

*The*  
**P.I. &**  
*The*  
**Dancer-**

*from the Cameron Locke  
files*

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This is an original shorty story and has  
never appeared elsewhere.

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**I dragged up the sidewalk toward my condo. An afternoon at the 'Y' probably didn't count as physical labor but my muscles didn't know that. I tried to remember why I was putting my forty-something-almost-fifty body through a thrice-weekly pounding. Weight machines, stationary bicycle, and worst of all, a sadistic treadmill that sped up unexpectedly or suddenly rose at an impossible gradient.**

**PI work was mostly cerebral, wasn't it? Tapping computer keys and looking up facts at the library. I'd never have to chase down a perp or defend myself or someone else against an armed lunatic. This according to my friend, Detective Sergeant Stan Logan, as he plied me with beer and tried to console me because I was past maximum age to apply for a job with the Hillwood Police Department. My former employer, Eastern Fabricators, after merging with another company, had let me go after twenty years, ten as head of their security department.**

**Stopping at the mail kiosk I unlocked my slot and pulled out a handful of mail. One of the envelopes bore the official seal of the great state of Tennessee. I ripped the flap and found inside the special piece of paper with my name printed on the line that declared I was now duly licensed as a Private Investigator and enjoyed all the rights and privileges thereof.**

**My satisfaction was reduced somewhat when I noticed the next envelope was from the County Property Assessor's office. No doubt it demanded that I send the county a large sum of money that I didn't have. My mortgage payment took a big chunk of the monthly cash I'd budgeted from my severance compensation-which was one years' salary, plus unemployment. Sundry living expenses & minimal groceries took the rest.**

**I'd refinanced and paid twenty grand from my 'out-the-door' pay off and my 401k so the condo payments would be more reasonable, barely. I could either borrow money for the property taxes or take another tax hit and withdraw it**

**from the anemic remnant of the 401k.**

**Neither option appealed to me. But clients were not beating down my door. I'd no reason to suppose that having license in hand would speed up the parade of individuals wanting to hire me to find long-lost Uncle George or get the goods on a cheating spouse.**

**I threw the tax notice and credit card bill in the basket on my kitchen counter and dumped the half dozen ads in the trash. The license I smoothed out and admired while a mug of water heated in the microwave. I tore open a tea bag and heard a ding, but the mug was still spinning merrily in the microwave when I reached to get it. When the ding sounded again I realized it was my doorbell.**

**Before I could get to the door the bell rang again and escalated to a continual 'ding-ding-ding-ding.' I jerked the door open, prepared to let somebody have it. A tall, thin man, about forty, finger still on the doorbell, stood on my porch. When he drew his hand back at last, the silence lasted for about two seconds, then another series of dings started. Since it was the microwave, this series was at least self-limiting.**

**"Mr. Locke? I want you to find my wife." In his other hand, the thin man held one of the business cards I had strewn around town in hopes of snagging business.**

**My mouth opened but I was hung up on the "Mr." I glanced down at myself. True, even in his most ardent seconds, and I use the word advisedly, my ex had never accused me of being a well-endowed woman. I'm five-eight-and-a-half, was wearing the sneakers I'd worn to the Y, and the gray sweats with generous dark spots around the underarms from my workout. The meager clue, or clues, that might have staked my claim to femaleness were squashed by a sports bra underneath the shapeless sweats. My headband was lost in my gym bag so I'd shoved my medium length hair under a Titans cap. So I suppose the man could have mistaken me for someone of his own gender.**

**Hopefully, if I ever spoke to him he'd catch on, but first I mentally filed the idea of passing as male under 'things that might come in handy on a future case.'**

**My brain finally communicated with my tongue and vocal cords. "Mr. Locke left for parts unknown several years ago. If you're looking for Cameron Locke, that's me."**

**He scowled and looked at the card in his hand. "Cameron Locke? A female private investigator?"**

**"You wanted to hire me to find your wife?"**

**"A private detective should be a man."**

**"Some are. But I'm not. Won't you come in?" I stepped back and invited him in. I couldn't say that this man appealed to me as a client, but the Property Assessor desperately needed money. I could use a little extra myself. The past year working for Dan Trayer, Investigations while I took classes to qualify for my own license had not been a stellar one, income-wise.**

**He moved a couple of steps inside, never taking his eyes off me, clearly he still had doubts. I dragged the cap off and shook my hair down. I reached around him to push the door closed and led him to the end of my dining room which I'd set up as an office.**

**I motioned for him to sit in the client seat, an upholstered chair commandeered from the living room, and went to my second-hand desk chair. I pulled out a notebook and picked up a pen. "Your name?"**

