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## From **THE GIRL WITH THE DEEP BLUE EYES**

### ONE

The phone woke him from a dream. At first his dream simply incorporated the sound in its narrative, and his dream-hand picked it up and his dream-voice said hello, and there his imagination quit on him, failing to invent a caller on the other end of the line. He said hello again, and the real-world phone went on ringing, and he shook off the dream and got the phone from the bedside table.

"Hello?"

"Doak Miller?"

"Right," he said. "Who's this?"

"Susie at the Sheriff's Office. Sorry, your voice sounded different."

"Thick with sleep."

"Oh, did I wake you? I'm sorry. Do you want to call us back?"

"No, it's what? Close to nine-thirty, time I was up. What can I do for you?"

"Um—"

"So long as it's not too complicated."

"On account of you're still not completely awake?"

He'd gotten a smile out of her, could hear it in her voice. He could picture her at her desk, twirling a strand of yellow hair around her finger, happy to let a phone conversation turn a little bit flirty.

"Oh, I'm awake," he said. "Just not at the absolute top of my game."

"Well, do you figure you're sharp enough for me to put you through to Sheriff Bill?"

"He won't be using a lot of big words, will he?"

"I'll warn him not to," she said. "You hold now, hear?"

Just the least bit flirty, because it was safe to flirt with him, wasn't it? He was old enough to be her father, old enough to be *retired*, for God's sake.

He let that thought go and went back for a look at his dream, but all that was left of it was the ringing telephone with no one on the other end of it. If the phone hadn't rung, he'd have awakened with no recollection of having dreamt. He knew he dreamed, knew everyone did, but he never remembered his dreams, or even that his sleep had been anything other than an uninterrupted void.

It was as if he led two lives, a sleeping life and a waking life, and it took the interruption of a phone call to make one life bleed through into the other.

"Doak?"

"Sheriff," he said. "How may I serve the good people of Gallatin County?"

"Now that's what I ask myself every hour of every day. You'll never believe the answer came back to me first thing this morning."

"Try me."

" 'Hire a hit man.' "

"So you thought of me."

"You know, there must be another fellow with your qualifications between Tampa and Panama City, but I wouldn't know how to get him on the phone. Susie said you were sleeping when she called, but you sound wide awake to me. You want to come by once you've had your breakfast?"

"Have y'all got coffee?"

"I'll tell her to make a fresh pot," Sheriff William Radburn said. "In your honor, sir."

\*

When he'd moved to the state three years ago, Doak had put up at first in a motel just across the Taylor County line. A Gujarati family owned it, and the office smelled not unpleasantly of curry. It took him a couple of months to tire of the noise of the other guests and the small-screen TV, and he let a housewife with a real estate license show him some houses. The one he liked was off by itself, with a dock on a creek that flowed into the gulf. You could hitch a boat to that dock, she'd pointed out. Or you could fish right off the dock.

He made an offer. When the owner accepted it, the agent delivered the good news in person. He'd had a beer going, and offered her one. She hesitated just long enough to signal that her acceptance was significant.

"Well," he said. "How are we going to celebrate?"

She gave him a look, and that was answer enough, but to underscore the look she twisted the wedding ring off her finger and dropped it in her purse. Then she looked at him again.

Her name was Barb—"Like a fishhook," she'd said—and while she wasn't the first woman he'd been to bed with since the move south, she was the first to join him in his room at the Gulf Mirage Motel. What better way, really, to celebrate his departure than by nailing the woman who'd facilitated it?

And she had a nice enough body, built more for comfort than for speed. Her breasts were nice, her ass was even nicer, and long before she'd shown him the house he wound up buying, he'd already decided not only that he wanted her but just how he intended to have her.

So when he went down on her he got a finger in her ass, and while she tensed up at first she wound up going with it. Her orgasm was a strong one, and had barely ended when he rolled her over and arranged her on her knees. He moistened himself in her pussy, and she was so warm and wet he had to force himself to leave, but he withdrew and she gave a little gasp at his departure and another when she felt him where his finger had been earlier.

She said, "Oh, I don't think—"

It wasn't much of a protest and he didn't pay any attention to it, forcing himself into her, feeling her resist, feeling her resistance subside, feeling her open for him only to tighten around him. He fucked her gently at first, then more savagely as passion took hold of him, and he cried out as he emptied himself into her.

He went away someplace for a moment, and the next thing he was aware of was lying on his back while she cleansed him with a washcloth. "Just a tame little thing now," she said, "but it like to split me in two a few minutes ago."

She took him in her mouth, and for an hour or so they found things to do. Then he got two more beers from the mini-fridge and they sat up in bed drinking them.

