

SAVANNAH SCORES

BY

MARY CHARLES

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PROLOGUE

Julio Castillo had gone just about as far as he could. His short, chubby legs hurt and he was wheezing with the effort of running. The undergrowth that covered the ground among the straggly pines and old oaks had torn his clothes in a dozen places, and the scrapes and bruises he'd endured in his panicked flight were sore to his touch. The river was close, very close. He could hear the gurgling sound of it just yards away, and the ground over which he was moving was damp with hidden traps everywhere from where the currents had eroded the soil from the roots of the thickly growing flora close to its banks.

It might have helped if he'd even known why he was running. He'd done absolutely nothing to deserve this. He'd always been a loyal member of the group and had told no one anything about what he was involved in. Why was this happening? Julio had never been a man whose strengths had been courage or leadership. He had always preferred the role of follower, even as a boy in Panama City, and was more than happy to bask in someone else's ideas and actions, which was one of the reasons he felt so betrayed by what was happening to him now.

Another low lying pine bough swept hard across his face, temporarily blinding him and sending him stumbling into a sink hole that brought him down hard. The dogs sounded like they were getting closer. He thought briefly about getting into the river as he struggled to get back to his feet. No, that wouldn't work. He didn't swim well and the excess fat he'd gained around his waist since he first came to Carter University in Savannah, Georgia two years ago as a graduate student wouldn't serve him any better in the water than it did here on land. Maybe if he just stopped and talked to the men closing in on him, they'd listen long enough to take him back to the camp and let him work things out with the major. He'd been with this group for eighteen months. No matter what they might have thought he'd done, he was innocent. He had to find a way to make them understand that.

Julio had lost his camouflage cap somewhere during his run, and he could feel the sweat running down from his close cropped hair over his forehead and into his eyes. The September heat of a sunny day in Georgia wasn't helping his mood. There was no way he could fight the men off, not a twenty-eight-year-old who only stood 5' 6" and weighed 212 lbs. He'd also lost his glasses some time ago thanks to another low lying limb, so he couldn't even see very well. Besides the fact that the men behind him were well armed, there were the dogs. Large Dobermans, they clearly enjoyed nothing more in the world than tearing some groveling creature to shreds with their savage teeth. If they got here before the men did, he would opt for the water. He heard the lead dog before he saw it. The low snarling sound and the heavy panting of an animal with a goal in mind made him whirl round. What he felt now was a more than familiar emotion, fear. It seemed to him he'd been afraid all of his life - afraid to take a stand; afraid to face up to bullies, hiding behind his books - so, like so many of his fellow humans, he had taken a chance at last, a chance to be part of something that he could feel good about, something to make him more admirable than he had ever been before. Was this the result of trying to be courageous? It all seemed so unfair.

It was no use. He could barely stand, let alone run. His legs felt like jelly and his back ached unceasingly. The men wouldn't kill him; they couldn't want to do that. No, they'd just bring him back to the camp, and he'd be able to talk his way out of this terrible misunderstanding. That's the way it had to be. After all, he was just a lowly student. Not very important at all.

“Heel, Wolf. Heel, boy.” The first face to appear was Red Chavez with Juan Olano close behind.

“Well, Julio, how you doin’ old boy. You run pretty good for a fat boy. Couldn’t dodge old Wolf here though, could ya?” Red snickered at the obvious discomfort of Julio.

“Red, Juan, for God’s sake we’ve known each other for ages. Why are you doing this to me? I’m one of you.”

“Well, you mighta been if you could’ve done one simple job. Now all you’ve done is put the heat on all of us.”

“I swear I didn’t do anything except what I was told to. How was I supposed to know that idiot would sell the meth to an undercover cop and then turn me over to them? I’d never talk. You know that.

“Too late, amigo. I’m afraid you made one mistake too many. Nice knowing you, friend,” said Juan.

Julio could feel the sweat pouring from his body, and he was fighting desperately to keep from crying. All he could see through the myopic haze were the two dim faces of men he knew well enough to know they’d kill in a moment and the sun glinting off the fangs of the Dobermans. He never saw the heavy limb that hit him from behind. The powerful arms of Jesus Moreno who stood 6’ 6” and was built like a professional wrestler handled the large branch as though it were a twig. The blow rendered Julio unconscious immediately, and then all that remained to be done was to roll the relatively short but rotund body into the muddy waters of the Ogeechee where the creatures that inhabited this part of the river could enjoy an unexpected treat as Julio made his last slow ride.

