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Quarry's Choice

Written by Max Allan Collins

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Quarry's Choice by Max Allan Collins

ONE

I had been killing people for money for over a year now, and it had been going fine. You have these occasional unexpected things crop up, but that's life.

Really, to be more exact about it, I'd been killing people for *good* money for over a year. Before that, in the Nam soup, I had been killing people for chump change, but then the Broker came along and showed me how to turn the skills Uncle Sugar had honed in me into a decent living.

I'll get to the Broker shortly, but you have to understand something: if you are a sick fuck who wants to read a book about some lunatic who gets off on murder, you are in the wrong place. I take no joy in killing. Pride, yes, but not to a degree that's obnoxious or anything.

As the Broker explained to me from right out of the gate, the people I'd be killing were essentially already dead: somebody had decided somebody else needed to die, and was going to have it done, which was where I came in. *After* the decision had been made. I'm not guilty of murder any more than my Browning nine millimeter is.

Guns don't kill people, some smart idiot said, *people kill people*—or in my case, people have some other person kill people.

There's a step here I've skipped and I better get to it. When I came home from overseas, I found my wife in bed with a guy. I didn't kill him, which I thought showed a certain restraint on my part, and when I went to talk to him about our "situation" the next day, I hadn't gone there to kill him, either. If I had, I'd have brought a fucking gun.

But he was working under this fancy little sports car, which like my wife had a body way too nice for this prick, and when he saw me, he looked up at me all sneery and said, "I got nothing to say to you,

bunghole.” And I took umbrage. Kicked the fucking jack out.

Ever hear the joke about the ice cream parlor? The cutie behind the counter asks, “*Crushed nuts, sir?*” “*No,*” the customer replies, “*rheumatism.*” Well, in my wife’s boyfriend’s case it was crushed nuts.

They didn’t prosecute me. They were going to at first, but then there was some support for me in the papers, and when the DA asked me if I might have *accidentally* jostled the jack, I said, “Sure, why not?” I had enough medals to make it messy in an election year. So I walked.

This was on the west coast, but I came from the Midwest, where I was no longer welcome. My father’s second wife did not want a murderer around—whether she was talking about the multiple yellow ones or the single-o white guy never came up. My father’s first wife, my mother, had no opinion, being dead.

The Broker found me in a shit pad in L.A. on a rare bender— I’m not by nature a booze hound, nor a smoker, not even a damn coffee drinker—and recruited me. I would come to find out he recruited a lot of ex-military for his network of contract killers. Vietnam had left a lot of guys fucked-up and confused and full of rage, not necessarily in that order, and he could sort of... channel it.

The contracts came from what I guess you’d call underworld sources. Some kills were clearly mob-related; others were civilians who were probably dirty enough to make contacts with the kind of organized crime types who did business with the Broker—a referral kind of deal. Thing was, a guy like me never knew who had taken the contract. That was the reason for a Broker—he was our agent and the client’s buffer.

Right now, maybe eighteen months since he’d tapped me on the shoulder, the Broker was sitting next to me in a red-button-tufted booth at the rear of an underpopulated restaurant and lounge on a Tuesday evening.

He was wearing that white hair a little longer now, sprayed in place, with some sideburns, and the mustache was plumper now, wider too,

but nicely trimmed. I never knew where that deep tan came from—Florida vacations? A tanning salon? Surely not the very cold winter that Davenport, Iowa, had just gone through, and that’s where we were—at the hotel the Broker owned a piece of, the Concor Inn near the government bridge over the Mississippi River, connecting Davenport and Rock Island, Illinois.

Specifically, we were in the Gay ’90s Lounge, one of the better restaurants in the Iowa/Illinois Quad Cities, a study in San Francisco-whorehouse red and black. The place seemed to cater to two crowds—well-off diners in the restaurant area and a singles-scene “meat market” in the bar area. A small combo—piano, bass and guitar—was playing jazzy lounge music, very quietly. A couple couples were upright and groping on the postage-stamp dance floor, while maybe four tables were dining, money men with trophy wives. Or were those mistresses?

The Broker sat with his back to the wall and I was on the curve of the booth next to him. Not right next to him. We weren’t cozy or anything. Often he had a bodyguard with him, another of his ex-military recruits—the Rock Island Arsenal was just across the government bridge and that may have been a source. But tonight it was just the two of us, a real father-and-son duo. We’d both had the surf and turf (surf being shrimp, not lobster—my host didn’t throw his dough around) and the Broker was sipping coffee. I had a Coke—actually, I was on my second. One of my few vices.

