

Anything for a Pal

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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Tony Kinsella looked at his platinum wristwatch. Ten more minutes. Just ten minutes to go. It was all set. In ten minutes a young man would be standing on that corner under the streetlight. Doreen would come up, speak to him, and then step into the drugstore. Once Doreen had put the finger on him, confirming that he was, in fact, the man they sought, the car would slide up, and he, Tony Kinsella, Boss Cardoza's ace torpedo, would send a stream of copper-jacketed bullets into the kid's body. It would be all over then, and Tony Kinsella would have saved his pal from the chair.

He looked up to the driver's seat where „Gloves“ McFadden slouched carelessly, waiting. He noted the thick neck, and heavy, prizefighter's shoulders. In the other front seat „Dopey“ Wentz stared off into the night. Kinsella didn't like that. A guy on weed was undependable. Kinsella shrugged; he didn't like it but the whole mess would soon be over.

This kid, Robbins, his name was, he'd seen Corney Watson pull the Baronski job. Tomorrow he was to identify Corney in court. Corney Watson had sprung Kinsella out of a western pen one time, so they were pals. And Kinsella, whatever his failings, had one boast: he'd do anything for a pal. Tony was proud of that. He was a right guy.

But that was only one of the two things he was proud of. The other the boys didn't know about, except in a vague way. It was his brother, George. Their name wasn't Kinsella, and George had no idea that such a name even existed. Their real name was Bretherton, but when Tony had been arrested the first time, he gave his name as Kinsella, and so it had been for a dozen years now.

Tony was proud of George. George was ten years the youngest, and had no idea that his idolized big brother was a gangster, a killer. Tony rarely saw him, but he'd paid his way through college, and into a classy set of people. Tony smiled into the darkness. George Bretherton: now wasn't that a classy name? Maybe, when he'd put a few grand more in his sock, he'd chuck the rackets and take George off to Europe. Then he'd be Anthony Bretherton, wealthy and respected.

Kinsella leaned back against the cushions. This was one job he was pulling for nothing. Just for a pal. Corney had bumped „Baron“ Baronski, and this kid had seen it. How he happened to be there, nobody knew or cared. Tomorrow he was going to testify, and that meant the chair for Corney unless Tony came through tonight, but Tony, who never failed when the chips were down, would come through.

They had located Robbins at a downtown hotel, a classy joint. Cardoza sent Doreen over there, and she got acquainted. Doreen was a swell kid, wore her clothes like a million, and she was wise. She had put the finger on more than one guy. This Robbins fellow, he wasn't one of Baronski's guns, so how had he been there at the time? Tony shrugged. Just one of those unfortunate things.

Why didn't George write, he wondered? He was working in a law office out west somewhere. Maybe he'd be the mouthpiece for some big corporation and make plenty of dough. That was the racket! No gang guns or coppers in that line, a safe bet.

Tony wondered what Corney was doing. Probably lying on his back in his cell hoping Kinsella would come through. Well, Tony smiled with satisfaction; he'd never botched a job yet.

Suddenly Dopey hissed: „Okay, Tony, there's the guy.“

„You think! When you see Doreen comin', let me know. I'm not interested 'til then.“

He suddenly found himself wishing it was over. He always felt like this at the last minute. Jumpy. Prizefighters felt that way before the bell. Nerves. But when the gun started to jump he was all right. He caressed the finned blue steel of the barrel lovingly.

„Get set, Tony, here she comes!“ The powerful motor came to life, purring quietly.

Kinsella sat up and rolled down the window. The cool evening air breathed softly across his face. He looked up at the stars, and then glanced both ways, up and down the street. It was all clear.

A tall, broad-shouldered fellow stood on the corner. Tony could see Doreen coming. She was walking fast. Probably she was nervous too. That big guy. That would be him. Tony licked his lips and lifted the ugly black muzzle of the submachine gun. Its cold nose peered over the edge of the window. He saw a man walk out of the drugstore, light a cigar, and stroll off up the street. Tony almost laughed as he thought how funny it would be if he were to start shooting then, how startled that man would be!

There! Doreen was talking to the man on the corner. Had one hand on his sleeve... smiling at him.

God, dames were coldblooded! In a couple of minutes that guy would be kicking in his own gore, and she was putting him on the spot and smiling at him!

Suddenly she turned away and started for the drugstore on some excuse or other. As she passed through the door she was almost running. The car was moving swiftly now, gliding toward the curb, the man looked up, and the gun spouted fire. The man threw up his arms oddly, jerked sharply, and fell headlong. McFadden wheeled the car and they drove back, the machine gun spouting fire again. The body, like a sack of old clothes, jerked as the bullets struck.

The next morning Tony lay on his back staring at the ceiling. He wondered where Doreen was. Probably the papers were full of the Robbins killing. Slowly he crawled out of bed, drew on his robe, and retrieved the morning paper from his apartment door. His eyes sought the headliners, blaring across the top in bold type:

GANG GUNS SLAY FEDERAL OPERATIVE.
MACHINE GUNS GET WATSON WITNESS.

Tony's eyes narrowed. A federal man, eh? That wasn't so good. Who would have thought Robbins was a federal man? Still, they were never where you expected them to be. Probably he'd been working a case on Baronski when Corney bumped him off. That would be it.

His eyes skimmed the brief account of the killing. It was as usual. They had no adequate description of either Doreen or the car. Then his eyes glimpsed a word in the last paragraph that gripped his attention. His face tense, he finished the story.

Slowly, he looked up. His eyes were blank. Walking across to the table he picked up his heavy automatic, flipped down the safety, and still staring blankly before him, put the muzzle in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

His body toppled across the table, the blood slowly staining the crumpled paper and almost obliterating the account of the Robbins killing. The final words of the account were barely visible as the spreading stain wiped it out:

„A fact unknown until the killing was that Jack Robbins, witness for the prosecution in the Baronski killing, was in reality George Bretherton, a Federal operative recently arrived from the Pacific Coast and working on his first case. He is survived by a brother whose present whereabouts are unknown.“

Signature