
MELISSA'S OLD- FASHIONED MAN

A Traditional Family - Book Three

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Chapter 1

Wednesday, December 26th – 9:00 PM
Coleman Family Home – Clemons, North Carolina.

Joe Coleman and Melissa Moffett rode in silence, the Coleman family home disappearing as soon as they left the driveway and headed down the narrow country highway.

After seeing Joe's parents in the window watching them leave, there seemed little to say, and without acknowledging it, both Joe and Melissa wanted to get through the intersection where, not even forty-eight hours earlier, on Christmas morning, Melissa had almost been killed and Joe had shot a man, most likely fatally.

It wasn't until they were on the highway, zipping towards the interstate, that Joe had finally broken the silence. "I don't suppose you could pour me a cup of that coffee? Although, with Carl making it, it's hard to say what it's going to taste like."

Melissa unscrewed the old-fashioned green thermos and poured a cup of the fragrant, steaming brew, and took a sip. “Wow.”

“Hot?”

She handed it over and poured another for herself. “Yes, and I don’t think we’re going to have to worry about staying awake.” She winced. “Looks like Carl subscribes to the old saying: if a little is good, a lot is better.”

“Pretty sure that doesn’t apply to coffee.” Joe laughed. “There’s a Starbucks with a drive-through in a strip mall right before we get on the interstate. We can stop if you want.”

“This is fine for me. I’m wide awake, and honestly, if I drink too much coffee, I won’t be able to fall asleep when we get where we’re going.” She paused. “Which is where by the way?”

“We’re going to Aunt Genie’s tonight, just like the original plan. It’s off the grid, and unless someone would actually be following us, there’s no way we could ever be found there. Then tomorrow, we’ll see. But Melissa, before I can even start to figure out what we should do, I need to hear what actually happened last summer. I’ve gotten bits and pieces, but right now, we have a long drive ahead of us, and hopefully no interruptions. I need to hear the complete sequence of events.”

Melissa felt a flash of frustrated anger. The quiet equilibrium, the feeling of safety, that had built up in the first fifteen minutes of the trip dissipated like a popped balloon. Now Joe wanted her to rehash last summer’s horror yet again, revisit the crisis that almost got her killed and landed her in Witness Protection? “You really think we’re going to be able to solve this? After the FBI couldn’t? They tried for weeks. I looked at mug shots and diagrams and charts and...” She stopped, her voice catching. “I went over this last summer so many times I wanted to puke.”

“I don’t know if I have a single thing to bring to the table.

But Melissa, I am a detective. A lot of people say I'm a good one." Melissa didn't answer, and Joe's voice grew firm. "Are you going to pout? Because I have an answer to that."

She turned to look at him, knowing that a bit of hot color was staining her cheeks. "I'm not going to pout."

"That's actually too bad," he muttered. "Because I've always wanted to stop the car and turn a bad girl over the hood and pull her pants down..." He paused. "Maybe we need to get this trip started right."

"Stop," she nearly shouted. "I'm not going to pout. Well, not about this," she allowed, and her mouth twitched in a small smile. "And I *will* tell you. I don't want you to think I'm not grateful for everything you're doing to help me. I just want it to be over. And I guess deep down I don't want to get my hopes up again."

"I get that. And maybe I can help and maybe I can't, but I can't even begin to have an opinion until I know the whole story from beginning to end."

"I know." Melissa took a sip of the dreadful coffee while she tried to put together what to say. "That's fair enough. And even if you can't help, you do need to know what happened, what you've gotten involved in. But, we're talking about something that from beginning to end took less than twenty seconds." Melissa took another long swallow and then started the tale that had haunted her for six months. "You know I was a real estate agent in Raleigh, North Carolina, right?"

"Yup."

"At the beginning of last summer, I got a call from a couple who had purchased a home with me about a year earlier. Their name was Walker – Polly and Pat – and, as we say in the industry to be discrete, they were fully-funded."

"Fully-funded," Joe snorted. "That's great. In other words, rich."

