

As John stood up on the stage, behind the podium, squinting past the blinking lights and barely able to hear over the cheering crowd, he had but one question for himself:

Why was he doing this again?

Then Bianca squeezed his hand and smiled. Right. *That* was why. Because even if he thought hypnosis was all complete nonsense and even if he thought "Chance Or Trance" was the stupidest game show in the world, he was a sucker for a pretty face. True, it wasn't the *only* reason he'd married Bianca, but it was definitely a contributing factor for their wedding...and the *only* factor contributing to his presence onstage.

He rolled his eyes and clicked his tongue with a grin as he squeezed Bianca's hand back. Their mics weren't on, so he could at least afford a stage-whisper to his wife as the crowd applauded at the behest of the blinking sign above them. "Just so you know? I'm gonna choose 'Cash' every time."

She giggled and leaned her head on his shoulder. "I thought you didn't *watch* the show."

"I don't," he murmured as the crowd finally began to settle down. "But I sure as hell asked all about what kind of stuff we're gonna be walking away with."

Bianca just sighed and swatted his forearm playfully. There wasn't much to do but banter back and forth under their breath until the hostess arrived, but-

"And now, the hostess of 'Chance Or Trance!' *Vicky Vance!*"

Right on cue, the theme song kicked in again and the audience leapt to their feet once more. The cheering was even louder this time, and it wasn't too hard to see why. Strutting out onto the stage was one of the most *gorgeous* women that John had ever seen in his life. Vicky Vance was all hourglass curves and sharp, striking contrast. Pale skin and jet-black hair, pure white gloves and an impeccably pressed stage magician outfit that hugged her hips, waist, and bust tighter than seemed humanly possible.

"*Thank you, thank you!*" She winked at the crowd and flashed a dazzling smile as she raised one hand into the air with a flourish. "*You're too kind, really!*" She blew a kiss and bowed deeply, to the audience's renewed approval.

Finally, though, she waved a hand to quiet them down, and the crowd obliged. Vicky stepped up to the podium, her heels clicking with every step on the black-and-white checkerboard of the stage. She grinned and cocked her head back to the spectators.

"Seems like they really like me, don't it?"

"Certainly does!" John replied. Bianca nodded.

"Ah, don't let 'em fool you." Vicky leaned her elbow against the podium, casting a glare at the crowd. She paused for a moment, narrowing her eyes at the audience. Then she looked back to John and Bianca. "Sure, they clap real loud when I show up, but they're even *louder* when I *leave* at the end." That got a laugh out of the crowd -- along with a chuckle and a shrug from John.

"But they're not here to see *me!*" Vicky straightened up once more, turning towards the cameras and smiling wide. "No, they're here to watch John and Bianca play..."

She thrust the microphone out towards the audience, and they happily filled in the blanks.

"*Chance! Or! Trance!*"

"You heard 'em, guys!" Vicky looked back to John and Bianca. "And if there's one thing that I try to make sure, it's that people leave happy. That means them. That means *you*. So! To make that happen, we're gonna play a little game today, and *hopefully* send you back home with some cash and prizes. How's that sound, John?"

She tilted the mic over to John. It was just a formality -- he and Bianca already had lavalier microphones on their collars -- but he still leaned in to answer. "Sounds good to me, Vicky."

"And how about you, Bianca? You ready to win big and make all the viewers here and at home real happy?"

Bianca smiled and nodded. "That's what we're here for!"

"Marvelous! So, I don't know if you've ever sat down and watched a game of Chance Or Trance. Either way, never hurts to get a refresher on how the game's played, so before we get into the nitty-gritty, let's go over the rules!" Vicky snapped her fingers, and with a puff of smoke, a large, multicolored lottery wheel appeared beside Bianca and John.

"Alright. So, here on Chance or Trance, we want to make sure that you two walk away with as much cash as you can. But!" She tapped the podium and leveled a finger at the two of them. "We're generous, but we're not *that* generous. Only *one* of you is actually going to be spinning the wheel and making that sweet, sweet moolah. It looks like that's going to be you tonight. That correct, John?"

He nodded. "That's the plan."

"Fantastic! So, John, you're going to step right over here-" She guided him beside the wheel itself, standing between him and Bianca. "-and Bianca, you're just gonna hunker down right there at the podium. So, John, before you go ahead and spin that wheel, let me explain just why you're gonna be giving that bad boy a whirl. See, over here on the wheel, we've got a whole bunch of little stars." She pointed to the wheel. "Each section has at least one star on it. Some of them have more. Some of them have a *lot* more. You wanna get as many stars as you can, because the more stars you get, the more prizes and the more cash you get. Five stars gets you one prize, ten gets you another, et cetera, et cetera. But!"

