

Con Game

Terry Ambrose

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FROM THE AUTHOR

Con Game is the sequel to *License to Lie*. Even though this is a sequel and there are references to events that have brought Skip Cosgrove and Roxy Tanner to a turning point in their lives, you can read either book first. When I originally conceived the idea of this series, I wanted to bring together two characters with opposing views of the world. In this second book, each understands the other a bit more and they must decide whether they can live with that knowledge.

The premise behind *Con Game* from the beginning was that everyone has a breaking point. The question is, what do we do when we reach it?

CHAPTER ONE

Roxy

I'm not particularly proud of my profession. When I was a little girl, I never said, "I want to grow up to be a con artist." But, here I was at a swanky Hollywood party, wearing a thousand-dollar sapphire-blue cocktail dress from Lela Rose, a pair of Jimmy Choo stilettos that set me back another half grand and a Victoria's Secret bra that gave me cleavage any hooker would be proud to display.

If I had a regular job—one where I wasn't trying to steal money from the moron in front of me—I'd slap him hard before telling him to look me in my baby blues. Instead, I knew what he expected, his reputation, and even what buttons to push. Go ahead, check out "the girls," Jack. His fun would cost him not six, but seven figures.

I leaned into him, smiling sweetly. "So, you're really an investment banker?"

Jack Welton gave the lapels of his tux a little tug of satisfaction as he puffed up his chest. "Honey, I deal with millions of dollars every day. I have clients who invest more money than you can dream of."

Believe me, Jack, I can dream. I glanced at the floor for a half second, then gazed into his eyes. "That's exciting."

He took a quick sip of his scotch, then spent two seconds checking out my neckline before he surveyed the room. Welton reached out; his fingers rested lightly on my arm. I sucked in a little

breath for effect. He motioned toward the door with his head as his hand inched up my arm. He was so reassuring. “No one will know.”

No one except your wife, asshole. Since Mrs. Welton was the majority shareholder in “his” company—the legitimate one—pissing her off could be fatal to the front for his other business, a massive stock scam. Welton’s hand lingered a few inches above my elbow.

When my phone rang, I recognized the tone immediately. It was Skip. Was he calling to chew me out again? He hated what I did. The cons. The danger. The rush.

“Excuse me.” I pulled the phone from my cocktail bag to shut off the ringer. Sorry Skip, I’m done. Work comes before stupid arguments. Or feelings. I slipped the phone back into my bag.

Shit. When I glanced up, Welton was surveying the room in search of other available women. I put my hand on the sleeve of his tux. “Are you, um, married?” The gentle caress, paired with the subtle promise of things to come, got his attention.

“What if I was?”

I winked. “The girls just want to have fun.”

He leered at my cleavage again; I arched my back enough to give him a better look. Never mind the fact that my knock-em-dead dress had silk lining or that it accented my eyes perfectly. And forget the killer black stilettos. Jack only cared about where my neckline stopped. Oh Jack, I thought, drool is so unbecoming.

My source had told me how much the wife, Frederica Gurney-Welton, hated fundraisers. She almost always begged off of these things with a headache, being too tired, or some other excuse. With Frederica out of the picture, this jackass only cared about how fast he could get laid. He whispered, “I have a little apartment downtown.”

What Jack the Ass didn't know was, I already knew about his apartment thanks to his last girlfriend. It was all I could do to not laugh at how naturally the nickname flowed. The woman who hired me gave it to him. Thanks to her, I had a little surprise waiting for Mr. Smooth at his apartment. He probably never gave breaking up with Anita a second thought, but she wanted revenge. Lots of it. That's where I came in.

Anita swore her motive for hiring me was to bring Welton to justice, to stop him from hurting innocent victims. The thing is, I learned a long time ago how even the purest of the pure can be fueled by greed when huge sums of money are in play. Her motives or the possible fallout from this job didn't matter to me. This was a job. A half mil. The bottom line? Jack's morality wasn't my concern.

Another man approached. Decked out in a fitted tux, he was, you might say, tall, dark and gorgeous. Slicked back hair with dark penetrating eyes. For him, I might be willing to—who knows?

“Hey, Jack!”

The two men shook hands. Immediately, Tall, Dark and Gorgeous flashed me a brilliant smile. “I'm Sam Oswald. Everyone calls me Oz.”

“I'm delighted to meet you, Oz.” Which I was. I put Welton on hold for a moment while I absorbed the musky scent of this new arrival's aftershave. The chemistry between us was what I needed to push my mark into the corner where I wanted him. I let Oz hold my hand a couple of seconds too long. Precisely long enough to make Welton bristle.

“Why haven't we met before?”

“Fate, I guess.” It was my dad who taught me about contingency planning. Always have a

backup, he'd said. Thank goodness Dad wasn't here to see how well his overachiever daughter learned how to use those lessons. I extracted a business card from my clutch. It was from an old con in which I'd pretended to run an escort service. "Call me." Welton peered at the card over Oz's shoulder—it looked like he might dump his load on the spot.

