

Chapter 3

Monday and Tuesday came and went without much fanfare. My next court appointment was not for another few weeks, so I spent most of my time at work in research mode. Being tied to a chair all day makes me my arms and legs turn to rubber. Both nights I stopped by the gym and put on my show.

Wednesday night was Roger's night to spend time with his kids, James and Lauren. Roger's slice of the joint custody agreement was a night every other week, and one weekend per month. Cheryl, Roger's ex, who was deemed the more stable of the two, had them the rest of the time. It took some fancy legal work to convince the courts to allow Cheryl's children to be in the presence of Roger and me together, and we did not receive all the time allotment for which we had asked. Initially, Roger was nearly devastated that he would not be spending daily time with his kids, but that faded within a few months, and I sometimes had to remind him that he had children to raise. In the long run, I believe my relationship with Roger benefited from the shorter and less frequent interruptions.

"Will Cheryl be joining us for dinner?" I asked.

Roger checked a boiling pot of noodles. "I don't think so. I'm sure she has other things to attend to."

The doorbell rang.

"Can you keep stirring this?" Roger pointed at the pot and handed me a spoon as he went to answer the door.

Even though Roger and I had been together since he was married and had been a couple for a few years, Cheryl still had difficulty accepting me. I really did not blame her. Although Roger was already disillusioned by his sham marriage and was on the road to divorce when I met him, Cheryl would always view me as the man who stole her husband from her--surely, in the eyes of a woman, a great humiliation.

Roger escorted James and Lauren into the kitchen.

"How's school?" I asked after we had exchanged our greetings.

Lauren's eyes glowed as she responded, "Good," while James mumbled, "It's fine," or something like that. James often still showed a surly attitude toward me, but Lauren had accepted my involvement in her father's life.

"James, be a little more courteous," said Roger, to which James simply rolled his eyes.

James was Roger's oldest and had the stronger resemblance to his father. His dusty-blond hair was

gelled and spiked in the style popular amongst the youth. Within a few years, I was certain he would have the young ladies at his school lining up to go on a date with him.

Before Roger could grab a spoon to begin serving, Lauren insisted, "Dad, we need to say grace."

Roger retracted his arm. "Oh, sorry, honey." He looked across the table to James and appeared to gather his courage. "James, would you mind?"

James grudgingly acceded. "Lord, thank you for this food," he droned with eyes down then immediately stuffed a spring roll in his mouth. I marveled that his throat knew when to switch between his lungs and his stomach the way he inhaled his food.

Lauren bit into a spring roll. "Mmm, Dad. This is really good." Even though Lauren took more after Cheryl's side of the family, she was still Daddy's little girl.

"Thank you, Lauren." Roger beamed with pride.

Lauren fixed her dark, coffee-colored eyes on her father. "You could be the chef there, too." She leaned against the table and smiled. Already her figure was beginning to show, and I could imagine Lauren growing into an attractive and stately young woman.

Roger bathed in the attention. "Not exactly, honey. But I do get some ideas from the chef." He blew on his

soup before spooning in a mouthful and swallowing. "I don't think you've met him yet."

Lauren's eyes twinkled and her dark, wavy hair accented her resemblance to a Raphaelite Madonna. "I think you can cook just as good. Don't you think so, Patrick?"

Roger and I had decided to have his kids address me simply using my name with no title. Some of our friends had suggested I take the title Uncle, but we did not want to add to their confusion about our relationship. Besides, Cheryl's brother would not have appreciated sharing the title with me. No other title seemed appropriate, and we abandoned the idea of a title altogether.

"Roger certainly has better talent in that area than I do." I had my specialties, but Roger even made those dishes burst with flavor. "I usually let him do the cooking."

James snorted but did not halt from his shoveling to comment.

Lauren took another bite and seemed to turn inward, as if pulling in all of her being to experience the meal. "Wouldn't it be exciting to visit China?" She twirled lo mein around her fork. "Mom and I ran into Julie in Chinatown. Julie's from China, and she says it's not like

that." She rested her cheek against her hand, propped up by her elbow on the table. "It would be an adventure."

"There's that author coming out in you again," said Roger, pointing his fork in her direction.

Lauren blushed with pleasure. She often drew us in to the tales of her adventures at school.

