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The Playboy

BY CLAUDIUS RAYE

A lady's man has to be careful. Buddy found himself on the floor; a redhead screaming, "Kill him, kill him!"

SHE WAS real close—giggling in his ear and it tickled. But he didn't mind. She was a real doll. For him, she couldn't get close enough.

They laughed rather shyly, for they had only met a few moments before, and held hands beneath the table. Around them, other couples whispered and giggled, somewhat concealed by the drifting clouds of cigarette smoke. No one noticed them sitting in the rear corner booth of the dimly lit bar.

Buddy squeezed her hand and she squeezed back. He was pleased. Shaken with the nearness of her, he leaned back against the smooth



padding of the seat as he tried to get his breath back. He kicked one foot up onto the seat on the other side of the enameled table.

"You're it," he said.

She flashed a brief, but warm smile at him before asking, "It what?"

"The *it*. You know. The *once in a life-time* sort of thing."

"Not me," she said and shook her head as if she didn't believe him.

"Sure," replied Buddy, moving nearer so she could understand him better. "You. No other. I knew it the very minute I sat down near you on the stool at the bar and you gave me the eye in the green-tinted mirror on the other side."

She playfully put one hand on his chest, as if to push him away. She didn't push very hard. "I did not give you the eye in the mirror!" she protested. "You gave me the eye!"

"See! What'd I tell you? Must be fate. We don't even know who picked the other up!"

"Just so it wasn't me," she said. "A girl must uphold her reputation these days. Men never try to help her any."

They both laughed at that. "Anyway," Buddy said, "I wouldn't offer too much help." He let go of her hand and tweaked her under the chin with his fore finger. "But you, you're different. When I saw your reflection, I knew I had to meet you someway. You looked so pretty in that green mirror that my heart

quit beating and I had to pinch myself to see if I was dreaming."

She wrinkled a cute, turned-up nose at him. "Did I honestly do you that way? Honestly, I mean?"

"Sure. You're real nice."

He had his arm propped on the table. She took his arm and entangled it in hers, clasping his hand tightly. "So you asked if you could buy me a drink and I agreed," she said softly, "... though nicely, as would be expected of a lady."

"Uh-huh," agreed Buddy. "Say, I never thought to ask your name. Mine's Buddy Ralls. What's yours?"

"Myreen Castle. Do you like it?"

"Sure. Wonderful name. Just like you."

"Do you really think so?"

"Ain't many girls I'd buy a drink for. Nope, I generally toss them a bottle of beer and that's that. But you? I had to get you the best. Heck! I'd even be willing to get you champagne, but I ain't had a job in a couple of weeks and can't afford it." He jangled some loose coins in his pocket. "Got enough for another martini, if you want."

"Oh, no. One is plenty. It was swell of you to buy me this, considering the fact that you're almost broke."

"Ah, I don't fret none. Oke Kingsley, my boss, will call me in a couple of days. I'll be loaded again."

She pressed nearer, until Buddy thought she was going to go inside

him. He took a strand of her cascading blonde hair and twisted it between his fingers. "Such lovely hair. We could buy some dark blue pillowcases. I could wake up in the morning and see you framed in blue. Blonde in blue. It would be nice, just like heaven."

"Please, Buddy," she said, "I'm not that kind of girl at all. A girl can't just go and do things like that. I couldn't go live with you."

Buddy wasn't convinced. "Why not? What's to keep you from it? Religion? Another guy?"

She shook her head.

"Your parents?"

"No. It's just that I believe in true love and marriage."

"See there! And we've got true love. But haven't you read any of these sex reports? We may not be compatible." He squeezed her hand firmly. "I'll tell you. Let's drive around for a while, huh? Both of us need some real, clear air. We can talk . . . that won't do any harm."

"I don't know . . ."

Buddy smiled warmly at her. He was sure that she was the type who would, but who wanted it to appear like an accident. Women . . .

"Sure you do. Remember? It's fate, us being together. You can't help yourself!"

Her lips puckered sweetly. "Well, I'll go driving with you anyway. I do need that fresh air. But I won't go to your apartment. A girl's got to keep looking for the right guy.

