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THE PLAYER

KRESLEY COLE

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“Desire is like chess. Do whatever you must to achieve your endgame.”

—Dmitri Sevastyan, computer prodigy, self-made billionaire

“Cardinal rule of the con: never, never, never fall for your mark.”

—Victoria Valentine, a.k.a. Vice, proud practitioner of confidence arts
Chapter 1

“I know my fairy tales,” I told my cousin. “And there’s a beast up in that lair.” Pete and I stood on the spacious terrace of the Calydon Casino’s penthouse, peering at an even higher observation deck.

We were already so elevated, I felt as if we could reach up and graze the full moon.

“You’re calling Dmitri Sevastyan a beast now?” Pete’s expression was amused, the dark blue of his smiling eyes a contrast to his light blond hair. Like my sister and me, he got his coloring from my dad’s side of the family. “Even though you’ve never met him?”

“Yes.” The Sevastyan’s lavish party was in full swing—music boomed and hundreds of revelers crowded inside the enormous four-suite penthouse—yet Dmitri had sequestered himself up on that deck, apparently on his worst behavior. “And just like in the fairy tales, you plan to sacrifice this maiden.” Pete wanted me to go scope out the combative man.

“That’s crazy talk. Everybody knows you’re not a maiden.”

I punched his arm. “Funny guy.” I might as well be a maiden. My three notches hadn’t been worth it.

“And Dmitri isn’t a beast,” he said, adding, “Much. Hardly at all.”

Pete knew everything there was to know about the Sevastyan family. Well, everything a grifter could find out with choice sources. As the casino’s VIP host, he catered to the whims of his rich high rollers—our very own inside man.
I didn’t know how much juice he’d had to use to snag his plum position, but for weeks, we’d targeted the Calydon’s degenerate whales, mainly for blackmail.

A curl escaped my up-do, and the warm August breeze made it flit around my face. “Since I started casing the deck, Dmitri’s chewed out a dozen women, sending them packing.”

Another group of hopefuls had ascended a few moments ago. Every female on the Strip seemed to have heard about this party—free food, free booze, and an eligible billionaire in attendance.

Pete shrugged his buff shoulders. I swore he was still growing at twenty-nine. “I’m not asking you to run game”—work a con—“on Dmitri. Just give me your take before we cut the Sevastyan crew loose for good.”

Half talent manager, half con coach, Pete had positioned me and my sister in the VIP lounge as cocktail servers/honey traps.

*Toe the line, boys, or you’ll feel the sting.*

Unfortunately, the three brothers, two wives, and one tagalong friend were toeing the line.

They didn’t ask for drugs, and their tastes didn’t run toward the illegal or immoral. Both of the married couples were devoted. In fact, the middle brother and his wife were here to celebrate their four-year wedding anniversary.

*No dirt, no dinero; no sins, no in.*

“Besides, you gotta get a looksee at Dmitri,” Pete said. “He’ll be the most beautiful man you’ve ever laid eyes on.” My sister Karin had said the same. She’d served the group drinks in the lounge last night.

“Even finer than his brothers?” I’d passed them in the penthouse, two built, black-haired hotties who’d been glued to their lovely wives.

“Much finer.” Pete made his eyes look guileless as he said, “Trust me.”

“Trust you?” Despite our circumstances, we had to share a chuckle. I could make my eyes
guileless too, had learned that trick before I could even read with them.

Grated words sounded from the deck above as Dmitri chewed out the latest females who’d dared to breach his lair.

Not long after, a bevy of babes in vagina-length dresses flounced down the steps. They all talked at once. “What a prick!” “I don’t care how gorgeous he is; who says shit like that?” “Could he have been hotter? Or more insulting?”

I recognized Sharon, a bottle-service girl who lived in my apartment complex. The buxom brunette was no stranger to the grifter life herself.

Champagne flute in hand, she waved her friends onward toward the bar, then sashayed over to us; with her every step, her strapless red dress valiantly struggled to contain her rack.

