

No.1 international bestselling author

KARIN SLAUGHTER

'I'd follow
her anywhere'

GILLIAN
FLYNN

He saw what
you did

FALSE WITNESS

He knows who you are ...

KARIN
SLAUGHTER
FALSE
WITNESS

 HarperCollins *Publishers*

For my readers

The past is never where you think you left it.
—Katherine Anne Porter

SPRING 2021

Sunday

1

Leigh Collier bit her lip as a seventh-grade girl belted out “Ya Got Trouble” to a captive audience. A gaggle of tweens skipped across the stage as Professor Hill warned the townsfolk about out-of-town jaspers luring their sons into horse-race gambling.

Not a wholesome trottin’ race, no! But a race where they set right down on the horse!

She doubted a generation that had grown up with WAP, murder hornets, Covid, cataclysmic social unrest, and being forcibly home-schooled by a bunch of depressed day drinkers really understood the threat of pool halls, but Leigh had to hand it to the drama teacher for putting on a gender-neutral production of *The Music Man*, one of the least offensive and most tedious musicals ever staged by a middle school.

Leigh’s daughter had just turned sixteen years old. She’d thought her days of watching nose-pickers, mamas’ boys, and stage hogs break into song were blissfully over, but then Maddy had taken an interest in teaching choreography so here they were, trapped in this hellhole of *trouble with a capital T and that rhymes with P and that stands for pool*.

KARIN SLAUGHTER

She looked for Walter. He was two rows down, closer to the aisle. His head was tilted at a weird angle, sort of looking at the stage, sort of looking at the back of the empty seat in front of him. Leigh didn't have to see what was in his hands to know that he was playing fantasy football on his phone.

She slipped her phone out of her purse and texted—*Maddy is going to ask you questions about the performance.*

Walter kept his head down, but she could tell from the ellipses that he was responding—*I can do two things at once.*

Leigh typed—*If that was true, we would still be together.*

He turned to find her. The crinkles at the corners of his eyes told her he was grinning behind his mask.

Leigh felt an unwelcome lurch in her heart. Their marriage had ended when Maddy was twelve, but during last year's lockdown, they had all ended up living at Walter's house and then Leigh had ended up in his bed and then she'd realized why it hadn't worked out in the first place. Walter was an amazing father, but Leigh had finally accepted that she was the bad type of woman who couldn't stay with a good man.

On stage, the set had changed. A spotlight swung onto a Dutch exchange student filling the role of Marian Paroo. He was telling his mother that a man with a suitcase had followed him home, a scenario that today would've ended in a SWAT standoff.

Leigh let her gaze wander around the audience. Tonight was the closing night after five consecutive Sunday performances. This was the only way to make sure all the parents got to see their kids whether they wanted to or not. The auditorium was one-quarter full, taped-off empty seats keeping everyone at a distance. Masks were mandatory. Hand sanitizer flowed like peach schnapps at a prom. Nobody wanted another Night of the Long Nasal Swabs.

Walter had his fantasy football. Leigh had her fantasy apocalypse fight club. She gave herself ten slots to fill out her team. Obviously, Janey Pringle was her first choice. The woman had sold enough toilet paper, Clorox wipes, and hand sanitizer on the black market to buy her son a brand new MacBook Pro. Gillian Nolan knew how to make schedules. Lisa Regan was frighteningly outdoorsy, so she could do things like build fires. Denene Millner

FALSE WITNESS

had punched a pit bull in the face when it charged her kid. Ronnie Copeland always had tampons in her purse. Ginger Vishnoo had made the AP physics teacher cry. Tommi Adams would blow anything with a pulse.

Leigh's eyes slid to the right, locating the broad, muscular shoulders of Darryl Washington. He'd quit his job to take care of the kids while his wife worked a high-paying corporate gig. Which was sweet but Leigh wasn't going to survive the apocalypse only to end up fucking a meatier version of Walter.

The men were the problem with this game. You could have one guy, possibly two on your team, but three or more and all the women would probably end up chained to beds in an underground bunker.

The house lights came up. The blue and gold curtains swished closed. Leigh wasn't sure whether she had dozed off or gone into a fugue state, but she was extraordinarily happy that the intermission had finally arrived.