"Loaded." Melissa laughed in return. "They called me,

saying they wanted to buy a higher-end house on the beach on the Outer Banks.”

“So... Nag’s Head, Kitty Hawk, Duck?”

“Right. You’ve been there?” As soon as she asked the question, she nearly bit her tongue. Of course he’d been there; Kitty Hawk was where, last summer, Joe’s sister, Terri had attended a wild house party from which Joe had unceremoniously extracted her. The incident had ended with Joe driving his sister back to Charleston, South Carolina and then spanking her until she couldn’t sit down.

However, Joe seemed completely oblivious to Melissa’s gaffe and answered matter-of-factly. “My parents got a vacation rental there a couple of times when I was growing up.” Joe paused, then slanted a quick puzzled glance in Melissa’s direction. “That’s really far from Raleigh, though. Did you normally go that far to sell houses?”

“Actually, no. I wasn’t even a member of the real estate association in that part of North Carolina, but Mr. Walker’s business wanted to use the house as a retreat. They were looking at top-of-the-line homes, the ones with pools even though they are right on the ocean, eight, ten bedrooms. Three decks, two kitchens, four hot tubs. That kind of house. So even though it was a seven hour round-trip from Raleigh, I went through the paperwork to become part of that real estate association, because if I found them something, my commission was going to be significant.”

“How much?”

“They were looking at properties in the one to two million range, so just as the selling agent, my commission would be at least thirty thousand. Probably more.”

Joe whistled. “I’m in the wrong line of work.”

“No, I wouldn’t give up your day job. A lot of real estate agents...” She thought about it. “Probably most real estate agents, actually, go their entire careers and never sell a house

in that range. Opportunities like that don't come along very often, but I'm sure you understand why I wanted to try."

"Absolutely," he agreed. It was the weekend right after the fourth of July and the Walkers were already there, staying with friends. I was supposed to meet them and show them six or eight houses. It was about 9:45 in the morning on Saturday, and I had just gotten to the first house. Obviously, I had never seen the house before in person, just online, so I got there early to look around, get the lights turned on, the AC cranked down, scented candles burning. The things good real estate agents do. I went in and..." Melissa stopped, her voice cracking.

"Honey, I know it's hard to talk about."

"It's not that. Not really. Don't forget, the Federal Marshals locked me in a cabin in the Smokies for six weeks last summer and I went over this every day. I've been over this so many times that now, when I talk about it, it's almost like a TV show I saw. Like it's not real." Melissa stared out the windshield at the passing winter landscape, barely visible in the dark, and she saw none of it. "It's other things. How much your life can change in a second. If I'd been anywhere else in the house except where I was, hell if I'd been in the bathroom, none of this would ever have happened. If I had gotten to the house three minutes later, it would have been over. But I was in exactly the wrong place at exactly the wrong time. Close enough to the door that I was able to get outside onto the deck between the beginning and the end." She shook her head. "I'd just come into the house. It was empty, brand new construction, no one was living there. It was a custom build, but the couple who had built it for their retirement had – if you can believe it – changed their minds and decided they wanted to live somewhere else. So, they put it on the market."

"Who changes their mind about a million dollar house?" Joe asked, incredulous.

“This was a two million dollar house, and you clearly have not worked in real estate.” Melissa chuckled. “You would not believe some of the craziness I’ve seen. Anyway, this was a beachfront house, on a cul de sac at the end of a street, so the back of this house faced the ocean, but the side was adjacent to the side of another house. The house where the shooting occurred was on the cul de sac of the next street. So even though the two houses were next to each other, the yard’s touching, there was no way to drive directly between them, if that makes sense. When we stop, I can show you on the maps program where this was.”

“No, it makes sense.”

