***For Lorraine***

***&***

***Tyro, Holly, Maggie, and Hawkie***

*She is mine, this beautiful spirit*

*who haunts me with the mysterious frozen secrets*

*of her Pyrenees ancestors,*

*and holds my life forever cradled*

*in the shelter of her paws.*

*She guards me, this gentle descendant of a thousand mountain dogs*

*with the strength of her jaws*

*and the calm nobility of her great heart.*

*Like snow from peaks, she lies an*

*avalanche of white fur, curled quiescent beside me,*

*the dark light in her watchful eyes fixed*

*for all eternity upon my soul.*

*Mee-Kat*

Acknowledgements

For Lorraine K. Fennemore of Karenz Great Pyrenees: my breeder, my mentor, my pal. Thank you for your friendship and encouragement over these past three decades. And most of all, thank you for my four Great Pyrenees, the greatest joy of my life.

For Joan Miller Goodman: my copy editor and BFF since we were pre-teens. Thank you for your work, your comments, and your ever wise and loyal friendship.

For Dr. Cindi Bossart: not only the world’s best veterinarian, AKC Veterinarian of the Year, but also a true and constant friend. Thank you for the loving care you gave to my pups.

PROLOGUE

The night cleaning crew disperses across the landmark building’s sixth floor, the spokes of a wagon wheel, aiming for the grand corner offices. Although the enormous foyer clock reads seven forty-five, at least a half dozen lawyers still toil at their desks. But not the partners who occupy the corner offices. The cleaners start there, vacuuming the oriental rugs and polishing the brass name plates atop the Duncan Phyfe desks. The firm has allotted considerable budget to the partners’ décor. Appearances matter.

Down the hallway, a smaller office is crowded with black metal file cabinets and a utilitarian computer desk. Three women sit on armless chairs, pouring over stacks of information. Spread out on the plain work table are piles of exhibits pertinent to the toxic tort class action, -- X-rays, expert witness testimony, deposition transcripts, photos of viscous material oozing from plastic disc-shaped devices. A picture of a petite, cachectic woman labeled “The Enemy” is propped up against a large stack: attorney Cynthia Steiner.

A knock at the office door disrupts the meeting. Aurora Spirakis laboriously hoists herself up and waddles to the doorway, her girth obstructing her clients’ view of the visitor.

“Delivery from Wo Phat,” the messenger announces.

Spirakis takes the food, opens the containers and places them in the middle of the work table, pushing the exhibits aside. She fishes for three plates and flatware from the sideboard sitting under a small window.

“Thought we could use a little nourishment to keep up our strength,” she grins as she begins spooning out Tum Yum Soup, pork with lime juice and Pad Thai shrimp.

“Best Asian Fusion in the city,” Spirakis claims. “Wo Phat.”

Callie Thornton DiMaris and Candace Cohn look at each other. Callie whispers the words “WO PHAT.” Candace just rolls her eyes and mouths the silent words back: “WO FAT” nodding at Spirakis. Entirely in the moment Callie points to The Enemy. “FOE SKINNY?” she suggests. Then the two friends break out into one of their legendary laugh fests.

“Are you mocking me?” Spirakis demands. “After I just ordered us this great Thai food.” “Oh no, Aurora, of course not.” Callie assures her. “We’re just in need of some comic relief. We just thought we should call Steiner “FOE SKINNY.”

Spirakis exhales, heaving a sigh of exhaustion. “I’m starving. Let’s eat and get back to work. And by the way ladies, Cynthia should be F-A-U-X Skinny, not F-O-E Skinny. Don’t think I didn’t hear you two.”

“Huh?” both clients ask together.

“Oh yeah,” the lawyer adds. “I know I’m fat but nobody is that skinny naturally. She’s a big phony and anorexic to boot.”

“Okay, FAUX SKINNY she is,” Candace agrees.

“We’ll just call her SKINNY,” Callie adds.

“And that makes me…?” Spirakis scowls.

“Our trusted counselor and purveyor of delicious nourishment,” Candace quickly replies --- fingers crossed behind her back.

“Oh yes,” Callie chimes in. “And when do we break out that bottle of pink champagne sitting on your étagère?”

“Étagère? My ass!” Spirakis retorts. It’s a ply wood book case from Walmart. Maybe when I win your cases, they’ll give me a real office!”

“Oh, I’ll drink to that.” Candace nods.

“Me too.” Callie adds.

“Then, to our success.” Spirakis grins. “Now, let’s eat.”

**CHAPTER 1**

At 7 P.M. sleet began glazing over New York’s 7th Avenue. By 10 o’clock the street would be impassable to all but official vehicles. But, nothing, including a major airline SNAFU, would postpone this night’s SRO Garden event. Even the most distal green seats were filled to capacity -- at scalper prices of $750 per ticket, or so I had heard. The crowd was electric with anticipation for the twenty-eight contestants about to saunter into the ring for their group competition.

I found my way to my box. Seat 3 in Section 46 Row F of Tower A gave me a bird’s eye view. I was directly front and center of the silver trophy table. In addition to the American Kennel Club’s president, I had a perfect view of David Frei, the “Voice of Westminster,” and the evening’s judges. From this vantage point I was able to pan the ringside seats for American royalty enthroned courtside. Glen Close and Martha Steward sparkled into view. My twelve-year-old dream would soon materialize.

“May I have the Sporting Group, please.”

David Frei called for the twenty-eight breed winners to enter the ring. Each champion pranced in to take its designated place behind the purple-lettered yellow box announcing its variety of Pointer, Retriever, or Spaniel, and waited for Judge Denise Crosby to be introduced. It was exactly 8 o’clock. Right on schedule.

Yesterday morning my own Grand Champion, TyTwo -- GCH Pyrfect’s Honor Thy Father -- won his breed. Last night at 8:45 he became the second Great Pyrenees in Westminster history to claim the Working Group’s Louis F Bishop III Memorial Trophy.

When Judge Bernard Yamaguchi pointed to TyTwo, I thought my heart had stopped and I had crossed The Rainbow Bridge where my Tyro awaits me. But this was no dream. I was still in the here and now and Tyro’s son was clowning for Judge Yamaguchi. TyTwo had given a shake, aiming his legendary drool straight at the judge’s ebony jacket. The judge didn’t seem to mind the “snot rocket” or the shimmering white hair TyTwo left all over his splendid Armani as he jumped up and hugged him. The dog knew he was destined for greatness. In just three hours he would make AKC and veterinary history. He would also make The New York Times, The Post, The Daily News, and network news for another reason entirely.

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At 9 o’clock the magnificent Afghan bitch, GCH Dragon Lady’s Amargee D’Amour,

flashed into the ring leading on the twenty-four other Hound Group contestants. With the sheen of her chestnut coat and Gwen Verdon moves, I thought she was a lock. Judge Michelle Wildlings also seemed to appreciate her.

As the judge moved down the aisle the crowd screamed and cheered on each of their favorites. But when she reached GCH Triplicity’s “As Good As It Gets,” the PBGV ({Petite Basset Griffon Vendeen), the din of delight was so high that there could be no doubt as to the winner.

By 9:50 David Frei introduced the Herding Group’s nineteen competitors. This time first in the ring finished first, and GCh Churchill’s Jenny Jerome, the Australian shepherd, joined the Magnificent Seven line-up as a Best-in-Show contender. The James Mortimer Memorial silver bowl glistened directly across the ring. It was only 10:20 p.m. Ten minutes early.

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“Water. Ice cold water here,” a vendor crooned, working his way down the tiered

steps toward Section 46’s main corridor to the backstage area.

“I’ll take two. How much?” I yelled, on my feet, following him towards the grooming area backstage.

“Ten.”

I handed over the bill, grabbed the two half sized bottles, and hustled over to the grooming area. With eight minutes to show time I found TyTwo ready and eager, but avoided his gaze, not wanting to break his concentration on Jim O’Donnell, his handler. He was beyond magnificent in his august stance. His beautiful coat twinkled with the sheen of a healthy diet and expensive coat conditioners, and his quick black eyes laughed at Jim as he gave him a rare Pyrenean smile. TyTwo, like his sire, could actually smile -- not merely express glee with his eyes, but open his mouth and turn its corners upwards, like a Samoyed.

My boy was ready to perform. I could barely choke out the compliment, “He looks phenomenal.”

The fresh-faced young woman standing next to TyTwo’s enormous brass crate was Lynne Hobbs, my long-time groomer and partner. She had just put the finishing touches on the dog’s hocks. All powdered and feathered, he was “Pyrfect” and the image of his beloved sire. We hugged and teared up over the memory of Tyro, Pyrfect Kennel’s foundation dog.

Lynne had been very young when we first met -- just out of junior college. We both were living in the western Philadelphia suburbs at the time, and she was grooming at a Petco in Ft. Washington. I had taken Tyro in for an emergency grooming one Friday because the local groomer I used was booked solid. Lynne confessed that she had never groomed a Great Pyrenees, but she got out a textbook and spiffed Tyro up the nines. The next morning, he went out and won his championship. They became life-long pals and Lynne later found a career at Pyrfect Kennels. There was no one I loved or trusted more.

Seven minutes to show time and the seven finalists were lined up at the gate, ready to prance into the ring. I pressed a ticket into Lynne’s hand.

“Follow me, you’re in Seat 4.” I told her as I started back inside.

“Right behind you.” she answered. “But first let me give Jim his ring treats.”

She opened a cooler and reached in for some fresh scraps of lamb and two pieces of

Cabot’s Vermont cheese. No ersatz appetizers for this dog. Again, like his father, TyTwo had a gourmand’s pallet.

I took the next gate back inside and gave a quick glance at the refreshment concessionaire. Three waiters stood by, waiting to pick up their orders. A bottle of Perrier Jouet, Champagne Brut, Fleur de Champagne Rose 1994 stood on the counter, ready to be popped and poured. Two flutes with fresh strawberry garnishes flanked the bottle.

“Oh, and make sure the wait staff knows where to send our champagne.” I yelled over to Lynne as I hurried out.

“No worries.” she assured me. “Everything is under control.”

#

Back in Tower A I took my seat and waved Lynne in my direction. As she settled into the box, I again scanned the courtside VIP’s. David Frei had just moved in on his microphone, about to introduce Richard Davalos, this year’s Best-in-Show judge.

#

There they were! Almost exactly as I remembered them -- a lifetime ago! Second row, right in back of Harry Smith and the BPGV’s designated Westminster ring station. Fat and Skinny, both “illegally blonde,” engrossed in what looked to be a contentious exchange. They appeared to be snarling at each other, but such was often the demeanor of their profession. Skinny, as always, was impeccable in her petite Dana Buchman oyster shantung tuxedo with the Dolce & Gabbana flats she favored. They always looked as if they had just come out of the box. Perhaps she bought them in bulk. She certainly could afford to.

Fat had dolled up to the best of her ability. She was squeezed into a black evening two piece knit from Bloomingdale’s plus department. Although the style was still current, the fit of last season’s purchase was not. Lynne also caught this and whispered to me:

“Doesn’t she look like a stack of Michelin tires on sale at Costco?”

The last gulp of my Poland Spring sprayed over the seat next to mine as I lost control.

Fortunately, at that moment, the seat was vacant.

#

“Aurora, shut up.” Skinny admonished, “Richard is about to be introduced.”

“Cynthia, I’m warning you…” Skinny interrupted before Fat could finish her threat.

“You’ll get what you need.” Skinny snapped. “I’ve told you that one hundred times -- tonight alone.”

“Don’t be so smug, Cynthia.” Fat retorted. “If it weren’t for me, you wouldn’t be sitting so pretty.”

“Look, don’t blame me because your boss double-crossed you, Aurora. That’s on you. You’re a poor judge or character…”

“Listen to me Cynthia, for the last time, you owe me...”

“And you’re getting your pay-back.” Skinny scoffed. “And I really hope you’ve learned your lesson. Next time -- if there is a next time, that is -- choose your clients more cautiously. How could you have underestimated that one? She had an advanced degree in Economics, for God’s sake.”

“So what? Just book smart. Who would think she would catch on?”

“Never underestimate the client.” Skinny snarled. “It’s the second rule after ‘never ask a question.’ You nearly blew it for everyone. That one exposed our red herring issue. Exculpatory evidence, Aurora! We would have lost the whole trial but for the judge. And thanks to your incompetence, she can still litigate the second half of the case!” Skinny chided the mound of wounded pride sitting next to her.

“What ever happened to that bitch, anyway?” Skinny’s tone softened as she noticed Aurora Spirakis’ bravado draining into a puddle of self-doubt. “I lost track after I went to Davalos Coldwell.”

“She just disappeared off the radar.” Fat responded. “She put up such a fight and then nothing.”

“It’s not like you Greeks to give in.” Skinny continued. “You should do an investigation, just to be sure. By the way, didn’t she have a Great Pyrenees dog? I seem to remember that dog playing a big role in her deposition. You just couldn’t control her.”

“First of all, Cynthia, she is not Greek.” Fat seemed repelled by the implication of lanzmanship with her nemesis. “DiMaris was her husband’s name. And yes, she did have a Great Pyrenees dog. That’s ironic, isn’t it? He looked just like the one here, but then I think they all look pretty much alike.”

“Well, so she liked big dogs. He had an odd name too,” Skinny mused.

“Ah for Christ’s sake Cynthia, the trivia you remember.” Fat was impatient. “You always get into the minutia.”

“That’s why I’m good at my job.” Skinny retorted. “What was that dog’s name? Tyrone comes to mind.”

“No.” Fat was happy to contradict. “She named him something to do with D Day. I think she called him Ike. You do know that she actually brought him into the office one day. He was disgusting with that drool! I can’t imagine why anyone would want a beast like that when they could have something really magnificent like that Shepherd Jimmy Moses is handling.”

“You’re an ass Aurora.” Skinny slammed. “Just because your father was on the canine police force. Get over it. And watch your mouth. Your new boss breeds Saints.”

“Oh, he’s my new boss?” Fat didn’t miss a beat.

“That’s the deal, isn’t it?” Skinny sighed. “But run a background check on her first thing in the morning. No point in taking any chances we can avoid. And give me that catalog for a minute.” Skinny demanded. Her anal-retentive character had kicked in.

“What now?” Aurora Spirakis surrendered the purple and gold book.

“Let’s just take a look at the contestants. Great Pyrenees is where?”

“Working Group, Cynthia.” Fat rubbed her forehead in exasperation. “About the center of the catalog.’

“Ah here it is!” Skinny announced, a mental light bulb exploding. “GCH Pyrfect’s Honor Thy Father. Look at this Aurora. Owners: Dr. Calliope Thornton and Lynne Hobbs. That’s her!”

“No, it isn’t,” Fat contradicted. Her name is Callie DiMaris and she is no doctor.”

“How did you ever make it through law school, Aurora?” Skinny was ready to scream but muttered her disdain through a clenched jaw. “I swear you are the stupidest person to ever hold a bar card. She’s probably a Ph.D., not an MD. She must have gone back to finish her degree. That’s why she has been off radar. And Thornton was her maiden name. How could you have forgotten that?”

“Oh, it’s been so long. It’s not an era I want to remember. That’s all.” Fat apologized, chagrined by her lapse.

“And look at this,” Skinny went on, scrutinizing TyTwo’s pedigree. “By CH Karenz Gen Bradly Eisenhower X Ch Karenz Pyrless Krispie Kreme.” That’s her. That’s her dog! You were right about the D-Day name. That bitch is here somewhere. Watch yourself Aurora. This could be lethal.”

“Okay, Cynthia. Point taken. Now you shut up. Your boss is on.” It was 10:30 p.m.

#

“And now ladies and gentlemen,” the silky baritone began, “tonight we are honored to have as Best-in-Show Judge, Mr. Richard Davalos, renowned Saint Bernard breeder and founder of the prestigious Topper Kennels of Alpine New Jersey. He has been a dog world presence for more than five decades. Starting as a junior handler and, as the legend goes, helping put himself through college and law school with his superb training and handling skills. Mr. Davalos went on to become a founding partner of the formidable Davalos, Coldwell, Glades, and Spitz, the pharmaceutical industry’s premier legal advisor. With over 300 partners and associates, Mr. Davalos affectionately refers to his firm as ‘The Pharma’s Market.’ A most eminent attorney, he has argued before the Supreme Court as both defendant and plaintiff counsel.

“We are honored to welcome this event’s Best-in-Show Judge, Mr. Richard Davalos.”

The slight wavy grey-haired figure in classic peak lapelled tuxedo took center stage. David Frei commanded the long-awaited moment.

“May we have tonight’s Best-in-Show contestants, please?”

The seven Group winners swept into the ring, prancing around the judge once and then circling back to their designated stations where each was stacked with perfect extension and attentive mien, eyes glued to their handler at lead’s end.

TyTwo trotted around totally at one with Jim, never diverting his smile from his handler’s face. He was at his most magnificent as he stretched his hind quarters back in elegant Pyr pose and lifted his massive head to gaze directly at the silver trophy waiting on the judges’ table. If the dog could talk, I’m sure he would say, “It’s mine. I know it’s mine.”

#

“Lynne, our champagne is coming. Right on time.” I nudged my friend indicating the waiter climbing up our section to Row F. The Moet & Chandon was still corked and the two flutes on the tray were trade-marked with MSG’s fresh strawberries. “You did good. Did you call the restaurant to order Ty’s rack-of-lamb?”

“Of course. Would I forget our boy? Jean-Pierre himself is preparing as we speak.”

Lynne had arranged for the dog’s favorite as a victory meal and Chez Giselle had the most luscious rack-of-lamb I had ever tasted, including the best Paris itself could offer. Jean-Pierre would messenger it over to the Hotel Pennsylvania as soon as Lynne gave the signal that we were ready. And then the giant fuzz ball would gently lick his reward as we each held a delicate chop for him to nibble. Sheer Nirvana.

“Take him down and back,” the judge ordered as TyTwo performed the obligatory show-off trek across the ring. Tail up and “Pyr” smile on his high-held head, he floated across the ring. And then, like a Mercedes E-Class sedan, he cruised to a quiet stop exactly twelve inches from Judge Davalos’ feet. The dog set himself up with all the expertise of the trained champion he was. He barely needed a handler at all.

He held his magnificent bear-like head atop his 24-inch neck with pride. With chest puffed out and snow-white glistening ruff, he reflected the pains Lynne had taken to groom him to perfection. He placed his paws in precise alignment as the judge leaned over to pat him down, making certain there was girth and not just “puff” to the 128-pound dog. A perfunctory rite. As Judge Davalos reached down to ensure that he possessed the mandatory dew claws, the dog laughed. A small almost human hiccup sound came out of his open mouth. He was ticklish. The judge appreciated this and gave him a gentle pat on the crown of his massive head.

Lynne and I clinked glasses and coked back our emotions. We knew Pyrfect Kennels had just made history. It was 10:45.

“Once more around, please,” Richard Davalos ordered as he gave each of the seven a final once-over, walked to the judges’ table to record his choice, and then took his stance center stage.

#

“Cynthia, take my strawberries,” Fat offered Skinny the fruit portion from her flute, “and waiter, please bring me a fresh glass,” she demanded just before the swarthy young man was about to pop the Perrier Jouet Rose. “I’m very allergic.” Fat explained.

“And bring another bottle -- not the pink stuff for me.” Skinny added.

“No problem, Mesdames. I’ll be right back.” The waiter disappeared towards the rear with Fat’s flute.

“When did we become **Mesdames**?” Fat groaned as Skinny toyed with her strawberries, now filling two thirds the flute.

“Do you think you’re getting any younger, Aurora? Oh, don’t look so chagrined. I’m not that far behind you. Oh, these strawberries are luscious -- Look! I think Richard is going to pick the DiMaris dog. Can you believe it? He should only know…”

At that moment the waiter reappeared with Fat’s fresh glass and Skinny’s new bottle. He poured the pink and the white champagne, offering each woman a glassful. “Enjoy,” he instructed, as he secured the wine back in his serving cooler. His clipped accent was not quite British, but far from West Indian. And then he gimped off; his right leg notably impaired.

The two lawyers held their flutes high in the air, in a toast to the judge’s big moment. Davalos recognized the offering and smiled at the pair. Fat felt a warmth of security sweep over her. Maybe now history could be rewritten. Then they both sipped their champagne bubbles.

#

The Garden fell to total silence in anticipation You could almost hear the snow falling outside. Richard Davalos cleared his throat. With every eye on him, the judge began his announcement:

“I want to thank each of you for showing me these seven wonderful dogs. I wish I had a trophy for each because they are all truly magnificent examples of the best of their breed. But, as there can be only one Best-in-Show winner, I must choose the one who comes closest to the perfect standard of his breed. Tonight, we have a winner who not only comes close, but actually is the ideal representation of his breed standard and is truly the very best animal I have ever had the privilege to judge. Ladies and gentlemen, this year the James Mortimer Memorial Best-in-Show trophy goes to the Great Py…”

Before Judge Davalos could anoint TyTwo, a clamor came up from the VIP section in the front two rows. Fat was screeching and shaking Skinny who had collapsed into the well between her seat and the one in front occupied by Harry Smith. She hadn’t made a single sound: she had just slithered downward, like Elphaba melting away.

**“She’s dead, I think she’s dead.”** Fat was in a frenzy of disbelief.

Emergency medics and NYPD blues were on the scene in seconds. The VIP section was cordoned off and Richard Davalos was left holding the silver bowl with mouth agape, as was the dog. They looked at each other, both stunned and confused. It was exactly 11:00 p.m.

**CHAPTER TWO**

**The Daily News** screamed its Valentine’s Day headline in extra bold type, using up one quarter of the page.

**DEADLY DRAMA AT DOG SHOW**

**MURDER TRUMPS WESTIMINSTER WINNER**

Last night’s Best-in-Show performance was upstaged by the sudden death of Cynthia Steiner, a 42-year-old lawyer, who collapsed in front of CBS’s Harry Smith and Richard Davalos, the night’s **BIG DOG JUDGE.** Steiner fell over just as Davalos was about to crown the winner. She was a senior partner at Davalos’ firm and was touted as an expert in toxic torts.

Paramedics rushed Steiner to Roosevelt Hospital where she was pronounced dead at 11:30 p.m. Foul play is suspected but the actual cause of death remains pending autopsy reports. The NYPD homicide squad is already interviewing persons of interest.

Steiner’s husband, Louis Dean, also an attorney, spent the evening at home with the couple’s four-year-old twins, Jason and Jennifer.

Great Pyrenees winner, “GCh Pyrfect’s Honor Thy Father” left the ring without his trophy.

CBS’s **Valentine’s Day “Today Show”** necessitated an emergency format change in anchor substitution.

“This is Kathy Curry in for Harry Smith this morning. As many of you already know by now, last night’s Westminster Kennel Club Show ended in both triumph and tragedy. A deadly twist of fate occurred at the very moment the winner was announced. One of the VIP attendees, and a star employee of the Best-in-Show judge, died suddenly. The victim, 42-year-old Cynthia Steiner, collapsed in front of Richard Davalos while our own Harry Smith was sitting first row ringside, directly in front of Ms. Steiner. Harry, a long-time animal advocate and dog show aficionado, is not with us this morning as he is a material witness in what appears to be a homicide, and is unable to comment publicly.

“As police and medical examiner’s office work to explain this tragedy, we here at CBS extend our heartfelt condolences to the husband and family of Cynthia Steiner, a luminary in her professional life and also the mother of four-year-old twins. We also extend our deepest sympathy to Richard Davalos, Ms. Steiner’s employer and mentor. We are able to confirm that Mr. Davalos is at home this morning, under medical surveillance, after suffering possible cardiac symptoms. We do wish him a speedy and complete recovery.

“And, on a brighter note, we are about to introduce you to another celebrity, the happiest and most deserving personality of last night’s event -- Grand Champion and Best-in-Show winner, Pyrfect’s Honor Thy Father. Come on over here TyTwo and give me a shake.”

On that cue Lynne was ushered onto the set, a big white snow ball leading. It had been difficult to spot him outside the studio and even harder to coax him inside. The GM Plaza was still not totally cleared of the night’s snowfall. Traffic logistics presented a serious challenge for the simple run up from the Hotel Pennsylvania to the CBS studio. TyTwo had insisted on a romp and snow-angel wiggle in Central Park before Lynne could coax him into the building. Fortunately, she knew her charge well and had allowed an extra hour to get to the set.

Still damp and glistening icicles from his hocks, TyTwo sauntered over to Kathy, gave himself a shake, sat down and held out his dripping right paw. “Thank you, TyTwo,” Kathy giggled as she shook the giant soggy foot. “Let me introduce you to our audience.

“For all you dog lovers and for those of you who may be novices to the dog show world, let me introduce you to this very special winner and his trainer, Lynne Hobbs. TyTwo, whose formal name is “Pyrfect’s Honor Thy Father” is the very first Great Pyrenees ever to win Best-in-Show at Westminster. Congratulations to you big fella, and to you Lynne. A job well done.

“Lynne, I understand that you actually are TyTwo’s co-owner, as well as his groomer and trainer. Can you tell us what all that means and how he came by his cute nickname?”

‘Sure Kathy,” Lynne was totally at ease as she sat scratching the big guy’s head and ears. He nestled against her, placing his heavy head on her lap as he enjoyed the spotlight.

“But first, let me apologize for the shower he just gave you. You did ask for a shake and he actually understands the command. You have to say ‘shake hands’ for the paw alone.”

“Oh, is he really that smart?” Kathy guffawed.

“Oh, yes he is.” Lynne eagerly assured. “He’s about the smartest dog I’ve ever worked with. I taught him and his father to “shake” themselves out after I bathed them. They’re the only two dogs I have ever been able to get to do that on command.”

“And can you tell us a little about yourself and TyTwo: How did you get to have this remarkable relationship with the dog?” Kathy asked.

“My friendship with his breeder, Dr. Calliope Thornton, goes way back. I met Callie about 15 years ago when she was campaigning TyTwo’s sire, Tyro. I had groomed Tyro one Friday afternoon and he went out and finished his championship the next day. So, Tyro and I became friends for life and so did Callie and I. I started out just grooming and then training Callie’s dogs and when she moved to upstate NY, I went with her and we became partners. It takes a lot of patience and money to create Westminster quality champions, Kathy. You have vet fees, entry fees, handling fees, grooming fees, not to mention travel and advertising expenses. Callie was finishing her doctorate and needed a partner to help run the kennel.”

Lynne took a breath and Kathy had her next question out before she could continue.

“I think the audience would love to know something about the fancy names these show dogs sport. So, would I. How does Tyro relate to TyTwo? I understand the sire’s name was actually General Bradly Eisenhower?” Kathy prompted. “Where did Tyro come from?”

Lynne laughed. “Tyro’s registered name on his AKC certificate was Karenz General Bradly Eisenhower.” She was happy to share Tyro’s history. “The name of the dog’s Kennel always precedes a show dog’s official name. Karenz was the name of Tyro’s kennel and Pyrfect is the name Callie chose as her kennel name when she started her own breeding program.

“In the dog world people have come to expect clever names and cute word plays. All dogs have call or nicknames. ‘Tyro’ actually is the name of a ski run on Mt. Mansfield in Stowe, Vermont. Callie and her husband used to love to ski there. Bradly Eisenhower honors D-Day. Tyro was the boss of his litter, acting like a ten-star general from the minute he was born, on D-Day.

“We called ‘Honor Thy Father’ -- TyTwo -- sort of Tyro junior. We bred a lot of puppies over the years before we got one that we felt would honor Tyro’s name.”

Then Kathy opened the floodgates.

“Lynne, I understand that the Great Pyrenees have a life expectancy of only about ten to twelve years. You said you first met TyTwo’s dad over fifteen years ago. TyTwo, according to my info is four years old. That would have made Tyro an extremely elderly dad, wouldn’t it? How long did he actually live?”

“Kathy, that is the million-dollar question.” Lynne was on a roll. “TyTwo is actually what we call a pupsicle.”

“Pupsicle?” Kathy asked in surprise.

“Yes, pupsicle,” Lynne continued, “he was breed from frozen sperm. It’s a dog breeding technique similar to in vitro fertilization in humans. Tyro produced many ‘gets’ -- litters -- in his lifetime, but Callie had his sperm frozen, hoping for one pup that might be an exact duplication of his father. And after years in the deep freeze, we finally got TyTwo.”

“So,” Kathy continued, “TyTwo may be the first Great Pyrenees as well as the first pupsicle to win Westminster.”

“He certainly is the first Pyr to win,” Lynne, demurred, “but I don’t think he’s the first pupsicle. This technique is common to breeders who fly sperm the world over to produce special champion combinations. But TyTwo is special for another reason. We had to mix Tyro’s sperm with another dog’s and then buffer the pH in the lab in order for the breeding to take. His sperm was too acidic and neutralized the ova. We had tried the technique twice before getting TyTwo’s litter -- eight of them!”

“Wouldn’t that be against AKC regulation?” Kathy’s inquiry came off as genuine although CBS had been briefed on the dog’s history.

“Not at all,” Lynne assured. “We did DNA matches to be certain Tyro was the sire. TyTwo truly made history last night.”

“He did, indeed!” Kathy announced. “This is one dog that will long be remembered.”

“TyTwo, shake hands,” Kathy commanded and the dog offered his hostess his paw, bent his giant head downwards and gave Kathy Curry the biggest, sloppiest kiss ever seen on network TV!

#

All **New York Times** readers are awed by the Obituary Editor’s stewardship of the paper’s death notices. But how he comprised Cynthia Steiner’s bio in time for the February 14th morning publication is as mysterious as the woman’s death. She was, after all, only 42 years old and certainly not the most famous lawyer in the country. Neither a match for the prestige of Johnny Cochran nor the notoriety of Roy Cohn, it must have taken an immense networking rolodex to whip the column together. Steiner’s obit was as much a tribute to the editor as it was to his subject.

**“Cynthia Steiner, Attorney known as the Princess of Torts, dies at 42”**

“Cynthia Steiner, partner at the firm of Davalos, Coldwell, Glades and Spitz, died under mysterious circumstances last night while attending the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show. She was 42 years old and had been a star player at the Davalos firm, and was also an adjunct professor at New York University’s School of Law. She was admitted to practice in all four New York State federal districts, as well as New Jersey’s state courts and was certified by the Court of Appeals for Second Circuit. Her death was confirmed by a spokesperson for Roosevelt Hospital at 1:00 am this morning. An autopsy is planned for later today.

Steiner, a native of Roslyn, New York, was a graduate of Yale’s College of Arts and Sciences, and received her J.D. from Yale’s Law School. Steiner worked exclusively in the prescription drug and medical device arena, advising clients on the national coordination of discovery in mass tort litigation. She specialized in women’s issues and her most recent achievement involved the advisement of advertising spin to Johnson & Johnson on the management of their Ortho-Evra birth control patch. It was Steiner’s counsel that convinced J&J to modify its direct-to-consumer product advertising. The drug maker’s policy was switched to physician disclosure on all potential risks associated with the patch, shielding the manufacturer from potential litigation through invocation of the learned intermediary rule of law.

Steiner was a well- known advocate for industry safety standards in the marketing of women’s products. She gained notoriety as a ferocious defendant’s agent during the breast implant litigation known as ‘**the silicone wars**’ in the late 1990’s. Her impressive victories on implant cases in New York’s Southern and Eastern districts alone insured her rise to full partnership at the Davalos firm at just 35 years of age. From this experience Steiner developed her trademark **mantra** to her clients as well as her law students: “Just as good doctors stress preventative medicine, a good legal advisor has the same obligation to his clients.”

Her professional affiliations included the Association of the Bar of the City of New York, the American Bar Association, the Healthcare Business Women’s Association where she chaired the Product Liability Committee, and the New York County Rotary Club.

Steiner also volunteered her time to “Autism Speaks,” spearheading work to raise public awareness and donations for the cause. ‘I’m blessed to have two normal, healthy children,’ she commented at last year’s Thanksgiving Charity Banquet, ‘but this is a tragedy that could happen to any of us. We must all do what we can to eradicate this scourge from continuing to damage future generations.’

Politically active in her suburban Hartsdale community, she held office as President of the Westchester League of Women Voters for one term and chaired the organization’s liaison work with elected officials.

Steiner is survived by her husband, Louis Dean, an intellectual property attorney. Also surviving are her four-year old twins: a son, Jason James and a daughter, Jennifer Amelia, her parents, Linda and David Steiner of West Palm Beach, Florida, and a sister, Julia Clemmons of New Brunswick, New Jersey. Funeral arrangements will be private and memorial services will be announced at a later date.”

On March 2 **The Daily News** again sensationalized Cynthia Steiner’s demise:

**“M.E. SAYS TOXIC TORT PRINCESS POISONED”**

The New York County medical examiner released its autopsy report on the Westminster murder early this morning. Ironically, Cynthia Steiner, the attorney who died at the dog show two weeks ago was poisoned with ‘pink juice,’ a barbiturate used to euthanize dogs. In animals, the drug causes the heart to stop almost immediately on injection. Traces of the toxin were found injected into the strawberries in the champagne glass Steiner was sipping when she keeled over. The office’s chief medical examiner described the amount as enough to kill a Great Dane or a full-grown Newfoundland -- it took less than two strawberries to kill the 98- pound lawyer.

“There is no question that the euthanasia fluid is what killed her,” Dr. Harold Bender commented. ‘The victim was a healthy adult female in every respect and there was no disease or drug -- prescription or otherwise -- present in her system. The evidence is conclusive.’”

**CHAPTER THREE**

**The Ides of March.** The reek blowing through the transom of Interrogation Room 3 at Manhattan South overwhelmed Assistant D.A. Thom Hudgins. He gagged. That reflux always dredged up memories of how, when he was a sickly kid, his mother had put it -- “green around the gills.”

This morning’s stench made his gills taste greener than bitter apple. Slight of build and prone to wheezing in damp weather, Thom had been ever at the mercy of schoolyard bullies. He had grown up on the streets of Manhattan’s Alphabet City, taunted for his puniness and persistent runny nose. His carrot top head and dark eyes juxtaposed against his milky complexion provoked slurs that included the nickname, “Casper.” Stung, but unbroken by the peer group taunts, young Thom resolved to raise above and “show them all.” By the time he graduated Corlears Junior High School 56 on Henry Street he thought he knew just what and how he would show them. At Stuyvesant High he excelled at chemistry and debate. He planned to become a lawyer specializing in drug company patents, but later discovered that his incisive mind better served him as an interrogator. He loved sitting on the “bully” side of a deposition table and showing all of “them” just how tough he had become. While in law school, when his hairline started thinning, Thom found that a polished dome suited him and he began shaving his head along with his face each morning. After finishing Fordham Law, Thom was recruited by New York County’s District Attorney’s office. Although “Casper” stuck with his childhood friends, his professional colleagues dubbed him “Pitts” for his bulldog demeanor, in face and spirit. He loved being thought of as a “dog with a bone.”

Thom watched as police detective Natalie Valdes paced on the other side of the one-way partition. He watched with admiration as she put her subject on the rack. He thought Fat’s stench smelled like flesh burning, but was even more foul. His nostrils quivered from the assault of her perspiration mixed with fear. Only the obese could smell that bad. He recognized the stench from his experiences with street bullies turned crybaby in the tombs. “Ha,” he thought “what in hell made you so gross. There must be some story behind that fat ass of yours, sister.”

Nat Valdes was the only woman Thom new who actually thought best on her feet. Sit her down and she clammed right up. Even in somber detective attire, Nat was a knock-out. The pale grey of her polyester suit only emphasized her perfect complexion and story-book features. Her almond shaped black eyes sparkled against her rosy checks and the exaggerated widow’s peak framing her heart-shaped face called to mind the one-time-opera star, Marguerite Piazza. Her lithe body moved like a cat as she sluiced across the room. At five foot three and just 100 pounds, she appeared so much larger as she worked over her prey. Thom watched her sally back and forth, cutting a trail from one tan wall to the other, gum soled loafers squeaking on contact with the dingy linoleum under foot. This irritant was her trademark. Sooner or later, it would jar her suspect’s nerves.

“Ah, Natalie,” Hudgins fell into reverie. “Those gams of yours are a waste in police clothes.” He fantasized the detective as his dominatrix in red leather, but was quickly transported back to the real world when the odor drifting out from the transom overtook him again. He gagged.

“Okay, Aurora,” Valdes prodded, “One more time. Tell me right now, how did you inject the pink juice into those strawberries.”

“I’m telling you I didn’t do it,” Fat wailed. “You’ve got to believe me. Cynthia was my friend.”

‘You don’t have any friends,” Valdes jabbed. “You sure you don’t want to call your lawyer? This is not looking good for you.”

“I am a lawyer. I ought to know when I need one. I didn’t do it,” Fat groaned, her odor growing more foul as the squeak of the gum soled pacing heightened. “Everything you have is circumstantial, that’s all.”

Valdes got ready to pounce, her thick dark hair tied in a horse’s tail, switching from one side of her neck to the other.

“Aurora, I’m telling you, we like you for this homicide. You had opportunity and means. Now, if you tell me how, I can talk to the DA. Maybe we can work something out…”

“There’s nothing to work out. I didn’t do it,” Fat squealed once more.

“All right. Then tell me this. How is it that your favorite brand of Champagne just happened to be waiting for you?” Valdes had hit pay dirt.

Fat’s face contorted in anguish as she gulped and squeezed her China blue eyes into slits. The smell of fear heightened as a puddle of urine stained the charcoal opaque hosiery binding her think ankles.

“I think I should call a lawyer now,” was all Fat could manage.

#

St. Patrick’s Day arrived raw, with dark skies and heavy drizzle, but that did not put a damper on the annual parade, or the NIT basketball plays-offs being held at The Garden. Leo Capatorto pushed his way through throngs of revelry, thrusting his wide shoulders into a northerly gust.

St. John’s cheering squad, in a formation five wide and four deep, marched towards him, blocking his passage and forcing him to detour around to the long route to Ninth Avenue. His teeth chattered as he reached the entrance to Manhattan South, his slick black hair glistening with hail.

He was ushered into the precinct’s holding area, where he shook off the hoary droplets. With his square head and heavy, lantern-like jaw aflap, he resembled a Neapolitan Mastiff with an ear itch, or Jay Leno with a twitch. His client was waiting.

“Aurora, someone ordered the Perrier Jouet. If it wasn’t you, then who?” Capatorto wasted no time.

“I don’t know, Cap,” Fat sighed. “Nice to see you, too. Thanks for coming. I knew I could count on you.” Their friendship went way back to study group at Brooklyn Law School. “It might have been Cynthia. I thought Richard Davalos had ordered it himself. You know how he adored Cynthia.”

“Yeah, sure. Too bad he joined the dearly departed last week. Can’t get any useful corroboration out of him now. And, the champagne was your favorite.” Capatorto grunted. You’re lucky they don’t up the charges to felony murder by coronary. Davalos was an okay guy, from what I’ve heard.”

“Come on Leo, this is no time for jokes. That’s almost funny, except for the circumstances.” Fat was less tense.

“Hey, I got you to loosen up, yes?” Capatorto gave a shrug and waved both palms in an upward gesture.

“You know for all the talking you do with those hands, you can always start a new career as an interpreter for the deaf. That’s if this law thing doesn’t work out.” Fat retorted.

“Atta girl, Aurora, now we’re on track. Now… who else knew you love that pink crap?” Capatorto continued.

“Just about anyone who ever sat in my office is all,” Fat whined. “I always had a bottle on the book case -- just in case a client wanted to, ah… send me a little thank you, you know…”

“That’s what you get for being such a pig, Aurora. You couldn’t be satisfied with the usual Teleflora gracias. You hadda be a glutton.”

“And look’s who’s talking. You and your single malt and -- oh what’s the difference? Just get me out of this.” Fat regained her focus and composure.

“Look, Aurora, I don’t see this going away. The Perrier Jouet is the lynch pin here. It is your trademark. Valdes knows this. The pink juice injected into the strawberries: very clever. You had knowledge. She knows you were a nurse before law school. You know how to use a hypodermic. She knows how jealous you were of Cynthia…”

“That’s not true,” Fat was quick to refute. “She really was my friend. She was helping to get me on staff at Davalos Coldwell. She had it set up for me to interview with Richard that week. Westminster was supposed to have been an informal opportunity to meet him.”

“That doesn’t hold up, Aurora. It wasn’t on Davalos’ calendar. There’s credible testimony that you were overhead arguing with Cynthia all through the show.” Capatorto challenged.

“Who said that? It’s not true.” Fat defended herself.

Capatorto laid his cards on the table. “Aurora, I’ll tell you who, just think about where you were sitting. Right in back of Harry Smith: it might as well have been Moses! The only reason I believe you is that I don’t think anyone could be that stupid… not even you. This is not looking good. The whole New York Bar knows what a pariah you are. No one believes the Davalos Group would ever consider you, **not after what you did to your women.”**

Fat snapped back. “I didn’t do anything you or anyone else in this profession hasn’t done, Leo.”

“I defend hookers Aurora, not injured consumers. My clients live and prosper by my deals. And, as a matter of fact, many of them could have used the services of your law firm. A good number were sick with symptoms of silicone poisoning. Only they didn’t want to get involved with lawyers and class actions. They knew better than to expose themselves.”

“Well then,” Spirakis countered, “maybe you should look at **my** clients. That Callie DiMaris was there you know. Only now she calls herself Dr. Calliope Thornton. Her dog was the winner.”

“Yeah, I know,” Capatorto retorted. “I saw the dog and the trainer on CBS with Kathy Curry.” He motioned for the guard. He found Thom Hudgins waiting in the corridor.

“Let her go,” Leo snarled at Hudgins. “You’ve got nothing to hold her on.”

“Au contraire, counselor. See you tomorrow, 10 a.m. Arraignment, Part 11. I just found out the Honorable Jacques Foxworthy is presiding. Don’t be late.” Hudgins turned on his heel and followed the squeak of gum-soles contacting the linoleum floor in the distance.

#

“Natalie,” Hudgins called out as he followed the maze of floor tiles around a corner to the bull pen area where Valdes sat. “What’s going on with Spirakis? Arraignment in front of Foxworthy, tomorrow? **Quel surprise** that was. How did that happen?”

Valdes turned, stretching her long neck full length to get Hudgins in her line of sight. “I thought you’d like that Casper,” she teased. “He’ll be a riot. I also think he’ll remand.”

“On what basis?” Hudgins smiled. His friend had more information.

“Oh, we’ll just have to wait and see. Can you get free for lunch today?”

Hudgins knew the use of his childhood nickname was Natalie’s code for privacy.

“Let’s make it early, say 11:45 Arno’s? It’s on me.”

The restaurant, on 36th Street, off Broadway was a garment center favorite but still within walking distance of the precinct house. It afforded some measure of privacy away from police ears.

“It’s a date.” She grabbed at the cellphone, vibrating from a clip at her waist as she waved Hudgins off.