No one stood up at first. There was some uncomfortable shifting in seats as people debated whether or not to go to the restroom. This wasn't like the old days when everybody busted down the doors, eager to gossip in the lobby while they ate cupcakes and drank punch in tiny paper cups. There had been a sign at the entrance instructing them to pick up a plastic bag before entering the auditorium. Inside each was a playbill, a small bottle of water, a paper mask, and a note reminding everyone to wash their hands and follow the CDC guidelines. The rogue—or, as the school called them, *non-compliant*—parents were given a Zoom password so they could watch the performance in the maskless comfort of their own living rooms.

Leigh took out her phone. She dashed off a quick text to Maddy—*The dancing was amazing! How cute was that little librarian? I'm so proud of you!*

Maddy buzzed back immediately—*Mom I am working*

No punctuation. No emojis or stickers. But for social media, Leigh would have no idea that her daughter was still capable of smiling.

This was what a thousand cuts felt like.

She looked for Walter again. His seat was empty. She spotted

him near the exit doors, talking to another broad-shouldered father. The man's back was to Leigh, but she could tell by the way Walter was waving his arms that they were discussing football.

Leigh let her gaze travel around the room. Most of the parents were either too young and healthy to jump ahead in the vaccine line, or smart and wealthy enough to know they should lie about buying early access. They were all standing in mismatched pairs talking in low murmurs across the required distance. After a nasty brawl had broken out during last year's Non-Denominational Holiday Celebration That Happened Around Christmas, no one talked about politics. Instead, Leigh caught snippets of more sports talk, the mourning of past bake sales, who was in whose bubble, whose parents were Covidiot or maskholes, and how men who wore their masks below their noses were the same jerks who acted like wearing a condom was a human rights violation.

She turned her focus toward the closed stage curtains, straining her ears to pick up the scraping and pounding and furious whispers as the kids changed out the set. Leigh felt the familiar lurch in her heart—not for Walter this time, but because she ached for her daughter. She wanted to come home to a mess in the kitchen. To yell about homework and screen time. To reach into her closet for a dress that had been “borrowed” or search for a pair of shoes that had been carelessly kicked under the bed. She wanted to hold her squirming, protesting daughter. To lie on the couch and watch a silly movie together. To catch Maddy giggling over something funny on her phone. To endure the withering glare when she asked her what was so funny.

All they did lately was argue, mostly via text in the morning and on the phone at six sharp every night. If Leigh had an ounce of intelligence she would back off, but backing off felt too much like letting go. She couldn't stand not knowing if Maddy had a boyfriend or a girlfriend or had left a string of broken hearts in her wake or had decided to give up love for the pursuit of art and mindfulness. The only thing Leigh knew for sure was that every nasty fucking thing she had ever done or said to her own mother kept slamming into her like a never-ending tidal wave.

Except Leigh's mother deserved it.

FALSE WITNESS

She reminded herself that their distance kept Maddy safe. Leigh stayed in the downtown condo they used to share. Maddy had moved to the suburbs with Walter. This was a decision they had all reached together.

Walter was legal counsel for the Atlanta Fire Fighters' Union, so his job entailed Microsoft Teams and phone calls made from the safety of his home office. Leigh was a defense attorney. Some of her work was online, but she still had to go into the office and meet with clients. She still had to enter the courthouse and sit through jury selection and conduct trials. Leigh had already caught the virus during the first wave last year. For nine agonizing days, she'd felt like a mule was kicking her in the chest. As far as anyone knew, the risk for kids seemed to be minimal—the school touted its under-one-percent infection rate on its website—but there was no way she was going to be responsible for bringing the plague home to her daughter.

“Leigh Collier, is that you?”

Ruby Heyer pulled her mask down below her nose, then yanked it quickly back up, like it was safe if you did it fast.

“Ruby. Hi.” Leigh was grateful for the six feet between them. Ruby was a mom-friend, a necessary companion back when their kids were toddlers and it was either set up a play date or blow out your brains on the coffee table. “How's Keely?”

“She's fine, but long time, huh?” Ruby's red-rimmed glasses bumped up on her smiling cheeks. She was a horrible poker player. “Funny seeing Maddy enrolled here. Didn't you say you wanted your daughter to have an *in-town education*?”

Leigh felt her mask suck to her mouth as she went from mild annoyance to full-on burn-the-motherfucker-down.

“Hey, ladies. Aren't the kids doing a terrific job?” Walter was standing in the aisle, hands tucked into his pants pockets. “Ruby, nice to see you.”

Ruby straddled her broomstick as she prepared to fly away. “Always a pleasure, *Walter*.”

Leigh caught the insinuation that she wasn't part of the pleasure, but Walter was shooting her his *don't be a bitch* look. She shot back her *go fuck yourself* look.

