

From the globally bestselling author of
THE GIRL BEFORE

Trust me. Love me. Just don't...

BELIEVE ME

FROM THE GLOBAL
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF

**THE
GIRL
BEFORE**

JP DELANEY

You act with your scars.

Shelley Winters

No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself, and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*

PROLOGUE

On the day of departure, guests are requested to vacate their rooms by noon.

By eleven o'clock, the sixth floor of the Lexington Hotel has nearly emptied. This is midtown Manhattan, where even the tourists are on schedules packed with galleries and department stores and sights. Any late sleepers have been woken by the noise of the maids, chattering to each other in Spanish as they come and go from the laundry room beside the elevator, preparing the rooms for another influx this afternoon.

Dotted down the hallway, discarded breakfast trays show which rooms still have to be cleaned.

There's no tray outside the door of the Terrace Suite.

Each morning, a folded copy of the *New York Times* is delivered to every room, with the hotel's compliments.

In the case of the Terrace Suite, the compliment has been refused. The paper lies on the mat, untouched. A *Do Not Disturb* tag hangs from the handle above it.

Consuela Alvarez leaves the Terrace Suite till last. Eventually, when all the other rooms are done, she can leave it no longer. Wincing at the ache in her lower back – she's changed a dozen sets of linen already this morning, and scrubbed a dozen shower

stalls – she taps on the door with her pass card, calls ‘Housekeeping,’ waits for a reply.

None comes.

The first thing she notices as she lets herself in is the cold. An icy draught is blowing through the drapes. She clucks disapprovingly as she goes to the window and hauls on the cord. Grey light floods the room.

The place is a mess. She bangs the window shut, a little ostentatiously.

The person in the bed doesn’t stir.

‘Please . . . You have to wake up now,’ Consuela says awkwardly.

The sheets have been pulled right up over the face. Smoothing the body’s contours, like something buried under layers of snow.

Looking around at the debris – a tipped lamp, a broken wine glass – Consuela has a sudden sense of foreboding. Last year, there was a suicide on the second floor. A bad business. A boy overdosed in the bathroom. And the hotel was fully booked: they’d had to clean the room and get it ready for the next occupant at five.

Besides, now that she looks again, there are several things that seem unusual, even strange, about the Terrace Suite today. Who goes to bed leaving broken glass on the carpet, where they might step on it next day? Who sleeps with sheets covering their head? Consuela has seen a lot of hotel rooms, and the scene in front of her seems somehow unnatural.

Staged, even.

Consuela crosses herself. Nervously, she puts her hand on the bed covers, near where the shoulder must be, and shakes it.

After a moment, where her hand has pressed, a red flower blooms on the white linen.

She knows there’s something wrong now, something very bad.

She touches the bed again, pressing with just a finger this time. Again, like ink spreading through tissue paper, a red petal blossoms on the sheet.

Consuela summons all her courage and, with her left hand, yanks the covers back.

Even before she takes in what she sees there, her other arm is reaching up to cross herself again. But this time the hand that darts to her forehead never completes the gesture. It comes down, trembling, to stifle her scream instead.

PART ONE
(FIVE DAYS EARLIER)

ONE

My friend hasn't showed yet.

That's what you'd think if you saw me here, perched at the bar of this corporate-cool New York hotel, trying to make my Virgin Mary last all evening. Just another young professional waiting for her date. A little more dressy than some of the other women here, maybe. I don't look like I just came from an office.

At the other end of the bar a group of young men are drinking and joshing, punching each other on the shoulder to make their points. One – good-looking, smartly dressed, athletic – catches my eye. He smiles. I look away.

Soon after, a table becomes free near the back, and I take my drink over and sit at it. Where, suddenly, this little scene unfolds:

INT. DELTON HOTEL BAR, W. 44TH ST, NEW YORK – NIGHT

MAN

(belligerently)

Excuse me?

Someone's standing in front of me. A businessman, about forty-five, wearing an expensive casual-cut suit that suggests he's

something more than the usual executive drone, the collar lapped by hair that's just a little too long for Wall Street.

He's angry. *Very* angry.

ME

Yes?

MAN

That's *my* table. I just went to the bathroom.

He gestures at the laptop, drink and magazine I somehow managed to miss.

MAN

That's *my* drink. *My* stuff. It was pretty clear this table's occupied.

