

A LUCKY DEY THRILLER

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99 PERCENT
KILL

"Will leave readers hungry for more from quick-witted

Monday

1

It was so much easier than the old days. Back then, it was closer to a fifty-fifty deal. Half of the investment came from the sheer force of Herm's personality, the other half in pure sweat equity. Herm was fast closing on sixty-years-old, practically ancient in the flesh game. And with no retirement plan but for the slivers of cash he could stow in his City National Bank safety deposit box, the former pimp was all about less talk and a high-efficiency system for identifying the most commercial girl.

"Just look into the camera and speak your name," said Herm flatly, but in his naturally resonant voice. It was meant to sound as if he'd performed video auditions tens of thousands of times instead of only a few hundred.

"Sandy Smithers," said the candidate through an artificially bright smile.

"That your real name?"

That's when the actress wannabe revealed a sheepish gleam. Innocent. Marketable.

"Stage name," she said. "Do you need my birth name?"

"No," said Herm, interjecting a little of the old charm along with a shiny grill of fine dental work as a pearly contrast to his near perfect complexion of eggshell brown skin. "As long as it's the same name on your headshot."

"Oh, good," said the girl, twisting from side to side on the pivoting stool. A sure sign of her nerves.

A pair of umbrella lights on aluminum stands cast a couple of hundred watts of soft light onto the subject. The rest of the candlepower bounced off the sheetrock walls to be absorbed by some low pile industrial-grade carpet. The videographer's kit looked professional enough and cost Herm less than thirty bucks on craigslist. Add to that the rental of the fifteen-by-fifteen audition space and advertisements in *Backstage* and Herm's total monthly investment clocked in at just north of three bills.

"Is this good like this?" asked Sandy, crossing her legs in order to show off her toned stems.

"That's totally fine," said Herm, flicking his eyes up to check the image on the tiny monitor screen instead of actually looking at the subject.

In his bad old days, Herm would have rejected Sandy the moment she'd uttered her stage name. *Sandy Smithers*. Sure it had a nice, double *S* sibilance and rolled smoothly and memorably over both the tongue and eyeballs. Just way back then the right girl would've been two to four years younger with an invented stage moniker chock-full of starry ambition.

Like Ashley Apples.

Herm suddenly found himself repeating the name—if only just in his head—freely allowing it to ricochet between his temples as he adjusted the video camera lens, pushing the frame until it was hugging Sandy's curves as tight as her peek-a-boo blouse.

"Now, I'd like you to please twist yourself about a quarter turn counter-clockwise," said Herm.

"That'd be this way, right? Little bit to my left?"

"That's good right there."

“Keep smiling?”

“Probably don’t have to tell you that,” said Herm.

Little Ashley Apples.

Herm had met the fourteen-year-old in a Sunset Boulevard coffee shop. He could tell from the instant he saw her that she was ripe. As brand spanking new as a shiny penny fresh off the assembly line at the U.S. Mint. She was just off the Greyhound bus and sharing a four-top booth with her hot pink rolling suitcase. And where was she originally from? Was it Washington State or Idaho? Near Spokane came to mind. Man, she was something to remember. A once-every-ten-years find. Herm remembered all the ones who ticked off his top boxes. They were the unicorns. The perfect perfects. Produced by none other than the hand of God for man’s earthly consumption. And if the stars and planets aligned, for Herm’s personal profit.

“Do you have something for me to read or do you want me to do a monologue?” asked Sandy, beginning to wonder how long Herm was going to let his video camera linger on her.

“Car commercial,” said Herm. “Clients are going for a certain look.”

“Any particular kind?” asked the wannabe. “I can do other looks.”

“I’ll bet you can,” said Herm, reverse zooming the video lens back to the widest angle. “But hey. Why mess with perfection?”

The actress giggled a little too easily. More tease than surprise. A sure sign she was accustomed to attention.

“Any piercings or tattoos?” he asked.

“Excuse me?”

“Might be some bikini work. Both the agency and automaker are European. I expect the ad will air somewhere overseas.”

“Can’t they just airbrush out a tattoo?”

“Airbrushing’s for still pictures. Digital film is way more expensive,” said Herm, easily spilling a little showbiz factoid in the name of veracity. His. Proving that a little truth could go a long way.

“Oh.”

“Gotta ask. On the agency casting form.”