She rose on her toes to kiss my cousin’s cheek and murmured with affection, “Petey Three Times.”

Grifter nicknames might be cliché, but Pete’s was spot-on. He was so good he could con you twice more, even if you caught him the first time. Also known as Re-Pete.

I’d gotten the nickname Vice as a baby. I’d earned my Cold-as-Ice designation from my family’s stock-investment schemes.

For years, we’d found men who wanted something for nothing, so we’d sold them nothing for something.

But those days were over. . . .

Pete smoothly said, “Sharon, you’re looking fabulous as ever.”

“Charmer.” She smoothed her hair, giving me a once-over. “Great dress, Vice. All classy.”

“Thanks, doll.” I’d made this white, one-shoulder drape a few months ago for a job.

Tonight, my look was sexy good-girl, a change from my usual racy/alternative. My black nails were now nude, my glam makeup neutral. I’d exchanged my spike earrings for diamond—read cubic zirconia—studs and secured my long hair into an elegant knot. Instead of platform heels, I
wore ankle-strap d’Orsay pumps.

Sharon sipped her flute. “You dress up for that Sebastian gull?” A gullible, anyone outside the grift.

“It’s actually with a V,” Pete said. “Suh-vast-yun.” Details were our job.

Sharon shrugged, her dress hanging on precariously. Her enhanced boobs dwarfed my 32Cs; she could legit carry drinks without a tray.

I always pictured her balancing martinis on her mammaries with circus music teed up. “No, not for him. I had a high roller on the line.” Wardrobe was critical in cons, and this look played to rich guys. My mark, Nigel, had approved. Until he’d inexplicably abandoned me in the Caly lobby a little while ago. “My con went south, so Pete invited me here.” To dig. These days, I wasn’t good for much else.

This honey trap might be stingerless.

“Looks like you’re having a shit week,” Sharon said. “I saw an eviction notice on your door.”

I lowered my voice to say, “I forgot my neck brace one freaking time.”

Pete’s blond brows rose. I hadn’t told him about my eviction, not with all my other recent failures.

“Happens to the best of us.” Sharon finished her champagne. “Two tears in a bucket; motherfuck it.”

I grinned. “I will never stop saying that saying.”

“How’d you hear about this party?” Pete asked her.

“Some crazy chick named Alicia or Jessica or something invited the entire Strip, telling everyone about a whale she’s trying to hook up. I came here to harpoon said whale. No dice. He actually told me, ‘I have a woman in mind for myself, and you are not her.’ Russians suck.”

Pete and I shared a look. We had a Russian KA, a known associate, who was like our
grandfather.

“I’m gonna go find some real action. Ciao, babies.” Sharon blew air kisses as she rejoined her friends. Just before they headed inside, she yelled over her shoulder to Dmitri, “Go fuck yourself, Russki!”

When a tirade of Russian boomed out from above, I raised my brows at Pete. “Maybe he’s not interested in women. If Karin bombed with this guy . . .” Last night, he’d ignored my breathtaking sister as if she were invisible. “Maybe Dmitri’s gay.”

“I should be so lucky,” Pete said, a wistful note to his voice. “For a guy like that, I would turn honey trap in a heartbeat.”

“It’s not as easy as it looks, chief.” I would know. I was supposed to have run my first badger game tonight. In a badger, a honey trap would maneuver a married mark into a compromising position while an accomplice snapped photos and took video. Voilà, blackmail.

Nigel had been my ideal man—a hitched skirt-chaser with a cheating clause in his prenup, wandering hands, and a tan line on his ring finger. Tonight the older man’s watery gaze had beamed at the sight of me—right up until the moment he’d checked his phone, sputtered at whatever he’d read, then all but fled the casino.

My fifth busted con in a row. I was as superstitious as the next grifter and knew what this streak meant. “Pete, I’m pretty sure I’m jinxed.” And yet I would drag myself back to the VIP lounge tomorrow to troll for yet another sleazebag. It’d taken me three double-backs—sixteen-hour stints in stilettos—to scare up Nigel.

