."

Something transformed in his expression—desire deepening into something more

profound. When he entered me, our physical union merely echoed what had already transpired emotionally. We established perfect rhythm, each thrust drawing us closer to completion and to each other.

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Unlike our first encounter, I abandoned restraint—every gasp, every moan, every plea escaped freely. Easton matched my abandon, his customary control yielding to raw need as he drove us both higher.

"Mine," he growled against my ear as I shattered around him, pleasure cascading through my body. "My wife."

"Yours," I affirmed, holding him tighter as he followed me into ecstasy, his release triggering aftershocks that left us trembling.

Afterward, we lay entwined, heartbeats gradually slowing. Easton's weight felt perfectly calibrated against me, his head resting on my chest as I idly traced invisible paths across his shoulders.

"Perhaps we should have begun with marriage and worked backward," he mused, pressing his lips to my collarbone. "Spared ourselves considerable complications."

I laughed unreservedly, the sound freer than I typically permitted. "And missed the dramatic buildup? Where's the entertainment in that?"

He propped himself on one elbow, examining my face with that intense focus that once intimidated me. Now, I recognized it as how he memorized things that mattered.

"I love you, Harlow." Simple words, directly delivered, quintessentially Easton.

"I love you too." The declaration emerged naturally, as if I'd expressed it countless times rather than the first.

His smile unfolded slowly, satisfied, and genuine, before he drew me against his chest. "Again?"

Hours later, we lay amid tangled sheets, my body pleasantly exhausted. Easton's fingertips traced lazy patterns on my hip as I nestled against his chest, listening to his steady heartbeat.

"We should discuss Enzo," I said reluctantly, breaking our peaceful interlude but knowing the conversation couldn't wait.

Easton's fingers paused momentarily before resuming their gentle exploration. "What specifically?"

"He mentioned Meridian Properties. Said you took something that destroyed his family's legacy."

A sigh expanded his chest beneath my cheek. "I anticipated this emerging eventually."

I shifted to see his expression. "Is it accurate?"

"It's his interpretation of events." Easton raked fingers through his tousled hair. "Meridian was his father's development company. I needed to expand my tech offices and found their ideal property. Standard acquisition process."

"But?"

"After contract signing, I discovered the property held significantly higher value than disclosed.

Mineral rights and zoning opportunities they either overlooked or deliberately

concealed.

"His expression remained open, honest. "I leveraged those advantages and generated substantial profit.

Enzo believes I defrauded his family, but everything was legally obtained. I simply conducted superior research."

The explanation aligned with what I'd learned about Easton—thorough, strategic, identifying angles others missed. "And his family's legacy?"

"His father overextended on other investments, expecting our deal to resolve his debts. When I paid fair market value rather than his inflated expectations, everything collapsed." Genuine regret colored his tone. "I learned about his circumstances afterward. Too late to intervene."

I studied his face, finding no deception. "Do you regret your actions?"

"I regret their suffering. I don't regret making sound business decisions with available information." His fingers traced my cheek. "That represents who I was then—focused on victory without always considering human consequences. I've evolved since."

"You have," I affirmed, recalling how he managed Bryce's betrayal—decisive but compassionate, firm but not vindictive.

He kissed me softly, silently acknowledging my faith in him. "What else did Enzo claim?"

"That you'd destroy my career once I served your purpose. Like others who trusted you." My tone remained casual, but the question carried weight.

Easton's expression darkened. "Classic manipulation—sowing doubt during vulnerability.

" His embrace tightened. "I've made mistakes, Harlow.

I've prioritized business over people too frequently.

But I've never deliberately destroyed someone who placed faith in me.

And I certainly don't consider you a temporary convenience. "

I believed him. Despite logical reasons for skepticism, I trusted the man holding me more than whispered warnings from someone with transparent motives.

"I know," I assured him, settling against his chest. "What comes next? For us?"

