

## THE ESCAPE CLAUSE

a short story

(4978 actual words)

The door opened just as I leaned back in my chair to take in a view of the city. Or at least the alley and row of dumpsters this "high rent" office of mine overlooks.

She stood in the opening for a full minute, the look on her face as though she'd somehow stepped off the elevator in sporting goods rather than women's lingerie. Wearing glossy red lipstick on a milky white face framed by long curls of deep black hair, her legs went all the way up to her cheeks.

I'll let you guess which ones.

"Excuse me, are you Glenn Spade?" she asked. "The private eye?"

She had the voice. You know -- Beverly Hills. Brentwood. Westwood Village.

"Well, I always wished I was more of a Sam Spade, but Glenn's as close as I'll ever get."

I spun around to face her, bracing my elbows on the desk. A giant diamond pendant in the center of her plunging neckline drew your attention away from...

I caught my breath.

"Yeah...I'm a private investigator. Somethin' I can do for you?"

"I think my husband's cheating on me."

I felt my head jerk back, my mouth drop open.

"You sure you need a private eye? I'm thinkin' your husband needs a psychiatrist."

She looked back toward the door, as if having second thoughts. Okay, maybe the gumshoe act was a little thick. Too bad, it always worked for Bogie.

"You don't understand," she said.

Her eyes wandered around the office--didn't take long at all--before settling in on the chair against the front wall. She slid it over a foot or so in front of the desk and sat. Her dress, not something you pull off the rack at JC Penny's, was slit up the side, and as she crossed her legs it slowly parted, the top skimming across her nylons, making a soft *whoosh* sound that could make a man's heart skip three beats.

Maybe four.

"I'm thinking that's one point we're in agreement on," I said. "I *don't* understand."

She reached into her purse and pulled out a tissue, dabbing it up against her eyes.

Something didn't wash. I couldn't put a finger on it right then, but one thing was for sure--there were no tears in them baby blues.

She took in a long breath.

"You see, he's been staying later and later at work. Missing dinner. Nights out with our friends."

I nodded. "What's he do?"

"He owns a rather large shipping firm. You may have heard of it. Grimswell International."

Another jerk of my head. Heard of it? You'd have to be living under a rock the last ten years not to have. Next to Microsoft--well, I guess that's Apple these days--Grimswell's pretty much the top banana.

"So, I take it you're *Mrs.* Grimswell?"

"Yes. But you can call me Ashley."

I didn't know much about this Grimswell fellow, but what I did know was that he was

pushing 60. Maybe 65. If I had to guess, I'd say Ashley here was 30 at best.

"Okay, Ashley it is. First off, as to the long hours your husband's puttin' in, in case you haven't noticed, there's a pretty nasty recession going on. Lots of folks are cutting back staff, having to put in extra time."

"I'm not that naive, Mr. Spade--"

"Glenn."

"Glenn. But I assure you it's not just that."

Another dab of the eyes and then she glanced over at the door, as if expecting someone to walk in.

"He's constantly going in the other room to make his calls. And even then, he whispers."

"I take it you've tried listening in?"

"Well...maybe once or twice." She looked away. "He's always texting, or getting texts. Even at dinner. I've asked him about it but he just blows it off, saying it's boring work crap." Letting out a long sigh, she touched the tissue to her nose. "He left his phone on the dining room table once. I tried to sneak a look, but it needs a password."

She dropped her head, as if in angst. But I caught her eyes as they slid to the side, looking my way.

I cleared my throat and started to reply, but she held up a hand--the left one--just enough for me to see her wedding ring. I'm telling ya...if the Titanic had hit an iceberg that size, there'd been no survivors at all.

"Wait...there's more."

I leaned back. "Okay. Go on."

"He bought a gun. Mr. Spade. One of those handguns you see the police using."

"Glock?"

She turned and looked me straight in the eye.

"Do you know much about guns, Mr. Spade?"

"I know if you don't point 'um the right way they can be hazardous to your health."