Pete said, “It could be the badger that’s giving you trouble, since it’s your first and all.”

“You’re making me sound like a noob.” Sure, every grifter had a specialty—mine had been those pump-and-dump stock cons—but a skilled confidence artist was versatile.

“Until you get your footing, you should help out with Karin’s kid another night or two a week, so she can close more. Just till we settle the debt.”
I blinked in disbelief. “We’re in the middle of a crisis, and you want me to babysit?” Not to mention that Mom and Dad would cage-fight me if I tried to limit their grandbaby time.

Pete scrubbed a palm over his handsome face. “Nigel should’ve been . . . well, he should’ve been low-hanging fruit.” In a grudging tone, he broke it to me straight: “Karin could’ve run him in her sleep.”

_Ouch._ Though one could definitely tell we were sisters, I was like a short, less-endowed indie version of her. At twenty-eight, she was all long-legged grace, confidence, and effortless sex-appeal; around men, if I didn’t concentrate, I could come across as standoffish—a kiss of death for a honey trap.

Pete rushed to say, “You’re an ace at cards, and your grift sense is the most honed of anybody I know. Your instincts in those stock schemes kept the lights on for the entire family. But stocks are out forever.”

We’d conned the wrong people, and they wanted their money back—plus interest. “Our deadline is only twenty days away, and you’re benching me?” No wonder everyone had texted me encouragement tonight! Yet I’d failed to pluck the low-hanging fruit.

“It’s _because_ the deadline’s on us.” He exhaled. “You’re wasting marks that Karin could close.” Over the last several weeks, she’d run a ton of lechers. She even had a two-timing congressman in the pipeline.

I hadn’t gotten a mark anywhere near our hidden-camera prop house.

Karin was my best friend, but sometimes I felt like screaming, “Marcia, Marcia, Marcia!”

In a softer tone, Pete said, “All you need is a little brushing up on your, you know, sexual manipulation skills, but we don’t have time right now.”

Sexual manipulation skills? Really? How did he think I got all those lowlifes to invest in our bogus stock deals?

_By making sure they read my cleavage instead of the writing on the wall!_
“When you’re not so exhausted, you’ll see where I’m coming from,” Pete said. “Why don’t you skip Dmitri and rest up?”

My eyes widened with realization. “You’ve already decided to cut the Sevastyans! My ‘assignment’ to dig . . . it’s busy work, isn’t it?” To make me feel better about Nigel!

After a moment, Pete raised his palms.

Busy work and babysitting. If he sidelined me, I’d go crazy in the next three weeks. How could I not be out fighting for my loved ones?

I burned to prove my value and contribute when they needed me most. My gaze darted up, landing on a beast’s lair. Words started leaving my mouth: “You know what? You’re not going to bench me. Because I’m gonna run game on the juiciest mark of them all—Dmitri Sevastyan.”
Chapter 2

Pete laughed—until he saw I was serious. “Karin couldn’t get a word out of him.”

Last night, when Pete had heard the Sevastyans were heading down to the VIP lounge, he’d sent me home and called in the family’s MVP for a milk-cow con—one of the most difficult of the long cons.

In a milk-cow, a temptress would whip a mark into a sexual frenzy, teasingly withholding intercourse to maneuver him into buying jewelry, cars, even real estate.

“Not a single word.” Pete shook his head. “Even though Dmitri was dateless, and she was on.”

If Karin couldn’t get the Russian to engage, then he wasn’t engage-able. But I’d talked a big game. “Then I won’t be wasting a potential mark, will I?”

“Don’t be pissed.”

I handed Pete my purse. “Pissed? Me? Haven’t you heard?” I started toward the stairs, saying over my shoulder, “I’m cold as ice.”

In reality, I was so pissed I almost stomped up the steps. But I controlled my temper, keeping my heels from striking the tile surface. Maybe I could sneak up on Dmitri and observe him unawares.

