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W. W. Scott — Editor

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HIRED FOR THE KILL

by AL JAMES

Paul had a sure-fire set-up for the big payoff murder

“YOU’VE got to kill her!”

Paul Clinton heard the words spoken by the woman sitting across from him. He’d thought them a thousand times. But out in the open they were harsh—jagged chunks of rock beneath bare feet. He nervously ran the palm of his hand across his broad forehead.

“You’re right of course,” he said slowly.

The girl smiled. “Of course I’m right. Isn’t that why you married her in the first place? So we could be rich?”

Paul nodded absent-mindedly, his eyes searching the dimly lighted roadhouse. No one was paying any attention to



them. They were just a couple seated in the rear booth.

The flashing neon sign on the road outside reflected through the window beside them, playing across the girl's face. The sharp, tight features were accentuated by the red glow as she eagerly leaned forward, her hand hard on his. "You've got to do it, Paul," she said, her low voice full of meaning.

The man nervously sipped at his drink, carefully wiping the beads of moisture away from his well-trimmed mustache. He looked up at the girl. "It's just that I can't really see any reason for killing her," he said. "I have control of all the money. I can easily give you your share now."

The girl's eyes narrowed to luminous green slits. Anger swelled the tiny wrinkles hidden by layers of powder. "Like hell you can," she spat. "That dame's worth over a million bucks. That's five hundred thousand for me. And I want every cent of it. I haven't worked in that mausoleum for three years because I'm fond of the old bat."

The man smiled grimly.

"Well, she's pretty fond of you. I wouldn't be surprised if she left you a little something in her will."

It was a poor joke. The girl snuffed out her cigarette savagely. "Go to hell," she spat angrily.

A car pulled in off the highway. Paul watched the twin lights sweep the side of the road house and vanish around back. "Supposing I don't decide to kill her," he said slowly. "Supposing I tell you to go to hell. Just what the devil can you do about it?"

A slanted smile twisted across the girl's over-full lips. "Just try it," she snapped. "What do you think the old dame will do when I tell her you married her only for the money? Do you think she'll keep you around like a favorite house cat after I flash our marriage license under her nose?" The girl lighted another cigarette, studying the silent man through the smoke. "And don't get any ideas about getting rid of me. I've got everything down on paper. If I'm found dead it will make interesting reading."

Paul sighed deeply. It was a very interesting mess. He heard the door to the road-house creak open. In the distance he saw the back of an overcoat approach the bar and talk to the aproned figure behind the wood.

The girl across from him stood up. "I've got to get back to the house. You better wait an hour before you come in. No sense making her suspicious now."

"Yeah," Paul agreed. "No sense."

HE watched the girl disappear out the front door and around back to the parking area. He wondered what the hell he'd ever seen in her. But it was too late for that now. He was married to two women. One a bastard and the other filthy rich. He had to admit that it had seemed like a good idea when they first thought of it. A million bucks was a lot of green. Enough to sit back and guzzle good Scotch the rest of his life.

He sipped at the drink, staring out the window at the cars speeding along the highway. So why kill the old gal? All

he had to do was hold her hand and he had everything. The big house in the country, a penthouse in New York. Plus the money.

He thought of Kate and sobered. She'd bitch until she had her way. And she'd keep her threat. If he didn't act fast she'd tell the old lady he was her legal husband.

Paul shuddered. The thought of going back into the old con racket was repulsive. He had no choice. The old dame had to go.

A deep, male voice chopped into his thoughts. "Well, well, if it ain't Paul Clinton. Long time no see."

Paul looked up from the table. The overcoat stood towering above him, a grin spread across the ugly face. "For Pete's sake," he spat. "What the hell you doing in this neck of the woods?"

The ugly face smiled thinly. "Just passing through, Clinton." The man motioned at the empty seat. "Ain't you going to ask me to sit down?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure." He waved at the seat. "Sit!"

The man grunted his frame into the booth and waved a

couple of drinks onto the table. At last he looked up from the whiskey. "I hear from the boys you been doing pretty good the last few years."

Clinton shrugged. "I suppose you might say so." He studied the man across from him, the glimmer of an idea worming its way into his skull. "You still in business?"

The man tapped a cigarette on his finger nail and stuck it into his mouth, his eyes hard on Clinton. "Yeah," he said coldly. "I'm still in business."

Clinton thought rapidly. He hated getting his own hands dirty. He'd had a lot of small mixings with the law but nothing big. He didn't relish the idea of something going wrong and having to take the big dive. He made up his mind rapidly, leaning forward on the table, lowering his voice in confidence. "What's the current price?"