#

The next morning Hudgins and Capatorto were seated on opposite sides of the aisle, waiting to be called in front the Honorable Jacques Foxworthy. The judge was busy making ready for his morning’s docket, sniffing a yellow rose in the Boda Bud Vase on his dais. He sipped from his Evian bottle and then emptied some of the water into the flower holder.

“Ah, the thaff of life,” he lisped, “for flora and fauna,” never caring to keep his metaphors straight. His flowing grey hair reached the neck of his robes and matched the neatly trimmed Van Dyke springing from his chin. His long fingers drummed his impatience as the bailiff flipped through the pages of cases ready to be called.

“Mithter Capatorto,” the judge quipped, “ith’s early in the day for you, ithn’t it?”

“Yes, your honor,” Leo agreed. “Nice to see you during the sunshine hours.”

“Coun-the-lor,” the judge commanded, misting the docket sheet in front of him with a spray of Evian, “thep up here. So unuthual to see you thans five o’clock thadow. You know, you really do rethemble Richard Nithon. HMM. Too bad for you.”

“You’re right, your honor. I’ve been told that before.” Capatorto played along.

“Well, what brings you in on this late winther’s morning?” Foxworthy went on. “A client with a new alarm clock, or a rooster, perhath? One of your girls into cock fighting?”

At that moment the bailiff came to Capatorto’s rescue.

“Case #3418. People versus Aurora Spirakis. Charge: Murder in the First Degree.”

“Capatorto for the defense,” Leo responded.

“Hudgins for the people, your honor” Thom countered.

“There’s a thine cock-a-doodle-doo,” the judged waxed on. “Where’s your client coun-the-lor? Thill thleeping?”

“Right here, your honor.” Leo gestured toward Fat, seated at the defense table.

“What?” the judge sputtered. “I thought you reprethented working girls, counthelor. That one looks like the couldn’t find work if the mayor gave her a franchthighs for 42nd and 8th Ave.”

“Your Honor” -- Capatorto was on his feet in protest. Fat shrank down in her wooden chair, hiding her lacquered blonde head between two pudgy palms, her “Michelin” black knit straining at the seams.

Fat looked up with Capatorto ready to officiate, but the judge had further comment before Leo could enter the plea.

“I’m mithtaken. I take that back madam. You should be retired by now. A working girl’s career is thort, you know, thame as a danther’s. Ah yes…” The judge was off in a reverie.

“Judge, my client is Aurora Spirakis, a respected member of the bar and officer of this court, if you please. She is not my usual client.” Capatorto interjected.

“My apologies, Madam Coun-the-lor,” the judge rejoined the work-day proceedings. “How do you plead?”

“Not guilty, your honor.” Capatorto was on. “Ms. Spirakis is a practicing attorney with strong community ties. She is not a flight risk and wants only to clear her name. We’re requesting ROR.”

“What thay the people?” Foxworthy turned to Thom.

“The people request remand, your honor. This is a capital case. It involves premeditated murder. The defendant had motive, means, and opportunity. Another well respected member of the bar, and the mother of two small children, is dead.” Thom put on his sternest “lawyer” face as he glared at Fat. “Please Natalie,” he prayed, ‘let your sources be good.” The little pit-bull conjured his career’s express elevator and smiled inwardly. “God bless old friends,” he thought and awaited the judge’s thunder.

“No one gets ROR on Murder One in my court!” the judge pronounced. “Counthelors thould know that.”

“Bail, your Honor.” Capatorto immediately switched.

“Remand. And Madam, if I may thay tho, a thint at Rikers will do you good. Think of it as a gift to -- what’s that place my wife loves so much --ah yeth, Elizabeth Arden’s Golden Arches. Nice to thee you again Mither Capatorto.” The judge then waved the bailiff to bring on his next case.

**CHAPTER FOUR**

“Listen to me, Casper, this could be really big.” One week after the Arno’s luncheon Thom Hudgins found himself running a mental replay of Valdes’ tip-off. Natalie had ordered the Arno Special – linguini with Frutti di Mare as she handed over **the** file. Hudgins now knew that the file could be worth a thousand times the cost of every item on the expensive menu. “Listen, I mean really big” she emphasized repeatedly. “You have to meet with Bernie Cleary. You will not believe what she has.”

“She?” Thom prodded.

“Yes, Special Agent Bernadette Cleary”—

“Couldn’t get more Irish, could it?” Thom interjected before Natalie could finish.

“Oh, you’d be surprised.” Natalie teased, a wide Cheshire grin eclipsing the rest of her features. “Cleary was at Federal Plaza when she first caught this case. That was more than a decade ago. Now she’s up in White Plains, but like any career civil servant, she kept copies of her files.”

“Okay,” Hudgins, probed. “Why you and why now?”

“Cleary thinks the dog woman, Thornton, might be a person of interest in the Steiner case,” Valdes explained. “So, she came to me. As lead detective I ran a background on this Dr. Calliope Thornton. She is a ‘person of interest’ here. A very interesting one! But, procedure and politics aside, Casper, I’m giving you the heads up. Cleary thinks this could be way bigger than an NYPD homicide. It started at Pearl Street, under federal jurisdiction. Bernie thinks this Thornton woman can testify to motive to lock Spirakis in. Call Special Agent Cleary, Casper. This could your big break.”

At that point her cell went off and she ended the lunch abruptly. All business now, she bade her friend goodbye, thanking him for lunch and promising to be in touch. Her switch to formality forced Hudgins to glance around the restaurant as he called for the check. He noted nothing amiss.

#

He drummed his fingers over Natalie’s file with the gold embossed FBI business card stapled to the folder’s lower edge. “Let’s go for it,” Hudgins muttered to himself.

Special Agent Bernadette Cleary had a 914-area code. He chose her cell number and waited for four rings expecting an automated voice to request a call-back message. Instead, a rich contralto with a faint Queens accent announced:

“Special Agent Bernadette Cleary here.” “Here” came over as “he air.”

“Agent Cleary, this is Assistant District Attorney Thomas Hudgins…”

Before he could finish, Cleary interjected, “Yes, I’ve been waiting for your call. When would you like to meet?” No small talk.

“I’d like to see you as soon as possible. Would you like me to come up to White Plains?”

“That would be great. There’s a Cheesecake Factory here just off Bloomingdale Road. Do you know it?” Cleary inquired.

“I’ll find it, but a restaurant?” Thom was puzzled by that choice.

“Yes,” Cleary assured him. “It’s dark and noisy with a constant turnover and I live right across the road. No one will notice us unless we’re under specific surveillance. And it’s way too early in this game for that, I think. At this point though, let’s keep this strictly between you, me, and Natalie Valdes.”

“Of course,” Thom let himself get pulled into the cloak and dagger routine. “Just say when and I’ll be there. How will I know who you are?” Tom waited for a description.

Instead, Cleary instructed him to bring Valdes along. “She knows me. Let’s keep this very private, please.” She was set on a clandestine meeting. Maybe she’d been with the Bureau too long.

“Let’s make it for Thursday, April 1, say 5:45 p.m.? That way we can get seated before it gets too crowded. Thursday’s a very busy night. We won’t call any attention to ourselves with all the locals staring the weekend early.”

“Fine,” Thom agreed, “so long as Detective Valdes is free.”

“Oh, she will be.” Clearly assured him and hung up.

Thom immediately went to Map Quest on his PDA. “Hmm. Bloomingdale Road? How cute,” he mused. “Ah, there it is, actually on Maple Avenue.” He patted his digital buddy with affection as he placed the call to Natalie.

#

They rolled into the Westchester Mall parking garage at exactly 5:30 p.m. The drive from Manhattan South hadn’t taken more than thirty-five minutes in all, traffic on the Major Deegan and Cross Westchester had been light. With just a few tight spots at the highway’s convergence points, they had cruised up to White Plains with time to spare. It was just a two-minute walk to the restaurant.

“What do you make of Cleary and her file?” Thom wanted to hear Valdes’ opinion again.

“You already know how big I think this is,” Valdes chided him as they entered The Cheesecake Factory. “I don’t know Cleary well enough yet, but I’d say that she’s an independent thinker, and my guess is that she’s underutilized by the bureau… Ah, there she is,” Valdes spotted Cleary before the hostess could ask for a party count. They crossed the dimly lit entrance and Thom followed Natalie towards the restaurant’s corner booths.

“Agent Cleary, this is Assistant District Attorney, Thomas Hudgins.” Natalie shook hands with a tall, elegant black woman sporting a manicured “natural” hairdo that framed her sharp features like a show-ready poodle. As she stood to greet them, Tom couldn’t help but notice her graceful long limbs and elegant Audrey Hepburn neck. He chided himself for having allowed the dog world to have so captured his fancy. But, man, he thought, if she doesn’t look like a gorgeous French Poodle, my name’s not Casper.

“Glad to know you, Agent Cle…” Thom was stopped by Cleary’s firm handshake as she asked to be called “Bernie.”

“Okay,” he replied. “I’m Thom and you and Natalie already know each other.”

“Thom,” Cleary continued, “Natalie tells me that you’re life-long friends and one of the most “dogged” prosecutors on the D.A.’s staff. I’m trusting you to take a serious look at this material.”

“No pun intended, Bernie, but this case may have turned me into a junkyard dog with a bone. At least I’ve picked up a new side-line, I can’t seem to stop catching dog shows on U-tube. It’s become an addiction.” Thom chuckled to himself as he envisioned Cleary prancing across a show ring with a sparkling show collar high under her exquisite jaw line.

“This Thornton woman came to me more than a decade ago.” Cleary continued. “She had been the lead plaintiff for Second Circuit’s silicone breast implant cases against Century MBF. Funny thing is she seemed anything but a plastic surgery stereotype. I thought she would have been an excellent witness, but she lost her case -- at least half of it. Took the whole venue down with her, according to her evaluation…” Cleary paused as the waitress approached to take their orders. She quickly switched the conversation with an upward flash of her left eyebrow in Thom’s direction.

“So, Thom,” she continued, “you’re also a Fordham Law Alum? What year were you?”

“Oh,” Tom murmured, “It’s been so long I’d rather not incriminate myself. But I’ve been with the D.A.’s Office for over fifteen years now. How about you? Also, a native New Yorker, I’m guessing?” He asked the ladies if they cared for an appetizer.

The waitress scribbled down their starters and drink orders and disappeared.

“Yes, to answer your question, Thom. I’m a native. I grew up in Queens --St. Albans, and went to Fordham Law after two years in the ad game. I worked at Federal Plaza after the FBI recruited me as a specialist in art theft. I had been an art history major at Hunter College, believe it or not. I had a good run there until I took the DiMaris file upstairs. That was over ten years ago. I got kicked ‘uptown’ for that effort and landed here in White Plains.”

“Sorry about that,” Natalie sympathized. “It must have been hard to leave he city. I don’t know if could ever do it myself.”

“Don’t knock it ‘til you’ve tried it.” Cleary retorted. “Turned out to be the best move I could have made. I walk to work. I bought a great co-op on Mamaroneck Avenue, right across the street. White Plains is a growing and thriving little metropolis. It’s the county seat with a Federal Court House on Main Street. I take art classes right here at the Westchester County Center and I’m in Manhattan in twenty-five minutes by rail or car. I even have a Bloomingdale’s within a shout of my office. What else could any New York girl want?”

“Why do you think they transferred you out of headquarters?” Thom was putting the pieces together. “And what do you mean, Thornton won half her case?”

“The silicone cases were bifurcated, Thom. You know how that goes. They only tried what they called ‘local’ injuries, not systemic disease, as causation was a political hot potato. The systemic disease cases went to a suspense calendar to await adjudication at some future date. In Thornton’s case -- Blazer used a playbook which was a pattern reused in venue after venue --they spent most of the trial arguing that Thornton had been implanted with another manufacturer’s product, not Blazer’s client’s. The red herring. It was the only aspect that her lawyers allowed her to testify to. And she blew them out of the water. She had photographic proof of identity taken by the explant surgeon in the OR. Exculpatory evidence.

“Then Blazer had to concede and stipulate that it was indeed Century MBF’s product. However, they didn’t give up. On the turn of a dime, they claimed Thornton had switched products. She worked in a hospital and had access, they argued! She could have gotten a Century implant from the hospital’s path lab.

“You gotta read the trial transcript. She had the jury in stiches when she announced that she did in fact work at a hospital: a VA, where she was a statistician for a Hematology/Oncology clinical trial group. Her principal investigator was a big shot prostate cancer investigator. She couldn’t recall any of the vets on her ward ever having had breast implants!

“So, the judge was forced to ask the jury to vote on the implant identity by separate ballot. Blazer burst a gasket but they didn’t want a mistrial, so they had to agree to the separate ballot. And she won!”

“No joke,” Natalie chuckled. “That must have been quite a scene.”

“Oh, wait ‘til you get the whole story. I promise you there’s a TV series waiting.” Cleary opined.

“So, back to basics,” Tom interjected. “Why do you think they transferred you out of headquarters?”

“I really think it was because they didn’t want to touch this case. They wanted to bury it.

All I had was Thornton -- who was then Callie DiMaris -- and her suspicions. There was plenty of evidence of malpractice, though no direct conspiracy link. Thornton was certain the firm had sacrificed her case to intimidate the other plaintiffs into submission. She thought the message was ‘if DiMaris can’t win, no one can.”’

“Do you agree?” Thom encouraged Cleary to continue.

“I think that all mass torts cheat the plaintiff. That’s a given of our civil justice system. But here, -- Thornton – was very convincing and the research she brought me was truly astounding. But, without an inside source to corroborate, the Bureau almost never opens an investigation.”

“Then why did you take it upstairs? There must have been something there.” Thom urged Cleary for more of the story.

“Well,” the Special Agent swallowed hard and continued. “Here’s the thing. Thornton discovered that the foreman of her jury was an attorney --- now, I ask you: What lawyer ever seats brethren on his jury? That’s the first preemption you pull! But, not only was the foreman an attorney, he was a high school pal of the presiding judge.”

“How the hell…” Thom couldn’t finish his shock before Cleary explained.

“I told you her research was astounding. The woman could have been a profiler with the Bureau itself. Oh, and by the way, she is now a Professor of Economics at Pace University in Pleasantville.”

“So, she’s smart enough to have framed Spirakis, you think?” Natalie chimed in.

“She’s smart enough, yes.” Cleary agreed. But I doubt she would have. I don’t see her as vengeful. Anyway, the reason I found her credible is a curious twist. The judge and his lawyer buddy both attended The Bronx High School of Science, way back -- in the 40” s. I also graduated Science, in 1986. I went back to the school library to have a look at the yearbooks. As an alumna, I had privilege. And, there they were. The judge and his buddy were in drama and debate club together. Several photos showed that they were well acquainted with each other.

“I knew this judge -- elevated to the federal bench by my favorite prez -- Bill Clinton, so I did a little research of my own. The judge passed several years ago due to a fall at his summer home and the friend died more recently. The friend’s obituary lauded his accomplishments and charity endowments and also noted that the bulk of his estate went to his devoted male companion of the past forty years.”

Thom gasped.

“No, not the judge. He had a wife and family. Actually, he officiated his daughter’s marriage in his chambers. Neither he nor his buddy gave off homosexual vibes, but clearly there was a connection that prevailed long past high school. The pal came out, but let’s just say the judge stayed “in camera.” But he wanted him on the DiMaris jury and he was able to arrange it.”

Thom chuckled. “Should have been enough to declare a mistrial.”

“Oh, there was more than enough.” Cleary assured him. “Trouble was the woman had no one on her side. The whole New York bar, from what she said, shunned her like an Amish pariah. And, that’s after she was the venue’s group leader and lobbyist for hundreds of victims in New York. She even brought Spirakis more than half her caseload from the women in her personal support group.”

“Ah,” Thom mused. “So that’s what Capatorto was talking about.” He remembered the cryptic St Patrick’s Day exchange between lawyer and client. “So, you think she’s credible. You think the trial was a fix and it went way up to the judge?” Thom tested Cleary’s grit.  
 “Do I think so? Yes, it could have happened. Do I know for sure? No. That was the problem. I had Thornton’s journal and trial transcripts, but no direct corroboration. But let me tell you this,” Cleary continued, “my gut says those two were more than friends, back in the day. As my mama would have put it, those boys sure looked to me like they were on the **down low** back then and old friendships like that never really fade away.”

“Phew…” Thom let out a long low whistle and gulped his Michelob Ultra.

Just then the waitress reappeared to collect their dinner orders. It was only 6:30. Yet it seemed to Tom that he had just entered a time machine and was speeding way into his future. “Scotty, beam me up,” his inner voice whispered.

He exchanged a knowing glance with Natalie and asked the ladies to eat hearty. “This may be a very long dinner,” Thom advised the waitress, “so please bring us another round.” He nodded at the empty bottles lined up at the table’s edge.

**CHAPTER FIVE**

Mid-April was particularly promising. Crystal blue skies and chirping from the red bird feeder in a shade tree alongside the kennel invited me outdoors. I took TyTwo and his sister, Holly, out for a romp. I leashed both dogs and headed towards the farm’s fenced property line. They pranced in tandem, sniffing out a trail surrounding Pyrfect Kennel’s three-acre fenced perimeter. Every four feet, or so, they paused, one giving three short barks, the other answering, “woof, woof, woof.” We got half-way round, past the kennel’s out-structures when I turned them loose. They continued their “Pyr” patrol, hugging the white PVC rails, announcing themselves to any and all. “We’re here, beware of us,” their barks admonished.

“Welcome Sweet Springtime,” Lynne called out to us from the door of “Pyrfect Grooming and Rehab.” Her business was housed in one of the tin-roofed barns that was left over from the hundred-acre dairy farm we had inherited from my husband’s family. We had sold off most of the land, keeping only the 1830’s “eyebrow” colonial and the out structures. We renovated the house, converted one barn into a heated kennel and rented the other to Lynne. There she ran her grooming and rehab business. She had installed an “endless swimming pool” to use for canine rehab from surgery, injury, and the scourge of arthritis afflicting older dogs. Her business was brisk, rarely leaving a 30-minute pool session unfilled. She had hired two techs to run the aquatics while she did the grooming and training. A local “people’s” chiropractor visited once a week to provide alternative rehab methodologies to dogs in need. All-in-all, it had turned into a “pyrfect” arrangement for us.

“They’re announcing themselves, aren’t they?” Lynne laughed at the chorus of woofs. “TyTwo, Holly, here!” she called and they bounded over, kissing and pawing their friend. “Oh, look at you two. You’ll have to take a bath.”

With that TyTwo sat, cocked his head to the left and gave a paw, in happy anticipation. Holly turned and ran. She had inherited her mother’s love of the mud. TyTwo, on the other hand, adored being groomed. **Just a “Pyrfect” show dog.**

“Holly, get back here,” I yelled, but she was gone. Back on patrol, she marched along the property’s edge, checking everything out. This is one of the instinctive habits that distinguishes our breed. Great Pyrenees will mark their turf by patrolling around the property’s edges, leaving their scent to discourage predators. When we first moved into the house, we would watch deer graze from the kitchen window. But as soon as Tyro began marking “his” territory, all wildlife retreated back into the woods. A decade later, the woods had retreated into a sub-development of two-acre plot McMansions with tennis courts and a Federalist styled clubhouse. Suburbia had pushed through the Upper Westchester boundary of Peekskill, New York. I was grateful for the company, the business opportunity for the kennel, and most of all, for the financial security from the land deal.

Just then, Lynne and I heard the Pyrenean blood curdling screech. Holly had sensed an enemy invading her turf and she was ready to attack.

“What the…” Lynne turned to me. “We’d better go and get her leashed.”

“I’ll get her. You go back to the kennel,” I instructed Lynne. “It must be that lawyer I told you about. He was supposed to be here at 11:15. I’ll deal with it. You stay out of sight. And, let me take TyTwo.” He was straining to run to Holly’s aid. He voiced his rich basso profundo in a series of five woofs -- his warning to the intruder.

I turned towards the front gate, Holly’s leash in one hand, and TyTwo in the other. Barely able to keep up with him, I got to the front of the house panting and trying to catch Holly by her collar. She evaded me again and broke right through the front gate, pushing the latch open with her nose and screaming in top voice. TyTwo yanked at his leash and snapped his link collar in half. Freeing himself and knocking me down, he bolted to his sister’s side. Now standing firm, a low guttural rumble sounded through his tightly clenched jaws.

“Oh no,” I thought. “Here comes trouble.” I picked myself up, gathered the broken neck piece, and hustled over to the gate, breathless. There, afraid to exit his French Vanilla Chrysler 300, sat Leo Capatorto. He rolled down the window two inches and yelled, “Lady call the dogs off.” And as an afterthought he added, “Please.”

It was 11:35. A little behind schedule.

“Hello,” I greeted the stranger, waiting for him to identify himself even though I knew full well who he was.

“Ty, Holly, quiet,” I commanded. The dogs ceased barking but continued their throaty menacing growls, totally intimidating the visitor in the huge white sedan.

“I’m Leo Capatorto,” the jowly man announced. “Do you think you could do something with the dogs, please? I have to tell you, I’m afraid to get out of this car.”

“Then don’t,” I thought, but assured him that the dogs were really gentle giants and were only doing their job.

“Their instinct is to guard home and family. Just let them give you a sniff and they’ll be fine so long as you mean us no harm.” I gathered both dogs by the scruff of their necks and led them over to the car.

“Now, be nice. TyTwo, Holly. Manners, please. Say hello,” I commanded. “Mr. Capatorto, please ask them to shake hands.”

He did. And much to his surprise both dogs sat, offered paws and sniffed at his left hand through the Chrysler’s open window. Then, for whatever reason we humans can only guess at, Holly must have decided that Capatorto smelled good and gave him a dainty, well placed kiss on the palm of his open hand.

He laughed, got out of the car and tussled Holly’s mane, rubbing both her ears. “Man, she’s a beauty,” he told me as he straightened up and reached into the Chrysler for his briefcase. TyTwo, a little startled to be left out, gave a “woof” causing the man to turn with a start.

“Oh, he’s a little jealous. He’s usually the one who gets all the attention,” I explained “Just give him a pet and he’ll settle down.”

“So,” the lawyer asked, “is this the big shot from the Westminster Show?”

I knew he was well enough informed to recognize TyTwo, but gave him the benefit of the doubt since he probably presumed Pyrfect Kennels housed other adult males.

“Yes, of course,” I said. “That’s him in the flesh -- or should I say fur?”

“And you’re Mrs. DiMaris?” He gestured with an upwards shrug of the shoulder and open right palm.

A flash of Eli Wallach’s Don Altobello came to mind. I conjured some poisoned cannoli and chuckled to myself.

“Yes, I am. Why don’t you follow us inside?”

I led Capatorto and the two dogs through our red front door. To the right was the living room, part of the original structure. Beyond that was an addition my husband and I had made during our renovation -- a solarium. It was our favorite spot. With three sides of floor to ceiling windows, we had a marvelous vista of rolling hills and all four seasons. It was particularly inviting during early Spring days when the ground thawed and there was still a chill in the air. The sun warmed the room and flooded it with soft natural light. I particularly liked to read and grade papers there. During the winter the double-faced fireplace which opened into the living room made the porch a cozy retreat. We seldom used the rest of the house.

The dogs took their spots, flanking the stone hearth while I motioned for Capatorto to sit. He chose one of the wicker “Kennedy” rockers: I sat in the other.

“This is quite a place you have here,” Capatorto began. “Not that far from the city yet worlds away.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “It’s just pyrfect. Pun intended.” I waited for Capatorto to get to the purpose of his visit, but he seemed more curious about the property and the kennels than lawyering.

“How long is it that you’ve been breeding these dogs, Mrs. DiMaris?” he asked. “They’re actually quite magnificent, I have to admit. And I’m not much of a dog person, living in the city, and all.”

“Oh, I think it’s over twenty years. And I’m Ms. or Professor Thornton.”

‘Sorry,” Capatorto replied, and then with lawyerly guile he asked, “Is Mr. DiMaris your first or second husband?”

I saw where he was heading and so I countered with the unnerving truth. I was now a widow and had been married only once. I told him I found my birth name easier for my students and doctors’ assistants to manage, and all my academic degrees were awarded in my maiden name.

“I didn’t know,” he claimed. “I’m sorry.” He seemed genuinely embarrassed by the faux pas.

Under any other circumstance I would have laughed at him and asked just what his slug of a client had told him. But I simply smiled and added that it was seven years now and my husband Nick had been several years older than I, and like most of the men in my life, he had suffered a fatal heart attack at age 62.

“Oh, again. I’m so sorry. Ms. Spirakis was under the impression that you still went by DiMaris.”

“Well,” I assured him, “there is really no reason for her to have any current information about me. It’s well over a decade since we last spoke. And she knew I was only married once.”

“So do you remember when or approximately when you last spoke with her?” he was fishing.

“Of course, I do.” I told him straight out. “It was when she lost my trial and refused to take an appeal on my behalf.”

“And you haven’t seen or spoken with her since?” Again, he was testing.

“I saw her when she gave a deposition in the malpractice suit. You probably know that, or did she not tell you that I filed suit against her and her firm?” I hoped to disarm with honesty.

“Ah, no… she…is that the only time you’ve seen her since your trial, Ms. Thornton?” He changed the subject, but not before letting on that his client had kept him in the dark.

Actually no, it isn’t.” Now I baited him.

“Then can you tell me when you did see her, apart from the trial and deposition?” He had regrouped and regained his lawyerly composure.

“She was at Westminster, in February,” I stated without hesitation. “I saw her on Best-in-Show night.”

“Did you speak with her?” Capatorto thought he had caught onto something.

“No, I didn’t.” I waited.

A moment of silence passed as he digested my response, and then he pressed, “is there any reason that you wouldn’t say hello?”

“No.”

“The why did you not speak with her?” The man obviously had never been to a benched dog show.

“I was sitting in the Towers and she was ringside. I’m sure she never gave me a second thought.” I watched his large jowly mouth droop as he grimaced and swallowed.

“Then how is it that you were able to spot her in her ringside seat?” Which is the stupidest question to ask a “dog person.”

“Mr. Capatorto,” I smiled and stroked TyTwo’s large head, “Going to Westminster is like going to the Met. You always have opera glasses. Especially if your dog is entered. Oh, and by the way, I also saw Glenn Close, Martha Stewart and Harry Smith.” It was an effort not to sound smug.

“Then you must have noticed Cynthia Steiner with her. Did you recognize her?” He actually was quicker than he appeared.

“No, I didn’t,” I lied.

“How is that Ms. Thornton? Didn’t Steiner take depositions for your case on behalf of Century MBF?”

She had actually grilled me for two entire days, setting up her trial strategy and trying to trap me into admissions which she could twist and use against me. At the time I thought I had fended her off very well, but I was a novice at the law of civil justice and it wasn’t until much later that I learned just how good Steiner actually was at her job. I also came to realize that I had no representation at all as my own lawyers were working against me.

“Yes, she did. But that was so many years ago. She was younger and had dark hair. She was quite blonde when I saw her with Aurora Spirakis on the night she died. I didn’t realize who she was until the next morning,” I lied again. I bent over to scratch Holly’s neck as I hid my exhaled breath. Capatorto did not seem to notice the cover-up. “Stay focused now,” I reminded myself.

“So, you didn’t recognize Steiner but you did identify Spirakis at the show. Weren’t you surprised to see her there?” Capatorto was fishing again.

“Why would I be surprised? Anyone can attend Westminster. It’s very popular. And this year’s Best-in-Show judge was a very distinguished attorney. It wouldn’t surprise me if half the New York Bar was there. By the way, should I have an attorney of my own present for this conversation?” I forced Capatorto to change his line of questioning again.

“Oh no, Ms. Thornton,” Capatorto assured me. “This is really an informal interview and I thank you for your graciousness. I’m just looking at Ms. Spirakis’ background and client roster. Lawyers make enemies.”

“To be sure they do,” I agreed. “But let’s just Leave her to Heaven…”

“Ah how refreshing,” Capatorto chuckled. “Not much poetry in my line of work. I generally defend hookers.” And then, for whatever reason, he diverted from the purpose of his visit and babbled on about his escapades in night court. He sighed and got back to his agenda.

“Tell me, Ms. Thornton, about the nature of your claim -- the personal injury claim in the underlying case.”

“Your client is better able to give you that information as she didn’t make much of a case for the injury I did sustain,” I countered, still bitter over Spirakis’ courtroom failure.

“No, she isn’t” the lawyer continued. “She claims that she remembers little of the particulars, but she did indicate that you had a particularly horrific injury and had endured several surgeries. That’s why she felt your case was a good one. Didn’t you undergo bilateral mastectomy as a result of the silicone rupture?”

“No, that was another client.” I told him. “My injury was far worse. The thing ruptured and seeped into my lungs, gluing my left lung to the chest wall. It had to be surgically freed, or debrided to use medical terminology.”

“How horrible! I can’t imagine going through that as a consequence of cosmetic surgery. You did have the implants for cosmetic reasons, right?” He seemed genuinely appalled.

“Yes, that’s right. It was not fun. It was excruciatingly painful and necessitated a very lengthy recuperation.” What I told him was a matter of record and he could fact check it himself.

But I also added that I now had to use supplemental oxygen for anything requiring exertion and was somewhat incapacitated.

“I’m sorry to hear that. You’ve certainly had your share of bad luck. But I’m sure Ms. Spirakis must have thought your case was winnable or she wouldn’t have taken it to trial. Sometimes it’s just not possible to win, particularly in such a controversial arena.” He took a moment to gather his thoughts before continuing.

“You must have been very crushed and angry with Spirakis for the loss?” It wasn’t really a question.

“Yes, of course,” was all I said.

“Then, what, if anything, did you say to her” he prodded.

“It’s not what I said to her, it’s what she said to me.” I retorted. “She told me to just get on with the rest of my life.” I would actually never forget those words.

“Excuse me?” Capatorto was aghast.

“That’s what she advised.” I added, “And I did just that. I went back to finish my Ph.D. dissertation, got on staff at Pace University teaching Economics, and bred some really fantastic Great Pyrenees. There can be life after betrayal, Mr. Capatorto.”

He remained speechless for an instant. Then he muttered, “well, we’ll just leave her to Heaven and karma,” thanked me for my time, and said he had to be heading back to New York City.

I watched as the big white sedan pulled out of the turn-around and headed down my steep quarter-mile driveway. When it reached the road’s end and turned onto the flat, I went inside and placed my call.

“ADA Hudgins” was Thom’s brusque answer. I had dialed his cell to avoid the intervening office voice mail.

“Mr. Hudgins, it’s Callie Thornton. Leo Capatorto just left.”

“Oh.” Thom’s voice was pregnant with anticipation. “How did it go?”

“Better than I thought,” I reported. “I don’t think his client has given him a lot to go on. He even got me and Candace mixed up, and he seemed unaware of my lung injury claim.”

“Did he bring up Steiner or the June 3 conference?” That’s what he really wanted to know.

“No. Not the conference. He mentioned Steiner and I got nervous but he never said a word about June 3. I don’t think he knows. But don’t you have to share full disclosure with him?”

“Just leave that to me. We’re not retrying your case at this juncture. We’re trying Spirakis for murder, not conspiracy right now.”

“Okay, by the way,” I added as I said good bye, “please give Special Agent Cleary a big hello from me.”

“Glad to,” he assured me and clicked off.

I went to the kitchen and gave each dog a treat of chicken jerky and took them back to the kennel where Lynne had the bathtub filled.

“How did it go?” she was tense.

“Relax,” I told her. “He’s clueless. Actually, he’s really not such a bad guy. He just doesn’t know his client very well. And ADA Hudgins asked for you.” I fibbed.

“Really?” Lynne turned pink.

\ “Yeah. I think he has eyes for you.” Just a little white lie.

With that Lynne called Holly over for her bath. “Oh no you don’t,” TyTwo must have thought. He pushed his sister out of his way and bounded over to the tub, stuck one front paw in and then the other. He hoisted his massive hind limbs over the tub’s edge and woofed! Then he switched his enormous furry tail back and forth, sloshing the bath water all over the grooming room and treating Lynne and myself to an unexpected April shower.

**CHAPTER SIX**

“Aurora, why didn’t you tell me that DiMaris sued you for malpractice?” Capatorto was irritated with his client. He took his seat opposite her in Riker’s lawyer/client conference room. The pungent odor of mildew infection was heightened by the day’s drizzle. His eyes stung.

“I don’t relish the thought of trekking out here every time I discover you left something out. Now, what else have you forgotten?” he snapped.

“I’m sorry, Cap,” the blimp in the orange jumpsuit whined. “I didn’t think it mattered anymore. The case actually went nowhere.”

“Why did it go nowhere, Aurora? It’s starting to look like you’re really covering up. What the hell happened with that case and why did you tell me she had a double mastectomy when she didn’t? Who was the other client? Or, more importantly, how many other clients have it in for you?” Capatorto was peeved at the memory of having looked foolish in front of Callie Thornton and had begun having second thoughts about representing his law school chum.

“This woman is a lot sharper than you think, and by the way, she goes by Thornton now. Professor Thornton, Aurora. She’s an Economics professor at Pace. Tell me you didn’t know that.”

“Don’t get so pissy, Leo. I haven’t had anything to do with her in years. How should I know she changed her name?” she lied, despite having been dressed down for that very lapse by Steiner.

“You dolt. She didn’t change her name. Thornton is her name. Her husband was DiMaris.”

“Was?” Fat asked. “You mean she divorced him?”

“No, she’s a widow,” Capatorto informed his client. “And if I’m going to focus on her to establish reasonable doubt, you’d better come up with something I can use. From what I can tell she’s very credible and likeable.”

“Now, for God’s sake -- what was the nature of her injury and how did you lose that case? Tell me exactly what you did and stop doing that blonde thing you’re so good at. You’re not exactly adorable anymore. Those days are long gone! So, just how many other clients may have it in for you?” Capatorto demanded. “Think as if your life depends on it, because it does.”

Fat hesitated and then confessed. “They all do. All one hundred of them.” She blinked several times to disguise the twitch which had taken hold of her left eyelid.

“Okay,” Capatorto relented and shot a benign smile across the table. “We have one hundred potential doers.” He reached into his left jacket pocket for a Bic Velocity as he pulled a legal pad tom his briefcase. “Now, start at the beginning. Who hates you the most?”

“Actually, I think that there’s someone who hates me more than the silicone women,” she replied.”

“Oh? Tell me.” Capatorto let his jaw go slack in mock astonishment.

“You look like a lose-flewed mastiff. Shut your mouth Leo, before you drool all over your notes,” Fat spit out.

“Arf, arf” Capatorto barked. Let’s have it.”

“Once, when I was in solo practice, I had an accident case against New York Transit. The client had a compound leg fracture as a result of a subway derailment. He became permanently disabled and walked with a pronounced limp.”

“Aurora, don’t tell me you lost an open-and-shut against New York Transit!” Capatorto grunted in disbelief.

“Cap, I did. I swear. I was green and missed a filing date. The case got dismissed. The guy had come to me because I had been a nurse and his girlfriend had worked with me. It should have been a high payout injury. He had multiple surgeries and a steel rod in his leg. When he realized what happened, he was so enraged that he threatened to break both my legs. Building Security had to remove him from my office and I had to get a restraining order to keep him away.” Fat shuttered at the memory.

“Whoa, can’t say I blame him.” Capatorto replied. “And where is he now? Do you know?” He went on before Fat could answer. “That kind of injury should have commanded a huge settlement. What did the guy do for a living?” Capatorto was calculating damages.

“I don’t know where he is. He may have gone back to his own country. He was Portuguese from Gibraltar, I think. The girlfriend dumped him when he couldn’t work. He was a dog handler, of all things. Here on a work visa. He had been a veterinarian but wasn’t licensed to practice here. I think he couldn’t pass the exams because his English wasn’t too good. Ironic, isn’t it?” Fat grimaced.

“Actually, yes. It sure is.” Capatorto was on his second page of notes. “So, who else?”

“The junior partner I reported to at the firm,” Fat admitted. “He thinks I wrecked his career.”

“Oh?” Capatorto furrowed his brows.

“He got fired over the case, -- actually over the DiMaris dog.”

“This has to be a good one.” Capatorto stopped writing and leaned in closer to Fat. “Now,” he declared, “I am drooling. How did the dog figure into all of this?”

Fat took a breath, and then like a sinner in the confessional, muttered that the other client was a woman named Candace Cohn. She had had breast cancer and underwent subcutaneous mastectomies to remove the spilled silicone used in reconstruction. She had actually lost her breasts twice. She and DiMaris had been fast friends.

“We called them **The Twizzlers**.” Fat admitted.

“Twizzlers?” Capatorto raised an eyebrow. “They weren’t pole dancers, were they?”

“Of course not.” Fat went on. “The firm was careful to screen the silicone clients for cases with credible plaintiffs. Both of them were educated, professional women.

“We called them **The Twizzlers** because Candy had shiny black curls, down to her waist and Callie was a flaming red-head with sea green eyes. They were worth millions to the firm. Their cases were absolutely delicious.”

“So, what about the dog?” Leo was glancing at his watch, anxious to get on with it.

“I’m getting there,” Fat continued. “It’s a twisted tale --”

“No pun intended,” Capatorto interjected.

“Leo--”

“Sorry, I couldn’t resist,” Capatorto apologized. “Go on.”

“I was used to handling clients who let their kids snack on lead paint chips like they were Oreos**. The Twizzlers** were something else. These two were just too smart. We had to quash their friendship so that they wouldn’t compare notes. We had never had a client think to question our strategy. These two were trying to run their own cases.” Fat related.

“And what of it? What were you up to?” Capatorto was growing impatient again. “Just spit it out.”

“There was a master plan on the handling of all the breast implant cases It came down from the highest sources --"  
 “How high?” Capatorto regained his eagerness.

“I don’t’ know for sure. But higher than the partners. I only know that the plan -- by the defendants --was to take down New York with a well-known case. They needed a sacrifice to control the docket. And that was Callie DiMaris. Her scleroderma with pulmonary fibrosis and pulmonary hypertension was undeniable. Scleroderma was the one disease category which was documented to the silicone exposure and hard to deny. And Callie had it in spades. They couldn’t let her win. Don’t forget there were several thousand cases through second circuit.

“But we had the best. There was none worth less than $5,000,000. The clients never knew this. We were afraid that **The Twizzlers** would figure it out.”

“Who was the presiding judge? It was federal, not state, right?”

“Oh yeah,” Fat assured Capatorto. “It was federal all right -- with the Honorable Donald Urston presiding. He came over from Brooklyn to hear the case.”

“No shit! The venerable one himself? Doesn’t get much higher than that, does it?” Capatorto had begun to sense the chess play on the board. “So, how did you divide and conquer?”

“I’m not sure that we did,” Fat admitted. “It actually might have backfired on us.”

“Oh?”

“Yes,” Fat went on. “It was right after their depositions at Christmas time. Callie was deposed first, then Candy. Callie was to go to verdict at trial and Candy was to settle. The defendants though it too risky to try Candy, given her injuries. A jury might feel sympathy. She was a cancer survivor, don’t forget. So, Blazer made Candy an offer to settle right after deposition. They even used different local law firms for the depos. I think that made **The Twizzlers** suspicious. I warned Candy not to discuss it with anyone, particularly not Callie. I tried to intimidate her with threats and veiled messages, but she didn’t seem to get it. Then I told her that the defendants would withdraw the offer if any word of it got out. That gagged her for the moment -- she was quite greedy for the dollar -- but I still wasn’t sure that she would keep her mouth shut. The two of them had become very close friends.

“Callie got no offer because Blazer wanted to make a spectacle of her at trial. We knew that Callie would figure there was a fix if Candy revealed her offer. We thought that they would fire us if they realized there were two separate strategies. And the partners were afraid they might get the press to poke into it. Don’t forget they ran a support group -- from where most of my clients came – and they had become lobbyists with some genuine friends in high places. Callie was always in Washington and had been a candidate for a consumer advocate chair on the FDA medical device panel. The defendants’ program had to be upheld, at all costs. Blazer was adamant. They had come to New York with their guns loaded for bear, and made it clear that any slip-ups would kill the deal. They would pursue the plaintiff firms with a vengeance. Alex Trissant was between a rock and a hard place. His own son even quit the firm over the issue. Blazer had offer $1,000,000 per each Century client, to be divvied up any way the firm saw fit. There was $21,000,000 to throw Callie’s case! The other 19 women came away with about $75,000 each. Callie and Candy got nothing. And Trissant had to ensure that his son wouldn’t turn whistle blower. It was an excruciatingly tense time.” Fat exhaled. “There you have it, Leo.”

Capatorto shook his head, muttered something to Fat about finding a new profession and told her to go on. “What about the dog?”

“It was actually her dog named Tyro, the Westminster winner’s sire.” She went on.

‘

V

**PART II**

**CHAPTER SEVEN**

**Earlier in Time**

“Candy,” I yelled, “Calm down. I can’t understand you. You’re breaking up.” Those were the days in which Dot and Com were first courting and their union had still to be consummated. Telecommunications progeny was yet to increase and multiply. My fancy Motorola flip phone was a far cry from the present-day connectivity toys Apple and Samsung sell us. “Let me call you right back.” I clicked off and drove down Route 7 to the nearest satellite tower and dialed her cell again.

“Callie,” she sobbed, “Bingo is dead. I’m at my vet. He thinks he ate something poisonous. I found him convulsing when I got up to walk him this morning.”

“What?” I couldn’t believe it. Her handsome German Shepherd was only four, just a couple of weeks older than my Tyro. “What could it have been? What do you think?” I didn’t know if I should try to comfort her or question her.

“The vet doesn’t know.” She chocked up. “He says poinsettia plants are poisonous, but Bingo’s a big dog and it wouldn’t work on him that fast -- unless he ate it yesterday. But I don’t have any poinsettias in the house. I don’t think that’s it. He could have gotten into someone else’s Christmas display, but no one has the plants outside. I don’t know. I don’t know.” She sobbed. “He was so pathetic, twitching and shaking and foaming. Oh, Callie you can’t imagine how awful it was to watch him. I rushed him to our vet, but it was too late. Oh, how can I get through all this without him? At the holidays, especially…”

I actually hadn’t spoken with Candy since Thanksgiving, almost a month earlier. After her deposition she had begun avoiding my calls and on the few occasions we did connect she had been distant. I had been more suspicious than offended, but couldn’t coax an answer from her. This news about Bingo came as a bolt out of the blue.

Aurora Spirakis had warned us both, “You never know who’s watching. Be careful. You don’t want to blow these cases, now. Lay low, and don’t let Blazer’s spies know you’re friends. They have eyes all over.” I thought she was being melodramatic, but Candy had expressed concern to me about being watched.

“You’re just spooked because of the ghosts in your neighborhood.” I had dismissed her paranoia with a chuckle.

“No, Callie,” she insisted. “I believe I am being watched. The same car passes by my block several times a week.”

