Chapter 1

Angie was rushing to bathe the baby and feed him before her husband arrived. She knew Buddy would be furious if his dinner wasn’t on the table and the baby was still awake. He was still angry that she had let herself get pregnant. It was all her fault he had screamed as he slapped her.

Angie was surprised that she had carried the baby to full term. After every beating, she always prayed to God to protect the baby and not take him away from her. When Trenton was born, she was thrilled to have something to love that loved her back.

She rushed to put the two-month-old into his crib. She kissed his tiny cheek then placed the bottle’s nipple between his sweet lips.

As the garage door went up, she placed dishes and silverware on the table then put ice in the tea glasses. The timer on the oven went off signaling the casserole was ready. She hurried to put it on the table before her husband entered the house.

Buddy slammed the door as he entered. Angie knew without looking up he was in a foul mood. His jacket was askew, and he reeked of alcohol and cigarettes. “Wash up,” she smiled tentatively, ”dinner is on the table. I cooked your favorite.”
Buddy grunted as he pushed past her to their bedroom. He returned wearing his undershirt and jeans. He nodded for her to serve his plate and pour his ice tea.

After she had made certain he had everything he needed; she moved to the sink. She wanted to stay out of her husband’s way. Buddy could be vicious when he was drunk, and he was clearly drunk. At some point, he had shaved his head, again. She wondered how drunk he was.

“You have a new haircut,” she softly said.
“I lost a damn wager,” Buddy growled. “Loser had to shave his head.”
“Aren’t you eating,” he asked as he reached for the bread. “I like for you to eat with me.”
“Of course,” she nodded and moved wryly toward the table. “Other than the bet, how was your day?”
“The usual,” Buddy snorted. “They won’t consider me for anything serious until I graduate.”

Angie wordlessly nodded. Her silence was usually safest. Normally, it didn’t irritate him. The wail of the baby made him jump and growl. “You need to shut up the brat.”

Angie quickly moved to the nursery and picked up Trent. She knew a few pats on the back, and several little burps would soothe the crying baby.

She walked the floor, patting Trent’s back.

Buddy staggered into the room. “Give him to me. I will stop that crying.”

“He is fine, really,” Angie backed away from her husband. “He just needs to burp. Little babies always have to be burped after they have a bottle.”

“Give him to me,” Buddy howled as he snatched the baby from his mother’s arms. He inadvertently hooked
his fingers in her necklace. The locket containing a photo of her and Trent clattered on the floor.

Trent wailed even louder. Buddy shook him. “Shut up,” he screamed.

Angie could tell that Trent was in distress. She reached to pull him away from Buddy, but her husband’s large fist sent her sailing across the room.

He continued to shake Trent. There was a small sound no louder than a hiccup then Trent’s head lolled backward in an unnatural position. He stopped crying.

Angie tried to stop her head from spinning. She was glad Trent had stopped crying. A hard kick to her stomach knocked all the air from her lungs as Buddy flung Trent on the floor beside her.

The last thing Angie saw was the cold staring eyes of her dead baby.

##

The pain in Buddy’s head told him he had emptied the bottle of Jack Daniels he had brought home the night before. He didn’t open his eyes. He knew the effort would cause more pain than he could endure in his current state.

He ran his thick tongue along his chapped lips, trying to find moisture in a mouth that felt like he had been eating sand. He decided he would choke if he didn’t drink something. He slowly rolled over and looked at the clock. It was past noon. He wondered why Angie hadn’t brought him his morning coffee. He would have to punish her for her negligence.

The effort to raise his head from the pillow cost him dearly as darkness threatened to overtake him to alleviate the pain behind his eyes. After several minutes, he made his way to the bathroom and splashed
water on his face. The action resulted in a million pinpricks dancing over his face and into his eyes.

He ran water into his cupped hands and drank from them. He would choke Angie for not bringing him his coffee. He plundered through the medicine cabinet and found the bottle of aspirin. He swallowed six and chased them with more water from his cupped hands.

He looked at himself in the wall mirror. He was naked. He didn’t bother to dress. His only thought was to get his hands on his inconsiderate wife.

He stumbled into the kitchen. The sight in the kitchen sent him reeling. Blood was everywhere. It was on the floor, all over the cabinet, and in the sink. A huge boning knife lay in a pool of blood next to the sink. Buddy sank to his knees as the memories of the prior evening rushed back into his brain.

“My God, what have I done,” he gasped.

##
Judge Judith Kincaid loved the law. All her life, she had wanted to be a judge. Fast approaching forty, Judge Kincaid wondered if she had sacrificed too much for her career. Her husband of twenty years had died in an automobile accident at age forty-two. Judith had lived a solitary life on their secluded estate for the past four years. Her biggest regret was the lack of children. Neither she nor Josh had wanted to slow down long enough to raise children. Now Judith realized she would do anything to have a child, someone to share her vast wealth and fame, someone to love.

Judith had recently been elected Judge of the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals. The court met in Austin, and Judge Kincaid knew she needed to relocate from her long-time home. She dreaded the move. Her term was for six years. She had recently purchased a home in Austin and would live there for the next six years. Still, she was dragging her feet on the move. Her heart simply wasn’t in it.

The horrible, liberal rulings over the last three years had made her run for the position of judge on the Court of Criminal Appeals. The court had released two different men who had been convicted of rape and murder. The men were serving life sentences when the court heard their appeals. Although neither appeal
produced any new evidence of innocence, both murdering rapists were released from prison. Both men had returned to their criminal ways. One was shot by the husband of a woman he tried to molest. The other had seriously wounded a Dallas police officer and was killed in the subsequent gunfight.

The court had released a woman convicted of killing her husband. She was a model prisoner and had served ten years of a life sentence. Upon her return to home, she methodically murdered her two young teenagers in their sleep, claiming they wanted to join their father.

Other similar poor decisions by the court had almost made it the laughing stock of state criminal appeals courts. Judith was determined to return the court to its former conservative glory.

Lost in thought, Judith almost missed the slight movement on the side of the road. She brake d hard to stop her car before it hit the form that had stumbled onto the pavement.

The judge flicked her headlights onto bright and backed her car away from the thing lying on the side of the road. She watched the form for a long time, trying to determine if it was a man or a woman. She pulled her cell phone from her purse to call the sheriff’s department. Her phone was dead. She cursed herself for failing to plug it into her car charger.

The form moved and struggled to stand, but fell back on the road. It had moved enough for Judith to tell it was a girl. Judith unsnapped the strap that held her gun in its shoulder holster and opened the car door.

The judge knew she was a fool, getting out of her car in the middle of the night on a little-traveled country
road. Uneasy, she pulled the handgun from its holster and slowly approached the girl.

Judith nudged the girl with her toe. The girl moaned pitifully. She was covered in blood, and her face was badly battered and bruised. The most serious wound was a cut that ran from the girl’s full, lower lip to a cleft in her chin. Ascertaining the girl was unconscious, the judge holstered her gun and walked back to her car. She pulled the car alongside the girl and unlocked the doors.

Judith had little trouble getting the girl into her car. She didn’t think the pitiful creature had any broken bones, only lacerations, and bruises.

As she pulled her car into the garage, she wished she hadn’t let her housekeeper go in anticipation of her move. Judith was the only one at the estate.

Judith located an old wheelchair that belonged to her late father and managed to move the girl from her car to a bedroom in her home. She undressed the young woman, cleansed her the best she could, and doctored her wounds. A check of the girl’s vital signs convinced Judith she wasn’t in a coma. She dressed her in a pair of her pajamas and wrapped her in a warm blanket. She found a good book and settled in the armchair in the bedroom. She would keep a silent vigil until the girl awoke.

“Mom?”

The hesitant word that was more a question than a statement pulled Judith from her sleep.

“Yes, sweetie,” Judith moved to the girl’s bedside. “How do you feel?”

“Fine,” the girl grimaced as she tried to sit. “Maybe not wonderful, but okay.”
Judith liked the young woman’s spunk. Most in her condition would have immediately said they felt awful. “Do you think you can eat something?”
“Yes,” the guest smiled slightly. “I am starving.” “You stay right here, and I will bring you something to eat.” Judith hurried to the kitchen.

The girl unclenched her fist and studied the heart-shaped locket in her hand. She opened it. It contained the picture of a young woman and a baby. She shoved it under her pillow.

The girl managed to sit up against the headboard of her bed. Judith could tell by the flushed look of her cheeks; she was running a fever.

“Eat this,” Judith placed a tray with a bowl of chicken noodle soup and a grilled cheese sandwich in front of the young woman. She placed her cool hand on the girl’s forehead.

“You are running a fever,” the judge informed her. “I am going for some Advil. I will be right back.”

“Mom,” the girl called after her. “May I have something to drink? My throat is so dry I am not sure I can swallow.”

Judith turned to stare at the young woman and made a life altering decision. “Of course, dear,” Judith grinned. “I can’t believe I didn’t think of that.”

Judith returned with water and three Advil. “Drink first, eat your lunch then take the Advil.”

The patient obeyed without questioning. She devoured the food as if she was starving and drank all the water.

Judith chatted as the girl ate. “We were supposed to leave for Austin today, but I think we should delay
our departure a few days. I am afraid you are weak from
your accident.”

The young woman surveyed her arms and hands.
Scratches and bruises them. Her back felt like someone
had used it for kicking practice. Most of all her head
was killing her.

“What happened,” the girl asked.

“You went for a ride on your bike,” Judith watched
the girl’s eyes as she spoke. “I became worried about
you when you didn’t return and went to look for you. I
found you on the side of the road.

“I believe a motorist must have run you off the road.
I was scared to death that you were badly hurt, but you
appear to be okay except for a few bruises and scratches.

“Did you see who hit you?”

The girl looked around the sparsely furnished room.

“I, I.  Mom, I can’t remember anything.”

“You remembered I was your mother,” Judith
smiled. “That is the most important thing.”

“Yes,” the young woman smiled. “That is the most
important thing.”

“Why don’t you try to sleep,” the judge stood. I
must run into town for a few things for our trip. I will
be back in an hour. Just in case you don’t remember,
the bathroom is behind that door.”

The girl nodded and slid down into the bed. She
was asleep before Judith left the room.

On the way into town, Judith called her closest
friend, police lieutenant Brett Claymore. He informed
Judith that there were no missing person reports for a
girl between sixteen and eighteen.

She drove to a store where she never shopped and
purchased jeans and tops for her guest. A pair of
sneakers, socks, and underwear completed the wardrobe. The girl was still asleep when she returned home. She quickly removed all the tags from the clothing and put the items in the washing machine. They finished drying by the time the girl awoke.

“I am glad to see you are awake,” Judith smiled as she carried a fresh change of clothes into the room. “How do you feel?”

“Much better,” the girl nodded. “I am going to the restroom.”

Judith moved to her side to steady her. “I think I can walk, mom,” the girl giggled. “I’m not a baby.”

“You are my baby,” Judith laughed. The girl affectionately leaned on her.

Judith went to her room and packed the girl’s extra clothes in the suitcase with her clothes. She returned to the kitchen to prepare dinner. The girl was standing on the back veranda surveying the property. She frowned when she saw Judith.

“Mom, I can’t believe I don’t remember this place. It is beautiful. I love it here.”

Judith smiled as she stood beside her on the porch. “You love to run from here and jump into the swimming pool.”

“Dad! Where is my father?” The girl grimaced as if trying to pull a memory from her mind.

“Josh, your dad, died in an automobile accident four years ago,” Judith shook her head sadly.

“Mom,” the girl softly said, “I don’t even remember my name.”

Judith Kincaid fleetingly thought she might be making a mistake then said, “Oh, sweetheart, your name
Death Was Too Easy

is Mandy. Amanda, Amanda Anne Kincaid but we call you Mandy. The Anne is after me, my middle name.”

She pulled the fragile girl into her arms and hugged her tightly. “Mandy, my daughter, you must have received a hard blow to the head, to forget your name.”

Mandy sank into the warm, loving arms of her mother. Even though she couldn’t remember anything about her life, she knew the woman loved her.

“You knew I was your mother, but you may not know my name. I am Judith Anne Kinkaid. I am a judge on the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals. I was recently elected to that position. That is why we are moving to Austin.”

Mandy looked at her mother in awe. “You seem so, so sweet.”

“I am sweet to my daughter,” Judith laughed. “I am not sure criminals share your feelings.”

Mandy sat at the kitchen island as Judith prepared dinner. “One of your favorite meals is chicken and rice with broccoli,” Judith smiled as she stirred a can of cream-of-chicken soup into the rice and let it simmer.

“It smells heavenly,” Mandy grinned. “I am glad you are my mother. You make me feel safe.”

“I will always keep you safe, if you will let me,” Judith smiled.

##
Chapter 3

Judge Judith Kincaid kissed her daughter’s forehead and bid her goodnight. “If you feel okay in the morning, we will leave for Austin.”

Mandy pulled the covers around her shoulders and quickly fell asleep.

Judith finished packing and placed their luggage by the front door. She called the caretaker to make certain he and his wife would arrive at the estate in the morning. He assured her she had no need to worry. They would take care of everything as if it were their own. He had keys and a long list of how Judith wanted things done.

Sleep eluded her as she considered what she had done. She knew nothing about the young woman sleeping in the next room. She had instinctively assumed the role of the girl’s mother and found that she liked it. It felt good to have someone depend on her and love her unconditionally.

She tried not to think of what would happen if Mandy’s memory returned. The girl that so freely trusted her would find she had lied. A terrible lie!

To tell someone you were their mother when you weren’t, was a terrible lie. In her mind, she went over the additional lies she would have to tell. The girl would wonder why she had no clothes in the boxes delivered by the movers. Judith would blame the moving company for losing some of their boxes. That would allow her to take Mandy shopping for new clothes. Judith would enjoy that. She had never shopped for a daughter.
Mandy was obviously between sixteen and twenty. Judith guessed on the younger side. She would have to arrange to enroll her in a private high school so she could graduate and get into college. Judith had friends in high places. She could easily arrange all of that.

##

The trip to Austin was delightful. Judith hadn’t enjoyed a car trip since Josh died. She loved riding with Mandy. They laughed and talked. Judith answered all of Mandy’s questions.

She told the girl she was extremely intelligent and was at the top of her class. A high school senior, Mandy would graduate and be accepted at the University of Texas.

“What is my major?” Mandy asked, delighted to find she was an honor student.

“Why, law, of course,” Judith laughed. “You have always wanted to be an attorney. When you were small, you would drag around my briefcase and pretend to be a lawyer. As a teenager, you begged to sit in the courtroom and watch me work.”

“Can I watch you work now,” Mandy’s eyes danced at the prospect.

“Yes, dear,” Judith chuckled. “My first case is one week from today. A man who robbed and murdered an unarmed couple as they walked to their car after a movie. He was convicted and sentenced to death. In Texas, the death penalty automatically appeals to the State Court of Criminal Appeals. Most of what I hear will be death penalty appeals.

“First thinks first tomorrow we will spend the day in the beauty shop,” Judith smiled. “We both color our
hair blonde so we want to do that before we see any of our cohorts. Two things a woman never reveals: her age and the true color of her hair.”

Both women laughed, reveling in each other’s company. Judith slowly but surely planted memories in the younger woman’s mind: memories of playing in the back yard of their home, memories of Josh carrying her on his shoulders, and memories of Judith reading her bedtime stories.

Judith retold several bedtime stories she had loved as a child. Mandy laughed with delight. “Your favorite was Snow White,” Judith informed her as she began telling the fairytale.

The moving company met them the afternoon of their arrival and unloaded the boxes of personal items and a few of Judith’s favorite decorative pieces.

“Why don’t we go to dinner and tackle unpacking tomorrow evening,” Judith suggested.

Mandy’s stomach growled on cue, and both women laughed.

“It feels like I have always laughed and loved life with you,” Mandy said over dinner. “I wish I could remember.”

“I am certain your memory will return, sweetheart. It is just a matter of time.” Judith patted her new daughter’s hand. “Apparently, you received a hard blow to the head. Thank heaven you didn’t have a concussion.”

Mandy nodded. “Thank heaven I have a mother like you.”

##
Mandy spent the summer in Judith’s courtroom. The judge was amazed at how quickly the girl grasped the law and many of its idiosyncrasies.

“You are like the queen of your courtroom,” Mandy laughed as they filled out the papers to enroll her in school. “No one dares to question you.”

Judith smiled as she handed her daughter the last of the forms to sign.

“I want to be a judge someday,” Mandy declared. “I want to be just like you, mom.”

Judith hugged the girl to her. “I love you so much,” she said. “You make me very proud.”

Perhaps it was true. Children become what you tell them they are. Mandy graduated at the top of her senior class but didn’t qualify for Valedictorian because she only attended the school one year. It didn’t seem to bother her as she prepared to attend college.

“Would you like to live on campus,” Judith asked her one day. “You know have the full college experience.”

“What, and leave my favorite person in the whole wide world,” Mandy asked wide eyed. “Unless you want me to be out of the house. Do you have a beau, mom?”

“Of course, not,” Judith blushed at the thought of dating any man but Josh. “I just don’t want to hold you back socially.”

“You, hold me back,” Mandy laughed. “Mom, living with you is like living with the quintessential social butterfly. I have met many people and made a few nice friends.”
“Good,” Judith grinned. “I love having you with me.”

##

Judith was happier than she had been since the death of her husband. The loneliness caused by the loss of Josh disappeared as she and Mandy studied together or discussed a case that was before the court.

Just as Judith had declared, Mandy was brilliant. Her mind was quick, and she had a special relationship with computers. The judge discovered her daughter could do anything with a computer.

“Can you hack other people’s accounts,” Judith asked Mandy over dinner.

“I have never tried,” Mandy smiled. “That is against the law, mom.”

“I know,” Judith shrugged. “I just wondered if you could.”

“I am certain I can,” Mandy laughed. “Do you have anyone in mind?”

“Oh, no,” the judge jumped. “I just wondered.”

Law school was constant studying and attending nightly networking functions for the students. Mandy clerked for the Justice Judith most admired. They constantly discussed the cases before the court. Judith could tell her daughter loved law as much as she loved it.

Mandy graduated college at the top of her class. Judith was amazed at all the special distinctions the girl received. “I am very proud of you,” she hugged her daughter tighter.
Death Was Too Easy

Judith was still reading when Mandy came in from her graduation celebration. The young woman knocked softly on her mother’s bedroom door.

“Come in,” Judith called, looking up from her book.
“i just wanted to let you know I am home,” Mandy smiled. “So, you can go to sleep.”
“Oh, I wasn’t waiting,” Mandy’s raised eyebrow stopped Judith’s little fib.
Mandy settled on the bed beside her mother. “I am extremely fortunate to have you as my mother,” she said seriously. “I am so proud of you.”
“Wow,” Judith grinned. “What did I do to deserve that?”
“Just being who you are,” Mandy softly said as she laid her head in her mother’s lap. “My friends were talking tonight about how you have raised the reputation of the State Supreme Court and made Texans proud again. That is a big accomplishment.”
“My biggest accomplishment and the one of which I am most proud is you.”
Judith stroked her daughter’s hair as the young woman slipped into a deep sleep.

##

Coke Cannon was the second chair to Bob Winter, his firm’s top appeals attorney. It was his first time in the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals, and he was excited to be a part of the case. Although he knew without a doubt their client was guilty; he also knew his mentor would get the man off on a technicality if they played their cards right.
“Damn,” Bob Winter had softly cursed when the court announced they had elected the Hanging Judge as the presiding judge for the court.”

Coke didn’t have to ask who the hanging judge was. He knew it was Judge Judith Kincaid. Their chances of winning the appeal were zero to nothing. Still, Coke was thrilled to be appearing before the appeals court. He double checked his briefcase to make certain he had all the files he would need in court.

Judith Kincaid was beginning her second term on the court. Having served on it for six years, she had established a stellar reputation for fairness and following the Constitution in every aspect of her decisions. She had easily won re-election, and her name was being whispered in many circles as a candidate for the U.S. Supreme Court.

Coke secretly liked Judge Kincaid and was pleased to see her named as the presiding judge. She was fair and honest. She followed the letter of the law which didn’t always bode well for their clients.

He also had a bad crush on the judge’s daughter, Mandy Kincaid. Coke was four years older than Mandy, but they had formed a friendship when Mandy clerked for Coke’s former mentor.

At twenty-eight, Mandy was already coming into her own as a defense attorney. She carefully selected her cases and rarely accepted a case where the defendant was obviously guilty. Consequently, her win average was in the high nineties.

Coke wished he could afford to be as selective. Working for a firm that would defend Hitler if he threw enough cash on their desks, he often found himself defending the vilest of human beings.
Everyone stood as the nine State Court judges took their seats. Judge Kincaid called the court to order. Coke glanced at the District Attorney’s team prosecuting the case. ADA Rick Randolph was in a whispered conversation with his second chair.

Randolph had buried their defendant’s case in testimonies and unimpeachable facts. Eyewitnesses, security videos, DNA, and fingerprints all pointed to their client as the killer of three teenage girls.

Police arrested the legal Syrian immigrant in his home. A search of his basement had produced the mutilated bodies of the girls. Randolph had a slam dunk case.

The Syrian had claimed he had no knowledge of the girls in his basement, but his skin and DNA were under the fingernails of all three girls.

All death sentences in the state of Texas are automatically appealed to the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals. Bob Winter had read and reread the trial transcripts searching for a technicality on which to hang his appeal. He desperately wanted to argue the case in front of the court. A win would be a huge feather in Bob’s cap. Randolph had offered their client life in prison instead of death if he would waive his right to appeal.

Randolph had never had a case overturned on a technicality. He was tenacious in his requirement that anyone working with the prosecution must be thoroughly versed in court procedures.

Bob had convinced the Syrian to appeal his sentence, promising him he would be able to get him off scot free. Now Bob was frantically trying to convince
Randolph they would accept his plea offer. Randolph had declined. He was angry that he had been forced to expend the time and energy on the case and that it was now in front of the judges.

“We will just let it play out,” Randolph frowned.

Judge Kincaid never wasted the court’s time. She cleared her throat and leveled her gaze at the Syrian. “The court has reviewed the transcripts and all other evidence and testimonies presented in your trial. We have studied the written argument of your attorney and have ruled unanimously that the death sentence is fair. The court affirms the conviction and death sentence.”


“Bailiff, please clear the courtroom,” Judge Kincaid ordered. She slammed her gavel and announced the court would break for lunch.

Bob Winter stomped from the courtroom mumbling something about oral argument. Coke was relieved they had not been required to put forth an oral argument. They would have only embarrassed themselves.

He walked to the DA’s table and extended his hand to Rick. “Nicely done,” he smiled.

“It is the pits when you fellows are forced to appeal a case such as this one,” Rick firmly shook his hand. “But that’s the law.”

The two attorneys walked from the courtroom together. They had been friends for several years. Although Rick was two years ahead of Coke, they had shared some classes in college and often spent hours debating decisions handed down by various courts.
Rick was rabid about prosecuting criminals. The more heinous the crime, the harder Rick fought for the death penalty.

“Want to join me for lunch,” Rick asked.

Coke nodded, and they walked to a nearby restaurant frequented by attorneys and court staffers. They were surprised to find Judge Kincaid and her daughter waiting for a table.

“This must be our lucky day,” Rick grinned as he acknowledged the two women. “Would you join us for lunch?”

Judge Kincaid considered the invitation momentarily then nodded. Both men were excellent examples of successful attorneys and very highly regarded in their professions. They were also dating age for Mandy. “We would like that,” the judge smiled.

Coke and Mandy immediately struck up a conversation as Rick chatted with the judge.

“Your brief on the case was excellent,” Judith told Rick. “It was much better than Bob Winter’s.”

“You have to admit, Bob got the short end of that stick,” Rick smiled. “He had to handle the appeal even though he had no grounds for it.”

“Didn’t you offer a plea bargain,” the judge frowned.

Rick nodded. “They turned it down.”

Coke didn’t join the conversation. He secretly believed that Bob Winters thought the Syrian die for his crimes. That was the true reason he had convinced the man to turn down the plea offer. Of course, Bob had gotten full payment for his services before the appeal.
“You have a tough case coming up next week,” Rick smiled at Mandy. “I am surprised you accepted a case like that.”

“I had no choice,” Mandy frowned. “My firm was assigned the case as a pro bono defense. Being the junior lawyer, I received the case.”

“What case is it,” Coke asked.

“The Lisa Mercer case,” Rick answered for Mandy. Mandy nodded. “She swears she is innocent. I don’t know, and frankly, I don’t want to know. I don’t think I could defend someone I knew was guilty of such a heinous crime.”

“Who is the prosecutor on the case,” Coke inquired.

“I am,” Rick announced proudly. “I promise you, Mandy, she is guilty.”

“You two should not be having this conversation in my presence,” Judith intervened. “Stick to discussing cases in which I will never have any involvement.”

Both male attorneys began carrying on conversations they thought would interest Mandy. Judith smiled as she watched the two men posturing to garner the favor of her daughter.

The men were opposites of one another. Coke was tall and muscular. His thick, wavy, blonde hair constantly teased his forehead, and his piercing blue eyes twinkled most of the time. He was obviously fond of Mandy but had never worked up the courage to tell her.

Rick was a little shorter than Coke, but still over six feet tall. His straight, blonde hair was carefully groomed and always in place. His light brown eyes always held a touch of melancholy, as if he were searching for something just out of his reach. Judith
only saw his eyes light up whenever her daughter entered the room. It was no secret Rick Randolph’s end goal was to be the District Attorney of Austin, Texas.

After ten years of hiding her biggest lie, Judge Kincaid was comfortable with it. She rarely thought of a time when Mandy Kincaid hadn’t been her daughter. After ten years, she was confident Mandy’s memory of an early childhood would not return.

At first, she had lived in constant fear that Mandy would awaken one morning and wonder where she was and what was happening. Sometimes a veil would momentarily drop over Mandy’s eyes, and Judith would hold her breath until the young woman would ask her a question about her past. She always accepted everything Judith told her without question. Judith knew her daughter trusted her completely. A trust she prayed never to break.

Judith could not have asked for a more perfect daughter. Tall and slender, Mandy was drop dead gorgeous. Her long blonde hair curled around her face and rested on her shoulders like a glorious golden cloud. Eyes as gray as the clouds just before they begin to darken as a storm rolls inward. Sometimes, when the light hit them just right, Judith thought Mandy’s eyes were silver. The tiny scar from her accident ran from her full lower lip to the cleft in her chin. It gave her a unique, almost fragile appearance.

Her youthful innocence was her most lethal weapon in the courtroom. Many prosecutors had lackadaisically argued their cases, thinking Mandy would be a pushover. By the time the young jurist had wrested a verdict away from them, it was too late to revisit their case.
Although she looked soft and sweet, Mandy was relentless in the courtroom. She would move heaven and earth to assure a “not guilty” verdict for her clients. Many prosecutors left the courtroom wondering what the heck just happened.

“Saturday night would be nice,” Judith heard Mandy say. “Pick me up at seven.”

Coke nodded. The smile on his face almost illuminated the entire room.

“It seems my planned date for the law enforcement officers ball has been stolen right from under my nose,” Rick frowned. “Judge, would you do me the honor of being my plus one?”

Judith laughed. “While I am extremely flattered, Rick. I am certain you can do better than me. Besides, I already have a date.”

The young lawyers spent the rest of lunch trying to wheedle from Judith the name of her date. The judge looked at her watch. “Time to reconvene.”

Coke said his goodbyes and returned to his office. Rick followed Mandy back into the courtroom to watch her mother work.

“Have dinner with me when this is over,” he whispered when Judith called the attorneys to the bench.

“I can’t. I am meeting with Lisa Mercer’s mother at five-thirty. She is coming to my office after she gets off work.”

“Why,” Rick asked.

“You seem to forget you are the enemy,” Mandy smiled mischievously. “A rakishly handsome enemy, but nonetheless the enemy.”

“I can already tell I am not going to like being on the opposite side from you,” Rick grinned.
“Meet me at Carlson’s after you meet with her,” Rick insisted. “I will be there until you arrive.”
“What if I can’t make it,” Mandy teased him.
“Then I will spend the night at Carlson’s waiting for you.” The light that danced in Rick Randolph’s eyes told Mandy he was serious.
“I will be there,” she nodded.

##
Bailey O’Shea reread the testimony of the arresting officer in the Lisa Mercer case. She wished she could erase the sloppy report and rewrite it. It contained contradictions and unwarranted conclusions. She wondered how Rick Randolph had managed to convince a jury of twelve people that Lisa Mercer had murdered her three children.

Rick was ruthless when it came to prosecuting criminals. Bailey knew that Rick had put a few innocent people in prison simply because they had been unfortunate enough to draw him for a prosecutor. Court appointed attorneys didn’t stand a chance against Rick Randolph.

Those convicted of murder were the lucky ones. At least the state laws mandated the review of the cases by the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals.

Bailey had landed the second chair on the case due to seniority. The original DA serving as Rick’s second chair had accepted a job with a criminal defense law firm.

Bailey was as tenacious as Rick. She hated to lose and took every case as a personal challenge. Her job was not to ferret out the innocence of a defendant, but to prove the guilt. She was good at her job. She had a seventy-five percent conviction rate and was considered one of the toughest prosecutors in the DA’s office.
She loved the prosecution side of the law. She never lost sleep over a guilty verdict. She always thought the worse of the defendants she faced and never really committed their faces to memory. They were all just faceless criminals that needed removal from society.

Lisa Mercer was no different. Lisa had done the unthinkable. She had murdered her three small children; a three-year-old daughter, a two-year-old son and a three-month-old baby boy.

Lisa claimed the children had been kidnapped from her home while she was sleeping. Police found the children in the basement of the house. The three-month-old had repeatedly been stabbed all over his body. The other two had been given lethal doses of Benadryl and stuffed inside an old trunk.

Bailey shuttered as she looked at the CSI photo of the children in the trunk. Small blonde heads seemed to mingle with small bodies. The children were naked, and it was difficult to tell where one body stopped and another started.

Lisa’s husband had stood beside his wife steadfastly defending her. He told the jury he believed someone had kidnapped his children, taken them to the basement, and drugged them. The children had large amounts of liquid Benadryl in their system. Two empty bottles of Benadryl were in the Mercer’s under-counter trash receptacle. The two older children weren’t molested or abused. They had simply gone to sleep and never awoke.

Bailey was delighted to learn that Mandy Kincaid was running defense for Lisa Mercer. That meant Judge Judith Kincaid would recuse herself from the case. The
court rarely overturned a death sentence handed down by a lower court. Bailey doubted they would reverse the Mercer opinion so that would be one more win for Rick and Bailey and a loss for Mandy Kincaid.

Bailey was itching to face Mandy Kincaid in the courtroom, again. She had battled the blonde attorney twice and had lost both times. It aggravated her that she had more years of experience and had handled many more cases than Mandy, yet the other woman seemed charmed when it came to winning her cases. In all fairness, Bailey had to admit that Mandy left no stone unturned when it came to digging up defense material that would produce a “not guilty” verdict for her clients.

The fact that Mandy was extremely beautiful and poised under pressure always won her points with jurors. Jurors loved her girl-next-door beauty and identified with her as a good, decent person.

The sound of the door opening tore her away from her thoughts. Rick marched in grinning like the Cheshire cat. He glanced at the file Bailey was perusing.

“Getting ready to take on Mandy Kincaid,” he smiled.

“Looks like a slam-dunk case,” Bailey nodded. “Although, I have never seen such slipshod police work. Do you truly believe Lisa Mercer murdered her children?”

“Ours is not to reason why, my lovely partner,” Rick chuckled at his cleverness, “ours is but, to see that they die.”

Bailey raised a perfectly arched brow at his prose and shrugged her shoulders.
Rick walked around Bailey’s desk and sat on the corner of it looking down into the greenest eyes he had ever seen. “I was wondering if you would do me the honor of being my date for the policeman’s ball Saturday night?”

“Did Mandy turn you down?” Bailey asked.

