

Breaking News

By Kate Simon

Steve Peters looked out the window of his corner office. The studio was on the nearly deserted main drag of Jefferson Pennsylvania. Jefferson was the county seat, but the county had a very small ass. Jefferson had a population of seventy five thousand and was one of the few towns in the region with a negative growth rate. Jefferson had been declining since the last of the coal mines had closed in the late sixties. Revitalization had fits and starts through the years. Directly across the street from Steve's office was an office building that had been part of the last mayor's redevelopment plan. Steve had covered the ribbon cutting. One of the owners of the building was a retired NFL player from the region. He was brought in to generate buzz. That was five years ago. They never rented a single space.

Steve had worked for WYTC since he was fresh out of college. He thought the local station was his stepping stone to the big show, network anchor. Thirty years later he was still here. But things might be changing. The regular weekend morning show anchor for the network was in a car crash and would be laid up for weeks. They needed a fill in anchor and he'd gotten the call. Jefferson was only two hours from New York City. Steve fit the network's image of who an anchor should be. Six feet tall with salt and pepper hair, Steve looked like he was born wearing a suit. He subbed for the guy a couple of times but this was a guarantee of at least four or five weekends in a row. This could give him the visibility he needed to get a permanent weekend slot. It also meant spending weekends in the network's corporate condo in the heart of the city. He'd be working seven days a week but it would be worth it. He hoped.

"Hey, Steve. Thirty minutes to air."

He turned to see his producer, Laura Donati, in his office. Laura wore her dark brown hair long and full. Her large gold hoops earring were her signature. She had a girlish smile that masked the work ethic of a Marine. Most people took her for thirty five, tops. Steve was one of the few people who knew she was fifty five. He knew because they went all through school together. Laura was one of the few people who knew Steve's real name, Stefan Petrov. Jefferson may have been founded by an alleged descendant of Thomas Jefferson but it was made up of multiple ethnic communities. Steve grew up

in the Russian section. Laura grew up three blocks away in the Italian section. She was a top flight producer and Steve was lucky to have her on his team.

“Yeah, I’m ready.”

“No, you’re not. She walked toward him and straighten his tie. She reached in his desk and pulled out a brush. She ran it over his right temple and then touched a loose strand with her hand. “Now you’re ready,” she smiled.

“What would I do without you?” he smiled.

“The mighty would fall,” she grinned. “Did you finish the copy?”

“Yes.”

“Questions?”

“Why is the bridge repair the lead and not the shooting in university park?”

“The powers that be made the call, not me.”

“I don’t understand how a dead eighteen year old coed is less important than potholes.”

Laura patted his chest. “You’re preaching to the choir, Steve. Now, off to the studio with you before Morrison has a coronary.”

Laura watched Steve deliver the day's news from her position behind the camera. He delivered the news, in the order Morrison wanted, with all the fake gravitas he could muster. It was only when he talked about the coed who'd been found dead in campus housing, she could tell the real Steve kicked in. She knew because she'd known for fifty years. Steve had been a presence in her life since kindergarten. Back then he was Stefan Petrov and intimidating students and teachers alike with his fluent and colorful Russian. Only Laura could put him in his place, usually with a string of Italian invectives. First and second generation Americans in Jefferson were taught by their parents and grandparents their origin language. The playground at Jefferson Elementary often sounded like a day at the UN.

They wrapped the eleven p.m. news and everyone dispersed as fast as they could. Everyone except Laura. She reviewed her notes about the broadcast. She would remind Charla, the weather girl, not to wear that damn green dress, again. For most of the of the weather segment it looked like a disembodied head and hands were delivering the forecast.

"Hey, you still here?"

She looked up at Steve. "I was trying to come up with something for the switchboard when viewers ask why our weather report was delivered by a floating head."

"How about because our boss has terrible taste in bimbos."

"Yeah, I'm thinking that won't fly."

"I missed dinner and I'm starving. I'm hitting the diner. Care to join me?"

Laura looked at Steve. Most people saw the most watched news anchor in the state of Pennsylvania and parts of southern New York. She just saw her friend, Stefan, smart, a bit full of himself and ruggedly handsome. "Yeah, sure. I could go for a milkshake."

They walked into the all night diner and took up their usual booth in the back. It was past midnight but they could count on at least one or two patrons to ask for an autograph. WYTC viewing area covered half the state thanks to widespread population, the Pocono mountain range and the lack of competition. One of the few competing stations, WNRP, had canceled their news programs in favor of paid commercial blocks. Eventually WYTC had made a deal with them. Now Steve's broadcasts appeared on two local networks.

"Hi guys. The usual?" asked Dorothy. She'd been their regular waitress since they'd started working together ten years ago.

"Laura?" asked Steve. She smiled. He was so old school.

"Yes, thanks, Dorothy."

"Same for me," said Steve.

"When do you leave for New York?" she asked.

"You don't miss anything, do you?"

"I'm a producer. It's my job to know all and see all."

"Tomorrow night after the eleven broadcast. The network wants me to cover the weekend morning show until Drew Harvey is back from medical."

"That's a lot, working seven days a week."

"I can handle it."

"We're not as young as we used to be."

"That's why I'm doing it."

"Excuse me?"

Steve waited to answer Dorothy set down their drinks. "Laura, I've been trying to get a network spot for years. This is my best shot."

"You mean if Drew Harvey doesn't recover."

“Damn, Laura, that’s pretty harsh. I like Drew. I hope he recovers.”

“But you still want his job.” She cautioned him with a raised hand. “Save your outrage. It’s the nature of the business. Believe me, I know.”

“I still don’t know understand why you gave it up. You were there.”

Laura sighed. She’d been a producer for the most watched morning show in the country for ten years. She’d worked with the best in the business, called celebrities by their first names. She’d reached the pinnacle of her profession, and then she’d walked away. “I left for a lot of reasons. I got into this for the same reason you did, to tell the story. But the story has changed. It’s all about image and spin. The truth has very little to do with it anymore.”

“You’re still producing.”

She smiled. “It’s a little late to change careers at my age. Now I’m back home and I’ve got my Mom and my family. I missed so much when I was in New York.”

“You came back a lot.”

“Not enough. I wasn’t here when my Dad died.”

Steve reached for her hand. “That wasn’t your fault. He was eighty. He passed in his sleep.”

“I hadn’t seen him in six months. I kept promising to come visit but something always came up.”

“It’s the job, Laura.”

“That’s the point. It’s always the job. That used to be a good excuse when the reason was a natural disaster or a political bombshell. Now it’s about celebrity feuds and tweets.”

“But you gave it all up to come back here.”

“That’s what one to many Kardashian stories will do to you.”

Dorothy brought their food and Laura took a sip of her milkshake. “Ah, that’s good.”

“Yeah, I’m starving.”

“If you’d eat a proper meal before you came to work instead of living on coffee, you wouldn’t be so hungry.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Cretino.”

“Pridurok.” They both laughed as they called each other a jerk in their origin language.

“Does Morrison know you’re covering the network for the next few weeks?”

“Yeah, he’s fine with it. It means WYTC gets a network plug. So long as I make the six o’clock broadcast on Monday I’m good.”

“Translation, Laura, I need you to cover my ass in the production meeting.”

He smiled. “I’ll bring you something shiny from New York.”

“Shiny, hell. I’ll take cash or gift cards along with your undying devotion.”

He gave her a look she didn’t quite understand. “You already have that.”

Laura smiled and tried to hide her shaking hand. They’d been friends since they were kids. Steve grew into the big man on campus. In Jefferson, he still was. Laura was everyone’s best buddy, but never the prom queen. They’d gone their separate ways after high school but they still ran into each other around town. Even when Laura lived in New York she would still see Steve in Jefferson when she came home to visit. She’d never told him she’d had feelings for him as long as she could remember and it was far too late now.

Steve paid a the bill and left a healthy tip for Dorothy. Laura got in the passenger seat and they headed back to the studio parking garage. He thought he saw a look on her face he didn't quite understand. Laura was the one person he trusted completely. He'd known her for as long as he could remember. He never had to guess where he stood with her. She was always up front with him. Except tonight.

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

"What? Yeah, sure."

"Are you sure you're okay with me doing New York on the weekends. You know if you need to reach me I'll answer."

"Of course I know," she smiled. "You know if you don't pick up I'll kick your ass."

"Oh, I know," he laughed. He pulled up next to her car. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Production meeting at three. Don't be late," she smiled. "And thanks for dinner."

"You're welcome."

Jefferson was located in a valley, surrounded by mountains. Only a few miles up the mountain and Steve pulled into his driveway. He'd rather have a condo in town, but if he wanted any privacy he had to be outside of town. Jefferson was more small town vibe than big city. Everyone in ten counties recognized him. He couldn't make a trip to the grocery store without taking a picture with a fan. It's not that he minded. Most fans were nice and respectful. There were just sometimes he wanted some quiet.

Steve tossed his keys on the sideboard and loosened his tie. He should try and get some rest since he'd be working a lot of hours the next couple of months. He pulled out his favorite dark blue and grey suits for the weekend. Tucked in and flipping channels usually made him fall asleep but his brain refused to shut off. Working the morning show was his best shot at getting a regular network spot. He knew that. But Laura seemed to be against it. What was going on with her? Steve valued her opinion. Laura was an experienced producer. She was also a good friend. Maybe something was going on with

her personal life. She never really talked about her personal life, anymore than he did. He knew she'd had a relationship in New York, but that ended before she came back to Jefferson. He didn't understand why she was single. She'd always been a cute girl but he never remembered her having a regular boyfriend. He had a thing for her back then but she was focused on her studies. Now she was a beautiful woman, distractingly so. But she was as unattached as he was. He clicked off the TV and the light. He hadn't figured out Laura Donati in the last fifty years. He wasn't going to do it tonight.

Steve reviewed the copy for the six p.m. broadcast. He flipped through the story line up but saw no update on the university shooting. "What's happened with the coed shooting?"

"It's a non starter. Let's move on," said Morrison.

"What do you means it's a non starter? This is a dead girl. Who did it? Have there been any arrests? This is what we do."

Morrison glared at him. "She wasn't a coed. She was a hooker. Move on."

Steve looked at Laura, who looked like she was trying to disappear into her file folder. "Laura?"

"He's right. She had a record."

"So that means no one investigates?"

"Nobody cares, Peters. She was a whore."

"You know, Morrison, you are unbelievable. You're the last person who should judge this girl considering you'll fuck anything with a pulse."

"Watch your mouth, Peters!"

Steve grabbed his copy and slammed the conference door behind him. He tossed the file on his desk and sat down. He wasn't surprised at the knock on his office door. "Come in."

Laura walked in and sat on the edge of his desk. "Morrison is pissed."

"Big surprise."

"You're pushing it with him."

"Why don't we have a picture of her?"

"You aren't going to let this go, are you?"

"You know the answer."

She pulled a picture out of the file she was holding. "Here."

Steve looked at the picture. Amy O'Hara was a pretty girl, with long dark hair and green eyes. "What happened to her? Drugs?"

Laura nodded. "Yeah. That was her high school graduation picture. A few weeks later she was arrested for shoplifting. A few weeks after that for solicitation. She was eighteen."

"Jesus." He looked up from the picture. "You knew I'd want to follow up."

She smiled. "I know you."

"Yeah, you do," he smiled. "Who's handling this at JPD?"

"Harrison."

"Are you kidding me? He could find his own ass with both hands. Can you follow up with him? Maybe if he knows we're pursuing it, he'll get off his ass."

"Steve, even if we get the story, Morrison isn't going to let us air it."

"Let me handle Morrison."

"You don't have the new job yet and I don't feel like breaking in a new anchor."

"Don't worry about that. See what you can find out over the weekend. Maybe get that intern, what's his name, to ask around. He's their age. He might get them to talk."

"His name is Zeke and..."

"Zeke? Really?"

"Really. He's a just out of school."

"This will give him a chance to show you what he's made of."

"Fine. But you owe me, Stefan."

Steve sat the morning desk and took a last look at his copy. At the meeting the senior producer told him it looked like Drew Harvey would be off the air for at least four months. It would mean a lot of work but it would be his chance to have a continuing presence on the network. Carol Burgess took the opening of the show and explained about Drew's accident. "We all wish a Drew a very speedy recovery. Sitting in for Drew is the evening anchor from our affiliate, WYTC, in Jefferson, Pennsylvania, Steve Peters. Welcome, Steve."

"Thank you, Carol." Steve introduced the first the first segment, a story about a hundred year old World War II vet. Three hours later he got notes from the producer and walked out onto the street. The traffic wasn't quite as bad as it would be during the week. In Jefferson, traffic this heavy would have been the lead story. He walked down the street toward the corporate condo, stopping at the small grocery store on the ground level. You could get anything you wanted in New York at any time of day.

Steve looked out the window as he finished his sandwich. Every square space outside his window was occupied. He wasn't in Jefferson any more. He glanced down at his ringing phone.

"Hey, Laura."

"Hey. Caught the broadcast."

"What did you think?"

"I think you were a perfect fit for the show."

Steve heard the tone in her voice. "But?"

"No but, you were fine."

"Laura, it's me. I know when you're holding something back."

"You were fine, but you're better than that."

"Excuse me?"

"You're so focused on getting to the network, what's the end game?"

“What do you mean? I get the network job and move to New York.”

“And then what? You spend the rest of your career describing the latest development in closets?”

Steve sighed. She had seen the show. “It was a feature. I don’t have control over content.”

“I’m not criticizing, Steve.”

“I know,” he sighed.

“Do you want to hear about what you left on my plate?”

“Sure.”

“Zeke, interviewed some frat boys. Turns out Amy was a regular at the parties.”

“Since when do frat boys hire pros for their parties.”

“That’s just it. They don’t. From what Zeke heard Amy liked to party. She’d hook up with what ever guy had the best stash.”

“So how does she wind up shot in the stairwell of a dorm?”

