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Written by Charles Cumming

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MI6 will push his loyalty
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CHARLES
CUMMING

A DIVIDED
SPY

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DAILY MAIL

CHARLES CUMMING

A Divided Spy



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'We are, I know not how, somewhat double in ourselves,
so that what we believe we disbelieve, and cannot rid
ourselves of what we condemn.'

Michel de Montaigne

'Truth doesn't always come from truthful men.'

James Salter

London

I

Put it all on red. Put it all on black.

Jim Martinelli stacked five thousand pounds of chips into two six-inch piles. He held each of the piles in the tips of his fingers. One of them was fractionally higher than the other, the other slightly crooked at the base. He stared at them. His whole future, the mountain of his debt, just twenty discs of plastic in a casino. Double the money and he could keep Chapman at bay. Lose it and he was finished.

Arms across the baize, a blur of hands as the players around him reached out to place their bets. The suit from Dubai putting single chips on eighteen through thirty-six, the other Arab putting a grand on red. The Chinese tourist to Martinelli's left put a carpet of blue chips in the upper third, smothering the table with piles of five and six. Big wins for him tonight, big losses. Then he put twenty grand on ten and walked away from the table. Twenty thousand pounds on a one in thirty-five chance. Even in the worst times, in the craziest urges of the last two years, Martinelli had never been stupid enough to do something like that. Perhaps he wasn't as messed up as he thought. Maybe he still had things under control.

The wheel was spinning. Martinelli stayed out of the play. It didn't feel right; he wasn't getting a clear reading on the numbers. The Chinese tourist was hovering near the bar, now

almost twenty feet away from the table. Martinelli tried to imagine what it must be like to have so much money that you could afford to blow twenty grand on a single moment of chance. Twenty grand was four months' salary at the Passport Office, more than half of his debt to Chapman. Two wins in the next two rounds and he would be holding that kind of dough. Then he could cash out, go home, call Chapman. He could start to pay back what he owed.

The croupier was tidying up. Centring chips, straightening piles. In a low, firm voice he said: 'No further bets, please, gentlemen,' and turned towards the wheel.

The house always wins, Martinelli told himself. *The house always wins . . .*

The ball was beginning to slow. The Chinese tourist was still hovering near the bar, back turned to the play, his little chimney of twenty grand on ten. The ball dropped and began to jump in the channels, the quiet innocent clatter as it popped from box to box. Martinelli laid a private bet with himself. *Red. It's going to be red.* He looked down at his pile of chips and wished that he had staked it all.

'Twenty-seven, red,' said the croupier, placing the wooden dolly on a low pile of chips in the centre of the baize. Martinelli felt a sting of irritation. He had missed his chance. Across the room, the tourist was returning from the bar, watching the croupier clear away the losing bets, the cheap plastic rustle of thousands of pounds being dragged across the baize and scooped into the tube. There was no expression on his face as the stack on ten was pulled; nothing to indicate loss or sorrow. Washed-out and inscrutable. The face of a gambler.

Martinelli stood up, nodded at the inspector. He left his chips on the table and walked downstairs to the bathroom. They were playing Abba on the sound system, a song that reminded Martinelli of driving long distances with his father as a child. The door of the gents was ajar, paper towels littering the floor. Martinelli scraped them to one side with his foot and checked his reflection in the mirror.

His skin was pallid and gleaming with sweat. In the bright fluorescent light of the bathroom the tiredness under his eyes looked like bruises from a fight. He had worn the same shirt two nights in a row and could see that a thin brown line of dirt had formed inside the collar. He bared his teeth, wondering if a chunk of olive or peanut had been lodged in his gums all night. But there was nothing. Just the pale yellow stains on his front teeth and a sense that his breath was stale. He took out a piece of gum and popped it into his mouth. He was exhausted.

'All right, Jim? How's it going for you tonight?'

Martinelli swung around.

'Kyle.'

It was Chapman. He was standing in the door, looking at a stack of leaflets in a plastic box beside the sink. Advice for gamblers, advice for addicts. Chapman picked one up.

'What does it say here?' he began, reading from the leaflet in his abrasive London accent. *'How to play responsibly.'*

Chapman smiled at Martinelli, but the eyes were dead, menacing. He turned the page.

