

Monday morning traffic in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex qualified as a form of torture akin to water boarding, but I had steeled myself to endure it because I needed to examine Carter's body and the crime scene.

"Watch it," I yelled. An idiot in a black Escalade executed a three-lane change, crossing inches in front of me to exit, causing me to hit my brakes and risk getting rear-ended by the Mercedes riding my bumper.

I didn't like subjecting Daddy's 1964 GTO 409 to this urban version of a demolition derby. But I loved driving my bright orange hunk of iron; it turned heads the way no modern vehicle ever could. Except maybe a red Porsche 911 or a yellow Lotus Elise. The Goat meant more to me than everything I owned. I'd lovingly cared for and driven it half my life. The automobile wasn't just an integral part of me, it defined me.

Strapped into the 60's version of a bucket seat with four-on-the-floor topped by an ivory-knobbed shifter, the chrome-encased gauges spreading out in front of me across the wide dash, the tach mounted on the steering column winding up, the wind whistling through the crevasses where the canvas mated with the chrome surrounding the windshield, I felt free as a dolphin breaking the water's surface, flying over the waves, knowing the herd of stallions under the hood stood ready at the beck of my right foot. Yeah, yeah, I know, mixed metaphors, but when I spurred those ponies from their lazy canter into a full gallop, the torque thrust me back and rocked my world like nothing else.

Except maybe good sex. If I remembered correctly. It had been a while.

I was headed for the best part of Dallas at the worst time of day. Living in Fort Worth, DFW was more convenient, but Love Field had more options for return flights, and I wasn't sure what time I'd be returning tonight.

I didn't mind getting up early—I always got up early. But not for this crap. To make matters worse, I'd skipped my tai chi and martial arts routine, and I couldn't remember when I'd last missed, except for illness, since I'd begun training at seven under Daddy's tutelage.

So why was I hurtling toward Dallas on I-30 in the dank chill of a dark February pre-dawn, with all size and manner of anthropomorphic predators—jaguars, cougars, vipers, and the like—pursuing my bright orange goat, instead of driving at a more reasonable hour when a greater percentage of those on the road were perhaps sane? Only one reason: To meet with the doc who had performed Carter's autopsy at the Lubbock morgue, and the fact that Dr. Wyatt couldn't, *for whatever reason*, accommodate me later than ten today, or Wednesday.

Exiting west onto Mockingbird Lane from the North Central Expressway, I wished I had argued harder for later today or asked for an appointment on Wednesday afternoon. But time was important in any criminal investigation,

especially a homicide.

I hoped Wyatt's autopsy would bury the specters of accidental death and suicide under a mountain of forensic evidence, and make participating in this demolition derby worthwhile.

The terminal shuttle from the short-term lot came to a stop in front of me. I climbed on. Before I could sit down, the phone in my pocket vibrated. I had turned off the ring while driving. My car didn't have a blue-tooth connection, and I refused to become one of those people who go everywhere with a miniature headset sticking out of an ear. The screen announced my partner was trying to reach me. Partner—I liked the sound of that. Jackson had proposed the change in my status on Friday afternoon, and we'd had a short negotiation that resulted in our shaking hands as partners.

I turned the ringer on, so I wouldn't forget later, took a seat, and answered his call.

"We're on our own," Jackson said. "Everyone in Company C is eyeball deep in other cases. Even the main crime lab in Austin can't assist—they're backed up months. Shameful, that's what it is. They aren't giving this investigation the proper level of priority. It could have been an accident. Even suicide. But I just can't see it, knowing Frank long as I did."

"Abby's certain he was murdered," I said, rushing my words, irritated at myself more than at Jackson, fearing I'd find Carter had shot himself. I was determined to prove he'd been murdered.

"If you'd known Frank, you'd understand," he said, "but that doesn't make it true."

My throat tightened, and I forced out my words in a hoarse whisper, "Gotta go."

I punched *End* on my phone.

*Crap.*

Then I remembered our talk after Abby had left on Sunday. He was committed, but he was reminding me to allow for every possibility in our investigation. I couldn't understand why that same commitment seemed to be lacking in others in the law enforcement fraternity. Maybe the crime scene techs had done a poor job, and the evidence, such as it was, pointed to an unthinkable conclusion. No one on active duty would want to have to render that sort of judgment. Me neither.

I got off the parking shuttle and made my way into the terminal and through security. "Dixie", my ring-tone for Jackson, sang out as I reached the gate. *Now what.*

"Need to patch you into a call," he said.

He introduced me to Major Woodrow Sims, current commander of Company C, and we said hello to one another. Then Jackson continued as if I weren't on the line.

"My partner and I will look into Carter's death. We'll be thorough, and we'll keep you informed," Jackson said, "but I can't promise results by Friday."

The line was silent long enough that I thought I might have lost the signal. Then Sims said, "Would you be interested in a special assignment?"

"Don't know if I could," Jackson said. "Wouldn't a special assignment pose a conflict of interest? I think Abby's retained us."

I thought it odd the way he mentioned our commitment to work for Abby. Then I realized she had never said she wanted to retain us. But I had no doubt she had done so, and it sounded as though Jackson was operating under the same impression.

Sims said, "Some might see it that way, but I know your reputation."

I heard Jackson clear his throat—his way of dismissing what others might think.

"No one would ever believe your findings could be colored by personal interest, no question. Don't give it another thought," Sims said.

"If you say so," Jackson said, doubt clouding his words.

"And you're younger than most retirees," Sims went on, "so I figure you have the energy. You're what, fifty-four?"

"Five," Jackson said.

Sims chuckled. "Damn. Guess I missed your birthday."

"Last week," Jackson said.

*Birthday—last week?* Jackson hadn't let on to me about it.

Sims continued. "I don't suppose I could keep you out of it anyway, even if Abigail hadn't come to you. Frank's the one brought you into the Rangers, wasn't he?"

Jackson grunted.

"You may as well have official credentials. Don't get your hopes up—I don't plan to pay you, not even expenses. No budget. But I'll provide active Ranger status."

"Not much's changed in three years." Jackson coughed that little laugh of his. I could picture him raising his eyebrows and holding his right hand in the air, palm half up, as if to say *so what else is new*.

"Yeah, you're right about that—some things never change." Sims said.

"Okay," Jackson said, "I'll take you up on your offer. It'll be good to be active again, if only on a temporary basis. Mickey is on her way there. She's a forensics expert—ten years of experience. Could you arrange for her to review the

evidence gathered at the scene?”

Sims hesitated—maybe rethinking assigning the investigation to Jackson, now that he knew his partner was female. Sims probably thought my name, Mickey, signified I was a man when Jackson introduced us.

Then Sims came back. “I’ll issue credentials for you both, soon as I hang up, and call the Lubbock chief—let him know we’ll be handling it with you as lead.”

“That it?” Jackson said.

“One more thing ... I know you were close to Frank, but don’t try to make a size twelve fit a size nine boot. I’ll give you two weeks.”

“Got it,” Jackson said, and broke the connection.

It seemed everyone feared Carter’s death was something other than murder. Except Abby.

My money was on her.

Group C for the Lubbock flight queued up—Southwest Airlines boarded in three groups, A, B, and C, and had no assigned seating. Most passengers wanted an A or B boarding pass, but I didn’t mind C, long as the flight wasn’t full, and I liked having no designated seat.

Good thing I was small. I could pick my seat from those few remaining—have half a chance to avoid the sumo-wrestler-size passengers.

Maybe I’d get lucky, sit next to a lean cowboy.