But with her husband, Fred, away so much and her only child, Danny, a college freshman, she was alone in her Pelham Gardens house for days on end. Fred was a navigator for United Airlines and their Bronx neighborhood abutting the Hutchinson River Parkway gave him quick access to La Guardia Airport. Wickham Avenue was bit isolated, almost dead-ending into the jogging path which outlined Pelham Parkway’s six-laned traffic. Jacobi Hospital where Candy worked as a medical social worker was directly across the road. The Cohns’ home was two doors from where one of Son of Sam’s teenage victims had lived. The neighborhood never quite recovered from the horror, despite decades of real estate turnover. The lore lingered on.

“Candy,’ I was gentle with my distraught friend. “I know you’re Jewish, but if you and Fred and Danny want, come up here and spend Christmas with us. I know Tyro would love to have you. You are sort of his godmother, after all. And oh, he does miss you.”

“I can’t make any plans right now. I just don’t know what to do.” She whimpered. “But I’ll let you know. Thanks for being there for me.” Then she said “good-bye,” but to my bruised psyche it sounded more like “hello.” What a terrible way to get a friend back. Was I glad or sad, or both?

#

The more I thought about it, the more puzzled I was. I called Candy back the next day and asked, as delicately as I could, if the vet had performed a necropsy. She said no, he hadn’t suggested it and she had been too distraught to even think of it. She was sorry and angry, but Bingo was already cremated.

“Look,” I offered, “I’d really like for you to come up here on Wednesday. Fred’s off and Danny’s home. Stay through the weekend. We’ll have a country Christmas, snow, turkey and all. The only other guest is Tyro’s sister, Pearl. It’ll be good for all of us.”

I was hoping a visit would repair out friendship. I had missed Candy more than I realized. Or, maybe the holiday season just heightened my December doldrums. I do so hate the short days of winter.

“You’re baby-sitting Pearl?” It was more a statement than a question. Candy knew Tyro’s sister as well as she knew him. My breeder friends often left a dog or two with us when they went away. They were visiting their daughter in Raleigh for Christmas.

“Oh sure. Lorraine and Tony are away at Cindy’s for the holidays. It’ her baby’s first Christmas.”

“Then, I guess we have no choice. Pearl is such a good girl. I just love her.” Candy sounded perked up. She really was fond of Pearl. But who could blame her? The “little” bitch was beautiful and endearing in the most mischievous ways -- eighty-eight pounds of snow-white fun.

#

Wisps of snowflakes greeted the Cohns as their maroon Volvo climbed our steep driveway. The dogs were outside behind the PVC pickets, sniffing at the fresh moist air. They stuck out their enormous pink tongues to catch a falling snow-star or flick one off a charcoal nose. They knew the ground would soon be blanketed in angel hair for them to wiggle in. They were like kids waiting for Santa -- too excited to sit still. When Candy stepped out of the car and called him, Tyro turned with a start and stuck his nose way out in front of his massive shoulders, as if to say, “What? Who called?”

“Here boy,” Candy commanded as she unlatched the front gate. “Come give your Aunt Candy a kiss. Pearly, you too.” An ear-to-ear grin lit up my friend’s face as both dogs ran to her. Tyro jumped up to hug her and planted his sloppy greeting squarely on her mouth. “Yuk,” she exclaimed in mock disgust. “Lucky I love you.” Not to be left out, Pearl nudged Candy’s knee, requesting a scratch and pat. “Hello to you too, big girl. Thanks for the invite, Cal. It’s really good to see you too Nick. Merry Christmas to all.” She, Fred and Danny followed us into the house. The snow shower had just turned heavy.

“I’ll let the dogs stay out for a little,” I told my guests as I marched them to their exercise pen. I ushered the Cohns into my dressed-for-the-holidays sun parlor and threw a fresh log onto the half burnt one in the hearth.

“Nicky,” I turned to my husband, “Could you help Fred and Danny take the bags upstairs? Candy and I need to say hello.” With that I held my friend in a big hug and told her how glad I was to see her and how awful I felt about her Bingo. “You need to get a new puppy, right away.” I encouraged her. “We’re not the kind of folks who can get by without a dog.”

“You’re right,” she agreed. “I’m going to North Shore next week. Maybe I’ll adopt an older dog this time. Or maybe I’ll go back to my breeder and wait for her next litter. We’ll see. God, it’s lonesome without Bingo.”

“That’s why I thought it would be good for you to spend time with us,” I told her. “I’m breeding Maggie to Tyro in February. If you’d like a Pyr pup, just say the word. You can have pick of the litter.”

“That’s so generous of you,” Candy was touched. “Let me think about it. But I’m such a Shepherd person. You know how breed loyal we dog people can be.”

“I know. Look, the lights just went on outside. It must be past 4:30 already I said as Candy looked out the window, turning towards the front lawn. The giant Douglass fir in the center of the yard was shimmering blue light as white fluff twinkled on its branches.

“How beautiful. You did the tree to match the house trim. Very effective,” Candy exclaimed. “Just so pretty…”

At that moment, a dark-toned sedan went roaring down the driveway, faster than any sane driver would attempt in slick weather.

“Where did that come from? I didn’t hear anyone drive up.” I turned to Candy in amazement. The men rushed down from upstairs, all at once. “Who was that?” Nick asked, not really expecting an answer.

“It was someone in a late model Taurus,” Fred responded, his pilot’s vision in service. I didn’t see a license plate, though.”

“Oh my God,” Candy cried. “I told you a car was passing by the house, it was a Taurus, I think.”

“Candy, please,” I said to her, “the Taurus is only the best-selling car in America. Maybe someone just got lost…”

But before I could finish my thought Tyro sent up the blood-curling howl that only a Great Pyrenees guarding his endangered flock can conjure. His long, high yowl repeated, three, four, five times.

“Let’s get out there, now,” I yelled as I grabbed my barn jacket from its hall peg. Nicky Fred, Danny and Candy followed as I ran towards the back pen where I had left the dogs to frolic in the snow.

There, immovable as an oak, stood my wonder boy, his sister pinned under him. He had her by the throat, warning her not to fight him. With his left paw, he was kicking at something the size of a man’s shoe, covered with falling snow. He continued his howl, even though he saw us coming, He would not let go of Pearl.

“Ty,” I yelled at him. “What’s wrong boy?” As I reached the dogs, I saw what he was doing. Pearl had tried to eat the snow-covered offering. She had a piece of it in her mouth and Tyro was trying to prevent her from chewing it. I pried the offender from her jaws and Tyro let go of her, pushing the bulk of the food item with his nose and then kicking it as far as he could. “Nicky,” I hollered, “what is that?”

Danny got to it first. He held up what looked like a raw London broil. “What is this?” He was dumbfounded. Apparently KP was not one of his chores. Of course, Candy had spoiled him rotten.

“Oh Danny, you nut,” Candy couldn’t help laughing, but she also couldn’t stop shaking. “It’s a piece of raw meat. You know what that looks like before it goes on the grill.”

“Oh, sure Mom,” the teenager retorted. “But not covered with snow. And what are all these blue dots melting into it?”

“What? Let’s have a look,” Fred took the meat from his son. “This is really bizarre. We need to have this analyzed. Whoever was in that car just tried to feed this to the dogs.”

“Let’s get the dogs into the house, now.” Urgency caused my voice to raise two octaves. “Pearl might have swallowed some of that and I think I know what it is.”

We raced back to the house, stomped our feet in front of the fire and warmed our hands quickly. I toweled Pearl off with the bath sheets I always kept in a tin hamper next to the front door. “Nicky” I instructed, “Get me the Hydrogen Peroxide, fast.”

He was there with the brown bottle in less than a minute. “Here, you hold her mouth open, I’ll pour.” I grabbed the bottle and in one movement had the cap off and three- quarters of the liquid down the soaked and startled little bitch’s gullet. “Poor girl,” I cooed as I stroked and kissed Pearl on the crown of her drenched head. “There, good girl, throw it all up, good girl…” I encouraged her as the poor thing wretched her guts out. Up came her yet-to-be digested lunch, her milk bone treat, and a large chunk of raw meat which she had barely chewed.

“And, that’s that,” I announced as Pearl circled around and settled herself in front of the stone hearth to dry out and recuperate, “Ty, you are the best dog in the whole world. What would we do without you?” I stroked the big bear as I dried his head, his tail and his huge feet. Then I hugged his giant neck and kissed him, over and over, “you just saved your sister’s life.”

“What was that?” Candy just stared at Pearl in disbelief, “Did someone just try to poison your dogs, too?”

“That’s exactly what just happened,” I agreed. “And I’d put money on it that it’s the same person who killed Bingo. If your vet had run a tox screen, I’ll bet it would have shown Bingo was poisoned with DeCon pellets, same as these in this piece of meat.”

“You think?” Candy managed to squeak out before collapsing into sobs.

“Yes, I do.” I assured her, putting my arms around her shoulders and signaling to Tyro to come comfort his friend.

The big guy trotted over, nudged her knee and when she reached down to acknowledge him, he gave her a big kiss on the hand, inviting her to bend down to him so he could lick her face without jumping up and knocking her over. He really was the best dog in the whole world, and he was mine.

“Don’t you think we should have the meat analyzed anyway?” Fred asked. “Just to be sure.”

“I guess, but who do we take it to? The local police.” Nick suggested.

“No, I’ll take it over to Dr. King, as soon as he’s in. Maybe Friday. Just put it in a freezer bag for now. Do you think we should keep it cold?” I asked. “I don’t know if mouse poison dissolves or not. But I’m certain that’s what those blue pellets are.”

“But why would anyone want to kill our dogs, and on Christmas Eve?” The shock of what had just happened was sinking in as Nick’s adrenaline slowed back down.

“Not why, but who.” Candy agreed. The same conclusion I had drawn had also occurred to her. “And for the same reason they killed Bingo -- on the first day of Chanukah. Intimidation. It’s those bastards at Blazer. I told you they were watching me.”

“I’m not so sure. But I swear to you, I’ll find out. Just wait ‘til after the holidays when they’re all back in their offices.” I promised. “Now, let’s shake off the grim reaper and have our Christmas Eve paella. I’ve been cooking it for two days.”

My guests followed me into my big French country kitchen and took their seats -- five of us at the long rectangular table with two giant white snow globes curled up at each end.

“Oh, by the way Cal,” Candy asked, “Where’s Lynne?”

“She’s away with her boyfriend in Puerto Rico this year.” I scowled.

“You really don’t like him, do you?” Candy remarked.

“No, not at all. I’ll have to do something about that…”

**CHAPTER EIGHT**

I waited until Friday, second week of January. The night before I called Candy to tell her I was ready with our plan. Everyone in the law firm was back in place after the new year’s recess and Candy, a municipal employee at Jacobi Hospital, had the day off in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King. She had a knack for information gathering and had sweet-talked Fat’s secretary into getting her a copy of the firm’s meeting calendar. They were to hold their planning meeting on January 12. A full house -- lawyers, accountant, investigative staff -- all in one place.

‘But Callie,” she asked, “how can you be sure it was someone at the firm? I really think it’s those bastards at Blazer.”

“Look Candy, if this doesn’t prove out, we’ll come up with a plan to probe into Blazer’s team,” I promised her. “But our firm is more accessible to us and I have a good hunch that someone there poisoned Bingo. I just don’t know who. I’ll drive down with Tyro and pick you up. Is 9:30 okay with you? That should get us downtown by 10:30 and me and Ty upstairs by 10:45.”

“Okay, sure,” she agreed. “Hugs to the big guy. I’ll bring him a treat.”

“Cool. But hold it until after he does his job.”

On Thursday night I couldn’t sleep. Tyro, sensing my agitation, was restless as well. He kept nudging my side of the bed, his moist back nose poking the eider down full of dents. As I tossed and turned, he stood guard and licked my hand or face or foot -- whatever body part was thrust out from under the covers. Finally, at about 2:30 a.m. he jumped up, circled round three times and settled himself between me and Nick, expelling a great whoosh of air as he snuggled in. I hugged his giant head and tweaked his ear and finally got some shut eye.

Friday morning finally came, cold, but clear and fresh. I dressed in my warmest fisherman’s sweater to avoid needing a jacket while driving. I got Tyro’s service carry pack out of the hall storage bin and buckled him into it. He licked my face with glee, knowing he was going on a special mission, Then I attached my light-weight oxygen concentrator to the backpack and selected an extra-long plastic hose and cannula to be assembled when we arrived downtown. “Screw them,” I cursed Blazer, that I needed the supplemental oxygen. Would I ever see justice or redress for this injury?

I led Tyro to the Windstar, settled him into his cargo area, went back to the house for my travel coffee, and kissed Nick good-bye.

“Good luck,” he wished us as he came out and told Tyro to do a good job. “Do exactly what Mom says,” he told the big guy as if the dog really understood. I think he did.

I headed down the Taconic Parkway towards the Saw Mill River. It was 8:55 a.m. when I turned onto the Cross Westchester Expressway towards the Hutch. I arrived at Candy’s exist off Pelham Parkway at 9:25. Right on time.

My friend was at her door, waiting. She waved, turned the key in her lock and jumped into the Windstar’s passenger’s seat. The automatic door was unlocked for her and I clicked it shut as soon as she was in. “You know how to operate these controls?” I asked. “We’re going to have to hop in and drive off in a hurry.”

“Oh sure.” Candy was excited, but nervous. “Are you sure that you can load Tyro into the van that quick?”

“Don’t worry about him. He’s faster than I am. Just open the passenger side door for both of us and we’ll jump in. Do you want to do a practice run here, now?” I offered.

“I think that’s a good idea.” So, I took the dog out of the cargo area and went over to Candy’s door. You get in the driver’s seat and when you see us moving toward you, open the door,” I called over to her.

As we started out, Candy opened the van’s sliding door and the dog and I hopped onto the second-row passenger bench.

“Okay, go.” I shouted. Candy drove to corner and pulled over.

“I guess we can make a clean get-away,” she laughed as we changed positions. I got Tyro settled back into his area and headed towards Manhattan.

Traffic was light on the Friday morning of a holiday weekend. We zipped down the West Side Highway and over to the financial district in just twenty minutes. I pulled up in front of the Woolworth Building and pushed my emergency flashes on and unloaded my dog. Candy placed her handicapped placard on the rearview mirror. With Ty at the curb, I attached the extra-long oxygen hose to the portable concentrator in his backpack and then placed the cannula at the other end in my nose. “Screw you bastards,” I thought. “I’ll make you pay for this.”

Whenever I needed an “assist” dog, Tyro was ready to port the oxygen for me. No one ever questioned us or denied us passage. Once when my support group was lobbying against tort reform the dog actually rode the tram between the Hart Office Building and the Capitol and went up to the balcony to watch the senate vote, carrying my oxygen concentrator for me.

“Callie, you’re sure about this?” Candy was apprehensive.

“Don’t worry,” I assured her. “The dog is well trained, and don’t forget he visits hospitals as a therapy dog. He’s more reliable than I am.”

“Just don’t let him pull on that tubing. That apparatus makes me nervous.”

“Relax,” I told her. “He’s a pro. We’re gonna get those bastards. We’re gonna get them good.”

I grabbed hold of Tyro’s leash and turned towards Candy. “Just circle around, if you need to move the van. But try to stay here with the flashers on. If a cop tells you to move, just play dumb or something.”

#

We were in the lobby. The elevator bank housed eight cars, each dedicated to different floors. I pushed the appropriate one and waited for an empty car. It’s amazing how people offer assistance when they see oxygen or a wheel chair. “I should use this gadget more often.” I thought. “Too bad I can’t take it swimming or skiing. Bastards.” My oxygen diffusion capacity had been damaged by scaring on the lungs’ pleural lining. I also had fibrosis and pulmonary hypertension. All gratis of Century’s garbage product.

The few visitors in the lobby gave the dog wide berth, and left us alone to the elevator car. “That’s okay.” A lawyerly-looking fellow with briefcase stepped aside. “l’ll get the next one.”

We rode up to the sixth floor and stepped out of the elevator into the firm’s lavish mahogany paneled reception foyer. The travertine floors gleamed under large art deco ceiling globes. The firm’s receptionist had her platinum head turned away from the entrance as Tyro and I sauntered in. She was engrossed in sorting a stack of FedEx envelopes by department. Tyro gave a “woof” in his deepest basso profundo and the girl nearly jumped out of her skin!

“Oh my God,” she exclaimed. “How did you get in here with that beast?” She reached for the security buzzer just as Joel Bayer happened to walk by. The junior partner who was Fat’s supervisor knew me well. He had personally interviewed me for acceptance of my case.

“Mrs. DiMaris,” he snarled. “What are you doing here with that --” He didn’t get the chance to finish his question. Tyro clenched his jaw and began his throaty menacing growl. Low and resonant, he continued his warning and fixed a “Scorpio” glance over his brow, giving Bayer a scary “malocchio.” Then he yanked free of me and attacked attorney Bayer, knocking the slight, needle-nose shyster to the polished marble floor. He was on top of him before I could regain control of the leash. The plastic tubing and cannula, ripped from my nose, had become entangled with the lawyer’s Joseph Abode necktie.

“For God’s sake, Sylvia,” Bayer shrieked at the receptionist. “Get security before he kills me.” Tyro had him pinned, straddling the skinny figure with his massive body as he sat on Bayer’s chest and yanked at the necktie, as if to strangle the man.

I grabbed the leash and regained control. “Let’s go, Ty,” I gasped as I tried to turn him back to the elevators. “Home boy, good job.”

The command worked (as it always did) and the dog gave his big bear head a shake, drool flying in all directions. By this time half a dozen members of the firm had made it into the lobby. They just gaped at me.

Aurora Spirakis had just arrived and yelled at me, “For God’s sake Callie, call the beast off,” just in time to catch one of Ty’s “snot rockets” in her open mouth. In all, the “hit” must have gob smacked at least four or five of the lawyers.

I chuckled to myself as Tyro and I jumped into the first open elevator. “Oh, please go straight down,” I muttered half out loud as the car jolted and then descended to the lobby while I tried to catch my breath.

We ran out of the Woolworth Building that day, never looking back. I thought I heard someone yell, “what the f---” as we whizzed out the door. Candy was right there, thank God. She opened the passenger door and we hopped in, just as we had rehearsed.

“Take off quick,” I said. But there was no need. She had already pulled to the corner of Park Row and was turning onto Broadway. We would be back on the West Side Highway in a flash. It was only 10:35. Way ahead of schedule.

“Well, that’s that,” I exhaled. “At least we got out of there. It was Bayer, alright. He’s the doer.” I related the zany escape and had Candy sputtering with laughter as she relished the vision of Fat under “spit attack.”

“Please Cal, I’m driving,” she choked out.

Candy had already cruised the Windstar past 14th Street on our way uptown. I was really too unnerved to drive. Ty, on the other hand, exhausted from his jaunt, was snoring contentedly in the back. I had repositioned him and moved up to the front passenger seat at West 12th Street.

“You’re so clever.” My friend flattered me. “How did you know it was Bayer? I was so sure it was the Blazer bastards. They’re so known for their dirty tricks.”

“I wasn’t sure at all. But I had the feeling they were up to something besides prepping our cases. Why does Fat keep trying to bully us? We’re not exactly uncooperative or unsympathetic clients. And yet, she’s been treating us like inmates on Cell Block 7 or something. And she doesn’t want us talking with each other.”

“I think all lawyers treat their clients like that. I don’t think you can trust any of them. But I would have sworn that Blazer was watching me. You really think it was Bayer, all along?” Candy repeated.

“Yeah, I do. But, why? I don’t know. I will tell you that Tyro went right for him. “There’s no doubt that he’s the firm’s henchman. Why would they poison our pets? It makes no sense to me, but I can never question Ty’s instinct. He’s never wrong.”

“I know.” Candy agreed.

“You know, if Marcia Clark had only used an animal behaviorist, that trial would have ended differently.” I postulated. “An Akita would always kill for his mistress, unless he knew who the ninja assassin was.”

Candy and I had heard the OJ verdict together that day, as we were driving back from a shopping excursion at Costco. We had pulled off Pelham Parkway onto a side street near Williamsbridge Road as the news came on. Fully expecting justice to prevail, we sat numbed to hear that OJ had been acquitted. Might this miscarriage be an omen for us? There seemed no doubt that justice could be bought.

“Cal, you’re such a believer. That trial was a joke. You should have heard all the black women I work with at the hospital. They hated Nicole. They considered her a whore and a parasite -- stealing a successful black man from their community. It wasn’t that Marcia Clark was a dunce, it was that Johnny Cochran knew how to pick a jury and she didn’t.

“It gives me the chills to think how Aurora can fuck this up for us. Do you think we should look for new lawyers?” Candy’s workplace experience was germane.

“I think that may be a good idea.” I had to agree. “But I just can’t fathom why they would want to harm the dogs…”

At that moment Candy’s cell went off. We had just turned onto the Cross Bronx Expressway, passing under the connector from the Henry Hudson. I reached for her phone so that Candy could focus on the mammoth pothole directly in front of us.

“Oh my God, Can,” I gasped. “It’s Fat.” I recognized the firm’s number.

“Don’t answer.” Candy instructed. “We have to figure this out first. What could she want?”

“Let her call back on the home phone. She’ll have to leave a message and we can save it. She’s up to something.” I was puzzled.

“Maybe she wants to know where I am. You know she tried to break up our friendship several times,” Candy reminded me.

“You don’t suppose she thinks you were involved in today’s fracas, do you? She should only know.”

“I doubt it. She probably thinks that we’re not speaking after…” I quickly changed the subject before finishing that awful memory of estrangement.

“Just look at the debris on this road. We’re lucky if we don’t get a flat here. Wouldn’t that be just wonderful? She swerved to avoid a broken two-by-four, probably jettisoned off some carpenter’s pick-up.

#

We pulled into Candy’s driveway at 11:15. Too early for lunch but too late to start back upstate on an empty stomach.

“Let’s get some lox,” Candy suggested. “Let’s drive over to Waldbaum and I’ll hop in. I’ve got some good bagels in the freezer and a fresh bag of Starbuck’s French roast -- your favorite.”

“How wonderful to have friends who really know you.” I felt lavished in good will.

“Oh, all you Greeks love your coffee strong.” Candy laughed.

“Now, now Can, I’m only half Greek and you know it. My dad could sure brew a mean pot of Earl Grey.” I reminded my friend that I was actually a mutt, unlike my pure-bred dogs and herself with a very precise Austrian-Jewish pedigree.

“Just kidding -- silly. I love to tease you, you’re always so serious,” she chided.

“Well, I am an economist, you know. And you’re a social worker -- we’re supposed to be dour.”

“Okay, long faces and no make-up. Isn’t that what Fat wants from us?” she asked as we pulled into the supermarket’s parking lot.

“I suppose. Oh, please get something good for Tyro to gnaw on. He doesn’t like fish much.” I laughed again.

#

We got back to Wickham Avenue and unloaded the groceries and the dog. We went through the garage into the big Snaidero kitchen. Candy had just finished the makeover before the holidays.

“Wow,” I complimented her. “You did some job here. This must have set you back a year’s salary.” I computed as I took in the six-burner Wolfe cook top, huge Subzero frig and Miele double wall ovens. “Did you lure me back here just to gloat?”

“Now, who’s teasing?” she scowled at me. “You know my brother’s in the business and I do have a kid in college. The only thing we paid for was the labor.” She winked as she tossed a humongous jambone over to Tyro. “Here boy, here’s your reward, Good boy, good dog What a special beast you are.”

#

I stroked his ears with my left hand and munched my Nova, tomato, and cream cheese with my right. “Oh, Can, you really know how to treat a friend.” I savored the sandwich and inhaled the aroma of my favorite Starbuck’s brewing across the room.

“How do you get him to obey the home boy, good job command? I can’t believe how reliable he is. I would have bet he’d go right for Bayer’s throat and ripped it out.” Candy was in awe.

“Lynne taught him that.” I informed her. “She taught him nearly all the tricks he knows. He actually passed his Canine Good Citizen exam with her handling. She’s the only person I could ever entrust him to if I ever had to give him away. They just love each other to death.”

“You think she’ll really move up to Peekskill?” Candy was very interested. “Maybe she can train my new puppy, when I get him.”

“We’ve talked about it. Nick offered her one of the barns to setup a grooming and training business. An adjunct of the kennel. I think it could happen soon.”

She had just broken it off with the boyfriend I didn’t like and was ready for a change. I was happy to think that Lynne might soon be my neighbor. The dogs, Nicky, and I all loved her like family and I, for one, was delighted that she had finally dumped the jerk she had been wasting her time on. She deserved the best. I intended to do all I could to see that she got it.

“Wait a minute -- what new puppy?” Candy had taken me by surprise.

“A Shepherd puppy, of course. I called my breeder and her champion bitch is due to whelp in three weeks.” Candy was kvelling. “I might even get into the show ring with this one.”

“Can, that’s wonderful! But I thought you disliked the whole show circuit political thing.” I was thrilled at the thought of sharing the fun, but really astounded by this revelation. “When did this happen?”

“Oh, it was right after Christmas at your house. I realized that I simply couldn’t be without a dog. I called Wendy right before New Year’s,” she admitted.

“And you didn’t tell me? You sure can keep it close to the vest, can’t you?” I was somewhat offended, although really pleased for her as well.

At that moment the land line rang, once, twice and on the fourth ring the answering machine picked up (this was pre-voice mail). It was Aurora Spirakis.

“Shh,” Candy whispered even though Fat couldn’t possibly hear us. “Let’s get this on tape. What the hell does She want?”

“Candace this is Aurora Spirakis.” The honey was dripping. “I just have to talk to you and also to Callie. So, call me as soon as you get this message. It’s quite urgent. The firm just fired Joel Bayer. I don’t know if you’re aware that Callie was here with her dog this morning and the beast tried to kill Bayer. Callie’s lucky that he won’t press charges because we have now discovered that he was a traitor -- actually feeding information to the Blazer team -- undermining our efforts and trying to blow your cases. When the partners realized this, they fired him on the spot.

“Believe me, we all want the very best for you both and for the rest of our clients. You are our two lead cases and we won’t let anyone compromise your chances. Please call me. We need to meet and plan our strategy. Bayer is now persona non grata and I have to say I’m pleased that the little twerp is gone. I promise you that I will personally ensure that you get the very best representation. Alex Trissant is going to personally litigate your cases. Of course, I don’t have to tell you that he is the number one trial attorney in New York. Tell Callie that I’m sorry for the fray, but she was right to suspect Bayer. That’s one smart dog she has.” Click and she was gone.

“Now what?” Candy turned to me. “Do we trust her?”

“I don’t know, I really don’t. That bitch tells a lie like the truth and the truth like a lie, so you never know with her. We’ll have to wait and see, but it won’t hurt to be on the lookout for new counsel. But I don’t think that will be easy at this point.”

“You’re right. I agree,” Candy said. “But still, why poison the dogs?”

**Part III**

**Back to the Present**

**CHAPTER 9**

All Riker’s conferees assembled at that moment -- lawyers, perps, snitches and conjugal visitors -- turned towards the large, jowly attorney, wracked in mirth. What was so funny? Could they get in on the joke?

Tears rolled down Leo Capatorto’s beefy cheeks as he held his sides in agony. He simply could not control the peals of laughter long enough to get his comments out. Like non-stop hiccups, his laughter just had to run its course. He slapped his knee and tried again to regroup. But the laughter would not stop.

“Leo, for Christ’s sake, it’s not that funny.” Fat was furious. “And all of you,” she indicated her gaping audience with a pointed finger. “Mind your own business or…”

“Or what Fatso,” a twerp with three days’ growth and slicked back pony-tail asked, “you gonna sit on me Mama? Oh, oh cruel and unusual, you got that Barry boy?” He poked his third finger up in his lawyer’s face. “We got anything here we can go with here? Com’on Mama, do me into a pancake.” The twerp jeered and gyrated in Fat’s direction.

“Oh, for God’s sake, Leo. Just look at what you started.” Fat looked at the twerp with disgust and called out, “Guard, get this idiot out of here.”

“You want your lawyer to leave?” The prison guard smirked, joining in on the joke.

“You know who I mean.” Fat held her tongue, not daring to incur the guard’s wrath. She flashed an “I’ll murder you look” in Leo’s direction.

“Okay, folks, fun’s over.” The guard waved the crowd back towards their seats. “Settle down to business or visiting hours are over.”

The twerp retreated to a corner with his counsel; the remainder resumed their prior seats. Sobriety again ruled the gloomy place.

“Sorry, Aurora,” Capatorto apologized, “but you’ve got to admit that scene was hilarious. The dog actually shot that drool of his into your mouth? I can just picture it.”

“Oh, he was one disgusting beast.” Fat spit on the floor. “Yuk,” she grimaced at the memory.

“I’d say he was a pretty smart animal,” Leo chuckled. “So, you got Joel Bayer fired over the DiMaris dog. What was he up to, selling out to the adversary?”

“He actually wasn’t, Leo.” Fat continued.

“Alex Trissant couldn’t take the chance that **The Twizzlers** would figure things out. Too much depended on their cases. So, when Callie came up to the office with the dog and he attacked Bayer, we had to spin it.”

“Did he or did he not poison the dogs?” Leo was irritated at the prospect of another of his client’s lengthy narratives.

“Yeah, he did. It was Alex’s idea, not mine.” Fat lied.

“What the hell for?” Capatorto was astounded. “They’re such gorgeous creatures.”

“Oh, come on, Leo, They’re monstrous.” Fat’s face contorted in disgust again.

“Look I’m not exactly a dog person, but I’ll tell you that the Thornton -- or DiMaris – Pyrenees are beautiful things with more brains and personality than most humans usually have. No doubt if her dog identified Bayer, he was the doer.”

“Oh, he was the henchman, all right. Trissant came up with the idea to kill the pets in order to unnerve them both. He can be so dramatic. Candy was always a little paranoid and Callie too single-minded to intimidate. He thought if we could keep them off guard, we could maintain control. Like I told you, I’m not sure the plan worked. I had to call them feigning shock and trying to reassure them that the firm was behind them 100%.”

“You think they bought it? They didn’t fire you,” Leo analyzed.

“No, they didn’t fire us, but they threatened to,” Fat explained. “And Trissant assured me that if they did, I’d be out on my ass -- my fat ass is what he said -- the next instant.”

“And he had no trouble firing Bayer, after all the dirty work? What made you think he’d honor any deal he made with you?” Leo made Fat squirm.

“You’re absolutely right, Leo.” Fat nodded. “I shouldn’t have trusted him. But I wanted to make partner so badly. I lost sight of the forest for the trees. And I thought I could control my women.”

“You could have quit.” Leo reminded her,

“I didn’t think I’d ever get another law job, if I did.” Fat sighed.

‘So, where did that leave you?” Capatorto urged her to continue.

“That left me at the partners’ mercy. I was their pawn, following their orders and playing the bungling idiot at every pre-trial motion hearing. I was afraid **The Twizzlers** would catch on, but they didn’t. They didn’t have a clue about how a case is actually won or lost in motion practice. They just kept focusing on Century MBF and the medical issues involved. They were so severely injured and yet they had no idea how lawyers operate. Your ‘working girls’ are probably more savvy, Leo.”

“Yeah, they may be, but then I don’t have a hidden agenda,” Capatorto grunted. “What the hell was the deal with those cases?”

“The deal was to throw the DiMaris case. The message was clear. If DiMaris can’t win, no one can. Blazer paid us $1,000,000 per client to divvy up as we wished -- which meant keeping most of it. But then Candy threw a wrench into the works.”

\ “I thought she didn’t have a clue?” Capatorto scratched at the back of his neck.

“Oh, I don’t think she did -- not then anyway. When we lost Callie’s trial, she insisted we litigate her case. No matter what we did, she wouldn’t budge. We had no deal to throw her case, but she left us no choice. It made no sense; except she was so confident that a jury would be sympathetic to a cancer survivor.”

Capatorto just shook his head in disbelief, and then signaled for the guard to let him out.

**CHAPTER TEN**

The week before Memorial Day brought sunny blue skies and renewed greenery to our little corner of Westchester. With lawns freshly mowed, hedges trimmed and old-fashioned wooden fences whitewashed, the neighborhood was readying for another country summer. The McMansions across the road sported freshly planted impatiens in alternate rows of lavender and white. We had just finished painting Pyrfect’s grooming’s barn a deep farm red and Lynne was busy installing a new hydraulic lift grooming table. Summer always saw her business double.

“Hey, Kiddo,” I called over to her. “Don’t work too hard. You’re only young once.”

“Oh, I’m not so young anymore, Callie,” she shrugged. “I’ve got plenty to do to get this place shaped up for the summer onslaught.”

“Well, put it aside for this afternoon. We’re going down to the city to meet with ADA Hudgins,” I told her. “Go get cleaned up. We’re leaving at eleven.”

“Oh?” She was puzzled. “What could he want now? I thought that murder was solved.”

“There’s still the trial,” I reminded her. “It’s in August and we’re on his witness list.” I fibbed. Thom had asked me to come in. I suggested Lynne as an afterthought, telling him she might have a detail or two to add -- certainly true, but not the motive for the suggestion.

“Come on, it will be good for you to get away. Don’t worry about the legal stuff. Just be yourself.” I had focused much maternal energy on Lynne since she had moved up to Peekskill, and when Nick died she became even more the daughter I never had. I longed to see her well settled. “Besides, Candace Cohn is going to be there, too. I’m sure she’d love to see you.”

#

Ten years had passed since Lynne had trained Candy’s little Shepherd bitch. A beautiful puppy, a gorgeous titled champion, and then the afflictions of old age. Poor Chloe had suffered so with arthritis and the dreadful back-end paralysis that claims so many Shepherds that the disease actually takes its name from it -- GSDM -- German Shepherd Degenerative Myelopathy. Candy had been heartbroken and wouldn’t hear of having another dog. Losing them was just too painful. She couldn’t do it again. GSDM had also claimed my valiant Tyro.

#

On the drive into Manhattan, I told Lynne that Thom Hudgins and Bernie Cleary had been talking to me as well as Candy. Thom was deep into it. Today’s meeting was an informal one, just to keep us prepped for trial. He was sure he had enough to get his conviction but he was after bigger fish. He wanted to be sure our testimony opened the right doors to allow him a probative line of questioning. “Do you remember anything about Westminster night?” I wanted Lynne to refresh her memories.

“Oh sure, the judge and TyTwo stood gaping at each other while Spirakis screeched her lungs out.” Lynn grimaced. “Poor dog’s big night and he left without his trophy.”

“That’s good.” I told her. “They can’t refute that. Just don’t mention the gimpy waiter. Leave that to me.”

“Why would I?” Lynne grimaced again. “Do you think he had something to do with it?”

“Maybe. But I really do think it was Spirakis. Who else had a motive to off Steiner? Other than me, of course, and I didn’t do it.” I mused, half to myself. “Anyway, Hudgins is sure he can get his conviction. And Bernie hopes it might allow the silicone fiasco to be reopened. So, we’ll see.”

#

We arrived at One Hogan Place and waited for the elevator to take us up to Thom Hudgins’ office. What a surprise when the doors opened and Leo Capotorto stepped out. Pop goes the weasel, I thought.

“Oh, how are you ladies?” he asked. “It’s Professor Thornton, right?”

“Yes. Nice to see you again, Mr. Capatorto.” Formality reigned.

“Oh, and you’re Ms. Hobbs, the dog trainer, right? I remember you from the Today Show. How nice to meet you.” Leo shook Lynne’s hand enthusiastically.

“Oh, nice to meet you too.” Lynne flashed a shiny grin at Capatorto and turned pink.

He held onto her hand a little too long not be noticed and then asked if she had a business card. “I’d love to learn more about those beautiful big white dogs you ladies breed. I really was quite taken with them.” And also with you. He telepathically whispered to Lynne.

Lynne handed over a Pyrfect Kennels card and told Capatorto she would be happy to oblige.

“Sorry to run, Mr. Capatorto, but we have an appointment.” I steered Lynne into the open elevator.

“I know,” he responded. His eyes remained locked on Lynne’s. “I’ll call. Nothing to do with the law business, I promise.”

#

“We just ran into the Spirakis attorney,” I greeted Thom Hudgins. “He seemed to know you’re expecting us.”

“Oh, don’t worry about him.” The ADA motioned for us to take seats opposite him across from his large oak desk. A number of framed academic degrees, licenses, and certificates embellished the drab walls behind him. Just what one would expect from a professional of his stature. But, when he leaned back and stretched his legs over the desktop, exposing a well-worn hole in the sole of his burgundy loafer, I couldn’t hide my surprise.

“Mr. Hudgins,” I exclaimed before I could stop myself. “Do you know your shoe has a hole in it?”

“Oh?” He craned his neck around, examined the bottom of his foot and shrugged. “I guess it’s time for a trip to Barney’s. I’ve been so wrapped up in this case, I haven’t given a thought to anything else in months -- which reminds me -- Bernie Cleary is on her way over. She’s going to give you the ‘girl stuff’ prep on trial attire. We want you to look yourself, but don’t try too hard. We want the jury to like you, not notice what you’re wearing, if you know what I mean.” He raised both eyebrows and gave us a tight-lipped grin.

“Wear the clothes, don’t let them wear you?” I offered in an attempt to help him out.

“Something like that, yes.” he said. “Now, let’s go over your recollections one more time.”

I recounted the events of Best-in-Show Night, including the sighting of Fat and Skinny through the opera glasses.

Lynne described Spirakis in her black knit dress as a stack of Michelin tires.

“She made me spray a mouthful of water all over the place.” I laughed and praised Lynne for her terrific sense of humor.

The mirth was lost on the prosecutor. He smirked and moved on to another line of questioning. “We don’t want the jury amused,” he advised. “We want them angry and disgusted with her.” Damn, I thought as I watched my match-making fizzle. Could he be gay?

“Do either of you remember seeing the waiter who brought the Champagne to them?”

The million-dollar question.

“Why yes,” I replied. “I did catch that. The guy did walk with a limp. Is it important?”

“Could be,” a poker-faced reply.

At that moment the secretary buzzed and announced that Candace Cohn had arrived with Special Agent Cleary.

“Ladies,” Hudgins began, “please make yourselves comfortable. Coffee? spring water? -- diet Pepsi for Bernie, I know.” He got up and went to his “half-pint” office fridge and fished out the cold drinks. “Anyone want coffee, or tea? It’s down the hall in the break room. I’ll get it.”

I realized that the DA’s office was short on amenities and its current culture didn’t encourage wait staff use of the secretaries. “No, not for me. Poland Spring will do just fine.” Lynne and Candy followed my lead and we settled in for our first prep session all together.

“Did we just see Capatorto on his way out?” the FBI agent asked. “He must have been here because all of his other cases are in night court, across the street.”

“Yeah, it was him. Came in with a ‘hypothetical’ to get his client’s charges reduced.”

“Oh?” Cleary’s nostrils flared. “Do I smell a rat?”

“Don’t worry, Bernie. We’re going all the way with this one. She’s guilty and I can prove it.” Thom waved his associate off. “He’s just doing his job. I don’t envy him.”

The rest of the meeting centered on the events of the dog show, how much we remembered, and how accurate our recollections were.

“The waiter with the limp.” Hudgins went back to it. “Do either of you know his name? He was the one whose case Spirakis allowed to get dismissed.

Candy and I both said we were sorry, but we really only knew Fat’s silicone breast implant women from our support group. We hadn’t realized that she had any other type of personal injury cases.

“Come on, ladies.” Hudgins cast us a sour look. “I know you’ve been in the basement, pulling cases. Didn’t you look up all of her clients?” He prodded us with uncharacteristic zeal.

“No, no,” Candy assured him. “We did look but couldn’t find any others, except for a med-mal case for a baby with a birth injury resulting from a forceps delivery.”

“I’m pretty sure the waiter had a foreign sounding name -- something like Zabargado. I found it on a docket list” I admitted, not risking getting caught in a lie.

“Good, that’s good.” He eased off. “This is what you’ll face on the stand. Don’t let Capatorto fool you. He seems gruff but he is a seasoned pro. And he knows his way around criminal defense work. Don’t forget, his hookers often get into serious jams.”

‘So, you think he’ll be brutal on us?” I asked.

“That’s what a trial is.” Terse as always. “You’ve been through it before.”

“Yes, we have,” Candy jumped in. “We can handle it. I don’t think Capatorto could be any worse than those Blazer bastards.” Candy was never to let go of her hatred towards the device manufacturer, just as I would pursue Spirakis and Steiner straight to hell. And one of them was already there.

“He’ll do what he has to. Let’s make sure that you’re both ready. I might have to call you too, Lynne, you are on the witness list. But I’ll try not to.”

“If you don’t, will her lawyer still want to?” Lynne asked.

“Could be,” was all Thom offered. “Now, Bernie’s going to go over wardrobe with you. Have a good time.”

With that he excused himself and left the three of us with Special Agent Cleary. He went out into the reception area to look at his PDA. Apparently, it had been buzzing during our meeting.

#

“Thanks for getting back so fast, Nat,” he said. “I couldn’t take your call while I was in with the women. But I do have news for you -- and a giant favor to ask, as well.”

“Okay, Casper, what gives?” Valdes was up to her chin in paperwork from the previous week’s arrests. “I need a break,” she yawned. “You should see the mountain of activity

in front of me.”

‘Well hold onto your carbons,” he warned her. “Capatorto was in to see me. He seems to think we’re going to pull Foxworthy for the Spirakis trial.”

“What? He’s an arraignment judge. How could that be?” Valdes vaulted out of her ennui.”

“Not anymore. He’s now a New York State Court justice. Capatorto is asking for TV coverage in the courtroom.” Thom added.

“Holy -- that’s just not done.” The detective’s interest was piqued. “So, what Casper? You want me to see what I can find out?” she asked.

“Oh sure. But that’s not the favor.”

“What then? Do you want me to set you up with my sister for a Memorial Day picnic?” she teased.

“No thanks. I could ask your sister myself -- that’s if I wanted to, but I don’t. But, would you mind taking me shopping at Barney’s? It seems I’m in desperate need of a wardrobe update,” Hudgins confessed. “I really don’t have a thing to wear and if we’re going to be on TV…”

“That’s a laugh,” Valdes chuckled. “I can’t see how Foxworthy would permit it, but, yes, I can do Barney’s with you. How’s Thursday night? It’ll take more than one trip; I promise you that.”

“I’m really that bad, huh?” He glanced down at his worn loafer.

“You got that right! So do I get a nice dinner for my trouble?” she negotiated.

“Of course. You pick the place. Oh, and Nat, one more favor, please?” he cajoled. “Would you wear that mini skirt I love so much? You know -- the red leather one.” Visions of Natalie’s gorgeous long legs were dancing in his head.

“Casper! That’s not proper attire for Barney’s. And its ultra-suede and maroon, not red,” she chided.

“So, call me color blind. But would you wear it for me? Please? I won’t be so intimidated by those snooty clerks if you and those gams of yours go in there with me,” he pled.

“Yeah, right,” she chortled. “Grow up Thomas. That will cost you dinner at Minetta Tavern.”