Herm picked up a clipboard and flipped over the first page to show her. Never mind that it was little more than a copy of an actual casting form he'd printed off the Net. He'd been using the same dog-eared sheet for two years already.

"I have two tiny bits of body art," said Sandy. She twisted at the waist and used a hot pink fingernail to pinpoint the first. "One on my shoulder here. And another cute one in kinda, you know... private place."

"So pink's your color?" weathered Herm, shifting gears and, more importantly, not taking her bait. His game required a professional demeanor. Non-threatening. Entirely devoid of malevolence. That was his job in the food chain.

"I do like pink," answered the girl, revealing a trace of Dixie in her voice. "What about you? You like girls who like pink?"

I just can't get enough of pink.

At least that's what Little Ashley Apples had said to him back in the day.

I like me lotsa pink and just a little bit of gray.

With that, Ashley would gently rub her knuckles up against Herm's spiky salt and pepper sideburns, grown just long enough to appear retro, à la some kind of seventies' rock star. He'd been about forty years old back then. Ripped like a gym monkey and full of Southern California vitality. Yet the gray around his temples gave him a distinguished streak. When some men of a certain age were spending hundreds of dollars in salon chairs, dyeing their years into blond or brown submission, Herm found wearing his forties like a badge made the teen girls he hunted feel that much safer in his care. Funny, he used to think. These young women whom he'd chosen to pluck from the runaway tree had all arrived in LA with a trunk full of parent issues. Abused. Already halfway down the trail to a future heroin, meth, or crack addiction. Yet it was a daddy sort of lover who they still so desired. And hell if Herm wasn't going to be there to provide for them.

I like pink alright. But Herman Bland needs him some green. You wanna help him with that?

And rare was the girl who said no to Herm. At least not the girls from the bad ol' days.

Why the crap do things gotta be so different today?

“Okay. I think we’re good to go,” said the finely aged man behind the camera.

“That’s it?” asked Sandy, hoping to have been given more opportunity to shine for the lens.

“All I need,” said Herm, giving a final once-over to her model consent form. “Now is this your home phone number or a cell?”

“Cell.”

Check one.

“And do you live in town?”

“You mean, here in LA?”

“Exactly.”

“Hollywood. Well, I think it’s Hollywood. Or is it just East Hollywood?”

“Roommates?”

“Two. I’m sorry. But what does that—”

“Not the best part of town. My guess is you’re new to Lalaland.”

“Lalaland?”

“LA. Hollywood. Tinseltown,” explained Herm, his voice reaching down for the tonal mellifluousness that lent him such gravitas. His height, smooth-yet-ethnically confusing pallor, and easy grace reminded many of famed character actor, Morgan Freeman. A comparison he used to his advantage.

“You guessed that I was new to California?” she asked.

Check two.

“Good you don’t live alone,” added Herm.

“That’s what my dad always says.”

“Might need to travel for the job. That a problem?”

“I love to travel. Where?”

Check three.

“Undetermined. These things change a lot. One day they’re shooting the spot in Cancun. The next at an airplane hangar in Lancaster.”

“Where’s Lancaster?”

“Don’t worry. No place you wanna go unless they’re paying you.”

“Good. Cuz I really need the money right now.”

“Don’t we all need the money?” smiled Herm as a way of wrapping up the audition. “Thanks for coming by. If there’s a callback, I’ve got your number.”

“Don’t call us. We’ll call you,” joked Sandy. “But I couldn’t call you anyway cuzza I don’t have your number.”

Herm released a polite, but still fraudulent chuckle, slipped his six-foot-four frame past the umbrella lamps and opened the door. Sandy said a faint goodbye, eventually disappearing down a long barren corridor with identical thresholds. It resembled a veterinary clinic more than a commercial casting operation renting audition space by the hour. Once the wannabe had vanished down the stairs, Herm swept his eyes over to the petite young woman in a pair of size-zero Daisy Dukes and bright red lipstick. She was seated in one of two folding chairs which flanked an Arrowhead water cooler.

She was no unicorn. For that matter, neither was Sandy Smithers. But either—given the right circumstance—would still be worth some coin.

“Are you Bristol?” asked Herm.

“I am,” said the girl, springing to her feet.

“Well, come on in and let’s get you on video.”

2

Van Nuys, California.

