

The Perils of Josephine

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She checked her makeup in the mirror one last time. Not too made up, just enough to make her look like the up-and-coming professional woman she wanted her... well, *victim* sounded predatory... mark, that worked... her mark to believe she was.

Tommy had briefed her on him - Ed Straker, CEO of Harlington-Straker Studios. American ex-military, divorced, rarely spoke to the press. Many of the other senior employees of the company were also ex-military. An odd coincidence, if it *was* a coincidence. Tommy didn't think it was. He was convinced there were strange and possibly nefarious things going on there. And if there were strange things happening at a film studio somebody might be willing to pay very well for that kind of information. And if there weren't, well, there might still be information to gather and sell.

She checked her watch - only a few minutes early. She double-checked the tape-recorder in her purse. The last thing she wanted was for the batteries to run out before she'd gotten what she'd come for.

A disinterested young woman in reception pointed her to the CEO's office. The woman seated inside Straker's outer office was older with frosted hair and sharp eyes. She was dressed informally, but Josephine knew the dress wasn't ready-to-wear.

The woman smiled expectantly.

"I'm Jo Frazer from Global News Service," Josephine said. "I have an appointment with Mister Straker."

The smile didn't change. The woman picked up one of the phones from her desk and spoke into the hand set. "Jo Frazer, the reporter from GPS is here, Mister Straker."

"Did he make an appointment?" a clear male voice demanded through the speaker.

The woman seemed amused by Straker's assumption that 'Jo Frazer' was a man. "Yes, sir, you agreed to it last week."

"Give me a few minutes," the voice said.

The woman hung up and gestured to the leather bench by the window. "Mister Straker will be right with you."

Josephine settled onto the bench. "So, how long have you worked for Mister Straker?"

The woman seemed to consider the question as she went back to whatever she'd been doing when Josephine entered the office. "Seven years, now," she said finally.

"And how is he to work for?"

"I thought you were here to interview Mister Straker, not his staff," the woman said.

"Background, that's all. Sometimes the best way to find out about a man is to find out what type of people he surrounds himself with."

"Mister Straker is a man who demands excellence," the woman said. Josephine detected more than a hint of smug pride in the statement. "He surrounds himself with people willing and

able to give him just that."

A light over the inner door turned green and the intercom buzzed. "I'm ready, Miss Ealand," the same male voice as before announced.

"Yes, sir." Miss Ealand sounded amused. She pressed a switch and the inner door slid open. She motioned for Josephine to enter Straker's inner sanctum.

Seated at a broad desk was a man with white-blond hair cut in an almost Roman style. He didn't bother to look up from his papers as she entered.

"Now, before we start, I must tell you I'm a very busy man, Mister Frazer," he began, still not lifting his head. Josephine stepped closer to the desk, letting her shadow fall across the papers. Finally, he looked up at her, blue eyes widening as he realized his mistaken assumption.

"I must apologize," she said, breaking into a smile. "My name is Josephine Frazer. I sometimes find that in a man's world, 'Jo' is more convenient."

"Hmm," Straker murmured. He had recovered his composure quickly. "Well, is it a man's world?" he asked with a curious smile as he sat back in his chair.

"I think so," she said, laughing a little. "I hope you'll forgive me." She was still standing, waiting for his next move.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Straker said as though suddenly remembering the proper protocol. "Please sit down." He indicated a chair not far from the desk. She pulled it closer and arranged herself in the chair. "Well, fire away, Miss Frazer," he invited.

She opened her purse and pulled out her note pad and pen. As she did so, the front flap fell forward, exposing the inside lining and the wire going to the microphone. She hurriedly folded the flap over and set her purse on the floor, hoping Straker hadn't noticed.

"And now, how long have you been head of the studio, Mister Straker?" she asked.

"You, ah, tape-record the interview and take notes?" he asked. He gave her a disarming smile. At least she thought it was meant to be disarming. There was still a hard calmness in his eyes. "I noticed the microphone in the front of your purse," he explained.