"The marriage paperwork is complete, which simplifies matters," he teased, resuming his gentle exploration of my skin. "But I want a proper ceremony after the grand opening. Something celebrating what we've chosen rather than what happened accidentally."

"I'd like that," I admitted, surprising myself with my sincerity. "And professionally?"

"You develop your oversight program. I operate Vegas's most compliant casino. We maintain appropriate public boundaries until after opening." His voice carried both conviction and tenderness. "We've embraced honesty in everything else—time to acknowledge this too."

"No more pretense," I agreed, feeling the rightness of our decision.

"No more pretense," he echoed, kissing my temple. "Just us, building something

meaningful. Together."

As sleep beckoned, secure in my husband's embrace, I marveled at our journey—from professional adversaries to reluctant allies to genuine partners. What initially seemed life's greatest misstep had somehow become its greatest gift.

"From enemies to lovers to partners," I murmured drowsily. "Who would have predicted this?"

Easton's soft laughter was the last sound I registered before surrendering to sleep. "Vegas, baby. Where the house doesn't always win—but sometimes everyone does."

Easton

Dawn painted the penthouse in liquid gold as sunlight spilled through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

I'd been awake for hours, mind cycling through contingency plans and countless details demanding attention on the most significant day of my career.

At noon, the Jade Petal would open its doors to the public.

Three years of rebuilding from humiliation, all culminating in these next twelve hours.

Beside me, Harlow stirred, her hair like a silk fan across the pillow as she blinked into consciousness. Even half-asleep, she radiated the quiet competence that had once made her my nemesis and now served as my anchor.

"You've been up for hours, haven't you?" she murmured, voice husky with sleep as she shifted closer.

"Just mental checklists." I brushed a strand of hair from her face, still marveling at how natural this felt—waking beside her, sharing thoughts without strategic calculation. "We still have time before heading downstairs."

Her fingers traced a path across my chest. "Nervous?"

"Terrified," I admitted with a candor I'd never have shown anyone else. "Everything

I've rebuilt goes on display today. If anything goes wrong—"

"It won't." The certainty in her voice steadied me. "The systems are flawless, the staff impeccably trained, and you've anticipated every contingency." She propped herself up, fully awake now. "And if something unexpected happens, you'll handle it. That's what you do best."

I caught her hand, pressing my lips to her palm. "When exactly did you become my champion? I distinctly recall you shutting down my first operation without hesitation."

"Because it deserved shutting down." Her smile softened the words. "This one doesn't. You've built something exceptional, Easton. Something worthy of your vision."

Three months ago, those words from Harlow Clarke would have seemed impossible. Now, they formed the foundation beneath everything I'd built.

"I had help," I said quietly. "Your standards elevated the Jade Petal."

She leaned down to kiss me, brief but tender. "Come on. Your empire awaits, and we have a schedule to maintain."

We moved through our morning with practiced synchronicity—sharing the bathroom, Harlow reviewing security protocols on her tablet while I confirmed staffing assignments.

When she emerged from the closet in a tailored jade blazer over a cream silk blouse, I felt that now-familiar tightening in my chest.

"Professional enough for the commission, coordinated enough for opening day," she

said, catching my appreciative gaze as she fastened pearl earrings. "Verdict?"

"I think you're remarkable." I moved behind her, hands resting lightly on her shoulders. "And I think we should tell everyone today."

Her eyes met mine in the reflection. "About us? The marriage?"

"All of it." I turned her to face me. "No more pretending we're just colleagues. No more hiding what matters most."

A smile bloomed across her face—the unreserved one she'd only recently begun showing me. "You're sure? Today is meant to spotlight the Jade Petal, not us."

"The Jade Petal exists because of us—your standards, my vision, our partnership." I grinned. "Besides, I'm tired of pretending I'm not married to the most brilliant woman in Nevada."

She laughed, the sound still new enough to warm me from within. "Flattery will get you everywhere, Hardwick." She straightened my tie with practiced fingers. "Alright. Today we go public. After the opening ceremony."

