

# THE FALCON

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# 1

Here's what you've got to understand: I'm not the type of cat who gets foiled by a dame. But this dame was something else – like a steam train running off its tracks and taking a whole damned town with it.

I met her at The Horse and Cart, an old dive downtown wedged between a meat warehouse and an empty shop the needle brigade took over to cook up their junk. By habit more than happenstance I was at the bar, caressing my usual whiskey, when she walked in.

I'm normally one for blondes, but every now and again a redhead like this knocked my proverbials off. She was slathered in an emerald dress which was wrapped in black mink, and she had two particular areas of curves I was interested in, along with the longest legs I'd seen since Tuesday.

I eyeballed her as she sauntered over to a corner booth and sat down, crossing one thigh over the other. Tom Brady, the proprietor of the establishment, leant forward over the bar.

“You see the gams on that?”

Every cat in the joint had seen them, but I said “I ain't here to look at no gams.”

I stretched out my hand, mighty painful from the fight I'd had last week. I was getting gray, inside and out. Damnation.

"You're all business, Joe," Tom Brady said. "How about it?"

"Not much doing," I said.

I poured a shot of black down my kisser.

"You see the list tonight?" Tom Brady said.

"I seen it."

"How was the length?"

"Mighty short, again. I remember when this game was worth it. Makes you mull, you know."

"The great Swingin' Joe ain't thinking of bailing, is he? Wouldn't be the same without you."

"I'm weak of it, Tom Brady. Too many new guns crossing names off the list without knowing a thing."

"They'd all be happy you were gone, for surely."

Over in the corner I saw the knockout stand. She had a wiggle to her walk, the sort of thing no gal is born with. No sir, you gotta learn a walk like that, and you don't learn it in a swish uptown finishing school. Her hips were solid mesmerizing.

"Gin," she said to Tom Brady.

“Tonic?”

“Neat.”

She perched on the stool next to mine. I turned straight on to her and let my lookers linger on her chest for a moment. She was the type you could see yourself straightening up for – little pad down in Georgia, away from the shit upstream. I shook my head. I was getting old, for surely.

“You done with that staring?” she said.

“I’m done. Whaddya say?”

“I say I got a message for you.”

“A message from who?”

“From the Falcon.”

Ah, the Falcon. There was a name to make most cats in the city want to dive into the sea. But not Swingin’ Joe – I’d seen worse in my time.

“You don’t beat around the bush, do you?” I said.

“You want your message or what?”

“Sock it to me, sugar.”

The broad uncrossed her gams, then crossed them again the other way.

“It’s about that hoofer out of Chicago.”

“Which one?”

“The one you offed.”

“I didn’t off no hoofer.”

“Last week, Harlem. About nineteen with rustish hair.”

I’d shot two chaps in Harlem the week before. I seemed to remember one with rustish hair, but after ten years in the game they all came out of my memory looking mighty similar.

“Well, yeah,” I said. “I think I offed him. But I didn’t know the guy – he was on the list.”

“And now you’re on the Falcon’s personal list.”

“What does he care about some two-bit hoofer?”

“He was the Falcon’s nephew.”

I sighed and medicated in some more whiskey. The Falcon didn’t care about who he hit or what lives he upended, but he had this weird kinky thing for his sister. If the hoofer was her son, I was in more trouble than I thought.

“Ah. Applesauce,” I said.

“He wants you to meet him at the club tomorrow night.”

“I ain’t that stupid, sweetpea.”

“Yeah, you’re a real hard-boiled cat, aren’t you?”

“That’s the job.”

“So I’ll tell the Falcon you’re not coming?”

“Tell him whatever you want.”

The broad got up from the stool and shrugged her mink up over her shoulders.

“Not gonna stay for your drink?” I said.

