

Casino

"The next morning, we went to the casino. Natural light never came close to touching the gaming floor, so it was very easy. Edward told me it was generally expected for them to go lose some money in the hotel—a suite like ours was reserved for that special class of visitor known as high rollers.

As they walked—and I rolled in my wheelchair—through the acres of elegantly decorated casino floor, three times Alice paused at a particular slot machine and slid a card through the scanner. Each time she did this, sirens would blare, lights would revolve, and an electronic simulation of coins dropping indicated that her prize had been credited to her room. She tried to get me to do it once, but I sceptically shook my head.

"I thought you were supposed to lose money," I accused her.

"Oh, I will," she assured me. "But not until I make them sweat a little." Her smile was sinful.

We reached a more lavishly decorated division of the huge casino, where there were no slot machines or casually dressed tourists with plastic cups full of change. Plush chairs replaced the swivelling bar stools, and the voices were quiet, serious. But we continued still further, through a set of ornate gold doors into another room, a private room, more opulent yet. Finally I understood why Alice had insisted on the raw silk, emerald green wrap around dress she'd tied on me today, why she was wearing a long, white satin sarong—with a short lace top that bared her flat, white stomach—and why Edward was overwhelming and irresistible in another light silk suit. The players in this room were all dressed with an exclusive splendour whose expense was far beyond my imagining. A few of the impeccable older men even had young women in glittering, strapless gowns standing behind their chairs, just like in the movies. I pitied the beautiful women as their eyes swept over Alice and Edward, realizing their own deficiencies as they measured the first, and the deficiencies of their partners as they ogled the second. I was the enigma, and their eyes slid away from me unsatisfied.

Alice glided off toward the long roulette tables, and I cringed as I thought of the havoc she would wreak.

"You do know how to play black jack, of course," Edward bent forward to murmur in my ear.

"Are you kidding?" I felt the colour drain from my face.

"Knowing your luck, I couldn't lose any more thoroughly than by letting you play," he chuckled. He wheeled me toward a table with three empty chairs. The two immaculately dressed, exceptionally dignified Asian men glanced up in disbelief as Edward lifted me gently into one of the empty velvet chairs, and took the seat next to me. The delicate oriental beauty who stood at the end of the table watched with insulting incredulity as Edward caressed my hair possessively.

"Only use one hand," he breathed almost silently in my ear. "And keep your cards over the table."

Edward spoke a quiet word to the dealer, and two impressive stacks of dark blue chips appeared on the table in front of us. They had no numbers—and I didn't want to know anyway. Edward pushed a small stack of his forward, and a larger stack of mine. I glared at Edward in embarrassed panic, but he just smiled impishly as the dealer dealt the cards swiftly around. I picked up my cards carefully with one hand, holding them rigidly above the

table. I had two nines. Edward held his cards loosely; I could see he had a five and a seven. I glanced guardedly at the two gentlemen next to me, intent but terrified, watching carefully to see what the protocol was for a high rolling black jack table. To my relief, it seemed easy enough. The first swept the top of his cards briefly against the felt, and received a card, the second slipped the corner of his cards under his bet, leaving them on the table, and didn't. I quickly put my cards down, shoving them awkwardly under my chips—cheeks flaming—when the dealer looked at me. Belatedly I noticed that the dealer had a queen. Edward brushed the table lightly, and the dealer threw a nine face up on the table in front of him. I glared at him, as the men beside me murmured appreciatively.

The dealer had a jack, and I lost, as did both Asian gentlemen. He smoothly relieved us of our chips. I heard a subdued commotion coming from the direction of the roulette table, but I was afraid to look. Edward pushed another stack of my chips onto the table, and it began again.

When my chips were gone, Edward passed me half of his, unable to contain his amused smile. He was doing well, winning three times as often as the other men at the table. But, with the size of my bets controlled by him, I was losing chips faster than he could rake them in. I had yet to win a hand. It was humiliating—but at least I was sure to never become a gambling addict.

Finally, I lost our last stack of chips. The Asian gentlemen, and their female escort, watched Edward with impressed curiosity as he could no longer contain his mirth, chuckling quietly, but with deep amusement, while he returned me to the wheel chair. I blushed and kept my eyes on the thick carpet as he pushed me away, still laughing.

"I'm the worst gambler in history," I muttered apologetically.

"Actually, you're not. That's what so funny." He laughed again. "You didn't do one thing wrong, aside from playing a little conservatively. The odds that you would lose every hand..." He shook his head, grinning.

We got to the roulette table just in time to watch Alice lose her spectacular pile of multihued chips in one disastrous spin of the wheel. The many hopeful players who had bet with her on seventeen black looked murderously disappointed. She laughed, a trilling, carefree sound, and joined us.

"Did we lose enough?" I whispered as we exited the gold doors.

"I think the house is satisfied. You're probably their favourite client today," he snickered.

"Please promise me one thing."

"Anything you want."

"Never, ever tell me how much money I lost today, please."

We were in the noisy casino by this time, and his laugh was unrestrained."