

BLUE MOON

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(Dedicated to Katherine and her Blue Moon guy. Pleasure to be under the same Blue Moon with you. ;-) With thanks, as always to Commander Straker, without his willingness to tell me these stories, you wouldn't have the pleasure of reading them. Now that's a real guy.)

"And as you can see, we'll have many props straight out of the Phillip Marlowe era, Mr. Straker. I'm confident that the 'The Little Sister' remake will be a great moneymaker for the studio."

"Yes, seems like it, well-" Ed Straker's beeper sounded, and he looked at it with relief. "Excuse me, I have to get back to the office."

"Certainly, Mr. Straker." The director pumped Ed's hand until Ed was sure it would snap off. Ed quickly found his way back to Shado HQ.

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"Ed, when are you going to get some sleep?" Alec Freeman wanted to know.

"Good question. Where's the report on the Interceptor launch times?" Ed flipped through the stack of files on his desk, ignoring his friend for the most part.

"Here. Right in front of you. You already signed it." Alec poked a file.

"I did? Oh. Yes, yes, of course I did. Now what were you saying?"

"Ed, you've been here all night. You should have gone home several hours ago," Alec said, trying to hide his amusement.

"Well, you see, Alec, I have something called a cover job. Besides, they're starting to shoot locations for the detective movie. Film noir thing. I had a brief meeting with one of the directors. Nice enough guy, but I had to listen to him rave on and on about mysteries and crime and hard-boiled private eyes, and the whole thing. I happen to like film noir, but enough is enough."

"Ed, go home."

"Alec, I can't. Look at all this. I'm way behind on getting through this paperwork. Now get out of here so that I can do my job."

"Okay, I'm going, I'm going. But if you're still here in an hour, I'm physically dragging you out." Alec smiled.

"Right, right."

Ed toyed with a pen. The writing on the file was beginning to blur. He shot a look at his watch. Ten-fifteen. God, he was exhausted. The pen fell unnoticed out of his hand. His eyes half closed. If only he could sleep. But he had a million things to do. He looked again at his watch. Something seemed to be happening to it. Something wasn't right. He wasn't going to get anywhere --

* * *

I wasn't going to get anywhere if the phone didn't ring. For too long the silence had been about as tense as a virgin on her wedding night. I was beginning to wonder how I could afford

my next cup of joe. I looked at my watch, squinted at it through the cracked crystal. Maybe I should have gone to medical school like my mother had wanted me to. Instead of being an ex-cop, sitting in an office with an old desk, cleaning the gunk beneath my nails with a bent paper clip. I threw the paper clip at the pebbled glass door with the backwards lettering that said Ed Straker, private investigations. I stared at the phone. It stared back. I was Eddie Straker, private eye, eternally broke. I hadn't had one case in the past two months. I needed a miracle. I needed a new job. I needed to relieve myself. I opened my drawer, looking for the key to the men's room down the hall. Not that I was too happy about the prospect of going there. I'd seen dumpsites that were cleaner. I pushed aside the junk that cluttered my drawer, like the memories that cluttered my 47 year old brain. Memories of an ex-wife, and a kid who had died from complications from a car accident. Memories I would have liked to throw out in the trash, along with bills of every conceivable kind, but they just stayed stuck in my brain, like chewing gum on a worn out shoe.

I saw my reflection suddenly in a small hand mirror I'd stuck in the drawer. There were more lines on my face than you'd hear at a play. I looked into my blue eyes. They looked back, not liking what they saw. My blond hair stuck out like bristles on a hair brush. I licked my thumb and used it to push an annoying lock of my hair back into place. It stayed there all of two seconds before it fell limply down, like the way an old man's privates might before a naked woman, like my mood. I grabbed the key, shoved the desk drawer closed so hard my coffee cup rattled. I made my way to the john and took care of mother nature. I zipped up and headed back to my office. I dropped into my chair, and rocked back and forth, playing with the key. It was then that she came in. Actually her cheap perfume came in before she did. Some dime store stuff. It didn't suit her angelic figure. That figure did things to me no vitamin could. I looked at her. I threw the key on the desk. I picked up my round paperweight, and tapped it thoughtfully.

"Whatever you're selling, angel, I'm buying. Sit down."

"You're the private eye here?"

"Eddie Straker, investigations. That's me, angel. What can I do for you?" I put my paperweight on its stand.

Her lower lip quivered.

"My husband, it's my husband."

"It always is, angel. Want a drink? I was about to have one. Maybe even several." I opened my desk drawer and took out the office bottle of whiskey, two semi-clean glasses marked with an S, which had been the only thing I'd gotten back from my wife after the divorce, I sure hadn't gotten back my dignity, and poured us some without waiting for an answer. She took one and made it do an disappearing act.

