

## CASEY'S REVENGE

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## DEDICATION

To the warm and caring staff and customers of the Waffle House on Northside Drive, Statesboro, GA without whom this book would not have been written.

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CASEY'S REVENGE

BY

MARY CHARLES

## Chapter 1

Casey Forbes strode confidently into the crowded conference room, arranged her notes neatly on the podium and looked straight into the eyes of Doug, sitting blatantly in the front row. What the hell was he doing on her turf? This was the most prestigious college teachers' conference, and here she was, finally, with a room full of colleagues, impressed graduate assistants, and Doug. Why on earth was he here? Was he going to plead for her to come back? Hoping that a telltale blush of nerves was not rising up her neck, Casey launched into her opening words. She was conscious of Doug looking at her, but she was far too professional a lecturer to be thrown by his presence. He'd hurt her enough in the past; she'd damn well show him that now she was utterly in control of the situation. As she analyzed various feminist detective writers, she paused and looking right at him adlibbed, "Of course, one of the main reasons murder is committed is because the man of the moment turns out to be a fraud, faithless, fickle or even married." The audience laughed and Casey, staring straight at Doug, saw him squirm in his seat. Good, she'd finally upset him and in a place where he could see that she was somebody, a respected intellectual.

At the end of the session, Doug rose and headed for the door without a backward glance. She was surrounded by well-wishers, which left her no other avenue but to stand and watch him go. She was completely bewildered. He had sat there for an hour with that so familiar half-smile on his face and didn't even have the nerve to talk to her at the end, to at least tell her what he was up to? What was it all about? You just don't make love to someone dozens of times and then act as if it never even happened. At least if you were Casey you didn't! The thought that men were some kind of cruel unfeeling alien race crossed her mind, and she briefly considered an alternate life style that would eliminate males completely.

It began to rain a few miles south of Atlanta. Casey was immediately reminded of one of her favorite theories that "no task left undone, however small, will ever go unpunished." She had been meaning to get the wipers fixed for what, five or six weeks now? There just always seemed to be something more important to do. Besides, she hated going to a garage, no matter how small the problem. The common attitude seemed to be, "Poor little thing, you're only a woman. We'll take care of it for you, honey; don't you worry your pretty little head." Even if the mechanics were polite and called her "ma'am," there was still a smugness barely hidden in their eyes that really got on her nerves.

The wipers struggled along as best they could, but her visibility was bad and getting worse. Even turning them on high had very little effect against the current deluge that seemed to be a sign for the coming of the second great flood. Casey sighed wearily and clung to the outside lane of the interstate. As usual the large trucks (which probably all had great wipers) plowed by at full throttle with great waves of water washing over her little car, causing dangerous temporary blind spots. Even the radio didn't seem to be working that well.

Casey tried to get a look at the next exit sign, which would give her some clue as to what progress she was making, if any. She realized that she was only about twenty miles outside of Macon, where she could have a rest from the torrential downpour, buy herself something to eat and maybe get rid of her incipient headache. She made her decision. The Waffle House it would be - a grilled cheese sandwich and maybe even some hash browns.

Her mood rose once the choice was made. She loved Waffle Houses with their predictable menu full of comfort food. She pulled off at the exit and noted with some relief that there was one fifty yards to the right. Not only that, it was virtually empty with no more than a half dozen cars in the lot. A noisy, packed diner was a little more than she could have dealt with at this point.

Casey scurried across the lot as quickly as possible in an effort to avoid being drenched and was thankful that she had had the sense to put on her sneakers before beginning her journey. She had not bothered to change from her black pinstriped suit and gray blouse before leaving the motel - too much on her mind - and she now regretted this. Her black was one of her better outfits and she didn't get paid enough to get careless with her best clothes. Casey liked the way she looked in the suit. She called it her kick ass suit, as it emphasized her brown hair and dark blue, wide set eyes, giving her a feeling of power and control when she wore it. Doug had always preferred her brighter outfits - red, yellow, and bright blue blouses with scoop necklines so he could ogle her breasts whenever she had to bend over. She had to admit she had done her fair share of bending over just to get the desired reaction from Doug. The skirts she had worn for him had also been shorter than she felt were appropriate for work, but since she had long slim legs, she'd been more than happy to wear them whenever they went dancing on a weekend.

