

COMPULSIVE

Stellen 022



Compulsive

A Novel

by,

Stellen Qxz

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Also by Stellen Qxz:

Principal Target

Compulsive

Criminal

Inactive

Vicious

Deadline

Extraction

Purity

Reciprocity

Blackball

Retrograde

Fearless

For Dad.

Psychology 101 vs. Philosophy

101

Compulsion: a psychological, and, usually, irrational force that compels somebody do something, often against their will.

Existentialism: a philosophical position that maintains individuals are responsible for their own actions and shape their own destinies. [\[1\]](#)

“There’s a shadow on the faces of the men who fan the flames of the wars that are fought in places we can’t even say the names. They sell us the president the same way they sell us our clothes and our cars, they sell us everything from youth to religion at the same time they sell us our wars. I want to know who the men in the shadows are, I want to hear somebody asking them why, they can be counted on to tell us who our enemies are, but they’re never the ones to fight and to die...”

—Jackson Browne, “Lives in the Balance”

ENDGAME

Leigh looked at me and grinned.

The waitress brought our drinks and was in the process of setting them on the table in front of each of us when suddenly I glanced up toward the entrance, and there he stood, dressed just as he had been the last time I saw him. How in the hell did he keep getting into places looking and smelling like *that*?

Stanley Toccata.

His arms were down by his sides and his hands back behind his legs and I couldn't tell if he had anything in them. He was wearing a baggy OD/BDU jacket that looked like it was about to fall apart, but it could conceal an entire arsenal of small arms, or an explosives belt for that matter. Sometimes having a fertile imagination was not such a good thing.

Some of the students seated at other tables near the front started to notice him, more like smelled him at first, and they reacted predictably. Then Bridgett turned and all the color drained from her face.

“*Stanley!*” she said in an urgent and shrill voice, recoiling.

Leigh turned to look and Charmane looked back over her shoulder...

Prologue

She was frightened. This was a new experience for her. Not the being frightened part, she had been afraid many times in her life. But never because of something like this.

She didn't know what to do, she didn't know whom she could turn to for help. If there was anyone who could help her.

She was so frightened.

The trembling of her limbs had only become worse over the past ten minutes that she had been alone. She didn't know if he would come back, and if he did, she was certain that he would kill her. A locked door meant nothing to him, the door had been locked in the first place; and he had still gotten in.

She didn't know what to do, her mind raced with frantic thoughts and she could make no sense of them. The only thing that was clear to her was the fear she felt. It was like a living part of her being.

She sat huddled in a ball on the floor in the corner of her very small studio apartment shaking and sobbing, as lost as anyone has ever been in all the world. There had to be something she could do, she thought suddenly, somewhere she could turn. There just had to be.

One thing she knew for certain, if she didn't get help she'd die.

She really didn't want that. Not at this point when everything in her life was starting to come together. At least it had been before this.

And now she was so frightened.

Chapter 1

I was standing at the back of the lower pistol range watching as the four men and one woman I'd been working with for the last five days calmly squeezed the triggers of their semiautomatic pistols, expended rounds striking the cardboard targets downrange in tight, precise patterns. Standing to my right, dressed somewhat inappropriately for a dusty firing range in mid-May in Alabama, was Marc Guyerson, Executive Vice President and Director of Corporate Security for the Colonial Bank Group of Alabama^[2], the second largest bank in the state. Everyone else, myself included, was wearing loose-fitting and comfortable lightweight clothing. Marc had on a charcoal gray suit, white shirt with button-down collar, and a red striped tie. His black leather oxfords had been highly polished when he first arrived, but no more. Still, he did look every bit the corporate executive that he was. I guess he couldn't leave the office even when he had left the office.

The five shooters were the newest members of the bank's Special Response Team (SRT), responsible for handling crisis situations ranging from bank branch robberies to kidnappings or attacks on key bank executives. They also acted as protectors for senior executives when they traveled overseas or during times of increased threat.

Marc Guyerson took a direct interest in the activities and training of SRT members and usually found the time to come out and watch at least part of their training when he was able to arrange it. Today he was able to make it out for their final firearms qualification and he was smiling like a proud papa, pleased to see the progress that each team member had made. He turned to me.

“Excellent work, as usual, Derrick,” he said, putting a hand on my shoulder. “Once again you’ve worked your magic and turned raw material into highly efficient operators. I just wish you’d agree to come to work for me full-time. The bank could really use you. Like I said before, you’d be a vice president right off..”

I held up a hand to silence him, still watching what was happening downrange, the team just emptying their weapons and quickly reloading in unison. Turning to Marc, I reached up and adjusted my eye protectors.

“You know I like working on my own, Marc,” I told him simply. “Being my own boss. Had enough of other people deciding what I should do and when during my ten years in the Air Force. Now I’m a free-agent and am quite happy. I appreciate the offer, but once again, no thanks.”

Before he could reply, there was more gun fire and we both turned to watch the team. When they finished this time they pulled the empty magazines from their weapons and holstered them. The range officer called the range safe and turned toward me. I nodded, removing my ear protectors and walking forward.

“Thanks, Pete,” I said to the thickset range officer who wore jeans, a black range T-shirt that was tight across his muscular chest,

and a matching ball cap. “We’re done down here for the day. At least with the shooting part. They’ll police the area and break down and clean their weapons before leaving.”

Pete Newhouse nodded, removing his own ear protectors, wiping the sweat from his brow underneath the brim of his cap.

“Alright, Derrick,” he said, walking over to the shaded cover where Marc and I had been standing. “They did real well, all of ‘em. Even the young lady, and I had my doubts about her in the beginning.”

I nodded.

“Yeah,” I said, choosing to ignore the hint of sexism in his remark. “Thanks for all your help, Pete. I’ll stop by the clubhouse before I go.”

He nodded, adjusted his cap, and then started off for the hill that led up out of the range and to the main clubhouse. Marc Guyerson was already standing in the middle of the small group of SRT members telling them how proud he was of them. I walked over, slipping a blue ball cap onto my cleanly shaven brown head.

“Does anybody here think they could use some improvement?” I asked no one in particular.

After a slight hesitation, they all raised their hands.

“Right answer,” I said. “Never let yourself get to the point where you think there’s no more you can learn or no room for improvement. Each of you is a hell of a shooter and an even better security agent, but none of you is perfect. You can all become better, and you should always strive for that. And having said that, let me say this, you all did very well this week and I would like to echo what

Mr. Guyerson just told you. I'm proud of what you've accomplished, and I am happy to sign off on each of you becoming full members of Colonial's SRT. Congratulations."

There were smiles, hoops and hollers, and some hugs.

I smiled, mostly to myself. None of these kids was older than twenty-eight. Marc was nearly fifty and I was forty, a generation older, and we had seen a lot more of the hard things in life than any of them. If they stayed in this business for any great length of time they would see plenty too, and then they wouldn't be smiling so much or so eager to take on jobs that stood a good chance of getting them killed one day. But that is not a relevant thought for today, not for them and not for me. My work is done. Collect my pay and go home. Pretty soon there would be another job, there always was.

I had them pick up all their brass, take down the targets they had shot up and drop them in the big garbage cans at the back of the range, then watched with Marc as they expertly broke down and cleaned their weapons. It was noon when they were done and Marc invited everyone out to lunch on him to celebrate. I had to decline because I had a prior commitment, but I shook everyone's hand and told them I'd be checking on them from time to time.

Marc and I left last, cresting the hill thirty yards from the rear of the clubhouse while the others were putting their equipment away in the trunks of their cars.

"Well I'm gonna buy you lunch or something some day soon," Marc said as we reached the spot where his black Lincoln was parked. "Next week? And I promise I won't try to hire you again. At least not during the meal."

He chuckled and I smiled a little.

“Alright,” I told him. “I’ll call you next week and we can set it up if you have time.”

“I’ll make time, Derrick,” he said earnestly, and then we shook hands. “Talk to you next week.”

I stood aside and watched as Marc and the other five backed out of the gravel parking spaces, kicking up dust and rocks, then making their way toward the half mile winding incline that was the entrance/exit to the F.O.P. Range and Training Center in Pleasant Grove, Alabama, ten miles west of Birmingham. Waving away dust, I turned and headed toward the clubhouse. I needed to wash up and pay Pete for the use of the range today, and then I had to get moving myself. I had lunch scheduled for one-thirty and I didn’t want to be late.

Chapter 2

I was born and raised in Birmingham, Alabama, but left shortly after graduating from college in 1989, receiving a commission in the U.S. Air Force and going off to serve my country with honor and distinction and glory and all that jazz. Well actually not so much. I spent ten years as an Air Force officer, finishing up as a captain. For eight of those years I was a special agent in the Office of Special Investigations, the OSI, or AFOSI. OSI is kind of like the Air Force's version of the FBI, or the detectives' bureau of a large police department. Probably more like the FBI though because it is a federal agency. It investigates crimes against Air Force personnel and facilities, or crimes committed by Air Force personnel, everything from rape to homicide to espionage, the OSI investigates it all, and while I was an agent, I investigated it all too, and a lot more.

However, with the increase in international terrorism in the late Eighties and Nineties, OSI started to get involved in the field of antiterrorism. By the mid-1990's several specialized teams had been formed with a specific mandate to combat and defeat terrorism. For the Air Force OSI the outfit that was most often on the front lines was the Antiterrorism Security Team (AST), its brief to provide high-threat protection to high-value terrorist targets all over the world, facilities and personnel, and to disrupt terror operations before they

could come to fruition through targeted strikes and *other* covert means. I joined AST in mid-1993 and by 1995, I was a team leader with my own squad of agents based out of Eglin Air Force Base in Florida. For the next four years, my team and I traveled the world fulfilling our mission, and on more than one occasion saw action against some pretty determined terrorists and paramilitary operators. I was good at the work, kind of liked it for the most part, but as time went on I began to realize that my team and I were doing more harm than good in some cases, making enemies that we didn't have to, and the thing that really started to bother me was the fact that my superiors didn't seem to mind this. In fact, I began to suspect that they expected and welcomed this consequence. Crazy I know, but it was something that I just couldn't shake from my mind.

In late 1998, following a near disastrous mission in Manila, I was having a frank conversation with the major who was my immediate superior and he told me quite bluntly that our leadership in OSI and the Air Force, and that of the American government in general, didn't care how many people we pissed off around the world, or how much *collateral*^[3] we accumulated. The more the better. Angry people were a threat, and threats kept *us* in business.

After the Soviet Union collapsed many in the military and the government—and a lot of rich business types with lucrative military contracts—all started to worry that if peace broke out they would lose their power and their wealth. So a new enemy was needed to motivate people and to scare them, to give them something to hate and to fear and thereby keep the military-industrial machine

grinding and churning out more and more money. Terrorism became the new enemy, although it had been on the radar for quite a while—as those of us who had been fighting it for years behind the scenes knew all too well—but now it was elevated to the forefront, a clear and present danger that threatened the very existence of civilization if something was not done to battle it with every resource possible.

It worked too, as was predictable. All you have to do is scare the shit out of people and you own them.

I watched it happen, helpless to stop it, and just couldn't stomach it after a while, knowing it would only get worse as the new century beckoned. So in late 1999, after my tenth year in the service, I decided to resign my commission; on the eve of my promotion to major. Many of my friends thought I was nuts, but I didn't care. Sometimes I can be a ruthless and cold-blooded son of a bitch and capable of almost anything, but there are some things that my personal honor and integrity will not allow. Banal, yes I know—but that's me—and those things in me would not allow me to continue to participate in something so cynical and depraved as the game I saw being played with the lives of so many. So I left, and at the right moment too. Had I been around in September 2001 there is no way I would not have been court-martialed, probably shot as an enemy of the state.

I have always had my suspicions about what really happened that day—the 11th of September—before and after. I'm not saying that I think the government staged the whole thing so they could eventually invade Iraq. Believe me, they're just not that bright—as history would later show. But the official story is bullshit, *intelligence*

failures my ass! During my time in Antiterrorism Security we routinely acquired reams of data about threats to targets inside the United States, some plans so detailed they made my blood run cold. The information was all passed along up the line, and then we were told that we were being overly dramatic and alarmist. *Alarmist?! I* always found it odd that in the aftermath of the attacks in 2001 that none of this ever came to light, even during Congressional hearings. The American people were simply told that the intelligence system failed, and they believed it, didn't question it, and it seems that many of those who knew the truth decided to keep quiet about it. Those few who did try to speak out were attacked, called un-American, unpatriotic during a time of national crisis and mourning, and summarily dismissed.

Had I still been in OSI at the time I would have had lots of questions for the politicians and my superiors, and I wouldn't have been very popular after asking them. So I guess it's a good thing I was gone by then.

By 2001 I had moved back to Birmingham, actually Homewood, just to the south of it. I found a quaint little furnished apartment off of Green Springs Highway called the Green Springs Executive Apartments, and still live there today. And because the Air Force had spent so many years and so many thousands of taxpayer dollars training me in the field of high-risk protective services, I decided to put my skills to use in the private sector.

Initially I had thought about getting a job with a local security company, even interviewed with several, but didn't really like the offers from any, despite their doing everything they could to entice

me because having a former AFOSI agent on the payroll looked good for any of them. I just wasn't interested, and soon began to think that perhaps moving back to Birmingham wasn't such a good idea after all. Maybe a larger city would hold more opportunities.

I was contemplating this one day when I came home late in the afternoon with a couple bags of groceries. There was an altercation up on the second floor, a very large man with a head shaved like mine was shoving around two women, one I knew to be his wife.

I never liked seeing a guy shove a woman around, and he looked as if he might toss one of them over the rail at any moment. So the groceries stayed in the car while I raced upstairs to stick my nose in where it did not belong. At first I tried reason, but that didn't work, and I was verbally insulted quite well. Had I been a weaker person I might have cried. As it turned out I kicked the guy in the balls and shoved his head into the door of his apartment. That calmed him down some, along with a couple of short jabs to his kidneys. Then his wife got upset and lunged for me. Smart man that I am—having worked a couple of domestic cases back when I was in the Security Police before OSI—I was expecting this and was able to subdue her without causing any real harm.

The other woman turned out to be a social worker from a local women's shelter and she had been trying to get the woman to leave her abusive husband once and for all and come to the shelter. Needless to say the husband took exception to this and expressed his displeasure the only way he knew how: violently. That was the point when I had come in. Shortly thereafter, the Homewood cops came in.

Once the matter was sorted, the husband arrested for assault times two, the wife now refusing to have anything to do with the social worker and locking herself in her apartment, I went down to my apartment to put my groceries away and the social worker joined me. We talked for a while, she asked me what my background was and I told her. She told me that the shelter she worked for could use somebody with my skills, maybe as a part-time consultant. The money wouldn't be all that great, but the job might be worthwhile. Well I wasn't doing anything else at the moment, and part-time was better than nothing, so I took her up on the offer.

Today I am still a part-time consultant to that shelter, and a few others, as well as to Colonial Bank and a number of other clients in and around Birmingham and beyond. As it turned out, coming back to Birmingham maybe wasn't such a bad idea after all. The added benefit was that there were still people in and around town that I had known for quite a while, friends from high school and college, that I could still see, and a family member or two, although I wasn't the biggest family man. My mother was still alive and I saw her when I could. Talked to her mostly on the phone once a week, sometimes more—and sometimes a lot less.

Today I'm having lunch with an old friend of mine, a woman I've known since she was fifteen, now closing on thirty-five, the mother of my seventeen year old goddaughter, the former wife of my best friend from college, now estranged. Her name is Leigh Danton and she is, as always, a cute, petite brunette with shoulder length straight brown hair, soft brown eyes behind silver framed glasses, a small nose, and thin lips with a very fair complexion. After two marriages

and a daughter with both husbands, Leigh had pretty much given up on the idea of happily ever-after matrimonial bliss and decided to settle for whatever made her feel happy on a given day. She shared custody of her two girls with their fathers, although her oldest Erin would be going off to college in another year and would largely be on her own. Justine, her ten year old, still had a few years to go and she spent a good deal more time with her father these days than with Leigh, mainly because Leigh was working a lot more now and her work required long and odd hours. Still, Leigh spent as much time with the girl as she could, and mother and daughter were pretty good friends, it was just too bad that Leigh and the fathers of her children could not get along better. But I'm not a marriage counselor, never even came close to getting hitched myself, and Leigh wasn't going to ask my advice anyway. She knew better.

There is a place in Center Point called Mama Edna's Diner. The proprietor is a sixty-eight year old ebony-skinned black woman named Mama Edna, nobody knows her by any other name. She is *Mama* to everybody, regardless of race or ethnicity, although being black myself, I have always felt that she takes an extra shine to me. Then maybe that's simply because I am so handsome and dashing with my neat goatee flecked with hints of light gray here and there. Of course, that must be it.

I found a space in the crowded parking lot and walked over to the diner, which set right next to a Mexican restaurant that did a brisk business as well. Inside there was a young black woman at the register counter and she smiled when I came in. I told her I was meeting someone here and that I suspected she was already inside

because her car was in the lot. Once I gave the description of Leigh the young woman nodded and led me to a table in the back near a window.

Leigh was sitting at the table sipping ice tea through a straw. She looked up when she saw me and smiled. I sat down and ordered tea as well.

“There you are,” Leigh said, adjusting her glasses. “Thought you might stand me up.”

“No guy in his right mind would ever do such a thing,” I told her with a smirk. “Not if he knows what’s good for him. I was over at the range overseeing the final test for one of my classes this morning. Traffic was kind of heavy on the interstate, two wrecks along the way.”

Leigh nodded.

“I know. I came in from Vestavia myself and 459 is like a parking lot in some places. Glad you made it though. The tea is very good today too.”

“I’m sure,” I said. “Always is. And you look good too. How’s life for you these days?”

Leigh grinned and twirled her straw around in the glass for a minute, glancing out the window before returning her focus to me.

“Thanks for the compliment, Derrick,” she said. “And you look as adorable as ever yourself.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I try. Not easy keeping this girlish figure, but I work at it.”

Leigh chuckled.

“The work’s paid off,” she said in a low tone. “As for me, life is fine. Maxwell and I actually had a civil conversation a couple weeks ago. We were talking about Erin and where she wants to go to college. He’s bucking for her to go in-state, Auburn or Alabama, he doesn’t care which.”

“No Samford?” I said, affecting a slightly wounded tone. “The birthplace of all knowledge?”

Leigh shook her head.

“Nope. Doesn’t want her to go to Samford. And she doesn’t want to go either, so the point is moot. She wants to go out of state. Florida most likely. FSU if she can get in. Maxwell and I are actually in agreement that she should stay in Alabama. Probably won’t happen, she is determined, and very smart.”

“Well being my goddaughter, what would you expect?” I interjected.

Leigh smirked.

“Yeah, must have gotten that from *your* genes,” she said. “And wouldn’t Maxwell have loved that? You know he still thinks you and I slept together when we were married.”

My tea arrived and I took a large sip. The waitress asked if we were ready to order and we told her to give us a few more minutes, and she went away.

“And I suppose he doesn’t believe we never slept together even after you were divorced?” I said.

She had more tea then shook her head.

“Nope. Which is kind of funny because Malcolm thinks we slept together too.”

I chuckled.

“God, what people must think of me,” I said. “What is it with the guys you marry anyway? Neither of them trusts us together, and one of them was my best friend at one time. And *he* introduced us.”

“Yeah,” Leigh said. “Which is probably part of the problem. When you consider my history and all. A couple of other guys he introduced me to I did sleep with. Just neither of them was you. Which is still your loss by the way.”

We both grinned and had more tea.

“Yes,” I said. “I have always believed that. My cross to bear, however.”

“Or not,” Leigh said as she leaned forward on the table.

I stared into her eyes for a moment. She really was quite an attractive woman, I had always thought so. And when she wore blue jeans, which was most of the time and included today, even a man as strong as I could not resist taking a good long look and wondering... but she was a friend, a good friend, and some things were more important than sex. Not many, but in her case...

The waitress returned and we ordered, then she went away again.

“So what are you working on?” I asked, sipping my tea and pushing all sexual thoughts as far from my mind as possible.

“Cheating husband,” Leigh answered. “It’s why I was in Vestavia. Guy’s banging his boss’ secretary. His wife suspects, so she hired me through her attorney. Secretary lives in Vestavia Hills. Today I got pictures of him going into her place on his lunch hour and coming

out an hour later—with her. They even kissed on the front door step. Very romantic. And it cooks his ass.”

“You tell your client yet?” I asked.

She shook her head.

“No. Got a meeting at four-thirty with her lawyer. I’ll turn the pictures over to her and she’ll tell the client. Digital cameras make P.I. work so much easier these days. What else are you doing now? Any more classes?”

“Not right now,” I told her. “Figure I’ll go over to the bookstore and pick up a few of the latest by my favorite authors and spend the weekend on the sofa reading. Got a few potential things coming up in the next couple of weeks. One or two look promising.”

“Well if you have any decoy work or anything else that needs doing...”

I nodded.

“I’ll give you a call,” I said.

Our lunches arrived and we ate while making conversation, mostly reminiscing. We had known each other for so long that conversation was never difficult, and even silence was not uncomfortable. We finished around three and I paid because it was my turn.

I walked Leigh out to her car, only once glancing down to observe the tightness of her blue jeans and the way her round butt fit nicely into them. She leaned back against her gray Honda with her arms folded across her small chest as we talked for another few minutes. She stood on her toes and gave me a fierce hug, then kissed me gently on the lips.

“I’ll call you in a week or so,” I told her after she got into her car and started it, rolling down the window.

“Okay,” Leigh said. “Take it easy. Have a good time reading this weekend. Me, I’ll probably go out with this Hoover cop who’s been trying to get me to go out with him for a couple of months now. He’s recently divorced and isn’t looking for anything long-term. Guy after my own heart, so to speak. Probably be his lucky weekend too. And mine...”

I smiled and waved as she drove off, then turned and walked over to my car. In some ways I guess I was a little jealous of that Hoover cop. No reason to be really, if I truly wanted to go out with Leigh, or something else, all I had to do was say so. She had made that quite clear on more than one occasion. So obviously I didn’t want anything more.

Probably.

“Books-A-Million here I come. And not a moment too soon.”

Chapter 3

I spent way too much time in bookstores, not to mention spent way too much of my money there. I was in luck, or not, depending on your point of view. The Books-A-Million in Homewood's Wildwood Shopping Center a couple miles south of my apartment had four new books by four of my favorite authors. All hardbacks, and all around twenty-five bucks. Even with my discount card I still spent a hundred bucks. And now I was at home, just a few minutes after five, the sun still shining brightly in the sky and the temperature up near ninety.

My apartment is on the first floor toward the south end of the complex, Apartment 31. Today I was in luck here as well; there was an open space right in front of my door. I pulled in and shut the engine off, reaching onto the passenger's side floor and picking up the bag of books. Felt kind of light for a hundred bucks, but what didn't these days?

I hadn't noticed the dark green Jeep Cherokee Limited Edition parked across the lot directly behind me when I'd turned in, but as I glanced in the rearview mirror now I did notice it, and I smiled, climbing out of the car with my hundred bucks worth of books.

The occupant of the jeep climbed out then and raised a hand above her eyes to shield them from the sun despite the fact that she had on dark shades. From her position she was facing directly into

the sun. She waved. I waved back then walked up the slight incline to the other side of the parking lot.

“Hi,” I said.

“Hi,” Traci Brenner said. “You weren’t home when I got here so I decided to wait.”

“Glad you did,” I said. “But you could have called my cell.”

“I know,” she said. “But I knew you’d be home eventually. Thought I’d surprise you.”

“You succeeded,” I said. “But if you had called I could have saved a hundred bucks at the bookstore.”

Traci grinned.

“You and your books,” she said. “Get anything good?”

“Everything I read is good,” I told her. “When did you get to town?”

“A few hours ago,” she said, glancing around the parking lot. “Went to the house and dropped off some things, packed a few others. I’m up here for the weekend. Got a thing at Oak Mountain for some kids from a local shelter. Saturday and Sunday. I go back to Mobile on Monday.”

“I see,” I said, feeling a familiar sensation rising slowly in my stomach. “Where’s Junior?”

“At home with my parents,” she said. “Didn’t think I’d have time for him this trip. Plus he had school today and I had to leave before he got out.”

I nodded, staring very intently at the slender brunette with light brown hair that hung an inch and a half above her shoulders,

knowing that behind those dark shades was one of the most spectacular pair of beautiful brown eyes that I have ever looked into.

“I take it Marcus is still overseas?” I said.

“For at least another six months,” she replied, a small smile forming in the corners of her pink mouth. “If his tour isn’t extended longer. But he doesn’t seem to mind. He loves his work, all of it. The longer the deployment the better in his eyes. And to be honest, Derrick, I really don’t care anymore at this point. Marcus, Jr. misses his father, and I do the best I can, but sometimes I really don’t care. I know that sounds bad. He’s off fighting a war, no matter how useless it is, and sometimes I can’t feel anything for him, my husband of more than ten years.”

“But you do *feel*,” I said to her. “Deeply and passionately.”

The smile became more pronounced and she took a step closer to me, pulling her shades down on her slightly pointy nose so that I could see her eyes. Those beautiful eyes.

“And you know me so well, Mr. Olin,” she whispered.

“Yes, I do,” I told her, reaching out and taking her left hand, squeezing gently, rubbing my thumb across her soft knuckles. “Want to come inside?”

She smiled even more and nodded.

“Yes,” she whispered, her voice suddenly hoarse.

There was an overnight bag on the front seat of her jeep. I carried it in for her, along with my hundred dollars worth of books and the gun case from the trunk of my car. Once we were inside and the door was locked, Traci turned to me, her shades now discarded.

She was wearing a long dress, denim on top and white cotton on the bottom. The top was low cut, which I loved, despite the fact that Traci has small breasts. That look is perfect for her, as is the concealed slit halfway up the right thigh of the bottom part of the dress. It's only visible when she sits and crosses her legs or moves suddenly, but I know it's there. I've seen this outfit many times. And it still affects me the same way.

Traci has a slender, athletic build, about five-seven and a half, maybe a hundred ten pounds. Long slender legs and arms, but very strong. She is one of the most passionate and imaginative women I have ever known. Marcus Brenner was an idiot. He spent most of the past five years either in Iraq or Afghanistan instead of here with his wife, this beautiful and insatiable creature. Well that was alright, Derrick Olin was here and he would take care of her needs. Every wickedly depraved one of them.

I stood in my living room leaning against the front door watching Traci slowly remove her dress, then her bra, and finally her panties.

This was going to be so much more fun than lying on the sofa and reading all weekend.

Traci came to me, leaning against me and kissing me gently on the lips while looking up into my eyes. My tumescence was full now, and my jeans were suddenly very tight. I slipped my arms around her and pulled her closer, kissing her more deeply.

“Oh damn,” I moaned. “You feel so good, baby.”

Traci grinned widely and pulled back a little.

“Just wait till you’re naked too,” she teased. “And you really get to *feel* me.”

We kissed again, then she stepped back a little more and started undoing my jeans, looking straight into my eyes the whole time.

Chapter 4

I made grilled chicken breasts and pasta salads for dinner and Traci and I sat on the floor behind the coffee table in my living room with the sofa at our backs, two candles serving as the only illumination as the curtains were closed and the sun was pretty much gone at a quarter to eight. Neither of us had on a stitch of clothing and probably wouldn't for the rest of the evening, not that our mutual nakedness bothered either of us, on the contrary, we were quite comfortable being naked in front of one another, and had been doing so for almost two years now, whenever time permitted.

Traci was thirty-seven, the mother of an eight year old boy, and the wife of a forty-one year old master sergeant in the 5th Special Forces Group of the United States Army. She lived in Mobile, Alabama and ran a horse breeding ranch. She loved horses, always had since she was a little girl, and she worked hard ever since she was a teenager, saving up money, and when as she was finally able to afford it, she bought a ranch and went into the breeding business. It was hard work but Traci loved it, and it gave her something to do to fill all of the time she had when her husband was away. Her son also loved horses and she taught him everything she knew, in small doses, hoping that one day he would decide to work on the ranch himself, perhaps even take it over when she retired. As long as he did not

follow his father into the Army. Traci really didn't think she could take that.

In addition to breeding horses she was also a certified riding instructor and taught youth equestrian classes at her ranch several times a year. A couple years ago a friend of hers who worked with abused children in the Jefferson County Domestic Safehouse Program asked if Traci would be interested in teaching a class to some of the kids in the program. Traci said she would and came up to Birmingham and made arrangements with the state park at Oak Mountain, even bringing up some of her own horses. The first class was such a success and Traci really enjoyed teaching the kids, seeing how much they appreciated the time she spent with them, and so she decided to keep the classes going, coming up to Birmingham every couple of months when time permitted.

Her family owned a house in Hoover, a city about eight miles south of Homewood, and whenever Traci came up she stayed there—mostly—when she wasn't staying with me, and when she came up without her son.

Two years ago I had been hired by the Jefferson County Domestic Safehouse Program to keep an eye on a young mother and her two children who had been suffering miserably at the hands of an abusive husband and father for years. I was at Oak Mountain State Park on a crisp and cool early April Saturday morning a week after Easter when the abusive husband-father showed up and tried to snatch his wife and kids while the children were enjoying their time with the horses. He was a big brute of a guy, mean, dumb, and

strong. My favorite kind of abuser. You don't feel bad when you hurt them. Not that I would have felt bad anyway.

Calm reason failed to work with him as well, and he took a couple of swings at me. I'm a big guy too—sort of—having put on a few pounds since leaving the Air Force, but I stay in shape, and I'm a lot faster than some people think. I easily avoided the punches and put a couple of solid ones into his gut, then an open palm to his face, which busted his nose. The guy was badly hurt but hadn't gone down easily, and he kept coming at me. I didn't waste much time after that, got in close and did a few things that I had always found worked for me in the field, and the hard-case went down hard.

The police were called, he was arrested, having, in addition to several other offenses, violated a court restraining order. The equestrian class was only mildly interrupted, and most people never did know what had happened, however the senior instructor of the class watched the whole thing, and afterwards she came over and introduced herself to me. From the first moment I looked into Traci Brenner's soft brown eyes I saw something familiar, but something that to this day I still could not adequately explain. Nonetheless, it was there, and it drew me to her.

