

Learning the Game

Faye Valentine

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Maya Collins sat at her desk, the harsh fluorescent lights above casting a sterile glow over stacks of paperwork. She had been in the department for six years, always meticulous, always prepared. But as she stared at the case file in front of her, something gnawed at her. This wasn't just another bust. This was a fight for lives. And it had become personal. The file was thick—too thick for an ordinary case. Pages of evidence, photos, and witness testimonies spilled over onto several tables and pegboards placed around the room. At the center of it all, a name kept jumping out at her. Donovan Crane. A name that had become synonymous with the horrors of human trafficking. Caught up in the frustration of the biggest case of her career still going unsolved, she did not hear the door open and close, or the footfalls clacking on the floor.

“Detective Collins,” Chief Ferguson’s voice broke through her thoughts.

“Sir! Sorry, didn’t hear you coming.”

“Find anything new?” Ferguson asked as he held out one of two cups of coffee he carried in with him.

Shoulders slumping, Maya sighed. “There has to be something we’re missing, Sir. I just need more time to go over every piece of evidence with a fine-tooth comb.”

“We’ve been tracking this guy for over a year now. Our resources are stretched thin, and the operation is stalled. We need someone who can get closer—someone who can get into his inner circle.”

Maya met his gaze, her heart racing. She knew what he was asking and despite her feelings knew there was only one answer she could give. “Whatever you need me to do I will, Sir.”

“I appreciate the enthusiasm, Collins, but you might want to hear the plan first.

“I know that look, Sir. You want me to go undercover. Just tell me the plan and I’ll get started immediately.”

“We’re potentially sending you in undercover. I wish there was another way, or someone else, but with your background you’re uniquely qualified. I won’t beat around the bush, Collins. You’ll be working the streets. You’re going in as a sex worker. And I don’t mean the normal undercover sting to catch Johns soliciting prostitution. There won’t be officers waiting in the next motel room to make the arrest. When you take clients back to your room you’ll do the deed. Do you get what I’m saying, Collins?”

Maya’s stomach tightened. She knew what the job entailed. It wasn’t just dangerous—it was a descent into a world she had watched far too many women ruin themselves over. Drugs. Greedy pimps. STIs. Violent clients. Acts of sexual perversion. Having spent most of her teens homeless, she understood the streets all-too-well and as much as she detested what was being asked of her, she knew the Chief was right. “I understand, Sir. You’re telling me if I accept then I’ll spend God only knows how long selling myself to whomever wishes to pay to use my body. You’re telling me I’ll be an actual sex worker taking clients back to some seedy motel to have their way with me for real.”

“As I said, it’s a lot to...”

“I’ll do it, Sir.”

“Are you sure? Don’t get me wrong, given what I know of your past I truly believe you’re the most qualified for the task, and I wouldn’t wish that life on anyone, but we need to catch this bastard and shut his operation down once and for all.”

“I agree, Sir.” Taking a sip of coffee, Maya stared at the dozens of photographs of women that had gone missing pinned to the pegboards. “I’m not going to lie, Sir, the thought of being a sex worker sickens me, but if it leads to rescuing even one woman and bringing Crane to justice then it’s worth the price.”

“Are you absolutely certain you’re up for the task? No is a viable answer, Collins, so please don’t feel pressured into doing something you’re not fully prepared for.”

“I’ve spent years living on the streets so know them better than any beat cop. I’ve spent my career chasing down criminals and studying the underworld from afar. I don’t know if I’ll ever be fully prepared to be a sex worker, but I’ll do whatever it takes to get the job done. That being said, do I have any backup at all?” she asked, trying to steady her nerves.

Lena will be your contact, but this is your operation, Collins. Keep your head down, get in close, and gather as much intel as possible. If the direct approach fails, then we bring them down from the inside.”

“Understood, Sir,” Maya nodded, but the weight of what lay ahead was already heavy on her chest. While her training was extensive, and she had spent most of her life taking risks and concocting ways of getting out of nearly every situation, this – going undercover as a sex worker, was not one of them. “I’m not familiar with any officers named Lena. Is she new?”

“She’s on loan from another department. We brought her in because, like you, she has a uniquely qualified background. She’s here to ensure you’re well-versed in being a sex worker and to make sure you completely embrace your new identity. There can be no mistakes, Collins, so you’ll have as much time as you need.

Glancing at the files spread across the room her fingers trembled as Maya reached for a page. Donovan Crane wasn’t just a criminal; he was a mastermind, and she was about to walk straight into his world. “I understand, Sir. When and where do I meet her?”

“You’ll meet her this evening,” Chief Ferguson said as he plucked a business card from his suit jacket pocket. You’ll meet her at that address and time. Until then, go home and start wrapping your head around your new life. While we take every measure to erase the old.”

“Yes Sir.”

“I know I’ve already asked multiple times, but are you absolutely certain you’re prepared for this?”

“I’m ready, Sir,” Maya said with a level of confidence her voice did not convey.

“You don’t sound so sure.”

“I’m not, Sir. You’re asking me to go undercover as a full-service sex worker. You’re asking me to go out on the streets and have actual sex with anyone paying to use me. That’s a lot to take in, but I’ll get my head wrapped around it eventually.”

“You better, as doubt leads to mistakes and I don’t need to tell you what Crane or anyone else in his organization is capable of. Go home and think about what you’re getting yourself into and if you still think you’re up for it then meet Lena this evening and she’ll teach you everything you need to know.”

“Yes Sir.” Taking one last look around the room, Maya rolled her chair back and reluctantly got to her feet. “I might sound unsure, Sir, but I’ve poured every ounce of myself into this case for over a year and I’m not going to stop until it’s closed.” Putting her hand on the cluttered desk, she took a deep breath, slowly exhaled, and then walked out for her new life.

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With no doubt in mind that she would accept the operation, Maya went home pondering all the ways her decision could backfire. Kicking her shoes off, she unbuttoned her light gray

blouse but left it on while she grabbed her phone. Adding all of her relevant friends and family members to a mass text, she paused to consider her words.

Dreaming of Mars, she started the text with a phrase everyone knew meant she was going undercover. *Other than walking the streets alone I can't remember any details. Hopefully I'll wake up soon, but this dream seems never-ending.*

Sighing, Maya put her phone on the coffee table knowing she would not receive any replies. *I'm really doing this*, she thought as she walked to her bedroom where she stripped out of her work clothes. *I'm going to be a sex worker. A prostitute. A whore for whomever is willing to pay to use me.* The thought of having sex with random strangers turning her stomach, she barely resisted the urge to throw up. Running away from home when she was fourteen after her ultra-religious parents discovered she had been experimenting with her sexuality with her then best friend Kelly, she spent the next three years begging for spare change, stealing food when she could get away with it and eating from dumpsters when she could not, and finding places to sleep where she would feel safe closing her eyes, she came close to turning to sex work many times, but seeing the toll it took on those that did, she swore it off at all costs. And now, here she was, a detective with tasked with doing just that.

Body trembling, she stepped into the adjoining bathroom and took a shower so hot it burned until the water ran so cold the trembling of fear became freezing shivers. Turning the water off, she stepped out of the tub, wrapped a large towel around herself, and then went to the bedroom to look for something to wear for her meeting with Lena. Figuring she would end up naked sooner than later, she opted for a loose-fitting olive green summer dress and a pair of matching flats. No bra. No Panties. No jewelry or other accessories.