The interior of the Waffle House was bright and cheery, with seven or eight people sitting alone or as couples. There was one booth open, but she felt uncomfortable about occupying a space that was designed for two or more people, even though no one else seemed to pay any attention. She opted for a stool at the low bar, making sure to maintain a space between her and the two other patrons sitting there.

There was a teenage couple occupying the booth closest to her, completely involved with one another. Probably local and regulars, they would have been there for an hour and would be there for an hour after she left. They would each have a burger and Coke and leave a \$.25 tip. Their waitress would watch them leave, with secret thoughts of torture, then sigh and wonder why she was working for a Waffle House.

The man two seats down on her left might just as well have "I am a salesman" stamped on the middle of his forehead. Slightly rumpled K-Mart suit, lavender shirt with overly loud tie pulled down and slightly to one side, hair cut to an acceptable length, and eyes that said "I've seen too many clients to remain sane." He cupped his coffee with both hands and stared straight ahead as if the coffee maker might contain the answers to all of his problems.

Casey was brought out of her reverie by the arrival of the fairly attractive, slightly overweight waitress. She had a good smile for a second shifter, and her voice was warm and friendly with its soft Southern accent. "Yes, ma'am, how ya doin'? Miserable night, ain't it? What can I get ya?" The name tag suggested that she was talking to a Cheryl Todd, a blonde blue-eyed, twenty-five to thirty-year-old. Casey mused that Cheryl probably already had three or four kids while she, closing in on thirty, had yet to have her first.

No time to get into that issue! "Yes, I'd like a grilled cheese sandwich with a side order of hash browns and a cup of coffee, please."

"Thank you ma'am," said Cheryl while turning to bellow out the order to the cook in a typical Waffle House fashion. The coffee arrived quickly with the expected "Ya take cream and sugar?" That task completed, Cheryl retreated back down the counter to continue her conversation with a customer at the high bar, who was obviously also a regular. This was an older man who probably didn't have a lot else to do and enjoyed having his supper while studying the rear ends of Waffle House waitresses.

Now that Casey had her coffee, she settled back to adjust to her surroundings and play one of her favorite games - guessing what the other customers did and where they might be

from. She'd already done the man on the left - definitely a salesman, probably covering the territory between Macon and Savannah, selling some bizarre product of a specialty nature. He didn't have the class to do Atlanta - that was a different world altogether. The old man was probably retired and spent as much time as possible avoiding a nagging wife. The kids were of high school age and probably spent most of their time drifting through classes and exploring the sexual joys of teenagers. Cheryl was not a mystery. A young woman already headed for old age, a husband who worked as a plumber or carpenter when he wasn't drunk, who took her paycheck and tips and told her how thankful she should be that he didn't beat her more often than he did. A middle-aged couple occupied a booth at the far end of the diner. Both leaned over the table to facilitate their conversation, and they kept smiling at one another. Casey was too far away to catch any part of their conversation, so she could not pick up on their accent, if any, which was a sure way of picking Southerners from visitors. He was slightly balding with glasses, a suntanned face and was casually, but expensively dressed. The woman was slim with a bright red blouse and short cut brown hair turning gray. Probably a couple from out of state taking a short vacation. Casey made a mental bet with herself that they were not locals and vowed to remember to check their license plate when she left.

She turned her attention to the man two chairs to the right. She shifted her head ever so slightly, better to observe without being noticed. At first glance he was quite attractive with clean jeans, a nice navy T-shirt without any type of logo as far as she could see, a beard and short curly brown hair. He was smoking and stared straight ahead. She glanced at him again, trying to guess his age, and was embarrassed when he looked back at her with a half-smile, as if he knew he was good-looking and was used to women giving him the eye. She hurriedly turned back to her coffee and took a sip.

"Here ya are then. Can I get ya anything else, some ketchup?"

"No, that's fine, thanks."

Casey was hungrier than she had thought and dug into the meal with some relish. She had the feeling of eyes on her and quickly turned left, then right. Neither the salesman nor the curly haired man had moved in any way; both continued to stare straight ahead, seemingly oblivious to all around them. Casey began to have a slight feeling of uneasiness, though nothing had been said; nothing had occurred. Still, she increased the speed of her eating and continued to look covertly right and left, trying to pick up even the slightest indication that someone might be watching her. "This is silly. Get yourself under control. You really are losing it. Thanks again, Doug." She finished eating, finished her coffee, and motioned for the smiling Cheryl to bring the check. The amount due came to \$3.45, so Casey, being in an expansive mood, gave Cheryl five dollars and told her to keep the change. She elicited a "Why thank you, ma'am. Ya try to keep dry out there."