She'll know when she finds him and he'll know too—just like that. Least, I believe so."

"Me, too, Myreen. It's love. I already know. But a guy should be careful in choosing a wife. She might not agree with him or something like that." He stood up. "Shall we go?"

His car, a black low-slung Ford, was parked down the street near the entrance of an alley. They walked that far in silence. Buddy opened the door for her, then he went around to the other side and got in.

"You live near here?" he asked.

She nodded her head and said, "Yes. I just moved to the city a week ago."

As he found the key and started the motor, she raised up and doubled her legs beneath her. She looked like a cute little kitten smiling fondly at its master.

"I knew there weren't any dolls like you around before or I would have met them. You're about twenty, aren't you?"

"Am not," she said with mock reproach. "I'm twenty-one."

"A pretty twenty-one."

He drove slowly through the traffic. He knew where he was going. It took a quarter of an hour to reach the harbor.

He parked in a narrow place between two warehouses. She came willingly into his arms. The girls always did.

She jerked away in alarm when

the fog horn of a boat on the river blasted through the night, but he pulled her right back against his chest. He began to whisper in her ear, telling her how wonderful she was, how pretty her eyes were, how lovely her lips were to kiss. But when he started pulling the zipper of her dress, she became panicky.

"No, Buddy! I meant what I said."

"Everything's going to be all right," Buddy assured her, his fingers working swiftly at the dress.

Her sobbing blended with the night sounds coming from the river.

And she was still crying softly much later, huddled in the corner of the seat, while Buddy was smoking a cigarette and feeling proud of himself.

"Honest," he said, trying to soothe her, "I never realized that you were a virgin. I probably wouldn't have done it, had I known."

"What—what are we going to do now?" Myreen sobbed.

"Do?"

"About me?"

"We'll talk about that later—in the morning."

"In the morning?" she questioned. She had ceased crying and was now dabbing at her eyes with a tiny handkerchief.

"Sure. We might as well spend the rest of the night at my apartment. Then we'll talk about things in the morning."

Myreen's eyes began to sparkle. She scooted across the seat and her hands went around his neck. "Oh, Buddy," she murmured and kissed him fervently, "and we can be married and everything will be okay."

Buddy pushed her gently away. He wasn't planning on marriage. "We'll think about it later. Not now. It's too early to tell if we're suited to each other."

"Too early!" exclaimed Myreen. "But I did what you wanted!"

Buddy was calm; he knew how to handle situations like this. He started the motor and backed the car out of the hidden niche. "We'll talk about it in the morning," he said. And for the moment, she seemed to accept that.

"Buddy, dear, you mentioned your job earlier in the evening," Myreen said softly. "Just what do you do for a living? I mean, it isn't really important, but . . ."

"The auto line," answered Buddy. He grinned.

"Darling, be serious."

"You ain't against a guy picking up a little easy dough, are you, Doll?"

She tossed her blonde curls about thoughtfully. "No. I guess not, if no one gets hurt. Do you do something crooked?" she asked. Her tone implied that she detested anything unlawful.

"I don't hurt nobody," he told her. "Shot a cop once." He paused, studying her. "You won't tell?"

She shook her head, one of her

smooth, white hands covering her mouth in an awed, shocked gesture—as if she wasn't sure about him at all.

"I've got it made, see. I transport hot cars for the Kingsley racket. I take them over the state line. Don't have to steal them, someone else does that. My job is safe. But this time, a cop got wise. He chased out after me. His car was souped-up or something. Though I was making one-ten, he kept gaining. So I pulled out my gun . . ."

"A gun!" Myreen interrupted, horrified at the thought.

"... a gat, a rod, a pusher—whatever you want to call it," Buddy replied harshly. "Yes, a gun. And as the cop drew up near, I popped a couple of slugs his way. Got him, too."

Buddy grinned. It didn't matter about telling her. She was already stuck on him. He could easily tell. They fell easy for his looks and line. Girls ate it up.