Melissa took a deep breath, her stomach lurching sickly. In spite of her telling Joe that, when she talked about it, it felt like a movie she’d seen, the fact was she hadn’t thought about it much in the past few months. She was getting sick again, and it wasn’t the coffee. “I had walked into the house, just started to look around, and within no more than a moment, I hear this really loud shout from outside the house, towards the beach. It wasn’t really a scream, but it wasn’t words either. Honestly, I wasn’t even sure it was a person. I was standing about ten feet from the door onto the deck, so I run to the door and go outside. As soon as I get out onto the deck I see a man. He was standing behind the next house over. His head was covered with blood. I don’t see anyone else, and the first think I think was that he had fallen off the deck somehow.”

“How far was it? If he’d fallen?”

“Far. Eight feet, so not something someone could jump because they’re in too much of a hurry to walk to the stairs. But I thought that’s all it was, that someone had fallen and had gotten hurt.”

“Jesus,” Joe muttered under his breath.

“These houses are huge, so the decks are too. The stairs to get down off the deck were twenty, thirty feet from where I

was standing. I was so shocked, for a second I just froze, but I was just getting ready to run to the stairs to help him, when two men came out of the other house. One of them was running, he burst out the door, but the other guy? He's just walking fast. Even in that one second, I knew he was the main guy, running the show, you know what I mean? I could sense it. There was this feeling of power around him."

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

"He was wearing a suit. A tie. A white shirt. I will never forget that. This is July on the Outer Banks. It was already probably ninety at ten in the morning, and he's wearing a suit?"

"Did they see you?"

"No. Not then. On the deck where I was standing, there was an outdoor fireplace, and I had run up to the edge of the deck. I was standing right at the corner of the fireplace, kind of in a shadow, and no, they didn't see me. The injured man starts running towards me..."

"Towards you?" Joe interrupted. "So he saw you?"

"I don't know." Melissa shrugged. "Maybe he did, or maybe he was just running away and the next house – where I was – happened to be the thing he was running towards. I know we never made eye contact. Anyway, the second guy – the guy wearing the suit? – he walks up the edge of the deck and shoots the man in the head. Lifts up his gun and shoots him. The man's head... exploded. That's the only word for it. One second his head was there and then he's hit, and he's flying forward like he got jerked with a rope, and then he's lying with his face in the sand. And there's blood everywhere. And the whole back of his head is just... mush."

"Probably a Glock 30," Joe commented. "They don't call them 'pocket cannons' for nothing." For a moment the car was dead silent. Finally, Joe asked, "How far away was this?"

“From where I was standing to where the body was lying was twenty-two yards. To the shooter, thirty-four yards.”

“That’s very precise,” Joe commented, startled.

“When I was in the safe house, they did a computer-generated re-enactment.”

“A what?”

“A re-enactment. They had photos of the actual houses, and then put little stick figures running around. I know exactly how far everything was. Down to the inch, unfortunately.” Melissa fiddled absently with the plastic lid on her coffee cup, then lifted her head and stared at the oncoming headlights. “I got to be the director of my own little movie. Unfortunately, it was one where I almost died.”

“So, what happened then?”

“The body was lying there, and I was just standing frozen. I literally could not breathe, I couldn’t scream, I couldn’t move. Then two more guys came running out of the house, and the man in the suit, the shooter, yelled at them to get the body. He turned around to go back into the house, off the deck and then he saw me. He stared right at me. He saw my face, I saw his face, and he knew I had seen everything. There was this second when we connected. You know in a cartoon how sometimes they connect the peoples’ eyes with a dotted line so you know they see each other?”

Joe chuckled softly. “That’s a good way to put it.”

“Well, it was like that. Two, maybe three full seconds we stared at each other. And then, I just turned and ran back into the house. I don’t remember ever even thinking, ‘I better get out of here,’ or ‘Run, Melissa!’ or anything like that. My legs just took over because my brain wasn’t working. They told me later he fired at me – they found a bullet in the outdoor fireplace – but I swear I never heard the shot. I just ran through the house, grabbed my purse from where I’d left it right by the front door, jumped into my car, and started it up. Thank God

my car had the push button start so I didn't have to look for my keys. Slammed the car into reverse, and floored it. Just as I pulled forward, one of the guys came around the corner of the house and I saw him in my rearview mirror."

"They didn't come after you in a car?"