Casey decided to use the restroom, although she generally hated having to go in cheap restaurants ever since she'd watched a show about all the germs that lingered there. She completed her business as quickly as possible and was nearly done when she noticed the handle of the restroom move almost imperceptibly. Just the slightest of jiggles, but she was positive it had moved. "I'll be right out," she shouted, wiping her hands on the paper towel. She went to the door, opened it, and was somewhat startled by the fact that there was no one there. No one leaning against the wall, no one in the little hallway, no one moving in the room beyond. As she pushed through the swinging door out into the main part of the restaurant again, she felt a little unease at the fact that nothing had changed. No one had moved. The middle-aged woman in the second booth did glance up and manage a small grin. As Casey moved toward the door, Cheryl looked up, and with a small wave said, "Ya come back now, hear." With that Casey braced herself and pushed through the outer door into the still pounding rainstorm. Again, that feeling of being watched - a quick turn and again nothing. No one staring, seemingly no one paying the slightest attention to her departure.

Casey ran to her car, fumbling her keys a couple of times before getting the door open. She glanced briefly at a nice Saab on her right. Yep, the plates were New Jersey, must be the older couple. She mentally patted herself on the back. She slammed the door against the weather, and cursed the fact that her umbrella was curled up in the closet at her apartment, no doubt enjoying the warmth and dryness of its own little home. She realized she had forgotten to ask for aspirins, but food and the coffee and the brief break from the downpour seemed to have done the job, and the headache had retreated to the status of a slight nag. She started the engine, or at least made her first attempt. Nothing but the whiney sound of the starter attempting to make contact with an engine that wouldn't start greeted her. It suddenly felt much warmer, and the pain behind her eyes started again with a vengeance. "Back off, try it again. Come on baby, you can do it. Please don't do this to me, please. Please, another pause, let's try it again. It's got to work this time." And it did.

The reassuring sound of her engine turning over brought waves of relief coursing through Casey. "It's probably just a stammering, probably just a little dampness under the hood. When was the last time I had this thing serviced? Can't really remember. One more thing on the list of things to be done at the very first opportunity. Right!" Just one more stop for gasoline, then on to a warm waiting apartment with furry Tarka to welcome her. It was true that Tarka might not have even realized she had been gone at this point; a candidate for Mensa he was not, and as long as his food dish was full, he tended to ignore most of the other circumstances in his life, but he was a very loving cat, never critical, rarely complaining, the perfect roommate.

Casey turned right and headed for the next set of gaudy neons down the road, a Dixie Mart. She wheeled into the station, pulling up to the set of pumps on the far right, and sat for a moment, hesitant to stop the car for fear it might not start again. She decided it was a risk that had to be taken at some point, and this was as good a spot as any. She popped the gas cap and headed toward the pump, read the list of instructions, which included the usual warning - "Pay before pumping after dark" - and headed toward the well-lit Dixie Mart. A bored-looking young black woman accepted her \$10 bill without comment, made some adjustments to the panel in front of her and went back to whatever she'd been doing prior to Casey's interruption. Casey retreated to the pump and decanted her allotted \$10 worth of gas into her tank.

That done, she decided to check the engine. Why, she wasn't really sure. She popped the hood anyway, put the little metal bar in place that held it up and stared with a contemplative look at the maze before her. Everything looked perfectly normal - nothing out of place - seemingly dry and happy. Oh well, maybe the difficult start at the Waffle House didn't really mean anything at all. Just a one-time hiccup. The hood went back down with a satisfying clunk. Casey turned back into the bright world of the Dixie Mart. A Diet Coke and a little snack for the long ride home might be just the thing. She browsed the aisles of quick food delights and finally decided on a slightly evil nut bar that screamed of sugar fulfillment and probably contained enough calories to kill three or four test mice. The car started without hesitation and received an affectionate pat on the dash from Casey, as a reward for a job well done. The wipers once again began their pitiful struggle against the elements, and she was back on the interstate headed through Macon and onto Interstate 16 and the last horrible one hundred and sixty miles of darkness towards home.

