

Time Kings of Las Vegas

by
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Prologue

January 30, 1994 - Buffalo

"God-damned. It's like we're fuckin' cursed."

Super Bowl XXVIII had ended almost two hours ago, in an all too familiar fashion: with Buffalo losing to the Dallas Cowboys 30-13. Most of the customers who'd gathered in Shorty's Bar and Grill to cheer on their hometown Bills had left long ago, despondent and defeated. Only a dozen diehards remained, drinking away their sorrows in clusters of twos and threes scattered about the room.

William was sitting on a stool up at the bar, nursing a beer while his friend Mike ranted about the loss.

"Un-fucking-believable!" Mike spat, pounding his mug on the bar top hard enough to send beer sloshing over the side. "Four Super Bowl losses in a row? Four? Bullshit, man. Total bullshit!"

Mike had claimed his seat at the bar an hour before kickoff, right in front of the 40-inch Sony Trinitron mounted on the wall above the shelves of booze. In the seven hours since then he hadn't moved - not even to use the restroom - despite downing what William estimated to be somewhere in the region of twenty pints of beer.

William had been here just as long, occupying the stool beside Mike. But he'd only had four beers, and he'd gotten up to pee several times during the game. Of course, he was also pushing fifty; almost two decades older than Mike.

"At least they made it to the Super Bowl again," William offered as consolation. "Nobody else has ever gone four times in a row."

"Nah," Mike objected, shaking his head. "You don't get it 'cause you didn't grow up here. This is like a kick in the nuts. Losing is worse than not going."

"He's right," Tom chimed in from behind the bar. "The whole country's watching. All of America saw us choke. Again."

"It's like we're stuck in a time loop or something," Mike muttered.

"Time doesn't loop," William said, with a rueful smile. "It is fluid, though."

"Fluid?" Mike parroted, blinking his eyes in confusion.

"Relative is more accurate," William amended. "Time can speed up or slow down, based on the velocity of an object. The faster you go, the slower time moves."

"Bullshit," Tom snorted, wiping down a glass and crouching down to set it on the shelf beneath the bar.

"Hey, now," Mike said, holding up a hand in his friend's defense, "Billy's a smart guy. He knows what he's talking about. Einstein and shit, right?"

"More or less," William acknowledged.

"Bullshit," Tom said again as he stood up. "Time is time. It doesn't change."

"They proved it," William assured him. "Verified with an atomic clock."

"Atomic?" Tom said. "Like a bomb?"

"Shit, you're stupid," Mike laughed. "It's not a bomb. Just real accurate."

"Precisely," William concurred. "An atomic clock is very, very accurate. In 1971 two men named Hafele and Keating conducted an experiment. They synced two atomic clocks and put one on a commercial jet. The other stayed on the ground.

"After the flight, they compared them and found the clocks were out of sync. The one on the plane had fallen behind by a few nanoseconds due to kinetic dilation."

Seeing the blank stares of the other two, William clarified. "Because of how fast it was flying, time had moved more slowly on the plane."

"Fuck me," Mike muttered, though William suspected his amazement was more due to alcohol than the wonders of science.

"As I said, time is relative. Fluid. Malleable."

"I still say bullshit," Tom grumbled, tossing his dishtowel over his shoulder and disappearing into the bar's back room.

"Level with me," Mike asked after Tom had left. "Is that story true?"

"A bit over-simplified," someone answered from over William's shoulder, "but essentially accurate."

William didn't need to turn around to recognize the speaker. He'd been dreading hearing that voice for years.

"Who the hell are you?" Mike asked the newcomer, eyeing him suspiciously.

"William and I go way back."

"That true?" Mike asked, as William stared pointedly down at his beer. "This guy a friend of yours?"

"Mike," William said without raising his head. "Can you give us a minute, please?"

Mike hesitated, sensing something was wrong. Then he pushed his seat back from the bar and stood up. "Gotta take a piss anyway."

The newcomer took the seat on William's opposite side as Mike staggered off.

"It took us a long time to find you," he said, his voice calm and relaxed, speaking softly enough so no one else in the bar could overhear. "I'm impressed."

William didn't answer.

"Where's Dr. Schuller?" the man asked.

The question had no urgency. There was no malice or threat in the tone. But it was there, nonetheless.

"Lisa and I went our separate ways when we left the project," William replied, keeping his gaze fixed firmly on his beer. *Thank god you haven't found her, too.*

"What about the girl?"

"Her name was Beth."

"Was?"

"She died last year. Ovarian cancer."

"So young," the other man remarked, without any real emotion. "Her cancer... was it caused by the project?"

William shrugged, still staring at his mug. "Probably. No way to know for sure."

"And her offspring?"

Offspring. So cold. So clinical.

"I don't know. Made sure I didn't know. In case you found me."

"I believe you, William," the voice said. "You're a smart man; you know ignorance is the only way to protect them. But you'll still have to come with us so we can be sure."

He speaks with the ease of a man asking about the weather. What kind of person can be so casual while threatening another human being with torture?

William finally turned his head to look at the man seated next to him. Dr. Arvihd Singh had changed little over the last few years - short, thin, balding. He wore the same wire-rim glasses, perched on the bridge of his long, narrow nose. His black beard was still trimmed to a sharp point, though William noticed a few strands of gray in it now. And his brown skin had a few more lines around the eyes. But otherwise he looked as he always had: academic and professional in his manner and appearance; completely unassuming.

But William knew the things he'd done. And he could imagine the things Dr. Singh was going to do to him once they left the bar. The man was a monster.

He hadn't come alone, of course. Two men in black overcoats hovered near the door, their features hard and chiseled, their eyes hidden behind mirrored sunglasses even though they were inside a dingy bar.

"What if I refuse to go with you?" William asked.

"You must decide," Singh explained. "Do you come quietly, without making a fuss? Or do you resist and force us to kill everyone in here before dragging you out that door? Either way, it ends the same for you."

His tone never changed. In all their years working together, William had never heard him yell. Or shout. Or even raise his voice. It was as if he knew his words - his orders - were inevitable.

William pulled a folded wad of bills from his pocket. He always paid cash for everything. He placed the entire stack on the bar - all the money he had on him - then slowly pushed his stool away and stood up.

"Let's go," he whispered. "Before Mike comes back."

A minute later the younger man returned from the restroom to find only an empty seat and a pile of twenties where his friend had been. He never saw William again.

Chapter 1

March 15, 2019 - Las Vegas

One month before the D Street Massacre

My name's Carson. Carson Gaines. There are three things you need to know about me. The first is that I'm a professional gambler. I'm not an addict. Not quite. But it's probably safe to call me a degenerate.

Carson shifted in his seat, trying to get comfortable. For the past four hours, he'd been hunched over a blackjack table in the Siegel Suites Casino, grinding away hand after hand, and the chairs weren't built with someone six-three in mind. As the dealer flipped out another round of cards, Carson rolled his head from side-to-side, listening to the snap-crackle-pop of the joints in his neck.

Such is the glamorous life of the professional card counter.

The Siegel wasn't one of the fancy mega-casinos that line the Strip. It wasn't even one of the kitschy "old Vegas" joints down on Freemont Street, refurbished and cleaned up to draw in the tourists and suck the dollars from their wallets while giving them free drinks to numb the pain of losing. Conveniently located close enough to skid row to smell the piss, the Siegel Suites could be charitably called a "locals-only" casino.

Carson just called it a shithole.

Despite being a Friday night, the place was almost empty; the March Madness crowd wouldn't hit the city until next week. At most there were two dozen people in the whole place, not counting the staff. The majority of the patrons were playing nickel slot machines, their eyes glazed over as they slapped the SPIN button in a repetitive, robotic trance.

Vegas had been built on the one-armed bandits, but the slots didn't even have handles anymore. It was all digital video bullshit now - cheaper to make, and cheaper to maintain.

Carson never touched the slots; the house edge was too high. He was a stats guy. He knew the odds of every game in every casino in Vegas.

The slots will bleed you dry in no time.

Blackjack, on the other hand, was a game smart players could control. Counting cards and adjusting your bets when the deck was running hot shifted the odds in the player's favor. It wasn't much, but it was just enough to turn a steady, reliable profit over the long haul.

Carson had been counting cards in Vegas ever for almost two years. All the good spots - places that didn't reek of stale cigarette smoke and weren't crawling with hookers and junkies - knew him by now. If he sat down at a blackjack table in any respectable casino, it wouldn't take long for security to swoop in and shut his action down. So, he had to set his sights lower.

And the Siegel is as low as it gets.

Besides the mindless slot jockeys, the rest of the crowd was a mix of hookers hunting tricks, junkies looking to score and stubborn players like Carson huddled around the four tables in the middle of the room that made up the tiny blackjack pit. Only two of the tables even had dealers; the others stood empty and abandoned. In any other casino, someone would have at least shooed the hookers and junkies away. In the Siegel, nobody could be bothered.

Fortunately, the apathy of the staff worked in Carson's favor. Counting cards in real life wasn't like it was portrayed in films. It wasn't possible to just grab a chair and win right away. It took focus and patience; it was a marathon, not a sprint. Every hand Carson would squeeze out

tiny mathematical advantages that would gradually add up over time... as long as he didn't get caught.

That's the real trick to counting cards. The math is simple. But staying off the casino's radar takes work.

He was dressed to avoid attracting attention: faded jeans and a long-sleeved, black t-shirt. More importantly, he was keeping his bets small. Even a dump like the Siegel had security cameras everywhere. Lower bets cut into his profits per hour, but it was a necessary sacrifice. Winning too much too fast would draw unwanted scrutiny from the eyes in the sky.

Carson looked over at the king sitting in front of the dealer, then glanced down at his cards: a pair of 4's.

