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The Stranger You Seek

Written by Amanda Kyle Williams

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THE STRANGER YOU SEEK

Amanda Kyle Williams

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Prologue

The sun had not even burned dew off the grass under the live oaks, but the air was thick and soupy already, air you could swim around in, and it was dead-summer hot.

Inside the car she had not yet noticed parked on her street, a patient hunter dabbed at a trickle of perspiration and watched as Westmore Drive began a sleepy jog toward midweek.

The white-trimmed windows in the small brick house were flung open around seven, and she first appeared as a faint image behind the kitchen window, nearly abstract behind glass and screen, but no less an object of desire. The smell of cooking food drifted from her screened windows – frying bacon and toast and coffee – and Lei Koto’s killer felt the first stab of hunger this placid summer morning.

A little before ten the street was silent. The last neighbor had left for work, 9:50 on the dot as always. The smells from Lei Koto’s kitchen had shifted from breakfast to something else, something green and cabbagey and rank.

The car door opened, then footsteps on the concrete walk, a briefcase, good shoes, a white smile, a business card.

They always open the door.

Chapter One

My name is Keye Street. First name from my Asian grandfather; my adoptive parents awarded me the second. By trade I am a detective, private, that is, a process server and bail recovery agent. In life, I am a dry alcoholic, a passionate believer in Krystal cheeseburgers and Krispy Kreme doughnuts, and a former behavioral analyst for the FBI. How I ended up here in the South, where I have the distinction of looking like what they still call a damn foreigner in most parts of Georgia and sounding like a hick everywhere else in the world, is a mystery Emily and Howard Street have never fully unraveled for me. I know they had wanted a child so badly they adopted a scrawny Chinese American with questionable genes from an orphanage. My grandparents and guardians had been murdered and my biological parents consisted of two drug addicts and one exotic dancer. I have no memory of them. They took flight shortly after my birth. I can only manage a word or two in Chinese, but my mother, Emily Street, who is as proficient in innuendo as anyone I've ever known, taught me a lot about the subtle and passive-aggressive language of southern women. They had tried for a cute little white kid, but something in my father's past, something they have for my entire life flat-out refused to share with me, got them rejected. It didn't take me long to understand that southerners are deeply secretive.

I embraced the South as a child, loved it passionately and love it still. You learn to forgive it for its narrow mind and growing pains because it has a huge heart. You forgive the stifling summers because spring is lush and pastel sprinkled, because November is astonishing

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in flame and crimson and gold, because winter is merciful and brief, because corn bread and sweet tea and fried chicken are every bit as vital to a Sunday as getting dressed up for church, and because any southerner worth their salt says please and thank you. It's soft air and summer vines, pine woods and fat home-grown tomatoes. It's pulling the fruit right off a peach tree and letting the juice run down your chin. It's a closeted and profound appreciation for our neighbors in Alabama who bear the brunt of the Bubba jokes. The South gets in your blood and nose and skin bone-deep. I am less a part of the South than it is a part of me. It's a romantic notion, being overcome by geography. But we are all a little starry-eyed down here. We're Rhett Butler and Scarlett O'Hara and Rosa Parks all at once.

My African American brother, Jimmy, whom my parents adopted two years after I moved in, had a different experience entirely. Not being white, we were both subjected to ignorance and stereotyping, but even that seemed to work in my favor and against Jimmy. People were often surprised that I spoke English and charmed that I spoke it with a southern accent. They also assumed my Asian heritage made me above average. I was expected and encouraged to excel. The same people would have crossed the street at night to avoid sharing a sidewalk with my brother, assuming that being both black and male he was also dangerous. He'd picked up our mother's coastal Carolina accent, the type usually reserved for southern whites in a primarily white neighborhood at a time when diversity was not necessarily something to be celebrated. He couldn't seem to find a comfortable slot for himself in any community, and he spent high school applying to West Coast universities and carefully plotting his escape. Jimmy's a planner. And careful with everything. Never screwed up his credit, never got fired, never had addiction issues, and never rode down Fifth Avenue in New York City after a few too many with his head sticking through the sunroof of a limo yelling 'Hey, y'all' like I did. Jimmy's the well-behaved child. He now lives in Seattle with his lover, Paul, and not even the promise of Mother's

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blackberry cobbler is an attractive enough offer to bring him home to Georgia.

