

Lament for a Broken Girl

Chapter One

Half an hour after leaving the airport I drove into my driveway as usual. I pulled in at an angle and as soon as I slammed the gearshift into park, I lunged for the glove compartment. Keeping my head below the back of the passenger seat, I grabbed my Glock. One time being ambushed in my own driveway was more than enough.

I'd noticed the dark gray Ford behind me as I left Airport Parkway for the county road. After making the several turns to reach my house the Ford was still tailing me. Maybe it would have been wiser to turn toward town and the police station. I hadn't done that.

I scooted my butt down to the passenger side floorboard, raised my head just high enough at the outside edge of the seat back to see through the rear window. I pushed the door handle down just enough to release the catch. The Ford turned into my driveway, and I waited until it had moved far enough that the driver couldn't see both sides of my car. I opened the door just enough to slide to the ground, clutching my weapon two handed. I might make a fool of myself. But my heart as well as my head still hurt when I remembered someone I considered a friend had almost killed me right here.

I heard the other car's door slam and footsteps crunched the gravel as someone walked toward me, I stood up and leveled my weapon center mass.

The best-looking man I'd ever seen, bar none, stopped so suddenly the gravel under his ankle boots slid and he lurched slightly to regain his balance. He threw his hands in the air as shock and a little fear flashed across his face. The fear quickly vanished and he smiled, a mouth full of even white teeth lighting a face tanned to perfection. Whether a result of tanning bulbs or tropical sun, he'd gotten his money's worth.

"I give up. What did I do?" He waited for my answer without fidgeting.

"Nothing yet. Who are you and why did you follow me from the airport?"

His smile widened. "Guess my tip was on the money. You are good."

I kept the Glock trained on him. "I haven't heard a name and your business."

"Oh. Sorry. I'm not used to a pretty woman pointing a gun at me. Eric Winters is the name. I have ID if I can toss it to you."

"I don't think so." I moved ten feet from my car. "Take your wallet out and put it on the trunk of my car, then go back to yours."

"Okay." He reached behind his back slowly and I tensed. But when his hand reappeared, it held his wallet. He walked forward and put it on my car

trunk. As he backed up to the Ford, he said, "I'm a potential client, if it matters. That is, if you're Cameron Locke."

Shit. My luck. But Don Mears had been good-looking, too. And a little flirtatious, even though many in the department assumed I was the girlfriend of his partner, Shac Lane. Keeping the Glock trained on Winters, I plucked his driver's license from his wallet. A quick glance showed it was a military license, with the wings decal of a pilot. Lieutenant in the U. S. Navy, and the face matched, thirty-one years old, address in Biloxi, Mississippi. I glanced at it again, back at him and frowned. The block for race said he was African-American. But his features were pure Caucasian.

A trace of amusement touched his eyes. "It's true."

I ignored the amusement, though it only added to his good looks. "No civilian PI's in Biloxi, Lieutenant Winters?"

"I thought a local PI might be more able to help me." His well-shaped lips drooped a little. "May I lower my arms? They're a tad uncomfortable."

I nodded, slipped his license back in his wallet, and tossed it to him. "Who recommended me?"

He restored the wallet to the back pocket of his perfectly creased dark gray pants, then crossed his arms across his chest, lounged back against his car.

"Had an unexpected delay when my plane developed a false alarm with the landing gear. Landed briefly in Knoxville because of it so I called your police department while I was on the ground. A woman gave me a couple of names, but said you might be the best. So I found your website and office address."

I'd have to thank Grace. She claimed to be envious of my "exciting PI career." Maybe she was. She'd had a pretty exciting career herself while she wore the patrol uniform. Until a shot by a drunken bastard, who was aiming for his wife, hit her in the hip when she pushed the woman aside. A shattered hip and femur put her behind a desk.

The wife stuck by the bastard during his trial for attempted murder, for which he got a ten year sentence. She even took him back after he got early release. Two days later he thanked her by giving her a fatal skull fracture with a fireplace poker. He was now serving life at Riverbend near Nashville.

Unseasonable heat from the late June sun brought my thoughts back to the present. It probably didn't bother my visitor from Mississippi, but I could feel perspiration sliding down between my shoulder blades. I lowered the Glock, and he gave an exaggerated sigh of relief.

I retrieved my tote bag and keys from my car and secured the gun in the holster attached to the inside of the tote bag. I walked to my office door, punched in the combination and pushed it open, assuming he would follow.

"I've sweet iced tea or can make coffee, if you'd like."

Winters followed me inside as the motion-activated lights in my office

brightened. His gaze predictably fell on the fifty-gallon tropical fish tank which took up nearly one whole wall, and he went over to it. I usually didn't go into explanations of why no fish swam in the tank unless someone asked. He didn't.

I wasn't really too lazy to flip a light switch. Dan Traynor had loved technology, especially as it related to security. The office and home he'd left me were crammed with it. Even the fifty-gallon aquarium in which no fish swam had a role in his security precautions. I have to admit last spring's close call had spurred me to add even more features. They included dusk to dawn floodlights outside and security cameras extending throughout my living quarters. Though the latter were not readily detected by guests in my home.

"Tea would be nice, thanks." He dropped into the client chair as I took ice and the pitcher of tea from my compact fridge. I dropped ice in two glasses and poured tea over it.

I knew pilots were trained to notice things and wondered if the Lieutenant had noticed that the display on one of my three desk monitors was not a normal screen saver. The pictures rotating across that screen showed outside views covering all sides of the house. As well as one covering the front door in my living room from the inside.

He took the glass I handed him and turned it up for a long drink. "Good. Not as strong or sweet as our Mississippi tea, but good."

I leaned back against my desk, reached for my notebook. "So what brings you to Wexler Bend, Lieutenant Winters?"

He didn't answer for a moment so I glanced up. His gaze was fixed as he stared toward my desk. As I followed his line of sight, my gaze landed on the monitor next to the one with rotating images. And I realized the adjacent screen was showing the last document I'd worked on, my bank statement. How in God's name did I forget to close it before leaving for the post office? Lieutenant Winters's look was so intense the thought that my gut instinct when he arrived had been spot on flickered through my mind. But I really needed a client at the moment. If he could see clearly the abysmal balance of my account he might be having second thoughts about hiring me for whatever he needed a private detective to look into.