

Red or Black

Martha staggered out of the wreckage, only the air bag and seat belt saved her. The cold night air was filled with the smell of diesel as steam hissed from the engine embedded into the tree trunk. Heart pounding, adrenalin pumping she stood looking up the road, Red lights receding into the black of the night as the car disappeared down the road; it was definitely him, the bastard!

The casino was quiet for a Thursday evening, the roulette wheel spun lazily, as if recognising the lack of punters. Soft lights and gentle music tried to produce a feeling of warmth and anticipation, but the room was devoid of the buzz of high rolling stakes as gamblers waited for the big money to arrive.

'Looks like a slow night,' Martha observed to Sandra the Casino manager, as they surveyed the gambling floor.

'It's going to be miserable; it'll be busier tomorrow when they've all got paid!'

'Hopefully there'll be no trouble tonight, I'm not sure I'm dressed for having a brawl like Gerry did last night.'

'You'll be fine. Gerry was unlucky last night; there's always one or two bad losers, but to get a gang of them.'

'Do you think he'll be back tomorrow night?'

'If not I'll have to find someone temporary, neither of us could cope if we have a bad night tomorrow,'

Approaching midnight not many of the regulars were in, as a well-dressed stranger appeared. Martha noticed him immediately; tall with a full head of thick, wavy black hair which lapped onto the collar of his shiny black dinner jacket, He looked suspicious, a dark five o'clock shadow added to his dubious appearance. Slowly he prowled round observing the tables without playing at any of them. Finally he loitered near the roulette table. Martha's long blonde hair and tall, athletic body were an obvious attraction. The tightly fitting red dress and matching high heels accentuated her slender figure. She could feel his dark eyes undressing her as he watched her across the table. After a few minutes observing her and the fortunes of the punters he moved stealthily across to the table.

'Are you playing sir?'

He smiled at Martha.

'I only play to win,' he quipped. 'Lucky number seven, I think.'

He pushed two of his chips towards her. She placed his bet.

'Any more bets, gentlemen?'

She set the wheel spinning and released the ball. It spun around and slowly descended before coming to rest on number eighteen. The short, scruffily dressed man next to Martha whooped for joy as his number came up. She pushed his winnings towards him with an obligatory insincere smile.

'Well done sir!'

'Lucky you mean,' muttered the stranger.

The scruffy man placed a couple of more bets before retiring with the majority of his winnings. As he left the table the stranger moved swiftly to take his place next to Martha. She could smell his cheap aftershave; it was like cat urine. The stench aggravated the back of her throat. She shuffled surreptitiously away from him to lose his sickly smell.

'Place your bets, please gentlemen,'

'Lucky number seven again, I think,' the stranger insisted, winking at her.

Concentrating on the spinning wheel she ignored his gesture. The ball rolled around, slipping down, trickling past number seven and on to number thirty five.

'Hard luck sir, better luck next time,' she commiserated with him.

He gave her an arrogant glance. Ignoring him she raked in all the chips and asked the punters to place their bets again.

'OK baby third time lucky, how about it?'

'It's your choice, sir.'

'Tony ... my name is Tony.'

'Any more bets gentlemen?'

'Lucky number seven it is.'

Spinning the wheel Martha ignored him,

'Come on baby, its number seven this time!'

The regulars viewed the brash new boy with contempt. The ball shuddered over the numbers before coming to rest on twenty one; no one won as Martha raked in all the chips. She could sense his frustration as his nostrils flared. The stranger looked angrily at the faces of the other punters before focusing on Martha again.

'Place your bets once more, gentlemen,'

'This time I'll be lucky baby,' he insisted.

She frowned again. He piled his remaining chips on number seven, drawing an expectant gasp from the other punters. Martha spun the wheel and released the ball.

The wheel slowed, the ball descended stuttering and rattling over the numbers as the assembled gamblers looked on in disbelief. Tony shrieked as he saw the wheel come to a gentle halt with the shiny silver ball nestling safely on number seven,

'I told you baby, it's my lucky number seven!'

'Congratulations sir,' she said with a forced smile pushing his winnings towards him.

'Thank you sweetheart, we can have a good time tonight!'

'He put his arm round her shoulder and pulled her into him. His stubbly chin scratched Martha's cheek. Close up he smelt as though he needed a shower, she shrugged him off struggling to regain her composure.

'OK, it's time to place your bets again gentlemen.'

'What's the chance of either red or black, darling?'

'It's about fifty - fifty sir,' she answered.

'Do you think I should go red or black then, darling?'

'Once again, it's your choice sir.'

'That sexy little dress of yours is telling me red, sweetheart.'

'If you say so sir.'

