

Chapter 1

August 21 Atlanta Police Headquarters

The commander's phone was ringing insistently. He finally picked, up speaking gruffly.

"Homicide. Major Wilenski."

"Uh, Major...this is Edwards on the screening desk," said the faceless voice on the other end. "Just got a UPS package, return address says Sergeant Elizabeth Chandler. I was about to take it down to the ID section and screen it for explosives, but I figured I ought to let you know it was here."


"Forget the ID section-- bring it up to me," Wilenski said, pushing his chair back and standing up quickly, not knowing exactly why. Then he looked around sheepishly and plopped his wiry frame back down in the chair.

"No disrespect, sir, but the manual says all outside packages have to go through ID section first," Edwards offered, hesitation in his voice. "I was just calling to tell..." He didn't get a chance to finish his recitation of office politics.

"Screw the manual, Edwards," the major snarled. "Get off your butt and bring me that package.

"Yes, *sir*. I'm on my way," the patrolman squeaked, thinking to himself what a miserable toad Wilenski was as he trudged up the stairs. He found himself wishing he'd taken his wife's advice about dropping twenty pounds.

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BY
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A LIZ CHANDLER NOVEL



Wilenski was on the phone when Edwards, sweating and struggling to catch his breath, finally arrived. The major motioned impatiently for him to hand over the package. He did so and waited, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. Wilenski looked at him as he might a fat horsefly buzzing around his head, cupped the receiver and growled, "You waiting for a merit badge or what? Get back to your desk."

The senior officer turned his back, missing Edwards' resentfully-muttered "Yes sir, Major Polack," which he made sure was audible only to himself. The younger man could just as easily have shouted it. Wilenski had already forgotten that he existed.

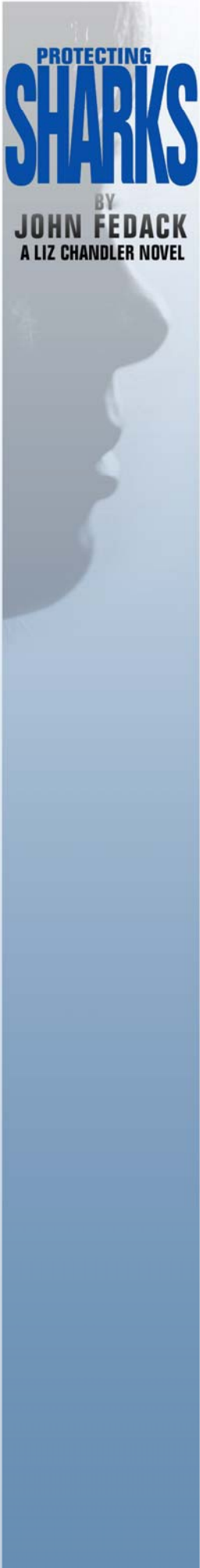
Cutting the other party off abruptly, the major searched through a desk drawer for a few seconds, finally retrieving a pair of scissors. The package was only the size of a shoebox, but it felt heavy in his hands. He sliced open the freezer tape that sealed the box and peered down at the contents. Pulling out a letter-sized envelope addressed to him, he sighed before opening it, already suspecting what it would say.

Dear Major Wilenski:

Please accept this, my letter of resignation from the Atlanta Police

Department, effective immediately. Enclosed you will find my service weapon, badge and ID card. Please inform the Human Resources Department that I will make an appointment to complete the necessary paperwork. I will collect all issued gear and return same shortly.

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I will call you upon my return to Atlanta to discuss the open cases assigned to me.

Respectfully,

[Sgt.] Elizabeth Chandler

Everyone near the Major's office heard him slam the door. As he called the chief to inform her of Liz Chandler's newest stunt, he picked up the pistol to make sure it wasn't loaded. Something wasn't right--the piece had been shot recently.

"Ah well...good riddance," he said to himself. "That's one less pain in the ass to deal with."

St. Simons Island

Choosing to ignore the advice I'd decided to follow, I stayed in the condo for the next day and a half, sleeping a lot and sitting on the balcony when I was awake, eating the meals room service brought me. I'd know when it was time to leave. Right after the encounter on the pier, I had boxed up my police-issued weapon with a short letter and sent the package to Atlanta. That was a start.

