

Even Butterflies Can Sting

by Mike Resnick

An Eli Paxton Story

If Marlowe could have laughed, he'd have been rolling on the floor, holding his sides and gasping for breath.

Marlowe's my dog. I don't like him much. He doesn't like me at all. But we're all each other's got, so I feed him and he hangs around.

Right at the moment, he was staring intently at me as I was struggling with the black tie. He'd been watching me for the better part of half an hour, as I cursed my way through the suspenders, cumberbund, and the cufflinks. He cocked his head to one side and grinned -- yeah, I know, dogs can't grin ... but no one ever told that to Marlowe -- as if to say that everything that went before was merely amusing, but my struggle with the tie was hilarious.

It wasn't that I was a stranger to tuxedos. I'd worn one to my junior prom in high school, and that had only been 27 years ago. Well, maybe 28. I could have sworn that first one was a lot easier to get into.

Maybe it's just that I was out of practice. I only owned two neckties, and I never untied them. I just slipped them over my head and slid the knots up, like you do on a noose. The only cufflinks I'd seen in the past decade were the fakes that Benny Fourth Street gave me as collateral for a twenty-dollar loan right before he took off for Gulfstream Park.

I looked at the face in the mirror. It glared back accusingly at me, as if to ask why I was inflicting all this suffering and humiliation on it.

The answer was easy: money.

I can still remember receiving the call from Bill Striker. He and I had been cops at the same time, and we had become private eyes at the same time. And there all resemblance ceased. The Striker Agency was the biggest in Cincinnati. Their clients all knew how to tie black ties, except for the really rich ones, who just knew how to hit home runs or throw touchdown passes or sing rock songs. My clients -- on those occasions I had any clients -- paid me with phony cufflinks.

Striker had heard I'd needed money (so what else was new?), and he thought he'd throw a little work my way. I was just a bit leery, since the last time he'd tossed me a bone it had teeth and damned near bit my ass off in a Mexican slum. But his information about my finances was dead on, so I figured I would at least listen to his proposition.

It seems that one of his clients was Carla Bigelow, the uncrowned Queen of the Cincinnati Opera Society. The organization was having its annual formal dinner, and she was planning on wearing her diamond earrings, which were worth a cool half million an ear, and she wanted a bodyguard. But no one ever gets as rich as Carla by tipping the chauffeur or remembering the maid's birthday, and she told Striker that since she was leaving the matching necklace at home, and it was worth another two million, she would only pay a third of his agency's usual fee.

He spent an hour trying to explain that what she wore didn't influence the service she would get, and when she refused to budge, he knew it was time to farm the job out to someone who needed the work -- and the aggravation -- more than he did.

Enter Eli Paxton, cut-rate protector of opera ladies' diamonds.

At least, I would be, if I ever figured out the intricacies of the damned tie.

I finally managed to wrestle it into a respectable bow. I checked my watch -- 6:30. Her limo would be pulling up in about five minutes. I decided to go downstairs and wait for it.

It was easy to spot. Whiter than a bridal gown and longer than a dinosaur. I opened the back door and bent my head down, preparing to climb in.

"The hired help sits in front," said a wiry silver-haired woman in a brocaded satin pantsuit. She was smoking a cigarette in an exquisite jeweled holder. I didn't even have to check her ears to know it was Clara Bigelow; the manner said it all.

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "I'll be happy to."

"And if you ever work for me again," she added as I closed the door, "learn how to tie a necktie."

If I ever work for you again, I'll know that an ice-skating rink has opened in hell, I thought, but I smiled and assured her I would.

Her driver, a heavysset black guy in a uniform that made him look like a refugee from a halftime marching band, shot me a sympathetic look. He didn't say a word, though. I didn't blame him.

We drove in perfect silence to Nicole's Restaurant. I'd walked past Nicole's a few times, and once in a while I wondered exactly what it was that made its lunches cost a hundred bucks apiece while its dinners ran into _real_ money. Now I'd finally get a chance to find out.

The limo pulled up to the front door. I scrambled out, intent on making a good impression by opening the door for the old girl, but a pair of uniformed doormen, dressed like two of the Three Musketeers, beat me to it. She emerged, shot me a contemptuous glare, and walked into the restaurant. I fell into step behind her and got my first good look at the earrings. I decided it was no wonder that she'd left the necklace behind; if its diamonds were anything like the earrings, she have to add ten pounds of muscle before she was strong enough to wear them all at the same time.

