

## Chapter One

I hate casinos.

I hate the noise. I hate the smell. I hate watching people gamble who can't afford to lose.

But a job was a job.

"Got anything?" Fitch's voice squawked in my earpiece.

I winced and adjusted the receiver. "Two. Hours. We've only been here *two hours.*"

"And Reyes is getting antsy."

I grimaced. The casino's head of security was always antsy.

Cigarette smoke clotted the air. Slots chimed, table watchers cheered. The doors to the event center opened, and the last strains of a Prince tribute band flowed out.

I adjusted the beach tote over my shoulder, weighed down with what was left of my micro-cams, plus an RF scanner, and a mini-drone. Because I'm all about preparedness.

It was the largest bag I could get away with and still look like a California gal on a Reno vacation, even if it didn't quite match my pink cotton button-up and navy running shoes. The collar on the former hid my lapel mic.

It was peak casino chaos—a perfect time for our stress test and for petty opportunists. Recently, the casino had seen an uptick in complaints of thefts. Reyes, the casino’s head of security, had hired Fitch Rhodes, PI, for an independent eye and to plug any security holes.

Discreetly.

Which is where I came in. I’m not a PI, but I *am* a specialist in security and surveillance. For now, at least.

Stooping, I placed a micro-cam, angled to catch the redemption kiosk, behind a decorative planter. I checked my tablet. It pinged—feed live. I glanced up. The placement would overlap well with the cameras in the ceiling domes above.

“I’m almost done placing the micro-cams.” I strode toward a cluster of gold-trimmed columns dividing slot rows from table games. The casino’s dome cameras on the columns were mounted about ten-feet up—high enough to deter tampering, low enough for maintenance.

“Almost? You’re not finished?”

“Keep your pants on,” I grumbled.

“Am I going to have to call HR?”

I snorted a laugh. Fitch was a one-man show, when he didn’t bring me in for odd jobs.

“There’s nothing funny about HR,” he said.

“No kidding. Have you been...?” I slowed, frowning.

One of the casino’s overhead domes looked slightly tilted. I scrolled through the walkthrough map on my tablet, confirming yes, I *had* checked these cameras earlier. I would have noticed if one had been off-kilter. “Hold on.”

I knelt, returning the tablet to my messenger bag, and placed another mini-cam low on a pillar’s base, partially hidden in a seam. My tablet pinged. The feed was live.

I rose and walked down the aisle. The crowds were thickening, aging Prince fans exiting the event center.

That’s when I spotted him.

A maintenance worker—mid-thirties, fit, just under six feet—pushing a rolling cart with a short ladder attached. He stopped beneath another dome camera near the cash-out kiosk and lifted his ladder off the cart.

The worker glanced around and climbed the ladder. I pulled out my phone and pretended to check my texts.

He reached up and fiddled with the mount. Not cleaning. Adjusting. He angled the dome slightly left—away from the aisle, toward a less-trafficked slot bank.

My brow creased. Had he just created or just fixed a blind spot?

I wandered behind a slot machine and pulled out my tablet, checking my baseline map and the dome's original angle in my notes. If I was right, he'd created a blind spot.

"Five grand, man," a frat boy strode past me, his baseball hat on backwards. His buddy slapped his back. "Dinner's on me."

The rolling cart rattled past me. I didn't look up, but I clocked the maintenance man's name tag. *Harlan*.

"I may have something," I pretended to say into my cellphone.

"What?" Fitch said.

"Check out the dome camera at pillar nine."

"On it," he said.

The frat boys got in line behind a woman inserting her ticket into the kiosk. The machine hummed. She reached in and took her cash.

"What am I looking at?" Fitch asked.

"The dome should cover the aisle fully to the kiosk, including the line. There should be a one-eighty overlap with adjacent domes."

"I'm not seeing the kiosk," Fitch said. "Or the line."

Three men in chinos and button-down shirts drifted past me.

One bumped into the frat boy. "Whoa. Sorry, sorry. You okay?"

“I’m better than okay,” the kid said.

“Cool, cool.”

