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Opening Extract from...

Deep Down Dead

Written by Steph Broadribb

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Prologue

Today

I open my eyes and the first thing I see are the cuffs. Flexing my wrists, I test their weight and try to ignore the dull ache in my right hand where the gash across my skin has dried crusty brown. The bruising on my forearms has turned a deep purple. From the way my ribs feel, I figure they must look the same. I keep my breathing shallow; seems it hurts a little less that way. I look up.

He's sitting opposite me, arms folded, legs stretched out beneath the table. Waiting. In this windowless box it's impossible to tell how much time has passed. Still, I can't look at him, not yet, so I focus just below his eyes, where the dark shadows lie. My heart's racing, a voice in my head screams, *run, just run*. I want to, I surely do, but I can't. For all that's gone down, someone has to pay. It's time for me to pony up.

'You lookin' at me now? Good. So answer the question.'

Same Kentucky accent, but he's not at all how I'd imagined. Guess that's the way it goes when your only contact has been by cell. I force myself to meet his gaze, swallow down the nausea, try not to let fear distort my voice. 'Can't believe all you hear.'

'Tell me why.'

Now the moment's come, I don't know if I can. Was he in on it? Should I trust him? Sure, he looks the part. He's wearing the uniform black suit, smart and efficient, shades hooked inside the breast pocket. He's a little older than I'd imagined, nearer fifty than forty, and wears his hair on the long side, slicked back to keep it tamed. He runs his hand through it, smoothing the strands into place. I wonder if he's nervous. I sure as hell am.

His cold stare says he figures that I'll talk eventually. All he need do is wait, because time's almost up for me. Every second I baulk, the people I love get dragged further from me. So we both know I have to give it up on his promise, tell him enough to end this, to stop all the talk of death row. But there's an order to these things, and we both know that too.

He puts a plastic beaker on the desk, pushes it from his side to mine. Inside there's a red liquid, two shades paler than blood. 'Drink. Medical said you're dehydrated.'

They're right. My mouth's drier than gator hide in August. Can't remember the last time I drank or ate properly. Shit like that hasn't figured much these past few days. The drink looks real tempting, but I need something from him first. This situation, it's all about power. If I do something for him, the balance swings over to his side, but if he does something for me, I get it a little more on mine.

I glance down at the cuffs. Look back at him. Wait.

He takes the hint. Leans across the table with the keys in his left hand, ready. As he moves, I catch the scent of his cologne – lemon, clean and sharp. Hope he's that way too. I have to trust him; we're all out of time to do anything else.

I push my hands over the wooden veneer towards him, palms up. The torn muscle in my shoulder feels like it's on fire. I don't let it show; bite back the pain. He uncuffs me, slips the bracelets and key into his jacket pocket. Eases back in his chair. Watching, again.

That's first base, right there.

So I drink. Show willing. Know I need the fluids, can't risk the dehydration muddling my mind, confusing the story. Have to tell it right. The liquid's raspberry-flavoured water. It's sweet, too sweet, and stings the corner of my mouth where I've taken one too many punches. I grimace at the taste. 'So how does this work?'

He stares right back at me. 'Tell me everything.'

I jerk back, spooked. Try not to wince at the spur-sharp pain in my side. He's moving way too fast. You can't jump from first base to fourth, it ain't polite and I can't allow it.

The pain doesn't fade. Nausea rises real fast and bile hits the back of my throat. I cough. Makes my bruised ribs hurt like a bitch. I bite my lip and press my arm against my side. Show no weakness. 'I have to get out of here, take my daughter home.'

He shakes his head. Leans forward, elbows on the table, face level with mine. 'Not going to happen. This situation? It's real serious. You're in no kind of position to be making demands.'

He's testing me. Wants to know how desperate I am. The answer? Real desperate, but I know way better than to let that show. This game here is all about timing. What I say, and whether he believes me, that'll be the difference between life and death. 'So what then?'

He stares at me, unblinking. Leans closer. 'Tell *me* the real story. Multiple homicide an' the rest that's gone down? There's no one else can help you. *I'm* the guy you've got to convince. Right now, and right here.'