We had lunch a few days later and talked, and talked, and talked. I knew she was married, the diamond wedding ring on her finger was obvious, and she never tried to hide it, told me all about her husband and her son, and many things about her life. It was obvious to me that she really wasn't happy with many aspects of that life, in particular her marriage, maybe even being a mother, though she would never admit this latter part even to herself. I liked talking to

her, liked listening to her too. Both were so easy. I told her many things about myself, which was unusual for me because I'm usually more circumspect, but I was comfortable with Traci, more comfortable than I had been with any woman in a long time. Actually there really had only been one other woman... but I didn't like to think about her that much anymore.

Traci came back to my place that night and we slept together. No regrets on either of our parts. The next morning I made her breakfast, kissed her good bye, and we both agreed that, while the night we had had was perfect, it should never be repeated. Actually that was her thinking and I didn't protest, but I would have been glad to have a repeat. And another, and another...

A month and a half later we did have a repeat engagement. And several more times after that. At this point neither one of us kidded ourselves. This might not go on forever, but if we were both careful we could enjoy it while it lasted. Fine by me, and I suspected it was fine by Traci as well.

Actually I knew it was.

"You're an excellent cook," Traci said, turning to me and smiling in the candlelight, "and you know how to fuck too. Hard to believe no woman has ever snapped up a catch like you."

I grinned and leaned over to kiss her lips.

"Well you have, sort of," I told her.

She smiled.

"Sort of," she agreed. "But you know what I mean. Not that I'm suggesting that it should happen any time soon. I suspect you would

be faithful to your wife and we wouldn't be able to get together like this anymore."

I didn't respond, but knew she was right. Having an affair with a married woman didn't bother me in the least. I wasn't the one who was married. As long as I wasn't friends with the guy to whom she was married. That might be awkward. However, if I was the one who was married, it would be cheating and that was something I could never do. You gotta have some principles, even if they are warped by so-called *normal* standards.

I kissed her again then reached for my glass of cranberry juice.

"What time do you have to be down at Oak Mountain in the morning?" I asked.

"Ten," she said. "Means we have several more hours of wicked fun before I have to get some sleep."

I smiled, reaching over with my free hand and placing it on her thigh.

"Glad to hear it. There are at least a couple dozen positions left we haven't tried yet today."

Traci giggled and picked up her glass.

"Only a couple of dozen, huh?" she said. "Well that just won't do. I know you're forty and all now, and I don't want to wear you out..."

I put my glass down and leaned closer to her.

"Baby, if you can, do it," I told her.

She pressed her lips against mine, keeping her eyes open.

"Derrick, you lovely man you," she said, her breath warm on my skin, "I am very wet right now."

I chuckled, glancing down at my erection.

“Well that’s a good thing” I said, reaching for her hand and pulling it onto my organ.

She smiled, gripping me.

“A very good thing. And a hard thing,” she said.

We kissed again, and then Traci climbed into my lap and straddled me, pressing my rigid penis between us.

“Tell me you have a condom close by,” she breathed, her arms encircling my neck as she settled on top of me.

“Just under the sofa behind me,” I responded in a thick voice. “Thought it might be necessary to...”

She cut me off by pressing her mouth to mine, slipping her tongue inside. After that there wasn’t much conversation. The condom came out of its wrapper and she thought of a very creative way to put it on me. Next Traci mounted me once more, this time taking me all the way inside her sleek little body.

At this point things became much more interesting, and a lot more intense.

And a whole lot more fun!

Chapter 5

Sunday night Traci cooked dinner for me at her place in Hoover. Halfway through the meal we were naked once again, as was to be expected. Now we were in the kitchen putting the dishes into the dishwasher. I rinsed them out in the sink and handed them to Traci and she put them in the machine. She did this by bending over very suggestively, and occasionally glancing back over her shoulder, brushing her hair aside with a finger and smiling at me.

The dishes could wait a while longer, I could not.

I grabbed her supple waist and pulled her to the sink, turning her to it, dropping down on my knees behind her. Greedily I took her with my mouth, mercilessly stimulating her with my lips and tongue, even my teeth, bringing her to a series of fervent orgasms that made her legs wobble like rubber afterwards and I had to support her to keep her from falling to the floor. It was also possible that she had shattered my eardrums because I felt something pop in my head when she screamed one time. Didn't really matter at the moment though, my ears weren't the most important part of my anatomy right now.

I finished putting the dishes in the washer by myself as Traci sat on a kitchen chair and caught her breath, her skin still flushed.

“Goddamn, Derrick,” she said with a devilish grin, still sucking in air. “Only a lesbian could go down on a woman better than you can.”

I burst into laughter and nearly dropped a pan.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” I said, turning and still laughing. “And how the hell would you know about a lesbian’s capabilities in the arena of female oral stimulation?”

Traci grinned and crossed her slender legs.

“You get to know a lot of things working in the horse business,” she said smartly.

I looked at her for another few moments then laughed again.

The dishes were all in the machine and I turned it on, then walked over to her and held out my hands. Traci took them and I pulled her up. Her balance seemed to have returned.

“You know,” I said, “even though my tongue is a little stiff, not to mention my jaw, I think I’m gonna have to prove to you that no lesbian could be better than me.”

Traci grinned, putting her arms around my neck and kissing me.

“You men, always have to prove you’re the best.”

“Right you are, missy,” I said, holding her body tight against mine. “Gotta keep my rep intact.”

She shook her head slowly, still grinning.

“No worries there, dear,” she said. “And I have no objections to another round with your tongue on my clit, but I’d kind of like to return the favor.”

“Only problem there, darling,” I said with a straight face, “I don’t have a clitoris.”

Traci smirked and lightly bumped my forehead with hers.

“You know what I mean, smart ass,” she said. “What, I gotta spell it out for you? Black guys can be so slow sometimes.”

We both started giggling and kissing again.

“It’s a good thing you’ve got a big dick,” she continued.

“But of course,” I said, trying not to laugh. “We black guys are known for this.”

“And that’s not all,” she teased. “But anyway, I want to suck that big dick of yours, if you don’t mind; and even if you do.”

“Of course,” I said.

“Good,” she said. “And maybe afterwards we can do something else that we both like to do.”

Her eyes stared into mine unblinking for about half a minute, and I felt myself growing harder and harder with each passing second. We kissed again.

“And what might that be?” I said in a husky voice.

Traci took my lower lip between her teeth and gently nibbled on it for a few seconds, then rose up on her toes and whispered her response in my right ear.

“Think you can handle that, Mr. Olin?” she said.

I took in a deep breath, and another.

“Oh yes, Mrs. Brenner,” I responded. “I can handle that. I just hope you can.”

Her whole face was one large impish smile now, and she kissed me with her eyes open. We didn’t talk anymore after that.

The next morning we said good bye and she drove back down to Mobile. I drove back to Homewood, stopping first by the gym in

Wildwood where I have a membership and spending an hour working out before heading back to my apartment. Perhaps today I would get a chance to start reading that hundred dollars worth of books I'd picked up on Friday. And that would give me sufficient time to recover from all of the physical strain that had been inflicted upon my poor hapless body this weekend.

Not that I was complaining, of course. Never would I complain about a weekend of ceaseless carnality with a nearly insatiable woman such as Traci Brenner. But as she herself had pointed out, I am forty now, so recovery time might take just a bit longer.

Four books should be enough time. Too bad I wouldn't be able to get through even one of them before work beckoned again.

Chapter 6

About a hundred years ago I was a student at Samford University, one of the best institutions of higher learning in the region, if they do say so themselves, and they are correct, despite the heavy influence of the Southern Baptist Convention. Actually I was a student at Samford back in the 1980's, '85 to '89. It's a good school, a little heavy on the religious side of things, but what would you expect from a Baptist university? In actuality the only reason I went to college—other than to please my parents—was to become an Air Force officer. A lot of people don't know it but in order to become an officer in any branch of the armed services you have to have a college degree, or spend four years in one of the nation's three military academies, which will amount to the same thing.

As luck had it, Samford had an Air Force ROTC program, and also as luck had it, my father started working on the campus in the Maintenance and Custodial Department in 1970. By the mid-eighties he was the head of that department. Despite it being a heck of an achievement for a man who never completed sixth grade, it didn't matter what position he held. He could have still been a janitor and I would still have been able to attend the university tuition-free. All dependents of full-time staff and faculty members are eligible for what is known as the employee tuition benefit. A fancy way of saying

we don't have to pay for our education. Except for books, that is. This was a great help to me because even back then Samford was an expensive place. By the time I graduated in May of '89 it cost a hundred fifty-three dollars per credit hour. Four years later a friend of mine and I were chatting on the phone and on a whim decided to find out how much tuition cost then. This was in 1993. The price tag per credit hour then was two hundred thirty-six dollars, and each class was at least three hours a week per semester. I didn't even want to think about how much it cost today. Glad I didn't have any kids to send to college.

Since graduation nearly twenty years ago I haven't come back to the school that much, despite the fact that I live just a few miles away. Samford is in Homewood on Lakeshore Drive, where it has been since moving and changing its name from Howard College in 1957, ten years before my birth. I drive by it sometimes when I go down to the shopping mall at the end of Lakeshore. It's called Brookwood Village and it too has been there for a long time, since the mid-seventies I think, one of the first major shopping complexes in the area, now one of the smallest. I don't spend much time there either, but occasionally I go to the bookstore there, just to spread my money around so Books-A-Million in Wildwood on the other end of Lakeshore won't get it all.

In the last few years I've probably been on the campus maybe five or six times, three of those times just to drive around and see how much the place has changed. And it really has changed, grown a lot, expanded across Lakeshore over to where Homewood High School is located. New schools, new structures, and lots more

students. When I was there we had around four thousand, now it was more than double that, and still growing. That kind of made me sad. I had always liked the closeness of the university, the isolation I felt there sometimes. In fact, some friends of mine and I used to call it *The Bubble*, our little academic sanctuary in the middle of a chaotic world, a safe place to spend four years of your life pretending you were much smarter than you actually were. But then some of us really were.

The other times I had been on the campus had been at the request of my former psychology professor, now head of the Department of Psychology, Dr. Charmane Foley, Ph.D. Charmane was the only reason I minored in psychology as well as my intended minor, which was English. As part of the requirements for obtaining a degree in sociology I had to take two courses in psychology. Charmane taught both of them. She was a very good instructor, knew how to relate the material to her students in a way that even the most challenged of us could understand, but that wasn't the reason I kept taking so many of her classes beyond those required, and I was not the only one. Not the only guy.

Charmane was thirty-nine when I first met her, and I was nineteen, and she was the most incredible woman I had ever met. Blond, bold, beautiful, sexy, and extremely smart. She also had a killer body and was not afraid to show it off. Clingy tops, sometimes low-cut, the occasional slit up the side of her skirts, sometimes a pair of snug blue jeans or slacks. Every guy on the campus noticed her, student and faculty alike, and her personality was so warm and engaging, and she had an uncanny ability to remember everyone's

name, even in a class where she had in excess of sixty students. Everyone mattered to her, and she made sure we all knew it.

Yes, surely she was the star of many a young man's masturbatory fantasies, mine included—and probably more than one young woman's too. Each of her classes was always filled every semester and Charmane was consistently voted the best professor on campus by the students at the end of every year I was at Samford. Of course, it was not simply her body that had caught my attention, although that was mostly it in the beginning. Charmane's specialty was the psychology of violence, and at the time she was also a consultant to the FBI. I had always been interested in law enforcement and was planning on taking that path in the Air Force, so I talked to her a lot outside of class and learned a great deal from her about the criminal and violent minds. Over the years when I was in AFOSI I referenced some of her written works on some of my cases. In the early nineties she became quite interested in the phenomenon of terrorism and published a number of papers for the FBI that became required reading when I joined the Antiterrorism Security Team in AFOSI. I even wrote to her a couple of times and she sent long letters in return, proud that one of her students was putting what she had taught him to good use.

About a year and a half ago I ran into Charmane at a political fundraiser that was being sponsored by Nadya Simon of the Simon Family Charitable Trusts. Nadya is an outspoken and very opinionated woman who has managed to anger quite a few people over the years. She gets death threats from time to time and whenever this happens, I usually get a call from her husband Lev and

then I spend a few days looking out for her. I was doing that at the fundraiser, and Charmane came right up to me, smiling. She was less than a couple years shy of sixty at the time and to my eyes she was still incredibly hot. We embraced fiercely and she actually kissed me on the corner of the mouth. If that had happened a couple of decades earlier I would have had to change my boxers. Almost had to anyway.

We talked briefly and Charmane made sure to get my number. She called a few days later and invited me to lunch. We spent a couple of hours catching up, I did most of the talking because she was really interested in what I had been doing since leaving the Air Force. But I wanted to know about her too, and she told me. She had never remarried after her first one ended in divorce just before we met, but she said she'd thought about it a time or two over the past twenty years. Then there was the three years she spent at Samford's London Study Centre in England, four books published, and just a year prior, her promotion to Chairwoman of the Department of Psychology. She told me she still did the occasional consult with the FBI and a few other federal agencies, but for the most part she concentrated on helping victims of family violence. Mainly abused children and women. As it turned out, she was a consultant to a couple of the same shelters that I did occasional work for.

After that lunch I got another call from Charmane about a month later, and she asked me to come to her office on the campus. When I arrived she told me that she needed my help with something. A *delicate* matter. And it was. A fifteen year old runaway that she had been counseling had shown up at her home the previous evening and begged her not to call the police or social services, which, of course,

she was required to do by law. But the girl was terrified and said if Charmane called the police or anyone else she would simply run again. It seems that she was being abused by her stepfather, a sterling citizen who no one would believe was capable of such a thing, not even her mother. She had already been sent back to her home with them twice before, and the abuse continued. The girl was desperate and needed help, and Charmane could not refuse her, but she needed help as well.

The stepfather was very powerful in local circles and statewide, he had friends and resources and money. It would not be difficult for him to track the girl to Charmane and if he got the police involved it would be she who was ultimately in trouble. Add to that the danger that the girl would be in. Obviously I agreed to help, and not simply because Charmane Foley still made my nether regions quiver, although I'm sure that had something to do with it on some level.

It took a couple of weeks, but an accommodation was eventually reached, and the stepfather promised he would seek counseling, never harming the girl again. However this would have to wait until after he had completed extensive physical therapy and was able to walk once again—although he would never be able to do so without a very distinct limp. It really was a pity he had *slipped* on those wet concrete steps and fallen, apparently several times, over and over again. But that's life. Sometimes you never see the bad things coming. Especially when it's dark.

Charmane continued to monitor the situation with the girl and her family and let me know how it was going. So far so good. Looks

like step-daddy wanted to make sure he didn't fall down anymore steps. Or maybe the next time it would be a really high roof.

This afternoon I was lying on my living room sofa already halfway through a Robert B. Parker novel when my cell phone rang. It was Charmane. She needed to see me in her office as soon as was possible. I told her I was at home and could be there in twenty minutes or so. She said that was good enough. So I got up, dressed in khaki slacks, a blue polo shirt, a comfortable pair of well-worn black boots, and added my blue blazer to complete the ensemble. It also gave the added benefit of providing cover for the "slimmed" compact .45 caliber Glock-36 that I strapped on to my right side. Never leave home unarmed, especially when I'm going to see Charmane. It's usually work she wants to see me about.

I arrived in the corridor outside her office door at 2:29pm. The halls were deserted at the moment, everyone apparently still in class. It was close to finals week and graduation would be soon, then the place would really be empty, that is until summer school started next month.

I took a deep breath and then knocked on the door. A moment later a very soft and very southern female voice told me to come in, and so I did.

Chapter 7

Charmane was wearing yellow today, her favorite and best color. She was seated behind her desk when I came in, black reading glasses perched above her small nose. Her shoulder length blond hair was worn up today. It gave her a kind of naughty professor look, in combination with the glasses. She stared at me as I came in and shut the door, her hands on the desk resting on top of an open file, an expensive looking ring on both ring fingers.

“Thank you for being so prompt, Derrick,” Charmane Foley said, reaching up and removing her glasses with her left hand, letting one of the earpieces rest between her full lips for a couple of moments before setting them down on the desk. “Please, come over and have a seat.”

I did, taking the chair on the left, adjusting my jacket and raising my left leg and resting the ankle on top of my right knee.

“What’s up, Doc?” I said, suppressing a grin.

Charmane shook her head, unable to suppress her grin.

“You’ve wanted to say that for years, haven’t you?” she said.

I smiled now.

“Couldn’t resist,” I said. “So what is up?”

She paused and interlaced her fingers, staring intently at me for several long moments.

“Derrick, I’m afraid I need your professional assistance again,” she said in a quiet voice.

“Of course,” I responded simply. “Tell me.”

Another pause.

“I’m also afraid this will not be a paying job,” she said.

I smiled again, nodding.

“I just finished a contract for Colonial Bank,” I told her. “They pay rather handsomely. I’m good for this month. Besides, if I can’t do a pro bono job for my favorite prof from time to time, then what good am I?”

Charmane smiled and shifted a little behind her desk.

“Well there is that,” she said. Then something occurred to her and she smiled even more. “I suppose this could be your way of paying me back for all of the *staring* you did back when you were my student.”

I chuckled.

“Now, Doctor, you know very well that you never caught me *staring* at you; not even once.”

Her crystal blue eyes looked deeply into my eyes for a time and she said nothing. Finally I smiled again.

“But that doesn’t mean I *didn’t* stare. Quite a lot actually. I was just very good at making sure you never caught me.”

Charmane grinned.

“Well that was twenty years and a few pounds ago,” she said.

“And you still turn just as many heads, Charmane, and you know it.”

We were both silent for a few moments. A part of me was wishing I had had the courage to joke with her like this twenty years ago, it might have made college a hell of a lot more fun. But I wasn't kidding. She was sixty now, and still the cat's ass of beauty as far as I could see. But that wasn't why I was here. I glanced out the window behind her desk for a moment, seeing some students walking by on the hill beyond, laughing and talking, and then I focused on Charmane once again.

"What's up?" I said.

She took a deep breath, pursed her lips, and then told me.

"I have a research assistant named Bridgett Lemons," she said. "A very bright young woman who is about six months away from getting her master's, maybe less depending on how summer school goes. She's twenty-four years old, been at Samford since she was a freshman, a very good student, and she might make a very good counselor one day. There's still a lot of work left for her here, but I think she can succeed."

"However?" I said.

"However, she has a problem with her former boyfriend," Charmane told me, her expression remaining the same, cool, detached, professional. This was a clinical problem she was discussing with a fellow specialist, and the details were important. "His name is Stanley Toccata. Stanley is twenty-eight, a Cullman native I believe. And also for nine years he served in the Army. Mostly in Special Forces, tours in both Iraq and Afghanistan. He was honorably discharged within the last few months. However, since that time he has become increasingly violent. He and Bridgett had

been dating for about two years and there was talk that they would get married one day—they were actually engaged—but as he started to change she began to reconsider, and finally, about five weeks ago, she broke it off with him.”

“And let me guess,” I said. “He did not take the news well?”

“At first he appeared to,” Charmane told me. “He simply left her apartment after she told him; and he didn’t say a thing. Then about a week later he started showing up at her place trying to talk to her. She told him she didn’t want to talk to him but he kept coming back, day after day. Finally she called the police and they had a talk with him. But because he was a combat veteran they let him off with a verbal warning, didn’t even write a formal report.”

“And he still kept coming back,” I said.

“Of course,” Charmane said. “And that’s when he started to get violent with Bridgett. Never left a bruise where it could be seen, but he has hurt her. And he has made it quite clear to her that she is his until he says otherwise. He continues to come by her apartment. She lives in Center Point by the way. He comes by, hangs out in the parking lot. A few times he’s broken in when she is at school or work. She called the police the first couple of times, but they didn’t find any evidence to connect Stanley to the break-ins, and nothing was taken, so they couldn’t do much. This has really taken a toll on the young woman, Derrick. She’s frightened and can’t concentrate, and that is not a good thing for a master’s candidate, especially this time of year. She’s scheduled to take a few more classes in summer school and then she could graduate ahead of time if she does well enough. That is, if this doesn’t break her first.”

I nodded.

“Where is she now?”

“Down in the psych library,” Charmane told me, reaching up and scratching the tip of her nose with a single finger. “She’s researching something for me. Actually I’m just keeping her busy while we talk. Last night he threatened her with a large knife, Derrick. Bridgett says it was his Army knife. Very big and sharp and scary. She really thought he would kill her. He was in her apartment when she came home. It was all she could do to come in today. I could see she was nearly at the breaking point. I am a little ashamed because I have known for a week or so that something was bothering her, but I’ve been so busy with a paper I’m working on that I put off asking her about it. But this morning I couldn’t do that anymore. It was just too obvious that she was terrified out of her mind. And she told me everything, like a dam bursting. I thought about calling the police, and then thought better of it. With no real proof other than her word, what can they really do?”

I nodded.

“Yes,” I said. “So you called me.”

Charmane smiled a little.

“Who better?” she said.

“Do you know where he lives?” I asked.

“According to Bridgett he doesn’t live anywhere. He was living with her the last few months before they broke up, and she doesn’t think he has a place now, maybe lives in his car. He’s always dirty when he accosts her, unshaved and unwashed. Sounds to me like he’s devolving, and I’m fairly certain that one day soon he will become

completely unhinged and harm her, probably right before he harms himself, perhaps even a lot of other people in the process. It would seem that Stanley has developed a fairly strong compulsion for controlling Bridgett. Maybe it's the only way he thinks he can control himself. But when he finally realizes that he cannot control her, he will then seek to destroy her; and himself."

I nodded, blowing some air out through my mouth as I adjusted my position in the chair, dropping my leg back to the floor.

"Sounds like he's nuts to me," I said.

Charmane smiled.

"In laymen's terms, probably. I know you take the existentialist view of life, Derrick, everyone being the master of his or her own destiny, but compulsions are quite real, and for some people, quite uncontrollable. It would be a good thing if we could get Stanley Toccata into some form of therapy and get him some help. After all, I have no doubt that he is suffering from post-combat stress brought on by his military service. There have been literally thousands of cases diagnosed over the past few years. Soldiers coming back from Afghanistan first, then Iraq, becoming violent with their loved ones, hurting some. A small number have even killed their spouses or significant others. This has been documented in both male and female vets, but mostly males. And it is a national shame and disgrace."

I sighed.

"Be that as it may, Charmane," I said in a patient tone, hopefully not sounding too condescending. "And I know you're right, and I agree with you that it is a disgrace, but I can't care about that. If this

guy can be helped with therapy, great, but that will have to be somebody else's problem. You want me to get involved, fine. No problem. It's what I do. But Bridgett will have to come first. She will actually be my only priority. Her safety my only concern."

Charmane was silent, her eyes never leaving mine, and we sat that way for nearly two full minutes before she nodded slowly and glanced at her watch.

"I understand," she said. "And believe me, I want Bridgett to be your top concern. I'm just hoping that you don't have to... to take drastic measures with the young man. After all, he is a victim as well. But that has to be put aside, I know. We have to help Bridgett now."

Charmane stood and smoothed out her top. I stood as well, and had a nice look while she smoothed out her top. She came around the desk and for the first time today I got a look at the bottom half of her body. She walked past me and glanced up into my eyes.

"Caught you that time," she quipped, then went over and opened her office door.

Yes, she had, and so it really didn't matter that I was now staring at that perfectly shaped ass of hers.

And now I was filled with many of the same feelings that had filled me as a twenty year old undergrad all those years ago. Some things never changed.

And that was a good thing.

Chapter 8

The Psychology Research Library is in the basement of the Beeson Education Building where the Department of Psychology is located on the near west side of Samford's campus. You had to take the stairs down from the first floor and I followed Charmane down the narrow staircase, only occasionally glancing at her butt.

There were only a couple of other people besides Bridgett Lemons in the small library when we arrived and they were packing up their things and preparing to leave. Both were psych students and they spoke briefly to Charmane before departing. Bridgett Lemons was at a table in the far corner, head down over a couple of books, pen in her left hand poised above a spiral notebook. She was a small woman, looked much younger than her purported twenty-four years. Straight black hair worn loose and hanging past her shoulders, slightly obscuring her face at the moment. She was of mixed race too, that much was obvious, her features a curious combination of Asian and Caucasian. Most likely it was her father who was white, given her last name.

Charmane stepped over to the table where the young woman sat and when she spoke her name the young woman started, completely unaware of our approach.

“Sorry to scare you, Bridgett,” Charmane said in a soothing voice. “You were so engrossed.”

Bridgett Lemons yellow-tinged skin had flushed red and now she gripped her arms tightly and stared up at her advising professor with embarrassment.

“It’s my fault, Dr. Foley,” she said in a small voice. “I should have been paying more attention. I’m sorry, I was just trying to complete the work you gave me.”

Charmane leaned over and touched the other woman’s shoulder.

“You didn’t do anything wrong, dear, and stop apologizing. And the work can wait. I’ve brought the man I told you about. A friend, and a former student of mine too. His name is Derrick Olin.”

I walked over to the table now, trying to appear as non-threatening as a large black man with a shaved head can in these situations. Bridgett Lemons’ dark eyes widened as she looked at me, then she quickly looked away. Charmane squeezed her shoulder again.

“It’s alright, Bridgett, really. Derrick is a friend and he is going to help us. But you’re going to have to talk to him, if you feel up to it.”

I waited for a few seconds before speaking, then took a breath and introduced myself.

“Hello, Bridgett. As Dr. Foley indicated, my name is Derrick, and I’m here to help you, if that’s what you want.”

She wouldn’t look at me, and at first said nothing, so we waited, Charmane still offering support through the placement of her hand on the younger woman’s shoulder. Then Bridgett Lemons started to cry. Charmane pulled out the chair next to hers and sat with her,

hugging her close to her body. I stood and waited, taking a few steps back and pretending to admire the collection of books in the library.

After nearly ten minutes Bridgett Lemons had managed to pull herself together and Charmane asked if it was alright for me to come over. She nodded without comment. Charmane nodded to me and I walked over, pulling out a chair on the opposite side of the table and sitting down, resting my hands in my lap.

Charmane placed her right hand on top of the other woman's hands on top of the table and squeezed them gently.

“Derrick was a student of mine back in the 1980's,” she explained in a conversational tone. “Not the best student I ever had, but he was rather bright. Couldn't get him to switch his major to psychology, but he did get a minor.”

I smiled a little, remembering a conversation I had had with my academic advisor following Charmane's pitch about switching my major from sociology to psychology. He had not been amused, but I assured him that despite some obvious enticements, I had no intention of becoming a psychology major. However, in the end I did have enough credits for that psych minor, along with the one I had actually been seeking in English. Not to mention a lot of time spent staring at and fantasizing about the lovely Dr. Foley.

“He went into the Air Force after college,” Charmane continued, now looking directly into my eyes. “He was commissioned as a second lieutenant right out of the detachment here at Samford. For ten years he served this country, and for most of that time he was a member of the Air Force Office of Special Investigations. You may not be familiar with that organization, but it has been in existence

within the Air Force for decades, and is both an investigative and protective agency of the federal government. Actually, there is a show on CBS these days called NCIS starring that delicious silver-haired hunk Mark Harmon. NCIS stands for Naval Criminal Investigative Service, and it is the Navy equivalent of the Air Force Office of Special Investigations, or AFOSI.”

At that point Bridgett looked up at me. Guess she wanted to see if I looked anything like Mark Harmon, and if she was hoping for that she would be sorely disappointed. She looked at me for maybe three seconds before looking away once more, and Charmane continued giving her a brief rundown on my background, going all the way up to what I was doing now, and the reason she had called me to help with her problem.

When Charmane finished there was more silence. I waited calmly. I had always heard that you couldn't go wrong if you kept your mouth shut when you didn't really have anything to say, and so far it had served me well.

Finally, after several shifts and false starts, Bridgett Lemons looked at Charmane, the pain and shame palpable in her entire being. She sniffled and Charmane touched her cheek.

“Bridgett, Derrick can help you,” she whispered. “I would not have called him if I did not believe this. You have to trust him. And you have to talk to him. It's the only way he can help you. And don't worry, I'll be right by your side every step of the way. We're going to get through this together.”

I thought she would break down again at that point, but she didn't. She nodded, sniffled again and wiped the back of her hand

across her nose, then turned toward me, not quite looking at me though.

Her voice was small and cracking when she spoke, and I could barely make out what she said.

“Thank you,” I understood that.

“Bridgett,” I said slowly, “I need you to tell me everything you can about Stanley Toccata, and if you have a picture of him that would be great too. And I promise you that I will do all that I can to make sure he never again harms you.”

She took several deep breaths and I could tell she was steeling herself for some great effort, and that’s when she looked into my eyes for the first time, tears still in hers.

“God I hope so,” she whispered.

Chapter 9

“I met him through a friend of mine. It was a little over two years ago and I was in Atlanta taking spring break with some friends. Stanley was on leave from Iraq and there was this big celebration for returning soldiers being held over there. Some of his friends who were from there got him to go. We met, started talking, and kind of fell for each other. I told him I was from Birmingham, or at least living here while I went to school, and he told me he grew up in Cullman and still had family there. After a few days of partying he had planned on going home to see them. We exchanged numbers and he said he might call me in the next week, if I wanted him to. I was really excited, he was so handsome, so strong, and seemed like a really gentle guy despite everything he had gone through over there. He was different than a lot of other soldiers I knew. He didn't brag about what he did, didn't try to make himself seem all that important. He'd been a Ranger and was in Special Forces by then, but he didn't make a big deal about it, mostly he just wanted to talk about me. I felt real special.

“And he did call the next week, and we went out. We had a great time, he was a perfect gentlemen, kind, sweet, romantic, and he didn't try to pressure me in to anything by saying he was going to be going back overseas when his leave was up. I knew that anyway, and

to be honest with you, it bothered me because I liked Stanley so much. We stayed together for the rest of his leave and when he redeployed we kept in touch. Wrote each other, talked on the phone whenever we could, and when he got leave again almost a year later following a minor injury, he came straight back here to be with me. That's when we got engaged."

