

LONG COLD WINTER

A Novel By

JD Couch

Reviews Long Cold Winter, and One Dark Night

Action and suspense is what I found in JD Couch's book, One Dark Night I strongly recommend this book if you like a novel filled with action and suspense from the word go.

Donna J Thompson, Author of Plot Twist

JD Couch Pieces together an intriguing story that shows how anything can happen any where.

Cassandra Zaruba, Author of Liquid Bones

Attention grabbing, edge of your seat suspense is what you will find In One Dark Night by JD Couch. Get your copy today while supplies last.

Dale Martin, Independent Press United Kingdom.

Email the Author at coldweather2970@yahoo.com for any questions or for updates on his upcoming releases.

This story is dedicated to my wife, Colleen, and to my sister-in-law, Dixie Shepherd. Special thanks, is extended to you both for all of your support. And also I would like to say a very special thank you to Joey Bartlett, (my Editor) who could see into the mind of my characters. Thank you for all of your help, and support.
JD Couch.

FORWARD

Hello, constant readers. Our story begins in what turns out to be one of the coldest winters in Harlan City, Kentucky's history. To make things worse, a serial killer is killing women in the city. He selects names from the telephone phone book then pursues them relentlessly, waiting for the opportune moment to strike. He strikes so fast his unsuspecting victims don't know he's there -- until it's too late.

But he soon learns that Jessica Robbins is different from the other girls. She is a woman who will fight to her last breath. She'll use her intelligence, courage, and strength to survive his brutal attacks.

When she finds herself in a hospital after barely surviving the killer's first botched attack, she calls her Uncle, Jack Bridges, in Louisiana. He comes to work with the Harlan City Police and Kentucky State Bureau of Investigation Agent chasing the killer, before the man comes after Jessica again.

Jack Bridges has loved and cared for Jessica since she was a toddler, barely able to walk. When Jack and Jessica's father were both young detectives, her father was killed in the line of duty. Jack made a promise that he would always protect her. Jack Bridges has never broken a promise.

In Harlan City, Bridges meets S.B.I. Agent Albert Champion. Both do everything in their power to protect Jessica. Will they capture the Phonebook Killer? Or will Jessica suffer the menace of the Long Cold Winter and an even colder killer.

Thanks

JD Couch

CHAPTER ONE

Jessica Robbins woke up feeling bad on that cold bitter January morning. Her body ached all over. She felt like she'd been beaten up by a pro boxer.

"Oh great," she sighed, "this is a helluva time to catch the Flu. I'll stop by Charley's drug store and get something for this; before it gets any worse."

She went into the bathroom and filled the tub for a hot bath to soak her aching body. Before she got in, she went into the kitchen and fixed a pot of freshly ground coffee. She had to have at least two cups before she went to work; that was her routine. She kept reminding herself she had to work; sick, or not. She knew if she didn't she couldn't pay her bills and the mortgage on her house would lapse.

She stepped out of the tub, wrapped a towel around her body, walked into her bedroom, put on her blue dress, and then went into the kitchen where the aroma from the coffee was wonderful. She fixed herself a hot cup, added cream and sugar, and then set it on the table. She walked to her front door, opened it, then bent with a groan and got the Harlan City Daily Chronicle off the steps. Inside, she eased into a chair by the table, spread the paper in front of her, and read on the front page, printed in large black letters:

Serial killer still at large in the rural area of Harlan
City;

Eight women, brutally raped and murdered in the past three

months, have the citizens of Harlan City staying closer to their homes. Each of the victims found had two things in common: they were a single woman, living alone, and a page from the telephone book, with a line drawn through their name, was attached to their body. Police Detective Ronnie Bailey is offering a ten thousand dollar reward to anyone willing to come forward with information leading to the arrest and conviction of the killer. The Harlan City and Kentucky State Police are doing everything in their power to put a stop to these killings.

Fear built in the lower part of Jessica's stomach. She lived alone and her phone number was listed.

CHAPTER TWO

Ten minutes later Jessica went into her bedroom and took her purse and coat out of the closet. With the keys to her Dodge Shadow in hand, she walked into the garage, got into her car, and started it. When it warmed up, she opened the garage door with her remote, and then backed out into the street. At the end of her driveway, she noticed a tall man wearing a pair of faded blue jeans and a black sweat shirt with a silver barracuda on each sleeve. Though he wore dark sunglasses, she could feel him staring at her. She tried to shake off the eerie feeling creeping up her spine. She told herself there was really nothing strange about someone standing on that corner of the street. Until today, she knew everyone that stood at that bus stop, but she'd never seen this man before. She put the car in drive and started for town. Ah hell, she thought, I'm just being paranoid.

Twenty-three-year old Jessica Robbins knew she was a pretty woman. It wasn't unusual for men to stare at her. Some told her they loved her long, naturally wavy, blonde hair, others said it was her aqua eyes that drew them to her, and a few said it was her smile. Whatever their confessed reason, she thanked them politely, almost shyly, then refused their invitation to dinner, dancing, or anything else they offered. She'd broken up with the young man she'd dated since eleventh grade, eight months before, and wasn't ready to get involved with anyone else; not yet – not ever.

Charley's Pharmacy came into view. She parked her car and

walked into the small combination drugstore/coffee shop. Past the long counter and booths, past the greeting card display, and past several isles of over-the-counter remedies, way at the back, was Charley's chin high partition dividing the pharmacy from the rest of the store. Charley stood behind it, head down; counting pills for a prescription he was filling.

"Mornin', Charley," Jessica said, sounding like a large croaker. Speaking made her throat hurt and she swallowed a couple times to try to ease the burning and clear the gruffness in her voice.

"Hello, Miss Jessica," Charley Stacey said, looking at her over the top of his glasses. "What can I get for you today?" Charley had been friends with her family since her childhood and was like a grandfather to her. He'd called her Miss Jessica as far back as she could remember.

"I need something for this bug I've caught," Mr. Charley.

He smiled. "Still chasing fireflies and stink bugs, are ya?"

"Nope... Gave that up about fifteen years ago – stink bugs anyway. This is a bug of the annoying, kick my fanny kind – and I don't have time for it. I can't afford to miss work 'because I'm sick.

"You have a fever?"

She felt her head. "I keep shivering, but my head doesn't feel hot."

"You can't tell that way." He ripped open a sterile pack, shoved the end of an electronic thermometer down into it and pulled it out with a fresh, plastic tip on it. He handed the gadget to her, over the counter. "Stick that."

Bad as she felt, she giggled. "Hope you intend for me to -- stick this – in my mouth."

"Of course – under your tongue..." he said looking annoyed, but kind.

Knowing better than to argue with Charley, she stuck it under her tongue. A few moments later the machine he held, connected to the thermometer by a stretchy cord, beeped several times. He held out his free hand. She removed the thermometer and handed it back to him.

He examined the device in his palm then shook his head. “Says 102.4; you’re sick, all right. You need to take yourself back home and climb right back into that bed.” he scolded mildly.

“I’ve got to work.”

“You should be at home, getting plenty of rest.” He popped the plastic tip off the thermometer, into the garbage, and then set the entire gadget aside. He looked down at her and drew his brows together, feigning a stern look. “Go. Home...”

“I can’t do that,” she said earnestly. “What do you recommend for this?”

He shrugged his shoulders in resignation. “It’s your funeral.”

“My grandmother use to say that every time she thought I was making a bad decision.”

“Smart woman; your grandmother...” He came around the side of the partition, walked to the middle isle and grabbed two boxes off a shelf. He went to Jessica and held them out. “The red box is for daytime. It won’t make you sleepy. The blue box is for nighttime. Don’t take it if you’re not going to go to bed. It’ll make you drowsy.”

“Thank you.”

He nodded then headed back behind the partition. She paid him for the medicine. As she turned to leave she heard him mumble, “Smart as that girl is, you’d think she’d have more sense.”

I have plenty of sense, Jessica thought. Its money I’m short on. She went to her car, unlocked it and got in. After dropping her purse and the bag of medicine on the seat next to her, she started the car and headed out of the parking lot. Blocking the exit was the man she’d seen at the bus stop next to her house. He widened his stance and squared his shoulders.

She dropped the car into neutral and gunned her engine.

He didn’t move.

She put it into drive and let it jump forward before slamming on the brakes.

He still didn't move.

She started inching towards him.

"Hey, darlin..!" Donna Jean Bumgarner hollered, clacking across the parking lot in too loose backless heels.

Jessica put on the brakes and waited for Donna Jean to come up to her window.

She didn't. She went straight for the man blocking the exit and threw her arms around him. Even in the high heels, Donna Jean was a good foot shorter than him. "Sorry I'm late, baby," she said. "I had to take Mama to Cut-n-Curl. You know how they are at that place. You can't get the ol' ducks to quit quackin'. I like to never got 'er outa there."

The man put his arms around Donna Jean, but Jessica just knew he had his eyes steadily pinned on her. She shivered – it wasn't from the fever.

Donna Jean tugged him towards her old Ford Bronco and he went with her, turning his attention and charm on the woman clinging to him like a static nylon dress wraps a thigh. When he smiled, he didn't seem so threatening. She inhaled deeply then exhaled slowly. She was letting that front page article she'd read get to her. She tried to dismiss her apprehension, but as she watched Donna Jean walk into Charley's, hanging on the man's arm, she heard Charley's voice in her head saying, *"it's your funeral"*.

CHAPTER THREE

For the first time in four years, Jessica was ten minutes late for work that morning. She usually got there a good thirty minutes before she was supposed to and had coffee ready when her bosses came in.

She walked into the office, hung her coat on the cherry wood rack and, before she could put her purse in her desk drawer, her boss hollered, “Where the hell is my coffee?”

“Brewing,” she hollered back. She dropped her purse in the drawer and the bag of medicine on her desk, and then went into the kitchenette off the waiting room. A few moments later she emerged with a glass of water. While the coffee was brewing she’d take the medicine. She pulled the blue box out, opened it and withdrew a foil wrapped packet. She tore it open, dropped two oblong pills into her palm, then popped them in her mouth one at a time; each pill followed by a sip of water. As she swallowed the second it occurred to her that something was wrong.

“Aw, damn.” She grabbed the blue box off her desk and read the front: *NIGHTTIME COLD AND FLU FORMULA*. She groaned. Charley had told her the blue box was for night and the red for day. They shouldn’t put nighttime medicine in blue boxes; sky blue, like daytime.

Now she not only had to fight the sickness, but soon she'd be fighting off sleep as well.

The phone rang. She answered it. "Good morning; Dalton and Ward, Attorneys at Law. May I help you?"

"Jessica, I need you to come into my office for a minute," Bob Dalton said.

"Yes, Sir," she said. "Be right there." He sounded aggravated. She tossed the blue box into the bag with the red one, and then dropped the bag in the drawer with her purse before heading back to the kitchenette. Never approach an annoyed boss without coffee in hand. Usually it calmed him or the kind gesture of making it for him guilted him into not hollering or, worse yet, firing. If all else failed and she was fired, she could have the satisfaction of throwing it at him. Coffee was a legal secretary's best friend. She half laughed and her humor chased away some of the worry she felt. It wasn't Mr. Dalton that worried her. She knew he wouldn't fire her for being late. It was Donna Jean and the man she'd seen her with. She still couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right about him.

