

One Night

Private Investigator Burma Ludlow

By Steve Messner

She walks into the barroom and my underpants suddenly seem three sizes too small. She is the kind of dame you see glued to the cover of high end fashion magazines, the kind of high breasted, full lipped, beauty that draws a crowd every time she bends down to straighten out her skirt. She won't look my way; her type never looks my way.

As she makes her way through the bar I see her accidentally drive a spiked heel into the big toe of some chump sitting near the bar. He smiles through a grimace and tips his baseball cap like she's just done him some sort of favor. Beautiful women can make a man do things he'd swear he'd never do and I wouldn't be above sullyng my name in a tap dancing competition for the privilege of tongue kissing her. But girls like her don't go for guys like me - hardened bastards with faces that have taken more hits than the front of a bumper car. Faces that beckon for plastic surgery and burlap sacks. No, I'm not going to bed this one down, but that won't stop me from trying because I'm never happy unless I'm making a complete ass out of myself.

She looks around the barroom and takes a seat at a table near the jukebox. This is no man's land in the bar, a place where hard drinkers sit to be alone and flog their livers with whatever cut rate accelerant the bartender might serve up.

"Diet Coke," she says to the waitress.

Okay, maybe I was wrong about the drink, maybe she had a rough one last night and needed something to settle her stomach but what I'm not wrong about is the fact that she is in some sort of a hurry, the kind of rush that comes from a certain impending doom. She is running to or from something, but what? My contact wasn't clear on that. I'll have to get close to her to find out and that's something I won't mind doing.

I pull a chair up to her table. "Mind if I join you?"

She lights a cigarette as long as a disposable pen and gives me the once over. "As a matter of fact I do."

"Is it my looks or my breath?"

She smiles with teeth as pure and white as polished moth balls. "Both."

"I guess then a ménage-a-trios with the 65 year old bar maid is out of the question."

"Definitely."

"They tell me my looks get better with every drink."

"They must drink one hell of a lot."

"True and they never seem to call me the next day."

"Oh, poor boy."

"Don't poor boy me, sister. I'm not the one running."

She slams the rest of her Diet Coke and her eyes water slightly. It would give me great pleasure to lick the tear off her cheek but I know such a maneuver would end me up with a fork in the eye or a spiked heel in the crotch and neither scenario seems particularly appealing.

"I'm not running."

“Oh.”

“I’m looking for a man they call Burma Ludlow. I was told he hangs out in this dive.”

“Hangs? You mean like a bat? Upside down from the rafters maybe?”

“Something like that,” she says looking away. “Do you know where I can find him?”

I take out a cigarillo and light it. “Maybe.”

“You don’t sound so sure. Maybe you really can’t find him. Maybe you’re just trying to impress me.”

I look at the lipstick on the filter of her cigarette and guess the shade to be Avon’s Raisin Glaze. I would prefer something much more neon, something like that of an electrified rose petal. Yeah, that would be just about right.

“Are you pretending to kiss?” she says.

“No, my lips were cramping...and who are you to come in here asking all these questions?” I demand.

“The girl of your dreams?” she says.

“Impossible, the girl of my dreams would be under the table right now.”

To my surprise she lifts the table cloth. The cigarillo drops out of my mouth.

“I’ll be right back,” she says and disappears under the table.

A moment later she pops back up. “Here it is.” She’s holding her cigarette lighter between her index finger and thumb.

“Damn,” I say.

“You really didn’t think I was going to do THAT did you?”

“The thought crossed my mind but then so do a lot of unusual things. Like me and you having met somewhere before.”

I pour the remainder of my Miller High Life down my throat, the warm beer sticking to the roof of my mouth and leaving a metallic film there.

She inhales on her cigarette like it’s foreplay and in no time my side of the table is lifted several inches off the floor. “I’m sure I’d remember a face like yours, one that looks like it was used as a backstop,” she says.

“Maybe I don’t have movie star good looks or movie star money but I’ve got something none of those guys will ever have?”

“And what’s that?”

“Give me some time, I’m thinking.”

“I don’t have time. That’s why I came to find Burma Ludlow.”

She stands, knocking her empty glass over. I notice she’s quite tall for a short lady and I suspect right away it has something to do with her spiked heels and the way she wears her hair, piled up on top of her head like a heap of dirty laundry.

I stand and walk over to her, stand so close to her I can smell she had scrambled eggs and coffee for breakfast this morning. “And you think this Ludlow guy can just clean up your problems? You think that life is that simple?”

“Life is never simple that’s why I’m here.”

“You’ve got a point there,” I say and press up against her. “They call me Burma Ludlow.”

“You?”

