

# A Four Color Noir

By: P.F. White

## 1. Cops and Robbers

"It's always love or money." says Joey the rat. A superior sneer shakes his whiskers like a two bit skirt as he repeats: "It's always one, sometimes love, or most of the time money."

I tell him that I gots a fist fulla steel and no time to be poetical.

He spills, like I knew he would, coughin up lungs-fulla info like tar from his disgusting lice ridden lungs. It soaks into my simian dome like music, it soaks into the rodents black n' grey fur like blood. Maybe it is blood, at least some of it. Got no time to check.

Some of the info is good, some bad, and I gots no time at all to tell what's what. Gotta play this one fast and loose: The Island City special. Only way to fly is by the seat of your pants. He's right about one thing: It's always about love or money. In some cases it's both. I don't bother to tell the bleedin, coughin Rat none of this. No sense in givin him a bigger head then he's already got.

His beady red eyes and sharp yellow teeth don't sit well with me, nor the whiskers. Always something to snicker at when yer a rat. Never when yer a cop. Life ain't fair.

I take a moment to straighten my red trench-coat after knockin down the Rat. He runs off yelping curses but glad to be alive. Joey ain't nothin but gutter trash. Just like every one of his damn brothers. One day these gutters is gonna get cleaned. Till then he's a useful fink, so I let em live. Don't mean I gotta like it o' course. Just deal with it.

Name's Mack by the way. Folks call me Mack 'The Truck' on account o my size and the way I barrel through cases without ever applyin the breaks. Some gum-shoes go fer finesse and subtlety in their work. They take pains to keep things tidy, quiet, and boring. I say nuts to those rubes an the bottle they rode in on. I'm an eight hundred pound Gorilla with a metal skeleton and a mean streak a mile wide, I do things my way. An my way means hard way, if yeh gets my drift, and I ain't askin.

Joey told me that my girl's bein held by the Cilantro brothers. Those Mook's are a trio o' small time Snakes lookin to make big by takin the mayors daughter hostage in their grease slick coils. They ain't big, and I aim to make em pay fer thinkin they is. No social climbing in my town boys: know your role. Joey jabbered somethin about a pack a Hyena's hangin round on the

payroll, but I doubt it'll amount to anything. The Rat will feed me anything when his skin is on the line, can't say I blame em. Can't say a dozen more wouldn't do the same in his shoes.

I hail a hover-taxi and hop in. The grav thrusters strain to take my simian bulk but eventually they settle. The Bot behind the wheel makes no comment, and for once I'm glad for the city's totally mechanized public services. Less lip and more tip is what I say...not that a flatfoot like me can spare the shine on polite service anyway.

“Where to?” says the bot. Good question.

Firstly I need a Zapper. Usually I operate without one, but the Cilantro's are just dumb enough to make trouble, and just smart enough to bring the firepower to make it hurt. Lucky for me I know just the place to snatch some atomic-fire on the hurry. I mutter the address to the Bot and he takes off with no comment. Nice and smooth, Just like it oughta be.

Most folks let an eight hundred pound Gorilla do what he wants. I suppose that's what got me into the police gig, that and the scratch. A cyber-ape's got bills to pay, and I don't got the patience for much else. It was either the bulls or the heels, and I ain't no heel. Maybe the scratch ain't the same but the respect's a damn sight better when folks is scared of you for the right reasons.

My squawk-box starts a racket, somethin about steerin clear of this one. Direct orders and such. I switch it dead and grin to myself. Like the mayor's gonna care if some two-bit snake-thugs end up dead after gettin his daughter back. I'll probably get a medal. Wouldn't be the first time the big fat kitty in city hall pinned some steel on my chest.

If those yeggs have hurt Lucy I swear to god I'll feed em their own tails. Nobody messes with my girl in my town and lives to tell about it. And I mean nobody.

The taxi pulls up in front of 'Spotted-Dick's Pawn and Gun'. It's a sleazy joint on the South edge of the island, but a discreet one. Plus Spotted-Dick owes me. I toss the Bot behind the wheel a no-nonsense look and squeeze outside. I grunt at him to keep the meter running.

Outside the night-sky is a beautiful shade of bright crimson. Below it the city's skyline of jagged black boxes blink on and off with irregular yellow lights as a carnival of mooks from a thousand species go about their nighttime reverie. An ocean blue half moon glows like a street lamp above it all. It casts mismatched shadows that skirt about in the dark uncertainly, just as scared of the dark as anyone else. I breathe deep the night smells of sweat, fear, and smog. My nose remembers each of the thousand different aromas crammed into this dark patch of heaven that I call my home. I love this town and I'll let no one tell yeh different. In spite of the job, in spite of the criminals, I could never leave this place. It's mine, as much a part of me as my blood or my fur. Lucy understands that. She complains sometimes, but she understands. My perfect white Kitten. What a doll. I swear to God she'll be fine...no matter who I gotta kill.