James grunted once with what sounded like scorn. He shoved stir-fry vegetables in his mouth, looking like a tiger tearing into prey. I wished the meal had more meat within which he could sink his teeth. He was only fourteen but was already beginning to gain height and fill out. He did not yet have the confidence I had seen in boys his age, but his good looks and fit appearance would help to develop it.

Lauren purposefully ignored her brother. "Maybe someday I will visit China and write a book about it."

James briefly lifted his scowling gaze to Roger before returning it to his quickly vanishing plate of food.

Of the two, I felt more comfortable around Lauren, and I suspected Roger felt the same. In the early years of our relationship, young Jimmy had made some insulting comments, which had been hurtful, and I think neither Roger nor I had completely forgotten. Lauren had remained quiet, at first, approaching us with caution and yet with her usual aplomb.

Eventually her charming and entertaining orations bridged the chasm that the divorce had opened. James had learned to hold his tongue.

"Mom's been dating someone," James blurted out after gorging himself. "He's nice."

I saw Lauren give her brother a look of warning, but James sat smugly and waited for Roger's response. He shared the cold blue of Roger's eyes, a blue that chilled like ice.

"Is this Gerald?" Roger nonchalantly finished chewing and swallowed. A slim smile graced his face. "Your mother mentioned him to me already."

"No, Dad, Gerald was months ago. He was a dork." James wrinkled his nose and shook his head. "Bryan's cool. He's helping me with my hitting and fielding. He says I've got a lot of talent."

I knew exactly the game James was playing with his father, and I hoped Roger would not fall into the trap. I calmly watched Roger to gauge his reaction. I feared this would be a long night.

"Well, you do have a lot of talent," said Roger with a more agreeable tone than I had expected. Perhaps everything would turn out all right. "I told you that."

James prepared to press forward, but Lauren jumped in before more damage was done. "Mom and Bryan met around Christmas. Mom didn't want us to tell you because she wanted to let you know first, and she didn't know how serious she and Bryan would be." She made the last statement while giving James a piercing look.

Roger sighed, and his eyes pleaded with me for support. "Lauren, James, your mother can see whomever she wants and let me know or not. You don't have to feel badly for not letting me know." He looked toward James, but James had his eyes fixed on his plate. "But I do appreciate knowing. So what is Bryan like?"

"Oh, he's very nice." Lauren answered quickly and pleasantly. She leaned with her elbows on the table, and her eyes sparkled with enthusiasm. "He and Mom took me shopping on Saturday for some new clothes while James was at practice."

Roger's gaze remained upon James. "And you say Bryan's helping you improve your baseball skills?"

"Yeah," mumbled James, keeping his eyes downcast.

I would have given round one of this family feud to Roger, but no one really ever came out a winner in these exchanges. As much as I felt it was important for Roger to be involved in his kids' lives, the awkwardness at times

made it difficult for me to sit still and pretend to blithely participate. "I'll go ahead and clean up, if you all would like to make yourselves more comfortable in the living room."

James screeched his chair on the floor as he backed it up and scuffled toward the living room like a zombie, leaving his chair out. Lauren and Roger thanked me for my kindness to help out and went to join James in the other room.

After cleaning up, I turned out the kitchen lights and sauntered down the hall to the living room, listening intently for tones and words. I assuredly did not want to walk in on a family argument. Thankfully, I found Roger and Lauren sitting on the couch, engaged in a discussion about Lauren's friends at school.

"Where's James?" I asked.

Roger's face expressed pain and frustration. "He went up to his room." James's room was my upstairs office since Lauren slept in our guest bedroom when they stayed over.

I left Roger and Lauren to their father-daughter talk and went in search of James. I understood that James had been uncooperative toward Roger since the divorce, but I tried to stress to Roger the importance of spending time with him and not ignoring his obvious cries for attention.

Roger, not liking confrontation with his children and recalling his own parents' divorce, consoled himself by remembering his need for time alone through that phase of his life and deduced that James would come around on his own. I took a less optimistic view.

I located James, as Roger had said, in my study, on his sleeping bag on the floor, leafing through one of my case study books. I rapped lightly on the door and asked if I could enter. James nodded me in.

"Interested in law?" I asked, indicating the book.

"I don't know," he replied. "Maybe."

"You're welcome to borrow any of my books to look through, if you'd like." I tendered the offer, hoping for an inroad.

