

—HER DEAD OCEANS

by Lorne Dixon

Jeannine. No, Charlotte. Not bad, but no.

She decided that today her name would be Scarlet, and that she would be an orphan. She had no real preference for the name; it leapt into her head like an insect and roosted down deep. Yesterday she was Pam. A sour taste-like spent peppermint-lingered in her mouth. She would have to find mouthwash, or seltzer, or cheap gin to wash it out. But not yet. First she made her way around the motel room and swept her belongings and clothes into the worn gym bag.

The man on the bed wasn't breathing. Hadn't for hours. She decided that his name should be William. When she met him at the bus stop he had offered her a cigarette and a name-Simon. But Simon seemed too British for today, and today she wanted very much to be in America. So, then, William.

Scarlet wandered into the bathroom, turned on the overhead fluorescents, and stared at herself in the small oval mirror. Not bad for having just woken, she decided, and then wiped the crust away. Her eyes had always been too dark for her tastes, two brown blemishes, two dead oceans. She posed, head cocked, lips pursed. A young Marlene Dietrich? No. More of an earlier Donna Reed. She reached into the shower, beyond the curtain, and turned on the water.

A scream from the shower, sudden and loud.

She had completely forgotten about the hostage. She pulled back the curtain and saw that the woman had managed to force the makeshift gag from her mouth. Naked, but her body hidden under fresh bruises, she was a beautiful woman, if a few years past her prime. Now, *there* was a Marlene Dietrich. She forced the bandana back into Marlene's protesting mouth and headed out of the bathroom.

There was a custom Kimber Raptor on the nightstand, sleek and black and as exciting as a vibrator in a convent. The booth trader at the gun show in Winter Bluff had been surprised when she had traded her Glock, telling her that 1911's were outdated for personal security. *Personal security*. It brought her a cheap smile, like two fingers of rye whiskey on a cool February morning.

There was an empty bottle of A. H. Hirsch Old Kentucky on its side next to the handgun.

She snatched up the gun, used it to push aside the window shades, and stole a glance outside. It had been raining when William had driven her to the motel, heavy enough that his pickup hadn't made it out of third gear. His free hand had done as much exploring inside as his tires had on the roadways. For a while, Pam didn't mind.

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The attention was nice, even if his shaking paw did nothing to stir her libido. But when the truck stopped he had slid over and kissed her. His tongue had rolled in her mouth like a squid unfurling. “Be right back.”

“Be waiting, Billy.” She remembered her voice, practiced and sweet.

He smiled, pulled himself out of the truck, and then smiled again. Goofy sumbitch. She had checked her purse for the Raptor as he ducked into the office to rent the room. Warm liquor, half a tube of lipstick, and a full clip-praise *Jesus*.

She let go of the blind and turned back toward the bathroom.

Marlene had managed to crawl out of the tub. Cutting off both her thumbs and large toes had reduced her to a four-legged spider, each appendage ended in a swollen pink nub. When she caught sight of Scarlet heading back in, she scrambled back on her knees and elbows, attempting to contort into the gap under the sink. Scarlet laughed. “You are a pathetic little thing, now aren’t you?”

The hostage screamed, but the bandana stole most of the sound. Still, Scarlet could make out the word *bitch*. The rest of the sentence was lost, but she was certain she caught the general meaning.

“You think I wanted to hurt you? That I hunted you down?” Scarlet tapped the safety off, cracking the Raptor’s cylinder wide open. She knelt down by the sink. “You’re the one that showed up here, yappin’ at the door about your man. You should have seen his face. He goes all pale and prickly, chest hair all static lightning and all. And I get up to let you in, and he’s just freaking out. I mean, freaking. He’s saying *she’s gonna kill me, gonna kill me*, all that.”

Marlene stopped screaming. And started mumbling.

“Well, I opened the door and you slapped at me with your little hooves. Didn’t hurt, even the time you actually hit me. He’s off the bed and just squealing to you that he’s *so sorry, so sorry baby*.”

When she pulled the trigger, a tiny flap of skin had blinked open just above William’s right eye, and then fluttered shut. His skull was strong. Even though the back of his head ballooned out, the bullet did not exit. Instead, it ricocheted down and blew out through the floor of his mouth, finally nesting home in his right knee. He fell back onto the bed; eyes wide open, tongue dangling through the new cavity.

Marlene hadn’t screamed then, just dropped down to her knees like a Catholic schoolgirl at a college keg party. The woman sank into catatonic shock. Which had allowed Scarlet a decent night’s sleep.

“Okay, now, you and I have to make a decision about what to do with you.” Scarlet reached under the sink and touched one finger to her nose. “I don’t want to put any undue pressure on you, recent breakup and all, but I need to ask you. Would you rather I put this beautiful weapon up to your head and pull the trigger right here-”

The mumbling transformed back into muffled screams.

“Or...Do you want to take the keys down to the office and sign us out of this asbestos cancer hole?” She replaced her finger with the handgun. “So, what do you have to say, Marlene? Do you wanna take a little walk for me, or do you wanna stay right here?”

The screams tapered off. Marlene wouldn’t face her; head buried in one shoulder, so Scarlet withdrew the gun, reached in with her free hand and forced the woman’s face forward. She walked two fingers through the air. “Hmm? So, have you decided?”