CHAPTER ONE

Tyler George lifted his foot off the gas pedal of his tan 1998 Saturn and gently applied it against the brake pedal. The little car eased its way over the speed bump in front of it while the speedometer reading dropped below ten miles per hour. To most people the speed bumps on University Avenue were nothing more than one more annoyance every motorist driving on campus endured while travelling from one far flung building to another. There were also the seemingly endless road construction projects in progress which never seemed to reach completion, and the numerous white lined crosswalks filled with students who fully expected that cars travelling in both directions would come to a stop as they made their way at a leisurely pace from one side of the street to the other.

If anyone had actually ever taken the time to notice the expressions of those behind the wheels trying to get from one spot to another at Carter University, the most common look would have been one of annoyance and frustration at the snail’s pace they were forced to travel.

This was not the case with Tyler George, however. If anything, he seemed to be enjoying himself. His thin lips were curved ever so slightly upward in what was the closest expression he had to a smile. His hazel eyes darted back and forth behind his opaque sunglasses like those of a hawk searching for a tiny mouse.

What constituted a pain-in-the-neck for most of the drivers working their way laboriously along this particular road was nothing more than pure pleasure for Tyler. As a matter of fact, it was something he did every time he got the chance. He brushed an unruly lock of dark hair away from his eyes as he stopped at another crosswalk where seven or eight girls were busily discussing some matter of great importance. They were completely oblivious to the angular face behind the wheel of the unimpressive two-door car whose occupant was

studying their every motion. Even if they had taken the time to notice Tyler, he wouldn't have made much of an impression. Just one more plain, long-haired character in a small inexpensive car. There wasn't anything there to start the pulses racing of a young nubile college girl.

Tyler, on the other hand, noticed every bulge in their skin-tight jeans or shorts and every curve of every breast as they slowly passed in front of him. While he might not have been able to tell what their faces looked like, he would certainly have been able to describe in detail the pluses and minuses of every figure in the group. What he couldn't commit to memory could be preserved forever by his small Canon digital camera sitting beside him on the passenger's seat.

He enjoyed being an entity that hardly anyone ever noticed most of the time, an anonymous driver in an anonymous car. The last thing he wanted was to attract unwanted attention from anyone who might feel obliged to complain about his behavior for whatever reason. He didn't mind being alone, and he invariably found himself a desk at the very back of every class he attended. It was his belief that most people weren't smart enough to appreciate his uniqueness, and so he couldn't be bothered to try and get to know them.

He took his foot off the brake and let the Saturn inch forward towards the next speed bump, making sure he wasn't moving fast enough to miss any pleasurable sights along the way. As he neared the next crosswalk, his eyes were drawn to a tall pony-tailed blond approaching from his left in blue jogging shorts and a white sports bra. She was slender with perky boobs that bounced in perfect cadence to her gait. He immediately stopped just before reaching the crossing zone even though the blond was still twenty yards or more away. If the young woman thought this was just a little odd, she didn't show it. She was what Tyler liked to think of as a Southern blond with hair so fair it looked almost white in the sun. He indulged himself by thinking about whether she might be that blond on other parts of her body.

He knew her eyes would be summer sky blue long before she was close enough for him to see their actual color. She glanced casually at Tyler as she trotted across the road with a look that implied only indifference, certainly neither curiosity nor recognition.

As she continued her run, Tyler got the opportunity to get in one quick snapshot of her from behind. The Canon worked to perfection as it always did, and he was able to capture one more prize for his already extensive collection of photos without the slightest problem, and with no one, including the blond, being the wiser.

The young woman chose this particular moment to come to a halt, put her right foot up on a bench and begin retying her shoelace. It was the perfect opportunity for Tyler to get a side shot of long tan legs and arms stretching to correct the problem created by her rebellious sneaker. His heart caught in his throat as he observed her cleavage while she completed the necessary adjustment to her running shoe. He managed to capture two quick shots of her in that position before she once again began her jog.

