

Prologue

Stewart Douglas could not, under any circumstances, be considered your average human being. He'd always been a fan of the vast variety of agonies that can be suffered by living creatures as long, of course, as they weren't his own. He brushed a lock of dark, unruly hair away from his forehead as he edged nearer to the center of the current attraction now taking place in the street in front of him. His dark eyes set deep within his brow like twin pools of opaque glass gleamed with excitement.

The crowd that swirled on that humid August morning around the scene of the accident was not unique in its composition. On the contrary, it was, in its intensity, not unlike any other self-respecting, lusty group you might find at your average prizefight or hockey game, waiting for the first signs of blood or mayhem.

The spectators gathered eagerly to watch the tableau generated by the collision of two vehicles traveling at high speeds, a first-hand opportunity to observe pain and suffering without any of the nastiness of actual physical involvement. A crash such as this one allowed participation in the struggle between life and death without actually sharing in the anguish of those who had been hurt or killed. Agony and death are always more desirable when seen from afar, invariably drawing the sentiment, "Shit, I'm glad that wasn't me."

Stewart could almost feel the collective flow of saliva emanating from the mouths of the fascinated, happily morbid onlookers collected at the corner of Broughton and Drayton Streets in the normally tranquil city of Savannah, Georgia. The police were doing the best they could to hold the crowd away from the firemen and paramedics who were working manfully to untangle the twisted masses of metal.

The driver of the older, dark green Chevy Impala sedan had begun his journey across Broughton Street cloaked securely in the knowledge that the green light in front of him gave him permission to do so. He now lay unmoving against the shattered remains of the passenger side dashboard with tiny rivulets of blood running down his ashy, middle-aged face.

The driver of the second vehicle, a bright red 1996 Dodge Charger, had apparently been convinced that running a red light would not be a problem. And he would have made it across Broughton and onto the next block were it not for the unfortunate circumstance of having the Chevy wrapped around his front end.

Stewart could feel his eyes narrowing even further, trying to magnify the details of what was happening before him. He could almost feel his pupils contracting with excitement, and he paused just long enough to wipe a tiny drop of spittle he felt at the corner of his mouth.

He had always loved the observation of the movements of fluids, particularly blood. Even in the twenty-eighth year of his life, he could still remember in vivid details his earliest cutting of unfortunate stray animals. When he was six, he'd gently cut his arm with a penknife he'd received as a birthday gift from his uncle and watched the blood in fascination. The years had added some pounds to his six-foot, slightly overweight frame, but had taken nothing away from his attraction for watching the flow of blood at any and every opportunity.

Even the mob surrounding him seemed fluid, ebbing and flowing ever closer to the scene of this current tragedy. The crowd was growing restless; nothing seemed to be happening fast enough. The victim in the Chevy remained pinned in his vehicle despite the best efforts of the firemen to free him. Comments like, "Do you think he's dead?" "He sure don't look too good to me" and "God, isn't this terrible?" floated across the air in muted undertones.

Every statement had the edge of anticipation clinging to it, the hope of viewing the mystery of death up close and personal. One young man with closely cropped brown hair cursed softly as he removed his white sneakered foot from a pool of oil that had worked its way in an ebony river from underneath the Chevy.

Stewart brushed his thick, dark mustache with the stubby, powerful fingers of his right hand and watched the little streaks of crimson work their way down the Chevy victim's sallow face. He wondered if the man had already released his body fluids in his final death throes. Stewart was making an intense effort to keep his wide, flaccid lips from breaking into a grin, which would be considered most inappropriate considering the circumstances. There would be time enough for that later when he was back home safely tucked away in the basement of his old white house in his private lab; then there would be time to review the entire incident in lurid, well-remembered details, time to visualize all those lovely flowing fluids.

The firemen finally succeeded in freeing the man from his Chevy and placed him on the pavement away from the oil and water, which would lend their evidence to this latest tragedy, at least until the next good rain. The paramedics began working over him feverishly. Some minutes passed before one of them looked at the other and slowly shook his head. All the oxygen and IV fluids in the world were not going to perform a miracle at this scene.

This was the signal that Stewart had been secretly waiting for, the signal that allowed him to turn away from the scene with satisfaction and begin the walk back towards his car, secure in the knowledge that soon he could watch the lovely fluids in private in his home. He hunched his heavy-set shoulders and held his hands clasped in front of him. So far it had been a pretty good day. As he moved away from the thinning crowd, he felt the first warm drops signaling the onslaught of another southern Georgia thunderstorm. With any luck he'd reach the parking lot before he was soaked to the skin. He even allowed himself a secret smile as he felt the excitement of what he'd seen begin to form tiny pools of sweat under his armpits. Yes! It was going to be a really good day.