"After the opening ceremony," I agreed, sealing the promise with a kiss that threatened to derail our carefully planned schedule.

The command center hummed with activity as we arrived. Carmen Torres approached immediately, tablet in hand.

"Final security sweep complete, Mr. Hardwick. All systems optimal. First VIPs arrive in forty-five minutes. Media already setting up in designated areas."

"Staff check-in?" I asked, scanning monitoring screens showing every angle of the casino floor, hotel lobby, and entrance plaza.

"One hundred percent attendance. Everyone's in position."

"Excellent." I nodded to David Wilson, the new CFO who had stepped up admirably after Bryce's removal. "Financial systems?"

"Fully operational. Backup protocols in place." Wilson handed me a report. "And preliminary bookings have exceeded projections by twenty-two percent."

Harlow maintained slight distance, professional mask firmly in place for the staff, but I caught her subtle nod of approval as she reviewed security protocols.

We'd agreed to maintain appropriate boundaries in public until our announcement, though most of my senior team had likely suspected the nature of our relationship.

The investors arrived precisely on schedule—a group whose combined wealth could purchase a small nation. Leading them was Marcus Kellerman, whose initial skepticism had been my biggest hurdle during financing.

"Hardwick." He extended his hand, his assessment taking in not just me but the operation behind me. "Impressive command center. Very... transparent."

"Transparency is our operating philosophy," I replied, shaking his hand firmly. "Would you like to see the monitoring systems before the official opening?"

For the next thirty minutes, I guided them through our security and compliance protocols, emphasizing the innovative oversight model Harlow had developed. The systems spoke for themselves—elegant, comprehensive, unprecedented in the industry.

"The transparency approach has generated more positive press than traditional marketing," Wilson explained, displaying media analytics. "Consumer confidence metrics are tracking forty percent above industry standards."

Kellerman nodded thoughtfully. "And the Gaming Commission? After that business with Delacroix?"

"Fully supportive." I gestured subtly toward Harlow, who was speaking with Torres across the room.

"Investigator Clarke's collaborative oversight model has become a case study in effective regulation.

The commission has asked her to develop formal guidelines for potential industry-wide implementation. "

"Quite a turnaround," Kellerman noted. "Last I heard, she was the one who shut down your previous venture."

"She was," I acknowledged. "Sometimes our harshest critics become our most valuable allies."

After the investors departed to prepare for the opening ceremony, Harlow approached, professional composure perfectly maintained despite the private smile in her eyes.

"They seemed impressed," she observed.

"They should be." I lowered my voice, for her ears only. "You saved me in ways you don't even realize. Not just the casino—me."

Her composure slipped momentarily, genuine emotion flickering across her features before she regained control. "Save the speeches for the opening. We have ten minutes before you need to be at the main entrance."

But she squeezed my hand when no one was looking, and that brief contact carried more meaning than any public declaration could have conveyed.

The grand lobby transformed into a spectacle of light and celebration as noon approached.

Crystal chandeliers scattered rainbows across marble floors.

The ceiling mural of jade koi seemed to swim in the reflected light.

A jazz quartet played from the mezzanine, their music floating above expectant murmurs of VIPs, media representatives, and high-rollers clutching exclusive invitations.

From my position near the emerald-glass entrance doors, I surveyed the crowd.

Commissioner Montgomery conversed with the governor's chief of staff, her progressive stance on regulatory reform having earned her newfound political capital.

Enzo Ricci was notably absent, though several of his associates had appeared, undoubtedly gathering intelligence for their boss.

Liv Chen from the Las Vegas Tribune positioned herself strategically near the ceremonial ribbon, camera crew capturing every detail.

And then there was Harlow—standing slightly apart from the commission contingent, professional demeanor intact but her eyes finding mine across the room with a warmth only I could recognize.

At precisely noon, I approached the podium positioned before the main casino entrance. The crowd quieted, cameras focused, and the moment I'd spent three years working toward arrived.

"Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, members of the press—welcome to the Jade Petal Hotel and Casino.

" My voice carried through the perfect acoustics of the lobby.

"Today marks not just the opening of a new destination on the Las Vegas Strip, but the beginning of a new era in hospitality and gaming excellence. "

The speech continued with acknowledgments of investors, designers, and staff who had made the Jade Petal possible.

I outlined our commitment to guest experience, security, and regulatory compliance without once glancing at my prepared remarks.

These weren't talking points; they were the principles that had guided every decision since rebuilding from the ruins of my previous failure.

"The Jade Petal represents more than luxury and entertainment," I concluded. "It embodies a vision of what's possible when innovation and integrity work in partnership. We are proud to set a new standard for the industry, and we invite you to experience it firsthand."

Applause rippled through the crowd as I cut the ceremonial ribbon.

The massive jade doors to the casino floor swung open, revealing the gaming paradise beyond—elegant tables staffed by impeccably trained dealers, state-of-the-art slots arranged in inviting configurations, the high-limit area visible through etched-glass partitions suggesting exclusivity without ostentation.

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For the next two hours, I circulated among guests, shaking hands, accepting congratulations, answering questions with practiced ease.

Throughout it all, I maintained appropriate distance from Harlow, though I was acutely aware of her location at every moment—as she toured commission representatives through security facilities, as she spoke with journalists about the collaborative oversight model, as she paused beside the fountain in the center of the casino floor, momentarily alone.

I seized the opportunity, approaching her with a champagne flute. "Investigator Clarke. Your assessment of the implementation?"

Her lips curved in the slight smile she reserved for public interactions. "Exemplary execution, Mr. Hardwick. The systems are performing precisely as designed."

"High praise, coming from you." I handed her the champagne, careful to avoid our fingers touching. "Would you join me on the mezzanine balcony? There's a compliance matter I'd like to discuss."

Her eyebrow arched slightly, recognizing the pretext. "Of course."

Moments later, we stood on the private balcony overlooking the casino floor. Below us, the Jade Petal pulsed with energy—players at the tables, staff moving with choreographed precision, the subtle symphony of excitement rising from the crowd.

"It's magnificent," Harlow said quietly, professional mask slipping away now that we were alone. "Everything you envisioned and more."

I moved beside her at the railing, close enough to feel her warmth without actually touching. "Three years ago, you shut me down. Now we've built something better together."

"We have." She turned to face me fully. "And not just the casino."

The sunlight filtering through emerald glass bathed her in a gentle green glow, highlighting the amber flecks in her hazel eyes. In that moment, I couldn't imagine a more perfect sight.

"Are you ready to tell the world we're actually married?" I asked.

Her smile—the real one, the one I'd earned through months of proving myself worthy of her trust—brightened her entire face. "More than ready."

The Dragon's Crown VIP lounge had been transformed for the private reception following the public opening. Vegas elite mingled with investors, commissioners, and select media representatives, celebrating the successful launch while staff circulated with champagne and delicacies.

I caught Harlow's eye across the room and received her subtle nod. With practiced ease, I moved to the center of the space and tapped a knife against my crystal flute, drawing attention.

"Ladies and gentlemen, if I could have your attention for a moment." Conversations quieted as all eyes turned toward me. "I'd like to propose a toast—not just to the Jade Petal's successful opening, but to something even more meaningful."

I extended my hand toward Harlow, who moved to join me with graceful confidence.

As she took her place beside me, curious murmurs spread through the assembled guests.

"Many of you know Investigator Clarke from the Nevada Gaming Commission, whose collaborative oversight model has been instrumental in creating the regulatory framework that makes the Jade Petal unique.

" I smiled down at her, no longer hiding the affection in my expression.

"What you may not know is that she is also my wife. "

The reaction was immediate—expressions of shock, confused whispers, several audible gasps. Liv Chen's photographer's camera clicked rapidly, capturing the moment for tomorrow's headlines.

