

The Bright Lights

He'd never met anyone like Nancy before. Sassy, brave, bright, and beautiful. What more could a middle-aged hustler, best years behind him, hope for? He took out his mobile, Nancy's face smiling at him with those big, blue eyes, and started to type...

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It had all started weeks earlier. Things had gone badly wrong in his previous life (as in the lives previous to that) and he'd slipped quietly away, caught an early train to London, disappearing into the crowds. A rucksack full of his worldly goods weighing light on his shoulder, he crossed the Euston Road, weaving his way south towards ... he couldn't be sure, could he? the bright lights of London being another example of something he knew little about, apart from what he had seen on the tele; and surely, *Eastenders* and *The Sweeney* were not a true reflection of the reality of the Metropolis, were they?

He wandered through Islington, the Georgian townhouses with their Teslas, and fancy railings, their monied owners still unable to dispose of their rubbish other than in the ubiquitous black bags: tempting prospects for the urban fox.

In need of a pint, *The Black Pig* seemed as good as any and he was soon propping up the bar, a pint of Pride going down nicely. And then she appeared. From where, he wasn't sure, but she sat herself down on the adjacent stool and took a packet of Marlborough from her small Gucci handbag. She lit up, then, noticing his stare, spoke.

'Want one?' She proffered the packet.

'Didn't think it was allowed. Or, is London different?'

She blew an extravagant smoke ring and shook her head. 'Nope. But I run the place, so who's gonna throw me out?'

'Police?'

'Nah. Me and the feds have an understanding. In fact...' she angled her head towards a smartly dressed couple enjoying a private laugh.'

'Ah...' was all he said, and emptied his glass.

'You're not from around here, are you? North of the Watford Gap?'

'Could say.'

'And what d'you do?'

'Bit of this, bit of that.'

She held his stare, blue eyes narrowing. 'And, a bit of the *other*?'

He stretched out a hand. 'Hi. I'm Jed.'

'Hi. It's Nancy.'

A week later he was working behind the bar: three-hundred a week, meals, and the use of the box-room two floors up. Nowhere to unpack his stuff, but it was a start. Wednesday afternoon, the bar

door opened and a couple of heavies rolled in. A punter nodded in recognition then returned to his paper; another kept his eyes firmly on the floor. While Nancy joined them, Jed busied himself, stacking the shelves. The conversation was indistinct, the accent strong, but he was sure he heard the chief heavy asking, 'Who's Loverboy?' then Nancy, nervous giggle, saying 'He's old enough to be my father!' Minutes later they were gone, the atmosphere restored. Jed said nothing, but later, before the place filled up with the city types, he approached her.

'So, what was with the gorilla?'

'Oh... *him*? That was Agron. He owns the place.'

'And where's he from?'

'Dunno. Albania? Somewhere?' she said, reaching for his hand, letting hers linger, then hurrying away to serve a new customer.

Things were developing nicely on the 'other' front – a loose hand brushing his backside, a quick smooch by the barrels, and finally, after closing-time, the first of a dozen visits made to his bed.

The night in question, after making love, she sat back smoking: in 'the afterglow', he always joked. Suddenly, the bright lights of a car below lit up the ceiling. She darted to the window, peering, hidden, behind the curtains.

'Fuck! It's Argon! You need to go, now! I promise you, he'll kill you!'

'You mean, you and Agron are...? But I love you!'

'Please! Just grab your bag and go! Now!'

He did as he was told and as Agron entered through the back, Jed exited the front, groaning at the cliché of his departure.

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Euston station. Platform 9. A train readying for departure. He stood, ticket to somewhere – anywhere- and mobile in his hand.

His hand shaking with emotion, he typed: *Nancy, I'm broken. I don't understand and I don't know what to do, where to go. **I've got one foot on the platform, the other foot on the train.***

A guard's whistle blew and a nearby clock rang out midnight.

Tears in his eyes, Jed pressed 'SEND', then slammed the train door shut.

From *The House of the Rising Sun* by Eric Burdon and The Animals and various other artists.

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