

Prologue

She leaned back in her chair, retrieved a burning cigarette from an ashtray next to the typewriter and stared at the words she had just written. After straightening her loose fitting robe, she reached for a half-full glass of Scotch sitting next to a typewritten manuscript, then blew a mouthful of blue smoke across the desk.

“That should do it,” she whispered before removing the paper from her typewriter, “the perfect ending to a terrible story.”

Sipping on the warm and watery drink, she smiled and mumbled quietly to herself, “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me. Well think again bastard...these words are gonna’ hurt and they’re gonna’ hurt for a long time to come.”

Engrossed in her work, Marlow didn’t hear the sliding houseboat door open. Unnoticed, her uninvited visitor entered the room and walked quietly in her direction. It only took a moment until he was just a few feet away, and staring down at where she sat.

Finally realizing the intrusion, she whirled around in her chair, stared at the visitor and screamed, “Get out of my house...get off my boat! You’ve got no business being here! Why are you here?”

“I’ve come to read your new book,” the visitor said calmly, and pointing at the stack of typewritten pages resting on the edge of her desk. “Is that the manuscript you’ve been working on?”

“None of your damn business,” Marlow yelled before standing up and facing her visitor.

Behind her back her hands were blindly searching the cluttered desk for anything that could be used as a weapon for defense. There was nothing. The best she could do was grab her drink and fling it at her visitor - it missed, falling harmlessly to the floor near the open door. Laughing at her frustrations, the visitor took another

step in her direction. Marlow knew she was in trouble; her shouts grew louder.

“Get out...get out of my house,” she screamed again. “Take the damn manuscript...I don’t care. I’ll just write another. They can’t...they won’t get away with what’s been done. I...I intend to tell everybody. I intend to tell the world.”

“I know Marlow, I know. That’s why I can’t let you publish that book.”

Marlow took a step to her left; still blindly searching the desk for anything to guard against the attack she knew was coming. The visitor stepped closer.

“What...what do you intend to do?” Nervous words were tripping over themselves as Marlow continued to move to the left and nearer her bedroom door.

“End it...end it here,” the visitor said with hard eyes and a cruel smile across their face. “You were warned, but just wouldn’t listen. Some things are better left unsaid, but Ms. Marlow Darling believes she must tell everyone our dirty little secrets. I’m not going to let that happen.”

“Get out...get out,” Marlow screamed again before making a desperate move toward the bedroom door. It was her last.

The visitor plunged a knife into Marlow Darlings throat, killing her almost instantly.

I knew where I was – I just couldn’t remember how I got here or why.

My last conscious memory was opening the door of a phone booth and reaching for the phone. I needed to call the police. I needed to report a murder.

Now I was lying on a hard metal bunk and staring at a concrete ceiling - the steel bars of a cell door only a few feet from my head.

Trying to make some sense of my predicament, I wondered how many others had laid on this bunk having similar thoughts. Closing my eyes I could almost see them – sitting alone and staring at the steel barrier and gray concrete that made up their new home. And even if I couldn't see them, I could damn sure smell them. Smell their sour body stench on the dirty blanket covering the equally dirty mattress I was lying on.

All jails have the same aroma – I should know, I've been in several. The abused mixture of bleach and detergent used on the bare walls and floors left a sickening smell that did little to cover lingering body odors, stale cigarette smoke and urine tracks left by current and former inhabitants.

Straining to focus on the rest of my surroundings, I was surprised to discover that I wasn't alone in my little chamber. Stretched out on an adjoining bunk was a man...an older man puffing on a cigarette and blowing smoke rings toward the ceiling.

Roused by my movement, he turned his rough, unshaven face in my direction. Long gray hair fell across dark eyes and he slowly brushed it away, avoiding his burning cigarette. My roommate didn't speak, but did give me a rigid stare. I suspect he was wondering why I was still dressed in street clothes. He wasn't.

My new friend was wearing an orange jumpsuit and, although I couldn't see it, I expected it had **SHELBY COUNTY JAIL** stenciled across the back. This meant he had already been booked, processed and waiting on a judge appearance for formal charging.

I, on the other hand, had obviously just arrived at my new home and those pleasant experiences were still ahead... lucky me.

"Carson Reno," I said, offering a nod in his direction.

For a moment he said nothing and continued to stare while blowing smoke rings – which were now traveling in my direction.

Finally he lifted up and put his feet on the floor, crushed out the cigarette, leaned back against the concrete wall and spoke. “Mighty nice jail clothes you have there Mr. Reno. Wan’na trade?”

“No thanks, I prefer these,” I said with a little attitude. “What’ve they got you locked up for?”

“Nothin’,” he slurred, “I’m innocent.”

“Isn’t everybody,” I mumbled.

“What did you do? You’re sittin’ in here with your fancy pants and fancy shirt. Why ain’t you dressed like everybody else?”

“I have no idea,” I continued to mumble. “Wish I did.”

“Hey guard,” my roommate yelled at the cell door and to someone I couldn’t see.

Almost immediately a short fat guard wearing a blue police uniform appeared and spoke directly to my roommate. “Lester...I told you to keep your mouth shut and stop disturbing my work. Either keep quiet or I’ll take those cigarettes away from you. Understand?”

My roommate, Lester, grabbed at the cigarette pack in the upper pocket of his jumpsuit - reassuring himself that he still had control. Satisfied, he continued to speak to the guard.

“I just...I just want to know what this fancy dressed feller smellin’ of liquor is doing in my cell. He says he has no idea. I think he’s lying.”

The short fat guard looked at me while answering Lester’s question in a soft voice.

“He’s being charged with murder.”

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Our story begins many hours earlier in my office at the *Peabody Hotel* – the office of *Drake Detective Agency* and Carson Reno – Private Investigator.



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