She said, "I hardly ever like that."

"Sex?"

"Silly. No, you know. Butt sex."

"You got into it pretty good there."

"I almost came. Which is something I never did."

"Came that way?"

"Never even enjoyed it, not really. I wonder if I ever could come that way."

"From getting fucked in the ass?"

"That sounds so *dirty*. Saying butt sex is bad enough."

"With an ass like yours—"

"I saw the way you looked at it. I knew what you wanted to do." She looked at him over the top of the beer can, weighed her words carefully.

"I knew you wanted to fuck me in my ass."

"Your gorgeous ass."

"My gorgeous ass. My gorgeous ass which is a little sore, but I'm not complaining. I thought, oh, that's what he's gonna want to do, I just know it."

"And you hardly ever like it."

"And yet," she said, "I took my ring off, didn't I? Which reminds me." She got the ring from her purse, put it on her finger. "Now I'm married again," she said. "And I'm in desperate need of a shower. It's bad enough I'll be going home smelling of beer."

She showered, toweled dry. While she was dressing he went over and put his hands on her, but she said, "No, not now. And you can finish my beer for me, because I've had enough, and what I have to do now is stop at Cozy Cole's for my usual end-of-the-day glass of Chardonnay."

"So you can smell of wine instead of beer."

"Probably a little of both," she said, "with a top note of—no, never mind. Doak? We're not going to have a romance, are we?"

"No."

"No, we're not, which means we can probably do this every now and then without worrying that it'll blow up in our faces. But maybe I'm getting ahead of myself here. I mean, would you want to do this every now and then? Like maybe a couple of times a month?"

"I'd like that."

"Like friends with benefits, I guess they call it, except I don't even know that we'd be friends. Friendly, sure, but friends?"

"Just so we get the benefits."

"And I'd be interested in finding out if I can come that way."

## TWO

It turned out she could. They established as much on her first visit to his new house, and it was a few days after that momentous occasion that he paid his first visit to the Gallatin County sheriff's office. It was a courtesy call, and a counterpart to one he'd made to the Taylor County sheriff not long after the state of Florida had licensed him as a private investigator. He didn't even know how much use he'd get out of the license, he could get by easily enough on his NYPD pension, but it never hurt to be on good terms with the local law, and he'd known retired cops back home with P.I. tickets who picked up the occasional piece of work through friends still on the job.

The sheriff of Taylor County turned out to be a piece of work himself, a slick article with a college diploma framed on his wall, and enough of a cracker accent to establish his bona fides as a good old boy. Doak could tell the man had an eye on the state house in Tallahassee, along with a snowball's chance of getting there, but he was young enough that it'd be another five years before he figured out that last part. Sheriff D. T. Newton was cordial enough, because he'd never be less than cordial to anyone without a reason, but Doak could tell right away they were never going to be Best Friends Forever.

The Gallatin County courtesy call was a good deal more fruitful. Bill Radburn was a genuine good old boy who didn't feel the need to act like one. If he'd ever had ambitions for higher office, he'd shed them somewhere along the way, and now all he wanted was to do his job well enough to keep the voters happy. His age was around sixty to Doak's forty-eight, and he liked ESPN and his wife's cooking, and the photo cube on his desk showed pictures of his grandchildren.

"Retired from the NYPD," he'd said. "Put in your twenty years?"

"Closer to twenty-five."

"And Tallahassee saw fit to give you a private license, though it's hard to guess what it'll do for you here in Gallatin County. Though I guess you never know, given the tendency folks have to get themselves in messes they can't get out of on their own."

"Oh, they do that down here, do they?"

"Now and again," the sheriff said.

And Doak had found occasion to drop in now and again himself, to drink a cup of coffee and swap war stories in a way he'd never have tried with D. T. Newton. Folks

did get in messes, and now and then one of them turned up on his doorstep, and he got to pick up an honest fee for a little honest work. Sometimes he had to drive around, sometimes he had to talk to people, but a surprising amount of the time he got the job done and made the client happy without leaving his desk. More often than you'd guess, your computer could go around and knock on doors for you—and did it all without pissing off the person on the other side of the door.

None of his clients ever came to him through Bill Radburn. But then one day his phone rang, and half an hour later he was in the man's office on Citrus Boulevard. He'd said he'd done undercover work now and again, hadn't he? Well, here they were looking at a local fellow who very likely knew everybody with a badge within a fifty-mile radius, and he hated to call in the stables in Tallahassee if he didn't have to. So was he up for a little exercise in role-playing?