"No, they couldn't. Remember, the houses were on different streets. The sides of the decks faced each other. So, there's no way to drive between the houses. By the time one of the men would have gotten into a car and started to come after me, gotten out to the highway, I was already gone."

"What did you do? Did you call 911?"

"Of course, I called 911." Melissa's voice went high. "Screaming hysterically. Fortunately, I was able to follow directions and they told me to drive to the police station, which I did."

"How long did it take the police to get to the house? Where the body was?"

"I don't know, I wasn't there, but I guess less than five minutes. Didn't matter. By the time the police got to the house, it was empty. No body."

"And they didn't set up road blocks?" Joe raked his hand through his hair in frustration. "There's only a couple ways on and off the Outer Banks!"

"Yes but, it took a while for them to figure out what was going on. I was hysterical, sitting in a little local police station with two officers who were both about twenty years old and a dispatcher. It took a while for anyone even remotely in charge to get there. It took even longer for someone from the state police to get there. At first, I was so upset that half of the cops couldn't understand me and the other half didn't believe me. Then, I gave them the address of the house where I had been, the one I was supposed to show, and of course they didn't find anything. By the time I managed to communicate that it was actually at a different house, even more time had passed. The

shooters didn't have time to clean up the other house, so when the police went in there, they did see blood and finally believed that something had happened, but then they thought I had something to do with it and accused me of trying to cover it up."

"Oh my God," Joe breathed. "I didn't see that coming, but yeah, that's exactly what they would think."

"It was complete chaos. 'Tell us what really happened here,'" Melissa mimicked. "'Who were you with?' 'Where's your husband, Mrs. Moffett?' 'What did the car look like?' Of course, once they started to accuse me, I just got more hysterical which didn't help. Fortunately, thank God, the Walkers had showed up for their appointment. They saw the police, figured out that something really bad had happened, and they went right down the police station. Pat Walker is an attorney, so he was able to control the situation, but by the time the cops figured out I was legit, that I had really witnessed a shooting and that the body was gone, it was probably close to two hours later."

"And too late to set up road blocks." Joe concluded. "What about the house? Couldn't they get any leads from that?"

"No, it was a vacation rental. Booked through an agency. Supposedly a group of New York lawyers and their wives having a company retreat. The card used to book the property was a debit card, tied to an off-shore account, with a fake name, so they got nothing from that."

"What about fingerprints, or DNA from the blood?"

"They got a hit on some prints in the house, but that wasn't until later."

"So, what happened?"

"What do you mean?" Before Joe could speak, though, she got his meaning. "Nothing. Nothing happened. These were local sheriffs and then state police. The FBI wasn't involved yet. They didn't have a body. What they had was some blood

in the house, some blood in the sand, and a hysterical real estate agent who doesn't even live in the area. They took my statement, and they let me go. I left."

Melissa did not know Joe that well yet, not really, but she knew him well enough to tell that he was so furious he was barely holding himself in check.

Checking the rearview, he pulled the car onto the shoulder. "I don't want to be driving when I ask you this next question because I don't want to risk running off the road."

"Right," responded Melissa slowly, dragging the word out, not sure what was coming.

Joe brought the car to a stop and put it into park, leaned forward and rested his elbows on the steering wheel, then turned to her, his stark face illuminated by the headlights of the cars passing them on the interstate. "You're telling me that the police had a woman who almost surely had witnessed a murder, maybe even a professional hit, and they just... let you go."

"Yes," Melissa affirmed. "That's what I'm telling you. They didn't have a body," she repeated. "*'We'll call you if something comes up,'* was pretty much how they left it. This was a Saturday. They apparently didn't even call the FBI until Monday morning."

Joe shut his eyes and rested his forehead on the steering wheel. "You're lucky you made it through the night," he whispered.

"I know. They had my name from the 911 call. Anyone with any access at all could have figured out who I was. The only reason I wasn't killed that night was probably because I didn't go back to Raleigh. Thank God for the Walkers. Their friends invited me to stay. I was at their house Saturday and Sunday night."

