

10 Luck be the Lady

He woke and felt both melancholy and happiness. It was dark outside and he heard the careful ocean lapping on the distant shore and muffled whispers of fun outside of a sliding door that he now remembered opening after checking into his room at Atlantis. He was naked and cold and his hunger hollowed him. He sat up, pulled on some shorts, and walked to the edge of the balcony and saw the snaking water park below, sheltered by a manmade jungle of palms and other tropical foliage and he felt life return.

He found a menu and ordered a rib eye with a bottle of merlot, baked potato and a house salad from room service. He showered and dressed in slacks, a light blue oxford, and tan sports jacket. He tipped the bellboy well and, sitting on the balcony, ate the food with passion. His mood was neither dark nor light; he wanted to be around people but not necessarily engaged with them and a casino was the perfect setting for such a desire.

It all swirled around Medusa; it was, however, supposed to be the burning sun with flames rising from its center but really, the glass sculpture sitting atop a Mayan-looking kiosk truly looked like the amber snakehead of the lady who turned men into stone and Whitte was afraid to glare at it too long. Radiating from Medusa was the casino, melting into the whispered lighting that lent solitude to chance.

The green felt wasn't kind to him. He knew the next card was a nine, sitting on a twelve. The dealer showed a three and you always assume there's a ten card underneath but that didn't matter, he felt the nine coming. It was the Jack of Hearts. The dealer had thirteen and the Jack would have busted her. There went a quick five thousand. The five thousand would be the last of the fifty he had started with. Unlucky in cards this night.

He bounced around the casino for a while. He drank when he gambled but unlike other times in his life, he refused to get drunk. Maybe it was the need to concentrate or simply because the excitement of cash was intoxicating enough. He was done with his drink and set it down beside a slot machine and just as he began to light a cigarette, a woman bumped into him. She was what one could describe as dumpy: stocky but not muscular, thick but not obese. She would look more at home with a sweatshirt and jeans, not the sequined party dress she wore now. She glanced at him and with a sheepish grin apologized and then turned her attention to a woman sitting in front of a slot machine.

The dumpy girl said, "Come on, Abby, we're going to be late."

Whitte glanced and caught a full shot of a seated blonde's ample cleavage. Slightly embarrassed for allowing his eyes to linger, he turned away and moved toward a large bar with giant bronze Chinese dragons on either wall. There were too many people in there; a meat market and for the most part, he wanted to be left alone. He spotted a more intimate bar to the left and so steered his ship in that direction.

He chose the corner stool at a bar tucked into a dark corner and ordered a T&T with a generous squeeze of lime. He lit a cigarette and swung his seat facing the floor. He smiled as he saw people react to their meager winnings; they probably didn't understand that they

had already gambled a ratio of twenty bucks to gain ten.

She sat down behind him and made a slight coughing sound that would make a poodle proud. He shook his head, always ready for a smoking Nazi to spout their complaint. He spun around.

“Listen honey, you people have kicked me out of bars and restaurants in the States because you can’t stand my smoke but I don’t give a damn if you think you’re going to get cancer from...”

She was the girl next door: pouty lips that gave way to a smooth chin, a soft nose with faded freckles across the bridge and beneath her emerald eyes dulled to hazel when her head turned from the light. Hers were captivating eyes: catlike, lazy with a familiarity that begged a person to be swallowed into her self-confidence. Her face was rounded with a smile that stretched wide but not outrageously so. Her skin was soft and supple that begged for a burrow under a sheepskin rug on a cold winter’s night. She was young and she wore a subtle red dress that hugged her tight in all the right places with a gold chain and locket that ducked into her cleavage. The cleavage he had just seen.

“I wasn’t coughing at you,” she said, the words leaving her pillowed lips like feathers, “only with you. Can I bum a cigarette?”

Whitte smiled the smile of the dumbstruck for she was that girl you really wanted after you settled for less and she made Whitte’s heart stop for just a moment. There was something strongly familiar about this young woman. Something just at the tip of his memory that begged exploration.

“Do you have one?” she said, amused at his awkward moment.

“Yeah, I’m sorry. I was stuck in a moment of panic.” He decided to be truthful.

“Panic?” she giggled.

