

The Dancing Dead

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She stepped lightly through the bathroom doorway, and the light winked off behind her. With a lovely, round, youthful face, pale green eyes, clear skin, and flowing dark-brunette hair, Molly was the picture of nubility. Her small, firm breasts bounced beneath a filmy red stretch halter top, which revealed every nuance and jiggle. Her slender waist was naked, smooth, and flat above apple-round hips. Tight blue-denim cutoffs showed off her perfect, long, athletic legs. Her bare feet padded onto the carpet.

But her grand entrance went unwitnessed.

Clive sat hunched on his tan leather sofa, his attention fixed on the display screen covering the opposite wall. He muttered to himself, "All dead now."

"What's that, honey?" Molly asked, as she sauntered to his side. "I couldn't hear you."

"Oh, nothing," Clive mumbled, his eyes still on the monitor, which was playing a soundless black-and-white rerun of Lawrence Welk waltzing with a gray-haired matron amid the sea of his elderly audience. Clive nodded at the picture. "All long dead."

Molly pouted as she slithered onto the sofa beside him. "Let's turn off the telly for now, okay, hon? Jus' for now?"

"A whole studio full of dead people dancing," he ruminated, apparently not noticing her. Clive looked to be in his mid-twenties, handsome, muscular, fit, and healthy, with a head of wild blond hair. But his words scratched crisp and dry like fallen autumn leaves.

Molly curled those pouty lips into a beguiling smile as she slid her hand onto his thigh and squeezed. "How about us right here'n now, sweetie?" Her finger traced the inseam of his white linen trousers. "Jus' you an' me."

"Alright. Alright, fine, but . . ." He turned and was caught in the net of her youthful allure. "Wow. Aren't you something?"

"But what?" she purred.

"Oh . . . I'd just like to get to know you a little first." He punched the remote and the screen went dark. "You okay with that?"

She straightened. She really wasn't okay with it. But she nodded anyway. "'S'okay by me. But the clock's runnin' y'know." She glanced over at the antique timepiece ticking on the mantle. "It's all on your dime."

"I've got plenty of money. No need to concern yourself about that. Money's never been a problem."

"That's nice. So . . . what's botherin' ya, hon?" The pout returned, like a mask pulled over the face of an accomplished actor.

Clive drew in a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh. He turned back to stare at the darkened screen. "Y'ever watch the Lawrence Welk Show?"

"The *what*?" Molly stiffened. A shock sparked down her spine and burst into a shiver. Something was not right.

"No. It's okay." Clive raised his hands. "This isn't anything kinky. You ever watch the Lawrence Welk Show?"

She studied him in silence. An almost-familiar shadow seemed to lurk behind his clear brown eyes. "I guess I . . . well . . . maybe my Gramma used to tune into reruns sometimes. I guess I looked at it too."

"Ever see those old folks dancing? Welk himself dancing a polka or a waltz with some old biddy out from the audience. You ever see that?"

She nodded, disoriented. "Why do ya call 'em 'dead people'? They were just . . . old."

Clive laughed. "Yeah. But think about it. You were watching reruns. *Old* reruns. And those old folks were already dead. Even while you were watching 'em dance. You never heard that before? 'Dead people dancing'?"

"No," she lied too quickly. At least it *seemed* to be a lie. His eyes weighed heavily on her. This was not going as she had planned.

"And that was . . . how long ago?" he asked gently.

This was exactly the sort of sideways interrogation Molly wanted to avoid. "Molly" wasn't even her name. Not the name her parents had called her. She couldn't remember them any more, nor the name they had given her. So many names had come and gone since then. So many lives. Some remembered. More forgotten. A forgotten foreign landscape to which she had no desire to return. She tried to regain control by bantering, "A gentleman never asks a girl her age."

Clive studied her pretty face. Her reticence kindled his fancy. There was something there, he thought, and his heart sped up. "No, really. How old *are* you, Mary?"

"Molly," she corrected.

"Sorry. Molly. You don't even look old enough to be street legal yet." He grinned to soften the gibe.

"I thought that's what you ordered." Molly frowned. "What are you, some kind of cop? A morals cop?"

"No. No. You *are* what I signed up for. You *are*. Perfect." Clive placed his hands on her shoulders to prevent her from rising. "No, I'm no cop. I think you're beautiful. The escort agency got it just right. And they already vetted me. It's just that . . . well . . . it's just that I've been . . . well . . . looking for someone . . . *special*."

Molly brightened. "Well, okay then, big boy," she smiled, "looks like you've found me. You ready to get on with a little action?" She reached for him.

"Wait." He held up his hands. "There's something else. I just don't know quite how to put it. Do you know the name . . . 'Deecy'?"

The word hit her like a slap on the face. *Deecy!* Where the hell was that coming from? Where had she heard it before? *Deecy was her name!* The one her mother had given her. The one she had forgotten. *Deecy*. Only her real name had been something else. "Deecy" was just a nickname she went by.

"I'm sorry," Clive said. "I didn't mean to frighten you." He tried to curl an arm around her shoulder, but she pushed it off. "I'm sorry. I just had to . . ."

"Who *are* you?" she demanded, wrapping her arms around her body, which had gone cold with goose bumps. "Who the hell *are* you?"

He searched her eyes until she grew uncomfortable. At last he said "Culbert."

The word meant nothing to her. But then it did. It shocked something awake inside her that long had slumbered. "Bert?"

He smiled. Nodded.

“Bert? Who . . . are you? My memory . . . I lost . . . a lot has been taken away . . . lost . . .”

“I know. I know. How long since your last reconstruction?”

She stared at him. “You know about *that*? How do you . . . ? Some of the *patients* don’t even know!”

“That was a long time ago. Before it was all legalized and regulated.”

She stared at her hands, which suddenly seemed strange and alien, then shrugged. “Three weeks. Maybe a month.”

He nodded.

She sat in silence, mulling it over, avoiding his gaze. She mouthed the word again, “Bert.”

“Yes, Deecy. It’s me.”

“You and I . . . we were . . . were we . . . ?”

“Married? Yes, we were married. Still are, far as I know.”

“But . . .,” she shook her head. “They had to prune so many memories.”

“I know.”

She looked into his eyes. “How do they know which ones to take?”

“They don’t. It’s all a crap shoot. They have this algorithm that’s supposed to thin out the tangles of neurons along with the plaques. To make room for new memories. There’s only so much space in there. It’s like weeding the garden. Except . . . in this case . . . the gardener is blind.”

“They told me I would outlive the folks I would have remembered anyhow.”

“Yes. Unless those memories are of someone who is reconstructed too.”

She gazed into his eyes. “Like you, Bert? You’re reconstructed too?”

“Five times now. While I was waiting for you.” He laughed. “And look at this ridiculous adolescent I’ve become.”

“It was me who called them that. Wasn’t it?”

“Called who what?”

“The ‘dancing dead.’ I’m beginning to remember.”

“You hated them. I think they frightened you.”

“I was afraid of growing old.”

“You spent too much time in front of the mirror.”

“The crinkles around my eyes. My turkey neck.”

“Never looked bad to me.” He smiled. “They say the second hundred years are the hardest. But we’re beyond that now, Deecy.”