The man smiled grimly, his eyes running the length of Clinton's expensive clothes. "Depends," he said slowly.

"On what?"

The man leaned back against the leather, his eyes

friendless slits. "On who gains what and how much."

"Quit the double talk," Clinton snapped angrily. "You know damned well what I'm talking about."

"Sure I do," the man smiled. "You and your wife had a bright idea about three years ago. Now that it's time you don't want to get dirty." He sucked at the cigarette, his eyes boring into Clinton. "The price to yellow backs is ten thousand bucks."

"You're still a bastard," Clinton hissed.

The man laughed. There was no humor in the sound. "Maybe so," he agreed. "But you need me."

CLINTON had to admit the man was right. He had a reputation that would chill the heart of Dracula. For a price he'd take a crack at the devil. "Okay. Ten thousand," he snapped.

"Half now."

"For Christ sake," Clinton growled. "I don't carry that much on me. I'll meet you at the junction of the highways tomorrow morning at nine."

The man scowled. "Where

the hell is that? I already got lost once tonight. That's why I came in here. To get directions."

"It's about ten miles up the road. Number 91 and 27 join in a 'Y'. You can't miss it."

"Okay," the man agreed. "Now how do I do it?"

"You have a rifle?"

"Sure," the man snapped. "What kind of a businessman do you think I am?"

Clinton ignored the caustic comment. "About five miles from Hilldale there's a cemetery. It's just about an acre square, surrounded by deep woods. My wife's brother's buried in it. I'll take her out there tomorrow at noon. You can hide in the woods and do the rest. It will be easy to pass it off as some hunter who got careless."

The man grinned, pleased. "Hey, that's good," he said. "No sweat."

"That's right," Clinton said grimly. "No sweat."

"Just one thing," the man interjected. "How can I be sure the dame with you is the right one?"

Clinton was impatient. "You can be sure," he snapped. "But

to make you feel better I'll borrow a handkerchief from her. She always carries a brown one. That's your target."

"Perfect," the man said slowly. "Real neat." He drained his drink and stood up, extending a gloved hand. "Until tomorrow when you gring the dough."

Clinton ignored the outstretched hand. The man spun on his heels and walked rapidly out of the roadhouse.

THE big house was quiet when Clinton let himself in. He looked in his wife's bedroom. She was asleep. He closed the door silently and moved down the hall to his own room.

For a long time he sat in the darkness, smoking and listening to the sounds of the country drifting in through the open window. Kate was right. The only thing to do was kill the old dame. Then he'd have the money and time to figure out a way to get rid of Kate. After that it would be nothing but whiskey and dames for the rest of his life. Clinton smiled

in the darkness. He liked that.

The noise at the door startled him. "Who's that?" he whispered nervously.

"Don't get excited," a feminine voice replied. "It's just your loving wife."

"For Christ sake," Clinton snapped. "Get the hell out of here. Supposing the old gal finds you in here?"

A dark figure moved closer and sat on the edge of the bed beside him. Moonlight filtering through the half drawn blinds flowed across the girl dressed in a thin nightgown. The dark tips of the firm breasts pressed against the flimsy material. Her teeth glowed in the darkness as she pulled her lips back in a smile. "Don't worry," she said soothingly. "She's beat from her trip to New York today."

"All the same," Clinton protested. "We should be more careful."

The girl ignored his worry. "You decided when?"

"Yeah. Tomorrow."

"Good," the girl hissed, pleased. "Let's celebrate."

"Celebrate?"

The girl wiggled out of the nightdress and lay flat on the

bed. Her voice, sultry and dipped in meaning came out of the darkness. "After all it's yours. Use it!"

Clinton did!

THE morning never seemed to end. By ten o'clock Clinton had met the gunman and given him the money and gotten back to the house.

Kate busied herself around the house doing the chores of a maid. His wife wasn't up yet.

He glanced at the hall clock. It stood at ten thirty. Clinton began to sweat. He had to get her to the cemetery by noon.

At last he heard activity upstairs. Kate passed him on the way to the kitchen. "Your wife is up, Mr. Clinton," she said, her eyes full of meaning. "She asked me to pour her coffee. She'll be right down."

Clinton nodded brusquely and moved into the breakfast room. He hadn't told Kate how it was to be done. It was none of her business.

The woman entering the room was ten years older than Clinton. Wrinkles of age traced deep valleys across the harsh skin. Her snow white hair was piled carelessly on

top of her head. She nodded at Clinton and sat down, sipping at her coffee.