Their entire marriage in two looks.

Walter said, “I’m glad we never had that three-way with her.”

Leigh laughed. If only Walter had suggested a three-way. “This would be a great school if it was an orphanage.”

“Is it necessary to poke every bear with a sharp stick?”

She shook her head, looking up at the gold leaf ceiling and professional sound and lighting rigs. “It’s like a Broadway theater in here.”

“It is.”

“Maddy’s old school—”

“Had a cardboard box for a stage and Maglite for a spot and a Mr. Microphone for sound and Maddy thought it was the best thing ever.”

Leigh ran her hand along the blue velvet seatback in front of her. The Hollis Academy logo was stitched in gold thread along the top, probably courtesy of a wealthy parent with too much money and not enough taste. Both she and Walter had been godless, public school-supporting, bleeding heart liberals until the virus hit. Now they were scraping together every last cent they could find to send Maddy to an insufferably snooty private school where every other car was a BMW and every other kid was an entitled cocksucker.

The classes were smaller. The students rotated in pods of ten. Extra staff kept the classrooms sanitized. PPE was mandated. Everyone followed the protocols. There were hardly ever any rolling lockdowns in the suburbs. Most of the parents had the luxury of working from home.

“Sweetheart.” Walter’s patient tone was grating. “Every parent would send their kid here if they could.”

“Every parent shouldn’t have to.”

Her work phone buzzed in her purse. Leigh felt her shoulders tense up. One year ago, she had been an overworked, under-compensated self-employed defense attorney helping sex workers, drug addicts, and petty thieves navigate the legal system. Today, she was a cog in a giant corporate machine representing bankers and small business owners who committed the same crimes as her previous clients, but had the money to get away with it.

Walter said, “They can’t expect you to work on a Sunday night.”

FALSE WITNESS

Leigh snorted at his naiveté. She was competing against dozens of twenty-something-year-olds with so much student loan debt that they slept at the office. She dug around in her purse, saying, “I asked Liz not to bother me unless it was life or death.”

“Maybe some rich dude just murdered his wife.”

She gave him the *go fuck yourself* look before unlocking her phone. “Octavia Bacca just texted me.”

“Everything okay?”

“Yes, but . . .” She hadn’t heard from Octavia in weeks. They’d made casual plans to meet for a walk at the Botanical Garden, but Leigh had never heard back, so she’d assumed that Octavia had gotten busy.

Leigh could see the text she’d sent at the end of last month—*Are we still on to walk?*

Octavia had texted her back just now—*So shitty. Don’t hate me.*

Below the text, a link popped up to a news story. The photo showed a clean-cut guy in his early thirties who looked like every clean-cut guy in his early thirties.

ACCUSED RAPIST INVOKES RIGHT TO SPEEDY TRIAL.

Walter asked, “But?”

“I guess Octavia is tied up on this case.” Leigh scrolled through the story, pulling out the details. “Stranger assault, not date rape, which isn’t the norm. The client is up on some serious charges. He claims he’s innocent—ha, ha. He’s demanding a jury trial.”

“That’ll make the judge happy.”

“And the jury.” No one wanted to risk exposure to the virus in order to hear a rapist say he didn’t do it. And even in the likely event that he *did* do it, rape was a fairly easy charge to plead down. Most prosecutors were hesitant to take on the fight because the cases tended to involve people who knew each other, and those pre-existing relationships further muddled the issue of consent. As a defense attorney, you negotiated for unlawful restraint or a lesser charge that would keep your client off the sex offender registry and out of jail and then you went home and took the longest, hottest shower you could tolerate to blast off the stink.

Walter asked, “Did he get bail?”

“Rona rules.” Given the coronavirus, judges were loath to

hold over defendants pending trial. Instead, they mandated ankle monitors and dared them to break the rules. Prisons and jails were worse than nursing homes. Leigh should know. Her own exposure had come courtesy of Atlanta's City Detention Center.

Walter asked, "Prosecutor didn't offer a deal?"

"I'd be shocked if they didn't, but it doesn't matter if the client won't take it. No wonder Octavia's been offline." She looked up from her phone. "Hey, if the rain holds off, do you think I can bribe Maddy into sitting with me on your back porch?"

"I've got umbrellas, sweetheart, but you know she's got an afterparty with her pod."

Tears welled into Leigh's eyes. She hated being on the outside looking in. A year had passed and she still went into Maddy's empty bedroom at least once a month to cry. "Was it this hard for you when she was living with me?"