Lucky Dey loathed stakeouts. Aside from his longstanding opinion that it was a waste of his time, he had spent enough hours with his ass wearing holes in car upholstery that he'd come to the conclusion that it was also an utter flush-hole of taxpayers' resources. He imagined the cumulative hours of his life lost on what he'd come to call *watch and rots*. He'd imagined the same for other LA County Sheriff's detectives, then applied salaries, union-negotiated overtime payments, plus the required contributions to each and every health and pension plan. It was a boondoggle in his undervalued opinion. When cops could have been spending their on-duty time trying to solve actual crime cases, chasing gangbangers with guns, or even the general minding of the public safety, they were often assigned the life-sucking task of watching some empty doorway and cataloguing every innocuous matter of a suspect's comings and goings. Sure, it

might possibly, maybe, or eventually lead to a real live hook. But Lucky rued the man hours that would be saved if Assistant DAs and the judges who signed warrants would reach into their pants, re-discover their testicles, and allow smart cops to bust down those empty doors and sort out the bad guys from good guys.

What made this Monday stakeout different was that instead of grinding over the waste of his precious time, Lucky was left to ponder the ungodly emptiness that had haunted him from the moment he had woken from his dreamless sleep. Distraction was his only relief from the nearly constant detachment he felt from the human race.

It was December in LA and unseasonably cold. Lucky's habit on stakeouts was to leave his car windows rolled down in order to utilize his ears as part of the surveillance. Hearing was key. Be it the throaty fingerprint of a car engine or identifying the direction of gunfire. But the bitter air outside made all those metal pins screwed into his bones just ache, convincing the Los Angeles native to keep the tinted windows at full mast and utilize the late morning sun to warm the borrowed, mid-nineties model Crown Victoria. It surely wasn't the stealthiest of vehicles. The old Ford reeked of cop car, complete with the hand-operated spotlight mounted just above the driver's side view mirror. The car was beat to hell, a patchwork of Bondo body repair and primer gray, blending well into the Van Nuys neighborhood that mixed small industry and lower middle-class single-family homes.

The Crown Vic was parked with its back end up against a Circle K. Lucky, sucking on a 44-ounce cocktail of Diet Coke and Mountain Dew, checked the Breitling watch which had belonged to his deceased younger brother, Tony. It ticked in tight Swiss circles, the only survivor of the upturned car fire that had consumed its previous owner.

It was 9:49 A.M.

The Ukrainian bastard Lucky was waiting on should have shown by now. The cop yawned. His eyes autonomically slammed shut as if to demand a power nap just before he forced his lids back open after a bone-shaking sneeze. The ensuing spew left fine speckles on his rearview mirror. With no tissues to clean the

misty mess, he tried utilizing the cuff of his jacket, only to leave a horizontal smear across his own blue-eyed reflection. Still, his view was clean enough to chart the deep creases on a face which was less than classic good looks and more akin to a buzzed-cut cage fighter who'd taken one too many cracks to the nose. Considering all the punishment, Lucky was sometimes shocked he could still breathe through his oft re-routed nasal passages.

Personal distractions aside, now was not the time for messing up. He had to get this done and move on to the next item on his never-ending list of duties.

Finally, he spotted the man.

He was hard to miss in the bright yellow Bug. The little damned intel Lucky had was the man's name. Benjamin Anton Kuzmanov. And that nearly everybody, including his employees, five children by three different mothers, and two ex-wives called him Kuz. The report also expressed that Kuz could best be found driving a newly leased VW Beetle between the hours of 8 A.M. and noon on most weekdays. That's when he would leave his fabricating plant for a late morning meal at Beeps Diner, a local fast food landmark. Guaranteed, Lucky's female source had claimed. The man apparently couldn't go a weekday without his Beep's Big Pastrami Breakfast.

The restaurant, famously trimmed in hot pink and turquoise, sat on the northeast corner of a busy boulevard, across which Lucky dodged a variety of cars, their horns sounding like noisy geese chased by a bird dog wanting to play. Lucky ignored the shouts from the annoyed driver of a Wonder Bread truck. The words weren't in a language he could recognize, but it fit well with the middle-fingered gesture the driver used to punctuate his angry, anti-pedestrian tirade.

As the sticky soles of Lucky's boots landed on the opposite curb, he re-directed himself to cut off his target before the man could reach the restaurant's entrance. Lucky was reaching around to retrieve something tucked into the small of his back when he spoke the man's name simply and clearly.