“Good question.”

“There’s something we’re missing. We need to find out about this girl.”

“Agreed. What do you want to do?”

“Talk to the mother.”

“Are you kidding me? She just lost her daughter. She’s not going to want to talk to us.”

“She will if she understands we’re looking for justice for her daughter.”

“I’ll get her information but you’ll need to do the interview. Everyone knows you. They don’t need me from Adam.”

“Agreed, but we can’t pull any of the regular crew for the interview. Morrison will stop us before we get started.”

Laura snickered. “Translation: Laura, can you run the camera?”

“Ah, yeah.”

“I think I remember what button to push.”

“You’re the best, Laura.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

Steve knocked on Laura's office door and held out a brown bag full of New York bagels in front of him. He was happy to see her smile as she held out her hands.

"Oooo. Come to mama!" She opened the bag and inhaled. "Ah, heaven. Wait. Where's the..." He held out a second bag with two different cream cheese spreads. "Okay, you're back in my good graces. Sit." He took a chair and reached for the bag. She held the bag close. "Well, okay, but you have to bring me more next week."

"Done." He spread some cream cheese on an egg bagel. "What do we have?"

"I've got Mrs. O'Hara's contact info. I think it would be better if you show up, rather than call. Your smile is more effective in person."

Steve stopped in mid bite. "Excuse me?"

"Oh, please. You know what I'm talking about. You've got that lopsided smile going on with those Paul Newman eyes. No woman can resist."

"Hah! You did," he laughed as he took a bite of his bagel.

"You never aimed them at me."

He didn't know what to do with that comment so he decided to let it go. "I assume you've followed up with the police."

"I have, for as much good as it did me. Harrison said there were no usable prints and DNA can take months to process."

"Despite what TV shows say."

"You know Jefferson doesn't have the facilities. They have to send it to the state lab."

"I know. What about Amy's record?"

"She had a pop for shoplifting. She got a fine."

"What about the solicitation charge?"

"That was weird. The charge was dropped."

“Why?”

“Lack of evidence.”

“More like the john was too important to be involved.”

“Exactly.”

“Something is really wrong here. I can feel it.”

“Agreed. Give me thirty minutes. The camera set up is already in my SUV.”

“What would I do without you?” he smiled.

“The mighty would fall.”

He studied her for a moment. “Without a doubt.”

The O’Hara home was a modest rancher on the outside of town. Steve and Laura pulled into her driveway. He noticed the curtain in the front window move aside. “Are you ready for this?” he asked.

“Yeah, are you?”

“She knows we’re here. Let’s go.” They walked up the path and knocked on the door. Kathleen O’Hara opened the front door a crack. “Mrs. O’Hara?”

“What do you want?”

“Mrs. O’Hara, I’m Steve Peters.”

“I know who you are. What do you want?”

“I’d like to talk to you about Amy.”

“Go away.” She started close the door.

“Mrs. O’Hara, please. We want to find out the truth. The truth no one is saying.” She studied him for a moment, then opened the door. “This is my producer, Laura Donati. May she come in?”

“Yeah, sure,” she said without turning around. She sat down on the couch and looked at them. “Why are you here?”

“I’ve seen enough stories like your daughter’s to know something isn’t right. No one deserves to die like she did. She deserves the truth.”

“You’re going to plaster my daughter’s face on the news for your ratings.”

“I’m not going to pretend that your daughter’s story won’t get a lot of attention. That’s the nature of my business. But that attention might be what gets to the truth.”

“Why should I believe you?”

“Because I’m guessing no one else has offered to help.”

“That detective won’t even take my calls.” She looked at Laura. “What are you here for?”

“I run the camera.”

“Then I guess you better get it.”

Fifteen minutes later, Laura was set up and Steve was ready to start. Kathleen had changed from shorts and a t shirt to a dark blue blouse and slacks. She’d run a brush through her hair but hadn’t added any makeup. It was obvious Kathleen was bone tired.

“Mrs. O’Hara, tell me about Amy.”

“My Amy was a good girl, smart.” She held up a framed news clipping with a picture of a young Amy with short hair in a Catholic School uniform. “This is when Amy won the state mathematics competition. She had an academic scholarship to the university. She was going to be a teacher.”

“What happened?”

“A few weeks after she graduated from high school she met someone. She wouldn’t tell me who. He got her into drugs. When she came home I could see it in her eyes. Then she stopped coming home. It got bad fast. She had a future, then someone took it away from her. I want to know why.”

Steve continued to question Kathleen about Amy's life. Kathleen obviously felt bad about being a single working mother. She blamed herself for not being around for Amy. "One last question, and this is a difficult one. Your daughter had been arrested for solicitation."

"That was bull! Not my girl! I don't care what anyone says, I know my girl. She would have never done something like that."

They stopped the interview and Laura turned off the lights. "Kathleen, I have one more question. Do you know any of Amy's friends?"

"Rose Burke. They've been friends since grade school."

"What did Rose say about what happened?"

"Nothing. I haven't heard from her. She didn't even come to the funeral."

"Do you have some contact information for Rose?"

"Yeah, I think so." Kathleen went into the kitchen and came back with a slip of paper. "Here."

"Thank you, Mrs. O'Hara. I will call you before the report goes live."

"Not tonight?"

"No. We need to edit the footage. I'd also like to talk to Rose. She may have some information."

Steve helped load the equipment in the SUV. Laura looked at him. "You were right. Something more is going on here."

"We need to talk to Rose."

It was three o'clock and Rose Burke should arrive home from class soon. Steve was surprised when Rose agreed to speak with them. She'd only agreed if they'd meet her at her parent's home, a few streets over from the O'Hara's. Both of her parents would be at work and she would cut her last class to meet them in private.

"Did you talk to Sara?" he asked.

"Yes. I told her to cover us for the production meeting."

"What did she say?"

Laura looked at him. "What do you mean, what did she say? She's my associate producer, which means I'm her boss. She said no problem."

"How long do you think it will take to cut together the package?"

"Depending on whether we use anything from Rose, give me a day. That way I have time for graphics. I can get it done but you haven't said how you plan on getting it on air. Morrison will never approve it."

Steve smiled. "It's the first week of the quarter."

Laura gasped. "Oh, Steve, you wouldn't."

"It's the only way it will work. Morrison will be at corporate with one hundred and seventy five other station managers getting his quarterly ass kicking." Most local affiliates in the country are owned by a handful of corporations. WYTC was no different.

"Which means he'll be in a crap mood when he gets back and we'll all be unemployed."

"Honestly, it's a risk. That's why before we go live we'll have to talk the staff. I'll take the hit for this. I'll tell Morrison I forced your hand."

"Okay, first of all, nobody forces my hand. And I'll take the responsibility for my crew. I'll give them the option to step away but I will back anyone who wants to help get this on the air."

"You are something else."

“Damn straight,” she smiled.

A small sedan pulled into the driveway and a small, slender girl got out. As she grabbed some books from her backseat she saw them parked on the street. She looked around and then nodded for them to follow. They followed her in to the living room of the small tract house.

“Thank you for seeing us, Rose,” said Steve.

“Let’s do this fast. I can’t have anyone find out about this.”

Steve glanced at Laura. There would be no need for a camera set up. Laura grabbed a notebook and pen. She’d take notes while they spoke. “Rose, Amy’s mother said you’d been friends for a long time.”

“For as long as I can remember.”

“It seems like everything was going great for her until this past summer. Do you know what happened?”

“He happened.”

“Who?”

Rose sighed and bit her lower lip. “Brad.”

“Brad who?”

“Bolton.”

Steve looked at Laura. Everyone in Jefferson and the surrounding counties knew the Bolton name. It was the biggest trucking outfit in the state. “Bolton trucking?”

“The old man’s grandson. We met him and his buddies at Delilah’s. Brad hooked up with Amy that night. I met his friend Tom Armstrong. We thought they were nice. Brad bought everyone drinks. At first he and Tom took Amy and me out, you know, movies, dinners. It was nice to be going out with guys who weren’t cheap. Most guys our age don’t have gas money.”

“I understand,” said Steve. “What happened?”

“One night we were at Brad’s apartment and he pulled out some coke. The guys were using and they wanted us to do it too. They said we had to if we wanted to keep seeing them. I told them no and I was ready to walk home. I tried to get Amy to come with me, but she wouldn’t.”

“Do you know why?”

“Amy spent her whole life studying. She never had time for a real boyfriend, especially someone like Brad. You know, big man on campus type. She’d gotten her scholarship and in a couple of months she was going to start four more years of studying. I think she saw Brad as her one chance to be like everyone else, not like us.”

“Like us?”

“Kids from the flats. Tom and Brad lived in university city, even though their parents didn’t live far from campus. They had everything we didn’t.”

“Including a cocaine habit,” said Laura.

“Yeah. I left that night. I called a friend and got a ride home. I didn’t see Amy much after that night. When she got caught shoplifting I cornered her outside her house. She said it was a mistake, that she’d done it on a dare.”

“What about the solicitation charge?”

“That was bullshit. Amy told me what happened. Brad and Amy we’re in the backseat of his car, you know...”

“Yes, I know.”

“They both got busted because Brad decked the cop. They got separated at the police station. Next thing she knew Brad’s dad was there with a lawyer who said Amy was a hooker. Brad was just a stupid kid who made a mistake. Brad didn’t do anything to help her. He just walked away.”

“Do you know why she was at Hanover Hall the night she died?”

“No, she shouldn’t have been there. That’s where Brad and Tom live. After Brad left her at the station he never called her again.”

Steve watched Rose closely during the interview. She looked him in the eyes, never faltered in her story. "Rose, I believe you. You had nothing to do with any criminal activity. Why don't you want people to know you were standing up to your friend?"

"Are you kidding me? It's the Bolton's. Nobody goes up against the them." Rose reached for her phone. "I have some pictures but you can't tell anyone where you got them."

Laura's phone beeped and she looked down. "Got them."

Steve extended his hand. "Thank you for talking to us. If you ever need anything, please call."

"Yeah, right."

"I mean it, Rose. You call and we'll answer."

Steve and Laura got into their car and pulled away, keeping their word to Rose to get out of sight as quick as they could. They pulled into the studio parking garage and turned off the car. "Damn. That was a hell of a day."

"Sure was," she said as she looked at her phone. She flipped through the pictures on her phone and held it toward him. The pictures weren't proof of criminal activity but they were proof that Amy and Rose had seen these guys on more than one occasion.

"Can you pull up a picture of Brad Bolton?" Laura hit a few buttons and smiled. She turned the phone back to Steve. "Well, well. Isn't that interesting?" There was a picture of the Bolton family, John Bolton, son John Jr., and grandson Bradley.

Laura sat staring at her monitor. Editing this piece was one of the hardest things she'd ever done. Not because it was a technical challenge. After thirty five years in the business she could do this in her sleep. The hard part was looking at Amy's face. She felt like she'd gotten to know her and she wanted justice for her as much as Steve did.

"You summoned?"

She smiled at Steve standing in her doorway. His damn lopsided smile always got to her. "Come in. The package is ready." His smile disappeared as he pulled a chair next to hers. He nodded and she pushed play. Three minutes and thirty seconds later she hit stop. "It's three times longer than standard but I couldn't cut it further. The story needs to time." He was staring at the blank screen. "Steve?"

He stood and straightened his jacket. "I'll bring you my copy before the production meeting. He looked at her and nodded. "You did good. Real good." Then he bent over and kissed the top of her head. Laura watched Steve close the door behind him as she wondered what the hell was happening.

Steve sipped his coffee as Laura read his copy. It had taken longer than he'd anticipated but he had to rise to the level of Laura's story. "What do you think?"

She sat back in her chair and reached for his hand. "You did good."

"Are you ready for the meeting?"

"Ready as I'll ever be." The production crew filtered in and settled down. As per usual, Laura started the meeting. Steve closed the door to make sure no one joined them. "Before we start, Steve and I would like to talk to you. We want to show you a story we're going to run tonight." She hit a button on the player. Three and one half minutes later, the screen went dark. Everyone sat in silence until Sara spoke up.

"Isn't that the story Morrison deep sixed?"

“It is,” said Laura. “We are planning on going forward with the story on today’s six p.m. broadcast.” She put up a crime scene picture she’d gotten from her JPD contact. “This is how Amy O’Hara’s life ended, in the basement of Hanover Hall.”

Steve heard a few gasps at the bloody image. Amy O’Hara died with nothing left of her pretty face. “Guys, listen. I’m pushing this through tonight because Morrison won’t be here to stop me.”

“Stop us,” Laura added.

He smiled and nodded at her. He had his back. “We want to give everyone the chance to opt out of tonight’s broadcast. Laura and I are prepared to take on Morrison’s wrath. We won’t make that choice for you. Before you make that decision you need to know the wild card in this story.” He put up the pictures that Rose had given them. Laura had already blurred Rose out of the pictures. He paged through Amy’s last good times.

“Is that the Bolton kid?” asked Zeke.

“It is.” Steve told them the story Rose had told them. “Her friend gave us this under the agreement of confidentiality. We can’t use any of it.”

“I will approve a day off for anyone who wants it,” said Laura.

Everyone looked at each other. Sara nodded. “I’m in.”

“Me too,” said Zeke. Everyone went around the room and voiced their support for the story.

“Thank you, everyone,” said Steve. “Now, let’s get to work.”

“Ideas?” asked Laura.

“I should go back to the university,” said Zeke. “Something’s not right with what I heard about her. She doesn’t seem like she was a party girl.”

“Good. Get on that.”

“I think we should have a toll free number for leads,” said Sara. “The police obviously aren’t interested in pursuing the case. I can set that up.”

“Great. Thanks Sara,” said Laura. “We will need people to record and track down the leads.”

“I’ve got that,” said Sara.

“It’s Friday night,” said Steve. “After the eleven broadcast I’ll be leaving for New York to cover the morning show tomorrow. I will still be available to any of you.”

