

## Prologue

My windshield disintegrated a nanosecond after the shotgun blast. I spilled from the driver's seat looking for the targets. The first responding uniforms were down and out. Their cruiser had blocked off the escape route of a shiny "pimped up" red Mustang. They had done something right. The two guys who had clipped the convenience store didn't want to leave their ride - idiots. The Seven-Eleven hit was not a new act for them. They had hit five places in the last three weeks. I was looking for two of them – maybe more – one with a cut down semi-automatic 22 - the other a sawed off sixteen gauge shotgun.

They had split up to close on me when the smart thing would have been to run like hell. I caught the guy with the 22 as he rounded the rear of my car. He got three slugs into me before punching out. This didn't look good. I had to move. The guy with the shotgun pressed for time but aware that his buddy was out of it slowed the action. Wrong move - I popped up between the fence and store and caught him under his eye as he swung around. The blast from his shotgun was deafening. I slumped against the wall and waited - my Glock held loosely in my lap. Elapsed time five seconds – two bad guys dead – one cop – dead – two cops almost.

### **Crazy Things Happen In Paradise**

“So you used to be a cop in Canada?”

“Yeah, in another life a long, long time ago.”

I was talking with a cute young waitress named Mia at the Clearwater Beach International House of Pancakes – IHOP. I had started to come to IHOP regularly for my main meal of the day, and Mia was the reason. The other two places that I used to go to were nearer to my room, but the chance to see Mia had made walking the extra distance seem worthwhile. I hadn't really said anything of consequence to her for the first week or so. I just enjoyed watching her. As the days passed, she seemed to take an increasing interest in me. I wanted to believe her attention was the result of my innate charm. More probably, her interest had grown in proportion to the generous tip I always sacrificed for her.

At first, when we finally did more than the serve and volley of ordering a meal, we made casual conversation - the weather – hurricanes and evacuation routes, Clearwater events, tourists and fishing. A week or so into that routine, she accidentally placed the wrong order in front of me. She apologized profusely claiming she had other things on her mind. Her embarrassment was evident. I teased her about being a blonde and having a mind to have other things on. And the verbal exchange started. She passed off my blonde insult with a quick wry smile and a verbal shot about single males eating alone every day at the IHOP - round one to Mia.

From that first short exchange, we began a daily ongoing banter that I thoroughly enjoyed. It was innocent. We were having fun.

Example: Did you hear about the two blondes who decided to drive to Disney Land? When they saw a sign that read “Disney Land left”, they turned around and went home.

Mia seemed to look forward to our verbal sparring as much as I did. Often, when I arrived for my meal, she would have an opening quip about tourists or Canadians. I soon realized that my stock of blonde jokes was running out pretty quickly. I made a quick visit to the local library's Internet service, and my cup overflowed. There were enough jokes to keep me going for years.

Very soon, I began to consider my meal at the IHOP as the highlight of my day. I eagerly anticipated my walk along the beach to talk with her. The meal became almost incidental. No matter, I thank God that more than pancakes and waffles were on offer. I also realized that I really missed Mia on her days off.

On one memorable late afternoon, the relationship took a turn. It was rainy - cooler than it had been for over a week. There were not as many people in the restaurant. Mia took her break and arrived at the side of my table with a mug of coffee in her hand. She asked if she could join me. This was a first. Our interaction had always been "on the fly". We had never sat down and looked at each other while discussing anything. I could see no harm in her sitting with me. In fact, I felt a tingle of fearful excitement at the prospect. Living alone can be lonely. I nodded and mumbled that sure, she could join me. She sat down. At first, there was an awkward silence. There were no jokes, no shots, just silence.

We just sat there like two very different beings from very different worlds considering those many differences as we looked at each other across the Formica tabletop. For whatever reason, confronted with the mental fantasy that I had created through the recent weeks, I did not know what to say. Perhaps it was the mutual awareness that we had just transcended some invisible boundary and moved into the new territory of a relationship that kept us quiet.

I smiled.

She smiled.

She was better at that game than I was. Too quickly, I began to feel even more embarrassed and awkward. Maybe this hadn't been a good idea after all. I didn't know what she expected. Flip banter was one thing; intelligent and meaningful conversation was another. Finally, just as I was about to say something about the weather, she broke our uneasy silence.

"You know that my name is Mia," she said quietly as her sharp blue eyes found something to intently study on the tabletop. She didn't smoke, so she picked up her coffee cup and took a silent sip. I realized that although I knew her name, I had never said it to her.

“I know that,” I said nodding to the small plastic nametag attached to her waitress smock above her right breast. “And I’ve heard other people call you that.”

She took a quick glance down to the tag and nodded and looked back capturing my eyes, “Oh yeah, after a while you kind of forget it’s there. So what’s your story Joe? You can’t be a tourist unless you got a lot of money and are here for the season. But if you had a lot of money, I don’t think you’d eat here as regularly as you do - unless there’s something here more than the food.”

“Probably not,” I said smiling at her and wondering how she knew my name, “but you guys do make a very good waffle.”