**He didn't answer for several seconds and I looked up. He was examining my one**

**file cabinet, telephone, and rolodex, which was strictly for retro looks value. I kept my address book and research files in my new computer, the one item on which I'd splurged.**

**He finally spoke. "Bertram Fletcher."**

**"How long has your wife been gone, Mr. Fletcher?"**

**"Five days."**

**"You've had no word from her in five, days?"**

**"No."**

**"Do you believe she deserted you?"**

**"She wouldn't dare." His jaw clenched for a few seconds and his big hands opened and closed a couple of times.**

**"Have you called the police then? Since you don't believe she left on her own?"**

**"No. I don't want the police."**

**No doubt. I'd bet the remains of my 401k there was a domestic abuse record with his name on it. "I see. But if you think your wife might have been abducted, it would be wise to get the police involved."**

**"I didn't say she was abducted. I want you to find her. You claim to be a private detective?"**

**"I do. I am." I doodled on my pad, pretending to make notes and trying to think**

**of a plausible reason to turn him down.**

**Plausible to him. How I'd explain turning away a paying client to the personal accountant in my head was another matter. The professional accountant who handled my 401k just smiled and waited for me to get over this hare-brained notion. He'd tried to persuade me that being head of security for a large industrial company did not necessarily fit one to be a private investigator.**

**"Then ask your questions, or whatever, and get out and find her," he ordered.**

**"You've checked with her friends?"**

**"She doesn't have friends. We've only lived here a short while."**

**"How long a while?"**

**"Two months. I thought a small town would be a good place for us."**

**"I see." I wrote that down. "And you moved here from--?"**

**"Pensacola, Florida."**

**Florida. I'd considered moving to Florida after my job ended. Become a snowbird. Actually persuaded my old friend Dan Trayer to call a buddy in Pensacola to feel out the possibility of getting into the business there. Dan's buddy didn't think it a good idea. Said PI's were all over the place, backstabbing each other, though not him, of course, to get customers.**

**"Might she have returned to Pensacola? Have you talked to friends in that area?"**

**He gave me a look that said he wanted to answer "She wouldn't dare," again, but contented himself with biting off the word, "No."**

**"Do you have a picture of her?"**

**He reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out a snapshot and handed it to me. The woman in the picture stood with one hand on a small table. Her hair was a thick pile of golden braids on top of her head, adding to her height. Even the long, loose high necked dress she wore could not conceal her full-bosomed figure. High cheek bones and large eyes above a small straight nose made up an oval face that was strikingly beautiful even without makeup. How had this hard-faced, angry man attracted a woman like that?**

**Pulling facts from him was harder than finding matching socks in my dresser drawer. But I managed to drag from him his address and phone number, his wife's name, Isabel, and their previous address in Florida. I quoted my required retainer, \$500.00, good for five days, emphasizing that expenses were a separate charge, hoping he'd change his mind, but no such luck. He counted out the retainer and another \$300 for expenses, in cash, and I eased him out the door. He drove off in a late model dark green van. God, no wonder the woman had walked out on him, which I firmly believed she had done.**

**After a shower and half-hearted go at my hair I checked the Hillwood city map to be sure I could find the neighborhood where the Fletcher's rented house was located. Not the best in town, but not the worst either. Then the reverse directory to find who were their neighbors.**

**I drove past the house first, noting that Fletcher's van was not in his driveway. Good. I parked at the end of the block and went back to knock on the screen door of the house on the north side, which shared the driveway. The inside door was open and I heard a loud female voice with a whining kid in the background.**

**I had to knock twice to get the woman's attention. She came through the room beyond the door looking back over her shoulder and yelling, "If you spill that drink you're cleaning it up, y'hear me?"**

**She didn't open the screen door. "Can I help you?"**

**I held up my business card. "Mrs. Brown? I'm Cameron Locke. If you have a minute, I'd like to ask you a few questions about your neighbor, Mrs. Fletcher."**

**"Isabel? She hasn't been around for a few days. Bert said she'd gone to visit her family. But she told me she didn't have any."**

**"I understand they moved here from Florida. Did she say anything about returning there?"**

**She pushed the door open and stepped out on the porch. "No. But then-I never talked to her much. Just when Bert wasn't around. He don't like being called Bert." She frowned. "Pervert."**

**That was interesting. "Is there a particular reason you called him that?"**

**She shrugged. "Their laundry room is at one end of the back porch, sorta closed in on three sides."**

**"Oh?"**

**"I'm no prude. Me'n my ol' man have a healthy - you know - in the bedroom. I walked over one evening and she was taking stuff outa the dryer."**

**"What exactly?"**

**"Them sexy things, tiny lacy undies, wouldn't cover nothing, little bitty round things with tassels and rhinestones. And sheer ruffled teddies like I saw once in that Frederick's catalog. Who would of thought?"**

