

Noir City



Collages by Daniel Marcus

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Scene One

She came in just before dark, wearing an evening gown that belonged somewhere with champagne and an orchestra, not in my office with its bad light and unpaid bills. She said somebody was trying to kill her. Something about a missing package. Maybe someone was trying to kill her. The trouble was, everything she said sounded as true as the promises of a Noir City politician.

I let her talk while the cigarette smoke climbed toward the ceiling and the rain worried the windows. Behind me, the blinds threw my shadow across the wall—half sober, tired, and, for reasons I preferred not to examine, wearing the long black beak of a crow. The blonde never noticed. Or pretended not to....



Scene Two

It had already been a long week. Tuesday the rain had been coming down since sundown, and then there was a beautiful woman pointing a gun at me. I'd had worse nights and I'd had guns pointed at me before. But I usually had some idea why. I managed to convince her that I didn't have whatever it was she was looking for. She finally put the gun down and stood there, silent, the carnations at her feet getting wetter and wetter in the rain.



Scene Three

Hollywood always looked better from a distance. Up in the hills there was a man in a fox mask, a dozen wolves coming down the road under a full moon, and a woman with a machine gun standing on the running board of a Packard. I knew Fox Man. I'd never seen the woman before. But she looked like trouble. I was following up on a lead, something the Blonde had said about someone in a white building in the hills. I knew the building too. I knew so much. Except what I was doing and what was going on.



Scene Four

The wolves were back. So were the shoes. I still didn't know what the shoes meant, but by then I'd stopped asking. Unlike me, the two women standing in the rain looked like they knew exactly what they were doing. The Clown was waiting in the car behind them. Nobody kept The Clown waiting unless they had a very good reason. So I had even more questions. Noir City had never shown much interest in answering them. But if The Clown was somehow involved in this business then maybe the blonde really was in trouble. Trouble that it would be very smart for me to keep out of.



Scene Five

Lieutenant Jackson had brought me in hours ago. Since then the Chief had asked the same questions twelve different ways, and I'd given him the same answers thirteen.

"The Clown," I said.

The Chief leaned across the desk. "You keep saying that. I keep asking for proof."

"Maybe you should ask him."

I nodded toward Fox Man. Nobody had introduced him. Nobody had explained why he was there. In Noir City that practically made him family. The Chief didn't say anything. Jackson didn't either. I lit another cigarette and wondered whether the Chief wanted proof because he didn't believe me—or because he needed to know how much I knew.



Scene Six

Lara had been winning. A lot. She called from the casino and said there were men watching her from the gaming rooms. Men who looked like they worked for the Clown. That was interesting. The last time we'd talked, she'd forgotten to mention knowing the Clown. The blonde forgot to mention a lot of things. We left by the back door and took my car. Lara spent the first few blocks looking at me instead of the road.

"Do you always rescue women you don't trust?"

"Only the ones who pay me."

"What if I stopped paying you?"

"Then we'd have to reconsider our relationship."

She smiled. The wolves were running beside us. They kept pace without effort, their eyes flashing whenever we passed a streetlight. Lara moved closer.

"Are they following us?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe they're protecting us."

"Maybe."

She put her hand on my knee. I decided the wolves were the least of my problems.



Scene Seven

I got there while the smoke was still hanging in the rafters. She was standing in the doorway with a gun in her hand. Fox Man was lying in the dirt. His hat had come off. He wouldn't need it anymore. There was another man at the edge of the light. I'd never seen him before. Moths circled his head and settled on his shoulders. He didn't seem to notice them.

"Did you shoot him?" I asked her.

She looked at the gun.

"Would it matter if I said no?"

I gestured at the body.

"It might matter to him."

I looked back toward the stranger. He was gone. The moths weren't. There was a shadow on the wall behind Lara. It looked like a man standing with his hands at his sides. There was nobody there to cast it. I sighed and went to find a phone. The lieutenant wasn't going to be happy.



Scene Eight

Miss Chevalier had been getting telephone calls after midnight, the kind where nobody says anything and you begin to feel foolish for saying hello. There had been men reading newspapers in the dark across the street, and once she had seen a wolf standing under the streetlight looking up at her window. There were white moths on the glass most mornings. None of this would have mattered much if Lara hadn't given her the package.

"Keep it somewhere safe," Lara had said.

"What is it?"

"Something I don't want to lose."

That was Lara. Always generous with information. Now there were white carnations scattered across Miss Chevalier's front steps and something making a small careful noise in the alley. She took the gun out of her purse and stood listening. There was a policeman she knew. She could call him. The question was who he'd call after she hung up.



Scene Nine

Lieutenant Jackson told Miss Chevalier to meet him at the corner of Mercy and Noon street. He was waiting under the awning of the closed drugstore with his hands in his coat pockets. When she got close enough he took one of them out. There was a gun in it.

"Spill it, sister. All of it."

She told him about the telephone calls, the men across the street, the carnations and the package. He listened without interrupting. When she finished he nodded toward the telephone booth.

"Call her."

Lara answered on the second ring.

"Where are you?"

