

The Dangerous Business

Enough Rope collection

by Lawrence Block, 1938-

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When she heard his car in the driveway she hurried at once to the door and opened it. Her first glimpse of his face told her all she wanted to know. She'd grown used to that expression over the years, the glow of elation underladen with exhaustion, the whole look foreshadowing the depression that would surely settle on him in an hour or a day or a week.

How many times had he come home to her like this? How many times had she rushed to the door to meet him?

And how could he go on doing this, year after year after year?

She could see, as he walked toward her now, just how much this latest piece of work had taken out of him. It had drawn new lines on his face. Yet, when he smiled at her, she could see too the young man she had married so many years ago.

Almost thirty years, and she treasured all those years, every last one of them. But what a price he'd paid for them! Thirty years in a dangerous, draining business, thirty years spent in the company of violent men, criminals, killers. Men whose names were familiar to her, men like Johnny Speed and Bart Callan, men he had used (or been used by) on and off throughout his career. And other men he would work with once and never again.

„It's finished," she said.

„All wrapped up." His smile widened. „You can always tell, can't you?"

„Well, after all these years. How did it go?"

„Not bad. It's gone better, but at least it's finished and I got out of it alive. I'll say this for it, it's thirsty work."

„Martini?"

„What else?"

She made a pitcher of them. They always had one drink apiece before dinner, but on the completion of a job he needed more of a release than came with one martini. They would drain the pitcher, with most of the martinis going to him, and dinner would be light, and before long they would be in bed.

She stirred at the thought. He would want her tonight, he would need her. Their pleasure in each other was as vital as ever after almost thirty years, if less frequently taken, and they both lived for nights like this one.

She handed him his drink, held her own aloft. „Well," she said.

„Here's to crime," he said. Predictably.

She drank without hesitating, but later that evening she said, „You know, I like our toast less and less these days."

„Well, get a new toaster. We can afford it. They have models now that do four slices of bread at a time."

„I mean *Here's to crime*. You knew what I meant."

„Of course I knew what you meant. I don't know that I like it much myself. *Here's to crime*. Force of habit, I guess."

„It takes so much out of you, darling. I wish—"

„What?"

She lowered her eyes. „That you could do something else."

„Might as well wish for wings."

„You're really that completely locked in?"

„Of course I am, baby. Now how many times have we been over this? I've been doing this my whole life. I have contacts, I have a certain reputation, there are some people who are kind enough to think I'm good at what I do—"

„You'd be good at anything you did."

„That's a loyal wife talking."

„It's still true."

He put his hand on hers. „Maybe. Sometimes I like to think so. And other times it seems to me that I was always cut out for this line of work. Crime and violence and sudden death."

„You’re such a gentle, gentle man.”

„Don’t let the word get out, huh? Not that anyone would be likely to believe you.”

„Oh, baby—”

„It’s not such a bad life, kid. And I’m too old to change now. Isn’t it funny how I get older all the time and you stay the same? It’s my bedtime already, an old man like me.”

„Some old man. But I guess you’re tired.”

„I said bedtime. I didn’t say anything about being tired.”

But in the days that followed she knew just how tired he was, and there was a brooding quality to his exhaustion that frightened her. Often at such times he liked to get away, and they would flee the city and spend a couple of weeks unwinding in unfamiliar terrain. This time, when his depression failed to pass, she suggested that they go away for a while. But he didn’t want to go anywhere. He didn’t even want to leave the house, and he passed the daytime hours sitting in front of the television set or turning the pages of books and magazines. Not watching the television, not reading the books and magazines.

At one point she thought he might want to talk about his work. In their first years together he had been excited about what he did, and at times she had felt herself a participant. But with the passage of time and with his growing discontent about his profession he tended to keep more and more of it to himself. In a sense she was grateful; it alienated her, the corruption and violence, the wanton killing, and it was easier for her to love him if she let herself dissociate the man from his work. And yet she wondered if this didn’t make the burden on his shoulders that much heavier for the lack of anyone to share it.

So she made an effort. „You’ve hardly talked about it,” she said one afternoon. „It went well, you said.”

„Well enough. Won’t make us rich, but it went quite smoothly. Hit a couple of snags along the way but nothing serious.”

„Who was in this one? Johnny Speed?”

„No.”

„Callan?”

„I don’t think I’m going to be able to use Callan anymore. No, none of the regulars came into it this time. Let’s say I put it together with a cast of unknowns. And there was nobody in it I’d care to work with again.” He chuckled mirthlessly. „Hardly anybody got out of it alive, as a matter of fact.”

