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**THE MAN COMES AROUND:
A Novel**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of South Alabama
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of English

in

Creative Writing

by
Franklin S. Bogle
B.A., Appalachian State University, 2020
May 2022

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ABSTRACT

Franklin S. Bogle, M. A., University of South Alabama, May 2022 *The Man Comes Around: A Novel*. Chair of Committee: Charlotte Pence, Ph.D.

On the same day that James Anderson's wife files for divorce and full custody of their two sons, his estranged brother Ken is arrested for murder. Making matters even more complicated is the victim of Ken's alleged heinous crime, Skye Davis.

Not only is Skye's father Bill Davis the Republican candidate in the 2004 North Carolina Gubernatorial race, but he is the former mayor of James' hometown of Gastonia. The Davis family has run Gastonia for years, having owned the mill the city was built around a hundred years before. Everyone is in Bill's pocket, and this doesn't exclude James, whose career-defining case is tied directly to Gastonia's most powerful family.

As the evidence stacks up against Ken and a hefty murder one charge amounts, James's own dark vice ridden personal life becomes a public spectacle - endangering any chance of split custody in his divorce trial, and potentially causing disbarment.

As James builds both cases, he realizes that the only chance he has is to dig deep into a shared traumatic past only he and Ken understand. Can their childhood trauma help save Ken from capital punishment? Will it threaten James's own chances at remaining a father? For James, the man has come around, and he has left him with a choice, one that will force him to make a decision with multiple lives at stake.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The Man Comes Around is the story of one man during the most important year of his life. As criminal attorney James Anderson prepares for the two biggest cases of his career, his demons lurk below the surface, waiting to ruin either case. A singular voice in a tunnel of chaos, James Anderson works as a first-person narrator, relaying the events chronologically. Following the timelines of two coinciding trials the novel questions several themes, such as morality, masculinity, and fatherhood. The novel also tackles Christianity, a topic that purposefully or not often seeps its way into crime fiction.

A work of both crime and legal fiction, this novel will adhere to specific genre tropes while pushing past and testing others. Through research and craft choices this novel has been formed around two fictional cases; one a murder; the other a bitter custody battle. Outlined in this introduction are several major aspects of the work for the pages present and future.

1.1 Main Characters

James Anderson: James is the novel's protagonist and serves as the first-person narrator. James is a thirty-four-year old defense attorney and father of two. He suffers from several vices, chiefly drinking and sports gambling, the latter being the domino that tilted the decline of his life forward. His wife is divorcing him for multiple reasons, but mainly due to his declining personal and mental health after the biggest case of his career. This case caused James to become a neglectful husband and untrustworthy parent. He is deep into the pockets of the current North Carolinian Republican candidate for governor, the one

man who holds James' life in his hands. He shares the demons stemming from childhood abuse with his brother, dealing with them in ways similar and different from Ken. He is tasked not only with defending his brother against the death penalty, but also attempting to maintain any custody he can of his two children. All the while, the cases and decisions in his past come to haunt him, and he is desperately trying to keep his firm afloat. His connection to the family of the woman killed by his brother threatens to expose every secret and lie he has hidden.

Ken Anderson Jr.: Ken is James' older brother by eight years. Ken is a lost soul who works dead-end job after dead-end job. He has suffered from multiple traumatic experiences in the past, mainly the abuse at the hands of his father. His past injuries hinder his mental capabilities and prevent him from maintaining any consistency in his life until he begins to date Skye Davis, who in turn he brutally kills in a fit of unconscious rage, or so James sets out to prove. It is his fathers' actions and his own inability to mature beyond his adversity that led him to the place where the novel begins, in cuffs, desperate for his little brother to save him.

1.2 Central Conflict

On the same day that his wife files for divorce and custody of his children, James Anderson's estranged brother, Ken, commits a brutal murder. Ken kills Skye Davis, the blacksheep daughter of Bill Davis III, the grandson of Davis Mill Manufacturing magnate Bill Davis. Not only is Bill Davis one of the state's wealthiest men, but he is currently in the middle of a run for the North Carolinian governorship, with capital punishment as a major campaign selling point.

James himself is in Bill's pocket after he helped Bill's godson beat a murder rap in a loaded trial. James saves Bill's godson, a Gastonia police officer, despite the fact that he illegally killed a young teenager. James does so after Bill's investigator finds discrepancies in James's law firm's trust account, learning he has illegally been laundering money to pay his sports gambling debts under the guise of payments to his law firm's operating account. This case was what led to James's drinking to become heavier, leading to separation from his wife Maria.

On the fateful night that Ken Anderson Jr. repeatedly strikes Skye Davis to the ground, he brings together the dark secrets of his own past along with his younger brother's past, two worlds colliding. To save his brother from the death penalty, James will have to face his own past and dive into his brother's, leading both to traverse into the rabbit hole that was their shared abusive childhood. As James determines the secret to Ken's insanity plea is his traumatic childhood, he tears down any chance of convincing the divorce court he is fit for fatherhood himself. He also risks Bill Davis bringing to light his illegal dealings. Can James save both his brother and his family life? In doing so, will he save his firm? Or worst of all, will he have to choose between the two? For James Anderson, the man has come around.

I.3 Structure of the Novel

The novel is split into two parts. Part one covers the ensuing two months after the murder of Skye Davis. During these two months, James investigates the murder and begins to build Ken's defense while going through the beginning steps of a case before it moves toward trial. These steps will follow the true to life North Carolina murder trial

timeline: Warrant for arrest - bail determined - Indictment - Rule 24 Hearing - Bond hearing - Arraignment - trial date set. During this first half of the novel, James will rely on his investigator, Joe Philon, and his partner, Dom Chavez, heavily. As he builds the criminal case, his own divorce case will simultaneously take place in civil court. During part one James and Maria attempt to end their marriage amicably in arbitration, but Maria is unrelenting in their custody agreement. James is left with no choice but to move towards trial with Dom representing him.

Part two takes place five months into the future, nearly seven months after Skye Davis is killed. Following the process of Voir Dire, the jurors are set for Ken's case, and the trial begins. During this time, Maria's attorney extends the divorce trial until the same week, lining up the two trials for James. As the two trials intersect and everything James has hidden becomes exposed, he is left with a choice. He can either maintain some semblance of custody of his sons or save his older brother's life.

Throughout both parts, James' past is hinted at, along with his other relationships, all of which converge into the final chapters of part two. The vices that have plagued him for years, along with his abusive childhood, build slowly through both parts at the same pace of the cases.

1.4 Point of View

The novel is told in first-person narration through James' character. The reasoning for this can be broken down into three ideas. First, with the smaller plots that add up to playing a part in the larger plot, maintaining a first-person point of view can prevent confusion for the reader.

Secondly, the novel is inherently a story about two brothers who shared an abusive childhood. These things would be hidden by the two brothers for years, and James is perhaps the only one that can understand Ken and introduce the truth behind these secrets to the reader. The first-person narration helps communicate what at times seems like space-filling memories of the family patriarch, Ken Anderson, Sr. the first-person voice allows the scenes to paint the patriarch in his true light, instead of how he portrays himself to the world. This contradiction will allow the reader to make his own decision regarding the eldest of the Anderson men.

Thirdly, the novel is inherently a trial. If effectively written, then both Anderson brothers are on trial to the reader. Who better to assert this innocence for both men to the reader than the defense attorney himself? For these three reasons, first person narration is an important aspect of this novel. It helps build the world of James and presents arguments for innocence to the reader on a personal level, as attorneys at trial set out to do.

Similarly, the limited knowledge of the first person is a form of power. James will have his beliefs about his brother, but as his attorney, he will seek to defend him no matter the charge, believing he is innocent. In first person crime fiction, the question of the whodunnit seems to last longer, enticing the reader to continue reading.

1.5 Why This Subject?

Crime fiction is often not compared to works within literary genres. However, I have always felt that quality crime fiction can at times ask more questions of the world than any other genre of fiction. Crime fiction asks questions about humanity, without

necessarily answering them, thus forcing readers to answer them for themselves. It works as commentary on the reason humans do the things they do, and entertains while doing so. It blurs the lines between black and white and good and evil; it also produces a gray area that most hate to admit exists in reality. This gray area has produced some of the greatest storytelling in history and is the main draw I have to the genre.

It is this gray area that I hope to elicit in my own novel. When we are children we learn of good and evil with no in between. As we grow older, we realize that good and evil are not so simple. This is where that gray is produced. This idea is what I find so enticing in crime fiction. Oftentimes, this gray area leaves us uneasy, but questions so much. In my own novel, I hope to bring forth the idea of mental illness and trauma and their effects on crime, along with why systems fail, and why good people sometimes do bad things. I am not setting out to answer these questions, but simply explore them, leaving the reader to question his own beliefs.

James Anderson is not a bad man, but he's lived in that gray area for too long. As the attorneys I researched with explained to me, all crimes make a great deal of sense. Most criminals aren't evil. They commit crimes out of necessity, passion, or greed. There is always a reasoning beyond a simple idea of evil. James has lived in this gray for so long that he knows nothing else. He attempts to feel from the vices he clings to, but he doesn't know if he can ever see the world the same again.

I am greatly enticed by this idea of the gray area, and I hope to replicate it in a way that is just a tenth as good as the crime fiction works I admire.

1.6 Research Process

For outside research, I conducted several studies, but for the sake of time, there are three specific things I would like to discuss. First, I spent time with Michael Neece, a Gastonia defense attorney. I was able to watch Michael in action with a client, as far as how he talks to them and how he explains their defense to them. This is important because in many ways the readers of crime novels must be walked through procedures without feeling like children or getting bogged down. Secondly, Michael walked me through how he puts together an insanity defense and how he approaches each murder trial. He has argued several in his career, having utilized the M'Naughten Cognitive Defense and Irresistible Impulse Insanity Defense. Both defenses are what James will use to defend Ken in the novel. Michael helped me walk through my fictional case and how he would approach it. While I will alter some things, having the actual guidance has been extremely helpful.

The second form of research I did was with my father, a criminal attorney in Gastonia, who walked me through the actual steps in a murder case and introduced me to the Rule 24 Hearing, which is singular to North Carolina. In this, the district attorney has to submit reasoning for seeking the death penalty to the judge before the arraignment. He also helped me map out how divorce proceedings commence in a legal sense. His firm's partner is a general practice attorney, meaning he handles all forms of civil related cases.

The third and final thing I did was go into the Gastonia Public Library and research the history of my hometown which is the basis for my novel. My research was geared towards the history of Gastonia, specifically, its foundation as a mill town.

Originally, the majority of Gaston County was all based around its mills, especially the Loray Mill, which has been fictionalized in my book as the Davis Mill. Researching the town's history helped me create a more realistic fictional setting. It also allows for me to create a more authentic discrepancy between the classes of people on which the novel focuses.