Carrying two cups of fresh coffee, she went into Mr. Dalton's office and sat down in one of the oversized, leather, swivel chairs in front of his huge mahogany desk. She handed one cup to him saying, "Good morning, Sir. Sorry I was late. I'm not feeling --"

He cut her off. "Your lateness isn't what concerns me," he said. He took a sip of his coffee. Everyone's late now and then – except me. I'm always punctual. Eight-thirty every work day, not a minute later... You look like hell."

"I'm not fee--"

"Did you read the Chronicle this morning?"

"Yes, Sir, I did."

"This man they're writing about sounds like a certified psychopath to me. Our city's motto, Small Town Friendly, has become: Small Town

Frightened. The thing I don't understand is how can someone not know they're being followed?"

"He's clever – or someone who blends in. I saw this television show about serial killers and it said most are ordinary looking people, someone in the community."

"That's true." He leaned forward and tapped the front page of the newspaper spread open on his desk. "This sick shit is someone we probably run into everyday: at the park, the gas station, the post office, grocery or drugstore."

She shivered. She pressed the coffee mug she held to her chest and let the warmth seep through her cotton dress. It eased a bit of the chill she felt.

"The color just drained from your face," Mr. Dalton stated.

"I do feel kinda –"

"They're not doing enough to find this guy."

"I'm sure they're doing everything they can."

He set his coffee cup down on the paper. "You be careful. Until they catch him, don't go out at night alone and make sure you lock all your doors and windows when you're at home."

"Don't worry, Boss, I can take care of myself."

"I'm sure you can; just keep your eyes open, okay? I hate training new secretaries."

Jessica smiled. Mr. Dalton sounded gruff and was a bulldog in a courtroom, but he had a heart the size of Inman County.

He picked up his coffee mug and started to take a sip, but hesitated and said, "And you're the first secretary we've had that hasn't either brought a sexual harassment suit against Ward -- or married him."

Johnson "Big John" Ward, the egotistical half of Dalton and Ward, was currently in Nassau on his fourth honeymoon. Or was it his fifth? She couldn't remember. His parent's must have had his number since the day he was born, because *Johnson* was the perfect name for the eternally

randy man. His mind was in his pants and his hand usually up some woman's skirt. She'd managed to avoid both his advances and proposals with her quick wit and her quicker reflexes. He'd finally given up and moved on to court the court stenographer, then a few paralegals, then the one he'd married this time: his ex-wife's step-sister, Judge Eileen Byers. That scandal had been what everyone had been talking about prior to the serial killings.

A wave of sleepiness and sadness caught her and drug her along in its undertow for a moment. She longed for the days of peaceful sleep and silly gossip.

"You okay? You really don't look good."

"I feel . . ." She waited to be interrupted.

"Go on . . . You feel what?"

"Sick."

"This is making us all sick, Jess."

"Not the killings – well, yeah, the killings, but I'm also coming down with something."

"You should go home. I don't have any cases being heard in court today and the town's hibernating because of the killings. I don't think there will be much business."

Jessica yawned; the medicine was kicking in. "I would, but it's the end of the month and my mortgage is due in a few days. I need a full paycheck." She stood. "I can make it through the day." A rush of dizziness washed over her. She swayed then grabbed the back of the chair with her free hand to catch her balance; the whole time trying not to spill her coffee.

"Go home before I end up having my carpet cleaned. You're either going to slosh your coffee on it or hurl. Either way, it'll cost me a steam cleaning. It'll be cheaper if I just pay your wages for the day."

"You are so sweet to me. Thank you."

"You have my cell phone number, right?"

“Yes, Sir...”

“Anything out of the ordinary happens, you call me – and watch your back.”

“I will. Thanks for the warning and the day off.”

He nodded. “Please leave my office door open so I can hear if anyone comes in.”

She walked out to her desk and shuffled through her paperwork for the day to see if there was anything pressing. There was nothing that couldn’t wait until Monday. She grabbed her purse and the pharmacy bag from the drawer, and then started for the door. Hand on the doorknob, she hesitated. Maybe she should tell Mr. Dalton about the man she’d seen first at the bus stop, then in the parking lot. She couldn’t get the man’s image out of her mind: faded jeans, silver barracudas, dark sunglasses. It was as if she was sitting behind the wheel of her car, his dead stare, like daggers, pinning her in place.

But Donna Jean hadn’t seemed frightened of him at all. “I worry too much,” she murmured, putting on her coat. “See you Monday, Mr. Dalton,” she said over her shoulder.

“Call me when you get home.”

“I will.”

“I mean it,” he ordered. “Call..! I want to know you’re safe. There’s a killer out there.”

She opened the door and stepped outside, squinting against the bright sunlight. It was a cool, but beautiful winter day. She looked up and down Main Street, lined with its quaint shops and offices. They’d restored all the old buildings and kept the nostalgic 1950’s look.

It was so hard to believe -- there’s a killer out there.

CHAPTER FOUR

By the time Jessica made it home, she was fighting both nausea and exhaustion. She wasn't sure it was the medicine making her feel so worn out or the virus. She managed to stay on her feet long enough to change into a pair of dark blue fleece sweat pants and an oversized white jersey with JUSTICE printed on the front in big bold letters. The word was inside a circle with a line drawn through it, like the NO SMOKING signs with a cigarette inside a lined through circle. She also made a cup of tea in the microwave and added a little honey. That took the last of her energy. She drug herself to the couch, eased down onto it, propped her feet on the coffee table, and then grabbed the television remote and hit the power button.

There was a *Special Report* on. She sipped her tea as a trustworthy looking newscaster said; "Our top story today is the bazaar and brutal murders plaguing a small Kentucky city. They have state and local authorities baffled. A killer, who chooses victims out of the phonebook, has struck again this morning. Officials found the body of his ninth victim."

Jessica set her cup on a coaster on the end table and leaned forward

to listen closely.

“The twenty-three year old was discovered in her apartment, by a neighbor. A page from the young woman’s phone book was stapled to her chest, her name and address crossed out with a red highlighter. Police Chief, Gerald Boone, is withholding the woman’s name until her family can be notified. This is News Channel Five, more as it develops.”

As much as it hurt to move, Jessica got up and made sure the doors and windows were all locked. She suddenly felt very nauseated. She made it to the bathroom just in time. She vomited until her head was pounding and she was left with only dry heaves. She finally managed to catch her breath and stop. She shuffled into her bedroom, drug the quilt off her bed then went back to the living room and turned off the ringer on her phone. She stretched out on the couch, huddled under the quilt, and turned the sound down on the television. They were still showing clips from the crime site: the front of the apartment complex, neighbors being interviewed.

Jessica couldn’t fight the medication any longer. She shut her eyes and briefly dozed. She opened her eyes for a moment and saw a fuzzy scene of a gurney being wheeled out the front door of the apartment with a body on it, wrapped from head to foot in a kind of sheet or tarp. Next to the two husky EMS men pushing the gurney, the body looked so small . . . so small . . .

* * *

She slept dreamlessly. When she finally woke she checked the clock on the wall above the television. It was almost four in the afternoon. She sat up, every muscle in her body aching. She leaned over the couch’s arm and looked at her phone. The little red light on the base was flashing. She had messages. She picked up the remote phone, punched in *98 then her pass code. A mechanical sounding voice said she had seven messages. The first one was from her mom, wanting her to call as soon as possible.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Jessica sighed.

The next one was from Mr. Dalton. He wanted to know why the hell she hadn’t called him when she got home. “Damn. I knew there was something I forgot.” The next one was also from Mr. Dalton. He’d come by her house during his lunch hour and peeked in her living room window. He’d seen her asleep on the couch and could see she was all right. He ended the call with, “Next time, call, damn it...” She felt bad that he’d spent the better part of his lunch hour driving out to her house to check on her. She called the office, but only got the answering machine. Next she tried his cell phone number. It said the caller was unavailable. She left him a brief message apologizing for not calling when she got home and thanking him for checking on her. She then dialed her voice mail again to listen to the rest of her messages.

Three of the last four were hang-ups; the last one was a man with a deep southern drawl. He said, “You look so good lying there, tucked in like a sweet little girl – my little girl.” She saved the message then called the police.

“Nine-one-one...”

“Robin, its Jessica... Will you please send an officer to my house? I think my name was just added to the killer’s list. I believe he called me. He said he was watching me. I saved the message.”

“Okay, Jessica. Hold a moment.”

She heard Robin dispatch the officer.

Robin came back on the line and said, “An officer is on his way. Make sure your windows and doors are locked.”

“That’s already taken care of,” Jessica assured.

“Stay away from all windows. I’ll stay on the line with you until the officer arrives.” “Okay. Thank you,” Jessica said.

About four minutes passed before the police arrived. The dispatcher told her the officer had just called in and said he was in front of her home and preparing to exit his car and come to her door. Jessica stood

and went to her window to look out. Robin was right, there was an officer striding up her walkway. There were also four more cruisers and an unmarked police car pulling in behind the first officer's car.

When she heard the knock at her door, she unlocked it and opened it just enough to peek out.

"I'm Officer Dean Ledbetter, Ma'am; Harlan City Police."

Jessica put the phone to her ear and said, "Robin?"

"I'm here."

"The officer's here – actually, the entire Harlan City Police Department is here. I think its okay to hang up now. Thank you."

"Anytime... You're in good hands now. Bye."

"Bye." Jessica opened the door and motioned for the officer to enter.

He came in, but the man from the unmarked car stayed outside and said to the four remaining officers, "Campbell, you help Ledbetter search the inside of her house. The rest, search the grounds. Look for footprints, close to the house, under the windows.

The man produced a gold shield and said, "I'm Detective Ronnie Bailey.

"Jessica Robbins."

"May Officer Campbell and I come in?"

"Sure. I'm a little overwhelmed by the response to my call. I didn't expect . . ."

"A detective and a quarter of the city's police force," Detective Bailey said.

"Exactly... Isn't that a bit much?"

"You said you may have received a call from the Phonebook Killer and he said he was watching you. Do you mind if these officers look around your home? We want to make sure there's no one here, but you, and no monitoring devices were installed?

"Oh, God..!" She put her hand over her heart. "It didn't occur to

me he might be inside or might have hidden a camera somewhere. Yes, yes, please check.”

Detective Bailey nodded at the officers and they left the living room; one heading towards the kitchen, the other towards her bedroom. The detective took a small notebook and pen out of a pocket inside the jacket of his dark gray suit. “What makes you think it’s him?”

“When I left for work, I saw a man at the bus stop on the corner. I know everyone who catches the morning bus there and I’d never seen him before. I saw him again in town about thirty minutes later when I was coming out of Charley’s Drugstore. He blocked my way when I tried to leave the parking lot. He didn’t say anything or make any gestures, he just stood there, staring at me, and wouldn’t move -- until Donna Jean Bumgarner came along.