Don't like those odds.

He tapped the table for a hit. The dealer flipped over a ten, giving him 18. Now he was stuck. He couldn't take another card without busting, but 18 probably wasn't going to win.

He waved off, and his fears were realized a few seconds later as the dealer flipped up another king, giving herself 20.

Sometimes you can see the train coming but you can't get off the tracks.

"New shoe," the dealer announced, snatching away his bet before shuffling up the cards.

Even with losing the last hand, a quick count of his chips confirmed Carson was up a little over \$500.

Not bad for three hours work. Enough to buy Ella something nice. That's the second thing you need to know about me: I have a daughter. Ella's four. She lives with her mother in LA. We got divorced two years ago, and I moved to Vegas right after. My gambling wasn't the reason we split up. But it sure as hell didn't help.

Knowing he had a few minutes before play would resume, Carson scooped up his chips and stuffed them into his pocket before heading for the restroom. Unlike the higher end casinos, the Siegel wasn't the kind of place where it was safe to just leave your money sitting on the table.

He took a quick piss, hurrying so he could get back before the next hand was dealt. He washed and dried his hands, then stepped back out onto the casino floor... only to find two men in dark suits waiting for him.

One looked to be about forty; the other was probably ten years younger. Square heads, thick jaws, identical grim expressions. Both men were very large and didn't try to hide it; their suits were cut to accentuate their thick, muscular frames rather than concealing them.

If you looked up "casino security" in an illustrated dictionary you'd find a picture of these two gorillas.

"Can I help you boys with something?" Carson asked, putting on a thick Southern drawl.

"You need to come with us, Mr. Gaines," the older one replied.

"Think y'all are a bit confused," Carson said, staying in character. "Name's Stevens, not Gaines."

"There's no mistake, Mr. Gaines."

Busted.

Carson didn't know what had tipped them off to his real identity. He wasn't betting heavy, but maybe someone watching from upstairs had gotten suspicious about the new player hanging around the tables the past few nights. It wouldn't have been hard to grab an image of his face from the cameras and pass it around to the surveillance crews at a few other joints. The casinos watched out for each other like that. Someone probably recognized him and was only too happy to tell the Siegel all about Carson Gaines, notorious card counter.

I just can't catch a fucking break!

"Let's go to the security office in the back and have a little chat, Mr. Gaines."

Right. Chat.

The bigger casinos, like the ones on the Strip that target tourists coming to Vegas to blow their wad, wouldn't actually do much if they caught someone counting cards. They might ban a counter from the blackjack tables; maybe charge a player with trespassing if they tried to sneak back into the game after being warned. But they were too worried about their reputations to do anything drastic.

The Siegel was different. The people running it cared a lot more about a few hundred dollars in chips than their already worthless reputation. And the goons in front of him clearly weren't going to shy away from the rough stuff.

"I'd love to stay," Carson said, "but it's getting late."

"This won't take long," the older man said, stepping forward and reaching out with a meaty paw.

*** *FREEZE!* ***

The man halted mid-stride, instantly paralyzed. His clutching hand hung motionless in the air, only a few inches away from the collar of Carson's shirt. Over his shoulder, Carson could see the other security guard's lips had curled up in a cruel grin, and his eyes were wide with the eager anticipation of impending violence. But like his partner, he was completely frozen in place.

That's the third thing you need to know about me. I can stop time.

It wasn't just the security guards who were affected. Every person in the entire casino was completely immobilized. Some were fixed in place with their hands hovering over the SPIN buttons of the slots; others were held fast as they feed more bills into the insatiable money-eaters. A \$5 chip tossed towards a blackjack dealer as a tip was suspended in mid-air.

Even the slot machines were frozen, the whirling images of their virtual reels stuck in mid-spin. There was no sound - the omnipresent cacophony of the chiming slots and the disgruntled mutterings of frustrated players had been swallowed up in an eerie, oppressive silence. The entire scene was motionless and still as a painting, or a video after someone hits pause.

That's my power. My gift. With a single thought, I can stop the entire world. But here's the kicker - whenever I do, I'm just as helpless as everyone else. While the world is in stasis, I can't actually do anything. Not even move my eyeballs to change what I'm looking at. I'm just... stuck. Trapped until I start everything up again.

When that happened - when Carson let the world snap back to normal and time began moving again - nobody would have any idea that they'd been temporarily frozen. Nobody would have any awareness of what he'd done, or that anything strange had happened.

Nobody but me.

But even though Carson couldn't move when the world is frozen, stopping time still had its uses. It gave him time to think. Analyze the situation. Formulate a plan whenever things took an unexpected turn... like running into a pair of security goons on the way back from taking a piss.

He surveyed the situation carefully, evaluating his options. He was taller than either of the guards, but they each outweighed him by at least thirty pounds. He wouldn't stand a chance against them, especially not two-on-one.

Not a problem. I usually prefer flight to fight anyway.

The guard reaching out to grab him was leaning forward. Anticipating Carson might try to scramble backwards, he'd shifted all his weight onto his front foot in a quick lunge. He was motionless now, of course, but from his position Carson could tell his center of mass was over-extended. Easy to knock off balance.

That's my angle.

He'd use his eagerness against him. Catch him off guard by doing the unexpected: attack instead of retreat. And then hope his partner couldn't react in time.

At least, that was the plan.

*** *GO!* ***

The world exploded back into life with a burst of motion and sound. The slot machines whirred and chimed as players resumed their robotic pawing at the buttons, completely unaware they had all just been released from a temporal prison.

The security guard's clutching hand snapped forward, but Carson was ready for it now. Stepping nimbly to the one side, he grabbed the sleeve of the guard's jacket and pulled down, hard.

The sudden ploy caused his surprised opponent to stagger forward and fall to the floor. Behind him, his less experienced partner looked on with an expression of shock and confusion.

Carson seized on his bewilderment by stepping forward to deliver a swift kick to the younger man's crotch, causing him to double over with a loud groan.

Dirty move, but I don't have a lot of options.

As the younger guard clutched his balls and sank to the ground, Carson hurdled over him and started running. Weaving his way between the tables and slots, he made a beeline for the doors leading to the street outside. Behind him, one of the guard's shouted out for someone to stop him.

Curious about the ruckus, a frail old woman stood up from her slot machine and turned to see what was going on, stepping right into Carson's path. He swerved to the side, narrowly avoiding barreling her over. But his left knee clipped the corner of one of the slot machines and the impact sent him crashing to the floor.

He scrambled back to his feet, trying to ignore the throbbing pain in his bruised knee as he limped towards the exit. As he burst from the casino the cloying curtain of stale smoke gave way to the crisp air of a mid-March night. But Carson didn't have time to stop and appreciate it.

Favoring his injured knee, he half-ran, half-hopped down the block. He only made it to the next corner before one of his pursuers crashed into him with a flying tackle from behind. They both slammed into the pavement, knocking the wind from Carson's lungs as the heavier man landed on top of him.

Momentarily stunned, Carson rolled onto his back, gasping for breath. Before he could recover, the second guard caught up with them and the two men yanked Carson to his feet. The younger man pinned his arms behind his back while the older man started unbuttoning his jacket.

"You stupid son of a bitch," he snarled, tossing the jacket to the ground and rolling up the cuffs of his shirt. "You think just because we're a small casino that we can't spot a fucking cheater?"

"Counting card isn't cheating!" Carson protested, struggling vainly against the iron grip of the man holding his arms. "And it's not illegal!"

"Tell it to someone who cares, fucktard!" the man replied, crouching down and cocking his fist before launching it toward Carson's mid-section in a vicious uppercut.

*** *FREEZE!* ***

His fist stopped mere inches from Carson's gut. Carson's head had already recoiled slightly in anticipation of the blow, making the muscles of his neck taut. Despite time being frozen, he could sense the man holding his arms had shifted his weight forward, bracing for the impact.

I don't know why I have this power. I've been doing my trick as far back as I can remember – even as a little kid. It's like walking or talking; just a natural thing I don't even remember learning to do.

But it's not all it's cracked up to be. Stopping time never really solved my problems. Not the ones that mattered. It couldn't make me popular with the cool kids in high school. It couldn't make the girls like me. It couldn't bring my parents back after they died in a car crash. It couldn't save my marriage.

And in this case, stopping time didn't change the fact that Carson was about to get his ass beat. He could hold his attackers at bay indefinitely. Just keep the world frozen, with that punch stopped a few inches from his gut. But to what end? Eventually he had to let the world start up again. And that swinging fist headed was going to land. Some things were inevitable.

Sometimes you can see the train coming, but you can't get out off the tracks.

*** *GO!* ***

The punch slammed home, just beneath his rib cage. Carson grunted in pain, gagging and coughing. The man pinning his arms chuckled, the sound echoing loudly in his ear. Two more blows caught him in the stomach; if he wasn't being held up, he would have doubled over on the ground.

With their victim gasping desperately for air, the first man scooped up his discarded jacket and wrapped it around his right hand. The he slammed his cushioned knuckles into Carson's jaw. The impact turned his world into a swirling mass of lights and colors; he barely even felt the next two blows.

The man behind let go and Carson crumpled to the curb. Still dazed, he felt something warm on his lips and chin, and there was a sticky taste in his mouth. It took him a second to realize it was blood gushing from his nose.

"Those chips are property of the Siegel Suites," one of the men growled, as they rolled him over and started rifling through his pockets.

Carson clutched and pawed at the men; an instinctive - yet futile - attempt to stop them from robbing him of his winnings for the night. All his efforts earned him was a swift kick to the midsection.

"Hey, you worthless bastards!" a woman's voice suddenly rang out. "Leave him alone!"