How I came to be here this night, edging my way along an old frame porch, double-clutching my 10mm Glock, body pressed flat against the house, peeling paint sticking to the back of my black T-shirt and drifting onto cracked wood, is another story entirely.

I had once been called Special Agent Street. It has a nice ring, doesn't it? I was superbly trained for this kind of work, had done my time in the field before transferring to the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC) at Quantico as a criminal investigative analyst, a profiler. A few years later, the FBI took away my security pass and my gun, and handed me a separation notice.

'You have the brains and the talent, Dr Street. You merely lack focus.'

I remember thinking at that moment that the only thing I really lacked was a drink, which was, of course, part of the problem.

I was escorted that day to the FBI garage, where my old convertible, a '69 Impala, white-on-white and about half a mile long, was parked at an angle over the line between two spaces. Fire one Special Agent, get back two parking spots. Sweet deal.

Now, four years later, I passed under the curtained front window and congratulated myself on accomplishing this soundlessly. Then the rotting porch creaked. The strobe from a television danced across the windows, volume so low I could barely make it out. I waited, still, listening for any movement inside, then stuck my head round and tried to peek between the curtains. I could see the outline of a man. *Whoa!* A big outline.

Jobs like this can be tricky. Bail jumpers move fast. You've got to go in when you can and take your chances. No time to learn the neighborhood, the routines, the visitors. I was here without the benefit of surveillance, without backup, going in cold with my heart thundering against my chest and adrenaline surging like water through a fire hose. I could taste it. *Almonds and saccharin.* I was scared shitless and I liked it.

Chapter Two

The streetlamps were out, the night draped in billowy white clouds that cast a faint light across the overgrown yard and locked in the heat like a blanket. Atlanta in summer – suffocating and damp. Nerves and humidity sent sweat trickling from my hairline and over my darkened cheekbones. I was grease-painted and dressed for night work, crouching near the front door, searching my black canvas backpack for Tom. Anyway I called it Tom, as in *Peeping Tom*, a thirty-six-inch fiber optic tube with a miniature screen attached to one end, an electronic eye to the other. Tom takes a lot of the guesswork out of jobs like this. As I twisted and turned the tiny tube under the door, I got a pretty good look at the front room.

The subject, Antonio Johnson, was a repeat violent offender. He'd been out of prison for two months when he robbed a convenience store. I had traced him to Canada three weeks ago and lost him. But his ex-wife was in Atlanta and Johnson had a history of stalking her. She'd been getting hang-ups again. A trace of the calls, with the help of a friend at APD, led to a pay phone in a sleazy motel in Atlanta's crack-infested West End. I found people there who knew Johnson. One of them ratted him out for thirty dollars. He was staying at a place off Jonesboro Road near Boulevard and the federal penitentiary. There even locals check their car doors at stoplights and commuters take the long way around after dark.

I could see him on the three-inch viewer, sitting on a ragged couch, feet on the edge of a wooden utility spool coffee table. He appeared to be alone, a beer in his right hand, his left hand in his lap and

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partially hidden from view. *You hiding something under there, big guy?*

Hovering in the damp air around the front porch, just above the sweet, sick scent of trash and empty beer cans, was the aroma of something synthetic like superglue and Styrofoam.

I triggered off the safety, then tapped on the front door. I was going to use my best woman-in-distress voice, say I needed a phone, say I had a flat, say something, anything, to get the door open. I wasn't sure. I'd learned to improvise since I'd been on my own.

Johnson didn't hesitate. I got a glimpse on my tiny viewer of something coming out of his lap seconds before he blew a hole in the door near my ear the size of a softball. The blast was cannon-loud, splintered the door, and left me light-headed and tumbling off the porch to safer ground.

Another blast. The front windows exploded. Glass flew like shrapnel. I balled up against the side of the porch and felt the sting on my neck and arms and knew I was cut, then rose up enough to get a shot off in the general direction of the front window. I didn't want to shoot him. I merely wanted him to back off a little.

... Then silence.

I took the porch steps in a half crouch, made it to the door. Still quiet. I tried reaching through the hole in the door to unlatch it. That's when I heard it, a shotgun, a goddamn pump-action, and if you've ever heard the sound, you'll never forget it – the foregrip sliding back, one shell ejecting, another pushing into the carrier, the bolt closing. It happens in a split second with a good operator, and Johnson had had plenty of practice.

I pressed my back against the house, took a breath, took a moment. A quick reality check is always a good idea in these situations. Did I really want to get killed bringing in this guy? Hell no, I did not, but the adrenal flood of mania this kind of event produces propelled me forward rather than back, which perhaps illustrates most effectively the differences between those of us in this business and the sane population.