“Donna Jean Bumgarner?” He wrote the name and something else in his notebook.

“Yes. She spoke to him a moment then they walked together towards her Bronco. I went on to work, but ended up leaving early because I’m sick. I came home and went to sleep. When I woke, I checked my messages and there was one from some man saying he had been watching me while I slept. It scared me, so I called the police right away.

“That’s understandable, Ma’am. May I listen to the message?”

“Yes, Sir,” she said. She walked to the end table her phone sat on, picked up the remote receiver and punched in *98, then her code. She quickly went through the messages preceding the one from the man. After the last hang up, she handed the phone to Detective Bailey. He took it and put the receiver to his ear. After listening a moment he pushed the #1 key, repeat message, and listened again. He did this several more times before hanging up the phone and handing it back to her. She set it back in its base.

“Do you recognize the voice?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“Know anyone who might want to play a cruel joke on you?”

“Not a clue,” she said.

Just then one of the officers searching the perimeter of her home came to the open front door and said, “There are two separate sets of footprints outside her living room window.”

“Get someone down here with the portable crime lab to make impressions,” Detective Bailey said, “I also need a recording of the message he left on her phone.”

As the officer turned his back on them to contact the dispatcher, Jessica said, “One set should be Robert Dalton’s. He called and left a message saying he came by and looked in on me through the living room window. I was supposed to call him when I got home, but forgot to. He came by during his lunch hour to see if I was all right. He saw I was okay and sleeping on the couch, so he didn’t wake me.”

“And the second set?”

“No idea.” She shivered at the thought of the killer so close and watching her. She crossed her arms over her chest.

“Describe the man you saw at the bus stop and in the parking lot.”

“He was tall like you; maybe six feet, maybe more. Donna was wearing heels and he was a good foot taller than her, but she’s tiny. He was thin, real thin. He had on old blue jeans and a long sleeve black shirt with silver barracudas on the sleeves. I couldn’t see his eyes because he wore dark sunglasses, but he had brownish blond hair and needed a haircut.

“Talk to Donna Jean Bumgarner. She lives on Big Springs Road, just off Main Street, in that single story apartment complex; the brick one. She can probably tell you a lot more about him than I can. She seemed real friendly with him.”

“I can’t get any information from Miss Bumgarner,” Detective Bailey said.

“Maybe she’s protecting him. She was on him like red on a tomato.”

“No . . .” He looked down a moment, then raised his head and looked her in the eyes. She died this morning.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Victim number nine, Donna Jean Bumgarner.

Jessica couldn't believe it . . . she just couldn't believe it. Tears stung her eyes. She took a deep, ragged breath, trying not to cry. She didn't want to lose it in front of all the cops.

"Apparently, Miss Robbins, you were the last one to see her alive," Detective Bailey said.

She recalled the Channel Five News special report: the exterior shots of the apartment complex, the gurney with the woman's petite body on it. She hadn't recognized the complex because the shots were close up and it never occurred to her the killer would kill during the day. Didn't they do things like that under cover of darkness? Not in daylight, not on beautiful, clear mornings. "I should have done something," she whispered.

"What could you have done?" Detective Bailey said, just as softly. "You can't blame yourself."

She looked him in the eyes. "I could have called and reported the man's suspicious behavior."

"Standing at a bus stop? Standing in your way when you were leaving the parking lot? He could have been entranced watching Miss Bumgarner walk towards him and never seen you. You know how some men are blind to everything around them when a pretty woman's coming

their way. You couldn't see his eyes. You can't know for sure he was looking at you."

"I felt it."

"Truth is, considering the killings; we would have followed up and checked on Miss Bumgarner if you had called – it would have been too late. You saw her at about what -- eight-thirty? She was found by her neighbor when the woman went over there to return a skirt she'd borrowed. She knocked. No one answered. She saw Miss Bumgarner's Bronco parked in front of her apartment, so she knocked again. When there still wasn't an answer, she tried the door and found it open. She opened the door wide enough to holler for Miss Bumgarner and saw her on the living room floor. She ran back to her apartment and called the police. We got the call at eight-fifty-eight. She was dead within fifteen to twenty minutes after you saw her."

"Oh." It was a cry, not a word. Jessica dropped to her knees and covered her face with her hands.

Detective Bailey squatted next to her and said, "We wouldn't have rushed right out to her apartment if you had called."

She put her hands in her lap and looked at him. "You're just saying that to make me feel better."

"No. We're getting dozens of calls an hour. Everyone's scared, especially women living alone. The slightest noise inside or outside their homes and they're on the phone to us. We follow up in the order they come in. By the time you got to work, called, and we made it out there, a half hour to an hour could have passed." He placed his hand over hers. "Believe me; it would have been too late."

"When I called, you were here within minutes."

"You said something that let us know it was the real deal. We've withheld a good bit of information from the media. One of the things is the killer's penchant for calling his victims and trying to frighten them. We've found messages on the women's land lines. We've also

interviewed friends and relatives of victims who reported the woman received disturbing calls shortly before her death.”

“He plays with them before he kills them,” Jessica said, her voice flat with suppressed anger.”

“Yes. He takes his time, learns what he can about them, and does things to intentionally frighten them before he actually attacks.”

“Donna Jean didn’t seem afraid of the man she was with.”

“This murder isn’t consistent with how he operates. He’s never made face to face contact with one of his victims – not that we’re aware of.”

Detective Bailey stood and offered his hand to Jessica. She took it and he easily pulled her to her feet. He’s strong, she thought. A woman would be safe with a man like him. She reluctantly let go of his hand. “So she wasn’t killed by the Phonebook Killer. It was her boyfriend.”

He didn’t say anything.

She sensed he wanted to spare her feelings. “. . . It *was* the killer.”

“There was a sheet from the phone book stapled to her chest -- over her heart – like the others.”

“But the man I saw her with probably wasn’t the killer?”

He shook his head. “Don’t know. Probably not... But we’re going to follow up on the information you’ve given; the description.”

She nodded.

“I need to clarify something here,” he said. “The man you saw may not have been the killer, but the man that left the message is. I’ve heard that voice several times before and each time it was in a message left for a woman who ended up dead.

* * *

After the portable crime lab crew had come and gone, Detective Bailey sent all but the two officers in the house back to their regular

duties. He then asked Jessica to have a seat. She sat on the edge of the couch, her hands clasped in her lap. He closed the living room blinds and curtains and the panels over the sliding glass doors, leading to a small patio off the living room, before coming to stand in front of her. She thought he was going to tell her what the crime lab found.

“Miss Robbins, we have a couple of options,” he said instead. “We can take you into protective custody. That would entail leaving your home and hiding out, so to speak. The upside of doing that is you’ll be safe. The downside is you could be in hiding for a long time; depending on how long it takes to catch the killer.

“What about work?” Jessica asked. “I have to work. I have bills.”

“No savings?”

Jessica looked down and mumbled, “No savings.”

“Didn’t your daddy give you *lecture number twelve*?”

She looked back up at him. He was grinning. She couldn’t help but smile too. “What is *lecture number twelve*?”

“You know the one about putting twenty percent of every paycheck into your savings account.”

“Ah, that one . . . I’m sure he meant to give me lecture number twelve, when I was old enough to understand, but he died shortly after I turned two. I didn’t even know what a piggy bank was, much less a savings account.”

“I’m sorry.” It was his turn to hang his head and mumble. “I didn’t know.”

“Hey, heads up, Rookie,” she said, mimicking a drill sergeant’s tone, standing, and punching him lightly on the shoulder. “How are you gonna dodge the punch if you don’t see it coming? Never look down or back. It’s a given that you’re up to your knees in shit, so you don’t need to look down. Your partner’s got your back covered. Keep your eyes on what’s coming at you from the front – *Lecture. Number... Two.*”

By the time she finished speaking, Detective Bailey was staring at

her in slack-jawed-awe.

“Every rookie in the Academy is told that,” he said. “How do you know it?”

“My dad was a cop and so is my uncle, Mom’s big brother. Uncle Jack tells me that every time I hang my head and feel sorry for myself or ashamed.

“A cop’s kid . . . He looked at her for a long moment then said, “You’re not gonna turn tail, run and hide, are you?”

She crossed her arms over her chest and raised her chin. “Nope... I’m going to take the other option. The one you’re avoiding telling me.”

He stepped closer and looked down into her eyes. “That option could get you dead.”

“If you want to lure a squirrel,” she said, “you’ve got to throw him an acorn -- I’m the nut.”

He laughed. Just then Campbell and Ledbetter came up and told them they’d searched every inch of the house and it was clear; no perpetrators, nor surveillance equipment. “Good,” Detective Bailey said. “Hope you boys don’t have dates tonight. You just drew the short straw and you’re putting in overtime. You already know the layout of the house, so you’re going to help me do the first watch. Drive your cars to the station, change into your civvies -- vests under your shirts -- then have two officers drive you here. One of the two officers will drive my car back to the station after you’re dropped off.”

“Question, Sir,” Officer Campbell said, tucking his hands in his pockets.

“Go ahead.”

“Do you really think he’ll come back here? Everyone on this block knows cops, and the crime lab have been here for the past couple of hours. The way news travels; probably most folks in this town know it too. That means the killer knows. He’s too smart to target Miss Robbins again.”

Officer Ledbetter added, “He’ll know we’re not gonna leave her alone. He’s not going to risk coming after her again. There’s no point baiting him with her.”

“You could both be right,” Detective Bailey agreed. “Odds are; you *are* right. But – if there’s one thing we’ve learned about this guy, it’s he’s relentless. He doesn’t give up. He won’t come back tonight, or tomorrow, or maybe even the day after that – but he’ll come back.”

The detective looked at his watch. “It’s almost seven. Change, eat, and be back by eight-thirty.”

“Yes, Sir,” they both said then left.

Detective Bailey locked the door behind them. When he turned around Jessica was standing there with her arms out. He froze. His face turned red and she’d swear he gasped. It was just a little one, but a gasp all the same. To keep from giggling, she quickly asked what she’d intended to, “May I take your coat? If you’re going to be here for awhile, you might as well get comfortable.”

“My coat . . .?”

“It seemed to take a second for that to sink in. “Yes, your coat.” She moved close to him, reached up, slid her hands under his lapels, and then slipped the coat off his broad shoulders and down his arms. He didn’t take his eyes off hers the entire time. She liked him looking at her like that; like she was vanilla Bavarian cream and he was really hungry for something sweet. She walked away from him, towards the front door. She hung his coat on the brass coat hook on the back of it then faced him. He had his hands clasped behind his back and his head down like he was studying a key piece of evidence on the floor.

“Are you going to stand all night?” she asked.

Without looking at her, he shook his head. He glanced at the couch, then the matching chair across from it. She knew he was deciding what would be his best option. If he sat on the couch she’d sit on the couch also – it was a question of how close. If he sat in the chair, she’d sit

on the couch, at a safe distance. Was the detective a man who took risks? Or played it safe?