She steadied herself for the mind numbing drive in front of her and tried to resist the temptation to crank the little car up to a speed which it probably really wouldn't like or do well with. Concentrating on staying within the 65 mph range, she once again tried to get the radio to produce something other than static with the occasional note of music thrown in. Mile marker 148 flashed by in a blur of rain and Casey thought, "Well, that's progress. I'm under one hundred and fifty miles." She tried to keep her mind from drifting back to Doug again -

that was a hopeless line of thought with only questions and no good answers. Thinking about her job wouldn't be particularly helpful, as she was quite tired of it at this point. Plenty of time for that tomorrow. And then of course there was Tarka, her beloved Persian cat of the last five years. He made her smile. She could easily visualize him, large and fluffy, curled up on top of his favorite location - a paper bag. He really loved bags. Whenever she returned from the supermarket with a nice new one, Tarka sought it out, flattened it to the perfect contour to fit his oversized body and then contentedly slipped off to wherever cats go when they dream.

Casey sensed, rather than felt, the tiniest of shudders run through the car - nothing she could put your finger on, just something that didn't quite "feel" right. It was enough to bring her attention to the dashboard - nothing unusual, no flashing lights, no unusual dings or groans - probably nothing. "Mile 139. I'm getting there."

The tiny shudder was enough to make her think about her last trip to Atlanta. Why had she decided to drive by herself? There had been other choices. She could've driven up with her best friend, Megan. Their conference presentations hadn't been that far apart, and right now she could be enjoying Megan's intelligent and witty conversation instead of turning into a nervous wreck all by herself. The thought of Megan brought a smile to her lips. She'd been there through all of the ups and downs with Doug, the tears and the riotous happiness. Megan was always helpful and caring, without being judgmental and was really the only friend she had that fitted into Tarka category - fun to be around without getting on her nerves at some point. She would definitely get together with Megan for the next trip, even if she had to wait a few extra hours. It would be worth any amount of time to have her sitting next to her right now, sharing the endless miles home. She could even take a flight from Savannah, then rent a car in Atlanta. It would cost more, but surely the time and the anxiety saved would be worth it, and she made enough to give herself a break every once in awhile.

Her mind shifted gears once again, back to Doug again - damn that man. The real problem was that it had been good, terrifically good. Casey thought of herself as a strong woman, an intelligent woman, someone above and beyond being twisted and turned by every little glitch of fate. She had only had sex with three men in her life, and the first one didn't count that much anyway, a high school thing that started and finished pretty much in the same week. It had only acted as the mechanism to fill in some of the holes in her curiosity and answer some of the questions about what the big deal was with sex. She hadn't felt anything at the finish except slightly older and slightly wiser.

The second hadn't been a great deal better. It lasted longer, but in retrospect she hadn't seemed a great deal more involved than she had been with her first experience. Kenny had been impatient and demanding, and the finish had come with a great deal of ranting and yelling that "signified nothing," as Shakespeare would have said.

But Doug, ah Doug, had been different right from the first. Intellectual, witty, undemanding. He had conquered her mind long before he got to her body. Everything had seemed right with Doug - so easy. The long lingering showers filled with soapy touches and caresses always filled her mind and body with anticipation for what would follow. There was no part of her he hadn't come to know in every detail. No part of her that hadn't ached with desire as he tenderly explored her. Every time had been different, but every time the same, leaving her with a breathless, but pleasurable exhaustion. Even thinking back to it now caused her body to begin to react with the same old signs of anticipation that she had once so enjoyed. "How long is this going to keep happening?" Casey wondered. "What would it take to forget Doug? Why oh why had he appeared at the conference? How did he know that she would be there? He wasn't going to start stalking her, was he? Was that the thought that had made her so stupidly nervous in the Waffle House?"

They'd been dating for quite some time when she discovered he was married. It happened quite by accident in the course of an otherwise innocent conversation with a fellow teacher. Doug seldom talked of his personal life and then only in relationship to some incident about his growing up, or some minor aspect of his job of selling various supplies to colleges between Charleston, South Carolina, and Atlanta and as far south as Gainesville, Florida. He spent most of his time on the road and was always full of amazing stories of life on the run.

