

YOUR LIFE IS MINE

Gary Barton

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I've known you for a long time, Johnnie Dale. Sure, I remember you from the old days. I remember seeing pictures of you and reading something in the papers a couple of times. And once in a while, your name would come up in one of those cheap dives where the whiskey is cheap and the air is heavy and foul with smoke; one of those places you cops don't know much about.

The things they said about you weren't nice, Johnnie Dale. But they all meant the same:

Johnnie Dale cold, hard, relentless, with a heart like his fists and fists like iron. The toughest dick in New York. Alien squad, vice, narcotics, safe-and-loft, homicide squad, and later, the Broadway beat.

It was when you were on the Broadway beat that I really got to know you, and now I wish that I had remembered those things I'd read and heard about you in the other days. But I didn't, then; and I guess it wouldn't have made any difference, anyway, because I had to know.

It was really just a few months ago. You were walking down Seventh Avenue, near where that dance hall is. You were on the prowl, and I was standing there because they used to say that you went past there at least once every night when you were looking for something or someone.

You picked up a lot of stuff from the punks who loafed around there; and when you put the arm on a guy, and he knew something, you usually got it, one way or another. They didn't hold out on Johnnie Dale very long.

But you didn't see me that night. I followed you down Seventh to Broadway, and it wasn't hard to stay out of sight, because war had just been declared against Japan and there were lots of people jamming Times Square, all watching the news bulletins that were running around the Times Building.

I was right behind you all the time, though you couldn't know that, of course. You couldn't know that there was a .45 automatic in my coat pocket, either; there was a full clip in the magazine and every slug had your name on it.

I was going to use that gun, and the next morning all the cops in New York would have a little black ribbon pinned across their shields.

That was the first night I picked you up. But it didn't turn out just that way.

You went into a little bar-and-grill below Times Square. There was a girl there, sitting in one of the side booths away from the bar, and she was waiting for you. She had big brown eyes that looked a little wet and hurt, and her hair was long and soft and the color of dark honey.

She was so sweet and pretty, that something all choked up in my throat; and instead of just sitting there in the booth behind you, I downed a quick double rye at the bar before I went back to listen to what she was telling you.

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I guess that was why I didn't hear all she said, but I had a good idea of what it was going to be. So I kept listening, and I kept thinking how funny it was that she should meet you on the first night I picked you up.

She told you her name was Betty Stanton and that her brother had disappeared. His name was Wayne, she told you, Wayne Stanton, and she gave you some photographs and a good description of him. But you didn't know who he was, then. You didn't know that until much later.

You told Betty Stanton that you would do your best to help her find her brother, and I heard your shoes scuff the floor beneath your table. I got out of my booth and left the place, then. I didn't want you to see me. I wanted to wait for you outside.

I felt a little sorry for Betty Stanton, but I guess I was grinning a little. You weren't going to find Wayne Stanton, Johnnie Dale!

I followed you every night after that. Every night? Hell! I was on your tail day and night! From the time you left your bachelor apartment in the morning, till you went home to bed, ten or twelve or sometimes sixteen hours later.

I ate breakfast at the same counter with you in that little place near headquarters, and lunch and dinner, and coffee at midnight. I was standing outside a cigar store when you went in for cigarettes, and I'd be playing the juke box in a bar when you dropped in for a beer.

I just want you to know how close I was to you all the time. I had a hundred chances to kill you. It would have been so easy. But I couldn't do it yet. I had to keep waiting, waiting, waiting

You were on the Century Trust Co. case. You remember that, of course. But perhaps there are some things about it you don't know. You see, I know all about that job, too. I should. I was in on it.

Nickie Morielli's outfit pulled that job, you know. Two bank clerks were burned down during the robbery. Too bad bank clerks always try to be heroes; they should know better. There were five of us in on it Nickie, three boys he had just brought in from Chicago, and myself. The heist went off O.K., but we were a little slow somewhere along the line and had to scatter when the alarm went off.