When I knew the time was right, I headed back home. Just after pulling off the causeway near Brunswick, I noticed a police car in my rearview, lights blazing. The officer pointed to the side of the road and I pulled over as instructed, remaining in my seat with my hands on the steering wheel. I

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could see him speaking on his radio, then he opened the door, staying safely behind it. His voice blared from the car's PA system.

"Ma'am, please step out of the car and let me see your hands at all times."

Sighing, I did exactly what he said, stepping out slowly and keeping my hands in his view.

"Ma'am, please step to the back of your car and place your hands on the trunk lid."

I didn't think I would have been quite as excessive, but I did as he asked.

I watched as the highway patrolman--most likely a rookie--approached me, holding a long black wand that I knew was a hand-held metal detector. He had it in his left hand and his right hand was on his pistol, still holstered but ready if he needed it.

"Ma'am, " he started hesitantly, voice gaining authority as he went on, "for your protection and mine, I'm going to ask your permission to sweep you for any hidden weapons. Do I have your permission?"

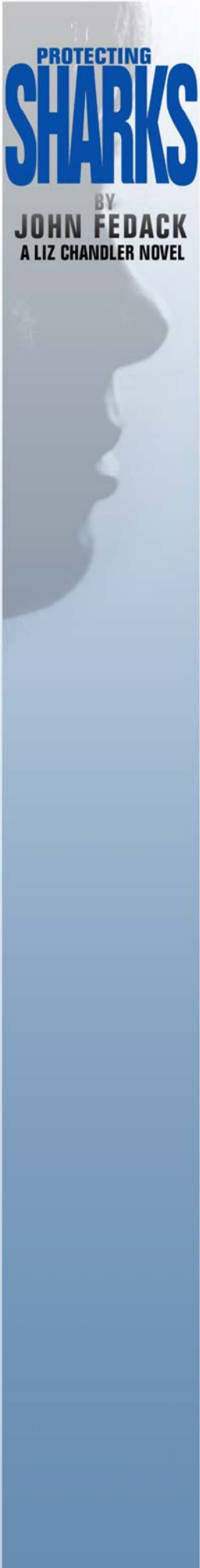
"Yes, you have my permission," I answered quietly. He was fast and barely touched me, but if I'd had something, he would have found it.

"You can turn around now Ma'am," he said, barely concealing his relief.

My eyes scanned him as quickly as he'd just scanned me, noting that he was about my height and was sporting a crew cut so short I couldn't make out his hair color. Probably blond or red, since his eyes were pale blue. Overall, he looked fit and healthy, more like a fireman than a cop.

Georgia's finest continued the standard drill with practiced efficiency.

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"Ma'am, I'm going to ask to see your driver's license, and I need your permission to retrieve your bag. May I reach into your vehicle and remove your handbag? I won't touch anything unless you're watching me."

This one wasn't just following the manual--I thought me might be just a tad on the obsessive- compulsive side.

"Yes, you may retrieve my bag," I responded, using all my will power to keep from smiling. "You'll find it on the passenger seat."

"Ma'am, do you have any weapons in your bag or in the vehicle?" he finished up his well- memorized list.

"No, officer, I do not have any type of weapon," I assured him, thinking that a couple of days ago, that wouldn't have been the case.

"Thank you, Ma'am." He stepped over to my Honda and reached in to pick up my bag, keeping his eyes on me the entire time.

Bringing the bag back toward me, the rookie asked if he could take everything out and place it on the trunk. I nodded. After looking through my bag and not finding anything of particular interest, he asked for my driver's license. I fished it out of my wallet and handed it over.

He took more time than necessary to verify that the hideous picture on the license was actually the woman standing in front of him, then he looked at me with slightly narrowed eyes.

"Ms. Chandler, I stopped you because for two days now, we've been looking for a woman who discharged a firearm on the pier and threatened a local fisherman."

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"You don't say," I answered, voice showing mild curiosity. "Why would someone threaten a fisherman on the pier?"

