
HER OLD-FASHIONED
HERO

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Her Old-Fashioned Hero

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Chapter 1

Tuesday, Christmas Day – 8:00 AM

Melissa Moffett eased herself back into the truck stop booth, sliding her tray, containing a breakfast sandwich wrapped in paper and a coffee in a to-go cup, across the table behind her. Creamers rested in a small bowl on the table, and she reached for one, tore the seal off, hands shaking. So clumsy was she that the creamer spilled onto the tray in a small white froth; she reached for another.

Try as she might, she couldn't stop herself from glancing nervously around the diner. In spite of her conviction that every eye in the place was focusing on her – and only her – as she looked around, she saw the truth. Absolutely no one, from the bleary-eyed travelers to the equally harried employees, had given her so much as a second glance. And why would they? Tucked towards the back of the coffee shop into a corner booth with her hair concealed under the hood of the borrowed sweatshirt, she knew her appearance was unremarkable.

Still, she could not relax for even a moment. A federally protected witness in the WITSEC program, Melissa was on the run. Approximately six hours ago, her life had gone from wonderful to terrible in a blink of an eye. One moment she had been dead asleep, the next moment Joe Coleman, a man she thought she could trust, a man who had been her lover, was dragging her out of a comfortable warm cocoon and accusing her of being a drug dealer. Since then, one way or another, she'd literally been running in fear for her life every second.

She'd been shot at, hidden in a mountain cabin, driven down that same mountain on a wild, freezing four-wheeler ride, and now, she was sitting in a truck stop along the interstate in a tiny North Carolina town, wondering if she was going to die today. In the parking lot outside the truck stop was a car that – technically – could be considered stolen, and to top it all off, in her pocket was a wallet that *was* stolen. No wonder her hands were shaking.

All in all, so far, her “escape,” if it could be called that, was not going well. In the end, Joseph Coleman, the man she'd met only three days earlier, the man who had set this entire debacle in motion, had come to understand his horrific mistake. He had rescued her from the shootout and then had devised the plan to get her away. He had given her the car and the (stolen) wallet. On the other hand, if it had not been for his meddling in the first place, she wouldn't be here at all. And the more she thought about *that*, the more upsetting it became.

His detective snooping and his ill-advised call to a fellow police officer had triggered all of this. He was sorry; she knew he was; he'd apologized repeatedly. And she'd messed up too, letting her real last name slip in a tipsy conversation, which had immediately led his analytical brain to be curious about the discrepancy. That didn't change the fact that she was in very grave danger right now because, instead of asking her about it, he'd called a cop friend to check up on her. They had already become lovers; was he so untrusting that he wouldn't ask a woman he was

sleeping with about an inconsistency like that? To put it mildly, that was damn hard to stomach.

As she considered her options, Melissa bit into the dry-as-dust breakfast sandwich, not because she was hungry, but because to leave it untouched looked a bit odd. Not for the first time in the last hour, she wondered if she should even follow his plan. He'd done his best, and she had to give him credit. She *was* well away from the Coleman family home, and for right now, she had to assume, safe. Joe's assumption had been that, if she could sneak away, everyone would still be looking for her on the mountaintop. It was a good bet that that was exactly what was happening.

That was the good news. The bad was that she was also behind schedule. Joe had plotted a route for her over the mountains, using country roads, to get from the Coleman home near Asheville to where she was now, in Marion, North Carolina. The backroad Joe had told her to take had turned out to be far more snow-covered and slippery than anticipated. At one point she'd missed a turn, and gone nearly five miles out of her way before she had discovered the mistake, and then had to turn around and come back. That ten-mile error had taken her almost thirty minutes. This initial stage of the journey, a distance that should have been covered in less than an hour, had taken well over two.