“I didn’t ask her,” Rick frowned. “I am asking you.”

“In that case, I’d love to be your date.”

Bailey’s phone rang. “Detective Plaine, thank you so much for returning my call.” She smiled at Rick as she shooed him from her office.

Rick knew his partner had noticed the discrepancies in Detective Paul Plaine’s written report on the Mercer case. He desperately hoped she could find a way to fix the mess the man had made. If anyone could move Plaine in the right direction, Bailey could.

Rick closed the door to Bailey’s office but continued to watch her through the picture window that separated their offices.

Bailey O’Shea was beautiful. Her dark hair framed her face and hung loosely down to her breasts. She pushed it back as she took notes.

He smiled to himself as he left the office to meet Mandy. Bailey would be a lot of fun to take to the policemen’s ball. He and Coke would be escorting the two most beautiful women in town.

##

The black limousine pulled under the portico of the hotel ballroom. The driver quickly opened the door and bowed slightly as Judge Judith Kincaid and Captain Brett Claymore stepped out of the car. Judith linked her
arm through Brett’s and prepared for the onslaught of questions she knew she would receive from her daughter.

“You really should tell her about us,” Brett said softly. “You will be seeing a lot more of me now that I am with the Austin Police Department.”

“I know,” Judith smiled slightly. “What exactly should I tell her?”

“That I want to marry you and spend the rest of my life being Judge Judith Kincaid’s husband, Brett chuckled.”

“Oh,” Judith gasped. Although they had been dating for over six years, they had never discussed marriage. They enjoyed each other’s company and shared many of the same interest. Judith did love Brett, but she had never considered marriage. Mandy had been the focal point of her life. Only Brett knew her secret, and he never spoke of it.

Mandy and Coke were dancing and talking. Judith thought they looked like a prince and princess from some fairytale. He was over six feet tall, and Mandy was five-foot-eight. Both had thick blonde hair and a golden complexion. Mandy’s gray eyes were perfect mirrors for Coke’s blue ones. Both were storybook beautiful.

The dance ended and the couple joined Judith and Brett at the table reserved for the judge’s entourage. “Uncle Brett,” Mandy hugged the man who had always been like a father to her. “How did we get so lucky to have you with us tonight?”

“Your mother called me begging for a date,” Brett teased, “said she would have to attend alone if I didn’t save her.”
“Nonsense,” Judith laughed. “Brett is the new captain of the Austin Police Department. We will be seeing a lot more of him.”

Mandy smiled, “That is wonderful. When did you get into town?”

“This morning,” Brett answered. “I squared everything away with personnel and checked out my new office. I haven’t even unpacked yet. I felt this was much more important.”

“We can all help you tomorrow,” Judith grinned, her gesture including Mandy and Coke.

“I am free,” Coke nodded.

“You can count on me,” Mandy agreed. “It will be fun.”

“If it is fun, count us in,” Rick and Bailey joined the group.

“Don’t you want to know what you are getting yourself into,” Mandy laughed.

“You’ll be there,” Rick grinned, “that is all I need to know.”

Mandy blushed slightly, embarrassed that Rick would blatantly flirt with her while on a date with Bailey. She turned back to Brett. “Bailey, Rick, I would like you to meet Austin’s newest police captain, and my uncle, Brett Claymore.

“You are Judge Kincaid’s brother,” Bailey smiled as she shook hands with Brett.

“No, no,” Mandy laughed, “Uncle Brett was there for mom and me after my dad died. He has been like a father to me.”

“Rick, why don’t we make a drink run,” Coke stood. “What can we get for you lovely ladies?”

~ 34 ~
The evening was a success with the couples changing partners and dancing to almost every song the band played. After the awards ceremony and speeches, the six of them sat around their table visiting.

Mandy and Coke sat out a dance to talk to Brett and Judith. Mandy told Brett about her upcoming case and how she felt the police investigation on the case was shoddy at best. “My client was railroaded,” she concluded.

“With no more evidence than they had,” Brett frowned, “I am surprised the jury convicted her. Who was the prosecuting attorney?”

“Rick Randolph,” Coke nodded toward Rick and Bailey who were dancing intimately to a slow song.

“Whoever killed the children wanted them found,” Brett surmised, “or they would have taken them away and buried them.

“I had a case about ten or eleven years ago, where a woman and her baby disappeared into thin air. We were positive the husband had murdered them, but there were no bodies. The husband swore his wife just packed her things, took the baby and left while he was at work.

“The woman’s father hounded me for years. He was positive his son-in-law had murdered his daughter and grandbaby, but there was no evidence. Nothing.

“I believe he murdered them, too, but he was smart enough to get rid of the bodies where we couldn’t find them.

“It has always haunted me that he got away with it.”

“What happened to him,” Mandy asked.

“I don’t know. He just disappeared one day.” Brett grimaced as if the thought hurt him.
“It does sound like your girl was either framed or not working with a full deck. I’ll examine the case and see if I can find anything,” Brett promised as Rick and Bailey rejoined them.

The three ladies excused themselves to visit the powder room.

“If you give me your tickets, I will have the valet pull our cars up,” Coke stood.

“I will go with you,” Rick took Brett’s ticket. “Why don’t you bring the ladies out when they are ready?”

“Mandy and I are going for a cup of coffee,” Coke said as they waited for their cars. “Would you and Bailey like to join us?”

“No,” Rick slyly grinned, “We are planning a nightcap at Bailey’s place. “I am hoping to get a little Irish crème tonight.”

Coke was speechless. Sometimes his friend could be too crass. Thoughts of Rick and Bailey flew from his mind as he watched Mandy walk toward him. She truly was gorgeous. He wondered if he stood a chance with Mandy Kincaid.

##
Chapter 5

Brett Claymore groaned and rolled out of bed as his doorbell rang the third time. He opened the door and his companions from last night filled his living room.

“Show me the way to your kitchen,” Judith said as he buttoned his shirt. She and Mandy were carrying brown bags full of groceries. He wondered how the women could look so gorgeous and be so chipper this early in the morning.

Bailey and Rick sat the table while Mandy and Judith cooked bacon, eggs, and toast. Coke filled glasses with orange juice and made coffee.

“You all work together like a well-oiled machine,” Brett noted as he pulled a package of napkins from one of the sacks. “You always think of everything, Judith,” he kissed her quickly while no one was in the kitchen with them.

“I have been thinking about what you said last night,” Judith smiled slightly. “Are you certain you want to get married?”

“Why else would I leave a great job that I loved and relocate to Austin,” Brett grinned.

“We will talk later,” Judith nodded.

“Maybe you could stay when the others leave and help me decorate,” Brett grinned mischievously.

“Maybe I will,” Judith winked.

##

~ 37 ~
As breakfast progressed, talk turned to the Lisa Mercer case. Judith agreed it was okay for the attorneys to discuss the appeal as she had recused herself from the case.

“Honestly, Rick,” Mandy smiled, “I can’t believe you even prosecuted the case. All you had was circumstantial evidence. There are no hard facts that would lead anyone to think Lisa Mercer was guilty.”

Bailey watched as Rick bowed his head in thought. “She was the most likely killer,” he said, staring Mandy in the eyes. “She was home alone with the children and was suffering from postpartum psychosis. We all know that can lead to life-threatening thoughts or behaviors and requires immediate treatment. She had refused to see a doctor when her husband voiced his concern about her symptoms. The only fingerprints on the Benadryl bottle belonged to her.”

“You knew she was suffering from postpartum psychosis,” Coke joined the discussion. “Which meant she had diminished mental capacity. Why didn’t you get her psychiatric help instead of the death penalty?”

“According to a statement from her husband,” Bailey added, “she had been dealing with postpartum psychosis ever since her first child was born.

“Three children in three years, I’d be psychotic, too. Heck, I wouldn’t kill my children. I’d kill my husband.”

Everyone chuckled and nodded in agreement with Bailey.

“In the trial, you had a psychiatrist testify that Lisa Mercer was suffering from postpartum depression. I never saw any testimony about postpartum psychosis. We all know that is a totally different diagnosis.

“Was she diagnosed with psychosis?”
“Yes,” Rick grunted. Have you interviewed the husband and her doctor? They will shed a lot of light on the situation.”

“I read their statements and testimony,” Mandy frowned. “Did you ever interview her mother?”

“No,” Rick said flatly.

“Even in her state of diminished capacity,” Mandy continued. “One would think she would have tried to hide her crime. She was a brilliant woman, a biochemist before she started popping out babies. Why would she leave the evidence where it was so obvious?”

“I watched the video from the trial,” Bailey stirred cream into her coffee, “Lisa Mercer was a pitiful, broken little thing. She didn’t fight back. She was an easy conviction.”

“She was guilty,” Rick glared at Bailey. “She killed her babies. She deserves to die.”

“Okay, enough attorney talk,” Brett said, beginning to clear the table. “Y’all promised to help me unpack.”

By midafternoon, they had unpacked all the boxes and put away Brett’s things. “This is the easiest move I have ever made,” Brett laughed as he placed the last stack of plates into the cabinet.

The three couples ordered pizza then sat around the living room discussing other cases they had worked.

“Have you ever convicted someone you knew for certain was innocent,” Mandy asked Rick as she set on the arm of the oversized chair Coke was occupying. She rested her arm across the back of the chair and leaned against the young attorney. Coke looked up at Mandy and sweetly smiled.
“It is not my job to ascertain their innocence,” Rick frowned. “It is my job to convict them.” He didn’t like Mandy leaning against Coke.

“But you have the final decision to prosecute a criminal,” Coke noted. “Have you ever chosen to prosecute someone you knew for certain was innocent but looked guilty? You know just to cut another notch in your gun. Doesn’t that bother you?”

“Sometimes I don’t prosecute killers when I am positive of their guilt,” Rick had a pained expression on his face. “I have to let them walk free because I can’t get enough evidence to convict them. They are the ones that bother me.”

##

It was six a.m., and Mandy was pouring her first cup of coffee when her mother walked into the kitchen. Judith was still wearing the same clothes from the prior day.

“Is this Judge Judith Kincaid making the walk of shame,” Mandy teased as her mother blushed a deep red.

Judith’s mouth moved, but no words came out of it. Mandy laughed and hugged the woman that had dominated her life.

“Soo-o, Uncle Brett and you,” her daughter raised a perfectly arched brow.

“You know Brett, and I have been close friends for years,” Judith shrugged as she accepted the cup of coffee her daughter shoved toward her.

“We are discussing marriage,” Judith said softly.

“Mom,” Mandy hugged her mother again. “That is wonderful. Congratulations. I love Uncle Brett, and I
have always known he was in love with you. However, you certainly managed to hide your feelings for him.

“I have seen him cast many longing glances at you, but I have never seen you covet him.”

“Yes,” well, I have a daughter to consider,” Judith softly said.

“Mom, I am twenty-eight and make a sizeable income,” Mandy smiled. “I am very capable of caring for myself. I can easily find an apartment.”

“Oh, no,” the judge laughed. “I won’t be rushing into anything. Believe me; there is no hurry.”

“Rushing,” Mandy grinned. “Six years isn’t exactly rushing.”

“Whatever,” Judith hugged her. “There is no wedding on the immediate horizon. I am going to shower and get ready for work.”

###

Mandy thought about her mother as she drove to her office. Almost fifty, Judith Kincaid was a beautiful woman. Tall and slender, Judith’s thick, blonde hair was just beginning to gray slightly at the temples. The silver mingled with the blonde hair beautifully. Judith’s hairdresser often said women paid her big bucks to streak their hair like Judith’s hair.

Mandy was glad she had inherited her mother’s glorious hair. Judith wore it shoulder length. It swept back from her face and flipped up slightly on the ends. She always looked elegant and gorgeous. Her clear, blue eyes usually twinkled as if she knew the punch line to a joke that the rest of the world would never hear.

Judith had been voted most beautiful judge on the bench for the past five years. An honor she had brushed
aside, considering it more theatrical than professional. She had turned down invitations to appear on Oprah and Ellen. “I take my position seriously,” Judith had laughed when Mandy had read the letter informing her of her recognition. “I won’t be going Hollywood on you.”

Mandy knew she had inherited Judith’s easy-going, but tenacious nature and her unerring sense of right and wrong. Mandy Kincaid was tremendously proud to be the daughter of Judge Judith Kincaid.

A commotion in her firm’s parking garage pulled Mandy from the thoughts of her mother. She recognized the husband of Lisa Mercer from the videos she had watched. Stanton Mercer was trying to push past the firm’s security guard. He ran in front of Mandy’s car when he recognized her. Mandy slammed on the brakes. The security guard twisted Mercer’s arm up behind his back and shoved him against the hood of Mandy’s car.

Mandy put the car in park and got out. “What is going on?”

“I have to talk to you,” Mercer pleaded. “I just need to talk to you. Please.”

“Take him to my office,” Mandy instructed the guard. “I will be in as soon as I park my car.”

Mandy scowled as she entered her office. Stanton Mercer was standing at her desk. He was holding the only thing Mandy ever left on her desktop, her appointment calendar.

“Please, have a seat,” Mandy said as she pulled her calendar from his hands.
“Miss Kincaid,” Stanton looked her directly in the eye, “my wife is innocent. She would never harm our children.”

Mandy studied Stanton Mercer. He was a handsome man, a little on the lean side, but tall. His unruly blonde hair gave him a disheveled look. His wrinkled shirt and slacks added to the appearance. His eyes were red-rimmed as if he hadn’t slept in weeks. The dark stubble on his face told her he hadn’t shaved in a week.

“Mr. Mercer, my appearance before the appeals court is not to retry your wife’s case. It is to convince the court that she did not receive a fair trial and to overturn her conviction on a technicality. Then there would be a retrial.”

“Do you have any technicalities you can use to get her death sentence overturned?”

“I don’t know yet,” Mandy answered. “I will do everything in my power to make certain your wife received a fair trial.”

“My wife was railroaded” Mercer growled. “That assistant district attorney Randolph was just looking for a win. In my wife’s diminished state, she was an easy conviction. She didn’t even fight.

“Her defense attorney was a joke. He wouldn’t put me on the witness stand. He didn’t rebuttal the testimony of the state’s psychiatrist with a psychiatrist of our choosing. No one knows my wife as well as I do. I am telling you she would never do anything as heinous.”

Mandy stared at Mercer for several minutes. “Who did kill your babies,” she asked.
Stanton Mercer snapped his mouth shut so hard his teeth rattled. “I don’t know,” he finally said. “I just know it wasn’t Lisa.”

Mercer looked like a man that had been living in hell for a long time. Tears began to run down his cheeks. “It wasn’t Lisa!”

Mandy shoved a box of tissues toward Mercer. “I will do everything in my power to save your wife from the death penalty.”

After Mercer had left her office, the young attorney poured over the transcripts and testimony from the Lisa Mercer Murder case. Several things jumped out at her. First and foremost, Lisa Mercer had never been Mirandized; therefore, the prosecution could not use her confession in court.

Mandy was astounded that any defense attorney that had passed the bar had let that happen. The missing Miranda Warning, alone, would constitute a mistrial.

Mandy dialed the number of Harvey Lambert, Lisa’s defense attorney. She reached a recording informing her the number was disconnected. She was considering her next action when her phone rang.

“Uncle Brett,” she smiled into the phone, “what can I do for you?”

“I think it is more what I can do for you,” Brett chuckled. “One of my detectives told me that Lisa Mercer had the worst defense attorney in history. He recalls Lambert’s arrest for driving while intoxicated around the time Lisa was on trial. Might be worth investigating.

“Why don’t you shoot over an official request for Harvey Lambert’s rap sheet and I will have one of my men run his file to you?”
“You are a dear, Uncle Brett,” Mandy laughed. “Consider it done.”

Almost as soon as she pushed the send button on her email request, Brett’s courier arrived with the file on Harvey Lambert. Not only had Lambert spent time in jail on a DWI during Lisa Mercer’s trial, but he was also disbarred right after the trial ended.

Although Lambert had amassed six DWIs without so much as a reprimand, the thing that had ended his career was stealing from his clients. During the time Lambert was defending Lisa, he was battling two civil suits against him. He had transferred funds from family trusts he managed into his personal account.

*Never fool with other people’s money,* Mandy thought. *It is okay for an inept attorney to send a young woman to death row, he could walk away unscathed from that, but stealing clients’ money would get one disbarred every time.*

Stanton Mercer had led a class action lawsuit against Lambert that resulted in the attorney’s clients taking a closer look at how he was handling their business. The result had been Lambert losing his license to practice law.

Mandy entered Lambert’s information into her phone, then dialed the last known number for him. It, too, had been disconnected.

She decided to drive to his home to talk to him.

###

Coke pulled his car into the parking space next to Mandy’s as she stepped off the elevator into the garage.

“I was just coming to see you,” he smiled. “Where are, you going?”
“I thought I would drive to Harvey Lambert’s house and speak with him. His phone is disconnected.
“You know he was disbarred,” Coke nodded.
“Yes, I would like to get him to give me a statement that he failed to represent Lisa Mercer adequately.”
Mandy unlocked her car. “Want to ride with me?”
“Of course,” Coke grinned.

##
Chapter 6

Harvey Lambert’s home was in an aging, upscale neighborhood. The once beautiful residence was derelict but not quiet to the point of being condemned.

Mandy knocked on the door, sadly eying the hole for the missing button on the doorbell. Paint peeled from the once ornate door, and wood rot had started at the bottom of the door frame.

After a reasonable time, she knocked louder and called out Harvey Lambert’s name. She could hear cursing inside the house as someone shuffled toward the entrance. “What do you want,” Lambert bellowed as he pulled open the door.

Harvey Lambert was the caricature of every drunk bum ever encountered on the streets of Austin. His hair was long, matted and greasy. His yellow teeth turned his snarl into a pitiful endorsement of the need for teeth whiteners. Red-rimmed, bloodshot eyes squinted against the sunlight.

Mandy introduced herself and held out her business card. Lambert made no move to take it.

“I am the attorney handling the appeal for Lisa Mercer,” Mandy said. “I was hoping you would help me.”

“I did all I could for that woman,” Lambert growled. “Can’t you people leave me alone. Isn’t it enough her husband cost me my livelihood?”
“Do you honestly feel you provided Lisa Mercer with the best legal defense possible?” Mandy continued. Lambert looked at her as if she had spit on him. “Get the hell off my property,” he barked as he slammed the door.

“She is going to die because you are a miserable attorney,” Mandy yelled through the door. “And a miserable human being.”

“Whoa counselor,” Coke laughed. “We are supposed to maintain a certain amount of decorum.”

“I don’t need him,” Mandy frowned. “Lord knows he made enough mistakes to warrant a new trial. I just wanted to put everything possible in my brief.

“I often fear I receive special treatment because Mother is a member of the appeals court. I feel I need to be twice as good and thorough as the attorney I am facing.

“You know Rick will bring his A game just to win against me because I am Judith Kincaid’s daughter.” Coke nodded, “No doubt about that. He is extremely competitive. A win against the presiding judge’s daughter would be a feather in his cap.”

Mandy glanced sideways at Coke as she backed her car from Lambert’s driveway. She was always surprised at how handsome he was. The fact that he seemed completely unaware of his good looks made him even more loveable.

Loveable, did I just think Coke is loveable,” Mandy slightly smiled to herself.

“Would you like to go to that new Thai place on the west side?” Coke asked hesitantly. “It opened about a month ago, so they should have the kinks worked out of it.”
“That sounds like fun,” Mandy nodded. “You will need to give me directions. I am not certain where it is.”

##

The restaurant was still riding its wave of popularity as being the new place in town. The only tables available were for four. “That is fine,” Coke nodded.

Mandy and Coke were sipping their first drink when Rick and Bailey entered the restaurant. Coke’s stomach slightly turned. He had been looking forward to a pleasant evening with Mandy. He hoped the hostess would seat the other couple before they noticed him and Mandy.

No such luck! Rick spotted them and charged toward their table, leaving Bailey in his wake. “I didn’t expect to find the two of you out on a date,” Rick glared at Mandy as if she were two-timing him.

“We go out every Friday night,” Mandy sweetly smiled. “Apparently, you and Bailey do, too.”

“Um, no,” Rick stuttered. “Just occasionally. We worked late and decided to grab a bite to eat.”

The hostess approached Rick, “Sir, I am afraid we have a thirty-minute wait. May I put your name on the list?”

“No,” Rick scowled as if offended that he would be expected to wait. “We will just join our friends. They have two extra chairs.”

The hostess looked questioningly at Coke.

Ever the gentleman, Coke shrugged. “Sure.”

Rick took the seat next to Mandy without pulling out a chair for Bailey. Coke quickly stood and pulled the chair out. “You look lovely tonight,” he smiled.

Bailey thanked him and slid into the chair.
“So, what are you two celebrating,” Rick asked.

“So, what are you two celebrating,” Rick asked.

“Nothing,” Mandy smiled. “Just our usual Friday night date.” She laid her hand on top of Cokes and looked at him. “We have after-dinner plans, but they are private.”

Rick choked on his drink and fought to keep from spewing it over his friends. Surely Mandy isn’t sleeping with Coke Cannon, he thought. The thought disturbed him more than he wanted to admit.

“Rick has an exciting announcement to make,” Bailey informed the group.

“Yes,” Rick beamed, “Today, I filed to run for District Attorney.”

“Congratulations,” Coke smiled. “I hope you win. We need a real law-and-order DA. Jefferson has gone soft on us.”

“Who will you be running against,” Mandy asked.

“A couple of nobody’s and Jefferson,” Rick smirked. “Of course, there is still time for others to file. Bailey convinced me that now is a good time to throw my hat into the ring.” He leaned over and kissed Bailey on the cheek.

He wanted to kiss Mandy and slap Coke. Oh, well, I can use Bailey to drive Mandy from my mind tonight, he thought. He had been doing that a lot lately. He knew Bailey was falling in love with him, but he also knew he loved Mandy Kincaid.

During the evening, Rick fought to control the conversation, to hold Mandy’s attention. It infuriated him when he saw her look up at Coke—through her long lashes—and smile. God, she is everything I have ever wanted, he thought.
Mandy’s cell phone rang. It was Judith. “I just wanted to let you know I won’t be home tonight,” the judge said. “Brett wants you to bring a date for dinner tomorrow night. He is grilling steaks on his new grill.”

“I would love that. Have fun,” Mandy laughed and hung up.

“Who was that,” Rick demanded.

Mandy jerked back from him and frowned. “None of your business,” she said.

An uncomfortable silence fell on the four diners as they processed Mandy’s reply to Rick’s rudeness.

“I’m sorry,” Rick apologized. “I didn’t mean to sound so…”

“Possessive,” Coke finished his sentence.

Rick glared at Coke. A wicked look of mischief crossed his face.

“You know,” Rick grinned, “Coke was quite the man about campus during our college days. The ladies loved him.”

Coke blushed and hung his head. He wondered where Rick was heading. Coke had never been a lady’s man. Law school and a part-time job had taken every second of his time.

“Coke had a line they couldn’t resist. He told them they didn’t know what a high was until they’d had a little Coke.” Rick burst out laughing at his cleverness.

“That was just crude,” Coke signaled for their check, “and untrue.”

##

“I need to take you to your car at my office,” Mandy said as she pulled from the restaurant parking lot.
“Mandy, I want you to know that what Rick said was a lie,” Coke buckled his seatbelt. “I would never…”

“I know,” Mandy interrupted him. “Sometimes Rick acts like a spoiled child.”

“I am sorry he ruined our evening,” Coke continued. “Thanks for letting him think it was a date. That upset him. Honestly, I liked jerking his chain.”

“So,” Mandy smiled, “I think you owe me a date.”

A euphoric smile spread across Coke’s face.

“So,” Mandy smiled, “I think you owe me a date.”

A euphoric smile spread across Coke’s face.

“Brett and Mom want us to join them for dinner tomorrow night,” she grinned. “Will you be my plus one?”

“I would love to,” he nodded.

##

Bailey O’Shea rolled onto her side. Rick was already asleep. He wasn’t one to cuddle after lovemaking, but he was perfect otherwise.

She wondered how she had allowed herself to get so deeply involved with the dark-haired Adonis sleeping next to her. Rick’s good looks and occasional gallant gestures had drawn her to him. His ambition and drive held her. He was intelligent and quick on his feet. It was entertaining to watch him in the courtroom. He was mesmerizing. She admired his “take no prisoners” attitude.

It perturbed her that he seemed interested in Mandy Kincaid, but who wasn’t. If she were into women, she would be courting Mandy, too.

Her biggest concern was the strict no-fraternizing-among-employees rule the DA’s office had. She knew the DA would fire one of them if others learned she was
sleeping with Rick. She was certain she would be the one to go.

*Perhaps I should extract myself from this relationship*; she thought as she drifted into sleep.

##
Mandy watched the door impatiently. She wondered why it was taking so long for the jailer to bring Lisa Mercer to meet with her.

It was Friday morning, Mandy had filed her brief to overturn Lisa’s conviction, and she was to present her oral arguments to the Appeals Court on Monday. The young attorney had concluded her research in the Mercer case and interviewed everyone associated with the case. The more she investigated, the more she believed Lisa Mercer was innocent. She had saved her meeting with her client until last.

The heavy, metal door swung open, and a prison matron led a scrawny, pathetic creature into the visitation room. The prisoner looked nothing like the photos Mandy had seen of Lisa Mercer. She looked past the matron to see if anyone else was entering the room. The skeletal woman was the only one with the jailer. She in no way resembled the photos Mandy had seen of Lisa Mercer.

Lisa advanced toward Mandy like an abused dog, expecting another beating. Her arm was in a cast, and there were deep lacerations on her arms and face. The frail woman looked like the walking dead.

Mandy was speechless. She motioned for Lisa to sit down and glared at the matron. “What happened to her?”
“No one likes baby killers,” the matron shrugged and left the room, locking the door behind her.

Mandy fought to gain control of her temper. Her client had obviously suffered severe abuse, and no one seemed to care. She waited until she was certain her voice would not show her distress then addressed Lisa.

“What happened?” Mandy softly asked.

“Nothing I didn’t deserve,” Lisa listlessly replied.

“Are you being abused here?” Mandy frowned.

“Nah,” Lisa drawled, “they treat me like a princess.”

“Mrs. Mercer,” Mandy hissed, “I am trying to save your life.”

“Just let me die,” Lisa whispered. “Please, get it over with quickly.”

“I don’t believe your killed your children,” Mandy declared.

“You are a majority of one,” Lisa snorted.

“Your husband doesn’t believe you killed them either. He has been extremely helpful to me working on your appeal.”

“Stanton loves me,” Lisa shook her head. “He thinks I can do no wrong.” She studied Mandy for a long time. “I guess he hired you with the insurance money. You look too smart to be a pro bona attorney.

“Give him a message for me. Tell him to get on with his life and forget about me. Take the insurance money and make a good life for himself.”

“The appeal will proceed on Monday whether you want it to or not,” Mandy glowered. “The appeal is automatic and required by law. You aren’t required to be there. I just want you to know that I will do everything in my power to overturn your conviction.”
“Don’t,” Lisa hissed. “Haven’t you read, I am guilty?”
Lisa walked to the metal door and banged against it for the guard to let her out of the room.

##

The haunted look in Lisa Mercer’s eyes tormented Mandy’s thoughts. The woman had obviously accepted her fate. Lisa’s once glorious blonde hair had been cut short, so she looked like a boy.
Mandy was aware that each child carried a million dollar insurance policy and that Stanton Mercer had already received a three-million-dollar check from the insurance company.
A three-million-dollar payout was a good motive for murder. Mandy wondered why the sole beneficiary had been Stanton Mercer. Children’s insurance policies usually named both parents as beneficiaries.

Mandy pushed the button to bring her car phone online and called Brett. “Uncle Brett, I need a favor.”
“If I can grant it,” Brett laughed, “consider it done.”
“I am afraid Lisa Mercer will die in prison,” Mandy explained. “Is there any way you can have her moved to a private cell at your jail until the appeal process is complete?”
“That I can do,” Brett promised.
As soon as she hung up, her phone rang. A quick glance at the screen told her it was Rick. She answered and silently listened as Rick talked.
“If you haven’t already made plans,” Rick said, “I was wondering if you would have dinner with me tonight?”
“We can’t discuss the Lisa Mercer case,” Mandy said sternly.

“Of course, not. I just want to take you out,” Rick reassured her. “You know I care for you, Mandy.”

“I thought you were dating Bailey,” Mandy replied.

“No, there is nothing serious between Bailey and me,” Rick chuckled. “We are good friends and coworkers. You know there is a non-fraternizing rule at the DA’s office. Neither of us would jeopardize our jobs.”

“What did you have in mind,” Mandy asked. She enjoyed making Rick Randolph squirm. He was always too sure of himself.

“I thought maybe dinner then dancing afterward,” Rick answered.

“Just dinner,” Mandy replied. “I still have a lot of preparation for our court appearance Monday.”

“Dinner it is,” Rick chuckled. “I will pick you up at seven.”

##
Death Was Too Easy
Mandy glanced at her watch. The Lisa Mercer case would begin in two hours, and Mandy was ready.

The court should overturn the death penalty simply because Lisa had never been Mirandized, but Mandy was taking no chances.

Her brief had pointed out the abysmal incompetence of defense attorney Harvey Lambert. It was obvious Lisa Mercer had received the most atrocious defense in the history of Texas trials. Mandy was glad the man could no longer practice law.

The appellate judges had requested oral arguments from the defense and the prosecution. Both attorneys were determined to win the case. Rick, because he hated to have one of his convictions overturned and Mandy because she believed Lisa Mercer was innocent.

Memories of her recent dinner date with Rick flooded Mandy’s mind. She liked Rick. There was no doubt in her mind that he would make an excellent district attorney. He was energetic and driven. He played the political game as good as anyone she had ever met. His boyish good looks and quick wit make him popular with his peers and, most of all, his jurors.

Mandy knew that winning a favorable verdict often depended on how much the jury liked the attorneys involved. She had never defended a client against Rick
Randolph, but she had witnessed him charm a guilty verdict out of several juries.

##

“You ready for this Goldilocks?” Rick squeezed Mandy’s elbow as they walked into the courtroom.

“As ready as I will ever be,” she smiled at his nickname for her.

“Whoever wins, I want to celebrate by taking you to dinner tonight,” he grinned.

“Sounds like I can’t lose on that deal,” Mandy laughed.

They took their seats and Bailey joined Rick. Mandy’s second chair was already waiting for her.

Everyone rose as the panel of judges entered the room. The hearing was less than an hour. The judges informed the attorneys that their written decision would be released as soon as possible.

Waiting for a jury to return a verdict had always been the hardest part for Mandy. She knew that waiting for the appeals court to give their written decision would drive her crazy.

She was pleased to see Coke in the courtroom. He walked to her and shyly touched her arm. “You did a great job. It is too bad you weren’t Lisa Mercer’s attorney for her trial. The jury would have acquitted her.”

Bailey joined them. “This is always the hardest part, waiting for the ruling. I hope they don’t drag this out forever. Maybe your mother can speed up the process, Mandy.”
“I would never ask her to use her influence to help me in any way,” Mandy scowled, “and she wouldn’t do it even if I did.”

“I was just teasing,” Bailey backed away from the blonde attorney. “I know how ethical both of you are.”

Come on, Coke, buy me a cup of coffee,” the auburn-haired beauty linked her arm through Cokes and pulled him toward the door. He cast Mandy a longing glance, then allowed Bailey to lead him from the courtroom.

“Look at the bright side,” Rick teased as they left the courtroom. “You can still have dinner with me.”

They discussed the case over dinner. Rick was certain the appellate court wouldn’t overturn the guilty verdict against Lisa Mercer. Mandy was equally certain the court would dismiss the death-penalty ruling due to errors and irregularities.

“What if the court does overturn the verdict?” Mandy sipped her second glass of wine.

“I will refile,” Rick declared.

“Seriously?” Mandy frowned. “That poor woman is barely functional. She needs to be hospitalized, not imprisoned.”