I knew the basics about him from Pete’s copious notes. Thirty-two years old, a resident of
Russia, raised in Siberia. Youngest of the three brothers. A computer and math prodigy.

He’d graduated at the top of his class from Oxford, then founded a company that revolutionized aspects of business computing. He’d cashed out with a couple of patents, retiring a billionaire. Yet there were few mentions of him online—and zero pictures.

As I stepped onto the deck, I raised my brows at the beast’s extravagant lair. Fire pits lit the area. A hot tub steamed under a wisteria-covered trellis, and a mosaic-tiled fountain sloshed against the back wall. A fully stocked bar stood off to the side, unmanned.

I spotted Dmitri at the railing, taking in the city’s vista. Not another soul was up here.

I silently approached, noting details about him. He had a muscular build and stood well over six feet, even taller than my ex’s six foot three.

My grandmother would call Dmitri Sevastyan a mountain of a man. He’d tower over my five feet four.

His expensive clothes were so well made, I nearly salivated. He wore tailored gray slacks that highlighted his narrow hips and tight ass. His charcoal-colored shirt clung to his back and arm muscles.

Beneath the thin material, I could see his triceps bulging as he white-knuckled that railing. Like Bruce Banner warding off the Hulk.

Pete had told me he’d picked up intermittent tension in Dmitri and Aleks, the oldest Sevastyan brother. Perhaps they’d fought and Dmitri was taking out his frustration on others?

If Dmitri was so angry, why not go back to his room? Why not take his fortune and fly somewhere else?

In the next second, everything I speculated got turned upside down—because Dmitri’s head tipped back, and his broad shoulders rose and fell on a breath. Even from this angle I could tell he was gazing at the full moon.

People didn’t normally do that when stewing; they did it when they felt regret, or even
longing.

A flare of pity arose. His family was right downstairs, but he remained here all by himself.

That was the thing about the beast from fairy tales; he didn’t want to be a beast. He didn’t want to be alone.

Dmitri finally released his grip to rub his temples.

Curiosity to see his face won out, so I headed toward the opposite end of the railing, letting my heels click.

He dropped his hands, and his muscles tensed even more. “How many times do I have to fucking say this?” he bit out, his accent thick. As he turned toward me, he snapped, “I—AM—NOT—GODDAMNED—INTER . . .” He trailed off, looking staggered.

I knew the feeling. Dmitri Sevastyan was . . . magnificent.

His flawless, masculine face swindled your breath and left your lungs holding the bag.

Thick black hair, chiseled cheekbones. Proud, slim nose and a rugged jaw. His eyes were blazing amber.

Beautiful, beautiful beast. I nearly reeled on my feet. I never did that, except as a ruse for pick-pocketing.

Once the angry set of his jaw eased, his lips went from thinned to oh-so-kissable. That vivid gaze of his roamed over my body from my heels to the top of my head. “You . . .” he breathed.

Make the talk, Vice. “Me?” I knew we hadn’t met. Because his face would’ve been seared into my brain forever.

“. . . are stunning. The sight of you has defeated my wits.”

Huh? Guys thought I was pretty, but in the land of long-legged showgirls and surgically enhanced models, it took a lot to stand out. (I’d always told myself I would crush it in Reno.)

And what about Karin? Maybe he’d forgotten his contacts last night.
Instead of chasing me away, the beast strode over to join me. I had to crane my head up to meet his gaze. *Well, hello there, big guy.*

He stood so close I could feel the heat coming off his body. I caught a hint of his aftershave—evergreen and something mysterious—and I wanted to purr. No, not a hint—*a hit.* His scent was a drug spiking the air.

“I am Dmitri Sevastyan,” he said in a deep voice. “You must tell me your name.” With way too much familiarity, he lifted that loose lock of my hair, the color stark against his tanned skin.

Engagement! What if I actually could run this guy?

“I’m Victoria Valentine.” My steady tone was impressive.

“*Victoryaa.*” The way he drew out the end of my name, rumbling the last syllable, made my cheeks burn.