He loosened his tie and sat on the couch, at the far end.

He was a man who took *calculated* risks.

Her move...

Two things were obvious: he was attracted to her and he hadn't dated in awhile, because he was nervous as hell being alone with a woman. As much fun as it was, she decided it was best not to give him a hard time. Apparently they were going to be spending a lot of time together so she needed to behave. Well, for the most part – it wouldn't hurt to play just a bit. After all, it was Friday night and she was stuck at home – with a killer stalking her. What was a girl to do?

Yes, she'd sworn off men after she'd caught her boyfriend with another girl – another blond haired, blue eyed girl, the same height and weight she was. It didn't make sense. If he didn't want her, why'd he cheat with someone just like her? The difference had to be in the way they acted. The other girl was stupid and seemed to be all about Owen; he was the girl's whole world. Jessica had a life beyond Owen. She had work, the paralegal classes she took at night, and a few close friends she hung out and shopped with.

Probably sex was the real reason he'd strayed. She had to admit sex with Owen was about as exciting as eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich – and it took longer to eat a P-B and J sandwich.

She plopped down on the couch at the opposite end and tucked her legs in Indian style.

He sat with his knees together, hands tucked between his thighs, watching a television that wasn't turned on. She wondered if the detective was a P-B and J. Maybe not... There had been that look, for just a moment; the Bavarian cream look, the hungry look. "Is it okay if I call you Ronnie? It is Ronnie, right?"

"Yes, Ma'am..."

He was avoiding looking at her and he'd put his Mr. Professional wall up. Damn; he might as well pin his gold shield on his sleeve and hide behind it. "Yes, ma'am; your name is Ronnie or yes, Ma'am; it's all right to call you Ronnie?"

"Both."

"Ronnie, the last time I saw someone sitting like that; all stiff, with their knees pinned together, their hands tucked, and their eyes on a boring subject . . . it was an old woman, sittin' rod straight, on the front pew at church, staring at the preacher like his sermon would open the gates of heaven for her."

He stretched his long legs out, rested one arm along the back of the couch and the other on the couch's arm, then slowly turned his head and looked at her. "What I was thinking would more likely, get me barred from heaven."

"What were you thinking?"

"Can't say..."

"Scared?" She raised one brow; issuing a challenge, more like baiting him.

He half smiled.

"Don't be scared," she whispered with mock sincerity. "You're not in danger."

He laughed. "There isn't a man on this planet in the company of a beautiful woman that can say *he's not in danger of something*."

"Surely you don't consider me threatening."

"Are you saying I'm safe with you?"

"Well protected – under the dictates of Rule Number One."

"Rule Number One?"

"My Uncle Jack may have neglected to inform about number twelve, but he definitely taught me number one."

"And that is . . .?"

"Rule Number One -- never fall for a cop."

“Wise man, your uncle...”

She turned so she could also lay her arm along the back of the couch. If she stretched just a bit and extended her fingers, the tip of her middle finger could just . . . touch . . . the tip . . . of his. Her fingertip brushed his fingertip.

There was an explosion of sound and glass as her metal lawn chair was thrown through her sliding glass doors. Ronnie jumped up then vaulted over the back of the couch. He grabbed Jessica under the arms, pulled her over the back too, and shoved her down.

CHAPTER SIX

He pulled a handgun from his shoulder holster. There was a second gun, a smaller snub nose, in a holster on his belt.

Jessica, hunched down behind the couch, didn't move. A loud bang came from just outside her glass doors followed by something hitting the couch's center back cushion with a "phump".

"Shit!" Ronnie knocked over the lamp on the end table, throwing the room into dimness. There was still some light coming from her kitchen, just enough to faintly see him pull his portable radio from the case on his belt.

He said into it, "Bailey. I'm code eight."

"Copy, code eight, Bailey," the Dispatcher said.

"Suspect is armed and possibly the Phonebook Killer," he added.

"Copy that. Stand by." A moment later she came back on and said, "Bailey, cover is en route to your last location."

"Copy..." He jammed the radio back into its case.

Another round hit the couch. They both ducked. Ronnie leaned across her, aimed his gun around the corner of the couch, and fired twice. The noise was deafening.

He pulled back from her enough to look at her and say, "We gotta get out of here before he comes through those doors." He crawled the short distance to the front door; unlocked and pulled it open. He looked outside, both ways. "Clear." He turned back in Jessica's direction and shot again, this time over the back of the couch, through the shattered

glass windows. “Run,” he said. “Run for my car. Now..!”

As he pulled his keys from his pocket, she crawled to the door then stood and ran towards his car. She heard her front door slam. It was only a few seconds before she felt Ronnie at her back. The lights inside his car went on and the locks came up. He’d hit the remote on his key chain. She jerked open the door, crawled in and scooted to the opposite side, Ronnie right behind her. He put his gun on the seat, between them, shoved the key in the ignition, and started the car. As the engine turned over, the seatbelts automatically slid back and locked into place. He jammed it into drive, caught rubber, and the tires squealed as they took off.

She was slumped down, but sat up just enough to look over the back of the seat when she heard sirens. Far behind, several cars were approaching her house, blue lights flashing.

Three separate voices came over the car radio, all saying they were, “On scene.”

Ronnie grabbed his radio and said, “Bailey. I’ve left the scene with the witness, break -”

“Confirm. Go ahead,” the dispatcher said.

“I’m on Fairview Gap Road, en route to the station. Suspect is still on scene.”

“Copy,” she said. “Are you code four?”

“Yes, we’re okay. Code four for now.”

“ETA..?”

“Less than ten...”

“Copy... I’m dispatching a cover car.”

Suddenly, a vehicle came rushing up behind them, its high beams blaring through their rear window.

“What the hell?” Ronnie said.

He started to reach for his radio, but the vehicle behind them crashed hard into the back of his car. His car swerved left. He grabbed the wheel with both hands straightening his car and getting back into the

right lane.

Jessica glanced behind them. The lights were high. It was a truck on their tail.

“Get down!” Ronnie yelled. “Keep your head down!” He floored the accelerator.

She slumped down again. The G-force pressed her back against the seat. His car was hit from behind again. It swerved left then right. Just as he recovered control of the car, they were slammed a third time. She yelped.

“Where the hell is my back up?” He glanced first at his side mirrors, then his rear view mirror.

She looked at the speedometer; they were doing eighty-seven in a forty-five mile an hour zone. Fairview Gap Road was a winding road. Ronnie hit the brakes and they jerked to a slower speed, but still took a curve on two wheels. He sped up again, but had to hit the breaks just a few moments later when they came to another curve. They slowed again. She saw the lights of the truck start around them on the driver’s side. As it came alongside, she heard a gunshot. The left front window shattered. They hit a straightaway and the truck passed them just as Ronnie swerved left, barely missing the truck’s tailgate. He slumped forward and his head hit the steering wheel.

She grabbed the wheel, kicked his leg aside and stomped the brakes. Before she could do more, they went off the road, hit a drainage ditch, then some rough ground, and then were air born. When they hit ground, the car flipped. They landed upside down, the roof caved, the dash shoved into them, and the windshield a cluster of web like fractures.

At first she was disorientated, but it didn’t take her long to realize what had happened. She fought nausea, swallowing bile burning her throat. She also fought the blackness threatening to engulf her. It felt like her head and heart were pounding in opposing rhythms. The engine wasn’t running, but one headlight was still on and she could see a little

inside the car. She smelled gas, but nothing burning. She felt something drip past the corner of her eye, down her right cheek and brushed the back of her hand across it. She didn't have to look at it to know the wetness was blood. She was cut just over her brow.

She unlocked her seat belt and landed on the car's ceiling, hurting her head and body so bad, she cried out. She curled up there until the pain subsided enough for her to inch over by Ronnie. His head had been thrown back against the headrest and his face was turned towards her. Still locked in by his seatbelt, he was upside down. Blood was draining from his neck. She was afraid to unbuckle the belt and let him drop. If his neck or back was broken it could hurt him even more. She put her hand over the wound and pressed down. She had little strength and couldn't apply much pressure. Blood oozed through her fingers. He opened his eyes.

He tried to say something. She couldn't understand him. "You're going to be okay," she said.

He tried again. "Rule one. Real one..."

"The real *rule number one*..?"

"Yes," he whispered. "Don't leave . . ."

"I won't leave you. I swear."

"No. Leave home without it."

"Leave home without it?"

"Don't . . ."

"Don't leave home without it?"

"Yes. Real . . ."

"The real rule number one is: Don't leave home without it?" Was he delusional?

He found her left hand, lightly squeezed it, and tried to smile.

He was joking – he was actually joking with her. She grinned.

"Now I know you're gonna live," she said, "but I did leave home without it; my purse and wallet."

“No . . .,” he whispered, and then pressed his snub nosed thirty-eight into her hand. “Don’t leave . . . this.” He tried to take a deep breath; it gurgled in his throat.

She wrapped her fingers around the handle; warm from him holding it. The gun... The real rule number one was: Don’t leave home without your gun.

He put his hand over hers and closed his eyes.

“Stay with me,” she said. “Talk to me.”

“I’m going to die here,” he said, eyes still closed.

“No, you’re –” She stopped talking and listened.

“What?”

“Shh . . . Footsteps,” she said close to his ear.

Someone walked up to the car on her side, the glass from her shattered window crunching under his feet when he got close. All she could see was a muddy pair of men’s black boots with silver bands around the toes and heels. She pulled the snub nose from her pants, looked over her shoulder, and aimed it in his direction. The man came to stand so close; the silver bands on the toes were just inside her window. She lay very still, keeping her eyes and gun trained on one of his legs. She didn’t know whether to play dead or try to shoot him in the ankle. She decided shooting him in the ankle, if she could even hit him shooting left handed, wouldn’t do much good, but if he’d just bend over to look in . . . and give her a shot at his face. She pulled her hand away from Ronnie’s neck, wiped it on her shirt and took the gun in her right hand.

Come on, you sick bastard. Take a look. Take a good look.

She heard a siren in the distance. She had no idea how far off the road they’d gone. She glanced at the switch that turned on Ronnie’s car’s siren. If she turned on the siren, the killer would know at least one of them was living. He might stick the gun through the open window and empty it without looking, hoping to kill whoever was still alive. If she didn’t, they might never find them. She didn’t know how far off the road

they'd gone or if the single head light could be seen from the top of the embankment.

She aimed the gun at the man's calf, then looked away long enough to flip the switch to the right, far as it would go, praying the siren worked. The siren wailed. It made her head hurt twice as bad as it did. She looked back towards the man's legs and pulled the trigger. She missed. He was already running away from the car.

She tucked the gun back down the front of her pants, pressed her hand back over the wound on Ronnie's neck, and whispered in his ear, "You're going to be all right. I prom... The world seemed to shift sideways and began spinning. Mercifully, the throbbing in her head and pain throughout her body stopped. Her vision blurred then faded to black .

..