Her heart sank as she scrambled for a plausible explanation. "Oh, that's to insure I don't misquote you. And the note pad's for my impressions."

"Of me?"

"I think first impressions are so important," she said sweetly.

"I think so, too," Straker agreed with a tiny chuckle.

Despite his reputation as a difficult man to deal with, Straker was promising to give her a good interview. Pity she had no contacts at GPS. They might have been willing to buy it from her.

* * *

Miss Ealand was still hard at work on whatever it was when Straker keyed open the inner door. He followed Josephine out of the office. To her surprise, he hadn't noticed that she'd left her purse with its microphone and recorder sitting next to his desk. That was a piece of good luck. Maybe it would pick something up that she and Tommy could use.

"Well, I'll walk you to your car," Straker announced.

Again Josephine scrambled mentally for an appropriate response. "Thank you," she said after only a slight pause. "I thought the age of chivalry was dead."

Straker chuckled. "Oh, no. I have to go up on the studio lot. It's on my way."

Josephine's heart sank. With no one in the office, the recorder was useless. "Good bye," she said with false brightness as Straker opened the outside door and ushered her though.

She followed him through a side door to the car park. Then she led the way to her car.

"Very smart," Straker commented when he caught sight of her little sports car.

"I've earned it," she said, not bothering to keep the pride out of her voice. She had earned it, just not in the way she knew he'd assume. It was part of the front, the window dressing. Men generally liked fast cars and assumed a fast car was driven by a fast woman. That assumption only helped her. She opened the car door and slid behind the steering wheel. "Well, thank you. You've been very kind."

"A pleasure."

"Good bye," she said, turning the key in the ignition.

"Miss Frazer." He gave her a nod and walked away. She sat and watched as he disappeared around a corner. Hurriedly, she turned off the car and went back into the building to retrieve her purse.

Miss Ealand was surprised to see her, but Josephine managed to breeze past her before she could stop her. Josephine wanted to look at the papers left on Straker's desk, but Miss Ealand had come to the door and was watching her suspiciously. Josephine grabbed her purse and hurried out.

* * *

She treated herself to a long lunch before heading to one of the motels she liked to stay at when 'working'. It was quiet and the manager wasn't at all curious.

On entering her room she headed straight for the phone. Tommy wasn't going to be happy with her news that he was going to have to find some other way to prove his claims. She seriously doubted she'd be invited back for a second interview with Straker.

"Miss Frazer?"

The voice was impossibly familiar. She hadn't realized she'd left the door open. "How did you find me?"

"The studio gate logs all license plate numbers," Straker explained. "From that I got your address. I called and they gave me a couple of places where I might find you. From there, it was a simple process of elimination." He paused, looking over the room. She had the impression he was disappointed.

"Who do you work for?" he asked. His voice was ice cold.

"Myself," she said, challenging him to call her a liar.

"And sell whatever you get to the highest bidder, hmm?"

"Look, I'm sorry I lied," she said, hoping he'd believe her. "But if I hadn't said I was from GPA, you wouldn't have seen me at all, would you?"

"Just give me the tape, Miss Frazer, and we'll call it a day," Straker said.

The tape? Surely he knew there was nothing on it. There'd been nothing in the office to record.

"The tape, Miss Frazer!"

She shivered at his tone, pulled the tape from her purse and handed it to him. He glanced at it.

"You've played it back," he stated.

"There wasn't time," she spat. There was something very, very, strange going on. The head of a film studio worried about a blank tape? And why do it himself? Surely he had underlings to handle the situation. Suddenly she knew she had to listen to that tape.

He turned to leave, the tape still in his hand. She grabbed her purse and swung it at him. He fell to his knees and she grabbed the tape before running out to her car.

She was well down the road when she realized there was bronze EuroFord Omen behind her. Her car was fast, but the Omen was faster. It pulled abreast of her and she recognized the driver - Straker.

She put her foot into the accelerator but it was no use. The bigger car was faster and Straker didn't seem to care that he was on the wrong side of the road. Then there was a honking horn and in the corner of her eye she saw the Omen slewing into her lane. She stood on the brakes, throwing the steering wheel over hard to get out of his way. Her car skidded into the ditch as the Omen screeched to a halt just ahead of her.

