

Once Around The Track

Chapter One

“Once Removed”

“Have you found him yet?” The voice on the cell phone was shrill and insistent, but then it always was, even for the most trivial of messages. Clients were notoriously impatient people, and she billed them accordingly.

Suzie Terrell looked out her windshield at the kudzu-covered hillside overlooking a ramshackle collection of buildings that could hardly be called a town. Next to the narrow concrete bridge spanning what was surely nothing more than a creek was a battered tin sign, emblazoned with checkered flags and bearing the bullet-riddled legend: *Marengo, Georgia: Home of Badger Jenkins, Winner of the Southern 500.*

“I think I’m on the last lap,” she said wearily, and clicked off the phone.

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As an Atlanta lawyer, Suzie Terrell had had her share of bizarre commissions--suing the dog’s plastic surgeon came to mind-- and this latest directive from a group of

woman investors would probably make the short list of *stories to tell at dinner parties after four drinks*. It promised to be quite an adventure.

Find Badger Jenkins.

Who the hell--? When she received the assignment, she had dutifully looked him up on the internet, and an instant later the name appeared on her computer screen, accompanied by an image of a glowering, but handsome man in opaque black sunglasses and a red and black fire suit, positively robotic in his well-chiseled perfection, possessing all the soul-less beauty of a state-of-the-art espresso machine.

Suzie stared at the scowling face for a few moments, and then she sank back in her office chair and muttered to herself, “Oh, great! Now I have to go and make small talk with the Angel of Death!”

Further searches on the internet turned up only vague hints as to the current whereabouts of this alien being. Badger Jenkins, it turned out, was a race car driver, currently unemployed, and a little older than NASCAR’s current crop of drivers (*that is, he was old enough to shave*). He was a native Georgian; he had won a few races, raised his share of hell both on and off the track, and was thought to be back home in some one-horse town called Marengo, wherever that was. What Mr. Jenkins was doing these days was anybody’s guess.

She had tried calling his business office in Marengo, but there didn’t seem to be one. The phone number, garnered from an out-of-date web site, turned out to be located in the Blue Tick Café, and was answered by a drawling waitress named Laraine, who claimed to be Badger Jenkins’ second cousin once-removed.

“*Once removed?*” said Suzie.

“Yeah, Hon. Once removed out from under him in the back seat of his car by my daddy and a loaded shotgun. I got grounded for three months, but, boy, it was worth it. He wasn’t but seventeen himself that time.” She sighed, savoring the moment. “Ol’ Badger was hotter than a two-dollar pistol back then. Tearing up dirt track, leaving a trail of broken hearts and dented fenders. Face like an angel, and hell on wheels. You ever seen one of them early sports cards of him?”

“Er-- no.”

“Woo-hoo! It’d give you hot flashes just to look at him. There’s one of them cards

I kept to this day that shows him with his fire suit unzipped to where you can see his curly little chest hair peeping out, and those white pants so tight you could practically read the Trojan wrapper in his pocket. ‘Course fire suits don’t have pockets, but you get my drift. And him settin’ there grinning, and facing the camera with his legs spread-eagled wide apart, same as he sits in every picture I have ever seen of him right to this day. Like Show and Tell. I swear, try as you might, you can’t help but look! Honey, if that boy was a mindreader, he could not walk past a crowd of women without limping.”

“How... evocative.“ Suzie shuddered. “Perhaps you can help me. I am trying to locate Mr. Jenkins. I was hoping that you could tell me how to reach him?”

Laraine was silent for a few moments. Then she said, “Well... your best bet is the post office box. I think the rent on it is paid up, anyhow. ‘Course even if it isn’t, Miz Todhunter will give him the letters anyhow. She’s seventy if she’s a minute, but she looks at him like a stray dog eying a drumstick.”

“Perhaps there is a phone number where he could be reached?”

“Oh, he don’t like us to give out phone numbers. Especially to bill collectors or ladies of a certain age, if you know what I’m saying. Badger says he’s a race car driver, not a damn turkey baster.”

“I have a business proposition to discuss with Mr. Jenkins,” said Suzie, adding ice to her most lawyerly tone.

