

The Girl in the Velvet Black Gown

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Rain blew in from the west that Friday, blanketing the moon with black-bellied clouds sporting fraudulent silver linings. I should've gone home then. Crawled back into my hole and pulled the darkness after me.

Maybe if I'd gone home before the rain, no one would've died.

We all have those shoulda moments. Winners run with it. Losers let the moment pass. I was too busy losing to think about shoulda's.

Or death.

Lake Tahoe, Nevada. Vacation paradise. Gambler's dream.

I'd hit the two mainstays first, Harrah's and Harvey's, turned my paycheck in for cash and the ever-present Lucky Buck, and actually built my wad to a grand. Another "shoulda" moment.

Tonight was The Night. I could feel it in my bones. Tonight old Reed Chandler, unemployed and unloved, would not be able to lose. I rolled right over into the Horizon. That's where the dough started to shake lose.

Rent sucked up at the blackjack table.

Something chronic losers never learn—casinos are all the same. Yeah, the decor is different—sometimes. Reds change, themes change. But within the heart of each casino beats the same ravenous beast, with an empty belly and a heart of stone, ready to chow down on a player's hard-earned dollars.

I sat for a moment, breathing a little air with my smoke and listening to the slot machines singing someone else's blues. No use hanging around when the tables were against me. So, I headed across the street. To another refurbished casino with a name I couldn't pronounce, let alone remember.

And the overdue car payment rolled away with the dice.

Looked like the tables were for losers tonight. I switched tactics.

Alimony swallowed alive by the one-armed bandit.

All gone faster than shit down the crapper.

I pulled out my pockets and counted the change. Enough green to buy a few groceries in the

morning or tequila right now.

Screw the five or six or seven food groups. Man cannot live without his tequila. At least this man couldn't.

Besides, the tequila was free as long as I kept playing. Twenty bucks and a wink bought a bottle on the outside. I could make the money work for me here. Have a chance at making back the rent and the car payment at least. Fuck the alimony. Everyone else did.

So I hit the black jack tables. Guzzled tequila. Doubled down when I should've surrendered. Hit when I should've stood soft. Lost the rest of my pocket change.

But I got the tequila.

Belly warm and head buzzing I stumbled out the casino door, shrugged my shoulders against the icy spring rain, and headed to my car. Might as well take a midnight cruise before the repo guys called in the morning. I'd switched digs ten times or more since signing the loan papers, but repo guys had a way of sniffing out cars that went missing.

I should know. I used to be one. A repo guy, not a car.

Back when I had a life, a wife, and an aversion to anything that remotely smelled like sin.

Before we moved to Tahoe. To an idyllic life in the mountains.

Clean air. Pure water. Pure crap.

Didn't take long before I lost my virginity. Sin started smelling sweet and the casinos like perfume. Nothing like the heady smell of cigarette butts and stale alcohol to make a guy hard. Unless it's the oily scent of felt stretched across the craps table.

Now that's real perfume.

Better than the new car smell still clinging to my Pontiac convertible. I opened the door and slid in out of the rain. Popped the glove box. Pulled out my emergency cigarette stash:

An old Airbourne tube holding two full sticks and a butt.

I lit the butt and took a few drags before revving up the engine and squealing out of the parking lot. Storm-blurred neon signs reflected—blue, orange, red—off rain-slicked surfaces. I blasted black tread through an iridescent orange puddle and headed for Kingsbury Grade.

There are nights when losing big kicks me down a dark tunnel where the only shining light comes from the gleam of a .38 Special. Those nights it takes more than tequila to keep me from eating a bullet. Lucky a skirt lives next door who likes nothing better than to go skirtless.

Then there are the nights when losing cuts me free. What's left to worry about when you've

lost everything?

Fuck payments. Fuck life. Fuck the world.

Those nights tooling around in my Pontiac convertible, used and abused, but still a convertible, is better than a hot romp in the hay. Top down, eyes tearing from the cold and wind. Destiny, I'm yours.

This was one of those nights.

Shocked me stupid that Destiny actually intervened. Maybe because the top wasn't down. Maybe because I'd really planned on paying those bills.

I almost rolled through the light at the bottom of the grade, but didn't have enough tequila coursing through my veins to forget the sheriff's station parked on the corner. The Pontiac coasted to a reluctant stop and I glanced around, poised for a shotgun start.

Someone pecked at the passenger window.

Next thing I knew, the door flew open, dumping rain all over the upholstery. Rain and a very wet, very round body, nicely sheathed in what looked like black velvet. Soggy and soft and scared.

And smelling of roses.

"Drive," said the body. Then, "Please." As if she thought being nice might help.

I stared at the girl scrunched down in the seat and said the first words that came to mind. "Who the hell are you?"

"Mindy," she whispered.

Not Destiny, but close enough. I'd left the big casinos behind, but there was still enough neon from the huge wedding chapel perched above the sheriff's station to turn her skin a pleasant pink . . . blue . . . pink.

"Please," she whispered again.

I always was a sucker for roses. "Where to?"

The answer almost sobered me up. Almost. If I'd been totally sober, I would've kicked her back out of the car and called her a cab.

But there was just enough of the tequila high left to make me a bit reckless and more than a bit curious.

And then there was that rose perfume.