“That’s right. Don’t let my somewhat saggy physique fool you. I keep it this way so that people will underestimate me. It’s always easier to punch a guy out when he doesn’t expect it.”

“You mean sucker punch them?”

“Never, I just take advantage of their not knowing my punches are coming.”

She looks at me like I’d just urinated on her grandmother’s headstone.

“Burma, that’s an unusual name.”

“It is. Call me Doug if you like.”

“Doug? Is that your real name?”

“No but there are a billion Doug’s out there sweetheart and I use the name as an alias. The chances of someone tracking me down are slim to zero if I give them the name Doug.”

“There are only six billion people on the earth. You’re telling me one sixth of them are named Doug?”

“I’m telling you that over half a billion Chinese names loosely translate to Doug. So yeah, there’s a billion, or close to it. If you want to get technical then, yeah, my initial estimate was probably off by a couple hundred million.”

“You’re weird, Doug.”

“You haven’t seen nothing yet sweetheart. Now let’s get down to business. Who do you want killed?”

“Killed? I don’t want anyone killed. I think there’s been some sort of misunderstanding.”

“Er, uh, that’s just code for working a case. I’ve never actually killed anyone unless you count my Grandfather. I was only six though - and how was I supposed to know he’d slip on the marbles I left on the basement steps?”

“Right...well, I guess my contact told you I’m a porn star.”

“And?”

“I won an AEA award, an Adult Entertainment Award for my part in Triple Decker Sluts. Best actress in a double penetration scene.”

“Aha, that’s where I’ve seen you before. Damn fine movie by the way. Your acting was superb.”

“Thanks. I’m really just using the porn industry to jump start my Hollywood career.”

“Aren’t we all,” I say.

Her smile is a painful one, a hybrid expression born from her indecision on the matter of whether or not I’m really joking or whether, like her, I’m delusional and think I might actually make it in Hollywood.

“Anyway, you win a giant gold cock as an award,” she says.

“Could we not use the word cock? It makes me uncomfortable.”

“Penis?”

“Okay, I can deal with that.”

“Okay, whatever, the point is that someone stole it and I need you to find it.”

“So let me get this straight. Someone stole your penis and you want me to find it?”

“Isn’t that what I just said?”

“No, your inflections were different but I won’t hold it against you. I’ll find your penis and it will be sitting on your nightstand before the end of the week. Now, who do you think stole your golden penis?”

“I have my suspicions.”

“I bet you do,” I say and down the rest of my Mille High Life.

Click. Click. Click. Click.

The eternal clicking of the cigarette lighters outside my bedroom window. It keeps me up at night, the crack whores getting off - the infernal metallic crickets of the asphalt jungle. There is never a shortage of cocaine or pimps or pushers and they all congregate outside my hotel, sucking the life out of everything that was once beautiful.

I find a sizeable cigarette butt in the ashtray next to my bed and join in the eternal clicking of the cigarette lighters. Inhaling the first nicotine of the day, my heart jumps to a start and won’t let up until I stumble back to my room that night after smoking three packs, downing roughly two gallons of coffee and topping it off with a quart of bourbon.

I roll over and she is gone, the only sign of her having been in my bed is a blonde hair on the pillow case. I take the hair in my fingers and hold it up to the end of my cigarette butt and watch it bend and twist and finally disintegrate under the heat. I never thought I’d sleep with a porn star, but there are a lot of things I never thought I’d do before I got into this business. There’s no sense considering the moral ramifications now. Regret is for suckers.

I throw my legs over the side of the bed and stand. Last night’s beer and bourbon combo has left a dent in my forehead - a hoof mark, the kick of the beast. I take the bottle of aspirin off the nightstand next to my bed and swallow two tablets dry. Tough guys never use water. It’s some sort of code or something. The last time I had a drink of water was probably in the third grade. I subsist solely on the cigarettes, booze and coffee now. I consider kidney stones a badge of honor...

I lean out the window and look down at them all, the human bugs, the ones that come scuttling out when the stone of night is lifted. I spit and it lands on the brim of a pimp’s hat. It’s time to start a new day.

On the expressway as I merge into traffic, the engine of my Monte Carlo roaring. I tell myself to ignore the plight of the city - that I have to squeeze a living out of this place and that humanity isn’t necessarily my concern. Yes, this is what I do: this is how one survives in a place like this.

I wonder to myself what the porn star thought of my performance last night. She seemed to enjoy it enough but I know she is an actress and might have been putting on the performance of her life. Maybe she was just trying to get a discount on the cost of my services. Suddenly, I feel dirty but the feeling quickly passes when I think of her cantaloupe sized breasts.