“It’s a date.” He smiled.

**CHAPTER ELEVEN**

The second week of June found Lynne and me draping half a dozen “old glories” over the front porch railing, balloon curtain style. Set against the white pickets with the deep red barns at a distance, the house and Pyrfect Kennels were as inviting a picture as any patriot could ask.

“Go put on more sun block,” I urged Lynne. “You’re so white. I’m afraid you’ll fry into a barbeque chip by noon.”

“Callie, you are sooo… maternal.” She laughed. “You really should have had some grandchildren to cluck over.”

“Well not in my cards,” I lamented. “Not the human kind anyway. Just the canine.”

“Speaking of which, Tia is due to whelp this week. I’m hoping they come on Flag Day, then we can theme them after the thirteen originals -- or at least the first six -- we’ll have Virginia, Maryland and Delaware for the girls and New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts for the boys. Won’t that be a fun litter?”

“You’re about as nuts as I am,” I told her. ‘I think we must have been a family in another lifetime.”

“Well, we certainly are in this one!” And with that my protégé gave me an enormous, joyous hug. “That’s just a bonus for good luck,” she said. “Oh, and by the way, I have to tell you something amusing. That lawyer, Leo Capatorto, is coming up for a visit,” she stammered. “He wants to see some puppies, but I told him he can’t see Tia’s litter until they’re at least six weeks old. He understood the quarantine but said he still wanted to visit the kennels. He really wants to buy a Pyr. Says he just fell in love with Holly and TyTwo.”

“Careful, Lynne.” I was alarmed. “Remember, he’s the Spirakis attorney. I think it’s highly irregular for him to initiate any contact with us at all. The last thing we need is for any impropriety to compromise ADA Hudgins’ case. Capatorto must be up to something.”

“Oh, I really don’t think that’s it at all.” Lynne was confident. I could tell by the way she squared her shoulders back. “He asked to take me to lunch at L’Ville Auberge.”

“Lynne!” I was startled. “He’s the enemy.”

“I don’t think he’s hostile at all. I think he really likes the dogs and I think he likes me, too.” She turned pink, and not from sunburn.

“Oh God,” I groaned. “What now? L’Ville Auberge? He must do okay defending his hookers.”

#

A week after Flag Day Leo Capatorto dressed himself carefully. New navy Dockers and a white polo shirt with a red logo. He reminded himself to make sure the price tags had been clipped off. He put on his Raymond Weil wristwatch and then decided that the leather banded Movado was better. His Kenneth Cole loafers were newly broken in and polished to a high shine. A brand-new Schick had scraped his face close enough to stave off his after-five shadow -- at least until seven p.m. Altogether, his bathroom mirror assured him that he would pass muster. As an afterthought, he reached for the Old Spice and splashed his face with it. Then he climbed into his large white Chrysler and headed north towards the Taconic with a CD of “Jersey Boys” for company. “Don’t be so nervous,” he told himself. “It’s only a lunch date.”

“Mr. Capatorto,” Lynne called out from Pyrfect Kennels’ Grooming Barn, “over here.” She beckoned him past the house to the property’s commercial zone.

“Hi, Lynne,” he smiled. “Please call me Leo. This is an entirely social visit. Thanks for letting me come up, with the new litter and all.”

“Oh, they are just gorgeous! I can’t wait to show them off, but not for four or five weeks -- you know that -- Leo.” Lynne felt her face warm up “Damn,” she thought, “I’m not even facing the sun.”

At that moment TyTwo and Holly bounded out. Both were freshly groomed with “stars and stripes” bandanas garnishing their glorious ruffs. They headed directly for the jowly lawyer, sniffed his feet and then embraced him. TyTwo rose up hugging the man’s shoulders and licking his ear while Holly approached from behind jumped up and nibbled the back of his collar, poking his neck with her cold nose.

“Ah,” Lynne thought to herself. “Saved by the dogs.” She knew her blushing was genetic and she could never control it. “TyTwo, Holly, manners,” she commanded and the two dogs sat, each offering the visitor a paw.

“Wow, that’s some greeting,” Leo laughed. “Quite different from the first time I was here.”

“They must have decided that you’re okay.” Lynne flattered her guest. “They really are infallible judges of character. And I think they like your cologne. Old Spice? Right? I always bought it for my dad for a stocking stuffer.”

“I’m so glad to hear that. You have no idea. So did you name the new puppies after the original states of the union like you said?” Capatorto joked, at ease now. “Who’s Pennsylvania and who’s New York?”

“We actually had seven,” Lynne told him. “We had Maryland, Virginia, and Delaware picked for girls’ names but we had a fourth girl and she’s Connecticut. And we have New York, New Jersey and Massachusetts for the boys. We didn’t name any for Pennsylvania. I think Massachusetts is the pick of this litter. He’s just gorgeous.”

“Then may I come back in five weeks?” Leo asked. “They must be adorable. I’ve been reading a lot about them. But how could anything top TyTwo?” He reached down to his knee and scratched the big fellow’s ears, not giving a thought to the white hairs clinging to his crisp navy slacks.

“He is a tough act to follow. But that’s a breeder’s dream, to always top the record. And actually, you didn’t know his father, Tyro. That dog was truly one of a kind. He was Callie’s “heart dog.” That’s what dog people call their all-time favorite. He was my heart dog too,” Lynne was full of pride.

“Let’s get over to the restaurant,” the lawyer suggested. “Our reservation is for twelve thirty. Although I don’t think it’s too busy today. And by the way, Lynne, I hope I don’t have to wait five weeks to see you again.”

Lynne blushed and her laughing blue eyes assured the lawyer of his success. “Just wait ‘til Fourth of July. You won’t be able to get into that place.”

#

“Waiter,” Leo commanded, “bring a half bottle of Pouilly Fuisse, please, and some Pellegrino, as well.”

“Well, you certainly know how to give a girl options,” Lynne smiled, her cheeks warming. They sat at a small banquette in the far corner of the old country inn.”

“Are you that easy to please?” Leo grinned. “Then I must be a lucky man, at least for today. What’s good here, and don’t say everything. I already know that.”

“Well, the house specialty is Veal Francese. But I particularly love the Chef’s Avocado and Shrimp salad,” Lynne told him. “How did you know about this place, coming from the city and all? It is sort of remote.”

“I confess my PDA is my genie. I never lose my way and I’m never at a loss for restaurant info. I also looked at the local newspaper, on-line,” he added.

“Wow, I never would have thought of that. Aren’t you the resourceful one?” Lynne was impressed.

“It’s what we lawyers are trained to do --” Leo raised a hand, open palm up. “No shop talk, I promised. Now, tell me everything I need to know about owning a Great Pyrenees.”

“Well,” Lynne began, “the first thing is that they’re expensive. Three grand for a pup from this litter, because it’s TyTwo’s, of course. You can find a cheaper breeder, or you can always rescue a dog whose owner had to give him up.”

“The price doesn’t matter. Go on.” Leo motioned for the waiter to take their orders.

“The Shrimp and Avocado Salad for the lady and I’ll try your Veal Francese.”

“Oh, so you’ve been our guest before?” the young man in black tee shirt and white cut-off jeans remarked. “Our most popular items.”

“No,” Leo said. “But I have a terrific scout here, with very good taste.”

Lynne felt herself turn pink.

“You blush an awful lot.” Leo smiled and reached across the table for her hand. He turned her palm upwards and commented about her long-life line and robust good health.

“Oh, you read palms, too.” Lynne was feeling a tingle creep from her finger tips to her arms and face. She flushed a deeper pink and bit her lip in annoyance with herself.

“No,” Leo told her. “It’s just an excuse to hold your hand. You’re so ingenuous.”

“Oh, my blushing tells you that?” Lynne teased. “Tell me more.”

“The blushing tells me that you can’t hide your feelings very well. That makes you honest. And ingenuous is just my way of saying you’re attractive in a delightful and refreshing way. And that Colgate smile doesn’t hurt a bit.” He hoped he sounded sincere because he was.

“You have to remember that I deal with a very cynical element. My clients can be quite jaded, even the more sophisticated of them can have an unpalatable edge.”

“Sophisticated? I thought you represented call girls?”

“That’s exactly what I mean by ingenuous,” Leo smiled and squeezed Lynne’s hand. “They’re not all Sidewalk Sallies. I have some very high-priced ‘escorts’ on my roster. You would really be surprised. Enough!” Leo steered the conversation back to Lynne. “I came here to learn about the dogs and get to know you.”

“What appeals to you for dessert? And I don’t t want to hear any nonsense about dieting.” He beckoned their waiter to show them the pastry cart.

“I couldn’t.” Lynne protested. “The desserts here are huge!”

“Tell you what, we’ll share. How about Baked Alaska in honor of our gorgeous fury friends?”

“Sounds good, Leo, but there is one thing I have to make clear.”

“Don’t worry,” he assured her. I will definitely eat my half.”

‘No, no, really. About the puppies. Pyrfect Kennels cannot sell or place a puppy with an owner who is not properly equipped to raise it. You live in an apartment, don’t you?” she asked him.

“Yes, in Chelsea,” he admitted.

“Well, these dogs need space to run. They’re wanderers and you have to have a yard with good fencing. Another thing. They’re barkers. You already know that. You can’t live too close to neighbors who might complain. And, you work long days, right? A puppy needs attention just like any other baby. You just can’t go out and leave him alone all day. And also, they are very high maintenance. They leave their hair all over and the males tend to dribble more kibble on the floor than they get in their mouths. I don’t mean to discourage you, but you have to think this through. We can’t sell a puppy if we think it might need to be returned to us.”

“Funny you should bring that up.” He smiled and motioned the waiter to place the dessert in-between them. “I’ll have an Espresso, and bring the lady an iced Cappuccino,” he requested as the Baked Alaska was set in place.

“Funny? And how did you know I love iced Cappuccino?”

“Déjà vu, maybe. And funny because I’ve been looking at real estate opportunities for a couple of months -- ever since I first came up here and met you friend Callie, I think it’s time for me to get out of the city.”

His revelation had the desired effect.

“But, what about your practice? Don’t you need to be near the courthouse, sort of like a doctor on call?” Lynne was taken by surprise.

“Sure. You’re right. I get called for bond hearings at all hours. But,” -- he let out a long-held breath -- “to tell you my secret, after this trial, I’m quitting defense work. Maybe I’ll even quit the law game completely. It’s time to get a better life.”

“Wow,” Lynne was shocked. “I don’t even know you but I do know that lawyers don’t give up their careers just like that. Do you want to tell me what’s going on?”

“No, I can’t. I’m not sure myself. But I can tell you that lawyers are an unhappy lot. About one-third, I think, leave the business every year. The only profession with a higher rate of attrition is psychiatry -- and a lot of them end up as suicides. It’s draining to always deal with duress. I’m weary. I need a change. But one thing I can tell you for sure is that I would like to have a Great Pyrenees puppy. And, I would like one that can be a show dog. I need a fun hobby.”

“But have you any clue as to what it costs to campaign a winning dog?” Lynne stabbed at the Baked Alaska without realizing it.

“Actually, yes,” Leo answered. “I remember your discussion with Kathy Curry the morning after Westminster…”

“Oh?” Lynne’s mouth was agape.

“I’ve actually reviewed the tape of that segment many times. At first, just to get a handle on the Westminster homicide, but you sucked me right into the dog world. And then I met Callie.”

“So,” he continued, “tell me more about yourself. I know how you met Callie, but what about your life before that? Did you always want to be involved in the dog world?”

“Actually, Leo, I did. I thought I would be a vet. But just as I was about to start college, my parents were killed in an auto crash…”

“How awful, I’m so sorry.” Leo took her hand and squeezed it. His dark eyes held fast on hers. “Do you have brothers or sisters?”

“No, I was an only child,” she admitted, “and I was terribly shaken up.”

“I get it.” Leo responded. “I was an only child, too. It’s a lonely existence, don’t you think? I always wished for a sibling.”

“Me too.” Lynne agreed. “I always planned to have at least four kids, myself. Since I was in kindergarten. Teacher asked us what we wanted to be when we grew up and I said I wanted to be a mother with lots of children. Instead, I have dogs. Me and Callie.”

“Fate can be cruel,” Leo commented. “But maybe there’s a master plan. Where did you grow up?”

“In Paoli Pennsylvania…”

“Ah, Main Liner.” Leo got the picture. “And what happened to vet school?”

“Well, I was supposed to enter Bryn Mawr that September. My parents were killed in June, right after my graduation, and since I was almost eighteen, the court declared me an emancipated minor, responsible for my own welfare. So, I jumped right into adult life and went to junior college instead of Bryn Mawr. Then I went to grooming school and the rest is history. Oh, and yes, my parents did leave me well-off financially. But money can’t make up for such a loss.

“I know what you mean,” Leo sympathized. “I lost my dad when I was small. We lived in Riverdale -- that’s really part of the Bronx, but people outside New York don’t realize that. They think it’s a Westchester suburb. My mom was a legal secretary and eventually remarried --Uncle Johnny. A really great fellow. They’re still together -- twenty-five years last March. Uncle Johnny was an attorney and guided me through law school. I went to Brooklyn Law, his alma mater.

“And undergraduate? -- as long as we’re doing true confessions,” Lynne reached for his hand.

“Oh, Manhattan College in Riverdale. I lived at home. I’m actually an engineer, believe it or not.” Leo chuckled and squeezed her hand.

“So, you must be a great handyman.” Lynne teased.

“Actually,” he said, “I am. I also cook.”

“Cook?” Lynne was genuinely surprised.

“Of course,” Leo boasted. “An Italian man who doesn’t cook? Quando Mai?”

She furrowed her brow. ‘What does that mean?”

“It roughly means there’s no such think. That’s why they’re always making the sauce in the gangster movies.”

“Well, you really are a catch, aren’t you?” She turned bright pink, amazed by her own momentary forwardness.

“If you say so,” Leo replied. “When can I see you again?”

“How about you come pick out your puppy week after next?” She winked. “I’ll have a surgical mask and gown for you. You’ll have to leave your shoes at the door. Okay?”

“Really? You’ll sell me a TyTwo puppy?” Leo grinned.

“Only if you move into a house. We’ll keep him here until you’re ready. Boy or girl?” she asked.

“How about one of each?”

Leo reached for her hand again. She felt a warm tingle creeping up her face, but this time it also burned downward, between her thighs.

“I do think I can arrange that,” she said. “I’ll tell Callie.”

#

The ride back to the city gave Leo a chance to think. “Do you know what you’re doing?” he asked himself. “Do you know what you letting yourself in for?” The Jersey Boys belted out “My Eyes Adored You,” and the lawyer smiled. “I think I do,” his inner voice answered, “I think I do.”

As he drove the winding parkway back towards the city he mused about his life, his career, his fate, and his immediate dilemma. Aurora -- “She’s not the murderer. I’m sure of that, he told himself. What did she have to gain? Steiner was valuable to her alive, not dead. Steiner promised to help her get a substantial law job. After what she did to Callie and Candace Cohn, and the rest of her women, she was labeled a pariah. No one would hire her. With Steiner dead, she remains a bottom feeder of the worst order. No, she had no motive to off Steiner.” He was sure of it. Besides,” he reminded himself, “no defense lawyer can ever think his client is anything but innocent. That’s just the way it works. I really do need to find another line of work,” he sighed. He was so lost in thought that he almost missed the Riverdale exist to his mother’s house.

**CHAPTER TWELVE**

“Nithe to thee you again, Mither Capatorto. Make yourthelf comfortable.” The Honorable Jacques Foxworthy motioned for Leo to take the seat nearest his 122large mahogany desk in his chambers.

He greeted Leo with a spray of his morning brew perched to the left of his desk calendar so he could “sip and lisp” his way through the morning’s docket.

“Where is your adversary this thine Friday morning?” the judge asked, casting about for Thom Hudgins. “Thith is a motion hearing to move thith court? Yeth? I read your paper, Mither Capatorto. Very Perthuasive…”

“Thank you, your Honor,” Leo interrupted before the judge could go off on a tangent. “I’m sure that my esteemed colleague will be her momentarily. I’m actually early, your honor.”

“Ah, yeth, that ith tho. I thee ith’s only theven minutes of nine. Early for you, Mither Capatorto. Very early. Would you like thome coffee? My clerk will be happy to oblige you. The judge sat back and slurped his Grande, dabbing his Van Dyke with a wad of Starbuck’s paper napkins.

“Thanks, your honor. I would A latte would be very nice.” Leo settled in as the lanky clerk was sent scurrying to the lobby’s vending area.

“Oh, Jim,” Leo called after the young lawyer. “May as well bring another Grande, black, two sugars for Thom. He should be here any sec--”

“Did I hear you call me, Leo?” Hudgins asked as he sidled up to the judge’s other Hunter green leather chair.

“Nice to see you Thom. I just ordered you a Starbuck’s. Two sugars, right?” Leo answered as Hudgins seated himself in the wing-back chair.

“Boys, boys,” Foxworthy spritzed his coffee all over the desk calendar as well as Leo’s brief. “How nice to thee thuch friendly advertharies. Oh, Mither Capatorto, it theems I have drowned your paper, dear, dear…”

“Not to worry, judge. I’ve another copy right here.” Leo reached into his brief case and handed the judge a second copy. “Same as the first, I promise…” The judge’s courtroom antics were a long-standing part of the courtroom lore and Leo knew to be prepared.

“Mither Hudgins?” Foxworthy raised one bushy white eyebrow in Thom’s direction.

“Oh, yes, Judge.” Thom presented his Honor with a copy of his brief. “I thought you might like to have a second copy.” Thom also knew that paper management was not this judge’s strong suit.

“Good, good. Now, let’s get to work. Mither Capatorto, you’re on firthst. Let’s hear from you.

“Your Honor, my client, Aurora Spirakis, a member of the bar and officer of this court, was arrested and held without bail on motive alone. There was not then, and is not now, one iota of physical evidence tying her to this crime and…”

“Mither Capatorto,” the judge wagged a bony finger, “thith is not opening argument. Thave it for trial. Get to the point. I denied her bail, mythelf, remember?”

“I’m getting there Judge. Just cut me a little latitude, please. This is a very high-profile case and my client’s life as well as her good name are at risk. Even when she is acquitted, her reputation will be so tarnished, she may not be able to practice law in this venue or elsewhere. She will be a pariah.”

“She’s already there. Pariah doesn’t begin to describe her. She has no good name to risk, the’s not a very thypathetic defendant. We all agree. Your point Mither Capatorto?” the judge wanted a quick statement.

“My motion is to allow TV cameras in the courtroom, your honor. Since Ms. Spirakis will be tried by the media, in addition to a jury of her peers, we want there to be full disclosure and a public record of this trial.” Leo was on his feet, motioning to his audience of two as if they were a full jury box in front of him.

“No need for theatrics, counsel,” Thom refuted. “You’re wasting everyone’s time. Section 52d of New York Civil Rights Law specifically prohibits cameras of any kind in the courtroom.”

“And that law was passed in 1952. Isn’t it about time New York States joins the twenty-first century?” Leo asked. “We are one of only nine states that hasn’t yet done so.” Leo was meticulous in his research.

“I’m sure, as defense counsel is aware, that is up to the legislature and not the trial court judge.” Thom stood his ground.

“Boys, boys, no need for the thoap box in here,” Foxworthy interjected. “Relaxth, Thave the drama for the courtroom.”

“Yes, your honor.” Leo sat and continued his argument.

“To allow cameras is a trial judge’s purview when a statute violates the first amendment requiring that criminal trials be open to the press unless there are compelling and clearly articulated reasons for closing them. This is a high-profile case, your honor. One lawyer accused of killing another? Surely press from around the country will be intent on covering it.”

“I’m not concerned about the press,” Thom countered. “I’m concerned about a fair trial which means barring a media circus. Obviously, Albany shares that concern.”

“But you’re putting a lawyer on trial.” Capatorto appealed to the judge. “Hoopla is a foregone conclusion. Your honor, there are precedents for ignoring the statue…”

“What’s really going on here, boys?” Mither Capatorto, you really can’t want your client’s pretty face on TV, now, can you?” The judge interrupted.

“If my client is to be crucified merely because she is a member of the bar, the least I can ask is that the public bears witness.” Capatorto seemed genuinely indignant.

“Ah what the hell. It’s about time we shake up those old boys up in Albany.”

Foxworthy sipped on his Grade and smiled.

“Your Honor!” Thom jumped to his feet in protest, trying his hardest to convey shock and surprise.

“Come on Thom, who’s it gonna hurt? Get yourthelves prettied up for the cameras boys. Hmmm… Maybe I thould take a haircut?” His honor waved the two lawyers off and settled into a reverie, sniffing his white rose in its Boda vase.

#

“One for you, Leo,” Thom commented as they rode an empty elevator car to the lobby.

“Oh, come off it Thom, we all won. Won’t do you any harm to let the public see you in action, Mister District Attorney,” Leo chided.

“Mr. ADA.” Thom corrected.

“For now. By the way, I heard you already got some fancy new duds at Barney’s.”

“What?” It was Thom’s turn for surprise.

“Relax, relax.” Leo laughed. “One of my hooker clients actually works there. Shirts and ties. I hear you like Hugo Boss. And your girlfriend’s pretty hot, too.”

“Phew,” Thom thought. “At least she didn’t know Natalie out of police garb. Or did she?”

“Oh, don’t look so surprised.” Leo smirked. “See you next time counselor. This is going to be a good one.”

“Another latte, Leo?” Thom offered, hoping for more of Capatorto’s tidbits.

“Thanks Thom. Another time. I’ve got a date with a realtor at noon. Got to catch the 10:59 out of Grand Central.” Leo headed uptown.

#

“Hello Leo, I’m Kate Walsh.” The tall, tailored blonde of undefinable age and notable designer attire was waiting at Peekskill’s Metro North Station. “I recognize you from your own description. You’re very unique.”

The realtor extended her hand. Leo was stunned by its nudity -- no rings, short, unpolished nails, a simple Timex on her right wrist. Another type of working girl, he noted. A serious one. He had chosen her from a list of ReMax Million Dollar Sales Club achievers.

“Glad to know you, Kate. Thanks for picking me up. This will be easier than jockeying two cars all afternoon.”

“Not a problem,” she assured him. “Here’s the group of listings I’ve prepared for you. Let’s grab some coffee and go through them so we can decide what to look at first.”

With that she headed for the local Starbuck’s drive through.

“I’ll have a cold latte, if you don’t mind.” Leo requested.

“Hmm, very continental of you,” the realtor noted. “And you like to cook.”

“As a matter of fact, yes, I do cook and the coffee’s not so continental a taste as it is a Manhattan fad, at the moment. But I have grown fond of them.” Leo confessed.

“Well, you told me that a well-equipped kitchen is important. And a family room or den that can open out to a yard for your dogs.”

The realtor shuffled listings, choosing the most appropriate listings first. “I have half a dozen houses to show you today. Three are at Troy Hills Estates and three are in Stone Mont Lakes Preserve.”

“What’s the difference between the two communities?” Leo asked.

“Oh, about $250,000,” Kate informed. “Stone Mont Lakes has a zoning of five-acre plots and a very particular HOA. Troy Hills is just as nice but a little cozier. The houses are on two-acre plots and its pet policy is quite liberal.

“And Stone Mont’s is not?” Leo asked.

“Not exactly. They have restrictions on numbers per household -- only two. And if there are more than three nuisance complaints, you’ll be compelled to get rid of a barker or a roamer. They’re quite strict. What kind of dogs do you have, Leo?” she asked.

“None yet,” he told her. “But I’m planning to buy two Great Pyrenees shortly.”

“How ironic!” Kate laughed. “Did you know that this year’s Westminster champion lives right here at Pyrfect Kennels? He and his breeder are quite famous in this town. In fact, she used to own the farmland that’s now Troy Hills.”

“Then, I think we need only to look at Troy Hills. Pyrenees are famous for their incessant barking and they do like to wander when they get loose. You have three possibilities there?” Leo asked. He remembered full well that Callie had mentioned the McMansions across the road were built on her acreage.

“Yes, I do. And they’re all very good buys right now. I think you’ll like the one with the chef’s kitchen. How nice to find a man who cooks!” She seemed so sincere. Leo couldn’t decide if she was flattering or flirting.

“I’ll invite you for dinner. That’s a promise,” he told her. “Let’s leave the chef’s kitchen for last so that I can have a point of comparison.”

And they headed off to the McMansions directly opposite Pyrfect Kennels. Leo smiled to himself. A good move to leave the Chrysler home. He intended to keep his plans private until after Fat’s trial.

#

“Candy, Candy, please be home. Answer the phone, please.” I prayed as I punched in Candy’s number. “This is not going on your answering machine.”

“Cal?” Candy came on the line. “I see you’re on the cell. What’s up?”

“You won’t believe it.” I spit out. “I just ran into my friend Kate and…”

“You mean the pretty one who sells all that real estate up there?” Candy knew Kate from various get-togethers at my house and craft shows in town.

“Yes, yes. Her. Listen to this… I think we have a situation…”

**CHAPTER THIRTEEN**

The little bailiff shepherded ninety-nine bedraggled citizens of New York down the corridor towards Judge Jacques Foxworthy’s courtroom. The sweltering August morning was melting each of the jurors away, one degree at a time. By noon they might all drop like flies. The court’s AC was on over-load and the lights from the TV crew only added steam to the chaos.

Bailiff Raglan moved his charges along. “Right this way, ladies and gentlemen, right this way. Watch your step, sir,” he advised an elderly gentleman leaning on a silver-toned horse-handled walking stick. The bailiff’s starched white shirt was already ruined with sweat stains and his eyeglasses fogged up, yet the dapper old boulevardier in linen blazer and green bow tie appeared cool as a cucumber – Maurice Chevalier himself. “It will be better inside the courtroom, single file, follow me,” the bailiff barked. Rumor was that all proceedings would be suspended by noon if the AC could not be brought back to life.

A guide dog carefully led her charge to the front of the line. “Please sir,” the young blind woman begged, “can I get some cold water for my dog? The bottle in my back pack is too warm by now.”

“Miss,” Raglan growled. “You know you can be excused from duty. In fact, I’ll let you go right now. What is your name?”

“I don’t want to be excused.” Virginia Pacheco snapped back loudly, unsure of the direction in which the voice of authority was located. “I just need some water for Carla. I want to do my civic duty here.” The shepherd bitch’s tongue hung out the side of her mouth as she clung close to her mistress, panting heavily.”

“Suit yourself, Miss.” Raglan shrugged. “I’ll send someone for some fresh water for your dog as soon as I get you all seated.”

“Aye,” came a thundering basso out of a ruddy-faced burly man. He wore a waxed grey handle-bar mustache stretching from one ear to the other. “Give the dog some water. It pearrforms a noble searrvice.” The burr, reminiscent of Sean Connery.

“Right away.” Bailiff Raglan was startled at what sounded like a command. “Just step into the courtroom. One doggie drink coming right up.”

With that Raglan shepherded his flock of jurors into Judge Foxworthy’s court where they were greeted by strobe flashes as the camera crew set up for the day’s event.

#

“Hey, Leo, I thought the cameras were for the trial, not Voire Dire,” Thom called over to Capatorto from his prosecutor’s table.

“Right. And that’s why you’re all duded up today? Just couldn’t wait to break out the new threads?” Leo sparred. But he smiled in Thom’s direction. Fat was seated next to him, again in a black knit suit -- this one of stretchy cotton for summer. She was no less a tire-stack than she had been at Best-in-Show night. The stint at Riker’s had not done much for her figure.

Candy and I slid into the back row, near the courtroom’s doors. We felt invisible that way, but we knew Fat was probably aware of our presence -- as well as that of at least thirty of her other breast implant clients. The silicone sisters sat lathering -- a mob in Salem. A high-pitched titter buzzing from their section took on the timbre of a cackling witches’ coven. We had warned them to be silent, but after all these years, it was just too much to ask. Only about one third of Fat’s client roster could be located. A pity! All 101 of the injured parties would enjoy this. But we knew they would be watching from somewhere -- on high, or in front of their TV screens. And Fat could do nothing about it. How sweet it was!

The potential jurors filed in and totally filled the front portion of the gallery. The blind girl sat in the first seat inside while her dog settled down right next to her. Someone had delivered the water and the animal slurped loudly. With that Jacques Foxworthy snapped to attention.

“Mith, mith with the dog,” he lisped. “What ith your name?” The judge’s speech impediment startled the court into silence and riveted the TV cameras on Foxworthy. “Oh dear,” he spurted, “Are we on? Do I...”

“I’m Virginia Pacheco.” Unaware of the mise-en-scene, the girl spoke up before any further banter could ensue. She stood up as if to answer roll call and tried to direct her response towards the lisper’s direction. “And who are you?” she asked, having no way of knowing she was addressing the judge.

“I’m the judge of thith court.” Foxworthy realized the girl’s disadvantage and felt empathy. “You know, Mith Pacheco, the law doeth not require you to therve jury duty. You may be excused. Go home and enjoy thith thine summer day.”

“No thank you, your honor.” Virginia pulled herself up to her tallest. “I came here to serve my civic duty, just like everyone else.”

“Way to go, lassie.” The basso with the burr boomed.

“Very well, then,” the judge went on. “Let uth begin. Mith Pacheco, please state your full name and occupation for the court.”

“My name is Virginia Elise Pacheco and I am a full-time graduate student right now. I’m in training to be a clinical psychologist at NYU.”

“Very imprethive, Mith Pacheco. Is there anyone in thith court whom you know or recognithe?”

A stifled chuckle ran through the courtroom as both lawyers and jurors responded to the judge’s gaucherie. Even Fat heaved peals of mute laugher.

The cameras were on it and captured a red-faced Foxworthy. No doubt “**Blind Justice**” would lead the six o’clock news.

Foxworthy pounded his gavel, demanding order. “My apologies, Mith Pacheco. Juth a thlip of the tongue. It’th a quethtion we alwayth have to athk.”

I nudged Candy. “No one asked that question at my trial, remember? That’s how Urston got his lawyer buddy on my jury. That arrogant bastard never thought anyone would figure it out. I still can’t believe that happened and no one gave a damn,” I whispered to Candy. I was still bitter, so many years later.

“At least you got to witness your Voire Dire. He kicked me and Freddie out of the courtroom. I had no idea who my jurors were except for the priest.”

“Shh. Let’s see what happens now. Bernie Cleary has all that history.” Where is she, I wondered. We had arrangements to confirm.

“Mith Pacheco,” the judge continued. “Thith trial ith a capital cathe. Would you have difficulty recommending the death penalty if warranted?”

Fat cringed while Capatorto held his breath.

“No, your honor. I would not have a problem. I voted for Governor Pataki,” the blind girl responded.

Thom gave a nod and tried to hide a gleeful smirk. “I have no problem with juror number 1, your honor.”

“Not yet, Mither Hudgins, not yet. I have another question. “Mith Pacheco, have you ever been party to a lawsuit?”

“Actually, I have, your honor.”

“And when wath that?” the judge asked.

“When I was a baby. My parents filed a medical malpractice suit against the hospital where I was born. They somehow gave me too much oxygen through a transfusion of adult blood with too much hemoglobin in it. It caused retinal detachment. It’s called RLF -- Retrolental Fibroplasia and happens to premature and low birth weight infants in incubators or needing transfusion, like me.”

“Oh?” the judge’s curiosity had been peaked. ‘How did that turn out for you?”

“I got a successful settlement. My trust fund will take care of me for life. Of course, I would rather have my eyesight,” she added plaintively.

“Thou, you have no prejudithe against lawyerth?” The judge spritzed his Evian all over his desk, also hitting one of the camera lenses straight on.

Another ripple of guffaws ran through the court.

“This is going to be a good one,” Special Agent Cleary whispered as she slid down the bench next to me. “You and Candy need to come outside with me, right now.”

“No, your honor. I would say that I admire lawyers for the help they give people like me.” Virginia answered honestly.

“Do you think you can be objective?” the judge went on.

\ “Yes, I know I can.” Virginia replied.

“Acceptable your honor.” Capatorto was on his feet, waving vigorously.

“Aurora,” he muttered to Fat in a stage whisper, “this is great for us. She likes lawyers and she can’t see how fat you are.”

Fat again cringed in her chair, sweat dripping from her forehead, partially erasing her left eyebrow.

Bernie Cleary ushered me and Candy out of the courtroom and rang the elevator’s down button. She shooed us in and pressed the cafeteria floor.

“Listen, you two. You’re on the witness list and you can’t be in the courtroom until -- or if -- you’re called. Otherwise, there could be grounds for a mistrial. So, keep out of sight,” she warned, pulling two FBI issue cell phones from her bag. She handed one to each of us, and gave a brief demonstration.

“I’ll leave my cell open so you’ll be able to hear everything. Of course, it will be recorded by the court stenographer and the TV cameras, so we can review anything we need.

But if you hear anything -- anything at all -- that sounds wrong, you call my cell. I’ll have it in my pocket on vibrate. Either me or Detective Valdes will come to meet you.”

“Oh, I thought you can’t bring phones into court,” I said.

“You can’t, but I can. I’ll make the drop every morning in the ladies’ room.” Cleary grinned. “We need to catch Spirakis in her lies. We can do this. Now, let’s get some lunch.”

#

“You thir, with the mustache, you’re up next.” Foxworthy jutted a bony finger at the burly red-faced man. “Thate your name for the record, pleathe.”

“Me name be Cornelius McGregor, for yer recor-rd.” The basso’s burr seemed to thicken.

“And where are you from, Mr. McGregor?”

“From Washington Heights, these past thirty years.” Another titter rippled through the courtroom.

“That’s when I’m not at sea. And it’s Captain McGregor, if ye don’t mind,” the seaman sounded off.

“Very well Captain, Nithe to have you. You are a naturalithed citithen, I’m guething?”

“Aye, sir, I am in truth. Thirty-five years a citizen of this grrr-eat country of ours.” He puffed up with pride.

“And do you know or reognithe anyone in this courtroom, Captain?”

“Nay, sir, I do not.”

“Have you ever been a party to any legal action?” Foxworthy actually managed to pose a question without “s” words?

“Aye, indeed I have.”

“What wath the nature of that claim?”

“I got rear ended by a drrr-unk on Christmas Eve, some twenty years back. I was home from me ship for the holidays. The jackass was celebrating a wee bit early in the day. Three sheets to the wind he was at three p.m. No self-respectn’ Scotsman would touch the bottle before five, I tell ya.”

Again, the courtroom shared a group giggle.

“How did that work out for you?” Again, Foxworthy avoided the “s” words.

“Ah, me lawyer did a great job ferrr me,” the seaman was happy to report. “He got me the whole policy and a new car, to boot.”

“And were you injured?” the judge asked.

“Ay, just a few bumps and stitches. I did go through the windshield, y’know.”

“No permanent damage?”

“Nay. It would take more than a Christmas drrr-unk to put me lights out, I tell ya.”

“Tho, you would be open-minded to hearing a cathe involving lawyers? Foxworthy inquired.  
 “Aye, sir, it would be me honor.”

“And could you vote for the death penalty, if need be?” The killer question.

“Aye. To be surr-re. Any person who breaks the law of this grrr-eat country of ours, deserves to suffer the consequence. Hang’em from the nearest yard’am, is what I say.”

“Acceptable, your honor.” Thom voted.

“He’s a buffoon, Aurora,” Capatorto scribbled on the legal pad he shoved over to Fat.

“No problem with juror number two, your honor,” Capatorto agreed.

“You’re next,” Foxworthy wiped his brow and indicated the boulevardier leaning on his silver handled cane. “Thate your name and occupation for the court.”

“My name is Antonio Pizzo and I am now retired,” the old man answered.

“Mither Piththo -- my that is a difficult name to pronounce -- are you over thixty-five yearth of age?”

“Yes, your honor. I’m seventy-two,” the elder responded.

“You are excuthed, you are not required to therve.” A benevolent judicial offering.

‘That’s okay, your honor. I got nothing better to do. I would love to serve. In fact, I hope this trial goes on for a month or two and I hope you sequester the jury.” Signor Pizzo declared.

“Would that not be a hardthip for you?” the judge asked.

‘No, not at all. It would be a vacation,” the elder claimed.

“Oh?” Foxworthy raised an eyebrow.

“You don’t know the Signora Pizzo,” the old man sighed.

The court snickered.

“Very well then, Mither Piththo. What is -- or was -- your occupation?

“I owned a tailor shop in the Bronx -- alterations to fit a king, if you please.”

With that Signor Pizzo gave a nod and gestured in the camera’s direction, obviously proud of his reputation.

“And do you know or recognithe anyone in the court, today?”

“No, your honor. All strangers to me.” Signor Pizzo nodded and smiled at the cameras, again.

“He’s going to be a trip,” Capatorto whispered to Fat and chuckled.

“And will you have any difficulty recommending the death penalty, thould you need to?” the judge lisped.

“There is a price for everything,” the tailor lamented. “And death is the great leveler.”

“Is that a yeth or a no?” The judge was unsure.

“It’s no, your honor. The punishment should fit the crime, we say.” The tailor smiled and nodded again.

“And have you ever been party to a lawsuit?”

“I have, yes, your honor.”

“When? And what was that about?” Foxworthy needed to know.

“Copyright Infringement.” The tailor startled the court.

“Please explain.” The judge raised an eyebrow and leaned his head forward, cupped in his right hand, as if he expected the tailor to relate a tale worthy of Chaucer or Boccaccio.

“My motto, your honor. He stole it, right off the sign over my tailor shop. ‘Alterations fit for a king. You’re gonna like the way you look.”

“Yeth, that is familiar.” Foxworthy mused. “Where have I heard that?”

‘I settled with a non-disclosure agreement so I can’t tell you. But it was all over TV, every night. Signor Pizzo shook his head, but retained his cool. Neither heat nor emotion seemed to elevate his temperature. “So, I sue him. My lawyer, he says it’s a new field --intellectual property infringement. What do I know? I’m just a simple tailor. But the motto --it was mine. Hung over my shop for forty years.”

“And how did that conclude?” Foxworthy waited with keen interest.

“Oh, I get a settlement to go away and shut up. Nuisance money, my lawyer calls it. I can’t talk about it or they take it back,” Signor Pizzo sighed and leaned on the silver handle of his walking stick.

“Come whithper it in my ear,” The judge invited Signor Pizzo to approach the bench with a wag of his bony figure.

#

Thinor Piththo will do just fine. Any objectionth?”

“Fine with me,” came from Hudgins.

“No problem, your honor,” Capatorto agreed. “Every lawsuit has it secrets.”

He nudged Fat who was looking apprehensive. “Relax. At least he understands the value of protective orders. He profited from the system. He’ll go with us.”

“I’m not sure, Leo. He seems too cool for me. I think you should object,” she said.

“No, I’ll save my preemptions for later.” He told her.

“Who’th next?” The judged asked for number four.

A tailored blonde got to her feet. The humidity had wrecked her sleek bob and her hair now framed her head like a hedge. Her makeup -- although skillfully applied -- was dissipated with sweat, accentuating the lines in her face -- adding years to her appearance. But her Calvin Klein linens were still crisp.

“What ith your name, Madam?”

“Kate Walsh,” your honor. I am a realtor and serving jury duty at this time is a hardship for me. It’s a very busy time in my office. I would like to be excused.”

“Ah, you’re the firtht to make that requeht. Congratulationth. Denied unleth you are over thixty-five or dithabled. Are you?” Foxworthy waited.

“No, sir” she replied.

“Now, then. Do you know, or are you acquainted with any perthon in this court?” the perfunctory question.

“I can’t say, your honor.” Kate avoided Capatorto’s gaze. He seemed surprised and amused to see her.

“Oh my God,” she thought. “I must look a wreck. And I haven’t closed the Troy Hills deal yet.”

“What do you mean, you can’t thay? Hath the cat got your tongue?” A spray of Evian graced the defendant’s table as the cameras honed in.

“No, your honor. I mean it’s a confidential matter and would represent a breach of professional ethics for me to answer.” Kate did her best not to stammer and sighed with secret relief that the cameras were more focused on the judge than her. She would die if any of her clients saw her so disheveled.

“That’th another firtht for thith court. Come here and whithper in my ear.” He crooked his bony finger at juror number four. The judge listened and chuckled and pointed to Leo and Thom. “You two, and you madam, chamberths, now.”

The camera crew focused on the four as they headed out the side entrance towards the judge’s quarters. They failed to notice the FBI agent as she hurried out the back.

#

“Bernie,” I was agitated. “Bernie, I can’t believe it.” I had frantically pushed the speed dial on my FBI phone to get Agent Cleary’s pocketed cell. Thank God, she had responded immediately. “Kate Walsh is a neighbor of mine. What is she doing here? And what’s this secret knowledge all about?” Candy had already chewed the nails of her left hand down to the quick.

“Relax,” Cleary answered. No amount of humidity could ruin her poodle cut and the lack of air-conditioning made her face glisten with moisture in a most sensual way. “Callie, did you discuss this case with anyone at all -- and that includes Kate Walsh.”

‘ She knew neither I nor Candy would have violated her instructions. “No, Bernie. Not a word to anyone.”

“Does Ms. Walsh have any knowledge of your involvement in the case?”

“Not from me, she doesn’t. The only connection to the murder is TyTwo, as far as I know.” I assured her.

“Well, then,” Cleary went on, “I think it’s safe to say that anyone who watched or read the news would know about TyTwo.”

“I suppose… but…”

“Look, Ms. Walsh doesn’t know you’re on the witness list. She didn’t see you in the courtroom, so that’s not her secret. She’s already avowed that she would prefer not to be here, so there is no agenda. For all we know, she may have dated someone in the jury pool. She’s single, right?” Cleary asked.

“Yes, she is. But I know she showed Leo Capatorto some properties up in Peekskill,” I reminded her. I had called her as soon as I made that discovery.

“Well, then maybe that’s it. Let the judge deal with it.” Cleary was a little too nonchalant.

“I just don’t know… it troubles me. What if it’s grounds for a mistrial?”

“Not to worry.” Then Cleary winked. “Don’t forget what Spirakis did to you both at your trials. You, Callie, -- she allowed the judge to plant a lawyer, and a friend of his, to boot, to mislead the jurors. And you, Candy, -- that sham with the priest --”

“What do you mean sham?” Candy demanded “You mean he wasn’t a priest?”

“No, he was an actor.” Cleary had done her research on both juries.

‘What? Candy was stunned.

“That’s right. I know you’re Jewish Candy, but clergy wouldn’t serve jury duty in collar and no Catholic priest I ever knew would wear a rug. The guy was planted to sway your jury. Just like the lawyer at Callie’s.”

“How do you know this?” we both asked, as one, our mouths hanging open.

“I did my research, trust me. I’ve been after Donald Urston for a long time. And after what you told me, Callie, it wasn’t much of a stretch to figure the same thing happened to Candy.”

Back in chambers, Jacques Foxworthy played the gracious host. His mini-fridge was well stocked with designer waters and cold drinks from a local natural foods market.