She suddenly stood, placing both her outstretched hands on the desk, knuckles going white. Her face, soft as a morning breeze, became tight; her eyes narrowed. Even with anger rushing through her veins one look'd make your heart flutter.

"I'm sorry if I'm wasting your time, Mr. Spade. I'm obviously going to have to find someone who doesn't see my situation as some kind of joke." Her voice was harsh, yet I thought I heard something else underneath.

Shaking her head, she raised her arms, as if in frustration.

"You came highly recommended. For the life of me I cannot understand why."

"Wait...you say I came recommended? By whom, may I ask?"

"An attorney. Clarence Digby. He mentioned he's a close personal friend of yours."

Good ol' Clarence. Though he does owe me a favor or two for that courtroom incident--that's a story for another time--I found it interesting he'd give me a recommendation.

"Well, if *Clarence* sent you my way..." I stood. "First, let me offer my most sincere apology. What'dya say we start all over. From scratch. Please...have a seat."

I extended my hand toward her chair.

With a slight tilt of the head and a raised eyebrow, she nodded, then sat.

"Okay."

"Now," I continued, dropping back into my chair, "you were saying something about your husband, cheating, and a gun."

It took her a moment to get rolling, but when she did I wasn't sure she'd ever shut up. The last minute business trips, the skipped vacations, the recent aloofness, the gun. It was all there. And with exception of the gun, it was a recipe for disaster I'd seen cooked up many a time before.

Usually, however, it involved a younger woman. In this case, Ashley *was* the younger woman.

She continued on, hardly stopping for a breath. It was like she'd been holding it all in and waiting for the dam to break. I kept nodding, taking a few notes, all the while trying to fit the

pieces together. Somewhere in there I picked up on the scent of her perfume. Nothing too sweet or flowery, just a hint of all that was right with the world.

Took you back to a time when...

“Mr. Spade?”

Suddenly I felt like a kid caught napping in class.

“Yes...I think I’ve got the gist,” I said, pretending I hadn’t missed a word. “So, I take it you want me to follow him around, maybe get a few pictures?”

“What I want, Mr. Spade, is for you to prove me wrong.”

“Glenn.”

“Glenn. Show me that I’m being nothing more than a silly fool for not trusting my husband. Show me that he still loves me.”

I rubbed my scratchy chin for a sec before grabbing my cup.

“Coffee?”

“No, thank you.”

More of an excuse to keep her there a while longer while I thought this through than anything, I ambled over to the Mr. Coffee and poured myself a cup.

“So most of this I can get my arms around,” I said. “What does bother me, however, is the gun.”

“Yes, I agree.”

“Mrs. Grimswell--“

“Ashley.”

“Ashley,”--what is it with this name thing, anyway?--“I’ll be blunt, and, somewhat personal. Did you sign a prenuptial agreement before you were married?”

“No.”

“So if there was a divorce, you’d be entitled to half I take it.”

Her chin dropped a bit and her eyes wandered toward the window.

“I would imagine so.” Her face suddenly flushed. “You don’t think that--“

“I’m not thinking anything just yet,” I interrupted. “Let’s let the facts tell us what to think.”

Taking a long sip of my coffee, I moved behind the desk and sat down.

“You haven’t asked me about money. How much I charge for something like this.”

Nodding, she reached into her purse and pulled out a bulky manila envelope. She slid it across the desk and stood.

“I’m hoping this should cover your initial expenses. My card’s in there in case you need to get in touch with me.”

Trying not to look at the envelope, I stood as well, extending my hand.

“Give me a week or two to do a little upfront research, get the lay of the land. Then I’ll give you a call and let you know what’s next.”

She nodded, softly shook my hand, and headed for the door. Just as she grabbed the handle she turned.

“One more thing, Mr. Spade. I trust you will be completely discreet about this?”

“Of course. Discretion is my middle name.”

“Good.” With a hint of a smile, she put a finger to the edge of her mouth. “Call me anytime. My cell’s on the card.”

And she was gone.

\* \* \*

Most of my best research I do from home early morning. There, sitting at the laptop in my underwear, a stale donut and coffee cup to my side, I click my way through the internet, scooping up most of the basics: bio, company info, and such. The real bonus comes with all the rumor and gossip carcasses that you’re bound to find lying alongside that information highway.