“Are we good?” asked Laura.

Everyone nodded and picked up their notes. “Let’s do this.’

“I’ve got to ask,” said Steve. “You know what Morrison might do. Are you sure you want to do this?”

Sara smiled. “It’s what we do.”

“It’s the reason we do this. There’s a story that needs to be told,” said Zeke.

“Thank you,” said Steve. When he was alone with Laura he let go a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding. “Wow. I didn’t expect that.”

“What did you think they’d do?”

“Morrison may fire us. Hell, he’ll probably will fire us. I’m surprised they’re willing to put their jobs on the line.”

Laura smiled. “It’s like Zeke said, it’s the reason we do this.”

Laura took her spot in the control room. She took a deep breath and looked around. It looked like any other broadcast day, except it wasn't. This could be the last broadcast for all of them. She looked at the digital clock and hit her microphone. "Alright people, if this is our last one, let's make it our best. We're live in three, two..." she pointed at Steve.

"Good evening. This is Eyewitness News at six. I'm Steve Peters. Our top story tonight is the murder of a young girl from Jefferson, Amy O'Hara, who's life ended before it began. Tonight we are going to tell Amy's story in the hope that it will lead to her killer." Steve nodded to the camera and Laura hit the transmit button. Three and one half minutes later they cut back to Steve. Laura could see he was fighting his emotions. "Amy O'Hara was a gifted young girl, with a bright future. Amy lived in Jefferson all her life. A lot of you knew her, knew the girl she used to be." Laura took the cue to put up the picture of the twelve year old Amy after she'd won the math competition. "Amy was an eighteen year old kid who, like all of us, may have made a questionable choice or two. Tonight, we are asking for your help to bring Amy's killer to justice. We are asking the public to call the toll free number or use the website on your screen, with information. Something you might think is of no consequence could be the key to catching Amy's killer. Let's get justice for Amy. We'll return after these messages."

"Clear," yelled Laura.

Steve took a deep breath and leaned back against his chair. Laura dashed out of the control booth and past the cameras to his chair. "Are you okay?" she whispered.

"I'll be fine."

"You did great," she smiled.

"Sixty seconds," called Sara from the booth.

"I've got to go." She grabbed his hand. "I've got you."

He gave her a small smile. "I know."

Twenty five minutes later they'd wrapped the broadcast and gathered in the conference room. Each one pulled out their phones. "Who's going to be first?" asked Sara.

“Me,” said Steve.

“No, I should,” said Laura. “I’m the producer. I’m in charge of content.””

“Before anyone does that, you might want to take a look at this.” Zeke flipped his laptop to face the group. “We’ve been off air for ten minutes and we have fifty messages.” The station receptionist, Lanie, knocked on the door before pushing her way in.

“Laura! I said I’d monitor the extra line but come on! It hasn’t stopped ringing. I’ve stuck it on record. You’ll have to get someone else to review the calls.” Lanie turned and shut the door.

“Well, on that note,” said Steve as he turned on his phone. It instantly rang and the caller ID was not a surprise. “Hello, Mr. Morrison.”

“Don’t Mr. Morrison me! I told you to drop that story.”

“I didn’t.”

“You son of a bitch! You’ve gone too far. Nobody gives a shit about a whore! You’re fired!”

“Fine, but first, you should know I’m in post production. You should be able to tell since you’re on speaker. Second, we’ve already received more messages about the story than any other story in the last year.”

“What?” he asked.

“Zeke, how many messages do we have?”

Zeke looked at his screen. “Fifty five, fifty six, fifty eight, sixty.”

“Alright, fine. Donati!”

Laura smiled. “Yes, sir.”

“I saw your name on the producing credit. You should know better.”

“I do sir. That’s why I did it.”

“You’re pushing your luck. Fine. Run the damn story but I’m warning you. Don’t you dare make on air accusations. Leave it to the police.”

Laura looked Steve. She could see he was thinking what she was. “Yes, sir,” she said. “We have to finish with our production meeting for the eleven o’clock broadcast.”

“Don’t any of you think just because I’m not there that I’m not in charge. If any of you cross the line you will never work in network news again.” The call disconnected and the room was dead quiet. Laura looked around at a room full of people who’d had their careers threatened.

“Give us the room, please,” said Laura. She waited for everyone to leave and close the conference room door. “What the hell, Steve?”

“He knows.”

“If he doesn’t know who, he knows who cares enough to make this go away.”

Steve reached for a coffee and took a seat in the conference room. The eleven o'clock report was done and so, quite possibly, was his career. He'd put everything on the line for this story and he had to pray it panned out.

"Coffee? At this hour?" Laura had joined him.

"I still have to drive to New York tonight."

"Oh, right." She set her papers on the table. "This is getting a bigger reaction than we'd anticipated. We have hundreds of posts and phone messages to wade through. Zeke said he has a few classmates he can call on to help review them." She sighed and leaned back against her chair. "And Morrison called again."

"For what?"

"To remind me my career is hanging by a thread."

"What an ass."

"True, but he's still the boss." Laura stared at him. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm just...I can't stop thinking about that picture."

"The crime scene?"

"No. The one when she was twelve. She was just a kid."

"And you're worried about your job."

"Laura!" He took a beat, then shook his head. "Damn, it. I really hate that you can read me so well."

"Don't beat yourself up. I feel the same way."

Steve was surprised his phone began to ring. Everyone who'd call him was in the building. He pulled it out of his pocket and saw it was Melanie Sandler, the network morning show producer. "Uh oh."

"Morrison?" asked Laura.

He shook his head. "Hi Melanie. What's up?"

“I live in your broadcast area. I saw your story tonight, about Amy O’Hara. It was an incredible piece.”

“Thank you.”

“Martin Stone also lives in your broadcast area. He agreed. We want you to air the piece tomorrow. You’ll have to have some copy ready for broadcast.”

“Ah, yeah. I can do that. I’ll bring my producer with me. She knows the piece better than anyone.” He smiled at Laura’s shocked face. “We’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

“What did you do?”

“That was Melanie Sandler. The network wants Amy’s story for broadcast tomorrow morning. It will be harder for Morrison to bury the story with network coverage.”

“Why do you want me there?”

“Because I will need help with the copy.”

“Bull.”

Steve smiled. She knew him too well. “You aren’t going to sleep tonight. You’re going to go through messages and try to find the needle in the haystack. You might as well do it in a corporate suite.”

She studied him for a moment. “Fine but first things first.”

“I need to call Kathleen O’Hara.”

Steve grabbed a luggage cart, hung up his garment bag and loaded their overnight bags. They pushed it and themselves into the elevator. It opened on to the marble hallway of the condo high rise. He pushed it toward the main desk.

“Good evening, Mr. Peters, Ms. Donati.”

“Hello, Ray.”

The young man handed him a computer key. “The kitchen is stocked. Please let me know if there’s anything you need.”

“Thanks. We will.” They rode up to the twenty eighth floor and Laura followed him to the condo.

“Wow. The network has stepped up their game since my day.”

Steve looked out the window to the lights of the city. “It doesn’t suck.” He pulled his garment off the cart. “There are two bedrooms but I doubt either one of us will sleep tonight.”

“Go rest. You need to be pretty in the morning.”

He looked at her and chuckled. “Fine. I’ll set my alarm for six. We should be there by seven. It’s only a five minute walk. Thank God, we’re not live until eight.” He walked to the bedroom door. “Dobroy nochi.”

Laura smiled. “Buona notte.”

“Wake up sleepy head.” Steve felt a hand on his shoulder. He rolled over to see Laura smiling at him. Not a stitch of makeup and she was more beautiful than most women he knew. Most, hell, all of them. “It’s ten after six. I turned off your alarm because it wasn’t waking you up.”

“I guess I was more tired than I thought.” He sat up and she jumped back. “Don’t worry. I’m still wearing my boxers.”

“Good to know. Now get your ass in gear. I’ll have the coffee ready by the time you’re dressed.”

Laura put the coffee on and tried to calm herself. She hadn’t seen Steve without a shirt on since they’d been swimming at the community pool as teenagers. She knew he spent time at the gym, but, damn! He’d been trim and fit as a teen but now he was ripped. She needed a distraction. She reached into the fridge and pulled out what looked like chocolate croissants. “Yeah, that’ll work.”

“What’ll work?”

She looked up and for the second time today Steve took her breath away. He wore a dark navy suit she hadn’t seen before with a light blue shirt and dark blue tie. “Ah, these croissants and that suit. Nothing like chocolate for breakfast. Is the suit new?” she asked as she pushed a mug of coffee towards him.

“Yeah, what do you think?”

“It highlights your baby blues.”

“What?” he laughed.

“Oh, please. The camera loves you and you know it.” She walked by him and couldn’t resist patting his chest. “Now eat something so we don’t hear your stomach growl during the broadcast.”

“Like that would ever happen.”

“Two weeks ago, eleven o’clock broadcast. We got calls. People thought there was an earthquake, or a sonic boom.”

“It wasn’t that bad and it wasn’t my fault. The sausage on my pizza was too spicy.”

“Yeah, yeah.” She pushed the croissant at him. “Eat.”

“Did you finish the copy?”

She looked at him like he'd asked the dumbest question ever. She clicked a button on her tablet and pushed it toward him. He read it quickly and nodded. "Perfect, of course."

"Are you trying to apologize for doubting me?"

He gave her a lopsided smile. "My apologies are much better than that."

Her heart was racing and she didn't know what was wrong with her. Sleep deprivation, yeah, that's it. She couldn't pull all-nighters any more like she could when she was young. She needed to change the subject. "Let's get it in gear, Petrov. It's quarter to seven."

Laura stood next to Melanie Sandler as the morning show went live. Melanie had looked at the new copy and merely nodded. She watched with a mix of pride and nervous flop sweat. Steve was perfect for the network and she hoped like hell he wouldn't get the job.

She waited until the story was finished and they went to commercial before she found an empty conference room. She grabbed a bottle of water and sat down on the couch. It had been ten years since she'd been in this room and she could honestly say she didn't miss it. She checked her emails from work. Sara and Zeke had hundreds of messages to go through and they'd probably have more thanks to the network story. She leaned back against a pillow and closed her eyes. She prayed that they could find justice for Amy.

"Hey, wake up sleepyhead."

"What?" Laura opened her eyes. Steve was sitting next to her on the couch. Damn, she was right about that suit.

"I wondered where you went."

"I was just going to sit here for a minute."

"That was three hours ago."

“I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. The show went fine. The network is already getting feedback on Amy’s story.”

“Really?”

“Really. Now, come on. It’s time to get you into bed.”

“Excuse me?”

“We both need a break from all of this and a few hours of sleep. After that I’ll take you to an early dinner.”

She sighed and stood. “Yeah, okay.”

They made the short walk back to the condo where Steve greeted a different desk clerk. “Hi Dwayne.”

“I saw the broadcast, Mr. Peters. The story about that girl was really something. I hope they catch the guy.”

“Thanks, Dwayne. So do I.” They walked toward the elevator, past the lobby gift shop. Laura stopped and looked in the window. “What is it?” he asked.

She smiled and pointed to a brown haired doll in the window. Her gown was a beautiful red velvet and gold. Her long hair was twisted in a braid and she was wearing a gold crown. “It’s her, the princess. She’s a Madam Alexander. They’re so beautiful.”

“Did you have one as a kid?”

Laura chuckled. “No. I’m the youngest of six. All my toys were hand me downs.” She turned and pointed to the elevator. “Come on. I’m getting loopy. Let’s get some sleep.”

Laura opened her eyes and stretched. She guessed from the light it was getting late. She looked at her phone and saw it was nearly six. She took a quick shower and put on some fresh jeans and a light sweater. She hadn’t brought anything that didn’t fit in an

overnight bag so dinner would have to be casual. She walked into the living room and found Steve on the couch with his laptop. He'd changed into a dark blue sweater and jeans.

"Hi. Did you have a good sleep?"

"Yeah, actually, I did. I should ask the desk clerk who makes their mattresses." She spotted a long blue box wrapped with a big ribbon on the coffee table. "What's this?"

"Maybe you should take a look," he smiled.

She pulled off the ribbon and lid. "What did you do?" she gasped. She pushed aside the tissue and saw the princess. "Oh, Steve."

"I promised you something shiny."

She pulled the doll out of the box and fluffed out her dress. Santa had finally granted her wish. "She's so beautiful," she whispered.

"She's not as pretty as you are but I'm glad you like her."

Laura was startled by his comment, but even more by the look on his face.

"Thank you, Laura."

"For what?"

"For everything. For backing me with Morrison. For putting up with me. Mostly, for being the one person I can count on, no matter what." He leaned in and kissed her cheek. "Now let's get some dinner. I made reservations."

Steve held the door for Laura and was greeted by a grey haired man at the front desk. "Mr. Peters, dobro pozhalovar."

"Priyatno videt tebya snova, Gregor. Eto, Ms. Donati."

Laura smiled at the Steve, then the maître d. "Blyo ochen priyatno poznakomit'sya"

The man smiled and shook her hand. "Donati doesn't sound Russian."

"It's not but I've picked up a few things." They took their seats at a corner booth. "You know, a date would be very impressed with you speaking Russian with a maître d."

"Not you," he smiled.

"I know you spoke Russian before you spoke English."

"I met Gregor the last time I was here. It's nice to find someone with whom I can speak Russian."

"I get it. If you speak it anywhere outside of the west side in Jefferson people think you're a spy."

"Speaking of which, since when did yours get so good?"

She picked up her menu and smiled. "Like I said, I've picked up a phrase or two."

"Yeah, right. I bet I could speak Russian the rest of the night and you'd understand everything."

"Vozmozhno."

Steve laughed. "Possibly? More like probably." Gregor returned to the table with a bottle of wine.

"This is compliments of the house. The owner saw your broadcast this morning."

"Thank you. That's very nice."

