

The Innocent

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Extract

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Reno, Nevada

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The doorbell jangled Kimmy Dale out of her dreamless sleep.

She stirred in her bed, groaned, checked the digital clock next to her bed.

11:47 a.m.

Despite it being solidly midday, the trailer remained night-dark. That was how Kimmy liked it. She worked nights and was a light sleeper. Back in her Vegas headlining days it had taken years of testing shades, blinds, curtains, shutters, sleeping blindfolds, before she found a combination that could truly keep the branding-iron Nevada sun from niggling at her slumber. The Reno rays were less relentless, but they still searched and exploited even the smallest sliver.

Kimmy sat up in her king-size bed. The television, a no-name model she'd bought used when a local motel finally decided to upgrade, was still on with the volume off. The images floated ghostly in some distant world. She slept alone right now, but that was a condition in constant flux. There was a time when each visitor, each prospective mate, brought hope with them to this bed, brought a this-could-be-the-one optimism that, in hindsight, Kimmy realized, bordered on the delusional.

There was no such hope anymore.

She rose slowly. The swelling on her chest from her most recent cosmetic surgery ached with the movement. It was her third procedure in the area, and she wasn't a kid anymore. She hadn't wanted to do it, but Chally, who thought he had an eye for such things, had insisted. Her tips were getting low. Her popularity was waning. So she agreed. But the skin in that area had become too stretched out from past surgical abuse. When Kimmy laid on her back, the damn things fell to the side and looked like fish eyes.

The doorbell rang again.

Kimmy looked down at her ebony legs. Thirty-five years old, never had a baby, but the varicose veins were growing like feeding worms. Too many years on her feet. Chally would want those worked on too. She was still in shape, still had a pretty great figure and terrific ass, but hey, thirty-five is not eighteen. There was some cellulite. And those veins. Like a damn relief map.

She stuck a cigarette in her mouth. The book of matches came from her current place of employment, a strip joint called the Eager Beaver. She had once been a headliner in Vegas, going by the stage name Black Magic. She did not long for those days. She did not, in truth, long for any days.

Kimmy Dale threw on a robe and opened her bedroom door. The front room had no sun protection. The glare assaulted her. She shielded her eyes and blinked. Kimmy did not have a lot of visitors – she never tricked at home – and figured that it was probably a Jehovah's Witness. Unlike pretty much everybody else in the free world, Kimmy did not mind their periodic intrusions. She always invited the religiously rapt into her home and listened carefully, envious that they had found something, wishing she could fall for their line of bull. As with

the men in her life, she hoped that this one would be different, that this one would be able to convince her and she'd be able to buy into it.

She opened the door without asking who it was.

'Are you Kimmy Dale?'

The girl at the door was young. Eighteen, twenty, something like that. Nope, not a Jehovah's Witness. Didn't have that scooped-out-brain smile. For a moment Kimmy wondered if she was one of Chally's recruits, but that wasn't it. The girl wasn't ugly or anything, but she wasn't for Chally. Chally liked flash and glitter.

'Who are you?' Kimmy asked.

'That's not important.'

'Excuse me?'

The girl lowered her eyes and bit on her lower lip. Kimmy saw something distantly familiar in the gesture and felt a small ripple in her chest.

The girl said, 'You knew my mother.'

Kimmy fiddled with the cigarette. 'I know lots of mothers.'

'My mother,' the girl said, 'was Candace Potter.'

Kimmy winced when she said that. It was north of ninety degrees, but she suddenly tightened her robe.

'Can I come in?'

Did Kimmy say yes? She couldn't say. She stepped to the side, and the girl pushed her way past.

Kimmy said, 'I don't understand.'

'Candace Potter was my mother. She put me up for adoption the day I was born.'

Kimmy tried to keep her bearings. She closed the trailer door. 'You want something to drink?'

'No, thank you.'

The two women looked at each other. Kimmy crossed her arms.

‘Not sure what you want here,’ she said.

The girl spoke as if she’d been rehearsing. ‘Two years ago I learned that I was adopted. I love my adopted family, so I don’t want you to get the wrong idea. I have two sisters and wonderful parents. They’ve been very good to me. This isn’t about them. It’s just that . . . when you find out something like this, you need to know.’

Kimmy nodded, though she wasn’t sure why.

‘So I started digging for information. It wasn’t easy. But there are groups who help adopted kids find their birth parents.’

Kimmy plucked the cigarette out of her mouth. Her hand was shaking. ‘But you know that Candi – I mean, your mother – Candace . . .’

‘. . . is dead. Yes, I know. She was murdered. I found out last week.’

Kimmy’s legs started to feel a little rubbery. She sat. Memories rushed back in and they stung.

Candace Potter. Known as ‘Candi Cane’ in the clubs.

‘What do you want from me?’ Kimmy asked.

‘I spoke to the officer who investigated her murder. His name is Max Darrow. Do you remember him?’

Oh, yes, she remembered good ol’ Max. Knew him even before the murder. At first Detective Max Darrow had barely gone through the motions. Talk about low priority. Dead stripper, no family. Another dying cactus on the landscape, that was all Candi was to Darrow. Kimmy had gotten involved, traded favors for favors. Way of the world.

‘Yeah,’ Kimmy said, ‘I remember him.’

