

Chapter One

“Had a bit of trouble here in the garden yesterday,” Mr. Thigpen said. I never get tired of hearing an older Southern gentleman say garden. The “r” is never pronounced, and the word sounds like “godden”.

It was a bright early morning. Following yesterday’s heavy rain, the colors were vivid, almost sharp to the eye.

I walked alongside Mr. Thigpen on the blue slate path leading to his formal garden. The focal point was a stunning water feature. That fountain is something else. It’s one of those huge three-tiered gray limestone fountains that look like something out of another century. One of the finest I’ve seen.

“Damn rain washed out all the crocus bulbs I’d planted. Had to run all over the yard, hunt ’em down, plant ’em again. Took me hours.”

I doubted that, but it turned out he had a lot more to worry about than scattered bulbs.

I was on the verge of telling him that there were actually some fall-blooming crocus, when a woman, dressed all in black, stepped out from behind the fountain as if she’d been waiting. Her long gauze dress went to her ankles and touched the tops of her worn, low top boots. The most unusual item of clothing though was the long veil, wrapped around her face and neck.

The assassin’s movement caused Mr. Thigpen to freeze. I was a couple feet behind him, and I stopped, too. The black-draped woman stood about five feet from Mr. Thigpen, held up a pistol, and fired shot after shot into him without pause. He never said a word, just made a groaning sound that could have been surprise or pain. He crumpled to his knees, then braced himself with his hands. Slowly, he fell forward until his face and body were resting on the ground. This all happened within seconds.

She swung her gun hand. For a few moments, the gun was pointed at my chest, and then she brought her hand up slowly until the weapon was aimed at the middle of my forehead. Here was one of those moments that one rehearses in daydreams. Everybody does this, right? Anyway, I’m afraid to say I did nothing. I didn’t charge and try to dislodge the gun. I didn’t turn and run. I didn’t even fall down on my knees and start boo-hoo crying. I just stood there, looking where I thought her eyes were, all the time wondering if this was a good idea. Would I be asked to identify a woman in a veil — and could I? The visual image of three to five women in burqas in a police lineup was ridiculous.

This went on for a while. Then I put my brain into rewind. How many shots had she fired? Don’t most guns have six bullets? I used my echoic memory, but could never decide if she’d fired five or six. And, boy, it made a difference, buddy.

For some reason, I glanced down at poor Mr. Thigpen. I didn’t need a medical degree to know he was dead. It was at that point that the woman made a swooshing noise and was gone. I don’t mean like magic. I mean she hiked up her dress and high-tailed it into the woods, heading in the direction of country singer Donnie Wembley’s estate.

I called 911 and waited for the police. Meanwhile, I knocked on windows and doors of Mr. Thigpen’s house, not particularly wanting to wait outside while there was a murderer on the loose. No one responded to my raps so I hid behind a white wood pillar on the covered porch until I heard the sirens.

The police asked a bunch of questions, some of which made sense, and then told me I could go, but not to reveal too many details about what I’d seen. After the police released me, I drove around for a while. I heard a helicopter and wondered if they were searching for the mystery woman in black.

I wasn't hungry though it was around 11:30 in the morning. I had the local radio station on, and they finally reported the murder. It was described as a shooting in a Buckhead neighborhood. According to the announcer, one was dead. It felt weird to hear about it and know how intimately I was involved.

I didn't want to do any more work that day, and I didn't want to go home. Nora was already at school. Today was her long day. She had a morning and afternoon class, and then would be teaching a film theory class later that evening. She wouldn't be back until around ten. I thought about calling her, but decided against it. She was better off not knowing. She'd have a difficult time focusing, and I decided to wait until I saw her.

I started worrying about reporters. What if they found my name and came after me, shoving a camera or microphone in my face? No thanks.

I drove around some more and ended up at Gail's real estate office on North Druid Hills. It's in one of those buildings that's supposed to look like a brick Colonial but instead looks like a new office building. Gail works as an administrative assistant for Century 21, but never seems to do anything. I knew it'd be okay to go and chat. In fact, when I got there she was looking on eBay for Villeroy and Boch Acapulco plates to add to her collection.