However, a phone call changed that, and I found myself in the office early instead.

The call came from a potential client, oddly, another recommendation from Digby, and

even odder, another case of marital infidelity.

Seems to be a lot of that going around.

Digby dealt mostly with estate planning and taxes--“death and taxes,” he’d always say--so the sudden interest in broken marriages seemed a little off base. I made up my mind to give him a call later to find out why the change of heart.

With the appointment mid-morning, I had time to drift through the standard sites, Wikipedia, etc., taking in what I could. I actually found Sir Thomas Grimswell--yep, that’s right, he was even knighted by the Queen--quite a surprise. He’d worked his way to the top the old-fashioned way -- he earned it. And along the way he’d given back to the community, his donations spread generously between the local schools, parks, charities, and youth clubs.

Despite his age, he ran a couple of marathons a year. To stay limber--maybe something to do with having a younger wife--he guest instructed at a taekwondo school.

What he enjoyed most, however, was playing Santa at the Eastside Children’s Hospital, where he made sure every child’s wish came true.

In fact, my guess was the only thing keeping him from immediate sainthood was the circumstance surrounding his first wife’s death two years prior.

Found shot to death in their lakeside cabin, the police speculated she’d walked in on a burglary in progress. While the door had been jimmed, nothing had been actually taken, and the tossing of the room appeared to be staged.

Even with Grimswell off on a cross-country business trip at the time, he was still considered the prime suspect. It was common knowledge their marriage was in shambles and most made the assumption he had her killed.

It didn’t help matters much when he married his personal assistant just a year later. Thirty years his junior, Ashley Callaroy was, to quote the Eagles, “a debutante out of Houston.”

I dug around a little more, yet never really found anything else useful about the incident, so I made a note to get in touch with my buddy, Sally, down at the sheriff’s office. Something wasn’t adding up here.

With just a few minutes left before my client was due I finally opened the bulging envelope left by Ashley.

I had to sit back. Aside from the card and a note with Grimswell's weekly schedule, there were several bundles of \$100 bills.

\$25,000 worth.

\* \* \*

I keep a couple of clunkers tucked away for a nice changeup whenever I'm doing a stakeout or tail. For Grimswell, I decided on the Toyota. Nondescript, it pretty much blends in with the traffic no matter how close I fall in behind my target.

Ashley's schedule was right on. Monday through Thursday he left their house at 7, went straight to the office, came back home around 6:30 in the evening. Friday's he'd venture down to their warehouses at the dock, spending most of the afternoon in the offices there.

With exception of his day at the docks, a petite young blonde, decked out in drop-dead business suits and carrying an iPad on which her fingers never ceased to stop moving, tagged along anywhere he went. She met him at the office door in the morning; walked him to the car at night.

His latest personal assistant would be my guess. I snapped a couple of pictures figuring to run them by Ashley.

By the second week I felt comfortable enough with his schedule to sneak in a little side time working my other case. As much as I hated being in the middle of these marriage breakdowns, and maybe, more so what it said about human nature, they'd become my bread and butter. And I was actually pretty good at them.

The poor guy, practically a newlywed, suspected his wife was already seeing another man. He didn't really have anything substantial to base it on--just a gut feeling and couple of cozy emails--but thought it worth the investment to have me check her out.



So with Sir Grimswell busy at the office, I took the opportunity to slip by my new client's house and develop a little sense of his wife's day.

For the most part it was boring stuff: Starbucks, shopping, hair appointments, Pilates, yoga, and more shopping. A gardening service stopped by on Wednesday, but the gardeners never went near the house.

Thursday changed all that. Just after noon a black SUV with off-road tires and darkened windows pulled up. A thirty-something, tall, muscular guy, dressed in boots and camo gear, slid out, while my client's wife waited to meet him at the front door. There was something familiar about the way he carried himself, his body style. I just couldn't get a handle on it.

This gettin' old stuff is really starting to suck.

