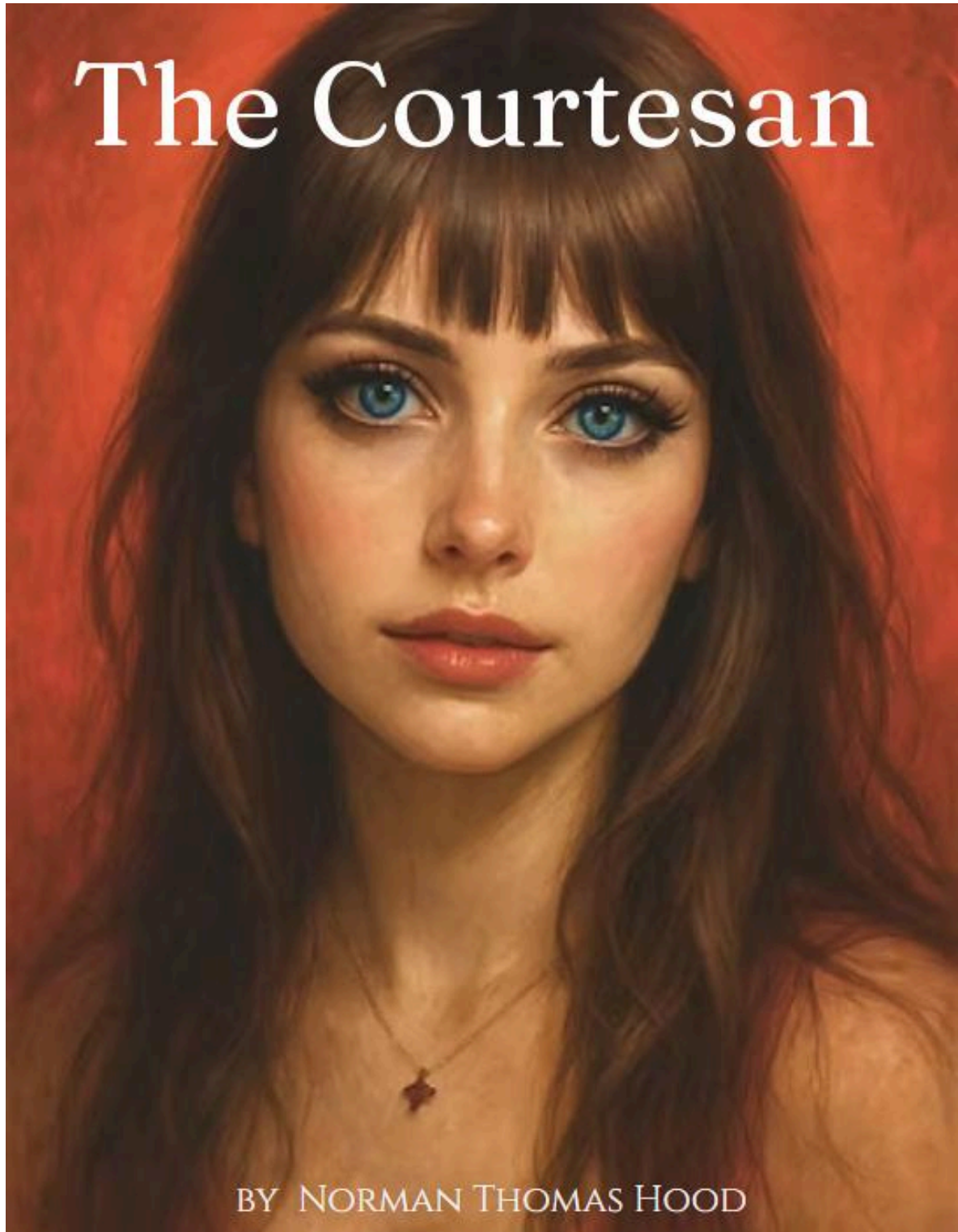




The Courtesan

By Norman Thomas Hood

Chapter 1

Not an Unusual Marriage

“So, how are things at home?” he asked, undressed and still in bed.

“You asked me that a week ago,” she said, pulling up her gym shorts.

“Yeah, and I didn’t get an answer then, either.”

“Well, what kind of answer will make you happy, Todd? That the papers got filed today? There’s a lot to do before that happens. Will and I have a son together, a house, investments... it takes time. I’m not rushing anything just to come out with less than I deserve.”

“Yeah, but you ain’t gettin’ anywhere if you don’t file the damn papers! Your lawyers get paid to work out all that other shit! Why are you waitin’?”

“What does it matter, Todd? I didn’t hear you complaining a few minutes ago. I told you... whether I’m married or not, I don’t want to get into anything serious right now. You said you agreed, so why are you complaining? We’re both getting laid.”

“Cause I’m sick of sneakin’ around, Claire! I feel like I’m back in high school again. Cheap motels, backseats... it’s bullshit!” Todd put on his clothes and grabbed his toboggan off the nightstand. “And this... I don’t even *wear* shit like this! Who the hell cares if I get recognized coming into a motel?”

“First of all, you’re single. I’m not. And it makes me *feel* better if we’re at least careful about things. These sunglasses cover half my damn face! I can barely see

out of them... I hate them! But they make me feel less nervous about being recognized. Is that okay with you? The less nervous I am walking *in* here means the more relaxed I'll be in that bed with you. Isn't that what you want?"

Todd opened the door, but stopped short of leaving.

"You know, Claire, I got an apartment. It may be a shithole, but it's better than this dump."

"I'm sure it is, but *this* dump is across the street from the grocery store. That's where he thinks I go after working out, remember? Why do you think I park in their lot? Because it makes me *feel* better."

"Well, feel good buying your third loaf of bread this week, Claire!"

He slammed the door on his way out. Seconds later, she heard him spinning his tires in the parking lot.

"It was *twice* this week, asshole," she said, grabbing her purse.

"Her blood pressure medication isn't due to be filled for two more days, Mr. Lawson. But I can ask Mr. Jeffries about it if you like," she said.

"No, that's fine, Elle. Just the other prescription then, And by the way, call me Will. I've been coming here for over a year now. Calling me 'Mr. Lawson' makes me feel like I golf with your dad."

"Well, I certainly don't *think* of you like my dad... but is it okay if I call you William? I've always *loved* that name. It just sounds so regal. Oh... and that's how your name is on your credit card, anyway" she said, pointing.

"Oh... yeah... it is, huh. Yes, William's fine. I think my mother's the only person on the earth who still *calls* me that... but sure."

"Well, then... I like her already, William. Have a nice weekend!"

She walked to the back of the pharmacy like a model owning the runway. Her long, brown hair swung obediently behind her soft young shoulders. Will didn't fail to notice.

Damn... I think I just got hit on! he thought, walking to his car.

Minutes later, he pulled into his driveway. Claire was already home, gathering two bags of groceries from her trunk.

"Hey, babe, I've got those," he said, hurrying over.

“Oh... okay,” she said. “Looks like I beat you home.”

He held up her prescription.

“Oh, yeah, I forgot about those.” She locked her car and walked to the front door.

“Hey babe, remember the Friday night “dates” we used to have?” he asked. “You wanna wait a little bit before taking one of those tonight?”

“Will, you *know* I need to take them at the same time every night for it to work.”

“Yeah, but they’re Xanax, dear. I don’t think a few minutes really matters, does it?”

She gave him an annoyed look. “It matters if I want to sleep tonight, Will.”

“Okay, fine... fine. I wasn’t trying to start an argument. It’s just been a while since we’ve... it’s fine... I’m good.”

He tried to kiss her cheek, but she turned away to open the refrigerator.

“Will, can you ask Danny to put the laundry detergent away and run the trash out? Too much time on the treadmill today. I’ll need a shower before I start dinner.”

Her cell phone beeped. She glanced at the text before casually flipping her phone over.

“No... I’ve got it.” he said.

He took the bottles and left the kitchen. Claire exhaled fully after reading Todd’s text.

“Asshole!” she said under her breath.

When Danny heard his parents were home, he quickly stashed his vape under his pillow and turned up the TV. A minute later, he heard a double knock on his bedroom door.

“Hey Danny, we’re home. You okay in there?” Will asked.

“Yeah, all good, dad... just watching videos.”

“Okay... dinner’s in about an hour.”

“Alright, thanks.”

When he heard his dad walking away, he turned down the TV and dug for the vape under his pillow.

Dinner was lasagna, from frozen. After they were finished eating, Claire rubbed her forehead and grimaced. It was a familiar tell.

“Will, I think I overdid it today. Can you and Danny take care of the cleanup?”

“No problem. Danny, we’re on kitchen duty.”

Claire went upstairs and shut her bedroom door. Will knew the next time she’d be coherent enough to hold a conversation would be the next day. She’d been sleeping fourteen or fifteen hours each day since starting the depressant, often taking more than she should. Danny opened the dishwasher and began rinsing off plates.

“Don’t worry about it, Danny. I got it tonight. Is your homework done?”

“Thanks, dad... and no homework today,” he said, leaving the kitchen.

Will watched him take off up the stairs. He finished the dishes and sat down at the table. As Claire’s bathwater ran, Will’s thoughts turned to his marriage.

He’d caught Claire cheating a year ago, but stayed in the marriage on the condition they would get counseling. Claire agreed, but stopped going when the counselor questioned her commitment to rebuilding trust. She stormed out of the office, saying she wasn’t paying him money just to be attacked. Will attended the remaining sessions alone, desperate for help dealing with the hurt she’d caused. Shortly after she quit therapy, Claire began having panic attacks. Her doctor prescribed Xanax to help. After two weeks, Claire lobbied for a higher dose, and got it.

Danny knew nothing of his mother’s affair, and Will was determined to keep it that way. Being a child of divorce himself, he knew what it was like going to bed at night hearing his parents argue. He didn’t want that for Danny. As far as the boy knew, his parents’ marriage was fine. Will, on the other hand, was left to deal with an injured marriage and an indifferent wife. He couldn’t rely on Xanax to help with that. He had to be at work each day and stay sharp.

Their lives were expensive. The house alone took half of Will’s salary. Claire quit her job after the panic attacks began, so it was left to Will to pay the bills. His career became his coping mechanism, with Danny’s happiness being the motivation.

Monday morning arrived faster than expected, which was perfectly fine with Will. He stopped at the drugstore on the way to work. A familiar face was behind the counter.

“Wow... didn’t expect to see *you* so soon,” Elle said, straightening her posture.

“Just here for me, today,” he replied, noticing her body language.

“Oh, nice! Well, what can I do for you, William?” She leaned over the counter, maintaining eye contact.

“Just these, please.” He sat a box of sinus tablets in front of her.

“Ouch... sinus pressure?”

“Yeah, I went to sleep with one headache and woke up with its brother.”

“Well, these are good... but you can help relieve it yourself, too,” she said.

“Sounds a little above my pay grade,” he laughed.

“No, not at all, William. Just do *this*...”

She used her first two fingers from each hand to rub her temples in a slow, circular motion. Then she moved to the sides of her nose and cheek bones.

“Work slowly... outwards, toward the ears,” she said, “medium pressure.”

“Like this?” He tried to parrot her movements but failed miserably.

“Not unless you’re finger painting,” she laughed.

She walked around the counter and stood inches from him now. He was struck by her deep, blue eyes and sweet fragrance.

“Like this, William...”

She put her hands on his temples and went through her motions, never breaking eye contact.

Will realized he was enjoying her touch more than he should, but was too lost in the experience to object. He gingerly took a step backwards after she finished.

“So, how was *that*?” she asked, knowing the answer.

“You felt amazing, Elle. I mean... *it* felt amazing. Effective... I mean. It feels better already.”

“I like your first answer better,” she whispered in his ear before walking behind the counter.

“Where’d you, uh... learn that?” he asked, barely able to form his words.

“I’m in nursing school. But what I just showed you is a homeopathic treatment.

“Nursing? You mean, you’re still in school?” Will asked, his eyes wide now. She noticed how shocked he suddenly appeared.

“Oh! You think I’m eighteen or nineteen... fresh out of high school, don’t you? I’ll take that as a compliment. No, William, I have a degree in Psychology from UC. I just changed my career path, that’s all. I’ve always loved healthcare. I think it’s a good fit for me. Besides, a psychology degree can only help.”

“That’s cool, Elle. And I didn’t think you were eighteen. I just—”

“It’s *okay*, William. You’re not robbing the cradle by talking to me. I’m twenty-five,” she said, “almost twenty-six... if that makes you feel a little more comfortable.”

Will walked to his car feeling emotions he hadn’t felt in years. He worked hard to convince himself he hadn’t done anything wrong.

It’s fine. I wasn’t chatting her up. She brought up the massage thing, not me. I never asked her to touch me.

Elle remained on his mind the entire drive home. So much so, he thought it’d be best to avoid the drugstore for a few days while he processed his encounter, and the implications it might bring.

Chapter 2

Hickeys are a No-No

Almost time for her 'workout' and grocery store trip, Claire was second in line at the pharmacy, trying without success to muffle her phone conversation.

"It's there or nowhere, Todd! I've already told you," she tried to whisper. "Ten or fifteen minutes, dammit! Because I had to make a stop. No, Todd... be at the motel or forget it!"

Her sunglasses almost fell off her face as she scanned the pharmacy for listeners.

"Lawson," Claire announced loudly, stepping to the counter.

"Yes, ma'am... can I help you?" Elle asked politely.

"Lawson... Lawson! You're supposed to have it ready for me. I called here over an hour ago!"

"Yes, ma'am. I took the call, but like I told you on the phone, it *has* to go through your doctor first. They haven't approved it yet. We can't replace a prescription without a new order."

"And I told *you*... my husband lost the damn bottle. It never even made it into the house! My doctor's off today and I need those pills to sleep, so just fill it! You can call them tomorrow."

Mr. Jeffries overheard Claire's demands and quickly stepped behind the counter, hoping to avoid a scene.

“Mrs. Lawson, I’m sorry, but Elle’s told you correctly. There’s nothing we can do without a new prescription. Do you want to try Melatonin tonight? We have them on the shelf, or I can comp one or two for you.”

“I don’t *want* any Melatonin! It doesn’t work for me. I *want* my damn Xanax! That’s what my doctor prescribed, and that’s what you’re supposed to give me.”

“Again, I’m sorry. There’s nothing I can do without a new prescription,” he repeated.

Claire grabbed her purse and shoved on her sunglasses, poking herself in the eye.

“Ow! Dammit! Just forget it! Expect a call from my doctor in the morning!” She stormed out the door.

Elle asked Mr. Jeffries for an early lunch. She hurried to her car and started the engine. Claire was already at the light, waiting to turn. Elle pulled up behind her and followed her through town a mile or two. She was just about to turn around when Claire made a sudden left turn into a motel’s parking lot.

“I knew it!” Elle said, smacking her steering wheel. “You cheating bitch. You don’t deserve him.”

Elle watched Claire walk into one of the motel’s rooms and quickly shut the door.

Will tried calling one more time. Claire’s phone went to voicemail again. He put away his phone and stopped to pick up a pizza on the way home, since Danny had asked for it the day before. When he walked through his front door, he heard the upstairs shower running. He put the pizza on the table and went upstairs to knock on the bathroom door. When Claire didn’t answer, he cracked it open an inch or so.

“Hey Babe I picked us up some—”

“Jesus, Will! You scared the shit out of me! What the hell is it?”

Claire was standing naked in front of the bathroom mirror. She grabbed at the shower curtain and nearly pulled it off the rod trying to cover herself, including the two hickeys she’d just noticed on her breasts. Leaving marks was against the rules. Claire knew Todd had done it on purpose.

“Sorry babe. Just letting you know I grabbed us some pizza on the way home. It’s on the table.”

“Pizza... great. You *know* I can’t eat that, Will.”

