

**EXCERPT FOR UGA FANS**

Two hours later, Terry was staring again at the discoloration on the right side of her nose—the mix of yellow and green so pale he might not have noticed it if her swollen lip hadn't spotlighted it. No way she'd stumbled into something in a dark hotel room in Houston.

“What in Jesus God's name are we doing here?” Tricia laughed, and the slice in her lip opened and began to bleed again. He gave her a towel from his bag. “Why are we at the **University of Georgia?**”

“This is where I'm gonna tell you the big idea. We're gonna walk around campus in a while, but first I wanted to come here.” Together they looked up at the Henry Feild Tennis Stadium, which he was sure was the best in the country. “The NCAAs were played here the last two years, and they'll be here next year too,” he said, eyes bright, “when I win, capping off my great senior year. Come on.” She'd taken a cab to the tournament, so he led her to the Mustang he'd rented for the week. “I miss my car,” he said and chuckled at the look she gave him. “Our car. Okay, your car. This rental is a piece of crap.”

“Hmm. Do you love me or my Porsche?”

“You. And I'm glad I lost that match. 'Cause now I know you love me too, win or lose.”

**Athens, he remembered as they began to walk, was a damn good college town, and UGA, a great school—great campus, great athletics, and rowdy, devoted fans. For years before the stadium was built, he'd been told, students watched tennis matches from Kudzu Hill behind**

**the courts, with coolers full of beer, and the kind of roaring cheers and jeers usually reserved for football games. To celebrate the stadium's completion in '77, Georgia had invited Southern Cal, the reigning NCAA men's tennis champs, to play a special dedication match. It had been tight, but the Bulldogs—Tennis Dawgs they were called—had sent those West Coast boys packing, shocked by defeat and a barking crowd. Texas had great fans, sure. But Georgia was fucking amazing.**

“Let's sit,” Tricia said, nodding at a bench on the edge of a shady quadrangle. “We've walked for an hour, and it's pretty here.”

“Know what kind of buildings those are?” he asked as she looked around the grassy park.

“Greek Revival? The columns—”

“No.”

“Not Greek Revival? Then what?”

“Old.”

“Very funny. But correct. Probably late nineteenth century.”

He made small talk, knowing it was procrastination dressed up as words. His right foot began to work, bouncing his leg up and down until she put her hand on his thigh.

“Drumroll, please. The big idea is?”

His eyes followed a student walking toward them—dark hair and eyes, short skirt, long legs. She smiled and walked on but glanced back over her shoulder twice.

“Cute,” he said.

“I'm sure she thinks you're cute too.”

“A lot of pretty girls in Georgia.”

“And in Texas, I suppose. Are you trying to make me jealous?”

“No. I’m stalling.”

**He sat up straight, crossed his arms, and told her everything he’d learned about UGA while hanging out during the championships. “They’ve had this tradition here forever, that when Georgia wins a football game, freshmen ring the bell at the chapel all night long. And remember streaking? A few years back? This school holds the national record. Fifteen hundred people got naked together and ran around campus.”**

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“Now that’s impressive,” she said wryly.

“It’s nice here, Tricia, don’t you think?”

“It’s beautiful. I love the architecture. The history must be very rich.”

“I knew you’d like it.” A clock chimed and students, alone, in pairs, and in groups, began spilling into the quadrangle, on their way from one class to another or into the weekend ahead. One group walked lockstep with an attractive, middle-aged woman, pleased to keep her classroom lecture going. “Tricia.” He had to look away to get through it. “Tricia, I want you to come to Austin with me.” In return, he got a look as empty as he’d ever seen from her.

“Terry—”

“Let me finish. That’s only the selfish part, for *me*. The other part is for you. I want you to get your doctorate. Because you want to, because of how much you love books and poems, because

of your parents, and because you'd be so happy teaching. I can see you right here or anywhere. I know you should finish it—for you. So why not Austin?"

Across the quadrangle, two guys were laughing at what must have been a great joke. Or they were laughing at him. Or maybe Tricia was laughing inside and he was somehow hearing.

"Terry—"

"Don't talk. Just think about it. No snap decisions, especially if you're snapping to a *no*." He paused. "Don't even say yes or maybe— not until you're sure." He watched her hand take his, mindful of the blisters. "It's too late for you to get accepted this fall, but you can start in January. And you might be able to get a graduate assistantship and a stipend." She raised her eyebrows and he said, "What? You think I don't know words like *stipend*? I told you I've been working on this idea. I know the chair of the English department because I almost lost my scholarship over English 101. There was a shitload of reading, but my coach is a good friend of hers and got her to help me out with a tutor. She has a twelve-year-old son with a wicked forehand, so I coached him some. Anyways, I happened to talk to her the other day—"

"You *happened* to talk to her? You mean you called her?"

"Yeah." He seemed to have crossed a forbidden line. She looked insulted or—hell, he had no idea how she looked. "I know you don't need money, but a stipend couldn't hurt, and you'd get to start teaching right away." The big idea was beginning to shrink. "I'm going back to Austin, Tricia. You've never said you'll come see me. You've just said you want to remember me. You can say anything else you want to and kiss me in the corner, and I may be stupid, but I don't think you want this to be over any more than I do." He stood up. To move, pace, fold, tug, unfold. "What does that look mean?"

"You told me not to talk." She held out her hand. He sat back down.

“You can talk as long as you don’t give me an answer yet.”

“I don’t have an answer yet, but I want to tell you that after Houston I went to Austin. I spent four days there.”

“Four days?” He frowned. “You’re kidding me, right? Why?”

She shook her head. “I had things to think through on my own, and I chose to do it there. I did what we’ve just done. I walked around campus. I walked miles around campus every day. I went to the library, the English department, the tennis courts. I thought about you.”

He looked up at the bluest sky he’d ever seen, felt the sun on his face.

“If you come with me,” he said, “I— You’ve gotta know I’m just talking Austin. I don’t have anything to offer, nothing more planned. I don’t have Nona now. I don’t know if I can make a living playing pro or not, but even to try, I’ll need money I don’t have.” He waited, thinking Porsche, beach house. He waited like a tennis brat for her to offer to help him. “I can’t see past Austin. That’s all I’ve got.”

“You’ve got me.”

He had a sense of things happening too fast and wanting them to happen faster. “Okay. That’s the big idea. Your turn. Kiss me in the corner.”

“At the beach house,” she said. “Let’s go back to Kiawah.”