“I have never had a guilty verdict overturned,” Rick smiled. “I am not about to start, now that I am running for DA. I agree that Harvey Lambert did a sorry job of defending her, but I still believe she is guilty. I think she did it for the insurance money.

“They were having severe financial problems. I think Lisa saw the insurance money as their way out of their difficulties.”

“Now Stanton Mercer has three million dollars, and his wife is rotting in jail,” Mandy said bitterly. “My
money is on him as the killer, even though he does seem genuinely upset over his wife’s imprisonment.”

Rick shrugged his shoulders. “Let’s talk about something else, like you, going with me to the governor’s ball next month.”

Mandy slowly smiled. “I would like that.”

##

Mandy said goodnight to him at the door. “I would invite you in, but I live with my mother.”

“You really should get your place,” Rick frowned as he bent down to kiss her. She turned her head, so his kiss landed on her cheek instead of the lips he desperately wanted to touch.

Rick Randolph wasn’t used to women deflecting his advances. He found it made him even more determined to be with Mandy Kincaid.

He took a long way home. He needed time to think and clear his head of the prurient thoughts he was having about the beautiful blonde attorney. He was a patient man. Sooner or later she would be his.

He turned his car toward Bailey’s apartment. Bailey will make me forget about Miss Kincaid, he thought. Bailey never refused him. He knew he should end their intimate relationship. If anyone ever found out he was sleeping with Bailey O’Shea, he would lose the election for district attorney. He decided to end their illicit relationship, but not tonight.

##

Bailey didn’t have to shuffle thru the mail. She recognized the large manila envelope bearing the return address of the appellate court. She carried the court’s
response to Rick’s office without opening it. As lead counsel, she felt he should be the one to open the ruling. “Are you ready for this?” she smiled as she placed the envelope on his desk.

“Ready as I will ever be,” Rick grinned. “I am pretty certain they didn’t overturn the guilty verdict.”

Bailey watched as Rick read the ruling. His eyes went from warm brown to cold, black orbs as he scanned the document.

“Son-of-a…” The shrill ring of the office phone cut off his profanity. He glared at the phone, then stomped from the office.

Bailey answered the phone, then picked up the contents of the envelope. The court had overturned the ruling and called for a new trial.

The fact that the court didn’t leave the decision to retry the case up to Rick told her they wanted Lisa Mercer to be either honestly convicted or acquitted.

Bailey reread the last paragraph, the one that had infuriated Rick. The court instructs attorney Amanda Kincaid to handle the defense of Lisa Mercer.

Not only had Rick been handed his first verdict reversal, but he had also been instructed to retry the case against a defense mounted by Mandy Kincaid.

Bailey knew the trial would be a bitter battle between the two brilliant attorneys. There was no way Rick would lose twice to Mandy Kincaid.

She called Mandy to congratulate her on the court’s ruling. Bailey was looking forward to running the second chair against the young attorney.

##
After Bailey’s call, Mandy dug through her inbox and opened the envelope from the appellate court. She smiled as she read the court’s decision remanding the case back to the local court for retrial. She gasped when she saw that the court had appointed her to handle Lisa Mercer’s defense.
Death Was Too Easy
Mandy called the county jail and requested a meeting with her client. In less than an hour, she was sitting across from the despondent woman.

“The appeals court overturned your death sentence and ordered a new trial,” Mandy smiled.

“What difference does it make,” Lisa softly said. “The state will assign some loser lawyer to my case, and the result will still be the same.”

Mandy watched Lisa’s eyes as she made her next statement. “Your husband has received the three-million-dollar death benefit from the insurance policies of your children. Why doesn’t he hire you a decent attorney?”

“I, I don’t know,” Lisa stammered. “I haven’t talked to him. Does he know I am here in the county jail?”

“Do you want me to arrange a meeting with him?” Mandy asked.

“I…yes, yes. I would like to talk to him,” Lisa smiled for the first time.

“Right now,” Mandy continued, “I need you to tell me what happened to your children.”

Lisa glared at the attorney. “I killed them,” she hissed.
Mandy physically recoiled from the venom and hatred in her client’s tone. “I need all the details,” she pushed.

The vacant look in Lisa’s eyes told Mandy the woman had slipped back into her world void of feelings. Lisa simply stared straight ahead, not seeing Mandy.

Mandy tried another avenue. “Are you being treated better here?”

Lisa was unresponsive. After five more minutes of trying to engage the woman in conversation, Mandy left her sitting alone in the visitation cubicle. She wondered, again, why Stanton Mercer had made no effort to mount a defense for his wife.

##

For the third time, Mandy called Stanton Mercer’s mobile phone. She was astounded that he hadn’t contacted her. All the news stations were carrying the story of his wife’s deliverance from the death penalty. He had to know the appeals court had granted his wife a new trial.

She decided to visit his place of employment, Biochemistry International. Stanton and Lisa were researchers on the genome project of one of the largest biochemical companies in the world.

The receptionist in the lobby informed Mandy that Stanton was out but would return in ten minutes. “He has an important meeting at two,” she explained.

Mandy found a chair where she could watch people coming into the twelve-story building. Just as the receptionist had promised, Stanton Mercer strolled toward the entrance of the building ten minutes later. He was engaged in an intense discussion with a
beautiful, dark-haired woman who could easily pass for a model or movie star.

The couple stopped a few feet from the revolving door, and Stanton grasped the woman by her shoulders. He looked directly into her face and spoke. By the expression on his face, Mandy knew what he was saying was serious, and he wanted the woman to pay attention.

When he stopped talking, the woman tiptoed and kissed him briefly. He smiled as the brunette turned and walked away.

From her vantage point, Mandy watched him as he waited for an elevator. Stanton Mercer looked nothing like the unkept, distraught man that had accosted her in the parking garage avowing his wife’s innocence.

Mercer wore an expensive suit and Italian loafers. His haircut was perfect, and his grooming was immaculate. He was incredibly handsome. Mandy knew that some of the insurance money had already paid for his new clothes.

Mandy waited until she was certain Stanton would be in his office and approached the receptionist again. The woman rang his phone and instructed Mandy to take the elevator to the ninth floor and go to room 901. “It is the first door on your left after you step from the elevator,” she instructed. “You can’t miss it.”

Stanton was waiting at the elevator when the doors opened. “Miss Kincaid,” he greeted her enthusiastically. “Thank you so much for getting Lisa’s death penalty overturned. When can I see her?”

“Right now,” Mandy called his bluff.

“I, uh, I, give me a few minutes,” Stanton stuttered. “I need to cancel a meeting I called for this afternoon.”
He led her into his office and motioned for her to sit in the chair across the desk from him. He called someone and asked them to notify everyone that the three o’clock meeting was rescheduled for the same time tomorrow.

“I am ready to see my wife,” he smiled.

##

Mandy arranged for the Mercers to meet in a private room. She observed through a one-way mirror. Stanton was pacing the floor, stopping short of wringing his hands. It was easy to see he was anxious about the meeting with Lisa.

The guard opened the door and led Lisa Mercer into the room.

“Oh, my God! My Angel, what have they done to you?” Stanton carefully embraced his wife and gently kissed her lips. She sagged against him.

Mandy could tell Stanton was supporting his wife, preventing her from crumbling to the floor. He held her for a long time as she clung to him.

“I have missed you so much,” Lisa mumbled into the front of her husband’s shirt.

“Oh, Lisa, Darling,” Stanton looked as if he would burst into tears. “What has happened to you?”

“Baby killers aren’t very popular in prison,” Lisa grimaced. “Miss Kincaid had me moved to the county jail to keep me alive.”

Stanton continued to assist his wife as he led her to a chair and conscientiously lowered her to the seat. He dropped to his knees and clasped her hands in his. “I am so, so, sorry,” he cried.
Lisa lovingly traced the worry lines in his face, then leaned forward and whispered in his ear.

“More than anything,” he exclaimed as she drew back and gazed into his eyes. “I want that more than anything.”

He buried his face in her lap and cried. She caressed his head and comforted him as one would comfort a child. “It is okay, baby,” she almost whispered. “I am okay. Everything is going to be okay.”

After several minutes, Stanton pulled a chair close to his wife, and they began to talk.

“Why is your arm in a cast?” he frowned as he reached out his hand and lightly touched the healing scars on her face. “And these scars?”

“Some of the inmates thought they would save the state the cost of putting me to death. They almost killed me. Thank, God a guard heard the uproar and pulled them off me.”

“Lisa, I…” she placed her finger on his lips and stopped him from talking.

“I need you to do something for me,” she looked him in the eye. “I need you to hire Mandy Kincaid as my defense attorney. I believe she can convince a jury that I am innocent.”

“Of course,” he exhaled softly, “anything. I will do anything to have you back with me. You are the most important thing in the world to me.”

The scene astounded Mandy. How could Stanton Mercer go from kissing his new paramour in front of his office building to declaring his undying love for his wife? Either the man was a great actor or a pathological liar.
Mandy watched the two until the guard opened the door to take Lisa away. The woman’s eyes glistened as she fought back the tears. Mandy knew her client was trying to be strong for her husband. Something was horribly wrong with the entire scenario.

Mandy met Stanton in the lobby of the police station. He smiled as he approached her. “Thank you so much, Miss Kincaid. It was wonderful to visit with my wife.”

Mandy visited with him for several minutes giving him every opportunity to hire her, but he said nothing.

“ADA Rick Randolph will be running prosecution for the new trial,” Mandy volunteered. “He is the same ADA that prosecuted your wife the first time.”

Stanton nodded as if he understood. “I hope they assign her a more capable defense attorney this time. That last guy was awful. Poor Lisa didn’t stand a chance.”

“Since you now have the money,” Mandy frowned, “you should hire a decent defense attorney for your wife.”

“Would it matter,” Stanton’s cold eyes held Mandy’s, “she is guilty, you know.”

Mandy exhaled, trying to catch her breath. The man’s declaration was like a punch in the stomach. “The last time I saw you, you were declaring her innocence.”

“Just now, in the room with her,” Stanton grimaced, “she leaned forward and whispered in my ear. She said, ‘I killed them, Stanton. I killed all three of them’.”

Mandy remained silent. In the interrogation room, his initial response to his wife’s whispered words didn’t fit with “Honey, I killed the kids.” She wondered what
kind of game Stanton was playing. She wondered why he wasn’t devastated by the death of his three small children. Most of all she wondered why he wasn’t going to provide a good defense attorney for Lisa.

“Do you believe her?” Mandy asked. “She is in an extremely emotional state. I believe she is suffering from postpartum psychosis and extreme depression. She took a terrible beating in the women’s prison, some serious blows to the head. I am not sure she knows what she is doing.”

Stanton shook his head. “I believe you are right, Miss Kincaid. Now, if you will excuse me, I am going home. All of this has been very tiring.”

###

As Mandy poured a glass of wine, she heard her mother pull into the garage. She reached for another glass and poured wine into it and walked into Judith’s office.

Judith placed her briefcase and an arm full of files on her desk and wordlessly smiled as her daughter handed her the wine. Both women took one sip and began talking at the same time. They laughed as the collapsed onto the office sofa.

“You go first,” Mandy encouraged her mother.

“We are reviewing that case from three years ago,” Judith frowned. “The one where the man murdered two women and a baby because he hated lesbians. I consider it a hate crime, although the defense keeps referring to it as a crime of passion.”

“Who was the prosecutor,” Mandy asked.
“Rick, who else? He seems to handle all the high-profile cases and win.” Judith kicked off her shoes and pulled her feet under her, settling into the sofa.

“He is good,” Mandy nodded.

“Tenacious as a pit bull,” the judge agreed. “I hear you are dating him.”

“We have been out to dinner, movies and a couple of plays,” Mandy smiled. “I find him fascinating. I have never met anyone with such drive and determination.

“How about you, mom. How are things with Uncle Brett?”

“Wonderful,” Judith blushed slightly. “He has always been wonderful.”

“Humm,” Mandy grinned then sipped her wine.

“I was glad to see the court sent the Mercer case back for retrial,” Judith said.

“Yes, but I don’t know why they designated me as the defense attorney. There is something not right about the case. I wish they had left it open for another attorney to be assigned.”

“Maybe they thought Lisa Mercer’s only chance for a fair trial was you,” Judith lovingly smiled at her daughter. “I am proud of the job you did before the appeals court. All the judges were impressed with the thoroughness of your brief. I understand they asked for your oral input just to see how you would handle it.”

“Great,” Mandy huffed. “I was dying a thousand deaths, and they were merely watching me jump through hoops.”

“Yes, they can be scoundrels sometimes,” the judge laughed. “Especially when a beautiful attorney is
presenting a brief. I also think they enjoyed seeing you give Rick a good trouncing. He can be arrogant.”

“I’ll pretend you didn’t say that,” Mandy laughed.

“What is bothering you about the Mercer case?” Judith drank the last of her wine.

Mandy walked to the kitchen and returned with the bottle. She filled her mother’s glass. “Should we discuss it?” Mandy frowned. “You could end up hearing the appeal on it.”

“I would have to recuse myself,” Judith shrugged. “If it went to the appellate court, you would have to present the defense brief.”

Mandy nodded, refilled her wine glass and settled on the end of the sofa facing her mother. *We look like bookends;* Mandy thought as she realized she was reflecting Judith, feet pulled under her, leaning back into the corner of the couch and sipping their favorite wine.

“I just have a gut feeling that Lisa Mercer did not murder her children,” Mandy frowned. “I feel there is much more to this case than we have ever uncovered.

“When I read through the case files I felt that very little background investigation happened on the case. It feels like the police took everything at face value and didn’t follow up on anything. They never interviewed Lisa’s or Stanton’s parents.

“The defense never called Lisa’s obstetrician to the stand or questioned the children’s pediatrician. It seems like such a sloppy investigation.

“I would suspect Stanton, but one of his employees swears he was working late with her.”

“Do you know Jason Kiser,” Judith asked.

~ 74 ~
“I have heard of him,” Mandy nodded, “but I have never met him.”

“He was a good assistant district attorney who felt too many innocent people were wrongly convicted, especially veterans with PTSD. He opened his detective agency and built an excellent reputation for himself. I believe he has agencies in Dallas, Houston, and here.

“He worked as a law enforcement officer while attending law school, so things didn’t come easy for him. He is an excellent example of how one can pull themselves up by their bootstraps.”

“You point is,” Mandy raised a perfectly arched eyebrow.

“You should hire him,” Judith smiled. “Have him thoroughly investigate the Mercers.”

Mandy nodded. “I will talk to him.”

“Enough shop talk,” Judith laughed, “Is Coke taking you to the Governor’s Ball?”

“I’m going with Rick,” Mandy shrugged. “He asked me first. What about you and Uncle Brett?”

“We will be there,” her mother grinned mischievously, “We may even have a sleepover.”

“Have you set a date yet,” Mandy raised her eyebrows.

“We are not in a hurry,” Judith smiled. “Things are good for us just as they are.”

They sat quietly for several minutes. “You know the President is considering me for a Supreme Court seat?”

Mandy nodded. She hadn’t pushed her mother for information on the appointment. She wasn’t certain how Judith felt about living in Washington, DC. She
wasn’t even certain her mother wanted to be a Supreme Court Justice.

“If that is my path,” Judith softly said, “I don’t want to force Brett to go with me. I want him to follow me if he wants to, not because he has to because he is married to me.”

##
Death Was Too Easy
Chapter 10

The Governor’s Ball was the highlight of the social season, and Mandy was excited. It was her first time to attend the affair. Members of the DA’s office always received invitations. Bailey had invited Coke so he could attend. “We can switch partners after we arrive,” she had commented. Rick did not intend to switch partners. Mandy was his date.

Rick called to let Mandy know he was running late. “I am sorry,” he apologized. “I may be an hour late.”

“Please, don’t worry about it,” Mandy said graciously, “I will just meet you there. I can ride with Mom and Uncle Brett.”

“Are you certain you don’t mind?” Rick asked anxiously.

“I promise, I do not mind,” Mandy laughed.

##

Brett and the Kincaid women looked like models in their ball attire. Judith was glad that Mandy had insisted on purchasing designer gowns for the occasion. Brett was dashing in his black tuxedo.

The usher led them to their assigned table. Mandy was glad to see Coke and Bailey seated with them. One of the new state senators was also at their table. Her date had gone to get drinks at the open bar.
Mandy introduced herself and took a seat next to the senator.

Mandy spotted him across the room. He was one of those men women followed with their eyes because he was perfect. The epitome of the ideal man: tall with well-defined muscles that strained excitingly against his perfectly fitted tuxedo. His thick brown hair was tousled as if someone had been running their fingers through it. He brushed it back from his forehead, allowing it to fall wherever it wished, partially covering the side part that had been there seconds before. His hair freed from the attempt at a formal hair style fell around his head in loose curls with blonde highlights.

She wondered if he realized he had ruffled his hair and looked adorable. He fluidly moved as if walking was a byproduct of his desire to get from one place to another. His broad shoulders tapered to small waist and hips.

“Breathe, dear,” Judith whispered in her ear, and Mandy realized she had been holding her breath. She had been thinking about how it would feel to run her fingers through his hair.

“Mom,” Judith whispered as her mother followed her gaze. “He is gorgeous. Who is he?”

To her surprise, the man languidly walked toward their table. “Judge Kincaid, what a wonderful surprise,” he smiled displaying perfect teeth surrounded by full, sensuous lips.

Judith extended her hand to him. “I am glad you are sitting at our table,” she smiled. She turned to her daughter. “Mandy, I would like to introduce you to Jason Kiser. Jason, this is my daughter Mandy.”
Jason took Mandy’s hand and bowed his head slightly. “I can see the apple didn’t fall far from the tree. You are as beautiful as your mother.”

Mandy drew from all the manners and etiquette Judith had taught her to keep from staring at Jason Kiser with her mouth hanging open.

Jason placed the drink he was carrying on the table and took his seat next to the senator.

“Where is Rick?” Bailey asked as she and Coke stood to dance.

“He is running late,” Mandy found her voice. “He will be here soon.”

“Excuse me, Jason,” the senator said. “The state attorney general is here. I need to speak with him.”

Jason nodded and stood as his date slid her chair back from the table and walked away.

“It seems everyone has deserted us,” Jason smiled. “Would you like to dance?”

Mandy nodded and allowed him to lead her to the dance floor. His hand was warm and firm. His eyes smiled as they looked into hers. *He fits me perfectly;* she thought as she moved into his arms.

Jason Kiser was an excellent dancer. The senator was working the room and paid him little attention. “It appears I have become the casualty of politics,” he grinned as he moved Mandy into a second dance.

“Does she always treat you like this,” Mandy asked curiously.

“Oh, no,” Jason laughed. “She usually treats me worse. Sometimes I feel she thinks I am her personal dating service. You know, Kiser Detective and Escort Service.”
Mandy laughed as he described his relationship with the senator. She wondered why he allowed her to treat him so rudely.

“So, you are Mandy Kincaid,” he drew back to look at her. “What is it like to be the daughter of Judge Judith Kincaid?”

“It is amazing,” Mandy answered honestly. “She is the most incredible person I have ever met. She is more than my mom. She is my best friend.”

“I have tremendous admiration for her,” Jason nodded. “She is truly one of the finest jurists I have ever met.”

“You and I already have a lot in common,” Mandy laughed.

“Yes, we do, Mandy Kincaid,” Jason said softly. He pulled her tight against him and easily moved her around the dance floor. She relaxed and let him lead, enjoying the feel of his arms around her and the pleasing scent of him.

As the dance ended, she pulled slightly away from him. “Mother and I were talking about you this week. She thinks I should engage your services on a case I am handling.”

“You may engage my services anytime you want,” he smiled, “both my detective and escort skills are at your disposal.”

Mandy couldn’t stop the blush she felt moving from her chest to her face. She wasn’t used to men flirting with her. They always dealt with her on a more professional level, and she had never been one to flirt. She had to admit she liked the way Jason Kiser made her feel.
He placed his hand on the small of her back as he followed her back to the table and sat down beside her. Rick slid into the chair on the other side of her and glared at Jason Kiser.

“Rick,” Mandy smiled, “do you know Jason Kiser?”

“Jason and I are old acquaintances,” Rick rolled his eyes.

“I apologize,” Jason addressed Rick, “I had no idea I was intruding on your turf.”

“What an awful thing to say,” Mandy huffed. “I am no one’s turf.” She grabbed Rick’s hand and pulled him onto the dance floor.

“He is a little barbaric,” Rick encouraged Mandy’s wrath toward Jason.

Mandy was silent. Until Rick’s arrival, Jason had been a perfect gentleman. Rick often brought out the worst in people.

She chanced a glance at their table and found Jason Kiser’s eyes on her. She couldn’t pull her eyes away from him. He grinned and pointed to her then to himself as if to say “you and me.”


“Yes, I mind,” Rick barked as he swung Mandy away from the other attorney.

##

Jason watched as the two attorneys vied for Mandy Kincaid’s attention all evening. He wasn’t surprised. She was one of the most beautiful women he had ever encountered.
What did surprise him was the way she stayed in his thoughts. Although their paths had never crossed, he had heard tales of her prowess in the courtroom. Her reputation for tenacity and aggressive defense techniques were almost legendary in law enforcement circles.

He thought it strange that in a world populated by men, law enforcement officers rarely referred to her beauty, choosing instead to talk about her intelligence and perseverance in the courtroom.

He knew officers hated Mandy’s cross examinations. She normally ripped them to shreds. He had to admit that Mandy Kincaid had forced officers to pay closer attention to detail and to make certain their reports were accurate. All of them now wrote reports containing only facts and not conjecture. No one wanted to justify a slipshod report to Mandy Kincaid in open court.

She glanced at him, and he realized he had been staring at her for a long time. Rick left the table and Jason slid into the chair beside her.

“When do you want to meet?” he asked almost gleefully.

“I beg your pardon?” Mandy frowned.

“To discuss your case. When can we meet?”

“My office. Monday at nine,” she softened. “I will let you buy me a cup of coffee.”

“It’s a date then,” Jason stood as Rick charged toward the table. “Until Monday.”

“So, Jason Kiser,” Judith wickedly grinned as they waited for their dinner salads.
“A hunk,” Mandy chuckled. “Is he a lady’s man?”
“I don’t think so,” Judith searched her memory for anything adverse about Jason. “No, everything I have ever heard about him is good. He is a hard worker, smart, fair and honest. Tough as nails. I am sure he must date, but I have never heard his name connected with anyone in our circles.”
“What about the senator?” Mandy asked.
“She is his sister,” Judith laughed. “He always escorts her to public functions. It looks good for her image. She is gay, you know.”
Mandy couldn’t explain her feelings. It felt like a huge rubber band had suddenly released from around her chest. She exhaled loudly. Monday couldn’t come soon enough.
“Make him give you the tour of his training facilities,” Judith said as the waiter refilled their tea glasses.
“Training facilities,” Mandy repeated. I have never met a private investigator with training facilities.”
“You’ve never met a private investigator like Jason Kiser,” Judith raised her eyebrows to emphasize her statement.
“You are right about that, Mom,” Mandy laughed.

##
Mandy spent the morning on the phone trying to get a bail hearing for Lisa Mercer. She finally got a hearing set for Friday at eight in the morning. She called Stanton Mercer’s mobile phone and left him the time and date of the hearing. Stanton would have to put up the bail money.

Brett was holding Lisa in a private cell pending the outcome of the hearing. Mandy was afraid her client would die in the general population cells. Prisoners had a way of taking the law into their hands if they thought someone was going to get away with a heinous crime.

Her intercom buzzed. “Miss Kincaid, Jason Kiser is her to see you.”

“Give me just a minute,” Mandy answered. Her heart had beat a little faster at the mention of the detective’s name. She composed herself and walked to her office door.

“Mr. Kiser,” she smiled as she opened the door. Jason was standing at the receptionist’s desk talking to the woman. He slowing raised his eyes to meet Mandy’s.

Mandy felt as if she was being scanned and judged. His smile told her he approved of everything he saw. Three long strides brought him to her side. She stepped back to allow him entrance to her office.
“I have read everything I could find on Lisa Mercer,” he plunged directly into the reason for their meeting. “It is an interesting case. Sad, but interesting.”

Mandy motioned for him to sit as she moved back to her desk. She liked the fact that he didn’t waste time with small talk.

“What did you think of the police investigation into the death of the children?” Mandy asked.

“Deplorable,” he shrugged. “They had Lisa tried and convicted before they ever questioned her. They never bothered to consider any other suspects.”

“What do you think of Stanton Mercer?” Mandy continued.

“Incongruous!” Jason’s one-word description of Stanton said it all.

Jason stood. “You promised I could buy you a cup of coffee,” he smiled. “I would like to hear your take on this case from start to finish.”

##

They sat side by side in the circular booth of the coffee shop. Mandy opened her file folder, and Jason pulled a small spiral notebook from his inside jacket pocket.

“I want to approach this case as if we know nothing,” Mandy frowned. “I don’t want to influence your perception of anyone involved in the case. Here is a list of people no one interviewed. I think we should talk to all of them.”

Jason scanned the list. Lisa’s parents, her co-workers and immediate supervisor, her OB/GYN, the children’s pediatrician, child care providers, psychiatrists, and neighbors. He found it hard to believe
neither the police nor the defense attorney had questioned the people on the list.

“Anyone else you can think of?” Mandy shrugged. “I checked for any domestic calls to police. I thought there might be a child or spousal abuse report. There was nothing.”

Jason squirmed in the booth. “Would you mind talking to the OB/GYN? Find out if there was any problem during delivery. That sort of thing,” he shyly said.

“Of course,” Mandy smiled.

“I think I will start with the parents,” Jason said as he paid their check. “Want to ride with me? It might be interesting.”

Mandy ran her schedule through her mind. Except for dinner with Coke, she had nothing pressing. “Sure.”

Vala Eichmann slowly opened the door to the man and woman standing on her front porch. She recognized Mandy Kincaid. “Miss Kincaid, please come in. We owe you so much. Thank you for saving our daughter.”

Mandy reassuringly smiled at her and introduced Jason. Albert Eichmann joined them in the living room.

“As you know,” Mandy explained, “Lisa’s case has been remanded back to the lower courts for a new trial. I will be handling her defense.”

“Oh, thank God,” Vala exclaimed. “I knew Stanton wouldn’t leave her at the mercy of a court-appointed attorney.”

“We are approaching this case as if everything is new and unknown to us, so we would like to ask you a few questions.”

~ 87 ~
“Of course,” nodded Mr. Eichmann earnestly nodded. “Ask us anything.”

“What do you think of your son-in-law?” Jason began with the question that held the most interest for him.

Albert and Vala exchanged a dark glance. “Lisa loved him,” Albert slowly said. “What difference does it make how we feel about him?”

“It is important because you know him as well as anyone,” Jason shrugged. “We are just trying to establish the family dynamics.”

“Stanton is brilliant,” Vala grimaced. “So is our Lisa. At first, they were extremely happy, always laughing and planning the next adventure in their lives. Stanton wanted many children, but Lisa only wanted two.”

“He used to say it was their duty to populate the world with their beautiful children,” Albert added. “Then our first grandchild was born, Laura. She was perfect. Blonde hair, blue eyes, a true Aryan child. She was beautiful. Lisa and Stanton doted on her.” Albert hung his head, overcome by emotion.

“Lisa took a leave from her research position to stay home with her,” Vala took over the story. “Laura was brilliant, just like her parents. By the time she was two, she was reading children’s books. She would climb into Albert’s lap and read him bedtime stories.

“Right after Laura’s first birthday, Lisa and Stanton informed us Lisa was pregnant, again. We were surprised. It seemed too soon.”

“Was Lisa happy that she was expecting another baby?” Jason asked.
“She was thrilled,” Vala frowned. “At first I thought she was putting up a good front, but she was thrilled.

“When Tyler was born, Stanton was strutting around, almost popping his buttons. He and Lisa were ecstatic that they had a boy and a girl. Then a year later Jeremy was born.”

“They were all beautiful children,” Albert continued. “They looked like they came from the same mold, blonde hair, blue eyes and perfect features. We were so proud of them.”

He gestured to a large portrait hanging over their fireplace. “See for yourself.”

The portrait looked like a small gathering of angels. Stanton was sitting in the grass, resting his back against a tree. Lisa sat beside him, leaning against his shoulder. His arm was around her snuggling her into his side. Three beautiful children sprawled across their laps. They all were laughing or smiling. A second, smaller portrait of the children rested on the fireplace mantel. The picture looked like time-lapsed photography. The older child was simply an older version of the second child and the third child. It looked as if someone had recorded the growth of one child.

“Then Lisa seemed to change,” Vala said. “Lisa became anxious, always checking on the children. When she became pregnant with Laura, she fired her housekeeper of five years, saying she wanted to care for her home and children herself.

After Jeremy was born, she cried a lot about nothing and lashed out at Stanton. She seemed to distance herself from the children, only caring for their basic needs.
“I knew she was feeling the pressure of caring for three children and a husband. Stanton didn’t help around the house much. He worked long hours, so he didn’t spend a lot of time with the children. Everything fell on Lisa’s shoulders.

“He expected Lisa to care for three children, keep the house, have his dinner on the table when he did come home,” Vala’s voice dropped to a whisper, “and take care of her wifely duties.”

Albert nodded in agreement with his wife. “We begged her to let us keep the children to give her some relief. You know, a Mother’s Day out, go shopping or see a movie, but she wouldn’t let the children out of her sight. She was extremely overprotective.”

“Did Lisa complain to you about anything,” Jason prodded.

“No, not really,” Vala shook her head. “She simply changed. All her life she has been a happy person, always laughing and sharing stories with us about her work and Laura. She began to change after Tyler was born.”

“Do you have the name of her psychiatrist,” Mandy asked.

The Eichmann’s looked at one another as if trying to understand the question. Finally, Albert spoke, “Psychiatrist, Lisa never saw a psychiatrist, except that quack the prosecution hired for her trial.”

“Mr. Kiser,” Vala held Jason’s gaze, “I know my daughter did not murder her children.”

“How can you be so certain,” Jason asked.

“Because I handled both the Benadryl bottles the day the children died. Lisa wasn’t feeling well, and the
children were congested. She called me and asked me to go to the pharmacy and bring her some Benadryl.

When I arrived at her home, the children were sleeping. I opened the boxes and removed the seal from one of the bottles. I handled both bottles several times while Lisa and I sat at the breakfast table having coffee. I read the instructions out loud to make certain she knew how much medicine to give to the children. She was despondent, and I was worried about her.

“The point of this story is the prosecution said the only fingerprints on the bottles belonged to Lisa. Mine should have been there, too, unless someone wiped the bottles clean, then put Lisa’s fingerprints on them.

“My daughter is an acknowledged genius, Mr. Kiser. She would not be stupid enough to murder her children, wipe the bottles clean, then cover them with her fingerprints.”

###

“I need to talk to Stanton Mercer,” Jason scowled as he pulled his car from the Eichmann’s driveway.

“He should be able to give us the name and phone number of the psychiatrist Lisa was seeing. I also want to speak with the fired housekeeper.”

“We have killed this day and skipped lunch in the process.” Jason grinned. “How do you feel about an early dinner? We can discuss this case. It is truly beginning to interest me.”

“That would be nice,” Mandy nodded.

###

They discussed the interview with the Eichmann’s; then talk turned to themselves.
“I know most of Judge Kincaid’s career was in the Dallas court system.” Jason smiled. “I assume you went to Dallas schools. As did I. I can’t believe our paths never crossed, football games, various competitions.”

“Mother preferred private schools,” Mandy said. “Once we moved here she still insisted on private school. With all the threats on Mom’s life, I was always surrounded by bodyguards. I guess it is just natural for mothers to be overprotective of their children.” I have no idea where I went to grade school, she thought. “Perhaps Lisa Mercer wasn’t that unusual after all.”

“She was obsessed with her children’s safety,” Jason frowned. “She was afraid something was going to happen to them.”

“Obviously, she was right,” Mandy noted. “Only the something might have been her.”

