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*Tryst*

Double on  
Nothing

CASSANDRA GOLD

*Double or Nothing*

*By*

*Cassandra Gold*

## **Double or Nothing by Cassandra Gold**

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### **Double or Nothing**

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**Dedication**

For Jennifer—Vegas, baby!

## The Bet

"Mr. Turner?"

Darren Turner removed his reading glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose in irritation. Scowling, he pushed the intercom button. "Yes, Phillips?"

"Sir, there's a man down here at table three who's up one million dollars. He's not one of our regulars, and he hasn't lost a bet yet. I don't know how he's doing it, but he's got to be cheating."

A sense of déjà vu washed over Darren. No. He wouldn't be back here at the same table. *Even he's not that blatant.*

Shrugging off the unsettled feeling, Darren looked toward the wall of television screens.

"Show me." At his command, one of the many screens switched to a view of roulette table three. He stared for a moment, not sure if he was surprised at the face he saw among the gamblers. Pinching the bridge of his nose again, he sighed. "Have your men escort him up here."

"Yes, sir."

\* \* \* \* \*

Within a few minutes, Darren's efficient security staff had escorted the questionable guest to his suite and left the two men alone. He looked at the familiar face for an endless moment, a mixture of longing and fury building. *How dare you come back here?* Putting on his coldest, calmest

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mask, he spoke. "You know, there are other ways to announce your presence than cheating my casino out of a million dollars."

The other man didn't look at all intimidated. In fact, Darren's unexpected guest looked better than he ever had—as lean and well built as ever, his deceptively sweet brown eyes sparkling. He lounged against the doorframe, grinning. "Are there?"

"You could have sent a postcard, or even called. We do have phones here, you know." *And I could have told you to stay the hell away.*

"I wanted to get your attention." The younger man continued to grin, undeterred by Darren's coldness.

"Well, you succeeded. What I want to know is why? Are the police after you? Did you get bored?"

"I missed you."

Darren's traitorous heart seemed to skip a beat. His cynical mind wanted to laugh. "What? After a year and a half you missed me?"

Smile fading, his ex-lover sighed. "I missed you the second I walked out the door. It just took me a while to admit it."

Anger and pain welled up, making him want to lash out. *Damn you! Why couldn't you stay gone?* "You were gone eighteen months, Joey. Do you honestly expect me to believe someone like you has been pining away for me for eighteen months?"

The name sank in, making his unwelcome visitor flinch. "I thought I was Noah with you."

Before he even had time to think about what he wanted to say, words began to pour out like a river. "Not anymore. Not after you left without a word. I actually worried about you. Can you believe that? You were off doing whatever the hell you were doing, not contacting me, and I *worried.*" Against his will, he barked out a pained, sarcastic laugh. "I don't know why. After all, you always made it crystal clear you can take care of yourself. Or find someone else to, I'm sure."

Unable to bear the sight of the man he'd made the foolish mistake of loving, Darren turned and went to the penthouse window, leaning on his cane. *He would come on one of my bad days.* He stared out, unseeing, trying to get himself under control.

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"I'm not going to lie to you, Darren. When I left here, I was determined to forget you. I thought I wanted to go right back to my old life, so I did. I gambled, and I made a fortune. I took on the most challenging casinos in the world and beat them. I even tried to drive out your memory with sex."

Darren closed his eyes. A stab of pain went through him at the thought of Joey—*his Noah*—with another man. He wanted to tell his uninvited guest to shut up, to leave, but he said nothing.

Joey/Noah seemed to take his silence as an invitation to continue. "Nothing worked. I didn't know what to do. Everything I did, everything I thought, all led back to you."

*Yeah. Eighteen months later.* Gritting his teeth, he ground out his words. "You expect me to believe that while you were fucking hot, young playboys you were thinking of a thirty-nine-year-old businessman who can barely walk without a cane?"

His ex-lover's voice came out tired and sad, something Darren had never heard from him before. "I don't expect you believe me, but it's true. When I started having real feelings for you, I freaked. I didn't want to leave, but I didn't know how to stay. I figured what I felt for you was just a passing thing, something I'd get over. A year and a half later, I still haven't."

