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# ALTERNATIVES, INC.

By MACK REYNOLDS

ILLUSTRATOR SCHROEDER

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*Do you feel you'd make a good science-fiction writer? Okay—let's find out. Your hero is a nice, ordinary guy who gets a bill from some joker for services rendered—said services being the disposal of said hero's wife. But our lad is a bachelor! Now—the problem is, where do we go from here? Plot the yarn out to your own finale and then see how Mack Reynolds, one of the best in the business—handled this intriguing premise.*

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I DON'T know if anybody ever gets to the point where he's so wealthy that when he finds his bank statement off exactly ten thousand dollars it doesn't make any difference. At any rate, I'm not; no kicks coming, I've got more than my share really, but ten thousand is still a lot of money.

Of course, at first I thought I'd made a mistake. I checked back and finally located the ten thousand. There was the check all right. It was signed with the best facsimile of my signature I'd ever seen; properly endorsed on the back by the payee; and had gone through the usual conglomeration of banks and clearing houses before coming back to me.

The check was made out to *Last Alternative, Inc.*

I gaped at that. It was bad

enough being the victim of some sort of racket, but that they had the colossal nerve to use a title so ludicrous that you'd think any banker . . .

Boiling inwardly, I phoned my bank so fast the dial seemed a blur under my finger. I had Vice-President Settin on the line in seconds. He started giving me the usual good-morning-Stephen-how're-things-going routine, but I cut him off short.

"Listen," I snapped, "haven't you got enough imagination down there to check with me before cashing a ten-thousand-dollar check for an outfit with a name like"—I looked down at the check again—"like *Last Alternative, Inc.?*"

His voice was pained. "Steve, are you joking? I phoned you myself on that, old boy, almost two weeks ago. You said it was

bona fide and to put it through."

It took me several moments to get the significance of that through my head. I sat staring at the receiver, trying to figure out some way that it'd make sense.

"Steve?" the phone shrilled worriedly.

"Call you back later," I mumbled, and hung up.

Whoever *Last Alternative, Inc.*, was, or were, they were clever and thorough. The only possibility I could see was that they knew when Settin was going to call me, and had some way of intercepting the call and impersonating my voice. I had a feeling that I'd be lucky to see that ten thousand again.

My next step ordinarily would have been to get in touch with my attorney, Gerald Lash, but something made me pick up the phone book and run my fingers down the "L" column. Unbelievably, there was *Last Alternative, Inc.*, listed as bold as brass.

I was out of my chair, had my hat, and was half through the door before the phone book hardly had time to drop the distance from my hand to the desk.

I grabbed a cab and was halfway to their offices before I had time to consider whether or not it would be wisest to take the police, or at least my lawyer, along with me; but I was in too much of a hurry, and too boiling mad to begrudge the few minutes it would have taken to pick up either. Actually, I didn't expect the crooks to be there, they'd have flown the coop by now.

They were there all right.

The offices of *Last Alternative, Inc.*, were in a second-rate building in the downtown area. Their rooms were attractive and businesslike, but not ostentatious.

The blonde—but not *too* blonde—reception clerk smiled at me and said, "Good morning, Mr. Stevens."

I glowered at her. Her expression, her smile, her ready greeting, gave every indication that she was thoroughly familiar with me. What an actress! I'd never seen her before in my life.

I restrained myself and barked, "Where's the boss?"

She flicked switches, pushed a button. "Mr. Emery has been handling your account, I believe. I'll see if he's in." She added chidingly, "You really should arrange beforehand for an appointment, you know."

I could feel the red creeping up from beneath my collar. It wasn't enough to be taken for ten thousand, I had to have a lecture from an office girl.

The inter-office communicator mumbled and she turned her smile back to me. "You may go in, Mr. Stevens."

I snorted and brushed by her desk. One of the doors beyond was lettered, **Frederick Emery**; I slammed through it, rammed halfway into the room and came to a belligerent halt before the ebony black desk that composed most of the furniture in the tiny office.

I opened my mouth to blast,



Suddenly his world was crowded with ghosts.

but the dapper young man I confronted spoke first. "Just a moment, Mr. Stevens." He grinned and waggled a finger at me. "I assure you, I go through this scene with every client we have. Let me say a word first. We are not charlatans; in fact, if you wish, your money will be refunded. However, *Last Alternative, Inc.*, has never been forced to make a refund thus far. I doubt if we will have to on this occasion."

I stared at him, shook my head and took a deep breath. "Somebody here is crazy; but whether it's you or me, the fact isn't going to cost me ten thousand bucks."

He still smiled but there was an air of do - I - have - to - go - through - this - still - again about him. "Sit down, Mr. Stevens," he said. "Am I to assume that you are not satisfied with our services?"

"Listen," I growled, "first off, you can drop that Mr. Stevens stuff, that air of being familiar with me. We've never met before, and you know darn well we haven't."

He started to say something, but I cut in with, "Now let's get to the explanations and hear what you have to say before I call in the police and my attorneys." I sat myself down in the chair he'd motioned to, and crossed my arms with elaborate patience.