Around us, heads are turning in our direction. But there's going to be no confrontation, no eruption of New York stress. Already I'm getting to my feet, pulling my bag on to my shoulder. Defusing the drama.

ME

Sorry – I hadn't realised. I'll find somewhere else.

I take a step away and look around helplessly, but the place is busy and my previous seat has gone. There *is* nowhere else.

Out of the corner of my eye I can sense him taking me in, running his eyes over Jess's Donna Karan jacket, the expensive one she keeps for auditions, the soft dark cashmere that sets off

my pale skin and dark hair. And realising what a stupid mistake he's making.

MAN

Wait . . . I guess we could share it.

He gestures at the table.

MAN

There's room for us both – I was just catching up on some work.

ME

(smiling gratefully)

Oh – *thank* you.

I put my bag back and sit down. For a while there's a silence I'm careful not to break. This has to come from him.

Sure enough, when he speaks his voice has changed subtly – it's huskier, thicker. Do women's voices change the same way? I should experiment with that, sometime.

MAN

Are you waiting on someone? Maybe he's been held up by the snow. That's why I'm staying an extra night – it's chaos out at LaGuardia.

And I smile to myself, because it's actually pretty neat, the way he tries to find out if this person I'm meeting is a man or a woman, and at the same time lets me know he's here on his own.

ME

Guess I could be here a while, then.

He nods at my now-empty glass.

MAN

In that case, can I get you another one of those? I'm Rick, by the way.

Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world . . .

ME

Thank you, Rick. I'd love a martini. And I'm Claire.

RICK

Nice to meet you, Claire. And, uh, sorry about just now.

ME

No, really, it was my mistake.

I say it with such offhand nonchalance, such gratitude, that even I'd be surprised to discover it's a lie.

But then, this isn't lying. This is *behaving truthfully under imaginary circumstances*. Which, as you'll discover, is very different.

The waitress takes our order. As she leaves, a man at the next table leans across and gives her a hard time about a missing drink. I watch as she sulkily tugs a pen from behind her ear, almost as if she can pull the customer's words out and flick them to the floor.

I could use that, I think. I put it away somewhere, deep in the filing system, focus my attention back on the man opposite.

ME

What brings you to New York, Rick?

RICK

Business. I'm a lawyer.

ME

I don't believe you.

Rick looks puzzled.

RICK

Why not?

ME

The lawyers I meet are all ugly and boring.

He matches my smile.

RICK

Well, I specialise in the music business. Up in Seattle. We like to think we're a little more exciting than your average criminal attorney. How about you?

ME

What do I do for a living? Or do I think I'm exciting?

To our mutual surprise, we're flirting now, a little.

RICK

Both.

I nod at the waitress's departing back.

ME

Well, I used to do what she does, before.

RICK

Before what?

ME

Before I realised there are more exciting ways to pay the rent.

It's always in the eyes – that slight, almost imperceptible stillness as an idea dawns behind them. He turns the possibilities of what I've just said over in his mind. Decides he's reading too much into it.

RICK

And where are you from, Claire? I'm trying to place that accent.

It's Virginia, damn you. Hence the way I rhymed the law in 'lawyer' with boy.

ME

I'm from . . . wherever you want me to be from.

He smiles. A wolfish, eager smile that says, *So I was right.*

RICK

I never met a girl from there before.

ME

And you meet a lot of girls, right?

RICK

I do combine my business trips with a certain amount of pleasure.

ME

Before you fly back to your wife and kids in Seattle.

Rick frowns.

RICK

What makes you think I'm married?

ME

(reassuringly)

The ones I go for usually are. The ones who know how to have fun.

Certain though he is now, he doesn't rush it. We sip our drinks and he tells me about some of his clients, back in Seattle – the famous teenage idol he names who likes underage girls, and the macho heavy-metal star who's gay but doesn't dare admit it. He tells me, with a hint of emphasis, how much money there is to be made doing what he does, drawing up contracts for those who are temperamentally unlikely to abide by them, requiring the services of people like him at both ends, the making of the

contract and its eventual dissolution. And finally, when I look suitably impressed at all that, he suggests that, since my friend clearly isn't going to show, we move on someplace else, a restaurant or club, whichever I'd prefer . . .

RICK

(softly)

Or we could just get ourselves some room service.
I'm staying right upstairs.

ME

Room service can be expensive.

RICK

Whatever you want. You choose. A bottle of Cristal,
some caviar . . .