The three Chicago boys got too close to a Tommy gun when a police prowler car screamed up in front of the bank as they were getting away. Or trying to. And they'll never see Chicago again or any other town this side of hell.

But I did get away. I don't know exactly how I did it. I only remember that I started running in circles almost, frantically, desperately, and everywhere I turned there were cops. Cops! Cops! The place was lousy with them! And there was lots of gunfire. And people yelling and women screaming.

I felt a slug crease my side and it burned like hell, and the blood started to run, warm and sticky, down my leg. But I kept going, blind with fright, and everything was a gray haze, with people moving crazily and yelling, and the sharp crack of police pistols.

Somehow, I managed to reach the subway entrance. There was a cop standing there, and there were so many people crowding around now that I guess he didn't realize that I was one of the crooks until it was too late.

I hated to do it, but it was my life, too, wasn't it? I didn't really think about it one way or another, but fleetingly, I was thinking: You've already burned down one back there in the bank. Don't let this one stop you, now.

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I was all the way down the subway stairs when I heard his body fall. He never made a sound, and he rolled behind me down the steps.

Luckily, a train was just pulling out. I hurdled the turnstiles and made it, rode to the next stop and went into the men's washroom, I stayed there about five minutes, cleaned up, then went out and on up to the street. I rode downtown in a cab.

The next day, it was spread all over the papers. Three killed, two got away. One got away with a bag containing a little cash and thirty thousand dollars in negotiable bonds and that was Nickie Morielli. Even I didn't know where he hid out with that loot.

I stayed in my hide-out for five days, and had a kid bring me the papers, every edition, and food and cigarettes. And so I read how you got Nickie Morielli.

He was fool enough to leave his hide-out, and the cops picked him up. He almost got away from you then, too. A running gun fight, wasn't it?

Anyway, I remember reading that he put a slug in one detective's knee and stopped another, before one of you put two bullets in his head. You got Nickie Morielli, but you never did get the bonds.

So that's why you were on the case, Johnnie Dale. You wanted to find out where Nickie had cached that loot. And that's why I was on the case. I wanted to find out, too. You were going to lead me to it. When you found it, I'd be there!

You were making the rounds, picking up the pieces. All the little things that seemed so insignificant. A stoolie here who might have heard something, a lead there that couldn't be overlooked, and all those little things in between that always came close, but didn't quite add up.

Most of the times, I could have told you what was good and what wasn't. But I couldn't. I couldn't let you know. And the days were moving into weeks, and the weeks into months.

And all this time I was behind you, like a shadow, like a ghost, haunting you, living your life, getting more desperate each day; cheering you when the trail looked hot, and cursing and feeling sick inside with you when you hit a dead-end.

It was getting so I hated the sight of you. Seeing you every day, night and day, never losing you. And seeing you always moving in my sleep at night, moving on and on, your big body slouched a little, stalking the trail, always ahead of me.

I thought I'd go crazy, always seeing you like this. And there were times when I wanted to scream and run up to you with that automatic in my fist and blast your head off. And then I'd watch you die, I thought, and I'd laugh. What did I care for thirty thousand dollars!

Yes, there were times when I felt that way and almost bumped you off. But, somehow, I managed to keep going, letting you lead the way, and waiting. And I learned why you were called "Relentless Johnnie Dale."

You used to see Betty Stanton often, too. You usually met her in that same little bar-and-grill just below Times Square. It must have been hard to keep telling her that you had no word about her brother and to see that look in her eyes.

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That time when the river patrol had dragged the body of a kid out of the Hudson there was a note in your voice, deep and sort of choking, and I could tell it was hurting you when you asked her to go down to the morgue and see if she could identify it.

But that kid they pulled from the river wasn't Wayne Stanton. You met his sister again the next night, and the next more often than you really had to, I was thinking.