I snapped a few shots with them intertwined in each other's arms, and another as they dove into a kiss that left me wondering if they were ever coming up for air. They then disappeared into the house, a good fifteen minutes passing before coming back out.

While the boyfriend remained in his camo, she'd changed into some faded jeans and a long-sleeved shirt, looking more the Midwestern farm girl than coastal mall-hopping shopper. Wearing a Cubs baseball hat, she toted a canvas gym bag as they headed to the SUV.

Ducking down in the seat, I gave them a minute or so to get up the road before whipping the Toyota around and slipping in behind them. I kept a couple cars' length between us as they wound first through the city suburbs, before leaving the main boulevards and climbing up a windy road leading into the foothills.

The asphalt came to an abrupt end right at the crest of the hill, shifting to rough gravel. As I jack-hammered along in the Toyota it became painfully clear as to why they'd taken the off-road SUV.

After a long 10 minutes they made a right, dropping down into a widened area intended for parking to the front of a small box canyon. I nestled up the car just behind a knoll and pulled over. Grabbing the binoculars and camera, I trekked up to the peak for a better view.

She got out first, still carrying the gym bag, while he went to the rear of the SUV and

grabbed a cardboard tube.

I remembered this place. The canyon wall at the far end was a sheer hundred feet of sandstone, making it popular with the local target shooters.

The woman laid the bag on the hood of the vehicle, zipped it open, and pulled out a black handgun. I guessed it a revolver--hard to tell even with the binoculars--as she seemed to be loading it with ammo from the bag.

Having been so busy watching her I missed the man moving 50 yards up the canyon from where she stood. He unrolled a large sheet of paper from the tube, clipped some weights to the bottom, and then tacked it to a branch of a dead tree.

When he stepped away I could see it was a target. The kind the cops use. A dark silhouette of a man.

They played a little game poking each other's ear plugs in, shared a laugh and a long kiss, and then she moved to the rear of the truck. With a quick flick of the hand she brought up the gun firing off three quick rounds.

**CRACK, CRACK, CRACK.**

I swung the binoculars over to have a look. Three holes were clumped dead center in the silhouetted chest; main-mass, just like they teach in police academy.

Then it hit me. The cropped hair. Buffed out. This dude was ex-military.

Or a cop.

She rattled off three more shots, the cluster of holes showing just below the first group.

Trying to figure where the pieces fit, I snapped one last picture, focusing in mostly on the guy, before heading back to the car. Sally had agreed to meet me this afternoon and a quick check of my watch confirmed what I already knew.

I was late.

I drove slow and easy the first mile or so, keeping the dust to a minimum. As I rounded the first corner and hit the gas, it occurred to me that while I was gallivanting about, Sir Grimswell could very well have left the office and be sitting in a strip club tarnishing that saintly

reputation of his.

\* \* \*

I squished my face up against the window and knocked. Sally, sitting at her desk, glanced up, then rapped her finger against her watch.

I know, I know, I nodded.

Standing, she buzzed me in and glared as I strolled over to the front of her desk.

Even though she's a cop--well, okay, some sort of special investigator--Sally's got a body that'll turn your legs to putty.

But what really grabs you are her eyes. A deep aquamarine, they take you to the shallow waters off a sandy beach in the Caribbean.

Which reminds me of the time we...well, that's a story for another time.

"You're late."

"Sorry...got tied up following a client's wife into the backwoods."

"Well, *there's* a surprise."

She slid a box across her desk.

"Here's the stuff we have on the Grimswell investigation. Not much. Few pictures, couple of bullets extracted from the victim. Tire tracks from the driveway. Whoever did it kept it pretty clean. Really nothing forensically."

She gave me the eye.

"What's got your goat on this one?"

I looked around the room. While I'm a firm believer in client confidentiality, when it comes to Sally, I usually try to put everything on the table.

"Grimswell's new wife hired me. When I started looking into his past and came across this...something about it just hit me wrong."

I opened the box and started digging through the paperwork.

