

Left for Dead: *You Should Have Killed Me*  
by Erin Wade

# ***Left For Dead***

*You Should Have Killed Me*

By Erin Wade

**Edited by**

Julie Versoi

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*You Should Have Killed Me!*  
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**Editor**  
Julie Versoi  
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**DEDICATION**

To the one who has always supported me in everything I have ever undertaken. You have encouraged me and have always been my biggest fan. Life is sweeter with you.

Erin

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A special “Thank You” to my wonderful witty friend and editor **Julie Versoi**. I treasure her advice and welcome her suggestions. She makes me a better storyteller.

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by  
Jean Austin Graphics

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## CHAPTER 1

**And so, it Begins – Jane Doe**



The semi-conscious woman whimpered as her attacker choked her into unconsciousness. Hours later she awoke in the dark deserted alley covered in blood—her blood. Without moving she made a mental check of her body. Blood oozed from a wound in her side and her arms were covered in defensive wounds. Her left eye where he had dealt the first blow was swollen closed and her throat hurt like the devil. Her face felt like it had lost the battle with a

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cheese grader. The stench of blood emanated from her long, matted hair and the palm of her right hand was a mangled mess.

She had fought for her life like a cornered tiger, clawing at the concrete for anything to use against her attacker. Her hand closed around the neck of a broken bottle. She screamed as she wrapped her hand around it and slammed it into her attacker's face, ripping it open from his eye to his chin. He howled and cursed as he choked the life from her.

She could deal with the cuts, the crushed larynx, and the facial disfigurement. He had removed her shoes, unbuckled her leather belt, pulled her jeans down to her ankles and molested her. She was glad she had been unconscious and had not experienced the revulsion of Baird on top of her.

She clutched the monogrammed pocket she had ripped from his shirt. It was drenched in blood. She knew where to find him. He should have killed her because she would hunt him down and slowly destroy him.

She screamed as she tried to sit up and knew he had broken her ribs. Crawling slowly, she inched to the brick wall and clawed her way into a standing position. Broken glass cut her bare feet as she stumbled along the alley wall. A twenty-four-hour emergency clinic was three blocks away. She was determined to reach it, determined to survive, determined to make his life a living hell.

She stumbled through the clinic doors and collapsed in the entrance way. She was aware of gentle hands lifting her onto a gurney before everything slipped into darkness.

##

The beeping sound and clean sheets told her she was in the hospital. She tried to open her left eye and whimpered as additional pain shot through her head. The effort was too much, and she let darkness overtake her once more.

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She lost all track of time as she drifted in and out of the blackness that helped her cope with the pain. Her head ached as she tried to identify the voices in her room. She listened as two women discussed her condition.

“She is lucky to be alive,” a soft voice said as its owner changed the bag hanging from the IV pole. “She could easily slip into a coma. Someone beat the hell out of her. She has concussion, broken ribs, and deep cuts in the palm of her hand and side. Her face is a mess. It looks like her assailant carved it up with broken glass.”

“Was she sexually assaulted?” a calm, confident voice asked.

“Yes, but she fought back hard. From the shape she was in when she collapsed inside the emergency room doors, I am certain her attacker meant to kill her in the end. I’d bet money he left her for dead.”

“Did she have any identification on her?”

“No, nothing. We admitted her to the hospital under Jane Doe. Whoever she is, I hope she has a lot of money because she is going to need extensive reconstructive surgery to make her look human.”

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## CHAPTER 2

### Seven Years Later



Hope Ford walked her last customer of the day to the door and closed it behind him. She was glad he was gone. It always made her uneasy when she was the last person left alone with a stranger. She turned off the main library lights leaving on only a few nightlights.

Hope jumped as a loud bang echoed throughout the library when a heavy book fell from a shelf. Following protocol, Hope left the entrance doors unlocked and entered the safe room that housed cameras covering every row of

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shelved books. She scanned each camera to make certain that no one was hiding in the library. For some reason, it had become a rite of passage for teenagers to dare each other to spend the night in the two-story building with all its books.

Her hand covered her mouth as she watched a figure slowly shuffle from the back of the room toward her safe place. It was an injured woman. Without hesitating, Hope called 911 and requested a policeman and an ambulance.

She retrieved the Kimber .380 pistol from her purse, locked herself in the security room, and watched the stranger pull herself along the shelves of books. She had almost made it to the reading area when she collapsed. Hope fought the urge to run to her but remained in her locked room. At five feet four inches, the hundred-twenty-pound brunette, had always been hesitant to rush into harm's way.

Lieutenant Montgomery (Monty) Masters pushed open the library door and was delighted it was unlocked. *Hope actually followed protocol*, she thought.

The five-foot nine-inch red head was rarely spooked by anything, but the eerie silence of the cavernous library made a chill run down her spine.

She carefully surveyed the voluminous room and spotted the body of a woman sprawled between two shelves.

"Hope, are you okay?" She called out to the librarian as she waved at the surveillance camera aimed at the entrance doors. The lock on the safe room door clicked and Hope poked out her head.

"Monty, thank God it's you." She hurried to the lieutenant and pointed to the woman. "I don't know who she is or why she was in the back of the library. I discovered her when I checked to make certain everyone had left."

As the emergency medical technicians followed behind her Monty carefully approached the woman and nudged her with her foot. She dropped to her knees when the woman moaned. "She's alive!"

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Monty checked the pockets of the woman's blazer and found her wallet.

"Her name is Rachel Lancaster. It looks like someone beat the hell out of her."

"Is she from here?" Hope asked as the EMTs loaded the unconscious woman onto their gurney.

"Her drivers license has an Oklahoma City address."

Monty pulled cards from the victim's wallet. "There's a receipt from the Fairfield Inn here in Oklahoma City dated today. It has a room number on it. If she lives in the city, I wonder why she was staying at the inn. I'll pay the Fairfield a visit and see what I can find out."

"Take me with you," Hope's eyes sparkled. "I've read a thousand mysteries that begin just like this, but I've never actually been involved in one."

Monty studied the petite woman for a few seconds. "It never hurts to have the company of a beautiful woman." She smiled. "Do you mind if we have dinner first? I haven't eaten all day. I need to call this into the office and let them know I'm going to notify the next of kin after dinner. I also want to know if a missing person's report has been filed on her."

"I am hungry," Hope admitted.

"I'll need copies of your security video to figure out when she came into the library and if anyone followed her," Monty said. "May I pick them up in the morning? I'll also need to close down the library until our forensic folks do their examination."

"Give me a few minutes and I'll download today's video onto a flash drive for you and post a closed sign on the door."

"Sometimes you are too good to be true, Hope Ford."

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## CHAPTER 3

**Rachel Lancaster**



Monty studied the victim's driver's license as they waited for the server to bring their dinner order. "Lancaster is a very familiar name," she commented.

"You know Bluebaird is running for Governor of Oklahoma."

Monty smiled. She knew Hope was using a play on words. "You mean Bluebeard?"

"You know, Baird Lancaster. He has that thick black beard. It is so black it looks blue. He thinks he looks like Abe



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Lincoln. He was the district attorney who refused to prosecute the criminal that raped that teenager at church camp.”

Monty nodded. “I remember, the man claimed the girl begged him to have sex with her.”

“Yeah,” Hope smirked. “That’s what twelve-year-old church kids do.”

“I know for a fact that the family withdrew the charges after the rapist paid them off.” Monty informed her.

Hope huffed. “Even a daughter’s virtue has a price now days. Do you think there is any chance Baird will be elected governor?”

“Who knows. Enough money will buy anything. I try to stay out of politics when at all possible.”

Monty called her sergeant and informed him that she was following up on the Rachel Lancaster case.

“Something you should know Lieutenant. Rachel Lancaster is the wife of that guy running for governor,” Sergeant Bobby Randle informed her.

“Baird Lancaster?”

“Yeah. The press has dubbed him Blackbaird. He comes from old money. He is a womanizer and had half a dozen assault charges against him in college. It looks like his father paid off people right and left to keep him out of jail.”

“I’ll check on Rachel in the hospital then pay Baird Lancaster a visit. I’m assuming he hasn’t reported his wife missing.”

“Not a peep.” Bobby replied. “I’ve pulled his rap sheet. I’ll leave it on your desk.”

“Thanks, Bobby. I appreciate that.”

Hope raised a questioning brow as Monty ended her call. “This may be a domestic violence case,” she informed the librarian.

##

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Beautiful Rachel Lancaster had learned all the makeup secrets necessary to cover a black eye. She was accustomed to being slapped around and degraded by her powerful husband. She knew he would be furious if he learned she was in the hospital. Sometimes she wished he would kill her and put her out of her misery.

Even before the honeymoon was over, she had learned how unpredictable her new husband's temper could be. She was shocked at his demands for rough sex. Something she despised. He seemed to enjoy beating her into submission.

When she returned home after her honeymoon, she had immediately gone to her parents' house to tell them she was going to divorce Baird. Both of her parents were appalled that she would leave the man being groomed for the governor's job in their state.

"He is abusive," Rachel had cried. "He has a horrible temper."

"You must be careful not to irritate him, dear," her mother had counseled her. "He will be governor one day and you will be the first lady of Oklahoma."

"I don't care about any of that. I just want to be safe. I fear for my life, Mother. He is nothing like the image he projects to the public."

"I'm sure you are overreacting to being a new bride. Some women are shocked by the things their husbands ask them to do." Janice Brighton had insisted as she poured her daughter a glass of wine. "Sip this. It will calm you down. You don't want to do anything drastic. You could cause Daddy to lose his trucking contract with the state. That would be devastating for our company."

Rachel had resigned herself to living in hell and stayed away from Baird as much as possible. She knew he had affairs with other women, and she was glad. *Better them, than me*, she thought.

##

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"I'm certain she is awake," the nurse told Monty. "She refused to allow us to do a rape kit on her."

Monty and Hope quietly entered Rachel's room. "Mrs. Lancaster, I'm Lieutenant Monty Masters with the OKC Police Department. May I ask you a few questions?"

Rachel clenched her eyes tightly fighting back the hot tears that threatened to run down her cheeks.

"Here," a soft hand pressed a tissue into her hand. "Everything is going to be okay."

Rachel blotted the tears from her eyes then focused on the face of the angel leaning over her. "Who are you?"

"I'm Hope Ford. The librarian you scared to death." The angel smiled.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't know where else to hide."

"Who were you hiding from?" Monty took over the conversation.

"I am so tired." Rachel closed her eyes and pretended to fall into a deep sleep.

"The drugs are kicking in," the nurse explained. "We gave her a sedative."

Monty nodded and motioned for the nurse to follow her from the room. "What is the extent of her injuries?"

"Black eye, cut lip, major blows to the body leaving huge bruises that won't show. Do you know who did this to her?"

"We're not sure," Monty replied.

Hope stood beside the injured woman's bed wondering how anyone could hurt Rachel Lancaster. *Even in distress, she is lovely*, Hope thought.

Hope jumped as Rachel caught her hand. "Please don't tell my husband where I am."

"We won't," Hope promised something she wasn't certain she could deliver.

##

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“Did she talk to you after I left the room?” Monty asked as they walked to the car.

“Yes, she begged me not to tell her husband where she is.”

Monty nodded. “That is what I expected.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m not going to contact Baird tonight. I doubt he is missing her. I am going to visit the Fairfield Inn and see what I can find out.”

“Good. It is late and I am tired. It has been a hellacious day.” Hope yawned.

“The good news is you can sleep late since I’ve locked down the crime scene. Do you want me to drop you off at your car or do you want to go with me to check out her room?”

“I want to go with you, of course.”

“You know we have to notify Baird eventually,” Monty noted. “I found her room card in her wallet so I’m not going to contact the front office. I’m just going to check the room with as little fanfare as possible.”

##

No one was at the front desk of the Fairfield when they entered the lobby. They hurried to the elevator and stopped on the second floor. “It’s room 209,” Monty said as they looked at the direction arrows on the wall.

“It’s on the left,” Hope replied.

The room was spotless. Obviously, housekeeping had cleaned it after Rachel left. Her suitcase and overnight bag were in the closet.

“I’m going to take her luggage,” Hope said. “She will need her personal items when they release her. I’ll drop them by her hospital room tomorrow.”

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When they reached the library parking garage, Monty helped transfer Rachel's bags from her car to Hope's vehicle. "What time are you going to see her tomorrow?"

"First thing in the morning." Hope replied, pulling open the driver's door of her SUV. "I'll keep you informed on anything I find out."

"You have always been my best source of information," Monty admitted. "Be careful with her. Baird is dangerous."

Hope saluted, "Aye. Aye, captain."

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## CHAPTER 4

### Hiding Rachel



Hope accepted the ticket from the valet and checked to make certain it had a phone number for her to call when she was ready for her car. She planned to check on Rachel Lancaster then call Monty to join her for lunch.

When Hope entered the hospital room, Rachel was sitting up in her bed watching the local news. She smiled then cringed as her lip reminded her of its cut. She motioned for Hope to sit in the chair beside her bed then muted the news program she was watching.

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“How are you feeling today?” Hope asked.

“Like the only piñata at a large birthday party.”

Hope giggled. “I don’t know how you can be so flippant about being mugged. You could have been killed.”

Rachel nodded. “It’s easier to joke about it than to face the cold hard truth.”

“Which is what?” Hope frowned.

“Nothing,” Rachel waved her hand dismissing the discussion. “I’m sorry I scared you.”

“I’m fine. I have had a sleepless night worrying about you. Does your husband know you are in the hospital?”

Fear flashed in Rachel’s eyes before she turned away from Hope. “I was watching the morning news to see if he has reported me missing. He hasn’t.”

“Did he beat you up?”

Rachel faced Hope. “I have a feeling you already know the answer to your question.”

“Does this happen often?”

“Only when he wants to hit something.” Rachel replied. “I left the house and checked into a hotel, but he found me, assaulted me, and told me I’d better be home when he finished his meetings. I hid in your library. I didn’t mean to involve you in my problems. I just needed time to develop a plan to get away from him.”

“Do you have a place to go, a friend, family?”

“No one wants to anger him,” Rachel explained. “Especially my parents.”

Hope furrowed her brow as she tried to think of a way to help the woman. She ignored the warning from the intelligent side of her brain and blurted, “You can hide out at my place.”

“You are very kind,” Rachel replied, “but I would never put you in harm’s way and believe me, Baird would find a way to punish you for helping me.”

“He doesn’t even know we are acquainted with each other.”

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“Did your friend file a police report on me?”

“I don’t know. I can find out.”

“My clothes are at the hotel,” Rachel said.

“I tagged along with Monty last night and we picked up your belongings from the hotel. I have them in my car.”

“Please help me get out of here,” Rachel pleaded. “I need to disappear before he finds me.”

“Can you walk?”

“Yes, I’ve suffered worse beatings than this then attended fundraisers with him.”

Hope cringed as she thought about Baird assaulting his wife.

“Would you help me dress. I can spend the night at your place then vanish into thin air.”

Hope nodded knowing she would help Rachel Lancaster vanish from the face of the earth if she could. She quickly helped the brunette dress.

“The hospital has video security on all the hallways and in the elevators,” Hope said. “We need to get out of here without anyone seeing me otherwise they will know I took you.”

Rachel ran the tip of her tongue along her lips. “Help me put my hair into a bun at the back of my neck then see if you can steal a doctor’s jacket. Give me your glasses. Do you need them to walk?”

Hope laughed. “No, just for distance.”

“They make you look beautifully intelligent,” Rachel complimented making Hope blush.

Hope checked out the nurses’ station as she walked toward the cold drink machine. Everyone was hurrying to a room that was flashing a code red. She ducked into the small room behind the station and grabbed a white doctor’s jacket, stuffed it under her blouse, and flattened it as much as possible. She continued to the cold drink machine, purchased a Dr Pepper, and headed back to Rachel.



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Rachel was dressed and ready to go. “There is a parking garage across from the hospital Hope informed her. Go inside it and take the elevator to the very top level. I’ll get my car from the valet, drive around the block and then into the garage to pick you up.”

“Thank you,” Rachel murmured.

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## CHAPTER 5

### A New DA in Town



Monty raised her head to look out the window at the officers in the bull pen. Their silence had caught her attention. She walked to her door and opened it. The most gorgeous creature she had ever seen was standing just inside the room looking around. Her gaze landed on Monty.

“Are you Captain Masters?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“I’m Assistant District Attorney Shay Steel.” The woman held out her hand and Monty shook it. Shay had a

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good, firm grip and the most intriguing eyes Monty had ever seen.

“Come in,” Monty waved her through the door in front of her and admired her perfect figure as she followed her into the office.

“DA Bren Anthony is very pleased to get you from the Houston DA’s office. What made you decide to become an Okie?” Monty pulled Shay’s file from the small stack on her desk and opened it. *Her photo doesn’t do her justice*, she thought.

Shay looked around the office avoiding Monty’s piercing gaze. “I had a misogynistic creep for a boss. I had two choices: transfer or shoot him.”

Monty laughed. “I’m glad you chose a transfer. I noticed you have done multiple cyber fraud prosecutions, and you have worked on several cyber bullying cases. Do you like cyber work?”

“I love working cyber cases. Computers are like an extension of my mind. Everything about them comes easy for me.”

“When I ran the background check on you, I noticed that you worked for the Houston police force before joining the DA’s office. You have several letters of accommodation in your file for your undercover work. You were obviously exceptionally good at covert operations.”

“I liked short term undercover work. You know, playing a prostitute to catch a john or a pimp, or a druggie to make a buy for a drug bust. That sort of thing. I’m not fond of deep cover assignments. I was almost killed on a two-year deep cover job.”

“I read that in your file, but you did bring down a huge drug ring.”

“Yes, but not before a thug stomped my hand. I’m still doing exercises to keep the scar tissue from building up.”

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“Your right hand,” Monty noted. “I also see you are extremely proficient on the firing range using your left hand.”

“After hours of practice, but the good news is I’m now ninety-nine percent proficient with either hand.”

“It’s the end results that matter,” Monty encouraged her. “We are delighted to have you in OKC. Bren asked me to give you a desk here while they complete remodeling the Leadership Square offices. I’ve put you in your own private office. I think you could be a distraction to the officers in the bull pen. They’re not creeps but they are human.”

Shay smiled. “Point me to my desk, I’m ready to get to work.”

Hope’s face popped onto Monty’s cellphone screen as she pulled the office key from her desk drawer and handed it to Shay. She let the call go to voicemail. “Your office is next to mine. Make yourself at home. You aren’t on the payroll until tomorrow so make the most of it.”

“I have nothing special to do. We could go to lunch, and you can tell me all the things you love about Oklahoma City.”

Hope called again and Monty answered. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes, we are fine. We’d like to go out for lunch. Do you think that is safe?”

“I’ll pick you up at noon. I don’t want you to go out alone. We still haven’t heard from Baird.” Monty informed her.

“Sounds like you already have lunch plans,” Shay shrugged.

“You can join us. I’ll fill you in on the case as we drive to Hope’s home.”

#

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“Baird Lancaster,” Shay repeated the name. “He’s been to Houston for fundraisers. Word is he will be Oklahoma’s next governor.”

“That’s the rumor. Personally, I think he is a criminal. I’d love to put him behind bars for what he has done to his wife,” Monty grumbled. “But rich guys seldom pay for abusing their wives. A slick lawyer would get him off.”

“He’s a wife beater,” Shay reiterated the information Monty had just given her. “How long can you keep her in protective custody?”

“As long as we need to. He hasn’t filed a missing person’s report on her.” Monty pulled her sedan into Hope’s driveway. “This is Hope’s home. She is the chief librarian. She smuggled Rachel out of the hospital to protect her from Baird.”

Shay followed Monty to the door and waited patiently for Hope to open it.

“You are right on time,” Hope smiled. “Rachel is almost ready.”

Monty stepped into the house and Hope caught her breath as Shay stepped into view. “Who are you?”

“Our new Assistant District Attorney Shay Steel, this is Hope Ford our chief librarian.” Monty made the introductions.

Shay’s blue eyes seemed to gleam as the overhead light reflected in them. She held out her hand.

“Close your mouth and shake her hand,” Monty teased Hope.

Shay held Hope’s hand a little longer than necessary. It was soft and cool. She instantly liked the petite brunette with her thousand-watt smile.

“This is Rachel Lancaster,” Monty announced as a statuesque dark-haired woman entered the room. “Rachel this is our new ADA Shay Steel.”

Shay tilted her head sideways and smiled as she scrutinized Rachel. She didn’t look abused.

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As if reading her mind Rachel pulled up her blouse and turned her back to Shay. It was black and blue from her waist to her shoulders.

Welts the size a belt, made Shay want to reach out and touch her—to make her feel better. “I am so sorry,” she whispered.

“Not your fault,” Rachel mumbled.

“He whipped you with a belt! He belongs in prison, not the governor’s mansion,” Shay replied.

“We all know that won’t happen,” Hope declared.

“Enough about my abusive husband,” Rachel exclaimed, “Hope promised to feed me.”

For some inexplicable reason Shay felt at ease with the three women as if she had known them all her life. They all believed in the same things: law and order and divine retribution. She wondered if all of them despised Baird Lancaster as much as she did for what he had done to beautiful Rachel Lancaster.

##

“That was delicious,” Shay exclaimed as she finished her dessert. “The best peach cobbler I’ve ever eaten.”

“How are you feeling?” Monty asked Rachel.

“Surprisingly well. I just need to move around and work out the soreness in my body. Shay, have you seen the OKC National Memorial to the one hundred sixty-eight innocents that died in the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building?”

“Isn’t that the building Timothy McVeigh parked a Ryder truck filled with explosives in front of?” Shay replied.

Rachel nodded.

“I haven’t seen the memorial, but I’ve heard many good things about it. I would love to see it.”

Monty checked her watch. “I have a meeting this afternoon. Hope can you take them?”

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“I’m interviewing two people for the assistant librarian’s job in half an hour,” Hope scowled. “I’d love to take you otherwise.”

“I’ll drop Hope back at her house and take you two to the police station where you can get Shay’s car.” Monty suggested.

“That works for me,” Shay exclaimed. “Is it okay with you, Rachel.”

“I’d enjoy the outing,” Rachel agreed.

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## CHAPTER 6

### A Sordid Affair



Rachel and Shay spent the afternoon visiting the memorial and the museum. It was almost sundown when they left the monument.

“I hope I haven’t tired you,” Shay commented as they walked to her car.

“No, I can’t remember the last time I felt so free and happy.”

“Would you like to go to dinner?” Shay asked wanting to spend more time with the beautiful woman.



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“I would like that. Do you prefer an incredibly excellent restaurant or fast food?”

“Something elegantly relaxed where the tables aren’t shoved against each other.” Shay requested.

“If you like a good steak, great service, and incredible ambiance we should go to The Stock and Bond. It is expensive, but so worth it. No one stands over your table hurrying you so they can seat the next customers.”

“Sounds like a perfect place to dine with a lovely lady,” Shay blushed at her own forwardness.

##

Shay requested a table in a secluded corner where they would be hidden. She perused the menu of The Stock and Bond restaurant. “It all looks good. I don’t know where to start. Do you have a favorite?”

“The small filet, cooked medium, with the broccoli and rice casserole,” Rachel suggested.

“Perfect, I’ll have that,” Shay told the server, “and iced tea.”

“I will have the same,” Rachel added.

Rachel studied her blonde dining partner. Shay’s golden hair and blue eyes seemed to glow against the dark paneling of the wall behind her. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen eyes the color of yours,” she complimented, “they are disconcerting, almost hypnotizing,”

Shay laughed softly. “I do believe my eyes can take the credit for most of my prosecutorial wins. Some convicts have even gone so far as to say they were hypnotized into confessing.”

Rachel joined her laughter. “I could see that happening.”

“I like to think I build a strong case against them without using any parlor tricks,” Shay insisted. “Enough about my eyes. How long have you been married to Baird Lancaster?”

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“Too long,” Rachel replied.

“Seriously, how long?”

“Three years,” Rachel answered. “Three fear-filled years.”

“Why don’t you leave him?”

“He would find a way to smear me and my parents. If I filed for a divorce, he would have his cronies swear I’d slept with all of them.”

Shay raised her brows questioningly.

“I have not slept with anyone but Baird.”

“I wasn’t questioning that,” Shay insisted. “I was wondering about your parents.”

“My family owns a large trucking company. Baird makes certain my father gets million-dollar contracts every year. The state of Oklahoma is Daddy’s largest client now. My mother pleads with me to stay with Baird so Daddy can be successful. You might say we’ve sold our souls to the devil.”

“A difficult pact to get out of,” Shay agreed.

A rowdy group of men and women followed the hostess into the restaurant. They acted as if they owned the place, talking loudly and guffawing at everything one man said.

“Don’t look now,” Shay whispered, “but I believe your husband and his entourage just entered the room.”

Rachel stiffened and inhaled deeply but didn’t turn around.

Shay recorded the scene as Baird pulled out the chair for a busty blonde then leaned down to kiss her on the cheek then the exposed top of her breasts. Shay’s eyes popped open then reduced to slits as she watched him fondle the woman while everyone hooted. She continued recording his antics on her cellphone.

She played the video for Rachel. “Who is she?”

“A high-priced prostitute. I’m certain Baird keeps her in a townhouse somewhere. Has he noticed us?”

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“No, he’s too busy showing off for his buddies. I can’t believe people are drawn to him. I’ve never seen a beard like his. It is so black it has a blue hue.”

“That is why his detractors call him Bluebaird. They have no idea how close to the truth that name is for him. If he had a locked room in our house, I certainly wouldn’t open it.”

“I know we just met today, and I don’t mean to get into your business, but I have to ask, what are you going to do?”

Rachel looked down at her hands and sighed. “I don’t know. It’s okay you asked. I feel as if I’ve known you for ages. You are easy to be with, Shay.”

They ordered a bottle of wine and talked quietly as Baird’s crowd grew rowdier.

“You know all about me,” Rachel said. “What about you? Is there a Mr. Steel in your life? Kids?”

“No, I’ve been too driven for a family. I am hoping this will be my home forever. I’ve almost reached my goal.”

“Which is?”

“To be the Oklahoma State Attorney General.”

“Um, lofty goal, but I’m sure you will attain it. All you have to do is prosecute and win one high profile case to get the establishment’s attention.”

The server brought their check then delivered a check to Baird for his table. “Does he usually pick up the check for everyone?” Shay asked.

“How else would he have so many ‘friends’ and lackies to do his bidding. His family is from old oil money. He has a very generous trust fund. The succubi that hang onto him would abandon him in a heartbeat if he weren’t picking up the tab for everything.”

Shay placed her credit card on top of the bill. “I can pay my own way,” Rachel declared, opening her purse.

“Please allow me just this once. You have been a marvelous tour guide and interesting dining partner.” She pulled her cellphone from her pocket and scrolled through her

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messages then fumbled with her apps. “May I have your phone number?”

“I was hoping you would ask.” Rachel smiled as she reached for Shay’s phone and called her own number. “There, now we have each other’s numbers.”

“What do you mean it was declined?” Baird bellowed as he stood up to face down the server.

“The card was declined, sir. I ran it three times.”

“That is impossible. It is a Black Card. Black Cards are never declined.” Baird fumed. “I want to speak to the manager.”

“Yes, sir.” The server scurried away from the belligerent man.

Soon a distinguished-looking man who looked more like a six-foot-six football tackle than a restaurant manager joined them. “What seems to be the problem, Mr. Lancaster?”

“Your credit card machine is malfunctioning,” Baird howled. “It declined my Black Card.”

“Let me try it again on another machine,” the manager offered. “I apologize for the inconvenience.”

Baird tossed the card to him and slumped back into his chair. “This place is going downhill,” he exclaimed loudly.

Shay was recording the exchange on her cellphone. She wanted to know the people who were hanging around Baird Lancaster.

One by one Baird’s friends made excuses to leave while he waited for the manager to return.

“Mr. Lancaster, I called the credit card company and there is a problem with your card,” the manager returned his card. “Could you give me another card?”

Baird’s face turned dark red, and Shay expected him to explode. “I only carry that one card.”

“It is unacceptable,” the manager said firmly. “Perhaps your lady friend has a card you can use until you get this straightened out.”

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“Kitty, do you have a credit card?”

“Of course.” Kitty pulled her card from her purse as the manager handed her the bill. “Holy crap! This bill is over five-thousand dollars,” she squealed. “My max is three thousand. That’s all you allow me.”

“Sir, perhaps you can call your father for a different card number,” the manager suggested.

Baird clenched his teeth. “I’m a forty-two-year-old adult. I don’t need to run to Daddy to pay my bills. I’ll sign an ‘I owe you’ and return tomorrow to pay it.”

“Very good, sir.” The manager shoved the pen and check toward him. “Simply write *I owe you* on the back and sign it.”

Baird signed the note then tossed the pen onto the table. “Come on Kitty, let’s get out of this dump.”

Shay watched the pair leave, still recording them as they departed. “He is a real piece of work. How did you ever get mixed up with him?”

“It’s a long story,” Rachel exhaled slowly. “A conversation we can save for another time.”

Shay smiled and nodded pleased to know there would be another time with the beautiful dark-haired woman.

As they walked toward the front of the restaurant, Hope called out to them. “Shay, Rachel, what are you to doing here?”

“Watching Baird crash and burn,” Rachel giggled. “Such a sordid affair.”

“He stomped by us cussing on his way out the door,” Monty remarked. “What’s going on?”

“I’m sending both of you the video,” Shay said softly. “We just finished dining, and I am taking Rachel back to Hope’s house. I’m afraid I’ve worn her out. She gave me the grand tour of the Memorial today. It is magnificent.”

“We will be home soon,” Monty informed them. “We’re just waiting for our check. I wish we had known you were here. We could have dined together.”

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Shay smiled. “I’ll stay with Rachel until you arrive.”

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## CHAPTER 7

**Jane Doe**



She had followed Baird Lancaster for a third of her life striving to get into a position where she could make his life one hell day after another. *It's finally beginning to work*, she thought as she stepped into the shower.

A shiver ran through her body as she recalled crawling through the alley after he had beaten her and left her for dead. Both of them had graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He had cast his hat into the political ring while she had continued her education in computer science.

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Her senior year at MIT she had developed a game application that sold for \$3.99. After paying all the platform companies and middlemen that made it possible to get her app to market, she had cleared one dollar per sale. Long ago, the app's sales peaked at five million downloads a year, and it was still in the top ten games on Apple. She was set for life.

She frowned at her reflection in the mirror realizing her natural hair color was growing out. *Time to color the roots*, she thought.

She gently touched her face. The face Baird Lancaster had scarred beyond recognition. She no longer resembled the innocent young girl Lancaster had ravaged. She had missed a year of college while reconstructive surgeons put her face back together and the broken bones in her body healed. An entire year to plan her vengeance on the man who still terrorized her nightmares.

*Oh, Baird, you have no idea what I have planned for you.*

##

Ensley Flynn's eyes opened wide as she watched the video from Humpty Dumpty. It showed governor wannabe Baird Lancaster in an altercation with the owner of one of OKC's four-star restaurants over the payment of a dinner tab. Humpty Dumpty had become one of her best sources of anonymous news tips. She watched the video two more times wondering if Lancaster had kept his word and paid the bill.

She had met the Lancasters at a charity ball and had been enthralled by Rachel Lancaster. She was a lady's lady. Baird on the other hand was a spoiled brat flouting his white privilege. Ensley wondered what his wife saw in the boring braggart.



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She decided to have lunch at The Stock and Bond. A lunch salad at an expensive restaurant wouldn't break her budget. She wanted to do her own investigation before posting anything negative on her podcast about the litigious Lancasters.

Her podcast, *The Flynn Factor* had amassed over five million followers growing from an audio podcast to a video production on YouTube. She had been picked up by Spotify and Apple. She was even bringing in a substantial amount of advertising revenue. She had to admit that tips from Humpty Dumpty had provided her best stories.

She had used every trick she knew to identify Humpty Dumpty but had failed. Whoever it was, they knew how to hide behind VPNs.

Ensley called her best friend to join her. "Hope, how would you like to go to lunch at the Stock and Bond?"

"It depends on who is paying," Hope replied.

"My treat," Ensley promised.

"I can't get out of here until my new assistant returns from lunch. I'll call you when I leave, and we can meet at the restaurant."

"Works for me," Ensley agreed.

##

Ensley requested a table close to the kitchen entrance hoping to hear staff gossip from the other side of the swinging doors as the servers waited for their orders to come up.

"May I take your drink order?" An attractive butch waitress asked.

"I'm waiting for a friend and would like to see what she wants before I order," Ensley explained as she read her name tag. "Thank you, Denny."

"I will check back when she joins you." Denny smiled.

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Ensley grinned as Hope appeared at the hostess stand. *She is the cutest little thing I've ever seen*, she thought. The room seemed to get brighter as the brunette chatted with the hostess on her way to the table.

"I was delightfully surprised to hear from you today," Hope enthused as she joined Ensley. "You must be searching for dirt on someone."

"Busted," Ensley faked embarrassment. "You know me too well. Let's order lunch, then I want to pick your brain."

They placed their orders and Ensley introduced Hope to Denny then waited for the server to walk away. Ensley pulled her phone from her pocket, queued up the Lancaster video and handed it to Hope. "Watch this. It is a hoot."

Hope frowned as she watched the replay of the scene she had witnessed. It was the recording Shay had made and forwarded to all their phones. "Where did you get this?"

"I wish I knew," Ensley said softly. "I've tried to track the sender, but it bounced all over the world before it landed on my phone. Whoever it is, they know how to mask their IP address." Hope briefly wondered which one of her friends had sent the video to Ensley: Rachel, Monty, or Shay.

"Do you know anyone who works here?" Ensley asked.

"No, this place is definitely above my pay scale," Hope admitted. "I won't know them unless they frequent the library."

As they dined Denny kept their drink glasses filled and brought extra bread. "I think she likes you," Hope whispered to Ensley.

Against all odds, Ensley asked Denny if she knew who Baird Lancaster was.

"Yeah, he's the creep that stiffed my dad last week."

"Gave him a hot check?" Ensley asked innocently.

"No, his credit card was declined so he gave Dad an IOU for a five-thousand-dollar dinner and bar bill.

"I'm sure he returned and took care of the bill," Ensley guessed.

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“Nope and he won’t take our calls.”

“Why don’t you turn it over to the authorities?” Ensley asked.

“He’s a good customer. Comes in here at least once a week with his groupies and picks up the tab. Dad thinks he will be good for it.”

