
Checkout Time®

by Glenn Gray

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"Where's the money?"

In the tight tweed suit and tilted hat she was all curves, all woman with a sandpaper edge. Eyes like half-sucked chocolate candy turned up nose and coffee-curls bouncing on slender shoulders.

She was a looker all right.

The fact she pointed a hand-canon square at my gut didn't take away from that one bit.

Think it was a .45.

"What dough?" I knew the boatload of cash was in a suitcase under the bed. She didn't, but she knew it was here somewhere. Somebody tipped her. This plan was going all to hell.

Thing is, a minute ago I thought I was getting lucky.

Meet this dame in a local speakeasy, minding my own business. Blowing smoke over my scotch, she parks next to me, chats me up. Seems like I knew her but it always seems that way. Didn't know if it was the scotch or the dame making me feel that way. Next thing I know we're in my hotel suite for a cozy drink. I head to the bathroom to tidy up, and saunter out whistling -- to this.

"Don't get smart." She stepped closer and I could smell her breath, humid with smoke and sauce. I was mesmerized by the eyes. "Just 'cause I'm a lady don't mean I won't use this thing."

The piece was within grabbing distance. I thought about quick-handing the metal, turning this thing around. I was having too much fun though, decided to play it cool. I took a step back, keeping my hands out front, fingers touching. I leaned on one leg.

"You ever really blast someone, sugar?"

"Hand it over," she said, ignoring me. The eyes narrowed and she lifted her chin up at me. She came closer, close enough to kiss. "And save the small talk."

"Hey, baby," I said, giving her my low voice now. I coulda sworn I been through this before. "You're too pretty to hurt someone."

I thought I was getting in there, breaking down the wall, seeing a few cracks. I

leaned forward, tilted my head. The scoop neck blouse gave me a good look at the deep valley between the lady business.

She smiled and I started to relax. I lowered my eyelids.

One quick thrust and she rammed the gun handle into my forehead, snapping my head back quick, tearing some skin. It drew a trickle of blood and I saw stars.

"Try me," she said, her voice dripping like hot tar.

It took me a second to get the vision cleared, the stars fading. A frisky dame. I had met my share of those.

"Like I said," I told her finally. "What can I get you?"

"Like *I* said," she told me, "the *money*."

"Why don't we have that other drink first," I said, massaging the knob on my forehead. I figured I'd try a different approach, give it to her straight. "Things are getting a little, should I say, out of hand?"

She laughed. "There was never gonna be another drink."

She started slinking toward me again.

"Really?" I said, a little sarcastic, taking a step back. "Now that ain't nice."

"What can I say?" she said. "Ain't never said I was nice."

"Can I ask who sent you?"

"Who said anybody sent me."

"Just figured as much," I said. "You with that Fontaine character?"

"You're *wastin'* precious time," she said with a silky smile. "You gimme the dirty money and I'll be on my way."

"O'Brian?" I said. "He knows my business."

The hammer clicked.

Play time was over.

"Whaddya say we talk about it." I tried a smooth smile again, managed a laugh. A droplet of warm blood crept into the corner of my eye. I wiped it with the back of my hand. "Solve this thing amicably?"

"One." She said with some force now, her smile gone.

"Hold your horses," I said, trying to think, waste a little time, thinking it

through. "I'll give it all right."

"Two." Even louder now.

"The closet." I nodded my head sideways. Figured I'd could push her in, slam her with the door maybe. "Over there."

"Get it." She said, waving with the gun.

I took a step to the closet door, looking her over. Something seemed familiar. Maybe the voice, the eyes. "I feel like we met before."

This woke her up a little, caught her attention.

"So what if we did," she said with a smirk.

It all started coming to me now.

Yeah. The curves had filled out in all the right places. The lanky girl body had transformed into that of a mature woman. Darker hair now, but the look in her eyes hadn't changed much. Her eyes had an edge back then, and still did.

About twenty years ago. California, 1910. We were just kids. Andy's little sister. She had a thing for me then, back when Andy and I were doing the big jobs, before he went away.

She was a few years younger than we were, watched and listened to everything we did. Like a little puppy. She followed us and hung around in the background when the boys met at Andy's place; the meetings, the card games, the moonshine.

"Andy?"

"Smoke's clearing now?" She stepped to the closet door, stood beside it.

"Andy," I said, nodding. "Yeah. Andy's baby sister. Been a heck of a while."

"Nice job, hotshot," she said. "Shoulda been a private eye."

Man, it all came back now. The eyes pulling it out.