1.7 Elements of Technique

Characterization: This is the most important aspect of the novel, especially how the characters are shaped and whether the reader feels empathy for them. As a reader, I know this can make or break my novel. In convincing the reader that Ken is insane, I will attempt to use a fresh take on a near psychopathic character. We have seen many different tropes over the years regarding characters like this, whether it be the intelligent psychopath, the straitjacket psychopath, or the silent psychopath. For Ken, it won't be one of these common tropes, but a character that at times seems mentally capable, yet can come unhinged in a moment's notice. This is especially important for the defense being built for Ken, as the Irresistible Impulse Insanity Defense ensures someone cannot contain his impulses consistently. In any case, a defense attorney's goal is to build empathy for his client, and James is no different. Throughout the novel, the question of whether he can build empathy for himself also remains. This is something I will have to focus heavily on, using various techniques I have been taught throughout the years. The idea of the lawyer suffering from his own problems while defending a client is one of the most commonly reproduced character tropes. For James to be different, I must go into the specifics of his characters; for instance, I share his love of Tarheel football, the gambling

addiction that plagues him, and the common tragedies he shares with his client. While the character of the plagued lawyer will be present, it is the minor aspects of his character I will use to set him apart from fictional lawyers before him. This also feeds into the narrative style, as first-person narration can offer me a better opportunity at presenting James as a singular character.

Setting: Gastonia is a real city, fictionalized in this novel. I chose this setting because of its combination of a rural and urban feel. It is almost equally both, bordering North Carolina's largest city, but also spawning rural living for miles. In the novel, a fictional version of Gastonia is presented, but the city should still seem real. In the 90's when the mills began to falter, Gastonia was dubbed "Little Chicago" for its high crime rate, especially its high murder rate. Gastonia is also heavily divided between those who have much and those who have little. This is an aspect of the city that will be featured prominently in the novel. The brothers come from the have nots, but one was able to make it out. This formulates the tension felt between the two, and the tension between present day James and his father. James has made something of himself, but still cannot shake his past. Ken never made anything of himself because he is haunted by his past. The larger web that James has spun himself into is also important because in a small southern town, word gets around. When the novel opens, James is lacking in clients because he saved a corrupt cop in a loaded trial, and while no one can prove it, they know it to be true. This aspect of a "large" small town also plays out with the victim of the novel, Skye Davis. She is the "it" girl of Gastonia because of who her father is, and when she dies, a massive media storm comes raining down.

Dialogue: The way the characters speak helps craft singular idiosyncratic characters. A large part of characterization in fiction writing is the way characters speak, their dialogue shaping them at times; for instance, James will speak more grammatically correct and much more eloquently than his brother. The dialogue alone shows the brothers now live in two different worlds despite belonging to the same city. To add to this point, the setting influences how the characters speak. Dialogue can propel a story forward; it can also slow it down. Ken's insanity defense is built through his dialogue, at least in the sense the reader will be convinced by the scenes in which they experience him. James's courthouse speeches provide a contrasting view for the reader. Words are a defense attorney's weapon, as they have nothing else but their rhetorical abilities. James, too, will be found guilty or innocent in the eyes of the readers based on his narration.

CHAPTER II

Today marked the one-year anniversary of my separation from my wife. Legally she can divorce me in the state of North Carolina. I've had a year to attempt to get back in her good graces and convince her our marriage is worth saving once more, but I've failed. Again.

Earlier tonight I managed to hide that thought behind whiskey shots, Miller Lites, and college football. But something about the plain white walls in interrogation room C of the Gastonia City Police Precinct brings the thought rushing back.

Maria can legally leave me forever, and who knows what that means for my two sons.

I light a cigarette and stare at the ceiling, for the first time noticing the yellowish color created by years of detectives and criminals smoking in this room. I watch my smoke rise, attempting to not think about Maria and the separation, or our boys. My attempts are only successful once I think about why I am here, in this room, at five in the morning on a Sunday. I'm running out of safe things to think about.

"Jaime, you know I'm not supposed to let you smoke in here," Officer Jackson says, opening the door to interrogation room C and placing an empty plastic cup in front of me to ash in. "But considering why we're here, your brother and all, I'll let you have

this,” he says. “That and your Heels got destroyed again tonight.” He goes to shut the door, empathy mixing with curiosity in his eyes.

Mostly empathy. I hate that. It’s my job to create empathy for my clients. Never to receive it myself.

“I appreciate it, Jim,” I say to the closed door. “Those damn Noles, we can never get past them.” I speak towards the closed door, no one listening. As if Florida State again thrashing my alma mater is the biggest of my concerns at this moment. For a few hours it was as I drank at Frankie’s with my partner, Dom, and other local attorneys.

As the others slipped out before their wives began cursing at them, I watched SportsCenter reruns until Frankie kicked me to the curb. That's when my sons and their faces returned, and the thoughts of Maria’s disdain for me followed. So, I called Jane, hoping for a few more fleeting moments of distraction from my deteriorating family.

We hadn’t been in bed for more than three minutes when I got the call. Actually, she got hers first. She jumped out of bed, hustling as she grabbed her gun and badge. ‘A call about a homicide in Cramer Mountain,’ she’d said. The more opulent of Gastonia’s two gated communities. ‘Might be some money in there for you,’ she’d quipped on the way out the door.

Imagine my surprise when my mother called just ten minutes later.

“Alright that’s enough, get in the room, asshole,” Officer Jackson says standing outside the door, his voice strong enough to carry into the room.

I fish a Marlboro Red from my pocket, placing it on my lips and lighting it. I take three hits before the door across from me finally opens. Officer Jackson holds my potential client’s cuffed wrists as he drags him into the room.

He ushers the disheveled mess into the plastic seat across from me, and I stare at the eyes that look so much like mine, eyes that have haunted me for years.

“Take your time, Jaime, I won’t rush you,” Officer Jackson speaks to me as he chains the cuffs around my clients’ wrist to the middle of the table. He turns to walk out the door but hesitates in the frame. “I’m sorry about this,” he says, then he turns his eyes to my client.

“Gosh, isn’t that sweet?” My older brother says, a grin covering his face.

“Thanks, Jim,” I say, putting the cigarette out in the plastic cup.

Officer Jackson shuts the door behind him now, leaving me alone with my client.

I think about how many times I’ve been through these.

Most during the day. More than you’d think but not too many at five thirty in the morning on a weekday.

Only once before at five thirty on a Sunday morning.

However, I’ve never been through one of these with my lone sibling.

“Little buddy,” he says, “You look rough. You been out drinking? Pa says you’ve been hitting the sauce but Ma always tells him he’s making it up. Buddy of mine says he sees you down at Frankie’s all the time.” His hair is a mess of unwashed curls, complementing the beard that’s weeks past due for a shave.

“Kenny, I have to sta- “

“Ken.”

“Excuse me?” I ask.

“It’s Ken. You know that. You called me Kenny. But it’s Ken. I have our father’s name. Not you.”

“Fine,” I say, reproducing the cigarettes from my pocket, wishing more and more that I was still in Jane’s bed. Or even more, my own. With Maria beside me.

“When did you start smoking again? I thought Maria hated that.”

“Ken, did you say anything to the police?”

“See, was that so hard?” He smiles wide, my brother the only man who can be found smiling two hours after waking up beside a dead body.

“Ken,” I repeat, attempting to mask my annoyance in a professional tone, but probably overdoing it. “Did you say anything to the police?” I ask.

“If you represent me, would you make Ma pay? I mean, that doesn’t seem right.”

“Listen to me, Ken, this is important. I need to know everything before the detectives come in here. We have a limited amount of time alone. Did you or did you not say anything when they found you?”

He blows a curl from his face, ignoring my question.

“Can I bum one of those?” He nods to the cigarettes in my pocket.

I place one on his lips, light it for him. I pull out another one for myself. I can’t tell you the last time I smoked like this.

“You aren’t going to charge Ma are you? I mean, that would be really messed up.”

“Listen to me. I am not here as your brother,” I say, looking at my estranged brother. The image of my sons, Scott and Andrew, again come to mind. I’ve separated myself from Ken. With as much distance as I could. Will they end up like us? I take a drag of the cigarette and push the thought away. “I am not here as a friend,” I continue, “I am not here for our poor mother. I am here as your attorney. And as your attorney, and

one who has handled several cases like this, I need you to listen when I talk. And when you talk, I need you to only talk about this case and what we are going to do to try and help you out. Do you understand?”

He stares at me blankly, thrown off by the sharpness of my tone. He is unable to see me as anything but his kid brother, despite the seriousness of the situation.

“But are you really gonna charge Ma and Pa? I mean c’mon Jaime.”

“I said we aren’t family right now Ken. We are attorney and client. Attorney and client. If you can’t understand that then I will recommend a new attorney for you.”

He smiles big. “I bet you love that. Getting to make all the rules of who’s what to who,” he says, staring at me blankly. “We haven’t been family in a while, Jaime.”

I take a heavy pull of my cigarette, unbuttoning my sleeves as I do. I roll them up to my elbows. I sit back and loosen my tie. It's a tie the boys bought me for Christmas three years ago. Well, really, Maria bought it for them to give to me, but that’s enough. Better even. It's a UNC tie, one to wear on game days. ‘For good luck,’ Scott had said. Then Andrew piped up, ‘Extra good luck.’

“You know Ma says she hasn’t seen the boys in at least three months,” Ken speaks, making sure he has my full attention before continuing. “Pa says you are going to get divorced. You guys aren’t getting a divorce are you, Jamie? Tell me it isn’t true. You know how much Ma loves Maria, that just breaks her heart. You know they say that children in divorced homes are twice as likely to commit violent crimes than kids that-”

“Shut up!” I scream, banging my fist on the table, rising from the cold plastic of the seat beneath me.

Two minutes is all it took being with my older brother for the first time in almost three years, and I've lost my cool. "First off, that is a ridiculous statistic and you have no idea what the hell you are talking about. Second, my personal life is none of your goddamn business. And third, please, for the love of Jesus Christ, the Lord Almighty, stop talking like you are on Little House and the fucking Prairie with your ma and pa shit! Nobody talks like that Kenny! It's 2003, not 1850."

Kenny stares at me, a bewildered look on his face. It's as if for a moment he begins to understand the severity of the situation, but this dissipates quickly, and the Cheshire cat grin returns.

"It's clear which one of us inherited Pa's anger. No wonder Maria left you. I just hope you don't get that anger out the same way he did."

I return to my chair, sliding it closer to the table. Pulling in the remainder of my cigarette with one long toke, I close my eyes.

Anywhere else in the world. Anywhere else is where I would rather be right now.

"Skye told me her friend told her she met you at a bar and slept with you," he says now, the first mentioning of something close to why we are here, yet he doesn't hesitate when he says her name. Could be a sign of innocence. Or insanity. "Said she was bragging about sleeping with that lawyer from the cover of The Gazette. The one that saved the killer cop." He pauses, looking me up and down, as if I were the one in handcuffs. He has the same judgmental eyes as our father. "You know, I always thought you were like a social justice warrior. Then you went and got that cop off. Bet that hurts your soul. Pa said you got paid a huge chunk of change to do that. Started calling you a sellout. I got friends at the Mill ask me about it too. Ask me how my brother did that,

asking me if I'm related to the Anderson all over the news." For a moment I can see a tinge of jealous anger hiding in the corner of his eye. "You forget we still live in the same city you know? Sure, you moved Maria and the boys up to Cramer Woods but don't you forget that Huntington Forest is still in the city limits."

I run my hand through my hair, then place out the cigarette in my hand. I feel for the pack, there are only a few left. Who cares? I'll buy another one.

"Jesus you're smoking those things pretty fast little brother," he reminds me as I light another. I haven't smoked like this at the very least since my sons were born. I know that at least. In fact, I didn't smoke for about the first seven years of Scott's life.

