

*Excerpt from THE RED SHOES by John Stewart Wynne*

I gave the cash to Maxo who didn't bother to count it but, taking his time, took out a key ring from his vest pocket, located a small key and opened a drawer in his desk, laid the bills inside and locked it. Then gave the handle a pull to make sure it was locked. He'd trusted me to deliver the correct amount agreed upon, so I decided it wasn't cool to open the envelope I'd been given and look inside to check the goods. Instead I stuffed it into my pants with an unconcerned air, hoping for the best.

Maxo was already getting up, "Well, back to work, no rest for the boss. I appreciate your stopping by for that drink. And more importantly, it's good to acknowledge we've taken our relationship to a new level, one that will continue, I have no doubt. We have a closeness now, *ami à l'ami*," he smiled. I was just relieved the exchange had gone off according to plan. "By the way I hope you weren't disappointed by the quality of that drink. It's the same as you had before."

I got up too and together we went back out behind the bar where we both noticed a commotion going on in the crowd. It didn't take long to see a whirlwind sweeping through the room, parting the crowd like the Red Sea, a whirlwind named Baily Cantevelter in his baseball cap, yellow satin jacket and boots, followed at a discreet distance by a limping Piers who was clutching a sore arm, his face in pain. Baily was headed right to the bar. Patrizia, alarmed, moved closer to Maxo and me, all three of us taken by surprise and unprepared for a scene.

Baily rudely pushed his way between two patrons sitting on bar stools and took in all three of us in turn. Me first. "You?" he said in disbelief. "What are you doing here? Come to dance on my grave?"

"Of course not, Baily. I'm here for a reason that has absolutely nothing to do with you. I'm your friend and you know it."

Patrizia was next. He sized her up. "You could do better than what you've got—with him," he nodded his head towards Maxo, without looking at him. "A woman with your class working in a shithole like this." He managed to shrug and sneer at the same time. "Go figure." Patrizia looked down sadly, not, I thought because she was with Maxo, but because of Baily's distraught state.

Then he turned his guns on his former boss. "Tell your girlfriend to leave."

"You seem to have things all turned around, Baily," Maxo said, calmly but firmly. "I give the orders here, not you. And she's staying right here."

Baily pounded his fist on the bar. "Give me my pay for the last few weeks I worked here. You fucking figured you could cheat me out of it. Blow me off before you paid me. No way, big man."

"You'd better leave now, Baily, and I'll forget about this."

"Pay me what you owe me, you fucking asshole. Then I'll be happy to be on my way."

Piers huddled in the background, afraid of Baily.

I felt frozen next to Maxo and Patrizia, somehow feeling it was my place to be in on this unpleasantness too as I was now involved one way or another with all three of them.

Maxo picked up an empty glass from behind him on the shelf, held it up to the light, and with a cloth studiously cleaned it. Finally, he said, "No," continuing to wipe the already spotless glass clean.

"No?" Baily was outraged. "Tell me I didn't hear that right."

"You did hear it right."

"You mean," Baily raised his voice so the customers could clearly hear, "that you admit to pulling a dirty trick like this and not paying a guy fairly who finished a job for you." If he'd hoped to get an anonymous group of club-goers behind him, he failed, as no one here was going to take the side of some loser against the man with all the money and power. In fact they stared open-mouthed at Baily like he was some poor deluded soul.

"You've been more than fairly compensated by me," Maxo hoped to bring the matter to a close.

"Oh, I get it. The time I was out sick. You figured I was on a binge when Gianni called and told you I had flu."

"I didn't have to figure. It was as clear as your brain is muddled. You don't have somebody call for you unless you're too wiped out to call yourself."

He turned his attention to me in a rage. "You told him!"

Maxo stood up for his new customer. "Gianni never told me anything except the lie you had him tell me. And I don't hold that against him, but against you."

"You paid for my Harley. And you paid for my rehab. Then you figured that wasn't money well spent. Since I slipped. So you decided to take what you could out of my pay before you fired me. To punish me."

Maxo's eyes carefully checked the glass for spots. He found it to his liking and replaced it on the shelf. "Something like that."