Bridgett Lemons paused, taking a deep breath and collecting her thoughts. We were all still sitting at the table in the basement library, thus far uninterrupted. Charmane sat back and watched her, a neutral expression on her face. I watched her as well, my face devoid of everything, just listening to her tell me the story of her life. Or at least this particular chapter of it.

"He went back to Iraq after about a month and we kept in touch as usual, but after about six months I started noticing some changes in him. He seemed to be less focused and more easily rattled. We'd be talking on the phone and I'd say something that just seemed to set him off, and he'd be yelling at me. But he quickly apologized, saying that it wasn't my fault, things were just bad over there at that time. But it kept happening. Still, I knew things weren't great where he was from all the things I saw on the news. The daily bombings, the sectarian violence, the terrorism. It was understandable that he would be getting stressed out. After all, he was on his second tour in that battle zone and had done one in Afghanistan earlier. Dr. Foley had taught a class one semester about the combat stress that many veterans suffered from for years after their experiences and I could see this at work with Stanley, and honestly that made me love him all

the more. I told him to do whatever he had to in order to come home safely and nothing else mattered.

“Then about four months ago he shows up on my door, no warning or anything, and it was the happiest moment of my life. I broke down, threw my arms around him, and we held each other for hours. He told me that he was out of the Army now, his final tour over, even showed me his DD-214^[4] affirming that he was honorably discharged, which I couldn’t have cared less about. He was home safe and that was all that mattered. I was so happy.”

Again she paused, glanced over at Charmane, then back at me.

“But that didn’t last long,” she continued. “Stanley continued to lose his focus, to get angry at the least little things. And this was made worse by his inability to find a job, despite the job placement program that the Army had set up to help returning vets. I tried to do what I could, listened to him, encouraged him, told him how much I loved him, but it didn’t really help the situation. It only seemed to make him angrier. And then he hit me. The first time it was unintentional, I knew that. A reflex because I was standing too close to him when he got upset. He apologized profusely, Mr. Olin, and I knew he meant it, and I forgave him. But a week later, he did it again, and this time I could tell that he really wasn’t sorry; even though he said he was. I really tried to make it work, I really did, but it only got worse, and Stanley didn’t seem to care after a while, so I decided to end things. The hardest decision I’ve ever had to make because I really did love him. Still do I guess, but...”

I waited and Charmane reached over and touched her hand again.

“But I can’t live like this,” she said, a hint of strength returning to her voice. “He started showing up at my place trying to talk about a month ago. I told him I didn’t want to talk to him, that he should try to go to the VA or some place and get some help. I don’t know where he’s living but I suspect it’s on the street. He never did have a place of his own here, just a car, and the last few times I’ve seen him he hasn’t had it with him. He hasn’t shaved in weeks, nor bathed. He seemed like a wild animal the last time I saw him.”

“That was last night?” I said.

She glanced at Charmane again and she nodded, and Bridgett looked back at me.

“Yeah. He came to my place last night. Actually he was there when I got home late. I thought he was there to kill me, Mr. Olin, I really did.”

“Call me Derrick,” I told her. “Did he break in or does he still have a key?”

“I changed the locks after he moved out,” she told me. “But he knows how to pick locks. Calls it covert infiltration. Guess they teach that kind of stuff to Special Forces guys.”

“Yeah,” I said. “You have any relatives you can stay with in town, maybe friends that he doesn’t know about?”

She shook her head.

“I’m from Mississippi, Mr. Olin—Derrick. My parents live there and they aren’t in the best of health. I wouldn’t want to stay with them even if they were here because I wouldn’t want Stanley to hurt

them. I've got a sister out in California. No one really close here, a few friends, but nobody I would feel comfortable staying with, risking their lives. And I have to stay here and finish my work. I can graduate this summer if I pass all of my classes."

I nodded, glancing at Charmane.

"Okay," I said. "Ideally, what would you like to happen?"

Bridgett looked at me intently for more than a minute, her eyes never blinking. She looked over at Charmane for a few seconds, then back at me.

"Ideally I'd like for him to leave me alone and get himself some help. But I really don't know if he ever will. He is so far gone now. I'm really frightened for him as much as for myself. I really believe that sooner or later he will try to kill me."

"Okay," I said once more. "Then we'll have to prevent that."

"Stanley's very dangerous, Mr. Olin," she told me, her eyes suddenly widening. "Derrick, sorry. He was in the Army nine years and Special Forces trained. I know you were military too, but he is younger. No offense. And in better shape."

I smiled.

"But I am pure of heart," I said.

Charmane grinned despite trying not to.

Bridgett looked at me oddly, uncertain whether or not I was joking. I get that look a lot. Sometimes from myself.

"I understand your concern, Bridgett," I told her. "But you need not worry. I've been doing this kind of thing for quite a while. I'm not arrogant enough to think I'm Superman, but I can handle myself, and Stanley Toccata if necessary. Now, do you have a photo of him?"

She glanced over at Charmane once more, then back at me.

“At my place,” she said. “Still got some. But he doesn’t look like them much anymore.”

“They’ll still help,” I told her. “Plus you can give me a description of his current appearance.”

“How are you going to work this, Derrick?” Charmane said.

“Do you have a job away from the university, Bridgett?” I asked.

“No,” she shook her head. “In addition to the research work I do for Dr. Foley I have a part-time job in the bookstore in the University Center.”

I smiled.

“Back in my day it was called the Students’ Center,” I told her. “Time marches on. What are your days and hours?”

“Tuesday through Thursday,” she said. “Five p.m. till close. Nine-thirty.”

“Alright,” I said. “Dr. Foley, you should speak with campus security about keeping an extra sharp eye out for strangers on campus. Has Stanley ever been here?”

“Yeah,” Bridgett told me. “A couple of times. He’s been in this building and the University Center. And he knows my schedule.”

I nodded.

“But the good thing is this is a closed campus, largely. Fairly easy to gain access to, but not so easy to move around if you don’t belong, especially if you look and smell like you say he does now. And this is not a comfortably familiar setting for him, so in all likelihood he won’t move against you here. But we will take precautions. Mainly I’ll

watch out for you when you are away from campus. You live in Center Point?”

“Yes,” she said, her manner attentive and helpful. “I’ve got a place off of 23rd Avenue behind the Arby’s, the Raintree Apartments. Kind of a dump, but it’s what I can afford.”

“I know the area,” I told her. “You ever eat at a place called Mama Edna’s?”

“Sure,” she said. “Place down in the Parkway East Shopping Center. Great southern food. About a mile down the parkway from my place.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Ate there with a friend last Friday. Anyway, I’ll be staking out your place. That seems to be his comfort zone for confrontation and it is logical to assume he will return there at some point. When you’re home, I’ll be there. When you’re here, campus security should be able to keep an eye on you, plus Homewood PD has a great response time to this place I’m sure. But I live close, just over on Green Springs a few miles away.”

Bridgett looked over at Charmane for a few moments, a question that she didn’t want to ask in her eyes. Finally she looked back at me.

“I don’t have any money,” she said in a small voice.

I let my face remain blank, sensing that this was not the time to be flippant. Sometimes the filter in my head does work.

“Don’t worry about that,” I said in a gentle tone. “Let’s just make sure you’re safe.” Then I smiled for affect.

She nodded, and gave a small smile as well.

Charmane was staring at me, her blue eyes amused. Strange as it seems, I had not truly realized until this very moment how much I

still wanted to fuck her brains out; just as much as I had wanted to twenty years ago. Maybe more, if that was possible.

Perhaps that could be my reward for helping out her research assistant?

Probably not.

Although it is quite dumb, and I know this, I am a completely loyal man—in most respects. It makes no difference that the woman I'm sleeping with is married to someone else, and although it is rare these days, she does still sleep with him, even has a kid by him. I would still consider it cheating. So even if Charmane offered, and I really wished she would, I'd have to decline.

And right after that I'd stick my Glock in my mouth.

“About what time will you be ready to go home today?” I asked, coming back to reality.

She glanced at her watch.

“Probably around five,” she said. “As soon as I wrap up here.”

I nodded.

“Okay. I'll go home and pack a few things I'll need for the night, then come back here and follow you home.”

She shook her head.

“I don't have a car right now, Mr. Olin—Derrick. It's broken down and I don't have the money to fix it at the moment. I've been taking the bus. Lucky for me there's a stop right at the corner at Arby's.”

“No problem,” I said. “Then I'll come back and take you home. That'll make it easier actually, not having to worry about keeping up with another car. And since Stanley doesn't know about me yet he

won't know to look for my car. I'll be back before five and meet you in Dr. Foley's office, if that's okay?"

Charmane nodded.

"Fine with me. I've got a faculty meeting at five-thirty this evening."

I nodded, and stood, and both women stood.

"Charmane will give you my cell number," I told Bridgett. "Do you have a cell phone?"

She nodded.

"Yes."

"Alright. I'll get the number when I come back. You can program mine in your speed-dial. Never hesitate to call if you feel you need me when I'm not around, okay?"

She nodded.

"Thank you," she said.

"You're welcome," I said. "I'll see you in a bit."

I turned and started away from the table and Charmane followed me, stopping me as I reached the base of the stairs.

"Thank you, Derrick," she whispered, standing very close to me, the scent of her perfume filling my nostrils, arousing me further. "I really appreciate this."

"No problem, Doc," I said, looking down into her eyes, the little imperfections of age on her face inconsequential. She was every bit as beautiful as she had always been to me. "This might get ugly you know. This guy might have a death wish and I might have to fulfill it for him."

She nodded silently, glancing over at Bridgett, who had returned to her work.

“Better him than her,” she whispered. “And better him than *you*.”

I smiled.

She smiled, then rose up on her toes and kissed me on the side of the mouth. Payment in full for services to be rendered. I felt a stirring in my groin and forced myself to think of anything I could that would negate it.

“Bye, Charmane,” I said, then turned and quickly ran up the stairs. Goddamn, it was like I was nineteen again. But I wasn’t. And she wasn’t my professor anymore. And she *had* kissed me.

But there was Traci Brenner, and that loyalty thing.

Oh well... happy are the pure at heart.

That’s me, Derrick Olin, pure at heart and horny as a toad; and preparing—possibly—to face off with a Special Forces-trained combat vet who in all likelihood wasn’t playing with a full deck.

Business as usual.

Chapter 10

I was dressed in comfortable, loose-fitting jeans, a short sleeve blue button-down shirt that was designed to be worn outside the trousers, and a pair of very broken in high-top black sneakers when I returned to the campus at ten to five. Most of the classes had ended that day and the campus was full of students walking in groups, some laughing and joking, others seemingly in serious conversation, probably getting prepared for finals, and there were some joggers too, preferring the hills around campus as opposed to the boring circular running track around the football field just below the gym on the west side of the campus.

I went back to the Education Building and found a spot in visitors' parking. Most of the lot was empty now, just a few other vehicles, and Charmane's perfunctory yellow Cadillac. With her some things truly never changed. Since I had known Charmane she had always driven a yellow Caddy, a newer model every few years.

Charmane and Bridgett were waiting for me in the professor's office when I knocked and entered. Bridgett seemed better to me, not so lost as before. She even smiled a little when I came in.

"Are we ready?" I asked, walking over to where she sat in one of the chair's opposite Charmane's steel desk.

"Yes," she said, glancing at Dr. Foley. "I suppose so."

“What time do you have to be back in the morning?” I asked.

“Got an eight o’clock class,” she told me. “Then at noon I’ll be helping Dr. Foley grade some pretests. This will probably take all day until I go to work at the University Center at five.”

I nodded.

“No problem. I’ll get you back here in plenty of time in the morning.”

“What about sleep?” she asked me.

I smiled.

“When you have a constitution as indestructible as mine, my dear, you don’t need sleep.”

She smiled, but I could tell she still wanted an answer.

“I’ll sleep tomorrow when you’re here,” I told her. “I’ve been doing nothing but resting the past few days. I can pull an all-nighter no problem.”

“I wish you didn’t have to,” she said solemnly.

“Yeah,” I said. “But we want to make sure you’re safe. So there it is. Don’t you worry, I’m quite used to it in my line of work.”

Bridgett nodded and looked at Charmane once more. The other woman stood and smiled. Bridgett stood as well as Charmane came around the desk. They embraced and Charmane whispered something in her ear that I couldn’t hear, then both women turned to me.

“Take good care of her, Derrick,” Charmane said seriously. “And if you need anything, don’t hesitate to call me at any time. You have my numbers as well.”

I nodded.

“Sure,” I said.

She walked Bridgett over to the door and we left her standing in the doorway of her office as we headed for the stairs that led down to the main floor. I let Bridgett into the passenger’s side of my four year old dark blue Ford Taurus, then went around to the other side and got in.

“Have you had dinner yet?” I asked, starting the car.

She shook her head.

“No,” she said. “But I’ll make something at home. Got some tuna and other stuff I can put together.”

“You like Chinese?” I asked, checking my mirrors as I slipped the selector into REVERSE.

“Sure,” she responded.

“Good,” I said. “There’s a pretty good Chinese place just around the corner from where you live. Recently renamed the *Asia Buffet*. Not the most original name, but damn good food. We’ll stop by on the way and pick something up. My treat.”

“You don’t have to do that, Derrick,” Bridgett told me in a low tone, staring down at her hands. “I mean, I appreciate all you’re doing for me, but you don’t have to buy me dinner too.”

“Well I’m gonna get something to eat from there because I love Chinese too,” I told her, backing out of the parking space. “And I’m hungry. Also, as a southern gentleman I would be remiss if I let a young woman starve while I was gorging myself on delicious Chinese food.”

She smiled and put her head back against the headrest.

I smiled too, then slipped the gear selector into DRIVE and started out of the parking lot.

Chapter 11

The Asia Buffet was doing a vigorous business when Bridgett and I arrived and there was quite a long line for both in-house and takeout dining. But we persevered, and by seven-thirty I was turning off of 23rd Avenue and into the entrance of the Raintree Apartments in Center Point. As Bridgett had indicated, not exactly the showplace of Birmingham, but it was home.

Bridgett lived in an apartment at the back of the complex and I drove around the parking lot a couple times, taking everything in, before finding a space across from the building near a clump of trees that were badly in need of some pruning. I shut off the engine and undid my seatbelt. The sun was going down fast but it would be light for maybe another twenty-five minutes. I took off my shades and put them on the dashboard.

“If you wouldn’t mind,” I said to Bridgett. “Carry the food in, please. Leave your books. I’ll come back and get them when I come back for my bag in a few minutes. I need to check your apartment first and make sure Stanley isn’t in there. I want you to stay close to me and do exactly what I say, alright?”

She nodded.

“Good,” I said. “And stay in the car until I come around and get you.”

Another nod.

I climbed out of the car, looking all around the parking lot as far as I could see, walking to the hood and pausing a minute, then continuing on to the other side and opening the door for Bridgett, careful to cover her body with mine as she exited. She had the two bags of hot and very aromatic Chinese food clutched in both of her small hands, and I could see that she was very nervous.

I let her proceed me and stayed a step and a half behind, well within arm's reach. We went in through the back door and had to take the stairs to the second floor where her apartment is located, there was no elevator. Once we reached the second floor I took the lead, undoing the bottom button on my shirt. The Glock-36 was tucked into my jeans in an inside-the-pants holster. If Stanley Toccata was inside Bridgett's apartment waiting for her I wanted to be able to greet him properly.

Her apartment was the third one from the end on the right side of the hall. I took her key and inserted it into the lock, turned it, then pushed the door open from the opposite side, my back flat against the wall. Bridgett was standing in front of the door of the next apartment down from hers.

We waited.

And then waited some more.

Finally, after two minutes, I stepped into the apartment, the Glock now in my right hand and held down behind my leg. There wasn't much to the apartment, barely more than a single room with a small kitchen area and a separate bathroom. I checked everything out in short order, even looking in the shower and under the tiny

bed. Nobody there. And the two windows were still locked. I put my weapon away.

Bridgett came in and I shut and locked the door. She went over to the table in the kitchen area and set down the bags of food, then turned and looked at me.

“Last night he was in the bathroom when I came in,” she said in a small voice. “He had that knife...”

I nodded, took a few steps closer to her.

“He’s not here tonight,” I told her. “Just the two of us. You’re safe now.”

She stared at me a few moments longer then nodded without much enthusiasm.

“I’m going to go get your books and my bag,” I told her. “Got some things in there for you. Why don’t you get that picture of Stanley so I can take a look at it, then we can eat.”

She nodded.

“Lock the door after I leave. Including the deadbolt, please. Don’t open it until you know it’s me, okay?”

She nodded. I stared at her for a few moments longer, then nodded myself and headed for the door. I stopped and looked out through the peephole first, opened the door carefully, and stepped out into the hallway. Bridgett came over as I closed the door and I waited until I heard the locks moving firmly in place. The door was not the best and neither were the locks. Any halfway competent burglar would have no problems getting in. Let alone a seasoned Special Operations commando. I was going to have to do something

to improve on her personal security. There were a few things in my bag that would probably do the trick in the short term.

And then, of course, there was me.

Always me.

Somewhat of a universal constant some might say.

Death, taxes, and Derrick Olin.

Or maybe that was just being redundant.

Chapter 12

“First time I had Chinese was when I was a junior at Samford. Loved it from that moment on. Two friends of mine and I used to go to this place off of Valley called *Sun Sees*. Some of the best food I ever had. Place has been renamed about a half dozen or more times since then, and I don’t go anymore, even though I just live on Green Springs around the corner now. Still go to the takeout place I found back then, the *Chop Suey Inn*.”

Bridgett swallowed a mouthful of chicken fried rice as she nodded.

“I’ve been there a bunch of times. The food there is really good too. This is good also, Derrick, and thank you again.”

I raised my glass of water and nodded, taking a sip.

“Not a problem. Food and good company, that’s what it’s all about.”

She smiled.

“You really are not what I would have expected a bodyguard to be,” she said.

“Not big enough huh?” I said.

She smiled more, shaking her head.

“No, that’s not it. I don’t know, you just don’t seem... I can’t think of the words. You’re funny, you make me laugh, and at the

same time you make me feel safe. You're not standoffish, or cold. I don't know, maybe I was expecting something like the Secret Service agents you see with the president. You're different, more somehow. And I'm glad."

I finished my water and put the glass down.

"Books and covers," I said.

She stared at me for a few moments, her expression somber.

"I guess that could be a reference to my relationship with Stanley," she said. "He really changed a lot. I never would have believed he could turn out the way he has. I never believed he could hurt me."

I sat and said nothing, and after a while she wiped a single tear from her left eye and looked at me.

"I guess you want to see those pictures of him now," she said.

"When you're ready," I said, checking my watch. "I also want to give you a couple of things. One is a portable alarm for your doors and windows. It's battery operated and only a noisemaker, but I've seen them come in handy before, scaring off would-be burglars. The second thing I'll show you in a bit. Finish eating though. We've got time."

Bridgett forced a smile and then picked up her fork.

I picked up a half eaten egg roll and took another bite. Delicious.

After dinner Bridgett went over to the bedside table and reached into the bottom drawer while I walked over to the tiny beat up sofa near the door and got my duffel bag, sitting down and unzipping it. I took out a black case and opened it on my lap. Inside was a two inch long rectangular black box with magnets on one side. Two smaller

boxes were also contained in the case along with three circuit contacts, also with magnets on their backs. The big one was for the front door, the other two for the windows. As I had told her, they were no more than noisemakers, not tied in to the police or any alarm company, but the chances were good that whoever tripped them wouldn't know that, and hopefully would flee rather than waiting around to find out if the cops would show up or not.

I set the case on the small table in front of me and reached into the bag once more, taking out a handheld mini stun gun. Bridgett walked over at that moment and froze when she saw what I held in my hand. I turned and looked up at her, pressing the discharge button and a blue electric beam fired between the two contacts in the middle of the front end of the device. Her eyes widened.

“Easy to use and effective,” I said to her. “And non-lethal. Sit, please.”

She hesitated for a few moments then sat down on the sofa, leaning away from me slightly. There were two photographs clasped in her small hands in her lap. I put the stun gun down on the table next to the case and reached out to her. She handed me the pictures.

Stanley Toccata was a handsome young man, at least in the pictures I was looking at. One was of him in uniform, the stripes of a staff sergeant on his sleeves, the Ranger's beret tipped to regulation angle on his angular head. The second picture was of him in casual clothes with Bridgett, both smiling and happy, better times. I studied them in detail, taking in everything I could about Toccata's build, his features, his eyes. Every little bit would help. I knew he looked

nothing like either of these pictures now, but he would still be familiar. I set them down on the table and turned to Bridgett.

“Tell me what he looks like now,” I said.

She thought a minute, then told me.

When she concluded I stared off in the distance for a few minutes, making adjustments in my mind, adding, subtracting, merging, then I nodded.

“Okay,” I said. “We’ll see. First thing I want to do is give you this and teach you to use it.”

I reached over and picked up the stun gun.

“As I indicated, it is non-lethal, but very effective. It is my hope that you will not have to use this, but if Stanley should get past me and you are in danger, you should be prepared.”

I pressed the discharge button once more and Bridgett cringed as the electric lights flashed between the contacts. For the next few minutes I explained how the device worked and the best ways in which to employ it should she need to. I could see the reluctance in her eyes, the reservations and doubts, but she listened, and when I put the stun gun in her hands, she accepted it with grim resolve, and then I watched her as she carried out my instructions, even discharging it herself a few times.

“Keep it with you at all times,” I told her. “Beside the bed at night when you sleep and in your purse when you leave home. You don’t need a license to carry it so you don’t have to worry about that. And it might come in handy. If you have to, don’t hesitate, use it. You won’t permanently injure him if that’s what you’re worrying about. It’ll just drop him long enough for you to get to safety.”

Strictly speaking this was not entirely true. If Stanley Toccata had a heart condition for instance, a shock from the stun gun could be enough to send him into cardiac arrest, but she didn't need to be burdened with that information right now. And if he attacked her again, his well-being was not of paramount concern.

Bridgett looked pensive, but she nodded.

After that I went about installing the portable alarms and showing her how they worked, letting her input a personal code that would allow her to activate and deactivate them via a small remote device that I also took from the case and gave to her.

“All you have to do is type in your code and press ARM or DISARM and the system is set. As I said before, it won't alert the police directly, but it will let you and your neighbors know something is up, and it will scare the shit out of whoever trips the system. Also keep the remote close, in your purse when you leave.”

Bridgett nodded.

“Okay,” I said, glancing at my watch. Nearly nine p.m. “You should get some rest. I'm going to leave now, drive around the neighborhood, then go over to Civitan Park across the street and wait for a while. I'll come back over here around ten or so and sit in the parking lot. You need me at any time, call and I'll be here. Alright?”

Bridgett Lemons took a deep breath and slowly released it as she nodded.

“Alright.”

I stood staring at her for a few moments longer and then I packed the black case back in my duffel and started for the door. Time to begin my long and sleepless night.

My life can be so exciting sometimes.

Chapter 13

A good deal of my professional life has been spent waiting for something to happen. So by now I'm pretty used to it. And I'm also used to nothing happening after a bunch of waiting. Once when I was still with AFOSI I lay on my stomach with a pair of binoculars and a radio in a hot, dusty, and smelly loft for fifteen hours a day for nearly two weeks waiting to see if a certain terrorist would return to a certain safehouse in Honduras that had been discovered during a routine intelligence sweep. The terrorist never did return and the surveillance was eventually called off, much to my delight. However, one good thing had come from that experience. I had learned patience, and how to pass the time while remaining alert and ready.

It was now after ten p.m. and well dark. After leaving Bridgett Lemons' place I'd driven west along 23rd Avenue all the way to Carson Road, then headed south until I could loop back around and get onto Center Point Parkway once more. Initially I had thought about parking in the lot across from the Ladies Riviera Fitness Center that set behind the Arby's and the AmSouth Bank on the parkway but decided against that idea because I didn't want anybody getting the impression that I was hanging around just to ogle the ladies in their workout clothes as they sweated on the exercise machines in the windows out front. I could have moved further down

the lot though. There's a Radio Shack, a Dollar Store, and a couple of other places down there, but after a while somebody might get suspicious and wonder if I was staking out one of those places for a robbery. It was best not to attract that kind of attention.

Across the street from the Arby's is a Walgreen's Pharmacy. I wasn't going to sit in that lot at night either. But across 23rd Avenue from the Walgreen's is Civitan Park. It's small, but well-maintained, and people come here to park all the time in the evening after work and later. Mostly couples, some people who just want to be alone and drink, and those of us who have time to kill while we wait for something to happen that probably won't.

This park falls under the jurisdiction of the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department because Center Point, although an incorporated city, is still fairly new and small and doesn't have its own police department yet. From time to time deputies come by just to let everyone know that the law is out keeping an eye on things. Mostly they don't hassle people if they aren't doing much beyond parking.

I was at the south end of the park near the fence that separated the grounds from the recently constructed Center Point Fire Station Number One. The lot across the fence was well lit and part of the light spilled into the back window of my car. The park itself was mostly dark, with only a couple of lamps giving mild illumination around the edges. Really the place was supposed to be closed at night, but that regulation was never enforced. And besides, there was no gate that could be closed and locked on the 23rd Avenue side.

I checked my watch and then felt an overwhelming urge to yawn. I was in the process of doing that when my cell phone rang. It was

Bridgett.

“Hello?” I said.

“Derrick, he *saw* you!” she spoke rapidly, her voice highly agitated. “He called just a little while ago and said he saw me come home with you. Said he was going to make me pay for cheating on him. He was real angry, Derrick. He said he’s coming here tonight and I’m going to be sorry.”

When I spoke I kept my tone even and calm, knowing that my client was on the verge of losing control.

“Alright, Bridgett,” I said. “Just stay calm. Take a deep breath and release it. I’m not far away. Just across the parkway in Civitan Park. I’m coming back to the complex now and will park as close to the rear entrance as I can. If he is there and tries to come in, trip the alarm by the remote I gave you, then get that stun gun. Use it if you have to. You understand?”

“Yes,” came the choppy reply. “Derrick, I’m so—.”

“I know,” I told her. “And I promised to look after you and I will. I’ll be there shortly and will call just as soon as I’m parked. I’m on my way now. Talk to you soon.”

She didn’t say anything more and I broke the connection, starting my car, and backing out while putting my seatbelt on. Suddenly I could feel my heart beating throughout my body.

“*Once more onto the breach,*” I murmured, and then drove rapidly toward the park’s exit.

Chapter 14

I found a space two down from where I'd parked earlier and backed in, quickly shutting off the lights and engine and undoing my seatbelt. On the passenger's seat already set for action was my Glock-36, loaded with seven high-velocity .45 caliber jacketed hollow-points. Man-stoppers. Hopefully it would not be necessary to use the weapon, but if the necessity arose...

I dialed Bridgett's cell and she answered on the first ring, the fear still evident in her voice.

"It's me," I told her. "I'm outside now, just a few feet away. Are you okay?"

"Yes," she said unconvincingly. "Just scared."

"I know you're scared, Bridgett, but you really should try to get some rest. Take your phone off the hook, keep your cell on then get into bed. Like I told you, I'm right here outside and can be up there in less than thirty seconds. You can't let him keep you from getting the rest you need. Like you told me, you've got a good chance of completing school this summer and getting your master's. Don't let him screw that up for you."

Silence for nearly a minute, then a heavy sigh.

"You're right, of course, Derrick. You're so right. And thank you. I just..."

There was a loud noise in the background, then Bridgett screamed.

I was out of the car and running now, the Glock held low behind my right buttock. Through the back door, up the rear stairs, and onto the poorly lit second floor. Before I cleared the stairs I could hear the high-pitched wail of the alarm I'd placed on Bridgett's door. Either she had tripped it or someone else had.

Down the hallway I could see a figure in dark clothing kicking his way through the door to Bridgett's apartment. Over the wail of the alarm I heard Bridgett screaming at him not to come in, but he was ignoring her. The figure did not appear to have a weapon in either of his hands as far as I could see but the light in the hallway was so poor that it was really hard to tell.

I eased down the hall a few feet then stopped, assuming the Modified Weaver stance, taking my weapon in a firm two-handed grip, feet a little more than shoulder-width apart, left leg forward, knees slightly bent, breathing in slowly and releasing it slowly.

"Stop!" I called loudly.

The figure heard me over the howl of the alarm and turned, startled. I could see a man now, hairy, disheveled, and even from this distance I could smell his unwashed body. The chances were good that I was looking at Stanley Toccata, former staff sergeant of the Special Forces.

Jesus Christ!

"Who the fuck are you?" he said in a ragged voice, taking a step in my direction, obviously not afraid of the weapon pointing at him.

Not a good sign. “Wait, you that guy. You the one tryin’ to take *my* girl!”

“Mr. Toccata,” I said calmly, but in a loud voice so I could be heard over the alarm. Then something occurred to me and I tried another tack. “Sergeant Toccata, my name is Derrick Olin.”

“I don’t care what your name is!” he spat, edging still closer. “You ain’t gonna get my girl.”

“Sergeant, I don’t want your girl,” I told him evenly, my index finger starting to take up the slack in the Glock’s trigger. “I was hired to make sure Bridgett is safe. I’m a bodyguard.”

“Fuck you are!” Toccata shouted, his eyes now visible in the low light. I’m not a professional psychologist, but if I had to put a label on the expression that I saw in his eyes I’d have to say they appeared to be *crazed*. “You tryin’ to take her from me, and I *won’t* let you!”

He lunged, and for some unknown—and idiotic—reason I had already decided not to shoot him, pivoting instead and letting him sail past me. That gave me the time to slip the Glock back into my holster and ready myself for his next move.

Stanley Toccata regained his balance quickly and spun around to face me, instinctively sinking into a combat crouch, knees slightly bent, hands held low in front of him. Shooting him probably would have been the smart thing to do, but I don’t always do the smart thing. If I did I probably wouldn’t be in this hallway right now facing this obviously dangerous and shattered young man who was as much a victim of life and circumstances as anyone.