"Ken, can we please talk about this case? What happened tonight? I need to know, Ken, because in a minute those detectives are going to come through that door and start their interrogation, and the only reason they even waited is because of the connections I have around this place, you understand me? They could have already come in here and started poking and prodding. But they haven't, they promised me a few minutes. So, in the few precious moments we have left before everything kicks into high gear, can we please talk about this case?" I ask, infuriated by my lack of control over this conversation.

"I'm innocent," he says. "That's all you need to know." He's scrunched over in his chair, the cuffs pulling him down. He's a solid six inches taller than I am, but he's nearly skin and bones, a body cultivated by blue collar work.

"Ken," I say, a thousand thoughts rushing through my mind. "You woke up next to her dead body. With blood on your hands."

He shakes his head, grinning still, but slightly less.

“I know you’ll take care of it. If you’re half as good as Ma says you are at your job. She brags about you so much. You know, I bet she could be a lawyer because she remembers everything you’ve ever told her on the phone. She was telling me when I called her tonight about what I can do and what I should do. You should have heard her Jaime. It was amazing. Sometimes I forget how intelligent that woman is.”

“Can we talk about it?”

“Ma’s intelligence?”

“No, Ken.” I inhale the smoke deep, praying that it can stave off the impending second wave of headaches coming my way. “Tonight. Can we talk about tonight? What happened?”

“You mean this morning?” He asked, smirking like a child who just learned that repeating what the adult says will piss them off.

“Sure, Ken,” I say. “This morning.”

He smirks wider now, playing with his wrist cuffs. He’s unfazed by the chains around his wrists, unlike any client I’ve ever had. He looks instead at his hands, calloused and cut. Blood still stains them in certain places.

“You remember that first time you came home from Chapel Hill?” He asks, as he looks away from me, focusing on the wall. The grin has entirely receded.

“Yes,” I say. Our father thought I was acting as if I was better than him, because I was working for the Dukakis campaign. When I’d offered a rebuttal to one of his political points, he struck me down with his fist. He began kicking me, until Ken tackled him. Then Ken punched him, over and over again.

“Why’d you stop me? The bastard deserved to be beaten.” He looks me fully in the eyes now, true emotion showing through, a combination of anger and fear. He balls his fists up in the cuffs, and I take real notice of the blood on his hands. His palms contain the majority of it.

“Did Skye deserve to be beaten tonight?”

He looks away, and stares at the wall, before beginning to laugh as several tears begin to escape from his face, like a running back hitting the b gap. He blows smoke from his face, the cigarette nearly finished, about to burn his lips.

“Saw the Heels got beat tonight. I’m sorry to hear it. I know you always cared about that team more than *anything* else in your life.” He looks me in the eyes again. I’ve always hated those eyes. We shared a room during most of my childhood. I remember being about eight, and every time I turned over in bed, there were those eyes.

I shake the thought from my head, looking away.

“Ken, you understand that just because you are my brother, the D.A. isn’t going to be easy on you. In fact it probably makes your situation worse. Along with who the victim was. I mean, what were you doing with her, Ken?”

He looks all around the room, as if the significance of the night is finally settling in.

“I loved her,” he begins to choke up now. Sadness overtaking his cynicism.

“C’mon Ken, she was trouble, you know that. There’s no reason for this town to have a Page Six in the paper and it does just for her!” I take a deep breath, calming myself. “You want to walk me through what happened?”

He turns to me with tears in his eyes, “You remember the only time Pa and I came to visit when you were at Chapel Hill?”

I sigh at yet another sidetrack, but from how the last five minutes have gone, all I can do is hear him out.

“We were playing against Miami. They were ranked second in the country.”

“Yeah... yeah,” he gets excited now, using his shoulder to wipe away a lone tear. “And you kept saying ‘We shouldn’t be in this, we shouldn’t be in this’ but you were. You and Pa, so happy. That quarterback just kept making throws. Now you know I never much cared for football but I just picked up on your guys’ emotion that night. You were on top of the world. And it came down to the end of the game, and the Tarheels got the ball with a few minutes left down four. You turned to me and said ‘Kenny, I can’t tell you how fuckin’ happy I am right now.’ And that’s the only time Pa never said nothin’ about your cussing. And when that QB ran in from a few yards out with barely any time left and you won. Was that stadium lit up? Everyone was so happy, smiles, hugs, people practically kissing the strangers next to them. And you two. You and Pa. Like best friends, hugging and singing along to the stadium music. It was amazing.” He pauses and before he can keep going I cut him off.

“Is there a point to all this?”

“That’s how Skye makes me feel. Like I shouldn’t be there. With her. At the places she brings me to, or in bed. I shouldn’t be with her, but I am. I’m the quarterback, getting in from the five-yard line on a scramble, and I’m also that stadium full of happy people. That’s why I was with her, Jaime. I would never hurt her.”

I shake my head.

“Remember how that night with dad ended, Ken?”

His shoulders sag.

“Do you remember?”

“Yeah Jaime, I do.” He sinks a bit in his chair.

“After the game we got in the wreck, the one caused by that drunk bastard because he refused to let you, the only sober one, drive.” I glance at the spider web scarring covering three knuckles on my right hand, “You were in the hospital for three months. That’s how that night turned out. Mom quit her job to sit by your bedside for three whole months. I got stitches in eight different places, and that old bastard got nothing. Not a scratch. That’s why you can’t invest in those feelings you’re describing.”

He looks away from me now towards the Casper-white walls of interrogation room C. There are three rooms in this jailhouse where you can have private meetings with clients, and preliminary interrogations are held. I’ve always preferred room C. I guess it’s the coziest.

“We’re going to have to talk about that if you get charged and this goes to a jury trial. You know that right? Probably bring in the doctors.”

“I didn’t kill her, Jaime,” he pleads.

“Ken, I’m just saying, if it comes to trial, and it may, we will have to call on some of your doctors.”

“Doctor Rick?” He begins to shed multiple tears now.

“Whoever will sit up there and testify on your behalf.”

“What does that mean?”

“Whoever will sit up there and say that the damage done to your brain that night, along with--well, what Dad did to you when we were kids,” I choke on my words for a moment. “That all those things together made you this way Ken. Made you what you are.”

Tears slip out of both his eyes in a perfect rotation now, watch them only on his left cheek as he turns his face from me, biting his lip.

“I didn’t mean to hurt her, Jaime, you know that.”

“I know that Ken. I do. I’m your attorney now, Ken, so I believe in your innocence.”

“I’m not what you think, what she said I was, what the asshole old man said I am! I’m not Jaime. I’m not a monster. I’m not a murderer!”

“Ken, look at me,” I say. You learn specific ways of saying those words depending on a client’s attitude. Somehow, those three words always get their attention. “Listen to me, Ken. The police think you are a killer now,” I wait a second. “Do you understand?”

He looks at me through red eyes, and though I didn’t know him as a child I felt the look in his eyes at this moment was that of Ken Anderson Jr. when he was a kid, fearful of everything in the world.

Especially scared of home.

CHAPTER III

In Gastonia we don't have multiple police precincts like in the TV shows. In Gastonia we just have the one precinct, headquarters for city cops. Then on the edge of town the Sheriff's office, where he and his multiple deputies preside. Because of this, when my clients are interrogated it doesn't happen in a box near detectives desks like in the movies and television shows. It happens in the same room where I get to meet with my clients, in the jail. So as the detectives enter room C, I have been through the process countless times.

"Ken, move the chair around," I say, ushering my brother up, moving him awkwardly to the side of the table beside me, allowing the two detectives to grab chairs from the corner and slide them to where Ken was just a few seconds ago.

"Mr. Anderson." Detective Fain nods to me, then my brother. "Mr. Anderson," the left corner of his mouth twitches as he speaks. His beard has been freshly trimmed, no longer bushy around his face, his eyes concentrated on my brother. His mouth tics the way it often does, the left side of his lip chewing on an imaginary carrot. They say it does that when he feels he's busted open a case.

We used to be golf buddies. Hell, actual friends, despite our obvious differences.

The biggest case of both our careers ruined that.

I look to his partner, Detective Murray. She doesn't look me in the eyes, instead concentrating on her partner.

“I’m going to need you to put that out,” Fain nods to the cigarette in my hand.
“You shouldn’t have that in here.”

“It’s fine,” Detective Murray says, “Let him smoke it.” She still doesn’t look towards me when she speaks. I wonder if she's still thinking about what we were doing just two hours ago. Or maybe she’s wondering if I’m capable of what my brother did. We do share the same blood.

“Is my client being charged?” I ask, looking at Jane. They can legally hold him for forty-eight hours, without an arrest. But they risk anything he says becoming inadmissible.

“Not yet,” Fain says smirking, his lip stopping moving for the time being.

“You don’t plan on that though do you Fain?”

“Detective Fain. Your client is free to go for the time being if he does me this simple favor of looking at these four photographs.”

“Of course, any reaction or statement my client makes after this deal won’t be held against him.”

“Of course.”

“Well, Ken? Forty-eight hours or a quick look at some pictures?”

He looks at me, eyes now red. The confidence he has in a room alone with me gone. Something that has always happened to him. Abundantly confident with the family, quickly timid around everyone else.

“Yeah, we’ll take a look. A quick look. Then we are gone.”

I nod to Ken. He doesn’t say a word.

Fain slides four crime scene photos onto the table. Jane turns away and looks towards the door.

I look down. Horror seeps from the images, infecting my eyes.

There she lies, Skye, in a pool of her own blood. Lifeless, nothing left but bruised and battered flesh. It's a Picasso fever dream of red and white.

I look away, holding in the whiskey that attempts to make its way up. I've seen dead bodies before, but never something as brutal as this.

I look at Ken, mostly in disbelief. I never thought my brother was capable of this. I don't think he is capable of this. Not in the right state of mind.

His face bunches up, tears in his eyes. He begins to shake.

"No! No! No!" He yells out, the shaking intensifying, until his limbs are moving congruently to a brutal rhythm. "I didn't do that! I wouldn't do that!"

"That's enough, Detective," I say, turning the photos over, looking at my brother.

"I loved her!" He begins to yell, "I didn't do it!" He yells, reiterating both over and over, the phrases playing tennis in his brain. "I loved her – I didn't do it!"

I stand, grabbing my brother's arm, removing him from his chair, his leg violently sending the chair to the ground. Cold plastic meeting cold tile.

"We looked at your little slideshow. Now remove him from his cuffs and let him go. Now!"

Fain ignores me, looking towards Ken.

"So, you just woke up next to her? And she was like that? Either you were so drunk you didn't hear her get beat to death, or you were the one who did it. Now, which seems more plausible?," Fain says, his voice a level between stern and yelling.

“Do not say another word, Ken! Let him go Detective!”

“What happened, Ken? She slept around on you? Tell you that you were useless? She say something about your famous brother here? How he was better?”

All of Ken's weight shifts, pushing him towards the ground, forcing me to hold him up, his wrists still cuffed to the table.

“Uncuff him now or charge him, Detective,” I say, pulling Ken nearly back to his feet. “We had a deal.”

I watch Jane remove the keys from her pocket, twisting them into the cuffs on Ken’s wrist, freeing him. He now fully collapses in my arms. Tears sobbing from his face. He keeps screaming those two phrases.

Jane finally looks at me, pain in her eyes.

My pain.

In this moment, I know she loves me.

CHAPTER IV

I wait until my mother has picked up Ken, standing by his side as they process him out. I don't walk him to the car, however. This is a tactical decision. I can't face my mother and her fury of a thousand questions at this moment.

