

NOBODY'S CHILD – Chapter 8

When Georgia picked up the tail three blocks from her apartment two days later, an uneasy feeling shot through her. How long had he been following her? How had she missed him? She hadn't been paying attention; that's how. Totally unacceptable. Her powers of observation were supposed to be incontestable. First-rate. She tried to rationalize: people didn't follow her—it was usually the other way around; she had been preoccupied; she wasn't on the clock.

No. No excuses. She was no better than the teenagers she'd tailed the other day. More important, excuses wouldn't solve the problem. She forced herself to focus on the now. Do the reconnaissance. Take appropriate action. Passing a bookstore, she stole a glance in the window. A man was about a hundred yards behind her. Burly. Caucasian. Brown jacket, jeans, work boots, wool hat. Shoulders hunched against the cold. Hands slouched in pockets. She couldn't see his face, but he didn't seem to be anything special. Just an average guy. An amateur, too, to be so obvious. Was he connected to the flash rob?

Frigid air stung her face, but she picked up her pace. Chicagoland was in the grip of a bitter cold—the kind of cold that made people grateful for any bit of warmth, even the exhaust from a bus. She was bundled up herself, a bulky, nondescript figure heading south on Sherman Avenue. It would be hard to recognize anyone. So where did he pick her up? Had he been staking out her apartment?

She slowed, reviewing basic countersurveillance techniques. She could climb on a bus, take it down to Howard, then switch to the El or a cab. Or she could double

back to Benson Avenue, cut through the parking lot, and circle around the bank. She'd likely lose him either way, but both options would mean staying outside. The sky was that miserable dirty gray that blankets Chicago from November until March, and the numbing cold sapped her resolve. Losing him wouldn't tell her why he'd been tailing her in the first place.

She stopped outside a coffee shop on the corner of Sherman and Davis, hoping he'd follow her in. It was a fifty-fifty shot. As she pushed through the door, a coffee-scented gust of warmth wafted over her. She went to the front window and waited.

He didn't appear. Georgia frowned. Was he not sure he had the right target? Had someone ordered him not to approach but simply report in? Or was he a pervert waiting for the right moment to pounce? She waited another few seconds, then turned around and unzipped her jacket. Whoever he was, whatever he wanted, he could damn well freeze his ass off. She wouldn't.

She headed over to the counter. There were only a couple of other people in the shop besides Paul Crosby, who was working the afternoon shift. Tall, slim, with brown hair, Paul had a sweet face marred by an ugly mole on his left cheek. She worried about that mole and kept nagging him to get it looked at, but Paul was cavalier, claiming it was the mark of God. What sort of mark, he couldn't explain. He moonlighted as a drummer for a blues band, and she'd spent plenty of nights at Hanson's listening to him jam. He'd even come on to her once or twice, but they were listless, halfhearted passes.

Now he was wiping down the espresso machine. She cleared her throat. He looked up and brightened. “Hey. What’s happening, peaches?”

“My bones are cold.” No sense telling him about the tail. They’d both know soon enough.

“I got just the thing.” Paul began playing with the levers of a giant metallic coffee machine with lots of tubes, valves, and handles. Steam hissed, curled into the air, and dissipated. Black liquid dropped into a cup. He pulled another lever. Something sputtered, and white foam covered the black. He slapped a top on the cup and handed it to Georgia. She took a sip.

“Thanks. This hits the spot.” She went back to the window. She couldn’t see the guy.

“They’re saying more snow tonight,” said one of the people in the shop, an elderly man with snowy white hair and beard.

“Feels that way,” Paul replied and started on one of his rants about the Chicago winter and how it wasn’t for wimps. Georgia barely listened—it was the sort of mindless chatter that passed for genuine communication today. Instead she mentally reviewed her cases. The flash rob case was over. She was still investigating a domestic and a workers’ comp claim, in which the plaintiff alleged he’d thrown his back out while working in a Lincolnwood factory, except he’d worked there only a week before he was fired for selling crack in the parking lot.

Still, unless her client was holding out on her, it wasn’t a heater. Or dangerous enough to warrant a tail. Neither was the domestic. She doctored her coffee with sweetener, shook off her coat, and sat at a small round table. Someone

had left a newspaper, and she idly thumbed through it. The paper, shrunken and plastered with photos and color graphics, wasn't good for much more than lining a birdcage.

Not that she was a big reader. She'd never been a good student; she discovered in high school she was dyslexic. Overcoming it would require a lot of behavioral changes, they said. Georgia decided she didn't have the time or the inclination, so she accepted the stigma that came with the label. She had a disability. She was slow. A retard. It hadn't really mattered. There were plenty of high school boys eager for her expertise in other things.

The door to the coffee shop opened. Georgia went on alert, but it was just a man and a woman, shivering and complaining about the cold. They ordered lattes, sat, and launched into an intense discussion about monetizing websites.

"You should come out to Bill's tonight," Paul called out over their chatter and the hum of the espresso machine. "I'm playing with Louie."

She folded the newspaper and looked out the front window. No one. Had the tail given up?

"Maybe."

"It might be one of our last gigs there. I don't think the place is gonna make it."

"Sorry to hear that." She gazed out the window.

Paul caught it. "Something going on?"

She shook her head. But his question spurred her to action. She zipped up her jacket and put on her gloves. She didn't like loose ends. Time to confront the tail, if

he was still there. Find out what he wanted. She took her coffee to the counter and set it down. "I'll be back in a minute. Save it for me."

Paul's eyebrows rose.

"Don't worry." She flashed him a smile.

She hunched her shoulders and went outside. The sky had darkened, and a few errant snowflakes sifted down. She glanced in both directions. She easily spotted the guy, leaning against the wall of a building on the same side of the street as the coffee shop. His gaze was on the coffee shop door; he wasn't even trying to be inconspicuous. Irritation flashed through her. She pulled her jacket close, intending to approach him and demand he tell her why he was following her. But as she turned toward him, a black SUV turned the corner and headed down Sherman.

Suddenly a burst of lightning-fast images exploded. The SUV headed toward the man who'd been tailing her. As it came abreast, it slowed. The man who'd been tailing her froze. A look of horror tore across his face. The passenger window rolled down. Georgia knew what was going to happen.

"Drop!" she yelled. "Get down and roll!"

The man didn't move. He was still staring at the SUV, his features a frozen grimace of fear. Georgia waved her hands and tried to simulate a crouching-down motion. But he couldn't see her. The barrel of a rifle emerged from the passenger window of the SUV. She couldn't make out the model, but when her tail saw it, his mouth dropped open, and he reeled back.

Not fast enough.

A series of loud cracks split the air. The man who'd been tailing her folded up like an accordion. The SUV driver gunned his engine, fishtailed, then shot down Sherman Avenue.