He came at me again, this time feinting left then launching a roundhouse at my head with his right leg. He was fast, but so am I,

and I managed to duck the kick and shove his leg into the opposite wall, backing away immediately, keeping distance between us.

Toccata recovered even quicker this time, moving in close and pelting me with quick jabs from both fists that I was able to block with my elbows and forearms. I could feel the sting of them but there was no real damage. He wasn't trying to hurt me at the moment, only testing, seeing what moves I had. I decided not to show him anything, just defend and move back, making use of what little space there was available in the cramped hallway. Time was on my side because by now somebody surely would have called the cops. Maybe Bridgett, or perhaps someone who was tired of that *damned* alarm blaring.

Suddenly Toccata struck with an upraised knee that connected with my left side. It was a pretty powerful blow and I groaned as I moved away, my back impacting against the wall on the right side of the hallway. He followed up with a hammer-fist to the side of my head, which I managed to block with the blade end of my left hand, then I lashed out with an extended knuckle strike that caught him in the throat, causing him to gag and move back several feet. Now I had some breathing room, and I needed it. My side was really starting to burn now.

Stanley Toccata was fighting for breath and rubbing his neck, all the while staring at me like an animal eyeing his cornered prey. He was angry, enraged, and all he wanted to do was tear me apart.

The door across the hall opened and light spilled out, causing both of us to flinch. A middle aged man with a pot belly and a serious

widow's peak stood in the doorway in a pair of boxers and an A-neck T-shirt. He did not look happy.

"What the hell's going on out here!" he demanded. "It's almost eleven at night and I gotta get up for work at four! Who the hell are you guys and what's all the noise about?"

"Go back in your apartment, sir!" I warned. "Now!"

"I want to know—."

Stanley Toccata rushed the man and shoved him back into his apartment.

"The man said *get* back in your apartment!" he shouted, slamming the door. "This ain't none of your business."

He was facing me again.

"Stanley," I said.

"No talk!" he raged. "No talk!"

And he came at me, this time a little more recklessly, combinations of kicks and jabs, not really coordinated. I defended at first, then went on the attack, delivering a couple of well-timed and powerful chops and blows that knocked him back and hurt him. But as I had said before, he was an animal and operating mainly on instinct now, and he kept coming, the pain I inflicted only fueling his rage.

At one point he managed to lock both my arms against my body and pinned me against the wall. Without hesitation I head-butted him and cracked his nose, but he held on as tightly as before. So I did it again, and again, drawing more and more blood.

Finally his grip loosened sufficiently for me free one arm and I immediately struck out with my fingers, poking one of his eyes. He

howled and pulled away and I dropped to the floor fighting for breath, sweat pouring down my forehead and running into my eyes.

As I lay there struggling to breathe, something occurred to me: *perhaps now was the time to shoot him!*

Weakly, I braced my back against the wall and started reaching under my shirt, and then a police siren could be heard in the distance over the noise of the alarm. Stanley Toccata recognized it as well. With a hand still pressed to his eye he staggered down the hallway toward the stairs, through the door and out of sight.

I was still sitting on the floor breathing heavily, Glock in my lap, when the police arrived three minutes later. Lucky for me the patrol sergeant who arrived next knew me and my explanation didn't have to be repeated over and over again, and it was accepted without reservations.

Good, because at the moment I was really in no mood for bullshit.

Actually I was in quite a lot of pain and not exactly pleased with my performance tonight.

On the plus side, my client was perfectly safe. At least physically.

But now, in addition to everything else, she needs a new front door.

Chapter 15

“You sure you don’t want to go to the hospital?”

I lowered the icepack from my forehead and looked up at the man in the dark blue uniform of a Birmingham Police sergeant. Late fifties, expanding belly, balding, and one hell of a good cop. Curtis Willis.

“Nah, I’m okay, Curtis,” I told him, and it was mostly true. I was sitting on the sofa in Bridgett Lemons’ apartment and my client was sitting next to me wrapped up in a blanket taken from her bed, her knees pressed together under her chin. She looked so small and so young, not to mention frightened. At the moment, in addition to Sergeant Willis, there were three other law enforcement officers in her apartment, two from Jefferson County and a second from Birmingham. Curtis Willis was the senior man on the scene and had immediately assumed charge once he found out I was involved. Technically this was within Center Point’s jurisdiction and that meant Jefferson County had the lead, but Sergeant Willis didn’t seem to care about that, and neither did the deputies from Jefferson County.

“Well we got cars out looking,” he said as he stood with his hands on his duty belt, thumbs dug inside, looking down at me through gold framed bifocals. “Sent out the description you gave me.

If he's still in the area we might just get him. But if he's as well trained as you claim, he might know how to hide. There are a lot of woods 'round here. You think you hurt him?"

"At least a little," I said, putting the icepack against my jaw. "Got in some pretty good shots of my own. I know I got him in the throat, poked one of his eyes, and smashed his nose pretty good a few times. He was bleeding pretty well before he ran off. Probably needs medical attention."

"Sure," Curtis said. "But if he is Special Forces-trained I'm sure he's got combat first-aid experience. Probably patch himself up if it's not too serious, and even if it is serious because he knows we'll be looking for him."

I lowered the icepack once more and glanced over at Bridgett. She seemed lost in her own little world. I reached over and touched her arm and she barely noticed. She didn't need to be here, and with the condition of the front door there was no way she could stay here tonight anyway, even if she wanted to.

"Curtis, I assume that now more can be done on an official level to persuade Mr. Toccata to leave Ms. Lemons alone?"

The sergeant nodded solemnly.

"You bet," he said. "My report will be in the hands of the DA by morning. A restraining order will be expedited, probably be in effect by tomorrow night. We'll also increase patrols in the area until he's caught. And the Detectives' Bureau will become involved too. I'll speak to my captain about getting the case officially assigned to somebody in Violent Assaults who knows what the hell they're doing."

I nodded, knowing that most of what he was saying was not for my benefit but for Bridgett's, if she was listening.

"Anything else you need from me right now?" I asked.

Curtis glanced around, looked at the two deputies from Jefferson County, then turned back to me and shook his head.

"Nah. We're done for now. You gonna take her out of here?"

"Yep," I told him, standing, a little unsteadily.

Curtis reached out to take my arm.

"You sure you're alright, Derrick?"

I nodded.

"Fit as a fiddle," I said. "Plus next time I see Stanley Toccata the chances are pretty good I'll simply shoot him."

Curtis Willis smiled.

"Now you're making sense. If you had done that in the first place then it would be over now."

I nodded, glancing back at Bridgett.

"Yeah, but then you'd have had to respond to a Signal-51 Homicide and the paperwork for that would have been a nightmare."

Curtis grinned.

"Always looking out for me," he said. "Okay. Need an escort somewhere?"

"Just out to the car," I told him. "I'm putting her up in a hotel tonight, and I'll have somebody I know come by and fix the door, actually put up a new reinforced one. Be complete by dawn. Can you assign somebody to look after the place till then?"

"Sure," Curtis said. "Having stripes gives you a bit of pull here and there. Got the perfect rookie in mind for that task. Anything else

you need let me know.”

“I will,” I told him.

Curtis signaled the other officer and the two deputies that it was time to exit the apartment and led them out. I turned back toward the sofa and knelt down in front of Bridgett, groaning slightly.

“Hey,” I said. “Are you with me?”

She took a minute to focus then her eyes settled on me, a hint of confusion evident.

“I’m going to take you to a hotel so you can get some rest,” I told her. “I need you to get up and pack some things. I’ll have your door repaired by morning and the police will watch the place until then. Right now we need to leave, okay?”

She took a while comprehending, but eventually let me help her up, taking the blanket with her as she went to pack. My head was still smarting and so was my side, but I would be okay. I’d been hurt far worse in my forty years. And pain was a good teacher. Tonight it was once more teaching me something that I had already known for a long time, but momentarily forgot. Compassion was a luxury that a professional bodyguard really couldn’t afford. I should probably dispense with it in the future. I knew that I didn’t have to shoot Stanley Toccata to stop him. My training in unarmed combat went far beyond the realm of personal defense. I had been well-schooled in the deadly arts to a fine pitch and could kill with my bare hands if I had to, but I had held back with Stanley tonight, and had nearly been killed myself.

That bothered me. Ordinarily I didn’t let things like compassion and other emotions get in the way of me doing my work. Usually I

was a thoroughly ruthless bastard but this time I had held back, paused. Why? Could it have been the man himself? That tattered animal of a half human that I had been faced with in the hallway, that broken and tragic figure? I saw him as a victim, which he was, but he was also a threat to my client, and for an instant I had forgotten that and tried to save him instead of my client.

Couldn't happen again, and the pain in my head and ribs and everywhere else would remind me of this the next time Mr. Toccata and I met.

Bridgett had a bag packed and was dressed in only ten minutes and I noticed her take the stun gun out of the nightstand drawer and put it in her purse. Good. She was thinking of her safety. Somebody should, since I was obviously suffering from professional senility.

Curtis Willis and two other officers escorted us down to my car and I thanked them. Once we were belted in I drove down Raintree Court and onto 23rd Avenue, turning right. I already knew my destination but would take a circuitous route to get there. The chances were slim that Stanley Toccata was still in the area, but I was taking no chances.

At least not anymore.

Lesson learned.

Chapter 16

There's a hotel down by the interstate on Parkway East called America's Best Inns and Suites behind a Waffle House and across the street from a Super Wal-Mart. There's a clerk on duty twenty-four hours a day, but at night the front lobby is locked and anyone wishing to rent a room has to pay through a slot in the bulletproof glass on the side of the desk. A well-dressed small man of foreign descent was working Monday night at a little after twelve when I arrived with Bridgett. She waited in the car while I rented a room for cash. It was on the fourth floor in back and once I had secured the key I drove around the building and found a parking space near the rear wall that was only about forty feet from the on-ramp to I-59. Convenient.

The elevator was inside the lobby and if you wanted to use it you had to walk up to the second floor and go from there. It was locked off from the first floor so no one could gain access to the lobby that way. I decided to bypass the elevator all the way and Bridgett and I walked up the steps in the well-lit stairwell.

The room was at the far end of the west side of the floor, number 413. It was a double room with two beds. Not the best of accommodations I had ever seen, but it would do for the night. The door wasn't all that sturdy either, but there was a chain, and a sturdy

chair that could be propped up under the door handle. After securing the door I turned to find Bridgett sitting on the bed farthest from the door, the backpack she had brought held on her small lap. She looked exhausted and very frightened.

I went over, sitting on the bed opposite and staring at her for a few minutes.

“You should get some rest,” I told her gently. “You’ll be safe now. He doesn’t know where you are, the police are out looking for him, and I’ll be right here all night.”

Bridgett didn’t say anything, just stared off in the distance for maybe a minute, then dropped the backpack to the floor and hugged herself as she began to shake violently. She was coming down from the adrenaline rush of earlier, I recognized the signs.

I stood up and sat down next to her, putting my arms around her and holding her close, telling her she would be okay. It took maybe ten minutes for her to regain control, then she actually started laughing. A perfectly normal reaction I had seen many times. Had even experienced it many times myself.

“God I don’t know where that came from,” she said, glancing up at me, a hand on her cheek. “One minute I’m scared to death and the next I’m laughing like a fool.”

I smiled.

“Dr. Foley could explain it better,” I told her. “But it is a typical after-action reaction for someone who has recently experienced a high-stress fright. You’ll be okay now. And you should get some rest.”

She stared at me for a few moments longer, leaned over and kissed my cheek, then stood up.

“Thank you, Derrick,” she said in a soft tone, turning and walking through the doorway into the bathroom and closing the door.

“You’re welcome,” I said to the door, standing up and stretching my neck and back. “Still no sleep for you tonight, Mr. Olin.”

I paced between the beds for a little while, thinking about what I was going to do next concerning Stanley Toccata. That restraining order Curtis Willis had talked about wasn’t really worth much unless the police happened to be present when Toccata violated it, and could arrest him before he did anything. Unlikely. But the next time, if he attacked and I didn’t kill him, simply subdued him, perhaps then they could arrest and charge him with violating it.

I shook my head.

Who was I kidding?

No way this guy was going go down easy. He was too far gone for that. I had seen it in his eyes tonight when we fought.

My best course of action was simply to be prepared to take him out, put a quick end to this as Sergeant Willis had suggested. It was probably the best thing for all concerned. Even for Stanley Toccata.

A few minutes later Bridgett Lemons came back out of the bathroom and got her backpack, returning to the bathroom to change into her bedclothes. I went over and sat in the chair that I had braced against the door. I would remain here for the rest of the night, Glock on my lap, waiting and ready, just in case in the unlikely event that Stanley Toccata found us; which was highly unlikely.

But not impossible.

Chapter 17

Tuesday morning Bridgett got to school a little bit late, but safe, and apparently was no worse for the wear of the previous evening. I left her at the Beeson Education Building where she had her first of two classes that day. Charmane was not yet on campus so after leaving Bridgett I went over to the campus security office and had a chat with the supervisor on duty, a fresh-faced twenty-five year old named Damon. He said he had been briefed on the situation regarding Bridgett by his chief after receiving notification by Dr. Foley. The entire force had been put on alert and an officer would be stationed at the Education Building whenever Bridgett was there, and also at the University Center during her shift in the bookstore. I told Damon about last night's incident and watched as he stiffened, but quickly recovered and began to take notes, saying he'd notify his chief as soon as he came in that morning.

After that I drove back over to Center Point and found a new reinforced door in place at Bridgett's apartment. The man who had installed it was still there and he handed me two keys to the brand new locks, explained some of the features of the new door, then left. I checked the apartment, saw that nothing appeared to have been disturbed since the last time I was there, then I left myself and headed back to Homewood and my own apartment. It was nine-

thirty and I was exhausted. The sun was shining brightly in the morning sky and that only seemed to make me feel even more tired.

First thing I did when I entered my apartment was get undressed and go into the bathroom where I took a ten minute hot shower, then went into the kitchen for a tall glass of cold cranberry juice, leaning back against the counter as I assessed the situation. This morning I could really feel the dull aches in my body where Stanley Toccata had landed some good blows last night. Lessons learned the hard way take more time to forget. Good.

When the juice was gone I went into the living room and sat on the sofa with my cell phone. It was late enough to make the call I had been thinking about for most of the night, and afterwards I would get some rest. I would need it if I planned on staying up all night again, and possibly tangling with Mr. Toccata once more should he make a return appearance.

The line rang four times before a familiar voice answered on the other end.

“Now what in the hell do you want?”

I chuckled.

“Good to hear your voice too, Colonel.”

A deep laugh from the other end.

“Hey, Derrick,” said Lieutenant Colonel William Edwin Jordon III, United States Air Force. “How the heck are you, guy?”

“Good, Will,” I replied, leaning back on the sofa and putting my feet up, pain rising in my side from the effort. “You?”

“Doing well too,” he replied. “Busy though. If you were ever planning on coming back to OSI, now would be the time my friend.

We could really use you. We've got civilian slots open now. Start you out as a GS-14, be the same as what your military rank would be if you were still in. Same as me, lieutenant colonel."

I chuckled again.

"Why is it that everybody seems to be offering me a job these days?"

"That's because everybody knows how good you are, pal," Will said. "Who else wants you?"

"A local bank security department," I told him. "The head of corporate security offered me a vice presidency last Friday. Turned him down too. Told him, and now I'm telling you, I like being a freelancer. Being my own boss. Offer appreciated, but I'll pass."

"Ah ha," Will said a little distractedly. "I hear you. But the offer still stands, if you ever change your mind. You know I'm now acting C.O. of the 703rd at Eglin, right?"

"Actually I didn't," I said. "Knew you were still at Eglin, but didn't know you'd taken over a detachment."

"It's only temporary," he replied. "The previous C.O. had a medical issue and I stepped in for her. I was down here without a permanent billet anyway and the Chief of Operations at Headquarters got the bright idea to give the detachment to me. Only problem is that Colonel Penrose isn't coming back now and it looks like it'll be another three months before they can get another C.O. down here. So for the next three months this is my TDY assignment. Then I head back to Antiterrorism. If I'm lucky I'll get the 55th Tactical Intervention Squadron at Wiesbaden. That's what I've been pushing for since I got to Eglin. But who knows, might end up back

in D.C. running an FIS^[5] or something. You know how it goes with bureaucracy.”

There was a pause and I gingerly adjusted my position on the sofa.

“So, anyway, enough about me,” Will continued. “What brings this call today? Not that I’m not glad to hear from one of my oldest and dearest comrades, a former fellow officer and gentleman.”

“It is good to talk to you as well, Will,” I said. “But the reason I called is not personal I’m afraid. I’ve got a professional query for you. And in view of your current position within OSI, you are exactly the right person I need to help me.”

“Okay,” Will said. “Now I’m intrigued. Tell me.”

I did, everything.

“So you’ve got an ex-Special Forces soldier stalking his ex-girlfriend and it would appear that he’s mentally unbalanced and dangerous. Seems like your life outside the service is just as exciting as it was inside. You’re right, Derrick, you should have shot him.”

“Right,” I said drearily. “Moment of weakness. Look, what I need from you, if you’re able, is to get a look at his military record. I want to know everything there is to know about him. Tours of duty, training, psychological evaluations, and, if possible, why his sudden discharge from the Army.”

“Strictly speaking, Derrick, you are no longer cleared to receive information like that. Now if you came back to work for me... Just kidding. I’ll access the records, bury the request in another investigation or something. The Army is not too keen to have us

poking around in their records, but that's too bad. Should take me the rest of the day, maybe into tomorrow with the other stuff I'm handling at the moment, but I'll get it for you."

"Appreciate it, Will, really. And I owe you."

"No you don't," he said. "This helps to even us up. Remember Bolivia and that third shooter I didn't see, but you did?"

I did remember, naturally, but wasn't going to bring it up, and didn't.

"Thanks again, Will," I said.

"No problem," he said. "Get some rest now, Derrick. And next time you go up against this guy..."

"Will do," I said.

We said good bye and hung up. The sofa was so comfortable that I didn't want to get up, but made myself. The bed in the other room was even more comfortable. Damn I was tired, and in considerable pain. Of course, if Traci Brenner happened to have been in town right now... good thing she wasn't though.

By a quarter after ten I was snuggled up in my bed in the darkness, eyes closed and drifting off to dream.

Chapter 18

I woke up at three minutes past four in the afternoon with my bladder demanding relief. That task completed, I went into the kitchen, still naked, and got a glass of water, leaning against the sink once more as I drank it and took a couple of Extra-Strength Tylenol. I felt stiff and sore after my slumber and should have taken the Tylenol before going to bed. But better late than not at all.

The light was flashing on my answering machine and I pressed the play button after turning up the volume. I'd turned it down and turned off the ringers on the two phones in my apartment before going to bed, as well as turned the ringer off on my cell phone, leaving it set to vibrate for emergencies. Sleep was important when you were working nights.

There was only one message on the machine, predictably from Charmane Foley. Bridgett had told her about the incident last night and she was concerned, said she hoped I was alright and that I should call her as soon as I woke up. Talking to Charmane Foley while naked was not a good idea so I went into the bedroom and got an old pair of black sweats and a blue T-shirt and slipped them on, then sat down on the bed and picked up the phone on the nightstand. Chances were good that at this time of day Charmane would be in her office. Most classes ended by three-thirty and most good professors

would be in their offices working on papers and arranging future class assignments, even if the school year was nearly out.

“Charmane Foley,” came the crisp response after two rings of the phone.

“Hey, Charmane,” I said. “It’s Derrick.”

“Derrick, glad you called. How are you?”

“Fine, love,” I told her. “Just fine. I wasn’t really hurt.”

“Bridgett told me what happened last night,” she said. “You should have called me.”

“Nothing for you to do,” I told her. “No need to worry you in the middle of the night. She was safe, uninjured, and the police responded. We spent the night in a hotel while I had her door repaired. She’ll be able to go back tonight. And I’ll be there once more. Plus the police will be more involved now, a restraining order is in the works.”

“Actually it’s already been issued,” Charmane informed me. “A deputy DA called here looking for Bridgett about two hours ago. She said that the court had issued a restraining order effective immediately requiring that Stanley Toccata stay at least one thousand feet away from Bridgett at all times. Only thing is they don’t know where he is to deliver notification.”

“Not that it would matter anyway,” I mused. “But that was fast work. Sergeant Willis must have pulled some strings.”

“Maybe so,” Charmane said. “A detective from the police department called as well, told Bridgett that he was taking over her case and would need to talk to her as soon as possible in order to

begin a file. He's supposed to be coming over at five, they're going to meet in my office."

I glanced at the bedside clock. I had planned on getting in a workout before going back over to Samford later this evening while Bridgett was at work, but perhaps it was better that I forego that for now and head over to meet with the detective.

"Alright," I said. "I'll be there at five too. How is she?"

"Remarkably calm," Charmane confided. "Somehow she doesn't seem as frightened as before, when he attacked her alone. She seems to have great confidence in you, Derrick. A good sign. She told me the things you did last night to make her feel safe before the attack, and how you came to her rescue once Toccata tried to break in."

"If I'd really been on my game last night Stanley Toccata would be in custody now," I remarked with self-disdain.

"Derrick, you kept her safe," Charmane said firmly. "That was your job. And in the process you were injured. Bridgett appreciates what you did for her, and so do I. Don't beat yourself up about not capturing him. That really isn't your job. I'm just glad both of you are okay. And when I see you later I'm going to give you a big hug and kiss to show my appreciation."

I smiled. A hug and a kiss, huh? That might be dangerous, but somehow I knew that I wasn't about to pass up the opportunity.

"I'll see you in about a half hour or so, Charmane," I told her.

"We'll be here," she told me.

We said good bye and hung up.

First a quick shower—maybe a cold one—then I'd dress and head over to the university. Tomorrow I'd work out extra hard and do it at

the gym instead of here at home. Might as well use that membership for which I keep paying three hundred bucks a year.

Chapter 19

The detective's name was Mike Doyle and he was probably in his mid-thirties, serious, professional, and quite clearly in love with the sound of his own voice, but he seemed competent enough. He asked the right questions, took copious notes, and made sure Bridgett had all of his numbers before concluding his interview at ten minutes to six. He and Bridgett had sat on the sofa against the front wall of Charmane's office while the professor and I had sat in the two straight-back chairs in front of the desk, turned to face the sofa. We all stood as the detective left, then Charmane went over and sat on the sofa with Bridgett, taking the other woman's hand and holding it gently.

"You did very well," she told Bridgett. "I'm proud of you."

Bridgett smiled, then looked down at her watch.

"And I'm very late for work," she said.

"Yes," Charmane said. "But I've called the manager of the bookstore and explained that you were going to need to be late this evening. It won't count against you."

"Thank you, Dr. Foley," Bridgett said, her dark eyes full of gratitude. "Very much. But I should get going now. Somebody is probably covering for me and I need to get there and relieve them."

“Of course,” Charmane said, turning toward me. “Derrick, you will escort her?”

“Of course,” I said, standing. “And campus security promised to have an officer posted in the University Center whenever she is on duty.”

“Yes,” Charmane said, also standing. “That was the arrangement I worked out with the chief when I spoke to him and the Dean of Students yesterday, but I would feel more comfortable if you went over with her.”

“I will,” I assured her. “And I’ll be in the area until Bridgett is ready to leave. You’ll be going back to your apartment tonight, correct?”

Bridgett stood and picked up her purse, putting the strap across her left shoulder. She looked at me intently for about thirty seconds, her expression resolute, and then a small smile broke through.

“Yeah. I’m going home. Nobody’s gonna run me out of that dump until I can afford something better.”

“Good,” I said, stepping toward her and reaching into the side pocket of the blue blazer I was wearing. “And as I told you, your door has been repaired. Here are the keys to your new locks. Knob and deadbolt.”

She took them and looked at them in the palm of her hand for a minute before nodding to herself and putting them in her purse.

“Thank you, Derrick,” she said in a low tone.

“You’re welcome. Now if you’re ready...”

“I am,” she said. “Just need to step down the hall and use the bathroom before we head over.”

I nodded as she stepped out into the corridor. Charmane and I followed her out and watched as she walked into the ladies' room, the door closing behind her. Chances were good she would be safe in there.

Charmane glanced at me and then looked around at the empty hallway.

She took my arm and pulled me back into her office, shutting the door but leaving it cracked a little.

“Now, for that hug and kiss,” she said with a grin.

Her body was so soft and warm, and she smelled great. Every fiber in my being wanted to hold onto her forever, and more, but I remained in control. After maybe a minute Charmane pulled back slightly, lifted her head, and kissed me on the lips.

Fuck me! was all I could think of saying, so I kept my mouth shut, figuratively. All those fibers now wanted me to do something else, but my ability to resist is quite strong, and I just managed to keep my tumescence in check, but only just. Charmane Foley was... Hell I couldn't even begin to describe it, or the affect she had on me.

She was staring at me now, her hands on my shoulders, a grin on her full wet lips.

“You know I actually wanted to do that when you were my student?” she told me and that took me by surprise. “It shouldn't shock you. You're a very handsome man, Derrick Olin. Now and then. But, of course, you were my student at the time. And nineteen.”

“I was twenty-one when I graduated,” I pointed out.

Charmane smiled and touched my lips with the fingers of her right hand.

“Yes you were,” she said. “And I was still your professor. But that’s not the case now.”

We stood staring into each other’s eyes for maybe a full minute, and while I don’t know what was going through Charmane’s mind during that minute, I know what was going through mine. It really wouldn’t be cheating because I wasn’t married to Traci, and she herself had even told me that I should not feel obligated to be completely faithful to our relationship because she was not, being married to another man and all.

But still, I did have my own personal standards and codes.

Chances were very good, however, that they might go out the window here very soon.

It was a good thing Bridgett came back when she did.

We said good bye to Charmane and left the office, choosing to walk from the Education Building to the University Center in the middle of the campus, not a very great distance. It was still light out and quite a pleasant day. The campus had changed a lot since my days as an undergrad, but still largely recognizable, if seemingly a bit more cluttered.

The main difference, I suppose, is that I am a lot older now and everyone else, for the most part, is a lot younger. But then, at heart I was still about sixteen, probably always would be. Apparently still as horny as a sixteen year old too. I was gonna be thinking about Charmane Foley a lot over the next few days. But for the moment she had to be put out of my mind so I could concentrate on the mission at hand: keeping Bridgett Lemons safe from Stanley Toccata.

Chapter 20

Tuesday night I didn't leave the parking lot of the Raintree Apartments. I was parked in the back just across from the rear entrance and at irregular intervals I got out and walked around the property. Everything appeared to have returned to normal after last night's excitement and that was a good thing. I suspected some folks were still a bit edgy and watchful, but for the most part things seemed calm. By midnight there was no one out and about except me. Bridgett had called on my cell at eleven-thirty to say good night and I had told her to rest well, I'd be out here if she needed me.

I had just gotten back in my car at ten after one when a police cruiser pulled into the lot and rolled down my way. The car was marked as number 203 and I knew that was a supervisor's unit. Behind the wheel sat Sergeant Curtis Willis, one of two night shift patrol supervisors for East Precinct. He stopped in front of my car and shut off his lights. I climbed back out and went and climbed in the front passenger's seat beside him.

"Hey, Curtis," I said, closing the door as he moved a clipboard onto the dashboard. "Checking up on me?"

"Figured I'd see for myself how things were going tonight," the sergeant said, picking up a Styrofoam cup from the double holder between the seats and prying up the lid. "Make sure you were alright.

Would have brought you a coffee but I know you don't drink the stuff."

"I appreciate the thought though," I told him, glancing in the rearview mirror. "I've got a thermos of tea in my car. I want to thank you for getting that restraining order filed so promptly too. And getting Detective Doyle on the job."

Curtis took a sip of his coffee and frowned.

"God this is awful. Good thing you don't drink it. But it helps keep me awake. And you're welcome. Doyle is a bit of a blowhard, but a good cop. And since he wants to get promoted to detective sergeant on the next cycle, he'll do a good job on this. I don't suppose you've heard anymore from this Toccata fella?"

I shook my head.

"Negative. Disappeared into the darkness and hasn't resurfaced since. Guess the BOLO you put out on him hasn't borne anything either?"

Willis shook his head.

"Not yet," he said. "But he is an expert at hiding, even in a city like Birmingham it ain't all that hard to disappear if you want to. But we're doing regular patrols of this area day and night, along with the County. If he comes back, we'll spot him. And then you're here too, with her."

I nodded.

"Till this is resolved," I said.

We sat in silence for a few minutes, Sergeant Willis drinking the rest of his bad coffee and both of us looking around the lot. Cars passed by on 23rd ever so often, but not much else seemed to be

going on. We heard a few calls on the radio being assigned to other units, all routine. Curtis listened casually, nodding to himself.

“Looks like another boring night in East Precinct,” he remarked, setting the now empty cup back in the holder between the seats. “Good. Means I might be able to get off work on time at seven in the morning.”

I smiled.

“The night is still young, my dear Sergeant Willis,” I said. “Could be a whole host of shootings, robberies, and car crashes between now and seven.”

He cut a sharp look in my direction.

“Bite your tongue, Derrick,” he said flatly. “Now if something does happen I’m blaming you.”

We both laughed, then a call came in about a three car accident on the interstate just above Roebuck Parkway.

“*Fucking* jinx!” Curtis Willis swore. “Get the hell out of my car!”

“Talk to you later,” I said, opening the door and standing up.

“Yeah,” he replied, turning the lights back on. “Keep sharp, and if you need me, call. Hopefully I won’t be too tied up with accidents, robberies, and other shootings.”

I watched as he backed up and turned around, then headed out of the parking lot at speed. On 23rd he turned left and switched on his flashers, heading toward Center Point Parkway.

I got back into my car and settled in for the evening, or morning depending on your point of view. On the passenger’s seat was my Glock-21 full-sized .45 caliber pistol, loaded with fourteen 200 grain jacketed hollow-points. I casually brushed the weapon then turned

the ignition key toward me, allowing the radio to come on. There was a classical CD in the player and it started up immediately and Bach began playing on low. Perfect stakeout music, Brandenburg Concerto Number Three.