'Remember. Gambling is a way for responsible adults to have some fun.'

Martinelli had never had the balls to read the leaflet. They said that the addict had to *want* to quit. He felt his stomach dissolve and had to steady himself against the wall.

'Most of our customers do not see gambling as a problem. But for a very small minority, Jim, we know that this is not the case.'

Chapman looked up. He moved the side of his mouth in a way that made Martinelli feel like he was going to spit at him.

'If you think you are having trouble controlling your gambling, this leaflet contains important information on where to seek help.'

Chapman lowered the leaflet and looked into Martinelli's eyes. 'Do you need help, Jim?' He tilted his head to one side and grinned. 'Do you want to talk to someone?'

'I've got five grand on the table. Upstairs.'

'Five? Have you?' Chapman sniffed loudly, as if he was

struggling to clear his sinuses. 'You and I both know that's not what we're talking about, don't we? You're not being straight, Jim.'

Chapman took a step forward. He raised the leaflet and held it in front of him, like a man singing a hymn in church.

'Only gamble what you can afford to lose,' he said. *'Set yourself personal limits. Only spend a certain amount of time at the tables.'* He stared at Martinelli. 'Time, Jim. That's what you've run out of, isn't it?'

'I've told you,' he said. 'Five grand. Upstairs. Let me play.'

Chapman walked towards the basins. He looked at himself in the mirror, admiring what he saw. Then he kicked out his leg behind him and slammed the bathroom door.

'I can tell you that you've got a problem,' he said. 'I can tell you that if you don't give me what's owed by tomorrow morning, I won't be – how do they say – responsible for my actions.'

'I understand that.' Martinelli could feel himself freezing up, his mind going numb.

'Oh you understand that, do you?'

'Can you just let me past?' Martinelli pressed away from the wall and moved towards the basins. 'Can you open the door, please? I want to go upstairs.'

Chapman appeared to admire his display of courage. He nodded and opened the door. An ominous smile was playing on his face as he indicated that Martinelli could leave.

'Don't let me stop you,' he said, stepping to one side with the flourish of a matador. 'You go and see what you can do, Jim. Be lucky.'

Martinelli climbed the stairs two at a time. He needed to be back at the tables in the way that a man who has been held underwater craves to reach the surface and to suck in a deep breath of air. He headed back to his seat and saw that a play was coming to an end. The pop and clatter of the ball, the rapt attention of the gamblers waiting for it to settle.

'Six. Black,' said the croupier.

Martinelli saw that the Chinese tourist had a split of five grand on five and six. A small fortune. The croupier placed the dolly on the winning square and began to sweep the losing chips from across the table. Then he paid out what he owed – more than eighty grand to the Chinese in a stack of twenty, with no discernible reaction from either man.

Martinelli took it as a sign. He waited until the table was clear, then moved his stack of chips on to black. All or nothing. Take it or leave it. The house always wins. Fuck Kyle Chapman.

Then it was just a question of waiting. The bloke from Dubai put his usual spread on eighteen through thirty-six, the other Arab going big on six-way splits along the baize. It worried Martinelli that the Chinese stayed out of the play, wandering over to the bar. It was like a bad omen. Maybe he should take back his chips.

‘No more bets, please, gentlemen,’ said the croupier.

Too late. Martinelli could do nothing but stare at the wheel, praying for the fifty-fifty chance on black, mesmerized – as he had always been – by the counterpoint of spokes and ball, the one hypnotically slow, the other a blur as it raced beneath the rim.

Slowing now, the ball about to drop. Nauseous with anxiety, Martinelli took his eyes away from the wheel and saw Kyle Chapman standing in his eyeline. He had come back upstairs. He wasn’t looking at the wheel. He wasn’t looking at the baize. He was looking directly at the man who owed him thirty thousand pounds.

Martinelli’s eyes went back to the table. All or nothing. Feast or famine. He heard the rattle and click of the ball, watched it drop and vanish beneath the rim like a magic trick.

The inspector looked down. He would see it first. The croupier leaned over the wheel, preparing to call the number.

Martinelli closed his eyes. It was like an axe falling. He always felt sick at this moment.

I should have put it all on red, he thought. *The house always wins.*