Casey didn't realize how little she really knew of Doug's life until the accidental fact of his marriage came out during a lunch date with a colleague. Speaking of the "cute" guy who delivered office supplies, Jane just happened to mention in the most innocent of ways, "What a shame he's married; I wouldn't mind his shoes under my bed." At that moment, both Casey's mind and heart had turned to stone as though someone had delivered a vicious right hook directly to her kidneys. She knew her facial expression had become a frozen mask and fought desperately to keep Jane from becoming aware of the devastation within her mind and body. She quickly begged off the rest of lunch on the pretext of a suddenly remembered emergency phone call that had to be made immediately.

Back in her office, she slammed the door and threw herself into her armchair, her mind a riot of confused thoughts. She fought the urge immediately of phoning Doug on his cell phone and screaming at him in despair. She had to think first, had to sort it out. What the hell was happening? The dreams had turned to dust in seconds. This just couldn't be right - it just couldn't. How could he have used her this way? Maybe Jane was wrong. Maybe she had confused Doug with someone else. Her head spun - her thoughts reeling from one thing to the next. "I'll call Megan; she'll know what to do." Her fingers fumbled but finally dialed Megan's extension. Several rings later, Casey gave up and was once again alone.

The passing of a truck doing eighty, with the accompanying tidal wave drowning her struggling wipers, brought Casey abruptly back to the present. Nothing had changed but the mile markers - number 119 went by in a small white blur that yanked her back into her current miserable situation, still holding on to her sense of loss over Doug.

Another small shudder, but this time there was a distinct difference. Casey was positive she'd seen the flicker of a small red light on the dash. It wasn't there now, but it had been, she was sure of it. Her fingers tightened on the wheel, and her foot seemed rooted to the gas pedal as stiff as a petrified tree. Flickers of fear filled every part of her, and her eyes returned to the dash, dreading a second appearance of the little red light. Her universe had shrunk in seconds to include nothing more than her dash panel. Nothing else existed but the possibility of little red lights going on and off.

There it was again, but for a longer duration this time. "Service engine soon. What the hell does that mean? I will as soon as I get home, tomorrow, I promise. Just get me home." The flickering had stopped. The light was on for keeps now, unblinking and unaware of Casey's current state of panic. A little red eye stuck directly in the middle of her small rain-swept world. "Oh God, please don't let this happen to me, not here, not now." Another unwanted thought flashed into her consciousness, the old quote, "There are no atheists in foxholes." She was quickly beginning to have a sense of exactly what that meant.

Involuntary tremors in her legs and arms competed for attention with the sinking feeling in her chest. The car seemed to be slowing and her speedometer confirmed it - 65, 64, 62. Casey fought the urge to cram the little gas pedal all the way to the floor in desperate hope that it might remedy the situation, even though her head knew it wouldn't help at all.

Her eyes now searched the road ahead for some sign of hope - an exit with a diner, or better still, a gas station. Something, anything. There was nothing ahead at all, only more black and more rain, not even another car in sight. "God, where the hell am I? I don't even know where the nearest town is." Her headlights picked up the flicker of green some distance

ahead - an exit. Casey sighed an audible sound of relief. There just had to be something up there to save her.

Her speed had now dropped to fifty, which seemed like an absolute crawl, and by the time she drew abreast of the exit sign, she was down to forty-five. Exit 16 - Gardenville one mile ahead. She'd never even heard of Gardenville, but at least if it had a gas station, she'd bless its name for eternity. Casey tried to pick up the other signs that normally preceded the exits - diners, gas stations, lodgings, etcetera - but there was absolutely nothing. "Oh, great. I've managed to find the one exit in Georgia with no services of any kind. You're doing just great, Case!"

Thoughts raced through her mind. Would it be better to exit and try to find the town, or simply pull to the side and hope for a Georgia State Patrol car to find and rescue her? The only problem with the latter was that she hadn't seen a patrol car since she left Atlanta. "Where the hell were they? Probably in some nice, cozy donut shop with nice, hot cups of coffee."

Her little Prizm seemed on the verge of making her decision for her. By the time she got to the exit ramp, her speed had dropped to twenty-five and no amount of pumping the gas pedal had any effect. It looked like a compromise was in order. Get just enough onto the exit to avoid being hit by some wild driving trucker, but close enough to the highway to be seen by a patrol car or even a passing motorist with a cell phone, who could relay her position to a local garage. The little car glided to a stop, just yards off the highway, on the right shoulder of the ramp. It obligingly turned itself off, and Casey, at once, knew that any hope of continuing further in this particular vehicle was over for the time being.