“I certainly hope so,” Ensley sympathized. “It takes a lot of customers to make up for a bill that size.”

##

Hope and Ensley chatted as they walked to the restaurant’s parking lot. “Are you going to put the video on your podcast?” Hope asked.

“I’m considering airing it on our *What Happened in OKC This Week* segment,” Ensley confided. “I won’t comment on it so I can’t be sued.”

“That would serve Baird right,” Hope agreed. She didn’t tell her friend that Rachel Lancaster was in protective custody to shield her from Baird Lancaster. “I watch your podcast every day but give me a heads up when you are going to run it.”

“I will,” Ensley promised.

##

Hope was showing her new assistant where the oldest books in the library were shelved in a climate-controlled area when her phone rang.

“Hope, this is Ensley. I’ve finished taping my segment on Baird. I spoke with Denny, and she said he still hasn’t taken care of the bill at their restaurant. I’m going to air it tonight.”

“All hell will break loose,” Hope reminded her. “The Lancasters won’t be happy.”

“I know. I ran it by my attorney, and he said they wouldn’t have a leg to stand on if they try to sue me.”

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“I will let Monty know so she can watch it.” Hope laughed. “We may have a watch party.”

Ensley laughed. “If you do, may I come over after the show?”

“I’d like that,” Hope replied.

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## CHAPTER 8

### Friends are Family



Hope placed fresh-baked bread on the kitchen island beside the crockpot of simmering beef stew. Dishes and flatware were beside cups filled with fresh coffee. Everything was ready for her friends to gather around the television and watch Ensley’s production of *What Happened in OKC This Week*?

She jumped as the door chimes announced the arrival of a guest. “Shay, I’m so glad you could make it,” Hope greeted

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her new friend. “You are the first to arrive. Make yourself at home. There is tea and coffee. The beer is in the fridge.”

Another announcement from her doorbell produced Monty and Rachel.

“Is Ensley going to join us?” Monty asked as she popped the top off a cold beer.

“She is on her way. I promised we would wait until she arrived to watch the podcast on YouTube. She wants to get our feedback as we watch it.” Hope replied.

“Isn’t she airing the video I took then forwarded a copy to all of you?” Shay asked.

“Yes,” Hope replied.

Shay looked from face to face. “Which one of you sent that video to Ensley?”

The women shook their heads and denied sending the embarrassing video to the podcaster.

Shay’s gaze rested on Rachel.

“I know I would seem to be the likely culprit,” Rachel admitted, “but honestly I never heard of *The Flynn Factor* until Monty started talking about it.”

Shay smiled. Somehow, she knew the beautiful woman wouldn’t do anything to incur the wrath of her husband. She wondered if Rachel would come to her senses and divorce Baird before he killed her in a fit of rage.

“It’s obvious Baird is keeping company with a prostitute,” Shay continued. “Will that embarrass you when it airs for all the world to see?”

“Baird is an embarrassment all by himself,” Rachel huffed. “One more prostitute won’t make a difference. His father will race around town cleaning up his mess. Like my own father, Mr. Lancaster wants someone he can control running our state government. Believe me, he wants Baird to be the Governor of Oklahoma.”

The door chimes heralded the arrival of Ensley. “Welcome,” Hope greeted her. “Everyone is here. Do you know Rachel Lancaster?”

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Ensley shyly smiled at Rachel. "I hope this isn't hurtful to you."

"It isn't." Rachel shrugged. "It is good to see someone exposing Baird for the creep he is."

"I have placed TV trays by all the chairs in the video room," Hope informed them. "Everyone, serve yourself, and let's get this show on the road."

They chattered as they filled bowls and collected their drinks. Shay grabbed a chair beside Rachel who blushed when the DA smiled at her.

*She has no idea how gorgeous she is*, Shay thought. She wondered how anyone could harm a woman as magnificent as Rachel. She also wondered if Rachel was married to Baird because she preferred men.

"It looks like the gathering of the Fantastic Five is complete," Hope declared as she clicked the play icon to begin the video. Everyone watched in silence as Baird Lancaster tried to bully his way out of the restaurant.

"I checked with the restaurant owner's daughter, and she said Baird hasn't paid his bill and won't return their phone calls," Ensley informed them as the video ended.

"Tell her to file a complaint with the police department," Monty advised.

"They will just blow her off," Ensley replied. "You know they are too busy fighting serious crime to bother with an unpaid dinner tab."

Monty handed Ensley her business card. "Have her contact me. I promise someone will follow up on the case if her father is willing to press charges."

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## CHAPTER 9

**Get rid of the prostitute!**



Baird was livid when he finished watching the pathetic excuse for a news show. He had never heard of *The Flynn Factor* until his father texted him the link to it. He inhaled deeply as his father's face appeared on his phone. He dreaded the conversation they were about to have.

"Are you crazy?" David Lancaster screamed into the phone when his son answered. "If you must screw around with a prostitute, at least have the good sense to take her to a dark dump to dine, not the most popular restaurant in the



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city. I never want to see her face associated with you again. Do I make myself clear?"

"The credit card company declined the charge on my Black card," Baird whined. "Did you cancel my card?"

"Hell no! Why would I do that? Have you called the card company to find out what happened? Please tell me you have made things right with the restaurant. We meet important people there all the time. You can't afford to be refused service. And get rid of the prostitute."

"I'll take care of everything. Don't worry." Baird disconnected the call and pulled his wallet from his pocket.

He called the credit card company and asked for customer service. He asked why his card had been declined.

"We never decline a black card, sir" the service representative said. "May I have your card number and the transaction date?"

Baird provided the information she needed and waited.

"I don't show a refusal on your record. I don't even show any attempts to use it on that date. There must have been a glitch in our system, sir. I am so sorry."

"I need your name and a direct line to you," Baird demanded. "I'm going to return to the restaurant and pay the bill. If I have a problem, I will call you."

"I will be happy to assist you in any way I can," the woman assured him providing the information he requested.

Baird's phone rang and he let it go to voicemail. The message from Kitty was short and sweet. "Your Kitty needs some stroking," the prostitute drawled. "You need to come take care of this pussy cat."

He decided to pay Kitty a visit on his way to The Stock and Bond. He would have one last romp with her then tell her they were over. He knew his father was right. He was too well known to be consorting with prostitutes right now. He wondered where Rachel was. She had run from the house after he hit her. Maybe he hit her more than once. He couldn't remember. *Probably hiding at her parents.*

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He grabbed his checkbook just in case his card was declined again.

##

As he drove to Kitty's apartment, Baird wondered who had videoed him in The Stock and Bond. He hadn't noticed anyone in the restaurant, but he was high as a kite and paying attention to Kitty.

He pulled his car into the apartment's parking garage and dialed his wife's phone. *She needs to come home*, he thought as the call went to voicemail. He began talking as the phone invited him to leave a message. "Rachel, I need to talk to you. I expect you home tonight. Do not disappoint me. We have many public appearances we must make together to further my political aspirations."

As usual Kitty met him at the door wearing only a dressing gown. "Do you want a drink?" she asked.

"No, I only want you." He grinned as she slid the gown down her shoulders and let it drop to the floor.

##

Kitty always made him forget about everything else. He rolled off her and lay on his back, panting like a big dog. "You are something else, Kitty."

"I hope I please you, Baird," she murmured as she straddled him.

He shoved her off him. "We need to talk," he gasped still trying to catch his breath.

"The four most dreaded words in the English language," Kitty drawled. "What has Daddy decreed now?"

"He says I must stop seeing you. We are getting close to the primary and I can't take a chance on being associated with you. It would be bad for my image."

"So, you must be seen with your perfect society wife," Kitty snorted.

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“Yeah. Rachel is good for my reputation.”

Kitty began massaging his manhood. “Couldn’t we just be extra careful to keep me your dirty little secret. You know, avoid the public—never going out together. I’ll just be here whenever you need me.”

“You would be willing to do that for me?” Baird asked.

“As long as you pay my rent and continue giving me my generous monthly allowance, I will do anything you need. I have no qualms about being a kept woman.”

Baird laughed as he slipped between her legs. “I always know where I stand with you. You don’t play games.”

“What your Daddy doesn’t know won’t hurt us,” Kitty hummed wrapping her legs around his waist.

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## CHAPTER 10

### A Place to Stay



Monty pulled the popcorn from the microwave as Rachel got cold drinks from the fridge. “You will love this movie,” she said. “It is a romantic comedy.”

Rachel smiled then frowned as her cellphone announced, “Baird calling.” She let it go to voicemail then played it back so Monty could hear the message reminding her they had social commitments.

“You aren’t returning to him, are you?” Monty exclaimed. “You should file assault charges against him.”

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“You know the authorities won’t charge him.”

“No, but the new ADA will.” Monty replied.

“I don’t want to put Shay in harm’s way. You know what happened to the last ADA that tried to investigate him. Can you protect her?”

“I have a feeling Shay Steel can protect herself,” Monty replied. “She always wears a gun, and she has the authority to use it. She is a hundred percent accurate with both hands.”

“Even if you arrest him, the judge will release him on bail. He is dangerous, and extremely vindictive. I don’t want anyone else to pay for my bad decision to marry him.”

“Have you spoken with Shay since our viewing of *The Flynn Factor*.”

“No, I’ve been helping Hope at the library. They closed the library in Edmond and moved everything to her building. I’m helping her shelve the books properly. I don’t know what I’d do without the two of you. You make me feel safe at night and she hovers over me like a mama bird in the daytime. The two of you keep me sane.”

“Have you seen Ensley since we viewed her podcast together?”

“Oh, yes. She drops by the library at least once a day. Sometimes she brings lunch, and we eat in Hope’s office. Hope helps her with the research for her podcast. Hope is incredibly knowledgeable. She is brilliant.”

“I have always found her to be a fountain of information,” Monty agreed with Rachel’s assessment of the perky librarian.

Monty started the movie and was unusually quiet during the video. When it ended, she turned off the television and began gathering the glasses and popcorn bowls from the coffee table.

“Is something bothering you?” Rachel inquired.

“No, not really.”

Rachel smiled. “It has always been my experience that ‘No, not really,’ means yes.”

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“Of all the women in the world, and I get a human lie detector,” Monty joked.

“Seriously, what is wrong?”

“I’m probably way out of line, but I have to ask you, are Hope and Ensley dating?”

“Oooh,” Rachel breathed. “Is that what is going on? I never suspected that Hope might prefer women. That explains why Ensley dances around her.”

“Do they go out together?” Monty reiterated.

“No, I’m certain they don’t.”

“How do you know?”

“While you are out all hours of the night keeping OKC safe, Hope and I usually go to dinner then she drops me back at your house. I’m certain she goes straight home because she always texts me that she is home safely. We watch out for each other.”

Rachel observed Monty’s shoulders relaxing and she smiled. “You like her, don’t you?”

“Very much,” Monty admitted.

“Does she know. I mean have you ever told her. Do the two of you date?”

“We attend a lot of city functions together,” Monty admitted, “but I’ve never actually asked her out on a date.”

“What makes you think she dates women?”

“She was with a woman when we met. They broke up and the woman moved to Arkansas.”

“How do you know this?”

“The woman was one of my officers. That is how I met Hope. She brought Hope to a police Christmas party.” Monty replied.

“Ah.” Rachel nodded. “How long ago was that?”

“Three years.” Monty mumbled.

“And you have never asked Hope out?” Rachel scoffed.

Monty shrugged. “She’s never given me any indication that she might want to date me. We’ve just become close friends that do things together.”

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Rachel dragged her hands down her face. “Trust me, she cares for you. You are all she talks about. I’ve heard about every case you have ever solved.”

Monty blushed. “Don’t pacify me. I’m a big girl. I can back off if she is cozying up to Ensley.

“She isn’t cozying up to Ensley, but I’m sure Ensley would like to be more than friends with Hope. Don’t wait until it is too late.”

“As long as we are baring our souls,” Monty said, “why did you marry Baird Lancaster?”

“He joined our church and seemed like a good Christian man. He was thoughtful and attentive—a real Jekyll and Hyde. The face he shows to the world is definitely a pretty mask that he wears. He is cruel and abusive.”

“You know he won’t change,” Monty said. “He will only get worse because you let him get away with it. Do you love him?”

“I thought I did, until I married him. Now, I hate him.”

“You must leave him,” Monty encouraged.

“Where would I go? My parents wouldn’t support me divorcing him. I don’t have a job. He won’t let me work.”

“You can live here as long as you need to,” Monty offered. “As you said, I am rarely home. We wouldn’t be in each other’s way.”

Rachel’s phone rang announcing a second call from Baird. “Dammit, Rachel, call me. I just spoke to your mother, and she hasn’t seen you either. If you are hiding, I will find you.”

Baird hung up and Rachel’s mother called. She answered the phone and put it on the speaker so Monty could hear what she was up against.

“Rachel, dear, this is Mom. Please call Baird. He is worried sick about you. I don’t know why you keep running away. He loves you.”

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“Mom, I don’t run away from him. I checked myself into a hospital until I recovered from the last beating, he gave me.”

“Anyway, dear please call him and let him know where you are. He is concerned about you. Don’t let Daddy down, Rachel.”

The line went dead as Rachel raised haunted eyes to look into Monty’s eyes.

“As I said, you are welcome to stay here as long as you like.” Monty said softly.

##

Ensley’s phone rang and she recognized the phone number of The Stock and Bond. She was pleasantly surprised to hear Denny’s voice.

“Hey, I wanted to thank you for the expo you did on Baird Lancaster stiffing us on his dinner check,” Denny bubbled. “He just came in and paid the bill. His card cleared.”

“That is great,” Ensley exclaimed. “I’m glad something good came out of it.”

“Dad said to invite you for a dinner on the house. We owe you.”

“Thanks, I may take you up on that. Will it be okay if I bring a date? I will be delighted to pay for her dinner.”

“Sure, just make your reservations and ask for me when you arrive. I’ll take good care of you.”

Ensley disconnected the call and sent a text message to her four friends telling them that Baird had paid his bill.



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## CHAPTER 11

### A Visit from Baird Lancaster



Jane read the text again. She wondered when Baird had paid the bill. *Too bad I can't mess with his head* she thought. *But I'm certain I'll have many opportunities to drive him mad. He has no idea what I have planned for him.*

She noted on her cellphone calendar the June gubernatorial primary date. She decided she would watch him work his ass off to win the primary then when it was almost certain he would be elected governor, she would unleash the hounds of hell on him.

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A text dinged into her cellphone, and she smiled as she read it. “Hey, we’re all going out to dinner tonight. Unless you have someone else to celebrate Valentines Day with, please join us.”

“I can’t think of anyone I’d rather spend Valentines Day with,” she responded. “Where should I meet you?”

“We’re meeting in the library. The author of the new bestseller, *The Dead Don’t Tell Secrets*, is giving a reading at the library then we are all heading to the OKC Grill for drinks and dinner.”

##

Rachel relaxed as the visiting author read her new book. For the first time since her marriage to Baird she was beginning to see light at the end of the tunnel. Monty, Shay, Hope, and Ensley made her feel safe. They laughingly referred to themselves—including her—as the Fantastic Five. They were friends she could count on, and they were fun.

She didn’t move as Shay’s shoulder rested against hers. It felt warm and protective. The ADA had talked with her about getting a restraining order against Baird, but she knew it would be useless and only infuriate him. Still, she didn’t want to return to his house. She knew she wouldn’t be safe with him.

The author concluded her reading and fans lined up to have her autograph their book. Her entourage floated around the library waiting for her.

“Are they going to dinner with us?” Rachel asked Hope.

“No, just the five of us.” Hope winked and smiled.

The five of them began putting away the cushioned folding chairs as the last book buyer left the room. Hope thanked the author for coming and walked her and her friends to the front of the library.

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Shay's phone rang as Hope's face appeared on her screen. "Get Rachel into the saferoom," Hope commanded. "Hurry, Baird is heading into the library."

Rachel didn't hesitate when Shay grabbed her arm and pulled her into the saferoom. Her stomach turned over as they dashed into the room and locked the door. She watched the cameras as her friends glared at Baird.

"I was told my wife is in here," he said loudly. "I need to pick her up and take her home." He looked disheveled and reeked of alcohol.

"She left a few minutes ago," Hope lied as she entered the room. "I'm surprised you didn't pass her on your way in."

Baird sauntered around the library as Hope and her friends finished straightening the reading area. He pulled a Marlboro pack from his shirt pocket, lit a cigarette, crumbled the pack then tossed it onto the floor. He inhaled deeply then blew a cloud of smoke into the air.

Hope pointed to the huge "No Smoking" sign on the wall behind her desk. "I must ask you to put that out. This is a no smoking area."

He took a drag off the cigarette, filled the area with smoke, and grinned maliciously. "Which one of you ladies is going to make me?" He hissed.

Monty pulled back her blazer exposing her badge and gun. "I will if it is necessary," she growled.

Baird glared at her as he ground his cigarette onto the surface of Hope's mahogany desk. "You really should keep an ashtray on your desk, dear."

"You need to leave before I arrest you for destroying city property," Monty moved toward him hoping he would give her an excuse to pistol whip him.

He held up his hands as he backed away from her. "I'm leaving. If any of you see my wife, tell her I'm looking for her. The poll-watch party begins in the morning, and I need

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her by my side. I will win by a landslide, and I want her to stand by me when I give my humble thank you speech?"

Hope and Monty followed him to the front door and locked it behind him. "Nothing would please me more than jailing that clown and throwing away the key," Monty said.

Hope nodded. "I am so thankful you are here. You were magnificent. I loved the way you stood up to him."

"As did you." Monty laughed. "And you're a little thing without a gun or a badge. That took true courage."

They returned to the main room and knocked on the saferoom door. "You can come out," Monty declared.

Rachel and Shay slowly opened the door. "I am so sorry to put all of you in danger," Rachel sobbed. "I feel so cowardly."

Shay slipped her arm around Rachel's shoulders. "Nonsense. Everyone is fine and that brute is off to bully someone else."

"He may be sitting in front of the building waiting to catch us leaving," Rachel commented.

"He can spend the night there," Hope snickered. "We're taking the service elevator to the parking garage that opens onto the street two blocks away."

Everyone laughed as Hope dimmed the library lights and set the alarm. Shay hugged Rachel's shoulders then stepped away from her.

"There is safety in numbers," Monty noted. "Let's all pile into Hope's Suburban. The windows are tinted black so no one can see inside. If Baird is watching for us, he will be looking for more than one vehicle."

"Do all law enforcement officers think like criminals?" Hope teased as they pushed the button on the freight elevator.

"Just the good ones," Monty quipped.

Shay sandwiched between Monty and Rachel as they climbed into the backseat and Ensley and Hope rode in front.

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Monty leaned over Shay and asked Rachel, “Are you going to show up for Baird’s watch party?”

“No, I’m going to file a restraining order against him if you will help me, Shay.”

“Of course, I will help you. I will present the order to the judge myself. I’ll pick you up from Monty’s on my way into the office in the morning. We will handle it first thing. Then I can drop you by the library. It might be nice to grab breakfast on our way in.”

“I’d like that.” Rachel snuggled into Shay’s side finding comfort in the blonde’s warm strength. She fought the desire to lean her head against Shay’s shoulder.

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## CHAPTER 12

### Restraining Orders and Danger



A light snow was falling as Hope pulled into the parking garage. She pulled her car into the spot marked *Librarian* and listened to the morning newswoman report that early ballots were showing Baird Lancaster was destined to be the new Governor of Oklahoma. If he won the primary, he would win the general election. His party had run the state for the past twelve years, so his win was almost guaranteed.

She turned off the engine and pulled her laptop bag into her lap. She had a nagging headache. *We should not have*

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*partied so hard last night, she thought. But it was the nicest Valentines Day I've experienced in a long time.*

She groaned as the elevator jerked to a stop on the main floor of the library. She was still furious that rat bastard Baird Lancaster had marred the surface of her new desk with his cigarette. *He belongs in a cage not the governor's office,* she thought.

Hope unlocked the library doors, disarmed the alarm, and turned on all the lights in the cavernous room. The lights made the library look warm and welcoming but in the dark, it was cold and ominous. She walked to the storeroom to get a dust cloth and furniture polish. *Maybe I can rub out the burned place on my desk.* She carefully scooped Baird's cigarette and the crushed pack into a Ziplock baggie just in case Monty needed it for anything. She dropped the baggie into her lap drawer.

Hope smiled as a teacher brought her class into her domain. She loved it when educators taught their students how to use the library. She frowned when she thought about the way the internet constantly rewrote history to please whatever political party was in control of the government. Printed books were the only true source of factual history.

A fashionably dressed woman who looked like an older version of Rachel Lancaster entered the library and looked around as if searching for someone.

"May I help you." Hope smiled as she approached the woman.

"I was told my daughter works here," the woman nervously replied.

"I have several employees," Hope noted. "What is your daughter's name?"

The woman fidgeted with the handle of her purse. "Rachel Lancaster," Janice Brighton replied.

"And you are?"

"Her mother, Janice Brighton. Please it is extremely important that I speak with her."

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“She isn’t here,” Hope said.

“Does she work here?” Janice insisted.

“Yes.”

“May I wait for her? I will sit at a table out of the way. You won’t even know I’m here.”

“She is taking care of personal business,” Hope informed her. “I’m not sure she will be in today. May I give her a message and have her call you?”

“I will just sit at that table in the corner and read a book,” Janice persisted.

##

“I can’t believe the process was so simple,” Rachel exclaimed as she and Shay walked from the courtroom.

“It helped that Monty smoothed the way for us,” Shay shared the credit for their success.

Rachel linked her arm through Shay’s. “Do you have a favorite breakfast place?”

“Not really,” Shay answered. “I’ve only been here a short time. I haven’t staked out favorite places yet.”

“There is a family-owned restaurant about two blocks from the library. The Brunch House, they have the best breakfast in town and their coffee is beyond wonderful.”

“Sounds like the place I’ve been searching for,” Shay agreed.

Snow had covered Shay’s vehicle, and she brushed the white layer from the window with her gloved hand before opening Rachel’s door. She quickly started the car and turned on the heater. “It will warm up in a minute,” she promised.

They rode in silence to the Brunch House, each of them keeping their thoughts to themselves.

##



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"This is nice," Shay commented as she looked around the restaurant. "It is pristine. I don't think I've ever seen a restaurant so clean."

"It is always this way," Rachel assured her.

They ordered coffee and the Bunch House Breakfast. Shay addressed the elephant in the booth with them. "Why are you so quiet?"

"I am wondering if I did the right thing. Baird will go ballistic when they serve him the restraining order."

"Are you going to divorce him?" Shay asked.

"Yes. But he will go after anyone he finds out helped me. I'm concerned about you and Monty."

"Don't worry about us," Shay assured her. "We have dealt with much worse than Baird Lancaster. Let's enjoy our breakfast then head to the library. You know Hope is dying to find out what happened in court."

"I'll bet you a dollar that Monty has already told her," Rachel predicted.

"I'd be a fool to take that bet." Shay laughed.

"May I ask you a personal question?" Rachel said softly.

"Sure, as long as you will understand if I don't answer it."

"Fair enough." Rachel shrugged. "Are Monty and Hope dating?"

"I honestly don't know," Shay answered. "Why do you ask?"

"They constantly flirt with each other."

"Both of them are extremely attractive," Shay pointed out. "I don't know about their sexual preferences."

Rachel nodded. "What is yours?"

"I've been too busy with my career and my goals in life to give that question much thought," Shay replied. "Since you married Baird, I'm assuming you prefer men."

"Not really." Rachel held her gaze for a long time as if she wanted to say more, then looked away.

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As they finished their breakfast, Shay's phone announced a call from Hope. "Good morning," she answered cheerfully then frowned as she listened to Hope.

"Shay, are you with Rachel?"

"Yes, we just finished breakfast and are heading your way now."

"She should know her mother is here wanting to talk to her." Hope informed her.

"Ah, okay. I'll text you and let you know what she is going to do."

Shay disconnected the call and gave Rachel the information. Rachel inhaled deeply and pulled back her shoulders. "I must go face the dragon," the brunette muttered.

"I will be right beside you," Shay assured her.

Rachel placed her hand on top of Shay's. "Thank you for all your support. It means a lot to me."

Shay didn't move. She was surprised at the warmth, generated by the touch of Rachel's hand, that was spreading through her body.

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## CHAPTER 13

### Arresting Baird



Hope put on her headphones and watched her desktop monitor as the primary election results flashed across the bottom of the news program. Baird was leading by a large margin.

Her cellphone flashed, calling her attention to a text from Shay. “We are in the parking garage. Will be there soon.”

Hope removed her headset and prepared herself for the meeting between Rachel and her mother. She sent a quick

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text to Monty. She always felt safer when the lieutenant was present.

Janice Lancaster stood as her daughter entered the room. She briefly glanced at the beautiful woman beside her. “Darling, I’ve been waiting all morning for you. Baird insisted that I bring you to the campaign headquarters so you can be there when they announce that he has won the primary and will officially be running for governor.”

“Mother, it is good to see you,” Rachel hugged her mother then backed away from her to stand beside Shay before announcing, “I am not going to the campaign headquarters. I’m tired of this charade and I am going to divorce Baird.”

Janice Brighton staggered and grabbed the corner of the desk to keep from falling. Shay shoved a chair behind her and gently guided her into the seat. Rachel didn’t move; she was used to her mother’s theatrics.

Hope brought Janice a cup of water. She slowly sipped the water watching her daughter through squinted eyes. “Baird needs you at his side,” Janice insisted.

“Mrs. Brighton, I am Assistant District Attorney Shay Steel, the judge has issued a restraining order on Baird Lancaster. He cannot make any contact with your daughter.”

Janice clutched at her heart and sucked air as if she would faint. Rachel grabbed Shay’s arm. “She is okay. That is her signature move when things don’t go to suit her.”

Janice glared at her daughter. “Rachel, you know how important this is to Daddy and me.”

“Yes, it is more important than my life,” Rachel scoffed.

“Where is your lady’s restroom?” Janice asked Hope.

Hope gestured to a door on the far side of the room and Janice stomped toward it. When she returned, she was in a better mood and smiled at everyone.

“I’m sorry you had to witness our little family tête-à-tête. We don’t normally air our grievances in public.”

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“Are you believing that scoundrel Lancaster is killing it in the polls?” Ensley announced as she entered the library.

“Ens, this is Rachel’s mother Janice Brighton,” Hope made the introductions hoping to stop Ensley’s diatribe.

Ensley smiled at Janice, not sure if she should continue her critical discourse about Baird. She ambled toward Hope and leaned down to whisper in her ear. “What’s going on?”

“Rachel’s mother is trying to make her go to Baird’s campaign headquarters and stand at the podium with him when he accepts the party’s nomination for governor.”

Janice sat back down in her chair. “I’ll just wait here until you are ready to go,” she smiled.

“Mother, I’m not going with you.” Rachel huffed in exasperation.

“No, you will go with me,” Baird declared as he swaggered into the room.

“It’s getting crowded in here,” Ensley mumbled, slipping out her cellphone to record the scene.

Baird reached for Rachel’s arm, but Shay pushed his hand away. “I don’t think she wants to go with you.”

“Who asked you?” He snarled. “Whoever you are, this is none of your business.”

“How convenient is this?” Monty strode into the room carrying a manilla envelope. She slapped it against Baird’s chest. “Baird Lancaster I am serving you. This is a restraining order for you to stay away from Rachel Lancaster. If you try to talk to her or get within a thousand feet of her, authorities will arrest you and place you in jail. Do you understand?”

Baird pulled the order from the envelope, glanced at it, then threw it on the floor and stomped it. “Do you have any idea who I am?” He snarled as he got into Monty’s face.

In one quick move Monty twisted his arm behind his back, handcuffing it as she pulled his other arm behind him and snapped the cuffs closed on it. “You are the man I am

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arresting.” She motioned for two uniform officers to take the man to jail.

Janice began to wail as two uniformed officers hauled Baird away. “This is awful. How can you do this to your own husband?” She yelled at Rachel then ran from the room screaming, “Don’t worry Baird, I’m calling your father.”

“I got it all,” Ensley grinned as she previewed her video on her cellphone. “This is going to be great on my podcast. I’m going to produce it right now so it can air before the polls close. Do you all want to meet at the OKC Grill around eight?”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

“Monty, I’m so glad you showed up when you did,” Shay said.

“Hope sent me a text to come to the library,” Monty explained smiling at the petite brunette. “I’d better get back to the office. I’m sure all hell is breaking loose, and I’ll hear about it.” She picked up the restraining order by the corner noting that it had Baird’s shoe print in the middle of it. She carefully slid it back into the envelope. “His fingerprints on the order are as good as his signature,” she said.

Hope opened her lap drawer and pulled out the baggie containing Baird’s cigarette and crumbled Marlboro pack. “Do you need this cigarette Baird ground into my desk?”

“No, I have all I need to justify arresting him,” Monty replied as Hope dropped the baggie back into the drawer.

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## CHAPTER 14

### Meeting at the OKC Grill



Shay was the first to arrive at the OKC Grill. She claimed the five seats at the bar in front of the large-screen television where the five of them could talk without screaming over the other customers. Monty joined her.

“Where are the girls?” Shay asked.

“Hope just texted me. They are on their way.” She turned her attention to the large television on the wall. “I’ll be darn.”

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Shay followed Monty's gaze and watched as the nation's top cable news show began running Ensley's podcast of the fiasco in the library and followed it with the podcast of Baird and Kitty Ray in *The Stock and Bond*. They switched to a live interview with Ensley. The newswoman asked their friend about the restraining order.

"I honestly don't know the situation," Ensley replied. "You will have to contact Lieutenant Montgomery Masters for the details."

"Thanks for throwing me under the bus, Ensley," Monty mumbled into her drink.

"I guess they will be interviewing you next," Shay forecasted.

"No, that's the job of our public relations department. They will give their usual reply, no comment. At least I'll be off the hook."

Wolf whistles and offers of free drinks alerted them that Hope and Rachel had arrived. "Men can be so uncouth," Shay grumped as Hope slid onto the stool beside her.

"Oh, I don't know." Hope giggled. "It is kinda' flattering to know others notice you in a crowd." She cut her eyes toward Monty and wrinkled her nose.

Shay laughed. "You truly are cute, and you know it."

"Yes, I do," Hope grinned. "So, are you going to offer me a drink?"

A server placed Hope's favorite drink in front of her and she raised her brows questioningly. "I ordered it when you walked through the door," Monty explained.

"Why don't you trade places with me, Shay," Hope said sliding from her stool so Shay could leave her place beside Monty. Shay moved over and sat beside Rachel.

"This is where I want to be anyway," she said softly to Rachel.

The brunette slid her hand onto Shay's thigh igniting the fire that was smoldering in the blonde.



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"I hope the rest of your day was more pleasant than this morning," Shay said fighting the urge to lean over and kiss Rachel.

"It had to get better," Rachel admitted. Her cellphone rang and she let it go to voicemail. "My father. He is furious with me. He has left me several texts about how destitute he and mother will be because of me."

Shay placed her hand on top of Rachel's as it continued resting on her leg. "I am so sorry you are going through this."

"It is nice to have friends. The four of you make it easier. Where is Ensley?"

Shay gestured toward the television as Ensley's video began. Rachel clutched Shay's leg as she watched her drama playout on the evening news for the world to see.

"I'm betting a lot of voters are wishing they could get a do over about now," Shay forecasted.

"Ensley just texted," Hope announced. "She is on her way."

"Good, I am starving," Monty said. "Anyone want an appetizer while we wait for Ensley?"

"I'm in," Shay replied pulling the menu in front of them. "What would you like?"

"Stuffed mushrooms," Rachel said.

The TV scene switched to Baird's campaign headquarters where reporters were trying to grill him about the prostitute and the scene in the library. Ensley slid onto the last barstool. "It looks like I've opened a giant can of worms for the man who would be governor." She flashed a grin.

"You should be immensely pleased with yourself, Hope declared. "You have single handedly taken down the Lancaster crime family."

"It sounds ominous when you put it that way," Ensley replied. "After all, he is still walking around a free man."

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“His attorney got him out on bail around 4:30 p.m.” Monty volunteered. “He will probably win the primary and find some way to clear his name before the general election.”

They watched the news, dined, and drank more than they should have. “I hate to be a party pooper,” Monty said, “but I’ve got to be in a meeting with the captain at 7:00 a.m. tomorrow.”

“Wow! Why so early,” Hope slurred leaning heavily against the auburn-haired beauty.

“So, he can chew my rear off before the rest of the troops get to work.” Monty mumbled.

“I’m sorry,” Hope snuggled closer to her. “I shouldn’t have called you.”

“Nonsense don’t ever hesitate to call me when you are in danger. Speaking of danger, I don’t think you should be driving tonight. You are a little drunk.”

“I’m a lotta’ drunk.” Hope giggled. “You should drive me home.”

“Go ahead,” Rachel encouraged Monty, “Shay can drive me to your house.”

“You really do need to get your own car,” Hope suggested. “I know Baird has all your finances tied up, but we can help you get a lease car to use until all this mess settles down.”

“I will try to do that this weekend,” Rachel agreed. “I am so thankful to you for the job in the library.”

“You are just what I needed,” Hope declared. “As a certified public accountant, you are the perfect person for the finance manager of the library. The best part is you help shelve books after you finish your accounting duties. I’ve had two accountants before you and both informed me that shelving books was not in their job description.”

Monty laughed. “I’m sure that is why they no longer work for you.”

“You’ve got that right, babe,” Hope hugged Monty’s arm.

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Monty blushed and looked down. "I should get you home."

Ensley tossed back the rest of her drink and stood. "I'm off to put together tomorrow's podcast," she said, tossing more than enough cash onto the table to cover her share of the bill.

Shay and Rachel ordered coffee and stayed to watch the coverage of the primary until the newscasters called the contest for Baird.

##

Baird Lancaster motioned for his staff to follow him on stage as he made his acceptance speech and thanked everyone for all their hard work.

"Where is your wife?" a television cameraman yelled from the crowd and Baird ignored him.

"Who is Kitty Ray?" a news woman screamed.

Baird refused to acknowledge them and quickly left the stage. His campaign manager took over the microphone as Baird sneaked out the back door. He didn't want to talk to his father. He knew David was furious with him. Damn, that stupid podcast woman. He needed a good stiff drink and Kitty's mouth on him.

He touched his key fob to unlock his car door as a grip of iron wrapped around his bicep. "Where are you going?" David Lancaster asked his son.

"Home," Baird choked.

