

Whose Lucky Night?
by Renata Kell

Something feels different tonight. Tonight, is our lucky night. We are prepared to cash in on this casino in a big way. Yet, I can't shake the feeling that something is off. Nothing looks different. The machines are flashing bright neon invitations to the dwindling bingo crowd. June and Charlie feed the hungry slot monster the remainder of their social security check. I wonder if they realize I have been watching them for more than six months. The girls in the deli are as fun to watch tonight as all the other nights. You would never know they are working. They are joking and laughing with each other and the customers that wander up to order midnight snack food. I can't help but laugh out loud as they start high-fiving and hip-bumping after a small burst of business.

"Vince," Joe says, his eyebrows narrowed in my direction.

"What? We're supposed to act like any other night, right?" I say.

Joe never smiles unless he is acting the part. What a waste of a perfectly good set of dentures.

"Knock it off you guys!" Big says. "Focus on the job until we get the OK."

I take a sip of my beer, avoiding eye contact with Big. There's something wrong with that guy. His long greasy hair, burly beard and the scar across his right eye make him look like a cross between a biker and a modern-day pirate.

I turn my gaze back to the girls at the deli. A perfect threesome to watch. The red head is easily embarrassed. Her face turns as red as her hair whenever men flirt with her. You can almost hear her heart beating as she musters up a comeback to sound cute and funny.

“Oh honey, your one husband too late, but boy if you’d been here a year ago, I might have taken you up on that.” She says, while batting her gorgeous blue eyes.

It works like a charm. Five more dollars in the tip box. Damn, I have never seen a group of waitresses that complement each other like these girls. All three tip boxes are filled to the brim.

Here comes the brunette back from lunch. Yep, ten after one, she’s late again. The other two girls are having too much fun to care. She’s the newest of the three but she fits right in. Not a wasted moment to earn a tip, she jumps into a conversation with the boys at the counter.

“How’s it going guys?” she says, handing them their food. “How was the poker game?”

“Why?” Says one of the guys, “You finally ready to let us teach you how to play?”

“I already told you, I’m not playing strip poker.” She says. “Unless you boys are doing the stripping.”

I once again find myself chuckling out loud at the familiar faces.

“What time you got?” Joe asks me.

“One thirty, how about you Big?” I mimic.

“One thirty, you Joe? Big asks, turning to Joe.

“One thirty, Joe says.”

I take another sip of my beer pulling my gaze from the deli to survey the crowd. June and Charlie have given up tonight. Their luck will be tested another day. I notice our inside security guard making his scheduled round. He avoids looking in our direction as he passes at a quicker pace than normal. Idiot, you would think that with all the practice he would have it down by now.

The casino is thinning out just as it should. Last night the casino had record numbers but tonight not so lucky. The only record numbers tonight, will be how much money the fifteen of us make away with. I doubt they will ever guess that we have fifteen people in the crew and three insiders. Man, I never thought when I got involved with this it was going to turn out to be such a big job.

I turn my gaze back to the deli. Oh, there she is, my favorite. The blonde is phenomenal. Twice the age of the girls but you'd never guess by looking at her. She doesn't act like she's a mom, let alone a grandma. Her green eyes blow me away and her smile puts more tips in the box than the other two girls combined. I love to watch as the girls jump off the till the minute she arrives. She instantly brightens up the crowd as she starts spitting out one liners' and slinging come backs to the obnoxious drunks.

"Any discounts for you gentlemen?" she said. "military or senior? Well if you say so, but I'm not sure I believe you,"

Her smile sucks them in for the remainder of this brilliantly rehearsed setup.

"Don't feel bad I'm right behind you."

She's done it again and again and she always gets the same response.

"No way," says the inebriated men in unison.

"How old are you?" asks one of the men.

"Your never supposed to ask a woman her age." Says his drunken friend.

Without missing a beat, she happily responds, "boys I am old enough to know better but young enough to do it again."

Laughter rings throughout the men and once again I am laughing out loud. I glance over at Big and Joe, who are glaring at me and tapping their watches. I look down at my watch. Shit, it is nearing two thirty already. Where the hell did the time go.

Big stands saying, "Going to the pisser, watch my beer."

Oh, shit. My heart starts beating and my palms are sweating. This is going to happen. I have to get my shit together, it's damn near time. Looking around the casino I only see a couple lingering people moving from machine to machine. They are probably that group of tweaks' that hang out and try to find casino players cards forgotten by excited winners or new players.