"Benjamin Kuzmanov?" announced Lucky, only to discover his voice swallowed by a cargo jet taking flight at the nearly-next-

door Van Nuys airport. So Lucky waited for a count of three, then elevated his volume with a simple, sharply enunciated, “Kuz!”

The runty man in question glanced over the top of his sunglasses, gathered in the visage of the buzz-cut cop in boots and Ray-Ban aviators and reversed his direction with a burst of purse-thief speed.

“STOP!” shouted Lucky.

Sonofabitch.

Before the cop even realized it, he was in a race, chasing the runty rabbit between parked cars and into four lanes of morning traffic. Lucky recalled hearing squealing tires coupled with relief that the sound of high-pitched friction on asphalt wasn't followed by the telltale whump of metal crunching metal.

Twenty yards ahead, all Lucky could see were those short damned legs cranking at what felt like double his own pace, a jean jacket flapping, and dark hair trailing as the man called Kuz cut behind the filling station and right-turned himself into the side yard of a transmission repair shop.

Why the hell am I chasing this fucker? thought Lucky.

Once in the yard, Lucky glimpsed the man vaulting over a wooden fence. Disappearing in a flash of curled black hair and denim. Lucky suddenly imagined himself in pursuit of some kind of former Soviet gymnast.

It was as Lucky hoisted himself over the fence that he felt the first significant spike of Monday's pain. A wincing jolt that radiated all the way through his limbs to his fingertips. Yet he continued the pursuit. Keeping his feet underneath him. Driving with his legs and arms down an overgrown back alley that reeked of week-old fry oil before he plowed into an eight-foot high vertical stretch of chain-link. Lucky climbed as if on autopilot. Got purchase with his feet, but got hung up when trying to sling his body over the top. A rogue wire had punctured through his Wranglers at mid-calf.

“Shit-fuck!” Lucky barked before landing on what felt and smelled like fresh-pressed asphalt.

He spun, scanning for the rat-faced runt who he was already blaming for ruining a new pair of dungarees. The radiating pain,

though, that was all on Lucky with an extra special mention to the team of docs who had pieced him back together with steel sutures and what must have been yards of orthopedic grade titanium. The rest of the blame was reserved for an evil former Marine named Greg Beem who, by some miracle, had survived a car wreck, a bullet to the back, and a rushing river that should have drowned him.

The Ukrainian was dashing across the fresh pavement without an ounce of slowing down. Just beyond was a pair of enormous airplane hangars. Big white elephants set atop an ocean of black asphalt. The short bastard had put some stretch in the distance between himself and Lucky. The running little prick was smaller, faster, and unfortunately blessed with a far more efficient pulmonary output.

That and you're Goddamned outta shape, Luck.

A lime green SUV swept wide around the southernmost hangar, cutting off Kuz's angle and forcing him to downshift his stubby legs and make a ninety-degree turn. As he pivoted, his suede deck shoes lost traction, nearly sending him to the tarmac. Then in no time his arms were pumping again and his speed was back.

But he didn't see Lucky's fence post of a forearm.

The clothesline move employed by the air-sucking cop instantly turned Ben Kuzmanov from a free-runner into a door stop. As his back landed on the asphalt, all air left him in a single exhale. Those superior lungs emptied, leaving the small man wheezing for oxygen.

"You're okay, ya dumb runt," insisted Lucky. "Just got the wind knocked outta ya."

Kuz could only offer the slightest up and down nod of his chin, acknowledging Lucky while trying like hell to force his diaphragm to re-expand.

"Now, yes or no?" asked Lucky, astride his captive. "Are you Ben Kuzmanov?"

The tires of that green SUV chirped, driver and passenger doors jack-knifing open.

"Yes or no?" demanded Lucky, his right fist unconsciously balled, knuckles pale and prepped to pummel.

“...Yeah,” coughed the runner, palms open and pleading surrender.

This is when Lucky, in the most accustomed of rituals, reached around to the small of his back to where so many cops stowed guns or handcuffs or both. Instead, he withdrew a short stack of papers, folded in thirds and sealed, then dropped it on the runner’s chest.

“You’ve been served, shit-wad,” spat Lucky.