“Lady, first.” The judge gestured to Kate. “What would you like? Iced coffee, tea or cola? I also have plenty of Evian and Pellegrino. Boys -- I know Leo wants a Starbucks iced Cappuccino. How about you, Thom?”

The group assembled themselves around the large mahogany desk as the judge obliged his audience, fishing three iced Starbucks from his little fridge. No one seemed to notice that his lisp had disappeared.

“Now, Miss Walsh, tell us what is so confidential about your knowledge of anyone in this court. What ethics violation are you invoking? It’s novel, I admit, but you will not be excused.”

Kate clutched her Cappuccino with a slippery grasp, as if it were a lifeline. She carefully set in down, rubbing her sweaty palms dry, hoping her angst was not so obvious.

“Well, your honor,” she confessed, “I do know Mr. Capatorto. He’s a client.”

“Oh, so that’s it?” Foxworthy chuckled. “Looking at some real estate, Leo? It’s a good time to invest.”

“I am, your honor,” Leo owned up. “Miss Walsh has been working with me. We’re hoping to go to closing right after this trial and I swore her to secrecy.”

“So, what’s the big secret?” the judge wanted to know. “It’s a legal transaction, not a fraudulent conveyance, I hope.”

“Oh, absolutely not, your honor but ah…” Leo stammered.

“Come on, Leo, spit it out.” Thom was annoyed. “Why would we care if you’re buying a house? Unless your relationship with Miss Walsh isn’t entirely professional? Thom smirked.?

Leo exhaled. “I assure you; we’ve only met twice and the house is a surprise for my fiancée.”

“Fiancée?” Both the judge and Thom crooned in unison.

“Yes. I’m hoping that the house will persuade her.”

“Take my word, it will.” Kate interjected, relieved that she had not been the one to break her client’ trust. She picked up her Cappuccino and sighed heavily.

“In my day, a diamond ring was the clincher. Have times changed that much?” Foxworthy chuckled again.

“Oh, I bought her that too,” Leo admitted.”

“Then what’s the big secret?” Thom asked. “And who is she? I didn’t think you had time for a social life, Leo, with this trial and your caseload in night court.”

“Oh, you’ll find out soon. I haven’t asked her yet and I don’t want the cat out of the bag, if you know what I mean.” Leo confessed.

“Hhm, a house and an engagement ring? I thought you were more self-confident Leo. Afraid she’ll turn you down? “Thom teased.

“Actually yes, I am.” Leo retorted.

“Boys, boys,” the judge mediated. “I’m sure the lady will find such a fine offering impossible to refuse. Good to know you’re getting on with your life, Leo.” How about you Thom, what’s in your future?”

“You tell me, judge.” A terse reply.

With that Foxworthy smirked and turned his attention back to Kate. ‘Okay Miss Walsh. Unless you know anyone else involved in this case, I’ll admit you to this jury. Is there anyone else here known to you?”

“Well, your honor, maybe.” Kate couldn’t keep from laughing out loud. “I know the subject of this trial, sort of --”

“Oh, the defendant?” the judge roared. “You can’t keep that a secret.”

“Oh no, for heaven’s sake no.” Kate repudiated the very idea of any association with Fat.

“I know the dog, TyTwo. Everyone in my town knows him.”

“My dear Madam,” the judge snorted. “If everyone in America didn’t know that dog before this morning, they do now. He just can’t stay out of the news. I think I will sequester this jury.”

‘Oh, come on, Judge.” Leo protested.

“Why not Leo? Did the dog do it? Is that your plan B?” Foxworthy laughed for a good ninety seconds.

“

**CHAPTER FOURTEEN**

The New York Post and The Daily News vied to top each other. On August 13 The Post had headlined the latest White House acquisition with more alacrity than a royal birth:

**PREZ BUYS PYR FOR FIRST KIDS**

The News blasted back: Its banner reading:

**WESTMINSTER DAUGHTER TO BE WHITE HOUSE FIRST DOG**

The New York Times also saw fit to make the announcement front page news, albeit at the bottom of the page:

**NEW PRESIDENTIAL PET IS WESTMINSTER CHAMPION OFFSPRING**

But The Washington Post trumped them all announcing:

**FIRST KIDS GET FIRST PYRENEES AND WHITE HOUSE ADDS NEW GUARD**

“It’s official. Delaney and Bryan McKenna have a new pet and it’s auspiciously a big white dog whose working breed is used as a family and livestock guardian. Forget about the expensive surveillance and security detail surrounding the first family. From now on, nobody gets past Little Connie, the nation’s new first dog.

This morning, President McKenna’s Press Secretary, PJ Harwood held a briefing to announce the latest addition to the first family -- a two-month-old Great Pyrenees puppy bitch, sired by this year’s Westminster winner, GCH Pyrfect’s Honor Thy Father, or TyTwo as he is known off the show circuit.

“The children had become enamored of the big white fluff after this year’s Westminster,” Ms. Harwood said, but it was really the first lady who insisted on having one of TyTwo’s puppies.

“The litter consisted of seven puppies, four girls and three boys, and all were given litter names themed after the thirteen colonies. They were born on June 14 and their breeder, Dr. Calliope Thornton, a professor of Economics at Pace University in Westchester, NY, named the females Virginia, Maryland, Connecticut, and Delaware. The boys are New York, New Jersey and Massachusetts. The entire litter was pre-sold and Dr. Thornton relinquished Connecticut, whom she intended to keep, when the First Lady, Sarah McKenna, inquired about buying one for her children.

“Mrs. McKenna is not exactly a novice to the show dog sport. She was an accomplished ‘junior handler’ during her teen years and has always favored large breeds, having grown up with Newfoundlands. Her first “Newf” was a Landseer called Napoleon. She won several titles with him, but left the show circuit when she entered college.

“The First Lady believes that her time in dog handling helped her to overcome her shyness.

“It was a wonderful way for a young, awkward girl to gain poise and self-confidence,” she claimed. “Show handling offered me a preview into the world of adult politics. I gained so much from my dog ring exposure and I have never lost my love of the competition or of the animals themselves. I think it’s the best hobby for Delaney at this point. She’s thrilled with little Connie who is now nine weeks old and weighs fourteen pounds. I’m sure the press will have fun watching her grow week by week.

“And President McKenna is taking credit for naming the puppy Pyrfect’s Constitutional Ratification. After all, her litter name was Connecticut. Furthermore, the President has assured the public that all training, travel, and dog show related fees will be paid out of his own pocket, with some contribution from Delaney’s allowance. ‘I also expect the First Lady will help out in a pinch,’ she joked. ‘After all this was her idea.’

“A special Special Agent was selected for this White House detail,” the press secretary continued. “Mrs. McKenna, Delaney, Bryan and puppy Connie will be guarded by Agent Bryn Pryor, herself a dog fancier. Agent Pryor owns two Samoyeds and is reputed to be an outstanding groomer. Indeed, I’m told, a large part of the Great Pyrenees’s magnificence is reliant on expert grooming care.

“The Great Pyrenees is not as well-known as its cousins, the Saint Bernard and Newfoundland -- at least it wasn’t until last February! The breed is an ancient one, originating in Asia and migrating to the Pyrenees mountains, specifically to the principality of Andorra. Over the centuries it came to be utilized by medieval lords who trained the dogs to hunt down castle thieves and looters. They worked in teams and were equally efficient at attacks on bears and wolves. They became a friend to the shepherd and mountain breeder, who often referred to the dogs as Patou or Pastoure. As a young boy, Louis XIV fell in love with the breed and brought a puppy back to Versailles, after a trip to the Pyrenees. It became the royal dog of France.

“Early blood lines trace the first recorded appearance of the breed in the United States back to 1815 when J.S. Skinner, author of “The Dog and the Sportsman,” documented that a Great Pyrenees was owned by a Mr. Beaudry, of Delaware. Then, in 1824 General Lafayette sent Skinner two “blaireau” or badger marked Pyrenees. The breed standard accepts either marked or pure white as equally correct. In 1934 the Great Pyrenees received official recognition by the American Kennel Club and has competed at Westminster every year since.

“Every year the Westminster Best-in-Show winner sparks a surge in its breed’s popularity. Although the Great Pyrenees is not for everyone, since Honor Thy Father’s win, its ranking has climbed to the twentieth most popular breed registered with the AKC. No doubt our little Connie’s presence at the White House will only add to the demand.”

PJ Harwood concluded her briefing with specific thanks to breeder, Dr. Calliope Thornton, for the history and background information. It appears that there is a new friend, as well as a new dog, in the White House.

**CHAPTER FIFTEEN**

“So,” Judge Foxworthy queried his guests. “If this dog weren’t the most famous animal in America, would we have a case at all?”

“You lost me, Judge,” Capatorto shrugged.

“Me too,” Thom added.

“But Judge,” Kate Walsh volunteered, “if you sequester the jury, how can you televise the trial?”

“Very good, Miss Walsh,” Foxworthy complemented Kate. “We’ll sequester. What goes on in the court, stays in the court as far as you jurors are concerned. No TV’s in the hotel rooms and no newspapers, either. Now, back to work.” He shooed the party back into the courtroom.

“Ladieth and gentlemen,” Foxworthy banged his gavel and sniffed his rose. His lisp had returned. “We have an announthement. You lucky fifteen folkth -- jurors and alternateth too – are now the guethtth of New York State. You may return home now and pack for a two-week thay. We are thequethtred ath of tomorrow a.m. Court dithmithed.”

He gave an authoritative bang with his gavel and swept off the dais back into his chambers.

“Well, Aurora,” Capatorto sighed. “It looks like we’re in for the long haul.”

“What the hell went on in chambers?” Fat demanded. “What made him sequester? And what did that blonde have to do with it?” The air conditioning had been restored, but Fat was still soaking wet. She looked as if she had sweated away ten pounds.

“Oh, good news I think,” her lawyer advised. “Foxworthy is concerned that there’s too much coverage about the dog now being a White House celeb. He thinks it will somehow prejudice the jury. Don’t ask me how. The blonde is a real estate agent who just sold me a house in Westchester. That was her secret.”

“What? Westchest—”

Before Fat could finish the thought, two guards attached themselves on either side of her to usher her out of the courtroom.

“Leo,” she sputtered, “what the hell is going on here? What is this circus?”

“I’ll explain later, Aurora. It’s really good news for us,” he whispered so that the guards wouldn’t catch on. “She’s making a big fat commission off me. Do you think she would vote against us? I hope she’s elected forelady,” he added and hurried out of the courtroom.

Fourteen jurors filed out of the room disgruntled at the prospect of sequestered service. But Signor Pizzo left smiling and nodding to himself, his green bow tie crisp as new and hardly a wrinkle in his seersucker trousers.

Kate Walsh hurried to the ladies’ room, repaired her face and sighed at the wreck her hair had become. Then she took the elevator to the lobby, smiled at the monstrous “Lady Justice” commandeering the space, and asked of no one in particular, “how blind are you really?” She walked out of the courthouse towards the parking lot, fishing her cell from her purse. She hit speed dial and waited… “Hey Cal, it’s me. It’s a done deal. I’m in.” She snapped the phone shut.

#

“What was that?” Candy was picking at her cold Peking Duck at a hole-in-the-wall eatery on Mulberry Street.

I gave my pal a big grin and asked for a high five. “Don’t worry, there’s no one here to watch,” I said. That was why we were in the dump in the first place. But the Peking Duck was really great.

“So…”

“That was Kate Walsh. She made the jury.”

“I swear Cal, I don’t know how you do it. You actually got her on the jury?”

“No, Silly. She got herself on. The trick was getting her called for duty. I’m not sure how that happened.”

“You’re sure we can count on her? And how did she get called to serve here? Candy was really nervous.

“Can, she’s a friend. And a great actress. A friend who doesn’t forget where her bread is buttered. She was the realtor who sold my farm to the Troy Brothers. That had to have been the largest commission of her career.”

“Who’d’ve thunk it?” was all Candy could manage. She went back to her Peking duck with renewed gusto. “By the way, Cal,” she added, “where the hell is Lynne?”

**CHAPTER SIXTEEN**

**“**Leo, stop. Don’t be ridiculous. What if anyone sees us in here?” Lynne had turned beet red as Capatorto nudged her into the men’s room at the end of the courtroom’s corridor.

“Shh…” he admonished as he wedged a comb through the handle and locked the door. “Don’t make a liar out of me now.”

“What are you talking about …” she asked and found herself buried in a strong, sweaty embrace. Leo’s cheek grazed hers while his mouth found hers, eager, returning his passionate kiss. ‘Oh, Leo, we…”

` “Shh…” again. He pressed against her more forcefully, feeling her quiver and melt. “Have you told Callie about us, yet?” he murmured, his voice throaty as he nibbled her neck.

“No, nobody knows, except the dogs. And they won’t tell.” She ran her hands through his dark, sleek hair and then worked them down towards the front of his trousers. “Oh Leo, we really shouldn’t do this here, should we?”

` “No, we shouldn’t but I have something else in mind,” he claimed as they heard a pounding on the men’s room door. Thom Hudgins banged and yelled, “for God’s sake, what’s going on in there? Do I have to call security to take a piss?”

“Just give me a minute, will you Thom?” Leo released Lynne and kissed her nose tenderly. “I love you and I will kill that little twerp for ruining the moment.”

“What, Leo?”

“Shh,” he admonished Lynne again.

“Leo, I swear if you don’t open this door…”

“Okay, okay, Thom, just hold on. Can’t a guy propose?”

“What?” Lynne rearranged herself and turned red again.

With that Leo reached into his pocket and repeated, “Please don’t make a liar of me. Will you marry me as soon as this trial is over? Please?” He took Lynne’s hand and slipped the two-carat emerald cut diamond on her finger.

“Oh, Leo, it’s beautiful...” she gasped.

“And?” he asked as he stroked a blonde strand back from her face.

“Yes, oh yes!” she gasped.

Finally, Leo went to the door and unwedged it. The little ADA jumped in and bounded over to the urinal furthest from the door. “Gotta hand it to you, Leo, you really are a card. Now do you two mind if I take a piss in private?”

Lynne dragged Capatorto out of the men’s room, turning redder than ever. “We really have to stop sneaking around like this.” She whispered as they encountered the line-up waiting at the restroom’s door. Captain MacGregor, Signor Pizzo and the judge himself. The burly Scotsman spoke first.

“Lassie, the ladies’ is at the other end of the hall, forr yer inforr-mation,” apparently oblivious to the scene which had just ensued.

But Signor Pizzo proved more shrewd. “Aren’t you the dog trainer? I saw you on TV,” he nodded at Lynne who was trying to disappear behind Capatorto.

“Oh, no. Now I will have to declare a mithtrial.” The judge lisped. ‘Mither Capatorto, what ith going on here?”

“Oh no, Judge. I see nothing. Nothing.” Signor Pizzo insisted. “Nothing at all.”

And then they all caught the sparkle on Lynne’s hand.

“Ah, Mither Capatorto,” the judge smiled at Leo. “Ith thith the beneficiary of the new house?”

“What house?” Lynne peaked out at the audience from behind Capatorto’s wide shoulders.

With that Capatorto stepped forward, embracing Lynne around the waist and presented her to the little crowd. “Yes, judge. This is my fiancée, Lynne Hobbs. She just said yes.”

“You’re a lucky man, Leo. The’s a peach.” The judge shook hands with Lynne.

“Nice going, Leo.” Thom congratulated the couple, leaned into Leo’s right ear and whispered something about removing Lynne from the witness list.

“Were you really going to call her?” Leo asked.

“Doubtful.” Thom replied, terse as ever.

“What house?” Lynne repeated.

“Judge you’ve ruined my surprise. Suppose you tell her.”

“Ah yeth Mith Hobbth. Your boyfriend here hath purchathed a new home for you. He wath afraid the diamond alone would not convinthe you.” The judge chuckled. “Apparently he thwore the realtor to thecrethy.”

“Kate Walsh?” Lynne gasped. “I don’t believe it.”

“Yup,” Leo conceded. “And we almost pulled it off. You weren’t supposed to know until closing, just in time for your name to go on the deed.”

“Huh?” from a flabbergasted Lynne.

“You are marrying into the legal profession, Miss Hobbs. Leo will teach you how to be careful. It is the ground rule for all success.” Pearls of honest wisdom from a lispless jurist.

At that moment the cameras burst out of the courtroom, capturing the crowd behind the doors. Lynne’s ring blinded one cameraman as its flash caught the light streaming though the courtroom door. He blinked and his lens caught Signor Pizzo nodding knowingly.

“Don’t even ask,” the judge shook his bony figure at the press. “It’s a private party.”

But the cameraman had already turned a forty-five-degree angle to pan the little clique. As he swiveled, the blind juror emerged seeking the ladies’ room, her guide dog in the lead. The shepherd gave a short yap to warn her mistress of the crowd in front of her. Startled, the cameraman lost his balance and toppled onto the dog, knocking Virginia Pacheco to the ground, along with the judge.

The dog turned to its mistress, panting and nudging her face. Capatorto was at her side in a flash. Foxworthy sat up, rubbing his elbow and asked, “are you okay Miss Pacheco?” Do you need the EMT?”

“No, I’m okay. Is that you judge?” She thought she recognized the voice sans lisp, as Capatorto helped her to her feet. Carla, the shepherd, grateful for the assistance to her mistress, approached Leo and licked his hand.

“Oh, where did that come from?” Capatorto shrugged as he patted the dog and gave the saddle handles back to the blind girl.

“Dogs like you, Leo,” Lynne said. “Good thing, too. You are marrying into the dog world.”

“Yes, Leo,” the judge concurred. “The animal kingdom welcomes you.”

**CHAPTER SEVENTEEN**

**“**Well?” Lynne demanded as I opened the front door at seven p.m., after a very long day of hide and seek with Candy and Bernie Cleary. “How did your spy day go?”

Before I could recount the day’s Peking Duck adventure, TyTwo and Holly interceded. A big sloppy kiss from himself, and a gentle nudge at the knee from Holly.

“Oh, I know you missed me, my darlings!” I scratched ears and hugged each of them.

“You know, Cal,” Lynne continued nonchalantly, “He doesn’t move from that door the whole time you’re gone. He just sits there and waits. I don’t think he even drank all day.”

“Then I guess they’re ready for dinner.” And I led the two dogs down the hallway into my kitchen. A curious aroma of cinnamon and cedar wood intensified as I approached the back end of the house.

“Surprise!” Lynne announced as I walked to the back of my house. There, at the end of my long wooden kitchen table, sat Leo Capatorto.

“Surprise, indeed,” I managed as I gawked at the jowly lawyer and then at Lynne. “Whatever is…”

“Oh, Cal, this is a really big surprise,” she cried and threw out her left hand. “Look!” She turned pink and beamed. With that Leo got to his feet, and embraced Lynne with great tenderness and announced: “I’m a very lucky man, today.”

Then, both dogs jumped up to hug him, sat down -- one next to Lynne, the other on Leo’s left and held up a paw, as if to give approval -- or ask for a treat.

“I thought so,” I said as I got two milk bones from the treat bowl on the counter. “I guess that explains why Candy and I lost track of you today. You are indeed a very lucky man, today, Leo Capatorto.” I kissed Lynne and in a rush of good faith, reached out to embrace the lawyer.

‘Welcome to the Pyrfect Kennel family.”

Not missing a beat, Lynne’s eyebrows wrinkled and she asked, “What do you mean you thought so?”

“Oh, the dogs told me. This has been going on since about Memorial Day, right?”

“How did you guess? We were so careful,” they claimed, in unison. “And how did the dogs tell you?” Lynne wanted to know.

“Well, I’ve been smelling that Old Spice on them since about the end of May.”

We all had a laugh and then Leo announced that he had to leave to prepare for the next day. I hugged Lynne with great affection. “Oh, Cal,” she gushed. “You’re just the best. I’m so happy.”

#

The next morning broke humid and drizzly. I headed down the Taconic toward the Hutchinson River Parkway to pick up Candy. A thick summer haze slowed traffic and I found my friend pacing her front lawn frantically as I pulled the van over to her driveway. She hopped in.

“Oh, Cal I’m so nervous, I thought something happened.” Her usual jumpy self.

“Did you even look outside?” I laughed at her. “You think it’s easy to drive the Hutch in this fog? You’re a pilot’ wife, for God’s sake, Can.”

“You’re right, of course. Fred is stuck up in Boston, so let’s get going.”

I pulled away from her house and aimed the Windstar back towards the Hutch to catch the Cross Bronx. “I wish there were a better way to get into Manhattan from your house, Can. These roads will kill my car.”

“Well, it’s time for a new one, don’t you think?” she teased. “This one is what -- twelve years old?”

“Wrong. It’s thirteen, and still a good baby. I’ll never give it up ‘til it dies.” Ford had quit making the model and there was nothing I liked well enough to replace it.

“I have news.” I was going to let Candy in on the happening.

“Really? What’s up?” She was all ears now.

“Well…” I hedged as I aimed for the Cross Bronx exit off the Hutch. “Just let me get into the middle lane and I’ll tell you.” I signaled and muttered something about freakin’ New York drivers as I struggled to slide into the center lane.

“Cal, you are really the worst driver. You need lane passing signals, if there is such a thing. You should have let me drive. So, what’s up? Spill it!”

“Okay, okay,” I sighed as I cruised towards the Bruckner Expressway. “Lynne is engaged. Two carat ring and all. Just guess to whom!”

“Well, let’s see. Your matching making with Thom Hudgins didn’t work out, so who else is there? Do I know him?”

“Yes, I think you do.” I wasn’t ready to give it up, just yet.

“Is he local or cosmopolitan?” An insightful query.

“You know, you would have made a good detective. That was a good question. Keep guessing.” I headed for the Triboro bridge. “Just hold on until I get onto the FDR. This is a bad turn.” I steered around the rollercoaster entrance onto the FDR, careful not to skid on the damp macadam.

“I swear, Cal, you need to go back to driving school. Now tell me.”

“No, I won’t but I’ll give you a hint. I had figured it out because the dogs told me.”

“What?”

“Yeah, they told me who it was before Lynne did.”

“So,” Candy played along. “It’s someone from the dog world. Is it the handler that shows the Newfies -- the one Lynne is always chatting with ringside?”

“No, of course not. He’s gay. You know that.”

“Well, some of them go both ways… Hmmm. Cosmopolitan or local. You didn’t answer that, Cal.”

“You know, you would have also been a good lawyer,” I teased. We were now on the FDR sailing down past ninety-sixth street.

“Are you going to keep this up all the way to the courthouse?” she demanded.

“Well, I’m trying to liven up a boring drive.”

“Then amuse me. Who the hell is it?”

“Oh, well,” I continued. “He’s kind of tall, dark, and handsome in a weird way.”

“Hmm, could be a lot of guys,” Candy mused. Lynne always liked exotic types.”

“Yeah, sure. But he’s not a foreigner. New York born and bred; I think.”

“Is he a dog person?” Candy was calculating her options. “What breed?”

“He’s not a show person but he is a Pyr person. Here’s another hint. He just bought two of TyTwo’s puppies.”

“For Christ’s sake. You don’t mean Capatorto?” she grimaced. “I can hardly believe that.”

“Yup, he’s the one. Don’t that beat all?” I sighed. “Who’d ‘ve thunk it?”

“So, just how did the dogs tell you that?” She was back on the clue track.

“They’ve been reeking of Old Spice all summer.”

“Hmm. How cosmopolitan can he be to wear that stuff? Does Lynne know what she’s doing?”

“I think she does. She seems very happy. And he just bought her one of the estate homes at Troy Hills. A gorgeous one, in fact.”

“And you know this because…”

“Right. Kate Walsh.” .”

“Well, I’ll be damned,” was all Candy could manage as we rolled into the court’s parking garage.

**CHAPTER EIGHTEEN**

Candy and I made our way to Judge Foxworthy’s floor and hustled into the ladies’ room. Special Agent Cleary was waiting by the telephone bank outside the restroom.

She followed us in and slipped me a new “special issue” cell. I palmed it and headed for the first stall on the left while Candy freshened her lipstick and pretended not to notice. I set the phone on vibrate and secured it in my hip pocket. Then we headed for the cafeteria while Bernie went into the courtroom. The day we had waited for so long had finally arrived.

Fifteen jurors, waiting in the corridor, filed into the courtroom. Bailiff Raglan urged them along loudly:

“So, did everyone sleep okay? Last night at home. You are now the guests of New York State. Trust me folks, you’re gonna find the downtown Marriott, very, very nice. Make sure to take advantage of the breakfasts, they’re a whole lot better than the Deli you’ll be getting for lunch.”

The service dog led her charge in first.

“Please Bailiff,” the blind girl asked, “can you get me and Carla to an aisle seat where we won’t be in the way?”

“It would be me pleasure,” Captain McGregor volunteered. “Leave her to me, Bailiff. I’ll see to her.” The seaman pushed his way to the front and took the girl by the arm. “Just come along with me, lassie. I’ll get you and yer dog situated.”

The jurors paraded into the courtroom in two straight lines with Bailiff Raglan holding up the rear. They settled themselves into the jury box as Foxworthy came sweeping in and climbed onto the. dais. He sniffed his pink rose and exhaled. “Ah, the thweet thmell of the morning, he sighed. “I trust you all are eager to perform your thivic duty?” he asked of no one in particular.

“Now, I underthand you voted for your foreperthon yetherday? He gazed from one to the next, his eyebrows knitted in question.

“Aye, yer honor, we have,” the Scotsman boomed with pride. “It is meself.”

The cameras focused on the right side of the room, just in time to miss Fat’s outburst: “For God’s sake, Leo, what kind of Kangaroo court is this?”

“Aurora, relax. He’s as good a peer as the rest.” He leaned in to whisper, “and none too bright. He’ll do just fine for us.” Capatorto assured her.

“Leo, I don’t like it one bit. You should have used a preemption on him. He’s a buffoon.”  
 “Problem Mith Sparakith?” Foxworthy had caught the banter. All cameras now swiveled and focused on the defendant’s table.

“No, no your honor.” Fat tried to regain her composure, but her reddened face and heaving chest gave her away. No doubt the evening news would make some mockery of it.

“Oh shit,” she muttered to Capatorto. Unfortunately, the camera also caught that. Someone would be certain to lip read and run closed captions across the bottom of the news screen. **S##T HAPPENS** might lead the day’s trial coverage.

All of this actually came through on the FBI issued cell. I was amazed. I told Candy who couldn’t keep from laughing out loud. “Well, now she knows how it feels to be at the victim.”

“The worm turns,” I said. “And this is only Day One.”

“Cal, do you think Capatorto is going to throw the case?” Candy speculated.

“I don’t. But I also don’t think he cares much what happens to her.”

#

Back in the courtroom the judge rearranged himself on his bench. He took a sip from his coffee mug and addressed his audience. “Now jury perthonth, are you ready? A perfunctory question. Signor Pizzo nodded and smiled broadly. “Aye, yer honor, we are here to serve!” the foreman boomed.

“Then let uth begin, Mr., Capatorto. You’re on firtht.”

Capatorto rose, buttoned his jacket, and uncharacteristically, ran his hands through his hair. Anxious or acting? Hard to tell. His client was left holding her chin in her hand and breathing audibly.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he began, “allow me to open with a little bad lawyer humor.

A renowned trial lawyer passes and goes on to the hereafter. He soon discovers that he has been condemned to Hell’s fire for all eternity. “Oh, dear God,” he cries.

“Too late for that, buddy,” a voice in back of him laughs.

The lawyer turns to see the devil himself watching a very beautiful woman making love to a hideous man. He recognizes the man as a lawyer who had been his adversary for many years.

“Oh, Satan,” he cries. “How can I be so condemned to Hell’s fire for all eternity and my associate, Ivan, gets to make love to that gorgeous woman? It’s not fair.”

“Who told you Hell was fair?” the devil smirks. “And who are you to question **her** punishment?”

The jury chuckled while the cameras panned the room for reactions. Again, they focused on Fat, who sat with a dour look.

**“We are not amused”** -- another potential news caption.

“Do any of you know why there are so many bad lawyer jokes?” Capatorto asked. “Right, because there are so many bad lawyers. But not in this courtroom. Not today. I am not going to tell you that I’m right and my adversary is wrong. You will decide for yourselves. I am not going to tell you that I am a better attorney than he is. I am not. We are both experienced and competent. I am not even going to tell you that we are adversaries. It’s true, we are opposing each other, but, in fact, we are friendly in real life. Most lawyers are. We belong to the same organizations and argue in front of the same judges, all the time. We do what the law requires. We offer a defense for the accused, and argue justice for the people.

“Ladies and gentlemen, he continued. We are here today to decide one thing and one thing only: Did my client, Aurora Spirakis, poison her colleague, Cynthia Steiner? A simple yes or no, no extenuating circumstances, and no crime of passion. Simply did she or did she not plot to kill her friend?

“Let’s look at that. Shall we? Despite what Mr. Hudgins may tell you, yes, Cynthia Steiner and my client, Aurora Spirakis, were friends. They knew each other for years. They argued cases against each other, particularly two of the most important silicone breast implant cases in second circuit -- in federal court here in New York. And you know what? Steiner won and Spirakis lost. Reason for murder? Could be, but does every lawyer kill his opponent when he loses? That’s ridiculous and we all know it. They were worthy adversaries. They respected each other and Steiner was even helping my client to get a position with her own law firm, the illustrious Davalos Caldwell, Glades, and Spitz.

“Now, you all read the newspapers and watch TV. Surely you are all familiar with the circumstances of the crime. And yes, the dog does figure into it. How? Well, he actually was the catalyst to the **fatal sip**. Just as TyTwo, the magnificent Great Pyrenees was about to be crowned the Westminster winner, Cynthia, who had just toasted the judge, her boss, keeled over. A sip of champagne and puff, and she’s gone. A toast and then we die.

“So, who poisoned the champagne? Mr. Hudgins will have you believe it was my client, Aurora Spirakis. But how did she do it? Listen very carefully when he tries to explain it to you.

The hint of a smile crossed Fat’s face. No doubt her legal training had registered the point. So had Thom Hudgins’ as he scribbled furiously on his long yellow pad and scowled. The cameras, intent on Capatorto, missed this, but the jury did not. A tightlipped smirk and a nod of the head from Signor Pizzo engaged his fellow jurors as they made note of the statement, mentally or in their notebooks.

“So,” Capatorto continued, “if my client poisoned her friend, Cynthia, why did she do it? Jealousy or revenge? Again Mr. Hudgins will tell you this. But, ask yourselves this question: Did Cynthia Steiner serve Ms. Spirakis better dead than alive? Of course, that’s a rhetorical question. Aurora Spirakis was desperate for that associate’s position at the Davalos law firm. Her career, quite bluntly, was in the toilet. After the “silicone wars” -- which I know you all read about in Cynthia Steiner’s obituary -- she, Aurora, was a pariah. No one would hire her after what she did to her clients -- all 101 of them. And they’re not the only ones who had it in for her. You’re going to hear about her directly from her supervisor. He believes she got him fired. You will decide.

“One hundred and one angry clients and one bitter supervisor. That’s one hundred and two people with a grudge. One hundred and two people who would love to see Aurora Spirakis pay the piper. One hundred and two reasons for some angry person to have set her up. Framed? You ask? Poetic justice! Entirely possible and highly probable. Don’t take my word or it. Just wait until you meet her enemies and hear from them. **Then** you tell me.”

Downstairs in the court’s cafeteria, I gasped and adjusted the Bluetooth earpiece to enable better sound.

“What? What?” Candy was impatient.

“You won’t believe it.” I told her. “I think Capatorto is going to call Joel Bayer as a witness.”

“What? I thought he was Hudgins’ witness.”

“He is, as far as I know.”

“Can Capatorto preempt Hudgins like that?” Candy asked.

“I really don’t know. But he certainly can cross-examine and I think Hudgins will treat him as a hostile witness. I’d put my money on Hudgins on this one,” I told my friend.

“How come?”

“Because Hudgins is on a career path. He has to win.”

“And Capatorto is not?” Candy was surprised.

“He says he’s quitting the law after this trial.”

“And you know this how….” She prodded.

“Lynne,” I said.

“Oh, of course, Lynne,” she replied.

“Here.” I offered her the earpiece. “You listen for a while.”

“By the way, Cal. Don’t you wish Tyro were still here to reenact that January caper?” I die laughing every time I think of it, and Joel Bayer.” Candy chuckled.

“I always wish Tyro were still here with me. He was my “heart” dog and I never stop missing him. I know he’s waiting at the Rainbow Bridge, but at least he has Nick with him.” I teared up. “But, you know, if Hudgins or Leo wants, we could do a reenactment with TyTwo.”

“How do you think that could happen?” Candy was all ears.

“Lynne.” I replied.

#

Back in the courtroom Capatorto continued. He leaned into the jury box, making eye contact with the first three peers. The blind girl coughed and apologized.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Capatorto,” Virginia explained. “But your cologne is so strong. I’m allergic to it.” She sneezed and grabbed for her purse.

“Here you are, Lassie.” Captain McGregor offered her his handkerchief. He was relishing his new role. “And if I may say so, counselor, you should go home and take a shower.” A titter ran through the court. The cameras were on it:

**“SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS OR…”** another possible six o’clock lead-in.

“Your honor,” Capatorto appealed to Foxworthy to rescue him with a pleading look. The judge banged his gavel. He announced, “We’ll retheth for twenty minuteth. Counselorth, in chamberth, now.”

Back in his chambers Foxworthy dropped his robes and his lisp. “Counselor,” he addressed Leo, “please feel free to use the executive john.” He pointed Capatorto towards his personal bathroom. “You’ll find everything you need in there. And don’t take more than fifteen minutes.” As an afterthought he asked, “What is that stink? It’s worse than my wife’s Estee Lauder that smells like a bordello. Youth Pew, I call it. I forbid her to wear it under threat of divorce. If your girlfriend doesn’t mind it, I’ll marry you myself.”

“Ok, it’s a deal your honor. You can officiate.” Leo and headed for the bathroom. He called back to the judge and Thom, “It’s Old Spice Classic and Lynne loves it.”

“For Chris’s sake Leo,” Thom yelled after him. Get with it. Try Paco Rabanne or something from Calvin.”

“Well, Thom,” Foxworthy continued, “you’ve got at least ten minutes of alone time with me. Anything you’d like to discuss ex parte?”

“Your honor! I wouldn’t dare.” Hudgins feigned shock. “But I would like to call Joel Bayer as a hostile witness. I just wish I had the dog to straddle him in the middle of the courtroom like his sire did in the law firm’s lobby. I would love to have seen him fling drool into Aurora Spirakis’ mouth.”

“Ah yes,” Foxworthy agreed. “Just how hostile do you want him? That spit attack has become a legend. I would love to have seen it myself. Let’s see what we can arrange, Mr. D.A.”

“Thanks, Judge.” Thom smiled, pleased as punch with Foxworthy’s suggestion, and mindful of the judge’s expectations of him.

#

Capatorto was ready to resume. He took his position at the jury box and began.

“Ladies and gentlemen. So sorry to have offended your senses. I hope to do better now. Any complaints? Are we good?” He raised two open palms and lifted eyebrows in classic Don Altobello pose.

“So, where were we?” Oh yes, we were left with one hundred and one angry clients and one very, very angry superior at her law firm. No, I am not going to call every one of them, but I will give you a sampling of the depth of animosity my client engendered against herself -- almost everyone she came into contact with hated her and wished her ill. Only Cynthia Steiner remained her friend and there’s a lot of speculation as to why. I’ve heard conjecture that they conspired to throw two major cases to satisfy the sellout their law firms had agreed to with Blazer International. Maybe. The women from the silicone litigation are convinced this is true. You will hear from two of them during the course of this action. That’s all you’ll really need. But you’ll hear from another client whose life she ruined after a tragic accident cost him his career. She lost his case by default, failing to properly file it on time. And lastly, you will hear from her superior who considers himself the biggest loser to her treachery. He was fired from his junior partnership because of a dog -- yes, the sire of the famous TyTwo. He blames Aurora Spirakis for the circus in their law firm’s lobby which exposed him as the firm’s henchman in the silicone debacle. You’ll decide whether you believe it or not.

“You’ll decide whether you can believe any or all of the witnesses against her. Whether they are on the defense or prosecution list, there is a commonalty. Everyone hates her. Every one of them had a reason to fame her. You’ll decide if you believe that or not. If you do, you will find her not guilty by reasonable doubt. I ask that each of you listen carefully and put yourself in the place of each of the witnesses as they tell their stories. You’ll decide if you think anyone of them could have framed her for revenge. That is all you really have to decide.

“I leave you now with a thought from the esteemed American poet, Robert Frost, who observed: “A jury consists of twelve persons chosen to decide who has the better lawyer.”

“Remember what I told you. You do not have to decide if I am a better lawyer than Mr. Hudgins, or if he is a better lawyer than me -- we are both great at our jobs. All you will have to decide is if one of Aurora Spirakis’ angry clients or her supervisor could have killed Cynthia Steiner to frame her.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Capatorto finished, “thank you for your attention and for your indulgence in bearing up under the stench of my Old Spice. I only hope I didn’t offend you too much.”

Capatorto returned to his seat next to Fat and smiled inwardly as he noted the jurors’ reactions.

“Well done, Cap,” Fat whispered.

#

“Did you hear that Cal?” Candy exclaimed as she handed over the earbud. “Of course not. She had the blue tooth. Capatorto is going for reasonable doubt and he is calling Joel Bayer.”

“That will be a hoot.” I exclaimed.

The “look” passed between us and we broke into our laugh fest and giggled for a full eight minutes. Comic relief, the oldest medicine.

#

Back upstairs Thom Hudgins prepared to make his opening argument. Special Agent Cleary slid to the end of her bench and moved forward, for a better view.

“Counthelor, you’re on.” Foxworthy pointed his bony finger at Thom.

Hudgins moved to the court center and faced the jurors. He began. His crisp new suit and Hugo Boss tie gave him a serious demeanor and proud posture. Natalie Valdes, sitting next to Bernie Cleary, smiled.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all for being here today and for listening to me as well as my esteemed colleague. Unlike Mr. Capatorto, I don’t think my cologne will offend you. I don’t wear any! My argument for the people’s case will impact you and your better judgment on the merits alone, without theatrics.

“My colleague has laid the groundwork for me. He wants you to believe that someone tried to frame Aurora Spirakis for the murder of Cynthia Steiner. Do you know what we call that in trial law? Of course, you do. You’re all savvy New Yorkers and I’m sure you’ve seen enough ‘Law and Order’ episodes to recognize a **PLAN B** when you see one. It’s classic. When there is no good defense, you raise reasonable doubt. The oldest trick in the book. Don’t believe it. Not for a New York minute. Aurora Spirakis did it. She had motive, the know-how, and she had the opportunity. She was jealous and furious with Steiner. Spirakis made a train wreck of her own career and blamed Steiner who was regarded as a rising star in the legal community. The DiMaris case proved to be her ticket to the top. They were not friends as Mr. Capatorto would have you believe. If Steiner were here and could be questioned, she probably would tell you how much she was disgusted by Aurora Spirakis and wanted nothing more than to be rid of her and her demands.

“According to Mr. Capatorto, there were one hundred and one clients and one supervisor who had it in for Ms. Spirakis. That’s one hundred and two enemies. Some of them, ladies and gentlemen, are sitting right here, in this court, today. With that Thom pointed to the coven of silicone sisters clustered in the two back rows. Yes -- there are what? About thirty women that I count as Aurora Spirakis’ clients. They feel they were denied justice by way of their attorney’s treachery. They believe there was a conspiracy to throw their cases. They will tell you that they were forced to settle for a pittance after Callie Thornton DiMaris lost her case. The word was ‘If DiMaris can’t win, no one can.’ That was because the DiMaris case was so strong. It was the lead case here in second circuit, and Mrs. DiMaris, whom you will meet, suffered horrific injuries. She now uses supplemental oxygen due to silicone seepage into her lungs. She also lost sight of an eye due to migrating silicone. And when she lost her case, Spirakis told her clients, ‘you’d best settle.’ They had no choice. They all did. All but Candace Cohn. You will meet her, too. She forced the firm to try her case, against their wisdom and the deal they made with Blazer International. Candace is a very powerful woman. She will tell you how Aurora Spirakis manipulated her and lied to her and to Callie, dividing their friendship with extreme measures. She will tell you how the defendant and her law firm masterminded the murder of her pet, Bingo, a beautiful German Shepherd. **Just to intimidate her**. She will tell you how the same perpetrator also tried to poison her friend Callie’s prize Great Pyrenees, Tyro, the sire of the now famous, TyTwo. She will tell you how she also lost her case -- a woman who underwent double mastectomy twice -- once for cancer and a second time for silicone seepage. No one thought it could be possible, but Aurora Spirakis and her law firm -- the mightiest personal injury law firm in New York -- did lose her case. She will tell you all about it. So will Callie DiMaris, or Professor Calliope Thornton as she will be introduced.”

Special Agent Cleary smiled and nodded at Detective Valdes. “Now we’re getting somewhere,” she whispered.

“You bet we are,” Natalie whispered back. “I know Thom wants to lay the groundwork for you.”

Hudgins continued. “You will also hear from Pablo Zabagrada, the client who sustained catastrophic leg injuries as a result of a NYC subway derailment. Mr. Zabagrada lost his livelihood and his girlfriend as a result of the defendant’s missing a filing date. He was tops in his field, specializing in handling big dogs -- Great Danes and Anatolian Shepherds. The girlfriend, with all due respect to Mr. Zabagrada, was no loss; she left him when he ran out of money. Mr. Capatorto is going to tell you that he is a likely candidate to take the Plan B fall. Don’t believe him. We went to great lengths to locate Mr.Zabagrada and bring him to New York to testify. He’s been living in Brazil for several years.

“So, there you have one hundred and one possible perpetrators. All hated the defendant and all, according to Mr. Capatorto, had reason to want revenge. But, what about the hundred and second, her supervisor, Attorney Joel Bayer. Remember him? Mr. Capatorto has already told you what happened to him. **Or has he**? We know that he holds Aurora Spirakis responsible for the loss of his position. Would he seek vengeance by framing her? Why not just blow the whistle? His law career was pretty much over. If he knew there was a conspiracy to throw the silicone cases, why not just walk across the street to the U.S. Attorney’s offices and spill his guts? Wouldn’t that be the perfect payback? Why the elaborate hoax of setting her up for a murder rap? Mr. Bayer didn’t even know Cynthia Steiner. Why would he want her dead?

“So, ladies and gentlemen, as you listen to each of the witnesses and consider all the evidence we will present, please, I ask you to keep in mind that all of Aurora Spirakis’ associates held grudges against her. And also remember that she has medical knowledge and knows how to use a hypodermic syringe. She was with Cynthia Steiner at the very minute she died. It’s obvious that she did it.