„Then it was very violent.”

„You might say that.”

„I thought so. I can tell, you know.”

„You’ve said that before. It’s hard to believe, but I guess I believe you.”

„If there were just a way to avoid the violence, the awful bloodshed—”

He shook his head. „Part of the game.”

„I know, but—”

„Part of the game.”

She let it go.

His mood lifted, of course. The depression had been deeper than usual and had lasted longer than usual, but it was not nearly so deep or so enduring as some he—and she—had been forced to live through in the past. Some years previously drinking had become a problem. Alcoholism was virtually an occupational illness in his profession, and of course it made efficient functioning impossible.

He'd gone on the wagon for several years, then found he was able to drink normally again. A single martini before the evening meal, a pitcher of them at the conclusion of a job, an occasional beer with lunch when he was resting up between jobs. But drinking never became a problem again, and she thanked God for that, even as she prayed to God that he could get into a line of work that didn't take so much out of him.

She raised the subject again one evening. He'd begun to talk about going back to work, not right away but before too long, and she wondered how he could face it so soon.

„You don't have to work so much," she said. „The kids are grown and gone. You and I have everything we want and money in the bank. You don't have to drive yourself."

„It's not a matter of driving myself. I can't sit idle too long. It gets to me."

„I know, but—"

„Rather wear out than rust out. Trite but true."

„Couldn't you try something else some of the time? Couldn't you try doing what you really want to do?"

He looked at her for a long moment, then turned his eyes aside and gazed off into space. Or, perhaps, into time.

„I've tried that," he said at length.

„I didn't know that."

„I didn't really want to talk about it. It didn't work out." Now he turned to face her again, and the expression on his face was enough to break her heart. „Maybe there was once something else I wanted to do. Maybe at some stage in my life I had the potential to do other things, to be somebody other than the man I turned into."

But I love the man you turned into, she thought. *I love the man you are, the man you've always been.*

„I may have the dreams," he said. „But that's all they ever were, baby. Dreams. You know what happens to dreams when you wake up. They go where smoke goes, into the air. Maybe I was born to do what I do. Maybe I just trained myself and wound up painting myself into a corner. But I'm an old man now—"

„You are like hell an old man!"

„—and it's all I know how to do and all I even seem to want to do. I've spent my whole life with crooks and grifters and strong-arm men, and I'll spend the rest of it with the same awful types, and yes, there'll be violence, but I guess I can go on living with that."

He smiled suddenly, and not merely with his mouth. „It's not so bad," he said. „It's depressing when I think of what might have been, but the hell with that, kid. I'm doing what I was cut out for. That's a hard thing to admit to yourself and it

hurts, I'll say it hurts, but once you make yourself believe it, then it becomes a liberating thing."

She thought for a moment. "Yes," she said. "Yes, I suppose that's true."

And so she was prepared a week later when he told her he was ready to go back to work. He'd been restless for a day or two, pacing back and forth across the living-room rug, jotting incomprehensible notes on long yellow pads of paper, even mumbling and muttering to himself. Then on Monday morning he looked at her over the brim of his second cup of coffee and told her.

"Well, the signs were there," she said. "You're sure you don't want more time off?"

"Positive."

"And you know what you want to do?"

"Uh-huh. I'm going to use Johnny again."

"Johnny Speed. How many times have you used him?"

"I don't know. Too many, I guess. He's got a lot of miles on the clock but I guess he's good for another go-round."

"How long do you think it'll take?"

"Couple of weeks."

"Be careful."

He looked at her. "Oh, come on," he said. "The violence never touches me, baby. You know that."

"Oh, but it does."

"Come off it."

"It's a dangerous business."

"Dangerous business," he said, tasting the phrase. "I kind of like that."

"Well, it is."

"I like the phrase," he said. "I don't know that it fits my life—"

"I think it does."

"—but it certainly fits the current project. *Dangerous Business. A Dangerous Business.* Which do you prefer?"

"I don't know. *The Dangerous Business?*"

"You know, that's best of all. *The Dangerous Business.* I think I'm going to use it."

"Don't you have to make sure nobody's used it already?"

"Doesn't matter. There's no such thing as copyright on titles. I thought you knew that."

"I must have forgotten."

"*The Dangerous Business.* A Johnny Speed Mystery. Yes, by God, I'm going to use it. It has a nice ring to it and it fits the plot I've got in mind."

"It fits, all right," she said. But he was caught up in the book he'd start that morning and didn't even notice the tone of her voice.