The Broker was in a double-knit navy two-button blazer with wide lapels, a wide light-blue tie and a very light-blue shirt, collars in. His trousers were canary yellow, but fortunately you couldn’t see that with him sitting. A big man, six two with a slender but solid build, with the handsome features of a sophisticated guy in a high-end booze ad in *Playboy*. Eyes light gray. Face grooved for smile and frown lines but otherwise smooth. Mid-forties, though with the bearing of an even older man.

I was in a tan leisure suit with a light brown shirt. Five ten, one-hundred and sixty pounds, brown hair worn a little on the long side but not enough to get heckled by a truck driver. Side-burns but nothing

radical. Just the guy sitting next to you on the bus or plane who you forgot about the instant you got where you were going. Average, but not so average that I couldn't get laid now and then.

“How do you like working with Boyd?” he asked. He had a mellow baritone and a liquid manner.

I had recently done a job with Boyd. Before that was a solo job and then five with a guy named Turner who I wound up bitching about to Broker.

Contracts were carried out by teams, in most cases, two- man ones—a passive and an active member. The passive guy went in ahead of time, sometimes as much as a month but at the very least two weeks, to get the pattern down, taking notes and running the whole surveillance gambit. The active guy came in a week or even less before the actual hit, utilizing the passive player's intel. Sometimes the passive half split town shortly after the active guy showed; sometimes the surveillance guy hung around if the getaway was tricky or backup might be needed.

“Well,” I said, “you *do* know he's a fag.”

The Broker's white eyebrows rose. It was like two caterpillars getting up on their hind legs. “No! Tough little fella like that? That hardly seems credible. Could you have misread the signs? You must be wrong, Quarry.”

That wasn't my name. My name is none of your business. Quarry is the alias or code moniker that the Broker hung on me. All of us working for him on active/passive teams went by single names. Like Charo or Liberace.

“Look, Broker,” I said, after a sip of Coke from a tall cocktail glass, “I don't give a shit.”

“Pardon?”

“I said I don't care who Boyd fucks as long as doesn't fuck up the job.”

Surprise twinkled in the gray eyes and one corner of his mouth turned

up slightly. “Well, that’s a very broad-minded attitude, Quarry.”

“A broad-minded attitude is exactly what Boyd doesn’t have.”

The Broker frowned at me. He had the sense of humor of a tuna. “If you wish, Quarry, I can team you with another of my boys—”

I stopped that with a raised hand. “I think Boyd is ideal for my purposes. He prefers passive and I prefer active. You’re well aware that sitting stakeout bores the shit out of me, whereas Boyd has a streak of voyeur in him.”

“Well, that’s hardly enough to recommend him as your permanent partner.”

“I’m not marrying him, Broker. Just working with him. And anyway, I like his style—he’s a regular guy, a beer-drinking, ball-team-following Joe. Fits in, blends in, does not the fuck stand out.”

Understand, Boyd was no queen—he was on the small side but sturdy, with a flat scarred face that had seen its share of brawls; his hair was curly and thick and brown, with bushy eye-brows and mustache, like so many were wearing. Also he had the kind of hard black eyes you see on a shark. Good eyes for this business.

With a what-the-hell wave, I said, “Let’s go with Boyd.” Broker smiled, lifting his coffee cup. “Boyd it shall be.” □ You probably noticed that the Broker talked like a guy who’d

read Shakespeare when to the rest of us English literature meant Ian Fleming.

“So,” I said, “four jobs last year, and the one last month. That par for the course?”

He nodded. “Your advance should be paid in full by the end of this year. With that off the books, you’ll have a very tidy income for a relative handful of jobs per annum.”

“Jobs that carry with them a high degree of risk.” □ “Nothing in life is

free, Quarry.” □ “Hey, I didn’t just fall off a turnip truck.” □ A smile twitched below the mustache. “So, they have *turnip*

trucks in Ohio, do they?” □ “I wouldn’t know. I’ve never been on a farm in my life. Strictly

a townie.” I leaned in. “Listen, Broker, I appreciate the free meal...keeping in mind nothing is free, like you said...but if you have no objection, I’m going to head home now.”