“Yeah, well it hit us wrong, too. It was an inside job if you ask me. The perp went through a lot of trouble to make it look like a forced entry...even used a crowbar to chunk up the front door. But it was after the fact. They had a key. Had to of.”

I nodded as I continued to dig.

“Weapon?” I asked.

“.357 Magnum. Probably a revolver. No casings were left behind. The bullets aren't of much use...they were hollow point, so they're pretty messed up.”

“Grimswell own any guns?”

“A regular arsenal. All legal and registered.” She made a gun with her finger and shot at me. “And, yes, he owns a .357. We checked it out and it came up clean.”

I nodded again. I pulled out a glossy of the cabin's living room, the ME kneeling down over the body. A detective could be seen in the background, but what caught my eye was the deputy just off to the side.

“Who's this guy,” I asked, pointing.

“Deputy Collins. He's fairly new. Transferred up from Houston.”

I dropped into the chair, my mind spinning.

“You okay?” she asked.

“Yeah. Say...I think I'm gonna need a couple of favors.”

“And what's so unusual about that?”

“Who's the detective in charge of this?”

“O'Neil. You know him?”

“Nah. He a good guy?”

“One of the best.”

“Good. We'll have to have a chat.”

Sally tilted her head. “What are you up to, slick?”

I kept looking at the picture.

“You know anyone over in your equipment provisioning?”

“Huh? Why?”

“I think I need to borrow some special police-type equipment for a bit.”

\* \* \*

On the way back to the office I stopped by to see my second client and pass along the bad news.

He was a little shaken by the pictures, but it only confirmed what he'd suspected all along.

At that point all that was left was to tie up the loose ends. Knowing he'd wanted a confrontation, I'd come up with a plan. The whole thing was a little risky--you never know about the power of the human emotion--but he was in. We set up a time and I headed back to the office.

I found myself sitting at my desk in a bit of a daze. A lot had happened in just one day and the road ahead was looking pretty bumpy.

Time for a distraction. Now was as good as time as any to bring Ashley up to date. I dug out her card and picked up the phone.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Mrs. Grimswell. It's Glenn Spade. Did I catch you at a bad time?”

“Why, no. Perfect, actually. I just got in.” She took in a deep breath. “You must have ESP...I was planning to give you a call.”

“Oh?”

“Yes...I have some news. I think my husband is meeting his little slut tomorrow. Right here at the house. Can you believe it? The minute I make plans to be out of town, they're hopping in the sack.”

“Out of town?”

“Yes. A dear friend of mine has taken ill. I'm flying to Houston in the morning.”

“I see. So tell me about this rendezvous.”

She went on in great detail about overhearing her husband on the phone. That he would

be sending a car to pick her up. That they would have the house to themselves for whatever pleasures came to mind.

“I’m absolutely sick over this, Mr. Spade. You must do something.”

“You say she’ll be there around 10 in the morning?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Tell you what. I’ll show up there just after 10.”

“You don’t know how much better that makes me feel.”

“That’s what you hired me for.”

“Oh, and Mr. Spade...”

“Yes?”

“If I were you, I’d bring a gun.”

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I took a nervous look at my watch. 10 exactly. What was I getting myself into?

I pulled up behind a limo parked just across from the steps to the Grimswell’s house.

Walking by, I took a quick glance in-- empty--and made my way up the stairs.

The front door was ajar.

Not a good sign.

After ringing the bell a couple of times and even trying the giant knocker, I called in through the crack.

“Hello. Anyone home?”

Nothing.

I pushed through, stepping into a cavernous foyer with marble flooring and walls paneled in an exotic wood. Twin staircases swept to either side, framing a set of giant doors to the back.

One was cocked open.

Drawn to the opening, I shouted yet again, only to be met with silence. On the far side of

the room--obviously the library--a massive wood desk sat in front of a wall of shelves filled with books.

“Hello?” I called, my eyes locked on a figure seated in the shadows behind the desk.

Grimswell stood. Wearing a bulky dark suit, red tie, and a face to be reckoned with, he held an opened stapler in his right hand.

“Mr. Spade, I presume.”

“Well, I sure ain’t Dr. Livingstone.”