Suddenly she stopped and turned to me.

"You!" she said imperiously.

I looked around, hoping she was speaking to someone else. No such luck.

"What's your name?" she demanded.

"Eli," I said. "Eli Paxton."

"Of the Boston Paxtons?"

"If I am, they've never told me."

She shook her head. "No, you couldn't be. No touch of elegance at all. And that name! No one is called Eli."

"I am."

"Nonsense," she shot back. "You are Elias, and that is what I shall call you."

_Just make sure you pay me \$250.00 and take care of my tux rental and you can call me Jack the

Ripper if it makes you happy._

"Then Elias is what I'll answer to, Miss Bigelow."

"I am not a Miss."

"_Mrs._ Bigelow," I corrected myself.

"_Ms._ Bigelow."

"Whatever you say," I replied pleasantly.

"On second thought, I think you had better call me Clara," she said after a moment's consideration.

"Isn't that a bit familiar?" I said. "After all, I'm just the hired help."

"I'd rather have them think you're my gigolo than my bodyguard," she answered. "Why alert them to the fact that I'm wearing the real earrings?"

It made sense. It also reminded me that when you're as rich as Clara Bigelow, you probably have fakes of all your jewelry. Although _fake_ is a little misleading; I know something about jewelry, and her fakes were probably worth more than most women's real McCoys.

We were ushered into a large private dining room, with an elaborate bar set up at one end.

"Keep your eyes opened, Elias," she said harshly. "I'm not paying you to enjoy yourself."

"We're on the same page, Clara," I said. _I haven't enjoyed myself since this damned evening began._

"Good. Now, what are you going to have for dinner?"

"I hadn't given it much thought," I said. "Maybe a hamburger..."

She looked like I'd just suggested setting fire to the Opera Palace.

"You will most certainly not embarrass me by ordering a hamburger!" she snapped.

"Okay," I said. "A steak, well-done, smothered in onions."

"Shut up."

I shut up.

"Do you like seafood?"

I made a face.

"Their shrimp de jonghe is superb. I will order it for both of us."

I was about to ask if Nicole's supplied doggie bags so I could share this treasure with Marlowe, but one look at her face made me change my mind.

She pulled a cigarette out, inserted it into her holder, and waited until I lit it. "Do you smoke, Elias?"

"Not any more," I said. "Well, maybe a cigar when the Bengals win, but it's been so long since they won that I can't be sure."

"I presume that passes for humor among your friends?"

"It's been known to bring a smile to a face or two," I answered.

"All of them unwashed and unshaven, no doubt," she said, closing the subject.

I looked around, matching faces against their newspaper photos, as the room filled up. There were a couple of bankers, some developers, a handful of local politicians, a pair of professional philanthropists, the owner of a car dealership, and a few faces I was sure I'd never seen before. The average age was somewhere close to 60, and the average tax bracket was somewhat higher than the summit of Mount Everest.

They milled around for maybe 20 minutes. I spotted three other bodyguards -- they all looked as uncomfortable as I did, and they all had bulges under their arms. I also spotted a couple of gigolos; they were too pretty to be bodyguards, too young and unmarked, and they didn't have bulges under their arms. There were a few good-looking women, though it was difficult to tell if they were trophy wives or just trophies.

Suddenly an elbow dug into my ribs.

"Stop staring down Maria Delacourt's neckline and pay attention!" hissed Clara.

"Pay attention to what?" I asked, rubbing my ribcage gingerly.

"He's here!"

"Who's here?"

"Do you see that bald man, the one with the thick glasses, who just walked in?"

I looked and saw a man limp into the room, leaning on a silver-handled cane. "Jason Woodford?"

"That's the one. Watch him like a hawk."

"He's the guy who's trying to bring a pro basketball franchise to Cincinnati."

"He's a thief and a liar!"

"It probably goes hand in glove with owning a sports team," I said.

"I will tolerate no more insubordination, Elias!" she snapped. "I want you to keep an eye on him."

"Are you seriously suggesting that he might grab your earrings and run for it?" I said. "I think I read somewhere that he lost a leg in Korea."

"He is a dreadful man," she said adamantly. "Nothing is beyond him."

"All right, Clara," I said. "I'll make him my special project."

"See that you do."

An old gentleman announced that we'd be sitting down to eat at 7:30, which was coming up fast, and Clara walked over to the table to stake out a pair of good seats for us.