He took a folder from his desk and let his eyes run over it quickly. "Let's see," he murmured.

"The agreement was that for ten thousand dollars we dispose of your wife in such manner that legal action could never be taken against you. Hmmm. You assigned us the case approximately a month ago. Your check was cleared last week. Uh huh. It's all quite in order." He looked up at me again. "From your attitude I see that the commission was successful."

The only reason he'd been able to get that much out before I interrupted him was that I was speechless. In a morning that had held a good many surprises for me, this one took the cake.

I finally sputtered, "You mean to sit there and state that I hired you to dispose of . . . *murder* I suppose you mean . . . my wife for ten thousand dollars?" I could hardly believe my ears.

He nodded.

I started to laugh. I roared. I doubled up with the ecstasy of the situation. After a while he gave a few agreeable chuckles in accompaniment.

Finally, I stopped, wiped my eyes, and tried to get my breath. "Oh, brother," I told him, "this time you've stuck your foot in it. I don't know what kind of a racket you've got established here, but brother, this is the end of it."

He chuckled again, in a friendly tone of voice.

I tucked my handkerchief back into my breast pocket and tightened my jaw. I jabbed a finger over the desk at him. "You've

stuck your neck out this time. You see, *I don't have a wife!*"

He nodded agreeably. "Of course not. We disposed of her for you."

I roared, "That's where you're wrong; that's what's going to break up this *Last Alternative, Inc.*, outfit. I don't know how you've been working it, what kind of filthy blackmail scheme you've been playing, but this time you've slipped. I'VE BEEN A BACHELOR ALL MY LIFE!"

The patient smile still hadn't left his friendly face. "Mr. Stevens," he said easily, "we almost invariably have difficulties convincing our clients of the service we've performed for them. That's just one of the reasons we always ask payment in advance. However, we take further measures. For instance . . ."

He handed me the paper he'd been perusing.

I shot a contemptuous stare at him, then read it rapidly. Supposedly it was a contract between myself and *Last Alternative, Inc.*, in which I agreed to pay ten thousand dollars in return for their disposing of my wife, Bertha Stevens, in such a manner that no legal action against me could result. It was signed by myself, by Frederick Emery and by two witnesses.

I snorted, "A palpable forgery!"

"Look at the bottom of the page," he said. "You'll note a fingerprint there in ink. It's your own, Mr. Stevens."

I looked down in disbelief, but there it was. An uncomfortable inner feeling told me that if I had it checked it would turn out to be mine.

"A detailed piece of work; I congratulate you," I told him coldly, "but you don't think for a minute this is going to convince anyone that I paid you ten thousand dollars to murder a wife I never had."

He wagged his finger at me again. "I wish you wouldn't keep using that term," he said in irritation. "The contract reads, *dispose* of your wife, not murder her."

I just growled at him, and arose from my chair. The farce had gone far enough; it was time for the police now. If anything, that contract would be additional evidence against this fantastic gang. I turned to leave.

"Just one more thing," he sighed. "We often have considerable difficulty, as I said before, in convincing our clients; consequently, we take the further step of making a short talking motion picture of the contract agreement." He motioned to the chair I'd just vacated. "If you please."

He got up from the desk and went to the nearest wall, pushed back a small sliding door and revealed a motion picture projector. He crossed to a file, brought out a tin of film and quickly placed the reel on the machine. He grinned at me, touched a button on the machine and another on the wall. The lights went low and on the oppo-

site wall began to flash a picture of the interior of the office in which we were seated.

I stumbled back into the chair in amazement and stared.

The scene wasn't very long. In it Frederick Emery read the contract and asked me to repeat it after him. I did. He called the office girl and a third person into the room and had them witness it; then I sat down at the desk and wrote out a check. At that point the camera faded in for a close-up and I saw myself signing the check and the contract. Afterward, I put my thumb print at the bottom, turned directly facing the camera, deliberately winked, and said, "This is the real McCoy, Steve, old man, and the end of Bertha, which is more of a relief than you'll ever know."

The lights in the room went up and Emery slid back the wall shutter and returned to his desk. I sat in my chair, unbelievably. I might have thought the whole thing staged, if it hadn't been for that last close-up of my face.

Frederick Emery sat down in his swivel chair again and waited for me to speak.

Finally, I got up and went to his phone. I dialed Gerald Lash, and when the lawyer was finally on the wire, asked him, shakily, "Lash, you've been my attorney for more than ten years. Now, don't think I'm crazy, just answer this: Am I, or have I ever been, married?"

The voice said plaintively, "Are you drunk, Steve? You

know damn well you've been a woman hater all your life. You never even date a woman, let alone marry one. Why . . ."

I put the phone back on the hook and let out a sigh of relief, then turned curtly to Emery. "All right, brother," I told him, "I'm ready to listen now; talk! It better be good; I imagine it will be if you've got this much of a set-up."

He leaned back in his chair and cracked his easy smile again. "Have you ever considered, Mr. Stevens, just how many of us have wives, husbands, business competitors, wealthy old uncles, rivals in love, or saxophone-playing neighbors, who we would gladly, er . . . *dispose* of were it not illegal?"