"Is there a payphone I can use?" I ask the nearest deputy.

"There's one outside, counselor," he says, frowning at me. Half the city cops like me, the other half hate me. I'll let you guess which category he falls under.

I step out into the brisk morning weather, not cold enough for a jacket, not warm enough for a short sleeve shirt, and walk towards the payphone.

I make two calls. First to my partner Dom. It wakes him, and he begrudgingly agrees to come pick me up once I've promised to buy him breakfast. The second call is quick.

"Yo," a groggy voice speaks into the phone after three rings.

"Joe, it's Jaime."

"What's good, Mr. Anderson?"

"Look, I got something for you. I'll pay you twice the normal rate. But it's hot, I doubt you can even get to the scene until later tonight, if at all before charges are filed. However--"

"You want me to see it before the police finish doing their thing."

"Yeah."

"Whose place?"

“Skye Davis - 5114 Summerell Avenue.”

“Shit man, Cramer Mountain? Skye Davis? I don’t know if I’ll be able to-”

“Twice your rate Joe, anything you can get. Let me know.”

There’s a silence over his end of the phone. I stare at the courthouse across the street. My arena. I briefly consider the biggest battles I’ve won there. If this does go to trial, none will measure up to this.

Joe coughs. “Okay, I’ll be at your office tomorrow, six o’clock. With whatever I can get.”

“Number four, two cream two sugars?”

“For sure.” Then he hangs up. I hang the phone up and walk towards a bench to sit on while waiting for Dom.

-

“Jaime, I’m sorry,” Dom says to me, shaking his head. He’s wearing his Sunday sweatpants and an old Tarheel t-shirt. An intramural one, from when we won a meaningless trophy together all those years ago.

“It’s alright. I just don’t know where this is headed.”

“I mean let’s be honest Jaime, if the evidence was actually as bad as you think, ‘ol Sherlock in there wouldn’t have ambushed Ken with those pictures. Attempt to get a confession like that.”

“I would have had it all thrown out, he knows that.”

Dom turns his car into the parking lot of the iHop on Cox Rd, a restaurant that has been the butt of many adolescent jokes. “So, instead, he lets you talk to him, which probably gets him more riled up, then busts in holding those photos,” he pauses. “Were they really that bad?”

I close my eyes, seeing them, Skye laying there. Pools of blood, so much of it, her lifeless corpse, white as snow. The pouches of blue bruises left on her skin.

“Let’s go inside,” I say, getting out of the car.

Dom nods, following me into the restaurant. We get a booth and remain silent. He looks at me and knows what I am thinking, what I’m feeling. We’ve been together since we were children, when Mrs. Carswell removed us both from Cramerton Baptist Child Care for having ‘the spirit of the devil in us.’ According to my mother, we were just being boys.

“Two coffees, black, and I’ll have the triple chocolate chip stack with extra whipped cream, two sides of bacon and a plate of sausage. Fill it up, I don’t want to see any white on that plate,” Dom says to the waitress.

“Just the coffee for me,” I say. The waitress nods and walks away. “Casey got you on a diet again?”

“We ate vegetable soup for dinner. In what Southern state does that classify as a meal? That should be a crime itself.”

I laugh for the first time since I got that call. Then we remain silent until the waitress returns with our coffees. She sets the plate of creamers and sugars in front of us, all the while saying nothing. Right now, we don’t necessarily give off the small talk vibe.

I look over at my partner thinking about things I don’t want to say aloud.

Dom may be the only person in this world I am truly honest with. We came out of undergraduate and law school together. He stood beside me at the altar. He was the first one aside from myself and Maria to hold both my boys when they were born. We opened our own firm together, which until sixteen months ago was the most profitable law firm in Gastonia.

One case single handedly ruined that.

“The fact that he woke up next to her screams guilt, Dom. But the blood was on the inside of his hands. Meaning he attempted to resuscitate her, and he blew over a point two eight. They had a large party. Lots of people. But I can’t shake this feeling, Dom, this awful feeling. I want to believe he didn’t do it.” I watch the steam rise from my coffee, hoping the words I’ve just released into the air will float away with it.

“Jaime, you can’t say that.”

“Those photos Dom, I mean, I’ve seen some twisted things in my life. But that...”

“Jaime, you never know what happened. You said Officer Jim said they found what? Like twenty something empty bottles of liquor? You just said they had a party? Maybe someone framed him, killed her and moved him next to her.”

“He was living there with her, you know that?”

“So?”

“All those marks on her body. Only someone with a deep connection to someone would hit them that many times. Someone in a psychopathic rage.”

“Who knows how many people were at that party? Plenty of people who knew her well.”

I sip my coffee, the taste of an actual good cup warming my chest.

“There’s a lot to be sorted out. But if he did do it…”

Dom shakes his head. He’s always liked Ken more than I have. It’s because he didn’t grow up with him, didn’t have to sleep in the same room with Ken’s beaten ghost.

He stares at me, his brain turning a million miles a minute. I know what he’s thinking about. He lets the silence hang in the air for several more minutes before finally coming out with it.

“Did you think about what this could do to us? With your connection to that family?” He whispers sternly, looking over both shoulders before he speaks.

There it is.

The reason we are struggling to stay afloat.

The reason my brother truly has no idea what he’s gotten the both of us into.

“We’ll have to deal with that when the time comes,” I say, watching the waitress arrive with the food.

“Jaime, you about destroyed our firm-” he stops as the waitress sets his feast down in front of him.

“What am I going to do, Dom? You know what they’ll push for. They’ll push for death, Dom. They’ll seek blood as retribution.”

He looks up from his pancakes, nodding with some sense of understanding.

“I can’t let that happen. I’ll just have to figure out the rest when the time comes.”

“Okay, I trust you. But Jaime?”

“Yeah?”

“You need to go ahead and talk to Maria about this when you pick up the boys today. I’m sure it will be in the Gazette tomorrow and all over the news by noon. She needs to know.”

I watch him eat, sipping my coffee, thinking about my wife.

“I need you to take me to Frankie’s to get my truck,” I say, placing a twenty and a ten on the table.

-

It is a strange feeling. Being parked in your own driveway and feeling like a stranger. As I sit behind the wheel of my silver F150 I can’t help but think about what Sundays used to be like in this house.

Maria would wake me up silently to not wake the boys and we’d make love before they had time to run downstairs and bust into our room. We’d get them ready for the early service at the church where her best friend’s husband preached. After the early service, we’d come home and I would make a massive brunch, the full works, like Dom’s iHop order.

Then the boys and I would get out of our Sunday clothes and into our real Sunday outfits, Scott in his Steve Beuerlein jersey, Andrew in his little Julius Peppers jersey. I’d tell them stories of Peppers at Chapel Hill, roaring past linemen, altering games in the opposing team’s backfield. Maria would roll her eyes but she could never contain her smile. We’d watch until after the Panthers game when we all would inevitably fall asleep, the four of us, the boys in my arms. Maria’s head on my shoulder.

“Fuck,” I say aloud and hit the wheel. I rarely get to see my sons now. Only every other weekend, and even then, they rarely stay the night. I get to take them to some practices, come to some games. But mostly though, I just have a few hours every other Saturday and Sunday.

I can already see Maria poking her head through the blinds as I approach the door.

“What are you doing here, James?” she asks in a low voice. Only Maria and my mother call me by that name. “You aren’t supposed to be here until after church.” Her reddish-brown hair curls to her shoulders, messy from sleep.

“I have to tell you something, Maria,” I say, trying to step inside, but she blocks my path.

“If the boys see you, they will go crazy with excitement.” She looks as beautiful as the day I met her. In a campus coffee shop, she was reading *LaBrava* and I knew then I’d met the love of my life. We went to Sutton’s after. We both got BLT’s. She had sweet tea, I had water with lemon.

She used to tell people we didn’t sleep together on the first date.

I used to tell them that we weren’t getting separated.

“Maria, listen to me, something has happened. Something you need to know. It will be everywhere soon.”

She looks at me. She knows how dramatic I am. Every little thing in my life is a movie in my head. She says that in my mind I am meant to be played by Brad Pitt when it finally comes out.

It used to be in times like this, when I came to her in a panic, she would cradle my face and tell me everything would be alright. ‘My little drama boy’ she’d say with a small

pout and we'd both laugh. The most serious girl I'd ever met in the world, speaking with an adolescent tone, and suddenly everything was okay. Now she just stares at me, no goofy voice, just contempt stemming from her lips.

“Outside,” she says, ushering me into the front yard of my house.

“The grass is cut,” I notice.

“Officer Alex, from my school, I paid him to cut it.”

“I could have cut it.”

“James, please. Why are you here?”

“It's Ken.”

“Your brother?”

“I think he killed someone.”

“What?” The look on her face spells horror. Maybe the look on mine should say the same.

“He woke up next to his girlfriend, dead. Called the police himself. Most logically he killed her.”

“The police?”

“They haven't charged him yet, I think they want to make sure everything is in line before they do since his girlfriend was, well- “

“The daughter of the man running for Governor??”

“The former Mayor.”

“Who is now running for Governor.”

“Yeah.” I look at the finely cut grass. The blades are perfect, manicured as a presentation for the outside world. “You should have told me the grass was getting bad. I can cut my own grass.”

“You live at Gastonia South apartments now James. I’m sure they have a gardener there.”

“Still, you should have told me.”

“Are you going to represent Ken?”

“I don’t know, Maria. I guess. I should. I mean, if there is anything I am good at, it's my job.”

She looks at me, the look in her light brown eyes that says she wants to cheer me up. But she has passed that stage in her life. The one where she eases my mind and numbs the pain when I am feeling bad about myself.

“I’ll tell you what, why don’t you take the boys earlier than normal, spend the morning with them. Just get them back before four. They have Scouts tonight,” she looks away from me as she speaks. Like something else is on her mind, but she’s holding back.

“Okay, yeah, that would be great.”

“James?” she says.

“Yeah?”

“You need to change your clothes. You smell like a dive bar.”

CHAPTER V

“Daddy, can I get cheese on my hashbrowns?” Andrew asks me, holding his menu straight up, so that I can’t see his little head behind it.

“You can get whatever you like son,” I say, lowering his menu to smile at him. He’s wearing one of his UNC pullovers, one I bought him for Christmas this past year. His hair is a ruffled mess, as any seven-year-old boy’s is, at any time of day. I look at Scott and his hair is covered by his Panthers hat, worn backwards on his head. He’s been wearing it that way since he was five, when he was old enough to recognize that’s how I wore mine.

“Dad, can I ask you something?” Scott says to me, looking out the glass plate window beside our booth. I try to see what he’s looking at. Perhaps he’s reading the sign from the Church across the street. It reads: *Will You be Ready to Answer for Your Sins?*

“Anything, son,” I say, hoping the deathly urgency of the sign goes over his nine-year-old head.

“Are you ever coming back?” He’s staring at me with his brown eyes, the same ones his mother has. A sudden shock goes through my skull.

“What do you mean? I’m right here,” I say in a high voice, attempting to deflect the seriousness of his question.

“No dad, I mean back home. Like to stay at the house again. With mommy, and us,” he says, looking to his little brother.

For nearly over a year, I've somehow managed to avoid these questions from either one of them. Maria and I have navigated this separation as best we could, as far as our sons go at least.

How do I answer this? If I tell the truth, will that not just open another can of worms?

"Yeah daddy, are you?" Andrew asks, piling on.

