

Rufus Blake Excerpt

(sound of a phone being dialled; then ringing.)

SCENE A

PRISON GUARD: Let me talk to Cinelli. It's Mitch ... Hi, Mr. Cinelli. He's getting out tomorrow ... Yeah, I got it straight from the warden's mouth ... Yeah ... like you thought, she came to see him ... No, I didn't hear exactly where. They were huddled like two lovebirds. ... Okay, if I hear anything more, I'll let you know. Maybe he'll let out something to his cell mate. The guy owes me one ... Yeah, anytime Mr. Cinelli.

ANNOUNCER: North Frontenac Little Theatre presents a radio play — *Hollywood Is My Business*: Rufus Blake, private investigator. Step back into the noir world of Hollywood in the forties and fifties.

RUFUS: Take one moonlight cruise that turned deadly, a corpse that wasn't dead and a pair of blue eyes who should've known better — and you end up with three corpses very much dead.

SCENE 1

RUFUS: It had been a slow month that March. Hell, who was I kidding. It had been a slow six months. Nothing but peeping-Tom divorce cases. Wayward husbands and wives playing the hanky-panky game. Barely paid rent and lights. You'd think being on the Strip just before it enters Beverly Hills would've brought in more high-class clients.

It was late. Nearly midnight. I was down to my last bottle of Scotch. I was thinking of calling it a night when there was a knock on the office door. A nervous knock. Persistent. I listened to it for a while, hoping the knocker would give up. I was tired of divorce cases.

LOLA: Mr. Blake? Are you in there?

RUFUS: It was a woman's voice. Soft. Worried.

LOLA: Mr. Blake, I know you're in there. I saw your light from the street. Please open up. It's a matter of life and death.

RUFUS: It's always a matter of life and death, and that doesn't usually pay the bills. But I guess I'm a sucker for a female voice.

The door's open.

I have one failing — actually, I have many, but that's another story. I never turn down a client, even when I know I should. That's why I always keep my door

unlocked. I figure the smart ones will figure that out and come in. And the dumb ones will walk away when I don't answer. She was smarter than the average. Most never call out to me. I waited for a bit and when the door didn't open, I did the calling out.

I said, the door's open.

LOLA: Yes, I heard you. I'm just ... I'm just nervous. I've never been to a private investigator before.

RUFUS: Well, come on in dearie. I'm as tame as a pussycat.
The door opened slowing. (*sound of creaking door*) I never oil the hinges. They make a good warning system. You never know in my business.

LOLA: Mr. Blake?

RUFUS: In she came. All five-foot-seven of her. She had enough curves on her to pitch for the Yankees. An hourglass figure that could hold back the sands of time. And a pair of dark eyes that seemed to be laughing and crying all at once. She was dressed in black. All black. From her hair down to her calf-high boots. With a tight-fitting evening dress in the middle.

LOLA: Mr. Blake, you've got to help me.

RUFUS: So you said.

LOLA: It's my sister. She's ... she's missing.

RUFUS: Missing? As in kidnapped, or she's just gone on a holiday?

LOLA: No. On both counts. Do you mind if I sit down? I feel a little faint.

RUFUS: No. Help yourself.

LOLA: Thank you.

RUFUS: There was something screwy about the woman. It was the look I saw in between "thank you" and her sitting down. Like a woman I once came across. She had killed her husband to get the insurance. And when the insurance man wouldn't pay out, she killed him. That look didn't fit the helpless act she was putting on. But in those days, I was a sucker for a pretty face. And she had a pretty face.

LOLA: My name is Lola Montes. I'm a singer at the Cat's Meow. You know on Sunset.

RUFUS: Well, that explained the flash of a hard look. The Cat's Meow was a club at the Hollywood end of Sunset. A speakeasy during the twenties. Now an illegal

gambling joint. It was run by a two-bit hood called Marty Gibson. Said to be in dutch with the local constabulary. And the mob. That's why he never got raided. Well, that explained it. You needed flashes of hard looks if you were a woman working for Marty.

LOLA: I remember reading something about you in the papers. You had acted as a go-between for a kidnapping pay out. I was going to call you in the morning but then I saw the light in your office building.

RUFUS: I looked at her more critically now. But the look I saw was back to the helpless act. So I continued to stare at "helpless," waiting for her to go on. She continued to stare at "curious" waiting for I didn't know what. I decided to break the ice.

So, about your sister. How do you know she's missing? When was the last time you saw her?

LOLA: Yesterday. We had lunch together.

RUFUS: One day doesn't make someone missing.

LOLA: But she was supposed to meet me at the club after my second set tonight.

RUFUS: Well, people change their minds. Listen, one day doesn't make for a disappearance. My advice to you is if you can't locate her by tomorrow, go to the police. They have better resources than I have to trace missing persons.

LOLA: Oh, I ... I couldn't do that. It's ... it's complicated.

RUFUS: It always is.

So we both waited while I considered. I hate missing persons. The cases usually end up in some fleabag of a motel and an ugly domestic fight.

LOLA: I'm willing to pay whatever you charge.