Oz eyed the card before he snatched it out of my hand. He stuffed it into his shirt pocket, then lowered his voice. He, too, couldn't keep his eyes where they belonged. "Are you, um, here on business?"

I turned to Welton. "Well?"

Oz said, "You lucky bastard. If you don't, I will."

Welton practically spit on himself when he blurted his answer. "Beat it."

"Guess I'm busy tonight." Now, it was Oz's turn to pine while I stroked Welton's arm.

Oz shook his head, a look of wonder on his face. "How'd you meet—never mind. God, I love Hollywood." He pulled out the card again, read it, and slipped it back into his pocket. "I'd really like to see you sometime."

He got the oh-so-genuine wink with the smile I'd perfected during my freshman year in high school. "Call me."

Before he walked away, he slapped Welton on the shoulder. "You lucky bastard. You goddamn lucky bastard."

If he only knew. Jack Welton wasn't going to come anywhere close to getting lucky tonight.

With Oz out of earshot, Welton said, "I thought you were a guest."

"I am." It took only a moment to catch the eye of our host, a distinguished, silver-haired Hollywood producer, across the room. He had no clue who I was, but when I smiled, he tipped

his glass in acknowledgment. I gave Jack my full attention again. “I can play rough, too. Would you prefer that?”

Jack swallowed hard. “You know him? Personally?”

I reached out to rest my fingertips on Jack’s arm before hitting him with the Southern drawl.

“How do you like it, sugar?”

“How much?”

“A thousand.”

“For the night?”

I shook my head. “Oh, Jack. You’re funny. An hour. But, you’re kind of cute, so for the night we’ll just call it an even five.” The room was filled with high society. Tuxes, cocktail dresses and evening gowns. Glamor and glitz. Boring conversations, fake laughs.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said.

The minute he took my arm, I could almost taste my regret.

CHAPTER TWO

Skip

Skip Cosgrove dropped his cell phone to the cold asphalt. He didn't want to die alone. Not now. Not next to some dumpster in a dark alley.

Roxy didn't even answer.

A horn blared a block away on the Coast Highway. The world felt hazy. Dammit. He was disconnecting.

How long would it take to bleed out?

He remembered lights from a car passing on the street. It may have been the only thing that saved him from his attacker. The rumble of a truck's diesel engine drowned out the traffic noise a block away.

Two figures outlined by white light ran toward him.

"Christ almighty," said the closer of the two.

"He alive?" It was the other. He stood, a frozen shadow against the light.

The closest one kneeled next to Skip, fingering his neck. The man's fingers shook so violently Skip doubted he could detect a pulse. "I ain't never seen so much blood. Call 9-1-1!"

"Already on it . . . yeah . . . we found a guy bleeding."

Skip closed his eyes. The world faded. In the background, he heard, "Hell if I know lady, the guy's layin' here in the alley bleeding to death when we shown up to haul away the trash."

“Christ, I got blood all over me.”

“She said two minutes!”

Skip opened his eyes. The kneeling man had pulled away. He stood, wiping his hands on his chest. “I got this shit all over me, man. I’m gonna puke.” Retching sounds mixed with the diesel’s rumble.

Moments later, sirens wailed, at first, distant, then so intense their echoes vibrated off the walls. Flashing lights cast the alley into alternating bands of red, white and blue.

The pavement. It felt cold.

Someone rolled him over. Dirt and blood from the asphalt filled his mouth, dried his throat.

A woman yelled, “Head wound. I’ll try to stop the bleeding.”

Were these the EMTs?

“Can you hear me?” Another new voice. Afraid, but determined.

“BP dropping!” It was the woman.

Skip’s arm stung with the prick of a needle. Cold coursed through his veins.

“One . . . two . . . three.”

Strong hands hoisted him onto a soft surface. The world moved. A bright overhead light slid into view. He shut his eyes to block out the brightness. Tightness in his chest. Bile filled his throat. Everything so foggy. Before he died, he had to remember. There was something to do. Would they ask questions on the other side?

He felt something on his face. Cool air rushed into his lungs. Fragmented pictures popped into Skip’s mind.

Joey Santino. A dingy bar. A meeting. Oncoming headlights on Coast Highway.

More sirens pierced the air. Disembodied voices barked. Was someone yelling at him? He couldn't tell.

Santino. He turned down this street.

The woman's insistent voice broke in. "C'mon mister, don't you give up on my shift."

There's only one street lamp. It's not enough light. There's too much risk.

A bright light shone in one of Skip's eyes, then the other.

Too many hidden shadows.

"BP seventy-two over forty-one."

Nothing here but danger. It even smells like it.

"Son-of-a-bitch is lucky he didn't bleed out."