He opened the pack of Marlboro Reds and gave her one and then flipped his Zippo open and provided her a light. Even the placement of the cigarette in her lips was sensual. He tried to remember when he had felt this way before, the suddenness of lust. No, not lust. Something else.

“If you’re going to buy me a drink and expect me to stay for a while, you’ll have to buy me a pack of Virginia Slims Ultra Lights. I don’t hang out in biker bars and these things,” she said motioning with the cigarette, “are going to kill my lungs in the morning.”

He narrowed his eyes a little and smiled. “What else do you want me to buy?” *Shit, why had he said that? Stupid. It wasn’t even funny.*

She leaned on the bar and faced him, the smoke wafting fluidly from her slightly ajar mouth. If smoke had not been there, he might have leaned forward and kissed her.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself cowboy. I’m really low maintenance. I wasn’t planning to sit at the bar all evening but the machines took all my money and my friends are all gone and, well, we aren’t going to have sex tonight so there’s no charge for that.”

“Well, I didn’t think you were that type of girl.”

“But you did.” She smiled and took another drag, her bony elbow resting on the bar.

“No, really. I didn’t.”

The bartender came to check on him.

“Can I get another one of these,” he flicked his glass, “and Miss? Will have?”

She shot a glance out of the casino, toward the shops that lined the walkway back to the hotel lobby and paused for a moment and then returned her gaze to Whitte. “Amber,” she stated matter-of-factly and then she watched Whitte’s eyes as if expecting some sort of recognition. He remained oblivious so she responded, “I’ll take a Cosmo.”

“A Cosmo for Amber. And do you have a pack of Virginia Slims?”

“Ultra Lights,” she added.

“Yes, Ultra Lights.”

“No sir. You can purchase them in the sundry shop just outside of the casino,” he stated, pointing toward the exit as he turned away.

“Excuse me, sir.” The bartender stopped and turned back to Whitte. “The lady and I are having a conversation and she finds my cigarettes a bit too strong for her liking. If I leave she may disappear and I’ll never know if I missed out on the love of my life. Certainly you can send someone. I will definitely pay a handsome price for this extra service.”

The woman snorted.

“Certainly, sir,” the bartender replied with a fainting smile.

“I knew this place was classy and you proved it. You sound like a guy with a wine cork up his ass,” she said, dabbing the cigarette out in the ashtray.

Jack was younger tonight. He was back on the beaches of Belize and life still had not yet begun. “It worked didn’t it? He’s going to get your drink and cigarettes and I get to sit here and chat with you, Amber.” He extinguished his cigarette and exhaled smoke away from her and narrowed his eyes. “So, Amber. What do you do and why are you here?”

“I’m a flight attendant and took my miles and flew here for a vacation. My friends met me and here we are.”

“You look too short to be a stewardess.”

“They don’t have height restrictions anymore. You don’t have to be a super model with big tits and an IQ of 50 to serve drinks and show passengers how to exit an aircraft in case of emergency—which I’ve never understood why we have to do that because I can think of so few crashes that happen where the plane has remained intact.”

“Yeah,” he laughed. “Can’t say that I remember any either. But I don’t buy it. You’re not a stewardess.”

“Flight attendant.”

“Flight attendant. Sorry. But you aren’t. You’re too comfortable in places like this. You’re not intimidated by the surroundings and you certainly know how to pick up an old guy.” Again, that last bit slipped out before his mind could catch up. Stupid. *Smooth, Jack.*

“So you’re back to calling me a whore?”

“No. I think you’re a wealthy daughter of a wealthy man...”

“Really?”

The bartender returned with the cigarettes and their drinks. She opened them without packing them against the palm of her hand: a sign of a novice.

“...and not a very good liar,” Whitte finished.

“I have yet to see any proof that you have caught me in a lie.”

“I think I have you characterized pretty well. The jewelry shop outside of the casino?”

“Yes,” she said, lighting her brand of cigarette, obviously enjoying where this was going.

“When I asked your name, you were staring straight at it and your eyes blinked ever so slightly.”

“So?”

“Maybe Amber is your favorite gem for all I know.”

“Oh, you’re reaching.”