"I realize this comes as a surprise," I continued, "so allow me to explain. Our story began conventionally enough—with Harlow shutting down my previous casino for compliance violations."

A ripple of laughter broke the tension.

"What followed was less conventional. Three years rebuilding. A reluctant partnership that became a genuine collaboration. And yes, a Vegas wedding chapel at three in the morning after perhaps one too many celebratory drinks."

More laughter now, easier, as the assembled guests processed the revelation.

"What began as a Vegas cliché has become the most meaningful relationship of my life," I said, my voice carrying absolute conviction. "Together, we've created not just a casino, but a new model for how regulation and industry can work in partnership rather than opposition."

I turned to Harlow, silently inviting her to speak.

She stepped forward, her professional composure seamlessly integrating with personal warmth.

"Our journey from adversaries to partners wasn't planned," she said, addressing the room with the same confidence she brought to commission hearings.

"But it's proven that the most productive relationships often arise from challenging each other to be better. "

She turned slightly to address the commissioners directly.

"The collaborative oversight model that the Jade Petal has pioneered demonstrates that effective regulation doesn't require antagonism.

By working together, we've created systems that better protect consumers, ensure compliance, and still allow for innovation and prosperity. "

Commissioner Montgomery raised her glass in subtle acknowledgment, while beside her, Commissioner Diaz's calculating expression suggested she was already considering the political implications.

"To partnerships," I proposed, raising my glass. "Professional and personal."

The toast echoed around the room as guests raised their glasses. The initial shock had transformed into fascination—especially among the journalists present, who clearly recognized the potential headline value of our revelation.

As conversations resumed, now centered on our announcement, Liv Chen approached with determined focus. "Mr. Hardwick, Investigator Clarke—quite the bombshell

you've dropped. The gaming commission knew about this relationship?"

"They were informed during the final licensing review," Harlow confirmed smoothly. "Our personal relationship developed after the primary investigation was complete, and the commission determined there was no conflict of interest given the timing and circumstances."

"And the wedding?" Liv pressed, barely containing her excitement at the scoop.

I laughed. "Exactly as unplanned as it sounds. Vegas at its finest."

"We intended to annul it initially," Harlow added, her honesty disarming even Liv's journalistic instincts. "But sometimes what begins as an accident turns out to be exactly right."

For the next hour, we navigated the reception together—no longer pretending to be merely professional associates.

To my surprise, the response was overwhelmingly positive.

Investors appreciated the transparency. Fellow casino operators seemed more intrigued than threatened.

Even the commissioners, after their initial concern, appeared to recognize the publicity value of being associated with our innovative approach.

"Power couple reshaping Vegas regulation," I overheard one journalist comment to another. "That's tomorrow's headline sorted."

As the reception continued around us, I found a moment to lead Harlow onto the private terrace. The Strip stretched below us, a river of neon and ambition against the

deepening dusk. The Jade Petal's emerald glass exterior gleamed like a beacon among its flashier neighbors.

"You realize we've just redefined industry-commission relations for the entire Strip," Harlow said, leaning against the railing beside me. "Camilla texted that her phone hasn't stopped ringing since our announcement."

"Bothered?" I asked, studying her face for any signs of regret.

She shook her head, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth. "Oddly, no. I spent years building walls between my professional and personal life. It's surprisingly liberating to tear them down."

I wrapped an arm around her waist, drawing her closer. "Speaking of liberation—how does it feel to be publicly married to the man you once considered your nemesis?"

"Professionally complicated. Personally perfect." She turned within the circle of my arms to face me. "I never expected this, Easton. Any of it."

"Neither did I." I brushed a strand of hair from her face. "But then again, the best partnerships often begin as accidents."

The kiss we shared then, overlooking the empire we'd built together, felt like both an ending and a beginning—the conclusion of our journey from enemies to allies, and the start of whatever came next.

Below us, the Jade Petal hummed with life and possibility.