"It's a lot easier to delight a twelve-year-old than it is to compete for a sixteen-year-old's attention." His eyes crinkled again. "She loves you so much, sweetheart. You're the best mother she could ever have."

Now her tears started to fall. "You're a good man, Walter."

"To a fault."

He wasn't joking.

The lights flickered. Intermission was over. Leigh was about to sit down, but her phone buzzed again. "Work."

"Lucky," Walter whispered.

She sneaked up the aisle toward the exit. A few of the parents glared at her over their masks. Whether it was for the current disruption or for Leigh's part in last year's Christmas-adjacent nasty brawl, she had no idea. She ignored them, feigning interest in her phone. The caller ID flashed BRADLEY, which was odd, because usually when her assistant called, it scrolled BRADLEY, CANFIELD & MARKS.

She stood in the middle of the ridiculously plush lobby, ignoring the gold sconces that had probably been plundered from an actual tomb. Walter claimed she had a chip on her shoulder about ostentatious displays of wealth, but Walter hadn't lived out of his car his first year in law school because he couldn't afford rent.

She answered the phone, "Liz?"

FALSE WITNESS

“No, Ms. Collier. This is Cole Bradley. I hope I’m not interrupting.”

She nearly swallowed her tongue. There were twenty floors and probably twice as many millions of dollars separating Leigh Collier and the man who had started the firm. She had only laid eyes on him once. Leigh was waiting her turn in the elevator lobby when Cole Bradley had used a key to summon the private car that went straight to the top floor. He looked like a taller, leaner version of Anthony Hopkins, if Anthony Hopkins had put a plastic surgeon on retainer shortly after graduating from the University of Georgia Law School.

“Ms. Collier?”

“Yes—I’m—” She tried to get her shit together. “I’m sorry. I’m at my daughter’s school play.”

He didn’t bother with small talk. “I’ve got a delicate matter that requires your immediate attention.”

She felt her mouth open. Leigh was not setting the world on fire at Bradley, Canfield & Marks. She was doing exactly enough to keep a roof over her head and her daughter in private school. Cole Bradley employed at least one hundred baby lawyers who would stab her in the face to get this phone call.

“Ms. Collier?”

“I’m sorry,” Leigh said. “I’m just—honestly, Mr. Bradley, I’ll do whatever you want but I’m not sure I’m the right person.”

“Frankly, Ms. Collier, I had no idea you even existed until this evening, but the client asked for you specifically. He’s waiting in my office as we speak.”

Now she was really confused. Leigh’s highest-profile client was the owner of a pet supply warehouse who’d been charged with breaking into his ex-wife’s house and urinating in her underwear drawer. The case had been joked about in one of Atlanta’s alternative papers, but she doubted Cole Bradley read *Atlanta INtown*.

“His name is Andrew Tenant,” Bradley said. “I trust you’ve heard of him.”

“Yes, sir. I have.” Leigh only knew the name because she’d just read it in the story Octavia Bacca had texted her.

So shitty. Don’t hate me.

Octavia lived with her elderly parents and a husband with

severe asthma. There were only two reasons Leigh could think of that her friend would refer out a case. She was either skipping out on a jury trial because of the virus risk or she was creeped out by her presumed rapist client. Not that Octavia's motivations mattered right now, because Leigh didn't have a choice.

She told Bradley, "I'll be there in half an hour."

Most passengers flying into Atlanta airport looked out the window and assumed that Buckhead was downtown, but the cluster of skyscrapers at the uptown end of Peachtree Street had not been built for convention-goers, government services or staid, financial institutions. The floors were filled with high-dollar litigators, day traders, and private money managers who catered to the surrounding client base living in one of the wealthiest ZIP codes in the southeast.

The headquarters for Bradley, Canfield & Marks loomed over the Buckhead commercial district, a glass-fronted behemoth that crested at the top like a breaking wave. Leigh found herself in the belly of the beast, trudging up the parking deck stairs. The gate was closed for visitor parking. The first available space she could find was three stories underground. The concrete stairwell felt like murder territory, but the elevators were locked and she hadn't been able to find a security guard. She took advantage of the time by going over in her head what Octavia Bacca had relayed over the phone during the drive over.

Or what she hadn't been able to tell her.