“No, really. I negotiate with all kinds of people and when they lie on the spot, they usually associate the lie with something within eyeshot. You, my dear, were lying.”

“A fib.”

“No. A fraud. But that’s okay. I forgive you.”

A smile seductively passed from her lips, leaving him hanging. “Do you have anymore observations or are you done?”

He glanced at her nails. They were short and professionally manicured. “I think you were a sorority girl but never really all that into it. It was expected of you.” There was a quick speck of puzzlement in her eye and then just as quick, composure. “Obviously,” he continued, “if you’re in a sorority, you’re in college. But what college?” He glanced down to her feet with the stark black heels and he followed her stocking laced legs up to where they disappeared under the red evening gown and then up, over her breasts and into her translucent green eyes.

“I hear a hint of Texas in your voice. You have a slight arrogance to you born from a sense of entitlement. I think you go to SMU. Maybe getting your MBA or, maybe a law

degree.”

She didn’t flinch, not even a glimmer in her eyes.

“And since your name is not Amber, I’m going to guess Abby.”

“You’re wrong,” she said too quickly.

“No, I think I’m right.” He took a drag from a new cigarette and blew it out over the bar. He was triumphant and at least for a moment or so, he was *Carnac the Magnificent*.

“My name is Abigail.”

“I was close enough to win a cigar.”

“Yes. And you no doubt cheated. You saw me when I checked in, or you saw my friends and me earlier talking or something.” Now she seemed slightly panicked.

“I’m sorry for looking, but it’s your locket. I can just make out the A so I believed you at first but then you bent down just a bit more and I saw that the A was followed by a lowercase B. I took a wild guess.”

She glanced down at her cleavage and then into his eyes. “And what if this was a gift from my boyfriend Abner?”

He snorted, “You don’t look like someone who would date an Abner.” He looked into her eyes, eyes that demanded truth. “Okay, I cheated some. Your friend bumped into me on the casino floor. She called you Abby.”

“Hah!” she exclaimed. “Okay, my turn,” she said with a dry smile. She examined him slowly, first his pinched shoes and socks and then up his pant legs to his crotch. With a seductive smile, she made sure he was watching her while she lingered there. Then she turned her attention to his shirt and jacket, to his shoulders and his long dark hair combed

back behind his ears and then turned her attention back to the bar and the ashtray as she patted off the ashes.

“You are comfortable in a bar and casino. You enjoy speaking with women, obviously, and you are a gambler.”

“Wow, insightful,” he said laughing.

“Let me continue,” she said with a warm smile as she turned to face him. “Your clothes are expensive but nowadays anyone can afford expensive clothing if they are willing to go to a discount store though I don’t believe you even know there are such things. You can lose large sums of money and it doesn’t seem to faze you. You are either a professional card shark or a shrewd businessman or, more than likely, you *believe* you are one or perhaps both. You wear no jewelry except that Zenith watch. It is extremely expensive but you don’t like the thought of having a run of the mill watch like a Rolex and so you want to stand-alone. There are no indentations on your left ring finger and so you are not married—at least you don’t want to advertise—and you probably have never been married.”

He smiled and ran his tongue slightly over his bottom lip, licking the remnants of his last sip of T&T. “Good. Very good. I’m trying to figure out how you cheated but I can’t just yet.”

“You’re filthy rich.”

“Depends on how you define filthy.”

She rolled her eyes. “You are used to commanding people, lots of people. You’re used to getting your way and when you don’t, you pout.”

He grinned. "You're no more direct than a fortuneteller. That kind of stuff could describe a lot of people."

"Really? Not a lot of people, in fact very few. You are really rich. You own a large company, or at least the CEO. And the way you wear your hair..."

"What's wrong with my hair?"

"Nothing if you want to be on *American Idol*. No you're on the wrong side of middle age and you don't want to admit it so you dress sophisticated but young, date a lot of women, get drunk, conduct business and there's nothing more to your life than that."

Whitte frowned, it was hitting pretty close to home. Seeing that she might be hurting his feelings, she blurted, "And your name is Jack."

Whitte narrowed his eyes. Was he being set up?

"I'm right, aren't I?"

"Pretty damned close. In fact too damned close."