“But I thought you were eating bread again now.

We had garlic toast just the other—”

“Toast, not pizza, Will! I’ll be sick all damn night if I eat that.”

“Sorry. Do you want me to get you something else? I can go back out,” he offered.

“No, I’m fine. I’ll take care of it myself!”

Will shook his head as he walked downstairs.

Damned if I do, damned if I don’t!

He sat on the couch and turned on the TV. Soon, he found his thoughts drifting to Elle again. Glancing upstairs, he reconsidered his plan of avoiding the pharmacy.

Larry heard an odd, repetitive noise coming from his friend’s office the next morning. The rapid sound of Will’s metal pen tapping on the desk was unbeknownst to him, but not his coworkers.

“Haven’t seen you look this dazed in about a year, dude. What gives?”

“Oh, yeah... sorry, Larry. I just have something on my mind.” Will put his pen down. “You know, my wheels were spinning, that’s all.”

“They were *spinning*, alright,” Larry laughed.

“Almost left tread marks on your desk! So, what’s her name?”

Will suddenly looked like a deer caught in headlights.

“It’s not our new accountant, is it?” Larry whispered. “What is she now, like seventy years old?”

“Very funny, smartass. You need anything else?” Will asked, looking around the office.

“No, I’ll let you get back to it, Romeo. Happy daydreaming... about *whoever* she is!”

Larry was right. But it wasn’t Janice from accounting, it was Elle from the pharmacy. Will found himself thinking of reasons to drop by during lunch.

Chapter 3

Loose the Chains that Bind You

Claire picked up her keys and walked toward the motel room's door.

"So, you're just going to leave without saying nothin'?" he asked. "What's with you lately? Get your back straightened out good, then run out the door?"

"Most guys would *prefer* it that way, Todd. So, what's your problem?" she asked.

That's what *I* want to know, Claire. What's *your* damn problem?"

"My problem? Let's see, Todd. First of all, you've been sounding more like my damn husband than a boyfriend lately. That wasn't our deal... and it's not sexy. That, and the hickeys you left on me Monday. What the hell was *that* about? You have a fucking death wish?"

"What'd you just call me? A boyfriend? I thought you wanted to be my old lady!" he said, jumping out of bed. "This is just like I said last week, Claire... more high school bullshit!"

"No, Todd... you're absolutely right. You're *not* my boyfriend. That was a bad choice of words on my part, and I'm sorry. You're a side-piece, Todd... nothing more! And, as with all side-pieces, sooner or later they reach the end of their run. You've reached yours, asshole! So, congratulations, dipshit... we're done! Don't call me, don't text me, and don't bother me anymore. You're not as fun as you used to be, and I'm over it."

“What? You serious? Why even show up, then? Screw me one last time before dumping my ass? That’s something a dude does!”

“Well, maybe you should have. It doesn’t matter now. You got what you wanted, same as me. But I’m serious, Todd... don’t contact me. I’m done with this. I knew it when you finished today... looking up at that stupid face of yours!”

She walked out of the room, leaving the door open in her wake.

“Don’t worry about it, bitch! It wasn’t no good anymore, anyway!” he shouted.

Claire drove out of the motel unnerved, but relieved. It didn’t take any soul searching to know she was really finished with Todd, along with all the lying and sneaking around. The affair had lost its excitement weeks ago. She felt a sense of peace having ended the relationship. It was time to leave Todd in the past, where he belonged. Leading two lives was too much work, she figured. For the first time in over a year, she actually looked forward to coming home to her husband.

“Two days in a row? Did I fall and bump my head?” Elle asked as Will walked in.

“Maybe I ran out of sinus tablets,” he said.

“So... you’re telling me you took all twenty last night?”

“Okay, you got me,” he said. “I just wanted to stop in and say ‘hi’, and ‘thank you’ for the, you know... face thing you did.”

“You’re welcome, William, and it’s called a sinus massage. But I need you to know, social visits aren’t allowed around here. You’ll have to buy something or move along. No loitering in my pharmacy.” Her smile quickly told on her.

“Okay, fine.” He grabbed a box of tropical Tic Tacs and tossed them onto the counter.

“Oh, my... aren’t we living dangerously, sir... tropical!”

“Beaches and tan lines... that’s how I roll,” he said, instantly regretting his words.

“Yeah... right. But I have to say, William, it looks like it’s been a few years since you’ve even *seen* the sun.”

“I tan on the inside,” he said, cringing again.

“Okay... I’m going to stop you before you say anything worse,” she laughed.

“Honestly, Elle... I don’t know *what* the hell I’m saying,” he confessed. “I guess I just wanted to come see you.”

She leaned forward.

“That’s the first honest thing you’ve said since walking in here today, William. The thing is though, you didn’t have to say *anything* to win me over. You already have.”

Her words left him exhilarated, but speechless. Just then his phone rang. It was Claire. Will suddenly looked like a deer caught in headlights.

“Elle, I need to answer this. Maybe I’ll see you again soon?”

“That’s completely up to you,” she said, “but I hope so, William.”

Her smile followed him out the door. He accepted the call, expecting the worst.

“Hey... is everything alright?” he asked her, pulling out of the lot.

“Everything is fine. Why wouldn’t it be?” Claire asked.

“Well... it’s just been a while since you’ve called me at work, that’s all. What’s going on?”

“Nothing.., just wondering how your day’s going... you know... at work.”

Now he really *was* worried. Did she know where he was?

“It’s good... it’s good. Just started on a new account today.”

“You sound like you’re driving,” she said. Will was sure she knew.

“Yeah, I am... late lunch. Heading back to the office now. You need anything while I’m out?”

“No, just kinda missing you, that’s all,” she said.

Will almost rear-ended the car ahead of him!

“Really? Are you sure everything is okay over there?”

“Yes, I already told you it was. Look, I get it, Will. I haven’t been very sweet... or even approachable lately. But I want to change all that. I want things to be different. And you know... Friday’s coming up. Why don’t we have that date night you asked for last week? Are you in?”

“Yeah, I think I can manage that.”

Will was too shocked to say more.

“See you when you get home, then. I’m making steak tonight.” She ended the call.

Will parked in front of his office building and sat there, his car idling. He didn't know what to think. His conversation with Elle loomed fresh in his thoughts. He was still reeling from seeing her. But Claire was his wife. He had been struggling for a year to get his marriage back, and now it seemed she wanted the same thing. If not for her sake, but for Danny's, he knew he should focus on his marriage.

The pharmacy would need to become a distant memory. But much had been said between Elle and him already. He needed to talk to her; explain things and apologize for leading her on.

"Dad, can I stay with Jonesy tonight? They're doing a *Final Destination* marathon."

"Eight hours of gruesome, synchronized deaths? You think your brain can handle that, Danny? Mine couldn't." Will said.

"It's Friday night, honey... remember?" Claire asked.

"Oh, I remember, babe," he smiled. "That's fine, Danny. Back before dinner tomorrow... deal?"

"Deal!"

He already had his backpack ready. Will dropped him off. When he returned, all the lights in the house were off. Will turned the hall light on.

"Leave it off, honey. You know how to get upstairs," Claire said.

He took the hint and climbed the steps. Claire was standing in the bedroom's doorway, her naked silhouette lit by a single candle behind her. Will took a look at her and started to undress. She stopped him, gave him a passionate kiss and finished undressing him herself.

The rest of the night was nothing short of a replay of their wedding night. Will's enthusiasm for his marriage returned. There was only one thing left undone now, and that would happen Monday morning.

Chapter 4

The Big Reveal

Will pulled into the pharmacy's lot, not knowing how he'd feel walking through its doors. But he knew what he needed to say.

"*There* you are. I was wondering which end of the Earth you fell off!"

She leaned over the counter, her eyes as blue and welcoming as ever. Will had to focus on his reason for being there before he messed up what he came to do.

"Hey, yeah... it's been almost a week, I think? That's kind of why I'm here, Elle. I need to talk to you. Privately, if you have a minute."

Elle asked Mr. Jeffries if she could step outside for a break, then motioned Will to follow her.

"There's a break table behind the store. We can talk there."

When they reached it, she brushed off a covering of leaves and sat down.

"Elle, I'm not good at things like this, so bear with me," he said. "For the last year or so, my wife and I have been dealing with some serious issues. Because of that, she... well, *we've* become pretty distant in our marriage. Honestly, I was ready to call it quits. But just lately, she's been showing me she wants our marriage to work now. It was very... unexpected. So... Elle, I think you're an awesome woman, and if I weren't—"

"William, stop. It's okay. I totally understand... and you know? I'm glad to hear it. That explains why your wife went to that motel the other day. It makes

perfect sense now... you two were split up. But things are better now, and I'm happy for you, really. Look, you don't have to say anything else. I'm not a home wrecker, William."

"Okay, but hold on... what motel? What are you talking about? Claire and I never split up. She's slept in our bed every day since we got married. I don't know why you'd think otherwise."

Elle appeared horrified. "Oh, my God. Oh, no." She scooted her chair away from the table. "I think I need to get back inside, William. I'm sorry!" She hurried toward the back door.

"Elle, wait! Don't go in yet. I need to know what you're talking about. What motel? What made you say that?"

She hesitated for a moment before coming back to sit down.

"It... was about a week ago. Your wife came in here and... William, I really don't want to say anything else—"

"Just keep going. So, Claire came in here?"

"Yes, she was trying to get us to refill her prescription of Xanax... the one you lost on your way home, and—"

"Lost? I didn't *lose* her prescription, Elle. I *handed* it to her in our kitchen, after taking in some groceries. I don't know what you're talking about."

"She was upset, William. She yelled at me and Mr. Jeffries. She said you lost it, and needed us to refill it. But we couldn't without another script from her doctor. She got really mad at us and stormed out. You can ask Mr. Jeffries if you need to."

"Okay, but that doesn't explain the motel. Listen, if you said that because you and I've been talking—" He stood now, visibly upset.

"No! I didn't! William... just listen to me." She took a breath before continuing. "While she was waiting to talk to us... in line behind a customer, she was on her phone with some guy named Todd. She said his name more than once, William. They were arguing about whether or not to meet in a motel. She wanted to, he didn't. She was annoyed, and said something like 'it's the motel or just forget it, Todd!' She told him she'd be there in fifteen minutes, so it had to be in town. William, I just figured you two were split up... that she'd been seeing someone. That's the only reason I've been so... well, unreserved with you lately. It's not my habit to flirt with married men. But still, I never mentioned it because

I thought you already knew she was seeing someone. Plus, whatever she's doing or not doing isn't my business, anyway. I only eavesdropped because of my interest in you. Now, I'm sorry I did."

Will looked like he had just seen a ghost. He sat down at the table again and held his head in his hands.

"Todd's the name of a guy she had an affair with a year ago," he told her. "Todd Spencer. He'd gone to the same gym as Claire. I caught her cheating with him in the parking lot one afternoon. She had pocket-dialed me. I heard... well... *stuff* going on. It was supposed to be over with, though. Claire told me he moved out of state a week after I caught them."

"I'm so sorry, William. But it's good that you two are on the mends now. It means she must have broken it off with him recently, and for good. You can still save your marriage, William. And I meant what I said when I told you I want you to be happy. You're a good guy. You deserve that."

"Yeah... I deserve that. I deserved being cheated on for a solid year."

"I didn't mean it that way." She looked like she was going to cry.

Will instinctively hugged her, his mind in a daze over what he'd just learned.

"I know you didn't. Elle, I'm sorry you got mixed up in my bullshit. And the Xanax... if they *were* actually lost, she lost them. She lied to both of you. She abuses them. I think she's addicted."

"I'm so sorry, William. I don't know what to say. I've ruined everything!"

"In no way is this your fault, Elle. Listen, I hate to leave you like this, but I need to get home and sort this all out."

"Please, William... if you can keep my name out of it—"

"Absolutely... you won't be mentioned, I promise. I should be grateful to you, Elle. I needed to know what was going on. It explains a hell of a lot from last year. The whole time I was trying to fix our marriage, she was still screwing the guy!"

He stood to leave. She quickly moved around the table and hugged him. Will drove home slower than usual, giving himself extra time to decide how to handle things. Soon he pulled into his driveway, still not exactly sure what he'd say or when he'd say it.

"Oh, you're home... and early!" She closed the door behind him and put her arms out; something she hadn't done in a year.

He backed away from her.

“What’s wrong, honey?” Claire asked. “Did something happen?”

Will walked inside a few steps and looked upstairs. Danny’s door was shut.

“I was told something today. It was pretty upsetting,” he said.

“About what? Something happen at work?”

“Not at work, Claire. I thought you told me Todd Spencer moved out of state a year ago.”

Claire had her own *deer in the headlights* moment. Will knew he’d struck a chord.

“I mean... he did, didn’t he? she asked, looking away.

“I think you know the answer to that, Claire.”

“Will, I don’t know what you’re—”

“Don’t... just don’t, Claire. You two have been screwing around all year... and at a local motel? Really? I already know, Claire, so I’d rather you just tell me the truth at this point. If I think I’m hearing anything else from you, I’m turning around and walking out that door.”

She pulled a chair out and sat down at the table. Will remained standing.

“I broke it off with him, Will. I swear to you. I ended it a week ago.”

“A *week* ago? You were *supposed* to end it a year ago, Claire! A *year* ago! What I was told happened just a few days ago!”

“You’re right, it’s true. I’m sorry... I’m so sorry, Will! He never should have told you. He did it out of spite! He wants to break us up! I told him to never contact me again. I wanted out of it. It wasn’t right... *I* wasn’t right. I thought I could keep our marriage and—”

“And what? Keep screwing your side-piece? Well, I guess you were right... at least for a year!”

Will was pacing the room now. Claire tried to approach him again, but he backed away, his hands in the air.

“Don’t even try, Claire! I can’t have you near me right now. For a whole damn year you’ve treated me like total dog shit! I was the one who got cheated on, but *you* acted like I was the guilty one! You treated me like everything was my fault! You *wouldn’t* go to counseling, you *wouldn’t* work on things with me... you basically abandoned the marriage. And, on top of that, you never even *ended* it with him! I’m done. It’s over! I’m taking off work tomorrow and filing for divorce.”

“No, Will! It’s over with him... I swear it! I ended it! I’ll go to counseling with you... I’ll put in the work! I’ll do anything! Just don’t file anything yet! We can fix this. We’re both ready at the same time now! I know we can fix this!”

“No. I’ve been ready for over a *year* now, Claire, and I *did* try to fix this. Only to have my efforts shut down by you every damn day. Save your promises for Todd. It’s too little and too late for me!”

Suddenly Danny shouted from the top of the stairs.

“You cheated on Dad? You *cheated* on him and now you’re getting a divorce?”

“Danny, I’m sorry!” Claire said. Danny looked at her with hate in his eyes before running back to his room. The door slammed behind him.

“Will, we have to---” she began.

“Sorry, there’s no ‘we’, Claire.... not anymore! I have to get out of here,” he said. “I’ll call Danny in a while, but I need to calm down. I can’t do it here... not with you. But yeah, it’s *over*, Claire. Let me be fucking clear about that. You’ve had over a year to get back into this marriage, but you’ve spent it on your back with Todd. I’ll be home before Danny goes to bed. I’ll talk more with him then. But I’ll be sleeping downstairs tonight, and I don’t want any drama.”

With that, he walked out the front door and left Claire alone, standing in the doorway.

Chapter 5

New Direction, Wrong Direction

Will pulled in at the drugstore and parked in the rear of the lot. He turned on the radio and leaned back in his seat, waiting for Elle to get off work.

Just after 6pm, the back door of the store opened and she emerged. Before she got to her car, she heard someone call out her name. She turned to see Will across the lot, standing by his car.

“What happened?” she asked. “Are you alright?”