"That podcaster made a fool of you tonight," David noted. "What's this about Rachel getting a restraining order against you? Are you two separated? Where is she living?"

Baird slumped against the fender of his car. "I hit her, and she put a restraining order against me," he admitted. "She wants a divorce. I don't know where she is staying. She is working at the public library."

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“You know the video of you fondling that prostitute and having a row with The Stock and Bond owner will be all over the news and internet tomorrow along with the announcement of your primary victory. Couple that with the policewoman giving you the restraining order and you can kiss your political career goodbye. I don’t mind telling you that you are a total disappointment to me and your mother.”

“What do you want me to do?” Baird asked.

“Did you get rid of the prostitute?”

“Yes.” Baird lied.

“You must make things right with Rachel. She is the best thing you have going for you. You are such a fool. I don’t blame her for leaving you. If you ever lay a hand on her again, I will kill you myself. And for God’s sake stay away from that podcaster.” David turned on his heel and walked away.

Baird got into his Mercedes and drove to Kitty’s apartment. She greeted him with open arms and tolerated his rough lovemaking as he worked off the tensions and disappointments of the day.

“You’re going to be governor,” she told him as he lay panting beside her. “No one can stop you now.”

Baird grunted, to spent to talk. She walked to the kitchen and brought him back a bottle of cold water. He gulped it down then leaned back against the headboard of the bed.

“Dad says I must stop seeing you,” Baird mumbled.

“Why? What have I done?”

“You’re a known prostitute.”

“I haven’t been with anyone but you for the past three years,” Kitty reminded him. “Well, you and your friends you asked me to entertain.”

“I know, but before me you were with half a dozen of Dad’s friends. I must stay away from you, or he will refuse to finance my campaign. I don’t like it any more than you do.”

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Kitty was furious that he would dump her just because his old man told him to. “He won’t keep you warm on a cold night,” she screamed. “You will regret this.”

It was after midnight when he finished with Kitty.

## CHAPTER 15

### Her Name is Kitty Ray



Monty pulled the plastic sheet from the victim's face. "Jesus, her face looks like it has been run through a meat grinder," she exclaimed. "Do we know who she is?"

"I ran her fingerprints on the mobile biometrics scanner," Medical Examiner Patricia (Pattie) Chambers replied. "Her name is Kitty Ray."

Monty frowned as she shot a photo of Kitty's face with her iPhone. "Is she that prostitute involved with Baird Lancaster?"

"Yeah," Pattie affirmed. "The apartment super is in the other room. He said Baird pays her rent every month."

Monty shook her head. "Whatever Kitty Ray was, she didn't deserve to die like this."

"My money's on Baird," Pattie commented. "I'll run every fluid and print test I have. The bedroom is covered in semen and blood. There will be tons of evidence there. She

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has bruises developing on her upper arms. I'm betting money that Baird's fingerprints will be all over her."

"Can you give me a good guess at the time of death?" Monty asked.

"Between 2:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m. when her maid came to clean the apartment. The super said Baird buzzed in around 11:00 p.m., but he has no idea when he left."

"She had a maid?" Monty repeated.

"Yeah, the super said Baird took real good care of Kitty."

"Until he didn't," Monty grumbled. "Has the news media gotten hold of this yet?"

"No, we have the maid in an empty apartment the super let us use. I can hold her until you interview her if you want me to."

"I noticed cameras in the hallway. Do they work?"

"No, the super said Baird disconnected them." Pattie said.

"Of course he did." Monty flipped her notebook closed. "I'm going to have Sergeant Bobby Randle take over the case. I'm too close to it. I've had Baird's wife in protective custody since he beat her so badly she ended up in the hospital."

"I noticed she wasn't on the stage with him last night when he announced his win in the primaries." Pattie motioned for her assistant to remove Kitty's body. "I'll give you a call and fax over my findings as soon as possible."

"Do everything you can to keep this out of the news cycle until we arrest Baird," Monty requested. "I'm positive you will have his semen. Right now, that is all I need."

##

Monty rapped her knuckles on the open door of Shay Steel's office. "Gotta minute?"

Shay grinned. "For you, always."

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Monty closed the door behind her and slumped down in the chair across from Shay. "Someone brutally murdered Baird Lancaster's girlfriend last night."

"Kitty Ray?" Shay raised a perfectly arched brow.

"Yep. I just sent you a photo I took at the crime scene."

"Jesus, this is horrific! Please tell me Baird did it?" Shay pleaded.

"It looks that way. I won't know until I get Pattie Chambers' final report. I've turned the case over to Sergeant Bobby Randle. He will pick up Baird for questioning as a person of interest."

"Does Rachel know?"

"Not yet. I'll go to the library when I leave here. I wanted to give you a heads up first."

"I appreciate that. May I accompany you to the library?" Shay asked.

"Sure. Why don't we pick up Hope and Rachel and go to lunch? I haven't even had a cup of coffee today."

Shay nodded then advised her secretary that she was going to lunch, while Monty called Hope.

##

Monty pulled her sedan to the curb in front of the library. Hope and Rachel hopped into the car laughing and talking.

"What's so funny?" Monty asked as Hope settled into the front passenger's seat and Shay moved to the back with Rachel.

"Ensley just called and said the police are looking for Baird," Hope announced.

Shay laced her fingers through Rachel's and pulled her hand into her lap. "I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"Is it true?" Rachel gasped. "What did he do?"



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“According to Ensley, his favorite pastime with women,” Hope answered. “Only this time it got out of hand and Kitty Ray is dead.”

“How did Ensley find out about it?” Monty scowled. “We are supposed to be keeping it quiet until we have Baird in custody.”

“She has spies in all branches of the government,” Hope proclaimed. “She is well connected.”

“Um, that isn’t what I wanted to hear,” Monty mumbled.

“Are you working the case?” Hope asked.

“Are you one of Ensley’s spies?” Monty countered.

Hope wrinkled her nose in that maddening, but loveable way and shrugged. “I would never share information you gave me. You know that.”

Monty nodded. “I know. This case is making me paranoid. Ensley is always one step ahead of us.”

“She does hate Baird.” Rachel agreed.

“Everyone who knows Baird well, hates him,” Shay defended their friend.

“Anyway, she is joining us at the restaurant,” Hope announced.

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## CHAPTER 16

### A Real Forensic Soup



Ensley was already in the restaurant when they arrived. She waved for Hope to sit beside her. “I have news for you,” she whispered pulling her cellphone from her pocket.

She waited until the other women gathered around so they could see her video, then pushed play. The scene showed Baird at a luncheon with city leaders when Sergeant Bobby Randle and four officers handcuffed him and led him from the restaurant.

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The next video began with the officers taking Baird into the police station. Ensley entered the precinct and asked the desk sergeant why Baird had been arrested.

"He is a person of interest in an ongoing investigation," the officer replied.

"What investigation?" Ensley asked.

"I can't tell you."

"Please," Ensley wheedled. "It would mean a lot to me."

"You need to leave before you get into trouble," the officer warned. "You will get no more information from me."

Ensley turned off the video. "That's what I'm going to run on my podcast this afternoon," Ensley informed them.

"Would it do me any good to ask you to hold off until tomorrow to run that?" Monty urged.

"Why?" Ensley frowned. "It is a great scoop."

"He is a person of interest right now, but we won't have all the forensics back until in the morning and we'd like to keep it out of the news until we have something concrete to charge him."

"What is he suspected of?" Ensley coaxed.

"I can't say right now," Monty said.

"Then I can't promise to hold this."

"Ensley, I'm asking as a friend," Monty emphasized. "A good friend. If we can't get enough evidence to hold him, and you put this on your podcast, I will be worried about you. He might come after you."

"Or he might sue the police department," Ensley added.

"No, we aren't releasing any information."

Ensley's phone rang. She answered it and listened as her caller talked for a minute. "Okay, I'm on my way. Thanks for the information."

"Hope, I must run. Can we have dinner tonight after my podcast?"

"I already have plans tonight," Hope replied.

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Ensley waved bye to them and hurried from the restaurant.

“Um, what are your plans for tonight?” Monty inquired.

“Didn’t you say you were taking me out to dinner?” Hope grinned.

“Yeah, I did.” Monty laughed.

“Okay, tell us what is going on?” Hope demanded.

Monty and Shay quietly discussed the case with the two women that were becoming important in their lives.

“Wow!” Hope breathed as they finished. “Poor Kitty. Just think Rachel that could have been you.”

“That’s why I’ve been hiding from him,” Rachel replied. “He has a vicious temper.”

Monty’s phone announced, “Bobby calling.”

“Give me some good news, Bobby.”

“Boss, Pattie just faxed me the forensic report. Baird’s semen, saliva, and blood are all over the apartment. Kitty put up one hell of a fight.”

“We’ve got him,” Monty exclaimed.

“Not exactly. There is also semen and fingerprints from two other men—a real forensic soup. We need to cut him loose until we build a solid case against him.”

“Jeeze, what a mess. I’m with ADA Steel,” Monty explained. “Let me discuss this with her. I’ll call you back.”

Monty ended her call then explained the situation. “We have copious amounts of semen, blood, and saliva at the scene along with fingerprints. The problem is it belongs to three different men including Baird.”

Rachel gripped Shay’s hand as the ADA began to talk. “I don’t want to file a case against Baird unless I’m certain I can win it,” Shay admitted. “We need to question the other two men involved. Do we know who they are?”

“Not yet. Pattie is working on it.”

“Are you on the case?” Shay asked.

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“No, I excused myself because Rachel is staying at my home.” Monty explained. “Something you might want to think about.”

Shay nodded and released Rachel’s hand.

##

“I will pick you up at 7:00 p.m.” Monty said as she pulled her vehicle into the parking garage under the library.

“I’m looking forward to our first date,” Hope admitted.

“I’ll call you,” Shay whispered to Rachel.

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## CHAPTER 17

### But Not Tonight



Rachel hoped Shay wouldn't stop seeing her. The ADA's lovely face often flashed through her mind. She smiled as she recalled Shay's dimples when she smiled, and the innocent way she hung her head and blushed before looking up at her through long lashes.

She was working on the library's financials when Shay's face popped onto the screen of her cellphone. "You have perfect timing," she said into the phone. "I was just

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about to take a break from the numbers dancing before my eyes.”

“It is good to know I saved you,” Shay bantered. “I thought you might like a homecooked meal tonight while Monty and Hope are on their date. I cook a great lasagna, and I have an ulterior motive for inviting you to my apartment.”

Rachel was surprised at the heat wave that swept her body at the thought of Shay’s ulterior motive. “It depends on your motive,” she replied.

“This weekend I am going to go house hunting, and I’d really like your help. I’m not familiar with OKC and need your advice on what part of town is the most desirable. I’ve been searching homes for sale on the internet and I don’t know where to start.”

“I would love to have dinner at your place and will be happy to give you my thoughts on housing.”

“I will pick you up from the library. What time?”

“Hope is leaving early, so I need to help her new assistant close tonight,” Rachel thought out loud. “Is 7:00 p.m. too late?”

“That is perfect. Do you have a favorite wine?”

“Surprise me.” Rachel giggled.

##

Rachel rode the elevator to the parking garage and was delighted to see Shay’s red Tesla parked in the space beside the lift. She opened the door and slid into Shay’s car.

“Hi,” Shay greeted her.

“I’m glad you called,” Rachel blurted. “I don’t want to stop seeing you.”

“The feeling is mutual,” Shay admitted pulling Rachel’s hand onto her leg.

“What time does Ensley’s podcast air?” Rachel asked.

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“It comes on at 8:00 p.m. I put the lasagna in the oven when I left to pick you up, so it will be cooked by the time we reach the apartment. Salad is ready so all I must do is pop the bread into the oven. We can be in front of the TV by the time the podcast begins.”

“Sounds like a plan. Now, tell me what you are looking for in a home.”

“Something with a lot of privacy. A couple of acres with security walls. I have a Blue Heeler named Bo, so I need space for him to run.”

“Where is he now?” Rachel asked.

“With a friend. I’d like the house to be relatively new and move in ready. One story. I think two story houses are spooky.”

Rachel laughed. “Don’t tell me our fearless ADA is afraid of the dark.”

“I’m not afraid of the dark, I just like everything on one level. You know, if you are downstairs and you hear something dragging across the floor above you, you are at a great disadvantage.”

“Why?”

“If someone is upstairs and you have no idea who it is or what they want, you have two choices: conceal yourself at the bottom of the stairs so you can take them by surprise when they come down the stairs or slowly walk up the stairs where they can jump out and shoot you.”

“I will never feel the same about a two-story house again.” Rachel shuddered.

Shay pulled her vehicle into the two-car garage of OKC’s most coveted apartment complexes. “This is nice,” Rachel noted. “Let me guess we are right beside your ground floor one-story apartment.”

Shay laughed. “Give the lady a Kewpie doll.”

##



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Rachel followed Shay into the kitchen of the apartment. “This is beautiful,” she exclaimed as she scooted onto a stool at the island and slid her hand over the countertop. “I love quartz.”

“I’d like something like this kitchen in my new home. I love cooking. It helps me relax.”

Rachel placed her hand over her heart, “I swear Ms. Steel, you have just won my heart.”

*I wish*, Shay thought. “If you and your heart will uncork the wine and pour it, I will take the lasagna from the oven to the table.”

“It smells wonderful,” Rachel proclaimed as Shay placed the Italian dish on the trivet in the center of the table and returned to the oven for the bread.

“What is your favorite salad dressing?” Shay asked opening the refrigerator to pull out the salads.

“Do you have raspberry vinegarette?”

“My favorite,” Shay answered.

##

They finished dinner in time to refill their wine glasses and relax on the sofa in front of the television. Shay clicked on Ensley’s podcast.

The podcaster showed the video of Baird fondling Kitty in The Stock and Bond restaurant followed with the scene of uniformed police officers escorting him from a luncheon with his cronies.

A nauseating photo of a woman’s pulverized face filled the screen of the podcast accompanied by Ensley’s voice. “This is the face of a woman found brutalized and murdered this morning. Police have identified her as this woman, a gorgeous photo of Kitty filled the screen, a known companion of Baird Lancaster.”

Rachel gasped loudly as Kitty’s face stayed on the screen and Ensley informed her viewers that Baird had been

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taken to police headquarters for questioning and was a person of interest in Kitty's death.

Rachel hid her face in Shay's shoulder as the blonde put her arms around her. "I am so sorry," Shay muttered. "We asked her not to run this until tomorrow."

"How did she get that murder scene photo?" Rachel sobbed. "Who had access to that?"

"I'm not sure. I know Monty took that photo because she sent it to me."

"I'm sure she sent it to Hope too," Rachel sniffed. "The three of you share everything. Hope isn't even in law enforcement."

"Then the photo had to come from one of us," Shay mumbled. "One of us sent it to Ensley, but why? Monty nor I would jeopardize our court case against Baird."

"That only leaves Hope," Rachel cried.

"Hope wouldn't do that."

"Did you?" Rachel demanded.

"What? No, I would never do anything that would compromise his conviction. I want to see him spend his life behind bars for what he did to you."

Rachel turned her face up to Shay.

"Oh, God, Rachel," Shay uttered as her lips softly touched the brunette's.

Rachel couldn't stop herself from responding. Shay's lips were as soft and silky as she had dreamed they were. She savored their sweetness like a woman starving for a cool drink of water. She didn't know when she straddled Shay, she only knew she wanted to feel those lips all over her body.

"You taste so good," Shay whispered as she ran her hands up and down Rachel's back, kissing her passionately as she pulled her against her body. "I knew you would."

Shay unbuttoned Rachel's blouse as she kissed her way down the brunette's neck and sucked gently on the pulse point in the hollow of her neck. Rachel moaned and Shay

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kissed the top of her breast as she slid the blouse from Rachel's arms onto the sofa.

"You have no idea how much I want you," Shay whispered in her ear as she caressed Rachel's full breast. The things I want to do..."

"Monty calling," blared from Shay's phone.

"Arrrgggg," Shay growled as Rachel slid from her lap onto the sofa. "Monty, what's up?"

"Have you seen Ensley's podcast?"

Shay fought to catch her breath. "Yeah."

"Where the hell did she get the photo of Kitty's mutilated face?"

"I have no idea. Did you send it to Hope?"

Monty's silence answered the question. "You did, didn't you?" Shay accused.

"Yes, but Hope didn't forward it to Ensley. She is with me, and she is as shocked as I am to see it on the podcast. Did you send it to Rachel?"

"No Rachel has no copy of it. She was horrified when it came on the podcast screen."

"Look, Hope is pretty shaken and wants to stay with me tonight. Can Rachel stay at your place?"

"Yes, I have a guest bedroom. Drop by my office around 9:00 a.m. tomorrow. We need to lay out a plan."

"I'll be there."

Rachel retrieved her blouse from the floor and slipped it on. "I'm sorry, I don't know what came over me. I should not have kissed you like that."

"And I fought you off so valiantly." Shay grinned.

Both women laughed at Shay's comment. "Do you feel okay about me spending the night in your guestroom?"

"Of course, but we do need to discuss this attraction between us. I thought my feelings for you were one sided and nothing would ever come of my crush on you, since you are straight. Now I'm forced to reassess our friendship."

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Rachel looked down at her hands then slowly raised her gaze to stare into Shay's hypnotizing blue eyes. "I am afraid I have developed feelings for you. I've never been involved with a woman and am not normally attracted to women. There is something different about you."

Shay nodded. "Rachel, I want to try any case that is brought against Baird. I want him to spend the rest of his miserable life servicing the worst of the worst in prison."

"We share a common goal," Rachel admitted. "Kitty's face—I can't get it out of my mind. How can one human do something like that to another?"

"You've been on the receiving end of Baird's fists," Shay reminded her. "Is he capable of beating a woman to death?"

"Yes," Rachel whispered.

"For the time being we must put aside our feelings for each other. If we were lovers, I would have to excuse myself from the case." Shay sighed. "We shouldn't be alone together until this is all settled."

"So, you are thinking we will become lovers?" Rachel whispered.

Shay exhaled, "Yes, but not tonight."

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## CHAPTER 18

### Brutus Leviticus



“You aren’t going to like this,” Monty charged into Shay’s office.

“Good morning to you too,” Shay smiled.

“So far there is nothing good about it,” Monty grumbled. “We have identified semen, blood and fingerprints from Baird, and one of his goons, but the third man is not in any of our data banks.”

“And you know the defense attorney will use that as reasonable doubt that Baird is the killer. Have you brought

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in the man we can identify? Maybe he can give us information on his friend.”

“Yeah, uniforms are picking him up as we speak. Do you want to watch when he is interviewed?”

“Wild horses couldn’t keep me away,” Shay declared pulling on her blazer to cover her sidearm.

“I do have something that might help you,” Monty pulled an envelope of photos from her jacket pocket and spread them across Shay’s desk. “This row is photos of Baird’s knuckles and the back of his hand. The other row is Baird’s henchman. Both men have abrasions on their knuckles from hitting something hard. I’m sure Pattie can match them with Kitty’s face when the swelling goes down.

“Pattie is phenomenal. We are lucky to have her. She made casts of our two suspect’s knuckles. If the knuckles fit the indentations in Kitty’s face, we have more evidence against them.”

“That is impressive,” Shay followed the lieutenant out the door and locked it behind her.

##

Shay observed the gorilla on the other side of the glass as Bobby interviewed him. “He looks like a caveman,” she commented. “He must be seven feet tall.”

“His name is Brutus Leviticus. Everyone calls him Brute. He is a big dude and stupid as a stick,” Monty said. “He is more animal than human, and he has a rap sheet a mile long for assault and murder. Baird always produces an alibi for him, so we’ve never been able to lock him up.”

They watched Bobby spread Kitty’s photos across the table in front of him. Brute scowled and pushed the pictures away from him. “I don’t beat women,” he growled.

“She has your fluids and fingerprints all over her,” Bobby insisted. “You’re going down for this one, Brutus.”

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“Give me a polygraph test. You’ll see I didn’t kill that woman. We just had a good time. She was alive and thanking me when I left.” His lecherous grin exposed uneven, broken teeth.

“How do you know her?” Bobby asked.

“She’s a prostitute. Everyone knows her.”

“We were told she was Baird Lancaster’s woman.” Bobby continued. “Why would she fool around with an ugly caveman like you?”

“Baird let me use her once in a while to thank me for a job well done.”

“He isn’t going to be happy when he finds out you beat her to death,” Bobby grinned. “Yeah, you are going down for this one. We’ve got your DNA, blood, semen, and fingerprints at the scene of the crime.”

“I told you I didn’t kill her,” Brute howled. “Give me a lie detector test.”

“Naw, we won’t waste our time or money. We have all the proof we need. The good news is you will get to select how you die: lethal injection, electric chair, or a firing squad,” Bobby began to dance around the room gleefully. “I think you should choose the firing squad. That’s so manly. More manly than beating a defenseless woman to death.”

Brute tried to stand but was shackled to the iron table. He roared like a demon and cursed Bobby.

“Just think you will help us catch up with Texas for the most executions in the U.S.” Bobby continued to taunt the giant. “We have a new assistant district attorney, and she hates lady killers. You are going to fry. I can hear you sizzling now.”

Brute twisted and yanked but the chains held. “I’ll kill you,” he screamed.

“You won’t kill me,” Bobby snorted. “You only beat helpless women to death.”

“She was alive when I left,” Brute yelled. “Ask Baird, he was in the apartment when I left.”

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“Really!” Bobby said softly. “It’s just your word against his. No one will believe you over Baird Lancaster.”

“Look on my cellphone,” Brute calmed down. “There is a photo of Kitty standing in the doorway of her apartment waving bye to me. Baird is behind her.”

“He *is* dumber than a stick. He just gave us Baird,” Shay whispered.

Bobby left the interrogation room and joined them in the observation room. “We got him boss,” he declared. “I’m going to personally arrest Baird.”

“Get Brute’s cellphone from evidence,” Monty directed, “then meet us in my office. We need to make certain that photo is on the phone.”

Shay couldn’t hide her excitement. Although she had only been in OKC a short time, she felt a bond with the four women who shared the common goal of putting Baird Lancaster behind bars.

“I wish Ensley hadn’t posted her podcast, giving Baird a heads up on this investigation,” Monty said. “If we are going to collaborate with her, she has to honor our requests.”

“The truth is, one of us sent her those photos,” Shay said. “We are the only ones who have access to them.”

Monty nodded and pushed aside the thought that whoever was feeding Ensley confidential information was definitely after Baird.



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## CHAPTER 19

### How Did We Miss That?



Jane licked her lips. She relished the sweet tang of success. She had to be careful—dot her I's and cross her T's. The evidence against Baird had to be iron clad. She had followed the unscrupulous politician all his adult life. Watching him, waiting for him to make the mistake that would put him in the penitentiary forever. She wanted to destroy his life the way he had destroyed hers.

She thought about how lucky she was to be included in the Fantastic Five. Five women who shared her desire to see

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Baird Lancaster rot in a jail cell. Women who had a strong sense of right and wrong. She wondered if they would approve of the things she had done to derail Baird's life. Their driving motive was justice. Her purpose in life was utter and complete revenge. The suffering of Baird Lancaster was her sole objective.

She touched her soft, smooth face. She had to admit the surgeons had made her incredibly beautiful. Before Baird she had been pretty. Because of him she was now magnificent. A look that served her well in everything she did. It was amazing how gleefully others welcomed her into their circles. It was true, doors easily opened for a beautiful woman. She was glad her outside didn't mirror the darkness in her soul.

##

Monty pulled together all the information she had on the death of Kitty Ray. It haunted her that they had not been able to identify the owner of the third set of fingerprints and the semen. Baird Lancaster's and Brutus Leviticus' DNA was all over the apartment and Kitty. Brutus' cellphone picture with a time stamp showed Kitty still alive when he left. A street camera had picked up his auto three minutes away from Kitty's. Baird had to be the killer.

She slipped the file into a large envelope and walked next door to Shay Steel's office.

##

Shay looked up from her computer screen as Monty entered her office. "To what do I owe the pleasure?" she grinned.

"I wanted to make certain you have all the paperwork related to the Baird Lancaster case," Monty replied. "I'm about to issue a warrant for his arrest and I don't want to eat it." She slid the envelope across Shay's desk.

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“Thank you, I appreciate your attention to detail. Like you, I don’t want to walk away from my first big OKC case with egg all over my face.”

She read the autopsy report for the umpteenth time. Something was niggling at the back of her mind. Suddenly it popped front and center.

“Only the fluids from the third rapist were found in the anus,” she mumbled.

“What?” Monty charged around the desk and read the report over Shay’s shoulder. “I can’t believe I missed that!”

Shay sighed loudly. “We must be careful. We want to convict Baird so badly; we are seeing evidence where there isn’t any, and missing evidence that exonerates him. I can’t believe I missed this.”

“She died between 2:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m.,” Shay read. “We have Baird’s car on the street cams around Kitty’s apartment after midnight. Which means he left her apartment before 2:00 a.m. Monty, the unidentified prints and DNA are from Kitty’s killer. Neither Baird nor Brutus killed her.”

Monty slumped into the chair across the desk from Shay. “I’m not believing this. I don’t know how he did it, but I know Baird killed her.”

Shay closed the file folder. “Let’s visit the crime scene again. We’re missing something.”

Monty nodded. “My car is out front.”

##

“Most ADAs don’t get so involved in the cases,” Monty noted as she pulled her car into the parking space in front of Kitty’s apartment. Yellow police tape was still stretched across the door.

“I’m not your average ADA,” Shay assured her.

“You certainly are not. Why did you select this field?”

“I want to make America safe,” Shay said. “I want college students to be able to walk down a street without fear

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of being molested. I want to take criminals off the streets, so children don't have to know what a pedophile is."

"The same reason I became a law enforcement officer" Monty said. "I'll call the super to let us in. Do you remember his name?"

"Josh Moore," Shay replied. "Who ran the background check on him?"

"One of the detectives. I'll pull it when I get back to the office. Darn, I don't have Moore on my list of contacts."

"He's on the second level," Shay recalled. "We can run up the stairs and get a key."

##

Moore opened his door and greeted the two women. "This must be my lucky day." He smiled as he fished in his pockets for his ring of keys. "I am rarely visited by *two* beautiful women." He led them downstairs and unlocked Kitty's apartment. "Just flip on the lock and pull the door closed when you finish. Make sure the door is locked. Can you give me some idea when you will release the room? I need to have it cleaned and sterilized so I can lease it."

"A couple more days," Monty answered him and followed Shay.

"I'll be in my apartment if you need me," Josh yelled as they closed the door.

"The smell of blood is still in the air," Shay noted. "We should release this place as soon as possible. The stench will only get worse."

"All the action took place in the bedroom," Monty pointed out. "The living room and kitchen are spotless, but Kitty put up one hell of a fight in the boudoir."

"There were no fingerprints on the doorknob leading out of the apartment," Shay read the forensic report. "They were wiped clean, proving that someone was here after Brutus and

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Baird. They wouldn't wipe a doorknob and leave the mess in the bedroom."

"Nothing like turning up evidence that disproves our killer," Monty grumbled.

"Yeah, but his attorneys will get a complete copy of this report, and they will go over it with a fine-tooth comb. They will find the same inconsistencies we are finding."

They walked into the bedroom and coughed as the odor overcame them. Shay closed her eyes and threw back her head to keep from vomiting. When she opened her eyes, it took her a few minutes to focus on the spot on the ceiling. She walked into the bathroom and glanced at the ceiling then walked out of the apartment sucking in the fresh air outside the building. Monty followed her.

"Did you see it?" She asked Monty.

"Yeah, I can't believe we missed it."

They ran up the stairs and knocked on Josh's door. When he opened it, Monty handcuffed him. "Josh Moore you are under arrest for the murder of Kitty Ray..." She continued to Mirandize Josh as she watched Shay pull back the corner of the area rug covering a peephole into Kitty's bedroom.

Shay hurried into Josh's bathroom and moved a small trash can revealing another peephole.

Monty checked Josh's hands for signs of scrapes or cuts. There were none. She called the ME. "Pattie, I need a forensic team to meet me at Kitty Ray's apartment. We have the killer, but I need you to give me all the info you can from the room above Kitty's apartment. We will wait for you."

"What's going on?" Josh asked. "Are you accusing me of murdering Kitty?"

"Yes," Monty replied.

"No way," Josh exclaimed. "I loved her. I'd never hurt her."

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“Did she love you, Josh or was it a one-sided thing?” Shay asked. “Did you live out your fantasies watching through your secret peepholes in the floor?”

“Watching the things other men did to her?” Monty joined the taunting. “Things she would never let you do.”

“No, no, you have it all wrong. She loved me.”

“It must have been hell watching two other men in her bed.” Monty smirked. “That had to drive you crazy.”

“It’s easy to understand how your jealousy could get the best of you, and you molested her,” Shay added.

“No, I didn’t touch her. I swear. I loved her.”

“Come on,” Monty commanded grabbing Josh’s key ring and pushing him toward the door. “Pattie is here. We need to get out of her way. Shay, please show her what we discovered then join me at the car.”

Monty put Josh in the back seat of her car, locked the door, and waved Pattie toward her.

“Pattie, we believe the super killed Kitty Ray,” Monty informed her. “Shay will show you his peepholes. Turn this place upside down. Check his tool shed, the pool pump house, any place he might hide something that will link him to her murder. I’ve got him cuffed and, in the car, if you want to get a DNA swab. We’re taking him in for questioning. I need anything you find ASAP.” She handed Josh’s keys to Pattie.

Monty unlocked her car and opened the door. “I need to get a swab from you,” Pattie said to Josh.

“Nope, I’m not opening my mouth, and I want a lawyer.”

Pattie slammed the door. “Don’t worry, I’ll find something in his apartment to pull a DNA sample from.”

## CHAPTER 20

### New Evidence Assures Conviction



“Put him in a holding cell,” Monty instructed the desk sergeant. “We’re going for a cup of coffee.”

The sergeant nodded and took Josh’s arm.

“Coffee sounds great,” Shay said.

“Let’s go to that little café down the block. It has good coffee and great burgers.”

Shay nodded and followed the lieutenant from the precinct. “It’s a good thing we didn’t arrest Lancaster,” Shay

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commented as they walked. “We’d be sued and fired all in one day.”

“Yeah,” Monty grunted. “I don’t know how we missed the unknown DNA being anal. I think I’m too close to this case.”

“Nonsense, everyone is horrified by the brutality of Kitty’s murder. We wanted Baird to be the killer and overlooked evidence that proved otherwise. I did the same thing. Why do you dislike Baird so much?”

“He’s an arrogant bastard,” Monty noted. “He has no respect for anything. I want to vomit every time I think about him being governor of our state. His old man has bribed more people than you can imagine.”

“Why did Rachel ever marry him?” Shay asked. “I mean she is such a straight shooter. I can’t see her with Baird.”

“Her parents put a lot of pressure on her. Hope knows more about her story than I do. Ask her.”

“Are you and Hope an item?” Shay asked.

“Not really. I finally got up the nerve to take her on a dinner date, but that’s all.”

They ordered coffee and a burger at the counter then found a table away from others. “Tell me about Ensley?” Shay asked.

“She came on the scene about ten years ago. She has a nice setup in her home where she produces her podcasts. She rarely does anything live. She records her podcasts then polishes them for her viewing audience. She rivals the news stations when it comes to uncovering great news stories and interviewing celebrities and people of interest.”

“She seems to dislike Baird.” Shay noted.

“I don’t think she has ever met him. She just knows how he treats Rachel.”

“She kicked the hornet’s nest when she ran the photo of Kitty’s mangled face along with the chaotic scene with the owner of The Stock and Bond.” Shay recalled.



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“Yeah, I have patrol cars drive by her place hourly to make certain no one bothers her. Again, Hope knows more about her than I do. Ensley practically lives at the library doing research.”

*That’s her excuse, Shay thought. I’ve seen the way she looks at Hope.*

Monty’s phone rang. “Pattie, what do you have for me? You are an angel. I knew you would come through. We’re heading your way now. Yes, the new ADA is with me.” Monty laughed. “Yes, she is.”

“Yes, she is what?” Shay asked as they left the café.

“Beautiful.” Monty grinned.

##

Pattie was waiting in Monty’s office when they returned to the precinct. “Must be nice to have a lunch break,” she teased as the two entered the room.

“We were killing time while we waited on you,” Monty replied. “Does the DNA match?”

Pattie handed her two sheets of paper. One had *Removed from the anus of Kitty Ray* across the top, the other said *Removed from soiled underwear of Josh Moore*. They were a perfect match.

“It looks like your first major murder case will be a slam dunk,” Monty said handing the sheets to Shay. “Unfortunately, it won’t be Baird Lancaster.”

“The killer is definitely Josh Moore,” Pattie added. “We found a pair of leather gloves hidden in his tool shed. They are covered with Kitty’s blood and facial skin and only Josh’s DNA is on the inside of them.” She handed the evidence bag containing the gloves to Monty.

“Do you want to watch?” Monty asked Shay.

Shay nodded and followed her from the room. “May I join you,” Pattie asked.

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“Sure,” Monty replied as she waved for Bobby to join her in the interrogation room.

##

Shay and Pattie watched as Monty and Bobby joined Josh. Bobby turned on the recorder.

“Josh, we have indisputable proof that you repeatedly slammed your fist into Kitty Ray’s face and sodomized her in her bedroom apartment,” Monty said.

“I didn’t kill her. I loved her,” Josh wailed. “Baird and Brute killed her. They took turns...”

Monty slid the DNA sheets onto the table. “No, they didn’t! Your semen was the only fluid found in her anus.”

“I admit we made love and indulged in anal sex,” Josh agreed, “but I didn’t kill her.”

“Yes, you did,” Monty slammed the blood covered leather gloves onto the table. Recognize these?”

Josh burst into tears. “She knew I was in love with her,” he cried, “but she wouldn’t have anything to do with me. She said I was just a super, and she had her sights set higher. I took it as long as I could. After watching Baird and his buddy use her, I couldn’t stop myself. I had to have her, but she fought. She was a whore, but I wasn’t good enough for her.”

“So, you sodomized her then beat her to death,” Monty clarified.

“Yes! I did that to her, but I didn’t kill her,” Josh screamed. “I want a lawyer.”

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## CHAPTER 21

### I Will Protect You



“Let’s get the girls together for dinner tonight,” Shay suggested. “It’s been a hell of a week. We deserve a delicious meal with great company.”

“I understand you make a great lasagna,” Monty said.