By now, it was on the grapevine that you were on the case and what you were doing; and, if you had had any worries, you would have had more than me to worry about. Because I wasn't the only one following you.

It doesn't take too long for that kind of news to get around the underworld, and there were a lot of boys in New York who wanted to get their hands on that thirty grand!

And then I began to worry, too.

It wasn't till you ran across that bank note that I saw the play, and then things started to build up fast. I guess I didn't get it at first, because I hadn't thought anyone else knew where the money was cached. But there was something funny about the way that kid turned up the bank note.

There had been a few large bills in with the bonds that Nickie Morielli had gotten away with from the Century Trust, and a lot of the merchants in town had pasted their serial numbers up alongside the cash registers.

The cashier in that little Village restaurant hadn't noticed the bill until the kid left, but, fortunately, I remembered him because I had kept wondering where I'd seen him before.

And when you ran across another one of those bills in that bar on Greenwich Street, the next night, I knew it wasn't just coincidence that they should turn up in the very places you happened to be in.

Maybe you were wise, by now, to the kid who was passing them; I don't know. But I know I was.

So when you went into that same restaurant the following night, I stayed outside. I have sort of an obsession for playing hunches, and this time I thought it was tagged right.

The kid came along less than five minutes after you went in. He was a young punk. Cheap. Cheap and gaudy. And he tried to get tough, till I pulled the rod from my pocket and forced him to back to the alley; then he got on his knees and blubbered all over the place.

He played mighty dumb, at first; he said he didn't know anything. I jacked a cartridge into the chamber of the automatic and let the sleeve slam back. It sounded like a gunshot in the quiet of the alley.

"Now, what's the play, kid?" I asked him. "Or are you still going to give me that lip about not knowing anything?"

"I...I don't know," he told me. All the toughness was gone, now, and he was shaking like a baby. "Honest, mister...I don't know what you mean "

"You can start in by telling me where you got that dough," I said. "And you can make it fast, because I haven't got much time!"

"A woman gave it to me," he said.

"Who is she?"

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"I don't know," he said. "Where does she live?" "I don't know that, either."

"Listen, kid " I snarled, and slapped the back of my fist across his mouth.

He stumbled across the alley and came up against the wall of a building, shaking his head.

"Honest!" he cried. "I don't know who she is! She just meets me on the corner every night up near Jane Street and gives me some money. Says to go to a certain restaurant in a hell of a hurry and get something to eat or to some bar she picks out for a beer then bring her back the— change. Honest, mister "

And all at once, this whole plan dawned on me. I thought I knew who this mysterious woman was. And she'd be the only logical person to know where Nickie Morielli had cached that loot.

"Thanks," I told the kid, and crossed another short jab to his mouth.

He went down in a crumbling heap on the dirty cobblestones of the alley. I wanted him to be out of circulation for a while, I didn't want you, Johnnie Dale, to put the arm on him.

I was on my own, Johnnie Dale. For the first time in four months, I was leaving you. And I wasn't sorry. I was only sorry because I hadn't seen through this thing a long time ago.

No, I wasn't forgetting you, Johnnie Dale. You were still dangerous to me. And you wouldn't quit this case until that money turned up I knew that. So I'd be back for you, with those bullets that had your name on them.

That would be after I had the thirty thousand dollars in bonds,

The building on Jane Street was a walk-up. And it was dark. But I knew where to go, and found the little apartment on the second floor, rear.

There was a shaft of yellow light showing beneath the door, and I tried the knob, though I knew it would be locked. But that lock was a cinch, and the woman sitting in the front room didn't know a thing till I walked in on her.

"Hello, Mona," I said softly.

"You!" she said. Her voice was little above a frightened whisper, and her eyes were wide with fear.

"Expecting me, Mona?"

"I've been expecting you for months," she told me.

"I thought you had left Nickie. I thought you were in Chi."

"Not when I knew this hide-out and that there was thirty thousand dollars lying around."