"My husband's trying to kill me." She started to cry, nice and lady-like. Her red hair, which I suspected she'd gotten from the corner drug store's selection of hair dyes, was cut into a neat bob. Her eyes were grayer than the prospects of a harlot at a church social. Her husband had to be more desperate than an turkey at Thanksgiving if he really wanted to snuff out this skirt. I could think of better things to do with this angel.

I took a long pull at my drink. A cold shower wasn't available just then. The booze, cheap as it was, would have to do.

"What makes you think so? And what's your name, dollface?"

"Rita. Rita Maroon. He took out a big insurance policy on me without telling me. And I saw him with another woman at the club by accident. Virginia Pool. They don't know I know.

Oh. Mr. Straker, you've got to help me!" She busied herself crying some more. I busied myself wondering why she wore the large A on a chain around her neck if her name was Rita Maroon. It looked like it was genuine gold, straight from Fort Knox. I was impressed. Beautiful women always impressed me. But gold impressed me even more.

"Club? What club?"

"The Purple Petunia, my husband runs it. His name is Lex Freeman. I sing there for a living."

"Freeman, huh? I know a Freeman. Got released from jail on a murder charge. Cheap hood with a record as long as your arm. Didn't know he ran the Petunia. Well, doll, you got yourself a detective. Going to cost you, though, I can't eat on promises. Whiskey costs money and so does my services." I quoted her my rates, and she snapped open her purse and passed me a couple of hundreds. I hadn't seen that much paper money since Abe Lincoln had freed the slaves. I touched one with a not too clean finger to make sure it was actually there. Amazingly, it didn't disappear in a puff of white smoke like my failure of a marriage had. I drew out the contract form I had, had her sign it, enjoyed what the act of signing her name did to her ample bosom, and took it back. Then I folded the money carefully, and put it into my inside jacket pocket, to keep the dust company.

"What company did your husband use for the insurance?"

She screwed up her frosted pink lips, as if she were going to kiss a rich lover with sour breath.

"Gee, I can't remember, but I can go look again, after I do my number at the club. The club! Oh no, I have to hurry, I'm booked to sing early tonight. Can you give me a ride there? I had to take a cab here, my husband has the car." She smiled prettily at me. Bells rang, and there wasn't a church around for miles. I was hotter than the breakfast special at the local cafe. I was somebody. I finished the rest of my whiskey in a cheerful gulp and put the glasses away.

"Sure. Come on."

* * *

Life was funny. The road was funny. The way she kept bumping into me accidentally as I drove to the club was funny. The cheap perfume was beginning to smell like it was more French than the Eiffel tower. This broad had more curves than the freeway. I could picture us together, just the two of us, her in her little fur trimmed gown, bent in my arms, me and my lips exploring her mouth like a mountain climber would track Everest. I could picture us all cozy in a little bungalow. I could picture myself in cold storage with a toe tag, after Lex put more holes in me than there were in imported cheese. I hit the brake, and I wasn't talking about the one in my old Buick.

I heard Lex Freeman before I saw him. He was a bulk of a man. His body would have stopped a speeding train. His eyes chewed me up and spit me out. His face had more craters than the moon. He was wearing an sharkskin suit than cost more than my old Buick had. I could see the outline of his gat. I showed him my teeth the way you'd hold out your hand for a strange dog to sniff. Rita introduced him.

"Rita, who's the pretty boy?" he asked, without returning my smile. I went on smiling. I was polite. I was friendly. I was going to be snapped like a twig if he suspected anything. I went on smiling.

"This is Eddie Straker, I ran into him at the cafe, I couldn't get a cab after shopping, and he offered me a ride," Rita said. She smiled prettily at her husband. The way she had smiled at me. Women. Who needed them. I didn't answer my own question on the grounds it would

incriminate me.

"I know you, Straker." Freeman grunted. He rubbed the diamond on his pinkie ring. It could have been used as a headlight. With muscle like his, I wouldn't be surprised if he dug it out of the mine himself.

"Yeah? Ain't it a small world?" I went on smiling. I was a dope. I was insane. I was going to be an insane dead man soon. That prospect didn't thrill me none.

"You were a cop, weren't you?" I heard him say.

"Yeah, I was. Thrown out cause they suspected I'd murdered some guy. Name of Foster. So happens I didn't." I stopped smiling.

"You never did any time in the big house. That don't mean your lily white hands are clean. Anyway, thanks for helping out my wife. Now beat it. Cops make me nervous."