“I’d never been able to control my blushing, no matter how much grief my family gave me over a tell. “It’s nice to meet you. But I believe you were about to yell at me that you weren’t goddamned interested?”

Color tinged his own cheekbones, and he dropped my hair. “The women here have been . . . persistent.”

“Most guys would consider that a good problem to have.”

“The women weren’t the only irritation,” he said. “I had the sense tonight would be different in some way. I was disappointed.”

“I figured.”

“Why?” His gaze skimmed my face, lingering on each of my features, as if committing them to memory.

“People who sigh at the moon are usually filled with regret or longing.” Now that I’d snagged his attention, it was time to be elusive. “I’ll leave you to it, big guy.” I turned toward the
stairs. *Chase me, chase me. . .*

Dmitri rushed to cut me off. “*However,* I am no longer disappointed since this curvy little blonde appeared, because in the moonlight, she looks like an angel. And I happen to be in great need of one.”

Angel? To save my family, I’d cut his nuts with a hangnail if I had to. “What if I’m not an angel? What if I’m a she-demon? Would you lock horns with me?”

He nodded solemnly. “I would very much like to lock *anything* with you.”

He was serious, but I caught myself fighting a grin. “Locking horns can be very meaningful, Mr. Sevastyan, and we’ve only just met.”

One corner of his lips quirked. “Call me Dmitri. Or Dima.” He stood between me and the stairs.

“You’ve been bellowing at women all night, yet you’re preventing me from leaving? I don’t know whether to be flattered or alarmed.”

“You heard that?” Another flush over those cheekbones.

“I was out on the terrace. I remarked that you were like a beast from a fairy tale, alone in his lair.”

Holding my gaze, he said, “I’ve found Beauty.”

My toes curled. I’d been prepared for anger and blustering, not charm. My eyes dipped to his full bottom lip. I had the urge to suck on it. What would it be like to kiss this man? To sleep with him?

Though I’d had every intention of doing the deed with someone since my ex, no guy had tempted me enough.

“I won’t prevent you from leaving,” the Russian said, “but I invite you to stay.”

“How do I know you won’t lose your temper again, Dmitri?”
His lids grew heavy—as if he enjoyed the way I said his name. “I believe I can behave, if motivated by a sweet enough treat.”

“You believe?” His hair was close-cut at the sides, but longer on top. A breeze tousled those thick locks. “You don’t know?”

“This is foreign territory for me. But I like my new guide very much.”

Did he, then? My good-girl disguise was paying off! What if I pulled my first ever milk-cow—with a billionaire? That would show everyone! And more importantly . . .

That would save everyone.

The con was on. “Perhaps you’re using me to keep other women away.”

“Perhaps I drove the others away so you would appear in front of me.”

I tilted my head at him. “You could be using me to make someone else jealous.” Which would explain a lot of this unexpected attention.

“Twice you’ve accused me of using you. Are you using me?”

Clever man. I’d have to be careful with this one. “I came up to check out the view. You’re the tourist chatting up the local girl.” In the timeline of a con, we’d just had “the meet.”

I glanced over my shoulder, wishing Pete could see this. Dmitri’s got a little change in his pocket goin’ jingle lingle ling! I would so fake-flirt with this Russian, in order to manipulate him into fake near-sex situations.

I would be perfect for a milk-cow, because I didn’t lose control sexually, even when I was supposed to.

“Do you want to get back to someone?” Dmitri asked. “Are you here with another man?”

Surely I misheard the jealousy in his tone. “Your VIP host invited me. Peter Valentine’s my cousin.”

“Ah, yes. He helped smooth over the near arrest of my sister-in-law’s friend.”
Jessica, the tagalong, was best friends with Natalie Sevastyan, the PhD redhead.

We’d been stoked about Jessica’s trouble with the law, thinking dirt! But Pete had heard the woman begging for a “pic with the po-po.” For her blog, “You guys must’ve been having a ton of fun for the LVPD to step in.” The five-o seemed to have given up on my family and our KAs.