* * *

She couldn't feel her legs – but she could sure feel her head. It hurt like blue-blazes. There was something covering her right eye. Gauze..? Some kind of bandage..? She tried to lift her right hand to touch it. Her arm felt like it was weighted down by a cinder block. She opened her left eye, squinting against bright light. Where was she? The light hurt.

She closed her eye and tried to remember . . . She'd been sick; a virus – but this was more than a stomach virus. There was something else . . . "Miss Robbins? Jessica?"

It was a man's voice. Without opening her eye, she asked, "I'm in a hospital, right?" Her voice was raspy, her throat sore. She tried to clear her throat. "I can't feel my legs."

"Yes, you're in a hospital, but you're going to be all right. They gave you a local anesthetic before they stitched your legs. It should wear off soon and you'll be able to feel them."

There was concern in his voice. And kindness and a certain tone that eased her fear... “I knew it wasn’t Heaven. They say there’s no pain in Heaven and I hurt like hell.”

“It’s not hell either,” the man said, “just Inman County Hospital.” He gently pressed something against her hand then closed her fingers around it. “The nurse told me if you press this button it will release the pain medication from the machine it’s attached to, to the I.V. in your arm.”

She felt the plastic object in her hand. At the top was a button. She pressed it. A few moments passed and she felt a bit nauseated, but that soon went away, replaced by some light-headedness. Then the pain started to ease up.

“Better?” the man asked.

“I made it halfway to Heaven it seems; I’m floating on a cloud,” she said, slurring a bit. “Will you please take this?” She opened her hand, exposing the object he’d given her to release the pain medication. He took it, his warm fingers brushing her palm. “Warm hands...”

“Yours are cold.”

“I feel like . . . my blood’s been drained.”

As he tucked her arm under the top sheet and blanket covering her, he said, “You lost a lot of blood. Your head, face, right arm, and both legs were injured in the accident.”

“Accident . . .” she whispered. “Accident . . .”

“You don’t remember?”

“No.”

“Do you want me to tell you what I know about it?”

“First, tell me your name. I have a feeling what you’ll say will be hard to hear and I want to know who’s –“

“The bearer of bad news..?”

“Is it bad news? I mean, worse than *Harlan City girl totals car and ends up in county hospital?*”

“My name is Al, Albert, Albert Champion.”

“Is there a title that precedes the name, like president or doctor?”

“Agent...”

“Agent..? F.B.I., C.I.A.? Double-O-Seven..?”

“S.B.I...”

“Am I under arrest?” she asked, alarm creeping into her voice. She opened her eye again, fighting the instinct to close it against the stinging brightness. Her eye watered, but she didn’t shut it. She tried focusing on the man sitting in the chair, next to her bed. “Are you here to make sure I don’t escape?”

“They don’t send State Bureau of Investigation Agents for guard duty,” he said.

“And they don’t send them for witness protection either,” she said. Her vision cleared a bit; enough to make out some rough features of the man. He made the small hospital chair he sat on look like it was built for an elf. He had short, dark hair, long legs, big hands, a bigger gun peeking out from under his coat, and a clean shaven, strong jaw line. He also looked like he could pick an average man up and toss him across the room they were in. She had a hard time reconciling the soft, kind voice she’d listened to with her eyes closed, to the one man strike force sitting next to her.

“Actually, they do – send agents for witness protection. In some cases,” he said, moving the chair up, closer to her face. “Can you see me better now? It looked like you were straining to see.”

“Yes, thank you. If you could tone down the lighting in here, it would help too. It’s blinding me.”

He got up and turned off all the lights except the track light above her bed then sat again.

“Is that better?”

She blinked a few times. “Much. Thanks.” She tried to take a deep breath to brace against what was coming next, but it hurt too much to

take more than a shallow breath. Agent Champion had forgotten to mention her ribs were either broken or badly bruised. “Tell me now – please.”

“About the accident?” he asked.

“The accident..? What I witnessed that warrants protection. Who you’re protecting me from...”

He leaned forward and rested his elbows on the edge of the hospital bed. “There’s a . . . a killer. You saw him; at least we think you did. He came after you. You were in a car, trying to escape him.”

She thought, tried to remember. A flicker of a picture came to mind. “It was night.”

“Yes.”

“He was behind us . . .”

“Go on.”

“Us . . .”

“Yes, you were with someone.”

“Detective . . . Detective . . . Ronnie. I was with Ronnie.”

“Detective Ronnie Bailey,” Champion said.

Hearing his name; it was like someone throwing open the doors to a panoramic view of what had happened. Everything that happened appeared in her mind, spread out like an epic mural on a wall; one scene after another -- one horrifying scene after another... She started talking, talking fast, running words together. We were in the house; chair came through the glass doors. Ronnie pulled me behind the couch. The killer shot at us. Ronnie shot back. We ran. We got in his car, driving to the station. We were rammed from behind. It was a truck. He hit us again and again and again then . . . He came alongside; Ronnie’s side. The window exploded. I grabbed the wheel and slid over enough to stomp the brakes, but we went off the road. We flipped. Ronnie was bleeding badly; from his neck.” She was panting, like she wasn’t getting enough air. She was suffocating. Tears stung her open eye and soaked the

bandage covering the other.

Agent Champion reached forward like he was going to hold her, but stopped. Instead he grabbed the plastic gadget he'd given her earlier and pressed the medication button. He mumbled, "God, I hope it's been fifteen minutes."

"Fifteen?" she said.

"You can use this every fifteen minutes – for pain."

She put her hand over her eyes and cried. "For pain," she whispered.

She cried until she felt the medication hit her system like it had the first time. It slowed her breathing and eased the sharp jabs of pain across her ribs, but not the ache in her chest. She put her hand down and glanced over at Agent Champion. He looked like a man does when his child walks up to him with her dead puppy in her arms and says, "A car hit him. Make him better."

She swiped the back of her hand across her eye. "How many..?"

"How many..?" He cocked his to one side.

"Did the killer murder?"

" . . . Nine... Nine women..."

"And one man..?" Her voice broke.

He looked at her for a long moment. She knew he didn't want to say the words, so she said them for him. He'd been kind. He was trying to comfort and take care of her. He deserved a break. "Ronnie died."

He nodded once then looked down, whispering, "I'm sorry."

"Did you know him?" she asked.

He shook his head.

The silence grew longer and longer, until it filled the room and closed around them like damp fog; eerie and chilling; where danger waits, where a relentless killer waits. Sooner or later she'd have to tell Agent Champion the truth about the situation: men who tried to protect her ended up dead. But, right then, she didn't have the strength for truth. She closed

her eye and felt herself sinking deeper and deeper into the softness of the pillow . . . deeper and deeper and deeper . . .

* * *

Champion watched her drift off to sleep. Soon as he was sure she was down, he stood and ran his fingers through his hair. “Damn,” he said, “I’m not good at this.” His first instinct had been to hold her. She’d looked so scared, so broken. He’d almost done it, but seen the med dispenser and took the safe road; another shot of morphine. It had worked. It had calmed her then put her to sleep and, coward that he was, he’d been so grateful. No, he wasn’t good at this.

He could half kill a man with his bare fists and not think twice about it, but put one fragile woman in his hands and he was lost. He looked down at the small, plastic and metal chair and wanted to kick it through the picture window with its pink blinds. Pale green walls and pink blinds; was that supposed to make a dying man feel peaceful – or help an injured, vulnerable woman, at the top of a maniac’s hit list, heal?

He heard the door opening behind him. In one smooth, fast motion he pulled his gun, spun around and aimed at the head of the officer who’d made the mistake of sticking his head inside without an invite.

The officer’s eyes got wide and his mouth formed an O that opened and half closed like a fish’s as he tried to speak, but couldn’t.

Champion wanted to say something that would leave the man feeling like he had the I.Q. of a guppy, but couldn’t after failing to really help or comfort Jessica Robbins and resorting to dealing with her by drugging her. If there was an idiot in the room, it wasn’t the young officer, frozen in the doorway, looking like a clown fish. “You won’t attract many girls with a bullet hole in your forehead,” he finally said, forcing him to half grin, and putting his gun back in his shoulder holster.

The officer relaxed enough to stammer, “W-w-we have a q-

question?”

“Ask.”

“A friend of Miss Robbins dropped off a bouquet of flowers at the nurse’s desk. Can the nurse bring it in?”

“Tell the nurse to step inside.”

The officer backed out and a moment later the day nurse, a middle-aged woman with a face marked by tired compassion, stepped inside.

“You wanted to see me?” She held a bouquet of small, delicate red roses.

“Someone dropped them off for Miss Robbins?” He indicated the flowers with a nod.

“Yes. Just now,” the nurse said.

“Man or woman?”

“Woman...”

“What did she look like?” He took the bouquet from her hands and looked it over. There was a small white envelope tied with a gold ribbon to one of the stems.

“She looked like a . . . a —“

“A what,”

The nurse’s face turned red. She leaned forward and whispered, “A prostitute.”

He squinted at her. “A prostitute...? Describe her.”

“It’s winter, of course,” she said, “She had on a coat, but it was open and I could see underneath she was wearing this tight, thin white shirt you could see her . . . you know . . . her —“

“I know,” he said quickly.

“She also had on a pair of dark green pants that looked like she’d put them on when she was ten then grew up in ‘em. They were too small and real worn. Her hair was long and dyed blond; she had dark roots. She wore too much make-up and too little underwear. You know the kind.”

He raised a brow.

She coughed. “I mean, not personally. You’ve come across the

kind in your line of work, I'm sure."

"I'm sure." Just to jerk her chain he wanted to tell her his last girlfriend was a dancer at the Triple L; Ladies and Liquor Lounge. It was a topless bar in the next county over. He was still feeling humbled by his encounter with Miss Robbins, so resisted the urge to tell the lie just to watch the conservative nurse choke and sputter.

The nurse looked over at Miss Robbins and said, "She doesn't look like the kind who'd have friends like that."

While he'd been waiting for Miss Robbins to wake the first time, he'd had the opportunity to study her closely. Even with bruising on her face and the bandage covering her one eye, he could tell she was pretty. It wasn't in a super model kind of way; it was a simple beauty – genuine beauty. After talking with her, she seemed to be an individual who didn't put on airs. She might have prostitutes for friends, but he doubted it. It wouldn't be because she thought herself above having a hooker for a pal, but she probably didn't run into the type in her small town, *whole wheat, Sunday roast at Mom's circle*.

He turned back to the nurse. "No, Ma'am. She doesn't look the kind. Do you have a sterile glove?"

The nurse went to a steel stand with several drawers in it, next to the bathroom door. From the top drawer, she pulled a rubber glove from an open box of them and handed it to him.

"Thank you." With some difficulty, he pulled the one-size-fits-all glove over his right hand. If it fit any better, it would cut off the circulation in his large hand entirely. Inside the small envelope was a gold embossed card. Holding it by the corner, he eased it out then turned the card over and read it.

In jagged black print was the message: *Get well soon. We have a date.*

CHAPTER SEVEN

He slid the card back in its envelope then asked the nurse, “Will you please have one of the officers come in.”