I growled, "You mean *murder*; but there're laws against it."

He wagged his finger. "No, I don't mean murder; I mean an alternative to murder. When your relationship to a person becomes unbearably obnoxious, our company, *Last Alternative, Inc.*, becomes your recourse."

I folded my arms again and closed my eyes. "Go on," I told him.

"Have you ever heard of the theory of alternative universes?" he asked.

I opened my eyes and scowled at him. "Have you been reading Science-fiction nonsense?"

He flicked a hand negatively. "The idea had been used a score of times in science fiction, which is beside the point. The fact that an idea is used in fantasy doesn't

mean that it is either right or wrong. The theory of alternative universes was considered long before the advent of science fiction."

"Go on," I said.

"Roughly, the theory is that there are alternative universes to the one we occupy."

"I know that much," I said gruffly. "Get to the point."

He ignored my impatience and went on easily. "One school of thought has it that there are an infinite number of alternative universes." He noticed my scowl and elaborated. "This school contends that everything happens, every possible thing, and even those things that we might deem impossible, somewhere, in one of these endless number of universes."

I shook my head. "You mean that somewhere, in some other universe, Hitler won the war?"

He nodded. "That's right. And in some universe Napoleon won at Waterloo; and in still another, Napoleon was never born; in others Napoleon was born but turned out to be a carpenter instead of a soldier and spent his life making chairs on Corsica."

"You mean," I asked unbelievably, "that all possibilities exist, no matter how improbable?"

"Yes. All possible universes exist, no matter how improbable, including the one in which we live—and consider for a moment just how improbable *it* is."

My head was beginning to ache. "All right," I told him, "I

understand the theory, I guess. But so what? There are a lot of screwy theories. What has that got to do with my giving you ten thousand dollars to er . . . *dispose* of a wife I never had?"

He sighed. "Don't you see? The existence of alternative universes isn't just a *theory*, it's a scientific law; and in another universe, in another thousand or million alternative universes, you *have* a wife."

I got to my feet, put my hands on his desk and leaned over until my face was only a foot from his. I snarled, "How many times do I have to tell you I've been a bachelor all my life? I don't have a wife. I never had one! *I don't want one!*"

He said patiently. "*Of course*, you don't have a wife. That's what I've been telling you right along. We have disposed of her for you."

I gave up and returned to my chair, recrossed my arms and legs and said, "All right, tell me more. I'll probably have to see a psychiatrist anyway after this mental working over you're giving me, you might as well do it up brown."

"There isn't much more to say," he went on. "You had a wife whom you wished to dispose of, came to us and made the arrangements. The head of *Last Alternative, Inc.*, Professor Bla . . . , er, his name doesn't matter, utilized a discovery he stumbled upon some time ago and removed all traces of your wife, Bertha Stevens, from this



universe. Of course, she still exists in an infinite number of other ones."

My eyes popped.

"The reason we object to the term *murder*," he continued, "is that you cannot murder a person who has never existed. This universe has been altered infinitesimally. Bertha Stevens was never born; her "family" never heard of her; there is no record anywhere on Earth, except in this office, of her existence."

I slumped back into the chair aghast. For the first time the significance hit me; the possibilities were endless. I sat silently for a long time digesting it. Frederick Emery didn't interrupt me.

"Brother!" I ejaculated finally, "why haven't I heard of this before?"

Frederick Emery consulted his file again. "Er, as a matter of fact," he said, "you're one of our oldest customers, Mr. Stevens. Let's see, the first time you came here it was your business partner . . ."

"Business partner! I never had a business partner!"

"Exactly," Emery said smoothly, "we disposed of him for you." He looked down at the file again. "And then there was a . . ."

"Wait a minute," I interrupted. "You mean I've been here several times before and each time after you've done an . . . er, job, for me, you've had to go through this whole rigmaroll all over again?"

He nodded in resignation. "And don't think it doesn't get

tiring; it's the worst part of this business. When we remove someone from this universe, all signs of him disappear. Obviously, the person who ordered the job done loses all memories of the one removed, even including his trip to this office to assign us the commission. He is invariably indignant to find he has paid for something he never heard about."

I nodded thoughtfully. "Listen," I told him. "I've got a cousin who's in line to inherit his father's estate in a few months after the old codger dies. If this cousin was disposed of, I'd be in line for the inheritance. How about it?"

Mr. Emery was briskly efficient. He got out a new contract form. "Of course, Mr. Stevens. Let's see, we'll have to have the details, his name, address, and so forth." He hesitated. "And we better switch on the movie camera, too; you're a more than usually difficult person to convince, you know."

After the contract was filled in and witnessed by the receptionist and another employee, the camera was brought closer to make a close-up of my signature. I signed the paper, put my thumbprint on it and turned to face the lens.

I winked into it and said, "This is the real McCoy, Steve, old man. Things are going to be much better with Cousin Roy out of the way, much better." I rubbed my hands together happily.

**THE END**