Around us, the Vegas skyline glittered with endless potential.

Three years ago, Harlow Clarke had shut down my casino and nearly destroyed my

career. Today, she stood beside me as my wife, my partner, my most trusted ally. If that wasn't the ultimate Vegas jackpot, I didn't know what was.

"Ready to go back in?" she asked when we finally separated.

I gazed down at her—this extraordinary woman who had challenged me, pushed me, made me better in ways I was only beginning to understand.

"With you? I'm ready for anything."

We returned to the reception hand in hand, no longer hiding, no longer pretending. Whatever came next—challenges, opportunities, triumphs, setbacks—we would face it together. And in Vegas, where the odds always favored the house, I had finally found the one bet worth placing everything on.

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Harlow

Six Months Later

Prisms of jade-tinted light danced across the ballroom floor as afternoon sun filtered through stained glass windows.

Six months ago, this grand space had hosted the Jade Petal's opening celebration—a triumph of professional reinvention.

Today, it witnessed something more personal—a wedding I'd never planned but now couldn't imagine my life without.

"You're overthinking again," Giselle murmured, adjusting the pearl pins securing my upswept hair. "I can see those mental checklists forming behind your eyes."

I caught my sister's reflection in the mirror, her artist's eye having transformed my typically severe chignon into something elegantly soft. "Professional hazard," I admitted.

"Even on your wedding day?" She arched a perfectly shaped eyebrow. "The real one, not the drunken Vegas chapel version."

"Especially today." I smoothed the silk of my gown—ivory rather than traditional white, its clean lines making a statement of quiet confidence rather than bridal spectacle. "It matters more when you're choosing it deliberately."

Giselle's expression softened as she fastened a pearl earring for me. "You two have written quite the story. From shutdown orders to 'I do,' with a brief detour through accidental matrimony."

I laughed, the sound freer than anyone at the commission would have recognized six months ago. "When you put it that way, it sounds absurd."

"The best stories usually are." She stepped back to admire her handiwork, a satisfied smile playing at her lips. "David thinks so too."

My eyes narrowed playfully. "Speaking of absurd stories—you and the CFO? After all your lectures about me getting involved with Easton?"

"What can I say?" Her grin turned mischievous. "Turns out financial analysis is surprisingly sexy. Besides, someone needed to keep an eye on the Jade Petal's books after that mess with Bryce."

The door opened before I could respond, revealing Commissioner Montgomery in a tailored navy pantsuit, her typically stern expression softened for the occasion.

"The guests are seated, Harlow." Her use of my first name—rare enough to notice—came with a genuine smile.

"The Collaborative Oversight Division is the talk of regulatory circles, you know.

Five casinos already implementing your framework, and the governor singing your praises to anyone who'll listen. "

Pride warmed my chest. The model Easton and I had pioneered had transformed from controversial experiment to emerging industry standard in just six months.

"Thank you for coming, Commissioner. Your support has meant everything to the

program's success."

"I recognize innovation when I see it." She paused at the door. "You've changed the game, Harlow. Not just in regulation, but in how we think about the relationship between oversight and industry."

As she departed, Giselle handed me my bouquet—pale roses with sprigs of gardenia, wrapped in silk that matched my dress. "Ready to get married? Again?"

I nodded, surprising myself with the certainty I felt. "More than ready."

The ballroom had transformed under Easton's exacting vision.

Crystal chandeliers suspended from the ceiling caught and refracted light in dazzling patterns.

The Vegas skyline provided a living backdrop through the floor-to-ceiling windows, the Strip stretching like a river of neon against the darkening desert sky.

Familiar faces filled the seats—commission colleagues, casino executives, industry leaders who had once viewed both the Jade Petal and our relationship with skepticism.

Camilla Duarte sat beside the governor in the second row, their presence a tacit endorsement of everything we'd built.

My parents watched from the front—my father, the retired police officer whose unwavering integrity had shaped my own; my mother, whose judicial career had taught me that while rules mattered, context mattered too.

