



LAPP DANCING

Tracie McBride

I needed to disappear for a while. Luckily Sneaky Pete owed me a favour, and he's the best "disappearer" in the business, which is how I ended up working for Layla, an anorexic chain-smoking dwarf with a penchant for wearing green. She owned a bar in Lapland, where I was to spend part of an Arctic winter pulling pints and fending off advances from drunken Finnish lumberjacks.

I'd just got word from Pete that it was safe for me to go home. A few more weeks at Layla's, and I'd have enough money for my airfare. It was a quiet night in the bar, and I was fantasizing about barbecues at the beach, margaritas by the pool and tanned men in shorts, when in he walked.

He seemed to fill the doorway, blocking the wind with his bulk as he stamped the snow off his massive black boots. He looked up, and a tremor ran through the dozen or so drinkers in the bar. Must be some kind of local celebrity, I thought, as patrons raised their glasses in unsteady hands and toasted the newcomer.

Layla beckoned him over from the top of her bar stool with the

built-in stepladder, where she was holding court with assorted paper mill magnates and reindeer herders. Standing on tiptoe, she was just able to kiss his chin. 'Nick, darling!' she said. 'How lovely to see you!' She snapped her fingers in my direction. 'Amber, make sure you look after Nick. All drinks on the house.'

Nick took a stool at the bar. His lush white beard and fleshy cheeks obscured a face that looked as though it would customarily be twinkly-eyed and smiling. No smiles tonight, though. He slumped in his seat, his beard brushing the counter. 'Bourbon,' he said. I tried not to slop his drink on the floor as I stared, transfixed, at his hands. They were huge, fat and white, like a pair of pillows tacked on the end of his arms. There wasn't a callous in sight. Obviously not a lumberjack, then. He downed the bourbon in one gulp, signaling for another before the glass left his mouth.

'Women trouble?' I guessed.

He looked startled and nodded.

'Don't tell me,' I said as I pushed his glass towards him, 'your wife doesn't understand you, right?' 'Worse,' he replied. 'She doesn't believe in me any more.' 'I don't get it,' I said.

'It's those bloody Jehovah's Witnesses,' he said, as if talking to himself. 'If they hadn't knocked on our door, we'd still be a happy couple. Coming into my house, filling her head with nonsense, converting her...if I get my hands on them, I'll...' He trailed off, his face contorted with rage and his fists clenched. Suddenly his hands looked considerably less pillow-like.

I still didn't get it, but then I'm a barmaid, not a psychiatrist (although customers frequently get the two confused). I poured him another bourbon. 'Perhaps you should go home and talk to her,' I said.

‘You’re not going to make things any better by sitting here.’

He nodded. ‘You’re right,’ he said. ‘That’s exactly what I’m going to do.’ He knocked back his drink, slammed the glass down on the bar and strode off. There was a lull in the wind that was roaring outside, and in the momentary quiet I thought I heard the tinkling of small bells. I felt quite pleased with myself, despite the fact that I’d lost Layla a customer for the night. It wasn’t often any of the punters actually listened to me.

He was back the next night, however, looking more morose than before.

‘That little talk with your wife didn’t go so well, I take it?’

‘No, it didn’t. And now I’ve got even bigger problems. Half my staff have come down with cervine flu. At my busiest time of year, too.’

‘What line of business are you in?’ I asked.

‘Toys,’ he replied.

‘Really?’ I said. ‘I thought that sort of stuff all came out of sweatshops in China these days.’

‘Don’t get me started!’ he roared, thumping his fist on the bar. Here comes that temper again, I thought, taking a couple of steps backward. ‘All the cheap plastic crap they turn out...that junk doesn’t even make it from one Christmas to the next most of the time.’

I could almost see the thunderclouds forming over his head, when he suddenly brightened. ‘Mind you, you’ve just given me a good idea,’ he said. ‘I could make a few phone calls, pull a few strings, maybe get a couple of Asian factories to switch over to my product line for a week or two...’ He gave me a wide-faced smile, the first I’d seen from him, leant over the bar and kissed me full on the lips.

‘You’re a genius!’ he said, and once again he swept off into the

night.

I didn't see him again until the night before I was due to fly out. Layla had already turned in, and I was finishing up as my last customer staggered out the door. Nick pushed past the exiting lumberjack and all but collapsed at the bar, burying his head in his arms. His shoulders heaved with huge gut-wrenching sobs. Without a word, I lined up three bourbons. When he had composed himself sufficiently to drink two of them, I dared to ask.

What's happened?

'It's Rudolph,' he said. 'He's dead!'

Who the hell is Rudolph, I thought. His brother? His best friend? His dog?

Nick continued. 'He broke his leg this morning. I had to...to shoot him!'

That ruled out my first two guesses.

He fell into another crying fit, then sculled the last bourbon. 'I just don't know what I'm going to do without him!' he cried. 'I'll never find another lead reindeer in time.'

What could I do? I was fresh out of good advice. I came out from behind the bar and gave him a few tentative consoling pats on the shoulder. It only seemed to make things worse. His wailing intensified, and he threw himself into my arms, almost knocking me off my feet. And that's how we stayed for the next half hour, until his tears were spent.