The room seems to shrink. The space feels airless, more claustrophobic. What he's just said, I hate it. I want to howl at the unfairness of it all, punch him until he feels the pain too. But I don't, because I know that he's right. I've got no other choice but to trust him. So I put down the beaker. Watch the liquid ripple once, twice, before lying still. Count in my head, all the way up to ten, then look up and meet his gaze. I can't delay any longer, need to move us on to second, defuse the situation. 'Honey, I can give you answers, just as soon as I know we've got a deal.'

He sits back in his chair, and crosses his legs, real relaxed. Keeps eye contact. 'Depends.'

There's a certainty about him, a determination that's somehow quite attractive. He plays hard to get real well; oftentimes I like that. Not today, though. Not now. Hard to get is hard to read, and one wrong move, one wrong word, will only end one way: everyone I love gone. 'I'm listening.'

'You tell me what happened. No bullshit, just the absolute truth from start to finish. Do that, then I'll tell you if we've got a deal.'

No guarantee, but I figure it's my best shot. So I nod, and let him

take third. Act like it's my idea, though. Force a smile as I swallow down the fear. 'You best get comfortable, sweetie. This'll take a little while.'

He nods, and I know that it's time. Now I have to get us to fourth, tell the story right, secure a deal.

There's a click as he switches on the audio recorder. He leans forward and places it on the table, dead centre. Looks me right in the eyes. 'You're up.'

And so I tell him.

1

Three days earlier

CF Bonds sits two minutes from the main drag of West Colonial Drive. It's nothing special, just a squat one-storey on Franklin, a few hundred yards from some fancy dog-grooming parlour and a take-out chicken joint. Not that Quinn, their top bondsman, would let fried anything past his lips. He's a health nut, into protein shakes, moisturiser and eighty-dollar haircuts. Looks good on it though, if having a man all waxed and buffed is your kind of deal. All that gym work does build a guy's stamina real nice. I found that out when I took him for a little test ride a couple of years back.

So I parked up outside, and me and my baby girl, Dakota, loped across the sidewalk to the entrance. The silver bell above the door jangled as we walked on through. Sounded real quaint, unlike a lot of the folks requiring the services of Quinn and the crew, but anyways, the noise had him jumping from his chair and striding out front to greet us.

I was glad of it. The small waiting area, divided off from the main office by a bulletproof glass screen, could get you to thinking that you were some kind of human goldfish if you stood there long enough. I never did like the feeling of being confined.

Quinn grasped my hand, pumping it up and down in that steady rhythm of his. 'Lori, good to see you.'

'You too,' I said, extracting my hand. Overfriendliness most likely meant he'd got a job that needed doing. Good. What with the rent due and being three months behind with the payments for Dakota's medical treatment, I needed cash, and fast. 'Can we talk?'

He nodded. Turning to Dakota, he smiled and ruffled her strawberry-blonde hair. 'Hey, kitten. Ain't *you* growing like a weed. Why, you must be at least ten years old by now?'

Rolling her eyes, she put her hands on her hips and thrust out her chin; a stance that never fails to remind me of her daddy. 'I'm nine, and I'm not a kitten or a weed, I'm a tiger.'

Quinn laughed. 'Well, alrighty then. Can I get the tiger a glass of milk?'

Dakota nodded, grinning.

Quinn glanced at me. 'You want coffee?'

I shook my head. Quinn makes weak-assed coffee. 'Tea.'

While he fetched the drinks, I led Dakota through the glass door and across the office. It wasn't a large space, just two desks with a couple of visitor chairs in front of each. On the wall behind Quinn's workspace a map of Florida was pinned to a bulletin board. The desk itself looked as neat as a showroom display: paper in trays, pens in their tidy, mouse on its mat. From experience I knew that the red tray closest to me was the spot where he stacked the jobs to assign. I took a peek. There wasn't much, two or three files at best. Damn.

Quinn returned. He sat behind his desk and gestured for me to take the seat opposite. I sat down and turned to Dakota, who'd gotten on to the other chair, her bare legs squeaking against the faux-leather seat. 'How about you go see what Mrs Valdez is working on?'