RUFUS: Yeah, well, it's fifty a day plus expenses. But I haven't said "yes" yet.

LOLA: Please, Mr. Blake.

RUFUS: She could certainly bat those eyes of hers. And like I said, I'm a sucker for a pretty face.

So, okay, I told her after another look at her pretty faced.
You got a picture of her?

LOLA: Yes. Here.

RUFUS: What's her name?

LOLA: It's Gillian. Gillian Stuart. Montes is my stage name. My mother was a Montes.

RUFUS: Address? Phone number?

LOLA: It's on the back of the picture. My phone number is there, too.

RUFUS: What does she do? Where does she work?

LOLA: She's an actress when she can get a part. She sometimes temps at Sears. The one on Wilshire in Santa Monica. But ... we're not very close so I haven't been keeping up to her.

RUFUS: Until you had lunch.

LOLA: Yes.

RUFUS: Well, that explains it. She's just gone about her own business.

LOLA: No ... She definitely said she'd meet me at the club tonight. I know something ... I know something bad's happen to her. When will I hear from you?

RUFUS: When? I haven't even started yet.

LOLA: Yes. I'm sorry. I'm just anxious. That's all. You'll go over to her place right now? Tonight? Then call me if ...

RUFUS: If what?

LOLA: If ... well you know.

RUFUS: Afraid I don't. So why don't *you* go over there. You don't need to pay me to do that. Or better yet, phone her.

LOLA: Oh, I ... I don't want to do that. You see, that lunch I told you about. Well, we had an argument. I said some words that ... well ... that doesn't matter. I would prefer you to go over there. That's why I came to you. To —

RUFUS: Okay, okay. Leave it with me.

LOLA: Then you'll go there now?

RUFUS: Sure. I'll call her place first.

LOLA: Oh, I wouldn't do that.

RUFUS: What?

LOLA: She hates to be wakened when she's asleep.

RUFUS: And me going there isn't going to wake her?

LOLA: Please. Just go and call me when you get there. If she's there, I'll talk to her. If she's not there, phone me anyways.

RUFUS: The whole thing sounded screwy to me. But fifty dollars was fifty dollars.

Okay. But it's gonna cost you fifty.

LOLA: I don't care about the money. Just go.

RUFUS: You're the boss. As soon as I find the keys to my car.

She stood up slowly. Very slowly so I could see all of her curves. She gave me a half smile.

You know that club of yours ... it's supposed to be a pretty tough joint. You look like too nice a kid to be working there.

LOLA: Oh Marty's all right. He keeps the place clean of high rollers. And I keep my nose clean.

RUFUS: I bet you do.

She turned around and made her way to the door. Also slowly. She stopped at the door and looked back at me. I swear, I thought she was going to blow me a kiss. But all I got was another half smile. Then she was gone.

SCENE 2

RUFUS: Gillian's place was just off Santa Monica Boulevard a few blocks from the steps leading down to the beach. Driving there gave me time to think. Something I try not to do too often. It hurts my head. But there was something screwy about this case. Why did this Lola put on the Little Miss Muffet act? And why not call her sister? Why me? Was Gillian the spider that frightened Little Miss Muffet away?

(car comes to a stop; car door opens; footsteps) It was a bungalow sandwiched in between two upper "G" apartment buildings. Unless she was renting a room

in the bungalow, it seemed to be a pretty fancy place for a sometime actress and a sometimes Sears clerk.

(FX as needed)

There were no lights on in the house. No car in the driveway. I went up the steps to the front door. It was obvious no one was home, but for fifty dollars a day, it was worth a try. I knocked. The door inched open. People should lock their doors, I said to myself. This was a tony neighbourhood. Lots of break and enters. I walked in. It was dark.

Gillian? Gillian Stuart? You here?

I pressed the light switch. I was in the living room. Either Gillian was a lousy housekeeper or someone had come looking for something. The sofa was torn apart. The contents of a ceiling-high bookcase were strewn all over the floor. The seat and back of an easy chair looked like Jack the Ripper had got here before me.

Gillian, I called out again. If you're hiding, it's okay to come out. Your sister sent me. My name is ...

(sound of a body falling: groans)

I never got to spell out my name. Something hard, cold and without mercy played my head like a bass drum.

(groans)

When I woke up, that bass drum had turned into a staccato symphony along the lines of Gene Krupa. I rolled over. My face met something hard. *(a groan)* It was dark so whoever decided I needed to sleep had turned out the lights. I stood up. Slowly. *(FX)* Then I banged my face when I tried to move forward. Hell, I was in some kind of closet. *(FX)* I kicked out with my feet until I heard wood breaking. The closet turned out to be a cupboard I had been stuffed into. And that turned out to be a kitchen cupboard. After I staggard around a bit, I thought I better look over the place in case Gillian turned out to be a dead body. But except for more bad housekeeping in all the rooms — she was going to need a legion of cleaners to put her house back together again — there were no bodies, dead or otherwise. Hell, this sure was a lousy way to earn a few bucks, I thought, as I felt the lump on my head.