

AN IMPROPER HEARING

by
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"In ten words or less, tell me again. Why are you going to kill this guy?" the woman asked through a mouthful of Mu-Shu pork.

She was a tiny, small-boned woman whose voice made up in volume for what she lacked in size. Even with her mouth full.

"Cause he's a philanderer," her companion said firmly. She was as large as the other woman was small, with a square slavic face and wide-set, hazel eyes that were scrunched up in a smile. It was a feline kind of smile, flat and enigmatic. "And because he has no redeeming social value at all. He's unkind, ungenerous and unbelievably... unbelievably tacky."

As they both laughed, the blood drained from the face of a man at a nearby table. If anyone had been watching him, they would have said he'd had a shock. But no one was watching.

"All right, I guess he deserves a painful death," the smaller woman conceded.

"Very, very painful," her companion said, nodding. She made snipping motions with her fingers, as if they were a pair of scissors.

That really cracked them up.

The man slipped out of his seat unnoticed and tiptoed up to the cash register on trembling legs. He waited less than a minute for the waitress who was busy on the phone, then left his bill and ten dollars to cover it on the counter.

"Shoot, Gwenda. You're such a riot!" the first woman brayed as the door fell shut behind him. "But you have to have a little more motive than that if you're going to murder someone. Readers want a realistic plot. Something that makes sense."

"Yeah, I know," Gwenda agreed, shaking her head. "It's not like real life. So you tell me, Anne, you're the published one. What else does it need?"

"Listen to you, with a contract lined up for your first one and another on the way."

"Okay," said Gwenda. "How about she can't divorce him because she signed over half of the family estate to him when they married." She paused for a bite of mu shu, swallowed and went on. "Or he knows some secret of hers that could destroy her. Or he's alienated the affections of her Persian cat on top of everything else."

Anne started giggling again and Gwenda joined in.

The man was driving down Main Street. Driving fast. He kept asking himself how Gwenda had found out about Jocelyn. He'd been so careful to keep it a secret. He couldn't afford a divorce. Gwenda did his books. Both sets. He groaned. She also managed the office. In fact, she did everything but sales. And she could probably do that, too. If he was dead.

But to kill him. Dang. He had no idea she felt that way about him. In a way, it was kinda a compliment, he told himself. But then he remembered the rest of her description. Or tried to. What had it been? Un-something—

He braked, just noticing the stop sign and the woman with the stroller in the crosswalk. The woman scowled at him and moved slowly across the street.

He waited until she was in front of his car before blasting her with his horn.

"Have you told Don that you're writing murder mysteries yet?" Anne asked Gwenda, back at the restaurant.

"I write all the checks, personal and business, except for the ones from his expense account. I fill out the tax forms too. He'll never notice the extra money."

"But why don't you want him to know?"

Gwenda shrugged. "You know Don. He's, oh...you know."

"Unkind..." Anne prompted.

Gwenda smiled in agreement. And then they finished the description together, "...ungenerous and unbelievably tacky," before bursting into new gales of laughter.

Don screeched into the parking lot of the new apartment building on Seventh Street. He was lucky, he told himself. He never would have heard Gwenda talking if he hadn't been at that crummy Chinese restaurant. And he never would have been at that restaurant if a sales call hadn't fallen through. Now all he had to do was to convince her that his affair was over. Completely over. He didn't put it past her to check up on him to make sure. She was a competent woman. A very competent woman. Good enough to kill him and make it look like an accident, he was sure.

He jumped out of the car and raced up the stairs to the second floor. Then he pounded on the door. He didn't hear any response. He whacked the door a few more times, remembering for a moment those blissful early days of his marriage when he used to whack Gwenda too. The days before she started hitting him back. He listened again at the door and heard nothing, then got out his key and used it.

Once he got the door unlocked, he shoved it open and found himself staring at a very well-developed young woman with wide blue eyes and a gun in her right hand. A gun pointed at him. Dang.

"Don't shoot, Jocelyn!" he shouted. "It's just me."

"Don!" she cried. She lowered the gun slowly and wrinkled her previously unwrinkled forehead. "I thought you were a burglar. What are you doing here in the middle of the day?"

"We've gotta talk," he told her, stepping closer.

"About what?"

"My wife knows about us," he said.

"So?"

"I've gotta stop seeing you—"

"But you said we were going to get married, Don. You said you'd divorce your wife. You said—"

"I can't divorce her," Don interrupted.

"But—"

"Listen," he growled, arm raised to back up his words. "Get this straight.

We're finished. You're nothing but a little gold digger anyway. Got that? We're done. And if you ever try to ask me for one gol dang thing—

The sound of the gun exploding drowned out the rest of his words. He dropped his hand, looked down at what was left of his chest, and fell to the floor, speechless.

It had been a nice funeral, Gwenda thought, looking around her. Really nice. All her friends had come to support her. And Don's friends too, of course. The casket had looked perfect, buried in gladioli. A young, well-built woman Gwenda didn't recognize came up to shake her hand.

"I'm Jocelyn," the woman whispered.

"Ah," Gwenda said. Jocelyn. The prosecutors hadn't brought murder charges. For what? Another domestic handgun incident. She'd thought the man breaking into her house was a burglar. Who could blame her? There was still a question about the unregistered gun, but that was all.

"Did you really know about us?" Jocelyn asked.

Gwenda scrunched up her eyes in a feline smile and shrugged her shoulders minutely.

It had been a nice funeral. No one was going to spoil it for her. Not even Don.