"I came to hear the lady sing. An favor for a favor." I put an edge in my voice. I hoped I'd put slugs in my gat. I didn't like this Freeman. He made me nervous. I didn't like nervous. I met, and beat Freeman's stare. Freeman suddenly laughed. I smiled thinly. I'd trusted rattlesnakes more than this two bit crook.

"You don't scare easy, Straker."

"Neither do you, Freeman. Now what does a guy have to do to water his tongue around here?" I smiled.

"Hey! Ford!"

A small man with a nervous disposition hurried up. He might have been Irish. He looked like he'd been caught reading porn by his monsignor. He grinned nervously at me, and rubbed his nose. I liked him instantly.

"Yes boss?" He looked obediently at Freeman.

"Find this man our best table. Drinks on the house."

"But boss, Mr. Carlin's party is at-"

Freeman suddenly grabbed Ford by his shirt and pulled him over and half lifted him up, and Ford was horrified. I could swear there was a whole half inch between the polished floor and Ford's shoe bottoms. Ford began to turn as blue as my eyes. I forced my revulsion down. I swallowed. My hands balled into fists. It was a good thing Freeman was too angry to notice.

"Did you hear what I said, you scum? The best table!" Freeman dropped Ford back on the ground. He would have fallen on his face if I hadn't steadied him. Freeman gave me a look. I didn't take it. I didn't like bullies. And he could have been crowned the king of them.

"Better do what the boss says. And bring me a whisky sour, make it a double," I heard myself say.

Ford looked at me like he was a horse I'd saved from being put down. I patted his hand. His mouth worked and formed the word thanks! I smiled at him as he scurried away like a mouse who just stumbled into a cat show by mistake. I followed him. I watched idly as couples formed on the dance floor, and people tinkled their glasses together, and the band tuned up their rented instruments. Rita had vanished off long ago during the little exchange between her husband and I. Ford turned up and gave me my whiskey sour. He had a different look on his face, the look of a man. Back then, he had looked like a wounded animal. I smiled at him.

"Thanks for what you did back there. I hate that son-of-a-bitch. I'm only working here until I can get enough money to send to my mother back home. You'd do well to scam after Rita's act. I've seen him crush men three times bigger than you for just saying her name. I'll keep the drinks coming. Enjoy the show."

"Thanks for the warning, Ford. And Ford-" I took one of the hundred dollar bills Rita had

given me and put it in Ford's jacket pocket. "Your tip."

He smiled.

"I won't forget ya." Ford said.

I watched him walk away until the lights went down. Couples went back to their tables. A hush fell over the crowd. The spotlight swung across the room and the band saxophonist started to play, and suddenly the spotlight came to rest on a pair of glittery silver high heels, across a shimmering orange gown which Rita Maroon was almost wearing. She paused in the spotlight as the rest of the band joined in the music, and then, sweetly, sadly, she began to sing. My heart stopped, then started again. It had been my song once. My favourite.

"Blue moon, you saw me standing alone Without a dream in my heart, Without a love of my own. Blue moon, you knew just what I was there for, -You heard me saying a prayer for Someone I really could care for." Rita walked slowly up to me. She smiled. She kept singing, and my eyes misted.

"And then there suddenly appeared before me The only one my arms would ever hold--I heard somebody whisper, Please adore me'." Rita bent slightly and put her hand in my hair. She stroked it. I could almost feel the hatred of Lex Freeman there, like a living thing, somewhere in the quiet club, but at that moment I stupidly no longer cared. She let go of my hair, gave me a smile that could raise the dead, and went on singing. She began to walk quietly away from me, and I gulped down my whiskey sour to dull the sudden pain. The loneliness. It ate away at me like acid. It always had. It always did.

"And when I looked, the moon had turned to gold. Blue moon, now I'm no longer alone, Without a dream in my heart, Without a love of my ownnnnnnnnn."

The music built and swelled up to a dramatic finish, and before she could finish the last sweet note, the club turned dark as Freeman's heart. I heard the sounds of panic from startled people, then three shots which followed one another like fuzzy baby ducks follow their mother. I heard Rita Maroon scream, and then I heard an unmistakable thump. The lights went on, and people screamed, and gasped. I grabbed my gat, and quickly looked around the club. Near where the stage was, Lex Freeman lie over his table. He'd seen his last act. Curtain up. I looked around for Ford. He was in the back where I figured he'd be, and there was a revolver in his hand. I went up to him. Without a word, he handed me his gun. I'd put mine away. I smelled the barrel of his, but didn't say anything. Some woman was sobbing over Lex's body. "Somebody call the police," I said in a voice deader than Freeman. Murder always ruined my mood.