"Look right here for me, John." She tapped the wheel, fingertip pointing to a star-shaped outline. "See these guys? These are different. Normally, you'd be after the filled-in stars, but if you end up on a space with one of *these* guys, you have the choice between-" She thrust the microphone towards the crowd once more.

"*Chance! Or! Trance!*"

"-and here's what that mean. See, *normally* these wouldn't count. But! If you've got guts, you can choose to Trance Out and have these special stars added to your total count. That means we'd zap you with out Hypnomatic for a quick hypnosis session. Harmless. Only *problem* is that we're going to ramp up its power every time you choose to Trance Out, and after a few rounds, you might end up leaning towards *Bianca's* side when it comes time to choose which prize you're gonna be going home with."

"See, every time you hit a new milestone, we're gonna give you two options: Cash or Carry. Cash is just what you'd expect: more money. *Carry* is one of any number of prizes we had Bianca here write down before the show. They cost a little bit more than the money you'd get choosing Cash, and. Well, it sure is *sweet*, isn't it? Showing your honey-bunny you

wanna spoil her. You might not be able to put it in a bank account, but it's *love* that makes the world go 'round."

Vicky paused a moment, keeping her eyes on John. "Think you got that, John?"

He nodded. "I think so."

"Attaboy! Alright, John!" Vicky stepped to the side and motioned with a flourish. "Give 'er a spin and let's see where you land!"

No need to tell him twice! John grabbed one of the spokes of the wheel, raised it up, and gave it a good, strong spin. The audience applauded once more as the wheel spun around and around, but their enthusiasm turned to dismay as it clacked to a stop on a measly one star.

"Oof!" Vicky winced with a shake of her head. "Looks like my bad luck's contagious. That's gonna get you one star towards your prizes, *but!*" She wagged a finger. "It looks like you'd be getting two more -- for a total of *three* stars -- if you decide you wanna Trance Out." Vicky shrugged. "What's it gonna be, John? You want to hit the ground running or take it slow and steady? The more stars you get, the more cash and prizes you're going home with."

He had to fight the urge to roll his eyes. She was high-energy, but all the enthusiasm in the world wasn't going to convince John that the "Hypnomatic" was going to do a *single thing* to him. If he could get more prizes just by letting her use her little gadget on him, he wasn't about to pass up the chance.

"I think I'm gonna Trance Out, Vicky."

The crowd erupted in cheering, and even Bianca clapped her hands together giddily at his answer. Vicky nodded her approval as she made her way to his side, mic in hand.

"Bold move. You know what, John? I *like* it. So." She removed her top hat with a flourish, tucked her microphone under her armpit, and made a show of reaching into her hat with her free hand. "Swear it's around here somewhere. Here we are!"

She pulled a rather tacky-looking headset from her top hat. An Oculus Rift, this was not. No, this was like a pair of chrome goggles and an oversized set of headphones, each component pocked with blinking lights. For a TV show as popular as Chance or Trance, their prop department seemed to have the budget of a high school drama club. Hypnosis might not have been a risk, but looking like an ass sure was. John couldn't help but look up at Bianca after catching a glimpse of the "Hypnomatic," and he mouthed a silent "Seriously?" to her.

She just giggled and shrugged.

"Alright, John. We're just gonna get this bad boy on you -- and keep it on you, just so we don't gotta keep taking it off and putting it right back on -- and fire it up. Just like I said, first time is going to be short, sweet, and to the point. Every time you choose to Trance Out after that? It's gonna get stronger and stronger. I'm sure you got a lot of people rooting for you, so stay focused!" Vicky winked and clenched one hand into a fist. "Do it for them! And for yourself!"

John half-sighed and half-laughed as he slid the contraption onto his head. OK, to be fair, it was a *lot* more comfortable than it looked. Stupidly gaudy or not, the Hypnomatic fit surprisingly well, and soon John gave Vicky a thumbs-up.

She returned it with a wink and raised one hand high into the air. "Alright! Counting down from three! Two! *One!*"

Whatever Vicky did next, John couldn't see. His vision was suddenly obscured by two spinning spirals. Big and monochromatic, they whirled right in front of his eyes. Once the initial surprise wore off, though...

...John couldn't help but laugh. Seriously? This sort of thing was straight out of old cartoons. If they thought *this* was going to hypnotize him, the producers either had a pretty low estimate of John or a high estimate of their tech. Either way, they only lasted a few seconds before the Hypnomatic shut down and he could see through the lenses again. Vicky grinned over at him, and Bianca could barely contain her laughter.

"So, John." Vicky winked. "Feeling sleepy yet?"