



MODERN VICES ♦

The Numbers Racket

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Gather close, friends, for tonight's vice is a humble one, played not by high rollers in a desert palace but by ordinary working people betting a penny or a nickel on a lucky number, in the tenements and barbershops and corner stores of the great cities a hundred years ago. It was illegal, it made some people fabulously rich, it drew the deadliest gangsters in the land, and at its heart, Carol, stands one of the most extraordinary figures we have ever put by this fire, a fearless woman who ran a fortune and fought the mob. This is the numbers racket.

CAROL

A penny on a lucky number, and it drew the deadliest gangsters in the land. Marty, how does something so small become something so big and so bloody? Tell me how the game even worked.



MARTY

It was beautifully simple, Carol, which was the whole genius of it. Each day you would pick a three-digit number, from zero zero zero to nine nine nine, and place your bet, a penny, a nickel, whatever you could spare, with a local runner, a neighborhood fellow everybody knew. And at the end of the day one winning number would be drawn, tied to some public figure that could not be rigged, like the last three digits of the day's totals at the racetrack or the bank clearinghouse. If your number came up, you were paid off at long odds, hundreds to one. It was a lottery, Carol, run privately and illegally, penny by penny, and in a poor neighborhood where a real bank would not even open an account for you, it was the one flutter of hope a body could afford.

CAROL

The one bit of hope you could buy for a penny. Marty, that is the gin lesson again, isn't it, the vice that rushes into the space where the ordinary world has offered nothing. So who ran it, in the beginning?



MARTY

In the beginning, Carol, and this is the part folk forget, it was largely run by and for the community itself, especially up in Harlem, the great Black neighborhood of New York. The numbers bankers were local figures, and the money, much of it, stayed and circulated in the neighborhood. Those bankers became pillars, employing hundreds of runners and collectors, sponsoring good works, lending money the banks refused. One of them, a dignified man named Casper Holstein, grew wealthy on the numbers and gave lavishly to schools and charities and causes. It was a vice, yes, but it was woven into the life of the place, an underground economy in a community locked out of the real one.

CAROL

So it was crooked and it was a genuine institution both at once. Marty, and now you promised me an extraordinary woman. I have been waiting.



MARTY

Her name was Stephanie St. Clair, Carol, and they called her Madame Queen, and she is unforgettable. A sharp, elegant, fierce woman of Caribbean birth who built herself into one of the biggest numbers bankers in Harlem, running a small empire of the game and commanding real wealth and real respect at a time when the whole world was stacked against a woman, and doubly against a Black woman, holding any power at all. She dressed magnificently, she spoke her mind without fear, and she took out advertisements in the newspapers, Carol, openly denouncing the crooked police who preyed on her people. She was not hiding in the shadows. She was a queen, and she meant everyone to know it.

CAROL

Taking out newspaper advertisements to call out the corrupt police, as a woman running an illegal empire. Marty, the sheer nerve of her takes my breath away. But such success must have drawn the wolves.



MARTY

The biggest wolf of the age, Carol. When the numbers game was found to be pulling in staggering sums, a fortune flowing daily out of these poor neighborhoods, the white gangsters who had grown rich on bootleg liquor came hunting for it, and chief among them a vicious, murderous mobster named Dutch Schultz. Schultz moved into Harlem with guns and threats, determined to seize the numbers racket for himself, muscling out or murdering the local bankers one by one, and turning what had been a neighborhood institution into just another arm of a violent white crime empire, its profits now draining away downtown.

CAROL

So the outside gangster comes to steal the one thing the community had built for itself. Marty, and did Madame Queen bow to him, as I fear most did?



MARTY

She did not, Carol. Stephanie St. Clair fought Dutch Schultz, one of the most feared killers in America, and she fought him with everything she had. She refused to pay him, she defied him publicly, she waged a war of nerve and cunning to hold onto what was hers, and when Schultz's own end finally came, Carol, when the very organization he served decided he had become too reckless and had him gunned down, Madame Queen struck one last magnificent blow. As Dutch Schultz lay dying in his hospital bed, she sent him a telegram, and it said simply, as ye sow, so shall ye reap. She had the last word on the man who had tried to destroy her.

CAROL

A telegram to his deathbed. Marty, that is ice-cold and glorious and completely earned. What became of her, this fearless queen?



MARTY

She lived out her life a legend of Harlem, Carol, defiant to the end, and the memory of her endures as one of the great figures of that world. But the numbers racket itself, once Schultz and men like him had forced their way in, was never quite the same, its wealth increasingly captured by the mob and bled from the neighborhoods that played it. And then, Carol, comes the final twist, the one that says the most. After decades of hunting the numbers game as a criminal vice, of arresting the runners and raiding the back rooms, the governments themselves looked at all that money and had a change of heart.

CAROL

Oh, Marty, I think I know where this is going. They decided they wanted it.



MARTY

They decided they wanted it, Carol, exactly. One state after another set up its own legal lottery, an official numbers game run by the government, with the very same penny dreams and long odds and daily drawings, only now the profits flowed to the state treasury instead of to Madame Queen or Dutch Schultz. The identical vice that had been a crime worth jailing people over became, almost overnight, a respectable public institution advertised on television, so long as the house taking the bet was the government. The runner in the barbershop went to prison. The state selling the same ticket built itself a monument.

CAROL

The very same game, a crime for the poor man and a public service for the state. Marty, there is a bitter irony there I cannot quite swallow. What is the meaning you take from the numbers?



MARTY

This, Carol, and it is a sharp one. We are taught that a vice is a wicked thing and the law is the good thing that opposes it, but the numbers racket shows you it is rarely so clean. The same penny bet was a beloved institution in one hand, a gangster's plunder in another, and a government revenue in a third, and the only thing that truly changed was who got to keep the money. When you see a vice hunted ferociously and then suddenly made legal and respectable, Carol, do not assume anyone decided it had become less harmful. Ask, as we always must, who is holding the bank now. And remember Madame Queen, who ran the game, fought the mob, and never once let anyone tell her to know her place. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I am thinking of the fearless Madame Queen in her fine clothes, sending a telegram to a dying man, and all the penny dreams that made and lost so many fortunes. When a vice changes from a crime to a public good overnight, friends, follow the money. Come back to the fire.