‘He’s retired now. Max Darrow, I mean. He says they know who killed her, but they don’t know where he is.’

Kimmy felt the tears coming to her eyes. ‘It was a long time ago.’

‘You and my mom were friends?’

Kimmy managed to nod. She still remembered it all, of course. Candi had been more than a friend to her. In this life you don’t find too many people you can truly count on. Candi had been one – maybe the only one since Mama died when Kimmy was twelve. They had been inseparable, Kimmy and this white chick, sometimes calling themselves, professionally at least, Pic and Sayers from the old movie *Brian’s Song*. And then, like in the movie, the white friend died.

‘Was she a prostitute?’ the girl asked.

Kimmy shook her head and told a lie that felt like truth. ‘Never.’

‘But she stripped.’

Kimmy said nothing.

‘I’m not judging her.’

‘What do you want then?’

‘I want to know about my mother.’

‘It doesn’t make any difference now.’

‘It does to me.’

Kimmy remembered when she first heard the news. She’d been onstage out near Tahoe doing a slow number for the lunch crowd, the biggest group of losers in the history of mankind, men with dirt on their boots and holes in their hearts that staring at naked women only made bigger. She hadn’t seen Candi for three days running, but then again Kimmy had been on the road. Up there, on that stage, that was where she first overheard the rumors. She knew something bad had gone down. She’d just prayed it hadn’t involved Candi.

But it had.

‘Your mother had a hard life,’ Kimmy said.

The girl sat rapt.

‘Candi thought we’d find a way out, you know? At

first she figured it'd be a guy at the club. They'd find us and take us away, but that's crap. Some of the girls try that. It never works. The guy wants some fantasy, not you. Your mother learned that pretty quick. She was a dreamer but with a purpose.'

Kimmy stopped, looked off.

'And?' the girl prompted.

'And then that bastard squashed her like she was a bug.'

The girl shifted in her chair. 'Detective Darrow said his name was Clyde Rangor?'

Kimmy nodded.

'He also mentioned a woman named Emma Lemay? Wasn't she his partner?'

'In some things, yeah. But I don't know the details.'

Kimmy did not cry when she first heard the news. She was beyond that. But she had come forward. She risked everything, telling that damn Darrow what she knew.

Thing is, you don't take too many stands in this life. But Kimmy would not betray Candi, even then, even when it was too late to help. Because when Candi died, so did the best parts of Kimmy.

So she talked to the cops, especially Max Darrow. Whoever did this – and yeah, she was sure it was Clyde and Emma – could hurt her or kill her, but she wouldn't back down.

In the end, Clyde and Emma had not confronted her. They ran instead.

That was ten years ago now.

The girl asked, 'Did you know about me?'

Kimmy nodded slowly. 'Your mother told me – but only once. It hurt her too much to talk about it. You have to understand. Candi was young when it happened. Fifteen, sixteen years old. They took you away the moment

you popped out. She never even knew if you were a boy or girl.'

The silence hung heavy. Kimmy wished that the girl would leave.

'What do you think happened to him? Clyde Rangor, I mean.'

'Probably dead,' she said, though Kimmy didn't believe it. Cockroaches like Clyde don't die. They just burrow back in and cause more hurt.

'I want to find him,' the girl said.

Kimmy looked up at her.

'I want to find my mother's killer and bring him to justice. I'm not rich, but I have some money.'

They were both quiet for a moment. The air felt heavy and sticky. Kimmy wondered how to put this.

'Can I tell you something?' she began.

'Of course.'

'Your mother tried to stand up to it all.'

'Up to what?'

Kimmy pressed on. 'Most of the girls, they surrender. You see? Your mother never did. She wouldn't bend. She dreamed. But she could never win.'

'I don't understand.'

'Are you happy, child?'

'Yes.'

'You still in school?'

'I'm starting college.'

'College,' Kimmy said in a dreamy voice. Then: 'You.'

'What about me?'

'See, you're your mother's win.'

The girl said nothing.

'Candi – your mother – wouldn't want you mixed up in this. Do you understand?'

'I guess I do.'

'Hold on a second.' Kimmy opened her drawer. It was there, of course. She didn't have it out anymore, but the photograph was right on top. She and Candi smiling out at the world. Pic and Sayers. Kimmy looked at her own image and realized that the young girl they'd called Black Magic was a stranger, that Clyde Rangor might as well have pummeled her body into oblivion too.

'Take this,' she said.

The girl held the picture as if it were porcelain.

'She was beautiful,' the girl whispered.

'Very.'

'She looks happy.'

'She wasn't. But she would be today.'

The girl put her chin up. 'I don't know if I can stay away from this.'

Then maybe, Kimmy thought, you are more like your mother than you know.

They hugged then, made promises of staying in touch. When the girl was gone, Kimmy got dressed. She drove to the florist and asked for a dozen tulips. Tulips had been Candi's favorite. She took the four-hour trip to the graveyard and knelt by her friend's grave. There was no one else around. Kimmy dusted off the tiny headstone. She had paid for the plot and stone herself. No potter's grave for Candi.

'Your daughter came by today,' she said out loud.

There was a slight breeze. Kimmy closed her eyes and listened. She thought that she could hear Candi's voice, silenced so long, beg her to keep her daughter safe.

And there, with the hot Nevada sun pounding on her skin, Kimmy promised that she would.