“You were right, Elle... it’s all true! She’s been meeting Todd for over a year now. I have no idea how many times. She never broke it off with him... not until last week, if *that’s* even true.”

She took his hand. “I’m so sorry, William. I wish I’d never said anything.”

“No, I’m grateful you told me. I needed to know. She’s been playing me for a year now, Elle! And it would have been longer if you hadn’t said anything.”

They walked to her car.

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

“File for divorce... tomorrow. It’s over. I can’t trust her. And I don’t care if she *did* break it off with him last week... I’m done. Oh, and she assumed her boyfriend told me about it... out of spite, because she’d dumped him. She didn’t even imagine it could be anyone else.”

“How’s your son? Does he know?”

“Yeah, thanks to me. I confronted Claire the second I came in the door. I didn’t think about Danny coming out of his room. I feel like shit about it. Going to talk to him tonight, though.”

“You’re going back home then?”

“Yeah, for now. But I let her know I’m sleeping downstairs. Tomorrow I’ll figure something out, after I talk to my lawyer.”

“Well... I hope everything goes okay tonight. I don’t envy you going back there.”

“If things get heated, I’ll rent a motel room of my own. It’ll be fine. I need to call Danny and make sure he knows I’ll be home later. Until then, I plan on going for a long drive. I need time to think, and I don’t want to be around Claire right now.”

“I understand. Look, here’s my number if you need anything. I don’t care if it’s late... just call if you need to.”

She wrote it down and handed it to him. He put it in his wallet and opened her car door.

“Really, William? With everything you’re going through... you still think to open my car door? Thank you.”

After she got inside, Will walked to his car and checked his phone. He had two missed calls from Claire, making a total of nine. Will didn’t call her back. He needed more time to cool down, and she wasn’t giving it to him. After another set of rings, he silenced his phone.

Three hours later, Will pulled into his driveway. His feelings of rage were gone. All that remained was sadness and a new goal: to navigate a divorce with as little harm to Danny as possible. As Will walked up the pathway, he noticed the front door was standing open.

“Dad!” Danny screamed.

Will ran upstairs to the boy’s room. It was empty.

“In here, Dad! Mom’s not breathing!”

Will found them in the bathroom. Claire was in the tub, unconscious! Will grabbed her by the shoulders and yelled her name. She didn’t respond.

“Call 911!” he told Danny.

“I already did! Like three minutes before you got here! She’s dead, Dad! She’s dead!”

Will checked her pulse. He didn’t feel anything at first, but then he thought he felt a faint heartbeat.

A paramedic called from the front door. Will told him where they were, and soon, two men were attending to Claire.

“I think I felt a pulse!” Will said.

“She’s not breathing,” one of the men said, “have you checked her airway?”

“No, I just got here... right before you!” Will answered. “Listen, she takes Xanax every night.”

There was a bottle of blood pressure pills and an empty bottle of Xanax on the bathroom sink.

“How many pills were in here?” The paramedic asked, holding up the bottle and reading the label.

“I don’t know... she’s told me she’s had to take more than one before.”

The paramedics started CPR and transported Claire to the hospital. Will and Danny followed in his car. After they reached the Emergency Department, one of the paramedics told them to wait outside the room while they treated her. Danny was beside himself. He said he’d yelled at his mother and called her names after Will left. She’d started crying and went into the bathroom. An hour or so later, he knocked on the door to tell her he was sorry. She didn’t answer. He knocked again but got no reply. Worried, he picked the doorknob’s lock with a hanger, only to find her the way she was now.

“It’s not your fault,” Will said. “The argument was between your mom and me. You couldn’t have known she took those pills.”

Will held his son tightly as the boy cried in his arms.

Hours later, a doctor appeared in the waiting room and motioned to Will. Danny was asleep next to him. The doctor walked into the hallway, Will following.

“She’s going to be okay, Mr. Lawson. The Naloxone she was given on the scene saved her life. Five or ten minutes later it would have made no difference. We had to make sure she remained stable but she’s cleared to go home now. Mr. Lawson, this was a suicide attempt. No adult overdoses on two pills. She had more than

enough in her system to stop her heart and lungs. The discharge nurse is going to counsel you both about treatment centers. If your wife refuses to go, you may need to file to have her admitted against her will. I've seen this too many times, Mr. Lawson. She's going to need help."

Will met privately with the nurse. Soon after, he was driving around to patient-pickup with Danny. An orderly wheeled Claire to the car. She was able to get in with minimal help.

"I'm sorry guys. I never... meant for this to happen," Claire said. "I really don't know what happened. I just took a few of my pills."

When they got home, Will and Danny helped her up the stairs and into bed. Will stayed by her side, assuring Danny it was okay to go to his room. Will sat at Claire's bedside, thinking about the number of times she called him earlier. His guilt was overwhelming. Claire fell asleep repeating her apologies and that she wasn't trying to kill herself. Regardless, everything Will told Elle about filing for divorce was out the window as far as he was concerned. He had to be there for his family now, for his son. At least until Claire was well again and getting the help she needed.

Chapter 6

Public Pictures

A week had passed since the overdose. Claire was doing well and things seemed to be getting back to normal. Better than normal, to Will. Claire's attitude and demeanor made him feel they were newlyweds again. Neither spoke of divorce anymore. It was as if the conversation had never taken place.

Will called Elle and explained everything that happened. She told him she understood, saying she supported them trying to save the marriage, if that's what he wanted. Will returned to work the next Monday, checking on Claire throughout the day.

After another two weeks, Claire began to work out at the gym again. She seemed ready to take her health back as well as her marriage. Everything was headed in a positive direction for the couple.

Early one afternoon, Claire finished working out and threw her gym bag in the front seat of her car. She wiped the sweat off her face and flipped down her mirror to put on some new lipstick before starting her car.

"Hey, darlin', you putin' that on for me?" A voice came from her back seat.

Claire screamed and turned around to find Todd sitting up from the back seat of her SUV. She tried to open her door but he reached forward and slapped his hand down on the lock button.

“Calm your tits, Claire. I’m just here to talk... then I’ll go.” he said, scanning the parking lot.

“What do you want?” she said, still shaking.

“I want something you never *gave* me, Claire... closure. And I’ve decided I’m not letting you kick me out of your life like an old dog you don’t want anymore.”

“I told you, it’s over, Todd! Haven’t you caused enough trouble for me? I told you never to contact me again. Thanks to you and your big mouth my husband knows everything!”

Todd squeezed himself between the bucket seats and worked his way into the front seat.

“I never said anything to your damn husband, Claire... not yet.”

“You told him about the motel! Don’t lie to me!”

“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. Like I said, I’m here for closure. That’s what I want, and you damn well owe it to me!”

“I gave you all the closure you needed four weeks ago, and I don’t owe you a *damn* thing! We had our time together and we’re done! I’m working things out with Will now.”

“Oh, we’re not finished *yet*, Claire. We’re not finished until your husband knows every dirty detail of our time together!”

“I told Will everything, you asshole! There’s nothing he doesn’t know. Now get out of my car before I call the cops!”

“Oh, he knows everything, huh?” He scanned the lot again. “Does he know how great you were at doing *this* for me?”

He grabbed the back of Claire’s head and forced her face into his lap. She struggled to get loose but he held her there several seconds before finally letting go. Claire sprung up and tried to slap him but he grabbed her arms. She dug her fingernails into the back of his hands.

“Dammit, bitch!” he said, letting go of her arms.

She tried again to open her door but he pulled her back by her hair. He grabbed both sides of her head and forced a kiss. Again, she tried to pull away, but he held her face pressed to his several seconds before letting go.

“What the hell is *wrong* with you?” she screamed, “You’re acting crazy! I can have you arrested, Todd... affair or not! You really want to go to jail?”

“Like I said, sugar-tits, I just wanted closure... and now I’ve got it. And don’t worry...you’re never going to see my ass again!”

He stepped out of the car and strolled across the parking lot like he didn’t have a care in the world. Claire was left shaken and confused as to what had just happened. She’d never seen Todd act that way before. She wanted to tell Will about it but decided against it. Whether he would believe her or not, the last thing she needed was for him to know she’d seen Todd again for *any* reason.

Elle met Todd at a gas station a few blocks from the gym. She had on a pair of dark sunglasses and wore a wig.

“Well lady... you get what you needed?” he asked, wiping Claire’s lipstick off his face.

“I did, thank you. Now, here’s your other half,” she said, handing him \$1000.

Todd counted the money. “You know, I’m no math wizard, and I ain’t arguin’... but you paid me \$750, and said it’d be another \$750 afterwards. So, why the extra \$250?”

“The extra is a friendly bonus for keeping our little agreement a secret. But I have to tell you, Mr. Spencer, several of the pictures I took look like an assault was happening in her car... if shown to the police, I mean. So... *you* have your bonus and *I* have my assurance. Do we understand each other?”

“Yeah, I get it. Damn, lady... I don’t know what you’re up to, but I wouldn’t want to cross ya. You must *really* hate your sister-in-law.”

He started to leave then turned around quickly.

“I need to know one thing before I go, though. Did she really say all that bullshit about me to her husband?”

“Every last word.” Elle said.

“That lyin’ bitch! She deserves everything she’s gettin’, then,” he said, walking away.

Claire got home and went straight to the shower. It wasn't so much from her workout as it was her wanting to rid herself from any essence of Todd, whatsoever. After washing off, she filled the tub and soaked for an hour. Danny came in from school and heard the water running.

"Mom, are you okay in there?" he said, knocking on the bathroom door.

"Yes, honey, I'm fine. Just taking a hot bath."

"You sure you're okay?"

"Yes, hon. Everything's fine. I just wanted to relax after my workout. I'm making tacos when your dad gets home."

"Okay... love you, Mom."

"Love you, too."

Claire felt a new strength for making sure her family succeeded. She wasn't going to stress about Todd or his antics any longer. Instead, she'd use that energy to rebuild her family. Finally, her past would be left behind, where it belonged.

"Hey, you! Haven't seen you in a while," Elle said.

"Hi! Yeah, it's been awhile. How are you?" Will asked.

"I'm fine. I was starting to worry you were going to another pharmacy now."

"Oh, no... of course not. I like it here... good people. Besides, Claire still needs her blood pressure medication."

"Oh, yes, of course! I think Mr. Jeffries filled that one. I'll check." She looked around to make sure no customers were listening. "By the way, how's she doing?"

"She's doing great, Elle. She seems healthier now than ever. She's sleeping better, too, and without the drugs. I've talked to her about counseling, but she won't go. She keeps insisting the overdose was an accident," he said. "I'm starting to think it really was."

Elle's expression changed. She looked around again before speaking.

"William, I don't want to worry you, but are you *sure* she's not taking anything to replace the Xanax? It's just that I know most people look for substitutes if they can't get what they're used to anymore."

“No, I mean... I don’t *think* she is, anyway. She’s been taking an over-the-counter PM pain-med to help her get to sleep some nights. But she’s taking the correct dose. I’ve been counting pills.”

“Well, I’m not trying to cause any doubt but you might check around the house for another bottle, just to be sure. Drug intervention is part of my program. I’ve heard a lot of scary stories about relapses.”

“I appreciate the words, Elle, really. I’ll keep an eye on it.”

“Good! I’m so happy you two are doing okay. And guess what? I’m seeing someone.”

“That’s great, Elle! From school?” he asked excitedly, though the news had struck him hard.

“No, a guy I met in a coffee shop. We’re just talking right now... nothing serious yet.”

“Wow... I’m happy for you Elle. He’d better be a good guy. You deserve that.”

“Thank you. I guess I’ll find out soon enough. We’re supposed to go out tonight.”

A woman behind Will purposely cleared her throat. “Excuse me... can someone *please* help me?”

“Oh, I think we have a customer waiting, Mr. Lawson. You have a great day, sir!”

Sir? Mr. Lawson? He felt the emotional separation as he walked out of the pharmacy.

Those titles hurt Will almost as much as hearing she’d met someone. He knew he had no right to feel the way he did, but it still bothered him. He drove back to work realizing how obsessed he really was with her. He knew he had to put her out of his mind and commit to moving on and refocusing on his marriage.

Chapter 7

Strike Three, You're Out!

Will walked into his office and noticed the stack of mail on his desk. One of the envelopes had no return address. He opened it to find a hand-written note inside, and several pictures. The note read:

I'm Todd's girlfriend. Or, at least I was. He's still screwing your wife, pal! These pictures were taken a few days ago. The dates are on them. I paid \$400 to have him followed, but it was worth it to prove what a cheating asshole he is. I just thought you'd want to know.

Will looked through the pictures and became sick to his stomach. Claire and her lover were together, in her car! There were pictures of them talking, kissing and a few with her head between his legs. The date they were taken was just a few days ago.

Todd put the pictures and letter in his pocket. His hands were shaking. He took a drink of his soda, but almost threw it up. After seeing those pictures, he knew Claire was never going to be faithful now, regardless of her promises. Todd was always going to be in the mix.

Will decided to confront her with the pictures that afternoon. He was hurt more than angry now, this being the final straw that broke his back. He was done with the marriage. Will left the office without a word to anyone.

The house smelled of cooked beef. Will wasn't hungry, and decided to wait until Danny had eaten and was in his room before he talked to Claire. He walked in quietly and avoided the kitchen on the way upstairs. When he passed Danny's room he smelled an overwhelming scent of chocolate. His door was locked.

"Hey bud, you in there? Will asked.

"Yeah, Dad."

"Mind if I come in?"

"Uh... I'm good, Dad. Can we just talk at dinner?"

"Dude, I smell the vape, and I know there's not a chocolate factory in your room."

Danny unlocked the door. Will entered and sat on the bed.

"Smells like a melted candy bar in here, Danny. You think you'd picked a different flavor this time. C'mon... let's have it."

Danny pulled the vape out from under his pillow and handed it to Will.

"How much did you pay for this? Will asked.

"Ten dollars."

Will took out his wallet and gave Danny a ten dollar bill.

"What's this for?"

"Because you're too young for this and I'm not. It's mine now. But if I catch you with one of these again before you're eighteen it's no phone for a month, got it?"

"Yes sir," Danny said.

Will put the vape in his pocket and left to change clothes before going downstairs. Claire was in the kitchen.

"Babe, you're home! I didn't hear you come in.

Already changed, huh?" Claire asked. "I'd give you a hug but my hands are greasy. You're early."

"I left work early," he said.

"Well, it'll be a while before the meat is done simmering."

"That's okay... not very hungry right now."

"Are you feeling okay? she asked, looking him over.

“I’ve been better. Going to watch some TV before dinner.”

“Okay... well, it won’t be too long. I’ll turn up the heat.”

Yeah, turn up the heat... like you did with Todd!

Will sat on the couch and watched TV. Thirty minutes passed before Claire called them for dinner. Will had no idea what he watched while waiting. His mind was on one thing: how to get through the evening without losing his shit again.

After they had dinner, Claire cleaned the kitchen and went upstairs.

“You coming, babe?” she asked.

“In a little while.”

Will sat down on the couch again and turned on the TV, finding a series to binge-watch for a while.

At 11pm he figured it was time to deal with the photos he’d received. He went upstairs and cracked Danny’s door open. He had on his headphones but looked like he was asleep. Will quietly closed his door and went across the hall.

“I was wondering if you were ever coming to bed,” Claire said, adjusting her pillow.

“I didn’t want to come up too early.”

“Too early for what? It’s after eleven, babe.”

“Too early to talk about these.” Will tossed the pictures onto the bed, along with the letter. Claire sat up and turned on her bedroom lamp.

“What are these?” she asked, gathering them up.

“Take a look. You might pick a less public place next time.” He stood by the bedroom door, arms folded.

“These are from last week... at the gym! You had me followed?”