On my right hip was my Glock-30 compact .45 auto loaded with eleven 200 grain jacketed hollow-points. At the small of my back was my Glock-36 slimmed compact .45 loaded with seven 200 grain jacketed hollow-points. Tonight I was prepared for serious business. Something told me that the next time Stanley Toccata came back here he would be prepared for battle as well; and therefore I was too.

On the back seat, covered by a blanket, was a Benelli M1 Super 90 12 gauge shotgun loaded with five shells of mixed steel balls and razor sharp fleshettes designed to shred flesh like paper.

No chances being taken from now on. Our next confrontation would most likely be our last, and it was my intention to be the one still breathing when it was all over. This is why I also had on body armor beneath my shirt. A little warm and restricting, but better than getting killed; and the car also had air conditioning if needed.

So I had my tea and I had Bach, and I also had a small arsenal. Now all I needed was for Stanley Toccata to make another appearance.

But Tuesday night he did not oblige.

Chapter 21

Wednesday morning I went directly to Sandi's Gym in Wildwood after dropping Bridgett off at Samford, spending an hour working out on most of the strength and endurance building machines before showering and dressing and heading across the street to Wildwood North to get breakfast at the I-HOP. From my window table I could see the Books-A-Million a hundred yards or so away, but made the bravest of efforts to resist its temptations. I still have that hundred bucks worth of books that I bought there on Friday, most of them unread. It might be a while before I got around to reading any more at the rate I was going, and that was a good thing for my wallet.

I got home at ten and felt both exhausted and strong. The workout was precisely what I had needed, and the good breakfast of steak and eggs. Now all I needed was to get a few hours of sleep and I'd be ready to do the whole stakeout thing again tonight.

I was in the bedroom undressing when my cell phone rang. The caller ID showed the number and I quickly answered it.

"Hey, Will," I said, my pants sliding down my thighs as I held the phone to my left ear. "What's up?"

"Got that file you wanted," he told me. "The service record on Stanley Toccata. A good portion of it is blacked out and it would have required an official request from the commanding general of OSI to

gain access to that. Perhaps even higher than that. Mostly the blacked out parts deal with operational stuff, what he did and where while serving overseas for the past three years. He's a true black operator. There's plenty in the file that I did get though, so I can imagine that the deleted stuff is pretty dark. It's still a fairly detailed file, Derrick. Makes interesting reading."

"I'll bet," I said, now sitting on the bed and pulling my feet out of my pants. "Can I see it?"

"Sure," Will said. "Soon as you give me an e-mail address I'll send it to you."

I gave him my e-mail.

"Any hint as to why his sudden discharge from the Army?" I asked.

"Nothing overt," Will said. "There are some hints here and there, possible problems he was having in the field. Nothing dramatic or unexpected from the perspective of someone who has served several extended tours in multiple combat zones. He was honorably discharged though. Still, there is something curious in the record that I was able to access."

"What?" I asked, lowering my back and head to the bed and getting comfortable.

"His unit was investigated by the Army CID about six months ago. The whole company from the C.O. on down, all four platoons. Can't get the background on the investigation, but I can tell you that it was originated out of CID Headquarters in Washington."

"That is curious," I said. "Any disposition on the investigation?"

“None as far as I can see,” Will Jordon said. “No indication that the investigation was ever terminated either. Could still be ongoing. In fact, there is a reference to a case officer with the CID in your neck of the woods. A Chief Warrant Officer Shelbee Roberts, she’s a lead agent with the detachment based at Redstone Arsenal. Six months ago she was based at CID Headquarters and she went over to Iraq to take part in the investigation of Toccata’s unit.”

“Curious and more curious,” I said. “Any other background on Roberts?”

“Been in the Army sixteen years,” Will told me. “Two years in the MP’s before getting into CID. Counterintelligence specialist. Whole slue of classified commendations, couldn’t tell you what they were for though. Once recommended for OCS by a C.O. but she turned it down because it would have meant she would have had to leave CID. They don’t allow officers to serve as agents. Been a chief warrant officer the last three years, the top wrung for her, can’t go any further. Got almost four years to go before her twenty. Probably gonna make a move after that, FBI or some place else where she can move ahead, but that’s just an educated guess. I’ve seen others with her background do the same.”

“Sounds like a star,” I mused.

“Yeah,” Will conceded.

“Okay,” I said. “Then why the hell was she posted to a place like Redstone Arsenal? Especially after being so recently assigned to CID Headquarters in D.C.? She piss somebody off?”

“No indication of that,” Will told me. “But you’re right, it doesn’t seem likely that an agent with her seniority and experience would be

transferred to a command like Redstone unless she had made someone angry. Unless...”

“Yeah,” I said. “Unless is right. Do me another favor, if you can, Will.”

“You want me to look further into the background of Shelbee Roberts?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Okay,” Will agreed. “I have to admit, I’m curious myself. I’ll do some more snooping, but it might take a few days. I’m really getting swamped here with detachment stuff and digging into the background of an active duty CID agent who is not under direct investigation by the OSI is a tricky proposition.”

“I understand,” I assured him. “And I appreciate it, Will. Whatever you can when you can.”

“You got it. I’ll e-mail you the file on Toccata now.”

I thanked him again then we hung up. I lay there for a few minutes deciding whether or not I wanted to get up and take my laptop down from the closet and access the file Will Jordon was sending to me. Then sleep got the better of me and I decided to wait until I woke up.

I stood up, pulled off my T-shirt and boxers, then pulled the covers back and rolled into bed. Sleep came quickly and took me unawares, and I didn’t move once during the whole peaceful experience.

Chapter 22

I was sitting at the table in the front room of my apartment at four p.m. staring at the screen of my laptop reading the file on Stanley Toccata that Will Jordon had sent to me. It was rather extensive, despite several key missing parts. I learned a great deal about a dedicated and brave young man who had selflessly served his country with distinction for nearly a decade. Unfortunately there was nothing in the file that told me how he had become the broken and desperate creature I had tangled with two nights ago. I read the vague reference to the CID investigation of Stanley Toccata's unit that Will had mentioned, but could glean nothing of significance from it. The timing was curious, two months before Stanley was discharged. Coincidence? His discharge was honorable though. Actually it was five months before his current enlistment was due to expire. Why would the Army let him out early, especially when so many were being retained against their wishes in what the Army liked to call a "Stop Loss Action"? Toccata was a seasoned Special Forces operator with years of actual combat experience to his credit. A valuable asset by any measure, yet the Army had let him go, and early at that. Something was there, I could feel it, but had no way of getting at it. Maybe Will Jordon could. After all, he was the head of his very own OSI detachment. A position I would mostly likely

occupy now had I remained in service. But then I wouldn't be looking out for Bridgett Lemons right now, and to me that was a hell of a lot more important than any work I ever did in OSI. Kind of explained why I wasn't there anymore.

I scanned through the file once again, reading parts that I had highlighted the first time, then glanced at my watch. Twenty to five. I should get dressed and get over to Samford. Bridgett would be about ready to head over to the bookstore to start her shift. She didn't really need me to walk her there, campus security was looking out for her, and Birmingham P.D. had given an alert to Homewood P.D. and they were keeping a closer eye on the campus, but I'd go over anyway, just for appearance sake.

And maybe I'd stop in and say *hi* to Charmane.

Something I really shouldn't do, but would nonetheless.

Perhaps I should give Traci a call, see how she's getting own down there in Mobile. And maybe see if she can come back this way real soon.

This evening I dressed in comfortable jeans, a loose-fitting gray shirt designed to be worn outside the pants, and my comfortable black high-top sneakers. Under the shirt I concealed my Glock-30 at the small of my back and my Glock-36 on my left side, butt forward. The Glock-21 and the Benelli shotgun were already outside in my car.

Chapter 23

I walked Bridgett to the bookstore and spent a few minutes glancing around, checking out the wares, then went out into the corridor of the University Center where a young female security officer was stationed. I introduced myself and the young woman sprang to attention, forcing me to suppress a smile. Two minutes of conversation was all I could take. It was clear that she took her job seriously, and that was good, but it was equally clear to me that the young woman was a little *too* intense about it. I told her to keep a sharp eye out and that I would be back before Bridgett was ready to leave at nine-thirty. Much to my relief the young woman did not salute me.

I walked the campus for about thirty minutes, seeing how much everything had changed since my time here, and not all of it for the better in my humble opinion. The campus was still small in relative terms, but too much expansion gave it a feeling of being crowded rather than close, like a community, as it had been when I was a student. Too much congestion and traffic too. And a lot more people than were really necessary. But it was progress I suppose, even if it depressed me.

By six I was back at the Beeson Education Building where I'd left my car. Charmane's Caddy was still in the lot and I surmised that

meant she was still on campus. Guess being a department head didn't mean you got to call it a day early. After a few minutes of deep reflection I said what the hell and went into the building and up to her office.

The door was closed and I knocked. After a pause Charmane called out and asked who was there. I told her. Another pause, then she told me to come in, so I did.

Today Charmane was wearing green. I could only see the top part of her body because she sat behind her desk, but that was more than enough to provide an excellent picture. I walked over and she sat back, pushing slightly away from the desk and crossing her legs. She was wearing a green skirt to match her blouse. Knee-length, slit up the right side. Charmane really did have nice legs, even if they were currently sixty years old. Like the rest of her they seemed ageless.

“Did Bridgett get to work safely?” she asked, taking her glasses off and setting them on the desk.

“Yes,” I responded. “And there is a very alert young security officer keeping watch over the bookstore right now. I have no doubt that should Stanley Toccata show up she will do her utmost to prevent him from harming Bridgett. She'll fail, of course, but she will fight to the last.”

“You don't appear to have great confidence in our campus security personnel,” Charmane said with a grin. “And sit, please.”

I did.

“I'm sure they're capable of doing the normal things that campus security officers are supposed to. Writing tickets for parking

violations, responding to minor accidents and emergencies, dealing with panty raids in the dorms, but I hardly believe they were trained for, or are capable of dealing with a violent individual who possesses Stanley Toccata's training. With luck, they won't have to."

"So you still don't think he will come for her here?" Charmane asked, shifting in her chair.

"It's always possible," I told her. "He knows she comes here every day. But this is not comfortable territory for him. Plus there is the distance factor. If he no longer has possession of his vehicle, there is a great distance to travel from Center Point to here. He could use public transit, but I believe in his current state he would not like the exposure. I believe he is probably still in her neighborhood, perhaps watching, waiting for his time. It is also possible that after the other night I might have moved myself ahead of Bridgett on his list of people to kill. Which would be a good thing."

Charmane frowned.

"Not necessarily," she said. "Especially if he kills you."

I smiled.

"I'll try to avoid that, but if I can refocus his rage, at least temporarily, that will add an additional layer of protection for Bridgett. While he's concentrating on me he might forget about her, at least for a little while."

"Psychologically sound," Charmane smiled. "Seems like you learned a thing or two back when you were taking my abnormal psych class. Makes me proud."

"You were an excellent teacher, Charmane," I told her sincerely. "I enjoyed almost every moment of all of your classes."

“Almost every moment?” she said. “What didn’t you enjoy?”

“The *tests*,” I told her. “You were a monster with tests. Fill in the blank, essay, multiple choice, and true-false where you had to mark out what was false and make it true! No wonder I never made an A in any of your classes.”

She grinned and uncrossed and recrossed her legs, smoothing out her skirt.

“You should have applied yourself more, Mister,” she teased.

“I *was* applying myself, Doctor,” I retorted. “Just remember I had five other classes to worry about in addition to yours.”

“Priorities,” she quipped.

I shook my head, smiling.

“Well I had to have some time for fantasies,” I told her in a low tone.

She stared into my eyes for an uncomfortably long moment before speaking once more.

“A healthy fantasy life is good for psychological development and mental health,” she told me. “Even if the fantasies are somewhat depraved.”

“Who says they were depraved?” I replied.

She smiled.

“I know young men,” she said. “Most, if not all of your fantasies are naughty.”

I nodded assent.

“I’ll concede that. But you know a part of that is your fault. Being beautiful was not something you could do anything about, but the outfits you wore, and still wear now, that was by choice and design.

And on behalf of all the straight men in all of your classes past and present, I thank you.”

Charmane laughed, and so did I. It took more than two minutes before we regained ourselves. Charmane looked at her watch and saw the time.

“God I didn’t realize it was so late,” she said.

“Not even seven yet,” I said.

“True, but I’m starving and was planning on making dinner tonight.”

“Got a date?” I asked.

“No,” she responded. “Not that it’s any of your business, Mr. Olin. I’m not seeing anyone at the moment. I just like to cook for myself some nights.”

“I know the feeling,” I told her. “Me too. Would you be opposed to eating out tonight?”

She stared at me for a few moments.

“Are you asking me to dinner, Derrick?”

“If you’d like,” I said. “Bridgett won’t be ready to leave until nine-thirty and all I’d be doing is hanging around here anyway. There’s a fairly good Italian place down on Shades Creek near Brookwood, not too far away. What do you say?”

“I like Italian,” she said.

“Good,” I said. “So will you eat with me?”

Charmane smiled and nodded.

“Of course, Derrick.”

That was settled. I waited while Charmane collected her things, turned her computer off, then the lights, and we left, taking my car.

After almost twenty-two years I was finally going on my first date with Charmane Foley.

Whoopee!

Chapter 24

It was close to nine p.m. when Charmane and I returned from Dino's Italian Restaurant down near Brookwood Mall on Shades Creek Parkway, which is what Lakeshore Drive turns into down on the far east end. We were full of good Italian food and hearty with good company and conversation, both of us laughing and merry. Unusual for me, but not unwelcome.

I had checked in with Bridgett on her cell phone earlier to make sure she was okay. She told me that everything was fine and that the young female security officer was still posted outside the store in the University Center. They were very busy tonight with so many students coming in to get Cliffs Notes among other things to aid in their last minute studying before finals. I didn't keep her long, and went back to my enjoyable evening out with Charmane Foley, Ph.D.

Now we were parked in front of the Beeson Education Building, just a few other cars left in the lot, one of them Charmane's.

"I had a great time tonight, Derrick," she said, undoing her seatbelt and turning to me on the front seat. "You are a most charming date, and the food was fantastic too. I've never eaten there. It was really good."

"I've been there a couple of times before," I told her, also removing my seatbelt. "They do a really great cheese pasta, and their

meatballs are absolute perfection.”

“Yes,” Charmane said, touching her stomach. “I know. I ate way more than I should have tonight, but everything was just so good. Tomorrow it’ll be rice cakes and salads. Maybe for the next few days.”

I smiled and shook my head.

“Charmane Foley, you know damn well you don’t have to worry about your figure. In the twenty years plus that I’ve known you I’d say you haven’t gained more than a couple of pounds. And they have been adequately distributed so as to make you even more beautiful.”

Charmane grinned and reached out to touch my arm.

“God what a silver-tongued devil you are, Derrick Olin,” she said. “And thank you. But I do have to watch it. You know I’m mildly diabetic. And that dessert I had pushed me right up to the limit. It was a good thing I got you to share it with me.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Which means I’ll be burning it off tomorrow at the gym.”

“Oh now that is rich,” she said. “You worried about your figure. Well you need not be. If I dare say so, you’re looking kind of... what’s the phrase I’m looking for? Oh the hell with it, you’re looking damn good yourself.”

We sat and stared into each other’s eyes in the darkness of the front seat of my car. There wasn’t much traffic on the campus roads this time of night, and few students out walking around. The lighting in this section of the parking lot was not all that great either, but I suspected crime was not a major concern on the campus anymore than it was when I was a student. Despite the expansion, Samford

University was still much the bubble it had been back then, just more crowded.

Charmane scooted over closer to me and I felt my mouth go dry. Perhaps that was a good thing because when she kissed me she did a very good job of moistening it for me with her tongue. I didn't resist, but I didn't respond either, at least not at first. My body wanted to, but my mind was screaming NO! My mind won out for maybe eight seconds then my body took over.

I put my arms around her and pulled her against my chest, and she came willingly, her arms slipping around my neck as I slipped my tongue into her mouth. I tasted garlic, but it did nothing to deter the absolute joy of the moment, and the kissing went on for several minutes.

When it ended I noticed Charmane's hand on the crotch of my jeans, and even more curiously, I noticed my hand on her thigh. We looked into each other's eyes some more, then out of the corner of my eye I noticed the dashboard clock.

"It's almost time for Bridgett to get off work," I said in a hoarse voice.

"Yes," Charmane responded, not moving her hand. "It is."

"I should let you go," I said.

"Probably," she said.

"One more kiss," I said.

"Yes," she said.

Then we kissed again.

Two minutes, and Charmane pulled away, tugging her skirt back down over her thighs.

“It’s a good thing we didn’t do this when I was your student twenty years ago,” I said as I leaned back in my seat and felt the swelling in my pants continue to grow. “If we had I’d have failed every course.”

Charmane chuckled, checking her appearance in the mirror above the visor on the passenger’s side.

“I was thinking about taking tomorrow morning off,” she said, still looking in the mirror and adjusting her shoulder length blond hair. “Maybe even the whole day. Bridgett and my TAs can handle what’s left to be done. All we’re doing is getting everybody ready for finals. Only the pretests left to be handed back and answer last minute questions. Don’t have any faculty responsibilities until Friday.”

I waited, knowing where this conversation was going, and not only was I thinking about how lucky a fucker I was at this moment, I was also thinking of what a rotten bastard I was for doing this, betraying Traci and all. But was I really betraying her? Would she really care? Of course she would, but she would never tell me so. More than once she had told me it would be okay if I saw other women, just as long as I made time for her. I really wanted this with Charmane, if only one time. And if she was offering... what was really the harm?

“When you bring Bridgett to school tomorrow,” Charmane continued, “you’ll be free for the day until around five?”

“Yes,” I said.

“I know you need your rest,” she said. “But you could get that at my place... eventually. I live down in Pelham now, Indian Spring

Village. About thirteen miles from here.”

“I know the area,” I told her.

She turned to me then, smiling.

“So what do you say?” she said.

I leaned over and kissed her gently on the lips.

“I say I’ll see you some time around nine in the morning, my lady.”

After another kiss Charmane climbed out of my car and got into hers. She waved good bye before backing out of her assigned parking space, then drove out of the lot. My erection had finally subsided sufficiently so as not to be overly noticeable and I backed out and drove from the lot as well. Bridgett would be getting off work in seven minutes and I would just be able to make it over to the parking lot closest to the rear of the University Center in time.

Chapter 25

We stopped by Arby's on the corner down from Bridgett's apartment and got a sandwich and fries for her dinner. It was a quarter after ten when I backed into a space in the rear of the lot of the Raintree Apartments, after a drive once around the building.

"Today was really busy at the bookstore," Bridgett said as she undid her seatbelt. "We ran out of some of the things that some of the students really wanted. Cliffs usually sells out really fast during finals. We're supposed to get another order in stock tomorrow afternoon. Probably be gone by the time I get off tomorrow night."

I shut the engine off and nodded.

"I remember those days well," I told her. "And am glad they're behind me for good. You gonna study tonight or get some rest?"

"Rest," Bridgett answered with a smile. "Only got one class tomorrow and it's not till eleven. Dr. Foley's not coming in tomorrow and it'll just be me and the TAs. Kind of a light day. I'll have some time to study in the morning. I still need to be in by eight though. Promised some undergrads I'd give them some help with the things they got wrong on the pretest."

"Not a problem," I said, reaching for the door handle. "Eight it is."

I climbed out of the car and had a quick look around, pausing at the hood to stare off to my left toward the entrance from 23rd Avenue about a hundred yards away. A chill touched the back of my neck and suddenly I felt agitated, but there was nothing in sight. No one out walking, only the occasional car passing on the street out front. There was darkness in the trees surrounding the parking lot, however I didn't detect any hint of movement; but I did feel a sudden tightness at the middle point between my shoulder blades.

Taking a deep breath, releasing it slowly, I moved to the passenger's side of the car and opened the door for Bridgett. She had her backpack in one hand and her Arby's bag in the other when she climbed out. I shut the door and stepped aside so she could move ahead of me, my eyes quickly scanning the surrounding areas once more.

When we were halfway to the rear entrance the door opened and a young couple came out holding hands, the man Latino, the woman black. They barely paid us any attention and I relaxed a bit, realizing they were no threat. We made it to the door and Bridgett was about to reach for the door handle when movement flashed in my peripheral vision. A blur, and I knew it was not the couple that had just exited the building because they had moved to a car in the opposite direction.

Instinct took over at that moment and I reached out and grabbed Bridgett by the shoulders, pulling her down to the ground and shielding her body with mine. Just in time too because two loud reports followed in quick succession and there were two hard impacts against the door where Bridgett had just been standing. She

screamed and the sound was so close that I that I could actually feel it inside my head.

More shots rang out and more rounds slammed into the door and building. Bridgett was flat on her stomach now and my body covered hers sideways as I looked in the direction from which the attack was launched. Approximately forty feet away I saw a dingy figure kneeling at the trunk of blue Chevy Malibu, a semiautomatic pistol in his hands, a Beretta M-9 by the sound of the report. Military issue. Of course it was.

Stanley Toccata stood up now and was about to fire again, but I had pulled the Glock-36 from my left side as I shoved Bridgett to the ground and now I returned his fire, a two round burst, one that slammed into the trunk of the Malibu, but the second seemed to hit Toccata somewhere in the lower torso because he spun back and fell against another car. However, he did not go down, and he came up firing once more, moving closer as he did so, apparently unafraid of being hit.

The grip of the Glock felt slippery in my right hand and I had to take firmer hold as I squeezed the trigger again, this time firing the last five rounds with precise control. Toccata suddenly dodged left and took cover behind a dumpster. That gave me a chance to reach behind me and pull the Glock-30 from my waistband. It saved time not having to reload the 36, plus the 30 had eleven rounds in it.

Toccata stuck his head out and I fired once. Then he stuck his M-9 out and fired five times. I ducked down lower and covered Bridgett's shaking body with mine. I took a couple of quick breaths

and came up quickly and fired five more rounds, hearing them bounce off the metal of the dumpster.

Stanley Toccata suddenly ran from the cover of the dumpster and moved toward the cars on the opposite side, where he had been hiding in the first place. I rose to a crouch and fired again, one of my rounds appearing to catch him in the back of the right upper arm. He staggered but continued running until he was out of sight.

Sirens could be heard in the background now. The cavalry coming in a nick of time, and too late.

I reached down quickly and pulled Bridgett up with my left hand, all the while keeping an eye out in case Stanley Toccata hadn't actually fled the scene.

"Come on!" I urged. "Let's get inside and wait for the police. He's gone now and I think I hit him. Actually I know I hit him. Once, maybe twice."

Bridgett Lemons was horrified and couldn't stop shaking enough to speak. I pushed her toward the back door, ignoring her food and backpack on the ground. Then I thought better about the backpack because more than likely her door keys were in there.

Inside I quickly led her up the stairs and down the corridor to her apartment. A few seconds after we got inside, the first police car arrived on scene, lights flashing, siren still blaring.

Another fun night with Birmingham and Jefferson County's finest, I thought humorlessly, taking deep breaths to control the shakes that had already begun. And in all likelihood the SOB will get away again.

"Son of a bitch!"

Chapter 26

“We found blood in a couple of spots out there, so you definitely hit him, but he gone now.”

It was eleven-thirty and half of East Precinct and the Center Point contingent of the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Department were present at the Raintree Apartments, most of them outside looking for clues as to where Stanley Toccata had run off, evidence technicians collecting what they could, photographers doing their thing, and detectives asking questions of any and every body. Sergeant Curtis Willis stood in the corridor outside Bridgett Lemons’ apartment on the second floor talking to me.

“Found his piece out by the dumpster,” Willis told me. “A nine like you thought. Beretta, military issue. Slide locked back like he ran out of bullets. Probably why he dropped it and took off. Found blood behind the dumpster and over by some cars. You might have hit him twice or he may have been bleeding already when he switched positions. Forty-five’s a pretty powerful round, as you know, Derrick, so either he just got winged, or he’s on something.”

“Or he’s so far gone that he can’t really feel anything anymore,” I offered. “Plus he’s been in combat most of the last three years. According to his service record he has three purple hearts. Getting wounded is nothing new to him.”

“You’ve seen his service record?” Willis asked, scratching behind his left ear.

“A friend got access,” I told him. “Someone I used to work with in OSI.”

“I see,” Willis said. “I might like to have a look at that file, and so would a few others I suspect.”

“I’ll let you see it,” I told him. “But I’d appreciate it if you made the others go through official channels. Wouldn’t want to get my friend in hot water.”

Willis nodded.

“Sure thing. I’ll keep it between us.”

“You got an e-mail address?”

He gave it to me.

“I’ll send it to you in the morning,” I told him. “Any of the units out there got anything so far?”

Willis shook his head, glancing back down the hallway. A few neighbors still stood out in the hall, talking low among themselves, once again enthralled in the aftermath of a violent episode not of their design. They looked away when the police sergeant looked in their direction.

“Still nothing. Blood trail ends about twenty yards west. Footprints are useless past point that too. It’s as if the fucker just beamed away or something. This kid must have been something in the field.”

I nodded.

“He was. An expert at guerrilla warfare. Among other things. I’d say if he’d been more in form tonight he’d have set a better ambush,

and the end result would have been different. Lucky for Bridgett and me he's off his game these days."

Willis smiled.

"Actually to me it seems more like you were on yours. You did good tonight, Derrick. Real good. He's hurt, maybe badly. If he doesn't go off somewhere and die, he might turn up in a hospital someplace. We'll get him."

"I hope so," I said. "I don't know how much more of this my client can take. Not to mention her neighbors. Two incidents involving the police in three days. I'm sure some of her neighbors will be passing petitions around to have her evicted by morning."

"You could be right about that," Curtis Willis admitted. "People don't feel safe in their homes they get angry. Maybe if we get this guy quick the problem will resolve itself."

"Maybe," I said. "I hope so. You need to talk to her anymore?"

Willis shook his head.

"Nah," he said. "And the detectives should be through with her too. She gonna stay here tonight?"

"Probably not," I said. "She was really shook up when it happened, and I suspect she still is. I'll see about putting her up in a hotel again tonight. Tomorrow we'll have to see. You'll keep cars in the area regardless, right?"

"Yep," Sergeant Willis said. "We gonna be here a while. But there will be extra cars in the area. We want this boy bad. He dangerous and don't care who he hurt to get at that young lady. We need to catch him quick."

I nodded.

“Thanks, Curtis,” I said. “And I’ll get you that file as soon as I can. Talk to you later.”

He nodded and I turned and went back into Bridgett’s apartment. I found her sitting on the sofa curled up in a ball still wearing all of the clothes she had on when I’d last seen her. When she saw me enter she stood up immediately and came to me, throwing her arms around my neck. She was shaking and could barely stand under her own power. I supported her and held onto her for several minutes and neither of us said anything.

In a while the shaking eased and I gently pushed her away a little, looking down at her. She looked up at me with fear and despair in her dark eyes.

“He was going to kill me,” she stammered. “He was honest to god gonna kill me, Derrick!”

“I know, Bridgett,” I said gently. “He seems to have reached the final stage of his devolution. At least the stage right before he kills himself. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” she retorted quickly. “You saved me tonight. My god, if it hadn’t been for you Stanley would have murdered me. Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome,” I said. “But what I was saying I’m sorry for is that I know how much you hoped he could be saved before he reached this point. I’m sorry that’s not the case now.”

Bridgett stared at me soberly for nearly a minute then slowly shook her head.

“I can’t feel sorry for him anymore, Derrick,” she said resolutely, a single tear falling from her right eye. “At some point a person has to

take responsibility for their own actions, their own lives. I know he went through some horrible things over there in the last few years, and I really tried to help him, to understand everything when he came back, but he wouldn't let me in, then he started hurting me. I can't worry about Stanley anymore, I have to worry about and take care of myself. I'm sorry for him, for what he has become, but now, after tonight, I feel no concern for him whatsoever."

And just that quickly, relatively speaking, love had turned to hate. I saw it plainly in her eyes. If I hadn't been as tough a man as I was I might have cried. At heart I really was a romantic. But this was a good thing for Bridgett, now she had the strength to see this through to the end, an end that would most likely result in the death of a man she had once loved.

"I need to call Dr. Foley," I told her. "Let her know what happened. I would prefer not to bother her this late, but I know if I don't she'll be pissed in the morning. After that I'm gonna take you to another hotel. I take it you don't want to sleep here tonight?"

She shook her head.

"No. Don't think I could sleep if I had to stay here."

I nodded, then took my cell phone from my pocket and accessed the memory, finding Charmane's home number and pressing CALL.

Four rings later the lady herself picked up, and I told her what had happened.

Chapter 27

Thursday morning did not go according to plan. Stanley Toccata had changed that when he'd made his attempt on Bridgett Wednesday night. After I talked to Charmane she insisted that I bring Bridgett to her place in Pelham about thirty miles south of Center Point. Bridgett had been reluctant at first, not wishing to impose further on her mentor and friend, but Charmane had been adamant, and so, at a quarter to one we arrived at her house and were shown in by the live-in housekeeper, Esmeralda. Charmane had greeted us in the living room and she took Bridgett in her arms and the two women stood embracing for a long time.

Esmeralda had made up the guest room at her mistress' request and Charmane led Bridgett to it, telling her to relax and get some rest, and not to worry about school in the morning. She would go in after all and take care of what needed to be done with the assistance of her TAs. Bridgett tried to protest but Charmane was unbending. Afterwards she joined me in the living room on the sofa and we talked for nearly two hours.

"Well this isn't exactly what I had in mind when I invited you over to my place yesterday," Charmane said with a grin, her shoulder pressing against mine. "Tomorrow's Esmeralda's day off, Bridgett would have been safe at Samford, and we would have been alone."

I nodded, putting my head back.

“You know what they say,” I said. “The best laid plans...”

Charmane snickered.

“That was actually the idea,” she said. “*Laid* plans.”