One night after a big card game. I was furious because I lost my shirt to Andy. Took a walk out around the yard. They lived on a big farm then. Their daddy used to grow grapes. I walked over by the barn, lit a smoke, turned around and there she was. She musta been seventeen.

She asked me what was wrong and I told her about all the dough I lost and she

came close and said that money didn't matter all that much. The moon was out and the crickets were going crazy. I remember telling her she was probably right and next thing you know we're mashing faces.

Two minutes later we're in the barn going at it like two farm animals and after, she asks me what the heck are we gonna tell Andy. I'm picking hay out of my hair and I say Andy ain't never gonna know. That's when she got antsy and smacked me good and said she had waited her whole life for me and this night. I told her to slow down and then there were voices outside, the guys lookin for me.

I shoulda known from that first smack tonight who I was dealing with.

I told her if she stayed quiet we would hash it out in the morning, but the morning never came. First chance I had I was on a train out of town, back to Chicago, and I hear she went ahead and told Andy everything.

"Why don't we talk about it?"

"About what?"

"That night," I said. "The barn."

"I don't remember nothing about a barn," she said, but I could tell she was lying, the way she said it. "I'm here for your filthy liquor money."

"I see how you're gonna play it," I said. "Guess I'd do the same."

"You don't even know," she said, laughing again. "Do you?"

"Know what?"

Then dead serious. "About him."

"Andy?"

"Yeah right," she said, mocking.

She looked me over good. Inhaled.

She came close.

Another whack, harder this time. Same spot on the forehead. The cut opened a little more. The force pushed me back a couple steps.

"Whoa, baby." I rubbed my eyes, dizzy. "The heck you talking about?"

"Don't matter much no more," She said.

"What don't?"

"Got himself shot pulling a small time bank job."

"Andy?"

"I wish."

"Spill it then."

"Your son!" she snapped. "Now how's that?"

"A son?" My head was spinning now. "My son? Our son?"

"Better off anyways," she said. "Gone at sixteen."

All of a sudden the room felt like it was underwater. Like things were in slow-motion. She musta seen I was out a sorts.

"What? Like you really care?" She said. "Like you cared when you split town?"

"I was a kid."

"So was I."

I took a deep breath. "You shoulda told me."

"Like what?" Her voice was shaky now. "Like you were gonna come back and marry me?"

"Nah." I shook my head, looked at the floor. "Guess not."

"Thought so," she said. "Besides, Andy took over. Raised him like his own."

"I shoulda known about it anyhow."

"You thought I'd go looking for a chump like you? Search you out?"

"You coulda done worse."

"Sure," She said. "Like Andy? You're all rats."

"He's your own flesh and blood."

"Seems things like that don't matter to him," she said, her voice like brick. "He played daddy and hubby."

"What're you saying now?"

"I ain't saying nothing." She looked all tense. Her eyes were glassy now.

I couldn't figure what she was trying to tell me. That Andy had his way with her? That was too crazy to consider. It was downright sick. But I had to know.

I looked her in the eye. In a low serious tone, said, "You... and Andy?"

This seemed to unleash an avalanche and a fireworks display all at once. Her eyes

popped and some veins came out on her neck. She looked like a wild animal on the hunt. I took this to be a yes to my question.

I never saw it coming. First it was a quick uppercut to the gut that took my wind away. This was followed by a combination worthy of a heavyweight title-holder; a jab to the left cheek followed by a hook to the right temple, including the butt of the gun. I was sent to the ground like a sack of loose change and the lights went out.

When I came to a moment later she had a spiked heel on my cheek and she was saying, "Get up."

I struggled to stand, using the back of the couch, wobbling, blood coming out all over.

After a moment I whispered through a busted lip, "I had no idea."

"Open the closet."

Everything seemed out of place, like I was in a dream.

I tried to change the subject, bring things back to the here and now. I grabbed the doorknob. "Well," I said. "I shoulda guessed."

"Guessed what?"

"The way you put it on at the bar."

"So."

"Too eager," I said. "Had a feeling something wasn't right."

She smiled through gritted teeth and said, "*You* didn't seem to mind."

I shrugged, my head like a balloon, lifting up. "Guess a man's got needs. Blurs his brain."

"Tell me about it," she said, waving the gun now. "Let's go, Casanova. *Open it!*"

I didn't move. My head was still doing backflips.

Next it was a swift bony knee to the groin, buckled me over, made me dry heave.

She laughed out loud, more like a cackle. "You *still* got needs?"

She shoved me aside while I was still off balance, grabbed the knob, flung open the closet door.

It was empty, except for three wire hangers.

I stood up, one hand climbing the wall, air slowly starting to fill my lungs.

"Where is it?"