"But that damn cop lived," he went on. "The bullet, the wreck and everything didn't kill him. I'd had my hat brim pulled low, so he couldn't identify me, but just to play it safe I had to dump that car in the lake and Kingsley was sure mad. That damned tough cop cost me a hell of a lot of dough."

Myreen was scared, but trying not to show it.

"Shooting a cop . . . that's awfully dangerous and bad," she said weakly.

Buddy scowled at her. "Only time it ever happened," he assured her. "Say! Are you worried about me or about that cop?"

"I think, about you," said Myreen.

Buddy smiled at her. "That's good, Baby. Because you and me, we're it, you know."

That seemed to calm Myreen somewhat. By the time they reached the apartment, she was holding his hand again.

The outside of the building was gray, tainted with the grime of soot and smoke from nearby factories. Inside, the walls were painted white, or had been painted white at one time. Now they were grimed like the outside. Before a door, Buddy stopped and withdrew some keys from his pocket.

"Here we are," he told her.

"Are you sure this is all right?"

"Natch." He unlocked the door and stepped inside. The lights were already on and a voluptuous redhead was curled up cosily on a couch, glaring at them.

"Damn it!" exclaimed Buddy, enraged. "I told you to pack up and move out!"

The redhead slithered off the couch and came toward him. She gave Myreen a dirty look and tried to put her arms around Buddy, but he pushed her away. Myreen was leaning against the closed door, trembling, as from freezing cold.

"Please, Honey," the redhead pleaded. "I love you. I don't want to move out. I have no place to go!"

"Move it, Jo! I can't stand your gaff."

The redhead and Buddy were now facing each other.

Jo said, "Buddy," real soft, trying to beg him. He lashed her across the face with the palm of his hand. He hit her so hard that she fell to the floor. She sat there, staring up at him bitterly, tears flowing from her eyes. She started moaning and holding her bruised cheek.

Myreen let out a horrified gasp.

"Git, Jo!" commanded Buddy, but the redhead didn't move. He began to steam with rage, his mouth twisting into a thin, crooked scar. He kicked Jo on the thigh, where the dress had fallen away to expose the edge of sheer silk stockings.

Jo was sobbing freely now. Buddy kicked her in the ribs this time. When she started to scream, he clasped a large, rough hand over her mouth. "You got to mind me, bitch. Got to move when I say move. Got to learn." He lifted her up by the front of her dress and struck her jaw with his fist.

She was still conscious, so he kept hitting her until his right hand became too tired to lift. He changed hands and continued to slug her, alternating between her face and her body.

Myreen yelled "Stop!" but Buddy didn't hear her, for he was so engrossed in beating up the redhead.

Suddenly, Buddy blacked-out. When he came to, he was down on the floor in some of his own puke.

Myreen was standing over him with a table lamp in her hand.

He mumbled curses and started to get up, but she motioned threateningly with the lamp and he changed his mind. His head was hurting like hell. He felt for the bump and found it.

"Kill him, kill him!" a voice was screaming. Buddy turned his head to the side and saw Jo who was doing the screaming. Her face was bloody and swollen from the beating he'd given her. Once shining and red, her hair now looked like a wrung out mop. She was trying to get up, but kept falling back. Finally, she quit trying and began to crawl toward him—slowly.

"What's this, Doll?" Buddy asked Myreen.

"You were beating her to death," she answered, making a flat, cold statement of it.

"Huh!" mumbled Buddy. He started to get to his feet again.

"Don't move," warned Myreen. Her mouth was twisted and he knew she meant it. Jo was still groaning and slowly making her way to him. She was only four feet away now.

"How many, Buddy?" asked Myreen.

"Many what?" His head was hurting something terrible.

"How many girls have you had and tossed out when you found something new?"

He rubbed at the bump on his head. "What difference does it

make? You're the only one that counts, Doll."

Jo stopped moving and laughed harshly. "Did he tell you he only bought beer for other girls, but you deserved champagne. He even bought me champagne." She

laughed some more, but it seemed to hurt her so she stopped. "I'm going to kill him," she said, her voice a high-pitched whine.

Myreen swung the lamp up over her head. It was solid metal.

"No," she said. "I am."