"Mercy and Noon."

"Get the package," Lara said. "Then run."

"Where?"

"Anywhere you can hide."

"Who am I hiding from?"

There was a pause.

"Everybody."

Miss Chevalier held the receiver tighter.

"Can I trust anyone?"

"The detective. Maybe the wolves. And especially not the police."

The line went dead. Miss Chevalier put the receiver back on its hook. Outside the booth the Lieutenant was still waiting with the gun. Down at the end of Mercy Street, the wolves came quietly out of the rain.



Scene Ten

The police finally arrested somebody. I got there while they were putting the bracelets on the brunette. I'd seen her before, standing in the rain holding a machine gun. She'd been standing next to her pal, another tough broad. The shoes had been there that night. They were here again. Officer Bolton seemed pleased with himself.

"We got your killer," he said.

"Which one?" I said.

He stopped looking pleased. The brunette wasn't talking. Neither was the Cat leaning against the wall. I didn't know him, but in Noir City that didn't mean much. What bothered me was the man on the other side of her. Fox Man. The last time I'd seen him he'd been lying in the dirt with a bullet in him. His hat had come off. I remembered thinking he wouldn't need it anymore. Somewhere behind all this was the Clown. I could feel him there even when I couldn't see him. The cops had made an arrest. I wished I knew what for.



Scene Eleven

Lieutenant Jackson had found a room in a hotel where nobody asked questions. He didn't like the wallpaper. Miss Chevalier was stretched out on the bed smoking a cigarette.

"You think she'll be all right?"

"We've got the package now."

"That isn't what I asked."

Jackson looked at the telephone. He hadn't reported in. By now the Chief would be looking for him. Maybe people who didn't carry badges would be looking for him too.

"They'll say I killed somebody," Miss Chevalier said.

"Who?"

"I don't know."

"That makes it harder."

"In Noir City?"

Jackson couldn't argue with that. There were wolves in the street below. Every few minutes one of them passed beneath the window and disappeared into the rain. Miss Chevalier looked at the gun in his hand.

"Are you protecting me or arresting me?"

"I haven't decided."

She smiled and took another drag on her cigarette. Jackson looked at the telephone again. It should be okay once they passed the package along. Nobody knew where he was. He hoped.



Scene Twelve

I found Lara at the Top Hat. Teddy Wilson was there with a trio. They were good. Lara belonged in places like this. Low lights, expensive liquor, cigarette smoke. Men with bad intentions.

"You're hard to find," I said.

"You found me."

She smiled. I sat down across from her.

"You have something of mine," she said.

"Do I?"

"I think you do."

"And if I did?"

She looked at me for a while. There were plenty of lies in Lara's eyes. The trouble was there were other things too. She put her hand over mine. I should have moved it. I didn't.

"You don't trust me," she said.

"I'm trying not to."

Behind her, somebody was watching us through the smoke. I couldn't see his face. Above the dance floor silver spoons hung in the air. One of them turned slowly, catching the light.

Lara leaned closer.

"Do you have the package?"

There it was. I looked at her hand on mine. For a second I wished she hadn't asked.

"Come away with me," she said.

"Where?"

"Away. Anywhere. New York."

Her hand tightened around mine. That was Lara. Just when you thought you'd caught her lying, she said something you wanted badly enough to believe in. I looked across the room. The man in the smoke was gone.

"Tonight," Lara said. "We can be gone in the morning."

"We?"

"You and me."

"And the package."

She smiled.

"If you insist."

For about five seconds there was New York, Lara beside me, and Noir City getting smaller through the window. Then I looked at the spoons. They were beginning to drift down.



Scene Thirteen

I was tired, so tired. I stopped across the street from Pop's and looked at the door. Lara had said she'd be there before dawn. The package was in my bag. I'd carried it all over Noir City and still didn't know what was in it. By then I wasn't sure I wanted to. I could take it to the Chief. Assuming the Chief was honest. I could give it to Lara. Assuming Lara was. There were two cats in the shadows beside Pop's. They were dressed better than I was. One of them looked at me. The other one didn't. I decided not to ask. Out over the water the morning zeppelin was coming in. Its lights moved slowly through the fog. Lara and I could be on it. I thought about her hand on mine at the Top Hat. I thought about New York. I thought about all the lies she'd told me and the ones I hadn't caught yet. Then I thought about her. The carnations were back. Somebody had left a dozen of them in the gutter. No shoes this time. No wolves either. I almost missed them. There were still things I didn't understand. The Clown. Fox Man. The moths. The wolves. Why dead men had trouble staying dead. Who wanted the package and what they were willing to do to get it. Maybe Lara knew. Maybe Lara was the reason nobody knew. Across the street someone moved behind the blinds. I put my hand on my bag. The zeppelin sounded its horn out on the water. Dawn was coming. I crossed the street.





The End

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A digital collage by

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2026

Dedicated with love and affection to

Dashiell Hammett

Raymond Chandler

And all the actors, writers, directors
and crews of all those magical
Hollywood Noir films

And to the peculiar alchemy of surrealism

