



Lucky Number Thirteen

a deleted scene from *Danse Macabre*

by Cristelle Comby

Although most of the time we travel with the Underground, we made an exception tonight and took a cab. It was my fault; I didn't feel like riding the Tube with my disguise.

To look like serious customers, I left the jeans and Converse in the wardrobe and put on — with great reluctance — a short, dark blue cocktail dress and high heels. Egan also made a special effort, leaving behind his habitual turtlenecks and deciding on a light blue dress shirt, black vest and equally black scarf which I tied neatly around his neck to hide the long scar he has there.

"Date number thirteen," my friend jokes, as we near the casino's entrance.

"Twelve," I say, and he frowns at me. "I do not count spending an entire afternoon searching through someone else's trash as a date." Urgh, I can still remember that awful smell and how it lingered on my skin for days afterwards.

He chuckles lightly. "Fun times."

"For you maybe; you weren't the one doing the searching." I force faked-scorn in my voice, and his smiles stretches.

"Next time, you can be the one who goes knee-deep in the garbage," I say, as we step through the revolving glass door.

We are momentarily astounded by the loud casino sounds of blipping and ticking machines. Although the floors are carpeted, it resounds all around us.

“Are you okay?” I ask my partner, concerned the loud ambient noise might somehow be overwhelming to him.

“Fine,” he says, taking an eager and springy step forward. I have to strain forward to catch up to him, which is not as easy as it sounds in high heels.

“Wait.” I halt him. “We need to get some chips first.”

I steer us to the change booth and hand the smiling lady minding the register a handful of notes. She exchanges those for five small piles of coloured chips, and wishes us “the best of luck.”

I place the coins in Egan’s vest pocket, and we move forward into the gambling house, at a slow pace. For no particular reason, I can’t seem to shake the familiar intro of *Smoke on the Water* from my mind.

Although we’re not here for entertainment purposes but to carry out a job, we have to mingle and look like real customers. I steer us towards the roulette – the only game here I understand.

I’ve never bothered to learn the rules of poker and other famous card games. Money’s always been tight in my family, and we never dared to play money games. The House always wins anyway, and losing our bread money was something we couldn’t afford.

“Roulette table?” Egan asks, as we near the rectangular table, covered in green velvet.

He must have heard the familiar click of the spinning wheel. There are half a dozen people around the game zone already. Several coins of different colours are placed on various numbers, and the croupier’s about to let the little white ball roll.

“Yes, it’s the only thing I know how to play.” I keep my voice low so that only Egan will hear it. “We’ll keep to playing colours only. The odds won’t be too bad that way, and we’ll be able to keep this charade up a little longer.”

Egan hums distractedly at my words, as he comes to stand near the table, feeling along its length with his right hand.

“We’ll play two or three games – to sell the lie – then go have a look at the rest of the place.”

"I feel lucky." Egan reaches in his pocket for the coins and places the lot on the side of the table.

My throat goes dry at the sight of the little coloured-chips. There are two thousand pounds there. It's the entirety of our bank account, which I emptied this very afternoon. Seeing the ATM screen show a balance of zero made me a little bit sick, but the success of our mission requires that we look like real players tonight.

I sigh; our hard-earned cash doesn't look like much once transformed into casino coins. Only twenty small, round plastic chips.

I watch the wheel spin. It shines under the bright neon light cast upon it. There's excitement in the air, and it's contagious. Despite my better judgement, the game captivates me. The little ball goes round and round, bounces once, twice and finally settles on a six, black.

Moans of protest rise all around us. Everyone's lost, save for one young red-haired twenty-something girl standing a little to our left. She bet on the right colour, I notice. She's all smiles when the croupier pushes her winnings towards her.

New bets are placed, and I turn my attention back to the wheel again, ready to watch it spin.

"Everything on number thirteen." My friend's familiar baritone startles me. What did he – I turn to him, panic rising as the meaning of his words sink in.

Egan's sporting a cryptic smile and a frown such as the one he has when deep in thought. Have I heard him right? Admittedly, I was mistaken, right... right?

My gaze shifts from his face to the table, but it's too late. The young croupier is already reaching for *our* money and placing it in the centre of the table. Our neat pile of plastic chips now covers black number thirteen.

I wave an anxious hand at the young man in black and white. "Wait, no!"

"Bets are closed," he says, dismissing me and moving back to the wheel.

"Are you mad? Stop this." I grip Egan's arm tightly. "Do something, that's all of our money!"

"I thought we were supposed to blend in," my partner replies in a hushed tone, still smiling.

“By spending *a little!*” I hiss. I try to keep my tone quiet, but it’s hard. “You just used all of our coins at once. Do you even know how this game works? We have like one chance in a million.”

“One out of thirty-seven.” Egan’s smile widens; it’s bordering on maniac, and I feel like hitting him on the head with his cane. “Good odds, don’t you think?”

“*Les jeux sont faits,*” the croupier says, distracting me. He spins the wheel and sends the little ball rolling in the other direction.

I close my eyes, unable to watch. My lunch threatens to make a reappearance, and though my feet are firmly planted on the ground, I’m feeling seasick. We’re officially bankrupt, and I’m going to kill my business partner.