“I didn’t have you followed. Read the note. An envelope with those pictures showed up today at my office.”

Claire read the letter then looked closer at the photos.

“That son of a bitch! Will, you have to believe me... these aren’t what they look like!”

“Wow. Really? That’s your answer? Come on, Claire! What the hell? You too were screwing around in your car!” He grabbed the pictures. “Here’s one of you kissing him... two with your head bobbing up and down on him. Oh, and here’s one of Todd climbing into your back seat. Todd, the guy you swore never to have

anything to do with again! No wonder you asked to go back to the gym. So, tell me Claire. How are they *not* exactly what they look like?”

Claire got out of bed and paced the room.

“Will! Those pictures were staged! Todd broke into my car while I was in the gym, working out! When I came back to my car, he was hiding in the back seat! He attacked me, Will! It wasn’t my fault! He *forced* me into those positions! He must have paid someone to take pictures... to make it *look* like we were messing around. He doesn’t even *have* a girlfriend! He’s trying to break us up!”

“Oh... you’ve *got* to be kidding me! That’s the biggest line of bullshit I’ve ever heard. Doesn’t have a girlfriend? Then what the hell are *you*? It’s bad enough you can’t keep from screwing this guy, but in a public parking lot? Again? Was your hotel booked up?” He grabbed some pictures off the bed and threw them against the wall.

“Why the hell can’t you just be happy in our marriage, Claire? You just *have* to keep sneaking around with this douchebag, don’t you? Well, good luck with him! I’m done with your lies, I’m done trying to save a bullshit marriage and I’m done with you! I’m sleeping in the basement until I find a place. And keep your damn distance... I don’t want any drama tonight or I’m calling the cops!”

Will picked up the photos and left Claire alone in the bedroom.

The next morning, Todd met with his lawyer and started his divorce filing. Instead of going home afterwards, he drove straight to the pharmacy. He walked in to find Elle stocking a shelf. No one else was there.

“Hey, Elle... how’d your date go last night?” he asked.

She didn’t answer, but kept on stocking the shelf. Will suddenly felt he had crossed a line.

“I’m sorry... just being nosy,” he said.

She stopped working and turned around. She seemed upset.

“No, you’re fine, William. The date didn’t happen.”

“Was he a no-show?” Will asked.

“No, I was.”

“Really? I’m sorry. Why... second thoughts?”

“No... too many thoughts of someone else.” Her eyes raised to meet his.

Will took a step towards her.

“Elle, I need to tell you—”

“Please don’t say it again, William. I know you and your wife are back on track. And I want you to be happy, really. But I’m not going to pretend it’s easy for me. I have feelings for you... I think it’s obvious. So, because of that I need to ask you to go gray-rock for me. I can’t handle seeing you here anymore. It’s not fair to me. I can’t pretend to just be friends, William. But it wouldn’t be for too long. I only have five months left of school. After that, I’m gone from here, anyway.”

“What if I won’t agree to stay away?” he asked.

“Seriously? I don’t get it. Is it asking too much for you to—”

“The marriage is over, Elle... at least for me it is,” he interrupted, “I filed for divorce today.”

“But why? I thought you two decided to work everything out... start over.”

“Elle, I’ve been trying to work things out with her for years now. I can’t do it anymore. Being cheated on... continually?”

“But she admitted to all that. She ended it with him.”

“Did she? I *thought* she had. Turns out I was wrong. Evidently ‘ole Todd had a girlfriend he was cheating on with Claire. She had him followed a few days ago and took pictures of them screwing around in her car. She sent copies of the photos to me. Claire tried to say he attacked her... that they were fake photos.”

“Are you serious? What is *wrong* with her? Can she *not* leave that guy alone?”

“Apparently not. I’m glad I saw the pictures, though. If I hadn’t seen proof she would have talked her way out of it like she always does. I’m not wasting anymore of my life fighting for a lost cause.”

“Oh Will, I’m sorry... really. I never wanted your marriage to fail.”

“I know you didn’t. But it failed because she couldn’t help herself. I don’t know what’s wrong with her. I mean, I *think* I’m a good husband. I don’t cheat... I try to do everything right... but I guess it’s not enough.”

“It is enough. It’s just not enough for *her*. Some women can’t be happy with a good guy, William. They want the worst of the worst... and, excuse my French, shit on all the good men that come into their lives. She doesn’t deserve you, William.”

“Well, whether she does or not, I don’t deserve the life I’ve had to live because of her. As of today, I’m legally separated. Well, after the court receives my filing and puts their little stamp on it,” he laughed.

She took a step towards him and tilted her head to the side a little.

“Well, now that you’re a free man, what are you going to do with your newfound freedom?” she asked.

“This.”

He took her in his arms, looked into her eyes and kissed her lips slowly, with purpose. When he ended the kiss, Elle remained standing, eyes closed and lost in the moment. When she finally spoke, her words fumbled.

“William, I was... I mean, I wanted to say... oh, hell!”

She leaned forward and kissed *him* this time. It was more aggressive. She pulled him in tightly, pressing her body against his. She gently bit and explored every part of his lips. The tables had turned now, as it was *he* who was left unable to speak.

Chapter 8

Playing Detective

Claire knew Todd lacked the brains to plan and execute the staged photos alone. She figured whoever took the pictures came up with the idea and probably paid *him* to participate. She had no idea who it could be or why they would do something like that, unless they were out to destroy her marriage. There was one thing she *did* know, though. It was clear that nothing short of proof would ever change Will's mind about those photographs. Without it, their marriage was over.

She reasoned she needed to find Todd and force him to confess. His phone went straight to voicemail when she dialed, so she drove to his apartment. She knocked on his door several times without an answer. She looked through his front window and discovered the place empty. Claire figured he'd found another apartment and skipped out of this one, probably owing them money. He'd done it before. She called the local bar he frequented but no one knew where he moved to. Then she had an idea.

Todd was a handyman and mowed several houses across from his apartment complex. It was fast money and she doubted he'd give it up. Claire drove to the street he worked on and asked some of his customers if they knew where he was. After several 'no's, one lady told her he was moving to an apartment in Sander's Heights.

Fifteen minutes later, Claire found the complex and his car. She knocked on the apartment's door closest to his vehicle. No one answered. She walked to the next one and knocked. Todd opened the door but immediately shut it after seeing her.

"Open the damn door, Todd!" Claire shouted.

Todd yelled back through his door, "Screw you, bitch! You said no more contact. So that's what you're gettin'!"

"That didn't stop you from the stunt you pulled in my car the other day!" she shouted.

"What stunt? I just came there to talk. You've had me in your car before, so that's where we talked."

"You did more than talk, Todd. You set me up! Whoever took those photos sent them to Will and now he's leaving me because of them!"

"What photos? I don't know anything about any photos! I was just there to talk, Claire. For closure, remember? Then I left, just like I told you I would."

"Bullshit! And I *know* someone besides you came up with the plan to set me up. You're too damn stupid!"

"Like I said, bitch, I don't know about any damn pictures or what the hell you're talking about. Now, leave before I call the cops on you!"

"I'll call them *for* you, asshole! Right now! I'll let them know you tried to rape me!" she threatened.

"That would be a damn lie and you know it, Claire! You're not dumb enough to lie to cops about somethin' like that! You'd go to jail for sure! And why do you suddenly care about your fuckin' marriage anyway? All last year, all I heard was what a boring loser your husband was... how you hated your marriage and wanted out! Now you're worried about what he knows about us? Well, baby, you can erase me from your life but you can't erase the shit we did together! I could tell him about some goooood times I had with you!"

"Let me tell *you* something, Todd! You have no fucking *idea* what I'd say or do right now to save my marriage! I don't care what you think about me anymore. We had our time together and it's over now. But this is my life we're talking about... *my* future and my *son's* future, and I want it back! You don't *have* to like it or even agree with it. I can't believe I ever screwed around with you in the first place! You're right, I can't change the past but I can damn well change my

future... and you aren't in it! Nothing's going to stop me... not *you* or whoever helped you set me up! You think I'm scared of the cops? By the time I'm done talking with them they'll be dragging you out of here in handcuffs! Don't think they'll believe me? You already have assault charges on your record, dumbass!"

She put her phone on speaker and started dialing. Todd opened the door and motioned for her to stop.

"Okay, okay... shit, Claire! What do you want to know? That someone set you up? Maybe. That I was paid to help? Yeah, maybe. But I'm not confessing to any cops about it! Besides, that redheaded bitch already threatened to make trouble for me if I said anything!"

"Well, I'm not just threatening you, Todd... I'll do it! And right now!"

"Okay... I'll tell Will about it over the phone, but that's it! I'm not doing it over text and I'm not writing any damn letter, understand? And both of you would have to give your word there'll be no trouble before I say anything!"

Claire pushed her way past Todd, walking straight into his apartment. He closed the door and sat in his recliner.

"The redhead... who is she? Did she say why she set me up? Is she messing around with Will?"

"I don't know her... but *you* do. It's your damn sister-in-law, from Maine! She came knocking at my old place... said she was Will's sister and knew all about our affair. Said she'd hated your ass for years and wanted you two to get a divorce but he keeps forgiving you. So, she wanted dated photos of us making out that she could send to him. I told her we weren't screwing around anymore, and she told me just to grab you and hold you in certain ways for a few seconds at a time. She said that would give her long enough to take some photos. And yeah, she paid me. I needed the damn money! So, unless Will has two red-heads for sisters, you damn well know who I'm talking about!"

"Will doesn't *have* any sisters, you dumbass! She fed you a load of shit, Todd... and you swallowed it! Now, I need to know *who* the hell she is and *you* need to help me find her!"

"How the hell should I know how to find her? She must have parked around the block because she left on foot from my apartment, and the same at the gym. She had red hair, a nice ass and looked younger than you. That's all I know!"

“I’ll be contacting you about when to make the phone call. And Todd, you’d better tell Will *everything* you just told me, word for word! If you don’t, I swear—”

“Yeah, I know,” he said. “But I’ll call *you*, and sometime in a day or two. You’re not going to know when. I don’t want any cops listening in!”

“Only Will and I will be on the phone. I’m not playing games, Todd... I want this fixed! You have two days to make the call, and you’d better make it or I swear I’ll do everything I told you I would!”

“Okay, fine... look, I ain’t apologizing, but shit, Claire... you dumped me and I was pissed! Plus, she had money and I needed it for this place. But yeah... I’ll make the damn call.”

Claire waited until she thought Danny was asleep. She walked down to the basement and tapped on the wall across from Will.

“What is it?” he asked, half asleep.

“I need to talk to you for a minute. And I need you to listen until I’m done, please. Then you can say whatever you want or nothing at all. But let me get this out.”

He sat up on the sofa, “Okay, fine. Go ahead.”

“Everything I told you about those pictures is true. I know it sounds crazy, and I don’t know who’s behind it... but I know more about it than I did yesterday. Todd didn’t do this by himself... he’s not smart enough. Plus, he’s too lazy to work out something like this. I went to his apartment this morning but he wasn’t—”

“You what?! After all the—”

“You said you wouldn’t interrupt!” she said, matching his volume. “Yes, I went to his apartment. He wasn’t there. I looked through the window... the place was empty! Anyway, I tracked him down to a new apartment and basically threatened him to tell me everything he knew about those pictures. He told me some lady with red hair knocked on his door and offered him money to set me up. She told him she was your sister, that she knew about the affair and didn’t want you married to me any longer. She told him to hold me in certain positions long enough for her to take pictures. She used ones that made it look like we were

messing around, then mailed them to your work. Todd admitted to it and agreed to call you and confess. Will, I'm telling the truth about this, one hundred percent! I need you to believe me."

"What you need is a psychiatrist, Claire. I'm not even kidding. You really think you can come down here and unload a story like *this* on me? Basically, the same thing you said the other night except you've added a mysterious redhead to the conspiracy? A sister I don't have? Plus, I find out you visited your boyfriend again and convinced him to call me and confess? Like I'd believe him? What'd you give him to agree, Claire? Never mind, I don't want to know. Look... I'm tired and I don't have the energy to swallow another dose of bullshit before I sleep tonight. If this is how it's going to be then I'll just rent a hotel room or an apartment until the divorce is final."

"You filed already? After I asked you to wait? Are you *that* anxious to get rid of me?" She started crying.

"This isn't *about* you anymore, Claire. Yes, the last eight years *were* about you, but not now. It's about me. I loved you... I fought for this marriage... alone. I got cheated on and treated like shit for a whole year. In fact, it's never really stopped! You don't care about me, Danny, or this marriage. You care about yourself, Claire. And now that you're scared of losing half of what we have, you'll say or do anything to keep it. I'm not buying the bullshit... not anymore. Goodnight!"

He flipped over on the couch and pulled his blanket over his head. Claire left the basement without saying another word.

Chapter 9

These are not Minty Fresh

Will phoned Elle the next morning and asked if she'd meet at the city park for lunch. They found each other's cars and walked to a picnic table under some trees.

"I didn't have any idea what you'd like to eat, so I stopped and got cheeseburgers, chicken strips, fish and salad. I figured I'd be right about *some* of it," he said.

"Silly! You could have just called me and asked. Think of the money you would have saved."

"Yeah, but some things are worth more than money... like feeding these squirrels whatever we don't eat."

"Oh, so *that* was your plan... feeding squirrels? I never would have guessed."

"You know, Elle... you look absolutely beautiful when you smile."

"Thank you, William. You make me smile without trying. So, how'd last night go? Was the basement comfortable enough? You look tired."

"Not fun, and yes, I *am* tired. It looks like I'll need to rent an apartment sooner than I thought. Claire's losing it. After all these years of not giving a shit about me or our marriage, she's suddenly desperate to save it. I don't know what part of 'over' she doesn't get."

"Wow. Did she keep you up all night?"

“No, but she did come down to the basement with more of the same bullshit she gave me about those photos. She just can’t let it go. She actually expects me to believe that crap.”

“I think she’s sick, William. No one comes up with something like that if they’re even *slightly* rational.”

“I told her she needed a psychiatrist. May have been a little harsh to say, but you wouldn’t believe the stuff she said.”

“Like what?”

“The same story as before... but she added to it. She said she went to Todd’s place and got him to admit it was all a setup. Supposedly, the mastermind behind the whole thing is some mysterious redhead... my sister, no less, even though I *have* no sister. This redhead supposedly hates Claire and is bent on getting us divorced. Evidently, she paid Todd to help her. It’s pathetic, Elle. I couldn’t believe she came to me with that crap. The worst part is I think she may believe it herself! She’s losing it. And really, if she’s *that* messed up then how safe is Danny around her?”

“He’s not safe at all, William. You need to step in and get her some help. She tried to kill herself, for God’s sake! You have to do something before anything else happens.”

“You’re right. I’ll talk to my lawyer. Oh, and she told me Todd agreed to call me in a couple days and confess! Can you believe that? Like I’d believe that asshole?”

“I don’t know, William... people can be pretty deceptive. Be careful,” she said.

“Look, if by some crazy chance she really *was* telling the truth about those photos then maybe I’d understand. But really... a conspiracy to break up a marriage she never wanted anyway? It’s just too much to swallow.”

“Do you think he’ll really call?” she asked.

“I have no idea. But I don’t doubt Claire would do whatever it took to make him do it. You said it yourself... she’s sick.”

“Just be careful, William. I don’t trust her. She’s desperate! And desperate people do desperate things.”

“I understand... and I will be. I can’t believe we’re finally alone and I’m wasting time talking about her. I’m sorry, Elle.”

She took his hand.

"I *want* to be the person you can talk to, William. About anything at all."

"I wish I had found you ten years ago, Elle."

"I would have been fifteen, William. So, let's say... seven years ago. At least I wouldn't have been a minor, and you wouldn't have gone to jail."

