

KARA  
LENNOX



TAKEN TO  
THE EDGE

*Cherish*

Kara Lennox  
**Taken to the Edge**

«HarperCollins»

## **Lennox K.**

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Ford Hyatt thought he was done. He was all set to give up on himself and on Project Justice. Then Robyn Jaspersen walks back into his life. His former bad-girl crush looks better than ever and needs his help getting a case overturned. Robyn's got an ex-husband in jail, a murdered son and nowhere else to turn. Ford let her down before. But now he can find the truth, set matters straight and redeem himself. And time is running out. If he fails, she has everything to lose. If he wins, he has everything to gain, including Robyn's heart.

# Содержание

His touch felt way too good	5
Taken to the Edge	6
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	7
CONTENTS	8
CHAPTER ONE	9
CHAPTER TWO	16
CHAPTER THREE	25
CHAPTER FOUR	31
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	32

## His touch felt way too good

“I’m okay now.” Robyn didn’t let go of his hand. She felt Ford slide across the big bench seat toward her. He slid one arm around her shoulders, and for a moment she thought he’d take her in his arms and kiss her. She kind of hoped he would.

She wanted his kiss more than oxygen.

It should have felt awkward as hell, but instead it felt like the exact right thing to do. She’d seen those old movie clichés of fireworks and waves crashing against rocks, but this was the first time she’d understood what those analogies meant.

Oh, God, he smelled good. The smell of his skin was intoxicating.

When his mouth finally made contact with hers, it was a sweet kiss, a gentle kiss, and Robyn didn’t want it to end. She wished she could bottle the way she felt right now, all tingly and warm and strangely right with the world.

Ford slid across the seat, resuming his spot behind the wheel. “I’ve wanted to do that ever since high school.”

Dear Reader,

Many years ago, I became fascinated by a news report about the Innocence Project, an organization dedicated to exonerating wrongly convicted people through the use of DNA testing. For years I’ve been mulling over the idea of creating a series of books about a similar organization. But the foundation I envisioned would use all sorts of methods for proving innocence—including a team of crack investigators, lawyers, evidence analysts and even computer hackers.

That’s how my fictional Project Justice was born. For the record, Project Justice is inspired by, but not based on, the Innocence Project. I designed my foundation not as a factually accurate portrayal of such an organization, but to maximize dramatic possibilities, for this and future books.

Taken to the Edge involves a lying eyewitness, a sloppy police investigation and advanced scientific analysis of physical evidence—all of which have been used in real cases to overturn convictions. Of course, the most important aspects of my story are the human ones, the personalities, motivations and emotions of the people involved.

As of this writing, there are dozens of “innocence organizations” in this country and around the world, working to help those the justice system itself has wronged. I applaud their courageous efforts.

Sincerely,

Kara Lennox

**Taken to the Edge**  
**Kara Lennox**



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kara Lennox has earned her living at various times as an art director, typesetter, textbook editor and reporter. She's worked in a boutique, a health club and an ad agency. She's been an antiques dealer, an artist and even a blackjack dealer. But no work has ever made her happier than writing romance novels. She has written more than sixty books.

Kara is a recent transplant to Southern California. When not writing, she indulges in an ever-changing array of hobbies. Her latest passions are bird-watching, long-distance bicycling, vintage jewelry and, by necessity, do-it-yourself home renovation. She loves to hear from readers; you can find her at [www.karalennox.com](http://www.karalennox.com).

For my tireless editor, Johanna Raisanen, who took the time and made the effort to figure out where I belong in the large spectrum of Harlequin Publishing. Johanna, your encouragement and enthusiasm mean so much.

## CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE  
CHAPTER TWO  
CHAPTER THREE  
CHAPTER FOUR  
CHAPTER FIVE  
CHAPTER SIX  
CHAPTER SEVEN  
CHAPTER EIGHT  
CHAPTER NINE  
CHAPTER TEN  
CHAPTER ELEVEN  
CHAPTER TWELVE  
CHAPTER THIRTEEN  
CHAPTER FOURTEEN  
CHAPTER FIFTEEN  
CHAPTER SIXTEEN

## CHAPTER ONE

IF ONE WILD TURKEY ON ICE didn't make the pain go away, maybe two would. That was Ford Hyatt's thinking when he'd ordered a second drink even though he needed to drive home. But two didn't work, either, and now he'd have to sit in this damn ugly bar for at least two hours while he sobered up.

This never worked. He just wasn't a drown-your-sorrows kind of guy. He was more of a go-fix-what's-wrong kind of guy, except there was no way to fix this, no arguing with the fact that a woman was in intensive care, and it was Ford's fault.

His supposedly infallible instincts had failed him. Again.

"Another?" The bartender nodded toward Ford's empty glass.

"Sure." Hell, why not? In for a penny and all that. He could take a cab home.

He first became aware of the woman on the bar stool next to him when he smelled her perfume, a light, teasing scent. He looked over, surprised to find her there. She'd slid onto that stool as noiselessly as a cat.

"Need someone to drown your sorrows with?" she asked.

How had she known? Maybe it was just a lucky guess. Guy drinking alone in a bar must have some sorrows.

"I don't need company, thanks," he said. Or, more accurately, he doubted she would want his company inflicted on her. Under other circumstances, he might have responded to the flirtation. He gave her a second look from the corner of his eye. She was tall and long-legged, and dressed too nice for this dive. The fact she was hanging out alone at McGoo's meant he could probably have gotten her into bed without too much effort.

But the easy conquests of his youth held little appeal these days. Anyway, he was in a helluva mood. Being nice, even civil, would require too much effort.

She ordered her own drink, a diet cola, which made the bartender's grizzled eyebrows rise in surprise. Ford was amazed the bar stocked diet anything.

He gave the woman a third look—and realized he knew her. He hadn't seen her in well over a decade, and she'd changed quite a bit, filled out, darkened her hair a shade. But her eyes were the same, big and blue and innocent—deceptively so, some had said.

"Robyn?" He would probably regret starting a conversation. But he had to say something.

"I wondered if you'd recognize me. It's been a long time." No smile, but why should there be? Their history wasn't exactly warm and fuzzy.

"You obviously recognized me," he said, wondering why she would even bother acknowledging him.

"I heard you hang out here sometimes. Your number's not in the book and no one would give it to me."

"Cops seldom list their numbers." God only knew how many wackos he'd arrested who'd love to find him, get a piece of him.

"Ex-cop now, isn't it?"

He nodded. "I left the Houston P.D. a couple of years ago."

"Why'd you leave?" The question sounded impulsive. "I mean, you were good at your job."

"Says who?"

"Well...everyone."

"You've been asking?"

"It's come up in conversation." She paused to take a sip of her drink, and Ford found his gaze drawn to her lips pursing around the straw.

Idiot. Yeah, so he'd found her hot in high school. The bad girl, forbidden fruit. Always in trouble. Not someone he would have gotten involved with. But that hadn't stopped him from getting a hard-on every time he saw her. Stupid how powerful adolescent memories were. He could suddenly remember every nuance of what it had been like for him back then, wanting something he knew would be bad for him, something that didn't fit in with his ironclad plans for the future. Doing the right thing, but wishing he didn't have to.

He took a gulp of his drink. "Any particular reason people have been talking about me?" he asked.

"Yes."

The single word hung in the air, and he knew for sure that this was no chance encounter, not just curiosity on her part. She'd come here looking for him, and she had an agenda.

"I assume you know about me, right?" she asked, her gaze not meeting his. "You heard what happened?"

Had anyone in Harris County missed hearing about the tragedy that had struck Robyn Jasperson's life? If they had, they'd been living under a rock. "Yes. I'm sorry." He didn't know what else to say. Stupid sentiment. Meaningless. But what could you say to a woman whose child had disappeared and was presumed dead? Nothing anyone said could make it better.

"Thank you." The rejoinder was automatic, probably uttered thousands of times since the tragedy—what, seven or eight years ago? At least they'd caught the bastard who did it...

That was when a disturbing possibility occurred to him. Oh, surely not. But the silence between them stretched uncomfortably.

He looked at her, and she met his probing gaze unflinchingly.

"Do you know why I wanted to speak to you?"

"I'm slow, but I'm starting to get an idea."

"You're not slow. In fact, most people agree that you are extraordinarily intelligent."

"You don't think Eldon did it?" he asked, incredulous. The D.A.'s case against Eldon Jasperson had been circumstantial, but it had been convincing—convincing enough for twelve jurors.

"No," Robyn said succinctly. "I do not believe my ex-husband murdered my son."

Without comment, Ford settled his bill and paid for Robyn's soft drink, too. "Let's walk outside." The stale-beer smell inside McGoo's suddenly turned his stomach. Maybe it was just that he didn't think some one as pretty and delicate looking as Robyn belonged in a place like this. McGoo's was close enough to the Houston shipping lanes that it attracted a rough clientele.