His assailants stood up and took a step back, wary of the unexpected interloper. Carson gingerly rolled onto one side to take a look at his savior as she came into view, materializing like a guardian angel from the darkness.

*** *FREEZE!* ***

The pain and disorientation clouding his thoughts vanished, but he knew from experience they'd return with a vengeance as soon as time started moving again. At least this gave him a clear-headed moment to take stock of the situation.

The woman was a stranger. White. Tall and thin. Older; sixty, maybe. Platinum-blond hair cut a few inches above the shoulder; sensible yet stylish. Her expression was hard and determined - eyes narrowed, jaw clenched. She was wearing dark pants, black calf-high boots with a low heel, and a long white coat belted at the waist. Her right arm was extended straight out in front of her, clutching a small can of what looked like mace. Pointing it right at Carson's new best friends.

On the edge of his peripheral vision Carson could just make out the older of the two thugs. He looked worried.

It's one thing to beat the shit out of some punk card counter. But roughing up a random woman in the street isn't in his job description.

Carson had no idea who the woman was, or why she decided to step in and help me.
But right now, I'll take all the help I can get.

*** GO! ***

Carson's world was once again enveloped in a concussive fog, his head still woozy from his recent beating. No longer frozen by the stoppage of time, the woman came closer with quick, deliberate steps, the can of mace held before her like a talisman.

"Back off!" she snapped at the still hesitant security goons. "Get your steroid-stuffed asses out of here before I call the god-damned cops!"

The older one tilted his head back in the direction of the casino in a silent signal to his partner, and they slowly backed away.

"They stole my chips," Carson tried to say, but all that came out was a low groan.

"We better not see you around here again," the older thug called out to Carson as they retreated.

"Keep moving!" the woman hissed in response. "Get out of here before you really piss me off. Go!"

She stared them down, keeping her mace at the ready until they disappeared around the corner. Once they were out of sight, she pocketed the mace and dropped down on one knee to help Carson into a sitting position. By this time, his head was clearing enough for him to try and speak again.

"Thanks," was all he could muster.

"This will probably hurt like a son of a bitch," she whispered to him as she cautiously felt along his ribs. Carson moaned loudly as her fingers found a sore spot.

"Don't be such a baby. They're just cracked, not broken.

"Let me check the nose," she said, grabbing him firmly by the chin.

He flinched as she roughly wiggled the tip back and forth.

"Huh. That's not broken either. Guess it's your lucky night."

"Yeah, I won the fucking jackpot," Carson replied, gritting his teeth against her continued poking and prodding of his face.

"Jaw and orbital bones seem intact. Can you stand?"

"I think so."

He leaned on her more than he meant to as he struggled to his feet, but she bore his weight with surprising ease.

"Let's get you to a hospital," she declared.

"I'm fine," Carson said, with a shake of his head.

The movement made his world lurch and sway, and he would have stumbled if she hadn't grabbed him.

"Don't be a dumbass. You've got a concussion. It could be serious. You need to see a doctor."

Realizing he was in no shape to argue, Carson let her lead him away.

Chapter 2

Carson spent the rest of the night in the hospital for observation. When they released him the next morning, the platinum-haired woman who'd come to his rescue was gone.

He wasn't surprised she'd left; he hadn't expected her to stick around all night. But it would have been nice to thank her properly.

No chance of that now. Never even got her name before she disappeared.

He caught the bus back to where he'd parked his car near the Siegel. Sometimes he'd try to make some extra cash picking up fares on Uber or Lyft – being a professional gambler wasn't always the most stable stream of income. But sitting behind the wheel he knew that wasn't going to be an option today.

Really not a good idea to be driving people around the city when I'm feeling this woozy.

The goons had given him a concussion, and the doctor had warned him he'd experience unpleasant symptoms for the next few days. Rather than fight it, he decided to take it easy and rest up.

Somehow, he made it safely back to his apartment, but even that short drive left his head pounding. For the next two days, he barely got out of bed. He slept fitfully, plagued by hazy nightmares of his beating. In his dreams, the thugs who worked him over were faceless blobs, and the foul-mouthed woman who rescued him was a figure bathed in shining silver light.

Each time he woke, he'd kick off the covers and try to get up... only to crawl right back into bed when the room started spinning and his stomach tried to puke itself up. Even lying down he didn't feel great, though his symptoms seemed to come and go in waves. When things got really bad - when the vertigo and the nausea and the pounding in his skull became too much to bear - he'd stop the world.

*** *FREEZE!* ***

He didn't feel sick when he stopped time. No headaches. No nausea. His symptoms were paused along with the rest of the physical world. But it was only a stopgap solution. He knew it would all come back the instant he started time up again.

Still, it's nice to take a break from feeling like shit. Even if it's only temporary.

His parents had no idea he could stop time. He'd asked them about it once when he was five or six. But they didn't know what he was talking about, and he was too young to properly explain it. In the end, they just assumed he was talking about a fantasy children dream up, like an imaginary friend or a monster in a closet.

Growing up, Carson had to figure things out for himself. What he could and couldn't do. Testing the limits of his power. But even after all these years, he still had no idea how long he could actually keep things locked in stasis. Seconds, minutes, hours - all those markers cease to have meaning when time itself no longer existed.

When the world is stopped, everything just happens in the now.

All Carson knew was that the longer he kept time frozen, the harder he had to concentrate. Eventually something would slip, and the universe would snap back into motion, seemingly oblivious to his temporary interruptions.

*** *GO!* ***

By Monday morning he was starting to feel like himself again. He managed to shower and eat breakfast without the room spinning even once. Rested and re-energized, he sat down at the kitchen table, fired up his iPad, and got to work.

When it came to counting cards, Vegas was basically dead to him now. If the crew at the Siegel could spot him, he didn't have much chance of going unnoticed anywhere else. But there were other ways to make money in Sin City.

And I'm not talking about driving for Uber.

The Men's NCAA Basketball Championship was starting in two days: sixteen games on Thursday, sixteen games on Friday, and sixteen more on the weekend. By then every hotel room on the Strip would be booked. Every sports bar and pub in the city would be packed with rabid fans. Every casino would be so crowded you could barely walk from one side to the other. It was called March Madness for a reason.

For the casinos, it was a gold mine – their most profitable weekend of the year. And Carson had every intention of getting himself a piece of that action. All he had to do was capitalize on what Vegas called "dumb money".

And nobody's dumber than college basketball fans at the start of March Madness.

Most people bet with their heart, not their head. They backed teams they already had a vested interest in: their alma matter; the local college; big name universities with national profiles like Notre Dame and Duke. Some people latched onto a school because of the mascot, or the color of the jerseys. Or maybe they got swept up in a great tournament run by a Cinderella team a few years ago, and just kept betting long shots hoping to recapture the magic every year after that.

Whatever the reason, it all boiled down to the same thing. They'd throw their money down on the team they *hoped* would win, as if their blind loyalty could help bring victory. They followed their gut. And the way to beat people who bet with their gut was simple: look at the numbers. Study the stats. Trust the math.

In the modern age it was possible to get literally thousands of data points on every team and player. Injury reports. Strength of schedule. Net plus/minus. Over/unders. RPI. A lot of it was just white noise, but if you were willing to sort through the static, you could find the real signal.

He analyzed all thirty-two first round matchups in detail, cross-referencing and comparing the teams as he searched for the soft lines. Hunting for those precious spots where dumb money had pushed the odds too far in one direction or the other. Looking for the tiny edges he could exploit.

When he finally shut his laptop down, five hours had slipped away. His eyes were blurry, and his headache had come back from staring at the screen for so long, but he had his picks.

Satisfied, he set his alarm for seven pm, crawled into bed and closed his eyes.

The shrill beeping woke him from a deep and dreamless sleep. Groggy and disoriented, he forced himself to get up and stumble to the kitchen. There he plopped himself down at the table and opened up his iPad.

Taking a second to compose himself, Carson tapped the FaceTime icon on the screen and called his ex-wife. A few seconds later, Sarah's face popped up into view.

"You'll have to make it a quick call tonight," she said by way of greeting, sounding tired and defeated. But her tone quickly changed to one of concern.

"Oh my God, Carson! What the fuck?"

For a second, he didn't know what she was talking about. Then his eyes flicked to the tiny image of himself in the corner of the screen, and he realized his face was an absolute mess.

He'd been cleaned up at the hospital, but there were still angry scrapes on his cheeks and a thick scab on his chin from being tackled on the pavement. His lip was split and swollen, and his eyes were a black and purple raccoon's mask.

"I ran into some trouble this weekend."

"Do I even want to know what?" Sarah asked, exasperated.

"A couple over-zealous casino security guards. No big deal."

Sarah pursed her lips, clearly wondering what he was holding back. But Carson didn't want to get into the details.

"Can I talk to Ella?"

"I can't let her see you like this!" Sarah protested.

From off-screen he heard Ella's voice call out, "Is it Daddy?"

"Come on, Sarah," Carson pleaded. "Let me see her."

Technically, she didn't have to say yes. Sarah had asked for full custody in the divorce, in exchange for not having to pay child support or alimony. Carson had agreed to her terms.

Not like I had much choice. If I fought her, she'd just play the "gambling addict" card. No judge in the world would take my side.

But Sarah wasn't a bad person. She was good about letting Carson be part of Ella's life. So after a few seconds, she rolled her eyes in resignation, then passed the iPad down into her daughter's waiting hands. The view on Carson's screen spun and flipped as Ella oriented the iPad on her end, and his stomach heaved.

Still a little woozy, I guess.

"Hi, Daddy!"

"Hello, Pumpkin!"

Ella's eyes went wide as she focused on Carson's image, though she seemed more fascinated than repulsed.