There she sat in a semi-petrified state in a pouring rain that couldn't possibly get any worse and then, of course, it did. The dash clock read 9:10 p.m. Surely there would be someone coming along soon. She fumbled through her briefcase searching for her cell phone. Where had she put it? She had brought it with her, hadn't she? Calm down. It must be here somewhere, but then a picture of it flashed into her mind, sitting happily on her breakfast table, where she'd left it after speaking at the last minute to her department chair. "My God, why aren't you more organized, Casey?"

Two cars sped by in a blur of rain and mist seemingly without even noticing the little blue car, which one would have thought was obviously in distress. "How could they think I'd park in this godforsaken spot on purpose?" Casey thought. "How about something white tied to the antenna? Wasn't that some sort of universal distress signal? What have I got that's white? A T-shirt in my overnight bag in the trunk. Oh, great. How do I get to that without turning into a water-logged caricature of a human being with plastered-down hair and runny make-up?"

A truck went by and managed to send a wave far enough to reach her car even though she was now some distance from the road. "Goddammit! Why me?" She briefly mused on how the Lord's name always seemed to crop up whenever humans managed to involve themselves in some impossible situation. She really should get back to going to church and mentally resolved to do so on the very next Sunday.

Casey could not resist the temptation to try the key just one more time. Maybe her silent prayer had been heard and the engine would roar to life with renewed energy, and she could be on her way again. "Nope, didn't really think so. Back to the waiting game." But first, the trip to the trunk. Steeling herself against the elements, Casey opened the door and made her way to the rear of the car, mumbling obscenities to herself the entire way. She was completely soaked by the time she inserted the key into the trunk lock. She'd taken many a shower where she hadn't got nearly as wet as she currently was, and usually her showers were taken without clothing, except on a couple of occasions when Doug had been feeling particularly kinky. On those occasions, however, a warm bed and nudity were only minutes

away. Her suit felt like it weighed at least fifty pounds, and it clung to every part of her body like a man clinging to a life preserver after leaving the Titanic. Standing outside the car, she opened the suitcase and pulled out the white T-shirt - no problem about getting any wetter - that wasn't possible. Slamming the trunk with a little more energy than required, Casey sloshed her way back along the car to the antenna where she tied the already sodden T-shirt in what would have been a rather cute little bow under another set of circumstances. Feeling she'd done the best she could, she opened the driver's side door and slid back into her car. At least it was dry inside. Her mind settled into a combination of worry and hope of rescue.

If she were still back in Connecticut with friends and family close at hand, she would have been out of this mess in no time. They didn't have exits in Connecticut that didn't have at least one decent garage and dozens of available telephones just begging to be of help to a maiden in distress.

Another mind a few miles away had its own set of priorities. The man watched the road ahead with a grim determination. The little thing he'd done with that bitch's engine should have done its work by now. There wasn't any real anger. There was actually very little emotion at all, just a coldness that ran from his soul all the way through his eyes and beyond. The hard, calloused hands held the wheel of the pick up with a long-practiced efficiency. The same way he handled nearly all the aspects of his life: coldly, efficiently, brutally. The man was at peace with his universe, a universe with no room for accommodation. What would not come willingly must be subdued, broken, and taken by whatever force necessary. His Pa had taught him well, and now his was a world without words of compromise or apologies. No quarter given, none taken. His eyes stared straight ahead, never moving, coal black, without expression, hard and unreadable. He looked neither left nor right. This was his territory, and he knew it like no other. In his world, he did whatever he wanted to, and whoever challenged that would feel his fury, especially that stuck-up little bitch. If she gave him any trouble.... She'd started it anyway. Those little sideways glances he wasn't supposed to notice. He knew she'd found him good-looking. Most women did. They wanted to look after him, but he didn't need a mother. After all he'd never really had one, had he? Probably this one had never seen a real man up close before. She was just another one of those high and mighty, intellectual bitches who came from some damned city up North, who lowered herself to come down to the South to teach us poor Southern boys all that was wrong with everything we did and everything we said.