Outside, the air could hardly be called fresh. Summer in South Texas was never fresh, but the ninety-degree heat from earlier that afternoon had abated to a tolerable eighty or so, muggy as hell but not so bad that your clothes became drenched the moment you stepped outside.

A worn footpath ran alongside the twisty road where the bar was located. Without asking her permission, he led Robyn there. They could talk with out being overheard. He realized too late she wasn't wearing good walking shoes, just some teeny blue sandals with her jeans and silk T-shirt, but she didn't complain.

"Why do you think that Eldon is innocent?" he asked point-blank. Project Justice, the charitable foundation he had worked for—until this afternoon—took on only cases with significant evidence to work with. The mere belief that someone was innocent, no matter how passionate, was not enough to get Project Justice to take on a case. There had to be new evidence, or perhaps a new way of scientifically testing old evidence, to meet the foundation's criteria.

"I have three things," Robyn said. Clearly she had prepared for this meeting. "First, a witness saw Eldon with Justin at the pizza parlor where he said Justin was taken from. Because the witness had drunk a beer—one beer—and hadn't gotten every detail exactly right, the police dismissed him as a crank and never even provided his name to the defense. But you, as a former cop, know that memory is imperfect at best."

“That’s a good point,” he said. “Any reason this witness wasn’t mentioned during Eldon’s appeals?”

“We’ve only just found him,” Robyn said.

“We?” Ford’s ears perked up. He wondered whom she was working with. “Are you teamed up with Eldon’s lawyer?”

“Frankly, I have no money to pay a lawyer. ‘We’ is myself and Trina Jasperson.”

“Trina—” It took a few moments for Ford to get it. “Eldon’s current wife?”

“The one who broke up my marriage, yes.” Robyn misstepped, and Ford grabbed her arm to keep her from falling.

“Maybe we should turn back,” he said. “I didn’t realize the footing was so bad on this path.” The mosquitoes were out, too. He waved away a couple that buzzed around his face.

“It’s okay. Let’s keep going.”

She probably wanted to prolong their meeting as long as possible to prevent him from walking away.

He took her arm again and firmly turned her around. “I won’t be responsible for you breaking your ankle. Don’t worry, I intend to hear you out. You’ve piqued my curiosity.” Robyn and Trina, allies? Ford knew Trina Jasperson only by reputation, but that wasn’t good. She’d been a party girl—possibly a call girl—before Eldon married her. “Frankly, I’m surprised Trina has stuck by him. She could have divorced him, gotten a huge settlement and moved on.”

“Not all women who marry rich men do so for the money,” Robyn said indignantly. “I didn’t.”

“Why did you marry Eldon?” Ford asked, then wished he hadn’t. That hardly had any bearing on the case, and it was none of his business. But a detective never loses his strong sense of curiosity. Had she sought respectability? A stable environment to raise children? Was it just the money?

“Hard as it is to believe, I loved him. He saw things about me that others missed, saw good qualities in me that I didn’t even know were there. He was good to me—well, to a point.”

She sounded comfortable with that answer—as if she’d defended her position many times. “Sorry. That was a rude question for me to ask.”

“I’ll answer any question you ask—anything—if it’ll help you free Eldon. He was hideously unfaithful, a serial cheater—that’s one of the things the prosecution used to tear down his character. But he was a terrific father, utterly devoted to Justin, and I love him for that. He grieved for his son, all the while having to go through that investigation, incarceration, the trial. To the public he looked stoic, perhaps even cold, but I knew him in a way most didn’t, and he was devastated by the loss of his son.”

Ford knew that even murderers sometimes grieved for their victims. “Is that point number two?”

“I’m sorry?”

“You said you had three reasons you believed Eldon is innocent. The first was the witness at the pizza parlor. Is the second the fact that Eldon grieved for Justin?”

“Oh. No, I understood Project Justice wanted facts, evidence, not feelings. I was just answering your question.”

“What are the other two points?”

Her heel caught on a rock and she stumbled again. This time she was the one who reached out for his arm to keep from falling. When she’d righted herself, she started to release him, but he grasped her hand and wrapped it around his bare forearm. “Maybe you better hold on till we get back to the parking lot.”

She didn’t argue, and for the next couple of minutes, Ford found himself annoyed that he could not stop focusing on the feel of her warm, soft hand against his arm. How many times in high school had he vividly imagined sex with her? Yet he’d never thought about the experience of holding her hand, or listening to her talk, or the faint scent of that light, teasing perfume.

“The second point I would like to bring up is the wig fiber,” she said, sounding more like an attorney than a...he didn’t know what she was now, other than I rich man’s ex-wife. “The cops

combed Eldon's car bit by bit, and they found one lone fiber that didn't belong—a blond, synthetic wig fiber. They claimed it was insignificant, but I can't think of a single person Eldon or Justin came in contact with who wore a blond wig."

Ford loved fiber evidence. In years past, forensic scientists could declare one synthetic fiber "consistent with" another. But as testing became more sophisticated, precise matches were more commonplace, particularly with something like a wig fiber. That was something he could sink his teeth into. "I like it," he said. "But as I recall, the cops found blood evidence in Eldon's car, too."

"A few tiny drops. Justin frequently had nose-bleeds."

"Okay. What's your third point?"

Robyn took a deep breath. "I believe Eldon was with someone that night, someone who could clear him. I know there's something he's holding back. There's a certain look he gets in his eyes when he's lying...about a woman."

Ford couldn't think what to reply to that. He had a healthy respect for a woman's instincts, but this was hardly hard evidence.

"I know what you're thinking," she rushed on to say. "But if I could just talk to him, I could convince him to come clean."

"You haven't talked to him?"

"They won't let me. And Trina—she knows nothing about the woman and I've hesitated to say anything to her. I don't want to be the one to tell her Eldon was cheating."

"I could probably get you an interview with Eldon," Ford found himself saying. The Project Justice lawyers were experts at negotiating prison regulations. "But why in hell didn't he speak up about this woman, if she exists?"

"He must have a reason. But I'm positive she exists." Robyn sounded like she was trying to keep the edge of desperation out of her voice.

"Maybe she's the one with the wig," Ford said.

"Exactly!" Right about then, Robyn realized she was still holding on to Ford's arm, and she pulled her hand back self-consciously. She wiped her damp palm on the leg of her jeans. "I'm sorry. I forgot I was holding on to you like that."

He hadn't forgotten. He still felt the ghost of her touch, like a brand on his forearm. "It's okay." He opened his mouth to tell her she could touch him any old time, then thought better of it. She'd come to him in a desperate frame of mind, and he would be lower than slime to take advantage of that.

"Robyn, it sounds like you've got some sound reasons for reopening the case. Have you talked to the original investigators? The District Attorney who tried the case?"

"Yes on both counts. They're like brick walls. Maybe you've never noticed this, but cops and D.A.'s don't like to admit they made a mistake. They particularly don't like to admit they sent an innocent man to death row. No matter what I hit them with, I get the same company line."

"We're positive the right man is behind bars?" He'd uttered that one once or twice himself when he was on the other side of the fence, and at the time he'd meant it.

"That's the one."

He'd once been that arrogant, believed himself infallible. He was a smart cop, everyone said so. Careful, conscientious. And still, he'd helped send an innocent man to prison—then, two years later, freed a guilty one.

He refused to make any more mistakes.

"I suggest you submit Eldon's case through the normal channels at Project Justice," Ford said. "I'll put in a good word for it."

"I've already done that."

Then why was she talking to him? Before he could voice the question, she answered it.

"The application process can take months. Do you know the date of Eldon's execution?"

It wasn't something Ford kept up with. "I'm afraid I don't."

“July 18. Exactly two weeks and one day from today. He’s running out of time, and you’re his only hope.”

“Ah, hell.” If Ford hadn’t been sober before leaving the bar, he was now. He walked back toward his big Crown Victoria—the same type of car he’d driven as a cop, purchased at a police auction. Old habits die hard. “You’re not making this easy, you know.”

“I didn’t intend to make it easy. An innocent man’s life is at stake.”

“Robyn, I no longer work for Project Justice.”

Her eyes widened in shock. “What? Since when?”

“Since this afternoon. I quit. But I could try to get Eldon’s case at the top of the pile—”

She shook her head. “I want you to handle it.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not? I don’t understand.”

He wasn’t going to explain it, either. But when he’d seen Katherine Hannigan lying in that hospital bed, literally black-and-blue, nearly murdered by a man Ford had helped to free, something had clicked inside his brain. He wasn’t going to take people’s lives into his hands anymore.

“I’ll plead your case tomorrow morning, first thing,” he said. “Give me your number. Someone will contact you within forty-eight hours.”

“I want you to handle it.”