“Oh. Well, I reckon you can talk to his daddy then. That might get a message to him. Mr. Jenkins says he don’t care if I give out his number to the older ladies. Reckon he’s hoping he’ll get some of the over-flow.”

But that hadn’t gone well, either.

The old man who answered the phone had barely let her say her name before he launched into his spiel. “If you’re calling about Clover Hoof, our prize angus bull, why, his stud fee is five hundred dollars, payable in advance. He’s a champion, he is. Won--”

“No, sir. It’s not about the bull.”

“Well, now, Keeper, our coon hound, ain’t won no prizes, but he’s the best tracker in three counties, no argument there, and his stud fee is fifty dollars cash money and the pick of the litter.”

“Mr. Jenkins, I’m calling about your son Badger.”

“Oh. Well, I reckon you’d better talk to him directly then,” said the old man. “I don’t know what *he* charges.”

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In the end Suzie consulted a road atlas, left her office in Atlanta, and drove nearly three hours north into the red clay hills of Georgia, in search of Marengo, which, Laraine had assured her, was so small it was only on the map two days a week.

Now she had found it. Parking wasn’t a problem, she told herself, as she surveyed the block of gently decaying storefronts subsiding into the hill of kudzu behind it. She seemed to be the only person in town. The two-lane blacktop was devoid of traffic, and town’s one stoplight was permanently set on a yellow caution light. In the minute business district, consisting of mostly-empty buildings, the Blue Tick Café was easy enough to spot: a whitewashed cinderblock building with a big plate glass window, framed by two white flower boxes of red geraniums. Suzie surveyed the scene, looking for stray dogs. In case she had to order something in the diner, she could always eat the pickle, ask for the rest of the order to go, and then give it to some starving pooch with a cast-iron stomach.

Assuming her brightest Junior League smile (*the one that said “my teeth and my pearls are both real”*), Suzie Terrell stepped inside the cafe, and beamed at the dishwasher blonde behind the counter, “Are you Laraine? We spoke on the phone.”

Narrowed eyes took in her pastel blue silk suit from Nieman Marcus and her Dolce and Gabbana purse. “Yeah, I remember. Is this about Badger?”

“Yes, it is. I represent a group of women--”

The waitress rolled her eyes and heaved a theatrical sigh. “His DNA’s on file at the courthouse.”

“No. That isn’t it. My clients want to offer him a job. Driving a Cup car.”

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A Cup car. Three weeks ago that term would have mystified her, ignorant as she was of all things NASCAR. Just because you were born and bred in Atlanta didn’t mean you acquired knowledge of stock car racing by osmosis. After all, what they called the

Atlanta Motor Speedway was in fact in Hampton, Georgia some thirty miles south of the big city. Suzie Terrell had never been there. In fact, where stock car racing was concerned, she had cherished her ignorance. Now here she was in an even more remote and savage place-- Marengo, Georgia, teetering on the edge of the world-- awaiting the arrival of the town's one celebrity. Badger Jenkins, race car driver and local satyr.

She cast about in search of small talk that she could make with the creature when he did appear, but quickly abandoned that idea-- after all, how many one-syllable words could you string together?

Maybe it would be better just to get right down to business. A group of female investors in Atlanta has secured funding, and --God knows why-- they wanted to field a NASCAR team with an all-female crew except for the driver, because there are no woman drivers at Cup level, the "major league" of motorsports. And they had chosen Badger Jenkins as their designated driver. Oh, well, she supposed that if the genders were reversed, no one would question the logic of their choice. *Why not get a pretty one?* That had been the underlying theme of male employment criteria for millennia.

And, if those sports cards were any indication, Badger Jenkins certainly was a pretty one.

His face was a perfect intersection of lines and planes -- the straight Saxon nose, the cleft chin, eyes the blue of a baptismal font.. *The better to drown you in, my dear...* Ancient eyes that seemed to hold the sorrows of the world. Saint's eyes.

Oh, Badger Jenkins had won the gene pool, all right...

In those beautiful eyes it would be easy to read complexity and depth where none might exist. To build him a soul and then proceed to fall in love with it. The oldest of biological traps.