Gregor opened the bottle and poured them each a glass. Laura took a sip and smiled. "Oh, that's good."

Steve took a sip and smiled. "Yes, it is." They placed their orders and sipped their excellent wine. "Okay, where are we with the team?"

"Zeke emailed me. He was right about the stories he'd heard not being of kosher. Turns out they were stories that people had heard. They were all rumors."

"Did he discover the source of the rumors?"

Laura smiled and sipped her wine. "That he did. He's turning into a great investigative reporter."

"Yeah, yeah. He's the next Steve Kroft. Did he find the source? Was it Bolton?"

"No. It was Tom Armstrong."

"The friend?"

"Yes. Apparently, Tom would tell anyone that would listen. Since he's the best friend of the big man on campus, everyone listened. Sara let me know that half the campus emailed pictures of Amy with Brad so we have proof they were an item for at least two months. We won't need Rose's pictures."

"We can't talk to Brad, we'll tip our hand. Sounds like Tom is the weak link."

"Agreed."

The waiter brought their meals and Steve refilled their glasses. "We can't do anymore on the story tonight. I say we relax and enjoy our meal."

"Sounds good. It's been a while since I've had a meal that didn't come out of a microwave."

Steve studied her for a moment. "Why?"

"Excuse me?"

"Why aren't you being wined and dined by the male population of Jefferson?"

Laura laughed. "You mean other than the fact that I work twenty four seven?"

"Other than that."

“Steve, I’m a vecchia. Nobody’s pounding on my door.”

“You’re not an old woman.”

She smiled. “Somebody’s Italian is pretty good.”

“My Italian is excellent, thank you. That still doesn’t change the fact that you’re a beautiful woman.”

She smiled. “Thank you.”

“Your mother was sure you were going to marry that guy you were with when you worked for the network.”

“It was more like she was saying novenas for my marriage. I can’t believe you talked to my mother about my love life.”

“I see her at the market. You’re her favorite topic of conversation.”

“No, her nineteen grandchildren are her favorite topic of conversation. She was probably testing to see if there was any interest. I’m sure she’s done it to every single man in Jefferson over fifty.”

“So what happened?”

“With my mother?”

“No, with New York guy.”

“Oh, him. He was a nice guy. We were together for a couple of years. It was...comfortable, but it wasn’t right. I wanted to get out of the city, he didn’t. I was offered the job at WYTC. I moved back home and he moved on.”

“That was ten years ago.”

“And?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Steve, you know how it is. It’s the job, it’s always the job. You follow the story to the next story. The next thing you know it’s ten years later. What about you?”

“What do you mean?”

“I heard you and Danielle Nelson were hot and heavy.”

“You heard from?”

Laura smiled. “From my mother.”

Steve chuckled. “Maybe we should go to Mom for our leads. Danielle and I were okay.” He smiled at Laura. “We were comfortable, but we weren’t right.”

They finished their meal with the comfortable ease of delicious food, an excellent bottle of wine and life long friends.

Steve opened the door to the condo and Laura kicked off her shoes. “Thanks for tonight. I really needed that.” She sat down on the couch.

“So did I.” He opened the fridge door. He pulled out a bottle of wine and held it up.

“Sure, it’s still early,” she smiled. He poured them each a glass and sat down next to her on the couch. “This is really nice.”

“Yeah, it is.” He pushed her hair aside and touched her gold hoops. “You’re still wearing these. You wore these in high school.”

“Hey, I’m an Italian girl. You don’t mess with my gold.”

He felt almost like he’d never seen her before. “Why didn’t we ever go out back then?”

Laura nearly spit out her wine. “Oh, please!”

“What?”

“You were the quarterback and had a different cheerleader for every day of the week. I was the nerdy girl.”

He sipped his wine. She wasn’t wrong. “That doesn’t mean I didn’t notice you then, or now.”

“You’ve never seen me like that. I’m your buddy. I have been since we were in kindergarten. You know how long ago that was? Fifty years. Fifty years of being your buddy. You don’t notice your buddy.”

“Who said? Who’s your source?”

“What do you mean? Everyone.”

“No, I think you need to another source.”

“Okay, I’ll bite. Who?”

“You?”

“Me?”

“Yes, we’ve already established that I found you attractive then and now. What about you? Did you notice me in high school?”

“What?”

“You heard me. Did you notice me in high school?”

“Well, yeah, of course. You were a skinny kid but you still had those killer eyes. You’ve always had a presence. I noticed. So did every girl in school.”

Steve grinned. “A presence? “And now.”

She looked at him and sighed. “Now, you’re better. You certainly haven’t wasted all the time you spent in the gym.”

“Oh really?”

She pushed at his chest. “Knock it off. You know what you look like and I’m not blind.”

“Neither am I.” He leaned in and gave her a soft kiss.

“What are you doing?” she whispered.

“It’s called kissing. Wow, it has been a while.”

“Shut up,” she laughed as she put her hand to cheek and pulled him close.

Steve had a brief thought of wishing they'd done this a few decades ago. His hands traveled her curves as he nipped at her neck. She wrapped her hands around his neck and pulled him tight against her.

“Stefan,” she whispered.

He realized everyone knew Steve but only one person, only Laura, knew Stefan. He stood and extended his hand. He let go of the breath he was holding when she smiled and gave him her hand. He led her into his bedroom. He gave her another deep kiss as he slipped his hands under her sweater. She stood back and smiled as he slipped her sweater over her head. “Woah...”

Laura giggled and touched the edge of her lavender lace bra. “I have a thing for Victoria Secret.”

“Huh?” He ran his finger down her cleavage. “Yeah, that’s nice too. ” He looked into her eyes and whispered, “I had no idea.” She grinned and slipped off her jeans. “Dear God, woman.”

“You’re turn,” she grinned. She slipped her hands under his sweater and pushed it over his head. “Ummm,” she grinned as she rubbed her hands up his chest and down his arms. “Damn,” she growled. Steve pulled off his jeans as Laura laid down on the bed. She pulled him back to her and a passionate kiss. He rubbed his hands down her body and replaced his hands with his lips. Laura murmured in Italian in between gasps. “Please,” she whispered.

He slipped off her lingerie and smiled. “Prekrasnyy.”

“Grazie,” she smiled. She pointed at his boxers. “They need to go.” He grinned and ditched his boxers. He was gratified to hear her whisper “Oh my.”

Steve explored every inch of her and she responded with groans and even a few colorful Italian phrases he was surprised she knew.

“Don’t tease, me,” she gasped. “I need you.”

He held Laura's hands above her head as he slipped inside her. He looked in her eyes and realized he'd found the answers to questions he didn't know he had.

Laura dried off and grabbed some fresh underwear. She ran a brush through her hair and tried not to think about having sex with her best friend. She couldn't believe she'd done it. They'd done it. Several times. She realized she was smiling. He was so passionate she thought he'd could pass for Italian. She chuckled to herself and looked at her watch. It was five forty five and they needed to be at the studio in an hour. She looked in on Steve and saw he was still sound asleep. She shook his shoulder. "Hey, sleeping beauty. Time to get up. The world is waiting to hear from you."

He rolled over and smiled. "Good morning."

"Good morning. Now get your ass up." She tried to move but he grabbed her hand.

"Laura, last night..."

"Yes, last night happened." She was terrified to talk this to death. She tried to move but he made her sit down on the bed.

"We had a lot of wine," he said.

"I wasn't drunk."

He smiled. "Neither was I." He rubbed his hand up her arm. "Tell me what to you want to do about this?"

"What I want is to not talk about this now. You have to be on national television in less than two hours."

"Okay, but we will talk about this later." He sat up and kicked his legs over the edge of the bed. Laura tried to think of something other than the fact that he was still naked. "I'll be ready in a few minutes."

Laura put on the coffee and made started a couple of omelets. She had to give it to the staff for stocking the hell out of the kitchen. She set out the food out on the table just as he walked out of the kitchen.

“What’s all this?”

“It’s called breakfast.”

“Thanks, smart ass.”

She tried to move to her seat but he pulled her to him. “Let’s try this again.” He gave her a deep kiss. He tasted of passion and toothpaste. “Good morning.”

She couldn’t help but smile. “Good morning.” She pushed against his chest. “Now go eat.”

“I get it. This has taken us both by surprise and we have a lot on our plates right now. We’ll talk about this later.”

“What is this? I thought you’d be focused on your broadcast, not on...” she pointed to the bedroom they’d used last night. “Not that.”

He sat back and smiled. “Laura, if we were any other two people this would be one of those awkward as hell morning after conversations. But we’re not. As you pointed out repeatedly last night, we’ve known each other all our lives. And that...” he pointed to the bedroom. “Is not going away.”

Laura watched as Steve delivered an update on the latest smartphone release. When they went to commercial he looked over at her and smiled. Then the bugger shot her a wink. She giggled, actually giggled, like a twelve year old girl.

“Are you two together?”

She was startled to see Melanie Sandler standing next to her. “Ah,…” Why was she hiding? “Yes,” she smiled.

“Nice. You two seem like a good fit.”

The studio went quiet as they returned from commercial. Steve stood next to his cohost, Carol, as they went through a celebrity chef segment on the perfect fall brunch. She stifled a laugh as he made the same happy groan eating an apple cider donut hole that he’d made last night. They cut to commercial and he walked over to her with a plate of donut holes.

“I saw that look. Try one.” He fed her a donut and she made the same happy groan.

“Oh God, they’re amazing.”

“Aren’t they? Bobby has a restaurant near here. He’s invited us to stop by before we go home.” Steve noticed Melanie’s smile. “Oh, sorry.” He held out the plate. “Donut hole?”

“No thanks,” she snickered. “Go finish the show.”

Laura smiled as she watched Steve move smoothly from segment to segment. His years of experience showed. She watched him through the monitor. He had an energy that jumped off the screen. He was everything the network wanted. Damn it. The show wrapped and he walked toward her.

“What did you think?”

“You were great.”

He smiled and rubbed his hand up her arm. “Thanks.”

“Yes, you were.”

She turned around to see a familiar face. His hair was a little more grey but he looked the same as he did ten years ago. “Martin. It’s good to see you again.” He shook her hand, then extended it to Steve.

“Martin Stone.”

“Yes, I know. It’s nice to meet you.” Of course he would know the president of the network.

“Martin was chief of the news department when I was here.”

“Laura is the only person who’s ever walked away from executive producing the top morning show in the country.”

“Willingly,” she smiled.

“Willingly. Do you have a moment? I’d like to talk.”

“Sure,” he said.

“I’ll wait here for you.” She wondered if this was the moment she’d lose Steve.

“No, I want to talk to you both.” They followed him into the empty conference room. “Have a seat.” They took up seats on either side of Martin. Laura was the only person who’d be able to see Steve was as nervous as she was. “First, Steve, you’ve been doing a great job subbing for Drew. It can’t be easy going back and forth, working seven days a week.”

“Thank you.” He looked at Laura and smiled. “My producer has been accommodating to my schedule.”

“I’d also like to talk to you about the story you ran yesterday. It was a very powerful piece. I wasn’t surprised when I saw Laura’s name on the producer credit. It was perfectly cut.”

“Thank you, Martin.”

He looked at Steve. “Tell me about how you came to do this story.”

“Honestly, it was her high school graduation picture. She was a pretty, young coed, like any other girl in Jefferson. She had a scholarship and a bright future. Nothing about her life seemed like it would land her shot to death in the bottom of a stairwell. I needed to know. The more we looked the more we found.”

“It’s an usual story for an affiliate.”

“Steve had to fight for it,” said Laura.

“How so?”

Oops. She’d stepped in it. “Well…”

“I went behind the station manager’s back. He didn’t want to pursue the story. I convinced Laura to help me with camera work and interviews. Then I ran the story when Morrison was at the station managers quarterly conference.”

Martin sat back and smiled. “That’s a very honest response.”

Steve shrugged. “You’re the president of the network. You already knew.”

“Yes I did. And knowing Laura, I imagine you didn’t have to do much to convince her. What was Morrison’s reaction?”

“He fired us.”

“He did what?”

“That was before he saw what kind of reaction the story was getting.”

“We’ve gotten a big reaction here too. You’ve taken what would have been a thirty second story at any other affiliate and made it real for the audience, made her real. You’ve given Amy O’Hara a voice. I assume you’re working on more leads.”

“Yes, we have a team at the station going through leads.”

“There’s a lot more to this story than you’ve broadcast, isn’t there?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Excellent. I want you to keep me up to date on your progress. When you get further along I want to feature it, and you, on Sunday Justice.”

“What?” they both gasped. Sunday Justice was the number one investigative news show in the country.

Martin stood. “You’ve done great work here, both of you. Now go back to Jefferson and do more.”

“Thank you, Martin,” said Laura. He smiled and gave her a hug.

“You were right when you left. You didn’t belong on a morning show. I’m glad you found your place.” He extended his hand to Steve. “I’m sure I’ll hear from you soon.”

Steve and Laura stood staring at each other. “What just happened?” he asked.

“It looks like we’re going to skip brunch. We have a lot of work to do.”

Laura put her overnight bag on the couch and grabbed an ice tea from the fridge. "Do you still want to stop for lunch?"

"Let's skip Bobby's and get something at the restaurant in the lobby."

"Why don't we have them deliver it up here. I could do with the quiet." Steve called downstairs and ordered them a couple of wraps. She took the lid of the doll box and looked at her princess again. "I can't believe you got this for me."

"I'm glad you like it."

"I love it." She touched the soft velvet of her gown. "She's so beautiful." She turned and gave him a soft kiss. "It was so thoughtful."

"If you love them why didn't you ever get one for yourself?"

"I asked Santa for one, but he never came through."

He hugged her close. "Ho, Ho, Ho."

It didn't take long for the restaurant to bring up their wraps and some excellent home made chips. "We've got a lot of work to do," she said. "Zeke said they have hundreds of emails. He's got four kids working with him. They graduated together from the journalism school," said Laura.