He laughed. "Jail? I haven't done anything to land me in jail, have I?"

"Not yet, but you will." Her smile said more than a wink ever could.

It was the second day and Todd hadn't called yet. Claire was getting anxious, knowing there was a good chance he'd back out or skip town. There was no way she could follow through with her threats to have him arrested, anyway. Todd would just ask his lawyer to have the photos entered into evidence if it went to trial. No judge or jury would believe her after seeing those photos.

Claire decided to drive to his place again, this time with a new idea. She would secretly record their conversation. She wished she'd thought of it last time. Maybe Will would have believed her if she'd come back with something solid to back up her story.

As she drove across town, she racked her brain trying to figure out who could be behind the photos. None of Will's old girlfriends were the type to stoop to anything like this, and most of them were married now, anyway. It had to be someone new, someone she didn't know; someone who wanted Will for themselves, she thought.

Claire called Todd's phone twice with no answer.

That's okay, asshole... I'll be knocking on your door in fifteen minutes!

His stupor from the half-drunk case of beer all but muffled the sounds of knocking coming from his front door. Todd sat up from his recliner and checked his pants, worried he'd pissed himself.

The sun was shining through his south window, so he figured it to be midday. He checked his phone for last night's game score then heard the knocking again.

"Todd, it's Claire! Open up! It's Claire!" The knocking got louder.

“Shit! Okay! I’m coming... quit knockin’!”

He stretched his back as he made his way to unlock the door.

“Well, fuck me runnin’, sweetheart! I didn’t think I’d ever see *you* again!”

Elle walked past Todd into the center of his living room. He closed the door behind her and leaned back on it.

“Have a seat, Red! Why’d you say you were Claire? Scared I wouldn’t let you in?”

“I don’t get scared, Mr. Spencer... and I’ll stand. We had a deal. You’d keep my secret and you wouldn’t have any trouble from me. I paid you extra to ensure that deal.”

“There’s all kinds of deals in play, lady. Seems like everyone’s coming to me with deals lately. You’re not the only one.”

“Yes, I know. It seems Claire paid you a recent visit. Part of our deal was you wouldn’t contact her again, remember? You broke your part of the deal, Mr. Spencer.”

“She found *me*, lady. I never contacted her. And how’d *you* find me, anyway?”

“Doesn’t matter... I found you. Have you called her husband yet?”

“Shit, lady... you know everything, don’t ya? I was going to call them tonight... unless you want to sweeten our deal a little.”

“I already paid you all I’m going to, Todd. You need to honor the deal we made.”

She bent forward and adjusted her shoe. He looked her over and closed the distance between them .

“Well, honey... money’s not everything, you know. Maybe you could give me a little somethin’ else, instead.”

She backed up a step. “Now, why would I do that?”

“To keep me from making that call, lady. To keep me from talking about you!”

“You’ve talked about me enough already,” she said.

“Oh, I can always find things to talk about. Unless I have a good reason not to.”

“I’m sure you could.” She looked around. “Is anyone else here?”

“Just you and me, darlin’.”

“Okay, Mr. Spencer, if that’s what it takes to shut you up for good, I’ll agree to it. But this is our last deal. If you cross me again—”

“There’ll be no crossing, lady. Well, alrighty then. I’ve gotta take a piss first. So you stay right there... and don’t you go away! I’ve got a feeling you’re gonna like this, Red. You might even come back for some more!”

Todd went to the bathroom to relieve last night’s drinking. Elle reached into her purse and pulled out a small capsule. She placed it between her fingers, hidden from view. The bathroom door opened and Todd returned to the living room. He walked over to Elle and ran his hands down her hips.

“I’m not into foreplay, Mr. Spencer. You’ve got exactly five minutes with me. Use them wisely.”

Todd wasted no time stripping off his shirt and sweatpants. He ran his hand down the front of her blouse.

“You want to take these clothes off or you want me too?”

“Use your imagination, Mr. Spencer. But first, you need a breath mint.”

She put the capsule up to his lips. As he opened his mouth, Elle held it just inside and squeezed it between her fingers until it burst, coating the back of his throat. Todd stepped back and coughed.

“What the hell kinda mint was *that*? It’s nasty as hell!”

He tried to spit out any of the liquid he hadn’t already swallowed.

Elle took out a wet wipe and quickly cleaned her fingers off. She wrapped the broken capsule in the towelette and put it in her purse.

“What’s the matter, Mr. Spencer... is it really that bad? I’ve always wondered what it tastes like.”

“It tastes lithe fu-ing shith---”

He tried spitting again then coughed hard, grabbing his throat. He continued coughing, desperate to keep his airway open! His face turned red as his throat completely closed.

He stumbled into Elle, knocking off her wig. His eyes widened as it rolled across the floor. Elle picked it up and placed it on her head again as Todd fell to his knees in front of her. She leaned over and spoke softly into his ear.

“Now you’ll keep your end of the bargain, Mr. Spencer. And don’t worry... the allergic reaction only lasts a few minutes. Not sure what you’ll do for air between now and then, though. I had to use more than necessary. I wasn’t going to make the same mistake I made with Claire’s blood pressure pills. The paramedics saved her life, just giving me more work to do.”

Todd fell to his stomach and stopped moving. Elle leaned over and lifted his head off the floor. With as much force as she could muster, she slammed his face onto the wood floor several times until she heard his nose break. Blood began to pool under his cheeks. Elle stood and adjusted her wig once more before leaving the apartment.

Claire turned the corner onto Todd's street and had to brake hard to avoid a car pulling out of the complex. As the vehicles passed each other, Claire noticed the driver's bright red hair.

"I fucking *knew* it! Those two are still working together!"

She tried to turn around, but there were too many oncoming cars. She quickly pulled into the lot and parked. After hurrying to his apartment, she banged on the door.

"Todd, it's Claire! Let me in! I *saw* your little woman, asshole! Open the door! She waited a few seconds before banging again. "Todd! Open the fucking door! I saw your bitch outside! Let me in... now!"

A woman in the apartment next to Todd's opened her door wide enough to see what was happening. Claire noticed and spun around.

"Mind your fucking business, grandma!"

The woman pulled her head back into her apartment and quickly locked her door.

"Todd, you open this door or you're a fucking dead man! You hear me? Todd!"

She turned the knob, expecting it to be locked. It turned freely. "I'm coming in there, you two-faced bastard!"

Todd was lying in the middle of the room, face down in his pool of blood. Claire rushed over and knelt down beside him. She shook him by the shoulders.

"Todd! Dammit! Todd!" She pulled hard at his collar, trying to turn him over. When she saw his face, she panicked, dropping him to the floor again! His cheek landed flat, splattering blood onto Claire's face and shirt. She jumped to her feet and reached into her pocket for her phone. It wasn't there! She'd left it in the car. She ran to the parking lot as sirens wailed in the distance. She grabbed her phone and dialed 911 while running back to the apartment.

"911, what's your emergency?" A woman asked.

"Hurry! There's a man here, hurt or dead... in his apartment! What? Oh, shit... I don't know! Oh, in Sander's Heights, number... 107!"

She knelt over Todd's body again and poked his shoulder, hoping for a reaction. He didn't move.

"Flat on the ground! Put your hands behind your back!" a man yelled behind her.

Claire turned to see two police officers, weapons drawn and aimed.

"I said on the ground!" the officer repeated.

Claire dropped to the floor onto her stomach, beside Todd's body. Before she could get her hands behind her back, an officer was on top of her, his knee pressing hard into her spine. She screamed in pain as he grabbed her arms and cuffed her hands.

"Officer... no! I found him this way! A lady with red hair did this! I saw her driving out of the lot when I got here!"

The officer's partner checked the apartment for other occupants then ran to Todd's body. He turned him over and checked for a pulse before beginning chest compressions.

A few minutes later, paramedics arrived and took over. Todd showed no signs of life. Claire was read her rights and put in the back of a police car while an ambulance transported Todd to the hospital.

Chapter 10

Framed, or Just Karma?

Will's cell phone vibrated while he was in a meeting. He looked down and saw 'Police Dept' as the caller I.D. He stepped into the hall and answered the phone. Claire's frantic voice was on the other end. She was terrified, telling Will about being arrested and finding Todd on the floor of his apartment. He asked her to slow down and tell him everything, start to finish. She began to cry and hyperventilate as she recounted the event. He couldn't understand much of what she said. Will told her to calm down; that he was on his way to the police station.

"Claire Lawson. She was brought in a few minutes ago. Where is she?" he asked the woman at the front desk.

"And who are you?" she asked.

"I'm her... husband. She called me from here. Where is she?"

"She's being questioned by our detectives. You'll need to wait here until they're finished."

"I'm her husband. Why can't I go in there?"

"Are you a lawyer, sir?"

"No. I *told* you... I'm her husband!"

"Then you'll need to wait out here until they're finished. They will come and talk to you out here, sir!" she said firmly.

Will took a seat and tried to think of what to do. The news of Todd being dead didn't upset him... but Claire? Was she involved? He pulled out his phone and called his neighbors' house. He asked them to meet Danny at the bus stop and keep him for a while, explaining it was a family emergency.

Two hours passed as he waited for someone to come talk to him.

"Mr. Lawson?" An officer said, approaching him.

"Yes! My wife... is she okay?" Will asked, standing to his feet.

"She's fine, Mr. Lawson. She's being detained. We'd like to ask you some questions regarding today's events. Can you follow me, please?"

"I don't know anything, officer. I got a call from her after you brought her in. She said she had been arrested and was here... that a man she knew was possibly dead. That's all I know."

"Please, Mr. Lawson... just follow me. It will only take a few minutes."

The man motioned him down the hallway, into a small room. Will realized he was about to be interrogated.

"Mr. Lawson, your wife's been detained in regards to the death of Todd Spencer."

"So, he's actually dead?" Will asked.

"Dead on arrival. We brought your wife in from the scene. She's being detained and questioned as we speak."

"Why? There's no possible way she had anything to do with that, detective! My wife's not a murderer... she's a stay-at-home mom, for God's sake!"

"I never used the word 'murder', Mr. Lawson, *you* did. She's being detained during our preliminary investigation into his death. We have a witness who says she saw and heard your wife screaming at Mr. Spencer and making death threats before entering his apartment. Do you know anything about that?"

"No. I told you, I don't know anything except what she told me on the phone when she called... from *here*. I'm sure you monitored the call."

"Well, sir... it appears shortly after Mr. Spencer allowed your wife into the apartment he succumbed to a deadly blow to his head. Is your wife prone to violence, Mr. Lawson?"

“What? No, she’s not! I... I think we need a lawyer, detective. I’m sorry but I won’t be answering any more questions until we contact one. Can I see my wife now?”

“Not yet, Mr. Lawson. She’s being detained without visitation... for now.”

“Don’t you have to charge her or let her go? Isn’t that the way it works?”

“You’ve watched too much TV, Mr. Lawson. Your wife’s been arrested and detained for suspicion of murder. We don’t have to charge her to keep her overnight. No one’s allowed to talk to her right now except a lawyer. In other words, get a lawyer, wait out here, or come back in the morning.”

“Can I step outside for a few minutes?” Will asked, shaken.

“Yes, sir... we’re not holding you.”

The detective pointed to the door and put away his notebook. Will hurried down the hall and out the front door, scrolling through his phone for his lawyer’s number. He made the call from his car but got no answer. He tried again with no luck. He had no idea what to do. He didn’t want to call Claire’s family until he talked to her and knew more about what happened. He sat in his car, his mind racing. He picked up his phone again and dialed Elle.

“Oh, my God, Will! You don’t think she really killed him, do you?” She asked.

“No... I mean... dammit... I really don’t know. She was out of her head this morning, still promising me Todd was going to call and confess. She was really pissed he hadn’t yet. But murder?”

“Maybe they had an argument and his death was an accident of some kind, William. Let’s not jump to any conclusions until you talk to her yourself,” Elle said.

“You’re right, I don’t know what to think, anyway. Danny’s with a neighbor right now. I’m sure he’s wondering what’s going on. I just don’t know what to do. I’ll have to tell him something, though.”

“Just tell him Claire’s okay but she’s busy for a while. I wouldn’t say anything else yet... you’ll just panic him.”

“True, and I don’t want to do that. He freaked out enough when he overheard she cheated on me. Elle, I appreciate you helping me think this through. God, I hope she didn’t kill him! She’ll go to prison for life! That would destroy Danny.”

“I’m sure she didn’t, Will. Have you called your lawyer yet?”

“No answer... I left two messages. Maybe he’s in court, I don’t know.”

“Keep trying him. If he doesn’t answer soon, you need to find someone else. She’s probably terrified in there!”

“You’re right. I’ll try again then call Larry from work. He’s always bragging about his lawyer.”

“Good idea!” she said. Listen, we’ll get through this.” They both hung up.

Will’s lawyer called back. He was out of state, on vacation. Will called Larry and got his lawyer’s number. After telling him all he knew, they met at the police station an hour later.

“Mr. Lawson? Ted Simmons. I want to talk to the detectives for a few minutes then meet with Claire. I’m going to ask you to wait out here while I do both. I’ll have better luck getting the answers I need without you being present. I’m sure she’s very emotional right now. Is that okay with you?”

Will agreed and stayed in the lobby. An hour passed before he saw the lawyer crossing the lobby again. He took Will aside and spoke to him quietly.

“I’m not going to sugarcoat this, Mr. Lawson. It isn’t good. They have a witness that saw your wife, and *only* your wife go in and out of that apartment. The witness told the police they heard Claire identify herself and threaten to kill Mr. Spencer. When the police arrived, your wife was kneeling over the body with his blood on her hands and shirt. Now, your *wife* told me she and the deceased had a year-long affair that ended badly. She mentioned he had set her up using some fake photos sent to you in order to sabotage your marriage... that she only went to his apartment to get him to confess to you. She swore she didn’t kill him, that he was already dead when she arrived. But then she mentioned seeing some mysterious redhead... said that she was secretly working with Mr. Spencer to destroy your marriage. She claims the woman is the *real* killer of Mr. Spencer. Like I said, Mr. Lawson, it isn’t good. They have more than probable cause here. So unless something new develops, expect charges soon, possibly even first degree murder. Whether it’ll stick or not remains to be seen. I’m sorry, Mr. Lawson. I’ll make some calls tonight and get back with you first thing in the morning. We’ll want to meet here early so you can see her. Do you have any questions on what I just told you?”

Will's brain was numb. He had no questions for the man and walked to his car, feeling defeated. He needed to pick Danny up from the neighbor's house and would have to tell him something. It was going to be a long night.

"Dad! What's going on?"

Danny was seated on the front step of their neighbor's home.

"I'm sorry, Will... he insisted on waiting outside for you. We fed him dinner, though."

"Thanks Cindy. I appreciate everything you and Bill did today. I'll call you in a bit to let you know what's going on. Just let me get Danny settled first."

"Sure, Will... and he was no trouble, really. It felt good to have a kid at the dinner table again."

Will nodded and walked Danny to their house. After going inside, he asked him to sit on the couch.

"Danny, something's happened."

"Is mom dead?" he asked.

"No, no... she's fine, Danny. She's, well... your mom's at the police station for a while."

"What? Why... what did she do?" he asked.

"She didn't do anything. She was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. A man was killed and your mom happened to discover him. A neighbor of the man called the police and got her facts wrong, that's all."

"So they *think* mom killed him?"

"The police don't know who killed him, but since the lady told them your mom was there, they have to keep her for a while until they find out what happened."

"Like, 'til tomorrow?"

"I'm not sure, Danny. It may take them more time to figure everything out."

"So, who's going to be here when I get home from school?"

"You have a key, and you're almost thirteen. You're responsible enough to let yourself in. Just call me when you get off the bus and keep me on the phone until

you're in the house. Then lock the door until I get home. It's less than two hours... I think you can handle that, right?"