That was exactly why *pretty* wasn't a safe commodity. *Pretty* is coral snakes and lightning bolts and the elegant spirals of plague DNA. She thought that to see such perfection in a human figure ought to trigger a signal in your brain that said: *Run!*

Well, Suzie told herself, she was only the attorney for the business deal. She wouldn't have to work with him. All she had to do was make him an offer on behalf of her clients. So what if he was handsome? He probably had an I.Q. of room temperature and the ego of a Turkish sultan. Spending an hour in conversation with this warrior angel

would give her a tale to dine out on in the party circuit for months to come. Since she had to talk to him, she might as well enjoy it.

She had managed to impress Laraine with the magnitude of the offer to Badger-- the possibility of another chance to drive in NASCAR, and with some misgivings, the waitress had agreed to phone the news to Badger himself, *assuming that his cell phone got any reception out there on the lake.*

Suzie accepted a cup of coffee and a week-old copy of the *Marengo Herald*, and sat down in a booth to await further developments. After a few minutes of muffled conversation, Laraine announced that Badger himself would be along *directly*, which in the South could mean anything from five minutes to an hour and a half. Suzie nodded and continued to study the Vidalia onion recipes on page six of the paper. She sipped her coffee and wondered what Badger Jenkins would be having to drink if he did show up.

From the look of that menacing photo of him on the web site, his drink of choice would be vodka and kerosene. She didn't see it on the beverage menu.

Directly translated to eighteen minutes and one free refill of black coffee before she heard a soft drawling voice say, "I understand you're looking for me."

Slowly she lowered the newspaper-- and kept lowering it.

The Angel of Death had apparently sent a cherub in his place. This boy-- well, maybe not a boy, exactly; he wasn't very tall, but apparently he was as tall as he was going to get, because there were touches of gray in his brown hair-- Was he thirty five? Forty, maybe?

She looked into a pair of earnest eyes that made her think that if the werewolf legend ever worked in reverse, so that a Golden Retriever could become human, he would look just like this sweet-faced boy: slender, handsome, and deeply sincere. In faded jeans, old work boots, and a tee shirt too worn for the logo to be legible, he stood there, as solemn as a guide dog, waiting to hear how he might help the lady. Was this Badger's younger brother, she wondered. His son, even?

"How do you do?" said Suzie, gearing up to convince yet another Marengo resident that she needed to see their local legend in person. "I am hoping to meet Badger Jenkins."

Solemnly the were-Retriever offered her his paw... er, his hand, and said, "Yes, ma'am. I'm him."

"No way!" She turned her exclamation of astonishment into a discreet cough as she struggled to regain her professional composure. Now that she looked at him she could see the resemblance between that fine-featured human face and the symphony of lines and planes that had been transformed into machine-like perfection in the motorsports publicity photos. Amazing what sports cards could imply without actually coming right out and saying it. The scowling six-foot Angel of Death, who looked like he ate kittens for breakfast, was apparently just a well-crafted media image of this angelic-looking kid from the backwoods of Georgia, who looked perfectly capable of giving his own breakfast to those aforementioned kittens. Go figure.

He nodded, still looking serious and deeply sincere, as if worried that his ordinariness had distressed her.

She motioned for him to take a seat opposite her in the booth. "I am Suzanne Terrell. I'm from a law firm in Atlanta, and I'm here on behalf of a group of investors to offer you a proposition." *Business proposition*, she corrected herself silently. *Business proposition!* She sighed. *Watch him pounce on that with a leering grin.*

But he was still looking at her with that earnest, faintly worried Retriever expression, without a flicker of amusement. "Yes, ma'am?"

She stared into his sorrowful blue eyes, searching for some trace of irony or opportunism, but if it was there, it was masquerading as polite sincerity. *Boy, he's good*, she thought. *He almost has me fooled. And he has the most perfect, regular features. The camera would love him. You could probably sell beachfront property in Kansas with that seraphic face.* She kept staring at him for just a few beats too long, before some still-functioning part of her brain called the rest of her body to order, prompting her to return to the business at hand.

"The people who sent me want to form an all-female NASCAR team," she said. "Well, except for the driver, because there aren't any woman drivers in Cup racing, or so they tell me. So they need one y-chromosome to round out the team, and they want it to be yours."