Mandy’s phone rang and Coke’s handsome face appeared on the screen. She had completely forgotten their dinner date. She waited until Coke finished his voice message, then texted him. In the middle of an interview on Lisa Mercer’s case. Will call you as soon as I can. It may be late. I must take a rain check on dinner.

Mandy felt slightly guilty for missing their date, but she wanted to stay with Jason Kiser. A feeling she couldn’t explain.

“Do you think we can interview Stanton at his home this evening?” Jason said thoughtfully. Various scenarios were already running through his mind. He desperately wanted to select the correct path to investigate.
Mandy called Stanton. As usual, he did not answer the phone. They decided to drive to the Mercer home and wait for him.

##

It was obvious the Stanton’s made good money in their jobs. The two-story house sat on what once was five perfectly manicured. Now it was overgrown and looked deserted. The late afternoon sun cast shadows from surrounding trees onto the house giving it a surreal look.

An eight-foot privacy fence surrounded the property, and a huge wrought iron gate blocked intruders from entering the driveway.

“I don’t think he lives here anymore,” Jason noted.

“It does look deserted,” Mandy agreed. “What do you think we should do?”

“Look around,” Jason said as he opened the car door.

Mandy was still trying to decide what to do when he opened her door and gently pulled her out of the car.

“We can slip through the space between the gate and the fence,” he softly said.

“That is not legal,” Mandy almost whispered.

“We aren’t trespassing,” Jason grinned. “Just looking around. You can wait in the car if you like.”

“No way,” Mandy huffed as she slipped through the space between the fence and gate.”

Children’s toys littered the large covered porch that encircled the house. A plastic tricycle, a Tonka Toy dump truck, poised to deliver a load of dirt and Barbie’s pink convertible—large enough for a four-year-old—were silently waiting for their playmates to return.
A baby doll in diapers lay away from the other toys. Its head was crushed in as if stomped by angry feet.

Jason raised an eyebrow then continued to the front door. He knocked hard on the door, rattling it in its frame. No sound came from inside the house. He tried the ornate doorknob, and the door easily swung open. He turned to Mandy, his eyebrows raised quizzically, asking permission to enter.

Mandy nodded and followed him inside.

A thin layer of dust covered the foyer and living room, but everything was in place and beautifully decorated. It didn’t look like the home of a psychotic mother. Photos of the children were proudly displayed everywhere. They were beautiful, angelic children.

The kitchen was like the living room, a place for everything and everything in its place. Three matching high chairs were lined up down one side of the island. A drawing that was an excellent caricature of Lisa hung on the refrigerator. “I love you Mommy!” was written in perfect block letters underneath the picture.

There were no dishes in the sink or on the cabinet. Mandy was certain forensics had confiscated everything in their zeal to build a case against Lisa Mercer. She recalled that the baby’s bottle had been filled with Benadryl and chocolate milk to cover the bitter taste of the drug.

A door opened into the pantry. Jason looked over her shoulder. She realized she liked the feel of him pressed against her back.

“What is that,” he directed her attention to a door at the back of the pantry. “Strange place for a door.”

He brushed against her as he moved around her to reach the other door.
Bright light flooded the kitchen and pantry. “What the hell are you doing?” Stanton Mercer held a gun in his hand as if he knew how to use it.

“Stanton,” Mandy stepped from the closet. Jason was close behind. The house looked deserted.”

“So, you were just, what?” Stanton motioned for them to move away from the pantry. “Helping yourselves to my can goods, ransacking my home.”

“We were looking for you,” Jason placed himself between Mandy and the gunman. “Miss Kincaid has left messages for you everywhere, and you haven’t returned her calls.”

Mandy knew Jason was trying to put Stanton on the defensive, so she joined him. “I felt certain you would want to know that Lisa is having a hearing on Friday. I may be able to get her released on bail.”

Stanton staggered as if she had slapped him. He sat down on one of the bar stools and laid his gun on the counter. He hung his head in his hands. “Why can’t you just leave us alone?” he begged.

Mandy and Jason stared at the man without speaking.

Stanton ran his fingers through his blonde hair and finally met their gaze. “If you get her out of jail, she will want to come home with me.”

“If no one pays her bail,” Jason volunteered, “she will stay in jail.”

Stanton weakly smiled. “Good.”

Jason easily took Stanton’s gun. When he realized how light it was, he knew it contained no bullets. He placed it back on the kitchen island.

“Why would you want your wife to stay in jail?” Mandy frowned.
“It is safer that way,” Stanton frowned. He looked down at his hands. “Lisa in jail is safer for everyone concerned.”

“Except for Lisa,” Mandy barked, “she almost died in prison.”

“Why do you care?” Stanton seemed to regain control. “I didn’t hire you. I don’t want you involved with my wife’s case.”

“But the state does,” Mandy smirked. “The appeals court assigned me to defend your wife.”

Stanton’s eyes darted around the room. He looked like a cornered animal with no place to run. Then he lowered his head and sat for several minutes without speaking.

“I need to see my wife,” he declared.


“You set it up for me,” he growled.

“I am her lawyer,” Mandy huffed, “I don’t have to do anything for you until you tell me what is going on.”

“You need to get out of my home,” Stanton stood to lead them to the door. “Now,” he barked when neither of them moved.

He pulled his mobile phone from his pocket and dialed a number. “Yes, I would like to report a breaking and entry at my home.”

Jason and Mandy immediately headed for the door. “My mistake,” Stanton said. “It is someone I know.”

At the door, Mandy turned to look back at Stanton Mercer. The man’s hollow, haunted eyes held secrets she needed to know.

###

~ 96 ~
Death Was Too Easy
Death Was Too Easy

~ 98 ~
Chapter 12

Jason walked Mandy to her door. “Thank you for a very exciting day,” he smiled. “I will work on nothing but this case until I am satisfied I have all the answers you need.”

“I appreciate that,” Mandy smiled. “I will pick you up at six tomorrow evening so that I can give you my report for the day over dinner.”

Mandy nodded. She knew she wanted to see the handsome detective again the next day. “Goodnight,” he smiled as he turned and walked to his car.

##

Mandy found her mother in the library reading an ancient law book. She fell into the chair across from Judith. She was exhausted both mentally and physically.

“You look tired, dear,” Judith slipped a bookmark into place and closed the book.

Mandy smiled. For as long as she could remember, her mother had always stopped what she was doing to pay attention to her daughter. “I love you,” Mandy softly said. “I love you, too,” Judith grinned. “Now tell me what brought on the unsolicited declaration.”
“I have spent the day talking to Lisa Mercer’s family; her mother and father and her husband.”

“Hold that thought,” Judith stood. “This sounds like a story best told over a glass of Merlot.”

###

Mandy returned from her early morning court appearance to find a message from Brett. She returned the call immediately.

“I thought you would like to know that Stanton Mercer is raising hell to see his wife,” Brett said. “What do you want us to do?”

“Let him see her in thirty minutes,” Mandy instructed. “Put them in a private visitation room with a two-way glass. I want to observe anytime he is with her.”

“Consider it done,” Brett said.

“I am on my way.” She thought about calling Jason then decided against it. He was also searching for pieces of the puzzle.

###

Mandy watched the Mercers embrace as if they would never let each other go. Lisa’s arm was no longer in a cast, and her hair had grown a little longer. Her blue eyes had lost their dazed, empty look. Her joy at seeing her husband was obvious.

“Are you okay?” Stanton held her at arm’s length and studied her face. “You are just beautiful,” he smiled then pulled her back against his chest. They silently held each other for a long time.

“Why are you here?” Lisa led him to a chair. “I am fine. You need to get on with your life.”
“I can’t, Lisa. Not without you.” Tears filled Stanton’s eyes as he clasped his wife’s hand. “I miss you so much…and the children,” he added hesitantly.

Lisa shook her head as her tears fell onto their clasped hands.

“They are asking questions,” Stanton continued. “They want to have you released on bail.”

“We would be together,” Lisa said excitedly. She lowered her voice. “We could leave the U.S. Go to a third-world country where no one will ever find us.”

“They will take our passports as a condition of your bail,” Stanton informed her. “You know they will find us.”

Lisa nodded dejectedly.

The guard announced their time was up and led Lisa back to her cell.

“I love you,” her husband called as his wife left the room. After the door had closed, Stanton laid his head on the table and cried.

##

Mandy picked up her messages then walked to her office as she shuffled through them. A call from Coke invited her to make up for their missed dinner. One message from Jason suggested she dress comfortably tonight. Three messages from Rick said, “Call me.”

She was surprised to find Rick waiting in her office. “How did you get in here?” she asked.

“Your new receptionist was impressed with the fact that I am running for DA,” Rick grinned. “I convinced her you needed to talk with me.”

“As a matter of fact, I do,” Mandy smiled. “We need to talk about Lisa Mercer.”

~ 101 ~
“No, we don’t,” Rick frowned. “I have called in every favor owed me to get her trial on the dockets for October first.”

“That is only two weeks away,” Mandy grimaced. “We won’t have time to prepare our case.”

Rick snorted, “You know this case inside and out. What do you need to prepare?”

“There is something terribly wrong with this case,” Mandy insisted.

“Yeah,” Rick growled. “A young mother murdered her three beautiful children.”

“I don’t think…,” Mandy started, but Rick cut her off.

“Save it for the courtroom, counselor,” he scowled. “Look, Mandy, we need to stop discussing this case. It is interfering with our friendship, and your friendship is important to me.

“I didn’t come here to fight with you,” Rick continued. “I came to ask you out to dinner tonight.”

“I can’t go tonight,” Mandy frowned. “I am busy.”

“Tomorrow night then?” Rick’s smile was tight and mirthless.

“Okay,” Mandy reluctantly conceded, “what time?”

“Seven,” Rick’s smile was now genuine. “I will pick you up at seven.”

##

After Rick had left, Mandy called her mother. Judith’s answering machine picked up the call. “Mom, what grade school did I attend? I will be home right after work to shower and dress. Remember, I am having dinner with Jason to discuss what he found out today.”

~ 102 ~
The machine beeped, and Mandy dropped her desk phone into the cradle.

Mandy looked at the list of people she wanted to interview before Lisa’s trial. With Jason’s help, she hoped she could accomplish the task.

She drew a line thru Lisa’s parents and psychiatrist since her mother had assured her Lisa had not been under psychiatric care. She also marked thru child care provider. If Lisa didn't leave her children with her parents, she certainly wouldn’t leave the with a babysitter. Mandy called Vala Eichmann.

“Mrs. Eichmann, this is Mandy Kincaid. I am sorry to bother you, but can you give me the names of Lisa’s OB/GYN and the children’s pediatrician?”

“I don’t know,” Vala said hesitantly. “Lisa never included me in her doctors’ visits. Stanton always accompanied her. He was very involved in the birth and health care of the children. He is some a doctor, you know.”

“Do you know in what hospital the children were born?”

“Yes,” Vala said, happy to finally have answers to Mandy’s questions. “They said the children were born at Seton Medical Center. Stanton said it was the very best hospital in the area.”

“Did you visit Lisa and the children in the hospital,” Mandy asked.

“No, everything happened so fast,” Vala spoke slowly, trying to recall why Stanton didn’t call them to the hospital for the birth of their first grandchild. “She was never in labor very long and went home the next day. Her deliveries were always easy ones.
“We were always thrilled that our little pink bundles were healthy and perfect.”
“Can you provide me the birth dates of each child,” Mandy asked.
“Of course,” Vala laughed. Those were very important dates in our lives.” She quickly rattled off each child’s full name and their date of birth.
“Do you happen to have a name and number for the housekeeper she let go?
“I know her name was Madie, but I have no idea about her last name.”
“Thank you,” Mandy slowly hung up the phone. At least she had a place to start, Seton Medical. She was positive the hospital would have the name of Lisa’s OB/GYN listed on the admittance form.
She couldn’t wait to share information with Jason. She checked her watch. She had time to run by the hospital on her way home.

##

“Are you certain?” Mandy asked incredulously.
“I have run every possible search; by name, by date, and by sex,” the technician grimaced. “No one by the name of Lisa Mercer has ever entered this hospital.”
Mandy drove to St. David’s Medical Center and searched for the same information. St. David’s had no record of Lisa Mercer or her babies.
Mandy’s mind turned over the information from the hospitals. So far, their investigation had only created more questions and no answers. She decided she would visit Stanton Mercer at his office tomorrow.
Mandy rushed through her shower and dressed comfortably for her dinner with Jason. After a day in
Death Was Too Easy

pantyhose, heels and a dress, the freedom of a pair of jeans and a soft pullover felt wonderful.

She surveyed herself in the mirror, briefly thought the sweater might be cut too low then dismissed the idea. She knew she was beautiful in any world but for some reason, she wanted to appeal to Jason Kiser.

Judith wasn’t home but had left a note on the refrigerator. “You attended Trinity Valley Private School until we moved to Austin,” her mother had written.

*Trinity Valley,* of course, Mandy thought as she crumpled the note and tossed it into the compactor. She would remember to share that with Jason if he brought it up again.

###

Jason couldn’t stop his eyes from traveling from Mandy’s feet up to her glorious mass of blonde hair. He also couldn’t stop the goofy grin that now creased his handsome face.

“A look is worth a thousand words,” Mandy teased as she pulled the door closed behind her.

“I didn’t mean to be brazen,” Jason laughed. “You are just so darn beautiful, even when you dress down.”

“Thank you, I think,” Mandy laughed.

Over barbecue and beer, they discussed their day. Mandy didn’t share the interaction she had witnessed between Stanton and Lisa. She wanted Jason to see them together and get his thoughts on their relationship.

“I spoke with all of the Mercer’s neighbors today,” Jason said. “Everyone said they were excellent neighbors. They were very private, but always spoke and were friendly whenever encountered.

~ 105 ~
“I hit the jackpot at Mrs.,” Jason flipped his notebook pages… “Mason’s. She hired Lisa’s maid after Lisa let her go. I have a name—Madie Dean—phone number and address. I am going to visit her tomorrow.

“I failed to find any record of Lisa Mercer giving birth to any baby at either Seton’s or St David’s,” Mandy informed him.

“Maybe Madie Dean can give us the name of Lisa’s OB/GYN,” Jason frowned. “Some obstetricians work out of their clinics they own or boutique hospitals. Heaven knows Austin has its share of those.”

They talked until the waitress informed them the restaurant needed to close.

Jason looked at his watch. “I had no idea it was this late,” he smiled. It is so easy to be with you; I lost track of time.”

They sat in the car talking. Mandy could see the light was on in her mother’s study. “Mom is home,” she said. “She is researching old laws for some reason.”

“Your mother is a remarkable woman,” Jason said. “I had such a crush on her when I was a rookie patrolman. I appeared in her court several times due to murder investigations. If I was the first officer on the scene, Judge Kincaid always made me testify. She did that with all first responders.

“I always tried to arrive at the murder scenes first so I could appear in her court,” he chuckled. “You look so much like her.”

“She truly is something,” Mandy agreed. “I am proud to be her daughter. I better go in. She always wants to hear about my day.”
Jason walked her to the door. “I will interview Madie Dean tomorrow and report to you over dinner tomorrow night,” he shyly grinned at his left-handed way of asking for another date.

“I can’t go tomorrow night,” Mandy frowned. “I have a prior engagement.”

Although he tried, Jason couldn’t hide his disappointment.

“I should be home by eight-thirty,” Mandy quickly added. “Why don’t you come to the house for coffee and dessert? I make a mean chocolate cake.”

“I would love that,” Jason grinned. He leaned down and kissed her cheek. “If I get anything earth shattering from Madie, I will call you.”

##

Finding Madie Dean wasn’t easy. The woman who answered the door at her address informed Jason the housekeeper had moved and she had no forwarding address. He managed to get the phone number of her landlord.

It was a short drive to the landlord’s house. A slight suggestion that he was a police officer garnered Jason a forwarding address.

Madie’s new address was in a nice middle-class neighborhood. The lawn was well kept, and a flowerbed of yellow Chocolate Daisies filled the air with the smell of chocolate. Jason thought about having dessert with Mandy and her mother in the evening.

Madie Dean looked like everyone’s grandmother. Her five-foot-five frame was home to ample breasts and a round stomach. He could easily imagine Madie cuddling the Mercer babies against her bosom.
“May I help you,” a sweet smile flitted across her pixie face.

Jason introduced himself and gave her his business card. “I am working on the Lisa Mercer case,” he informed her.

A hardness replaced the smile as Madie moved to close her door. Jason was too quick for her and kept his foot firmly planted in the doorway.

“I know nothing about what happened to those precious babies,” Madie scowled.

“Please, just answer a couple of questions,” Jason pleaded and gave her his best little boy look. “It will help me keep my job.”

Madie nodded. “What do you want to know?”

“May I come in,” Jason asked.

“No! Just ask your questions and leave.”

“How did the Mercers react to the news of Lisa’s first pregnancy?”

“They were ecstatic,” Madie smiled as she recalled how excited Lisa and Stanton had been.

“Did she have any problems carrying the baby?” Jason pressed.

“No. Nothing unusual. Morning sickness the first three months, but that is not unusual,” Madie thoughtfully said.

“Why did she let you go?”

Madie narrowed her eyes. “You have to ask her. She told me that she wanted to care for the baby and their home. Since she was taking a pregnancy leave, she would be home, and it would give her something to do.

“Miss Lisa was extremely energetic, and she was fidgety, always looking for something to occupy her time.
“She let me help her with Laura the first month, but after that, she said she wanted to do everything herself. “She found me another job with better pay, so she did right by me,” Madie added.

“Did you see or sense anything unusual going on in the Mercer home?” Jason pushed.

“No. Mr. Stanton and Miss Lisa were wonderful. So, in love and so proud of Laura. They were the perfect family.” Tears began to roll down Madie’s cheeks. “I can’t imagine what went so horribly wrong.”

“One last question,” Jason blushed. “Do you know the name of her OB/GYN?”

“No,” but I am certain Mr. Stanton can tell you. He always accompanied her on her doctor’s visits.

“There must be canceled checks or credit card charges,” Madie mischievously grinned as she told him how to do his job. “Don’t you people have access to all of that?”

Jason thanked Madie and encouraged her to call him if she thought of anything that might help with Lisa’s defense.”

##
Mandy’s actions aggravated Rick Randolph. She had spent the last half hour looking at her watch.

“Do you need to be somewhere?” he scowled.

“I’m sorry, Rick. I promised Mom I would be home by 8:30,” she shrugged. “We have some things to discuss tonight.”

“Mandy, I asked you out tonight so we could discuss our futures,” Rick took the plunge. “The polls show that I have a lock on the election for district attorney.”

Mandy nodded. “I am very proud of you.”

“We have been friends for a long time and dated off and on,” Rick swallowed, “but after the election, I would like to take our relationship to another level if you agree.”

“I don’t know what…,” Mandy started, but Rick interrupted her.

“I would like us to be exclusive,” Rick blurted out.

“You mean only date each other?” Mandy asked incredulously.

“Yes,” Rick nodded.

“Rick, I care a great deal for you,” Mandy frowned, “and I care for Coke. I can’t make that commitment right now.”

“But, you are not saying, no?” Rick urged.
“I am saying I can’t make that commitment. My career is just taking off. I work around the clock. I haven’t given any thought to settling down with one person. Right now, Lisa Mercer’s case consumes my thoughts.”

“Mandy,” Rick spoke softly and slowly like one would do when explaining something important to a wayward child. “Lisa Mercer is guilty. I will fight with everything at my disposal to see that she gets the death penalty. I must win this case for two reasons. Number one, I truly believe she is guilty. Nothing is more despicable than a child killer. Number two, winning this case will guarantee my election as district attorney.”

Mandy looked at her watch. “I have to go. Please take me home.”

Rick paid the check and silently drove her home.

“You don’t have to walk me to the door,” she smiled. “Thank you for a lovely dinner. She was out of the car and to the front door before Rick could unbuckle his seatbelt.

The evening did not go the way I planned; Rick thought as he pulled away from the curb and headed toward Bailey O’Shea’s apartment.

###

“Sounds to me like the Mercers were just your average married couple,” Judith said as she added cream to her coffee.

“There is just something not right,” Jason frowned. “Something I can’t grasp.”

“You need to see them together,” Mandy added. “Stanton is visiting her tomorrow. You should observe them.”

~ 111 ~
Jason nodded. “And you need to get copies of his bank statements and credit card transactions.”

“Umm, this cake is to die for,” Jason said as he took another bite. “Brilliant, beautiful and a great cook; your daughter has it all, Judge.”

“She is wonderful,” Judith agreed.

“You probably don’t even remember me,” Jason smiled. “I was one of your biggest fans.”

“I remember you,” Judith laughed. “The first time you testified in my courtroom, I thought you were going to faint.”

“I had an awful crush on you,” Jason confessed. “I knew you were married, but I didn’t know you had a daughter.”

“When Mandy was born, Josh and I agreed to keep her under the radar. Both of us received hate mail and death threats daily, so we wanted to protect our little girl from the world.” She patted her daughter’s hand and smiled.

“I might add, that I am also twenty years your senior,” Judith laughed.

“Oh, but still beautiful,” Jason grinned. “And honestly, you haven’t changed much.”

Judith suddenly felt uncomfortable with Jason. She hadn’t thought about being so closely involved with someone from her past; a past Mandy didn’t remember.

She wanted Jason to leave. She wanted to curl up in bed beside her little girl and read to her.


“I went to Trinity Valley,” Mandy repeated the information Judith had given her.
“Private, school girl,” Jason teased. “No wonder our paths never crossed.”

“It is getting late,” Judith noted. “We should call it a night. I don’t know about you two, but I have to be in court bright and early in the morning.”

“Stanton will visit Lisa at eight-thirty in the morning, on his way to work,” Mandy told Jason. “Both of us should be there.”

Jason smiled and carried his plate and cup to the sink. “Dessert was delicious, and the company was wonderful. Thank you for having me.”

Mandy moved beside him to walk him to the door. “Good night, Judge,” he smiled again.

###

Judge Judith Kincaid lay awake in the dark. For the first time in a very long time, she was scared. Scared her daughter would learn of her duplicity. It had been ten years since she rescued the little waif from the side of the road.

Judith knew that she had become complacent. Mandy was so much a part of her life; she couldn’t recall a time when the young woman hadn’t been there. Life without Mandy had been another lifetime.

No mother could love a daughter any more than Judith loved Mandy. She would do anything to protect her daughter. Anything!

Judith had never tried to find out about Mandy’s past. She hadn’t notified the authorities of Mandy’s existence. She hadn’t followed up on missing persons’ reports. She had simply packed Mandy into the car and moved her to Austin away from whatever dangers lay hidden in her past.
Death Was Too Easy

“And I would do it all over again,” Judith thought as she drifted into a dreamless sleep.

##
Chapter 14

Stanton Mercer paced the floor of the small interrogation room that had become the rendezvous point for him and his wife.

Jason and Mandy watched the nervous man from the other side of the mirror. Stanton wore an expensive sports jacket, perfectly creased slacks and a different pair of Italian shoes. His blonde hair fell forward partially covering his forehead. He looked like a wealthy playboy.

The door opened, and the guard led Lisa into the room. Her hair was longer, and the scars had healed, leaving only slight marks on her beautiful face. She stood quietly as the guard unlocked her shackles and left the room.

Stanton approached his wife shyly. “You are the most beautiful woman in the world,” he softly said. She was instantly in his arms. He kissed her as if his life depended on it. Lisa pushed tighter against her husband as he slid his hands down her back to pull her closer.

“Um, I feel like a voyeur watching this,” Jason whispered to Mandy.

“Just watch,” Mandy instructed.

Stanton finally released his wife and led her to sit beside him in a chair. “Let me look at you?” his voice was filled with emotion. “You look wonderful. Miss Kincaid must be taking good care of you.”
“The food is much better here,” Lisa shrugged, “and I don’t have to worry about someone killing me in my sleep. I have access to a safe workout room, so I spend a lot of time there.

“Feel my muscle,” she laughed, pulling her forearm to her shoulder to show off her biceps.

Stanton slowly wrapped his fingers around her bicep, never taking his eyes from hers. “Feels wonderful,” he grinned.

“Has Miss Kincaid told you about your bail hearing Friday,” Stanton frowned.

She nodded. “I will take care of it. Don’t worry.”

The guard entered to take Lisa away.

##

I think you should follow Stanton Mercer,” Mandy suggested as they ate lunch. “I would like to know what he does when he is not here.”

Jason nodded. “They seem very much in love.”

“That is what everyone says,” Mandy agreed. “Still, there is something I can’t put my finger on that niggles at the back of my mind.”

“So-o, if I tail Stanton all day do I get to report to you over dinner tonight?” Jason’s devilish grin made Mandy laugh.

“Only if you have something to report,” she said playfully.

“Oh, I am certain I will have something,” Jason laughed.

##
Chapter 15

Bailey O’Shea reread her arguments to deny the request for Lisa Mercer’s bail. Rick had to make a command performance before the Latino’s in Politics organization so Bailey would make the state’s plea to keep Lisa Mercer incarcerate.

She thought of the discovery she had made last night. Rick had knocked on her door late, telling her he’d had a rough day and just wanted to shower. Of course, he had wanted much more when he slid into her bed.

While Rick showered, she hung up the jacket he had tossed across the back of her couch. A small box containing a gorgeous diamond engagement ring fell from the jacket pocket.

Rick had practically lived at Bailey’s apartment for the past three months. She didn’t expect him to pop the question until after the November, election. She wasn’t surprised he had already purchased a ring. Rick always thought ahead. That was what made him such a great prosecutor. Defense attorneys rarely caught Rick unaware.

##

Mandy and Lisa Mercer were sitting at the defense table when Bailey entered the room. Mandy was
smiling as if she had already received the ruling she desired.

Bailey was prepared to wipe that smile from her opponent’s gorgeous face.

Everyone stood as the judge entered the courtroom. Mandy would present her reasons why the bail should be granted then Bailey would have the opportunity to explain why Lisa was a flight risk.

After Mandy had completed her pleadings, Lisa Mercer stood. Every eye in the courtroom was on the young woman. “May I speak, your honor?” Lisa addressed the judge.

Mandy stood and whispered sternly in her client’s ear, but Lisa simply stepped away from her attorney.

The judge looked at both attorneys, then nodded his consent. “Let the records show that the defendant has requested permission to speak on her behalf.”

“I want the court to know that if you grant my bail,” Lisa’s voice filled the courtroom. “I will do everything in my power to leave the country and avoid prosecution for the crime I have committed.”

Bailey suppressed a gleeful smile. Mandy looked as if she would faint. Not only had Lisa admitted she was a flight risk, but she had also virtually admitted—in front of God and everybody—she was guilty. Silence fell on the courtroom as everyone waited for the judge’s reaction.

“Miss Kincaid,” the judge frowned, “I have no option but to deny your client’s bail.”

“Yes, your honor,” Mandy frowned as the bailiff snapped handcuffs on Lisa and led her away.

Jason watched the slow smile spread across Stanton Mercer’s face. The man stood and left the courtroom.
Jason was close behind him.

###

“What the hell was that?” Mandy raged at her client. “Lisa, I can’t continue to protect you in prison.”

“You certainly can’t protect me if I am outside prison,” Lisa replied wearily. “I want to enter a plea of guilty.”

“That would take the death penalty off the table,” Mandy huffed, “but you would get life without parole. Do you want to spend your life in prison, Lisa? Is that what you want?”

“Yes,” Lisa shouted. “I want to die in this hell hole.”

Mandy was surprised. It was the first time her client had ever shown any emotion. She had an idea.

“Fine,” Mandy barked. “I will make the arrangements.”

As she left the jail, Mandy called Jason. “I have an idea,” she said.

###

“It took me three days,” Jason smiled as he slid into the booth beside Mandy, “but I have what you need.”

They ordered ice tea, then spread out the photos Jason placed on the table. He had captured shot after shot of Stanton Mercer and the brunette woman Mandy had seen with him in front of his office building.

He had photos of them walking hand in hand, stealing kisses and long hugs.

“She is a looker,” Jason said, “but she doesn’t even come close to being as beautiful as Lisa.”

“Who is she?” Mandy frowned.
“She is his alibi for the time his children died,” Jason raised his eyebrows.

“Is she a co-worker?”

“It took a lot of digging,” Jason hesitated giving Mandy a chance to appreciate his genius, “but I discovered she has ties with Biochemistry International. She is the company’s largest, single stockholder. One could say she runs the behemoth from the shadows. Her name is Adora Ortega.

“My guess is she can offer Stanton everything he has ever dreamed of to advance his career. She is probably backing his research. He will end up with fame, fortune and a beautiful wife, while Lisa rots in prison.

“You know the adage ‘Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,’” Jason continued. “I think Lisa killed the children in a fit of jealousy just to hurt Stanton. Now she’s incredibly remorseful.”

Mandy shook her head. “Let’s show Lisa these photos and see her reaction.”

##

Jason and Mandy sat across from Lisa Mercer as she shuffled thru the photos of her husband and Adora Ortega.

Lisa looked at each photo then shoved them back to Mandy. Her eyes contained the same haunted look Mandy had seen during their first meeting. Lisa said nothing.

“Have you seen this,” Mandy shoved another photo toward Lisa. It was the bloody photo of the children stuffed into the trunk.
“Oh, my God, my babies. My beautiful babies,” Lisa cried just before she vomited all over the visitation room. To say the woman was hysterical was the understatement of a lifetime. She crashed to the floor and began to convulse, rolling in her own vomit. The sound of her head hitting the table corner before cracking open on the hard cement floor told Jason she was severely injured. Blood began to pour from her nose and mouth.

“Guard, Guard,” Jason banged on the door. “We need a doctor immediately.

Jason and Mandy followed the ambulance carrying Lisa Mercer to the hospital and sat in the waiting room. Two armed policemen stood just inside the waiting room.

“I never intended to cause her bodily harm,” Mandy fought back the tears as she recalled the site of Lisa Mercer convulsing on the hard concrete floor. “I had no idea she was in such a fragile state. I feel terrible.”

A short, dark man dressed in blue scrubs pushed the surgical mask to the top of his head as he entered the room. “Mercer family,” he called out.

Mandy and Jason immediately went to him. “How is Lisa?” Mandy blurted out.

“I am Dr. Ray Kapp,” the doctor introduced himself. “She is going to be fine. I apologize for the long wait. I ordered a full-body MRI on her. She had bruising and scars on her lower back and abdomen. I wanted to see what I was dealing with before I treated her.

“She has a concussion, and I had to put stitches in the back of her head. Everything else looks good. It
looks like she had a recent break of the left ulna, but it is healing nicely.

We will keep her overnight. I will look in on her in the morning. If she is awake and alert, she can go home.”

“That is great,” Mandy weakly smiled. “May I sit with her tonight?”

“We will keep her in ICU tonight just to be safe,” the doctor frowned, “but you are welcome to sit in the waiting room and see her in the morning.

“Miss, can you tell me just exactly what has happened to this woman? She has all the symptoms and trauma of a battered wife.”

“She is a prisoner in county jail,” Mandy nodded toward the two guards. They will be here all night. No one is to see her but me.”

“Lisa Mercer. I remember that case. She doesn’t look like a monster, does she? I will notify the nurses,” the doctor shrugged then left the room.

Mandy gave the guards her business card and asked them to call her if anything unusual happened. “No one is to see her,” Mandy reiterated.

##

“What a day,” Mandy leaned her head back on the headrest of Jason’s car and closed her eyes. She jumped slightly as soft lips touched hers.

Jason’s kiss was sweet and gentle. “It will all work out,” he whispered then kissed her again. She kissed him back.