“I do, but I’m not in the mood to cook. I want to go somewhere and let someone wait on me while I drink a bottle of wine to put this day out of my mind.”

“You have the best ideas,” Monty agreed. “I’ll call Hope and Rachel. You call Ensley.”

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“Ensley is probably at the library,” Shay said.

As predicted one call reached all three women. “I am so glad you called,” Hope enthused. “Rachel and Ensley are here. I’ll make certain they join us.”

##

Shay dried her blonde hair and let it fall loosely across her shoulders. It seemed like days since she had seen Rachel, and she wanted to hold the brunette’s attention. She decided to dress casually sexy. She traded her usual business suit for a pair of pale-blue jeans and a pink button-down shirt. She rolled up the three-quarter sleeves, pulled on her mid-calf boots and wondered if she looked too butch. A glance in the full-length mirror told her she looked good enough to eat. She tamped down her thoughts, *If only I should get so lucky tonight*. Just to increase her chances, she spritzed perfume on the front of her shirt.

She slid her gun into her purse, hung the strap from her shoulder and hurried to her car. She didn’t want to make an entrance, she wanted to watch Rachel walk toward her.

##

Ensley was sitting alone at a table for six when Shay joined her. “I hear you are charging Josh Moore in the murder of Kitty Ray,” Ensley blurted as soon as Shay joined her.

“Hello to you too, Ensley,” Shay smirked.

“Is it true?”

“Where did you get the information?” Shay asked waving the waitress over to order a drink. She ordered a cocktail for herself and a glass of Rachel’s favorite wine.

“I haven’t received anything from Monty,” Shay said. “You will have to ask her if she has enough evidence to convict Moore.”

Ensley nodded.

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“How has your week been?” Shay turned to polite conversation.

“Slow news week, but good from a personal relationship standpoint.”

Shay raised a questioning eyebrow. “Oh, do share. Who’s the lucky lady?”

Ensley looked around to make certain no one was close enough to overhear their conversation. “Hope.” She grinned.

“Hope Ford? I thought she was...” Shay let her statement die on her lips.

“What?” Ensley asked. “Is she dating anyone else?”

“How would I know. I’m not her keeper.” A smile crossed Shay’s face as Rachel walked toward them. *God, she’s beautiful.* Shay stood and pulled out the chair next to her own. “I took the liberty of ordering your favorite wine. I hope it’s okay.”

Rachel’s eyes sparkled as she hugged Shay. “You may take any liberty you want,” she whispered in her ear.

Shay jerked as Rachel’s warm breath caressed her ear and fire shot through her. She swallowed and sat down beside Rachel. “How was your day?”

“Good, I filed for a divorce yesterday. They should have served Baird today.”

“Monty needs to give you police protection,” Shay declared.

“That would thrill the taxpayers,” Rachel joked. “Baird’s ratings are already in the gutter. The party is talking about dropping him from the ticket for governor.”

“Couldn’t happen to a nicer guy,” Shay held up her glass to toast and Rachel clinked her wine glass against it.

“What made you file yesterday?” Shay asked.

“I figured it was safe since Monty was going to arrest him for the murder of Kitty Ray.”

“No,” Shay whispered. “Josh Moore, the super of her apartments killed her.”

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Rachel shook her head in disbelief. "Please tell me you are teasing me."

"I'm not."

"I think I'm going to be sick," Rachel mumbled. "I must call Liv Dixon and stop her."

"You hired Liv Dixon?"

"Yes, she is the best divorce lawyer in the state."

They stopped talking when they realized that Ensley was intently listening.

"Excuse me," Rachel said leaving the table and hurrying to the lady's room.

"She's divorcing Lancaster?" Ensley asked. "And you *did* arrest Josh Moore for the murder of Kitty Ray. My day just got better. I mean sunshine and skittles better."

"Ensley, please don't air the information. Baird will try to harm Rachel."

"Why wouldn't you share the information about Josh Moore with me when I asked?"

"Because I don't trust you," Shay answered honestly. "You've released privileged information in the past when we have asked you to hold it for a day."

"It's my job," Ensley defended her actions, "and I didn't release information from the fantastic five. I released information I received from an anonymous source."

"And you don't care who gets hurt."

Ensley grinned. "You are gorgeous when you are angry. I promise I won't release anything about the divorce, but there is no harm in letting the public know the police have made an arrest in Kitty's death."

"Discuss it with Monty." Shay suggested. "Get her permission to release it. I'm going to see about Rachel."

##

A woman was washing her hands when Shay entered the lady's room. Shay greeted the woman and washed her

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own hands. “The only thing bad about the fruity drinks is the way they stick to you when you slosh them over.” She smiled at the woman.

“I know,” the woman answered as she left the room. “Have a good evening.”

“Rachel, are you in here?” Shay called out.

A stall door opened, and Rachel’s tear-stained face peeked out. “I’m on the phone to Liv.”

Shay nodded. “I’ll wait outside.”

“Please stay,” Rachel said. “Liv, hello. I have a serious problem. I just found out the police have charged Kitty Ray’s apartment superintendent with her murder and will not be charging Baird.”

Shay saw tears well up in Rachel’s eyes. “You’ve already served him. There’s no way to stop it? No, no, that is okay. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” Rachel disconnected the call and burst into tears. “He will kill me,” she wailed. “He will blame me for everything that has happened to him.”

“One of us will be with you at all times,” Shay assured her. “He won’t get within a mile of you. When Monty isn’t guarding you, I will be. I will protect you, Rachel.”

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## CHAPTER 22

### Faking Out the Flynn Factor



Baird Lancaster paced the floor. His morning was starting off on a miserable note. “Damn Rachel, she will cost me this election,” he cursed as he perused the divorce papers he had just received. “I’ve got to find a way to get the public on my side.” He wondered how long he could keep the impending divorce from his father and the public.

*I’ve got to get in front of it. I must get on the most viewed public television station and let the world know I am the victim in all of this. Tell them what an awful wife Rachel is.*



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He called his publicity manager. “Get me an interview on the highest rated news show on TV as soon as possible.”

He disconnected the call and had a stroke of genius. *I’ll call that woman who trashed me on her podcast. She is the one responsible for all my negative publicity.*

He called his secretary. “Helen, get me that podcast woman who has been trying to destroy my reputation.”

“Which one, sir?”

“There’s more than one?” he howled. “I don’t know their names. I need the one that ran that awful photo of the prostitute that was beaten to death.”

“Ensley Flynn does *The Flynn Factor* and has been less than kind to you,” Helen recalled.

“She’s the one! Get her on the phone for me.”

##

“The Flynn Factor, Ensley Flynn speaking,” Ensley answered her phone. She was shocked to hear from Baird Lancaster’s secretary.

“Please hold a moment,” Helen said, “Mr. Baird Lancaster wishes to speak to you.”

Before Ensley could reply Baird was on the line. “Ms. Flynn, this is Baird Lancaster. I believe you know me.”

“Yes sir.”

“I was wondering if you would like to have an exclusive interview with me about all the information swirling around my run for governor?”

Ensley weighed the pros and cons of an interview with Baird. He rarely gave a public interview and had refused to answer questions about his wife, mistress, and floundering campaign. She decided the interview would be a real coup and put her podcast on the map.

“Ms. Flynn are you there?”

“Yes sir, I was just trying to think when I might interview you.”

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"I could be in your office in an hour," Baird volunteered.

"Make it two hours and I'll be there." Ensley replied.

"I'm away from the podcast right now."

"Where are you located?" Baird asked.

For the first time, Ensley wished she didn't have the podcast set up in her home. She was a little afraid to be alone with Baird. Throwing caution to the wind, she gave him her address.

"I'll be there at 3:00 p.m.," Baird agreed ending the conversation.

Ensley grabbed a note pad and began making a list of all the questions she wanted to ask Baird. She thought about his quick temper and called Monty's cellphone. The call went to voicemail, and she left a message. "Monty, I have a 3:00 p.m. interview today with Baird Lancaster in my home. He scares me a little. Could you be here when he arrives?"

##

Baird pulled his car into the driveway of the three-bedroom frame house with a perfectly manicured lawn and shrubs. *Nice*, he thought, *I wonder how she affords this*. He walked to the door and rang the doorbell. A striking woman with short auburn hair and flashing green eyes opened the door. Baird was stunned. Ensley Flynn was much prettier in person than on her podcast.

"Ms. Flynn, I am Baird Lancaster."

"Please come in, Mr. Lancaster." She glanced at her watch. "You are very punctual." *Where the hell is Monty?* She thought.

"I appreciate you making time for me on such short notice," Baird said as she led him through her home and into a soundproof room at the back. "I know your time is precious, so I didn't want to be late."

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Ensley was surprised by the man in her home. He was nothing like the crude drunk she had witnessed in The Stock and Bond Restaurant.

“How do you do this?” Baird asked. “Do you script our conversation or is it just freewheeling and anything goes? I’ve watched your podcast for some time, and it seems to get down to business.”

“Do you want to go live, or would you prefer that I record it and release it later?”

“Live seems to be more exciting.” Baird smiled showing perfect white teeth.

“You do know that if we go live, you can either answer my questions or pass,” Ensley instructed.

“Yes, ma’am.” Baird nodded.

Ensley handed him a headset and put on her own as he adjusted his to fit snugly. “I’ll ask you a question then you answer,” she instructed.

“Go ahead.”

Ensley flipped the switch that sent the podcast live to her followers. “I have a surprise for my followers today. Oklahoma gubernatorial candidate Baird Lancaster is my guest, and we will be talking live. Baird I must ask you what made you come on my broadcast today?”

“First I’d like to thank you for agreeing to this interview,” Baird said. “Most of you know that my beautiful wife of three years has filed for a divorce.” He looked down as if having trouble dealing with the statement. “It comes as no surprise to those close to me since Rachel and I have been living apart for several months. I admit that I found solace in the arms of Miss Kitty Ray who was tragically murdered by one of her customers.

“I want to assure Oklahoma voters that I know I was wrong to seek comfort from another woman, but I am only human. I love my wife and hope we can work out our differences. I vow to keep my personal life out of the news and to set a pristine example for my voters. I hope you can

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find it in your heart to forgive me. When Rachel left me, I was devastated, and I didn't deal with it very well. Please know that I will always do what is right for Oklahoma and Oklahoma citizens.

"I want to thank everyone who voted for me in the primary and plead with you to continue to support me. I promise to be the best governor Oklahoma has ever had."

Ensley was shocked. She had not expected Baird to make a confession and plead for forgiveness.

"Mr. Lancaster, it has been reported that your wife left you because you were mentally and physically abusive." Ensley interjected.

"Did Rachel tell you that?" Baird gasped. "I can't believe she would spread such lies. Did you hear that directly from her?"

"Well, no, no she...", Ensley stammered.

"So, you are just repeating hearsay," Baird challenged. "That is what I'm saying. Much of what was reported about me is false and people like you are just repeating it. To my friends and supporters, if you are watching this, please know that ninety-nine percent of what you have seen in the news about me is totally false and the result of a smear campaign perpetrated by this podcast."

He stood and removed his headset. "Thank you, Ms. Flynn. I appreciate the opportunity to rebuttal the lies you have spread about me on your podcast."

Baird slammed the door on his way out of the house leaving Ensley wondering how she had lost complete control of the interview.

Monty pulled to the curb in front of Ensley's home as Baird sped away from the house. She ran inside praying that Ensley was okay. "Ensley, where are you?" She called out as she ran through the rooms.

Ensley opened the door of the soundproof room and screamed as she came face to face with Monty. "You scared

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the crap out of me,” Ensley squealed. “I thought you were Baird coming back to kill me.”

“Are you okay? I just saw Baird lay rubber leaving your place.” Monty caught her shoulders and looked her up and down.

“I’m okay. If being used and made to look like a fool on my own podcast is okay.” Ensley said.

“I just got your message,” Monty explained. “I was in a meeting with the chief. What was Baird doing here?”

“He was the guest on my live podcast today,” Ensley explained.

“Seriously. I’m surprised he would agree to that.”

“He requested it. I should have known he had something up his sleeve. He used my podcast to tell his supporters that the bad publicity he has received is a smear campaign to keep people from voting for him. God, he can be so personable and slick when he wants to.”

“Do Rachel and Hope know about Baird’s interview?” Monty asked.

“No, he just called me a couple of hours ago and set it up. I’ll run it recorded tonight at my usual time, but the actual interview was live just now.”

“Hop into my car and we will go to the library and let Rachel know what is going on.” Monty said.

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## CHAPTER 23

### Fireworks and Heros



Monty wasn't surprised to find Shay at the library with Rachel and Hope.

"To what do we owe the honor of this visit," Hope beamed at Monty.

"Ensley just finished an interview with Baird," Monty announced. "It was live. Did any of you catch it?"

"I did," Shay blurted. "That is why I'm here. Just in case he tries to contact Rachel."

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Hope looked around. "Let me see if I can get my assistant to close tonight and we can go to the OKC Grill and discuss this over drinks. Baird is capable of showing up here to harass Rachel."

Everyone nodded their agreement as Hope scurried down a long aisle of books to find her assistant.

"Let's all ride in Hope's Suburban," Ensley suggested, "so we can talk in private on the way over."

Hope rejoined them, grabbed her purse, and led the way to the elevator. "Are we all riding in my vehicle?"

"Yes," everyone chorused.

Hope scurried ahead of them to unlock her Chevy. Before she reached it, she pressed the key fob to unlock the doors. A tiny light flashed beneath the Suburban.

"No!" Shay screamed as she charged toward Hope, tackling her to the ground and rolling them away from the vehicle as it exploded.

The sound was deafening, and glass flew everywhere as the SUV burst into flames. Monty and Ensley grabbed fire extinguishers from the wall and began spraying the flames as Rachel called 911.

"Are you okay?" Shay asked Hope as she rolled off her.

"I am fine, but you are bleeding," Hope cried. "There are shards of glass in your back and the flames burned your blouse."

The wail of fire engines and ambulances filled the night as emergency vehicles entered the garage. Everyone gathered around Shay and Hope to make certain they were okay.

"You need to go to the hospital," the EMT instructed Shay. "They need to remove the glass from your back and treat your burns."

Shay crawled into the ambulance and lay down on her stomach. The others jumped into Monty's car to follow their friend to the hospital.

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##

"I am really going to need that drink, when this is over," Hope sighed as they settled in the hospital waiting room. "Shay saved my life. If she hadn't tackled me and shielded me with her body, I would have taken the brunt of the explosion on my face and chest. I'd be dead."

"Oh my God," Ensley exclaimed as her podcast with Baird began running on mainstream television. "They are showing my session with Baird this afternoon."

Everyone watched silently as the podcast ended. "Why would you interview him?" Rachel whispered. "He has made himself look like a victim."

"That wasn't my intention," Ensley defended. "He asked to come on the podcast, and I thought it would be an excellent opportunity to grill him about Kitty and his temper, but he was a perfect gentleman and totally took control of the production. You probably noticed he did all the talking."

"You did let him take over your podcast," Hope smirked.

Ensley shook her head. "I am so sorry. He was better than I expected."

A doctor walked into the waiting room. "Is the Steel family in here?"

"I'm with Shay Steele," Rachel rushed to the doctor. "I'm her sister. Is she okay?"

"She will be fine. She will have to stay off her back for about a week, and someone will have to help her change the bandages daily."

"I can do that," Rachel volunteered. "May I see her?"

"She can only have one visitor at a time. They will move her to a room and then send someone to get you."



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## CHAPTER 24

### Collecting Evidence



It was dark when Shay opened her eyes. The only night light in the room illuminated Rachel's lovely face. Shay started to turn over on her side, but the pain in her back was excruciating. She lay on her stomach watching the brunette sleep.

Rachell rolled her shoulders as her eyelids fluttered open. She checked on Shay. "You're awake. How do you feel?"

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“Like a pincushion,” Shay replied, making Rachel giggle.

“Your back looks like one. You’ve got more stitches than a voodoo doll.”

“Is Hope okay?” Shay asked.

“Not a scratch except for skinned knees, thanks to you. That was very brave of you. You both could have been killed.”

“Just instinct,” Shay said honestly. “I didn’t have time to think about it. When can I get out of here?”

“You can go home tomorrow, but you must have someone stay with you for a week to change your bandages, then return to a doctor in two weeks to have the stitches removed. Do you have a doctor you use?”

“Fortunately, I haven’t needed one since I moved here. Can you suggest a good one?”

“I have a family physician,” Rachel replied. “I will make an appointment for you.”

“I’d appreciate that.”

Rachel held her gaze. “I can also stay with you to take care of you.”

Shay moaned as she tried to move. “I guess you will be safe since I’m incapacitated.” She grinned.

Rachel laughed. “ADA Steel, I believe you are an awful tease.”

“Knock, knock,” Monty said as she opened the door.

“I thought I’d relieve you,” Monty volunteered. “You’ve been with our friend for twenty-four hours.”

“I would like to shower and put on clean clothes,” Rachel agreed. “It shouldn’t take me more than a couple of hours. Is Hope okay to hold down the fort until I can take Shay home tomorrow?”

“She is glad to be alive. Do whatever you need to do to get Shay back into action. We have an attempted murder case on our hands.”

“Who is the culprit?” Rachel asked.

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"I'm not at liberty to say right now," Monty said.

"I understand," Rachel replied gathering her belongings and heading for the door. "Shay may need a pain reliever in a few minutes. She just woke up."

Monty waited until Rachel left the room then began sharing details with Shay. "I'm sure you have already ascertained a bomb was attached to Hope's SUV. I'm certain it was set to activate when she touched the door handle to unlock the vehicle."

Shay grunted and Monty continued. "Thank God she clicked her key fob to unlock it before she was standing right beside it. Your lightning-fast reaction saved her life."

"Get to the part where you know who the killer is," Shay insisted.

"I'm certain Baird is responsible," Monty said. "We have street camera recordings of his vehicle driving back and fourth in front of the library."

"What about fingerprints, DNA, actual physical evidence? He can claim someone stole his car or he loaned it to a friend." Shay pointed out.

"I have a cigarette butt from the garage with his DNA on it." Monty informed her, "and an empty Marlboro cigarette pack discarded at the entrance of the garage. Both have Baird's fingerprints on them."

"You do know that Marlboro has a 46% market share in America," Shay informed her.

"Yeah, but they don't have Baird's DNA and fingerprints." Monty grinned.

"A cigarette butt and a crumbled Marlboro pack is pretty skimpy evidence to arrest a potential governor," Shay argued. "Do me a favor, don't arrest him until we are able to pull together more damaging evidence."

Monty nodded. She wanted to arrest Baird Lancaster so badly she could taste it, but Shay was right they needed ironclad evidence before arresting him. "I am not sharing

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this information with anyone,” Monty said. “I don’t want it ending up on Ensley’s podcast again.”

“Good idea,” Shay agreed.

Shay couldn’t get the image of Baird’s cigarette butt ground into Hope’s desk and the crumbled Marlboro pack in Hope’s zip lock baggie out of her mind. The same evidence that was now at the scene of Hope’s SUV bombing. Surely none of her friends would frame Baird Lancaster.

##

Shay was sleeping when Rachel returned to the hospital. Monty led Rachel from the room and closed the door. “You weren’t gone very long,” she noted.

“I showered, changed clothes, and hurried back to relieve you,” Rachel replied. “I brought clean clothes for her. We are about the same size so she can wear mine until we get to her apartment.”

“Did you get anything to eat?”

“No, I didn’t think about eating.”

“I haven’t had dinner,” Monty informed her. “Would you like to get something from the hospital cafeteria? The nurse just gave Shay a sedative that should let her sleep the rest of the night.”

“A sandwich and a cup of coffee does sound good,” Rachel agreed.

They talked on their way to the cafeteria. “How long will Shay be in the hospital?”

“They said she can go home tomorrow if she has someone to stay with her and change her bandages. I volunteered,” Rachel answered.

“I will assign around the clock security for her apartment,” Monty said. “I don’t know who that explosion was meant for—probably all of us—but I don’t want to take any chances. We have officers watching Hope and Ensley too.”

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They ordered hot ham and cheese sandwiches, and coffee then sat at a table away from others for privacy. “I spoke with Hope on my way back to the hospital,” Rachel said. “I asked if it would be okay for me to take the time off to take care of Shay. She said that would be fine.”

Monty chuckled. “That’s the least she can do since Shay saved her life.”

“What is she going to do for a car?” Rachel asked. “She told me you are picking her up tonight.”

“Right now, she is staying at my place and we’re getting her a rental in the morning. You know, since you will be at Shay’s apartment, I may insist she stay at my home until we make an arrest.”

Rachel smiled. “I think that is an excellent idea.”

After dinner, Rachel hugged Monty goodbye. “There’s no need for you to walk me back to Shay’s room,” she insisted. I know you must be exhausted.”

“I do need to pick up Hope. Don’t hesitate to call me,” Monty said.

## CHAPTER 25

### Going Home



A gentle hand on Rachel's shoulder shook her awake. "Miss, would you like a cup of coffee?"

She shook her head to clear the cobwebs and gain her bearings. "That would be wonderful," she responded. The events of the past few days flooded her mind as she scanned the room for Shay. "Where is my friend?"

"She insisted on walking to the bathroom," the aide replied.

"Of course she did," Rachel scowled. "Is she okay?"

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“She is very sore, but her stitches are healing nicely and the more she moves around the better she will feel as long as she doesn’t get too rambunctious.”

Shay returned to her bed and sat on the edge of it. “I couldn’t lay flat on my face one more minute.” Her dimples deepened as she smiled at Rachel.

*Lord, she is gorgeous*, Rachel thought, wishing that Shay wasn’t incapacitated.

“What time do you think the doctor will release me?” Shay asked the nurse.

“He makes his rounds between 8:00 and 10:00 a.m. He will sign your release after he checks your wounds, and I change your bandages.”

Shay moved to a straight-back chair as her bed linens were changed. She turned on the TV and navigated to Ensley’s podcast. They watched in horror as the podcast replayed the explosion of Hope’s SUV. She ended the podcast with the line, “Although Rachel Lancaster estranged wife of gubernatorial candidate Baird Lancaster was in the targeted group there appears to be no connection between Baird and the bombing.”

“I can’t believe she got the entire thing,” Rachel declared. “She started recording our group long before we got close to the Suburban. It’s as if she knew something was going to happen.”

“I can’t believe she is showing it on her podcast.” Shay shook her head as the podcast zoomed in on Shay’s bloody back with shards of glass sticking out of it. “May I borrow your cellphone?”

Rachel pulled the phone from her purse. “Are you calling Monty?”

“Yes.”

Rachel opened her frequent contacts, touched the avatar for the policewoman, and handed the phone to Shay.

“Monty, have you seen Ensley’s latest podcast?” Shay blurted into the phone.

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“Yeah, we need to talk.”

“I’m about to be released from the hospital,” Shay informed her. I’ll call you when we leave here. We can meet at my apartment if you don’t mind.”

“Great, I was afraid you might not be up to discussing the case any further.”

“Oh, I’m up to it” Shay declared.

“How are doing today, Ms. Steel?” her doctor entered the room.

“Great,” Shay declared. “I’m hoping you let me go home today.”

“I’m sure I can. Let me look at your sutures and make certain everything is okay. Will you lower your gown so I can see your back?” He looked at Rachel questioningly.

“She can stay in the room,” Shay said slipping the hospital gown to her waist. “She is a close friend.”

The doctor gently touched her back in multiple places. “I used glue to seal the smaller cuts, but you have four large lacerations. I had to stitch those, but they shouldn’t scar. Are you familiar with ScarAway products?”

“Very.” Shay blurted.

“Then you know ScarAway will keep you from having scars.”

Shay nodded.

“Make an appointment with my office in two weeks, and I’ll remove the sutures. You are lucky that your back took the blast and not your lovely face.”



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## CHAPTER 26

### Suspiciously the Same



“I placed a duvet and pillows in the back seat so you can lay on your stomach,” Rachel said as she opened the back car door. “I don’t think you can sit in the seat.”

“Do you always think of everything?” Shay smiled.

“I try.”

Monty was parked in front of Shay’s apartment when they arrived. She hurried to help Shay from the car.

“I’ve got it,” Shay assured her. “Rachel, the keys to the front door are in my purse.”

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"You should lay down," Rachel suggested as Shay perched on the edge of an overstuffed chair.

"What I'd really like," Shay flashed her dimples, "is Chinese food from the China Dragon."

"I know when I'm being sent away," Rachel scowled. "What do you want to eat. You too Monty. Give me your order." She wrote down their meals and left them alone to talk.

"When you return pull your car into the garage," Shay called. "Call me when you are on your way back and I'll open the door with my cellphone. The last thing we need is your vehicle seen in front of my apartment."

"How much do we know about Ensley?" Shay asked Monty.

"She's been around for several years, is dedicated and a hard worker," Monty replied. "I've never had any reason to run her, so I don't know her background."

"She seems obsessed with making Baird's life miserable," Shay pointed out. "She never misses an opportunity to show him in a bad light."

"I noticed how she managed to tie Baird's name to the bombing."

"Does she know about the evidence you have?" Shay asked.

"No, I haven't discussed that with anyone, not even my officers."

"If she knows about it, then we know she planted it," Shay said softly.

Monty frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean the cigarette butt and crumpled cigarette pack are suspiciously like the items left in the library."

Monty glared at her. "You think someone has framed Baird and they were willing to chance one of us being killed in the process."

"It's a possibility."

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Monty shook her head. "I'm having a problem wrapping my mind around the idea."

"There are a lot of loose ends I want to tie up," Shay said as her phone announced, "Rachel calling."

"I just opened the garage door," Shay answered the phone. "Be careful."

They stopped talking when Rachel turned the handle and pushed the door open. "Rachel's Door Dash at your service," she announced cheerfully as she entered the apartment.

"I'll get the plates and flatware," Monty stood and followed Rachel to the kitchen. Shay joined them.

Rachel filled a glass with water and handed Shay her pain medication. "You should try to sleep after we eat."

"Next month is the Policeman's Ball," Monty announced. "You two should attend. I'll get your tickets when I pick up Hope's and mine."

"That would be great," Shay said. "Could you get four extra ones for the people in my office. I'll write you a check for six tickets."

Rachel placed Shay's purse on the island in front of her and Shay pulled out her checkbook. "I'll just sign it. You can fill in the amount and who it is to. Please forgive me, I am going to have to lay down. Rachel has drugged me." She smiled at the brunette.

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## CHAPTER 27

**Jane Doe**



There was no doubt in Jane's mind that Baird Lancaster was responsible for the bomb planted under Hope's SUV. It was time to step up her silent harassment of the man before he killed all of them. She had to get access to his cellphone and home internet.

##

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“You get your stitches out today,” Rachel reminded Shay as she dried her back. “You are a fast healer. Your back looks good. You should have very little scarring.” She gently traced the longest line of stitches with the tips of her fingers. “You have the softest skin.”

“And you have the most soothing touch.” Shay fought the urge to turn around and pull Rachel into her arms. The past two weeks with her had been incredible. *It is good that I am incapacitated*, she thought. They had talked about everything, sharing their life experiences, laughing about the crazy things they had done growing up and learning each other’s ideas and beliefs.

*It is good to get to know a woman before jumping into bed with her*, Shay thought, *but the more I get to know her, the more I want to make love to her.*

“After the nurse removes your stitches, Monty and Hope are going to meet us for lunch,” Rachel informed Shay. “They said they needed proof of life.”

Shay laughed. “I suppose we have been hermits the past two weeks.”

“You needed to heal,” Rachel pointed out. “You know work will be stacked up when you return to the office.”

“I have truly enjoyed every minute I have spent with you,” Shay said. “Thank you for being here for me.”

“It has been nice to really get to know you,” Rachel noted. “I feel like I’ve known you all my life.”

“After we finish lunch, can we run by Collision King and give them the key fob to my car so they can tow it from the garage?” Shay asked. “It’s been there since the bombing. Hope placed a big *Do Not Tow* sign on it. The hood had damage from the explosion, and I need to have it repaired.”

##

Hope and Monty were already seated when they arrived but stood and rushed to greet them. “You two are a sight for

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sore eyes,” Hope squealed as she hugged Rachel tightly and Shay carefully.

“How do you feel?” Monty asked.

“Good, really good,” Shay replied. “It is good to get out. I’m sure Rachel was going stir crazy cooped up with me for two weeks.”

“I’ve had worse experiences.” Rachel smiled. “I will warn you about one thing, don’t play cards with her for money.”

Everyone laughed and Rachel let her hand rest on Shay’s thigh.

“Speaking of money,” Monty said, “I have your tickets for the Policeman’s Ball next Friday night. I put the receipt in the envelope, so you know the amount of your check.”

“Did the doctor release you?” Hope asked.

“Yes, we will be back at work Monday.” Shay promised. “Thank you for giving Rachel the time off. I don’t know what I would have done without her.”

“The city is shaking things up at the library,” Hope informed them. “You know the hall of offices that back up to the library. They are converting those rooms to lease spaces for anyone who wants to open an office in them.”

Rachel’s blue eyes glistened. “I might open an accounting office in one of them,” she said. “I am a certified public accountant. I do need to begin planning to support myself in the style I want to live.”

“Quick, pick the one you want. They are going to announce their availability in a couple of weeks.”

“Who do I speak with about renting one?” Rachel asked.

“Moi.” Hope grinned.

“Put me down for the first one.” Rachel committed. “The one right in front of the elevator.”

“Tell me about the Policeman’s Ball,” Shay asked. “Is it formal, Sunday dress, or what?”

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“Some of the dignitaries will show up in tuxedos, the rank and file will wear their Sunday best,” Monty replied. “The Chief wants everyone to be comfortable.

“He will hand out awards for bravery, service above and beyond the call of duty, and other special awards to recognize outstanding officers.”

“They always hire an awesome dance band,” Hope chimed in. “Save me a dance, Shay.”

Shay raised an eyebrow. “Women dance with women?”

“Yes,” Hope giggled. “There are several gay officers. No one cares what their proclivity is if it doesn’t interfere with their job.”

“Would it make you uncomfortable to dance with a woman?” Rachel asked.

“It might,” Shay mumbled. “I haven’t been here very long and the last thing I need is people talking about me behind my back.”

Rachel nodded. “I understand.”

They finished their meal and paid their checks as Hope and Rachel visited the lady’s room.

“Have you had any breakthroughs on the bombing of Hope’s SUV?” Shay asked Monty.

“No, just having Baird’s car on the street cams isn’t enough to arrest him and I don’t want to tip our hand that we may have more evidence.”

“You mean the cigarette and pack?”

“Yeah.”

“Is that all we have?” Shay queried.

“I’m afraid so.”

“I’ve never been formally introduced to Baird,” Shay said. “Why don’t you let it slip to him that I was the one who insisted he was innocent in Kitty’s murder and you, and I kept pushing until we got a confession from Josh Moore?”

“I was surprised when Josh admitted killing Kitty,” Monty interjected. “He vehemently swore his was innocent then changed his story and confessed.”

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“Then at the Policeman’s Ball introduce Baird to me.”  
Shay finished.

“You know he will want to dance with you.”

“I hope so,” Shay smirked. “I’d like to talk to him, but not in my official capacity as ADA.”

Monty grinned. “You are sneaky, Shay Steel. You should let Rachel know what you have planned. You know she won’t like him dancing with you.”

“Have you discussed anything about the case with Hope?” Shay asked.

“No, although she insists that I should arrest Baird. She hates him for what he did to Rachel.”

“I noticed he bounced back in the polls after he was on Ensley’s podcast.” Shay commented.

“Yeah, you wouldn’t believe the women that are climbing all over him since Rachel filed for divorce.”

“Some women never cease to amaze me,” Shay replied.

##

Rachel and Shay met the Collision King representative at Shay’s car and picked up her computer bag and case files she needed to finish. She switched out the USB flash drive and retrieved the drycleaning she had in the back.

“I’m going to have a lease car delivered to my office this afternoon,” Shay informed Rachel. “I appreciate you driving me everywhere, but I have inconvenienced you enough.”

“I don’t mind,” Rachel said. “I get more alone time with you.”

“I do like that,” Shay admitted, “but once I get back into court our schedules will be very different.”



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## CHAPTER 28

### The Policeman's Ball



“Do me a favor and zip me up.” Shay walked out of her en suite wearing a fitted burgundy dress with a slit up to her thigh.

Rachel licked her lips. “That dress doesn’t leave much to the imagination,” she exclaimed.

Shay smiled. “You don’t like it?”

“I love it. You are gorgeous. I just don’t want everyone else in the world vying for what I want.”

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Shay kissed her softly. "Believe me, you are the only one in the contest. I want to get Baird's attention tonight. I want to dance with him and covertly question him, so look the other way when I flirt with him."

"I am certain he will be too busy looking down the front of your dress to realize that you are extracting information from him."

"We need to be careful to avoid looking like we are together," Shay noted. "Who is sitting at our table?"

"Monty, Hope, and Ensley is bringing a date. I'll sit between Monty and Hope. Is that okay? If not, I can sit at my parents' table."

"No, Baird might bother you at your parents' table. I want you close to us so we can protect you in case he gets drunk, but I don't want to look like a couple."

"We're not a couple," Rachel declared. "We are no more than good friends."

"I want to prosecute Baird," Shay said. "I don't want to do anything that will jeopardize that."

"I'm good with that," Rachel replied zipping up the sexy burgundy dress. "Just don't let him get you alone. He is tricky and your burgundy fuck-me heels are so damn sexy."

"You look pretty hot, yourself," Shay smiled. "You will have to fight off the suitors who are aware that you are divorcing Baird. Do you happen to know Baird's phone password? I'm going to try to pair his phone with mine tonight."

"Phi Beta Kappa that he is, it is all numbers: one, two, three, four, five, six." Rachel replied.

"I can remember that." Shay laughed.

##

"Whoa," Monty exclaimed as Shay and Rachel walked toward them. "Two beautiful women are headed our way."

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Hope glanced around the room and noticed that everyone was watching as their two friends walked to their table. "The rest of the room thinks so too," she whispered placing her hand on Monty's. "You just remember who you are with tonight."

Monty laughed. "Believe me, I only have eyes for you. I have a feeling Shay is too hot to handle and Rachel has a lot of baggage."

Everyone took their seats around the table and Ensley introduced Denny to everyone. "I feel like I know all of you," Denny said. "I've seen you at The Stock and Bond."

"I recognize you from the awful scene with my soon to be ex-husband," Rachel said. "We are delighted to have you with us."

"Thanks to Ensley, that all ended well," Denny replied.