James grimaced and closed the book. "No, this stuff is just boring. Too much sitting around and arguing about stuff that no one knows whether it's right or wrong. I'd rather be out working on construction or designing something, like an engineer." His ice-blue eyes steeled squarely into mine. "You know, real men's work."

I declined to bite James's bait. "Well, the offer is always open." Against my better judgment, I attempted a different tack. "If you want to come downstairs and join us, I think we're going to put in a movie."

"No thanks. I've got to finish my homework and get to bed." He rolled over, signaling a dismissal. "Lauren and I aren't supposed to stay up late on school nights."

I chose to not inform him that I knew his school had already let out for the summer, instead deciding to leave him alone with his adolescent angst. Perhaps Roger was right. He had the parenting experience, after all.

As it turned out, Roger and Lauren were perfectly content talking all evening. I joined in on the conversation periodically, but since much of the time was spent catching up on life with Cheryl--not one of my favorite people--I retired early. Later, I awoke when the bed shook gently, and I felt Roger's form against my back.

"How are they?" I asked, desiring to hear Roger's assessment of the evening.

"They're fine." He hesitated as if in a mental debate. "Lauren tells me that her mother still hasn't told Bryan about us yet."

"You mean about me." I hated that I still sometimes felt as if I were hiding, holding back. "So I imagine he doesn't know why the divorce happened."

"Apparently, Cheryl tells everyone we were just incompatible." Roger sighed, and his breath warmed the back of my neck. "Very safe."

I wanted to turn and hold Roger in my arms, but I resisted in order to get my thoughts out. "I think you should talk with James."

"I know. I try. He's just not ready yet."

"How long did it take you to work out your feelings from your parents' divorce?"

Roger was quiet for a moment. "A few months. Maybe half a year. Maybe a year, I'm not really sure."

"Roger, it's been four years since your divorce." I kept the force of irritation in my voice. "Don't you think James should be past this by now?"

Roger's breath warmed my back between my shoulders. "I went in to wish him good-night. He pretended he was asleep, but I knew better. I tried to ask him how his school year ended, but he didn't want to talk about it." When I did not reply, Roger continued with obvious pain in his voice. "I can't force him to talk with me."

I turned my body so that we lay facing each other. "Maybe you just need to have a day alone with him. Now that it's the summer, he'll have more time."

The soft light from the hallway partially illuminated Roger's face and reflected off the rivulets across his cheeks. "Perhaps." He wiped at his cheek. "I should go to one of his baseball games. He plays on a team in a

select summer league now." He breathed in and shuddered.

"Lauren says he's really good."

I tenderly stroked the tears from his face. "I could go with you."

"No, I don't think he would like that," Roger said, swiping his hand across his face and turning away from me. "I need to get some sleep. Sorry."

Sometime in the night, I woke to use the bathroom. From the hallway I could hear sobbing from my office. I tread quietly past the door and walked down the stairs to use the toilet down there, not wanting to disturb the emotional outlet. I prayed for the pain and frustration to be washed away.

I left early the next morning, eschewing the familial exchange. I stopped by a Starbucks instead, picking up a muffin with my nonfat latte.

Roger greeted me at the door when I returned that evening. "Brent and Mark called. We're meeting them at Asia SF in forty minutes."

I started to express my frustration that Roger had not called to let me know while I was at work, but I sensed his frayed nerves and decided to let this one pass.

"How was James this morning?" I started up the stairs to signify that a summary would suffice.

Roger turned toward the hall, apparently not wanting to discuss his son at length, either. "Silent. He didn't say a word the whole way home." As he disappeared from view, I heard him call back, "Sorry about the short notice. I just needed to get out tonight."

Spring was moving into summer, and I could feel the shift on the air. Roger and I rolled the windows down to let the breeze flow through the car refreshing us as we drove through the city to Asia SF, the Pan-Asian restaurant world famous for its "gender illusionist" servers. We took a few detours to enjoy the sights brought on by the warmer weather, which made us about ten minutes later than planned.

Mark was sitting at a table on the outdoor deck where we joined him. The empty seat next to Mark was pushed in as if it had not yet been occupied.

I glanced around a bit before asking, "Where's Brent?"

Mark sipped his drink, set it down and looked at us with sadness and anger in his eyes. "He'll be here. Morgan's dead. He just needed some time alone."

I almost did not catch Mark's extraordinary comment. "What? Morgan's dead?"