Badger Jenkins' brow furrowed. "What's that mean?"

“What?”

“That y-thing ?”

“Ah. Chromosome. It means that they need a man to drive the car.”

“Oh. But the rest of the team will be women?” He considered it. “Have to be some big ones then. Some of those pit jobs-- like tire-changing-- call for right much size and strength, you know.”

Suzie didn't know, but she assumed that the people with the twenty million dollars had taken such things into account. “Well, this is all preliminary,” she told him. “They just wanted to talk to you. To see if you're interested.”

Badger Jenkins glanced at his watch. “Well, I might be,” he said. “If it isn't a p.o.s. car.”

“I believe it is a standard stock car,” said Suzie. “A Ford, perhaps, or a Dodge.”

Laraine, who had been hovering in the background, coffee pot in hand, giggled. “P.O.S. means *piece of shit*,” she announced. “That was the problem with his last team, wasn't it, hon? They had an under-funded p.o.s. car, and they wanted him to stand on it, and 'course he wouldn't. Be crazy to've.”

Suzie blinked. Apparently, when one comes to north Georgia, one should bring along an interpreter. Well, whatever all that meant, it wasn't her concern. Her mission was simply to arrange a meeting between the investors and their chosen driver. The rest would be someone else's problem.

Badger looked at his watch again, and she found herself faintly annoyed that the prospect of a NASCAR job -- not to mention her own elegant self-- did not seem sufficient to hold his interest. “I'm sorry,” she said sweetly. “Am I keeping you from something?”

He looked uncomfortable. “No. I'm real interested in what you have to say, ma'am. It's just that the body shop closes at five, and I need to get there before Jesse goes home.”

“Body shop? You mean, like car repair?”

He nodded unhappily. “Yeah. Only it's not a car I'm taking in. It's a turtle.”

Suzie frowned. “I'm sorry. I'm not very familiar with racing terms. What is a turtle?”

Badger gave this question serious consideration. "Well," he said at last. "It's sorta like a lizard but with a hard shell."

"An actual turtle?"

"Uh-huh. This one is about so big." He positioned his hands to indicated something the size of a garbage can lid.

"Do you mean that you are taking a live turtle to a car repair shop?" She was side-tracked in spite of herself.

"Have to," said Badger as solemnly as ever. "I found it in the lake just as I was putting in to come here. Motorboat propeller had tore up his shell pretty bad, so I hauled him in, and put him in the truck. I figured me and Jesse could fix him."

Suzie stared. "How?"

"Fiberglass. You know how to apply fiberglass for repair work? No ? Well, it comes in a close-woven mat, and you just mix it with resin and paint it onto the split part of the shell, smooth it down with a roller, maybe sand it down after it dries, and it'll just knit that shell right back up into one piece. Only take a couple hours, I reckon."

She was gazing into those drowned eyes again in bewildered fascination. "So you are going to spend the evening saving the life of an injured turtle?"

"Uh-huh." He glanced away. "Laraine, do you have any lettuce you were going to throw away? Figure he might get hungry while we're waiting for the stuff to harden."

Like one who is hypnotized yet still awake, Suzie saw her hand place itself on the young man's arm, and she heard herself say, "Do you need any help? I could come with you. Maybe bring you some dinner while you're working?"

"Well, thank you," said Badger, "But I expect you ought to be getting back to Atlanta before it starts getting dark. The roads aren't too well marked up here. But thank you for coming. And you can tell those folks I'd be glad to talk to them about driving."

He stopped just long enough to accept a plate full of chopped lettuce from Laraine, and then he was gone. Suzie stared for a few moments at the door to the cafe, and then, still dazed, she emptied a packet of Sweet & Low into her empty coffee cup and tried to drink it.

From behind the counter Laraine was watching her with a pitying smile.

Finally Suzie murmured, "But he's so sweet. From what you said, I thought he'd

be some kind of leering, sex-crazed playboy.”

Laraine shook her head sadly. “Oh, no, Hon. You got the wrong end of the stick. Badger ain’t the motorboat. He’s the turtle.”