"You were a fool to stay, Mona," I told her.

"I would have been a fool to leave with you and the rest of the wolves after this dough!"

"So now you have a partner," I said.

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"Like hell there'll be a partner!" Mona snapped, and there was a gun in her hand. "Here's where you came in "

I whirled even as she fired. And she must have been very nervous and excited, because the slug went high and chewed into the wall in back of me. I hit the couch on the other side of the room rolling, and another bullet tugged at my coat. But I had the .45 out of my pocket now, and was firing under my arm as I went down.

The couch had rolled away from the wall as I hit it, and I got down behind it and got set. Mona sent two more at me, but her gun was still kicking high and the slugs bit into the plaster over my head.

My next shot caught her in the wrist, and she screamed terribly and dropped the gun to the floor. She was still screaming when I put one high into her chest I was afraid the noise she was making would bring the cops and she crumpled to the floor and lay very still, and there was no more sound.

Feverishly, I searched the tiny apartment for the little bag that held the stolen bonds. It wasn't hard to find. It was lying on the floor of the closet near the rear door.

I could hear the sound of excited voices in the hall, but they weren't coming near the door. They must be tenants, I thought, wondering what was happening but too frightened to find out.

But I wasn't going to chance making my getaway down those front stairs. The police would be here any minute, drawn by the sound of those shots. I picked up the bag and raced out the rear door.

And I ran into you, Johnnie Dale!

It was very dark in that back hallway, and even though I might have surprised you, I would have known it was you if I hadn't been able to see you. But this was what I wanted, wasn't it? I had the thirty thousand in bonds, and my next step was to get you!

The automatic was still in my hand, and I fired. I felt the gun buck and then I saw your big body whirl suddenly, as the bullet caught you and smashed you up against the wall. Then I saw the red flashes of your gun and heard the thunder as you fired.

It seemed that you just stood there against the wall, where my bullet had sent you, and kept firing fast, again and again.

And I realized I was standing right in the rear doorway, outlined in the yellow light that was coming from the apartment. I was scared, but I kept firing, though I was really too frightened to shoot right and I was too frightened to move.

I felt two of your bullets crash into my side that same side where a bullet had creased me on the day of the robbery and my leg was numb and burning with pain and I couldn't stand any longer. I knew I was going down, and I couldn't hold on.

Then another bullet crashed into my chest and I could hardly breathe. The blood was coming up into my mouth and choking me, and I thought I was going to strangle to death. Funny? I was full of lead and was afraid of strangling to death.

Then, very quickly, a nauseating blackness swept over me and I could feel the cold floor against my face, and I couldn't see the flashes of your gun any more. And that was all I remembered.

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The doctors have just told me that I haven't much longer to live, Johnnie Dale. And I guess that's all right, because there's a cop outside the door here in the prison ward, day and night. And I'll save the State some money by going out this way.

They've told me that you knew I was following you all the time, and that you let me pick up the clues you were turning up, I could tell the good ones from the bad; then some day I'd lead you to where that loot was cached. I guess I should have realized that all along, but I thought I was the smart guy.

They also told me that you had figured out Mona Morielli's play on having the kid pass out those stolen bills. She didn't die, I understand, and she told you though you had figured it out that she feared to make her getaway because the boys were after the loot and she was afraid to try to get out of the apartment.

Her plan was to get the kid to bring you there, and your coming would scatter anyone who might be watching the place. Then your walking in the front would cover her escape out the rear.

Yes, you figured that out, all right. That's why you were waiting for me at that rear door.

But all this is a build-up, Johnnie Dale. The real reason I'm writing you is this: I've learned that you didn't tell my sister who I really am, told her only that you still have no word of my disappearance.

She's a swell kid, Betty Stanton is: and after a while, she'll forget, I guess. I was never any good, anyway.

So, thanks! You're a swell guy, Johnnie Dale!

THE END.