He gestured like a *Price Is Right* model to a curtain opening onto a grand prize. “You’re welcome to stay another night, my young friend. Several nights, if you like. You’ve earned a rest and a...bonus, perhaps? Possibly by way of a working girl? Something young and clean? Check out the redhead and the brunette, there at the end of the bar....”

“No thanks, Broker.” He seemed unusually generous tonight. “I just want to head back.”

“But it’s eight o’clock, and so many miles before you sleep.”

I shrugged. “I like to drive at night. Why, is there something else you want to go over?”

It had felt throughout the meal that something more was hanging in the air than the question of Boyd as my official passive partner.

He lowered his head while raising his eyes to me. There was something careful, even cautious about it. Very quietly, though no one was seated anywhere near us, he asked, “How do you feel about a contract involving...a woman?”

With a shrug, I said, “I don’t care who hires me. Hell, I don’t even *know* who hires me, thanks to you.”

“Not what I mean, Quarry.”

I grinned at him. “Yeah, I knew that. Just rattling your chain, Broker.”

He sighed, weight-of-the-world. “You know, I really should resent your insolence. Your impertinence. Your insubordina- tion.”

“Is that all? Can’t you think of anything else that starts with an ‘I’?”

That made him smile. Maybe a little sense of humor at that. “Such a rascal.”

“Not to mention scamp.”

Now he raised his head and lowered his eyes to me. Still very quiet, as if hunting wabbits. “I mean, if the...person you were dispatched to dislodge were of the female persuasion. Would that trouble you?”

That was arch even for the Broker.

I said, “I don’t think it’s possible to persuade anybody to be a female. Maybe you should check with Boyd on that one.”

“Quarry...a straight answer please.” “You won’t get one of those out of Boyd.”

He frowned, very disapproving now.

I pawed the air. “Okay, okay. No clowning. No, I have no problem with ‘dislodging’ the fairer sex. It’s been my experi- ence that women are human beings, and human beings are miserable creatures, so what the heck. Sure.”

He nodded like a priest who’d just heard a confessor agree to a dozen Hail Marys. “Good to know. Good to know. Now, Quarry, there may be upon occasion jobs in the offing...so to speak...that might require a willingness to perform as you’ve indicated.”

Jesus. I couldn’t navigate that sentence with a fucking sextant. So I just nodded.

“May I say that I admire your technique. I don’t wish to em- barrass you, Quarry, but you have a certain almost surgical skill...”

That’s what they said about Jack the Ripper. □ “...minimizing discomfort for our...subjects.” □ “Stop,” I said. “I’ll blush.” □ He leaned back in the booth. “Not everyone came back from

their terrible overseas ordeal as well-adjusted as you, Quarry. Some of my boys have real problems.”

“Imagine that. I’d like some dessert, if that’s okay.” □ I’d spotted a waiter with a dessert tray. □ The Broker gave a little bow and did that Arab hand roll

thing like he was approaching a pasha. Jesus, this guy. “It would be my pleasure, Quarry. There is a quite delicious little hot-fudge sundae we make here, with local ice cream. Courtesy of the Lagomarcino family.”

“Didn’t I do one of them in Chicago last September?” □ “Uh, no. Different family. Similar name.” □ “Rose by any other.” □ Knowing I planned to book it after the meal, I had already stowed my little suitcase in the back seat of my Green Opel GT out in the parking lot.

So in fifteen minutes more or less, the Broker—after signing for the meal—walked me out into a cool spring night, the full moon casting a nice ivory glow on the nearby Mississippi, its surface of gentle ripples making the kind of interesting texture you find on an alligator.

The Concorc Inn was a ten-story slab of glass and steel, angled to provide a better river view for the lucky guests on that side. The hotel resided on about half a city block’s worth of cement, surrounded by parking. The lights of cars on the nearby government bridge, an ancient structure dating back to when nobody skimmed on steel, were not enough to fend off the gloom of the nearby seedy warehouse area that made a less than scenic vista for the unlucky guests on the hotel’s far side. The hotel’s sign didn’t do much to help matters, either, just a rooftop billboard with some underlighting. Four lanes of traffic cutting under the bridge separated the parking lot from the riverfront, but on a Tuesday night at a quarter till nine, “traffic” was an overstatement.