Joe stands adjusts his pants and says, "I'm going to the pisser, watch my beer."

I look at my watch and it is already two forty-five. I turn to watch the girls at the deli as they start their final clean of the night. The blonde stocks and cleans the tables. She looks relieved to have help. Most Sundays she is flying solo, but as luck would have it, they kept the other girls on tonight. Suddenly, I am overcome by an overwhelming sense of guilt. But why, nobody is going to get hurt. That was one of my conditions of taking this job. I watch the blonde with intensity as image's play in my head, like an old theater movie. I see the blonde telling the other girls of her childhood abuse, her abusive marriage and the day she walked away with nothing to start over. She mesmerizes the girls with her positive attitude and her words of wisdom.

She approaches my table.

"Well howdy there stranger. I didn't see you order any food tonight."

"Not tonight," I said, raising my beer to her.

"You boys out honky tonkin tonight?" she asks.

"Just a little." I respond.

“Well don’t do anything I wouldn’t,” she said, moving on to the next table.

I look at my watch and, in a panic, I stand to join the others in the bathroom.

As I rush into the bathroom, Joe throws the coveralls and mask at me with force.

“It’s about time Casanova.” Joe says

“Hurry up and get ready,” Big says, “It’s time.”

I put on the overalls and mask. I grab the gun that Joe is thrusting at me and notice, Big’s pupils are nearly invisible.

“You got a little white stuff on your nose.” I say, gesturing to wipe it off.

“What? You got a problem?” Big says.

“As a matter of fact, I do. I thought we agreed to be cool tonight!”

Big and I are nosed to nose when Joe steps in.

“Fucking quit it you two. We are cool Vince, just a little pick me up.”

“Fuck it, let’s do this shit.” I say, moving to the door of the bathroom.

I peek out the door to see that the drop team is set up and ready to perform their well-choreographed routine. Two security guards, a manager, and five team members surround the mobile cage containing the drop boxes for the slot machines. More than a million dollars sitting just inside our section waiting to be stolen. Not to mention the big score on the other side of the casino. Just then shots ring out in the distance. Adrenaline takes over and we burst into the casino. Joe moves left to the guard station, gun drawn.

“Get on the ground! I’m not fucking around. Face down now!”

Big and I move to the deli as three crew members sneak out of a nearby bathroom behind the drop team.

“Get your hands off your gun!” says the first crew member.

“You, right there,” pointing at the manager, “tell them to cooperate if they want to go home tonight!” says the second crew member.

The manager, a tough looking fellow who could be mistaken for an escaped convict, throws down his gun and orders the other team members to do the same.

My focus is redirected to the deli as Big moves to the counter gun wielding.

“Get out of there.”

He directs the girls to the same table we sat at so many nights plotting and planning for tonight.

His hands shake as the red head begins crying hysterically.

“Shut up that crying,” he says.

I notice the blond frozen at the till as I move closer with my gun aimed at her head.

“Let me see your hands mamma bear,” I say. “Don’t even think about pressing that panic button pretty lady.”

Oh, my word she is so strong. She backs away from the counter hands in the air and head held high. She’s got tears in her eyes but doesn’t blink. I direct her to join the others waving my gun in their direction. She moves sideways never taking her eyes from me. Damn, I hate doing this to her.

The sounds of screaming throughout the casino ring in my ears. By now the rest of the crew has taken the whole casino hostage. The inside security guards have taken over surveillance cameras, as well as the emergency response team. Big is hyped up and I can see sweat streaming from under his mask.

Turning to me he says, “Keep them right here. I’m going to check with Joe, and for God’s sake shut up the wine bag before I shut her up!”

I watch him walk away and turn back to the deli girls.

Locking eyes with the blonde I say, “Everything’s going to be okay. Just do as we say, and nobody is going to get hurt. We just want the money.”

Visibly shaken but steady she turns to the red head who is losing it and says,

“Calm down. We are going to be fine. Just do as they say, and you’ll be home with your son before you know it.”

The red head slows her crying comforted by this amazing woman. There is something about her that is so comforting. I don’t know if it is her strength or her nurturing, but just hearing her voice even calms my nerves.