Boom! Johnson let the shotgun loose once more. I felt it under my

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feet, like a fireworks show when the ground shakes. He was probably making his own loads. God only knew what he was firing at me. Another chunk of front door blew out. Then the *pop, pop, pop, pop* of an automatic weapon.

On three, I told myself.

... One ... Two ... Two and a half ... Two and three quarters. Fuck! Three!

I put everything I had behind one of the black combat boots I wear for this kind of work and went for the space just above the front doorknob. It had no fight left, splintered and swung open. I flattened back against the house and waited.

... Silence.

Glock steadied with both hands, heart slamming so hard I felt a vein in my throat tick, tick, ticking against my shirt collar. I stepped around the corner and surveyed the front room, a living-room/dining-room combo pack. I could see the kitchen beyond that, a hallway. I was figuring the place for two bedrooms and a bath. I'd poked around outside for quite a while before making my move, counting doors and windows. So where was he? A bedroom, the hallway?

... Then pop, pop, pop. I hit the floor and rolled into the tiny dining room, got off a few rounds in case he had any ideas about coming to find me.

'Bail recovery, Mr Johnson! Drop your weapon and come out with your hands behind your head. *Do it now!*'

'A chick?' Johnson yelled back, and laughed. 'No fucking way!'

Then I heard the back door opening, the screen slamming. I rushed into the kitchen and saw the door swinging half off its hinges, and beyond that the white letters on Johnson's T-shirt bobbed across the dark backyard toward the fence.

I took the back steps into the yard and watched with some satisfaction as Johnson neared the fence and the gate. I'd left something back there in case it came to this, which had been a pretty good bet.

It didn't take long. It was a postage-stamp small yard with a

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chain-link fence and a horseshoe lever on the gate. Johnson grabbed the fence, and just as he tried to hoist himself over, a blue-white explosion knocked him backward. Just a little black powder, some petroleum jelly, a battery and a couple of wires, a few fireworks to slow him down. My ears rang from five feet away and for a couple of seconds I had to fight my way through a million tiny flashbulbs.

Johnson lay there like a slug, motionless. I approached him cautiously, Glock steady, and checked him for signs of life. Breathing fine. Out cold. I pulled his big arms up behind him. His palms were scorched.

'It wasn't supposed to be quite that dramatic,' I told his limp body as I snapped cuffs on his wrists and threaded a belt around his waist and through the cuffs. 'But then I really don't know shit about explosives.'

I rolled him onto his back. With one size-thirteen shoe in each hand, I attempted to drag him by the ankles. *Damn.* The guy was at least two-sixty and dead weight. I'm five-five on tiptoes and one-ten if I drink enough water. I moved him about three inches before I gave up. I could have used my mobile phone to call the cops for a pickup, but the girl jokes would have run for weeks at APD.

I plopped down on the ground and poked him in the ribs with my Glock. 'Come on, you big fat baby, wake up.'

His eyelids rose a full minute before his eyes were able to focus.

'Hi,' I said cheerfully, shining my flashlight into his bloodshot brown eyes. I was holding it cop-style over my shoulder and near my face. 'Remember me?'

He squirmed angrily, then made grunting animal sounds when he realized his hands were locked behind him.

'Now, would you like to walk your fat ass to my car, or you want me to call the cops?'

'Who you if you ain't no cop?'

I thought about that. It wasn't a bad question. 'Soon as I figure it out, I'll let you know,' I promised him, nudging him again to get him

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on his feet. But he was having trouble getting up without his hands. I got behind him and pushed.

'Ever think about a diet?'

'You like it, bitch,' Johnson slurred. He seemed a little loopy. 'You want some Antonio. You know you do.'

Oh yeah, bring it on. Nothing like a big ole fat man with a prison record.

'Okay, Lard Boy. Lets you and me take a drive.'