I double check the directions I have written down on an empty cigarette pack. "This can't be it," I say. But sure enough, the street number matches: 25005 Kingsland Rd. I'm in the industrial center of Harrisburg. Nothing here but warehouses. She told me the producer I needed to see lived here. Maybe she was wrong. Maybe she meant he worked here. People don't live in places like this. Even rats steer clear of places like this.

I shut off the Monte Carlo and light up a cigarillo. I figure the smoke will make me look tough...though it could backfire if I have to climb any stairs. I'll be huffing and puffing like a pregnant otter. *Fuck it*, I think, inhaling. You only live once and even if I did live twice I wouldn't do it any other way than my own. I think Sinatra said something similar to that.

I make my way to the door, my black dress shoes clicking on the crumbling sidewalk. The puke green door is pocked with rust and a sign hanging on it reads: *In Session*. I bang on the door with my fist until I hear an intercom click on.

"Yes, who is it?" a voice says from somewhere around the door.

"This is private investigator Burma Ludlow. I need to speak with Mr. Jackson Ferret."

"I'm Jackson Ferret. What can I do for you Mr. Ludlow?"

"I'm working for Candy Underling. She told me you might be able to answer some questions about who stole her porn award."

"Someone stole her award?"

"Yes, the big gold penis thing..."

"Well, I'm afraid I can't help you Mr. Ludlow. I don't know anything about it."

"Still I'd like to have a few words with you."

Silence.

"Okay, but I'm busy. I only have a few minutes. I'm in the middle of shooting a feature."

The door clicks and I open it and step inside. I'm surprised to see the innards of this dilapidated building to be not unlike some of the lobbies of the finer hotels I've seen on TV.

"Mr. Ludlow," a voice calls. I turn to see a little bald man with a goatee amidst a tangle of cords, cameras and lights. An actor and actress are going at it on the bed. I drop my cigarette, realizing only too late that I've dropped it on a fine looking Persian rug. I rub it out anyway.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your work, Mr. Ferret," I say.

"It's been one of those days. None of my fluffers showed up," Ferret says. His gaze is fixed on my cigarette butt on his rug and only reluctantly do his eyes some moments later meet mine.

I step on my cigarette butt so he doesn't focus on it again.

"Damn, I hate when that happens. It's hard to find reliable fluffers these days."

Ferret furrows his eyebrows. "Yes, it is. Now, what can I do for you?"

"Have you ever slept with Candy Underling?"

"Did I what?"

I stick my finger in the center of his chest and push. "I asked if you ever slept with her?"

"Well, I wouldn't be the first and I certainly wasn't the last."

Ferret looks at the actors on the bed when he says this and it pisses me off. Well, maybe I'm a little jealous too. I don't want to hear about all the other men Candy's bedded down.

"What does this have to do with finding her award?" Ferret asks.

I take a step towards him. "It has everything to do with it."

"She got to you didn't she? You slept with her."

"That's none of your business smart guy. Now tell me what you know about this stolen award. My hunch is that you were jealous and you stole her golden penis. That you thought you deserved it."

"I won one for best director. Why would I want hers? Hell, I hang hats on the damn thing. You can have it if you want it. It's just a piece of junk as far as I'm concerned."

This isn't going well. Evidently I've overestimated the value of such an accolade - but then why would someone steal it? None of this is making sense.

"Well, you can say that now but that award meant something to someone sometime."

"You might try her costar Daryl Lick. They used to be lovers. Maybe he wanted it for some reason."

I'm getting the distinct feeling that my sweet little Candy Underling isn't as innocent as she pretends to be. She's slept with every man in this room and even if it is only three people it's two more than I want to know about.

"Where can I find this Daryl Lick?" I ask.

"You can find him right here."

The guy that was screwing on the bed is suddenly standing next to me. Apparently he's still excited.

"I'd like to ask you some questions," I say.

He cinches his robe. "Me first. Who in the fuck are you?"

"I'm Burma Ludlow," I say.

"Burma who?"

This guy has enough chest hair to hide a Thanksgiving turkey and all the trimmings in. I don't like grotesque gorilla chest hair and I don't like the fact that my sweet Candy probably ran her tongue across it.

Someone opens a door behind me and I turn to see who it is. Immediately I know this is a mistake. In a mirror on the porn set I see Daryl Lick swinging a lamp over my head.

From out of nowhere, water hits my face and I am pulled up out of the blackness like a puppy from its mother's womb. Only I don't feel all new and excited about the world around me. If I had a tail there's no way I would be wagging it. I feel like hell and I don't mean the flashy side with all the casino lights and magnificent orange fires. I'm talking about the underbelly, the rotting place where souls are piled on top of one another, suffocating in an eternity of torture, the place that smells like the ripe armpit of death. Yeah, that's just about how I feel.