"Is he dead, oh my God, is he really dead?" the woman was sobbing. Rita Maroon was standing on the stage, with her hand over her mouth, eyes wide. For the moment, I ignored her, and went up to the woman.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Virginia Pool, the hat check girl here. Oh my God, Lex, Lex, you can't be dead! You can't be!!"

"You seem to be the only one mourning the guy," I told her.

"I loved him! We were going to run away together, after he got a divorce from Adele. Oh God, I loved him." She leaned against me, weeping bitterly, shaking. I'd forgotten what it was like to have a woman in my arms.

"Adele who?" I said roughly. I didn't like having to ask these questions when the dame was so upset, but it was necessary. People think of me as a hard-boiled detective, but if they'd look closer, they'd find out the eggs were more scrambled than hard-boiled. I didn't like

upsetting beautiful women. And Ginny was as beautiful as they came. She made Maroon look like a daisy in a bouquet of roses. I thought about plucking her. I was a sap.

"Adele Maroon, that's Rita's real name. She never loved Lex, she just married him for the money." Virginia sobbed. I eased her into a chair.

"Ford. Get Ginny here a brandy." Ford nodded, went away and came back with one. I smiled at him.

"Shut up you little tramp!" Rita spat out. "I knew you were having an affair with him. I knew you two planned to kill me and make it look like an accident! I found the insurance policy under my bed. I hired Ed Straker to protect me. He's a private dick."

"You're nuts! You're making it all up. But who hated him enough to kill him?" Virginia sobbed. I put the drink into her hands. I made her drink some.

"God knows I did," Ford said quietly. "He killed my father. Just because he owed Freeman money from gambling. My mother hasn't been the same since. I hope he burns in hell."

"Yeah, you had a motive. You and everybody else in the world. And I have your gun. And everybody saw you with it when the lights came on." I said.

"My God, Ford, you killed him?" Rita stared at him. "You're the one who put those three 9 mm slugs in him?" Rita looked like she might faint. I narrowed my eyes at her.

"He killed my dad. And my dad never hurt a fly. He just was more in love with the horses than he was my mom."

"You're like your dad, Ford. You wouldn't hurt a fly either. And you didn't kill Lex Freeman," I recited.

"Wait, what are you saying?" Rita gasped. "You just said everyone saw Ford's gun."

"I smelled Ford's gun seconds after the shooting, and I examined it. It probably wasn't loaded, and it didn't have an odor." I took out Ford's gun, opened it. It was as empty as a bank safe after a robbery. "You're not the kind, Ford. You don't have the stomach for killing." I smiled at him. I passed it to him. "I suggest you pawn it, and use the money to help your mom. Better yet, go home to her. A son is the best medicine money can buy." I tried to ignore the way I ached when I heard myself say the word son'. I was fine. If I said that enough times, maybe it would be true. But I hadn't been fine in a long while.

"Someone killed my Lex, Mr. Straker. I'll pay you to find out who did." Virginia begged me.

Just then, I noticed that the cops had come in. I gave them the condensed version of what had happened and they scowled at me.

"Can't keep out of trouble, can you, Mr. Straker? Just like back when you and me were in the Air Force," one cop with fluffy eyebrows said. I remembered my stint in the service, and I remembered him. Wished I hadn't. Name of Jimmy Henderson. He always had been on my back in the PD, like a barnacle on a whale. He had tried his damndest to prove I'd murdered a man in cold blood, but no matter how much he tried to make the charge stick, he had failed. So he'd settled for ending my ten year career as a cop. Ten years, and it had taken a punk like him to mess it all up. I hadn't killed the stoolie named Foster, no matter how much he wanted it to be true. Matter of fact, I often suspected he had. But I couldn't prove it.

"For once, listen to me. The real person who killed Lex Freeman is in this room," I said softly. I turned and looked at the murderer.

"Oh yeah, pretty boy?" Henderson spat in my direction. I ignored it.

"Yeah. And the name is Straker, not pretty boy. The murderer is the songbird wife, Rita

Maroon."

Rita gave me a deadly look for an instant and then tossed back her head and laughed. "You've been drinking too much of the club's watered down drinks, Eddie boy. You must be out of that gorgeous head of yours." She smiled prettily at me. Women. Who needed them? Especially the ones who murdered their husbands.

"Henderson, if you examine the body, you'll find three nice neat bullet holes in it. Made with 9 mm slugs. And my guess is, if you search Miss Maroon, you'll find a nice neat gun with the remaining 9 mm slugs." I shrugged.