She wore a gray blazer and slacks. Tugging on the string of pearls around her neck she appeared distressed.

"Find anything?" I asked.

She shook her head. "They get you on the shipping. Fifteen dollars for shipping? Give me a fucking break. I should turn the fucking bastard in." Gail was probably the most foul-mouthed person I knew. Her profanity was a sharp contrast to her conservative appearance.

I sat in the red upholstered chair next to her desk. She faced me, apparently sensing I had something important to say. "A client of mine got murdered today," I said. "In front of me."

She blinked, trying to process what I said. Once I told her the whole story in short fragmented sentences, she left eBay and went to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* site to see if the murder had been reported. It hadn't, but I can't say I was surprised. The *AJC* can be slow to update their site. Another thing, Mr. Thigpen's Buckhead neighborhood is connected; they do things differently there.

Gail is a great audience. When I told my story, she reacted with gasps, a hand over her mouth, wide eyes — the whole bit. But, bless her, she let me finish before she asked questions. Maybe that's why I went to her first. Most people interrupt a story something awful. I wanted to say the whole thing without being interrupted.

"Did you think about throwing yourself in front of him?" she asked.

I narrowed my eyes at Gail. "I'm his gardener. Not his bodyguard."

Gail is an ex from a long time ago. Always way too dramatic. Throw myself in front of him? That's exactly what I mean about being too dramatic. She's one of those who, every time she has a headache, it's a tumor. When I first met her she worked as a library assistant. "I'm the keeper of knowledge," she solemnly told me when I asked what she did.

"God, you could have been killed, Nickie!" she exclaimed. "Oh my God! Killed! Snuffed out like a candle!"

She gets kind of hysterical, too.

"God didn't want me yet," I said. Gail shoved me because she knew I was being sacrilegious. It's not that I don't believe in God. I just don't believe in a God who's micromanaging my life and deciding all of a sudden, "Nope. Not yet." Still, I joked because the incident had shaken me. Bad. I kept seeing that gun pointed at me and thought, yeah, I could have been killed. As it was, someone was sure enough dead. I

didn't know Mr. Thigpen well, but I don't do well with the death of anything, especially one that involved senseless violence. I kept hearing and seeing the murder replay in my brain.

After I left Gail I went to a little restaurant in downtown Decatur named Pauline's Diner. It's in an ancient-looking yellow stucco building not far from the Square. You can't miss it because the door is bright red. Blood red, if you will. Sorry, but the murder had become like a car accident. You know how you relive an accident over and over? I was doing that with the demise of Mr. Thigpen. For some reason, I kept seeing the blood pooling out from his body.

Anyway, the Pauline's Diner sign is red with white writing. It's Becky's handwriting—I'd know it anywhere. It's the cursive style we learned from those green signs hanging up on schoolroom walls. Most of us have long since abandoned that formal style in favor of something unreadable, but not Becky.

Becky, another ex, works at Pauline's as a cook. I usually stop by when Nora has a night class. Becky makes me an incredible vegetarian stroganoff, and it gives us a chance to talk. Unfortunately, Becky is a full-blown alcoholic so it's best to see her when she's at work. When she's at Pauline's she's fine. But once she goes home she drinks vodka and tonic until she passes out. It's been like this for years, and I don't see that it's ever going to change. That was the biggest reason we broke up — it was awful watching her drink herself to death night after night. She once told me that she'd never had a drink until she was in college. Then one night she had a screwdriver. Someone told her, "It's just orange juice." That was it. She got drunk and never stopped drinking. She's like Barney on *The Simpsons*. Just one drink, and a person's life is changed forever. Becky didn't graduate, and pretty much went from job to job until she got the job at Pauline's. Pauline is one of her exes, too. Well, they say they're exes, but I suspect they've never totally broken. Still, Pauline is apparently a better influence on Becky than I ever was.