“Whoa...wait...” hacked Kuz, still seeking inflation to his lungs. Despite the lack of air behind them, his words were clear yet thickly coated with a Russian accent. “I’m getting sued? You’re a fucking process server?”

“Got sweat in your ears?”

“Thought you were a cop!”

“I *am* a Goddamn cop!” barked Lucky. “Just not today.”

“So you’re a cop?” interjected the heftier of the two Lockheed-Martin security officers who’d taken up trained positions at ten and two o’clock. Their uniform shirts were the same shade of green as their SUV with brass badges so shiny the sun was glinting off them. Both men were armed, hands placed on the butts of their un-skinned weapons.

“LA County,” said Lucky, finally catching his own breath. “Dude hopped your fence. I’m just the pursuer.”

“He’s a fucking process server!” said Kuz, finding his feet and dusting off his khakis with the process papers.

“So which is it?” asked the security officer. “Cop or process server?”

“Both,” said Lucky, fending off their looks with a shrug. “So what? Never heard of moonlighting?”

“That means you’re *both* trespassing on private property,” said the security officer. “Gonna have to ask you to please get in the vehicle.”

“How’s this?” offered Lucky, snagging his prize by the back of the collar and jerking him as if setting a hook. “I turn around and drag runt-turd’s ass back over the fence and we forget this ever happened?”

“If you’re really with the Sheriff’s,” said the security officer, “then you should understand protocols.”

“We really gonna do it this way?” asked Lucky.

“Lockheed’s a government contractor,” said the security officer. “Homeland Security writes our rulebook. Now, please? Get in the truck.”

Though Lucky shook his head in disbelief, he quickly relented for no reason other than he’d ridden down such a road way too many times before. Whether it was the Feebies or just some bullshit jurisdictional beef between county deputies and the jack-booted LAPD, it was sometimes more efficient—let alone easier on the personnel dossier—to acquiesce and let the bureaucrats have their petty procedures.

As Lucky started toward the back of the SUV, the runty runner’s tony deck shoes seemed to be stuck in the asphalt. So Lucky popped him in the back of the head with an open hand.

“The both of us means me *and* you,” reminded Lucky.

“I have a business to get back to,” demanded Kuz in a practiced protest that Lucky wrote off as that of a habitual shirker of responsibility. “Asshole. You should’ve left me to my breakfast.”

“Next time don’t run, Mr. Kuz.”

“Not Kuz. Coooooz. You hear the ‘ooooo’ sound? Kuz. That’s how you say my name.”

“Get in the truck Kuuuuuuz before I hang you up and use you for a piñata.”

3

Thump. Thump. Thump. Thump...

Cherry's eyes were closed as she swiveled her hips to the incessant beat. Not that anybody could see that her eyes were actually shut. For that last set of the night, she'd kept her retinas hidden behind a pair of cheap, costume sunglasses. White rims. Coffee grind lenses. The shades were identical to the hundred other pairs that had been handed out to the party guests. Boys and girls. Dressed to their thirteen-year-old nines. About half the young women were wobbling on heels too steep for their young legs to handle.

Cherry danced in her usual spot, at nine o'clock to Marco, the DJ, atop a gray Plexiglas cube with a synchronized strobe underneath. The pulsing light caught the thousands of tiny jewels fixed to her Lycra short-shorts. Each booty shake colored the room in a constellation of ever-shifting rainbows. It was a cheesy effect. But, for the most part, the kids loved it.

Fifteen more minutes, get paid, then a fast elevator to the valet, my shitty car, and a late shift at The Rabbit Pole.

The bar mitzvah had all the bells and whistles of a top-shelf event. The parents of the lucky boy had rented out the event room that sat atop the Sheraton Hotel at Universal Studios in North Hollywood. The space sported two-story, floor-to-ceiling windows with a two-hundred-seventy-degree view of the San Fernando Valley. Below, a sparkling carpet of lights spread north and west for miles upon suburban miles. And to the south, a carving streak of car lights cut through the low lying hills—thousands upon thousands of beams in a constant river that flowed in and out of the Basin and beyond.

“All my friends think you’re the hottest dancer,” shouted the boy over the ear-bleeding din.