I've argued a case in front of the State Supreme Court. I've had three clients acquitted in murder trials. Yet, I have no words for this moment.

"What are you three men having?" The waitress with cigarette-stained teeth asks, smiling at Scott and Andrew, saving me without knowing it.

"Boys, go ahead and order," I say, smiling at both of them. As they order I think about it further. I know the answer to their question, but I haven't been able to answer that question truthfully when I ask myself it in the mirror.

"And for you?" The waitress asks.

"The all-star breakfast, with ham, onions, and cheese on those hashbrowns," I say, handing her all three of our menus.

"Sounds good," she says, grabbing the menus and walking away.

"Onions? Onions make your breath stink, they're nasty," Scott says.

"Well, I like them," Andrew says.

"You're only saying that because Dad ordered them."

"Am not!"

"Are too stupid!"

“Hey,” I say. “Don’t you ever call your brother stupid. You two need to stop that, and love each other. You know how lucky you are to have each other? To have a brother? There’s nothing better in life than having a sibling so close in age, you’ll always have a best friend, someone to rely on. Someone that always understands you. So, no fighting, you hear?”

“Yes sir,” they both say reluctantly.

“Now both of you say you're sorry.”

They look at me and both apologize begrudgingly.

“You two want to go to Franklin Square after this? Go to the movies? Or we can go to Party City. I know it’s early, but their Halloween costumes are probably already on the shelves.”

“Oh yeah!” They both yell, smiling as the waitress comes by and refills our drinks.

They begin to talk to the waitress about something but I don’t hear it. I think about what I just told them, and where it came from. I can’t tell you how many times my mother said that to me, how fortunate Ken and I were to have each other.

She never mentioned how unfortunate we were to have our father. How the only shared understanding we had was that we lived down the hall from a monster. The only thing Ken and I ever truly had in common were being victims of that house. That, and the same last name. I stare out the window, at that church sign, its haunting plastic letters glaring to all passerbys.

Ken never had a chance.

Hell, I'm not sure that I did either.

About all the entertainment you'll find in Gastonia is in Franklin Square, where over forty shops are located, along with a Regal movie theater. After deciding that there wasn't an age-appropriate movie they wanted to see, and that it was too early to buy Halloween costumes, we stopped in the local bookstore.

"I'm going to get a coffee. You boys want anything?" I ask them. Sometimes when I look at them, really look at them, I can see the combination of myself and Maria that created them. My hair, her eyes. Their perfect little smiles, just like their mothers'. Their light brown hair and brown eyes, coming from both of us. They inherited all the physical beauty their mother holds, and perhaps what little handsomeness I have to offer.

I just hope they both inherit their mother's soul, and not their father's.

"Can we get hot chocolate with whipped cream? That's how Andrew likes it," Scott says, looking at and smiling at his brother.

"Of course," I say, and we approach the counter to order. "You guys go look around for a book too, and not one that's just full of pictures."

As I wait in line, one of the local workers walks past me, carrying today's copies of The Gaston Gazette. The headline catches my eyes.

"Sir, can I grab one of those?" I ask, and he mumbles something to himself while he hands me one. "Thank you," I say, reading the headline.

Crime in Cramer Woods:

Police Respond to Reported Homicide

I read further, but little else is contained on the cover. In fact, so little else is provided that I wonder how it even became the headline story. Product of living in a small town. For now, though, there is nothing about Skye Davis, or more importantly, my brother. But again, that's just for now.

“Crazy, huh?” The woman behind me in line asks. “People pay so much to live in that neighborhood, but crime can happen anywhere.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I nod, staring at the cover image of the gated neighborhood's sign.

-

“Daddy got us books!” Andrew says, as Maria greets us at the front door. Her hair is up in a ponytail now, and she's wearing a Wake Forest Law School shirt, an old one of mine.

“No way! How nice,” she smiles at the boys, “What did you get?” She doesn't have on any makeup, and I've always found her more beautiful that way. The shape of her face, that's what always attracted me the most to her. I've always found it breathtaking when she smiles, the way her cheeks rise and accentuate her natural beauty.

“The new Harry Potter!” Scott shouts.

“The Order of the Phoenix!” Andrew says. “We're going to start reading it today!”

“We got you something, too, Mom,” Scott says, handing her a plastic bag with a book in it. They both run past her now, into the house.

“You bought me a book,” she asks, the smile gone from her face.

“Well, they did.”

“Yeah,” she half smiles, “with what money?”

“I just figured you’d like it.”

She removes the book from the plastic now, holding it in her hands.

“*The Davinci Code*, wow, I’ve been wanting to read it,” she says, nearly allowing herself to smile at me.

“Dom was talking about it the other day, said it was amazing. They had a whole shelf dedicated to it. I figured you might like it.”

“Yeah, well, thank you, James.”

I hesitate on the front steps. “Alright, well, I’ll see you later. Thanks for letting me have them earlier than normal today.”

She nods. “You’re welcome.”

I turn and walk back towards the truck, the same sinking feeling coming over me that always does after I drop them off, leaving my house. My children, my wife.

“James, wait,” Maria says. “I need to tell you something too. I was going to wait, but well, you’d find out tomorrow anyways.”

“What’s that?” I ask.

“I filed the papers. I got a job, a vice principal position in South Carolina, where Stacy and Mick live.”

CHAPTER VI

As I drive away my hands become numb, and I light my last cigarette, hoping the smoke will bring me some kind of feeling. Any feeling at all would be nice. I need a drink, and I can't think about anything else at this moment.

She actually filed for it.

I'm going to get divorced.

I could lose my children. Today could be the last day I ever spend with them.

Everything we've been through, and this is it. Even with the cigarette the numbness remains. I should be thinking about my boys, but really, I'm thinking about *her*. There was once, when we'd been seeing each other for four months, that we were lying on the floor together at her apartment wrapped in sheets. She held my head in her lap, and I told her I loved her. She got red, said thank you, like some kind of sitcom gag. We talked for hours about how it was too early for me to say that, and how she needed me to understand that. I told her I did, that I was lying, I was just caught up in the afterglow of our weekend long sex marathon. I do wear my emotions on my sleeve after all.

After finally convincing her that I didn't actually love her, in an attempt to not scare her away, Dom picked me up and we went to dinner at a little Chinese place called Chef King. They had the best sushi around. I remember telling him about what happened, and he laughed. All through college he'd been with Casey, and I had attempted to be some ill-fated Casanova. Yet here I was, telling a girl I loved her too soon.

He asked me if I actually meant it.

I said yes, taking a bite of the spicy tuna roll in front of me.

And not only did I mean it, but I knew she was the girl I was going to marry.

Now, she's the girl I'm going to divorce.

-

My apartment is small, only three pieces of furniture. My poker table, a punching bag, and a worn-out couch. The fake leather has been peeling for years, but I could never get rid of it. I paid nearly two grand for the couch in my house with Maria, so I thought it would be nice to remember the one Dom and I picked up off the side of the road with our frat brother Shoey. Guess I never knew if I'd need it again.

I turn on the television, tuning it to one of the afternoon NFL games. I try to watch it, but I can't concentrate. Whether I have money on this game or not is consequential to me at the moment.

I head to the kitchen, searching for the strongest form of alcohol I have. I settle on vodka, sipping it from the bottle after I realize there are no clean cups around to make a drink in.

I used to hate Sundays as a kid.

Ken did too.

Our mother dressed us up like dolls. Made this big show of her boys being at church with her husband. She made my skin crawl.

But my father, he was the worst. Clean suit, slicked back hair. The greatest faux Christian there ever was. The pastor would shake his hand, Ken Anderson, the great usher. He'd count the money every week, just his little 'act for God.'

Once, when Pastor Ronnie was exalting my father with praise, both Ken and I rolled our eyes. Pastor Ronnie saw us and chastised us both for it. He pulled us aside, scolding us about disrespecting our 'wonderful' father. He begged us to understand how important respecting our elders was to God. He looked me in the eyes, and then over to Ken, and repeated to us both his favorite phrase.

'The lord will consider the entirety of your actions from the beginning to the end when it comes time. Will you, my boys, be ready to meet him, when the man comes around?'

My father repeated that phrase all the time.

When the man comes around.

As if he didn't sin on a regular basis, drinking, whoring, beating.

But every single Sunday he was perfect.

It wasn't until one of my frat brothers introduced me to a guy who knew a guy that Sundays became my favorite day of the week. Well, only when I won of course.

Then I had a family, and Sundays became about more than money lines and parlays.

Maria's little kisses on my neck, how great she looked all dressed up. We never made it out the door on time, but the later we were the better she looked. The boys, in their cute little polo vests, always the best looking kids in that church.

I feel like my mother when I reminisce on this.

What if I never get to see them again? Hold them, hug them, kiss them. What if I never get to watch them grow up, play ball, graduate?

It takes a few sips to shake the thought from my mind.

I flip channels, and there it is, on the local morning news. I turn up the volume. The desk anchor is in the middle of handing it off to an onsite reporter.

“Thank you, Sandra. Yes, here in Cramer Mountain, the normally serene Sunday mood has turned quite dour. Early this morning police responded to multiple calls about a domestic violence case. What they found was far worse. Thirty-three-year-old Skye Davis was found murdered. At this moment in time, the police aren’t responding to questions and have yet to name a suspect.” The reporter pauses. An image of Skye Davis appears, smiling, in the upper right-hand corner. “Skye Davis has been a prominent fixture in the news for years now here in Gastonia. From her multiple drunk driving arrests to her role as the mistress of former North Carolina Attorney General David Tilman in his divorce. Skye Davis might be more famous, however, for being the daughter of Bill Davis the third. The Davis family has long operated and run the majority of Gastonia, owning the Davis Mill that the city is built around. More recently Bill Davis won the Republican nomination in the state’s gubernatorial race in a landslide just months ago. How he will respond has yet to be seen, as his people are currently not accepting press requests either. We will keep you updated here as more information pours in. Back to you, Sandra.”

I flip the channel, and there is Skye’s face again. They chose one of her best pictures, the one they always flashed up when covering the Attorney General’s divorce.

Suddenly I can only see it bloodied and beaten, red overtaking the picture. I turn off the television and retreat to the kitchen for more vodka.

The phone begins to ring. I see my mother's number pop up on the phone. I watch it blink, over and over. This is probably the first Sunday in her life the woman hasn't been in church by nine o'clock. I watch the red signal beam until it disappears and my machine picks up.

'Hello, you have reached the voicemail of James Anderson. I can't make it to the phone right now. Please leave a message and I will return your call at my earliest convenience.'

"James - James please answer if you are there . . ." the urgency and anxiety in her voice seeps through the phone. I wait for her to say something else, but there is nothing else. I hear her breathing for a few minutes, nearly hyperventilating, but then the line goes dead.

Staring at the phone, I sip my drink and wonder whether I should answer. But what would I say? There is not much to say. I will help him. Like I told Dom. I have to help him. They let him go, which for now means they have no physical evidence, just a hunch from the City's best homicide detective. Best detective period. But I've poked holes in hunches before. Men don't go to jail based on hunches. They certainly don't get sent to the chair on hunches. For now, I wait.

I wait to hear from Joe. To hear from the police. To see if the charge comes. And if it does, then we wait some more.

Wait for the warrant, then the initial appearance. Wait for the charge. Then I proceed with my job. Because I know what's coming. It's just a matter of the ferocity of it.