"Hey," she said, "I read the *Texas Monthly* article." She held out her hand and he took it. "Glad to meet you, Mr. Whitte."

Her comments about his age embarrassed him and he suddenly realized she was young. Very young, probably young enough to be his daughter, if he had one. She was right; he didn't like getting older and he was playing a fool in a fantasy and so, he had to extract himself gracefully. "Listen, I'm sorry..."

"Yes," she said, seeing the guilt in his eyes. "I'm 23 and you're old enough to be my father but why don't we forget the fact that you're that old and I'm this young and just drink and be friends, even if it's only for tonight."

He swiveled and looked through the dimmed lighting beyond the sea of half empty opaque liquor bottles stacked on the glass shelves behind the bar and then rested his head on his hand and turned his gaze to her.

“So, what happen? You’re friends go off and leave you?” he asked, changing the subject.

“No. I kind of decided to miss the bus tonight. I’m here for a bachelorette party. They took Molly, the bride, to a dance club in Nassau. You know the kind where the guys strip and push their sweaty bodies up against your face?”

“No. Sorry. In all of my travels and all of my experiences, I can truly say that I’ve never had a half-naked sweaty man hug me,” he said.

“You don’t know what you’re missing, then,” she said smiling. “Anyway, it’s just not my thing. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah, I don’t really get off on being hugged by sweaty naked-girls.” he delivered in a sarcastic tone.

“I hope you’re not implying I would enjoy the girls,” she smiled over the smoke. “I’ve got this old leech calling me a whore and lesbo. That really boosts a girl’s confidence.”

He laughed. “Forgive me. It’s been a very long time since I have been around a woman that I found attractive and wanted to talk to and *wasn’t* trying to pick up.”

“What, you stopped trying?” she laughed.

“As I recall, you’re the one that said we weren’t having sex tonight.”

She seductively held his hand and examined his watch. “Well, if you haven’t

noticed it's almost midnight," she said tapping the crystal face, "and so unless we hop up on the bar and started doing the nasty right here and now, it would be nearly impossible to have sex *tonight*."

They sat at the bar for a long while. He drank a couple more of his drinks, she had a couple more of hers and he finished off his pack of cigarettes so had to start stealing hers though the menthol tasted horrid as hell. She was a lot more mature than he would think a 23-year-old would be. Maybe he couldn't remember what twenty-three was like anymore. At twenty-three he had no cares in the world and then suddenly had come twenty-four and then forty-five.

She spoke of growing up—in general terms—and admitting that she had a special life, a sheltered life but the pressures of conformity took its toll and the pressures of boys when they were growing up were to get laid and the pressure on girls now were to get laid and it was all really too much sometimes. She said it was constant pressure—and everybody wanted sex and didn't seem to worry with whom. Whitte told her times really hadn't changed that much from when he was there.

She said she had gone to Rice University for her undergrad, graduating early and then earning her MBA; then to the University of Texas for law. She was a year out from finishing and after going through all of that, she wasn't sure she wanted to be a lawyer. He told her he hadn't been sure that he wanted to be a millionaire but had no choice. She laughed, assuming he was making a joke.

They danced like that past one in the morning. The casino had lost some people but many were still there, pushing luck and bucks across the tables and into the machines. The

bar was no longer crowded and he started to feel a little too intoxicated. It wasn't the alcohol. It was what he felt for this girl and he needed to get away before he acted. She leaned forward and kissed him gently on his lips. He returned it and she reached down and grabbed his hand and began to get up.

"No. You said no sex tonight," he reminded her.

"I have to repay you for the drinks and cigarettes."

"Now you're calling yourself a whore?"

She smiled. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah. Regretfully, I am."

"You're casting the big fish back into the sea. You're that confident?" she asked.

"You seem to be," he laughed. "You will still be here tomorrow, won't you?"

"Some, but I have obligations. On Wednesday the party's over and we're heading back to Austin. My friend is getting married on Saturday."

"I'll see you tomorrow."

She had a pout on her lower lip and a glistening in her eye. "Will you?"

"Yes. And you'll see me."

"Perhaps," she said softly. She rubbed by him, brushing her lips by his and then onto his cheek and with that, her hand pulled from his and she faded into the night.

