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Written by Lawrence Block

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The GIRL
with the
DEEP BLUE
EYES

by Lawrence Block

A HARD CASE



CRIME NOVEL

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This one's for my brown-eyed girl.

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 states 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,” Radburn 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.