"Yeah, I can. Is mom in a jail cell?"

"I'm not sure, but I know she'll be okay. Why don't you take a shower, get a snack and go to bed. It's almost 8pm."

"Dad, I haven't had an eight o'clock bedtime for two years."

"Yeah, that's true... just have all your electronics off by 9pm, okay?"

"Got it. Night, Dad."

"Goodnight Danny."

The impact of their conversation reminded Will how fragile Danny really was. He needed the strength of a stable parent to make him feel safe and secure; especially now.

Chapter 11

Sinking Ship in Orange

Will couldn't sleep. Instead, he made a sandwich and brewed a pot of coffee. He sat at the kitchen table, thinking about everything that had happened. Around 3am, he felt his eyes getting heavy. The couch became his bed for the next few hours.

The alarm on his phone jolted him from his sleep. Will swung his legs over the sofa and made his way upstairs to wake Danny. Halfway up, he heard the toilet flush.

"You up already?" he asked.

"Yeah dad... since mom's not here I set my alarm. I'll be down in a few minutes. You don't have to cook anything... I'm having cereal."

"Okay... thanks for getting up on your own."

"Well, you said I was almost a teenager, so I figured I need to start acting more adult."

"That's awesome Danny... shows you're growing up."

Will had cereal as well. After he got dressed, Mr. Simmons' called. The reality of Claire's situation was relayed once again, leaving Will overwhelmed with new choices to make. He called work and asked to take a week off for personal reasons. He hoped that would be enough time for the detectives to figure out Claire had nothing to do with Todd's death. He finished his coffee and drove to

see Elle. She wasn't at the pharmacy, so Will dialed her number. She answered quickly.

"William, how are you doing? Is Danny okay?"

"Surprisingly, he's fine. He got up on his own this morning, fixed his breakfast and got on the bus without any help from me... said he was old enough to handle it."

"I'm glad he's okay. He really sounds like a sweet boy... I hope to meet him someday."

"You'll like him, Elle. He's a good kid."

"He's like his dad then. So... how's Claire doing?"

"Not good. They didn't let me see her. The lawyer was allowed, though... he said she's scared to death and not in a good mental state."

"Will, I've been thinking. Maybe I need to give you some time to sort all this out. I can't imagine what you're going through but I know Claire's situation needs your complete attention... and Danny needs it, too. I don't want to cause any problems or come between you and your family."

"Elle, if this is too much for you, I understand. I've put you through too much already. But you're not causing any problems. In fact, I don't know how I'd be coping with this if it weren't for you. I want you to know that whatever happens with Claire's situation isn't going to change my feelings for you or my decision about the divorce. The marriage is over. I don't feel the way I used to about her; I know that now. The papers are filed and I'm not putting a hold on anything. She's too prideful not to sign them, despite her present situation. I'll do my best to help in the police matter, but she and I are done. My real fear is that all of this is going to make you run for the hills. And if you did, I wouldn't blame you. I'd tell you to keep running and don't look back."

"I'm not the type to run, William. And I want to be your support through this and *anything* else we face. I was just worried. With all this going on with Claire, I didn't want you to think I was taking advantage of the situation... trying to insert myself into your life. Does that make sense?"

"I *want* you in my life, Elle. You know, if we can make it through this, we can make it through anything."

"William, I can promise you this... I don't scare easily. And when I offer my love, it's forever. I won't let anyone or anything come between us."

Claire's charges came the next morning; first degree murder. Her lawyer called and relayed the information to Will, who was just about to leave for the station. When Will arrived, the detective he had spoken to was in the lobby.

"Detective Nichols!" Will called out. The detective saw him and crossed the room.

"Formal charges were filed an hour ago, Mr. Lawson. Your wife's being transferred to County before lunch. Her arraignment will probably be within a couple days. Your lawyer's here and knows the situation. He should be finding you soon."

"I don't understand, detective... first degree murder? Weren't you going to investigate further before charging her? It's been less than a day!"

"We did, Mr. Lawson. We've got everything we need short of a confession. Your wife admitted she was angry with the deceased when she entered the apartment. She also admitted to the threats the witness claimed she made to him, along with the blood on her shirt and hands being his. We had probable cause to submit a report to the prosecutor, Mr. Lawson. That's our job... we don't make the rules, regardless of the time it took to gather evidence."

"But didn't she tell you she found him already dead? Isn't that possible?"

"Sure... and she also went on and on about some mysterious redhead who is hell-bent on destroying your marriage... that this woman worked with the deceased to fake some intimate photos and used them to turn you against her. Oh, and that *she's* the real killer of Mr. Spencer, not your wife."

"I *did* receive those pictures, detective. She's telling the truth about that."

"Do you know this woman in red, Mr. Lawson? Do you still have the photos and *know* whether they're faked or not?"

"I don't know her and haven't seen her. Claire told me about her."

"Right... look, I don't know what else to tell you. Our witness didn't see her, either... just your wife. Mr. Lawson, this isn't a case we've been trying to build over several months... or years. This is a homicide that dropped in our laps one day ago. We don't have any skin in this. The probable cause was there, we made our report and forwarded it to the prosecutor. They decide who gets charged and

who doesn't... not us. Now, I told the officers downstairs if you showed up before the transfer to let you see her. Just go down there and show them your I.D."

Will's phone rang. It was Claire's lawyer. The detective left Will to his call.

"Mr. Lawson, I tried to call you. Are you still at home?"

"No, I'm here at the station...just talked to the detective. He said you were here. He's letting me see Claire before they move her to County."

"Be careful, Will. An officer is sure to be there when you talk to her. Anything said by you *or* her can be used against her in court. You can give her emotional support but don't discuss any specifics of the case! And for God's sake, don't let *her*! Did the detective talk to you about the case?"

"Yes, but just the things Claire already told them... and about why they believe they have probable cause."

"He shouldn't have said *anything* about the case... especially to you! He was fishing, Will... hoping you'd say something that could help them."

"I didn't say anything that could help them in any way."

"Let's hope not. Listen, I'm here and on the way up to the lobby. I have some time before I'm due in court today. Wait for me before you talk to her. They can't be present if I'm in the room to consult with her. I'll request a private place to talk."

"Okay, I'll be in the lobby."

Will noticed the detective eyeballing him from across the room.

The police complied with Simmon's request for a private area to meet with Claire. An officer brought her in and removed the handcuffs. Will was shocked at her condition. Her eyes were red and puffy, her arms were trembling and she had a bruise on her left cheek. She looked ten years older. Claire ran to him and threw her arms around his neck, bursting into tears. After the emotional greeting, the three sat down around a large, steel table.

"Will, I didn't do anything... I swear! He was dead when I got there!"

Her lawyer waved her off and pulled out a voice recorder from his pocket.

"Hold on, Mrs. Lawson... I'm going to record this. They aren't supposed to monitor anything said in here, but it happens. The recorder is to ensure nothing said here can be used in court. If they try to, I can have it thrown out."

"Will, I swear... I only went over there because he hadn't called you! I passed a woman with red hair driving out of the apartment's lot on my way there! I *know*

it was the same bitch who set me up! I just know it! I knocked on Todd's door several times before trying the doorknob... it was open. I went in and found him on the floor! I tried to turn him over but couldn't. His face hit the floor and that's how his blood got on my shirt! He was already dead, Will... I didn't kill him! I called 911... but before I could even tell them anything, a policeman was on top of me with his knee in my back!"

"Mr. Lawson, if I hand you my phone, could you take some pictures of her back and head? And Mrs. Lawson, turn your head as far to your left as you can so you can be identified in the pictures."

Will took his phone and stood to take the pictures. Claire carefully lifted her shirt from the back, revealing a huge bruise over her spine.

"Oh, Claire... you're black and blue!" Will said, before taking the pictures.

"Do you have any other injuries, Mrs. Lawson?" her lawyer asked, retrieving his phone.

"Not that I know of... just some bruises on my wrists."

He took pictures of both arms before putting his phone away.

"Will, they told me I was being charged with murder! They're transferring me to County in an hour. What are we going to do? What's going to happen to me?"

"Mrs. Lawson, I've asked you this before, but is there *anything* you remember at Mr. Spencer's apartment that could be helpful? Was anyone else there? Any strange sounds or noises? Any drugs or alcohol in the room?"

"Like I said, he had been drinking. The smell of beer was all over him. There were open beer cans on the coffee table and the floor."

"It's possible he fell, then. Anything else?"

"Just that his front door was unlocked. Todd owed money to people. He wouldn't leave his door unlocked. He let that redheaded *bitch* inside, though... and she killed him!"

The lawyer glanced at Will. It was clear he doubted her story.

"You said you saw the lady when you pulled into Mr. Spencer's apartment complex, correct?"

"Yes, the bitch had just pulled out of the lot. She almost hit me as I was trying to pull in!"

"Have you ever seen her before?" the lawyer asked.

“Well, no... but Todd had told me about her. It was *her* damn idea to set me up in the first place! She came to Todd with the plan!”

Mr. Simmons turned to Will. “Do you know this red-haired woman?”

“No, I don’t. I don’t have any female friends with red hair. In fact, I don’t know *any* women with red hair, personally. I never saw her.

“Okay. Look, I’ll have someone check with the businesses across the street. Maybe they have a camera that would have caught her pulling out of there.”

There was a knock on the door.

“Yes?” The lawyer asked.

“Transfer van’s here. We need to process her out.” An officer said.

“Okay. Look... don’t be frightened, Claire. This is *all* procedure. You’ll be safe at County. Your arraignment is in two days. We will be there. Will, be sure to have your I.D. on you, and anyone else you bring will need theirs.”

“It will just be me. I don’t want Danny there,” Will said.

Claire started crying and grabbed Will’s arms.

“Will, I don’t want to go! Make them stop! I didn’t do anything!”

He hugged her and told her not to worry. The lawyer shook both their hands.

“Will, you have my personal cell number. If anything comes up between now and then, give me a call.” Simmons said.

An officer opened the door and proceeded to handcuff Claire and take her out of the room.

Will had never experienced such a surreal moment as watching his wife being led down the hall by the police. The lawyer noticed the look of shock on his face.

“I’m sorry, Will... these things can be very traumatic. It’s like entering another world when you’re suddenly thrown into the justice system.”

“Yeah... another world,” Will agreed.

“I wish I didn’t have to tell you this, but in the bathroom I overheard a detective talking about their witness’s testimony. Evidently the witness heard Mr. Spencer say he was coming to the door while your wife was knocking. That’s a deathnail to us, Will. It destroys any theory of him being already dead before Claire arrived.”

“This just keeps getting worse, Ted.”

Simmons nodded as the two parted ways.

Chapter 12

A New Bond is Formed

Will got home and waited for Danny to get off the bus. When the boy was almost to his front door, Will met him on the porch.

“C’mon, big guy... we’re eating out tonight. I need to talk with you about some stuff.”

“Okay... pizza?” Danny asked.

“If you want... your choice.”

“Pizza,” Danny said.

After they ate, Will told him where his mom was and much of what had been going on. He left out any details unnecessary for Danny to hear, telling him just enough to explain the situation. Danny was upset, but surprisingly, he didn’t cry. Will assured him that life would go on and his mom would be okay.

They came home and watched a movie together before Danny went to his room. Will took a shower and went to bed alone again. He would need to get used to it, he figured. He watched TV until 11pm., not able to sleep. Before he knew it, he was dialing Elle.

“Hey Elle, sorry it’s so late... you still up?”

“I am... I was hoping you’d call. How’d it go today?”

“First degree murder charges... arraignment in two days.”

“Oh, Lord... that’s really fast! Is she okay? What about Danny? And are *you* okay?” she asked.

“She’s a basket case... Danny’s surprisingly okay, and I’m just still in shock. I guess it hasn’t fully sunk in yet.”

“William, sadly enough, it *will*... and when it does, be sure to take care of *you*. And let me help take care of you, too. I can’t offer much but I’m a good listener.”

“Thanks, Elle. I’ve decided to take off from work until things calm down. Things are moving so fast with Claire’s situation... I want to be home when Danny gets off the bus for a while. I’m worried he’s chosen not to deal with his feelings.”

“That’s a good idea. Do you think you could arrange some counseling for him? I think he’s going to need it... any kid would.”

“I hadn’t thought of that, but yes, absolutely. I want to get ahead of this. Bottling up his emotions isn’t healthy.”

“I know some good ones if you need their numbers,” Elle said.

“Thanks dear, I appreciate it. My mind’s racked with a lot of ‘what ifs’ right now. It’s hard to stay on top of things.”

“Do you know what you just said to me, William?” she asked.

“What do you mean... that my mind’s racked?”

“No... you called me ‘dear’.”

“Oh... it just came out. You know how I think of you—”

“I loved it, William. Don’t explain... just let it ring in my ears a little longer.”

After a short pause, she followed up.

“You know, I think I’ll take off tomorrow, myself. Do you want to get some coffee tomorrow morning? I think our brains need a short vacation considering everything that’s been happening.”

“That’s a perfect idea, Elle. Let’s meet at the park. We’ll take my car and go for a drive... get some coffee and take a walk together.”

“Sounds like heaven, William. Is around nine okay?”

“Nine’s perfect, *dear*.”

“Dad! You’re not up yet? It’s 7:15. The bus will be here in like three minutes. You okay?” Danny asked.

“Yes, I’m fine. Sorry I wasn’t up earlier... hard to sleep these last couple of days.”

“Yeah, when I went downstairs and didn’t smell coffee, I knew you hadn’t been down yet.”

“Yes, that’s a good clue... going out to get coffee this morning, though. Have a good day at school and call me if you need to, okay?”

“Okay, seeya!” Danny shut the door behind him.

Will remembered Elle’s suggestion for arranging counseling. Danny wasn’t acting like anything in the world was wrong, and that was worrisome.

Will took a shower and got dressed to meet Elle. He felt some guilt about seeing her while Claire sat in jail. He was technically still married. But the fact that Claire had maintained her relationship with Todd was enough to relieve his guilt for pursuing his new relationship. He didn’t choose the timing or the circumstances, he reasoned. It was Fate’s fault if anyone’s. He found himself hurrying to get out the door.

The park’s lots were surprisingly full for 9am.

So this is how the other half lives. No job... just wake up and enjoy the whole day... no work responsibilities, he thought. *Exactly what Claire had... but she just had to have more.*

He noticed a car’s window lowering to his right.

“Wow, do you have a tracker on me? You found me so fast!” Elle joked.

“Not an electronic one.” Will said, feeling foolish as he pointed to his heart.

“Oh, that’s sweet, dear,” she smiled.

“Elle, do you realize what you—”

“I know *exactly* what I said, William. But I need to ask something before we go any further. Are you really up for this? Only that Claire’s... well, you know where she is... and I’m feeling a little selfish about asking you out with all that going on. I think I should have waited longer.”

“Don’t feel that way, Elle. Whatever she’s done or not done to land her where she is *not* our fault. What you said last night was right... our brains *do* need a short vacation, and there’s no one else I’d rather spend it with.”

“Well then, let’s make it count,” she said, kissing him on the cheek.

Elle left her car and rode with Will to a coffee shop the next town over. After that, they went for a walk around a camping ground and local lake.

During the walk, they held each other's hands.

The trees showed their love for fall, presenting a cascade of color around the lake. Birds sang, and the occasional ripples of water on the lake hinted at a family of turtles. Will felt like a teenager again, taking his girl on a first date. When they had reached the far side of the lake, they came upon a fence that bordered it from private land. Elle began to climb the fence.

"What are you doing? I think we're supposed to turn around, Elle. There's a sign---"

"See that tree, William? There's a family graveyard on the other side of it. Let's take a look."