I can smell the aroma of gun powder and glance around to take a look at the progress of the others. The casino has become silent except for the sounds of the refrigeration fans and the musical distraction of the slot machines. It’s almost an eerie feeling, so different from the usual Sunday night.

Big returns to my side agitated and bouncing around causing the red head to once again begin crying. I watch as the blonde and the brunette reach for her hands to calm her. The brunette has been silent until now.

“Why don’t you guys just get the hell out of here with your money!”

Big lunges towards her and thrusts his gun in her face.

“Oh, you got balls now?”

Instantly the blonde goes into protection mode.

“She doesn’t know what she’s saying! Can’t you tell she’s just scared. Fuck, look at her, she’s white as a ghost!”

Without missing a beat, she looks at the brunette with warning eyes and says,

“Now’s not the time!”

Big turns the gun on the blonde making my heart skip a beat.

“You got something to add?” he says.

“Woe, now let’s all calm down.” Big!

I insert myself between the two of them gaining Big’s attention.

“Okay Casanova, keep them quiet.”

We both back away and the girls quiet down. Big wanders off again and I find myself overcome by the anger flashing in the blonds eyes. I have never seen that before. She’s the happy go lucky one without an ounce of mean in her. Damn it, I hate that she’s going through this. She doesn’t deserve any more shit in her life to go wrong. I wish I could spare her this pain and erase all the former pain that she has endured. Maybe I should leave her some money in her car. Shit, that wouldn’t do any good, she’s so honest she’d just turn it in anyways. I would love to whisk her off her feet and keep her for myself, but she’d never be happy living my life. Looking over her shoulder the rest of her life would kill her. She’s finally free and I couldn’t keep her like a caged animal. Besides, She met a new guy who is making her happy. No, She’s better off not knowing me.

I glance around and see Big coming back. The crew is nearly done. The money is gathered in a pile by the exit. Just outside the glass doors the vans are waiting to be loaded. A sense of relief overcomes my body. This is almost over. I jerk my head back to the girls as Big rejoins me. What’s that look on her face? She’s staring at me with a look of recognition. She’s

looking at my arm. Oh, shit. My sleeve has revealed the tattoo of an angel on my wrist. Does she see it? I look at Big who has not noticed yet. I can't move or he'll know. Her head is cocked sideways now, and the look turns to disappointment. Damn it! Why did I tell her all about the angel tattoo representing my mom? She knows who I am! I look at Big again and he's staring at her. He follows her stare to my arm. His eyes widen as he sees my tattoo exposed.

"Oh, you've done it now! I fucking told you not to get too cozy with these girls. You know what we have to do!" Big says.

"Fuck you, I told you nobody gets hurt!" I say.

"Whose fault is that!" Big says.

Big turns back to the blonde aiming his gun, finger on the trigger. The shot from the gun penetrates my ears.

She screams, "No!"

Big bellows, "Let's get the hell out of here."

People are running and screaming. Big is gone. Her green eyes are glowing and full of tears. Tires squeal in the distance.

"Vince, hold on. Help is on the way. Why Vince? Why did you do this for me?"

She's an angel. Damn my head hurts. Wait. Why am I on the ground? Why is my head soaked?

"Vince, can you hear me?"

"Yes?"

"Can you see me?"

"Of course, beautiful"

She's sitting over me. She smiles through the flood of tears. She never cries. Oh, god is she okay. Wait, Big missed?

"Vince, Vince, hang on. Don't you dare die on me!"

Die? What is she talking about? What happened? Let me think, I was standing next to Big, and he shot...

Oh shit, that bastard shot me! I...I jumped in front of her and...he shot me in the head!

I open my eyes and look up at her through the blood that is running down my forehead. Well, I may not be able to whisk her away or give her any money, but she's alive to tell another amazing story. I smile at her and manage one last sentence,

"Tonight, is your lucky night, momma bear."

Everything goes black for a second. I don't feel any pain now. Wait, What's this? I can see her. She is crying over my body. There she goes again being her wonderful self. She's trying to bring me back. She's pounding on my chest. One pump, then two, and three then a breath. Here comes the medics. She screams to them,

"Get over here! He's been shot!"

I keep telling her to quit. Let me go. Don't you worry your little head, I deserve this, but she can't hear me. It goes black again.

"Aghhhh"

Oh, my God my head hurts.

"Hang on fellow, we're on our way to the hospital," says the medic. "You're one lucky son of a bitch. That woman saved your life."

The End