'It's Tony, I've told you ... Tony,' he barked,

'I'm sorry, sir, we're not allowed to address customers personally, it's a house rule.'

'Damn the house rules, I'm putting the lot on red, it's all or nothing!'

The other punters warily placed their bets, as the stranger confidently pushed his stack of chips on to the red. Martha spun the wheel and let the ball go. Round it went, silence fell amongst the onlookers. As the wheel slowed, the ball descended rattling over the last few numbers before settling on number twenty seven . . . red twenty seven!

'I love you sweetheart!' Tony yelled as he grabbed Martha round the waist and kissed her firmly on the lips.

In shock she pulled away again, but this time he had a vice like grip around her waist.

'Let go of me,' she shouted.

'Come on baby, we can have a great time tonight now!'

'Excuse me sir, let go of her!' demanded Sandra as she rushed over to intervene.

Martha wriggled to break free from his clutches as he reluctantly relaxed his grip.

Once free she struggled to light back the tears.

'OK sir, collect your winnings and go now,' ordered Sandra.

'What! You must be kidding!' rasped Tony. 'I've only just started; I'm on a lucky streak.'

'I'm sorry sir, we can't tolerate abuse of our staff'

'Abuse! I only kissed her for God's sake!'

'I didn't want to be kissed,' Martha cried.

'Oh I'm sorry; I should have asked permission I suppose.'

'Look, take your winnings, please!' she pleaded as tears streamed down her face smudging her black mascara.

'Come on sir, we don't want any trouble, do we?' reinforced Sandra.

He scowled as Sandra ushered him towards the cashier's office with his large pile of chips.

'Just you wait, bitch!' he turned and shouted,

Sandra bundled him into the cashier's office out of Martha's way.

'I'm sorry, I need a break,' she sobbed to the concerned gamblers congregated round the roulette table.

Sandra joined her in the staffroom, and put her arm round her.

'Are you alright? It's OK I've seen him out the door.'

'I'm sorry; I should have handled that better. I thought he looked like trouble when he came in.'

'Don't worry, he's gone now. Are you OK to carry on? Sandra asked.

'Yes just give me a couple of minutes, I'll be OK,' Martha confirmed.

Ten minutes later with her makeup restored she was back out at the roulette wheel.

Sandra kept an eye on her for the rest of the evening, as she was clearly unsettled.

'Do you want me to drive you home?' Sandra enquired at closing time,

'No, I'll be fine. He really shook me up, but it's OK I'm over it now.'

'Are you sure? I could always call you a cab,' Sandra added.

'No it's fine. He'll be miles away by now.'

Martha walked out to her car in the freezing night air. Her stilettos clicked on the rough concrete surface as she made her way across the poorly lit car park.

Unlocking it she got in and turned on the engine and lights. Her windscreen was covered in a thin layer of ice. Getting out again, she heard a car door slam across car park. Looking round nervously, she could see a tall, dark, sinister figure

approaching through the shadows. A quick hiss of de-icer and she jumped back in the car. The wipers swished to clear the windscreen. In horror she saw the stranger

standing in front of her bonnet in the ghostly glow of the headlights. He staggered round to the driver's side window and slammed his fist hard down on the roof.

'Open the window, bitch!'

Martha revved the engine aggressively, but he didn't flinch. He thumped the roof again, Uncertain whether to open the window or just go, she reluctantly pressed the button and lowered the window slightly. The noxious smell of alcohol and after shave greeted her.

'What's your game then?' he shrieked through the partially open window.

'Just leave me alone, please,' she croaked.

'We could have gone for a drink afterwards to celebrate my win and have a good time, but no! Miss Goody Two Shoes doesn't want to!'

'I don't know you, it's late and I'm tired. Just leave me alone,' she pleaded.

'Get out of the car, now bitch!' he shouted.

Trembling, Martha slammed the car into gear and hit the accelerator. He made a grab for the door handle as she let the clutch go and set off with a screech of tyres and smell of exhaust fumes. Ignoring the thirty mile an hour limit she sped to the outskirts of town, five more miles to the safety of home. No traffic at that time of night, but Martha kept a wary eye on her mirror. Down the long straight road past the industrial estate, suddenly a pair of headlights appeared in the mirror behind her. Faster she went, but the lights got bigger and brighter in her mirror. She felt an icy shiver down her back as the lights got even closer, then on full beam blinding her. Approaching the forest she had to slow down unable to see the road ahead for the dazzling glow behind her. The car behind pulled out and overtook her just before the bend. It roared alongside as she glanced sideways, but the car was past in a flash. It swerved sharply in front of her forcing her off the road. She braked hard, but too late she saw the corner with only trees ahead.