Cherry lifted her eyelids but didn’t stop grinding out the song from atop her post. Below her was a thirteen-year-old boy with a mop of black curly hair wearing a nifty, gray tailored suit. Still growing, she sized up. And most likely from serious money. The boy, though nearly six feet in height, was still in full sprout. And only a mom and dad with a bank full of fuck-you cash would hook up their growing child with an Italian custom tailor.

“What’s that?” shouted Cherry, wanting the boy to repeat himself. She remembered him, picking him out as maybe the tallest young man at the party and the obvious best friend to the evening’s boy of honor. She had even wondered which of the coterie of fawning teen girls attending might be the likeliest to service the young stud—if that hadn’t already happened in some darker hotel corner. After all, she had party-danced at so many of these “manhood” celebrations that she’d picked up on the stories. Willing thirteen-year-old Jewish girls—still giggly and seemingly innocent enough—queued up to orally pleasure the bar mitzvah boy and his equally decked out entourage.

Cherry, who was originally from Sacramento, had written off the sordid accounts as myth until one Saturday event only a month before, she’d stumbled into just such a situation. Three girls on their knees fellating three equally young boys in the ladies’ room’s handicap stall.

“You’re definitely the hottest dancer,” shouted the boy even louder.

“Why thank you,” mouthed Cherry, not caring to compete with the decibels.

“I mean, you can really move,” continued the tall boy, venturing close enough where he wouldn’t have to scream. “Sure. Like she may be way prettier than you. But she can’t dance near as hot.”

Cherry was certain there was a compliment in there somewhere. But the *she* to whom the boy was referring was Cherry’s dancing doppelganger on the opposite side of the stage. Her name was Valerie or Valentina or some damned *V* name. Whatever the stage name she’d chosen to sell, it for sure wasn’t her birth certificate name. That much Cherry could guess. This from a woman who everyone assumed had her own fake moniker. As if she’d pulled the name out of the air the moment after finishing up her very first strip club try-out. The owner of the club had asked her name. And because she’d already been saying it her entire life, it was easy to remember.

I’m Cherry. Like Cherry Pie, you know?

Just like the title of the classic hair metal hit she’d just auditioned to. *Cherry Pie* by Warrant.

So that’s your name? Cherry Pie?

Yessir. That’s my name. Don’t wear it out.

As for Valerie or Valentina or whatever the new girl’s name was. Sure, she may have been prettier, and much, much younger than Cherry. Not yet eighteen, by Cherry’s street-wise estimate. But the girl couldn’t move nearly as well as her more seasoned counterpart. She was still stuck in ballet class, thought Cherry. Waiting for some mean prima dance instructor to stalk her from behind, grab hold of her bun-head and yank upward to get the girlie to put some steel in her spine.

The party ended with a final blitzkrieg of disco-pop. Marco, on the turntable, pushed the volume up to an ear-rupturing torment, making Cherry glad she remembered to install her earplugs. For the last set, her job was to venture forth and drag whoever hadn’t yet sweat through their Saturday finery out of their seats and onto

the dance floor. The new girl hadn't yet mastered the art of luring the unwilling to shake their booties. Out of the corner of her eye, Cherry could see her gesturing and cajoling various middle-aged bar mitzvah invitees to join the dancing throng. That wasn't at all what Cherry had instructed her. The trick was to simply smile flirtatiously, reach out and grab the unsuspecting man or woman, and begin pulling them toward the parquet.

Ask somebody and they'll usually say no. Grab hold and pull and they'll feel obligated to trot back to the dance floor with ya.

Then came the stroke of 11 P.M. when, by hotel contract, the boy's bar mitzvah was required to unplug. DJ Marco, who could spot a hotel security phalanx from two hundred paces, turned off the mix and began to strike his audio equipment.

For her part, Cherry wisely stayed amongst the milling adults for a few extra moments, congratulating them, shaking hands, accepting both compliments on her energetic dancing and making herself available for whatever cash tips might come her way. She'd begin with her own twenty-dollar bill folded into her fist as a way of chumming the water. There'd surely be a few more Andrew Jacksons to follow from men who didn't want to be embarrassed in front of their wives or impressionable children. That and there'd always be one or two who would inquire as to her background or even quasi-tease her with their hotel room numbers. And if a man appeared at all cool, she might tell him where he could see her later.

I dance at The Rabbit Pole. Midnight to two. Come see me and I'll dance some more for you.

"Did you really just tell that man you work as a stripper?" asked the new girl.