She frowned. 'Can't I stay here?'

'No, sweetie. This is a business meeting.'

Quinn leant across the desk. 'Mrs Valdez is out back in the filing room. I hear she keeps a jar of cookies there.' He took a blank bond application form from his drawer, wrote something in the box in the top corner and handed it to Dakota. 'If you deliver this to her for me, maybe she'll give you a cookie as a reward.'

Dakota's eyes lit up. She leapt from the chair, picked up her milk and took the paper. 'Cool. I'll find her.'

We watched her skip over to the back office.

'She's looking well.'

'For now.' I stirred honey into my tea, slow and steady. Didn't look at Quinn.

I nodded towards the files in the red tray. 'So what have you got for me?'

Quinn shook his head. 'Not much.'

'Shit. I've got rent to pay, Quinn. And the hospital instalments, they're real high, y'know?'

He shrugged. 'I've only got what I've got.'

Problem was, as a bail runner, I was associated to CF Bonds but not directly employed by them like their in-house investigator, Walt Bailey. For them, it was cheaper to have Bailey to do the work. In truth, Quinn owed me nothing.

'Like I told you last month, and the month before that, things have been running smoother.'

'Is that right?' I stared at him hard. His cheeks flushed a little. I kept on staring. 'You know what happens if I don't make a payment this month? They cancel her follow-ups. You know what that means? If the cancer comes back they won't be watching, they won't catch it in time.'

'Yeah. Look, I get it, but I just—'

'Quinn, you gotta give me something.' I pictured the letter sitting on my kitchen counter, the big red words stamped across the top: *FINAL DEMAND*. I had to find a way to pay. Couldn't think on the alternative. My baby couldn't get sick, not again.

'Look, maybe I can shift one or two of Bailey's cases your way. A couple of skip traces, few hundred bucks a shot.'

Shook my head. 'Thanks, but that won't cut it. I need something big.'

He glanced at the files in the red tray. 'Well, there is this one job, but it's not local, and you've always said—'

'What's the money?'

'Five figures.'

That sounded more like it. 'How "not local"?'

'West Virginia.'

Not local, for sure, but at that money could I really refuse? I smiled my most charming smile. 'I'm listening.'

If Quinn was surprised, he didn't let it show. 'There's only three days left until the summary judgement, so you'd need to get it done fast. You interested?'

'Depends.' I pulled the spoon from my tea. There was still a dab of honey on the tip. I put it in my mouth and sucked while I let Quinn sweat a little.

You see, a bond gone that far along means just one thing: no one else has managed to catch the guy. Since they'd skipped out on their original court date, you could bet Quinn had been trying his damnedest to find them. In Florida there's a thirty-day statutory surrender period between non-appearance in court and the bond being forfeited. If this guy wasn't brought in by the summary-judgement date, CF Bonds stood to lose a whole bunch of dollars, and they really hated that. So, if this fugitive was still out there, they had to be real smart or real fast or, most likely, both. 'How much you offering?'

'Ten thousand.'

Damn. Ten grand. I worked at keeping my expression Texas-Hold-'em neutral. As a bail runner, I was entitled to ten percent of the bond value if I brought in the fugitive in time for the summary judgement. Most of the cases I'd worked had been worth a whole lot less – three or four figures rather than five. 'He's on a hundred-thousand-dollar bond?' I asked. 'What he do?'

Quinn flicked through the short stack of files and found one with a sticky note on it marked *JULY*. He plucked it from the pile, opened it and scanned the document inside. 'Caused some aggravation in that amusement park down near Fernandina Beach – Winter Wonderland. Seems our guy had a problem with the owner, a Randall B. Emerson. Security stepped in and called the cops.'

'Much violence?'

Quinn flicked through the pages of the thin file, shook his head. 'Some posturing, perhaps.'

'Guns?'

'Not that it says.'

I frowned. Was I being paranoid or was Quinn acting a little evasive?

He needed this fugitive back fast, so was he skimming over the truth to be sure I'd take the job? 'Why the high bond, then?'