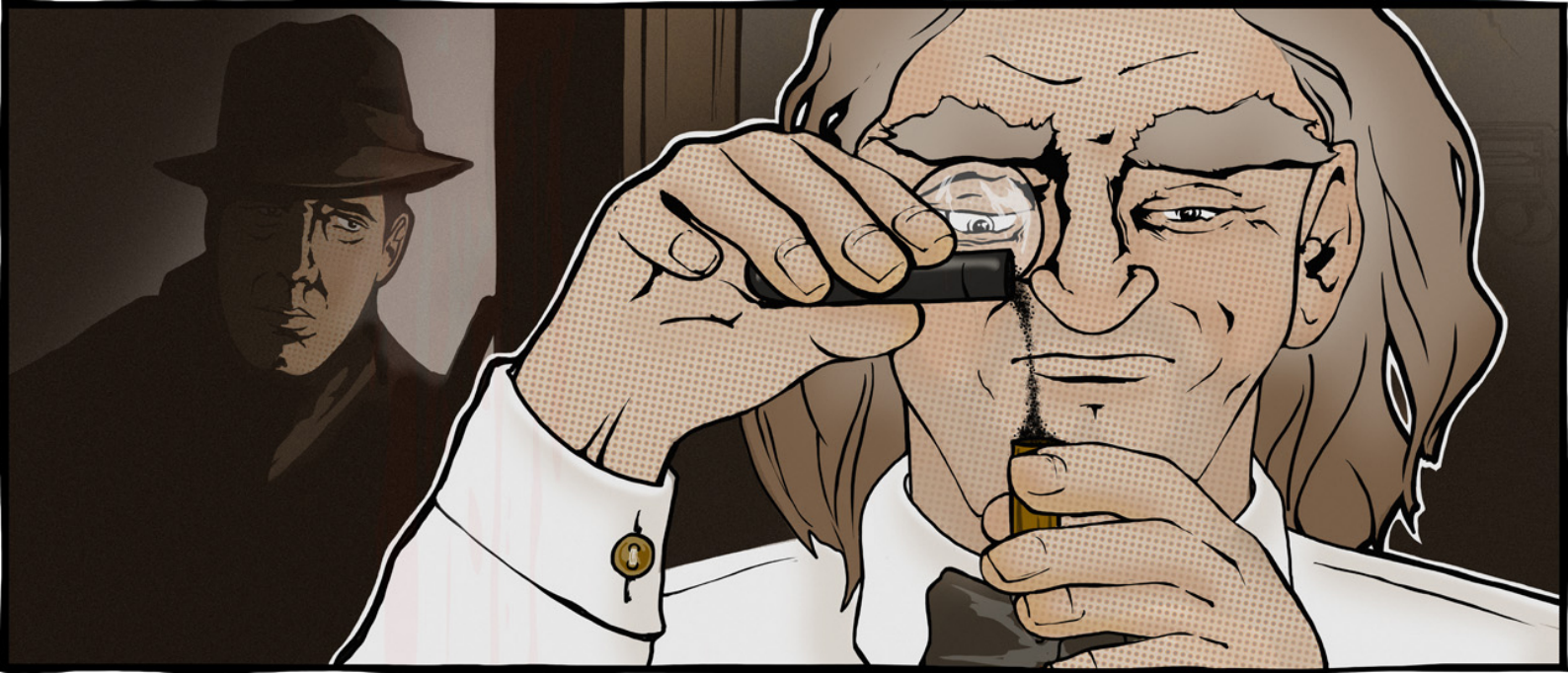
She looked up at me with a half smile. Her lips were painted fire engine-like. She took the glass and downed the drink in one go – a gal after my own ticker.

“You haven’t paid for that,” Tom Brady called out as she wiggled away.

“Put it on Joe’s tab.”

“You ain’t gonna tell me your name?” I said.

“It’s Lulu. Burn that one into your brain, daddy.”



## 2

As killer as it was meeting Lulu, the problem with the Falcon was serious as a knife to the gut. A big shot he wasn't, but he was just crazy enough to be the wrong enemy to have. There wasn't much doing that night so I went to see a cat I knew, a real crooked shooter with one glass eye and one ear to the ground. He worked out of a broken down train car dumped down by the docks. It stank like fish and gunpowder. Old Glass-Eye was sitting on a pile of carpet squares, filling bullet casings with the boom stuff.

"I hear you're in the soup," he said.

"It's all tomato."

"The Falcon ain't no tomato. But his moll is."

"Loose?"

"More than a goose. Lulu's her name."

My ticker ticked a little faster. "I met the broad."

“I know. It’s on the street.”

“What is?”

“The word.”

I sat down on a hollowed-out television set.

“You got the file on her?” I said.

“Yeah. She’s a real cool cusotmer, straight out of Philly. Sits at the Falcon’s right hand during the day and on his musk stick at night, if you catch my fly.”

“I catch it.”

“Best keep your yards if you want to keep your head.”

“The Faclon’s after my noggin anyway. Maybe I’ll take a chance with her.”

“Ain’t no broad worth it, buddy,” Old Glass-Eye laughed.

“You didn’t see the gams on this one. Worth a rumble with the Falcon, for surely.”

“I heard you were thinking of quitting the game, anyways.”

“Good news travels fast around here.”

Old Glass-Eye wiped at some gunpowder that had fallen onto his trousers. He finished with one box of shells and moved onto the next.

“Lots of cats are interested in your impending retirement.”