"I did and I do," said Cherry, toweling the sweat off her face with the nearest, unused cloth napkin. In the quiet air following the hours of nonstop dance music, Cherry's voice gave off a throaty tone. Smoky and warm.

"Is that cool?"

"Is what cool?" asked Cherry. "That I dance at a strip club or tell some middle-aged dude where I dance?"

"I guess...both."

“What’s your name again?” asked Cherry, toweled off and beginning her beeline to the elevators.

“Valeriana,” repeated the new girl, following but not nearly as sweat-drenched as her more experienced doppelganger.

“Valeriana,” said Cherry. “You dance for three hours around a lotta these middle-aged Jewish dads and you’re gonna find out who’s horny and who ain’t. Better you have a safe place for them to come watch you finish them. Instead of, you know...”

“You know...” pressed the new girl.

“Instead of them trying to get you into some hotel room.”

The new girl—Valeriana—nodded as if she understood. In Cherry’s view, the new girl clearly hadn’t the maturity or grasp of the potential side effects or benefits that came with the job of a party dancer.

“You been doin’ this awhile, huh?” asked Valeriana.

“Party dancing?” said Cherry. “Off an’ on for five or so years. Mostly on. It’s once a week and an easy two hundred bucks.”

“But you also... You know.”

“Strip. Yeah, so?”

“So nothing...”

“Stripping pays for my car and my rent and all my classes. Party dancing pays gas if I’m lucky.”

“Is it hard?”

“Making a living? In this town?” was Cherry’s answer, acting as if she didn’t understand the question.

“Exotic...stripper dancing?” clarified Valeriana.

“How old are you?” Cherry pressed the down elevator button, engaged with the new girl but still moving.

“Eighteen.”

“My ass,” said Cherry. “More like sixteen or fifteen or you tell me?”

Valeriana bit her lip like a bad liar. It brought out the pink in her face, flushing behind all the strawberry freckles under a fever of matching blonde hair.

“Don’t worry. I’m not gonna tell Marco,” promised Cherry. “As long as you don’t tell him I told some old guy with bad cologne to meet me at The Rabbit Pole.”

“Sixteen this coming Friday,” admitted Valeriana.

“And Valeriana’s not your real name, is it?”

“...Not really.”

“That’s okay. Think my real name’s Cherry Pie?”

“It’s not?”

“It kind of is. But that’s for another party.”

Valeriana laughed. And when she did, her face sparkled like a new day. Cherry would later remember that. She herself was Los Angeles jaded. Had thought she’d seen just about all the city had to give. But Valeriana or whatever the hell her real name was? At that moment, Cherry saw the new girl had something special. Unique. A quality that one could easily see, but not exactly describe. More than just a mix of hair and eyes and preternatural shapeliness.

“Hey,” said Cherry. “You wanna come along?”

“To where?” asked the new girl.

“My other job. See how things work.”

“But I just told you I wasn’t even sixteen.”

“Far as I’m concerned you’re Valeriana and you’re eighteen and from Shitsburg.”

Then it happened again. The lip biting as a tell to the new girl’s thinking process. Engaging. Sexy. Telegenic as hell.

“I better not,” answered Valeriana. “I’m not ready for...that.”

“No girl is ever ready for it. Just maybe a little less wanting.”

“Wanting for what?”

Man, thought Cherry. What she could do with the new girl. General Ho, the owner-manager of The Rabbit Pole, would probably pay Cherry for an introduction to a girl with such radioactive cuteness.

“There’s the elevator,” announced Cherry. “Last chance.”

“Another time?” asked the new girl.

“Yeah. Another time. You gonna work next weekend?”

“If I’m available. I’m kinda up for another job.”

“Ooooh?” guessed Cherry. “Sounds like an acting gig.”

“Sorta maybe.”

“Well, good luck with it.”

“Good luck to you, too.”

“No luck in shucking your clothes for tips,” said Cherry. “As long as the club’s ATM machine is working.”

Then came the new girl’s laugh again. Magical. On the verge of miraculous. With that, Cherry stepped into the elevator and gave an unconsciously girlish wave. Then, just as the doors were sliding shut...

“Wait!” called out the new girl.

Cherry stuck out her hand and the doors slid back open.

“Got nowhere else to go,” admitted Valeriana. “Guess it wouldn’t hurt if I came along.”

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