I managed one wild side kick to her knee, figuring my time was up. This sent her stumbling. She still managed a shot and it went whistling by my ear into the ceiling.

I was able to pull a small framed picture off the wall, leaned and slapped her across the head with it as we both fell. It knocked her hat off. I landed on top of her and the gun kicked over across the floor.

We were both breathing heavily, me with bloody bruises all over, dirtying her up a bit. She tried to push me off, but I made my weight sink into her.

She said, "I can't breathe." She pushed my chest with her palms.

I eased up a little and our faces were but an inch apart and I just did what came natural. I don't know why but it seemed the right thing to do. I started mashing her face with my lips, just like outside that barn.

She struggled at first, swinging her head, kicking her knees up. But then it was quiet. After a moment I pulled my bloody face back. Her lipstick was smeared and a little patch of my blood was on her face.

She got all funny now, eyes looking crazy, staring into space. Smiling.

I had to know about Andy, where he was. "Is Andy with you?"

She didn't answer right away. She kept staring, like she was somewhere else. She mumbled a little first.

"After prison," she said finally, "he been back in California making wine. Selling it. His big dream is to get hooked up with Capone's crew."

I lifted off her a bit, decided to give her some room, spill some more. I twisted to the side.

"He here in Chicago now?"

"Yup," she said. "It's how I knew about you. I followed him, talked to some of his guys."

I'll be damned.

"You still see him?" I said.

"Not since I shot him," she said. "Two years ago. I heard he still keeps tabs though."

"Shot him?"

"Lucky for him I was a little off target," she said with a big grin and then seemed to snap back. "I'm a much better shot now. Let's get that liquor money, shall we?"

I started to get on my knees, shakin my head. I said, "I'd a shot'em too."

She sprung up and then there was a bare heel to the forehead that sent me back on my rear. Fortunately, her shoes were off.

She grabbed the gun, pointed, and said, "Let's go."

I got to my feet. Here we were again. Full circle.

"I thought we were making headway?" I said. "We got a lot to talk about."

"After I get the money," she said. "Now where is it?"

Somebody knuckled the door. We looked at it then back at each other. I shrugged.

She said, under her breath, "Company?"

I told her the truth. "I ain't expecting nobody."

"Open it," she said, fixing her hair and wiping her face. "And no funny stuff." She held the gun low, near the small of her back. Her face loosened.

I hobbled to the door, pulled it and the hotel bellhop was there smiling, pushing a cart over the doorsill, all in white and wearing a funny hat. The cart was draped in white cloth and had a covered plate in its center, a cup of coffee, bread, napkins.

"Special for you sir," he said, standing at attention.

There was an awkward silence.

"Thank you," she said, face like stone.

No one moved.

The clock on the wall ticked a few beats and I could smell black coffee.

She said, like a judge in court, "That'll be all."

I watched him. He didn't seem alarmed that I looked like I had been run over by the noon train to Philly. There was a glint in his eye.

"You're welcome," he said and lifted the shiny dome revealing a Colt .38 Special. With one fluid motion he grabbed the piece and waved it.

He had it pointing right at me. Things were really going to pot now. First a beat-

ing by a dame with a gun. And now a bellhop with a gun.

"The heck is this?" I said, thinking I had nothing to lose. Figured I'd try to make some sense of this mess. I looked over at Andy's little sister and she was grinning.

He then slowly turned it away, pointed it at her, catching her off guard.

He said, "Andy sends his love."

She started to swing the gun round front. Too late.

She only had a flash to say, "That..." before he put a slug in her.

There was a pop and my ears rang a little.

She slid down the wall, sat on the floor, the stain expanding over her left breast. A whiff of pistol powder tugged my nose hairs.

Her eyes were still gaping and her fingers clutched the gun at her side.

I was foggy and confused and all I could muster up was, "Guess that drink is out after all."

She didn't answer.

Bellhop boy already had the gun back on the plate and started to back out, holding the door open with one foot. He looked at me and winked.

"The heck is going on?" I said.

"Enjoy your stay sir," he said. "Mr. Andy would be pleased to have you for dinner at eight. In the lounge."

Andy? Must've had his boys on me the whole time, figured out my operation.

"Sure kid," I said, grinning, throwing my chin at him.

The door closed.

I yanked the suitcase out from under the bed. I tucked in my shirt, wiped my face and grabbed my coat and hat.

I figured I could make it down the stairs and out the back by the kitchen without a fuss. The train station was a block away. New York was sounding good.

I flipped the sign on the door handle to read: "*Do Not Disturb.*"

Andy was gonna have to eat alone.

THE END

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