"I'm heading to the bar," Monty stood. "What can I get you lovely ladies?"

"I'll go with you," Shay insisted as Monty made a mental note of the drink orders.

"Baird isn't here yet," Monty noted. "He is one of the speakers. I hope he is on time."

They ordered their drinks and watched the crowd mill around the dance floor waiting for the music to begin. "Baird at three o'clock," Monty muttered.

Shay laughed softly, "Oh Monty, you say the funniest things."

"Lieutenant Masters," Baird approached them with his hand held out, "it is good to see you."

"Baird Lancaster, I'd like to introduce you to our new ADA Shay Steel," Monty said as she shook his hand.

Baird smiled as he grabbed Shay's hand and shook it. "You didn't tell me she is movie-star beautiful," he complimented. "Are you here with anyone, Ms. Steel?"

"Not really," Shay replied. "Monty is introducing me to people. I'm delighted to meet you."

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“Please join my table,” Baird insisted. “My parents are here, and State Attorney General Glen Benson is sitting with us tonight.”

“Go ahead,” Monty encouraged. “I need to mingle with my officers.”

Baird motioned for the bartender to take his order as Monty picked up the tray holding the drinks for her table. Shay took her wine glass and whispered, “Call me.”

Baird stepped back from the bar as he waited for his order and turned his attention to Shay. “Lieutenant Masters told me that you were the one who insisted I was innocent of Kitty Ray’s murder,” he said softly.

Shay nodded.

“I am in your debt,” Baird said. “Anyone else would have railroaded me. My political enemies were already ordering my tombstone.”

Shay smiled. “There were too many inconsistencies, and I didn’t want to lose my first big case in my new job.”

Baird laughed. “You are my kind of politician, Shay.”

The bartender placed Baird’s tray on the bar top and motioned for him to get it. Shay followed him back to his table on the far side of the room from her friends.

He introduced her to everyone and pulled out a chair for her then sat down beside her. The men at the table vied for her attention while the women seethed over their attentiveness. Shay made a concentrated effort to make conversation with the women, alleviating their animosity.

Baird’s phone rang and he excused himself to answer it. Shay was talking with the State Attorney General’s wife Ellen Benson when her own phone rang. She pulled it from her purse and silenced it then placed it on the table.

Baird returned to the table and placed his phone beside Shay’s. It took her a few seconds to realize that he was trying to clone her phone. She knocked over her drink pouring it into Baird’s lap. He jumped up as she grabbed a napkin and began patting it against his crotch to dry the wine. His

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reaction was immediate. He looked down at himself and blushed. He grabbed her hand to still it then took the napkin. "I'll take care of this in the men's room," he mumbled.

"I am so sorry," an embarrassed Shay stammered. "I must excuse myself to wash my hands." She scooped both phones into her purse and left the table.

In the lady's room, she tried to pair the two phones but failed. She hurried back to the table and returned Baird's phone to its original location.

"I really must join my friends," Shay explained as Baird returned, "and I know you are about to give the welcoming speech. It was delightful meeting all of you and I know our paths will cross in the future."

##

"Did you succeed?" Rachel asked when Shay sat down beside her.

"No!"

"Succeed at what?" Hope asked.

"Shay tried to pair her phone with Baird's, but it didn't work. Maybe he changed his passcode," Rachel surmised.

"What is his passcode?" Hope queried. "Let me guess. One, two, three, four, five, six."

"How did you know that?" Rachel frowned.

"Baird isn't the brightest match in the box," Hope explained. "He would use the easiest numbers to remember."

"Half of the men in Oklahoma use that passcode," Ensley declared. "They are too lazy to memorize a unique code."

"I'm just not computer savvy enough to clone someone's phone to mine," Shay said softly. "He will slip up. We will get him."

"How did you manage to extract yourself from him and his friends?" Rachel asked.

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“I poured my drink in his crotch and proceeded to mop it up with my napkin.”

“And his good little soldier stood at attention,” Rachel forecast.

“Yep.” Shay giggled as the entire table broke into laughter.

Jane Doe looked around at her friends and smiled. She had Baird’s passcode. She didn’t need his phone. She could break into it remotely. What a fool Baird was. Screwing with him was going to be so easy.

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## CHAPTER 29

### Destroying Baird Lancaster



Jane Doe sat down at her desktop and sent Baird an email. “I know you planted the bomb.”

“Who is this?” Came the reply. And the virus loaded onto the fool’s computer. She didn’t engage him in conversation. She had complete access to his computer. Tonight, while he slept, she would begin tearing his world apart piece by piece.”

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She showered, dried her hair, and put on her pajamas. It felt good to be clean and warm. It was after midnight, time to begin the mind games with Baird Lancaster.

She searched his computer for a list of usernames and passwords. Like a good little idiot, he had a spreadsheet listing every account he had and the username and passcode.

Vanguard! Yes, she would start with Vanguard. The government's current ineptness had driven down the stock market to its lowest point in ten years. She logged onto Vanguard and changed the phone number on the account to her burner phone number. She logged onto Baird's email with the username and password he had on his spreadsheet.

When the email verifying the phone number change appeared on Baird's email, she clicked "Yes, I authorized this change."

A code popped onto her phone screen, and she typed it into the verification space on the Vanguard account.

Baird had invested millions in Vanguard, and he had lost over half of it. Of course, if he left it alone, it would go back up. The stock market always rebounded. She placed an immediate sale order for all his stock that would take place when the market opened at 9:30 a.m. Eastern Time. Baird would lose half his investment. Tomorrow she would find a way to lose the rest of his funds. Crypto, Bitcoin—yes that was a wonderful way to lose billions overnight. El Salvador's Bitcoin was teetering on the brink. Yes, Baird needed to invest in Bitcoin.

She downloaded a copy of his spreadsheet and saved it. Next, she placed an immediate disconnect order for all of Baird's phone services and electric service. No one could reach him, and he couldn't reach anyone. With no electricity he could not charge his Tesla. Yep, Baird was screwed.

She set her alarm for 8:00 a.m. She wanted to awaken and be on the computer in time to watch Vanguard sell all his stocks.



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##

Jane awoke before her alarm sounded, walked to the kitchen, and started the coffee. She dropped two slices of raisin bread into the toaster and pulled butter from the refrigerator.

The toast popped up and she finished buttering it just as the Keurig finished brewing her coffee. She quartered the slices of toast. It was a routine she had perfected over the years of living alone. She poured cream into her coffee and carried her meal to her desk.

*I hope the Vanguard sale has happened*, she thought as she turned on her computer.

She logged into Baird's email and was astounded to find multiple entries from the State Attorney General's wife. She quickly scanned the correspondence. Obviously, Baird was having an affair with the woman.

She scrolled down the emails until she found the notice of sale from Vanguard. She opened the account and smiled gleefully as she saw the amount of loss Baird had incurred. She ate a slice of her toast glorying in the thought that by the end of the day Baird Lancaster would wish he were dead.

Poor Baird, he only had ten million dollars left in his Vanguard account. She carefully set up his Crypto currency account backed by El Salvador and spent all but a hundred dollars from his Vanguard account to buy Bitcoin backed by the government of El Salvador.

She wished she could see Baird's face at the end of the day when he discovered he was destitute. No matter how it horrified him, it would not be as devastating as being left for dead in a filthy alley.

As an afterthought, she cancelled his Black Card and transferred all the funds in his checking account to the OKC Animal Shelter's account. She forwarded the message thread between Baird and Ellen Benson to the Fantastic Five group

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email, bouncing in through multiple servers using her whistleblower name Humpty Dumpty.

She changed the Vanguard phone number back to Baird's number and logged out, erasing all evidence that she had wreaked havoc on the man's fortune.

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## CHAPTER 30

### When Your World Falls Apart



“Do you have time to show me the offices you will be leasing?” Rachel asked Hope as she placed her purse and laptop under the library counter.

“Of course, It will be so much fun having you close to me.” Hope informed her assistant that she was showing Rachel the office space and led the way.

“I would take the very first office on the hallway,” Hope advised. “Your clients won’t have to search for you, and you

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will be close to me.” She unlocked the door and let Rachel enter.

“This is the reception area and there are two offices off this room.” Hope showed her the two offices. “There are large rooms off each office for file cabinets and storage.”

Rachel opened doors and inspected all the rooms. “This is perfect. I will take it.”

“Don’t you want to know how much the rent is?”

“As long as it isn’t over a thousand a month,” I can swing it,” Rachel smiled shyly.

“A thousand, it is,” Hope hugged her. “Now we must get you furniture and decide what you want to stencil onto your door.”

“I’m taking back my maiden name, so Rachel Brighton, Certified Public Accountant will be perfect.”

“I will tell maintenance to paint everything, shine the floors, and replace the lightbulbs. The office should be ready in a couple of weeks.”

“That is perfect. We are going house hunting for Shay’s new home this weekend. We can look for furniture too.”

“You and Shay?” Hope waggled her eyebrows.

“Just good friends,” Rachel admitted. “No thanks to me. She is so sweet and drop dead gorgeous, I must fight to keep from throwing myself at her. She thinks she will eventually charge Baird with the bombing of your SUV, and she doesn’t want our relationship to jeopardize her case against him. I moved back to Monty’s as soon as the doctor released her.”

“Really? The way she looks at you I thought you were sleeping together.”

“No such luck.” Rachel shrugged. “What about you and Monty?”

“Occasionally she spends the night, but no ring on my finger.”

Rachel nodded her understanding. “At least you are getting some action. If I didn’t know better, I’d think Shay is a nun.”

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Hope giggled at the thought of the smoking hot ADA being a nun. “What color do you want maintenance to paint the walls?” she asked.

“Ivory or ecru. What do you think?”

“The entire library is ivory,” Hope noted. “Let’s make your rooms different. I like ecru or light gray.”

“Ecru,” Rachel decided.

“Rachel, Hope, are y’all in here,” Shay called as she entered the office.

“Back here,” Hope yelled.

“What are you doing in here?” Shay looked around the office space.

“I am renting this office for my CPA firm,” Rachel informed her. “What do you think?”

“I love it. It is close to Hope and only two blocks from my office. It is perfect.”

“What are you doing here?” Hope asked.

“I thought the prettiest woman in OKC might want to go to lunch with me,” Shay smiled.

“I promised Ensley I’d have lunch with her,” Hope teased.

Shay’s dimples deepened as she blushed. “I meant Rachel.”

Both women burst into laughter as the ADA tried to overcome her faux pas.

“I’d love to go to lunch with you.” Rachel rescued her.

Everyone laughed. “I’d like that.” Shay wrinkled her nose. “I’d like that a lot. Let me wash my hands. This office is dusty.”

“I’ll wait for you in the library,” Rachel said as she followed Hope to the reading room.

##

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Baird cursed as he flipped the light switch off and on. “Damn electric company. When I’m governor they will rue the day their service got so bad.”

He found his cellphone and was shocked to see *No Service* on the screen. He turned it off and back on again, but it was dead. He threw it against the bedroom wall and walked to his office to use his land line. It was also dead.

Something kept dinging and he finally located his iPad. “Thank heaven something is working in this damn place,” he grumbled as he opened his email.

Five emails from Vanguard caught his attention. He opened the top one that said, “Click here for your most recent statement.”

He opened the statement and stared in disbelief at the balance in his account—one hundred dollars.

“What the hell!” He grabbed his cellphone to call his broker then remembered it was dead.

Another email dinged in from Bitcoin. He opened the message announcing that he was now the proud owner of ten million dollars in El Salvadorian Crypto Currency.

“Son of a,” he choked as he ran to his bedroom to dress. He had to get into his office so he could make phone calls.

“My car,” he huffed. His Tesla had its own private phone line. He snatched his key fob from the dresser and sprinted to his vehicle. The battery was dead. “The damn electricity is off. It didn’t charge overnight,” he screamed.

He tried to calm down as he scurried to his closest neighbor and rang the doorbell. Bob Miller opened his door. “Baird, what can I do for you?”

“I need to use your phone. My electricity is off and none of my phones are working. I don’t know what is going on. I need to call a cab.

“Sure, come in.” Bob pulled his cellphone from his pocket, touched the name of the local cab company under his frequent contacts and handed the phone to Baird.

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Baird ordered the driver, thanked Bob for the use of his phone then returned to his address.

While he waited for the cab, he opened his iPad and read all the emails from Vanguard and Bitcoin. All the transactions executed as soon as the stock market opened this morning. Millions were missing from his account. He had to get somewhere to talk to his advisor.

He searched in the dark for his bottle of Macallan Scotch Whiskey and a glass. Glass shattered on the floor as he fumbled for a tumbler. He wrapped his hand around the neck of the liquor bottle and gulped straight from the container.

When the cab pulled to the curb, he staggered out to get into the vehicle. He gave the driver the address of his office and leaned back against the leather seat. By the time he reached his office, he had calmed down. Obviously, someone had made a terrible mistake. He handed the driver his Black Card and drummed his fingers on the door rest as he impatiently waited for the man to run it.

“Mr. Lancaster, your card is declined.” The man smirked as he recalled watching the fiasco on a podcast when Lancaster’s card was declined in a restaurant.

Baird’s mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water. “Run it again,” he commanded.

“Sir don’t worry about it. I know you are good for it. We will send you an invoice.”

“Thanks,” Baird barked as he jumped from the car.

The driver called his dispatcher. “Put a black mark through Baird Lancaster’s name. They declined his Black Card.”

##

Ensley couldn’t stop the big grin spreading across her face. Everyone knew an email from Humpty Dumpty meant

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dirt on Baird Lancaster. She eagerly opened the message and read the conversations between Baird and Ellen Benson.

“Hot damn!” she squealed as she printed the emails. “Old Baird just can’t keep it in his pants.”

She had been silently fuming over the way Baird had taken over her podcast and made himself look like a victim and her look like a fool.

She decided to discuss the email with Shay before she aired it. The last thing she needed was the State Attorney General breathing down her neck. She called the Assistant District Attorney and reached Shay’s voicemail. “Shay, this is Ensley. Please give me a call. I have a conundrum, and I need your advice.”



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## CHAPTER 31

### Humpty Dumpty Rumors



Shay was scanning real estate that was for sale in OKC when Rachel let herself into the apartment. “I was beginning to get worried about you,” she said as the brunette stood behind her and massaged her shoulders.

“I had a meeting with a potential customer, Oklahoma Auto Dealers Association. The firm they have been using made a huge mistake on their tax return last year and overpaid their taxes several hundred thousand dollars. They are having difficulty getting their money back from the IRS.”

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"I didn't even know it was possible to get money back from the IRS," Shay joked.

"I'm certain I can do it," Rachel said confidently.

Shay swiveled her chair around and pulled Rachel onto her lap. "If anyone can, it is you." She kissed her gently. "You are amazing."

"What are you working on?" Rachel asked, snuggling into Shay's arms.

"I found four places we might look at tomorrow. Two homes are move-in ready and the other two are under construction in that new area on the lake."

"Is it lakefront property?" Rachel asked.

"There are homes on the lake and cheaper ones without lake frontage. I agree with you, I prefer lakefront."

A buzzer went off in the kitchen and both women jumped. "Dinner is ready," Shay announced as she stood pulling Rachel with her. "I hope you like meatloaf."

"I love meatloaf," Rachel exclaimed. "I can't believe you cooked dinner."

"Nothing special, I'm afraid," Shay shrugged. "Meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and green beans."

"Sounds delicious," Rachel said, hugging her tightly. "I really did want to spend the evening alone with you instead of going out to dinner."

##

"I hate to discuss business over dinner," Shay said, as she poured their wine, "but I need to ask you about something that came across my desk today."

"Okay."

"Your father owns OKC Trucking, doesn't he?"

"Yes."

"Is he also president of the OKC Truckers and Hauler's Union?"

"Yes. What is this about, Shay?"

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“The State Auditor is questioning a state grant to the Truckers and Hauler’s Union that was used to make a political donation to Baird’s campaign for governor.”

“Isn’t that illegal?”

“Yes, it is. Your father signed off on it personally.”

“I can’t say I am surprised.”

“I plan to prosecute Baird. He may throw your father under the bus.”

“I’m certain he will, to save his own hide.” Rachel nodded her head.

“Would your father testify against Baird?”

“I honestly don’t know. Baird has been responsible for most of my father’s large contracts from the state.”

“But he does provide the services?” Shay asked.

“Yes.”

A message dinged into their cellphones at the same time. Shay read the message from Humpty Dumpty sent to the Fantastic Five group. She raised dark eyes to gaze at Rachel.

Rachel had never seen such longing and pain in another’s eyes. She wondered what Shay was thinking.

“I am so sorry, Rachel. It looks like Baird is having an affair with Ellen Benson.”

“I don’t care, and I’m not surprised. I told you Baird is not a nice man.”

“And if he ever found out that I’m in love with his wife, he would try to destroy me,” Shay said.

Shay’s phone rang and Ensley’s photo appeared on her screen. She put the call on speaker so Rachel could hear it. “Hello Ensley. Yes, I just read it. Where did it come from? How do you know it is legitimate?”

“I’ve received information from Humpty Dumpty before,” Ensley replied.

“Do you know who Humpty Dumpty is?”

“No.”

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“I wouldn’t run it, Ens. You have no way to verify it. Baird will sue you out of business.”

“Not if I get proof,” Ensley declared. “I’ll get photos of him with the Attorney General’s wife.”

“Be careful. Baird is an extremely dangerous man.”

“I know.” Ensley disconnected the call.

Rachel couldn’t pull her gaze from Shay’s incredible eyes that seemed to glow in the lamp light. “I love you,” Rachel blurted as her desire for the ADA made her entire body burn.

Shay didn’t say anything. She simply held Rachel captive with her hypnotizing blue eyes. “I’m going to take a shower,” she announced and walked from the room.

Rachel leaned her head back against the chair. She had never experienced such a consuming reaction to anyone in her life. She clenched her thighs together as her body shuddered.

She didn’t know how long she sat without breathing. She gasped and pulled air into her lungs. Moving with no thought but to get Shay out of her mind, she cleaned the kitchen, turned out the lights and went to the guest room she had used during Shay’s recovery.

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## CHAPTER 32

### Looking for a Home



The smell of freshly brewing coffee pulled Shay from a deep sleep. She lay on her back as images of Rachel pirouetted through her mind. More than anything in the world she wanted to make love to the beautiful brunette, but it would only complicate everything, her career, any chance of sending Baird to prison, Rachel's divorce, and her reputation.

She slid out of bed and dressed for the day. Jeans and a casual button-up shirt were her attire. They were going house

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hunting. She wanted a house that Rachel loved. She brushed her long blonde hair letting it fall wherever it wanted and slipped on a pair of sneakers. She knew she looked like a teenager but that was okay. Today, she wanted to forget that she was Assistant District Attorney Shay Steel. She just wanted to be Rachel Lancaster's friend.

"Good morning, Sleeping Beauty," Rachel greeted her as she poured two cups of coffee. "I started to bring you coffee in bed, but I feared you wouldn't ravish me, and my ego couldn't take that rejection before my coffee."

Shay accepted the cup of coffee and sat on a stool at the kitchen island. "Believe me, it takes everything in me to resist you."

Rachel looked down into the blackness in her coffee cup. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be so aggressive."

"Aggressive is good," Shay admitted. "I like aggressive. There is so much at stake, I don't want to lose the fight because we can't keep our hands off each other. Have you looked at the list I made of houses to see today?"

"Yes. Do you play golf?" Rachel asked.

Shay smiled. "I love to play golf."

"And you are very good at it, aren't you?"

"I'm competitive."

"In everything you do?" Rachel raised a perfectly arched eyebrow. "There is a gorgeous home for sale in Gaillardia, a gated community with around the clock security guards. It is on an acre. It has everything you are looking for: privacy, security, and a golf course. The realtor is hosting an open house today."

"Does it allow privacy walls? I need a safe place for Bo and us."

Rachel turned Shay's stool around and pushed her body between her knees. "I like when you talk about us." She slipped her arms around Shay's neck and kissed her softly.

Shay wrapped her arms around Rachel's waist and pulled her tightly against her. She marveled at the firmness

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of Rachel's lips and moved her own against their silkiness. Rachel moaned and responded running the tip of her tongue between Shay's teeth.

Tongues teased and lips pressed tighter as they lost themselves in the feel of each other.

Rachel pulled away and backed from Shay. "I'll help us be strong," she promised. "I know a lot is at stake. Drink your coffee while I cook our omelets."

##

Shay pulled her car into the circular driveway of the sprawling mansion in Gaillardia. "This is beautiful," she declared. "Do you like it?"

"I love it," Rachel replied.

"Let's see if it is as lovely on the inside as it is on the outside."

An attractive, middle-aged woman met them in the foyer. "Welcome to our open house," she greeted them with a smile. "Are you seriously searching for a home or just kicking tires?"

"I like direct people," Shay replied. "I am looking to buy."

"Then you have entered the right house. It is spectacular and has everything one could wish for in a forever home."

She led them throughout the house pointing out the many exquisite features. As they completed their tour another couple entered the foyer.

"We'd like to walk back through the house on our own, if that is okay," Shay told the agent.

"Of course. I'll give the newcomers the fifty-cent tour while you make up your mind."

"What do you think?" Shay asked as soon as they were alone.

"I love it. It is everything one could want in a home. If you come with it, it is perfect." Rachel touched Shay's arm.

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They walked through the house again, ending up in the main bedroom. “Does the furniture come with the house?” Shay wondered out loud.

“I’m sure it can be arranged,” Rachel said.

They walked outside where a fountain flowed into a large swimming pool.

“If they will let us put a rock wall around it, I want it, if you want it.” Shay said.

“I love it,” Rachel agreed.

“Let’s go find the agent and put in our offer.”

The agent and the other couple were looking at information on the kitchen island. “I don’t think the sellers will accept your offer,” the agent said as she walked the couple to the front door, “but I will present it to them.”

“What do you think?” she asked Shay and Rachel when she returned to the kitchen.

“If we can build a stone wall around it, we will pay the asking price,” Shay said. “But the security is a deal breaker for us.”

“I’m certain that can be arranged,” the agent advised. “Fill out the form finalizing your offer and I will present it to the owners and verify the stone wall with the homeowner’s association. You will want their answer in writing. How quickly can you get the financing?”

“It will be a cash deal,” Shay replied. “I sold a home in Houston when I moved here. The funds are in the bank.”

“I will call you tonight and let you know the response from the HOA and the sellers.”

##

“I can’t believe you made up your mind so quickly,” Rachel said as they drove away from the house.

“It is everything I’m looking for in a forever home. You said you like it. That made up my mind. You do like it, right?”



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“I love it. It is nicer than any place I’ve ever lived in. I love the location, landscaping, and the interior is beautiful. The arches and crown molding are breath taking.”

“Much like you.” Shay smiled.

Although she wanted to discuss their future, Rachel was uncertain about having the conversation as long as Shay was hell bent on putting Baird in prison. She rested her hand on top of the blonde’s and said, “Thank you.”

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## CHAPTER 33

### Getting Proof



Ensley parked her car outside the gated community that held the home of Ellen and Glen Benson. She had staked out the secure community for three days without a glimpse of the woman who was Baird's lover.

It was 9:00 p.m. when the wrought iron gates swung open, and a silver Mercedes rolled onto the street. Blonde-haired Ellen Benson was at the wheel. Ensley waited until she turned left at the intersection then followed her.

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They drove twenty-two miles, then the Mercedes turned into the Fordson Hotel in the arts district. The auto pulled into the parking garage and Ensley followed. It took her by surprise when Ellen parked the car in a space on the street level beside an ornate door with *entrance* across the top. Ensley drove past and quickly parked on the second level.

Ensley dropped down to the floor level of the parking garage as Ellen walked through the entrance doors. She followed at a distance and waited until Ellen entered the elevator, and the door closed.

“Tenth floor,” Ensley muttered to herself as the tenth-floor button lighted. She pushed the button for the elevator.

The tenth floor was beautifully decorated with art and sculptures that begged to be studied. Ensley made a mental note to return and leisurely explore the exquisite pieces on display in the hallway.

She slowly walked down the corridor listening for any sound that might give her some idea about the room housing Ellen and Baird. The elevator rang and Ensley ducked into an alcove with the ice and cold drink machines. A room service server rolled a cart past her. She peaked from the alcove in time to see him pushing the cart through door ten twenty-two. She hid behind the drink machine until the server left the floor then looked for a safe place to video Baird and Ellen as they exited their room.

##

Ensley checked her watch. It was 6:00 a.m. She had hidden all night behind a jousting knight suit of armor in a cramped alcove at the end of the hallway. Her video camera was focused and ready for the lovers to walk from the hotel room.

Her patience was rewarded at 6:30 a.m. when the pair laughed and giggled like teenagers as they stopped for one last passionate kiss in front of the open hotel room door.

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Ensley controlled her exuberance as she watched through the video screen. *This is my money shot*, she thought.

Ellen walked toward the elevator as Baird returned to the room and closed the door. After she heard the elevator ding open, then close, Ensley debated waiting for Baird to leave, or make a dash for the elevator. She knew it would be disastrous if he caught her in the hotel.

Her muscles complained as she inched her way from behind the armor. She hadn't moved in eight hours, and it felt heavenly to stretch her back. As she reached to pull her camera from behind the knight, Baird's door opened.

Panicked, Ensley dove into the recess, housing the door to the stairwell. She didn't dare open the door because it would alert Baird to her presence. She prayed he wouldn't notice her camera and walk her way to check it out.

*Damned carpet*, she cursed silently. *I can't tell if he is walking or not*. The dinging and closing of the elevator announced the departure of the man who had humiliated her. She retrieved her camera and skipped down the stairwell. Ten floors of exercise felt good after being bent like a noodle behind the knight.

##

*Hope will be so impressed with me*, Ensley thought as she finished prepping the video for her podcast. She called the librarian and invited her to watch the show at her place.

"My podcast tonight will knock your socks off," Ensley bragged. "If there were a Pulitzer Prize for podcasts, I'd surely win it."

"The whole gang is here," Hope quipped. "We will pick up pizza and be there by 7:30 p.m."

"I was hoping—"

"We will also bring beer," Hope added.

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“Great. See you tonight,” a disappointed Ensley agreed, her hopes of spending the evening alone with the petite beauty thwarted.

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## CHAPTER 34

### Park My Ride



Hope and Monty rang Ensley's doorbell. "Where are Shay and Rachel?" Ensley asked disappointed that her audience had dwindled.

"We dropped them by the Tesla dealer," Monty explained. "They finished the repairs on Shay's car, and she wanted to pick it up. They will be here soon. What is your surprise?"

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“First things first,” Hope chirped. “Let’s cut the pizza and get the tv trays set up so we don’t miss any of the podcast. We brought wine and beer.”

“It seems sacrilegious to drink wine with pizza,” Monty said.

The doorbell announced the arrival of their two friends. Hope opened the door as Monty and Ensley placed a plate of pizza on each tv tray.

“We have pizza,” Hope informed them. “What do you want to drink?”

“Beer,” was the unanimous answer.

Monty passed out the cold beer and everyone claimed a chair in the tv room. Shay jumped into the chair by Rachel and grinned at the beautiful brunette. “We really should go to a movie together sometime.”

“Um, or watch something on Netflix and chill,” Rachel flirted.

Shay pressed her thighs together trying to control the surge of desire that shot through her. She was having difficulty keeping her hands off Rachel who now blatantly flirted with her just to drive her crazy.

“Show time,” Ensley announced as she turned on the television and started her podcast.

Everyone watched in silence as Ensley introduced her newest video with clips from Kitty’s murder and Baird’s confession that he had frequently used the prostitute’s services because of the rift between him and his wife who had filed for divorce.

“The would-be governor of Oklahoma is now finding solace in the arms of Ellen Benson wife of Oklahoma State Attorney General Glen Benson.

“Is Baird Lancaster really the man we want representing us as governor of the great state of Oklahoma?” Ensley concluded the podcast.

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“Oh my God!” Hope muttered. “Ensley, I can’t believe you followed them into the hotel. You’re going to get yourself killed.”

“Baird is going to go crazy when he sees this,” Rachel agreed. “You must be careful. He is dangerous.”

“At least he won’t be Governor,” Monty said.

“You are a great reporter,” Shay complimented. “You are fearless. Very few reporters put boots on the ground to dig up stories. Most cable news shows just fill their time with clips from other cable news shows and now they depend on TikTok and social media for footage to fill their boring hour. You are a true newswoman.”

“Thank you,” Ensley blushed. “That means a lot to me, coming from you.”

Monty called the precinct and ordered patrol cars to pass by Ensley’s address every thirty minutes for the rest of the week. “Do you have anything stronger than beer or wine?” she asked as she got off the phone.

##

“That was an interesting podcast,” Rachel commented as Shay buckled her seatbelt. “It will be all over the news tomorrow.”

“Yes. I am glad Monty ordered patrolmen to pass Ensley’s house every thirty minutes. I don’t think she realizes how dangerous Baird is.”

“May I stay at your place tonight?” Rachel asked.

“I would like that. Hope is going home with Monty, so you probably don’t want to be there.”

“I just want to be with you,” Rachel admitted. “All this bedlam with Baird is unbelievable. He is more malicious than I ever dreamed.”

Shay pulled Rachel’s hand onto her lap. “I am so sorry you are going through this. Believe me, if I could find a legal way to remove him from your life, I would.”



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“I just want to forget about him and get on with our lives.”

Shay pushed the button to start her car and nothing happened. She pushed it again. “Great. It won’t start. I’m glad I parked at the curb, so we aren’t blocking Ensley’s driveway. I’ll call Monty to come back for us.”

“They are at the stop sign at the end of the block,” Rachel noticed.

Shay locked her car and armed the sentry as Monty turned around and pulled alongside them.

“Didn’t you just pick up this thing?” Monty asked as Shay and Rachel slid into the back seat.

“Yes, the explosion at the library must have done more damage to it than the hood.” Shay acknowledged. “It is dead as a door nail. I’ll have them send a wrecker for it tomorrow.”

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## CHAPTER 35

### Fire Can Hide a Multitude of Sins



After everyone left Ensley opened a cold beer and leaned back in her recliner to watch her podcast one more time. She was pleased that Shay had called her a great reporter. She did put her heart and soul into everything she did.

She finished her beer as the podcast ended and switched to the local news station that was running clips from her podcast. She kept thinking she should get up and go to bed,

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she was sound asleep when her burglar alarm split the night with its shrieking.

Ensley jerked awake taking a minute to realize she was asleep in her recliner. She lowered the footrest so she could stand and briefly wondered where all the light was coming from. The shrieking burglar alarm was joined by the intermittent shrill of the smoke alarm.

Smoke filled the room as flames licked around the doorframe into the television room. "My house is on fire," she screamed as she started toward the bright light.

The crackling of burning wood and leaping flames drove her back into the room that had no other door. Smoke filled the room as she struggled to unlock the window to the outside. The black smoke was making it difficult to see and breathe. She could feel the heat of the fire on her back. "God is this how I'm going to die?" she yelled.

Giving up on opening the window locks, she grabbed a TV tray and broke out the window with it. She dove out the window as part of the roof fell in behind her. Landing in her prize rosebushes she cursed as she clawed her way out of them and rolled onto the grass.

The wail of fire engines screamed though the night as she scrambled to her feet and ran to the street. A patrol car was already on the scene and a patrolman ran to her. He put an arm around her and helped her into his car while his partner called Monty.

##

Monty's car screeched to a halt behind the patrol car, and she hit the ground running. "What the hell is going on here?" She yelled at the patrolman.

"Looks like arson," the officer answered. "The fire chief said the fire started at the front of the house where an accelerant was splashed all over the front porch door and everything wood, then ignited. Your friend is in my car. She

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is fine except for a few scrapes and bruises. She grabbed my personal cellphone and is filming everything.”

“Yeah, she would do that!” Monty scoffed. “Keep the local news away from here until the fire is out.”

Monty walked to Ensley and took her by the arm. “You need to come with me. I need to get a statement from you.”

“Please wait,” Ensley begged. “I want to video it burning to the ground. I know Baird is the one responsible. This will be the lead story on my podcast tomorrow.”

“Do you have proof to back up that statement?”

“No, but you know I’m right. Who else would torch my home after tonight’s podcast?”

“I agree with you,” Monty replied. “I’m just saying you have no proof and need to refrain from blaming Baird publicly. He will sue you into poverty.”

Ensley snorted. “He just destroyed everything I own. The poverty part is already a reality.”

“Is it insured?”

“Yeah. At least I had sense enough to do that.”

“Come on, you can stay at my place tonight. We will worry about Baird tomorrow. I’ll find out where he was tonight. After your podcast, I have a feeling Ellen Benson won’t be providing him an alibi.”

##

Baird grinned manically as he watched the news report about Ensley Flynn. Her home was now smoking cinders. The two fire engines couldn’t save it. *Stupid slut, he’d teach her not to fool with Baird Lancaster.*

When he made his first pass in front of her house, he noticed the patrol cars circling every half hour. He had parked four blocks away and carried the five-gallon plastic container filled with gasoline to her home, waited in the shrubs as a patrol car passed, then drenched her front door and anything wood with the flammable liquid. He hid again

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as the officer drove by, then flicked the grill lighter and set the house ablaze.

Running through the back yard of the neighbor across the street, he was gone before the flames filled the night sky. He was certain Ensley was the one screwing with him. She was extremely computer literate. He drove the rented car to his office, picked up his company issued cellphone, and went back to the hotel where he was staying until the electric company turned on his electricity.

He called for room service, quickly showered, then stretched out on the hotel room bed as he watched the podcaster's home disappear from the face of the earth. *Fire is such a beautiful thing, and it can hide a multitude of sins*, he thought.

The room service server knocked on his door and he answered in his robe with his hair still wet.

"Thank you so much. Please put the cart in front of the TV." As he pulled a fifty from his wallet, he made a point to stand close to the television showing live footage of Ensley's home burning. He wanted to make certain the server would remember he was in the room while the fire was engulfing the house. "I wonder what caused that fire," he commented gesturing toward the screen.

"Who knows." the server shrugged as he pocketed the fifty. "Thanks."

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## CHAPTER 36

### Searching for Proof Against an Arsonist



Monty and Sergeant Bobby Randle pushed the doorbell on the front door of Baird's mansion. When no one answered, Bobby held down the bell. "I don't think it is working," he said as he pounded on the door with his fist.

"Baird isn't home," the next-door neighbor yelled. "The electric company cut off his service yesterday."

"Do you have any idea where he is?" Monty asked.

"No, you might catch him at his law firm. Do you know where that is?"