Andrew Tenant had fired Octavia two days ago. No, he hadn't given her an explanation why. Yes, Octavia had thought until that point that Andrew was satisfied with her counsel. No, she couldn't guess why Tenant had made the change, but, two hours ago, Octavia had been instructed to transfer all of his case files to BC&M care of Leigh Collier. The *so shitty* text was meant as an apology for dumping a jury trial into her lap eight days before it was scheduled to begin. Leigh had no idea why a client would drop one of the best defense attorneys in the city when his life was on the line, but she had to assume the man was an idiot.

The bigger mystery to solve was how the hell Andrew Tenant even knew Leigh's name. She had texted Walter, who was just as

FALSE WITNESS

clueless, and that was the sum total of Leigh's ability to mine information from her past because Walter was the only person currently in her life who had known her before she had graduated from law school.

Leigh stopped at the top of the stairs, sweat dripping down her back. She did a quick inventory of her appearance. She hadn't exactly dressed up for her night at the theater. She had thrown her hair into an old-lady bun and chosen two-day-old jeans and a faded Aerosmith Bad Boys from Boston T-shirt, if only to stand in contrast to the Birkin-bagged bitches in the audience. She would have to swing by her office on the way to the top floor. Like everyone else, Leigh kept a courtroom outfit at work. Her make-up bag was in her desk drawer. The thought of having to put on her face for an accused rapist on a Sunday night that she should've been spending with her family ramped up her level of annoyance. She hated this building. She hated this job. She hated her life.

She loved her daughter.

Leigh looked for a mask in her purse, which Walter called her feedbag because she used it as a briefcase and, in the last year, a mini-pandemic supply store. Hand sanitizers. Clorox wipes. Masks. Nitrile gloves just in case. The firm tested them twice a week, and Leigh had already suffered through the virus, but, with the variants going around, it was better to be safe than sorry.

She checked the time as she looped the mask over her ears. She could steal a few seconds for her daughter. Leigh juggled her two phones, looking for the distinctive blue and gold Hollis Academy case on her personal device. The wallpaper photo was of Tim Tam, the family dog, because the chocolate Lab had shown Leigh a hell of a lot more love lately than her own daughter.

Leigh sighed at the screen. Maddy hadn't texted back to Leigh's profuse apology for her early departure. A quick perusal of Instagram showed her daughter dancing with friends at a small party in what looked like Keely Heyer's basement, Tim Tam sleeping on a beanbag chair in the corner. So much for unquestioning devotion.

Leigh's fingers slid across the screen, typing yet another text to Maddy—*I'm sorry I had to leave, baby. I love you so much.*

She stupidly waited for a response before opening the door.

The overly air-conditioned lobby enveloped her in cold steel and marble. Leigh nodded to the security guard in his Plexiglas booth. Lorenzo was hunkered down over a cup of soup, shoulders up to his ears, bowl close to his mouth. Leigh was reminded of a succulent plant her mother used to keep in the kitchen window.

“Ms. Collier.”

Leigh silently panicked at the sight of Cole Bradley standing in the elevator lobby. Her hand flew up to the back of her hair. She could feel tendrils shooting out like a flattened octopus. The BAD BOYS logo across her ratty T-shirt was an affront to his bespoke Italian suit.

“You caught me in the act.” He tucked a pack of cigarettes into his breast pocket. “I went outside for a smoke.”

Leigh felt her eyebrows rise up. Bradley practically owned the building. No one was going to stop him from doing anything.

He smiled. Or at least she thought he did. He was north of eighty years old but his skin was so tight that only the tips of his ears twitched.

He said, “Given the political climate, it’s good to be seen playing by the rules.”

The bell rang for the partners’ private elevator. The noise was so tinkly that it sounded like Lady Hoopskirts summoning the butler for afternoon tea.

Bradley retrieved a mask from his breast pocket. She assumed this, too, was for appearances. His age alone would’ve put him in the first group for the vaccine. Then again, the vaccine wouldn’t be a get-out-of-jail-free card until almost everyone was inoculated.

“Ms. Collier?” Bradley was waiting at the open elevator doors.

Leigh hesitated, because she doubted underlings were allowed in the private car. “I was going to swing by my office to change into something more professional.”

“Unnecessary. They know the circumstances of the late hour.” He indicated that she should go in ahead of him.

Even with his permission, Leigh felt like a trespasser as she stepped into the fancy elevator. She pressed her calves against the narrow, red bench along the back wall. She had only glanced inside the private car once but, up close, she realized the black

FALSE WITNESS

walls were paneled in ostrich skin. The floor was one giant slab of black marble. The ceiling and all of the floor buttons were trimmed in red and black because if you'd graduated from the University of Georgia, pretty much the biggest thing that had ever happened to you in your life was that you had graduated from the University of Georgia.