“Now, allow me to follow in my esteemed colleague’s penchant for poetry -- ‘How do I hate thee, let me count the ways…’ All of them had reason to wish her ill, but frame her for Steiner’s murder? Too elaborate a ruse and impossible, I think, to pull off. I think -- and you will agree -- that although everyone seems to despise the defendant, there was one, and only one, individual who hated Cynthia Steiner. Yes, Aurora Spirakis hated Cynthia enough to kill her. She is the only one who could have done it. After you have heard all the evidence, you will agree and find the defendant guilty as charged.”

**CHAPTER NINETEEN**

Candy and I planned that I would stay at her house the night before my testimony since it was such a long trip from Peekskill. Leo had told me that I was first to be called on Thom’s witness list on Monday morning. I was so nervous and wished for Nicky and Tyro to get me through a restless night, but they were both gone.

Knowing me so well, Lynne drove me and TyTwo down to Candy’s house on Sunday afternoon. “Leo told me you’re on first, so I thought you would need some good “woof” company tonight. I know how important this testimony is to you and Thom Hudgins,” she said.

“Lynne,” I was confused. “Isn’t it some kind of breach that Leo told you this?”

“I suppose,” but nobody’s calling me to the stand and Leo really doesn’t care whether Thom and Bernie Cleary reopen the silicone wars. He hopes you get some satisfaction, if it gives you some closure. But all he personally cares about is getting Fat off the hook and retiring from trial work. He doesn’t want to lose his last case.

“He also told me he’s so happy we’re getting married, so he doesn’t have to go to confession anymore.” Lynne added.

“Huh?” Candy and I uttered in unison.

“Yup. He says he goes to confession all the time, just to unburden his conscience. The priest is the only one he can talk to about his work. Now he has me, and besides, he won’t be a lawyer soon.”

“Who’d ‘ve thunk it,” Candy squealed in between peals of laughter. The counselor is a choir boy.”

With that TyTwo decided he had had enough and nudged me and Lynne to go inside. There in the middle of Candy’s family room stood a cardboard life-size photo of Joel Bayer, with a Joseph Abboud tie wrapped around the neck.

“Let me show you his latest trick,” Lynne glowed with pride. “Leo wanted me to teach it to him. He said Thom Hudgins suggested it.”

**CHAPTER TWENTY**

“State your name for the record, please,” Bailiff Raglan requested and then asked me to swear to tell the truth. I did so and could barely contain my zeal. Now the world can know the whole truth. I relished the thought as I placed my right hand on the court’s well-worn bible. My heart was beating so hard, I thought the jury could actually see it through my jacket. I disciplined myself mentally and prepared to continue.

Thom Hudgins stood and faced me dead on. “Now, Mrs. DiMaris -- or is it Ms. Thornton?” he prodded, knowing the answer.

“It’s Dr. Thornton, Calliope Thornton. DiMaris was my husband’s name.”

“Was?” he questioned, as if he didn’t know.

“Yes, I’m a widow. Thornton is my birth name.”

“And Dr. Thornton, what kind of doctor are you?” Again, for the jury’s benefit.

“I hold a Ph.D. in Economics and I’m a professor at Pace University.” I noticed several jury members nod in appreciation.

“Now, Dr. Thornton, can you tell us when you first became acquainted with the defendant, Aurora Spirakis?

“Yes. I recall that it was sometime during the month of May, 1994.” Hudgins had prepped me to keep my responses short unless he asked me to expound.

“And the circumstances of that occasion?”

“I met with her to evaluate my case against Century MBF International.”

“Can you briefly describe the nature of that lawsuit for this court?”

“I don’t think I can be brief,” I responded. A titter arose from the gaggle of silicone sisters in the rear.

Capatorto was on his feet. “Your honor, please instruct the witness to answer the question.”

“Yeth, Dr. Thornton. Pleathe anther ath thuccintly ath you can,” Foxworthy lisped. This time the jury giggled.

“Are you laughing at me?” The judge demanded and banged his gavel. “Order, or I will canthel lunch!” Stunned, the room quieted before the cameras could pan the jurors and audience.

Kate Walsh brushed her hair back and focused on me. I took a breath and began.

“Yes, your honor. I brought a personal injury a case against Century MBF the manufacturer of my silicone breast implants. They had ruptured and caused me horrific injuries.

Ms. Spirakis’ firm had the reputation of being the best personal injury firm in New York. It was known to only accept cases of high value. That was in 1994.”

“And when did your case go to trial, Dr. Thornton?” Hudgins asked.

“Four years later, in 1998. They had plenty of time to prepare.”

“Tell us what happened, please.”

“Well,” I continued, “as you know, the breast implant cases were divided -- or bifurcated to use the legal term -- into local and systemic injury.”

“Can you tell us how each injury is defined?” Hudgins asked.

“Objection!” Capatorto was on his feet. “Calls for a legal argument from a lay person.”

“Overruled, Mither. Capatorto.” Foxworthy banged his gavel. “I want to hear thith. You may anthwer, Profethor. But pleathe be thuccint.”

“Local injury,” I began, “was defined as any problem the implant may have caused necessitating removal -- most often hardening or rupture. Many times the implants broke through the skin -- especially in mastectomy patients. Often, they shifted out of place, but the most common need for follow-up surgery was encapsulation, or hardening. The implants form scar capsules around them. The resulting firmness -- capsular contracture -- of the implanted breast was graded as Baker I, II, III, or IV with Baker IV being as hard as a baseball.”

I stared straight at the jury, particularly at Captain McGregor who winced, and then I informed them that a Baker IV encapsulation made it extremely painful for the patient to sleep on her stomach or even to hug a child. Also, if the implant ruptured, the silicone could migrate anywhere in the body, causing deadly damage wherever it went.

“My own left implant had ruptured during a mammogram and the silicone gel then seeped into my lungs, gluing my left lung to my chest wall. It had to be surgically freed or debrided. I was told that I was fortunate that I didn’t throw a clot into the lungs. That had been known to happen.”

Capatorto scribbled furiously and shifted the legal pad for Fat to read. I was positive that she had no knowledge of the extent of my own research or that I was familiar with the Ellenbogen and Ellenbogen paper on the morbidity and mortality of silicone fluid in the human body -- the most definitive study at that time.

The jury gasped. Fat glared at Capatorto who objected.

“Down Mither Capatorto, and overruled. A horrible experienthe for you Profethor, no doubt. What can you tell us about thythemic ditheathe? Foxworthy asked.

“Your honor, please,” Hudgins implored. “Let me do my job.”

“Thorry Mther Hudginth,” the judge apologized. “Pleathe athk the quethtion.”  
 “Yes, Professor, please define systemic injury for us, if you can.” Hudgins directed. “But first tell us was the lung the extent of your local injuries?”

“Actually, no.” I related. “Several years later I developed visual problems in my left eye. The silicone had migrated to the retina and caused scarring, necessitating another surgery.”

The jury gasped.

“And this was also caused by the silicone?” Hudgins asked.

“According to the pathology report, it was.”

“And how is your vision in that eye today?” He asked.

“It’s extremely poor. After four surgeries, I can’t even read my wrist watch with that eye. All I can make out on the eye chart is the big E.”

I noticed the blind juror grimace and stroke her dog.

“How awful for you, I am so sorry, Professor. Now can you define systemic disease, the way in which the courts used it in this litigation.”

“Yes,” I resumed. “Systemic disease referred to autoimmune problems that were thought to be incited by exposure to silicone. When the products were introduced in the 1960’s, silicone was thought to be an inert substance. It wasn’t until the 1980’s that anecdotal evidence of silicone immune reactions began to be noted in some medical literature.

“The courts decided that only the local injury cases would be heard and the systemic cases would be held for adjudication at a later date because there had been such controversy over whether or not there was a causal relationship between the implants and various autoimmune diseases. The manufacturers had spent fortunes trying to protect themselves.”

“What kind of autoimmune diseases are we talking about?” Hudgins probed.

“All kinds,” I told the court. “The most common was joint involvement or rheumatoid arthritis. Multiple sclerosis was often diagnosed in women with saline implants, or saline/silicone combinations. Lupus and scleroderma are common and are present in all the components these diseases may cause -- Raynaud’s, sicca syndrome with dry eyes, dry mouth. Kidney failure with Lupus, organ fibrosis with Scleroderma. The list goes on.

“The diseases might be mild or terminal depending on the individual, the length of time the implants were worn, and the type of implant used. Some were worse than others. It also depended upon the patient’s own immune system. We had one very debilitated sister in California who had an identical twin who had not been implanted. The twin was perfectly fine. The manufacturer went to great lengths to bury that case.”

The jury gasped.

“Objection, your honor. She’s not a medical doctor.” Capatorto was on his feet again.

“Overruled again Mither Capatorto. The judge asked me to continue. “Thith ith motht interething. I think the jury thould hear it.”

“In fact, the manufacturers offered what they called a ‘global settlement’ to all the women on a graded scale of injury with payouts ranging from one thousand dollars to two million for the worst cases. Claimants were ranked in two groups -- Option I and Option II according to their symptoms, categories A,B,C. Option I required fewer medical records. Option II necessitated extensive monitoring and complete records.”

Capatorto was on his feet again. “Objection. Assumes facts not in evidence.”

“Overruled again. Continue, Mither Hudgins.”

“And how were you categorized, Professor?” Hudgins asked me.

“I was Option II, B. Systemic Sclerosis,” I told Hudgins and made eye contact with the jury. Kate blinked at me. Morse code? She knew my saga, full well. The cameras were on it.

“And that means what?” Hudgins asked.

“It means I had the highest rating without being dead. You’d have to be Option II A for that.”

Again, the jurors gasped.

“And what was your payout?” as if he didn’t know.

“None,” I replied. “The global settlement was withdrawn and the women were left to face court or accept a pittance.”

“What did your lawyer tell you at that time?”

“She told me I had a very solid local injury case. I had the documentation and my win would carry the rest of the caseload to victory.” I stared straight at Fat and bit my tongue to control my smirk. She squirmed, sweat beading her brow. You rat, I thought. Payback is going to be a bitch.

“So, Professor Thornton,” Hudgins continued. “Did there come a time when Attorney Spirakis advised you that she was preparing your case to be heard?”

“Yes, during June of 1998. She told me we had a court date in August but she would try to get it adjourned until December, so that my case and Candace Cohn’s could be heard together, as companion cases. But that didn’t happen.”

“Why not?” Hudgins asked me.

“I really don’t know for sure, but I think it was a ploy to keep us under control. I don’t think there ever was a plan to try our cases together. My local injury was to my lungs and Candace’s was bilateral mastectomy for a second time, due to extensive silicone seepage into the chest. I don’t see how the two cases could have lost.” I looked at the jury, who were now focused on Fat.

“So, you were on your own. Please tell us what happened.”

“Well, the firm kept me addled. At the last minute they brought in a substitute, of counsel lawyer to try the case. After holding the case for four years, Alex Trissant was not going to argue for me. The substitute had only about one month to be brought up to speed. In fact, he told the jury, ‘A month ago I didn’t know Mrs. DiMaris or an implant from a football.’”

“That’s not so unusual in trial work.” Hudgins commented, “It happens when firms are overworked. How did that affect you and your claim?”

“It was disastrous, Mister Hudgins. Maybe it’s acceptable in simpler cases, but not in such a complex litigation and certainly not in such a controversial case. I was the lead case in second circuit and my lawyers should have pulled out all the stops to win it. At least that’s what one would think. But the substitute of counsel attorney knew very little about the subject at hand, and even less about me, his client. He just kept telling me how stupid I was.”

“What?” Hudgins was genuinely surprised.

“Yes,” I confessed. “He kept telling me how stupid I was. ‘You may be educated but you’re not smart.’ I think he wanted to keep me off guard, and it worked.”

“And the defendant, Aurora Spirakis, how did she respond to this bullying?” Hudgins scowled in Fat’s direction.

“Oh, she chimed right in and further denigrated me. And Blazer had its A team on my case. I was, after all, the lead case in second circuit. Blazer’s lead counsel had made quite a name for herself trying silicone cases across the country and Cynthia Steiner was her second chair.”

The jury gasped again and sat riveted.

Capatorto objected and was overruled again.

“Thertainly that its relevant to thith cathe,” he told Capatorto.

“What was the defendant’s, Ms. Spirakis’, role at your trial? Hudgins asked me.

“She did little but sit like a stooge at my trial. She did all her damage at the pre-trial conferences.” I was finally ready to drop the bombshell -- just as we had planned.

“And what was that? The ADA asked.

Fat glared at Capatorto who looked dumfounded. “What’s this about, Aurora?” he jotted on his legal pad and shoved it toward her. “Now what have you forgotten to tell me?”

I continued. “On June 3, during a pre-trial hearing, Aurora Spirakis handed my case over to Cynthia Steiner on a silver platter. With a large red Christmas bow, I might add. She absolutely threw my case that day.”

“Approach the witness, you honor?” Hudgins asked the judge.

“You may.”

Hudgins walked to the stand and handed me a transcript of about twenty pages. “Do you recognize this document Professor?” he asked. The twenty-million-dollar question.

“Yes, Mr. Hudgins, “I do.”

“Would you read the cover page to the jury, please?” he asked.

“All of it? It’s a lot of information.”

“Okay, just tell us what it is.” He instructed.

“It’s captioned Number 34 and appears to be a transcript of the pretrial conference in my case, held on June 3, 1998 under Magistrate Michael Dolan.”

“And Professor, please tell us who was present at that hearing?”

“Cynthia Steiner for Blazer International and Aurora Spirakis representing me, the plaintiff.”

“And just give us the gist of that conference, please, Professor.” Hudgins was getting ready to pounce.

“The conference was basically a status check on readiness for trial. Spirakis is begging for more time because she is so overworked, having a cohort of four silicone cases in state court at the same time. My case was federal. She just didn’t have enough time to prepare and the firm was giving her no assistance.”

“Oh?” Hudgins raised an eyebrow. “How could the premiere personal injury firm in New York have been so careless with its most important case?”

“Oh, that’s an easy question.” I responded. “I suspect they had an agreement not to win.”

“Objection. Move to strike. Assumes facts not in evidence.” Capatorto again.

“Thuthained. Pleathe, Profethor, no editorialithing.”

“Please turn to page 10, Professor,” Hudgins instructed.”

I did so and looked up.

“Go down to line 19 and read for us, please.”

“Okay,” I said, “Where it begins with The Court?”

“Yes, that’s the place.” Hudgins urged. “Go on.”

**The Court: “Now, is the interstitial lung disease any different from what’s listed here as “left lung adherent to chest wall” which is written in quotes from the plaintiff’s local injury supplement.”**

**Ms. Spirakis: “That’s part and parcel of the lung disease, your Honor.”**

**The Court: “Then I am satisfied on the basis of the submissions and my reading of the decision on severance of Judge Urston, that this condition, insofar as the plaintiff has presented it in this case to the defendant and the court, should be argued by the plaintiff as being immunological in nature and is, therefore within the category of systemic injury and therefore belongs in the next trial, not in this trial.”**

My voice cracked as I choked my emotions back and just cringed.

“So,” Hudgins summed up for the jury’s benefit: “Your own lawyer, who had four years to prepare your case, didn’t understand the legal difference between the two types of injury?”

**“**I certainly seems so,” I agreed.

“And you, who are not a lawyer, nor a medical doctor, appear to have a compete grasp of the definitions as well as their legal application. Is that an accurate summation?” he asked.

“Leading the witness.” Capatorto popped up again.

“Overruled. Tell us profethor, how did you come by thith knowledge?

“With all respect, your honor. It’s not that hard. I do know how to read. I’ve also seen enough doctors over these past twenty or so years.”

Fat had broken into a cold sweat, perspiration dripping down her face and the armpits of her navy knit jacket showed half-moons. I smiled inwardly, thinking, Oh, Candy, I wish you were here now. No doubt she was listening in on Special Agent Cleary’s cell.

“So, what do you think happened?” Hudgins was giving me some latitude.

“I think she made a fool of herself intentionally. I’m suspect she was under orders to mangle the case in return for future partnership at her firm. We had heard those rumors. Instead, she was fired right after Candace Cohn’s trial.”

I watched Fat intensely and could not dispel the lyrics of “The Life Fandango” from playing in my head: “Her face at first justly ghostly, turned a whiter shade of pale.”

“Recess, your honor,” Capatorto cried as Fat turned her head and heaved up her cookies. The cameras were on it.

“Ah, I mused, what would tonight’s news lead-in be? **‘Out to lunch?’”**

Twenty minutes later Thom Hudgins recalled me to the stand. “Remember you are still under oath, Dr. Thornton.”

“Yes, sir.” I replied.

“Approach again?” he asked, turning towards the judge.

“You may.”

Hudgins walked up to the stand and handed me another document. This time only one page. “Do you recognize this paper?” he asked.

“Yes, I do. It’s the consent form to the first breast augmentation surgery I had in 1981.”

“The first?” he asked, as if he didn’t know.

“Yes. I had two. The first in 1981, was with saline filled implants. They lasted only eighteen months before deflating. My surgeon exchanged them for a silicone set in 1983. In fact, what we warned newcomers to our support group was this: If you have the implants, be prepared to have multiple replacement surgeries -- at your own cost. Your insurance will not cover it unless it’s for reconstruction, sometimes, but not always. This may be your first augmentation surgery, but it won’t be your last.”

“You honor, please.” Capatorto again.

The sisterhood was cackling in the background, high-fiving me.

“Order, order,” Foxworthy banged his gavel. “You are a witness, not a group leader here today, Professor. Leave out the editorializing.” He forgot his lisp and the cameras took note.

“And,” the ADA asked, “is that the consent form for surgery which was used for the Century MBF product, the subject of your lawsuit?”

Fat looked as if she was going to heave again, but instead she jabbed Capatorto in the ribs.

“Your honor.” he protested.

“Yeth Mither Capatorto, I will have the defendant removed from the court.”

“Not necessary judge. I will control my client,” Capatorto replied and in a loud stage whisper.

“Pleathe anthwer, Dr. Thornton,” the judge directed.

“May I have the question again?” I asked. Hudgins repeated it. The jury waited to determine where to place their attention.

“No, Mr. Hudgins. It is not. This consent form had nothing to do with the Century MBF silicone implants which I received two years after I signed this document for the saline product which was made by another manufacturer.”

“Tell us then, Dr. Thornton, why was it used as evidence in your trial against Century?”

“You should really ask the defendant,” I nodded in Fat’s direction.

‘Yes, but I would like your opinion. You seem to know more about this litigation than any of the lawyers I know. Tell us, please.”

“There was no consent form to the 1983 surgery. My plastic surgeon exchanged the faulty saline implants with the new and improved -- he claimed --silicone ones. He told me it was a favor. I signed no consent form for the exchange surgery and there was no hospital record, even though the second surgery was performed at New York Presbyterian. I was not charged a penny for the exchange. When the 1981consent form was used at my trial, someone had “augmented” it by printing in the line: “I have been explained everything about breast implants.”

“Added in?” Hudgins questioned.

“Yes, because it wasn’t on the original form. I distinctly remember because the English syntax was wrong. I most certainly would have made note of that when I signed it in 1981. It was not there.”

The jury stared. Signor Pizzo nodded and smirked. Captain McGregor was jolted out of a semi-snooze.

“Then why do you think your attorney allowed the form into evidence? We all want to know?” Hudgins indicated the jurors and the audience.

“Yeth, pleathe tell uth.” Even the judge’s curiosity was peaked.

“Because it was a setup. The jackass of counsel litigator they hired on even jumped up at one point and stipulated that no one gets surgery without a consent form. I almost pointed it out while on was on the stand, but I had been so addled into submission that I kept my mouth shut. I expected that this joker would point out that it was from a different surgery and was not admissible. He did not and still, to this day, I can’t forgive myself for my stupidity. After the trial loss, I hired a private investigator to poll the jury, since my lawyers would not. I was furious. That’s when I discovered that the consent form was the lynchpin for the defendant verdict. The lawyer on my jury deliberately led the jurors to the wrong conclusion by telling them there was no liability since I had signed the document that claimed ‘I had been explained everything about breast implants.’ An honest lawyer would have pointed to the date of 1981 and said that the document in question was irrelevant and inadmissible. That’s why Judge Urston planted him on the jury.”

“Excuse me, Dr. Thornton.” Hudgins feigned shock. “Did you just say that a member of the bar was impaneled on your jury?”

“Yes sir.”

“I can hardly believe it. Your lawyers didn’t raise an objection?”

“No. They were happy to have him. When I overheard him talking about the case on the public telephone outside the courtroom, they refused to report it to the judge. I could have had a mistrial. But, Mr. Hudgins, it turned out that the lawyer sitting on my jury was an old high school friend of Judge Urston. They had been classmates at The Bronx High School of Science. I also heard rumors that they were more than friends.” I concluded my testimony and at long, long last placed my grievance on the public record.

“Now then, Dr. Thornton,” Hudgins went on, “wouldn’t you say, -- if these claims are true, and we can verify them -- that you had every reason for animosity towards the defendant, Aurora Spirakis?”

“Certainly, I did.”

“Enough animosity, Dr. Thornton, to seek revenge?” He knew the answer that was coming.

“What I sought, Mr. Hudgins, all these years, is what I just got.” I smiled.

“And that was?” he had to ask.

The cameras riveted on me as I exhaled and commented:

“Vindication. The satisfaction of putting the truth on the record. And, oh yes, I am enjoying seeing Ms. Spirakis squirm, here in this court.”

Bernie Cleary flashed me a smile. Quick, but exuberant. She was closer to what she wanted.

The evening’s news headlines might read, **“The Best Revenge.”**

Nothing more, your honor,” Hudgins concluded.

Before Judge Foxworthy could ask me to stand down, Bailiff Raglan came rushing into the courtroom, waving a message and a phone handset. “Your honor,” he cried, “there is an urgent phone call. So sorry to interrupt the court.”

Foxworthy took the note from the little bailiff and snorted amusement, spraying his Evian directly at Raglan. “Thorry Bailiff,” the judge apologized, “but thith ith a good one. I think the whole court thould hear it.” The news crew immediately refocused and waited.

“Profethor Thornton,” Foxworthy lisped. “Thith call ith for you. Put it on thpeaker tho we all can hear.”

Dumbfounded, I accepted the phone from the bailiff. The judge chortled.

“Hello,” I said, “this is Calliope Thornton.”

“Oh Callie,” a familiar female voice answered, “so glad to catch you. I hope I’m not interrupting you. Is this a bad time?” It sounded like Sarah McKenna, the first lady. Of course, it was. Who else could get to a court in session?

“Mrs. McKenna? Is that you?” I managed.

The jury was thunderstruck, as was I. Each of them moved closer to the edge of their seat, in a synchronization worthy of the Radio City Rockettes. Fat snarled a look of disgust at Capatorto, who shrugged in genuine disbelief.

“Yes, it’s me. I have a question about little Connie. I can’t believe what she just did.”

Of course. little Connie was Pyrfect’s Constitutional Ratification; the nine-week-old puppy bitch I had relinquished to the first family when Sarah McKenna decided she had to have one of TyTwo’s offspring. And of course, I wouldn’t charge the White House for the puppy.

“Is she okay?” I was alarmed. Even though she was already fifteen pounds, she was just a baby.

“Oh, she’s fine,” the first lady admitted. “But our vet told me to give her rice because she had a little diarrhea yesterday. So, we gave her rice for breakfast. Do you know what she did? I can hardly believe it.”

“Oh, tell me. Or should I say tell us?” I waved at Foxworthy.

Tell uth pleathe, Mrth McKenna,” the judge called out.

“Well,” the first lady related, “she stuck her head into the bowl, looked up over her shoulder at me, kicked the bowl, and gave one big woof! At just nine weeks. Complaining about her food already, and actually barking.”

“Oh no.” I laughed and again wished that Candy were in the courtroom to hear this. We could have shared one of our laugh fests with the court and the press! “Mrs. McKenna,” I said, “I have to tell you that is an inherited trait. Connie’s grandfather, my Tyro, did the exact same thing. But he was only eight weeks old at the time. His first bark was also to register a food complaint. I think this means that little Connie will grow up to have a gourmand’s a palate just like her father and grandfather. You’re in for a lot of fun with her.”

“Oh, you think?” the first lady asked. “I know I got her for Delaney, but she seems to have attached herself to me.”

“Are you the one who feeds her?” I asked.

“Yes, of course I am.”

“Then, Mrs. McKenna, you’ll have a friend and protector for life. Just make sure there’s a scrap of people food for her. Just a little, though.”

“What should I give her?”

“She should have giant breed puppy kibble. But you can give her a tiny bit of lamb or chicken. Not too much. And start her on Greenies, to keep her teeth clean and white as soon as her adult set come in. Remember, just a bit of people food. You can’t really spoil her because that palate is inherited. It’s not cultivated.”

“Oh, thank you. And one more thing, Callie. Her tail is beginning to unfurl and it is indented at the top. It looks strange. Is that normal?”

“Yes, Mrs. McKenna. It is absolutely normal and is an indication of leadership. It’s called a shepherd’s crock, and the Pyrs with that characteristic are generally the leader of the pack. So, it seems that you’ve got yourself a very special little alpha bitch.”

“Oh, thank you so much, Callie. So nice to talk with you again. We hope to see you ringside at some shows in the future.” The first lady said goodbye.

The judge was actually giggling.

“Your witneth, Mither Capatorto.” Foxworthy motioned for Leo to start his cross.

“Reserve the right to recall this witness at a later date, your honor.” That was a surprise to all, including Fat who gave him another poke in the ribs.

“Leo,” she hissed, “what the hell is wrong with you?”  
 “Shut up, Aurora, I know exactly what I’m doing. If you know what’s good for you, just do as I say,” he admonished.

“Very well then, Professor Thornton,” the judge began without the lisp. “You may stand down.” He hesitated as I left the stand and then added, “Just a moment Professor, let’s give the jury a treat. Why don’t you bring that famous dog of yours to court tomorrow? I’d love to see him myself.” The lisp had disappeared.

“As you wish, your honor.” I just love it when a plan comes together. God Bless Lynne, I thought. And then I slithered into a seat at the back of the courtroom and hid myself in-between the coven of silicone sisters. No one seemed to notice. At least I hoped they didn’t. I wanted to watch Candy testify.

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“Call your next witneth Mither Hudgins.” The judge resumed his lisp.

Thom took a step towards the polished oak rail separating the audience from the bench and asked Candy to step forward. She had just been led into the courtroom by Bailiff Raglan.

“Bailiff,” Foxworthy directed, “pleathe thwear the witneth.”

Bailiff Raglan approached and asked Candy to place her hand on the good book and swear to tell the truth. Nothing could please her more -- or make her more nervous. She kept picking at her fingernails until they were just stubs and her face was drawn and pale, but her dark gypsy eyes danced with glee. She spotted me hidden in the back and gave me her Mona Lisa smile. I returned the greeting with my own silent salute to her -- a raised eyebrow, disappearing under my long bangs. We knew each other so well.

“Now, Mrs. Cohn,” the assistant district attorney began, “please tell us how you became acquainted with the defendant, Aurora Spirakis.”

“Well,” Candy began, “I wanted a strong law firm for my case against Century MBF.”

“So,” Thom encouraged, “was it Ms. Spirakis who filed the complaint for you?”

“Actually, no it wasn’t,” Candy replied. “I had another well-known solo practitioner representing me. Ms. Spirakis actually poached quite a bit of her clientele away from her.”

“And how did she accomplish that **highly unethical** deed?” Thom sneered at Fat with the question. The zing struck Fat like an arrow. She turned crimson with rage, jumped up and screamed her objection.

“Mith Thirakith,” the judge barked. “Are you reprethenting yourthelf here? You had better give the right anthwer or I will have you removed from the court.”

“Sorry, your honor.” She sank into her chair, blinking back tears. Candy smiled. Leo just shook his head and whispered in Fat’s ear.

“Anthwer the quethtion, Mrs. Cohn,” the judge instructed.

“Ms. Spirakis wheedled an invitation to one of our support group meetings and insinuated herself into our midst. She gained our trust and friendship and promised us all the best representation from the most powerful firm in New York. She educated us on the facts of the law governing class actions and promised she would send us to the very best expert physicians to build our cases for a maximum payout. She wooed us away from the lawyers some of us had already signed with and then collected the remainder of her caseload by referral from the new women joining our support group. **Oh, and she was not nearly so fat then**.”

Spirakis turned purple and glared at Candy. Capatorto bit his tongue and tried to look away to hide a smirk.

Thom snickered. “What kind of group was this, Mrs. Cohn. Please describe it for the jury.”

“It was a support group,” Candy began. “All breast implant women were welcome. We met once month and did a great deal of phone networking. We didn’t have Facebook back then. Internet was pretty new, too, and primitive. The women were all ill and frightened. Some more than others. We offered emotional support in seeking medical attention and offered referrals to the best surgeons who were experienced in removing the devices. We did have one member who actually was an attorney herself, and she helped us in understanding the rules of law governing the class action. We hooked women up with doctors, lawyers, and each other. Some friendships have endured, most have not.”

“Mrs. Cohn,” Thom asked, “what was your role in the group?”

“Callie Thornton and I were co-leaders of the New York group. I dealt with the social networking aspects and kept the group grounded while Callie interpreted the medical science and lobbied with the trial lawyers who were fighting for us.”

“Do you have specific qualifications for this type of work, Mrs. Cohn?”  
 “Actually. Yes. I’m an MSW and work at Jacobi Hospital,” Candy replied.

“MSW?” Thom asked for the jury’s benefit.

“Master of Social Work, specializing in medical social needs,” she answered with some ego, her posture more erect.

The jury took note, as did the cameras.

Tell us, Mrs. Cohn, who was the attorney in the group?” Thom really didn’t expect an answer.

“She was just another implant patient. I’m not at liberty to divulge her identity. But she did give us some valuable legal insights.” Candy smirked in Fat’s direction.

“How so?” Thom urged Candy on.

“Well, she contended that the entire class was based on the wrong rule of law.” Candy was pleased to make this revelation.

“What? Did I hear you correctly?” the ADA again feigned surprise.

“Yes, that’s what she thought.”

“Explain that, please.” Thom prompted.

“Well,” Candy went on, “at that time, the breast implants had not been approved by the FDA; their usage should have been governed by informed consent guidelines. The implants were grandfathered in so that the doctors could invoke the learned intermediary rule of law and use them indiscriminately, without full explanation and a lot of paperwork and follow-up.”

“Can you explain the difference between these two standards of classification as you understand them?” Thom rubbed his chin and waited.

“Objection.” Capatorto jumped up. “The witness is not an attorney.”  
 “Overruled, Mither Capatorto, unleth you want to call an expert withneth to the thand.”

Foxworthy was fascinated by Candy.

“Continue, Mrs. Cohn, pleathe.”

“Thank you, your honor,” Candy continued. “The informed consent is a legal document for an experimental drug or device. Every time there is an adverse effect, it gets reported to the hospital’s institutional review board and to the drug or device manufacturer, and then the consent form is redrafted to include the event so that all potential users are advised of the risk. Every participant who signs the consent form is educated as to the risk/benefit of the drug or device.

“The learned intermediary rule applies to the physician’s role. He or she is the one with the knowledge as the drug or device is already approved for use by the FDA, and it is his or her obligation to inform the patient of the risks versus benefits. It saves a great deal of time and paperwork and safeguards the manufacturer. But the implants did not have FDA approval, did not undergo clinical trials, and were therefore an experimental device and needed to be tried under the informed consent standard of law. Simply put, we came to believe that every woman who had been implanted had a right to a lawsuit because she was denied the benefit of a proper consent. The whole issue was really not one of whether or not the implants caused harm. It was a matter of the women having their right to consent abridged and being reduced to the status of a laboratory rat.”

The jury gasped and nodded. Signor Pizzo actually gave Candy a round of applause. The rest jumped to their feet and joined in. The silicone coven stood and high fived everyone around them. Foxworthy banged his gavel and screamed for order.

“Well done, Mrs. Cohn,” the judge complimented, “but I warn you, keep your anthers thort with leth hithrionicth.

“So, Mrs. Cohn,” Hudgins continued, “what did the defendant, Aurora Spirakis, say when you presented her with this argument?”  
 “She told us we were ridiculous. If we wanted to argue our own cases, we should get law degrees.”

“So, did there come a time when the defendant was not so friendly or encouraging to you and the rest of her breast implant clients?” Thom already knew the answer.

“Yes, after a year or so, the global settlement which the manufacturers had offered, fell apart. The manufacturers’ major player filed bankruptcy. Women were scrambling for new lawyers who would try their cases, but there were none to be found. Ms. Spirakis began brow beating all of us into taking a pittance just to put the litigation behind us.”

“Brow beating?” Thom asked.

“Yes, brow beating and intimidating. She began turning a nasty cheek to us all. She wouldn’t return phone calls and she would lie to us about everything. We didn’t know what to do or what to believe. We didn’t want to sign our cases away for pennies.”

“How exactly did she intimidate the women? Please explain what she did to you.”

“Well, Blazer International had taken my deposition in December, just before the holidays. Callie Thornton had been deposed in early November. After my depo, Blazer made me a settlement offer of $150,000. Please remember, Mr. Hudgins, that Spirakis’ firm did not accept cases that were not meritorious of million-dollar awards. One hundred and fifty thousand was actually an insult. Don’t forget, I had lost both my breasts, twice. Once to cancer, and then to silicone invasion into the chest wall. It was a lot to withstand.

“After my deposition, Aurora really got heavy handed with me. She warned me not to let on that Blazer had made me an offer. She said if I slipped and let it out, Blazer would retract it.”

“So, you told no one?” He knew that answer, too.

“No, I did not.”

“Not even Callie Thornton who was your co-leader and best friend in all this?”

“No. Aurora especially didn’t want me to tell Callie. I thought, at that time, that Callie had the same experience and had been given the same instructions. It turned out she hadn’t and that episode nearly destroyed our friendship.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that I stopped talking to Callie. I cried myself to sleep for weeks before I saw Callie again. But it was years before I actually confessed that I had been made the offer. If I had told Callie about it, I’m sure we would have figured out that something was up and we would probably have fired Aurora and her firm. But I kept my mouth shut. I don’t know how Callie was ever able to forgive me. I really don’t.” With that Candy broke down and sobbed on the stand.

Thom called for a twenty-minute recess.

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Back on the stand, Thom asked Candy to continue.

“Apparently you were able to repair the friendship and continue on. Is that right Mrs. Cohn?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Did you think a deal had been struck between Blazer International and your law firm, at that time.?”

“Yes, we did. Blazer’s plan was to force Callie to trial; the firm would forfeit her case and that was supposed to scare the remainder of the clientele into settlement. That included me, but I insisted that they try my case.”

“And you also lost?”

“Of course, I did.”

“In addition to the warning about the settlement offer, was there anything else you believe the defendant’s firm did to separate you from Callie Thornton?”

“Yes, but it backfired on them.”

“What do you mean? Please explain.” Again, Thom already knew what had happened.

Candy stared straight at the jury, making eye contact with Captain McGregor and Signor Pizzo and then continued.

“It was just before Christmas, the first day of Chanukah, when my beautiful German Shepherd, Bingo died. He had been poisoned, and I was more than distraught. The only person I could think to call was Callie. She was so kind. She insisted that I spend Christmas with my husband and son at her house. That’s when we devised the plan to uncover and expose the monster who had done this. I swore it was Blazer but Callie thought differently.”

“And did you succeed with your plan?”

“Yes, we did. Because the same person who poisoned Bingo tried to kill Callie’s magnificent Tyro as well. And on Christmas Eve.”

“But the Thornton dog survived, I take it?” Thom knew he had.

“Yes. Tyro was too smart to take the bait -- rat poison in a London Broil.”

Virginia Pacheco grimaced and hugged Carla to her. This was not lost on Fat, who put her head in her hands to cover her tears.

“And you think it was Aurora Spirakis who engineered this monstrous deed?”

“I don’t know whether it was her idea or not, but someone at the law firm wanted to keep us addled and off base. That suited Aurora’s purpose. She wanted to keep us under control and intimidated. She wanted to brow beat us into submission. But it didn’t work. At least not on me or Callie. So, we concocted a plan. Callie managed to get Tyro into the firm’s lobby where he attacked Joel Bayer as soon as he saw him. The scene was hilarious, the way Callie related it. Tyro knew it was Bayer who tried to poison him and his sister. Actually, the irony of the story is that Tyro saved his sister’s life. He sat on her and would not let her swallow the piece of poisoned meat. He has to be the smartest dog…”

“So, you might say, Mrs. Cohn, that you are another client of Aurora Spirakis who would wish her ill?” Thom thought he knew the answer.

“I would say that. But I would say that everyone who knows her probably has the same feeling. She has become a bottom feeder of the worst kind, and we all -- and I mean the support group -- got the last laugh when she was fired.

“Oh? Explain that please?”

“We had information that it would happen and when it did about twenty-five of us were waiting in the building’s lobby. When she stepped out of the elevator, we all waved pink slips at her and jeered. We couldn’t have been more pleased.”

With that the cameras switched over to Fat who sobbed uncontrollably and was escorted out of the courtroom by Bailiff Raglan.

“And that,” Candy summed up, gesturing toward the courtroom doors which had just closed on Fat, “is the perfect revenge.”

“No more questions your honor,” Thom concluded.

“Mithr Capatorto, your witneth.”

“Reserve the right to recall. Recess your honor?” Leo asked.

“It’th already late in the afternoon. Court is in retheth until tomorrow,” the judge announced. Have a pleathant evening, everyone. Foxworthy swept off of his dais and headed towards his chambers. As an afterthought he turned and called back to me, “Don’t forget Profethor, I expect to thee your dog in court tomorrow.”

Son of a gun, I thought. He knew I was in the back all along.

**CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE**

Candy and I pulled into her driveway at four fifteen, exhausted and emotionally drained. The ride back to the Bronx had been a silent one. Candy’s breakdown on the stand had dredged up so many memories of that hideous time and the betrayal which had nearly killed our friendship. I never guessed at the guilt she carried with her, nor did I realize the true depth to which she treasured that friendship.

Lynne was at Candy’s door. TyTwo woofed at the sound of the van as we turned the corner onto Wickham Avenue. His ears very every bit as sharp as his sire’s. Tyro could recognize Nicky’s car from three miles down the road.

“Surprise,” she yelled. “Look what I have for you guys.” She led us into Candy’s family room where she had prepared a treat for us.

“I know you must have had a grueling day,” she said, “so I thought you deserved a treat. At least we can celebrate that you’re finished with your testimony.”

A bottle of champagne -- yes, the very same pink stuff -- sat waiting in a cooler alongside Candy’s sheer flutes, filled with luscious looking strawberries. She had filled a platter with all types of cheeses and grapes, and included the smoked salmon and cream cheese pinwheels I loved so much.

“Lynne,” I exclaimed. “What a surprise. You’re just the best -- wait a minute. How do you know that we’re done with our testimony? Leo hasn’t done his cross yet.”

“Callie,” she smiled, “you have to trust me. You’re done.” Then she turned bright pink, giving the secret away. Of course, Leo had called her after court!

“Lynne, sweetheart,” Candy hugged her. “I wish I could have fixed you up with my Danny, years ago. What a great daughter-in-law you’d be.”

“Well, he’s a bit too young for me, don’t you think?” Lynne teased. “Besides, I’m not Jewish.”

“Oh, I don’t care.” Candy scratched TyTwo’s ears and handed him a piece of Vermont White Cheddar. The dog pushed his black wet nose against the cocktail table and asked for another piece. He would never help himself.

“Freddie’s in Atlanta tonight, so let’s celebrate. Just us girls,” Candy suggested as she dug into the Brie. TyTwo woofed and gave a quizzical look. “Did you forget about me?”

“Here boy, here’s your cheese.” I fed him another hunk of the Vermont White Cheddar. He devoured it and raised his left paw up in the air and woofed again. “More?” I asked him. “Okay but not too much.” I gave him a kiss on the snout and told him that he had to be at his best tomorrow.

“You don’t have to worry,” Lynne claimed with assurance. “We’ve rehearsed over and over. He’s ready.”

“The let’s have our happy hour.” Candy poured the champagne as we nibbled on the cheese treats.

“You know,” Candy mused, “I don’t really see how Aurora could have injected the strawberries with the pink juice. It would have been so much easier just to mix it into the pink champagne. It’s a perfect disguise. Why go to all that trouble?”

“Can, you’re right, but don’t forget that it was Fat who drinks the pink stuff. Steiner had the white, so that theory doesn’t work.”

“I don’t know. If not her, then who? Who hated Cynthia Steiner enough to want to off her?”

Lynne answered Candy’s question. “Leave that to Leo. He has a theory.”

“Sweetie, I don’t want to rain on your fiancé’s parade, but we just can’t bear the thought of Fat getting away with it.” I blurted out.

“Oh, don’t worry Cal. She won’t. But Leo does want to plead her down to a lesser count.”

“Really?”

“Yes. He’s morally opposed to the death penalty. And he’s not happy that he has Spirakis as his last client.” Lynne sighed and chugged her champagne.

“Easy, girl. That’s not ginger ale. We can’t afford to be wasted tomorrow.”

“Cal, you’re such a mother. Anyway, I won’t be in court. Leo wants me to stay far away.”

“Okay, So it’s up to you and me, Ty boy. Are you ready?”

“Woof!”

I fed him another hunk of his cheese and he settled himself at my feet, slapping one giant paw over my ankle. And then, to the amusement of all three of us, the big white fluff began to snore, a six-inch drool hanging from his jet black flew.

**CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO**

TyTwo woofed with glee as I loaded him into the van, decked out in his sire’s service vest. Like Tyro -- and all good dogs -- he knew that much would be required to honor the wearing of the royal blue jacket. He woofed and pawed at the back of the driver’s seat, and then at the passenger side where Candy had settled herself.

“Don’t forget,” I told my friend. “One piece of the Cheddar now and another when we pull into the court’s parking garage.”

“Got it.” She tucked the cheese away and we were off.

TyTwo decided it was a good opportunity for a nice snooze and snored contently on the back bench. When we reached the court’s parking garage, I stopped the van in the entrance and Ty awoke. He gave one loud woof to announce that he was up, stretched out, and stuck his massive head over my left shoulder to glimpse the garage attendant.

“Oh, my God,” the uniformed woman exclaimed. “That is the most beautiful dog I ever seen. What is it?”

I smiled proudly. “He’s a Great Pyrenees.”

“Is he friendly? Can I pet him?”

“Yes, and yes. He’s a gentle giant and a certified therapy and service dog.”

The woman fussed over TyTwo for several minutes and wanted to know what it would cost to buy one. I told her and she gasped.

“Not on my salary.”

“Well,” I informed her, “Contact the Great Pyrenees Club of America and ask to be connected with their rescue division. They’ll hook you up with a dog that needs a new home. So long as you don’t mind fostering a mature dog instead of a puppy.”

“Thanks. I’ll think ‘bout that. Where you ladies go’n?”

I told her.

“Oh, that that’s the three-ring circus Judge Foxworthy’s runnin’. How you gonna get that dog in there?” she chuckled.