And the following afternoon he was sitting in his beat-up Monte Carlo in the parking lot of the Winn-Dixie, settling into the role of a mobbed-up hit man from northern New Jersey—"Bergen County, maybe you's heard of it"—agreeing to rid a man with the second most profitable auto dealership in Gallatin County of his business partner.

"He won't buy me out, he won't let me buy *him* out, and I can't stand the sight of the son of a bitch," the man said. "So what choice do I have here?"

"The man has a point," Radburn said, when they listened to the recording of the conversation. They played it again for the District Attorney, Pierce Weldon, whose vision of the future was not limited to Gallatin County, and who clearly liked what he was hearing.

"How's a man that stupid sell so many cars?" he wondered. "Jesus, the dumb bastard lays it all out there in black and white, or it will be when it's typed up. Though credit where it's due, Mr. Doak."

"Just Doak," Radburn said. "Last name's Miller."

"My mistake, but all the same, Doak, I have to say you make a very convincing hit man. I damn near bought your act myself. I don't suppose you ever crossed the street to do a little moonlighting, did you?"

"If I did," he said, "I wouldn't say so. Be just my luck you'd be wearing a wire."

They all assumed he'd have to testify, but the auto dealer's attorney listened to the tape a couple of times and convinced his client to plead guilty. After sentencing, Doak and Radburn and Weldon shook hands all around. "And another solid citizen wins himself a ticket to Raiford," the D.A. said. "That trophy wife of his was all teary-eyed, but I don't guess she'll have too much trouble finding somebody to elevate her spirits. Won't be me, I know that much, and I'd like to think it's my high moral principles but it may just be cowardice."

"They do dress alike," Radford said, "and it can be tricky to tell them apart."

"And it won't be you either, Grandfather William, because you're just too damned comfortable with your life as it is to reinvent yourself as Foxy Grandpa. But our cop-turned-hit man might find an opening here, so to speak. You're not married, are you, Doak?"

"Used to be."

"Was that a note of bitterness there? And you live alone? No entangling alliances? But maybe your sensitive self recoils at the idea of literally doing unto the wife what you've already done metaphorically to the husband."

"I did that once," he remembered.

"Oh?"

"Guy was a burglar, caught him before he could get the goods to a fence."

"And he had a hot wife?"

He nodded. "I knew better, but..."

"So many sad stories start with those four words."

"This wasn't that sad because it didn't last that long. She liked her booze, and after the third drink something in her eyes would change, and I realized I was afraid to fall asleep in her bed for fear that she'd stick a knife in me."

"Or go all Lorena Bobbitt on you."

"Jesus, there's a name from the past. Which is probably where it should stay."

And he knew he wouldn't hit on the auto dealer's wife, either. Because he was capable of learning from experience.

Besides, hell, she wasn't *that* hot.

### THREE

The coffee Susie poured him was fresh, though not as strong as he'd have preferred. He settled in his chair across the desk from the sheriff and asked just who it was who wanted to dissolve a partnership.

"It's not like that this time," Radburn said, and stopped himself. "Except, come to think of it, it is."

"How's that?"

"Wife wants you to kill her husband," he said. "So it's a partnership, but of the domestic persuasion."

"And she wants me—"

"Well, not specifically, since she doesn't know you. At least I hope she doesn't, because that would be a deal breaker, wouldn't it? She's expecting a dead-eyed assassin, and who shows up but her buddy Doak from the Tuesday Night Bowling League."

"Wouldn't work."

"Her name's Lisa Otterbein, but her maiden name's Yarrow, and that's what she uses professionally. And I suspect she'll go back to it altogether once you kill George Otterbein for her."

"And we know she wants me to do this because—"

"Because three nights ago she sat down across a table from a fellow named Richard Lyle Gonson. Know him?"

"I don't think so."

"If you were looking to hire a hit man, he'd be a natural to sit across the table

from. Not because you think he'd take the job, but because he'd probably know somebody who would. Or somebody who'd know somebody."

"He's not Reverend R. L. Gonson, the Congregationalist minister."

Radburn shook his head. "He's done, as the saying goes, a little of this and a little of that. He mostly gets away with it, but he's done a few bids, one of them federal. It's getting on for ten years since the last time he got out."

"He's behaving himself?"

"Does the bear give up a lifelong habit of sylvan defecation? Best he can do is learn to cover it up afterward. Even so, I had him for receiving last year, right around the end of hurricane season."

"But you couldn't make it stick?"

"He had something to trade."

"Ah."