The truck that had been coming toward them honked furiously at them as it passed.

* * *

"What now? The police?" Josephine asked. Straker was driving her back to the motel, the tape safely tucked in his jacket pocket. The tow-truck he had called had already pulled her car from the ditch. A tie-rod had come loose, but the driver was sure the nearest garage wouldn't have it repaired until late morning, at the earliest.

"Who are you?" Straker asked, ignoring her question.

"Jo Frazer, freelance reporter, failed," she said with a grimace. "I've only had one article published in the last month." She wasn't sure if he believed her or not. If not then... well there were worse things than jail.

He drove past the motel and she had to fight down her fear. No one knew she was with him. No one knew where she was. Tommy might worry but even he hadn't known her plans. She could disappear from the face of the Earth and no one would be the wiser.

"My motel is back there," she said, trying to keep her voice from shaking.

"I know."

To her relief, Straker pulled into the parking lot of the King's Arms, a posh restaurant-bar just off the main road. Josephine had heard of but had never been there - it was too pricey for her budget.

It was getting near dinner time and the lot was almost full, but Straker managed to find an open space not too far from the entrance.

There were no tables open in the dining room and it was a forty-five minute wait to be seated. However, there were still a few open tables in the lounge. Straker found one near a quiet corner.

"Why did you do it?" Straker asked after the waiter had taken their drink order and left.

"It's a dirty world," she said. "Sometimes you have to cut a few corners."

"To get what you want?" Straker asked. "Like that car of yours?"

She gave him a bitter laugh. "The car? It's on hire. All part of the front."

She suspected he already knew that wasn't strictly true. The car was on lease, rather than being a rental. But even a lease was far less expensive than a purchase.

The waiter returned with their drinks. She had ordered a gin and tonic. His choice was coffee.

"Does it matter?" she asked when the waiter had gone.

"Well, let's say, I'm interested."

"You've heard it all before."

"I'm a very good listener."

"With an ice cold, clinical outlook."

He simply watched her for a long moment.

"You don't believe me, do you?" she observed.

"You know, there's one thing I hate," he said. His voice was harsh. She stiffened, suspecting the worst.

"It's eating dinner alone," he finished with a little smile.

* * *

Straker stopped at a little mart and picked up some groceries and a bottle of wine. Then he drove to a well-kept duplex. By Josephine's calculations they were only a few miles from the studio complex. It certainly wasn't the digs she'd expected of a high-powered studio executive. No security that she could see, certainly not a gated community. The house was small and mundane.

Straker hefted the sack of groceries onto one hip, unlocked the front door and let her inside.

"Hmm, nice," she commented, looking around the living room. It was nice. The furniture wasn't cheap and the walls were covered with various collections of things - antique pistols, art prints. There were even a few sculptures. Josephine was fairly certain the prints were numbered lithographs and the sculptures were expensive originals, even if she couldn't identify the artist.

"Well, it suits me," Straker said with a smile. "Well, I'll get things moving in the kitchen."

"Can I help you?"

"No, I can handle it," he said. He set the sack down and started unloading it on the kitchen counter. Then he snapped his fingers in annoyance. "I left the wine in the car."

"I'll get it," she volunteered. He handed her the keys to the Omen and she headed out to his car. She considered taking the car and running but dismissed the idea. Grand theft auto wasn't something she wanted added to her record.

She retrieved the bottle from the back seat and went back inside.

Straker was on the phone with someone. He held the receiver out to her. "Come and say hello to Miss Ealand."

She took the phone, handing Straker the bottle of wine. "Hello, Miss Ealand," she said into the receiver. "You're working very late tonight. Hope to see you again soon. Good bye now."

"Good bye," Miss Ealand said. Josephine handed the phone back to Straker. He put the phone to his ear and listened a moment.