"Elias," she said, after I'd pulled a chair out for her and she'd sat down, "get me a Purple Butterfly."

I looked around, trying to figure out what the hell she was talking about. "I think it's the wrong time of year for them."

"That's a drink, you fool."

"And if I just walk up to the bar and ask for a Purple Butterfly, someone on the other side of it will know what I'm talking about?"

"They'd better," she said ominously. "I've been ordering them here for 40 years."

"Uh ... Clara," I began. "I hate to bring this up, but it's a cash bar, and..." I let the sentence linger and die.

She reached into her purse and pulled a bill out without looking at it. "Here," she said, thrusting it into my hand. "Buy one for yourself, too. And I expect change."

I looked down. It was a fifty. I walked over to the bar and ordered a pair of Purple Butterflies. I half-expected the bartender to laugh in my face. Instead he nodded, muttered "Mrs. Bigelow, of course," and began mixing up a wildly exotic concoction. When he was done he stuck it in the blender for a moment, then poured the purple drink into two glasses, filling them all the way to the top. All that was missing were the paper umbrellas.

I picked them up, realized that I'd never make it back to the table without spilling something, and took a sip of each. They were a little sweet for my taste, but not bad. Maybe the rich folks knew a little something about how to enjoy themselves after all. Maybe I might even eat a few of my shrimp before poisoning Marlowe with the rest of them.

"Here's your drink," I said, handing it to Clara as I reached the table.

"And my change?"

I gave it to her. She counted it to the penny, then dumped it into her purse.

They began bringing out the food just then. There was a lobster soup -- they didn't call it soup; they gave it some other name -- and a salad with vegetables that I'll swear didn't grow within five thousand miles of Cincinnati, and then came the main course. I wasn't three bites into it before I decided to tell the guys at Luigi's Cut-Rate Pizza that they had to add shrimp de jonghe to their menu. I mean, hell, shrimp and garlic and bread crumbs was almost an Italian dish anyway, no matter how fancy they spelled it.

"Don't eat the plate!" whispered Clara disapprovingly as I attacked my meal with increasing enthusiasm.

I finished in two more bites, straightened up, placed my knife and fork on the plate the way I saw a number of other people doing, and waited for dessert. I checked my watch: it was 8:30. The Reds were playing the Dodgers on the road; if the speeches weren't too long, I might even get home in time to hear the last few innings.

The waiters bussed the plates off the table, and Jason Woodford walked over.

"Good evening, Clara," he said.

"Good evening, Jason," she said coldly.

"Tonight is the night," he said with a smile.

"You're welcome to think so."

"I've got the votes," he said.

"We'll see."

"No hard feelings," he said. "You made a good fight of it."

"Go away, Jason."

His gaze fell on her drink. "You still drinking Purple whatever's?" he said, picking it up. "Every year I try to figure out why." He took a sip.

An instant later he staggered as if he'd been shot. He grabbed at his throat, tried to say something, and collapsed onto the table.

Three or four women screamed. A couple of men jumped to their feet. The bodyguards sprang into action, drawing their weapons, looking fruitlessly for a killer.

The bodyguard who had walked in with Woodford searched for a pulse. Then he laid a hand against the old man's neck, but there was no sign of life.

"He's dead," he announced. And then, so softly that no more than half a dozen of us heard it, he added, "Shit! Striker's gonna have my ass for this!"

"Are you working for Bill Striker?" I asked.

"Yeah." He gestured toward the corpse. "The man had enemies out the wazoo."

"Some bodyguard!" snarled Clara Bigelow. It took me a moment to realize she was speaking to me. "Whatever killed him was meant for me! Now take me home before whoever did it tries again!"

"That's out of the question, Clara," I said.

"Why?" she demanded imperiously.

"A murder's been committed. The police will want to question everyone."

"But it's obvious that the killer is in this room!"

"You have four trained bodyguards in this room, all of us armed," I said. "If everyone can refrain from eating and drinking until the police get here, no one else is going to die." I turned to Striker's man. "Make sure none of the cooks or waiters leave." He nodded and raced off to the kitchen, while I considered what to do next.

"I'd better report this to Homicide," I announced.

"You can use my cellular phone," offered a man.

"Thanks," I lied, "but I have to give a very blunt description of what happened, and I don't want to upset any of the ladies present."

Thankfully no one challenged that, and I walked out of the room to the pay phone by the front door, alone with my problem.

