

Prologue

August 19 St. Simons Island, GA

I knew the worst of it was over the minute I opened my eyes. The invisible lead weights that made every step a struggle were gone and I'd lost the urge to block out the sunlight I now saw peeking through the drapes. Maybe it was a week at the beach with a bottle of wine to top off each evening. Maybe it was the old saw "time heals all wounds" proving it self to be more than a cliché. Who's to say? All I knew was that hiding under the covers had lost its appeal. The visions of Mr. Hanson's murder were still vivid--too vivid--but they had stopped dominating all of my waking and sleeping hours.

The shrinks say the first step to overcoming depression is getting back out among the living again. Since dealing with what Churchill referred to as the "black dog" was something I'd never experienced before, I was open to anything that would make the dark feelings disappear. What the hell, I figured. Getting out wouldn't kill me and it might even help, so I followed the experts' advice. Fixing my hair and putting on some badly-needed makeup from the Lancome bag that was never far from reach, I slipped into a nice outfit, left the solitude of my rented condo for the first time in a week and found a quiet little restaurant off the beaten tourist path. To my surprise and delight, I actually tasted food and found myself enjoying the stuffed flounder the waiter served discretely to the lonely lady dining alone. Why do they always assume that just because you're alone, you must be tragically lonely? It's such a ridiculous misconception.

I left very little on my plate and decided that a walk might help burn off the meal. The approaching dusk still gave me plenty of light as I headed down to the pier to enjoy the sunset. Hindsight being 20/20, I should have just strolled back to my condo. But I didn't. I breathed in the cool, clean air the afternoon's rain had left behind and felt a spring in my step that had been missing for a longer time than I wanted to think about.



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BY
JOHN FEDACK
A LIZ CHANDLER NOVEL

As I neared the pier, I saw a crowd gathered. Damn! You'd think the tourists had never seen the sun go down. But as I drew closer, I saw that it wasn't the sun that had them so fascinated.

My ears caught it before my eyes did--a whacking sound like someone beating the dirt out of a rug. What was this? My curiosity drew me into the crowd, even as I told myself that I was far from my jurisdiction and an Atlanta police detective had no business sticking her nose into whatever was happening.

But stick it I did. Pushing my way to the front of the pack, I saw a young guy--no more than twenty-five--swinging a heavy stick down on something on the pier. Then I saw what the something was: a small shark, still alive, but just barely. The scrawny punk whacked the creature on the head a couple of times, moved away, then stepped in to dole out more punishment, spinning the stick like one of those cartoon Ninja turtles. He was performing for the tourists, who encouraged him with laughter and applause. One fat slug who would most likely die from gluttony before he turned forty even held his small son up on his shoulders to get a better view of the sideshow. These cretins reminded me of rubber-neckers on the freeway who bring traffic to a halt at the bloodthirsty possibility that a simple fender-bender might turn out to be a grotesque death scene.


First I was nauseated, then I got mad.

"Kill the shark or throw it back in the water," I demanded in my best cop-busting-a-crack dealer tone.

Several people turned to see who was raining on their parade. A couple of them seemed about to speak, but saw the expression on my face and thought better of it, sidling as far away from me as they could get without seeming too conspicuous.

The unwashed little Ninja wannabe raised his stick again, but stopped in mid-swing when I said, a little louder this time, "Everybody else heard me. Are you deaf or just stupid?"

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That was greeted with a sneer that sent me from mad straight in to dangerous.

"I'm a police officer and I'm telling you to put the stick down. Move away from the shark. Now!"

"Bite me, lady cop, " he snarled. "Why don't you *try* to make me move?"

It was music to my ears. I calmly pulled the 9 millimeter out of my fanny pack and put the shark out of its misery with a single shot just above the left eye. Then I slowly turned around to face the punk, who still had that annoying sneer on his face. I grabbed the stick out of his hand and hurled it as far as I could into the ocean, then turned back to him and the now-silent crowd.

"Show's over, folks, " I said, not even trying to keep the contempt I felt for them out of my voice. "Why don't you all get together and watch "Jaws" tonight? Maybe it'll give you a little perspective." The tourists wasted no time leaving the scene, most with their eyes lowered and a red flush that didn't come from the sun on their faces. Now there were just two.

"Not a nice way to treat another living creature...don't you agree?" I asked quietly. He paused for a split second, then moved toward me. I looked him up and down, slowly letting my eyes meet his with a cold stare.

"What do you figure your odds are?" I challenged in the same quiet tone. "You've lost your big stick, I've got a gun and at least four inches on you. How's your insurance coverage?"

He looked at me with pure hatred and spat, "Bitch! Xena warrior dyke bitch!"

That was all I needed. Before he could get another word out, I had his right arm behind his back and the muzzle of my gun against his temple.

"I could kill you right now and never even get my wrist slapped," I whispered. "And here's a promise: I'll be watching you. If you ever



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mistreat another helpless creature... and I mean *any* creature, I'll see that you get so much worse than you give."

Then I spun him around, put my right shoe squarely on his rear end and sent him flying off the pier. The sound of his splashing and cursing grew fainter as I walked away and I sent up a silent prayer that the little insect didn't know how to swim.

My stroll back to the condo took twice as long as it should have. I needed to think and aimless walking helped. By the time I put the key in the door, I knew exactly what I was going to do. I finally knew what I *had* to do.