In her chin-forward, clench-fisted stance, he caught a glimpse of that belligerent girl he’d known in school, the one who had so steadfastly maintained her innocence when she’d been accused of a theft.

The one he’d wanted to believe.

“Why me?” he wanted to know. “I thought you hated me.”

She flashed him the ghost of a smile, then sobered. My personal feelings for you are irrelevant. I know you’re determined. I know when you get a case in your teeth, you don’t let it go. And after years of being lied to by lawyers and scammed by private investigators, after having cops and D.A.s cover their butts rather than get at the truth, I want someone on my team who will work hard, stay the course. You’re the ideal candidate.”

Ford could hardly believe his ears. Why would Robyn Jasperson put so much faith in him? “How do you know that about me?”

“I pay attention.”

They stared at each other, sizing up each other’s resolve in the dimly lit parking lot as rowdy music from the bar’s jukebox drifted out each time the front door opened.

“I’ve changed,” he said softly, looking away.

“People don’t change that much. Can you really walk away from a man who’s going to die by lethal injection in little more than two weeks? If there’s even a chance he’s innocent?”

Damn it. He couldn’t. He wasn’t sure how she knew that about him, but she did.

“I’ll think about it.” He wouldn’t make a promise he couldn’t keep.

FORD DIDN’T TRUST MANY people, but Daniel Logan was someone he did.

Daniel had no training as either a lawyer or a cop. But six years in federal prison maneuvering through the ins and outs of his various appeals had provided him quite an education.

With the help of his billionaire father, Daniel eventually had found a way to prove he was innocent of his business partner’s grisly murder.

Given his freedom and a full pardon, Daniel had wanted nothing more than to help others who didn’t belong in jail. Thus Project Justice was born. His father had financed the foundation and Daniel ran it, though the employees rarely saw him.

“I never liked the looks of that Jasperson case,” Daniel said after Ford had spent all day reading the trial transcript, then presenting his evidence to Daniel. They were in Daniel’s study at his River

Oaks mansion, which looked like NASA's ground control, given all the computers and research paraphernalia.

Daniel, tall and lean with a world-weary look that made him seem older than his thirty-six years, sat behind one of those computers rapidly tapping at the keys as he spoke. "The death of a child brings out the best and the worst in people. In this case, the people wanted blood. The cops and the D.A. gave it to them."

"The case was badly mishandled from the beginning." Ford sat in a leather wingback chair, Daniel's one concession to comfort in his high-tech lair. "A guy like Jasperson could have afforded the best lawyer in the country, and he chose some school buddy who couldn't tell his ear from a leaf of cabbage."

"Jasperson was an arrogant idiot. He wasn't worried enough to hire the best. He was so sure he would beat the charge—maybe because he was innocent. Maybe because he thought he was clever."

"I can't help thinking that if he were clever, he'd have done a better job staging a crime." Once Ford had started checking things out, he felt his blood thrumming. He loved the challenge of a complex case, ferreting out the tiny points of illogic, the inconsistencies everyone else overlooked.

"You know as well as I that intelligent people do stupid, stupid things, especially in the heat of the moment."

"So what's the bottom line?" Ford asked, intensely aware that the evening was slipping away. He wanted to have an answer for Robynas soon as possible.

Daniel tapped a finger to his chin. "I think there's enough to warrant an investigation."

Yes! "I'd like Raleigh to take the case. She has experience with—"

"Raleigh just took on the Simonetti case, the guy who supposedly shot his girlfriend."

"Well, Joe Kinkaid, then. He's been asking for—"

"I gave him the Blanchard case this morning."

Damn. Who did that leave? Project Justice wasn't a large foundation. They received far more requests each month than they could take on, and regrettably had to turn down cases even when the evidence seemed strong.

"Who, then?"

"With your resignation—which I have not accepted, by the way—we're running at full capacity and then some. While I feel strongly that the Jasperson case should get some attention, I don't have anyone free. And I won't have any of my people neglect a case they've already committed to. Nothing gets done half-assed around Project Justice."

Ford knew that. No one got a job with the foundation unless they were willing to work nights and weekends when called for. Daniel was passionate about his vocation, and he demanded that same dedication from his people.

"The fact of the matter is," Daniel said, looking up from the screen, "if you don't work this case, no one will." He sighed. "I simply don't have the manpower."

If it had been anyone else, Ford would have felt manipulated. However, Daniel Logan didn't play games, not with Ford anyway. If he said the personnel were stretched to the limit, then they were.

"Would you even want me to take this on?" Ford asked. "After the Copelson case..." He let that hang in the air.

"The Copelson case was a mistake," Daniel said.

"It was worse than a mistake. Using my skills to get that animal out of jail was a crime. They should have put me behind bars."

"Don't be melodramatic, Hyatt. The cops manufactured evidence on that case, and you proved it. He was unfairly convicted."

"Unfairly convicted, and guilty as hell," Ford muttered. He should have seen the guy's rotten soul oozing out his pores.

"Better to let a hundred guilty men go free than one innocent man—"

“I know the saying,” Ford said impatiently. It was emblazoned on the gold seal in the front foyer of the Project Justice offices. He wished he could be as calm and businesslike as Daniel, to simply admit a mistake, learn from it and move on. But Daniel hadn’t seen Katherine Hannigan in the hospital, the savageries done to her body. “So if I don’t take the Jasperson case, no one will?”

“That’s the truth, I’m afraid.”

Damn it. “Fine,” he gritted out. “I’ll take it.” But at what cost to his soul, he didn’t know.

## CHAPTER TWO

“MS. JASPERSON!” CAME the panicked summons. “My pot keeps collapsing.”

Suppressing a smile, Robyn hurried to the aid of one of her summer school ceramics students who was using a pottery wheel for the first time. Yesterday, his “pot” would have meant something else entirely. Today Arnie was lost in the throes of creativity, the feel of the wet clay, the joy of creating something out of nothing.

Sure enough, the tall, thin vessel he’d been painstakingly working on had fallen in on itself and was now a formless lump of clay.

“That’s the fun thing about pottery,” she said. “If you ruin something, you can just add some more water and start over. No need to throw it out. I think for this first pot you might try making something a little shorter and the walls a little thicker.”

“But I was gonna make a vase,” he objected. “For my mama.”

“Vases come in all shapes and sizes.” She loved it when the tough-talking kids expressed their love for their mamas. Arnie was still just a baby. He’d been arrested twice for defacing public property, but it wasn’t too late for him to realize that creating something beautiful was a whole lot more fun than destroying something. She’d started this summer pro-gram after only a year of teaching. At first, she had donated her time. Now she received funding from a grant, enough to buy materials and pay herself a small stipend.

She showed Arnie an example of the kind of vase he might attempt. It was squat with thick walls, but it had a dramatic red glaze with blue streaks. “Can I make mine red like that?”

“Sure.”

“All right, then.” Satisfied, he followed Robyn’s instructions for getting the new vase started, then she left him to his own devices and went to check her cell phone again. It was almost two o’clock, and she hadn’t yet heard from Ford. His forty-eight hours would be up soon.

She didn’t know what had disillusioned Ford. He’d been a serious student and athlete in school, a hard worker. But he’d also had an infectious smile—especially around people who needed cheering up.

He’d had no smile for her last night.

She knew she was right about him. He might have been wrong about her back in high school when he’d laid out her punishment for supposedly stealing those art supplies. But she’d recognized even then that he operated under a moral guidance system that saw no room for compromise. He’d seen things in black and white, right and wrong, just and unjust. And that was exactly the sort of person she needed to free Eldon.

“Okay, kids.” She pulled herself back to the moment. “It’s time to put away our supplies and clean up.”

“What about my pot?” Arnie never took his eyes off the vessel he formed with clumsy hands.

Pleased that he hadn’t given up at the first suggestion that freedom was imminent, she said, “You can finish up. I’ll help you put things away.”

A few minutes later, beaming over his crooked vase, Arnie flashed Robyn a grin. “Thanks, Mrs. J,” he said as he washed his hands, speaking quietly so his friends wouldn’t hear him being polite to a teacher. Then he grabbed his backpack and ran to catch up with the others.

Robyn’s smile faded. Why didn’t Ford call and tell her something?

A soft tap sounded on the door, and Robyn’s throat constricted with apprehension. Could it be Ford? Had he come in person to deliver bad news? But Ford wouldn’t be so tentative, she reasoned, and then she saw who it was.

She wasn’t particularly anxious to see the woman who had replaced her in her ex-husband’s eyes. Trina was everything Robyn was not—petite, curvaceous, exotic. She could also be a royal pain

in the rear. But it was her husband in prison, Robyn reminded herself. It had been Trina's idea to contact Project Justice, and then to approach Ford personally, since he'd grown up in their town.

Robyn opened the door. "Hello, Trina."