Had Joe realized how bad the roads would be when he'd mapped out the route for her? The last thing either of them needed was for her to have a car problem. Joe had not considered that higher in the mountains, and moving further north, the roads would be much more treacherous than they had been at his home. There, the Christmas Eve snow flurries had been nothing more than a lovely touch, melting almost immediately and leaving the roads wet but not slick. In the mountains, much of the time, she'd been driving on a sheet of ice, and at one point she'd slid partially into a ditch. Thank goodness she'd managed

to figure out how to turn on the four-wheel drive in the old Blazer.

But that was over now. She'd made it here, to Marion, the place on the route where she was supposed to pick up the Blue Ridge Parkway, which would take her north into Virginia. The small town was behind her, and out of the window of the truck stop she could see the interstate. At this hour on Christmas morning it was almost devoid of cars, but at least the truck stop had been open.

She opened the road atlas that she'd brought in with her from the car and studied the map while she sipped her coffee. It was hot and bracing, just what Melissa needed, and just for a second, she relaxed a bit. The bustle around her in the truck stop was enough that she was starting to feel a bit less conspicuous: the crowd seemed to be mostly families rushing cranky children in for a quick bathroom break before getting back on the road.

Melissa didn't see many actual trucks in the lot, and she guessed that most of the drivers took Christmas Day off. More people moved through the truck stop than Melissa would have assumed from the quality of the food – she winced as she took another bite of the sandwich – but from a chance overheard comment, she realized that this was the only place for miles around that *was* open. Apparently, even fast food places that were “always” open closed on Christmas Day, leaving travelers with few choices.

She really had no stomach for the food, but ever mindful of appearances, she pretended to nibble on it. Sitting and eating was far less conspicuous than just sitting and staring off into space. Melissa had to think about things like that now, for, she supposed, she was officially a fugitive. Yet, as much as she knew she needed to focus on the future, her mind kept drifting to the past.

Twelve hours earlier, she'd been at a fondue party at Terri and Joe's parents' home. It seemed like three lifetimes but – she

checked her watch again – it *was* less than twelve hours. Joe had spent the majority of the party staring at her as if he was on the verge of dragging her off, caveman style. Finally, he'd had enough and, party be damned, he *had* dragged her off to the privacy of his little garage apartment. In spite of the fact that she'd met Joe only three days earlier, a relationship had exploded between Melissa and Joe with the force of a hurricane. The relationship had been fueled by the fact that Joe Coleman, police detective or no, had a kinky streak a mile wide, and it hadn't taken him long to uncover that Melissa shared a common interest.

A shudder passed through Melissa as she remembered some of the things she and Joe had done, remembered his mouth, his hands, his cock. Joe was the perfect alpha male. He had, in the space of three days, become her dream lover, the man she never thought she'd find, someone who understand her every fantasy better than she did herself. Melissa loved the idea of being dominated, and now, she knew, with the right man, she loved the reality too, loved hard, genuine bare-bottom spankings delivered by a man who knew what he was doing and loved it as much as she did. His domination to her submission. Joe had left her so sore she could hardly walk, and when she thought about it, she realized her bottom was still a bit tender from all the spankings. She knew there were probably some marks, and for one absurd crazy second, she wanted to run to the ladies' room to check and see.

Get a grip, she admonished herself brutally. Less than five hours ago, she'd been shot at. How could she be sitting and thinking about marks on her butt? It was insane. She had to focus and focus now, or she knew she'd be lost. She'd either be recaptured by the U.S. Marshals Service and forced back into hiding or the Albanians would find her and she'd be dead.

She was not going back into WITSEC. She was *not*, and if she lost her concentration, it would only be a matter of minutes

before she screwed up in some way, and the marshals found her. Everyone she'd dealt with in the marshals service had been kind and well-meaning, but, with apologies to the U.S. Government, it was becoming clear to her that the Albanian mobsters who were determined to find her had organization and connections that the marshals couldn't touch. Somehow the *Albanians* had managed to get three people into rural North Carolina to kill her before the *marshals* knew she was even in danger. Nope, she was done with the marshals. She would make it on her own.