"Yes, that'll be fine," he said to whatever it was Miss Ealand had told him. "Good night, Miss Ealand." He hung up the phone and turned to Josephine. "Well, why don't you help yourself to a drink, and I'll go and break out the can-opener."

"Fine," she said with a little laugh, holding out his keys. He put out his hand and she dropped them into his palm.

"Thanks," he said, putting them in his pocket.

Josephine fixed herself a drink from Straker's small bar. There was gin, whiskey, vodka - all expensive brands. Only the whiskey had been opened. She chose the gin.

She replayed the conversation with Miss Ealand. Why had he insisted she speak with his secretary unless it was to prove she was here? Was Miss Ealand his safety net in case something happened to *him*? Was he in the habit of bringing home strange women? Miss Ealand certainly didn't sound surprised to hear her voice on the phone. Was this a side to Straker no one else knew? Was it something she and Tommy could exploit?

Soon, he had dinner ready. She sat opposite him, sipping her wine from a pewter goblet. Dinner was piscine with *giardiniera*, a green salad with a homemade vinaigrette. Straker had

coffee instead of wine.

"You know, Ed, you're a terrific cook," she said, pushing aside her empty plate. It had been very good. He was obviously a man who knew his way around a kitchen.

"I just follow the instructions on the can," Straker said with a small self-depreciating laugh.

"The wine was great," she said, taking another sip. "You should have had some." She looked around the room once more. "You know, you have a nice home here."

"A place to sleep," Straker said with a slight shrug. "You know, it's funny, Jo, I enjoyed today," he said, pouring her another glass of wine. "Ever since my divorce, I've kept myself pretty much to myself. You know how it is."

"Yes, I do know," she said. He sounded sincere and she wondered where he planned to take this. The wine was making her muzzy headed.

* * *

Straker had turned the lights down. Wagner was playing on the stereo system. He watched her from his place on the leather sofa as she looked around the room, at the artwork, the small collection of sculptures.

She inspected one of the sculptures, running her hand down the smooth marble shape. She noticed that there was nothing personal in the room. There were no family photographs, no awards, nothing with his name on it. It was curious.

After a short time, she came to sit beside him on the sofa. She settled back, laid her hand on his chest. His pulse was racing. That was odd, too. She hadn't imagined he was nervous, maybe even more nervous than she was. He had said he'd kept himself to himself - maybe it *had* been that long since he'd been with a woman.

She smiled in an invitation and he accepted it.

His kisses were gentle and tentative and he let her take the lead. He tasted of smoke. At least Tommy didn't taste of smoke.

They were interrupted by the phone. Straker got up to answer it. "Straker," he said into the receiver.

It was time to take this to the next level. She got up and made her way to the bedroom while he finished speaking to whoever it was on the phone. She had just slipped out of her dress when she heard the music stop.

She looked up to see him standing in the doorway. His expression was grim and maybe a bit disappointed. He picked up her dress and handed it to her.

"What's the matter, Ed?"

"Get out," he ordered.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"I know, that's what's wrong," he said, voice cracking. "One article published in the last month? The car on hire? You were right about that the first time. You earned it, the hard way. Just what did you have mapped out for me? You plan to take me for all you could get? Or maybe something more cozy, like an idyllic weekend somewhere, and a guy with a camera just happens to burst in at the right time?"

"Maybe, at first," she said, pulling her dress on. It wasn't the truth, exactly. It hadn't been her plan at all until he invited her over.

"Oh, come on, don't give me that," Straker spat. His voice was sharp and bitter. "Don't tell me there's an emotion left in that pretty little head. You're getting soft!"

"Soft?" she shot back angrily. "That's the way you get eaten alive." She pulled up the

zipper on the back of her dress and grabbed her purse from the floor. "Oh, you wouldn't understand. It's a man's world, remember?"

She stalked out of the house, slamming the front door behind her.

She stopped at the car, realizing she was going to have to walk to the mart and call a cab. Then she realized she was shaking. She had no idea how he had found out about her past. None of the other men she'd seduced had bothered to check her out, at least not until she was through with them. So why had Straker?

What *had* been on that tape?