'Well, you know what the amusement parks are like. We need those tourists, and places like Winter Wonderland pull them in from all over. I'm guessing it was about making an example of the man rather than him being a danger.'

Made sense. Part of the whole amusement-park experience was that you were entering a world where bad things never happened. Any kind of disturbance in that sugar-coated ecosystem would be bad for business across the whole state. 'So why isn't Bailey getting him?'

Quinn sighed. 'He was. Trouble is, Bailey had an accident a couple of days back. He was chasing down this young guy and tried to vault over a wall.'

I tried not to smile. Bailey is built more for the couch than the chase. 'Bailey did? Now that I wish I'd seen. Hell, I'd have paid for the privilege.'

'Yeah, it didn't go so well. He landed bad, got himself a busted wrist.'

Fractures are never fun, but Bailey had been riding my ass ever since I'd signed up with CF Bonds. The jokes at my expense never grew old for him. Perhaps this was him reaping a little of what he'd sown. I hoped so. 'How come this bond's gotten so far along, anyways?'

Quinn's expression turned serious. 'Yeah. About that. Look, the guy isn't local. We only did his bail as a favour for an old business associate of the boss. The fugitive lives out in Georgia, but when Bailey made a visit, he was already in the wind. We've been tracking him these past few weeks. Bailey found a location for him yesterday, over in West Virginia, so I called Bucky Dalton, thinking he could go collect him. Turns out Bucky got himself all shot up by some drug dealer he was tailing and he's in the hospital peeing into a bag. So Bucky's older brother, Merv, agreed to pick our fugitive up and hold him until we can collect.'

I raised an eyebrow. 'Last I knew, Merv wasn't licensed for work here in Florida. Any pick-up he'd make for you would be unlawful.'

'Yeah, well…' Quinn stared at the weak-assed coffee in his cup like it was real interesting. 'So, as I said, the job's yours if you want.'

But did I want it? I needed the money, that was for sure, but with school being out, and Krista – my neighbour and regular sitter for Dakota when I was on a job – about to set off visiting her folks in Tennessee, chances were I'd have to take Dakota along on any work I did out of state.

Through the door to the back office I spotted Dakota sitting beside Mrs Valdez, helping her fold letters and stuff them into envelopes. She was chattering away all happy, her pigtails bobbing up and down as she nodded at something the older woman had said. As if sensing my gaze, Dakota looked up and met my eyes. She grinned.

I looked back at Quinn. Shook my head. 'The thing is, I've got no sitter for Dakota right now. She'd have to come along, and I'm not real keen on some fugitive being around my kid.'

Quinn shrugged. 'I get that, Lori. But if you're looking for a high-money job, this is all I got. Should be easy, no complications, just a taxi-driver gig. The man you'd be collecting is a professional who got mixed up in a bit of trouble when tempers ran high. Bailey's done the tracking. Merv's picked him up.'

It did sound easy. And a taxi ride – well, that sounded safe enough. But would it be safe enough for my daughter to ride shotgun? I wasn't real convinced of that.

'All I need,' Quinn continued, 'is for you to collect the man and bring him back for the summary judgement in three days. Your Silverado's fitted out with restraints and a full transport kit, isn't it?'

I nodded. 'Yeah.'

He smiled, revealing thousands of dollars' worth of dental work. 'So there's no chance of this man getting close to your little girl, is there? The way I see it, this is easy money, and fast. Hell, I'd go do it myself if I wasn't needed here.'

I snorted with laughter, couldn't help myself. The most physical Quinn had ever gotten was a Boxercise class at the gym. 'Is that right?'

His smile sagged. 'Sure is.'

Guess I'd deflated his ego a little. I studied his expression for a beat, considering his offer. He was right, it sounded easy and the money was

good. My Silverado had a proper travel cell, real secure, so there'd be no need for Dakota to be in contact with the fugitive. But I'd had another idea. Krista wasn't due to leave for her folks' place until that afternoon. I could offer her a thousand bucks to delay her trip by three days and watch Dakota for me. What with three kids and her husband out of work she always needed cash, so I was sure I could convince her.

