



# LAST RIGHTS

A NOVEL BY THE AUTHOR OF *DAYS OF DRUMS*

# PHILLIP SHELBY



ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

*Days of Drums*



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A NOVEL

# PHILIP SHELBY

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However, this remains a work of fiction. Certain details concerning explosives, sniping, and military protocol have been altered to prevent misuse of such information.

P H I L I P S H E L B Y



PART

ONE





# 1

*Rachel* Collins, warrant officer second grade, shifted, her boot heels scraping the hot, corrugated roof of the metal shed where she lay spread-eagle. The residue of mid-September hurricanes that tore up the Carolinas usually brought rain this far north. But tonight the beams and sheet-metal walls of the warehouses stacked along Baltimore's industrial docks creaked and snapped as the temperature dropped grudgingly a few degrees from its high of eighty-two.

The operation was fraying at the edges. Rachel felt it in the tense whispers of the men scattered nearby in the darkness, dressed in black jumpsuits bulked out by soft-shell body armor. Beneath the soft crackle of two-way radios, after the call signs and counter-signals, were clipped questions. Too many questions, followed by lengthy pauses and sometimes no answers at all.

“Jafo, you okay?”

The words of QRT (Quick Response Team) commander Robert Burns came on puffs of peppermint-smelling breath.

“I’m okay.”

“We fixed the receiver. As soon as we hear a little chitchat, I’ll decide on entry.”

It should have been no big thing, a faulty receiver. QRT always carried backup. But the backup had failed, so the communications specialist had had to do a cut-and-paste. Another frayed thread . . .

Rachel knew exactly where the problem had started: with the Baltimore Police Department’s ego and its desire to guard its turf.

The situation had developed earlier that day, when the watch commander had received an anonymous tip. The informant talked about a supply sergeant named Charlie Dunn, who had access to a dockside warehouse the army leased from the city. Dunn had allegedly gone into business for himself. Tonight he’d be selling a few crates of M-16’s, a dozen rocket launchers, and as many antipersonnel mines as he could get his hands on. The buyer was some rich guy from out west, a regional commander of the White Guard. No name had been given, but apparently Dunn had done business with the Guard before—was in fact a charter member. When the unidentified caller made references to Oklahoma City and Ruby Ridge, Baltimore P.D. sat up and took notice.

But it did not share this information with any other agency, federal, state, or local. An assistant deputy district attorney decided it didn’t have to. The warehouse complex was owned by the city. The army was only a tenant. There was no reason to suspect that the call had been made outside the sovereign state of Maryland, so the issue of interstate transmission regarding a possible felony was moot. Only when the police needed to confirm the existence and location of Sergeant Charlie Dunn had they been forced to go outside the department. That route had led them through the central army registry in Alexandria, Virginia, and ultimately to the army’s Criminal Investigation Division at Fort Belvoir.

Rachel remembered how the duty officer at Fort Belvoir, Jessup, had put it to her:

“Baltimore P.D. has its collective nuts in a wringer over Dunn. Our records show he’s clean. My guess? Their informant is either stringing them along or else he’s ponying up the wrong guy. Go up to Baltimore, Collins, and see what these Joes really have. If army personnel are involved, get on the horn to me pronto.”

“What’s my standing re Baltimore P.D., sir?”

“You’re a Jafo, Collins. Nothing more.”

“And if the situation should become . . . complicated, sir?”

“Then you’re a Jafo on the phone to me.”

“Yes, sir.”

It hadn’t been hard for Rachel to tell that the local enforcement was less than enthusiastic about her arrival. Maybe they were expecting a big, strapping specimen with ranger flashes, not this five-foot-seven, California-beach blonde with blue eyes and freckles across her nose. Rachel had felt eyes roving over her as soon as she’d stepped out of the army-issue sedan in the parking lot of the QRT command post. There had been chuckles and snide remarks about the “Citadel chick” and how many hands she would need to hold up that big sidearm of hers.

The team’s sniper had blocked her way, looked her up and down. Rachel knew what he was thinking but would not stoop to explain that she’d just come off a ten-day R&R in Santa Barbara.

“You the Jafo?”

Rachel had stepped hard on the insult, let it slide right off her. “That’s correct, sir. . . . Just another fucking observer.”

“Make sure you stay out of my line of fire is all, sweet thing.”

Then the QRT commander had come walking up. He was close enough to have heard the sniper’s last comment, but all he’d said was, “Miss Collins, I’m Commander Burns. You ready to go?”

Now, two hours later, Rachel lay grilling on the roof. The night sky was moonless and clouded over, and the heat crept along her skin like a rash. The cuffs of her camouflage jacket were soaked with sweat.