A footstep. Behind him. The pain. White lightning shooting through his skull.

"Damn. Sixty-eight over forty."

"Your girlfriend's next. But first—"

"No! You will not die on my shift, goddammit!"

CHAPTER THREE

Roxy

Welton and I stepped into the coolness of night. The air was fresh. Exactly what I needed to cleanse my senses. Here in the hills above L.A., the residents lived in multimillion-dollar homes, kept perfectly manicured yards, drove elegant cars and could peer down on the little people whenever they chose. I'd enjoyed my brief opportunity to rub shoulders with the rich and famous, but now it was time to do my job.

Goosebumps rose on my bare skin, but Welton didn't offer his coat. He made no move to comfort me. I was hired help. Nothing more. I knew it. He knew it.

"How'd you get here?" he asked.

"Limo." Cons often lived or died based on seemingly insignificant details. It was a fact of life. It was also a mistake I tried not to make.

"Can you—"

I cut the jerk off. "Not unless I'm going home alone. You don't have a car?"

"I told my driver to take the rest of the night off." He grumbled, but called a cab on his cell.

Ten minutes later, this California girl had resolved she needed another shopping trip to Saks for a wrap to match her new dress. My already healthy disrespect for Welton was at a new high. The cheapskate was stealing millions from unsuspecting investors, yet he wanted to hitch a ride with a hooker to avoid paying a few bucks in overtime?

The cabbie made great time. Within 15 minutes, we were sitting at a red light one block from Welton's swank apartment building. Twenty-two floors. A tower of gleaming light in downtown L.A. Somehow, it fit Welton's persona. The company owned the apartment, which gave him complete access according to Anita. The apartment cost was buried somewhere in the real estate holdings of the company's financial statements.

According to Anita, using the condo to seduce women was Jack's M.O. She was one of the latest "girls" who had been to the condo, one more who wanted to join the "I Hate Jack" fan club. Their plight should piss me off. It was why I should be here. I should be doing this because this guy preyed on his female employees. I wasn't.

I gave Welton a sweet smile as he worked his hand up my thigh. I turned the tables by moving his hand back in his lap with mine resting on top of his. "Honey, you've got to pay to play."

The brash conglomeration of tambourines, drums and whiny voices spewing from the radio set my nerves on edge. The cabbie put on a good show by singing along, but the mirror was a little cockeyed. I knew this one, like most cabbies, wasn't missing a thing.

Our cab surged forward the moment the light turned green. I removed my hand. Even in the dimness, I saw Welton's eyes flash. He was pissed. Excited. The vein in his neck pounded furiously. A wave of self-satisfaction washed over me. I was the one Welton would go looking for afterwards when this was over. That risk got me a 50-50 split with Anita. A half million dollars.

The more complex the con, the harder it is to keep all the moving parts in sync. My ideal option was to have Welton voluntarily access his bank account from his laptop. His one mistake

would save me from having to bring in an expert hacker, to avoid the hassles of dealing with yet another partner, but raised the pressure on me to perform.

The lines on Welton's face, the way he breathed, everything indicated a mark on the edge. It wouldn't take much to have him tapping the keys for money at a frantic pace to get laid. He forced a smile. "You're one tough bitch."

"You do know how to flatter a girl." I pursed my lips.

"Upstairs."

"Can't wait." I laced my left arm through his right with my free hand on his elbow. "This will be a night you'll never forget. I promise."

The doorman, a young innocent with shoulders broad enough to stretch the fabric of his uniform, did an admirable job of attempting to remain impassive. His buzz cut gave him a conservative appearance, but that didn't stop him from stealing a glance at me. I winked; he blushed six shades of red before he averted his eyes. Welton, who caught the whole interaction, puffed up his chest like a proud schoolboy as he jabbed the elevator up button.

Even though the ride to the 22nd floor took less than half a minute, his breathing became more shallow and rapid with each passing moment. The doors were barely open when he slipped sideways between them to wait impatiently in the hall. The way he fidgeted worried me. Had I lost him to some weird elevator phobia? It felt like I'd been transported to con-game hell, a place I might never escape. Was I destined to repeat the same moves until I died?

Keys in hand, Welton reached for the doorknob. I stopped him with a firm grip of my hand on his.

He glanced at me. "Slowly," I whispered. Together, we inched the key toward the lock until it

slipped in. The ridges and grooves sent a vibration into his hand as each slipped past a pin.

“Very . . . very . . . slowly.”

He exhaled—his breath raspy, catching in spurts. According to Anita, he’d always controlled their interactions. He’d probably acted the same with every woman he’d ever known, but maybe Jack had a secret wish to be dominated. The key settled in. Welton started to turn it, but stopped when I applied a slight counter pressure while massaging the back of his hand. With my shoulder resting against his, his tension felt like an electrical charge jumping through the material of his jacket.

“Enjoy the moment.” I released the counter pressure.

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