He watched the aged figure in disgust. For three years he'd been forced to cater to her every whim. He must have been out of his mind last night to even consider going on living with her. He thought of the nights she demanded him and his stomach flipped.

He forced a smile to his lips. "Good morning, Clarissa," he said cheerfully. "How'd you sleep?"

"Rotten," the woman snapped, her voice dry as the toast in front of her. She stopped eating and looked at him curiously. "You look in good spirits. You must have slept well."

Clinton shrugged, pouring himself a cup of coffee from the silver decanter. "Just so so. The heat irritated me."

Clarissa poised the cup in front of her mouth. "Nothing else bothered you?"

Clinton shook his head. "No. Why?"

She swallowed the coffee and set the cup back in the saucer with a clatter. "Noth-

ing," she snapped. "Nothing at all."

Something was wrong here, Clinton thought. She suspected. That had to be it. It was lucky he'd arranged everything for today.

"I thought we might go out to the cemetery today," he said. "We haven't been there in some time." He'd expected an argument. There was none. Clarissa nodded her head.

"Good idea, Paul," she said brusquely. "I'll get ready. Tell Kate to come upstairs."

Clinton waited in the furniture cluttered front room. The big clock boomed sound in the quietness of the house. He wiped sweat from his hands and lighted a cigarette from the one he was smoking.

At last Clarissa came out of the dimness of the hall. Kate followed closely behind, carrying a large basket of flowers.

"She's going with us?" he asked, trying to keep the trembling out of his voice.

"Of course she's going with us," Clarissa snapped.

Paul glanced at Kate whose eyes were filled with mock amusement. He covered his nervousness by yanking the

front door open. It was lucky, he thought, that he'd been smart enough to have a signal.

BY the time they got to the cemetery, Clinton was a nervous wreck. No one had said a word during the short drive. He followed the two women across the well kept lawn to the brother's grave, his eyes searching the surrounding woods for some sign. All he saw were the thick trees waving gently in the breeze. He wondered if he'd been crossed.

And then he saw the glint of metal in the bushes a block away. It was all set. He helped place the flowers and straightened up, his eyes moving between the two women.

He knew the time was at hand but his voice refused to co-operate. He cleared his throat and faced Clarissa who was standing in front of him, his hand fumbling through his pockets. "Can I borrow your handkerchief?" he said huskily. "I seem to have left mine at home."

Clarissa snorted. "Just like you to be so careless." She reached in her purse. When her

hand came out it was empty. "Looks like I forgot mine too," she snapped.

"Here, take mine," Kate said from behind him.

Clinton spun around and his blood chilled. In her outstretched hand she held a *brown* handkerchief.

"Where—where did you get that?" he stammered.

Kate smiled, pushing the cloth towards him. He backed away as if she were offering him a live rattlesnake. "Why, Mrs. Clinton gave it to me for Christmas last year," she said, smiling. "For being such a good employee."

"Drop it," Clinton snapped. "For God's sake get rid of it."

It was too late. The flat bark of a rifle shattered the afternoon and Kate's face melted to blooded puty. The blow spun the body away from the startled man. It dropped lifeless to the ground, draped across a tombstone.

Clinton tore his eyes away from the still figure and leveled them on Clarissa. Her face was stone as she stood rigid in front of him.

"You knew," he accused, his voice shouting. "You knew all

the time. You wanted to get rid of her so you could have me all to yourself."

Only the lips moved in the rock face. "Did I?" she said coldly, her eyes flint.

Clinton's brain spun. The heat of the afternoon blazed into his skull. And then he remembered. Why had the man been in the neighborhood? Why had Clarissa been so concerned if he'd heard anything in the night? *Why had she gone to New York? Shooting Kate had not been an accident.*

The woman in front of him guessed his thinking. A cold smile pulled the ancient flesh back in a smile. "Ten thousand to go," she muttered.

Clinton swore an oath and dug his heels into the soft

ground, sprinting across the grass as fast as his gasping lungs would let him. He was inches away from the protective trees when he heard the rifle bark again. A red hot poker smashed at his shoulder. He stopped running and ducked for the ground.

The stars exploded in his head. He felt his legs collapse into rubber bands. Something trickled across his eyes, warm, blurring his vision. He tried to struggle to his feet. Pain smashed at his chest. A black wall started toppling onto him.

From a long distance away he heard a woman laughing. The cackle grew to hysteria.

Clinton could see nothing to laugh at!

THE END