We paused outside the double doors we’d just exited. No doorman was on duty. Which was to say, no doorman was ever on duty: this was Iowa. The Broker was lighting up a cheroot, and for the first time I realized what he most reminded me of: an old riverboat gambler. It took standing here on the Mississippi riverfront to finally get that across to me. All he needed one of those Rhett Butler hats and Bret

Maverick string ties. And he should probably lose the yellow pants.

“Broker,” I said, “you *knew* Boyd was gay.”

“Did I?” He smiled a little, his eyebrows rising just a touch, his face turned a flickery orange by the kitchen match he was applying to the tip of the slender cigar.

“Of course you did,” I said. “You research *all* of us down to how many fillings we have, what our fathers did for a living, and what church we stopped going to.”

He waved the match out. “Why would I pretend not to have known that Boyd is a practicing homosexual? Perhaps it’s just something I missed.”

“Christ, Broker, he lives in Albany with a hairdresser. And I doubt at this point he needs any practice.”

He gave me a grandiloquent shrug. “Perhaps I thought you might have been offended had I mentioned the fact.”

“I told you. He can sleep with sheep if he wants. Boy sheep, girl sheep, I don’t give a fuck. But why hold that back?”

He let out some cheroot smoke. He seemed vaguely embarrassed. “One of my boys strongly objected to Boyd. But somehow my instincts told me that you would not. That you would be—”

“Broad-minded.”

“I was going to say forward-thinking.” He folded his arms and gave me a professorly look. “It’s important we not be judgmental individuals, Quarry. That we be open-minded, unprejudiced, so that our professionalism will hold sway.”

“Right the fuck on,” I said.

He frowned at that, crudity never pleasing him, and the big two-tone green Fleetwood swung into the lot from the four-lane with the suddenness and speed of a boat that had gone terribly off course. The

Caddy slowed as it cut across our path, the window on the rider's side down. The face looking out at us was almost demonic but that was because its Brillo-haired owner was grimacing as he leaned the big automatic against the rolled-down window and aimed it at us, like a turret gun on a ship's deck. A .45, I'd bet.

But I had taken the Broker down to the pavement, even before the thunder of it shook the night and my nine millimeter was out from under my left arm and I was shooting back at the bastard just as a second shot rocketed past me, eating some metal and glass, close enough for me to feel the wind of it but not touching me, and I put two holes in that grimace, both in the forehead, above either eye, and blood was welling down over his eyes like scarlet tears as the big vehicle tore out.

The last thing I saw was his expression, the expression of a screaming man, but he wasn't screaming, because he was dead. And dead men not only don't tell tales, they don't make *any* fucking sound, including screams.

I didn't chase them. Killing the shooter was enough. Maybe too much.

The Broker, looking alarmed, said something goddamned goofy to me, as I was hauling him up. "You wore a gun to *dinner* with me? Are you insane, man? This is neutral territory."

"Tell those assholes," I said, "and by the way—you're welcome."

He was unsteady on his feet.

The desk manager came rushing out and the Broker glanced back and shouted, "Nothing to see here! Children with cherry bombs. Franklin, keep everybody inside."

Franklin, an efficient little guy in a vest and bow tie (more riverboat shit), rounded up the curious, handing out drink chits. There was a stone bench near the double doors and I sat

Broker down on it and plopped beside him. □ "You okay?" I asked. □ He looked blister pale. "My dignity is bruised." □ "Well, it doesn't show in

those pants. I killed the shooter.” “Good. That should send a message.” □ “Yeah, but who to? And if you correct me with ‘to whom,’ I’ll

shoot you myself.” □ He frowned at me, more confusion than displeasure. “Did

you get the license?” □ “Not the number. Mississippi plates, though.”

That seemed to pale him further. “Oh dear.” □ “Oh dear, huh? Must be bad.” □ “Somebody may call the cops,” I said. “Not everybody who

heard that, and maybe saw it, is in having free drinks right now.” He nodded. “You need to leave. Now.” □ “No argument.” I had already put the gun away. They weren’t

coming back, not with a guy shot twice in the face they weren’t. Anyway, by now “they” was one guy, driving a big buggy into a night that was just getting darker.

I patted him on the shoulder. That was about as friendly as we’d ever got. “Sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine. I’ll handle this. Go.”

I went, and the night I was driving into was getting darker, too. But I had the nine millimeter on the rider’s seat to keep me company. That and my “Who’s Next” eight-track.