I survey my surroundings, which is what any good private investigator does so don't go placing me on some fancy lace covered pedestal. I'm just doing my damn job. Anyway, I discover I'm in some sort abandoned warehouse, the kind of place that young men enter and never leave, the kind of place only old men make it out of alive with measly pensions and bent backs, dreams of Florida beaches playing under their infertile scalps. I notice someone standing in front of me with a plastic red bucket in his hands. There's a naked light bulb hanging from the ceiling behind him. It's Daryl Lick.

"Nice chest hair, cocksucker," I say.

I don't so much see the back of his hand as I feel it bounce off my jaw bone. I smile as blood trickles out of the side of my mouth. I like the taste of blood. It fuels the beast that dwells deep in the root cellar of my soul.

"You're going to have to do better than that," I say.

"Stop it."

I see movement next to me and look over. It's Candy, my beautiful, sweet, lickable Candy. She's tied to a chair just like me. Though I've never felt it before I'm pretty sure this could be love, at least from my end of the equation.

"Anything for you, Candy," I say.

"Oh, Burma, I'm so sorry I got you into this," Candy says. She bats her eyelashes and I swear they're so goddamn big that I can feel the wind off of them tickle the hairs in my ear. I'm sure they came in a plastic package and were applied with glue but I don't give a good Goddamn. They're beautiful like butterflies.

"You didn't get me into anything. Whoever stole that golden penis is the one that got me into something. This is my job," I say.

Daryl twirls his chest hair with his index finger. "How romantic. It sounds like you two are in love."

"Daryl, please let us go," Candy says.

I test the strength of whatever it is that is binding my hands behind my back. It feels loose and I know that I'll only have one chance.

"What is it with you people and this damn porn award?" I ask. "It's like the Maltese penis or something."

I look over at Candy. Tears are making her mascara run in little black rivulets.

"Let her go and I'll give you the damn porn award," I say.

Daryl takes a step towards me and without warning buries his gloved fist in my stomach. All the air is pushed out of me and replaced with white hot pain.

"Where the fuck is the award?" Daryl says.

He takes Candy's jaw in his hand and squeezes hard. Nobody touches my Candy.

I summon all the strength I can and explode upward. My chair rises up off the ground and whatever is binding my hands splits in half. I lunge at Daryl Lick and knock him to the ground. I lay there for a moment and then roll over.

Against the wall is a three legged table with a radio on it. I use the table to help pull myself to my feet. When I turn I see Daryl is already up, his fists in front of his face. He dances about like some sort of chicken with tar on its feet.

"You know I was a Gold Gloves champion?" he says.

I see the missing table leg lying near my feet. I pick it up and my mind goes blank. I swing and there is a thud and after that there is nothing but a series of thuds and crunches. This goes on for some time until I hear the sweet voice of Candy.

“Burma, stop,” she cries.

I’m holding a bloody gold chain in my hand. I’m not quite sure how it got there.

I grab Candy and we kiss and Daryl’s blood and my blood mix between our lips. She looks deeply into my eyes and I feel something like a railroad spike in the front pocket of my pants.

“You’re really not that good looking,” Candy says.

“I may not be good looking but at least I know it,” I say.

“I like that about you,” she says.

I pull her towards me.

“What about him?” Candy asks.

I release her. There’s a can of paint thinner sitting next to a generator by the door. I kick the container and it breaks open against the wall dousing Daryl’s body. I take out my Zippo and toss it into the pool of paint thinner on the ground.

“Let’s get out of here,” I say.

She picks up her giant handbag and we hustle out of the building.

Outside I breathe in the air which isn’t real clean, but a hell of a lot better than the stuff in the warehouse. I bend over and spit up some black gunk and the pressure of something cold digs into my neck. At first I think it might be the lip of an empty beer bottle but then I hear the voice, the voice of Jackson Ferret and I know it’s a gun.

“You’re awful nose Mr. Ludlow. A person could get themselves hurt by asking the wrong kinds of questions to the wrong kinds of people.”

“If you think you’re threatening me you’d better think again. Because before you can pull that trigger I’ll knock that gun out of your hand and then kick a hole in your head,” I say.

I hear the trigger of the gun being cocked.

“Doubtful, Mr. Ludlow.”

Candy rushes forward, her face red with anger. She’s sexy when she’s angry.

“Leave him alone Ferret. He’s just trying to help me find my award.”

“I realize that, Candy. What I don’t understand is why you think the award is so valuable. I mean if it were just a golden penis award that you wanted we could have that replaced. No, there’s something else going on here. Do you know what’s going on here Mr. Ludlow?”