“I’m afraid you’ve made a grave mistake,” he said.

“I’m sure we can talk this out--“

Before I could finish Ashley slipped through the door from behind, rushing to my side.

“Shoot him, shoot him,” she screamed. “Can’t you see he has a gun?”

“Wait, it’s a--“

“You fool.”

BAM. BAM.

I watched Grimswell fly back against his chair and drop to the floor. With my ears ringing, I stood there in shock, the acrid smell of gunpowder filling the air.

Ashley thrust the gun into my hand and peeled off her latex gloves.

“There. Now when the police come I’ll say it was self-defense. You had no choice but to shoot. After all it was you or him.”

“What? Are you...”

Shaking my head, I rushed across to where Grimswell lie on his back behind the desk, his tie shredded, his left leg entangled in the tipped-over chair.

I put my fingers to his throat just as Ashley stepped up.

“He’s dead,” I said.

Turning away she smiled.

I held up the gun, a .357 Magnum.

“This is the same gun you used to kill his first wife, isn’t it?”

She spun, her face pale, mouth open wide.

“Why would you say such a thing?”

“Oh, please. Let’s not play games here,” I said, moving out away from the desk. “I know all about you and Deputy Collins.”

She dropped back against a shelf, knocking over several books. “What? How could you...”

I said nothing, letting the moment pass.

A smirk crossed her face and she stood, straightening her top.

“You just think you’re so smart, don’t you Mr. Spade. Or...should I call you Glenn?”

“I think under the circumstances, *Mr.* Spade will do just fine.”

“Well, Mr. Spade, you seem to be quite sure of yourself. But...there’s no evidence, now is there? You can’t prove a thing. In fact, now that you’re in possession of the murder weapon, I’d say you’re the prime suspect, eh?”

I held up the gun.

“Of course, that might change if, for example, this gun was used for target shooting. Let’s say up in the local foothills nearby. And, let’s say that someone was able to pick up a few of the bullets that were fired and compare them to the ones found at Mrs. Grimswell’s murder scene.”

Ashley’s mouth moved, but no words came out.

“You can’t prove anything. In fact, I could say it was YOU target shooting.”

I nodded. “Well, we’ll see.” I turned and looked down at Grimswell. “I must say this has been quite a journey for you, hasn’t it? You killed off his wife, seduced him into marrying you, all the while figuring on a healthy divorce. But then that nasty prenup got in the way, didn’t it? So, you had to resort to murder.”

She huffed and threw up her arms.

“He **INSISTED** on that damn prenup. What was I supposed to do? Tell the old guy all I wanted was his money?”

“Guess the truth hurts.”



A frown crossed her mouth. "Well, Mr. Spade...what now?"

"I guess we call the police."

She smiled. "And how do I know I can trust you?"

I shrugged. "You can't."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

I made my way over to the desk. Extending my hand I helped Sir Thomas Grimswell back to his feet.

"You were right," he said to me, rubbing his chest. "Damn, that hurt.

Ashley's eyes nearly popped out.

"But...how..."

He peeled open his shirt.

"Bullet-proof vest. Courtesy the local Sheriff's Department," I said. "It was a risk, but once I saw you shooting that target up at the range, I felt pretty comfortable with where you'd be aiming."

She started to say something else but I held up my hand.

"Speaking of the Sheriff's Department...Detective O'Neil? You can come out now."

I turned back to Ashley. "I think you might want to exercise your Miranda Rights at this point."

Rustling erupted from both the main door and a side door as deputies poured in surrounding the startled woman. Detective O'Neil shot me a quick smile and then stepped over to Ashley, slipping on handcuffs.

From behind someone laid a hand on my shoulder.

Sally.

"You owe me big time."

"That I do, my dear. That I do."

We stepped to either side of a grimacing Grimswell and helped him out of the Kevlar.

"Mr. Grimswell," I said, setting the vest on the desktop. "I just have one question."

“Shoot.”

“How is it that both you and Ashley were referred to me by Clarence Digby?”

His face broke into a broad smile.

“That, my good sir, is a story for another time.”