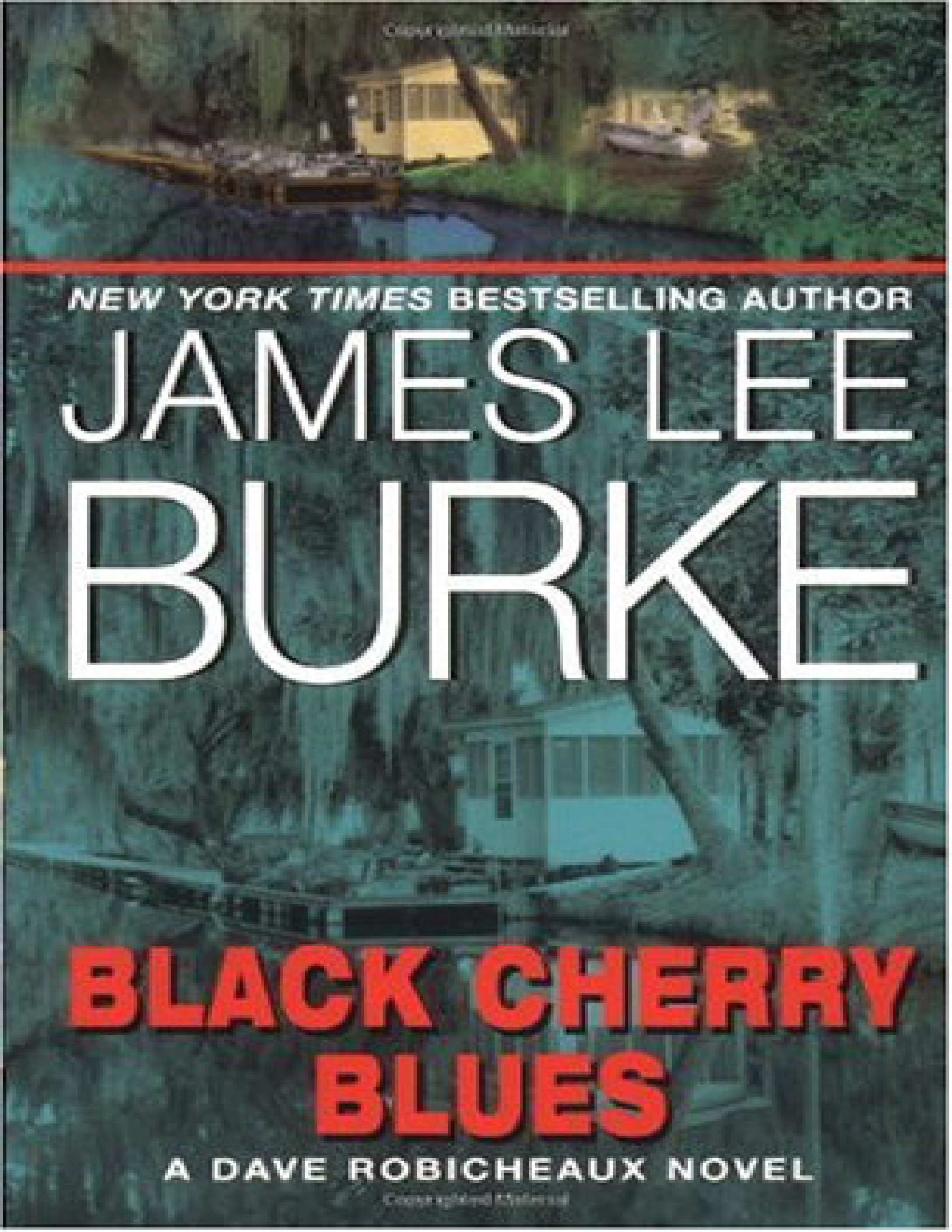
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
JAMES LEE
BURKE
BLACK CHERRY
BLUES
A DAVE ROBICHEAUX NOVEL

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Black Cherry Blues

By

James Lee Burke

v1.0 Initial release

v1.1 Misc formatting, fixed misc ocr errors, fixed broken paragraphs, separated joined paragraphs

Synopsis:

A first class detective adventure, tough and suspenseful ... I've not read anything so good since Raymond Chandler set down Philip Marlowe in Los Angeles' Walker Percy James Lee Burke, author of the highly-acclaimedHEAVEN'S PRISONERS andTHE NEON RAIN , returns with his third Dave Robicheaux adventure which confirms his reputation as a brilliant storyteller and a crime novelist of compelling originality.