"What happened to your face?"

"I fell down," Carson said. "And I bumped my head. But I'm okay now, sweetie."

"I fell down, too!" Ella exclaimed, flashing an enormous, toothy grin. "Look!"

She tilted the iPad down to show a large bandage plastered over one knee.

"Oh, Ella - did you hurt yourself?"

"Uh-huh. It was bleeding and everything, but I didn't cry."

"Wow, what a brave girl you are. Did Mommy put that band-aid on?"

"No, other Daddy did. He kissed it better, too."

Other Daddy. Ouch.

"Well, I'm glad you're okay now honey."

"I didn't even cry."

Carson laughed. "I know. You told me. You know what, honey? Daddy cried a little when he fell down."

Ella laughed. "Daddies don't cry!" she insisted.

"I guess I'm not as brave as you are, sweetie."

They talked for another twenty minutes; Ella prattling on about play dates with friends Carson had never met and kids' shows he'd never seen. Carson relished every second of it. It gave him a connection to her life, even from hundreds of miles away. And then, all too soon, it was time to say goodbye.

"Okay, Ella," he heard Sarah chime in from off-screen. "We better let Daddy rest."

"Mommy's right, kiddo. I should go."

"Okay, Daddy. Bye!"

"Bye, kiddo. I love you."

"I love you too, Daddy!"

And with that, Ella vanished, handing the iPad to her mother as she rushed off on another adventure Carson couldn't be a part of.

"Thanks for letting me talk to her," he said to Sarah once she was gone. "Even looking like this."

"You have a right to be in her life," Sarah grudgingly acknowledged. "You're her father." *But I'm not her only father anymore, am I?*

"So... I guess she's calling Greg 'Daddy' now?"

"She's been calling him Daddy for almost a year," Sarah said. "Ever since we got married. Is that a problem?"

"No, no," Carson hastily replied. "Greg's a good guy. It just caught me off guard, is all."

There was an awkward silence before Carson asked, "Her knee? When she fell? Was it another seizure?"

Sarah didn't say anything, but she nodded faintly.

"You didn't bother to tell me?"

Carson was surprised at how sharp and accusing his words sounded.

"What would be the point?" Sarah's shot back, mirroring her ex's tone. "You can't do anything about it when you're out there in Vegas."

****FREEZE!****

Carson had never told Sarah about his power; she had no idea he could stop time. But he'd used his ability plenty of times during their relationship.

Whenever they were on the verge of an argument, he'd freeze the world. Then he'd carefully collect his thoughts and present a rational and cogent counter argument in an effort to try and defuse the situation. Sometimes it worked. Usually it just made things worse.

Logic isn't always the best way to navigate a relationship.

In this case it was obvious why Sarah was so tense. But he wasn't ready to back down – she didn't have a monopoly on caring about their daughter.

****GO!****

"I know you're worried about her," he said, keeping his voice level but firm. "But so am I. I have a right to know what's going on."

Sarah sighed and reached up to rub her temples. When she finally answered, her anger had been replaced by weary resignation.

"It's been a bad week, Carson."

"I thought this new drug was helping."

"It's better. She went almost two weeks without a seizure before this last one. But it's not a cure."

"What about that specialist?"

"We have an appointment Friday."

Carson nodded. "Let me know how it goes."

"I will."

"I'll call again next week" Carson promised. "Same time if that works for you."

Sarah nodded but didn't speak. There was a long pause, as if she was working herself up to say something more.

Or maybe she's waiting for me to say something.

But whatever it was, whatever words she wanted to say or hear, never came.

Instead, she simply said, "Goodbye, Carson." Then she abruptly ended the call.

Communication was never our strong suit.

He stared at the blank screen for a few more seconds before closing FaceTime and crawling back into bed.

Chapter 3

It was just past nine pm on Friday when Carson arrived at the Planet Hollywood Hotel and Casino on the Las Vegas strip. The first round of March Madness was in the books, and he'd already run up an 7-3 record on his bets, netting almost four thousand in profit.

About time my luck turned around.

Tomorrow he'd start looking for more soft lines to wager on in the second round, scoping out the Sunday games to parlay his winning streak. And on Monday, he'd visit the bank and wire a chunk of his profits to Sarah to help cover Ella's medical costs.

She'd never admit it, but I know that specialist they're taking her to won't be cheap.

But tonight, Carson wasn't focused on any of that. He was riding the high of his wins, and he had every intention of reveling in his triumph.

And there's no better place to celebrate a big payday than Planet Hollywood.

Carson felt a primal, Pavlovian response as he rode the escalator from the lower lobby up to the main floor. His body tingled with nervous energy as adrenalin surged through his veins and he felt the heady rush of anticipation.

The scene that greeted him at the top of the escalator was simultaneously chaotic yet comforting. The PH gaming floor was a demented mash-up of bordello, night club and casino. The garish decor of ruby red hearts on dark red walls above a crimson carpet was accentuated with an overabundance of pink and purple neon. Pounding hip-hop and pop remixes blasted over the speakers, drowning out the drunken laughter, triumphant cries and sorrowful lamentations of the players crowded around every table in the place. Cocktail waitresses wearing hot pants and barely buttoned tops weaved their way among the crowd, carrying trays of complimentary drinks. And in the center of it all stood the infamous Pleasure Pit, where the card tables were staffed by gorgeous women in lingerie corsets flanked by limber, scantily clad pole-dancers on conspicuously placed stages.

Carson paused for a moment to let it all wash over him, reveling in the overwhelming mish-mash of sights and sounds.

Every casino in Vegas had its own unique vibe. Venetian; New York, New York; Paris - unabashedly faux tourist traps. Caesar's Palace and the Wynn were old money; stuffy and too quiet for Carson's taste.

But the PH hits my sweet spot.

Young, upscale crowd; twenty and thirty-somethings with money to burn. Lots of bachelor and bachelorette parties; even the odd pro athlete or celeb kicking around. Everyone having fun, or at least pretending to. Including Carson. Tonight, he wouldn't be grinding at a blackjack table counting cards. He was here to cut loose and gamble.

He'd swapped out the non-descript clothes he'd worn at the Siegel for an outfit that screamed 'player': black blazer; gray slacks; cream shirt and a red pocket swatch for an eye-catching splash of color. His most prized possession - a 1993 stainless steel Rolex Submariner his parents had given him when he graduated high school - was prominently displayed on his wrist. Carson believed in math, stats and the science of probability... but he never gambled without his lucky watch.

Place is jumping tonight!

The first days of March Madness were the busiest weekend the casinos would see all year. Crazy college hoops fans had descended on the city like a plague of locusts: a swarm of obnoxious, drunken alumni proudly wearing their garish school colors, mindlessly handing their

money over to the casino while keeping one eye on the TV screens mounted over every other table so they could watch the games and cheer on their teams.

As he made his way through the shoulder-to-shoulder crowd in the casino, he got a succession of friendly nods and waves from the staff. When he wasn't counting cards, the PH was his preferred haunt, and most of the dealers knew him by sight if not by name. He wasn't a high roller; just a semi-regular local. But it wasn't hard to get on good terms with the casino staff: just don't be an asshole and remember to tip. It sounded simple, but Carson was always amazed at how many people couldn't pull it off.

His first stop, as always, was the craps pit. With the March Madness crowd every table was busy, but as Carson drew near, he saw only one was really buzzing. There was an electricity around a hot craps table; a crackling energy in the air that made his skin actually tingle. It was a rush unlike anything else in Vegas - better than roulette or blackjack, and a damn sight better than the mind-numbing slots.

A tiny Asian girl in a sparkly LBD was rolling the dice at the far end of the table. A young black man wearing dark jeans, a hot pink shirt, a black jacket with rolled up sleeves and a grey fedora was pressed close against her side, one arm wrapped possessively around her hip, a drink clutched in his free hand and a ten-mile-wide grin plastered on his face. Flanking them were two more fashionable young couples; a posse of hipster kids taking a run at the casino before hitting the clubs.

A dozen other players were also packed in along the entire length of the craps table's rail, including four muscular brosephs in jeans and t-shirts, their skin bright red from too long out at the pool without sunscreen; an older white man wearing a rumpled brown jacket; an overweight sugar-daddy with a cowboy hat and rhinestone suit and the much younger, bleached-blond arm candy fawning all over him.

They were jammed in so tight that they couldn't help but rub up against each other, bumping shoulders and elbows as they tossed their chips on the table. But since they were all winning, nobody cared; everyone was laughing, yelling and high fiving. It was loud and crowded and chaotic and beautiful: the glorious cacophony of the dice.

Nothing brings people together like a hot streak at a craps table.

There was an unmistakable rhythm to the sound of craps; an almost hypnotic pattern. It started when the stickman passed the dice to the shooter. Players began calling out bets and throwing chips on the table, scrambling to make their plays: "Press up my inside!"; "Gimmie five on the hard six!"; "C and E! C and E!" The buzz built as the shooter picked up the dice, and players started shouting out encouragement - "Keep it going!"; "Hit that six!"; "Gimmie a yo!" "Thirty-three! Thirty-three!" - each cry louder and more urgent than the one before it.

"Bring it home, BABY!" the grinning boyfriend bellowed as the girl in the LBD awkwardly rattled the dice around in her palm. "You got this!"

"Come on six!" she squealed, snapping her arm forward in a clumsy underhand toss that launched the dice high in the air.

The sound dropped as the dice were released, every player involuntarily sucking in his or her breath in anticipation as they little plastic cubes soared across the felt, ricocheted off the back wall and bounced to a stop. There was a brief moment of heavy silence as eyes darted back and forth between the dice, alcohol-addled minds struggling to add up the pips showing on each face - the calm before the storm.