“I know it. Had one of the green guns try to off me last month, just because I beat him to the top list name.”

“This new breed, they’re too fast for me. There used to be an art to this game, now it’s just about bulleting the name as fast as you can. Where’s the fun in that, I ask you?”

“I hear you, pal.”

Old Glass-Eye stopped and looked around in the vicinity of his feet. Then he took a shoe from a pile next to him and pegged it hard at something I couldn’t see. There was a squeak as the something got hit and died.

“Say,” Old Glass-Eye said. “It’s a damn shame you bumped that hooper off.”

“He was on the list.”

“You don’t check the list?”

“No. Do you?”

“No. But I ain’t never offed a cheese’s nephew.”

I kicked my feet out and yawned. The sun was coming up, but I was too wired to sleep.

“What should I do about these fish sticks I done landed in?” I said.

“Steam out of the city, if you’re smart.”

“And if I ain’t?”

“Then you’d better off the Falcon, too.”



### 3

I liked Old Glass-Eye's plan. Off the Falcon, easy as pumpkin, yeah? Not quite – first I had to get near him. He was famous in the game for being hidden out, underground and out of sight. And that's where the lovely Lulu figured into things. It didn't take much spading to find a low-down cat in the Falcon's crew willing to put me in touch with Lulu in return for some top-shelf hooch. I had her meet me at the Horse and Cart, for old time's sake.

She came on in with a red dress cut so low she might as well have left it on the hanger. She sat opposite me in the booth I always reserved for business. There was no slow smile like the time before – she seemed antsed about something.

"Alright, slick," she said. "What's on your mind?"

"No hello? No how-do-you-do? No how's your mother?"

"How's your mother?"

"Who knows?"

"Good to hear. Now let's get to it."

She looked solid peachy when she was irritated.

“I’ve been mulling on the Falcon’s offer,” I said.

“I don’t remember an offer.”

“You intimated that he wanted a meeting with me, tonight.”

“It’s not a meeting he wants.”

“He’s not going to give me a chance to explain?”

“What’s to explain?”

“It’s about the list.”

“It’s always about the list with you fellows. I’m awful tired of hearing about it.”

“The Falcon’s in the game. Surely he gets it.”

“I know him pretty well – he’s not the understanding type. All he wants is your red stuff pooling on his floor.”

I put on my best smile for her. I knew how dead charming I was when I showed my chompers.

“So here’s what I think,” I said. “You take me to see the Falcon, alone. No henchmen. I explain to him what happened and he lets me go.”

“That’s a sweet dream you’re having. Let me know when you wake up.”

“I’m solid that I can talk him around, if I have the chance.”

“Maybe I can get you to him. What’s in it for me?”

“Say I can talk him into letting you go.”

“Go where?”

“Wherever you want. Starting with my bed, of course.”

“Lucky me.”

“What else could you want?”

“Let me think. How much did you get for offing the hoofer?”

“Five hundred. Low down on the list.”

Her eye twitched as she tapped a finger on the table.

“Give me four hundred.”

“You’re a cool one, ain’t you?”

“I do what I have to.”

“So do I. You have yourself a deal, kitten.”

“Swell. Pick me up at eight.”



## 4

Lulu lived in the ritzy part of the shittiest ‘burb midtown. The walls of her pad were painted dark purple and all the furniture was black as tar. Well, what else could you expect from a gal like her? I put the four hundred on the table while she was in the other room, doing whatever dames do to get prettied up. While she was busying herself I took out the day’s list from my pocket. Only four names – shortest one in living memory. Even if I wasn’t tied up on this matter tonight I’d never have made it to the first three, not with the new guns always racing out trying to get ahead of me.

But the fourth, that complicated things.

Lulu Barron.

With that particular name it was no shock that she was still standing, for the moment. The reputation of the family Barron was enough to put off the green ones. It was almost enough to put me off, now that I knew who she was – but not completely. She wasn’t like the Barrons I’d happened across in the past, though she could take care of herself, for surely. But still, best to get her away before the wolves came – she was top of the list after all, and that meant top payment.

I put the list away just before she came out, dressed all in black like she was off to give a eulogy. She took the four hundred from the table.

“Thanks,” she said.

I stood up. “Whaddya say we get out of here?”

“It’s not far to the Falcon’s.”

“What if we just jumped town, you know? Got out of here and away from the game.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s weak, sweetpea. Mighty weak.”

“And where is it you want to take me?”

“South. Georgia, or wherever you fancy.”

“Why me?”

“Why not? You’re a decent-looking broad with a lot to offer an old cat like me.”