“Jessica attracts trouble wherever she goes.” Sounding mystified, Dmitri said, “And yet she is invited everywhere with the group.”

“I think she’s funny. As I passed her downstairs, she was wondering aloud if a local plant-eater would be a ‘vegan Las Vegan.’ Then she did a spot-on Lady Gaga impression.”

“Funny?” Dmitri seemed to be processing this information.

“Yes.” Pete had told me he’d walked in on Jessica in the men’s bathroom, voguing and primping her hair. Upon seeing him, she’d lifted a leg and plopped her heel on the counter to vogue her junk. “My bush stylist talked me into this natural look,” she’d told him, “but I’m not convinced. What say you, Peter Pumpkin Eater?” And she thought he was straight.

Dmitri gave a curt nod. “Jessica is around your age. You would want to socialize with her. I will take you inside.”

“Wait, I don’t want to intrude.” He sounded as if he wanted to formally introduce me, or something. “Pete said you’re here to celebrate something.” I worried my bottom lip.

His eyes clocked the little movement. “Da. Natalie, my oldest brother’s wife, completed her doctorate. And my middle brother and his wife just had their four-year anniversary.”

Maksimilian, the retired politician, and his hot Latina heiress, Lucía.

Pete had learned the pair owned half of Miami and were refurbishing it while they acquired the other half. “Those are some great accomplishments. Most people come here to celebrate getting a paycheck on Friday.”

He raised his gaze from my mouth. “You do sound like a local.”
“Third generation.” My mom came from a long line of serial brides, and my dad descended from carnies. They’d never leave this city.

“What do you do here?”

“I sling drinks downstairs. Like my sister.” I had to find out why he was talking to me over her. Grifters around town had nicknamed her “the Woman,” because she was everything a man could ever want in one. Even my mom, the infamous Diamond Jill, hadn’t landed as many marks in her badger days. “Karin served you guys last night at the tables.”

“Had you been there, we could have met a day sooner,” he said, as if he regretted the loss.

I’d been substituted out by Coach Grift.

Dmitri frowned. “I hope we tipped your sister enough.”

“Plenty.” A family record for tips, in fact. And it’d all gone toward the debt. Always the freaking debt. Which brought my mind back to the con. Time for more elusiveness. “I better be going. Maybe I’ll see you around.”

He clasped my elbow with a warm, strong hand.

My back shot straight as if I’d been jolted, and unfamiliar sensations radiated through my body. A rush of heat mixed with shivers? Before I turned back to him, I masked my look of bewilderment.

He didn’t mask his. His eyes had narrowed, his lips parting. “I had no idea skin could be so soft.” He released me to run the backs of his fingers along my bare arm.

I watched in confusion as my skin prickled in the wake of his caress. Cold-as-Ice Vice was feeling very, very hot. I peered up at him, as if I could find the answer in his expression.

His eyes really were glorious. This close, I could see his amber pupils were awash with brighter flecks; they made his eyes gleam gold.

I could get lost in them. If he were a grifter, he’d be a thrall, the type of con artist whose sex appeal was so strong he or she could manipulate a mark’s behavior with just a look.
He eased in even closer, raising a hand to brush his knuckles over my jawline, then a cheekbone. “So incredibly beautiful, moy ángel.”

Was this billionaire going to kiss me? I murmured, “You’re a player, aren’t you?”

Still caressing my face, he said, “Give me your definition of ‘player.’”

“A guy who finds women interchangeable, and goes through a lot of them. He plays games with their heads.” The only thing worse than a player? A tourist player.

Dmitri lowered his hand to curl his forefinger under my chin. “There are two things you should know about me, Victoria. One, I will play games with you.”

Warmth flooded my body, centering between my thighs. I swallowed. “What’s the other thing, big guy?”

He palmed the back of my head, drawing me close. Yet then he hesitated, as if relishing that he was about to kiss me. “You will like my games.” He leaned down and trailed his warm, firm lips along the side of my neck.