"And you won't even give me a second chance? As hard as I've worked for you."

"There are no second chances in life, Baily. Not with you. Your second chance would turn into a third, then a fourth." That wouldn't have been everyone's assessment, some would have agreed to give Baily a break, that second chance, young as he was, but Maxo had a definite point of view.

Baily didn't give up, only tried a softer touch. "But Maxo, if I don't have this job, I'm in deep shit. I have bills to pay, I have to eat like everybody else."

Maxo was silent. Patrizia came up next to me and took my hand in hers and squeezed it.

"And the rent on my apartment is overdue. I could be evicted in a month or so if I don't come up with it somehow. And end up on the streets. It's tough out there, trying to land a new job. Especially in a hurry. I went to a few places. They either told me they weren't hiring or gave me a line to come back another day when the boss was around. It

was embarrassing, making the rounds, cup in hand."

"Get off the cross, Baily, we need the wood," Maxo said.

Livid, Baily picked up a customer's drink and hurled it straight at Maxo who ducked. The glass hit the mirror on the wall, shattering both a section of the mirror as well as destroying the glass, sending tiny shards flying towards Patrizia, speckling her violet-strewn hair, while the liquid from the drink spilled down the front of her violet crinoline.

"Are you all right?" I asked her.

She nodded she was, but of course she was shaken. I was more so, because I realized, right at that moment, how much I cared about her.

"Come outside, you weak motherfucker," Baily challenged Maxo who had uprighted himself, "and fight me like a man. For all your big biceps, I could beat the living crap out of you."

But Maxo had already gone into action by giving a secretive signal with a simple nod of the head and before Baily knew it, four bruisers I presumed to be other bouncers had him in the air. To subdue a kid that was now like a wild animal took all four of them, each of them grabbing one of his legs and arms and then carrying a kicking and cursing Baily towards the door and hoisting him back outside. Maxo hustled Patrizia and me into his back office as the clientele began to dance and party again, excited to have witnessed some drama which let them feel that being in a club like this one kept them on the cutting edge of something.

Maxo eased Patrizia down into a chair in front of his desk and softly rubbed the cheeks of her beautiful face which, thank God, didn't show any signs of having been cut. He said to her gently, *"Il mio tesoro, siete ferite?"*

"No," she shook her head, *"Ma soddisfa, lascia da solo ora. E molto turbata."*

"What's she saying?"

He gazed at me perplexed, "That she isn't hurt, and to leave Baily alone, he's upset."

He found a cloth and began to dry the front of her dress while I picked the pinpricks of broken glass from her hair, trying not to crush the violets, though that turned out to be impossible as I wanted to get every last piece of glass out. I remembered as a boy being afraid to reach out to touch the roses growing in my mother's dirt-filled box because I was afraid I'd prick my fingers. I had none of that same fear now. So what if I pricked them?

Patrizia was still in a bit of a daze. She turned to Maxo and said, *"Ringrazi Gianni per l'uso dei suoi pattini rossi."*

Again I had to ask for a translation.

"She told me to thank you for wearing those red shoes."

I knelt down beside her. "You're welcome. But let's all speak English, since we can. So nobody has to act as a translator."

She smiled. "Of course. I'm so used to talking to Maxo in my first language, especially when I'm upset. I forget I'm fluent in several. When I was married to George, he'd sometimes catch me muttering in Italian and ask me the same thing. To please speak

English.”

Maxo picked up a call on his cell phone. He listened, then, “Why am I not surprised?” he answered, then shut off the phone. “I’ve just had a report Baily’s hanging around outside the club, just sitting quietly now on some trash can.”

“Let him sit there, Maxo,” Patrizia pleaded. “He’s not doing any harm.”

“You’re so trusting,” Maxo answered her. “Believing the best about everyone.”

“No,” she responded thoughtfully, as if she were remembering something. “Not everyone.” I wondered what she meant. For some reason I thought she might be referring to Crewe, why I don’t know, it was just a hunch coming out of nowhere, but it was a strong one.

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