“I guess, but after a while you can hardly even look at one. And the smell almost makes me gag.” She made a face, and took another quick sip from her coffee cup. Her intelligent blue eyes never released me. “So again, if you don’t mind too much, what’s your story?”

“I don’t mind at all I guess. I’ve been in Clearwater for almost three weeks now, and the only person I have had a sustained conversation with is the guy who works for the property management company that checks up on the old house where I live. The woman who owns the place, Mrs. Reilly, according to the property guy, is a bit of a flake. She still lives in the house, but I don’t usually know she’s there and even more rarely actually see her. The fishing boat owner I work for from time to time is not what you’d call a conversationalist unless fishing is the topic. I know squat about fish or fishing.”

I realized that I was rambling – a nervous habit. Still, I blabbed on, “And the security work I sometimes do on Sand Key is pretty lonely stuff. You just sign rich people in and sign rich people out. Every so often, you walk around the property. But if I tell you my story, you have to tell me yours. Agreed?”

“Well, that will be a short one sure enough, but yeah, okay, I agree.”

So I told her.

“Why Clearwater?” she asked.

“I visited here before when I was a kid. My folks brought my brothers and me to the area a few times. And I liked the place. It’s warm. I like the beach and the gulf. That’s gulf not golf. No snow, no ice. It’s kind of a nice change from home.”

“So what kind of cop were you? Traffic, a motorcycle or cruiser cop or what?”

“No, I was a detective attached to the Major Crimes department. I was moving along through the ranks - taking courses - that kind of stuff.”

“So why did you stop being a cop? Were you undercover and the bad guys found out you were a cop and now you have to hide out?”

She seemed to know about as much of how police forces work as someone who spent too much time watching too much television.

I smiled. I guess I could have shown her the scars, but I shrugged that one off.

She would have made a pretty fair interrogator. Her eyes never left me. But she was way too fast to jump to wrong conclusions.

“Yeah, well, maybe I’ll save that mystery for another time. But I will tell you that I was married in another life – no kids. And here I am.”

But she was tenacious. For the next fifteen minutes she conducted a succinct Q&A. She got most of my life in a nutshell, but I held back the stuff about my brother as well as how my chosen career came to an abrupt end.

“What about your story now?” I asked.

“I got to go back to work,” she said with a quick smile as she rose from her chair with her empty coffee mug. “If you really want to hear my dreary story, I get off at nine. I’ll meet you right outside. Oh yeah, your bill is at the cash register. And I still want to know why you aren’t a cop anymore.”

I quietly finished what I could of my now cold meal – chicken strips – hot or cold, they taste about the same. It’s difficult to eat and tell your life story at the same time. I felt strangely discomfited by the abrupt ending to my meeting with Mia, but there was nothing I could do about that. Her quick smile was a warm touch. I watched her as she started serving another table.

It was as if I didn't exist and our conversation had never happened. There was no doubt about it. She had certainly surprised me. Then I had to ask myself - Was this a date? I didn't know whether I would return to meet her at nine or not. Yes I did. Was she just messing with me or was she sincere? I mean I had to be at least ten or twelve years older than her - maybe more. Did she want something from me? Was she setting me up for something? And if this was a set-up, what was that all about? All the innate cop suspicions that I believed had died long ago rose up in me with cynical lone wolf wariness. I wasn't afraid. I was curious. I dropped a generous tip on the table and went to the check-out counter.

The overweight middle-aged woman, who managed the restaurant, was usually a naturally pleasant woman. She most often greeted me with a friendly smile. This time, there was no smile. She mutely looked at me as if part of my meal was still stuck to my face. She handed me my check. I paid; thanked her - nothing - and left.

### **Something to Think About**

Even though it was overcast with a steady fine drizzle of rain falling, I decided to walk along the beach. The long wide strip of white sand was ripe with the warm smell of the sea salt and the partial remains of a decaying fish. There were only a few other people walking or jogging along the shoreline. Mainly tourists, I thought dismissively as I ambled quietly along the packed sand near the churning surf. A lone grey gull screamed protectively overhead and then swooped down upon the rotten fish carcass. Nature's garbage men!

While I walked, I remembered the first time that I met Mia. She had greeted me at the entry to the restaurant, flashed that radiant smile with those brilliant blue eyes and led me to a table in her section. Mia was by nature gregarious. Our relationship had been built on those short, often humorous, verbal exchanges while I ordered my meal. To me, it seemed that she, like so many waitresses, young or old, was a natural flirt. I had watched her play with other customers in a similar manner - the Pretty Woman/ Cinderella dream of whores and waitresses everywhere – some good looking guy with more bucks than brains will come along and take her away from all this misery.

The banter between us had always been harmless and frivolous. There had not been anything sexual or suggestive in our exchanges - no hard line come-on. I had not seriously expected or even dreamed - well, perhaps I had fantasized a little - that anything would come of it. She had become a very pleasant diversion in my otherwise pretty ordinary day. She was the all-Canadian girl next door, but maybe not so innocent – and definitely not Canadian - the stereotypical tanned, blond, blue-eyed young beauty with the firm fit petite body of a cheerleader or gymnast that every adolescent male dreams about at some time in his teens. Those days were a distant memory.