His thoughts briefly flashed back to his 1101 Composition class he'd taken earlier in the day. *I wonder how Dr. Forbes would like a detailed essay on the sexual desires of a young horny male student. I bet she'd notice me if I turned that one in.*

Tyler's tongue flicked out like that of a rattler testing the air and licked the beads of sweat on his upper lip. It was time to pack it in and head back to the small one bedroom apartment he called home. A few short minutes at his computer and Photoshop would provide him with the eight by ten proofs of what he'd just been so fortunate to witness. Then it would be time once again for him to lie naked on his couch and enjoy the fruits of

this afternoon's labors. It wasn't quite as good as having a real live woman there beside him, but for Tyler, it was a damned close second.

Casey Forbes looked around her new office and smiled. She was so pleased that the Composition department had moved to the new and larger building because it meant that she warranted a bigger office with two windows. Since having one window was a major victory to most faculty at Carter University, Casey thought that all her scholarship and service had obviously impressed the department chair enough so that he had given her an office with two.

She glanced around her at all the objects that made her life what it was and gave her an inner sense of pride at what she'd been able to accomplish.

Her face smiled back at her from a photograph taken during an interview with the grand dame of female English mystery writers P. D. James. Her dark blue eyes shone like sapphires in that picture and even her short curly brown hair seemed alive with the excitement of that particular moment.

A few years had passed since that photo had been taken, but she didn't feel she'd changed that much. There might be a couple of added wrinkles around the eyes that hadn't been there when that photo was taken, but there were still no gray hairs that she was able to detect. Her 5' 6" frame still carried a nicely proportioned 120 pounds, and her skin was as smooth and creamy as it had always been.

Another wall contained postcards of all the places she had visited and learned to love: England, Scotland, Spain, the Islands of the Caribbean. These were the places and adventures that brought color and meaning to her life along with the many good friends she'd made during her time at Carter. Her Ph.D diploma from the University of Connecticut was also proudly displayed, beautifully matted and framed by her old friend Destiny Lynne Durden.

Casey always thanked God for her career. She really loved teaching, and her students seemed to appreciate all the hard work she poured into her classes. Sometimes she felt her job and her close friends were the only things that had kept her sane during the difficult times she'd experienced.

This Friday there were very few of her colleagues to be seen since most did not teach on Friday afternoons and many students left campus for the greater excitement of Atlanta. So, it was a surprise when a sharp knock roused her from her essay grading.

"Er, Dr. Forbes, can I have a word with you?"

Casey looked up to see one of her least favorite students, Tiffany Marks, standing in the doorway. "Of course, Tiffany, come on in and sit down." She pointed to an office chair close to her desk. Tiffany, however, flounced to the armchair in the corner of the office, moved a pile of books and sat back.

"It's about my grade," she said in an aggrieved tone. "I don't know why you gave me a D. You said I was doing fine when we spoke last time."

"No," Casey answered, trying to keep her temper. Tiffany always managed to aggravate her with her heavy makeup, skimpy clothes and general attitude, which shouted daddy's darling and mommy's precious winner of numerous beauty pageants. "Last time we spoke, I said that your essay had some good points, but you needed to develop several of your ideas further and make a greater effort with your punctuation. I also recommended that you get help with your organization, but you didn't come for help and that was why the essay earned a D. Also, if you remember, that was the second D grade you got which is why your first major grade was a D."

Tiffany leaned forward to glare at Casey. “But if I get a D in this class, I may not be eligible to be on the cheerleading team.”

“Well, I’m sorry, but you should have thought of that and worked harder on both the essays. But remember this is only the first major grade; you’ll have plenty more essays and in-class assignments, which can pull your grade up to a passing C or even a B if you get the help you need. I’m more than happy to see you in my office hours and work with you.” Casey smiled encouragingly at the closed-in face of Tiffany.

“Yeah, right.”

“If you don’t want to get help from me, there’s always the Writing Center or the Tutoring Center. Have you been there?”

“No.”

“Well, try them and come to me when you begin the next assignment and we’ll do the best to pull your grades up.” Casey smiled again, this time attempting to show more warmth.

Tiffany just stared at her. “It’s all very well for you. You just don’t understand how hard it is for people like me. One of these days, maybe one of these days, you will.” Muttering to herself, Tiffany rushed out of the office, leaving Casey staring bewilderedly at her back. *Had that been a threat?*

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