“Sure. Can I check Miss Robbins first?”

He stepped aside and motioned for her to pass. The nurse looked Miss Robbins over, checked the monitors and the medication machine, documented some information on the chart at the foot of the bed, and then left the room. Her exit was followed by the entrance of the second officer guarding the outside of the hospital room door. Apparently he’d scared the first officer enough the young man would probably avoid him the rest of his watch.

“McCurry, is it?” Champion asked.

“Yes, Sir...”

He handed him the flowers. “Put these in a plastic garbage bag and have Dispatch send an officer down here to pick it up and take it directly to the crime lab.”

The officer looked like he wanted to ask questions, but must have decided it wasn’t in his best interest to do so because he simply said, “Yes, Sir,” and left.

There would be no point asking Miss Robbins if she had a friend

matching the prostitute's description. He knew she didn't. The killer had paid the prostitute to deliver the flowers. It was Sunday. There were no flower shops open on Sundays, only grocery stores. They'd been bought from one of the local stores. He pulled off the rubber glove with a snap, tossed it in the garbage can next to the hospital bed, and then wiggled his fingers until some of the circulation returned. When they stopped tingling, he took his cell phone from the case on his belt, a business card from his coat pocket, and dialed the number on the back.

"Harlan City Police Department," a woman said in a professionally polite voice.

"Chief Boone, please?"

A man with a deep, gruff voice answered, "Boone."

"Sir, this is Agent Champion."

"All quiet down there?" Boone asked.

"We just received a message from the suspect."

"What? He had the balls to call there?"

"Not call, send flowers," Champion said then added, "with a note."

The Chief huffed then said, "When this guy is cornered, hope he tries to fight or shoot his way out. I'd really hate to see the state waste its money on his trial. What flower shop would deliver on a Sunday?"

"From what the nurse described, the woman delivering the flowers appeared to be a hooker. He probably paid her to bring the flowers or buy them from a grocery store and bring them."

"I'll have the officers on duty in the districts where there are grocery stores stop in and question the staff. And the message...?"

"Get well soon. We have a date."

There was a long pause on Chief Boone's end. He finally said, "We have to get her out of there. How soon before she can travel?"

He looked over at Jessica. She looked so fragile and helpless. "The doctor reported nothing's broken, but she has stitches in her face, above her eye and at the corner where a glass fragment was removed. She

also has multiple places on her legs that required stitches. Because they were concerned about head trauma, they only gave her local anesthesia. She woke briefly and couldn't move her legs, but she should soon regain movement. The rest of her injuries are minor cuts and some hellacious bruises. She was lucky.

"That all depends on whether you consider a serial killer wanting to date you lucky. What's she doing now?"

"Sleeping... They have her heavily medicated. I don't think they want her moving any time soon. She could rip out those stitches in her legs." He winced at the half-lie he'd just told. *They* didn't have her heavily medicated; he'd done it because he couldn't deal with her heartbreaking sadness and grief. The part about moving her had been true. She was still too hurt to be far from medical care."

"Did you get her to give you a description of the man?"

"Not yet. She was just conscious for a few minutes and at first she couldn't even remember what happened; the accident. She did manage to recall some details, among them Detective Bailey's death. We didn't get any further than that."

"He knows where she's at," Boone said. "We've got to move her and do it soon. Every minute she's there is one more the killer has to formulate a plan to get at her. I don't know if it's because he believes she can identify him or because he's obsessed with her, but he won't stop until she's dead."

* * *

She had a headache and cuts and bruises now, to go along with the virus -- and her own personal serial killer. What more could a girl want?

Her daddy... There wasn't a day went by she didn't think of her father; wonder what kind of man he was. Her mother and Uncle Jack had told her a lot about him, but she knew there were parts they left out. He

wasn't the perfect husband, father, officer, and man they'd described. She was smart enough to know no man was perfect. She'd managed to read between the lines and figure out that he was courageous to the point of putting himself and others in danger at times. He was stubborn and single minded. When he set his mind on something, nothing came between him and what he wanted. That's how he'd gotten her mother. She was engaged to another man when he'd first met her. He'd maneuvered his way around the fiancé, through the obstacles of her protective friend's, over the wishes and demands of her parents, and into the heart and arms of what he considered the most beautiful woman in Inman County.

His tenacity had also got him killed. He'd gotten in over his head going after two bootlegging brothers turned bud farmers. They co-owned Turtle Rock Mountain and grew the biggest patch of marijuana this side of the Mississippi. He'd underestimated what lengths they'd go to, to protect their harvest. They'd kill.

She wished he was here now, with her, protecting her . . .

She opened her eyes and let them adjust to the light. She saw a man standing a few feet away, half facing her, peeking through the window blinds, intent on whatever he was watching outside. It was . . . Agent . . . Agent Champion. Damn, he was tall. They must have some rule in the S.B.I. that said an agent had to be at least six feet four inches tall. The agents her Uncle Jack had for friends were also very tall.

Her vision had been fuzzy the first time she woke so she hadn't been able to get a good look at him. Now she could see him clearly. He looked to be in his early thirties, was well built, and had short cut black hair and sideburns. He wouldn't be bad looking if it weren't for his eyes and mouth; both had what seemed to be a permanent scowl.

He suddenly turned his head in her direction and their eyes locked. The hard look in his eyes disappeared and was replaced with one of bland observation; a look that took in everything and gave away nothing he was feeling or thinking.

“Did you feel me?” she asked.

“What?” He looked utterly mortified. “I would never do anything like that.”

Guess he hadn’t perfected the *never show your emotions* technique after all. Jessica couldn’t help but laugh. When she did, it made her head pound. She put her hands on her temples and gently pressed to ease the pain. The look on his face was worth the hammering in her head – almost.

“What’s so funny?” Champion asked, drawing his brows together.

She looked over at him and said, “I was referring to you *feeling me looking at you*, not grabbing a feel.”

“... I see. Sorry. I thought –“

“I was accusing you of taking advantage of me while I was out of it.”

“Yes.”

“Are you often accused of illicit acts?”

“Absolutely not... What makes you ask that?” Again the mortified look...

She tried not to smile. “Your immediate assumption; that I was accusing you of touching me. You look like a man who might pull the ol’ sneak-a-feel.”

“I do not.” His voice went up an octave on the last word.

“You’re right,” she said, “you don’t. You look like a man going through life with a permanent tighty-whitey wedgie – seriously repressed and suppressed.”

“You’re trying me.”

She finally allowed herself to smile. “I’m innocent until proven guilty.”

He stepped up next to the bed and gave her a stern look. “You seem to be feeling much better.”

“Deed I do. Someone in my head is hammering out the William Tell Overture, my body was backed over by a locomotive, and my mouth

is so dry they could film, Egypt; Desire among the Dunes, in it. In summary, I feel like hell. But – the first time I woke I felt like I was bumping noses with death, so this is a vast improvement.

He poured her a glass of water from the pitcher on her bedside table and handed it to her.

She took it and waited while he pushed the button raising the top half of the bed. The movement, though slow, hurt and she grimaced. He immediately stopped. “Thank you,” she said, then took a sip of water. “Mmm, I don’t think anything has ever tasted quite so good.”

“Is there anything else you need?”

She looked at him over the top of her cup. “I need to push a few more of your buttons.”

He’d managed to procure a chair that was a better fit. He pulled it up next to the bed then sat; leaning forward, elbows on knees. “Pushing the wrong button could be dangerous. You may want to simply ask me what you want to know.”

“Do you have a short temper? What are you most afraid of? When was the last time you spoke to your mother? What does your wife think of you living for weeks on end with a twenty-something woman?”

“Not usually. Suffocating... Saturday morning. And my *ex*- wife didn’t give a damn who I was with or for how long when I was married to her and certainly doesn’t give a flying monkey’s ass who I spend time with now that we’re divorced. Boxers...”

She pursed her lips and considered his answers a moment then said, “Could have swore you were a tighty-whitey man.” She took another sip of water before asking, “Don’t you want to know why I asked those particular questions?”

“I already know. Since we’re going to be in close quarters for awhile you want to know if small things like leaving your bra hanging on the shower head or snoring when you sleep set me off.”

She lifted her chin. “I don’t snore.”

“We’ll call it purring, then. See, I can compromise. You want to know if I have a good relationship with my mother, because that’s some sort of indicator I’m capable of relating to or connecting with women in general. The question about the wife – you wanted to know if I was available.”

“I. Did. Not.”

He smiled. “Any more questions..?”

She put the cup on the bedside table and crossed her arms over her chest. “I don’t think so. Not at the moment.”

He sat back, looking rather smug.

“Tighty-whiteys.” she said.

“Boxers...” He gave her a look that asked, “Want me to prove it?”

She decided it was best not to challenge him.

She could feel her legs now – and they hurt from toe to thigh. She picked up the covers and looked beneath. There were stitches in the top of her left foot, in both calves, and a long line across her right thigh. Glass and dash... She’d been cut badly when the car flipped and crashed.

She let the covers drop and closed her eyes. Flashes of that night came and went like a strobe light, each bringing a stab of fear or sadness or rage until all the emotions ran together like muddy water in a drainage ditch.

From far away, she heard the soft, calming voice she’d heard the first time she’d awakened. He said, “You’re safe. Tell me about him.”

With her eyes still closed, she said, “The killer stopped his truck and walked down the side of the mountain, over to Ronnie’s car. He stopped by my side and stood there a moment. It wasn’t long. I turned on the car’s siren and he ran. He wore a pair of muddy cowboy boots that had steel on the toes and heels; a metal band on the heel of both boots. He wore faded jeans. I couldn’t see anything above his knees as he ran.”

“That’s good,” Champion softly said. “That’s a start.”

She opened her eyes, but looked down at her hands instead of at

the man at her bedside with the probing questions and deeper probing eyes. “Why did he . . . shoot Ronnie?” she asked.

“Truth...?”

She nodded.

“Probably to get to you,” he quickly added, “or maybe Ronnie had found out something about the killer.”

“I’d given him a description of a man I’d seen that morning with Donna Jean Bumgarner.” She finally looked at him.

“The woman they found dead last Friday morning, in her apartment?”

“Yes.” She pulled the covers up close to her neck. She wasn’t really cold; it made her feel safer, like being tucked in did when she was a little girl. “Ronnie wrote it down in a small notebook he kept in his jacket pocket. I told him I’d seen her with a tall man, around six feet. He was real thin. He had on old blue jeans and a long sleeve black shirt with silver barracudas on the sleeves. He wore dark sunglasses and had brownish blond hair. He wasn’t wearing boots though. I’d remember those boots. He had on black sneakers.”

“Did Detective Bailey pass that information on?”

“I don’t know. The crime lab was there and other officers. He probably told one of them.”

Champion shook his head and sat up straight. “That description wasn’t in the profile they gave me.” More to him than to her, he said, “I wonder why he withheld such important details.”