Will looked around and saw no one watching, so he climbed the fence and followed Elle.

"Wow... look at these, William! They must be two hundred years old! The engravings have worn off on most of them."

"Yeah, it has to be early American. From the dates I can make out, it looks like the family stopped using the graveyard about a hundred and fifty years ago," he said.

"They're beautiful. As worn as they are... just beautiful! There's history in the ground here, William. Love, loss... life and death, all together under these stones."

"Makes you appreciate your time on earth, doesn't it?" he asked.

"Yes, exactly. It tells me not to waste a single moment."

She knelt down under the tree and took Will's hand. He sat down in the grass next to her and they kissed. She bit his bottom lip and pulled back a little before letting go. Then she kissed him again, repeating the action.

"I didn't hurt you, did I?" she asked.

"No, it almost hurt, but it felt good."

"Sometimes the sweetest tastes are hidden in our pain," she said.

She kissed his face, working up to his right ear.

She took his earlobe into her mouth and gently used her teeth as she had done his lip. When she looked into his eyes, they were closed. She kissed him softly on

his cheek. He opened his eyes to find her unbuttoning her top. He started to speak but she stopped him with another kiss and gently pushed him backwards.

“Lie back and close your eyes, William,” she said.

He felt her unbuttoning his pants. Seconds later he opened his eyes to find her straddling him, perfectly set between him and the sun behind her head. She appeared as a glowing silhouette now, the light outlining her sensuous form.

Her movements were gentle and rhythmic, taking Will to places he’s never been with another woman. She seemed to read his every sensation. She rose and fell in sync with his body’s desires.

Time disappeared as one moment melted into the next. When neither could hold back their arousal any longer, they released together. She pressed her hips into his and moaned loudly before collapsing into his arms. At that moment, their bodies made an unspoken vow to one another. Both knew the significance.

Having left the park, the two looked for a place to eat lunch. They found a small Italian restaurant, a few miles from the park. Several people were seated near them but Will and Elle only saw each other. The waiter had to clear his throat twice to get their attention.

“Is this a special occasion?” he asked.

“Yes it is,” replied Elle. “A *very* special occasion.” Will nodded and smiled.

“We have a table in the corner if you’d like,” he offered.

“I don’t think it matters *where* we are right now,” Will replied.

Elle smiled and stirred the slice of lemon in her water. Moments later, a plate of rolls arrived. Will hadn’t noticed the waiter had even left. They eventually ordered their food and talked over dinner.

After their meal, Will drove Elle back to her car. She leaned against it and motioned him to her. Will walked over to give her a kiss. She grabbed him by his shirt and pulled him into an embrace. One long, soft kiss later left each inside their own cars, driving separately again. Will was still in a daze. He looked at the dashboard and realized the time. Danny’s bus would arrive in thirty minutes. Will was twenty minutes away.

The day couldn’t have been better timed, he thought.

Chapter 13

Arraignment

At 3:30pm, Will's phone rang. Mr. Simmons informed him of the arraignment time for the following day. Will felt a wave of dread wash over him as he thought of Claire. With the witness's report it was likely her charge would stick. Claire would need a miracle to keep it from going to trial.

He called her family. The conversations were difficult, her brother's being the worst. Will didn't speak of the affair, only that Claire had walked in on a recent homicide. He explained she didn't want them to attend the arraignment; if the charges held, then they could attend the trial. Neither was satisfied with her request. Will wondered if he should have disregarded her wishes and called them sooner. Danny didn't hear the conversations and was still unaware of his mother's arraignment. Will thought it best for him to not know. He'd be better off in school, he thought.

Claire's lawyer offered to meet Will at 8am so they could consult with Claire. Will called Elle to let her know what the plans were.

"Are you nervous?" she asked.

"I am for *her*," he said. "I can't imagine what she must be going through."

"Just remember, William, *you* didn't put her there. If she'd cut it off near the beginning, your marriage would have had a chance. But another year of cheating? Then caught in the act inside her car? I have to wonder... was she *really* at his apartment just for a confession? Maybe there's more to it. All I'm saying is *you're*

the victim in this thing, not her. You and Danny. She had her cake and was happily eating it. She knew it could come with a price and now she's paying that cost. I know I sound harsh, William... and I sincerely hope she had nothing to do with the man's death... but all of that is out of your hands. You just have to know, however painful it may be, we all end up where we're supposed to be."

"I know, it's just hard to swallow... my soon-to-be ex, a murderer? How's Danny going to take it?"

"Slowly... and with good counseling. He'll be okay. He has a great dad. And maybe... someday... a great friend and support in me."

"I hope so, Elle. You'd really love him... and he you. We'll just have to take things slowly with him. He's a very sensitive kid."

"I think I know where he gets that," she said.

"Today was wonderful, Elle... you were—"

"Shhhh! Don't talk about it. You'll ruin it with words... it was more than that," she said.

"Agreed," he answered.

Will went to bed with two alarms set, dreading the next morning. He dreamed about Claire. She was being tortured inside a prison yard. Several inmates were beating her. Will was outside the fence and couldn't reach her. Some women had knives and were cutting her. She was bloody and helpless, as the prison guards only laughed; cheering them on. Will woke up covered in sweat. He showered and slept the remainder of the night on the couch.

The morning came too soon. Danny left for school and soon Will was behind the wheel, driving to his wife's arraignment. Simmons met him out front and they walked into the courthouse together. The somber lawyer spoke with a court official and soon Claire was escorted to them. She was a complete wreck. It was obvious she hadn't slept.

She hugged Will and tried to kiss him but he pulled back. The look on her face made Will instantly regret the action but it was sudden and involuntary. He knew in his heart things were over between them but he needed to be as supportive as possible, especially for Danny's sake.

“Claire, let’s focus on what’s in front of us today,” her lawyer said, having seen their interaction.

Simmons explained what to expect during the arraignment and confirmed what Claire’s plea would be.

After the meeting, Claire was escorted out of the room. Will and Simmons made their way to the courtroom and waited for their case to be called.

After three long hours, it was Claire’s turn. The judge read the charges against her and asked for a plea. Claire pled ‘not guilty’ to first degree murder. The prosecution requested no bail be set. Simmons fought the request, noting Claire’s lack of a criminal record and good standing in the community. That, and the notion she wouldn’t be a flight risk, left Simmons thinking bail would be set somewhere between \$100,000 and \$500,000. The courtroom was stunned to hear the judge deny bail altogether. He explained that his decision was based on the brutality of the crime and the level of malice that was required. He contended Claire could be a danger to the community and should remain incarcerated until her trial.

The arraignment lasted a total of six minutes. Claire was devastated by the judge’s decision and cried out, screaming at her lawyer.

“I didn’t kill anybody! Do something, you son of a bitch!” A bailiff quickly removed her from the courtroom, leaving Will and Mr. Simmons stunned.

“I was afraid of this, Will. I’ll keep working on my end, but the cards are stacked against us right now. You have my number. Call me any time you need to. I’m sorry.”

Will left the courthouse with conflicted feelings. Part of him was actually relieved Claire was not released. He wrestled with the guilt from that. Why he felt so guilty was something he struggled to understand. Left-over loyalty to the marriage, he figured. He’d tried to save the marriage for so long that he was still clinging to that mindset. He knew had to let it go... let *her* go. His life has changed now, and for the better. He felt he finally had a partner who was honest and loving. He wouldn’t screw that up.

For the next few months Will and Elle kept their relationship private. They wanted to wait until Claire’s trial was over before introducing her to Danny.

Elle graduated nursing school soon after Will’s divorce became final. And for once, he felt officially free of any husbandly ties or obligations to Claire.

The story of Todd's murder appeared in the local paper and was covered almost weekly. The public was salivating for the upcoming trial. Will's work environment and Danny's schooling were both affected. Whereas Will's coworkers eventually stopped asking him questions about the case.

Danny's life in school became a living hell. After many weeks of bullying, Will had no choice but to transfer him to another school district.

Chapter 14

The Oven is Working

Claire's pre-trial came faster than expected and soon her trial date was approaching. When her day in court finally arrived, her brother and mother were seated in the courtroom, as well as several of their friends. Todd's brothers were also present, anticipating and lobbying for a guilty verdict.

Reporters sat in the back, taking notes, as cameras were not allowed in the courtroom. There were a deluge of local news trucks outside the building, waiting to pounce for interviews. The atmosphere in the courtroom was thick with anticipation.

The amount of people present made it difficult for the air conditioners to keep up. As the temperature in the room rose, the prosecution made their case.

They were done in less than four hours, offering testimony from Todd's neighbor as well as the police officers and paramedics. Added to their physical evidence, the case appeared very solid.

Simmons pleaded his defense, raising doubts about the witnesses' eyesight and testimony along with the lack of camera evidence. He hit hard at the prosecution's timeline, allowing for the possibility of another perpetrator having committed the crime.

But the real climax of the case came from Claire. Against her lawyer's advice, she insisted on taking the stand. She did well for Simmons' questioning, but fell

apart under cross-examination. So badly, that she publicly admitted to wishing Todd dead more than once before the day of the murder. Her lawyer did his best to re-direct, but the damage was done.

The jury deliberated for less than two hours. Their decision and recommendation came quickly; guilty of murder in the first degree, life in prison without the possibility of parole. When the ruling was read, the courtroom erupted. Claire fainted, hitting her head on the floor. She had to be put on a gurney and removed for medical care. The noise was deafening upon her exit. Amidst the cheering and shouting, Will quietly lowered his head, sorry for Claire but more so for what the ruling would mean for Danny. So far, Will had done his best to keep him out of the drama.

What now? he wondered. *What kind of life does a kid lead having a parent imprisoned for murder?*

He would need all the support he could get.

Will called Elle on the way home from court. They decided Will's full attention needed to be on Danny.

"He needs you, Will... more than ever now. When the time is right we can move forward but he's top priority right now. I'll be here.... I'm not going anywhere."

"Elle, every day I wake up I feel so damn lucky to have you. From day one you've been my only real support. I really don't know what I'd do without you."

"You'll never have to worry about that, dear. I've told you before... I'll never let anyone or anything come between us. You have my word on that. Life will bend to us... not the other way around."

Will decided to take Danny out of school for a week, and spend some time together. They drove up north on a 'rollabout', Will's idea of a *Crocodile Dundee* walkabout. They stopped wherever they wanted to, just having fun and discovering new things along the way.

When they returned, Danny was a different person; full of confidence and happy again. They made a commitment to go on a rollabout every year until Danny started college, the next one being out west.

Visitations between Danny and Claire happened smoothly. Will sat in the back of the room to give Danny more privacy with his mother. Through prison counseling, Claire came to live with her sentence, though she maintained her innocence and sought an appeal.

Will continued seeing Elle and eventually introduced her to Danny. The boy bonded with her instantly. Will was immensely relieved, as he wasn't sure how Danny would react to him dating. Danny and Elle got along perfectly, playing video games together and debating the other's love of horror films. Soon it became two households functioning as a solid, family unit.

Will's phone rang while he was working. Elle's name appeared on the caller I.D.

"Hey honey... calling me at work again? If people found out, they'd think there's something serious going on between us," he said.

"Oh, that *would* be a scandal. Well, I've got breaking news for you, Mr. Lawson... something serious *is* going on. I want to take you out for dinner tonight. Think Danny would be okay with a pizza while I kidnapped his dad?"

"Oooo, I don't know, Elle. Kidnapping is a crime. I'd have to ask him."

"Well, *ask* then. I have a surprise for you. I'm hoping you'll like... or maybe even *love* it."

"Oh, if a surprise is involved, I'll answer *for* him... yes!" he said.

"I'll pick you up at 6pm then. Be ready."

"Oh, you're driving? Must be important."

"I guess you'll find out, won't you?"

"Fair enough, even though I'll be wondering what it is 'til then."

"You'll just have to suffer," she said.

Six o'clock came and Elle pulled into Will's driveway. He walked out to meet her.

"Get in," she said, "you're being kidnapped."

"Couldn't I just decide *not* to get in?" he asked.

"You could... but then I'd *really* have to kidnap you."

He got in the car. Claire put on some music and drove to the edge of town.

"Wow, you really *are* kidnapping me, huh?"

“Just for a few hours,” she said.

Elle pulled into the same spot Will parked when taking her to the lake almost two years before.

“Let’s go for a walk,” she said.

“You’re the kidnapper.” He held her hand.

They walked half way around the lake and came upon the wooden fence.

“Climb over,” she instructed.

Will climbed the fence and followed her to the cemetery.

“Kneel down,” she told him.

He knelt onto the grass as instructed. Elle did so as well.

“You remember this spot?” she asked.

“How could I forget? It’s where I spent the best hour of my life.”

“Well, I’m hoping *this* will be the best hour of your life,” she said.

Elle leaned over and whispered in his ear, “William, I’m pregnant.”

“What? Really? You are? Babe!”

“You’re happy then?” she asked.

“Happy? Yes! More than happy!” he reached over to kiss her. “Elle, I love you. Nothing would make me happier than raising a child with you.”

“I was really scared,” she said, “Danny is fourteen now. I worried you wouldn’t be happy starting over again.”

“I’m happy, sweetheart. Nothing could make me happier.”

They spent the next hour wondering and planning; excited for the future baby. Elle drove Will to the restaurant they ate at the last time they visited the lake. This time they sat at the corner table. Will took a piece of napkin and rolled it into a long cord before tying it around Elle’s finger.

“Honey, I don’t know how to describe how much I love you. From the moment we shared words I’ve felt a timeless connection with you. Someone above must be looking out for me, because when I needed you most, you came into my life. You’re the most beautiful, caring and loving woman a man could ask for. I meant what I said when I told you I wake up each morning feeling lucky to have you. I never want to wake up without you, Elle. You truly are my soul mate. I want you to be my partner in this life and the next. I want you to say you’ll marry me.”

“Yes!” she said excitedly. “My heart said ‘yes’ to you a long time ago, William. I want to be your partner, and I would love to be your wife!”

The room was suddenly filled with clapping and whistles from excited eavesdroppers.

Will took Elle shopping for a real ring the next day. She picked out a beautiful one with a modest diamond. Will encouraged her to pick a bigger stone but she said no.

“This is the one, William. This one speaks to me. It was meant to be mine, as you were.”

She carefully took the paper ring off her finger and put it in the box her engagement ring came in.

“I want you to know, this ring you made me will also have my heart, William. I will never lose either one,” she said.

When they got home they told Danny the news. He was truly excited, giving them both a hug and multiple high-fives. After a small ceremony, Will’s new family was formed.

Chapter 15

Blessings and Turmoil

Elle's pregnancy progressed and Will soon turned his den into a nursery, ready for the little boy they expected. When the day arrived, Will had just pulled out of his driveway for work. His phone rang.

"Babe, before you go to the office I need you to pick up something," Elle said. Before Will could answer, she added, "Me! Right now. My water broke!"

Elle heard his tires screeching from the kitchen. She grabbed the bag she'd prepared for the hospital and walked toward the front door. By the time she got there Will had it open and helped her to the car. Six hours of labor later, their baby boy was born.

Elle insisted he be named after Will, as Claire named Danny after her deceased father. Will agreed, and William Anthony Lawson Jr. was entered onto the birth certificate.

Two days later, mama and baby were driven home from the hospital. Danny doted over the little boy, protective, like a big brother should be. Will took a leave from work to help Elle with the baby.

Soon, their lives adjusted perfectly around the new addition and the family of four thrived. Will and Elle decided she would stay home with William Jr. for his first year.

The child developed beautifully, having his mother's eyes and his father's nose and ears. He was a happy child; a true *mama's boy*.

When the time came for Elle to resume her nursing career, they found a reputable daycare service. She cried the first time they dropped him off. It was hard on Will, too, but they adjusted. Life was moving forward like clock-work. All except for Danny.

