

# Red or Black

**R**ed or black?

The colours of blood and death. I have to bet on one of them—no other choice. The stakes are too high to walk away. I've been to Vegas, walked past the tables where the minimum bet is thousands of dollars, shaken my head at the crazy people willing to lose everything, their trembling hands hovering over those same two colours.

Now it's me facing that choice. Only this is no glittering casino where pretty smiling girls deliver cocktails to the high rollers. This is a hospital, and I'm alone in its dimly lit basement.

I'm looking at a bomb.

They can't evacuate the patients. Many are too ill to move. Those who could escape would face the snipers outside. So, the nurses and doctors get on with their jobs and trust that I can do mine. Those with faith will pray, while some clutch their lucky mascots. I have neither.

The managers and admin staff are sheltering as far away as possible, assuming the blast will not reach their sanctuary. They're wrong—I know what's behind this mass of wires and it'll take out not just the hospital but most of the slums surrounding it.

It's hot down here, but that can't wholly explain the sweat that soaks my shirt. I thought this one would be easy. Most bombs are—their creators don't expect them to be found before detonation, so simple is best. I can guess who made this one. We've tried to take him out a few times, but he's too clever. He takes no risks, either over his own safety or the efficiency of his devices.

What doesn't help is that I don't know how this will be triggered. It could be a timer, or he might set it off remotely. The former is more likely—I'm not sure a mobile signal would get down here, but knowing it's a timer is little consolation. In films there's always a bright red counter telling you how long you've got to disarm it. You don't get them in real life.

I was welcomed by the squeaks and scratchings of rats when I got here. Now even they're gone, deserting this metaphorical sinking ship. The only sounds are the beating of my heart and my steady breathing. Long, slow, calming—that's the theory. My hands are shaking. I'm using the torch strapped to my head to examine the tangle of wires, seeking the tell-tale signs indicating which ones are live.

I can't move it. He'll have put a motion sensor in there. I know that because of our procedures. I describe every move I plan to make into a wireless microphone connected to a receiver at the far

end of the room. The receiver is well protected—unlike me, it will survive the blast. A colleague faced a similar device and announced he was about to shift the bugger. Hardly the most eloquent last words.

Poor guy left a wife and kids. I don't have that worry. My missus walked out, couldn't stand the strain. Her or the job, she said. I protested that someone had to do it; it was important. She should be proud of me, all that stuff. The truth is, I couldn't do anything else. I'd have been bored rigid. Disarm one of these, you feel so alive, like you're king of the world. It's like a drug. Heroin probably—the chances are it'll kill you in the end.

Red or black? The ex had black locks. You couldn't say brunette—that suggests a hint of brown. Hers was jet black, long and straight down her back. I think that's what attracted me at first. I was a bit of a goth in my youth, and Jane's hair and pale skin gave her the touch of a vampire. Too true, she sucked me dry during the divorce, economically and emotionally. I felt suicidal—it's ironic that what got my sanity back was doing this work—oblivion at your fingertips. I'm over her now, but every so often I'm not so sure.

This basement is lit, if you can call it that, by a single bulb. Every so often it flickers—I'm not sure if it's the bulb or supply that's unreliable. I can barely make out the end of the room. It's a strange shape, almost like a giant coffin. The walls are mottled with damp, odd in a country where it only rains for a few days a year. I keep seeing human shapes in the stains, as if the ghosts of those who've gone before are waiting to welcome me.

I need to focus on these wires. My pliers hover over the red. My thoughts stray to Susan. I met her a couple of weeks ago, the last time I went home. Flame red hair, full lips. Divorcee like me, two teenage kids. I ran into her at my cousin's wedding reception. She was the bride's sister. We chatted, got on all right, then I asked her out for a drink. I think we got on all right—she kissed me when we parted, but I got the impression that, like Jane, she's not keen on what I do. I can't blame her.

Red or black? Like life, this bastard's not consistent. Joe picked red—survived. Tommo went for the same—boom.

Too many mates have died. I can't call them real friends. In this job, you can't afford to get too close to people. You can tell jokes, have a beer, even risk your life if you think you can save them, but you can't let them inside your head. The only person you can confide in is yourself, just as I'm doing now, and that's not healthy. Feel sorry for other people, that's okay. Feel self-pity and you're

on the road to hell. Usually via the bottle. And that's a killer. You get the shakes doing this, you're dead before you start.

Focus, damn you! Somewhere in this deadly spaghetti is a clue to which wire to cut. Probably in the timer component at the back, but no way of seeing how it's set. The thing's soldered at the rear, so I'm not able to check which wires are dummies. I've got it down to these two at the front, the black and the red. I think of them as Jane and Susan.

The pliers move towards Jane—the black. What does the condemned man do in the minute before his execution? Besides prayer and panic? Like the apocryphal drowning man, my past is flashing before me. My mind drifts back to my few happy years with my ex. I was already in the army when we got together. I was a lieutenant in the Black Watch when it was a real regiment. She loved the uniform, hated the job. Hardly surprising when I was deployed in Afghanistan. Every reported death hammered another nail into the coffin of our marriage, but I never knew, not then. She made every leave special—at first.

The problem was I had these highs at home, then I had to return to the war. All we did was sit in our barracks inviting an attack or go out on patrol and avoid the bombs. Waiting to die. We found a device inside a school—couldn't leave it. An engineer talked me through defusing it and that was it. I was hooked. Death can't creep up from behind—you meet him face to face and the winner takes all. I put in for a transfer to the Engineers, told Jane, and that was the end.

Most devices are easy. Half of them haven't even exploded when they should, so the chances they'll blow up in your face are limited. We call them IEDs because they're improvised, not constructed by an expert like this one.

I've faced thirty-eight so far, and I'm still here. This one makes treble thirteen, worrying if you're superstitious. I'm not. Most of my colleagues are, although some claim it as religion. They reckon they need every bit of help they can get. If there is a lady called Luck, she wouldn't hang around this hellhole. Neither would the Deity. The description "godforsaken" was never truer. I'm on my own.

There again, I'm not. *He's* here in spirit, and physically, he won't be that far away. The master bomb maker, the craftsman of carnage. He'll be holed up somewhere, no doubt looking at a watch, waiting for the climax when his creation and everything, everybody, around it are obliterated.

I recall a film—I think it was called the Seventh Seal—where a knight plays chess against Death. If the hero loses, he dies. If I remember right, the knight lost but saved others. I won't even have that consolation. If I go, hundreds come with me. But that chess match—it was the ultimate

battle for the hero. This is mine. If there is a next one, it'll be an anticlimax. If I blow myself up in the future, it will be just a fatal embarrassment.

Do I have a future? Perhaps a rosy one with Susan. I could ride off into the sunset, leave the army, get a safe job, maybe advising companies on their security. Could I stomach it—the routine, the lack of danger?

I'm taking a final look. I can't see anything that'll tell me which wire to cut. It's fifty-fifty, dead even. Black or red? Jane or Susan?

I can't afford to hesitate any longer—this baby could go off any second.

Indecision will kill me like a modern-day Hamlet.

I choose red.