"How is this *my* problem? You left me. I've moved on."

A long silence followed. Darren had almost begun to believe the other man had left when a soft, uneven voice broke the silence. "Oh. I should have known you'd find someone else. He's a lucky man, whoever he is."

Against his will, he admitted the truth. "There isn't anyone else. There hasn't been anyone since you left."

"There hasn't been anyone for me either, not really. I wasn't strong enough to be alone, and God, how I regret that, but I couldn't feel anything for anybody else. Even beating the casinos didn't give me a thrill. Everything was...empty. *I'm* empty. I had to come back here."

Darren whirled to face the younger man, ignoring the twinge of pain from his bad leg and the sorrowful look in his ex-lover's eyes. His

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anger spilled out in a torrent of bitter words. "What did you come back for, Joey? Did you think we could pick up where we left off? I don't think so. The man I fell for, Noah, never existed." He threw his free hand up in despair. "You're always going to be Joey Randall, the cheat and con artist who never even told me his real last name and walked out on me without even the courtesy of a Dear John letter. I deserve better than someone who's going to take off the next time he wants the thrill of beating a casino."

Pushing his blond hair back from his face, Joey/Noah met Darren's eyes without hesitation. "You're right. You do deserve better, Darren. You deserve someone who's mature enough to know what he wants, and not to be selfish. A straight-up kind of guy. But...what if I said I could be that man?"

Once again, Darren felt an urge to try to hurt his ex-lover, even though he knew he wouldn't feel any better in the end. He sneered. "You couldn't be what I needed a year and a half ago. What makes you think you could now?"

Despite his sneer, those brown eyes didn't waver. "Eighteen months ago I was sure going back to my old life would make me happy. Now I realize I was only happy the three months I spent with you. You showed me a glimpse of the man I could be, if I hadn't been too much of a coward. I threw away the only love I ever had, for nothing. I won't make the same mistake again."

Darren found he couldn't keep up his sneering, cold mask in the face of such seeming sincerity. His leg aching, he made his way over to the sofa and sat on the edge. He put his cane aside, rested his elbows on his knees, and put his face in his hands. *I can't do this again. I can't.* Not lifting his head, he muttered, "What do you want, Joey?"

The sofa cushions shifted as the other man sat down beside him, near enough to touch him, but not touching. "I want another chance."

A foolish longing surged up inside him, but he tamped the feeling down ruthlessly. *No. I'm not going down that road again.* Still not looking at his ex-lover, Darren tried to put a stop to the conversation. "I'm too old for this, Joey. I can't. I *won't.*"

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There was silence for a few minutes, and then his ex spoke again. "I have a proposal for you. A wager."

Curious despite himself, Darren finally looked up. Determined brown eyes met his. He sighed. "A *wager*? Is there anything you won't turn into a bet?"

"There didn't used to be. This is different. Will you hear me out?" Determination and perhaps even a bit of desperation colored Joey/Noah's voice.

Those eyes still bore into Darren's, refusing to let him look away. He found he couldn't deny the request. "All right. But then you need to leave."

"When I've finished, I will." Joey/Noah seemed to collect himself for a moment, swallowing and taking a deep breath before he began. "I want another chance. You want me to go away. Here are the terms." He raised one finger. "I get one month to prove to you I've changed."

Pausing as if to let the first term sink in, he raised a second finger. "I won't go to any casino but this one. I won't get together with my old associates or get into anything remotely shady." A third finger went up, enumerating Darren's part of the deal. "In return, you'll spend your evenings with me."

Something seemed wrong with the arrangements so far. "What will you do all day? I know you. You can't stand being bored."

"If you approve, I'll be working here. I'll work with your security team, helping them catch bad guys. I ought to be damn good at that, since I am one."

That surprised a smile out of him. "And what will the result of this wager be?"

"Double or nothing. If in one month, you're convinced I've changed, you give me another chance. If you aren't, I leave Vegas and never come back."