"Four kids? We don't want this getting out."

"Don't worry. I spoke to Zeke. He assures me that he trusts all of them implicitly."

"Okay."

"And they're working for free."

"Noted." They finished their meal and cleaned up after themselves. Just because it was a corporate condo didn't mean they'd leave a mess for someone else to clean. "So, what was it like to see your old boss?"

"It was great. I haven't seen him for ten years. He was really surprised when I left."

“He seemed really happy to see you.”

Laura put the last glass back in the cabinet and looked at Steve. She couldn't believe the look she was getting. “Seriously? We just got what is the biggest assignment in either of our careers and this is what you're thinking about?”

“You did work together for a long time.”

She smiled a smile that told Steve he was probably in trouble. “Okay, I'll tell you all about Martin Stone. Besides being the devastatingly handsome, president of the network he's also a badass biker. He rides a Harley. And under that perfectly tailored suit are a lot of awesome tattoos.”

“Tattoos?”

She stood closer. “And you know what else he is?”

“You're about to tell me.”

“He's a devoted, church going, family man who's madly in love with his wife and has been for thirty years. Everyone knows that.” She punched a finger in his shoulder. “And now you know too.” She shook her head. “Jealous? Really?”

He slipped his arms around her waist. “Well, you're the one who said Stone was devastatingly handsome. And how do you know about his tattoos?”

“Because I know his wife, Barbara, and she showed me pictures of their vacation in Maui.”

“Oh.”

“Do you feel silly?”

“A little bit. Forgive me?” He grinned.

“I'll let you make it up to me,” she smiled. He pulled her into a deep kiss as he rubbed his hands down her ass, pulling her tight against him. She pulled back. “Are you actually suggesting we delay our trip back to Jefferson to have sex?”

“Absolutely.”

“Cool,” she grinned as grabbed his hand and pulled him into the bedroom.

Steve glanced over at Laura, asleep in the passenger seat. This weekend had been a revelation. Everything about being with Laura seemed to be right. He knew they had a lot of work ahead of them but they'd be doing it together. She stirred awake and smiled.

"Hey, what time is it?"

"We're almost home. Maybe twenty minutes."

"Sorry. I guess I was more tired than I thought."

"Not a problem." He gripped the wheel and took a breath. "I want to ask you something."

"Sure, ask."

"When we get back what do you want to do about us?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you want to keep us quiet?" He was relieved when she smiled.

"Well, Melanie knows."

"She does?"

"Yeah. She caught that wink you shot me and then I giggled like a school girl. She asked me if we were together. I guess it was pretty obvious. I thought about it for a minute but I finally said yes. I'm sure Martin figured it out too. Did you want to keep it quiet?"

"No. There's no reason we shouldn't be together. We're both single. We don't affect each other's jobs. I can't fire you. You can't fire me." He reached for her hand. "Being with you feels right."

"Comfortable?" she smiled.

"Hah! Us comfortable? Maybe when we're eighty. Laura, sweetheart, I'm really happy we're together."

“I’m happy about it too.”

He pulled her hand to his lips and kissed it. “Good. I don’t need people to know, but I’d rather not hide. The only thing odd about us is that this didn’t happen sooner.”

She squeezed his hand. “Agreed.”

“So we’re officially a couple, finally,” he smiled.

Laura laughed. “Oh God, my mother is going to be so happy.” They were ten minutes from Laura’s when the red lights and sirens startled them. He pulled over to the side of the road and parked. “You weren’t speeding.”

“I guess I’m about to find out.” He rolled down the window and put on his best anchor man smile. A young female officer with black hair and dark eyes stood next to his door. He looked at her name plate. “Hello, Officer Mendoza.”

“License and registration, please.” He handed her He pulled out his wallet and the registration out of the glove box. “Stefan Petrov?”

“It’s my legal name. Steve Peters is my broadcast name.”

She handed him back his ID. “I know,” she said. “My dash cam is running so I’ll be talking to you as if this is a regular stop.”

“It’s not?”

“I talk, you listen. We don’t have a lot of time. We know you’re looking into the O’Hara case. You need to drop it, for your own good.”

“Why is that?”

“They know who did it. They’ve decided not to pursue it.”

“What?” asked Laura. Steve grabbed her hand.

“Tell us why.”

“The chief is appointed by the mayor.”

“We know that.”

“Then you should understand.”

“But you don’t, do you? asked Steve.

“No. If they’d prosecuted Bolton for the assault on an officer that girl might still be alive.”

“He decked a cop. It probably wouldn’t have gotten him more than a slap on the wrist.”

“He didn’t just deck a cop, he beat the crap out of him. Craig had a severe concussion, a broken jaw and three broken ribs. He was in the hospital for a month.”

“Why did they let him go?”

“Craig wanted to pursue charges but the word came down. They made him take an early retirement. He didn’t want to do it but he had no choice. For your own safety, you don’t want to go up against these people.”

“You’re putting yourself at risk by telling me this. Why?”

“This town is full of good people. Unfortunately, it’s run by crooked bastards. I’m not here for them. I took an oath to serve and protect. I’m here for the town. If anyone asks, I let you off with a warning. Now, get moving.” The officer returned to her squad car and pulled back onto the road.

“Whoa,” said Laura.

“Damn. We’ve got a lot of work to do.”

They'd grabbed a change of clothes from Laura's and drove to Steve's. They sat at his dining room table with Chinese takeout and notepads.

"Okay we start with the mayor. Why would he want to help Bolton's kid?" asked Steve.

"Bolton must be a supporter."

"Agreed, but the limit on personal contributions per campaign is twenty eight hundred. It's got to be something more than that."

"Let's have Zeke look at his list of contributors. That's public information. I'll send him an email." She pulled out her phone and typed out a message.

"The line has to be Bolton, to Mayor Cartwright to Chief Douglas, but why would they risk everything to cover up a murder?"

Laura looked up from her notes. "They didn't, at least not at first. At first they were covering up the assault. Once they'd done that they were committed. If they let the murder investigation go forward it would come out what they'd done. It's like the officer said. If they hadn't covered up the assault, Amy would still be alive."

Steve sat back against his chair. "You're right." They finished their dinner and looked over some of their notes for tomorrow. "What time did you set for the meetings?"

"Noon for Sara, Zeke and his team. Two for the broadcast meeting. It's been a long weekend. We should get some rest."

Steve sat in bed and waited for Laura to come out of the bathroom. It had been a long time since he'd had a woman stay over. Now it was Laura, his best friend. He smiled at the memory of their time together. She was quite a surprise. The bathroom door opened and he was surprised, again. Her hair was twisted up on the top of her head. She was wearing a small pair of white shorts and a little white top with small straps and lace across the top. He smiled and pointed to her hair. "What's with the Pebbles Flintstone look?"

"I put it up so it doesn't get twisted around my face. That can make breathing a problem."

“Well, we can’t have that,” he smiled as she climbed into bed. She turned out the light and curled up against him.

“We should get some rest. Tomorrow is going to be a long day.”

“Yeah,” he grinned as he leaned over and kissed her. Then he kissed her neck as he pushed the thin strap off her shoulder.

“Ah, I thought we were getting some rest?”

“I have a beautiful woman in my bed. Resting is no longer my priority.” He slipped his hand under her small top.

Laura giggled. “Are you sure you’re not Italian?”

Steve and Laura walked into the station offices and were headed to the conference room when they heard a familiar bellow.

“Peters, Donati, my office, now!” Morrison shouted.

Steve looked at Laura. “You ready for this?”

“We knew it would happen sooner or later.” They sat down in chairs opposite of Morrison’s.

“I just got a call from Martin Stone. He was telling me what a great job you’d done subbing on the morning show. He also told me that he’s looking forward to your updating the O’Hara story. “You bastard! You know now I have to let you run with the story.”

“We have leads,” said Steve.

“Like what?”

“A few weeks before she was murdered Amy and Brad were stopped by a patrolman for having sex in the backseat of his car.”

“That’s what hookers do.”

“She wasn’t a hooker. She was his girlfriend. We have evidence they’d been together since May. Brad was arrested for assaulting the officer.”

“He’s a stupid kid. He got carried away.”

“Says who?” asked Laura.

Morrison ignored her. “Is that all you have? That’s nothing.”

“He didn’t just hit the officer, he beat him so bad the officer was in the hospital for a month. Brad Bolton has a bad cocaine habit and a violent streak. The assaulted officer was forced to drop the charges and take early retirement.”

Morrison paled. “What? Why?”

“The mayor called the chief of police. The chief made sure the case was dropped.”

“Do you have proof?”

“Not yet, but we’re working on it. Our source is very reliable,” said Laura. They watched as Morrison deflated in his chair. “Don, who called you about not running the story?” asked Laura.

“Bolton Jr. I ran into him at Greenwich Country Club. He told me his kid was caught with a hooker. He said he’d be grateful if I didn’t make a thing about it. He was a good kid who made a mistake. After the murder he called me. He said he didn’t want his son’s name attached to the story because a hooker got herself killed. It seemed to make sense. The bastard played me.” He sighed and looked at them. “Sometimes, I really hate what this job has become. This story is now your focus. What ever resources you need, you’ve got. Sara can take over the broadcast production. Steve, if you need to miss a broadcast I’ll call in Gary from the weekend broadcast to cover.”

“We have some volunteer interns who’ve done great work.”

“Pay them.”

“Thanks,” said Steve. “We should get back to it.”

“Steve, I’m sorry. I assumed you were pursuing this case because you want a network gig.”

“You aren’t wrong, Don. I want a network job, but not more than I want justice for Amy. She deserves it. Her mother deserves it.”

Morrison nodded. “I’m still sorry.”

Steve looked at his boss with a lot more respect than he’d had when he walked in. “I accept. Now we’re going to get back to work.” He looked at Laura and smiled. “We won’t let you down, Don.”

He gave them a half smile. “See that you don’t.”

Steve and Laura walked into the conference room and shut the door. “What the hell just happened?” she asked.

“I think our boss had a ‘Come to Jesus’ moment.”

“Steve, this has gone from a kid killing his girlfriend to a federal case. If we get the proof, some of the most powerful men in state are facing prison time. Are we in over our heads?”

“No, we’ve got this.”

“Don’t take this lightly. One girl is dead. What makes you think they wouldn’t come after you? I couldn’t bear it if...” Laura closed her eyes.

He pulled her into a tight hug. “Shhh. It’s okay, sweetheart. I promise to be careful.”

“You better be.”

He kissed the top of her head. “I tell you what, you watch my back and I’ll watch yours.”

“Well, hello there.” Sara was standing in the now open doorway with Zeke. She pulled a twenty out of her jeans and handed it to Zeke. “Fine. You were right.”

“Excuse me?” asked Laura.

“The kid bet me you two were a couple.”

Steve and Laura looked at each other and smiled. They weren’t about to explain that if Sara and Zeke had made the bet earlier than this weekend, Sara would have been the winner.

“Everyone come in and grab a seat,” said Steve. Zeke’s recruits looked just like what they were, newly graduated kids, fully of youthful enthusiasm. “Zeke, introduce your associates.”

“Sure.” He pointed to the skinny kid next to him with dark hair and a wishful beard. “This is Roy. Next to him is Angel.” A pretty girl with long dark hair nodded and smiled. Steve had the idea that if the circumstances were different, this could be Amy. Next to

her was a chubby blonde guy with unruly hair and horn rimmed glasses and a red haired guy who was as Irish as the day was long. “This is Dave and Ryan.”

“Hello everyone. I’m Steve and this is our executive producer Laura Donati.”

They sat down at the head of the table. “First of all, it seems Don Morrison has had a change of heart. We now have his full support.”

“Say what now?” asked Sara.

“We were just as surprised,” said Laura. “He wants you to take over the six and eleven broadcasts until we wrap the story.” She looked at the new interns. “Also, you four will be paid for your work on this story. It won’t be for long but that means you can use this on your resumes.” That news was greeted with smiles and pats on the back.

Sara shook her head. “There’s got to be frost warnings in hell.”

“Okay, let’s get to it,” said Steve. “We all know this has become a lot bigger than we expected. I want to remind all of you that everything stays in this room.” He spotted the shocked look on Sara’s face. “I say that, not because I think you would reveal sources. I say that because I want you all to be careful. We are going up against some very powerful people. I want you all to be very cautious.” He felt Laura’s hand on his leg. He nodded. He’d be extra cautious too, for her. “Did anything jump out from the leads that were sent it?”

“The team has waded through hundreds of emails and phone messages. Most of the valid tips were from people in Brad and Amy’s circle confirming that they had been an item since mid May,” said Sara. “They sent pictures that confirm it.”

“Let’s see the pictures.”

Angel opened her laptop and linked it to room’s big screen. “I organized them on a timeline. I’ve verified that each is a genuine photo, not photo shopped.”

Laura nodded at the girl. “Nice work.”

The pictures appeared on the screen, in order from when the two met. There were pictures of dancing, hanging out in various apartments, and several pool parties. Brad

and Amy looked very affectionate with each other. It all looked incredibly normal, other than the fact that Amy was dead. "It looks like they did nothing but party all summer," said Angel.

"Nice for them but all it does is confirm that they were a couple. Zeke, did you find anything on the contributors list?" asked Laura.

He opened his laptop and linked it to the room's big screen. A list of contributors popped up on the screen. Zeke highlighted four names on the list. "These are contributions in the name of Bolton Sr., his wife, Bolton Jr. and his wife."

"The maximum personal contribution is twenty eight hundred so that's a little over eleven grand," said Steve. "That's can't be enough to buy a kid out of an assault charge, let alone a murder charge."

"Wait," said Laura as she stood next to the screen. "Can you blow up the list of names?" She pointed to five contributions from the same family. "Look at these. Cheswick. That's John Bolton's in-laws. There are five contributions." She sighed. "Even if the money came from Bolton through his in-laws it still doesn't add up to be more than twenty five thousand. It still doesn't make sense." She sat back down and looked at the group. "Any ideas?"