I chuckled and turned my head toward her.

“Blame Stanley Toccata,” I told her. “But we’ll have time later, if you still want to.”

She looked at me seriously for a few moments, then leaned close and kissed me on the lips.

“Yes, I still want to. You haven’t changed your mind, have you?”

In truth I had about a dozen times since the end of our *date* Wednesday night, but there was no need to tell her that. As far as I was concerned I fully intended to see where things went with Charmane, for better or worse, Traci notwithstanding. It would just have to wait for a while now. At least until after this situation with Bridgett Lemons and Stanley Toccata was resolved.

I kissed her.

“Haven’t changed it one bit,” I lied.

“Good,” she said with an impish grin. “Because I’d hate to have to *discipline* you, Mr. Olin. You may no longer be one of my students, but that doesn’t mean I can’t be *firm* with you if the need arises.”

I smiled at that, growing quite tumescent.

“You have any idea how many times I wanted to be *firm* with you twenty years ago?” I told her. “You are so incredibly beautiful, Charmane Foley, really.”

She leaned close again.

“And you’re making me incredibly libidinous, Derrick,” she whispered. “Maybe I should go up to bed before things get out of hand. Probably wouldn’t be a good idea for Bridgett to come down and find her advisor and her protector naked and going at it on the couch like two teenagers in heat.”

I laughed and touched her knee.

“Now there’s a thought,” I said. “But you’re right. And there is Esmeralda to think about too.”

She nodded, adjusting her pink robe.

“Yeah,” she said. “Poor dear would probably have a heart attack.”

We stood and Charmane put her arms around my neck as I slipped mine around her waist, holding her against me.

“You’re not gonna sleep tonight, are you?” she asked.

“Probably not,” I admitted. “Some things I need to think about. I’ll get some rest tomorrow. Keeping Bridgett here for now will make her safer, and that’ll be less of a headache. But I know she won’t want to stay away from school for more than a day. Not with finals next week and all.”

Charmane nodded, then kissed me and went up to bed.

For the remainder of the night I sat on the sofa or paced through the lower floor of the house, thinking, analyzing, plotting, and having some indecently erotic thoughts about the good Dr. Charmane Foley, Ph.D.

After Charmane left for work at eight Thursday morning and Esmeralda left to enjoy her day off, Bridgett and I were left alone in the lavish but tasteful southern colonial style house in the middle of a

quiet neighborhood on a well-maintained street in Shelby County. Bridgett had brought along her books and her laptop computer so she could keep occupied even if she couldn't go to the campus today, at least not until it was time to go to work. She had been insistent that she couldn't afford to miss any more work, and I relented. On the campus she was probably still safe, however I would be ultra vigilant this evening.

Following some more in-depth thought I made a phone call. Leigh Danton picked up on the third ring.

“Hello handsome,” she said cheerfully. “What can I do for you this fine morning?”

I told her without preamble.

Chapter 28

Bridgett was inside the University Center bookstore and I was sitting in my car in the parking lot out back eating a Wendy's bacon cheeseburger and drinking bad lemonade at a quarter to six Thursday evening. It had started to rain lightly and I had to keep the windows rolled up, so the engine remained on in order for me to be able to use the AC. I hadn't gotten much sleep today, I was restless in Charmane's house. It had not been how I had planned on spending the day in that house, but then's the breaks. Tonight Bridgett was going back there after work and I planned on taking advantage of the relative security of being in an undisclosed location—as far as Stanley Toccata was concerned—and getting in a few hours of sleep on the sofa, with Charmane Foley just one floor away. It would be too unprofessional to spend the night where I wanted to spend it, doing what I wanted to be doing. Even if the chances of Stanley Toccata finding Bridgett were slim I couldn't allow that kind of distraction. Just thinking about it was enough of one.

I'd gone home briefly after dropping Bridgett off at work, changing clothes and packing others, then dropping by Wendy's off of Valley Avenue on the way back. Now all I had to do was sit here and wait, maybe take a walk around later on. There was another campus security officer on duty inside the University Center tonight,

and after what had happened at Bridgett's place last night, Homewood P.D. drove up on campus every half hour just to make their presence felt. It made me feel better, although somehow I got the impression that if Stanley Toccata did show up, the presence of police officers probably wouldn't do much to deter him. Hopefully he had been injured severely enough that even if he didn't seek medical attention he would be in no shape to make another attempt. Maybe in a few days the cops would find him dead somewhere.

However, I really didn't buy that. Everything in his service record, at least the parts not blacked out, suggested that he was a tough and resourceful soldier fully capable of adapting to his enemy's tactics and finding a way around them. So unless he was dead, he'd try again. Which was why we weren't going back to Bridgett's place any time soon.

Of course, being resourceful, chances were good that Stanley would eventually make his way here. And that explained why my Glock-21 was on the passenger's seat beside me covered by my laptop bag. The Benelli shotgun was on the backseat under a blanket, and under my shirt were the other two Glock compact pistols, freshly cleaned, fully reloaded, and ready for further action. With any luck Stanley Toccata had lost his only gun last night and would be reduced to throwing rocks. Not likely though, being a soldier for nine years he probably had a whole arsenal stockpiled somewhere, or at least knew how to get his hands on another piece.

I finished my dinner and shut off the engine. The rain had slacked off and I was thinking about getting out and taking a walk around to stretch my legs. My cell phone rang and altered my course.

“Hey, Will,” I said. “What’s up?”

“Curious thing,” Lieutenant Colonel Will Jordon said. “Got a call today from a CID executive in D.C. A full bird. Wanted to know why I accessed the file on one of their people. Special Agent Shelbee Roberts.”

“Fuck,” I said. “Sorry to get you in trouble, Will.”

“You didn’t,” Will told me. “I figured out a way to get the information on her sooner than I thought. OSI and CID are supposed to be setting up a joint counterintelligence task force in the next few months and I was asked to consult on personnel about a month ago. It’s a matter of record. So I simply told the bird that I was looking into Roberts as a possible candidate for the task force.”

“Smart thinking,” I told him. “Guess you didn’t get those silver oak leaves by accident.”

Will chuckled.

“Nor for my looks,” he said. “Anyway the bird tells me that Special Agent Roberts will be unavailable to work on the joint task force because of her present duties. Apparently she is a very busy woman with a lot on her plate.”

“And a full bird colonel running interference for her,” I said. “Impressive.”

“Very,” Will admitted. “And it’s got me even more curious about her. So you know I’m not letting go. Something odd is going on here, Derrick, and seeing as how it involves that unstable Special Forces guy you’ve been tangling with up there...”

I told him about last night.

“Christ, he really has lost it.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “He has. Look, Will, this thing is going to resolve itself one way, I can see that now. And there’s no sense in you digging a hole for yourself over it. Whatever happened to the kid over there, whether or not this investigation is relevant to that, and whoever the hell Shelbee Roberts is connected to, it all makes no difference. My job is to protect my client, and if that means killing Stanley Toccata, so be it.”

“Yeah, I knew you’d say that, Derrick,” Will Jordon told me. “And you’re right. But now my professional curiosity has been aroused. I have to know what’s up. I’ll be prudent, and I’ll let you know if I find anything out that is of relevance to your mission. In the meantime, be careful. This boy is on a death mission now.”

I sighed.

“Yeah,” I said. “And I’m afraid it’ll be my unpleasant duty to complete the trip for him.”

We said good bye after that and I deactivated my phone. It had started raining harder now and I opted against the walk. I had an umbrella but right now I didn’t feel much like moving around.

Fuck!

Chapter 29

Friday morning Bridgett went back to class. I delivered her there promptly at eight and saw that campus security had one of its officers posted in the downstairs main entryway to the Education Building. There were three other ways that I knew of a person could get in the building besides the main entrance, but at least they were making the effort.

Charmane had faculty meetings scheduled for this morning and would have a full day after that, so there was zero chance of us getting together today. Probably a good thing. I needed to spend all my time and energy concentrating on dealing with Stanley Toccata.

It was still raining this morning and the day was pretty gloomy. Already I'd passed three accidents and if the weather got much worse there would be more. Last night I'd managed a few hours sleep on Charmane's fairly comfortable living room sofa, and this morning I wasn't really all that tired, so I decided to go over to Sandi's Gym for a workout.

When I got there at eight-thirty Sandi Michaels was in the reception area talking to the well-muscled and lean young man of about thirty who usually occupied the circular reception desk. When Sandi saw me she smiled and came over.

Sandi is forty-six, almost forty-seven, and in great shape for a woman half her age. She's got shoulder-blade length brown hair braided in a ponytail this morning, cool almond colored eyes, and a firm jaw line. Her looks are not what one would consider classic beauty, but she turns heads here and there. Especially when she's dressed in gym clothes, like this morning. Her legs and arms have more muscles in them than my entire body. Everything toned, tanned, and tight. The white shorts and blue tank-top she's wearing strain under her taunt muscles as she walks, and more than likely pleases all who watch her. It really is strange being sexually attracted to a woman who could probably break you in half with just two fingers.

"Hey, Derrick," Sandi greeted me warmly, her voice reminding me, as it always did, of singer Stevie Nicks. "Decided to swim in for a workout?"

"Yeah," I nodded, closing my umbrella after shaking the water out. "Supposed to do this all day according to weather reports. Figured I'd come in here for an hour or so and see what I could do with this tired old body."

Sandi grinned.

"Yeah, right. You're in better shape than most of my customers, and you know it. Got anything in particular you want to work on today?"

I shook my head.

"Nah. I think I'll do a little of everything, total body workout."

Sandi smiled again.

“Well then you’ve come to the right place,” she told me. “Most of Chamber Three is free right now.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I’ll just go change in the locker room then hit it.”

Sandi nodded.

“Have a good workout.”

I said I would, greeted the receptionist-guy, and then walked down the corridor to the right toward the men’s locker room. I already had a fresh set of workout clothes and sneakers in my locker and it only took me five minutes to change. Exercise Chamber Three is located directly across from the men’s locker room and once I was dressed I went in and found only two other occupants. One was a black guy in his mid-fifties who looked like he should have started exercising about twenty years ago. The other was a skinny Latino man who was probably a beginner, and in desperate need of this place before some bully kicked sand in his face.

I found my way to the opposite corner and spent ten minutes stretching everything from my neck down to my ankles, then I went to work, first on the chest-press machine and progressing all around the room until sixty-five minutes and about three gallons of sweat later I had made it around the room twice without stopping. My other two workout buddies had long since given up and left, having now been replaced by five others, two of them actually appeared to know what they were doing.

Now I stood by the leg-press machine toweling my shaved head and taking deep breaths. Exhaustion and exhilaration once again competed for supremacy within me. I felt good, but not as good as I

would feel once I had a hot shower. That was accomplished in short order and then I got dressed in my street clothes.

I thought about going over to I-HOP again for breakfast, decided against it. I had stuff at home I could make, and this morning I really didn't feel like company while I ate. I got back into my car after saying good bye to Sandi Michaels. The rain had remained steady all during the time I was inside the gym and because I didn't want to risk being involved in another interstate accident, I decided to skip I-65 and take Green Springs back up to my place. The drive was a bit longer, but it was also a lot safer. For some reason I could never fathom bad weather made Birmingham drivers even worse than they normally were.

It was ten a.m. when I pulled into the lot and found a space almost directly in front of my apartment. There was an unfamiliar car parked in the space directly in front of my place. And although it was unmarked, there was something *official* looking about it. It reminded me of a car I used to drive a decade or so ago, only different.

G.O.V.—Government Owned Vehicle.

It was empty at the moment, no sign of its owner. I shut my engine off, collected my duffel bag and laptop bag from the passenger's side floor, then quickly climbed out and ran the four feet to the cover of the upper level walkway above my floor. I glanced all around and saw no one nearby. Most everybody who lived here had daytime jobs and were gone by this time. Only the few who worked evening or night shifts, or were currently between jobs, remained. And the owner of that unmarked G.O.V.

I inserted my key into the lock on the front door of my apartment and carefully entered, glancing around warily. My alarm was still in working order and after securing the front door and setting my bags down on the sofa, I moved over and deactivated the system. I had just begun to breathe again when a knock sounded at the front door.

Instinctively I pulled the Glock-30 from my back as I moved over to look through the peephole. A blond woman, maybe in her late thirties to early forties, attractive, but in a subdued manner, stood outside my door. She had that *official* look as well. Must be the owner of the G.O.V. And I'll just bet I can guess who she is.

I slipped the Glock back into my waistband and unlocked the door, opening it and greeting the woman.

“Derrick Olin?” she said without preamble.

“Yes,” I said amiably. “And you must be Shelbee Roberts. Something told me I might be seeing you sooner or later. Come in, I suppose we need to talk.”

She didn't seem too surprised that I knew who she was before she identified herself. A very cool customer this one. She simply gave a perfunctory half-smile and followed me inside the apartment.

I closed and locked the door and took a little comfort from the weight of the Glock at my back.

Always the little things you notice when the lioness enters your den.

Chapter 30

Senior Lead Special Agent/Chief Warrant Officer Shelbee Roberts wore a tailored black pants suit with a turquoise blouse and matching shoes. I didn't know all that much about women's fashion—or men's for that matter—but I could tell she took great care with her wardrobe. Her long blond hair was put up in order to give her a more professional appearance, but nonetheless, she was still quite attractive. And now that I saw her up close I'd put her age closer to mine. Forty.

She sat on my sofa and I sat across from her on the sole easy chair in the apartment. Just for routine she had shown me her credentials before we sat and I now knew for certain that she was in fact she. So I just had to learn why *she* was in my living room.

“Are you sure I can't get you anything?” I asked. “I was going to make breakfast myself, I could make it for two.”

“No thank you, Mr. Olin,” Shelbee Roberts said in a professional tone that was used to authority. “As I indicated, I just have a few questions for you.”

“Of course,” I said. “The thing is, I'm wondering why the Army Criminal Investigations Division is paying me a visit. Kind of off the normal route I should think.”

She didn't even attempt to feign pleasantries.

“As a former Air Force OSI agent yourself, Mr. Olin, you know that the normal route is not always so normal. Like the AFOSI the Army CID has a wide jurisdiction and route. We go wherever necessary to pursue our cases. And today the pursuit has brought me to you.”

I nodded, maintaining my friendly and outgoing expression, knowing that it was driving her nuts. She knew I was being deliberately vague and somewhat obtuse, but she didn't have any leverage to threaten me with, especially since she knew I was well-familiar with her authority and its limitations. So she had to tread lightly, and it was fun for me to watch.

“You were in the OSI for ten years, Mr. Olin?” she said.

“Actually no,” I responded. “I was in the Air Force ten years, OSI eight. First two years I was in the Security Police. Then I got into OSI after that.”

She nodded, shifting a little as she crossed her long legs. I put her height at around five-eight without the shoes, with them she was my height. Her body seemed fit beneath the well-designed suit. I also noticed that there was no ring on her left hand. Probably married to the job, but something told me she didn't spend all her time working. Shelbee Roberts seemed too well-balanced and centered to be an absolute workaholic. But she was dedicated to her work, and at times driven by it. All of that could be seen clearly in her cold black eyes. Not a woman to take lightly. In other circumstances she might have been my kind of woman.

“During your time in AFOSI you were trained in antiterrorism tactics, is that correct?”

“Might I ask what my military background has to do with an Army investigation, Special Agent Roberts?” I said mildly. “I mean really, I’ve been out of the Air Force for eight years now, a private citizen. And I suspect that if my military career were being investigated it would be handled by the agency I used to work for, not the CID.”

“Unless that agency was the subject of an investigation itself, Mr. Olin,” Shelbee Roberts pointed out in a cold and direct tone, one that would have sent a chill up the spine of a mere mortal, but I am not any mere mortal, and I really didn’t give a damn if OSI was under investigation; which I knew it wasn’t. Just a tactic, and in my case a bad one. Time to take this to the next level. The confrontation.

“Look lady, let me save you some time and we can cut the bullshit here,” I said, all the pleasantness gone from my voice. I wasn’t angry, but I let her think I was building to it. Just a tactic of mine. “You aren’t interested in my OSI background and the OSI is not under investigation. And even if it was it wouldn’t concern me because I’ve been gone too long. And I also know the CID wouldn’t be handling such an investigation. That would be done by the Pentagon’s Defense Security Division or the Defense Criminal Investigative Service. So why don’t we just get to it. Tell me why you’re here, which I’m pretty sure you suspect that I already *suspect* myself.”

That was a mouthful and I was proud of myself for getting through it without stumbling over any of the words.

Silence followed, both of us sitting and staring at the other. Suddenly I was very sleepy but I didn’t have anything to do until later

in the afternoon so I could waste a little more time with this. Bridgett didn't have work today but would be spending some time this afternoon doing tutoring in the research library in the Education Building. Probably wouldn't be ready to leave until at least five. So I had the time. But I suspected Shelbee Roberts did not.

And she cracked first.

"Alright, Mr. Olin," she said finally, uncrossing and recrossing her legs. "I'll be straight with you. As straight as I can under the circumstances. The reason I was asking about your background in OSI is because I know with the Antiterrorism Security Team you had a high level clearance and you can appreciate the necessity of maintaining operational security. It saves lives, and in this case maybe even a lot of lives."

Now she was trying to appeal to my sense of patriotism. Duty, honor... Boy was she in for a shock, but I played it close to the vest, leaning forward a little and staring at her seriously.

"The reason I've come to see you today, as I'm sure you have guessed, is because of your involvement in a matter that involves one of the Army's own. A Staff Sergeant Stanley Toccata."

And now the cat was out of the bag.

Time to see where it went from here.

Chapter 31

“You don’t have to confirm it, Mr. Olin,” Shelbee Roberts continued, her manner perfectly calculating and cool. “But I know you used to work with William Jordon when you were in the Air Force. He is now a lieutenant colonel and assigned as the commander of the 703rd AFOSI Detachment at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida.”

“Acting commander,” I told her. “And yes, I know Will. We used to work together back when we were young, dumb, and foolish.”

“And you remain friends today?” she said.

“Of course,” I said. “As you well know. And you also know he ran a background check on Stanley Toccata for me. Which led to some bird from your headquarters in Washington calling him and asking questions.”

She nodded.

“That was because Colonel Jordon attempted to access my file, Mr. Olin. That’s why the Chief of Staff to the Commander of CID called him. Colonel Jordon gave a very convincing explanation by the way. Very plausible. But complete bullshit, as Colonel Morrison knew.”

“But couldn’t prove,” I offered unnecessarily.

“Of course not,” Shelbee Roberts responded. “Colonel Jordon has been in the business a long time himself and he is quite well adept at protecting himself when he does something off the books as it were. Still, Colonel Morrison and I both knew the real reason he was accessing my file, and its link to Sergeant Toccata. The situation involving his ex-girlfriend.”

“Actually ex-fiancé,” I told her. “They were engaged.”

“Of course,” she said. “But they are no longer. And the sergeant isn’t taking it very well.”

“Ex-sergeant,” I said.

Shelbee Roberts stared at me like she would an obstinate child, then nodded slightly.

“Yes, he is no longer in the Army; however, the Army does feel a certain responsibility for all of its soldiers, present and past.”

“I’m sure,” I said dryly. “Which is why a senior CID agent is here talking to me right now. Just the Army’s way of showing concern.”

“Well I’m afraid it’s a little more complicated than that now, Mr. Olin,” she told me. “In light of what has been happening in the last few days. The two incidents in particular where he attempted to harm the young woman.”

“Bridgett Lemons,” I said. “And those were not the first attempts. Apparently he’s been violent with her for quite a while now. Last week he broke into her apartment and threatened her with a knife for several hours. This is what led to my providing protection for her now. Would you know anything about that, Agent Roberts?”

“What I know is very sensitive, Mr. Olin,” she retorted. “There are certain national security concerns here that I must take into

account when considering sharing information with personnel not cleared to receive it.”

My blood pressure started to rise and I had to make a concentrated effort not to get angry, which was probably what she wanted to happen anyway. Get me angry and maybe I’ll reveal something I didn’t want to. Not likely in this case because I really didn’t know anything.

“Tell me why you are here, Agent Roberts?” I said finally, my voice even and more calm than I felt inside.

She paused for affect.

“Well, I’m sure Colonel Jordon reported to you that Sergeant Toccata’s unit was investigated while on deployment in Iraq. And that I was a part of the investigating team.”

I said nothing, just waited.

“I cannot go into the specific nature of the investigation, which I’m sure you understand given your similar background, however what I can tell you is that there were very serious allegations against some members of the unit, Sergeant Toccata included. Allegations that, if proven, would have resulted in serious consequences for those accused, not to mention the field command in-country.”

“But no charges were brought against Toccata?” I said. “He left with an honorable discharge. Although he did leave several months before his tour was up, and it’s kind of hard to believe the Army would let a Special Forces operator with his experience out early, if at all.”

Shelbee Roberts was quiet again, mulling over what she wanted to say next.

“You know the way the military works, Olin, you were in it ten years, and you were an investigator too, you know how that goes sometimes. Sometimes we do things for the good of the service and the reputation of the country. Might not always be right, but sometimes it is necessary, and the best thing for all concerned. And honorable discharges aren’t always so *honorable*. If you get my meaning?”

I did, and I had to admit it startled me a little that she had been this candid with me. I decided to open up a bit myself and see what happened.

“Look, let me say this right off, my only interest in Stanley Toccata’s military record was to determine his background and training in an attempt to build a threat profile. I didn’t and don’t care about what he did in Iraq or any other place. My only concern is keeping my client safe.”

Shelbee Roberts stared into my eyes for several moments, then nodded slowly.

“I can understand that, Mr. Olin,” she said. “And appreciate it. Stanley Toccata is a very well trained soldier with a lot of combat time under his belt. It was smart of you to want to study his background. I have, and I have to tell you that boy is the serious real deal. I’ve seen most of the classified stuff and let me just say that he makes Rambo look like a pussy.”

I chuckled.

“He was a great asset to the Army and it was a shame we had to lose him, but sometimes...” She trailed off and became sullen. I sat and watched her, waiting. “Anyway, that’s not important right now,

what is important is making sure he doesn't hurt Bridgett Lemons or anyone else. It is obvious after what happened Wednesday night that he is seriously unstable. I've seen the police reports regarding the incident. You believe you hit him, twice?"

"Possibly," I told her. "It seemed to me as if he recoiled twice from separate impacts. Although I could be mistaken. I was using 200 grain jacketed hollow-points. Not many people could take two of them and keep moving for very long."

Shelbee Roberts smiled for the first time since I'd met her. An actual genuine smile.

"Forty-five calibers?" she said.

"Yeah," I nodded.

"I like the .45," she said. "Carry one myself. A SIG. You?"

"Glock," I told her. "Three models actually. The night of the incident I used both a Model-36 and a 30. Both compacts, the 36 a slimmed version."

"I know," she said. "I'm familiar with them. Very good weapons. It does seem unlikely that a man could take two rounds like that and get away, but Stanley Toccata is a very strong man and a hell of a soldier. He's been seriously wounded before. Three purple hearts to his credit."

"I know," I told her. "And he is mentally unbalanced. Perhaps beyond even feeling pain in a normal way. Which would make him even more dangerous."

Shelbee Roberts nodded.

"The cops think he may have crawled off some place and died," she offered.

“Yeah,” I said. “I know. But if that were the case his body would probably have been discovered somewhere by now. No, I think he’s still alive, somewhere. Found a way to repair his wounds, and now is waiting to heal a bit before making his next move.”

“You could be right,” Shelbee Roberts said. “And if that is the case then the next move is his. Unless the cops happen to stumble across him.”

“Unless that,” I said.

We were quiet some more, neither of us seeming uncomfortable with that.

“Can I get you some juice or something,” I said suddenly.

Shelbee Roberts was startled by the abrupt change of subject, and she smiled again, nodding her head.

“Sure, why not.”

I went into the kitchen and came back with two glasses of cranberry grape juice, giving one to her and taking the other and returning to my easy chair, enjoying the cool liquid as it went down my throat.

“That hits the spot,” I said with a smile. “Love this stuff.”

“It is rather good,” she admitted, holding the glass in both hands at her lap. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” I said. “Now, tell me, Agent Roberts...”

“Please,” she cut in. “Call me Shelbee.”

I nodded.

“Alright, Shelbee. Tell me, what exactly is your brief here? Did the Army send you to help stop Stanley Toccata, or did they send you to make sure he *was* stopped? Permanently?”

Shelbee Roberts sipped more juice, looked into the glass, and then drank the rest of it down.

“I’m here to do my job, Mr. Olin,” she said flatly.

“Derrick,” I told her. “And what I’m asking, Shelbee, is what *is* your job? Specifically. Or as specific as you can be.”

She sighed.

“Derrick, you know how this works,” she said in a quiet tone that had a hint of weariness in it. The weariness of a battle-scarred soldier perhaps too long in the field.

“Yeah,” I said with the same tone in my voice. “I do. Which is why I don’t have your job anymore. Fine, it really isn’t important to me anyway. Let me just say this so we’re clear. Whatever happened in Iraq, whatever Stanley Toccata was or was not involved in, whether there are national security concerns or not, I really don’t give a flying fuck. He’s a civilian now and he’s in Birmingham, Alabama threatening a woman I’ve been asked to protect. He seems determined to do her harm so the Army need not worry, whatever secrets he knows will not be coming out because when this is over he is going to be *very* dead. Period!”

United States Army Criminal Investigations Division Senior Lead Special Agent Shelbee Roberts stared at me very keenly for a long time, saying not a word and not blinking even once. I returned her stare, an absence of all emotions within me. Finally she nodded and stood, setting the empty glass on the coffee table that separated us.

“Okay then,” she said. “Thanks for your time, Derrick. And the juice. It really was very good.”

We shook hands and I walked her to the door, watching as she got into her G.O.V. and drove away in the rain. The first thing I did after closing and locking the door was to check my entire apartment for listening or recording devices. Finding none, I went into the closet in my bedroom and opened the floor safe I'd had secretly installed there shortly after moving into the apartment years earlier. Inside, in addition to an assortment of weapons and documents, was a stash of disposable cell phones, all of them already activated. I took one out, closed the safe, then went out onto the covered back deck that overlooked I-65 and dialed a number from memory.

Will Jordon answered after six rings.

“It’s me, Will. We need to talk...”

Chapter 32

Bridgett's tutoring lasted a little longer than expected so I waited for her up in Charmane's office. While we were alone I filled the professor in on my conversation with the CID agent that morning. Today Charmane wore red, another color she looked stunning in. Button-down blouse and slacks that justly accentuated her perfect backside. We were sitting in the two chairs across from her desk, close and intimate, Charmane with her short legs crossed right over left, me with my legs out in front and crossed at the ankles. I had on khaki slacks, a grey short sleeve polo shirt, and my trusty blue blazer.

"So you think the Army is worried about something that happened while Stanley was in Iraq?" Charmane said once I'd finished speaking, her expression curious and analytical.

"Seems like it," I said. "Agent Roberts was trying to play it pretty close this morning, but she knew she had to give me something. From what I was able to surmise from what little she did say, they've got her watching Stanley because somebody high up in the Army chain-of-command is worried about what he might say or do if he gets arrested."

"Everything seems to be a conspiracy these days, Derrick," Charmane said, tapping her knee with the fingertips of her left hand.

“Everyone seems to have something to cover up for some reason or other. Especially nowadays with the way the world is.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Especially the government—this administration—and by extension, it seems the military as well. Which really isn’t a new thing. When I was in the Air Force we were always receiving *guidance* from the civilians about not allowing certain information to become public which could embarrass either the service or higher ups. In particular the higher ups. Sometimes it made doing the job more difficult, a few times impossible. One of the reasons I decided to quit.”

Charmane stared at me intently for a few moments, considering what I had just said.

“You believe that this Agent Roberts is here to see to it that Stanley Toccata is not taken in alive?”

I sighed.

“The orders would not have been that specific,” I told her. “Nobody is ever direct in situations like this, the ever-looming threat of a congressional hearing or the appointment of a special counsel somewhere in the back of their minds. A *request* would have come down from somewhere, seemingly from middle management, but that would be a blind. This request would express the need to *monitor* Stanley Toccata to make sure he was having no problems adjusting to civilian life, for his own good and that of the Army. It would have begun like that, just a friendly and innocuous request, and then some time later there would be another, and another...”

“Over the course of this monitoring it would be noted that Stanley was having problems with his adjustment, and that perhaps

something should be done to *help* him, however this help could not be overt, and not traceable to the Army. CID is good at this sort of thing, and so the job would be given to them, one agent in particular, an agent who was very good at carrying out orders and cleaning up messes without asking any questions. Another *good* soldier.”

“Like this Shelbee Roberts?” Charmane asked.

“So it would appear,” I told her. “When my friend in OSI ran a query on her he got a call from the chief of staff to the commanding general of CID. This means she is pretty well connected. And factoring that in, her transfer to the CID detachment at Redstone Arsenal makes even less sense, unless you consider that it is the closest command available for her to be near Birmingham. And she was on the team that went to Iraq to conduct the investigation into Stanley Toccata’s unit, whatever it was about. Too many coincidences in this thing.”

Charmane nodded, glancing at her watch.

“I see what you mean,” she said. “Something doesn’t add up.”

“Lots of things don’t add up,” I said. “But to be honest, it really doesn’t concern me as far as how I perform my job. The Army may want him dead, and believe me, I don’t want to do the Army any favors, but if he comes after Bridgett again I’ll have no choice. Which will just save Agent Roberts the trouble.”

Charmane shook her head disgustedly.

“My god I hate this stuff,” she said. “Whatever is wrong with this young man, the Army had a hand in it. That damned war, all that killing, the stress of it damaged him, and a lot of others, men and women. And now they want to kill him, to make sure he doesn’t

cause them trouble, tell their secrets, expose their lies. It's just so wrong."

"An old story, Charmane," I said. "Not unique to this time in our history, or this war. In truth, if we really examined many of the things we believe to be true from other time periods, other wars for instance, we would find that at least half of these truths were not true, in fact, outright lies, deceptions designed by politicians in order to shield the people from knowing what actually happened because they believed it to be too difficult for them to understand and accept. People have been killed to silence them for the *good of the nation* for centuries, here and everywhere else. Like I said, nothing new."