“Tell me something.” She waited until she had his attention. “I was home alone, asleep, all afternoon. The killer was there, outside my home. Why didn’t he come in and kill me?”

Champion shook his head. “Don’t know. He’d killed that morning. Maybe it was too soon to kill again. He may have a ritual, a way of doing things, an order. Certain things may have to take place or be done before he kills his female victims. I don’t have any solid answers for

you. There are only two things I know for sure.”

“What’s that?”

“He’ll kill again.”

“And..?”

“It won’t be you.”

He looked her straight in the eyes – and she believed him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“I need to call my uncle and let him know what’s happening,” Jessica said. “Maybe he can help. At least he can advise me about what I should tell my mother and what to do about getting my bills paid while I’m temporarily out of work.” She motioned to her body and face then asked, “How long do you think it’ll take all this to heal enough for me to go back to work? Did the doctors give you any idea?”

“You’re hurt pretty bad; a lot of stitches and bruises but . . .”

“But what..?”

“That’s not the main problem.” He debated telling her about the flowers and note. Finally, deciding against it, he simply said, “You’re going to have to remain in protective custody until the killer’s caught. I can’t predict how long that will take.”

“I had this conversation with – with Ronnie. I’m going to tell you the same thing I told him: I can’t spend the rest of my life hiding.”

“If you don’t allow us to protect you, you won’t have a life. He *will* kill you – like he killed Detective Bailey.” She looked at him like she wanted to drop kick him to Tennessee. He stood and went to the window, turning his back to her. Without looking at her, he said, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Hand me the phone.” Her voice was hard. “My uncle will know what to do.”

“Who’s your uncle?” Champion asked, turning to face her.

“His name is Jack Bridges.”

His mouth fell open. “Not the Jack Bridges who used to be a detective here?” he asked sounding a little astonished.

She nodded as she said, “Yep.”

“This just keeps getting better and better.” He smiled sardonically – then frowned. “You’re Jack Bridges niece . . . that means you’re also Wayne Robbins –“

“Daughter... They were the greatest detectives in Kentucky history?”

“I’ll be damned.” He seemed to remember something long before and far away. College I went straight into training for the S.B.I. After completing the training program, one of the first cases I worked, an interstate kidnapping, brought me to this county and face to face with your uncle. Your dad had been gone for sometime by then, but I’d heard all the stories about him and Bridges. I thought they were like most legends; half truth, half bullshit.

Bridges tried to tell me the suspect had accomplices, but I was positive he was in it alone. We figured out where the suspect was and, against Bridge’s advice, I captured the kidnapper and brought him in for questioning, trying to get him to give up the location of the two victims. His *accomplices* shot the five year old boy and dumped him in front of the Post Office, with a note taped around his forearm that said his three year old sister was next if they didn’t get both the money and the suspect we had in custody. The boy survived the gunshot; barely. After that, Bridges essentially told me to stay the hell out of his way and let him handle it before I got everybody involved shot.

“I’d come in, throwing my education, weight and authority around and ended up looking like the rookie fool I was. He came up with a plan

that saved the girl and captured the accomplices, using the man I'd captured and part of the ransom money. That was the first and last time I met your uncle. God, I hope he doesn't remember me."

"He remembers everything," she said.

"He had this name for me . . ."

"What was it?"

"I'm taking that one to my grave. Hopefully he's half forgotten me and definitely what he called me."

"Will you dial the number for me, please?" she asked her tone less harsh than before.

He walked around to the other side of the bed, she told him the number; he dialed it, waited to hear the first ring, and then handed her the phone.

He heard a strong voice on the other end say, "You better have a damn good reason for interrupting the Broncos/Colts game."

Champion went back to his chair and sat. From there, as loud as Bridges talked, it was easy to overhear what he was saying.

"Uncle Jack? It's me Jessica."

"Well, hello there, little darlin'," Bridges said. "I haven't heard from you in a couple weeks. What's been goin' on?"

"It's a long story, Uncle Jack," she said. "I need your help. Something's happened. I'm in . . . the hospital."

"What?" he yelled.

"I was in a car accident. I'm okay for the most part; some cuts and bruises mostly."

"What the hell happened?" Bridges asked.

She looked over at him like a doe caught in the high beams of an oncoming car. He knew she wanted him to take the phone and tell her uncle what had happened, but it was something the man really needed to hear from her. Talking to an S.B.I. agent, especially this man would alarm Bridges even more. "It's okay," he whispered to her. "Just start at the

beginning.”

“Uncle Jack . . . last time we talked I mentioned the women being killed here; remember? Then, eight women had died. Now nine are dead and he’s stalking . . . number ten.”

“What does all this have to do with you having an accident and being in the hospital?”

“I’m number ten.”

* * *

“Shit!” Bridges hollered.

“Uncle Ja –“

“I’m on my way.”

Apparently he put his hand over the mouthpiece, muffling his voice, but Jessica could still hear him tell his wife, Becky, briefly what had happened and that he was going to fly to Harlan City. He then asked her if she’d call the airport and book a flight while he went upstairs and packed.

He came back on the line and said, “Jessica, you need to have police protection. I’m going to call Boone and ask him to have a couple officers guard you until I can get there.”

“I’ve already got two officers outside my door and an S.B. I. agent in my room,” she told him.

“What’s the agent’s name?”

“Albert Champion.”

There was a long pause then Bridges said, “Let me talk to Agent Snuggies.”

She held the phone out to Champion. “He said he wants to talk to Agent Snuggies.” She mouthed, “*Agent Snuggies?*” then put her hand over her mouth to keep from laughing out loud.

He snatched the phone from her hand and said into it, a little too loudly, “Agent Cham-pi-on”

That was all Champion got a chance to say. For the next ninety seconds he listened while Bridges rattled off a long list of instructions. He was speaking so fast Jessica could only catch the occasional word or two.

She didn’t miss her uncle’s final words though. “She gets hurt or worse; first I’ll hunt that sick son-of-a-bitch down, then I’ll hunt you down.”

Champion slowly handed her the phone. She put it to her ear. There was only the dial tone. She tried to hang it up, but couldn’t reach the receiver. He jumped up, rushed around the bed, and hung it up for her. He went back to the opposite side, poured himself a glass of water and dropped into the chair.

She was sure he wished the water he sipped was scotch instead.

CHAPTER NINE

Jessica heard men's voices escalating outside her door; one very agitated -- and very familiar. Agent Champion pulled his gun, squared his stance, and held his weapon in the ready. "No, no, that's my Uncle Jack," Jessica yelled. "Please, let him in," she said, pushing the button to raise the bed so she could sit up.

Champion didn't holster his gun, but cautiously opened the door and started to peek out. Just then the door burst open. Champion jumped back and leveled his gun on the man standing in the doorway with two officers behind him, each trying to hold onto one of the man's thick arms.

"No!" she hollered, trying to get out of bed to get between them. She quickly realized she couldn't; it hurt too bad to move much. She lay back and helplessly watched as the officers tried to stop a man over twice their age and three times their strength. Jack Bridges might be on the short side, but he was stout, strong as a wild boar, twice as stubborn, and three times as dangerous.

Champion kept his gun aimed at her uncle, never taking his eyes off him. "Either shoot my ass or put that damn thing away," Jack said to

him. To the officers he said, “Get your hands off me. I’m here to see my niece and not you or that agent’s magnum will stop me.” He spread his arms and looked at Jessica with a smile. “Peaches...!”

Champion holstered his gun as he said to the two officers, “Let him go. He’s really her uncle.”

Soon as they released him, Bridges sat at her side and gently hugged her. She’d intended to put up a brave front, but the moment she was in his comforting arms, she started to cry and the entire story poured out with her tears. She told him about Donna Jean, the man with her, the police and crime lab at her home, the accident and Ronnie’s death. He held her and listened. She knew he was listening with the ear of a concerned loved one, but also the ear of a police detective with more years experience than she’d even been alive. She was sure Agent Champion was good at what he did, but he wasn’t Jack Bridges and he wasn’t the man who’d sworn to always protect her.

When she finished, he dabbed at her eyes with the end of the sheet and said, “Peaches, I’m going to make all this go away. Okay?”

She sniffled and waited for him to explode into action: taking charge, making things happen, making her safe.

He didn’t.

To her chagrin, he only sat there; solemn and grim. “Uncle Jack?” she whispered.

Jack slowly looked up and into her eyes. “He knew you were alive. He killed the detective, but left you alive.”

“I don’t understand what you’re trying to tell me,” she said. She glanced over at Champion, standing alone by the door. At some point, while she was in her uncle’s arms, the officers must have slipped out. She tried to read the agent’s face. What wasn’t she getting about all this? Champion’s expression was flat. There were no answers there.”

“There’s only one reason you’re not dead,” Jack said, “he has plans for you; very sick plans. He doesn’t give a damn if you saw him or

not. It's not about that. It's about having you."

"So I have to stay in protective custody?"

"Absolutely..."

"Feels more like running to me... You've always told me to stand my ground. That's what I intend to do. I'm going back home and going to make a stand. No psycho's going to force me to leave."

"So now you think you're ready to go right back into the lion's den; you and your stitched up legs. It's hard to stand your ground when you can't stand at all. You could also get Agent Snuggles killed too."

Jack cupped his rough, rugged hands to her cheeks and said. "So young, so brave, so very foolish..."

"Foolish?"

"One man lost his life trying to save you, didn't he?"

She looked away, out the window.

"Do you know how much manpower it would take to guard her twenty-four seven?" he said nodding toward Detective Champion.

She looked at Detective Champion fidgeting by the door.

"Tell her," Jack said.

"Two officers, three shifts a day: seven days a week; forty-two officers and one S.B.I agent.

"That's right," Jack said, "forty two police officers and one . . ." He gave a flippant wave in Champion's direction then said, "and one of – him. All that just so you can stay in town."

"Uncle Jack," she said, "If I don't work, my bills don't get paid. I could lose my home."

"You know I'm the trustee of the trust fund set up for you with your father's life insurance. His will said you weren't supposed to get it until you were twenty-five; mature enough to make sound financial decisions and not throw the money away, but I think in this case we can make an exception. We can use some of that money now to pay your bills, until all this is behind you and the killer is behind bars. Now, aside

from that damn Robbins pride, I don't think there's anything keeping you here."

She took his big hand and squeezed it. "You win. I'll go stay in some hidey-hole, all safe and *snuggie*." She glanced over at Champion. The agent narrowed his eyes at her.

"That's my girl." He patted her hand. To Champion he said, "Do you have a place set up yet?"

"Yes, Sir... We've been waiting for her to be released."

"When will that be?" Jack asked.

"Don't know," Champion said.

Jack stood. "First, I'm going to find her doctor and get a prospective release date. After that I'm going to take a taxi to Barley's Tap Room and get me some chili and chicken wings. Barley's is still open, isn't it? Don't tell me he went out of business. There's no better chili and wings in the south."

"Barley's is still open," Jessica said. "Will you sneak in a pint of chili and ten wings when you come back?"