Anyway, sober, Becky's great. When it's about fifteen minutes or so before she gets off from work, you can start to see the change. She starts sweating, just going crazy, anticipating that drink once she gets home. By the time I got to Pauline's it was long before Becky would be getting off, so she was fine. I briefly told her my story while I stood with her in the small, steamy kitchen.

"Nora's going to flip out," she said. She wiped her hands on her jeans. "I wonder why the shooter didn't kill you." Becky can be blunt sometimes.

I swallowed.

Becky thought some more. She was smoking, which she wasn't supposed to do, of course. There's some rule against smoking in a restaurant kitchen. I would have preferred she not smoke while making my dinner, but, hey, she was making my stroganoff, after all. Right now the cigarette was stuck between her lips, and she squinted as she tossed the mushroom mixture in the frying pan. "If it were me, I would have killed you. No witnesses."

"Well, thank God she didn't."

"Is he married?" she asked. "The dead guy?"

"Mr. Thigpen," I corrected, thinking he deserved more respect than to be referred to as "the dead guy". I shook my head. "I don't know. I don't think so."

"If he is, that's probably who done it." Sometimes Becky talks like that. She does it on purpose to sound, well, I don't know what. When I say she was in college, I mean she was in her third year at Penn State. She's smart — that's why it's so difficult watching her kill brain cells day after day. She likes to think she's tough, and maybe she is. But I know her pretty well, and I also know she's not as tough as she seems. Underneath her gruff exterior are three more gruff exteriors, but finally you get to her heart, and it's golden. But pickled.

I was amused. "If he's not married, then who did it?"

"Family member," she said. She tugged at her soiled white t-shirt. "Who else is going to kill you but someone who loves you."

"Okay. If it's not a family member or a wife?"

She thought for a moment. "Business partner."

"And then—"

"Annoyed cook."

When I left Pauline's I slipped three five dollar bills in the tip jar as I always do. Times are pretty good for Nora and me, and I know most of it will get doled out to Becky.

Dad takes care of the dogs when Nora has a late night. He's not ever going to get any grandkids so he's taken to treat Min and Bill as substitutes. I don't like leaving the dogs alone for too long, and Dad enjoys the company. I think they mostly nap and eat. Sometimes he takes them to Wendy's, even though he says he doesn't.

I had already decided I wasn't going to tell Dad about the murder. When I was a kid Dad did a great job of protecting me. I used to be afraid of storms. Don't ask me why, but I'd start crying when I heard thunder. Dad told me it was just God bowling up in heaven, and then he'd get me to try to guess how many pins He'd knocked down. He did that kind of thing a lot. I try to do the same now. If I told him, it'd just worry him and make him stay awake staring at the ceiling for hours. Would you do that to your Dad? I don't think so. He'll find out about it eventually, but by then I won't be all shook up and will be able to joke about it.

As it was, I almost lost it when I walked into his condo. CNN was on, and it was blaring. Bill is totally deaf, and Dad's hearing is mostly gone. Min heard me, though, and got up on the back of the couch and silently wagged her tail about a hundred miles an hour. She wanted me all to her selfish self at that moment and didn't want to alert the others. She can certainly make a yapping ruckus when she wants. I knelt down in the small parquet foyer and motioned her to me.

The motion of Min jumping off the back of the couch stirred Dad and Bill. Dad, dressed in his light blue sweat suit and white tennis shoes, glanced around and gave me that wave he gives me when he doesn't want me to know he was dozing. Old Bill gingerly climbed off the couch the civilized way and sidled stiffly toward me, greeting me with high-pitched whimpers. Bill always acts embarrassed when I'm able to sneak in without him knowing. He gets this goofy look, like he's on the verge of putting on spectacles and readjusting a hearing aid.

I nuzzled my head against the two French fry-scented dogs and suddenly felt weepy. I hid my face for as long as I could from Dad, afraid my emotions might betray me. Don't think I was crying for myself. Well, maybe in a way I was. Dad's got COPD, and it'll eventually kill him. I thought about how tough it'd be for him if I'd been killed. He's already lost my little brother Roy and Mom. To lose me would be hard. Also, I knew by now someone would be grieving over Mr. Thigpen. Like death, I don't do well with grief, and my heart ached for whoever loved Mr. Thigpen and had to deal with his loss.