"You sound so cynical, Derrick," she said, a frown on her lips.

"I've always been a cynic, love," I told her. "And a realist. Always that. Fairytales are for little kids and fools. There are no happy endings like in storybooks. You just have to make your own happy endings. And for Stanley Toccata I'm afraid the only happy ending he's gonna get is in his grave."

Charmane shook her head, folded her arms across her chest, and hugged herself.

I looked at my watch.

"Nearly six," I said. "She ought to be wrapping up down there pretty soon. I should go check on her. You sure you don't mind having us as houseguests for the weekend?"

Charmane suddenly smiled.

"Actually I really would like to have you as a *houseguest* for the weekend under different circumstances," she told me. "But for right now it is important that we keep Bridgett safe. And for right now the

best way to accomplish that is to keep her at my place. I'm fine with it. I've got to spend most of Saturday at a charity fundraiser at the Wynfrey Hotel for Nadya Simon anyway so I won't be home. But on Sunday I was thinking I might make the three of us a full-course meal. I don't often get to cook for anyone but myself and Esmeralda these days. I think it might be fun to expand a little."

"Sounds good," I said. "If you don't mind the trouble."

Charmane leaned closer to me.

"There are plenty of things I don't mind, Derrick," she said.

I leaned closer and nodded.

"Me too," I said.

I wanted to kiss her, but didn't. It was best to put a check on that for the time being, until this situation was resolved one way or the other. So I stood up and stretched my neck. Charmane stood up too and went back behind her desk.

"I'm going to be leaving in a little while myself," she said, stacking some folders together. "I was thinking about picking up Chinese. That okay with you?"

"Fine by me," I told her. "Bridgett and I had it the other night, but I'm sure she won't mind. Said she liked it as much as I did, and she seemed to enjoy it."

"Good then," Charmane said. "That'll be dinner tonight, on me. Guess I'll see the two of you when you get there."

I nodded, turning for the door.

"See you later."

I stepped out into the corridor and closed the door, taking a deep breath. Resisting Charmane Foley was not an easy thing to do, and

the effort it took not to kiss her when I knew I could was monumental. Never in all of my days did I ever think I would actually be the one who was doing the restraining.

But times do change.

I exhaled and started off toward the stairs.

Chapter 33

At midnight I got a call from Sergeant Curtis Willis of the East Precinct.

“Where are you man?” he asked.

I was on Charmane’s sofa watching TV with the volume down low, an old movie that I hadn’t seen in years, and wasn’t really interested in now, but it was something to do to pass the time.

“Someplace safe with my client,” I told him, pressing mute on the remote and lying back, my head resting on the arm of the sofa. “Where are you?”

“Out protecting the fine citizens of this great city of ours,” Willis responded humorously. “Where else would I be?”

“Of course,” I chuckled. “Must be that all-night doughnut place on the Parkway near the Wal-Mart Neighborhood Market.”

Willis laughed.

“Nah,” he said. “Left there ‘bout five minutes ago. Did a drive by your girl’s place half hour before that. Didn’t see nothing, not even your car. You still keeping her at a hotel?”

I hadn’t told him where I was keeping Bridgett out of habit and the need for operational security. It wasn’t that I didn’t trust Curtis; on the contrary, however my training had taught me to be very conservative with information, never giving people more than they

absolutely needed in order to perform their tasks. There simply was no reason to tell him where Bridgett was staying, so I didn't.

"Sure," I lied smoothly. "You got anything on Stanley Toccata yet?"

"Actually that's why I'm calling," he said. "Detectives with Jefferson County took a report today about a break-in at a vet's office on Pinson Valley Parkway. Appears to have happened several days ago but the office has been closed because the doctor had to go out of town on a family emergency. He came back today and found the place had been broken in to."

I already knew what he was going to tell me, but waited anyway.

"They found blood all over the place, and a lot of things were taken, some left behind and used. Stuff you'd need to treat a wounded animal, or human in a pinch. Stanley Toccata is combat medic qualified according to the file you sent me so I figure he got in and got what he needed, and patched himself up."

"And is probably laying low somewhere right now healing, waiting till he's better, then he'll try and find Bridgett again."

"Be my guess," Curtis said. "Hey, you know the Army got some broad from the CID down here looking at this thing? And she been asking questions about you too."

"Have you talked to her?" I asked.

"Nah," Curtis said. "I'm morning shift, I only get information second and third hand. Mike Doyle talked to her though, and he told me."

"I know about her," I said. "Name's Shelbee Roberts. We've met. She came by my place and we had a nice chat today, letting me know

how concerned the Army is about one of their own.”

Curtis Willis chuckled.

“Yeah, I’m sure. You know I spent twenty years in the Army myself before I became a cop, Derrick. I know the Army, and its goal-one is to keep itself from getting a black eye or a bloody nose. She ain’t here to look after nobody’s well-being except the Army’s. More likely some general’s.”

“You get no argument from me there, Curtis,” I told him. “And if she gets to him before he comes after my client again, well I won’t cry.”

“I know you won’t,” he said. “But if she do anything illegal in my jurisdiction I’m gonna arrest her butt. Don’t care if she does have an Army badge. She in Birmingham now. Might not be able to hold her, but I sure as hell will make a stink about it.”

I knew Sergeant Willis was not bluffing, and for that reason I sincerely hoped he did not get a chance to confront Shelbee Roberts. That woman was extremely dangerous and very well connected and protected. No way a patrol sergeant in Birmingham, Alabama would survive tangling with her. Career, and perhaps otherwise.

“We can always hope that Toccata wises up and leaves town,” I offered.

“Or dies of sepsis,” Willis said. “Either way, we’ll just see. Well I gotta go now. Just wanted to check in and tell you about the vet’s office. Anything else come up I’ll let you know. You know I’m off the next two nights, but you need me just give my cell a jingle.”

I told him I would then we said good bye and hung up.

Suddenly I had lost all interest in the movie and shut the TV off, lying back and staring up at the ceiling in the darkness.

If I was half as tough as I pretended to be sometimes this whole situation wouldn't be bothering me as much as it was. In truth, I had no compunction whatsoever when it came to killing. Never had. The concept and the practice had never really affected me in a negative way, or any way for that matter. It was not something I enjoyed or looked forward to doing, simply a necessity sometimes of the work that I did. And I never lost a second of sleep, or had bad dreams, or spent much time afterwards thinking about the lives I had ended. I knew the exact number, remembered the faces and names of all of them, and none of that bothered me in the least.

But the thought of killing Stanley Toccata just didn't sit right with me. And it was probably because I knew that if I did it—more than likely *when* I did it—I would be cleaning up some dirty little secret that the Army wanted hidden away. And that I did not like. I had done too many other things like that during my time with OSI.

But what else could I do?

Not a damn thing. This had become an obsession for the shattered young man that Stanley Toccata was now. A compulsion that he was powerless to let go of. Nothing else to do then.

And so I closed my eyes and drifted off to a dreamless and remorseless sleep.

Chapter 34

After Charmane left to go do her charity thing Bridgett spent most of her day upstairs in the guest room studying. Esmeralda did some cleaning and then left to go do the weekly grocery shopping, taking with her the list of things that Charmane had requested in order to cook dinner for us tomorrow night. It was a little odd that she employed a full-time housekeeper but did most of her own cooking, however Charmane Foley was not a typical woman by any stretch of the imagination, and it was one of the things that attracted me to her. Just one of many.

I was restless with little to do, so after showering and changing into the spare set of clothes I had brought with me, I pulled out my laptop and sat at the table in the dining room and decided to read over Stanley Toccata's service record once more. This time I went a bit more slowly, stopping to take the time to analyze everything a little more carefully, but in the end no more insights came to me, so I closed the file, inserted my wireless card, then went online to check my e-mail. There was a message from Will Jordon, with an attachment. The message simply read: *Pay dirt*.

I opened the attachment and found myself staring at the complete service file of one Shelbee Norma Roberts, age 40, Chief

Warrant Officer, United States Army; Senior Lead Special Agent, Criminal Investigations Division (Section III).

“Way to go, Colonel Jordon,” I said with a smile. Will must have pulled some major strings to get this file, and I just hoped he hadn’t gotten himself in any trouble doing so. I got the impression that whoever Shelbee Roberts was, she had a highly connected *guardian angel* watching her back very closely, and they probably didn’t care too much for a nosy Air Force lieutenant colonel snooping around one of their own. But for the moment that was not my major concern. Will could take care of himself. I went into the kitchen and got a glass of juice then came back and started reading the file.

Shelbee Roberts had turned forty last month. She’d been in the Army since she was twenty-three. The daughter of a career Army officer, a full-bird colonel in Intelligence. She was born in Tennessee but had moved all over the world while growing up, which accounted for the fact that she spoke with no regional accent, least of all southern. At age eighteen she had been accepted into West Point, actually spent a year there, but then dropped out suddenly when she was nineteen, the reason listed as a family emergency. Then there was a notation in the file about the death of her father three months later. And following that young Shelbee never returned to West Point.

She dropped out of sight for a year and then resurfaced as an undergrad at the University of Virginia. Graduated three years later with honors and a degree in criminology. Then she enlisted in the Army. An odd choice because with a college degree she could have become an officer, but she had declined. Two years in the Military

Police Corps followed, where she distinguished herself in the eyes of two of her superiors, so much so that one eventually recommended her for a position with the Army's Criminal Investigations Division. She was accepted and went into training shortly after her twenty-sixth birthday. First posting after graduating from their academy was in Germany, specifically Wiesbaden. There she worked as part of a new counterintelligence and security investigations team that had been established to handle problems that were developing following the reunification of the two Germanys into one nation. Their brief was to deal with threats of sabotage and other terrorism directed against U.S. forces and other government entities that were considered prime targets. During this assignment Shelbee Roberts had gone undercover for six months and managed to infiltrate a terrorist cell that was intent on detonating several bombs at American military installations around the country and other parts of Europe. With her assistance these plans were all interdicted and many arrests followed, leading to the dismantling of a large portion of the terrorist network's operations in three countries. She was decorated and promoted and eventually received a posting to London where she continued her work in the field of counterintelligence and counterterrorism, a star on the rise.

I continued to read the file for more than an hour, and grudgingly came to admire Shelbee Roberts. She was a hell of an operator, and had done many worthwhile things in her career, but I also began to notice a very dark pattern in her history too. More and more it seemed that over the latter years she had been called in time and time again to deal with what the Army termed *sensitive*

situations. And by sensitive the Army meant situations in which they could be publicly embarrassed. Details were a bit sketchy, but I recognized the doublespeak and euphemisms for what they were. Lead Special Agent Roberts was their *Madam Fix-it*. She made the Army's problems go away, disappear never to be seen or heard from again, which really didn't surprise me. I had gotten that impression when I was talking to her in my apartment yesterday morning.

Then another curious thought occurred to me.

What if I got in her way? Would she try to disappear me as well? Did her brief extend to disposing of civilians who were potential liabilities as well as nut-job former service members?

I sighed heavily and closed the file. I knew her type. A true American *patriot* and soldier for the cause. The only thing that mattered to her was the mission, and in her eyes that mission was keeping her country and her service strong, by whatever means necessary. Morality and the law were luxuries that she could not and did not care about. She'd do what she had to in order to accomplish her mission. I just wished I knew why they wanted Stanley Toccata dead. And if they did, why had they not tried to take him out before he came back stateside? Sure, he was a dangerous bastard, but that wouldn't deter the likes of Shelbee Roberts. But maybe her superiors had held out hope that it would not be necessary to kill such a decorated operator. Perhaps. Or maybe it was something else.

Again, what did it really matter? I was a bodyguard on this, hired to keep a young woman safe from her deranged ex-fiancé. It didn't really matter to me why he had become deranged, I just had to stop him.

But it still gnawed at me, and pissed me off.

I stood up and stretched my back and legs, then took the empty juice glass back into the kitchen to wash it out. I was leaning against the sink thinking some more when my cell phone rang. The number was unfamiliar and I thought that perhaps it was a wrong number.

When I answered it I quickly realized it was not a wrong number.

It was the police.

Chapter 35

I had two pieces of good fortune that Saturday morning. The first was that Pete Newhouse lived in Pelham not too far from Charmane Foley's house. The second was the fact that he had this Saturday off and wasn't busy. I asked him if he could come right over and he said no problem. I told him he should bring his *equipment* and he said no problem again. I liked that about Pete, a real simple guy, and very dependable.

He arrived at the house just before eleven and I let him in, briefing him quickly on the situation and then introducing him to both Bridgett and Esmeralda, the latter having returned from her shopping trip by now. Both women were agitated and had many questions, but I had no time for that now, they knew as much as I was going to tell them and anything more would have to wait. At least until I knew more myself.

I told Pete not to let anyone into the house until he heard from me, and I knew he would do this without question, so when I left the house a short time later I had no worries about security. But I was worried.

Nadya Simon had been holding an upscale *garage* sale for charity in one of the large ballrooms at the Wynfrey Hotel in Riverchase. The goods on sale were all donated by the wealthy and

the noted of Birmingham society and it had been expected that a fair sum of money would be raised in the effort, one hundred percent of it donated directly to the charity that Nadya had designated. This was possible because the foundation that Nadya ran, the Simon Family Charitable Trusts, would be picking up the tab for all operating costs. And why not, the Simon family was probably the wealthiest in the entire state, and Nadya loved to spend their money on her causes.

Charmane had been asked to work as one of the volunteer sellers and had agreed without hesitation because the charity that was being helped today was one that specialized in aiding children with physical handicaps, a cause that was very near and dear to the Samford professor's heart. She got to the hotel early that morning to help set up and spent the first couple of hours working at the main table, but then excused herself for a bathroom break and went out to the ladies' room just down the hall from the ballroom.

About ten minutes later she came out, slightly distracted because she noticed a small stain on her blouse, and she didn't see the person who grabbed her and pulled her into the men's room across the hall. It was empty at the moment and the attacker had dragged Charmane into the stall at the back, the handicap one with lots of extra room. The attacker had slammed Charmane against the rear wall of the stall then locked the door.

As she fell back Charmane hit her head and was momentarily disorientated, and when she regained herself her attacker had grabbed her once again, bringing his heavily bearded and grimy face

close to hers. Charmane had known real fear then because in that instant she realized who it was that had grabbed her.

Stanley Toccata.

For five minutes he terrorized her, threatened her, and asked her over and over again where Bridgett Lemons was. Charmane thought he would kill her, and indeed he had held a filthy, but razor sharp knife against her throat for most of the ordeal. But in the end someone had come into the bathroom and she had screamed. Much to Charmane's surprise, Stanley Toccata had not cut her throat, fleeing instead, knocking down the man who was trying to come to her rescue. After that hotel security responded and locked down the hotel, then called the Hoover Police. It was one of them who had called me at Charmane's insistence.

Now I was making my way into the hotel escorted by a uniformed Hoover officer who had been out in the parking lot awaiting my arrival. There were news vehicles pulled right up in front of the hotel but police and security officers were keeping the reporters and bystanders at bay. Inside I saw officers from several departments, including Birmingham and Jefferson County, although the hotel is actually located in Shelby County.

The officer brought me to a captain and the captain led me to a small private meeting room down a long, thickly carpeted corridor at the back of the first level. The room was guarded by two uniformed officers who came to attention when the captain approached. The captain opened the door and stepped aside so I could go in.

Charmane Foley was sitting on a roller chair with her head leaning back as a female doctor examined her face. Both women

turned when I entered and Charmane grimaced in pain.

“Don’t move,” the physician told her. “It looks a lot worse than it is, but it’s gonna hurt like hell for a few days. And I am a little worried that you might have a concussion. You really should come to the hospital for a CAT scan and some other tests.”

Charmane lowered her head and I got a good look at her bruises. They looked bad now, and would be worse by morning, and I knew she really would be very sore for a few days. However, I could still see the determination and strength in the woman’s eyes, she was a fighter, and right now she was fighting mad.

“Thank you, Doctor,” she told the other woman, glancing up at her. “But I’ll be alright. If I don’t feel better in a couple of days I’ll go see my own doctor.”

The female physician shook her head despairingly and told Charmane that she was going to give her a prescription for a painkiller and some cream for her face that should be filled right away, then she collected her medical bag and excused herself. The Hoover captain nodded at me and closed the door as he went back into the hall. Now Charmane and I were alone.

She tried to stand up but winced in pain. I walked over to her and knelt down, placing my hand on her knee.

“Don’t try to get up,” I told her soothingly. “Just rest. I’m sorry this happened to you.”

She looked into my eyes and I could see tears start to form in hers, but she resisted them, putting her hand on top of mine and squeezing.

“It was him, Derrick,” she told me. “Stanley Toccata. He came after *me* because he couldn’t find Bridgett. He must have figured I’d know where she was.”

I nodded.

“I should have figured he might do that,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t you be,” she told me. “This isn’t your fault, Derrick. Your job was to keep Bridgett safe, not me. You couldn’t have known he would come for me. Or that he would even have known where to find me today.”

“How did he know?” I said, frowning.

“This event has been in the papers for a couple of weeks,” Charmane told me. “And my name’s been mentioned. He probably saw it somewhere and figured this would be as good a place as any to come for me. How he got in here is still a mystery. The Wynfrey is supposed to have very good security and the guy looked like a street person, smelled horrible too. There is no way he should have been able to get in here, but he did.”

“Stanley Toccata is an expert at covert infiltration, love,” I told her. “And if he had time to plan, he would have found a way in. Which he obviously did. And I take it they weren’t able to catch him either?”

Charmane shook her head and the small effort caused her immense pain.

“No. But they do have him on camera escaping. Not that it does us much good. Hey, do you think he’ll go to my house next?”

“I have to tell you, Charmane, I’m not sure I feel comfortable predicting his behavior now. I really didn’t see this as a serious

possibility, him coming after you. He might go to your house. It's not far away. But if he does he'll find a friend of mine there who will be all too happy to blow his brains out for him. Nonetheless, I'll tell the cops to get some units over there. And for the time being, I'll arrange some protection for you."

She started to protest but I shook my head.

"Sweetheart, your life is under threat now. And until Stanley Toccata is... *neutralized*, you will be protected. Period!"

She stared at me for a long moment, then smiled as much as her bruised face would allow, reaching up and touching my cheek.

"I'd kiss you right now if my mouth didn't hurt so much," she told me.

I squeezed her knee.

"I'll get you home in a bit and you can put some ice on it. I'll also get that painkiller and other prescription filled for you too. Bridgett and Esmeralda are both very concerned about you right now. I should call and let them know you're okay. Then we'll go."

"Alright," Charmane said.

I stared at her for a few more moments then stood up, turning and going over to open the door. The Hoover captain was standing outside with the two uniformed officers. I asked him to come in for a quick chat and shut the door once he entered.

Chapter 36

As was to be expected, Bridgett was beside herself with guilt. She burst into tears as soon as she saw Charmane's bruises, and so did Esmeralda actually. But Bridgett felt directly responsible and wanted to leave Charmane's house immediately before she brought her anymore trouble. However, Charmane would hear none of it, taking the younger woman by the shoulders and telling her in a very firm tone that what had happened to her was not her fault, and she would not let her leave now, not when it was most obvious that she needed safety and protection, and the best place that could be provided was right here at Charmane's place.

Eventually Bridgett relented, but I could tell Esmeralda wished she had not. She did not like the fact that somebody had hurt her employer, and she liked it even less that the same person who had done so might now come here looking to do worse, but she didn't get a say in the matter so she kept her objections to herself. But her little dark eyes were like daggers every time I looked into them.

I sent Pete Newhouse out to fill the prescriptions for Charmane and when he came back I asked if he could hang around for a bit longer. Pete told me he could stay the whole day if I needed him to, and I did. After a further briefing, during which time I showed him the pictures Bridgett had given me of Stanley Toccata and told him

how the man looked now, Pete went outside and took up station in his pickup truck parked at the curb in front of Charmane's house.

I took Charmane her medication and found her sitting propped up in bed, now wearing green pajamas, Esmeralda tending to her on one side and Bridgett sitting on the other side looking as sorry as any single person I've ever seen in my life. Esmeralda glanced up at me with barely contained hostility, which I ignored. A honked off housekeeper was the least of my worries right now.

"Here are the painkillers and the cream the doctor prescribed," I said, holding out the small bag from the CVS Pharmacy a few blocks away. "You should take a couple of the painkillers now and try to get some rest."

Esmeralda came and took the bag and said she'd go get some water.

Charmane reached out a hand and I walked around the bed to take it.

"Thank you, Derrick," she said in an exhausted voice. "For being here, for everything."

"You're welcome," I said, glancing at Bridgett. "You get some rest now and we'll check on you from time to time. And don't worry about dinner. I'll take care of that."

"Esmeralda can do that," Charmane said. "While it's true that I usually prefer to do my own cooking, Esmeralda is a wonderful cook. So don't you worry. But I am tired. I could use those painkillers too. You aren't going anywhere are you?"

I shook my head.

“Not right now,” I told her. “I’ll be here when you wake up, don’t worry. I’ve also got my friend Pete out front for the rest of the day. I’m gonna work on arranging something more permanent.”

She sighed and closed her eyes.

“I really wish you didn’t have to,” she said wearily.

“I know,” I said. “But it is necessary.”

Esmeralda came back with the glass of water and the pills. I looked over at Bridgett again and she nodded. I let go of Charmane’s hand and we excused ourselves, closing the door behind us.

Bridgett turned to me out in the hallway and her eyes overflowed with tears. I took her in my arms and held her close as she cried silently. I was feeling very angry at the moment, and a good bit of that anger was directed at me. This situation had now gone absolutely too far. It needed to end immediately. Perhaps it wouldn’t be such a bad thing if Shelbee Roberts found and executed Stanley Toccata before he could do any more damage.

A good thing for all concerned.

But strangely, even now, I really didn’t seem to care too much for that option.

Chapter 37

“How is she?”

“Appears to be resting comfortably,” I told Leigh Danton as I walked back into Charmane’s dining room and pulled the doors closed behind me. “And Esmeralda seems to have gone to bed as well. Which is good because she’s becoming a real pest. I know she’s only concerned for Charmane, but I could do without her evil-eye stares.”

Leigh smiled and sipped coffee from a large mug that I had found in the kitchen. She was seated on the right side of the table next to where I had my laptop set up. It was after midnight and about an hour ago the sky had opened up and a torrent of rain began to fall. The storm was still going on now with the occasional lightening and thunder for punctuation. Leigh had arrived just after it began, getting soaked as she ran in from where she’d parked in the driveway. Pete Newhouse had left at ten, at my insistence, but he said he’d come back in the morning around eight and sit for twelve hours. He had to go to work at the range on Monday but knew some people he could call if I wanted him to. Off duty cops who wouldn’t mind helping out. I told him sure, if he would, and I would do what I could to see about getting them compensated for their time. Pete had simply smiled and

shook his head. “Not everybody works for money, Derrick,” he said. “As you should well know.” Then he left.

I sat down at the head of the table and picked up the mug of hot Earl Grey tea that I had prepared before going upstairs to check on Charmane. It had just cooled to a temperature that I could tolerate so I took a couple of quick sips.

“Well from the sound of what you told me,” Leigh said, “it would seem that Dr. Foley was very lucky that guy came in when he did. Or she might have been hurt worse, maybe even killed.”

I nodded.

“Yeah. But I get the impression he really didn’t want to hurt her. Or he would have taken out the guy and continued with her. Plus he could have kept her from screaming if he really wanted to. Or simply cut her throat. No, I believe he went after her strictly because he figured she might know where Bridgett was. Which just happened to be the case.”

“Think he knows how to find out where she lives?” Leigh asked, sipping her coffee.

“Charmane’s not listed in the book,” I said. “But Mr. Toccata has proven to be quite resourceful so far. He might be able to find out. Although he’d have to know that Charmane would most likely be under some form of protection herself following his attack on her. And he might not actually believe Bridgett would be staying with her anyway.”

“Or he might,” Leigh pointed out. “As you said, he is very resourceful and well trained.”

“True,” I said. “Which is one of the reasons I’ve been considering moving both of them to a hotel or some other safe location, and hope that in the meantime somebody in one of the half dozen or so police and sheriff’s departments presently looking for Stanley Toccata actually finds him before he does more damage. But I know Charmane won’t want to leave her home. Bridgett would be willing to leave but I get the feeling she’d probably insist on going back to her place, and that would be far less safe; not to mention her neighbors need a break from all of this too. It’s been sheer luck that nobody at the Raintree Apartments has been hurt so far. I’d like to keep it that way.”

Leigh nodded, set her mug on the table, then reached into the inside pocket of the lightweight windbreaker she was wearing, pulling out a small spiral notebook and opening it in front of her. She reached up and adjusted her glasses while staring at her handwritten notes. I know it was a bit of a challenge. Leigh is one of the few people whose handwriting is actually worse than mine.

“Well you asked me to go up to Cullman and dig up everything I could on Stanley Toccata, family history, school records, friends, anything I could get my hands on. To be honest with you, Derrick, there isn’t a whole lot. His folks are dead and no close relatives remain in the area. I found out he had one brother but nobody has seen him in years either. No close friends, a few people knew him in high school, but not really well. They all said he was quiet and pretty much a loner. Didn’t date much either, but was regarded as handsome, kind of shy though. Everybody knew he joined the Army after high school, came back once or twice in the early years to visit

his folks before they died. Hasn't been back to town since his mother passed nearly five years ago, as far as anybody knows anyhow. Dad went two years before that. Guess he lied to Bridgett about visiting home before. And beyond the cursory, Derrick, there isn't a whole lot to learn about this guy in his hometown."

I nodded, glancing down at my tea for a moment.

"It was a long shot anyhow," I said. "Just thought it was possible there might be somebody still there with a connection to him, somebody who might be able to help talk him down. But I guess there isn't. Thanks for going anyhow."

Leigh nodded, flipping through pages, then closed the notebook and set it on the table.

"Sure, no problem," she said. "Wasn't busy doing anything else. Glad to help. So what are you going to do now, or do you know?"

I smiled, glancing over at her.

"You know me so well. Right now I haven't got a clue. I've got two people to protect from the same lunatic and the ball is in his court. The cops are looking for him, even the Army's got somebody stalking him, but so far nobody's been able to lay hands on him. Hell, I shot him but he still keeps coming. I guess what I'm gonna do now is the only thing I can do. Sit back and wait. Be ready. I have no doubt in my mind that Stanley Toccata will be coming, and sooner rather than later."

Leigh nodded and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Well in that case, why don't I give you a hand?" she said. "Be an extra pair of eyes and an extra gun if you need it."

"You sure?" I said.

She nodded.

“Of course,” she said. “Not doing anything else, like I said, and what are friends for?”

I smiled.

“Ain’t that the truth,” I said. “And thank you again. I will gladly accept your offer of assistance. And I tell you what, why don’t you go home now and get some rest. Pete’s coming back in the morning at eight. Why don’t you come back around noon tomorrow and we’ll see where things stand then, okay?”

“Sure,” Leigh said. “If you’re sure you don’t need me tonight.”

I thought about that for a minute, then shook my head.

“Nah. Shelby County has a cruiser parked at the end of the street and another does drive-by runs every half hour. We’ll be alright tonight. You go get some sleep.”

Leigh nodded and stood up.

“Okay,” she said, then covered her mouth as she yawned. “And it would appear that I need some sleep.”

I got up and walked her to the door, watching as she ran back to her car in the downpour. I waited until she started up her car and pulled off before going back into the house. Once I secured the door and made sure the rest of the house was locked tight, I made myself another cup of hot tea and returned to the dining room and sat at my computer.

What was I going to do indeed? Exactly what I had told Leigh. Sit and wait.

And probably sit and wait some more.

Chapter 38

Sunday afternoon everybody was gathered around Charmane's dining table for lunch. Bridgett, Leigh, Pete Newhouse, Charmane, and I. Parked in an unmarked car at the front curb were two off duty Pelham Police officers, friends of Pete's. When they got off at midnight they'd be replaced by two more of Pete's friends, these two from Hoover P.D. Being the senior range officer at the facility where most of the local departments did their training helped you make a lot of friends who carried badges and guns.

Charmane's bruises looked worse today but she said she felt much better thanks to the pain medication the doctor had given her and the rest she had gotten yesterday afternoon. She had insisted on getting dressed and coming downstairs for lunch. Esmeralda had prepared a delicious meal and everyone was quite pleased, at least everyone who was not Esmeralda because she was still liberally dispensing glares of disapproval to all of us interlopers in her mistress' home. But we largely ignored her.

Charmane was in the process of telling a very funny story from my days in her class when my cell phone rang. I excused myself and went into the front room to answer it, already knowing who the caller was by the special ring tone that played.

"Hey," I said into the receiver.

“Hey yourself,” Traci Brenner said. “Been thinking about you all week since I left Birmingham. Just thought I’d call and see if you missed me.”

I smiled, sitting down on the sofa.

“I always miss you, sweetie,” I told her and meant it. “I’ve been kind of busy ever since you left, but I have thought about you a time or two. How are you?”

“*Wet*,” she replied with a mischievous chuckle. “How do you think I am?”

I smiled, and a pang of guilt struck me.

“I think you’re beautiful,” I said, glancing around me to make sure no one had come into the room. “And I wish I was with you right now to deal with your *wetness* dilemma.”

Traci snickered.

“Me too. Unfortunately it doesn’t look like I’m gonna be able to get away again until late next month. If I can I’ll try for earlier. I really hope I can.”

“Me too,” I told her. “But to be honest with you, right now isn’t a good time anyway. I’m in the middle of a job.”

“Really?” she said. “That was quick.”

“Quicker than you know,” I told her. “It started right after you left Monday.”

“Oh yeah?” she said. “What’s it about?”

I didn’t want to worry her with details so I was vague; completely leaving out the two violent encounters I had had with Mr. Stanley Toccata.

“Well I’m gonna say be careful anyhow,” she said. “I know you always are, but I’d hate for something to happen to that delicious chocolate body of yours.”