"Eddie, I'm telling you, you're crazy!" she all but screamed. She began to back away, but a woman grabbed her. The woman smiled at me. I looked at her strangely, but I smiled back. Rita twisted in her grip, but the woman held her fast, expertly searched her. She found a cute little gun and pointed at it. Maroon had it in a thigh holster. Henderson grunted unhappily.

"So you caught the statement she made earlier? About Ford being the one to put the nine mm slugs in the poor sap?" The woman grinned at me.

"Yeah, either she was the killer, or she ought to trade her singing in for a mind reading act. Nobody could have been that good at guessing the caliber of the slugs. Hey, who are you anyway, sister?" I watched Henderson handcuff Rita for a moment, and lead her away. I walked over to the dame.

"I ain't your sister for one thing. I'm an private investigator, like you. Name of Kathy Moe. And I owe you a cup of coffee, good looking. I've been trying to track down that songbird on a counterfeit check charge for a long time. Murder's even better."

"You?" I laughed. "A dame as a dick? You must be nuts." And then I found myself pinned on the floor. "Yeow! Let me go! "

"Still think I'm nuts, handsome?" Kathy grinned. "By the way, you smell good." She let me go and I counted all my fingers to make sure they were still there.

"Nice trick. Some Chinese thing?" I grinned at her. "I thought they only made fortune cookies."

"I might teach it to you sometime, Eddie. That is, if you want me to." She lowered her voice and I suddenly had a new appreciation for her. I had a new lease on life. Birds chirped in the trees. The sun came out. The air smelled fresh. My heart thumped. I sweated. I was either getting the flu or falling for her.

"Anything you say, sister." I grinned back.

"Its Kathy, you brat. Now, how about me buying you dinner? You're damn skinny, you need to eat, Ed."

"A gal springing for my supper? You're plenty weird, Kathy. But I like it. I like it. "

"Close your eyes and I'll give you something you'll like better, love, I haven't kissed a handsome man since my husband died , and a gal gets lonely. You aren't married , are you handsome?"

"No, I'm not married, but I get lonely too, Kathy. And any time you want to kiss a handsome man, you can. That is, if you can find one." I smiled at her. I was beginning to feel light-headed and it wasn't all the booze I had drank. I decided to go on the wagon right there and then.

"Close your eyes, you silly man. Don't you have any idea how handsome you are, Handsome?" Kathy put her arms around me, and I slowly closed my eyes, and embraced her. She started to kiss me, gently, warmly, sweetly, and then I returned it, with the heat of a man that hadn't been loved far too long.

I opened my eyes, and I smiled at her. I started to sing . I wasn't Bing, but I could carry a tune. Especially for a sweetheart like my Kathy.

"Blue moon, you saw me standing alone Without a dream in my heart, Without a love of my own. Blue moon, you knew just what I was there for, -You heard me saying a prayer for Someone I really could care for. "

"Oh Edward." Kathy said quietly.

"Say my name again, Kathy." I smiled at her, a man in love. I stroked her hair. I saw a pearl clasp which held back her brown curls and I unsnapped it. I kissed her hair. "Say my name, say it."

"Edward." Kathy smiled at me, and took my hand and kissed it. "Edward, love."

"Edward."

"Edward."

"Ed--"

"Ed? Ed? Wake up!" Alec Freeman insisted. Ed opened his eyes, took in the surroundings of his office.

"Did I fall asleep?" Ed sighed. "I was dreaming. It was quite a dream. I was a private eye."

Alec grinned. "Well, Detective Straker, its time for you to turn in your gun and go home. I'll mind the store and solve the cases and get the beautiful girls for now." Alec chuckled.

Ed smiled. "Okay, okay, you win." Ed stood up and gathered up his files and straightened them up by tapping them on the desk. Something clattered to the ground. "Get my pen, would you, Alec? And have them bring my car around. Actually, you better drive me home, and let Paul manage the store. I'm so exhausted I don't trust myself to drive."

"Now you're talking." Alec smiled. He bent and picked up something as Ed closed his attach, case and piled the files on his desk for Foster.

"What are you-" Ed broke off as he saw what Alec was holding. It was a woman's pearl hair clasp.

"You okay, Ed? You look pale." Alec said , suddenly worried. He dropped the object into Ed's hand.

Ed stared at it, blinked. It was just his pen, and he gave a long sigh.

"I'm okay, Alec. I just thought it was something else for a moment. But a moment like that only comes once in a blue moon. Come on, let's go." Ed said with a trace of sadness.

The End