"Eight the hard way!" the stickman called out, and the table erupted with cheers. Another winner.

Carson moved in closer but didn't carve himself out a place on the rail right away. It was bad karma to just jump right in.

Craps 101: respect the roll, and never mess with the momentum of a hot table.

He lingered just behind the players as they tossed more chips onto the table to press up their bets. Giggling and laughing, the girl fumbled with the dice, struggling to pick them up. Clearly, she was a newbie.

The young woman cocked her entire arm back and launched the dice again, sending them on another high, looping arc. At the same time, someone behind Carson slapped him hard on the ass.

Still jumpy after his recent beating, his reaction was instant and instinctual.

****FREEZE!****

The noise and chaos of the casino stopped. Everyone - the staff, the servers, the players – had been transformed into statues sculpted by an artist with a penchant for ludicrous poses. Some had their arms raised in giddy anticipation, others were leaning forward or slapping their neighbor on the back. One man was suspended a half-foot above the ground, caught mid-air as he leaped with excitement.

In front of Carson, the dice hung motionless a few feet above the center of the table. The two little red cubes stared back at him like the wily eyes of an otherwise invisible monster.

On the very edge of his peripheral vision he could just make out a cocktail waitress at the next table extending a drink to an older gentleman. His gaze was firmly fixed on the ample cleavage exposed by her skimpy uniform.

Carson registered all this in an offhand, almost automatic way as he tried to figure out whose hand was still firmly planted on his left butt-cheek. After a moment, he realized there could only be one answer.

Maya Belfour.

****GO!****

As the world lurched back into motion, Carson smiled and turned to face the woman who had snuck up behind him. Over his shoulder he heard the stick man call out, "Six!" and a round of cheers erupted from the table.

Another winner.

Maya Belfour always stood out in a crowd. She was tall: almost six feet in her heels. And she was gorgeous: flawless light-brown skin; long, lustrous black hair, and a sense of confidence and style that even the standard issue casino security uniform of a black jacket and pantsuit couldn't hide.

"Hey, Maya. You're looking good tonight. Is that a new jacket?"

Maya smirked at the joke – she'd been wearing the same outfit every night on the job for the past two years. She gave him a quick hug by way of greeting, then took a step back and raised one eyebrow.

"You look like shit, Carson. What the hell happened?"

She had the hint of an accent Carson had never been able to place. Cuban, maybe. Or Cajun. But he knew better than to bring it up. Every once in a while, some wannabe smooth talker would ask what her heritage was, and she always fired back with "American!".

"Security at the Siegel decided to have a chat with me," Carson explained, self-consciously rubbing his scabbed chin. "Guess those boys haven't learned to use their words yet."

"Fucking amateur hour over there," she hissed, shaking her head.

"That's why I'm back here," he agreed, giving her a playful wink.

"Just don't do anything foolish," she warned, placing a firm hand on his upper arm. "You know the rules. Stay away from my blackjack tables."

Maya was the one who had banned him from the PH blackjack pit nearly two years ago. Unlike the gorillas at the Siegel, she had handled it with class - a firm but polite warning was all it took.

"I'll stick to craps tonight. Scout's honor."

"Glad to hear it." She flashed a quick smile, and he caught a glimpse of her teeth, perfect and pearly white behind dark red lips.

Over the past couple years, Carson and Maya had gotten to know each other fairly well. Guest relations were part of her job, but he felt like it was more than that. There was a real spark between them.

*At least, I *think* there's a spark.*

They'd even gone for drinks a few times after her shift... though only as friends and never on an actual "date".

"You file a police report on those Siegel jag-offs?" Maya asked.

"Figured it would be a waste of time."

"True enough," she agreed, rolling her eyes.

Maya had been a cop before she got the casino gig, but she didn't have much use for the police now. She'd once told Carson every officer on patrol in Vegas was just building up experience for their resumes so they could apply for a job with casino security. Better pay, easier work.

"Anyone half decent gets scooped up within three years," she'd explained once. "The cops still on the job longer than that are either corrupt or incompetent."

"I'm glad you came in tonight," she said, her hand dropping from Carson's arm.

"Something I want to tell you when you have a minute."

The dice were calling, but for Maya he was willing to wait.

"I've got some time now."

She took him by the elbow and half guided, half dragged him away from the craps pit to a less crowded spot near the slot machines. After a quick glance to make sure nobody was close enough to hear them over the music blasting from the speakers overhead, she leaned in and spoke in a low voice.

"I'm not going to be working here much longer."

"Another casino making a bid to scoop you up?" Carson managed to ask after a moment of hesitation.

"Better. I've applied to the Bureau."

"The Bureau?"

"The FBI," she said with a grin, barely able to contain her excitement. "Been thinking about applying for a while now. Finally decided to write the entrance exam. Just got my results a couple days ago."

Always knew she was too good for this place.

"Let me guess - you passed the test with flying colors." Carson made sure his voice hid the disappointment he felt at the news.

Won't be the same around here with her gone.

"Don't spoil my story!" she objected, playfully punching him in the shoulder. "It's rude!"

"Sorry," he replied, sheepish. "Congrats."

"Thanks. Don't say anything, though. Haven't told anyone around here yet."

"You having a goodbye party?"

"Eventually. But I'm not leaving for a few weeks. The next class of recruits doesn't start until May, so I figure I'll work through March Madness. Rack up some OT before I start at the Academy."

"And it's still not official until I pass the fitness test," she added.

"Better hit the gym, then," Carson teased. "You're looking a little flabby lately."

She gasped in mock horror, then raised her right arm and cocked her elbow in the classic biceps pose.

"Feel these guns," she ordered. "Nothing flabby here!"

Carson reached out and gave her arm a gentle squeeze. Even through the fabric of her coat he could feel her muscle, taut and firm.

"Pretty good, right?"

"Exceptional," he agreed. Then added, "Who the hell am I going to shoot the shit with around here after you ditch me?"

"Look on the bright side," she replied. "Once I'm gone you can take another run at these blackjack tables."

"Just not tonight," she added quickly.

"Got it."

She spun away from him, heading off to another part of the casino.

"Good luck," she called out as she left.

Carson watched until she disappeared into the crowd. For months he'd been trying to work up the courage to ask Maya out. To tell her how he really felt about her. But he was worried how she'd react. Scared he might lose her as a friend. So he kept putting it off. And now it was too late.

Fucking coward. You had your chance and you blew it.

"Seven - out!" the stick man back at the craps table called, snapping Carson out of his pity party.

Quit mooning over Maya and focus on making some money.

He hustled back over to the table, his heart speeding up as the adrenaline rush of anticipation kicked in. The girl in the black dress wasn't throwing anymore, but most of the same people were still crowded around the game, yelling and laughing - a good sign that the table was still hot.

"Coming out!" the stick man hollered, indicating a new roll was about to start.

Perfect timing.

Squeezing in along the rail, he tossed his money down. Forty minutes later he was up almost two grand. But anybody could win money in Vegas; the real trick was not giving it back.

Step one - control the alcohol intake.

Rum and coke was his drink of choice, and he nursed each one. All he wanted was a mellow buzz to enhance the experience; he rarely went beyond that.

Step two - know when to walk away.

Counting cards was one thing; it wasn't even really gambling. Just grinding hour after hour after hour. A marathon. But craps was a sprint; a quick hit, the glorious rush of victory, and get out. And after two bad shooters in a row, he could tell the table had gone cold.

"Color me up," Carson called out, piling his chips on the table before the next roll started. His towering stacks of reds and greens were transformed into four pink chips, two blacks, and some change - roughly \$2200.

"For the dealers," he said, tossing fifty bucks in leftover reds onto the table.

"Much appreciated, Mr. Gaines," the stickman said, raking them in and dropping them into the tip box.

Carson left the table smiling. The shit that went down at the Siegel had him thinking he was cursed. But since then he'd killed it on both his basketball plays and the craps table.

Maybe getting my ass kicked was a good omen.

Hot streaks never lasted long in Vegas; Carson was smart enough to know that much. But he had every intention of enjoying this ride while it lasted.

Chapter 4

Carson took the chips from the craps table over to the cash cage and exchanged them for hundred-dollar bills, then slipped them into his money clip. He was still amped from the rush of the table, his confidence high.

Looking for a distraction, he headed over to the Heart Bar in the center of the casino. The drinks there were overpriced, but he'd rather pay for his booze than risk his winnings by going straight another table. He knew enough about how casinos worked to pace himself - the "free" drinks could get expensive.

The Heart Bar was small, but unlike the clubs there was no cover and no line to get in. About two dozen people mingled around inside, taking a break from the action on the casino floor, shouting at each other to be heard above the pounding music from the DJ booth in the corner. Couples were squished together on the loveseats and overstuffed chairs lining the circular walls, laughing and drinking. Three dude-bros with Gonzaga hats, wearing Gonzaga tank-tops over Gonzaga t-shirts, were chatting up a bachelorette party. A gaggle of soccer moms were whooping it up on the dance floor, gyrating and grinding along with the thumping music, each of them raising the roof with one hand while clutching a yard-long margarita in the other.

Carson worked his way through the crowd and ordered a vodka red bull at the bar. Now that he wasn't gambling, he wanted something with a little kick extra kick. The first one went down easy. So did the second.

By the time he was onto his third, he noticed notice a pair of ladies sitting by themselves in the shadows near the back. The pale-skinned brunette was wearing a very short, very tight black cocktail dress, and her tanned, blonde friend was wearing a slinky gold number that showed a little less skin. They were both sipping on twisted crazy straws plunged into coconut half-shells. The brunette caught his eye and smiled in his direction.