The phone begins to ring again and I pull the cord from the wall. Then I sift through the leftovers in my fridge, hoping to find something not too old to eat.

I find nothing and settle on more vodka.

-

I'm shaken awake, and in a moment of fear swing my hand in a half-balled fist at whoever is waking me. Jane dodges it, and lightly slaps my face.

"Jesus Christ James, how much have you had to drink?"

"Jaime."

"Huh?"

"You always call me Jaime, why are you calling me James now?" I blink my eyes several times, coming too, the pain on the left side of my head the first real thing I notice.

"How much do you drink?"

"What time is it?" I rise from the couch to move past her, moving clumsily in pursuit of the Ibuprofen in my kitchen drawer.

"It's nearly midnight," she says. She gets up from the couch to walk towards me, setting her gun and badge on my kitchen counter. "I called four times. You didn't answer. It said you didn't have a machine either."

“My mother wouldn’t stop calling.”

The Ibuprofen hits my tongue, and I realize that my attempt to swallow them without water is in vain. I stick my head underneath the kitchen faucet.

“James, I mean, Jaime.” She smiles softly at me. “Are you okay?” She places her gun and badge on the kitchen counter and walks over to begin caressing my face.

“Yeah, I’m good,” I say. My eyes fully open, taking in the darkness of the room.

“Why are you here?”

“To check on you.”

“Jane, that’s not your job.” The moment the words leave my lips I regret them. Pain forms slightly in her eyes, but she shakes it away quickly. She drops her hands and takes a few steps back.

She looks towards my tiny hallway for a moment, the six feet of space separating the living room and kitchen from one bedroom and bath. There is a silence between us. I wonder if she is waiting for me to apologize. Why don’t I apologize?

“They are arresting him right now. Judge Carson signed off on the warrant an hour ago. Your buddy Judge Anthony wouldn’t do it.”

“So, that’s why you’re really here.”

“No. I’m here for you. I mean, what would you do if you found out anyways? It’s not like you can stop him from being brought in with a warrant.”

“You don’t want me there when you question him again. I bet Fain already has him in a box,” I move towards the fridge, grabbing a Miller Lite. “I’ll have it thrown out,” I say as I pop the tab on the beer.

“What if he confesses?”

“He’s clearly mental, Detective Murray. Look at that crime scene and tell me an insane person isn’t the only one capable of that. If for some reason my client were to confess it is only because of further mental distress placed on an already mentally distressed mind.”

“Detective Murray?” She laughs.

“This is cheap, Jane, you coming over here like this. You trying to block me from helping him?”

“Jaime, Fain is too smart to interview him without his attorney present. You know that. He’s just being booked right now. I came over here to let you know before everyone else, before it’s on the cover of the newspaper and all over TV.”

There is clear pain in her eyes when she speaks to me.

“How’d they know to send you? You tell them you were sleeping with city police enemy number one, or did Detective Poirot over there figure it out?”

“Jaime, listen to me right now,” she grabs her gun and badge and places them back on her hip. “We have evidence, Jaime, and Ken is going to be charged.”

“He’s innocent, Jane,” I say, not knowing if I even believe the words myself.

“He’s being arrested, Jaime,” she says to me sternly. “And one more thing.”

“What’s that?” I ask, noticing tears forming in her eyes.

“This is over. I realized tonight that all I am to you is a distraction, just like the booze, and the other vices you think I don’t know exist. I don’t know where this case is going to go. But you think I don’t know about the Newton trial? Everyone does, James. And now with this, I don’t know what’s going to happen. But I can’t be around as a crutch for you when everything comes crashing down,” she says, turning to walk away.

“Jane, wait... Maria filed for divorce Friday.”

“What are you trying to say, James? That you actually want something real here?”

She stares at me; her face having become like a brick in the span of seconds.

I don't know what I am trying to say.

“You're toxic, James. I knew that from the start, but it was fun. I see it all now,”

she says, turning to head towards the door.

I should say something to her.

She steps outside, but before she fully closes the door, she tells me one more thing. “Hell, I'm amazed you even made it this far with the family you got.”

Then she shuts the door behind her, another woman leaving.

CHAPTER VII

I'm up early, showering and sucking down two cups of coffee before five-thirty. I'm in the truck and on the way to the office at fifteen before six. I haven't woken up this early in a while. As I stop through the McDonald's drive-thru, I contemplate the day ahead. The warrant was served; Ken has been charged. I will have to stop by and see him. Most likely room C again. We'll have a similar conversation, and I will have to explain to him what an initial appearance is, and how we will get a slight look at the District Attorney's hand. That this appearance determines nothing, aside from bail. I'll have to finally speak to my mother about that, if I can even successfully garner him bail.

I have to shake my relationship to Ken from my mind. Work this as I would any of my cases. That's the only way he stands a chance.

"Have a great day," the drive thru attendant says as she hands me my order, and I think about an idea I forgot about in the last twenty-four hours.

I've got other clients. Other cases. This is going to be time consuming. And very expensive.

And then I'll have this divorce settlement. Or no settlement, just more time and money fighting another losing case.

"Sir, um, you can go now," the drive thru attendant says as nicely as possible as a horn honks behind me.

"Oh, yeah, my bad."

Any attorney worth their salt in Gaston County works in an office located on West Main Avenue. Even more than that, the cream of the crop work out of the Simpson building, owned by the family of the deceased Wally Simpson, the most prominent attorney of his time in the area. Among his clients were Bill Davis and Bill Davis, Jr.

The building is nearly as old as the city, and has only ever been used to house law firms. Five stories high, with very few modern renovations, it's as old as the law itself. Among the great features is that it stands out prominently in downtown and is within walking distance of the courthouse. Across from that is the police department, where my brother currently resides.

I inherited my office from one of Wally's closet friends, a man named John Strauss. He hired me when I was fresh out of law school, luring me away from the District Attorney's office where Dom took a job. We were local boys and both interned for John as undergraduates and first-year law students. It's always bothered Dom a bit that John only offered me a job.

I worked for John for four years, arguing the cases he created. He always said he was the coach, and I was the quarterback. I just had to run his plays the right way, and I always did, winning nineteen jury trials in my time working for him, losing only three. I helped him coerce the DA into even more settlements, too many to keep count.

John taught me nearly everything he knew before his wife killed him after finding him in bed with his mistress. John left nothing to his family, giving everything to an illegitimate child no one knew about aside from myself and a few close friends. His

family fought for years to gain any cent from this unknown family member. They inevitably lost in court, after I successfully defended his illegitimate child. It was the least I could do for him, him putting my name on his lease and all, along with teaching me nearly everything he knew.

I inherited the office and brought Dom in, and we turned Strauss and associates to Anderson and Chavez, Attorneys at Law. We've had the office for seven years now, right on the first floor of the Simpson building.

When you walk in you see all the names of the offices by the entrance, but the only actual office you see outright is ours, at the end of the long hall. The only first floor office, which might not be as flashy as the fourth or fifth floor, but as John always said, people are lazy.

Especially our clients.

They love the first floor in a building that has no elevator.

I often enter through the back because attempting to find a parking spot on the street downtown is a hassle. Also, the back door leads directly into the two separate offices, and not the waiting room and reception area. Dom and I are the only two tenants of the building that have this luxury.

As I go to turn my key in the door while holding two coffees and a greasy bag of food, someone opens it for me.

"Mr. Anderson, I got that," Joe says, grabbing the food from me, hoisting the door open with his foot.

“Joe, my man, you look tired,” I say, turning on the light and placing the coffee on my desk. I read the cup to see which one has the cream and sugar, then I hand it to him, taking the lid off of mine for a large sip.

“And you look hungover.”

Joe begins going through the bag, separating our food. He’s got a small cigar hanging from his lips, smoking it slowly.

I slide open the bottom drawer of my desk, retrieving a pack of Marlboro Reds. I decide to smoke one before I eat. “You have any trouble?” I ask.

He nods yes, placing the cigar in my ashtray and beginning to cover his breakfast burrito in hot picante sauce.

“My usual guy wasn’t at the scene, said he couldn’t get me in if he was. Said it was airtight.”

Joe is well-built, a past life as a boxer and several years in jail having led to massive shoulders and forearms. I had a client once, a long time ago, one of my first, tell me that prison did that to a man. You either left in the worst or the best shape of your life, no in-between. I didn’t know Joe when he went in, but the first time I visited him about his case he’d been in nearly sixteen months, and he looked drastically stronger than he’d looked in his file.

I blow smoke from my lips. “Well damn, Joe, you could have called to tell me you had nothing.”

He laughs. His bald head shakes back and forth as does so. He blows on his hot coffee before sipping it.

“I didn’t say I didn’t get anything. I said I had trouble.”

I nod and smoke my cigarette, waiting for the coffee to cool a bit before I sip it again. There are specific cases I've used Joe on as my investigator. Every defense attorney uses one, especially if they often take on criminal cases. I have two. Ron, an older retired cop who worked in secret for John for years, who I previously used on the majority of my cases. But Ron has gotten a little slower over the last half decade. Then there is Joe, who as an unlicensed private investigator has made a decent living going to certain places cops, retired or otherwise, aren't welcome. At first he did work for me on small drug cases, getting information for me that helped achieve several acquittals, all the while paying his legal fees off to me. From there we moved more towards the higher paying cases, and more and more lately I find myself only dialing Joe when I'm in need of investigative help. Only issue is that sometimes I may need to call my investigator to the stand, and it isn't always easy doing so when my investigator is technically unlicensed and has served eighteen months in the pen. The District Attorney can often put evidence given by Joe to bed, especially in the eyes of a jury. In fact, I've paid Ron to be a patsy at times, and no one has been the wiser.

But again, Joe gets results because he's grown up in the filth of this city. He's lived in it, thrived in it too.

"So, what did you get?"

He reaches into his pocket, producing a yellow envelope. It's large, and stuffed full, at least according to the staples holding on for dear life. He hands it across the desk to me.

I take it from him and open it carefully.

"The case file?"

He shakes his head no.

“Pictures,” he says. “Not every crime scene photo, but almost all of them. I also got into her bedroom, along with another room that her boyfriend apparently was staying in. Pictures of those in there too. Looks like this guy was shacking up with her, but that he maintained a separate room where a bed and bath was his, and she sort of used the rest.”

I look at the pictures now, shuffling through them, starting with the crime scene. The only thing Joe didn't get was a picture of Skye's body, but I've already seen those. I don't care to see them again. Not at least until I have to. I look at ones from the kitchen and large living room, bottles strewn everywhere. There looks to be somewhere between one to two hundred empty bottles, a mixture of champagne and liquor, most of which are brands I recognize.

“Joe, I need to tell you something, before we progress further.”

“I know, Mr. Anderson,” he says. “Your brother Ken. He's the suspect.”

I nod.

“Are you allowed to represent him?” Joe asks, his voice wavering between curiosity and worry.

“Yes, but it's never recommended.”

Joe nods that he understands enough to question further.

I put my cigarette out and set the pictures down on my desk. “Looks like they had a party.”

Joe nods and sips his coffee before reverting back to a more professional tone. “From what I could gather they had a party, one that started around eight o’clock, at least from what my source on the inside said. Pull that back paper out.”

I listen to him and pull out the back sheet of paper. It’s a white piece of printer paper, and drawn roughly on it is an elementary timeline of the murder.

“So, if you look right there,” Joe says before swallowing a bite of his burrito, “I started the timeline at eight. So, I did find in the trash can, if you look through the pictures, a receipt she’d thrown away in her bathroom, marked at seven thirty-four p.m. Saturday evening. It was from Nick’s.”