Trina's eyes were shiny with imminent tears. "I couldn't wait to hear from you. I was going crazy just sitting at home and doing nothing."

Trina hovered at the doorway, peeking past Robyn into the classroom. She wore a short sundress that showed off her spectacular legs and matching sandals, her dark hair stylishly mussed, every eyelash in place. No matter what was going on in her life, she always managed to present a polished facade in public.

Robyn felt like a bum in comparison wearing her clay-stained jeans, her shoulder-length hair pulled back into a bandanna.

"Come on in. The kids are gone and I was just straightening up. I haven't heard anything yet."

Trina fairly vibrated with nervous energy as she click-clacked in on her heels.

"Why is it taking so long?" Trina said on a moan. She looked around, maybe for a place to sit, but in the end she just stood there. "Maybe we shouldn't have trusted Ford. Maybe he forgot about us and went golfing or something."

"He didn't forget." Of that Robyn was sure, though he probably wished he could. He sure hadn't looked happy two nights ago.

"Are you done for the day?" Trina fanned herself. The studio was always hot in the summer, both from the kilns and a lack of insulation against the blazing Texas sun. "I'll buy you a beer."

Robyn didn't really feel like having a beer at two in the afternoon. But Trina obviously needed companionship. "Where do you want to go?"

"Somewhere cheap," Trina said. "I have to watch my spending. The lawyers put a pretty good dent in our bank account, and obviously with Eldon in prison I have very little coming in."

Robyn tried to hide her surprise. Eldon had been worth millions. All of those appeals must have been costly, but could he and Trina have gone through that much money? Enough that Trina had to watch her pennies?

People had said Trina, a hairstylist, had married Eldon for his money. Eldon's high-society friends had never embraced her, and his parents had liked her even less than they'd liked Robyn. But Trina certainly hadn't balked at spending whatever was necessary to free her husband.

Since Robyn had been similarly judged, she tended to believe Trina really loved Eldon. The two women never would have been friends under normal circumstances, but they'd come to know each other during Eldon's ordeal, and Trina had been kind to Robyn when she'd grieved over the loss of her child.

Robyn never had been one to turn up her nose at friendship. Friends were in short supply right now. Many had deserted her after the divorce. Others had drifted away after the kidnapping, feeling uncomfortable around Robyn and her grief. The few close friends who remained thought she was insane for trying to free the man who killed her son.

Public sentiment against Eldon had been incredibly strong and still was.

As they reached Trina's white Cadillac, Robyn's cell phone rang. The ring-tone was an earthy hip-hop song one of her students had downloaded for her when she'd left her phone unguarded. Trina froze as Robyn fumbled for the phone.

"Yes?"

"It's Ford Hyatt. Can I meet with you and Trina?"

"Now?"

"As soon as possible. I'm at a bar and grill called Pacifica. Do you know where it is?"

"Yes. We can be there in half an hour."

"I'll be watching for you." He disconnected. A man of few words.

"Was it him?" Trina asked eagerly. "Is Project Justice taking on the case?"

“He wants to meet with us.”

Trina clamped her eyes shut. “That sounds like bad news. He would just tell you over the phone if it was good news, right?”

“Let’s not assume the worst,” Robyn said, though she suspected Trina was right. Ford had sounded solemn. He might want to deliver bad news in person, to soften the blow. But then, Ford had turned into a solemn man. Again, she wondered what circumstances had caused that bleak look in his eye, and why she’d had to track him down at a bar where he was drinking—alone.

PACIFICA WASN’T THE SORT of place where Ford hung out. It was an upscale suburban bar, with a posh, funky decor that appealed to Houston’s young professionals and where the martinis cost ten dollars and came in pretty colors.

Raleigh had chosen it. Raleigh Shinn was the senior attorney at Project Justice. She would consult on the Jasperson case, file the necessary papers and make court appearances. Ford liked working with Raleigh because she was thorough, knowledgeable and a hard worker. On the other hand, she was utterly humorless. He’d never seen her wear anything but a severe suit, her reddish hair slicked back into a tight bun. She had a pretty face and a stunning figure, but she downplayed her looks to a ridiculous degree.

As they sat at a corner table waiting for Robyn and Trina, Raleigh nursed a club soda.

“They’re late,” Raleigh said.

“Probably stuck in traffic.”

“I’ve been digging around in the backgrounds of these two ladies. The first Mrs. Jasperson has a juvenile record, sealed. The second is no angel, either. She’s been charged with everything from public intoxication to disturbing the peace to solicitation.”

“Solicitation? I thought those were just rumors.” What was it with rich men and their prostitutes?

“The charge didn’t stick. I think she was more of a party girl—sleeping with rich men in return for nice dinners out, clothes, jewelry. Eldon apparently had an appetite for bad girls.”

“But by the time Robyn married him, she’d turned her life around.” He’d done some digging around of his own. Robyn had gone to college and was now a teacher. Who would have guessed?

“Robyn, is it? First names?”

“She’s an old friend. Well, acquaintance, anyway. I can tell you what’s in her juvey record. Shoplifting, underage drinking, misdemeanor possession. But she went through one of those ‘Scared Straight’ programs and turned herself around.”

Raleigh raised one skeptical eyebrow at Ford. “How do you know so much?”

“I went to high school with her,” he admitted. “Green Prairie High was a good school, not too many troublemakers. Robyn was the exception.” She had alternately fascinated him and horrified him. That a pretty, intelligent girl like Robyn would have such disregard for her future, that she would choose to hang around slackers, losers and dopers, confused the hell out of him.

He’d tried reaching out to her. He’d caught her alone for once, sitting in the cafeteria with a crummy school-lunch taco in one hand, the Cliff’s Notes for Hamlet in the other. It was shortly after she’d returned from a stint in juvey.

He’d set his tray down across from her, then wished he’d rehearsed what he would say beforehand. Normally he wasn’t tongue-tied around girls. But Robyn, who seemed more adult and worldly to him than the other girls, had him flummoxed.

“You need any help with the Bard?” he’d asked.

She’d looked up at him, puzzled and not very friendly. “The what?”

“Shakespeare. The Bard.”

“Oh. No, thanks, got it covered.”

“I did Hamlet last year.” Ford had taken all advanced placement classes, so he was ahead of Robyn, even though they were both seniors. “I’d be happy to help you study for the test.”

She'd set her book down and stared at him. "Are you coming on to me?"

"I'm offering to help you study." And, yes, maybe secretly he'd been hoping something would happen. But he hadn't admitted that at the time, not even to himself.

She shook her head. "You have got to be kidding." She picked up her books and strolled away without a backward glance, leaving her half-finished taco behind.

Ford had mentally kicked himself for even trying with a girl like Robyn.

It wasn't long after that she'd been accused of stealing those art supplies and had come before the student government tribunal. She probably thought he'd voted her guilty to get back at her for rebuffing him. That hadn't been the case; he'd honestly thought her guilty and still did. But he'd taken some small gram of satisfaction from seeing her punished. In fact, he'd been the one to devise her penalty.

"Is that them?" Raleigh asked, nodding toward the door.

Ford waved to get their attention. "Yeah, that's them."

Curvaceous Trina Jasperson looked slick in a lime-green sundress, the neckline plunging to reveal impressive cleavage. Her hair moved just so as she walked her bouncy walk, and she wore enough makeup to lend truth to her questionable past.

Beside her, tall, long-legged Robyn wore a gauzy, paisley shirt and faded jeans with a big smudge on the thigh. Her hair was pulled back in a careless ponytail. No kitten heels tonight. She wore flat, leather sandals. And still, she made his mouth grow dry. There was something about her... she reminded him of a mustang filly, alert and high-spirited, loath to trust anyone.

He bet she'd hated coming to him for help. But she'd done it, to save the life of a man who'd cheated on her and betrayed her. That took guts, and he admired her for that.

The two women joined Ford and Raleigh at the table. By the time introductions were made, the waitress came by. "Can I get you ladies something to drink?"

"Bud Light," Trina said without hesitation.

"Iced tea, please." Robyn's polite smile faded the moment the waitress disappeared. She looked straight at Ford as if no one else were at the table. "Please don't leave us in suspense. Are you taking the case?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. I guess I should have told you that over the phone."

"Like, yeah," Trina said, grinning suddenly. "I was so nervous on the way over here I chewed the polish off my nails."

Rather than berate him, Robyn just looked relieved. "Tell us what our next step is."

Raleigh was prepared for that question. She pulled her briefcase onto the table and extracted a thick sheaf of papers Robyn and Trina would have to sign, basically naming Raleigh as the attorney of record for Eldon and holding Project Justice and its agents harmless, whatever the outcome of their effort to free Eldon Jasperson.

Trina peered suspiciously at her stack of papers. "This isn't gonna cost me anything, is it? I mean, like, y'all do this for free, don't you? Like a public service?"