So here she sat, at an interstate truck stop on Christmas morning, on the run for her life. Her purse and suitcase left behind at the scene of the shootout, she was dressed in slouchy borrowed clothing, her hair hidden, big cheap sunglasses on her face, a wallet that wasn't hers in her pocket, and a stolen vehicle in the parking lot. How quickly things had changed!

Absently, Melissa glanced out the glass window to her right. A family was climbing out of a Honda minivan with Tennessee plates: two parents, a teenage girl with purple hair, two younger boys, and an older woman who looked "grandmother" age.

Suddenly, Melissa froze, her breath catching in a painful spasm, the family group forgotten. A North Carolina state patrol car had also pulled in directly outside the building from where she sat. In another moment, the officer got out of the car and put his hat on his head; through the glass, standing on the sidewalk, he was not more than six feet from her. She stared straight ahead and tried to fight the urge to turn her head and look at him. Memories of the previous night, which had been simmering just below the surface of her consciousness, crashed over her. It had only been a few hours since she'd been in an identical car, with Joe, Terri and an injured North Carolina state trooper named Seth Douglass.

Slowly she angled her body, trying surreptitiously to watch the officer through the window. He scanned the parking lot, and Melissa's heart raced. Had Joe's cover story of her running away

from him in the mountains been found out and they were looking for her here? From where Melissa sat, she could see the Coleman family's Chevy Blazer parked between two other cars. With its somewhat battered appearance and North Carolina plates, the vehicle definitely did not stick out, but – she froze – did his gaze linger on it for a second? Oh God, he *was* looking at the Blazer, he was!

Her heart raced, and she started looking around for a back door. Melissa had seen dozens of movies, and these places *always* had back doors.

Then the officer started walking along the sidewalk and Melissa let her breath out with a whoosh so loud it actually came out as a soft whimper, causing the woman at the next table to turn sharply and look at her. Melissa met the woman's gaze, blushed guiltily, and then shrugged. "Coffee," she mumbled lamely. "Hot."

The woman looked at her for one more long, skeptical second, but then turned back to her food.

What was her next move? The trooper walked in the front door; Melissa picked up her sandwich, hunched forward with both elbows on the table, and brought the sandwich to her mouth, knowing that this would almost completely block her face. But the trooper never even glanced back into the diner section, and instead walked up to the counter. Melissa couldn't hear the dialogue between the officer and the counter clerk, but the officer was obviously a regular and the conversation was casual. Whatever they were saying, it was *not*: "Have you seen this woman?"

Maintaining her hunched forward pose, Melissa pretended to give all her attention to the road atlas open on the table in front of her, forcing herself *not* to look up at the trooper every second. She wouldn't look up again... she wouldn't... and then she couldn't help herself and she did, but the trooper was gone from the counter. From her angle, she could not see the back of

the store where the restrooms were. He must have gone back there.

The door to the truck stop banged again and the family group she'd noticed earlier walked in, voices loud. The teenage girl had purple hair drawn back in a bizarre style, spikes shooting up everywhere, and Melissa could see multiple piercings in her ears. The group walked towards the diner.

"So, we had to get up at six fucking thirty for nothing? That's what you're saying." The girl's voice was shrill. She was mad and did not care who knew it.

"Emily! Language!" The mother tried to remonstrate in a low calm voice that was neither. "It's not for nothing."

"Then tell me why we got up at six thirty. Because I'd really like to know." She snapped her fingers in her mother's face for emphasis.

The family walked up to the food counter. The father gave a low-voiced order for himself and the two boys, followed by the older woman who ordered for herself; the mother and the daughter continued to argue. Temporarily the girl kept her diatribe a bit softer, but Melissa still heard snatches: "lamest family on the face of the planet," "why the hell did I ever come?" and more, including at least one "F-bomb" every ten seconds or so.