I opened the feed from my micro-cam and backed it up. One of the guys in chinos had lifted the frat boy’s wallet from his back pocket. They could have been brothers, smooth-faced and slim. Or maybe they were just trying to look alike to confuse identification.

“Check mini-cam twenty-two,” I said to Fitch, “ten-thirty-three PM mark.”

I wandered after the three men. They bumped into a woman, distracted by her phone. She tumbled to the thin carpet. Apologizing, grinning, the men helped her up, dusted her off, lifted her wallet from her purse.

They were good. Coordinated.

“Reyes is sending in security,” Fitch said. “You can hang back.”

“And check on a Harlan from maintenance—or someone wearing Harlan from maintenance’s uniform,” I said.

An older man leaning heavily on a walker moved shakily down the aisle away from us. His threadbare gray sweater bagged around his narrow frame. A thick wallet stuck from his back pocket.

The three men glanced at each other and moved toward him.

*Oh, hell no.* A bump and lift could cause a man in his condition serious damage. Also, these jerks were pissing me off. I hated pickpockets.

I hurried toward the man with the walker. I couldn't be obvious. I'd no authority to stop the pickpockets. But I could cause a delay until casino security arrived.

"Dad? What are you doing here?" I said loudly and trotted toward him, knocking into the shoulder of one of the pickpockets. "Whoops! Sorry!"

The pickpocket glanced up at me. Yes, I *am* that tall. And that blond.

I slowed beside the silver-haired man. "Oh my gosh," I gushed. "I'm sorry. I thought you were my father." I pressed a hand to my chest and laughed. "You look just like him from behind."

He blinked up at me and stopped. His legs trembled. "Well, that's strange. Because you look like one of those Wagnerian broads that come out at the opera."

"Really?" I looked around brightly.

The three men closed on us. They weren't giving up. This was happening. I exhaled slowly, relaxing, expanding my awareness.

"You tell me you haven't noticed?" the older man asked. "Look in the mirror. You look like a damned Valkyrie looking for someone to bench press."

The taller pickpocket, a blond, faked a stumble, his shoulder driving toward the older man's back. I pivoted, raising one knee. It connected, slamming into his jaw. He grunted and tumbled into a slot machine.

"Hey!" One of the pickpockets grabbed my arm.

I've been told I'm a master of the RBF. I turned it on now, letting my anger show. "I think you should go," I said in a low, hard voice. "Now."

He glanced down at his fallen comrade. The third pickpocket nudged his arm. The two hurried toward the exit, abandoning their buddy.

"That's what I thought," I said.

"He don't look so good." The older man adjusted his glasses and peered at the pickpocket, sprawled unconscious.

"Probably too much to drink."

"Really? Because it looked to me like you kneed him in the jaw."

He'd seen that? "Ah..."

"Alice?" Fitch jogged toward me, two security guards in gray behind him, and I relaxed.

Fitch is only attractive if you like the whole Greek god of War look, and what red-blooded American woman doesn't? He had dark curly hair, just the right amount of muscles, and green eyes.

As an added bonus, at six-foot-two, he was slightly taller than me. He was exactly the kind of guy you wanted in a fight—cool-headed enough to avoid one, devastating when in one.

“We got the maintenance guy.” Fitch glanced down at the unconscious man. “What happened?”

“Three punks tried to finger my chips,” the older man wheezed. He pulled back his sweater, revealing the front pocket of his stained shirt, bulging with chips. “I used to run with crews that’d eat these boys for breakfast. The nerve of ‘em, coming at me.”

*Ex-mobster*, I thought. *So much for innocent old man*. I shivered and shook it off. “There are two others—”

“Yeah,” Fitch said. “Security’s picking them up. What did you do to the guy?”

“Knead him right in the jaw,” the older man said. “She’s been practicing. I can tell. *Madonna santa*, what a specimen.” He kissed his fingertips. “She’s not half as sweet as she looks, is she?”

Fitch’s gaze slid to me. One corner of his mouth lifted. “No, she’s not.”

“Good thing for both of us,” I shot back.

Nearby, a slot machine dinged—a winner’s frantic chime. But the adrenaline still roaring in my ears kept me from clocking what it really was: an omen.

A countdown.