In the low light of the bar, it was hard to tell for sure, but he guessed they were in their late twenties. Carson had been in Vegas long enough to spot a hooker from the other side of the Strip, but these girls didn't have that vibe. They were more cute than sexy, and they didn't carry the in-your-face attitude of a pro. Just two girlfriends on vacation, looking for a little adventure.

What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.

It was amazing how many people actually bought into that slogan. He saw it all the time: women looking for a quick hook-up; something to feed the illusion that they were being wild and dangerous without any real risk. And Carson fit the profile perfectly. He was tall and in reasonably good shape. Decent looking. Well dressed. Most important, he looked like he belonged. He was comfortable and confident in the glittering madness - part of the whole Vegas experience, without too much of the sleaze. He could probably get laid every weekend if he wanted to. But the thrill of endless one-night stands had worn thin for him long ago. It wasn't that he never did it anymore; he just had to be in the right mood. Tonight, he was.

"Another vodka red bull for me, and two more of whatever those ladies are having."

The bartender whipped up the drinks while Carson tried to play it cool. He smiled back at the brunette and tilted his head in her direction. She laughed nervously and grabbed her friend's knee. The blonde eyed him suspiciously at first, but her expression softened to indifference after she gave him the once over and didn't see anything to set off any warning bells.

The bartender dropped the drinks on the bar. Carson scooped them up and headed over to where the women were sitting. He had his own drink clutched in his left hand, while the fingers

of his right were splayed wide enough to grasp the two coconut-shell concoctions. The women watched him coming the whole way; the blonde apathetic, the brunette intrigued.

"Looks like you ladies need a refill," he said by way of introduction, holding out his gifts.

"Perfect timing - we just ran out!" the brunette answered enthusiastically as she wrapped both hands around one of the shells. The blonde only shrugged, but she still accepted his offer.

"Mind if I sit down?"

The brunette scooped closer to her friend and patted the couch beside her. "Got a spot right here for you!"

His weight caused the overstuffed cushion to sink down slightly as he settled in, tipping the brunette so that she slid right up against him. She giggled at the awkwardness but didn't pull away.

"I'm Maddie," she said, holding out her hand like the queen welcoming a visiting dignitary. "From Michigan."

Carson reached out, enveloping her hand with both of his.

"Hello, Maddie from Michigan. I'm Carson from Las Vegas."

"Ooh... I like your watch, Carson," she noted.

"Thanks. It was a gift from my father."

"I'm Sarah," her friend said abruptly, interrupting the flow of their banter. She leaned forward to look past Maddie and give Carson a nod but didn't bother offering her hand.

Carson was smart enough not to mention that Sarah his ex-wife's name. Instead, he asked, "What brings you girls to my town?"

"It's somebody's birthday," Maddie said in a sing-song voice, tilting her head in Sarah's direction.

"Happy birthday, Sarah!" Carson said, raising his drink.

"Hooray for me," she replied, her voice dripping with boredom.

"You two following March Madness?" Carson asked, hoping to find something that might spark Sarah's interest and draw her into the conversation before she tried to shut Maddie down. "The Spartans look strong this year."

"Fuck Michigan State!" Maddie bellowed, tipping her head back to holler at the ceiling. "Wolverines forever! Whooo!"

"Wolverines forever!" Sarah echoed, raising her drink to toast the team with actual enthusiasm.

Aha!

"I hate to burst your bubble, ladies," Carson said, shaking his head with mock sadness, "but I'm afraid your team doesn't stand a chance."

"We've been ranked top five all year!" Sarah shot back.

"That was before Irving blew out his knee. Without him, your team's cooked."

"Don't count Irving out yet," Maddie countered with a sly grin. "He might be coming back."

"Maddie!" Sarah hissed. "You're not supposed to tell anyone!"

Interesting.

"You girls got a hot tip or something?" Carson teased.

Maddie but didn't say anything, but her smile spoke volumes. Instead of pressing her, Carson let the pause in the conversation linger. People were uncomfortable with silence; he'd learned they'd tell you all their secrets if you just gave them a chance.

Sure enough, Maddie leaned forward after a few seconds to spill her bit of juicy gossip.

"Sarah's uncle is one of the Wolverine trainers. He's been rehabbing Irving."

Sarah threw up her hands in exasperation. But Maddie was oblivious as she plowed on.

"He told us if the Wolverines make it through this weekend, Irving is going to play in the Sweet Sixteen."

The revelation was a key piece of data for Carson to add into his models... assuming it was true.

"Your secret is safe with me, ladies," Carson swore, placing his hand over his heart.

"Scout's honor."

"What happened to your face?" Sarah suddenly demanded, clearly eager to change the subject. "You fall down the stairs?"

"Sarah!" Maddie gasped, playfully slapping her friend's thigh.

"It's okay," Carson reassured her. "I'm a card counter. Ran into some trouble a few days ago. Hazard of the profession."

Maddie's eyes went wide with excitement. "Really? What happened?"

Carson paused, letting the tension build. Maddie was clearly hooked, and even Sarah seemed mildly interested in the answer.

He took a deep breath, then opened with, "You ladies ever been to a casino called the Siegel?"

And just like that, he was in. As he spun his story, he bought them another round of drinks. They talked some more. They laughed. They danced and drank. Eventually the three of them walked over to the Karaoke bar in the adjacent Miracle Mile strip mall and sang their hearts out.

Four hours after they first met, Carson had Sarah bent over the bed in her hotel room, the two of them going at it like rabbits.

"Fuck me like you mean it!" she shouted.

He'd pegged Maddie as the one looking for a Vegas fling, but life was full of surprises.

"Harder! Harder!"

Turned out, Maddie had a boyfriend back in Michigan. Sarah, not so much.

"Pull my hair!"

Carson didn't argue; he just obeyed while thrusting wildly into her from behind.

"Oh, God! Oh, Jesus Christ!" she wailed. "Oh, God! Oh... my... guhhh!"

Her words transformed into animalistic grunts and moans. One hand reached back to claw at Carson's naked thigh while the other braced her body against the mattress as she savagely ground into him. Her moans put him over the top; he was ready to explode.

*** *FREEZE!* ***

Carson always stopped the world right before he climaxed.

Is that weird? Maybe. But I can't help it. It just sort of happens.

He'd been doing it ever since he was a teenager rubbing one out into an old sock, and some habits were hard to break.

Doesn't make my orgasm any better. I can't feel anything when the world is frozen.

It was purely a mental exercise; a way to savor the moment. With the world in stasis, he could fully appreciate the curve of Sarah's hips and buttocks. Or the way her hair cascaded over her one shoulder with her head turned back to look at him.

But it wasn't just about appreciating the moment. Inevitably, he always fell into self-analysis, rating his performance while the world was stopped.

Tonight I'd give myself a solid B+.

It had only been fifteen minutes since they'd reached the room and started ripping off each other's clothes. But what they lacked in endurance they made up for with intensity.

Sarah seemed to enjoy it, at least.

The women usually did, but Carson knew that didn't have much to do with him. Most of the girls he hooked up with in Vegas were already halfway there. They'd built the whole encounter up in their mind as something wild, dangerous, and dirty. Carson understood he was just playing a part in their fantasy.

All I have to do is show up, shut up, and keep it up and they usually get off.

In the end, it wasn't a bad deal. A little harmless entertainment and everyone ended up satisfied. No regrets, no guilt.

*** GO! ***

As the world started up again the incoming wave of sexual ecstasy crashed over him.

Boom goes the dynamite.

Twenty minutes later they were still cuddling on the bed, but Carson could feel it was starting to get uncomfortable. They were both a little drunk, but still sober enough to be aware of the awkwardness between them now that the deed was done.

This was always the worst time for him. It wasn't likely they'd ever see each other again, but he didn't want to be rude.

No point ending her Vegas fantasy-pling on a sour note.

Problem was, he never knew which way to play it. If he made some lame excuse and left, he'd seem like an insensitive asshole. But if he stayed too long, he'd seem like some kind of clingy stalker.

While Carson was debating his next move, Sarah turned her head towards the clock by the bedside.

"Three-thirty," she muttered. "Didn't realize it was so late."

"That's okay," he answered, relieved as he rolled out from under the sheets. "I should probably be going anyway."

She watched him gather up his clothes without speaking. He dressed quickly, but not so fast that it seemed like he was trying to escape. She only broke her silence once he was heading towards the door.

"Hey... it was fun."

Carson smiled and nodded, then slipped out into the hall. The door to her room closed behind him with a sharp *click*.

He took the elevator back down to the casino floor. It was late enough that most of the crowd had thinned out. But Maya was still working.

Carson noticed her watching him from the far side of the mostly empty casino.

Shit. Did she see me go up to Sarah's room?

There was no reason for him to feel guilty; it wasn't like he and Maya were dating. But he still felt his cheeks flushing with embarrassment as he made his way over to her.

"Saw you escorting that little blonde up to her room earlier," she said by way of greeting.

Her voice was light and easy; clearly his liaison didn't bother her at all.

I kind of wish it did.

"You keeping tabs on me now?" Carson answered, matching her tone. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were jealous."

"Of a casino bunny?" Maya snorted. "Please."

"Come on," Carson said, hoping she wouldn't notice how red-faced he was getting. "You telling me you've never had a one-night stand?"

Maya held up her hands defensively.

"Hey, I'm not judging. I'm just surprised you're back so soon. Figured you'd have a bit more stamina."

"Ouch!"

"Call 'em like I see 'em," she said with a shrug. "You out of here?"

Carson knew her shift was almost over, and for one brief moment he thought about asking her to grab a drink when she got off. But in the end he couldn't pull the trigger.

"Yeah, I'm heading home. Busy day tomorrow. But if you're up for it, maybe we can do drinks again sometime before you head off to join the FBI."