But I felt that there was something more to her - something beyond her obvious physical attractiveness. She seemed to me to be an intelligent individual with a quick wit and a neat sense of humour. It was only her eyes that tipped me to the fact that she had seen a more of life than might be guessed at first glance. Shortly after we met, I found myself wondering why someone

like her would have to take a job at IHOP. Now, after her invitation to meet her at nine, maybe I would find out. Or maybe I was reading more into her invitation than was actually there. If she thought I was the Richard Gere to her Julia Roberts, she was going to be disappointed.

Throughout my meander towards home, I continued to play the various scenarios in my head. Whatever it was, I was already looking forward to meeting her again that night.

I had a few hours before I had to start back over to the IHOP. I wondered about driving over in the Jaguar. That would impress her. Too Richard Gere – the Jag would stay in the garage. I had a shower and a fresh shave, the second of the day, a personal record. I wondered what I should wear. I realized that I was more alive than I had been in more than a decade. Perhaps alive was not the word. More like curious or intrigued. Then, I as I was wondering if this was going anywhere, I also realized I was being more than just a little bit silly. I mean there had been nothing more than an invitation to meet her after work so that she could honour her side of our agreement. She would tell me her story. I would make some appropriate comment and then, thank her. She would go home. I would go home - end of story. And tomorrow the Florida sun would shine and nothing would be different in my life or hers. Boy! Was I ever wrong!



### **A First Date in Paradise**

I reached the restaurant at ten to nine. I wondered about going inside, but then I remembered the stone faced manager when I paid my bill earlier. I decided to wait outside. It wasn't raining anymore although the darkening sky was still overcast with heavy cloud cover. No starlit night tonight. As I stood there, I mentally re-played the various scenarios I had developed through the late afternoon. I actually laughed out loud at myself. I must be losing it - becoming delusional. Maybe spending too much time alone in the sun isn't such a good thing.

"Do you often laugh like that when there's no one around?" she asked smiling at my obvious embarrassment.

"Er - no, actually I was thinking of a joke someone told me recently."

"Really - it must have been pretty good. Tell it to me."

Caught again - damn. "Well, it really wasn't a joke - er - it was more like a humorous incident."

"I'm listening. It sounds even more interesting." She was still smiling at me. Evidently, she had recognized my discomfort. She was enjoying herself.

"It was nothing," I confessed. "I was actually thinking about this."

"This? What's this?" She was really into it now. She was laughing at me. And then I was laughing with her.

"Okay, so where do you want to go to tell me your pitiful story?" I asked. "I mean that's what I'm here for - right?"

"That's right, and pitiful is a pretty good word for it," she replied lightly - almost as if somehow she had forgotten that was supposed to be why I was here. "Let's go somewhere that's not too noisy."

"Well, we could go to this charming Waffle House I know about. It's off the ground floor of the new Holiday Inn - used to be the Ramada. The food is pretty good if you like pancakes or waffles. The waitresses there are like waitresses everywhere - kind of goofy - and they often smell like syrup and waffles."

The former Ramada Inn was about two hundred yards back in towards the loop. It was the IHOP's main competitor in the open twenty -four hour a day mid-priced food group.

"Goofy?" she playfully hit my arm and then did a quick sniff of her jacket. "Who was standing here laughing out loud to himself a minute ago? Do I really smell like a waffle and syrup?"

"No, you smell great," I said as we started walking down the street towards the sound of the gentle surf washing up onto the beach. So much for romance! I had just told her she smelled great. God, I'm an idiot. "I was just kidding about going to the Waffle House. There's a fairly quiet coffee place slash bar just along Gulfview. It's supposed to be okay."

The place that we went into was really about as upscale a restaurant/bar as you can find anywhere on the beach. That's not saying much. It was called Frenchy's South Beach Cafe. Everybody, who had been on the beach for more than a week, just called it Frenchy's. In some upscale urban areas, the joint would have been summarily condemned to a quick meeting with a large wrecking ball. In Clearwater Beach, Frenchy's was considered quaint.

The interior was darkened and the red and white checked vinyl covered tables were candle lit. There was some quiet elevator type music – Kenny G, I think - playing softly in the background. A jockey size maitre d' led us to a quiet table near the back corner of the almost empty dining area. The dinner crowd had finished and moved on. The drinkers would start arriving after ten o'clock the miniature maitre d' said haughtily, as he handed us black plastic covered menus. He was responding to my observation about the shortage of people in the restaurant.

Mia didn't even open her menu. I did and made a mental note to return sometime in the future. "Want a dessert or something more than just coffee?"

"No, you go ahead though," she replied with a fleeting smile. Something was on her mind. It wasn't romance, and it had to do with me. Still a cop I thought as I continued to do a quick scan of the menu.

## Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