He paused for a moment, then said in a less official tone, "Well...I happen to know the complainant, and I sometimes wish I could do what I heard this woman did. The victim in this case is a sorry little drunk who likes to catch sharks and beat them to death. Anyway, the woman we're looking for this is a thirty-five-year-old white female, blond hair, about six feet tall. Several people described her as athletic looking. May I ask how tall you are?"

"You may," I said with just the tiniest hint of a smile. "I'm exactly five-ten. "

"Yes ma'am, and your license says you're thirty-eight years old."

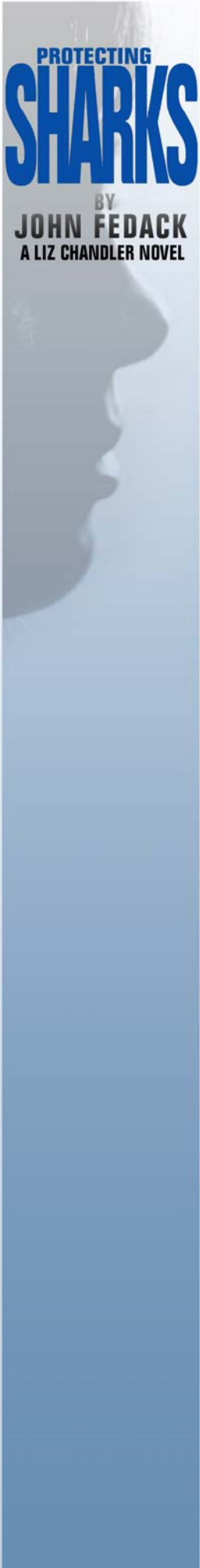
He was looking at me just the way I looked at people before I arrested them. What was he waiting for?

"That's correct," I said, waiting for the handcuffs to appear.

He stared at me intently with those pale baby blues before asking, "Ma'am, if someone were beating a defenseless animal or fish, would you shoot that creature to put it out of its misery? Could you do that, Ma'am?"

"Well, Officer," I answered matter-of-factly, "I don't have a gun...but if I *did* have one, I suspect I would do whatever I could to put the creature out of its misery. And I must say I'm happy to hear that no one was hurt in the...incident. Frankly, this woman sounds like someone I'd like to meet someday. It was on the pier, you say?"

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"Yes Ma'am. And I feel the same way you do, to tell you the truth. By the way, this woman identified herself as a police officer. Do you happen to be a police officer, Ma'am?"

"No, sir," I shot back emphatically. "I can definitely say that I am not a police officer."

"If you don't mind my saying so, you strike me as a smart and perceptive woman, Ms. Chandler," Officer Blue Eyes said almost shyly. "Why do you think a person would discharge a weapon in such a manner? Any ideas?"

"Hmmm," I answered after appearing to give it some thought. "Maybe this lady had a bad day at the office. Maybe she had recently lost someone who was kind, ethical and ...saved her life. Just a guess on my part, but you never know. "


He kept staring at my license and a flash of realization crossed his face.

"Ms.

Chandler, your license says that you're from Atlanta."

"That's right," I answered, trying to keep the wariness out of my voice.

"We heard about a female Atlanta detective who was involved in a tragic shoot-out not long ago," he said, almost to himself. "This detective was working with a retired Atlanta officer who was shot and killed during an investigation. Will you do me a favor? If you happen to run into her someday, will you please tell her all the police officers in this part of state send their respect?"



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"I certainly will," I replied seriously.

With a knowing look, he concluded, "Since you're thirty-eight and not thirty-five and since you apparently don't own a handgun, I guess I'll have to keep looking. You're free to go and I'm sorry for inconveniencing you. Just be careful in the future." He shook my hand.

"Will do," I said, retrieving my hand. "And thank you."

"My pleasure...Sergeant...uh... Ms. Chandler." He might have given me a sly wink or he might have just had something in his eye when he turned and walked to his cruiser. He definitely gave me a wave as he drove away.

I stopped off to buy a Diet Coke for the rest of my trip back to Atlanta. Getting onto the highway, I ejected the gloomy Norah Jones CD I'd been listening to and heard the opening strains of Simon and Garfunkel's "Homeward Bound" on an oldies station. I decided that it was a good omen. After all that had happened, I was finally headed home.