The mirrored doors slid closed. Bradley's posture was ramrod straight. His mask was black with red piping. A pin on his lapel showed Uga, the Georgia Bulldog mascot. He touched the UP button on the panel, sending them to the penthouse level.

Leigh stared straight ahead, still unsure of the etiquette. There were signs on the plebeian elevator warning people to keep their distance and avoid conversation. No such signs existed here, not even the inspection notice. Her nose tickled with the smell of Bradley's aftershave mixed with cigarette smoke. Leigh hated men who smoked. She opened her mouth to breathe behind her mask.

Bradley cleared his throat. "I wonder, Ms. Collier, how many of your fellow students at Lake Point High School ended up graduating with honors from Northwestern?"

He'd done his homework while she was breaking the sound barrier to get here. He knew she'd grown up on the bad side of town. He knew she'd ended up at a top-tier law school.

Leigh said, "UGA waitlisted me."

She imagined he would've raised one of his eyebrows if the Botox would've let him. Cole Bradley wasn't used to his subordinates having personalities.

He said, "You interned at a poverty law firm based out of Cabrini Green. After Northwestern, you returned to Atlanta and joined the Legal Aid Society. Five years later, you started your own practice specializing in criminal defense. You were doing quite well until the pandemic closed down the courts. The end of this month will mark your first-year anniversary with BC&M."

She waited for a question.

"Your choices strike me as somewhat iconoclastic." He paused, giving her ample opportunity to chime in. "I assume you had the luxury of scholarships, so finances didn't dictate your career options."

She kept waiting.

"And yet here you are at my firm." Another pause. Another

ignored opportunity. “Would it be impolite to note that you’re closer to forty than most of our first-year hires?”

She let her gaze find his. “It would be accurate.”

He openly studied her. “How do you know Andrew Tenant?”

“I don’t, and I have no idea how he knows me.”

Bradley took a deep breath before saying, “Andrew is the scion of Gregory Tenant, one of my very first clients. We met so long ago that Jesus Christ himself introduced us. He was waitlisted at UGA, too.”

“Jesus or Gregory?”

His ears twitched up slightly, which she understood was his way of smiling.

Bradley said, “Tenant Automotive Group started out with a single Ford dealership back in the seventies. You’ll be too young to remember the commercials, but they had a very memorable jingle. Gregory Tenant, Sr., was a fraternity brother of mine. When he died, Greg Jr. inherited the business and turned it into a network of thirty-eight dealerships across the southeast. Greg passed away from a particularly aggressive form of cancer last year. His sister took over the day-to-day operations. Andrew is her son.”

Leigh was still marveling at anyone using the word *scion*.

The elevator bell tinkled. The doors slid open. They had reached the top floor. She could feel cold air fighting against the umbrella of heat outside. The space was as cavernous as an aircraft hangar. The overhead fixtures were off. The only lights came from the lamps on the steel and glass desks standing sentry outside closed office doors.

Bradley walked to the middle of the room and stopped. “It never fails to take my breath away.”

Leigh knew he meant the view. They were in the trough of the giant wave at the top of the building. Massive pieces of glass reached at least forty feet to the crest. The floor was high enough above the light pollution for them to see tiny pinpoints of stars punching through the night sky. Far below, the cars traveling along Peachtree Street paved a red and white trail toward the glowing mass of downtown.

“It looks like a snow globe,” she said.

FALSE WITNESS

Bradley turned to face her. He had taken off his mask. “How do you feel about rape?”

“Definitely against it.”

His expression told Leigh that the time for her to have a personality was over.

She said, “I’ve handled dozens of assault cases over the years. The nature of the charge is irrelevant. The majority of my clients are factually guilty. The prosecutor has to prove those facts beyond a reasonable doubt. You pay me a hell of a lot of money to find that doubt.”

He nodded, approving of her response. “You’ve got jury selection on Thursday, with the trial commencing one week from tomorrow. No judge will grant you a continuance based on substituting counsel. I can offer you two full-time associates. Will the truncated timeline be a problem?”

“It’s a challenge,” Leigh said. “But not a problem.”

“Andrew was offered a reduced charge in exchange for one year of monitored probation.”

Leigh pulled down her mask. “No sex offender registry?”

“No. And the charges roll off if Andrew stays out of trouble for three years.”

Even this far into the game, Leigh was always surprised by how fantastic it was to be a white, wealthy man. “That’s a sweet-heart deal. What are you not telling me?”

