

Precious



*T*he parking area at the *Whirlaway Club* was almost empty, but I guess three o'clock on a Tuesday afternoon wasn't exactly the busiest part of their day. There was no problem finding the Ford a spot near the entrance.

It was a large single-story windowless building painted an ugly battleship gray – I presume in an effort to remain as unnoticed as possible by the 'good' citizens of Memphis. Apparently that was successful, because all the 'good' citizens stayed away and didn't complain about what went on behind those gray walls. The 'not so good' citizens liked it that way.

Stenciled in large red letters across the gray metal entrance door was a sign that read:

MEMBERS ONLY

I pushed it open and stepped into a short dark hallway; it was like walking into a cave - leaving all the brightness behind and seeing a murky unknown ahead. Almost immediately I found myself face to face with a huge black man wearing a tuxedo – a man who probably had a second job working as a stunt double for King Kong! A neon 'black light' hanging from the shallow ceiling highlighted his size and rough features. He spoke with an equally rough voice.

"Five dollars membership fee," he growled.

I placed a five dollar bill in his giant hand along with offering a smile that was not returned. He examined the currency, apparently

decided it was authentic, opened the door behind him and motioned for me to enter. I followed instructions.

The huge room I entered was completely dark except for flashing lights coming from an elevated stage located in the center, which was surrounded by mostly empty tables and chairs. Earsplitting music blasted from oversized speakers, and was being provided by an invisible disc jockey - spinning records that were not being played for their popularity, but for their absence of words or song.



A young woman wearing nothing but high heel shoes and a sailor's hat was standing in the middle of the stage - slowly moving her body to the loud music while hanging onto a pole - which extended from the stage floor to the ceiling. She seemed uninterested in her surroundings and stared off into the distance darkness, paying no attention to the few customers who were watching

and apparently enjoying her dancing. The customers demonstrating their enjoyment by throwing dollar bills on the stage and offering an occasional whistle or shout in her direction.

Pausing to let my eyes adjust to the dim light, I spotted a long bar counter located to my left, and slowly made my way in that direction - trying to not trip over anything in the darkness.

Somehow I managed to find a stool, and was glancing over my shoulder to have another look at the lady dancer when I heard a soft voice from behind the counter.

"Good afternoon mister. Can I get you something to drink?"

Turning to face the voice, I think I saw a beautiful young



lady leaning across the counter – her face almost touching mine. The light was still playing tricks with my eyes so I was a little uncertain, but the sweet smell of her perfume and a giant, radiant smile were hard to miss – along with a few other things.

Long blonde hair swept over her shoulders like a waterfall. Underneath the hair, her head relaxed in both hands while elbows rested on the counter, along with her ‘womanly wares’. I rubbed my eyes to make sure I wasn’t seeing things.

She licked her red lips before speaking again. “Your first visit to the *Whirlaway*?” she asked, with a voice that seemed to come from another room – which was odd because our faces were only inches apart. Perhaps my focus was not where it should have been.

I spoke slowly while returning her smile and pretending not to stare. “I’ll have a Jack Daniel’s and Coke – heavy on the ice.”

“Could I get you anything else?” Her smile got bigger.

“Yes...yes I would like to see the manager, if they’re available.”

Without a response, her face, elbows, sweet perfume, smile and ‘womanly wares’ left the counter and disappeared into the darkness. I wasn’t sure if she was getting me a drink, attending to my request or running from my stare.



I was still pondering that question when a large white ostrich feather crossed my right shoulder and wrapped around my neck. Then, the same perfume the bartender was wearing tickled my nose again. Before I could react, another feather came from the other direction and I was instantly surrounded. I silently enjoyed my captivity before hearing a quiet voice coming from my left.

“Hello handsome, welcome to the *Whirlaway*. My name’s Precious...what’s yours?”

Using both hands I pushed the lovely nuisance away and looked at my captor – I was immediately speechless.