"What do you mean?" Roger's hands flew up to cover his mouth. "What happened?"

"Some man found him dead, lying in an alley. His head had been bashed in."

I stared hard at Mark and could feel my ire rising. "A hate crime."

Roger's face mirrored mine. "They found him. Those guys from the nightclub." His eyes became daggers of ice. "Do you remember what they looked like? I think I remember what that big one looked like."

Mark wearily shook his head. "The police don't know how it happened yet. All they know is that someone hit him on the head with a cement brick that happened to be in the alley. That was what killed him, but he wasn't beat up at all. At least not then. Not since Saturday night."

"I can't believe this," Roger hissed through clenched teeth. "I can't believe that we still have to deal with people's hatred here, of all places, after all the strides that have been made."

"You aren't going to change some people's minds regardless of what you do. Even here, although Brent and I rarely experience anything like Saturday night." Mark gulped down the rest of his drink. "I really think Morgan brought some of that on himself."

Rage welled inside me. "I agree he wasn't very cautious, but he didn't do anything deserving of death. The police need to find whoever did this."

"Oh, they're working on it," said Mark. "I don't imagine getting fingerprints off a cement block is the easiest thing to do."

Mark signaled the waitress, who stopped by to get our drink orders and asked if anyone else would be joining us. Mark pointed out the fourth seat.

"I say we go down to the station and tell them what we know about that group of thugs," insisted Roger.

I felt myself calming and my training starting to take over. "I'm sure we'll have our chance," I said to pacify Roger and then turned to Mark. "When was Morgan found? I assume this morning or last night." I strove to not put on too much pressure.

"Last night," answered Mark. His attention kept diverting to the bar. "A worker at Pepo's Market, which is a small shop down near the Hard Knox, went into the alley to have a smoke and found his body tucked away behind a dumpster."

"Did they mention the time of death?"

"No," Mark replied then seemed to reconsider, "or if they did, I don't know it."

"Do they know if he was attacked by a group or by just one person?"

"Okay, Mr. Lawyer, let's give the man a break," chided Roger, placing a hand on my forearm and squeezing gently. "He wasn't there, and if we wait for Brent, I'll bet he'll have the details your questioning mind wants to know."

"Oh, it's okay. I want to know the answers as much as you do. Brent was a little closer to Morgan, having known him longer, so he's been communicating with the police about it all." Mark's attention shifted, and his gaze softened. "You can ask him yourself, but please be gentle. Brent can come off as harsh and indifferent sometimes, but he really has a soft heart inside."

Brent looked more worn than when I had last seen him. The news of Morgan's death had apparently shaken him. With fortuitous timing, the server appeared with our drinks as Brent slid into the unoccupied seat. He was able to order his drink--stiffer than usual--without having to wait or flag down a server.

"I assume Mark has told you the news." Brent asked as if he hoped he would not have to tell us.

"Yes, I can't believe it. What are we going to do?" Roger grew more restless again, avid for action. He was

pecking at his drink, too excited for anything more than quick sips at a time.

Brent shook his head and frowned. "I've already been to the police to tell them everything about what happened Saturday night. I described the men who attacked Morgan as best I could. They were interested in what I had to say and seemed competent enough."

"Would it help if we described them, too?" asked Roger.

Brent continued to frown and kept his stare fixed on the far end of the table. I began to wonder if he had heard Roger's question.

"What's wrong?" Mark prodded Brent gently. "Are the police really going to look into this?"

Brent appeared to wake from a trance. "Oh, yes, they were really pretty helpful, actually. It was just something they mentioned about the crime scene."

"Pretty gruesome, huh," said Roger.

"No, they weren't crass about it," said Brent, with an edge of irritation to his voice. "I just doubt the whole gang-beating idea that I originally assumed. You remember how those guys were kicking and pounding on Morgan Saturday."

"I sure don't doubt the idea. Five on one." Roger's voice grew more agitated. "I'm surprised he wasn't killed then."

I could feel my blood pressure rise thinking back to the prior events. I had to take a deep breath to keep my anger under control. I downed the rest of my drink, hoping it might keep me loose.

Brent nodded. "Right, so if they got to him last night, I would have expected him to be beat beyond recognition."

Roger gasped. "You didn't see the body, did you?"