I jam myself through the pawn-shop door like a whale through a sewer pipe. Spotted-Dick doesn't say anything. The old Leopard sits cool as a cucumber behind his counter, polishing

some little brik-a-brak like it's the most important thing in the world. I approach the counter without a word and look at the selection under glass. The wily yellow Leopard finally speaks up.

"I heard about Lucy through the wire. It's a tough brake Mack. I figured I would stay open a little longer, maybe furnish a friend with something he needs."

I grunt and tap the glass, saying: "Saves me the trouble of having to break in I suppose."

He flips a switch and the counter opens for my inspection. There is a hundred different kinds of hurt under the glass: rays and lasers and lightning and fire of all variety. I pick a Mark Seven Smiles and Wesley atomic ray-gun. It's a serious piece of blazing yellow beauty and not something a normal sap could comfortably tote, let alone fire. Most other folks would use it with two hands but I figure it fits comfortably in just one of my mitts. Dick lets me take it without a word and free of charge. Like I said: eight hundred pound Gorilla, I usually get what I want.

I notice that Dick's prized Mark Eight is missing from its designer case. That thing cost him a fortune to get ahold of and is just about the most illegal piece of hardware in the city. He never uses it and I ain't never even seen one fired outside of picture shows. Needless to say it's what I wanted to be packing. Just as well I suppose, I won't need to shoot down any moons tonight.

The taxi Bot doesn't say anything as I get back into the car. The mark seven is tucked into my coat, the safety already turned off because you never know when some chatty Bot might need a blastin. I tell the driver our next destination and it revs the engine into motion nice and easy. For a tin-head it seems like a good one. I ask its name and it replies in a strict monotone:

"Name is Norm. I heard about your case Mack. This one is on the house."

I grunt at that. I wasn't plannin on paying anyway, but it's nice of him to make the gesture. I wonder if I can trust him. In this town it seems everyone is on someone's payroll and Bots are notorious for their lack of loyalty. Doesn't look like much though. I could probably take him. Why the hell does everyone know about the case? I would feel suspicious if I weren't so angry.

We speed through the darkened city in silence. Lights fly by like bitter memories and I think of Lucy. Love and Money, it's all that matters and its all we got.

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I give the mook another two freight-train hooks to the gut and he crumples to the street. He's a short ugly Hyena cub, fresh off the teat from the looks of him. I feel bad about killing the young ones so I let him off light. He'll be in bed for a few months but then he'll heal. Who knows, maybe the pain will even do him some good. Doubt it though. Call me a cynic.

I muscle the door open, its hinges crying out in pain. I notice a key-ring on the poor sobbing mook and snatch it with my bare foot. He also has a Zapper. Not a classy job like the

Mark Seven, but a tiny little black-box that buzzes like a hornet and probably stings like a sledgehammer. I pocket it. You can never have too much gun when there's killing to do.

The tenement building is slowly dying and you can feel it with your eyes as you step through the door. Sad grey plaster melts slowly off the walls, exposing red-electric wires and howling blue air-ducts. Most of the room numbers have been broken off and graffiti spells crude messages across the corners. There are too many places like this in Island City. Too many hell-holes filled with crime and despair, run by two bit yeggs who think they're slick just cause they can convince a dozen thugs to call em boss.

I trudge the hallway lookin for a way to the top floor. Snakes like the Cilantro brothers always seek a nice secure nest where they can look down on their petty kingdoms and sneer. There doesn't appear to be a working elevator, but I hear voices around the corner.

"Wadda yah mean Mugzy bear iz washed up! Didja see the way he mauled Porky Slugs?"

"Ah my ol man could take Porky, an he don't even have tusks no more. Put the bear against one o' them fight-bots they're buildin on north-side and then you'll see how washed up Mugzy is."

They're talkin about the cage fights down in South-side. Highly illegal in its own right, but tonight I have bigger fish to fry. I edge along the decaying wall and risk a glance around the corner. I can make out a sort of half-finished lounge leading to a service lift. The two yappers are a rust-red Gator and a blue-grey Elephant. Both are sprawled out on chairs with their Zappers in easy reach. Bored, slow, and evil. These thugs ain't young pups. These thugs have had a lifetime of crime to work up a big mean nasty towards the world.

These thugs don't deserve any mercy at all.

The Gator will be no problem if I can take em early, the elephant though...he was bound to be trouble any way you sliced it. This pachyderm was bigger than me and it didn't look like he let any of that bulk go to waste. I draw my mark seven and crank the beam to its max, taking comfort in the feeling of warmth emanating from the plasma charges in my hand. Then everything goes wrong.