Danny made some new friends at school that weren't good influences. He stopped coming directly home from school, often getting off the bus near his friends' houses. After the school contacted Will, he asked Danny why he was doing it.

"I just want to be with my friends, that's all. No one's here now until you get home with William Jr... so I'd just rather not be bored, that's all."

"Where are you going... who's house?" Will asked.

"Jimmy's... and his older brother's usually there, so it's not like we're unsupervised."

"Isn't Jimmy the one who got caught with weed in his locker?"

"It wasn't weed, it was synthetic," Danny replied.

"Hell, Danny... that's even worse! That stuff can kill you. You're not smoking that crap, are you? If I had you tested today you'd pass, right?"

"Yes, dad... I'd pass. I just like hanging out with them. I'll be fifteen in two months. It's not like I'm a child anymore."

"I understand that, but I don't want you just *hanging out*, especially with a kid that smokes that stuff."

"He doesn't smoke it, dad... he just—"

"Oh, so he got busted with it in his locker but doesn't smoke it? Don't give me any crap like he was just *holding* it, Danny. He's either smoking it or selling it... or both," Will said.

"He's not doing either, dad! Why do you want to judge my friend so bad? He's not an evil person!"

“Maybe not... I don’t know him. But I know this... the next time you pass your bus stop and go anywhere without permission will be your last day going anywhere, got it?”

“Jesus, dad! Why do you have to make this place such a prison? Ever since you two had the baby, this place has been like a jail for me. I can’t do anything! I get it that y’all are all about the baby now, but like... do I have to stop *my* life for it, too?”

He grabbed his book bag and ran out the front door. William called after him.

“I’m going to Jimmy’s for a couple hours. I guess you’ll just have to call the police on me like you did Mom!” Danny shouted.

Will closed the door, speechless. He had noticed changes in Danny’s attitude but nothing like this. He sat down and dialed his number, getting no answer. Then he texted, saying if he didn’t answer his phone it would be locked down. Danny texted back and said he was sorry for what he said but he’s just sick of everything being about the baby. William assured him it wasn’t true. Danny wrote back that they never did anything together anymore; that everything revolved around the baby. William told him to be home by dinner and that he and Elle would sit down and talk with him about it. He texted Elle to see when she’d be home.

Elle: Seven. Is everything okay?

Will: Not sure. Danny’s having a bad day and I think we need to talk about some things.

Elle: No problem. I hope he’s okay, she wrote.

By the time Elle got home, Danny had already eaten and was in his room. Elle grabbed a bite and gave William Jr. a bottle. Will texted Danny to come sit in the living room. Danny came downstairs with his headphones on. Will had to ask him twice to take them off.

“I didn’t hear you... Jesus, dad!”

“That’s *exactly* what I’m talking about, Danny. What’s going on with you lately? Your grades have dropped, you never come downstairs anymore except to eat... what’s going on?” Will asked.

“Nothing... I already told you... nothing! I just want to be alone.”

“If that was the case, you wouldn’t be ditching your bus stop and going to Jimmy’s after school, Danny. So which is it? Do you hate it here or just like Jimmy’s place better?”

“Both! At least at their house they talk to me. Over here it’s William Jr. this... William Jr. that... I might as well be somewhere else, anyway. You two wouldn’t even know I was gone!”

That’s not true,” Elle said, “We love you and *always* ask you to be a part of whatever we’re doing.”

“Like changing diapers? Giving bottles? And why the hell is he still *on* a bottle, anyway? He’s like a year old! Shouldn’t he be eating dinner by now?”

“Danny, watch your mouth!” Will said.

“He’s eating, too, Danny, but he’s not ready for regular food yet. And can you please talk a little quieter? He’s about ready to fall asleep... I don’t want to upset him,” she said.

“Then why didn’t you just wait ‘til he *was* asleep before you called me down for your little inquisition?” Danny asked.

“Dammit, Danny... that’s enough! Give me your phone. You’re not going to treat us like crap just because you’re annoyed. We asked you down here to talk. Hand it over.”

Danny threw the phone onto the couch. It bounced off a seat cushion and just missed William Jr.’s head.

“Danny!” Elle shouted. William Jr. began to cry.

“I’m sorry! It didn’t hit him... it’s not my fault he’s crying, dad... she’s the one who yelled!”

“That’s it! In your room! We’ll talk about this in the morning!” Will shouted.

Danny flew up the stairs. Will and Elle looked at each other, both speechless about what had just happened. They decided to put it aside long enough to get William Jr. to sleep. Later on, Will told Elle about the school calling him about Danny. They both agreed he needed to come straight home after school from now

on and that Will would contact the school's counselor in the morning to set up a meeting.

The next morning, Will made the call. The school counselor's aide answered and took the message down wrong, thinking he wanted them to meet with Danny instead of him.

That afternoon, they sent a student-aid to Danny's class to have him sent to the office. Some of his classmates heard the aide talking to his teacher and laughed at Danny for having to see the counselor. Danny ran out of class and left school property. The principal called Will and alerted him. Will left work and eventually found Danny sitting on Jimmy's front porch. No one was at the house. He drove the boy home and apologized.

"I wasn't meaning to embarrass you, Danny. I'm just concerned for you and wanted to help things get better. The meeting was supposed to be with the counselor and me, not you. I don't know how they got it backwards."

"Good, but I don't need counseling for every little thing, dad. I just want things like they were before. We used to *do* stuff... *Elle* used to do things with me. We never play C.O.D. anymore... we don't watch movies... all because of William Jr.!"

"It's not his fault, Danny. Things change when you have a new addition. There's responsibilities... it takes time and energy."

"Yeah, time and energy that used to be spent on me."

"We don't love you any less. I know it's not easy sharing your parents with a little brother, but it'll get better, I promise. And we'll do more together. These are the things we have to talk about. You can't bottle up your feelings and let them come out the way they have been... just talk to us."

"Okay, dad. Look, I'm sorry for bailing at school. I just couldn't take it, being laughed at like that."

"I get it. Just call me next time. I'll be there if you need me."

Later that evening, Will told Elle about his talk with Danny and his jealousy of the time spent on William Jr.. Elle said she understood his frustration and would do her part to resolve the situation.

The next few weeks passed uneventfully. Elle started a 'Friday night scare fest' movie night with Danny, and Will even sat in on a few. Danny's mood improved swiftly and soon the vibe in the house was back to normal.

Chapter 16

Loss and Discovery

Saturday morning found all four sitting around the breakfast table; William Jr. in his highchair. Elle made biscuits and gravy, at Danny's request. Will took a look around the table.

"This is the way I'd like to start *every* weekend; all four of us together, eating at the same table. Oh, that reminds me. I'll be working over next week. About an hour or two each day. We're pitching to a large contractor soon and everyone's working together on a presentation. Danny, I picked up some frozen dinners for you today in case you can't wait 'til I get home; the ones with the fries you like. Just throw them in the microwave for however long they say," Will said.

"Okay, thanks dad," Danny answered.

"Well, you may have a different wife sitting across from you at the table soon," Elle joked.

"I don't think I'd like that," Will said.

"Well, it'd still be me, but with a new look. I want to get my hair cut... short. Are you still going to love me if I come home looking like a teenage boy?"

"I highly doubt you could ever look like a boy, my dear."

"Yeah, *that* ain't happening," Danny added.

"Well, thank you both. It won't be *too* short, just shoulder length... something different, just for me," she said.

Monday afternoon, Will pitched his ideas for a presentation to his co-workers. Just before he finished, he missed a call from Danny then immediately received a text.

Dad, I'm sick. Can you come home?

Will stepped into the hall and called Danny. He didn't pick up. Will called again; no answer. Just then his phone rang.

"William, Danny's really sick. He just called me, here, at the hospital. One of us needs to get home, and now. He's thrown up three times."

"On my way, babe."

Will made his apologies to his coworkers and left the office. On the way home he called Danny again. Danny answered this time, saying he was better and trying to drink some water. Will pulled in the driveway and found him upstairs with his head over the toilet.

"Did you throw up again?" Will asked.

"Just water," but yeah. I think I'm feeling a little better now. I just got sick all of a sudden... and my throat's really itchy."

"Have you eaten anything since school?"

"I think it was the eggs I fixed this morning. I had diarrhea at school."

The front door opened, Elle was home.

"Is he okay?"

"I don't know... he threw up again... said he thought it was the eggs he made this morning. He said he's feeling better, though."

"You okay, Danny?" she asked.

"I'm okay. I was sick at school already."

"Let's throw those eggs out," Will said.

"Okay, but let me float test them first," Elle said, going to the kitchen.

She filled a bowl with water and put the remaining eggs in it. Four sunk to the bottom of the bowl while two floated near the top.

"Two of these are bad," she said, "the other four are okay but I'm throwing them all out."

"Good. No more eggs for a while," Will said. "I'm feeling sick just thinking about them after seeing Danny up there."

"Agreed," Elle said. Danny gave them a thumbs-up.

“Okay, since everything’s okay now, I’m going to pick William Jr. up. I already clocked out for the day,” Elle said.

“Okay, babe. See you soon. Thanks for coming home.” Will gave her a quick kiss.

“Yeah, thanks!” Danny said.

At 3am, Elle woke Will after hearing something moving downstairs. Will got out of bed and went to check on it. The light in the kitchen was on.

“Danny... you in there?”

“Yeah, dad... I’m freakin’ starving!”

Will laughed. “Wow, that’s the fastest recovery I’ve ever seen!”

“Yeah, sorry... but I’m killin’ this bag of cheese curls. Can I take them to my room?”

“They’re all yours,” he said, before going upstairs.

“Everything okay?” Elle asked.

“Yeah...he’s just raiding the cabinets for chips... says he’s starving.”

“Well, that’s a good sign... just don’t let him eat any dairy.”

“He’s not... just chips.”

The next day Will’s phone rang around the same time it had the day before. It was Danny again.

“Danny, you there? Hey... you called me. You okay?” He heard nothing on the other end. “Danny? Danny! If you’re joking around, it’s not funny... Danny!”

Will grabbed his keys and left for the house, dialing his number back. No one answered. He immediately called Elle.

“Babe, did Danny just call you?” he asked.

“No, why? Is everything okay?”

“I hope to hell it is. He called me and said nothing. He never hung up, either. Now he won’t answer. I’m calling 911.”

“Just keep driving, dear... I’ll call 911, and I’m on my way, too!”

Will got home and ran inside. Danny wasn’t in the kitchen or living room. Will ran upstairs to the bathroom then checked Danny’s room. Danny was lying on his floor, face down. Will turned him over.

“Danny! Danny, answer me!” Will shouted. His eyes were open but he was unresponsive.

“Will!” Elle called from downstairs.

“Up here! He’s unconscious! Help him, Elle!”

Elle ran into the room and checked Danny’s vitals.

“He’s not breathing, Will! She started CPR. “I can’t get any air in, Will!” She checked for an obstruction.

Will heard people downstairs.

“Paramedics! Do you need assistance?”

“Yes, up here!” Will said, “Hurry!”

“Elle, I think he was eating this! It’s still warm,” he said, holding up a dinner tray. “I got these for him to eat while I worked over!”

Two men began working on Danny. “Does your son do drugs? Are there any drugs in the home?”

“No and none,” Will said. “He was sick and throwing up yesterday, too. He was eating this just before it happened.”

He showed them the dinner. “Is he going to be okay?”

“His airway’s closed and his lips are swollen. I think he’s had an allergic reaction. We need to transport him now. Clear the door!”

A third man entered the room with a gurney. They gave Danny a shot of epinephrine before strapping him to the gurney. Seconds later, they were out the front door with him and the half-eaten dinner. Will and Elle followed them to the hospital. When they arrived, they rushed Danny to the emergency room. He was dead on arrival. Will collapsed in the hallway. More officers arrived. The emergency room doctor told the police it looked like poisoning.

Minutes later they questioned Will and Elle, asking for permission to search the home. Will gave them permission. Elle sat next to him in the waiting room. Will was beside himself with grief. Several minutes passed when Will suddenly stood and started pacing around the waiting room.

“What the hell happened? I gave my son food that killed him? He ate one of those yesterday, too!”

“If that’s what it is, it’s not your fault, William! If something’s wrong with those dinners, it happened long before you even brought them home. You can’t blame yourself for something you had no control or knowledge of!”

“But I *bought* them for him. I *brought* them into our home, Elle! If I hadn’t been staying over at work---” He smacked the wall, causing a picture to fall.

“It’s not your fault, babe! Don’t do this to yourself. Let the police handle it. They’ll send them to a lab and find out what happened.”

The funeral was held on the following Saturday to give Will’s and Claire’s family time to attend. Many came to pay their respects, heartbroken over the young man’s death. Will remained at the gravesite after the service. Elle stayed by his side, comforting him as best she could.

Claire was there, too, as she was granted permission to attend the funeral under guard. It was the first time she had seen Will and Elle together. When the guard told Claire it was time to go, she asked for another minute.

“I heard you got remarried, Will... from Danny, of course. And a new baby, too. Wow... starting over.” There was no smile on her face.

“He’s a year old now,” Will said, his arm tightly around Elle.

Claire stared at her, trying to place where she’d seen her before. Elle held out her hand.

“I’m Elle... pleased to meet you.”

“I *bet* you are,” Claire said, ignoring the gesture. She turned to the guard and signaled she was ready to leave. As they walked toward the transport van she looked back at Danny’s grave one last time. The sun was behind it, making it difficult to see. Claire squinted her eyes for a clearer look.

The sunlight made Elle’s hair appear fiery red. Claire stopped walking. Her expression changed to a combination of fear and rage. She pointed directly at Elle.

“It’s her! She’s the murderer! *She’s* the one I told you about, Will!”

The guard grabbed her by the arm and started pulling her to the van. Claire fought hard to stay where she was.

“No! It’s her! She killed Todd! Now she’s killed my baby! Let me go, asshole!” Claire screamed, trying to get to Elle.

Elle moved closer to Will's side, seemingly terrified. Another guard ran over to help force Claire into the van. As the doors closed, her screaming could still be heard.

"Why's she saying that, Will? What's *wrong* with her?" She cried into his chest.

"She's crazy, Elle. I used to have my doubts she killed Todd, but she's erased those now. Don't listen to her, she's lost her damn mind! Let's just get home."

They left the gravesite and drove away, Elle holding his hand tightly.

The next several weeks were a difficult time. There were days Will's emotions took over to the point of complete breakdown. One night they got a call from a detective. He explained the lab tests on the dinners had come back. The one Danny had eaten the day he died was positive for hydrogen cyanide, a poison, as was one of the three unopened dinners they took from the home. Both dinners had the same lot number and production date. As there were no visible cuts or puncture marks on the unopened dinner, Will and Claire were cleared of any wrong-doing. An investigation was on-going at the plant where the dinners were made. They suspected an employee may have poisoned some of the meals during production. No other dinners were found to be contaminated and no arrests had been made. Will discussed suing the company but decided he didn't want the stress of another trial.

"I think you made the right decision, babe," Elle told him. "Suing isn't going to bring Danny back. We need to look *forward* from here... try to find some sense of normal again. It'll only make things harder if we had to endure another court case. We have William Jr. to think about."

"You're right, honey... you're right. I couldn't take the stress, anyway. I don't know what I'd do without you, Elle. I couldn't make it, I *know* I couldn't. If I didn't have you---"

"You'll never have to worry about that, dear. You'll have me forever, by your side... right where I belong. I'll never let anyone or anything come between us, William." She smiled softly and pressed up against him for a kiss, but the moment their lips touched, they were interrupted.

William Jr. had awakened from his nap. He cried loudly from his crib. Elle apologized as she left William's side to attend to him.

As she approached the screaming infant, her smile slowly disappeared.

The End