I knew who the killer was, and I had no way of proving it.

It was Clara, of course. I'd taken a sip of her Purple Butterfly as I carried it to the table, and I was fine.

Jason Woodford had taken a sip an hour later and he was dead. No one had touched that glass during the interim except Clara.

I didn't know how she'd managed to sneak the poison into the drink, or when, but there was no question that she'd done it. The problem was that it was going to be my word against hers, and if you were a Cincinnatian, you just naturally took Clara Bigelow's word over a broken-down private eye who was moonlighting as a cut-rate bodyguard.

My contact at Homicide was Jim Simmons. We'd been drinking buddies for years. He might believe me. But the last time he believed me when I'd gone up against certain powers-that-be, it almost cost him his job.

Still, I didn't have much choice, so I reached into my pocket for some change -- and my fingers came into contact with something that didn't belong there.

I pulled it out and held it up to the light.

Carla's empty cigarette pack.

Now I knew how she'd smuggled in the poison. She'd been playing with her cigarettes all night. At some point she had emptied the poison at the bottom of the pack into her own drink. Or maybe she'd been even more subtle. She could have emptied it onto a spoon and transferred it that way -- much less attention-getting. It didn't really matter how; the pack itself was enough to convict her.

Except that it was now in my hand, with my fingerprints all over it, and doubtless with enough residue to send me away for a long, long time. I was supposed to use a cellular to report the murder; I wasn't supposed to know what was in my pocket until the police found it.

I knew what I had to do, and I couldn't tell Jim Simmons about it, so I put in an anonymous call to 911 and returned to the room. The corpse still lay on the table, and everyone else milled around aimlessly.

"They'll be here any minute," I said, walking over to Clara.

"They'd better be!" she said.

And indeed they were. I acted startled, accidentally backed into Clara, and made the switch before she even started cursing me for a clumsy fool. She never relinquished her deathgrip on her little purse; I probably couldn't have opened it without someone noticing anyway. All I kept thinking was: Thank God for pants suits.

The cops were thorough. They questioned each diner, and went through their possessions thoroughly. When they came to Clara, they rummaged through her purse, and then a policewoman gently patted her down -- and pulled the empty cigarette pack out of her jacket pocket.

She took a sniff of it, frowned, and handed it to her superior.

I fought back a grin as Clara glared furiously at me. She was hooked -- and there wasn't a thing she could do. What could she say? "I planted it on my bodyguard and the dirty bastard snuck it back into my pocket!"

Everyone knew she smoked. I could produce enough witnesses to prove I gave it up years ago.

Q.E.D., as they used to say in some math class or other.

Later it was reported that she and Woodford had fought all year long over who the opera's next musical director would be, and when it became obvious that he was going to win, she decided to kill him. Most murders are committed for love or money, but I suppose when you don't love anyone and you're worth twenty gazillion dollars, you find other reasons to kill people.

Every year Woodford took a sip of her Purple Butterfly and made some deprecating remark about her taste, which I'm sure he hoped would imply she had no taste in other matters, like musical directors. It had almost become a ritual, and she'd counted on the fact that he would do it again this year. I don't know what she'd have done if he hadn't taken his annual sip.

I stopped by Bill Striker's office the next morning to pick up my two hundred and fifty dollars.

"I don't have it, Eli."

"I'll take a check," I said.

He shook his head. "Eli, you performed a wonderful public service last night, and I'm grateful -- but you don't seriously expect Clara Bigelow to pay us our fee."

I tried Clara's lawyer that afternoon. I think he's still laughing.

I couldn't even claim credit for nailing a killer. There's this annoying little statute that says you can't plant evidence of a crime on someone, even if she's guilty.

The kicker came when I got home. Marlowe must have spotted a bug sometime during the day, and had decided that the best way to kill it was by lifting his leg and drowning the poor little sucker.

I'd just finished scrubbing down the couch and a couple of chair legs when the phone rang.

"Mr. Paxton?" said a precise, high-pitched man's voice.

"Yeah."

"This is Fabulous Formals."

"Look," I said. "If it's about the rental fee, talk to Mrs. Clara Bigelow."

"Mrs. Bigelow paid the fee before you picked it up."

"Then what's the problem?" I asked.

"It seems a dog has chewed one of the pants cuffs past the point of repair. I'm afraid we are going to have to bill you for the purchase price of the tuxedo."

I just hate being a hero.

-- The End --

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