By the time I stood, I'd pulled myself together and had a big smile for Dad. I made a joke about the dogs' burger breath. Dad insisted on walking me outside. He lumbered outside as I loaded the dogs in the Tundra. I gave him a good strong hug — not so strong he'd know anything was wrong — and we went home and waited for Nora. She usually lets her class out around 9:30 and gets home a little before ten o'clock.

Yep, we're Nick and Nora. Nora said she knew I was the right one because I knew who Nick and Nora were on our first date. Mom loved old movies, and she'd turned me on to *The Thin Man* movies when I was a kid. One time Nora and I went to a Halloween party dressed as Myrna Loy and William Powell (I was Myrna, believe it or not), but no

one seemed to get it. They just thought we were dressed as a 1940s lady and man. We actually won a prize, but it was for the wrong reason.

By the time I heard the garage door open I was getting shaky again. I was quiet while Nora let off steam about a departmental meeting she'd attended that afternoon. I followed her as she got out of her sweater and slacks. She stopped to kiss and pet Bill and Min. Nora smelled their heads and gave me a look, but we have a rule that we can never say anything negative about the other's family. If that sounds easy, try it for a week. Oh, and be sure to give it a shot during the holidays.

She removed her two gold rings and necklace in a well-rehearsed motion, placing them in the cedar box on the dresser. Next, Nora unclasped her barrette, leaned forward, and tousled her hair loose. I love her hair like this, but she doesn't think it's professional. She got into her black sweats and t-shirt and went into the kitchen.

I waited till after she ate her peanut butter and jelly sandwich before I told her. She is neither dramatic nor hysterical. She's also the best listener in the world and another who won't interrupt a story. I saw her eyes react as I haltingly laid out the high points. She'd heard the news report on the radio when she was driving home so she knew some details.

"I thought when I heard about a murder in a Buckhead garden..." she said. "But I thought I was just being..." She swallowed.

She was particularly upset that the police ran a test on my hands to make sure I hadn't fired the gun. I couldn't blame them and, believe me, I didn't want any suspicions to remain about my involvement, so I consented.

"You should have refused," she said, "and gotten a lawyer."

I shook my head. "I didn't do it. I didn't have anything to worry about."

"You're never supposed to consent to anything without talking to a lawyer."

"Did you really want me to drag this out? Pay for a lawyer?" I was getting a bit irritated. We may have money now, but neither of us could be considered extravagant. We do our own taxes and have never in our lives hired an attorney, except when we bought our house.

"What if something had gone wrong with the test?" she asked. "Things have happened before."

We stared at each other. We have a decree. You can only say the same thing three times in an argument, and that's it. She'd used up her three.

She didn't really care that I had my hands checked for gun residue. She cared that I almost got blown away on a day that seemed like any other day, and she'd almost lost me for the rest of her life. I knew that so I put my arms around her, and we leaned against the kitchen counter. When you've been with someone for a long time, there are times when you don't have to say anything.

I was worried Nora might have trouble falling asleep, but within a few minutes, after we'd turned out the light, I heard everyone's sleep noises. Min and Bill always fall asleep right away — what a gift that must be, huh? Sometimes it takes Nora a while, but then I'll hear the steady breathing through her nose. It's not technically a snore, but it kind of is so I refer to it as the Snora. I'm usually the last person to fall asleep, and tonight was no different. Of course, it was different. I kept replaying the scene in my mind while staring at the ceiling. Something was troubling me. The murderer could have easily waited to kill Mr. Thigpen when he was alone. Wouldn't most murderers prefer that? It seemed to me the murderer wanted a witness. And maybe me specifically. It was an unsettling thought but no more chilling than this one: I was pretty sure the murderer had considered shooting me. The gun was definitely pointed at me for a few seconds while we stood, face to face. A thought process seemed to be taking place.