Steve looked at the list. It had to be here. There had to be a connection. Everyone in this town was connected. Everyone was connected. "That's it! Angel, put up the pictures again." They appeared on the screen and Steve stood. He pointed to a picture of someone who looked vaguely familiar. "Laura, who does that look like to you?"

"I don't know." She walked closer.

"Come on, we went to school with his father."

"Is that?"

"Cartwright's son. Somebody confirm that."

Roy narrated his search. "Accessing Jefferson High's May graduating class, this year, now last year. That is Matthew Cartwright, classmate of Brad's and a year ahead of Amy."

"Brad is friends with the mayor's son." Steve pointed to a couple of pictures. "Angel, pull these up." The other pictures disappeared and they were left with six pictures of pool parties. "That is some pool. Look at that, a waterfall, a grotto, a water slide. Look at the size of that outdoor kitchen. It's bigger than the one in my house. Where is this? Is this at Bolton's estate?"

"I can check the geo tags."

"The what?" asked Sara.

"It's a location code on every picture. It tells you where they were taken. That is if the user had it active when they took the picture. Confirming these pictures were taken inside of Jefferson city limits."

"We need to narrow it down," said Laura. "Jefferson covers fifty square miles."

"I can do that," said Ryan. He started typing. "Confirming the Bolton home is outside Jefferson, in Clark Summit." He looked up and smiled. "Hey, you wanna look into the mayor's backyard?"

"Exactly how would we do that?" Steve asked.

"Google earth," said Ryan. "They updated this area last year."

"Yeah, I wanna," Steve smiled. Ryan linked his computer and typed in an address. He twisted and narrowed the image until they saw an aerial view of the mayor's backyard. In addition to the pool there was a tennis court and basketball court, not to mention some luxury landscaping. He stared at the screen "Who could build a pool like this in this area?" He smiled when he heard typing. These kids were good.

Dave clapped his hands. "Cheswick Construction."

"Bolton's in-laws. How much is something like that?" Steve asked.

“From what I see here with the slide, a hot tub, all the bells and whistles, at least seventy five thousand.”

“The courts had to be at least another ten thousand,” said Zeke.

“The landscaping probably cost twice that,” said Sara. “My uncle is a landscaper.”

“The kitchen looks like it’s another fifteen thousand,” said Dave. “According to a couple of local websites.”

“Sara, how much does the mayor make?”

“Sixty five thousand.”

Steve smiled. “So how does a guy who makes sixty five thousand a year afford a backyard worth one hundred and twenty five thousand?”

“Does the wife come from money?” asked Roy.

“No. Laura and I went to school with her too. The Hughes family were middle class.”

“Could it really be just that?” asked Laura. “Between the fancy backyard and the campaign contributions were looking at what, one hundred and fifty thousand? Could he be bought for so little?”

“We’re going to find out. So now we have a link, tenuous right now, between Bolton and the mayor.”

“What about the mayor and the chief?” asked Sara.

“That’s a little more clear cut. The mayor hires and fires the chief of police. If Douglas wants to protect his pension he’d have to go along,” said Steve.

“But why did Brad kill Amy?” asked Zeke. “Why did he do it? We know why his family would protect him and we know why the mayor and the chief would protect his family. We still don’t he would kill his girlfriend.”

“Zeke, did you speak directly with Tom Armstrong?”

“Briefly. He gave me the party line on Amy.”

Steve looked at the group. “I think it’s time we talk to him again.”

They met with Zeke and planned their strategy for questioning Tom Armstrong. Zeke knew Tom’s classes were over by three and he should be back in his apartment. Hanover Hall wasn’t your typical dorm hall. No cinder block walls and push out windows. This was a modern building with every convenience, including a fitness center and desk clerk. They tried to walk past the desk but were stopped.

“Can I help you?” asked a young blonde girl.

“No thanks. We know where we’re going,” said Steve as they tried to walk past. The girl came around the desk.

“I’m sorry. You can’t go upstairs without being escorted, Mr. Peters,” she grinned as she stood closer. “I’m a big fan.” Steve didn’t know what to say but apparently Laura did. She moved in between him and the overly friendly clerk.

“Alright, sweetie, take a step back.”

“Who are you?”

“Someone you don’t want to piss off.”

The girl looked Laura up and down. “I’m not afraid of you.”

Laura moved closer to the girl and lowered her voice. “Are you sure?” The girl ran back behind the safety of her desk. “And don’t call anyone. We won’t be long.”

As the elevator doors closed, Steve started chuckling. “You know you scared the crap out of her.”

“You scared me too,” said Zeke.

Now Steve was full on laughing as they stepped out onto the floor. “You were jealous.”

Laura smiled. "Am I in trouble?"

He slipped his arm around her waist and gave her a quick kiss. "I'll let you make it up to me."

"You do know I can hear you," said Zeke. "How about we go interview this guy about a murder?" Zeke positioned himself in front of the door as Steve and Laura stood out of view of the door. The door opened and a short blond guy opened the door. What he lacked in height he made up for in muscle. He obviously made good use of the fitness center. "Hello, Tom."

"Who are you?" asked Tom.

"Zeke. We spoke before about Amy."

"Oh, yeah, well, she's dead and I've got a physics exam." He tried to close the door but Zeke put his hand on the doorknob.

"So when you're done answering our questions you can get back to it," he said as he pushed his way in.

"Our?"

"Hello, Tom," said Steve. Laura nodded and closed the door behind them.

"You're that news guy."

"That would be me. Now, why don't you tell us why you told everyone Amy was a party girl."

His face went from shocked to defiant. "Because she was."

Steve smiled and shook his head. "Tom, we know that's not true. We know that she and Brad were together for months. We have the proof. Now, I'm going to ask you again, why?"

Tom looked over at Laura. If he was looking for some female reassurance he was looking in the wrong place.

"You trashed a dead girl's reputation. Slimy move," she said.

“You’re putting her all over the news to make a buck.” Tom countered. He erred.

She leaned closer. “We are going to find out the truth, all of it. Your only option is to get out ahead of this.”

Steve restrained a smile. He’d thought she’d scared the clerk. “Look, Tom, I get it. You were trying to help your friend. Brad got himself in over his head with Amy. But now, it’s out of hand. Laura, what’s Tom looking at for accessory after the fact?”

“Three to five years in state prison.”

“So you won’t have to worry about passing that physics test,” said Zeke.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Zeke put his hand on Tom’s shoulder. “Dude, you don’t actually think the Bolton’s will have your back? They look out for themselves. They’ll throw you under the bus the first chance they get.”

Steve caught a look of panic on Tom’s face. It was something more than trashing the reputation a dead girl. “You’ve been friends for a long time.”

“Since grade school.”

“He’s been getting into messes his whole life and you’ve been cleaning up after him the whole time. Are you really going to give up the rest of your life to cover for him?” Tom shoulders slumped and Steve knew he had him. “Brad came to you about Amy, she was a problem.”

“Not for him. He really liked Amy. It was his parents. They were hassling about her.”

“Why?”

“She was from the flats. Single mother, public schools. She wasn’t what they wanted. When they got arrested his parents blamed Amy. They said she was a bad influence.”

“I’m guessing they don’t know about his coke habit.”

Tom looked startled. "What? No. I don't know what you're talking about."

Zeke chuckled. "Save it. We've already heard from every one you've ever partied with. Amy's not around any more to blame for his habit. Who do you think they'll point their finger's at?"

"What did he ask you to do?" asked Steve.

Tom tried to hide his shaking hands. "What?"

"Amy's dead. I don't think you killed her. Brad pulled you in to this."

"What?! No! I never hurt her."

"Brad did," said Steve.

"I'm not saying that."

"Do you really think he's not going to drag you into this?"

Tom straightened his back. "He won't. He can't."

Steve looked at him. "You have something on him." The look on Tom's face told him that he was right. "Tom, look at me. These are the Bolttons. You know about this family. They will do anything to protect themselves. You can't stand up against them by yourself. They don't care that you've been friends with Brad since you were a kid. You need to go to the authorities."

Tom laughed. Steve didn't blame him. "The police? Please. The Bolttons own the police."

"They don't own the FBI. We know the Bolttons bought off the mayor to stop the investigation. That makes it a federal case."

Tom stood. "No. Get out. All of you. Leave me alone." He tried to close the door on Steve but he put his hand on the kid's arm.

"Listen to me. If we figured this out, so will they. You knew Amy. She was a good kid before Brad. She didn't deserve to die like that. Tom, you're in danger and you know it. Go to the FBI. Protect yourself and get justice for Amy. Don't let them win." He pulled

a business card out of his pocket and handed it to him. "If you need anything, please call."
Tom shut the door behind them.

"If he's not careful he's going to get himself killed."

Laura sat in Steve's office going over what leads they'd gotten in the last few days. Most of them were confirmation from Brad's circle that he and Amy were an item. She opened a picture and saw Brad and Amy. He had his arm draped around her shoulder and they looked like a happy young couple.

"Look at this picture." She handed her tablet to Steve.

"He really had feelings for her."

"He did. So what the hell happened? We know he stopped calling her after they got arrested. Why was she at Hanover Hall that day?"

A knock on the door was followed by Zeke sticking his head in the office. "You got a minute?"

"Come in," said Steve.

"What's up?" asked Laura.

"I went back to Hanover to check on Tom. I thought maybe he'd tell me something he wouldn't tell you."

"And?"

"He's missing."

"What!"

"He hasn't been seen since the day after we talked to him."

"Oh my God," she whispered.

"Maybe he went home."

"I spoke with his mother. She's really worried. He hasn't been in class all week."

"Has she called the police?" asked Steve.

"She did but they told her he probably took off to party."

"He's been gone longer than forty eight hours. That's a missing person."

"I checked with the police. He's listed as a missing person but they think he's, and I quote, a junkie on a bender."

"And under the bus he goes," said Laura.

"I thought you'd want to know."

"Thanks, Zeke."

Zeke left them alone and Laura didn't like the look on Steve's face. "Steve?"

"Shit! Did we get this guy killed?"

"We don't know that."

"We need to run an update." He pointed to the picture of Amy and Brad. "We use this picture. Then we post a picture of Tom. Ask for any information on his whereabouts."

"Steve, we can't post a picture with Brad. We don't have any evidence on him."

"We blur his face."

"Everyone will still know it's him."

"Exactly. I'm sick of these people. We need to stir the pot. We need to find out why Brad would have killed her, a girl he obviously cared about." He routed through some papers on his desk and handed Laura an invitation. "The Harvest Gala is this weekend. I was invited but I wasn't going to go. I think we should."

"This is Bolton family fundraiser for the St. Francis food pantry," she said.

"Bolton's annual effort to buy their way into heaven."

Laura looked at the invitation. "This is for this tomorrow night. Aren't you still covering at the network?"

"I'll call Melanie and ask her to get someone else. Stone will back me up."

"Are you sure you want to do that? It's the network."

"Yeah, I do. This is too important."

Laura stood and walked over to him. She kissed him and whispered, "I'm very proud of you."

"Thank you, sweetheart. Now let's get to work. We've got a lot to get done before tonight's broadcast."

Laura put the finishing touches on her makeup. It was more makeup than she usually wore but then she rarely wore a floor length, red satin evening gown. She'd twisted her hair on top of her head and her long gold earrings nearly brushed her shoulders. Her gold necklace highlighted her neckline. She hoped it wasn't too low. She hadn't worn this dress in a while. Sometimes she forgot how old she was. Not having kids, she didn't see the march of time like her contemporaries. She hoped she didn't look like she was dressing too young for her age. She hadn't had time to get anything new.

Yesterday's broadcasts hadn't given them any leads on Tom's location but it had pissed off the Boltons. John Bolton had called Morrison to chew him out. To her boss's credit, he'd stood his ground. Now they were about to wade into shark infested waters. She knew it was worth it but she was still nervous. No one had seen or heard from Tom Armstrong in nearly a week.

She heard a knock at the door and peered through the peephole and gasped. Steve was wearing a beautifully tailored tux. She opened the door and smiled. "Well hello there." She gave him a quick kiss and closed the door. "You look so handsome." He kept staring at her. "Steve?" He walked toward her and ran a finger under the strap of the gown.

"Wow," he whispered. "You look so beautiful."

"It's not too young? I don't want to look like I'm trying to be something I'm not."

He pulled her close. "Sweetheart, you look like a stunningly beautiful woman, and I'm not just saying that because I'm in love with you." His smile went straight to her heart. "You did know that, right? I'm in love with you, Laura."

Her heart raced and she smiled. "I figured that out." She gave him a kiss. "I'm in love with you too." He grinned and pulled her into a passionate kiss. She finally pushed back. "As much as I want to continue this, and have every intention of doing so tonight, we need to go talk to some bad guys." She grinned and wiped the lip gloss off his with her thumb. "Right after I fix my lips."

"They seemed to be working fine to me."

Laura laughed. "Corny, but cute."

Steve was proud to walk into the gala with Laura on his arm. He was in love with his best friend and she loved him. She looked amazing and the photographers ran to take their picture. When the photographers finally relented he led them to the bar and got both a glass of wine.

"Thanks, I need this," she said as she took a healthy sip.

"Sweetheart, don't worry. We're surrounded by people. We'll be okay."

She took another sip. "I'll hold you to it." She looked around the room. "From the looks of it we're not the most popular couple here."

Steve glanced around and saw a few people he knew. He smiled at some, nodded at the others. He spotted a cluster of people around the buffet table who were shooting them daggers. It was the Cartwrights and the Boltons. He smiled and raised his glass to them. They quickly turned away. This was going to be a tough night. "First things first." He pointed to the St. Francis' food bank display. He finished his wine and set the glass back down. He held Laura's hand as he approached a nun standing by the display.