“Thirteen, black,” a voice booms to my right and cheers echo all around us.

The hell?

My heart stops, and I open wide round eyes. Sure enough, the white ball ended on number thirteen, Egan’s number.

“I can’t believe it,” I breathe out, stunned.

The young croupier looks at me with a bright smile, and something tells me such luck doesn’t happen very often. The man next to me, a fifty-something chap in a worn-out and too tight around the waist suit claps me on the shoulder. I’m too stung to say anything, or move, or even breathe.

“Told you I was feeling lucky,” Egan says.

The gleefulness in his voice is enough to shake me out of my stupor. I reach forward for the – now much bigger, thank you very much – pile of coins the croupier is pushing our way. I grab the chips before Egan has time to reach for any of them and drop the lot in my handbag. I zip it close and force myself not to calculate how much we just won.

Egan reaches an expectant outstretched hand my way. “Give me some more; I want to try again.”

I look at him hard and eye him critically from head to toe. He’s smiling. And looking like a kid on a sugar-high who wants another go on the rollercoaster at the fair.

"No way! You've played enough for one night." I flap his hand away and reach for his elbow to lead him away. "Come on; we've blended enough; time to work."

"Spoil sports." He groans but accepts to follow me nonetheless.

We drift through the casino, and I quickly map the area, committing to memory the locations of security cameras, game tables, and security personnel.

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"What the hell was that?" Frustration is evident in my tone, as I sit down in Egan's couch. Though it is hugely comfortable, I sit ramrod straight; tension still courses through my veins.

"What do you mean?" Egan asks as he drifts near the kitchen's entrance.

"Porcca vacca, you know damn well, what I mean." I sit up, point a useless finger in his direction. "You. In the casino. Betting all of *our* money in one game."

"We won, didn't we?" He smiles at me, his lips pressing into a thin, taut line.

"It was pure luck. We could have lost everything, just as easily" My voice is rising in volume, but I can't help it. Damn it! Does he not realize how much trouble would have been in if we'd lost?

"We're trying to build a business here, Ash. I don't know if you've noticed, but clients aren't rubbing elbows by our door to hire us. I have bills to pay: health insurance, food, rent."

"I know that." A touch of disdain colours Egan's words; a reminder that he hates being at the receiving end of a lecture. "I'm not a child."

"Then my question still stands. What the hell was that?" I repeat voice just below screaming levels.

Egan's face closes off instantly. His hand flexes nervously, and then he takes three steps to stand behind the table, his back to me.

Shit.

I count to ten, take some deep breaths in and try to look at the situation in its entirety. I'm missing something, I can feel it. What happened in the casino was uncharacteristic of my friend. So is his attitude right now.

Cool off, Lexa. And think.

I try another approach, come to stand beside him and place a reassuring hand on his forearm. Despite my outburst, there are no hurt feelings, and I want him to know that.

"I won," he says in a small voice, almost a whisper.

There it is again; that nagging feeling that I'm missing something. I force myself to forget about the money, about the risk Egan just took, about us almost losing everything. Instead, I analyse what's in front of me: Egan's posture, his tone, what little emotions he lets filter on his face. And it hits me.

I see the shame and regrets, and the pieces of the puzzle fall together. "Ash, how often do you go to casinos?"

"I don't—" he swallows, thickly "—I don't frequent casinos, anymore."

I tighten my grasp on his arm. "You like playing, don't you?" I nod understandingly to myself. "Too much."

"Can't help it. I love it there. The excitement, the noises all around. So alive, so vibrant." He shrugs. "And it just — it seems so easy. The odds aren't so bad once you do the maths, you know?"

"Don't tell me about the odds. The house wins, Ash. The house *always* wins." I may not know much about casinos, but I know this much.

"That it does," he reluctantly admits. "I lost a lot, before... Before I stopped going."

This admission is a hard one to make, I can see it. "Why didn't you tell me about this? We didn't have to take this case."

He shrugs again and moves away from me. He paces to the wall, turns on his heel and faces me. "Didn't seem relevant to tell you." He leans back until his shoulders rest against the wall.

With his hands in his pockets, my partner looks like the picture of misery.

I don't want to give him a hard time about his addiction, but I can't let what happened slide either. I still dread to think what could have happened if we'd lost.

"Yeah, right. How could the fact that you're a gambling addict be of any relevance in a case involving a dirty croupier in a casino? I fail to see the connection."

Egan lowers his head with a grimace. "Sorry," he mutters through clenched teeth. "I thought I could control it; could control... me."

His broken-hearted tone, the shame that tinges each syllable strikes a chord in me. I walk up to him; reach up to let my hands rest on his shoulders.

"No more gambling with the company's money, okay?" I order tersely but in a kind voice. "And if we ever go back in there, I'm not letting you go anywhere near the chips."

Egan nods in agreement and slumps forward until his head settles on my shoulder. In one fluid motion, I close my arms around him. The hug, as always, only lasts a few handfuls of seconds, but it's enough to reassure the both of us that everything is okay.

I take a step back when Egan moves away from me and goes to sit by his desk.

"Alright," I say, turning back to face the room. "Let's recap what we know."

The Neve & Egan Cases books are available on Amazon:

- [Russian Dolls](#)
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