

IDYLL THREATS

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A THOMAS LYNCH NOVEL

STEPHANIE
GAYLE



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*For Cally Gayle, my mother
Every book I write is for you.*

SATURDAY, AUGUST 9TH, 1997

2230 HOURS

I didn't make small talk, didn't ask about anyone's evening plans or even say good night. I snuck out the station's rear exit, the metal door squeaky with humidity, got into my cruiser, and drove to a secluded road. I parked and sat, watching the darkness grow, swallowing one tree at a time. I'd driven to the woods to think. Or not to think. To be alone. I did a lot of that.

An insect symphony played, all percussions. I didn't like so many bugs so near. I was city-bred, used to roaches and the occasional mosquito. Something pinged against my windshield. My hand went to my gun. Reflex. The action recalled last year's report on gun deaths that I'd read earlier today. In 1996, only fifty-five cops in the US died on the job from gun-related incidents. I bit my lower lip. In a year less likely to end in a police funeral, my partner, Rick, had beaten the odds. Been shot dead by a dealer. I could hear Rick in my head. "What can I say, buddy? I'm exceptional."

A bug adhered itself to the passenger window, its fat body vibrating against the glass. To hell with this. I turned the key in the ignition. Time to go home.

He sped past my cruiser, his convertible's top down. Doing 55 miles per hour, at least. I flipped on my lights and siren and cut a U-turn. The car fishtailed before the tires bit down. The frame shuddered as I lowered my foot. The driver slowed, then stopped his car. He stared ahead at the pocked road, hands on the wheel.

I approached slowly. You never know whether the guy you've

stopped is an upright father of four or an anxious kidnapper. If he was the former, I didn't want to scare him.

The crescent moon turned his gray hair silver. He turned toward me when I reached his door. Blue eyes. I've always been a sucker for blue eyes. "Sir?"

He started when I spoke. Not unusual. I'm a big guy with a deep voice.

"License and registration, please."

He handed over both. His watch was a TAG Heuer. A real one. I'd seen the fakes sold on Canal Street. His name was Leo Wilton. Age forty-nine. Address in Ashford, Connecticut. Thirty minutes east of here.

I considered running his plates. Screw it. Too much to hope he was a serial killer.

I returned his papers. "The speed limit on this road is 35 miles per hour."

"That right?"

"Lot of wildlife out here. Deer. They do nasty things to cars." Or so I'd heard. I'd been here seven months and not seen one. I suspected the locals invented things.

"Sure. Sorry 'bout that." He looked directly at me. Straight men don't stare into each other's eyes, unless they're about to fight. This guy wasn't angry. My body responded. My brain fought back. I was within town limits. I could be spotted. But it had been a long time since I'd scratched this itch. Six and a half months: a long winter, a stone-cold spring, and a summer with no skin in it. I craved contact.

"You see a lot of action out here?" He waved his hand at the trees, their needles pointy, ominous at night.

"Action?" He was hitting on me. I hadn't mistaken it. "Not exactly." In this town, with its picket-fenced homes, action was unknown. Everyone here was hetero or pretending to be. I gave him a small smile, just a quick pull of my lips. It was enough.

"You want to go somewhere?" he asked.

I chewed the smooth skin inside my cheek. I was off duty, but in

uniform. A hell of a risk, but he looked nice in the moonlight, like a foil-wrapped gift.

“There’s a place not far from here,” he said.

Had I known what would result from this encounter—the secrets, the lies—I would’ve gone home and slept alone, again. But murder doesn’t call ahead, warn you that it’s coming. And if it had, I wouldn’t have believed it. In this sleepy town named Idyll, murder seemed impossible. So I walked, lightheaded with lust, unaware that each step brought me closer to death and near destruction.

He led me to a disheveled shack I’d heard of but never seen. The cabin by Hought’s Pond was condemned. In New York, to be condemned required one of three Cs: crack house, critters, or collapse. Here in Idyll, Connecticut, public disapproval was enough. The house, a shingled box, had a sunken porch, a rotted roof, and windows shot out by teens with BB guns. “Jack is a dooshbag” was spray-painted on the front door. Above the tag, a frayed No Trespassing sign dangled. This place was a blight in its postcard-perfect town. No wonder they’d condemned it.

He gripped my shirt and tugged me down so my face was level with his. I stiffened all over. He smelled of peppermint, his lips thin and slick. He reached under my shirt, his fingers tickling my abs. “Someone’s been working out.”

I grunted. We stomped up the creaking stairs in unsteady lockstep. My cock throbbed, halfway between pain and pleasure. Our bodies bumped. “Ah,” I said. I nipped his neck. He held me closer. We crashed through the cabin door. My foot connected with a can. It rattled across the floor.

“Hey!”

We jerked apart. A couple lay on the floor, half-undressed. They reared back, as if struck. Near them, an oil lamp glowed. Too dim to warn this place was occupied. “You can’t come barging in here,” the girl said. She lifted her ass to wiggle into her jeans. Metal winked. Belly button ring. She was young. Twenty or so. Her hair a waterfall of brown. Her panties pink lace, a good girl’s version of sexy. She smelled

fresh-from-the-shower clean. But her tone and company told a different story. Even in the feeble light I saw her friend was daddy material. His hair thinning on top. He fumbled with his zipper and half rolled to his side.

“Let’s go,” I said, but Leo crossed his arms.

“Not so fast,” he said.

“Faster.” My lust had fled when I’d seen the couple. I touched his hand, but he yanked it back.

“You miss the No Trespassing sign?” Leo raised his voice to fill the space.

The girl thrust her face forward. A white oval with red lips. Just kissed. Pretty, and angry. “This your cabin?” she asked. Her tone left no doubt she knew the answer.

“Stop arguing,” her friend said. He stabbed his arms into his jacket.

“He could arrest you,” Leo said. He pointed to my badge.

The couple blinked. They hadn’t noticed my uniform. But now they stared, eyes on my badge. I inhaled. It hurt. A lifetime of work, burnt to ash. And for what? A quickie in a rotting cabin? The man got up from the floor and hurried past, hand to his face. Like a pedophile on a perp walk.

The girl looked smaller now, her eyes on the door. “Guess you don’t have any real criminals to chase, huh?” She shoved her feet in her sneakers, not bothering with the laces. As she stomped past, I smelled coconut. The door smacked shut and bounced, the wood warped by damp.

“Why the fuck did you do that?” I said to Leo.

“What?”

“Point out my badge. I’m not looking to advertise.”

He spread his arms wide. “Now we have the place to ourselves.” He smiled. I didn’t.

“You don’t bully people because you want a fuck. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.” He saluted.

“I’ll lead you to your car.” I’d make sure the bastard left town, and fast.

He snorted. "I can find it. I've been here before. This place isn't a secret." He pointed at my badge again. "Except to you, I guess. Later, Chief." He stepped around a discarded condom. I let him go. He knew my rank. From the cruiser and my badge. He could report me. Ruin me. If he hadn't already.

Broken glass littered the floor. The space smelled of pond algae, like corpses in advanced stages of decay. Multiple people had come here for sex? Why? And how had I almost been among them? God, I was like Rick. My dead partner. Risking my career for a stupid fix. Moonlight shifted through the roof's holes. A pattern of spotlights played on the sprouting floor. A cracked window shivered. In it, I saw myself, a hulking dark shape. My badge glinted, the only bright thing in that lonely space. I bent down and blew out the oil-lamp flame.