"I think you should stick to the hospital menu for now," Champion said. You've been banged up pretty bad, inside and out. That kind of food might –"

"Don't you dare mention constipation, gas, heartburn or hemorrhoids? Barley's chili and wings are worth every bit of it." She gave her uncle that *please, please; please* pout that no male from six to sixty could say "no" to.

"Okay," Jack said, "I'll sneak some in, but don't complain when you can't sleep for the heartburn."

"You warnin' me or you?" she asked.

"A little of both... The way I figure it, I may regret it later when I spend half the night sleepless with heartburn, but I really don't think a good night's sleep is something any of us are going to get for awhile." He looked over at Champion and said, "You want me to bring you something

back?”

“Chili and wings sounds good.” He started to reach for his wallet.

“I got it,” Jack said. “You managed to keep the both of you alive this long; the least I can do is give ya a night o’heartburn.” He patted his round belly. “Makes a man feel alive..!” He started to leave, but stopped at the door and turned back. “Oh, Agent Snuggie, try not to shoot me when I come back.” With that, he jerked open the door and left.

They could both hear him loudly giving the officers guarding her door a few *directives* before he actually left, entrusting them with her safety.

Soon as it got quiet outside her room, Jessica asked, “Why does he call you Agent Snuggie.” She tried not to smile.”

Champion looked down and ignored her.

“Aw, come on . . . you can tell me. I’ll never tell.”

He was quiet for a long moment then raised his head and said, “You know those throw-away diapers they have? There use to be a brand called Snuggies.”

“I get it. He called you that back when you were new to the job and green; kinda like a baby.”

“Well, yeah, I was new and green, but that’s not why he called me Snuggie.”

“No?” Champion leaned back against the door and half smiled. “He said I was full of shit and disposable.”

CHAPTER TEN

Geordie paced in front of the single sized bed in his living room, pulling out single strands of his hair, one at a time; a nervous habit he'd developed by kindergarten. He was a single man, livin' in a single bedroom apartment, at the end of a single drive just off the hospital's roadway. The apartments had firstly been built for young doctors to stay in during their residencies, but had been rented out when stayin' uptown in the second story apartments of old shops on historical Main Street had become trendy.

The Law was getting' in his way; comin' between him and the one he wanted. She was perfect: tall and long legged and pretty. He plucked another hair from his head; looked at it and tapped the end. It was like touchin' the point of a pine needle. His hair was coarse and prickly. He dropped it then turned up his shirt's hem. He'd sewn a button there. He unwound several long strands of blond hair he'd wrapped 'round it – her hair. He stopped pacing and let his head fall back. He dragged the strands 'cross his face and down his neck then sniffed them. They didn't smell like her no more. He'd been with the others before their hair lost their scent. This one was hard to get to. They were keepin' them apart.

The Law... He'd shot that one tryin' to take her away from him. He'd died tryin'. The others would die tryin' too. He carefully wrapped

the strands back around the button to keep her close to his skin, close to him. He walked into his dark bedroom.

He slept on the single bed in the living room. He *lived* in the bedroom. It was empty except for a long mirror in a standing black steel frame and a single matching steel chair with a black vinyl seat, placed in front of the mirror, only inches from it. These were smack in the middle of the room. He knew just where they were and didn't need light to find 'em or find what he'd come for. On the chair's seat were two black woven belts. Both were an inch wide and two feet long and each had a polished brass locking buckle with a barracuda etched in it. He gently picked them up and returned to the living room. He put them tenderly in his backpack then fished 'round in the bottom until he felt his sunglasses.

He put them on before he opened the door. He kept his blinds closed and curtains drawn. The room was lit by a single light in the ceiling with only a twenty watt bulb in it. He flipped the light off as he left and locked the door behind him.

Outside, it was overcast so he had to wait only a few moments to adjust to the light. He climbed up into his black Ford F-150, and set his backpack on the spotless floorboard, and then started the truck. Next to him, on the seat, were two pages torn from the local telephone book. One page, unevenly ripped from the book, had names beginning with R on it. The other, carefully torn, had names beginning with C. He fingered the button sewn to the hem of his shirt. He couldn't have Jessica – yet, but he could have the other.

Jessica was supposed to be next. He'd gone to her house right after he'd been with Donna Jean and broke in while Jessica slept. Poor girl had been so sick. He'd wanted to stay and make her feel better, but her damn boss had shown up. He'd already got her hair from her brush in the bathroom, but was forced to rip out the phonebook page with her name on it and slip out the slidin' glass doors. He'd tried to call her about an hour later, but she hadn't answered. He'd left a message, telling her how

sweet she looked.

Then the whole lot had gone wrong.

There'd been the law and the detective and the crime lab. Why'd she call them? None of the others had called the law. They'd fallen for his charm, fallen into his protectin' arms, and fallen into his snare. Jessica had turned to some detective. He'd dared to take her away. He didn't get anything' for his trouble, but dead.

Now there was the agent in her room, two cops outside her door, and a fourth man had just showed up. He didn't know who the older man was, but he'd find out. There was too many to get to her, but he was enduring. He'd already waited over a month. What was a day more, a week, even another month? One by one they'd all leave or get slack then she'd be his.

Usually he didn't need to be with his new woman so soon after breakin' with the last, but he was fretful and mad over those men keepin' his Jessica from him. He'd pulled out hair until there was a two inch bald spot on the right side of his head. He couldn't wait. He needed her now.

He'd been watchin' Amanda almost as long as he'd been watchin' Jessica. She was supposed to come after Jessica, but things being like they was, her time had come sooner. The day after his Donna Jean left him; he'd broken into Amanda's double-wide trailer and stolen the page with her name from her phone book. He'd called her, actin' like he wanted to talk to someone else, but had dialed the wrong number. He'd got her to talk to him. The next day she'd talked to him again. Now she was goin' to have supper with him.

Amanda Crane left her job that afternoon at four-o'clock. She walked into the parking garage, keys in hand, unlocked the driver side door, and got in, but didn't start the car. He watched her from his truck, parked on the street, knowin' she was waitin' for him.

A-man-da... When he was first drawn to a woman, before he found out everything he could about her, he tried to imagine her name.

This one was short, like Donna Jean, but wasn't round and soft like her. She was bony and knobby kneed, but her face was like one of those painted angels at the flea market; lake blue eyes and just the right blush of pink on her cheeks and lips. He'd dreamed her name was Mary or Ruth or Sarah; something biblical. A-man-da... He didn't much like the name at first, but was a bit more pleased when he looked it up and found out it meant *loveable*.

Loveable Amanda...

He waited a couple more minutes while everyone comin' out of the office got in cars and left, using the time to put Jessica's page in the glove compartment and Amanda's in his backpack. When he thought they was all gone, he grabbed his backpack, slung it over his left shoulder and went to Amanda, grinning' like a teen just handed the keys to a Mustang GT. "Hey, baby," he drawled, intentionally comin' up behind her.

She nearly jumped out her open window he scared her so bad. "Damn you to hell and back, Taylor Urban. Don't you know there's a killer runnin' 'round? And there you go sneaking' up on me."

"Sorry, baby," he softly said, twirlin' a thick lock of her strawberry blonde hair 'round his first finger. "Didn't mean to scare my sweet thing..."

"Don't do it no more," she warned. "I got a gun in my purse. I coulda shot you dead."

"Let's not talk about bein' dead. I want you to live long as you can, baby. Live long as you can."

He got in the passenger side of her car and with soft words, softer kisses and shy touches, talked her out of supper and into driving to her trailer instead.

* * *

Some fought him at first. Some didn't. They all fought in the end.

They'd been rollin' 'round in front of the gas log fireplace, kissin' and putting their hands up shirts or down pants for a good thirty minutes.

Geordie was bored with playin' that game and was ready to take it up a few notches; literally. He rolled her onto her back and got on top of her. Close to her ear he whispered, "I can make you feel like no man has ever made you feel – but only if you really want me to. Say yes." He slid his hand down her panties and between her legs.

"Yes," she said her voice breathy.

He pulled his hand from her panties, raised up, knelt between her legs then pulled her so she was sittin' up too. He grabbed the bottom of her shirt and said, "Say yes."

She giggled. "Yes."

He pulled her shirt over her head and slipped off the bra he'd undone earlier. Amanda fell back on the thick carpet, her arms above her head; waiting . . . Smiling.

He pulled off his own shirt then unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans, but left them on. Instead, he kissed his way down her belly 'til he reached her skirt. He unbuttoned it and, before goin' any further, looked her in the eyes and said, "Say yes."

She was breathin' harder now, her face flushed, eyes glassy. "Yes," she said, barely above a whisper. He pulled off her skirt and panties; slow, makin' a show of it.

She grasped his shoulders, tryin' to pull him down on top of her, but he grabbed her hands, kissed the underside of each wrist, and then gently placed them out to her sides. "Slow down, sweet, sweet girl."

He leaned over her, dragged his backpack next to him, unzipped it and pulled a condom out. He ripped it open, tossed the wrapper, shoved his pants down his hips and rolled it on.

"I want you now, Taylor. Hurry..."

"You got me, baby . . ." He snatched one of the belts from his pack, already looped through the buckle, and pulled it over his own head, letting it dangle from 'round his neck like a stiff necktie.

Amanda cocked her head to one side and looked at him like,

“What the hell?”

He grabbed the second belt, also looped through the buckle, then said, “And I got you.” He shoved it down, over her head. Before she could speak or scream, he yanked it tight and locked it down so it held. She immediately reached to release the buckle so she could breathe.

He slapped her face hard; knocking her head to the side. It distracted her long enough for him to cinch the belt around his neck and lock it down, cutting off his own air.

So she couldn’t get to the belt ‘round her throat, he grasped her wrists, diggin’ his nails into her skin. He entered her fast and hard, watchin’ her face as he moved; ‘specially her eyes. Eyes filled with questions, at first. Why was he choking her? Why was he choking himself? The questioning look left fast, followed by one of anger. She needed air. She wanted to live. She was goin’ to fight.

She bucked and twisted, but he stayed on her; kept moving.

He knew what she felt; her body screamin’ for air, her mind screamin’ for mercy. Her struggling got weaker and weaker. There it was; pleading tears, begging eyes.

She was dying – and knew it.

His own body wailed for breath, but was building to a shrieking crescendo. Give me what I need. You can’t outlast me. Give it. Give it..!. Giveitgiveitgiveitgiveit...

There it was; knowing she was seconds from death.

Terror...

It hit him like the crack of a whip then rolled through him in electric shivers. His body convulsed and flashes of white light blinded him.

The pain...

The pleasure...

He was dying.

He was so fucking alive.

On the edge of passing out, he popped the locking buckle and pulled loose the belt 'round his neck. He sucked in great gasps of air, collapsing on top of his sweet girl. His body felt weak, so weak . . . but so good.

After a few moments, he raised up on his elbows. Still trembling', still feeling' powerful and alive, he looked down at Amanda's face. Life had left her eyes. She stared at some place past him.

He brushed his lips across her blue tinged cheek and whispered, "Loveable Amanda."