BLACK CHERRY BLUESsweeps from the lush, misty Bayou country of Southern Louisiana to the rugged landscape of Montana, where Dave Robicheaux ex-New Orleans homicide detective confronts Indians, oil company roughnecks and ruthless criminals.

Haunted by a double tragedy the accidental death of his father and brutal murder of his wife

-Robicheaux embarks on an investigation that leads to the Montana offices of the oil company that once employed his father. And in coming to the aid of an old friend, burnt-out rockabilly star Dixie Lee Pugh, he is sucked into a violent, terrifying world where shady federal agents and

mafia henchmen obey nobody's rules but their own...

"A stunning novel that takes detective fiction into new imaginative realms"

Publishers Weekly

Also by James Lee Burke

The Neon Rain

Heaven's Prisoners

Black Cherry Blues

Century

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For John and Flavia McBride

I would like to thank the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation for its generous assistance, and I also would like to thank the National Endowment for the Arts for its past support.

Black Cherry Blues

CHAPTER 1

Her hair is curly and gold on the pillow, her skin white in the heat lightning that trembles beyond the pecan trees outside the bedroom window. The night is hot and breathless, the clouds painted like horsetails against the sky; a peal of thunder rumbles out on the Gulf like an apple rolling around in the bottom of a wood barrel, and the first raindrops ping against the window fan. She sleeps on her side, and the sheet molds her thigh, the curve of her hip, her breast. In the flicker of the heat lightning the sun freckles on her bare shoulder look like brown flaws in sculpted marble.

Then a prizing bar splinters the front door out of the jamb, and two men burst inside the house in heavy shoes, their pump shotguns at port arms. One is a tall Haitian, the other a Latin **Page 3**

whose hair hangs off his head in oiled ringlets. They stand at the foot of the double bed in which she sleeps alone, and do not speak. She awakes with her mouth open, her eyes wide and empty of meaning. Her face is still warm from a dream, and she cannot separate sleep from the two men who stare at her without speaking. Then she sees them looking at each other and aim their shotguns point-blank at her chest. Her eyes film and she calls out my name like a wet bubble bursting in her throat.

The sheet is twisted in her hands; she holds it against her breasts as though it could protect her from twelve-gauge deer slugs and double-aught buckshot.

They begin shooting, and the room seems to explode with smoke and flame from their shotgun barrels, with shell wadding, mattress stuffing, splinters gouged out of the bedstead, torn lampshades, flying glass. The two killers are methodical. They have taken out the sportsman's plug in their shotguns so they can load five rounds in the magazine, and they keep firing and ejecting the smoking hulls on the floor until their firing pins snap empty. Then they reload with the calmness of men who might have just stood up in a blind and fired at a formation of ducks overhead.

The sheet is torn, drenched with her blood, embedded in her wounds. The men have gone now, and I sink to my knees by my wife and kiss her sightless eyes, run my hands over her hair and wan face, put her fingers in my mouth. A solitary drop of her blood runs down the shattered headboard and pools on my skin. A bolt of lightning explodes in an empty field behind the house. The inside of my head is filled with a wet, sulphurous smell, and again I hear my name rise like muffled, trapped air released from the sandy bottom of a pond.

It was four in the morning on a Saturday and raining hard when I awoke from the dream in a West Baton Rouge motel. I sat on the side of the bed in my underwear and tried to rub the dream out of my face, then I used the bathroom and came back and sat on the side of the bed again in the dark.