"That's one way to cover up the pile in the woods. We got the chance to put away somebody who'd been giving us a lot more grief than Mr. Gonson ever did, and he saw the wisdom of having friends in law enforcement. So when Lisa let him know what she wanted, instead of telling her to go shit in her hat—"

"Or in the woods."

"—he said he knew the very man to call."

"And that man turned out to be you."

"It did. Neither of those names ring a bell? George Otterbein? Lisa Yarrow Otterbein?"

He shook his head.

"George's father started a restaurant-supply business. George inherited it and married money. Made a good thing of the business and invested some of the proceeds in local real estate. Rental properties, mostly, bringing in more money to go with the money he's already got."

"I'm guessing Lisa's a second wife."

"You New Yorkers, nothing gets past you. First wife was in one of those fifty-car chain pile-ups on 41. Foggy morning and one guy stops short and everybody hits him. Airbag deployed and Jo was unhurt, but somebody insisted she go to the hospital as a precaution, and while they were checking her they found something they didn't like, and so they checked some more, and she had cancer cells in everything but her hair."

"Jesus."

"Two months later she was gone. No symptoms before the accident, and it's hard not to think that if they hadn't found it she'd still be alive today. Which is ridiculous, but still."

Nothing to say to that. Doak sipped his coffee.

"You know the Cattle Baron? On Camp Road a mile or so north of Lee?"

"I've passed it. Never stopped."

"That'd be the best policy if you chanced to be a vegetarian. Just hold your breath and drive on by. Steak and seafood's what they've got on offer, and the steak's dry-aged prime Angus beef. After he buried Jo, George got in the habit of taking his dinners at the Baron. He was partial to their bone-in rib eye, which I can recommend, assuming you're not a vegetarian."

"I'll have to try it."

"You might want to wait a couple of weeks. All goes well, they'll have to find somebody new to show you to your table."

"Lisa's the hostess?"

"She showed George to his table every night, and I guess that wasn't all she showed him, and as soon as Jo was six months in the ground they went and got married. He'd had three children with Jo, two girls and a boy, and the oldest was the same age as Lisa. Now there's different ways kids will react to that sort of thing. Either the new wife's an angel for offering their daddy a second chance for happiness, or she's a gold-digging bitch. My experience, the more money's involved, the less likely she is to get the benefit of the doubt."

"Figures. She kept her job after they got married?"

Radburn shook his head. "Moved into his big house on Rumsey Road and set about being a woman of leisure. Spent some of George's money redecorating, bought some antiques in Tampa and some art in Miami. That held her interest for the better part of two years, and then she turned up one night back at the Cattle Baron, greeting her old customers by name and showing them to their tables like she'd never left."

"And the marriage?"

"I guess the honeymoon was over. If Lisa was working evenings, that had to cut into their together time. Far as anyone knew, they were comfortable enough with the new arrangement."

"Until a couple of nights ago."

"Until a couple of nights ago, when Rich Gonson and two other fellows came by to eat some meat and drink some whiskey. When Lisa brought the check to the table, she told him to stick around."

"And he did."

"Thought he was about to get lucky, according to him, but after his friends left and she sat down at his table, our girl was all business. 'Of course I don't know anybody in that line of work,' he told me—"

"Meaning he does."

"Wouldn't surprise me. What he told Lisa was he'd have to make a few phone calls, and the first call he made was to me. So last night I told Mary Beth she was about due for dinner out, and we had us a couple of shrimp cocktails and split the big rib eye, and I paid the tab myself instead of expensing it to Gallatin County."

"What a guy."

"Left a good tip, too. And took a picture when no one was paying attention." He found the photo on his iPhone, handed it across the desk. "Lisa Yarrow Otterbein."

"Very nice."

"She had long hair when she married George. I don't know when she got it cut, but it was short like that by the time she was back working at the Baron. I understand a woman's trying to tell you something when she cuts her hair, but they never gave me the code book. You ever seen her before? That you remember?"

He shook his head. "I'd remember," he said.

"Then she's probably never met you, either, so there's no reason she won't believe you're Frankie from New Jersey. Of course, the accent may give you away. You're starting to talk Southern."

"I am?"

"On the phone this morning. 'Have y'all got coffee?' That how they'd say it in Jersey?"

"Maybe South Jersey." He took another look at Lisa Otterbein's picture. Lisa Otterbein, Lisa Yarrow, whatever she called herself. The haircut, he decided, was probably a good idea, whatever the psychological motivation behind it. The short hair drew attention to her facial features, and it was a face you wanted to study. Beautiful, but that was almost beside the point.

"Give me your email, why don't you, and I'll send you the photo. Otherwise I get the feeling I'll never get my phone back."

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