Holding the feathers and leaning against the counter was a dark-haired woman offering a smile that took my breath away. She was short, only about five foot, but what was packed into those sixty inches made the hair on the back of my neck tingle. Her hair was cut short, like a man's, and the strange lighting in the room made it almost glow – along with her dark eyes and the red lipstick that surrounded her smile.

Normally a naked woman would not make me nervous, but for some reason this one did. My words came with difficulty.

“I’m...I’m sure you are...precious, I mean.”

She put her stiletto covered right foot on the lower step of my stool and leaned closer. “You’re new to the *Whirlaway* – I don’t recall seeing you here before. Are you here to just drink or did you come to watch the ladies?”

Before I could respond, the blonde bartender delivered my Jack and Coke, gave me a smile, winked at Precious and then disappeared back into the darkness.

Needing the reinforcement, I took a healthy swallow before answering. “Actually I’m here on business. I would like to speak with the manager, if they’re available.”

She leaned closer and ignored my comment. “You didn’t tell me your name...that’s not fair. You know mine but I don’t know yours. Don’t you like me?”

Now...there was a question that begged for an answer. But for some reason I simply couldn’t find one.

“Carson is my name...Carson Reno.”

She leaned a little closer. “You’re handsome Mr. Carson Reno. Would you like to see me dance?”

“Yes...I mean no...I mean yes I would like to see you dance, but I’m really here on business. As I said, I would like to speak with the manager if they’re available.”

“Awe,” she giggled. “Marty is no fun. Why would you want to talk to him?”

“I’m...I’m looking into the death of Roxy Howard. Did you know her? I mean...were you friends?”

“Sure, everybody loved Roxy.”

My words were making me sound like a fool, but Precious didn’t seem to mind. She leaned even closer; her breasts were now resting on my left arm.

“I’ll be on stage in fifteen minutes; I hope you stick around to watch me dance. I promise you won’t be disappointed.”

“I...I...,” I stuttered. For a fellow who likes to talk – I seemed to have left all my words outside in the Ford or at the front door. I certainly hadn’t brought them inside with me.

She smiled, took her feathers and slowly disappeared into the darkness.

The word ‘smitten’ came to mind as I strained my eyes watching her walk away.

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“**H**ey mister,” the bartender returned and I turned to face her words. “Marty says he’s busy and wants to know what this visit is about. Are you a cop?”

“No I’m not a cop. You can tell Marty that it’s about the dancer...the *Whirlaway* employee that was murdered several days ago. I’ve just got a few questions and it won’t take long.”

She placed her elbows and 'womanly wares' back on the counter. "Did you know Roxy? She was a sweet girl and what happened to her was just awful. Are you a friend of hers?"

"Not exactly...you might say I'm a friend of a friend - a friend that has asked me to look into the situation."

"The cops have been here already asking questions. But if you're not a cop...then what are you?"

"I'm a private detective and my 'friend' asked me to investigate. They want to make sure there is justice for what happened to Miss Howard."

She leaned back slightly, produced a cigarette from somewhere and lit it. "That boyfriend of hers didn't do it...I can tell you that much."

"How do you know?"

She took a big draw from her cigarette and blew the smoke out into the stale air. "Because he loved Roxy and could never hurt her. Her boyfriend was in here all the time, and I can tell you there is no way that man could hurt Roxy."

"The police think he was upset about her working here. Do you think he was?"

"Well...hey mister...who you trying to kid? No man that loves a woman wants to see her run around naked in front of other men. But just because a woman does that - it doesn't mean she can't love her man. Trust me...I know."

"Does your man approve of you running around naked in front of other men?"

"Ha," she laughed before crushing out her half-smoked cigarette. "My man don't know about it. And if he did I don't suppose he would approve. But if he didn't approve, then I guess I would just need to find me a new man...know what I mean?"

"Yes," I nodded, "yes, I believe I do know what you mean."