'So, will you do it?' Quinn was looking hopeful again. He needed this man back fast, and he knew I had the skills to get it done. Seemed like I was near on his last shot.

That got me to thinking. CF Bonds might be prepared to pay a little more than usual for this job, and any extra sure would help. 'West Virginia is an awful long way from Florida. Perhaps if you upped my percentage I could work something out.'

'Well, maybe,' Quinn said, trying to cling on to his smile. 'I could go to eleven percent.'

I shook my head. 'It's gonna cost me more than one percent in gas money. I was thinking closer to twenty.'

'Jesus, Lori. You're trying to bleed me to nothing here.' He opened the top drawer of his desk, pulled out a calculator and tapped in a few numbers. 'I guess I could scrape by at fifteen. Final offer. What do you say?'

Fifteen percent on a hundred-thousand-dollar bond would give me fifteen thousand bucks. That sure was a decent stack of money. It'd pay the arrears I'd gotten into on the medical bills and allow for me to pay a few months' rent in advance. But it all hinged on Krista sticking around, and on me feeling able to leave Dakota with her. It'd be the longest I'd have been apart from her since before she'd gotten sick. This past year I'd never stayed away overnight; was always watching for the slightest sign of the cancer returning, so I'd be sure to catch it early and get her help. Three days. Could I bring myself to leave her that long? I sure hoped so. Her treatment had to continue.

I was still thinking on it when I heard the flush of the john followed by heavy footsteps trudging from the backroom to the office. Bailey.

'Oh look, it's *Barbie the Bounty Hunter*,' Bailey said, his tone loaded with sarcasm.

He waddled over to me and offered the hand that wasn't in plaster for a flaccid handshake. His palm felt clammy as he gripped mine. He stepped closer; too close. I could feel the press of his generous belly against my hip and smell the chilli dog on his breath.

I removed my hand and resisted the urge to wipe it on my pants. 'So you tracked this guy for a few weeks. What can you tell me?'

Bailey ignored the question. He walked to his paper-scattered desk and plonked himself down in his chair. The wooden frame creaked under the strain. He glared at Quinn and shook his head. 'You're sending *her* after *my* fugitive?'

I smiled real sweet as I imagined punching Bailey in his doughy, three-chinned face. 'Don't look so troubled, sweetie. This ain't my first rodeo.'

'So you'll do it?' Quinn said.

I winked at Bailey, whose cheeks had turned an ugly shade of puce, then looked back at Quinn. 'Sure.'

Quinn smiled, looked relieved. He nodded towards the file. 'The warrant and auth-to-arrest are inside. You—'

'Did he tell you that your fugitive is one of us?' Bailey interrupted. 'The leads I followed, they're all in the file, but from what folks said he's quite the superstar bounty hunter out in Georgia. Shit, some even called him a legend.'

I frowned. 'Yeah, and now he's a fugitive.'

'A smart one.' Bailey sucked in his gut, pushed his chest out. 'Been in the wind over a month, but I found him.'

Poor Bailey. So competitive. He just hated that my clearance rate was higher than his. 'Good for you, sweetie.'

I'd forgotten that Bailey never got anyplace fast. He either wanted to impress me, or show his superiority, or maybe both. Whichever it was, he launched into a description of all the web searches he'd done, the papers he'd pulled, the folks he'd talked with. All that information would be in the case file, I didn't need it verbal too. From Bailey's yammering it sounded like he'd interviewed everyone but the neighbours' pet dog's cousin before he'd gotten lucky with an address.

'... works for a Victor Accorsi, known as Pops, he's a bondsman based in Savannah...'

Pops I knew. He'd given me my first job when I'd gotten into this game. My mentor had made the introduction almost ten years ago. I felt my heart rate quicken. 'You got a name, a mugshot?'

Quinn thumbed through the papers in the file until he found the booking photo. 'That's him,' he said, passing it to me.

'Son-of-a-bitch.' I dropped the picture like it was the business end of a branding iron. It landed face up on the desk.

I stared at the photo. Heart racing, mouth dry.

It was him.

The man I'd seen in my nightmares for near on the past decade. The only other living person who knew the truth of what happened all those years ago.