I grinned, glancing around once more.

“Or at least one particular part of it, huh?” I said.

She laughed.

“Oh you know that,” she said. “I wish I could taste *him* right now.”

“So does *he*,” I replied in a low tone. “But look, babe, I need to go now. I’m still working. I’m glad you called. I like hearing your voice. I’ll try to call you in the next few days, okay?”

“Sure,” Traci said. “Go do what you have to, Derrick. I’ll talk to you later. And stay safe.”

“You too, love,” I told her, then waited until after she had hung up before I pressed the END button.”

Now I really was feeling guilty. Man was my life more complicated than it should have been at this stage. Maybe I should just get married and then I wouldn’t have to worry about it.

But who would I marry?

There was only one woman that I would have ever seriously considered. But that was the past, something that was best left there and forgotten. Just wish I could forget. All these years gone by now and she’s married and... And it’s just too depressing to think about right now.

Fuck it!

I got up from the sofa and went back into the dining room to finish lunch and to listen to more embarrassing stories from my

youth.

Chapter 39

I've always liked strong-willed and smart women, at least on a personal basis. Professionally they could be a real pain in the ass. On Monday both Charmane and Bridgett insisted on going to Samford, and there was nothing I could do to talk either of them out of it, so I relented. This was going to be a trying day. On the plus side the rain had finally stopped last night and this morning the sun was shining brightly. Of course that meant the day was going to be hot, but you can't have perfection I'm told, so you live with it.

Since Bridgett was the primary concern and my primary responsibility, I would be escorting her today, staying as close to her as possible throughout the day. Charmane was probably not in any immediate danger, but I had made the mistake of thinking that once before, so Leigh Danton would be her escort and shadow today. When she arrived at Charmane's place at seven that morning I couldn't help but smile. Leigh was dressed like a college kid and could easily pull it off because despite being in her mid-thirties, in many ways she seemed like a kid, or at least like somebody in their early twenties. She'd blend right in on the campus.

As for me, I didn't even make an attempt. I suppose I could have put on a suit and tried to pass for a visiting professor or something, but that would take too much work and would probably fool no one.

Campus security knew who I was and why I was on property. If anybody asked why a suspicious looking black guy was hanging around the Education Building all day they could deal with the inquiry.

I did have on my trusty blue blazer again though, and a black polo shirt, blue jeans, and well-worn black leather boots. The outfit that all the fashionable bodyguards were wearing in Birmingham this season. Along with the obligatory accessories by Glock.

Bridgett had a nine o'clock pre-final review class on the second floor of the Education Building and I walked her there, carefully scanning all of the much too young men and women in the corridors who were moving in and out of classrooms. None of them looked anything like Stanley Toccata and they did not appear to pose a threat to my client, but I still didn't relax. Bridgett smiled at me and touched my arm before going into her class, telling me she'd see me in about an hour. I nodded and waited until the professor had shut the door after the last student entered, then I moved off down the hall to check the stairs. Everything seemed clear at the moment so I took out my cell phone and called Leigh as I leaned back against the stairwell door.

"What's going on?" I asked when she answered.

"Nothing much," Leigh said. "Dr. Foley is in a meeting with two other people, she was expecting them. One of them I believe is the Dean of Students. She seemed pretty self-important."

I chuckled.

"That's every professor I've ever met at this place, Leigh," I told her. "It's a job requirement I think."

“I see,” she said. “Well I’m hanging around outside Dr. Foley’s office; one of her TAs is doing some work in the sitting area. I’m just outside there now. Got a couple of books that look like textbooks so I can make passersby think I’m studying for finals like a good little student while waiting to talk to my professor.”

I smiled.

“You always did enjoy playing your roles,” I told her. “Well just remember, if Stanley Toccata shows up, don’t forget to play the role of the little lady with the gun.”

“No worries there, Derrick,” she replied seriously. “If I see him, I’ll shoot him.”

“Same here,” I told her. “Well I’ll let you go now. Need me, shout, okay?”

“Will do,” Leigh said. “And you do the same.”

I said I would then hung up.

After another tour of the empty hallway past a number of half empty classrooms, I came back to the stairwell and leaned against the wall, my arms folded across my chest. This was the biggest part of protection work, and often times the most exciting. However, in the case of Stanley Toccata I knew that sooner or later there would be far more excitement than I wanted.

Sooner would be preferable to later for all concerned. Especially for me.

Chapter 40

Bridgett didn't have anymore classes after the nine o'clock so when she came out of it at five minutes to ten she went to Charmane's office to see if she needed any help. The professor had just completed a list of tasks that she needed taken care of before the end of the day and had handed the list to her two TAs. When Bridgett showed up she took the list back and divided the responsibilities once more. Bridgett would be going to the basement to do some more research, and I would be joining her. Leigh smiled and gave me a small wave as I left the office trailing behind my principal.

At one o'clock Bridgett took off her reading glasses and rubbed her eyes.

"My eyes are starting to cross, Derrick," she said, glancing over the table at me. "And I'm starving. How about you?"

"I could eat," I said, closing the book on criminal psychology that I had been absently thumbing through. "Where did you have in mind?"

"The café in the University Center," she said with a hint of resignation. "All I really have time for. Sorry."

"No problem," I told her. "I'm sure I've eaten worse. Just makes me remember what we used to call the place when I was a student here."

She folded her arms on the table and stared at me with a grin.

“What?”

“The *Barf Palace*,” I told her.

“My god,” she said. “We call it the same thing. I guess some things don’t change after all.”

“And that’s kind of disheartening,” I told her. “Because it probably means the food hasn’t gotten any better.”

She grinned and started closing books and stuffing her notes back into her backpack. A few minutes later she was ready to go and I was waiting over by the stairs.

“I’m gonna stop by Doc’s office first to see if she wants me to pick her something up,” Bridgett said as she lifted her backpack to her right shoulder.

“Sure thing,” I said, leading the way up.

Leigh was in the outer sitting area of Charmane’s office suite when Bridgett and I arrived. She was sitting on a chair near the door reading a book, or at least pretending to. She closed it and looked at us as we came in.

“Have you had lunch yet?” I asked her.

She shook her head.

“Nope, and my tummy’s starting to growl. You going out to get something?”

“Not actually,” I told her. “Bridgett and I were going to go over to the Barf Palace and get something. Figured we’d stop by and see if you and Charmane wanted anything.”

Leigh smiled and stood up, dropping the book back on the chair.

“The *Barf Palace*,” she said. “Isn’t that what you and Maxwell used to call the cafeteria back when you were in school here?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Apparently the name lives on, along with the cuisine.”

“Well I am hungry,” she admitted. “So I guess I can’t be too choosy. Yeah, I’ll get something.”

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s just check with Dr. Foley and see if she wants something.”

Bridgett moved past us and knocked, then entered the office. Charmane was on the phone but held up a finger indicating that she was almost done. We waited, and two minutes later she cradled the receiver and pushed back from her desk.

“What’s up?” she asked.

“We’re hungry,” Bridgett told her, moving over to the desk. “Figured I’d go over to the café and get something. Wanted to see if you wanted anything.”

Charmane checked her watch and frowned.

“Didn’t realize it was this late,” she said. “And I am kind of hungry. You know what, I think I’ll join you. We can all get out of here for a while and take a walk over.”

“Okay,” Bridgett said, glancing back at me. I nodded.

Charmane closed a file she had been working on on her computer then stood up, collecting her purse from the waist-high bookcase to the left of her desk. Bridgett dropped her backpack on one of the chairs in front of the desk and then they started out of the office with Leigh leading the way and me bringing up the rear.

Since we were walking I decided to keep the formation that way. Leigh out front about ten feet scanning all the faces and vehicles in our path, and me about five feet behind, far enough so as not to be intrusive, but close enough to be able to respond quickly in the event of an attack. I was also scanning the surrounding area for any sign of a threat, Stanley Toccata in particular.

The Education Building is only about seventy-five yards from the University Center in true distance, but the cafeteria is located on the back side and the front side faces the direction we were walking from. So instead of going in the front of the building we walked around the east side and through the parking lot in the rear, entering through the side doors.

Actually there are two places to eat in the University Center. The main cafeteria is located up on the second floor and has the worst reputation for food preparation that I have ever encountered; at least it did twenty years ago and that probably hadn't changed much over time.

On the lower level a few yards from the bookstore is a small diner type café that has been known to serve better fare, but only just. We opted for this location and were lucky enough to find a table in back when we came in. If it hadn't been finals week and school was in regular session this place would have been totally packed.

Not much had changed since I had eaten here last about eighteen years ago, except the paint job and the youth of the students. Some of the kids in here weren't even alive when I was here. Christ I was getting old. And some days felt it more than others. This was one of those days.

I took the chair that had the wall directly at its back so that I could see the entrance to the café as well as most of the establishment itself. Leigh sat to my left, Bridgett to my right, and Charmane directly across. There were already menus on the table and we each picked them up and gave them a look through.

“Anything good here these days?” I asked, my eyes not really all that pleased with the selections I saw.

“Not really,” Bridgett replied. “But it hasn’t killed anybody yet.”

Leigh smiled.

“Just like my cooking,” she said.

“God I hope not,” I said.

She smirked at me.

“And comments like that will not get you invited to Sunday dinner at my place, Mr. Olin.”

“Well now there’s a piece of good news,” I responded.

Leigh swatted at me with her menu and laughed.

A student-waitress came over and took our drink orders, then went away. When she came back with the drinks we gave her our lunch orders and she went away again.

I picked up my ice tea and had a sip. Not bad. It was kind of hard to screw up ice tea though. However some have succeeded.

“Are you going home after finals, Bridgett?” Leigh asked, sipping her diet coke. “Summer school doesn’t start right away, does it?”

Bridgett shook her head, sampling her own coke.

“No, it does not. But I’m not going home. I’m going to help out with inventory at the bookstore and get ready for summer school. If I

pass everything in the next couple of months I can graduate in August. That's my goal for now, graduating."

Charmane smiled and set down her glass of tea.

"And you'll do it with honors," she told her. "I know you will. You're a very good student, if I do say so myself, and one day you'll make an excellent counselor."

The younger woman beamed at her professor with pride and admiration, and I could tell she was too choked up to respond.

Our meals came and I had to admit that everything looked and smelled good, however that could be deceptive. I'd ordered a burger and onion rings. The burger was adequate, not the best I'd ever had by a long shot, but edible. The onion rings were not. Barely rings at all, and I'm not sure they had actual onions in them either. I let them remain on the side dish while I ate the burger.

"So you're a bona-fide private eye, huh, Leigh?" Charmane asked after swallowing a mouthful of the salad she'd ordered. "That must have some exciting moments."

Leigh chewed and swallowed a bite of her ham and cheese sandwich and took a sip of her soda before responding.

"Very few," she said. "Sometimes there's a little excitement here and there, but mostly it's boring and routine, but it pays the bills, and I'm kind of good at it."

"She's very good at it," I put in. "Especially in the area of surveillance. She can follow anybody and never get spotted. As you can no doubt tell, she knows how to blend into any environment."

"Yeah," Charmane nodded. "When I saw how she was dressed this morning I knew right off she'd fit in perfectly on the campus."

Nobody would ever suspect that she was really a bodyguard, and not just because she's a woman."

"One of her specialties," I said. "Not appearing to be what she is."

"How long have you been in the business?" Bridgett asked.

"About ten years now," Leigh said. "I did a lot of security work part-time when I was younger and married to my first husband. Then I drifted a bit, and had a second marriage and kid. Kind of got into the P.I. thing by accident, and found I was good at it and could make a living, so I stuck with it. So you're going to be a counselor, huh?"

Bridgett nodded, brushing her hair back out of her eyes with her left hand, a little shy when it came to the subject of her future career.

"That's what I'm planning. Dr. Foley has always said that the world would be a far less violent place if more people had somebody to talk to who would actually listen to them without judging, hear the things they had to say and try to offer support rather than opinion or ridicule. I just hope I can help."

Charmane was staring at Bridgett and I could see the delight in her eyes. She really did like this young woman, had taken her under her wing, and would do everything in her power to make sure she succeeded. Which is why she had been so adamant that I protect her.

I finished my tea and the waitress came over and asked if I'd like more. I said I would and the others asked for refills as well.

"What have your colleagues said about your bruises?" I asked Charmane.

She shook her head and gave me a small smile.

“Well, after assuring them that I was not in an abusive relationship, I told them the truth. Most of them had seen something about the incident on the news over the weekend but my name was not mentioned so they didn’t know it was me, until today. They’ve been really sympathetic and supportive. And I was going to wait until I got the final word, but I’ll tell you now, Derrick. The Dean of Students has convinced the provost to pay for your services, and that of anyone you feel you should bring in. Retroactively. All they need now is the president’s signature. And I’m sure she’ll go along with it.”

“Well that’s considerate of them,” I said. “I don’t mind doing a freebie here and there, but I don’t like asking others to do the same, so on behalf of them, please thank the establishment.”

Leigh looked at me and grinned.

The waitress brought our drinks and was in the process of setting them on the table in front of each of us when suddenly I glanced up toward the entrance. And there he stood, dressed just as he had been the last time I saw him. How in the hell did he keep getting into places looking and smelling like *that*?

Stanley Toccata.

His arms were down by his sides and his hands were back behind his legs and I couldn’t tell if he had anything in them. He was wearing a baggy OD/BDU jacket that looked like it was about to fall apart, but it could conceal an entire arsenal of small arms, or an explosives belt for that matter. Sometimes having a fertile imagination was not such a good thing.

Some of the students seated at other tables near the front started to notice him, more likely smelled him at first, and they reacted

predictably. Then Bridgett turned and all the color drained from her face.

“*Stanley!*” she said in an urgent and shrill voice, recoiling.

Leigh turned to look and Charmane glanced back over her shoulder. I grabbed Bridgett and pulled her out of the chair, moving her back behind me as Stanley Toccata started moving into the room, his left hand coming up from his side holding a pistol. His eyes were blank, the emptiest I had ever seen in my life, my own included.

Leigh had her weapon out and was yelling at him to stop. He ignored her. Charmane tried to stand up and I leaned forward, pulling her out of the chair and over the table behind me as well, shoving her down on the floor with Bridgett, my Glock-30 already in my right hand.

The shooting started, three weapons. Toccata’s, Leigh’s, and mine. Two bullets whizzed past my right ear and struck the wall behind me. I flinched a little, ducking down a bit, and kept firing.

Stanley Toccata had moved to the right, getting between a group of frightened students who were trying to flee. He was still firing through and over them but couldn’t get a clear shot, however this did not appear to matter to him. He was like a machine. Cool and deadly.

With the students in the way neither Leigh nor I could get a clean shot either and had to stop firing. We did care about hitting bystanders. That was one of the drawbacks of not being a psychopath.

“Cover them!” I shouted to Leigh, indicating Charmane and Bridgett, and she nodded, moving over to crouch in front of the two women down on the floor hugging each other. I moved forward,

trying to get a clear shot at Toccata, and having no luck. He was being moved back by the rush of horrified students, and now I suspected that his weapon was empty because he had stopped firing too. Then I saw him reach into one of the pockets on his BDU jacket and come out with a large military-style knife, which he promptly began using to slice and jab at people, forcing them away from him. Unfortunately by the time he was clear of bystanders he was all the way back at the entrance. I had my shot now, but he moved with amazing speed and ran out the door.

Fuck!

I glanced back at Leigh. She had Charmane and Bridgett covered. Strictly speaking, my mission was one of protection, not pursuit and apprehension. Or termination. But this had to end. Stanley Toccata could not be allowed to escape this time. That meant I had to break protocol and go after him. And quickly.

I nodded to Leigh, she nodded back, understanding, and then I turned and raced out of the room.

Chapter 41

It wasn't hard to discover the direction in which Stanley Toccata had run. There were several dismayed students standing with mouths agape holding onto to one another and looking toward the lower level lobby doors. Out beyond them was the center of the campus where the quad that gave access to most of the buildings was located. I paused only briefly to slip a fully loaded magazine into my weapon then pushed past everyone and out the door.

Just as I made it outside, over the heads of a bunch of other frightened bystanders, I saw Stanley Toccata maybe twenty yards away and making his way down the hill to the quad of green grass. I went after him, running full-out, afraid that if I didn't catch up with him quickly he'd disappear again.

I had to shove several people out of the way, and one of them, a young Asian woman, fell into another student and they both toppled to the ground. Apologies could come later, and I pushed on, taking in air through my mouth as I ran.

Stanley had avoided the steps that led down the hill and I did the same, careful not to lose my balance and twist my ankle as I ran through the grass and dirt. Up ahead I could see him running steadily, his BDU jacket flapping behind him, his head low. He appeared to be going straight for the rear of Frank Park Samford

Hall, also known as the Administration Building, which set next to the Brock Concert Hall, also known as the *Music Building*. If he made it in there he would be in an enclosed area where there would more than likely be a lot of students and faculty around. Potential hostages, or human shields, or more victims. With that cheery thought in mind I forced myself to move faster, trying to gain on him before he made it to the rear doors of Samford Hall.

Suddenly the rear doors of Brock Hall opened and three students, two male and one female, came out talking and smiling. At first they didn't see the crazed knife-wielding man running toward them, but then the girl did see him, and she gave a start, causing her two male companions to look out toward the quad and they recoiled instantly, one of them taking the girl and pulling her behind him. The other one moved ahead of both of them and assumed a defensive stance that suggested he might have studied some form of the martial arts. Judo perhaps. And probably like a lot of people he thought he was better at it than he really was; he probably wasn't. And Stanley Toccata was a very dangerous individual. I was not going to be able to get to them in time.

The former Army commando didn't even slow down, simply slashed the chest of the young man who confronted him, then moved on, continuing toward Samford Hall. The girl screamed and the other young man rushed to his fallen friend.

Suddenly Stanley stopped, turned, and saw me. I could see he was breathing heavily from the effort of running and he was sweating copiously, the perspiration clear on his glistening forehead despite his unruly hair. He went for the girl, grabbing her right arm and

trying to pull her toward him. She pulled away abruptly and Stanley had to grab her again. But by this time I was close enough, leaped over the two young men on the ground, and hit Stanley with a flying-block, taking him and the girl both down to the concrete walkway behind the building. She hit the ground hard and there was no time to see if she was alright. Stanley still had the knife and was attempting to stick it into me.

I rolled away from him and came up on one knee, raising my Glock. Stanley got to his feet quicker, however, and he dove at me, taking me back down to the concrete and pinning me beneath his weight, my weapon trapped between us. God did he smell horrible!

He head-butted me, I guess attempting to pay me back for what I had done to him the other night in the hallway outside Bridgett's apartment. And now that I got a good look at him I could see that his nose had been broken by my efforts and it was healing poorly. Too *fucking* bad!

I absorbed his head-butt and spit in his eyes, and while he recoiled momentarily, I managed to free my left hand and shove stiffened fingers into his eyes, causing him to shout in pain and anger and sit back a little more. Then I hit him again, this time in the chest with as much of an open-palm strike as I could deliver from the position I was in on my back. Not full power, but sufficient enough to stun him.

I shoved him off of me and rolled to my right, catching my breath as I turned and came up on both knees. Despite the damage I had done to him he still had the focus and determination to keeping coming at me. The knife slashed at my right shoulder and I just

managed to duck to my left and roll away again, but I knew he'd be right behind me, and he was.

As soon as I turned he was there, jabbing the knife at me like a fencer, so I kept on rolling backwards, now in the grass and almost up against the brick wall at the back of Samford Hall. I raised my Glock and swung it at the hand that held the knife, connecting with his wrist and he howled once more. Now my back was against the wall and I quickly got to my knees as Stanley Toccata did the same. He swung a haymaker at my left jaw. I managed to move my head far enough away so as not to take the brunt of the blow, and at the same time shoved my pistol into his side and pulled the trigger. The report was very loud in the confined space and for a second I thought my eardrums would explode.

Stanley Toccata threw himself back several feet and I used that opportunity to breathe again, taking in a joyous lungful of much needed oxygen. In the distance I could see three campus security officers running toward us, guns drawn. Oddly, this did not fill me with confidence because I didn't know what their level of training and skills were and I didn't want to get shot by some trigger-happy campus cop.

I'd taken my eye off of Stanley Toccata for just a split second, but it was enough, now he had a pistol in his hand and was pointing it at me. He fired and I was already diving to the ground, and rolling once again. When I stopped I was on my stomach in the prone position, automatically aiming my weapon in his direction. Then I swore because he had moved behind the girl who was now on her knees crying and holding her head in both hands, blood visible at the

corners of her mouth and nose. He grabbed her by the hair and pulled her up, using her body as a shield.

But then I saw something, an exposed point, and decided to take the chance. I fired a single round, catching him in the ankle. He dropped the girl and fell back to the ground, his face a twisted mass of pain and fury. There was something else in his eyes as well. Something I recognized as grim resolve. He was still a soldier on a mission. The last he'd ever undertake. His weapon came toward me...

I didn't blink, didn't take a breath, simply pulled the trigger, firing twice at his upper torso... and once at his forehead. This time when Stanley Toccata went down he did not get up again. Nonetheless, this time I didn't take my eyes off of him either.

Not even when the campus cops came rushing at me and shouting things like: "*Drop the fucking gun, mother fucker!*"

My word, didn't these fellas know they were working on a conservative Southern Baptist Christian campus with impressionable Christian young men and women who didn't swear or drink or do drugs or have sex or even dance? The language, my good fellows, the language! These kids would have to wash their ears out with lye and say a hundred prayers before they went to bed tonight.

I ignored the security officers, even though they had guns. Something told me they weren't going to shoot, and it was very fortunate for them that they hadn't confronted Stanley Toccata because he would have killed them all without even blinking.

A couple minutes of thorough checking confirmed what I already knew. Stanley Toccata was not breathing and had no pulse or

heartbeat. I didn't think anybody was going to volunteer to administer CPR. Not that it would have done any good.

Satisfied that Stanley was no longer a threat, I holstered my weapon and stood up, facing the security officers who still had their guns drawn and pointing at me.

Suddenly I felt very weary. But on the plus side my mission was now accomplished. I was about to say something to the officers when I noticed a familiar figure standing maybe fifty feet away in a crowd of on-lookers. The figure was dressed in a perfectly tailored pantsuit and wearing dark shades. Female, forty, blond, very attractive.

Shelbee Roberts.

After a few moments she stepped backwards into the crowd and disappeared.

Now I really felt weary.

I sighed and started talking, and for the rest of the day that's all that I did.

Chapter 42

A week after the death of Stanley Toccata I got a call from CID Senior Lead Special Agent Shelbee Roberts. She wanted to meet with me and talk. I couldn't figure out what we had to talk about, but curiosity got the better of me so I agreed to see her. The place she suggested was not that far away from my apartment. George Ward Park. The time selected was eleven p.m. and we met on the south side bleachers. I was a little apprehensive about the meeting and the location, and took the necessary precautions, but went anyway.

When I arrived I found her sitting alone on the top row of the metal bleachers, in the dark, wearing yet another tailored pantsuit. I went up and sat down a couple feet to her left.

"You could have come to my place again," I said after settling down and glancing around.

"I like outdoor meetings," she replied simply. "Less claustrophobic. And meeting in a location that the person you're meeting with has not had an opportunity to prepare for has its advantages."

"I can imagine," I replied, already growing tired of this conversation. "So, Shelbee Roberts, what do we have to talk about? Stanley Toccata is dead, the threat to my client is neutralized. And I imagine that means the threat to yours is neutralized too."

She nodded, glancing around before settling her eyes on me. They were as black as coal but I could still make them out in the darkness.

“How is your client?” she asked.

“Upset,” I said. “She really didn’t want him to die. But she’s also relieved that she’s alive. Sorry about all the people who got hurt in the process. A couple of students were shot, several others cut, some still in critical condition, but thankfully none of them died. Dr. Foley believes she will eventually be okay. But that is beyond my concern. I did the job I was asked to do.”

“Yes, you did,” Shelbee Roberts said. “And rather well. It was a shame about the young man. He was a very good soldier at one time, but in the end he simply went bad.”

“Sure,” I said in a detached tone.

She stared at me some more.

“You don’t sound convinced, Derrick,” she said.

“Do I need to be?” I said.

“Not particularly,” she said. “But I would like to believe you understand that what you did was necessary. Not only for the good of your client, but for the whole country. Derrick, you know what kind of situation this country is facing right now, all of the threats from every quarter. We are in a fight for our very survival and our way of life. It is unfortunate that sometimes good people, people who have sacrificed so much for their country, end up like Stanley Toccata. But it does happen, and in the grand scheme of things perhaps it is even necessary.”

Now I was completely bored with this conversation, and with Shelbee Roberts as well.

“Is that what you wanted to tell me?” I asked, glancing around. “Because if it is, I should be going now. I’m missing my beauty sleep.”

“Actually there is more,” she said, her tone suddenly somber. “I wanted to talk to you about your client, Ms. Lemons.”

“What about her?” I said, suddenly feeling a chill up my spine.

“Well, Derrick, she was engaged to him, lived with him, talked with him. The thing is, my superiors and I are just concerned that he might have told her certain things, things that might, if made public, be very bad for the country, and for national security.”

I shook my head, smiling, feeling absolutely no humor whatsoever.

“Christ you people are something,” I said. “Really something. It wasn’t enough to see to it that Stanley Toccata met his end, you want to make sure that there are no loose ends, no matter how slight. I was right about you, wasn’t I? You’re the Army’s *Madam Fix-it*. A clandestine operator of the first order. You’ve heard of the *Clandestine Mentality*, I assume?”

She smiled a cold half-smile and nodded.

“Of course,” she said, amused, but also without any sign of real humor.

“And you’re a believer, right?”

“Of course,” she said again. “Whole-heartedly. Derrick, you aren’t a newbie. You know how the world works, you served your country for ten years. You know that sometimes there are things that

have to be done, no matter how dirty or unpleasant. And somebody has to do them.”

I nodded, feeling a slight throbbing sensation in my temples.

“Yeah. ‘*Does it need to be done, can it be done, and can plausible deniability be maintained?*’ The only three questions clandestine operators need concern themselves with. Civil law and morality are immaterial considerations in covert and clandestine operations, right?”

“Of course,” Shelbee Roberts responded, her expression transforming into that of a parent growing tired of a petulant child’s foolishness. “It’s the law of the jungle. We have enemies, Derrick. The country has enemies, and those enemies are determined and ruthless. We are justified in doing whatever we have to do in order to stop them.”

“And that’s it, isn’t it?” I said. “Stanley Toccata and his unit did something in Iraq, something that was covertly sanctioned but blew up in their faces, and then the Army wanted it covered up. But something tells me that Stanley couldn’t go along with the cover up. So he quit, and the Army let him. What I don’t understand is why they didn’t simply arrange for an *accident* while he was still over there? It would have saved everybody else a lot of hardship.”

She was silent for a moment, and so was I, staring at one another.

“Derrick, now you’re getting off the path,” Shelbee Roberts said finally. “We were talking about your client. You see...”

The reason the CID agent stopped speaking so abruptly was because I had inserted a small semiautomatic pistol into her mouth

and forced her head back.

“We were not talking about my client you insane bitch!” I said in a low but firm tone, my face very close to hers as the index finger of my right hand took up the slack in the pistol’s trigger. “We’re never going to talk about her again. In fact, after tonight we’re never going to see each other again. Because if I ever lay eyes on you after this I’m going to blow your brains out. I’m reasonably sure Stanley didn’t tell Bridgett anything, and even if he did she could never substantiate it. So it’s over. You’re leaving Birmingham and the whole state of Alabama. Go back to Washington and take up the next black-bag job for your masters. Practice your end of the Clandestine Mentality to your black heart’s content. I don’t care. But if you ever come back here again, be prepared to die. I hope you take me seriously. If you don’t, I don’t care about that either. It’ll be your unmarked grave. People like you turn my fucking stomach. You call yourselves *patriots* because you’re willing to do whatever it takes to preserve the politicians’ lies. Even kill the very people you talk into doing bad things in the name of freedom and democracy, and *National Fucking Security!* You’re all a bunch of fucking nuts and the world would be much better off without you. In my humble opinion. Be that as it may, we’re through talking. Your SIG’s at your back. I’m going to take it and unload it. If you try anything, I’ll kill you. Once I hand the weapon back to you, you’re gonna leave. If you try anything then, I’ll kill you. Clear?”

She tried to nod but the gun in her mouth made it difficult, so I removed it.

Five minutes later I watched her get into her G.O.V. and drive away. I had just made another friend for life. Probably should have blown her brains out. The weapon I held was completely untraceable. Might have to do it anyway some day. Something to look forward to in the future.

I got back into my car and drove home.

Epilogue

Dinner had been perfect, as had the conversation following it, and then there was the thing that we had both been waiting a long time for. That was perfect too. Now we were lying intertwined in the middle of my bed drifting ever-closer to sleep, two of the most satisfied people in Birmingham, possibly the entire southeastern region of the country.

“I missed you,” Traci Brenner whispered in my ear.

I squeezed her tightly, kissing her cheek.

“Missed you too, sweetie,” I said.

Charmane Foley and I had never happened, and, very surprisingly, I didn't regret it. Well not nearly as much as I would have thought. The nineteen year old student still wanted the thirty-nine year old professor. That was the fantasy, and even so, it probably would have been good had it happened, but for the time being I was content being faithful to one woman, even if she was married. Strange as that sounded. But if you haven't figured it out yet, I am a very strange guy.

Traci moaned softly and opened her eyes suddenly, smiling.

“You know,” she whispered. “I could *fuck* you again.”

I smiled.

“Funny,” I said. “I was just thinking the same thing about you.”

She kissed me and I kissed her.

Sleep didn't come for a long time after that, but *we* did.

[1] Guiding principle in Derrick Olin's life.

[2] In August of 2009 Colonial Bank of Alabama failed and was taken over by BB&T of North Carolina, however for the purposes of this series of novels Colonial still exists.

[3] Collateral Damage. Innocent people we didn't intend to kill; but we did!

[4] Order of discharge from the U.S. Armed Forces.

[5] Field Investigative Squadron