

CHICKEN AND BARLEY MOON

“In Medieval times, the English called this the Barley Moon,” Charlie Austen announced, “so I think we should have another beer.” He reached into the Playmate, opened and passed a cold *Carib* to his bride of six days.

The late-August full moon seemed even brighter as it reflected off the stillness of the Caribbean Sea, and the honeymooners basked in the silvery glow as an eighty degree breeze wafted over them.

Lori’s smile caught him off-guard, the brightness as luminous as the lunar orb itself. “You’re making that up.” She touched it to her full lips and took a long swig, making a satisfied “ahhh!”

“Am not,” he sing-sang, childishly. “If the second full moon comes in September instead, it’s called a Harvest Moon. That, I’m sure you’ve heard of.”

“Of course,” she giggled.

“Because of the song, right? Did I tell you when I was a kid, I sang in a Barber Shop Quartet. That was our big number, *Harvest Moon*. We practiced all summer, and we made it to the finals at the Parish Talent Show. Then Timmy O’Brien’s voice changed...”

She ignored him. “It’s so beautiful,” she whispered, as if afraid to be overheard, even though the locals had closed up their huts and gone home. “The moon I mean, not the song.”

“I was a Tenor back then,” he went on. “We did *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*, too.”

She smirked and he smiled back and said, “I told you that one already, huh?”

She nodded and took another gulp.

“Well, we *did* practice a lot, all summer,” he mumbled to no one in particular.

There was no reason to concern themselves with eaves-droppers. They were, in fact, the only humans on this two mile stretch of sand on the Dutch side of St. Maarten. Their rented SUV

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sat fifty yards away, ready to transport them back to their luxury hotel for one more night before their return to the reality of New York life.

He followed her gaze, and recalled what she had said. “Not as beautiful as you, Mrs. Austen,” he grinned as he slipped his arm around her thin waist.

She giggled playfully, “You’re insatiable. Do you know that? Can’t you think about anything else?”

He playfully bit at her ear, and growled, “Nope!”

Their blanket sat high above the shoreline, the steepness a testament to the storms that ripped through the area every September. Those same storms, plus the summer warmth back north were the reasons for the dearth of other tourists.

Come January and February, the high season, the decks on the Lolos behind them would be jammed with sweaty bodies, writhing to Bob Marley as he sang about shooting the sheriff. But now, it was as if they were alone in the universe.

Oh sure, they had met a few couples this week who had only scheduled a St. Maarten honeymoon because they were on limited budgets, the low season meaning much-cheaper hotel rooms.

But Charlie and Lori weren’t concerned with cost. The only important thing was to be together, quickly. They’d only met in April, when Charlie joined a new gym after changing practices and relocating from Midtown Manhattan to Long Island.

Being a divorce lawyer, he could move freely from firm to firm without concern for a following of clients. They were usually one-and-done for at least a few years, and they could always track him down if another marriage went south.

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One dark-haired trainer caught his fancy on that first day, and although originally rebuffed, Lori Anne Sawicki soon succumbed to his charms and accepted an invitation to drinks. She was seventeen years younger than his forty-two years, with a body that young men dreamed about; not waif-like, but no Kardashian, either. He pulled out all the stops: drinks, then dinner, then club-hopping by limo into the City. They awoke in each other's arms in her apartment, a surprisingly small studio unit in Bayside, Queens.

A confirmed bachelor, Charlie Austen had fallen and fallen hard. Within a month, he told his buddies he was rethinking his marital choices. Within two, he was proposing, and, on July Fourth, she finally accepted.

How did I get so lucky? he asked himself.

The non-denominational ceremony and reception were swiftly organized and held on his father's lawn in Sand's Point on Long Island. The huge tent over-looked Long Island Sound. His father knew people in the business, and had the whole thing catered for a hastily-prepared guest list of just over two hundred. No expense was spared.

The whirlwind romance had finally dropped out of light-speed this week, and Charlie was showing signs of tiring: it's not easy to keep up with a twenty-five year old.