"No, his mother had already come in and IDed it, and personally," Brent scowled, "I would not have been too interested in viewing it, although I would have, if needed." He shook his head and fidgeted with his napkin. "No, the problem is that he wasn't beat up at all. I mean, the police could tell he'd been in some sort of scuffle, and he still had bruises from Saturday night, but he wasn't beaten to death." His eyes widened as if his thoughts appalled him. "Basically, someone came up to him and bashed his head in with a concrete block in one hit."

Roger gasped again, and his hands once more covered his mouth. "So someone came up behind him and hit him on the head with a concrete block?" He clutched at his drink,

almost spilling it, and quickly sipped again. His eyes were wide with alarm and horror.

Brent struggled to continue. "No, apparently he was on the ground already. He must have been unconscious or something because the police seem to think he just lay there and let his skull be crushed." He stopped abruptly, and his nose wrinkled in distaste. "I'm sorry, I need to stop talking about this for a moment. Mark, order for me when the server returns, will you? You know what I like."

Brent pushed back from the table, stood up and quick-stepped to the restroom. In his haste, his napkin fell to the floor, and a passing patron inadvertently trampled upon it.

"He's really torn up--" started Roger but halted as the waitress appeared with Brent's drink.

"Yes, I'd hoped the show here would cheer him up." Mark indicated the red runway bar where the gender illusionists performed, after the waitress had left with our orders for food and another round of drinks.

Roger fidgeted in his chair and with his now-empty glass. "If it wasn't one of those thugs from Saturday night, who could it be then?"

"I'm sure the police are doing all they can to figure that out," said Mark, his words already slurring.

"Yes, of course, I'm sure, too, but aren't you at least curious?"

I wondered if the alcohol was making Roger hyper instead of relaxing him. Just what he needed after the past night.

"It could have just been a mugging for all we know. Morgan probably tried to fight back and was overpowered, knocked unconscious and killed." I attempted to keep my anger at bay as I tried to restrain myself from reminding Roger that he had earlier told me to stop asking questions. "Just let it alone for right now."

"Oh, come on. I don't believe you really think that. He would have been more roughed up than what Brent was saying." Roger became more shrill with each breath. "And was anything taken from him? Who mugs someone and then leaves without taking anything, especially after whacking him so hard he kills him?" He glared at me, his eyes narrowed to slits. "And why kill him, if he's already unconscious?"

I started to feel considerable irritation at Roger's tone. "Look, we don't know what happened, and all we can do is tell the police what we know, if they ask us, and let them do their job," I snapped. Roger tended to let his emotions run away. "We're not going to get anywhere with

wild speculations, so you can stop asking questions for now." I noticed Brent approaching. "You're only going to upset Brent further."

"Everything okay?" asked Mark with a look of concern, as Brent sat again.

Brent nodded and searched for his napkin. "Yes, I've collected my wits again. I'm sure you can all understand it's been a bit of a bad day."

Mark grabbed a napkin off a nearby table and handed it to Brent, explaining the misfortune of the former cloth. Brent thanked him, smiled softly to Mark and set the napkin in his lap.

I could sense Roger itching to interrogate Brent, but he had the good sense to hold off and wait until a more opportune moment. With that, my mood brightened, and I was able to enjoy the meal when it arrived.

After we had all finished eating, and the waitress had cleared our plates, I could tell that Brent had stabilized emotionally. Apparently, Roger must have sensed this as well.

"Brent, what else did the police tell you about how they found Morgan?" he asked.

"I'm sorry," responded Brent, "but I just don't want to talk anymore about that today. I spoke with the police

at length about Morgan, and I've had enough for one day." He held up a hand to hold off Roger's curiosity. "Tell you what, though. We're meeting up with the others at nine-thirty on Saturday at Blondie's. Join us, and we can talk it all out then."

"We'll be there," agreed Roger for both of us. Luckily for him, I was reasonably certain we had no prior plans for that evening.

"And if you're interested," continued Brent, "there will be a wake on Wednesday from two to four in the afternoon. Mark and I will be going, if you want to meet us there."

"We'll be--" started Roger, but I interjected, "Let me check my schedule at work. I'll get back to you." I suspected I could easily slip away for an hour or so, but I knew it would be prudent to consult my calendar first before committing.

"I'll be there either way," Roger said. And then as if to emphasize, "With or without Patrick."

We would need to have a talk.