He started the car and pulled out of the parking garage before she could speak. She was savoring the kisses.
“How about a sandwich and something to drink,” he suggested.
She nodded her agreement.
They settled in the booth of their favorite restaurant and ordered. Jason scooted close to her, so their legs were touching. He felt solid and comforting.
“I think that was the first time she had seen that photo of her children,” he speculated. “Her reaction was one of shock and horror. I don’t know how to explain it, Mandy, but I think you may be right. Lisa Mercer did not murder her children.”
Mandy wanted to think about something—anything—except how pitiful Lisa Mercer had looked jerking around on the interrogation room floor.
“What made you moved to Austin,” she asked Jason.
“The Dallas/Fort Worth area holds some unpleasant memories for me,” he frowned. “Memories best left buried in the past.”
“How about you? Did you resent being dragged out of the school you had attended all your life? It is hard to change schools your senior year.”
“No,” Mandy said honestly. “Mother made the entire transition very easy. I think teenagers are the same everywhere.
“My mom is a really big deal,” Mandy softly chuckled. “The superintendent at my school gushed and kissed up to her something awful. You know mom; she is just mom.
“The second week of my senior year my civics teacher pulled me aside and asked me if there were any chance Mom would speak to our civics class.

~ 123 ~
“I said I was sure she would. She gave me her home phone number for Mom to call.

“When I asked Mother that night, she called the teacher’s home phone number and set up a time and date to visit the class.

“I can’t even begin to tell you how excited everyone in the school was about mom’s appearance. They moved the event—as the superintendent called it—to the auditorium so the entire school could hear Judge Judith Kincaid.

“Mom was awesome. It was a huge civics discussion with Mom answering questions and telling my classmates how important it is for average people to be involved in government on all levels. I was extremely proud.”

“Now you know my life’s story, tell me how you ended up the owner of a large and successful private investigation firm. Uncle Brett tells me you even consult with law enforcement agencies.”

“You already know I was a Dallas patrolman,” Jason shrugged. “I worked that job until I graduated from college.

“I thought that once I had a degree, I would move up the ranks and one day become the chief of a big-city police force. Unfortunately, things didn’t work out that way. There was a scandal involving a woman and me.

“I decided the best thing I could do was cut my losses and move to another town. I have learned from my mistakes. I work hard and keep my nose clean. Everything I do is above board and by the books.

“You should visit our headquarters. I am very proud of our facilities and the caliber of investigators we employ.”
“That would be fun and informative,” Mandy agreed. She wanted to ask him what his scandal was but respected his privacy enough to avoid invading it.

“How about tomorrow?” He grinned. “I will give you the guided tour myself and throw in lunch in our shiny new cafeteria.”

“How could I turn down a tour and lunch, too?” Mandy laughed. “Afterward, we can check on Lisa.”

“Sounds like a plan.” He tossed enough money on the table to cover their bill then slipped from the booth.

##
Bailey O’Shea looked at the request for postponement Mandy Kincaid had filed with the court. *Rick will be angry,* she thought. He was counting on the Mercer case putting another feather in his hat before the elections.

Popular opinion had been on his side during Lisa Mercer’s first trial, and he was certain it would be again. The original trial had cast a bright light on him, and he had used the publicity to advance his career.

Bailey began writing the memorandum to contest the postponement request. She knew Rick would not accept Mandy’s request without fighting back.

She called Mandy Kincaid’s office and spoke with Lisa’s defense attorney. Mandy explained Lisa’s concussion and mental state. Bailey briefly felt sorry for Lisa, but not sorry enough to stop filing the request to expedite the trial.

Bailey made the decision to do something she had been putting off longer than she should have. She pulled the Walgreen’s bag from her purse and carried it to the ladies’ room down the hall from her office. She locked the door.

There was no way she could be pregnant. She had been on the pill most of her adult life, but she had missed her last period. She hated guessing games. The
test was ninety-nine percent accurate, so she decided to put her mind at ease.

She opened the box and removed the test. One no longer had to guess at the lines or shade of colors. Tests now had two messages: pregnant or not pregnant.

She urinated on the wick. She washed her hands as she watched the digital stick countdown to her results. She stared in disbelief then shook the device as one would shake a thermometer. No matter what she did, the results were the same. PREGNANT screamed from the screen.

She wrapped the treasonous wand in the Walgreen’s bag and stuffed it in the bathroom trash can. She went over the dialogue in her mind. Telling Rick would be tricky. He obviously wanted to wait until after the election to get married, and he would be in a bad mood over the postponement of the Mercer case. She decided to save her little revelation until later.

Bailey wasn’t upset that she was pregnant, only a little concerned with the timing. She would have preferred waiting a year after they were married to have children, but some things simply were not in the hands of mortals.

She wondered if she dared make an appointment with her obstetrician. She didn’t want the news to leak to the press. Rick would be furious. She knew him well enough to know that he would want to be in the spotlight. He would want to announce the pending birth of his baby. He would probably hold a press conference. She wondered if her baby would be a boy or a girl.
Death Was Too Easy

Bailey was excited. She had to know the sex of the child she was carrying. Her hands slightly trembled as she pushed the button to call her OB/GYN.

###

The tour of Jason’s facilities was intriguing and informative. A large complex included an Olympic-sized pool, a firing range, a hand-to-hand combat area and a fully-equipped gym complete with boxing bags and the latest in exercise equipment.

Another building held classrooms and several rooms with banks of computers. Men and women were fully engaged in all areas.

“This looks like something from a James Bond movie,” Mandy said.

“We strive to provide the very best trained and informed detectives possible,” Jason responded. “We want our people to be able to deal with anything they encounter.”

Lunch in the firm’s cafeteria was pleasant and delicious. “I see you have very little turnover in your company,” Mandy chortled as she examined the multiple choices of entrees, vegetables, and desserts available from the serving line of the gleaming kitchen.

After lunch, they drove to the hospital to check on Lisa Mercer.

Two new police guards stood outside the door of the room where Lisa Mercer now rested. The woman was sitting up in bed reading a newspaper with her photo and the photo of her three children splashed across the front page. The headline read *Baby Murderer Attempts Suicide!* The look of anguish on her face was
indecipherable. She looked up when Mandy and Jason entered the room. Tears filled Lisa’s eyes.

Mandy was shocked at the paper’s headline. How could any rag print such an official sounding article, with so little accurate information? She gently removed the paper from Lisa’s lap and placed it on the nightstand beside her bed.

“How do you feel?” Mandy asked.

“Fine,” Lisa snorted then winced as if the effort caused her pain.

“Lisa, you must help us,” Mandy peered into her client’s clear blue eyes.

Lisa’s trance-like stare told Mandy the woman was tuning her out of her mind. Lisa ignored everything Mandy said. Her eyes and face were motionless. She looked like a stone statue.

Mandy knew that all their progress had disappeared, and Lisa was in the same place she had been in their first meeting.

“Ah, Miss Kincaid,” the doctor entered Lisa’s room. “I am glad I caught you. May I speak to you in private for a minute?”

Mandy glanced at Jason then followed the doctor into the hallway, closing the door behind her.

“I asked our top psychiatrist to visit with Mrs. Mercer,” the doctor jumped right into the conversation. “He has a very interesting diagnosis.”

Mandy nodded as she accepted the card the doctor held out to her. “Dr. Stein’s office is on the second floor of this hospital,” he informed her. “I think you should stop by his office after you leave Mrs. Mercer. I am going to keep her here at least one more day.”
Mandy thanked the doctor and slowly returned to Lisa’s room. Jason was sitting beside her bed trying to engage her in conversation. He met with the same blank stare Mandy had encountered. It was as if no one was at home in Lisa Mercer’s head.

##

As they rode down the elevator, Mandy called Dr. Stein’s office to see if he could visit with her. The receptionist told her Dr. Stein would be available in ten minutes. “He has been expecting your call,” the woman said. “He wants to speak with you.”

Dr. Newton Stein was not a textbook psychiatrist. He was tall and gangly. His jacket was too short for his long arms, and he moved awkwardly around his desk to shake hands with his visitors. A thick crop of gray hair perched on the crest of his head, while the sides were a burr cut. Mandy suppressed the thought that he looked like an old rooster.

“Miss Kincaid, come in, come in,” he shook her hand and launched into a conversation, ignoring Jason. “I followed Mrs. Mercers trial and often wondered why her defense didn’t call a psychiatrist to testify on her behalf. She was obviously suffering a psychotic break.”

“She has been granted a new trial because of the inadequacy of her defense,” Mandy explained.

“Good, Good,” Dr. Stein mumbled. “Miss Kincaid, are you familiar with the term sudden bereavement?”

“I believe it is sudden death or an unexpected crisis for which one is totally unprepared,” Mandy nodded.

“Yes,” Stein crowed. “The shock is so great the bereaved one often suffers from traumatic grief or post-traumatic stress or—in your client’s case—both.
“Sufferers feel demoralized about themselves, the future, and those they love. They often feel they have nothing for which to live. They can withdraw into a world of their own to block out the emotional pain they are feeling. I believe Mrs. Mercer is suffering from this condition.”

“Dr. Stein, would you testify at Mrs. Mercer’s new trial,” Mandy excitedly asked.

“I, I don’t know,” Stein stammered. “I have a very busy schedule. I will need to see her again to do an in-depth examination. When is the trial? I will try to clear a day to testify.

In the meantime, would it be possible for you to arrange for her to stay in the hospital for a few days? I would like to visit with her daily.”

Mandy couldn’t help herself; she hugged the lanky doctor. “I will call you as soon as I have a date.” For the first time, the attorney felt she might have a fighting chance at saving Lisa Mercer’s life.

##

Jury selection had been a nightmare. Due to the national coverage of Lisa’s first trial, it was impossible to find anyone who wasn’t familiar with the case.

Mandy used all her peremptory challenges to keep young mothers with three or more children off the jury. Rick targeted older men and women, feeling they would be more sympathetic to Lisa.

The twelve-person jury was selected and sequestered once the trial started.

The final jury was made up of six men and six women, between the ages of forty and fifty.
Rick offered Lisa life in prison if she pleaded guilty. Mandy held her breath as her client considered the prosecutor’s offer.

“Honestly,” Lisa grinned maniacally, “I’d rather be put to death than spend my life in prison.”

Rick smiled and held out his hand to shake hands with Mandy. “Counselor, it looks like we will see each other in court. Just remember whatever I do it is nothing personal. My job is to see that your client gets the death penalty.”

Mandy nodded. “My job is to see that she walks away from the courtroom a free woman.”

###

Judge Judith Kincaid was excited. She reread the invitation she had received from the President of the United States inviting her and a guest of her choice to a dinner with the current members of the Supreme Court.

She couldn’t wait for Mandy to get home to tell her the news. She hoped her daughter would be able to attend with her. She called Mandy’s mobile phone but immediately went to voicemail. She didn’t leave a message.

The judge went into the kitchen and began preparing dinner for her and her daughter. She was pulling the casserole from the oven when the garage door went up.

“Wow, something smells awesome,” Mandy kissed her mother’s cheek and unloaded her briefcase, laptop, and purse into a nearby chair.

“I thought you might like a home-cooked meal,” Judith smiled. “The young men in this town seem to be lined up to wine and dine you.”

~ 132 ~
“I would love a home-cooked meal,” Mandy laughed as she twisted the corkscrew into a bottle of her mother’s favorite wine. “It is good that I have inherited your tremendous metabolism. Otherwise, I would be as big as a house.”

“As much as I would like to think I am that desirable,” she chuckled, “the truth is most of my dinners have been work related. The Lisa Mercer case is an enigma to me.”

“I heard that the court denied your request for a postponement,” Judith frowned. “I am sorry, dear.”

“It is okay,” Mandy shrugged. “I think I have enough to support an insanity plea, but I don’t want her condemned to a life in a mental institution. With her brilliant mind, can you imagine what the shrinks would do to her?”

Mandy put the silverware and plates in place as Judith placed the casserole on the table. “You look very pleased with yourself,” she scrutinized her mother, “Is the casserole that good?”

Judith laughed then handed the invitation to her daughter. Mandy’s eyes beamed as she read the invitation. “Mom, I am so proud of you. You know what this means?”

“It means I have been invited to dine with the brightest legal minds of our nation,” Judith smiled. “Don’t read too much into it.”

Mandy hugged her mother. “I am so proud of you. Mom, you could be Supreme Court Justice Judith Kincaid.”

“The invitation is for a guest and me,” Judith said hurriedly. “Will you be my guest?”
“Yes! Yes, of course, I would be honored.” Mandy hugged her mother, again. She double checked the date. It was the Friday before the Mercer trial began. “We can fly to Washington on Thursday and return home on Saturday. That will give me plenty of time to review my case and prepare for court on Monday.”

“Oh, my,” Judith murmured. “I wasn’t thinking. Are you certain the trip won’t interfere with your preparation for the trial? You are that woman’s only hope.”

“I am already well prepared,” Mandy grimaced. “I have a few loose ends to tie up, but with Jason’s help I can do that in a couple of days.”

Judith narrowed her eyes. “How is Jason?”

“He is wonderful,” Mandy smiled. “He has been a tremendous help to me. Thank you, so much, for recommending him.”

The two women talked and planned their futures until the early morning hours. Both thankful for the other.

##
Chapter 17

“Damn,” Captain Brett Claymore growled as he watched an officer lead Steven Baker toward his office. He replaced his scowl with a forced smile as his door opened.

“Steven,” Brett stood and shook the man’s hand. “What are you doing in this neck of the woods. Are you stalking me?”

A melancholy smile crossed Steven Baker’s haggard face. “I heard he is in Austin,” the man replied.

“Stephen,” Brett motioned for the man to sit, “you can’t stalk him either. We had no charges to hold him then, and we have one now.”

“I know he murdered my daughter and grandson,” Baker frowned. “There is no way Angie would run away with a two-month old baby and not contact me. I am telling you, Claymore; they are dead.”

“Where is he,” Brett exhaled slowly. “I will keep an eye on him.”

“I don’t know for certain,” Steven frowned. “I just heard he is in Austin.”

“So, you haven’t seen him?”

“No, but I will find him. What are you going to do when I locate him?”

“Steven, I can’t do anything unless you have new evidence,” Brett said exasperatedly. “Do you have new evidence? Like, maybe a body!”

~ 135 ~
“No,” Steven Baker mumbled.
“You can’t stalk him. You can’t accuse him,” Brett frowned. “He will only file charges against you and force me to arrest you. Please, Steven, go home.”
“I don’t have a home,” Steven muttered.
“What do you mean you don’t have a home?” Brett was shocked. Steven Baker had been a successful real estate mogul eleven years ago when Claymore had purchased his home from him.
“I still have the house where he killed them,” Steven said, “but I have sold everything else to pay detectives and follow leads on sightings of Angie and Trent.”
“Have you turned up anything?” Brett asked.
“No,” Steven hung his head. “But I am planning to stay in Austin for a couple of weeks.”
“Suit yourself,” Brett shrugged.
Steven continued to sit as if waiting for Brett to do something.
“Steven, I handled Angie’s disappearance investigation. I promise you I left no stone unturned. We went thru that house with a fine-toothed comb. I am telling you there was no sign of foul play.
“All of Angie’s clothes and her suitcases were gone. She took all the baby’s things: diaper bag, bottles, formula, everything. We found her car at the bus station. There was no blood in it. It looked like she bought a ticket to Houston. The trail died after that.”
“You could find nothing to show she purchased the bus ticket,” Steven frowned. “It was purchased with cash. Buddy could have purchased the ticket. I am telling you he killed them and buried their bodies.”
“Then, dammit Steven, find their bodies. Give me something to work with.” Brett was losing his patients.
Steven Baker had been the bane if his existence for the past ten years.

“We sprayed luminol all over the house. We found no large blood spots.”

“But you did find blood spots?” Steven insisted.

“Yes, but the DNA and blood were so degraded we couldn’t prove anything with it.” Brett shrugged. “Look, I am not saying I don’t believe he killed them. I am just saying we can’t prove it.

“The hard surfaces of the kitchen were practically hosed down with bleach and every acidic cleaner on the market. We found no traces of blood on the walls or ceiling where one would expect to find cast-off blood splatter if Buddy repeatedly stabbed or bludgeoned Angie.

“We can’t arrest a man because his house is spotless.”

“You know he was abusive,” Stephen cried. “You saw the records of the trips to the hospital for treatment.”

Brett rubbed his eyes with his middle finger and thumb. “What do you think I can do? You know the law. You are a smart man, Steven. Tell me what you truly think I can do without a body?”

“Nothing,” Steven loudly whispered, defeat strangling his voice. “You can do nothing.”

“Have you had dinner,” Brett asked.

“I’m not hungry,” Steven stood and shook his hand. “Thank you for seeing me.”

Brett watched the broken man walk from his office.

###
For the thousandth time in his life, Captain Brett Claymore wondered why he had chosen law enforcement as a career. Cases like the disappearance of Angie Baker Layne made him doubt his effectiveness.

Brett was certain Buddy Layne had murdered his young wife and baby. He just couldn’t prove it.

Layne hadn’t reported his wife and son missing. Steven Baker had become concerned after he left messages for several days and Angie hadn’t returned his call. Layne also refused to return his father-in-law’s calls.

Steven had called the police to Layne’s house at midnight then demanded to know where his daughter and grandson were. Only then did Buddy Layne say he hadn’t seen them in over a week.

As the sergeant over homicide detectives, Brett had taken the case report.

Buddy Layne claimed his wife had left him, taking their son with her. “I came home from work, and she was gone. No note. No phone call. Nothing,” Layne had whined. “She just up and left me.

“She took our new car,” he snorted, “left me that old clunker. I want to find her, too. I need that car back.”

When all the facts came out, Brett learned that Angie had left ten or eleven days ago. Buddy wasn’t sure. When asked why he hadn’t returned his father-in-law’s calls or reported his missing wife and child to the police, Layne had said he was embarrassed to admit his wife had left him. He kept hoping she would return.

The definite time of Angie’s disappearance was twelve days before Layne reported her gone. For twelve
days, Layne had scrubbed and used every cleaner on the market to remove any evidence of foul play from his home.

Brett had used every weapon in his arsenal to find something to incriminate Buddy Layne, but he failed. He knew he had failed, and Steven Baker knew he had failed.

Claymore pulled a ragged file from the bottom drawer of his desk. He perused it as he had done several hundred times. Angie Layne was a frail, dark-haired girl with huge blue eyes.

Buddy Layne looked like a skinhead. He was tall and muscular. *If he hadn’t shaved his head, he might be handsome;* Brett thought as he stared at the man’s picture.

Brett’s cell phone rang as he shoved the file back into the drawer. Judith Kincaid’s gorgeous face filled the screen.

“God, you are beautiful,” Brett whispered into the phone. “Are you coming over tonight?”

“Umm, the thought is definitely on my mind,” Judith softly replied. “I have something to discuss with you.”

###
Chapter 18

Mandy squeezed her mother’s arm as their plane made the approach to land at Dulles International Airport in Washington, DC.

Four secret service men met them as they walked through the gate into the airport. They ushered the pair to a waiting limousine and stowed their luggage in the trunk.

“I am Secret Service Agent Jamie Harris,” a female agent introduced herself as she settled into the limo seat across from Judith. “It is a pleasure to meet you both.

“We will take you to your hotel so you can rest until dinner. We will return for you at seven. I will come to your room and escort you down to the car.”

“Oh, you don’t have to bother,” Judith smiled.

“It is no bother,” Agent Harris grinned. “It is a necessity. Judge, you are being considered for the highest court in the land. Your safety is of the utmost importance. Two agents will be outside your room at all times.”

“Oh,” Judith softly responded.

Mandy smiled. She had never seen her mother speechless. It was all a bit overwhelming.

“Do you have any questions,” Agent Harris asked.

“Can you give us detailed information on the schedule for this evening,” Mandy replied.

##

~140~
The expertly trained wait staff served dinner in the Great Hall of the Supreme Court. Mandy and Judith had visited the Supreme Court building several times during Mandy’s law school days, and Judith had argued two cases in front of the Justices. They were familiar with the rooms of the building that were open to the public but were never privileged to the internal rooms that were the judges’ chambers.

The awe-inspiring monument was made almost entirely of marble. Both Mandy and Judith held a reverence for the Supreme Court architecture and the history of the court itself.

Several other judges considered for the open court position were present. Judith knew and admired most of them. Everyone stood at attention as the Justices paraded into the room.

As the last justice took her seat, Mandy couldn’t help but utter her thoughts to her mother. “If death had a funeral, this is what it would look like,” the younger attorney muttered.

Judge Judith Kincaid teetered between admonishing her daughter and laughing out loud. She mustered her most severe scowl and turned to face Mandy who coyly smiled apologetically.

##

“I could have pinched off your head,” Judith laughed as they tumbled into their room, laughing.

“Oh, Mom, everyone was so old and so somber,” Mandy giggled as she kicked off her shoes. “I just can’t see you being as solemn.”

“I probably wouldn’t be at a dinner,” Judith said, “but I would be dead serious about any case I heard.”
“You always have been,” Mandy hugged her.

Judith’s phone rang and Brett Claymore’s rugged face appeared on her screen. “Uncle Brett,” Mandy raised her eyebrows and grinned. “I will shower while you talk with him.”

Brett was delighted to reach the woman that constantly filled his thoughts. They talked for a long time. She shared Mandy’s observation about the ages of the justices and Brett laughed out loud.

He told her about Steve Baker and his move to Austin. “I hope he doesn’t decide to take things into his own hands,” Brett sighed. “I am afraid he has almost reached the end of his rope.”

“But enough shop talk,” Brett’s warm voice filled her ear. “When will you be home? I miss you.”

“Our flight will land tomorrow at DFW at two-fifteen,” Judith answered. “I miss you, too.”

##

“Jason, what are you doing here,” Brett held out his hand and shook hands with his friend.

“I suspect I am here for the same reason as you,” Jason grinned mischievously. “To pick up a Kincaid woman.”

“Ah,” Brett knowingly nodded. “Fortunately, we aren’t after the same woman.”

The baggage conveyor beeped and began to turn as luggage emerged from the dark tunnel into the light, seeking its owner.

Brett spotted Judith’s suitcase and pulled it from the baggage carousel.
“Just an observation,” Jason chuckled, “but it appears this isn’t the first time you have retrieved Judge Kincaid’s luggage.”

Brett blushed slightly and shrugged.
“I have no idea what Mandy’s looks like,” Jason frowned. “Do you?”
“That one,” Brett gestured toward a light blue soft-side rearing its head as it peeked at the top of the conveyor before plunging onto the carousel.
Jason easily swung the suitcase from the belt and checked the tag. It was Mandy’s. “Good call,” he laughed.
“And here come the most beautiful girls in the world,” Brett said as he walked toward the Kincaid women.
“I didn’t know Jason was picking up you,” Judith whispered to her daughter.
“Neither did I,” Mandy smiled. “I don’t know how he got my flight information.”
Brett bent and softly kissed Judith. Taking his cue from the older man, Jason leaned down and kissed Mandy. “I missed you,” he muttered.
“It missed you, too,” she admitted.
“You ladies want to catch an early dinner,” Jason invited.
“You two go ahead,” Brett sheepishly smiled. “I thought Judith and I might grill steaks at my place tonight.”

##

“I need to talk with Lisa Mercer,” Mandy frowned. “Her trial begins tomorrow, and I need to see how she is doing.”

~ 143 ~
Jason nodded and steered his car toward the hospital. Dr. Stein and Dr. Kapp had coordinated with Brett to keep Lisa in the hospital until her trial.

“There is a file in the back seat I believe you will find extremely interesting,” Jason said.

Mandy perused the reports from Dr. Stein and Dr. Kapp. “This is what I needed,” she said. “Jason, we can win this case.”

##

Lisa looked healthier than Mandy had ever seen. Someone had cut her hair into an attractive style, and her cheeks were almost rosy. Her crystal blue eyes were clear and bright.

“You look great,” Mandy greeted her. “How do you feel?”

“Good,” Lisa nodded. “Has Stanton tried to see me?”

“No,” Mandy huffed. “I haven’t heard from him. Are you ready for tomorrow?”

“As ready as I will ever be,” Lisa scowled. “Are you going to put me on the witness stand?”

“No,” Mandy adamantly answered. “I can win this case without you, and you might harm our defense.” Mandy didn’t add that she did not trust Lisa Mercer on the witness stand.

“I was going to plead guilty,” Lisa shrugged, “but Dr. Stein convinced me I shouldn’t. He said you would get me off scot-free.”

##
A hush fell over the courtroom spectators as defense attorney Mandy Kincaid and her client entered the court. Mandy knew that most of them had come to watch the destruction of Lisa Mercer.

Coke had volunteered to be the second chair to Mandy and sat down on the other side of Lisa.

Prosecuting District Attorney Rick Randolph had appeared on national TV to discuss the case. Mandy had turned down a similar invitation to appear with him on the show. “I prefer to defend my client in the courtroom where it matters,” Mandy had said, “not on national television in the arena of public opinion.”

Mandy took her seat at the defense table, but Lisa turned to face the spectators, tentatively smiling. She located her husband in the crowded room, nodded then sat down.

Rick made his opening statements. “Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, for the second time…

“Objection,” Mandy sprang to her feet. “Your Honor, may I approach the bench?”

“Please do,” Judge Arthur Knight waved both attorneys to him. “Mr. Randolph, we both know you are not a stupid man. Pull one more stunt like that and I will have you removed from this case and your second chair will handle the prosecution. Under no
circumstances may you refer to the first trial of Mrs. Mercer.”

“Yes, your honor,” Rick scowled. He bowed his head to hide his anger. Mandy Kincaid had crammed down his throat, the first sentence out of his mouth. Obviously, Judge Knight liked her.

“You may deliver your opening statements now, Mr. Randolph,” Judge Knight nodded to Rick.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the jury,” Rick looked down at his shoes, “We are here today to try a woman for the most heinous crime a mother can commit; killing her three small children.”

Rick paused and scanned the jury to see if his words had appalled any of the jurors. Three women subtly nodded their heads in agreement. *Three down and nine to go,*” he smiled pitifully as if his job was too difficult to continue.

“I plan to prove to you beyond a shadow of a doubt that Lisa Mercer committed, not one but three, acts of premeditated murder. Acts that ended the tiny lives of her three-year-old daughter, her two-year-old son and her baby boy who was only three-months-old.”

“This was not an act of sudden psychosis. It was not the act of a woman driven insane by the constant crying of her babies or their constant demand for her attention. It was not the act of a mother who just couldn’t stand it anymore.” Rick scanned the jury, his face a mask of painful horror. “This was a carefully planned, premeditated murder. Preplanning, Mrs. Mercer purchased two large bottles of Benadryl and overdosed all three of her children. I can’t even begin to tell you why she knifed the baby to death.”
“Lisa Mercer simply decided she no longer wanted to be a mother, so she murdered three innocent babies.”

“The court is asking you to do an awful thing; find a beautiful young mother guilty of killing her children. The defense will, no doubt, present you with all kinds of excuses for Mrs. Mercer’s behavior. They will tell you she was depressed and psychotic. They will tell you she was exhausted and mentally unable to cope with raising three young babies.

“They will try to convince you that Lisa Mercer deserves treatment in a hospital for the criminally insane, but the truth is you must put Lisa Mercer to death for the premeditated murder of three innocent little children.

Rick walked to the jury box and surveyed each juror. “It is your duty to provide justice for a three-year-old girl, a two-year-old boy, and a three-month-old baby boy. It is your duty to declare Lisa Mercer guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.”

Rick turned and nodded to Mandy then sat down beside Bailey. Bailey squeezed his forearm, letting him know he had done a good job.

Mandy had watched the faces of the jurors as Rick made his opening statement. She spotted the same three women agreeing with him. *Now, to change their minds,* she thought.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the jury,” Mandy smiled, “Mr. Randolph has just told you a lie.” She paused as a low murmur came from the jurors.

“I do not intend to try to convince you to let Lisa Mercer live because she murdered her children in a fit of insanity. I will not ask you to condemn this beautiful young woman to spend the rest of her life in a mental
hospital. I intend to prove to you, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that Lisa Mercer did not have anything to do with the deaths of her children.

“I intend to ask you to find her not guilty because she is, not guilty. I intend to present witnesses and facts that prove to you someone else murdered the Mercer children. Lisa Mercer did not murder her children.”

Mandy returned to her chair beside Lisa. “You can do that,” Lisa whispered. Mandy nodded, yes.

“The prosecution calls Detective Paul Plaine to the witness stand,” Rick waited for Plaine to be sworn in for testimony, then proceeded.

“Detective Plaine, were you the first officer on the scene?” Rick asked.

“I was the first officer of any rank,” Plaine answered smugly.

That is not the answer I wanted, Rick thought. “Please tell us what you found.”

“That woman,” Plaine pointed his finger at Lisa, “was sitting in the kitchen swearing she had no idea where her children were.”

“Were her children in the house,” Rick said.

“Yes, I found all three of them stuffed into a trunk in her basement.” Plaine puffed up as if he had accomplished something.

“Did Mrs. Mercer seem to know her children were dead?” Rick moved so the jury could clearly see Paul Plaine.

“Yes, she did,” Plaine scowled.

Rick turned to Mandy. “Your witness, counselor.” Mandy thumbed through a group of papers on her desk, studied them then stood but didn’t leave the desk.
“Detective Plaine,” she smiled timidly, “I imagine this case has caused you to have nightmares.”

“Yes, ma’am, it has,” Plaine feigned distress.

“Could you share with the jury your feelings when you opened the lid of the old trunk and saw the children for the first time,” Mandy continued. Could you describe how they were dressed and positioned in the trunk? But first, tell us if the trunk was locked.”

Plaine stared at Mandy with a glimmer of hatred. “No, the trunk was not locked. The children still wore their pajamas.”

“Were they laid out side by side,” Mandy said softly.

“Yes, three perfect little blonde angels,” Plaine choked emotionally. “It was awful. That picture of the little angels remains embedded in my mind.”

“What made you arrest my client for the crime?” Mandy moved from behind her desk and walked to face Plaine.

“Her fingerprints were on the Benadryl bottle, and the children had overdosed on the drug,” Plaine smirked.

“But you didn’t know that at the time,” Mandy reminded him. “Isn’t it true that you arrested Mrs. Mercer after you dragged her to the basement and made her look at her dead children?

“Didn’t you arrest her after she became incoherent and dazed after she showed symptoms of sudden bereavement?

“Isn’t it true that you were not the first officer on the scene? That Officer Rance Williams was the first on the scene?”
“I said I was the first officer of significant rank,” Plaine said loudly.

“I am not going to call Officer Williams to the stand right now,” Mandy glared, “but I am going to read to the jury his sworn statement attached to the report he filed that night.”

Mandy returned to her desk and picked up the papers. When we arrived on the scene, Mrs. Mercer was frantic. She could not find her three small children.

She seemed drowsy and disoriented. She said the children were sleeping in their cribs when she laid down for a nap. She seemed to have trouble clearing her head and comprehending what was going on. She seemed drugged. We later verified that Mrs. Mercer had consumed a large quantity of Benadryl. She said she did not recall taking the drug.

I found two large, empty bottles of Benadryl in the trashcan under the sink. I bagged the bottles and turned them over to CSI.

I called for backup and began a thorough search of the house. The last place I searched was the basement. I found the children in a new trunk. The trunk was not locked. The children were inside the trunk. They were naked, and it appeared they had been thrown into the trunk haphazardly. It was hard to tell where one stopped and the other began. Small hands and arms were everywhere.

Mandy stopped reading. “Should I go on, or do you want to recant your original statement?”

Plaine squirmed on the witness stand. “Perhaps I did get things a bit jumbled.”
“A bit,” Mandy glared. “Nothing in your report correlates with Officer Williams’ report and the report of three other officers on the scene before you arrived.

“I believe you arrested Lisa Mercer simply because she was there,” Mandy seethed. “You showed her the bodies of her children, throwing her into sudden bereavement then proceeded to question her while she was in a dazed and confused state.”

“Her fingerprints were the only ones on the Benadryl bottles,” Plaine screamed. “She purchased the drugs, and her fingerprints are all over the bottles.”

“Detective Plaine, do you know who made the phone call to 911 because the children were missing?” Mandy held his gaze.

“No,” Plaine barked.

“Lisa Mercer placed the call,” Mandy said.

“I have no more questions for this witness,” Mandy turned her back on Plaine and shook her head in disgust.