ME

I meant, room service can be expensive . . . when I'm
the one providing it.

There. It's out in the open now. But don't react to what you've just said, don't smile or look away. No big deal. You do this all the time.

Just ignore the hammering in your chest, the sick feeling in the pit of your stomach.

Rick nods, satisfied.

RICK

I'm not the only one here on business, right?

ME

You got me, Rick.

RICK

If you don't mind me saying, Claire, you don't seem the type.

Time to confess.

ME

That's because . . . I'm not.

RICK

So what type *are* you?

ME

The type who comes here to take acting classes and gets behind on her tuition fees. Every couple of months I go out, have some fun . . . And the problem goes away.

On the other side of the lobby, a family are checking in. A little girl, about six years old, all dressed up in a coat, bobble hat and scarf for her trip to the city, wants to see what's going on behind the desk. Her father lifts her up, placing her feet on her elephant-trunk suitcase, and she sprawls across the counter, excited, as the manager issues the key cards, handing one to her with a smile. Her dad keeps one hand protectively on the small of her back, making sure she doesn't slip off. I feel a familiar tug of envy and pain.

I push it from my mind, get back into the conversation with Rick, who's leaning forward, his voice lowered, eyes bright –

RICK

And how *much* fun are you looking to have tonight, Claire?

ME

I guess that's open to negotiation.

He smiles. He's a lawyer. Negotiations are part of the game.

RICK

Shall we say three hundred?

ME

That's what they charge in Seattle, is it?

RICK

For that you get quite a lot in Seattle, believe me.

ME

What's the most you've ever paid for a woman, Rick?

RICK

Five hundred. But that was—

ME

(interrupting)

Double it.

RICK

(stunned)

Are you *serious*?

ME

No, I'm not. I'm an ordinary girl out to have fun – and that's why I'm worth a thousand dollars. But if you've changed your mind . . .

I reach for the bag, deliberately casual, hoping he won't see how much my hand is shaking.

RICK

No, wait. A thousand's . . . fine.

ME

What's your room number?

RICK

Eight fourteen.

ME

I'll knock on the door in five minutes. Don't make eye contact with the concierge.

He stands up.

RICK

(admiringly)

That trick with the table was pretty neat. Picking me up right under the noses of the bar staff.

ME

You get to learn these things. When you're having fun.

When he reaches the elevator, Rick looks back. I give him a nod and a tiny, secret smile.

Which dies as soon as the doors close, obscuring his view of me. I pick up my bag and walk to the street exit.

Fade out.

Outside, it's finally stopped snowing, the fire hydrants along the sidewalk all wearing white toupées of snow. A short way down the street a black town car is waiting, its lights off, its engine running. I pull open the rear door and get in.

She's about forty-five, Rick's wife, with the kind of jaded but expensive looks that suggest she was once part of the music scene herself, before she started hosting Rick's business dinners and bearing his children. She's sitting next to Henry on the back seat, shivering despite the warm air gushing from the heaters.

'Everything OK?' Henry asks quietly.

'Fine,' I say, pulling the little video camera out of my bag. I've dropped the Virginia accent now. In my ordinary, British voice, I say to the wife, 'Look, I'm going to say what I always say in these situations, which is that you really don't have to watch this. You could just go home and try to work things out.'

And she says, as they always say, 'I want to know.'

I hand her the camera. 'The bottom line is, he uses prostitutes regularly. Not just when he's away, either. He talked about paying up to five hundred dollars back in Seattle. And he just offered me a thousand.'

The wife's eyes fill with tears. 'Oh, God. Oh, *God*.'

'I'm really sorry,' I say awkwardly. 'He's waiting for me in room eight fourteen, if you want to go and talk to him.'

Her eyes might be full of tears, but they also blaze with anger.

Remember that. ‘Oh, sure, I’ll talk to a lawyer. But it’ll be a divorce lawyer. Not him.’

She turns to Henry. ‘I’d like to go now.’

‘Of course,’ he says smoothly. As we get out of the car – me to go on my way, Henry to get behind the wheel – he discreetly passes me an envelope.

Four hundred dollars. Not bad for an evening’s work.

And, after all, Rick was a scumbag. He made my flesh crawl. He was arrogant and aggressive, as well as a cheat. He deserves everything his wife’s about to throw at him.

So why, as the town car pulls away through the dirty grey snow, am I left feeling so sick and disgusted by what I just did?