The skin around Bradley’s cheeks rippled in a wince. “The previous firm had a private investigator do some digging around. Apparently, a guilty admission on this particular reduced charge could lead to further exposure.”

Octavia hadn’t mentioned that detail. Maybe she hadn’t been updated before she was fired, or maybe she had seen the potential ratfuck and was glad to be out of it. If the PI was right, the prosecutor was trying to lure Andrew Tenant into pleading guilty to one rape so they could show a pattern of behavior that linked him to other assaults.

Leigh asked, “How much exposure?”

“Two, possibly three.”

Women, she thought. Two or three more *women* who had been raped.

“No DNA on any of the possible cases,” Bradley said. “I’ve gathered there’s some circumstantial evidence, but nothing insurmountable.”

“Alibi?”

“His fiancée, but—” Bradley shrugged it off the same as a jury would. “Thoughts?”

Leigh had two: either Tenant was a serial rapist or the district attorney was trying to get him to self-incriminate into being labeled one. Leigh had seen this kind of prosecutorial fuckery when she worked on her own, but Andrew Tenant wasn’t a busboy who copped a guilty plea because he didn’t have the money to fight it.

She knew in her gut that Bradley was holding something else back. She chose her words carefully. “Andrew is the scion of a wealthy family. The district attorney knows you don’t take a shot at the king if you think you’ll miss.”

Bradley didn’t respond, but his demeanor became more guarded. Leigh heard Walter’s earlier question zinging around her head. Had she poked the wrong bear with the wrong stick? Cole Bradley had asked her how she felt about rape cases. He hadn’t asked her how she felt about innocent clients. By his own admission, he had known the Tenant family since he was in short pants. For all she knew, he could be Andrew Tenant’s godparent.

Bradley clearly wasn’t going to share his thinking. He extended his arm, indicating the last closed door on the right. “Andrew is in my conference room with his mother as well as his fiancée.”

Leigh pulled up her mask as she walked past her boss. She recalibrated herself away from being Walter’s wife and Maddy’s mother and the plucky gal who’d joked with a human skeleton inside a private elevator. Andrew Tenant had asked for Leigh specifically, probably because she was still coasting on her pre-BC&M reputation, which fell somewhere between a hummingbird and a hyena. Leigh had to be that person now or she’d not only lose the client, but possibly her job.

Bradley reached ahead of her to open the door.

The downstairs conference rooms were smaller than a Holiday Inn toilet and operated on a first-come, first-serve basis. Leigh had been expecting a slightly larger version of the same, but Cole Bradley’s personal meeting space was more like a suite at the

FALSE WITNESS

Waldorf, down to the fireplace and a wet bar. There was a heavy glass vase of flowers on a pedestal. Photographs of various Uga bulldogs across the years lined the back wall. A painting of Vince Dooley hung above the fireplace. Stacks of legal pads and pens were on the black marble credenza. Trophies for various legal prizes crowded out rows of water bottles. The conference table, which was approximately twelve feet long and six feet wide, was made from redwood. The chairs were black leather.

Three people sat at the far end of the table, faces uncovered. She recognized Andrew Tenant from his photo in the news story, though he was better looking in person. The woman clutching his right arm was late-twenties with a tattoo sleeve and an *eat shit* snarl that any mother would want for her son.

The mother in question sat stiff in her chair, arms crossed low on her chest. Her short blonde hair was streaked with white. A slim gold choker ringed her tanned neck. She was wearing a pale yellow, honest-to-God, down to the little alligator, Izod shirt. The popped collar gave the impression of someone who'd just come off the golf course to sip a Bloody Mary by the pool.

In other words, the type of woman Leigh only knew about from binging *Gossip Girl* reruns with her daughter.

"I'm sorry we kept you waiting." Bradley moved a thick stack of files to the far side of the table, indicating where Leigh should sit. "This is Sidney Winslow, Andrew's fiancée."

"Sid," the girl said.

Leigh had known she'd be called something like Sid or Punkie or Katniss the moment she'd laid eyes on the multiple piercings, clumpy mascara, and jet-black shag cut.

Still, Leigh made nice with her client's other half. "I'm sorry to be meeting you under these circumstances."