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“Yes,” Monty replied. “We’ve been there a few times.”

They drove to Baird’s downtown law office and approached the receptionist on the first floor. “May I help you?” she asked politely.

“We’re here to see Baird Lancaster,” Monty replied.

The woman checked her computer screen. “Mr. Lancaster hasn’t come in this morning. Would you like to leave a message?”

Monty held her identification in front of the girl. “I understand he is staying somewhere else until his electric service is reestablished. Can you tell me where?”

“Here he is now,” the receptionist nodded toward the electric doors as they slid open.

Bobby caught Baird’s elbow. “Mr. Lancaster, we need you to come with us.”

“Why?”

“We need to get a statement from you,” Bobby informed him.

“About what? If this has anything to do with Kitty Ray. You already have her killer.”

Bobby moved Baird toward the door and guided him outside after it opened. “It has to do with arson,” Bobby growled.

“I have no idea what you are talking about,” Baird insisted.

“Do I need to handcuff you?” Bobby grinned.

“No. I’ll come to your precinct. I need to speak with your Chief anyway. He needs to know I’m going to file a lawsuit against you for harassment.”

##

Bobby led Baird to the interrogation room while Monty called Shay. “I have Lancaster here at the station. Do you want to watch while we take his statement?”

“On my way,” Shay replied.

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Baird was pacing the floor as Shay and Monty observed him. "What excuse are you going to use for hauling him in here?" Shay asked.

"I want to know where he was last night when Ensley's home burned to the ground, and I want it on our official record."

"Please don't tell me you found a cigarette butt with his DNA on it and a crumpled Marlboro pack."

Monty studied Shay for a few seconds. "No one likes a smart-ass Assistant District Attorney Shay."

"I'm not being difficult," Shay defended. "I just want something solid. No one wants Baird in prison more than I do."

"Let's see where he was last night," Monty suggested as she opened the door.

"Monty, thank you for calling me."

"That's what friends do," Monty smiled.

Bobby was waiting for Monty to begin interrogating Baird. He turned on the recorder and announced, "Lieutenant Monty Masters and Sergeant Bobby Randle are questioning Baird Lancaster at 11:00 a.m. Time and date stamps are on the recording."

"Do you want your lawyer present for this session?" Monty asked.

Baird huffed. "I am the best criminal attorney in Oklahoma City. I will represent myself."

"Let the record show that Baird Lancaster waived his right to have an attorney present," Bobby said.

"Where were you at 1:00 a.m. this morning?"

Baird frowned. "Asleep. No, wait! I worked late at the office and left around midnight. I was in my hotel room by 12:30 a.m. I showered and ordered room service around 1:00 a.m. Why? What is this about?"

"Why are you staying in a hotel?" Monty questioned.

"The electricity isn't working at my home. I'm waiting for the electric company to fix it."



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“Did you watch the news last night?”

“I told you; I was working at my office.”

“Are you aware that someone firebombed Hope Ford’s SUV in the library parking garage?”

“Last night!” Baird blurted.

“No, about a month ago.”

“No, was it on the news?” Baird asked.

“I don’t think so. We tried to keep it quiet.” Monty informed him. “The funny thing is we found a cigarette butt with your DNA on it and a crumpled Marlboro pack with your fingerprints on it. We’re considering you a person of interest in the bombing. If we search your home and the surrounding grounds, will we find the materials to make a car bomb?”

Baird’s eyes shifted from Bobby to Monty. “Are you serious?”

“As death,” Monty replied. “If the bomb hadn’t gone off prematurely, it would have killed the ADA, Hope Ford, Ensley Flynn, me, and your wife.”

“You don’t have anything to hold me on,” Baird exclaimed.

“I think I have enough to hold you for twenty-four hours while the crime unit searches your property.”

“You don’t have a search warrant,” Baird yelled.

“Oh, but I do. I got it this morning.” Monty showed him the warrant. “Sergeant Randel, if you will put Mr. Lancaster in a holding cell, I’ll get on with the business of searching his property.”

##

Monty joined Shay in the observation room as the ADA’s phone started ringing. Ensley’s face lit up the screen. “Hello,” Shay answered putting the call on speaker.

“Shay, is it true that Monty has arrested Baird?”

“Jesus, where did you hear that?” Shay exclaimed.

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“I have my sources. Does Monty have him in custody?”

“You need to call Monty and ask her.”

“I have called Monty and left four messages. She isn’t returning my calls.”

“I’m on this call,” Monty announced, “and yes, I have Baird in custody. We are holding him for twenty-four hours while we search his property for bomb making materials.”

“Would you call him a person of interest in the torching of my home?” Ensley persisted.

“Yes, but don’t—”

“She’s ended the conversation,” Shay showed the screen to Monty.

“Dammit, the last thing I need is Ensley doing one of her half-cocked broadcasts,” Monty grumbled.

“Monty don’t do this if you don’t have absolute proof,” Shay advised. “I won’t prosecute a case I can’t win.”

“You’re not the only prosecutor in the DA’s office,” Monty reminded her.

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## CHAPTER 37

### New Evidence



Denny drove Ensley to her bank where she obtained a new ATM card and a credit card. Ensley had already contacted her insurance company and reported the total destruction of her car that was in the garage when her house went up in flames. They arranged for an adjuster to look at the car and the house and provided a rental car until they mailed her a check for the auto. She picked up the rental promising to call Denny later that night.

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“You know, you are welcome to stay at my place,” Denny offered. “I have an extra bedroom.”

“Obviously, I have a target on my back,” Ensley said. “There is no way I would endanger you. I won’t be safe as long as Baird is roaming the streets.”

She rented an apartment in a gated community that had extra security guards and cameras covering all areas of the parking lot.

Her next stop was at the local electronics store where she purchased the equipment she needed for her podcast. She couldn’t wait to show her demolished home and auto. She was thrilled at the thought of announcing to the world that Baird Lancaster was a person of interest in the arson that destroyed everything she owned. By 7:30 p.m. she had finalized her podcast ending it with, “I believe the party would be making a grave mistake if they put forth Baird Lancaster as their nominee for governor.”

Local and national news media picked up segments of her podcast and by 10:00 p.m. the party had announced that they were withdrawing their support for Baird Lancaster who was being held in jail.

##

David Lancaster shook his head in disbelief as he watched the late-night news. He was shocked to learn that his son was in jail for arson. Baird had always been a disappointment to him, but his latest antics didn’t involve a woman, they involved arson. If true, his actions were criminal. “At least he is wealthy and can afford the best criminal lawyer in Oklahoma,” he told his wife. “We need to distance ourselves from him. He will ruin me.”

##

Shay heard Monty’s office door slam and knew she was in a bad mood. She wanted to go next door and inquire about

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the search on Baird's property, but decided Monty would share with her when she was ready.

Shay's assistant David Bransom stuck his head in her office and announced she had a call from ME Pattie Chambers. She picked up her desk phone and greeted the woman.

"Pattie, I hope you have news that will make my day."

"I have one word for you," Pattie said, "necrophilia!"

"Necrophilia! You mean as in sexual activity with a corpse?"

"You've got it." Pattie declared.

"Do I have a new case headed my way?" Shay asked.

"No, but it will put Baird behind bars for a very long time if you play your cards right."

"You lost me somewhere between corpse and Baird," Shay said.

"Kitty Ray had been dead over eight hours when Josh Moore had anal sex with her, rigor mortis had already set in," Patty announced. "Which means he didn't kill her. You need to get the truth out of him. I don't know why he confessed to her murder."

"Wow!" Shay exclaimed. "The case that keeps on giving. Why am I surprised? Nothing is easy with Baird Lancaster. You're certain your evidence will hold up in a criminal murder trial?"

"Positive! Shay, when I tell you something, you can take it to court."

"Thanks, Pattie, you just made my day."

Shay made calls arranging to visit Josh Moore and to peruse his visitor's logs. She contemplated sharing Pattie's information with Monty and decided she wanted to despite the Lieutenant's foul mood. She walked next door and knocked.

"Come in," Monty called out.

"Good morning." Shay smiled.

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“What’s good about it? I just got off the phone with the fire chief. He confirmed that someone intentionally burned Ensley’s house to the ground last night.”

“Oh my God,” Shay gasped forgetting her own news. “Is Ensley okay?”

“She’s alive and feisty as ever.”

“I’m certain we both suspect the same person,” Shay blurted, “but do we have any evidence? I’m getting desperate. I’d try the bastard for anything at all—killing a spider, stepping on an ant.”

Monty laughed. “Now we are on the same page. Unfortunately, we have no forensic evidence pointing toward Baird except the cigarette butt and the Marlboro pack we collected from the bombing of Hope’s SUV and for some reason, you think that is tainted evidence.”

“I may have something,” Shay informed her. “Take me to the Oklahoma State Penitentiary in your squad car. I’ll fill you in on the way.”

Monty grabbed her blazer and clipped her badge to her belt. “If we’re going to *Big Mac* in McAlester, I assume we are going to visit Josh Moore.”

“Yep,” Shay quipped.

“I can’t think of anyone I’d rather make a two-hour drive with.” Monty smiled. “And I’m dying to know why you want to talk to Moore.”

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## CHAPTER 38

### A Visit to the Prison



“With a dead woman?” Monty gagged as she processed the information Shay had shared with her. “This world is filled with perverts.”

“Yeah, and fiends that are passing as humans. Monty, I want to put Baird as deep into the prison system as possible for what he did to Rachel.”

“Why do you think Moore lied?”

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“I don’t know, but I intend to find out.” Shay scowled. “Let’s look at his visitor’s log before we visit him. We will find some answers there.”

Monty pulled up to the prison gates and showed her badge to the guard. “This is ADA Shay Steel,” she said as she passed Shay’s identification to the guard.

The woman nodded and waved them through the gate.

“Are you ready to visit our Oklahoma’s version of hell?” Monty asked.

“This isn’t the first prison I have been in,” Shay reminded her.

They went through two more check points leaving their guns, cellphones, and other belongings with the last guard. “I must take this folder with me,” Shay explained. “It contains photos I need to show him.” They were taken to an office where inmates and civilians were working.

Shay filled out a request form and handed it to one of the civilians who returned with Josh Moore’s visitor’s records. “He’s not very popular the woman said. “He only had one visitor right after he was arrested.”

Shay and Monty shook their heads when they saw the name of the visitor at the Oklahoma Department of Corrections in OKC. “Wouldn’t you know,” Monty whispered.

They followed their guard to the prison’s visitation area and walked to the table where Josh Moore was chained to the floor.

“They must consider you dangerous,” Shay noted.

“You can never tell what a deviant is going to do,” Josh snarled.

“Yeah,” Shay agreed, placing a folder in front of him. “Josh, I have reason to believe that you did not kill Kitty Ray.”

“And yet here I am,” Josh mumbled.

“Because you confessed.” Monty noted.



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“Are you allowed to watch television or the news in here?” Shay continued.

“I could, but I don’t. Unspeakable things happen in the TV room.”

“Do the inmates get amorous in the TV room?” Monty sneered.

“Let me bring you up to date on the current news,” Shay volunteered pushing the front page of *The Oklahoman* newspaper in front of him and spreading out the cover story.

The headline announced, “Baird Lancaster Dumped by Party.” The sub-headline read, “Lancaster arrested for arson.”

Josh stared in disbelief at the newspaper, moving his lips as he read the article. “Baird isn’t running for Governor,” he muttered.

“He is finished in politics,” Shay declared. “He will probably be your cellmate.”

“He can’t pardon me?” Josh mumbled.

Monty snorted in disgust. “When we are finished with him, the only thing Baird will do is pray for death.”

Tears ran down Josh’s face. “You mean I’m stuck in this hell hole for the rest of my life?”

“If you murdered Kitty Ray, you will be.” Monty scoffed at his question.

“But I didn’t kill her,” Josh blurted. “Baird and his thug did.”

“We have your confession and DNA that proves you were involved,” Shay reminded him.

“I—I did do things I am ashamed of,” Josh admitted, “but Kitty had been dead for hours before I visited her.”

“You do admit to being a necrophiliac?” Monty asked.

“Yes, but I didn’t kill Kitty.”

“I believe you did.” Monty took the role of bad cop.

“I don’t think he did.” Shay smiled. “He is protecting someone. Am I right, Josh?”

Josh bowed his head. “I want my attorney.”

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“This is a one-time chance for you to get out of this hell hole,” Shay said softly. “I believe Baird killed Kitty and you are covering for him, but I can’t figure out why. I checked your visitor’s log. Right after we arrested you, Baird Lancaster visited you for two hours. He hasn’t visited you since then and I doubt he ever will except as a fellow inmate.”

Josh swallowed hard. “If I tell you everything will you get me out of here?”

“If you tell me the truth, I will clear you of the murder charge and I won’t personally prosecute you for necrophilia,” Shay promised, “but I can’t tell you what the DA will do about the perversion charges.”

“I am guilty of the anal sex, but Baird and Brute murdered Kitty. All three of them were drunk as skunks. I watched through my secret hole in the floor. It was like they were in a marathon. They took turns one after the other until Kitty passed out and they fell asleep.

“Brute awoke first and was dressing when Baird and Kitty roused. They walked Brute to the door and waved goodbye. When they returned to the bedroom. Baird shoved Kitty onto the bed and accused her of enjoying Brute’s lovemaking more than his. They began arguing and Baird hit her hard with his fists then he strangled her. He beat her to death then dressed and left.

“After you arrested me for Kitty’s death he visited me in jail and said that he would pardon me when he became governor, and he would give me a million dollars if I would plead guilty to Kitty’s murder. It seemed like a good way to get a fresh start in life with money in my pocket. He must have planted my gloves with Kitty’s blood on them. He was trying to frame me to begin with, but when I agreed to his offer, the gloves cinched the proof of my guilt. If there is no way in hell, he will ever be governor, then I’m stuck in this place for life.”

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“I will have you moved to the city jail, and we can record your statement,” Monty said. “I will stay with you until ADA Steel takes care of the paperwork. Shay, talk with the warden and see if we can take Josh with us now. Tell him we need Josh to testify in another case. Don’t let him know the case involves Baird.”

“Wait,” Shay blurted. “We have no proof Josh is telling the truth, and he did confess.”

“I have proof,” Josh croaked. “I have a video uploaded to my cloud. I recorded the entire day Kitty died.”

“I need your username and password,” Shay said. “I need to know for certain I can pin Kitty’s death on Baird.”

Josh gave her the information she needed and inhaled deeply. The thought of freedom overwhelmed him.

“I will be quick,” Shay promised them.

##

Shay visited with the warden who began processing the forms she needed to transfer Josh from the Penitentiary to the Oklahoma Department of Corrections in OKC.

“May I use my cellphone?” Shay asked. “I need to verify some information the prisoner gave us.”

The warden directed her secretary to retrieve Shay’s phone and bring it to her.

Shay fought the urge to vomit as she watched the video on Josh’s cloud account. She downloaded it to her phone, then thanked the warden for her help. “May I keep my phone with me.”

The warden agreed and Shay sat down to wait for the paperwork to move Josh.

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## CHAPTER 39

### A Law Enforcer and a Pencil Pusher



Thirty minutes later Shay returned with street clothes for Josh and the warden's approval to move the inmate. Everyone held their breaths as they drove through the prison gates into the outside world.

"The air out here is cleaner," Josh noted.

They drove to the precinct where they recorded Josh's statement, printed it, and he signed it.

"We have your signed statement on video and in writing," Shay informed Josh. "Now I am going to download

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the video from your cloud storage.” She opened her laptop, accessed Josh’s cloud, and gasped as she watched the video again.

“That is disgusting,” Shay exclaimed. “This should put Baird and Brute away for life. They are animals.”

“I’m going to place you in a private cell here in the precinct,” Monty informed Josh. “We will have a guard on you twenty-four-seven. I’m booking you under another name so do not tell anyone your real name or why you are here. Baird is a gangster. He has contacts everywhere. You won’t be safe until he is behind bars.”

##

“We finally have Baird Lancaster,” Shay exclaimed as they returned to Monty’s office. “Monty, I don’t know how it would have happened without you.”

“I’m glad we finally have an ADA who is willing to take on the Lancasters,” Monty replied. “I think we deserve a long, cool drink to celebrate.”

“Maybe tomorrow,” Shay said. “I want to file charges against Baird in the morning and keep him in jail for the rest of his life.”

“I’m sure he will hire a hot shot defense attorney. The Lancasters have money to burn.”

“I’ll be ready for them,” Shay declared. “That’s why I want to begin drafting the charges against him. Don’t let Ensley know about the video we have from Josh. I don’t want her showing all our cards to the world.”

##

It was after midnight when Shay finished filling out all the forms required to charge a man for murder. She only filed on Baird, saving Brute’s trial for her assistant. It was a slam dunk, and it would be valuable experience for the young attorney.

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##

Shay was at the court clerk's office when the doors opened the next morning. The clerk read the charges and looked up at Shay. "You will need a grand jury," she informed her.

"No, I'm going straight to trial," Shay declared. "Please get me on the docket as soon as possible."

She wanted to file the case then visit Rachel. It had been days since she had seen the brunette, and she desperately wanted to touch her.

##

Rachel looked up from her desk and smiled when Shay entered the room. She released the breath she had been holding for too long. "I thought you had forgotten about me," she said, half teasing.

"You are always on my mind," Shay replied honestly. "I'm hoping you will have breakfast with me. I've missed you something awful."

"A phone call would have been nice."

"I've been incredibly busy," Shay made excuses, "putting your husband behind bars."

Rachel smirked. "In that case your negligence of me is forgiven and I'd love to have breakfast with you."

"Do you have time to get out of downtown so we can avoid running into our friends? I need to have a serious conversation with you."

Rachel looked around at her empty office. "I believe I can arrange that. My office isn't exactly overrun with clients. Do you want to say hello to Hope on our way out? She hasn't seen Monty in a few days either. I'm assuming you two are working the same case."

"No, she might want to join us, and I just want to be with you."

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“How is your accounting business doing?” Shay asked as they rode the elevator to the garage.

“Good. I have ten serious clients and I’m getting referrals from them. Two small firms have hired me as their bookkeeper, so I manage all their transactions, dispense checks, make deposits, and process payroll. I love being a pencil pusher.”

“Sounds like business is thriving. You will have to hire an assistant before too long.”

“I am interviewing for one now,” Rachel admitted. “I have someone coming in after lunch.”

Shay opened the door for Rachel then hurried to her side of the car. “When will you get your car back?” Rachel asked.

“Who knows, they haven’t found the problem yet.”

“You know, Hope is a little jealous of you and Monty,” Rachel said as they pulled from the garage. “She said Monty spends more time with you than she spends with her.”

Shay laughed. “Hope has nothing to worry about. Monty is crazy about her.”

“Why doesn’t she ask Hope to move in with her?”

“She is afraid Hope will say no. You know Hope is the only one of us that has lived with another woman and that didn’t last but two years. I know Monty is interested in a lifetime commitment, not a short-term affair. It takes a special kind of woman to be married to a law enforcement officer.”

“What are you searching for?” Rachel turned so she could study Shay’s profile.

“I’m not searching for anything,” Shay replied. “I’ve already found what I want.”

“Care to share?”

“Do you really have to ask?” Shay shot back.

“I don’t like playing games,” Rachel said. “I like—”

The ringing of Shay’s phone interrupted their conversation as she answered it. “Hello... Yes that is perfect. Two weeks is fine.”

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“That was the real estate agent on the house. The homeowner’s association has agreed to the security measures we requested, and the sellers accepted my offer. I have the code to open the agent’s lock. Do you want to walk through it again—just you and me?”

“Of course, I do. I am so happy for you.”

“Let’s eat breakfast first. I had a long night and am in dire need of coffee.”

##

After the server took their order and brought them coffee, Shay pulled her cellphone from her pocket. “We arrested Baird yesterday for the murder of Kitty Ray. I filed charges this morning. I have irrefutable proof that he killed Kitty.”

“Please be careful. Baird has a way of weaseling out of bad situations or those testifying against him disappear. He will keep things tied up in court forever. Which means we can’t be together forever.”

Shay placed her hand on top of Rachel’s. “I promise I will expedite every phase of this case. It won’t take forever. I want to be with you so badly I can taste it.”

Rachel clinched her core. “Taste it? You certainly have a way with words, ADA Shay.”

Shay blushed, looked down at their hands then raised her glistening eyes to stare into Rachel’s. “Please give me time to remove Baird from our lives forever.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Rachel promised.

The server placed their order on the table and refilled their coffee cups. Rachel waited until she walked away then said, “Am I allowed to know about the evidence you have against Baird?”

“It is extremely graphic and gruesome,” Shay replied. “I’d rather not show it to you. I know you would never show



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it to anyone else, but if it got out, it could damage my case against Baird.”

Rachel nodded. “You know I would never share anything you shared with me in confidence.”

“I know you would never intentionally break my trust in you, but sometimes things happen accidentally. Someone in our group leaks everything that has to do with Baird to Ensley and it ends up on her podcast even when I ask her not to use it.”

“I’ve never shared anything with Ensley,” Rachel declared. “I know you don’t trust her. I am certain she didn’t burn her own home to the ground.”

“I am throwing everything but the kitchen sink at Baird. I’m also charging him with the bombing of Hope’s SUV and I’m certain he torched Ensley’s home. I have some proof he was responsible or at least present when the bomb was placed beneath Hope’s vehicle. I have no proof about Ensley’s fire.”

“I understand,” Rachel admitted but still hurt by Shay’s lack of trust in her.

They finished their breakfast in silence, each of them trying to tamp down the raging desire that was building between them.

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## CHAPTER 40

### Can I Spend the Night?



As they drove through the gates Rachel admired the beauty of the home Shay had selected. “I love the style of this house,” she said.

“I’ve always been a fan of Mediterranean architecture,” Shay admitted. “This isn’t my first home, but I hope it is my forever home. I like Oklahoma, especially Oklahoma women. One in particular.”

“I am certain the feeling is mutual.” Rachel smiled.

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Shay pulled the car to a stop in front of the home and ran around to catch Rachel's hand as she closed the auto door. "I am very excited," she admitted as she pulled the brunette to the front door and keyed in the entry code.

"The furnishings are exquisite," Rachel noted. "Whoever owned it has excellent taste."

"Do you like the furniture?"

"I love it."

"Great, so do I and we can purchase the house furnished if we want. Come to the kitchen and see the open area concept. I love the way we can see most of the main area from the kitchen," Shay flung her arms open as if encompassing the entire house. "I can cook while you watch television or sit at the immense island and talk to me. The fantastic five can gather around the island and talk to us while we put together charcuterie boards to snack on while we watch Ensley's podcasts or just you and I chilling with Netflix."

Rachel walked into a large dining room. "This will be perfect for those political dinners a state attorney general will be expected to host."

They walked down a short hallway and opened a door leading into the main bedroom. "This is lovely," Rachel whispered. "I love the crown molding and the gorgeous ceiling fan over the bed—"

"For when things get really hot." Shay grinned.

"When do you think that might happen?" Rachel sat on the bed, bouncing it up and down.

Two long strides took Shay to her. The blonde pulled Rachel to her feet and kissed her slowly—softly at first then deeper, more demanding. As the kiss deepened and tongues searched for each other, Shay's long fingers unbuttoned Rachel's blouse and slid it off her shoulders.

Without breaking their kiss, Shay unfastened Rachel's bra and let it slide to the floor. She stood back and looked at

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her lovers perfect breasts. "Every inch of you is as perfect as I knew it would be," she praised.

Rachel couldn't recall when they shed all their clothes, and she found herself beneath the woman of her dreams. Shay was so much more than she expected. Taking her time to kiss from Rachel's toes, up her legs and between her thighs.

Rachel writhed on the bed pulling Shays face up to her lips and kissing her passionately. "More," she begged, "I want more."

Shay kissed her full lips as she caressed Rachel's firm breasts, moaning against a nipple as she held it between her teeth. She rose above Rachel gently massaging each breast. "Oh, God, Rachel, you are even more glorious than I ever dreamed."

She kissed behind Rachel's ear as she caressed her breast, placed soft kisses down Rachel's neck to the pulse point at the base of her throat. Her lips were welcomed by pert nipples as she sucked one while gently squeezing the other.

Shay kissed her way down Rachel's aching body and spread her legs as she claimed her place between them. Rachel began to buck and arch upward begging for more from her tormentor. Shay teased her moist lips then slid two fingers into her as Rachel screamed her name. "Deeper, baby," Rachel pleaded.

They climaxed together, each declaring their undying love and desire for the other. Shay fell onto her back trying to catch her breath. "I've never," she heaved.

"Neither have I," Rachel agreed.

Shay turned on her side and propped herself up on her elbow. She loved looking at Rachel's beautiful face. "I love you so much," she declared. "I didn't mean for this to happen until after the trial, but I'm glad it did. I was about to explode."

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“I was going crazy,” Rachel admitted. “I won’t lie, I have been putting new batteries in my vibrator every night.”

Shay laughed. “God I love the lusty side of you.” She leaned down and kissed her, a slow, loving kiss. A kiss that promised forever. She lay back and pulled Rachel’s head onto her shoulder.

Shay jerked as she almost fell asleep. “We should get dressed. I don’t want the real estate agent finding us naked on the bed in a house we don’t own yet.”

Rachel laughed at the idea then sat up. “Can I spend the night at your place tonight?”

“Is this your way of telling me I didn’t satisfy you?” Shay feigned disappointment.

Rachel kissed her soundly. “You didn’t even come close, baby,” she whispered.

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## CHAPTER 41

### **I Don't Represent Deadbeats!**



“Thank God,” Baird snarled as his attorney entered the visitation room. “Did you post my bail?”

“I tried to, but the check you gave me for bail and my retainer won’t clear the bank.” Abigail Sanders snarled back. “I don’t represent deadbeats. You need to find yourself another attorney.”

“No, that isn’t possible. I gave you a check drawn on my Vanguard account. I have millions in Vanguard. Something is wrong.”

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“Then you need to call your accountant.”

“Please, call my father. He will take care of everything. I don’t know what is going on.”

He gave Abigail the phone number. “Please tell him I must see him as soon as possible.”

“I will, but I don’t represent people who give me hot checks. You need to find someone else.”

“No, I want you. You are the best. I will get this straightened out. Just have my father visit me.”

##

Against his better judgement David Lancaster arranged to visit his son in jail. “I should have been stricter on him,” he mumbled as he waited for the jailer to lead him to Baird. “His mother coddled him too much. He is a spoiled, entitled brat, even if he is my son. I should have groomed his sister for governor.”

A uniformed female opened the door to the waiting room. “Mr. Lancaster,” she called out.

David hurriedly moved toward her nodding for her to lead the way. “You have thirty minutes with him, sir.” She opened the door and stepped aside for David to enter.

“Dad, thank you for coming. I don’t know what the hell is going on. Abigail Sanders said my check for bail and her retainer won’t clear the bank. You’ve got to do something. Get me out of here.”

“You’re being charged with two counts of arson and the murder of that prostitute.” David scowled. “What the hell is going on? Why are your checks bouncing? I know you have millions. You have your Grandmother’s trust.”

“I don’t know. I haven’t withdrawn a dime from Vanguard, but that is who bounced my checks.”

“I don’t think they will provide me information because my name isn’t on your account. Let me see if I can get permission for you to have a laptop in your cell. Then you

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can track down your funds. I'm sure there is a misunderstanding somewhere."

"That would be great."

"Baird, did you murder that prostitute?"

"No, the super of her apartment killed her. He admitted it. He waived a trial and is already in the penitentiary."

"Good, good. I'm glad to know you weren't that stupid. I'll see what I can do about getting you a laptop."

David stood. "Oh, and Baird, don't drag Mary and me into your sordid affairs. Don't expect us to be sitting in the peanut gallery while your trial unfolds."

"Dad, you can pull strings and make this all go away," Baird blurted.

"Obviously, you haven't met the new ADA who is handling your case. I think she hates your guts."

"A woman? What's her name?"

"Umm, Shay Steel. Have you done something stupid to her?"

"No, we are friends. Not close friends, but certainly not enemies."

"Humph," David grunted as he walked away.

##

True to his word David Lancaster had a laptop delivered to his son's cell. Baird immediately logged onto his Vanguard account and howled when it contained only a hundred dollars in cash and a crap-load of Bitcoin that was absolutely worthless. He traced the transactions that had taken place in the past twenty-four hours. How could someone sell all of his holdings and then buy worthless Bitcoin with the balance in his account? All the transactions were approved with his authorization.

He opened his checking account and discovered it was overdrawn and that a check paid to the OKC Animal Shelter had wiped out his original balance. A quick check of his



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Black Card and utilities confirmed that all had been cancelled. He threw back his head and howled like a crazed animal. “Who is screwing with me?” he screamed. “I will kill them.”

“I must speak with someone,” he screamed from his cell. “Hello, is anyone out there. I want to speak to whoever is in charge of this dump?”

His ravings were ignored. Everyone was in the courtyard enjoying the sunshine. His jailers had strict orders to keep Baird away from the general population of the prison.

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by Erin Wade

## CHAPTER 42

### An Assistant for Rachel



Jane Doe leaned back and propped her feet on her desk. Life was good. Baird Lancaster was in jail waiting to be tried for murder and arson. His father disowned him. He was destitute and rumor had it he was just two shades to the left of insane. It couldn't happen to a better man.

"I wonder what else I can do to screw with him," she said out loud. *I'll just watch him twist in the wind every day in court. A jury will surely find him guilty, but juries don't always react as one would expect. I need insurance.*

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by Erin Wade

##

A note from Hope was taped on Rachel's office door when she returned from her outing with Shay. "Your 3:00 p.m. appointment is waiting in the library."

The note pulled her thoughts away from her incredible rendezvous with the smoking hot blonde. Shay was the perfect lover. Rachel knew she would be passionate, aggressive but gentle, and eager to please. She felt bad about teasing her about her lack of satisfaction. *I'll make it up to her tonight*, she thought as she hurried to the library.

Hope was talking to a curvaceous blonde, a little overweight, but attractive.

"Here she is now," Hope said as Rachel approached them. "Rachel Lancaster this is your new assistant accountant, Mindy Stevens."

"I, uh," Rachel stuttered.

"She is perfect for you," Hope assured Rachel, squinting her eyes.

"Mindy, please come with me," Rachel said. "Since Hope has hired you, the least I can do is get to know you."

Mindy followed Rachel to her office. "I know that it is your decision to hire me," she said, "but I promise you I will be the best employee you will ever find."

Rachel laughed. "I do love your enthusiasm. Why don't you fill out my employment application then we can visit? I need to make a few phone calls so I will leave you to fill in the information."

##

Rachel closed the door between the two offices and leaned back against it. Just thinking about Shay caused a tidal wave of desire to sweep through her body. A text dinged into her cellphone. "I can't stop thinking about you. I'm useless here. Please meet me at my apartment?" Shay texted.

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“I can’t, baby. I’m interviewing my new assistant.” Rachel answered.

“Groan,” Shay replied. “I need to pick up my car anyway. It is ready. I’ll run by the library when I’m finished. We can go to dinner if you want.”

“I’m looking forward to seeing you.” Rachel texted back as Mindy knocked on her door.

She hurried to her desk and sat down before calling out, “Come in.”

“I am ready for the oral interview,” Mindy said as she entered and handed Rachel the application.

Rachel gestured for her to sit down in the chair across from her while she reviewed the application. Mindy was everything she was looking for as an assistant. She was a certified public accountant with five years of experience. She had recently moved to OKC and was divorced with a one-year-old son named Doug.

“Hope is right, you are perfect,” Rachel announced when she finished reading the resume.

“Does that mean I have the job?”

“Definitely. When can you start work?”

“Is in the morning too soon?” Mindy asked.

“In the morning is perfect. You will be acting as CPA and secretary until business builds,” Rachel explained. “My little accounting firm is growing quickly so I don’t expect you will have to pull double duty for more than six months then we will hire a secretary.”

“My time is yours eight hours a day. I will handle anything you want me to.”

“Who will keep your son?”

“My Mom lives with us. She keeps Doug.”

Rachel stood. “I will see you in the morning. I am looking forward to working with you.” She walked Mindy to the elevator then went to see if Shay was in the library. She wasn’t.

“Did you hire Mindy?” Hope asked.

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"I did. You were right, she is exactly what I was looking for."

"Spill it!" Hope blurted.

"What?"

"You have that loved-on look all over you," Hope explained, "and you were an hour late for your appointment."

"I have no idea what you are talking about," Rachel smirked. "Sometimes you drive me crazy."

Hope laughed. "Okay, but I know you have been with Shay."

"We had lunch."

"All day?" Hope scoffed. "You two hooked up, didn't you?"

Rachel wanted to tell her friend that Shay Steel was the best lover in the world, but she knew Shay was adamant they should keep their involvement a secret until the trial was over. They had taken their relationship to a new level today and she didn't want to do anything that would break Shay's trust in her. "Stop being silly. If I'd been with Shay, I wouldn't have left her to come to the office."

"Did I hear my name being discussed?" Shay strolled into the library.

"Hope is just being silly," Rachel reiterated.

"I am buying a home," Shay volunteered. "Rachel was kind enough to accompany me on a detailed walk through before I sign away my life. I'm purchasing it furnished, and I wanted her opinion on the décor. I'm not very good with that sort of thing."

"How is Ensley?" Rachel changed the conversation.

"She is good. She just left before you arrived."

"I hired an assistant," Rachel told Shay. "She starts in the morning. She is divorced and just moved to OKC."

"That is great. Let's go to dinner and celebrate." Shay took Rachel's elbow and steered her toward the double doors as they waved goodbye to Hope.

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“Please tell me we aren’t really going to dinner,” Rachel pleaded as the elevator door opened into the garage.

“If we get hungry later, we will order Chinese,” Shay whispered in her ear.

“Do you have any idea how sexy it is when you breathe into my ear?”

“Of course, I do.” Shay grinned stealing a quick kiss. “Park your car in my garage. I’ll be right behind you.”

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by Erin Wade

## CHAPTER 43

### Barracuda Crawford, Defense Attorney



It had been a week since she filed the court request for Baird's trial and Shay was getting impatient. Baird's motion for bail had been denied so she didn't worry about him killing anyone else. She called her boss DA Bren Anthony. "Bren, can you do anything to speed up the Baird Lancaster trial?"

"Oh Jesus," Bren exclaimed. "We received that last Thursday. Didn't someone tell you that the trial is on the docket for Wednesday."

"Wednesday! This coming Wednesday? The day after tomorrow?"