Robyn visibly tensed while Raleigh, used to such questions, quietly explained to Trina the foundation would handle all reasonable expenses.

She worried at her lower lip. "My lawyer has told me not to sign anything without his okay."

"Jeez Louise, Trina, just sign the damn things," Robyn said. "We don't have time for more lawyers."

Trina looked chagrined. "You're right, of course. Do you have a pen?"

Ford fought the urge to reach over and touch Robyn's arm, to soothe her jangled nerves. They were all going to be pulling their hair out by the end of this thing. No use going into it frazzled. But he didn't dare touch her, not when he was so blatantly aware of her sexuality. He recalled her cold rebuff from high school and decided she might not welcome any friendly overtures from him,

no matter how well-meant. She'd hired him to perform a service, nothing more, and he would do well to remember that.

With the legalities out of the way, Raleigh took off. She had a court appearance the following day, and her role on this case was strictly advisory. He would bother her only when he had legal questions or requirements—or enough evidence to move forward.

“She scares me.” Trina took a long draw from her beer, which the waitress had just delivered. “I’m glad she’s on our side. She should do something with her hair.”

Robyn again tensed, her hands gripping her glass until her knuckles turned white.

“Raleigh is what I call coldly efficient,” Ford said, attempting to ease the tension. “We’re lucky she agreed to squeeze us into her schedule today. Are you ladies hungry? I can order up some food.”

“I don’t eat fish,” Trina said. “They got something else here? Hamburger steak, maybe?”

“They have all kinds of things. I’ll get you a menu. Robyn?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“We’ll be working a lot of long, stressful hours,” Ford said. “I want you both to eat well and stay hydrated.”

“You make it sound like we’re running a marathon,” Robyn said.

“We are, in a way. Given the deadline.”

At this grim reminder, Robyn sobered and Trina’s eyes filled with tears. “Try not to remind me, okay? I just get so upset every time I think about it.” The waitress brought menus, but Trina waved hers away. “I can’t eat, either.”

With a sigh, Ford ordered himself an overpriced, rare tuna steak and a side of pasta. He tended to eat a lot when he was in the thick of a case.

Once the waitress left, Ford cleared his throat. “All right then, let’s start at the beginning.”

“What do you mean?” Trina asked.

“We can start with the weekend of the murder.”

“Kidnapping,” Robyn said in a firm voice. “Although realistically I know my son must be... gone, we shouldn’t assume anything. All we know for sure is that he disappeared.”

“Point taken. Eldon had visitation with your son that weekend?” Ford asked. He knew the answers to most of the questions he would ask, but he wanted to hear them from the source.

“Yes. He kept Justin every other weekend, and sometimes during the week, too. He seemed to enjoy the time he spent with Justin, never complained or tried to weasel out of it.”

“He really did,” Trina agreed. “That kid was everything to him.”

“And was there anything unusual about this weekend? Any confusion or resentment, any arguments?”

“If you’ve read the trial transcript, you know that Eldon and I had an argument. But it wasn’t a big deal like the prosecutors made it. His mother was trying to tell me how to raise my child, and Eldon thought his mother could do no wrong.”

“You can say that again,” Trina put in. “She’s a control freak.”

“It was just the usual stuff all divorced couples argue about. Not a big deal.”

“So Eldon picked up Justin after work, took him to his house, and... where were you, Trina?”

“At a professional development conference. I was working to get my massage therapy license at the time.”

“And this conference was... where?”

“Corpus Christi, at the Sheraton Hotel. I tried not to hang around too much when Eldon had Justin, so they could do their father-son thing without the evil stepmother getting in the way.”

“The police verified your alibi?”

Trina nodded. “Oh, yes. A bunch of us from the salon where I used to work went to the conference together.”

“Okay. So Eldon maintains that he was home, alone, with Justin on that Friday night. But for some reason he went out for pizza at midnight.” Ford consulted his notes. “A large half pepperoni, half black olive pizza.”

“Black olive?” Trina snorted. “Who told you that? Eldon hates black olives. I’m the one who likes olives.”

“I got it straight from the police report,” Ford said. That was when he realized Robyn was giving him urgent, covert hand signals to shut up—and he recalled that Trina knew nothing of the mystery woman Eldon had supposedly entertained that night.

Well, here was the evidence, pretty obvious even to someone who didn’t know Eldon hated black olives. Most people don’t order a half-and-half pizza for one person.

“That just goes to show you how incompetent the Green Prairie Police are,” Trina said, all but spitting. “I mean, if they can’t get a little thing like that right—” She stopped, thinking it through. Her eyes widened, and she set her beer bottle down with a clunk.

Ford looked at Robyn, not quite sure what she wanted him to say. Personally, he thought they should put all their cards on the table and work as a team. But he didn’t want to be the one to spill it to Trina that her husband had cheated on her.

“He...might not have been alone,” Robyn said gently.

“That’s ridiculous!” Trina had turned pale under her tan. She scraped her chair back and stood abruptly, bumping the table and nearly upsetting their drinks. Several other patrons looked over to see what the commotion was about. “Eldon was not unfaithful! My husband loves me. He’s always loved me. How could you say things like that about him when he’s not here to defend himself? Hasn’t he been bad-mouthed enough?”

“Trina...” Robyn tried, but Trina had turned and was already marching out the door, head held high, heels clacking noisily on the wood floor.

“Well, that went smoothly,” Ford said, letting out a gusty breath.

“I told you Trina didn’t know about the mystery woman,” Robyn said.

“She would have found out sooner or later,” Ford said.

“I didn’t want to tell her unless we actually found the woman. Trina’s been through so much—I didn’t want her to suffer more.”

“You’ve been through worse.”

Robyn looked down, her lashes casting long shadows on her cheeks. “I won’t argue that. But I’ve dealt with my grief. Trina’s husband is on death row, and I can’t imagine what horrible images haunt her at night when she’s trying to sleep. I know she’s kind of melodramatic, but she must be pretty torn up.”

“Tell me more about her. Did she bear any animosity toward Justin?”

“Trina? No, I don’t think so. I didn’t have a lot of contact with her until Eldon was arrested, but Eldon never mentioned any problem.”

“Her alibi was solid? Corpus Christi isn’t that far away.”

“She had witnesses who say she was drinking in the bar until late, then she and her roommate went up to bed. She didn’t leave the room until morning.”

“That sounds pretty solid,” Ford concluded. “What about your alibi?” He tossed the question out casually. He knew from reading the reports—and from chatting up Bryan Pizak, a Green Prairie cop he’d grown up with—that Robin had been considered a suspect.

Robyn shrugged. “I don’t have one. I was at home, alone, sleeping like a baby while some animal preyed upon my child.” She swallowed, and her eyes glinted cold and hard.

Ford steeled himself not to react to her emotionally. If there was one thing he’d learned in law enforcement, it was that emotions played no part. Emotions led you to form opinions, and opinions led to bias and tunnel vision. His goal was always to remain open-minded, unbiased, uninvolved. If that made him come off as cold and unfeeling, too bad.

She took a gulp of her tea. “The cops questioned me at length, of course.”

“When something happens to a child, the parents are always the first suspects.”

“Yes, they explained that. I guess I must have convinced them I had nothing to do with it, because after a few days they stopped badgering me.”

“You think they focused in on Eldon pretty quickly?”

“Yes. Too quickly. They just didn’t like his story, didn’t like the way he was acting.”

Ford couldn’t help it. He flashed back to another time, early in his career, when he’d been called out to his first gang-related homicide. He’d been so eager to perform well, and he’d gone the extra mile, searching behind garages and around back porches in that seedy neighborhood, and he’d found a kid cowering in the bushes. Seventeen, wearing his colors, terrified.

Ford had made up his mind right there. He’d found the murderer. It was amazingly easy to do.

“People act all different ways when they become victims of crime,” Ford said. “Some fall apart, some seem perfectly composed but they don’t make sense, and some detach themselves from the crime completely and they come off as cold and uncaring.”

“That was Eldon. He was not one to show his messy emotions in public. They said he was cold.”

“It’s enough to bias the investigating cops against him.” Ford made a note to find those first cops on the scene and give them a good grilling. “Now then, what about this witness you mentioned?”

“He was an employee at the pizza place. Recently I talked with Mindy Hodges, who was night manager at the time. I’ve been tracking down witnesses one by one and speaking personally to them. She went over everything she could remember, and she mentioned an employee I never heard of—Roy. She doesn’t remember his last name. She says he was there. He spoke to the cops, yet I never heard his name before now.”

Ford made a note. Finding that witness would be first on his priority list.

They talked a long time. Hours. Ford persuaded Robyn to share his dinner, since there was plenty. By the time they were done, Ford had extracted every small memory Robyn had of the crime and the aftermath. He’d spent more time, focused exclusively on her, than he would have on a date. She’d been cautious at first, wary of saying something wrong. But gradually, as the hours passed, he wore down her caution and resistance until she quit censoring herself.