My lids slid shut, all of my senses heightening. His scent had been enticing; now irresistible. His body heat had been magnetic; now he felt hot as flames.

My thoughts tried to scatter, but I struggled for control. Potential mark. Keep your head. What’re you doing?

I perceived his light breaths against my mouth. His lips grazed mine with such tenderness—almost . . . reverence. He was seducing me.

And it was delicious.

For all my sexual life, I’d longed for the wild passion other people talked about, wrote about, sang about. I’d enjoyed sex, but I’d easily lived without it for a year. Sometimes I feared I would never find the key to unlock my passion.

When I parted my lips for him, he slanted his mouth and our tongues touched. My breath hitched at the contact, my neglected libido sizzling to life. Could a single, solitary man be my
key?

With a groan, he cradled my face and slowly twined his tongue with mine.

I shivered with wonder, grasping his broad shoulders, savoring his muscles. My nipples stiffened against the cups of my strapless bra, and my thong grew damp.

Though tension stole through his body, he kept up his measured seduction.

I got the impression he struggled to be gentle with me; I didn’t want gentle. I inwardly begged, *More* . . .

But he kept up his slow-burn, seething pace.

*More!* My fingernails bit into his shoulders; as if I’d flipped a switch in him, ferocity overpowered his tenderness. With a growl against my lips, his hands landed on my ass, yanking me against him.

I gasped into our kiss—his cock was huge! Was he moving us? My back met a wall.

He pressed his body against mine and rocked his hips, grinding his erection.

I shuddered with want, moaning for the thick length trapped between us. I grew even wetter, my pussy aching for it. My head swam. I couldn’t get close enough to him. Rolling my hips against him, I sucked on his tongue—

“*Vice*?”
Chapter 3

I broke away from that dream kiss. When I pushed against Dmitri’s chest, his muscles flexed to my touch. My greedy fingers decided to clutch at his rigid pecs, and I was about to dip right back into the dream—

Pete cleared his throat.

I dropped my hands and shimmied around Dmitri, trying to catch my breath.

The Russian refused to let go, turning to pull my back against his front so we both faced Pete. I blushed again when I felt Dmitri’s cock between us.

He draped his arms over me possessively. “Peter, how could you hide a cousin this beautiful from me?”

Pete must be thinking: But I threw our best and brightest at your feet. With my little purse in his hands, he said, “I had no idea you would hit it off . . . with her.” Obviously. He’d been so shocked to find us kissing, he’d used my family nickname in front of a gull.

Dmitri made a sound of disbelief. “How could I not?”

I made a mental note to ask my cousin how smug I looked at this moment.

“Maksimilian is looking for you,” Pete said. “They’re about to start the toasts.”

Dmitri tugged me even closer. “We will be down soon.”
“Actually”—I twisted in his arms to peer up at him—“can I meet you downstairs? I need to talk to Pete about something.”

Dmitri glanced at my cousin. He shuttered his reaction, but I read faces like a pro, even micro expressions. And right now, Dmitri’s was micro-irritated. “Before I go . . .” He dug in his shirt pocket and handed me his miniscule phone. “I would like you to call yourself.”

I accepted the high-tech looking thing, but playfully said, “Hmm. Maybe I shouldn’t give you my number.” *I am desperate for you to have my number.*

“I will simply hound Peter for it. Maksim paid ten thousand dollars for Lucía’s; do you think I’ll do less?” He peered down at me. He was using the thrall on me!

But then, I *did* want to comply. In a way, he was assisting in his own conning. As I dialed myself, he strode to a nearby table and collected his jacket. With his back to us, he drew it on and fastened a button.

Because he was still hard?

When music sounded from my purse, Dmitri returned, raising a brow at my unusual ringtone.


He took my hand to press a kiss into my palm. “Don’t keep me waiting too long, Victoria.”

He descended the stairs.

My cousin and I stared after him until we were alone. “What the hell did you do to him?”