Darren sat back, mulling the idea over. If he agreed to the wager, he might be able to use the time to shake his ridiculous feelings for this man. On the other hand, the whole thing could blow up in his face, leaving him worse off than before. "Why should I take the wager? I can

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get what I want by having you thrown out of here.”

Joey/Noah stared him down, eyes narrowed. “You could, but you can’t make me leave Vegas. I’ll stay here until you agree.”

*This is new.* The man he remembered had never been this determined. If something became too difficult, his ex would just walk away. Deciding to test this newfound resolve, he smirked. “If I do agree, what’s to keep me from lying when the time is up, just to get rid of you?”

The jab hit its mark, and Joey/Noah gave him a sad smile. “Well, if you want me gone badly enough to lie, then I’ll go, even if I know you’re lying.”

Exasperated, he threw up his hands. “I’ve been trying to tell you I want you gone. Why won’t you just leave now and save us both the trouble? Why go through an elaborate charade which will probably only hurt us both?”

His ex-lover leaned forward, meeting his eyes again. Darren saw nothing but deep sorrow and remorse there, but he tried to remind himself what a good actor the other man was. *He’s a con artist. He can play anything from hick tourist to suave high roller. I doubt repentant lover would be much of a stretch.*

Voice raw with regret, Joey/Noah pleaded with him. “Walking out on you was the worst mistake I ever made. I can’t go back to my old life again, knowing you’re here, knowing I might have been able to be with you if I’d only had the courage to try. I have to try, Dare. Even if I lose.”

Darren barely registered the old nickname. He’d gotten stuck on a couple of other things. Admitting a mistake? Accepting he might lose? Who was this man? Shaking off the possibility his ex had really changed, he considered the wager again. *Maybe if I take the bait, I can get rid of him. I certainly don’t want him hanging around here trying to get me to change my mind. But one month? Could I get through a whole month without falling for him all over again?*

Before he even realized he was going to speak, Darren heard his own steady voice. “All right. I agree to your terms, with one change. You get two weeks, and when I ask you to go, you leave.”

“Only two weeks?”

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“Two weeks, or no deal.” He might be agreeing to this ridiculous idea, but it would be on his terms or not at all.

The other man thought for a moment. “Fine. But I want to add something as well.”

He frowned. “What?”

“I want you to call me Noah.”

Darren mentally shrank away from doing what the other man had asked. “Everyone who knows you here knows you as Joey. Why does what I call you matter?”

“It matters. Please.”

He knew exactly how important the name was, even though he’d protested. “Fine. Noah.”

Joey— *Noah*—gave him a true, brilliant smile and stood. “Thank you, Darren. I’ll go now, but I’ll be back tomorrow. The two weeks will start then. Good night.”

Darren closed his eyes and let his head flop back onto the sofa. He knew he’d probably gotten himself in way over his head, but there didn’t seem to be any other option. Hardening his heart and getting rid of Noah once and for all had to be the solution; maybe then, he’d get over him.

Getting over Noah would be easier said than done though, given their past together. Things between them had progressed quickly. It had been impossible for Darren not to fall for the man, from their very first meeting...

\* \* \* \* \*

### *Eighteen Months Earlier*

“Mr. Turner?”

“Yes, Bennett?”

“There’s a player at roulette table three that the floor manager is convinced is cheating, but we can’t figure out what he’s doing. What do you want us to do?”

“Show me.”

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As soon as the screen switched to table three, he could tell whom Bennett and the floor manager had pegged as the cheater: a young, well-dressed man with a huge stack of chips in front of him. He watched the next spin and witnessed the chip stack grow, but he didn't see the man cheat. Even after several minutes of watching, he still wasn't sure what was going on. He frowned.

"Sir?"

Although they couldn't throw him out without proof, Darren could have a little talk with him. "I can't see anything either. Bring him up to my office."

A few minutes later, two of his security staff escorted the young man from table three into his office. At Darren's nod, the two security guards left the room. He knew they'd wait in the hall until the meeting was finished.

The young man stood in the doorway with casual nonchalance. The expensive, well-made black suit and blue shirt he wore, minus the tie, gave the impression of a rich businessman on the town. His handsome face held no trace of concern. If being escorted up here by security unnerved him, he didn't show it. Against Darren's will, the man's calm impressed him.