The challenging edge in her blue eyes softened.

Something else happened, though it was hardly unexpected. Ford found himself wanting her with the same intensity he’d felt in high school.

“Do you still smoke?” he asked abruptly, half hoping she would say yes. Nothing turned him off more than the smell of cigarettes on a woman.

“What?” She laughed. “Where did that come from?”

“I don’t know. I just remembered that you smoked in high school. Down by the Art Building.”

“How would you know what went on at the Art Building? You and your jock friends probably never set foot in there. Too afraid someone would think you were gay.”

True enough. He wouldn’t have been caught dead taking an art class. He’d taken music appreciation to satisfy his arts credits, and that was bad enough.

Ford shrugged. “I spied on you.”

“You mean, you were like a student narc?” she said, her distaste evident.

He shook his head. “No, that wasn’t it at all. I just liked to watch you.” He couldn’t believe he was telling her this. But the woman had just told him about her and Eldon’s sexual habits, and he’d shared nothing with her. Not that working this case had anything to do with mutual sharing. But he appreciated her frankness, and wanted to keep the honest line of communication open. A little confession on his part was good for his soul.

“You were a Peeping Tom.”

“I didn’t say I spied on you in the girls’ locker room.” So much for confession. Maybe it was better if he abandoned this line of conversation. He could interrogate the hardest of criminals, but

when it came to sharing his own feelings, he was a washout. Kathy, his ex-wife, had pointed that out to him with annoying frequency. When she wasn't badgering him to seek another promotion.

"I quit smoking when I got engaged to Eldon. He tried to make me over into someone worthy to be a Jas person."

"How'd that work for him?"

"Not well enough, in his mother's opinion. She thought a degree in art was useless, a career as a teacher was common. And working with disadvantaged kids? Repulsive. 'God knows what sort of parasites and germs you bring home from work.'"

"I was blessed with a nice mother-in-law," Ford said. That had been one of the worst things about the divorce—losing Stella along with Kathy.

"Was? You're divorced?"

"I was something of a disappointment to my wife."

Robyn studied him, as if trying to figure out exactly what his ex-wife had found lacking in him. He didn't want to go there. It was a grocery list.

"It's late," he said, "and we have a long day tomorrow. Raleigh will get us the court order that will allow us access to all the evidence. When that happens, we'll get media attention, so be prepared."

"I hate reporters."

"Reporters are our friends. They're going to put the word out that we're looking for information and that we're willing to pay for it. Be nice to them."

"If I have to. What should I do?"

"You figure out how to get Eldon to admit he was with someone that night. We're going to visit him as soon as possible."

"What about Trina? She was pretty upset. Should I try to talk to her?"

"Frankly, I consider Trina a loose cannon. I sure as hell don't want her talking to Eldon about his indiscretions before we can get to him."

Ford paid their check, refusing the money Robyn offered for her part. "I have an expense account."

As they exited into another warm, muggy night, Robyn stopped suddenly. "Hell, I don't have a way to get home. Trina was my ride."

"I'll take you."

ROBYN HAD TRIED TO DISSUADE Ford from taking her home. She could have called a cab. But Ford had insisted, though it was far out of his way to drive all the way to Green Prairie.

She was glad he drove a large car. Even so, it felt crowded. The big, muscular kid she remembered had grown into a wide-shouldered, slim-hipped man without any extra pounds anywhere.

Built for speed.

That thought gave her a pleasurable shiver. Not that she'd want him to hurry... Oh, God, why was she thinking along those lines?

Learning that he'd watched her in high school had unnerved her. She'd watched him, too, stripped down to gym shorts and a cropped T-shirt on the football practice field, all sweaty. She'd loved to watch him move. He had an easy grace that most kids his age had lacked, a comfort with his own body. He hadn't shown off and swaggered for the girls like some of his teammates, focusing on the drills with single-minded determination.

That was what she remembered most about Ford Hyatt—that concentration. If he took on a project, it got done. In the few classes they'd shared, he paid constant attention, took notes, asked questions. She remembered thinking how awesome it would be to have that attention focused on her.

Tonight she'd found out how it would feel. She should have been uncomfortable, pouring out the most intimate details of her life to him. Yet, after getting over her initial case of nerves, she'd felt okay talking to Ford. Good, even. It had been a relief to let down her guard and be perfectly honest—sort of the way she felt when she was throwing a pot or painting a picture.

She'd also felt more than one inappropriate shiver of desire. No man had ever really listened to her. Not the cops who'd interrogated her—they'd been more interested in putting words in her mouth and trying to catch her up. Certainly not Eldon, who wanted her to be the audience, soaking up his superior knowledge, following his instructions to better herself.

Being the sole focus of Ford's attention had made her feel like she'd never felt before. She'd had a hard time remembering that this was the guy who'd once judged her so unfairly.

Robyn still burned every time she thought of that high school incident. She'd been trying so hard—so hard—to be good for once in her life. A two-month stay in a juvenile detention center had been an eye-opening experience, enough to convince her she did not want to hang around those people anymore, ever. She'd made big plans to change, to make something of herself.

And no one had noticed. Not her mother, who was way too wrapped up in her own problems. Not her teachers, who'd already made up their minds about her. Not her old friends, who had barely noticed that she wasn't around anymore to smoke dope and spray-paint bridges.

But she kept on. And then came the unfair accusations, the humiliation of being accused of theft, the student government tribunal, which was run kind of like The People's Court. And Ford, head of the tribunal, student body president, so smug as he'd handed down the tribunal's decision.

She was kicked off the senior mural project. Looking back, it sounded silly that something so minor should still bother her. But her mural design had been chosen over a dozen others. It was the first time she'd excelled at anything, been chosen for anything, and she'd been as excited about it as a kid with her first finger paints. She'd been looking forward to having something positive to put on her college applications.

Ford had derailed all that.

She unearthed that old anger and held on tight to it as he drove her home. People like Ford could serve a purpose. That steel-spined sense of right and wrong, black and white and that dogged determination, were what she needed to free Eldon. But certainly no sane woman wanted a man like that in her personal life. No matter how good-looking he was. No matter how he made her stomach swoop.

Even if he was the first man to do so in years.

## CHAPTER THREE

TWO DAYS LATER, ROBYN WAS getting antsy. After that first wave of urgency, Ford had become ominously silent. But when she got out of the shower that morning, the answering machine by her bed was flashing.

She pushed the button. “I have an appointment in Huntsville at two o’clock this afternoon,” came Ford’s no-nonsense voice. “I’ll pick you up at eleven. Wear something conservative.”

That was it. He didn’t identify himself, didn’t begin or end the message with pleasantries. Well, hell, it wasn’t as if they were going on a date, was it? They were visiting her ex-husband in prison. Hardly a romantic outing.

Just the same, she dressed with care. She didn’t have a lot of nice clothes. As an artist and art teacher, she tended to destroy clothes as fast as she could buy them, so jeans and T-shirts were the norm. But she did have a couple of outfits she’d worn to court. She chose her long, slim black skirt and a plain blue silk T-shirt, about as conservative as she could get.

In deference to the heat, she twisted her hair into a knot at the back of her head, holding it in place with a tortoiseshell comb. She refused to do stockings, but she wore high-heeled sandals.

She even wore makeup, something she didn’t bother with most days. Halfway through her mascara, she wondered whom she was trying to impress. But Ford had told her to be prepared for the media, and that was what she told herself—that she wanted to look good on camera.

She was absolutely, positively not primping for Ford. That would be ludicrous and kind of sick, as well. She was trying to save a man’s life.

Ford arrived promptly at eleven. Unfortunately, so did a TV van from Houston’s Channel 6. It pulled right behind Ford’s car, blocking him in.

Robyn hated reporters. She knew they weren’t all scumbags, but the ones who lurked around corners and tailed unsuspecting crime victims rated no better than hyenas in her book. At the time of Eldon’s trial, all they’d wanted from her was a sensational sound bite to crank up ratings.

Ford exited his car and faced the eager reporter and cameraman who’d leaped out of the van almost before it had stopped. Taking a deep breath, she grabbed her purse and went to join him. He’d said they needed publicity to shake information out of the bushes. But she knew from experience how damaging the wrong sort of publicity could be. If public sentiment got whipped up against Eldon, the governor was far less likely to stay the execution.

The reporters—more than one—spotted her the moment she emerged from her upstairs apartment and were on her before she reached the bottom of the steps.

“Mrs. Jasperson, do you have any new leads as to the whereabouts of your son?”

“Has a body been found?”

“Why would you try to free your son’s murderer?”

“Are you still in love with your ex-husband?”

She thought she’d been prepared, but the barrage of rapid-fire questions overloaded her brain. “I believe my ex-husband is innocent,” she said. “As I have from the beginning.”