Chapter Three

The old Sears Roebuck building is an Atlanta landmark. It took seven months to build it in 1926, and even in its day, the building, which includes a guardlike tower in the center, looked more like a prison than the center of retail activity. Two million square feet of faded brick sprawls for acres and rises up nine floors above Ponce de Leon Avenue on the outer edge of Midtown, where you couldn't stop for gas without getting heckled by street people or hit up for money before the cops moved in. For the last few years the sign out front has read CITY HALL EAST and the building currently houses overflow from our growing bureaucracy and a portion of Atlanta's massive police force. This will soon change. The mayor closed a forty-million-dollar deal with a developer who says it will be the city's hottest new address in a couple of years. Condos, live/work artists' spaces, restaurants. So it goes in Midtown Atlanta, where the landscape is ever changing and scaffolding is a thriving industry. The city was hashing out details on where the current residents will end up, but no one seemed happy about packing up their offices and moving out. At least not the cops I knew firsthand.

A couple of blocks east, a breakfast line was already forming at the community soup kitchen. The temperature hadn't dropped below seventy-eight degrees at sunrise in a month. We were having a real southern-style heat wave, but the homeless line up for breakfast in jackets. It must be hard to stay warm when your stomach is empty. I wondered how the city's hottest new address would get along with the soup kitchen regulars.

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At the station with Antonio Johnson, I saw Lieutenant Aaron Rauser watching me from his office across the hall in Homicide. Johnson was fully alert by then, cursing, struggling, trying to make a scene, showing off a little. He'd been fine in the car, quiet in the backseat, still fighting off the drugs and the explosives, but when I was using one of the station phones to call Tyrone, whom I worked with as a contractor at Tyrone's Quikbail, and let him know I'd nabbed Johnson, the rascal started acting up.

Cops, trickling in at the end of their shifts, laughed at the commotion. 'Hey, Keye,' one of the uniforms snickered. 'You don't look so good. You let Fat Boy kick your ass?'

I rolled my eyes and handed Johnson over for printing and then waited for the receipt I'd need to collect my money from Tyrone. When I ducked into Rauser's glass office in Homicide, detectives sitting in their open cubes made kissing sounds. Rauser's relationship with me was an endless source of amusement at the station. I suppose we seemed an unlikely pair. Rauser is white and twelve years my senior. We had come from different worlds and there were whispers around the station that we were lovers. Not true. But he is my best friend.

'Good morning.' I was trying to be cheerful even though my head was pounding. I hadn't had time to wash up and I was still picking glass out of my forearms and wiping away dried blood.

Rauser looked terrible too. He gestured to the desk where they were fingerprinting Antonio Johnson. 'Why you have to take shit work like that?'

'Money,' I said, but he wasn't buying it. The smile dropped off my face. It was his tone. Sometimes that's all it took for Rauser to do that to me, and I didn't like it. He had that look in his eye. He always picked on me when something wasn't right in his world.

'Keye, for Christ's sake. You got degrees and corporate accounts. You don't have to do that crap. I don't get the choices you make sometimes.'

I was playing with the pencil cup on his desk and refusing eye

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contact, which, in his mind, was dismissive and I knew it, but I wasn't in the mood for all his Daddy stuff.

I briefly ran a mental list of the corporate accounts he was talking about. The retainers were fat. I'd paid down some of the mortgage on my loft with them. But the work was mind-numbing – employment service application checks, nanny backgrounds, lawsuit histories on contractors, workers' comp cases, unfaithful spouses, service of process. The odd subpoena offered a bit of challenge from time to time, but for the most part it was all excruciatingly boring.

I'd been a licensed Bail Recovery Agent since leaving the Bureau. It bought the groceries while I built my private investigating business, and it still supplemented my income nicely. My shrink, Dr Shetty, says it's a power thing, that I have a brutal case of penis envy. What can I say? I like strapping on a big Glock now and then.

And the degrees: criminology from Georgia Southern, doctoral studies at Georgia State in developmental psychology. And none of it, even with eight years at the Bureau, would earn me a real position with a law enforcement agency in this country. Not now. Drinking had changed all that. It entered my records as it tore away at my life and discredited me professionally forever. I couldn't even jump on the expert witness gravy train. Expert testimony requires an expert who can't be discredited on the stand. That's so not me. My closet is full of bones.

I was fifteen when I first heard about the Behavioral Analysis Unit (BAU) at the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, and I could think of nothing else after that. I tailored my studies and my life around getting there, and a few years later, there I was. And then I blew it.

Sometimes you only get one chance at something. Sometimes that's a good thing too. When that door slams shut on the thing you couldn't live without, what happens next is when the real education begins. You have to figure out how to make some peace with it all, how to have an interior life you can live with. Digging down deep is

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never really a bad thing in the end, but it will flat-out kick your ass while it's happening.