She turned to walk away. "I'll see if Marty can come talk to you. I know he ain't busy."

Again she disappeared into the darkness, and I took another sip of my watery drink.

Almost instantly a man was standing where the blonde bartender had been standing before. He was in his mid to late forties, short with balding hair and a ruddy complexion. A dark open collar silk shirt was unbuttoned almost to his navel, exposing a full chest of salt and pepper colored hair – I assume he believed that look was exciting for the ladies. His large belly sagged over a wide white belt, which I suppose somehow managed to keep his plaid slacks from falling to the floor - because if he had an ass to support the slacks it certainly wasn't visible. A half-smoked cigar rested in the corner of his large mouth and he carried a grin that reminded me of a possum who had just eaten the last egg in the hen house.

If there was ever a man 'dressed to kill' this was the man.

He removed the cigar before speaking. "My name is Marty Broom. Candy said you wanted to speak to the manager...I'm the manager, so speak."

"Candy," I questioned, "was that the lady who served me my drink?"

He just stared at me and didn't respond.

"My name is Carson Reno and I'm a private investigator. I've been asked to look into the death...the murder of Roxy Howard."

"Asked by who?" He stuck the cigar back in his mouth.

"That's not really important," I answered with a little attitude. "What can you tell me about Roxy?"

"She's dead and her fans are missing her. Roxie will be difficult to replace, but we've got a lot of talent on the floor and more in the wings if those can't get the job done."

“I see,” I said for no reason. “But, what can you tell me about Roxy as a person...not just as a dancer.”

He ignored my question. “Look mister, I’m busy and ain’t got time for no third degree interview from some half-ass private dick. You got questions, go ask the police – they have all the answers.”

I was insulted, but somehow managed to continue. “Did you know her real name was Ruth Ann Grimes not Roxy Howard?”

He lost the grin and gave me a hard stare before removing his cigar. “Look mister, all these girls got ‘real’ names and I could care less what it is. They can call themselves anything they want; I don’t give a shit – just as long as it ain’t Mary or Ruth Ann or some other homely name they brought with them from the farm. Our customers ain’t in here courting the ‘girl next door’ – they’re in here for the pleasure of seeing real women and enjoying their company. That’s what makes the girls good tips, puts money in the register and makes the *Whirlaway* go round and round.”

(*Whirlaway* go round and round...I wonder if he thought that up all by himself!)

“You have any idea who might have wanted to kill her?”

“The boyfriend I guess, that’s what I read in the newspaper.” His irritation was showing. “Go peddle your product somewhere else. We’re busy and I’ve got a business to run.”

I glanced across the room. “You don’t look busy. Is this what you call busy?”

He stuffed the cigar back in his mouth. “Have yourself a nice day and find somewhere else to stroke your libido. I don’t think the *Whirlaway* has what you’re looking for.”

He turned, and within an instant disappeared into the darkness.

I was staring at my watery drink when the bartender, Candy, reappeared. She was dressed, or rather not dressed, just as before. A cigarette was hanging from her red lips and the smoke rolled up, through and over her long blonde hair.

“Would you like another drink mister?” She was still smiling.

“So your name is Candy? That’s what the manager called you. Is that your real name?”

She put her elbows and ‘womanly wares’ back on the counter and her face close to mine. “Mister, I can see that you ain’t spent much time in places like the *Whirlaway*. When I walk through those doors for work my name is Candy Barr - when I walk out those doors that other name ain’t none of your business. Understand?”

“Yes...yes I do understand and I appreciate your honesty.”

“Like I said,” she removed her ‘wares’ and elbows from the counter, put out her cigarette and leaned back. “You ain’t spent much time in places like the *Whirlaway* – if you had you would know about things like that. And besides, people around here appreciate a lot of things, but honesty sure ain’t one of them.”

“You mean honesty with their work or honesty with their feelings?”