Nick’s is the most expensive dining in downtown Gastonia. It’s within walking distance of my office, but it can take me up to a month to get a reservation at times. The chef, a New York druggie washout, rehabbed in the south and set up the thriving restaurant with big financial backers behind him.

“When you double check to make sure she was there with Ken, be careful. The Davis’s own the place,” I say, running my fingers over the paper, tracing the timeline by hand.

Joe nods yes like he already knows that. The fact that he even went into the trash shows his abilities. While the police have the ability to check credit cards, Joe has to be more creative. Oftentimes investigators for attorneys make their bones with unconventional methods. They know the way the police think, so they know how to help poke holes in some cases.

“Looks like based on what my boy could tell me, their party started around eight o’clock, perhaps a little later. And your brother called the police at 2:47 a.m. about waking up next to her dead body. That’s the preliminary timeline.”

I look over the paper in front of me while Joe speaks, pulling a pen from my jacket, making a few notes myself.

“So, they went to dinner, had a party of what, fifty to seventy-five people?”

“I got a boy who works the front desk at metro cab. He's going to pull last nights’ receipts, you know they run that area over there. If anyone ordered a cab from them, it could lead to a very rough estimate. Now that’s not considering that perhaps several of her neighbors came by. However, we know a lot of her neighbors didn’t care for her. I spoke to one witness briefly at the scene, an older woman, Mrs. Scherbatsky. Said everyone expected something bad to happen to her at some point. No emotion in her voice at all, no respect for the girl.”

I nod my head, unwrapping my own burrito, sipping from the now slightly cooled off coffee.

“But again, I’ll call my boy at Metro. That could also help us figure out roughly when the party started to end.” Joe says, ashing his cigar.

“Okay, so for now the police think that they have this big party, the two of them fight at some point, and my brother drunkenly kills her.”

“Allegedly,” he makes a point of saying. It’s a word I used the first time we met each other, and he’s heard me say it hundreds of times since.

“Yes, allegedly. But I got a feeling we might be approaching this from a different standpoint than we have before.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, Joe, you’re a smart enough investigator. He woke up with her blood, lying next to her. Blood on his hands as well. He called 911, and he was the only one there with the body. Now, we don’t know everything, not until the autopsy and other evidence comes in, but they’ve already made the arrest. There is no doubt to the police that Ken killed her.”

“So? Are you saying you can’t poke a hole in this case?”

“I’m saying there is a chance he’s innocent, and he believes he is. They had a lot of people over, and a lot of alcohol. Ken called the police himself. There are still a lot of questions to be asked. So, continue working the case in that regard, but I need you to approach it another way as well.”

“What do you mean?” He asks.

“I’m saying that to save my brother's life I’m - we - are going to have to approach this case as if he may have done it, but not under his own volition.”

“Are you saying your brother is insane?”

“I’m saying that he is innocent, whether he physically committed the act or not.” I tear a corner off a loose piece of paper and scribble down a phone number and address, then I hand it to him.

“What’s this?”

“It’s the name and number of a psychiatrist in Hickory. Ken saw him for about five years, after he had an accident that messed up his brain. He was required to see him. He got into some legal trouble, small stuff after the accident. My old boss, John Strauss, who I was interning for him at the time, got Ken off on the condition that he would see a

therapist, state selected. Ken was required to see him for six months, ended up seeing him five years.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Find him, see if he works out of the same practice, if he retired and moved to Florida, or if he’s dead. We will need him as a witness when this goes to trial.”

Joe nods and rises from his seat, putting out his cigar in the ashtray. I rise with him, and walk to a safe in the corner of the office disguised to look like a mini fridge. I put in the code, Maria’s birthday, and extract a white envelope. I ignore the two yellow envelopes beside it, envelopes that only I know about.

I hand the white envelope to Joe. “There’s an advance in there as well. Keep up with your hours on this. I’ll bill you as we normally do. And Joe, with who the victim is, and the power of that family, be careful. I’m going to need you on this, but this won’t be just any other case. We’re up against more than ever this time around.”

He smiles and nods, placing the envelope in the pocket inside of his jacket. “Call you in a few days.”

“Hey, Joe, hold on a second.”

“What’s up?”

“I uh...” I look around the office, the pictures of Maria and the boys catching my eyes, everywhere I look, pictures of my boys and wife. I think about what I am about to ask, and then I decide not to. How can I ask him to trace my wife? Dig up dirt for the divorce trial? Hell, I can’t believe the thought even entered my mind. “Never mind. Have a great day.”

He nods, and exits out the back, taking his food and coffee with him.

CHAPTER VIII

Dom beats both our receptionists through the door, carrying the firm's mail under his arm. I was wondering why he came in through the front.

"Dom, that's Roger's job, or Courtney's."

"Just helping them out," he smiles, looking at me as if I'm an orphan, a grandiose look of pity in his eyes. "You're here early."

"Had some business to take care of. Spoke to Joe."

He nods and doesn't push any further. Dom never deals with our criminal clients. He is what is called a general practice attorney. Mostly civil cases. In a city like Gastonia, the big money is in civil, but the consistent money is in criminal. Dom takes on about a fourth of the cases I do, and his closure rate is significantly less than mine, but when Dom closes a case, it is often worth about what six to seven of mine are.

"They book him?" He asks.

"Yeah, about an hour ago officially, Murder in the first degree. Aggravated assault too, even went as far as to throw on an attempted rape charge."

"Jesus Christ," he says, "did they run a rape kit?"

"I don't know, but you know how Fain and his little minions work."

"Yeah," Dom nods, "but still."

It isn't uncommon for the police to overbook a suspect in a felony related case. They hit him with multiple charges, sometimes ones that have no merit. Like the attempted rape charge in this case. The police know that Ken and Skye were an item, but they piled that on anyway. That's because the only charges that matter are the one the

District Attorney actually files, and often the D.A. doesn't file everything the police present them with. In this case, they'll throw away the rape charge, possibly even the ag-assault, but they'll keep the big one. Murder in the first degree.

That's the one that carries the big prize.

"They moved fast, Dom; that isn't good. You know the blood won't be back for over a week, even if they send it to Charlotte Mecklenburg and rush it, which I'm sure they have. The fastest that process can turn around with both their blood samples is what, ten days, right? Isn't that what Ron says?"

Dom nods to say yes, "What about the autopsy?"

"I don't know, but I'm sure it came back that she died from blunt force trauma. Based on the pictures, and with the bruises on Ken's hands, that doesn't bode well for him. Who knows what witnesses they've already found from canvassing the scene. I don't know when Alan will file the charges but I think it will be soon. I'm going to have to go see Ken today or tomorrow, have another conversation with him. If Alan files them today, we'll have the initial appearance tomorrow."

I start to go through the mail.

"Your mother called me. Casey talked to her for a moment. Said she couldn't get a hold of you."

"I unplugged my phone," I answer, sifting through the mail, which is mostly bills.

"That's why I couldn't get through to you either. You also didn't answer your cell."

“That’s only for emergencies. I doubt it’s even charged,” I keep looking through the stack of envelopes, coming upon a big one at the bottom of the pile. “You’ve got to be shitting me,” I say, nearly falling back, having to grab onto the desk for a moment.

“What? What’s wrong?” Dom asks.

I hand him the envelope.

“McAlister and Associates,” he reads from the top corner, “What the hell is she mailing us for?”

I take a moment to gather myself, attempting to process everything in my mind. I take a moment to tell Dom the truth.

“Maria filed for divorce on Friday, Dom. Told me yesterday when I stopped by to inform her about Ken and pick up the boys.”

“Oh God no,” Dom says, opening the envelope. His response isn’t related to my deteriorated marriage, but the name on the envelope.

“How can she even afford her? Hell, I can’t afford Ann!” I say, running my hands over my face.

Dom starts to laugh. One of those laughs between finding something humorous and worrisome.

“This isn’t funny Dom!”

“One attorney above you in our graduating class, and your wife gets that one to represent her,” he laughs nervously. His eyes look around the room, studying our shared walls.

“What am I going to do?”

“Against a shark like her? Jesus Jaime, I’m worried about the firm! She’s going to take everything you own.”

I sit in Courtney’s chair, burying my hands in my face, fighting back the oncoming tears.

Everything I own.

She can have my money. The truck. My suits and my watches. Hell, she can have my half of the firm. I don’t care about any of that. There’s only one thing I care about.

“She wants the boys, Dom. Full custody, and to take them out of the state, as far from me as she can.”

I look up at him. He's reading the papers. I extend my hand.

It’s an order, temporary custody, granted to Maria for the entirety of our divorce proceedings. Along with an official filing of divorce.

Signed off on by Judge Carson.

“Fuck Carson,” I say, reading through every one of the papers. “We had a great day yesterday too,” I say aloud. After my discussion with Maria yesterday I figured she told me what she was going to do. That I could block the custody order. I didn’t know she’d already gotten it. I guess I should be thankful she let me see them yesterday.

“Come here, Jaime,” Dom says, putting his arm around my shoulder, guiding me back towards my office, as I hear the front door open and the voices of Courtney and Roger drifting into the air.

Dom opens my office and guides me in, shutting the door behind us. I walk over and sit in my chair.

“Take a few breaths, Jaime, just a few deep breaths.”

I bite my fist to stop myself from crying, my eyes beginning to burn.

“You know Maria bought me this chair?” I rub the arms of my leather seat, holding back tears. “When I started here, I was just a lowly associate, and had an awful office in the back. We didn’t even have furniture at home and she spent half her paycheck to get me this wonderful chair, told me, ‘You need a good chair for the office, you might die in it one day.’”

I start to laugh in hope of holding off the tears. But then I’m overtaken, a few slipping out onto my cheeks. I bury my face deep into my hands. I feel Dom’s hand on my shoulder.

“Jaime, I’m sorry man. I really am.”

“It’s all my fault, I know that. I mean, this may be the easiest case of Ann’s career.”

“You won’t lose your boys man. I’ll help you, I promise.”

“She can have the house, she can have my half of the firm, but I can’t lose them. Even if it’s just four hours on Saturday or Sunday like we do now. Dom, I mean, I can’t lose them.”

I remove my hands from my face. My eyes drift towards a picture of the four of us at a UNC game. The boys with face paint on, Maria and me in matching alumni shirts she’d bought us.

There is a knock at the door. Dom walks over and opens it slightly.

“Hey um- sorry to interrupt but Ann McAlister is on the phone. She wants to have lunch with Mr. Anderson today?” Courtney speaks softly.

Dom looks over to me.

“Tell her he will call her back.”

“Tell her I'm not back from the jail yet, I will call her when I get in,” I say and Courtney nods to Dom like she understands.

Dom shuts the door again, turning to me. He stops for a moment as he re-approaches the desk, lingering over a picture on the wall. It's of Maria and Casey. We took the picture, when all four of us went to Disneyworld. The two of them had so much fun. Dom and I complained the whole time about the crowd, the prices, the walks, etc. But they loved it. Back in the old days, when the four of us and a few other couples would get together all the time, that was one of Maria's favorite stories to tell. She and Casey had it down pat, written like a joke from a script. Each one of them nailing their lines with impeccable comedic timing, and all Dom and I could do was laugh. One year Maria gave me that picture as a joke, because my impatience with little things like crowds and slow-moving lines always tickled her, up until the point that it didn't. Up until the point that being tickled became being angry, angry at so many different things, not just those little pet peeves of mine.