By Day Six, they both were tiring of dining in empty restaurants, where they were treated more like annoyances by some staff, who seemed just as happy to sit around and drink with the regular local bar customers. So it came as a relief when Lori suggested a picnic on their favorite beach for their last night.

Tonight they arrived just before the Lolos closed. During the day, the two local beach bars served fresh fish, chicken and burgers, cooked on an open propane and charcoal fire in

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halved oil barrels. The bar served a full range of alcohol, but specialized in frozen fruit cocktails from the blender.

After sipping their two Pina Coladas, Charlie ordered their food at Mama Rosie's kitchen. Lori noticed the handsome, tanned man sitting at the end of the bar. The brazen hunk winked and raised his glass to her, but she looked away, remembering her new husband's jealous streak.

So, for sixteen dollars American, the newlyweds feasted on freshly-broiled fillet sandwiches, spicy jerk chicken and French Fries, toasting with *Caribs*, the local beer, from their Igloo Playmate. And now that they were alone, with the floor show being the moon atop its shimmering reflection on serene Mullet Bay. A lone 35-foot sailboat bobbing on its mooring a hundred yards off shore. It had been there when they arrived and Lori picked out their beach spot, and still showed no signs of life.

She smiled suggestively and asked, "Have you ever gone skinny-dipping?"

"Really, Lori? Here?"

"Sure, why not? There's nobody around. Unless you ate too much and now you're Chicken!"

"Am not!" he laughed.

"Are too!"

She was up now, moving down the slope to the softly-lapping surf, leaving a trail of beach wrap, swim top, then bottoms as she hit the water. Her tanned, toned body cast quite a silhouette, and Charlie was sure he'd remember his mind's snapshot for the rest of his life.

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She looked spectacular in the pale moonlight, splashing around, calling “Charlie’s a chicken! Charlie’s a chicken!” If anyone had been there, they surely would have heard her. Her skin seemed almost light-blue now, and he followed her down, tearing off his tee and shorts.

The cool water refreshed but sent a chill through his sun-baked body, and he felt surprisingly alive. She laughed and splashed around, going deeper as he tried to get her into his grasp. He finally caught her, wrapping his arms around her, feeling her tight muscles and the warmth of her flesh against him.

Their laughter ended in a slow, deep kiss, and for now the world was theirs, and no one else mattered. They hardly noticed the slow movement was drawing them deeper, until they had to tread water.

Lori giggled again, “You’re going to drown us,” she said, pushing away, and Charlie kicked and stroked to follow her.

“Unggh!” he coughed, as his head went under, but he came back up, flailing his arms. “Hey,” he called out before going down again, as Lori swam toward swallower water.

When she had gotten to waist-deep, she turned for the first time, seeing Charlie’s arms flailing, and then he went down for the third time.

“Charlie!” she called, but he didn’t answer. At first she froze, then took a few cautious steps back toward him, seeing only a few bubbles and a ripple where her husband had been.

Cautiously, she approached, waiting to see him break the surface again, looking left and right, calling out, “Charlie?”

But there was no answer, and the bay became still again. She stood, looking out to the sailboat, but there was still no movement, and she slowly turned and made her way back, picking up their belongings along the way, then thought better of it and left them.

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As she toweled off, she saw the headlights of another SUV and heard the door open. It was the tanned hunk from the bar.

“Everything alright?” he asked.

“Perfect,” she answered with a smile.

“Okay, good. Just make sure you sound frantic when you call it in.”

She nodded. “I *know* what to *do*, Lou.”

“Okay,” the man said, turning. “I’ll see you back in the States.”

“I love you,” she called after him.

The SUV roared to life as he called back, “Love you, too.”

She flipped open her rented cell phone and dialed, screaming, “Hello, Police? Hurry, quick! My husband...!”

She sat sobbing, as an officer wrapped another blanket around her. The search was continuing at Mullet Bay and they had brought her to the precinct when she refused medical attention.