Melissa listened curiously to the fight, though she kept her eyes glued to the atlas so as not to appear to be watching. She couldn't help but notice both how upset the mother was, and how completely the father seemed to be ignoring the conflict.

What a difference to what she'd just seen at the Coleman family home! In the car, on the way to the Christmas celebration, twenty-five-year-old Terri Coleman had dropped a bombshell: her brother Joe had spanked her the previous summer. Further conversation had led to Terri's revealing that the Coleman family believed in spanking in general, and that Terri had been subjected to old-fashioned discipline well into her teen years. As

Terri had put it to Melissa, she'd gotten "the kind of spankings you think no one gets anymore." A paddle with the words "Attitude Adjuster" continued to hang in the Coleman family laundry room to the present day.

Spanking was a Coleman family custom that, with enough provocation, Joe had no problem revisiting with his sister the previous summer, and, as the argument raged, now in tones that were again becoming strident, Melissa could not help but wonder how Jonas Coleman, Terri's father, would have handled a teenaged Terri who spoke to her mother like this. Melissa gave an amused wince. She actually did not have to wonder, she knew. In the Coleman family it would not have ended well for the teen. Then she amended that thought. In the Coleman family, it would never have started in the first place.

Finally, the mother raised her voice. "Emily, I don't understand why you are upset. Now we'll get to Aunt Janet's at least two hours earlier, and that's what you wanted all along!"

"I didn't want to fucking get up. Are you an idiot? I said that at least three fucking times."

"Is there a problem here?" a deep voice interrupted.

Melissa startled and looked up sharply. The North Carolina state trooper had walked back into the diner from the front of the store and was now standing behind the family as they waited for their food. Melissa felt her face flame, but she managed to keep herself steady. At first, she tried not to watch, but then she realized that everyone else in the entire place was gazing at the scene with undisguised fascination, including the family's two younger brothers who were both staring, slack-jawed. It did not take a mind reader to realize that they both fervently hoped their sister would be arrested.

Finally, the father spoke up. "No. My daughter," he paused, "woke up earlier than she wanted to."

The state trooper wasn't pulling any punches. He fixed a steely gaze on the entire family. "Public use of obscene language

in the state of North Carolina is a misdemeanor. Young lady, there are families in this diner, including your own. Unless you'd like to continue this conversation in the back of my patrol car, I suggest you get your breakfasts and concentrate on eating." Now, he did speak to the girl's father. "Are we clear on this, sir?"

"Yes, of course, Officer."

The trooper was definitely no nonsense, and he was not going to let it go at that. "What about you, young lady? Are we clear?"

"Yes," Emily answered sullenly.

The trooper waited.

"Yes, sir," she finished.

After a long moment, the trooper turned and walked away. It was only after he left the building that Melissa realized he'd never even glanced in her direction. He'd come in on a routine stop, nothing more.

Melissa was glad to see that the trooper had at least a somewhat calming effect on the out-of-control Emily, who managed to order food and wait for it without a single additional F-bomb. The entire family pushed into the booth next to Melissa, and because she was facing towards them, she could see everything. Emily and her mother sat on one side, their backs to Melissa. The father and the two younger boys on the other side, and the older woman pulled a chair up at the end.

In spite of Emily's calming down, quite a bit of interest in the diner was surreptitiously still focused on them, Melissa realized. Which was fine because that was all the more reason that no one would notice Melissa.

Opening her breakfast sandwich, Emily took one bite and threw it down with an exaggerated motion. "Gross. It's so dry." She was quieter than before but not by much, and Melissa heard her clearly.

The father gave his daughter a long-suffering glance. "Em, please. Just let your mother and me work this out."

“Whatever,” she snapped, but thankfully, turned to look out the window and ignored everyone.

The man and his wife were hunched together over a phone. Finally, the man shook his head. “I’ve got no service at all. Karen, do you think they sell maps?” he asked his wife.

“We’re going to have to get something, Marty. We can’t just guess at it.”