I examined my nails. “I used some good, old-fashioned sexual manipulation skills,” I said, as if I’d done more than hold on for dear life.

Four aces couldn’t beat Dmitri’s kiss.

Pete handed me my purse. “You’re thinking a milk-cow, aren’t you? Even though you’ve
never done one before? That is a completely different animal from stock cons, with full-on emotion and entanglement. You’ve never even done a one-night badger game!” More to himself, he said, “We could still bring in Karin to close this. Maybe Dmitri didn’t have his contacts in last night.”

Though I’d had the exact same thought, I snapped, “Oh, come on!” Marcia, Marcia, Marcia! “He likes me.”

“You’re right, you’re right. But are you ready for a sexual con?"

After that kiss? Deal me in! “I’m ready.”

“You’ve only been with three men,” Pete pointed out. “And one of those guys lasted five seconds!”

I should never have told my cousin about one-thrust Ronny.

“Can you tease Dmitri to sexual insanity and then deny him? Get him so crazed he’ll promise you anything?”

As if I had a choice? I lifted my chin. “I’m going down to that party—as primary.” The lead player in a con. “I’m gonna do my job, so why don’t you do yours?” I wasn’t entering the room blind—I’d read Pete’s notes on the Sevastyans—but I’d take any more information he could give me. “How many bodyguards?” The bane of a grifter’s existence.

“Several. Dmitri and Aleks have two each. Maksim’s head of security is the bald one, Vasili. He could be trouble, so keep a lookout for him.”

“Will we stand up to a billionaire’s kind of background scrutiny?” Though no one in my immediate family had an arrest record, we were KAs of people who’d done time.

“We couldn’t beat the investigation three months ago, but Benji’s made adjustments since then. So maybe.” My adopted brother, Ben Valentine—a.k.a. Benji the Eye—was our tech guy.

“We’ll have to roll the dice on that.”

“Any last-minute tips?”
“This crew likes ribald—and I mean filthy—humor. The girls do tequila; the guys don’t drink that much. Jessica will make you do shooters. Don’t waste energy resisting her. Just try to keep eating. If she likes you, life will be a lot easier. She’ll probably be attracted to you.”

“Let’s hope.” I’d read she liked both guys and dolls.

“If the opportunity arises, impress Lucía with your Spanish. She’s an influencer with Dmitri. Oh, and if the group hits the tables, don’t give poker advice. Besides, I think he calculates pot odds as well as you do.”

Did he, then? To a girl like me, that was sexy as hell. “Speaking of poker”—I tapped my chin—“what if I could get him to stake me?”

“Forget it. You’re a grinder at the tables. We need a huge score.”

He was right. I had all the tools to make a living, but not to make a killing. Not unless I could get my hands on the deck. “So you aren’t coming with?” I didn’t expect him to. A mark couldn’t relax fully with a male family member around.

“I’ll hang on the periphery and work the environment.” Keeping the atmosphere conducive to romance.

I’d seen him do everything from bribing DJs to wild-dog removal.

“Vice, these people might be gulls, but they’re still brilliant. Listen to your grift sense.”

Grift sense was like the Force for a con artist. Maybe there was some mystical basis; maybe a grifter’s subconscious picked up on behavioral clues and channeled them into intuition.

One thing I knew for certain: to trust mine. I cracked my knuckles. “I’ve got this. Clear eyes, full hearts, can’t lose, right?”

He gave a long-suffering sigh, and we turned toward the stairs. On the way down, he said, “Quiet in there.”

The DJ had stopped playing. “They’ve probably already started the toasts.”

Pete and I entered the living room together. No toasts. Every eye was focused . . . on me. No
one spoke.

On a stretch sectional couch, Maksim sat with Lucía, Aleks with Natalie. Jessica too. All five stared wordlessly, and the other party-goers seemed to follow their lead.

Standing nearby, Dmitri proudly announced, “Meet Victoria Valentine. She is my date.”

Pete murmured, “All yours, primary.”

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