First light was still two hours away, but I knew I would not sleep again. I put on my raincoat and hat and drove in my pickup truck to an all-night cafe that occupied one side of a clapboard roadhouse. The rain clattered on my truck cab, and the wind was blowing strong out of the southwest, across the Atchafalaya swamp, whipping the palm and oak trees by the highway. West Baton Rouge, which begins at the Mississippi River, has always been a seedy area of truck stops, marginal gambling joints, Negro and blue-collar bars. To the east you can see the lighted girders of the Earl K. Long Bridge, plumes of smoke rising from the oil refineries, the state capitol building silhouetted in the rain. Baton Rouge is a green town full of oak trees, parks, and lakes, and the thousands of lights on the refineries and chemical plants are regarded as a testimony to financial security rather than a sign of industrial blight. But once you drive west across the metal grid of the bridge and thump down on the old cracked four-lane, you're in a world that caters to **Page 4**

the people of the Atchafalaya basin Cajuns, red bones roustabouts, pipe lingers rednecks whose shrinking piece of American geography is identified only by a battered pickup, a tape deck playing Waylon, and a twelve-pack of Jax.

The rain spun in the yellow arc lights over the cafe parking lot. It was empty inside, except for a fat Negro woman whom I could see through the service window in the kitchen, and a pretty, redheaded waitress in her early

twenties, dressed in a pink uniform with her hair tied up on her freckled neck. She was obviously tired, but she was polite and smiled at me when she took my order, and I felt a sense of guilt, almost shame, at my susceptibility and easy fondness for a young woman's smile. Because if you're forty-nine and unmarried or a widower or if you've simply chosen to live alone, you're easily flattered by a young woman's seeming attention to you, and you forget that it is often simply a deference to your age.

I ordered a chicken-fried steak and a cup of coffee and listened to Jimmy Clanton's recording of "Just a Dream" that came from the jukebox next door. Through the open doorway that gave onto the empty dance floor, I could see a half-dozen people at the bar against the far wall. I watched a man my age, with waved blond hair, drink his whiskey down to the ice, point to the glass for the bartender to refill it, then rise from his stool and walk across the dance floor into the cafe.

He wore gray slacks, a green sport shirt with blue flowers on it, shined loafers, white socks, a gold watch, and gold clip-on ballpoint pens in his shirt pocket. He wore his shirt outside his slacks to hide his paunch and love handles.

"Hey, hon, let me have a cheeseburger and bring it up to the bar, will you?" he said.

Then his eyes adjusted to the light and he looked at me more carefully.

"Great God Almighty," he said.

"Dave Robicheaux. You son of a buck."

A voice and a face out of the past, not simply mine but from an era. Dixie Lee Pugh, my freshman roommate at Southwestern Louisiana Institute in 1956: a pecker wood kid from a river town north of Baton Rouge, with an accent more Mississippi than Louisiana, who flunked out

his first semester, then went to Memphis and cut ajUk two records at the same studio where Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash, and Elvis began their careers. The second record put him on New York television, and we

watched in awe while he played his sunburst rhythm-and-blues guitar or hammered his fingers on the piano keyboard while an audience of thousands went insane and danced in the aisles.

He was one of the biggest in the early rock 'n' roll era. But he had something more going for him than many of the others did. He was the real article, an honest-to-God white blues singer.

He learned his music in the Baptist church, but somebody in that little cotton and pecan-orchard town rubbed a lot of pain into him, too, because it was in everything he sang and it wasn't manufactured for the moment, either.

Then we read and heard other stories about him: the four or five failed marriages, the death of one of his children in a fire, a hit-and-run accident and DWI in Texas that put him in Huntsville pen.

"Dave, I don't believe it," he said, grinning.

"I saw you ten or twelve years ago in New Orleans. You were a cop."

I remembered it. It had been in a low-rent bar off Canal, the kind of place that featured yesterday's celebrities, where the clientele made noise during the performances and insulted the entertainers.

He sat down next to me and shook hands, almost as an afterthought.

"We got to drink some mash and talk some trash," he said, then told the waitress to bring me a beer or a highball.

"No, thanks, Dixie," I said.