The target was ninety feet away, directly across a cobblestone street that gleamed with crankshaft oil leaked from big rigs. The metal warehouse was Vietnam vintage, its four-story sides sagging

and streaked with rust. The cargo bays were empty, the roll-down doors closed. There was a smaller door, garage size, to the left of the bays. It was padlocked. Above was a row of grimy windows with wire mesh embedded in the glass. Beyond the windows was total darkness, not even the telltale glow of a cigarette being smoked in the darkness.

“When is Dunn supposed to arrive—according to your informant?”

Burns, stretched out beside her, expelled a breath that hung in the hot, heavy air like a tired balloon. He kept his Wolf’s Eyes night vision binoculars pressed against his eyes. “Sometime before midnight. These things don’t run on a clock, Jafo. Most times you gotta wait ’em out.”

Rachel knew more about surveillance than she cared to share. In July she’d pulled a wait-and-see for twenty-two hours outside Flagstaff, the temperature nudging 117.

So far, QRT had done it by the book. The soft-entry specialist had gone in first, popped the lock on the garage door, and disappeared inside. In less than two minutes he had bypassed the alarm, installed the microphones and transmitter, and finished the job. On his way out he had relocked the door. By then the rest of the eight-man squad was in position, two snipers on the other rooftops targeting the windows, the rest of the team scattered behind Dumpsters and locked Peterbilt rigs. Rachel had been shepherded along by Burns, a short, wiry man with a tic at the right side of his mouth, chewing breath mints. He’d chosen the shed roof to set up the command and control post. He’d grasped her arm once, hard, to let her know he expected her to stay put.

The warehouse receiver perched beside her hissed like a snake testing the air for prey. The only other sound coming out of the twin two-inch speakers was that of dripping water. Rachel had no idea where the microphones were concealed. Either they were very sensitive or one had been laid near a sink or a drain.

“Strawberry Four.”

Burns pressed the earpiece of his two-way radio headset. “Go, Four.”

“We got us a vehicle coming down the alley from the west.

Chevy Suburban, big bitch, customized for heavy loads. Male driver. . . . The passenger . . . the passenger is a woman. Repeat, a woman.”

“Roger, Four. I got it. Everyone chill. Let’s see what he’s up to.”

Rachel watched the vehicle rock its way down the street, slow, then turn and back up to the padlocked warehouse door. There was enough light from the lamps over the cargo bays to illuminate the driver’s face when he got out.

“By my reckoning that’s Dunn,” Burns murmured.

The face, which could have belonged to an over-the-hill boxer, matched the photo Rachel had memorized from Dunn’s file. Except that now the supply sergeant was dressed in work boots, jeans, and a stained T-shirt.

The passenger door opened and a woman’s head appeared. She had a thin, pinched face, the kind you saw behind fly-spattered windows in trailer parks.

Rachel heard Dunn growl, “I told you to stay the fuck in the truck!”

The woman retreated, taking care to close the passenger door quietly. Rachel watched Charlie Dunn go to work on the lock. A few seconds later he was rolling up the garage door and punching in the alarm codes.

Dunn got back into the Suburban and eased it inside the warehouse. He came back to bring down the door, then pale lights glowed through the warehouse windows.

“That truck he’s got won’t carry the ordnance he’s supposed to be stealing,” Rachel said. “And the woman—”

“Dunn’s not the one who’ll be taking the stuff,” Burns said, cutting her off. “The buyer hasn’t arrived yet.”

“But he brings his wife or girlfriend to the meet?”

“Big deal.” He shrugged. “He’s probably done this a hundred times before. She’ll stay in the truck, he’ll do the deal, in twenty minutes everyone’s on their way.”

Rachel didn’t buy that. The presence of the woman made it all wrong. Now the receiver was sending up a stream of chatter from inside the warehouse.

*"I told you to stay in the goddamn truck!"*

Then, the sickening sound of flesh smacking flesh. The woman screamed once, then a second time, followed by something that sounded like a baseball bat striking a hanging side of beef.

Then, a third cry . . . and wailing.

Rachel twisted around. "He's got *kids* in there!"

Burns stared at her, then slowly raised his binoculars. Rachel heard questions coming in over the two-way radio.

"Everyone relax. Domestic violence isn't our gig. Stay frosty. The buyer has to be along. . . ."

He turned to Rachel. "When we bring Dunn out, you can teach him some manners, if you have a mind to."

The screams and shouting died away to sobbing and a child's whimper. The woman was breathing hard through her pain. Rachel imagined her crawling back into the truck, over the seats, flinging her arms around the child, terrified yet trying to comfort him.