I gather myself, reaching for my cigarettes and lighting one. I hand one to Dom when he motions that he wants one.

There is another knock at the door. I nod to Dom that he can open it, wiping my eyes for tear stains.

“Here you both go,” Courtney says, handing us our schedules for the day. On top of the schedules is this morning's copy of *The Gaston Gazette*. She stares at me and lingers when handing me the paper.

I stare at the cover. Now I see why.

On the cover, in big, bold letters reads the headline:

**Suspect in Skylar Davis Killing Arrested:
Former Mayor's Daughter found Dead early Sunday Morning**

Underneath that is a picture of Ken. My mother cleaned him up. He's grinning in church clothes, as if he's being welcomed to the Oscars.

"He looks like an idiot," I say to Dom, smoking my cigarette.

"Underneath the photo, Jaime," he speaks with worry slipping from his voice.

The bi-line, located underneath the picture, reads:

*Ken Anderson Jr. is the brother of James Anderson, the criminal Attorney who defended
Bill Davis's godson, Jack Newton, successfully just sixteen months ago.*

I take another long drag of my cigarette.

"Great. How long before the press is at our office?"

"Only calls thus far are from Shonterica Johnson. She called twice. The last time she was laughing. Said you got what's coming to you," Courtney says.

"Thank you, Courtney," Dom says to her, ushering her out of the office, looking towards me. His eyes no longer soaked in pity, but fear.

"She isn't wrong," I say.

"C'mon Jaime, you didn't kill that boy."

"Yeah, but I'm the reason his killer walked free," I stand up to find my ashtray.

"You know, I never really believed in karma, Dom. But I could never shake that feeling

that my father beat into me, the idea that God really does see all, that his eyes are hovering over us, like that billboard in Gatsby, you know? Now tell me, Dom, out of all the girls in this world, why'd Ken have to kill that one?"

"I don't know. We don't even know if he did it yet, Jaime."

"They've arrested him for it, Dom."

"They make wrong arrests every day," he says, half chuckling. "Hell, that helps us make profit."

"Why her, Dom?"

He just stares at me, nearly frozen in time. Then he says what I don't want to say aloud. "I mean, you know how they met."

"You think it's a coincidence they met through that case? Alienated from their families, they connected as outsiders at the trial. I mean, maybe it's all that God's purpose crap that insane Baptist pastor was always screaming at us."

There is yet another knock at the door.

"Come in again," I say, sitting back down, the annoyance clear in my voice.

"Hey, sorry to interrupt." It's Roger this time, peeking his head in, "but Ann called again, said something came up so she's busy until lunch but if you want to meet her she will be at Jia shortly after noon. She'll be there alone. She said for you to know that."

Dom looks over at me. "Are you going to go? You'd have to push off seeing Ken until tomorrow with your schedule."

"I need to, right? I mean, any chance we could solve everything through mediation? It would make dealing with Ken's case much easier."

Dom laughs.

“Yeah,” I say, “that’s what I figured.”

CHAPTER IX

If you want to make money as an attorney, go into divorce. What is that statistic people are always throwing around? One in two American marriages end in divorce? Well, someone has to defend those people. And there is nothing more frightening than a divorce attorney with a hard-on for poor southern spouses.

Except a female attorney who has made so much money she takes on cases just to stick it to what she deems terrible men. An attorney who is best at painting most men for what they are, pieces of shit.

Enter Ann McAlister. The best of the best in the greater Gaston County area, though occasionally she steps into Charlotte if the fish is big enough. She's made more in the last five years than I will probably make in the next fifteen. We graduated from Wake Law together.

She was top of our class.

I was second.

She started at the District Attorney's office, but lasted only for a few years. She rose quickly, until she lost a murder trial.

To me.

I've been on her radar ever since.

Never once in my life have I driven to a business lunch with my gut clenched.

As I sit in Jia, the best and really only Gastonia sushi bar, I can't stop tapping my leg. The only thing I can think about is the extensive drink menu they have, but I hear Dom's words echoing in my head. *Don't drink during a divorce mediation*, he said. It

isn't technically a mediation yet, just a meeting between lawyers. *Don't drink during this meeting, Jamie.*

"James, don't you look tired," Ann says, as the waitress pulls the chair out for her. "Water, not from the tap, whatever else you have is fine. Two lemons, and make sure they are wedges from inside the lemon, not the outside pieces."

She's wearing all black. A pantsuit so dark Batman might be jealous, with a button-down shirt underneath, slightly less dark. If there is a thing.

"Ann, nice to see you. How have you been?"

"You know how I've been. It's you we're here to talk about. And Maria of course, that poor woman. She still loves you, you know. She hired a shark and wants me to hide my teeth."

I adjust in my chair. Any given Monday I'm out to eat lunch with Dom and the boys. Probably Brent, his partner Rick. We're having a few beers, eating some good food, making jokes only our kind understands. By our kind I mean pretentious jerk offs.

"You seem nervous," she says.

"I am."

"Because of me? Or everything else going on?" She nods to a couple a table down from us. They are looking at me and whispering to each other. "Problems of living in a small town."

"Just a lot on my plate at the moment, Ann."

"Let me ask, Jaime. Did he do it?"

The waitress brings out drinks and stands awkwardly next to the table. "Are you ready to order?"

“Sushi lunch special, ginger on the salad. Miso soup,” Ann says.

“Same,” I say, while straightening my tie. The waitress nods and walks away.

“Be honest with me, Jaime, how scared were you when you saw my name on those papers?” She leans forward. She’s smiling wide, who knows how long she’s waited for this moment? She always wanted to become the city’s District Attorney. She had the political ambitions to match. Then she lost that public trial to me, got passed over for promotion. Unfairly, might I add, but it was me she blamed. It’s not as if divorce law is a terrible consolation prize.

“Just confused. I’m not sure how she’s affording you.”

“I’m doing it pro bono. Heard through the grapevine she was looking for an attorney, figured I would offer my assistance.”

“Of course you did,” I say, staring at the Jia walls. There are pictures of symbols covering most of them and in between are little glass streams of water, constantly running, in a soothing fashion. I’ve always enjoyed the ambiance of it. The restaurant has moved twice, to a bigger location each time. The first time it was open was near mine and Maria’s first house. We used to go every Thursday night, a scheduled date night. Maria hates sushi, but she loves their lemon chicken.

She looks around at the people who think they are being slick while looking over at me.

“Let’s wait and talk about business, Jaime. I’m more interested in other things.”

“Ann, I don’t want to talk about that.”

“C’mon, Jaime, it’s everywhere now. I heard they arrested him.”

“They haven’t booked him yet,” I say. “He’s innocent, you know.”

“Is he?” She looks around and leans in, studying my face.

I know it doesn’t spell confidence.

“You know I represented the Attorney General’s wife in her divorce trial, right?”

“I forgot that,” I say, sipping my water.

“Skye Davis was the reason we won so much in the settlement. She got up on that stand so mad. The man had called her a whore, you know, blamed her for everything. Anyway, she just got up there and sang like a bird. She talked about all the stuff he did, the gifts he bought her. She was going to incriminate him.”

I’d always heard that, a rumor that Attorney General Tilman was misusing funds, making backdoor deals, etc. Never heard any definite proof, however.

“But he was a friend of her fathers, so he got off without any criminal charges relating to ‘proper misuse of public funds.’ He lost a lot in that trial though.”

“Why are you telling me this Ann?”

“Because you and I both know how district attorneys work. They’ll paint her as some kind of angel. Then they’ll say you’re victim blaming when you bring that up. If he did do it, Jaime, then it might be best for you to settle out of court with Maria. And quick,” she leans back now as the waitress brings our salads and soups.

We sit in silence for a moment, eating, and I think about my little boys. I can’t let them become like the Anderson men before them. It’s my job to prevent that. To not pass on the sins of their father, and his father before him.

“You’re not going to take my boys from me, Ann. You can take everything else but not my boys. I’m still going to be a part of their lives. I’m their father for God’s sake.”

I think about the pictures on the wall and will myself not to cry. I spent thirty minutes before lunch just making sure it didn't look like I had been crying.

Ann puts down her chopsticks and looks at me, staring through me, and flashes a smile. "James, these trials would align, and I don't think you want that. All Maria wants is custody. Not your money or your suffering firm. She wants them. And she will get what she wants. You don't want these trials to line up, Jaime. I can promise you that."

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"How was it?" Dom asks as I step back into the office.

"You got a minute?"

"I got to meet with Tanner Baldaci in about five minutes over the Freightliner workers comp case, after that good?"

I nod yes and place a pair of cupcakes from Jia on the counter for Roger and Courtney.

"Perfect. Also, you didn't get me a cupcake? What the hell man?"

I tap his stomach. "You know Casey doesn't want that thing to keep growing."

He shoots me the bird. "I'll be back in a little while."

I walk down the short hallway to my office and when I open the door I am surprised to see Jane, holding a silent finger to her lips. She must have come in the back. In the past few months I had made her a spare key, in case there was ever time she wanted to swing by.

"What's going on?" I say with a low voice.

She turns to me, no smile on her face.

“We need to talk, James,” she says. “Jaime, I mean. Sorry.”

“Have a seat,” I motion to the chair Joe sat in earlier this morning. As I walk to my desk and watch her sit down I notice the envelope in her right hand. “What’s going on?”

Jane looks around the room.

“I was never here Jaime.”

“Excuse me?”

“I was never here, and this is the last thing I’ll ever do for you. I shouldn’t even be doing this... but I don’t know Jaime, I loved you. I still love you. Some of those nights we had together, Charleston, I mean. I just, I want to do you one last favor.”

I smile for the first time all day at that memory.

“Jane, I’m sorry about last night. I was still drunk, and-”

“No Jaime, look. It was never a good idea. But I want you to know. Bill Davis’s people were at the station today. They met with Fain and District Attorney Bell. This is the most important case of Fain’s career. Especially after Newton. Davis hates him for that, and Bell was brought in for that specific reason. My point in telling you this is that, well, we wouldn’t have charged him this fast if we didn’t have something good.”

She reaches the envelope out and lays it on my desk. There is a large bulge in the middle of it.

“What is it?”

“A tape. A twenty-second 911 call from about an hour before Ken called the police himself. The responder couldn’t get enough information over the phone and the line didn’t answer when she called back, so nothing happened from it, despite her best

efforts. But this morning they figured out the numbers were the same. Well, Fain did. And the call, Skye Davis herself made it. That's all I'll say."

She rises to leave now, heading towards the back door.

"Jane."

"Don't listen to it too loud Jaime, and please, get rid of it after you're done. No one should have to hear what's on that tape."

"Jane, wait," I rise now, and her hand stops turning the knob. "For what it's worth, Charleston was the last time I've been happy in almost two years," I say, smiling at her. "That chef with the unibrow, the champagne boat, those silk sheets that cost a week's pay to replace."

She hesitates before turning the knob to leave. For a moment I think I see her smiling. Then I see that she left her key on the table nearest the door.

I press play on the tape recorder, turning the volume low, holding it to my ear.

I listen for six seconds, before I nearly turn and vomit every piece of sushi I had for lunch.

Saving my brother's life just got a hell of a lot harder.

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(<https://www.100daysinappalachia.com/2020/06/the-way-we-live-now-managing-a-lost-final-semester/>)