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“Yes, that Wednesday,” Bren replied. “Wednesday at 8:00 a.m. Who do you want as your backup prosecutor?”

“My assistant David Bransom. He has collaborated with me on this case from the beginning. I won’t need to bring anyone up to speed.”

“Can you be ready Wednesday?” Bren asked. “I can have it rescheduled if you want.”

“No! Wednesday is perfect. We are ready. I’ll call Baird’s attorney for a meeting this afternoon and share the evidence we have against his client. Hopefully, I can find out what his defense strategy will be. Do you know who is representing him?”

Shay could hear the shuffling of papers as Bren searched for the information. “It looks like a public defender named Barri Crawford.”

“Seriously! With Baird’s fortune, the state is providing him a free attorney?”

“It seems that Baird has fallen on hard times,” Bren replied. “Sold his stock when it was at rock bottom then took the proceeds to purchase Bitcoin. It’s all in the attorney’s paperwork. I’ll send it over to you. Oh, and Shay, Barri stands for Barracuda Crawford.”

“Why does that not surprise me? Do you have any idea when my office will be ready? I love the detectives and Monty Masters, but I would like to be in your office so I can stay on top of things.”

“Last I heard was another month.”

“Please have someone bring over Baird’s file immediately. I don’t want to be blindsided by any last-minute filings by Barracuda,” she snickered.

##

Shay thumbed through the file from Bren’s office. Everything was in order. She dialed the number for Barri



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Crawford, and a pleasant voice answered the phone. “Barri Crawford’s office, how may I help you?”

“This is ADA Shay Steel may I speak with Mr. Crawford?”

“There is no Mr. Crawford,” the pleasant voice replied, “but I am Barri Crawford. Will I do?”

“I’m sure you will.” Shay bantered. “I want to see if we can get together this afternoon and exchange information. I can come to your office, or you can come to mine. Whatever is convenient for you.” She wanted to play nice with Barri because she knew that the short notice about the trial date would be reason to postpone the trial.

“Why don’t we enjoy ourselves,” Barri replied, “and do this over dinner? I can meet you at 5:30 p.m. at The Stock and Bond.”

“I will be there,” Shay assured her.

Shay disconnected the call then dialed Rachel. “I love the sound of your voice,” she said when the brunette answered.

“It is good to hear yours too.”

“I need to cancel our lunch date,” Shay said. “Baird’s public defender wants to exchange information over dinner, and I need to prepare some information for her.”

“Probably going to stick you for the bill,” Rachel giggled.

“Probably,” Shay agreed. “We are going to trial Wednesday at 8:00 a.m. I want to get a feel for his attorney and her strategy.”

“Why such short notice?”

“It’s a long story. I’ll tell you tonight. Love you.”

“I love you too, Shay.”

##

“Welcome back,” Denny greeted Shay and led her to a table. “I haven’t seen you in a while.”

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"We are snowed under in the DA's office. I haven't seen anyone much since Ensley's home burned to the ground."

"We've been out a couple of times. Ensley is doing okay." Denny informed her. "I do know she is crazy excited over Baird's upcoming trial. Do you know when it starts?"

Shay debated telling Denny the information but decided it would be a good thing to have Ensley covering the trial once it started. She didn't want to share the video that Josh had given them. It was her guilty verdict guarantee.

Denny gave a low wolf whistle as a striking brunette entered the restaurant. "Wow! I hope this is your dinner date."

*I wish she weren't*, Shay thought as the woman walked toward her table.

"ADA Shay Steel?"

"Yes," Shay gulped. Her foe had just become more formidable. She was hoping for a dowdy, older attorney not one that looked like a runway model. "You must be Barri Crawford. Please, sit."

"What would you like to drink?" Denny found her voice.

"I'll have a glass of Pinot Grigio," Barry ordered, "your house wine."

"The same," Shay chimed raising her brow at the other attorney's choice of wine.

Barri smiled. "You thought I'd order something expensive and stick you with the bill, didn't you?"

"The thought did cross my mind," Shay admitted. *You have high maintenance written all over you*, she thought.

"I haven't had the opportunity to visit with my client," Barri said. "I just received the assignment yesterday."

"I just learned we have a Wednesday court date," Shay replied. "I wanted to provide you with the information I have and what I will be using to prosecute Baird."

"Are you married?"

"No. What does that have to do with anything?"

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“Single attorneys tend to be more anal about their cases—more obsessive, driven to win.” Barri shrugged. “A-type personalities.”

“I know what anal means.” Shay silently cursed herself for blushing. “If you mean, do I like to win? The answer is yes. Baird is an animal, and I intend to see him locked away for life.”

“You’re not going for the death penalty?”

“No, life without parole is what he deserves.” Shay reiterated.

Denny served their wine and took their order.

Shay handed Barri the file that contained all the charges against Baird. “I’m sure you already have copies of my filings,” she said, “but I have one piece of evidence I intend to use that I feel will be detrimental for your client, so I haven’t made it public yet. Of course, I must disclose it to you. It is extremely graphic, and I’d rather show it in the privacy of my car, if you don’t mind.”

“Works for me.” Barri winked.

During dinner Barri asked a few questions as she scanned the charges. She closed the file and asked, “Why are you charging my client with murder?”

“Because he killed Kitty Ray.”

“Why are you so adamant about a prostitute?”

“She was still a human being. No one deserves what Baird did to her. If he had been successful with his arsons, he would have killed several others. They just got lucky.”

##

They finished their dinner, Shay paid the bill and led Barri to her car. She unlocked the doors and walked to the driver’s side.

“In your file is a thumb drive,” Shay informed the other attorney.

“Wine always makes me amorous,” Barri purred.

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“I have something that will cure that in a heartbeat.” Shay slid a thumb drive into her dash video and pushed play.

Barri gasped as she watched the demise of Kitty Ray. Her hand involuntarily went to her neck as she held her breath.

“I can’t defend this man. He is a monster,” Barri declared. “I couldn’t live with myself if I was responsible for putting him back on the streets.”

“Please don’t repeat that,” Shay begged. “It will taint the jury pool.”

“I won’t but I will ask to be removed from this case. I will give this file to the new person assigned to it. I’ll recommend a man defend Baird Lancaster.”

“The judge may make you defend him.”

“Then it will end in a mistrial,” Barri declared. “I cannot with a clear conscience defend him and I will say so in front of the jury.”

“I’m sorry,” Shay said. “If you ever want to work in the DA’s office, please give me a call. We need attorney’s like you. It was a pleasure to meet you. Please let me know who takes your place.”

Shay watched Barri walk to her car and wondered why she hadn’t returned the Lancaster file. *I must meet with the attorney that takes Baird’s case. I hope she gives everything to him so he or she has time to study the evidence. The case is cut and dried. Baird really has no defense.*

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## CHAPTER 44

### Jury Selection



Shay awakened to find Rachel staring down at her. She pulled the brunette on top of her and hugged her tightly. “Did you sleep okay?” she asked.

“Like a rock. I was totally relaxed after that full-body massage you gave me last night.” Rachel snuggled into Shay’s arms. “I wish we could stay like this and lock out the world.”

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“Mm-hmm, but you know today is the beginning of Baird’s trial.”

“When it is over, please come directly to me.” Rachel said.

“I will beat a path to your arms,” Shay promised. “Today will be motions filed by the defense and jury selection. The actual trial begins Thursday. Baird won’t be in the courtroom until then.”

“Want to shower with me?” Rachel asked.

“Always.”

##

Shay and David Bransom were seated at the prosecution table when Baird’s attorney and entourage entered the courtroom. Shay was surprised to see the group led by Barracuda Crawford who wore a low cut, fitted dress that hugged her perfect body to just below the knees.

Shay raised her eyebrows and Barri Smiled. “It is nice to see you again counselor.”

Everyone stood as the judge entered the room, took his place, and motioned for them to sit.

“Ms. Steel, Counselor Crawford has requested a private audience in my chambers with just the three of us. If the two of you will follow my clerk, we will get on with this trial.”

Barri and Shaw followed the clerk into the Judge’s chambers and motioned for them to sit in the two chairs across the desk from the judge.

“Good morning,” Judge Johnathan Right greeted them. “Counselor Steel, Ms. Crawford has presented me with a recording that I find disturbing. I’d like to play it for you and get your input.”

Shay nodded, fearing the vile video of Kitty’s death would be thrown out as evidence. The judge pushed the play button, and her own words filled the room. *“I’m sorry. If you ever want to work in the DA’s office, please give me a call.”*

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*We need attorney's like you. It was a pleasure to meet you. Please let me know who takes your place."*

"Is that you?" the judge asked.

"Yes sir," Shay replied.

"Counselor Crawford said you offered her a job in the DA's office if she would withdraw from this case. That is considered a bribe."

"This is the entire conversation, your honor," Shay said pulling her cellphone from her blazer pocket and pushing play.

*"I can't defend this man. He is a monster," Barri declared. "I couldn't live with myself if I was responsible for putting him back on the streets."*

*"Please don't repeat that," Shay begged. "It will taint the jury pool."*

*"I won't but I will ask to be removed from this case. I will give this file to the new person assigned to it. I'll recommend a man defend Baird Lancaster."*

*"The judge may make you defend him."*

*"Then it will end in a mistrial," Barri declared. "I cannot with a clear conscience defend him and I will say so in front of the jury."*

*"I'm sorry," Shay said. "If you ever want to work in the DA's office, please give me a call. We need attorney's like you. It was a pleasure to meet you. Please let me know who takes your place."*

The judge glared at Barri. "Ms. Crawford, you have misrepresented your conversation with Counselor Steel. I am fining you five thousand dollars. If you ever lie to this court again I will personally see that your license to practice law is revoked."

Barri stood and scurried from the room.

"Thank you, Judge," Shay said.

"It is a delight to preside over your first trial in our state, Counselor Steel. Good luck."

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The jury selection was halfway completed when they broke for lunch. As Shay and David stood to leave, Barri approached her. "I'm sorry about that little misunderstanding."

"No problem. It showed me exactly the kind of person I'm dealing with. You are the perfect attorney for Baird Lancaster."

"I'm truly sorry." Barri insisted.

"You know what hurts the most?" Shay asked.

"No."

"That you would think I was stupid enough to have a conversation with you and not record it."

David followed Shay from the courtroom. "Evil really can be beautiful," he commented as he caught up with his boss.

By the end of the day, the jury and substitutes had been selected. At the request of both attorneys the judge had agreed to clear the courtroom of all visitors and news personnel during the showing of Kitty's murder video.

"Tomorrow we get down to business," Shay informed David. "We will lay the groundwork with the arson cases and end with the video of Kitty's murder."

"Then we get to see Ms. Crawford in action." David grinned. "Why did the judge call the two of you into his office this morning?"

"Nothing I wasn't prepared for," Shay said. "Always remember when you are alone with another attorney, record your conversation."



## CHAPTER 45

### Bargaining with the Devil



Shay listened attentively as the judge gave the preliminary instructions to the jury then glanced at her opening statement one more time. The judge nodded to her, and she stood up and walked to the jury box.

“Good morning Your Honor, ladies, and gentlemen of the jury. My name is Shay Steel. We are here today because Baird Lancaster maliciously murdered Kitty Ray and is also charged with two counts of arson. I intend to prove to you

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beyond a reasonable doubt that Mr. Lancaster committed the crimes he has been charged with.

“We will provide you proof that Baird Lancaster planted a bomb under the SUV his estranged wife and her friends often traveled in. We will also prove that he set fire to the home of Oklahoma podcaster Ensley Flynn. Most importantly, we will present irrefutable evidence that Baird Lancaster beat Kitty Ray to death with his bare hands.

“Based on the evidence we will provide you, at the end of this trial I will ask you to find Baird Lancaster guilty of arson and the brutal murder of Kitty Ray as charged in this indictment. Thank you.”

Barri stood for a moment and frowned as if trying to decide what to say. “Good morning. My name is Barri Crawford, and it is my pleasure to represent Mr. Baird Lancaster, a pillar of our community and an upstanding member of Oklahoma City society.

“Pay close attention to Ms. Steel’s evidence and decide for yourself if it is factual or hearsay or just fabricated because I am here to ask you for a not-guilty verdict for Mr. Baird Lancaster former candidate for Governor of Oklahoma.”

Shay felt her stomach flip as she once again thought about the arson evidence. She had a sinking feeling that the cigarette butt and crumpled cigarette pack with Baird’s DNA and fingerprints might be the same ones Hope had saved in a baggie. But why would Hope want to frame Baird?

She decided to introduce the two fires first then end with Josh Moore’s testimony and his video of Baird killing Kitty. Hopefully, the video would be damning enough Barri wouldn’t question the flimsy arson evidence.

Although Josh was on the prosecution’s witness list, only Shay and Monty knew he had recanted his confession and would testify against Baird.

Shay introduced the cigarette butt and Marlboro pack verified by Hope, Ensley, and Monty as being found in the

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parking garage. ME Pattie Chambers testified on the DNA and fingerprints found on the evidence at the scene.

“Your Honor, in the spirit of full disclosure, I need to tell the jury that Rachel Lancaster and I were also at the scene of Hope Ford’s SUV explosion. The five of us feel that the explosion was rigged to kill Baird’s estranged wife. The rest of us were just collateral damage.”

A twitter ran through the courtroom. Shay wasn’t sure if it was about Baird’s willingness to murder four innocent people to kill his estranged wife or the fact that the five women were friends.

Barri jumped to her feet. “Your Honor is Ms. Steel, the prosecutor, or a witness for the state? I move that she be removed from this case.”

“Counselor Steel, do you want to answer Ms. Crawford’s question?”

“Your Honor, I moved to Oklahoma City and joined the District Attorney’s office about six months ago. I met Lieutenant Montgomery Masters, and the Chief Librarian Hope Ford two days after I arrived. They have been wonderful friends to me. They introduced me to Ensley Flynn and Rachel Lancaster a few days later. The five of us are good friends so I have been involved with and almost a victim of the attempts on Mrs. Lancaster’s and Ms. Flynn’s lives. I have worked with Lieutenant Masters during the entire investigation of Baird Lancaster, so I have first-hand knowledge of his actions and the reason he is being tried for murder. I would think our justice system would want someone who takes the time to check and verify before prosecuting.”

“Your motion is denied, Ms. Crawford.” The judge said. He recessed the court after Shay’s declaration. “Court will reconvene at 8:00 a.m. tomorrow morning.”

Shay packed her things into her computer bag, said goodnight to David, and headed for the door.

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“Shay, wait up,” Barri called out. “I thought we might discuss this case over drinks.”

“Isn’t that like drinking with the enemy?”

“No, we are thinking about a plea bargain. Baird almost fainted when I showed him the video of Kitty. He wants to claim it is a fake made by your friend Ensley Flynn, but I had my forensic guy check it out. I know it is legit, but we both know your arson charges are worthless. Your evidence in the vehicle bombing can be explained away and I doubt you have any evidence in the house fire.”

“If he confesses, I’ll settle for life in prison,” Shay replied.

“We’re thinking less time than that—like five years with parole in one.” Barri smiled.

“Nope.”

“You know I will win this case,” Barri threatened.

“Let’s settle it out of the courtroom and get it over with.”

Shay chuckled. “Goodnight Barri.”

##

As she pulled from the courthouse parking garage, Shay called Rachel.

“Shay, I’ve been dying to hear from you,” the brunette answered.

“Hello to you too, Rachel. Are you still in your office?”

“Yes. Monty, Hope, and Ensley just arrived. Everyone wants to go to dinner. Is that okay?”

“I’d really rather go home with you, but I guess people will begin talking about us if we become recluses.”

“Um-hum,” Rachel hummed into the phone. “I will meet you at the OKC Grill in thirty minutes. The others are going to help Hope with some business so we can visit over drinks before they arrive.”

“A few minutes alone with you sounds good. I love you.”

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by Erin Wade

“Yes,” Rachel responded.

##

Driving to OKC Grill Shay couldn’t stop thinking about how sneaky Barri was. She called Bren. “Hey boss is Barri Crawford a public defender?”

Bren laughed in her ear. “Barracuda Crawford is one of the most devious women you will ever meet. Let me guess, she told you she was assigned to Lancaster’s case by the court.”

“Yep, but I’m beginning to suspect that is a lie.”

“My guess is that David Lancaster hired her to defend his son after Baird’s check to the original defense attorney bounced to the moon and back. Baird being convicted of murder will bring shame to the Lancaster name. I’m sure the old man would rather see his son get the death sentence than have him serve life in prison. A dead son—no matter the reason—tends to bring one sympathy. A lifer is a constant reminder of the disgrace the old man won’t outlive.”

“Baird Lancaster has no shame,” Shay responded.

“Just be careful with Crawford. She is sneaky.”

“Thanks, boss.”

Shay hung up and pulled the thought that had been festering at the back of her mind to the forefront. *I shouldn’t be sleeping with Baird’s estranged wife, she thought.*

*If Barracuda finds out we are lovers, she will find a way to have me removed from the case. It would be embarrassing for Rachel and me.*

She pulled into a parking place in front of the Grill and was pleasantly surprised when Rachel parked beside her. She had to admit her heart skipped several beats every time she saw the brunette beauty. She vowed to discuss her conundrum with Rachel.

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“Hey,” Shay said as Rachel approached. “Don’t be overly friendly with me. I have a defense attorney that would love to have me thrown off Baird’s case.”

Rachel nodded and followed Shay into the restaurant overcoming the desire to touch her. They found a secluded table in the corner of the establishment and sat across the table from each other. “I hate this,” Rachel said.

“So do I, but I am so close to sending Baird away for life I don’t want to miss this opportunity. I want him out of your life forever.”

“So do I,” Rachel admitted, “but sometimes being with you means more to me than being rid of Baird.”

“How is your divorce coming along?”

“Viv said he won’t consent to anything so she will get a divorce decree from the court. Then she will have a professional process server deliver the decree in person.”

“That’s it?”

“Viv said it is easier than dealing with him in divorce court. Since I am asking for nothing but my freedom, there are no property, children or settlements involved. I just want out.

“How is your murder trial going? Monty won’t discuss it.”

“It’s hard to tell. Bren just informed me I am up against one of the most deceitful defense attorneys in OKC.”

“What’s his name?”

“Her name is Barri Crawford.” Shay said.

“Barracuda Crawford,” Rachel responded.

“Yeah, who names their baby daughter Barracuda?”

“She is David Lancaster’s personal attorney. He keeps her on a retainer. She has gotten Baird out of trouble on several occasions. She always finds a way to make things go away.”

“She can’t make murder go away,” Shay replied. “Not this time. Which brings me to our relationship.”

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“You don’t have to tell me.” Rachel’s eyes glistened as she fought back tears. “We need to stay away from each other until the trial is over.”

“It is for the best. She will have me removed from the case if she finds out we are lovers.”

Rachel smiled. “We are lovers, aren’t we?”

“Yes, but I hope we become so much more after this trial is over.”

“As do I. I guess it means I will be sleeping at Monty’s tonight.”

Shay nodded. “It will be over soon.”

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## CHAPTER 46

**Jane Doe**



Baird Lancaster's trial was the circus Jane had hoped it would be. She prayed the judge wouldn't acquiesce to the defense's request for a closed trial. She wanted the world to know the kind of monster Baird Lancaster was.

When she had learned that a video of Kitty's murder was uploaded to the cloud, it hadn't taken her long to locate it. She had done everything she could think of short of



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raining down a plague of locust on Baird. Unfortunately, she didn't have that ability.

Reporters from local and national news stations vied with podcasters and social influencers for videos and quick comments from the prosecution and defense. While Baird's attorney was always ready with a nonsensical quip about her client's innocence, the prosecution only replied, "No comment."

She debated anonymously posting the murder video on all social media outlets but decided against it. *Too many children have access to the platforms*, she thought.

She had done everything she could do to persecute Baird now it was up to the court system to mete out his justice.

##

At 5:00 a.m. Shay gave up trying to sleep. She was astounded at how quickly she had become accustomed to sleeping curled around Rachel. She had lost count of the number of times she had reached for the brunette during the night to only find a cold empty bed. She hoped the insomnia didn't last the duration of the trial. She needed to be at the top of her game to defeat Barri.

A notification from her phone reminded her she needed to change the thumb drive in her vehicle. "I might as well do it now," she mumbled as she slipped on her slippers.

She switched the thumb drives and tossed the latest one into her computer bag with the one recorded before it. She showered, recalling the last time she had lathered Rachel's shoulders and kissed her way down to the small of her back. A spark shot through her as she realized how much Rachel was a part of her life. "She is my life," Shay whispered into the spray of hot water.

##

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Hope Ford tucked herself away in her usual place—the far back corner of the courtroom behind the prosecution. She had taken her vacation from the library to see for herself how the trial was going and to watch Shay in action. Although she had attended every day, she also rewatched the trial every night on Ensley’s podcast. Ensley had recorded every moment of the activity. Being able to pause and study the expressions on the player’s faces was priceless.

She watched her own testimony from the day before and was upset to see Barri Crawford scribbling notes in her folder as fast as Hope could talk. She knew that meant she would be cross examined. *I hope I don’t do anything to hurt Shay’s case, she thought.*

Monty was allowed in the courtroom but was required to sit directly behind the prosecution as she was a star witness who had been involved in every aspect of the case. Josh Moore would be the final witness for the prosecution and was being held in a nearby cell with guards posted in front of it.

##

Shay hurried up the steps of the courthouse and briefly wondered why the institution had so many steps to climb. It was a challenge just to get into the building. She was an hour early and was glad to see very few others were in the building. She slipped into an empty room and pulled out her computer to quickly type thoughts she’d had on her trip to the courthouse.

With forty-five minutes to kill, she pulled the Tesla’s thumb drives from her purse and popped one of them into her computer. She fast-forwarded the video to the end and gasped as Baird Lancaster’s face appeared in the frames. She paused the recording where her car had self-parked in front of Ensley’s house. She pushed play and stared at the screen. She had left her car at Ensley’s because it wouldn’t start and

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had armed the sentry on it. She watched as a figure ran from the house across the street and sloshed liquid across the front of Ensley's house. The culprit poured a line of the fluid onto the ground for five feet as he backed from the house. He flicked a grill lighter and held the flame to the liquid. Fire shot toward the house, and it burst into flames as Baird Lancaster turned and looked directly into the camera lens of Shay's car.

"I've got you, you rat bastard," she huffed as she replaced the thumb drive with the other one. Just as she suspected, the car's cameras had videoed Baird and Brute attaching a combustible device beneath Hope's SUV.

She made a copy of each thumb drive and walked to the courtroom. As she expected Barri was already at her desk.

"I have additional evidence I need to share with you," Shay informed her.

"If this is a last-minute trick, don't waste your time!" Barri smiled sweetly for the cameras already in the room.

Shay gave her the thumb drive. "You decide, Barracuda."

Shay took her seat beside David and filled out an evidence envelope. "I have videos of Baird setting fire to Ensley's home and booby-trapping Hope's SUV," she whispered.

"Wow," David gasped. "Where did you get it?"

"I was at Ensley's watching her podcast that night and my car wouldn't start when I was ready to leave, so I left it, and Monty dropped me at my apartment. My car's security cameras videoed Baird setting fire to Ensley's house. It also recorded Brute and Baird rigging Hope's vehicle."

##

Shay tamped down her excitement as the judge made his usual opening remarks then she asked to approach the bench. "Your Honor, we have new evidence we want to introduce."

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She showed the judge the evidence envelope and said, "It is a video of Baird Lancaster setting fire to Ensley Flynn's home and a video of Brute and Baird rigging explosives beneath Hope Ford's SUV. It was taken by my vehicle's security cameras."

A murmur ran through the onlookers as Shay handed the envelope to the court clerk. "If it pleases the court, I'd like to show the videos to the jury and request a recess while we bring in video equipment to facilitate the viewing."

David Lancaster, Barri, and Baird had their heads together discussing the new evidence. Barri nodded then addressed the judge.

"Your Honor, I'd like to request a meeting with the prosecution in your office while we wait for the video equipment," Barry said.

"Granted." the judge gaveled. "Court will take a ten-minute recess."

Barri scurried into the judge's office wanting to talk before Shay entered, but the prosecutor was on her heels.

"Your Honor," Barri began "My client wishes to enter a guilty plea in regard to the arson charges if the prosecution will drop the murder charges."

Shay opened her mouth to decline but the judge held up his hand stopping her reply.

"Two arson charges hardly equal one murder charge, Ms. Crawford" the judge replied. "I will not allow that plea."

"Sir, at least agree to clear the courtroom when the video of Kitty Ray's murder is shown to the jury," Barri pushed.

"Why?"

"It is extremely graphic and nauseous," Barri admitted. "It is something the Lancaster family does not want splashed all over the news media."

"No," Shay exclaimed. "Baird Lancaster is a monster. The world needs to know what he really is. They need to know the real man who aspired to be governor of our state."

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“We will not try this case in my office,” the judge declared. “Please return to the decorum of the courtroom.”

##

Back in the courtroom, Shay explained to the jury what they were about to view, then David pushed the play button. Baird’s frequent full-faced views into the cameras left no doubt in anyone’s mind that he had set fire to Ensley’s house and Hope’s Suburban.

“I will be suing the bastard for a new home,” Ensley mumbled.

At the end of the video, Barri stood and addressed the judge. “Your Honor, in view of this evidence, I would like to request that the court recess for today to give me the opportunity to confer with my client and the prosecution.”

The judge scowled, then banged his gavel. “Court is adjourned. We will reconvene at 8:00 a.m. in the morning.”

Shay packed her computer bag and smiled at David. “We are in the driver’s seat,” she said softly. “Is Barracuda walking my way?”

“Yes.” David smiled.

“We seriously want to plea bargain,” Barri exclaimed. “David Lancaster doesn’t want that disgusting video out in public. Baird will plead guilty, but only if he gets the death penalty.”

“Not a chance,” Shay scoffed.

“Seriously!” Barri screamed. “You obviously want the most severe penalty the state has. The death sentence is it.”

“I do wish you would stop insulting me, Barri. This isn’t my first rodeo. I’ve ridden bulls tougher and smarter than you.” Shay grabbed her bag and took David’s arm. “Let’s go get a drink.”

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## CHAPTER 47

### The Killer Who Almost Became Governor



“Why didn’t you accept the death penalty?” David asked as they walked two blocks to the Press Club.

“The death sentence triggers an automatic appeal to the Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals,” Shay shared her reasoning. “The appeal examines trial records looking for errors that might have affected the verdict or sentencing, including inappropriate prosecutorial actions, improper jury instructions, and a sloppy or lazy defense. I am certain Barri

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would find some way to manipulate her way into an appeal and eventually parole for Baird. I want him to die behind bars.”

“Why do you hate him so?”

“You would have to see how he beat his wife to understand,” Shay exclaimed. “And what he did to Kitty Ray is unconscionable. He is an immoral barbarian.”

“How could anyone beat someone as lovely as Rachel Lancaster,” David said. “It would take a monster to mistreat her. She is beautiful.”

Shay nodded then changed the subject because she had a feeling David had a crush on her woman.

“The only penalty I will accept is life without parole,” she declared. “I want him to live with the fear of being beaten and molested every day.”

“It is what he deserves,” David agreed pulling open the door to Tammy’s Taproom.

They found a quiet place where patrons wouldn’t overhear their discussion.

“There are so many ways criminals can avoid punishment,” David said after the server took their order.

“Yes, insidious ways,” Shay agreed as her phone flashed Hope’s pretty face. “Hello. Yes, David and I are having a drink in Tammy’s Taproom. Sure, you can join us.”

“Hope Ford is going to join us,” Shay explained. “She has been in the courtroom every day.”

“I noticed her.” David smiled. “She’s the petite brunette in the far back corner.”

##

They were on their second drink when four attractive women descended on their table. Shay’s heart fluttered as Rachel flashed a beautiful smile. “Look who I found,” Hope sang out as they pulled chairs around the table to join David and Shay.

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“We cannot discuss the trial,” Shay admonished them. Ensley zipped her lips. “I promise to only broadcast things I learn on my own.”

“Fair enough,” Shay agreed.

“I have good news,” Rachel said softly.

“Share,” Hope encouraged.

“My divorce is final.”

“That is incredible news,” Monty agreed. “Viv Dix is one hell of a divorce attorney.”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

Shay listened to her friends share their lives and daily activities as she stole glances at Rachel. Every inch of her ached to hold the brunette in her arms and hug her as tightly as possible. She wanted to spend the rest of her life with the beauty seated across from her. She jerked as the toe of a high-heel shoe slowly dragged up her calf. *Lord, have mercy, woman*, she thought as Rachel sweetly smiled at her.

The six of them shared anecdotes and their thoughts over dinner and drinks. “David and I need to call it a night,” Shay said checking her watch. “It is amazing how fast time passes when you are in the company of people you love.”

##

Hope pulled her new Suburban into the garage and quickly closed it. Since Baird had planted an explosive device under her vehicle, she had become nervous about being alone at night. Monty stayed with her most nights, but Rachel was staying with the lieutenant until the trial was over and Baird was locked away in the state prison.

She showered and got ready for bed. She stacked her pillows against the headboard, pulled her laptop onto her lap, and opened her notebook containing her trial notes. She began typing, adding to her story titled *Baird Lancaster: The killer who almost became Governor*. She smiled to herself as she read the book’s title.



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Hidden away in the city library, Hope had lost count of the books she had read. But she had written exactly none. She was determined to change that. She was determined to champion her friends Shay Steel, Montgomery Masters, and Ensley Flynn for their roles in bringing the monster Baird Lancaster to justice.

She blushed when she thought about how she had used her womanly wiles to get Monty to let her see the Kitty Ray death video. She prayed that Shay wouldn't let the judge clear the courtroom when the recording was presented to the jury. She wanted the world to see how vicious Baird was. Anyone who snubbed out a cigarette on the top of a beautiful mahogany desk deserved to be exposed for the deviant he was.

She had finished her research on Baird—where he went to private school and the university he had attended, his marriage to Rachel. Monty gave her information about the many assault charges that had been filed against him and how his wealthy family had made them all go away. Waving a checkbook was better than waving a magic wand. It was true you could buy anything if you had enough money and David Baird had money's mother.

Hope knew her book would be a bestseller. She had already signed a contract with a large publishing company that promised to release it immediately after Baird's incarceration. Her final chapter would be an interview with Baird in his prison cell. She only had to talk the authorities into letting her talk to him and getting his agreement to the interview. Hopefully, Shay and Monty can help facilitate the meeting.

She finished writing the chapter on today's trial, then turned off her laptop. *I can't wait to see what tomorrow brings*, she thought.

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## CHAPTER 48

### The Face Off



Shay's phone began ringing before her alarm went off. She answered it hoping it was Rachel. "Shay, please work with me." Barri's voice dripped with honey as she secretly hoped she had awakened the prosecutor.

"What time is it?" Shay mumbled.

"Time for you to be reasonable," Barri insisted. "Meet me for breakfast and let's work out a plea bargain we can present to the judge this morning."

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“Give me an hour. I’ll meet you in the Courthouse Café down the block from the court.”

“I know where it is,” Barri smirked. “Don’t be late.”

Shay showered, dried her hair, and selected her most flattering business suit for the meeting. It flitted across her mind that Barri might be setting her up to die. The Lancasters weren’t above anything. She slipped on her shoulder holster and racked her Glock hoping she wouldn’t need to use it. She considered calling Monty then decided she could handle the situation herself.

Barracuda Crawford was at the coffee shop when Shay arrived. “I already have your coffee,” she called when Shay walked in.

Again, paranoia took over as Shay thought the coffee might be spiked. “No offence Barri, but I’ll get my own coffee,” she replied walking to the coffee bar and ordering her drink.

“The more for me,” Barri smirked as she pulled the cup toward her.

“What are you offering today?”

“I’ve been with David Lancaster. I have a very lucrative offer for you.”

“As in a bribe? Surely you know me better than that. I’ll see you in court.”

“Wait,” Barri caught her arm. “Tell me what we need to do to keep from dragging this mess through courts and creating slop for the news hogs lined up at our trough.”

“I want Baird in prison for life with no chance of parole. Nothing else will do. I won’t agree to the death penalty because we both know his father wants this to go away and would rather have a dead son than a jailbird for life. I want the Lancasters to live with the shame of Baird’s crimes. They enabled him and still do. And if you are recording this, so am I.”

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“Let me talk to the Lancasters. I know they want the Kitty video squashed, but I have a feeling you will insist that the jury see it and I am sure the judge will agree with you.”

“I will.”

“If we agree to your terms, will you destroy the video?”

“I can’t promise,” Shay admitted. “It was submitted to the court as evidence, and I have no control over it now. Also, you have a copy. I have no idea what you will do with it. If you agree to my terms, the only thing I can guarantee is we can dismiss the jury and there will be no public showing of the recording. I can’t guarantee it won’t get out. It was on the cloud and probably still is. I’m sure the Lancasters can find a way to destroy it.”

“Do you have a copy?”

“Yes, I will be happy to turn it over to you. Once the plea is signed and I will have no further use for it.”

“Okay, I’ll call David Lancaster. If he is agreeable, I will draw up the document and Baird can sign it in front of the judge. I’ll meet you in the courtroom.”

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## CHAPTER 49

### Telling the World



Ensley arrived early to set up her recording equipment. Today would be the day the prosecution showed the snuff film to the jury. She had been advertising the coming of the murder video all week and her watchers were clamoring for the grisly details. She watched the heated conversation between Shay and Barri as they waited for the jury to enter the room.

Barri was waving around several sheets of paper and stopping to scribble notes on them. *God, I hope they don't*

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*arrive at a plea bargain. I know Shay will not agree to anything but life without parole, but Barracuda is really pushing something.*

Ensley strolled toward the two lawyers, but a court bailiff stopped her. "You must stay in the press section, ma'am," he said.

Ensley ambled back toward her equipment as Hope entered the room. Hope hurried to her usual seat in the back corner and opened a steno pad. She scribbled the date at the top of a page. Ensley slid into the chair beside her.

"Do you know anything I need to know?" she asked Hope.

"Nope. I just got here, but it looks like Shay and Barri are arguing about something."

"I hope they aren't hammering out a plea bargain," Ensley whispered.

"That would suck," Hope agreed. "I'm looking forward to seeing the Kitty video."

"The ghoul in me is waiting for it too," Ensley agreed. "My followers are howling for it. I've heard it is a combination of extreme sex and a snuff video."