“Ma’am, I’m pleased to tell you that TyTwo was invited by the judge himself.”

“Oh, you mean to tell me that this here is the famous Westminster dog? As I live and breathe! I don’t believe it. Here boy, you come here and g’me some sugar. Wait. Let me get my phone. I gotta get a picture of this.” She scooted back to her booth while we waited at the entrance.

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Then we walked over to the courthouse’s steep front steps and began climbing up to the lobby where the security screening equipment waited. But, with TyTwo in hand, we were ushered around the line of visitors and led to the attorney entrance, and then escorted to the wood paneled elevators.

“Have a good day, Ladies,” the guard told us and gave TyTwo a pat. “Wow. He really is something. The whole court is talking about him. Foxworthy managed to gain some notoriety, this being his first state court case, and all.” Ty sensed the praise was for him and placed his huge paws on the guard’s shoulders to kiss his face. He was expert at “meet and greet” just like his father was. The guard laughed and told us to bring the dog back to him when we were finished in court. He’d have special treat waiting.

“He loves cheese,” I said. “Vermont White Cheddar.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

And I knew that a block of Cabot’s would be there when we were done. But now, adventure awaited.

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In all about a dozen people had stopped us to “friend” TyTwo. The dog was a master networker, just as his sire had been. When Tyro was young, I used to take him to a grooming school where the students would bet on who got to “do” him. It was a beautiful new facility with five grooming stations set up like a beauty parlor. Tyro would go to each station, sit, give a tail wag and a paw to each operator -- a politician making the room! Each of the students had to have their turn “doing” the ten-star general!

When we finally arrived at the courtroom, Thom Hudgins had just called the day’s first witness.”

“Good Morning, Profethor” Foxworthy greeted us. “Let’th have a look at the famouth

TyTwo. Bring him up here,” he ordered and beckoned me to the bench.

“Come, tell uth hith fasthinatin full name.”

He patted the gigantic head and sprayed Evian at him. TyTwo gave his hiccup laugh and licked the judge’s hand in thanks for the shower. The jury laughed. The TV cameras scooped it up.

“Yes, sir,” I replied. His name is Grand Champion Pyrfect’s Honor Thy Father.”

“And I underthand that TyTwo is actually Ty junior after hith thirer? Ith that right, Profeth…”

Before the judge could finish his question, TyTwo began his low grumble. He let out a menacing growl from the back of his throat and narrowed his coal black eyes. His gaze was fixed on the diminutive stick figure about to be sworn in at the witness box. Joel Bayer! Joel Bayer in a Joseph Abboud tie!

The jury reacted in kind. Stunned by the unexpected threat, they shrank back in their seats, crouching behind the jury box.

“Easy boy,” I commanded knowing full well that the stage was set and the signal had been flashed. With that TyTwo broke loose from my grip and pounced on Attorney Bayer, knocking him to the floor. The shyster shrieked, and the next thing I knew -- and did not expect -- the seeing eye Shepherd leapt over the jury box to join TyTwo in the fray.

“Carla, Carla, come back,” the blind girl cried, not understanding what was happening.

“I’ll take care of it Lassie,” Captain McGregor shouted as he hoisted his bulk over the jury box, caught his ankle on the edge, and toppled into the middle of the court, his shock of silver waves flying off his head and landing on Attorney Bayer’s crotch.

By then TyTwo had the twerp secured, sitting on his chest while his new-found pack mate pulled at Bayer’s trouser leg. Curious, Ty gave the toupee a good sniff which terrified twerp Bayer even more.

“Stop, stop.” Bayer screeched. “Stop them and I’ll tell you everything. Everything. Just get them off of me.” The cameras were on it.

“Ty,” I commanded, “come here boy.”

To everyone’s astonishment, the giant white bear got up, shook himself out and sauntered over to me where his treat awaited, but not before he finished his act. He fixed a menacing gaze in Fat’s direction.

**Déjà vu**. I couldn’t have planned it better. Fat sat there with her mouth agape as not one, but two dogs attacked her former supervisor. Doubtlessly, she remembered that January melee when Tyro and I had stormed the Woolworth Building.

And just when I thought it couldn’t get any better, it did. A “snot rocket” of thick, long drool went flying across the defendant’s table and hit Fat smack in her open mouth. Again! She gagged and heaved all over the shiny mahogany table. Leo grimaced, but could not contain himself. He rollicked with peals of laughter until tears ran down his face.

The jury and Thom Hudgins joined in and the cameramen couldn’t decide where to focus. They too, were in hysterics. Foxworthy was laughing and banging his gavel but couldn’t get a grip on himself. TyTwo, confused that he was no longer the center of attention, marched over to Joel Bayer who had not yet recovered from his fright and still lay prone on the courtroom floor.

Quite ceremoniously the big dog gave Bayer a sniff, lifted his leg, and relieved himself all over the shyster’s Joseph Abboud tie. Then he walked back to me, sat down, and looked up as if to say, “How did I do?” All this came out as one big **“woof’!**

The entire court -- other than Fat and Bayer and Virginia Pacheco who was being appraised of the antics by Signor Pizzo -- were in hysterics. Even the judge could not compose himself to demand “Order.” He laughed until he sobbed. Undoubtedly, the evening’s news lead-in would be “**The Wiz**.”

**CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE**

The next morning the courtroom was abuzz as Foxworthy banged his gavel. “Order, order,” he yelled, “or I’ll kick the cameras out.”

“Yeah right,” I thought as I nodded at the sisterhood cackling in the background. Bernie Cleary was “up” for the occasion, notebook in hand; Natalie Valdes was serious in her police uniform. They smiled at each other the same way Candy and I did. I could see that their friendship would strengthen and endure long after these silicone misadventures were settled. But this morning we all had great expectations.

“Are we ready?” the judge asked.

“Yes, your honor,” Leo and Thom answered in unison.

“I didn’t realithe you were the Bobbthie Twinth,” Foxworthy quipped. “Shall we retire to chamberth, couselorth?” Foxworthy asked indicating the two litigators and Joel Bayer.

“If it please the court, your honor,” Capatorto was quick to interpose. “The purpose of the media covering this trial was to place it on the public record. Let us not forget that. I believe the People, as well as the Defense and the Court want to give the public direct access to this testimony, live, as it happens.”

“Thanks, Leo.” Hudgins was anxious for the show to go on.”

“Yeth, Mither Capatorto, you are right. We will protheed here in the room. Let uth begin. Mither Hudgins, you’re on firth. Bailiff, pleathe thwear the witneth,” the judge ordered.

Joel Bayer, ashen and drained from the previous day’s events, walked to the stand, in obvious fright. He gave his name and swore to tell the truth, wincing through the ceremony.

Fat sat at the defendant’s table in a navy blue plus-sized suit which made her look all the more the prison matron. She blanched as Joel Bayer began his testimony. The stage was set.

Mister Bayer,” Hudgins began. “Please tell us what your relationship is to the defendant, Aurora Spirakis.”

“We no longer have a relationship. I was her immediate superior when we worked at Simpson Kennedy Wallace Trissant. I was the managing partner assigned to the breast implant litigation and Ms. Spirakis was the firm’s associate in charge of managing the clientele.”  
 “And who hired her into this position?”

“Actually, I did. The partners wanted a woman who could relate to the clients. Aurora had been a nurse, so her medical knowledge gave the clients a certain comfort level.”

“And whom else did Ms. Spirakis report to, other than yourself?”

“Oh, all of the partners. Particularly to Alex Trissant who was the firm’s lead litigator.”

“Please describe her role at Simpson Kenney Wallace Trissant.”

“She was to manage the silicone breast implant case load. Procure the clients and evaluate each case for trial. In the beginning we were not trolling for settlement cases. Only trial cases meritorious of seven figure awards.”

“Did there come a time when the focus changed?” Hudgins asked.

The cameras rolled and Bernie Cleary took furious notes. “This is what we needed to pursue this case,” she whispered to Natalie. But no one inside the firm would squeal.”

“Yes, there did.” Bayer continued. “There had been a global settlement offer -- meaning a settlement that included all of the manufacturers of the devices -- which offered the women awards on the all levels of injury and illnesses caused by the implants. After about four years when the lead manufacturer filed bankruptcy, the global collapsed. The remaining manufacturers withdrew from participation.”

“Why was that, if you know?” Hudgins asked.

“I don’t’ know exactly. My impression -- and I’m not alone in this --was that they never intended to honor the settlement. What they did was collect the medical records of all the women who had filed claims against them -- about half a million -- giving them full knowledge of their exposure. They held the records for about four years while they got their ducks in a row, and then offered a revised settlement for pennies on the dollar.”

“What did your firm do when this occurred?”

“Well, managing all these angry women became quite a chore. Aurora’s assignment was to brow beat them in any way to get them to cave. But most did not. In fact, the one hundred or so clients she had collected proved to be the most determined in New York. They were a tough bunch and were impossible to control.”

Hoots and howls came from the silicone coven in the back. They actually gave Bayer a standing ovation.

“Order, order” Foxworthy screamed, banging his gavel. “No more of that or I’ll have you all removed.”

“The sisterhood shrank back into their seats, but not before the cameras caught all thirty of them for the next news broadcast.

“And why was that?” Hudgins thought he knew what was coming.

‘They’re New York women. They’re not put together with Campbell’s soup.”

“Excuse me?” Hudgins was puzzled.

“Well, I mean we did have the best cases in the venue. And they had admirable leadership in their support system. Callie Thornton DiMaris and Candace Cohn had the two best cases in New York. And the support group loved them. Both of them had suffered horrific injuries -- Callie’s lungs were ruined and now, I understand, she also lost most of the vision in her left eye. Candy, the woman who had been a bilateral mastectomy cancer victim, lost her breasts a second time to silicone seepage. Both these women also had systemic diseases which placed them at the top of the original settlement offer grid. The irony is that both of them lost their trials, despite being eligible for the highest level of compensation on the original global settlement grid.”

The sisters in the back rose in unison and offered silent “high fives” to each other. Judge Foxworthy was flabbergasted. He simply waved for them to be seated.

Fat sat listening, not daring to breathe. She knew we were there and she had to be feeling the vibes of hatred directed at her.

And then came the zinger.

“Tell us, Mister Bayer, how was it that you lost both trials? They were such outstanding cases and Alex Trissant enjoys the reputation of being New York’s premier trial attorney.”

“I think we all know that it was a set-up,” Bayer replied, reluctant to continue.

“Yes, that is the rumor,” Hudgins remarked. “But give us the specifics, and remember you are under oath.”

“Leo,” Fat hissed at Capatorto. “Object. What has this got to do with Cynthia’s murder?”

“Shut up, Aurora, you will soon see. And it will help you.”

Joel Bayer continued. “It was about one year before Thornton and Cohn were deposed. The manufacturers came to town with their guns loaded for bear. They made offers to the firms that controlled the litigation in second circuit. That was us and another firm that had thousands of cases across the country, but none as well documented or as meritorious as ours. The DiMaris and Cohn cases were worth a fortune. Originally the plan had been to try them as a cohort together. Both women had identical implants, placed in the same year. Both experienced rupture and invasion of the low molecular weight silicone gel --”

“Please restate in layman’s terms, Mr. Bayer.”

“It means that the product was pure garbage. The manufacturers had been producing implants filled with thin, runny silicone in very thin shells so they would feel more natural. But they ruptured easily and the gel traveled throughout the body, with potential for damage wherever it went.

“The logic was that together the DiMaris and Cohn cases could not help but convince a jury to find for huge awards and set the tone for good settlements for the rest of the cases. Both women had sympathetic cases and both were very similar in background. They were both born and bred New Yorkers, professional women, with undergraduate degrees from Hunter College and graduate degrees from NYU. Both were tough as nails and without any scandal in their private lives. Likeable and deserving. They should have prevailed.”  
 “Right,” Hudgins added, “but they didn’t. What happened?”

“As I said, the manufacturers came to town with their checkbooks. We had twenty clients who had Century MBF implants. Blazer offered us a million dollars per client. Twenty million dollars to throw the DiMaris case and split up the twenty million between the remaining 19 women as we saw fit. We actually gave each client about one hundred and fifty thousand, but took expenses and our thirty-three percent out of that so the women wound up with between fifty and sixty thousand. DiMaris and Cohn got nothing. In fact, Blazer taxed them for costs and we did nothing. The federal statue for taxation of costs is thirty days after verdict. DiMaris was taxed thirty-three days later and Judge Urston allowed it. But she still wouldn’t cave and sign off on her systemic case.”

“And how did Alex Trissant arrange to throw the DiMaris case? After all, he is the premiere trial attorney in New York State.” Hudgins prodded.

“He had been warned that if he didn’t get with the program, Blazer would force all twenty of his cases to trial. Trissant couldn’t risk that. He knew Blazer meant it. So, at the last minute he hired a ringer to litigate for him. This was Blazer’s play book for all their silicone trials. The substitute was a buffoon who played the role to make a fool of himself in court. And Aurora was given her marching orders. ‘Play the unprepared greenhorn at pretrial conferencing. In reality, the DiMaris case was lost before it ever was heard in Donald Urston’s court.”

“Oh? Can you expound?”

Fat cringed again. She looked at Capatorto in despair.

“Well,” Bayer continued, “only the local injury cases were to be tried. The issue of systemic disease was to be held in abeyance on a suspense calendar. There had been, don’t forget -- and for all those who don’t know -- an enormous controversy totally contrived by the manufacturers, as to whether or not the silicone caused systemic diseases. This is after the diseases were acknowledged on the global settlement grid. This had actually been published in The New York Times, by Philip Hilts, the paper’s premiere science and medical journalist. I think he even got a Pulitzer. It made no sense. It has long been known to the medical community that silicone is immunogenic; it is not inert. Any scientist will attest to this. But the manufacturers spread enough money around to buy science on the issue.”

“Buy science?” Hudgins feigned shock and nodded in the jury’s direction.

“Yes.” Bayer shook his head. “What do you call it when professionals accept payoffs to agree with a benefactor’s position? It actually happens every time a pharmaceutical company pays a principal investigator’s way to a conference. They can be most persuasive and also intimidating. Their tactics in dealing with the hard-nosed are well known in research circles.”

“So, what happens to the hard-nosed? I’m sure we all want to hear that.” Thom was actually being facetious, but Bayer turned pale.

“Mister Hudgins,” the twerp choked out. “I’ve actually suspected some murders in these cases. The wife of one expert witness disappeared while jogging near her home and has never been found.”

A gasp went out from the entire court -- judge, jury, and audience -- only Fat was unsurprised. “It’s true,” she whispered to Capatorto. “I remember when that happened.”

“And your firm, Mister Bayer, how did you deal with the hard-nosed clientele?” It was clear that Thom was referring to me and Candy.

“I was instructed to poison their pets.” Bayer answered.

“Another gasp from the court. Candy began sobbing and I put my arm around her to lead her out of the court. “No, Callie. I have to hear this.” She tried to control herself, but the tears just kept streaming now her cheeks. “My beautiful Bingo,” she sobbed. “My poor beautiful Bingo.”

“Continue Mister Bayer. Whose pets did you poison and how?” Thom probed.

“The first was Candace Cohn’s German Shepherd. I was told to make it a good one. The partners felt that Candace was the more vulnerable of the two. I cased her house for a few weeks, making sure that she noticed. It was to make her nervous. And then I was to poison the dog on the first day of Chanukah, just to be mean. We had no idea that she would go crying to Callie DiMaris. Aurora had forbidden her to contact Callie and we were sure she would comply. But went I drove up to Peekskill to off the Great Pyrenees, I was shocked to find Cohn’s Volvo in the driveway. I also didn’t expect two dogs when I tossed the poisoned meat to the DiMaris dog. He proved too smart for me, gave me a growl and pinned the smaller dog -- a female I guessed -- so that she wouldn’t eat the meat. I took off down the driveway like a bat out of hell. I don’t know how I didn’t skid into a tree; it was so icy. That was on Christmas Eve. Not my best holiday season that year.”

“I’m sure we all feel for your plight, Mr. Bayer,” Thom derided.

“It wasn’t my finest hour. But I had no choice. The partners were adamant. Intimidate and control, any way possible. They had to get out from under the silicone mess and they didn’t want to deal with difficult clients.”

“Okay, Mister Bayer. So, you have the clients where you want the them. What happened next?”

“Instead of caving, they rallied and came after us.”

And then he related the Woolworth caper. The courtroom howled. Even the cameramen hooted. Leo slapped his thigh in unabashed mirth, tears running down his face. Candy and I shared a “laugh fest.” Only Fat remained silent, turning white with rage.

Foxworthy banged his gavel. The room settled back down. Thom resumed his interrogation.

“Okay, Mister Bayer. We get the picture. There’s no doubt that these Great Pyrenees are remarkable dogs. Now, tell me this. After the plaintiffs -- Mrs. Cohn and Dr. Thornton -- recognized that you were the perpetrator and that the firm’s interests were -- shall we say -- questionable, why did they not fire you and get new counsel?”  
 “Mr. Hudgins,” Bayer sighed loudly. “The firm fired **me** to throw the two of them off track after the January foray. But, don’t forget there was a serious agreement in place. In order for the plaintiff firms to get in on the new settlement action, we all had to agree not to take on any new cases. The only firms who could touch a breast implant case would be the new, solo practitioners **with little experience**. There simply was no way to change lawyers at that point. Especially for high profile developed cases. I’m sure that DiMaris and Cohn found that out the hard way.

**BINGO GOTCHA** Thom thought.

“Why did you not just offer the women a settlement and slap them with gag orders, like the rest of the clientele? Why throw them to the wolves?” Again, Thom knew.

“The manufacturers wanted a high-profile win in second circuit. Their message was ‘if DiMaris can’t win, no one can.’ And it worked. The women finally caved. The DiMaris loss was just too much for them. Her case was so sound.”

**GOTCHA!** Special Agent Cleary scribbled a note to Natalie Valdes.

“And how did you manage to fracture her case even before it went to trial? Please explain.” Candy and I poked each other and Bernie Cleary turned a page in her notebook.

“We simply excluded her lung injury. We purposefully never sent the sample tissue to our expert pathologist to identify the silicone damage. As recorded in previous testimony, that pretrial conference on June 3 was set up to dismiss the local injury and identify the lung problem as systemic in nature. The woman actually had four patterns of injury in her lungs. One was the scarring on the pleural lining due to silicone seepage through the chest wall. Another was early interstitial fibrosis which is autoimmune in nature. The third was that her left lung was adhered to the chest wall as if someone had poured Elmer’s glue through her ribs. And the fourth, most life-threatening was pulmonary hypertension and an AVM probably sustained during implant surgery and necessitating Mrs. DiMaris to need supplemental oxygen. Not that the subcutaneous mastectomies in Mrs. Cohn’s case is a day at the beach, but the lungs? Who could imagine that?”

“Mr. Bayer.” Thom continued. “I am surprised to hear you exhibit such empathy for Professor Thornton. I thought she had become your adversary through legal malpractice action.”

“I swore to tell you the whole truth, ugly as it is. It was not easy to forfeit these cases. But I had my orders.”

“And what were the defendant’s, Aurora Spirakis’ orders?”

“She was instructed to play the buffoon and allow Cynthia Steiner to challenge all the cases’ merits. She was to cede the hearings to Steiner. In fact, she just about handed it over to Steiner on a silver platter. That was the June 3 hearing under the magistrate judge. Donald Urston had made it clear that he would tolerate only defendant verdicts on these cases.”

“What??? Did I hear you properly Mr. Bayer?” Even Foxworthy could not hide his shock.

“Yes, your honor you did,” Bayer admitted. “Our instruction on these cases came from the highest level.”

“How high do you mean?” The judge put himself in the middle.

“Please, your honor,” Thom begged. “Let me do my job.”

“Yeth Mither Hudginth, go ahead. But get to the bottom of thith.”

“Mister Bayer, please explain to us what you meant by your last statement. Just where did your marching orders come from?”

“Mine came from the partners. But they were under Donald Urston’s control. And Judge Urston got his instruction from the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court -- at least that’s what we were led to believe.” Bayer exhaled heavily.

“The Chief Justice? Why,” Thom asked, “would he care about this issue at all?” He waited for **the answer**.

“Because he was protecting Century Chemical, the parent of Century MBF -- the ultimate deep pocket in the implant daisy chain. All roads led back to Century Chemical.”

“And if that allegation is true -- and it’s quite a stretch -- you’re suggesting that the entire class action was a conspiracy to protect Century Chemical?” Thom pushed the envelope.

“It’s a theory. I can only attest to those actions I was personally privy to.” Bayer was ready to conclude his testimony.

“Okay, it’s a theory. But getting back down to earth, didn’t you testify that Aurora Spirakis had been instructed to throw the case to Blazer?”

“Yes, that’s right. She was to present herself as a fat, lazy, stupid slob who never should have been admitted to the bar.” Bayer looked at Fat and winced.

“And she did just that, correct?”

“Oh, she did.”

“And was she rewarded for her compliance?”

“No, she was fired, just as I had been.” Bayer stated.

“Then tell me, Mr. Bayer, wouldn’t that be ample motive for the defendant to want revenge on her colleague? Wouldn’t she have resented her enough to kill her?”

“Aurora kill Cynthia?” Bayer was adamant. “No, never.”

“Why not?” Thom asked. “Steiner rose to the top; she made partner for her victory in second circuit. And on Aurora Spirakis’ back.”

“Because she was blackmailing Steiner.” Bayer announced. “You don’t kill that goose that lays the golden egg.”

Fat shrank down in her chair trying to hide from the cameras.

“Blackmail?” Thom was shocked. So was Capatorto who looked at Fat, swallowed his Adam’s apple, and shook his head, unable to utter a word.

“Yes. She was blackmailing Cynthia under threat of exposure. If Cynthia didn’t help her out, she would blow the whistle and take everyone down with her.”

“What did she get from Steiner?”

“She got some monetary payoff, I think. But what she really wanted was a law job. No one would hire her. She had become a pariah in the New York legal community. I think Steiner actually was trying to bring her onboard with Davalos Coldwell. I can’t believe that Aurora would have killed her. No way.”

“Thank you, Mr. Bayer.” Thom concluded.

“You may thtand down, Mithter Bayer,” Foxworthy instructed.

“Court is now in recess. I think we all need a break.” the judge sighed. The cameras rolled while the courtroom remained dead silent. “Counselors, -- Mr. Hudgins, Mr. Capatorto, my chambers now. You too, Ms. Spirakis,” the judged summoned without his lisp.

**CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR**

“Now Ms. Spirakis,” Foxworthy began. “Before we resume this trial in front of the cameras, I would like to hear from you, in camera, -- pun intended. So, tell us, can you corroborate your colleague’s testimony?” Foxworthy was all ears.

“Don’t answer that, Aurora.” Capatorto piped up. “A word with my client, your honor?”

“Of course, Leo, but not too long. I want to know what the hell went down with that class.” Foxworthy drummed his bony fingers on his desktop and sipped his Evian. “Refreshments, counselors? Where are my manners?”

“No thanks, Judge.” Hudgins responded. Capatorto and Fat engaged in a whispered tete-a-tete.

“We’re ready, your honor,” Capatorto said, “but first, before my client gives any information, can we negotiate a plea?”

“What do you have in mind?” Foxworthy raised an eyebrow at Leo. “This is a murder one charge and so far, I haven’t heard any evidence that she didn’t do it. Just Mr. Bayer’s speculation.”  
 “Well, your honor, if you think her testimony has veracity, we can reopen the entire issue. I’m sure my esteemed colleague here would love to have that on his agenda.” Leo indicated Thom who stood by trying not to look too much like the Cheshire cat.

Oh, beam me up Scottie. Nat, I’m forever indebted to you for this one. Thom tried to wipe the grin from his face.

“I would ask for a lesser charge. If you agree, we can be done. Say, involuntary manslaughter with five to fifteen, and early parole.” Leo bargained.

“She’d be out in three,” the judge calculated. Involuntary manslaughter? How did you come up with that?”

“She didn’t do it, your honor. She had no reason to kill Cynthia Steiner. Yes, she was blackmailing her, out of desperation. But I think someone else poisoned those strawberries. Not Ms. Spirakis. I think the murderer may actually have been after my client and somehow got the strawberries to the wrong woman. After all, everyone did hate her.”

Fat cringed, but nodded in agreement.

“Okay then, Ms. Spirakis. Let’s hear from you. Then we will decide. Now about Joel Bayer. Can you corroborate his testimony?” The judge waited.

Fat began. “Yes, your honor, there was a conspiracy. Not originally, but as the class developed and over half a million women filed claims, the implant manufacturers became desperate. Several of the smaller ones went out of business and Century Chemical’s subsidiary, Century MBF, -- the largest defendant with over forty percent of the liability -- filed for bankruptcy protection. The manufacturers created the global settlement offer, just as Mr. Bayer described. They never really intended to pay the women; they just wanted to buy time and get a good look at their exposure.”

“Yes, we got that. When exactly did they approach your firm?” The judge waged a bony finger at Fat.

“That would have been in the fall of 1995. They came to Alex Trissant and told him he had to get with the program. It was on a national level. If he refused, they would force every one of our one hundred cases to trial. No exceptions. Trissant was beside himself. He had planned on one case -- Callie DiMaris -- this had been that pattern in earlier venues -- Boston, Reno, Atlanta, and New Orleans. But it was too late. The die was cast and the manufacturers were determined. They had a master plan. Every case that was tried was orchestrated by the same playbook -- pare the case down in pretrial conferencing, brutalize the plaintiff, put in a ringer litigator who would act the buffoon and call inexperienced expert witnesses who would not hold up on the stand. Prevent the women’s treating physicians from testifying. In the DiMaris case we actually brought in an expert radiologist who worked with her explant surgeon and sent him home to Ohio without putting him on the stand. Then we billed Mrs. DiMaris twelve thousand dollars for his trip. We also prevented her explant surgeon -- the best in the country --from testifying on Mrs. DiMaris’ behalf.

“What??” Foxworthy was livid. “How do you bill like that on a personal injury action? That’s a contingency action. Explain Ms. Spirakis or I will… never mind.” He composed himself and jabbed a forefinger at the court reporter. “Make damn sure you get all this down.”

“I know, Judge. Actually, the idea came from Blazer International’s team. They filed for taxation of costs for about thirty thousand dollars against Callie DiMaris. They thought that affixing charges again DiMaris and then Cohn would be a deterrent to the rest of the clientele. DiMaris was actually taxed out of statute. The prevailing party has thirty days to file and…”

“I went to judge school. I do know the Federal Code of Civil Procedure, Ms. Spirakis.” Foxworthy interrupted. “Go on.”

“So, Blazer files thirty-three days after entry of verdict and then Alex Trissant hits DiMaris with a bill for over one hundred thousand for expenses. All padded.”

“Good lord, she didn’t pay that, did she?” Foxworthy was aghast.

“No, of course not. We used it as a ploy. If she would drop her systemic half of the case, we would drop the charges.”

“And did she drop the case?”

“No. She was determined to see justice -- which she never would.”

“And why not?” Foxworthy wanted to know.

\ “Because the systemic half of the case was suspended indefinitely. Judge Urston had demanded that the local injury cases move forward because the systemic cases might never return to the venue. They’re still pending, to this day.”

“So, if I heard you properly, your firm allowed the defendants to fix costs on your client, out of statute, and further sought to intimidate her by billing for services rendered by contingency contract. As if that is not bad enough, they allowed a final verdict to be entered on a bifurcated case? I am truly shocked.” Foxworthy shook his head in disbelief.

“Oh, Beam me up again Scottie. Even better than I imagined.” Thom thought.

“Yes, your honor. They were determined. Don’t forget, we also used a forged and inadmissible surgical consent from an earlier procedure in the DiMaris case.”

“Unbelievable!”

“And Judge Urston did place a “friend” on her jury. An attorney who was a life-long associate, going back to high school.”

“Hmm…” Foxworthy stroked his goatee. “There are rumors about Urston having a closeted past. I assume you knew who this lawyer was?”

“Oh, we knew. It was well rehearsed. There was no way Callie DiMaris could win. Only she did win part of her case.”

“Let’s hear it,” the judge sighed.

“Blazer had challenged the identity of her implants. They claimed they weren’t Century MBF’s, not their product. We allowed her to testify on that point. Not only was she convincing she was able to produce dated photographs to prove her point. The jury voted, by separate ballot, that she received Century MBF implants. In fact, most of the week’s trial was consumed by the identity issue. It was a red herring.”

“You did quite a job on this woman, didn’t you Ms. Spirakis? Oh, don’t look so shocked Leo,” the judge admonished. We’re not in night court anymore.”

“Yes, your honor, we did.” Fat admitted. “If we had let her open her mouth more, I’m sure she would have won. We had to keep her under control.” Fat finished.

“Well, Ms. Spirakis,” Foxworthy went on, “I imagine you can supply documentation to support these allegations?”

‘Yes, I can, your honor. But still, I didn’t poison Cynthia. You’ve got to believe me. She really was my friend,” she whined.

“Aurora, I’m warning you. Shut up.” Capatorto whispered. “A minute with my client, please?” he asked.

“Take your time. Use my private chambers. But don’t come back without a decision. I’ll keep the offer on the table right now as involuntary manslaughter. Five to fifteen. Okay with you Mr. Hudgins?”

Thom nodded.

“Talk with your client, Mr., Capatorto.” Foxworthy shook his head in exhaustion. “I don’t freakin’ believe it,” he muttered to himself, over and over.

Back in the judge’s private quarters, Leo sat Fat down in one of the wing chairs and laid the cards on the table. “Okay, Aurora, this is it. It’s a gift.”

“Leo, I didn’t do it. Put me on the stand, please. I didn’t do it.”

“Aurora, I almost believe you. As your defense attorney, I have to believe you. But putting you on the stand will get you life, maybe the death penalty. This jury does not like you. They will not believe you and they will have no sympathy for you. They will convict. Take the plea. Trust me. I’m saving you.”

“You don’t know that for sure.” Fat was abashed and frightened. “Oh God,” she gulped.

“Not again.” She got up and ran into Foxworthy’s private bathroom.

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Back in court, Foxworthy climbed up to his bench and addressed his audience, mugging for the cameras.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, members of the media, and spectators here present, we have an announcement. A plea has been reached and you are free to go with the State of New York’s thanks.” He swept his arms out in a magnanimous gesture, robe sleeves flapping across his bench, spilling his opened bottle of Evian.

“Oops,” he exclaimed, mopping up the water with his bat sleeves. “Sentencing is set for the twentieth of next month. Court is dismissed.”

He swept down from the dais and dropped into his swivel chair back in chambers. “Oh Jim,” he called, “would you get me a beer, please? What a day this has been.”

“Sure, Judge,” the lanky aide agreed and scooted off to the private mini fridge down the hall.

#

On the ride home I snapped my cell phone open and said “Hi” to Kate Walsh.

“So, it’s over. Did she give you what you needed?” Kate asked me.

“Kate, I’m not sure, but I suspect that she did or she wouldn’t have gotten the plea. I’ll have to ask Leo -- no I mean I’ll ask Lynne. Protective orders of silence are probably attached.” I haven’t spoken with Bernadette Cleary or Natalie Valdes yet.”

“Candy, watch the pothole,” I warned as we headed back on the Cross Bronx.

“Actually, the jury was disappointed not to see the case go to verdict,” Kate confided.

“How do you think they would have voted?” I held my breath.

“Oh, we all thought she was guilty. No question. Only the blind girl had reservations.”

“So, Leo got her off.” I wasn’t surprised.

“Yeah, he did. If Virginia Pacheco weren’t blind, it would have been unanimous. She couldn’t see how vile a bitch Spirakis really is. Looks do matter.”

“Kate, have you spoken to Leo?” I was suspicious.

“No, of course not, Callie. I didn’t speak with anyone involved with the trial. How unethical do you think I could be?” She laughed and clicked off.

“Ah, Lynne,” I mused with pride.

**CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE**

Columbus Day proved parade perfect -- clear, bright, and inviting. Special Agent Cleary hurried down Fifth Avenue towards Rockefeller Center. The crowds slowed her, but not enough to keep her from enjoying a brisk stroll. She passed Tiffany’s and was tempted to window shop, but kept going. Nat Valdes was probably already at the ice rink waiting for her. Just as she reached 51 Street, the Monsignor Farrell Marching Band tooted past. She caught sight of the golden Prometheus across the avenue from Saks’ main entrance and scanned the crowd for her cohort.

Just then the mayor and his entourage marched by -- flanked by NYPD officers and what Cleary recognized as private security as well. The mayor waved at the crowd and caught her eye. He nodded to her. She was not unknown to city dignitaries.

“Hey, Bernie,” the mayor called. “How’s everything going with you?”

Before she could answer, a tap on her shoulder startled her. She turned and exclaimed, “Nat, for God’s Sake, you scared me. How did you spot me in this crowd?”

“Oh easy. I knew when the mayor would pass and figured that he’d spot you for me. I just waited here. Saks isn’t so bad a place to rendezvous, you know.”

“I’m a Bloomie’s girl myself,” Bernie retorted. “Let’s get lunch.”

The two women settled themselves in a corner at the Rock Center Café and eyed the rink. Early in the season, but still, it entertained skaters of all ages and abilities. A day off from school or work always gave New Yorkers time to enjoy the city as their own playground.

“Looks like fun. We should give it a whirl; don’t you think?” Valdes asked her friend.

“Oh, not for me, thanks,” Cleary replied. “I never liked winter sports. Give me tennis and the summer. Anyway, Nat, what’s up? And what’s good for lunch here?”  
 “Oh everything,” Valdes claimed. “I had Thom bring me her for my birthday, last month.”

“Too much information!” Cleary teased. “Don’t tell me about your personal life. But, have you heard about Capatorto? Did he actually quit the law?”

“I heard that he did. He’s taking exams to go into the insurance business. Wants to open his own brokerage. Don’t that beat all?” The detective ordered Manhattan Clam Chowder with a calamari salad.

“Same for me,” the special agent repeated. “Sounds good.”

“Oh, I can understand why he would quit,” Cleary added. “He really wants a new life, now that he’s getting married and all. By the way, did you get an invite?”

“I sure did. Thom is best man and he asked me to be his date. I hear Foxworthy is presiding.”

“Now, don’t that beat all? And on Thanksgiving Day. It should be quite a feast. I’ve got to hand it to Callie Thornton. Surrogate mother-of-the-bride that she is.” Cleary remarked.

“I know. I can’t wait. Have you clued her in on our investigations? I’m not sure how much we should tell her. But I think she’ll be thrilled that Thom has motioned to recertify the entire class for second circuit. If he’s successful …. You know what that will mean.” Nat responded.

“Oh, I sure do.” Cleary replied. “I hope Callie gets what she wants. I always believed she was right. Wouldn’t it be something if those verdicts were thrown out and the whole class was retried? Looks like there was a conspiracy at the highest levels – jury tampering, conspiracy with witness tampering, and on and on. And that Urston -- I’ve been after him for years.”

“Come on. Bernie,” Valdes chided. “You know how hard it is to remove a federal judge, incompetent or corrupt. It’s easier to off them.”

“You’re right Nat. I know that. But Donald Urston is one arrogant pig and I think he’s as dirty as they come. The silicone fiasco isn’t the only class he’s controlled. The plaintiff always gets screwed in his court -- which carries nationwide implication. And then guess what? Years later he reverses himself -- after they’re all dead. I’m happy to help Thom get him, if I can.”

“Bravo Bernie.” Natalie continued. “Now have you found anything on Spirakis and Steiner? You know, I went up to Bedford to interview her as a follow-up -- at least that’s what I told her, and she still claims she’s innocent. I almost believe her. She still maintains that Steiner was trying to help her get a new law job and that they really were friends.”

“She’s lying -- about their being friends. The law job? Could be.” Cleary was all business now. “Have a look at these.” She pulled a list of phone luds from her briefcase.

“What? You pulled Spirakis’ phone records already?” Valdes was delighted with Cleary’s “quick on the uptake.”

“Yes, I did.” Cleary went on. “They didn’t show anything we don’t already have. But I also went to Steiner’s. I thought that would be harder. Hard to get her house line -- expectation of privacy -- and all that. However -- and you won’t believe this --her husband was most cooperative!”

“Oh?” Valdes’ eyebrows rose in question.

“Yes.” Cleary grinned. “He said he had a sense that something was wrong for a while. Couldn’t put his finger on it, but claimed that Steiner had been distracted and secretive. He got suspicious when one of the twins told him that Mommy had taken them to see a nice fat lady with yellow hair. Steiner dismissed it as a kiddy movie with a pudgy nanny. But Daddy Steiner didn’t buy it. He couldn’t figure it out according to the current kiddie cartoons. So, with his permission, I was able to run the home luds quickly, without a court order.

“He thought that she was hiding money. His first impression was that she was involved with another man and was squirreling a stash and was going to leave him. That’s why he never mentioned it to the police at the time of the murder. He was sure she was having an affair and was mortified that anyone would find out. A real straight arrow, that one.”

“Is that possible?” Valdes asked. “Any other leads for us?

“Oh yeah.” Cleary grinned again. “Just have a look. See this number that appears on the Steiner home phone only once? 917 area code? It’s from a cell on Staten Island. But when I went to trace it, it turned out to be a throw away phone. Bought with cash.”

“That really doesn’t help us, does it?” Valdes was disappointed.

“Well, maybe it does. Because…” Cleary was now the Cheshire Cat.

“Because what?”

“Because I did a little old-fashioned sleuthing,” Cleary confided. “And it wasn’t really that hard. The cell buyer wasn’t too bright. He bought the cell at the Staten Island Ferry Terminal. I had a hunch, so that was the first place I looked. Sure enough. The vendor remembered because he had sold a few of the throw-aways- illegal without a vendor’s license. He runs a doughnut shop with a little contraband on the side.”

“So… all you had to do was flash a badge and look the other way for his cooperation.” Valdes laughed. “You’re really good. I’ve got to hand it to you, Bernie. Not that an NYPD detective couldn’t do the same.”

“I’m sure you could, but sometimes it pays to be ‘**of color**’ and play that card,” Cleary admitted. “And it never hurts that the FBI always has surveillance at points of entry into Manhattan. They have a known list of illicit vendors who might be something more. So, I strutted over there in glitter and high boots with lots of lip gloss. The powdered sugar nearly blew off his doughnuts.”

The women slapped high fives and laughed through their calamari salads.

“Do we know who the cell user is?” Natalie asked.

“No, not yet. But the vendor remembered that the guy was swarthy and walked with a pronounced limp.”

“Holy crap!” Valdes smiled.

**CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX**

“Lynne.” I called over to the grooming area. I stood in the doorway, waiting. “Come on. We’ll be late to Madam Baldwina.”

“Oh Callie,” my beautiful protégé chided. “You do cluck so. Just let me finish brushing Holly out. She’s blowing so much coat. I hope she doesn’t lose it all before the wedding.”

“Oh, don’t worry. She’d be beautiful if she were bald. And don’t forget who’s the center of attention.”

“Sure, TyTwo,” Lynne teased.

I laughed. “Thank the lord you’ll only be moving across the road. What would I do without you?” I shuddered at that reality. Lynne was the only one in my life I could consider family. And Candy, of course.

“Well,” she assured me, “we’ll never leave. Leo just loves it up here. He said he was ‘smitten’ that first day he drove up to interview you. He fell in love with the dogs and the land, just like that. He says it was fate.”

“Fate was meeting you,” I reminded her. “Now let’s get to that fitting before you lose another size and we have to get you a different dress.”

And off we went to the town’s bridal shop. No malls, no David’s Bridal, no labels. Just an old-fashioned dress maker who was Aunt Wina to us locals, and had outfitted the town’s brides and mothers for decades.

Lynne insisted that I wear something in sea green that I could use again. “It should match your eyes,” she had decided. “Green is your best color. I want you to radiate.”

I hugged her and could hardly stem away the tears. “You’ll be the most beautiful bride and certainly the most unique. Just wait ‘til everyone sees what you’re planning.”

“I hope we can carry it off. All we need is for the weather to cooperate.”

“I know that it will. Don’t worry,” I assured her.

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At the shop, Aunt Wina greeted us and shooed Lynne into a fitting room where she tucked and pinned, stood back and announced that it was perfect. “But,” she warned, “do not lose another ounce. Callie, make sure the girl eats.”

‘Don’t worry, Wina. I’ll force feed her if I have to.”

“Now, you’ve got to try on your dress. It just came in from the manufacturer. I think it will fit perfectly, except for the length. Unless you want it to the ankle. Up to you, Callie.”

I inspected the beautiful sea green wool crepe and rubbed it against my face. Soft and warm with a slight hint of mohair. I loved it.

Lynne’s dress was a creamy white, also wool crepe with a hint of mohair and a giant cowl neckline. No contemporary strapless for her. She had ordered the dress to coordinate with the Pyrenees fur shawl I had crocheted for her from Tyro’s hair. She insisted that Tyro be part of her wedding. The shawl was an open lacy pattern which she thought would be a wonderful substitute for a veil.

“It’ll be sort of a mantilla,” she claimed and practiced arranging the scarf around her blonde hair.

I had scoured the internet for authentic Spanish peinetas and found just the right tortoise shell set of combs, imbedded with seed pearls. They would be stunning with her “unique” mantilla. She would be thrilled, I knew. And she would be a vision.

“I’ll try on the complete outfit for you, as soon as I find the right shoes,” she promised

Baldwina.

“I’m going to splurge when I find what I want. Just like Carrie Bradshaw.”

We hooted at that. “Don’t even think about it,” I told her. “You’re much prettier-- although you do have the same beautiful complexion. But those characters -- I can’t imagine you carrying on like them.”

“Oh Cal, you’re such a prude. It’s my favorite show. And I’m going to buy the most expensive shoes -- just like Carrie did when she finally married Mr. Big.”

“Okay. But just the shoes, please.” I relented.

We waved good-bye and took off for lower Westchester and the Mall with Nordstrom’s. “If you can’t find the shoes there, you’ll just have to be a barefoot bride,” I teased. “And don’t worry about the cost, they’re on me.”

“Oh Callie, I do love you, but I want to pay for my own wedding shoes,” she insisted.

**CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN**

We cruised into the Westchester Mall’s garage, parked my Windstar, and headed to Nordstrom’s. “Let’s go find those shoes.” I guided Lynne to the elevator. “But you know what? Let’s have lunch first. They have a nice little restaurant here.”

“Sounds good. I’m actually hungry.” She surprised me.

We waited on line and just as the hostess was about to seat us, a tap on the shoulder startled me. Out of nowhere, Special Agent Bernadette Cleary materialized.

“Oh, hey how are you?”

“Good, I’m good.” She responded. “You guys on a shopping spree for Lynne’s wedding?”

“You’re not a special agent for nothing!” I laughed. “We’re on a quest for the perfect wedding shoes. But first, we’re having a little lunch. Join us?”

“Sure. That’s great.” Cleary accepted. “I wanted to talk with you anyway.”