The smallest of mirthless grins creased the corners of his mouth and his thoughts turned to her body and how she'd get to love the hard thrusts of him once she got a taste of real lovin'. They were all the same, women - so aloof, so much better than him. That was until they got stuck real good. That brought them down to where they belonged. Only then, when they were full of him, would they catch on to where the real power was.

An involuntary twitch of his right index finger was the only outward indication of the rage of emotion inside. There was no other indicator on the bearded placid face. No other body signals given, unless you looked directly into those eyes - slightly hooded, like those of a snake and with as little feeling in them. Patient and deadly, with a frightening single-mindedness, a walking, talking cobra.

Was that a car on the side of the road up ahead? Yup. A small blue GEO Prizm with something white tied to the aerial. Damn, she'd got further than he'd thought possible, but it was still only 10 miles from the house. No problem there - she sure as hell wouldn't feel the ride no how. Need to play this real careful. His finger twitched again. He didn't want things getting messy out here on the highway, even though he hadn't seen another vehicle in the last ten miles. No use taking unnecessary chances. Didn't need no damn do-gooders bustin' into a matter that was strictly between him and the little lady up ahead waitin' on him.

His mind slipped briefly back to the last time he'd had to teach some little bitch a lesson. That had almost turned into a disaster. Pa had been real angry, although he was part of the problem. They'd both have to be a little more careful this time - no mistakes. He hadn't yet decided whether or not he'd let this one go. Maybe, maybe not. He felt powerful beyond the limits of normal humans and there was no fear, only a cunning animal desire to do what he needed to do without getting caught.

He eased the old pickup to the side of the road - motor running, lights on. It'd be tough to see him through the downpour, but even tougher without the lights on. He pulled the yellow slicker from the passenger seat and put it on while still in the truck, making sure the hood covered his head and face to the maximum degree possible.

He saw her in the front seat, nothing more than a dark shape in the gloom. Another mirthless smirk twitched at the corners of his mouth. She was probably thinking, "Thank God, someone's stopped." Let's see if she still felt that way in a few hours. He worked his way towards the car, bent over against the rain, hood pulled tight across his face. "Here I come, darlin'. Your prayers are about to be answered."

Pulling even with the driver's side window, he tapped lightly. An anxious, white face surrounded by plastered-down, dark hair peered out at him from the interior. She mouthed something he couldn't make out, and he shook his head to let her know he hadn't heard a word.

Casey cracked the window just the slightest bit and said, "Can you help me? My car seems to have died." The huddled figure in the rain seemed vaguely familiar, but nothing she could put a finger on.

"Yes, ma'am. What seems to be the trouble?" came out in the slow Southern drawl, peculiar to this part of the state. The voice was non-threatening, but there was some kind of nearly imperceptible edge to it. "You want to pop that there hood? I'd be happy to take a peek." Although a vague sense of unease had begun to creep through Casey, she couldn't come up with a good reason not to pop the hood. She was securely locked inside, and what possible harm could be done to a car that had already stopped working? She yanked the hood release and the hooded figure slogged to the front of the car, pulled up the hood, and inserted the brace.

Several minutes went by with nothing happening - no words, no sight of the stranger. Then she heard a faint command barked from the front, accompanied by a hand signaling her to turn on the ignition. "Try her now."

Casey obediently turned the key, but was not rewarded with anything other than a useless whine of an engine attempting to start without success. The blurry figure headed back along the car toward her window and said something completely unintelligible into the one-inch open space where her window was rolled down. "What? I didn't get that." The man made some motions with his hands to signify something or other then spoke another half dozen words that made no more sense than the last group. Casey was becoming more desperate by the minute, and in the interest of developing some sort of communication with this hooded creature, she rolled the window down another two inches and moved closer to the glass. "Looks like.....could be..... carburetor..... can't..... 'bout..... miles..... see if ..... rain..... could you..... hour....." There was a message there, but she just couldn't hear it. Hope for rescue lay so close. Just a couple more inches of open window, so she could get a little of her head out and she'd be able to find out what was going on.

Casey never even saw the stun gun. It slipped from his pocket into position so quickly that she wasn't even aware it was there until the powerful electric jolt caught her full-force in the chest. Reality disappeared in that fraction of a second, as she reeled into the passenger seat, aware of very little, except a painful buzzing somewhere far off. She never saw the driver's side door being opened and the dark figure looming over her.