The sound of running feet behind me makes me dodge instinctively. A red-ray blast takes a bite out of the wall and I return fire in kind catching the first shooter in the face and turning it into a cloud of boiling red mist. His body tumbles to the ground soundlessly. Oddly enough the thug looks like the Hyena I put down outside, only bigger. There are three more behind him lookin hot and ready to let fly with the same ugly black Zappers that junior was carrying. A pack then, maybe even a family of sorts. This was going to get ugly.

I draw my second Zapper as I spray a wild volley with the Mark seven. The Hyena pack dives for cover in all directions, tripping over one another in a comical display of ineptitude. This gives me an opportunity to retreat and I take it. My feet carry me backwards and I let loose with both guns. The two guards around the corner are no doubt surprised to see a black Gorilla in a

red trench-coat blazing away with some two fisted action, but they don't show it. Instead the thugs go for their Zappers like professionals. I decide to push my luck to eleven and mash a rock against a hard place.

Hunching as low as possible I ram my body as hard as I can against the Elephant. He doubles over around me and provides me with a temporary meat shield. Right on cue a series of shots hit on all sides and carve meaty holes through my melting Elephantine companion. The Elephant falls and I return fire with devastating fury, taking a few hits to my shoulders and ribs but giving back nothing but atomic death. Two Hyenas fall with a dozen wounds before my guns run dry.

The mark seven is on the verge of overheating, the black-box is a melted ruin and I'm out of luck. There's a moment of brief quiet as the high pitched whine and charge leaves the air and the only noise is the steady drip of charred blood. Some of its mine of course but nothing I can't walk off. I feel the Gator put the muzzle of his Zapper against my face, the gun is hot enough to singe my flesh but I don't squirm. Small potatoes to a scrapper like me. The Gator says something snide but I don't pay attention. It all sounds the same after awhile. The remaining Hyena laughs hysterically.

I can hear reinforcements stirring in their tenement rooms. Bleary-eyed goons wondering aloud what all the racket is, and weighing whether they can sit this one out. They won't be deciding for long, so I need to think fast.

Aw who am I kidding? I know exactly what I need to do, and that is to be the biggest angriest Gorilla in the room. I look up at the Gator, my frown turning his smile into utter confusion. I let my rage bleed out my eyeballs, standing to my full high and clenching fists the size of watermelons. His focus drops: fear.

I crush the Gators puny Zapper with one meaty paw. The gun goes off in my hand, burning it down to the shining metal skeleton, so I crush the Gators skull with the other one. Easy as egg-shells.

The Hyena fires desperately into our grapple. Fear combines with inexperience to turn his shots wild as the zapper bucks in his hands. I throw the Gator on him then finish the job on the both of them with my fists. This time I don't go in for the fancy gut pounding business. I aim to crack skulls. You do one nice turn for a yegg in this world and you're gonna pay for it. Mark my words.

I can hear yelling all around me. The place is coming to life, mooks crawling out of their burrowed holes like maggots in a corpse. I grab two working black Zappers from the dead and squeeze into the lift. I don't even feel the pain anymore from my charred wounds. In this world, that can only be a good thing.

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Someone cuts the lift's power halfway to the top. That's fine, I don't have eight hundred pounds of muscle for nothing. I force the roof open and climb to the nearest floor. By now the Cilantro brothers are expecting me, so if I'm gonna get the drop on em then I'm gonna need a way to knock their scales off. The climb gives me an idea.

I run through a deserted floor of abandoned flops filled with bad memories. Yellow paint has faded to grey and the entire place looks like an ancient corpse. I find a window that was once covered in high tech kudzu paint. Piles of blood red flakes lie where the living paint finally died. I grab what was once a couch and throw it through the window. The sudden influx of color and sound feels like a betrayal to this tomb that has long resigned itself to rust and rest. I climb outside.

The city air takes my breath away. Cold and damp with just the right taste of bitter, a rare vintage for a ground dweller who usually keeps his feet on the ground. Lights glare at me from a thousand rooms all around as if the city itself disapproves of my activities. I climb the buildings black exterior with simian ease. My red coat can surely be seen a mile away by anyone with a care to look. I'm sure no one does, there are enough troubles on the street.

Twenty stories up I find the penthouse. There are three blue Snakes, one silver Bot, one black Bear, and no sign of Lucy. I briefly think back to Joey. If the Rat lied to me about this then I'm gonna send him to a special kind of hell. He knows it too...which is why I trusted him in the first place. You don't get to be a long time fink with the Island City Police force without the fear of God put into you.

It's a queer sort of party going on inside though. The Snakes are playing it up like mob-kings holding court, while the Bear has his mitts done up like a palooka and is arguing something with his eyes to the ground. Behind him stands the proud silver Bot with his arms folded and a shiny red plasma-pistol on his belt. I can't hear a word anyone is saying from outside, so I decide to come in.