Darren stood stiffly, reaching for his cane and moving to greet the man. When he reached the entryway, he held out his hand to shake. "Hello. I'm Darren Turner."

The young man's melting brown eyes met his, and he felt a sudden, unexpected, and inappropriate surge of attraction. A strong, slim hand clasped his, and they shook. The handshake lasted a bit longer than was necessary. The blond's smile wavered a bit, and a puzzled line appeared on his forehead for an instant before disappearing again.

Turning the megawatt smile on again, the kid went for the innocent and naïve approach. "I'm Joey Randall. I must really rate, getting to come up here and meet the boss and all."

A sharp laugh slipped out. *He's playing with me! Good camouflage, but I'm not buying.* "Lay off, Mr. Randall. We both know why you're up here."

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The young man's smile turned sly. Leaning against the doorway, he brushed his hair out of his eyes, continuing to keep them on Darren. "I know. The question is, do you?"

*Damn, he's good.* The unwitting admiration returned. The kid had balls, no doubt about it. "I suppose that's my problem. I know you're doing something, Mr. Randall, but I'm not sure what."

The cynical look Randall gave him looked odd on one so young. "Let me guess. You want me to leave and not come back. Correct?"

Rather taken aback, he raised an eyebrow. "Does this happen to you often?"

The smirk returned. "No. I'm too good."

He laughed again, unable to believe the nerve of the man, yet somehow not annoyed by it. The whole conversation was the most amusement he'd had in quite a while. "Is that so?"

Randall pushed off the doorway and took a step toward him, looking almost predatory. He stopped within a foot of Darren, eyes darkening, voice going low. "I could show you, if you want."

Darren felt his mouth drop open in shock. For a long, charged moment, he said nothing. *Is he saying what I think he's saying?*

What could he hope to gain? Joey Randall couldn't be hitting on Darren because he was hot. He'd seen himself in the mirror. There was gray in his hair now, and he was on the wrong side of thirty-five. Feeling unsettled, out of control of the situation, annoyed him. What game was Randall playing?

Determined to nip whatever plan the man had come up with, he decided to ask. "What's your game?"

One corner of the young man's wide mouth quirked up in genuine amusement, and he shrugged. "No game. Not this time, anyway. I'd like to have dinner with you."

To his utter astonishment, Darren had actually found himself agreeing. They went to Joey's hotel for dinner, and even though he hadn't intended to, afterwards they'd gone upstairs for...dessert.

Darren's nervousness at having such an attractive man see his mangled leg had turned into surprised relief as Joey simply said, "That

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sucks,” when he told him about the car accident which had caused his injuries, and then acted as if the ugliness of the limb didn’t bother him a bit.

After some of the most mind-blowing sex he’d ever experienced, he’d dressed and left, not expecting more than a one-night stand. Three nights later, Joey had reappeared at the casino, and their relationship began. Within three weeks, Joey was staying with him in his suite.

He was unexpectedly happy with Joey. The sex was always phenomenal, and the younger man made him laugh in a way he hadn’t since long before the accident. Even though he knew getting too attached to a gambler and con artist would be more than stupid, Darren fell anyway. He didn’t say anything, though, afraid to chase his lover away.

About three months into their relationship, they were talking softly in bed after making love when Joey got quiet.

“Joey? You okay?”

Those beautiful brown eyes met his, filled with longing. His voice went so low, Darren almost couldn’t hear it. “Call me Noah.”

Darren felt his heart expanding in his chest at the sign of trust. He doubted anyone in Vegas knew Joey’s true name. “Okay. Noah.”

They’d made love again, slowly and tenderly, and when he’d climaxed and cried out “Noah,” he knew the other man had been pleased.

Two days later, though, Noah was gone.

The first week, Darren had been convinced his lover would return. Then, he’d worried. Finally, he’d admitted to himself Noah had probably gone back to his old life, and tried to move on. Tried, but not succeeded, obviously. Now, he had to spend two weeks with the man in order to be rid of him for good.

Resolve welled up inside him. *I’m not letting him hurt me again.*