“Prosecution has no witnesses to call at this time,” Rick informed the judge.

“Defense would like to call Mrs. Vala Eichmann to the witness stand.” Mandy waited patiently as the bailiff swore in Lisa’s mother.

“Mrs. Eichmann,” Mandy said sweetly, “can you tell the jury your association with Lisa Mercer?”

“Lisa is my daughter,” Vala said proudly.

Vala Eichmann was the perfect witness. A beautiful blonde, with big blue eyes, she was sedately, but elegantly dressed. She was the epitome of an upper-class grandmother. She clutched several tissues in her hand.

“Did you ever accompany your daughter on her OB/GYN visits?” Mandy asked casually.

~ 151 ~
“No, Stanton always took her,” Vala grimaced.
“When the babies were born,” Mandy said nonchalantly, “did you and Mr. Eichmann sit in the waiting room while Stanton was with his wife?”
“No,” Vala answered. “Lisa and the baby were home before Stanton notified us of the birth. Of course, we rushed to see our newest family member.”
“Tell me how your daughter was with her children,” Mandy suggested.
“She adored them,” Vala smiled. “She was very protective and rarely let them stay with us. She brought them to visit but never left them with us. She said she couldn’t bear to be away from them.”
“On the day the children died,” Mandy grimaced, “did you see them?”
“Yes, Lisa called me and asked me to pick up two large bottles of Benadryl,” Vala looked at the jury. “She had a severe sinus infection, too. When I arrived at her home, she was in the kitchen making a fresh pot of coffee. The children were asleep.
“I opened both boxes of the Benadryl and took out the bottles. I handled them both. I read the instructions then Lisa, and I discussed them. The bottles were sitting on the table when I left.”
“Thank you, Mrs. Eichmann,” Mandy smiled. “I have no further questions for this witness.”
“Prosecution reserves the right to recall this witness later,” Rick shrugged. He knew Vala’s testimony hadn’t hurt his case in any way.
Rick moved to the front of his desk. “Prosecution calls CSI Roger Simmons,” Rick said.

~ 152 ~
“Investigator Simmons,” Rick smirked, “can you describe the scene you worked at the home of Lisa Mercer?”

Simmons described working the scene and collection of the evidence they found against Lisa Mercer. Rick thanked the man then turned him over to Mandy for cross-examination.

“Mr. Simmons,” Mandy smiled her most disarming smile, “my office never received a copy of the fingerprint report in this case. Did your office provide that information to the prosecution?”

Simmons shifted in the chair and said, “Yes, ma’am.”

“May I see your copy, Mr. Randolph?” Mandy spun around and quickly walked to Rick and Bailey.

Rick shot a “what the hell” look at Bailey who flipped thru the prosecution book and found the report. She showed it to Mandy.

“May I show this to Investigator Simmons?” Mandy smiled coyly.

Rick nodded as a lump formed in his throat. He removed the report from the prosecution notebook and handed it to Mandy.

“Mr. Simmons,” Mandy placed the report in the man’s hands, “Please read the information on fingerprints.”

Simmons’ eye narrowed as he surveyed the report then began to read. “Four distinct sets of prints were pulled from the Benadryl bottles. One set belonged to Lisa Mercer. The other three sets were unidentifiable.”

“So, Lisa’s prints were not the only prints on the bottle,” Mandy frowned. “She was arrested because her
prints were the only identifiable prints. Sounds like pretty lazy police work to me.”

“Not on our part,” Simmons defended. “Here, look. The next paragraph says the same prints were found all over the house.”

“Did you disqualify Stanton Mercer’s prints?” Mandy demanded.

“Yes, ma’am. None of the prints on the bottle matched Mr. Mercers.

“I am through with this witness,” Mandy nodded.

A hum ran through the courtroom as onlookers discussed the case Mandy Kincaid was making. The judge adjourned the case.

“We will reconvene at nine in the morning,” Judge Knight declared.

“You were awesome,” Jason hugged Mandy who hugged him back.

“Thank you,” she said tentatively, startled by how much she liked the feel of Jason’s arms around her.

Rick and Bailey charged from the courtroom.

“She is destroying us,” Rick growled, as Bailey ran to keep up with him.

Stanton joined the defense team at the front of the room. Stanton hugged his wife as the bailiff pulled her away.

Adora Ortega silently watched from the back of the room.

“Do you feel like discussing our strategy for tomorrow over dinner,” Coke asked.

“I would love that,” Mandy laughed as the tension of the examination drained from her body.

Jason shook her hand. “Nicely done, counselor,” he smiled. “How about dinner?”
“Oh, I…,” Mandy stuttered. “Coke and I are going to dinner so we can strategize for tomorrow. Why don’t you join us?”

“Are you sure I won’t be intruding?” Jason smiled. “Nonsense,” Mandy’s eyes sparkled. “You know as much about this case as anyone. We need all the help we can get.”

##

Rick Randolph reread the points he wanted to make in the courtroom. Sounds from the bathroom told him Bailey was ill. He hoped she didn’t have anything contagious. The last thing he needed was the flu.

“Are you okay,” he asked as the brunette came from the bathroom.

“Fine,” Bailey shrugged. “I must have a bug or something.” *Mostly something,* she thought.

She thought about telling him what was causing her morning sickness but knew now wasn’t a good time. It would distract him from the day that lay ahead of them. She decided she would tell him tonight that she was pregnant.

##
“You prepped Dr. Ryder,” Rick scowled at Bailey. “I don’t want Mandy Kincaid ripping him apart like she did CSI Simmons.”

“He is as prepped as possible,” Bailey grimaced. “He is upset that Mandy will be grilling him on the witness stand. Apparently, there is a difference between being questioned by Harvey Lambert and Mandy Kincaid.”

“But you have prepared him to withstand Mandy’s ripping,” Rick frowned. “He is our strongest witness. If Mandy destroys him, our case is dead in the water.”

“We have a signed confession of guilt from Lisa Mercer,” Bailey pointed out.

“Mandy will rip that to shreds,” Rick shook his head. “That confession was signed after the police questioned her for twenty hours without an attorney present.

“Mandy will convince the jury that any mother who had just lost three babies would have caved under that kind of pressure.

“All she has to do is show the jury the video of Lisa Mercer’s interrogation, and the jury will turn on us like a mongoose on a viper.

“We have the statement from Lisa’s co-worker, Rita Lake, about how distracted Lisa was the day the
children died. The woman visited her and asked to see the children,” Bailey thumbed through the file for the statement.

“She said Lisa refused to let her see the children and wouldn’t invite her into her home.”

“Let’s put Ryder on the stand first,” Rick smiled slightly. “Let’s see what Ms. Kincaid does to the good doctor.”

##

Rick smugly called Dr. Quenton Ryder to the stand. After Dr. Ryder had rattled off all his qualifications to be considered an authority in his field, Rick began his questioning.

“Dr. Ryder would you tell the jury what postpartum depression is,” Rick ask in a concerned voice.

“Yes,” Ryder nodded. “Postpartum depression usually occurs three to four weeks following childbirth and can last until the patient seeks treatment. Treatment is successful. The mother feels depressed, cries excessively, withdraws from family and friends. She may become easily fatigued and lethargic. The mother is easily angered or irritable.

“The most dangerous situations arise when postpartum depression goes untreated. The woman may develop diminished capacity; the ability to think clearly or make proper decisions. She may have severe anxiety attacks and recurring thoughts of harming her baby or suicide.

“I believe Lisa Mercer was suffering from ongoing postpartum depression. She never had the opportunity to recover from the birth of one baby before she had another one.” Ryder glared at Stanton Mercer.
“Do you think she was stable enough to recognize right from wrong?” Rick asked.
“Yes,” Ryder said emphatically. “She premeditated the murder of her children.”
“Objection,” Mandy jumped to her feet. “Dr. Ryder is stating facts that are not in evidence.”
“I defer to my esteemed colleague,” Rick slightly smiled. “Let me ask you one last question, Dr. Ryder. Was Lisa Mercer mentally ill?”
“Absolutely not,” Ryder declared.
“I have no more questions for this witness,” Rick sat down.
Mandy approached Dr. Ryder smiling. “Dr. Ryder, would you also tell the jury what postpartum psychosis is?”
Ryder shifted in his chair and glanced at Rick Randolph. “Postpartum psychosis is a very serious mental illness that can affect a new mother.”
“How is it different from postpartum depression?” Mandy’s brow furrowed as if she had trouble understanding.
Ryder looked down at his hands then spoke quietly. “A woman with postpartum psychosis can lose touch with reality. They can have both auditory and visual hallucinations, meaning they hear and see things that are not real. Women with postpartum psychosis are a danger to themselves and anyone around them. They should be in the hospital.”
“Is it possible Lisa Mercer suffered from postpartum psychosis?” Mandy glared at the doctor.
Ryder squirmed in his chair and looked at the ceiling. “It is possible, but not probable.”
“Why is it not probable?”
“She appeared to be suffering from depression for at least three years,” Ryder pointed out. With untreated psychosis, she would have killed her first baby within a year.”

“Did you ever visit with Lisa Mercer before the deaths of her children?” Mandy turned her back on the witness and watched the jury.

“No.”

“The first time you spoke with the defendant was after her children died. Is that correct?” Mandy continued to watch her jury.

“Yes,” Ryder nodded.

“But you would stake your reputation on the fact that Lisa Mercer was suffering from postpartum depression. Therefore she knew the difference between right and wrong, which makes her guilty of murder?”

“Yes!” Ryder almost screamed the answer.

“Are you familiar with the term sudden bereavement?”

“Yes,” Ryder almost whispered. “That would not apply to Lisa Mercer. She had just given birth. I stand by my original diagnosis.”

“That will be all, for now, Dr. Ryder,” Mandy weakly smiled. “Defense reserves the right to recall this witness.”

“Mr. Randolph, why don’t you call one more witness for the prosecution then we will break for lunch?” The judge said.

“The prosecution calls Dr. Rita Lake,” Rick smiled brightly as Dr. Lake walked to the stand.

“Dr. Lake,” Rick began, “you are a friend and colleague of Lisa Mercer. Is that correct?”

“Yes, sir. Stanton, too.”

~ 159 ~
“Please, just answer the questions,” Rick said roughly.
“On the day the children died, you went to visit Lisa,” Rick continued. “Please tell us about that visit?”
“There isn’t much to tell,” Dr. Lake shrugged. “Lisa seemed to be fighting a cold. She said she would invite me in, but she was afraid she was contagious. I asked to see the children, and she said they were sleeping.”
“What time did you visit Mrs. Mercer,” Rick quietly asked.
“Around three,” Dr. Lake answered. “I remember because I left my office early to see her while Stanton was at work.”
“I have no further questions for this witness,” Rick frowned. “Dr. Lake, you may be excused.”
“I have questions for this witness, your honor,” Mandy slowly approached the witness box.
“Dr. Lake why did you want to speak to Lisa without Stanton being present?”
Rita Lake looked shocked at the question. She sat silently for several seconds then turned to the judge.
“Do I have to answer that question?”
“Yes, doctor, you do,” Judge Knight smiled kindly. “You must answer any question Ms. Kincaid asks you.”
“Can’t I plead the fifth or something,” Dr. Lake grimaced.
“You may if your answer would somehow incriminate you in the murders.” Judge Knight scowled. “Counselor, please repeat your question. Dr. Lake, you must answer it.”
“I was concerned about her,” Dr. Lake plunged on without waiting for Mandy to repeat the question.
“Lisa and Stanton have worked their entire career on a project. About four years ago, they made a tremendous scientific breakthrough. I honestly do not know much about the project.

“They presented their findings to Adora Ortega, CEO of Biochemistry International. Adora immediately moved their project from the general area into a secluded area of our compound. Heavy security protected the area, and only Stanton, Lisa, and Adora were allowed access to the experiments in the lab.

“After Lisa went out on maternity leave, Adora—also a brilliant research scientist—began working with Stanton.

“The jury needs to understand that the Stanton’s aren’t your usual scientists. They are geniuses. Both are years ahead of others in their thinking and accomplishments. Their work with the human genome is unrivaled. Their brilliance is almost terrifying.

“As their family grew, Stanton spent more hours in the lab. Sometimes he didn’t even go home for days. Adora was always with him. Adora is extremely ambitious and drives us hard to produce results.

“I felt that Stanton was spending entirely too much time with Adora and I could see they were cutting Lisa out of the credit for the success they were about to announce to the world. I wanted Lisa to know what was happening. I feared for her life.”

A titter ran through the courtroom as Dr. Lake made her last statement.

“I have no more questions for this witness.” Mandy turned to Jason. “We need to talk to Stanton and Adora.”
“Court will adjourn until two p.m.,” Judge Knight announced.

Huddled in a small room across from the courtroom, Coke and Mandy queried Stanton.

“What is going on here?” Mandy demanded. “Your wife’s life is at stake, and both of you are hiding secrets. Why?”

“If you put me on the stand, I will plead the fifth,” Stanton looked down at his fancy shoes.

“You do that,” Mandy growled. “That will be enough to give the jury reasonable doubt.”

“I must speak with my wife,” Stanton said sullenly.

“No way,” Mandy hissed. “You will only try to get her to announce her guilt to the courtroom.”

“But she is…” Mandy cut off Stanton before he could finish his sentence. “No, she isn’t,” the attorney barked.

##

“Dr. Lake,” Rick strutted in front of the jury, “did you relay your suspicions to Lisa Mercer on the day of your visit?”

“Yes,” Dr. Lake replied.

“Thank you, that will be all,” Rick took his seat with a smug smile on his face.

“Prosecution would like to call Stanton Mercer to the stand,” Rick announced. “Please let the record show we consider Mr. Mercer, a hostile witness.”

Stanton was sworn in then took his seat in the witness box. He glared at Rick.

“Mr. Mercer, did your wife kill your children?” Rick slammed Stanton with the question.
Stanton locked eyes with his wife then looked down at his hands. “I don’t know,” he said loudly. “I wasn’t there.”

“Were you having an affair with Adora Ortega?” Rick continued aggressively. “Isn’t it true your wife murdered your children in a fit of jealous rage?”

“I have never had an affair with Ms. Ortega,” Stanton declared. Again, his eyes locked with Lisa’s. “My wife is not the jealous type. She knows I love her with all my heart. We have always been like two halves. She completes me—makes me whole.”

“Did you love your children?” Rick took another approach.

“I adored my children, as did my wife.”

“Can you think of any reason someone would want your children dead?” Stanton’s head snapped as if Rick had slapped him.

Rick smiled. He could smell blood. “Please answer the question.”

Stanton slowly smiled at Mandy. “I plead the fifth amendment,” he growled.

“Do you wish to cross?” Rick addressed Mandy.

“I have no questions for this witness,” Mandy smiled. Rick had unwittingly done her job for her.

##

“We are winning, aren’t we?” For the first time, there was hope in the eyes of Lisa Mercer. “Stanton just gave the jury reasonable doubt.”

Mandy chuckled. She was surprised at how perceptive Lisa was. She nodded slowly, suddenly wondering if the couple was playing her.
Jason put his arm across the back of Mandy’s chair and leaned into her to discuss the case. She was surprised at how comforting it felt to have the detective so close.

“Would you like to discuss this over dinner?” she smiled sweetly.

“Of course,” Jason smiled.  *God, I love her,* he thought, then wondered from where that epiphany had materialized.

##

Bailey walked fast to keep up with Rick Randolph. Rick knew he had just made a mistake with Stanton Mercer. He kicked himself for playing into the scenario Mandy Kincaid was setting up for the murder of the three babies.

Rick had gone over the facts a hundred times. Lisa Mercer was the only likely killer of the children. Stanton had an iron-clad alibi. He had been at work. No one else had a vested interest in the children’s death.

“Where are we going to dinner?” Bailey asked as they entered the elevator.

“I am going to my place,” Rick said distractedly. “I need to go over everything for tomorrow. Bailey, I can’t lose this case.”

“I know,” Bailey sighed.

“Damn,” Rick cursed. “I left my cell phone in the courtroom. Go ahead. I will see you tomorrow.”

Bailey started to remind him that she had ridden to the courthouse with him but decided to catch a taxi.

Coke Cannon stepped into the elevator as Rick brushed past him. “Going to the first floor,” he smiled at Bailey as his hand hovered over the elevator buttons.
Bailey nodded.

Coke made a pretense of looking around. “Looks like we are on our own tonight,” he flashed her another brilliant smile. Um, do you think it would be frowned upon if we went to dinner together?”

“Only if they find out,” Bailey laughed.

“Let me help you carry some of that load,” Coke took a computer bag and file case from Bailey. “I promise not to snoop in anything.”

“I parked my car in the lot across the street,” Coke explained. “We can get in it and drive to your car.”

“I was going to take a taxi,” Bailey grinned. “No car.”

As Coke opened doors for her and led the way to his car, Bailey thought how different he was from Rick. Both were exceedingly handsome, but Coke was attentive. His pleasant conversation was a welcome change from Rick’s grunts and one-word answers. Bailey liked Coke Cannon but knew his heart belonged to Mandy Kincaid.

Dinner was an enjoyable affair with Coke asking about her family and what made her select a law career. He answered her questions amiably and seemed to enjoy her company. She was thankful he never brought up the Mercer case.

“I enjoyed dinner with you,” Coke grinned as he walked Bailey to her door. “I would like to do it again if you are agreeable.”

Before she could stop the words, they sprung from her lips. “I would like that,” she smiled.

Bailey closed the door and leaned her back against it. What am I doing, she thought? For the first time in a long time, she felt happy. I will be glad when this case

~ 165 ~
is over so I can share the good news about the baby with Rick.

“Why are you planning another dinner date with Coke Cannon,” a little voice asked.

It wasn’t a date. It was two friends sharing a meal. Nothing more.
Chapter 21

“Mr. Randolph, you may call your first witness.” Judge Knight nodded to Rick.

“Prosecution defers to the defense,” Rick nodded to Mandy and smiled.

Now that she had punched holes in his case, he realized he had little evidence to convict Lisa Mercer. His last-ditch effort would be to introduce Lisa’s signed confession and hope Mandy wouldn’t insist on showing the jury the video of the interrogation. He also hoped Mandy would make a mistake.

“Defense calls Dr. Newton Stein. Dr. Stein is one of the top psychiatrists in the field of depression and psychosis.” Mandy waited patiently as Dr. Stein took the oath.

“Dr. Stein, unlike Dr. Ryder, you have treated Lisa Mercer for several weeks,” Mandy opened her argument. “Can you give the jury your diagnosis of Mrs. Mercer’s condition?”

Dr. Stein nodded. “It is my conclusion that Lisa Mercer is suffering from sudden bereavement. The sudden death of her children rendered her helpless, both emotionally and physically.

“Mrs. Mercer was easy prey for anyone trying to extract a confession of guilt from her. Let me explain. Immediately upon finding that a loved one has died, the suddenly bereaved often display shock, periods of disbelief; that it is all a bad dream.

“They feel as if they are in a haze and nothing matters or makes sense to them. They are trying to
come to terms with the sudden death of a loved one while their mind refuses to accept the facts.

“Mrs. Mercer displayed all the symptoms of sudden bereavement: shaking, screaming, the inability to talk or move. She ceased eating and drinking. She couldn’t sleep. These symptoms are intensely emotionally and physically draining.”

“So, it is your opinion that Lisa Mercer did not suffer from postpartum psychosis or postpartum depression?” Mandy watched the jury.

“That is correct,” Dr. Stein nodded. “After consulting with Dr. Ray Kapp, it is my opinion that Lisa Mercer did not murder her children.”

Rick could hardly sit still in his chair. Mandy had just taken the defense of temporary insanity away from Lisa Mercer.

Rick stood. “Just to make certain that I and the jury understand your testimony,” he smiled slyly, “Lisa Mercer was not insane at the time of her children’s death?”

“That is correct,” Dr. Stein smiled tolerantly.

A soft roar spread across the courtroom as spectators discussed how badly the defense had just hurt its case.

“I have no more questions for this witness,” Rick said almost gleefully.

“Thank you, Dr. Stein,” Mandy slightly smiled as she called her next witness.

“Defense calls Dr. Ray Kapp to the witness stand,” Mandy announced.

A silence fell over the courtroom as Dr. Kapp was given the oath and took his seat in the witness box. Everyone was wondering how the beautiful defense
attorney was going to recover from the testimony of her last witness.

“Dr. Kapp,” Mandy frowned, “would you give the jury a brief description of your relationship with Lisa Mercer?”

“I operated on Mrs. Mercer after she fell hitting her head on the corner of a desk. Inmates had almost beaten her to death, so I did a complete body scan and MRI on Mrs. Mercer to ascertain the amount of damage she had sustained.

“I have brought those images with me to show the jury so they can more easily understand what I am about to say.”

“Mandy carried the images to the court clerk. “Defense wishes to enter into evidence copies of Mrs. Mercer’s X-rays and MRIs.”

Coke rolled a screen and computer from the corner of the room. As the images began to come on the screen, Dr. Kapp pulled a laser pointer from his pocket.

He explained Lisa’s injuries. “The most interesting thing I discovered,” Kapp said, “is this.”

“This is a shot of Mrs. Mercer’s cervix opening; as you can see it is in a complete circle.

Kapp moved his pointer to another MRI. “This is a shot of a woman who has given birth to one child; as you can see her cervix opening is oval shaped.

“A woman who has given birth vaginally has an oval shaped cervix. The cervix of women who have never given birth is completely round.

“Lisa Mercer has never given birth to a baby?”

“No!” Lisa screamed and tried to reach Dr. Kapp. “Liar! You are lying. They were my babies.”
Court officers held the hysterical woman. Except for Lisa’s hysterics, complete silence filled the courtroom as spectators and jurors digested the information they had just received.

ADA Rick Randolph jumped to his feet. “Given this new evidence, prosecution requests we adjourn for the day and reconvene tomorrow. We need to verify the validity of the evidence.”

“Court dismissed,” Judge Knight scowled. “We will reconvene at two p.m. tomorrow. That should give you time to investigate this turn of events.” The judge was certain he had heard more confusing cases, but he couldn’t remember when.

##

“Your daughter certainly has a tiger by the tail,” Captain Brett Claymore smiled as he refilled Judith Kincaid’s wine glass.

“Yes,” a troubled expression crossed Judith’s lovely face. “I wonder where she is heading with this case, or better yet, where is it taking her?”

“Speaking of strange cases,” Brett frowned. “I heard from Steven Baker today. He returned home and is remodeling the only house he has left. The one, his daughter, occupied before her disappearance.

“He said he was taking my advice and attempting to get on with his life.”

“You found no trace of her or the baby?” Judith swirled the wine in her glass then took a sip. “Do you think Buddy murdered them?”

“Yes,” Brett nodded. “I am certain both are dead.”

##

~ 170 ~
It was five in the morning when Rick Randolph rang Bailey’s doorbell. Half awake, she stumbled to the door and looked out the peephole to see who was at her door so early.

_I should have known_, she thought. _Only Rick would be this thoughtless._ She considered not opening the door, but he began to beat on the door with his fist.

“Okay, okay,” she said as she unlocked the door and opened it slightly. “This better be good.”

A soft smile lit Rick’s face. “It will be,” he grinned as he reached for her.

“Are you insane?” she growled. “You show up at five in the morning for a booty call before we go into court.”

“Being with you always soothes the wild beast,” Rick pulled her into his arms. “Today, I need to be as relaxed and in control as possible. You can help me with that.”

Bailey struggled to free herself from Rick’s arms. “I need to tell you something,” she tentatively smiled. “It is important.”

“What could be more important than making love to you?” Rick shyly smiled, giving her his best little boy look.

“You are going to be a father,” she smiled as she blurted out the information.

“What?” Rick’s head physically jerked as if she had hit him.

“I am pregnant,” Bailey grinned happily. “You are going to be a father. I wanted to wait until after the trial to tell you, but I can’t wait. I am too excited.”
Rick stumbled backward and fell onto the sofa. Bailey sat down beside him and laced her fingers thru his.

“Are you certain?” he whispered. “Sometimes those drugstore tests are wrong.”

“Yes,” Bailey laughed. “I visited my OB/GYN.”

“I…I don’t know what to say,” Rick mumbled cheerlessly. “The campaign and the trial, I have a lot on my plate right now.”

“How far along are you?” His desperation was obvious. “No one can find out.”

For the first time, Bailey admitted what she had always pushed to the back of her mind. *Rick doesn’t love me.*

The pain in her face made him stop babbling. “Oh, Bailey, it is okay, baby,” he smiled. “I will be there for you. I will take care of you. You know I am a stand-up guy.”

She fell into his arms and sobbed against his chest.

“I was afraid you didn’t…

“Shush,” he calmed her as he stroked her long black hair. “I will take care of everything. Don’t worry.”

##

Everyone stood as the judge entered the courtroom. “Court is now in session,” Judge Knight declared.

“Mrs. Mercer, if you have another outburst like yesterday, you will be removed from the courtroom for the duration of this trial. Mr. Randolph, you may call your first witness,” the judge instructed.”

“The prosecution would like to recall Dr. Ray Kapp,” Rick said.
As Dr. Kapp settled into the witness box, Rick reminded him he was still under oath. Kapp nodded he understood.

“If Lisa Mercer has never given birth,” Rick started out softly then let his voice rise slightly with each word, “how do you explain, this?” Rick shoved several photos of the Mercer children in front of Dr. Kapp.

“Look closely at these children,” Rick instructed. “They don’t just look like Lisa Mercer; they are the identical image of her.”

“Do they share the same DNA?” Dr. Kapp asked

“Yes, they are a perfect match,” Rick grinned sardonically. “They also have the same blood type.” He pulled four sheets from his evidence book and gave the DNA results to Dr. Kapp.

“See for yourself,” Rick smirked.

Kapp looked at each sheet, then placed them one on top of the other and held them up to the light. “You have handed me four sheets of identical DNA,” Dr. Kapp frowned. “Where is the DNA test from the three children?”

Rick stood in stunned silence as Dr. Kapp’s words registered with his knowledge of DNA. He snatched the sheets from the doctor’s hands and studied them.

The top of each sheet bore the child’s name and age. It was impossible, but the DNA for three-year-old Laura, two-year-old Tyler, and two-month-old Jeremy were identical to their mother’s DNA results.

“The lab has made a terrible mistake,” Rick blurted out as he handed the judge the sheets. “They have produced three sheets with the same DNA for three different children. They are all a perfect match to Lisa Mercer’s DNA.”
“There is something else,” Dr. Kapp added. “Mothers always retain some residual DNA from their children when they are born. Lisa Mercer has no residual DNA one would find after childbirth.”

Lisa jumped to her feet. “Your honor, I murdered my babies, all three of them.” She burst into tears.

Mandy stood and put her arm around Lisa trying to calm her.

The courtroom was in an uproar.

“Silence,” Judge Knight banged his gavel. “Silence or I will clear the courtroom. Bailiff, remove Mrs. Mercer from the courtroom.”

“Counselors, approach the bench,” Judge Knight scowled. He leaned over and growled at Mandy and Rick. “Can either of you tell me what is going on here?”

“I have no idea,” Rick looked as puzzled as the judge.

“Ms. Kincaid, you seem to be trying to make a point. Please get to it, now.”

“Sir, I don’t believe Lisa Mercer murdered her children. I don’t even believe they were her children. I am not certain what is going on, but I know Lisa Mercer never gave birth to three children and I believe she is innocent.”

“Then convince the jury of that,” Knight ordered.

“Defense calls Stanton Mercer to the stand,” Mandy took a deep breath and searched her mind for a conclusion to which she could lead Stanton.

Her mother’s age old axiom ran through her mind, “Don’t ask the question unless you know the answer.” Right now, Mandy had far more questions than she had answers.
Stanton’s shoulders slumped as he took the witness stand. He couldn’t take his eyes off Adora Ortega seated at the back of the room.

“Mr. Stanton,” Mandy softly said, “we have proof that your wife has never given birth. She has never been to an OB/GYN or a delivery room. You seem to be the only one that can solve this riddle for us.”

Tears ran down Stanton’s face as he covered his eyes with his hands.

“Stanton,” Mandy pleaded, “tell us what happened to your children.”

When Stanton uncovered his eyes, he looked like a man possessed. He stared at Adora without blinking.

“Lisa and I are so much in love,” his voice seemed to echo from deep within his chest. “She is my world. We are perfect for each other. Our minds are so in tune; we don’t even have to talk. More than anything we wanted to share our lives and love with our children, but we were unable to conceive.

“We are prodigies. We are so far ahead of others in our knowledge and understanding of the human genome it is horrifying. We developed a process to clone ourselves.

“Adora realized our work was years ahead of others and provided us with a private lab and everything we needed to develop our project. Money was no object.”

“We were very careful. We only had three failures; failures we had to destroy.” Stanton exhaled loudly and continued. “Then we made Laura. She was us. She looked like us. Like us she was brilliant, and we loved her.

As the fetus grew in our lab, Lisa began to wear a stomach pad to simulate pregnancy. When Laura was
completely formed at nine months, we pretended that Lisa had given birth to her.

“Then we made Tyler and Jeremy. We were thrilled. I can’t even tell you how thrilling it was to watch three little replicas of ourselves running around our home, climbing into our laps and playing together.

Stanton suddenly fell to his knees and began praying in a loud voice calling on God to strike him dead. It was obvious the man was having a psychotic break.

“Bailiff, call an ambulance,” Judge Knight instructed. “This man must be hospitalized.”

“Court is adjourned until further notice. Counselors, my chambers, please.”

Mandy watched as attendants lead a babbling Stanton Mercer from the courtroom. She was speechless. She turned around to see Rick following the judge into his chambers and quickly caught up with them.

“Miss Kincaid,” Judge Knight leveled a scathing gaze at her, “I will not have my courtroom turned into a three-ring circus. Please enlighten us as to what is going on with your clients?”

“I…uh…,” Mandy searched for some legal jargon that would satisfy the judge, then honestly said, “I have no idea, your honor.”

‘Mr. Randolph?’ Judge Knight nodded expectantly.

“I’ve got nothing, your honor,” Rick frowned.

“I suggest the two of you confer with one another and either put forth the motion to declare a mistrial or evidence to convince me this charade should continue.”
“We will reconvene on Monday at nine a.m., so you have a few days to work this out. I warn you both; I am losing my patients with this case.”

##

Are you still convinced Lisa Mercer killed her children?” Mandy stared into Rick’s dark eyes as a waitress placed their dinner in front of them.

“This is the strangest case I have ever prosecuted,” Rick frowned. “I have no idea what is going on. I think Stanton is honest when he says he and Lisa are eons above everyone else in the intelligence department. Do I think she is innocent? No!”

“Why would she kill the children?” Mandy pondered out loud.

“I don’t know,” Rick shook his head. “I just keep coming back to the fact that the only fingerprints on the Benadryl bottles belonged to her and the two oldest children. That is something a mother would do; let her toddlers hold the medicine bottle to involve them in the medicine-taking process.”

“But Vala’s fingerprints should also be on the bottles,” Mandy pointed out.

Rick shrugged and shoveled a fork full of food into his mouth. He hadn’t been alone with Mandy in weeks, and he hated to squander the time discussing the case.

“Rick, I feel I should move for a mistrial,” Mandy exhaled slowly.

“You know I have to fight it?” he grimaced. “I don’t want to do that. I am tired of being at odds with you.”

Mandy smiled slightly. “I feel the same way.”
“Could you simply drop the charges given the new evidence?” Mandy raised her eyebrows hopefully.

Rick chortled. “I would do anything for you, counselor, but losing this case would cost me the election. I do want to be the District Attorney.”

“Even if it means sending an innocent woman to her death,” Mandy narrowed her eyes and glared at him.

“Are you free tomorrow?” Rick smiled weakly. “I need time to study all that has happened.”

“Good idea,” Mandy nodded. “I am wrung out emotionally after the trial today. Tomorrow might give us a new perspective on everything. Do you want to visit Stanton in the hospital and see if we can make some sense of all this mess?”