“How do you feel about Eldon’s current wife?”

“Do you know anything about Justin’s murder?”

“Did you kidnap your son? Is that why you know Eldon is innocent?”

“Is your conscience bothering you?”

She wanted to tell them all what to do with their disgusting insinuations, but Ford had said not to antagonize the press. “I really don’t have any more to add—”

“How do you explain Justin’s blood found in Eldon’s car?”

They moved in close, sticking microphones in her face, crowding her so that she could not escape. She’d never liked crowds, and panic rose in her throat.

Just then Ford pushed through the crowd and put a protective arm around Robyn's shoulders. "No more questions. We'll issue a statement soon, but right now we're on a tight schedule." He managed to sound cordial but firm, and the reporters immediately backed off. Ford escorted Robyn to his car, whispering in her ear, "You look like a scared rabbit. Straighten up and act serene and confident."

She tried. But all she could think about was reaching the haven of Ford's car and getting away from the insistent voices, wanting to rip her apart like carrion.

"Mr. Hyatt, aren't you afraid of putting another murderer back on the street?" one bold reporter asked after the others had fallen silent.

"If I were afraid I wouldn't pursue this case," Ford said with a tight smile.

He opened the passenger door and helped Robyn to climb in, acting the chivalrous gentleman for the press. Once the door was closed and locked, she took her first easy breath since Ford had arrived. She watched as Ford had words with a couple of men, and the van blocking their path moved out of the way as he joined her in the car.

"You okay?"

"Yeah." She took another cleansing breath. "You'd think I'd be used to it by now."

"You did fine." He started the engine, threw the car in gear and backed out all in one seamless motion. She liked the way he drove, all smooth confidence.

"Fine if you like scared rabbits." She still shook.

"Have you eaten today?"

"Yes." She'd had some toast for breakfast. "Is there some reason you're so fascinated by my diet?"

"You don't eat when you're under stress, and that's when you really should eat well."

How in the hell did he know that? But it was true. When she was worried about something, she either forgot to eat, or she nibbled because food didn't sit well in her nervous stomach.

"There's a white bag by your feet. I bought you a vanilla milk shake. Maybe not the healthiest thing in the world, but at least you won't pass out. Drink it."

She didn't like his imperious attitude. No one had ordered her around since she'd been in juvenile detention. Certainly not her mother, who had taken off with her third husband shortly after Robyn's high school graduation, apparently happy to be free of her daughter. But he was right; she did need something more in her stomach. She gave him a curt "thanks" and retrieved the milk shake from the bag. It was smooth and creamy and cool in her throat—exactly what she needed.

"What did that reporter mean?" she asked after a minute or so.

"Which one?"

"That last one, who asked you if you were afraid of letting another murderer back on the street."

"He was just trying to get a reaction out of me." But Ford's hands gripped the steering wheel more tightly.

"Have you ever made a mistake?"

"Who hasn't?" he tossed off.

"No, I mean, have you ever believed someone was innocent, and then you were wrong? Did you ever free a guilty man?"

There was a long, pregnant pause. "You must not read the papers."

"Not too often, no." Robyn sensed the tension rolling off him and debated whether to press him or let it ride.

"Drew Copelson. I got his conviction overturned. Two weeks after he got out of jail, he attacked and beat an elderly woman."

"Oh, my God. Did you—I mean, did you suspect—"

"No. I am, to this day, utterly convinced he did not commit the murder he was convicted of. He became a suspect because he had priors of violent crime, and he couldn't come up with an alibi.

Forensics proved the police planted evidence to clinch their case. He didn't do it but I wish to God I'd left him in prison to rot. Katherine Hannigan wouldn't be lying in a hospital room right now."

"I didn't realize it was so recent," she said, wishing she hadn't brought up what was obviously a painful subject. "I'm sorry it turned out that way. But we can't just go around locking up people because they might commit a crime. You did the right thing."

"You wouldn't say that if you met Katherine. Or her family."

She hated the desolation she heard in his voice. She couldn't imagine what it must feel like to be blamed for the brutal attack of a woman. And clearly some people had blamed Ford.

"That's why I resigned from Project Justice. I was getting out of the guilt-and-innocence business. I would not be working this case if you hadn't pressured me." His hands gripped the steering wheel more tightly. "Clearly I should have gotten out a long time ago."

"I don't believe that's true. I've read about your other cases—the man in Atlanta who was accused of murdering his wife. The woman in Illinois who went to jail for supposedly killing her elderly father. I believe in our justice system, but it's only as good as the people involved. And when the system breaks down, someone needs to step in and fix it."

"I used to think that. Maybe I still do. But that person won't be me. Not after I finish this case." An SUV whipped in front of their car, cutting them off. Ford rammed his hand into the horn. "Damn, look at this traffic. Hey, have you talked to Trina?"

Robyn recognized a desperate ploy to change the subject. She let him. "I'm giving her a chance to cool down, but I'll check on her later. She's probably feeling betrayed by everyone right now, but once she thinks about it she'll see we're right."

"How did you two end up being friends, anyway?"

Robyn sucked up the last sip of her milk shake, amazed she'd finished it. "I wouldn't exactly say we're friends. She did steal my husband, after all."

"In my experience, husbands don't get stolen unless they want to be stolen."

"Yeah, I know." She blotted her mouth with a paper napkin she'd found in the milk shake sack. "I was being flip. She's not someone I would choose as a friend. But when Eldon went to trial, his lawyer thought it would play well with the jury if both Mrs. Jaspersons presented a united front."

"Sitting next to Trina in the courtroom day after day, I got to know her. I'd always thought of her as the conniving 'other woman,' but I realized she truly did love Eldon. She's not a bad person. People condemn her because she was poor and married money, but they said the same thing about me."

"At least Eldon wasn't married when you met him. You were already making a better life, working your way through college, when you met Eldon. You weren't on the prowl for a rich husband."

How did Ford know so much about her and Trina?

"I didn't say I admired Trina. But I understand why she wanted Eldon. And I understand why he wanted her. Eldon has a pattern of taking on projects—young, unsophisticated, impoverished girls he could mold and improve. Once I was improved, at least enough that his mother quit badgering him to divorce me, he lost interest."

"Do you still love him?"

The question hung between them longer than it should have. Her answer should have been immediate—no. But she wanted to answer Ford just right.

"I'll always be grateful for the things Eldon did for me. He paid for my last two years of college. He encouraged me to get my teaching certificate. And he gave me Justin. Those two and a half years I spent as a mother were the best of my life."

"But I no longer love my ex-husband in a romantic way. He hurt me too deeply for that."

On that note, Ford ended his questions. He'd been nosy, and he'd gotten more than he bargained for—a glimpse of the raw pain Robyn had until now kept carefully hidden.

Not for the first time, he wondered if he was doing the right thing in pursuing Eldon Jasperson's freedom. He wouldn't take this case to the governor unless he was damn sure—a hundred percent sure

—Jasperson was innocent. That was a pretty high standard. There was no way he would be responsible for putting another murderer—a child killer—out on the street.

If he bailed on the case, which was a definite possibility, he would dash Robyn's hopes and prove to her once again that she couldn't count on anyone. Getting involved in this was a mistake, but it was too late now to back out.

They arrived at Huntsville State Prison in plenty of time for the appointment Ford had arranged. Of course, they had to go through the usual security rigmarole. They were searched and scanned more thoroughly than a suspected terrorist at an airport, and then they were given a list of rules, verbally and in writing, detailing everything they couldn't do during the visit.

This was old hat to Ford. He'd visited more than one death row inmate since starting with Project Justice. But Robyn had probably not gone through this before. An inmate on death row was seldom allowed visitors, usually only with a compelling reason. Robyn was clearly nervous—she'd already chewed off her carefully applied lipstick and hadn't bothered to put on more.

When the guards were positive Ford and Robyn weren't packing a stun gun or bolt cutters, they were walked down one depressing corridor after another until they reached Cell Block H. There was no sign declaring it to be death row, but everyone knew what Cell Block H was.

They were shown to a room with a large table and four chairs bolted to the floor.

"Jasperson will be brought in shortly," one of the guards said.

When they were alone again, Robyn jumped out of her chair and paced. "I thought we would visit him through one of those windows with telephones—you know, kind of like in the movies."

"Are you nervous about seeing him face-to-face?"

She flashed a guilty, nervous smile. "Terrified. I haven't seen him in years. Trina says he isn't holding up well."

"Sit down," Ford said. "You heard the rules. We have to stay in our chairs."

"Sorry." She slid back into her seat, then clenched her hands in front of her on the scarred metal table.