“I think we need to get back to I-26 and then that will take us all the way into South Carolina to Charleston.” Marty continued to fumble with the phone.

“And that’s I-26 right out there?”

“No, that’s I-40,” Marty replied. “We got off of 26 at Asheville.”

“Who does a stupid scenic drive on Christmas morning?” Emily asked the window.

“Em, your grandmother wanted to go part way on the Blue Ridge Parkway.”

Melissa perked up at the name of the road. The Blue Ridge Parkway was what she was supposed to pick up to drive into Virginia, but there were a limited number of places one could enter and exit. From the map, the closest entrance to the Coleman’s house was near Marion and from that entrance, you could go either direction. Joe had believed that staying on the parkway – off the main roads – was going to be her best bet. Melissa had intended to take the parkway north into Virginia. From the sound of it, this family had intended to go south.

“Well, we can’t do it now, so you should be happy,” her mother snapped, obviously at the end of her rope.

Melissa tried to put together what she was hearing. Inadvertently, the family had shared two critical facts. First, it certainly sounded as if the road was closed. Second, the family right in front of her was heading to Charleston, South Carolina.

“Excuse me, did you say the Blue Ridge Parkway was closed?” Melissa spoke loudly enough for the family to hear.

The woman – her husband had called her Karen – turned around and looked at Melissa; she was blushing hotly, obviously terribly embarrassed by her daughter, but she at least tried to give Melissa a friendly smile. The girl turned and looked too, a mean-girl expression on her face, as if to say, “Who the hell are you to be talking to us?”

Melissa again found herself wondering what would be happening to this teenager right now if this were the Coleman family.

“Yes,” Karen responded. “They told us as we were checking out of the hotel. They don’t do any snow removal up there at all and the snow last night closed it completely. So now we’re going to have to take the interstate. But we don’t have a map and our phones don’t work.”

Melissa wondered if Joe had known that the road would be closed if there were any snow at all. That must mean it was closed most of the winter. Why had he recommended she come this way?

“I have a map,” Melissa offered. “Here.” She got up and moved to the opposite side of the booth, so she and Karen were sitting adjacent, and handed them the atlas over the seat back. “Did I hear you say you were going to Charleston? Charleston, South Carolina?” Melissa knew there was also a Charleston, West Virginia, so it was prudent to ask.

“Thanks.” Karen handed the atlas to her husband. “Yes, we’re going to Summerville. Just outside.”

Melissa’s brain was spinning. As the couple pored over the atlas, Melissa turned back to her own food, trying to keep emotion out of her expression. She had no reason at all to think anyone was watching her, but she knew she needed to keep as cool as possible.

She was supposed to go north, to Virginia, to a town outside Richmond called Goochland. There, Joe Coleman’s elderly great-aunt lived on a farm. Joe had sent Melissa there because he

knew the house was empty, as the aunt was spending Christmas with her children and grandchildren in New York. It was isolated, there was no security system, and he had a key, which he had given to Melissa.

Joe's plan was to – for lack of a better word – stash Melissa there until the heat was off, until he could leave North Carolina without wondering if anyone was following him to try to find her. Their relationship was still completely secret. Very much afraid that he would come under scrutiny if he acted strangely in any way, Joe knew he needed to play it cool for a few days. All Melissa had to do was reach Goochland safely and she'd have a private, isolated place to stay, “off the grid,” until Joe could return to Richmond and they could make a plan.

“Oh, okay, thanks. Actually, I was thinking of doing the same thing myself, so change of plans, I guess.”

“You were thinking of taking the parkway?”

“Yes.” Melissa almost told Karen she had planned on heading north, but something made her stop. Did she really want to go north? Or did she – forming the thought concretely for the first time – actually want to go back to Charleston? Was this family in front of her opening a door to another option?

Afraid that her thoughts would show on her face, she turned away from Karen hurriedly and took a sip of her coffee.