**"Did you say anything about them?"**

**Her mouth and brows formed a straight line, then she spat out two words. "She did."**

**"What?" I'd learned early on when Dan let me tag along on interviews that you had to pull information from some people. Helen Brown was one of them.**

**"She winked and said, 'I'm an exotic dancer. Bert likes me to practice for him.'"**

**"Do you think she was?" I was trying to reconcile the picture I'd seen of Mrs. Fletcher in her high-necked dress with ruffled teddies and rhinestone pasties.**

**"The only times I saw her leave the house he was with her. They'd come back with groceries, a lamp once. They're a strange couple."**

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**When I got home I turned on the computer, opened a file and entered my interview notes for the Fletcher case. Hillwood's city fathers had shut down the one so-called night club in town last year. But Ashtown boasted a couple, one a small dark hole on the south side that served the town's seamier population. The other was more colorful, frequented by business and blue-collared men, and some women, wanting more excitement**

than the steak house offered.

The club didn't open until 9pm so I did some web surfing to see if Fletcher had history. The only thing I found was in an account of a small religious sect in Florida which practiced plural marriage. The leader was one Mingo Boanerges, and second in the group was Bert Fletcher. Last year the leader was convicted of manslaughter and sent to prison when his wife was found beaten to death. The flock seemed to have scattered after that. Something didn't figure. A religious sect whose women, or at least one, were exotic dancers?

Around nine I put on the business suit and heels I used to wear to Eastern Fabricators board meetings. The manager of the Fanlight Club would probably take me for a do-gooder come to get the performers saved. But maybe I wouldn't have to fend off so many horny voyeurs.

The first person I saw when I walked into the dimly lit vestibule separated from the main club by swaying bead curtains was Bud Castle. I'd been forced to fire him a year or so before I was let go. He crossed his muscular arms and gave me a malicious grin. "Cameron Locke. Lookin' for a job?"

"I heard you worked here, Bud, but I'd forgotten. How're things?"

"Never better. No hard feelins', Cam. I'm makin' a lot more dough than Eastern paid me." He looked me up and down. "We don't need no more security. An' I don't think you'd cut it as a dancer."

"You're probably right about the dancing. But I have a job. Private eye. Licensed and everything."

"Oh, yeah. I heard you worked with Dan Trayer last year."

**I eased on through the curtain and immediately saw that my hunch had been on target. Before I could move closer, Bud's meaty hand closed on my sleeve. "Can't look without buying, Cam."**

**"Whatever." I pulled a five from my pocket and handed it to the bored redhead all but falling out of her black bustier. "Vodka, rocks." She hoisted her tray and headed for the bar.**

**"Like the new talent? The johns are pushing and shoving to stuff her g-string." Bud still hovered like he had nothing else to do.**

**She was something else up on that stage. Long, shapely legs that had been concealed by the dress, above shiny strips of six-inch spike-heeled sandals, glittering g-string. But what really caught the eye were the decorations up top. Sequinned letters spelling out 'Izzy1' and 'Izzy2' slashed diagonally across the generous breasts, the second 'Z' in each strategically placed, like a pasty. The long blonde hair swung to the loud rock music as she threw her head back and writhed around the pole.**

**The redhead passed by and handed me a four ounce glass with more ice than clear liquid. She didn't offer change and I didn't expect any. I asked Bud, "How long has the blonde worked here?"**

**"Couple days. You know her?" Before I could answer his walkie-talkie squawked and he said a few words into it.**

**"I'd like to talk to her for just a minute when she's done with her set."**

**Bud shrugged. "I'll ask. Up to her."**

**We squeezed through the hollering, salivating men toward the back of the room. At one of the tiny tables I saw two women who were seventy if they were a day, eyes glued to the stage.**

**When Isabel stepped down from the rounded platform at the end of the stage where she finished her act, Bud touched her arm and spoke to her. She glanced at me and nodded. Bud motioned for me to follow her.**

**She moved fast even in those heels and I had to step smartly. She pushed through another bead curtain, pulled on a short sheer robe, and sat on a chair before a shelf covered with bottles and pots of makeup, jars filled with brushes and pencils, combs, brushes, and an overflowing ashtray. Suddenly one long leg and then the other shot straight up, parallel to her torso. I could live at the gym the rest of my life and never be that flexible.**

**"Can't stop moving all at once. Muscles will seize up." Her voice was soft and gentle, taking me by surprise. "Bert sent you." It was a statement.**

**"Ummm. Your husband hired me to find you, yes."**

**"He's not, you know." She stopped elevating her legs above her head and clasped her fingers together in front, raising and lowering her elbows.**