I'd like to say that I slept with him against my better judgment, but I don't think I have a better judgment. It's not that he was completely

unattractive. In fact, he had a strangely powerful allure. Every time I was around him, I felt an almost uncontrollable urge to climb into his lap. One night embracing that mountain of white flab, however, and I was completely over it.

I tried to break it to him as gently as I could. 'Look,' I said, 'There's no future for us. I'm flying home tomorrow. Besides, you're a married man. I make it a rule not to steal other women's men. I just borrow them for a while.'

He didn't take it well. 'You can't leave me now!' he ranted. 'Not after all we've been through together! I need you! Tomorrow's the most important night of the year for me! I can't get through it without you!' By now he was storming around my room, which was essentially a storage room at the back of the bar with a double bed in the corner, and he was breaking stuff with his flailing arms. A forty ounce bottle of rum tumbled from the top shelf and shattered at my feet, closely followed by a bottle of cognac.

I squealed and jumped up on the bed. Nick paused in his rampage, and his eyes narrowed as a malevolent thought entered his head. He picked up another bottle of spirits and, holding it high above his head, hurled it at the floor, where it exploded in a splatter of booze and glass. The ceiling echoed with loud thuds as Layla thumped on the floor of her apartment above us. 'What's going on down there?' she yelled.

'Nothing, Layla,' I yelled back. 'I've got it under control.' I turned back to Nick.

'That's it!' I hissed. 'Layla's going to take the damage out of my wages. If you don't leave right now, I'm going to call the cops.' I waved my cell phone at him to show that I meant it.

‘Go ahead!’ he said, gesturing widely and destroying another bottle in the process. ‘I’m highly respected around here. They won’t do a thing.’

I rolled my eyes and started dialing. Rock stars, politicians, adult movie directors, I’ve heard them all say the same thing. Nine times out of ten, they learn the hard way that they’re not above the law. I hardly thought a local toy manufacturer was going to have much pull.

The two cops that arrived five minutes later were a twin drool fest, with their white-blond buzz cuts, classic Nordic features and chiseled pecs straining against their shirts. I half-expected them to be carrying a portable CD player and wearing tear-away pants. Damn it, I thought, why couldn’t there have been a bar brawl that needed breaking up six weeks’ ago?

Nick stared intently at one of the cops. ‘I know you,’ he said. ‘Marko Vatanen, isn’t it?’

‘That’s right, said the cop. ‘I’m surprised you remember me. I didn’t get too many visits from you when I was a kid.’

‘What did you expect?’ said Nick. ‘Pulling wings off flies, stealing money from your mother’s wallet, blowing up your neighbour’s letterbox with a homemade pipe bomb...’ Nick counted off the offenses on his overstuffed fingers. ‘Frankly, I’m astounded you were accepted into the police force.’

Marko shrugged. ‘Are you familiar with the term ‘good cop, bad cop’?’ he said. ‘They had a shortage of bad cops.’ He twisted Nick’s arms savagely behind his back and snapped on handcuffs.

‘Hang on a minute, Marko,’ said the other cop. ‘Aren’t you being a bit hasty here? It’s Christmas Eve tomorrow night. I’m sure this can all be sorted out without having to take him in.’

Marko shook his head. ‘The law’s the law,’ he said gleefully. He marched Nick out the door. His partner trailed after them. I was too intent on cleaning up the mess to give much thought to his parting words. ‘But Marko,’ he said, ‘think of the kids...’

The first thing I did when I stepped off the plane on Christmas Eve was buy several bottles of fake tan and the skimpiest summer dress I could find. The second thing I did was select a table in a garden bar within stumbling distance of my flat, and order a big creamy cocktail, complete with a little paper umbrella, half a tropical jungle of fruit garnishes and one of those chewy green cherries that nobody likes. The third thing I did was order another one. I can’t remember the fourth, fifth and sixth things I did. At some point I must have made my way home, because I woke up the next morning in my own bed with the mother, father, uncle and second-cousin-once-removed of all hangovers. It took me a few seconds to realize that the pounding I could hear wasn’t just in my head.

Someone was hammering on my door. It was Sneaky Pete. ‘Merry Christmas,’ he said, blowing me air kisses and sweeping into the room. ‘Oh, good, you haven’t unpacked yet.’ He grabbed me by the arm and propelled me towards the door, scooping up suitcases as he went. ‘You can dress in the car,’ he said. ‘You’re in trouble. Again.’

‘But I’ve only been back 24 hours,’ I protested. ‘That would be a record, even for me.’

‘It’s the Finns,’ he explained. ‘You slept with the wrong man. Again. Layla rang me last night. His wife has friends in high places, apparently, and when she found out you’d bedded her husband and

had him arrested, she made a few calls and hired Joey the Snake to pay you a little visit.’

I shook my head, trying to prompt my few functioning brain cells into some kind of activity. ‘But...but he said that his wife was some kind of religious convert. That doesn’t sound like very pious behaviour.’

Pete gave me a pitying look. ‘Oh, honey,’ he said, ‘You didn’t fall for the old “my wife doesn’t believe in me” line, did you? Again? Come on. I’ve got you booked on a flight to Kazakhstan. I’ve got a contact there who owns a strip club. You’ll be safe there — well, safe-ish — until I can sort this out.’

I groaned. ‘Not again!’ I followed him to his car. As I stood blinking in the early morning light, I could hear all up and down the street the ear-aching screech of children crying.

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