

GOTCHA by Tom Lytes

EXCERPT

1

“Why the— Why are you over here?” the smaller one asked, grasping a soft leather bag in one hand and a suitcase in the other. Spit flew from his mouth, a strand swung, pendulum-style, from his lip. Her eyes drifted towards her feet and the blood pooled seeping through her designer shoe. The man with the bags looked agitated. There were two men, actually, wearing identical charcoal suits. Looking too warm on the sandy path that led to the dock where Gretchen stood.

“You were to meet over there,” he said to Gretchen pointing. He turned to the other suit,

“Is this really what’s happening. Amateur bullshit with this woman—”

“She’s attractive.”

“Right, doesn’t look hassled, like us.” Now he pointed at Gretchen. “Really, is this who we do business with now? Is this how it gets done?”

The other suit shrugged, “Boss says gotta keep changing.”

“Yeah.”

“So, he’s smarter than you, and richer, and—”

“I get it.”

“So, don’t worry. We do what he says. Let’s get outta here.”

He gestured with his head past a streetlight where the dock met land, a union grimly celebrated with excessive weed growth and a battered Styrofoam “Big Gulp” cup from the Circle K, the island’s only convenience store.

Gretchen moved her foot, leaving drops of blood to dry behind her. Didn't she leave pieces of herself all along her life's travails?

"Is there anything left?" Gretchen asked, feeling hollow, shaking her foot. It was the biggest of the questions swirling in her head. There were others, too. Who were these guys?

What did they mean she was supposed to be over there? Over where? And what was that tiny crab doing scuttling towards the end of the dock? Didn't it know it was going to fall in? Yep.

There it went. Right over the edge into the marsh grass.

Big charcoal suit guy looked away, and said to the other, "Give them to her and let's go."

When accepting the backpack and briefcase seemed to be an alternative to stressful conversation, she took one in each hand. Cuff links dazzled in the light, briefly, before again nesting under jacket sleeves. Gretchen thought if she was on Netflix, she'd say it was too hot for coats this time of year unless you were hiding something — like a gun.

The men left Gretchen standing on the wood-planked dock as water slapped at the wood supports underneath. She watched their charcoal colored pants push through the weeds by the road before they turned left and continued out of sight. A minute later, Gretchen heard doors slam and a car's engine start. The suits drove off at high speed, maybe even turbo.

Falling forward onto the cupped wood of the dock, her head suddenly felt too heavy to lift. The empty space between two boards seemed too narrow as the rough planks of the dock pushed back at her cheek. When her eyes briefly found focus, she stared at a knot worn smooth in the wood planking.

Gretchen's last thought was about missing the final moments of her imploded legal career. Whatever punishments the disciplinary board was about to mete out for bribery, jury tampering, perjury, misappropriation of client funds – there was more but those were the big issues— would be justified. Planning to attend the hearing and deny it all vehemently, it wasn't meant to be, and she blacked out thinking about what led up to her assumption of a prone, dock-splatted position.

Before breakfast, Gretchen took enough pills to care very little about her impending disciplinary proceedings. It happened to be the same number of pills needed to make her forget she already took her medication, so, as she drove, she popped a fresh round. Swallowing a few innocuous tablets from this bottle, half a dozen from another bottle and so on, made driving a bad idea.

Gretchen didn't see the other vehicle, and the collision felt like imagination until she tried to exit her car. Something, it took both hands to shove it aside, pressed the blown airbag into her.

A man's face - mousy with a cleft chin, long nose hairs, and a missed spot under his lip during the last shave momentarily paralyzed her. Then her flight response took over.

"Aaaaa—" she whispered, flutter-kicking and squirming to get away. She yelled an obvious question only half wanting to know the answer. "Where's your body?"

Her Audi seemed reluctant to release her but finally relented in a flutter of arms, airbags, seatbelt straps, shattered glass and dizziness. Stumbling around the wreckage, she noticed the other cars flung-open glove box. Shuddering, thinking about the head, she inspected the depths of the cavity for clues about whose face she'd just seen. No paperwork could be found, just a meat sandwich with runny tomato and mayonnaise in a fitted Ziploc bag.

Gretchen saw her wallet and consciously left it in the wreck. Emerging from the fog of pills, and no doubt a concussion from the crash, came the idea. This could be her opportunity, her moment. She could disappear. She pulled a lighter from her pocket. Turning her back to the cars, she walked, thrusting her thumb at the lighter's spinny ignitor until it lit, finally tossing it into the puddle of gas gurgling from beneath the cars. Expecting an explosion, she was left with something less dramatic. It took maybe two minutes for both cars to bathe in enough flame to look like a star.

She began to wonder when she'd become capable of her actions. Maybe the exact moment was when her husband left. Or when her law practice began to fail. At some point, right and wrong stopped mattering, but it seemed like it should. It wasn't like she didn't know the difference between the two. It was more like she just didn't care as she gradually needed more pills, prioritizing feeling pretty popped over everything else.

As she walked down the street, away from the wreck, a vehicle slowed behind her.

"I saw you torch the cars." A stranger spoke across an empty seat and through the open passenger window of a blue car. His voice found her again. "That was a good move, no loose ends. Garrison will be pleased. Are you still okay to do the drop? I can bring you the rest of the way."

Gretchen vaguely thought the stranger assumed she was doing the job of the dead guy from the wreck. That was the goal of leaving her wallet by his head too, wasn't it? To confuse

identities and roles? Hell, she'd pick the dead guy's life over hers— well, maybe or maybe not.

Another look at the guy driving the blue car made her wonder.

“Yeah,” Gretchen said, swooning from the change in light as she moved into the shade of the stranger's car and settled into the passenger seat.

“Good,” the stranger said. “Just do everything like you would have if there wasn't that accident.”

Gretchen nodded a while, agreeably, before the stranger dropped her off at the side of the road a few miles north. A dirty white truck sped past, pulling a trailer filled with pine straw, kicking wind and sand in her eyes until she stumbled backwards. She found her footing on the weathered planks of a dock that continued far into the marsh until it ended at a meandering tributary of deeper water. Gretchen followed the lines of the dock back from the end to where she was standing, and that was when she noticed the blood leaking from her calf. And then the charcoal suit guys showed up.

She knew she should be asking all those questions swimming in her head, but the darkness clipped at the sides of her vision. The sun went out.