“I mean most people here keep their personal lives to themselves and don’t let it interfere with their work. What they do with their lives outside these walls is nobody’s business. When that other part of their life does enter these walls, it’s never a good thing. That don’t mean they’re not friends with coworkers and it don’t mean they ain’t honest, it just means they’re human.”

I was digging myself a hole and needed to change the subject. “Did Roxy have a lot of friends?”

“Everybody was Roxy’s friend...everybody liked her. She was a real professional at what she did.”

“No, I mean besides her boyfriend. Did Roxy have other male friends...that you know about?”

“Look mister, I’m not going there. What she did with her own time was her business – not mine. If she wanted to hang out with Silky...well, then that was her business – not mine.”

“Silky?” I questioned.

“Silky Gilmore...he owns this joint along with a few others. But like I said, that was her business – not mine.”

I would file that name away for future reference.

“Were Roxy and Silky friends...like man and woman type friends?”

“Mister, you want another drink because like I told you I’m not going there. Research the rumors somewhere else. I like this job and I need this job.”

Candy was sharing a lot of information. I needed to back off a little and keep her talking.

“What about customers? Did she have any customer friends – regulars that she might have given special attention?”

“No, Roxy wasn’t like that – I told you it was strictly professional what she did.” Candy stopped for a moment, found and lit another cigarette, then gave me an odd look. “You know, there was this guy who was always here when Roxy danced. He never missed a night – front row center and throwing dollar bills at her every move. I mean, she didn’t show him any special attention, but somehow I think he thought she did. And you know what; since Roxy’s been gone I ain’t seen him in here.”

“What is this guy’s name?”

“I have no idea, but when you asked me about friends I just remembered this guy. He used to get drunk and tell everyone that Roxy was his girl and they were going to get married someday.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, but nobody took this guy serious – especially Roxy. Besides, he was kinda’ weird.”

“What do you mean ‘kinda’ weird?”

“You know...weird. He dressed funny, looked funny and I’m sure the last tit he got close enough to kiss probably belonged to his mother - if you know what I mean.”

“When is the last time you saw him?”

She thought for moment. “It was the last night she danced, the night she was murdered. He was here that night and I believe Elijah had to throw him out – he went up on the stage while Roxy was dancing.”

“Interesting,” I mumbled to myself.

“Mister, can I get you another drink? I gotta’ get busy and quit yapping before Marty gets pissed. My turn on the pole is in thirty minutes and he gets sore if we ain’t pulling our weight. This time of day is slow, but customers are customers. You need to stick around and watch me dance – you might like what you see.” Her grin got wide.

“Thanks for the invitation. I would love to do both...have another drink and watch you dance. But, it’s getting late and I need to be somewhere else,” I lied.

I stood, dropped my business card and a twenty dollar bill on the counter. “If anybody wants to talk about Roxy Howard they can reach me here. And if that ‘weird friend’ of hers comes back around I would like to know about it.”



“Sure...sure.” She picked up the card, read it and then placed it on a shelf behind the bar. “Come see us again,” Candy winked, before disappearing into the darkness.

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*B*efore leaving I glanced at the large stage floor hoping to get another look at Precious. However, unlike what she had told me, Precious was not dancing. I wondered why.

Another woman wearing nothing but high heel shoes and a Confederate flag was entertaining the handful of customers. And, just like the lady with the sailor hat, she had their undivided attention.

But where was Precious? Why would she tell me to watch her dance and then not perform as scheduled?

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I waved at ‘King Kong’ when I walked back through the entryway – he didn’t wave back and still wasn’t smiling. I wonder if he ever smiled.

However, I was not prepared for the glaring sunlight that hit me when opening the outer door. The shock caused me to use my hands to cover my eyes and search for my sunglasses. It must have been fifteen minutes before I was able to get back in the Ford and drive. Living in a dark cave like a bat was just not my kind of life, and I wondered how those girls did what they did.

But, in a strange sort of way I admired them. Not sure why.