

# Friend of the Firm

*A Sheldon Bailey Mystery*

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Frances Richter

This novel is a work of fiction. Its characters are a product of the author's imagination. Certain places, events and situations are factual in basis, but are used fictitiously.

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## PROLOGUE

Sophie pretended to nap. She hated their conversations. He used to buy her presents. He used to make her feel special. Now all he does is complain. All the money she made, he took from her. He said she owed him, and she couldn't argue. But now, all of that is over. Now she is afraid of him.

She thought of her mother, standing in the kitchen offering her a piece of steaming apple pie, hot from the oven, the cinnamon-apple smell making her mouth water. She wanted to talk to her, to tell her she was all right and that she wanted to come home, but she was too ashamed to call.

"Hey! Wake up," he said. "Run in the store and get me a drink, I'm thirsty."

"Where are we?" She feigned a yawn and stretched.

"Richmond. Here, take this and get me a Mountain Dew. Hurry up. I'll wait here."

She took the twenty and got out of the car. After using the restroom she purchased two sodas and pushed open the glass door of the Quick Mart. He was gone.

She ran out into the parking lot and looked both ways down the street. Nothing. She spotted a dumpster out back. She thought he might have decided to clean out the car; it needed it. She ran around the back of the building. Nothing. She ran back into the store.

She stood in the open doorway and spoke breathlessly to the clerk.

"Did you see the guy I was with? Do you know where he went?"

The clerk looked up from his newspaper.

"No, sorry, Honey. Didn't even see ya'll pull up. Just you when you bought them sodas. Can I do something for you?"

"No. I'm not sure. It's okay. Never mind."

She went back outside, sat on the curb and buried her face between her knees.

*What do I do now? Where do I go? I'm a thousand miles from home. I'm all alone and I have nothing. I'm wearing a tank top and shorts. I don't have a wallet or a cell phone. I have no place to go. I wish my mamma would just come and get me. Why did I leave? She wasn't that bad. She tried to tell me what was best for me. She tried to keep me out of trouble, and all I cared about was boys and drugs. Now look at the mess I'm in. I look terrible. I smell bad. Would she even talk to me if I called?*

She wiped her eyes and sat up straight. Anger welled up from within.

*That asshole! How dare he just dump me out here and leave! I should have shot him when I had the chance. What can I do now? Somebody needs to stop him.*

She counted the change from the twenty.

"Seventeen dollars and sixty-nine cents," she sighed aloud.

She went back into the store.

"Do you have a telephone I can use?"

The clerk spoke without looking up.

"Pay phone outside, on the corner of the building."

Sophie opened the phone book and found the number to the local F.B.I. office. She dialed it slowly and carefully, all the while looking around to make sure he didn't sneak up on her.

"F.B.I., Richmond field office, how may I help you?" a woman said.

"This is Sophie Charles. I'm seventeen years old, and I need your help."

"All right, Sophie. What's the problem?" the woman answered in a pleasant tone.

She began to cry.  
“I want to go home.”

## CHAPTER I

“Seven years active. Five years probation. Restitution to be calculated by post-conviction services. Defendant is remanded to the custody of the Mecklenburg County Sheriff’s Department.”

One strike of the gavel, and the judge handed the file to his clerk.

“Thank you, your Honor,” replied Sheldon.

Her client’s family was ecstatic. She patted the young man on the shoulder and told him to hang in there, for his family’s sake. A deputy led him away, his shackles clinking with each short step. Sheldon explained to his parents that he had received an unusually low sentence from one of the toughest superior court judges in the state. Originally charged with murder in the first degree, he could have spent the rest of his life in prison. She was able to get him a plea to a second-degree offense after successful negotiations with the District Attorney. In her book, it was a huge win.

She took the courthouse staff’s elevator to the ground floor. She and Greg simultaneously spotted each other at the main entrance.

“Hey, Greg!”

“Sheldon. Glad you made it to the party. Did you have a good time?”

“Sure did. Thanks again. Tell Nan the food was fabulous.”

“Will do. Hey, tell me something about that knockout of a woman who was with you at the party. Is she from around here?”

Her mobile phone vibrated on her hip, rescuing her.

“Later, Greg. I need to answer this call.”

She quickly stepped through the large doorway and out onto the sidewalk in front of the courthouse, glad for the interruption. She remembered how he acted at the party. He was a happily married husband and father, and a successful attorney. The last thing she needed was to encourage an affair.

Her phone indicated that Liv Jordan was calling.

“Hey, girl. How are you?”

“I’m not sure, Sheldon. I need to talk to you. Is there a good time we can meet?”

Liv sounded troubled.

“Absolutely! How about lunch? Hey, are you all right?”

“I’m okay, but I’m afraid something has happened. Can you meet me at the Sandwich Shoppe at twelve-thirty?”

“I’ll be there.”

She flipped the phone closed and wondered what was up. Her color rose when she remembered how she felt the last time they were together.

*Liv wants me.*

A car horn blared, warning her not to step into oncoming traffic. She stopped abruptly and shook her head. The driver gave her a dirty look.

*Stop it. What is wrong with you?*

She took a deep breath and forced herself to think of Sera, smiling and taking her hand. She remembered how she had fallen in love with her when they met, now almost five years ago.

She hurried toward her building. People bustled across the streets along the red-bricked sidewalks. Mothers tugged on the arms of children that stepped quickly trying to keep up. Couriers rushed by with urgent deliveries. She contemplated their faces.

*What are all these people thinking about? Do they stop and think at all, or do they just go through the motions? Are they happy? Am I happy? Do I know what I’m doing?*

She evaluated her relationship with Sera. She thought of her bright smile and laughing eyes.

*I can’t do this. Sera deserves better. Am I crazy?*

When she reached the Mercedes parked in front of her office building, she flung her briefcase into the back seat and revved the engine. It was twelve-fifteen. She had just enough time to make it to the small café by twelve-thirty. The thoughts of Sera vanished and were replaced, once again, with fantasies of Liv.

“Tell me what’s going on,” Sheldon urged as she approached a table and hung her jacket over the back of a chair.

Liv’s concern was evident. Sheldon noticed that she bit her bottom lip to control the quiver. She took a deep breath and sat across from her at the small table.

She scrutinized Liv’s appearance. Compared to Saturday night when she was dressed to kill, her looks were not as unnerving, but she was stunning nonetheless. Her long, silky black hair was pulled into a tight pony-tail, and she wore no make-up on her flawless skin. Her stylish sweats were well fitted to her exquisite body. Sheldon compared her own looks to Liv’s. She knew that she was attractive, but in Liv’s presence, she felt plain and unnoticeable.

“Something happened,” Liv began. Her voice quivered like a frightened child’s. “My roommate...Tina...” She struggled to speak, choking back the tears that threatened to spill down her face. “...she’s...missing. I’m so scared, Sheldon. She hasn’t come home or called in two days, and I’ve tried her cell phone and I only get her voice mail. It’s not like her to do this.”

Sheldon watched as tears streamed down her pinkish cheeks.

“Has she done anything like this before? Does she ever stay overnight at a boyfriend’s house and forget to call?” Sheldon asked carefully, unsure if Liv was over-dramatizing the situation.