Lulu held up a diamond necklace and I took it from her. She turned around while I snapped it onto her neck. When she turned back to me she stared into my lookers for a while.

“What about the Falcon? He’d find us.”

“I still think I can talk both of us away.”

“You won’t be able to. I got you your meeting, alone like you wanted. There’s no reasoning with the Falcon – but if you manage it, I’m yours.”

“That’s what you want?”

“Sure.”

“Then that’s what you’ll get.”



## 5

The Falcon was set up underground. Deep. We descended down into the old subway tunnels that hadn't been used for who knows how long. The air was stale and every now and again I felt like I was choking. I didn't know how he could stomach it – solid uncivilized, you know. Somewhere in the back of this shithole maze was a big wooden door which we took to walking through.

When you hear the mutterings about the Falcon you get an impression of him, so I expected his lair to be all grand and intimidating. Reality – it was just as much of a shithole as the rest of the tunnels. Just a big room with some dim lighting and an eau de piss. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust, but then I saw the five big cats, all the Falcon's henchmen. One shut the door behind us.

"I thought he was going to be alone," I said to Lulu.

"Falcon's never alone."

I straightened up my jacket. The feeling of my pistol against my hip was mighty comforting right then.

The Falcon was parked in a chair at the other end of the room. Corpulent, for surely. Rolls of fatness hanging down to his thighs. He was so piggy I had to eyeball Lulu, trying to imagine her knocking boots with him. It wasn't pretty.

"This is the list guy," Lulu said.

The Falcon fixed his black eyes on me.

"So you're the guy." He had a girly voice that squeaked on every second word. "I'm impressed."

"I'm an impressive guy."

"You misunderstand. I don't think you're impressive, I'm impressed that Lulu strongarmed you here."

Lulu gave me a strange look, then left me to sit beside the Falcon. He patted her on the head. I could see up her dress, which was preferable to looking into her eyes.

"There was no stronging or arming involved," I said. "I came to clear this mess up with you, about the hooper."

"Ah, yes."

"He was on the list, you know. It had to be done. If I didn't do it, some other cat would have, maybe even one of yours."

"That's a fine argument."

"Did it work?"

The Falcon shifted his considerable bulk in the chair. A line of saliva escaped his mouth and dripped onto his shirt.

“Here’s the thing – I don’t care about the hoofer.”

“But he was your nephew.”

“Not as suchly. Not at all, actually.”

“Then who in damnation was he?”

Lulu stood and draped her arm around the Falcon’s neck.

“He was my brother,” Lulu said.

“So your brother gets offed and you try to fix it by knocking boots with the Falcon? Bit drastic, sweetpea.”

“I was never Falcon’s moll. He was just helping me and the family to right the wrong of Billy’s demise.”

“I thought the Barrons and the Falcon were enemies.”

“We used to be,” the Falcon said. “We’ve entered a new arrangement, one that will see us take over the whole country, starting with this dump of a city.”

“I see.”

My hand moved towards my pistol, but the Falcon was already leveling his at my noggin. Lulu took her own pistol from her purse and aimed it.

“Foiled,” I said.

“By the best,” Lulu said. “By a Barron. Nothing to get cockeyed over.”

“I suppose I can’t talk you around?”

Lulu walked towards me, the pistol steady aimed at my chest. I took one last look at her gams. A long one.

“Not a chance, daddy,” Lulu said. “An eye for an eye, you understand.”

“I understand, doll. Shame about that place in Georgia. That would’ve been real comfy, I think.”

“Shame indeed.”

“You thought about it for a moment, didn’t you? I saw it.”

“For a moment. That was all.”

She triggered the pistol and a bullet sank into my chest. It was solid painful. I fell back onto the floor.

“That’s for Billy.” She shot another into my gut. “And that’s for eyeballing up my dress.”

I dropped my head to the side where I could see my red stuff covering the concrete. I laughed. Like I said, that dame was something else.

The room grew darker but something was transpiring and my attention held on.

“Well,” The Falcon said. “You got your man, and you got him down here where we can dispose of him without any of his friends interfering. You satiated?”

“I am.”

“Then it’s over.”

“It is.”

“Except there’s the little matter of today’s list.”

“Screw the goddamned list.”

“Miss Barron, you have to dig this – I don’t make the rules. But I do follow them, and your name happens to be atop the list today.”

“You probably put it there yourself, you pig.”

Lulu started to say something else, beginning with a few choice expletives, but there was another shot and she fell to the floor beside me. She turned her head and aimed her lookers at me.

“Bet that place in Georgia is sounding mighty nice now,” I said.

“I guess I’ve been foiled.”

“That’s the job, sugar.”

Then the world went solid black.



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