And at the altar, waiting with rare stillness, stood Easton.

Our eyes connected the moment I appeared, and everything else—the guests, the music, Vegas itself—receded.

In his gaze, I saw our entire unlikely journey reflected: the antagonism of our first encounters, the reluctant respect that followed, the passion that caught us both unprepared, and finally, this—a partnership neither of us had sought but both now treasured.

The ceremony passed in a haze of emotion until we reached our vows. Easton took my hands, his voice steady but intimate, meant primarily for me despite our audience.

"Harlow," he began, his eyes never leaving mine, "when you walked into my casino three years ago with that shutdown order, I was certain you'd ruined everything.

I never imagined you'd actually save me.

" His thumb traced circles on my palm, a gesture of connection only I could feel.

"You challenged every assumption, every shortcut, every compromise I'd made.

You held me to standards I didn't believe I could meet—until I did. "

He took a breath, emotion briefly overwhelming his usual composure.

"Our first wedding may have been spontaneous Vegas madness, but this one isn't. This time, we know exactly what we're choosing.

I choose you—your brilliance, your unflinching integrity, your impossible standards.

I choose our partnership in all its forms. And I promise to spend every day earning

the trust you've placed in me. "

When my turn came, I was surprised by the steadiness of my own voice.

"Easton, I built my career on rules, boundaries, and meticulous planning.

Then you came along and upended everything—first as my professional adversary, then as my accidental husband, and finally as the partner I never knew I needed.

" I tightened my grip on his hands. "You taught me that sometimes the most valuable discoveries happen when plans collapse.

You showed me that flexibility isn't always compromise, and that trust can be stronger than certainty. "

I smiled, letting him see everything I felt without reservation. "This time, I'm choosing you deliberately—your vision, your determination, your capacity to learn and grow. I promise to challenge you when you need it, support you when it matters, and stand beside you in everything that comes next."

The exchange of rings—platinum bands that would never turn our fingers green like those chapel-provided ones—felt like sealing a covenant more significant than either of us had anticipated six months ago.

Later, as we danced beneath the crystal chandeliers, the Strip creating a tapestry of light behind us, I rested my head against Easton's shoulder.

"Record-breaking six months," he murmured against my hair.

"The Jade Petal's revenue or our relationship timeline?" I asked, smiling against the

fine fabric of his tuxedo.

"Both." His hand tightened at my waist. "From enemies to partners to lovers to husband and wife in less than a year. I'd call that impressively efficient."

"Or reckless," I countered, though the word had lost its sting. "The best mistake we ever made."

"Some rules are worth breaking." He pulled back enough to meet my eyes, his expression unguarded in a way few people ever witnessed. "Or perhaps rewriting entirely."

"A collaborative approach?" I suggested, deliberately echoing our professional terminology.

"To everything." He spun me gently before drawing me back against him. "The Jade Petal, the oversight model, us—it all works because we stopped seeing each other as two-dimensional adversaries, but real people with beating hearts."

Around us, the reception continued—Giselle laughing with David near the champagne fountain, commissioners mingling with casino executives in conversations that would have been unthinkable a year ago, journalists documenting what had become Vegas's most unexpected power couple.

But in that moment, wrapped in Easton's arms as we moved across the floor, I wasn't thinking about career achievements or regulatory innovations.

I was thinking about chance—how one impulsive night had changed everything, how what should have been my greatest professional mistake had become my greatest personal blessing.

"What are you thinking about?" Easton asked, reading my expression with the

familiarity of someone who had made studying me a priority.

"The future," I replied honestly. "Ours."

His smile—the genuine one, not the polished version he showed the public—warmed me from within. "I like those odds."

And as Vegas glittered beyond the windows, as familiar and yet different as we ourselves had become, I realized some gambles were always worth taking. Especially when you found a partner who made you better with every play.

"So do I, my love," I whispered, sealing the promise with a kiss. "So do I."