"You mean like it's too late or too early in the day or like you're off the jug?" he said.

"I go to meetings now. You know what I mean?"

"Heck yeah. That takes guts, man. I admire it." His eyes were green and filled with an alcohol shine. He looked at me directly a moment, then his eyes blinked and he looked momentarily embarrassed.

"I read in the newspaper about your wife, man. I'm sorry."

"Thank you."

"They caught the guys that did it?"

"More or less."

"Huh," he said, and studied me for a moment. I could see that he was becoming uncomfortable with the knowledge that a chance meeting with an old friend is no guarantee that you can reclaim pleasant moments out of the past. Then he smiled again.

"You still a cop?" he asked.

"I own a bait and boat-rental business south of New Iberia. I came up here last night to pick up some refrigeration equipment and got stuck in the storm."

He nodded. We were both silent.

"Are you playing here, Dixie?" I said.

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Mistake.

"No, I don't do that anymore. I never really got back to it after that trouble in Texas."

He cleared his throat and took a cigarette out of the pack in his shirt pocket.

"Say, hon, how about getting me my drink out of the bar?"

The waitress smiled, put down the rag she had been using to clean the counter, and went into the nightclub next door.

"You know about that stuff in Texas?" he asked.

"Yes, I think so."

"I was DWI, all right, and I ran away from the accident. But the guy run that stop sign. There wasn't no way I could have avoided it. But it killed his little boy, man. That's some hard shit to live with. I got out in eighteen months with good time." He made lines on a napkin with his thumbnail.

"A lot of people just don't want to forget, though."

I didn't know what to say. I felt sorry for him. He seemed little different from the kid I used to know, except he was probably ninety-proof most of the time now. I remembered a quote in a Newsweek story about Dixie Lee that seemed to define him better than anything else I had ever seen written about him. The reporter had asked him if any of his band members could read music. He replied, "Yeah, some of them can, but it don't hurt their playing any."

So I asked him what he was doing now, because I had to say something.

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"Leaseman," he said.

"Like Hank Snow used to say, "From old Montana down to Alabama." I cover it all.

Anyplace there's oil and coal. The money's right, too, podna."

The waitress put his bourbon and water down in front of him. He drank from it and winked at her over his glass.

"I'm glad you're doing okay, Dixie," I said.

"Yeah, it's a good life. A Caddy convertible, a new address every week, it beats collard greens and grits." He hit me on the arm.

"Heck, it's all rock 'n' roll, anyway, man."

I nodded good-naturedly and looked through the service window at the Negro woman who was scraping my hash browns and chicken-fried steak onto a plate. I was about to tell the waitress that I had meant the order to go.

"Well, I got some people waiting on me," Dixie Lee said.

"Like, some of the sweet young things still come around, you know what I mean? Take it easy, buddy. You look good."

I shook hands with him, ate my steak, bought a second cup of coffee for the road, and walked out into the rain.

The wind buffeted my truck all the way across the Atchafalaya basin. When the sun came up the light was gray and wet, and ducks and herons were flying low over the dead cypress in the marsh. The water in the bays was the color of lead and capping in the wind. A gas flare burned

on a drilling rig set back in a flooded stand of willow trees. Each morning I began the day with a prayer, thanking my Higher Power for my sobriety of yesterday and asking Him to help me keep it today. This morning I included Dixie Lee in my prayer.

I drove back to New Iberia through St. Martinville. The sun was above the oaks on Bayou Teche now, but in the deep, early morning shadows the mist still hung like clouds of smoke among the cattails and damp tree trunks. It was only March, but spring was roaring into southern Louisiana, as it always does after the long gray rains of February. Along East Main in New Iberia the yards were filled with blooming azalea, roses, and yellow and red hibiscus, and the trellises and gazebos were covered with trumpet vine and clumps of purple wisteria. I rumbled over the drawbridge and followed the dirt road along the bayou south of town, where I operated a fish dock and lived with a six-year-old El Salvadoran refugee girl named Alafair in the old home my father had built out of cypress and oak during the Depression.