*"Forget the fucking kid and get out here now!"*

Dunn talking, the tailgate of the truck dropping into place. Labored breathing as he struggled with something heavy. Then a thud as a wooden crate was dumped on the metal bed.

Rachel glanced at Burns, saw the tic working furiously. She heard the vehicle door opening and flinched when the woman cried out again, pitifully this time, in resignation. The child howled as his mother was yanked out of the truck. Rachel could almost feel Dunn shoving the woman and steeled herself against the volley of abuse. She heard a faint slur to some of Dunn's words; the sergeant had been drinking. He was in a hurry. He needed the woman to help him load the truck.

"There is no buyer," Rachel heard herself say. "He's stealing the ordnance himself—"

"Collins . . ."

"Maybe to resell it later. I don't know. And I don't really give a damn. He's an army noncom thief. And that makes him mine."

"Collins, don't you fuck this up for me!"

Burns rose to grab her, but he was too slow. Rachel had rolled away from him and was perched on the edge of the roof.

"You want to take this up with my commanding officer, Burns?"

Fine. But we're going to get pictures of that woman and kid, so get ready to explain why you sat around while he beat them."

Rachel dropped, hitting the ground harder than she expected, legs pumping across the oil-slick lot. She pressed herself against the garage door, breathing deeply to steady herself. Her weapon was out, chambered.

Now, in the stillness, she felt the hairs on her forearms push up against her camouflage jacket. Somewhere out there, eight barrels held her in their sights, fingers curled around trigger guards. Someone at Fort Belvoir had once told her that Baltimore QRT was a professional bunch, no cowboys. She hoped so.

Raising the warehouse door would take too long, make too much noise. Dunn had an arsenal in there he could turn on her.

That left the windows.

Rachel jumped up onto the landing bay and grabbed the first iron handhold welded to the side of the warehouse. Pulling herself up, she climbed thirty feet to the ledge beneath the windows.

She saw it all now through a pane covered with decades of soot. It was like peering through a fogged-up windshield.

The Suburban was parked in the middle of an empty rectangle defined by stacked pallets. Both the passenger and driver doors were open, and the tailgate was down.

The little boy huddled in the passenger seat was no more than six or seven years old, dressed in blue denim overalls, clutching an Orioles baseball cap. Rachel saw his lips move, thought he might be singing to himself, the way children did when they regressed from violence they could not stop.

And there was Charlie Dunn, dragging another crate across the polished concrete floor, sweat pouring off him, muscles straining. Dunn was in good shape, not much of a belly. Rachel knew she would have to take him down hard and fast.

Dunn maneuvered the wooden crate close to the tailgate and barked at his wife. She bent over and grabbed the rope handle with both hands. Dunn did the same, lifted his end easily enough, cursed her as she struggled.

Then he made the mistake of swinging his end onto the tailgate. The woman didn't have nearly the strength to copy Dunn's move. For a split second she alone was holding the weight of the crate.



As the rope handle tore into her palms, she cried out and jumped back, letting go of her end. The crate crashed to the floor. The top popped, and M-16 rifles gleaming with factory oil spilled across the concrete.

Dunn pounced on her, using his fists to pummel her forearms as she tried to cover her face; then he went for the exposed rib cage, knocking the wind out of her.

He was still raging when the windows high above him exploded.

The glass was so old and brittle that it shattered into shards no bigger than snowflakes. Her arms protecting her face, Rachel jumped, landing with both feet on a stack of pallets thirty feet below. Searing pain shot up through her ankles to her thighs as she tucked her upper body and rolled forward on her shoulders. Her hands were smeared with blood as she held fast to her sidearm.

Charlie Dunn had snapped out of his shock and was ripping the oilskin sheath off the stock of a freshly minted M-16. He was so well trained that he never took his eyes off the intruder while his hands slapped the rifle together.

Rachel shook herself, showering splintered glass to the floor, then leaped onto the forklift parked beside the pallets. She landed on the seat and from there jumped the remaining distance to the floor, where she took cover behind the thick steel engine housing at the rear of the machine.

“CID, Dunn! Give it up. Now!”

Rachel heard the telltale click beneath the echo of her words and scrambled behind the forklift’s four-foot-high rear tire. A split second later the warehouse was filled with the roar of automatic gunfire. Chips of hard tire rubber caromed off Rachel’s back and shoulders.

“Yo, bitch! In case you didn’t notice, I’m not alone!”

Dunn’s voice rang through the cordite-hazed air. Rachel peered around the shredded tire, saw Dunn with his forearm around the woman’s throat, dragging her along, a human shield.

“Yeah?” Rachel called back. “Well, Baltimore QRT’s waiting outside. You know their drill, Dunn.”

She bit her lip to try to stop shaking. If he saw her terror, he’d slay her like a lamb.