I have to admit that I’m not quite sure what’s going on, although like any good PI I’ve got my suspicions.

Jackson Ferret tweaks his goatee and grins. “You want to know why I want that award? I’ll tell you why. It’s not for any sentimental value. Trust me. I couldn’t give a good Goddamn about any damn porn award. I’m not an artist. I know that. I’m just a guy that wants to make money, to be able to retire to some warm island and sip bourbon all day long on a beach.”

“Scum like you wouldn’t survive in the sun. You need a cave. A cave filled with bats and bat shit,” I say.

Ferret lowers the gun and I’m thinking this just might be his last mistake.

“That award is much more valuable than some cheap mantle piece given to some slut for kicking her legs up in the air higher than anyone else.”

I take a step towards Ferret. I’m hoping he’s made peace with whatever pagan god he worships.

“Wait,” Candy says, putting her open hand on my chest.

“Thank you my dear. Now, I’m going to tell you this because I need Mr. Ludlow’s help and I will give you a substantial amount of cash for your services.”

“How much is substantial?” I ask.

“I’ll get to that,” Ferret says. “You see the award you won Candy was actually designed after an ancient Aztec piece. An invaluable piece.”

“The Aztecs had golden penises?” Candy asks.

“Well, yes, in so many words, but only one of this kind. It was a gift from the Aztecs to their fertility god Xipe Totec which translates to "Our Lord of the Flayed One".

“Like Fish-O-Fillet?” Candy asks.

Ferret frowns and I ball up my fist and punched him in the stomach (yes, the old sucker punch). He drops to the ground and his gun squirts across the floor.

“Answer her question,” I say.

A sound like a car with a bad muffler comes out of Ferrets mouth. It takes a good thirty seconds for him to regain his composure.

“This golden penis is the only one of its kind. It was stolen and came into the hands of a pawn shop owner in Las Vegas by the name of Herm Meister who also ran a trophy and awards business. He was going to sell it on the black market, but before he could he found out someone was looking for it, a certain someone who wouldn’t take no for an answer. So, wanting to hide it he took the contract to make the awards for the Adult Video Awards. He made all the awards look like the relic and Candy got the real golden penis at the awards show. When Herm found out Candy had his relic he planned to switch it with a phony by first gaining her trust and then befriending her but he ended up screwing her and told her the secret. Of course, he then got whacked and now, according to Candy, the relic is missing.”

“You were that certain someone?” I say.

“Exactly,” Ferret says. “It wasn’t hard to figure out Candy was the one who had the award. Herm Meister wasn’t very discreet about his relationship with her.”

I reach down and help him up from the floor. He stands and brushes himself off.

“This is your fault,” Jackson says to Candy. “If you would have just held on to that damn relic we wouldn’t be in this mess. Daryl would still be alive you damn slut.”

“Liar!” Candy screams.

Jackson pulls another gun from his belt and aims it Candy. I hear Candy calling me but I can’t get back to her. I swing and drive my fist into Jackson Ferret’s nose. He falls backwards dropping his gun and slams his head on the macadam. Blood pours out of the back of his head. I’m sure he’s dead and my perfect record of killing no one in a single day has been broken by two.

Candy presses the wood base of her bamboo handbag and a drawer pops out. Inside is THE golden penis. “I knew they would never find this compartment. The golden penis was right under their noses.”

“I don’t understand. You had the golden penis all along,” I say.

“I needed someone to get rid of Ferret and Daryl. Herm Meister told me all about the award when I slept with him. We were going to get married and sell it when the time was right.”

“Wait, so you did sleep with Herm Meister?”

Candy takes a cigarette lighter out of her purse and it slips from between her fingers. Being a gentleman I bend over to pick it up.

“Oh, Burma, I really hate to do this,” Candy says.

Out of the corner of my eye I see the golden penis flash just before it hits my temple.

My eyelids flicker open. I’m lying outside my hotel building in the gutter. At least Candy hasn’t left me at the scene of my crimes. There’s an envelope lying on my chest. It smells like Candy’s lilac body spray. I open it.

Burma,

**I’m sorry things had to go down the way they did. I never
planned to fall in love with you. I love you Burma Ludlow.**

Candy

Before I can crumple up the paper, I spot a flash of green under the lilac paper. My fee. At least that’s something.

Steve Messner lives in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania where he is employed as a legal assistant, personal trainer and bouncer. He received his bachelor’s degree in English from West Virginia University in 1994. In 2002 he graduated from Johns Hopkins University where he received his masters degree in fiction writing. He has recently finished his first book The Barbecue Wire Boy.