**"Not - what?" I was confused.**

**"Bert is not my husband. He's supposed to be taking care of me for my husband."**

**I took a gamble. "Mingo Boanerges is your husband?"**

**Her eyes opened wide. She stopped pumping her elbows and lit a cigarette.**

**"Mingo and Bert are bad people."**

**"What happened in Florida?"**

**"Mingo is bad, but he has - charm. He caught my act in a club and persuaded me to marry him, a second wife, move to the group's ranch. The charm soon wore off and I was ready to take off. His first wife was going to tell him. No one left the group. So I got to him first and told him she was leaving because she was jealous. He beat her, too hard, and she died. He got twenty years for manslaughter." Her soft voice recounted the story with no emotion, as though she was talking about someone else. My inclination to like her went down a few notches.**

**"So what about Bert Fletcher?"**

**"Mingo put him in charge of the group. Ordered him to keep us together, restrained from leaving the ranch, so I'd still be there when he got out of prison. But several pulled out and the group broke up. Bert didn't have the ability to control them that Mingo had. He brought me here. He - needed more than games and dancing for his kicks. So I left."**

**"That's it? You just wanted to get away from him?" I suspected there was more to the story.**

**She blew a smoke ring, then stabbed the cigarette out in the overflowing ash-tray." And the money."**

**"Money?"**

**"He had access to all the money the group members gave Mingo over the years."**

**He'd only been with Mingo a couple years. He didn't deserve it."**

**"But you do?"**

**"I'm not getting any younger. I need money to quit dancing."**

**I remembered the anger I saw in Bert Fletcher's dark eyes. He probably did want Isabel back, but he sure as hell wanted the money, too. And even if I didn't tell him where she was, it was only a matter of time until he found her himself.**

**"Maybe you should move on. He'll find you, you know."**

**"Bud will take care of him. I have to liquidate some bonds and stuff."**

**She sat in front of the mirror adjusting a false eyelash as I turned and pushed through the bead curtain. Bud waved and called, "So long, Cam", as I left the club. I had little confidence in his ability to protect Isabel. But then I'd known him longer.**

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**I was pulled awake by my doorbell ringing nonstop again and there was a pounding as well. The clock radio beside my bed said 5:35am. I jumped out of bed and stomped toward the front door. If it was Bert Fletcher at this ungodly hour, I swore I'd call the cops. But when I peered through the peephole, it was Stan Logan.**

**I yanked the door open and pulled him in. "You'll piss off all my neighbors. Why are you pounding on my door at this ungodly hour, Stan?"**

**He looked around the room. "Anybody else here?"**

**"God, Stan." I was wearing my usual ancient men's pj's, with ragged sleeves that I'd shortened by ripping off the cuffs. "Of course not. What's this about?"**

**"You know an Isabel Fletcher, Cam?"**

**A chill skittered down my back. "I have a client named Bert Fletcher, his wife's name is Isabel."**

**I'd hesitated at wife and Stan pounced. "Wife?"**

**"He called her his wife. She said she wasn't. His wife."**

**"So you've talked to her. When?"**

**"Last night. At the Fanlight Club."**

**"Was she going home?"**

**"To Bert? I don't think so. I left her at the club. Now tell me what's this about."**

**In answer he pulled out a picture. Isabel lay sprawled naked on what looked like a tiled floor. Blood had pooled around her head and the blonde hair was partly red. Her throat had been cut, but what caught the eye were the slashes on the chest. They looked like the letter 'Z', one on each flattened mound. A wicked-looking knife lay beside her, the blade covered in blood.**

**I felt sick. Raising my eyes to Stan, I asked, "When?"**

**"Neighbor called it in at four-thirty. Heard screaming, then a vehicle peeling out. Your card was on the counter. So talk."**

**I told him about Fletcher's visit yesterday, my research, what Isabel had told me. He said there was already a BOLO for the van. They'd have the Ashtown police talk to Bud and the Fanlight management.**

**As it turned out, Bud saw Isabel arguing with somebody beside a van in the club parking lot after closing. He didn't go out to see what was going on, big surprise. He watched the man push her into the van and they left.**

**Fletcher was picked up the next day. A bank bag full of cash and bearer bonds with Isabel's fingerprints on them was found in his van. And his were found on the bloody knife he left beside her body. I'd found the woman my first client hired me to find and he murdered her. Her killer would spend the rest of his sadistic life in prison, unlike his mentor.**

**Isabel had wanted the money so she could give up her exotic dancing. If she'd never chosen that career in the first place, what might her fate have been? I knew I'd now lie awake at night trying to bury regret for ever taking the case. And resist second thoughts about my own career choice and what my own fate might turn out to be.**

**The end**