"This entire ordeal has been a nightmare." Sidney's voice was as husky as expected. She pushed back her hair, flashing dark blue fingernail polish and a leather bracelet that had pointy-looking metal studs. "Andy nearly got murdered in jail, and he was only there two nights. He's totally innocent. Obviously. No one is safe anymore. Some crazy bitch can just point a finger and—"

"Sidney, let the woman get her bearings." The tightly controlled rage in the mother's tone reminded Leigh of the voice she used

when she was reprimanding Maddy in the presence of other people. “Leigh, please take your time.”

Leigh held the older woman’s smile for a few seconds before she put her game face on.

“I’ll just need a moment.” She opened the file, hoping a detail would jog her memory as to who the hell these people were. The top page showed the intake form from Andrew Tenant’s arrest. Thirty-three years old. Car salesman. High-dollar address. Charged with kidnap and sexual assault March 13, 2020, just as the first wave of the pandemic was taking off.

Leigh didn’t read deeply into the details because it was hard to unring a bell. She needed to hear Andrew’s version of events first. All that she knew for certain was that Andrew Trevor Tenant had picked a bad time to ask for his day in court. Because of the virus, prospective jurors over sixty-five were generally excused. Only someone under the age of sixty-five would accept that this clean-cut, nice-looking young man could be a serial rapist.

She looked up from the file. She silently debated how to proceed. The mother and son clearly thought that Leigh knew them. Leigh clearly did not. If Andrew Tenant wanted her to be his lawyer, lying to his face the first time they met was the very definition of operating in bad faith.

She took a breath, preparing to confess, but then Bradley cut her off.

“Remind me, Linda, how do you know Ms. Collier?”

Linda.

Something about the name itched at Leigh’s memory. She actually reached up to her scalp as if she could scratch it out. But it wasn’t the mother who was triggering her recollection. Leigh’s eyes skipped across the older woman and went to her son.

Andrew Tenant smiled at her. His lips curved up to the left. “It’s been a long time, hasn’t it?”

“Decades,” Linda told Bradley. “Andrew knows the girls better than I do. I was still in nursing back then. I worked nights. Leigh and her sister were the only babysitters I trusted.”

Leigh’s stomach turned into a clenched fist that started slowly punching up into her throat.

Andrew asked her, “How’s Callie doing? What’s she up to?”

FALSE WITNESS

Callie.

“Leigh?” Andrew’s tone implied that she was not acting normal. “Where’s your sister these days?”

“She—” Leigh had broken out in a cold sweat. Her hands were shaking. She clutched them together under the table. “She’s living on a farm in Iowa. With kids. Her husband’s a cow farm—a dairy farmer.”

“That sounds about right,” Andrew said. “Callie loved animals. She got me interested in aquariums.”

He told this last part to Sidney, going into detail about his first saltwater tank.

“Right,” Sidney said. “She was the cheerleader.”

All Leigh could do was pretend to listen, her teeth clenched tight so that she didn’t start screaming. This couldn’t be right. None of this was right.

She looked down at the label on the file.

TENANT, ANDREW TREVOR.

The clenched fist kept moving up her throat, every horrific detail she had suppressed over the last twenty-three years threatening to choke her.

Callie’s terrifying phone call. Leigh’s frantic drive to reach her. The horrific scene in the kitchen. The familiar smell of the dank house, the cigars and Scotch and blood—so much blood.

Leigh had to know for sure. She needed to hear it said out loud. Her teenage voice came out of her mouth when she asked, “Trevor?”

The way Andrew’s lips curved up to the left was so chillingly familiar. Leigh felt a tingle of goose bumps prickle her skin. She had been his babysitter, and then, when she was old enough to find real work, she had passed the job on to her baby sister.

“I go by Andrew now,” he told her. “Tenant is Mom’s maiden name. We both thought it would be good to change things up after what happened with Dad.”

After what happened with Dad.

Buddy Waleski had disappeared. He’d abandoned his wife and son. No note. No apologies. That’s what Leigh and Callie had made it look like. That’s what they had told the police. Buddy had done a lot of bad things. He was in debt to a lot of bad people. It made sense. At the time, all of it had made sense.

KARIN SLAUGHTER

Andrew seemed to feed off her dawning recognition. His smile softened, the upward curve of his lips slowly smoothing out.

He said, "It's been a long time, Harleigh."

Harleigh.

Only one person in her life still called her by that name.

Andrew said, "I thought you'd forgotten all about me."

Leigh shook her head. She would never forget him. Trevor Waleski had been a sweet kid. A little awkward. A lot clingy. The last time Leigh had seen him, he was drugged into oblivion. She had watched her sister gently kiss the top of his head.

Then the two of them had gone back into the kitchen to finish murdering his father.