"So no one knew where to find you."

"Right, and you're not going to believe this, but I even

ended up showing them some houses the next day. Life goes on, right? Then on Monday morning, I drove back to Raleigh. I was still pretty shaken up..."

"I would say so," Joe interjected.

"And I had already decided to take a week or so off, maybe book a last minute cruise or something, but I had a closing scheduled for that Monday afternoon that I couldn't cancel. Later on, I found out that on Monday morning the FBI had gotten a tip. Apparently, a confidential informant associated with the Gambino family had reported that someone associated with the Duraj Albanian syndicate had been secretly working for the Gambinos, had gotten caught and had been executed over the weekend. Supposedly, the top person in the Duraj group had been personally present at this guy's execution... and there was a witness. Now, they have this random tip from an informant, and a report from the state police in North Carolina about a shooting and a missing body. Suddenly, at about noon on Monday, someone at the FBI connects the dots. The Federal Marshals were actually on the way to pick me up when my car got blown up."

"I'm surprised they didn't get you at your apartment, baby." Joe's voice was stark with horror.

"I must have a guardian angel, because just by chance, I didn't go back to my apartment. I had professional clothes with me, so I never went home on Monday. I left the Walkers' friends' house and drove right from the Outer Banks to my office that morning. I was getting the paperwork ready for a closing when Ellen walked in and asked if she could borrow my car." Melissa's voice grew tight with grief. "And that, as they say, was that."

"I wonder when they planted the bomb. Hard to do in a public place in the middle of the day."

"It wasn't a bomb, Joe," Melissa said softly. "It was an RPG. A rocket-propelled grenade."

"I know what an RPG is," he interrupted. There was a long silence in the car and Melissa realized that Joe was, quite literally, speechless. Finally, he muttered, "They weren't fooling around."

"The speculation was that some members of the Gambino family really were going to use the house for the week for an actual vacation. Wives and kids, grandchildren. Maybe even the Don himself. The house that I was showing and the house where the murder happened were both huge, expensive houses. The rental on the house where the murder happened was twenty-two thousand a week. The FBI found some bloody fingerprints going out onto the deck, so they guessed they probably belonged to the dead guy. He was Albanian, and the guess was that he had gotten caught by his boss. Somehow, they knew about this house, and they decided to kill him there to send a message to the Gambinos."

"Right. Then, when Don Gambino gets there with the wife and grandkids, the body's right there." He snorted cynically. "Because nothing says 'vacation' quite like a corpse in the beach house."

"And they'd probably been looking for me all weekend, watching my apartment in Raleigh, but – like I said – I never went back to my apartment in Raleigh. I just drove right from the Outer Banks to my office that morning."

"So, they were watching the office too."

"Yes."

There was a long silence, nothing but the monotonous hum of road noise in the car. Finally, Joe asked her softly, "Did you look like her?"

"Not really. But from a distance? It was enough, I guess. We were both wearing dark pantsuits that day, and we both had longer hair. If they saw me get out of the car and her get back in... We were the only two agents in the office who

weren't married, who didn't have kids. If she'd had children, I don't think I could have gone on."

In a terribly flat voice, Joe delivered a summary. "So, they missed you at the beach house, they couldn't find you the entire weekend after the shooting, and then they missed you at your office. With an RPG no less."

"And now they've missed me again."

"No wonder they burned the convent down." Joe stared forward into the night. Outside the car, in the dark, a tractor trailer roared by.

"Joe," Melissa asked finally, "are you sure you don't want me to get out right now? Just dump me along the interstate?"

He swiveled his head to look at her, his eyes hard. "You say that one more time, Melissa, and we will be getting out of the car. But it won't be to dump you. Are we clear?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Yes, sir," he suggested.

"Yes, sir," she returned. But then, even with that very specific promise hanging between them, Melissa couldn't stop herself from saying, "Eventually my luck is going to run out, Joe."

"Not on my watch it's not," he said. "Not on my watch." Carefully checking behind them, he pulled the Jeep back out on to the interstate.