"Sister Dolores?" asked Laura.

The nun turned around and smiled. "Laura. It's good to see you. How's your mom?"

"She's good, thank you. Sister, this is Steve Peters. Sister Dolores is in charge of just about everything in my parish."

He extended her hand. "It's very nice to meet you." He reached into his jacket and pulled out an envelope. "I have something for you."

"Thank you, Mr. Peters," she said as she opened the envelope. "That's very...oh my, thank you. This is very generous. You do know we have a blind auction. You can put this toward one of the items."

"No thank you, Sister. It's a worthy cause. I don't need anything in return."

Sister Dolores smiled. "Your donation will help a lot of families." She looked at Laura. "You did well with this one."

"I think so too."

The music had started and Steve pulled Laura to the dance floor. "While we have a chance," he whispered. He held her close and moved her around the floor. Everything about having Laura in his arms felt right. He prayed he wasn't putting her in harms way by pursuing this story. The music stopped and he gave her a kiss. He was vaguely aware of the sound of camera shutters. "I love you, sweetheart."

"I love you, too."

He looked over at the group surrounding the mayor and his followers. "Are you ready for this?"

"Let's do it."

They walked toward the group surrounding the mayor. The crowd parted and they walked toward the mayor and Bolton. Steve nodded. "Good evening, Mr. Mayor."

"Peters," he said as if saying more was forbidden. Bolton looked like he was ready to spit fire. "John, it looks like another successful event for St. Francis."

"What the hell are you doing here?" asked Bolton.

"It's a worthy cause," he smiled.

"You keep trying to tie my boy to that hooker and I won't have it."

"Come on, John. You and I both know Amy O'Hara was no hooker. She was your son's girlfriend. You know who else knows? Everyone."

"She was a bad influence."

"Saying it doesn't make it so. You know it was all Brad."

Bolton walked closer. "You're pushing your luck." He leered at Laura. "You should be more careful."

Steve didn't take the bait. "So should you." He walked Laura away and put his back between Laura and Bolton. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought you with me. I've put you in their line of fire."

She shook his arm. "Hey, I'm no delicate flower."

He smiled. "Of course you're not." She peered around him.

"That's Jason Wolfe by the bar," she said. "He's the dean of admissions at the university." She looked at Steve and smiled. "He goes to my church. We should say hi." They walked to the bar and Steve got them each a glass of wine. Jason walked up to the bar and ordered a soda. "Hi, Jason."

"Laura?" he smiled and took her by each hand. "Wow. You look great."

"Thank you," she smiled as she disengaged from his grip. "Do you know my boyfriend, Steve?" Steve smiled at Jason's crestfallen look.

"Just from the news," he said as he extended his hand.

Steve shook his hand. "It's nice to meet you."

"Jason, can we talk to you for a second?" she asked. From the look on his face, he knew what this was about. "Please, Jason."

"Fine, but let's find a quiet spot." They moved toward the corner of the room.

"Jason, what do you know about Amy O'Hara?" asked Laura.

"Do you know what kind of position you're putting me in?"

"It's not shot dead at the bottom of a stairwell," said Steve. He got a death stare from Laura. They would discuss this later.

"Jason, please, help us. Help Amy."

"Who's going to help me when I'm out of work?"

“Jason, please.”

He sighed and looked around. “I got a call from the Chancellor. Amy O’Hara’s scholarship was pulled.”

“What? Why?”

“She was arrested for solicitation.”

“It wasn’t true. Charges were dropped.”

“True or not, that’s what he told me.”

“When did this happen?” asked Steve.

He looked around the room. “My wife is waiting for me. I have to go.”

“Jason, a girl was murdered,” said Laura.

“It was the day before she died. I have to go. I’ll see you at church.” Jason bolted to his wife’s side.

“Now we know why Amy went to see Brad,” said Steve. “She knew the Bolton’s must have tanked her scholarship.”

“We know John Bolton thinks she was a bad influence. She was about to go to the university. She’d be around Brad all the time,” said Laura.

“But why did he kill her? He really cared about her.”

Laura nodded toward the bar. There stood Brad Bolton, drinking what was definitely not his first whiskey. “I think it’s time we ask.”

Steve and Laura positioned themselves between Brad and the rest of the room. The last thing they wanted was anyone stopping the conversation before it started. “Hello, Brad.”

Brad Bolton would have been a good looking kid if it hadn’t been for his lifestyle. His blond hair was stylishly mussed. His face had the bloat of a man who’d been a heavy drinker for years. His eyes were his biggest tell. Instead of the slow to dilate eyes of a

someone who's drunk, his looked like a cat at night. He was high as a kite on coke. "You're that news guy."

"Yes, I am."

Brad leered at Laura. "I don't usually do old broads but for you, I'd make an exception."

She rolled her eyes and looked at Steve. "Charming."

"We want to ask you about Amy."

"I've got nothing to say to you."

"She was your girlfriend," said Laura. "I know your family didn't care for her, but you did."

"Whatever," he muttered as he took another gulp of his whiskey.

"Brad, we know most of it," said Steve. "You really cared about Amy. Once you got arrested your father put an end to it and you went along with it. But your father wasn't satisfied. He didn't want the two of you at school together so he had her scholarship pulled." Steve could see Brad was sweating. He hadn't realized how much they'd put together. "That day she came to see you, things got out of hand. Amy wound up dead. Then you went to Tom. Why wouldn't you? After all he's your best friend. You pulled him into it. But now Tom's missing."

Brad huffed. "If you know so much why do you need me?"

Laura put her hand on Brad's arm and spoke softly. "We want to know your side of things. What's the truth? What happened with Amy, Brad?"

They could see tears in his eyes. "She was so mad," he whispered.

Steve nodded toward Laura. She was making headway.

"Brad, she was mad at you. What happened?"

He straightened his shoulders. "Nothing. Nothing happened."

Steve knew even as stoned as Brad was, he wouldn't incriminate himself. "Where's Tom, Brad? Did he threaten to go to the police?"

"No! Not Tom! Tom would never betray me! You're just trying to turn everyone against me. All that shit you're saying on TV! Everyone is turning against me! This is your fault!" Brad grabbed a knife off the bar and lunged. Steve pushed Laura behind him as he tried to dodge Brad's attack. He felt pain shoot across his forearm as Brad hit the floor. A woman in a black off the shoulder dress had hit Brad from behind. She put his knee in his back and pinned his shoulders to the ground.

"Officer Mendoza, it's good to see you again."

She looked up at Steve. "Are you okay?"

"Get off me, bitch!" Brad shouted.

"You have the right to remain silent. Use it!" she yelled. A security guard pushed his way through the crowd.

"What the hell?"

"Officer Sarah Mendoza, Jefferson PD. Call for a squad car and an ambulance for Mr. Peters."

The crowd parted for John Bolton. "Get off my son!"

She ignored Bolton and looked at Steve. "I assume you're pressing charges."

"Hell, yes."

"You can't do that!" John screamed.

He looked the man in the face. "Oh yes I can. You might be able to get him off from assaulting a Jefferson officer, but I have a national platform. This is going to make national news tomorrow morning." John Bolton stared at Steve with a look of pure hate.

A patrolman came through the crowd. "Sarah?"

"Hey, Charlie. Give me your cuffs." The stunned officer handed her his cuffs. She cuffed Brad's hands behind him and pulled him to his feet. "Brad Bolton, you're under

arrest for aggravated assault. You have the right to remain silent.” She continued to recite Brad his rights as he led him out the ballroom. John Bolton was close behind.

Steve had instinctively grabbed his forearm when he’d been hit. He looked down to see blood seeping through his fingers. “Ah, shit.” He looked at Laura, who’d gone pale. “Sweetheart, are you okay?”

She gasped when she saw the blood. She pointed at the bartender. “You. Napkins. Now.” The man handed her a stack of fresh linen napkins as she pushed his hand aside. “God, Steve. What were you thinking?”

“I pushed too hard. I’m so sorry sweetheart. I could have gotten you hurt.”

She looked up from his wound. Her eyes were filled with tears. “You pushed me behind you. You shielded me.”

“Sweetheart, please don’t cry.”

“He could have killed you.” EMT’s came into the ballroom and took over for Laura. She grabbed a fresh linen and wiped the blood off her hands. An EMT cut the sleeve of his tux and shirt, exposing the wound. He heard Laura gasp and he tried to focus on her, not the pain.

“Damn, I really liked this tux.”

Two hours later they were back at Laura’s and Steve was getting into bed. It took twenty stitches to sew up the wound. Laura got him a glass of water so he could take the pain med he would need. He could feel what they’d given him at the hospital starting to wear off. She handed him the water and then climbed into bed next to him. “I’m sorry, babe. I should have known better. He was high as a kite. I should have known he’d go off.”

“As much as I hate this, we did find out something very important.”

“Brad doesn’t know where Tom is,” he said.

“Chances are, Tom is still alive.”

Steve tried to not let Laura how much his arm hurt. He didn't want to take another dose before his conference call with Melanie Sandler and Martin Stone. He sat down at the kitchen table as Laura handed him a mug of coffee.

"Breakfast will be ready in a minute."

"This is fine."

"What is it with you and breakfast? You can't take more pain med on an empty stomach."

"I'm fine."

She stopped in mid stride and rolled her eyes. "Oh, please. If you could you'd take one right now and climb back into bed. She set the toast on the table. "Make yourself useful and butter this." His phone rang unknown caller.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Peters, this is Sarah Mendoza. How are you doing?"

"Yes, Officer Mendoza. I'm doing well, thank you."

"I wanted to let you know that Brad Bolton will be arraigned tomorrow. There will be additional charges of possession of a controlled substance. He was found to have a more than an ounce of cocaine."

"Is his father making noise?"

"Like a class five tornado. They can't get Brad out before arraignment, not with you involved. But once he's arraigned and bail is set he's out. If you've got any rabbits in any hats, now will be the time."

"I'm working on it. Are you okay? Is anyone giving you trouble?"

"As far as anyone knows I was a guest at the Gala. A citizen was attacked and I disarmed the suspect. By the way, thanks for the tickets. My wife and I had a great time."

"You're very welcome. Thanks for having my back."

Sarah chuckled. "Serve and protect. It's the job description. Now figure something out so we don't have to turn this shit loose."

"I'm working on it." He disconnected the call and took a sip of coffee. "Okay, let's call Melanie and Stone." He called Martin Stone first, conferenced Melanie in, then put them both on speaker. "There's been a development you should know about." He filled them both in on the progress in the story. Then he told them about the event of last night.

"He stabbed you?!" asked Stone.

"More like slashed."

"Oh, that makes it better. What the hell, Steve?!" said Melanie.

"He has twenty stitches and what will be a wicked, but very butch scar," Laura smiled. "He threw himself in front of me. He was too busy protecting me to protect himself."

"Oh my God, Steve," Melanie whispered.

"Laura, are you okay?" asked Stone.

"Yes, thanks to Steve."

Steve squeezed her hand and smiled. "I'm not calling to say oh, poor me. I need a favor. Right now Brad Bolton is in jail but they will arraign him tomorrow. He'll get bail and that's the last we'll see him. These are people who've never heard the word no. We need to show them they can't get away with murder. To do that we may have to start with you can't get away with stabbing a news anchor. If you run the story this morning it will get national attention. A light that bright will restrict them."

"Whatever you want, Steve," said Stone. "Melanie, work on the copy. Steve, are you up to a phone in interview?"

"Sure."

"Okay, you'll be the lead story. We'll have you on air first up. Melanie, are you good."

“Yeah, I’ve got this. Steve, I’ll have you linked in by seven fifty.”

“Thank you, both of you.”

“Whatever you need, Steve. I mean it. Let’s nail this bastard.”

“That’s the plan.” He disconnected the phone. “Well, it looks like we’re going national.”

Laura grinned. “Eat your breakfast. I need to call my mother.”

“Your mom?”

“I haven’t told her about us yet. I don’t need her to find out about all of this on national television. She’s eighty but she can still kick my ass.”

Laura had insisted on Steve resting after breakfast. She handled giving Melanie and her mother the details of last night. Of the two, Mom was tougher. She was thrilled that Steve and Laura were finally together but furious they were pursuing such a dangerous story. The next dinner at Mom’s would be awkward as hell.

She went into the bedroom and touched Steve’s shoulder. “Babe, time to wake up.” He rolled over and winced. As soon as this was over she’d get him another pain pill. “You’re on in ten minutes.” He sat up and rubbed his hands over his eyes.

“Okay, let’s do this.”

Laura sat on the bed next to him and turned on the TV. Her phone rang and she answered. “Hello, Melanie.”

“Are you ready?”

“Yes we are.”

“Okay, you’re linked in to the control room. You’re on in ten.”

Laura set the phone in front of them. Steve took her hand in his. They watched as the title graphics played.

“Good morning and welcome to The Morning Today, I’m Carol Burgess. Our top story this morning is deeply upsetting to everyone here at The Morning Today.” A headshot of Steve appeared behind Carol. *“News anchor and friend, Steve Peters was attacked with a knife and wounded yesterday while attending the Harvest Gala for the benefit of St. Francis food bank in Jefferson Pennsylvania. The suspect was disarmed and arrested by off duty Jefferson police officer Sarah Mendoza.”* Steve looked at Laura.

“She deserves the credit.”

“The suspect, Brad Bolton, nineteen, of Clark Summit Pennsylvania, was charged with aggravated assault and possession of a controlled substance.” A booking shot appeared in split screen next to Steve’s headshot. Brad and Steve were now linked in the minds of the public, nationwide. The Bolton’s would never be able to hide from this.

“How did she get Bolton’s mugshot so fast?” asked Steve.

“Melanie is very resourceful.”

“On the phone we have Steve, who is at home with his partner, Producer Laura Donati. Steve, are you there?”

“I’m here, Carol.”

“How are you doing?”

“Honestly, it hurts like hell, but Laura is taking good care of me.”