“Can we get you more coffee, Mrs. Austen?” the female officer asked, not sure if Lori was drunk at this point.

“No,” she replied, turning her attention to the detective, a large dark-skinned black man whose eyes seemed permanently bloodshot. “Haven’t they found him yet?”

“I’m sorry, Ma’am, but there are some strange currents in that area.” He didn’t include that it may take days for a floater to bob to the surface.

“Maybe you need more boats? How about the Navy, the US Navy. He’s a citizen, you know.”

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“We’re doing everything within our power, Ma’am,” he assured her.

He was supposed to be wedged between two large boulders only 100 yards off-shore, she thought. This is going to delay transporting the body back home.

“I.. I have to notify his family. There are arrangements that must be made...”

“As I said,” the detective repeated, “the satellite is down, so calls off-island aren’t going through.

That makes no sense at all, she thought. But, if I protest too much, they may get suspicious. “I’m sorry,” she finally told him. “I’m just so upset right now.”

“That’s totally understandable. We hope to hear something soon. For now, why don’t you just try to relax.” His phone buzzed, and he answered, “Yes?”

He’s looking at me. It must have something to do with Charlie, she surmised. Good, let’s get this over with.

He began to rise. “Will you excuse me?”

She bit her tongue and nodded.

There was a commotion in the next office, she could see, a prisoner, based on all the cops. And through the glass partition, she saw him. It was Lou, her lover, and their eyes met.

What happened? She tried asking telepathically, but got no answer in return. Did you get in a fight at the airport? Or Immigration? Or ...?

“Shine on, shine on, Harvest Moon...” she heard.

She turned to see Charlie, still in his bathing suit with a towel around his shoulders. Stunned, her mind raced, until she blurted, “Charlie! My God, you’re alright! Oh, Baby, I was so worried.” She started toward him but was restrained by the female cop.

“What? What is this?”

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Charlie stood, his arms crossed.

“Charlie?”

He shook his head. “You could have had it all, Lori, I loved you that much.”

“But, Honey,” she pleaded, “I don’t understand.”

“What you and your boyfriend didn’t understand was, even during the off-season, five thousand bucks isn’t enough for murder. My friend Dombie here Googled me, found that I was a fairly successful attorney and figured I could make him a better deal. He was right.”

A thin black man with long dreads gave her a wave. “Hello,” he said with a smile.

The detective was back now, listening.

“Oh, I didn’t believe him at first, but then I convinced him to tell his story to Detective Mack.” He nodded to the large man.

“Dombie did what you and Lou asked, but he brought two tanks, and we swam back to his sailboat. It was just a matter of picking up Lou at the airport.”

Tears welled-up in her eyes as she pleaded, “Me? No, it was all Lou’s idea, I swear. Ask Dombie. I never met the man.”

It was the detective’s turn. “I had one of my men in the bushes when your boyfriend pulled up. He recorded everything. Then, we followed your accomplice to the airport.”

“Baby...?” she pleaded, but there was an emptiness in his eyes that sent a chill through her.

“You know,” he said with a mocking chuckle, “I still didn’t believe it until he tugged on my leg. I guess I was wishing on a star, and not the moon.” He turned to the detective.

“Do you need me for anything right now?” Charlie asked.

“Nothing that won’t wait until tomorrow,” Mack replied.

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Charlie turned abruptly, and left, not bothering to look back. He was trailed by Dombie, who shrugged and waved goodbye to Lori. Once outside in the humid night air, Charlie said, “Give me a lift back to my hotel. I’ll buy you a drink, and write you a check.”

“Deal,” Dombie replied, behind a smile as bright as Lori’s was earlier.

The wind whipped through the Jeep convertible as Dombie maneuvered through narrow curved roads, over the mountain, on his way to the Island King Hotel.

At the top of the peak, Charlie looked out on the Caribbean Sea at the Barley Moon, and thought, *Well, Charlie my boy, you were wondering how you got so lucky? Now you know.*