A few moments later, a guard escorted Eldon Jasperson into the room wearing shackles on both hands and feet, and Ford got his first good look at the man since the trial, when he was more familiar to Houstonians than the hottest Hollywood celebrity. Though Ford knew prison was hard on the inmates, he wasn't prepared to see a gaunt man with thinning gray hair and sallow skin. In the eight years of incarceration, he'd aged twenty.

The guard seated his prisoner in a chair across the table from them and chained him to it. Jasperson's gaze was on Robyn—and it was hungry. A surge of protectiveness welled up in Ford, so strong it stole the air out of his lungs.

"Robyn." Jasperson's voice was low, cultured. "This is a surprise."

"Hi, Eldon." She sounded soft, comforting, full of emotion. "I've brought someone to see you—someone who might be able to help."

Eldon spared a quick, dismissive glance for Ford. "Another lawyer?"

"I'm an investigator with Project Justice. Ford Hyatt." Ford nodded, since they weren't allowed to shake hands. "Are you familiar with Project Justice?"

Eldon's interest ratcheted up a notch. "You're the folks who get innocent people out of jail."

"Sometimes." Ford spent a couple of minutes telling him the basics of how the foundation worked and his role there. "Robyn brought your case to my attention. I'd heard of it, of course. But I hadn't realized how many unanswered questions remained. The information she provided was compelling enough for me to want to look into it."

"A little late, isn't it?"

"We're often the avenue of last resort. Mr. Jasperson, I'll get right to the point. I've read the police report, and I have strong reason to believe you were not alone the night Justin disappeared."

Fear and surprise flashed briefly in Eldon's sullen gray eyes, but he quickly hid his reaction. Not quickly enough, however. Ford knew he was on to something.

"Why would you think something like that? If anyone could back up my story, don't you think I'd have said something?"

"Why did you order a large, half-and-half pizza?" Ford asked.

He gave an exaggerated shrug. "Because I was hungry? Who the hell told you what kind of pizza I ordered? Why would anyone care about such a stupid detail?"

"It was in the police report," Ford replied. "Police often ask for small details when they're questioning victims or witnesses—or potential suspects. The details will trip people up."

"Or help them out," Robyn said. "Eldon, you ordered a large pizza, half black olives. You hate black olives."

"That's just not true." But he swallowed several times. The questions were making him nervous.

Ford continued to push. "Mr. Jasperson, I can't imagine why you wouldn't tell us who you were with. Whatever your reasons for keeping that secret—surely they don't matter anymore. You have nothing to lose."

"I'd like to help, believe me," Jasperson said politely. "But I was alone."

Robyn banged one fist on the metal table. "You were cheating on Trina while she was away at a conference," she said, suddenly harsh. "Why can't you admit that?"

"Where would you get such a foolish idea?" Jasperson sounded less polite now.

"Because you cheated on me. And I know what it looks like. I watched the video of your interrogation, and I know the look that was on your face. I've seen it before—when you'd been with Trina and you were trying to hide it from me."

He sat up straighter, defiant. "Maybe I looked guilty on that video because I killed our son."

Ford expected Robyn to flinch at the words, but she came right back at him. "I know damn well you would never have hurt Justin. Tell me who she is."

Robyn and her ex-husband stared at each other, challenging, until Ford was sure blue sparks would fly between them. But finally Eldon looked away, defeated. "I can't find her," he said softly. "I saw no reason to involve her at the beginning. I had no clue things would turn out as they did, not an inkling that I'd be arrested for Justin's murder. So I said I was alone. Later, when I knew I was in trouble, I couldn't find her. She'd left town. So I said nothing. Changing my story—with no one to corroborate it—would only make me look like a liar. And a cheating husband on top of that."

Ford resisted the urge to grin. He really hadn't been sure Robyn's hunch would pan out.

"So what's her name?" Ford asked, pad and pencil ready.

Eldon shook his head. "You won't find her. She hid her tracks well. Anyway, she wasn't there when Justin was taken. She was back at my house."

"But she can verify that Justin was alive at the time you left to get pizza." Ford was amazed that Jasperson didn't grasp this. "The prosecution has always maintained the pizza run was a cover story used to stage a phony kidnapping, and that you'd probably killed Justin hours earlier and spent a good amount of time disposing of the body."

Now both Robyn and Eldon did flinch.

"I'm sorry, but there's no time to worry about delicate sensibilities. Eldon, this woman could clear you."

"I doubt she'll talk, even if you do find her."

"Let me worry about that. What's her name?"

"You can't do this!" Eldon roared. "Trina... Trina has been so loyal through all this. I can't face death knowing I've turned her against me."

"Eldon," Robyn said. "It's too late for that. She already knows."

"She's okay with it," Ford added, lying through his teeth. "She understands. She won't hold it against you, not at this late date. It was a long time ago."

Eldon shook his head stubbornly.

“You’d rather die than take this chance?” Ford asked.

He didn’t respond.

“We’ll find her without your cooperation,” Ford said with steely determination. “And when we do, I won’t be gentle with her. I’ll feed her name to every sleazy reporter in the country. Her life will be a living hell.”

ROBYN WANTED TO OBJECT to Ford’s harsh threat. Hadn’t Eldon been savaged enough? But what did Ford care? He didn’t know Eldon, had never seen him playing horsey with Justin or entertaining the baby with faces while changing his diaper. Ford’s job wasn’t to make friends. He was pursuing this case the way he did everything—moving resolutely forward, eye on the goal, never wavering.

It was the reason she’d agreed with Trina that he was the right man for the case.

When Ford had shielded her from the media vultures, she had thought she’d seen a speck of caring there. But she must have been mistaken. The man was a machine.

“Eldon,” Robyn said gently, grasping his attention. “No matter what happens, you won’t die alone. I will be here for you. I still care for you.”

“How could you?” he asked. “After what you’ve been through...”

“You lost a son, too. Maybe you aren’t the most faithful of husbands, but that doesn’t mean you didn’t love your son—or that you should die for someone else’s crime. For the love we had for Justin—for the love we once shared. Help us help you.” A single tear escaped, and she dashed it away. “Tell us the woman’s name. We’ll handle it sensitively.”

Eldon closed his eyes, battling some internal demon. Finally he looked at Robyn, shutting out Ford. “Heather.” He barely whispered the word. “It was Heather.”

“Heather Boone?” Robyn asked, her voice coming out a hoarse accusation. Oh, God. No wonder he hadn’t wanted to say anything.

“Do you understand now?”

Robyn was afraid she did. “How old was she at the time?” She chanced a look at Ford, gauging his reaction. He leaned back in his chair, his face a granite wall. But she noted a faint flicker of displeasure in his eyes. He wasn’t happy with the conversation’s direction.

“She was above the age of consent,” Eldon said.

Ford suddenly sat forward. “Look, would somebody mind telling me who Heather Boone is?”

“She was one of my art students. Someone I took a special interest in. Apparently Eldon did, too,” she added bitterly. “Damn it, Eldon, she was a troubled child. How could you take advantage—”

“I was helping her.”

“By sleeping with her?”

“Time-out!” Ford silenced them with his outburst. Robyn looked at him, startled at his show of temper. But there was a time to be sensitive, and a time to play hardball. Ford instinctively knew which strategy to use. “If you want me to move forward with this case, y’all are both gonna have to shut up and listen to me. Eldon, you’re dealing with me now, not your ex-wife. Tell me from start to finish what happened that night. And if I sense any bullshit, I’m walking out of here and never coming back.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

ROBYN SHRANK BACK IN THE face of Ford's anger. She wasn't used to people speaking to her that way. Most people, family included, handled her with kid gloves. They tolerated any sort of emotional outburst or bad behavior because she had lost her child to tragedy.

She stared at Ford and he at her, bracing for more harsh words. But they didn't come. After a few charged moments he sat back in his chair and straightened some papers on the table in front of him.

Robyn switched her attention to Eldon, positive he would be the next to explode. Her ex had never tolerated anyone speaking to him in such a manner—which hadn't boded well for him during police interrogations. But to her surprise, he didn't strike back. He folded his arms and looked down in a classic posture of submission.

He hardly looked like the man she knew. Or thought she knew. God, he'd had an affair with a teenager. A girl still in high school. Barely legal. Of course, Robyn had been the same age when Eldon had first become interested in her; Trina had barely been out of her teens at the time Robyn discovered that affair.

"I'll go over the story again," Eldon said calmly, as if the outburst hadn't happened. "If you think it will help."

He started at the beginning, when he had picked up Justin from Robyn's house and they'd argued about his mother's interference. His story lined up with her own—possibly because they had both told it so many times that their memories had become identical.

When he got to the part about Heather, he spoke barely above a whisper, so that Ford had to ask him to speak up so the digital recorder could pick up his voice.

They had spent the evening as people having illicit affairs generally did. Then Heather, with a case of the postcoital munchies, had begged Eldon to order pizza. He'd gone to pick it up, he said, because the restaurant didn't deliver past midnight.

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