'Keep screwing around with bonding-company trash and you're gonna get hurt,' Rauser grumbled, then muttered something that sounded like 'sick fucks.'

I lowered myself gingerly into a chair across from his desk. There were two of them, thin black vinyl cushions with metal armrests. I was sore from the tumble I'd taken earlier and it was just beginning to sink in.

'What's wrong?' I demanded.

Rauser slipped a cigarette from his shirt pocket, stuck it in the corner of his mouth. The flint on his Zippo caught after the third try. He wasn't supposed to smoke in the building, but I wasn't going to correct him. Not today. 'Remember when there was just, like, normal stuff? Somebody shoots the guy in bed with his wife or something? Nothing weird. Just normal everyday murder.'

I shook my head. 'Before my time.'

Rauser pulled open his desk drawer and dropped his cigarette into a hidden ashtray and, head down, massaged both temples. For the first time, I realized that there was more silver than black in his hair. He was nearly fifty, handsome and fit, but a lifetime of caffeine and cigarettes, a lifetime of chasing monsters, had turned him to ash.

'Bad case?' I asked.

Rauser didn't look at me. 'Understatement.'

'You'll figure it out,' I told him. 'Good guy always wins, right?'

'Uh-huh,' Rauser said, with about as much conviction as Bill Clinton at a deposition. 'And maybe Judge Judy will come in here and shake her ass for us too.'

'I'd like that,' I said, and Rauser showed me his smile for the first time today.

Chapter Four

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It was the first time I had been so near to her, although I'd seen her many times. And she had seen me. Whether it was conscious I am not sure, but her eyes had skipped over me in public places. I stood on her porch waiting for her to answer the door. I didn't need to wait. She had not even latched the screen. So safe in your little homes, I kept thinking, and an old song came to mind. *Little boxes on the hillside, little boxes made of ticky tacky . . . and they all look just the same . . .*

She came to the door wearing a pale blue cotton shirt, a dish towel in her hand, perspiration around her hairline. She motioned for me to follow her. A hot breeze from the street rushed through open windows. She took me to her kitchen and offered me a chair at her table. She cooks early before the heat is too bad. The house has no air-conditioning. It is stifling already. The stink of boiling cabbage nearly choked me when we stepped into the room. The countertops were Formica, poisonous yellow and dated. She was chattering about her son coming home from summer camp that afternoon, and all I could think about was how she would smell once the chemicals began their wild run.

'My son is always starving,' she said, and smiled at me as if starving were an endearing quality, a clucking mother hen. 'I'm glad you're here. I didn't realize it would be today.'

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I did not tell her why I was there. I did not want to ruin the surprise. The silly cow was smiling at me and using the back of her hand to push sweaty hair off her forehead. I was thinking about her skin, the warmth of it, the texture, the salty taste, the firm resistance against my teeth as I bite into her.

She offered me iced tea and set it in front of me. Sweat trickled from the glass onto the tabletop. I did not bring my hands from my lap, did not touch the glass. I touch nothing. I am invisible.

I had my briefcase on the table opened away from her. She was at the stove stirring a pot of purple cabbage. 'How do you think little Tim will do living with your sister?' I asked. I could not resist the urge to play. These things go so quickly.

She turned from the stove. 'My son lives with me. I don't understand.'

You will.

A shadow crossed her face, something uneasy. Alarm lit up her dark eyes as they moved from the briefcase to my face, to the hands I had kept in my lap, to the kitchen door. Something inside her was clawing, urging, begging for attention, some still, small voice warning her to get out, but she was not going to listen. They never listen. It is absurd, really, utterly absurd. They do not want to offend me. What if they are wrong? It would be so impolite.

I closed my eyes and breathed. Beyond the food and the heat I detected it at last, the onion scent of fear, hers and mine, hanging heavy in our shared air. It hit me like an electric current. The chemicals were surging, cortisol was practically bleeding out through our skin, my heart and hopes clamoring at the thought of what was coming next. I felt a deep and urgent ache between my legs. All I could see was this small woman. All I could smell. All I wanted. She was everything.

I stretched on tight surgical gloves so sheer I could almost feel the air against my warm fingertips, and took my favorite toy from the briefcase – satin-finished with a white-gold throat, a crook-back with four and a half inches of high-carbon steel blade. I looked at her narrow back as she stood there stirring her cabbage and wondered if she felt it yet, our connection. I wanted her to feel it, to *know* it, just an instant before my hand reached her.

I think she did. I think she wanted it.