“Yes, he can probably clear up a lot of our questions.” Rick signaled for the check.

##

“So, how long do you plan to live with your mother?” Rick teased as he eased his Cadillac to the curb.

“Until she throws me out,” Mandy laughed. “I love living with her. She is not only my mom but my best friend.”

“Hum,” Rick’s lips formed a thin smile. “Don’t you ever want a place of your own where you can invite a friend in for a nightcap?”

Mandy slightly cocked her head and studied the handsome attorney. “Sometimes,” she said.

“I will be content to walk you up to the door,” Rick smiled.

He caught her arm as they reached the door and pulled her against him. His lips were firm and eager as
he kissed his nemesis. She kissed him back. “I will pick you up at nine for breakfast then we will see if we can make some sense of the quagmire we are in.” He quickly strode to his car.

Mandy watched him walk away. He was an enigma to her. Rick was extremely handsome. Tall and slim, he could be a male model. She smiled as she visualized him modeling men’s underwear.

He was an excellent attorney and was very ambitious. She had nothing against ambition if it didn’t overshadow every other aspect of one’s life. She sighed and slipped her key into the front door.

Mandy knew her mother wasn’t home. Judith had called earlier to inform her she was staying over at Uncle Brett’s house. She hadn’t invited Rick in for a nightcap because she wasn’t certain if she didn’t trust him or herself.

##

Rick Randolph was euphoric. Mandy Kincaid had kissed him back. Not a namby-pamby kiss, but a solid, I-want-more kiss. He couldn’t wait to spend the entire day with her tomorrow. He briefly considered giving her copies of all the photos taken at the scene of the Mercer children’s deaths. They wouldn’t make a difference, he told himself.

_Bailey! I must make things right with Bailey. Oh, Rick, what have you gotten yourself into?_ He thought. He made a u-turn and headed to Bailey’s apartment.

Rick sat in the parking lot watching the windows in Bailey’s apartment. The lights were out. He debated between waking the sleeping woman and letting her get
some rest. His better half won the argument. Carrying
the baby, she needed all the rest she could get.
He cranked his car and drove home.
Several minutes after Rick’s car drove away, Coke
Cannon delivered his dinner date to her door. “Thank
you for seeing me again,” he said shyly. “I truly
enjoyed the evening.”
“I had a wonderful time,” Bailey’s brilliant smile
convinced Coke of her sincerity.
“I, um, have two tickets to see the musical touring
company of Aladdin at the Dell Friday night,” he
shuffled his feet and glanced down like a shy little boy.
“Would you like to attend with me?”
“I would love to,” Bailey moved closer to him and
tiptoed to brush her lips against his. Before she realized
what was happening, Coke pulled her tight against him
and kissed her slowly, deliberately. She relaxed and
melted into his arms.
“I better go,” Coke grinned. “I can’t wait until
Friday.”
Bailey breathlessly nodded.
Sleep was a torturous exercise for Bailey. Her
dreams filled with visions of Rick and Coke. Rick;
smiling, pushing her down onto the bed. Coke;
laughing and cuddling a baby. She jerked awake.
Rick’s baby! She was carrying Rick’s baby. She would
break her date with Coke first thing in the morning.
There was no doubt in her mind she was falling in
love with the handsome, shy attorney. She had to stop
the fall.

##

~ 180 ~
By the end of the day, Rick and Mandy were no closer to solving their puzzle. Doctors had refused to allow them to talk to Stanton Mercer and Lisa Mercer had refused to leave her cell.

A visit to Adora Ortega’s office was a waste of time. She had left the country.

Mandy turned down Rick’s invitation to dinner saying she had promised Brett and Judith she would dine with them. She ignored Rick’s hints that he would be delighted to dine with the police chief and the judge.

#

At the end of the day, Rick found himself knocking on Bailey O’Shea’s door.

“You didn’t come into the office today?” Bailey pouted as she opened the door. “And you didn’t return any of my phone calls.”

“I am sorry,” Rick exhaled loudly as if weary of everything. “I was trying to make some sense of the Mercer case.”

“Why don’t you simply withdraw it?” Bailey said as she handed him a glass of iced tea. “Save face. You know Mandy Kincaid is going to win this one.”

“Don’t you have anything stronger?” Rick frowned. “Sorry, I am drinking only non-alcoholic, decaf beverages,” Bailey laughed. “I try not to think about how good a glass of wine would taste.”

She walked to the side cabinet and poured him a glass of bourbon. She joined him on the sofa, snuggling into his side. They sat silently for a long time as they sipped their drinks.

“Mandy will win this case over my dead body,” Rick finally growled.
The ferociousness of his comment startled Bailey. She decided not to discuss the topic.

Rick finished his drink then stood. “I have something for you,” he proudly smiled.

_Finally, the ring,_ Bailey thought and prepared to pretend to be surprised.

Rick pulled a thick envelope from his pocket and placed it on the table.

“I have taken care of everything. The instructions are in there.” He pointed to the envelope. “I can go with you if you need me.”

There was no pretense in the surprised look on Bailey’s face as she picked up the envelope and opened it. It was full of hundred dollar bills and an appointment with an abortion doctor. She fought back the tears that threatened to fill her eyes and glared at Rick.

“You want me to murder our baby?” she gasped.

“It’s not murder,” Rick shifted his weight uneasily. “It is perfectly legal. You are still in the first trimester. It is no big deal.

“I thought this is what you wanted me to do,” he said lamely.

“I wanted you to marry me,” Bailey cried. “I wanted us to raise our child together.”

“Marry you,” Rick said incredulously. “I never promised you anything. I’m not even certain it’s my baby.”

“Get out,” Bailey growled thru gritted teeth. “Get out now!”

##
Chapter 22

Captain Brett Claymore frowned as he watched Steven Baker push his way past a detective and scurry to his office.

“Steven, I thought you were in Fort Worth,” Brett shook hands with his friend.

“Brett, I have found the smoking gun,” Steven breathlessly blurted.

Caught up in the man’s excitement Brett watched as Steven spread receipts across his desk.

“You said the house was spotless,” Steven exclaimed. “That it had been bleached and cleaned with industrial cleaners and repainted.”

Brett nodded, not certain where Steven’s questions were leading.

“I was cleaning out the garage and found these receipts stuffed into a trash bag under a pile of garbage. Something made me open the bag. Look at these.”

Brett examined a receipt from Lowe’s. It was dated the day after Angie disappeared with the baby.

The receipt was for ten gallons of Glidden Profession Gripper Primer/Sealer and ten gallons of KILZ Premium High-Hide Stain Blocking Interior/Exterior Latex Primer/Sealer.

A second receipt dated three days later was from Sherwin Williams Paints for ten gallons of eggshell colored interior paint. Buddy Layne’s credit card was used to pay both receipts.

“It was obvious he had repainted the walls,” Brett frowned. “That isn’t enough to arrest him.”
“What about this?” Steven pulled a plastic baggie from his jacket pocket. It was full of half-dollar sized paint chips. “I neglected the house, and there is a leak down one wall. It is cracking, and paint is falling off the wall in big chunks. Look at the back side of the chips. There is blood, Angie’s blood.”

Brett examined the chips. “I am going to take these to our crime lab and see if this is Angie’s blood. If it is, we definitely will have probable cause.” He grinned at Steven. “Good work, my friend.”

Lab tests proved Angie’s blood was on the paint chips. Now, all they had to do was find Layne. Brett put out an all-points bulletin on Calvin (Buddy) Layne. He still wished he had a body. A body would prove the case against Layne.

##

Mandy approached Bailey O’Shea. “I wish your office would drop the charges against my client,” Mandy said.

Bailey shrugged. “Rick won’t even discuss it. He is hell bent on winning this case.”

Mandy nodded and joined Coke at their table. “He is so pigheaded,” Mandy mumbled as Rick walked toward them.

“Do you think we can wrap up this case today?” He smiled.

“I have filed a motion for dismissal,” Mandy smirked. “We both know Lisa Mercer is innocent.”

“Then who murdered the children?” Rick grimaced. “They didn’t stuff themselves into that trunk.”

A titter ran through the courtroom as Stanton Mercer slipped into a seat behind Mandy and Coke.
Lisa was led into the courtroom and seated beside Coke. The Mercers avoided making eye contact.

The judge called the court to order and looked through Mandy’s motion one more time.

“Miss Kincaid,” Judge Knight said, “I am going to postpone ruling on your motion until you finish questioning Stanton Mercer.”

“May I approach the bench, your honor?” Mandy frowned.

Judge Knight nodded for her to approach him.

“Sir, I don’t wish to question Stanton Mercer,” Mandy softly said. “I don’t…”

“I would like to hear what he has to say,” Judge Knight said sternly.

“Defense calls Stanton Mercer to the stand,” Mandy glowered.

Stanton made his way to the witness box. His shoulders slumped, and he kept his head bowed. Mandy had never seen a man in such fragile condition.

Mandy struggled to find the proper words to question Stanton without causing him to breakdown.

“Stanton,” she sweetly smiled, “you were telling us how gratifying it was to watch your children play. How much you loved them and how happy you were. Could you tell us what went wrong?”

Stanton’s head remained bowed. “Our babies were beautiful and brilliant. Laura was the perfect image of Lisa,” Stanton made eye contact with Lisa. “You must understand, I love my wife with every breath in me. To have a daughter that looked like her was wonderful.

“Then we had Tyler. He also looked like Lisa. I can’t tell you how my heart would almost burst with love when I looked at them sitting in my wife’s lap.”
“We decided three children were enough and Jeremy completed our family.”

Tears began to run down Stanton’s face. He shook his head as if he couldn’t understand what was happening.

“We were Gods. We had created the perfect humans, but something went terribly wrong. They had our looks and genius, but they lacked our empathy, our ability to love.

“Right after we brought Jeremy home, I caught Laura bashing in the head of her doll. I will never forget the look on her face. ‘Its name is Jeremy,’ she leered at me when I picked up the broken doll.”

“Stanton,” Lisa whispered loudly, “please, don’t.”

“The children were cunning,” Stanton continued. “They were brilliant, knowledgeable far beyond their years. Laura knew just what to say or do to get away with something whenever we caught her doing anything wrong.

“We tried to overlook it at first, but Tyler was just like her. Our cat scratched him, and he choked it to death, laughing as it struggled to wiggle free. I walked into the room as the animal expired. Tyler held it up for me to see. ‘I killed it, Daddy,’ he grinned the most soulless grin I have ever seen.”

“Lisa disciplined Laura for playing with matches. I don’t even know where she got them. Laura had an awful tantrum. She suddenly stopped screaming and grabbed a knife from the kitchen cabinet and attacked Lisa with it. It was horrible. Our beautiful little daughter barred her teeth and stomped toward her mother intent on stabbing her with a knife.
“I grabbed her from behind and took the knife from her. She changed instantly, calling me daddy and snuggling into my arms. ‘I kill Mommy,’ she said so sweetly. That night Laura stabbed Lisa in her sleep. I wrestled the knife away from her and locked her in her room.

“Lisa and I decided to go to Adora and tell her what we had done. Everyone thought Lisa had given birth to the three children. No one knew we had incubated them at the lab for nine months. Adora didn’t even know.

“Adora was livid. We had created three soulless monsters, and somehow we had to destroy them, but we couldn’t bring ourselves to do it.”

Stanton sobbed loudly. “We slept with Jeremy in our bedroom and locked our door. ‘We didn’t sleep. Laura and Tyler scratched at our door begging to come in, but we were afraid of them. Afraid of our own children!’

Stanton stared at the Jury. “You cannot even imagine the horror of living in a house where you are terrified of two small children. It doesn’t even sound plausible. It is insane. But it is true.”

“We decided to see if Adora would let us sneak Laura and Tyler into the lab so we could,” Stanton shrugged, “reconfigure their genetics. We thought we could fix them. Adora said she wanted nothing to do with the nightmare we had created.

“The day the children died,” I was with Adora trying to persuade her to let me try to fix them.”

“Who killed your children?” Mandy asked.

“No one,” Stanton mumbled.

“Oh, Stanton, no!” Lisa cried.
“The only thing I can figure out is that they killed themselves,” Stanton whimpered.

“I have no more questions for this witness,” Mandy set down. Stanton’s story had made her sick to her stomach.

“I have questions for this witness,” Rick swaggered toward Stanton.

“You have conjured a hair-raising tale for the jury,” Rick glared at Stanton. “Tell me, how did the dead children put themselves into the trunk and close the lid?”

Rick smugly surveyed the jury; as the jurors looked dubiously at one another.

“I don’t know,” Stanton’s entire being seemed to collapse.

“I have no further questions for this witness,” Rick smirked.

“Court will take a fifteen-minute break,” Judge Knight said solemnly.

Mandy opened her trial book and studied the photos of the chest containing the children. Blood was around the front edges and down the front of the trunk. Jeremy’s naked, mutilated body was beneath Tyler and Laura’s bodies.

Bailey looked at the photos in the prosecution’s trial book. She left the book open and announced that she was going to get a drink. Rick had left the room as soon as the judge declared a recess.

Mandy walked to the prosecution table. They had more photographs of the crime scene than she had.

##
Defense calls CSI Roger Simmons,” Mandy declared as the court session began. Simmons took the stand and looked quizzically at the attorney.

“Agent Simmons these are the photos you provided me from the crime scene,” Mandy spread out six photos on the flat surface in front of the CSI.

Simmons nodded.

“Do you usually only take six photos when you work a crime scene?” Mandy smiled.

“No, we take dozens of photos.” Simmons touched each photograph. “You should have a dozen more. We sent two packets to ADA Randolph.”

Mandy nodded knowingly. “Did you find blood anywhere other than the trunk containing the children’s bodies?”

“Yes, ma’am. There was a pool of blood beneath the stairwell and a trail of blood where someone dragged the baby’s body to the trunk.” Simmons looked distraught. “I can have my office send over a complete set for you. I don’t know why you didn’t receive them.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Mandy smiled. “I am certain ADA Randolph has a complete set.” She whirled on Rick. “May I see your photos, please?”

Rick’s eyes narrowed as he handed Mandy the photos. She thumbed through them quickly, removed three from their protective plastic and placed one in front of Simmons.

“Agent Simmons,” Mandy wrinkled her nose, “can you tell me what this is?”

“Footprints,” Simmons shrugged. “My assessment is in my report on the blood spatter at the scene.”

“I’m sure ADA Randolph has it,” Mandy glared at Rick.

~ 189 ~
“We compared them to the two older children’s feet, and they are a perfect match,” Simmons continued. “Obviously, the older children walked around in the pool of blood from the baby.”

“Can you tell the jury what this is?” Mandy slid the second photo in front of Simmons. “It is a kitchen knife we found under the stairwell,” Simmons grimaced. “And did it have fingerprints on it?” Mandy asked. “Yes. The fingerprints of Laura Mercer were on the handle,” Simmons said clearly.

A collectively gasp escaped from the spectators. “And this photo?” Mandy slid it in front of the man. “Bloody drag marks where thy dragged the baby’s body from under the stairs to the trunk.” “What about the footprints or half footprint?” Mandy frowned.

“It is my opinion,” CSI Simmons inhaled as if what he was about to say was difficult, “that the two younger children each pulled the baby by the arm. “You can see, here,” he pointed to footprints on each side of the drag marks. “It took both of them to drag the body.”

“I have no more questions for this witness,” Mandy said. “Your Honor, I request a brief conference with ADA Randolph.” “Fifteen minutes,” Judge Knight bellowed. “Mandy, I don’t know…” Rick started. “Rick, I knew you were ambitious but unethical?” Mandy shook her head in disgust. “You can either drop the charges against Lisa Mercer, or I will make certain Judge Knight declares a mistrial. How many millions
of the taxpayers’ money have you spent trying to kill Lisa Mercer?

“You have withheld evidence and…”

“No,” Rick said vehemently. “I have not withheld evidence. I promise you I provided copies of everything to Harvey Lambert. I had no way of knowing it wasn’t passed on to you.”

Mandy blushed, suddenly embarrassed that she had accused her friend of such malfeasance. “I’m sorry, Rick,” she sighed. “I was angry.”

“Mandy, when this is over, I sincerely want to court you,” Rick blushed slightly. “I would never do something like that to you.”

Mandy nodded. “Let’s wrap this up today. I am ready to give my closing arguments.”

“So am I,” Rick agreed.

##

“There is never an excuse for killing a child,” Rick opened his closing statement. “No matter how you look at it, Lisa and Stanton Mercer brought three children into this world. When the children they created no longer met their acceptance, Lisa killed them.”

“I am more convinced than ever that Lisa Mercer murdered her three babies because they no longer fit into her tidy little world.

“What the Mercers did was unconscionable. They made designer children. Only there were serious flaws in the design. What they did was against the very laws of nature and the laws of God.

“When their failures became apparent, they killed their creations. After hearing their story, I believe that Lisa had, even more, reasons to kill her children.
“You heard Stanton Mercer,” Rick’s voice was low with disbelief. “He told you himself that he and his wife are horribly brilliant, eons above mere mortals such as you and me. I believe that. I believe the Mercers are brilliant, cunning and criminally insane. Only an insanely brilliant mind could concoct the story Stanton Mercer has asked us to believe.

“I am taking the death penalty off the table,” Rick narrowed his eyes. “I ask you to find Lisa Mercer guilty and sentence her to life in prison. Death is too easy for someone who has murdered a baby.

“As the protectors of society, you must find Lisa Mercer guilty.”

##

Mandy walked in front of the jury. “The state wants the death penalty for a young woman who has been through hell and back. You must find Lisa Mercer guilty beyond a doubt. Beyond a doubt,” Mandy emphasized.

“Mr. Randolph has spun a scenario for you that isn’t quite substantiated by the evidence. The truth is that in their desire to have a family, Lisa and Stanton Mercer created miniature Frankensteins. Beautiful children, totally devoid of love. Children without a conscience or a filter for right and wrong, dangerous children.

“It is obvious the two older children were jealous of the baby. They began to act out after the baby arrived. In the end, they stabbed the baby and wrestled its body into the trunk. Then they went upstairs. Each of them drank a bottle of Benadryl, took off their clothes and climbed into the trunk with their baby brother and went to sleep. We have no way of knowing if they pulled the

~ 192 ~
trunk lid down or if it fell shut. We do know for a fact they killed Jeremy.

“Lisa Mercer tried to protect her husband by pleading guilty. Stanton defended his wife. Each thought the other had murdered the children. The truth is the children killed Jeremy and accidently committed suicide.

“Lisa Mercer is innocent. She did not kill her children. She will suffer for the rest of her life. Don’t heap this on her, too. Find Lisa not guilty!”

##

“What is taking so long?” Rick glared at Bailey. “This should be a slam-dunk case.”

Bailey didn’t look up as her boss entered her office. She had nothing to say to Rick Randolph.

Coke Cannon stuck his head into Bailey’s office. “Jury is in,” he informed them.

Rick pushed past Coke and charged toward the courthouse.

Coke leaned down and gently kissed Bailey. “Let me help you carry your things,” he smiled.

Mandy was already in the courtroom when Rick arrived. Coke and Bailey joined them, and Judge Knight called the court to order.

The judge asked the defendant to stand and acknowledged the jury foreman, “In the case of Texas versus Lisa Mercer, how find you?”

The foreman took a deep breath and looked over his shoulder at his fellow jury members. “The jury has voted unanimously to find Lisa Mercer not guilty, your Honor.”
“Thank God,” Stanton declared as he rushed to embrace his wife. “Thank God!”

Stanton and Lisa hugged Mandy and Coke, thanking them profusely for defending Lisa.

“Don’t think you are getting off this easy,” Rick glared. “What you have done is a sin against society. It is against the law to play God in this country.”

“Rick, don’t do this,” Mandy pleaded. “They have suffered enough.”

Rick’s eyes were black with anger. He couldn’t believe he had lost the case.

Rick stomped from the courtroom leaving all the case boxes for Bailey to wrestle back to the office.

Bailey smiled apologetically at the defense attorneys. “He isn’t used to losing,” she shrugged then sat down as a wave of dizziness swept over her.

“Let me help you,” Coke touched Bailey’s hand as she began loading their case files and trial notebooks into the boxes. The courtroom cleared as Coke strapped the boxes on the dolly. He placed Bailey’s computer and purse in the top of the last box. Bailey carried one light box.

A small crowd milled in the hallway at the elevators.

“Let us help you with that,” Jason nodded toward the box Bailey carried. “Everyone must use the stairs. The elevator is stuck.”

“Surely, I can manage this,” Bailey smiled. “I am not a helpless female. Coke might need some help. He is moving the heavy load.”

“This is a one-man job,” Coke frowned as he thought about rolling the dolly down three floors, one stair-step at a time.
The three followed Coke to the top of the stairs and watched as he thumped down the first flight. Bailey carefully looked around the box she was carrying and stepped forward.

No one knew what happened. Bailey suddenly plunged down the stairs and lay in a crumpled heap at Coke’s feet.

“She’s hurt,” Coke yelled as Mandy called an ambulance.

##

Bailey slowly opened her eyes and surveyed the room. It took her a minute to ascertain she was in a hospital. An uncomfortable sensation told her an IV connected to her right wrist. A warm hand held her other hand.

“Good, you are awake,” Coke smiled sweetly. “How do you feel?”

“Sore all over,” Bailey offered a faint smile as she took an inventory of her body.

Coke leaned forward to kiss her lips gently. “I am sorry, honey. We lost the baby.” Coke’s look was one of genuine sorry.

“We?” Bailey gazed into his eyes. “It wasn’t…”

Soft lips stopped her words. “It doesn’t matter,” Coke smiled, “You and I have a lifetime ahead of us.”

Bailey squeezed her eyes tightly shut, trying to stop the tears from falling. She failed.

Coke kissed away the tears and continued to hold her hand. “Get some rest,” he said softly. “I will be right here if you need me.”

“I think I am in love with you Coke Cannon,” she whispered as she slipped into a drug induced sleep.

~ 195 ~
Rick Randolph paced in the hospital waiting room debating whether he should leave or check on Bailey. He hoped against all the odds that the attending physicians wouldn’t discover Bailey’s pregnancy. Losing the Mercer case was bad enough, but if information surfaced that Bailey was carrying his child, it would ruin him and his chances of being elected District Attorney.

He finally decided to venture into her room. He was surprised to find Coke Cannon sleeping in a chair beside Bailey’s bed. The defense attorney clasped Bailey's hand in his.

Coke roused, sensing someone in the room.

“I need to know about her,” Rick whispered. “Is she okay?”

Coke gently extracted his hand from Bailey’s and walked into the hall to talk to Rick.

“She is doing well,” Coke informed the man. “The doctor said he would release her tomorrow.”

“What happened?” Rick asked. “I just found out about her accident this morning.”

“She was taking all the files you left with her back to the office,” Coke scowled accusingly. “She lost her balance and fell down a flight of stairs.”

“I didn’t intend for her to get the files,” Rick shook his head. “I went back for them later that night. I just had to get out of that courtroom.”

“Whatever,” Coke huffed disgustedly. “The damage is done, but she will be okay in a week.”

“Why don’t I sit with her so you can get some rest?” Rick moved toward the door, but Coke blocked him from entering the room.
“I will take care of her,” Coke’s eyes darkened threateningly. “You need to stay away from her.”
“She is my…co-worker,” Rick frowned. “I just want to help.”
“You have done enough, counselor,” Coke stoic demeanor told Rick he should leave.
“Tell her to call me when she feels like talking,” Rick said as he strode off down the hallway.

##
Chapter 23

The international news media had a field day with the Lisa Mercer story. Federal authorities were investigating Biochemistry International for their unsanctioned experiments.

Mandy hid from reporters and television commentators eager to conduct interviews with her. She thought about the horrors of the trial as Jason drove them to Brett’s home.

“A dollar for your thoughts,” Jason squeezed her hand.

“I was thinking about the trial,” Mandy sighed. “Never in my wildest dreams did I expect the story the Mercers told.”

“It was pretty wild,” Jason nodded. “You know before Lisa’s first trial, Stanton had the children cremated as soon as authorities released their bodies to him. There was nothing to substantiate their story. Adora Ortega swore ignorance of all their cloning experiments. She said they were working on cell rejuvenation.”

“I know,” Mandy smirked. “They retracted their story after the trial, and the authorities had nothing to prove or disprove it. Stanton insisted the CSI lab had contaminated the DNA and there was none to conduct another test.”

“I suspect the name of Mandy Kincaid will go down in the annuals of strangest cases ever defended,” Jason grinned.
“Right now, I would settle for anonymity,” Mandy smiled. “I can’t even get to my office for the news media and paparazzi.”

“It will be good to spend time with your mother and Brett,” Jason nodded. “Is Coke joining us?”

“Yes,” Mandy smiled. “He is bringing a date.”

Judith was finishing the salad when her daughter and Jason arrived. “About time you got here,” she smiled at the couple and hugged her daughter.

“Jason,” please take this to the patio table,” she handed the detective the salad.

“How are you feeling, today?” Judith pulled Mandy into another comforting hug.

“Much better, Mom. It seems like I am emerging from a horrible nightmare.”

“In all my years in law, I don’t believe I have ever encountered a more disturbing case,” Judith nodded. “Rick still believes the Mercers killed their children and concocted their story to get away with it.”

“What do you believe?” Judith frowned.

“I believe we will never know for certain,” Mandy sadly smiled. “But today is a celebration of your engagement to Uncle Brett. Let’s forget about work.”

Judith wrapped her arm around her daughter’s shoulder and led Mandy to the patio where Brett was grilling steaks.

“I left the wine in the car,” Jason smiled. “I will run get. It needs to chill before we drink it.”

“How many people are you expecting?” Mandy laughed as she counted the rib eye steaks sizzling on the grill.
“Um, Coke and Bailey are coming, and your uncle invited Rick and a man named Steven Baker,” Judith informed her.

“Who is Steven Baker?” Mandy asked.

“He is the father of the woman I told you about,” Brett answered. “I was certain her husband had killed her and their baby, but I couldn’t prove it.

“Steven was remodeling the house they lived in and discovered his daughter’s blood. The authorities in Fort Worth have scraped the walls and told me the place looks like a slaughter house. We have an APB out for Calvin Layne also known as Buddy Layne.

“We will get him,” Brett said confidently.

“Look who I found making out in their car in front of your house,” Jason teased Coke and Bailey as he led them onto the patio.

The ringing of the doorbell announced the arrival of another guest. “I’ll get it,” Judith grinned.

“Let me,” Jason insisted. “I need to put the wine in the refrigerator.”

Jason opened the door and greeted Rick, then led him to the patio.

“Rick, I am glad you could make it,” Brett shook the ADA’s hand. “Grab a beer; the steaks are almost ready to eat.”

A silence had fallen on the group when Rick arrived.

Coke stepped forward and shook Rick’s hand. Bailey nodded a cold hello.

“I am glad we are all together today,” Rick cleared his throat. “I wanted to congratulate Mandy on the exceptional defense she mounted for Lisa Mercer.”
“Bailey and I gave it our best shot, but you beat us fair and square,” he smiled at Mandy. “There is no doubt in anyone’s mind that Lisa had the best defense money can buy.”

Mandy blushed, unaccustomed to Rick’s praise. “Coke and I make a good team,” she smiled. “And our client was innocent.”

“Someone is at the front door,” Mandy shrugged. “I will get it this time.”

Mandy opened the door and stood face to face with Steven Baker. “You must be Mr. Baker,” she smiled brightly.

“Please, call me Steven,” the man grinned back at her. He had never seen a more beautiful woman.

“I am Mandy Kincaid, Judith’s daughter,” Mandy smiled proudly.

“Everyone is on the patio,” she said as Steven followed her through the house.

The men were standing with their backs to the door as Steven and Mandy stepped onto the patio.

“Mother, do you know Steven Baker?”

“I have never met Mr. Baker,” Judith’s welcoming smile made Steven relax. She shook his hand and introduced him to Bailey as Brett closed the lid of the grill and assumed the host’s task of introducing his friend to his other guests.

Jason, Rick, and Coke turned to face the newcomer. “You!” Steven blanched as he stood face to face with his daughter’s killer. “Murderer.”

The three men exchanged glances with one another, trying to determine which one of them Steven was accusing.
Brett broke the silence that had fallen over his guests. “Steven?”

“You,” Steven pointed a shaking finger at Rick Randolph. “You murdered Angie and Trent!”

Rick looked to either side of himself trying to determine to whom Steven was speaking.

Before anyone could move, Steven swung his fist, landing a solid blow on the ADA’s jaw. Rick stumbled backward and landed on the ground.

Coke and Jason grabbed Steven and held him as he railed against Rick.

“Brett,” Rick stood slowly, “who is this guy?”

“Steven, what is the meaning of this?” Brett demanded. “You have just attacked the assistant district attorney, Ricky Randolph.”

“No,” Steven gasped. “He is Buddy Layne, my ex-son-in-law.”

“I have been Rick Randolph all my life,” Rick growled rubbing his chin. “I have never met you before in my life.”

“Arrest him, Brett,” Steven demanded. “He is Buddy Layne.”

“There is a simple way to settle this misunderstanding,” Rick scowled. “Run my DNA against this Buddy Layne.”

Brett studied Rick Randolph. The attorney was visibly shaken. Who wouldn’t be? He had just been assaulted and accused of murder at the police chief’s engagement party.

“Steven,” Brett tried to lead the distraught man into the house. “I think you are way off base on this. There is no way…”

~ 202 ~
“I am telling you, Brett,” Steven shouted, “he is Buddy Layne. If you don’t take care of him, I will.”

“Steven, you can’t go around threatening the ADA,” Brett reasoned.

“If you don’t arrest him, I will kill him myself,” Steven hissed.

Brett made a phone call, and within minutes two police officers arrived at his home. Brett stepped outside to speak with them then led them to the living room where Steven was pacing the floor.

“It is about time you did something,” Steven growled. “What the hell?”

Before Steven could react, the larger of the two police officers had handcuffed his hands behind his back.

“Are you crazy?” Steven hissed at Brett. “I am not the killer. He is.”

“This is for your protection,” Brett reassured his friend. “I can’t have you taking the law into your hands and harming the ADA. Let me handle this. We will run a DNA test on Rick Monday morning. In the meantime, I am putting you in jail so you can’t harm yourself or anyone else.” Brett nodded to the officers who led a ranting Steven to their patrol car.

##

Jason had assumed the job of grilling the steaks and announced that they were ready to serve. “Bring your plates,” he grinned. “Rare steaks, first.”

The party atmosphere that had set the mood for the beginning of the party had dissipated and replaced with somber emotions.

“Have you met Steven before?” Brett asked Rick.
“Never,” Rick glowered. “How do you know him?”

“A little over eleven years ago, his daughter and grandson disappeared,” Brett shrugged. “Steven is convinced his son-in-law murdered them. I caught the case, but could never find any evidence to prove Steven’s theory. I am afraid it has pushed him over the edge.”

“Poor bastard,” Rick mumbled.

###

~ 204 ~
Chapter 24

Captain Brett Claymore leaned back in his chair and glared at his computer screen. He had run every search imaginable and could only trace Rick Randolph back ten years.

Rick had graduated from the University of Texas, passed the bar and settled in Austin. Brett couldn’t ascertain where he attended college before working on his law degree at UT.

As promised, Rick had been waiting in Brett’s office when he arrived at the station that morning. He had volunteered for the DNA swab and drank a cup of coffee with Brett before heading to his office.

Bret had put a rush on the DNA order and pestered the lab until they ran the test to get rid of him. Now he was looking at the results on his computer screen. There was no match in the system for Rick’s DNA. Then he discovered they did not have Calvin “Buddy” Layne in the system.

He looked up as an officer escorted Steven Baker into his office. “Have a seat, Steven.”

Steven’s icy look told Brett the man was furious. “How could you put me in jail?” Steven demanded.

“It was for your good,” Brett exhaled heavily. “For your information, Rick Randolph’s DNA didn’t match the DNA of anyone in CODIS. You can’t go around accusing the man, who is about to become Austin’s District Attorney, of murder without proof.”
“When you investigated Buddy at the time of Angie’s disappearance, did you get his DNA and fingerprints?”