“Can you tell us what happened?”

“We were discussing an ongoing investigation when Bolton grabbed the knife and attacked. Fortunately, Officer Mendoza’s quick thinking saved us and everyone in the ballroom from further harm.”

“You were attending with your partner, Laura Donati. Laura is also a member of the This Morning Today family. She was a producer for the weekday morning broadcast for ten years. Laura how are you doing?”

“I’m okay, Carol, thanks to Steve. When he was attacked Steve pushed me away. He was busy protecting me, so he couldn’t protect himself.” Laura swallowed her tears.

"I'm glad you're both okay. Please keep us up to date on your progress."

Steve smiled. They both knew Carol wasn't talking about his wound. "I will Carol, thank you." Carol ended their segment and moved on to the next story. Steve had pushed the latest political scandal to second place.

"Okay, that's it for now. Take your pill and get some rest. I'll be in the living room." She tried to get out of bed but he grabbed her hand.

"Talk to me."

"What?"

"Tell me what's going on."

"Nothing. I'm going to work from the living room. Now get some rest."

"You were always a dreadful liar. Talk to me, sweetheart. What is it?"

Her lip started quiver. "I was so scared," she whispered.

He pulled her close. "I'm okay."

"No you're not. Your hurt. It could have been so much worse. When I saw him come at you I...I..." Laura did something she hadn't done in decades. She had a full blown sobbing meltdown. Steve held her close until she was cried out.

Steve held Laura's hand as they walked into the station building. His arm was still throbbing but he wanted to get to work. After the broadcast yesterday morning, the story was picked up by the other networks and wire feeds. He needed to get on camera and tell his own story. They found Don Morrison standing still in the middle of the studio office.

"Don?"

He smiled and started applauding. People popped up from their cubicles and poured into the aisles, joining in Don's applause. Once the applause died down Don pointed to Steve's sling. "How are you doing?"

"I'll be in this for a while. The doctor wants me to keep it still so I give it a chance to heal."

"Laura, how are you doing?"

"I'm okay, Don. Thanks."

"Let's go in my office and talk." They followed Don into his office and sat down. This was a very different conversation than their last meeting. "I had a call from Bolton's lawyer."

"Is he threatening to sue?" asked Steve.

"He's past threatening. He's already filed. Bolton's suing the station and you personally."

"For what?" Laura demanded. "For getting in the way of Brad's knife?"

"He's claiming libel."

"That's insane!" said Laura.

Steve grabbed her hand. "It's okay, sweetheart. We'll handle it. I'll call my lawyer."

"You don't need to," said Don. "The station will cover you."

"Excuse me?"

“I’ve already been on the phone with corporate. You have their complete support. They see this as a first amendment case. They want you to pursue the story.”

Laura sat back and muttered, “Frost warnings in hell.”

They were going over their notes for the six o’clock broadcast when there was a knock on Steve’s office door. “Come in.”

Zeke opened the door and stepped in. “Hi guys. There’s someone here to see you.” A woman with wearing a plain blue suit and white blouse entered. Her long brown hair was pulled tight into a tight bun. The woman turned toward Zeke and stared. It was enough to get him to leave his office. She looked back at them and pulled out a wallet out and flashed a badge.

“Special Agent Alice Edwards, FBI.”

“What can we do for you?”

“I need you to come with me.”

“Excuse me?”

“I need you and Ms. Donati to come with me.”

“The reason?”

“I will explain when we get to our location.”

“Are we under arrest?” asked Laura.

“No. I require your assistance.”

“And this is how you ask? We’re going to need more. What’s this about?”

Agent Edwards made sure the door was locked before she sat down. “It’s about bribery, corruption and hindering prosecution. The grand jury met this morning and issued indictments for Mayor Thomas Cartwright, Chief of Police Mark Douglas and John Bolton.”

Steve looked at Laura. "Holy shit."

"Indeed," said the agent. "I had been investigating corruption in Jefferson for quite some time but I couldn't get any support for my investigation."

"Why not?"

"Because it was considered small time, not worth the resources to investigate. I've been able to trace only fifty thousand in illegal campaign contributions. But your reports cut too close to home. The powers that be instructed me to go forward with the grand jury and get the indictments."

Laura looked at him and nodded. "Tell her. It will help with the trial."

"Tell me what?"

"We were able to identify at least one hundred and fifty thousand dollars in construction and landscaping to Cartwright and Cheswick Construction."

"The Bolton family."

"Exactly. We won't identify our sources, of course, but we'll give you copies of what we have."

Agent Edwards sat back in her chair. "That would be very helpful. Why would you give me that without a subpoena?"

"Because we want justice. We'll never have it in this town until these men are prosecuted."

Laura opened her laptop and grabbed a flash drive from her computer case. She copied several files and handed the drive to the agent. "Here. If you have any questions I'm sure you know how to reach me."

For the first time the agent's veneer cracked. "Yes, as a matter of fact, I do." She tucked the flash drive inside her jacket. "I have something for you." She pulled out her phone and pressed a button. "Jenkins, where do we stand? Okay, fine. I want a perp walk in front of the federal building in thirty minutes." She disconnected the phone and looked

at them. "Teams are making coordinated arrests at this time. If you get your crew in front of the federal building you'll get the footage."

"Holy shit!" yelled Laura as she flew to her feet and threw open the door. "Sara, Zeke, get over here, now!" Sara and Zeke ran towards them. "Get a portable set up and get in front of the federal building in less than thirty. The FBI have arrested Cartwright, Douglas and Bolton." They stood frozen in front of her. "Move! Now!" They took off running. She closed the door and sat back down. "Now what?"

"I still need the both of you to come with me."

"Why?"

"I have a witness with critical information but he won't testify unless he sees the two. It seems like you convinced him the FBI was his only alternative."

Steve sat back and smiled. "Tom."

They pulled into a cabin thirty minutes outside of Jefferson. Thirty minutes up Oak Mountain also meant thirty years back in time. It was so sparsely populated that there was no cell service or WIFI signal. They walked into the cabin and saw a pale and pacing Tom Armstrong. Another agent stood and walked out onto the porch.

“Tom, it’s good to see you again. We were very worried. So is your mother.”

“Is she okay? They didn’t get to her, did they?” he asked.

“She’s safe. It’s obvious she has no idea where you are so she posed no threat.”

“Good, good,” he said as he continued to pace.

“Tom, why did you ask to see us?” asked Steve.

“I want my Mom to know I tried to fix it. They may get to me and I need you to tell her. They can’t get rid of you, not now.”

“Tom, they’ve been arrested.”

“That won’t stop them.”

Laura took his hand. “Tom, please, sit. It will be okay. We’re here now.”

Tom sat down and took a breath. “You told me the FBI would be safe. They said they’d protect me but I’ve been spilling my guts for a week. I’ve been around the Bolton’s my whole life. Nobody ever paid attention if I was in the room. I’ve seen a lot of what the Bolton’s are capable of.”

“Tom, tell us what you need us to know.”

Tom wiped a tear from his cheek. “I liked Amy, I really did. She and Brad were good together except when Brad got lit up. Brad’s always had a temper. Lately it’s gotten really bad. He really hurt that cop when they got arrested but his father paid off the mayor. His father was so pissed. He blamed Amy for everything. He told Brad that if he ever saw her again he’d cut him off. Brad didn’t want to but he went along with what his father wanted. I know Amy was really hurt but she stayed away. Then his father got her scholarship pulled. Being a teacher was all Amy talked about. She came to see him that night.”

“Tom, how do you know?”

“I was there.”

Steve and Laura looked at each other. This was what they’d been looking for.

“What happened, Tom?”

“She pounded on the door and started yelling. She demanded he call his father and get her reinstated. She said if he didn’t she’d skip the cops and go straight to the press. She’d tell them about his father’s shady deals. See, Brad would tell her stuff, especially when he was high. She knew stuff. Brad started screaming at her. He was so high that night and he was so mad. She wouldn’t stop saying she’d destroy his father. It happened so fast.” Tom buried his face in his hands, hiding from the images.

“Tom, you need to tell us.”

“He pulled a gun out from the kitchen drawer and he shot her. Brad started crying. He kept saying he didn’t mean to do it. It was her fault. She made him. Then he begged me to help him. He’s been my friend forever, I had to. We wrapped her up in a rug. We were going to put her in the trunk and drive her up here to Oak Mountain. We figured no one would find her. But there were too many people in the lobby. We couldn’t get out of the building without being seen so we put her at the bottom of the stairwell.”

“Tell us the rest, Tom,” said Steve.

“He asked me to help him, you know, after.”

“By telling lies about Amy?”

Tom nodded. “Yeah.”

Steve knew he was holding something back. “What else, Tom? You have to tell us all of it.”

“He asked me to get rid of the gun.”

“You know what the Bolton’s are like. How they will turn on people,” said Steve. Tom nodded. “You didn’t get rid of it, did you?”

“No.”

“Where is it?”

He pulled out the keys to his car. “It’s in the trunk of my car, under the carpet next to the spare.”

Steve took the keys and handed them to Agent Edwards. “Do you have an evidence bag?”

“Of course.” They followed her out to the car and watched as she pulled the gun out from the wheel well and sealed it in the bag. They went back inside to find Tom back to pacing. “I’ll make a call,” she said. “This isn’t FBI jurisdiction but now that the Chief is out of the picture, I can speak to the Jefferson district attorney. I’ll get her to file additional charges against Brad Bolton for the murder of Amy O’Hara.”

“Will she do that on your say so?” asked Laura.

For the first time, Agent Edwards smiled. “Who do you think got me involved in all this in the first place?”

They were left alone with Tom. Laura finally got him to sit down on the couch and sat down next to him. “It’s going to be okay, Tom.”

“No it’s not. I should have never done it. I shouldn’t have helped him. I shouldn’t have trashed Amy.”

Laura took his hand. “No, you shouldn’t have but now you’re going to make it right. I’m not saying it will be easy. You’ll have to testify in multiple trials.”

“Oh God,” he sighed.

Steve sat down next to Laura. “Tom, we will tell your story. We’ll make sure everyone knows how you got justice for Amy.”

Steve pulled a sleeping Laura close. It was Monday morning and they were cuddled together in the network's corporate condo. It had been an insanely busy week. They'd filmed Brad Bolton's arraignment on murder charges. Brad's father was busy fighting federal racketeering charges. Cartwright and Douglas were negotiating plea deals. Steve had filmed their final piece on Amy O'Hara. He was grateful they were able to go to Kathleen O'Hara with her daughter's reputation restored. Last night Steve broadcast their story live on Sunday Justice. Laura's editing on the piece had been her best work. Despite his protests, Laura insisted they include Brad's attack on him as part of the story. Now, at the insistence of Martin Stone, they were going to spend the rest of the week in the condo, enjoying the city and each other.

"Why aren't you asleep?" Laura muttered.

"Because I have a beautiful woman in my arms."

"Corny but cute," she smiled and gave him a quick kiss. His ringing phone interrupted them.

"Hold that thought." He picked up his phone and answered. "Peters."

"Hi Steve, it's Martin Stone."

"Hello, Mr. Stone."

"Martin, please. Is Laura there?"

"Yes."

"Good. Put me on speaker."

"You're on," he said.

"Hi, Martin," said Laura.

"Hi, Laura. I want to bring you up both up to speed. First, Drew Harvey has recovered enough to return to the broadcast."

Steve smiled at Laura's expression. She was disappointed for him. "That's great news, Martin. Please give Drew my best wishes."

“I’ll do that. Now I want to talk about last night. The overnights are crazy high. The feedback on social media is positive across the board.”

“That’s good to know.”

“I’m not surprised. It was the kind of work that we all got into the business to do. You told the story, honestly and fairly, no matter how difficult the circumstances. You found justice for a girl who would have been ignored by the system and the public at large. I want you on the Sunday Justice team full time.”

“What?” Steve gasped.

“I want you both.”

“What?” Laura gasped.

“You two are a perfect team. You can stay based Jefferson if you want but I want the two of you to be a field team. We get hundreds of emails every month from people who want their cases investigated. You sort through the cases and go boots on the ground. Investigate and report. Maybe we can get a few more Amys some justice.”

“Martin, that’s an amazing offer.”

“You’ll need a team, an associate producer. You can pick your own people.”

They looked at each other and both smiled. “Zeke.”

“I know it’s a lot to process right now. Think about it. Relax and enjoy the condo. Everything is on me. Take your time and call me when you’re ready.”

“We’ll do that. Thank you, Martin.”

Steve disconnected the call and looked at Laura. “What do you think?”

“I think it’s amazing. It’s what you’ve always wanted.”

“You’re right, I’ve spent my whole career wanting a network job but my motivation was all wrong. I wanted the job for the achievement, not the work. These past few weeks, working on Amy’s story, has meant more to me than any other story I’ve ever covered. We found the truth and got her justice. The idea that we could do that for more people is

wonderful. But you know what else I loved about this was working with you. You're the best producer in the business and the best editor. Also, you know me better than anyone else on the planet. You can call me on my crap and keep me on track. As much as I'd want to do this, I don't want to do it without you."

"What?"

"This work will keep us moving. You heard him, boots on the ground. I don't want to spend that much time away from you. The only way this works for me is if it works for you."

"All I wanted when I woke up this morning was you and a chocolate croissant."

"What does that mean?"

"It means Martin was right. This is the kind of work we got in the business to do. It means no more reporting on the latest developments in closets or the potholes on Main Street. It means I don't want to be away from you either."

"So, you're in?" he asked.

She touched his cheek. "All in."

Steve pulled her into a deep kiss. "I love you, Laura."

"I love you too," she smiled. "Do you want to call Martin back?"

"Not yet." He tried to pull her close but she sat up.

"Great, because those croissants are calling my name."

He laughed and pulled her back to bed. "I'll serve them to you with a fresh mug of coffee." He pushed her back against the bed. "Later."