Non-committal. Safe. Cowardly.

"I'd like that," Maya said, smiling. "What about that place we went to a couple months ago. Wolf something?"

"Sparrow and Wolf."

"Right!" Maya laughed. "I'm surprised you remember – you got so drunk I had to drive you home!"

*** *FREEZE!* ***

Carson remembered that night all too well: a small restaurant/bar; romantic atmosphere; amazing custom cocktails. A tiny, intimate table.

She looked incredible. She always looks amazing, but something about her was different that night. It was like she was glowing!

He had wanted to kiss her. He had wanted to tell her that they should be more than just friends. But, just like tonight, he didn't have the nerve. So he'd just kept drinking, hoping enough liquid courage would spur him into action.

Instead, I got so stumbling drunk Maya had to half-carry me out of there.

But that wasn't the worst of it. She drove him home, and during the ride he'd shared his deepest secret with her. He told her he could stop time – the first time he'd told anyone since he was a child.

In a slurred, rambling, barely coherent monologue he had tried to explain his power to her – what it was; how it worked. Of course, she didn't believe him.

She laughed. She thought it was some kind of weird joke. Not surprising, given how drunk I was.

Looking back the next day, he'd been so embarrassed he actually avoided coming to PH for a couple weeks. When he finally got up the guts to return, Maya never mentioned it. Neither did he. They just carried on like it never happened.

Probably for the best.

Now she wanted to go back to the scene of his humiliation. But why? Had Maya sensed what he was thinking that night? Did she know how he really felt about her?? Was suggesting

they go back there again a signal that she was interested in him, too? Or was she just craving the octopus appetizer and another of their Famous Freddy Fender whiskey highballs?

Shit. Quit over-analyzing everything. For once, just say yes and take the win!

*** *GO!* ***

“Sparrow and Wolf sounds good,” Carson told her, his heart pounding so fast he was feeling light-headed. “But this time I’ll try to pace myself a little better with the alcohol.”

"Good plan," she said with a coy wink.

She leaned in and gave him a goodbye hug. Then, as he turned to go, she gave him another hard slap on the ass.

"Don't go looking for trouble, Carson."

"Never do." *But sometimes trouble just has a way of finding me.*

Chapter 5

The Sunday games weren't as profitable as the first round, but Carson still managed to keep his lucky streak going. Between the basketball and his run at the craps table, he was up almost five grand on the weekend. When the time for his Monday night call with Ella arrived, Carson was riding high and feeling good. But his mood changed quickly when he saw his ex-wife's expression on the video chat.

"Sarah? What's wrong?"

Her face was drawn, and her eyes were puffy, as if she'd spent all night crying instead of sleeping.

"Ella's asleep. We were at the specialist all day running tests. She's exhausted."

From her tone, Carson knew it wasn't good news.

"What did they find?"

Sarah shook her head and shrugged. "Nothing yet. They want to run more tests later this week. Maybe try some new drugs. Greg and I... we're trying to figure it out."

"What's there to figure out?" Carson demanded. "Just run the damn tests. If they want to change her meds, change her meds. Keep trying until we get this right!"

Sarah was silent for a long moment. When she spoke, her voice was barely more than a whisper.

"Greg's insurance won't cover it."

"Wait. This is about *money*?"

"Of course it's about money!" Sarah snapped back at him, her voice cracked and raw.

"Do you have any idea how much all this costs?"

Jesus Christ – she's our daughter!

"Run the tests. I'll pay for them."

Sarah snorted in contempt. "How the hell are you going to do that? You don't even have a job!"

"Bullshit! You know I'm a professional gambler."

"That's not a job. That's a hustle."

"It pays my bills!" Carson fired back, not bothering to mention he was supplementing his income as an Uber driver now.

"I'm tired, Carson," Sarah said. "I don't want to do this tonight."

"I'll transfer you some money tomorrow," Carson insisted. "Five grand. I've had a good run lately."

"You think that will cover Sarah's medical bills?" she said, barking out a harsh laugh.

"You really think Greg and I couldn't come up with five fucking thousand dollars on our own?"

Carson was stung into shamed silence by her words.

After a few seconds, Sarah closed her eyes, tilted her head back and took a deep breath as she tried to calm herself down. It was a reaction Carson recognized all too well from the days of their marriage.

"I'm sorry," Carson said. "I just want to help. How much are we talking about?"

"I know you want to be the hero here," Sarah countered, "but it's not that simple. Don't worry - Greg and I will figure something out."

"How... much?" Carson asked again, speaking each word slowly and forcefully.

Sarah hesitated before admitting, "The estimate they gave us on Friday was just over eighty thousand dollars."

Jesus Christ!

"And the worst part is, they can't even promise it'll work," she continued. "Nobody really knows what's wrong with her. They're just guessing at this point."

"You weren't even going to tell me about this, were you?" Carson snapped, his words dripping with accusation and resentment despite his best intentions.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize you had an extra eighty grand lying around!" his ex-wife snapped back at him. "Guess all I had to do was ask, right? Thank god! Problem fucking solved!"

*** *FREEZE!* ***

Carson stopped the world before he said something even more hurtful in response. He needed time to think. Time to compose himself.

Lashing out at Sarah isn't going to help Ella. It'll probably just make things worse.

It was always easy to take the high road when he didn't have the adrenaline rush of emotions clouding his thoughts.

But in this case, it's important to remember we're both on the same side.

*** *GO!* ***

"I'm sorry," Carson told her, lowering his voice. "I'm just worried about Ella. And I know you are too."

Sarah sighed in acknowledgment of the apology. When she spoke again, the anger was gone. Or at least carefully buried.

"Greg and I are trying to work something out. Maybe a second mortgage. Something."

From the slight tremble in her voice Carson could tell she was barely holding it together.

"I'll send you the five grand," Carson vowed. "I know it's not much, but it's better than nothing. And we'll figure this out somehow. I promise."

Sarah forced a smile and nodded, but in her eyes Carson saw how scared and desperate she was.

"I should let you go," he said, filling in the uncomfortable looming silence. "Tell Ella I love her. Maybe I can call in a few days when she's rested up."

Sarah nodded again, then abruptly ended the call.

It's like she was afraid if she tried to speak, she'd break down completely.

Carson stared at the disconnected screen for a few seconds, trying to wrap his head around the price tag of his daughter's health.

Eighty thousand dollars!

Carson was a realist. He understood numbers and data. He knew the math. Eighty thousand was a big number. Overwhelming. Logically, there wasn't anything more he could do. But logic didn't count for much when it came to the well-being of his daughter.

There has to be something I can do. Some angle I'm not seeing.

Unbidden, his mind flashed back to Friday night at the Heart Bar.

Maddie said Irving was going to play if the Wolverines got past the second round.

The Wolverines had won on Sunday, barely scraping by to advance in the tournament. But there hadn't been any rumblings about their star player returning. Not yet. If Irving really was on the verge of playing again, they'd managed to keep the news out of the media so far.

Normally, Carson would never make a wager based on a tip he'd picked up in a bar. He preferred stats and analysis to unsubstantiated rumors. And he knew the Wolverines were heavy underdogs going into their next game. But Irving was the kind of player who could single-handedly lead his team to a National Championship. If Maddie was right – if Irving actually played – it would completely flip the odds. And nobody else knew about it. At least, not yet.

It's a risk, but it's my best chance to help Ella. Gotta ride the hot streak as long as it lasts.

News like this was bound to leak before the game, and once it did the betting line would change. If he wanted to take advantage of his inside info, he had to act fast.

Time to go see Mama Pearl.

Ten minutes later he was driving across town. Staring through the windshield, he couldn't help but notice how shitty the city looked in the early evening sun. Vegas was meant to be seen at night. The glittering lights and flashing neon signs on the Strip might be tacky, but there was something alluring about them. Tempting. Tantalizing. In the fading daylight, though, everything just looked tired and worn. Run down. It exposed the city for what it really was: a grimy, dusty mirage of cracking concrete and melting asphalt plopped down in the middle of the god-damned desert.

And yet I chose to come live here. Just one in a string of many questionable life decisions.

The traffic was light, and it didn't take long to reach his destination: Flannigan's on D Street - a small hole-in-the-wall bar in one of Vegas's most rough and rundown neighborhoods.

He pulled up and parked right in front, underneath a sign that said **LOADING ZONE – 15 MIN ONLY!**

Plenty of time... I hope.

The inside of Flannigan's was a stereotypical dingy Irish dive bar. Poor lighting, out of date decor, a couple crappy TVs mounted at either end of the bar. A few regulars sitting on stools at the bar, some empty booths. A couple dusty old pool tables in the back.

"Hey, Carson," the bartender greeted him. "I'll go grab your money from the back."

"Actually, Jimmy, I'm here to see Mama."

Jimmy hesitated a moment, then nodded.

"Grab a seat. I'll tell her you're here."

Carson found a spot at one of the booths in the corner as the bartender disappeared into the back. A few seconds later he returned, followed by a mature Chinese woman wearing a cream-colored pantsuit covered in bright yellow flowers.

Mama Pearl was tiny - five feet tall and ninety pounds soaking wet. Her black, bobbed hair was short but thick, forming a semi-circular frame around the noticeable wrinkles of her face. She wore too much makeup, and her silver necklace and oversized matching earrings were cheap and tacky looking. Her age was difficult to peg; she could have been anywhere from fifty to eighty.

Flanking her on either side were two very large Latino men in expensive suits. Carson noticed the butt of a pistol in a shoulder holster peeking out from beneath the coat of the man on the left.

"Carson!" Mama Pearl called out, extending her arms as she approached. Carson obliged and stood up to receive an overly enthusiastic hug. "So nice to see you!"