“By the way, Bernie,” I asked. “What are you doing here?”  
 “I live across the street on Mamaroneck Avenue. You didn’t know that?” She seemed surprised.

“No. I took you for a Manhattanite.”

“Well, not anymore. I’ve lived in White Plains for well over a decade now. Remember, I got kicked up here when I tried to take your case upstairs.”

“I’m sorry about that.” I told her.

“Don’t be. It was good --- in fact, a terrific move for me. And, I do have news for you.”

“Tell me.” I swallowed and tried not to sure my anxiety.

“Relax, Callie. You’re finally going to get a break. Detective Valdes and I have been working with Thom Hudgins to reopen the silicone class. We think we know how Donald Urston threw it. We’re pretty sure of it. But what we’re still trying to unravel is how the Steiner murder fits in.”

“What?” I asked. “You mean you don’t think Aurora did it out of revenge?”

“Not necessarily. She may have, but I really think there’s more to it. We know she was blackmailing Steiner.”

“She really is as vile as they come.” I felt my stomach knot and knew that my poached salmon would remain on my plate. Every time I thought of Aurora Spirakis, my intestines knotted in protest. Since it was more than two decades since my trial, I could only guess that the gastro-upset was part of my life forever.

“Oh, Callie, please don’t get upset.” Lynne was so attuned to my psyche. “She’s in jail, where she belongs, and maybe you’ll be able to reopen your case.”

“Yes, Callie, Lynne is right and we may need your help and probably we will be able to reopen your case,” the special agent assured me.

“Okay, tell me what’s up.” I waited.

Bernadette Cleary told me the latest developments in the Steiner murder mystery. She and Natalie Valdes had caught a clue that led them to a potential suspect who actually might have been the one who poisoned Cynthia Steiner. Apparently, there might have been someone else besides Aurora Spirakis who wanted Steiner dead. They thought they might have an ID on him and wanted to know if Lynne and I could recognize him in a line-up.

“How would we know him in the first place?” I was puzzled.

“He was the gimpy waiter at Best-in-Show night at Westminster,” she said.

“Oh, my God, Bernie! How did you know Lynne and I would be here today? This meeting wasn’t a coincidence, was it? Do you know who the waiter was?”

“Come on Callie. You know it pays to have contacts. And no, we don’t have an ID yet. But he wasn’t the dog handler client whose case Spirakis blew. We’ve known that much for a while. Remember, Thom located him in Brazil. He wasn’t at Westminster at all.”

“Arrange the line-up. We’ll be there, right Lynne?” I nodded at her.

“You bet we will. But first, let’s get my wedding shoes.”

We took leave of Agent Cleary and headed for the shoe salon, as she promised to be in touch soon. “Be prepared.”

**CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT**

The cream-colored crocodile pumps sat waiting behind a locked glass cabinet. They were slightly 1960’s. The high instep was square, mirroring the toe, and Jacqueline Kennedy. We looked at them and nodded at each other.

“Can we see those, please?” Lynne asked the stylish silver-haired salesman.

“The Stuart Weitzman’s? What size? We don’t stock too many of them.”

“Seven,” Lynne replied.

“Oh, I think we only stock the Cinderella sizes. Let me check.”

“And, by the way, how much are they?” I asked.

“Well, if you have to ask…” the cavalier salesman condescended.

“Take it easy.” I shot back. “I’m the mother of the bride here, and these are what she wants. So, if you don’t have her size, order them. We need them in four weeks.”

“Cal,” Lynne whispered, the wedding isn’t for six weeks.”

“Right. What if you don’t like them and we have to look for something else? Leave this to me,” I ordered.

The salesman floated to the back and returned with two boxes. “Here, turns out we do have your size. But I brought the seven and a half as well -- just in case. Try them both.”

“I guess he knew they run small,” Lynne remarked as she switched to the larger shoe. “What do you think?” She stuck her foot out in front and twisted her ankle back and forth.

“They’re gorgeous, but walk in them,” I advised. “We can’t have you limping down the aisle. Someone might think you’re the gimpy waiter in disguise.”

“Cal, you’re a riot.” She got up and strolled around the salon. “They’re perfect. Or should I say pyrfect?”

“They will be absolutely pyrfect with your dress and veil.”

I handed my Visa card to the salesman.

“Don’t you want to know the price?” There was none posted on the box.

“No. I don’t have to ask. How often do you get to buy your daughter wedding shoes?”

That was October. When I got my November bill, I almost died.

**CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE**

“What do you think, Thom?” Agent Cleary asked.

She, the ADA and NYPD Detective 2nd Grade, Natalie Valdes, huddled in Thom Hudgins’ office. They had brain stormed for the past week, but still came up empty.

“Who was this guy? Why can’t we find him?” Thom mused.

“Let’s go over what we have,” Valdes suggested. “Okay? Number 1, he walks with a limp. Do we know if it’s the right leg or the left?”

“Good point, Nat. We do know that Spirakis’ client with the gimp had an impaired right leg.” Cleary concurred. “What else?”

“He was of swarthy complexion.”

‘Yeah, that also checks.” Cleary agreed. “Wait a minute. The Staten Island vendor did mention that the cell buyer spoke with an accent.”

“Go back to him and find out more. Get on that right now.” Thom instructed the two women.

#

“What a freakin’ dreary day to ride the ferry.” Valdes shivered as they approached the Staten Island Terminal. “We should have taken a car.”

“Too long a drive through Brooklyn for the Verrazano.” Cleary answered. “Besides, a little adventure fuels creativity.”

‘What are you thinking, Bernie?” Valdes sensed her cohort was onto something.

“Well, let’s just see what that vendor has to say,” she replied and settled back into her reverie for the remainder of the trip.

The two women stepped off the ferry and headed over to the vending area. Sure enough, the “Dunkin” vendor was still there, hawking his jelly doughnuts. He recognized Agent Cleary and made an attempt to dart out the back. Not quick enough.

“Nat, take the back,” Cleary called as she sprinted to the stand. Valdes, like a cat, pounced on the doughnut vendor in a flash, just as he reached the back door. They fell backwards into shelves of jelly doughnuts and croissants, spewing bakery remnants and powdered sugar across the terminals’ food court.

“Ah, Jez, look what you done,” the vendor complained. “What the hell you want from me now?” The complaint was directed at Cleary. “I already told you what I know and I’m not sellin’ nothing but doughnuts, no more.”

“Relax. We’ll pay you for your inventory. This is a friendly visit. It’s your chance to win some favor with the NYPD. Now, don’t tell me that a fellow in your position couldn’t use a friend in the right place.” Valdes took the lead.

“Okay, okay.” He dusted himself off and shook his head at his ruined display. “Good thing you didn’t break no glass.”

“Let’s talk over there.” Cleary led him to a bench in the most remote area of the terminal.

“Now, abut my losses…” the entrepreneur had his priorities.

“Here’s my card. Valdes handed over her business card. I’m putting my badge number on the back. You can contact me direct at any time. Just list the damages and I’ll get you a check. And don’t over bill the NYPD. Deal?”

Yeah, deal. But I’m gonna charge you for the whole day’s losses.”

“Fine.” Cleary agreed. “Now, we need some more information about the guy who bought the toss-away cell from you. Do you remember if he limped on the right or left leg?”

“I don’t know. L’me think. I noticed when he walked away from me. I was facing out to the clock and he -- he limped on his right side.

“You’re sure?”

“Pretty sure. It was a long time back. I sell a lot of doughnuts here.”

“Yeah, sure you do. How many contraband cell phones do you sell?”

“Ah, Jez. That again. I told you I don’t do that no more.”

“Right,” Cleary responded. “Now this is very important. Think carefully. Okay?”

“Okay what?” the vendor squirmed, eyeing evening customers as the passed his stand and then headed for the pretzel vendor.

“Did the guy who bought the cell phone have an accent that you could recognize?”

“Like what? Bronx? Brooklyn? Southern?”

“How about foreign?” Cleary prompted.

“Foreign? We don’t get much international tourism here. Just local yokels goin’ to the city.”  
 “So, did he sound like Bronx or Brooklyn to you?”

“Nah. Maybe he sounded like he came from Jersey.”

“Jersey?” Cleary was surprised.

“Well, it ain’t really that far from here.”

“You’re right. It’s not. So, he didn’t sound like he came from England, or Germany, say?” Cleary prodded some more.

“Nah. The dude was local. Totally.”

“And you’re certain about the leg?” Valdes asked again.

“Oh yeah, I think that’s right.”

“Thank you for your cooperation. Make sure to get your bill to Detective Valdes as soon as you can. We may need you again.” Cleary turned to leave.

“Jez,” he complained. “I hope not. I can’t afford no more ruined work days.”

The two women headed out to catch the next ferry back to Manhattan. Valdes boarded, looked at Cleary and burst out in laughter.

“What?” Cleary demanded.

“Look at you. You look like a party-colored poodle with all that sugar in your hair.”

“Party-colored poodle?” What is that?” Cleary was not amused.

“It’s a black and white poodle, like a black and white cocker spaniel,” Valdes informed her.

“And now you’re a dog aficionado?”

“Can’t help it with Thom and Leo. They’re both obsessed. I’ve been to over twenty-five dog shows since May. By the Way, the party-colored poodle is shown only in obedience or agility. They’re not recognized in conformation.”

“Too much information,” Clearly chided. She shook her head and remained silent the entire ride. As they docked, Valdes asked her if she had formulated any new theories. She had one of her own to share.

“You go first.” Cleary urged Valdes.

“Okay, how about this,” Valdes began. “If the guy is from Jersey, it may be that Steiner knew him from Davalos’ office in Newark. Don’t forget most of the big pharma law firms have to be in Jersey and also have offices in other places. Davalos Coldwell Spitz and Glades’ main office is in Newark. Steiner went there often. And Staten Island is really close. All you do is drive over the Goethals Bridge to the ferry terminal and park. That’s if you can find a space. If this guy had a pronounced limp, he probably had a handicapped placard.”

“And we’re going to track down Jersey drivers with handicapped privileges?” Cleary shook her head.

“Maybe we won’t have to. But we can start with Newark and Davalos Coldwell employees. Maybe this guy worked there.” Valdes was thinking out loud.

“What’s your take, Bernie?”

“I’m thinking the accent angle,” Cleary said. “The waiter who served the champagne had a clipped accent, right? That was confirmed by some of the witnesses at the scene. Even Harry Smith recalled hearing him serve the lawyers. He was certain of the accent but couldn’t quite place it.

“You’d think someone like that would recognize every English accent right off, wouldn’t you?” Valdes was excited.

“Exactly. Smith said it wasn’t quite British, but it wasn’t West Indian. Almost South African, but not quite that either. He thought it was put on.” Cleary reminded Valdes of the case history.

“Right… That’s what he said…”

“So, Cleary didn’t give her time to finish her sentence. “What if the accent was phony? Could we be looking for an actor?”

“An actor with a limp. A limp that seemed real.” Valdes added.

“Don’t forget, Nat, that law firm used an actor on Candace Cohn’s jury. Disguised him as a priest.”

“And who ran that trial as well as Callie’s?” Natalie asked.

“Right,” Cleary went on. “Cynthia Steiner.”

“I’m going to go look at SAG cards. Nat, you go see Thom and then meet me in Times Square.”

“SAG?” Valdes was confused.

“Screen Actors’ Guild,” Cleary clarified. Then she hurried to the Number 1 train uptown. Valdes head over to One Hogan Place.

#

“Nat, I think you’re on to something.” Hudgins was excited. “I’d go with Bernie and the theatric connection, first. But I think we could start on the Jersey handicapped lead, unless the guy is driving without a license. I’ll phone over to Trenton and get that started. “We’re looking for a Davalos Coldwell employee who should have a handicapped placard. Not as big a needle in the haystack as going through all the impaired Jersey drivers. A piece of cake.” Thom joked.

“You think she hired an actor? Then how in hell did she end up the dead one? I’m confused.” Natalie shook her head.

“If he was an actor, at all. We really don’t know any more about him other than his accent was phony and he limped.” Hudgins reminded her. “Now say ‘Good Night Gracie,’ and let me get back to work.” He kissed her goodbye. “Don’t forget, you’re taking me clothes shopping for Leo’s wedding.”

“Right. Another trip to Barney’s.” Natalie laughed, turned and teased, “you know what that means, don’t you?”

“You’re my girl, right?” Thom grinned.

“Oh yeah, but I was thinking another dinner at Minetta’s.”

**CHAPTER THIRTY**

**“**Bernie where are you?” Valdes was on her cell. “I’m at the library.”

“Come over to the SAG office at 360 Madison and help me go through some files. There’s enough here to last a month.” Cleary sighed.

Valdes swung over to Madison Avenue and found her partner engrossed in boxes of files piled in rows high up to the window sill. “There seem to be thousands of aspiring actors in this city. You’d think we were in Los Angeles.”

“Isn’t there some way we can narrow the search?” Valdes was weary, just looking at the stacks.

“Well, if you’ve got an idea, let’s hear it.” Cleary was irritated.

“Do you think they cross-file by special attributes? Like limps, or lisps?” Valdes joked. “That would help.”

“You’re right! That’s genius.” Cleary was on her feet. “Let’s get a look at their computerized files.”

An hour and a half later, Valdes yelled, “Eureka! Bernie here’s something. This guy, Peter Brandt. Limps on the right leg due to childhood injury. Is the right age. Plays bit roles,

often gangsters. Screen and movie credits, here. Let’s go see a show.”

“I hate to remind you, Nat, but we’ve never laid eyes on him,” Cleary cautioned.

“No, but Callie and Lynne have. We can run the tape for them, and if he’s the one, we can go pick him up. And look at this, Bernie -- he is also listed as a reader for trial testimony. I don’t believe it!” Valdes had hit pay dirt!

“Should I ask if it lists what law firms use him?” Cleary questioned.

“Well, Davalos Coldwell isn’t listed here,” Valdes scrutinized the screen. “But you know lawyers, they all know each other. I’ll call Thom and ask him to pull the New Jersey automotive and employment records for Peter Brandt. That will cut his work load by one thousand percent. I think we’re done here. This calls for a beer!”

“Right behind you.” Cleary followed Valdes out of the building and they headed a few blocks over to Arno’s. “We should have dinner, as long as we’re here. This is a good place.” Cleary suggested.

“Oh, yes, we should definitely treat ourselves. This is a very good place.” Nat smiled at the memory of her lunch with Thom when it all started. “This is a very good place.” Valdes repeated.

#

Cleary and Valdes were seated in the middle of the room, facing the wall’s mural of ancient Rome. They savored their entrees and complimented their waiter on his wine recommendation.

“Best California Chianti I’ve ever had,” Natalie exclaimed.

“If you say so.” Bernie acquiesced. “I’m no connoisseur, but this is really good… Nat, I think I just heard your cell go off.”

‘Oh my gosh, you’re right. I forgot to take it out of my purse.” By the time she fished around and found it, the call was gone. “Damn,” she said, “it was Thom.” She hit the callback button.

“Nat, why do you insist on keeping that phone in that catchall you call a purse? Put it back on your belt,” was Hudgins “hello.”

“I happened not to be wearing a belt today. You saw me, right?”

“Yeah, right.” He was cowed. But for God’s sake, Nat, this is important.”

“What? I just saw you three hours ago. And I have progress to report,” she informed him.

“Well,” Hudgins told her, “so do I. I think we found our guy. Sure, enough he’s from Jersey -- South Orange, right on the border of Newark.”

“Well, we found him too.” Valdes eagerly added. “He’s an actor with a SAG card. Last address we have for him is someplace in Chinatown, off Canal. Ours is named Peter Brandt.”

“Mine is Peter Bracco, like the actress. No relation. I already checked. And get this --until last December he worked for Steiner’s firm in Newark. Part time messenger. Used to run depositions and motion papers back and forth.” Hudgins informed.

“So, he probably knew Steiner,” Natalie added.

“What? What?” Cleary demanded.”

“Tell you in a minute,” she waved her colleague off. “Anything else for now Thom?”

“No, check with the neighbors in both places before we pick him up. And don’t lose your phone in your bag anymore!”

“God, you know me too well. And we’re not even married.” She clicked off and turned to Cleary who was gapping at her.

“You and Hudgins?” she looked thoroughly puzzled.

“Oh, not really. We’ve just known each other since we were kids. We have some work to do. Tomorrow. But tonight, let’s just enjoy our dinner.”

Valdes sliced a bit of her veal and swabbed it in its delicious scaloppini sauce.

Clearly stare at the mural and laughed out loud. “All roads really do seem to lead to Rome,” she said. “This place is really special.”

#

The next morning, they met at Canal Street near Sixth Avenue. A light drizzle dampened the streets and moistened the rows of curbside garbage waiting to be picked up.

“Whew. It sure stinks down here,” Cleary complained.

“Yeah, I can smell Peeking Duck -- or is that rancid lobster sauce?” Valdes held her nose.

“I think that’s vomit. Let’s get moving.” Cleary picked up the pace. “What a yuk day.”  
 They got to the next corner and looked for the address. It was a small old-fashioned brownstone that had seen better times. It was wedged in between a Chinese grocery and a cigar store adorned with a wooden Indian in front.

“I wonder what else they sell in there.” Valdes pointed to the Indian as the two knocked on the downstairs alley door marked “Super.”

“Some kind of social club,” Cleary guessed. “A place where Peter Bracco might meet friends?”

“You know...” Valdes was thinking when the Chinese herbologist opened the door. “Yes, I can help you?” A wonderful aroma of green herbs, peppermint tea and incense greeted the women.

“Detective Valdes and Special Agent Cleary.” Natalie identified herself and Bernie. They flashed their badges. “May we come in?”

#

“Dr. Lee, we’re looking for one of the tenants in this building, Peter Brandt.” Cleary began. “It is possible that you know him as Peter Bracco.”

“No. No one here by that name now. Peppermint tea, ladies? Not nice day out.” The herbologist shook his head and poured piping hot tea into three little porcelain cups.

“Now?” Cleary caught on. “Did he used to live here?”

“Last year, yes. He live here a while. Come and go. Mostly go. I fix him herb medicines for bad leg. Very bad rheumatism in leg. Herbs help a lot. Taste tea. Make you warm,” Dr. Lee urged.

“Ah, so that’s why Brandt was here.” Valdes and Cleary nodded at each other. “By the way Dr. Lee, what’s next door with the Indian?”

“Ah. Not too much. Just a bunch of guys come by to smoke cigars and play chess.”

“So, it is a social club!”

“Do you know if Peter ever went over there?” Valdes asked.

“No, I do not know. No see him in a long time. Almost one year. I have box of his things waiting. You want to take? I already rent room to new tenant.”  
 “Sure, we’ll take it with us. Who lives here now?” Valdes asked, for the record.

“Old man. Have colon cancer. I treat with herbs and acupuncture.”

“So, this is kind of an alternative clinic, then?” Cleary asked.

“No. Is Chinese medicine house. All tenants get treatment. Others come too.”

“Dr. Lee, it’s been a pleasure. Thank you so much.” The women left with a large cardboard carton.

“Nat, I told you we should have taken the cruiser,” Cleary lamented.

“Oh, don’t’ fret, I’ll call the precinct to send a car for us. Looks like our next stop is South Orange. But, let’s get a look at what we have here.” Natalie pulled her cell off her waist and dialed.

“Our ride will be right here,” she told Cleary. “Let’s take our booty over to Thom’s office.”

#

“Don’t tell me the super just gave this to you?” Hudgins couldn’t believe the good luck. “What fortune cookie did you two eat?”

“Honest, Thom. He said it was just sitting there waiting for someone to claim it. No one did. What do you suppose happened to Brandt? Or Bracco?” Natalie mused.

“Well, you’re going to South Orange for some answers. The guy disappeared after Westminster, intentionally… or otherwise,” Thom conjectured.

“You think he’s dead?” Cleary spoke.

“Maybe. Let’s have a look at the loot. What’s in there?”

#

An inventory of the container revealed three cell phones -- all the toss away kind, a bundle of herbs gone rancid, hair gel, spray-on “tan in a can,” goulashes and a Down East slicker, a half-used memo pad, and a photocopy of last February’s Westminster program containing a seating chart of Madison Square Garden.

“Bingo,” Valdes cried. “I think we’ve got him.”

“What about the cells?” Thom added. “Let’s see if they tell us anything.”

“Hold on a minute,” Cleary was examining the note pad. “Let’s get forensics to raise the imprint from this pad. What a jerk. He should have gotten rid of all of this.”

“Maybe he didn’t have the chance,” Thom guessed. “I think we need to clue Leo in.”

“I think we should go out to Jersey first?” Valdes raise her eyebrows. “Agree?”

Thom and Bernie nodded.

#

The row house in South Orange sat on a heavily trafficked street. With no place to park, Cleary and Valdes pulled down the steep driveway to the back of the house.

“Jez, this would be a real obstacle for a guy with a bad leg,” Valdes observed. “Look how narrow that house is. I bet there are four levels of very steep and narrow stairs.”

“Well, let’s go see,” Cleary answered as she climbed out of the police cruiser.

Amy and Bartholomew D’Abruzzi were listed as the owners of the house. The property had been owned by a D’Abruzzi family member for several decades.

“Mrs. D’Abruzzi?” Cleary asked as a woman in her early forties answered the doorbell.

“Yes. Who’s asking?” She seemed more weary than suspicious.

“I’m Special Agent Bernadette Cleary and this is New York City Detective Natalie Valdes.”

“What’s this about?” she hesitated.

“It’s about a Peter Bracco or Peter Brandt. This is his last known address.”

“Of course, it is. He died last spring. He way my brother. You may as well come in.” She opened the door.

#

“So, Bernie it seems your hunch was right again.” Hudgins settled into his swivel chair and stretched his feet out on his desk.

“Thom,” Valdes chided. “You’ve still got those shoes with a hole in the sole!”

“Again? Seems like I just bought these.” He shrugged. “When are we going to Barney’s?” he asked Valdes. “Leo’s wedding is in three weeks.”

“As soon as we wrap this up. I think we’ve got it figured out.” Natalie informed him.

“So, Peter Bracco – aka Peter Brandt on stage – actually was a bit actor and loved to do accents. He was not mobbed up as we had thought. Just a poor soul, down on his luck, with serious health problems. He was loaded up on pain killers and Chinese herbs for the leg -- he was run over as a kid riding his bike and never got good medical care. But, that’s not what killed him.” Cleary related what Amy D’Abruzzi had confided.

“There was no inquest because there was no crime -- at least not involving Bracco’s demise,” Cleary went on. ‘He contracted cellulitis last December and was on IV antibiotic drips for two months, twice a day. For that time, he lived with his sister so she could care for him.”

“Hmmm,” Thom listened. “Cellulitis is a pretty serious infection.”

“It’s actually a killer. And Bracco, or Brandt, was already compromised from years of pain killers and narcotics -- all prescription. No illegal trafficking at all, but over-prescribed opiates. The sister said that instead of staying in and resting, as per doctor’s orders, he kept running around. He told her he was working for some big law firm in Newark and had a special assignment that meant good money to him. That’s all the sister knew, or would say.

“Anyway,” Bernie continued, “just after Cynthia Steiner’s demise, he relapsed. He was hospitalized again, for several days, at University Hospital in Newark -- and yes, we pulled those records.

“The sister said he was never the same after the first hospitalization. IV antibiotics again in March, but at that time he seemed to have lost it. The sister claimed that he had been acting strange since the first episode and wondered if the drugs had done something to his mind. He became irrational and violent. Would go off at the drop of a hat or just sob for no reason.

“Anyway, after the second relapse, he never recovered. The infection spread and septicemia killed him. That was in Mid-March. If you check the dates, it was right after the coroner’s report on Steiner was published. Ironic, no?”

“Fate’s a funny thing,” Thom noted as he scrutinized the forensics on the note pad and the cell phone examinations. “I do think that Leo needs to be in on this.”

**CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE**

On November 11 Capatorto walked into the lobby at One Hogan Place and found the building virtually deserted. Only a skeleton crew on duty. A uniformed guard rang up to Hudgins’s office.

“He’s in. You can go right up. I’ll open the elevator for you. It’s on manual for the holiday.”

“Thanks,” Leo said. “You must be getting double time for today. I appreciate it.”

“No problem,” the guard assured him. “And it’s triple. God Bless our vets!” The guard obliged and turned the elevator key on.

Leo stepped into the ADA’s reception foyer and found Hudgins waiting for him. “Come on in, Leo. The girls are here already. Good day for a private meeting. So, how’s the bridegroom? Any jitters?” Hudgins smacked him on the back. “Good to see you.”

“Hi Bernie, Natalie.” Capatorto greeted each of the women with a hug and settled into the worn leather sofa, opposite Thom’s desk. “Your show, Thom. Let’s have it,” he said.

“Well, Leo this is quite a dilemma. And I’m afraid we have to dump it on you,” Thom started.

“Oh? Ominous huh?” Leo asked.

“Yep,” Hudgins replied and related the details of their recent discoveries. “We actually were able to locate the gimpy waiter and identify him.”

“So, it wasn’t Spirakis’ subway client?” Leo wasn’t surprised. He knew that her client had a solid alibi.

“No. That’s why Spirakis didn’t recognize him. She really isn’t that stupid.” Thom went on. “Here’s what we found and how we’ve pieced it together.

“Cynthia Steiner knew the perpetrator, one Peter Brandt or Peter Bracco. Brandt was his stage name. He was a two-bit actor and errand boy. He worked out of Davalos Coldwell’s Newark office, part time. He couriered papers back and forth to Steiner in their Manhattan office. He was a small potatoes actor and liked extra money when he could find it. We think Steiner had contacted him to do a special job for her. We know that Spirakis was blackmailing her. That much Spirakis admitted. That’s true.

“Apparently Steiner wanted a way out and hired Bracco to take care of it. She must have picked him because of the limp and the talent for accents. It makes sense that she would want to throw suspicion on an angry client who had it in for Spirakis. Clever. But with bit of a twist. It appears that it was Steiner’s idea to poison the champagne. We raised that clue from the notepad that Bracco left behind…”

“How dumb can you be?” Leo was actually shocked.

“He wasn’t dumb. At least we don’t think he was dumb. He died before he could dispose of the evidence,” Natalie interjected.

“We’ll get to that,” Thom went on. “Steiner instructed him to buy two bottles of champagne, one pink and one white. He was to inject the euthanasia fluid through the cork of the pink bottle, serve that one to Spirakis, and the white to Steiner.

“So, what happened? How come she’s dead instead of Aurora?” Capatorto was aghast.

“Ah the big question?” Cleary piped up.

“From what we can gather -- and we pulled the guy’s death bed hospital records -- he was delusional at the end, ranting on and on about strawberries. ‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry Miss,’ he kept ranting.” Valdes finished her part of the narration.

“So, what we think happened,” Thom took over, “is that the plan was to poison the wine though the cork, but he couldn’t get it to work, so he improvised and injected the strawberries instead. He would have no idea that Spirakis was allergic to them and would offer them to Steiner.”

“Wait a minute,” Leo’s mouth hung open, like a mastiff’s. “Do you mean to tell me that Cynthia Steiner was responsible for her own murder?”

“That’s exactly what we think.”

“Whoa. That means I can reopen Aurora’s case. Not that I want to practice defense work anymore.” Leo was thinking out loud.

“We know that Leo,” Thom concurred. “Here’s the rub. It’s all circumstantial. The perpetrator is dead. We have no direct witnesses. This is mostly conjecture and we can just let it be. We thought that we had an obligation to give you a heads up. It’s your decision. You can pursue it or just leave it in this room. Either way, I can still try to recertify the class action.” Thom exhaled and he and the women looked to Leo for his reaction.

“Aurora’s not a murderer. But she’ not so innocent either,” Leo mused. “I have to think this through. I don’t see how I can go against Callie Thornton. She’s my mother-in-law in two weeks.”

“Maybe you should ask her, Leo,” Cleary suggested.

“Yes. I will. Or better yet, I’ll ask Lynne first.”

#

“So, let’s have a toast.” Thom went to his mini fridge and produced a bottle of Korbel. “Not the wedding stuff, but great for an informal toast.” He popped the cork and filled the office’s plastic flutes.

“Cheers, Leo. I’ll save my real toast for your big day.” Thom clinked glasses with all. “Drink up.”

“Leo, where’s the honeymoon?” Natalie asked.

“Ever the romantic, aren’t you?” Thom threw her a look.

“Well?” she waited.’

“Tell you the truth, it’s not a secret. We’re going to Orlando -- no not Disney -- we’re going to Eukanuba.”

“A dog show for a honeymoon! I might do that myself.” Thom caught a “look” from Natalie.

“You two really have lost your marbles with these dogs.” Cleary remarked. “They’re changing your entire lives.”

“Yes, and I love it.” Leo grinned. “Lynne has TyTwo entered, of course -- you know this show is for prize money, not just trophies. The first lady is bringing her little Connie and Lynne and I will both be showing my two puppies -- Hawkeye Pierce and Hotlips Hoolihan. The litter turns six months on December 14th. Three litter mates making their show debut together with their sire.”

“Hawkeye and Hotlips? Mash fan, Leo?” Cleary joked.

“Loved the show, but that’s not it,” Leo laughed. “You won’t believe it, but Lynne tells me that the inimitable Tyro watched that show every day. Says he would march into the living room at four p.m. and sit in front of the television, waiting for Callie to turn it on so he could watch the reruns. She guessed that he liked that music, but really suspected that he identified with Colonel Potter. Don’t forget, the dog’s name was General Bradly Eisenhower.”

They all chuckled and finished their champagne.

“Wait ‘til you see what Lynne has planned for our wedding,” Leo hinted, as he turned to leave. “Gotta catch the 4:45 up to Peekskill. I’m a suburbanite now. Oh, and I will have that talk with Callie.”

**CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO**

Thanksgiving Day was everything I had hoped for. I knew it would be. The left-over bronzed leaves sparkled shades of amber into the crisp air. The ground was laden with autumn hues. Too many leaves to rake. They added a rich palette of color, drifting from the lawn to the hills. The house was ready. Kate Walsh had contracted her House and Gardens friend to style it for the wedding.

“My pleasure, Cal. Don’t forget I owe my career to you. And I also owe Leo. I made a tidy sum off of his buy. Always glad to help.” Kate assured me. I remembered how I had vouched for her loyalty to Candy. I generally knew my people -- at least the girl part.

“Candy,” I called. Please get over here and help me with this garland.” The dogs had brushed past the red oak leaf and vine swag decorating the banister to the upstairs. Half of it hung from the center step to the floor.

“Cal,” she said, “I think you’d better put them away before the ceremony or we’ll be picking up after them all day.”

“You’re right. I’ll put them back in the mud room. They’re happy there,” I told her. “I just have to give them a final once over before the ceremony. TyTwo is drooling up a storm. Holly is so excited; she can’t sit still. She’s such a girl.”

“Where’s Lynne?” Candy asked.

“Believe it or not, she’s getting ready at the kennel. Says she’s most relaxed there. And she believes she’s closest to Tyro there, too. Maybe she’s right. Anyway, the house is already filling up with the guests. By the way, where’s Danny? I just saw Freddy in the kitchen.”

“Oh, he’s around. He’s outside somewhere, just looking around. He just loves to look at the open skies and the deer prancing through the blinds.”

“Hunting is off limits for the wedding. The only “pop” we want to hear today is the champagne. Why don’t you go see if Lynne is ready while I get the guests placed?” I urged.

#

A string quartet played in the background while I shooed everyone into the living room. All the furniture had been removed to one of the barns and replaced with gilt chairs dressed in white muslin. Small bouquets of colored leaves and vines were tied to the back of each chair, creating a blaze of color in the pale-yellow room. The fireplace, too, was done up in autumn motif -- the same entwining of leaves and vines, but with a large pumpkin on either side. The rows of chairs separated in the center, creating an aisle to the hearth.

Leo and Thom stood waiting on the right side. Judge Foxworthy was in place. We had added a baby grand to the sun parlor and together with the string quartet; they played Pachelbel’s “Cannon in D.” I ambled my way down the aisle to the judge’s right and took my place. I was “mother-of-the-bride” and “matron of honor,” and couldn’t have been more overwhelmed. My sea green wool crepe dress blended perfectly with the décor and was a replica of Lynne’s gown. My eyes glistened as Lynne appeared in the hallway, TyTwo on her right and Holly on her left.

The quartet and pianist began playing “Someone to Watch Over Me,” -- the music Lynne had chosen. And since she had no one to give her away, she chose TyTwo and Holly to escort her to the altar. Both dogs were well rehearsed and strolled in perfect pace to the music. TyTwo wore and orange chrysanthemum in his collar while Holly’s was pink, complimenting Lynne’s bridal bouquet of Pieter B an Evelyn Roses, bunny tails, pink-edged variegated dogwood, tied up in a vintage gold jacquard ribbon. For fun she had added a couple of cranberry sprigs. She made sure that Leo and Thom had boutonnieres to match; my own bouquet of pale pink tea roses was wrapped in a sea green jacquard ribbon.

The aroma of turkey roasting drifted through the house. Lynne had decided she wanted her wedding anniversary to always be her favorite holiday. She insisted the chef from L’Ville Auberge cater the affair, in honor of her first date with Leo. She couldn’t have made a more perfect choice. The only traditional wedding food she wanted was the cake. A towering work of confection sat in the kitchen -- a pink champagne cake with white chocolate strawberry ganache inside, with pink sugar roses edging each layer. On top sat a canine bride and groom -- Great Pyrenees in wedding garb, of course!!

Leo insisted that the champagne be the infamous Perrier Jouet, Champagne Brut, Fleur de Champagne Rose. “After all,” he explained, “if not for the pink juice, I would never have met Lynne.”

Lynne and the dogs reached the hearth to the music’s decrescendo. To everyone’s amazement, she handed her bouquet to Holly, who took it in her mouth, came to me and sat down at my side, flowers decorating her flews. Lynne must have hidden a treat in there, I thought. The dog sat like a statue, eyes on the bride.

TyTwo took his place next to Thom and offered him a paw. The best man leaned down and took the small ring pouch from the dog’s collar. Ty gave a “woof” and shook hands with Thom. Well done, Lynne, I reflected. There can’t be a better dog trainer.

Leo took her hand as they stood facing the judge. She was truly a vision in the gorgeous costume she had devised. The “mantilla” of Tyro’s fur glistened, just as his coat had in life. The tortoise pearl enhanced combs sparkled in her blonde hair, and the beautiful cream wool dress complimented her casual beauty in a way the best of **fashionistas** couldn’t copy. But the shoes! The crocodile Stuart Weitzman’s sparkled against my Bokhara rug. Lynne had insisted that we leave the rug in place and not cover it with the traditional white. She was right. It was perfect! She was at her most beautiful and I only wished that the moment could last a little longer…

#

Judge Foxworthy began: “Ladies and gentlemen, friends, relatives, guests, we are honored to be here today to share this most joyous occasion with Lynne and Leo. And to partake of our culture’s most celebrated holiday. Good friends, good food, good feelings. What more can we ask on this Thanksgiving Day?”

“Where’s his lisp?” Natalie whispered to Bernie.

“I don’t know,” the special agent replied. “I think it’s put on, like the waiter’s accent.”

“Is anyone ever what they seem?” Natalie waxed philosophic.

“Thom is,” Cleary assured her. “What you see there is exactly what you get.”

“Shh. There’s Mrs. Foxworthy over by the quartet. She’s not anything like we’d think, is she?” Natalie nudged her friend.

“No, she isn’t. Who would expect Barbara Bush? They must be married fifty years,” Cleary speculated.

“I don’t think so. Leo said they got married about three years ago. He was divorced for years.” Natalie was proud of her gossip.

“No kidding? Don’t that beat all? He does flit like a queen.” Cleary shut up.

“You don’t like the judiciary much, do you?” Natalie teased.

“Not at all,” Cleary answered. “Quiet. Here come the vows.”

#

“Do you, Leo, take Lynne as your lawful wife…”

“I do,” Leo couldn’t wait. The judge chuckled.

“And you, Lynne, do you take Leo as your wedded husband, to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, from this day forward until death do you part?”

“I do, your honor.” Lynne was serene.

“Leo, will you honor and cherish Lynne all the days of your life and hold her dear to you heart, above all others?” Foxworthy nodded at Thom.

“Repeat after me: Lynne, take this ring as a symbol of my devotion. As it has no beginning and no end, such is the love I give you here today, in front of our friends and society. Place the ring on Lynne’s finger.”

Leo did and announced clearly, “je taime plus qu’hier et moin que domain.”

“Lynne,” the judge resumed, “repeat after me. Leo take this ring as a symbol of my fealty. As it has no beginning and no end, such is the love I offer you here today, in front of our friends and society. Place the ring on Leo’s finger.”

She did and whispered back, “aussi mois, jetaime plus qu…” flustered, she sighed. “Oh, Ditto!” TyTwo agreed with a woof. The comic relief offset the teary-eyed moment.

“By the power vested in me by the State of New York, I now pronounce you -- hitched! You may kiss your bride.” Foxworthy shook hands with Leo. Before he could turn to Lynne, the dogs announced their congratulations. Another “woof” from TyTwo and a “wooooof” from Holly. She picked up the bouquet and brought it to Lynne, stopping to lick the crocodile shoes. “Oh,” Lynne thought to herself, “if only I could click my heels and have Tyro appear.”

With that TyTwo jumped over his sister and rose up to kiss Leo, then Lynne. He sniffed at her veil in recognition of some familiar smell and nuzzled her neck. He sniffed again and sat at her feet. The strings and piano began “I Love You More Today Than Yesterday” as the newlyweds walked away from the hearth to the sun parlor where the hors d’oeuvres and champagne were waiting.

The dogs waited. The miniature Quiche Lorraines Lynne had ordered were the chef’s specialty and she had requested them specifically for the dogs. The rest of the delicious platters were passed around for all. The entrée smoldered in the kitchen, a dozen oyster-stuffed turkeys cooling on my long country kitchen table. L’Ville Auberge’s kitchen and wait staff scampered about. The catering company was busy putting the final touches on the table settings in the large heated tent, which filled the side yard. The house was much too small for a sit-down crowd of this size.

**“**Here, here,” Thom began. “May I have everyone’s attention, please?” He tapped a champagne flute with a silver spoon to quiet the din, but with no response from the crowd. Lynne saw his dilemma and signaled TyTwo. “Woof, woof—woof, woof, woof” he beckoned, just as his sire would have done. The guests turned, startled, looking for the source of the command. TyTwo sauntered over to Thom and sat at his side.

“Thanks boy,” Thom said as he gave him a well-deserved scratch and a Quiche Lorraine. “You earned this. Good boy.”

“Now that I have your attention, I would like to ask you to join me in a toast to Lynne and Leo – but first let’s all thank TyTwo for taking over as master of ceremony!”

The crowd applauded and the dog -- who was not unaccustomed to public acclaim -- free stacked himself in perfect show pose and gazed adoringly at the newlyweds.

“Oh, what a good boy,” Lynne cooed. “Here’s another quiche for you. And one for you too, Holly girl.” The dogs went to her and sat at her side and waited for Thom’s speech.

The wait staff had been busy passing out trays of the pink champagne. Thom got ready for his toast. “So, friends, will you raise a glass in honor of the new Mr. and Mrs. Leo Capatorto? Leo, Lynne, I wish you all the good fortune and happiness you could want. I wish you the good health to enjoy life together for many, many years to come. And most of all, I wish you success in Orlando in two weeks! Here’s to Lynne, Leo, TyTwo and his progeny. May the best dogs win! Cheers everyone!”

We raised our glasses of the pink bubbly and then followed TyTwo’s lead outside. The photographer waited by the front gate, adorned with fall leaves, twines and cranberries. We took our places for a family portrait. Then one of Lynne and Leo together. Then one of TyTwo, Holly, Lynne and Leo. Then one of Thom, me, Lynne and Leo. Then one of all us with the judge. An hour passed in a flash. The guests were milling around and had begun to meander over to the “mess” tent.

“So, Mister Capatorto, the deed is done. What about you Mister DA?” Foxworthy addressed the “boys” without lisp.

“Oh, I don’t know judge. We’ll call you when we’re ready.” Thom replied.

Natalie blushed and Bernie gave her a nudge. “What’s this Mr. DA?” she demanded.

“Time to move forward,” Natalie muttered. “Scares me to death. I’ve known Casper since we were kids…”

“Casper?” Cleary grimaced.

“Yeah, Casper. From the old neighborhood. Not such good old days for either of us,” Natalie confided. “We’re much better as adults.”

“Casper?” Foxworthy had been eavesdropping on the exchange. “I’ll have to remember that.”

“So long as you remember your lisp, too,” Thom retorted

“Deal, Mither DA,” the judge offered.

“Deal, your honor,” Thom agreed.

#

The wedding guests had already made their way to the dinner tent. Just as we turned to follow, both dogs woofed, in unison.

“What boy?” Lynne stroked TyTwo. Holly pawed at her shoes.

“Oh, Lynne look! She really loves those Stuart Weitzman’s…” I exclaimed. “I guess it’s a girl thing.”

“No, no Callie. That’s not it. She wants our attention She wants to show us something.” The little bitch was eager. “Let’s see what it is.”

TyTwo followed Holly as she led us to the rolling hill on the side of the house facing the sun porch. She sat at the top of the mound and woofed at TyTwo. “Hurry up here, boy. Woof, woof.” She urged her brother on.

They both reached the rounded peak and sat, gazing up at a wondrous cumulous cloud floating by. They turned and woofed for us to follow to the solitary spot marked by a simple stone under the ancient oak Tyro had claimed as his own. From there he would stand guard, fending off intruders from the animal or human kingdoms. Or he would just have a lazy afternoon nap on a summer’s day. Of course, there was no place else to bury him. Just as he had watched over the house from his private lair in life, his spirit now consecrated the farm and his charges, forever.

As his offspring commanded, we followed their gaze to the clear sky. An enormous cumulous hovered directly above the oak tree. The cloud slowly materialized as it passed by -- first the massive head, the full body, and then the big fluffy tail.

“Look at that,” Leo exclaimed. “It’s a Pyr and he’s crying.”

“No, silly,” Lynne corrected. “That’s drool!” She tapped her right foot to the heel of her left and laughed. “There’s no place like home. Right boy?” She gave each dog a pet and led them to Tyro’s marker. “Now, Honor thy Father,” she instructed and both Pyrs nuzzled the marker, and then flanked each side of the stone, sitting at attention, watching the sky.

“There really is no place like home,” I agreed. Tears dampened my cheeks as I looked up at the breathtaking apparition. It smiled as it dissipated away into the horizon. I would cherish that omen for the rest of my life.

“That was Tyro,” I said.

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**EPILOGUE**

**Fat and Skinny made a lethal mistake**

**They conspired to throw the DiMaris case:**

**Now Skinny’s remains fill a Cloisonné vase**

**And Fat spends time in an ugly place.**

**A Pyrfect ending to a legal disgrace.**

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