A short swing of my fist results in a lot of shattering glass. The room turns in horror and I blast the Bot to bits with three shots from one of the compact black zappers. I let myself in easily after that, trying not to step on any broken glass but too mad to care if I do.

"Where's the girl you yeggs?!" I growl at the three Snakes, the Cilantro brothers unless I've got the wrong address. Their tongues dart out in consternation and no one has the gall to say anything. They are obviously looking for a lie so I let em know I'm serious.

Alphonso Cilantro plummets forty stories to his death. I crack a smile as he hisses through the air, his constricted vocal cords preventing him from screaming properly.

"Which one of you jokers wants to join em next?" I ask. I point the box at Leo, the eldest brother and supposedly the toughest. He doesn't bat an eye or flick a tongue. Being cool under pressure is supposedly easier when you're cold-blooded, but I don't believe it as his brother looks ready to mess the floor. The palooka Bear takes a few steps backwards towards the door and I let him. Maybe I'm gettin soft.

"I said-"

But I don't get a chance to repeat myself. I'm hit from behind with what feels like a lightning bolt from God. I crumple to my knees, and do my best to avoid passing out. A slick red pool pours onto the carpeting below me and I can barely keep ahold of the black-box. A familiar voice speaks to me.

"Mack honey, drop the piece. I don't want to have to kill you."

It's Lucy. She makes her way to my front and I can just barely see her through my blurring eyes. She's holding the mark eight in her perfectly white feline paws. The Zapper looks huge compared to her, but I can tell she means business. I drop my gun. I could barely hold on to it anyway.

Love or money, it's what it always comes down to. I thought I knew which was more important to Lucy, but I guess I was wrong.

"Don't look at me like that Mack. It was fun while it lasted. You just got so...square! Suddenly you had this big crusade to bring about justice. We couldn't just have fun anymore. Everything became black and white, cops and robbers, life and death. You didn't give a damn who you stepped on as long as they were the people that father told you to step on. Some of them were nice people, some of them were my friends...but that didn't matter did it Mack? It's all about the job." She wavers for a moment, overcome by emotions and trying to hold back her tears. I suddenly want to both hold her in my arms, and give her a slap in the mouth.

I guess love is like that.

She gathers herself together and begins again, the giant mark eight still glaring at me with its hate filled muzzle.

"Then there's the scratch. You're father's number one enforcer and you make less than a good second story man! I'm his daughter and I'm given even less than that! I'm not asking for much, just nice things you know? Diamonds, champagne, fancy dresses and parties to show them off in. Nice company wouldn't hurt either. You always kept me to yourself like a jewel in a vault, locked away with either you or father from dusk till dawn! Well I'm sick of father and his stuffy old mansion and I don't ever want to see your damn brownstone again!"

She stops momentarily, huffing and puffing with her cute face gone red. I try to grunt out something about right and wrong, justice and chaos, good and evil. Epic stuff you know? But with my guts pouring out onto the floor already my speech comes out as little more than a sour mumble. My mouth refuses to cooperate with my brain, I'm hurt bad. It's actually a frikkin miracle that I can still stand up. No one's ever walked away from a mark eight blast before. It was designed to be used against armored vehicles in war! I somehow doubt I will be the first.

"Ze kittie'sss right cah-pah . Ss-in case you's hav-ont notissed: Ziz world ain't all blacksss and white. Not everyone wantsss to be ze penniless Ssschmuck viz a chip on hisss shoulder! Sssome of us are jus' lookin fer a few good kicksss, ond a kitten to ssshare zem wiz." The sleezy nasal voice of Leo Cilantro cuts me like a knife. The Snake even wraps his slimy blue coils around Lucy, who surprisingly doesn't flinch at the touch.

And somehow that is the last straw. My anger, boiling out with each drop of blood finally reaches a fever pitch. To hell with the injury, to hell with the mark eight, to hell with love! I draw my mark seven and the second black-box with a single fluid motion and spray atomic fire as fast as my trigger fingers will pull.

Everything happens in a flash as vengeance and hate aim my shots better than any marksmanship training. Leo falls to cinders as my blasts tear apart his serpentine body. The Mark seven explodes in my hand in a burst of blinding white energy, overheating from a lack of proper cooling. My hand probably goes with it but I don't feel a thing. I kill the last Cilantro brother as he makes a dive for safety, the black-box tearing a hole through his head big enough to fit my fist through. The palooka runs for the exit in the confusion. Fires erupt from the residual heat and the lights flicker as static charge fills the air. Then a great weight strikes me in the chest and I feel the open air rushing past me.

I notice the sky is the same color as my blood and the thought gives me little comfort. The black buildings around me look like eager spectators curious as to what will happen next. My eyes close for a moment and then I feel the impact.

Love and money? Who gives a damn.