She spoke with a thick Chinese accent, but sometimes Carson noticed it slipped just a little. He had a sneaking suspicion that the whole "Mama Pearl" thing was an act. There were rumors she had connections to the Hong Kong Triads, but he wondered if she'd made those up herself.

If she really works for the Triads, why aren't her bodyguards Asian?

Mama broke off the hug, then she slid into the booth across from Carson. Her bodyguards stood a respectful distance away, hands clasped calmly at their waists.

"You did good last week," she noted. "Lots of winners for Mama to pay out."

She bubbled with energy, her words quick, clipped, and always verging on a shout.

"I did okay," Carson answered modestly. *My wins are her losses. No point in rubbing it in her face.* "Guess I'm on a lucky streak."

"Not that lucky, maybe," she said, leaning forward to gently tap the faded scrape on his chin.

"No big deal," he assured her, mildly surprised she could make out his mostly healed injuries under the crappy neon lights.

Don't underestimate her. She's sharp and she's dangerous.

"You drink?" she offered. "Rum and coke, yes?"

Carson shook his head. "A little early for me."

Plus, the drinks here taste like warm, watered-down piss.

Mama Pearl hadn't bought Flannigan's to make money serving booze. The bar was just a front; a way to launder cash from her real business: one of the biggest illegal books in Vegas.

It wasn't easy being a bookie in a town where anyone could walk into a casino and place a bet twenty-four/seven. To compete, Mama Pearl had to offer certain advantages.

It started with a lower vig. Instead of the standard ten percent bookie fee, Mama Pearl only charged eight. Two percent might not seem like much, but over the course of the year it added up. More importantly, though, she let players bet on credit. The casinos all demand cash up front. By leveraging his credit line with Mama Pearl, Carson could maximize the edge on his bets.

Only this time I need to push things to a whole new level.

"What you want, Carson?"

"I need to extend my line of credit."

Mama pursed her lips, studying him closely. Carson had proven himself to be a reliable customer: if he lost, he always paid his debts on time. But she knew he was on a hot streak. Asking for extra credit when he already had several thousand in his account was unusual.

"How much you want?"

Carson had given a lot of consideration to that exact question. Mama typically let him run about five grand through her operation; add in the five thousand he was already up and he had 10k to wager. Double that with a big win on the Michigan game, and it still wasn't enough to cover Sarah's medical bills.

And that's just the up-front costs. If the new therapies work, the final cost could be way over the initial estimate.

"I want to place a bet for fifty grand."

The only sign of surprise Mama showed was a slight arching of one eyebrow.

"That a lot of money, Carson."

It was. But if he won, he'd have plenty to cover Sarah's costs... and maybe even a little left over for himself. And if he lost, it didn't really matter whether he owed Mama fifty thousand,

or a hundred thousand, or a million – there was no way he could ever pay it back. If the Wolverines lost, this ended only one of two ways: with Carson on the run, or in a shallow grave out in the Nevada desert.

Hopefully, she doesn't know that, though.

“Why you so desperate, Carson?”

“I'm not desperate. I've just got a hot tip. One I can't pass up.”

Mama nodded slowly, sensing this much at least was true.

“How you pay me back if you lose?”

“My parents. They've got money.”

“So ask them to front you.”

“They don't approve of gambling,” Carson lied, leaning into the backstory he'd prepared.

“They won't give it to me just so I can make a bet. But they'll give it to me if I need to pay you back. They know what will happen if I don't. Parents will do anything to protect their kid.”

A flat out lie wrapped around a single grain of universal truth. The question is, will she buy it?

After several long seconds of silence, Mama finally said, “I need collateral.”

“Hold onto the money I won this week.”

“Not enough,” she countered, shaking her head.

Carson had suspected she might push back on him. He reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out a leather case, and set it on the table. Then he popped it open to reveal his Rolex Submariner.

“My father gave this to me when I graduated high school. Worth twenty grand.”

More like ten, but at this point what's a little more embellishment?

Mama picked up the watch and hefted it in her hand, as if she could verify the authenticity simply by weight. Then she set the watch back in the case and closed the lid.

Carson's heart was pounding, but he did his best to keep his breathing slow and his demeanor calm.

“Not enough. What kind car you drive?”

“Nissan maxima. A couple years old.”

“You leave car here. And watch. Plus, Mama get ten percent if you win.”

*** *FREEZE!* ***

It was an outrageous – almost offensive – proposition. Bookies never took a cut from the winnings; it simply wasn't done. Basically, she was offering to front him the money, lay off the bets with other bookies to minimize her exposure, and then charge him 10% for the service. If he won, she made a cool five grand, with no risk. And if he lost, he'd have to cover the entire bet... plus an extra few thousand for her normal vig.

My watch. My car. My pride. She's got me by the balls, and she knows it.

Statistically, there was no way to come out ahead with terms like this. Not in the long run. It was a total sucker's play. But Carson was out of options. And so was Ella.

*** *GO!* ***

Ignoring every instinct that told him to get up and walk away, Carson forced a smile.

“Mama,” he said, handing over his keys, “you've got yourself a deal.”

Chapter 6

The day before Michigan's Sweet Sixteen game, rumors started leaking out that Irving would suit up. Money poured in on the Wolverines as frantic gamblers tried to get a piece of the action. By tip-off, the Wolverines had gone from nearly double-digit underdogs to four-point favorites.

Thanks to his early tip, Carson had his bets down at the original number. Michigan didn't even have to win. They just had to keep it close. If they lost by 9 points or less, he would still cash in.

The first half couldn't have gone better. Irving poured in twenty-two points, and the Wolverines were up by six. And then just before halftime, it all came undone. Irving stole the ball and went in for a thunderous breakaway dunk. But as he rose up from the floor, he let out a scream. The ball flew from his hands as he clutched at his knee and came crashing back down to the ground.

In that instant, Carson knew it was over.

There was no way to say for sure whether Irving had come back too soon and pushed his still healing body beyond its limits, or whether it was just a fluke injury that would have happened even if he was healthy and rested. And ultimately, it didn't matter. Michigan's star player - Carson's secret weapon - was done for the season.

It only took five minutes in the second half for the Wolverines to give up their lead. After ten minutes, they were down by seven. The injury to Irving had completely demoralized his team: crushed their dreams and ripped out their hearts.

With four minutes to go, they were down by sixteen and Carson was already packing. By the time the final buzzer sounded, he was at the Las Vegas Greyhound terminal, trying to sneak out of town before Mama or her goons knew he was gone. Running was a foolish, desperate move. But it was the only move he had left.

Guess my hot streak is over.

Mama Pearl still had his car, so he grabbed an Uber and got a lift to the downtown Greyhound station. He knew he should be terrified about what Mama would do to him if she caught him trying to skip town, but as he bought his ticket it wasn't fear that he felt. It was just a crushing, hopeless sense of defeat.

Ella needed me. And I let her down.

He'd thought about heading to LA, but on the off-chance Mama tracked him down he didn't want to risk putting his daughter – or Sarah – in danger. So he was heading east. Phoenix to start. Then maybe on to New Orleans.

Gotta put some distance between me and Mama.

But that meant moving even farther away from Ella. And then trying to explain to Sarah why he moved in a way that wouldn't make her cut him out of Ella's life completely.

Couldn't blame her if she did. Ella might be better off without me. A broke, gambling addict on the run from his bookie... what kid needs that?

As he waited for his bus, the feeling of despair began to recede. And now the fear began to trickle in to fill the void. It started in the pit of his stomach - a sense of looming dread and impending doom.

You're being ridiculous. Mama won't be looking for you yet. You still have until tomorrow night to pay her back.

Despite his own reassurances, Carson couldn't stop his eyes from darting back and forth across the other patrons in the terminal. When he spotted a large, bearded white guy in a black leather jacket, he almost panicked. The man looked to be about thirty-five; six-three and 220 pounds of muscle and attitude. Based on his size and expression, he looked like the kind of guy who might break legs for a living... the kind of guy Mama would send to collect her money.

Except that he didn't seem to be looking for anyone. The bearded man wasn't scanning the crowd, trying to pick anyone out. He was just making his way along and minding his own business like everyone else.

You're being paranoid. Jumping at shadows.

Carson took a few deep breaths to calm his nerves.

You're good. Just stay calm, get on the bus, and you're home free.

But a few seconds later, when Carson saw the woman with the platinum hair and the long white jacket - the one who helped him outside the Siegel Suites - he panicked.

*** *FREEZE!* ***

Stopping time was instinctive; a gut reaction to the woman's unexpected appearance. By coincidence, he'd frozen the world stopped with his own focused directly on the woman. Like everyone else in the crowd, they were both completely motionless.

Carson he studied her features intently, hoping to find some hint of why she was here in her expression.

Maybe she works for Mama.

That didn't make any sense. But seeing her at the bus station while he was about to skip town was too much of a coincidence for Carson to ignore.

Maybe she's been following me ever since that night at the Siegel. Or maybe she was following me even before that!

It would explain how she had showed up when the security goons worked him over. But that wouldn't explain why she had bothered to step in and save him, though. Or why she would have been following him in the first place.

None of this makes any sense.

There had to be some explanation, but Carson couldn't afford to figure it out right now. Not if he wanted to stay one step ahead of Mama's goons.

Just stick to the plan and get on that bus.

She wasn't looking in his direction. She'd been frozen with her head was turned so that her gaze was focused on the other side of the station.

Maybe I can just slip away. Blend in with the crowd and disappear before she... what... the... fuck?

The rest of the world was still frozen. Every soul in the bus station - including Carson himself - was trapped in place, still as statues. Except for one person - the bearded man in the leather jacket was moving!