Hope stifled a laugh. "It *is* ghoulish to want to see a video of a woman repeatedly having sex with two men and then one of them beating her to death. Now that I've voiced it, maybe I don't want to see it."

"They're bringing in the jury," Ensley noted. "Gotta' get to my press station. Let's have dinner tonight. I'll pick you up at seven."

She was gone before Hope could reply.

The Judge called the court to order and nodded to Shay to continue her prosecution.

"Your Honor, the prosecution and the defense have reached a plea bargain that is agreeable to both of us. May we adjourn until after lunch to give us time to produce the necessary papers for signatures and finalize this trial?"

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“Of course,” the judge replied. “It will save the taxpayers thousands of dollars and allow the jury to go home. Court is recessed until 1:00p.m. Hopefully we can conclude this messy trial today.”

The sensationalizing press groaned in unison as they realized they might not get to see Kitty’s film after all.

##

After lunch Judge Arthur March read the plea agreement worked out by the two attorneys. He raised his eyes and slowly scanned the three people in front of him. “There is no one in my office but the four of us,” he noted. “If anyone has a question, now is the time to tell me.” Silence greeted him.

“Baird Lancaster you are pleading guilty to attempted murder of your ex-wife Rachel Lancaster and her friends, Hope Ford, Montgomery Masters, Shay Steel and Ensley Flynn. Is that true?”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“And you are pleading guilty to the brutal murder of Kitty Ray. Is that true?”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

Baird showed no remorse or fear. He was certain his father would find a way to get him out of his current unpleasant situation.

“Baird Lancaster have you read this plea agreement in its entirety and agree with the document you are about to sign?”

“I do, Your Honor.”

The judge pushed the signature page toward Baird. “Sign above your name. Counselors, each of you do the same.” He motioned for two of the court bailiff’s guarding his chamber door to sign in the spaces designated for witnesses.

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The three followed Judge March into the courtroom and sat down at their desks.

Judge March called the court to order and announced that the parties involved had reached a plea agreement whereby Baird Lancaster pleaded guilty and would spend the rest of his life in prison without parole. He thanked the jurors for their time and dismissed them.

A collective moan of disappointment went around the courtroom and was loudest in the press section. "What an anti-climax," Ensley complained. "My followers want to see the snuff film."

"Bailiffs, please clear the courtroom," Judge March commanded. "I am tired of the jackals howling over the carcass of Kitty Ray."

Barri sauntered to Shay. "Can we have that drink now, Counselor?" She smiled. "I'm harmless when I'm not in attorney mode."

Shay laughed. "Sure. I have a feeling we will face off on many occasions in the future."

"Hopefully not on cases as gruesome as Baird Lancaster's."

"Are you going to file appeals?" Shay asked.

"No, David said to forget about Baird, and I will have no problem doing that."



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## CHAPTER 50

### Saving Face



Mary Lancaster straightened her husband's tie. "I am looking forward to seeing Louise Gideon tonight. Her group has officially approved me for membership in Daughters of the American Revolution."

David hugged his wife. "Thankfully, this mess with Baird is behind us. It took a lot of money and several bribes to squash that hideous video of the prostitute, but we have survived the sordid affair unscathed."

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Mary tiptoed to kiss her husband. “You always take care of everything. I don’t know where we failed Baird but thank heaven I have you. You always protect our good name.”

David smiled and followed Mary to the waiting car. “Get us as close as possible to the Mezzanine Dining level,” he instructed their chauffeur. “We’re attending a fundraiser for the Art Museum.”

Mary chatted on about her induction into the DAR while David tried to put Baird out of his mind. Baird never understood the concept of *taking one* for the family name. He didn’t appreciate how important it was to be lauded as one of OKC’s most influential families.

Mary stopped chattering and squeezed her husband’s hand. “Are you thinking about Baird, dear?”

“Yes. I’m thinking I never want to hear his name again. He is dead to me.”

Mary’s hand fluttered to her heart. “Oh, good. I was afraid you were fretting about him.”

“No, I sat in court today and watched him grinning like a fool. He thinks I can get him out of this mess. Mary, I saw that creature’s face and watched the video of him and Brute with her. It was the most repulsive thing I’ve ever seen. I never want to see or hear from Baird again. As far as I am concerned. He is dead.”

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## CHAPTER 51

### Time for Us



“It is finished,” Shay said softly when Rachel answered the phone. “I’m on my way to get you.”

“Hurry,” Rachel encouraged her. “I’ve missed you something awful.”

Shay parked in the library garage and ran to the elevator. She couldn’t wait to hold Rachel in her arms and tell her how much she loved her.

The elevator doors opened and framed the most beautiful woman Shay had ever seen in her life. She stared

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as Rachel pulled her into her arms and kissed her so passionately it made her toes curl into the soles of her shoes.

“Don’t kiss me like that again, or they will arrest us for rolling around on the floor in the library lobby.” Shay warned. “Can you leave now?”

Rachel pushed her back into the elevator and kissed her again as the doors closed. Shay pushed the down button then fully participated in a smoking hot kiss. “I’m going to kiss you from the tip of your toes to the top of your head,” Shay promised as the elevator door opened into the garage.

Holding hands, they ran to Shay’s car, slipped in, and started kissing again. “I can’t keep my hands off you,” Rachel murmured.

“You’ll get no complaints from me,” Shay laughed as she started the car and pulled from the garage. It had been a long time since she had felt so happy and carefree.

Shay’s phone rang and Rachel turned it off. “Whoever this is, they can wait until tomorrow afternoon.”

“Afternoon?” Shay wiggled her eyebrows. “Don’t underestimate my stamina.”

“Or the next day.” Rachel’s golden laughter filled the car.

Shay pulled the car into her garage, lowered the door, and jumped from the driver’s seat. She and Rachel met halfway, and the kissing began again. “I can’t wait to get my hands on you,” Shay murmured as she kissed down Rachel’s neck to the top of her bosom.

“I’m gonna ride you like I bought you at an Amazon auction.” Rachel warned.

“Bring it on, baby.”

A trail of clothes was scattered from the garage entry, across the kitchen, living room, and into the bedroom.

When they reached the bed, Shay fell onto her back pulling naked Rachel on top of her. “Nothing feels as good as silky skin against silky skin,” She cooed as Rachel straddled her. “Unless it’s hot—”

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Rachel captured Shay's lips, molding her own against the sweet softness of her lovers. She slipped the tip of her tongue between Shay's teeth and teased the blonde's tongue until Shay flipped her over on her back and slipped her knee between Rachel's legs.

"Yessss," Rachel hissed as she clasped her thighs tightly on Shay's leg and began to undulate on it.

"You are so wet," Shay whispered in her ear as she pressed her entire body hard against Rachel.

"I am so sorry," Rachel muttered as she slid up and down on Shays leg. "I can't wait."

Shay licked a pert nipple then pulled it between her lips and sucked as Rachel screamed her name and begged for more. "Suck me and Fu—Shay," she screamed. "Shay!" as she dug her fingers into the blonde's back pulling her closer as she rode out her orgasm. Shay found herself having her own earth-shaking experience as Rachel clutched her tighter.

"So good," Rachel cooed. "You make me feel so good."

Shay fell onto her back gasping for air. "Yes, this is what I've been missing. God, I love you."

Both lay still trying to catch their breath. "I am miserable without you," Rachel admitted.

"I feel the same way," Shay agreed. "Life without you isn't worth living." She blew out a deep breath. "I can't breathe. You are something else, honey."

After several minutes, their breathing returned to normal. "Now that we've done our imitation of two horny teenagers, would you like to talk about your day?" Rachel asked running her fingers lightly from Shay's navel up her abdomen and between her breasts.

"This is the only part of my day I can remember," Shay declared. "If you want to talk to me, you must stop touching me."

"Talk or touch," Rachel weighed her choices and smiled seductively. "We can talk later."

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##

The sun was high in the sky when they awoke the next day. Shay rolled over and wrapped herself around Rachel. “Good morning, darling,” she murmured against silky brown hair. “Did you sleep well?”

“Like a rock,” Rachel giggled. “Every inch of me feels like I’ve ridden a bicycle a hundred miles.”

“And I thought you were teasing when you said you were going to ride me like you owned me.” Shay chuckled.

“I can’t believe I said that out loud,” Rachel blushed.

“You do own me you know.” Shay admitted. “Everything about you lets me know you are my woman. I hope I make you feel as safe with me.”

“I felt safe the minute Monty introduced us. There was just something about you.”

“My long blonde hair and incredibly good looks,” Shay teased.

“And don’t forget your ample breasts,” Rachel joined in. Then became serious. “And eyes that capture one’s soul. I would climb mountains and swim oceans to gaze into your eyes. They are mesmerizing.”

Shay sat up pulling Rachel with her. “Marry me!” She exclaimed. “I love you and I will always do everything in my power to make you happy and protect you.”

“Of course,” Rachel smirked, “I thought it was understood I’d marry you. I don’t fall into bed with every beautiful woman that comes along.”

Shay laughed out loud. “Life with you is going to be so wonderful.”

The alarm on Rachel’s cellphone sounded making both of them jerk. She looked at the instrument then muttered, “Oh no.”

“What is wrong?”

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"I'm the keynote speaker at the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce tonight. It is about ways to detect fraud in your business."

"That's great," Shay responded proudly.

"Tonight," Rachel squeaked.

"What time?"

"Dinner at 7:00 p.m. then my presentation. I completely forgot."

Shay looked at her watch. "It is 5:00 p.m." she pointed out. "We can make that easily."

"Do you want to go with me?" Rachel asked hesitantly.

"I want to be wherever you are for the rest of my life," Shay declared. "Come on, we can shower together."

##

"You are beautiful," Shay complimented as she followed Rachel into the large dining room. "Ah, I see my boss is here."

Bren rushed to the couple. "Impressive job, Shay. Everyone is talking about you."

"Bren, this is Rachel's night. We can talk about the trial tomorrow."

"I promise," Bren raised her right hand as if swearing on the Bible. "But you must sit with us."

"Do sit with Bren," Rachel encouraged. "I must sit at the head table, and I don't have a seat for a plus one."

Shay squeezed her arm. "I'm good, but don't let it happen again." She smiled and watched Rachel take her place at the head table.

"Come on," Bren tugged at her arm. "I want to introduce you to some very influential people. "You have been the main topic of conversation all day. I looked for you, but you disappeared and didn't answer your phone."

"I, um, was pretty exhausted after the trial. I went home, turned off my phone, and went to bed."

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Bren glanced at Rachel who was watching Shay. “Good for you.” She grinned. “Come with me, I have important people I want you to meet.”

Shay charmed all of Bren’s friends and soon discovered she was sitting with the movers and shakers of the dominant political organization in Oklahoma.

“Thanks to you, we didn’t just dodge a bullet, we ducked a torpedo.” An attractive woman dripping diamonds sat down in the chair beside Shay. “Susan Cain,” the woman held out her hand.

Shay shook the offered hand and smiled. “How so?”

“Baird Lancaster,” the woman whispered as if she feared invoking the devil.

Shay nodded her understanding. “Lieutenant Monty Masters was the lead on that investigation. I just tagged along for the experience.”

The woman ran her fingernail down Shay’s sleeve. “I love a woman with a little humility.”

Shay watched Rachel as she chatted with the people beside her at the head table. Memories of their last twenty-four hours together made her smile. Rachel looked up at her as if she had read her thoughts. Her smoldering gaze told Shay they were having the same thoughts.

“...don’t you think?” Susan asked.

“Um,” Shay hummed.

“You’re not listening to me, are you?”

“I’m sorry. I’m a little exhausted by the week I’ve just lived through. I’m afraid I’m not very good company tonight.”

“That’s understandable,” Susan agreed.

“I didn’t realize how hungry I was until I saw this,” Shay commented as servers placed dinner in front of them. “Chicken cordon bleu is my favorite poultry dish.”

“I make a fantastic chicken cordon bleu,” Susan bragged. “I’ll have to make it for you one day.”



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Shay didn't respond pretending to devote her full attention to cutting the chicken.

"I'd like a full report in the morning," Bren whispered.

"I will be in early," Shay promised. "I have some personal business to take care of tomorrow afternoon if that is okay with you."

"Of course, it is okay. You have been working around the clock."

A distinguished gentleman rose from the head table, stood in front of the microphone, and tapped a spoon against his water glass. Silence fell across the room. "I want to thank all of you for coming tonight. With all the talk about waste, fraud, and abuse, we thought it might be good to have a qualified CPA give us pointers on what to look out for in our own operations to detect problems and resolve them. We are fortunate enough to have as a member, CPA Rachel Brighton, daughter of our long-time members Janice and Warren Brighton.

*When did Rachel take back her maiden name?* Shay thought as she listened to Rachel's introduction. She suddenly realized how much life went on without her when she was embroiled in a case.

After her presentation Rachel joined Shay and Bren. "It is so good to see you, Bren. Thank you for coming tonight."

"It was time well spent," Bren replied. "I learned a few things tonight. I'm looking forward to implementing them with my staff."

"And we thank you for that, Ms. Brighton." Shay smiled.

The president of the Chamber of Commerce joined them. "Shay Steel, this Charles Milton, our president," Rachel introduced them.

"I am so happy you joined us tonight," Charles enthused. "Your name is being floated around a lot. I understand you are one of our rising stars."

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by Erin Wade

Shay wasn't certain what Charles meant so she just smiled and nodded.

##

"You were magnificent tonight," Shay complimented Rachel as they drove to the apartment. "Everyone was impressed."

"Thank you," Rachel reached for the blonde's hand and pulled it onto her lap. "I love numbers. They are so honest and irrefutable. I picked up several new clients tonight. Mindy and I may need to bring in a dedicated secretary so we can concentrate on our bookkeeping."

"You know there is a new accounting program just released titled "By the Numbers." It is eons ahead of anything out there."

"I don't know if I'm up to learning a new program right now," Rachel admitted.

"It is AI driven. It practically runs by itself. You just plug in the numbers. It is amazing."

Rachel studied Shay's profile and smiled. "How do you know so much about so many things?"

"I'm more than just a pretty face." Shay laughed.

"I have a special place for your pretty face," Rachel leaned over and kissed Shay's cheek. "Can you drive a little faster?"

## CHAPTER 52

### Interview with a killer



Hope was waiting in Shay's office when the ADA walked through the door. She held out Shay's favorite coffee.

"Why do I feel like I am being bribed?" Shay teased.

"Not bribed, but asked for a huge favor," Hope wrinkled her nose in that cute way she had.

Shay sat down behind her desk and removed the lid from her coffee. "Shoot!"

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"I very much want to interview Baird before you ship him off to the penitentiary." Hope blurted.

Shay sipped her coffee and studied the diminutive brunette. "Why?"

"I have written a book about him and his crimes. I want the last chapter to end with an interview with him. You know, what makes him tick? Why does he feel so entitled that he thought he would get away with murder and arson? That sort of thing."

Shay picked up a pen and began doodling on her desk pad. "I don't—"

"Please, don't say no, Shay. I have no words to explain to you how important this is to me."

"Why?"

"Because I have signed a lucrative contract with a publishing company and received a large advance that I will have to return if the book doesn't contain an actual interview with Baird. I think it will be a number one bestseller, and my ego needs it. All of you are so accomplished. You are a great prosecutor, Monty is a high-ranking law enforcement officer, Ensley owns one of the top eight podcasts in the U.S. and Rachel is an accomplished CPA. I'm just a librarian."

"A librarian who is instrumental in bringing us all together and helping us form close ties with each other. Not to mention your crusade to encourage children to read books."

Shay frowned. "If you promised the publishers a live interview with Baird, then you felt confident I'd agree with your request."

Hope hung her head. "Something like that," she mumbled.

Shay pushed her chair back and stood. "When do you want to interview him?"

"Oh! My God, you are going to let me!" Hope cried. "I thought you were going to say no."

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by Erin Wade

“I’ll have to clear it with Bren. I have a meeting with her in fifteen minutes. I will do my best to make it happen.”

Hope threw her arms around Shay and hugged her waist. “Thank you.”

Hope rushed past Bobby as he entered the office. “I need to learn your secret,” he said. “Women are always hugging you.”

“Chanel Number five.” Shay laughed.

##

Shay knocked on DA Bren Anthony’s door. “Come in,” Bren called. “Shay great, I’ve been waiting all night to talk to you.”

“What’s so important?” Shay asked sitting in the chair across from her boss.

“I’m going to run for Oklahoma State Attorney General,” Bren informed her. “I would love to see you run for my office. I will throw my considerable political weight behind you and everyone at the meeting last night was enamored of you. You made an excellent impression on the people at my table. They have the money to elect you DA.”

Shay was speechless. She hadn’t considered that Bren might have higher aspirations. “I don’t know what to say,” she replied. “I’ll have to think about it. Whether I run for DA or not, I will certainly campaign for you.”

Bren smiled. “I truly want you to run for DA. Oklahoma City needs you. Putting Baird away broke the chokehold the Lancaster family had on Oklahoma politics. They couldn’t buy you off. A lot of people were watching you. We need more honest politicians.”

Shay smirked. “Isn’t that an oxymoron?”

Bren laughed. “I hope not.”

“I will think about it,” Shay promised. “In the meantime, I need a favor from you.”

“Name it.”

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“Chief Librarian Hope Ford has a contract with a major publishing company to publish a book on the Baird Lancaster affair. It hinges on her getting a personal interview with Baird. We need to make it happen before he is transferred to the state penitentiary.”

“Do it,” Bren exclaimed. “Do you want me to sign anything?”

“No, I can make it happen. I just wanted to clear it with you.”

“See, that’s what I mean-teamwork. You will make a wonderful DA.”

Shay thanked Bren and walked the few blocks to the library. She needed the exercise.

“Please tell me Bren said, yes,” Hope said rushing to Shay as she entered the door.

“She was more than happy to help you,” Shay assured her. “I must file a few forms, and we can get a date to visit Baird.”

Hope pulled open the drawer of her desk and pulled out a steno pad. “I have a hundred questions for him,” she said flipping open the cover of the pad.

Shay leaned around her and looked into the drawer. “Why are you keeping the baggie with Baird’s cigarette butt and crushed Marlboro pack?”

“I haven’t given it a second thought,” Hope admitted as she pulled the baggie from her desk and dropped it into the plastic lined trashcan beside her desk.

Shay breathed a sigh of relief as she realized the evidence Patti had pulled DNA and fingerprints from was not the same evidence Hope had just thrown away.

##

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Hope nervously awaited the guard that would take her to meet with Baird Lancaster. She was surprised the criminal had agreed to an interview with her. Shay had arranged for her to interview him and record their conversation.

"This way, ma'am," a guard motioned for Hope to follow him. "Let me help you carry that recorder?"

"Thank you," Hope agreed. The equipment was heavy, and she had no idea how far they would walk.

She brushed an imaginary spot off her orange shirt. She had selected the color hoping to make Baird more comfortable in his orange jumpsuit. Her goal was to get him to relax and trust her, even if he had tried to kill her and her friends.

Baird was seated at a metal table that was bolted to the floor. His ankles were shackled and fastened to the floor. *Like he could run away*, Hope thought as the guard placed the recorder on the table and moved to stand in the corner.

Hope tentatively held out her hand. "I'm Hope Ford," she said.

"I know who you are," Baird smirked ignoring her extended hand.

Hope pushed the record button on the recorder and began talking. "Thank you for agreeing to this interview. I am writing a book about your case and wanted to get a prospective from your point of view."

"I was railroaded," Baird snarled.

"You pleaded guilty to murder and arson," Hope pointed out. "Are you guilty?"

Baird drew back his shoulders and a twisted smile crossed his lips. "More than you will ever know."

"Have you killed others?" Hope tried to keep her voice from shaking as she realized she was in the presence of evil like none she had ever known.

"You really want to know. I will tell you because it won't matter now. The worst crime I did commit, your Super Prosecutor never even knew about."

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“Now is a good time to unburden your soul, Baird.” Hope tried to appeal to whatever humanity the man possessed.

Baird gently stroked his beard and smiled. “Years ago, I did attack a woman in an alley. She fought like a tiger and managed to stab a broken beer bottle into the side of my face and drag it down to my chin. I grew this beard to cover the horrendous scar.”

“Who was she?”

“A student in my university graduating class. I’ve forgotten her name. We were celebrating getting our diplomas. She was a younger, scholarship student. Not on my social level at all. We were ready to take on the world and I thought she was drunk enough for a little gratuitous sex, but she was just teasing and refused to follow through.”

“What happened?” Hope encouraged him to keep talking. “Did you rape her?”

“Yeah.” Baird smiled as he recalled the incident. “I dragged her into an alley, but she fought like a crazy woman, scratching, kicking, and screaming. She grabbed a piece of broken glass in the alley and stabbed me in the face. She cut her own hand. I choked her in a fit of rage, carved my initials into her face, then ran from the alley. I never heard a peep about it. I watched the news for weeks expecting a report on her body, but there was nothing.”

“You left her for dead without checking to see if she was still alive? Maybe you didn’t kill her.” Hope said.

“I’m sure I did. I never saw her again, and no one ever mentioned her. She had no family I know of.”

“She is probably buried somewhere with a Jane Doe headstone,” Hope surmised. “Where did this happen?”

“Cambridge, Massachusetts. We were MIT graduates.”

“No one missed her?”

“Yeah, we all graduated and went our separate ways.” Baird scoffed. “She wasn’t missed for sure.”



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“Do you feel any remorse for killing Jane Doe and Kitty Ray?” Hope asked.

Baird shrugged. “Not really. Kitty was a known prostitute. Everyone thought I killed her in a fit of passion, but the truth is my father told me to get rid of her.”

“He told you to kill her?” Hope gasped.

“Not in so many words, but I knew what he wanted me to do.”

“How do you justify killing your classmate?”

“She should have put out like I wanted her to. She’d still be alive today if she had.”

Hope bowed her head trying to keep Baird from seeing the disgust she was certain showed on her face.

“How did you feel when your wife divorced you?” she asked.

“Betrayed,” Baird howled. “She betrayed me. How could she divorce me in my time of need?”

“I was told you beat her often.”

“Only when she didn’t follow my instructions. I’m a busy man—gonna’ be governor—I can’t have my wife disobeying me.”

“Have you ever sought psychiatric help?” Hope asked.

“Why would I?”

“Obviously you are a disturbed individual,” Hope replied. “A narcissist with no moral conscience. I suspect you would be diagnosed as a psychopath.”

Baird continued stroking his beard. “Barracuda should have used that in my defense. Be sure you play this tape for her. The stupid bitch.”

Hope turned off the recorder and stood. “Thank you for the interview Mr. Lancaster and good luck in your new home.”

“I’ll be out before you know it,” Baird said. “I have friends in high places.”

“Sure, you do,” Hope mocked him.

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##

On the drive home, Hope called Monty. “Can you come over tonight? I don’t want to be alone.”

“Was Baird a bad interview?”

“He is unbelievable,” Hope replied. “I need to share this interview with you. He confessed to another murder while he was at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.”

“Jeeze,” Monty exhaled. “Who was she?”

“He can’t recall her name. She was beneath him socially, so he never bothered to get to know her. He just raped and murdered her.”

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## CHAPTER 53

### A Home of our Own



Shay was surprised to see Ensley sitting on Mindy's desk when she opened the door to Rachel's reception area. She placed her fingers against her lips to quiet them. She carried flowers and candy and wanted to surprise her lover. "Is she in?" Shay whispered.

Mindy and Ensley nodded, and Shay strode to the door and knocked. "Come in," Rachel invited.

"I come bearing gifts," Shay declared. "Hoping to steal you away for the rest of the day."

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Rachel couldn't stop the smile that lit her face. "You don't have to bribe me. I am always happy to steal away with you, darling." She stood, accepted the flowers and candy, then kissed Shay longingly. "Where are you spiriting me away to?"

"I must run by the real estate office and sign papers, so the sale is final. I wanted to talk to you first. I hope you were serious when you said you would marry me."

"I've never been more serious about anything in my life," Rachel declared.

"Good, I want to make it official." Shay pulled a ring box from her pocket and dropped to one knee. "Rachel Brighton, will you marry me?"

"Yes, a thousand times yes." Rachel caught Shay's hands and pulled her into a standing position. Shay slipped the diamond on her love's finger and kissed her. A kiss that promised forever.

"How soon can we get married?" Shay asked, "and what last name do you want to use?"

"I rather like Rachel Steel," the brunette answered.

"Whew! I have a confession about a surprise I hope is okay with you," Shay said. "I had our new home put in the name of Shay Steel and Rachel Steel. Is that okay?"

Rachel's kiss showed her wholehearted approval.

"Let's go sign the papers then go to our new home." Shay grinned. "At what point do I get to carry you over the threshold?"

"We should save that for after the wedding," Rachel murmured. "God knows we haven't saved anything else."

"Can you leave now?" Shay asked grinning from ear to ear.

##

"I removed the digital lock this morning," the real estate agency told them as she dropped keys to all the doors of the

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house. "She's all yours. I wish both of you love and happiness for the rest of your life."

"Thank you," they chimed.

"We should invite the gang over tonight for spaghetti," Rachel suggested. "I am a great Italian cook."

"I learn new and wonderful things about you every day," Shay noted.

"You know much more about me than I know about you," Rachel pointed out.

"What's to know?" Shay smiled. "I'm insanely in love with you. I'm a hell of a prosecuting attorney, I'm kinda cute, and did I mention I'm insanely in love with you."

Rachel laughed out loud. "I am also insanely in love with you."

Rachel's phone rang as they drove through the ornate iron gates of their home. "It's Hope."

"What's up?" Rachel said playfully. She listened then responded.

"I have a better idea. Why don't the three of you help us christen our new home and come to dinner at our place tonight...Great. We will have meatballs and spaghetti, salad, French bread...Yes, you can bring the beer."

Rachel disconnected the call and said, "We need to run by the store and pick up a few things for dinner. We need a bottle of champagne to celebrate our engagement and our first meal in our new home.

"I'm thinking you are right." Shay declared.

##

After a tour of their home, everyone gathered around the kitchen island. Rachel held glasses as Shay filled them with champagne, then passed them out to their friends.

They dished up their own meatballs and spaghetti settling around the island to discuss what was going on in their lives.

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“Um, is that an engagement ring,” Hope pointed out.

“I thought you would never notice it,” Rachel teased.

“Shay asked me to marry her today and of course I said yes.”

“Hopefully someone in this room will follow Shay’s lead,” Hope said kicking Monty on the leg.

“Would you marry me, if I asked you?” Monty said.

“Are you asking me?” Hope quipped.

“Hope Ford, will you marry me?” Monty asked.

“Yes, yes, yes, and I have witnesses.”

“I feel like a fifth wheel,” Ensley declared, “but I am working on someone.”

“Do tell!” Hope quipped.

“Nope, don’t want to jinx it. You will know when I’m ready.”

“I have a serious question for all of you,” Ensley said.

The other four nodded for her to continue.

“How many of you have seen the video of Kitty Ray’s demise?”

Everyone groaned. “I have,” Monty replied.

“So have I,” Shay admitted.

Hope hung her head. “I may have sneaked a look at it on Monty’s computer.”

“So, everyone but me,” Ensley declared. “It is the most important video of my career, and you won’t share it with me.”

“The court declared it privileged information,” Shay explained. “As an officer of the court, I can’t share it.”

“Neither can I,” Monty chimed in.

“I have never seen it,” Rachel admitted, “and I have no desire to see it.”

All eyes turned to Hope. “I stole a look at it, but I don’t have a copy of it.”

“Monty and I could get into career-ending trouble if the video surfaced,” Shay pointed out. “We are the only two who have it and we will not share it.”

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“How did you get it?” Ensley asked.

“It was on the cloud,” Monty answered, and a knowing smile crossed Ensley’s lips.

“Hope what is the latest on your book?” Rachel changed the subject.

“It is releasing on the first of next month and I am so excited. I think all of you will like it. It has sold a million copies in pre-sales.”

“I can’t wait to read it,” Shay said. “I’m glad it is such a success for you.”

“A toast to Hope,” Rachel said refilling everyone’s champagne glasses.

##

Jane Doe looked from one friend to the other. Her life was a living dream. She had found a woman she adored, and she had friends who would stand beside her through thick and thin, and her career was taking off like a rocket.

Best of all Baird Lancaster was rotting in prison. She had two more things to do to the monster then he would be gone from her life forever.

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## CHAPTER 54

### Success Comes to Those Who Work



“This is going to be so much fun,” Hope declared as they loaded into her SUV. “The house is right on the beach, and we have access to paddle boats and motorboats.”

“Don’t forget the great food,” Ensley chimed in. “Cookouts on the beach and deep-sea fishing.”

Shay and Rachel had volunteered to ride in the far back seat while Ensley and Denny were in the center row with Hope and Monty up front. “We can take turns driving.” Monty poked at the calculator on her cellphone. “Google



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says the trip takes approximately seven and a half hours. Each one of us can drive for about an hour and a half, allowing for stops along the way.”

A soft moan came from Rachel.

“If the newly married couple in the far back can refrain from amorous activity, it will be greatly appreciated by those of us who are still single.”

“But not for long,” Hope reminded her fiancée of their fast-approaching nuptials.

Monty leaned over and kissed her intended’s neck.

“You really should behave yourself,” Rachel whispered to Shay.

“Yes ma’am,” Shay slid over putting a few inches between her and the woman she couldn’t keep her hands off of.

##

Jane Doe surveyed her friends. Hope’s book on Baird Lancaster was released and broke sales records in the first week. She had autographed copies for everyone and planned to distribute them for vacation reading on the beach.

Hope now had a contract with her publishing house for two more books. “I plan to base them on the cases you two solve,” she told Monty and Shay.

Miraculously someone had emailed all five of them the link to Josh Moore’s cloud account. Ensley immediately ran the Kitty Ray video on her podcast and her followers now numbered over twenty million. When investigators tried to blame someone for the release of the files, Ensley pointed out that she had found the link still on the cloud, leaving the cyber unit with egg on their face. They immediately removed the link, but not before the video was all over the internet. Ensley was seriously dating Denny.

Monty was now Captain Masters heading up the homicide division. She complained that she much preferred

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being on the streets to being cooped up in her office, but the crime stats were already dropping under her supervision so there was no chance the chief would let her return to her former position.

Rachel's CPA service had grown large enough to encompass the entire office space available in the library and Shay's rise in politics was stellar.

"We are lucky," Hope noted as they sat around the beach campfire. "All of us have succeeded in our fields."

"But the best part of all is that we are still best friends who always have each other's backs." Shay pointed out. "Dependable friends are the greatest riches a woman can have."

"I'll drink to that," Monty raised her beer can and her friends followed her lead.

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## CHAPTER 55

### Five Years Later



Baird Lancaster frowned as the jailer secured his handcuffs to the visitor's table. *I should act more civilly, then they wouldn't treat me like a common criminal*, he thought as he raised his eyes to meet the cold stare of Oklahoma's new Governor.

He cleared the lump in his throat and began to talk. "I never thought I'd see you again. I saw on television that you married my wife. I heard you received a lot of kudos for

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building a case against me and you are extremely popular with the stupid voters. You could become president.”

“I am right where I want to be,” Shay assured him. “I have everything you aspired to, and I thank God every day for my wife and my wonderful life.”

“Have you come to tell me you arrested the wrong man?” Baird sneered.

Shay laughed. “We both know I arrested the right man. I just came to see how you are doing.”

“How do you think I’m doing in this hell hole?”

“I suspect you have a different dance partner every night.” Shay grinned. “Or two or three. I bet they are rough just like you like it.”

Baird snorted. “You really do have it in for me, don’t you Steel?”

“I love your haircut,” Shay smirked as she surveyed his bald head. “And they make you guys shave every day, so you have no black beard to hide behind. How did you get this?” She ran her fingertips down the thick scar that ran from his cheekbone to his chin. “Did someone knife you?”

Baird yanked his face away from her fingers.

“Since they made me shave off my beard, everyone calls me Scarface,” he whined, “but I’m sure you have read your little friend’s book and are very aware of how I got this scar. I laugh at you every day knowing you didn’t get to prosecute me for killing that girl in the alley. It’s one of my guilty pleasures.”

“I’m glad we have finally put you in a place where you can’t hurt people,” Shay declared. “You will be here until you die. I will block every attempt at a parole or new trial. You will be here until they use you up. There will be plenty of gratuitous sex for you.”

Shay stood and held out a copy of Hope’s book. “Hope said to tell you, hello. She autographed it. I think you will like page three hundred. I’ve bookmarked it for you.”

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Baird flipped open the book to the chapter titled *Jane Doe* and choked as he looked at the monogrammed pocket she had torn from his shirt years ago, then stared into her eyes. “You!” he gasped. “This is why you hate me.”

Shay leaned close and said, “You *should* have killed me.”

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## CHAPTER 56

### No Secrets Between Us



Rachel looked up from the book she was reading as Shay entered the room. “I’ve been trying to call you. I was worried about you. Where have you been?”

“You’re reading Hope’s book,” Shay noted. “It took you long enough.”

“I’m almost finished. I just read the chapter on that poor college student he murdered. The one they called Jane Doe. Baird is even more evil than I ever imagined. If I hadn’t met you, I am sure I would have ended up as one of his victims.

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You gave me the strength to walk away from him and his corrupt world.”

Shay sat down on the foot stool, pulled Rachel’s feet onto her lap, and began to massage them. Rachel moaned softly. “I love when you touch me,” she admitted.

“I love touching you,” Shay replied.

“You didn’t answer my question,” Rachel noted. “Where have you been?”

“I went to see Baird.”

“Why? Why can’t you let him go? You have driven him from my mind why can’t you dismiss him from yours?”

“Baird did life altering things to both of us,” Shay admitted, “but your love has made me the woman I am today. Thanks to you I can let go of all the ghosts from my past.”

“I don’t understand,” Rachel said softly.

“I... am Jane Doe.” Shay admitted. “I am also Humpty Dumpty. I am the one that fed all the information to Ensley. I have tracked Baird Lancaster for two-thirds of my life. My only goal was to destroy him. I wanted to make his life the living hell he made mine.

“Then I met you. I fell in love with you instantly. You won my heart when you said, ‘Not your fault’ because in a way it was my fault. I should have taken him down sooner instead I toyed with him, giving him time to torture you. I was so focused on Baird, I didn’t know about you.”

“I don’t care who you are, I love you beyond belief.” Rachel pulled Shay into her arms. “We have our entire life ahead of us without Baird’s shadow hanging over us. Thanks to you, darling we have a wonderful life and there will be no more secrets between us.”

## The End

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