“I had no reason to,” Brett furrowed his brow. “We didn’t arrest him.”

“The receipts I gave you,” Steven’s eyes brightened. “He signed the credit card receipt. Can’t your handwriting experts see if the signatures match?”

Brett pulled Angie Layne’s file from his bottom desk drawer. The first thing in the file was a photo of a bald Buddy Layne. Brett shuffled through the contents until he found the receipts from Lowe’s and Sherwin Williams.

“They are extremely faded,” he noted, “but let’s give it a shot.”

Steven smiled appreciatively. “Thank you.”

After Steven had left his office, Brett called their sketch artist. “I have a photo I need you to age for me.”

It was after five when Brett called Bailey O’Shea. “I need to visit with you,” he said.

Bailey checked her calendar. “Tomorrow after lunch, okay?”

“I mean now,” Brett emphasized. “I need you to come to my office. It is important, Bailey.”

“Give me ten minutes,” the ADA said.

##

Bailey thumbed through the file Brett placed before her. “Why do you have an artist’s composition of Rick in here?”

“Look at the next photo,” Brett nodded.
Bailey placed the two pictures side by side. “This is Rick with hair and Rick without hair,” she laughed nervously.

“The one without hair is Buddy Layne,” Brett frowned.

“Oh, my God,” Bailey gasped. “Rick is… That can’t be. You know Rick. He isn’t a killer.” Or is he? Bailey thought as she recalled how callously he had suggested she kill their unborn baby.

Ever the consummate prosecutor, Bailey continued to look through the file. “Is this all you have?” she scowled. “A statement from the department’s forensic document examiner that the handwriting on the receipts is the same and these pictures?”

“What do you know about Rick?” Brett asked.

“What do you know about Rick?” Brett asked. “Have you met his parents?”

“Both deceased,” Bailey shrugged.

“Does he have any family at all?”

“Not that I know of,” Bailey said slowly.

“Where did he grow up? What high school did he attend? Bailey, according to all the records I can find, Rick Randolph has only been in existence for ten years.”


Brett shook his head, no. “Nothing older than ten years.”

“I’m not sure I could get a conviction on such flimsy evidence,” Bailey scowled. “I’m not certain we should charge him.”

“Is this Bailey O’Shea the prosecutor or Bailey O’Shea the girlfriend of Rick Randolph speaking?” Brett raised a questioning eyebrow.
“There is no love between Rick and me,” Bailey said honestly. “I am speaking purely from a prosecutor’s point of view. I don’t want to press a case I can’t win.”

“Steven Baker positively identified him,” Brett reminded her. “I don’t want to arrest him if you believe we have no case. I would have one pissed off ADA on my hands and a destroyed relationship with the DA’s office.”

“Can I think about this overnight and give you my answer in the morning?”

##

As much as Bailey now disliked Rick, she didn’t want to indict him if she couldn’t convict him. A part of her wanted to arraign him just to get even with him for being such a selfish ass. The professional in her demanded that she handle everything by the books.

Coke’s hand wrapped around hers as he pulled the car to a stop in front of the restaurant where they were meeting Mandy and Jason for dinner. “Why do I have the feeling I am on this date alone,” he teased.

“I am sorry,” Bailey sighed. “I have some unpleasant things going on at work.”

“Anything I can do to help,” he leaned over and lightly brushed her lips with his.

“No, more than likely we will end up on opposite sides of the bench on this one,” Bailey grimaced.

“Rick?” It was more a statement than a question.

“Yes,” Bailey nodded.

“Why don’t you turn it over to another ADA?”

“If we file charges,” Bailey frowned, “I want a conviction. You know if we lose, he will sue the state

~ 208 ~
and me for false prosecution. So, we must have a slam-
dunk case. And I have to know beyond the shadow of a
doubt that he is guilty.”

A tap on their window made them jump as the valet
opened their door. “Want me to park your ride, sir?”

Inside the restaurant, Mandy and Jason were
animatedly discussing the accusations Steven Baker had
thrown at Rick. They dropped the subject as Coke and
Bailey joined them.

After discussing mundane things like the weather,
Mandy blurted, “Are you going to prosecute Rick?”

Bailey smiled tolerantly. “If I do will you defend
him?”

“If he hires me,” Mandy shrugged. “He deserves a
solid defense. I just can’t see Rick murdering his wife
and child.”

I can, Bailey thought.

“Brett is putting together a pretty solid case,” Bailey
said more to convince herself than Mandy.

“Can you share?” Mandy queried.

“You will get it all in discovery anyway,” Bailey
shrugged.

“The most condemning is the identification by
Steven Baker.”

“Rick says Steven Baker is delusional,” Mandy
noted. “God knows the poor man has been through
enough to drive him crazy.”

“Brett’s forensic document examiner said Rick’s
handwriting is the same as Buddy Layne’s. The police
sketch artist’s rendering of Buddy Layne, with hair, is a
dead ringer for Rick. Most important of all, there is no
history for Rick Randolph that is older than ten years.
Ten years ago, he just materialized out of thin air about the same time Buddy Layne disappeared.”

“That’s skimpy evidence,” Mandy smiled. “You know I will debunk it in court.”

Bailey nodded. “I know that is why I am debating pressing charges.”

“You should,” Mandy said. “Give Uncle Brett the opportunity to interrogate him. Make him explain who he is.”

“Is this your way of drumming up business, counselor?” Bailey laughed.

“No,” Mandy chuckled. “It is my way of removing a dark cloud hanging over the head of a colleague.”

##

“Is the world coming to an end?” Mandy grinned as she poured her mother a cup of coffee. “Why aren’t you in court this morning?”

“I recused myself,” Judith smiled. “I was friends with the victim in the current case before the court.”

“The president is holding a press conference this morning,” Judith continued. “I want to watch it.”

“Umm, does it have anything to do with his selection for the Supreme Court?” Mandy’s eyes twinkled as she hugged her mother.

“I hope so,” Judith laughed. “The waiting is driving me crazy.” She turned the television to a news station and refilled their coffee cups as they waited for the president to announce his selection.

“After due consideration and extreme vetting,” the president hesitated then looked directly into the camera, “I have selected Texas Court of Criminal Appeals Judge
Judith Kincaid as my nominee for the U.S. Supreme Court.”

“Mom,” Mandy gasped as she hugged her mother. “Oh, Mom, I am so proud of you and excited for you.”

Judith shook off the excitement that had overcome her and listened as the president continued.

“Judge Kincaid is a constitutionalist who is currently serving her second term on the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals where she is the presiding judge.”

“Judith Kincaid is a single parent who raised her daughter alone after the death of her husband, Josh. Her daughter Mandy Kincaid is a successful attorney in Austin, TX.”

The rest of the interview was lost on the two women as they clasped hands and danced around the living room.

“I must spend a great deal of time in Washington meeting committees before my confirmation hearing,” Judith exhaled slowly.

“When do you have to leave?” Mandy asked.

“I am not certain. Someone from the president’s office will notify me sometime today.”

Judith’s phone sounded Brett’s ringtone. She smiled at Mandy and hugged her one more time before answering the call.

“Thank you, darling,” Judith hummed into the phone. “No, I’d rather stay in tonight. Why don’t you come here and have dinner with Mandy and me?”

“Of course, bring Steven, too. Six is fine.”

“Are you up to dinner tonight with the older crowd?” Judith chortled.
“My two, favorite people, you bet,” Mandy couldn’t contain her pride for her mother. “I am fortunate to be the daughter of Judith Kincaid,” she said.

##

Steven Baker studied Mandy Kincaid as she laughed and hugged her mother, again. It was good to see a daughter so devoted to her mother.

Angie’s mother had died in an automobile accident when Angie was two, so she never knew the love of a mother. Steven had tried to be mother and father to her as she grew up, but he knew he had failed miserably. He knew he hadn’t provided much guidance for her. Girls were difficult.

He had tried to talk her out of marrying Buddy Layne but had acquiesced when he found out she was pregnant. He loved his daughter and had been thrilled to have a grandson. Buddy was insanely jealous and rarely allowed him to visit them. Steven knew that Buddy abused Angie, but looked the other way when she had a black eye or a split lip. She always defended her husband.

Steven smiled as he watched Mandy Kincaid. No man would abuse her. Judith had raised a fiercely independent young woman capable of taking on the world and winning.

Sometime Mandy’s smile and flashing blue eyes reminded him of Angie before she met Buddy Layne.

“My Angie was only two years older than you,” Steven told Mandy. “She was like you, so full of life and happiness then she married Buddy Layne.”
Silence fell around the table, and Steven realized that he had put a damper on a celebration. “I’m sorry,” he hung his head. “I didn’t mean to…”

“It is okay,” Mandy placed her hand over Steven’s. “We understand.”

##

Mandy’s office phone was ringing as she entered her office. “Mandy Kincaid,” she answered.

“Mandy, you are my one call,” a frantic Rick Randolph yelled into the phone. “The police have arrested me for the murder of a woman I have never heard of.”

“Angie Baker,” Mandy said breathlessly. “Steven Baker’s daughter.”

“Yes! Mandy, I swear I have never met the woman,” Rick declared. “Bailey is pressing charges against me. She is railroading me. You’ve got to help me. Will you take my case?”

“Of course,” Mandy said softly.

##
“Mandy,” Rick pulled the beautiful blonde into a hug. “Thank you so much for helping me. Do you have any idea what is going on?”

“Has Uncle, uh Captain Claymore questioned you yet?” Mandy surveyed Rick. His eyes were red-rimmed and cloudy. His usually perfect hair was disheveled.

“No!” Rick growled. “They Mirandized me then stuck me into a cell. That was late last night.”

“You must be in a private cell,” Mandy smirked. “You don’t look like Lisa Mercer looked the first time I saw her?”

“What do you mean?” Rick frowned.

“I mean no one has tried to beat you to death,” Mandy smirked.

Rick stared at her but made no comment.

“I guess Captain Claymore knew you wouldn’t live long in general population,” she added.

“What evidence do they have that would make them believe I am this Buddy Layne?” Rick demanded.

“This,” Mandy placed two pictures side by side. “You have to admit you look just like Buddy Layne.”

Rick shook his head in disbelief.

The forensic document examiner is willing to testify that your handwriting and Buddy Layne’s are the same.”

“That’s impossible,” Rick raged.

“Steven Baker has positively identified you as his son-in-law.”

~ 214 ~
“That’s it. That’s all the prosecution has?” Rick snorted.

“That and the fact that the same year Buddy Layne vanished, you materialized.” Mandy watched her client. “Ten years ago, Rick Randolph didn’t exist.”

“That is insane,” Rack said through clenched teeth.

“Tell me where you were or better yet, who you were,” Mandy pulled a notebook and pen from her briefcase.

“I can’t,” Rick sighed. “You don’t need to know. Do they have anything solid like Buddy’s fingerprints and DNA that match mine?”

“No,” Mandy admitted. “Buddy did an extraordinary job of cleaning up after himself.”

Rick pinched the bridge of his nose between his finger and thumb trying to stave off a monster headache he could feel starting.

“Mandy, I have faith in you,” he smiled. “Take care of me like you did Lisa Mercer.”

“What do you mean?” Mandy frowned.

“Concoct a lie so big the jury will believe it,” Rick smirked.

“Excuse me, Ms. Kincaid,” the officer said politely. “Captain wants to see Randolph in the interrogation room.”

“I will meet you there,” Mandy said as she quickly placed her writing materials back into her briefcase and exited the visitor’s cubicle.

##

“Uncle Brett,” Mandy hugged the man who had been like a father all her life.

“What are you doing here, princess?” he teased.
“Representing Rick Randolph,” Mandy shrugged. “I need to sit in on his interrogation.”
“Do I hate it when we are on opposing sides,” Brett groaned.
“So, do I,” Mandy agreed. “Uncle Brett, is there any chance Steven Baker is a little unhinged?”
“I don’t think so, honey,” Brett opened the door for her and led her to the interrogation room where Bailey was waiting for them in the hallway.

Rick waited in the room. Handcuffs chained him to the steel table in the room.
“Are these necessary?” He held his cuffed hands toward Brett.
“Standard police procedure,” Bret shrugged.
Brett shuffled through his file folder on Rick Randolph then looked him in the eye. “Where did you go to high school?”
“Joiner, Arkansas” Rick answered. “I went to grade school there, too.”
“Before settling in Austin, what did you do?” Brett asked.
“Black ops for the CIA,” Rick grinned.
Brett stared at him. Both men knew that Brett couldn’t verify a black ops operator.
So, he begins his big lie, Mandy thought.
“We can’t verify your black ops operation,” Bailey said coldly, “but we can verify you were in the service. Through what agency were you serving your country?”
“I am not at liberty to say,” Rick smirked.
“Then I will assume you are lying,” Bailey’s voice was hard and hateful. Not at all like the voice of the woman he had made love to for the past year.

“Bailey, you know me,” Rick pleaded. “I would never murder a woman and her child.”

“Where are their bodies?” Bailey turned to Brett. “We can pull DNA from them and compare it to Rick’s. That will settle this.”

“We have no bodies,” Brett mumbled.

“You’re not even certain the woman and baby are dead,” Mandy slipped into her role as a defense attorney. “Captain Claypool, surely you aren’t moving forward with charges against my client?”

“File the charges, Captain,” Bailey stood and closed her briefcase. “We will prosecute this case.”

“Bailey,” Mandy gasped, “you can’t be serious.”

“I am,” Bailey snapped. “Good day, counselor.”

##

Bailey quickly moved to set Rick’s trial date. Over Mandy’s objections, she filed it as Texas vs. Calvin (Buddy) Layne.

Mandy acted just as fast to get a bail hearing for her client. She frowned when she saw that Judge Carson would hear the case. She had hoped for Judge Knight.

“Your Honor,” Mandy stood beside Rick, “my client is not a flight risk. He has been a resident of Austin for the past eleven years. Six of those years he served Travis County as an assistant district attorney.”

“If it pleases the court,” Bailey smiled at the judge, “the prosecution requests that the defendant is remanded in custody pending the outcome of his trial. Calvin Layne has proven himself to be a flight risk.
Eleven years ago, he committed a heinous crime then disappeared. We believe he will do the same thing again if he is out on bail.”

Judge Carson looked from Bailey to Mandy. “The court hereby remands the accused into the custody of the Travis County jail without bail.”

“I need to share this with you,” Bailey dropped a manila envelope on the desk in front of Mandy then walked away.

Mandy pulled a letter from the envelope. “What is it?” Jason asked as he lightly touched the small of Mandy’s back.

Mandy read the letter then looked up at Jason. “It seems the Joiner, Arkansas school district was closed years ago. Ten years ago, a fire destroyed all their records that were in storage.”

“How convenient is that?” Jason frowned.

##

Judge Judith Kincaid patiently answered the committee’s questions. She was careful not to volunteer information about her daughter. Thankfully, the committee was more concerned about her judicial record than her parenting abilities.

She relaxed when the committee concluded their day-long interrogation of her. The only secret in Judge Kincaid’s life was her daughter. She thanked God that she had been able to protect Mandy. She shuddered to think how Mandy would react if she ever found out Judith wasn’t her birth mother.

Judith pushed to the back of her mind the thought that Mandy might be Steven Baker’s daughter. The
Death Was Too Easy

same person Rick Randolph was now being tried for killing.

Judith shook her head at the irony of it all. Mandy was fighting to defend the man who had tried to kill her and her child. Neither the attorney nor the defendant knew who the other was.

Mandy’s complete amnesia had left her with only the memories Judith had carefully instilled in her mind. Judith loved her daughter more than life itself and would do anything to protect her.

###

Steven Baker sat behind the prosecution as Mandy made her opening statements and relinquished the floor to Bailey O’Shea.

Bailey skillfully presented her evidence, then called Steven to the stand. He was sworn in then took his seat in the witness box.

“Mr. Baker, can you point out your son-in-law, the man that was married to your daughter Angie?”

“He is the man in the blue suit sitting next to Mandy Kincaid,” Steven pointed to Rick.

“Let the record show that Mr. Baker identified ADA Rick Randolph as Calvin (Buddy) Layne, the man married to Mr. Baker’s daughter when she disappeared eleven years ago,” Bailey’s serious expression took in all the jurors.

“Could you describe your daughter’s marriage to Mr. Layne?” Bailey urged.

“Abusive,” Steven said loudly. “He was physically and mentally abusive to Angie.”


~ 219 ~
“Sustained,” Judge Carson nodded. “Please stick to provable facts, Counselor.”
Bailey carefully laid out the prosecution’s case then relinquished the witness to Mandy.
“Mr. Baker,” Mandy said gently, “until you ran into Mr. Randolph in Austin, how long had it been since you last saw him?”
“Over ten years,” Steven said.
“Could you please, describe the Buddy Layne that was married to your daughter?” Bailey was careful to be cognizant of Steven’s loss.
“He was six foot three and weighed almost three hundred pounds,” Steven said.
“What color was his hair, when he was married to your daughter?” Bailey asked.
“I don’t know,” Steven frowned. “He was bald.”
“Was he bald because he shaved his head or because of hair loss?” Mandy continued.
“I don’t know,” Steven shook his head.
“The man you describe as your daughter’s husband looks nothing like ADA Randolph,” Mandy said gently.
“Why do you think he is Buddy Layne?”
“His voice, his mannerisms,” Steven exhaled slowly. “He has the same soulless brown eyes.”
“They look like attractive brown eyes to me,” Mandy smiled.
“The court agrees Mr. Randolph has brown eyes,” Judge Carson said. “We can do without the adjectives. Please move on, Counselor.”
“The point I am trying to make,” Mandy continued, “is that it is all in the eye of the beholder.”
“Mr. Baker,” Mandy’s tone changed. “Were you close to your daughter?”

~ 220 ~
“What difference does that make?” Steven frowned.
“I am simply trying to give the jurors some insight into your relationship with your daughter. Were you close?”
“Not really,” Steven mumbled.
“I didn’t hear your answer,” Mandy said loudly.
“No!” Steven screamed. “No,” he said quietly.
“Wearen’t close. I was too busy wheeling and dealing in real estate to spend much time with her and Buddy didn’t want me around.”

As the trial progressed, Mandy discredited all the evidence the prosecution used in their efforts to convict Rick. At the close of the day, she knew it was simply a matter of a strong closing statement, and the jury would find Rick not guilty.

“Counselors,” Judge Carson addressed them, “we be prepared to give your closing statements in the morning. Jury members, you will carefully consider all the information you have received. I hope to end this trial tomorrow so we can all have a nice weekend.”

##

“Why so melancholy?” Jason asked as they finished their meal. “Am I that boring?”
Mandy laughed. “Darling, you are never boring. I can’t forget the look in Steven Baker’s eyes as he left the stand. He believes the system has let him down and I am the reason.”

“The case against Rick was weak, at best,” Jason frowned. “I was surprised Bailey filed it.”

“Somehow, I feel she knows something I don’t know,” Mandy closed her eyes and sighed.
“I better go home,” Mandy took Jason’s hand in hers. “I need to work on my closing arguments for tomorrow.”

##

“Mom is home,” Mandy clapped her hands like a child as Jason pulled his car into the driveway. “I didn’t expect her back until tomorrow night.”

Mandy leaned over and kissed Jason goodnight. “I love you,” he whispered.

She smiled and nodded, acknowledging his declaration of love. “I love you, too.” She quickly opened her door and ran into her house.

“Tell me all about it,” Mandy hugged her mother. “Don’t leave out anything.”

“First things first,” Judith laughed. “Judge Carson’s office called to notify you that he is in the hospital. Apparently, he ate some bad fish and has a slight case of food poisoning. Your case won’t reconvene until Tuesday morning at nine.”

Mandy made several phone calls notifying everyone involved then turned her full attention to her mother.

As they had done all her life, Mandy and Judith sat cross-legged on Judith’s bed and talked until the wee hours of the morning.

Judith’s confirmation hearing had gone extremely well, and there were no roadblocks to her becoming the newest Supreme Court Justice.

“Tell me about Rick’s trial,” Judith said. “Are you going to get him off?”

“I am sure the jury will find him not guilty,” Mandy nodded. “The case against him is flimsy, but…”

~ 222 ~
“But, you have questions, don’t you?” Judith gazed into her daughter’s troubled eyes.
“Yes,” Mandy almost whispered.
“He won’t tell us where he was or who he was before he appeared as Rick Randolph. He says he was a black ops agent serving the U.S. government. I can neither confirm nor deny that. Getting information from the government is more difficult than extracting a tooth from a grizzle.”
Judith laughed at her daughter’s comparison and agreed with her. She tamped down a flicker of guilt as she thought about telling Mandy of her past. It was a brief flicker, and then it was gone. Judith would do nothing to harm the incredibly loving relationship she had with her daughter.
“Steven Baker admitted in court today that he and his daughter weren’t close,” Mandy said. “That is sad. I don’t know what I would do without you in my life.”

##
Mandy reached out a hand to silence her alarm. Even after she had pushed it, the thing continued to ring. The doorbell, she thought. It is the doorbell.
Stumbling into the living room, she wondered where her mother was. Following the sound of voices in the kitchen, she found Judith in a heated conversation with two men in suits.
Silence filled the kitchen as Mandy entered the room.
“You must be Mandy Kincaid,” one of the men addressed her.
“I am,” she said cautiously.
“I am FBI agent Turner Cline, and this is agent Arnold Swain. We would like a few words with you.”

Mandy looked at her mother. Judith neither affirmed nor denied the man’s request. The judge’s face was pale and drawn. Mandy knew something was wrong.

Mandy walked to the coffee pot and took her time locating a cup and pouring the black liquid into it. She was stalling for time, for some sense of direction from her mother. Why did the FBI want to question her?

“Is this about Rick Randolph?” she asked as she perched atop one of the stools at the kitchen counter.

“No,” the agent shuffled his feet and looked longingly at the cup of coffee.

“Where are my manners?” Mandy smiled as she stood and poured two more cups of coffee and refilled her mother’s cup. “Please, have a seat. Do either of you use cream or sugar?”

Both men shook their heads, no and settled their tall frames onto the stools. Judith sat down beside her daughter.

“First, let me apologize, Judge,” the man addressed Judith. “Questions have been raised by the opposition party to block your confirmation. I am certain you realize that we must follow up on even the tiniest hint of a scandal.”

Judith nodded. Her lips formed a tightly drawn smile, and Mandy briefly saw her hand shake as she stirred her coffee.

“What is this about?” Mandy asked.

“How long have you known Judge Judith Kincaid?” the agent asked.

Mandy laughed out loud.
“All my life,” Mandy chuckled. “She is my mother.”

“You have never had another mother?” The agent continued.

“Let me make this very clear,” Mandy gritted her teeth, “Judith Anne Kincaid is the only mother I have ever known. Josh Kincaid was the only father I have ever known. He died when I was fourteen and mother raised me by herself.”

“I told you this was a wild goose chase,” the other agent elbowed his partner. “Steven Baker is a demented old man who won’t accept the fact that his daughter is dead.”

“What does Steven Baker have to do with this?” Mandy narrowed her eyes as if trying to focus on the problem.

“He contacted our office last week and told our boss that you are his daughter.”

“His daughter,” Mandy exclaimed. “I am the defense attorney for a man he has accused of murdering his daughter.”

“Obviously, he is trying to derail the trial with this ridiculous tactic,” Mandy scowled.

“We are sorry we bothered you, Ms. Kincaid, Judge.” The agent almost bowed. “We will let ourselves out.”

Judith walked the agents to the door then rejoined Mandy in the kitchen. Mandy studied her mother closely. The look on her face was one Judith had never seen before.

“You are my mother,” Mandy said slowly. “I don’t care what else you are: lawyer, judge, Supreme Court
Justice, I love you, and you will always be my mother. That is all that matters to me.”

“That is the most important thing in my life,” Judith pulled her daughter into her arms and hugged her tightly.

##

Judith closed the dishwasher and turned as Mandy reentered the kitchen. She wore jeans and a dark pink pullover that went perfectly with her blonde hair.

“I have some errands to run,” Mandy kissed her mother on the cheek. “May I take you and Uncle Brett to dinner tonight?”

“That would be wonderful,” Judith smiled.

“Jason may join us,” Mandy blushed slightly. “I will ask him.”

“We would enjoy that,” Judith hugged her daughter one more time.

##

Bailey stared at the small yellow envelope peeking from under her door. She carefully opened it and read the typed note inside. She immediately called Brett Claymore.

##

Brett, Coke, and Bailey watched as the Fort Worth CSI team carried out the instructions written in the note.

As Bailey watched the team tediously sift through the pounds of sediment, she wondered who had known enough about Buddy Layne’s heinous crime to suggest the investigation should take this strange direction.

##

~ 226 ~
Mandy sat quietly as the jailer brought Rick Randolph into the visitor’s cubicle.

“One more day and I will be a free man,” he grinned at his defense attorney. “Then watch out, Mandy Kincaid, because I intend to do everything in my power to convince you to marry me.”

The stern look on Mandy’s face sobered Rick. “What is wrong?”

“I…I have some very bad news,” Mandy frowned. “What?” A cold chill ran down Rick’s spine.

“The house where Angie and Buddy Layne lived had a septic tank,” Mandy scowled. “The house has been empty for the past eleven years, and all the liquid matter has evaporated leaving only solid materials at the bottom of the tank.”

Rick glared at Mandy. His mouth gaped open.

“Fort Worth police spent all weekend sifting through that material. Do you know what they found?” Mandy asked sadly.

Rick slowly turned his head from side to side, answering, no.


Mandy covered her mouth with her hand as if to refrain from vomiting. “How could you?”

“No! No!” Rick screamed. “You know me. I am Rick Randolph. Someone is framing me.
“You can beat this. You are the best in the business, Mandy Kincaid. You can do this. You get me off!”

Mandy sat silently for a long time as Rick railed against the system, society, and anyone else who thought he was a killer.

“Are you taking yourself off my case?” Rick asked.
“No,” Mandy frowned. “That would be unethical.”
“Bailey has offered you a plea bargain. She will take the death penalty off the table and offer you a life sentence instead if you plead guilty.”
“I never meant to kill him,” Rick cried.
“You cut him up with a boning knife and stuffed him down the disposal,” Mandy fought back the bile that threatened to rise from her stomach. “You put your son down the disposal.”
“I, I was drunk. I didn’t know what I was doing. Angie, it was all her fault. She antagonized me and made me crazy!”
“Crazy, yes,” Rick’s eyes gleamed insanely. “I want to plead temporary insanity. With good behavior, I could be out in five years.”
“Are you certain that is what you want?” Mandy frowned.
“Yes! Yes, talk to Bailey. Fix this for me.”

###

“Draft it,” Bailey shrugged her shoulders. “If Rick signs it, I will sign it.”
“This will guarantee that he will be off the streets and in a cell,” Mandy smirked. “In many ways, it is worse than the death penalty.”
“Yes,” Bailey nodded. “I’d rather die than spend my life in a mental institution.”

~ 228 ~
Mandy spent a full day writing the temporary insanity plea Rick had requested. She left no stone unturned in fulfilling his request.

###

“Bailey has already signed this,” Mandy smiled as she pushed the documents across the table to Rick. “All I need is your signature then to convince the judge this is the best resolution of the case.”

Rick grinned as he pulled the documents closer to sign them. Mandy looked up at the camera that was recording the proceedings.

“I highly recommend that you thoroughly read these before you sign them,” she said stoically.

“I just want to get this over with,” Rick smirked. “Let me know as soon as Judge Carson signs off on this.”

###

Judge Carson slowly read the documents Mandy Kincaid had placed before him. He was not surprised that Rick Randolph—aka Calvin (Buddy) Layne—had entered an insanity plea. Randolph was sly like a fox. Just above his name, Carson added a handwritten paragraph to the agreement and signed the document.

###

Buddy Layne who insisted on being called Rick Randolph sat in his recliner as he watched the morning news. A pre-recorded interview with Supreme Court Justice Judith Kincaid was airing on a major cable news station. The excitement of the interviewer was obvious as the judge’s gorgeous daughter, Mandy Kincaid joined her.
“You seem to be following in your mother’s footsteps,” the show host beamed. “Congratulations on your recent election to the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals.”

“Thank you,” Mandy smiled coyly. “I know I could never fill my mother’s shoes, but she has been a wonderful teacher and role model. I hope I can be as good a mother to my daughter.”

A photo of Mandy standing beside Jason who was holding a beautiful blonde three-year-old filled the screen.

“We wish your husband and you the best of luck in everything,” the host said then he turned to Judith. “Justice Kincaid…”

Rick stopped listening. He hadn’t seen Mandy in five years. She had married Jason and Bailey had wed Coke. Coke and Bailey had a handsome son that looked like his mother. Judith had married Brett and moved to Washington where Captain Claymore now managed a team of Treasury agents.

Rick had a meeting with Mandy in a few minutes. He had exemplary behavior and was certain he would be deemed cured and ready for reintroduction into the real world. Mandy just needed to facilitate things as soon as possible.

_I should have done this right after I killed Trent_, he thought. _I would already be out and living my life by now._

“You have a visitor,” the nurse pushed open his door. Rick stood and rushed to embrace Mandy. She hugged him stiffly then took a seat across from his recliner.
“Have you put things in motion?” He hugged himself in childlike glee as he thought about getting out of the institution.

“I filed the request,” Mandy handed him a copy. Declined was stamped across the document in big red letters.

“I don’t understand,” Rick growled. “I have been a model patient. I never cause any trouble. I…”

“Apparently two of the three doctors required for your release don’t believe you are stable enough to be outside these facilities. They had labeled you a sociopath,” Mandy looked down at her hands and lightly touched the wedding band she wore.

“I saw you on TV this morning,” Rick grinned slightly. “Your daughter is beautiful. And congratulations on your judgeship.”

“Thank you,” Mandy nodded.

“I’ve been thinking,” Rick smiled. “I believe Angie murdered our son and framed me. I keep telling the people who run this place that Angie was the killer, not me.”

“Seriously?” Mandy scowled.

“She disappeared the same time I did,” he grinned. “No one knows where she is.”

“Everyone assumes you killed her and hid the body,” Mandy smirked.

“I didn’t,” Rick said softly. “But no one believes me. Everyone thinks I am insane. No one believes anything I say.”

Mandy said nothing.

“So, how soon can I file for a hearing,” Rick asked. “Hearing?” Mandy raised a questioning eyebrow. “To get out of this place,” Rick scowled.

~ 231 ~
“Have you ever read the final decree from Judge Carson?” Mandy frowned.
“I have it here somewhere,” Rick waved his hand toward his dresser. “I never bothered reading it.”
“You should,” Mandy advised. “It will govern the rest of your life.”
Mandy stood, “I must be going. I won’t see you again. I have turned your case over to Coke. He will see that you get what you deserve.”
“Wait, wait,” Rick rummaged through his dresser drawers and pulled out the decree. He flipped to the last page. Right above Judge Carson’s signature was a simple handwritten paragraph. “Calvin Layne may be considered for release when he tells authorities where he hid his wife’s body.”
Panic shot through every cell of his being. “I have no idea where she is,” he screamed. “She left me! She murdered our son then ran away.”
“Find her!” He moved toward Mandy. “You’ve got to find her. I’d rather be dead than be confined to a mental institution the rest of my life.”
“You’ve got to find her, Mandy. You are the only hope I have.” Tears ran down Rick’s face as he pleaded for her help. The same way tears had run down Angie’s face when he shook Trent to death.
“I’ve always know where Angie was,” Mandy said coldly.
Rick stared at her in disbelief. “What?”
“I have something for you, Buddy. Something for you to remember me. Hold out your hand.”
He held out his hand and gasped as he felt the cold weight of the locket in his palm. “You,” he gasped.
Death Was Too Easy

“The jury would have found me guilty and given me the death penalty. Why didn’t you just let me die?”

Mandy opened the door then turned to look at him one last time. “You murdered my son. For you, death was too easy.”

THE END